

MOCTEZUMA II: MAN, MYTH, AND EMPIRE

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When the Spanish Conquest of Mexico began with Hernán Cortés' first landfall at Veracruz in 1519, Moctezuma II (Fig 1) was in the process of consolidating an empire that embraced a large swathe of central Mexico. He is perhaps best known for his role in the subsequent turbulent events surrounding the Conquest, before meeting his death under mysterious circumstances. Moctezuma's fame has, nevertheless, been projected down the centuries through texts and images so that it still resonates today. The British Museum traces this extraordinary biographical narrative in 'Moctezuma: Aztec Ruler' - the fourth and final exhibition in a series exploring the role of renowned leaders in world history.

Moctezuma's great-grandfather Moctezuma I had been the sixth ruler (r. 1440-1469). Following the death of his uncle Ahuitzotl who ruled from 1486 until 1502, Moctezuma II was elected ninth *huey tlatoani* - 'Ruling Lord' or 'Great Speaker' - referring to the rhetorical skills demanded of those who held high office. From 1502 until 1520, Moctezuma held sway as the Ruling Lord of the Aztecs who are now more correctly referred to as the Mexica (the people and culture we know as 'Aztec' referred to themselves as the Mexica - pronounced Me-shee-ka). Like his predecessors Moctezuma gave a fresh impetus to the growth of the imperial capital Tenochtitlan commissioning monumental sculptures that formed part of an ambitious programme of public architecture. This article identifies some of those artefacts that have survived and that help convey an understanding of the nature of his rulership - how he sought to be portrayed at the height of his powers and how his public visibility was managed and manipulated.

Moctezuma's investiture in 1502-3 followed prescribed protocols that unfolded over many months. After initial ceremonies at the Great Temple and in the palace, Moctezuma was called upon to wage a 'coronation war'. This was a military campaign designed to secure captives for sacrifice to the gods and to prove his skills and bravery in the battlefield. Evidence of Moctezuma's journey can be seen in a large carved outcrop in the foothills of Mt Iztaccihuatl known as the Acameca Stone.

Upon his return to Tenochtitlan in a triumphal parade, Moctezuma was duly enthroned in a ceremony that lasted several days. He was crowned

with the *xiuhuitzollí*, the triangular turquoise diadem that served as an emblem of royal rulership, and was also adopted by Moctezuma as the principal element in his name glyph. Much of the information we have about the investiture is derived from later secondary colonial sources, however there is one surviving archaeological object known as the Coronation Stone that probably commemorates this important event. This large rectangular stone slab is carved on both sides as well as on its edges (Fig 2). On the underside, the date 1 Rabbit marks the beginning of time in Mexica beliefs. The four edges of the monument are carved with images of Tlaltecuhltli, the Earth Goddess, who crouches with open upturned jaws waiting to be nourished by sacrificial blood. Flanking each, Tlaltecuhltli are symbols for fire-water (*teoatl-tlachinolli*), invoking the sacred obligation to wage war and make sacrifices. On the upper surface of the stone a cosmogram of the universe is complemented by two glyph dates, 1 Crocodile and 11 Reed, which can be read as 15 July 1503, the date thought to represent the culmination of Moctezuma's coronation.

To display his new-found political prestige Moctezuma ordered the construction of a new palace, nearly all traces of which were erased soon after the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521. Its original location, lying adjacent to the Sacred Precinct in the heart of the city, can be deduced from colonial representations and their accompanying textual accounts. The first western map accompanying the letters by Cortés to Charles V depicts a broad plan of the 'city in the lake' (Fig 7).

Sculptures and architectural fragments have been excavated from the foundations of Moctezuma's Palace that lie buried beneath the National Palace (see *Minerva*, November/December 2008, pp. 5-6). One such surviving sculpture is the formidable quadrangular sculpted head of a serpent that recalls the archaic Xochicalca style (Fig 8). The feathered ruff around its neck, alludes to Quetzalcoatl, or 'feathered serpent', the legendary ruler of Tula. Mexica rulers, including Moctezuma, made constant reference to Tula, revisiting the abandoned site to copy its art style and iconography. Mexica sculptors also left an imprint of their presence in the form of an image of the water goddess Chalchiutlicue and the culture hero Ce Acatl Topiltzin on a nearby cliff-face (Fig 9).

Another impressive sculpture is the large, skillfully executed tail of a rattle

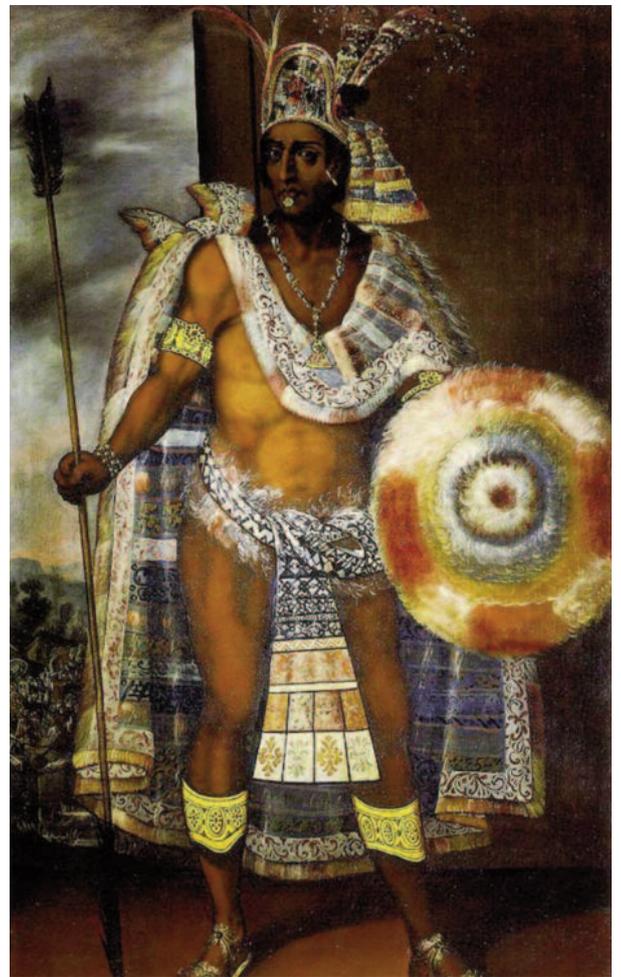


Fig 1. Portrait of Moctezuma by Antonio Rodríguez. Oil on canvas, 1680-97. 180 x 165cm. Museo degli Argenti, Florence © Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali.

Fig 2. Coronation Stone of Moctezuma, Art Institute of Chicago, early 16th century. 22.8 x 67.3 x 57.7cm. © Art Institute of Chicago.



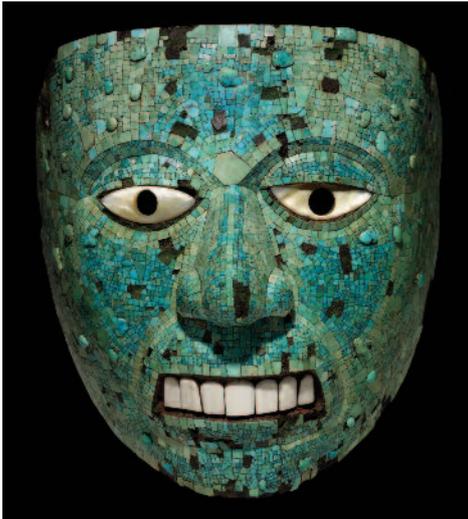


Fig 4. Wooden mask encrusted with turquoise and shell, possibly representing Tonatiuh. Mexico, 15th or 16th century. H. 19.5cm. W. 12.5cm. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig 5. Wooden mask encrusted with turquoise and shell, representing the rain god Tlaloc. Mexico, 15th or 16th century. H. 19.5cm. W. 12.5cm. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig 6. Wooden mask encrusted with turquoise and shell, thought to represent the god Tezcatlipoca, or possibly Mictlantecutli. Mexico, 15th or 16th century. H. 19.5cm, W. 12.5cm. © Trustees of the British Museum.

snake (Fig 11). This stone sculpture was once covered with a thin layer of stucco and brightly painted. From the serpent's scales six ears of corn emerge, reflecting its importance as a staple food. The serpent sculpture might in fact represent Chicomecóatl, the goddess of corn and provider of sustenance. This monumental sculpture conceivably guarded the entrance to the palace granaries where the food was kept for redistribution in times of drought and famine. Numerous storage houses were located in the palace precinct proclaiming Moctezuma's control over the wealth and resources of the empire (Fig 10).

Moctezuma's public visibility and image were carefully controlled and he was presented to his people as a semi-divine figure and model to be followed by the Mexica nation. His divine status granted him special relations with the gods, and it was through his deeds and intervention that the wellbeing of his people and the stability of the cosmos were assured.

Moctezuma was portrayed in anthropomorphic form as a figure costumed with regalia identifying him as a personified deity. His name glyph on certain monuments identifies these as having been commissioned by him and asserts his symbolic presence. The standardised glyph is composed of an assemblage of recognisable elements: a triangular gold diadem inlaid with turquoise mosaic set against short, straight hair and ear spool, plus a nose ornament and double speech scroll.

Several stone caskets, or *tepetlacalli*, with representations of Moctezuma's glyph have survived. One example shows his glyph-name on the inside of the lid, indicating that this was a treasured personal object belonging to the ruler. In another scene the glyph and the anthropomorphic representation of Moctezuma are found together. Moctezuma is depicted as a seated figure performing self-sacrifice by piercing his earlobe with a maguey spine, while on the opposite side of the box, the god Quetzalcoatl is performing the

same rituals (Fig 12). Moctezuma is represented here as mediator between the nocturnal forces. He is feeding the Earth Goddess, who is carved on the underside of the casket, with his own sacrificial blood. Thus Moctezuma becomes a central player in the cosmic order and through his ritual actions ensures cosmic balance.

A number of major sculpted monuments reveal how Moctezuma's image is linked to significant cosmic events. On the front of the so-called Teocalli of Sacred Warfare two standing figures flank the solar disk (Figs 14, 15). On the left stands Huitzilopochtli, the tribal god of the Mexica; to the right stands Moctezuma, identified by his name glyph and adorned with a Chichimec headdress and cloak, alluding to his royal origins. Both figures grasp the spines used to draw their own blood. The image leaves no doubt that Moctezuma is positioned on a par with the divinities and performing a vital role in cosmic affairs. The symbol for

Fig 7 (below left). Nuremberg Map, from: from: Hernán Cortés, *Cartas de relación, Nuremberg 1524, Paper. 35 x 65cm.*

Fig 8 (below). Stone serpent head from Mexico City, 15th or 16th century. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. 55.5 x 55.5 x 64cm. © Museo Nacional de Antropología.





burning water, for burning water (*teoatl-tlachinolli*) emerges from his mouth underlining his demand for warfare and sacrifices to be able to feed the Earth Goddess and to allow the sun to be re-born every day after its journey through the underworld. Moreover, Moctezuma stands above the date 2 Reed, one of the calendar dates flanking the staircase in the front of this monument. Huitzilopochtli is placed above the glyph 1 Rabbit. Those dates respectively mark the celebration of the New Fire Ceremony, which fell in 1507 (2 Reed) during Moctezuma's reign. The New Fire ceremony, or *xiuhmolpilli*, literally translated as 'the binding of years', was held at the end of each 52-year cycle when the inter-meshed solar and divinatory calendars began the cycle anew. Another magnificent sculpture, a coiled Xiuh-coatl or fire serpent worked in diorite, bears Moctezuma's glyph on its underside above the date 2 Reed. Here the message is condensed into just the two glyphs declaring that Moctezuma was the patron of the 1507 New Fire Ceremony.

Another huge circular monolith reinforces the responsibility of the Mexica ruler to control and maintain the cycles of time. This is the so-called Sun Stone (Fig 16), which probably

once stood in the Sacred Precinct of Tenochtitlan and has Moctezuma's name-glyph carved on the top left side of the solar disk next to the date 1 Flint. At its centre is the frontal face of a deity with clawed limbs embedded within the glyph for 4-Movement that represents the present era or Sun. This central image perhaps symbolises the sun in the sub-earthly realm. Around one decorative band run the 20-day glyphs of the 260 day calendar encapsulating the need to maintain the solar circle and the sacrifices required to ensure its daily return.

Direct in-situ evidence for Moctezuma's presence is difficult to find in the archaeological record. An exception is possibly the last work commissioned by Moctezuma, his sculpted portrait at Chapultepec Hill. Following a tradition begun by his great-grandfather Moctezuma I, all subsequent Mexica rulers carved their portraits/images in the bedrock of Chapultepec Hill. Moctezuma's image seems to have been executed around 1519, shortly before the traumatic events that would irrevocably alter the world as he knew it. He is portrayed as a standing frontal figure, fully armed and dressed with the flayed skin traditionally worn by the god Xipe Totec, a god of war, and renewal (Fig 17). His image is flanked

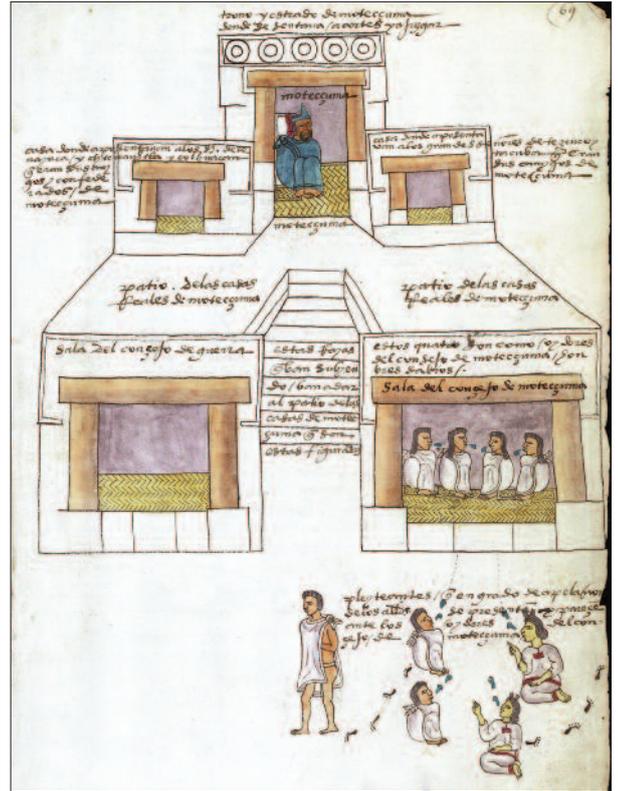


Fig 9 (above left). Rock relief of the water goddess Chalchiuhtlicue (at left) with Ce Acatl Topiltzin (at right) at Cerro de la Malinche, Tula, 50km north-west of Mexico City, c. AD 1200-1400.

Fig 10 (above). Folio 69 of the Codex Mendoza depicting Moctezuma in his palace, 16th century. 30 x 21cm. © Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

by six glyphs, which probably mark the major events in his reign. The date 1 Crocodile probably refers to his coronation ceremony. Above it the Moctezuma glyph name is carved speaking the symbol for burning-water, war and sacrifices. On top of it the glyph 2 Reed, bound by a rope, refers again to the major New Fire Ceremony that took place during his reign. On the other side of the figure two of the glyphs are considerably defaced, but the date 1 Reed is clearly seen at the top. This reinforces the close relationship of the ruler with the god Quetzalcoatl, and might commemorate 1519. This was the fateful

Fig 11 (below left). Basalt serpent tail with maize cobs, CONACULTA-INAH, Mexico, 15th or 16th century. 99.8 x 56 x 138cm. © Museo Nacional de Antropología.

Fig 12. Stone Hackmack Casket depicting Moctezuma, Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg, 16th century. 15 x 33.5 x 21cm. © Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg.





year when foreigners set foot in Moctezuma's domain.

Moctezuma was the political, economic, and military leader of the empire, but he chose to immortalise his figure as a semi-divine ruler and key player in maintaining the stability of the cosmos and the human relationship with divine forces. Surviving Mexica monuments show how he was portrayed at his time; as a complex and multi-faceted figure that led the Mexica empire in their ideological and religious pursuits. Later colonial images downplayed the religious and divine aspects of his rulership and emphasised his political role. Moctezuma's palace was dismantled and destroyed soon after the Conquest, and the Palace of the Spanish Viceroy was constructed on top as a clear statement of the superimposition of powers. Subsequently, after Mexican Independence, it became the Palacio Nacional, today the centre of governance in Mexico. ■

'Moctezuma: Aztec Ruler' runs at the British Museum 24 September - 24 January. A catalogue of the same name is available, edited by Colin McEwan and Leonardo López Luján (British Museum Press, 2009. 320pp, 230 colour illustrations. Hardback, £40. Paperback, £25).

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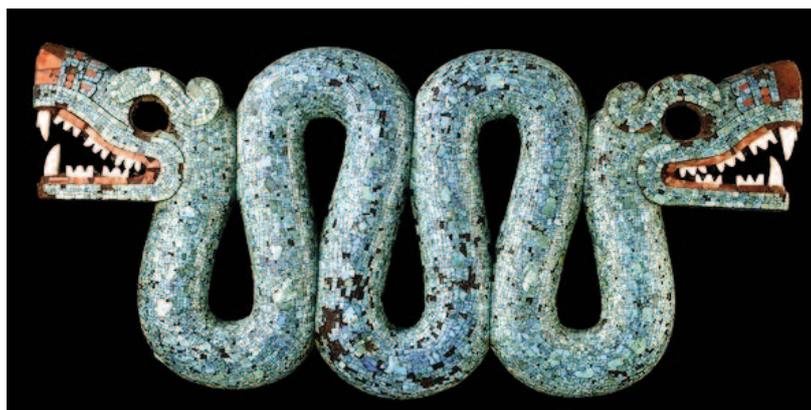
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Figs 14, 15 (above and left). Stone Teocalli of Sacred Warfare, discovered in 1831 in the foundations of the National Palace of Mexico, 15th or 16th century. 123 x 92 x 100cm. CONACULTA-INAH, Mexico. © Museo Nacional de Antropología.

Fig 16 (left). Sun Stone, discovered at El Zócalo in the centre of Mexico City in 1790. CONACULTA-INAH, Mexico, 15th or 16th century. Diam. 3.6m. © Museo Nacional de Antropología.

Fig 17 (below left). Drawing of a 16th-century stone relief frontal portrait of Moctezuma II at Chapultepec Hill on the outskirts of Mexico City. Drawing: Jim Farrant.

Fig 18. Wood and turquoise mosaic of a double-headed serpent from Mexico. An icon of Mexica art, this striking object was probably worn on ceremonial occasions as a pectoral (an ornament worn on the chest), 15th-16th century AD. H. 20.5cm; W. 43cm. © Trustees of the British Museum.



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