

Archaeologists unearth 500-year-old Aztec tower of skulls in Mexico City

By Washington Post, adapted by the Newsela staff on 07.13.17

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A Tzompantli, or skull wall, in Templo Mayor in Mexico City, Mexico. Photo by: Wolfgang Sauber/Wikimedia Commons

When 400 Spanish soldiers walked into the Aztec capital in the 1500s, they had power and wealth on their minds. They were planning a conquest. At first, however, they were welcomed as friends.

What they saw in the Aztec city amazed them. They found a civilization that was both magnificent and brutal. There were grand temples, for example, that were soaked with human blood.

They heard tales of thousands of people being sacrificed at the Great Temple's dedication. Lines of people waiting to be sacrificed stretched for miles. First, their hearts were torn out. Next, they were thrown down the steps of the temple. Their bodies were then broken apart and eaten in a stew with chilies and tomatoes.

One thing terrified the European newcomers more than almost anything. A rack of human skulls that towered over one corner of the temple to Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of the sun, war and human sacrifice.

Spanish Soldier Had Counted 136,000 Skulls

Andres de Tapia was one of Hernán Cortés' soldiers. Cortés was a conquistador, or a Spanish conqueror. Tapia wrote that there were so many human skulls, he had to resort to multiplication to count them all.

"We found there were 136,000 heads," he remembered.

Those skulls, the conquistadors assumed, were what remained of men who the Aztecs had defeated in battle. They were both a decoration and a message: "This is what happens to Aztec enemies," the skulls warned.

500 Years Later, Skulls Uncovered In Mexico City

Nearly 500 years later, scientists digging in Mexico City have uncovered the skulls. They have also turned up more questions about the nature of Aztec human sacrifice that goes against some of the conquistadors' thinking.

Their biggest finding was that the skulls weren't just the heads of male warriors who had been defeated by the Aztecs. Some were the smaller, thinner skulls of women and children.

"We were expecting just men, obviously young men, as warriors would be," said Rodrigo Bolanos, a biological anthropologist investigating the find. "The thing about the women and children is that you'd think they wouldn't be going to war."

It's clear the Aztecs had publicly displayed the skulls of women and children, but who were they? Defeated people from neighboring civilizations? Aztecs who had been sacrificed?

Tower Was A Show Of Power By Aztecs

Another mystery: Why did the Aztecs display them in one of their holiest places?

Researchers believe the tower of skulls was indeed a show of power by the Aztecs. They have had trouble coming up with a more detailed explanation, however, and the full story of the skulls have died with the Aztecs.

The skulls were found near Templo Mayor, one of the main temples in the Aztec empire, in 2015. Bolanos and other researchers from the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History have been researching the skull rack ever since.

700 Skulls Unearthed So Far In Latest Dig

The excavation has already unearthed nearly 700 skulls. Researchers are still digging, however, and they expect to find more as they get closer to the base of the tower of skulls.

The Spanish weren't exactly known for their attention to preserving history. After being welcomed as guests, they slaughtered the Aztecs, which they could do easily with their superior weapons. Many of the Aztecs who escaped their bullets ended up dying of European diseases that the Spaniards carried with them. In the end, the native population was dramatically reduced.

On the ruins of the Aztec empire, Mexico City began to rise.

In fact, the Spanish used Aztec structures as the foundation for new churches and cathedrals, according to newspapers.

It was both a symbolic decision and a practical one. Symbolically, it showed how the Aztec gods had been displaced by the Christian church. At the same time, it also saved the Spaniards the trouble of building new foundations, walls and floors.

Forgotten Ruins Buried Beneath Mexico City

In the following centuries, forgotten Aztec ruins were buried beneath Mexico City. Some have refused to stay buried, however.

In 1985, for example, ruins were found during the cleanup that followed an earthquake. In 1978, workers laying electrical cables two blocks from the Zócalo, Mexico City's main square, discovered the Aztecs' Templo Mayor, or high temple.

Decades later, Templo Mayor is still being uncovered and explored. That's where the rack of skulls was recently unearthed, answering some questions and raising new ones.

"Something is happening that we have no record of," said Bolanos, the biological anthropologist. "This is really new, a first."

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article provides the BEST support for the idea that the Aztecs were using the skull tower to intimidate their enemies?
- (A) One thing terrified the European newcomers more than almost anything.
 - (B) Tapia wrote that there were so many human skulls, he had to resort to multiplication to count them all.
 - (C) Their biggest finding was that the skulls weren't just the heads of male warriors who had been defeated by the Aztecs.
 - (D) Researchers believe the tower of skulls was indeed a show of power by the Aztecs.

- 2 Read the section "500 Years Later, Skulls Uncovered In Mexico City."
- Select the paragraph that suggests scientists have multiple theories about who the skulls could have belonged to.

- 3 Read the paragraph from the section "700 Skulls Unearthed So Far In Latest Dig."

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HOW does this information develop the central idea of the article?

- (A) by explaining why researchers have little information about the Aztecs
- (B) by describing the military might of the Spanish over the Aztecs
- (C) by proving that the Spanish were not afraid of the Aztec skull tower
- (D) by offering a guess about who and when the Aztec skulls came from

- 4 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) Using multiplication was the only way Spanish conquistadors could estimate the number of Aztec skulls.
 - (B) The discovery of the tower of skulls has scientists re-evaluating their understanding of the Aztecs.
 - (C) The Aztecs had lines of people who waited to sacrifice their lives to the gods and be eaten by Aztecs.
 - (D) Using Aztec structures as foundations enabled the Spanish to build Mexico City more easily.

Answer Key

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Paragraph 10:

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