

Mexica Gold

When Hernán Cortés and his men arrived in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Mexica Empire, in November 1519, they were given rooms in the former quarters of the previous ruler Axayacatl, an old and luxurious residence across from Moteuczoma's own palace. Shortly after they had settled in, they had a stroke of luck, for they noticed that one of the walls bore traces of a doorway, recently sealed off and freshly plastered. The Spaniards did not hesitate to break through the wall and force their way into the chamber, called the *teocalco*, where the emperor kept treasures inherited from his ancestors.¹ In the words of an eyewitness, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a Spanish conquistador who was a foot soldier to Cortés: "Cortés and some of his captains went in first, and they saw so much jewelry, and round and rectangular gold sheets, and *chalchihuites* (blue-green metamorphic stones) and other great riches, that they were quite carried away and did not know what to say about such wealth."²

In the end, it took three days and the participation of numerous goldsmiths brought from Azcapotzalco to brutally strip off all the gold; it embellished weapons, insignia, and ornaments crafted from lavish feathers, fine woods, precious stones, gorgeous textiles, and other materials that the conquerors dismissed as worthless. Through this plunder, the men obtained three mounds of gold, worth about 162,000 pesos, that were immediately melted down.³ Of the resulting booty, Cortés set aside a fifth for the king of Spain, another fifth for himself, and a flat amount to cover expedition expenses; then he gave eighty pesos to each horseman and sixty pesos to each foot soldier. No one was satisfied with this ridiculously low sum. Indeed, some of the men refused to receive such paltry compensation, arguing that it was not commensurate with their efforts in the conquest of Mexico.

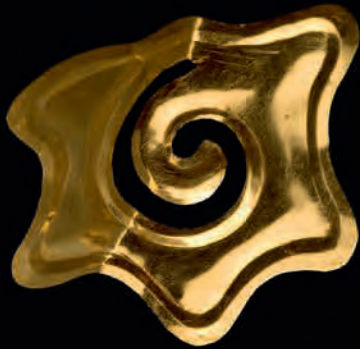
While this well-known episode highlights Cortés's unfair treatment of his fellow Spaniards, it also reveals that the gold concentrated in the imperial coffers of Tenochtitlan was not as abundant as we have been led to believe. This fact becomes even more apparent if we consider the enormous

riches amassed by the Spaniards during the conquest of Peru. For example, the treasure taken by Francisco Pizarro's army during the capture of Atahualpa at Cajamarca, along with the treasure from Cusco, amounted to 1,890,000 pesos.⁴ The first of these fortunes, after discounting the Royal Fifth, was enough to pay each soldier a hundred times more than what Cortés distributed, leading the chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo to declare: "Everything about Cortés seemed like night compared to the clarity we saw when it came to the riches of the South Sea."⁵

Why were the Mexica and Inca worlds so different? The answer is quite simple. First, Mexico is a country poor in gold, especially compared to Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia.⁶ Second, the Mexican states richest in gold are located in the north, far away from the area dominated in pre-Hispanic times by Tenochtitlan and its allies.⁷ Third, metallurgy was introduced to Mesoamerica at a relatively late date,⁸ and gold processing based on copper, lead, silver, or zinc sulfide was never developed through such advanced techniques as pyrometallurgical smelting or chemical processing.⁹ As a result, the Mexicas, Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and other Mesoamerican peoples were limited to exploiting the prized metal in its pure, native state. Gold was used in modest amounts, never assuming the same economic, social, political, and religious status enjoyed by other valued materials, such as brightly colored feathers and jade.¹⁰ This fact is clearly reflected in Nahua history, iconography, poetry, and metaphors.¹¹

Archaeology teaches us a similar lesson. In the case of Tenochtitlan, the gold that has come down to us is strikingly scarce. Excavations carried out from 1948 to 2015 in the Templo Mayor archaeological zone in Mexico City (see Caplan, this volume) have yielded 204 offerings concentrated within a space of only 1.51 hectares (3.73 acres); however, just fourteen of these offerings contained gold objects.¹² From these ritual deposits only 267 complete gold pieces, all of small dimensions, have been discovered, in addition to 1,090 fragments. These numbers are insignificant in relation to the tens of thousands of greenstone, obsidian, flint, and copper artifacts found in the same area from the same period.¹³ Moreover, the total weight of the

Gold Adornments, AD 1486–1502, Mexica, Museo del Templo Mayor, Secretaría de Cultura—INAH; see also cat. 215.



gold artifacts discovered in the Templo Mayor area comes to a mere 500 grams, which seems minor when compared to the 2.4 kilograms found in Tombs 1 and 2 at Zaachila; the 3.5 kilograms from Monte Albán Tomb 7 (see fig. 119); the 5.9 kilograms from the Veracruz Fisherman's Treasure (see cats. 220–222); and the 7.2 kilograms from the Sacred Cenote of Chichen Itza (see figs. 94 and 96).¹⁴ The quantity from the Templo Mayor area seems especially negligible when we consider the scale and power of the Mexica Empire.

This essay focuses on the gold objects recovered by the Proyecto Templo Mayor (Templo Mayor Project) of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), and examines the provenance and circulation of the raw material, the techniques employed to produce the gold artifacts, and those items' ritual uses.

Historical Information

Much of what is known about the role of gold in Mexica civilization comes from documents written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Fortunately, modern researchers have extensively studied these texts,¹⁵ and their work allows us to reconstruct the production–circulation–consumption cycle. In pre-Hispanic times, native gold was obtained from placer deposits, which accumulate at the bends of rivers and streams. Gold nuggets and particles of pure metal collect in these sandy beds when they become dislodged by erosion and are carried downstream from quartz veins in the mountains. Díaz del Castillo tells us that the indigenous people collected the wet sand in gourds “so that after the earth was washed away some grains of gold remained.”¹⁶ According to what Moteuczoma told Cortés, the main placers were in Zozolan, Tochtepec, and Malinaltepec, and in Coatlecamaç, which lay beyond the southern border of the empire in the lands of Chinantla.¹⁷ Local peoples exploited these sources, sending the gold to Tenochtitlan and other important capitals.

Eleven provinces paid gold in tribute to the Mexica, and almost all of them were conquered during the reign of Moteuczoma I (AD 1440–69).¹⁸ These provinces were located to the northeast, east, south, and southeast of Tenochtitlan, and on Mexico's modern-day border with Guatemala. Some had gold-bearing placers either within their territories or in neighboring provinces; other provinces had to trade with distant towns to fulfill their tribute obligations. According to the Codex Mendoza (AD 1541–42), gold shipments consisted not only of the raw material but also of the semiprocessed and finished pieces.¹⁹ Gold dust brought in gourds is an example of the first category; gold sheets in the form of tablets or disks were examples of semiprocessed products. Finished pieces included diadems, headbands, shields, strands of round beads and bells, and lip plugs embellished with amber or beryl (see p. 98).

Along with these regular tribute obligations, Tenochtitlan also demanded tribute payments for special occasions, such as political or religious events, funerals of sovereigns, coronations, or consecrations of additions to the Templo Mayor.²⁰ While numerous finished objects—mainly ornaments—were gathered, large volumes of raw materials

also arrived in the imperial capital, and the high steward delivered them to the palace craftsmen to fashion objects for use in these special occasions. Gold also reached Tenochtitlan through gifts, spoils, and trade.²¹ Friar Bernardino de Sahagún mentions that this metal had been sold at the Tlatelolco market since the beginning of the fifteenth century.²² Gold was exchanged as nuggets; as gold dust inside feather quills; and as processed rings, noseplugs, earflares, labrets, bangles, belts, and crowns.²³

The precious metal was worked in Tenochtitlan by full-time specialists with the highest levels of expertise. Many artisans worked in the royal palace, where they were fed and closely guarded.²⁴ Their ateliers were in the *totocalli*, or bird house, next to the workshops of feather workers and lapidaries with whom they often collaborated.²⁵ Gold-workers were supplied with the materials and tools they required, but if they made any mistakes in their commissions, they were severely punished and sometimes even banished.²⁶ Apart from the palace gold-workers, there were other, likewise supremely skilled artisans who lived in the neighboring city of Azcapotzalco.²⁷ Díaz del Castillo referred to them as “the silversmiths of the great Montezuma,” which suggests the direct connection between these specialists and the palace of Tenochtitlan, despite the seven miles separating the two cities. Indeed, since the conquest of Azcapotzalco by the Mexica ruler Itzcoatl in 1430, half of the city's territory had been colonized by the Mexica and named Mexicapan.²⁸

Historical sources—and specifically Sahagún's informants—help us to reconstruct the processes by which Mexica goldsmiths transformed their material (see fig. 19).²⁹ The *teocuitlatzotzonqueh* hammered nuggets into thin sheets. Generally working in the open air, these workers cut, perforated, embossed, and engraved sheet metal to create all sorts of objects. The *teocuitlapitzqueh*, experts in the lost-wax casting technique, melted gold on small stoves and used blow-pipes to stoke the fire and green branches to remove the scoria, or slag.

The result of these chains of production was a wide array of sumptuary and prestige items. Many of these works were combined with precious stones, wood, feathers, ceramics, or textiles.³⁰ Almost all of them were conceived to be worn as garments or ornaments, to be held in the hands as insignia or weaponry, or to be displayed as part of elite household goods or as images in a state cult (see figs. 116 and 117).³¹ These objects were gathered in the imperial palaces and sacred precincts: in the aforementioned treasury of the *teocalco*, Petlalcaco storerooms, armories of Tlacoçcalco, and artisans' workshops in the *totocalli*.³² There, the sovereign could access them for personal use or for distribution as prestigious gifts to nobility, high-ranking warriors, and distinguished visitors. These luxury pieces were also brought by ambassadors to leaders of allied, subjugated, or independent lands; given to merchants as items to exchange on long-distance expeditions; and entrusted to priests to place in votive or funerary offerings in temples.³³



Fig. 123. Western facade of the Templo Mayor archaeological zone, Tenochtitlan, Mexico City.

Archaeological Data

With the Spaniards' arrival in Tenochtitlan, the vast majority of gold objects in circulation ended up in crucibles. Only a small number of Mesoamerican gold objects of high aesthetic quality survived, and they can be found today in museums in Europe, the United States, and Mexico.³⁴ But the most important corpus consists of those artifacts that had been buried earlier by the Mexica in their sacred precinct, and recovered in archaeological studies over the last thirty-seven years.³⁵ Thanks to a detailed field record, it has been possible to document each piece in its archaeological context, thereby allowing us to shed light on important questions regarding chronology, function, and meaning.

As mentioned earlier, thus far only fourteen offerings—thirteen at the Templo Mayor and one more in the House of the Eagles—have been found to contain gold objects. Of these fourteen, nine offerings were discovered in the Great Temple (fig. 123); four were found in front of the temple pyramid's main facade and around the monolith of Tlaltecuhltli, an earth goddess; and one was uncovered at the entrance of the adjacent House of the Eagles. The Mexicas buried six of these fourteen offerings at plaza level, another six in the pyramid platform, and the

Templo Mayor Archaeological Zone

- ▼ TEMPLO MAYOR
- ▼ HOUSE OF EAGLES
- ▼ TLALTECUHTLI AREA

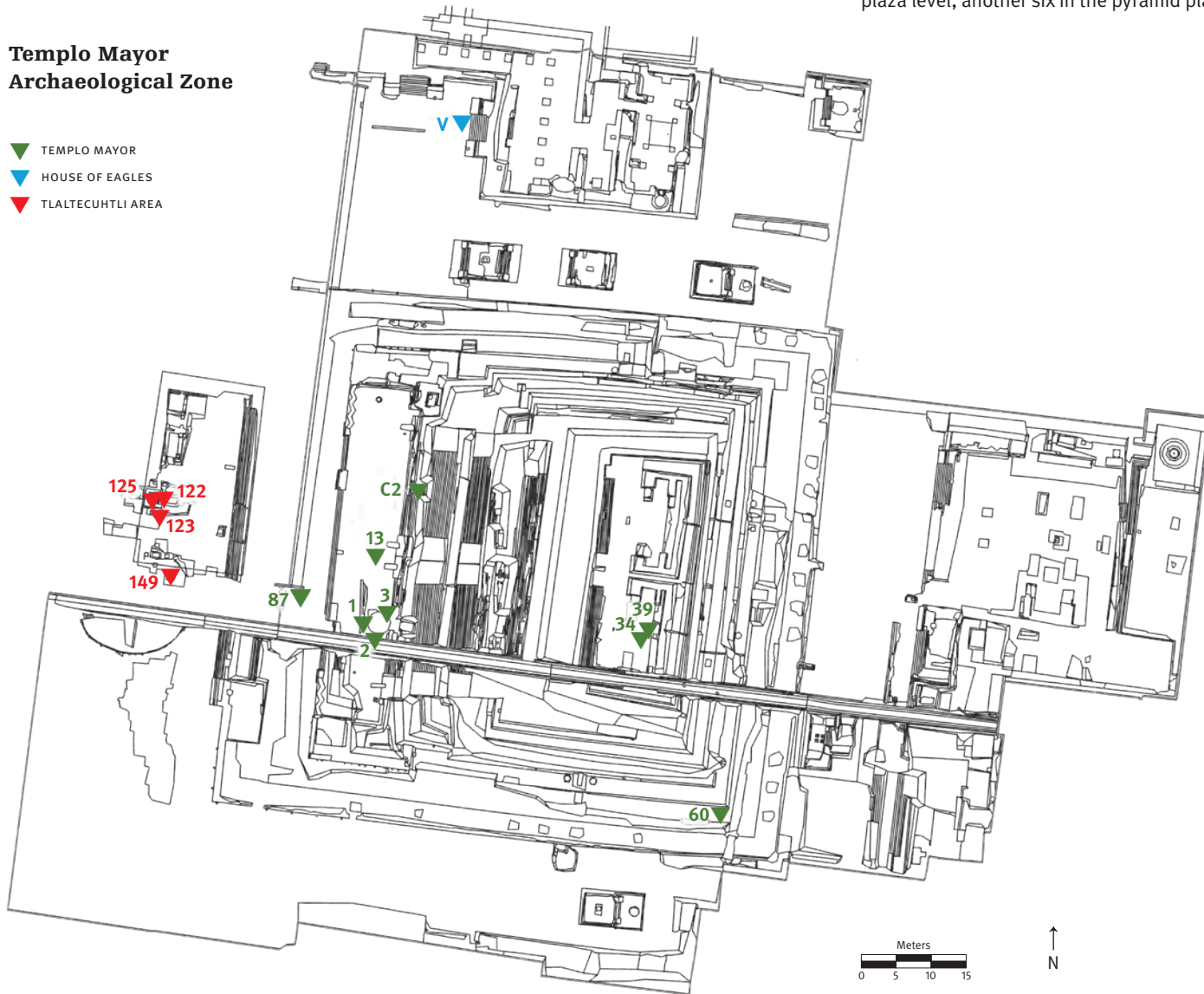


Fig. 124. Buildings with gold objects, Templo Mayor archaeological zone.

The Aztec Templo Mayor

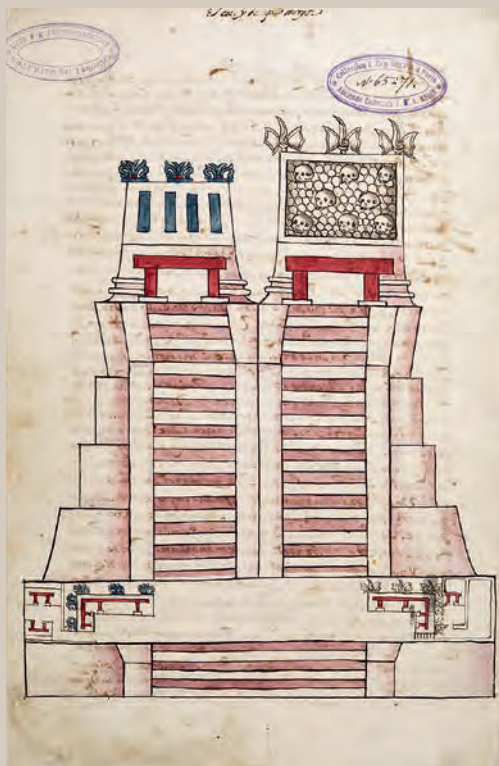


Fig. 125. Tetzaco's double-pyramid platform with twin temples, thought to have closely resembled the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, in Codex Ixtlilxochitl, Fol. 112v, AD 1582, Bibliothèque nationale de France; see also cat. 203.

Between 1428 and 1521, when the vast Aztec Empire that covered central Mexico was ruled by an alliance of the city-states of Tenochtitlan, Tetzaco, and Tlacopan, the Templo Mayor (Great Temple) was the urban and religious center of Tenochtitlan, home of the Mexica people (see fig. 109). According to legend, after leading the Mexicas on a two-hundred-year southward migration, their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, brought them to the future site of the Templo Mayor: a sacred white place in the midst of thick reeds where Huitzilopochtli appeared as an eagle sitting on a cactus; in his talons he clutched either a writhing snake or a bird with shining feathers.¹ The temple erected there became the center of the new city, the intersecting point of its four districts and major thoroughfares. The Mexicas perceived the site as a liminal space, where the human realm touched the divine, and as an *axis mundi*, the central point from which the rest of the universe unfolded.²



Fig. 126. Offering 126 of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, Secretaría de Cultura—INAH.

The Templo Mayor was a double-pyramid platform topped by twin temples (fig. 125). It was built in nested successive stages, with each new phase replicating and covering the former (see fig. 123). The southern half was dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, associated with war and the sun, while the northern half belonged to Tlaloc, an ancient Mesoamerican rain god. The structure replicated two sacred mountains: Coatepetl, the mythic site where Huitzilopochtli was born and defeated his sister, Coyolxauhqui, who threatened to kill him and his mother; and Tonacatepetl, the hollow mountain of sustenance where Tlaloc guarded maize and water.³ Monolithic sculptures of serpents and a dismembered Coyolxauhqui underscored these mythic associations.

Razed and built over following the Spanish Conquest, the temple was rediscovered in 1978 next to Mexico City's main square.⁴ Since then, excavations by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Leonardo López Luján, and the Proyecto Templo Mayor have uncovered many offerings, which were deposited during rituals for Mexica religious ceremonies, noble burials, social advancement, trade expeditions, and dedications of new additions to the temple (fig. 126).⁵ Deposits included gods' adornments; heirloom Olmec and Toltec greenstone carvings; feathers; turquoise mosaics; shells; textiles; gold, copper, and silver ornaments; and human remains as well as the remains of diverse flora and fauna (see cats. 208, 209, 211, 214, and 219).⁶ The variety of materials suggests

the value placed on distant origins, antiquity, brilliance, color, and connections with divinities and elements of the cosmos.⁷

The temple's stages of construction and their ritual deposits correlate with periods of Mexica history and, as such, shed light on this group's political and economic expansion.⁸ As Tenochtitlan rose from a tribute-paying city to an imperial capital, offerings deposited at the Templo Mayor reflect increasing access to foreign materials, such as jade, turquoise, and mother-of-pearl. Further, the marked preponderance of materials from the tribute-paying provinces of Puebla, Oaxaca, Guerrero, and the Gulf coast may have been intended to symbolize Mexica domination over these areas (see p. 98).⁹ Specifically selected and gathered to the very heart of the empire, these offerings reflect Aztec understandings of the raw materials and finished works that embodied superlative value.

1. The animal differs between colonial sources: Durán describes the eagle holding a bird, while Chimalpahin says it was a serpent. Durán (1581) 1984, 2: 44, 48; López Luján 2005, 65–66.
2. López Luján 2005, 64–65.
3. Broda 1987, 237.
4. López Luján 2005, 1–17.
5. López Luján 2014; López Luján 2005, 76–77.
6. López Luján 2005, 100.
7. Broda 1987, 214, 222; López Luján 2005, 109, 188–201; Umberger 1987, 66–68.
8. López Luján 2005, 52–54.
9. Matos Moctezuma 1988, 90–91; Umberger 1987, 68.

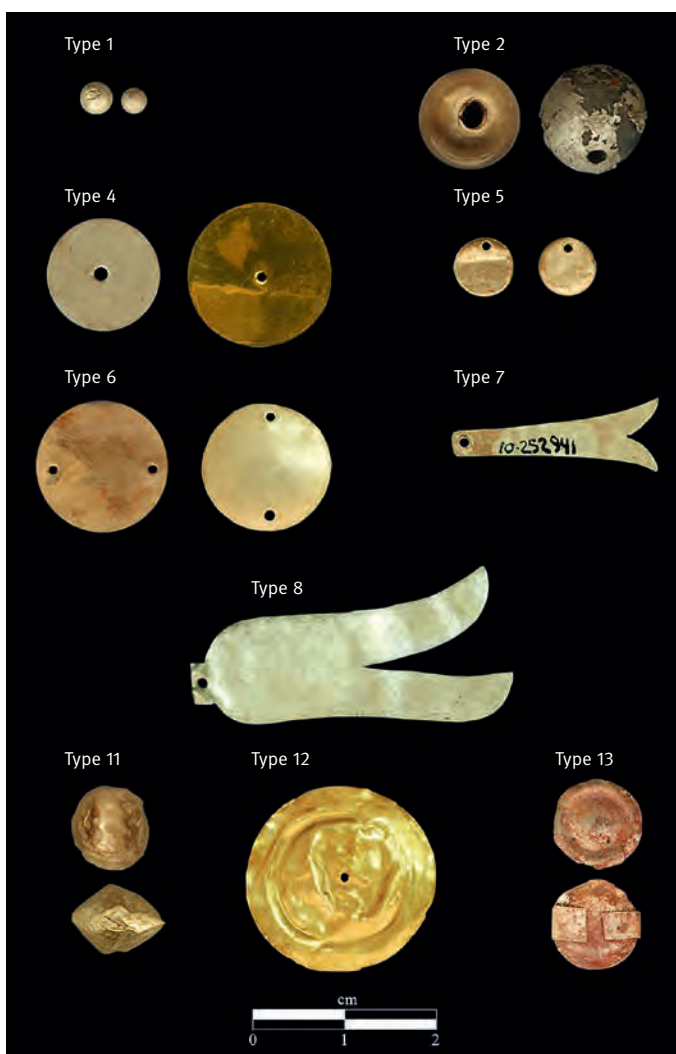


Fig. 127. Gold objects from the Templo Mayor archaeological zone, types 1, 2, 4–8, and 11–13.

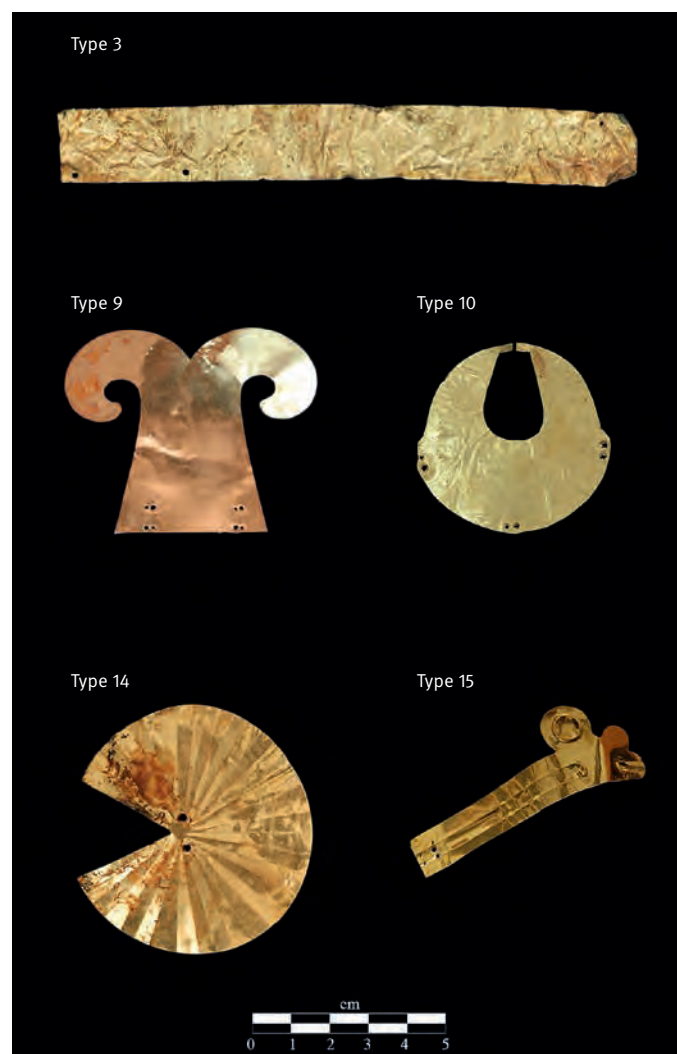


Fig. 128. Gold objects from the Templo Mayor archaeological zone, types 3, 9, 10, 14, and 15.

remaining two inside Huitzilopochtli's shrine, which crowned the summit (see fig. 124). In terms of the Templo Mayor's dual symbolic associations with both Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, among the offerings found at the Great Temple, the majority of them—twelve—were located in the southern half of the structure, related to the dry season and dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, the solar war god.³⁶ We should bear in mind that gold was conceptually linked to the sun, its brilliance, and its dryness. Only one offering was found in the Templo Mayor's northern half, which was dedicated to the cult of Tlaloc, the Rain God. In terms of chronology, two offerings were found in Templo Mayor's Phase II (AD 1375–1427),³⁷ six correspond to Phase IVb (AD 1469–81), and the remaining six are from Phase VI (AD 1486–1502). This distribution constitutes strong evidence of a ritual practice that lasted at least one hundred years.

The 267 complete artifacts can be divided into two groups according to the technique used to create them—either hammered sheet metal or lost-wax casting—following the taxonomy suggested by Sahagún's informants. Of the works in sheet metal, seventy-two, or 27 percent of the total, are spheres or round ceramic beads that have been covered with an extremely thin layer of gold leaf (fig. 127,

types 1 and 2). Another 45.3 percent, or 121 objects, are works in sheet gold that have been cut and perforated, including small disk-shaped pendants (see fig. 127, types 4–6) and gold sheet in the shape of a bifurcated tongue or an eagle feather military insignia (see fig. 127, types 7 and 8). Others—such as tiny hollow hemispheres, disk-shaped pendants, and disk-shaped appliques for an earspool—have been embossed (see fig. 127, types 11–13). Of particular note are works representing gods' specific insignia, including the double volute headdress characteristic of Huitzilopochtli and round noseplugs worn by the deities Itztlacolihqui, Itztapaltotec, and Tlazolteotl³⁸ (fig. 128, types 9 and 10); circular pleated headdress elements characteristic of the death gods (see fig. 128, type 14); a long bone associated with Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, the Wind God (see fig. 128, type 15); and a pendant in the shape of a cut shell, likewise associated with Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl (see fig. 129, type 16; see also p. 110 and cat. 215.3). Others—including a knotted headdress element and a U-shaped nose ornament—evoke pulque gods (see fig. 129, types 17 and 18; see also p. 110 and cat. 215.1). Another represents the glyph for star, shown as a round, lidded eye (see fig. 129, type 19). The group of hammered objects



Fig. 129. Gold objects from the Templo Mayor archaeological zone, types 16–21; see also cats. 215.1–215.3.



Fig. 130. Gold objects from the Templo Mayor archaeological zone, types 22–29; see also cat. 209.

concludes with the two rectangular ear ornaments of a pulque god, each object made of a pair of gold sheets joined with a tab-and-slot system, and two unusual folded sheet-metal clasps with wires (see fig. 129, types 20 and 21; see also p. 110 and cat. 215.2).

The second major technological group—those cast via the lost-wax technique—is composed of seventy-four pieces, or 27.7 percent of the total. These objects include fasteners and a beautiful round bead with false filigree (fig. 130, types 22 and 23; see cat. 210). Much more abundant are bells, both round (see fig. 130, types 24 and 25) and pear-shaped, either plain or adorned with spirals, rendered in false filigree (see fig. 130, types 26 and 27). An exceptional olive-shaped bell represents the glyph for movement (see fig. 130, type 28; see also cat. 209).

The function and meaning of many of these gold artifacts become clear when we examine the archaeological contexts in which they were found. The ninety-five complete pieces and sixty fragments formed part of votive offerings, valuables that were buried in cavities or stone boxes to honor the deities of the Templo Mayor (see fig. 131).³⁹ Ten of these offerings contained works of gold. Some served as miniature insignia that were affixed to sacrificial flint knives, and these

insignia linked the knives to specific deities. For example, the gold pieces in the shape of a bone and cut shell identified two knives as Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl (see fig. 132).⁴⁰ The miniature representations of the insignia of the pulque gods were placed in Offering 125 (see p. 110), adorning a spider monkey skin. In the same offering, priests put strands of pear-shaped bells on the feet of an elderly she-wolf and on those of a male golden eagle. A female golden eagle in this same offering had copper bells on her feet.⁴¹

Funerary offerings formed the context for another 142 complete pieces and 763 fragments. These groups of objects were deposited with the cremated remains of high-ranking dignitaries inside spaces under the floors (see fig. 131).⁴² Six funerary offerings have been discovered to date, including four with gold artifacts (see cat. 209). Some of these pieces are elements of the personal accoutrements and finery of the deceased, while others are jewelry offered by mourners during funeral rites. Pear- and olive-shaped bells are the most numerous, along with hollow hemispheres and disk-shaped pendants that might have been sewn onto cotton garments. Beads, ear ornament appliqué, and a perforated strip were also found.

Templo Mayor Archaeological Zone

▼ VOTIVE
▼ FUNERARY



Fig. 131. Locations of votive and funerary offerings with gold objects, Templo Mayor archaeological zone.

Most of these objects exhibit deformations resulting from long exposure to fire, which means that they were cast into funerary pyres that reached temperatures of around 1,742°F to 1,850°F (see fig. 130, type 29). Others, however, are well preserved, which suggests that they were deposited in burials once the ashes had cooled.

Chemical Analysis

A crucial aspect of our research addresses two fundamental questions: Where did the gold come from, and where were these objects made? This is a difficult matter, for no map yet exists that identifies the gold sources exploited by Mesoamerican peoples through time. Therefore, we lack the chemical profiles of the numerous placers where the metal was obtained. To make up for this gap, since the mid-1970s systematic studies have been undertaken of the chemical compositions of several archaeological collections—specifically their percentages of gold, silver, and copper.⁴³ This research has made it possible to generate ternary equilibrium diagrams that reveal clear compositional

differences among Mixtec gold from the central valleys of Oaxaca; Zapotec gold from the Sierra de Juárez; gold from the Fisherman's Treasure (supposedly also from Oaxaca); Costa Rican and Panamanian gold recovered from the Sacred Cenote of Chichen Itza; and some Mexica artifacts found in Mexico City. Thus, we are able to identify what we might call geographic zones of gold use.

We analyzed the ternary composition of all of the complete pieces and a large part of the fragments in the broader Templo Mayor archaeological zone collection. We used X-ray fluorescence (XRF), a reliable, highly sensitive, multi-elemental technique that is also nondestructive, noninvasive, and efficient. We employed SANDRA for this purpose, which is a portable system calibrated with homogeneous Degussa alloys.⁴⁴ More than six hundred measurements were taken, each for sixty seconds, often in multiple regions of the same object. The results obtained from each piece were averaged to produce the standard deviation.⁴⁵

We developed three ternary diagrams, each representing finds from a different area in the sacred precinct. The



Fig. 132. Pair of Ceremonial Knives Representing the God Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, from Offering 125, Phase VI, Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, Mexico City, Mexico, AD 1486–1502. Flint, jadeite, shell, obsidian, spider monkey skin, gold, and copal. Right: 31 × 17 × 7.5 cm (12³/₁₆ × 6¹¹/₁₆ × 2¹⁵/₁₆ in.); left: 23 × 12.7 × 3.5 cm (9¹/₁₆ × 5 × 1³/₁₆ in.). Mexico City, Museo del Templo Mayor, Secretaría de Cultura—INAH.

artifacts from the offerings at the Templo Mayor proper (fig. 133) form a fairly heterogeneous group in which marked variation can be observed in the percentages of gold, silver, and copper. Such divergence may be explained by the fact that these eight deposits differ in both date and type: some are votive and others funerary. Things change greatly in the second graph, which shows data for Offering 5 (fig. 134). In this funerary deposit from the House of the Eagles, there is a more compact group of artifacts, with notable shifts in the percentages of gold and silver but always minimal copper content. Even more homogeneous is the group of artifacts from Offerings 122, 123, 125, and 149—votive deposits associated with the monolith of Tlaltecuhli (fig. 135). Apart from the minimal copper content, what stands out in this third graph is the smaller variance in the percentages of gold and silver when compared to the preceding example. This difference may be explained by the fact that the offerings represented in figure 133 are contiguous and were buried simultaneously, thus the gold artifacts could have been created intentionally in the same workshop.

The next graph offers clearer results. Here we have divided all of the offerings into two groups, according to type (fig. 136). There are noticeably greater fluctuations in

the ternary composition of funerary offerings. As mentioned above, these types of deposits brought together highly diversified gold artifacts, because they contained not only the belongings of the deceased but also gifts given by relatives and foreign dignitaries.⁴⁶ In contrast, almost all of the artifacts from the votive offerings are circumscribed in a highly limited area; this may be explained by the fact that the rulers of Tenochtitlan tended to have the palace goldsmiths create gold objects expressly for use as deposits for Templo Mayor consecration ceremonies.⁴⁷

Figure 137 shows the data divided chronologically. A few gold artifacts date to the end of the fourteenth century, when the rulers Acamapichtli, Huitzilihuitl, and Chimalpopoca governed a humble Tenochtitlan that was still a dependency of Azcapotzalco. Numerous items, however, correspond to the second half of the fifteenth century, when Axayacatl successfully consolidated an independent state on the path to expansion. Finally, the largest group of objects dates from the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Ahuitzotl expanded the frontiers of the empire from the Tarascan area to the modern-day border with Guatemala. There is a general tendency over time toward homogenization in the ternary composition of gold objects. In our opinion, this increasing standardization—not only in chemical composition but also in shape and size—might have resulted from raw materials from a small number of placers being used in the production of ceremonial artifacts and from these pieces being processed only in specific workshops, such as imperial palace or Azcapotzalco workshops.

In the ternary graph showing geographic zones of gold use (fig. 138), we see that the artifacts from Chichen Itza have extremely high percentages of gold (gold: 96%, silver: 3.5%, copper: 0.5%); Mixtec objects from Oaxaca have high percentages of silver (gold: 60–85%, silver: 10–40%, copper: 10–15%); the Fisherman's Treasure has a high percentage of copper (gold: 46–63%, silver: 14–25%, copper: 11–27%); and the Zapotec bell from Caxonos in the Sierra de Juárez boasts the highest percentage of copper (gold: 60%, silver: 10%, copper: 30%).⁴⁸

When we put this graph together with the values for the gold objects from Tenochtitlan, two fundamental findings become apparent: (1) there is greater variability in the ternary composition of the Tenochtitlan objects (gold: 30–95%, silver: 3–62%, copper: 0–35%), and (2) despite this variability, the Tenochtitlan group stands apart for having lower percentages of copper.

A New Mesoamerican Geographic Zone of Gold Use

One of the crucial questions left unanswered is: Where did the gold-working tradition practiced in Tenochtitlan and Azcapotzalco come from? Nearly all modern-day researchers have directed their gaze toward Oaxaca, especially the Mixteca area. In fact, the prevailing school of thought for many decades has been that the artifacts found in the Basin of Mexico—if not imported from the Mixtecs of Oaxaca or Puebla—were worked by Mixtec goldsmiths living in capital cities such as Tenochtitlan, Tetzaco, and Azcapotzalco. Thus, whenever Mesoamerican gold pieces are exhibited or

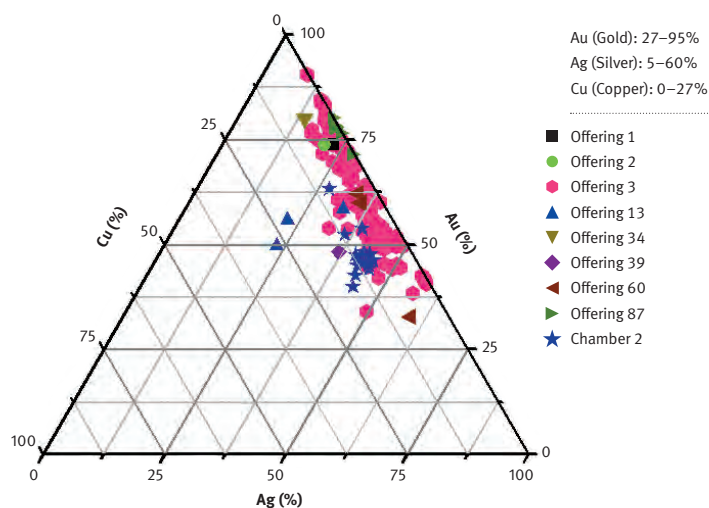


Fig. 133. Ternary equilibrium diagram (gold-silver-copper) of the objects from the Templo Mayor offerings.

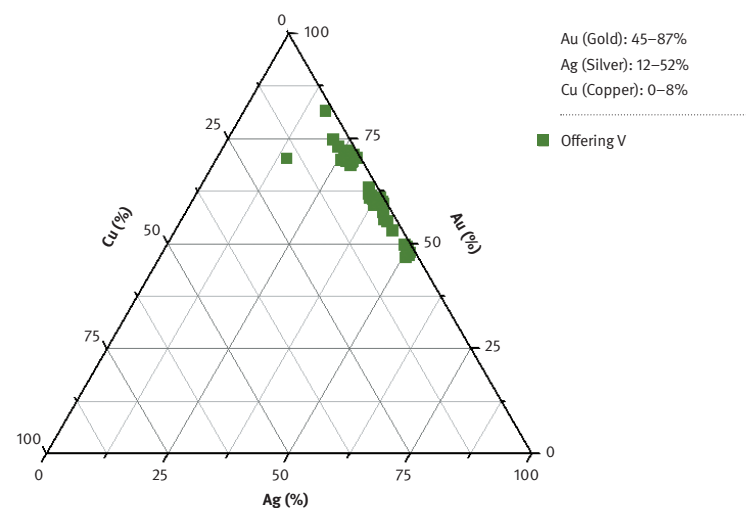


Fig. 134. Ternary equilibrium diagram (gold-silver-copper) of the objects from the House of the Eagles offerings.

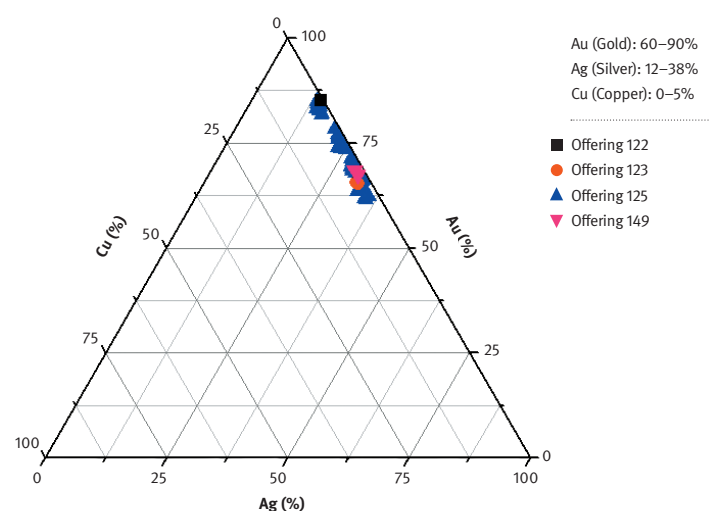


Fig. 135. Ternary equilibrium diagram (gold-silver-copper) of the objects from the Tlattecutli-area offerings.

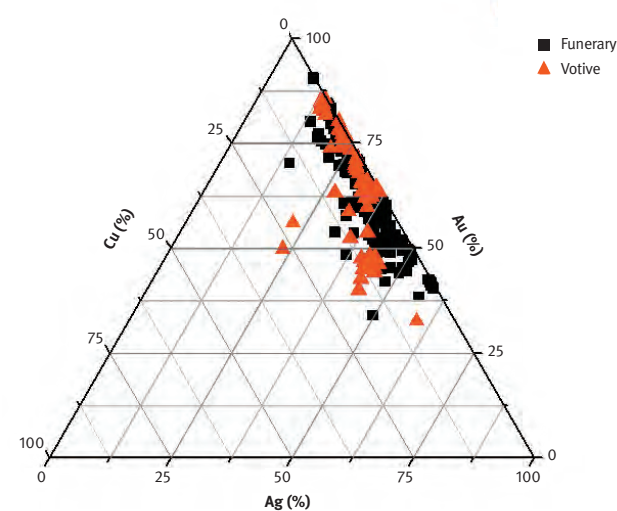


Fig. 136. Ternary equilibrium diagram (gold-silver-copper) of the objects from votive and funerary offerings.

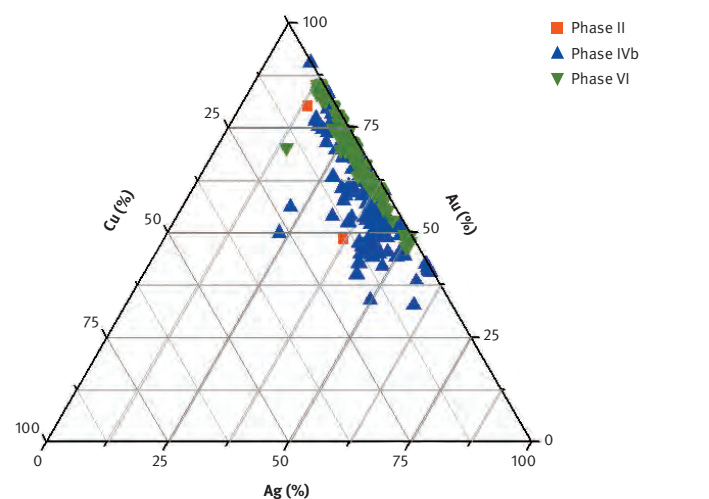


Fig. 137. Ternary equilibrium diagram (gold-silver-copper) of the objects from Phases II, IVb, and VI.

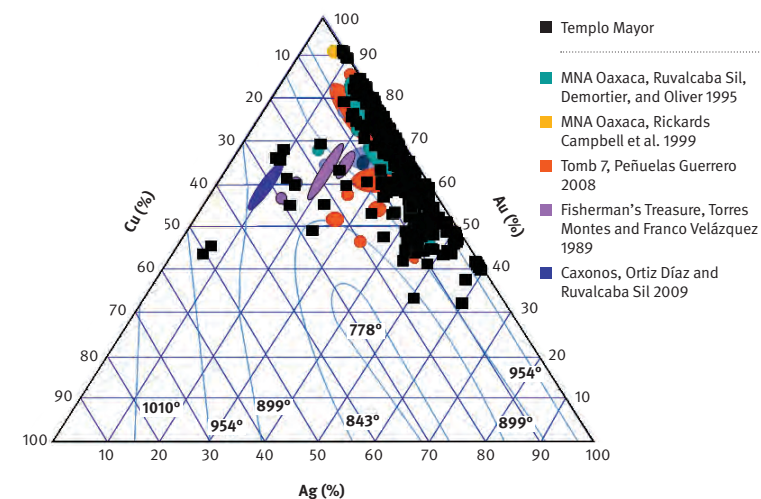


Fig. 138. Ternary equilibrium diagram (gold-silver-copper) of objects from different geographic zones of gold use.

published, those that are not Maya and whose exact origin is unknown are given the vague designation “Mixtec-Aztec.”

Against such hypotheses, scholar H. B. Nicholson emphasized the absence of any passages in the primary historical sources that indicated that Mixtec-speaking artisans from Oaxaca or Puebla had been brought to Tenochtitlan to practice their skills there and to transmit them to local artisans.⁴⁹ In his judgment, the great artisanal tradition of central Mexico does not derive from the Mixtecs; rather, it has autochthonous roots that go back at least to Classic-period Teotihuacan. For the early sixteenth century, Nicholson observed that gold-working was as developed in central Mexico as it was in the Mixteca region, and that Moteuczoma had no need to import gold items from distant Oaxaca for the Spanish conquistadors when he could draw upon local production.

Nicholson’s critical view aligns with our research on the archaeological gold from Tenochtitlan’s sacred precinct. In terms of form and style, a detailed comparison of the 121 spectacular Mixtec objects from Tomb 7 at Monte Albán⁵⁰ makes it clear that they are totally different from the twenty-nine types described here from Tenochtitlan’s Templo Mayor and House of the Eagles.

Contextual data also support Nicholson’s stance. Our research indicates that the use of gold objects at the Templo Mayor differed greatly from that of the pieces recovered by archaeologists in Oaxaca. The use of gold-sheet ornaments and bells to identify certain sacrificial knives and animal skins as specific deities, for example, is distinct from the use of gold ornaments on the deceased in Monte Albán’s Tomb 7, as is the use of bells to adorn the wolf and eagle in Offering 125 near the Tlaltecuhltli monolith.

Similarly, in iconographic terms, some of the gold objects found in the offerings at Tenochtitlan have counterparts in central Mexican codices, but they are absent from the visual arts of the Mixteca region. Perhaps the clearest evidence is the frontal ornament of the pulque gods that appears in several places in the Codex Magliabechiano and its cognate, the Codex Tudela, but that is absent in Mixtec codices, such as the Codex Zouche-Nuttall and the Codex Vindobonensis, and from mural paintings, such as those at Mitla.

Finally, we turn to our chemical analyses, which yielded ternary gold-silver-copper percentages with copper values fundamentally lower than those of Mixtec gold. In fact, we have seen that Tenochtitlan gold gradually became standardized in terms of size, shape, and chemical composition; perhaps this is because the requirements for creating ceremonial objects restricted both procurement, to only a few placers, and production, to specific workshops in the capital and Azcapotzalco—and all were under direct state control. This leads us to propose a new Mesoamerican geographic zone of gold use, distinct from the Mixteca region, which could be called the Basin of Mexico tradition.

Epilogue

In March 1981 a surprising archaeological discovery was made in an area just north of the Alameda Central in Mexico City. During the construction of a large government building, a gold ingot was unearthed from the bed of the long-since-

receded Lake Texcoco, near the ancient causeway that once connected the island of Tenochtitlan with the allied city of Tlacopan (see cat. 223). All signs point to this piece being dropped by one of Cortés’s men in their hasty retreat from the Mexica capital during the Noche Triste (Night of Sorrows) on June 30, 1520. Surely melted from treasure plundered from the royal coffers by the Spanish conquistadors, this ingot would seem to be a material manifestation of the destiny and demise of the Mexica metallurgical tradition. We know, however, that this was not so. The descendants of “the silversmiths of the great Montezuma” continued to practice their art in Azcapotzalco throughout the colonial period. At first they made fine jewelry for the peninsular- and American-born Spaniards, even for the viceroy himself. But during the mid-seventeenth century, as economic conditions worsened, these artisans began to manufacture bronze bells, nails, hinges, and artillery pieces; nevertheless, today in Azcapotzalco, some precious metalsmith workshops still survive, and they serve as a reminder of the great tradition born on the shores of Lake Texcoco.

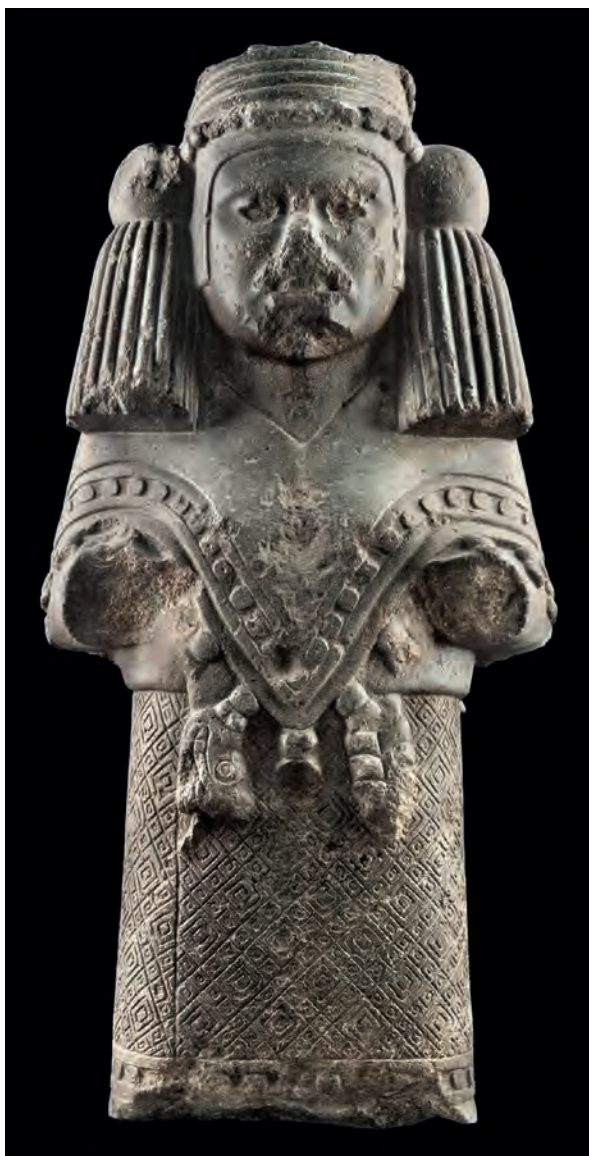
Acknowledgments

We dedicate this essay to Frannie Berdan and Elizabeth Boone, and we would also like to acknowledge the assistance of numerous colleagues and friends, among them Frannie Berdan, David Carrasco, Laura Filloy, Timothy King, Alfredo López Austin, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Bertina Olmedo, Joanne Pillsbury, Kim Richter, Nicklas Schulze, Moisés Torres Montúfar, and Enrique Vela, in addition to Scott Sessions for translating our Spanish text into English.

Notes

1. Cortés 1963, 69–70; Díaz del Castillo (1568) 1908–16, 2: 84–85; Díaz del Castillo and Ramírez Cabañas (1568) 1969, 164–65; Tapia 1866, 579; Sahagún (1575–77) 1950–82, bk. 12, 45–46; Durán (1581) 1984, 2: 542–44.
2. Díaz del Castillo (1568) 1908–16, 2: 84–85; Díaz del Castillo and Ramírez Cabañas (1568) 1969, 164.
3. Cortés 1963, 69–70. Based on Haring (1915, 435n1), 162,000 pesos were equivalent to 677 kilograms of gold.
4. According to Mayer (1998, 65), both treasures together contained 7,900 kilograms of gold. Marfounine (1988, 152) calculated 6,752 kilograms of gold, equivalent to 1,615,311 pesos. See also Pillsbury, “Luminous Power,” this volume.
5. Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés 1959, 1: 156–58.
6. Aguilar Piedra 1946, 15; Emmerich 1965, 138–39; Langenscheidt 2009, 132–34; Sánchez Nava 2009, 31.
7. Panczner 1987, 209–16; Terrones Langone 1986, 104–5; Langenscheidt 2009, 134, figs. 7–8; Sánchez Nava 2009, 31.
8. Aguilar Piedra 1946, 15; Rivet and Arsandaux 1946, 182; Caso 1969, 80–81; León-Portilla 1978, 7; N. Schultze 2008, 196; Torres Montúfar 2011, 118.
9. Langenscheidt 2009, 133–34; Sánchez Nava 2009, 31.
10. Emmerich 1965, 146; Boone 1989, 54.
11. See, for example, Berdan 1992b, 293–95.
12. López Luján and Ruvalcaba Sil 2015, 22–23. See also López Luján 2005.
13. López Luján 2006, 1: 188.
14. Caso 1969, 133; Lothrop 1952, 107; Torres Montes and Franco Velázquez 1989, 225, 253.
15. Saville 1920; Aguilar Piedra 1946; D. Easby 1957, 1969; León-Portilla 1978; Berdan 1987; Klein 1993; Baquedano 2005; Torres Montúfar 2011.
16. Díaz del Castillo (1568) 1908–16, 2: 128; 1969, 184.
17. Cortés 1963, 64–65. See also Díaz del Castillo (1568) 1908–16, 2: 127–30; Díaz del Castillo and Ramírez Cabañas (1568) 1969, 184–87; Berdan 1987, 162–67, 167n8.
18. Saville 1920, 108–9; León-Portilla 1978, 31–32; Berdan 1987, 162–67; Torres Montúfar 2011, 75–85.

19. Codex Mendoza (1542) 1992.
20. Torres Montúfar 2011, 64–69; for examples, see Durán (1581) 1984, 2: 297, 306, 323, 328, 341.
21. Berdan 1987, 176–78; Torres Montúfar 2011, 85–105, 109–11.
22. Sahagún (1575–77) 1950–82, bk. 9, 2.
23. Díaz del Castillo (1568) 1908–16, 2: 73; Díaz del Castillo and Ramírez Cabañas (1568) 1969, 159–60; Cortés 1963, 72; Durán (1581) 1984, 2: 236.
24. Sahagún (1575–77) 2000, 755.
25. Díaz del Castillo (1568) 1908–16, 2: 65–67; Díaz del Castillo and Ramírez Cabañas (1568) 1969, 156–57; Sahagún (1575–77) 1950–82, bk. 9, 76; 2000, 762, 1192.
26. Durán (1581) 1984, 2: 323.
27. Díaz del Castillo (1568) 1908–16, 2: 137–44, 4: 35; Díaz del Castillo and Ramírez Cabañas (1568) 1969, 188–92, 278.
28. López Luján and Ruvalcaba Sil 2015, 43–48. The other half of the settlement was known as Tepanecapan.
29. Sahagún (1575–77) 1950–82, bk. 9, 69, 73–78, bk. 10, 25–26; 2000, 873–74. See also Seler 1892, 401–18; Lothrop 1952, 16–19; D. Easby 1957; 1969, 348, 361–65; Caso 1969, 75–80; León-Portilla 1978, 26–27; Torres Montúfar 2011, 169–72.
30. Aguilar Piedra 1946, 25; Torres Montúfar 2011, 5–10.
31. Torres Montúfar 2011, 10–15.
32. Torres Montúfar 2011, 22–33.
33. For example, Durán (1581) 1984, 2: 151, 172, 341. See also Berdan 1987, 174–75; Torres Montúfar 2011, 48–74.
34. Saville 1920, 102–3; Rivet and Arsandaux 1946, 180–82; Emmerich 1965, 137–39; Caso 1969, 74; Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1983, 152; Feest 1990; Young-Sánchez 1996, 103.
35. López Luján and Ruvalcaba Sil 2015, 22–38.
36. See López Austin and López Luján 2009, 229–468.
37. Matos Moctezuma 1981, 50. See also López Austin and López Luján 2009, 207–14.
38. Respectively, the god of frost; an aspect of the fertility god Xipe Totec; and the goddess of filth.
39. López Luján 2005, 81–115; 2006, 1: 225–55.
40. Chávez Balderas et al. 2010; López Luján and Aguirre Molina 2010; López Luján and Chávez Balderas 2010.
41. López Luján et al. 2014, 50.
42. López Luján 2005, 172–83; 2006, 1: 244–53; Chávez Balderas 2007; López Austin and López Luján 2009, 403–7.
43. Grinberg, Grinberg, and Torres 1976.
44. The acronym derives from “Sistema de Análisis No Destructivo por Rayos X.” See Ruvalcaba Sil et al. 2010.
45. López Luján and Ruvalcaba Sil 2015, 38–43.
46. For example, Durán (1581) 1984, 2: 297.
47. For example, Durán (1581) 1984, 2: 341.
48. Ruvalcaba Sil et al. 2009; Peñuelas Guerrero et al. 2011.
49. Nicholson 1982, 232–38.
50. Caso 1969, 83–133.



207 (Obverse)



207 (Reverse)

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Chalchiuhtlicue

ca. AD 1500
Aztec; Mexico, Mexico City
Diorite
85 × 37 × 25 cm (33⁷/₁₆ × 14⁹/₁₆ × 9¹³/₁₆ in.)
Mexico City, Museo Nacional de Antropología, 10-82215
Secretaría de Cultura—INAH

Chalchiuhtlicue was the *teotl* (god) identified with lakes, rivers, and moving waters. Her name, “Jade Her Skirt,” speaks of the close identification of precious greenstones (*chalchihuitl*) with life-giving waters. As is common in sculpted representations of Chalchiuhtlicue, she is depicted wearing a *quechquemiltl*, a women’s garment draped over the shoulders, edged with greenstone beads and tassels. Though commonly worn by Totonac, Mixtec, and Zapotec women, the *quechquemiltl*, among the Nahuas, was a foreign Huastec garment

restricted to ritual uses.¹ Her skirt, or *cueitl*, which is secured with a rattlesnake belt, bears a distinctive design of squares set in a diamond grid, known as the *xiuhtlalpilli* turquoise mosaic design, most famously used on the Mexica ruler’s cape.² This design appears in codices as a visual descriptor of turquoise mosaic objects and is composed of round greenstone beads set in a grid of dotted squares. On Chalchiuhtlicue’s skirt, this design underscores the garment’s identification with the *teotl*’s name and visually embodies the flowing movement and sparkling blue-green of an expanse of water in the turquoise textile.

Xihuítl often is distinguished from *chalchihuitl*, as the former is identified as turquoise and the latter as jadeite or greenstone; however, in this context, *xihuítl* represents a type of *chalchihuitl*. The round greenstone beads’ inclusion as a component of the *xiuhtlalpilli* design and Aztec viewers’ recognition of the turquoise design as a representation of the name Chalchiuhtlicue reveal the closeness of jadeite and turquoise in Nuhua

conceptualizations of these precious blue-green materials. —AC

1. Olko 2014, 146–47.
2. Olko 2014, 86; Magaloni Kerpel 2014, 42–43, fig. 19.

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Mask with Serpent Earrings and Bells

AD 1375–1427
Mexico; Mexico, Mexico City, Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, Phase II, Offering 34, Artifact 1a
Silver
4.9 × 4.5 cm (1¹⁵/₁₆ × 1³/₄ in.)
Mexico City, Museo del Templo Mayor, 10-168843
Secretaría de Cultura—INAH

Silver, called *iztac teocuitlatl* (“white divine excrement”) in Nahuatl and symbolically associated with the moon,¹ was rarely used in

Mesoamerican metalworking. Although sixteenth-century sources mention its sale in the most important markets of the Aztec Empire, it is significant that—contrary to gold and copper—silver does not appear in the lists of items periodically paid in tribute to Tenochtitlan. Archaeological findings likewise attest to this scarcity: after forty years of excavations at the Templo Mayor, only this small silver piece has been recovered.²

Specialists still debate whether this visage corresponds to that of a monkey (linked to Ehecatl, the god of wind, or Xochipilli, the god of music) or to that of Xipe Totec, a deity associated with vegetation and war. Most recently, it has been reinterpreted as the effigy of Yacateuctli, patron of commerce and travelers.³ Usually depicted with a prominent nose and a black-and-white face, this god was one of the aspects of Quetzalcoatl and symbolized the setting sun's transformation into Venus.⁴ The earrings here are traversed by serpents, which may have served as conduits for wind transporting the soul of the deceased.⁵ This object appeared together with a golden bell pendant (see cat. 209) in Offering 34 at the Templo Mayor, a funerary deposit buried inside the patron god Huitzilopochtli's shrine. —LLL

1. Roskamp 2010, 7.
2. Compositional analysis: 96% silver, 3.5% copper, 0.5% gold; weight: 10.4 g.
3. Karl Taube, personal communication, 2016.
4. Graulich 1990, 424.
5. Taube 2003, 433–34.

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Olive-Shaped Bell Pendant with *Ollin* Symbol

AD 1375–1427

Mexica; Mexico, Mexico City, Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, Phase II, Offering 34, Artifact 1b

Gold

2.7 × 2.2 cm (1¹/₁₆ × 7⁷/₁₆ in.)

Mexico City, Museo del Templo Mayor, 10-168844
Secretaría de Cultura—INAH

This cast bell is finely decorated with false filigree in the form of spheres, simple coils, and the double spiral known as *xonecuilli* (a rain and astral symbol); the *ollin* (movement) symbol is depicted above the resonator.¹ A similar object appears in the Codex Magliabechiano as part of the funerary offering dedicated to a merchant.²

The piece was discovered, together with a small silver mask (see cat. 208) and human skeletal remains, inside an obsidian cinerary urn with the effigy of Mictlanteuctli, the god of death.³ According to bioarchaeological analysis, the cremated remains include the cranium of an individual between twenty-one and twenty-four years of age whose corpse was found in Offering 39, an adjacent deposit. Because these remains were placed at the top of the Templo Mayor, they may



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belong to one of the early Mexica sovereigns. The funerary offering's otherwise modest deposits and historical accounts claiming that Acamapichtli and Huitzililhuitl died at advanced ages, however, have generated uncertainty. In the case of Chimalpopoca, his exact age at time of death is not known, but apparently he well exceeded twenty-four years. —LLL

1. Compositional analysis: 80.1% gold, 13.9% silver, and 6% copper; weight: 7.1 g.
2. Codex Magliabechiano 1983, 68r.
3. López Luján 2005, 172–83; Chávez Balderas 2007.



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210

Bead with Serpent and Star Motif

AD 1469–81

Mexica; Mexico, Mexico City, Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, Phase IVb, Offering 3

Gold

Diam: 1.7 cm (1¹/₁₆ in.)

Mexico City, Museo del Templo Mayor, 10-263402
Secretaría de Cultura—INAH

Representing two intertwined serpents and a star, this bead was cast via the lost-wax method, with false-filigree and false-granulation techniques—which means that each minute detail had to be elaborated in the wax model rather than soldered on postcasting, as was typical in the Old World.¹ This level of precision and the excellence of the product reveal the mastery of



215.1



215.2



215.4



215.3

copper, and shell—was attached to a sacrificial flint knife that personified Quetzalcoatl, the creator and Wind God.³

We also found dozens of cast gold bells that formed anklets around the claws of a male golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) and the hind paws of a female Mexican wolf (*Canis lupus baileyi*). In addition to the anklets, this canine wore two wooden, turquoise mosaic earrings, a necklace with sixty-four greenstone beads, and a belt with twenty-three *Oliva* shells.⁴ —LLL

1. López Luján and Chávez Balderas 2010. Cat. 249.1 was found to contain 77.2% gold, 21.9% silver, and 0.9% copper; cat. 249.2, 73.8%–74.5% gold, 24.5%–25.2% silver, and 0.97%–1.02% copper; cat. 249.3, 76.7% gold, 22.2% silver, and 1.09% copper; and cat. 249.4, 83.7%–84.6% gold, 13.9%–14.6% silver, and 1.25%–1.71% copper.

2. Codex Magliabechiano 1983, 55r.

3. Chávez Balderas et al. 2010; López Luján and Aguirre Molina 2010.

4. López Luján et al. 2014.

216

Pair of Fire Serpent Ornaments

ca. AD 1500

Mexica; Mexico, Mexico City, Calle de las Escalerillas

Gold

L: 16.1 cm (6 $\frac{5}{16}$ in.)

Mexico City, Museo Nacional de Antropología, 10-594810,

10-3302

Secretaría de Cultura—INAH

In 1900, the Mexican archaeologist Leopoldo Batres excavated these gold ornaments in the Calle de las Escalerillas, near the Mexica Templo Mayor.¹ They were formed by hammering gold into sheets, cutting out the desired forms, and then embossing the details. Based on the distinctive segmented tails, the serpent ornaments can be identified as depictions of Xiuhcoatl (“Fire-Turquoise Serpent”).

This deity has its Classic-period antecedent in Teotihuacan’s War Serpent.² Continuing this association with warfare during the Late Postclassic period, the Mexicas’ patron god, Huitzilopochtli, carried a Xiuhcoatl spear-thrower. —KNR

1. Batres 1902, 22–24.

2. Taube 2012, 121.



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Effigy Mask of Coyolxauhqui

ca. AD 1500
Mexico; Mexico
Greenstone
10.5 × 14.5 × 4 cm (4¹/₈ × 5¹¹/₁₆ × 1⁵/₁₆ in.)
Cambridge, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology,
Harvard University, 28-40-20/C10108

Prominent bells on the cheeks of this mask, representing a disembodied head, reveal its identity: Coyolxauhqui (“She Who Has Facial Painting with Bells”), the sister of Huitzilopochtli (“Hummingbird(s) Left/South”),¹ the Mexicas’ patron god. Coyolxauhqui and her four hundred brothers, the Centzonhuitznahua (“Four Hundred Southerners”), attacked their mother, Coatlicue (“Serpent Skirt”), after she miraculously conceived while sweeping on the mountain Coatepetl.² Huitzilopochtli emerged from his mother’s womb fully armed with his Xiuhcoatl (“Fire-Turquoise Serpent”) spear-thrower, fending off the attack and slaying his siblings. Coyolxauhqui’s dismembered body rolled down the hill and came to rest.

Although this myth represents the daily cosmological struggle between the moon and the sun—for Coyolxauhqui is the Moon Goddess and Huitzilopochtli is the Sun God³—it had political overtones as well. The Mexicas constructed their main temple, the Templo Mayor, as a symbolic

representation of Coatepetl and dedicated it to Tlaloc (the Rain God) and Huitzilopochtli (see Caplan, this volume).⁴ At the foot of Huitzilopochtli’s side of the double-pyramid platform was a monumental relief depicting Coyolxauhqui’s broken body. When victims—often captives taken in battle—were sacrificed at the summit of the temple platform, their discarded bodies landed on this relief. As representations of a defeated enemy, sculptures of Coyolxauhqui would have reminded potentially rebellious groups within the Aztec Empire of the consequences of defying their overlords.⁵

Like its monumental counterparts, this sculpture features the deity’s iconic gold ornaments: the bells on the cheeks and the ear pendants. The latter are composed of a round earspool with a dangling trapeze-and-ray sign, which represents the tail of Xiuhcoatl, thus associating Coyolxauhqui with war and alluding to the radiant nature of this Moon Goddess.⁶ Recent excavations at the Templo Mayor have unearthed her gold ornaments in Offering 167 (see cat. 218). The carved feathers on her head mark Coyolxauhqui as a sacrificial victim, while the closed eyes indicate that she is dead; holes on the side of the mask would have allowed for suspension. —KNR

1. Karttunen 1992, 91.
2. Sahagún (1575–77) 1950–82, bk. 3, 1–5.
3. Seler 1902–23, 3: 318–21.
4. Matos Moctezuma 1987.
5. Klein 1988.
6. Aguilera García 2001, 17.



218.1



218.2

218

218.1

Pair of Ear Ornaments

AD 1486–1502
Mexico; Mexico, Mexico City, Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan,
Phase VI, Offering 167, Artifacts 2 and 91
Gold
8.8 × 4.2 cm (3⁷/₁₆ × 1⁵/₈ in.)
Mexico City, Museo del Templo Mayor, 10-654075, 10-654076
Secretaría de Cultura—INAH

218.2

Pair of Pear-Shaped Bell Pendants

AD 1486–1502
Mexico; Mexico, Mexico City, Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan,
Phase VI, Offering 167, Artifacts 100 and 233
Gold
2 × 0.9 cm (13¹/₁₆ × 3⁷/₈ in.)
Mexico City, Museo del Templo Mayor, 10-654077, 10-654078
Secretaría de Cultura—INAH

218.3

Heart-Shaped Pendant

AD 1486–1502
Mexico; Mexico, Mexico City, Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan,
Phase VI, Offering 167, Artifact 263
Gold
4.1 × 2.6 cm (1⁵/₈ × 1 in.)
Mexico City, Museo del Templo Mayor, 10-654079
Secretaría de Cultura—INAH



218.3



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The Templo Mayor was the terrestrial representation of Coatepetl (“Mountain of Serpents”), a mythical setting where Coatlicue, an earth goddess, gave birth to Huitzilopochtli, the Sun God, right at the moment when she was about to be assassinated by her daughter, Coyolxauhqui, the Moon Goddess. The first diurnal and nocturnal confrontation then ensued: Huitzilopochtli was victorious, and Coyolxauhqui’s dead body fell from the top of the mountain. This myth explains why the Mexicas placed at the base of their main pyramid at least two large sculptures—one corresponding to Phase IVa and the other to Phase IVb—of a decapitated and dismembered Coyolxauhqui.

In 2015, in the same section of the building, though dated to Phase VI, archaeologists discovered an offering that contained the earrings and gold bells of Coyolxauhqui. Perhaps to denote the goddess’s defeat, the priest who interred the objects surrounded them with obsidian projectile points and sacrificial flint knives. He also placed four sheet-gold representations of hearts, alluding to the vital organs of the goddess and her astral

siblings, who, according to myth,¹ were devoured by Huitzilopochtli. One of the hearts had been intentionally deformed, perhaps to signify that Coyolxauhqui was “perverse” and “bad,” as inferred by the words *yolochico*, *yollonecuil*, and *yollocuecuech* (“crooked,” “bent,” and “twisted heart”), or to “offend her” magically, as conveyed in the literal sense of the verb *teyolitlacoa* (“to damage someone’s heart”).² —LLL

1. Alvarado Tezozómoc 1975, 33–34.
2. Burkhart 1989, 28–29, 177.

219

Mosaic Disk

AD 1502–20
Mexico; Mexico, Mexico City, Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, Phase VII, Offering 99
Turquoise
Diam.: 38.3 cm (15 $\frac{1}{16}$ in.)
Mexico City, Museo del Templo Mayor, 10-604439
Secretaría de Cultura—INAH

Turquoise was one of the minerals used most widely by the Mexicas for making mosaics; its great value stemmed from its foreign and exotic character. Associated with fire, time, royal power, and political succession, this lithic material was employed to make insignia of some Nahua deities, and it was an emblem of power or a prestige item for Tenochca elites. Among the thousands of turquoise objects found at the Templo Mayor, only the mosaic disk from Offering 99 depicts seven figures dressed as warriors or gods similar to the Mixteca-Puebla tradition. Nevertheless, when this disk is compared with



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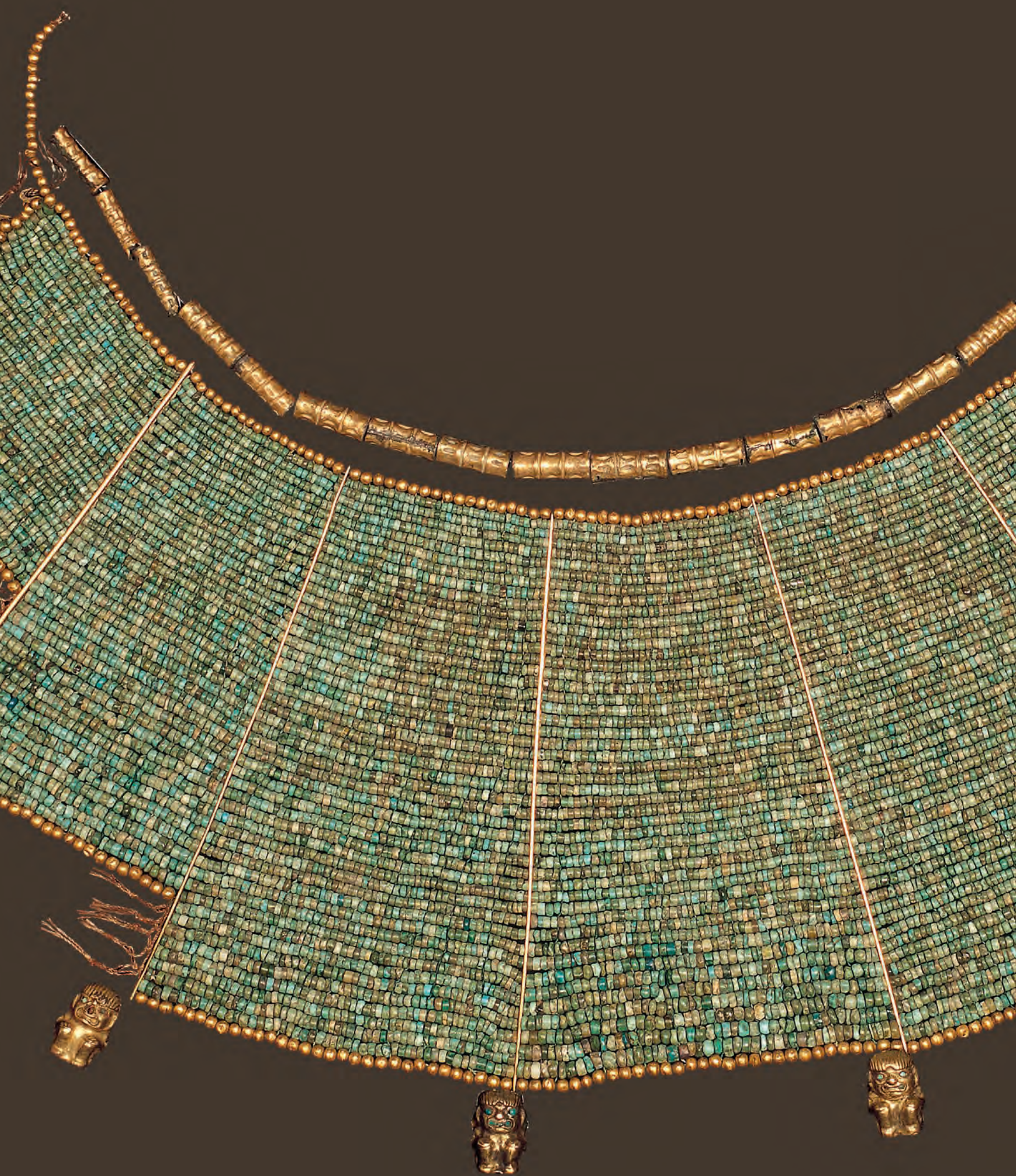
Golden Kingdoms

Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas

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Edited by Joanne Pillsbury, Timothy Potts, and Kim N. Richter

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Luxury Arts in
the Ancient Americas

The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Getty Research Institute ■ Los Angeles

This publication is issued on the occasion of the exhibition *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury and Legacy in the Ancient Americas*, on view at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, from September 16, 2017, through January 28, 2018, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from February 27 through May 28, 2018.

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Jacket: Pectoral, AD 200–900, Nahuange, Museo del Oro, Banco de la República; see also cat. 88.

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Upper left: Serpent Labret with Articulated Tongue, AD 1300–1521, Aztec, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; see also cat. 205.

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Lower left: Plaque, AD 700–800, Maya, Dumbarton Oaks, Pre-Columbian Collection; see also cat. 150.

Lower right: Ear Ornament, Winged Runner, AD 400–700, Moche, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; see also cat. 21.

Page i: Lime Container in the Shape of a Jaguar, 100 BC–AD 800, Calima-Yotoco, Museo del Oro, Banco de la República; see also cat. 81.

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