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A History of Mexico City

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Introduction

Mexico City is one of the world's most fascinating urban landscapes — a metropolis layered with the remnants, aspirations, and contradictions of centuries. "A History of Mexico City" aims to provide an expansive yet accessible narrative charting the evolution of this great city, from its pre-Hispanic beginnings as the dazzling island capital of the Mexica, through the cataclysms and transformations of conquest and colonization, up to the vibrant, complex megalopolis of today. The history of Mexico City is, inextricably, the history of Mexico itself: a story of indigenous resilience, colonial ambition, independence, revolution, and the ongoing negotiation of identity and modernity.

From the moment the Mexica are said to have seen the enigmatic eagle on a cactus—founding Tenochtitlan with stone and vision—this valley has been a stage for the play of empires. To explore Mexico City's past is to discover not merely ruins and relics, but the dynamism and adaptability of its people. Tenochtitlan, the awe-inspiring city-on-water, set patterns of urban organization and social life that would, in altered form, echo through centuries of upheaval and innovation. Living atop these foundations, the Spanish imposed new political, religious, and architectural orders, turning Tenochtitlan into the centerpiece of New Spain.

The resulting colonial city grew into a center of power, learning, and commerce, but also a space marked by stark inequalities and the contradictions of empire. Its streets and plazas saw pageantry and violence, artistic splendor left in the shadow of poverty and exclusion. Independence brought new dreams of nationhood and civic life, but also long decades of instability, reform, and counter-reform, as Mexico City changed hands amid wars, foreign interventions, and the winds of modernization.

The twentieth century ushered in a period of unprecedented transformation. Rural migrants flooded the city, its population multiplied, and its physical boundaries expanded over the drained lakebed. The histories of laborers, students, artists, and officials became deeply intertwined, shaping the built environment, the political culture, and the social realities of millions. Moments of celebration and trauma — the Olympic Games, the Tlatelolco massacre, and catastrophic earthquakes — left indelible marks on collective memory and urban consciousness.

Today, Mexico City is a place where past and present coexist palpable and visible: pre-Hispanic ruins stand beside Spanish baroque cathedrals, modernist university campuses, bustling markets, and dense towers of glass and steel. Its challenges — from environmental fragility to social inequality, from democratic reforms to new forms of cultural expression — are immense, yet so too is its resilience and creativity.

This book seeks to capture the breadth of experiences that have defined Mexico City across time, exploring not only monuments and leaders but also the everyday lives and struggles of its people.

In charting the history of Mexico City, we follow the shifting courses of a city whose identity has always been in the making — layered, disputed, celebrated, and reimagined by countless generations. As the city faces the challenges and promises of the twenty-first century, understanding its past is more vital than ever, offering insight not only into one remarkable urban space but also into the deeper currents of Mexican and world history.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Valley of Mexico Before the Mexica

Long before the eagle supposedly landed on the cactus, signaling the destiny of the Mexica, the Valley of Mexico was already a seasoned stage for human drama. This high-altitude basin, cradled by snow-capped volcanoes and shimmering with a complex network of lakes, had nurtured and buried civilizations for millennia. Its story is not merely a prelude to the Aztec Empire but a rich tapestry of innovation, ambition, and the enduring human quest to build something lasting in a world of constant change. To understand the city that would eventually dominate this landscape, Tenochtitlan, one must first journey back, far before its famed founders even dreamed of their island capital.

The Valley of Mexico, known to its later Nahuatl-speaking inhabitants as Anáhuac, meaning "Land on the Edge of the Water," is a unique geographical entity. It's essentially a massive, internally drained basin, perched over 7,000 feet above sea level, encircled by towering volcanic ranges, including the majestic Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl to the southeast. This volcanic embrace was both a blessing and a curse, providing fertile ash for agriculture but also posing the occasional, catastrophic threat of eruption or earthquake. In its primeval state, the valley floor was dominated by a system of five interconnected, yet distinct, shallow lakes: Zumpango and Xaltocan to the north (saltwater), Texcoco in the vast center (the saltiest), and Xochimilco and Chalco to the south (freshwater), fed by mountain springs and rivers.

This lacustrine environment was the defining feature of the valley, shaping its climate, its resources, and the very way of life for its inhabitants. The lakes teemed with fish, waterfowl, and edible insects like *ahuautle* (water fly eggs), providing a protein-rich diet. The marshy peripheries and shallow waters were ideal for later development of raised-bed agriculture, the *chinampas*, though this intensive system would reach its zenith much later. Salt, a precious commodity, was harvested from the saline waters of Lake Texcoco. Surrounding forests offered timber and game, while volcanic outcrops yielded obsidian, the razor-sharp volcanic glass essential for tools and weapons before the widespread use of metal.

The first human footprints in this high valley date back to the Paleo-Indian period, at least 12,000 years ago. These were nomadic bands of hunter-gatherers, contemporaries of the last Ice Age, who pursued large game like mammoths, bison, and prehistoric horses across the chilly grasslands. Archaeological sites around the ancient lake shores have yielded stone tools and occasional faunal remains, hinting at their presence. The famous "Tepexpan Man," discovered in 1947 and initially hailed as

a very ancient individual, later proved to be more recent, but genuine evidence of early hunters, such as hearths and butchered mammoth bones near Santa Isabel Iztapan, leaves no doubt about their long tenure in the valley.

Over thousands of years, as the climate warmed and the megafauna disappeared, these early inhabitants gradually adapted. The Archaic period (roughly 7000 to 2500 B.C.E.) saw a slow transition towards a more settled existence, with increased reliance on plant gathering and the incipient cultivation of key Mesoamerican staples: maize, beans, and squash. This wasn't a sudden revolution but a creeping change, as groups became more tethered to specific locales within the valley, learning the rhythms of its seasons and perfecting the art of exploiting its diverse microenvironments, from the lake shores to the piedmont slopes.

By the Formative or Preclassic period (circa 2500 B.C.E. to 250 C.E.), settled village life, based primarily on agriculture, had become the norm. Pottery appeared, a crucial technological development for storing food and water, and also a medium for artistic expression. Small hamlets and villages dotted the valley, particularly along the fertile southern lake shores and near reliable water sources. One of the earliest significant settlements to emerge was Tlatilco, flourishing between 1400 and 400 B.C.E. Located on the western side of Lake Texcoco, Tlatilco is renowned for its distinctive pottery, particularly its lively human figurines, often depicting daily life, shamans, ballplayers, and enigmatic dual-faced individuals. The art style shows some affinities with the distant Olmec civilization of the Gulf Coast, suggesting early long-distance trade and cultural exchange.

A more imposing center arose in the southern part of the valley: Cuicuilco. Flourishing from around 800 B.C.E. to perhaps as late as 250 C.E., Cuicuilco boasted one of the earliest large-scale public ceremonial structures in Central Mexico - a massive circular pyramid with four tiers, quite distinct from the later rectangular pyramids common in the region. This indicated a growing social complexity, with a leadership capable of mobilizing labor for monumental construction and a populace participating in shared religious rituals. At its height, Cuicuilco may have supported a population of up to 20,000 people, a significant urban experiment for its time.

However, Cuicuilco's destiny was cut short by a cataclysm. Sometime between 50 B.C.E. and 250 C.E. (the exact dating is still debated), the small volcano Xitle, located on the Ajusco mountain range to the south, erupted violently. Lava flows poured down into the valley, engulfing much of Cuicuilco and the surrounding fertile lands, creating the rugged volcanic pedregal that characterizes parts of southern Mexico City today. This environmental disaster undoubtedly had profound consequences, displacing populations and likely shifting the balance of power within the Valley of Mexico. It's plausible that the decline of Cuicuilco opened a window of opportunity for another, even more ambitious urban project brewing to the northeast.

This new power was Teotihuacan. Rising majestically in a side valley about 30 miles northeast of modern Mexico City's center, Teotihuacan ("The City of the Gods," or "Place Where Men Become Gods," as it was later named by the Nahuatl-speaking Aztecs who marveled at its ruins) became the dominant political, economic, and religious force not just in the Valley of Mexico but across much of Mesoamerica during the Classic Period (roughly 100-650 C.E.). Its origins are somewhat obscure, but by the first centuries C.E., it had embarked on a path of extraordinary urban development.

At its zenith, around 450-500 C.E., Teotihuacan was a sprawling metropolis covering over eight square miles, with a population variously estimated between 100,000 and 200,000 inhabitants. This made it one of the largest cities anywhere in the world at that time. What astonished, and continues to astonish, is its highly planned layout. The city was organized along a central north-south axis, the grand "Avenue of the Dead," which stretched for over two miles. Flanking this avenue were impressive ceremonial structures, most notably the colossal Pyramid of the Sun, one of the largest man-made structures in the pre-Columbian Americas, and the slightly smaller but equally imposing Pyramid of the Moon at the avenue's northern terminus.

Further south along the Avenue of the Dead lay the Citadel, a large square enclosure containing the exquisitely decorated Temple of the Feathered Serpent (Quetzalcoatl). Its facades were adorned with alternating sculpted heads of the Feathered Serpent, a key deity in Mesoamerican religion, and a goggle-eyed deity often associated with warfare or storms, possibly a precursor to the Aztec Tlaloc. The precision of the city's grid, with east-west avenues intersecting the main thoroughfare, and the careful orientation of its major buildings, suggest a sophisticated understanding of astronomy and a powerful central authority capable of imposing such a grand design.

Beyond the ceremonial core, Teotihuacan was a city of neighborhoods. Excavations have revealed multi-family apartment compounds, often ornately decorated with murals depicting religious ceremonies, deities, animals, and abstract motifs. These compounds suggest a complex social organization, possibly based on kinship or craft specialization. Evidence indicates that Teotihuacan was a multi-ethnic city, attracting people from various parts of Mesoamerica, including Zapotecs from Oaxaca and people from the Gulf Coast, who lived in distinct barrios, maintaining some of their own cultural traditions while being integrated into the wider Teotihuacan system.

The economic might of Teotihuacan was built on several pillars. It controlled important obsidian sources, particularly the green obsidian from Pachuca, which was fashioned into tools and prestige items traded far and wide. Its artisans also produced distinctive thin orange pottery that found its way across Mesoamerica. The sheer scale of its agricultural hinterland, likely augmented by irrigation, was necessary to feed its large population. The city's influence, whether through direct political control, trade networks, or cultural prestige, extended to the Maya regions of Guatemala and Belize,

to Monte Albán in Oaxaca, and to western Mexico. Teotihuacan-style architecture, ceramics, and iconographic elements appear in many distant sites, testifying to its pervasive impact.

The nature of Teotihuacan's governance remains a subject of scholarly debate. While its monumental architecture and planned layout imply strong rulers, there is a conspicuous absence of the kind of ruler portraits and dynastic inscriptions common in Maya cities. This has led some to suggest a more collective or corporate form of leadership, perhaps a council of nobles or priests. Whatever its political structure, its ideological power, centered on its imposing pyramids and potent religious symbolism, was undeniable.

Yet, like all great empires and cities of antiquity, Teotihuacan's era of dominance eventually came to an end. Around 650-750 C.E., the ceremonial core of the city experienced a major fire and deliberate destruction. Main temples and elite residences along the Avenue of the Dead were burned and ritually desecrated. The population dwindled rapidly, and while parts of the city remained inhabited for some time, its role as a major power center was over. The reasons for this collapse are still not fully understood and are likely complex, involving a combination of factors: internal social unrest, environmental degradation from over-exploitation of resources, prolonged drought, disruption of trade routes, or pressure from rising rival centers outside the valley.

The fall of Teotihuacan created a power vacuum in Central Mexico, ushering in the Epiclassic period (roughly 650-900 C.E.). This era was characterized by increased competition and conflict among smaller regional centers, many of which adopted and adapted elements of Teotihuacan's cultural legacy. Sites like Xochicalco in Morelos, Cacaxtla in Tlaxcala, and Cantona in Puebla rose to prominence, often heavily fortified, reflecting a more militaristic age. While these were largely outside the immediate Valley of Mexico, their interactions and the shifting political landscape inevitably affected the valley's remaining settlements, which now lacked a centralizing force.

Into this somewhat fragmented world stepped the Toltecs. Their capital, Tollan (Tula), located in the modern state of Hidalgo, about 50 miles north of the Valley of Mexico, flourished primarily between 900 and 1150 C.E. The Toltecs loomed large in the historical imagination of later Mesoamerican peoples, including the Aztecs, who regarded them as wise ancestors and the originators of high culture, art, and legitimate rulership. Tracing one's lineage back to the Toltecs became a powerful claim to authority for many subsequent dynasties.

According to later legends, the Toltecs were led by a charismatic ruler named Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (Our Lord One Reed Feathered Serpent). This figure, who blended historical leadership with divine attributes associated with the ancient Feathered Serpent deity, was said to have established a great city of artists and

craftsmen. Archaeological evidence at Tula, while not quite matching the grandeur of Teotihuacan or the later Aztec legends, reveals a significant urban center with distinctive architectural features, including columned halls and the famous Atlantean warrior statues atop Pyramid B, thought to represent Toltec warriors.

The Toltecs were indeed known for their martial prowess and seem to have extended their influence over a considerable area, possibly including parts of the Valley of Mexico. Their art and iconography, particularly motifs like warriors, eagles devouring hearts, and feathered serpents, became widespread. The cult of Quetzalcoatl, in its various forms, gained renewed prominence during this period and would continue to be a powerful religious force. The Toltecs also engaged in long-distance trade, acquiring turquoise from the American Southwest and establishing connections as far south as the Yucatan Peninsula, where sites like Chichen Itza show strong Toltec architectural and iconographic influences.

However, Tula's ascendancy was also relatively short-lived. By around 1150 C.E., it too suffered a decline, marked by internal strife, possible invasions by groups known as Chichimecs (a generic term for nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples from the north), and eventual abandonment of its ceremonial core. The fall of Tula, like that of Teotihuacan before it, once again reshuffled the political deck in Central Mexico and set the stage for new migrations and new contenders for power.

In the wake of Tula's collapse, the Valley of Mexico entered what is known as the Early Postclassic period (roughly 1150-1350 C.E.). This was a dynamic and often turbulent era. The valley became a magnet for various groups, many of them Nahuatl-speaking, migrating from the north and west, often referred to collectively as "Chichimecs," though they comprised diverse peoples with varying degrees of agricultural sophistication. These newcomers intermingled with, and sometimes displaced, the existing populations who traced their heritage back to Teotihuacan or even earlier settlers.

The key political unit of this period was the *altepetl*, a Nahuatl term meaning "water-mountain," which essentially referred to a city-state or ethnic polity. Each *altepetl* was ruled by a *tlatoani* (speaker, or ruler) and had its own territory, patron deity, and distinct identity, often linked to a legendary migration story and a claim to Toltec legitimacy, however tenuous. The Valley of Mexico became a mosaic of these competing *altepetl*, clustered around the shores of the lake system, taking advantage of its resources and strategic locations.

Among the more prominent *altepetl* established or re-energized during this period were Culhuacan, Azcapotzalco, Texcoco, Chalco, and Xochimilco. Culhuacan, situated on the Iztapalapa peninsula, was particularly esteemed because its rulers claimed direct descent from the Toltec nobility, making it a repository of Toltec prestige and a source of legitimate royal lines for newer, up-and-coming groups. Azcapotzalco, on the

western shore of Lake Texcoco, became the capital of the Tepanec people, who were steadily building a formidable military and economic power. To the east, Texcoco was developing as the center of the Acolhua people, known for their cultural refinement. The southern, freshwater lake region was dominated by a confederacy of city-states often collectively referred to as Chalco-Xochimilco, masters of chinampa agriculture.

These altepetl were constantly vying with each other for land, resources, tribute, and regional dominance. Alliances shifted, wars were frequent, and the political landscape was fluid. It was into this crowded, competitive, and complex environment that a relatively obscure, Nahuatl-speaking group, latecomers to the Valley of Mexico, would eventually arrive. They called themselves the Mexica. Their journey had been long, their early years in the Valley marked by hardship and subservience to more established powers. But they carried with them a fierce determination and a unique destiny, one that would lead them to found a city that would not only transform the Valley but also become the heart of a vast empire. The stage, meticulously set by thousands of years of previous civilizations, was ready for its next, and perhaps most dramatic, act.

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