
Review: A New Analysis of the Gender Attribution of the "Great Goddess" of Teotihuacan

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She/Her/Hers

"My name is Angelica Alvarado and I recently graduated from Dominguez Hills with a degree in Anthropology and focus in archaeology. I plan on attending graduate school in the Fall of 2021 assuming the world does not end before then. My hope is to eventually become a professor and adapt to students' learning styles instead of having students adapt to my teaching style."

Throughout time, science has helped discover—and then rediscover—many fascinating puzzle pieces of information about our past. For instance, until recent discoveries, it was believed that humans had reached the Americas no earlier than 13,000 years ago by way of a land bridge. Archaeologists and scientists have always used common knowledge, along with clues left by ancient peoples, to decipher the message they may have been trying to convey. Just as the peopling of the Americas has been a topic of debate, gender has also been revisited as our own society continues to progress. Located in the Valley of Mexico, Teotihuacan has been known in the past for its ancient Mesoamerican architecture. Thanks to modern science and reevaluation, however, the ancient city is getting more attention for one Goddess—or so they think—in particular.

Written by Elisa Mandell, "A New Analysis of the Gender Attribution of the 'Great Goddess' of Teotihuacan" argues for the avoidance of gender labels as we try to understand past generations. With the constant back and forth between genders and gender

roles in certain civilizations, this paper made clear that not only are we evolving as a society, but our thoughts and understandings on past societies are changing simultaneously. Although the obvious theme of the article is surrounded by proofs of gender norms and attributes, the underlying theme is one shrouded by the changes we face in our society. As I delve further into the article's main discussion, I invite you to challenge your mind in the same way that this article challenged mine.

The Great Goddess of Teotihuacan, also known as the Teotihuacan Spider Woman, has been a major topic of debate since her rediscovery in 1972 by archaeologist Alfonso Caso. The Goddess appears on multiple surfaces, such as homes and important buildings, proudly displaying her elegant headdress covered in multicolored zigzag patterns. With her arms stretched wide and water dripping from her fingertips, she seems to represent birth and nurturing. However, she is also surrounded by spiders, with a noticeable nose pendant and a variety of other features that continue to baffle scientists, as those attributes are always found on male deities. While some believe that this entity is actually an expression of multiple deities, college professor Esther Pasztory was the first to argue that the "goddess" may not be female at all—or male, for that matter. To understand just who the Goddess of Teotihuacan is, we may have to put our own views of gender aside.

Over the past fifty years, the ongoing debate over The Goddess' gender has been nothing short of a rollercoaster ride. Bouncing back and forth between male and female, history has settled on "goddess" solely due to the outward appearance of this deity. The reasons why this debate has been going on for so long can be attributed to our own understanding of past generations and their gender expression. It is also assumed that imposed societal norms placed on the anthropologist or archaeologist contribute to the gender projection and finally, we still know a minuscule amount of this ancient language so all we can do as Anthropologists, is speculate.

First, we cannot talk about which gender The Goddess represents without first deciphering what genders exist. In his article for *Journal for Anthropological Research*, author Jay Miller writes a piece titled "Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America." Miller explains that while it is widely accepted in Western societies that there are only two genders, male and female, there are a plethora of societies (like the Native American Lakota culture) that see gender as nonlinear and fluid. This includes the idea of a "two spirit" person or "mixed gendered." These seemingly progressive ideas on gender tend to remain centered on males and somehow only give men the wiggle room to switch between masculine and feminine. For example, "third gender" refers to Lakota men who prefer to

live their lives as women in terms of how they dress and act, but they are still considered men (Miller 1999). This term was later changed to an emasculating “Molly” in the 1800s. “Fourth gender” refers to a Lakota man who makes a complete lifestyle change and no longer lives as a man but as a woman completely (Miller 1999). However, with our social expansion of gender fluidity becoming more and more prevalent, the same influence goes into the work done at these sites. This is why the term “two spirited person” or “mixed gendered” is preferred due to the non-forceful conformity it places on a single person or culture.

Second, we must look at the way we are raised in terms of identity and gender roles. Traditionally, our gender roles place women as home makers who rely on the man of the house to bring home whatever they need. They rear their children, dote on the hard-working men, make sure dinner and laundry is ready by 6pm, and they are expected to do this with a smile on their faces. While the idea is less *Leave it to Beaver* in Teotihuacan and more about status and responsibility, the gender roles tended to be clearer in past societies. For example, Maya societies elaborate on whether their hero or figure is meant to be masculine or feminine by sculpting the genitalia or including something telling that would help researchers determine the sex. On some occasions, if no distinguishment is made between male or female, the Maya often left some type of documentation that explained why the deity or figure’s gender was left

ambiguous. Men and women still had separate roles in Teotihuacan societies that catered to our way of thinking, but those ideas were further cemented in the 19th and early 20th century, when discrimination of feminine men and masculine woman became the norm (Hill 2006). These ideas, whether subtle or not, can affect the way a researcher looks at a society. By using their learned knowledge to help determine roles and genders in a society, this biased decision-making can lead to incorrect information.

Finally, one of the main reasons why it is so difficult for anthropologists to distinguish the gender of The Goddess and what she represents is due to the overwhelming amount of evidence that she is both. Symbols like the owl, the zigzag patterns in the headband, and the people underneath that all represent darkness are contradicted by the water, the spiders, and the trees that all represented a feminine energy. These symbols also make it increasingly harder to determine what deity she/he represents as she/he has been seen depicted with some of the items some of the time but never all of them, all the time.

Columbia University professor Esther Pasztory has done an impressive amount of her own research on The Goddess, which many people have then taken and expanded upon. One of Dr. Pasztory’s main points is that maybe The Goddess was a little bit of everything. She proposes the idea that the Teotihuacan people depict her in different ways because she represents many different

people. We tend to be familiar with the Christian idea that God is everywhere, and in everything, but this is where we draw the line. It is “too far-fetched” to believe that past civilizations believed the same to be true about their gods. While The Goddess remains a mysterious figure, our society feels it is important to place her/him into a female or male category. What is clear, is that The Goddess represented many things to the people of Teotihuacan. She did not need to be just the goddess of water or Earth for them, but more fittingly, she was the goddess of creation and destruction, of light and dark. In other words, she is a little bit of everything, for everyone.

Works Cited

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