

Goddess and the king

Right 3D Scan of the stone sculpture of *Tlaltecuhltli* (Scan: Saburo Sugiyama, Tenoch Medina & Acord /© Project Greater Temple, INAH).

Below (left) Excavation work on the sculpture *in situ* (Photo Leonardo López Luján/© Project Greater Temple, INAH).

Below (right) Detail of the claw, showing the date symbol, from an image of the *Tlaltecuhltli* stone still *in situ* and before cleaning (Photo Marco Pacheco/ Courtesy Proyecto Templo Mayor).

Archaeological work in Mexico City has helped to deepen our understanding of the ancient city of Tenochtitlan. Now on the eve of a once-in-a-lifetime discovery, **Leonardo López Luján** and **Eduardo Matos Moctezuma** present their latest find



Above Aerial image of the city (Photo Michael Calderwood) with superimposed model of temple (© The Trustees of the British Museum)

Urban archaeology can hold astonishing surprises, especially in Mexico City. Here modern buildings in the city centre are juxtaposed with those of the Spanish colonial metropolis (1521–1821 AD) and superimposed directly above what was once Tenochtitlan, capital of the Mexica empire (1325–1521 AD). Extensive excavations at Templo Mayor (Great Temple) have been undertaken in the course of the last thirty years, but the most recent discovery made on 2 October 2006 stands as a milestone in the history of Mexican archaeology. As the Urban Archaeology Programme team was exploring the area occupied by the House of Ajaracas at the intersection of Guatemala

Street and Argentina Street, a huge monolith was discovered just in front of the stepped facade of the Templo Mayor. It was even larger than the two previous great discoveries, the Piedra del Sol (Sun Stone) and the large round sculpture of the lunar goddess Coyolxauhqui. The new monolith is an impressive 12-ton rectangular slab, made of volcanic stone, and measuring 3.57 m by 4.17 m, and 38 cm deep.

When we arrived at the site the day after it first appeared, only the lower edge of the monolith was visible. Given our knowledge of the established canons of Mexica sculpture, we surmised that this was most probably the frontal representation of a divinity. As more of the sculpture was exposed, it became apparent that the whole upper surface was beautifully carved in relief and painted in a vivid polychrome palette of red, ochre, white, blue and black. The style and quality of the sculpture date it to the imperial period, the reign of King Ahuítzotl (1486–1502), two decades prior to the Spanish conquest when Mexica imperial art had reached its apogee. This, we realised, was the fearsome crouching figure of an earth goddess, with her limbs splayed outwards. The pose is analogous to the birth-giving position and often compared to the splayed pose of a toad, symbol of the earth in Mexica culture. Her outstretched arms and legs allude to the four cardinal directions. In terms of identification, there were several candidates to choose from for this type of deity, generically called *tzitzimime*. We suspected it was most likely *Tlaltecuhltli* (Lord/Lady of the Earth), based on some forty similar surviving sculptures and reliefs of this supernatural being, who gave birth to the sky and the underworld.

The deity has bare breasts and wears an intricately patterned skirt. On either side are skull and crossbone motifs. The joints of her elbows and knees are marked by skulls, and the four claws bear faces of telluric beings. The tightly curled hair is typical of the deities of earth, night and the underworld. Paper flags, symbols of sacrifice, adorn her hair. The facial features are characteristic of the earth goddess: deep-set, crescent-moon-shaped eyes; wide flat nose; cheeks with two circular motifs typical of this goddess; grimacing mouth, open wide with teeth exposed. A long spurt of blood emerges from her abdomen flowing upwards into her mouth. She has prominent ears, adorned with circular earrings with hanging tassels.

This combination of attributes fits with the well-known sculptural representations of *Tlaltecuhltli* in her feminine, anthropomorphic aspects. Nevertheless, there are in this monolith rare and unusual elements, such as skulls on her elbows and knees instead of telluric faces which link the goddess to death. The flags in the hair connect her with sacrifice, and the blood streaming into her mouth, reveals the goddess in her aspect as a devourer. *Tlaltecuhltli* is usually seen as marking the beginning or end of the life cycle, either as the source of life or depicted devouring the dead.

In our view, the main key to unlocking the significance of this monolith is to consider the exact location where it was discovered. It lies immediately west of the Templo Mayor, on the central east–west axis that governed orientation of the Sacred Precinct and the temple itself. It is also right next to the place where a building known as the Cuauhxicalco once stood. In the famous



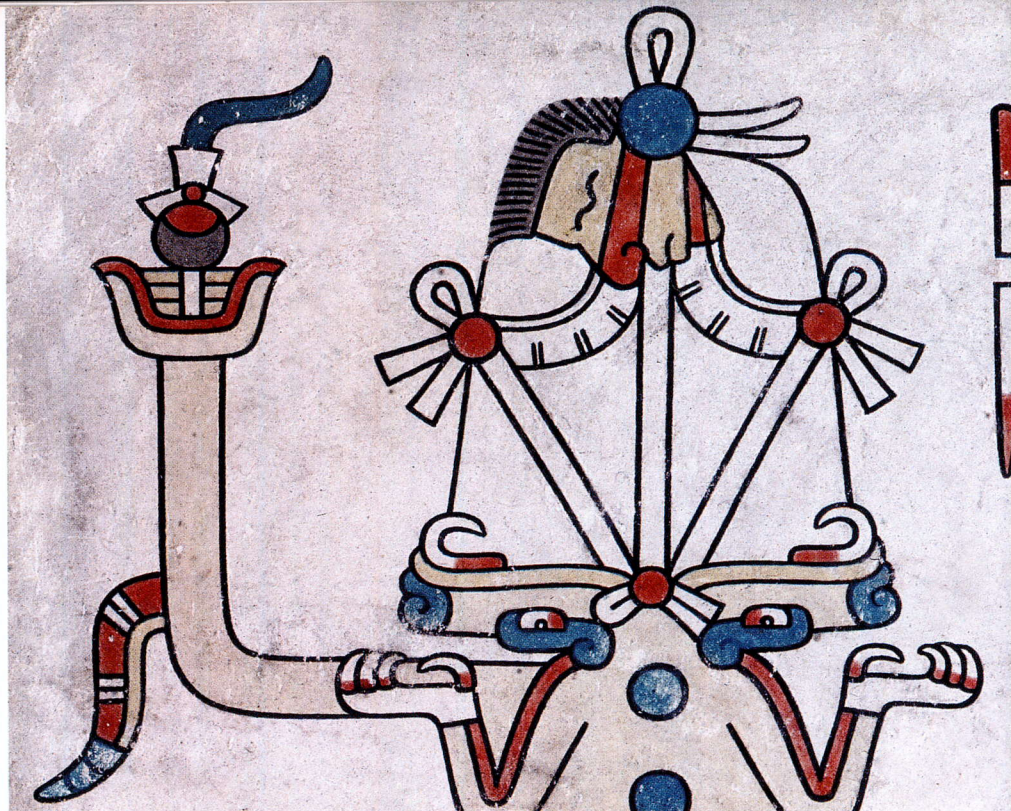


image of the Sacred Precinct, portrayed in the early colonial codex *Primeros Memoriales de Sahagún* (*First Memorials*) by the Spanish chronicler Bernardo Sahagún, the Cuauhxicalco appears between the Templo Mayor and a structure called Tzompantli. According to the historians Diego Durán and Alvarado Tezozómoc, the ashes of several Mexica kings were interred in the Cuauhxicalco. The latter details how their funerary bundles were placed on a great pyre at the foot of the Templo Mayor. For hours, the flames consumed the royal corpse and part of the offerings. These consisted of the hearts and blood of deer, dwarves and sacrificed slaves. The ashes were carefully gathered in urns or royal mantles and buried in the Cuauhxicalco.

Further insights into the location of the monolith and the role played by *Tlaltecuhltli* in Mexica cosmology are found in myths which make it clear that she played a dual role. On the one hand, she is charged with generative functions connected with the conception and birth of human beings and with the cycle of seasonal renewal and vegetative growth. On the other hand, she is an insatiable devourer of blood and the dead. In fact, not only does she consume all kinds of creatures which inhabit the earth, she also devours the Sun at dusk and regurgitates it at

dawn. In the Borgia, Telleriano-Remensis, Borbónico and Tonalámatl de Aubin codices, *Tlaltecuhltli* swallows the Sun itself in the form of *Tlalchitonatiuh* (the 'Sun that is near the Earth'). It is well known that, for the Mexica, the Sun's daily cycle was the metaphor par excellence for a ruler's reign. For that reason, the passing of the sovereign was associated with the descent into darkness, like that of dusk at sunset or a solar eclipse. Different historical sources such as the Borgia, Laud and Fejérváry-Mayer codices depict royal funerary bundles being 'swallowed' by the open jaws of *Tlaltecuhltli*.

Given this backdrop, we think it likely that the newly discovered monolith of *Tlaltecuhltli* may in fact mark the entrance to a royal tomb. The claw on the right leg frames the glyph *Conejo* (Rabbit) with the numbers 2 and 10 appearing on either side. Its meaning is ambiguous. One possibility is that it represents the date 10-*Conejo* (10-Rabbit) which equates to the year 1502 in the Christian calendar. This was precisely the year in which Moctezuma II's predecessor Ahuitzotl, the eighth Mexica ruler, died. On the other hand, the date 2-*Conejo* (2-Rabbit) could allude to the gods of Pulque, stellar and nocturnal beings, who were the arch-enemies of the Sun and the cause of eclipses.

Above left General view of the intersection of Argentina Street and Guatemala Street in Mexico City. The steps of the Templo Mayor and the stone of the goddess *Tlaltecuhltli* are visible in the foreground (Photo Lourdes Elegant/ © Project Greater Temple, INAH).

Above Right Detail showing the funerary bundle of a deceased ruler descending into the jaws of *Tlaltecuhltli*, as depicted in the Fejérváry-Mayer Codex (©National Museums Liverpool)

By way of conclusion, we should note that following Ahuitzotl's funeral rites, the high council of lords met to elect his successor, because 'esta corona, ymperio mexicano, a oscuras tinieblas' (this crown, this Mexican empire, lay in pitch darkness). Thus was Moctezuma II appointed. As was the custom, he offered penance in the Templo Mayor and the Tlacatecco-Tlacoachcalco, ritually dying to be reborn later in majesty and to be crowned, 'tornando así a resplandecer el sol' thus bringing back the shining sun to resplendent Tenochtitlan.

Special thanks to Mariela Juárez Duarte for helping with the translation of the text; Leonardo López Luján will be giving this year's William Fagg lecture on his discoveries on 29 October; for further details, see the Museum's website at www.britishmuseum.org



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