Huaxtepec: The Sacred Garden of an Aztec Emperor

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ABSTRACT The symbolic meaning of Huaxtepec, a very famous Aztec garden, is explained, showing how it could have reflected some concepts of the pre-Columbian world view. Aztec and Maya societies were essentially agricultural. Thus, their main preoccupation was fertility, which they tried to maintain through the cult of gods associated with water and earth. Human life was impossible without earth, plants and animals. In a world where the sacred was conceived in terms of deified forms of the cosmic human and vegetal cycle, gardens, like the one in Huaxtepec, became important spaces for ritual celebrations. Unfortunately, very little is left of this significant Aztec garden, and in the 1960s part of it was turned into a vacation centre. However, through the study of colonial documents and other important descriptions, this ancient garden is reconstructed and its use as a ritual space is explained.

KEY WORDS: Gardens, Religion, Aztec

Pre-Hispanic Myths and Landscape
The famous Aztec royal gardens in Mexico amazed the first conquerors with their variety, extent and elaborate layouts. There were royal gardens in and near the Aztec capital in Tenochtitlan, Chapultepec, Ixtapalapa, el Peñón and Tetzoco, as well as in more distant locations such as Huaxtepec (Morelos). Gardens of the élite, such as those on the temple grounds, were maintained by a large labour force and contained ornamental, aromatic and medicinal plants. In a world like the pre-Hispanic one, where man was intimately connected with nature and where flowers, plants and trees were thought to have a soul like human beings, gardens played an important role in the landscape. These gardens were part of a sacred landscape where images of the sun, the mountains and the waters of life stood at the centre of pre-Hispanic religion.

In Mesoamerica the whole of the cosmos was animate: the cosmic forces earth, water, wind and earthquake were seen as animated beings and were incorporated into myth and religion. One of the most important myths recounted in 16th-century works was the creation of the earth and the sky. This myth describes the formation of the earth and sky as the tearing apart of the goddess Tlaltecuhtli. Tlaltecuhtli was a monstrous being with eyes and mouths in her joints, who floated in a great sea.