

INAH Examines a Golden Eagle Bas-Relief Recently Uncovered by Templo Mayor Project (PTM)

*** With 3.47' (1.06 m) long and 27.55" (70 cm) wide, it is the biggest relief among similar stone carvings found thus far.

*** The piece was spotted at the base of Templo Mayor, on the central axis of a “chapel” dedicated to Huitzilopochtli. It might correspond to the years of Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina’s reign (1440-1469 A. D.).

Under the intersection of Guatemala and Argentina streets, at the core of Mexico City’s urban palimpsest, experts from Templo Mayor Project (PTM) —a branch of Mexico’s National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH)— found an ancient and finely achieved expression of Aztec sculpture: a bas-relief representing a golden eagle.

“For what we have seen in pictures, it is a beautifully made piece that shows the great mysteries that former Mexico Tenochtitlan’s Templo Mayor still has to reveal. I would like to acknowledge the INAH archaeologists who collaborate in this site. It is because of their effort and dedication that we can continue to recover our History and our memory of the past. Fieldwork has been postponed due to the health emergency, but it is clear that there is a thriving research and an academic reflection that has not been stopped,” Mexican Cultural Minister, Alejandra Frausto Guerrero said in regards to this outstanding finding.

The liberation and cleaning of this itzcuahtli (a Nahuatl term that means “Obsidian Eagle,” coined by the Aztecs to name the golden eagle or *Aquila chrysaetos canadensis*) was held in February, 2020. However, the finding was announced only after the cabinet research was developed.

Carved in a 3.47' (1.06 m) long and 27.55" (70 cm) wide slab of reddish tezontle stone, this bas-relief is the widest from over 67 similar elements found at Templo Mayor thus far.

According to scholars, the carving's relevance is evident not only for its size and decoration, but for its location at the base of the most important building in the Aztec world. It was uncovered at the central axis that traverses the "chapel" of Huitzilopochtli and the monumental sculpture of goddess Coyolxauhqui. The piece is also close to the Cuauhxiccalco, a circular structure whose name means "Place of the Eagle's Cup" and where sixteenth century documents indicate that Aztec rulers were cremated.

On the bas-relief's discovery, PTM's archaeologist Rodolfo Aguilar Tapia —who examined the piece along with Archaeology and Physical Anthropology interns from Mexico's National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH)— informed that the piece was verified during the project's ninth field season.

The field season, directed by PTM's chief archaeologist Leonardo López Luján, has focused on exploring the area underneath the bridge that links Guatemala and Argentina streets. During the Pre-Columbian era, a plaza located westwards of Mexico Tenochtitlan's Sacred Temple occupied this point. The carved slab was part of the area's floor, which might have been in use during Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina's ruling between 1440 and 1469 A. D.

"This floor is unique among the whole Templo Mayor complex, as it contains bas-reliefs that symbolize the site's dual nature. On the south side, where we are currently exploring, elements such as this raptor are linked with Huitzilopochtli's mythical life cycle. In contrast, the bas-reliefs located at the northern section —the former ones uncovered in 1900 by Leopoldo Batres, and the latter ones by the PTM and Mexico City's Urban Archaeology Programme (PAU)— depict representations associated with Tlaloc, the water cycle, and regeneration of maize."

Aguilar Tapia said that thanks to the work made by archaeologists Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Leonardo López Luján, the project has a definite stratigraphic correlation. This sequence allows researchers to know the constructive layer where the findings belong, thus identifying the time they were made.

He mentioned that prior to the exploration works at the aforementioned intersection, the floor seen by the archaeologists belonged to Templo Mayor's stage IV, which developed during Ahuizotl's reign (1486-1502 A. D.). After thorough excavations, the scholars have successfully reached the IV-A stage, which means that they have unearthed remains that date back to Motecuhzoma I's period.



The plaza's floor was covered since the Pre-Columbian era during Templo Mayor's expansions. "That is why is it so well preserved," Aguilar Tapia said. "It is an element that was never seen by the Spaniards."

The golden eagle's symbolism

The COVID-19 delays enabled PTM's researchers to study several elements from the structure, including the bas-relief. Among other aspects, they analyzed the available iconography in ancient sources such as codices so they can correlate them with this piece.

According to Aguilar Tapia, one of these representations is found in Codex Borgia's page 50, where a golden eagle stands on a mesquite —a tree that was believed to grow from a flayed skin deity. "What interests us is that in terms of iconography, this image is very similar to the bas-relief found on fieldwork. Both representations have knifelike feathers that emulate the ones used on ritual sacrifices. This reminds us of the Nahuatl name of the raptor: Obsidian Eagle."

For the Aztecs, the bird of prey had a close relationship with war and sacrifice. It was also considered as the Sun's nahual or shapeshifting spirit, and therefore as Huitzilopochtli's tutelary deity.

The researcher concluded that future PTM's field seasons will focus in actions that complete the exploration of the floor where the bas-relief remains so new works can emerge. They aim to remove them temporarily to track the area below in search of offerings or architectural features. "After all this exploration and with the support from experts in restoration, we will put each bas-relief back to their exact (original) location."

Similar elements might be identified when the excavations around the Cuauhxicalli resume. PTM archaeologists aim to put the artifacts on public display once the research project is finished. They would be exhibited in their original position: westwards of Templo Mayor.

