

XILONEN: SEEING EGYPT IN MEXICO

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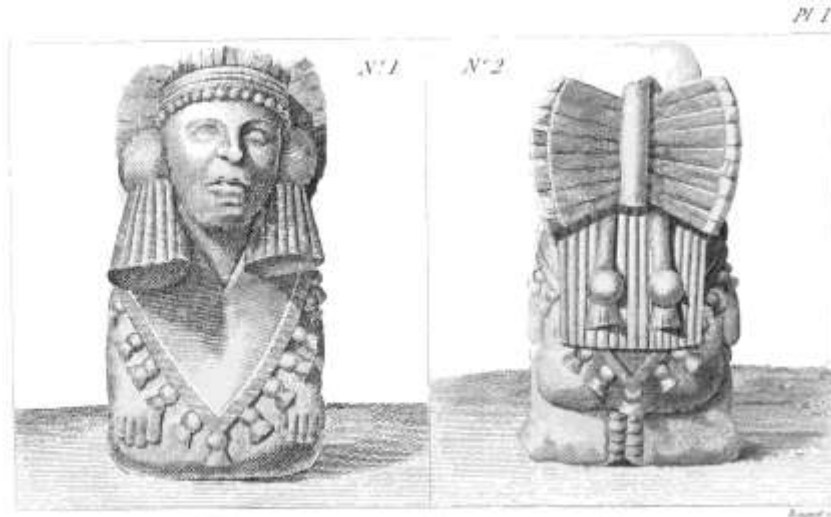


Figure 1. Bust of an Aztec Priestess.

Alexander von Humboldt's *Vues des cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* (1810-1813) is a striking album of sixty-nine 'views' of natural and 'artificial' or man-made monuments, which the author 'collected' over the course of his travels in the Americas between 1799 and 1804. The ancient ruins at Mitla, the great pyramid at Cholula, the fortress at Xochicalco, stone figurines, ceramic vessels, and 'hieroglyphic paintings' (codices) alternate with 'views' and descriptions of a sublime and agitated nature: Mount Chimborazo, the basaltic prisms at Santa María Regla in New Spain, or the Tequendama Falls on the Bogotá River. Humboldt had first-hand knowledge of many of these places; for others, he relied upon the drawings and depictions made by Creole savants or on his exchanges with local informants.

Comentado [DMT1]: Suggested title. I realize you are mostly talking about 'Egyptian style' not 'Egypt' but it rings more provocatively for general readers of the kind who visit the British Museum.

Comentado [DMT2]: Please insert full citation and permission if needed.

Comentado [DMT3]: By 'other scholars' do you mean Creoles or Europeans or both?

It is no accident that the Parisian album of New World curiosities opens with an engraving of the sculpture of an 'Aztec priestess' which Humboldt saw in the collection of Guillermo Dupaix, one of New Spain's foremost antiquarian scholars, during his residence in Mexico City in 1803 (Figure 1). Dupaix's 'priestess' reminds Humboldt of a similar 'idol' he collected in the ruins in Texcoco outside Mexico City, and later deposited in King Friedrich Wilhelm III's collection in Berlin. But Humboldt is especially struck by the apparent resemblance between the headdress of the Aztec priestess and –that of a Greek statue of Isis in the Villa Ludvisi in Rome and indeed of the heads embedded in the capitals of the columns at the Temple of Hathor at Dendera in Egypt (Figure 2), which Humboldt saw in Vivant Denon's recently published *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Égypte* (1802). On the basis of conversations with Georg Zoega, a scholar of ancient Egypt and curator of Mexican codices in the Borgia collection, Humboldt decided that the distinctive feature at the back of the statue's head, which he takes to be a purse-like knot that ties her hair, resembles sculptures of Osiris. In addition, the so-called Aztec priestess's triangular 'skirt,' decorated with twenty-four symmetrically-placed bells, reminds Humboldt of the robes of the 'grand priest of the Hebrews.' To be sure, Humboldt also noted differences between the Mexican and Old-World artefacts. He notes that the string of 'pearls' around the head of the 'Aztec priestess' looks nothing like the adornments of Egyptian statues; instead, they are evidence of commercial ties between ancient Mexico and the Californias.

What should we make of Humboldt's Orientalist reading of the 'Aztec priestess'? Finding affinities between ancient Mexican and Egyptian artifacts falls today in the realms of pseudoscience, science fiction and fake news. During Humboldt's lifetime

and indeed into the early twentieth century, however, such comparisons not only did not raise eyebrows, they were de rigueur among the learned. Ancient Egypt and the Orient at large had been a point of reference for chroniclers of the New World ever since exotic artefacts from the Americas or ‘Indies’ began to circulate in Europe in the sixteenth century. However, at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Humboldt was writing his *Vues*, in the minds of many several developments brought the ancient civilizations of America and Egypt even closer together.

On the one hand, quite literally, the increasing circulation and accumulation of both ancient Egyptian and Mexican objects in the same spaces of display, such as the Louvre, the British Museum or the Royal Cabinet of Natural History in Madrid, made them increasingly accessible for comparative study. On the other hand, such comparisons were taking place in the context of unprecedented popular and scholarly interest in all things Egyptian, following Napoleon’s campaigns in North Africa. Denon’s *Voyage*, one of the earliest reference books on ancient Egypt, now brought the zodiac of Dendera to the attention of the French public. Denon’s engravings of the zodiac became the focus of fierce controversies, which pitted supporters of the biblical narrative against those who thought the world was a lot older. Humboldt, who was in Paris at the time working on his *Vues*, apparently did not take sides in the controversies. Still, the debates found their way into his writings.

Comentado [DMT4]: We want to draw attention to this. There were Egyptian pieces in Madrid as well.

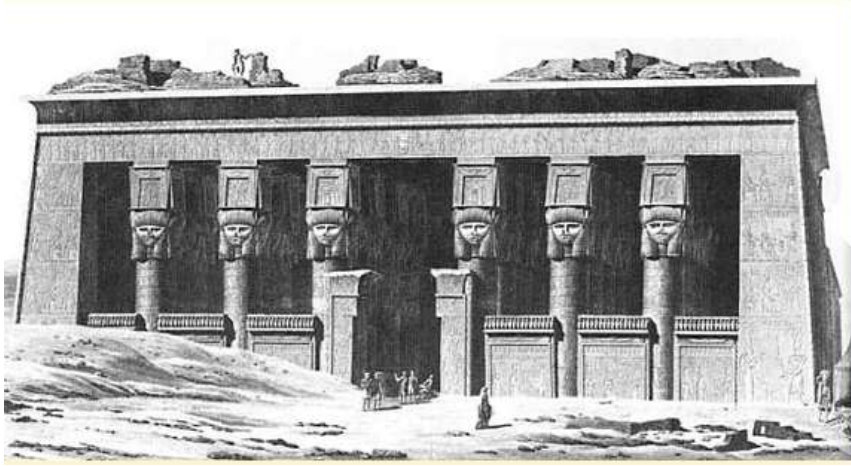


Figure 2. Temple of Hathor at Dendera.

Comentado [DMT5]: Please insert, after caption, full citation and permission if needed.

The increasing proximity of Mexican and Egyptian artifacts, however, is only part of the story of why Egypt was a recourse for studying ancient Mexico. Increasingly it was the notion of ‘style’ and, in this case, ‘Egyptian style,’ that moved scholars to lump otherwise distant cultures or civilizations under one label. How did the concept of ‘style’ work? How did the concept serve to produce knowledge about and value for, Mexico’s ancient past?

Style, writes the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, is a category of exclusion (as in the signature style of an artist) and inclusion (as an expression of the taste that dominated a certain age, nation or civilization). It is style as an inclusive category that most interested Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), although his evolutionary theory of style would turn out to be rather exclusive. Winckelmann was one of the most prominent and influential thinkers of the Enlightenment on art history and aesthetics. Borrowing from contemporary evolutionary thinking in natural history, Winckelmann rejected a model of the history of art centered on artist biographies or

Comentado [DMT6]: This is your point, no? Why not say it here?

on single works of art, to produce instead an evolutionary, aestheticist, object-oriented history of art that privileged ancient Greece. In *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764), Winckelmann postulated that a uniform, evolutionary pattern marks the history of art, which unfolds, from origin to decline, in phases corresponding to artistic stages in the representation of the human figure. For Winckelmann, the Greek nude figure was a culminating moment in art history. In his evolutionary scheme, Egyptian and Etruscan artifacts were imperfect preludes, while Roman sculpture was the tail end of the period when art had reached its apogee. Winckelmann further suggested that style is shaped by climate and the political regime, hence, the history of civilization could be read in a sequencing of styles. In short, style was in Winckelmann's influential formula a universal material index of human progress.

In *Vues des cordillères et monuments*, Humboldt rehearses many of Winckelmann's theories. Building upon Winckelmann's idea that artistic productions are expressions of their immediate surroundings, Humboldt proposed that the 'coarseness of style and the lack of correction' of American antiquities were determined by climate, the physiognomy of vegetation, and especially by the fact that the peoples of America – much in the same way as those of Northern Europe and East Asia – were at war against 'a perennially savage and agitated nature.' In the Americas, the shape of antiquities was dictated by the massiveness and extremeness of the topography: 'volcanoes with their craters surrounded by eternal snow [...], the contours of mountains, valleys with their furrowed flanks, and imposing waterfalls.' The supposed lack of political freedom that, for Humboldt and many other European philosophes, had prevailed in the ancient Americas, further helped explain why pre-Columbian aesthetics deviated 'from the ideal artistic style, in which the Greeks have

Comentado [DMT7]: ?? Please explain how it is that Mexicans and the Mexican climate are similar to those of Northern Europe and East Asia in Humboldt's thought, such that all are 'at war' with nature.

bequeathed us inimitable models.’ Although lacking aesthetic value, Humboldt did not deem American antiquities to be ‘unworthy of attention.’ As in Winckelmann’s evolutionary scheme, they were valuable as objects of a universal science, for, he wrote, ‘they offer to our eyes a picture of the uniform and progressive march of the human spirit.’

For Humboldt, the style of American antiquities came closest to that of the ancient Egyptians and, to some extent, to that of Mongols and Tartars. This was not simply because preconquest antiquities resembled morphologically the antiquities of ancient Egypt or China. More importantly, it was the political and religious structures expressed in preconquest antiquities that justified their being placed together with those of Egypt. Collectively, preconquest vestiges functioned as an index of the stage of civilization reached by America’s ancient peoples, comparable to the stage reached by the ancient Egyptians. Throughout his writings, Humboldt abstained from concluding that Mexico would have been an Egyptian colony in the New World. For him, analogy did not mean provenance. Rather, structures.

Many of his contemporaries, however, distrustful or uncomfortable with the idea that anyone, short of Aryan races, could have constructed complex civilizations or produced sophisticated objects, feverishly bolstered theories of Old-World colonies in the Americas in the past, while making the case that Americans (south of the US border) still needed the guidance of European powers if they were to succeed in the present. By the mid-nineteenth century, style was being wielded as justification for a new round of European imperialism in Africa and Asia, and of neocolonialism in the Americas.

Comentado [DMT8]: Sure, but Humboldt argued for the Oriental origins of the Toltecs, and he speculated that Manco Capac was a wandering Brahmin. So yes, like many of his contemporaries he thought that ancient American civilization came from the Orient and was oriental or despotic ‘in spirit.’ It would be useful I think to make this point here. Such orientalist views were supported not only by object-science but by German comparative etymology, which compared lists of Sanskrit words to Nahua and Quechua words, for example. As Jorge notes, Humboldt broke with those like Voltaire who speculated that the Incas were wayward whites, possibly from southern Europe or the Canary Islands; the result was a shift from Occidentalism to Orientalism, both of which denied the native origins and genius of American civilization.

Comentado [DMT9]: Indeed, in the nineteenth century some German and Creole scholars speculated, based on linguistics and skeletal evidence, that the Incas were quite possibly descended from Aryans. I and others have argued that Creoles often argued for foreign origins for other reasons, including justifying the immigration of coolies into Peru.

Against such European cultural and political claims on Mexico's past and present, Mexican scholars took intellectual charge of preconquest antiquities to argue for their autochthonous quality. Writing in 1857, José Fernando Ramírez, the curator of the National Museum of Mexico, complained that 'those who do not want to grant America's unfortunate son any original thought, explain the pyramids as an imitation of Egypt.' Ramírez called for more locally sensitive approaches to the study of Mexico's past, which would bring into play codices, chronicles, indigenous languages, and toponymics. In time, Humboldt's 'Aztec priestess' would come to be identified with Chalchiutlicue, goddess of water, or with Xilonen, goddess of young corn. Both goddesses were typically represented with headdresses made of folded paper and decorated with amaranth seeds, but Xilonen was painted red, while Chalchiutlicue was blue. Humboldt's 'Aztec priestess,' now in the British Museum, still shows faint traces of red paint.

Comentado [DMT10]: Mariano Rivero, director of Peru's national museum and student of Humboldt, made the same argument decades before, although for lack of funds it was not published until 1851.

Further Reading

Comentado [DMT11]: Please provide more English titles of interest to general readers.

Jed Z. Buchwald and Diane Greco Josefowicz, *The Zodiac of Paris: How an Improbable Controversy over an Ancient Egyptian Artifact Provoked a Modern Debate between Religion and Science*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Esther Pasztory, 'Identity and difference: the uses and meanings of ethnic styles', *Thinking with Things. Toward a New Vision of Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 159.

Comentado [DMT12]: Please give article pages

Carlo Ginzburg, 'Style as Inclusion, Style as Exclusion' in Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison, eds., *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 27-54.

Alexander von Humboldt, *Vues des cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* (1810-1813).

Comentado [DMT13]: Full citation please.