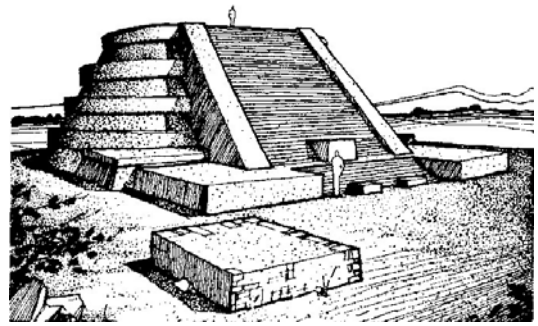


Calixtlahuaca: A Brief Guide to the Site

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INTRODUCTION

Calixtlahuaca (“Place of the plain of houses”) is an archaeological zone just north of the modern city of Toluca. It is the ruins of a large ancient city that was a powerful political capital before the area was conquered by the Mexica or Aztec empire in 1478. After that date, the city was stripped of its power and authority, and became one of several cities that paid tribute to the Aztec empire through the provincial capital Tollocan (modern Toluca). Calixtlahuaca has some of the finest examples of Late Postclassic (“Aztec”) architecture in all of Mexico, and these are the primary interest of the site for visitors today. Excavations have uncovered many examples of stone sculpture, ceramic vessels, and objects of bronze, obsidian, and other materials. A few of these are on display at the small site museum and others can be seen at various museums in Toluca and elsewhere.

Most of the visible architecture at Calixtlahuaca was excavated and restored in the 1930s by archaeologist José García Payón. In 2006 I initiated a new fieldwork project at Calixtlahuaca whose goal is to understand the lives of the people of Calixtlahuaca, the nature of the settlement as an urban center, and the impact of Aztec conquest on the people and society of the Toluca Valley. This guidebook is a provisional draft intended to give visitors some idea of the nature of the site, its monuments, and its significance. Other guidebooks are either outdated or out of print, and difficult to obtain.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE POSTCLASSIC TOLUCA VALLEY

The historical record for the Postclassic Toluca Valley is not extensive. There are only scanty historical data on conditions before the conquest of the Valley by the Mexica king Axayacatl in 1478. Home to speakers of the Nahuatl, Matlatzinca, Otomi, and Mazahua languages, the Valley was a complex ethnic and political mosaic. The most powerful capital prior to Axayacatl’s conquest was known as “Matlatzinco,” and several lines of independent evidence suggest strongly that the archaeological site of Calixtlahuaca was in fact this capital city.

According to native historical accounts, Axayacatl’s conquests of Calixtlahuaca and the other polities of the Toluca Valley in 1478 were motivated primarily by the need to stop the expansion of the Tarascan empire (which was centered west of the Toluca Valley). Groups of immigrants from the Basin of Mexico were sent to repopulate areas of the Toluca Valley where residents had fled or where resistance was encountered, and some natives were forcibly moved to new areas. Calixtlahuaca/Matlatzinco was demoted (and perhaps destroyed), and Tollocan (Toluca) selected as the provincial capital for the organization of imperial tribute collection.

The toponym Calixtlahuaca, not used before this date, starts to show up in the documents (fig. 1). In the Codex Mendoza, Calixtlahuaca is

listed as a town in the Aztec tributary province of Tolloacan, and other documents suggest that Axayacatl installed tribute collectors there.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL ZONE AND ITS EXPLORATION

The archaeological site of Calixtlahuaca is located in the modern village of San Francisco Calixtlahuaca. Postclassic settlement was spread out along the slopes of Cerro Tenismo (a 250-meter hill) and onto the plain at its base. The site is an official government archaeological zone, whose outline is shown in fig. 2.

The archaeological zone, as surveyed by the Centro INAH en el Estado de México, extends to the summit of the Cerro, covering a total of about 140 hectares (1.4 square km.). The modern village covers the northern and northeastern edges of the site. The area of occupation clearly extends beyond the boundaries shown in fig. 1. The identification of the extent of settlement was one of the objectives of the 2006 fieldwork season of the Calixtlahuaca Archaeological Project. The site surface on the slopes is a mosaic of pasture and small maize plots bounded by stone terrace walls and maguey semi-terraces; these terrace fields are visible on the aerial photo in fig. 2. On the plain the site is covered by a mixture of larger maize plots, fields of low-intensity use, and modern houselots.

José García Payón excavated at Calixtlahuaca over several seasons in the early 1930s. He was attracted by the monumental architecture scattered over the site. He identified 17 structures, clearing and restoring 8 of these (most are shown in fig. 1). He also uncovered a series of rich burials and offerings; most date to the Postclassic period, with a smaller number from Classic times.

After his work at Calixtlahuaca, García Payón excavated at Malinalco and then he moved to Veracruz and spent the remainder of his career working at major sites such as El Tajín and Zempoala. Although he visited Calixtlahuaca during his later career (fig. 17), he failed to publish fully his fieldwork from the 1930s.

José García Payón published two major articles on his work at Calixtlahuaca, and the introductory volume of a planned multi-volume site report. After his death, historian Mario Colín

located García Payón's unpublished notes and materials, and Wanda Tommasi and Leonardo Manrique assembled this material and published two books of a proposed three-volume set. Unfortunately, a planned third volume of illustrations was edited and prepared, but became lost and was never published. I am engaged in an ongoing search for this manuscript and other excavation notes and materials.

Based on the results of the 2006 field season, the occupation at Calixtlahuaca dates to the Aztec period (known as the Middle and Late Postclassic phases, ca. AD 1100 – 1520). The surface collections from that project recovered no evidence for occupation in earlier periods. The monumental architecture also fits within the general style of Aztec-period central Mexican architecture.

THE MAJOR MONUMENTS ON THE SLOPES

This section and the next describe the major architectural monuments at Calixtlahuaca. They are arranged in the most convenient order of visit, starting at the Museum and parking area.

Structure 3

Structure 3, located close to the site museum and parking area, is a circular temple with a stairway on its east side (fig. 4; see also the drawing at the front of this guidebook). By excavating into the structure, García Payón identified four construction stages (fig. 5). Most of the visible temple dates to the third stage; the base of the wall for the fourth and final stage can be seen on the south side of the temple. There is a small tunnel-like entrance in the stairway with an opening on top as a skylight. This is a modern tunnel to let visitors see evidence of the earlier construction stages; it was not present in ancient times.

Numerous Aztec written and pictorial sources tell us that circular temples were dedicated to Ehecatl, the god of wind. For example, the Spanish friar Torquemada stated,

This was the God of the Air, and he had his Temple in circular form, and it was very sumptuous ... These Indians of New Spain formed and devised the Temple of the Air God also round;

and the reason that they gave was to say that thus as the Air moves and surrounds all, thus the house had to be, so that in its form it might reveal its meaning. (Torquemada 1975-83: v.3, p.86)
Translation by Pollock (1936:8-9).

One of García Payón's most spectacular finds was a life-size sculpture of Ehecatl that had been placed as an offering in the platform on the south side of the stairway of structure 3. This sculpture (fig. 6), considered one of the finest pieces of Aztec art, shows the duck-bill mask that was the sign of Ehecatl. This is either a depiction of the deity himself, or else of a priest who has turned himself into the deity by donning the sacred mask. This sculpture today is in the Museo de Antropología in Toluca.

Another fine example of Aztec sculptural art is a sacrificial stone excavated adjacent to the base of the structure 3 stairway on the north side (fig. 7). One of two such monuments, García Payón encountered the altar upside down, suggesting that it had been thrown down from the top of the stairs (where such altars normally sat), probably during the Spanish conquest. This sculpture can be found in the Teotenango museum today. The other very similar alter currently resides in the village church of San Francisco Calixtlahuaca.

Although a number of circular temples have been excavated at Aztec sites throughout central Mexico, structure 3 at Calixtlahuaca is notable for its complete excavation and for the offering of the Ehecatl sculpture. Only one other example of a circular temple with such an offering is known; this is the small circular shrine excavated in the Pino Suárez metro station in Mexico City.

Structure 1

Structure 1 is a small single-stair pyramid located about 400 meters east of structure 3. Visitors must navigate a winding modern street to reach structure 1. There are few signs and it is helpful to ask the site guards or local inhabitants how to get there.

Structure 1 was excavated by García Payón, and has been partially restored by several archaeological projects over the years. It is notable for its masonry technique of flat stones set without mortar; this is visible in a small area at the base of the east side. There is normally a guard stationed at structure 1 who can point out the original

stonework; most of the walls are modern reconstructions. Although the size and form of the structure are probably faithful to the original, only the small area of original stonework can be considered accurate.

This structure is of less interest than most others at the site

Group B (structures 4, 7, and 20)

Group B is a complex of three temples or shrines located about 200 meters from structure 3. Visitors should walk uphill and around the hillslope to the southwest from structure 3. There are few signs, but the buildings are quite obvious as one approaches.

The three structures are arranged around a formal paved patio supported on a large stone terrace (fig. 8). **Structure 4**, the largest structure, is on the west side of the group. This is one of the best preserved examples of the single-temple pyramid, the most common form of temple in Aztec cities. The top has not been reconstructed. The temple on top had collapsed (as at most ancient Mesoamerican pyramids), and we do not know what it looked like. García Payón reported finding several ceramic images Tlaloc, the rain god, in and around this structure.

Structure 7 is a low platform on the north side of the group. Its use and significance are not known.

Structure 20, referred to by García Payón as the "cruciform structure," is utterly unique in the canons of ancient Mesoamerican architecture. It is a cross-shaped platform whose exterior walls were decorated by tenoned cones and human skulls of stone. It is not clear whether the open channels within the platform were like this when it was in use, or whether they are due to García Payón's reconstruction of the structure. Although several scholars, including García Payón, have suggested that this may have been a *tzompantli*, or skull rack, my own interpretation is that it is more likely related to a specialized type of Aztec altar known as the Tzitzimimi platform. These were altars decorated with images of human skulls and bones (sculpted or painted) that were involved in female-related rites of fertility and curing involving veneration of the Tzitzimime deities.

The structures of Group B share the same compass orientation as structure 3, even though one

cannot see one area from the other. This suggests to archaeoastronomer Anthony Aveni that their orientations were probably determined by astronomical observations of some sort.

Group C, “El Panteón”

Group C consists of several structures arranged around a patio (fig. 9). It is located about 400 meters from Group B, continuing in the same direction (up the slope and around the hill to the southwest). It is called locally *el panteón* (“the cemetery”) because García Payón excavated numerous burials in the patio and structures of the group.

The largest building, structure 5, has been reconstructed in such a way that several construction stages are visible (fig. 10). This was probably a small temple. Structure 6, the second-largest building in this group, has only been partially restored; it was probably another small temple. Group C also contains at least four other small structures, some or all of which were probably small platforms or altars used for various types of ritual practices.

One of the offerings excavated inside structure 5 supposedly included a Roman ceramic figurine. Problems with this find, not announced by García Payón until 3 decades after the excavations, are summarized on my web site: (www.public.asu.edu/~mesmith9/tval/RomanFigurine.html).

Group E

Group E consists of three unreconstructed temples built on top of Cerro Tenismo. It is a stiff climb of nearly 200 meters elevation up from Group C. The view from the hilltop is very nice, particularly looking south over Toluca and toward the Nevado de Toluca volcano. Little is known about these temples, apart from a fine sculpture of the deity Coatlicue recovered near or in this group (fig. 11). This sculpture is on display at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City.

THE MAJOR MONUMENTS ON THE PLAIN

José García Payón located two large structures on the plain below Cerro Tenismo: structures 16 and 17.

Structure 17, “El Calmecac”

Structure 17 is a large architectural complex located about 300 meters northwest of the museum. Visitors can walk down the slope, or the structure can be reached by car. Access to this fenced structure is blocked if no guard is present, but the guards at structure 3 can unlock it if required.

Structure 17 consists of a series of platforms and rooms arranged around a large central courtyard with a single entrance on the west side (fig. 12). García Payón called this complex a *calmecac* (“school”), and locally it is known by that label today. He was almost certainly wrong in his interpretation, however. Today, with the benefit of many studies carried out since the 1930s, it is clear that it was a palace, probably the royal palace of Calixtlahuaca. The form of structure 17—rooms and platforms arranged about a patio; a single entrance; and a tall platform opposite the entrance—fits the standard plan of Aztec palaces at numerous cities.

Although we do not know today what kinds of artifacts or offerings were excavated in the different parts of structure 17, the overall use of the building can be reconstructed from the architecture and from comparative information on other Aztec palaces. The tall platform on the east side was probably the throne room of the king. The king and his family most likely lived in the complex of rooms on the south side. The remaining rooms and platforms probably included some or all of these features common in Aztec royal palaces: rooms for nobles and for warriors to meet; storage chambers for food, weapons, and treasure; workshops for artisans producing luxury goods such as sculpture or feather art; and various shrines and ritual spaces.

Some small rooms on the back of the tall platform do not connect with the other parts of the palace; perhaps these were for stewards who managed the labor of people who came to the palace to fulfill their labor tax. In one section of the south room complex a wall of adobe bricks has surprisingly survived centuries of rain and deterioration.

Structure 16

Structure 16 is a large low platform located about 300 meters northeast of structure 17, along the road toward the center of the village of Calixtlahuaca (the major road through the village runs along the north side of structure 16). García Payón uncovered the walls of the platform, and one can still see the fine stonework (similar to that visible in structure 1) on most of the four sides. He conducted only limited testing on top of the platform, and the nature and function of this structure is unknown. Although a ballcourt is perhaps the most likely candidate, test excavations (by García Payón and later by Román Piña Chán) have been unsuccessful in determining the form or use of structure 16.

BURIALS AND OFFERINGS

José García Payón excavated a large number of human burials at Calixtlahuaca, most of which were apparently accompanied by offerings of goods. He described some of the burials and offerings briefly in his publications, but complete descriptions were never published (perhaps there is information in the lost volume of illustrations). The only image of a burial offering published by García Payón is shown in figure 13. Many of the human burials were secondary burials (i.e., after a period of disintegration of the body, the bones were gathered up and reburied), and a large number of the long bones were cut with notches (fig. 13). Such bones were used in Aztec ceremonies as musical instruments.

The left image in figure 13 shows two ceramic vessels included as offerings with the burial: a tripod plate inverted over the skull, and a globular jar. Most of the ceramic vessels and other objects from burial offerings are stored today in the Museo de Antropología in Toluca (see below). In 2002 I studied over 1,200 of these vessels; some of the typical vessel forms are shown in figure 14. Objects of bronze alloys (copper alloyed with tin and/or arsenic) were also common burial goods; the bells shown in figure 15 are good examples. The bronze objects were probably manufactured in western Mexico and traded to Calixtlahuaca (Hosler 1994), although it is possible that there was a local tradition of copper metalworking in the region.

URBAN PLANNING AND LAYOUT

There are several notable aspects of the planning and layout of the ancient city of Calixtlahuaca. First, the spatial distribution of public architecture is radically different from other Aztec-period cities in central Mexico. At most of these cities the temples, palace, and other large stone buildings are clustered together in a central district, but at Calixtlahuaca these structures are scattered throughout the site. Furthermore, Calixtlahuaca lacks a large formal public plaza, a basic feature of urban layout at most Mesoamerican cities. These and other features of spatial layout at Calixtlahuaca remain enigmatic and are the target of ongoing research at the site.

A second notable feature of urban planning at Calixtlahuaca is the role of stone terraces. Terracing has a long history as an intensive agricultural technique in Mesoamerica. The rapid growth of population during the Aztec period was accompanied by the construction of many thousands of stone terrace walls on hillsides throughout central Mexico. Although a close association between Aztec terracing and rural settlement has been documented in many areas, Calixtlahuaca is the only large urban center in which the majority of urban land was covered with terraces. Settlement covered the northern slopes of Cerro Tenismo, all of which were modified by construction of stone terrace walls. These can be seen on the air photos of the site (figs. 2, 3). Remnants of these walls survive in many parts of the site (fig. 16). Settlement only extended a limited distance onto the plain at the base of the hill.

With the entire slope of the mountain converted into a mosaic of stone terraces, Calixtlahuaca presented an impressive view to anyone approaching the city from the north or west. Most of the large temples were also visible from afar, including structure 3 and the temples of groups B and E.

MUSEUMS

The Museum at the Site

The site museum, owned and run by the city of Toluca, was built with a circular form like structure 3 at the site. There is a small collection of objects from the excavations of José García Payón,

including ceramic vessels and figurines, stone sculptures and reliefs, and other items. Most of the portable objects in the displays were excavated in burial offerings. There is also a fragmentary stone sculpture of two feet that resemble the feet of the well-known Ehecatl sculpture from the site.

The Museo de Antropología (Toluca)

The majority of the surviving artifacts and objects excavated by García Payón are in storage at the Museo de Antropología, located in the Centro Cultural Mexiquense in Toluca. This museum is run by the Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura, a branch of the government of the State of Mexico. The collections are well organized and cataloged, although little of the original provenience or contextual data survives.

The permanent exhibit of this museum includes a section on Calixtlahuaca, with a scale model of structure 3 that visitors walk through. The display cases contain many of the finest examples of ceramic vessels and objects, lithic tools, bronze jewelry and tools from the site. The famous Ehecatl sculpture (fig. 6) is on permanent display.

The Museo de Antropología also includes excellent exhibits from other archaeological sites in the State of Mexico. Admission is free to the public. The Centro Cultural Mexiquense also includes an outstanding museum of traditional folk art from the State of Mexico and a museum of modern art.

The Museo Román Piña Chán (Teotenango)

The Museo Román Piña Chán is an attractive museum at the Teotenango archaeological site in the city of Tenango del Valle. It is run by the Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura. Most of the objects on display are from excavations at the site of Teotenango, but a number of sculptures and other objects from Calixtlahuaca are also displayed at the museum (although they are not labeled as such). In fact, most of the Aztec-style stone sculptures on display are from Calixtlahuaca, including the cylindrical altar excavated in front of structure 3 (fig. 7).

Other Museums

The fine Coatlicue sculpture from Calixtlahuaca (fig. 11) is on permanent display at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico

City. Several sculptures from Calixtlahuaca are in the permanent exhibit of the Museo Luis Mario Schneider in Malinalco, an excellent new museum.

Calixtlahuaca has been a popular location for the purchase and collection of looted objects for over one hundred years. Many objects looted and purchased at the site in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have ended up in major museums in Mexico (particularly the Museo Nacional de Antropología), in Europe, and in the United States.

Looting and Destruction of the Site

Illegal digging for artifacts at Calixtlahuaca continues today. Most of the objects recovered in this way are sold to tourists and visitors to the site. By law, all ancient objects and buildings legally belong to the Mexican people. When excavated by archaeologists approved by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, ancient objects can be studied by experts and they can be displayed in museums and exhibits for everyone to see. When looted illegally and sold to individuals, ancient objects are lost to scholarship and lost to the public. The people of Calixtlahuaca (and all Mexicans) are robbed of their history so that a few individuals can enjoy their illegal collections of artifacts.

If visitors find ancient objects at Calixtlahuaca (or at any ancient archaeological site), they should report these to the appropriate professionals (site guards, archaeologists, or personnel of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia). It is up to all people to help protect the remains of the past.

CONCLUSION

Calixtlahuaca provides some of the best preserved examples of Aztec urban architecture, including the circular temple, the palace, and several of the smaller temples. Although these buildings are not yet dated as securely as one would like, they most likely were built during the Middle (AD 1100-1300) and Late Postclassic (AD 1300-1520) periods, otherwise known as the Aztec period. Most of the construction activity took place before Calixtlahuaca and Matlatzinco were conquered by the Mexica king Axayacatl in 1478. This dating suggests that the widespread distribution of Aztec architectural forms and styles throughout central Mexico occurred long before the

expansion of the Mexica Empire. Although the buildings at Calixtlahuaca closely resemble examples from the imperial capitals and other cities of the Basin of Mexico, their organization and layout differ greatly from other Aztec cities. Instead of being concentrated in an urban epicenter, these structures are scattered throughout the city with little clear indication of a central plan.

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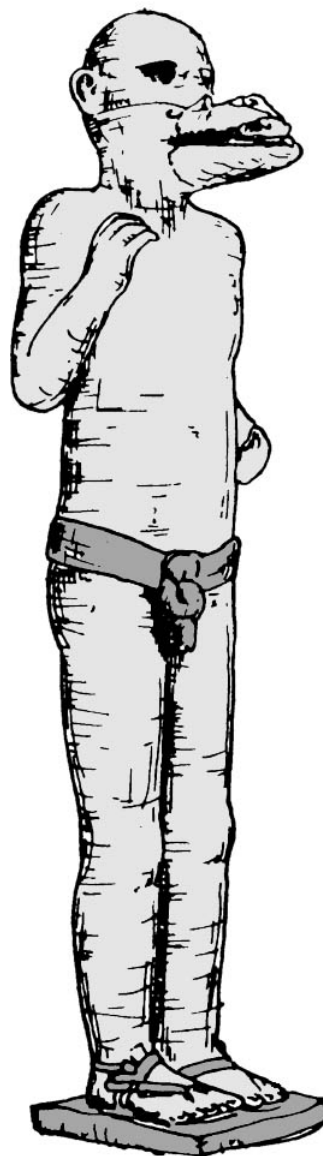
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Figures

Fig. 1. The toponym (place-name glyph) of Calixtlahuaca from the Codex Mendoza.

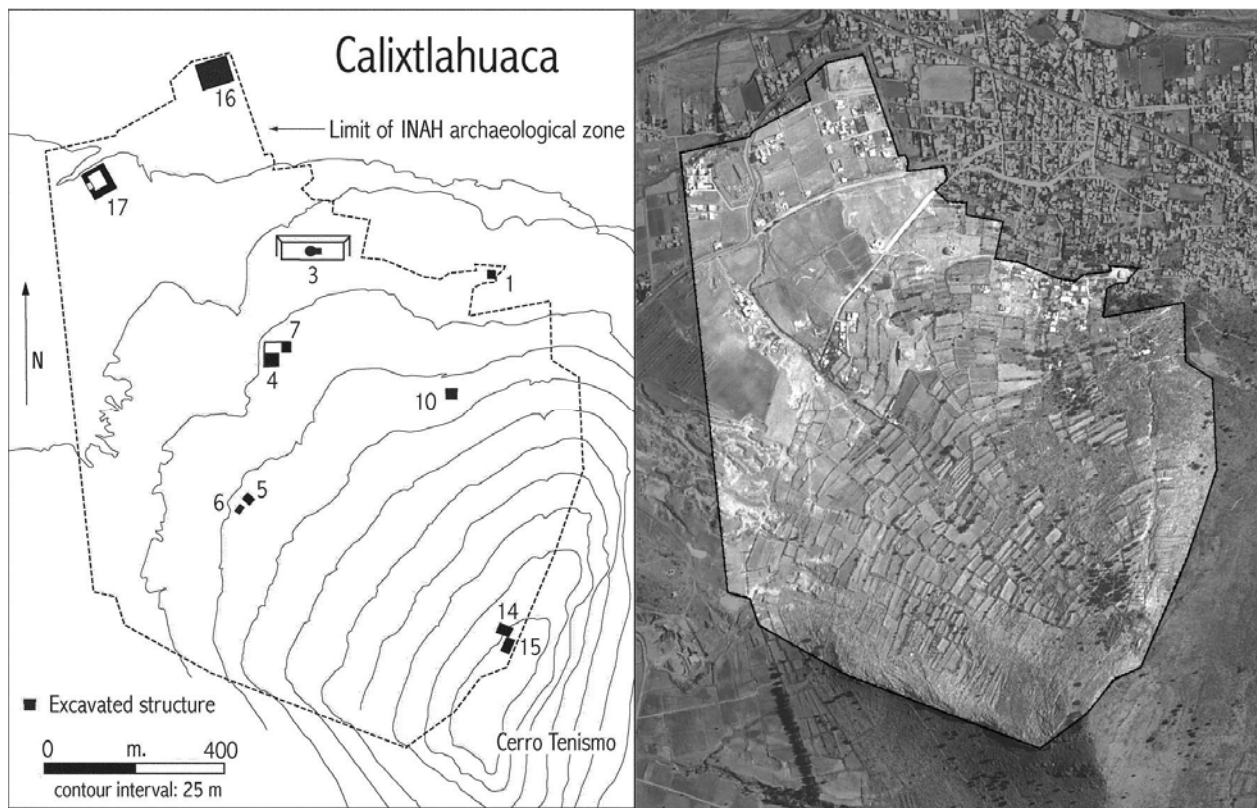


Figure 2. Map and air photo of the Calixtlahuaca archaeological zone.

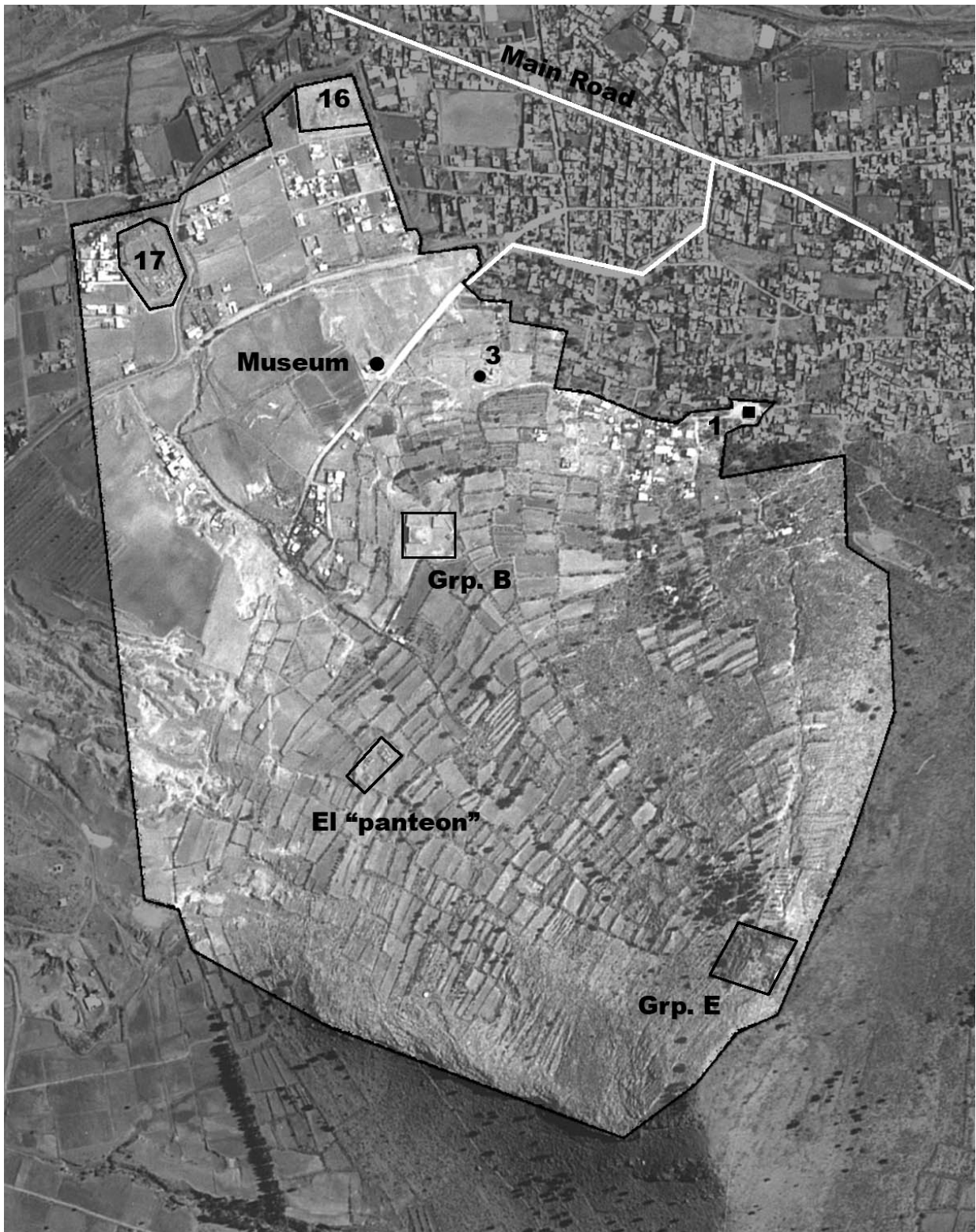


Fig 3. Locations of major buildings.



Fig. 4
Photograph of
structure 3, the
Ehecatl
temple.

Fig. 5. Construction stages
of structure 3.

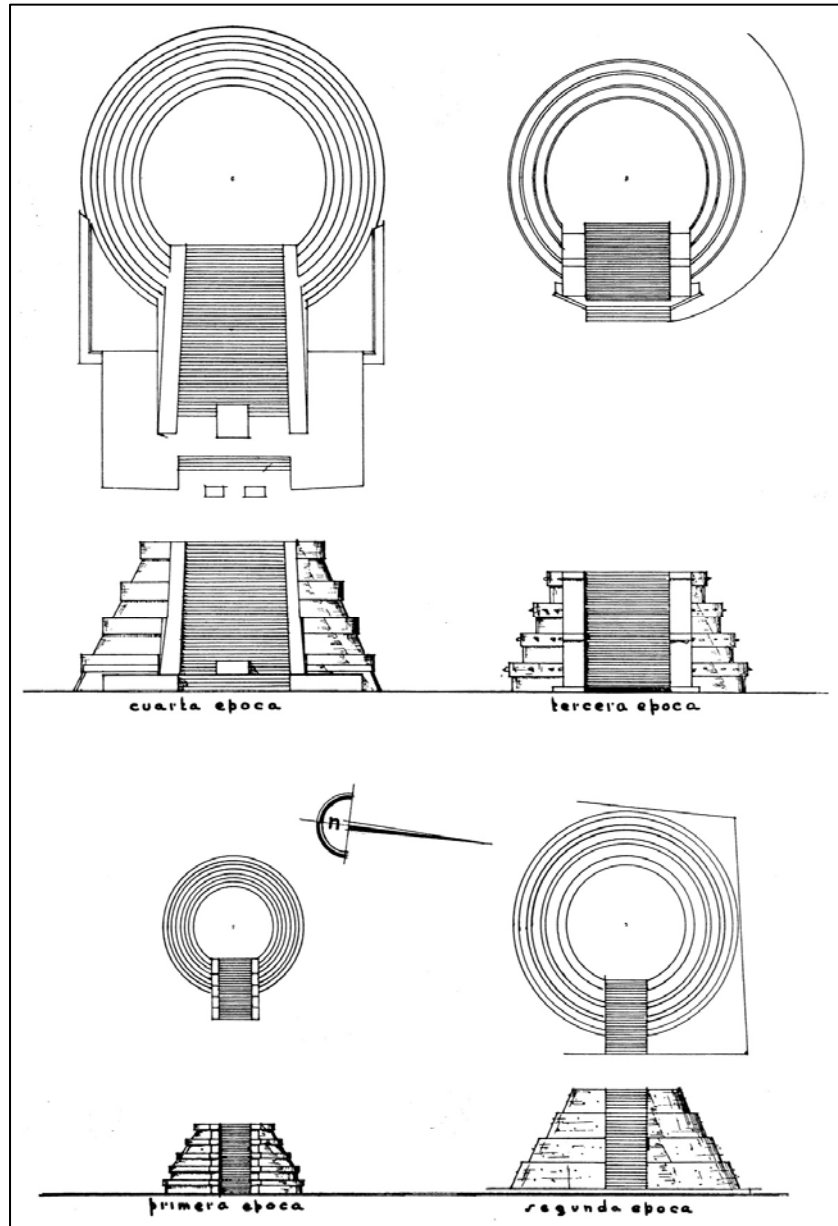




Fig. 6. Ehecatl sculpture from structure 3.

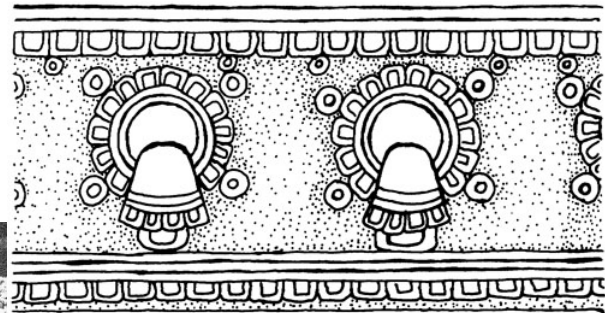


Fig. 7. Sacrificial altar from structure 3.

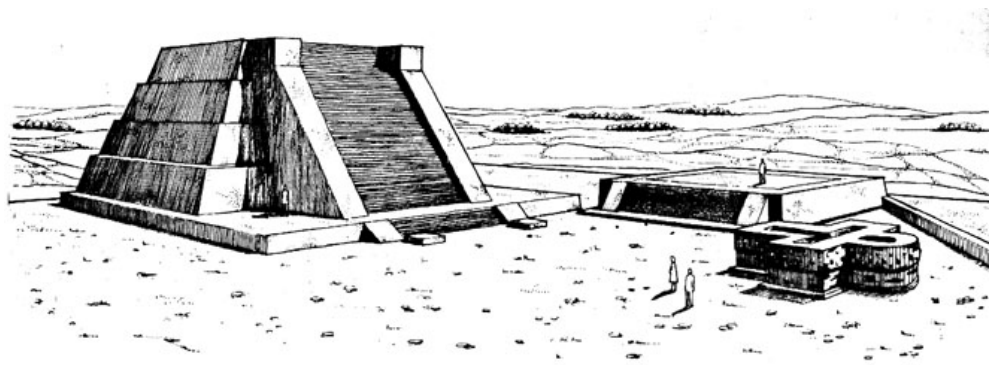


Fig. 8. Drawing of Group B (structures 4, 7, and 20).



Fig. 9. Group C. The restored structure 5 is at right.



Fig. 10. Structure 5 of Group C.



Fig. 11. Sculpture of Coatlicue recovered on top of Cerro Tenismo.

Fig. 12. Structure 17, the royal palace.

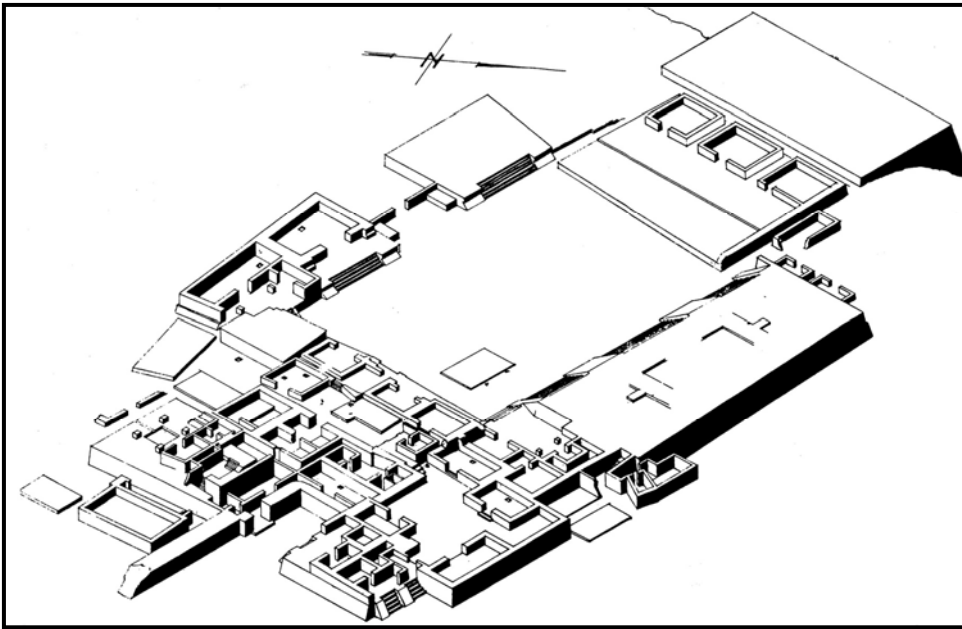


Fig. 13. Secondary burials with notched bones and ceramic vessels.



Fig. 14. Ceramic vessels from burial offerings.



Fig. 15. Bronze bells from burial offerings.



Fig. 16. Remains of a stone terrace wall.



Fig. 17. Excavator José García Payón visiting Calixtlahuaca several decades after his fieldwork at the site.