

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


LINDEN-MUSEUM STUTTGART
Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde

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TARASCAN

OTOMI



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MIXTEC

YOPÍ

ZAPOTEC

Gulf of Mexico

MAYA

xoconochco

Pacific Ocean

Contents

Forewords			
8 Winfried Kretschmann Words of Welcome	63 Doris Kurella The Political Economy in the Basin of Mexico	141 Ludo Snijders Toltecayotl, the Aztec Artisans	237 Raúl Barrera Rodríguez The Huei Tzompantli, the Ball Game and the Temple of Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl A Trilogy of the Latest Discoveries
9 ##### Vorwort INAH		149 Gerard van Bussel Three Works of Ancient Mexican Feather Art in Vienna	
12 Inés de Castro Preface and Acknowledgements	69 Ehrentraud Bayer Geography, Ecology, Cultivated Plants and Nutritional Crops	155 Inés de Castro Xolotl or Quetzalcoatl?	255 Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez Sacrifice in Ancient Mexico
Introduction	79 Manuel Aguilar-Moreno Mexica-Aztec Society and Government	163 Inés de Castro Two Aztec Feathered Shields from the Württemberg Art Room	267 Ximena Chávez Balderas Bioarchaeology at the Sacred Precinct of Tenochtitlan
17 Eduardo Matos Moctezuma Introduction	95 Frances F. Berdan Markets, Merchants and Tribute in the Aztec Empire		
25 Ivonne Athie Islas Meso-America			273 Raul Macuil Martínez Nican tīstoque! ("Here we are!")
The Sources			
33 Martin Berger The Sources	109 Martin Berger The Migration of the Mexica and the Founding of Tenochtitlan	173 Leonardo López Luján The Sacred Precinct of Tenochtitlan	283 Catalogue
37 Leonardo López Luján The Archaeology of Tenochtitlan	117 Barbara E. Mundy Tenochtitlan: Layout, Planning and Urban Life	183 Guilhem Olivier The Foundational Myths of the Aztecs	346 Bibliography
47 Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez Mexican Codices: An Introduction	125 Susan Toby Evans The Aztec Palace	193 Araceli Rojas Martínez Gracida The 260-day Calendar	356 List of Authors
55 Felix Hinz The Written Sources on the Aztec Culture and the Spanish Conquest	131 Justyna Olko Aztec Rule and Insignia	203 Leonardo López Luján The Templo Mayor	358 Colophon
		227 Leonardo López Luján The House of Eagles	



The Sacred Precinct



Leonardo López Luján

The Sacred Precinct of Tenochtitlan

The Heart of the Island

The Sacred Precinct of Tenochtitlan was the ultimate centre of divine propitiation and one of the most important ritual grounds in Meso-American history. Clearly separated from the secular space of the city, it was framed on its four sides by a wide rectangular platform with alternate vertical walls, inclined planes and staircases on its internal and external faces. This platform, which would have measured 340 metres from north to south and 360 metres from east to west, was interrupted at three or four intervals to form the main entrance gates. The interior space, measuring more than 12 hectares, was occupied by different types of buildings: *teocalli* (pyramids of all sizes, which were always crowned by chapels), *momoztli* (small ritual platforms without roofed spaces), priestly houses and oratories (enclosures for the fasting and penitence of dignitaries), *calmecac* (temple schools for nobles), *tlachtli* (ball game courts), *tzompantli* (palisades where the skulls of the sacrificed were displayed), *tlacochcalco* (armories where weapons acquired sacred power), *yopilcalco* (temples where the foreign sovereigns who came to witness the great ceremonies stayed), ritual monoliths such as *temalacatl*, *techcatl*, and *cuauhxicalli* (for the sacrifice of animals and human beings, and the subsequent offering of their blood and hearts), springs and other replicas of the sacred geography (such as a small arid environment), all of which were separated from by wide squares or smaller courtyards (Marquina 1960; Lupo et.al., 2006; Nichols and Rodríguez Alegría 2019).

Historical data concerning the number of buildings within the Sacred Precinct vary greatly from one source to another. Captain general Hernán Cortés told of “forty very tall and well-wrought towers”, whilst Franciscan friar Toribio de Benavente recalls 12 or 15 *teocalli* and chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo recalls more than 60 *cus* (various types of religious buildings). Dominican friar Diego Durán signals that there were eight or nine groups of temple buildings, each with its own courtyard and staircase, distinguished by roof ornaments and fitted out with lodgings for ministers. In contrast, Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún’s indigenous informants describe 78 buildings of a variety of sizes and functions.

Fig. 1 ▲
The ruins of the
Templo Mayor in the
heart of Mexico City
Photo: Inés de Castro

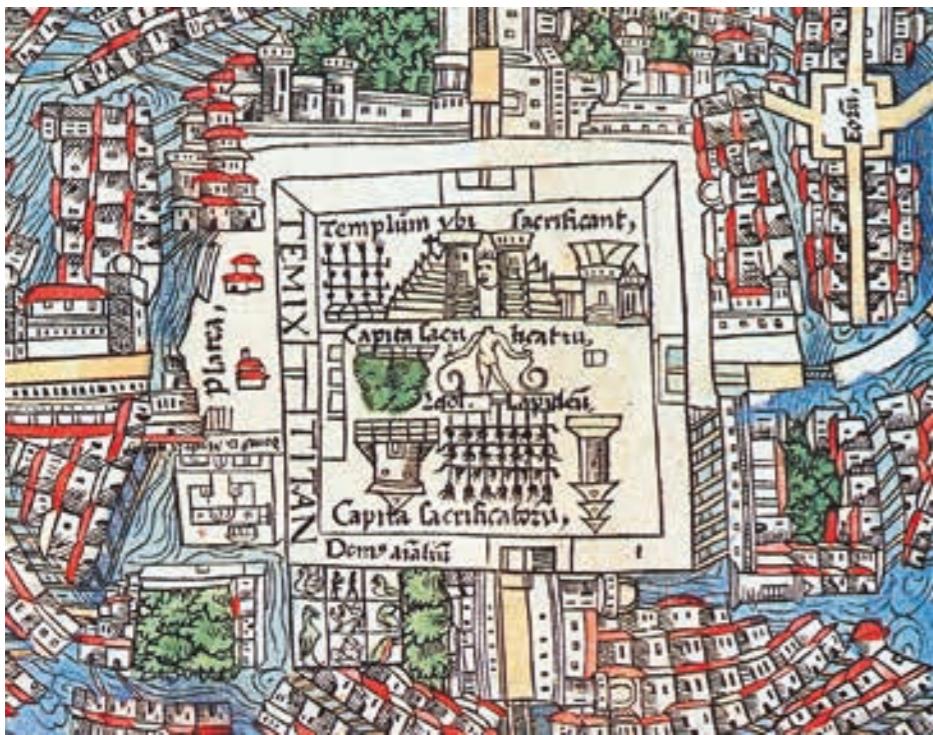


Fig. 2

The main temples
The Sacred Precinct of
Tenochtitlan, detail of the
map ascribed to Hernán
Cortés, published in 1524
in Nuremberg

The main temples

In the eastern sector of the Sacred Precinct, with its main façade facing west, was the Huei Teocalli or “Templo Mayor”. This was a vast pyramid that, at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards, had 113 or 114 steps. At its summit were two chapels: one dedicated to the god of sun and war, Huitzilopochtli, in the southern half, and one dedicated to the worship of the god of rain and earthly fertility, Tlaloc, in the northern half (Matos Moctezuma 1988; López Austin und López Luján 2009). The famous Coacalco (“Place of the Meeting House”) was located in the temple of Huitzilopochtli. According to Sahagún’s indigenous informants, this was “a room with grilles like a prison. Here [dwelt] the gods of cities which, in all places which the Mexicans overran, were held captive.” This building existed as a consequence of the Mexica practice of stripping the defeated of their divine strength: after setting fire to their temples as a sign of victory, the victorious armies returned jubilantly to Tenochtitlan, carrying the captured cult effigies on their backs.

Close to the Templo Mayor, temples to other important divinities were constructed, which radiated the supernatural powers that gave the Mexica people the strength and protection necessary to wage war against far-flung settlements. The most notable of these temples are, according to Jesuit priest

Joseph de Acosta, an 80-step pyramid in honour of the lord of destiny, Tezcatlipoca, a “very tall and very beautifully built” building, and a 60-step temple consecrated to the wind god, Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, in the form of a truncated cone “because of the way the wind swirls around the sky, they made this a round temple”, the entrance of which was “through a door built like the mouth of a snake and painted devilishly”. The foundations of these two constructions have been uncovered recently, the first under the Palace of the Archbishopric and the second under the modern Hotel Catedral.

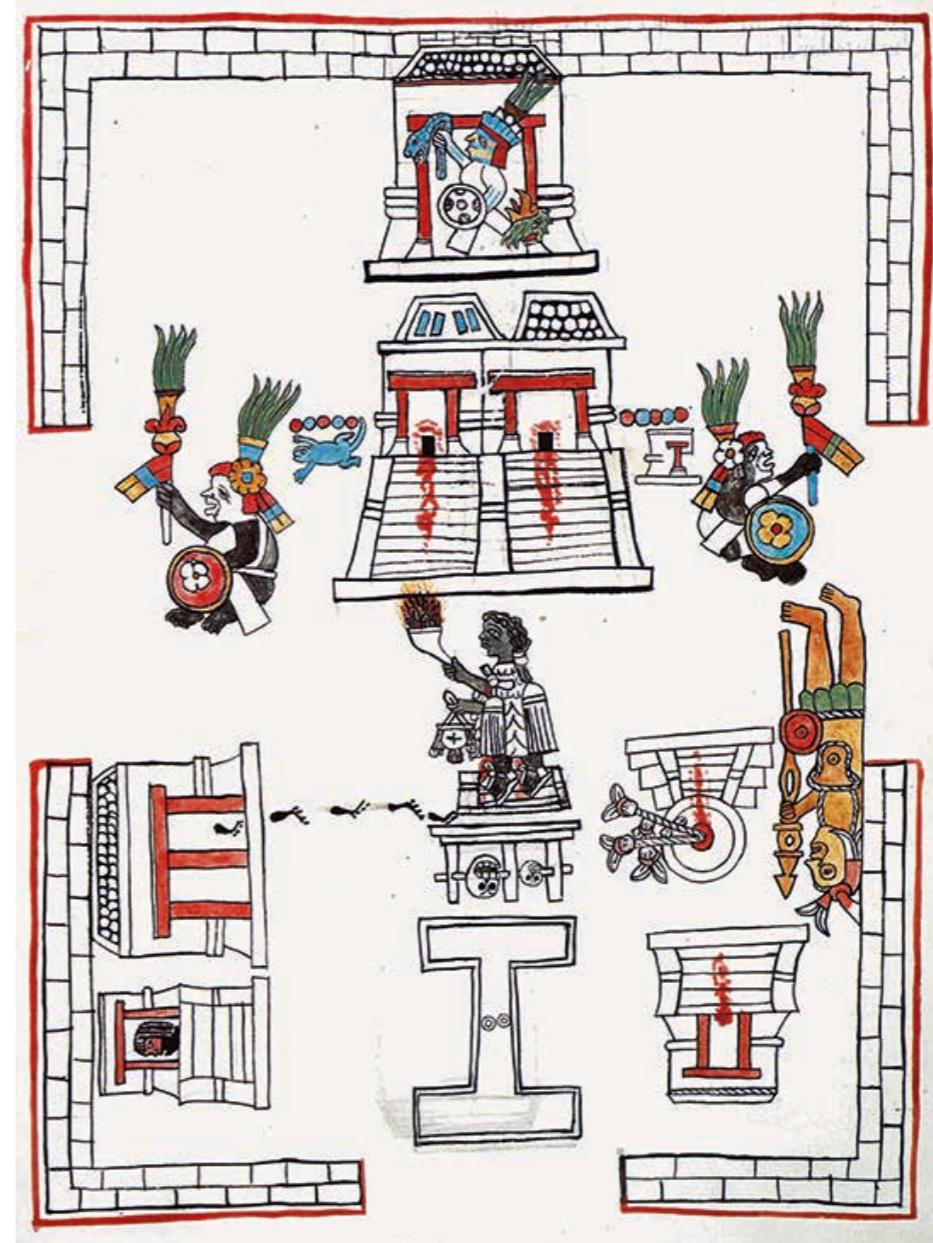


Fig. 3

The Sacred Precinct of
Tenochtitlan, *Primeros
Memoriales*, Sahagún 1999

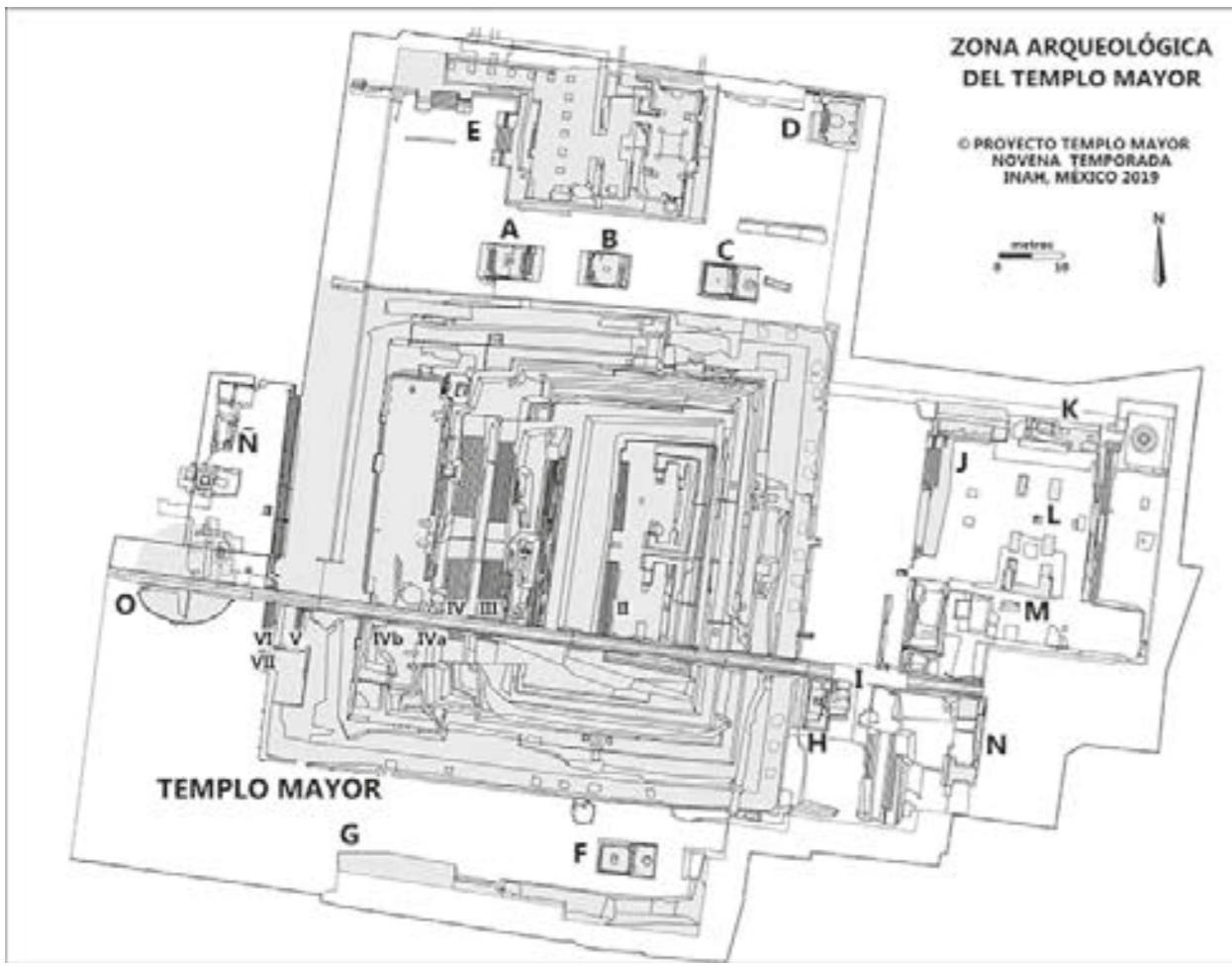


Fig. 4
This map shows the Templo Mayor Archaeological Zone, excavated by the Proyecto Templo Mayor between 1978 and 2019 and covering 1.29 hectares.

With the kind permission of the Proyecto Templo Mayor
Preparation and drawing:
Michelle De Anda, Saburo Sugiyama and Leonardo López Luján

Thanks to the work of archaeologists, we now know that there were several buildings of a markedly archaic style, whose design and decoration evoked the style of two renowned civilisations that had already disappeared: Teotihuacan (100–600 AD) and Tula (950–1150 AD) (López Luján 2013). First of all, four neo-Teotihuacan shrines have been exhumed, three of which are now known as the “Red Temples”, dedicated to Xochipilli-Macuilxochitl, god of the sun, music and dance. The mural paintings, religious iconography and symbols of the Sun found within these temples, as well as their orientation towards dawn and the offerings of musical instruments found within them, clearly allude to the beginning of a new era in the mythical Teotihuacan, that is, the creation of the Fifth Sun. Secondly, two neo-Toltec porticoed enclosures have also been discovered. One of these is the *Huei Calmecac* associated with the temple of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, which was a school for nobles whose patron god was Quetzalcoatl, the legendary ruler of Tula. The other building

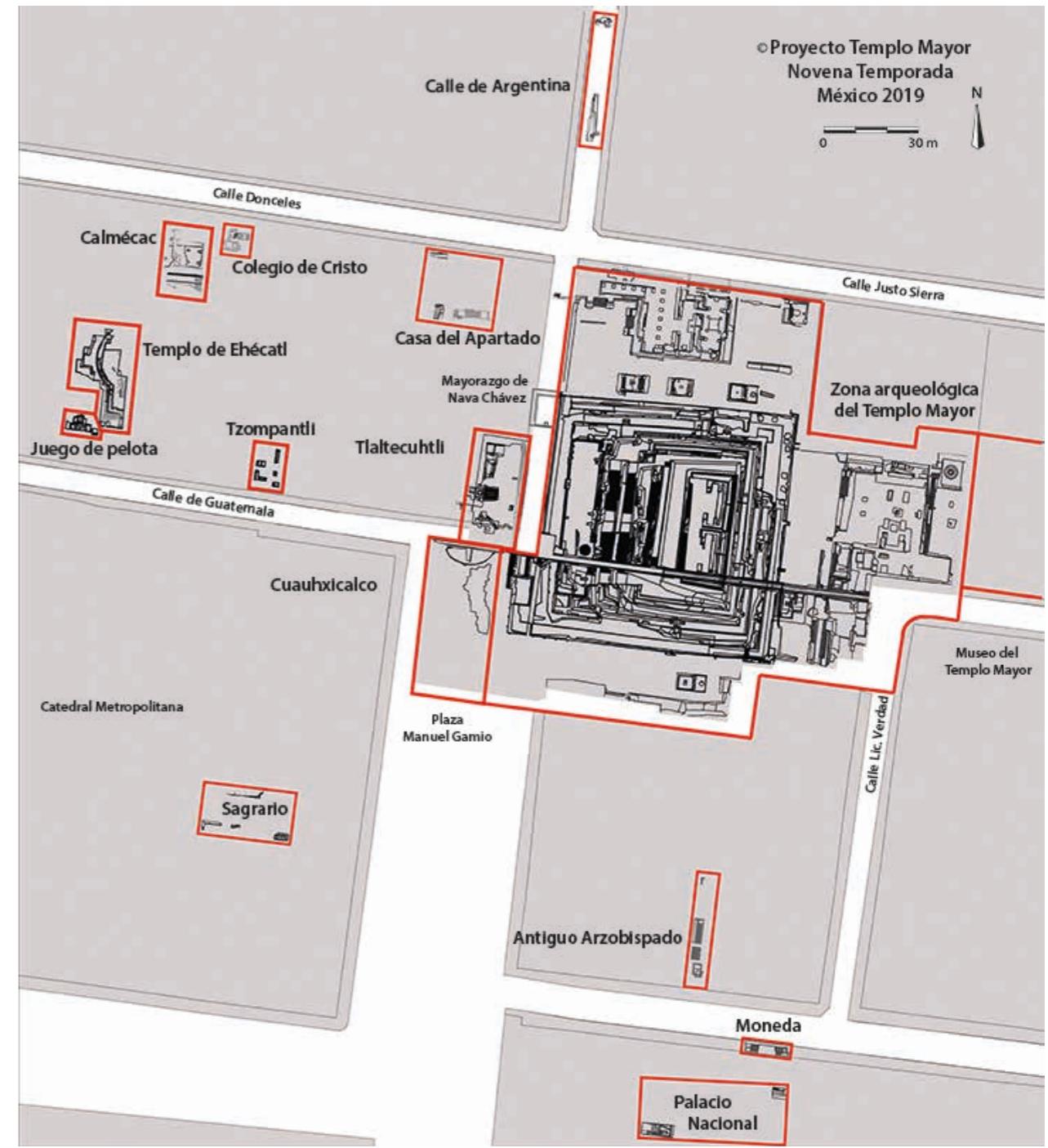


Fig. 5
This map shows the heart of Mexico City's historical district with the Mexica buildings excavated by the Proyecto Templo Mayor, by the Programa de Arqueología Urbana, and by other older archaeological projects.

With the kind permission of the Proyecto Templo Mayor
Preparation and drawing: Michelle De Anda, Saburo Sugiyama and Leonardo López Luján



Fig. 6
Building B, related to
Mictlan, the ninth level of
the Underworld.

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

was named the House of Eagles by archaeologists and was the ritual ground for the handing over of power from the deceased *tlatoani* (sovereign) to his newly elected successor.

Large Public Gatherings

According to Cortés, the Sacred Precinct could fit an entire village of 500 Spanish inhabitants inside it, while soldier Andrés de Tapia reduces this figure to 400. Historian Francisco López de Gómara, meanwhile, claimed that within this site there were about 5,000 people at all times, who performed a variety of services and whose principal mission was to preserve order and harmony within this space. In contrast, Acosta recalled that on holy days, between 8,000 and 10,000 individuals would congregate inside these grounds to rejoice in dance (López Austin and López Luján 2017).

Those attending the ceremonies ranged from large crowds of locals to small and very select groups of dignitaries from other cities. Local crowds were not only made up of the inhabitants of the island, but also those of the entire region, as was stated in descriptions of the “gladiatorial” combat between the sacrificial victim and Mexica warriors, or the distribution of food that the *tlatoani* made to the poor during eight days of the twenty-day period known as *Huei tecuhilhuitl*. As far as foreign dignitaries were concerned, it can be assumed that only those from allied political entities came to Tenochtitlan; however, historical sources make it clear that the Mexica *tlatoani* also invited their rivals; they were hidden away behind lattices so that they could witness the ritual spectacles without their presence being noticed by the people. This practice was evidently motivated by the desire to deter and intimidate enemy spectators, as it was not uncommon for them to witness the sacrifice of their own warriors who had been captured in battle (López Austin and López Luján 2001; Berdan 2014).

Fig. 7
Building C or “Red Temple
North”

With the kind permission of
the Proyecto Templo Mayor
Architectural reconstruction
and colouring: Michelle De
Anda and Fernando Carrizosa

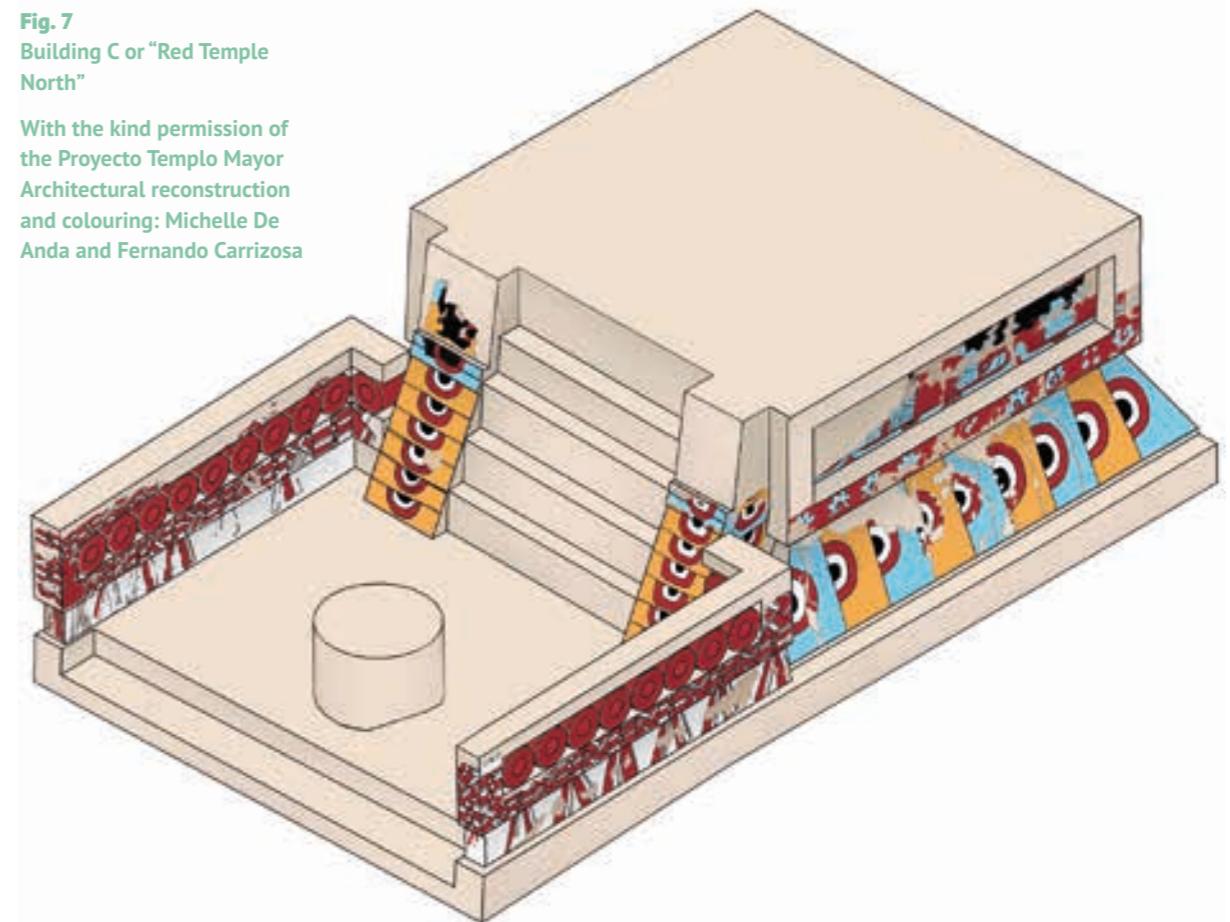




Fig. 8
Large stone slab in the form
of a sacrificial knife, part of
the *ofrenda* 78, found in the
Templo Rojo Sur

Museo Templo Mayor, Mexico
City, D.R. Secretaría de
Cultura – INAH (cat. 115b)

The state cult was endorsed by the supreme government and its purpose was to appease important gods and goddesses such as Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc, Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, Xipe Totec, Cihuacoatl and Chicomecoatl in order to achieve the well-being of all the inhabitants of the city and its dependent communities, as well as military and agricultural success. This cult was largely governed by the calendar, mainly the *xiuhpohualli* (solar cycle of 365 days organised into 18 twenty-day periods plus five unlucky days).

The liturgy



Beyond the ceremonies dictated by the calendar, the state protocol ordered lavish rituals in the sacred precinct for royal and noble funeral rites, the enthronement of rulers, the recognition of the newly elected sovereigns belonging to the Triple Alliance, the arrival of triumphant armies and the procession of captives who would become victims for the gods. In addition, both the revealing of the sacrificial monoliths and the construction and continuous expansion of the pyramid temples called for sumptuous festivals, ritual burnings and the burial of rich offerings. Lastly, ceremonies were also performed in these sacred grounds in which the people asked for an end to the great misfortunes with which the gods punished human beings, namely agricultural catastrophes, famines and epidemics (López Luján 2018). ■

Fig. 9
Stone of Tizoc, used as an
altar stone during the
festival of Tlacaxipehualitzli
With the kind permission of
the Proyecto Templo Mayor
Photo: Mirsa Islas

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