

# Oaxaca Times

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## The Grasshopper

No. 58

The Florentine Codex lists six species of *chapulín* or *chapolin*, the Nahuatl word meaning "hill" or "earth locust." It describes the *yectli chapolin* which means "thing, locust," as an insect of medium size, with red front and feet, which turns reddish at harvest time, the *chilli*. This is probably the insect represented in the red stone sculpture of a grasshopper which has been part of the collection at the National Museum of Anthropology since the last century. This splendid piece comes from Mexico City, although the precise location of the find remains unknown. We do not fully understand the function of this and other insect sculptures. Perhaps they were considered idols, or perhaps they were merely placed in the vicinity of altars as part of the ritual furnishings. Whatever the case, this piece, which shows the grasshopper with its wings and legs tucked beneath its body, certainly testifies to the realism of pre-Hispanic art.



"Insects" Francisco Toledo

Mendoza, it is depicted on top of a hill to indicate the toponym Chapultepec, "place of the grasshopper hill." Although it is not always rendered with great realism, its shape is easily recognized.

The grasshopper is another culinary specialty that survives to this day. Pre-Hispanic peoples were fond of the *yectli chapolin* mentioned above, which may well be the same kind that is roasted and sold today at the market in the city of Oaxaca.

Del Barco (1973:37) states that "the following manner of serving it is the most common at almost every meal. They roast them first, then grind them between two stones to make a powder which is eaten. In this way neither legs, feet nor scales go to waste."

There is also evidence of locust plagues. Del Barco (1973:36-37) mentions one that took place in the 18th century in Baja California, while Fray Antonio de Ciudad Real (1976, I:247) reports how in 1586 he watched the Indians trying to fend off the clouds of locusts by yelling, blowing trumpets and beating drums. Such a

plague plays a key role in a folk tale that has come down to us from a Nahuatl speaking region of the Isthmus: an old lady who had nothing to eat appealed to

her son for help, which he refused to offer. Soon after, however, the son left the house to fetch corn to give to a friend. When he failed to return, his wife went in search of him, only to come across a heap of clean bones: he had been killed and devoured by a marauding band of locusts (Castellon

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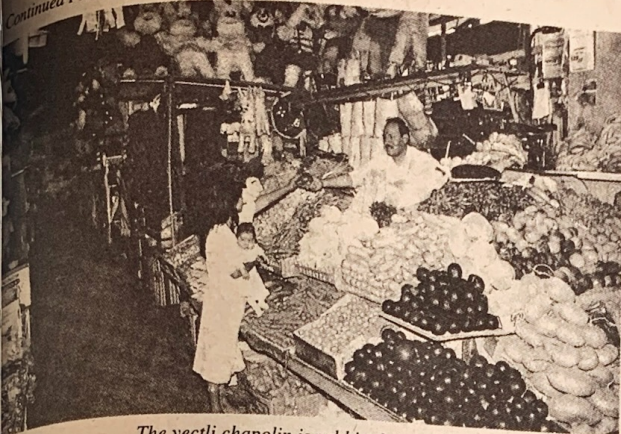
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# The Grasshopper

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The yectli chapolin is sold in the market

berta, 1987:203-205).

Apart from the insects we have dealt with so far, several others are seen to crop up in the pre-hispanic and colonial worlds that rarely deserve to be mentioned. Of these, the cockroach, for instance, Francisco Clavijero writes (1945, I:155) that this "kind of domestic beetle" has the utmost use in homes and buildings since "it eliminates bedbugs. It is constantly observed that European ships arriving in Veracruz completely infested with

bedbugs, enjoy a return voyage free from this insufferable pest. They have all been purged by cockroaches." Among the Maya, cockroach is ix kuluch, which means "the hardened one." It is not regarded as a beetle, the name for which is *ix culcim*, "the wallower", or *mackech*, "the covered one". This beetle, stripped of wings and shell and dried, is a popular trinket among young girls, who tie it as a charm around their necks or wrists (C. Alvarez, 1980:27-271).

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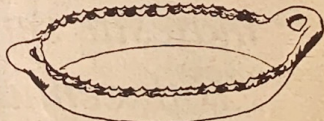
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The jumil is a stink bug (Pentatomidae family) still valued today as a beneficial and highly tasty morsel. Indeed it is high in protein, and is sold in markets to be swallowed alive in tacos or with sauce, in rice and other dishes. The enthusiasm for this insect is such that in

Taxco it has its own temple on Jumil Hill, where Jumil Day is celebrated every November, when it is most abundant. The flea, now known to be a harmful carrier of disease, was regarded in pre-Hispanic times as a lovely part of Nature. There is even a fine Mexican sculpture of this insect.

But perhaps one of the most fascinating examples of the important role played by insects in the pre-Hispanic world is provided by the Teotlacualli or "divine food," prepared by the priests



Los chapulines are collected in the country-side

according to a recipe recorded by Diego Durán in his 16th century History (1967,1:51-53). "This divine nourishment was well in keeping with the god who partook of it. It was wholly composed of poisonous vermin, namely, spiders, scorpions, centipedes, salamanders, vipers, and so forth. These were collected by youths who always kept a rich stock of them in readiness for when the priests might require them." To prepare this divine brew, priests took a number of

these creatures and "burned them in the brazier of the god who was in temple, and once well burned, they threw the ashes into mortars with plenty of ground tobacco (...) and pounded this into a devilish, stinking and deadly ointment." After this they poured the mixture into pots or gourds which they placed before the god as "divine food." The priests also anointed their bodies with this paste, causing them, Duran continues, "to lose all semblance of fear. They would slaughter men for sacrifice with the utmost recklessness, and set off alone by night, thus besmeared, into the mountains, with their gloomy caverns and dark, fearsome ravines. Coated with the divine food that would protect them, none ever feared that any harm might come their way..." The teotlacualli mixture also served as a medicinal balm that brought rapid relief when applied to

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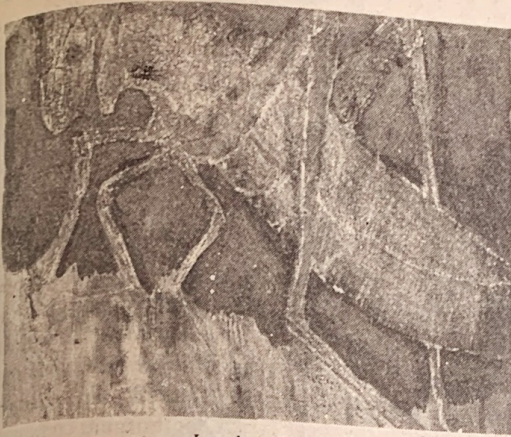
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# The Grasshopper



Los chapulines

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the affected part of the body. Duran notes this in the chapter of his History devoted to *Tezcatlipoca*, the supreme deity in whose honor the priests painted their bodies black. The mixture was the same "as that with which they smeared the idol and with which priests and ministers anointed themselves" (II:31). The sacred character of the ingredients used to make the Divine Food is thus undeniable. But *Tezcatlipoca* was also a sorcerer—and poisonous insects were frequently assigned as sorcerers' messengers. This is how Durán describes this aspect in the tale of the quarrel between *Huitzilopochtli* and his sister, the great sorceress *Malinalxóchtli*; he got angry with his sister "to see how great was the power she had already obtained over fierce and noxious beasts, and how her spells and charms could kill those who offended her, by sending the viper and the scorpion, the centipede or the deadly spider to sting them. . . ." (II:31). As a final example of the same phenomenon, we may recall *Motecuizoma's*

efforts to halt the Spanish advance. Duran relates the story as if he were the *tlatoani Motecuizoma* himself: "And the best means I can think of is to summon all the enchanters and witches and those who dispose of dreams, and command the serpent and the scorpion and the spider, to bewitch them and give them dreams and dazzle them with visions and have the insects sting them to death. Thus I have resolved to send for them from *Yauhtepec* and *Oaxtepec* and *Malinalco* and *Tepuztlan*, so that all those dealing and practiced in such of offices may gather here and go to kill and destroy them with their sorcery." (II:521-523).

The sorcerers were duly sent on their mission, but returned complaining that the Spaniards were very thick-skinned, that they stayed awake all night, which hampered the insects in their task, and that if they were bitten by so much as a flea, they got up and killed it straight away. By Lorna Fox. ■

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