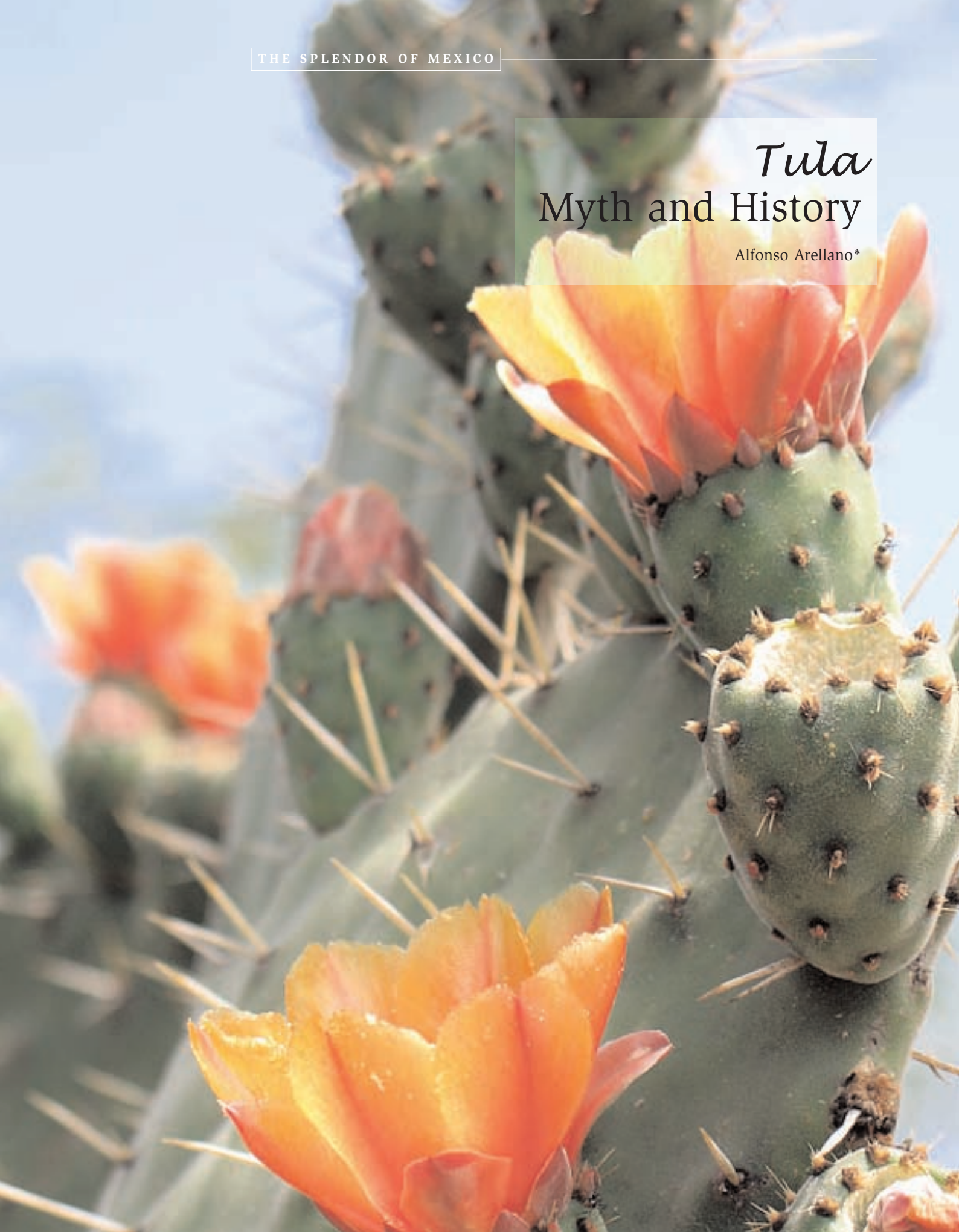


THE SPLENDOR OF MEXICO

Tula
Myth and History

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Few cities have as important a place in understanding our Mesoamerican past and oscillate as much between myth and history as Tula. It has become popular because it is the archaeological site where the “Atlante” stone sculptures of warrior kings are located. It is also associated with the splen-

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Photo previous page by Mauricio Degollado.

did political, economic and religious home to the priest-king Ce Ácatl Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl, perhaps the most emblematic figure of the pre-Hispanic world. However, in archaeological and historical research, Tula continues to be a city that poses more questions than answers.

Certainly, a great deal of data has been culled from excavations, in particular about its development over more than five centuries, its socio-economic structure and the links Tula established with different groups

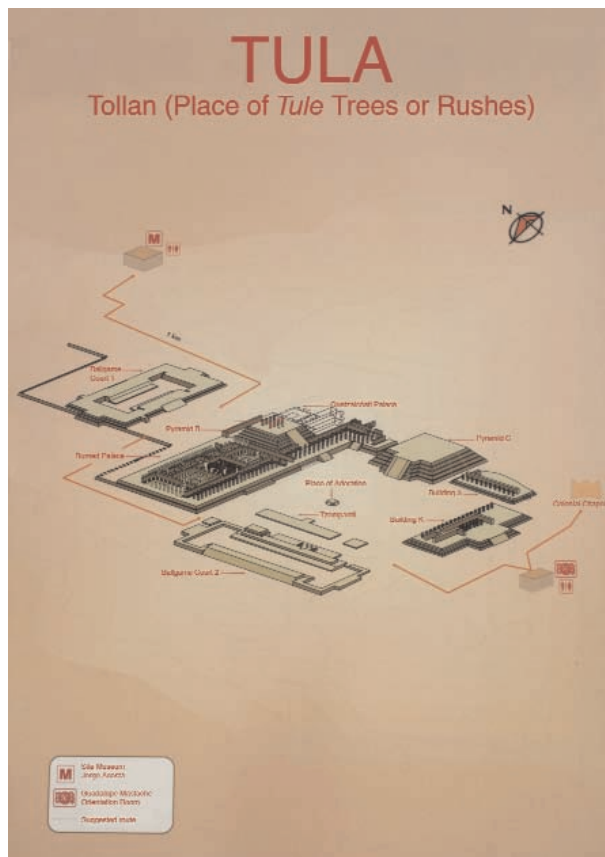


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and regions. We also have abundant historical references: lists of rulers, sacred stories and chronicles of different events (wars, matrimonial alliances, coronations). Thanks to all of this, our panorama of the city seems coherent and complete. However, when we look more closely, we do not always find a correlation between the different pieces of data. For example, in archaeological terms it is difficult to situate the government of a specific ruler. The most recent archaeological

work and historical interpretations continue to leave the chronology hazy. So, much remains to be done.

However, there is little doubt that since 1930, the Tula of historical sources (among them the *Anales de Cuauhtitlán* [The Annals of Cuauhtitlán], the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* [The Toltec-Chichimec History] by Alva Ixtlixóchitl, the *Historia de las cosas de la Nueva España* [History of Things of New Spain] by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, and the *Historia de los mexi-*



Map of Tula Grande.

canos por sus pinturas [History of Mexicans through Their Paintings]) is the history of what is called archaeological Tula. The latter is located in the state of Hidalgo between the Tula and Rosas Rivers, and east of the Salado River, surrounded by the Jicuco, Cincoc and Nopaltépetl or Magoni Hills. On the other hand, different Nahua peoples (Texcocans, Culhuas and Mexicas) are the source of the myths about Tula, and, above all, the invention of the *toltecáyotl* (the Toltec):

the essence of being an inhabitant of a fabulous city and, at the same time, being a wise man and artist *par excellence*.

Archaeological Tula Xicocotitlán, excavated several decades ago, revealed a long, complex history. We know that the first human settlements were established between 800 B.C. and 600 B.C., and that during the late pre-classical period (400-200 B.C.) it may have had trade links with regions of the West, the Bajío and the Mexican Basin, according to finds of Chupícuaro and Ticomán ceramics. In the early classical period, areas around Chingú and Julián Villagrán had links to Teotihuacan. At that time (A.D. 200-600), Tula became important when it built an extensive irrigation system and began exploiting limestone deposits.

When Teotihuacan fell, between A.D. 650 and A.D. 700, Tula survived thanks to its hydraulic systems, but it was besieged by the arrival of groups from the North who brought with them a new culture. The change is reflected in ceramics and architecture: the *coyotlateco* tradition and the construction of rooms with ceilings held up by columns, serpent-covered walls (*coatepantli*) and skulls (*tzompantli*). In addition, they controlled the green obsidian deposits in the Navajas

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Ballgame court 1.



Pyramid C.



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Burned Palace.

Hill. As a result, the city recovered its dynamism, particularly in the area known today as Tula Chico, located north of the area open to the public, while residential areas expanded in El Cielito, the Malinche and El Tesoro, eventually covering five square kilometers.

Little by little, Tula Chico was abandoned for a more southern area, Tula Grande, today the area open to the public. We do not know all the reasons, but we do know that a large fire destroyed the city.

Some specialists have preferred the mythological, religious explanation for the population abandoning the area: the myth of Quetzalcóatl and his enmity with Tezcatlipoca.

According to legend, Quetzalcóatl's birth was portentous. His parents, Chimalma and Mixcóatl, lived in or around Xochicalco. One day, Mixcóatl went hunting but found no prey; instead, one of his arrows was aimed at Lady Chimalma, who stopped it with her hand (thus giving rise to the name "shield hand"), impregnating her. To avenge this offense, Chimalma's brothers killed Mixcóatl and banished the future mother. These were the circumstances of Quetzalcóatl's birth, but when he grew up, he returned to avenge his parents, killing his uncles. Later, he was crowned as lord of Tula, where he ruled wisely in peace. At one point, Quetzalcóatl fell ill and no one could cure him. It was then that his rival Tezcatlipoca appeared, disguised as an old man, and offered him a brew that immediately made him better. However, it also made him drunk since the singular medication was *pulque*. Under the influence of the alcohol, the lord of Tula committed incest with his sister and other crimes. The next day, Tezcatlipoca

returned to show the lord his evil deeds in his magic mirror, the *tlachialoni*. Quetzalcóatl despaired and decided to abdicate and abandon Tula with his most faithful servants and followers.

Tula Grande then occupied the place left by Tula Chico. It reached its zenith in the mid-tenth century A.D., covering 16 square kilometers and even surrounding the old site. The latter, however, was never re-inhabited; and only occasional offerings were made there. Tula Grande continued to control the obsidian and limestone deposits and developed a very complex soci-



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Coatepantli, detail.



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Coatepantli, detail.

ety with many neighborhoods where both subsistence and luxury items were produced.

Tula's influence spread to several places in Mesoamerica and beyond, from New Mexico to Costa Rica. This can be seen from archaeological finds: turquoise, precious metals, ceramics (like the Soconusco lead ceramics and Costa Rica's *nicoya*), fine shells, furs, feathers and cacao. In addition, the city even boasted neighborhoods for foreigners: Huastecs (in the El Corral area), Mayas, Mixtecs, people from the Veracruz region and Zoques, besides Nahuas and native Otomís.

The city's houses were built around patios, perhaps inhabited by nuclear and extended families (that is, parents and children and their spouses and children). Although it is by no means certain, it may have been a patrilocal system: the daughter would remain in her parents' house when she married, and her husband would move there to live with her. Each household had its own temple where they may have buried their most important ancestors; the rest of the dead would be buried in different places around the house. The upper classes lived in the areas close to the large public and religious buildings, and their homes were richly decorated, judging by their multi-colored re-

liefs. To feed the population, Tula used an area with a radius of almost 40 kilometers for cultivation and hunting and gathering.

Tula collapsed around A.D. 1200. This has been explained, among other things, by deforestation, scanty rainfall, soil erosion and the arrival of new waves of migration from the North between 1197 and 1215 (if we can believe the Boturini Codex), although there is no certainty that they caused the city's fall. Archaeological studies do not confirm the cause.

Another legend attributes the fall of the Toltec city to Tezcatlipoca, during the reign of Lord Huémac. When one of his daughters visited the market and fell in love with a strong, handsome, nude Huastec man selling chili peppers, she became ill with love and Huémac, anxious to cure her, summoned the Huastec,

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Ornament on the back of one of the warrior kings.



Panoramic view of the Burned Palace from the top of Pyramid B.

named Tohueyo (a name which refers to the thumb, sex and being foreign). But actually, Tohueyo was the god Tezcatlipoca in disguise. The first chance he had, Huémac sent his son-in-law to war with the idea that he would be killed, but that did not happen: Tohueyo returned triumphant from that and other battles.

However, as punishment, the kingdom would succumb to several catastrophes. The most outstanding one was a ball game in which Huémac challenged the Tlaloque, gods of rain. The players bet their precious stones and fine feathers. Huémac won the game and the Tlaloque gave him ears and husks of corn, but the ruler refused these gifts, demanding jade and quetzal feathers. In revenge, the gods sent drought and people began to die of hunger and thirst. The survivors abandoned the kingdom and Huémac committed suicide in the Tzincalco cave to avoid witnessing the end.

Tula never recovered. After that, it was subdued by different kingdoms. By the fourteenth century, Azcapotzalco ruled over it, and later it was controlled by the Mexica. After 1521, a son of Moctezuma, Pedro Tlacahuepan Moctezuma, married to a granddaughter of Axayácatl, of royal Toltec blood, claimed Tula.

His palace was located in the El Cielito district to the southeast of Tula Grande.

Today, Tula oscillates between ruin, conservation, study and the encroachment of modern populations. And, despite everything, it retains that aura of mysticism and greatness that the centuries preserve, thanks to archaeology, history and the perpetuation of myths. **MM**

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