

AZTECS



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Edited by Doris Kurella, Martin Berger and Inés de Castro in cooperation with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), Mexico



HIRMER

*NORTH MEXICO*

*Gulf of Mexico*

TARASCAN

OTOMI

Tula

Teotihuacan

Tenochtitlan  
(Mexico City)

Texcoco

Tlacopan

Lake Texcoco

Cortés' Route

TLAXCALAN

*AZTEC EMPIRE*

MIXTEC

YOPI

Huaxyacac

ZAPOTEC

MAYA

XOCONOCHCO

*Pacific Ocean*

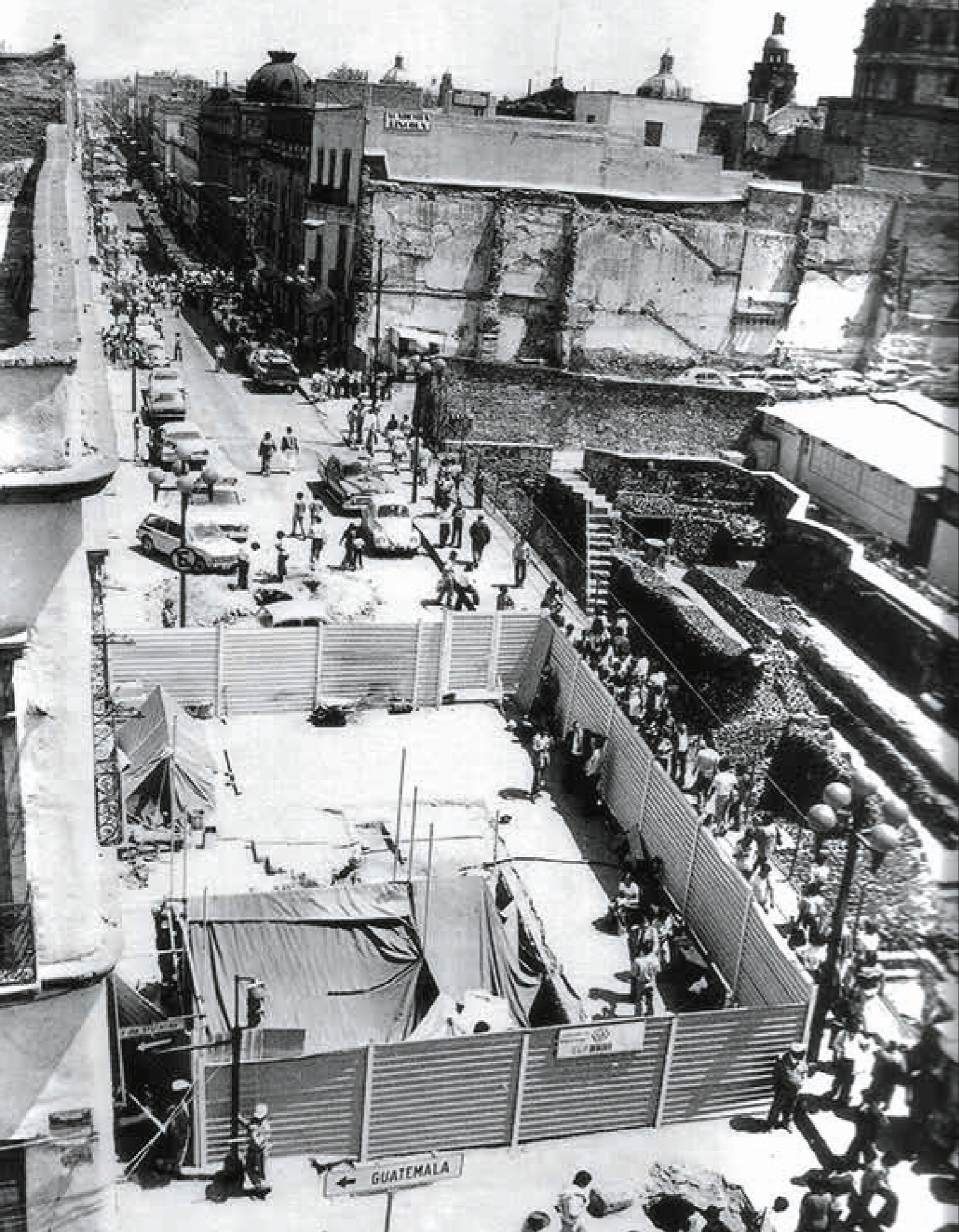


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Leonardo López Luján

## The Archaeology of Tenochtitlan

### An urban palimpsest

Archaeologists who work on the ruins of Tenochtitlan – the insular capital of the Mexicas – have much in common with their counterparts who explore the vestiges of ancient Rome, Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), Lutetia (Paris) and Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium (Cologne): they study legendary ancient settlements buried under bustling modern metropolises. For these persistent researchers, Mexico City, like modern-day Rome, Istanbul, Paris and Cologne represent almost insurmountable barriers in the form of all manner of buildings and thick layers of asphalt that allow them only to open tiny windows into the past (Matos Moctezuma 1988; López Luján and Levin 2006; López Luján 2015, 2017).

Without a doubt, the archaeologists of Tenochtitlan work in less than romantic surroundings, especially when compared to their colleagues who excavate hunter-gatherer camps in the wide expanse of northern Mexico's deserts, or who exhume Mayan palaces in the dense jungles of the country's south. In Mexico City, in contrast, scholars of the pre-Hispanic world spend the best part of their days inside dark, damp and foul-smelling trenches within the midst of a bustling and chaotic city which today is home to 20 million inhabitants, and a city centre that prides itself on having the highest concentration of historical and artistic monuments on the American continent. In such circumstances, archaeologists take every opportunity to penetrate the subsoil: the resurfacing of streets, the building of a Metro line, the installation of an underground electrical transformer, the replacement of an old building's foundations or the repair of drinking water and drainage networks. They invest immeasurable efforts and considerable sums of money in this venture, knowing that the best outcome they can hope for is the discovery in record time of just part of a Mexica temple, a canal, a house or a rubbish dump. But no matter how small these vestiges may be, bringing to light a fraction of Meso-America's most famous city always gives them enormous satisfaction and the feeling that one more mission has been accomplished.

Fig. 1 ◀  
The excavations by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and the complete exposure of the Templo Mayor in 1978.

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Photo: Anonymous



Starke Moiré-Gefahr bei dieser Abbildung

**Fig. 2**  
The island city of Tenochtitlan on a map attributed to Hernán Cortés. It was published for the first time in 1524 in Nuremberg.

Obviously, there are certain advantages to excavating in an urban environment such as this. For example, archaeologists have regular access to a range of specialists, libraries, archives, comparative collections and laboratories with scientific instruments that are generally not available in the desert or the jungle. In addition, in the case of the archaeological zones of the Templo Mayor and Tlatelolco, which are protected areas and therefore exempt from the frenzied construction that characterises the modern city, it is possible to carry out exploration projects that last as long as necessary. This simple factor enables the detailed recording of information and effective conservation of the materials uncovered.

### Ruins on ruins

Whenever an archaeological exploration is undertaken in the historic centre of Mexico City, it is important to bear in mind that the ground layers are technically difficult to penetrate given the concrete foundations and stone fillings dissected by unruly water networks, electrical wiring and fibre optics. As if this were not enough, immediately beneath these ground layers lies unstable clay subsoil, through which groundwater, often contaminated by sewage, soon makes an appearance. This is where the levels of the capital of New Spain, which dates from the period between 1521 and 1821, are located (López Luján 2018). These layers are marked by the abundance of cultural artefacts that attest to the opulent life of the European conquerors and their descendants: the floors and walls of sumptuous mansions, fragments of Chinese porcelain and Spanish and Italian majolica, as well as an exorbitant number of pitchers used to transport wine, vinegar, oil, olives and other fine preserves from far-off Andalusia. These extravagant consumption habits are understandable in a city that, within a matter of decades, had established itself as the fastest-growing Hispanic colony. Mexico City at the time was a true economic emporium, where the wealth originating from agriculture, cattle-rearing *haciendas* and mining regions was concentrated and which profited from strong trade relationships with Spain and the Philippines, the latter effectively a province of New Spain. The city was also the most influential cultural centre in the New World. America's first printing press and second university were established there.



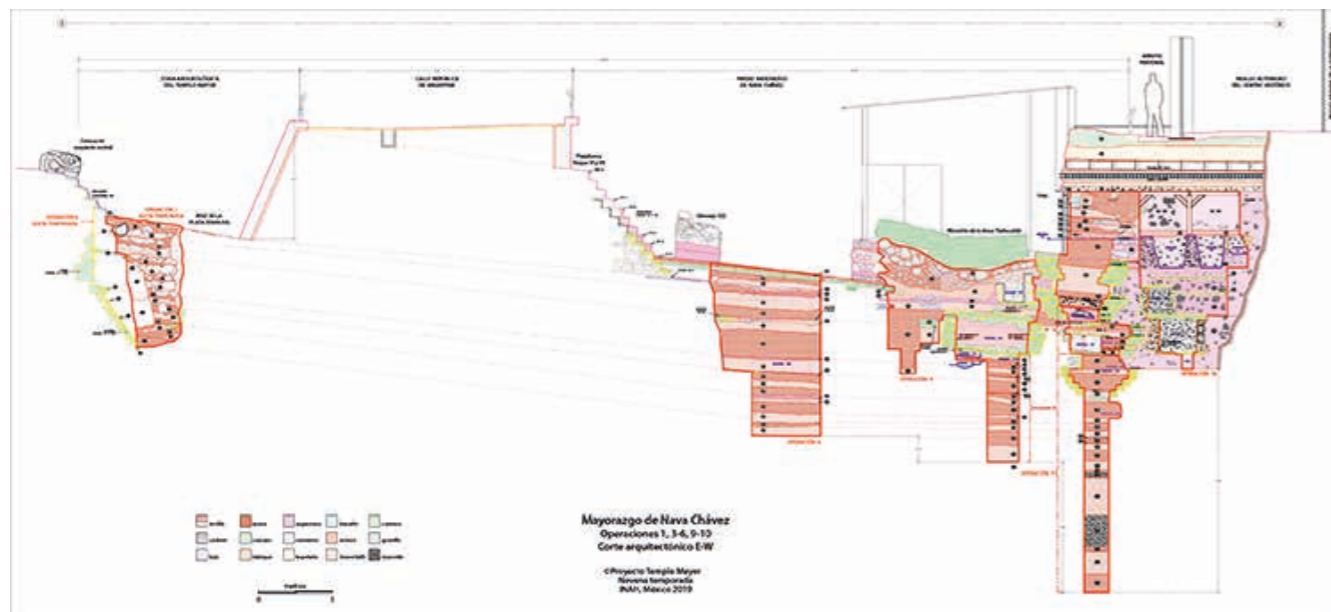
**Fig. 3**  
The Aztec Sun Stone when it was still embedded in the west tower of the Cathedral of Mexico City

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Photo: Anonymous, ca. 1870



If you dig beyond the colonial layers, you will find the ruins of a Tenochtitlan devastated by the clashes of 1521 and by the systematic demolition of its buildings undertaken after the Conquest. Naturally, it is rare that archaeologists reach this far deep. For this reason, little has been discovered through archaeology about the structure and functioning of the ancient city. Perhaps the only exception is the ceremonial ground, known as the Sacred Precinct, located in the heart of the Mexica capital. This was a majestic and sacred space that was built and renovated tirelessly between 1325 and 1521. It was separated from the secular ground by a quadrangular platform, inside which the most illustrious religious buildings of the empire were erected, included the Huei Teocalli or “Templo Mayor”.

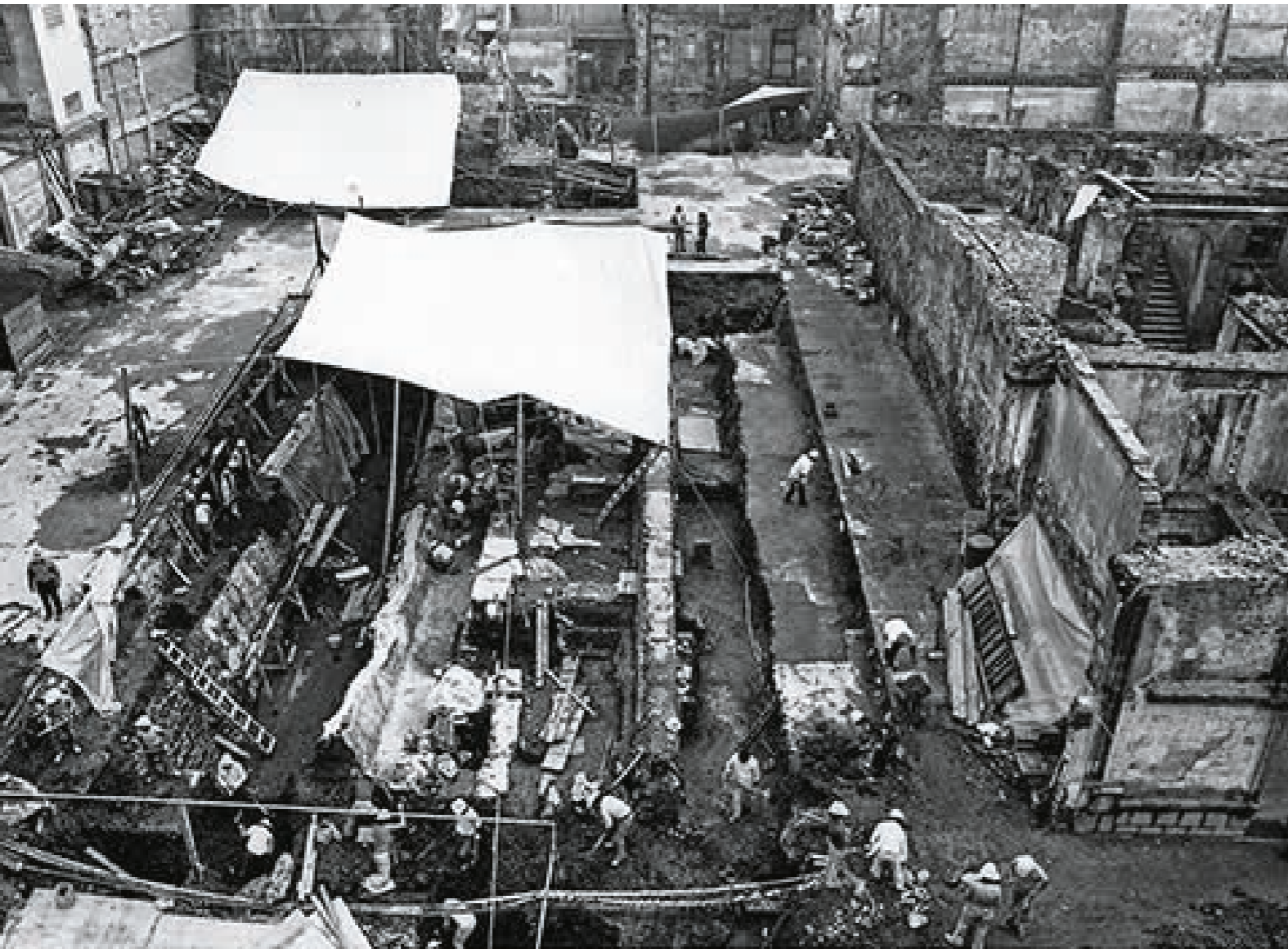
**Fig. 4** ▾  
 The complex stratigraphy of the historic centre of Mexico City: the modern, Colonial-era and pre-Hispanic layers  
 With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
 Drawing: Michelle De Anda



**In search of times gone by**

The unexpected discovery of the monolith of the lunar goddess, Coyolxauqui, on 21 February 1978 triggered a series of events that transformed the face of Mexico City and revolutionised our knowledge of the ancient Mexica civilization (Boone 1978; Broda et al. 1987). In this unique turn of events, the National Institute of Anthropology and History managed to implement one of the most ambitious and enduring archaeological enterprises of recent times: The Templo Mayor Project. Founded forty-one years ago by Professor Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, this scientific research project has since been charged with exhuming a good part of the Sacred Precinct of Tenochtitlan, with the express objective of reconstructing the religious, socio-political and economic life of the imperial capital. To date, eight long periods of excavation have been carried out, the first three of which were directed by Matos

**Fig. 5** ▲  
 The excavations by Manuel Gamio and the discovery of the Templo Mayor in 1914  
 With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
 Photo: Anonymous



**Fig. 6** ▲  
The excavations by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and the complete exposure of the Templo Mayor in 1978

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Photo: Anonymous



**Fig. 7** ▶  
Aerial view of the archaeological zone of the Templo Mayor in Mexico City

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Photo: Michael Calderwood



Moctezuma himself and the remaining five by Leonardo López Luján (Matos Moctezuma 1988; López Luján 2005, 2006, 2015, 2017). During this period, an area of 1.29 hectares has been explored, which is equivalent to no less than 10.5 percent of the 12.24 hectares that the Sacred Precinct would have covered, and 0.1 percent of the 13.5 square kilometres that the island would have spanned at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Another decisive moment came in 1991 with the creation of the Urban Archaeology Programme which is currently coordinated by archaeologist Raúl Barrera Rodríguez. This programme is responsible for rescue and recovery operations in the heart of Mexico City and is complementary in many ways to the Templo Mayor Project. The key to success for the two teams involved, a research team and a rescue archaeology team, is continuity. Successive generations of specialists have compiled their efforts, gradually adding “pieces” to a gigantic “archaeological puzzle”, which they know will never be completed. Such “pieces” include the Templo Mayor (a double pyramid in honour of the sun god, Huitzilopochtli, and the rain god, Tlaloc), the Casa de las Águilas (“House of Eagles”), the Templos Rojos, the Huei Tlachco or main ball game court, the Calmecac or temple-school where nobles were trained in all fields of knowledge, the Temple of Ehecatl (the god of wind) and the Huei Tzompantli or palisade where the skulls of the sacrificed were exhibited. Along with these constructions, which are now



**Fig. 8**  
 Mexica Chacmool figure,  
 representing the rain god  
 Tlaloc.

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, D.R.  
 Secretaría de Cultura – INAH  
 (cat. 120)

in ruins, a multitude of worship shrines, sculptures, mural paintings and altars have appeared, enriching the heritage of the Mexican people.

Over the years, the work of the Templo Mayor Project has resulted in the conservation, refurbishment and opening of an archaeological site that is visited by hundreds of thousands of people each year; the construction of the Templo Mayor Museum, a modern building whose eight rooms exhibit the treasures found during the excavations; and the creation of a research centre that has produced more than 1,200 publications on all manner of subjects (López Luján and Chávez Balderas 2019). The impact of these achievements has been such that the Archaeological Zone of the Templo Mayor and the rest of Mexico City’s historic centre were declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO in 1987. 📌



**Fig. 9**  
 Almeha, roof ornamentation  
 of the elite school *calmecac*

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, D.R.  
 Secretaría de Cultura – INAH  
 (cat. 114)

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An exhibition of the Linden-Museum Stuttgart  
in collaboration with Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen

## Baden-Württemberg State Exhibition at the Linden-Museum Stuttgart

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## Special Exhibition at the Weltmuseum Wien

24 June 2020 to 6 January 2021

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