

Archeologists discover array of Aztec artefacts under Mexico City

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Ritual offerings could shed light on religious rituals and political spectacles in Aztec society, experts say.

Mexico City, November 27 (RHC)-- An extensive cache of Aztec ritual offerings found underneath downtown Mexico City, off the steps of what would have been the empire's holiest shrine, provides new insight into pre-Hispanic religious rites and political propaganda.

Sealed in stone boxes five centuries ago at the foot of the temple, the contents of one box found in the exact centre of what was a circular ceremonial stage has shattered records for the number of sea

offerings from both the Pacific Ocean and off Mexico's gulf coast, including more than 165 once-bright-red starfish and upwards of 180 complete corral branches.

Archaeologists believe Aztec priests carefully layered these offerings in the box within the elevated platform for a ceremony likely attended by thousands of rapt spectators amid the thunderclap of drums.

"Pure imperial propaganda," Leonardo Lopez Lujan, a lead archaeologist at the Proyecto Templo Mayor of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), which is overseeing the dig, said of the likely spectacle.

In the same box, archaeologists previously found a sacrificed jaguar dressed like a warrior associated with the Aztec patron Huitzilopochtli, the war and sun god, before the COVID-19 pandemic forced a pause on excavations for more than two years.

Previously unreported details include last month's discovery of a sacrificed eagle held in the clutches of the jaguar, along with miniature wooden spears and a reed shield found next to the west-facing feline, which had copper bells tied around its ankles.

The half-excavated rectangular box, dating to the reign of emperor Ahuitzotl, who ruled from 1486 to 1502, now shows a mysterious bulge in the middle under the jaguar's skeleton, indicating something solid below. "Whatever is underneath the jaguar is something enormously important," said Lopez Lujan. "We're expecting a great discovery."

Lopez Lujan, who heads excavations at what is today known as the Templo Mayor, thinks the box could contain an urn holding the cremated remains of Ahuitzotl, the emperor whose military campaigns expanded the empire to modern-day Guatemala while linking Mexico's Pacific and gulf coasts. But he says at least another year of digging is needed to settle the question.

To date, no Aztec royal tomb has ever been found despite more than 40 years of digging around the Templo Mayor, where more than 200 offerings boxes have been found. The temple towered as high as a 15-storey building before it was razed in the years after the 1521 Spanish conquest of Mexico, the rubble serving to obscure many of the latest finds.

Besides the central offering containing the jaguar, two additional boxes were recently identified adjacent to it, with both set to be opened in the next few weeks. More ferocious animals dressed as warriors, perhaps adorned with jade, turquoise and gold, are likely.

The aquatic offerings covering the jaguar may represent the watery underworld where the Aztecs believed the sun sank each night, or possibly part of a king's journey after death.

Joyce Marcus, an archaeologist specialising in ancient Mexico at the University of Michigan, says the recently unearthed offerings illuminate the Aztec "worldview, ritual economy, and the obvious links between imperial expansion, warfare, military prowess and the ruler's role" in ceremonies that sanctified conquests and allowed tributes to flow into the capital. "Each offering box adds another piece of the puzzle," she said.

Lastly, the skulls of a dozen sacrificed children between one to six years old were also discovered in a nearby pit, dating back decades earlier but also linked to the god Huitzilopochtli. The information obtained from the excavations goes far beyond incomplete colonial-era accounts that were also coloured by the European invaders' own justifications for conquest, according to Diana Moreiras, an Aztec scholar at the University of British Columbia.

"We're really getting to know the Aztecs on their own terms," she said, "because we're actually looking at what they did, not what the Spaniards thought about them."

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