

FAMSI © 2006: Miguel Pérez Negrete

The Temple of the New Fire at the Huixachtécatl (Hill of the Star)

Translation of the Spanish by Alex Lomónaco



Research Year: 2002

Culture: Aztec

Chronology: Late Classic

Location: México, D.F.

Site: Cerro de la Estrella, Colhuacán

Table of Contents

[Abstract](#)

[Resumen](#)

[Presentation](#)

[Location](#)

[The Significance of the Temple of the New Fire](#)

[Temple of the New Fire Architectural Complex](#)

[Scheme of the Thesis](#)

[List of Figures](#)

Abstract

Thanks to FAMSI's support, the bachelor's degree thesis of Archaeology titled "*El Templo del Fuego Nuevo en el Huixachtécatl (Cerro de la Estrella)*" has now been completed. This investigation was a development focused on one of the most important ceremonial centers. There, the last New Fire ceremony of the prehispanic times made by the Tenochca Empire was celebrated, in 1507. The remarkable significance of the sanctuary is not limited to the Late Postclassic period. The pyramid shows a series of

superimposed stages with continuity in the ritual occupation since the Classic period; two stages have a relation with Colhuacán and one with the Mexica. We have defined the architectural characteristic as well as those of the offerings, which have revealed a water-fire duality.

Resumen

Gracias al apoyo de FAMSI pudo ser concluida la tesis de licenciatura titulada "El Templo del Fuego Nuevo en el Huixachtécatl (Cerro de la Estrella)". Esta investigación se realizó sobre uno de los centros ceremoniales más importantes, ya que ahí fue celebrado el último Fuego Nuevo de la época prehispánica por el imperio tenochca, en 1507. La trascendencia del santuario no se restringe al Posclásico Tardío. La estructura tiene una secuencia de etapas constructivas que denotan una continuidad a lo largo de la ocupación ritual, desde el Período Clásico. Dos etapas se asocian a Colhuacán y una a los mexicas. Con la investigación se pudieron definir las características arquitectónicas en unión a los depósitos rituales que poseen un carácter de dualidad agua-fuego.

Submitted 09/12/2003 by:
Miguel Pérez Negrete
huixachtla@yahoo.es

Presentation

The Cerro de la Estrella (*Hill of the Star*) displays a great archaeological potential, with several settlements that spanned from the Preclassic Period to the last years of the prehispanic times, together with some others located in the surrounding areas which show evidence of populational continuity after México's Conquest, namely Iztapalapa, Culhuacán and Mexicaltzingo. The Temple of the New Fire is one of these archaeological sites and the focus of our present investigation, completed through FAMSI's support.

One of the aspects that characterize the research we have conducted at Cerro de la Estrella is the scarcity of published results. Most of the information is scattered in government archives, or is in the hands of private individuals, or at best, has been briefly referred to in scholarly works, besides the dissemination of other archaeological endeavors, which are scarce. For this reason, we proceeded with the collection of information and the analysis of archaeological materials and historic sources, with the purpose of studying the Temple of the New Fire in the frame of the ancient State and

the existing connection between the hegemonic centers and the hill sanctuaries from the Basin of México.

Location

The Huixachtécatl, presently known as Cerro de la Estrella, is located at the south of the México Basin, within the political boundaries set by the Iztapalapa Delegation of the Federal District ([Figure 1](#)). It consists of a formation of volcanic origin which rises 2,240 to 2,460 meters above sea level.

In earlier times, Cerro de la Estrella was the westernmost elevation of the peninsula of Iztapalapa, which jointly with Coyoacán formed a strait through which the waters of the lakes Chalco and Xochimilco communicated with those of Lake Texcoco ([Figure 2](#)).

At the highest point of the Cerro de la Estrella rests the Temple of the New Fire, which visually dominates Mexico City, together with other elevations in the one-time lacustrine bed, such as the Sierra de Santa Catarina, the Peñón Viejo, and the Hill of Chimalhuacán.

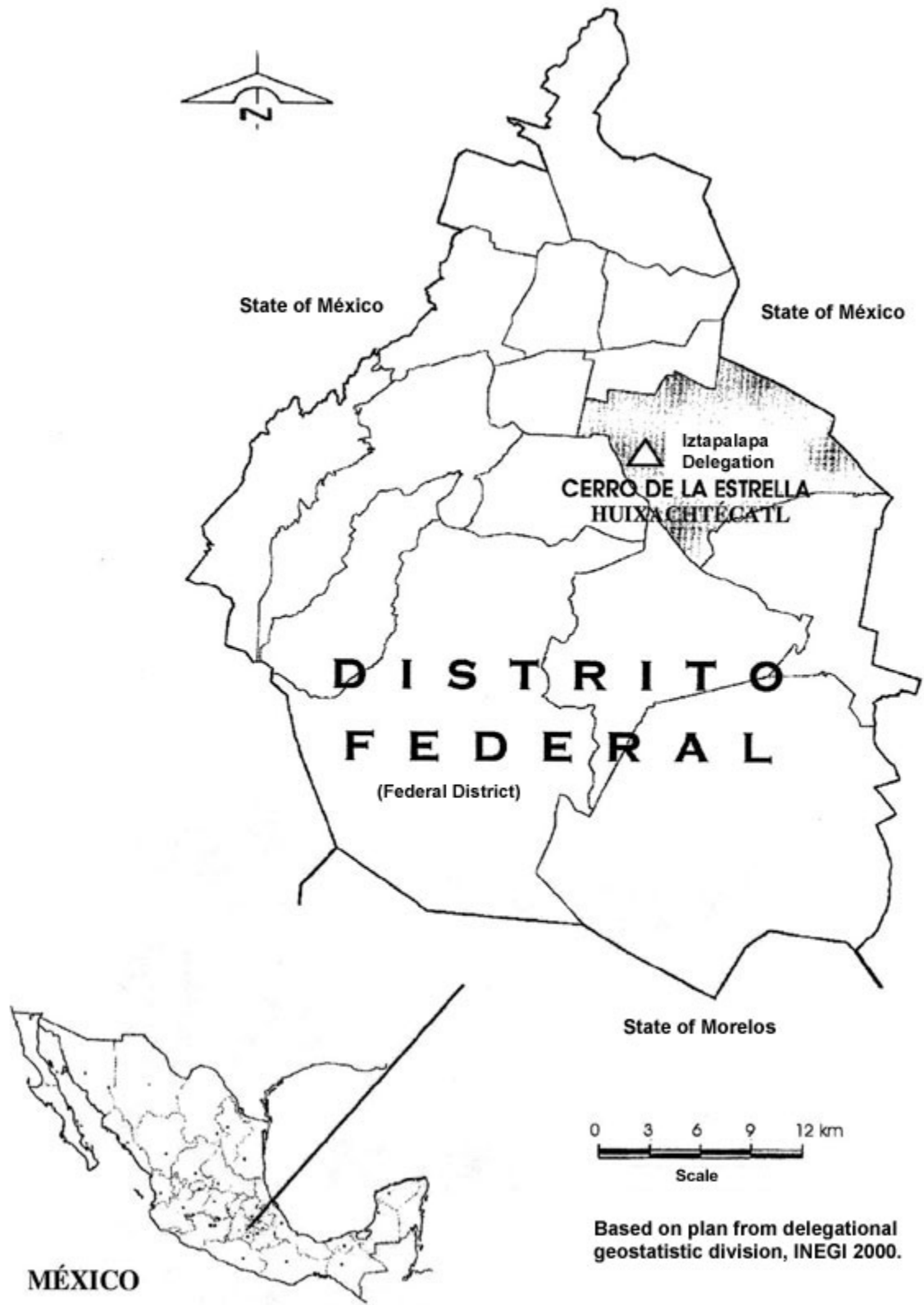


Figure 1. Place where the Cerro de la Estrella (Hill of the Star) or Huixachtécatl is located in Central México.

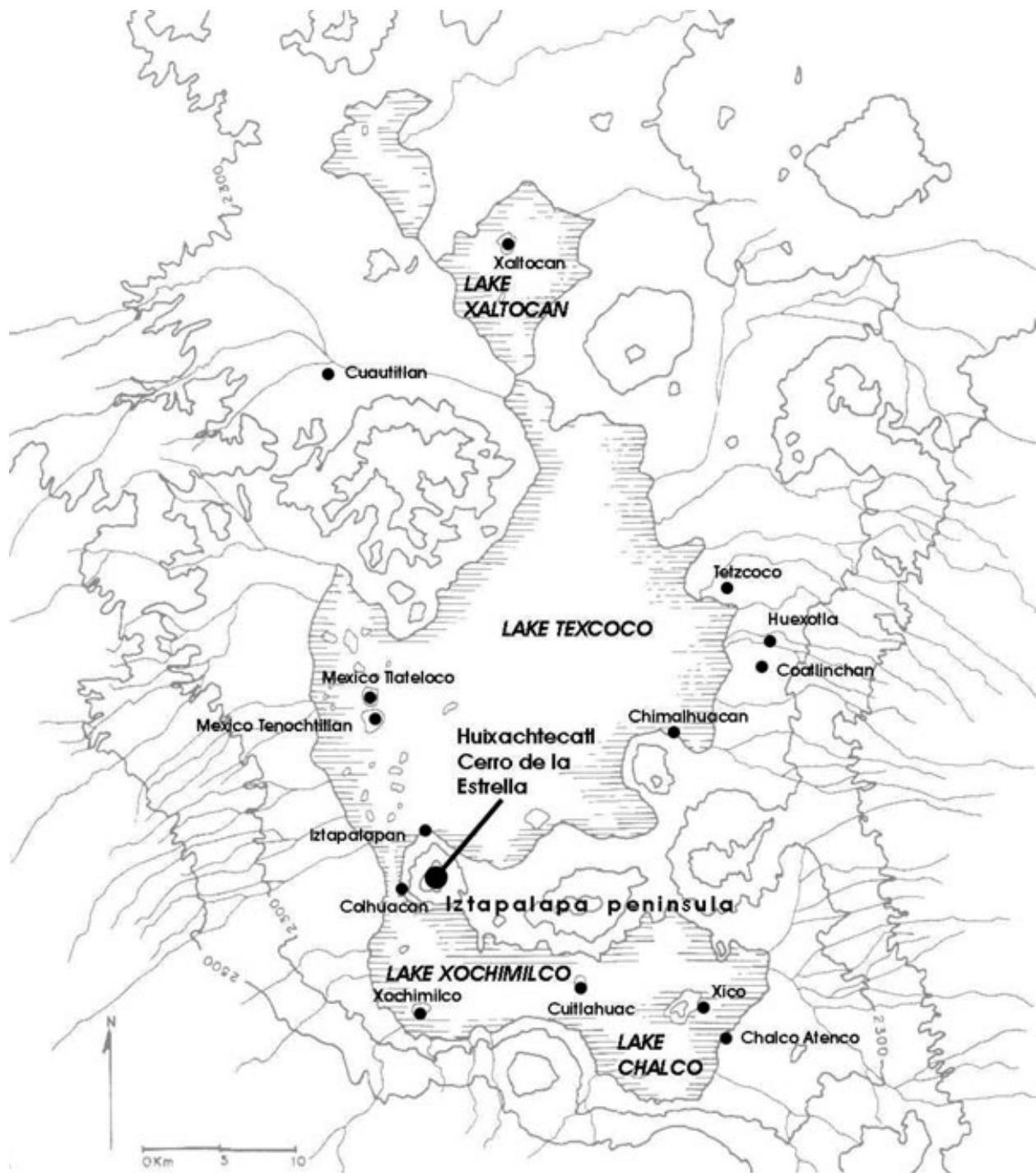


Figure 2. The Cerro de la Estrella within the lacustrine system in the XVI century (map based on Niederberger 1987, *Paleopaysages et archeologie pre-urbaine du Bassin de Mexique*, CEMCA, México).

The Significance of the Temple of the New Fire

In 1507, the year of 2 Reed, one of the most magnificent ceremonies of prehispanic Mexico took place. The calendaric wheel of 52 years had come to an end, making it necessary to perform the ritual that would allow the world to exist for another 52 years. In the month of Panquetzaliztli, the lords of Tenochtitlán, Texcoco and Tacuba gathered together to celebrate the New Fire on the summit of the Huixachtécatl ("the Huizache lord"). The solemn ceremony involved three different aspects.

The first one was to bring down the flame from the sky, a notion that prehispanic peoples had regarding the "binding of the year" or *xiuhmolpilli*, to secure the dawning of the new cycle, although in earlier times it seems that Venus also played a crucial role in this type of ceremony.

The second was the conjunction of the New Fire with the date of 2 Reed when the birth of Huitzilopochtli was celebrated. The Mexicas made sure that the new cycle of 52 years was linked with the glorious birth of their patron god at dawn. That is why they switched the New Fire date from 1 Rabbit to 2 Reed. This reflects the monopolization by the Tenochca Empire of such a crucial ceremony.

In the third place, this celebration included the inauguration of what was known as the magnificent *ayauhcalli*, built under Moctezuma II at the summit of the Huixachtécatl for the ceremony of the New Fire. The *ayauhcalli* or "house of the mist" was a place of veneration for deities of water and agriculture, and some of its remains are still in place ([Figure 3](#)) forming an archaeological site presently known as the Temple of the New Fire ([Figure 4](#)).



Figure 3. West façade of the Temple of the New Fire located on the summit of the Huixachtécatl (photo by Miguel Pérez Negrete).



Figure 4. Aerial photo of the Cerro de la Estrella summit, where the architectural remains of Huixachtécatl's magnificent ayauhcalli, known today as the Temple of the New Fire, are located (after aerial photos from the INEGI, 1999).

Temple of the New Fire Architectural Complex

The Temple of the New Fire is an architectural complex composed of one pyramidal basal platform, a plaza and a lower terrace known as the West Terrace ([Figure 5](#)). The last stage of construction was the place where the New Fire was celebrated in 1507, but in fact, the ceremonial center was an ancestral sanctuary with earlier ritual manifestations which seem to date back to the Classic period.

With at least five construction stages, the first known temple dates to the Epiclassic period (750-950), associated with a settlement similar in temporality which was located on the northern slope of the Cerro de la Estrella. Since then, the presence of an aquatic and agricultural worship is evident.

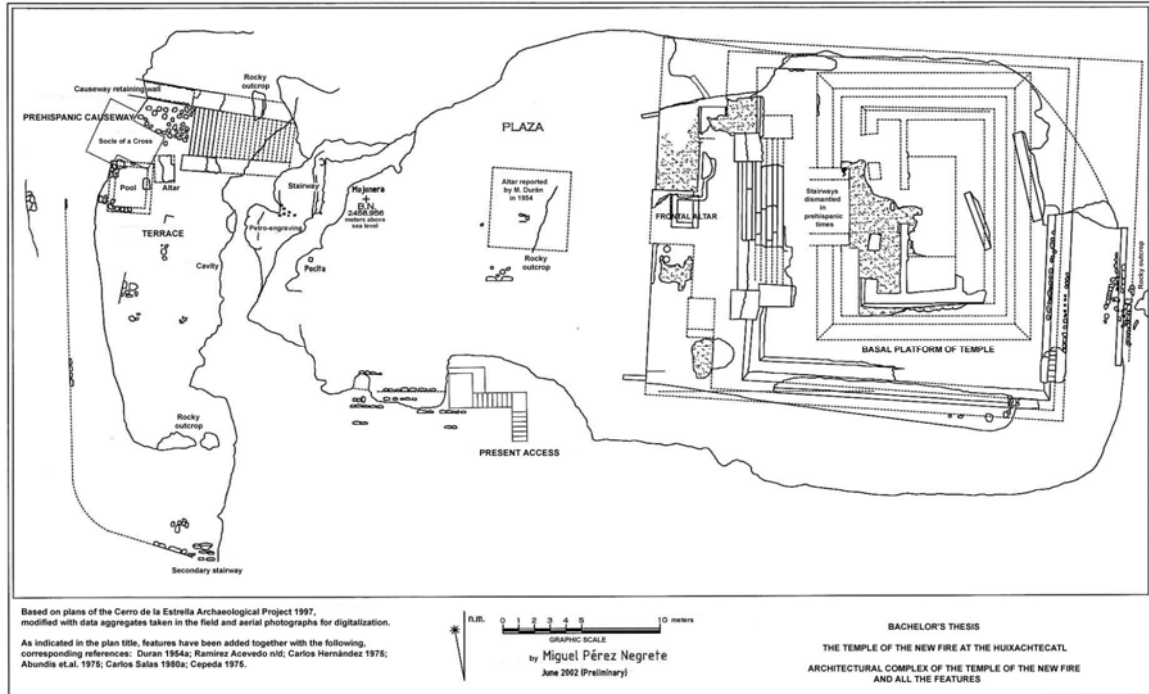


Figure 5. The Temple of the New Fire Architectural Complex (by Miguel Pérez Negrete).



Figure 6. Photograph of the southwest corner of the basal platform where the superposition of structures may be observed. The stages present have been indicated (photo by Miguel Pérez Negrete).

In turn, the two substructures that preceded the Mexica stage, the early Colhua stage and the late Colhua stage ([Figure 6](#)) are linked to the large settlement of Colhuacán, a city that was a power in the Mexico Basin during the Early Postclassic period (950 to 1200) and the beginning of the Middle Postclassic period (1150-1200). As of that moment, the existence of a ritual complex that joined together the notion of water-fire in all the 15 ritual deposits became more evident, with a special emphasis made on the rich ritual deposits or offerings from the Early Postclassic period ([Figure 7](#)). The objects in the cache included plates of jadeite and shell of marine species ([Figure 8](#)).

This dual character of antagonistic pairs (water-fire) would persist until the end of prehispanic times in that ceremonial center turned into a "house of mist", a place where the sacred flame descended from the sky during the *xiuhmolpilli*.



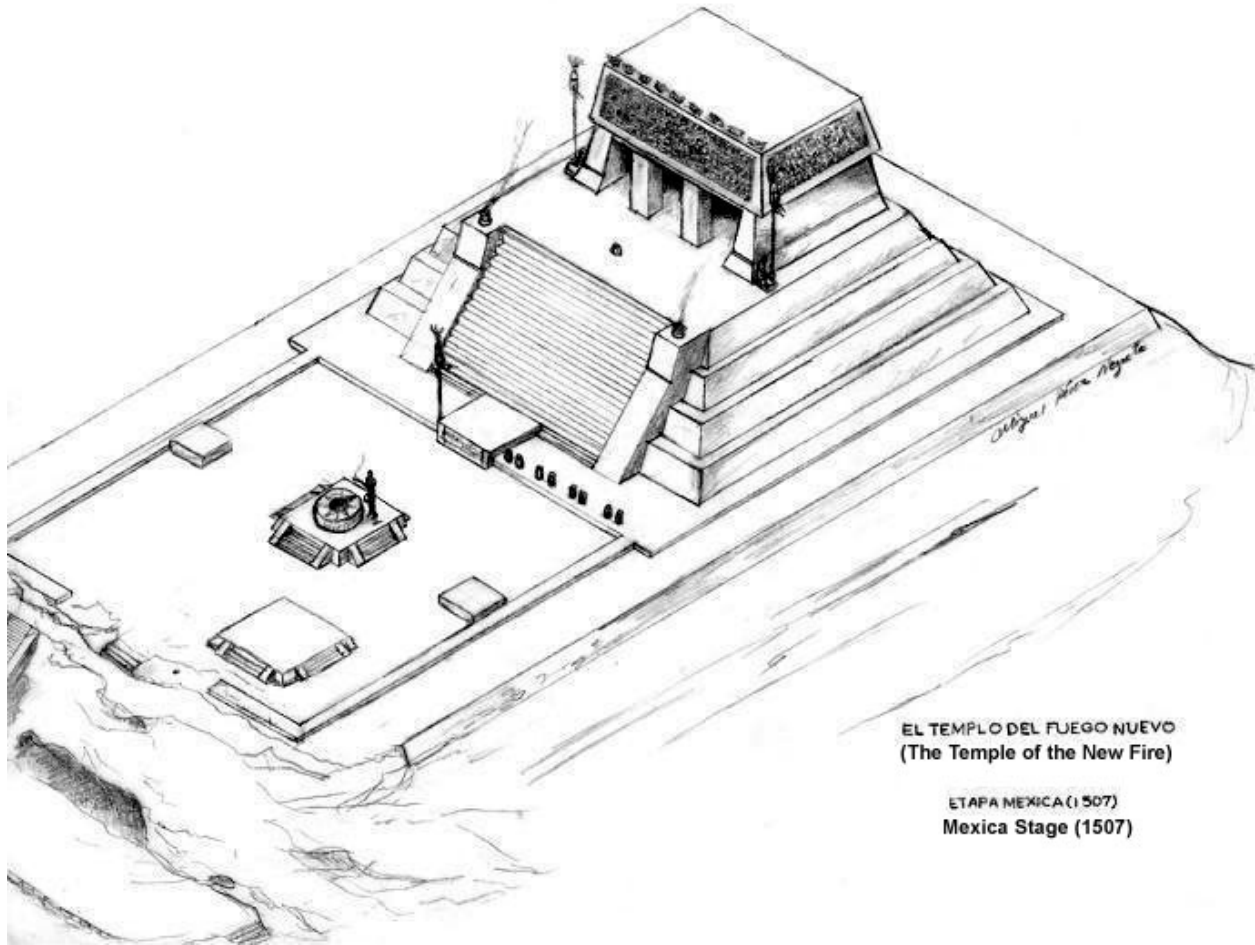
Figure 7. A number of pieces with Toltec traits from Ritual Deposit 1 corresponding to the early Colhua stage found at the Temple of the New Fire, with an estimated chronology that corresponds to the beginning of the Early Postclassic period. There are aquatic features at left: Tláloc bowls, Tláloc representations with attributes of fire and of Chalchiuhtlicue Chicomecóatl. At the center there is a Mazapa figurine associated to a terrestrial and fertility notion. At the upper right, bird or turquoise warriors linked to a solar cult, while in the lower portion there are canine figurines in relation with fire and the underworld.



Figure 8. Some pieces of Ritual Deposit 2 of the Late Teocolhua stage, with a temporality corresponding to the end of the Epiclassic period or the beginning of the Early Postclassic period. Above, jadeite plates from the Maya Region, at the lower left a pyrite mirror and at right, shells of marine species.

The restitution of the ritual space and of the architectural and iconographic characteristics through the study of archaeological materials and historic sources, reveal the large amount of labor and resources allocated for the construction of the sanctuary; in fact, during the Mexica stage, a stone paved road that led from the foot of the hills to the summit was built.

Of the final Mexica stage of construction, as we have mentioned elsewhere in this report, we have prepared a hypothetical reconstruction ([Figure 9](#)) based on the evidence at hand ([Figure 10](#)). The temple corresponding to this stage was described by Hernán Cortés as a tower, it was represented in the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* ([Figure 10](#)), and mentioned in multiple chronicles and codices of the XVI century.



EL TEMPLO DEL FUEGO NUEVO
(The Temple of the New Fire)

ETAPA MEXICA (1507)
Mexico Stage (1507)

Figure 9. Hypothetical reconstruction of the last constructive phase of the Temple of the New Fire, the Mexica stage, in 1507. To achieve this purpose we have used the iconographic features found in the various unpublished explorations and the architectural analysis of the site, as well as comparative studies.

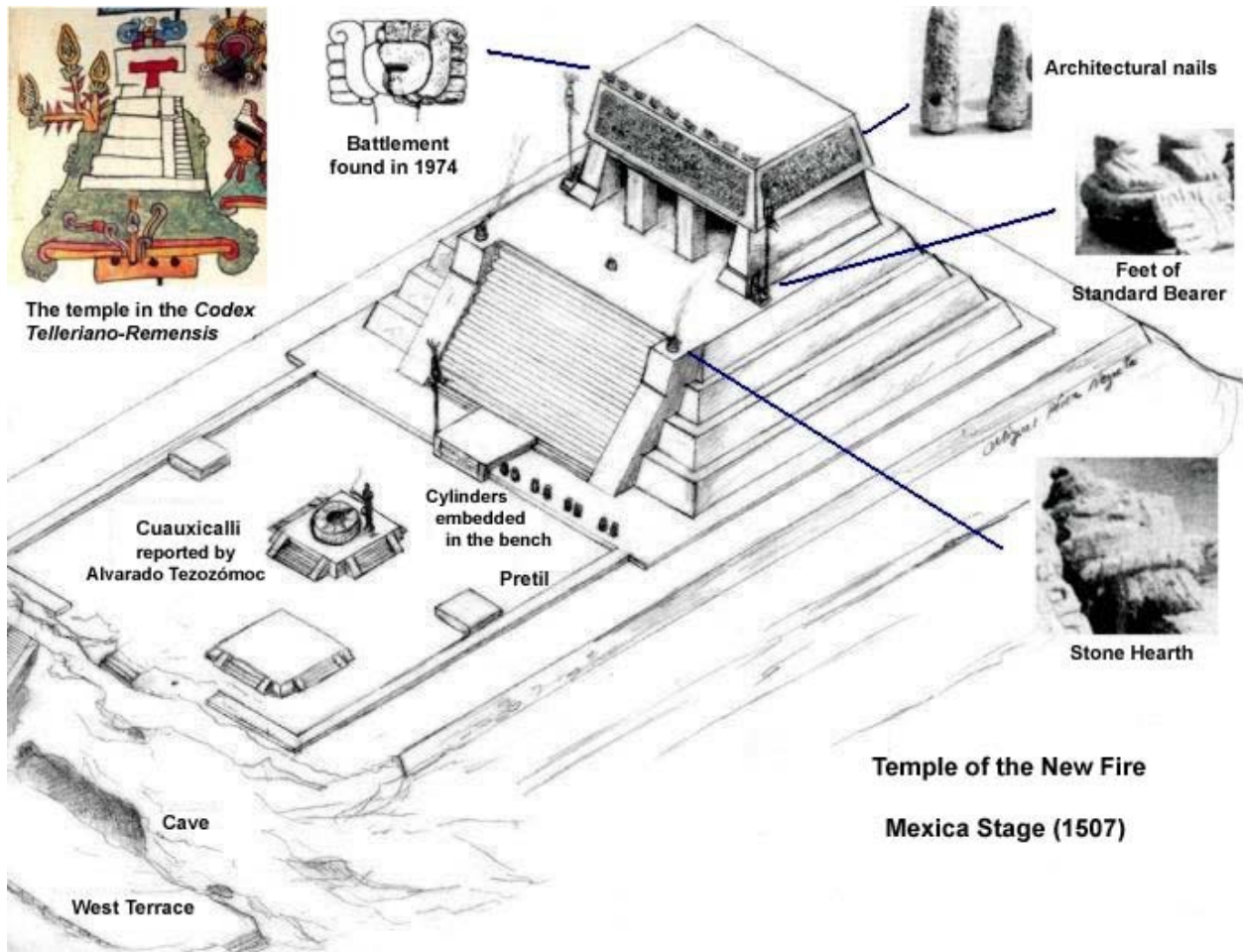


Figure 10. The Mexica stage with some of the archaeological materials used for the hypothetical reconstruction. Note the similarity among the battlement found and the one crowning the representation of the Temple of the New Fire in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (by Miguel Pérez Negrte).

Contrary to the belief that the New Fire was lit by the Mexicas on the summit of the hill during more than one *xiuhmolpilli*, the critical study led us to conclude that the penultimate Mexica New Fire was lit in 1454 at the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlán, and that it was not until the following New Fire that the year was changed from 1506 to 1507, in addition to the rebuilding of the *ayauhcalli* at the Huixachtécatl as a part of the imperial strategies. It could be for more than one reason that Tenochtitlán decided to turn the Cerro de la Estrella into its sacred hill, and we have evaluated the ones below:

- (a) Scenographic characteristics.
- (b) A favored astronomical observation.
- (c) Ceremonial correspondence.
- (d) Justification by lineage.
- (e) Inter-group legitimization.

We must also say that the Huixachtécatl was as well the sacred hill of Colhuacán, a place where the Mexica blended with the Toltec lineage to such a degree that they were thereafter known as the Culhua-Mexicas.

Scheme of the Thesis

The Temple of the New Fire cannot be understood as a place isolated from the settlements that created it as a ceremonial center; for this reason, it was framed geographically and a review of previous investigations of the Cerro de la Estrella was undertaken. Then, through a critical analysis of the references to the hill and to the New Fire ceremony in historical accounts, we proceeded to define the characteristics of the ritual space and architectural sequence. The thesis includes the following chapters:

- Chapter 1. The Power Discourse and the Shrines.
- Chapter 2. Geographical Setting.
- Chapter 3. Historiographic Revision.
- Chapter 4. The Cerro de la Estrella in Historic Sources.
- Chapter 5. The New Fire.
- Chapter 6. Component Parts of the Ceremonial Center.
- Chapter 7. The Preclassic Occupation on the Summit.
- Chapter 8. The Classic Occupation on the Summit.
- Chapter 9. The Ceremonial Center in the Epiclassic period (early and late Teoculhua stages).
- Chapter 10. Ceremonial Characteristics in the Postclassic period.
- Chapter 11. The Ceremonial Center in the Early Postclassic period (early and late Colhua stages).
- Chapter 12. The Ceremonial Center in the Middle Postclassic period.
- Chapter 13. The Ceremonial Center in the Late Postclassic period (Mexica stage).

List of Figures

[Figure 1](#). Place where the Cerro de la Estrella (Hill of the Star) or Huixachtécatl is located in Central México.

[Figure 2](#). The Cerro de la Estrella within the lacustrine system in the XVI century (map based on Niederberger 1987, *Paleopaysages et archeologie pre-urbane du Bassin de Mexique*, CEMCA, México).

[Figure 3](#). West façade of the Temple of the New Fire located on the summit of the Huixachtécatl (photo by Miguel Pérez Negrete).

[Figure 4](#). Aerial photo of the Cerro de la Estrella summit, where the architectural remains of Huixachtécatl's magnificent *ayauhcalli*, known today as the Temple of the New Fire, are located (after aerial photos from the INEGI, 1999).

[Figure 5](#). The Temple of the New Fire Architectural Complex (by Miguel Pérez Negrete).

[Figure 6](#). Photograph of the southwest corner of the basal platform where the superposition of structures may be observed. The stages present have been indicated (photo by Miguel Pérez Negrete).

[Figure 7](#). A number of pieces with Toltec traits from Ritual Deposit 1 corresponding to the early Colhua stage found at the Temple of the New Fire, with an estimated chronology that corresponds to the beginning of the Early Postclassic period. There are aquatic features at left: Tláloc bowls, Tláloc representations with attributes of fire and of Chalchiuhtlicue Chicomecóatl. At the center there is a Mazapa figurine associated to a terrestrial and fertility notion. At the upper right, bird or turquoise warriors linked to a solar cult, while in the lower portion there are canine figurines in relation with fire and the underworld.

[Figure 8](#). Some pieces of Ritual Deposit 2 of the Late Teocolhua stage, with a temporality corresponding to the end of the Epiclassic period or the beginning of the Early Postclassic period. Above, jadeite plates from the Maya Region, at the lower left a pyrite mirror and at right, shells of marine species.

[Figure 9](#). Hypothetical reconstruction of the last constructive phase of the Temple of the New Fire, the Mexica stage, in 1507. To achieve this purpose we have used the iconographic features found in the various unpublished explorations and the architectural analysis of the site, as well as comparative studies.

[Figure 10](#). The Mexica stage with some of the archaeological materials used for the hypothetical reconstruction. Note the similarity among the battlement found and the one crowning the representation of the Temple of the New Fire in the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (by Miguel Pérez Negrete).