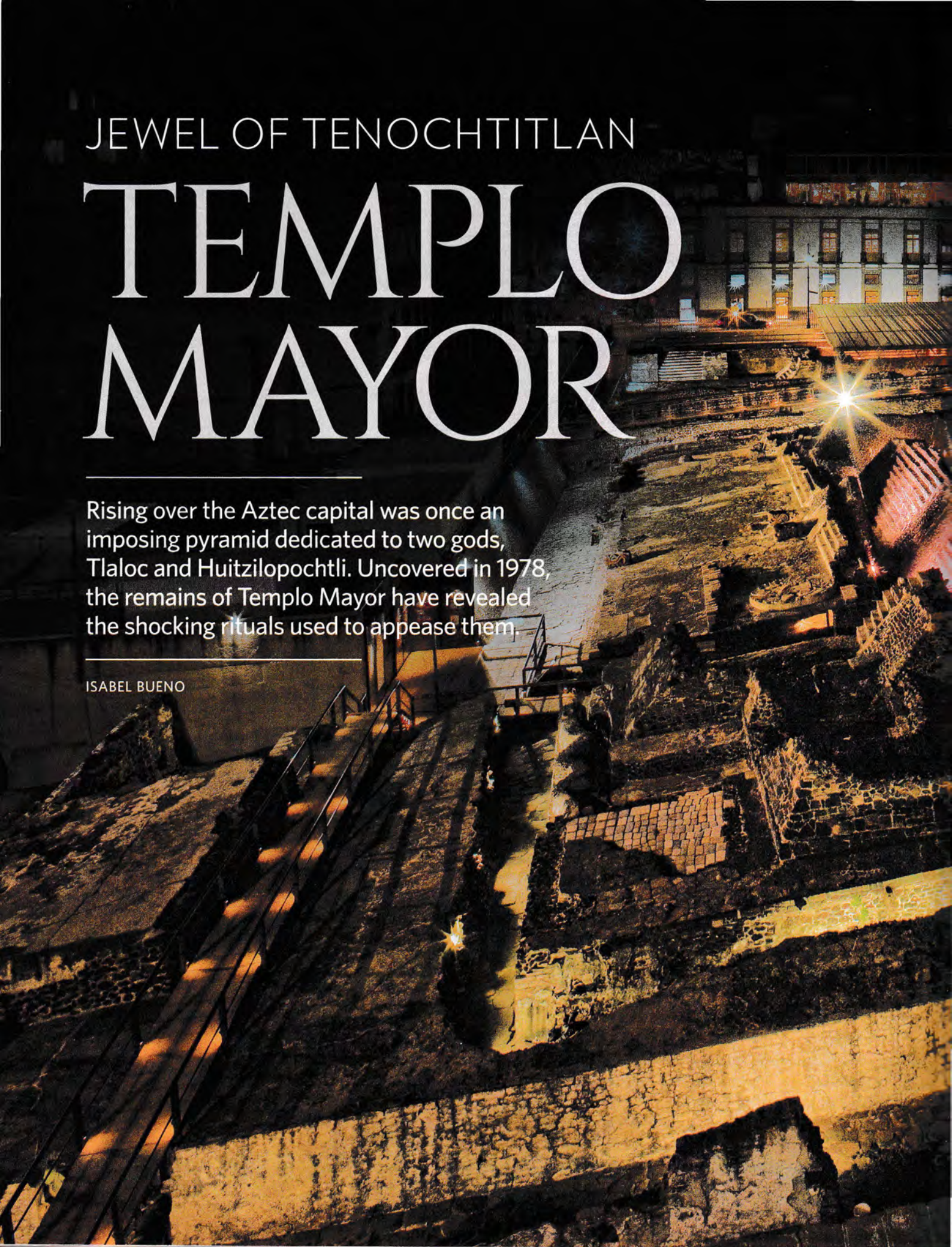


JEWEL OF TENOCHTITLAN

TEMPLO MAYOR

Rising over the Aztec capital was once an imposing pyramid dedicated to two gods, Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. Uncovered in 1978, the remains of Templo Mayor have revealed the shocking rituals used to appease them.

ISABEL BUENO





UNEARTHED TEMPLE

Since its discovery in 1978, archaeologists have succeeded in exhuming the base of the great Aztec Templo Mayor. Digs have revealed several phases of expansion from 1375 to 1519.

PETER ESSICK/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IMAGE COLLECTION

Center of the Aztec Cosmos



1325

The Aztec (Mexico) build a temple in Tenochtitlan to honor the god Huitzilopochtli. Seven building phases will expand it into a massive pyramid.



1440-1469

During the reign of Moctezuma I, Templo Mayor is expanded several times. Colorful artworks and elaborate architectural elements are added.



1486-1502

Ahuizotl takes the throne and begins a large-scale renovation of the temple. It is inaugurated in 1487 with numerous human sacrifices.



1519

Hernán Cortés and his Spanish forces first set foot in Tenochtitlan and are impressed by the grandeur of Templo Mayor.



1521

After the Aztec defeat, stones from Templo Mayor are robbed from the pyramid and used to erect the buildings of New Spain.



FALL OF TENOCHTITLAN

Templo Mayor rises in the distance as Hernán Cortés's troops attack the city in 1521. 17th century, anonymous, private collection

BRIDGEMAN/ACI



For centuries, archaeologists searched in vain for Templo Mayor, which they knew existed somewhere beneath modern-day Mexico City. Once rising some 160 feet above the Aztec (or Mexica, as the Aztec referred to themselves) ceremonial center of Tenochtitlan, the ancient capital of the Aztec Empire, the pyramid served as the religious focal point and, some say, the center of the Aztec universe. But then Hernán Cortés, head of a joint force of Spanish troops and hundreds of thousands of Indigenous allies, conquered the city in 1521, badly damaging the pyramid. Over time, it gradually disappeared.

Maps and chronicles indicated that Templo Mayor lay beneath Mexico City Metropolitan Cathedral. Once in a while, when work was carried out in the city's subsoil, objects related to Templo Mayor would appear. In 1790 a large statue of the goddess Coatlicue and a 24-ton monolith, called the sun stone or Aztec calendar, were found. In 1914 an archaeologist unearthed more remains that he linked to Templo Mayor.

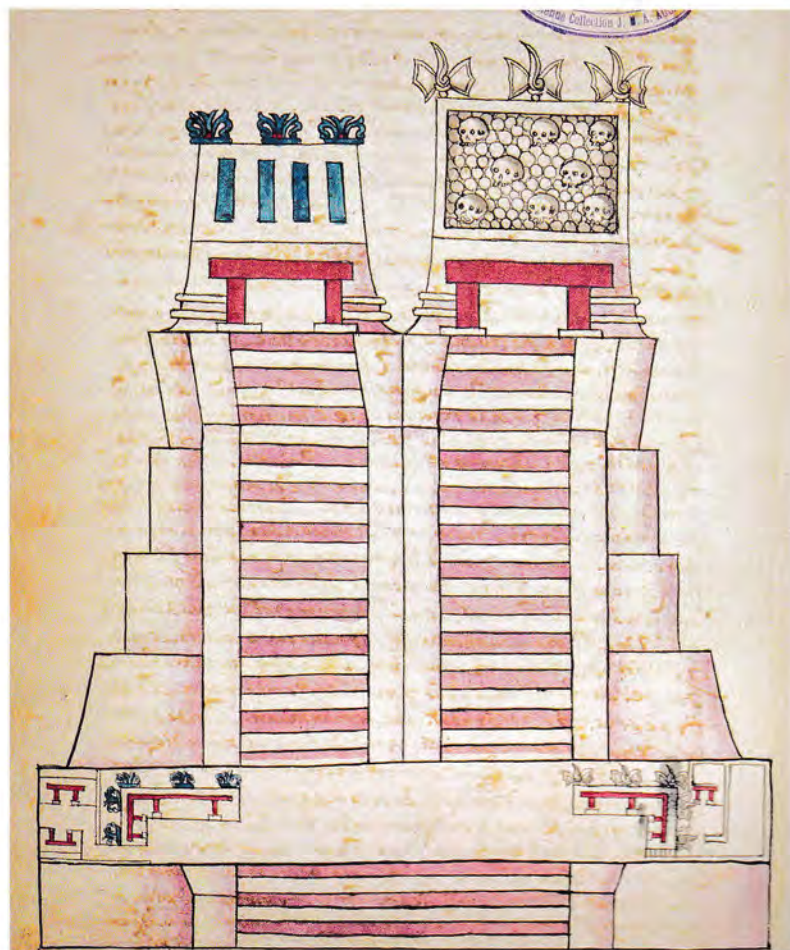
Growth of the Aztec Empire by ruler

- Itzcoatl, 1427-1440
- Moctezuma I, 1440-1469
- Axayacatl, 1469-1481
- Ahuizotl, 1486-1502
- Moctezuma II, 1502-1520



NG/MAPS

GUATEMALA



A breakthrough came in 1978, when, in the course of some underground cabling work, electricity company workers made the chance discovery of an 11-foot-wide monolith depicting Coyolxauhqui. In Aztec mythology, she is the goddess of the moon and sister of Huitzilopochtli, the sun, to whom the Templo Mayor was dedicated. Shockingly, the goddess was portrayed as decapitated and dismembered. Archaeologists were riveted by the find and wanted to know more.

An excavation team overseen by archaeologist Eduardo Matos Moctezuma was immediately launched. “What emerged from these diggings was the ‘Templo Mayor,’ a huge temple-pyramid that had served as the sacred center of the Aztec Empire,” writes archaeologist Michael E. Smith in *The Aztecs*. Over the past 45 years, the team’s painstaking work has brought to light some of the most breathtaking Aztec artifacts ever found. And with them came startling insights into major aspects of Aztec religion, life, and society.

Power and Might

The original Templo Mayor was a simple thatched shrine, built during the reign of Itzcoatl (r. 1427–1440). Subsequent leaders ordered its enlargement to commemorate their military victories (or sometimes as the result of flooding or other environmental problems). Excavations have confirmed at least seven expansions.

It may be surprising that they preferred to enlarge the old temple instead of building a new one, but there is a reason that has to do with the special significance of the site itself. According to myth, the god Huitzilopochtli led the Aztec, or Mexica, on their march from their mythical homeland of Aztlan to Lake Texcoco. There he showed

SACRED PLAN

A drawing of Templo Mayor (above) appears in the 16th-century *Codex Ixtlilxochitl*. National Library of France, Paris

BNF/RMN-GRAND PALAIS

This eagle warrior (right) was discovered at the House of the Eagles, the military elite’s headquarters at Templo Mayor. 15th century, Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City

DAGLI ORTI/AURIMAGES



Head. The goddess's hair is embellished with eagle feather disks that evoke death and sacrifice.

Arms. Bones are visible in her shattered arms, which are adorned with beads and bells.



Torso. The goddess is bare-chested, typical of depictions of this deity. She wears a belt made out of snakes that holds a skull in place on her side, depicting a terrestrial deity.

Legs. The double-headed serpent Maquicoatl, symbol of Huitzilopochtli, coils around the goddess's broken legs.

Sibling Rivalry

AT THE FOOT OF THE STEPS of the Templo Mayor was a large monolith that represented the death of the goddess Coyolxauhqui. According to the myth, after the great Aztec god Huitzilopochtli was born, he was attacked by his elder siblings. The attackers included his sister Coyolxauhqui, whom he dismembered with his flaming sword and threw

down the mountain. This mythical episode was repeated every time the priests sacrificed a captive on top of Templo Mayor. After ripping out their heart, they threw the body down the stairs. The dismembered body of Coyolxauhqui also referred to the lunar phases and the cycles of renewal of nature.

DAGLI ORTI/AURIMAGES



Monolith of Coyolxauhqui
was found at the Templo
Mayor site in 1978.

ANDREW RAKOCZY/SCIENCE SOURCE ALBUM

the priests a small island where an eagle was perched on a nopal cactus, called *tenochtli* in Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica. The land was little more than a swamp, but these hardy new inhabitants—“almost totally uncultured” yet possessing “an indomitable will,” according to renowned scholar Miguel León-Portilla—founded Tenochtitlan and built there the embryo of the Templo Mayor.

It took the labor of thousands of people over many years to construct this magnificent temple. The workers included not only the city’s inhabitants but also laborers from other towns that were dominated by the Aztec. These subjects were forced to work on government projects as part of their tribute to the empire. The Aztec also required them to provide building materials. Refusal to “collaborate” could trigger a war, with the resulting taking and sacrificing of prisoners. Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan thus became a demonstration of the power of the Aztec rulers over the surrounding peoples.

No doubt the site was magnificent. Templo Mayor (*Huey Teocalli* in Nahuatl) stood in the eastern part of the ceremonial center of Tenochtitlan. There were 78 buildings in this area, including temples, priestly residences, altars, a ball game court, and *tzompantlis*, racks on which human skulls were displayed.

At its peak, Templo Mayor’s final iteration was a truncated pyramid resting on a four-tiered platform. Twin staircases accessed two smaller temples atop the pyramid, each dedicated to the city’s main gods, Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. The Coyolxauhqui monolith was found at the base of the stairs leading to the latter temple.

Life and Death

Templo Mayor was built to symbolically represent Coatepec, the sacred mountain where the sun god Huitzilopochtli was born. The Aztec considered it to be the center of the world, from which the four

EARTH GODDESS

This statue of Coatlicue (below), goddess of the earth and mother of gods and mortals, was found in the Templo Mayor in 1790.

DAGLI ORTI/AURIMAGES



Iztaccihuatl

Popocatepetl

Templo Mayor,
Tenochtitlan's
ceremonial complex

City of Tenochtitlan

Shrine to
Huitzilopochtli

Shrine to Tlaloc

Stone on which human sacrifices
were performed

Stone of
Coyolxauhqui

Sculptures of snakes that
evoke the mythical hill Coatepec,
associated with serpents

Stone of Tlaltecuhlli, made of
pink andesite brought in from
a quarry six miles away



THE LAYERS OF TEMPLO MAYOR

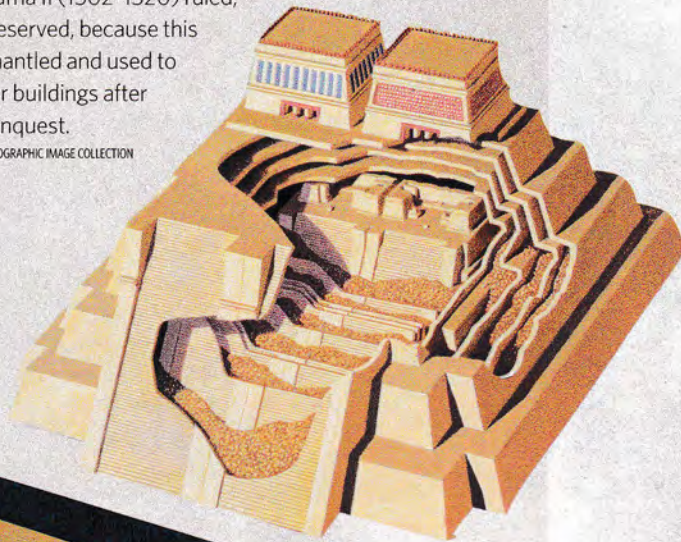
Templo Mayor was expanded to its largest around 1500, when the Aztec Empire was at its height. Rulers would sometimes renovate the sacred complex to commemorate victories. Work also was carried out because of floods and the instability of the ground beneath the foundation.

HERNÁN CÁÑELLAS/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IMAGE COLLECTION

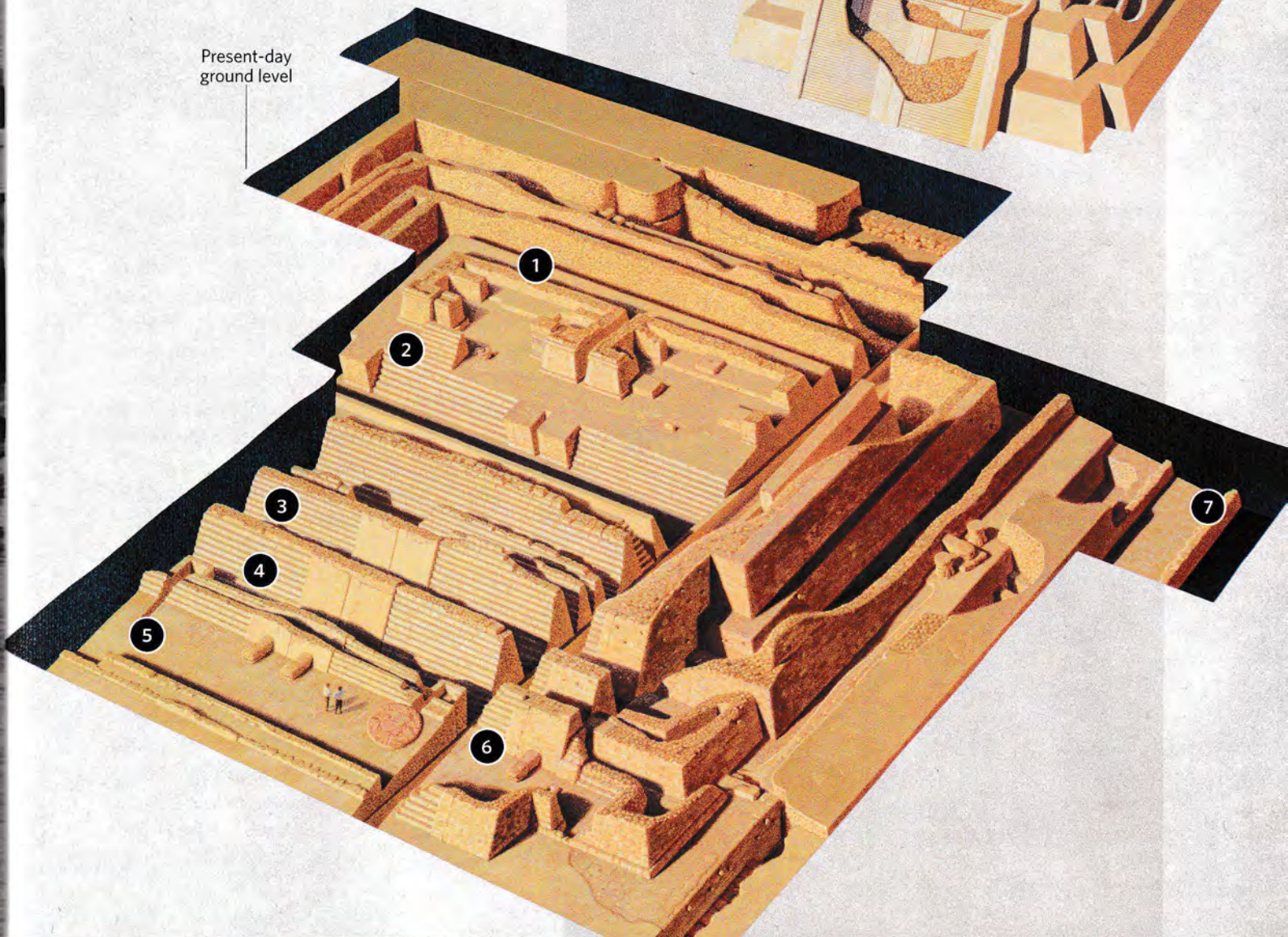
MAJOR RENOVATIONS

Ever since Templo Mayor's identification in 1978, archaeologists have thrilled at peeling back successive layers to find **1** the earliest phases at its heart. The pyramid of Tenochtitlan was almost constantly under renovation, from its initial construction in the 14th century to its destruction in the 16th century. **2** Early expansions were begun under the first three rulers of Tenochtitlan (1325–1427). The Aztec rose to become the region's dominant power under Itzcoatl (1427–1440), who greatly enlarged **3** the structure during his reign. His successor, Moctezuma I (1440–1469), continued **4** expanding the temple. Under Axayacatl (1469–1481), **5** the main facade was enlarged. Under the rule of Ahuitzotl (1486–1502), **6** all four sides of the pyramid were enlarged. Paradoxically, **7** the outermost layer, built when Moctezuma II (1502–1520) ruled, is the worst preserved, because this layer was dismantled and used to construct other buildings after the Spanish conquest.

NED M. SEIDLER/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IMAGE COLLECTION



Present-day
ground level





axes that marked the courses of the universe embarked. The Templo Mayor was thus the point of intersection through which cosmic energy flowed, enabling communication between gods and men. “The sacred mountain is as important as the cross in Christianity,” says Harvard historian of religions David Carrasco.

Its pyramidal structure represented the three levels of the Aztec worldview. The square platform on which the temple stood was the horizontal plane where all living beings existed, while the pyramid represented the celestial level, and below it was the underworld.

Templo Mayor was a tangible display of life and death, beginning and end. Even the two temples that crowned it reflected this symbolism. Tlaloc, as an aquatic divinity, represented life and sustenance for agricultural people such as the Aztec, while Huitzilopochtli was the god of war and death, sunset and sunrise.

XIUHTECUHTLI

A figure of the fire god was found at Templo Mayor and dates to the 14th-16th centuries. National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City

SCALA, FLORENCE



The temple also commemorated the victory of Huitzilopochtli over his innumerable brothers who, according to the myth, had conspired against him and paid for it with their lives. His sister Coyolxauhqui also rebelled, and Huitzilopochtli killed her by throwing her from the summit of Mount Coatepec. A monolith representing the goddess’s death was placed at the foot of the staircase leading to Templo Mayor.

Rites and Rituals

As the most important temple, Templo Mayor hosted the main ceremonies of Aztec society, from the coronations of new monarchs to varied rituals related to agriculture, rain, and the proper functioning of the heavenly bodies. The ceremonies were spread throughout the ritual calendar according to the importance of the divinity in the Aztec pantheon. “Many of the human sacrifices took place as parts of these monthly celebrations,” Smith writes. “Each year, hundreds or



SACRED VESSEL

Lying at the top of the Templo Mayor, in front of the sanctuary of Tlaloc, is a Chacmool figure. These reclining statues were often used in Aztec rituals to hold the hearts of sacrificial victims.

KENNETH GARRETT



Tlaloc, god of rain, is portrayed on a 15th-century ceramic vessel found in the Templo Mayor.

DEA/ALBUM

perhaps thousands of victims had their chests cut open, and their still-beating hearts ripped out by knife-wielding priests, as throngs of spectators looked on."

The most solemn events were reserved for the most important god, Huitzilopochtli. On these days, people were executed on a stone in front of Huitzilopochtli's temple. Their hearts were then placed on a beautiful polychrome Chacmool, a reclining figure sculpted in stone, in front of the temple of Tlaloc.

The Aztec believed human sacrifices were necessary in their religious rituals to placate the sun god. Through these sacrifices, they repeated the deaths of the gods who sacrificed themselves in the sacred hearth of Teotihuacan so that men could live, feeding the movement of the sun with their blood. They believed the sacred deaths ensured the continuity of life on Earth, while reminding those who opposed the Aztec that they could die on the bloody altar of the Templo Mayor. "Most victims were enemy warriors captured in battle," Smith writes.

"The captor sponsored the sacrifice, thereby gaining prestige."

One of the most eagerly awaited Aztec festivals was Panquetzaliztli, "the raising of banners," which was celebrated in December, close to the winter solstice. As dawn broke, a runner carrying an image of Huitzilopochtli, made of baked dough, sprinted down from the top of the temple and ran away, pursued by the crowd.

He first took the god to the ball game court, where four victims were sacrificed to him

DIVINE ORIGINS

The Aztec founded Tenochtitlan, where they witnessed an eagle with a snake in its beak, as illustrated (below) in the 1579 *History of the Indies*, National Library, Madrid

DEA/ALBUM



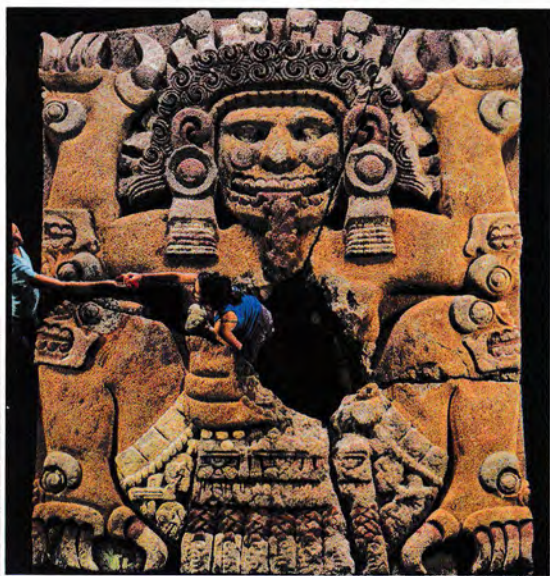




**COLORFUL
PROTECTION**

Work at the Templo Mayor site has revealed colossal stone snakes, guardians whose original polychrome is still preserved on some of the statues.

KENNETH GARRETT



Offering 125 is a masonry box inside which various objects were carefully placed in layers. **1** The first level contained the skin of a spider monkey; gold and jade ornaments; eight knives symbolizing lunar divinities; and two royal eagles adorned with copper objects. **2** The second level contained the remains of 62 marine species, including crabs, snails, and corals. **3** The third and final level contained the remains of a she-wolf adorned with a jade collar, earrings, and a belt made of shells. All of these items had a funerary meaning. On the first level, the eagles facing the setting sun symbolize the night of death. On the second level, the shells evoke the waters that the deceased must cross. And on the third level, the canine may have been a pet, perhaps laid there to guide the deceased on a journey to the afterlife.

KENNETH GARRETT

DIVINE OFFERINGS

In 2006 a huge monolith, dedicated to the earth goddess Tlaltecuhlti, was discovered in front of Templo Mayor. Underneath was a shaft with numerous offerings inside, perhaps because the well was seen as a gateway to the Earth's center. Some believe it may even be a tomb, although conclusive evidence has not yet been found.

ILLUSTRATION: HERNÁN CÁNELLAS/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IMAGE COLLECTION





Stone altar where priests carried out human sacrifices in the Templo Mayor
KENNETH GARRETT

and he received their hearts as an offering. The runner then continued the frantic chase through some riverside towns, followed by the faithful, who struggled to catch up with him. The reason he ran had to do with the fact that Huitzilopochtli was never defeated. The entire route was adorned with large triumphal arches of roses, frangipani, and flags. At each arch, musicians played drums and conch shells to announce the passing of the procession.

When the idol returned to Tenochtitlan along the Iztapalapa road, all the temples' dignitaries went out to welcome it with music and dances. Before going up the temple steps, the image was shown to those kept next to the skull fence, who were waiting their turn to be sacrificed. At the foot of the temple's steps, the idol's image was placed on a platform and hoisted reverently to the top with thick ropes.

Four priests held down the feet and hands of those who were to die. Another held their throat, and the sixth opened their chest and extracted their heart. The priests' bodies were

painted black, and their hair was tied with leather bands around their heads and little paper rings on their foreheads. After the ceremony, the image of the god was blessed and divided among the attendees to be eaten.

Mother's Day

Another important Aztec festival was the one dedicated to the goddess Toci (part of Coatlicue), mother of the gods and heart of the earth, which was celebrated in the Templo Mayor on September 16. In this ceremony, a woman of 40 to 45 years of age was offered to the goddess. They first purified her, washed her, and named her after the divinity.

Before dawn on the feast day, the sanctified woman was taken outside, and a man carried her on his back, face

MIGHTY HUITZILOPOCHTLI

The god of war and the sun is depicted in a 16th-century illustration from the Codex Borbonicus. Library of the National Assembly, Paris

GRANGER/ALBUM





KNIVES OUT

A 15th- or 16th-century sacrificial knife, or *tecpatl* (below), was found at Templo Mayor. The colorful handle depicts a human figure, and the blade is made of chalcedony. British Museum, London

BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

up, to the top of the temple. There, a priest held her by the hair and slit her throat, bathing the one who held her in blood. As soon as she was dead, she was skinned, from her thighs to her elbows, and the skin was used to dress the man who had carried her up, who again represented the goddess. He then watched a performance of a battle between young men dressed for war, in which many were badly wounded.

Once the combat was over, the sacrifices in honor of the goddess continued. For this purpose, wooden steps were built at the top of the temple, which the two priest-executioners, climbed up. The man covered with the skin of the first victim would be forced up, held in case he resisted, and then pushed down the stairs. His throat was then slit and his blood was collected in a bowl in the same way they sacrificed all the victims dedicated to this goddess. The blood of the sacrificial victims was placed in a basin, wrapped in multicolored feathers, and set before the mother of the gods.

The Aztec Fall

On November 8, 1519, Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés and his men set foot in Tenochtitlan for the first time. Astonished by the city's finely planned grandeur, they spared no praise in describing it. But it's the imposing Templo Mayor that caught their eye. Cortés himself noted, in his second "Letter of Relation," that in spite of the large number of temples in the city,





WALL OF SKULLS

A skull rack, called a *tzompantli*, was uncovered at Templo Mayor in 2007. It held hundreds of skulls of sacrificial victims that were mortared together on a frame to create a wall.

KENNETH GARRETT



“there is one, the main one, whose greatness and features no human tongue can describe.”

During the subsequent siege of Tenochtitlan, Templo Mayor was badly damaged by the cannon the Spanish used to subdue the city. After the fall of the Aztec capital, the building was not immediately demolished. Sources confirm it was still standing as late as 1524.

With the passage of time, all traces of the ancient Aztec place of worship disappeared. Workers of the new Mexico City used materials from preexisting buildings. So, little by little, the stones from temples and other buildings in the ancient Aztec ceremonial center, including Templo Mayor, were taken and used to build 68 churches within the former boundaries of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. They were also used in the countless houses and structures erected in the city center.

Since 1978, archaeological excavations of the ancient temple have revealed more and more of the grandeur that was Templo Mayor. They’ve found palace rooms, built-in baths, the House

of the Eagles (the meeting place of the military elite), a school for priests, and sculptures of snakes and serpents.

As excavation work continues, a big mystery remains. Historical records state that the remains of three Aztec kings were cremated and their ashes buried at the foot of Templo Mayor, and yet no emperor’s remains have been found. Chief archaeologist Leonardo López Luján believes their discoveries will point to Ahuitzotl’s burial place. “We’re persuaded that sooner or later we’ll find [his] tomb,” he says. “We’re digging deeper and deeper.”

If and when they do succeed in finding the tomb, it will be the culmination of decades of work that have shed light on one of the world’s most legendary and misunderstood empires. ■

ISABEL BUENO IS AN HONORARY MEMBER OF THE VICENTE LOMBARDO TOLEDANO CENTER IN MEXICO, ON WHOSE HISTORY SHE WRITES EXTENSIVELY.

Learn more

The Offerings of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan
Leonardo López Luján, University of New Mexico Press, 2005

DIVINE OFFERINGS

An Aztec priest at Templo Mayor removes the still beating heart of a victim to offer it to the god Huitzilopochtli. This illustration (above) is from an early 20th-century reproduction of the 16th-century *Codex Magliabecchi*.

UIG/ALBUM