

Prehistory from the subway

Excavations for Mexico City's new subway produce a truckload of archaeological pieces every day.

"When the work began last year," says Raul Martin Arana, head of the archaeological rescue team that monitors the digging, "the findings barely filled a wheelbarrow.

"Now the average comes to about 2,000 pieces a day, and the warehouses of the National Institute of Anthropology are insufficient to store the growing flood of prehistoric pieces."

In the beginning a great many of the pieces found were broken and incomplete, but excited archaeologists believe the best is yet to come as digging approaches the Zocolo (main square). It is possible that archaeologists will finally be able to get at whatever was buried under the major temple of Gran Tenochtitlán (the Aztec capital and site of the modern metropolis today).

Already more than 50,000 objects, the best of those uncovered and retained, jam the cellar storerooms of the Institute. These range from pre-Columbian stone and clay figures, masks and vessels, obsidian and jade carvings, knives, and potsherds to hundreds of ceramic and jewelry pieces of the colonial epoch.

"This is a golden dream come true," Martin Arana exults, "and with the excavations lasting another three years we will have increased opportunities for our work. Who knows, we may make some incredible, unexpected finds, and especially highly valuable pieces when work is begun on the Zocolo subsoil."

As an aid to keeping tabs on subway excavations, archaeologists have prepared a scale model of the Aztec city before the arrival of the Spanish. The model features 30 buildings reportedly part of the great ceremonial center in the vicinity of the present-day Cathedral Plaza. Archaeologists feel that relics that may finally come into their hands may also include a second Aztec Calen-



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Calendar stone: the elaborately carved Aztec view of the universe.

dar or Stone of the Sun. This stone, however, may be a Stone of Tizoc, similar to the so-called Sacrificial Stones—all of which are huge, round stones—up to 13 feet across and several feet thick—with figures carved in relief. Some of these stones are hollowed out, some are flat.

Archaeologists in the United States would consider finding such a Calendar Stone or a Stone of Tizoc as a first-class discovery.

The stone in question, as yet uncovered, lies under the street on a line between the facade of the sanctuary which stands next to the Cathedral, a rather shaky structure that has been reinforced, and the right Portico of the National Palace.

It may resist salvaging if it is so positioned that damage to the Cathedral would result.

"Archaeological explorations being carried on jointly with the excavation of the metro, have already brought to light data and information unknown until now," says Dr. Eusebio Davalos Hurtado, head of the Institute.

"It will take years to study and classify the relics, and the quantity and quality increases from month to month.

"As an outcome of this windfall, I believe that archaeological researchers will have to modify many concepts we have had about Gran Tenochtitlán. The artifacts will also make it possible for us to verify many former conjectures."

When the research work is finally completed, 10 or more years from now, investigators expect to be able to establish the material evolution of the Mex-

ican capital from its first inhabitants to the present day.

In the digging along Izazaga Street, archaeologists discovered pilings which caused momentary surprise. After careful study the conclusion was reached that these pilings were used to sustain basements of the old Aztec temples and houses.

"This is proof that the Aztecs used control pylons of wood to avoid sinking of their buildings, and to absorb the effects of earthquakes," says archaeologist Martin Arana.

As for the potsherds, Martin Arana is confident that these will provide samples of household implements, and weapons, used in each epoch. He believes that, "with the enormous numbers of pieces accumulating, we may even be able to pinpoint these from decade to decade."

One of the most interesting finds is a stone figure of Coatlicue, goddess of the earth, also known as the goddess of life and death.

This piece, 36¼ inches high and 38¼ inches in diameter, was unearthed in front of the Monserrat Church, on the corner of Izazaga and Isabel la Católica Streets, at a depth of only 26 feet.

Ehecatl, the god of the wind, a 20-inch figure, was unearthed at less than 12 feet, and the story is the same as subway diggers move slowly toward the Zocolo. As the subway will criss-cross the city in three separate routes, the finds yet to come may even exceed those now turning up daily.

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