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Human skulls emerge from the ruins of an ancient complex found near a structure believed to be an 800-year-old Aztec pyramid. Researchers recently discovered the remains and the potential pyramid in central Mexico City while excavating the Aztec settlement of Tlatelolco.

Photograph by Henry Romero/Reuters

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Aztec Pyramid, Elite Graves Unearthed in Mexico City

Kelly Hearn
for [National Geographic News](#)
January 4, 2008

A structure believed to be an 800-year-old Aztec pyramid has been discovered in central [Mexico City](#) and could drastically revise the early history of the ancient empire, officials announced.

The structure was found inside a larger pyramid known as the Grand Temple at the site of the Aztec city of Tlatelolco.



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If the age of the edifice is confirmed, the discovery could push back the age of Tlatelolco—as well as that of its nearby "twin city" Tenochtitlán—by a century or more, said Salvador Guilliem of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History.

Guilliem, who is leading an archaeological effort to study Tlatelolco, said the structure's construction suggests it could have been built as early as A.D. 1100 or 1200, at least a century earlier than historical accounts suggest the city was founded.

While Guilliem's team continues to work on determining the new pyramid's age, the researchers have already uncovered new insights into the Grand Temple.

"Until now we thought Tlatelolco's Grand Temple had seven phases of construction," Guilliem told National Geographic News.

"Now we know that there are eight."

The team also used ground-penetrating radar to locate a series of other structures near the Grand Temple containing human remains and grave offerings.

"We dug 2 meters [6.5 feet] and found an offering of green stones and five skulls," Guilliem said.

The remains—belonging to four adults and a child—appear to have been positioned with heads turned toward the north and bodies to the south, he added.

"We will explore more next season, but we think this building corresponds to the military elite," he said.

(Read related story: ["Aztec Ruler's Tomb Found Under Mexico City"](#) [August 9, 2007].)

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Ancient Legends

Modern interpretations of Aztec legends say Tlatelolco was built around A.D. 1358, the same year as Tenochtitlán, although archaeological evidence has cast doubt on that date in recent years, experts say.



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"If true, the date of this pyramid fits with many other archaeological finds that reveal evidence of Aztec occupation earlier than the traditional dates," said Susan Gillespie, a University of Florida anthropologist.

The find could also shed light on the poorly understood early relationship between Tlatelolco—a massive market province—and Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital and one of Mesoamerica's largest cities.

"The nature of Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlán's entwined origins and histories remains one of the underexplored mysteries of the Aztec era," Gillespie said.

The new discovery could challenge the notion that Tenochtitlán was the dominant twin during the early, entangled development of the two Aztec provinces, said Michael Smith, an Aztec expert at Arizona State University.

"There are vague traces in the historical sources that Tlatelolco may have been more powerful than Tenochtitlán in its early decades," he said.

"If there was indeed a large pyramid in Tlatelolco in the Early Aztec period, given that no such find exists in Tenochtitlán, it may suggest that Tlatelolco was indeed the dominant city in their early years. That would be significant."

What's Inside the Pyramid?

Guilliem and his colleagues believe that an offering to Tezcatlipoca Black, the Aztec god of commerce, will be found inside the newly discovered pyramid.

Guilliem theorizes that workers intentionally broke into the smaller pyramid in 1368 while building a subsequent phase.

"When they broke it, it is very probable that they deposited a deity that's likely to be Tezcatlipoca," he said.

"They most likely deposited an offering to the deity [Tezcatlipoca Black], conducted a ceremony, [and] then closed it again."

The team also wants to determine if the Grand Temple at Tenochtitlán has a similar stage of construction—a key to untangling the early power balance between the two city-states, Guilliem said.

Gillespie, the University of Florida anthropologist, said such a comparison could

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yield crucial clues to the dynamics of the ancient Aztec cities.

"The great temple at Tenochtitlán similarly had many cached offerings as part of the different building phases," Gillespie said.

"It will be interesting to see how the Tlatelolcan corpus of offerings compares to that of Tenochtitlán."

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