

# **AZTEC ART**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A main function of Aztec Art was to express religious and mythical concepts to legitimize the power of the State. This artistic language spoke predominantly through the form of iconographic symbols and metaphors. For example, the image of the eagle symbolized the warrior and the sun at its zenith. Images of serpents were linked to the gods Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli, and thus were represented as water or fire serpents, respectively. Representations of frogs as aquatic beings were also reminiscent of Tlaloc. The conch shell was related to fertility, life, and creation. As indicated by Heyden and Villaseñor (1994), sculpture served as communication through visual metaphors, which were realized with a purity of techniques that allowed for refinement of detail.

It is unwise and misleading for modern Western scholars to label most forms of Aztec expression as fine art. Vaillant (1938) mentions that the Aztecs, like many ancient nonwestern civilizations, did not have a word to describe fine art, and that they did not argue over questions of aesthetics; nor did they create objects to be observed for their own sake. Instead they created objects intended to serve a well-defined function--to indoctrinate standard religious, political, and military imperatives. Understanding the artistic principles of the ancient indigenous past is difficult given our own cultural biases and our own definitions of an artistic world. But it is easy to recognize that the Mexica

appreciated beauty in terms of their own culturally dictated standards.

## THE AZTEC ARTISTS AND CRAFTSMEN

Though historians and European chroniclers found reasons to document information describing the daily life of Emperors, members of the imperial family, and warriors, there is little information about the day-to-day life of Aztec artisans and craftsmen despite the fact that artists at Tenochtitlan and other Aztec cities constituted a numerous class with its own quarters and organizations; they preserved the class below that of the *pochteca* (long-distance merchants), though they were in some respects affiliated to the upper classes. Not so much is known about the guilds of the quarrymen, who are sometimes mentioned in ethnohistorical sources without much detail. The only groups of artists that were much taken into account were those associated with the decorative arts: the goldsmiths, the jewelers, and the *amanteca* (feather-workers). They used various tools of stone, copper and wood, and wet sand for the abrasion of jade and crystal. Soustelle (1979) states that gold (*teocuitlatl*), silver, amber, crystal, pearls, and amethysts were popular materials for creating rich jewels, and vibrantly dyed feathers decorated fine clothing. Most importantly, they had an infinite amount of patience to any unique cannon dictated by their rulers and religious leaders.

According to Soustelle (1979), these people were named *tolteca* (the Toltecs) because the origins of their art-work were traditionally associated to the ancient Toltec civilization, whom the Aztecs venerated as their forefathers over the centuries.

### ***Tolteca***

Initially, the Aztecs were a nomadic tribe with no craftsmen or artists that arrived to the Valley of Mexico in the year 1325, overpowering the citizens of small settlements, such as Colhuacan or Xochimilco, which preserved the ancient art traditions of Tula (the Toltec capital) after its fall, along with its language and customs. According to Sahagún (1951-1969, Book 3), the Toltecs, meaning literally a group of skilled craftsmen, were all very skilled artisans. To be referred to as a *tolteca*, or Toltec, was an honor for Aztec

artisans; it served as a reminder that as craftsmen they were members of the artistic traditions of a golden era. Aztec craftsmen were inspired by their Toltec ancestors, who created magnificent feather mosaics, worked gold and other precious metals, and carved stone to create monumental sculptures for their kings and gods

As Aztec rulers expanded the political boundaries under their control, reaching even the remote tropical regions, wealth began to accumulate rapidly and artisans grew in social status as they became more in demand. The *tolteca* class provided artisans and their families with certain privileges that common people did not possess. However, most artisans did not rise from their own stations to any positions of considerable power, and so they maintained peaceful relationships with the ruling class. Presumably artists, given their unique talents, preferred to stay in their positions where they were respected and admired for their abilities.

Artisans who worked directly for the Aztec ruler performed their jobs either inside the palace and or in their own homes, where raw materials such as stones, feathers, or precious metals could be sent. But they did not work alone. Interestingly, the artist's workshop witnessed the entire family's participation. Each family member worked in prescribed roles to complete pieces. For example, the wife of an artist wove blankets with the rabbit hair, dyed feathers, and embroidered clothing, depending on the profession of her husband. Children in such households would learn and inherit the artistic traditions of their parents.

Accounts regarding an artist's salary are rare. One account reveals that artisans were well paid for their work. The stone sculpture of Motecuhzoma II was executed by fourteen sculptors who were paid with clothing for their wives and themselves, cotton, ten loads of calabashes, and maize given as an advance. After the work was completed, they were each given two servants, cocoa, crockery, salt, and more clothing. Although artists may have been given good compensation, they were also taxed; however, they were not required to give personal service or any agricultural labor. And if legal disputes arose, the *tolteca* class had chiefs who represented them before the authority of the law.

## MONUMENTAL STONE SCULPTURE

Aztec sculpture was not the result of random inspiration but a monumental synthesis of religious and cultural concepts. An important characteristic of Aztec sculpture is the abstraction of whole images that retain realistic, concrete details. Sculptures represented their myths, dreams, and illusions of life and death [Fig. 1]. Monumentality was another important trend in Aztec sculpting. However, monumental art was not just the representation of something massive and enormous; it was the visual symbol of force of an idea, simply executed and manifested in the relationship between dimensions. Aztec monumentality awed and frightened the spectator and imposed a manipulated impression of power that the State invested in all Aztec art.

### ***Ocelotl-Cuauhxicalli***

A vessel in the form of a jaguar, the *Ocelotl-Cuauhxicalli* was used to store the hearts of sacrificed victims [Fig. 2]. On the inside bottom of the *cuauhxicalli* (vessel of the eagles), two figures with striped bodies and skeletal jaws are piercing their ears with sharp bones. The rim of the vessel is composed of concentric circles conveying jades with eagle feathers. In a general sense, this colossal *ocelotl-cuauhxicalli* is a monument dedicated to the underworld, the earth, and the deified kings of the past.

According to Pasztory (1983), the great power of the jaguar is shown in this vessel without its grace and swiftness, a somber version of an otherwise vivacious animal. As a vessel related to the act of sacrifice and death, the jaguar represents the god of the earth, where the corpse would be buried, and the underworld, where the soul of the dead would travel. The image of the *ocelotl*, or jaguar, stands for the earth receiving sacrificial offerings. Jaguars were also icons of royalty and status symbols. Rulers wore jaguar skins and were associated with the feline. Artists might have witnessed the jaguar first hand in the zoos of Motecuhzoma II and other Aztec kings.

The two skeletal figures inside the vessel probably indicate the importance of ancestry the Mexica people. They are shown with the smoking mirror foot of Tezcatlipoca, god of

the many forms and protector of warriors, who possibly represents dead kings of past civilizations disguised as deities. They also extract blood from their ears utilizing blood-letting implements similar to the ones used in the penitential rituals performed by the ancient Aztec kings, another sign that they are symbols of ancestry. As Esther Pasztory points out, ultimately, the vessel, commissioned by Motecuhzoma II, links his own reign with the gods of the past.

### ***Cuauhtli-Cuauhxicalli***

The Cuauhtli-Cuauhxicalli, like the Ocelotl-Cuauhxicalli, was sculpted in the form of an animal--the eagle. The circular hole in the back of the figure indicates that this sculpture was a *cuauhxicalli*, or sacrificial vessel. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the Cuauhtli-Cuauhxicalli stored the hearts and blood of the sacrificed victims so that the deities, descending from the heavens, could feed themselves on the offerings [Fig. 3].

In ancient Mexico, the *cuauhtli* (eagle) symbolized both the sun and a strong warrior who fought the powers of the night under the direction of his patron deity Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. The eagle was an important symbol in ancient times since it was responsible for feeding the sun with the hearts and blood of the sacrificed victims, which gave the sun its energy to make its daily journey across the sky. This vessel points to a vital belief encompassed in the Aztec worldview--that life and death are joined. Death must occur so that life can exist, making human sacrifice a necessary component in ensuring the survival of both the sun and the universe, and consequently, human life.

This offering vessel is a magnificent example of the fine artistry of the Aztec sculptor. Sculpted as if the artist wanted to imitate in stone the real bird, the eagle eye is surrounded by delicate feathers while the tail is made of longer feathers that fall vertically. The details of the vessel are rich in texture and form.

### ***Dedication Stone***

This skillfully carved greenstone plaque was made in commemoration of the completion of the Temple of Huitzilopochtli at Tenochitlan in the year 8 Reed or 1487 [Fig. 4]. Where this panel was located originally is still unknown, but relief panels with dates, such as this one, were usually set into architecture like stairways and pyramid platforms. Very similar stones have been found in the Great Temple of Tenochitlan and



this plaque was probably a part of those.

In the lower half of the stone, the glyph 8 Reed is carved in an abstract design with double outlines. The upper half of the stone is similar to the carvings in the Bench Relief and the Stone of Tizoc. In the plaque, the rulers Ahuitzotl and Tizoc are dressed up as priests holding incense bags and piercing their ears with a bone. Tizoc was in power between 1481 and 1486, and his brother Ahuitzotl succeeded him and ruled from 1486 to 1502. Blood is flowing from their heads into an incense burner and is represented as a serpent into the maw of the earth monster border. Between the two Emperors, there is a grass ball of sacrifice, or *zacatapayolli*, with the bone piercers or *maguey* thorns used for auto-sacrifice (blood-letting) stuck in it. Also, streams of blood are flowing from the wounds in each of their legs. Both kings are identified by their own glyphs: Tizoc by his “bleeding leg” glyph and Ahuitzotl by the water being with a curly tail. The two kings appear in profile, with their heads and legs pointing sideways, while their torsos appear in a full frontal view. They are barefoot, which is a symbol of divinity. Above the two men, the date 7 Reed appears, whose meaning is unclear.

This stone depicts an act of devotion. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the Aztecs believed that humans could achieve immortality by their good actions, such as devotion acts performed for the gods. Expanding the Great Temple of Tenochitlan, dedicated to the patron Mexica gods Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, was the duty of every ruler or *tlatoani*. This plaque reveals the same sentiment. Tizoc began expanding the Great Temple and his brother Ahuitzotl finished the completion of the project. Also, both emperors are performing an act of sacrifice, which involves the offering of *maguey* thorns or bone piercers covered with their own blood and inserted in a *zacatapayolli* to mother Earth.

### **Stone of the Warriors**

Discovered in 1897 near the main square in Mexico City, the Stone of the Warriors is full of reliefs of warriors in procession holding their weapons [Fig. 5]. As described by Pasztory (1983), the soldiers approach a symbol of sacrifice fully armed for battle, each wearing a different headdress; they approach the grass ball, or *zacatapayolli*. It is possible that a ruler at one time stood next to the grass ball, but time has abraded the

stone making it unclear. These 14 carved warriors might represent the City of Tenochitlan and even the Aztec Empire's mighty power and strength.

On top of the sculpture, the earth monster image (either Tlaltecuhтли or Itzpapalotl) is carved, symbolizing the devourer of human blood and hearts. The earth covers the physical bodies of the dead and feeds on them, and it requires the sacred liquid of blood to be in balance with the universe.

The Stone of the Warriors probably served at one time as an altar or a throne owing to the fact that the depression in the center was made during the colonial period.

### ***Bench Relief***

Until an early Chacmool sculpture was found, the Bench Relief was thought to be one of the earliest Aztec sculptures ever found [\[Fig. 6\]](#).

According to Pasztory (1983), the Bench Relief is composed of 52 panels that were taken away and re-used to reconstruct buildings in Tenochitlan. There is the important emblem depicted in the central stones of the monument, which shows the grass ball of sacrifice (*zacatapayolli*) stuck with thorns and human bones used to draw blood. Two warriors surround the sacrificial grass ball of thorns. These warriors belong to a high rank in Aztec society suggested by their clothing, such as their three types of headdresses, one with the turquoise diadem of a chief, a headdress of feathers associated with a lord, and a two feather headdress, which indicate a high position. The warriors are also carrying such weapons as spear throwers (*atlatl*), spears, and shields. All the images represent humans, except for the one on the left, who has a leg ending in a representation of smoke rather than a human leg. According to Pasztory (1983), the figure with the smoke leg is mixing human and divine features. The person with divine features is disguised as the god Tezcatlipoca, with the smoking mirror on his hair and he is leading the other Aztec noble-warriors to battle. The nose bar, as well as his turquoise diadem headdress, is symbols of royalty. The figure on the left might represent a king of Tenochitlan, possibly Motecuhzoma I who is praying, as suggested by the curled flower design in front of his face. If this is so, then the monument's date

range between 1440 and 1469.

There are only a few traces of the stucco paint used to decorate the Bench Relief. The Aztecs might have made an imitation, in this relief, of a Toltec bench relief, since it is closely similar to Toltec prototypes. The Tula bench relief in the Burnt Palace also depicts a procession of warriors with feathered serpent borders. An Aztec trend in this relief is the grass ball of sacrifice in the center, serving as a penitential symbol and an emphasis on the image of the Aztec ruler.

### ***Teocalli of the Sacred War (Temple Stone)***

The Temple Stone, named the *teocalli* (temple) of the Sacred War by Alfonso Caso, is a commemoration to the New Fire Ceremony of 1507, the sacred war, and the imperial power of the Mexica [Fig. 7].

The Temple Stone is composed of sixteen images and six glyphs on both of its sides, taking the shape of an Aztec temple. A scene of a natural world with an eagle and a cactus on the back of the sculpture alludes to the founding of Tenochtitlan [Fig. 8]. According to the migration legend, the patron god Huitzilopochtli told them to build a settlement in the place where they would see an eagle landing on a cactus growing on a lake [Fig.9]. When the Mexica saw the vision, they founded Tenochtitlan on Lake Tetzcoco.

On top of this colossal monument there is the date 2 House (1325), indicating that this was the date of the traditional founding of the Aztec capital. The entire monument symbolizes the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, rising from Lake Tetzcoco. The monument itself is mixing the elements of a royal throne, a temple, and a year bundle. For the Aztecs, a main temple of a city represented the city's symbol and in manuscripts, a burning temple represents that the city has been conquered. In Mesoamerica, temples were shaped in the form of pyramids symbolizing the mountains, where fertility and creation happens, where the wombs of creation are kept, which are the caves themselves. The word city in Nahuatl is *altepetl*, which means "water-mountain."

Some scholars suggest that the Temple Stone was in fact a royal throne of

iconographical meaning. This monument was found in Moctezuma II's palace in 1831 and might have served as his symbolic or actual throne. The sculpture also is related to year bundles representing the 52 years of an Aztec century. The year 2 Reed (glyph of the New Fire Ceremony), 1 Flint knife, and 1 Death are represented in the stone sculpture. According to Pasztory (1983), during important feasts, the year bundles were used as seats for the nobility, thus making the Temple Stone a royal throne, a symbol of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan as a mountain pyramid, and the 52 years cycle. At the top of the stone there is a sun disk showing the glyph 4 Movement. The disk is flanked by a god, or a priest dressed as the god Huitzilopochtli in the left, and by Moctezuma II on the right [Fig.7]. The sun disk symbolizes the Aztec dedication to a solar cult and a new era of their rule. Both god and human king carry sacrificial knives and bones for drawing blood. A grass ball of sacrifice full of thorns to draw blood, appear on top of the solar disk. In a sense, the Temple Stone is itself being crowned by an Aztec Emperor and a patron deity, who are drawing sacrificial blood as a solar symbol for light, life, and time.

Opposing this image of life is the representation of death below the sun disk on top of the seat. Below the sun disk, lies the Earth Monster (Tlaltecuhctli) with a skull belt symbolizing the voracious power of the earth. Furthermore, the Earth Monster is flanked in the sides by weaponry, such as shields, spears, and war banners, all of them representing emblems of war. The *cuauhxicalli* vessels, which are being represented for the first time in a royal monument, are adorned with eagle feathers and jaguar spots, thus making them symbols to the Aztec warrior orders of the eagle and the jaguar. So, the sculpture is a monument to the sacred war in which the Mexica are conquering the Earth.

On both sides of the stone sculpture, is a pair of seated images with skeletal jaws wearing triangular loincloths and feather headdresses, typical of Aztec warrior regalia [Fig. 10]. They might represent the ancestors of the Aztecs, the ancient rulers prior to the Mexica conquest, or the Aztec deities, since the image on the left has that moustache and those goggles attributed to the rain god Tlaloc. Another figure has a royal diadem, and he is either a ruler or the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli. The Aztecs associated

Tlaloc and Xiuhtecuhtli to older civilizations, especially with the Toltecs; they believed that Tlaloc was the patron god of the Toltecs. The Aztecs understood the importance of honoring their ancestors and sought to find their spiritual support for the Empire. According to Pasztory (1983), when someone, such as Moctezuma II, sat in this royal throne, in a symbolical way he might have been resting on top of the earth, the underworld, and on his back, he carried the sun and the ancient past of the ancestors. Also, the glyph representing the 1 Flint knife, next to Huitzilopochtli, is the mythical date in which the Aztecs began their migration from Aztlan. Motecuhzoma II is glorifying his heritage and his ancestors by wearing a headdress of plumes tied to sticks. This was the headdress wore by the nomadic Chichimec ancestors of the Mexica. The Temple Stone embodies the concept of unbreakable continuity of Aztec and Toltec dominations, and the right of the Aztecs to supersede the Toltec civilization by conquest, sacrificial death, and by the divine guidance of Huitzilopochtli.

### ***The Sun Stone***

Carved in the late Post-Classic period, 1479, the year 13 *acatl*, during the reign of the sixth emperor Axayacatl, this very elaborate monument to the sun in its many manifestations is also known as the Calendar Stone and as the Aztec Calendar, though in reality it was never used as a calendar [Fig. 11]. The stone also represents human sacrifice related to the cult of Tonatiuh, god of the sun.

At the center of the Sun Stone, the wrinkled face of a blond-haired Tonatiuh is depicted with his tongue ravenously hanging from his mouth in the shape of an obsidian sacrificial knife. (Some scholars think that the deity is actually Tlaltecuhтли, the night sun of the underworld). His wrinkles indicate his old age, and his blond hair associates him with the golden sun. But it is his tongue that links him so graphically to human sacrifice, so hungry is it for human blood [Fig. 12].

Tonatiuh is surrounded by the symbol *Nahui Ollin*, the date on which the current sun of motion (the Fifth Sun) was created in Teotihuacan. In the four flanges of the *Ollin* sign appear the names of the four previous creations, which are Four Jaguar, Four Wind, Four Rain, and Four Water. Adjacent to the flanges, the four directions or cardinal

points of the Universe are represented like a cosmological map. The North is a warrior's headdress, which symbolizes the military power of the Mexica and their growing Empire. The South is a monkey and represents a part of one of the previous suns or ages in the myth of creation. The East is an obsidian dagger or *tecpatl* representing human sacrifice. The West is the Tlalocan, the house of the rain-god Tlaloc, and symbolizes water, essential for human survival.

In the next outer circle are shown the 20 days of the month. The Solar Calendar was composed of 18 periods of 20 days plus five days called *nemontemi* (useless and nameless). Starting from the position of the symbol of the North and heading clockwise, the Nahuatl names of the months correspond to the figure carved in each box that forms the circle. In order, they are: *Cipactli* (Crocodile), *Ehecatl* (Wind), *Calli* (House), *Cuetzpallin* (Lizard), *Coatl* (Serpent), *Miquiztli* (Death), *Mazatl* (Deer), *Tochtli* (Rabbit), *Atl* (Water), *Itzcuitli* (Dog), *Ozomatli* (Monkey), *Malinalli* (Plant, Grass), *Acatl* (Reed), *Ocelotl* (Jaguar), *Cuauhtli* (Eagle), *Cozcacuauhtli* (Vulture), *Ollin* (Movement), *Tecpatl* (Flint or Obsidian), *Quiahuitl* (Rain), and *Xochitl* (Flower). Out of this circle, eight arrowheads symbolizing the sun's rays scattering throughout the Universe point in all directions.

The outermost circle depicts the bodies of two fire serpents that encompass the Sun Stone [Fig. 11]. These serpents symbolize the connection between the upper and lower worlds, and work like an *axis mundi* (axis) uniting the two opposite worlds. Their opened mouths at the bottom represent the underworld. Two heads emerge from their opened mouths: Quetzalcoatl, personified as Tonatiuh (the sun) on the right, and Tezcatlipoca, personified as Xiuhtecuhtli (god of the night) on the left. These two gods have their tongues out touching each other representing the continuity of time. This interaction symbolizes the everyday struggle of the gods for supremacy on Earth and in the Heavens. In other words, the tongues touching each other signify the rising and setting of the sun, which are always in contact.

The Sun Stone symbolizes the destruction of the Fifth Sun, and acts as a celebration for the creation of the world where the forces of creation and destruction play equal roles. The iconography also suggests that the Sun Stone is a testament to Aztec victory. The

glyph above the Flint knife states the day on which the Aztecs began their migration from their original homeland of Aztlan. According to Pasztory (1983), this date was historically important; in that year, 1428, the Aztecs defeated the Tepanecs and became the new rulers of the Valley of Mexico. In that context, the Sun Stone supports the belief that the reign of the Aztec Empire was to be a new era in Mesoamerica.

### ***The Stones of Tizoc and Motecuhzoma I***

The Stone of Tizoc depicts the victories of Tizoc, the Emperor during 1481-86, and is a masterpiece of intricate stone carving [Fig. 13]. Pasztory (1983), states that the monumental Stone of Tizoc is the first of its kind that was dated and associated to a known king. In 1988, a similar stone dedicated to the King Motcuhezoma I was discovered [Fig. 14]. These stones, called *temalacatl*, were very probably used for gladiatory sacrifices of important captured warriors. The cavities that they each have in the middle of a solar disc suggest that they were also used as *cuauhxicallis*, vessels where the hearts of the sacrificed victims were deposited.

In the Stone of Tizoc, the King, portrayed here in the guise of the god Tezcatlipoca, and his conquests are glorified in stone. He is identified by his glyph, the symbol for leg. At the top of the cylinder is a sun disk with eight rays. Next to the cylinder, a sky border decorates the upper part and a register conveying the maw of the earth monster borders the bottom. The frieze between the two borders portrays fifteen Aztec warriors holding captive victims by the hair. Each of the fifteen conquering warriors wears a smoking mirror in his headdress, the symbol of Tezcatlipoca, the god of shape shifting and protector of warriors. Tizoc is the only warrior wearing the hummingbird helmet of the god Huitzilopochtli.

Only one of the fifteen warriors is identified as Tizoc; the rest might have been captains under his rule [Fig. 15]. Pasztory (1983) states that the Aztecs had fifteen lords, or fifteen city districts, referred to as the *calpulli*, and the number fifteen possibly symbolizes the Mexica's political and military divisions led by Tizoc. The captives

represent their rulers since they combine human and divine attributes by dressing as their city's principal deities. Two female figures present are associated with the female patron deities of Culhuacan and Xochimilco. It was a tradition of the Aztecs to take some of the local idols of a conquered city and bring them to a special temple in Tenochtitlan. The stone suggests that these events take place in the human realm and the divine realm, in which historical Emperors conquer specific towns while the deities ensure success or failure.

According to Pasztory (1983), some of the conquests that appear on the sculpture are attributed not to Tizoc, but to his forefathers. The glyphs associated with the captured towns suggest that they stand for major Aztec conquests up to the time of Tizoc, or they might belong to some ethnic groups rather than cities. The *Codex Mendoza* attributes 14 conquests to Tizoc, but the monument probably commemorates the conquests of the Aztec expansion embodied by Emperor Tizoc.

The Stone of Tizoc was inspired by Mixtec-Puebla manuscript painting evidenced by the similarity of the sun disk border and the earth monster border to images in Mixtec-Puebla documents. Also, each of the captives is identified by their own glyphs, which indicates that they are identified in the tradition of the Mixtec-Puebla historical codices. The stone also shows that the Aztecs were deliberately imitating Toltec models by making their own imperial art. Reference to Toltec models is limited only to clothing details of the warriors, who wear the butterfly chest ornament like those worn by the *Atlantes* of Tula [Fig. 16]. However, the use of a historical image in a cosmic setting to decorate a ritual object is especially Aztec in origin, and the patron gods of the Aztecs are more emphasized in the stone.

The stone as a whole represents the Aztec empire, originated by conquest, and the commemoration of Tizoc's reign. It is interesting to notice that the glyph next to Tizoc's prisoner is that of his first campaign, Matlatlan. Ironically, Tizoc was the most unsuccessful military Mexica leader and his very first campaign in Matlatlan was a total disaster; the monument amounts to political propaganda to glorify the Aztec power. Tizoc is better known for his major contributions to architecture, not war. The stone was



probably going to belong to his new monumental architectural project that implicated the re-building of many of the temples of the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan (See Section of Architecture).

### ***Portrait of Motecuhzoma II***

Commissioned in the year 1519, when the Emperor was 52 years old, this monumental portrait of Motecuhzoma II was carved in the cliff of the hill of Chapultepec (Hill of the Grasshopper), a sacred mountain shrine valued for its many fresh water springs [Fig. 17]. Chapultepec was important to the Aztecs because it was the place where they first settled, chose their very first king, and made the first human sacrifice to bring the blood and hearts to the deities. The Aztec Emperors utilized this hill to make portraits of themselves carved in the living rock.

According to Pasztory (1983), the Aztec rulers wanted to erect portraits that would last longer than the images erected for the Toltec emperors. Perhaps in observance of the prophecies of his downfall, Motecuhzoma II wanted a permanent image of himself at a time close to the first news about the arrival of the Spanish explorers. Chapultepec was a place that represented the royal Aztec ancestry, and it is said that the last Toltec ruler Huemac disappeared with all of his treasures into a cave in the hill. According to Chimalpahin, Motecuhzoma was looking for Huemac's advice in dealing with the colonizers and a way to escape from them.

The monument was finished apparently in 30 days by 14 sculptors. Although the image is heavily damaged, it is clear that Motecuhzoma II is dressed in his military costume shaped like Xipec Totec, the god of agriculture and fertility and the patron deity of the workers of precious metals (See Chapter 6). At one time, the figure was life-size and very realistic, which was a characteristic in the sculpture court of Moctezuma II. He is identified by his glyph, the nose plug and royal headdress, and several dates refer to his reign: 2 Reed (1507) represents the New Fire Ceremony; the glyph 1 Crocodile, probably indicates the date of his coronation; and the date 1 Reed, 1519, when the Europeans arrived in what was to become New Spain.

### ***Spiral Snail Shell (Caracol)***

This *caracol*, or spiral snail shell, was found in the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan [Fig. 18]. The sculpture shows how skilled the artists were in the late Post Classic Period (1250-1521) to create naturalistic figures related to symbolic metaphors. It was probably used as a musical instrument (*tecciztli*) in festivities and to announce the coming of a war. The *caracol* also became an emblem of the wind when it was cut transversally (*ehcailacacozcaatl*). Surprisingly, it still shows the remains of the original stucco and blue paint that connect it to the Tlaloc shrine.

According to Matos Moctezuma and Solís (2002), in the Aztec cosmivision, the universe was a layer of water that existed under the earth, and the water was inhabited by fantastic animals like the *cipactli* or alligator. As an aspect of this watery domain, the conch shell was an important element in Aztec iconography as a symbol of fertility, life, and creation. In Mesoamerica, shells were associated with the god Tlaloc, the bringer of water and rain. Snail shells have been found next to altars, which indicate that shells might have been important for religious rituals, amulets, and offerings to Tlaloc for his blessing.

### ***Tlaltecuhli (Earth God)***

This is the external face of the base of a *cuauhxicalli* that represents the earth monster Tlaltecuhli [Fig. 19]. In this case, the earth god is depicted as a “diving god” with a fleshless mouth; two *chalchihuites* (precious stones) decorate his cheeks and a flint stone forms his ornamented knife-tongue. On his back he wears a skull. This monument represents the devouring power of the earth that needs the sacrifice of humans in order to maintain its life and to continue to provide fertility.

### ***Tlaltecuhli del Metro (Earth God)***

According to Matos and Solis (2002), this sculpture was found during the construction of a Metro line in Mexico City, and because of its similarities to the statue of Coatlicue, it was thought to represent the goddess herself; therefore, it was initially named *Coatlicue del Metro* [Fig. 20]. But, recent research reveals the true identity of the sculpture: it represents the first known depiction of Tlaltecuhli, or Earth Lord, sculpted in the round

(a sculpture given a three dimensional shape that audiences can view by walking around the sculpture).

Tlaltecuhтли poses, crossed-legged with claw-like hands, as a devourer of human remains. He wears the necklace strung with human hearts and hands and an ornament at the back with a skull, a necklace similar to that of Coatlicue. His face is similar to that in the center of the Sun Stone, which symbolizes a connection with Tlachi-Tonatiuh, or the Underground Sun. The Underground Sun was the nocturnal part of the sun's journey as it travels around the world.

Matos and Solis (2002) suggest that this god represents the embodiment of earth, which is the final place where the human remains rest. As such, this figure is also a monument for death and sacrifice, which are necessary to sustain life and persuade the gods to balance the world. According to Pasztory, the figure is an embodiment of the voracious force of the earth that needs to be fed with sacrificial human victims.

The Earth God figure shows the great skill achieved at carving in three dimensions during the reigns of Ahuitzotl and Motecuhzoma II.

### ***Coatlicue***

The masterwork of the Aztec and whole Mesoamerican stone sculpture is the spectacular representation of the goddess Coatlicue [Fig. 21]. Coatlicue (She of the Skirt of Snakes) is the goddess of the Earth and a mother-goddess; she is at the same time a deity of fertility and destruction, uniting the duality of life and death in an overwhelming and crushing vision.

Her statue is a sublime testament of the main principle of the Aztec sculpture: abstraction of the whole and realism in detail. The figure in total represents the idea of the cosmic force that provides life and renews itself in death; she is the cosmic-religious conception of the Earth goddess in her two roles of womb and tomb. By contrast, the details of the sculpture are realistic: two serpent heads meet nose to nose to create a single impressive monstrous head; her hands appear like serpents that symbolize the renovation of the Nature; interwoven serpents form her skirt justify her name; a

necklace is strung with hands, hearts and the skull of a sacrificed victim; two breasts of an old woman hang from her chest, weary from an eternity of feeding all creatures; a thick serpent hangs between her legs forming a symbolized penis; the eyes and fangs that appear in her feet are monstrous maws that symbolize the devouring power of the Earth. There are two snakes forming her face that symbolize rivers of blood emerging from her decapitated neck, as explained by the Myth of Coatepec. She stands as a sacrificed victim.

According to Pasztory (1983), the colossal statue of Coatlicue represents the dual mind of the Aztecs. At the center of the figure there is a great contrast of opposing forces, in which the breasts are seen behind a skull, the two symbols of life and death. The sculpture is at the same time passive and active, monster and victim. Her arms are raised in a fearful gesture, and she wears a necklace of hand and heart trophies with skull pendants at the front and back.

The carving on the bottom of the sculpture is that of the god Tlaltecuhтли in his typical earth monster crouching position, and disguised as the god Tlaloc, the bringer of water [Fig. 22]. Coatlicue is Huitzilopochtli's mother, who is decapitated by the hands of her daughter Coyolxauhqui, making her the Earth mother that gave birth to the Aztecs. Another possible identification of this magnificent work of art is that of Cihuacoatl, or woman serpent, a goddess that embodies the voracious side of Earth.

Cihuacoatl was the patron goddess of Culhuacan, a Toltec-related ruling dynastic community from which the emperors of Tenochtitlan claimed to come from. Therefore, Coatlicue is the Aztec variant of Cihuacoatl, who symbolized the Toltec Earth-mother of the Mexica.

This colossal sculpture, one of the greatest surrealistic monuments in the world, should not be judged by traditional European artistic canons; its monstrous solemnity expresses the dramatic and dynamic energy of the cosmivision of a culture tragically destroyed. It can be said that the statue of Coatlicue is neither cruel nor good; it is just the artistic manifestation of the Aztec reality of life and death, expressed in a

monumental way. An almost identical sculpture known as Yollotlicue, since she wears a skirt of hearts instead of intertwined snakes, is kept in the Museum of Anthropology of Mexico City.

With the advent of the Spanish Conquest the mother goddess Coatlicue as mother of the main Aztec god Huitzilopochtli, became identified as the Virgin of Guadalupe, an indianized Virgin Mary, mother of the Christian God Jesus Christ [Fig. 23]. This image symbolizes the identity and integration of the modern Mexican people.

### ***Coatlicue of Coxcatlan***

This figure is another monument to Coatlicue, the mother of Huitzilopochtli [Fig. 24]. It was found in the town of Coxcatlan, in Puebla State. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the name Coatlicue means “serpent skirt,” a representation of the surface of the earth, which the Mexica believed was composed of a network of serpents. Coatlicue represents the cycle of life and death. In this image, she is shown with claw-like hands raised in an aggressive position and with a skull-like head, claiming the bodies of human beings. She is the mother-goddess of humankind, and feeds the sun and the moon and in reciprocity, she needs human sacrifice. Her turquoise ornaments and inlays are still visible. The holes on her head were probably used to insert human hair, making the sculpture life-like.

### ***Cihuacoatl***

This figure is a representation of Cihuacoatl, a powerful earth goddess [Fig. 25]. She also represents fertility by giving life and keeping the souls of the dead. Cihuacoatl means woman serpent, which makes her a half human, half serpent deity. The divine being is shown as emerging from the maw of a snake with a long forked tongue that comes out of her mouth. Cihuacoatl is also related to Xochiquetzal, the goddess of flowers, and they are associated with the fertility of the feminine aspect of the cosmos.

The goddess Cihuacoatl also had a political significance suggested by the use of her name; *cihuacoatl* was the title for the official (prime minister) next in power of the ruler, known as the *tlatoani*. The *cihuacoatl's* job was primarily concerned with domestic affairs while the *tlatoani's* position ruled over war and foreign relations. Rulership was

thus divided into two offices, with the *tlatoani* in the guise of the Mexica sun god Huitzilopochtli and the *cihuacoatl* in the guise of the Toltec Earth-mother. Pasztory suggests that, this situation symbolizes a dual relationship that brings together opposing forces such as the old and the new, war and fertility, life and death, Mexica and Toltec, and conqueror and conquered.

### ***Xiuhtecuhtli-Huitzilopochtli***

The god represented in this monument is shown as a young man in ritual garb [Fig. 26]. His hands were probably made to hold weapons or banners. This figure is also known as The Standard Bearer. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the figure is wearing the standard warrior clothing described as having a rectangular striped loincloth with a triangular cloth on top of it. He is also connected to the sun, which is represented by the sandals ornamented in the heels by solar rays and by a cape in the form of a tail of the *xiuhcoatl*, or fire serpent. He is represented as a warrior ready for battle. His calendrical name, *Nahui Cipactli* (4 Alligator) is located on the back of his head. Also, his head is full of small holes for the insertion of hair to make the figure seem more realistic, and his eyes and teeth still have their original shell and obsidian inlays. It was found in Coxcatlan, in Puebla State.

### ***Coyolxauhqui Relief***

This great oval stone, once painted in bright colors, is an impressive example of the artistic heights reached by Mexica artisans. It has a flat upper surface with the image of a dismembered goddess carved in low relief. She has been identified as the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui because of the symbols in her head: hair adorned with feathers, earplugs in the form of the fire god, and golden bells on her cheeks [Fig. 27a]. Her face bears the band and rattles that identify her as Coyolxauhqui, meaning she of the bells or rattles on the cheeks. The goddess is depicted naked with large lactating-like breasts hanging out and folds in her belly. Her torso is surrounded by a rope belt threaded through a skull. It is important to note that the fact of her beheading and dismembering confirms her role as goddess of the moon, because those events are connected to femininity and the “mutilations” of the phases of the moon.

The severed limbs arranged in a pinwheel manner indicate that she is dead. She is in

profile, with her head looking to the side and her body in a frontal view. This was an artistic device designed to show the entire body of the figure. Joints at her knees and elbows as well as her sandal heels have fanged monstrous masks. Such masks were usually related to earth-monster figures. Some forms in the sculpture stand out for their realism such as the modeled creases of the palms of the hands. Surprisingly, there are no glyphs made for this statue. Coyolxauhqui seems to be in a dynamic, almost running pose, as if sculpted in that instant of tumbling down the Mount of Coatepec beheaded and dismembered.

The location where it was found offers another aspect of its meaning. The monument was placed in the floor in front of the Temple of Huitzilopochtli with the head facing toward the stairway. It has been suggested that the sculpture might mark the conceptual center of Tenochtitlan, a point marked by sacrifice and conquest. This also might be the first image making reference to the myths of Huitzilopochtli as the main deity of the Aztecs and his triumph on the Mount of Coatepec, where he killed his sister Coyolxauhqui. This relief monument must have been a frightening reminder to any visitor to Tenochtitlan of the sacrificial death awaiting those who were considered enemies of Huitzilopochtli and his people, the Aztecs. Human sacrifice performed at the summit of the Great Temple was a ritual repetition of the execution of Coyolxauhqui, an eternal confirmation of Huitzilopochtli's power. In this way, art and architecture provided a setting for the reenactment of mythical-historical events.

### ***Head of Coyolxauhqui***

This colossal head of Coyolxauhqui, goddess of the moon, was the largest sculpture ever made using diorite, another precious stone used in Mesoamerica [\[Fig. 28\]](#). Figures of bells are carved on each of her cheeks identifying her as Coyolxauhqui. The cross with four dots indicates that the bells are made of gold. According to Pasztory (1983), the ornaments in her nose represent a day symbol, which is typical of the fire gods. The shells on top of her head are balls of down, which symbolize the sacrificial victims.

The head of the goddess is a complete work in itself; it is not a fragment of another statue. Underneath it is carved with a relief of serpents intertwined in a river of water

and fire (*atl-tlachinolli*, symbol of war), and a rope with plumes. As the goddess is decapitated, her head pours streams of blood represented by those serpents. This probably refers to a necessity to feed the gods with human sacrifices provided by warfare.

According to the legend, Coyolxauhqui was decapitated by her brother Huitzilopochtli for trying to kill Coatlicue, their mother. The sculpture represents the death of the goddess and the founding of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan under the guidance of Huitzilopochtli; the date 1 Reed is depicted in the figure, which is the date of the mythical creation of the world. This head was probably made for the dedication of the Great Temple in 1487; it is recorded that the king Ahuitzotl commissioned a figure of Coyolxauhqui for the temple.

### ***Xochipilli (God of Flowers)***

The picturesque town of Tlalmanalco, once part of the province of Chalco, is situated at the foot of the volcano Iztaccihuatl in the Valley of Mexico and was an important pre-Columbian religious center and a region famous for its artists. According to Durán (1967), this region was one of the replicas of the Tlalocan, the exuberant paradise of Tlaloc at the lower slopes of the volcano Iztaccihuatl, which was considered the mountain of sustenance. Here the sculpture of Xochipilli, the Aztec god of flowers, music, dance and feasting, was found [Fig. 29]. Whether the statue depicts a priest wearing the mask of Xochipilli or whether the statue depicts the god himself is unclear.

The shallow and intricate floral reliefs on the body of Xochipilli show a pre-Columbian technique of flat and beveled carving. The flower ornaments that decorate the entire body of the figure determine the god's identification. On all sides of the pedestal of the monument are blossoming flowers with a butterfly drinking the nectar in the center representing the blossoming of the universe.

The god is sitting with his legs crossed at the ankles in a tense position, but the organic and cylindrical form of the god's muscles makes him seem more alive and dynamic. The posture of Xochipilli suggests a shaman in hypnotical trance of hallucinogenic ecstasy.



He sits in shamanic flight to Tlalocan, the exuberant paradise of fertility and abundance for the Aztecs. The carvings in his knees and the pedestal are the glyphs of the *teonanacatl*, the sacred hallucinogenic mushrooms. In diverse parts of his body are representations of other enteogenic flowers like tobacco, *ololiuhqui* or *maravilla*, *sinicuichi*, and probably *datura* or *toloache*.

This sculpture suggests that the Chalco style had a high ornamental quality.

### ***Feathered Serpent***

This sculpture portrays a snake in a coiled position with its jaw fully opened to reveal the sharpness of its teeth. This figure represents Quetzalcoatl (the Feathered Serpent), one of the most important gods in the Aztec pantheon [Fig. 30]. On top of the figure appears the date 1 Acatl, which is the year Quetzalcoatl promised to return to Earth before disappearing in the East.

The Feathered Serpent gave humans the knowledge of agriculture and of art, fundamental for their survival and the development of their soul, and the piece pays homage to his role in fertility, renewal, and transformation.

Tlaltecuhltli, the god who devours human remains, is depicted at the bottom of the sculpture. His figure juxtaposed with the Feather Serpent signifies the green surface of the earth covering the voracious underworld, making this a sculpture that celebrated the duality inherent in human endeavor—fertility stands in contrast to the sacrificial death required to sustain life.

### ***Xiuhcoatl (Fire Serpent Head)***

This colossal *xiuhcoatl* with a daunting open jaw of fangs was found near the *Ocelotl-Cuauhxicalli*, or jaguar sacrificial vessel [Fig. 31]. Its size and modeling are similar to those of the colossal jaguar vessel, and so it is attributed to the reign of Motecuhzoma II. This image of the Fire Serpent was of interest to King Motecuhzoma II because of his New Fire Ceremony in 1507. According to the myth of the birth of the Aztec patron god Huitzilopochtli, the Fire Serpent Xiuhcoatl was used by Huitzilopochtli to decapitate his

sister, Coyolxauhqui. As such a weapon, the *xiuhcoatl* became a national and political emblem.

According to Pasztory (1983), through the serpent's fangs and open mouth curving back toward the top of the head, the sky was connected to the earth, and the heavenly bodies traveled through the body of the creature. The *xiuhcoatls* carry the sun in its daily cycle and represent the sun rays; understandably, they appear on the Calendar Stone (Sun Stone). They also symbolize the dry season in opposition to the Feather serpents (Quetzalcoatl) that represents the rainy, fertile season.

### ***The Early Chacmool in the Tlaloc Shrine***

*Chacmools*, a type of sculptural figure, have been found in various places of Mesoamerica, especially in the Toltec capital of Tula and the Maya city of Chichen Itza. Mexica versions of *chacmools* reproduce Toltec features, including the reclining posture and a receptacle, or vessel, on top of the stomach for offerings. *Chacmools* are thought to be mediators between humans and the divine.

This monument displaying a reclining male figure was discovered during the 1979 excavations of the twin pyramids (Great Temple) of Tenochtitlan on the floor of the temple dedicated to Tlaloc. [\[Fig. 32\]](#). As in Chichen Itza, this *chacmool* was set on the floor at the entrance of an important temple. This *chacmool* may represent one of the earliest examples of Aztec sculpture. According to Matos (1981), the date of the figure might be 1375-1427.

Besides being of importance for the Tlaloc temple, this figure is the first instance of an Aztec copy from the Toltec monumental arts. Pasztory (1983) asserts that *chacmool* was influenced by Toltec art and represented Toltec ancestry, since Tlaloc is also associated with the Toltec *chacmools*. In some historical accounts, the rain god Tlaloc even gave approval to the Aztecs to settle at Tenochtitlan. The *Chacmool* is not yet as realistic as later Aztec carvings and it is angular and crudely finished, like its Toltec prototypes; details were evidently painted rather than carved. The statue still preserves its original paint, including red, blue, white, black, and yellow.

The facial aspect of this statue from Tenochtitlan is weathered by time, but it does not seem to represent a deity. As in Toltec art, the *Chacmool* is a dressed man holding a dish on his stomach. He is reclining in an uncomfortable position with raised knees while his head turns away from the temple by ninety degrees and looks over his shoulder to the horizon. It still is not known what this posture signified in either Toltec or Aztec art. A fan at the back of his neck symbolizes a fertility god. Its location in the temple and the vessel it holds may suggest that the monument served as a sacrificial stone or a place to store offerings.

### ***Tlaloc-Chacmool***

This sculpture represents a reclining man wearing necklaces, a large feather headdress, bangles and bracelets of jade with gold and copper bells as attachments. According to Matos and Solís (2002), it is also characterized by a mask over the mouth and the eyes, which connects the figure to Tlaloc [\[Fig. 33\]](#). There are many indicators of a late date for this *chacmool*, such as its complex iconography, the three-dimensionality of its carving, and the well-modeled hands and arms.

The *cuauhxicalli* (vessel for hearts) that rests on the stomach of the figure is surrounded by a relief of human hearts, and the god is in the pose of the earth god Tlaltecuhтли. The hearts and the god are surrounded by snails, symbol of fertility and life, and water creatures, which associate the figure with the sacred liquids of the Universe: blood and underground water. Water was very important for the Mesoamerican people, whose main source of sustenance was agriculture.

This figure was probably associated with Tlaloc temples because it presents the deity himself. The Aztecs became the great empire that substituted for the Toltecs, but at the same time they continued to worship them and their gods as their ancestors. This is a dual relationship in which a culture is supplanted and venerated at the same time. Pasztory (1983) states that, this *chacmool* is a Mexica reinterpretation of a Toltec art form to honor and venerate the main Toltec deity and their Toltec forefathers.

### ***Chicomecoatl***

This sculpture represents the goddess Chicomecoatl (calendrical name, Seven Serpent). She was a fertility goddess responsible of the growth of maize [Fig. 34]. She wears the *amacalli*, a square headdress adorned with two or more rosettes, which is also known as the “temple headdress.” As indicated by Matos and Solís (2002), she wears the typical female costume: an ankle-length skirt (*cueitl*) and a triangular ritual cape that falls on her chest and back (*quechquemitl*). In each hand she holds a *cinmaitl*, which is a pair of corncobs decorated with strips of paper. Chicomecoatl is associated with Xilonen, the goddess of young maize who is represented with a more simple cotton headdress and ears of corn. Xilonen represents the ripe ear of corn, and at the beginning of each harvest, the corn was collected and offered to her so that more prosperous harvests would come [Fig. 35].

As maize was the fundamental food for the sustenance of the Aztecs, there are strong conceptual and iconographic connections between Chicomecoatl and other fertility deities, such as Xochiquetzal (goddess of love and flowers), Cinteotl (young male maize god), Teteoinnan (old earth and mother goddess), and Chalchiuhtlicue (goddess of terrestrial water).

### ***Hueheteotl***

This monument is dedicated to Hueheteotl, the old fire god, one of the most ancient deities of Mesoamerica [Fig. 36]. He is always portrayed, like in this image, as a seated god with the hands on the knees, the right hand opened, and the left hand closed like a fist. His face is wrinkled and his mouth is toothless just like an old man. The fire god bends over on a sitting position with a heavy brazier over his shoulders. This monument still preserves the ancient Mesoamerican features, but with a few new elements. His face is almost hidden by a mask and his mouth has fangs, he has a great necklace with a large pendant that adorns the chest, and he also has big ear-flares.

The glyph 2 Reed is on the back of the figure and the carving of two shells surrounded by water and whirlpools are placed on top of the brazier. Because of this, the figure shows a relationship or association between the gods of fire and water, two opposites. Hueheteotl symbolizes the old god that governed the center of the universe while

maintaining the equilibrium of the cosmos.

This statue was probably a synthesis of more than one god because it holds a number of icons representing fire, water, and death. Huehueteotl is another representation of Xiuhtecuhtli, the fire god of central Mexico, who was also known as “Turquoise Lord” or “Lord of the Year.” The stone figure wears goggle eyes, a moustache-like feature, and fangs, which are characteristic traits of masks depicting Tlaloc. Also, masks with sharp teeth on his elbows and knees are similar to those that adorn Coyolxauhqui and Tlaltecuhltli, which might symbolize a passage to the underworld. The origins of god Huehueteotl can be traced to earlier civilizations like Cuicuilco and Teotihuacan. This Aztec version of the Old God was found north of the Great Temple, near the Red Temple, which also has features of Teotihuacan; as such, the stone god shows the Mexica appropriation of the Teotihuacan past.

### ***Cihuateotl (Deified Woman)***

Found in a temple dedicated to women who died giving birth, this *Cihuateotl* (Deified Woman) has the face of the living dead [Fig. 37]. The hands of this macabre figure have jaguar claws that are raised aggressively, as if to grab someone, and she has the tangled hair of a corpse. These deified women (*cihuateteo*) were considered to be the female counterparts of the male warriors in the Mexica society [Fig. 38]. For the Aztecs, women who died at childbirth were given the highest honor of accompanying the sun from its midday zenith to its setting on the West, just like the warriors who gave their lives in battles and accompanied the sun from its rising to noon.

It was believed that the *cihuateteo* lived in the western horizon, or *Cihuatlampa* (place of women). They were admired especially by young warriors, but at the same time they were feared because they were considered evil spirits. It was thought that they haunted crossroads at night and were dangerous to young children, since they had been deprived to being mothers themselves. This is probably the origin of the modern legend of *La Llorona* (the crying woman), who wanders by night in the towns of Mexico looking for her lost children.

### ***Altar of the Planet Venus***

The altar of Venus that is represented here is depicted as a three-lobed figure, which is a symbol that identifies this planet in other reliefs and codices [Fig. 39]. The Aztecs believed that the 13 celestial realms that formed the universe served as a field of action of heavenly bodies. According to Matos and Solis (2002), the Aztecs attributed a special significance to the planet Venus because of its year cycle of 584 days, which has two phases when it is invisible and another two phases when it is the last star to disappear in the morning and the first one to appear at dusk. This altar is like a prism with four sides. The upper register, or band, is a sequence of spheres that represent the canopy of stars. In the lower band Venus is shown with half closed eyes in her nocturnal nature with monstrous jaws. Four *tecpatl* (flint) knives with faces jut from the personified star. There are two additional flint knives that commemorate the sacrifice of Venus when it was pierced by the sun with an arrow.

### ***Altar of Itzpapalotl (Obsidian Butterfly)***

In contrast with relief carving, platforms or altars have sides that are also composed of carvings [Fig. 40]. This altar shows Itzpapalotl, a big butterfly with wings decorated with obsidian knives, which hold bleeding human hearts in its human hands. The monument probably represents the importance of sacrificial death to maintain a balance in life and the *tzitzimime* (female monsters of destruction).

These creatures of destruction were among the most feared of all supernatural beings as they were considered to be stars that transformed themselves into “demons” (evil spirits) who descended from the sky to devour human beings during certain calendrical and celestial events (solar eclipses). Itzpapalotl was primary among these deities and was associated with springtime and sacrifice.

### ***Ahuitzotl Box***

This box features three-dimensional carving and relief decorations similar to the works executed under the reign of Motecuhzoma II. The water monster that appears in three dimensions on the top and in relief inside of the box represents the king Ahuitzotl, a ruler-priest expected to perform penitential rites involving the drawing of blood. There is a figure of the water god Tlaloc, who is pouring this sacred liquid and ears of corn from

a jade vessel. There is a river of the fertilizing water surrounding the animal image of the king, probably representing his connection to lineage fertility and sustenance. This box was probably used as a container for blood-letting implements because it is full of sacrificial symbolism. The box was a container to protect the sacred blood of the ruler. The box was possibly made in the year 1499, since the date 7 Reed appears inside the stone lid.

### ***Tepetlacalli (Stone Box) with Figure Drawing Blood and Zacatapayolli***

The *tepetlacalli* (stone boxes) might have been inspired by utilitarian wooden or mat boxes since this type of sculpture is unique to Aztec art [Fig. 41]. These boxes have many functions such as containers for carrying elite dead ashes, thorns used in blood-letting rituals, and for storing assorted offerings. Molina's Nahuatl dictionary defines the stone boxes as coffins or caskets, and this ethnohistorical source serves as evidence that these boxes were used as to keep the ashes of cremated individuals. In the base of every stone box, including this one, a carving of the Earth Monster always appears as the voracious power of the earth always hungry for human remains. This particular box is full of images associated with penitential rites, such as an individual drawing blood from his ear with a thorn and a fire serpent in the background. Present is also a *zacatapayolli*, the grass ball used to keep the sacrificial bones.

### ***Stone Box of Motecuhzoma II***

The stone boxes with calendrical symbols served in special rites for certain deities and or in the households of the emperor and nobility. The ruler's name, in this case Motecuhzoma II, usually appears on the box along with significant dates of his reign [Fig. 42]. This box has eight *quincunces* (cosmic diagram with 5 points) on the outside, which symbolizes the Aztec universe. According to Matos and Solís (2002), some scholars believe that the box probably stored the remains of King Motecuhzoma II, since the carvings inside of the lid depict his name-glyph, the speaking *xihuitzolli o copilli* (royal headdress) and a design showing his hair, a nose-ornament made of turquoise, and a decorated speech scroll, an emblem of *tlatoani*, meaning he who speaks. Also, the date 11 Flint (1516) depicted on the lid is the year in which Netzahualpilli, the ruler of Tetzaco, died. According to Umberger, this date may

indicate that this stone box was a present given by Motecuhzoma II at the death of the Tetzcoacan lord, who was a close friend.

### ***Head of an Eagle Warrior***

In the Aztec army's higher ranks, there were two orders: the Eagle and the Jaguar warriors [Fig. 43]. Usually only members of the nobility could belong to these two orders. The *Cuauhtli* (Eagle) knights were associated with the sun and with daytime battles. For the Mexica, the eagle symbolized the sun at its zenith as well as the warrior. Their job was to nourish the sun by sacrificing their own blood, thus making them resistant to pain and capable of risking their own life unconditionally.

This statue presents the head of a young warrior with an eagle helmet, which in pre-Columbian times would have been covered with eagle feathers and made out of wood. The sculpture shows the Aztec ideal in facial features seen in many stone works of heads and masks. The eyes might have been inlaid with shells, and dog's teeth might have been inserted into the holes in his mouth. The dog's fangs were probably used to intimidate others and show the warrior's ferocity and strength. The sculpture is also linked to the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli by the paper bow on the neck, which is also a mark indicating the appropriate lineage for an eagle or jaguar warrior.

### ***Jaguar Warrior***

This man with a Jaguar Helmet is believed to be a warrior of the Aztec Jaguar Order, just like the Eagle knights of the Eagle Order [Fig. 44]. This warrior wears a folded paper fan on the back of his head that connects him to the fertility and nature deities. He also has a collar imitating jade jewelry like those of the rain god *Chacmool*.

According to Pasztory (1983), this feline helmet is associated to deities such as Tepeyollotl, who is the jaguar form of the god Tezcatlipoca. Tepeyollotl, meaning the heart of the mountain, is a deity related to earth and nature, which connects him to the gods of the ancient past. Also, the jaguar symbolizes caves and the interior of the earth, which associates the feline with fertility since the caves are the wombs of the mountains where creation happened. The jewelry is emphasized in this sculpture; the greenstones were found in caves and guarded by ancient deified Toltec kings and rain gods.



### ***Atlantean Warriors***

This group of five colossal sculptures of warriors represents the Aztec vision of the universe, inspired in the famous Toltec *Atlantes* of Tula [Fig. 16]. Their military character is suggested by their spears, spear-throwers, and their clay-nose bars [Fig. 45]. They are warriors ready for battle and eager to feed the gods with human blood so that the universe stays in a constant balance. According to Matos and Solís (2002) the sculptures represent warriors who support the creations of the gods by military actions. Four of the sculptures that were found in Tenochtitlan are male; the fifth is female. One of the warriors is bearded and is supposed to guard the center of the Cosmos. The other 3 males mark the North, East and South; meanwhile the female warrior stays in the West, which is the *cihuatlampa* (place of women). Together they create a *quincunx*, the four cardinal points that were the four directions of the universe, plus a center.

These possibly deified warriors that guard the sun in its celestial realm resemble Toltec models such as those *Atlantes* of Tula; they have in the center of their bodies, as well as their helmets, the butterfly pectoral of Toltec warriors.

### ***Feathered Coyote***

This monument is the depiction of a coyote sitting on his back and covered in a fur of feathers that symbolize motion and movement. The image of the coyote, which was not usually carved in sculpture in the round, was a patron of the Aztec elite knight orders, since like the jaguar and eagle; the coyote was a powerful predator [Fig. 46]. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the coyote was connected to Tezcatlipoca, who was the god of masculinity and war, thus making the animal a symbol of sexual male potency and fertility.

### ***The Acolman Cross (Colonial Period, 1550)***

The most astonishing *tequitqui* monument in the town of Acolman is the atrial cross (a monumental stone cross located in the center of the plaza before the church) [Fig. 47]. The Acolman cross features at its top the INRI (Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews) inscription, under which lies the Augustinian emblem of the arrow-pierced heart, an impressive realistic head of Christ in bulk at the intersection of the arms and the shaft, a

chalice, pliers, a ladder, the spear, a palm leaf, a human bone, and a skull. The arms of the cross are decorated with vegetal motifs like flowers, vines and leaves. Each arm ends with a stylized *fleur-de-lys*. The base that supports the cross intends to emphasize the theme of Calvary, showing a crude image of the Virgin of the Sorrows surrounded by native iconography explained further below [\[Fig. 48\]](#).

Although there are precedents in Europe for open-air crosses along roads or in town squares, the Mexican crosses have a different iconography and an indigenous aesthetic. The atrial cross of Acolman provides, like all atrial crosses in general, a dual system of meanings: the Christian and the pagan. The cross is the central symbol of Christianity and represents the death of Christ, who with his resurrection made possible the redemption of human beings. The cross reflected the doctrine taught by the friars, but the very rooted idolatry induced the Indians to bury images of their gods underneath the atrial crosses and persist in the practice of old rituals. In time, these would become syncretic with the new religion.

At the same time, the Indians understood the Christian cross at the center of the atrio as another representation of the World Tree, or Tree of Life. It was the *Axis Mundi* that connected the gods of the Upperworld and Underworld with the human beings on the surface of the earth. The cosmogram was completed with the four *posa* chapels to represent the four corners of the Universe.

In the Mesoamerican vision of the World, the cycle of planting and harvesting of the maize became sacred because it was the main source of sustenance for the human beings. At the same time the cycle of the maize was a metaphor for the death and rebirth of the humankind. When a maize seed was planted in the soil, it died, but from it a living plant emerged. It implied that from death life will come, a process that was energized by the earth that lies in the Underworld. In the same way, the people would die in order to rise again exactly like the Maize God, Cinteotl.

This agricultural and cosmological belief was somewhat compatible with the Christian idea that God came to the world incarnated as Jesus Christ, suffered greatly, and died

as a human man. Three days later, he was resurrected, and the blood of his sacrifice on the cross redeemed and granted eternal paradise to believing human beings. For the Indian in the midst of conversion, Christ was the Maize God and the Cross was the maize plant. The *fleurs-de-lys* at the end of the arms of the cross were the sprouts of the maize plant that represented the endless rebirth of fertility and life. The carved flowers, vines and leaves that decorate the arms were the vines of beans and squash that the peasants grow together with the maize stalks in the *milpas* (corn fields) to facilitate a healthier development of the habitat of the crops. The cross rising from Calvary reflects the mountain on the earth where Christ defeated Death. In the same way the maize plant (foliated cross) rises from the “monster of earth” where death is transformed to life.

At the foot of the Acolman cross lies a crude image of the Virgin of the Sorrows (La Dolorosa) that clearly reflects Christian features: crossed hands and shrouded head. The style, with which she is carved, however, distinctly resembles an Indian idol as such, she becomes a Christianized Coatlicue or Teteoinnan, and the disk on her chest recalls the Aztec practice of inseting a jade or obsidian stone over the hearts of their idols symbolizing their vital energy. From a Christian view point the disk could be a wafer that together with the small chalice that appears under her hands are symbols of the Eucharist. The idea of communion with God through the partaking of His flesh and blood had some parallel with the Aztec practice of ritual cannibalism and human sacrifice. In both cases there was communion with the Divinity, but in the Christian rite it is symbolic, while in the Aztec one it was a physical performance.

To the left of the Virgin there is a skull that makes reference to her presence in Golgotha (Place of the Skull), the Hebrew name for Calvary. At the feet of the Virgin there is a terrestrial sphere and a serpent, two symbols linked to the Immaculate Conception (La Purísima). In the eschatological mentality of the Augustinians, this apocalyptic association probably was intended to remind the Indians that the new religion destroyed the old one of Quetzalcoatl (serpent) and would reign over the earth. This is the same meaning of the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe [Fig. 23], the name that was given to the Virgin Mary owing to the possible misunderstanding of the

Nahuatl language by the Archbishop Zumárraga or some other Spanish witness. According to the tradition he heard the name “María de Guadalupe,” the name of a Virgin Mary already venerated in Spain. It seems that the original words were “María tecoahtlaxopeuh,” meaning Mary, the one that will destroy the stone serpent (Altamirano 1884). This action of stepping on the serpent is a common image of the Immaculate Conception in European images; in the indigenous world it refers to the destruction of Quetzalcoatl (stone serpent) and the triumph of the Christian religion against idolatry.

## TERRACOTTA SCULPTURE

For most cultures in Mesoamerica, terracotta sculpture was one of the principal forms of art during the Pre-Classic and Classic periods. The Aztecs, however, were infatuated with the permanence of stone, and so worked less often in clay than most of their neighbors. Except for a few larger hollow figurines, most Aztec terracotta sculptures are small, solid, mold-made figurines. According to Pasztory (1983), terracotta sculptures are fundamental in identifying the cult practices and gods of the lower class Aztecs in cities and remote areas. Their main subjects are the deities of nature and fertility and mothers with children; less frequently death may be the subject of a piece. Death and sacrifice seem to be the focus of noble terracotta works.

### ***Eagle Warrior***

This ceramic figure was found inside of the House of Eagles, a building constructed in a Neo-Toltec style, north of the Great Temple in Mexico City [Fig. 49]. He wears an eagle helmet, his arms are covered with wings, and his legs are adorned with claws. Some remaining stucco paint reveals that the feathers on his clothes were painted in white.

Besides representing the mighty eagle warriors, this figure, along with another figurine found in the same place, is believed to symbolize the sun at dawn. This sculpture was on top of a multi-colored bench with the figures of warriors marching toward a *zacatapayolli* (a ball of grass in which the blood-letting instruments were inserted). The House of Eagles served as a place dedicated to prayer ceremonies, self-sacrifice, and spiritual rituals (See Section of Architecture).

## ***Mictlantecuhtli***

This figure was also found in the House of Eagles on top of benches, and it represents Mictlantecuhtli, god of the dead [Fig. 50]. Mictlantecuhtli lived in a damp and cold place known as Mictlan, which was the underworld, or lower part of the cosmos--a universal womb where human remains were kept.

The god is shown wearing a loincloth and small holes in his scalp indicate that at one time, curly human hair decorated his head, typical of earth and death god figurines. His claw-like hands are poised as if ready to attack someone. Most dramatically, he is represented with his flesh wide-open below his chest. According to Matos and Solís (2002), out of the opened flesh in the stomach, a great liver appears, the organ where the *ihiyotl* (soul) dwells. The liver was connected to Mictlan, the Underworld. The *ihiyotl* is one of the three mystical elements that inhabits the human body; the *tonalli*, the determinant of one's fate, is located in the head, and the *teyolia*, the house of consciousness, resides in the heart. In this sculpture the deity is showing where one of those three mystical elements rests in the human body until death.

## ***Xipec Totec***

Xipec Totec had been worshipped by the Mesoamerican people since the Classic period. Xipec Totec was the god of vegetation and agricultural renewal, and was one of the patron gods associated to the 13-day periods in the divinatory calendar [Fig. 51]. He was also the patron of the festival Tlacaxipehualiztli, held before the coming of the rains, in which captives were sacrificed. After the sacrificed bodies were flayed, priests wore the skins for 20 days.

Xipec Totec is depicted in the sculpture as a man with a flayed skin. A rope, sculpted in detail, ties the skin at the back, head, and chest. This piece forms part of a series of great images created by Pre-Columbian artists, who expressed their deeply held belief that only through death can life exist. The difference between the tight skin layer and the animate form inside is represented in a simple manner, without the gruesome dramatization that is typical in the images of death gods and goddesses. Remarkably, the sculpture still retains its original paint; the flayed skin is yellow and the skin of Xipec

Totec is red.

## CERAMICS

The Aztecs made several functional and ceremonial objects out of clay: incense burners, dishes, ritual vessels, funerary urns, stamps, and spindle whorls. Large vase-shaped incense burners were sometimes over 3 feet in height with a figure in high relief on one side or an ornament of projections and flanges. Red ware goblets were often made for drinking *pulque* at feasts. Many of these clay objects had decoration but usually without the elaborate iconographic meaning that characterized monumental sculpture and manuscript painting.

One of the most amazing works of Aztec art is a clay urn resting on three tilted cylinder legs, found in Tlatelolco.

The ceramics of the Valley of Mexico have been divided into nine different wares on the basis of clay, type, vessel shape, surface, and decoration. Orange and red wares are the most common. Red ware, generally associated with Tetzaco, is usually highly burnished and painted with a red slip; its painted designs are in black, black and white, or black, white and yellow, and they consist of simple lines and frets that often appear boldly applied. These vessels vary significantly in quality. Red ware was sometimes completely covered with white slip, then painted with black designs of skulls and crossed bones. In its controlled quality the line and design suggest Mixteca-Puebla vessels.

### ***Vessel with a mask of Tlaloc***

According to Matos and Solís (2002), this vessel was part of offering 56 at the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, facing north in the direction of the Temple of Tlaloc. As part of an offering, the pot was put inside a box made out of volcanic rock containing remains of aquatic creatures and shells, symbols of water and fertility. The box also contained a sacrificial knife (*tecpatl*) and two bowls of *copal* (incense).

This vessel represents the rain god Tlaloc [Fig. 52]. On the outside of the vessel, Tlaloc

features goggle-like eyes and two fangs; a serpent surrounds his mouth forming what looks like a moustache. The god wears a white headdress, a reference to the mountains where the deity was believed to keep his waters, a place where fertility flourishes and water flows down the hills to nourish the soil. In whole, the vessel symbolizes the uterus and the feminine powers of creation.

### ***Funerary Urn with image of god Tezcatlipoca***

This urn was found in the Great Temple, near the monolith of the great goddess Coyolxauhqui [\[Fig. 53\]](#). Cremated bones of Aztec warriors who probably died in battle against the Tarascans of Michoacan during the reign of king Axayacatl were found inside. A necklace of beads, a spear point, and a bone perforator were also inside.

Inside a rectangle carved on the outside wall of the urn lies the image of Tezcatlipoca surrounded by a feathered serpent with a forked tongue. Wearing a headdress full of eagle feathers, symbols connected to the sun, the deity seems to be armed and ready for battle. He has a spear thrower in one hand and two spears in the other. In the hand holding the two spears he wears a protector similar to the ones used in Toltec imagery. He wears a smoking mirror, his characteristic symbol, on one of his feet.

According to Matos and Solis (2002), this urn represents one of those warriors that embodies the image of the god Tezcatlipoca (smoking mirror), a creator god that inhabits the four horizontal directions and the three vertical levels of the cosmos. Tezcatlipoca is also the protector of warriors, kings, and sorcerers and the god of the cold who symbolized the dark night sky. He was considered invisible and mysterious.

### ***Flutes***

In Aztec festivities, clay flutes were commonly played. The shape and decoration of these instruments varied according to the gods being worshipped at the time [\[Fig. 54\]](#). According to Matos and Solís (2002), at the feast of Toxcatl, the person chosen to personify the god Tezcatlipoca played a sad melody with a thin flute with a flower shape at the end while walking up to the temple to be sacrificed. Depending on the occasion, the Aztecs made flutes with different shapes, such as the image of the god Huehuetotl-Xiuhtecuhtli. The god is shown as an old man with a beard symbolizing wisdom.

Another flute ends with the shape of an eagle, a symbol of divine fire, the sun, and warriors. The eagle seems to be wearing a headdress. Some flutes have elegant ornaments, like the step-fret design used in Aztec-Mixtec gold rings. This flute shows the blending of the Aztec and Mixtec cultures, and suggests that besides wars, there was trade and exchange of cultural traditions.

## WOOD ART

Wood was not just a substitute for stone. Many of the icons, or idols, in the major Aztec temples were made out of wood and dressed in beautiful clothes and jewelry. However, the symbolic significance of wood for the Aztecs is unclear. Many Aztec texts refer to the superiority of stone figures to wooden ones because of their durability and endurance. But, in weight, flexibility, and resonance, wood was the perfect material for such objects as drums, spear-throwers, shields, and masks. Some objects were also made of wood so that they could be burned symbolically as offerings.

### ***Huehuetl (Vertical Drum) of Malinalco***

In the town of Malinalco, it was found a wooden *tlalpanhuehuetl* or war drum, still used in some ceremonies until 1894, when it was transferred to its present location in the Museum of the City of Toluca [Fig. 55]. The *Huehuetl* contains the date *Nahui-Ollin* (4-Movement). The *Ollin* symbol was used to represent the movement of the Sun and the dynamic life of the World. From the word *ollin* derives *yollotl* (heart) and *yoliztli* (life). Inside of this particular *Ollin* we find a ray emanating from a solar eye and a *chalchihuitl* (precious stone). The Sun was considered as the “Shining One”, the “Precious Child”, the “Jade” and “Xiuhpiltontli” (Turquoise Child). The date *nahui-ollin* alludes to *Ollin-Tonatiuh*, the Sun of Movement, the present world that will be destroyed by earthquakes, and to the festival of *Nahui-Ollin*, described by Durán (1967), in which the messenger of the Sun was sacrificed.

To the right of the date *Nahui-Ollin*, the artist carved the outstanding figure of an *ocelotl* (jaguar) and to the left a *cuauhtli* (eagle), both dancing. These images represent *cuauhtli* and *ocelotl* warriors, distinguished orders of the Aztec army. These warriors carry the flag of sacrifice (*pámitl*) and wear a headdress with heron feathers (*aztaxelli*),



a symbol of hierarchy.

In the lower sections that support the Huehuetl, there are two more *ocelotl* warriors and one *cuauhtli* warrior. From the mouths and beaks of the warriors and around their paws and claws, appears the glyph *Atl-Tlachinolli*, or *Teuatl-Tlachinolli*, that means “divine water (blood)-fire”; it signals the call of war and is sometimes represented as a song and dance of war. This metaphor *Atl-Tlachinolli* is expressed in sculpture, carvings, and the codices as two intertwined rivers, one of water and the other of fire. The stream of water ends with pearls and conches, while the stream of fire ends with the body of the *xiuhcoatl* (snake of fire) who is emitting a flame.

All the warriors depicted on the *Huehuetl* have in one of their eyes the sign *atl* (water), which indicates that they are crying while they sing. This sign reveals the duality of feelings before the sacrifice. One of the *ocelotl* warriors has behind one of his paws the sign *atl* combined with an *aztamecatl* (rope), indicating that he is a *Uauantin* (captive striped in red) who will be sacrificed in the *temalácatl*. This recalls the image of a warrior carrying a rope in the mural of Temple III of the site. The *cuauhtli* warriors have hanging among their feathers obsidian knives (*tecpatl*), symbols of human sacrifice.

A band divides the two parts of the Huehuetl and portrays *chimallis* (shields) with bundles of cotton and arrows (*tlacochtli*), sacrificial flags (*pamitl*) and a continuous stream of the glyph *Atl-Tlachinolli*. All of these are metaphors of war. Interestingly, the *Huehuetl* represents a real event in Malinalco: the scene of *cuauhtli-ocelotl* warriors singing, dancing and crying in the festival of *Nahui-Ollin*, that ended with the dance of the messenger of the Sun who, ascending the staircase to reach the doorway of the *Cuauhcalli*, would be sacrificed and his heart and blood would be placed in the *cuauhxicalli* that stood behind the eagle-shaped image of the Sun (See Malinalco's Temples in Section of architecture). The Sun is called when is in ascension *Cuauhtehuaniatl* (Rising Sun) and in the afternoon when it is descending is called *Cuauhtemoc* (Setting Sun).

The Sun was considered as the young warrior that every day at dawn, fight in the

heavens to defeat the darkness, stars and moon (*metztli*), using as weapons the *xiuhcoatl*s (snakes of fire, solar rays). In this way he ascends to the zenith, preceded by Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, the morning star (Venus).

At dusk, the Sun, preceded by Xolotl, the evening star (Venus) sets in Tlillan Tlapallan, the Land of the Black and Red, and descends to the underground transformed into a jaguar to illuminate the world of the dead. The next dawn, in an endless cycle, he will repeat his cosmic fight to bring a new day to humankind.

The *Huehuetl* of Malinalco presents the image of Cuauhtehuanitl, Tonatiuh in his eagle embodiment (Huitzilopochtli), ascending to the zenith in the sky [Fig. 56]. The face of the god is emerging from the beak of the eagle and has a turquoise (*yacaxihuitl*) in his nose. Under his chin appears the sign of singing, *cuicatl*, which indicates that the deity ascends singing. The feathers of the eagle are stylized in a way that resembles the precious feathers of the quetzal.

The ascending Sun (*Cuauhtehuanitl*) is accompanied by the *xiuhcoatl*s (snakes of fire) who carry him during his daily cycle. They are also the embodiments of the solar rays. We can see the representation of the heads of the *xiuhcoatl*s featuring open mouth with fangs, solar eye and a horn. One of them has a realistic shape, while the other is portrayed with more abstraction, but shows the same characteristic elements.

The quality of the Aztec sculpture and carving applied to this *Huehuetl* is so precise and refined that it is comparable to the amazing and powerful expression of the codices. The images shown by this musical masterwork confirm and complement our hypothesis about the function and uses of the “Cuauhtinchan” (Temple I) of Malinalco.

### ***Teponaztli (Horizontal Drum) of a Feline***

The *teponaztli*, a horizontal type of drum still in use today, was another popular instrument used by the Aztecs [Fig. 57]. The drum is a double-tongued xylophone. The tongues are made out of slits positioned in a hollowed piece of wood that works as the sound box. Hammers in the shape of sticks with rubber tips were used to hit the tongues, thereby producing the tones and melodies of the drum. A *teponaztli* from

Malinalco is in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. After the Spanish conquest, the missionaries prohibited traditional Mexica ritual practices and they often destroyed artifacts belonging to those rituals; it is fortunate that this *teponaztli* survives.

The animal carved on this horizontal drum is either a crouching coyote or a type of jaguar with its tail next to its left side. It could represent the *nahual* (soul or double) of a *coyotl* or a jaguar warrior. However, the curls on the head of the animal have led some scholars to identify it as an *ahuitzotl*, or a water-thorn beast, possibly a water possum. Amazingly, this horizontal drum still has the original canine teeth and molars placed inside the mouth to make the animal look more realistic and ferocious.

### ***Teponaztli (Horizontal Drum) with Effigy of a Warrior***

The human effigy depicted on this *teponaztli* is a representation of a reclining Tlaxcalan warrior [Fig. 58]. Matos and Solís (2002) point out that the representation of this warrior is decorated with the unique military emblems of his Tlaxcalan culture. His weapons include the jaw of a sawfish and an axe with a copper blade. The eyes of the warrior still preserve their shell and obsidian inlays.

### ***Tlaloc***

This wood sculpture is an example of a work meant to be burned in honor of Tlaloc. Such figures were made out of resin and copal applied to sticks and burnt after a prayer was offered Tlaloc. The Aztecs believed that the smoke rising from the burning resin and copal would make the clouds dark and cause them to liberate a fertilizing rain over the earth. This image was found inside a cave in Iztaccihuatl volcano.

This sculpture features the characteristics consistently attributed to the rain god Tlaloc: ear ornaments, goggle-like eyes, protruding fangs, and a headdress symbolizing the mountains where he kept water. This sculpture also features a folded paper bow behind Tlaloc's neck, which, according to Matos and Solís (2002), represents the *tlaquechpanyotl*, the sign of the deity's noble ancestry.

## FEATHER WORK

Among the large variety of media utilized by the Aztec craftsmen/artists, their feather work is perhaps the least known today. The Aztecs became master feather-crafters before the arrival of the Spaniards, and had developed highly sophisticated methods of gathering feathers throughout their territories and incorporating them into objects of impressive visual impact and surprising durability. The artists in the village of Amatlan (a district of Tenochitlan) were exceptionally known for their feather work.

The *amanteca* (feather-workers) either fixed their precious tropical feathers on light reed frameworks by tying each one onto the backing with cotton, or fastened them on cloth or paper to form mosaics in which certain effects of color were obtained by exploiting their transparent qualities. Belonging exclusively to the Aztecs, this art lingered in the form of little feather icons after the Conquest and then almost disappeared entirely.

Only a handful of these original masterpieces have survived, and today there are only a handful of artists scattered in diverse cities of Mexico who keep the art of feather-work alive. While the Spanish did not consider feather-works to be as valuable as gold or precious stones, nor a treasure worth preserving, they sent shiploads of it to Spain as curiosities from the New World. The many churches, monasteries, and individuals who received these precious gifts did not protect them from the natural process of decay, and out of hundreds of costumes, mantles, standards, and shields sent to Europe, today only a few pieces are known to exist. There are some surviving examples, such as Christian symbols, made in colonial times in a style similar to that of the Renaissance, that constitute the best of feather-work.

Pasztory (1983) affirms that colorful tropical birds such as the scarlet macaw, various species of parrot, red spoonbill, blue cotinga, and the quetzal provided most of the vibrant feathers used in mosaic feather-work. The most common colors used were red and yellow. The most precious colors used were blue and green, the colors of water and agriculture, fertility and creation. Green quetzal feathers were among the rarest and most sought after; in Nahuatl, *quetzal* meant precious. The two long green tail feathers

of the male quetzal birds were collected for great headdresses and standards. Unfortunately, the precious bird quetzal is today an endangered species. Almost as precious as the quetzal were hummingbird feathers; often greenish in color, hummingbird feathers become iridescent when lit from certain angles.

As pointed out by Castelló Iturbide (1993), together with stones such as jade and turquoise, feathers were considered among the most valued objects of Mesoamerica. They were so highly venerated that statues of Aztec deities were clothed in cloaks full of brilliant feathers and precious stones. Viewed in magical terms, feathers were considered icons of fertility, abundance, and wealth and power, and they connected the individual or statue wearing them with the divine. According to Fray Diego Durán (1967), the Aztecs believed that the feathers were shadows of the deities.

### ***The Headdress of Motecuhzoma II***

Assembled from five hundred quetzal feathers taken from 250 birds, this feather headdress is one of the best examples that have survived over time [Fig. 59]. Despite its name, it is still unclear if it was used or it belonged to this emperor. According to Pasztory (1983), a model of a crown used by Motecuhzoma was depicted in the Codex Mendoza, and it was composed of turquoise, not feathers. The headdress probably derives its name from this traditional story: when Motecuhzoma met Cortés, he gave the Conquistador luxurious items that included headdresses, gold and silver objects, clothes, among many other things, in a diplomatic gesture to please and salute Emperor Charles V. When the brother of Charles V, Ferdinand, married, he received the Headdress of Motecuhzoma II that had been stored in the Ambras Castle in Tyrol, Austria. In time, the art collections of the Habsburg Monarchy were placed in state museums, and now the famous headdress is housed in the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna, together with a feathered fan and the Ahuizotl Shield. There is a replica of the headdress in the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico City [Fig. 60].

This kind of feather headdress was probably used as a military insignia instead of a crown. The feather headdress would have been placed on a bamboo stick and

positioned on a distinguished soldier's back. Pasztory (1983) has suggested that there is evidence that headdresses, such as this piece, were part of the Aztec royalty for ritualistic purposes, especially to be worn when impersonating the god Quetzalcoatl.

### ***Feathered Fan***

In pre-Conquest periods, fans were a symbol of noble and *pochteca* (professional traders) classes. According to Matos and Solís (2002), fans gave a fancy touch to the wardrobes of the *tlatoani* (Emperor) and his royal family, who always looked elegant and distinguished. The fans were eye-catching pieces constructed of wood and decorated with colorful feathers.

A fan found north of the Tlaloc Temple, in a place considered to be part of the sacred precinct of the Aztec capital, was restored by a professional feather-worker and is kept in the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico City. The tip of the fan depicts the head of a warrior who is well dressed for war. Another beautiful example of a preserved fan can be found in the Museum of Ethnology of Vienna [\[Fig. 62\]](#).

### ***Ahuitzotl Shield***

The *Chimalli* (shield) of Ahuitzotl was a gift from Hernán Cortés to Don Pedro de la Gasca, Bishop of Palencia, Spain. It is an assemblage of different types of feathers, including feathers from scarlet macaws, blue cotingas, rose spoonbills, and yellow orioles; tassels of feathers hang from the lower edge [\[Fig. 63\]](#). Vegetable fibers hold together the base of reed splints that supports the colorfully arranged plumage. On the back, two loops are formed to allow the shield to be carried.

The Ahuitzotl Shield portrays the figure of a *Coyotl* warrior in gold and feathers. The symbol of the sacred war *atl-tlachinolli* (the water, the fire) comes out of his mouth, indicating that he is shouting a call or song of war. The figure depicted on the shield is not an *ahuitzotl* (fantastical water being) as has been traditionally identified. Water creatures are linked to the rain god Tlaloc. Rather, the animal represented may be a coyote associated to warfare and a military Aztec order.

The Ahuitzotl Shield is housed in the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna, along with the

Headdress of Motecuhzoma II and a feathered fan.

### ***Chalice Cover***

This object, found by Rafael García Granados, comes from the early transitional times of the campaign to convert all of the Mesoamerican indigenous populations to Catholicism [Fig. 64]. The blue creature adorning the cover may be related to the god Tlaloc, since it has goggle-like eyes and a moustache. If this is true, the cover may be associated with one of the most sacred liquids of the universe—water. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the circular panel surrounding the creature in the center represents water in motion, and in terms of Christian doctrine, symbolizes the holy water communicating the message of God. God is shown as a stylized Aztec Tlaloc mask with fangs, which throws fire out of His mouth. In the context of Christianity, the fire represents the blood of the sacrificed Christ that cleanses the world of human sin; at the same time, the fire is an indigenous symbol of the primeval waters of the old Aztec deities. This piece expresses the complex process of transculturation that occurred during the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Mexico while two different cultures tried to establish a religious dialogue.

### ***Christ the Savior***

After the Spanish conquest, feather-art was applied to ritual objects with the shape and iconography of the new religion. One example is an embodiment of Christ the Savior, who blesses the World with his right hand. The orb that he is holds in his left hand is an icon of sovereignty, which was considered, during the Middle Ages, an emblem of divine power. An inscription surrounds the image of Christ, but it has not yet been translated successfully.

## **LAPIDARY ARTS**

The Aztecs had a very special interest in precious stones of all kinds. Since their culture was primarily Neolithic (New Stone Age), tools were predominantly made of stone, though copper tools were also utilized. Obsidian and flint were used to make the ritually valued sacrificial knives; obsidian also served as scraping and more domestic cutting

implements.

The Mexica were particularly skilled at carving hard stones of different colors and brilliant surfaces, such as greenstone, porphyry, obsidian, rock crystal, turquoise, and onyx. From these stones, they created a variety of sculptures, vessels, and jewelry. In the lapidary art, the Aztecs made elaborate art pieces of rock-crystal, amethyst, jade, turquoise, obsidian, and other important stones, as well as mother of pearl. Using instruments of reed, sand, and emery, they arranged small pieces of stone in brilliant mosaics on backgrounds of bone, stucco, and wood.

It was a sign of status for the men of the highest class to learn the lapidary arts. Their technique was called *toltecayotl* (the matter of the Toltecs, or the Toltec thing) and was based on the Toltec artistic traditions that the Aztecs so admired.

The green stones, such as jadeite, diorite, and serpentine, were the most important precious stones in Mesoamerica. Jade beads were placed on a corpse's mouth as payment for the trip of the soul of the dead person through the Underworld, a tradition also found in ancient China. The greenstone acted as an offering to protect the soul in its journey through the afterlife. Greenstones were also buried in the floor of the temples. Green was a symbol for water and plants, life and fertility. The word *chalchihuitl* (jade symbol) was an embodiment of preciousness.

Greenstone, such as jade, came from the province of Guerrero and was offered as tribute by the southern provinces. The most famous lapidary artists in the Valley of Mexico were the artisans of Chalco and Xochimilco; the lapidary art was said to come from the artisans of Xochimilco.

### ***Turquoise Mask***

This beautiful blue mask is believed to represent Xiuhtecuhtli, the god of fire [\[Fig. 66\]](#). Matos and Solís (2002) state that the deity's name Xiuhtecuhtli (Turquoise Lord) is a derivative of the Nahuatl word for year (*xihuitl*), which makes him a deity of time. The turquoise pieces are affixed to a cedar wood base with a kind of resinous substance. Made out of pearl oyster shell, the eyes have a central hole suggesting that



impersonators of divine beings in religious rituals wore the mask. His teeth are also made out of shells. This mask is one of the best surviving examples of its kind from the Post Classic period.

### ***Double-Headed Serpent Pectoral***

This pectoral features double-headed and intertwined serpents associated with the feathered serpent god, Quetzalcoatl. Their jaws are open, symbolizing the caves of Mictlan, gateways to the underworld. The whole piece is a wooden base covered with turquoise mosaic inlays making it look as blue as the sky. The noses, gums, and teeth of the reptiles are inlaid with white and red shells.

Double headed and intertwined serpents were icons in Mesoamerican art that represented the sky [Fig. 67]. The serpents were a symbol of renewal since they shed their skin. They are also metaphoric streams of blood. In this context, the pectoral is a work dedicated to life, which depends on death and the Underworld in order to renew itself.

It is believed that a priest or noble wore this pectoral in rituals connected to the birth of the god Huitzilpochtli, the patron Aztec god who was born at Coatepec, the “Snake Mountain”.

### ***Sacrificial Knife***

The *tecpatl*, or sacrificial knife, was an important feature of Aztec rituals. With the knife, priests cut open the chests of sacrificial victims to extract the heart that would feed the gods, hoping that such a gift would bring blessings to humankind. On the few surviving *tecpatls*, there are some representations of deities on the handles. One famous pre-Hispanic example is the carved image of a figure wearing a circular ear ornament and a large feather linking, associating the figure to Tonatiuh, the sun god. The arms of Tonatiuh seem to be supporting the blade. Matos and Solis (2002) state that the weapon of Huitzilpochtli, patron deity of war and the sun, is referenced in the handle by the presence of the *xiuhcoatl* (fire serpent). This particular knife emphasizes the importance of human sacrifice to the nourishment of the gods, especially the sun god, who illuminate the earth and sustain life.

This handle, separated from its blade, was discovered in Mexico City; the blade was attached later.

### ***Knife with an Image of a Face***

Found in the Great Temple in Tenochtitlan, this knife bears a face in profile that is presumed to represent the year-bearer *tecpatl*, a lesser deity [Fig. 68]. Its teeth and eyes accentuate by inlaid white flint and obsidian, a volcanic rock. Since this a sacred sacrificial knife, it is symbolically connected with Mictlan, the lower part of the universe where beings without flesh lived. Mictlan was associated with the color black and the *tecpatl* (sacrificial knife). According to Matos and Solís (2002), this knife is associated to the black god Tezcatlipoca, who embodies an obsidian knife representing black wind. As a sacrificial knife, it is also associated with the North (the direction of death) and the flayed god Xipeec Totec.

## **GOLD WORK**

As time passed by, the nomadic Aztecs became a society divided by distinct classes. Wealth and power belonged to the *pipiltin* (nobility). For the *pipiltin*, the Aztec metal workers made expensive and beautiful objects of gold. Though gold was not as desirable as green stone or turquoise, gold was a symbol of status. Tenochtitlan was the cosmopolitan center of Aztec art and people of Mixtec origin were encouraged to settle there because they were famous for their gold work, which was distributed all over the city and the empire.

According to Matos and Solís (2002), gold, combined with textiles and other precious stones, was used to ornament the dress of both the gods and humans, as shown in various manuscripts. The nobles in the Aztec society wore gold bells on their costumes. This clothing style was also depicted in monumental sculpture. After the Spanish Conquest, figures of gold and other precious stones were taken to European countries and were exhibited as exotic commodities. Hernán Cortés gave descriptions of such figures; for example, he saw a bird-shaped piece with green feathers and with eyes,

feet, and a beak made of gold.

A sense of mystery surrounded the *teocuitlahuaque* (goldsmiths). Though given the highly esteemed title of *tolteca*, goldsmiths were believed to be from a far, remote, and exotic nation. Xipec Totec was the patron deity of the *teocuitlahuaque* and they worshipped him in a temple named Yopico (the Yopi ground). The word *Yopi* was the name of the people who lived in the western parts of the mountains reaching the Pacific Ocean. They did not speak Nahuatl, lived independent of the Aztecs, and subsisted in very poor conditions as Sahagún (1951-1969) has suggested. Even though they had their own customs and cultural traditions, they were embedded in the Aztec world, and were considered rich due to their abilities to manipulate and work gold.

# **AZTEC ARCHITECTURE**

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Aztec architecture reflects the values and civilization of an empire, and studying Aztec architecture is instrumental in understanding the history of the Aztecs, including their migration across Mexico and their re-enactment of religious rituals. Aztec architecture can be best described as monumental. Its purpose was to manifest power, while at the same time adhering to strong religious beliefs. This is evident in the design of the temples, shrines, palaces, and everyday homes.

The capital city of the Aztec Empire was Tenochtitlán, located in present day Mexico City. Tenochtitlán was an overwhelming, monumental city that was built on top of small islands and marsh lands. It was the third largest city in the world, after Constantinople and Paris, housing 200,000 inhabitants at its height. Tenochtitlán was the city where the most impressive and monumental Aztec architecture was to be found. After the Spanish conquest, the city was looted, torn down, and its materials were used to build present day Mexico City. From archaeological and various historical documents, such as Spanish Chronicles and codices written by friars, Indians and other historians, the extent and significance of the Aztec architecture can be deciphered.

Although Tenochtitlán was the most impressive of the Aztec cities, there were other cities and archaeological sites that represented Aztec architecture, daily life and ritual. The Aztecs had a long migration history, during which time they split several times. The people who founded Tenochtitlán, however, remained united and devoted themselves to the worship of Huitzilopochtli, the sun and war god. Because the Aztecs migrated for several hundred years and split several times, they adopted various gods, customs, architectural styles, and techniques. The final migratory split occurred in Coatepec (near Tula), where Huitzilopochtli, one of the most important Aztec deities, was born. Half of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán was built in his honor.

The Great Temple of Tenochtitlán contains the history of Huitzilopochtli in sculpture (see section below: Great Temple for more details). The Great Temple was the sacred place where the Aztecs worshiped Huitzilopochtli and sacrificed human beings in order to appease him. To fully understand Aztec architecture, an extensive examination of Aztec cosmology, mythology and culture is required because most Aztec structures were religiously charged. This is evident in the various temples and shrines that were built in order to worship Aztec deities and offer human sacrifices. (See Chapter 6: Religion, Cosmology and Mythology for more details).

Aztec architecture was heavily influenced by the Toltecs of Colhuacan, the Tepanecs of Atzacapotzalco, and the Acolhuas of Tetzaco. Because the Aztec empire was built through conquest, the Aztecs had to find ways to integrate various dominated ethnic groups. Thus, the Aztecs relied on their architecture and artwork to promote their worldview. The massive structures reflected the military might of the empire.

The Aztecs were well organized and had strong infrastructures and systems that mobilized people and material resources in order to build large edifices that met the needs of their population. Tenochtitlán, the capital city, symbolized Aztec power. Aztec architecture, being similar to that of other Mesoamerican cultures, possessed an innate sense of order and symmetry. Geometric designs and sweeping lines were representations of religious tenets and the power of the state. In addition, the Aztecs used bas-reliefs, walls, plazas, and platforms, as media to represent their gods and ideals. During various epochs of their empire, the Aztecs added new techniques and materials to their structures. Examples of Aztec monumentality and grandeur are seen at the Great Temple, where 8,000 people could fit into its plaza, and the market of Tlatelolco that housed 20,000 people on market days. Aztec architectural adaptation and ingenuity can be seen at Malinalco (see section below), where a temple was cut out of the rock and was integrated into a mountain.

### ***Symbolism***

Aztec architecture is deeply embedded with symbolism. The cardinal points are



religious symbols for the four directions and corners of the earth. They are religious entities that have divine patrons, colors, days, and year signs which vary according to different historical versions. For the Aztecs, North was represented by the color black and ruled by Tezcatlipoca, god of fate, destiny and night; it was the region called Mictlampa, meaning the place of death, and its associated symbol was a flint knife. South was characterized by the color blue and ruled by Huitzilopochtli, the solar god and war deity; this was the region called Huitztlampa, the region of thorns, and its symbol was the rabbit. East was associated with the color red and ruled by Tonatiuh, the sun god, Xipeec Totec, the god of fertility and vegetation, and Camaxtli-Mixcoatl, the god of hunting; it was the region called Tlapallan, meaning the place of red color and also Tlapcopa, the place of light; its symbol was a reed. West was represented by the color white and ruled by Quetzalcoatl, the god of wind, Venus, and wisdom. The West, where the sun goes down into the land of night and the dead, was the region called Cihuatlampa, meaning the place of the women, where the *Cihuateteo* (deified women who have died in childbirth) escorted the sun each evening after his journey across the sky; its symbol was a house. These gods of the four directions are responsible for fire, sun, the waters, earth, man, the place of the dead, and time. They maintain equilibrium on earth. The Aztecs were aware of the above significance, and for that reason, their City of Tenochtitlán and its structures, specifically the Great Temple, followed those cosmological patterns [Fig. 69]. It can be clearly seen in the *Codex Mendoza* with the Ceremonial Precinct of Tenochtitlán at the center with four sectors emanating from it oriented to the four cardinal points. The Aztecs wished to maintain equilibrium and appease their gods for fear that the earth would collapse like it did during the First to the Fourth Sun time periods (previous creations of the world). Thus, the city's orientation is a result of the belief that when the Fifth Sun was created in Teotihuacán, the diverse gods faced different directions to see from which direction the new sun would rise. According to the *Leyenda de los Soles* (Myth of the Suns), the Great Temple faces west because the first god to see the sun was Quetzalcoatl, whose temple faces east, following the path of the sun.

Other symbols seen in Aztec architecture are: the eagle representing the sun at the zenith as well as the warriors, serpents symbolizing water or fire serpents, each are

linked to Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli, respectively, and the conch shell relating to fertility, life and creation. Representations of frogs as aquatic creature were reminiscent of Tlaloc symbols.

## TYPES OF ARCHITECTURE

### ***General Construction of Pyramid-Temples***

Pyramid-temple were built to facilitate the Aztec religion and worldview. Building pyramid temple was one of the most important architectural duties for the Aztecs because of their religious significance. They were government sponsored public works designed to create a sense of religious piety and imperial power. They were believed to represent mountains that were the sources of water and fertility, and the home of the spirits of Aztec ancestors. Pyramid-temple, like mountains, also symbolized the concept of *altepetl*, meaning the heart of the city filled with fertilizing water. They also served as important sanctuaries where rituals were celebrated, and important people were sometimes buried within them. More importantly, they represented the celestial order where the cosmos was divided into 13 sections, each associated with a different superhuman phenomenon. For that reason, according to Van Zantwijk, many of the pyramids that followed the blueprint of the Great Temple consisted of four platforms built step like on top of each other, relating to the four cardinal directions. The three lower platforms multiplied by the four sides, consisted of 12 sections (3 X 4); the 13<sup>th</sup> section was the small top platform where the dual temple of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc were built [See [Fig. 70](#)].

Most pyramid-temple followed a general pattern that consisted of a platform, a long broad, steep double staircase rising from the center, with balustrades along the sides of the steps. Sculpted stone blocks and skulls were used to decorate the platform and the end of the balustrades. Constructed with cosmology in mind, pyramid-temple always faced west and were cardinally located on the eastern side of the town center/plaza border. The double staircase also faced west, where the sun descended into the

underworld.

The tops of the pyramids had small flat plateaus where a temple or a sacrificial block of a temple would be built. There was an adjoining back room that contained the idol to whom the temple was dedicated and an antechamber for a priest. Most temples' inside walls were ornamented with either sculpture or paint. Temples were also decorated with geometrically carved blocks of stone. Early Aztecs built pyramids in a style similar to the ones of earlier Classic and Post-Classic Mesoamerican people. However, it is important to note there were some differences. Some of the most common features found in Aztec pyramid-temples are: 13 steps along the stairway, staircases with two balustrades with changing slopes at the top, almost becoming vertical, and representations of an eagle that is the *nahual* (disguise or form) of Huitzilopochtli-Tonatiuh. The elements can be seen on temples at Tepoztlan, the Temple of the Feathered Serpent in Xochicalco, the round temple of Cempoala, and the temple of Ehecatl in Calixtlahuaca.

### ***Temples***

A temple was usually found on the top of a pyramid, though there were exceptions, located at the center of the city. Since many state related ceremonies were held inside temples, politics and religion could not be separate. This union of politics and religion increased the emperors' authority and legitimized their respective gods' power. Temples were provided with priests, adjoining residences, schools, and land (as seen with the Great Temple).

The empire's cosmological and religious ideals were manifested in temples. They were the center point for the four cardinal directions, the place where the vertical channel or axis led to heaven and the underworld and where the supreme ruler interacted with the gods [Fig. 70]. Many of the ceremonies held at the temples followed seasonal and festival calendars. According to Aztec beliefs, it was essential to provide the gods with nourishment in order to prevent the end of the world. The nourishment of the gods was the blood shed during human sacrifice. Not all temples were built for human sacrifice. The Aztecs were a polytheistic people who built various temples in honor of different

gods. For that reason, the offerings or honors presented to different deities varied. In addition, temples were places for the renewal of the empire, altars of rebirth and hope.

Temples were constructed in accordance to the four cardinal directions. Temples were normally erected on the eastern border of the town center or plaza, facing west. If a new temple was to replace an already existing temple, the older temple was not destroyed. Rather, builders would add a new structure over the existing edifice. The result would be a new temple that was larger, more extravagant, and more detailed. Enlarging preexisting structures meant adding more stairs and making the sacrificial area more spacious. According to the emperor, layering a preexisting temple was acceptable because the gods had already blessed the original temple. Building a more magnificent temple paid further tribute to the gods.

The appearance of most temples was similar. They resembled truncated pyramids. The outside of the temples had terraces and steps. Some of the most detailed and decorated parts of the temple were the staircases that pointed towards the heavens. Stone serpent heads were frequently placed at the end of the staircases. The serpent heads' signified the representation of Coatepec (Snake Mountain), as the place of birth of the Aztecs' main god Huitzilopochtli. Also, it is believed that by using poisonous or dangerous animals for décor, evil spirits would be warded away.

## ***Types of Pyramids***

### ***ROUND PYRAMIDS***

Round pyramids are predominantly found in Calixtlahuaca, in the Toluca Valley. They are dedicated to the god of the wind Ehecatl, one of the forms of god Quetzalcoatl. The structures were constructed in a circular fashion to facilitate wind flow thereby preventing the structure from acting as a barrier that could hinder the wind god's entrance. According to Aztec and other pre-Columbian beliefs, Ehecatl blew wind in the four cardinal directions so that the earth would be cleansed, enabling Tlaloc to send rain. Gentle wind would be sent to the east, where *Tlalocan* (paradise of god Tlaloc) lived. Wind with gales would be sent in the direction of *Mictlan* (the underworld). Gentle

cold wind blew to the west where the *Cihuapipiltin* (noble women who died while giving birth) stayed, and to the south where the Huitznahua gods (the stars of the south) resided, strong gusty winds were blown [Fig. 160].

### ***TWIN STAIRS PYRAMIDS***

An example of a twin stairs pyramid is the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán. At its summit, it had two temples and a double staircase. The temples were dedicated to Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. The temple on the left side honored Tlaloc. Tlaloc was responsible for providing a good rain season and an abundant harvest. If enough rain was not forthcoming, the result was famine. For that reason, Tlaloc was highly revered. His temple was decorated with blue and white, the colors that symbolized water and moisture. The temple on the right side was dedicated to Huitzilopochtli. It was painted in red and white in honor of war and sacrifice. The Great Temple was very steep and high in altitude. The temples on top of the pyramid could not be seen unless a person stood on the platform. Temples similar to the Great Temple were tall in height because the gods lived in the sky and above the people. Being at the summit of a pyramid was the closest a person could be to the gods [Fig. 76a]. Other examples of double staircase pyramids are found in Tenayuca and Tlatelolco.

### ***SHRINES (ADORATORIOS)***

Aztec shrines were important religious structures. Since the Aztecs were polytheistic, each shrine that was built was to honor a specific god. Since different shrines worshiped a specific god, their respective appearances were relatively diverse. Although shrines' exteriors varied, their internal structure was more uniform. The interior usually had a circular form with a round table in the middle of the room that was used to hold the offerings to the cult of the god to whom the shrine was built. Since the Aztecs were extremely devout and had many offerings, there usually was not enough room for all the offerings on the shrine. It was not uncommon for an additional building to be added. The adjoining structure consisted of a rectangular building that led to a smaller round room where there was a fire in the center to burn offerings. It was often the case that the second building would burn down because the roof was thatched of grass and

straw. It is believed that the above is the reason why large quantities of shrines were built, and why they were abundant throughout the Aztec empire. These shrines played an integral part in the religious lives of Aztecs who strongly believed that offerings were essential in pleasing the gods. Examples of these shrines are found in Mount Tlaloc and in the *Huixachtepetl* or Hill of the Star (presently Cerro de la Estrella) [Fig. 71].

### ***Early Capital Cities***

The general layout and architecture of Aztec capital cities was formally planned around a center with randomly scattered homes in the outskirts of town. Buildings were cosmologically oriented. At the heart of the city, there was a rectangular public plaza with civic and religious buildings at its borders. Most temples, shrines, and pyramid-temples were found in this area. Beyond the central area there were markets, dwellings, schools, and other randomly scattered buildings.

### ***City-State Capitals***

City-state capitals were cities that had control of provinces, and they were usually planned in a similar manner as the more local capital cities. Like capital cities, city-state capitals were also cosmologically oriented. They had a central plaza with adjoining civic and religious structures. Pyramid-temples were on the eastern side of the plaza facing west. Other important civic or religious buildings had a designated location according to the four cardinal directions. Since the Aztec empire was large and it dominated many cultures, most city-states had little or no contact with the imperial metropolis. As a result, the city-state capitals played a more important role in the daily lives of the people than did Tenochtitlán. City-state capitals were used by peasants to take care of personal, religious, and administrative obligations, like market days and other activities.

### ***Ballcourts***

Ball courts were used to play the famous Mesoamerican Ballgame, and they were generally constructed according to the traditional I-shape [Fig. 72], though there were some variations. The ballcourt was called *tlachco*, and the game played on the *tlachco* was *tlachtli* or *ullamaliztli*. The *tlachtli* was part of an overall early Mesoamerican

tradition that is still played today in some parts of Mexico. For the Aztecs, the ballgame was the main sport that embodied recreation and religious ritual, and whenever the Aztecs settled a site, their first act was to build a shrine for Huitzilopochtli and a ballcourt next to it. Ballcourts were associated to the myth of Huitzilopochtli at Coatepec, where he fought Coyolxauhqui (Moon goddess) and the Centzohuitznahua (the 400 stars), decapitated them, and ate their hearts at the center of the ballcourt called *itzompan* (place of the skull). The myth of Coatepec reflects the daily cosmic fight between the Sun (light and life) and the nocturnal celestial bodies (death and darkness) and the permanent victory of the Sun that allows the continuity of Life in the Universe. The movement of the ball was a metaphor for the cult drama of the moving sun across the sky, and was intended to reflect the celestial events on earth.

### ***Aqueducts and Dams***

The major cities of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco were erected on tiny marshy islands along Lake Tetzoco. Those swampy islands had a limited supply of drinking water, so an aqueduct was built to carry fresh water over the lake from springs at Chapultepec on the mainland [Fig. 73]. The Aztecs also created long canals for irrigation of the fields, and in the times of the king Motecuzoma I, the Tezcocan king Netzahuacoyotl built a dyke or dam that protected Tenochtitlán from floods that were very destructive during heavy rainy seasons. These sophisticated hydraulic works were some of the most impressive accomplishments of Aztec technology.

### ***Markets***

All major cities had thriving markets located near or adjacent to the main temple at the center of the community [Fig. 74]. According to Spanish chroniclers, Aztec law required that one goes to the market and bring supplies to town. Nothing could be sold on the way to the market for fear that of the Market god would punish the offender; this was enforced by strict penalties under the law. Markets were important not only for the economic prosperity of the city, but they also served as meeting places for gathering information such as rumors of rebellions or attacks by neighboring peoples, as was the case during the early years of the empire. Although markets and their respective plazas did not contain immense buildings like the Great Temple or palaces, they are important

to the architecture of the Aztecs in terms of their location, layout, and cosmological implications.

### **Gardens**

Many Aztec gardens were modeled after an old garden discovered by Motecuhzoma I in Huaxtepec that once belonged to “the ancestors.” The emperor decided to restore and rebuild the garden and a variety of plants and fauna were brought from other regions and planted. There after, other gardens flourished in cities such as the one founded by Netzahuacoyotl in Tetzcotzinco, several in Itztapalapa, Tetzoco, Tlatelolco, and in the palaces of future emperors (See Tetzcotzinco gardens later in this section). They were well organized and incorporated into the architectural plan of palaces. The gardens were primarily kept for pleasure, but they also held medicinal plants. Most gardens were very similar and can be compared to that of the palace of Itztapalapa that was described by Hernán Cortés (1986) as spaces with many trees and sweet-scented flowers. Bathing places of fresh water with well constructed steps leading down to the bottom allowed rulers a peaceful resting place. There was also a large orchard tree near the house, overlooked by a high terrace with many beautiful corridors and rooms. Within the orchard was a great square pool of fresh water, very well constructed, with sides of handsome masonry, around which runs a walk with a well-laid pavement of tiles, so wide that four persons can walk abreast on it, and 400 paces square, making it all 600 paces. On the other side of the promenade toward the wall of the garden were hedges of lattice work made of cane, behind which were all sorts of plantations of trees and aromatic herbs. The pool contained many fish and different kinds of waterfowl.

## **BUILDING MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES**

The Aztecs were adept builders and craftsmen who used chisels, hard stones, and obsidian blades as tools. Many of the materials used were the same as those used for about two thousand years in the Mexican central valley. However, in Tenochtitlán’s most recent constructions, the Aztec began to focus on the solidity of buildings due to the ever sinking subsoil. As a result, *tezontle*, a strong and light volcanic stone was extensively used. *Tezontle* was very popular because it was easy to cut and its texture



and color was appealing. It was used in the construction of monumental buildings, filling in walls and roofing. Aztecs attributed the large quantities of *tezontle* stone to the destruction of the world according to the *Legend of Suns*, which explains that during the era of the third sun (*tletonatiuh*) there was a rain of fire that destroyed the world leaving the *tezontle* on the surface. Another popular technique used to prevent the city's sinking was to use platforms as foundations or to drive wooden piles into the earth in close-packed formations. This has been revealed in excavations.

Metal (except copper) was unknown to the Aztecs. Cords, wedges, or other means would be used to cut stone, and sand and water were popular abrasives. Most building materials used by the Aztecs were found in the region or acquired through trade. In Tenochtitlán swamp delicacies such as frogs, fish, and algae were traded for building materials such as rock and fill. Rock and fill were used to expand and stabilize the marshy *chinampas* (land plots that were used for agriculture) [Fig. 75]. Rubble, plaster, adobe, and lime to make stucco were also commonly used. Loose stone and rubble was imported from coastal regions. Outside of Tenochtitlán people used wood from uninhabited forests. Pine and oak were popular for making support beams and door jambs.

The Aztecs were so adept in working and carving stone that the Spaniards, in a later epoch, utilized and combined the Indian artists with their own artists who used metal tools in the construction of colonial edifices, resulting in the *tequitqui* or *mestizo* art of Mexico [Figs. 47 and 48].

## THE PRECINCT OF TENOCHTITLAN

### ***Introduction***

Tenochtitlán was a monumental city that stood for power and endurance, as well as a living metaphor for the Aztec story of migration and the supremacy of their Sun god, Huitzilopochtli. It was an urban island settlement that housed approximately 200,000 inhabitants at the time of the Spanish conquest. Its name is derived from *tetl*, rock;

*nochtli*, cactus; and *tlan*, a suffix signifying location. It is also believed that the city was named after Tenoch, a priest-king that ruled the Mexica when the city was founded in 1325 C.E. Tenoch had led his people through years of hardship in the Mexican central valley, during which time he devoutly followed Huitzilopochtli's signs that led to founding Tenochtitlán. Tenoch predicted that the land where the Mexica should settle would be found *vis-à-vis* an eagle perched on a prickly pear cactus devouring a serpent, a white field, a white frog, and a white willow (some of the same foundational elements that appeared in previous cultural stories, such as those from Tula and Cholula). The heart of Copil, nephew of Huitzilopochtli, would determine the exact location of where the city would be founded. Copil was the son of Malinalxochitl, the goddess sister of Huitzilopochtli. Malinalxochitl was a mischievous sorceress who was abandoned by the Mexica in Malinalco due to her evil witchcraft activities. Malinalxochitl encouraged animosity between her son and brother. When Copil and Huitzilopochtli fought, Copil was defeated and his heart was thrown over the lake of Tetzaco. It landed on the island that would become Tenochtitlán.

When the sacred city was founded, a temple in honor of Huitzilopochtli was immediately erected. The temple was constructed of reeds and straw with a foundation of swamp grass. According to Aztec history, that evening Huitzilopochtli spoke to a priest and advised him to divide the city into four *campan* (major *barrios* or quarters) with a temple dedicated to him at the center [Fig. 76b]. This nucleus became the ceremonial precinct of Tenochtitlán, with the Great Temple in the center surrounded by other temples and shrines that were later erected. The complex was enclosed by a wall and could only be entered through four gates oriented towards the cardinal directions, like the causeways that led outside of the city [Fig. 76a].

Initially, Tenochtitlán was structured in the same manner as other city-state capitals with a planned central area and an unorganized region on the outskirts of the precinct. The above layout changed when Tenochtitlán's population began to grow exponentially. When it was determined that Tenochtitlán would become the capital of the Aztec civilization, it was renovated. The architects of Tenochtitlán borrowed many stylistic attributes (such as the urban grid) from Teotihuacán and Tula. When

the city was reconstructed, the Toltec city of Tula was looted. Many Toltec monuments were incorporated into Tenochtitlán. One of the defining features of Aztec architecture in Tenochtitlán was the massive edifices. Since the structures were massive and on top of a marshy, muddy island, they continuously sank. As a result, new layers were added to pre-existing structures. This is particularly true of the Great Temple located in the central plaza. The early Spanish edifices suffered from the same problem. To assert their dominion the Spaniards built present day Mexico City over Tenochtitlán. In some parts of Mexico City, Aztec structures are literally eight meters below the city streets.

Tenochtitlán was said to have been a magnificent city, the Venice of the New World. According to the Spanish chroniclers, it was the most impressive and beautiful city that they had seen. Shortly after the conquest, plans of the city showing the precinct of Tenochtitlán were drawn. One of them is known as *Map of Mexico-Tenochtitlán of 1550* (Map of Uppsala) and the other was drawn up by Hernán Cortés in his second letter to the Emperor Charles V and published in Nuremberg in 1524 [Fig. 77]. These plans as well as Spanish chronicles and archeological data have been instrumental in documenting Aztec architecture and urbanization. Due to the Conquistadors' systematic destruction and the missionaries' religious zeal, the precinct of Tenochtitlán no longer exists. However, its glory can be retrieved from data archeologists have gathered and the descriptions of the Spanish chroniclers. Each is usually consistent with the other, though there are some discrepancies. Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1963), a Spanish eye witness, wrote that the Spaniards were astounded by the sight of villages built in the water, an enchanted vision like that of *Amadis of Gaul*, a Spanish romance of chivalry published in 1508, of a town rising from the water. Believing it to be a dream, they were surprised when they found friendly lodging in the palace of Itztapalapa. The palaces were very spacious and well built, of magnificent stone, cedar-wood, and wood of other sweet-smelling trees, with great rooms and courts, and all covered with awning of woven cotton." When describing the gardens, Díaz del Castillo continues to recount of a marvelous place both to see and walk in. He was never tired of noticing the diversity of trees and the various scents given off by each, and the paths choked with

roses and other flowers, and the many local fruit-trees and rose-bushes, and the pond of fresh water. Then there were a variety of birds which came to the pond. Another remarkable thing he wrote about was that large canoes could come into the garden from the lake, through a channel they had cut, and their crews did not have to disembark.

When describing the Great Temple, Díaz del Castillo added that to reach it, one must pass through a series of large courts. These courts were surrounded by a double wall masonry wall and paved, like the whole temple, with a very large smooth floor with flagstones. Where these stones were absent, everything was whitened and polished. The temple was so clean that there was not a straw or a grain of dust to be found there. When Díaz del Castillo arrived at the Great Temple, he observed six priest and two chieftains walk down from the top of the temple, where they were making sacrifices; they climbed the one hundred and fourteen steps to the top of the temple, which formed an open square on which stood a platform where the great stones stood on which they placed the poor Indians for sacrifice. On that platform, Díaz del Castillo also saw a massive image like a dragon, and other hideous figures, and a great deal of blood that had been spilled that day.

From the top of the temple, one could see, a great number of canoes, some coming with provisions and others returning with cargo and merchandise. Díaz del Castillo observed that no one could pass from one house to another of that great city and the other cities that were built on the water except over wooded drawbridges or by canoe. All the houses had flat roofs, and on the causeways were other small towers and shrines built like fortresses. The market swarmed of people buying and selling; some of the Spanish soldiers had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, in Rome, and all over Italy, and they proclaimed that they had never seen a market so well laid out, so large, so orderly, and so full of people.

### ***Urbanism***

The Aztecs built their capital on a tiny island in the lake Tetzaco that was enlarged by filling in surrounding marshy areas [\[Fig. 76a\]](#). It was divided into four large quarters (*campan*) symbolizing the four cardinal directions and a ceremonial center considered

to be the heart or the fifth direction (Mesoamericans thought that the center, the fifth direction, held the sky and earth together). The quarters were then subdivided into smaller *barrios* or neighborhoods called *calpultin* (sing. *calpulli*). Each *calpulli* had its own central plaza, shrines, patron deities, and administrative buildings, but the major temples were in the ceremonial precinct of Tenochtitlán.

The city was joined by three main causeways and a double aqueduct that brought fresh water from Chapultepec because the lake was salty. To the north lay the road to Tepeyacac (Tepeyac), to the south lay Itztapalapa and Coyoacan, and to the west lay the road to Tlacopan (Tacuba) and Chapultepec [Figs. 76b and 77]. In addition, there was a network of canals that crossed each other at right angles, dividing the city into four quadrants, plus the center that was the sacred precinct (symbolizing the Mesoamerican cosmogram of the four cardinal directions and the center). Each quadrant was further subdivided into the four directions, with a center and its own ceremonial precinct. The city followed the ancient city of Teotihuacán's urban grid-plan system. The pyramids and plazas were a metaphor for the surrounding mountainous volcanic shapes and the plateau of the lake.

Tenochtitlán had three types of streets: dirt roads for walking, water canals that required a canoe, and dirt-water streets which could be walked or canoed. Because the city was on top of a lake, many streets intersected with deep water canals flanked by bridges made of wood beams.

The Aztecs sought to acquire prestige by incorporating stylistic features of past great cultures, as seen in the Red Temples and ceremonial banquettes. The Red Temples were located on the north and south sides of the Great Temple proper. The temples were named after their color of decoration, having dull-red murals painted inside and out. They were raised on low bases and their styles were reminiscent of Teotihuacán. The ceremonial banquettes were identical to those constructed in the Charred Palace of Tula, illustrating a Toltec influence.

There were many sculptures, such as *Coatlicue*, systematically distributed in patios and

temples. Many were destroyed during the Conquest. The ones that remain are at the National Museum of Anthropology (for more information on the stone sculptures, see the section of Aztec Art).

### ***Ceremonial Plaza (Interior of the Sacred Precinct)***

The central ceremonial plaza was the religious and administrative center of Tenochtitlán. The core of the city was the Great Temple which rose at the intersection of the three causeways. It was surrounded by a ceremonial center that formed a quadrangular 400 meter square that was symmetrical in plan. It consisted of 78 religious structures, all painted in brilliant symbolic colors and surrounded by secondary complexes and rows of residencies [Fig. 78a, b, and c]. This sacred area was bounded by the *coatepantli* (serpent wall) and was dedicated to the religious ceremonies celebrated throughout the year. The ceremonial center was placed on a raised quadrangular platform that formed a square where ritual buildings were symmetrically arranged. The area consisted of recurring stairways, platforms, and house like temples laid out in a hierarchy that faced the four directions in a prevalent east-west axis. The ceremonial precinct included diverse pyramid-sanctuaries like the Templo Mayor (Great Temple) dedicated to the gods Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, the circular Temple of Quetzalcoatl, the Temple of Tonatiuh, the temple-palaces of the eagle and jaguar warriors, as well as the ballcourt, a *temalacatl* (gladiatorial-stone), the *calmecac* (school), libraries, the *tzompantli* (skull rack), ponds for ritual ablutions, and residences for priests. In the patio of the temple of Xipe Totec or *Yopico* there was an elevated base platform that had a *temalacatl*, a round stone where prisoners were tied during the gladiatorial sacrifice.

The ceremonial plaza was surrounded by the royal palace and the houses of nobles, which were located immediately outside of the *coatepantli*. The homes of the lower class stood at the periphery of the precinct. The major market of Tenochtitlán was adjacent to the south of the central plaza. There were also small markets that served the smaller wards far from the precinct. Some sections of Tenochtitlán's outskirts consisted of cultivated *chinampa* plots that extended on to the lake. Crops were grown on these small marshy floating islands. Their layout is illustrated in the *Plano*

*en Papel Maguey*, an early colonial document [Fig. 75]. The architecture of Tenochtitlán is not to be understood in terms of the design or style of its buildings. Rather, its plans, monuments, and natural settings are expressions of the daily lives and religious beliefs of the people.

Tenochtitlán was a large city with multiple structures. Due to the fact that Mexico City is literally on top of the Aztec buildings and the subsoil is fragile, excavations are limited. In addition, many of Mexico City's structures are colonial in nature, and thus are considered historic. For those reasons, there are limited areas designated for archaeological research. For example, some important structures are believed to be beneath the historic and colonial cathedral of Mexico City. Due to its historic and religious nature, the cathedral cannot be destroyed, although limited excavations are being practiced rescuing interesting materials. Nevertheless, these edifices were an integral part of the architecture and urbanization of Tenochtitlán. For example, the temple of Tezcatlipoca lies beneath the modern archbishop's headquarters. It is believed that it may have been important because it was 20 meters high and it had an 80 step stairway.

On the west side of the precinct was the *tozpalatl*, a structure surrounding the sacred spring used for ritual bathing. This area also contained the *teutlalpan*, a token wooded area for hunting rituals enclosed by four walls. Also there was the tall pole that was adorned during festivals of *Xocotl Huetzi* (Falling of the Fruit) when the sacrifice by fire was performed in honor of the fire god Xiutecuhtli, and prisoners were thrown alive into the flames of a ceremonial fire.

The *coateocalli*, a temple where the captured gods and religious paraphernalia of conquered communities were held, was located directly below the corner of present day Donceles and Argentina Street in the Northwest part of the precinct. Near that area there were other buildings that functioned as lodgings for priests, penance houses, and preparation homes for the youth in service of the temple. The circular temple of Quetzalcóatl was located directly in front of the Great Temple. Behind the temple of Quetzalcóatl, on the western end of the ceremonial center lay the ballcourt for the ritual

ballgame. The Temple of the Sun appears to have been located on the southwest corner of the precinct, and it faced the stone for gladiatorial sacrifices. Other temples in the ceremonial center were: the temple of the goddess Cihuacóatl, the House of Eagle Warriors, which formed one of the most important military orders (this one was found in the excavations of the Templo Mayor Project), the Temple of Chicomecoatl, the goddess of vegetation and corn, and the Temple of Xochiquetzal, the goddess of beauty and love associated with artisans and artists.

### ***The Great Temple***

The Great Temple was one of the finest testaments of Aztec monumental architecture and power. The temple's architectural layout, organization, location, and art work represented the social, religious, and geographical center of the Aztec universe. According to Aztec thought, the central point where the temple stood was where the celestial and sub-terrestrial levels (vertical dimensions) intersect with the terrestrial realm (horizontal dimension). The celestial realm consisted of 13 heavens (where celestial bodies lie and gods live), the terrestrial consisted of the four world directions, and the sub-terrestrial realms consisted of nine levels that the deceased must pass through to get to the underworld [Fig. 70]. The temple was built on the conceptual spot where the vertical channel met with the horizontal. In addition, the Great Temple was built in a city surrounded by water. Aztlan, the Aztec homeland, called *Cemanahuac*, meaning the place in a circle of water, was also in the middle of a lake. Metaphorically, all shores and seas can be called *Cemanahuac*. Thus *Cemanahuac* or *Anahuac* was, by extension, the name that the Aztecs used to refer to the Valley of Mexico and in general to the world. In addition, it was prophesized that the god Huitzilopochtli would lead the Aztecs to a place where they would have power and grandeur. Thus, the Aztecs claimed to be in the center of the universe as the chosen people.

The ceremonial center of Tenochtitlán developed around the temple of Huitzilopochtli. Over time, the temple followed the tradition of other Mesoamerican pyramids as it was rebuilt in enveloping layers. Thus, the original temple with its offerings, sculptures, and related artifacts was completely enclosed by a new superimposed structure, evolving from a humble dwelling to the center of the Aztec Universe.



During the excavations of the Great Temple, its architecture revealed some interesting facts. The first is that the growth of the temple during consecutive imperial reigns was a result of the state patronage, in particular that of Motecuhzoma Ihuilcamina and his son Axayacatl [Fig. 79a, b, c]. The second is that the pyramid was organized as a symbolic man-made mountain. The third is that the pyramid-temple was organized as a dual stage where religious and mythological rites related to the *Tonacatepetl* (Mount of Sustenance associated with god Tlaloc and its shrine on Mount Tlaloc) and the Mount of *Coatepec* (Snake Mountain, place of birth of Huitzilopochtli) were reenacted [Fig. 80b].

The Great Temple is a microcosm for the Aztec worldview. According to Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, the platform that supports the temple corresponds to the terrestrial level due to the fact that sculptures of serpents, symbols of the earth, are located there. There are two large braziers on each side of the serpent-head sculptures at the center of the north and south façades and on the east side on the axis with the central line of the Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli shrines. The braziers indicate that perishable offerings were given, further evidencing that the platform was the terrestrial level. Four slightly tapering tiers of the pyramid that rise to the summit of the two shrines of the chief gods represent the celestial level. The sub-terrestrial realm (underworld) lies beneath the earthly platform. Many offerings have been found below this floor. Lastly, Nezahualpilli's words to Ahuitzotl, an Aztec emperor, during the commemoration of the completion of one of the temple's construction phases, affirmed its sacredness. He stated that Tenochtitlán was a powerful kingdom, the root, the navel and the heart of the entire world.

### ***Myths Symbolized in the Great Temple***

The Great Temple is a dual pyramid with twin temples on its top platform, representing two sacred mountains: *Coatepec* on the south side dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, and *Tonacatepetl* on the north side dedicated to Tlaloc [Fig. 80a]. The south side of the temple is an architectural representation of the myth of the birth of Huitzilopochtli on the mount of Coatepec (or Hill of the Serpents), symbolizing the Aztecs' rise to power.

Coatepec is a Toltec site near Tula and was visited by the Aztecs in 1163 C.E. during their long migration. It was at Coatepec that Huitzilopochtli, the child of a virginal conception, was born from the womb of Coatlicue and where he fought and killed his jealous sister, Coyolxauhqui (the moon goddess), and his brothers, the Centzohuitznahua (the 400 hundreds stars from the south) [Fig. 81]. The temple is filled with sculptures of serpents, representations that are in accordance with the name of Coatepec that means Snake Mountain. The myth of Coatepec probably had a historical foundation related to a conflict between two Aztec factions trying to gain control over the entire group and seeking to impose leadership during the migration. It is apparent that one group wanted to stay in Coatepec and the other group wanted to continue in pursuit of the Promised Land that Huitzilopochtli had offered to them. The myth was important because it represented the daily cosmic battle between the sun (Huitzilopochtli) and the deities of the night (moon and stars) and his triumph at dawn in the East. It was also a theological justification for the Aztecs settling in the area of Lake Tetzaco and for their practices of warfare and human sacrifice.

According to the myth, after his victory against Coyolxauhqui, Huitzilopochtli remained on the hill of Coatepec. His shrine on the top of the Great Temple is a symbol of his reign. In the same myth Coyolxauhqui was decapitated by her brother and her dismembered body rolled to the bottom of the hill. On the platform of the base of the temple, a large bas-relief sculpture representing the decapitated goddess was discovered [Fig. 27a, b]. The Coyolxauhqui sculpture was found in several of the construction stages/layers, illustrating the continuity of this myth. Some scholars believe that the sacrificial stone at the entrance of Huitzilopochtli's shrine indicates the immolation of his sister and was used in re-enactment rites of human sacrifice. There were decapitation rites that involved female victims during the festival of *Ochpaniztli*, and archaeologists have found female skulls placed as offerings related to the Coyolxauhqui sculpture. In addition to excavation results, the Spanish chroniclers, through their descriptions of rites conducted during festivals, provide data suggesting that the temple was used to recreate the myth of the birth Huitzilopochtli. During festivals, tribute was offered and people were sacrificed at the top of a scaffold, thrown

to the ground, beheaded, and rolled down the stairways ending at the bottom of the pyramid. This ritual reenacted the mythic events at Coatepec Hill.

The northern side of the Great Temple symbolizes the mountain *Tonacatepetl* (Mount of Sustenance) and is dedicated to Tláloc, the god of fertility that provided food through his beneficial waters that form rain clouds on mountain tops. This mountain is also related to the myth of the creation of Aztec man and the discovery of maize. There are two beliefs concerning the association of this structure with Tlaloc. The first is that the temple represents Mount Tlaloc, a hill nearby located between the cities of Tetzoco and Cholula where nobles and rulers from central Mexico made offerings of jewels, valuables, and food to the deity so that he would provide the necessary rain for a good harvest season [Fig. 132a]. The second belief according to another myth, is that it was at the Hill of Sustenance where Quetzalcoatl discovered maize and brought it to the gods, so that they could give it to human beings as primordial foodstuff. But then the Tlaloques, rain deities, assistants to god Tlaloc, seized the maize. However, Tlaloc and the Tlaloques provided the maize and other foods by fertilizing the earth and making the plants grow. This myth shows how the fertility of the earth is controlled by the power of water. Several Spanish chronicles describe the elaborate ceremonies conducted at Tlaloc's temple.

Archaeology and historical accounts show how the temple was the *axis mundi* of the Aztecs, the place where some of their main myths came alive as they were reenacted through ritual. According to Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (1988), Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli are joined together in architecture, myth and ritual, and these two gods represent water and war, life and death, food and tribute, all fundamental to the very existence of the Aztec people. And so it is appropriate that they are connected to the Great Temple.

### ***Construction Stages Found In the Archeological Excavations of the Great Temple***

The Great Temple was enlarged at relatively short periods, seven times completely and four times partially [Fig. 79a, b, and c]. Each subsequent superimposition was more grandiose because of a need to improve and to surpass the previous construction, as

well as to project a prestige and sense of power of the ruler in position. They reflect the emperors' ambition and personality, which are imprinted in the overwhelming monumentality of Aztec art to create a sense of imperial domination and religious transcendence [Fig. 82].

### *Construction Phase I*

Phase I is related to the first humble temple erected by the Aztecs when they arrived in Tenochtitlán in 1325 C.E. This temple is known only from historical accounts because it is not possible to excavate below Phase II due to the fragile watery subsoil.

### *Construction Phase II*

This phase is consistent with historical accounts of Phase VII that the Spaniards witnessed [Fig. 83]. At the summit, in front of the entrance to Huitzilopochtli's shrine, there is a sacrificial stone (*techcatl*) similar to the one described by the chroniclers [Fig. 84]. Its building material was *tezontle* (volcanic stone). The entrance to the Tlaloc shrine has a colorful *chacmool* used as a divine messenger that took sacrifices of children performed here and offerings from the priest to gods [Figs. 85 and 32]. Some interior murals of both shrines have survived. Representations and colors corresponded to the specific deity. Pine and wood, used for pillars and doorjambs, were also found.

Archeologists believe that Phase II corresponds to the period between 1325 and 1428 C.E. when the early emperors Acamapichtli, Huitzilihuitl, and Chimalpopoca reigned.

### *Construction Phase III*

Not much has survived of Phase III except for the plain pyramidal base with the double stairways. Eight *tezontle* sculptures of life-size standard-bearers were found leaning near the base of the stairs that led to the Huitzilopochtli shrine. They perhaps represent the *Centzohuitznahua* (Huitzilopochtli's 400 brothers) [Fig. 86]. This phase, according to a date carved at the base of the temple may correspond to 1431 C.E. during the reign of Itzcoatl.

### *Construction Phase IV*

Phase IV of construction is considered to be one of the most spectacular because

considerable material and data have been found. During this phase, the pyramidal base was enlarged and adorned with braziers and serpent heads on all four sides [Fig. 87]. Oversized braziers at the rear of the Tlaloc side bear his visage, and the braziers on Huitzilopochtli's side have a large bow, a symbol of the Sun deity. Traces of offerings have been found. Phase IV also included an additional partial enlargement. The west side of the main façade was amplified and adorned. The temple lay on a vast platform with a single stairway. There were large, undulating serpent bodies around the corners [Fig. 88]. Each serpent had an individualized face and traces of paint. The Stairway was broken by a little altar near the base of Tlaloc's shrine that has two frogs (symbols of water). In addition, the middle of the stairway on the platform side of Huitzilopochtli's shrine has a two meter long tablet that is part of the fourth stair and has a serpent engraved on the rise. The base of the platform formed the stairs. Four serpent heads mark the place where the two structures dedicated to Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli meet. At the foot of the stairway, in the middle of Huitzilopochtli's side, the Coyolxauhqui Stone showing the dismembered body of the moon goddess was found; it is a magnificent carving in low relief [Figs. 87 and 27a]. Many offerings were found beneath this platform [Fig. 89]. It appears that this phase corresponds to the year 1454 C.E. and 1469 C.E. during the reigns of Motecuhzoma I and Axayacatl.

### *Construction Phase V*

Little has survived of Phase V. However, stucco plaster on the Temple platform and part of the floor of the ceremonial precinct was found [Fig. 90]. This phase is associated to the reign of Tizoc (1481-1486 C.E.)

### *Construction Phase VI*

The little of what remains of Phase VI includes the great platform underlying the entire temple structure [Fig. 90]. Part of the stairway is still visible. The principal façade was adorned by three serpent heads and a balustrade. Three small temples designated with the letters A [Fig. 91], B (tzompantli or skull-rack altar) [Fig. 92], and C (Red Temple of Teotihuacán influence) [Fig. 93], as well as the precinct of the Eagle warriors belong to this phase [Fig. 94]. In this last building, once occupied by those brave elite warriors, there is the Eagle Patio [Fig. 95] that is flanked by decorated stone banquettes

reminiscent of Tula [Figs. 96 and 97]. This phase corresponds to the reign of Ahuitzotl (1486-1502 C.E.).

### ***Construction Phase VII***

Phase VII constitutes the last building stage and was the phase of construction seen by the Spaniards in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The stone flooring of the ceremonial precinct and traces of where the Great Temple stood are all that remain [Fig. 90]. This phase was undertaken during the reign of Motecuhzoma II (1502-1520 C.E.).

### ***Emperors' Palaces***

The Palace of Motecuhzoma II was one of the most elaborate and grand buildings constructed in the Aztec empire [Fig. 98]. It was located on the southern side of the Great Temple, where the Presidential Palace of Mexico stands today. It was two stories tall and had a large courtyard. The emperor's palace occupied an estimated 2.4 hectares (a little more than 5 acres). The royal palace was a large complex that housed 1,000 guards, servants, nobles, cooks, courtiers and members of the king's harem. It was reported that approximately 600 nobles attended the king's palace at all times. The aristocracy's residences were either attached to the palace or located near by. The palace was surrounded by a garden, other minor palaces, residences, military houses, and other structures for military orders and warrior groups. The temples of the precinct were surrounded by similar edifices as the emperor's palace. The palace had many rooms with the largest on the first floor. Columns were placed on the first floor in order to support the weight of the second floor. The staircase that connected the ground level to the second level was made of pure marble and was located directly in the center of the palace. Marble was a luxury in the Aztec empire; only the richest people in the empire had access to this fine good. The wealth of the emperor was manifested in the numerous paintings, gold panels, carvings, and mosaics found throughout the palace. According to Bernal Díaz Del Castillo (1963), Motecuhzoma's dining room had a low wooden throne (*icpalli*) and a low table covered with fine cloths. When the emperor ate, he was hidden by a golden-colored wood screen door so that he would not be seen by those in attendance. The emperor was served by numerous women and was entertained by dancers, singers, and musicians.

There were several main rooms on the first floor. The room in which the emperor received nobles, travelers, and other officials was named the Reception Chamber. The second and largest room (three times the size of the Reception Chamber) in the palace was the Main Meeting Chamber. It was designed to make the emperor appear omnipotent and powerful. For example, the emperor was raised above the people who visited him vis-à-vis an elevated platform with stairs that led to the emperor's throne. Thus, his presence was felt. This was the room where messengers provided the emperor with news about the empire. The last main room on the first floor was the Tribute Room/Store that was used to house the gifts the emperor received from his loyal citizens. The emperor received such large quantities of gifts, that there was usually not enough room in the Tribute Store for all his gifts/goods. Another important section of the palace was the emperor's personal apartments.

Not only was the palace exceedingly large, but it was also highly complex. The structure housed multiple rooms that served specific functions. There was an armory, a tribute hall, special rooms for women that wove textiles for the royal household, artisan workshops, an aviary, a zoo, and a pond. The aviary housed various species of birds from nearby and tropical regions. The zoo contained animals such as snakes, foxes, and jaguars. The special pond contained aquatic birds.

Motecuhzuma II's gardens and baths were an integral part of the overall layout and architecture of his palace. They were modeled after the gardens at Tetzaco. Because the gardens and baths no longer exist, the account of Bernal Díaz del Castillo is very important. He described the gardens as being filled with fragrant flowers and trees, promenades, ponds with fresh water, and canals with running water. He also wrote that the trees were full of small birds bred on the premises and the gardens were full of medicinal plants.

The palaces of previous emperors were also magnificent. The palace of Axayacatl is believed to be located beneath present day Tacuba and Monte de Piedad Streets (it was initially believed to have been below Guatemala and Correo Mayor Streets). The

palace of Motecuhzuma II is believed to be below the present day National Palace. On the west side of the National Palace's main plaza or *zócalo* (where the Aztec market-plaza was) lay the *petlacalco* (great warehouse), the *calpixcalli* (house of the butlers), the *pilcalli* (house of the noblemen) and *cuicacalli* (house of singing).

Cuauhtemoc's residency, erected by his father Ahuitzotl is considered to be west of the plaza of Santo Domingo [\[Fig. 78a\]](#).

### **Homes of the Inhabitants**

The royal palaces and the homes of the nobility were built near the main square of the Great Temple while the houses of the *macehualtin* (potters, stonecutters, weavers, jewelers, farmers and fishermen) surrounded the city centers. For the Aztecs, the type of dwelling in which a person lived was an indication of status. The homes of the peasants and nobles were similar in layout and pattern, but different in size, decoration, and construction materials. The nobles' homes were made of stone and white-washed plaster. Their interior walls were of stucco painted with colorful murals. The dwellings of the *macehualtin* were humbler. They lived in different *calpultin*, and their homes were made of adobe bricks (mud mixed with straw or rushes). Wood and straw were also used in the construction of houses and their sloping gabled roofs.

Aztec residences were typically one story high (with the exception of palaces), and consisted of two structures, and housed up to 12 people. The first structure was comprised of a single room with a perfectly level floor divided into four areas. The bed area was where the entire family slept. The kitchen area was where the meals were prepared. In most kitchens, a *metlatl* (*metate*), a flat stone for grinding corn, and a *comal*, a clay dish for baking tortillas, were found [\[Fig. 99\]](#). There was a separate area designated for eating. This is where the family would sit, eat, and discuss the events of the day. The last area is where the family shrine was found.

The shrine area contained figurines of gods. Aztec homes did not have doors because theft was not an issue. The second adjoining structure was a *temazcal* (steam bath) [\[Fig. 100\]](#). According to Aztec doctors, steam baths were therapeutic and all families were advised to have one. Next to the bath area, a chimney and a stove were found.



The hot walls of the stove maintained the room's heat. When an Aztec wished to steam the room, water would be poured on the stove's wall. In order to maintain the stove's walls heat, the furnace had to constantly be burning. Although most Aztec homes contained a steam bath, they were predominantly used by the nobles because they had more leisure time than the peasants.

### ***Chinampas***

The swamps and gardens were on the outskirts of the city. *Chinampas*, known as "floating gardens" were rectangular patches of earth on the swamp used to cultivate food and to build houses [Fig. 101]. They were constructed on the swampy lakebed by staking out long rectangular enclosures of about 2.5m wide and 30m long. Stakes were woven together to form fences which would be covered with decaying vegetation and mud. Another plot would be constructed parallel to the first. The water in between each plot formed a canal. This developed long rectangular *chinampa* patterns. *Chinampas* were stabilized by planting slender willows around their perimeter. The willows' dense roots anchored the retaining walls. In order to irrigate the *chinampas*, a sophisticated drainage system of dams, sluice gates, and canals were installed. The *chinampas* allowed the Aztecs to have productive planting areas.

### ***Ballcourts***

The main ballcourt (*tlachtli*) of Tenochtitlán was located on the east-west axis of the ceremonial precinct's western end, aligned with the Great Temple and the Temple of Quetzalcoatl [Fig. 102]. The east-west axis of the ballcourt is meaningful in the context of sacred geography because the ballgame represents the daily cosmic battle between the day and night, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, and ultimately, Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui. In the architecture of the ballcourt, ancestral myths are brought to life.

The ballcourt was formed by an I-shaped area with two large sloping walls, tiers, porticos for dignitaries, and boxes for judges. The structure was adorned by skull-racks, *tzompantli* that contained the heads of the decapitated captives from diverse rituals. In many cases the skulls were trophy heads from decapitation rituals linked to the ballgame. The skull-racks consisted of a base with upright wooden posts. The skulls of

the sacrificed were strung on top of bars located between the posts. It is believed that the main skull-rack was located in an area that is now buried under the Cathedral of Mexico City.

### ***Temple outside the Sacred Precinct***

This small circular temple was found during the construction of the Pino Suarez Metro Station in downtown Mexico City, but outside of what was the ceremonial precinct of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán [Fig. 103]. The circular design of its two upper bodies suggests the possible dedication to Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, the wind god. It was common in Aztec architecture the construction of this kind of temples in diverse cities and their shape symbolized the whirlpools and free circulation of wind.

## **OTHER CITIES**

The Aztec empire was a large domain that extended from the Valley of Mexico to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec [Figs. 104 and 105]. Large portions of the empire were not occupied, but governed. Other cities of the empire were occupied and were important for military, religious or tribute purposes. Many sites such as Malinalco and the Hill of Coatepec were significant because the final breaks of the Aztecs occurred there during their migration history. In addition to Tenochtitlán, the more important cities of the Aztec world where archaeological remains can be visited are: Tenayuca, Sta. Cecilia Acatitlan, Teopanzolco, Tlatelolco, Tetzcotzinco, Tepoztlan, Huexotla, Calixtlahuaca, Coatetelco, and Malinalco. They are discussed below.

### ***Tenayuca***

Tenayuca, meaning the Place Where Walls Are Made, was a Chichimec city founded in 1224 C.E., and was located northwest of Mexico City. Tenayuca was an enclosed and fortified city founded by king Xolotl, and was the capital of the Chichimecs until a later king, Quinatzin moved to Tetzco. It had six major construction phases from 1224 to 1507 C.E. Aztec influence was visible by 1325 C.E. Although its temple was built during the Post-Classic period, archaeological materials found inside the temple indicate that Tenayuca was inhabited long before. The early phases of Tenayuca's pyramid

construction began after the fall of Tula (1200 C.E.) and before the founding of Tenochtitlán. It is believed by some scholars that the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán was modeled after the great temple of Tenayuca. The double-pyramid was four-tiered, faced the plaza, and was ornamented with rows of serpents surrounding all three sides of the base, forming a *coatepantli* (serpent wall) inspired by the one in Tula. As the snakes in the *coatepantli* have a spiral-like crest in their heads, they are identified as *xiuhcoatl*s, or fire serpents, the weapon of Huitzilopochtli. This symbol signified an association of Tenayuca with sun god cult and fire renewal. The gods Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc, Mixcoatl, Itzpapalotl, Chicomecoatl, and Coatlicue were worshiped there.

### *The Pyramid*

Tenayuca's pyramid is composed of several superimposed layers [Fig. 106]. All layers follow the same system of construction, patterns of decoration, and layout. The earliest structure has carved stone slabs facing a rock core. There after, the current pyramid would be used as a core for the next successive layering/construction phase [Fig. 107]. Slabs were coated with cement made from sand, lime, and crushed *tezontle*. Color would then be applied. Carved stone serpent heads, year glyphs, shields, knives, and other symbols were used for decoration. The low platform that projected from the pyramid was ornamented with bones and sculpted crossed skulls.

### *Wall of Serpents*

Known as the *coatepantli*, the Wall of Serpents, covers all three sides of the pyramid's platform [Fig. 108]. It was found that there are 43, 50 and 45 serpent heads on the north, east and south walls [Fig. 109]. Greenish blue paint is visible on the snakes' bodies of the south side and half of the bodies on the east side. Their bodies' scales were outlined in black. The north wall's serpents were garnished in black with white ovals. Snakes' rattles were detailed by carving three stepped planes at the tip of their tails. It is believed that the color schemes used on the bodies were related to the symbolism of sun worship.

On the north and south ground level of the pyramid, coiled serpents were positioned. The heads of stone are ornamented with a spiral crest that identifies the fire serpent as

a *xiuhcoatl*, which is associated with fire renewal, sun worship, and the 52-year calendar [Fig. 110]. The stone heads were decorated with bulging dots that are believed to symbolize stars.

The rocky stairway has visible engravings from the last structural addition. A year glyph, a linked rectangle and triangle, banners, concentric circles, a knife, turquoise, *chimallis* or shields, and precious stones are still visible. The carvings do not appear to have a systematic order.

### ***Tomb-Altar***

Located in front of the pyramid, there is a combined tomb and altar with colored paintings of crossbones and skulls inside. The outside has carved stone reliefs illustrating skulls [Fig. 111].

### ***Sta. Cecilia Acatitlan***

St. Cecilia Acatitlan, meaning between the canes, is located north of modern day Mexico City. This Chichimec city was occupied later by the Mexica-Aztecs and was transformed into one of the numerous religious enclaves that surrounded the Tetzoco lake region. Sta. Cecilia Acatitlan has a double pyramid-temple that faces a cobbled stone plaza that may have been used as a public arena during ceremonies [Fig. 112]. In that plaza, in front of the pyramid, there is a small church built in late 16<sup>th</sup> century with stones taken from the Pre-Columbian site.

### ***The Pyramid***

The pyramidal platform is composed of a double stairway that faces west and is separated by a balustrade (*alfarda*) that is twice as wide as the other two balustrades that form the extremes of the platform [Fig. 113]. On top of it there are two temples. The North Temple was dedicated to Tlaloc [Fig. 114]. A sculpture of Chac Mool (messenger of the gods who carry the human sacrifice offerings) used to accompany Tlaloc inside his temple, but because the deterioration of this North Temple, the Chac Mool is placed in the contiguous temple. The South Temple was dedicated to Huitzilopochtli. The roof of this temple was made out of inclining *tableros* (panels) that were decorated with nail-

like stones [\[Fig. 115\]](#). The doorway of the shrine has a wood lintel. Next to the figure of the Chac Mool, there can be seen a *techcatl* (sacrificial stone) and a brazier [\[Fig. 116\]](#).

The dual pyramid-temple of Santa Cecilia Acatitlan, with some variants, follows the traditional Aztec pattern of twin pyramids dedicated to Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli.

### **Teopanzolco**

Teopanzolco is located in the northeast part of the city of Cuernavaca and was originally under Tlahuica control and later taken over by Aztec imperial forces. This site with early Aztec architecture has a main pyramid, believed to have served as a model for the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán located in one side of a big plaza [\[Fig. 117\]](#). The pyramid had double shrines: one dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and the other to Tlaloc. The pyramid displays similar attributes with the one located in Tenayuca. It has several superimpositions; two have been found. The only remains of the exterior walls' last layer are the *talud* (sloping wall) and a staircase flanked by *alfardas* (balustrades) that is divided in two parts by a central double *alfarda* that forms the front of the pyramid which faces west and has a rectangular base that is 50 by 32 meters [\[Fig. 118\]](#). The substructure is better preserved than the most recent layer. It also faces west and measures 32 by 18 meters. Its stairway is limited by *alfardas* and like in Tenayuca; they rise vertically in the upper section. This characteristic also occurs midway up the stairs, forming a type of pedestal [\[Fig. 119\]](#).

The South Temple dedicated to Huitzilopochtli on top of the pyramid is rectangular in form, measuring ten by seven meters and it has a wide entrance that is divided by a transversal wall with an opening leading to a room that has a bench. The North Temple dedicated to Tlaloc has a small rectangular room measuring seven by four meters with an ample clearing and a bench at the end. There are also pillars presumed to have supported the wood that sustained the roof.

Behind the main pyramid, to the right of a temple attributed to god Tezcatlipoca [\[Fig. 120\]](#), there is a small stone altar possibly utilized for human sacrifice rituals, as suggested by the mass sacrificial burial found in the site [\[Fig. 121\]](#).

At the opposite side of the great plaza, there is a temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl that is circular in design, thus honoring the deity in his Ehecatl form representing the wind [\[Fig. 122\]](#).

### ***Tlatelolco***

Tlatelolco was founded 12 years after Tenochtitlán when a group of dissident Aztecs decided to move northeast to Xaltelolco, meaning On the Hillrock of Sand. Xaltelolco was one of the marshy islands located along Lake Tetzaco. It had previously been inhabited by groups related to Teotihuacán and the Tepanecs. Overtime, this site came to be known as Tlatelolco. According to other scholars, its name is believed to have derived from the word *tlatelli* that means a built up mound of earth.

Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlán were contemporary cities that underwent parallel developments and were rivals until Tenochtitlán attacked and defeated Tlatelolco during the reign of Axayacatl in 1473 C.E. Tlatelolco was then incorporated into Tenochtitlán.

The city originally covered an area of about 20 square miles. Tlatelolco today is a neighborhood of Mexico City and its core forms the so called Plaza of the Three Cultures. The reason behind this name is that Tlatelolco is a living testimony of the transculturation process that created the *mestizaje* in Mexico. There coexist remains of Aztec temples, the Colonial church, and the convent of Santiago built by Fray Juan de Torquemada, all among many modern Mexican constructions [\[Fig. 123\]](#). Tlatelolco had a ceremonial complex that was dominated by a typical Aztec double pyramid similar to the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán and a very large market, in fact the largest in Mesoamerica [\[Fig. 124\]](#). There were also smaller pyramids, temples, and markets scattered throughout various districts.

One of the anomalies of Tlatelolco is that it did not appear to have the type of monumental architecture found at other Aztecs sites. One of the reasons for this is that it is believed that it was far from Coyoacan, the place where most of the Aztec monoliths were built. The other reason is the amount of time it was an independent city. Tlatelolco was incorporated into Tenochtitlán during the reign of Axayacatl, the emperor responsible for initiating the construction of large scale projects. Prior to Axayacatl,

Aztec architecture was not as massive. Another factor to consider is that at Tlatelolco the main material used may have been wood. For example, it is an established fact that there were thousands of canoes, but only one has been archeologically found. The others have doubtless disintegrated. Other perishable materials may have been used, making it difficult to discern the architecture of the city prior to its incorporation into Tenochtitlán. Nonetheless, Tlatelolco was an integral part of the Aztec metropolis and continued to flourish after its annexation.

Similar to other towns of the empire, Tlatelolco had its share of shrines, temples, palaces, gardens, markets, and canals. There is a Shrine, located near the north door of the colonial church of Santiago, which was built of human mandibles in a jewel like manner. Other altars similar to the above were found throughout the ceremonial complex. In addition, some other structures are reminiscent of Chichén Itzá and Teotihuacán. One of the edifices that display Chichén Itzá qualities has four staircases facing the cardinal directions. It is believed to have been situated in the middle of a plaza and was used for religious ceremonies, during which time the priest would direct the smoke from his incense to the four cardinal points. For that reason this particular structure did not have an altar. Such influence is not surprising since Tlatelolco had been previously inhabited and had borrowed styles from other groups.

### *The Temple of the Calendar*

The Temple of the Calendar is one of the most significant structures of Tlatelolco. It is a unique edifice whose décor deviates from the norm in that it is ornamented with elements of the *Tonalpohualli* calendar [Fig. 125]. During Aztec times two calendars were used: the *Tonalpohualli* and the *Xiuhpohualli*. The *Xiuhpohualli* was the civil calendar and it was used to determine festivities, record history, and to date tribute collections. The *Tonalpohualli* served as the ritual calendar. *Tonalpohualli* consisted of 260 days while the *Xiuhpohualli* consisted of 360 plus the five bad days. The Temple of the Calendar is a quadrangular edifice with representations of 39 days; thirteen on each wall painted in blues, reds, and whites [Fig. 126]. The base of the temple also has polychrome paintings with figures drawn similar to those found in the codices. These drawings correspond to early Tlatelolco and are intact in the front side of the temple due

to a later superimposition. The temple was a very important religious structure because computing time was one of the primary duties of the priests: determining solstices, baptisms, rituals, festivals, commerce, tribute, etc. This is the only calendrical structure that has been found.

### *Temple Of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl*

This round temple was dedicated to Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, the wind deity. It consisted of a semicircular base that wound into a circular cone like *teocalli* roof, a staircase and a quadrangular platform [Fig. 127]. In general the temples dedicated to Ehecatl, the wind deity are of circular shape in order to not block the trajectory of the wind which could make whirlpools around the structure. Its entrance is characterized by a snake's mouth symbolizing Quetzalcóatl. This temple is similar to that in Calixtlahuaca and underwent two construction phases. Its construction dates back to the early times of Tlatelolco. In later times, other edifices were built over it. A rectangular enclosure decorated with polychrome paintings was found next to the temple. It is older than the temple itself.

### *Sacred Well*

The sacred well is located next to the priests' residencies. It is a small monument that resembles a staired swimming pool that leads to the sacred well. The well is approximately three meters wide on each side. Scholars believe that it may have been used for ablution practices by priests or as a sacred spring.

### *Priests' Residency*

The priests' residency was located within the ceremonial precinct because they were responsible for the maintenance of the temples and shrines associated to the cult of the deity to which they belonged. Their residence was constructed of *tezontle* and wood. The structure consisted of an altar and two sections adjoined by a central corridor with a chimney like area for burning wood. The structure also has wood wedges that supported lintels.

### *The Marketplace*

Tlatelolco was best known for its immense and highly lucrative market place. Once Tlatelolco was incorporated into Tenochtitlán, its market became the principle market of



the Aztec empire [Fig. 128]. According to Spanish chroniclers, the market housed approximately 25,000 people on a daily basis and 40,000 to 50,000 on special market days held every fifth day. The market was directed, administered, and organized by principal merchants called *pochtecas*. The *pochtecas* were responsible for assigning each type of merchandise to a particular section of the plaza and for determining prices. The market was very orderly, well run and very clean. The Spaniards were amazed at its organization and variety of goods. Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1963) described the market as an organized and well managed space where merchandise and the quality of people who sold goods were well administered [Fig. 129]. Each type of merchandise was kept by itself and had its fixed place marked out. The market was filled with luxury goods such as gold, silver, and precious stones, feathers, mantles, and embroidered goods, but it was also filled with the daily necessities, such as slaves, cloth and cotton and cacao. Every sort of merchandise that was to be found in the whole of New Spain was sold in the market, including the skins of tigers and lions, of otters and jackals, deer and other animals and badgers and mountain cats, some tanned and other untanned. There were also buildings where three magistrates sat in judgment, and there were executive officers like Alguacils who inspect the merchandise [Fig. 130]. The great market place with its surrounding arcades was so crowded with people, that one would not have been able to see and inquire about it all in two days.

Tlatelolco was the last bastion of the Aztec resistance against the Spaniards in the Conquest war. Here ended the Mexica Empire with the capture of King Cuauhtémoc, as expressed by a dramatic sign located in the plaza next to the ruins [Fig. 131].

### ***Tetzcotzinco***

The Hill of Tetzcotzinco is an important Aztec site that is surrounded by agricultural terraces and is located east of Tetzco at the base of the Mt. Tlaloc foothills. It is associated with life giving rain rites and agriculture. Although there has been little archaeological excavation at this site, survey plans, surface explorations, and aerial views demonstrate its layout. The architecture of this site combines landscape, sculpture and ritual. Tetzcotzinco is a reenactment of the symbolic landscape of Mt. Tlaloc and has been a place of worship since the time of the Chichimecs [Fig. 132a].

After the famine of 1454 C.E., the *tlatoani* of Tetzaco, Netzahuacoyotl, decided to build a new ceremonial center, refurbish, and reconstruct the Hill of Tetzcotzinco. This became the site where Netzahuacoyotl erected his personal palaces. It had rock-cut baths known popularly as the “baths of Nezahualcoyotl” and canals, aqueducts, gardens, and over 300 rooms. Tetzcotzinco had a system of farming terraces extending northward from the hill, forming a huge natural amphitheater, and the hill and the neighboring towns that still exist today, were supplied with water by aqueducts from springs high on Mt. Tlaloc. The hydraulic works of Tetzcotzinco are considered one of the major engineering accomplishments of the Pre-Columbian times [Fig. 132b]. The aqueduct transported water over a distance of eight kilometers from springs at the slopes of Mt. Tlaloc through the Metecatl Hill to irrigate an extensive area of gardens, fountains, and baths carved in the rock of the Tetzcotzinco hill under the auspices of the great poet, engineer, and king Netzahuacoyotl [Fig. 133].

Most of the monuments of Tetzcotzinco were destroyed by the Spanish in 1539 C.E.; however, many pictorial manuscripts, texts, and related sculpture and architecture provide useful information to reconstruct what remains of the site. The archaeologist Richard Townsend mapped the area in 1979 and revealed that the upper hill was cosmologically designed. Approximately 55 meters below the summit, the ritual zone is demarcated by a walkway cut around the hill. On this path there are four baths or shallow basins oriented to the four cardinal directions. Their receptacles were manifestations of Chalchiuhtlicue’s aquatic domain and were used for ritual purification. Their water was supplied by an aqueduct built in a circular path that served processional circumambulation and divided the upper sacred zone from the profane space below [Fig. 134a, b].

### *Civic Monuments*

Among the civil architectural features that can still be seen at Tetzcotzinco are: the Reservoir System H [Fig. 135] and the Fountain System A [Fig. 132b], a group of water deposits built on the northern skirts of Metecatl Hill with the intention to control the speed and flow of the water that descended to Tetzcotzinco; the Monolithic Room, a

pool at the entrance of the hydraulic system that had a temple on top dedicated either to the wind god Ehecatl or to the Sun (Tonatiuh) [Fig. 136 and 137]; the aqueduct subsystem circuit with a series of channels every 50 meters to irrigate the gardens, the farming terraces and give services to the royal compounds [Fig. 138]; the so-called King's [Fig. 139] and Queen's baths [Figs. 140 and 141], a collection of rock-cut monolithic deposits of water with a magnificent view to the former gardens in the slopes of the hill and the Valley of Mexico; and finally, the Palace attributed to Netzahuacoyotl that is not yet excavated.

### *Shrines*

The Tetzcotzinco Hill has a sequence of shrine stations along an east-west axis that follows the natural ridge of the hill. The alignment indicates the path of the sun, leading scholars to believe that Tetzcotzinco had calendrical and astronomical functions determined by the solstice and equinox [Fig. 134]. In Tetzcotzinco's summit there are remains of a temple built over a cave [Fig. 142]. There is also a goggle-eyed mask of Tlaloc engraved on a bedrock boulder [Figs. 143 and 144].

There is an important shrine that is a cave below the circumscribing path next to the King's bath and near a system of lower terraces where Netzahualcoyotl's palace and botanical gardens stood [Fig. 145 and 146]. Caves are associated with the heart of the earth, mountains, and wombs related to fertility. The cave above is related to the ancestors and lineage of Netzahuacoyotl, recalling the genesis theme that people first emerged from the womb of the earth through caves (*Chicomoztoc*). By placing his compounds next to the cave, Netzahuacoyotl legitimized himself and his legacy.

Another shrine is located high on the western axis, it has two very damaged carved effigies on the living rock; they are of female divinities connected to the cycle of maize. The divinities are associated with the festivals of *Huey Tozoztli*, *Huey Tecuihuatl* and *Ochpaniztli*. *Huey Tozoztli* was dedicated to Chicomecoatl, the goddess of dried seed corn, and Cinteotl, the conflated male and female deity of the young corn, and was celebrated at the height of the dry season when corn was consecrated for the coming planting. *Huey Tecuihuatl* was dedicated to Xilonen, goddess of the mature corn, and it

occurred during the middle of the rain season. *Ochpaniztli* was dedicated to the male and female earth and maize deities, and it was celebrated during the harvest to mark the start of the dry season.

The last shrines are Netzahualcoyotl's personal commemorative monuments located on the eastern slope of the hill below the summit. There was an ample assembly plaza that was constructed facing an exposed rock-face where the sculptures were carved. The monuments have been destroyed, but from the writings of chronicler Fernando de Alva Ixtlixochitl, it is known that the first monument recorded the deeds of Netzahuacoyotl as a hero and founder of the Tetzcoacan nation. Adjacent to this sculpture there was a seated coyote of stone with Netzahualcoyotl's hieroglyphic name, which means fasting coyote. The monuments faced east toward the rising sun, associating Netzahuacoyotl with the daily appearance of light, heat, and the renewal of seasons.

### ***Huexotla***

Meaning "Place of the Willows," Huexotla is located 5 km (3 miles) south of the city of Tetzcoaco. It was an important city of the kingdom of Acolhuacan whose capital was the city of Tetzcoaco. It consisted of an urban center surrounded by suburbs and scattered villages. Huexotla's formal qualities are those of a military city suited for defense and attacks; it was protected by a wall on the west side. Scholars believe the main building of Huexotla is located directly below the Franciscan convent and church of San Luis that was built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The great *atrio* (churchoyard) displays the unique characteristic of being formed by two levels connected by a staircase due to an underlying Pre-Columbian pyramid. It shows the deliberate intention of the missionaries to impose the Catholic religion physically and conceptually in the indigenous towns [Fig. 147].

The site consists of the following parts:

#### ***The Wall***

The great wall erected by the people of Huexotla was 650 meters (2,130 feet) long and 6 meters (21 feet) wide. At present only part of the original huge wall remains [Fig. 148].

This defense mechanism covered the space between two gorges and completely enclosed the site. Evidence suggests that what appears to have been the main town area was accessed through several gates. Today two entrances remain: one in front of San Francisco Street which leads to *La Estancia* and *La Comunidad* buildings and one in front of the San Luis Church.

The wall was made of the volcanic *tezontle*. Spikes (stones cut into cones) were found on the first tier. At present, only the round part remains visible; the rest is embedded into the wall's core. Building the wall was necessary because neighboring warring groups sought to extend their territories. Other towns of the region such as *Tenayuca* were also built with bulwarks as defense mechanisms.

### *La Comunidad (The Community)*

La Comunidad is a staired structure that is superimposed on a previous building that faces a different direction and whose function is unclear. It consists of two tiers and is believed to have been a palace with several rooms and a portico with four columns on top [Fig. 149]. In some of the rooms are found *Tlecuiles* (hearths). The floor has traces of red paint and is coated with plaster.

### *La Estancia (The Hacienda)*

Las Estancia covers an older building. It consists of two tiers with a staircase in the front leading the first tier to the second tier [Fig. 150]. The front façade is a plaster-paved apron. Some of the original red paint is still visible.

### *Santa Maria Group*

The Santa María Group consists of two structures. It is found past the San Bernardino Gorge over the colonial bridge. The first structure had two construction phases. The first was between 1150 and 1350 C.E. It consisted of a platform with a staircase on the west side [Fig. 151]. The second building phase (1350-1515 C.E.) was very crude, suggesting that the site lost importance during this time. The second structure is located east side of the first structure. A section of the west wall can be seen from this building.

## ***San Marcos***

Local people call this edifice the observatory, but its original function is unknown. This mound is a series of rooms with a small staircase that leads to a plastered room with an adobe that is unevenly shaped. A stone structure rests on top.

## ***Santiago***

The Santiago was a ceremonial platform in Pre-Columbian times. Because 16<sup>th</sup> century, evangelizing Spanish friars had a chapel built over it, its only remains are the columns that held up the chapel's roof.

## ***The Ehecatl-Quetzalcóatl Building***

It is located east of the other Huexotlan pre-Columbian structures with a beautiful view of Mount Tlaloc in the background. The structure was built on a circular platform that is 19 meters (62 feet) in diameter. The building was fashioned in the traditional circular form so that it would not act as a barrier that could hinder the wind god's entrance [Fig. 152]. The front of the structure indicates that there are two impositions. The first building was erected with the small stones cut in a similar fashion as those from the Santa María building. The newest layer is the one that is presently visible [Fig. 153].

## ***Tepoztlan***

Tepoztlan whose name means "place of copper" is a town located south of Mexico City, near the city of Cuernavaca. Other meanings or names associated with the site are "place of split stones" or "place of axes". In some records, the town is named Tepozteco because the spectacular and beautiful sierra with the same name surrounds it [Figs. 154 and 155]. The city was founded in the Late Post-Classic period by the Tlahuica people. Its pyramidal complex was dedicated to Tepoztecatl also known as Ome Tochtli, the *pulque* (alcoholic beverage from the maguey plant) god. He was a legendary cultural hero that after being a priest for the gods of *pulque* was deified. The intoxication with *pulque* was an important religious practice of alteration of consciousness with the purpose of communication with the gods. According to the *Mendoza Codex*, Tepoztlan was conquered by Motecuhzoma II Ihuilcamina, becoming tributary to Tenochtitlán.

### ***The Pyramid-Temple of Tepoztlan***

The pyramid was built on top of a mountain in the spectacular Tepoztlan sierra. The area where the pyramid was erected is rocky in nature and was artificially molded and cut [Fig. 156]. A 9.50 meter high platform was constructed there. The platform is accessed from the east side through stairs situated in the posterior part of the temple; there are other stairs in the southeast section of the edifice. On the back section of the platform, there is a raised base composed of two inclined sections separated by a passageway that has stairs on its west side leading to the temple [Fig. 157].

The temple consists of two rooms that are bordered by two meter wide walls. The first room or vestibule is formed by the extension of two side walls and two pillars [Fig. 158]. The room is six by 5.20 meters and has lateral benches and a depression at the center similar to some of the temples in Malinalco. Archaeological remains suggest that the roof was made of *tezontle*; door jambs and benches were made of stone. The benches have small cornices whose ornamentation is believed to represent the twenty day signs. In the lower part of the pyramid there are two plaques; one has the hieroglyph of king Ahuizotl, indicating a date of 1500 C.E. and the other has the date *10 Tochtli* (rabbit) that corresponds to the last (final) years of Ahuizotl's reign. These plates indicate that this monument was constructed sometime between 1502 and 1520 C.E. The pyramid also consisted of 13 steps that symbolized the 13 levels of heaven.

*Ome Tochtli*, the *pulque* god and patron deity of Tepoztlan is related to the earth goddess. Festivals at the temple were carried out after the crop season. In addition, when a person died of alcohol intoxication, the town members would have a celebration in honor of the deceased individual. At present, on December 8 every year coinciding with the Christian festival of the Nativity, there is a festival dedicated to the cultural hero Tepoztecatl, and people still climb the mountain to place offerings to him. Tepoztlan is a place loaded with ancient traditions, legends and magic practices of Pre-Columbian affiliation.

### ***Calixtlahuaca***

Dating back to the Early Post-Classic Period (900-1250 C.E.), Calixtlahuaca was

located in the Valley of Toluca, southwest of modern day Mexico City. Calixtlahuaca, meaning Place of Houses on the Plain, was named by the Mexica-Aztecs who were impressed by the large quantity of towns that dotted the area of the Matlatzinca settlement. The city's overall architectural style is a combination of Toltec and Aztec motifs. However, when the Matlatzincas were in power, they developed a style reminiscent of Teotihuacán and built joined stone slabs covered with mud. The city was founded along the Tejalpa River, bordering the emerging Aztec Empire from the Valley of Mexico and the Tarascan domain to the west. This was a highly vulnerable position. For that reason, the Matlatzincas had fortifications and granaries placed in protected areas in order to withstand a siege.

According to the writings of Friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1951-69) in the 16th century, the Matlatzincas were called the net people because of their innovative use of nets. Because Calixtlahuaca was in a region surrounded by lakes, the use of nets was common and with nets they fished, trashed corn, carried their children, trapped birds, and made sacrifices. The Matlatzincas were also referred to as *quaquatl*, a Nahuatl word alluding to use of slings for hunting small game. Slings were strapped to their heads.

Calixtlahuaca was conquered by the Aztecs during the reign of Axayacatl (1469-1481 C.E.). It is believed that approximately 11,000 Calixtlahuacan prisoners were sacrificed in temple rituals at Tenochtitlán. Aztecs families moved to Calixtlahuaca to solidify the Aztec authority and to act as a buffer against the Tarascans. Major temples were added to the city. There are 17 visible mounds, with several of them lying on an artificially terraced hill. With the exception of the structures listed below, most of the monuments have not been excavated. It should be noted that a statue of Coatlicue was found at the top of the hill and is now at the Mexico City Museum of Anthropology.

### *Temple Of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl*

The temple was built in four separate stages. Each stage added a new layer, though the structure always maintained its circular form indicating worship to the wind god Ehecatl [Fig. 159]. The original temple was plain, without much decoration. The



second layer was added during the Toltec dominion (900-1200 C.E.). The third layer was erected at the time the Matlatzincas controlled the area (1200-1474 C.E.). The final layer was added after the Mexica conquest [Fig. 160]. The temple also has a single stairway facing east with 13 steps, a symbol of the thirteen heavens of the supernatural realm [Fig. 161]. Carved stones are embedded into the structure.

Next to the temple was found a stone image of the wind god Ehecatl wearing a *maxtlatl* (loincloth), sandals and a mask with a beaklike mouth indicating that he is an incarnation of Quetzalcóatl, the Feathered Serpent [Fig. 162].

### *The Tlaloc Cluster*

A group of three structures are clustered together around a small plaza in the middle of the hill. Archaeological findings associate them with Tlaloc [Fig. 163]. The Altar of the Skulls (*tzompantli*) was erected in a cruciform fashion on the west side. The transverse part to the west is semicircular. The outside walls are covered with projecting skull-shaped carvings [Figs. 164 and 165]. Rows of skulls, possibly heads of prisoners of war were found in this building.

The other two structures in this plaza are rectangular platforms with a single staircase that face the plaza [Fig. 166].

### *Calmecac Group*

The *calmecac* group is a series of clustered buildings around a courtyard on the lower part of the hill near the Tejalpa River. The word *calmecac* derives from the Náhuatl word *calli* for house and *mecatl* for rope. The name is a reference to a building with long narrow corridors [Fig. 167].

According to the Spanish chronicles, priests in charge of the education of the nobility's children lived in *calmecac*. *Calmecac* were the elite schools where Quetzalcoatl was a patron god. Flowers, sugar cane, beverages, and food were offered to the god on the day *Ce Acatl*, "one cane" of their calendar. Trimmed snail shells, symbols of Quetzalcoatl, were found during the explorations of the rooms of the buildings.

## ***Ballcourt***

The site of Calixtlahuaca holds a traditional ballcourt used to play the Mesoamerican ballgame. The ballcourt has not been excavated.

## ***Coatetelco***

Coatetelco is an urban site of medium size built in the late Aztec period [Fig. 168]. The ceremonial center was excavated by the archaeologist Raúl Arana in the 1970s. It consists of a ballcourt [Fig. 169], a small pyramid-temple [Fig. 170], a building that seems to be a palace [Fig. 171], and a few other edifices all clustered around a public plaza [Fig. 172]. The ballcourt is one of the very scarce Aztec ballcourts that have been excavated [Fig. 173]. Under the stairway of the western ballcourt platform elite burials were found with a great amount of tomb artifacts, such as ceramic vessels, obsidian, jade, copper-bronze objects, and a pile of *manos* (stone tools for grinding corn on a flat stone, called *metate*). According to Michael Smith (2003), the residential areas of the site are buried today under the modern town of Coatetelco.

Coatetelco is important because it is one of the few surviving Aztec sites that were not destroyed deliberately by the Spanish Conquest. Thus, its sacred precinct has been widely excavated and studied. There is a group of small platforms aligned in the plaza adjacent to the ballcourt [Fig. 174]. One of the platforms is circular and that would suggest its use in the worship of the wind god Ehecatl, but in this case it is also possible that it was used for gladiatorial sacrifices [Fig. 175]. This is reinforced by the fact that in the site was found a *temalacatl*, a round stone utilized to tie the captive warriors in those practices [Fig. 176]. The *temalacatl* were used also as rings for the ballgame, but in this case the size is too big and the hole is too small to allow the passing of a ball. Those platforms besides being a unique feature in Aztec urban planning, they contained buried offerings that included long-handled incense burners similar to those shown in the codices and utilized by the priests in diverse rituals [Fig. 177]. The provincial town of Coatetelco has an interesting architectural feature. Its main pyramid-temple is relatively modest indicating that not all Aztec cities followed the pattern of building large, massive twin pyramids like those in Tenochtitlán, Teopanzolco, or Tenayuca. Excavations of the

residential areas have not been conducted.

## ***Malinalco***

Malinalco is a city located in the east-central part of the state of Mexico, south of the modern city of Toluca. It is believed that the site was founded by the Matlanzincas and was taken by the Aztecs in 1469-1476 C.E., during the reign of King Axayacatl. Malinalco is best known for its rock-cut temples (similar to those of Ajanta and Ellora in India, the Longmen caves of China, the city of Petra in Jordan, and the temple Abu Simbel in Egypt) and for being a fortress city of the Aztecs. Called the Eagle's Nest (*Cuauhtinchan*) by the Aztecs, it served military-religious society purposes and was the headquarters for the Eagle and Jaguar Knights, the Aztec military castes of prestigious warriors.

Malinalco's ceremonial center is located on a mountain cliff called the *Cerro de los Idolos* (Idols mount), and it resembles an eagle's nest amid a mountainous region [Fig. 178a]. Malinalco was a strategic location, allowing the Aztecs to control the Valley of Toluca (Matlatzinca region), northern Guerrero and the Tlahuica region. Its name means "place where Malinalxochitl (grass flower) is adored," or more simply, "Place of the Grass Flower" [Fig. 178b].

The temples of Malinalco are usually described as sculpture-temples or sculptural architecture. They were carved on a sloping hill, oriented southeast for ritual purposes [Fig. 179a]. According to the Aztecs, Malinalco was one of the most important architectural sites because of its association to Aztec religious history and for its military nature. Malinalco is the place where the three levels of the Cosmos unite: the sky, the earth, and the underworld [Fig. 179b]. It is well known for its shamanism and as the place where Copil, nephew of Huitzilopochtli and son of Malinalxochitl, fought Huitzilopochtli. Copil was defeated and his heart was thrown over the lake of Tetzaco and landed on the island that would later become Tenochtitlán.

### ***Temple I (Cuauhcalli) - Temple of the Eagle and Jaguar Knights***

The major structure of Malinalco is a temple called the *cuauhcalli*, meaning house of the eagles, by the archaeologist José García Payón (1974). The circular *cuauhcalli*

pyramidal base and balustraded staircase is a rock-cut structure carved in the mountain side and is oriented south. It has two bodies in *talud*, with one superimposed on the other with a height of four meters [\[Fig. 180\]](#).

The staircase, located in the front façade of the building, is two meters wide and has 13 steps. The staircase has two balustrades with changing slopes at the top, each becoming almost vertical. On the left and right sides of the stairs, two squatting jaguars are found. On the fourth and seventh steps, there are remains of a damaged sculpture of a sitting standard (*pantli*) bearer similar to ones that once stood on top of the balustrades of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán [\[Fig. 181\]](#).

At the top of the stairs there is low platform that functioned as an antechamber for the shrine of the temple. The platform floor has a rectangular perforation that is believed to have had an embedded *Techcatl* (sacrificial stone). Three-dimensional figures of a serpent head with an Eagle Knight sitting on top (east side) and a *huehuetl* (vertical drum) covered with *ocelotl* (jaguar) skin surmounted with remains of a Jaguar Knight on the west side, flank the doorway [\[Fig. 182\]](#). The doorway of the shrine is the open mouth of a serpent, with fangs on each side and a bifid tongue sculpted on the floor [\[Fig. 183\]](#). García Payón believed that this architectural sculpture represented Tlaltecuhltli, the earth monster, but it is now more widely accepted that it is Coatlicue, the mother earth goddess. This characteristic makes the *Cuauhcalli*, to be a cave-temple, the entrance to the womb of the earth.

The interior structure has a painted, raised ledge cut from rock which follows the circular contour of the wall and is almost six meters (19 feet) in diameter. The east and west sides have sculptures of flat eagles and the north side has an extended jaguar. The sculptures were zoomorphic thrones. The extended jaguar was used by the king and the eagles by his imperial officers. In the center of the shrine there is a sculpture of an eagle facing the doorway [\[Fig. 184\]](#). Behind the eagle there is a circular hole, approximately 30 cm (12 inches) wide and 33 cm (13 inches) deep. It is believed that it was a *cuauhxicalli* (repository for the hearts of sacrificed victims) that served as offerings that were needed to maintain the movement of the Sun and human existence.

The eagle is the *nahual* (disguise) of the Sun and is the terrestrial form taken by god Huitzilopochtli-Tonatiuh. The carved circular wall was completed with an extension of *tezontle* to support the thatched roof.

Like most Aztec architecture, the *cuauhcalli* is a re-enactment of historical and religious beliefs. As stated above, to some scholars it simply honors Tlaltecuhltli or Coatlicue, the earth monsters through its function of a sanctuary that represents the earth itself on which Aztec Warriors struggled in warfare and perished fighting, offering their lives to the sun. To other scholars (including the author of this work) the temple represents, like the Great temple of Tenochtitlán, the mount of Coatepec (Snake Mountain) that is a transitional place on the surface of the earth (*tlalticpac*) connecting the middle world with the heavens and underworld. It is the mythical house of Coatlicue, represented by the serpent's mouth door. When the interior chamber is entered, it leads to a cave, the womb of the earth. It is a metaphor for the mythical places of creation and origin Tamoanchan-Aztlán-Chicomoztoc. Coatepec, as we have seen before, is the place where Huitzilopochtli was born from the womb of Coatlicue. There are physical elements referring to the myth of Coatepec in the *cuauhcalli*. The *cuauhtehuanitl* (ascending eagle) or rising Sun is represented by the carved eagle in the center of the shrine that faces toward the portal of the earth cave (Coatlicue) [Fig. 185]. It symbolized Huitzilopochtli's victory over his siblings. The battle was re-enacted everyday symbolizing a new day for human beings. This is exactly the same meaning that appears in the *huehuetl* of Malinalco discussed in the section of Art. When the Sun rose from the east, it was carried from the zenith by warriors that died in war or on sacrificial stones. When it sets on the west, it is taken by the *Cihuateteo*, deified women who died in child birth. It was believed by warriors, that the hearts placed in the circular hole of the shrine's floor aided Huitzilopochtli in his nightly quests. In the exterior, next to the portal, on the southeast side, there is a *xiuhcoatl*, the weapon used by Huitzilopochtli when he traveled everyday from east to west [Fig. 186]. The archaeoastronomical measurements of Javier Romero-Quiroz (1980) and Jesús Galindo-Trejo (1989) confirm that the day of the winter solstice (December 21st) at noon, the light of the Sun coming from a cleft in a mountain located in front of the

*cuauhcalli*, enters through the doorway of it, illuminating exactly the head of the eagle that is the embodiment of Huitzilopochtli, the Sun himself [Fig. 187]. We know through Sahagún, that on the solsticial day the *Panquetzaliztli* was celebrated, a festival dedicated to honor the flags of sacrifice because this was the day of the descent of Huitzilopochtli to the earth. It means that the orientation of this temple was built with this solsticial effect in mind (see section on the Great Temple in this article for further information).

Flanking the door are images of the *Cuauhtli* and *Ocelotl* warriors who were the guardians of the temple and worshippers of the Sun [Fig. 182]. Archaeologist Richard Townsend (1982, 2000) points out that *Cuauhtli* and *Ocelotl* warriors' ritual practices and ceremonies such as initiation and graduation were celebrated in this temple.

Although Temple I is circular, it is not associated with the cult of Quetzalcoatl (many circular structures in Mesoamerica honor the deity). This temple was erected in honor of the Sun god Huitzilopochtli and that is proven by all the iconographic motifs already discussed.

### *Temple II*

Temple II is a truncated pyramid that is located a few feet southeast of Temple I. It has a squared floor plan and a staircase on the west side of the façade. The balustrades were constructed with carved stones and were built with stucco plaster [Fig. 188]. Altar carvings and a platform were incorporated into the building. The building is consolidated, but it shows a state of deterioration.

### *Temple III*

Temple III was used to celebrate the funerals of warriors who died in war or captivity and were worthy of going to *Tonatiuh Ilhuicac* (the paradise of the Sun) [Fig. 189]. The rock-cut structure holds two chambers, a circular and a rectangular one. The eastern portion of the building faces south and is part of a natural *talud* (slope) of the mountain. It is constructed of stone joined with soil and lime mortar. The temple's entrance consists of three doors that are separated by two columns [Fig. 190].

The rectangular chamber has a fire pit in the middle of the room. The room contains a

bench that runs through the east, west, and north sides. It is interrupted at the center of the north side and gives access to the circular chamber. The rectangular chamber originally had a mural that represented the *mimixcoua*, the deified eagle and jaguar warriors who lived in the Heaven of the Sun [Fig. 191]. Unfortunately, this mural no longer exists.

### *Temple IV*

Temple IV is partially carved into the living rock, faces east, and is considered to be a *Tonatiuhcalli*; Temple of the Sun. Half of the edifice is carved out of rock, while the other half, the front façade, is made of ashlar of stone. The building is raised from a platform and has a central staircase [Fig. 192]. The interior consists of two rectangular pedestals that served as column bases that supported the roof. There is an altar carved out of the rock that lies along the main wall [Fig. 193]. Some scholars believe that an image of the sun, similar to the Aztec Calendar of Tenochtitlán was embedded in the main wall due to the fact that the Temple wall was designed to receive the light rays of the rising Sun (*Cuauhtehuaitl*), illuminating every morning the face of the god.

### *Temple V*

This monument has a circular floor plan of 2 m. of diameter and is built of stone ashlar over a platform [Fig. 194]. Even though it is very dilapidated, its limited space and round form are similar to the Kivas of the Southwest of the United States, an area located beyond the north border of Mesoamerica. The hole that this structure has in its center could have been used to hold the flags or banners of war and sacrifice.

### *Temple VI*

Temple VI was under construction at the time of the Spanish conquest, and so it was never completed. Its platform is identified as that of a *temalacatl* (wheel of stone) [Fig. 195]. The chroniclers and the codices show that on that particular type of stone, brave enemy captives were exposed to the gladiatorial sacrifice (*tlauauanaliztli*) [Fig. 175]. Some *temalacatl* were also considered to be *cuauhxicallis* (vessels that contained the hearts of the sacrificial victims).

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