



Smithsonian Associates

## Mexico City in the Footsteps of Moctezuma: Aztec Art and Architecture

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Wednesday, March 27, 2024 - 6:45 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET

### Vocabulary:

**Aztecs** – A name coined by the Spanish friar Clavijero in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and popularized by the German explorer Alexander von Humboldt during his travels in Mexico. He meant it to refer to “people from Aztlán” (see below).

**Aztlán** – Legendary or mythic homeland of some of the Nahua groups, located somewhere to the north.

**Calpulli** – Neighborhood group within the city of Tenochtitlán

**Chinampa** – Artificial island created for agricultural cultivation on lake

**Ixiptla** – Physical form of a god/divine presence, whether a stone sculpture, other type of deity as rendered in amaranth dough, copal resin, wood, paper etc. Also a human “deity impersonator” who “lived as the god” for some period of time (this last also called a teixiptla.)

**Mexica** – Name that the Nahuatl-speaking founders of **Tenochtitlán** called themselves, in tribute to their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, also known as Mexi. (These are the rulers/people commonly referred to as Aztecs.)

**Nahuatl** – The language of the Valley of Mexico from ca. 1000 CE on, possibly much earlier. From this, we get **Nahua(s)**, collective name for Nahua speaking people in central Mexico ca. 1500. (Around the Valley of Mexico and beyond.)

**Tenochtitlán** – Island capital of the Mexica, in tribute to a mythical early ruler known as Tenoch / Tenochca

**Tezontle** – Volcanic rock like pumice that was used as building materials for much of Tenochtitlán

## Buildings/Objects discussed today

1. **Templo Mayor (Great Temple)** – Main Aztec temple. First version built before 1400, likely in perishable materials. Twin Pyramid dedicated to Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. Seven major phases, eleven total levels of construction.
2. **Coatlicue stone** – Basalt, 1486-1502, 3.5 m high. (This and all works located at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City unless otherwise noted)
3. **Stone of Tizoc** – Basalt, 1481-86, 0.9 m high x 2.7 m in diameter
4. **Calendar Stone** – Also known as the Sun Stone. Basalt stone. Ca. 1502-1520, 3.6 m in diameter, weighs 10 tons
5. **Stone of Tizoc** – Basalt, 1481-86, 0.9 m high x 2.7 m in diameter
6. **Tlaloc figure** – Volcanic stone with traces of pigment, 1481-86, 20” tall. (Walters Art Museum 2009.20.201)
7. **Eagle Warrior figure** – Ceramic with traces of pigment, probably 1507-1520, Approx. 5’ tall. (Museum of the Templo Mayor, Mexico City)
8. **Cholula ceramic cup** – Ceramic with slip paints, 900-1521 (prob. Ca. 1300-1500), 5 11/16 x 7 5/16 in. diam. (Cleveland Art Museum 1951.317)
9. **Shield of Ahuitzotl** – Fabric, reeds, textiles, feathers, fur, gold, ca. 1486-1502, 27.5” in diameter, 4” deep. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, acc. No. 43,380)
10. **Feather mosaic “Jesus at the Age of Twelve”** – Juan Baptista Cuiris, artist. Feathers on paper on copper with gilding, ca. 1590-1600. 10 x 7.2” Based on engraving by Philippe Thomassin and Jean Turpin, based on a drawing by Giulio Clovio. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Schatzkammer, GS Kap 321)

## Mexica Rulers and History

1325 – Traditional date of foundation of Tenochtitlan (may have actually been earlier)

1427 – War with Azcapotzalco, Mexica victory

1428-1440 – Rule of **Itzcoatl**

1440- 1468 – Rule of **Moctezuma I** (Montezuma /Motecuhzoma)  
Triple Alliance (Tenochtitlan, Tlacopan, Texcoco)  
Tlacaehlel becomes important advisor

1468-1481 – Rule of **Axayacatl**  
Military expansion of tribute empire

1481-1486 – Rule of **Tizoc**  
Defeats by / pyrrhic victories over enemies, not much territory gained  
Addition to Templo Mayor

1486-1502 – Rule of **Ahuitzotl**  
Dedication of the Templo Mayor  
Expansion of tribute empire into Guatemala

1502-1520 – Rule of **Moctezuma II**  
1507 – New Fire Ceremony  
1519 – Arrival of Cortés

1520-1521 – Rule of **Cuauhtémoc** (after death of Moctezuma II)

### **Aztec Templo Mayor –**

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--First built sometime after 1325 – possibly with perishable materials, currently under water table of Mexico City

--2<sup>nd</sup> temple – completed by about 1427

--3<sup>rd</sup> temple – 1427-1440

--4<sup>th</sup> temple – 1440-1481 – Fully made of stone & masonry, completed under rulers

Moctezuma I and Axayacatl

--5<sup>th</sup> temple – 1481-86 – under Tizoc

--6<sup>th</sup> temple – ca. 1487 – under Ahuitzotl

--7<sup>th</sup> temple – what Spaniards saw in 1500s – about 30 meters tall, Approx. 100 x 80 meters in size – updated under Moctezuma II

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**Cosmic eras** – The people of Mesoamerica believed in cyclical time and creations. The current world in which they were living was the fifth creation, and it would be destroyed on the day 4 Movement. The four previous eras were destroyed on days related to the modes of destruction, which were :

4 Wind, 4 Jaguar, 4 Water, 4 Fire

**Center of the Calendar Stone:**

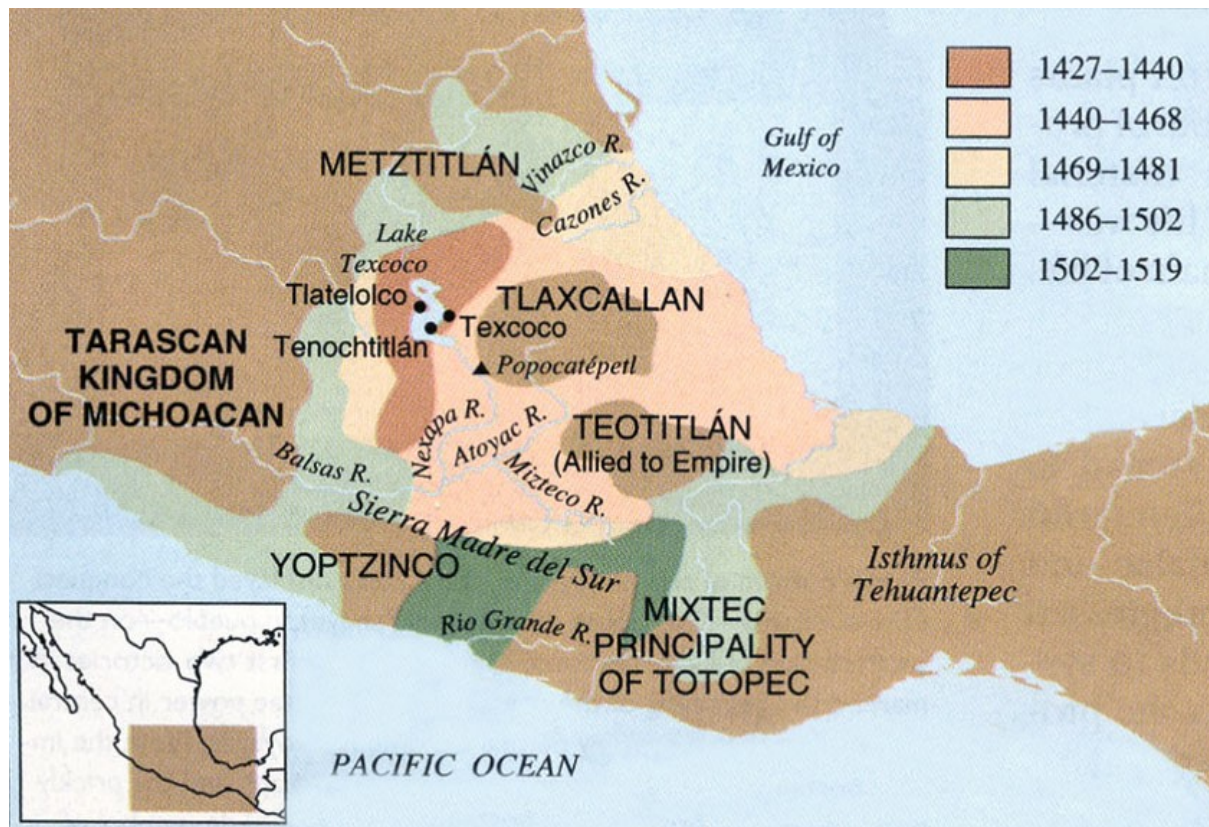


**Maps:**



Note the division in Lake Texcoco – allowed Aztecs to have both freshwater and saltwater fishes – amazing feat of engineering

## Aztec empire through time:



## Guide to Pronunciation and Spelling:

In Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, most consonants are pronounced as in English, and vowels are pronounced as in Spanish. The major exceptions are:

- H* pronounced “hw” (Huitzilopochtli; macehualli)
- Qua, quo* pronounced “kw” (quachtli)
- Tl* pronounced like the tl in English “atlas”, even at the end of a word, where it is unvoiced (Tlaloc; Nahuatl, coatl)
- X* pronounced “sh” (Xipe Totec; Mexica)

## Spanish vowels:

- A* = pronounced “ah” (Aztlán)
- E* = ey sound as in “hey” (Ehecatl)
- I* = eeh, as in second i of indIana (ixiptla)
- O* = oh (ome)
- U* = ooh, as in “stUdious” (Uxmal)

### **For Further Reading / Resources:**

--Digital Florentine Codex: <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/>

--Digital reconstruction of Tenochtitlan: <https://tenochtitlan.thomaskole.nl/>

--Mexicolore: A great site, geared originally for students, but all the topics and answers are written or vetted by major experts in the field: <https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/>

### **Books:**

--Aguilar-Moreno, Manuel. *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

--Mundy, Barbara. *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, The Life of Mexico City*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015.

--Pasztory, Esther. *Aztec Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983.

### **Website:**

Ellenhoobler.com – please feel free to send comments and/or questions