

# Archaeological Sites in Morelos

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The diversity of climates, soil, flora and fauna, as well as the physiography of what is now the state of Morelos was the determining factor in the establishment of a great many human settlements there in the pre-Hispanic period because the inhabitants had countless resources for both subsistence and trade. The roads through its valleys and lake basins were used for traveling to other cultural regions, thus favoring trade that extended to the most remote

dominions of Mesoamerica. This made possible the concentration in Morelos of a mosaic of pre-Hispanic cultural elements from the vast region of Mesoamerica that the local population assimilated and molded with its own particular stamp.

The oldest settlements known in Morelos date from approximately 1500 B.C., or the beginning of the middle pre-classic period, when humanity adopted a fully agricultural village life. These settlements were established near water, a basic requirement for sedentary existence and producing agricultural surpluses. Gualupita, Cerritos, Cuautlixco, Yautepec, Tlaltizapan, Olintepc, Nexpa and Chalcatzingo are some of the archaeological sites from that period.

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Xochicalco.



Flower, Chalcatzingo.



The King, Chalcatzingo.



The ruins of Chalcatzingo, first inhabited around 1500 B.C., were discovered in 1934.

#### CHALCATZINGO

Located in the eastern part of the Valley of Morelos, Chalcatzingo was first publicized in 1934 by archaeologist Eulalia Guzmán thanks to her discovery of a magnificent bas-relief on a stone called “The King.” Its origins date back to 1500 B.C., and evidence indicates that the first occupation of the area lasted 500 years: it was a small hamlet of farmers who traded with the peoples on the Gulf Coast, the Valley of Oaxaca, Puebla and what is now the State of Mexico. About 1000 B.C. the settlement grew considerably, reaching its high point around 750 B.C. The

inhabitants built big rooms (some 8 to 10 meters long) over a broad area at the foot of large rocks. They dealt with the uneven terrain by building embankments and terraces. Not much can be seen of these houses today since after being excavated and studied, they were covered over with dirt again to preserve them, given the poor conditions the buildings were in. Archaeologists also excavated the foundations of temples and human burial sites with offerings.

In its heyday, Chalcatzingo must have been important for the whole Central Highland. Its inhabitants maintained contact with very remote areas, as can be seen in the influence of the great Olmec artistic style from the Gulf of Mexico in its magnificent bas-reliefs. The realist, mythical and even symbolic representations reflect their creators’ world view.

The decline of Chalcatzingo, around the year 500 B.C. coincided with that of other urban centers in the Valley of Mexico and the Gulf Coast. Its inhabitants remained there, however, until the arrival of the Nahuatl tribes in the thirteenth century of our era and adapted to the new political and economic organization in the area. With the arrival of the Spaniards, the pre-Hispanic buildings were covered with new con-



Legend has it that Quetzalcóatl was born where the vast expanse of Xochicalco's civic and religious buildings were erected.

structions and remained hidden until the twentieth century.

#### LAS PILAS

Las Pilas is located in the environs of Chalcatzingo. This settlement flourished between the years A.D. 500 and A.D. 650, during the classical period (which lasted from A.D. 100 to A.D. 850). This was when Teotihuacan extended its influence throughout Mesoamerica. The Las Pilas archaeological site retains relatively few vestiges of the ancient culture, but what does remain reveals architecture of the classical Teotihuacan type, characterized by the use of the so-called *talud-tablero*, typical of temple construction.

Its inhabitants settled near the springs given their water "culture." During excavation, canals built with great flag-stones to carry the water to storage deposits for use in the dry season were discovered. After the canals were no longer used to convey water, ceremonial human burials were effected in these aqueducts: the bodies, placed in lotus position, were flanked by rich offerings.



A plumed serpent winds all the way around this pyramid atop the Xochicalco ruins.

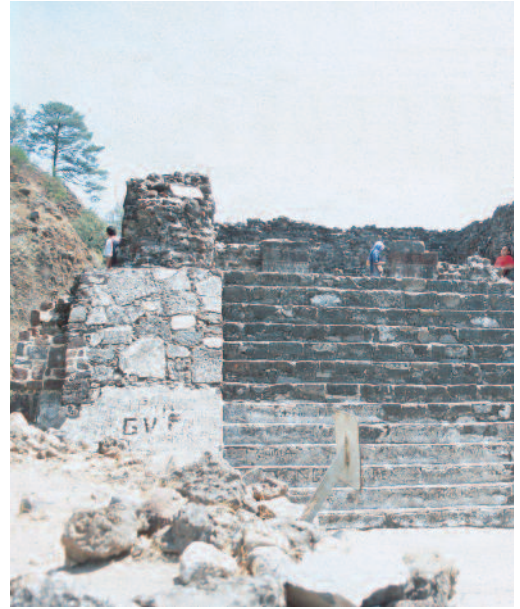
#### XOCHICALCO

The splendor of Xochicalco came between A.D. 700 and 900. After the fall of Teotihuacan, it became the most important cosmopolitan center in Central Mexico.

The city was planned. Its hilltop location required extraordinary adaptation and use of the topography. All the works like underpasses, fill-ins, ramps, stairways, waterways, etc., demonstrate a profound knowledge of engineering, mathematics, architecture and, of course, aesthetics. Access to this fortified city was restricted and controlled. Multi-level plazas were



The remains of the temple to Tepoztecatl survey the entire Valley of Cuernavaca.



Part of the ruins atop the Tepozteco Mountain.

built, culminating with the main plaza, the highest, on which the buildings of the governing elite were erected. And the great walls protected the city from intruders.

Xochicalco's buildings were of both a civic and religious nature and many incorporated decorative elements from other regions of Mesoamerica. On the base of the feathered serpent are Mixtec, Zapotec, Maya and Nahuatl glyphs in bas-relief. Other iconographic elements placed on the sides of this building indicate that the city's inhabitants knew astronomy and, therefore, had knowledge of calendars. This can also be seen in the observatory built to watch the movement of the heavens located in a natural cave adapted for the purpose.

Thanks to archaeological findings, we know that the city's inhabitants traded with the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Coasts, as well as with other inland regions: many decorations have been found representing animals and plants identifiable with those remote lands.

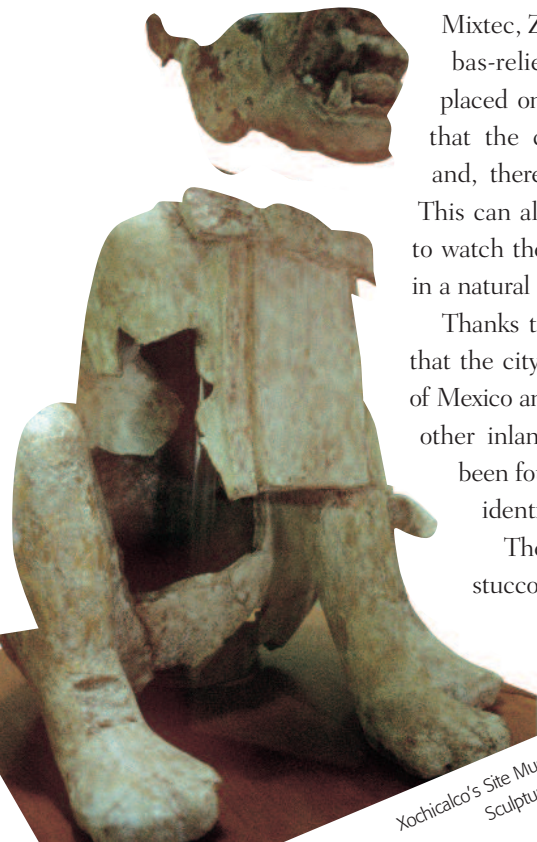
The city's buildings were covered with stucco and painted and connected to each other by well-built boulevards and ramps. The spaces in their interiors were ample, and there-

fore pillars and columns were used to hold up the roofs. In addition to holy buildings and palaces, there were warehouses and storehouses for grain and water, *temazcal* steam baths and ball game courts.

All this grandeur met with a violent end when domestic rebellions led to the destruction and burning of the buildings. The greatness of Xochicalco endured only in the memory of local inhabitants, narrated hundreds of years later to Spanish chroniclers.

#### THE TEPOZTECO

The Tepozteco is a post-classical archaeological site, singular in that it is located on top of the mountains surrounding the town of Tepoztlán. Among the different constructions at the site are the remains of the temple discovered in 1885, apparently dedicated to a deity called Tepoztecatl, dating from the late post-classical period (1350-1521). To erect it, the inhabitants had to level the rocky terrain and build a platform upon which several buildings were placed, of which Tepoztecatl's temple is the most interesting.



Xochicalco's Site Museum.  
Sculpture.



Yautepec is an excellent example of a royal palace or *tecpan*, originally covered with stucco and red, blue and yellow paint.

According to archaeologist Giselle Canto Aguilar, the buildings taken as a whole are arranged in such a way as to suggest a royal palace similar to the one found in Yautepec.<sup>1</sup> In the door-jambs of the temple's center room and on the benches with their backs to the walls, bas-reliefs have been preserved that depict geometric designs, personages, calendar dates and symbols of this people's world view, among them, the god of *pulque* (a fermented drink made from the sap of the maguey plant), Ometochtli. In the middle of the central bedroom, on a pedestal, was the figure of Tepoztecatl, until its presence so disquieted the Spanish friars that they removed it in the sixteenth century.

#### YAUTEPEC

South of Cuernavaca, at the entrance of the town of Yautepec is the large mound of the Archaeological site of the same name. Thanks to archaeologists' patient excavations, this site has proffered valuable information about life in a royal palace, or *tecpan*.

The pre-Hispanic settlement in Yautepec dates from the middle pre-classical period, just

like Chalcatzingo. The ostentatious building, whose facade has been preserved, corresponds to the last stages of building, when Morelos was part of the Mexica empire. Originally, it was covered with stucco and painted in brilliant hues of red, blue and yellow, among other colors. As the building was being cleaned, remains of paint were found, and among the different geometric designs, archaeologists were able to identify the representation of the god of water, Tláloc. The upper part of the palace has numerous internal patios surrounded by rooms, a pattern of distribution typical of a *tecpan*. Around the bed-chamber of the main lord were workshops, store-rooms and service quarters. The platform on which the *tecpan* is built is 95 meters by 75 meters, but Yautepec as a whole in its heyday took up 200 hectares, with a population of approximately 11,500.<sup>2</sup> According to archaeologist Hortensia de Vega, the *tecpan* was twice covered by other structures, with the front facing in a different direction to comply with the Mexica belief that the life cycle ended every 52 years.<sup>3</sup>



Xochicalco's Site Museum.

The materials from the Yautepec site threw light on the *tecpan* inhabitants' many trade contacts with other areas like Guerrero and Puebla. The dominion of Yautepec was one of the most powerful of the time of Mexican dominance and is frequently mentioned in the written records of the period.

#### TEOPANZOLCO

Located inside what is now the city of Cuernavaca, this site, a contemporary of the Yautepec *tecpan*, has been reduced to four hectares by the city's growth. In that area, a few ceremonial buildings have been preserved with architecture similar to that which the Mexicas used in the center of the city of Tenochtitlan. Of particular inter-

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est is the great base of the pyramid with its double stairway leading to the temples of Tláloc (god of water) and Huitzilopochtli (god of war). The walls of the temples have been preserved; supposedly they held up a kind of wooden roof covered with hay. The walls and the stairways of the pyramid's base still show traces of the stucco that covered all the buildings. The construction clearly took place in two different stages, perhaps due to the custom of every 52 years covering the building and erecting another on top of it. In front of the pyramid base is a plaza surrounded by small platforms and other bases, on which temples dedicated to lesser gods were built. Two round bases were the foundations for the temples dedicated to the god of the wind, Ehécatl, one of Quetzacóatl's other guises. In the southern part of the site is a large platform topped with the remains of walls; archaeologists suppose it to have been living quarters. In the same area are small platforms also for living quarters, one which was found underneath the base and can be seen above ground. This room was used by craftsmen who made pigments using iron oxides that they burned in the furnaces along the walls of the house.



Teopanzolco may have been part of ancient Cuauhnahuac.



Construction of Teopanzolco took place in two stages.

Teopanzolco has also rendered up evidence of sacrificial rites carried out according to Mexica custom. Its ceramics, dating from A.D. 1200 to 1521, show signs of both Tlahaica and Mexica influence. This locale may well have been part of ancient Cuauhnahuac since its location gives it a strategic view from which to survey and control much of the valley.

#### COATETELCO

Located near Miacatlan in western Morelos, the history of Coatetelco, like that of other post-classic pre-Hispanic sites, has been interrupted repeatedly.<sup>4</sup> Excavation has supplied evidence of occupation from the period of Teotihuacan influence (from A.D. 450 to 600), but the constructions that survive are from the late post-classical period (A.D. 1350-1521), mainly the time of the Mexica presence in Morelos. Like in other sites in the state, the only surviving part of the old settlement is the remains of the ceremonial center. The inside of the houses have carved pre-Hispanic rocks and there is a base upon which a chapel was built in the six-

teenth century and a church in the eighteenth. The site has bases for pyramids, platforms and a ball game court (one of the smallest known in Mesoamerica), near which are the remains of a *tzompantli* were found, a spot for placing sacrificial skulls, with a great many stone spikes where they were affixed.

These buildings were erected in the traditional way, by forming a nucleus of dirt and rock and covering them with faced stone. The remains of stucco have survived on some walls and stairways. The distribution of the buildings around the plaza was integrated into the topography of the terrain. Stylistically speaking, the buildings are typically Mexica: pyramid bases with two stairways on the outside of the building, flanked by thin beams. This kind of access would lead us to believe that there were twin

Yautepec dates from the middle pre-classical period. The building whose facade has been preserved, corresponds to the stage when it was part of the Mexica empire.



Coatetelco's ball court, one of the smallest in Mesoamerica.



At Coatetelco, surviving ruins date from the late post-classical period.



One of Xochicalco's two ball game courts.

temples on the top, such as in other structures of the same period. During the excavations, it was possible to determine that all the constructions were built in four stages.

On the east end of the main plaza is the "great temple," called this because it was the highest structure in the site. A broad stairway with two lateral beams leads to the temple. The main bodies of the bases are built in the slanted *talud* form and covered with stucco. Archaeologists found a stone sculpture of a woman whom they called Cuauhtlitzin; actually, it is a sculpted head hidden by the inhabitants in the carved stone vault purposely placed at the height of the first stage of the platform. Archaeologist Jorge Angulo thinks that the statue resembles the Mexica goddess Cihuateotl who may have originated with the Coixca groups of the Pacific Coast.

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The sites open to the public and described in this article are only a small part of the state of

Morelos' archaeological wealth. Many other great surprises are certainly in store for us, surprises that will change our understanding of the lives of the inhabitants of these lands before the Spaniards arrived. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Giselle Canto Aguilar and Laura Ledesma Gallegos, "Historia antigua de Morelos," *Antología de textos para IV curso sobre historia y cultura del estado de Morelos* (Cuernavaca: INAH-Morelos Center, 1999), pp. 25-79.

<sup>2</sup> Michael E. Smith, *Archaeological Research at Aztec-Period Rural Sites in Morelos, Mexico. Excavations and Architecture*, vol. 1, *University of Pittsburgh Memoirs in Latin American Archaeology* no. 4 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Hortensia de Vega Nova, "Proyecto de Investigación Arqueológica en Yauhtepec, Morelos," *Memoria del Tercer Congreso Interno del Centro INAH-Morelos* (Cuernavaca: INAH-Morelos Center, 1994), pp. 149-169.

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Angulo Villaseñor, *El museo de Coatetelco-Guía oficial* (Mexico City: INAH, 1978).