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## The Oztotl Page

Being an expos of some of the known things  
and others just guessed at relating to Oztotl



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Articles in .pdf Format

## Cave Rituals in Oaxaca, Mexico

by Janet Fitzsimmons Steele

Ethnohistoric and ethnographic data from accounts of Oaxacan cave use by native ethnic groups is reviewed and summarized. What is known from this research is applied to the five archaeological cave sites from the Mazatec and Cuicatec regions. (2025 NOTE: PDF included with this doc)

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## CAVES IN ANCIENT MEXICAN RELIGION

by

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*1965 Speleo Digest*

Caves have been of great significance to most of the archaic peoples of the world, wherever caves are found in any abundance, evidence of mans' use of them as habitations or religious sanctuaries has been. Discovered, the paintings and carvings executed on cave walls and the artifacts found within caves can only vaguely suggest the actual meaning the cave had to the people who left in it their Magico--religious art and paraphernalia, probably any caver could verbalize those qualities of caves which would produce a religious aura about them to those persons and cultures who look for the supernatural in the physical world: everlasting darkness and the eerie beauty and mystery of winding passages, stark formations, cold rivers. Usually the anthropologist could say little more than this about why caves would be important to a people and often nothing about the actual place of caves in a culture's religious thought. Much has been said, of course, about those things, on the wall or removable, which man has left in caves.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the meaning and place of the cave itself in the religion of prehispanic Mexico, as the records of both the Indians of Mexico and the Spanish provide

information on it. In 1500, the Aztecs (properly the Mexica--may-sh-ka) were the dominant power of central Mexico, and it is from them that most of the knowledge of Mexico's religion comes, but the Aztecs were only the latest, and last, of a series of peoples who had gained military ascendancy over this area. As such their culture was in great part an inheritance from those who had gone before. So it was with that aspect of culture labeled religion. The broad outlines of this religion seen in practice by European eyes in 1519 were probably developed by the time of Christ, with one major modification occurring around 800.

To briefly, and consequently unjustly, summarize Mexican religion, it may be said that it was founded upon a dualistic concept of the universe. This dualism was not moral; that is, good versus bad, but rather physical such as light and darkness, heat and cold, wet and dry. Within each of these pairs an eternal conflict for supremacy was waged, and it was man's place within this system to attempt to assist and promote those forces which favored his existence. The elements and the forces of the universe as the ancient Mexicans conceived them were personified as a great pantheon of gods; creative gods, fertility gods, rain and water gods, fire gods, deities of the planets and stars, gods of death and the earth, and the great gods Huitzilopochtli (chief god of the Aztecs, god of war and the sun), Tezcatlipoca (also a god of war and the sun), and Quetzalcoatl (a god of life and learning).

Where then do caves fit into Mexican religion? In looking first at the surviving origin legends of the Aztecs, caves figure in at least two versions. One describes how the Aztecs came from a cave located on an island in the middle of a lake. Another account tells of their origin in seven caves, and it was from here rather than an island that they began the wanderings which would eventually bring them to the valley of Mexico and the founding of Tenochtitlan, their capital.

Legends also mention that it was during their travels that the Aztecs found an idol of Huitzilopochtli in a hillside cave. The mighty warrior and god of sun Huitzilopochtli ('hummingbird on the left' or 'hummingbird wizard') was an Aztec god, but he seems to be another version of the god Tezcatlipoca, who was undoubtedly quite ancient in Mexican religion. Huitzilopochtli became head of the Aztec pantheon and guided his people to the valley of Mexico and to their eventual greatness. Although these are not the only accounts of the origin of the Aztecs and Huitzilopochtli, it is evident that caves were significantly associated with beginnings; with creation. But the Aztecs did not appear on the historical scene of Mexico until somewhere around 1168 AD. To look for the beginnings of their concepts concerning caves, a much earlier period of time and another area must be considered.

To the east of the valley of Mexico lies the long and narrow Veracruz coast, a lowland region of limestone and tropical evergreen forest where caves abound. In some of these caves, carved stone artifacts representing the heads of jaguars with human heads in their mouths have been found. These probably date around 200--500 AD.

From the earliest times in Mexico the jaguar seems to have been associated with the earth and the underworld. The underworld in the Mexican conception was not a hell, but simply the place of the dead. As such, of course, it was a dreaded and fear-inspiring place. It is the opinion of some authorities that these carved jaguar heads found in their cave locations are

indicative of a well-developed cave and earth cult. A group which must have been specially dedicated to the worship of caves and the personification of caves such as the jaguar. The survival of the beliefs of this cult may possibly be seen in Aztec times in the form of the god Tepeyollotl, both a jaguar god and a mountain god. Tepeyollotl is translated 'heart of mountains', easily suggestive of his cave affinities.

Another archaeologically known object which is relevant to the discussion is the so-called stone 'yoke', these are very heavy stone, usually a diorite, carved in the shape of a capital 'u' and large enough to go around a man's waist (figure 1). Yokes may come from a time as early as 100 BC The basic 'u' shape is very frequently carved with the form of a crouching jaguar or frog-like creature (figure 2a, 2b), both symbolic of the earth and the underworld.



FIGURE 1--UNCARVED STONE "YOKE", ,FIGURE 2A--TOP VIEW OF FROG YOKE, & FIGURE 2B--SIDE VIEW OF FROG YOKE

Because of their association with these monsters of the earth, the opening of the yoke has often been interpreted as representing the gaping mouth of the earth, open to receive the souls of the dead. Supporting this theory, as well as that regarding the jaguar's heads devouring humans, have been the finds of graves in which the head of the skeleton lies between the arms of the yoke as if the yoke is receiving the body. All of this indicates that the openings of the yokes are symbolic of caves, the openings into the depths of the earth, the place of the dead. It has also been pointed out by one archaeologist that a 'frog' yoke seen from the top is very much like the Aztec symbol for cave 'Oztotl' (figure 3). There is also indication that the word 'Oztotl' itself had some implication of entrance to the underworld.



FIGURE 3. "OZTOTL", SYMBOL OF A CAVE, FROM THE CODEX CUAUHTLINCHAN (PUEBLA)

So back into the early periods of Mexico, caves seemed to have held significant place in the religious concepts. This early development apparently provided the basis for the places of caves in the Aztec's later religion. In addition Totepeyollotl, 'heart of mountains', a further association of caves and gods and monsters of the earth among the Aztecs is with a creature whose body or mouth was the entrance to the underworld. This creature was conceived in many forms and with many names. Frequently he was called Tlaltecuhltli, lord of the earth. He was also referred to as earth dragon, toad, and, significantly, throat of the earth. One of the most common representations of Tlaltecuhltli shows him with his gaping mouth opening upward, the lines of teeth thrusting out (figure 4). The open mouth of this monster is often encountered in paintings or carvings at the bottom of the illustration, as a depiction of the awesome toothed opening to the nether world, such as in (figure 5), where one of the trees of the four directions is shown emerging.

FIGURE 5--ONE OF THE TREES OF THE FOUR DIRECTIONS COMING FROM THE MOUTH OF THE EARTH MONSTER (CODEX FEJAVERY-MAYER)

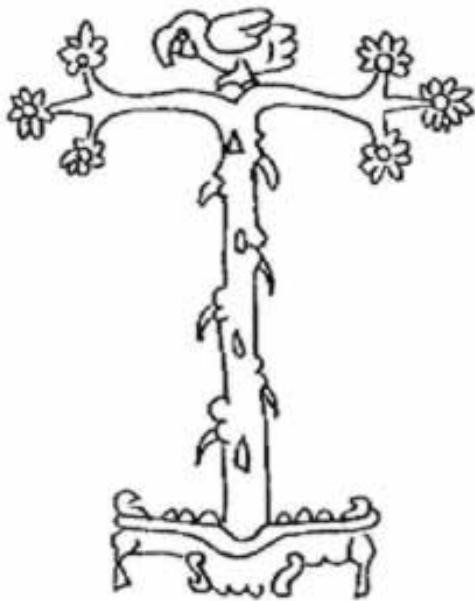


FIGURE 4--TLALTECUHTLI, "THROAT OF THE EARTH", FROM THE CODEX BORBONICUS

In other cases the teeth alone are shown, as on the famous 'sacrificial' stone of King Tizoc in which the teeth are in two rows beneath a scene of battle (figure 6). Here the underworld awaits the souls of the dead which will soon come to it. There are many similarities between Aztec or Mexican religion and the religion of the classic Maya of the peten rain forest (southern Mexico and northern Guatemala). The earth monster must certainly be a common idea as again the open jaws and upturned teeth may be seen in carvings such as the one in (figure 7), which formed part of the design sculptured on the lid of a stone tomb at the site of palenque

FIGURE 6--SKETCHED DETAIL FROM THE AZTEC MEMORIAL STONE TO KING TIZOC, SHOWING ROWS OF TEETH OF THE EARTH MONSTER



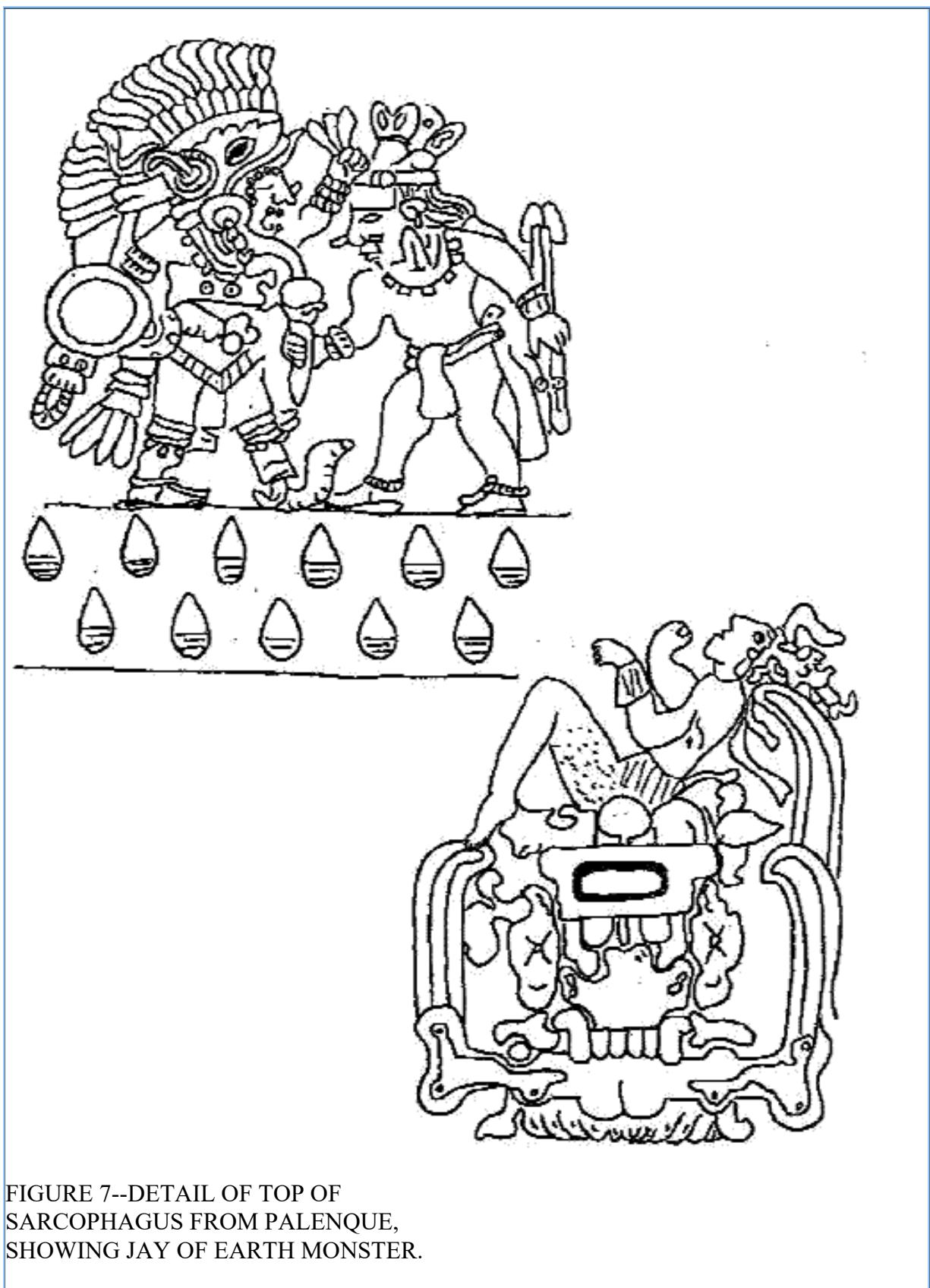


FIGURE 7--DETAIL OF TOP OF  
SARCOPHAGUS FROM PALENQUE,  
SHOWING JAW OF EARTH MONSTER.

There seems to be little doubt that the jaws of Tlaltecuhlti, throat of the earth, entrance to the underworld are symbolic of a cave. The underworld was part of the earth and the earth was a personified being, the dualistic opposite of the powerful sun. The cave was conceived as the earth's mouth which was symbolized in Aztec times by Tlaltecuhlti, or in the earlier periods by the jaguar or the frog, the significance of the 'earth's mouth' is also illustrated by the fact that the Aztec's highly important view of universal conflict, the great sun was swallowed daily by the earth; swallowed through Tlaltecuhlti. Thus, as the place of man's origin and entrance to the region of the dead, the cave was important in the cosmology of ancient Mexico.

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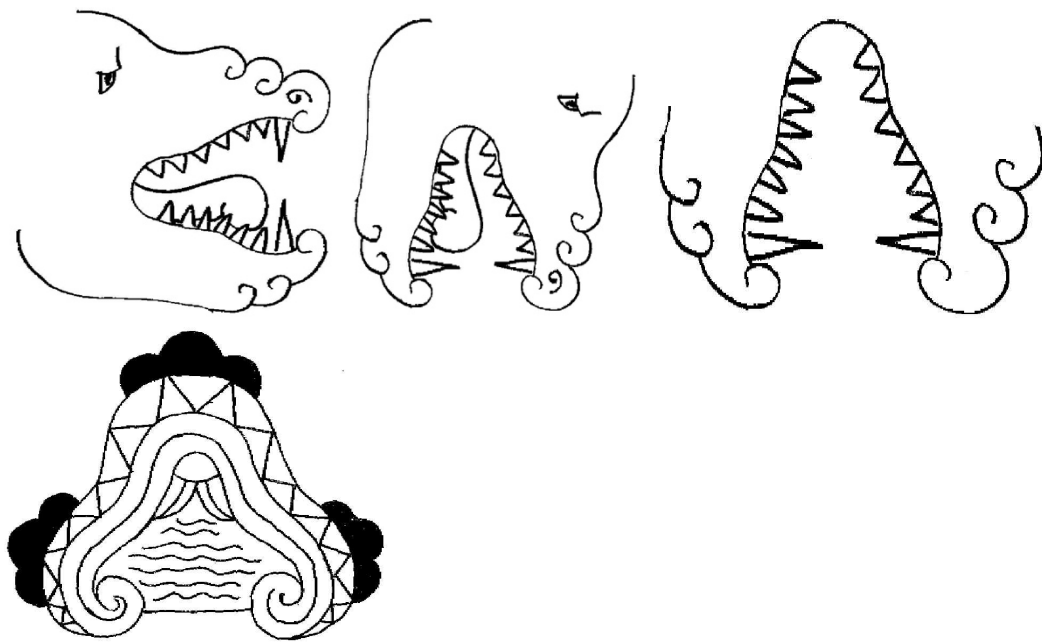
FIGURES 1, 2A, 3 AND 4 TAKEN FROM COVARRUBIAS, 1957. FIGURE 6 TAKEN FROM BERNAL, 1963, FIGURE 7 TAKEN FROM SEJOURNE, 1960.

## ADDITIONAL NOTES

by  
Gill Ediger  
November 1998

I have seen an article, which I cannot locate, containing a drawing with the head of a jaguar, taken from some Mayan/Mexican source, similar to the one shown here on the left. As stated above, the jaguar was an earth symbol. It is a simple matter to turn the drawing, as in the center, and not too much of a stretch to easily see the transition to an Oztotl, represented by the 3rd and finally the 4th drawings.





The basic outside shape of the Oztotl represents Tepec, the Aztec word for Hill (or Mountain) and is used in various place names, a famous one of which is Chapultepec, a hill and park in Mexico City. A chapulin is a grasshopper, so Chapultepec means Grasshopper Hill and is represented by an Oztotl shaped object with a grasshopper sitting on it.



Chapultepec image & Gill Ediger  
in Mexico City 1979 by Michel Siffre

Likewise, the hill symbol was fairly commonly used in various codexes accompanied by other distinguishing symbols to identify place names, often as a part of the tribute rolls. The Oztotl, meaning a cave, utilizes the hill symbol with the jaguar (entrance to the earth) represented by the teeth and, perhaps, scrolling, along with a water symbol, caves often giving the only access to water, giving the basics of life--absent the sun, which may very well be represented by the internal symbol--the sun god is usually shown with teeth, often long and curving. The sun, naturally, had to travel underground--west to east--during the night to get back in a position to rise in the morning, thus became a god of the night during its off-time. This is all too confusing for us here in the waning daze of the 20th Century. In ancient Mexico, writing was in the hands of the artists and they were free to do just about anything they wanted so long as the basics of the symbol were retained. If there was ever a symbol that screamed out CAVE, Oztotl is it!

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## **A Pilgrimage to OZTOTL'S Cave**

by  
Craig Bittinger

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Long ago and far away a group of Indians lived high in the mountains west of Mexico City. They were a simple people living close to the earth and aware of the basic elements of life. Their food and water came from the ground and when they died, they returned to the earth.

These people watched the world and felt its mysteries and wondered about their existence. Like all people, their thoughts turned to certain philosophical questions such as, "why am I here? What is the purpose of life? How does our world work?" The old and wise men of the tribe gathered to discuss these issues and slowly came into agreement as to where this knowledge must lie. The answer to these questions seemed to lie within--within each person's mind and within the earth. Introspection and sincere thoughts could open the doors to inner knowledge of oneself. When one wanted to understand and influence the happenings of the world, one should look within the earth. These occurrences were seen as the workings of a deity. The natural place for an earth god to live was within an opening in the earth--a cave.

Water, the holy fluid of life, ran out of a cave as if it were the gift of a happy god and back into the ground into yet another cave. These people called their god Oztotl and characterized him as a quiet and benevolent deity who could help with the Problems of an uncertain life. Oztotl was the kind of god that should be approached with gladness in one's heart and flowers in one's hair. They believed that Oztotl lived within the earth and that any opening in the earth ran close to his presence.

Those caves which had water issuing from them were especially blessed. If a person bathed in these waters, sicknesses could be healed and ailments alleviated.

In the valley where the Indians farmed, there existed a cave which had formed on the contact zone between a basalt flow and an underlying bed of limestone. Water issued forth from the earth and the Indians came there to worship. A small grotto existed in the basalt above the spring and here they carved an image of Oztotl. The glyph consisted of a cave symbol with water issuing forth. The people grew and flourished under the guidance of their god and all was happy and peaceful for many years.

Then the Spaniards arrived and the people welcomed them with open arms and took them to their shrine to bathe in the god-given waters and to reunite with the earth through worship of their choice. The holy men of the Spaniards reacted with shock to these people worshiping an idol. To them all idols were associated with the devil. The Spaniards left and later returned with a group of followers to proselytize the Indians. The Indians tried to point out that the god of the Spaniards was compatible with theirs and that there was no reason they could not peacefully coexist. However, the Spaniards' minds were closed and no amount of arguing would change their beliefs. Because the Spaniards were more powerful, the Indians were

forced to move the main worship center to other caves. It made little difference because their god was found wherever there was an opening in the earth.

In an effort to discourage the Indians from worshiping the cave god, the Spanish priests late one night sneaked into Oztotl's shrine and smashed the image of Oztotl into a thousand pieces. They substituted their own religious image and when the Indians discovered the switch the next morning, they were told that it was a great miracle. The new image was called Nuestro Senor Del Chalma after the saint of the day, September 29. The priests gave Chalma the same attributes as that of the previous god (Oztotl) and the sacred waters now healed people in the name of Chalma. Over the years a church was built upon the site of the sacred waters and a town grew up around the church. Centuries passed and the reputation of the healing waters spread and every year thousands of people came to bathe and to see the sacred sights.

One day a group of true believers set out to visit Oztotl, They had learned of him through the study of ancient volumes and hoped to refresh themselves in his healing presence. These pilgrims had devoted themselves to the study of the inner mysteries of the earth and had often felt Oztotl's guiding influence. As they approached the sacred spot, they passed a procession of



local people traveling toward the same spot and wearing flowers in their hair and carrying banners. These people were about to enjoy the blessing of Oztotl, yet they knew nothing of him and attributed his deeds to another. The true believers wondered at this injustice.

At last they arrived at the sacred spot where the waters issued forth only to find that the Spaniards had blocked the opening and forced the water to run through pipes into a small pool. On all sides were the images of the Spaniards, Vendors sold souvenirs and of the hundreds of people present, none knew or spoke of Oztotl. The natives sat about telling jokes and littering and profaning the site. The true believers came very close to fleeing in utter disgust. With grim determination they forced themselves onward to find Oztotl's true cave.

At last they found it, on a hill, above all the gawking masses. A gate across its entrance kept out all visitors and a plaque proclaimed that upon this site the image of Oztotl had been destroyed. A terrible feeling of indignity rose within the breasts of the true believers, Was Oztotl truly alive and powerful? If so, how could he allow this sacrilege? In a state of utter depression they sat down to ponder these events. They lifted their eyes to the lush limestone mountains surrounding the town. The natural beauty of the earth reasserted itself and the follies of man's desecration paled to insignificance. The spirit of Oztotl moved over them and wisdom- entered their minds. They realized that their deity was not limited to one spot on the earth's surface. He existed wherever people thought about the inner nature of the world and pondered the basic nature of life. Yet, Oztotl was tolerant and wise and not bothered by the insignificant alterations that had been made in his holy site. He existed only to help his people realize the true things in life and to aid those that journeyed through the inner pathways of the earth.

With new wisdom, the true believers left the sacred site, stopping only to fill a flask with holy water so that they could spread the blessing of Oztotl to the other true believers who had not been able to accompany them on their pilgrimage.

## **Oztotl is Everywhere as evidenced by these photos**











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of the Oztotl Page

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