

AZTECS



# AZTECS

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 Templo Mayor

### History and archaeology

Prior to 1978 there was relatively little structured archaeological information about Tenochtitlan. Compared to Mayan, Zapotec and Teotihuacan archaeology, there were few material vestiges of Mexica culture and only sparse information regarding the subsoil layers in which they had been uncovered. Of course, the main obstacle that has limited – and continues to limit – archaeological knowledge of the illustrious pre-Hispanic capital lies in the buildings from the colonial and independent periods that rest atop its ancient ruins (López Luján 2015, 2018). Only in exceptional circumstances and in very small areas of modern Mexico City has it been possible to shed light on small portions of ancient Tenochtitlan (see the article on the archaeology of Tenochtitlan in this catalogue). This problem is compounded by the fact that a large part of the explorations prior to 1978 took place as a result of unexpected discoveries during urban works. Such explorations were often limited to the hasty recovery of some of the most exceptional Mexica works of art, usually in the form of large-scale sculptures, and this prevented detailed archaeological recording.

There was, however, a well-rounded picture of Mexica society and of the general physiognomy of Tenochtitlan, thanks to the innumerable historical sources from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in obvious contrast to the meagre pictographic and written information available on the Maya, the Zapotec and, above all, the Teotihuacan people. For example, extensive information abounds in the codices of local artists regarding the main pyramid of the Mexica capital, known as Huei Teocalli or the “Templo Mayor”: in the stories of the indigenous sages written in Latin, Nahuatl and even in Spanish in the chronicles of the Spanish conquistadors, who bore eyewitness to the pyramid when it was in use; in the accounts of Franciscan, Dominican and Jesuit friars, often based on the indigenous tradition; and even in the fantastic publications – with outlandish illustrations – which were written in Europe by people who had never set foot on the American continent.

**Fig. 1** ◀  
The construction phases  
of the Templo Mayor  
Phase I, 1325–1375  
Phase II, 1375–1427  
Phase III, 1427–1440  
Phase IVa, 1440–1469  
Phase IVb, 1469–1481  
Phase V, 1481–1486  
Phase VI, 1486–1502  
Phase VII, 1502–1520

Diagram: [www.latin-americanstudies.org](http://www.latin-americanstudies.org)

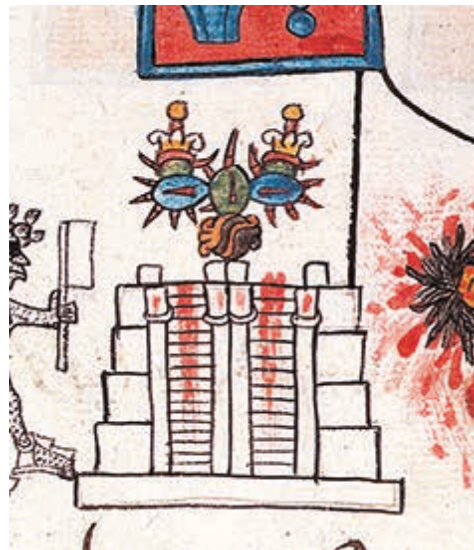


Fig. 2  
Drawing showing a reconstruction of the Templo Mayor  
in the heart of Mexico City

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Drawing of the reconstruction: Michelle De Anda



In this sense, it can be said that no other monument in ancient Mexico attracted as much attention among both the Mexica and foreigners as the Templo Mayor. As a consequence, we now have a unique documentary archive of practically its entire history, from the very moment of its foundation, through its continuous extensions and architectural modifications, to its destruction and complete dismantling. These written accounts also provide insight into the construction of the pyramid and the physiognomy of the two chapels that crowned it; the number of steps from the base and the top; its structural and decorative elements; its religious imagery and ritual furniture; and the wide variety of ceremonies – religious and political, scheduled or otherwise, public or private – that it housed.



While it is true that the archaeological discovery of the Templo Mayor dates back to 1914 and is attributable to the Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, it was not until the period between 1978 and 1982 that another famed Mexican, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, and his team completely liberated the pyramid from the rubble that had covered it for centuries (Broda et al. 1987; Matos Moctezuma 1988). Since then and by means of the valuable combination of historical and archaeological testimonies we know that, at the time of the arrival of the Europeans, this monument measured exactly 78 metres at its base from north to south and 83.6 metres from east to west, while it had around 45 metres in height, like the Pyramid of the Moon in Teotihuacan and the Column of Independence (nicknamed “The Angel”) in the modern Paseo

de la Reforma in Mexico City. It was also discovered that this architectural complex consisted of a quadrangular platform, on which stood a pyramid with four superimposed bodies, which served as a base for two chapels: the southern one dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, god of the sun and war, and the northern one dedicated to the worship of Tlaloc, god of the rain and earth (López Austin and López Luján 2009). From ground level, these chapels were reached by a double staircase on the western façade, flanked by large snake heads carved in basalt.

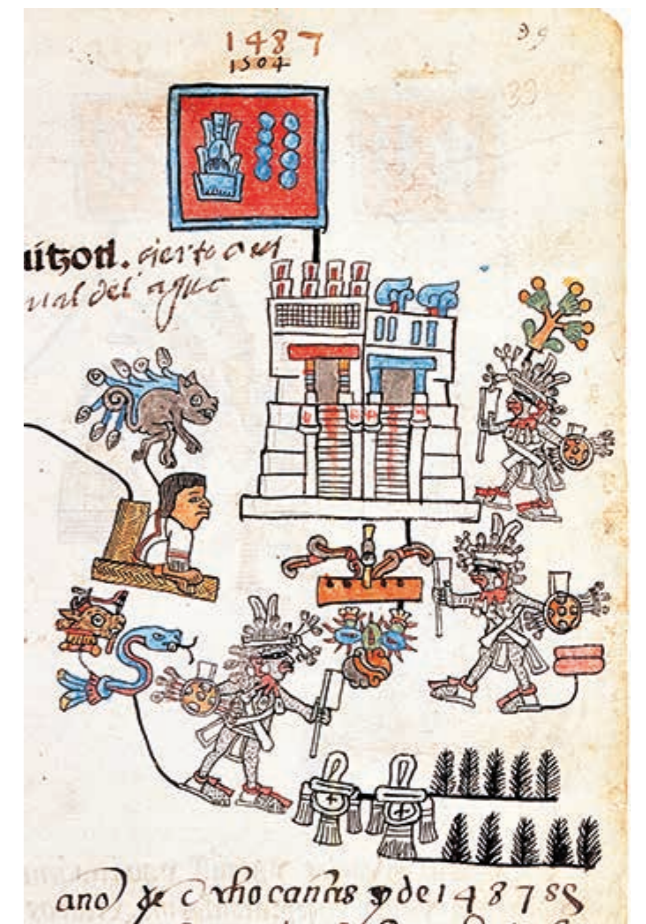
**Figs. 3,4,5**  
Extension of the Templo Mayor, begun by Tizoc and finished and inaugurated by Ahuizotl with the blood of war captives.

Bibliothèque nationale de France  
Codex Telleriano-Remensis.

### The materials of the building

The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, like many of the Meso-American pyramids, is a solid mass of stone, earth, limestone, sand and wood. It was principally built from extrusive igneous rocks as the result of a deliberate decision on the part of its architects, but also due to two factors worthy of consideration (López Austin and López Luján 2009). Firstly, the Basin of Mexico had been the site of significant volcanic activity in its recent past and as a consequence there were no outcrops of sedimentary or metamorphic rocks. And secondly, pre-Hispanic civilisations lacked draught animals, and never implemented the mechanised use of the wheel. It is logical to suppose that the combination of these factors inhibited the transfer of allochthonous rocks – especially large blocks – from regions that were not only distant, but also located on the other side of the high mountains that surround the Basin.

To date five types of rocks have been found during excavations. The first of these is dense grey and black basalts (*metlatetl*), ideal for building foundations, load-bearing walls, staircases and floors for exteriors. Next is light but highly resistant volcanic slag (*tezontli*), which is reddish, violet or blackish in colour and forms part of the building’s fillings and façades; it is also found in the staircases, stucco floors, paving stones and walls. Thirdly, there is the pale pinkish lamprobolite andesites (*tenayocattetl*), whose pseudostratification makes it easy to obtain flat faces which can be used to make magnificent floor slabs, corner stones, covering ashlar and drains. Pyroxene andesites (*iztapaltetl*) are grey or off-white, dense stones with flat and smooth faces used for floors, foundation templates, façade ties and drains. And finally there is limestone (*tetizatl*), a sedimentary rock of whitish, grey, rose and ochre tones. To date, these stones have only been detected on the platform of stage IVa of the Templo Mayor, where they were used in the luxurious tile floors of two small rooms that flank the steps leading to the upper chapels. Unlike the other rocks, these were brought from far-off sources located in what is now the state of Puebla.



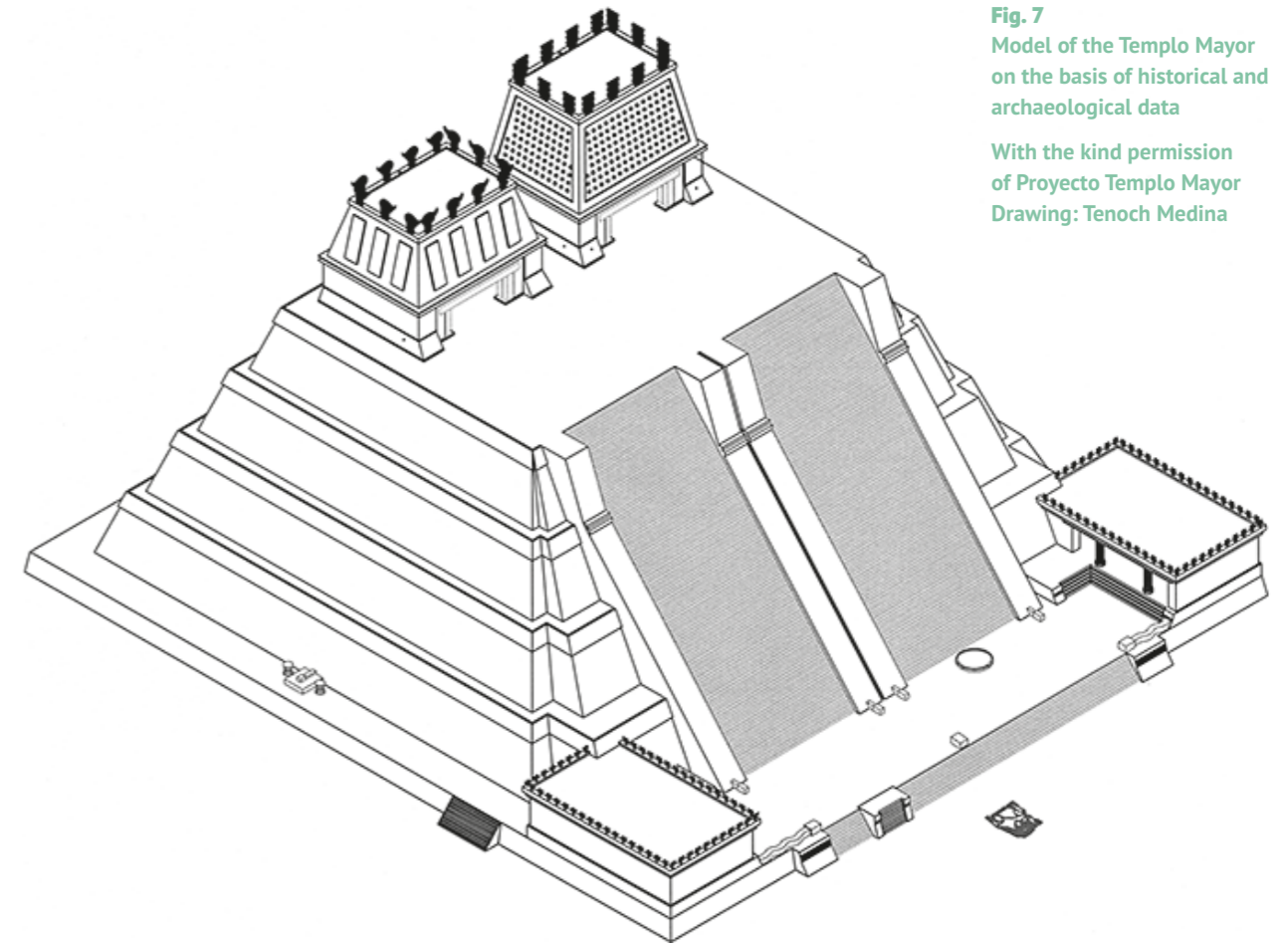


**Fig. 6**  
The Templo Mayor with the chapels for Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli, *Codex Durán*  
Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid

Soil formed the basic component of the construction fillings. It is characterised by a clay-like texture and dark brown colour resulting from its high content of organic matter. Evidence indicates that the soil was obtained from the shallow beds of the lake or in the swampy zones along its shores. In fact, when examining the botanical content of the various fillings we can observe a clear predominance of seeds belonging to species found in lake and marsh habitats. It was also possible to identify significant concentrations of fish scales and freshwater snails.

Sand and lime were also essential to construction. They were used to make plaster and stucco coverings for floors, walls and staircases of all stages of the building, and they also served as ingredients for the preparation of concrete and mortar (Miriello et al. 2011). The sand used, given its volcanic origin, was probably obtained from any of the numerous deposits in the Basin of

Mexico. In contrast, limestone had to be imported from more remote locations. Historical sources and chemical analyses point to the region of Tula, in what is now the state of Hidalgo. Lastly, wood was used to make stakes for the foundations, door posts and lintels, as well as beams, planks and roof rafters. We know from botanical analyses that the Mexica also made use of pine, cedar and willow trees from the cold and temperate forests, located between 2,350 and 4,000 metres above sea level within the Basin.



**Fig. 7**  
Model of the Templo Mayor on the basis of historical and archaeological data  
With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Drawing: Tenoch Medina

### A tireless activity

The geological formations and forests where these building materials could be found extended almost to the shores of the lake system surrounding the island of Tenochtitlan, which made it relatively easy to exploit them. Despite this, the Mexica forced all the riverside towns to participate in obtaining and transporting supplies for the expansion of their pyramidal temples. Among them were the Chalca, who had to travel the longest distance, as their territory was located around 38 kilometres from the Mexica capital. This distance does not seem excessive if we consider that for most of their journey the



**Fig. 8**  
Map of the Basin of Mexico with the sites of the building materials which were used for the Templo Mayor and other temples in Tenochtitlan

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Drawing: Jaime Torres



people of Chalco were not carrying heavy loads on their shoulders, as almost all transportation was done by canoe. This mode of transport was between forty and fifty times more efficient than *tlamamaque* or human carriers. According to fairly reliable calculations based on historical, ethnographic and experimental data, a man capable of carrying a maximum load of 23 kilograms over the course of a day on his back was able to transport up to 1,200 kilograms in a canoe. In addition, it must be considered that people advanced

at the same speed both on foot and by canoe, covering between 2.6 and 3.5 kilometres per hour. Accordingly, the transportation of more than a tonne of materials from Chalco to Tenochtitlan by boat would take just ten hours (López Luján et al. 2003).

In light of the vestiges excavated by the Templo Mayor Project, it is evident that the main pyramid of Tenochtitlan was subject to constant renovation from its erection in the fourteenth century to its destruction in the sixteenth century. This is demonstrated by the discovery of at least seven complete extensions, corresponding to its four façades (stages I–VII); six partial extensions of only of the main façade or the northern façade (stages IIa, IIb, IIc, IIIa, IVa and IVb); a complete renovation of the platform staircase (stage VIa); multiple re-levellings of the upper façades of some pyramidal structures; and numerous minor refurbishments of the lateral façades (López Austin and López Luján 2009). We also know that when each of these stages was underway, on more than one occasion the level of the platform and also the floor height of the surrounding square were raised.

<i>Etapa</i>	<i>Matos Moctezuma</i>	<i>Umberger</i>
II-IIc	1375-1427 Acamapichtli Huitzilihuitl Chimalpopoca	
III	1427-1440 Itzcóatl	
IV	1440-1469	1440-1469 Motecuhzoma I
IVa	Motecuhzoma I	
IVb	1469-1481 Axayácatl	Motecuhzoma I
V	1481-1486 Tízoc	1469-1481 Axayácatl
VI	1486-1502 Ahuítzotl	1481-1502 Tízoc Ahuítzotl
VII	1502-1520 Motecuhzoma II	

**Fig. 9**  
Chronology of the construction phases of the Templo Mayor  
With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Plate: Alfredo Lopez Austin and Leonardo López Luján

**Fig. 10** ▶ The binary division of the sculptures at the Templo Mayor: in the middle of the south side, which is dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, the serpents are ochre-coloured and some are feathered, a symbol of the sky. In the middle of the north side, which is dedicated to Tlaloc, the serpents are blue and some show symbols of jade beads, symbols of water droplets. In fact, other alludes to the Dry season of the year and blue-green to the Rainy season.

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

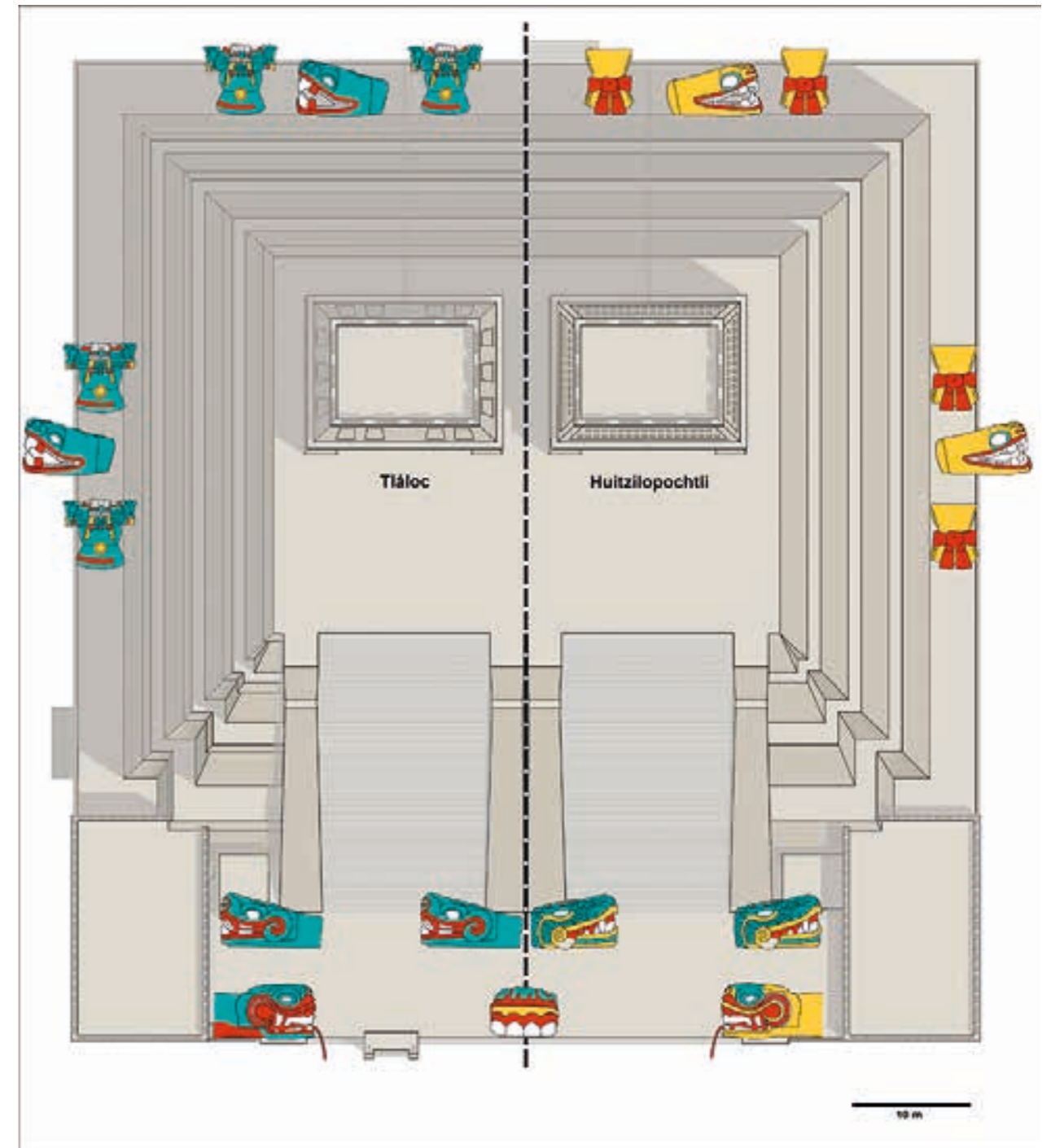
Undoubtedly, there were many different reasons for this exaggerated constructive fervour recorded in the relatively short period of 150 years. One such reason was the natural phenomena such as earthquakes, floods and land subsidence that the pyramid was subject to as a result of its location on a lake bed containing compressible clays. Some researchers have also suggested that the Templo Mayor was renovated every 52 years; however, there are few facts to support this theory. Other more plausible theories set forth that with each enlargement, successive Mexica sovereigns sought to leave their personal mark on history.

However, most of the expansions recorded in historical sources seem to be the direct result of an expansionist policy that began when Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina took power in 1440 and ended with the Spanish conquest (López Luján et al. 2003). A careful reading of the work of the indigenous chronicler Hernando Alvarado Tezozómoc reveals an important factor relating to these expansions: each enlargement was inaugurated with the blood of warriors from a kingdom conquered solely for the celebration. Thus, the new building symbolised, celebrated and sanctified the inclusion of new tributaries within the sphere of the Mexica Empire. In exceptional circumstances in which the troops of the Triple Alliance (made up of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan) failed to conquer an independent settlement – as was the case in the unsuccessful expedition of King Axayacatl to Tarascan lands – the celebration was postponed until a successful conquest had taken place. In other words, the Templo Mayor grew at the same rate as the empire expanded. This helps explain why it grew 13 times in such a short time.

### Stage of mythical re-enactment

Like many other pyramids in pre-Hispanic Mexico, the Templo Mayor emulates a sacred mountain. In this specific case it evokes Mount Coatepetl, a mythical place where the dramatic birth of the god Huitzilopochtli took place. Fortunately, several versions of this fantastical event have survived to the present day, the most complete and well-known of which is included in the *Florentine Codex* of friar Bernardino de Sahagún and his indigenous informants (Matos Moctezuma 1988; López Austin and López Luján 2009). The basic story goes like this:

It all began with a woman called Coatlicue performing her daily penance at the top of Mount Coatepetl, the “Hill of the Serpents”. One day, when she was sweeping, she noticed a feather fall right in front of her eyes. Without hesitating, she grasped hold of it and used it to touch her stomach, an act that



resulted in a miraculous pregnancy. Shortly afterwards, Coyolxauhqui and the Centzonhuitznahuah, the sons of Coatlicue, learned of this inexplicable transgression and, feeling that their honour had been besmirched, decided to go and kill their mother.

They set out for Coatepetl, passing through the sites of Tzompantitlan, Coaxalpan, Apetlac, and then reaching the slope of the hill and finally its summit. When they reached their mother, they witnessed the birth of their brother Huitzilopochtli, who emerged from his mother's womb as a fully armed young man ready to fight them. He immediately gouged a magic *xiuhcoatl* or fire serpent into the torso of his sister, Coyolxauhqui, and then decapitated her with it and threw her to the foot of the hill, where she fell inert and her body shattered into pieces. Huitzilopochtli's exploits came to an end when he attacked his brothers and chased them away towards the sky.

More than a century ago, the different versions of this story were analysed by the German sage Eduard Seler, who astutely identified Huitzilopochtli as the young rising Sun, Coyolxauhqui as the Moon and the Centzonhuitznahuah as the stars, explaining the myth as the astral struggle between the forces of day and night. Inspired by these ideas, Matos Moctezuma (1988) affirmed that the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan is the material manifestation of the myth of Huitzilopochtli. The most convincing proof of this theory is the spectacular monolith of the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui at stage IVb, found in 1978, in which the goddess was depicted decapitated and dismembered. Matos Moctezuma notes that this monolith symbolising the defeat of the night was placed precisely at the foot of the steps leading to the top of the pyramid, where the image of the sun god Huitzilopochtli was placed triumphant at the zenith. Matos Moctezuma also points out that certain architectural features of the Templo Mayor recall the name Coatepetl, such as the four large serpent heads at the foot of the staircases' balustrades and the coarse stones embedded in the successive bodies of the pyramid. According to this logic, the serpents would have the phonetic value of *coa[tl]*, while the stones would respond to the wild character of the word *tepetl*.

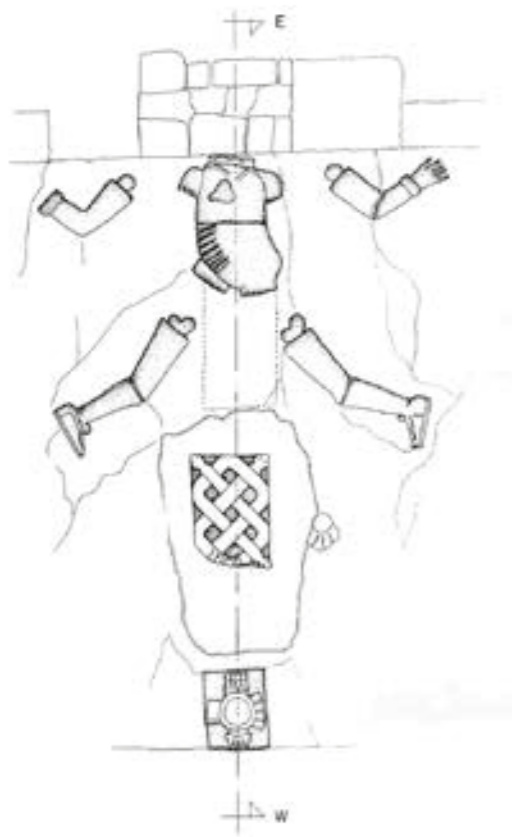
On this firm basis, the Mexican archaeologist then constructed a series of hypotheses that attempt to give coherence to other elements of the iconographic programme of the Templo Mayor. It is suggested, for example, that the great anthropomorphic sculptures discovered on the southern staircase of stage III were the effigies of the Centzonhuitznahuah referred to by Alvarado Tezozómoc when he stated that the warrior brothers of Coyolxauhqui were depicted with shields around the pyramid.

**Fig. 11**  
The Earth goddess Coatlicue gives birth to the sun god Huitzilopochtli. As an adult the latter, armed with a fire serpent, vanquishes his brothers, the moon and the stars, *Codex Florentinus*.

Biblioteca Medicea  
Laurenziana, Florence



To the monuments listed by Matos Moctezuma we could add, on the one hand, the mural paintings he discovered in 1979 inside the chapel of Huitzilopochtli corresponding to stage II and, on the other, the three sculptures that were exhumed completely in 1987 in stage IVa. The pictorial ensemble in question, although almost completely destroyed, represents a jumbled heap of weapons and luxurious military effects, among them shields, darts and banners, all linked to the god of the sun and war. On the other hand, the sculptural ensemble consists of a rudimentary effigy of Coyolxauhqui, a mat of snakes and a slab with a shield, a flag and four darts in relief. The headless, dismembered goddess is depicted here as the archetypal victim lying at the base of the pyramid hill. The weapons, on the other hand, commemorate the confrontation between the Sun and the Moon, while at the same time sanctifying war as a means of satisfying the gods. Finally, the mat alludes to the omen that those who sat on this web of snakes would soon meet their death, as happened to Coyolxauhqui, or discover power, as happened to Huitzilopochtli.



**Fig. 12**  
Drawing of Coyolxauhqui, beheaded and hacked to death, on the platform of building stage IVa of the Templo Mayor

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

According to Selser, the fact that the Templo Mayor is referred to as Coatepetl in historical documents clearly identifies it as an arena for ritual reenactment. On this stage a procession of faithful carrying the image of Huitzilopochtli dramatised the mythical offensive against the Centzonhuitznahuah during the *Panquetzalitzli* festival. The German researcher pointed out that this connection was made even more evident by the names Tzompantitlan, Coaxalpan and Apetlac, received by both the places visited by Coyolxauhqui and the Centzonhuitznahuah in the myth as well as three existing constructions in the sacred site: the line of trophy-skulls opposite the Great Temple (the *tzompantli*), the base of the pyramid (called *coaxalpan*) and its platform (named *apetlac*).

**Fig. 12a**  
Gold earring similar to that of the goddess Coyolxauhqui. It was found in a recently discovered sacrificial chest *ofrenda* 167.

Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City, D.R. Secretaría de Cultura – INAH (cat. 128)



**Fig. 13**  
Monolithic stone sculpture of the goddess Coyolxauhqui on the platform of building stage IVb of the Templo Mayor

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

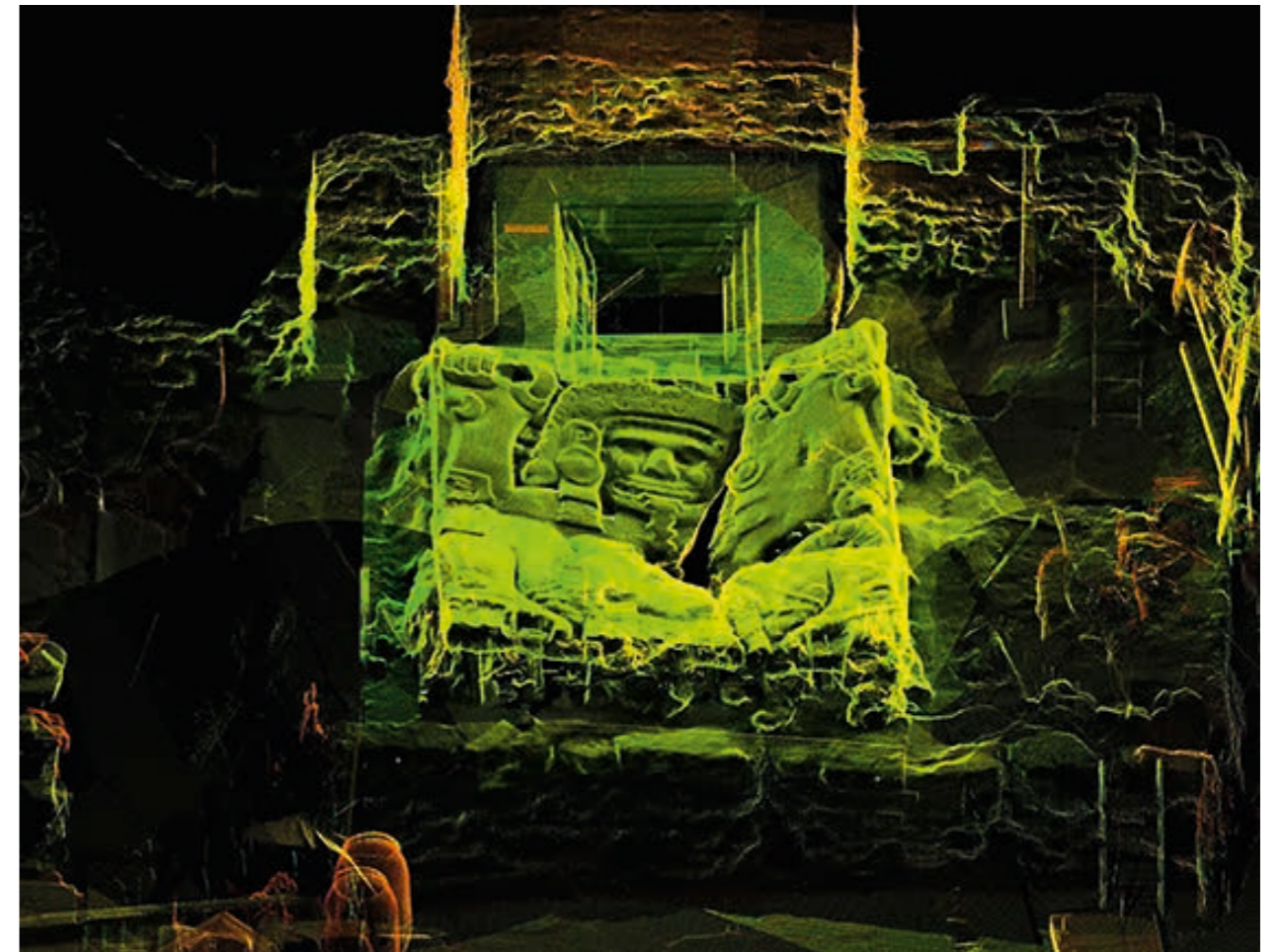




**Fig. 14**  
Excavation of the monolithic stone sculpture of the goddess Tlaltecuhltli at the foot of the Templo Mayor  
With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Photo: Leonardo López Luján

### The dual pattern of the pyramid

According to some foundational myths, the original *tlalmomoztli* – the humble earth chapel, which with the passage of time became the majestic Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan – was built on the exact spot where the miraculous sign that marked the end of the Mexica migration took place: the stone and the cactus (*nopal*) where the eagle landed and spread its wings. In some versions of this story it is said that under the stone and the *nopal* there were two caves or two large rocks from which two streams flowed, foreshadowing the double features of the pyramid of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. For Matos Moctezuma (1988) (Broda et al. 1987), the unique design of the monument and its devotion to two divinities is the clear ideological reflection of an economy based both on the tribute of the towns conquered by the Mexica empire and on obtaining the fruits of the earth through agriculture.



**Fig. 15**  
Monolithic stone sculpture of the goddess Tlaltecuhltli in situ  
With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
3D-scan: Guido Galvani and Martia Sanchez

Another group of theories suggests that the dual composition of the Templo Mayor is fully in line with the Meso-American cosmovision, which was mainly binary (López Austin and López Luján 2009). Indeed, the division into opposing pairs has its roots in the oldest cultural manifestations of ancient Mexico and became a true obsession. According to the defenders of this hypothesis, the Templo Mayor was the consolidation of the universe's opposing and complementary forces: dry season/rainy season, ripened/tender, winter solstice/summer solstice, life/death, sky/earth, day/night, stars/vegetation, fire/water, heat/cold, ochre/blue, and so on.

This recurring pattern is clearly expressed in the binary distribution of the architectural, sculptural, pictorial and oblatory elements that have been archaeologically excavated to date, which are listed in the following table:

Vertical section	Middle North Section	Middle South Section	
Merlons	Clouds, pots, barrel cactus, <i>cuechtli</i> , <i>tecciztli</i>	Flames, fire, feathered snake, <i>tecciztli</i>	
Summit	Plinth for the image of Tlaloc	Plinth for the image of Huitzilopochtli	
	Paintings of the maize god and water imagery	Paintings of weapons	
	Water and fertility offerings	Burials of cremated dignitaries	
	Sacrificial <i>Chacmool</i> -Tlaloc	Sacrificial polyhedron	
Tlatlacapan (Pyramid)	Moulding decoration	Without moulding decoration	
	Four superimposed bodies: rough flanks	Four superimposed bodies: rough flanks	
	Reliefs of <i>chalchihuitl</i> and spiral	Reliefs of <i>chalchihuitl</i> , spiral and astral	
	Offerings of overturned blue pots		
	<i>Chalchihuitl</i> snakes entwined	<i>Centzonhuitznahuah</i>	
	Snake heads with jade beads	Snake heads with feathers	
	Scaled snake heads with jade beads	Scaled snake heads without jade beads	
	Tlaloc braziers	Braziers with red ribbon	
	Apetlac (West platform)	Chamber 2: blue and aquatic/terrestrial cave	Chamber 1: ochre and astral cave
		Water and fertility offerings	Burials of cremated dignitaries
<i>Tepetlacalli</i> of water and fertility		<i>Tepetlacalli</i> of water and fertility	
		Coyolxauhqui, weapons, <i>petlacoatl</i>	
	Consecration offerings with Rain and Fire gods effigies		
Coaxalpan (West platform and square)	Great undulating blue snake	Great undulating ochre snake	
		Central axis: Large blue/ochre snake head	
	Altar of the Frogs	Altar of the Celestial Serpents	
	Tlaloc, spring, cloud and corn slabs	Astral, fire, captive, snake, weapon and eagle slabs	
		Central axis: Anthropomorphic Tlaltecuhli monolith	
	Central axis: Zoomorphic Tlaltecuhli slabs		



**Fig. 16**  
Monolithic stone sculpture  
of the goddess Tlaltecuhli  
With the kind permission  
of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Colour reconstruction:  
Michelle De Anda and  
Kenneth Garrett

**Fig. 17**  
Dedicatory offering  
box found under the  
Tlaltecuhltli monolith  
  
With the kind  
permission of  
Proyecto Templo  
Mayor  
Photo: Jesus López



**Fig. 18**  
Content of a dedicatory  
offering box discovered  
under the Tlaltecuhltli  
monolith  
  
With the kind permission  
of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Photo: Jorge Vertiz



**Fig. 19**  
Skeleton of a she-Mexican  
wolf dressed as a warrior.  
Offering box 120.  
The Mexica buried several  
kinds of dressed animals, all  
of them related to war  
orders: Jaguars, pumas,  
wolves, eagles.

**Fig. 20**

Reconstructed disc with turquoise mosaic from the *ofrenda* 99 of the Templo Mayor. Seven deities of the Night with the attributes of Star Warriors are arranged around the inner disc.

With the kind permission of Proyecto Templo Mayor  
Photo: Jorge Vertiz





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

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12 October 2019 to 3 May 2020

## Special Exhibition at the Weltmuseum Wien

24 June 2020 to 6 January 2021

## Special Exhibition at the Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden

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