

# A Man of the People

by DUDLEY T. EASBY, JR. *Secretary*

After a peregrination that began apparently over half a century ago a fine Aztec stone sculpture from Mexico (Frontispiece, Figures 2, 3) has come to rest in the Museum's collections. It is a figure of a man, seated, one might almost say crouched, on a low block, clad only in a loincloth and sandals. The fragmentary right hand, resting on the knee, is carved in a clenched position to receive or hold some object. His humble, yet curiously powerful frame is rendered with striking anatomical realism. The faithful depiction of the features and of such forms as the shoulder blades, the kneecaps, and the ankle bones, as well as the loincloth and sandals, are all the more noteworthy when we recall that what are commonly accepted as sculptor's tools were unknown to the forgotten craftsman who fashioned this piece from a block of laminated sandstone. It is a tour de force executed entirely by pecking, grinding, and polishing with stone tools and abrasives.

However, the precisely rendered details never obscure the over-all form of this compact statue. The expression of resignation in both the features and the pose reflect the austerity of the civilization that produced it, and have little in common with the traditions of European sculpture. The impression it conveys is similar to the monumental simplicity of Egyptian sculpture and the quiet dignity of such Near Eastern works as our Sumerian statue of Gudea of the third millennium B.C. As a result, this remarkable piece has a

FRONTISPICE: *Detail of the standard-bearer shown in Figures 2 and 3*

ON THE COVER: *Detail of an X-ray photograph of the gold phiale illustrated on pp. 156 and 157*

universal and timeless appeal, reinforced by a strong and comparatively rare humanism. It is not burdened, for example, with any of the strange, and to us often repulsive, mythological attributes so common in the art of this culture, such as skulls, human hearts, severed hands, writhing snakes, spiders, and the like, nor is the figure grotesque or contorted. Rather we have here the simple eloquence of the human form, portrayed with sensitivity and accuracy.

This figure comes from the last period of the great Middle American civilization that was overthrown and destroyed by European invaders. This contact with Europeans accounts for the fact that the Aztecs are the most widely known of the societies of Middle America, although their religion, institutions, art, and architecture were influenced by liberal borrowings from the great, but less familiar, cultures that preceded them, and those that they conquered. Our figure, in fact, represents such a borrowing: the well-

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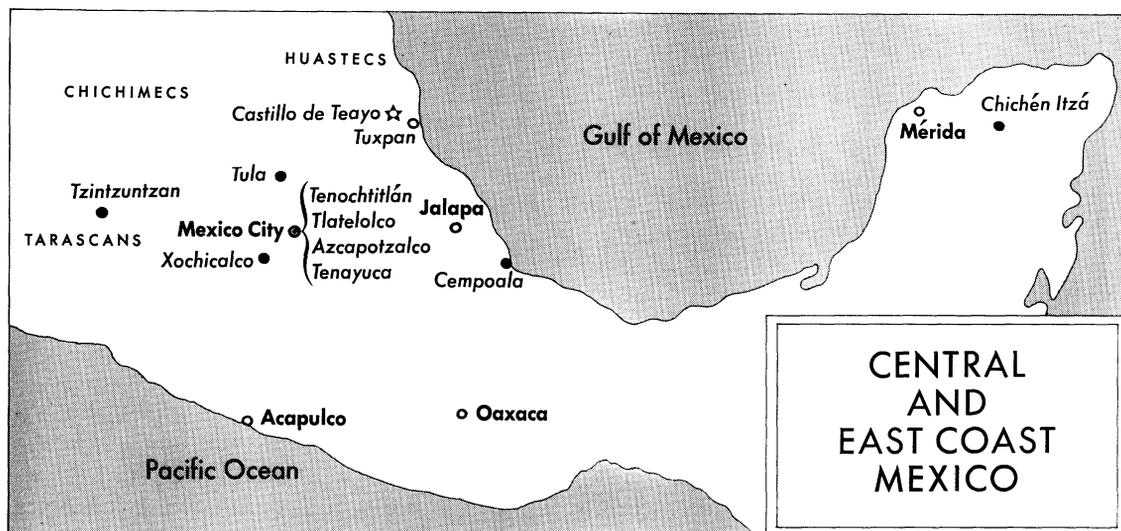
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known concept of the *portaestandarte*, or standard-bearer, which was created by the Toltecs of Tula.

While Aztec history can be largely reconstructed from written records, both native and European, Toltec history is a curious mixture of fact and legend. It may be said to have begun around 908, with the arrival on the Central Plateau of Mexico of nomadic barbarians from the northwest, under the leadership of the ruthless Mixcoatl (literally "Cloud Snake," an allusion to the Milky Way). These nomads intermarried with the survivors of Classic Teotihuacán and absorbed their culture. By 980 the Toltecs had established the seat of their "empire" at Tula under the leadership of Mixcoatl's son, who took from the Classic Teotihuacanos the name of Quetzalcoatl ("Feathered Serpent"), and became the best-known culture hero of Middle America. He, his teachings, his accomplishments, and his great city all merged into

a legend to which the latter-day Aztecs harked back with a nostalgia bordering on reverence. The arts and crafts flourished anew; a great pan-Mexican period came into being; and Toltec influence spread to such faraway points as the Gulf Coast and Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán peninsula to the east, Oaxaca and Chiapas to the south, and Tzintzuntzan and Xochicalco to the west. However, in 1168 this came to a sudden end, largely as the result of a violent and terrible civil war complicated by new barbaric invasions from the north. Tula was put to the torch and destroyed, followed by the fall of other Toltec centers, and mass migrations took place.

The period between the destruction and abandonment of Tula in 1168 and the arrival of the Aztecs in the valley of Mexico during the latter part of the thirteenth century appears to have been one of confusion and readjustment, with a return to tribal autonomy and the rise of such centers as Tenayuca and Azcapotzalco, near present-day Mexico City, and Cholula. The new arrivals, like the tenth century invaders who paved the way for the Toltec renaissance, were an uncouth, barbaric, and pugnacious tribe of nomads. In their later recorded history they claimed that they came from Aztlán in western Mexico, but their origins are still obscure. Certainly in their wanderings they spent considerable time in the north, the land of the

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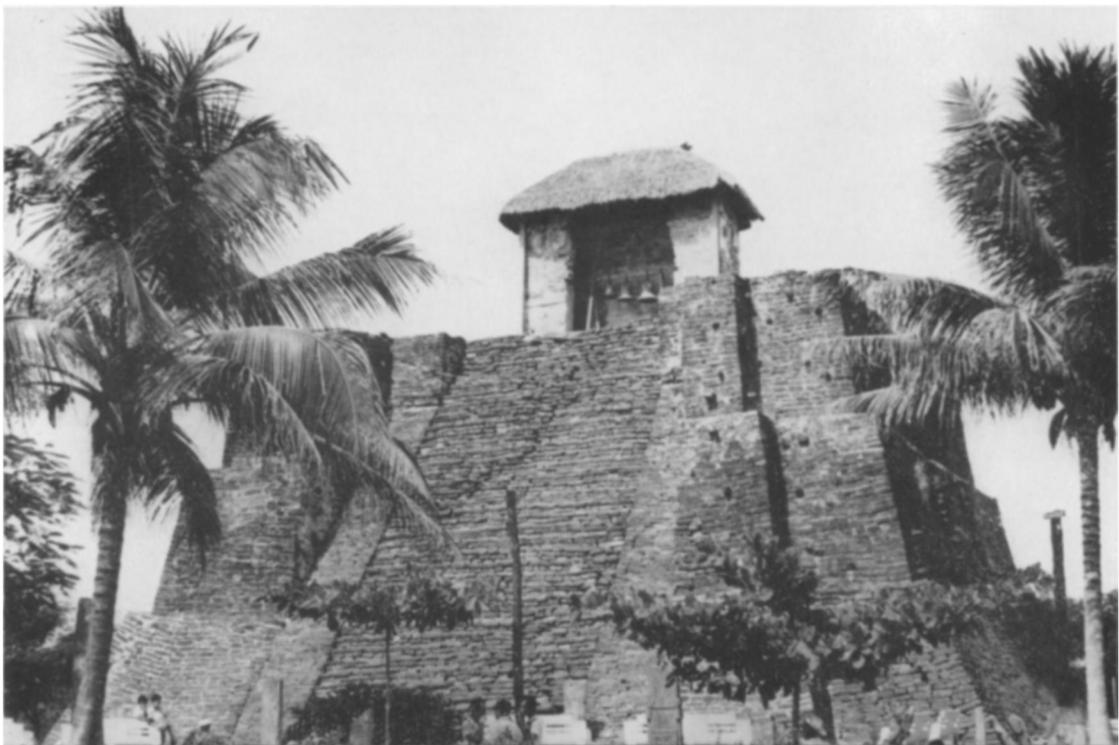
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Chichimecas, whence the earlier barbarians had come. At first the Aztecs hired themselves out as mercenaries in local disputes, but caused so much trouble with their intrigues and machinations that they were finally isolated on a small island in the Lake of Texcoco, where Tenoch, their leader, established his capital, Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City). In 1337 they were the vassals of the city of Azcapotzalco on the western shore of the lake, but by 1428 they had thrown off their shackles, destroyed Azcapotzalco, and formed the tripartite alliance of the city-states of Tenochtitlán, Tlacopan, and Texcoco. This alliance, the nucleus of the Aztec empire, was to continue until Indian civilization was abruptly wiped out by the Spanish conquest. At the peak of Aztec expansion, in the reign of the second Montezuma at the beginning of the sixteenth century, thirty-eight tributary provinces, extending from the Pacific to the Atlantic and from the Tarascan, Chichimec, and Huastec frontiers on the north all the way south to the Guatemalan border, were under the hegemony

of Tenochtitlán. For the most part this was a fiscal, tribute-gathering scheme rather than a political entity; military governors were set up only in recently subjugated areas and in fortified outposts on the frontiers.

Not only were the Aztecs noteworthy for their military exploits; they managed to build up in less than two centuries a civilization that aroused the amazement and admiration of the sixteenth century conquistadors. Having no cultural heritage or tradition of their own, they simply appropriated one, taking over large parts of Toltec culture from the dispersed survivors of Tula. The era of the Toltecs became for them the Golden Age, the Aztec master craftsmen were known as *tolteca*, and the generic term for mastery or excellence in the arts and crafts was *toltecatoytl*, which is literally "Toltec in quality." Not only were the terms and the techniques taken over in the civilizing process, but there is also archaeological evidence that a few surviving Toltec sculptures were brought from Tula to Tenochtitlán. So great was the Aztec admiration

1. *Pyramid at Castillo de Teayo, three truncated bodies surmounted by a small temple. On the west side is a stairway flanked by steep balustrades, at the top of one of which the standard-bearer was placed. If there was a second similar figure, as was usual, it has not been found. The walls of the pyramid, the balustrades, and the stairway were covered with stucco and painted; only a few traces of painted stucco remain today, on the walls of the little temple. The thatched roof is a modern restoration, and the village bells now hang where an idol, or idols, originally were housed. Although of modest height (approximately forty feet), this pyramid is almost unique among Aztec ones in that its temple escaped destruction by the Spaniards at the time of the Conquest. Photograph: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*



for the Toltecs, their adopted spiritual and cultural forebears, that *tolteca* by extension came to mean a civilized person, a metropolitan man, a master builder, or one learned in the arts and sciences.

Paradoxically, our knowledge of Aztec art is incomplete for much the same reason that the Aztecs are so well known—direct contact with European invaders. Their great works of sculp-

ture, for example, were above ground in the ceremonial enclosures, the first areas to be wrecked by the Spanish conquerors and missionaries. Also, the relatively few pieces that have come to light have been found accidentally among rubble, and not with associated architecture and artifacts. Nevertheless, even in the few surviving examples, one great difference between Aztec sculpture and its Toltec prototypes

2, 3. *Standard-bearer from Castillo de Teayo, Veracruz, Mexico. Aztec, about 1480-1491. Laminated sandstone. Height, including base, 31 5/8 inches. Dick Fund, 62.47*



stands out. The Toltec style was based on straight lines, cubes, and cylinders, producing a certain rigidity of form, whereas Aztec sculpture is more realistic and sophisticated, and technically superior. It was a case of the apprentice surpassing the master.

The standard-bearer was a Toltec artistic and architectural convention. Sometimes it was a standing human figure, sometimes a seated one, and sometimes a seated jaguar. These statues were usually set up in pairs, with one at the top

of each balustrade of the grand stairway leading up a pyramid to the temple platform at its summit (Figure 1). On the occasion of the human sacrifices that were a basic part of Toltec and Aztec religion, a staff tipped with a banner of brilliant tropical plumes was inserted in a hole in the statue provided for that purpose; the human figures held the staff, while the jaguar standard-bearer supported it in a hole or socket drilled into the back. Thus, Fray Diego Duran, a sixteenth century missionary-chronicler, wrote



that the standard-bearers flanking the stairway of the Great Pyramid in Tenochtitlán were “two seated stone Indians with staffs in their hands the tips of which staffs were decorated with bunches of rich yellow and green feathers.” Cortés’s best-known soldier, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, described a similar statue he saw on the pyramid at nearby Tlatelolco in 1519 as a

4, 5. LEFT: *Stela bearing glyphs for the day “one crocodile.” When this photograph was taken the temple roof had not been restored. Photograph: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.* RIGHT: *Reverse side of stela bearing glyphs for the day “thirteen flower.” Dated monuments like this one are all but unknown at Aztec sites*



“small idol,” a page or attendant of the principal deity in the temple. Sculptures of this kind have been found only at Toltec or Aztec ceremonial centers, or those subject to strong Toltec or Aztec influence. These include not only Tula and Tenochtitlán, but also such distant places as Toltec-dominated Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán, and the Aztec outposts at Cempoala and Castillo de Teayo in the Veracruz littoral.

Our standard-bearer has been identified as coming from Castillo de Teayo, an historically important but little-known hamlet between the Tuxpan and the Cazonces rivers in the heart of the petroleum country of northern Veracruz. By great good fortune the site was abandoned about the time of the conquest, so that its monuments miraculously escaped the full destructive impact of the conquistadors and zealous missionaries.

Although the only structure of the settlement that remains is a characteristic Aztec pyramid, it has a considerably longer history. This is evidenced by earlier Toltec and Huastec monolithic sculptures found there, which indicate that occupancy of the site began some four centuries or more before the final or Aztec phase.

The Huastec inhabitants of the area were a cultivated but tough, belligerent, and rebellious lot who were an almost constant thorn in the side of the arrogant, tribute-seeking Aztecs. The elder Montezuma (1440-1469) sent the first expedition to subdue nearby Tzicoac and Tuxpan about 1458. Similar military expeditions had to be continued under succeeding Aztec rulers, Axayacatl (1469-1481), Tizoc (1481-1486), and Ahuizotl (1486-1502); during this brief span of time the Aztec establishment at Teayo with its pyramid, temple, and related sculptures came into being.

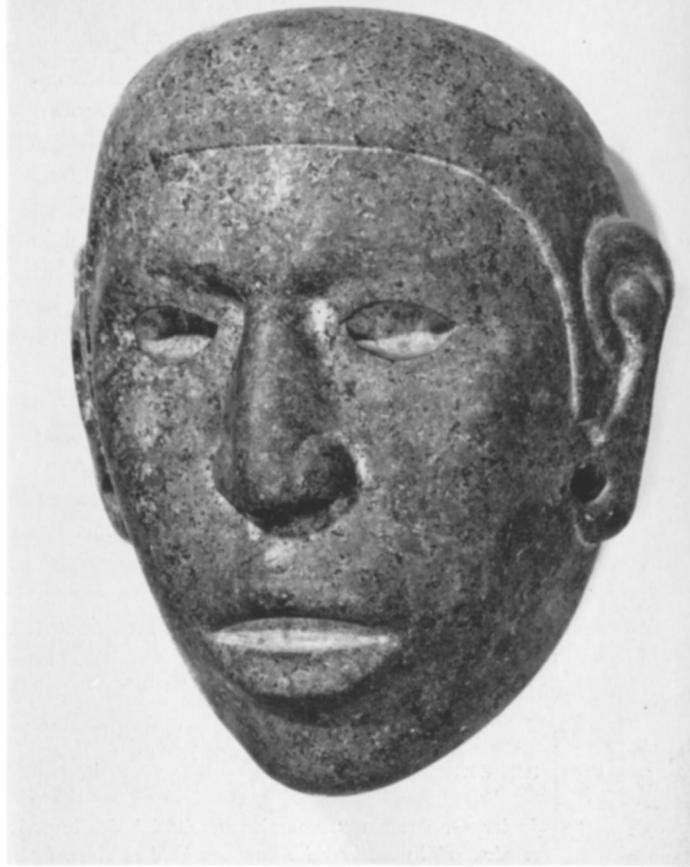
The ancient name for Teayo is still a matter of debate. R. F. Barlow has identified it in the Codex Mendoza, or Tribute Roll, as Mictlán or Miquetlán in the province of Tuxpan. There are historical records that Mictlán was subdued late in the reign of Axayacatl and again during the reign of Tizoc. One of the great rarities found at Castillo de Teayo is an Aztec dated monument, or stela (Figures 4, 5), bearing two dates, the day “one crocodile” in the year “thirteen reed” and the day “thirteen flower” in the

year “one flint knife.” The German scholar Eduard Seler identified these dates as the beginning and end of a ritual calendric cycle of 260 days (*tonalpohualli*). According to Alfonso Caso’s correlation with the Christian calendar, the first year, “thirteen reed,” corresponds roughly to 1479 and the second, “one flint knife,” to 1480, so the stela may commemorate the victory of Axayacatl.

Teayo, having been abandoned and allowed to return to bush, was resettled about 1872 by neighboring farmers who burned and cleared the surrounding tropical growth in order to plant cornfields and grow fodder in the fertile soil. The new village was built around the base of the ancient pyramid, and called Castillo de Teayo, after the pyramid, to distinguish it from the existing Hacienda Teayo nearby. When the land was burned off, many old stone monuments were exposed. Some were in quite good condition, but others were destroyed by the heat. The villagers collected a number of these relics and set them up in the main plaza around the base of the pyramid.

When Eduard Seler visited the site in 1903, photographing, drawing, and describing the pyramid and statues, he reported that the seated figure now at the Museum had been installed in the town hall as a sort of patron, affectionately dubbed Benito Juárez after Mexico’s great nineteenth century Indian leader and liberator. It seems probable, however, that Benito began his long journey soon after, for J. W. Fewkes wrote, following his visit in 1905, “The image or idol that once stood on the summit of the temple is now in the Dehesa collection at Jalapa.” Teodoro Dehesa was governor of the state of Veracruz at that time, and had long since begun to build a private collection of outstanding antiquities from the region.

Whereas it took Seler two days to reach Teayo from Tuxpan on the coast, one can drive there today in about an hour from Poza Rica, more or less the same distance away as the crow flies, arriving via an excellent highway that passes through the Jiliapa oil field. Except for better access and the splendid work of reconstruction and consolidation begun by the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History in 1948, little has changed since Seler’s visit. The



6. Green stone mask found near Castillo de Teayo, called one of “the finest secular sculptures of the Aztec period” by the late George C. Vaillant. The features and treatment of the hair show a close relationship with the Museum’s seated figure. Aztec, late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Porphyry. Height 7  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches. *The American Museum of Natural History*

open-air museum at the base of the pyramid is still there, but, as Raúl Flores Guerrero of the National University of Mexico has recently pointed out, although the stone sculptures are picturesque and charming set in the tropical garden around the base of the pyramid, the erosive action of torrential rains on the laminated sandstone makes the erection of a local museum seem imperative.

The date on the stela at Castillo de Teayo and the style of the Museum’s piece make it possible to date the latter with reasonable assurance. This is generally not the case with pre-Columbian sculpture. Aztec stone carving reached its

best period during the reign of Tizoc and the early years of his brother Ahuizotl, who succeeded him. It is likely that the commemorative stela of 1479-1480 would have been erected shortly after the victory of Axayacatl, and before the other ceremonial structures and monuments of this eastern frontier garrison and religious center. The pyramid with its temple, the principal and only surviving structure, would have been early on the agenda, and its decoration would have followed as a matter of course. If insurrections and shortage of manpower are allowed for, to date the Museum's standard-bearer within ten or eleven years from Axayacatl's initial conquest—that is, between 1480 and 1491, and closer to the latter—seems to be reasonably safe.

Since the local laminated sandstone was used, there would seem to be no doubt that this statue

was executed locally, probably by an artist who accompanied one of the expeditions or was sent specially from the capital at Tenochtitlán. It is not a provincial or secondary work, but ranks with the Hombre Muerto, the head of the Eagle Warrior, and other fine Aztec sculptures found in or near Mexico City, now in the National Museum there. Like the Hombre Muerto, it represents not a deity or a dignitary but a simple man of the people, a *maceualli*. It is by no means unusual to find work of such quality at a far-flung border outpost. The famous green stone mask (Figure 6) now at The American Museum of Natural History also came from Castillo de Teayo. Apparently the Aztec rulers wished to impress the conquered people with something more than their military prowess; this survivor of their artistic achievements cannot fail to impress the beholder.

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