

From Semi-Desert To Jungle The Ancient Peoples of the Tamaulipa

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Tamaulipas has a rich and varied range of natural resources, which explains why it has been inhabited by different human groups from very ancient times. It has three contrasting ecosystems: the semi-desert, the forest and the jungle, the backdrops for the evolution of three cultures that, despite reaching different levels of technological development, co-existed without altering each others' specific way of life for 1,500 years and even exchanging products. With the arrival of the Spaniards, first the Huastecs and then the hunter-gatherers would suffer a common fate, the end of their culture.

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THE PEOPLES OF THE SEMI-DESERT

North of the Tropic of Cancer lie the immense semi-desert plains of northeastern Mexico and Texas, which were once home to groups of humans adapted culturally and anatomically to surviving in this hostile environment. To this place of arid soil, thorny bushes and burning temperatures arrived small bands of hunter-gatherers 12,000 years ago. These groups had inherited carved stone technology, which allowed them to make simple tools and weapons, from their predecessors, who arrived via the Bering Straits. The first weapons were used for hunting and slaughtering animals like the mammoth and other giant species that became extinct about 10,000 B.C. due to severe climatic changes. This forced humans to change the basis for their subsistence to collecting vegetables, supplemented by the meat of animals like deer and other mammals, reptiles, birds and insects.

Traditionally, these groups have been characterized as being at a low cultural stage and are labeled as barbarians or savages; in reality they were successful societies whose life style and implements were perfectly adapted to the rigors of their environment. For example, they lived in small bands and moved cyclically throughout a specific territory to collect seasonal vegetables and hunt local wildlife. They carved arrows and knives out of stone for hunting or war, scrapers for curing skins, punching tools for making clothing, etc. On medium-sized stones rounded by flowing river water, they made mortars to grind seeds with which they made flour, dough and *atole* (a beverage made from ground seeds and water). Some groups lived in the wild while others made temporary shelters and even portable houses. They generally went

nude, covered only in skins or grass skirts. They decorated their bodies from head to toe with thin blue stripes.

One of their known ceremonies (handed down to us by observers from the colonial period) was the *mitote*, which consisted of a gathering of up to 700 individuals who danced, drank peyote wine and, on occasion, devoured the bodies of enemies captured during wartime.

The fierceness of these tribes, plus the hostility of the semi-desert, inhibited the Spanish conquest of their lands for more than 200 years, until 1747, when José de Escandón developed a plan to colonize them, which would end up by displacing and re-grouping and, in the worst of cases, exterminating, all the indigenous in Tamaulipas's semi-desert.

About 300 mountain villages have been found in Tamaulipas, of which only two can be visited, Balcón de Montezuma and El Sabinito.



Balcón de Montezuma's characteristic circular buildings, made up of great slabs of calcite.

THE FOREST PEOPLES

The central part of the state is dominated by two large mountain ranges: the Eastern Sierra Madre and the Tamaulipas Mountains. There, amidst pine and holm oak forests, a civilization emerged around 1500 B.C. that spread an immense network of stone villages possibly all the way to the Querétaro Sierra Gorda mountains, 600 kilometers to the southwest. Nothing is known about who these ancient mountain inhabitants were or what language they spoke, but it is believed that they were descendants of the first farmers who inhabited the La Perra and Diablo Caves 3,000 years before.

This civilization characteristically erected circular buildings with great slabs of calcite placed on top of each other with nothing to cement them.

Some were as large as 15 meters in diameter and 4 meters high, with fan-shaped inset stairways. Each one of these buildings was the foundation for a circular house with walls of wooden staves and cone-shaped, palm roofs. Other smaller, circular or rectangular structures served as altars, while the large circular or square buildings held temples. Some eighteenth-century chronicles hint that the Olive, Pasita or Mariguan indigenous may have erected these magnificent mountain buildings.

Some towns reached considerable size, with as many as 1,000 houses set around circular plazas with walkways, passageways, water storage tanks and steam baths in the shape of igloos. Their utensils reveal a society based on agriculture and long-distance trading of secondary goods such as shell, semi-precious stone or ceramic ornaments. Out-

Of the many Huastec sites in Tamaulipas, only Las Flores, located on a hill overlooking the beautiful Chairel Lagoon, remains open to the public.



The Las Flores pyramid is now part of the urban landscape of the city of Tampico.



Amatlán sculpture.



Semi-desert landscape.

standing among the remains are clay pipes, that indicate that these people smoked. Representations of their gods are unknown, however.

About 300 mountain villages have been found in Tamaulipas, of which only two can be visited, Balcón de Montezuma and El Sabinito. The former is located 26 kilometers from Ciudad Victoria, the state capital. It is a small village with 90 circular foundations built around two plazas. In a very favorable location, atop a hill surrounded by Juan Capitán Canyon, it boasts a splendid landscape of palm trees and ancient holm oak groves. El Sabinito is located 95 kilometers from the capital, in the northern foothills of the Tamaulipas Mountains, near the flowing Soto la Marina River. Sabinito was a large village, possibly the center of political control, with more than 600 foundations built on terraces, corridors and plazas that testify to urban planning. Outstanding among its constructions is its circular, eight-meter-high pyramid, with slabs sticking out of its sides like the arms of a windmill. Here, the terrain is practically a tropical jungle, with suffocating heat and humidity.

For reasons unknown to us, but possibly because of a severe drought and the arrival of hunter-gath-

erer tribes, the mountain villages were definitively abandoned around A.D. 1200; with that, a civilization that dominated the mountain tops for more than 2,000 years disappeared forever.

THE JUNGLE PEOPLES

The extreme southern part of the state, called the Huasteca, has a tropical climate and important water systems made up of the Guayalejo-Tamesí-Pánuco Rivers and the Chairel-Champayán-Pueblo Viejo Lagoons.

This rich environment gave sustenance and a wide variety of raw materials to the pre-Hispanic peoples who settled there from 1600 B.C. on.

From their very origins, the Huastec indigenous were a complex ethnic mosaic, in which different groups like the Teenek, Nahuatl, Totonac, Pame, and Tepehua shared a single territory and a single cultural tradition, the Huastec. The Teenek or Huastec belonged to the Maya linguistic family from which they separated about 3,600 years ago, time enough for totally different languages to evolve.



The mountain peoples' civilization disappeared almost 3,000 years ago.



El Sabinito may have been a center of political control.

The Huastec culture is characterized by its cut-off, cone-shaped structures made of packed earth and covered with a thick sand and lime plaster. These buildings, together with long platforms and small earthen mounds made up their villages, distributed around semi-circular or rectangular plazas. But, better known than their architecture are their beautiful creations made of such diverse materials as stone, clay and shell. They carved sublime representations of their gods in thick and thin blocks of sandstone: Teem, the fertility goddess, with naked breasts, hands over her belly and a great semi-circular head-dress on her head; Mam, or "old god", related to the sun and fire, represented by a crooked old man with a walking stick; Ajactictamzemplab, or Lord of Death, represented by a man without flesh. They made ceramic receptacles with expressive human, animal and phytomorphic forms, decorated with complex brown geometrical designs on a natural background or combining red, maroon and black. They fashioned magnificent shell jewelry such as earrings, bracelets and pendants, and particularly great triangular necklaces carved with mythical scenes like the *ehcacózcatl*, or "jewel of the wind," a symbol of Ehécatl-Quetzalcóatl, one of their main gods.



Of the many Huastec sites in Tamaulipas, only Las Flores, located on a hill overlooking the beautiful Chairel Lagoon, remains open to the public. More than 20 enormous mounds built between A.D. 1000 and A.D. 1250 were originally discovered, but they were overwhelmed by the fearful urbanization of the first half of the twentieth century. Today, the only remains of their greatness is the so-called Las Flores Pyramid, located at Azahar Street and Chairel Avenue in Tampico's Las Flores neighborhood. The pyramid has a great circular foundation, 36 meters in diameter and 6 meters high. Superimposed on it are the bodies and stairways that correspond to six different stages of construction. This is a magnificent example—and the only one on display—of Huastec earthen, lime-plastered architecture.

In 1522, Hernán Cortés attacked the Huastec peoples settled along the banks of the Chairel Lagoon, conquering them in less than 20 days. This brought about the end of the indigenous Huastec culture, which would only re-emerge as a mestizo culture, incorporating European and African elements brought by the conquest and colonization. **MM**