

# Water Deity Figure

***Water Goddess (Chalchiuhtlicue), Artist Unidentified.***

The cultural activities, belief structures, and art of the Nahua (Aztec) Empire (1325–1520 CE) centered around numerous deities, including the powerful water goddess Chalchiuhtlicue (pronounced “chal-chew-tuh-lee-quay”).

Chalchiuhtlicue (“jade is her skirt,” in the Nahuatl language) was associated with the power and the purity of groundwater, spring, river, and lake water. She was the goddess of fertility and presided over all social and spiritual functions of freshwater. Her domain extended to birthing rituals, cleansing of sins, sacrificial ceremonies, the ritual washing of the deceased, and destruction through both floods and droughts.

This sculpture of the goddess was finely carved from basalt, or volcanic rock, in central Mexico during the height of the Aztec Empire. Most likely the rock was sourced from a quarry near the empire’s stronghold, Tenochtitlán (present-day Mexico City). Tenochtitlán was built on two islands in Lake Texcoco, where life centered around water through transportation, agriculture, and daily routines.

Although the exact location of the sculpture’s origin is unknown, the smooth surface and fine details of the basalt indicate that the sculptor was an expert craftsman. Typical of depictions of the goddess, this sculpture shows Chalchiuhtlicue kneeling with both hands resting on her knees. She is wearing a distinctive tasseled headdress, a long skirt, and a noblewoman’s cape with triangular tassels and adorned with double-ringed earrings visible in front of straight hair that hangs just below her shoulders. Small indents in her eye sockets indicate that inlays of obsidian or shell may have enlivened her face.

While this sculpture is a visual representation of Chalchiuhtlicue, it was viewed as a living and powerful being in its original context. Displayed in a temple setting, the form actualizes the goddess, a concept known as *ixiptla*, a Nahua term describing an artwork’s ability to be a container and the embodiment of the power found in the person or being.

## Challenges for students

The Aztec Empire was a dominating power in Mesoamerica with an extensive social, political, religious, commercial, and artistic reach. Lead your students in a deep dive into the artistic and historical background of the empire.

**Visit [artbma.org/aztec](http://artbma.org/aztec) to learn more about Aztec culture.**

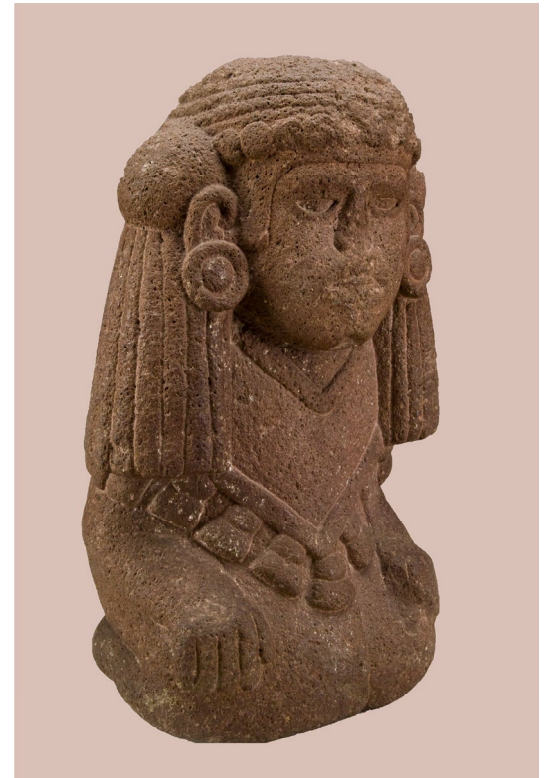
Numerous representations of Chalchiuhtlicue feature the same visual elements (headdress, tasseled cloak). Lead your students through a compare-and-contrast lesson comparing the BMA’s sculpture to other representations of the goddess.

**Visit [artbma.org/azteciconography](http://artbma.org/azteciconography) to learn more about Aztec symbols.**

**Visit [artbma.org/chalchiuhtlicue](http://artbma.org/chalchiuhtlicue) to see more examples of water deities.**

Chalchiuhtlicue was the goddess of water, which the Aztec Empire relied on heavily for its success in building its empire. Lead a discussion on the role that water plays in our daily lives. List or discuss ways that we can bring awareness to the necessity of preserving and honoring this valuable natural resource. Create an artwork on the theme of water and its preciousness.

Print the following page for your students.



Unidentified Nahua (Aztec) artist. *Water Goddess (Chalchiuhtlicue)*. 14th-early 16th century. Mexico. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Alan Wurtzburger, BMA 1960.30.1

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