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AZTECS

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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 House of Eagles

To the north of the Templo Mayor

The Casa de las Águilas (House of Eagles) is one of the most impressive religious buildings discovered in the ruins of Tenochtitlan to date. It was built and enlarged three times between 1430 and 1502 AD, and stands out not only due to its proximity to the Templo Mayor, its large dimensions and staircases decorated with eagle heads, but also for its rich neo-Toltec ornamentation, inspired by a style that was fashionable four centuries before in the city of Tula (950-1150 AD) (López Luján 2013).

Unfortunately, of the last two construction phases of the House of Eagles (stages 3–4) only the platform survives, as the upper half of the building was razed between 1521 and 1523 AD following the Spanish conquest. The platform has an L-shaped floor plan and is comprised of two connected areas: the east wing and the north wing, with two access staircases in the southwest corner. Although it has not been possible to excavate it completely, it is estimated to measure 32 metres in a north-south direction and 52 metres in an east-west direction.

When excavating the interior of stages 3 and 4, an older stage (stage 2) was located. This had been built between 1469 and 1481 AD, during the reign of Axayacatl (López Luján 2006, 2017). This stage also consists of a solid, small, L-shaped platform which serves as the base for a portico, several rooms and a small interior courtyard. In pre-Hispanic times the east wing of the building was accessed via a staircase that rose from the public plaza to the portico, supported by a regularly distributed series of pilasters (fig. 3). In order to reach the main room, it was necessary to pass through a door guarded by two ceramic, full-body, life-size sculptures of individuals dressed in eagle costumes. From the main room, occupied by a large altar, the next rooms were reached through a narrow corridor. This led to a rectangular courtyard flanked by two rooms, one to the north and one to the south. Each of these had a small altar and a pair of ceramic incense burners decorated with Tlaloc's face shedding tears of rain.

Fig. 1 ◀
Ceramic in the form of the god Mictlantecuhtli, the lord of the kingdom of the dead

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor
Photo: Michel Zabé

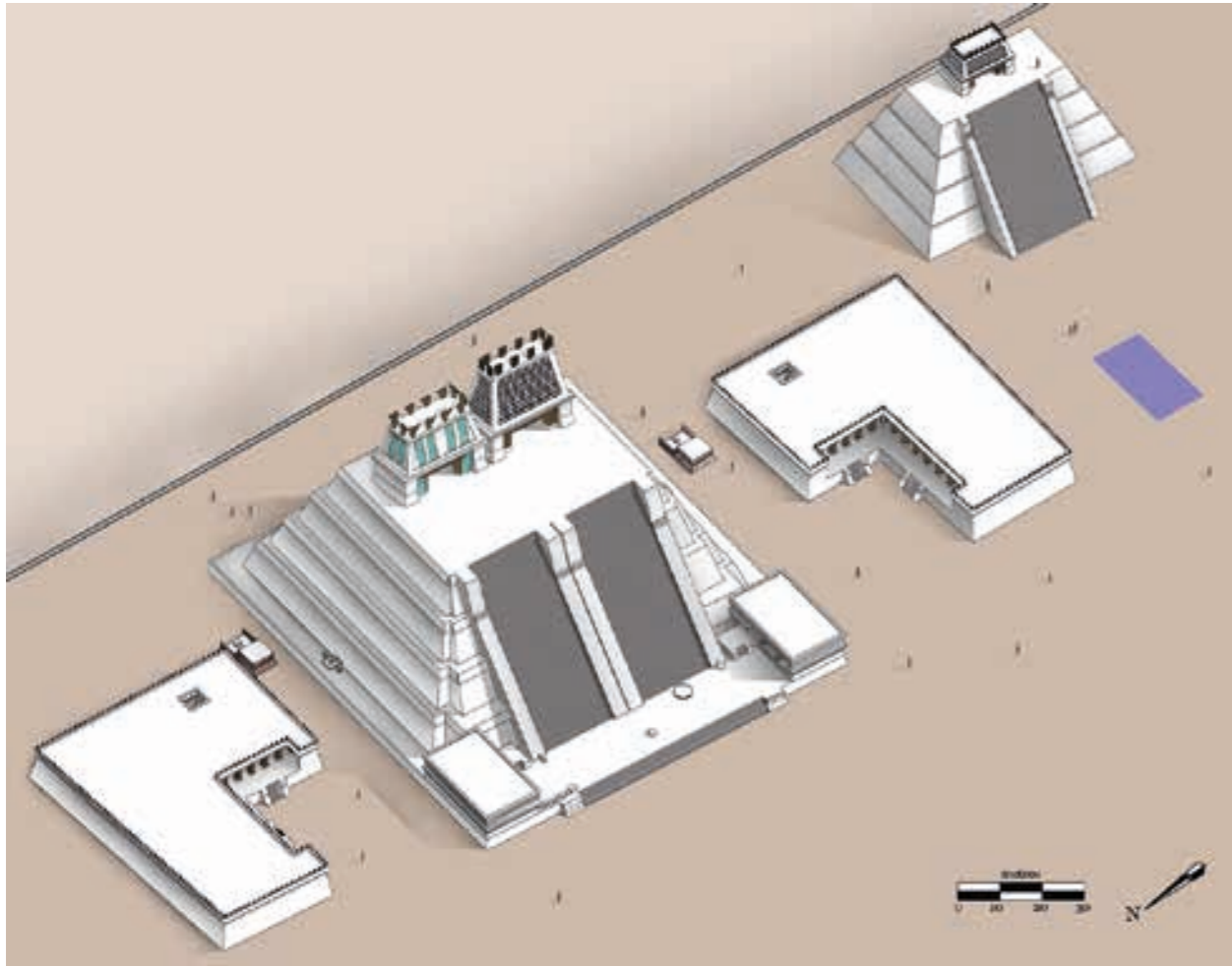


Fig. 2 ▲
The House of Eagles lies to the north of the Templo Mayor

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor
Reconstruction drawing: Michelle De Anda

Fig. 3 ◀
The House of Eagles in the northern inner plaza

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor
Photo: Leonardo López Luján

Fig. 4
The four building phases of the House of Eagles
With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor
Drawing: Tenoch Medina

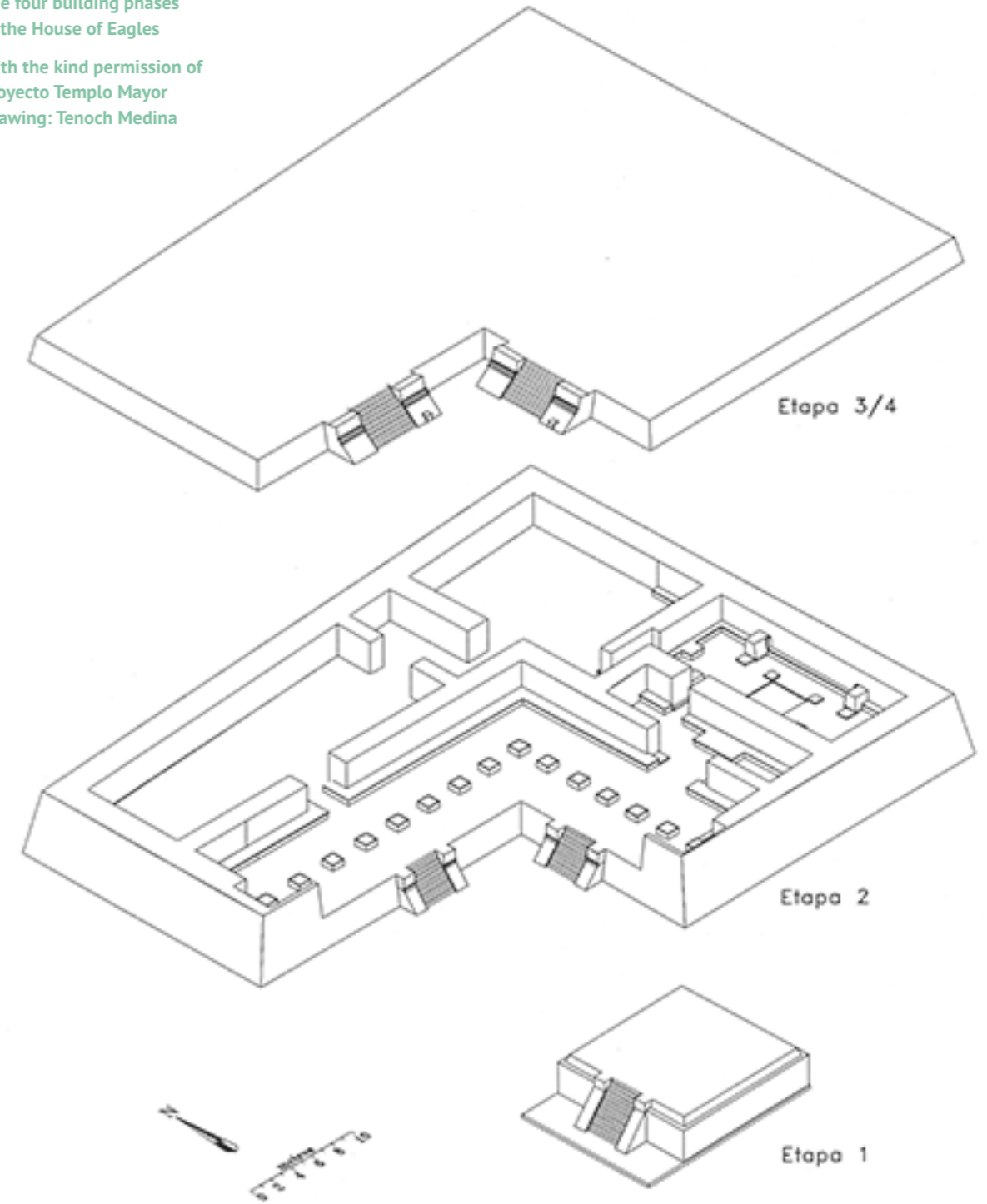




Fig. 5
Incense burner
Museo del Templo Mayor,
Mexico City, D.R. Secretaría
de Cultura – INAH (cat. 111)

Fig. 6 ▶
Tlaloc braziers and carved
benches in neo-Toltec style
With the kind permission of
Proyecto Templo Mayor
Photo: Salvador Guilliem

The interior spaces of the House of Eagles have stucco floors and masonry walls decorated with bench-like structures of basalt running around the perimeter and paintings on flat, smooth earth plastering. So far, 86 metres of benches have been excavated, all decorated with rich polychrome reliefs, in addition to 90.5 square metres of paintings that are unfortunately in a very poor state of conservation.

The tunnel excavation

Since the northern half of the House of Eagles is buried under the street Justo Sierra and the colonial building of Librería Porrúa, in 1994 two long tunnels were dug under the tourist walkway of the archaeological zone. In the first tunnel, a room of large proportions was uncovered. It was decorated with mural paintings and more than 13 metres of polychrome benches, which were mostly intact.

Even more impressive was the discovery in the second tunnel, where the access to the north wing of the building was found, guarded by two impressive ceramic figures representing Mictlantecuhtli, the Lord of the World of



Fig. 7 ▲
Comparison of a Neo-Toltec
Rain God ceramic braziers
from the House of Eagles
(top) with a Toltec incense
burner found in Tula (below)
With the kind permission of
Proyecto Templo Mayor
Drawing: Fernando Carrizosa

the Dead. Both were broken into smithereens due to the high level of humidity in the subsoil and the great amount of pressure exerted by the weight of the colonial and modern buildings. After five months of work inside the tunnel and eight more months in the conservation laboratory, these real-life puzzles measuring 1.74 metres tall and 128 kilograms in weight were finally put together.

The areas of ritual activity

The House of Eagles was an important stage in the religious life of Tenochtitlan. Architecturally, the interior spaces of the building provided ideal conditions for performing private rites in which only a few individuals participated. Its isolation from the outside, restricted lighting conditions and reduced dimensions create a secluded atmosphere ideal for activities such as prayer, meditation and penance. In addition, the rich interior decoration would suggest that blood offering was one of the main ceremonies to take place there. The vertical faces of the benches depict religious processions of armed warriors that converge in a *zacatapayolli*, a ball of hay, into which worshippers stuck bloody bone knives during the ritual of self-sacrifice.

Fig. 8
Ceramic of a person dressed as a royal eagle. The eagle represents the rising sun.
With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor
Photo: Michel Zabe



Architecture and benches are not the only sources of information available for reconstructing the ceremonies that took place in this monument. Stucco floors also offer valuable data. For this reason, they were studied under the assumption that they were chemically “clean” when they were first used and that, with the passage of time, the solutions spilled during the performance of specific rites accumulated in their porous structure. According to this logic, floor samples were taken every metre and were subjected to ten different analyses. The results make it clear that the spatial distribution of chemical



values cannot be attributed to chance: the highest indices were always recorded in front of the altars with incense burners, revealing that these were the places where most ritual activity took place. There, residues from the ritual use of copal and other aromatic resins, animal fats, human blood and fermented beverages such as *pulque* can be found.

An archaic style

In stage 2 of the House of Eagles, allusions to Toltec civilisation abound to convey to the faithful the idea of a glorious past, such as ceramic braziers bearing the face of the God of Rain. While it is true that these Mexica imitations are fairly similar to Toltec originals of the Abra Café Burdo ceramic type, their raw materials, smaller dimensions and certain stylistic details point towards a different origin.

The murals of the House of Eagles also bear the unmistakable Toltec stamp. Mexica artists made use of technical and stylistic solutions that were already in vogue in Tula. The exterior masonry wall of the building was coated on

Figs. 9 and 10
Comparison of a Neo-Toltec “bench seat” from the House of Eagles (top) with a Toltec bench seat found in Tula (below)

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor
Drawing: Fernando Carrizosa

both sides with a thin layer of beaten earth. The lower part of the walls, about one third in each case, was covered with a thin layer of stucco, a mixture of lime and sand. The upper part of the walls was treated with a clay plaster (dark, very malleable clay with a low lime content). The painting layer was applied to these plaster layers. Toltec ornamental motifs such as the multi-coloured borders were also copied. These are made up of four horizontal bands that are always repeated in the same colour sequence: black, blue, red and ochre succeed each other from bottom to top.

The neo-Toltec programme of the House of Eagles is finished off with an impressive sequence of benches. Each one is composed of two panels carved in bas-relief. The top panel is a frieze containing images of snakes with undulating bodies. As previously mentioned, the lower panel, shows a procession of warriors making a blood offering.

A rigorous study of historical sources has allowed us to conclude that this neo-Toltec building served as a stage for the rites of dynastic transition. It was here that the vigil for the corpse of the king was held and it was here, too, that the successor to the throne performed the death and rebirth rituals prior to coronation a few days later. In this regard, it should be considered that, for the Mexica, the legitimacy of power was based on two beliefs: that their ruling lineage was descended from the god Quetzalcoatl and that it was linked to the ancient Tula through the blood ties of Acamapichtli, the founding king of the dynasty of Tenochtitlan.

The closing rites

Between 1486 and 1502 AD, the Mexica decided to enlarge the House of Eagles once more, perhaps because its dimensions and the quality of its finishes no longer reflected the splendour that Tenochtitlan had achieved. As was the custom, a group of priests ritually closed the sacred space just before the new building work began. In

the first rite identified by archaeologists, the images of Mictlantecuhtli and the figures dressed in eagle costumes flanking the main entrances to the building were literally soaked in human blood and biochemists. Then one of these entrances was blocked with a sculpture depicting a threatening rattlesnake. Then the stucco floors, the Tlaloc braziers, the rattlesnake, the polychrome benches, the ceramic sculptures and the mural paintings were covered with a thin layer of lacustrine clay. Lastly, several human jaws were placed in front of the torso of each of the large images, possibly to emphasise their ritual death and definitive burial.

Once the ritual was over, the whole complex was meticulously protected with walls made of large stones. Finally, the rooms were filled with earth, and the flat roofs were taken down to create a solid platform that would serve as a base for the new building. ▣

Fig. 11 ◀
Wall paintings in the north wing of the House of Eagles with symbols of death and brightly coloured Neo-Toltec bands

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor

Fig. 12 ▼
Blood sacrifice for the god Mictlantecuhtli, *Codex Magliabechiano*

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