In search of Mexica kings: current excavations in Tenochtitlan

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A FEW years ago, the local government of Mexico City ordered the demolition of two buildings in the historic centre that had been irreparably damaged by the 1985 earthquake. This decision aroused great hopes in archaeologists as both these buildings were situated on a plot in front of the ruins of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan. It was known that the funerals of at least three kings - Axayacatl (1469–81), Tizoc (1481–86) and Ahuitzotl (1486–1502) – had taken place right at the foot of the main façade of this pyramid. Historical sources from the sixteenth century had revealed that the corpses of the Mexica kings were cremated here and their ashes were buried along with luxurious offerings and the bodies of the servants sacrificed for the occasion.

An archaeological dig undertaken in 2006 confirmed the enormous importance of this site, as it unearthed the biggest Mexica monolith discovered to date. This was a one-eyed sculpture carved out of pink andesite, measuring 4.17 x 3.62 x 0.38 m and weighing 12 tonnes. This monument depicts Tlalcteuhlti (lady of the earth), a goddess who appears in the myths as the venerated mother who gives birth to all creatures (plants, animals, human beings, the sun and the moon), as well as the monster who devours them when they die.

In March 2007 a new phase of the Templo Mayor Project (founded in 1978) was initiated to explore this area with state-of-the-art technology and meticulous scientific techniques. A few months later, the monolith was temporarily removed from the ground with the help of a long-armed crane in order to be cleaned, restored and analysed. This work...
revealed the rich colours used by the Mexica artists to paint the goddess. Meanwhile, geophysical radar studies and archaeological excavations were under way on the site occupied by the monolith. These revealed an entrance to the east of the monolith that may have led to a funeral chamber via a deep vertical shaft.

Thirteen offerings have now been recovered, featuring a wide range of gifts: plants (amaranth and cotton seeds, maguey stalks, bars of tree resin), sea animals (shells, snails, corals, fishes, crabs, prawns, sea urchins, sand dollars, sharks, sawfish), birds (eagles, herons, ibises), mammals (pumas, wolves, lynxes) and ritual objects (pottery jars and censers, wooden masks and sceptres, greenstone ornaments and beads, flint knives and a number of unprecedented gold pieces).

Fourteen of the gold pieces that were recently unearthed are now on display for the first time. Some of these objects were made with hammered, embossed and highly burnished gold sheets, while others were produced using the lost-wax technique. The first group of pieces comes from offering 123, found underneath the monolith of Tlaltecuhtli. They are representations of the pleated paper rosettes known as ixcatechimalli ('shield of the forehead') worn on the heads of gods and priests (fig. 92). These insignia were originally attached to personalized sacrificial knives with large fangs and eyes in the shape of a Maltese Cross – features associated with the four fire priests who
made offerings during the New Fire ceremony, as shown in plate 34 of the Codex Borbonicus (see cat. 73). The second group was discovered in offering 125, to the west of the monolith. It comprises one insignia in the form of a femur (omitl) and another in the form of a sectioned shell (ehecacozcatl) (figs 93 and 94). Both were associated with the personalized sacrificial knives depicting Quetzalcoatl (Venus at dawn), Xolotl (Venus at nightfall) and Pahtecatl (the moon god of pulque, an intoxicating drink made from agave), as seen in fols 61r, 62r and 55r of the Codex Magliabechiano, respectively. The third group also comes from offering 125, apart from a nose ornament that was found during operation 4 in the building rubble fill supporting the monolith. All these objects are insignia belonging to the gods of pulque: an ornament for the forehead, two rectangular ear-spools with a central jewelled pendant, a moon-shaped nose ornament (yacametzli) and six pear-shaped bells (figs 95, 96, 97 and 98). Their position inside the offering indicates that some of these ornaments were linked to sacrificial flint knives, while others were associated with the remains of a spider monkey (Ateles geofroyi) pelt, as shown in fol. 55r of the Codex Magliabechiano (fig. 91).
Golden representations of pleated paper rosettes, $6.3 \times 6.5 \times 0.05$ cm. Offering 123, artefacts 88 and 102, Templo Mayor (c. 1486–1502).

Golden insignia in the form of a femur, $6.2 \times 2.4 \times 0.03$ cm. Offering 125, artefact 215, Templo Mayor (c. 1486–1502).

Golden pectoral in the form of a sectioned shell, $2.9 \times 3.1 \times 0.03$ cm. Offering 125, artefact 68, Templo Mayor (c. 1486–1502).
Fig. 95 left
Golden ornament for the forehead, 5.6 × 6 × 0.03 cm. Offering 125, artefact 13, Templo Mayor (c. 1486–1502).

Fig. 96 centre, left and right
Golden rectangular ear-spools, 4.3 × 2.5 × 0.05 cm. Offering 125, artefacts 11–12, Templo Mayor (c. 1486–1502).

Fig. 97 centre, middle
Golden moon-shaped ornament, 1.5 × 1.9 × 0.04 cm. Offering 4, artefact 113, Templo Mayor (c. 1486–1502).

Fig. 98 left
Golden pear-shaped bells, 2 × 0.9 cm. Offering 125, artefacts 475–479 and 578, Templo Mayor (c. 1486–1502).
Introduction

1 Authored by native, mestizo and Spanish chroniclers. Among these early chroniclers are: Hernando Alvarado Tezozómitl, author of the Crónica mexicayotl, Cristóbal del Castillo, author of the Historia de la venida de los mexicanos, and the indigenous authors of the Codex Boturini and the Codex Azcatitlan.

2 Aztlan is sometimes depicted graphically (for example in the Codex Aubin in the British Museum) as an 'archetypal' island or ancestral place in 'a world ocean' with four 'house' glyphs marking the cardinal directions.

3 The name Tenochca applied to the citizens of Tenochtitlan itself.

4 Family documents from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, located in the Archivo de Indias in Seville, spell the name either as 'Motezuma' or 'Moctezuma'. Nahuatl scholars prefer 'Motecuhzoma' or 'Moteuczoma' and it is perhaps most correctly pronounced in Nahuatl phonemes as mo-teuc-cho-n-oma. They note that much of the early confusion stems from the inability in Spanish to capture some of the sounds of Nahuatl, as well as other difficulties of translation and comprehension. Problems occur in the orthographic transcription of his name into Spanish phonemes, especially crossovers between 'o' and 'u', and the spirant consonant-vowel combination that appears in the middle part of his name, yielding both - teuc- and - tecuh - in the sources.

5 Other variations include Motezuma, Motezucuahome or Motezcuhoma (Moteuczuhoma).

6 Following Moctezuma's death Cuilhuahua governed for 80 days only to die of smallpox and Cuahtemoc, who relinquished independence on 13 August 1521, was later killed in Híbaras.

Chapter 1 Family Histories

1 In the native Mexica-Nahuatl language this term defines the highest political authority; 'speaker or great lord' (Molina 1970, p. 140v); 'He who speaks well; hence, great lord, prince, ruler' (Siméon 1977, p. 674).


3 The versions of events that is most widely accepted among historians specializing in the history of the Mexica people, and that on which the present account is based, is that by Francisco Javier Clavijero in his Ancient History of Mexico published in 1781-82.

4 Alvarado Tezozómoc 1949, p. 25.

5 Brotherston 1995, pp. 46-47.

6 Códice Boturini 1964; Barlow 1949.

7 Caso 1927, p. 10. In fig. 3, as in the Codex Boturini, a rectangular block can be seen in the upper section, which we assume corresponds to the location of the deity.

8 Alvarado Tezozómoc 1949, pp. 15-16, took his account from Alonso Franco, a mestizo who died in 1602. Franco not only claimed that Moctezuma ruled as king in Aztlan New Mexico, but also that he had two sons: the eldest was destined to govern the Huastecos, and the youngest, Chalchihuitlatolli, instructed his people to leave Aztlan and embark on their migration.

9 Chimalpáhín 1998, p. 85, even affirms that the chieftain Moctezuma who ruled in Aztlan also held the position of huey tlatoani.

10 These are described as three men, Cuauhtocatl, Apanectli and Tezozocatl, and a woman, Chimalma. Chimalpáhín 1998, p. 183.

11 Chimalpáhín 1998, pp. 329-31. The chronicle of Chalco-Ancemacan noted that 'on the death of Tezcucuecatl, who led the Mexica for forty years ... the chieftain Huehue Huitzilihuitl ruled as the first tlatoani of the Mexica.'

12 Chimalpáhín 1998, p. 161. Chimalpáhín claims that he was the first tlatoani of the Mexica, even though officially, in the sequence of governors of Tenochtitlan, he links this investiture with Acamapichtli.


14 Códice Boturini 1964. In the lower section of plate 20, sexual union is expressed graphically with the image of the couple guiding a final journey through their footprints.

15 Durán 1995, pp. 84-87. This episode describes the confrontation between the Culhua under the leadership of Achitometl and the Mexica, following the sacrifice of Achitometl's daughter with the image of the couple guiding a final journey through their footprints.

16 In the pictographs of this symbolic scene, a bird sometimes replaces the snake; see fol. 25v of the Codex Aubin. Lehmann and Kutscher 1981, p. 240.

17 Anales de Tlatelolco 1948, p. 51. According to the Tlatelolca, this happened the other way round; after the foundation of this city, Tenoch founded Tlentechiltzin on an adjacent island.

18 Durán 1995, vol. I, p. 99. '...fearing his kingdom would be left without an heir, the councillors took his advice and determined that each of them should give him one of their daughters, for him to have as his wives, to bear him heirs to his kingdom and successors.'

19 A crown, mitre or diadem adorned with precious stones. Siméon 1997, p. 770.

20 A crown, similar to a mitre, used for coronations. It was tall and ended in a point in the middle of the forehead; the back section hung down the neck. Siméon 1997, p. 126.

21 Sahagún 1993, fols 53r-52r. Significantly, after the 52-year ceremony had been held in year 1 Rabbit, but since this sign was now considered unlucky, it was moved to year 2 Reed.


Chapter 4 Moctezuma and the renewal of nature
1 Zantwijk 1963.
3 Sahagún 1950–82, Book 1, p. 9.

Chapter 5 Moctezuma’s military and economic rule
1 Durán 1992, pp. 405.
6 Coe and Coe 1996, p. 22.
8 Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vol. 3, fol. 64r and passim.

Chapter 6 The overthrow of Moctezuma and his empire
1 León-Portilla 1962, p. 13.
2 Lockhart 1993, pp. 6, 18–19.
9 Carpentier 1975, p. 11.

Chapter 7 The rebirth of ancient Mexico
1 Paz 1990, p. 4.
3 The indispensable source remains Icazbalceta 1954, passim.
4 Benavente 1971, p. 31; see also León-Portilla 2003, pp. 117–43.
8 Torquemada 1975–83, Vol. 7 consists of editorial commentary and analysis of sources.
12 Ibid., pp. 408–21.
16 On Kircher see Evans 1979, pp. 433–42.
19 Raynal 1798, see vol. II, p. 381, where Moctezuma is described as ‘sunk in a state of effeminacy and indolence’; on Mexico City see vol. II, p. 398.
21 Clavigero 1664, pp. xvii, xxi, xxx. See also Ronan 1977, passim.
23 Ibi., see his Third, Fourth and Fifth Dissertations, pp. 454–524.
24 León y Gama 1787, unpaginated introduction.
25 Lemoine Villacañas 1665, pp. 368–69.
26 Tena Ramírez 1967, pp. 31–35.
32 Riva Palacio 1884–89. Chavero asserted that the Nahua descended from Basques who had migrated from Europe via Atlantis, whereas the Mayas and Otomis derived from Chinese migration. See vol. I, pp. 62–73.

Chapter 8 Rethinking Moctezuma
1 Fria 1900, 1st series, nos 12, 17 and 28.
2 Fria and Martínez 1925.
3 See further Martínez 1988 and Rueda Smithers 1993.
4 Ce Acatl was the sacred calendar name of Quetzalcoatl.
5 Uchman 1972, p. 12.
9 Carpenter 1975, p. 11.
10 Nogués 1996.

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Antonio de Solís, Istorya della conquista del Messico, della popolazione, e de' progressi nell'America Settentrionale conosciuta sotto il nome di Nuova Spagna, Brussels 1794
Solís Olguín 1976
Felipe Solís Olguín, La escultura de Santa Cecilia Acatitlán, Mexico City 1976
Solís Olguín 1990
MOCTEZUMA

AZTEC RULER

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Half title: Moctezuma’s name glyph from the Codex Mendoza (detail of fig. 52)
Frontispiece: portrait of Moctezuma (detail of cat. 130)
Opposite: tripod plate (see cat. 55)
p. 9: Moctezuma travels to meet Cortés (detail of cat. 111).
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Acknowledgements

This project originated in an innovative collaboration between Mexico and the British Museum when, in January 2007, Mexican Ambassador Juan José Bremer and Director Neil MacGregor agreed that ‘Moctezuma’ would make a fitting finale for the Museum’s exhibition series on renowned rulers.

From its inception the initiative enjoyed a remarkable spirit of collegial goodwill. In July 2007 our three principal Mexican curatorial colleagues Eduardo Matos, Leonardo López and Felipe Solís were invited to join John Elliott, David Brading, Hugh Thomas and Felipe Fernández-Armesto in London. All contributed thoughtfully to a lively seminar at the British Museum that did much to stimulate our ideas about how the life of the enigmatic and complex figure of Moctezuma II might be addressed afresh. Subsequent curatorial meetings in Mexico City helped advance our thinking about the themes and content of the exhibition. In particular Leonardo López Luján’s deep knowledge of the subject and extraordinary generosity have made telling contributions at every turn in the development of the exhibition and the book. It has been a singular privilege to renew our collaboration with such an outstandingly gifted scholar and friend.

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