

Tamtoc

Guillermo Ahuja*



Mauricio Degollado

The ancient city of Tamtoc was apparently inhabited by people of the Huastec culture from 700 B.C. to A.D. 1500. The first references we have for the city date from 1939 by San Luis Potosí-born historian Joaquín Meade, who compared it to great Mesoamerican cities like Teotihuacan. In 1962, the French archaeological and ethnological mission in Mexico did the first explorations, but it would not be until 2001 when efforts were

made to create the Tamtoc archaeological trust, which bought 133 of the 380 hectares the ancient city covered with the aim of protecting and researching the central area.

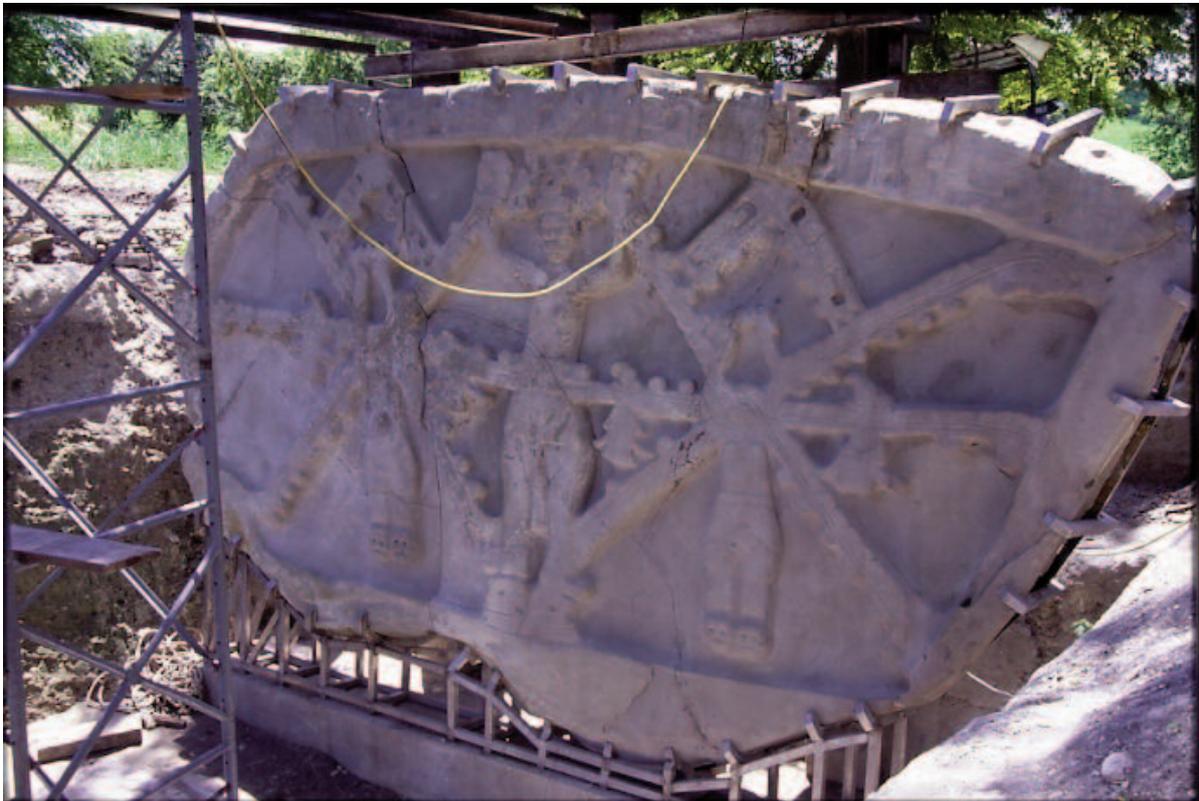
A SITE VISIT

The Tamtoc archaeological site is made up of different plazas, four of which have already been explored. The first, called Plaza A, where objects dating from A.D. 400 have been found, has 23 constructions around an oval plaza. Apparently, this was the city's economic center.

* Archaeologist in charge of the Tamtoc archaeological dig.

This plaza has architecture typical of the Huastec period: circular constructions that with the passage of time have turned into horseshoe shapes. Most of the buildings have rounded corners. The specifically Huastec style is evident, with the addition of little sidewalks or walkways around the circular form, beginning or leading off of the center of the stairway itself. Remains of human bones

of the constructions is clear: here, they are rectangular with stairways mainly at the center. A double circular structure with four access points at each one of the astronomical directions makes us think it was an observatory. Also interesting are the small rectangular platforms varying between 30 cm and 40 cm in height. Here, archaeologists have found bone and metal needles, spindles for wind-



Elsie Montiel

Monument 32, the most important find at the Tamtoc site, repositions the value of the Huastec culture.

have been found in some of these sidewalks, but it has not been determined if the walkways were used for astronomical or calendar purposes.

Next to some of the stairways there are also small sidewalks that seem to have been used for observation and contemplation. In the structure called Corcovado, one of the largest in this plaza, the sidewalk functioned as an altar: an offering of 52 miniature receptacles was discovered on it. Plaza B has 25 structures. A change in the style

ing cotton thread, vessels for controlling the skeins and the remains of a mural painted with geometric designs. This plaza is divided into three sections in the eastern part built at different times, probably due to the constant flooding that forced Tamtoc inhabitants to raise the city's level.

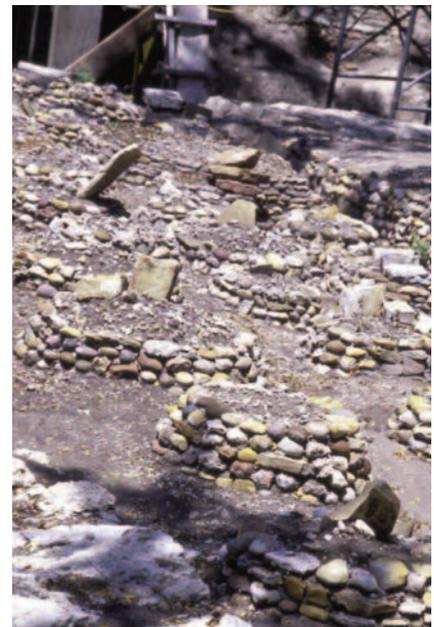
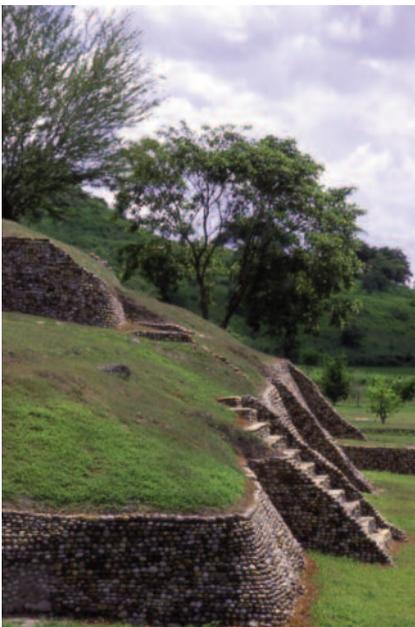
The northern part was probably used for both living quarters and public activities. To the west begins what has been called Group C, in whose first plaza there were 12 buildings. Buried human

remains covered with cinnabar and what is left of a mural painting were found here. A ritual offering of dozens of intentionally broken receptacles placed together with the bones of two decapitated females were also outstanding.

The ceramics and the human remains are reminiscent of the rites performed at the end of a calendar cycle. The two decapitated women point to the

stratigraphic sequence of bone deposits; this means that a grave may contain up to three individuals placed there in different periods. Another important architectural feature of the Noria is the reservoir, an oval structure with rounded stone walls which seems to have collected rainwater to feed the city's three artificial lakes. Its formed by large stone slabs and the walls are covered with carved glyphs, ovals, circles,

Finding the symbols and the calendar stone repositions the value of the Huastec culture as a contributor of fundamental technological and cultural advances for the blossoming and development of Mesoamerica.



Photos this page: Elsie Montiel

Left: Buildings with rounded corners typical of the Huastec period. **Center:** Monument 22. **Right:** The cemetery: most of the remains found were of women.

vitaly important role of women in Tamtoc's social, ritual and possibly political organization.

Continuing north in the city, the Noria quarter, probably the part of the site occupied the earliest, has basically three sectors. One, the Huastec cemetery, has more than 80 graves, most in the form of truncated cones, which contain human bones in a sitting position, most of them of women.

A significant detail is that this cemetery was occupied from the early classical period, since it has a

fluted molding and small thin rods. This, together with very early ceramics, allows us to date the construction at about 500 B.C.

The meaning of the glyphs is still being interpreted; they are not common to the Mesoamerican tradition, or at least they have never been reported or registered before. Because of their placement, we associate them directly with water, fertility and rain, all cosmic matters that continue in use among the Teenek today.

A double circular structure with four access points at each one of the astronomical directions makes us think it was an observatory.

Photo: Elsie Montiel



We know that the Huastec region and the Gulf Coast were the parts of Mesoamerica which developed hydraulic technology the most, which is why the discovery of the fountain or reservoir is not out of the ordinary. But the timeline is important, since until now it was thought that this kind of installations belonged to later periods.

A FINDING THAT REINTERPRETS HISTORY

Close to the fountain is the most important find at the site: the Tamtoc calendar stone, or Monument 32, a monolith fragmented into two large blocks each seven meters long and four meters high decorated with high reliefs of three decapitated female figures. From the sides of the figures' necks flow what seem to be streams of blood or precious liquid, part of which flow into the figure at the center, which we think represents the Earth.

This group seems to be manifesting the cycle of life generated by life blood or water, which nurtures or penetrates the earth to give life to the plants, flowers, food, animals, etc. The liquid flows to the area of the central figure's navel. The central figure's head has no flesh on it and she is emblazoned with an emblem, a hieroglyph, which may allude to her calendar name. Above the three figures is a sequence of glyphs, very similar to those found in the fountain reservoir. They may be related to the 13 lunar periods of the year, making us think that it might be a lunar calendar. It is also

possible that the same piece contains elements of both the lunar and solar calendars.¹

Finding the symbols and the calendar stone repositions the value of the Huastec culture as a contributor of fundamental technological and cultural advances for the blossoming and development of Mesoamerica.

THE WEST ZONE

To the west we find one of the site's highest hillocks. This is Tizate, made up of two bodies: a platform on which there is a cone-shaped mound with a central stone slab staircase, and an artificial structure made of black earth filler that raised the construction to 31 meters. The Tizate hillock probably dates from A.D. 100 or A.D. 200.

Tizate and Cubilete, located on the east side, are the two great hillocks that flank or guard the entire archaeological site. From the highest point on both hillocks, it is possible to observe the course of the Tampaón River and the entire archaeological area, as well as its environs.

This shows that Tamtoc's ancient inhabitants had visual control of the Tanchipa Mountains and of a large part of the coastal plain that leads to the Gulf of Mexico.

At Group F, close to one of the lagoons used as a reservoir to raise fish, the plaza has six structures, with Monument 22 at its center, accompanied by a series of enormous slabs with the re-



The meaning of the glyphs is still being interpreted; they are not common to the Mesoamerican tradition and have never been registered before.

Photo: Elsie Montiel

mains of carvings. Apparently they indicate the different areas controlled by the Tamtoc seignior. The main slab represents a male figure naked from the waist down, apparently one of the lords of the domain, wearing only a penis protector. The perforation of the penis is reminiscent of part of the myth of creation.² This monument also has a series of symbols on its left side that seem to indicate the name Tamtoc had in antiquity: Tamtocow, or “the Place of the Water Clouds.” On the right side, we find a vertical strip that may indicate the calendar name of the figure represented, Bo ul pailom, Lord Five Snail, who must have been one of the rulers of the city.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

From the data obtained, we can conclude that the first stage of settlement in Tamtoc occurred around 500 B.C. Apparently, it was influenced by the arrival of a group of people with very important knowledge about calendars, hydraulics and stone masonry, a group which mingled with the local inhabitants, resulting in the flowering of what we call the Huastec culture. The settlement was permanent from the late pre-classical period until the early post-classical period: some elements lead us to think that Tamtoc was inhabited at least until A.D. 1400.

Judging on the bone remains, the male inhabitants were from 1.60 to 1.65 meters tall, and the

females, 1.50 to 1.55 meters. Both were robust, with very wide bones, indicating great physical effort in their daily activity. The remains also point to health problems: dental cavities, linked to the kind of water available; amebiasis; and a kind of syphilis. Average life span was probably between 36 and 40 years, although some individuals were found that lived to 50 or 60. The Huastec population in the area of Tamtoc was very enterprising, dedicated to hunting, fishing and gathering. They were also active traders, which can be noted through the ceramic pieces they had exchanged or traded. We are talking here about a group in constant movement from early times, with technological skills, as shown in their management of hydraulics and their use of the calendar. It is very probable that through migration of the Huastec group, this kind of knowledge spread to the mountains and highlands, or the coastal regions. What is certain is that this culture was very active socially, culturally, politically and economically from the time of the pre-classical period. **MM**

NOTES

¹ A team of specialists has been formed to seek answers, do follow-up and improve the reading of the monolith.

² According to the myth, Quetzalcóatl went down into the underworld to collect the bones of his ancestors and take them to Tamoanchan (another name for the Huastec region). There, he gave them to the goddess Quilaztli, who ground them up while Quetzalcóatl pierced his penis. Later, she would mix his blood and divine semen with the dust of the bones of by-gone generations, and from there emerged the man of the fifth sun.