

# In Mexico City, Possible Discovery of an Aztec Ruler's Grave

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MEXICO CITY, Aug. 4 (AP) — Mexican archaeologists using ground-penetrating radar have detected underground chambers they believe contain the remains of Ahuizotl, who was the emperor of the Aztecs when Columbus landed in the New World. It would be the first tomb of an Aztec ruler ever found.

The find could provide an extraordinary window into Aztec civilization at its apogee. Ahuizotl (pronounced ah-WEE-zoh-tuhl), an empire-builder who extended the Aztecs' reach as far as what is now Guatemala, was the last emperor to complete his rule before the Spanish conquest.

Accounts written by Spanish priests suggest that the area was used by the Aztecs to cremate and bury their rulers. But no tomb of an Aztec ruler has ever been found, in part because the Spanish conquerors built their own city atop the Aztecs' ceremonial center, leaving behind colonial structures considered too historically valuable to remove for excavations.

One of those colonial buildings was so damaged in a 1985 earthquake that it had to be torn down, eventually giving experts their first chance to examine the site off Zócalo, the central plaza in Mexico City between the Metropolitan Cathedral and the ruins of the Templo Mayor pyramid.

Archaeologists said that they had found what appeared to be a 6--by-6-foot entryway into the tomb about 15 feet below ground. The passage is filled with water, rocks and mud, forcing workers to dig delicately while suspended from slings. Pumps work to keep the water level down.

“We are doing it very, very slowly,” said Leonardo López Luján, the lead government archaeologist on the project. “The responsibility is

very great, and we want to register everything. It's a totally new situation for us, and we don't know exactly what it will be like down there."

As early as this fall, they hope to enter the inner chambers — a damp, low-ceilinged space. Once there they hope to find the ashes of Ahuizotl, who was probably cremated on a funeral pyre in 1502.

By that time, Columbus had already landed in the New World. But the Aztecs' first contact with Europeans occurred 17 years later, in 1519, when Hernán Cortés and his band of conquistadors marched into the Mexico Valley and took Ahuizotl's successor hostage. That was his nephew Montezuma.

Because no Aztec royal tomb has ever been found, the archaeologists are literally digging into the unknown. Radar indicates the tomb has up to four chambers, and scientists think they will find a constellation of elaborate offerings to the gods on the floor.

"He must have been buried with solemn ceremony and rich offerings, like vases, ornaments," said Luis Alberto Martos, director of archaeological studies at Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History. "Certainly some objects he personally used."

"This would be quite an important find for Aztec archaeology," said Michael E. Smith, an archaeologist at [Arizona State University](#) who is not connected to the dig. "It would be tremendously important because it would be direct information about kingship, burial and the empire that is difficult to come by otherwise."

All signs found so far point to Ahuizotl. The site lies directly below a huge, recently discovered stone monolith carved with a representation of the Aztec god of the earth, Tlaltecuhltli (pronounced tlahl-tay-KOO-lee).

Depicted as a woman with huge claws and a stream of blood flowing into her mouth as she squats to give birth, Tlaltecuhltli was believed to

devour the dead and then give them new life. The god was so fearsome that Aztecs normally buried her depictions face-down in the earth. However, this one is face-up.

In the claw of her right foot, the god holds a rabbit and 10 dots, indicating the date “10 Rabbit” — 1502, the year of Ahuizotl’s death.