

In Search of an Aztec King

In the heart of Mexico City archaeologists are following a trail of evidence that could lead them to a rare royal tomb.

By Johanna Tuckman

For an architectural summary of the drama of Mexican history you could do a lot worse than stand on the base of the Templo Mayor (Great Temple) pyramid at the heart of the capital. This battered memorial to the Aztecs stands defiantly in the shadow of the huge Catholic cathedral constructed by the Spanish Colonialists who crushed their empire in 1521. To one side stretches the huge National Palace, built on the site of the palaces of the Aztec kings and their Spanish Colonial successors, where Mexican presidents concentrated all branches of governmental power after independence three centuries later. One of the biggest squares in the world, the Zocalo, evokes images of the countless coups and the revolution that followed. And in the distance, obscured by the haze and smog, you can see the high-rise business and apartment buildings occupied by today's elites, reminding us who calls the shots in the modern world.

This tableau is so replete with symbols of power you are unlikely to notice a portacabin behind a barrier at the foot of the pyramid, where a small excavation is in progress. Here



This is one of the many serpent heads that once decorated the Templo Mayor pyramid. The Aztecs called their pyramid Huey Teocalli (Great Temple) and Coatepec (Hill of Serpents). Coatepec, according to Aztec mythology, is the place where the sun god Huitzilopochtli killed his lunar sister Coyolxauhqui.





LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN

Ximena Chávez cleans the Tlaltecuhтли monolith and takes samples that will be analyzed for traces of blood that suggest sacrificial offerings.

a team of some 15 workers is searching for the tomb of the great Aztec ruler King Ahuítzotl—as formidable a ruler as this land has ever produced. “The [Aztec] king was the representative of the sun on earth,” says Leonardo López Luján, the director of the Templo Mayor Project that has been excavating the pyramid and its environs for the past 30 years.

“Everything we are finding leads us to the conclusion that the first [Aztec] royal tomb ever found is probably below us,” he says. “The historical sources tell us that this is where the [Aztec] lords were buried. The archaeology says that there are cavities there; the geophysical evidence says the same.”

The son of one of Mexico’s foremost scholars of Mesoamerican culture, López Luján joined the Templo Mayor excavations as a young man when, he says, he had “hair and 40 pounds less weight.” He tends to qualify his enthusiasm with warnings against overconfidence, insisting that archaeologists are vulnerable to self-delusion when the possibility of a spectacular find appears to be at hand.

It all makes for an intense atmosphere at the site, despite López Luján’s easy manner and understated authority. The crew—a mixture of veterans of the project, rising stars of the national archaeology scene, and students—works in silence for much of the time. Focused on the immediate tasks of cleaning, registering, photographing, drawing, and then removing every item, however minor, the excitement of being on the verge of a major discovery is repressed. “Whenever you get too thrilled, it’s best to take a walk around the

block,” says Ximena Chávez, one of the supervisors. “You can then come back with a clear head and keep digging.”

Sixteenth-century accounts of the Aztec empire by Diego Durán, a Dominican friar, and Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, a grandchild of Aztec nobility, told of how the bodies of monarchs were wrapped in bundles of cloth and burnt on great funeral pyres below the Templo Mayor. They describe the subsequent burials nearby, accompanied by sacrificial victims and incredibly rich offerings to the gods.

BUT ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE TO CORROBORATE THESE ACCOUNTS

did not emerge until two structurally unstable houses on the site were slated for demolition. One was leveled in 1995 and a subsequent excavation revealed many items thought to be offerings to the gods, as well as part of the lower steps of the pyramid, which was razed by the Spanish, who built their own city on top of that of the defeated Aztecs. The second house was leveled in 2006, allowing for more extensive digging, although there was still no suggestion of a royal tomb until a monolith was accidentally discovered in October of 2006.

“It was without doubt one of the most important discoveries in the old center of Mexico City,” López Luján says of the beautifully carved 12-ton volcanic stone that is the biggest of three huge monoliths so far discovered in ruins of the old Aztec capital. It was also the first piece of physical evidence suggesting the presence of a royal tomb.

A relief of the deity Tlaltechutli completely covers the upper face of the monolith. In the Aztecs' complex pantheon, Tlaltechutli at times was portrayed as the start of the life-death cycle: the source of life for all living things, even the sun. On other occasions she represented the end of the cycle, devouring the dead as well as the very light of the day. Here she crouches down with human skulls carved on her knees and elbows, banners in her hair that represent death and sacrifice, and a stream of blood flowing into a lipless mouth. "This is the goddess of the earth in terrifying form with her mouth open so she can eat the sun every night," says López Luján. "It is a logical hypothesis that a royal tomb might have a funeral stone like this."

The monolith also contains a date carved between the claws of the goddess' right foot. Composed of a rabbit with two dots on one side and 10 dots on the other, the date in the Aztec calendar could represent the year Ten Rabbit, when King Ahuítzotl died. It could also be read as Twelve Rabbit, which was a year of a solar eclipse. If this were not confusing enough, the glyph could also be read as Two Rabbit, which is the name of a god who eclipsed the sun.

There is a hole in the center of the monolith that splits it into four huge pieces. The stone was found in a layer of construction associated with Ahuítzotl's reign from 1486 to 1502 and was covered over by work done by his successor, Moctezuma II. This all but rules out the possibility that the Tlaltechutli was smashed by marauding conquistadors who, having conquered the Aztecs, sought to obliterate their culture.

The monolith was removed last November and placed

in a cabin on the site for restoration. It is also being tested for the presence of iron and albumin, which would indicate sacrificial offerings of blood in accordance with common Aztec ritual practice. The strongest physical evidence for a tomb comes from remote sensing results that revealed anomalies below the monolith suggesting at least one, and perhaps three, chambers. Moving the monolith has allowed the archaeologists to excavate this area to determine if one or more tombs lie below.

By mid-February the team was uncovering flat stones at the edge of this area that they surmised could be the roof of a chamber. The fill also contains at least three stone boxes of offerings that at the time of writing had yet to be opened. López Luján, author of an award-winning book about Aztec offerings, describes them as "scaled-down models of the cosmos." Typically they involved a layer of sand, shells, coral, jade, and other objects associated with the aquatic underworld, followed by a second level containing terrestrial symbols such as crocodile skins and jaguar skeletons, and topped by a third of birds and other things associated with the sky.

Though the format is basic, the variety of the offerings is enormous. Fifteen thousand objects, including 350 different species of animals, have been found in the 145 offerings the archaeologists have recovered so far. "This demonstrates the power of the empire," says López Luján, alluding to the richness and variety of these objects brought from the far reaches of the Aztec kingdom. "The way each object is placed tells you something about the messages being sent to the gods."

The archaeologists are also excavating a square stone-



Leonardo López Luján excavates while lying on scaffolding placed over the area that was exposed by the removal of the monolith. The archaeologists use the scaffolding because they don't want to walk on what could be the roof of Ahuítzotl's tomb.

AZTEC RULERS

Acamapichtli
1375–1395

Huitzilihuitl
1396–1417
Acamapichtli's son

Chimalpopoca
1417–1427
Acamapichtli's son

Itzcoatl
1427–1440
Huitzilihuitl's son

Moctezuma Ilhuicamina
1440–1469
Huitzilihuitl's son

Axayácatl
1469–1481
Son of Chimalpopoca's son
and Moctezuma Ilhuicamina's
daughter

Tízoc
1481–1486
Axayácatl's brother

Ahuítzotl
1486–1502
Tízoc's brother

Moctezuma Xocoyotzin
1502–1520
Axayácatl's son

Cuitláhuac
1520
Axayácatl's son

Cuauhtémoc
1520–1521
Ahuítzotl's son

framed hole, discovered just to the west of where the Tlaltechutli monolith lay, that is assumed to have been an entranceway for people who performed ceremonies in the tomb. The entranceway is filled with mud, which has hindered the excavation. The archaeologists uncovered an offering near the top of the hole that included sharpened pieces of bone used for self-sacrificial bloodletting, copal incense bars, agave leaves, and greenstone beads on top of an undisturbed seal of lime and sand. "This is something completely new for us. We have never excavated a context like this," says López Luján. "But it is very similar to funerary structures excavated in other Mesoamerican civilizations."

THE NEED TO TURN TO OTHER CULTURES FOR CLUES IS NOT USUALLY necessary in Aztec archaeology, where the wealth of documentation informs interpretations of archaeological findings. This documentation includes the Aztec's own pictorial accounts of their origins in a mythical place called Aztlán and years of nomadism that ended in the mid-13th century when they arrived in a lake-filled mountain valley in what is now central Mexico. The tribe moved around the general area for a few more decades until they founded their capital, called Tenochtitlan, on a small island on the west side of Lake Texcoco in 1325.

An alliance with two neighboring tribes fostered peace and stability at home while Aztec warriors were dispatched to conquer and exact tribute from the peoples beyond the valley. The Imperial Period, usually dated from the ascension of Moctezuma I in 1440, marked the spread of the empire along the Gulf Coast. It reached its apogee under Ahuítzotl towards the end of the century. The eighth and most powerful of all Aztec rulers, Ahuítzotl nearly doubled the lands under Aztec dominance, particularly on the Pacific coast and south as far as what is now northern Guatemala.

Empire building abroad brought unprecedented wealth at home. "The Imperial Period in Tenochtitlan was like New York in the 1940 and '50s. Like Paris at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th," says López Luján. "Artists came from everywhere and there was a sudden jump in the quality of the architecture and in particular of the sculpture." By the time Hernán Cortés arrived in the valley in 1519, Tenochtitlan was a fabulously rich and ostentatious city, home to 200,000 people and built on artificial extensions of the original island into the lake. The conquistadors compared it to the great cities they had seen in Europe and Asia.

But the Aztecs were destined to be remembered by the world not for their engineering prowess or artistic splendor, let alone for their accomplished astronomical calculations or the lyrical poetry of their flowery Nahuatl language. Instead, they became famous for their brutality. There is no doubt that war, death, and sacrifice were central to their society. The Aztecs believed that the gods required offerings of blood or the world, even time itself, would come to an end. But López Luján insists historical accounts of temples running with the blood of tens of thousands of sacrificed war captives were grossly exaggerated in order to justify the Spanish victory and Catholic evangelization.

"In the Templo Mayor we have found the skeletons of children and adults, men and women who were sacrificed. We have found evidence of human blood all over the place. We have found over a thousand sacrificial knives, as well as sacrificial stones where victims were laid down," he says. "But in 30 years of this excavation we have found 127 victims. Compared to other ancient cultures all over the world, that is not very much."

As well as rewriting history, the conquistadors set about dismantling Tenochtitlan. Within a few years it was buried under the capital of New Spain, and soon even the precise location of the Templo Mayor became a matter of speculation. It was rediscovered when a building was demolished in 1913 revealing part of the pyramid's stairway and a carved serpent's head. For various reasons, excavations didn't begin until 1978, after electrical workers accidentally discovered a circular monolith carved with the dismembered goddess of the moon, Coyolxauhqui, giving birth to the Templo Mayor Project.



LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN

Immediately beneath the modern capital are the ruins of the ancient one. The steps of the Templo Mayor are seen in the left foreground. To the right of the steps is the Tlaltecuhli monolith. The cathedral is seen in the upper right of the photo and the National Palace is to the upper left.

american archaeology



A worker produces a three-dimensional laser scan of the monolith.

The excavations from 1978 to 1982, headed by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, were “undoubtedly the most important,” López Luján says of the effort to uncover the pyramid and surrounding buildings. “There were 600 workers involved and the place was like an ants’ nest.”

Matos headed the next two seasons as well, delving into the earliest stages of the Templo Mayor, which had at least seven major renovations ordered by different monarchs.

A disciple of Matos, López Luján took over in 1991, directing excavations that focused on the so-called “house of the eagles.” Chief among the finds there were two extraordinary life-sized ceramic sculptures of the god of death. The excavations from 2004 to 2005 focused on the base of the pyramid, during which time archaeologists made the rare discovery of the skeleton of a child sacrificed to Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. It was much more common for the Aztecs to sacrifice children to the rain god, Tlaloc. López Luján himself excavated an offering to Tlaloc containing 43 children in 1980.

THIS SEASON THE ARCHAEOLOGISTS ARE making a three-dimensional map to replace the existing site plan that dates to 1982, and they’re also creating a digital record of excavated murals. But the search for Ahuizotl’s tomb has inevitably grabbed most of the attention, and tested the patience of many due to its painfully slow progress. “The fundamental problem for this excavation is the water table is so high,” says López Luján, who now relies on three pumps working around the clock to keep the site dry for excavation.

How to deal with the city’s high water table has always been a problem for its inhabitants. Ahuizotl died from injuries sustained in a flood he provoked with the construction of an aqueduct. Things got much worse when the Spaniards decided to expand their colonial city by draining the lake. From then on urban engineers have constantly devised new ways of channeling the water from heavy rains out of the mountain-ringed city.

If not for the pumps, the water rises nearly to the top of the entranceway beside the monolith. Due to mechanical difficulties the pumps have not always worked at full capacity. “Water,

LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN



This model shows the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan. At the top center of the model is the Templo Mayor. Two chapels are perched at the top of the temple. The chapel on the right is dedicated to the sun god Huitzilopochtli; the chapel on the left, to the rain god Tlaloc. The archaeologists are excavating at the foot of the pyramid.

HECTOR MONTAÑO MATUS



The problem posed by the high water table is evident in this photograph of an excavated offering pit. Among the objects uncovered by the archaeologists are numerous sacrificial knives as well as golden eagle bones, copper bells, and various other items.

water, water,” says Chávez as she stares into the hole at the liquid hindering her work. “There are times like today that are really exasperating.” But Chávez adds that while water is the “enemy” of progress, it is the “friend” of any artifacts they might find because these bog-like conditions can preserve fragile items such as organic matter.

In their accounts, Friar Diego Durán and Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc mentioned not only the funeral and burial of Ahuítzotl, but also those of his two brothers who ruled directly before him: Axayácatl from 1469 to 1481, and then Tízoc from 1481 to 1486. This, together with a Mesoamerican tradition of royal family crypts, suggests to López Luján that all three brothers could be in the chamber.

It is even possible, he believes, that Ahuítzotl’s successors could be there too. Moctezuma Xocoyotzin was killed during the initial Spanish sojourn in Tenochtitlan, while they were there as his guests. By that time relations between the conquistadors and their hosts had become so tense Cortés and his men tried to flee the city one night in secret and, having been discovered, managed to escape after a bloody battle. The Spanish finally conquered Tenochtitlan after a siege that relied heavily on the help of indigenous enemies of the Aztecs. Cuitláhuac, Moctezuma’s replacement, died within 80 days of taking the throne, a victim of the smallpox epidemic resulting from Spanish contact that was ravaging the city. His successor, Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec monarch, was taken

hostage by the Spaniards and killed outside the city, therefore López Luján rules out finding his body at Templo Mayor.

The search for riches was at the heart of the Spanish conquest, and once Cortés controlled Tenochtitlan, it intensified. Not satisfied with the gold they found, the Spanish tortured Cuauhtémoc—his feet were dipped in oil and then set alight—to obtain information about other hidden treasures, but he maintained there were none.

There is also the question of what, and who, the Aztec kings took with them to their graves. The historical sources describe not only a wealth of offerings from around the empire, but also women, musicians, dwarfs, and servants sacrificed and interred with their lords.

“I think everybody here has a mix of feelings. Scientifically speaking, this would be something spectacular,” says López Luján. “But the other side of the coin is the responsibility. You only excavate something like this once, and I think we are all getting a little nervous thinking about that.”

He and his crew may be nervous but, despite the evidence suggesting they are on the verge of a major discovery, they are not overconfident. López Luján predicts they may uncover a royal tomb, “rich offerings,” or nothing. “All these possibilities are real.”

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