

Xochicalco (Mexico)

No 939

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The archaeological monuments zone of Xochicalco
<i>Location</i>	Municipalities of Temixco and Miacatlan, Morelos State
<i>State Party</i>	Mexico
<i>Date</i>	1 July 1998

Justification by State Party

The Epiclassic Period in Mesoamerica (*c* AD 650-900) is characterized by the waning and ultimate fall of the large dominant Classic centres such as Teotihuacan. The Epiclassic is a transitional period with high population mobility which allowed other regional centres to rise and prosper. These new cities represent more militaristic societies and were usually located in elevated defensive positions. Xochicalco is the most important manifestation of this new type of fortified Mesoamerican city.

Criterion ii

Xochicalco shows exceptional city planning features. The hill was artificially modified by cutting and filling in order to create platforms at different levels on which were placed the main structures, allocating a specific function to each part of the city.

Criterion iii

The presence of sculptural work of extraordinary quality on the walls of the Plumed Serpent Pyramid, with complex iconography and a rich combination of stylistic influences, indicates wide contacts with diverse cultures from other Mesoamerican regions.

Criteria ii and iii

An innovation in Mesoamerican architecture is the exceptional use of a complex system of accesses through porticoes to large plazas, as well as bastions at the entrances to the city. The site is unique because of the presence of porticoes as independent buildings, exclusively in order to control access and circulation inside the urban centre.

Criterion iv

Other extraordinary features are an underground observatory where on certain specific dates sunlight falls on the floor with spectacular luminosity; an interesting ramp paved with flagstones engraved with animal figures; one of the most magnificent *temazcal* (steam baths), located near the ball-court and used for

purification in the ball-game ritual; and the marvellous integration with the natural environment and surrounding landscape resulting for the location.

Criterion iv

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

History and Description

History

The decline of the political and economic primacy of the Teotihuacan cities in the 7th and 8th centuries AD marked the end of the Mesoamerican Classic period and the beginning of an age of some two centuries that saw the fall of other large Classic capitals, such as Monte Alban, Palenque, La Quemada, and Tikal, which had dominated large territories. The result was reduction of urban populations or even complete abandonment.

There was considerable movement of peoples and new relationships were established between different regions such as the Central Highlands, the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, Yucatan, Chiapas, and Guatemala. This period, from *c* 650 to 900, is known as the Epiclassic Period. New expansionist societies developed, though none achieved the dominance and magnitude of Teotihuacan, Monte Alban, or Tikal. There was a low level of integration between them, confederations being formed and dissolved. Their survival depended upon their success in controlling scarce resources, development of specialized productions, and dominance of commercial routes.

In a period of political instability and commercial competition such as this, the military infrastructure became crucial, and new settlements grew up at easily defensible sites, equipped with ramparts, moats, palisades, bastions, and citadels. Xochicalco is the supreme example of this type of Epiclassic fortified city. It appears to have been the creation of a confederation of settlements in the large region which is now constituted of the States of Guerrero, México, and western Morelos.

A large number of impressive public and religious structures were erected in a very short time, and these show cultural influences from both the Central Highlands, the Gulf coast, and the Mayan region. It was founded in the second half of the 7th century and was abruptly abandoned after having been sacked in the late 9th century.

Description

Xochicalco was built on a series of natural hills. The highest of these was the core of the settlement, with many public buildings, but evidence of occupation has been found on six of the lower hills surrounding it. Substantial engineering work in the form of terracing and the construction of massive retaining walls in order to create a series of open spaces defined by platforms

and pyramidal structures. They are linked by a complex system of staircases, terraces, and ramps, so as to create a main north-south communication axis.

There are three distinct levels of organization to be recognized in material terms at Xochicalco - social, political, and religious. The lower part is encircled by moated walls, pierced by defended entrances; it contains largely residential buildings. Next comes the intermediate level, the so-called "Market Ensemble," with the Plaza of the Stele of the Two Glyphs, a ball-court, and more residential structures. The highest level consists of a group of temples and other monumental buildings for the use of the ruling class around the main plaza. The crest of the hill is the so-called "Acropolis."

- The lower level

The access way begins at the base of the southern hill and enters the city through the main entrance, which is flanked by two bastions. The causeway is paved with irregular flagstones and flanked with low walls giving on to residential areas.

- The intermediate level

The *Market Ensemble* is a plaza measuring 40m by 70m which appears from archaeological evidence to have been used as a market.

Beyond it is another plaza on a platform from which a broad staircase more than 30m wide ascends to the *Plaza of the Stele of the Two Glyphs*. This 40m square plaza is closed on its east and west sides by two buildings that are similar in form and size, and to the north by the *Great Pyramid*, the largest structure on the site. It consists of seven steps, with the remains of a temple at the apex. The stele from which the plaza takes its name is located on a square podium in its centre. Its form and location suggest that this was the centre of civic and ceremonial life for the community, not least because it is easily accessible.

The *southern ball-court*, the largest at Xochicalco, is reached by a wide causeway. Beyond it is a group of structures known as the *Palace*; residential rooms, kitchens, workshops, and storerooms, along with a *temazcal* (steam-bath) are ranged around a series of patios. There is a series of 21 calendar altars lining the causeway, recording the months (and in one case days) of the ceremonial year. Below there is a mound measuring 70m by 45m, known as *La Malinche* (so far unexplored), access to which was made possible by filling a gorge 15m deep.

- The upper level

A large platform was built around the northern, southern, and west sides of the upper level. To the east there is a complex of three structures. The first of these is rectangular in plan and opens out into a 15m by 8m patio sunk 3.7m below the external level; it is accessible only from the roofs of the rooms.

The second unit is a large (35m by 25m) patio closed on three sides by narrow galleries and delimited on the fourth by three pyramidal platforms. Alongside it is the third element, the east ball-court, separated by a 15m by 6m monumental ramp paved with stone slabs engraved

with images of birds, reptiles, insects, and mammals, known as the *Ramp of the Animals*.

To the north there is a series of large structures, supported by a 15m high retaining wall. They include imposing structures of uncertain use and a *temazcal* formed by four rectangular pillars supporting a flat roof; this is one of the finest examples of this type of structure in Mesoamerica. The 90m long northern ball-court is exceptional in that one of its sides has the normal slope whilst the other consists of a massive wall 9m high which acts as the retaining wall for the platform above.

This sector also includes a large rainwater cistern that formed part of a complex water system covering the whole settlement. Beneath this platform is to be found the entrance to the caves that were used in the early phases of occupation for quarrying building materials. Later it was modified as an observatory for studying the heavens and for ceremonies.

The *Main Plaza* is on an enormous artificial mound, accessible only through the two defended porticoes, 100m above the main entrance, some 600m away. It is dominated by two architectural complexes. That to the north consists of four very large rooms round a patio. The eastern one is more complicated in plan, round four patios; access is strictly controlled.

In the south-eastern corner of the Main Plaza is to be found the *Pyramid of the Stele of the Two Glyphs*, a stepped pyramidal base with a structure at its apex consisting of a patio defined by two lateral rooms and a temple at the far end.

Two pyramidal structures are located in the middle of the plaza. One is the remarkable *Pyramid of the Plumed Serpents*. The excellent proportions of its sloping base and the projecting panel with a flared cornice give this structure a distinctive appearance. The four facades are sculpted in high relief with representations of enormous plumed serpents, the Quetzalcoatl of Teotihuacan. Their bodies frame seated figures with Mayan characteristics, interpreted as priests, rulers, and astronomers. On the projecting panel there are similar seated figures, but less elaborately attired, along with calendar symbols. The cornice is decorated with a ridge of shells. The upper walls of the temple bear figures that have been interpreted as warriors.

The so-called *Twin Pyramid* is similar in form and size, but it lacks the relief decoration. However, there is evidence that its walls were originally ornamented with mural paintings.

The *Acropolis* is built on a 6m high platform to the west of the Main Plaza. It is formed of a series of buildings laid out on variations of a central patio with lateral rooms.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The property is protected under the provisions of the 1972 Federal Law for Archaeological, Artistic and

Historical Monuments and Zones, which lays down strict regulations for the protection and conservation of designated archaeological sites. Xochicalco was designated an Archaeological Monuments Zone by Federal Decree on 18 February 1994.

Management

Most of the Archaeological Zone is National Property. There are strict controls over any form of development within the Zone or in the substantial protected area (which constitutes an adequate buffer zone as defined in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*).

Management of the site is the responsibility of the National Institute for Anthropology and History (*Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* - INAH), through its Regional Centre in Morelos. INAH is an agency of the National Council for Culture and Arts (CNCA) and of the Ministry of Public Education (SEP). In the case of Xochicalco it works in collaboration with the State of Morelos and the Municipalities of Miacatlan and Temixco.

The Xochicalco site is located on hilltops in a wild region that is difficult of access. There is only one route to it, which crosses 8km from Federal Highway 55 and goes on to the Municipalities of Xochitepec and Miacatlan, both 24km further on. This isolation has contributed greatly to its excellent state of conservation and assisted in its effective management until now, but this situation may change in the future (see "ICOMOS recommendations" below).

INAH has been developing protection and management criteria in collaboration with other authorities for Xochicalco since 1978. The 1980 Miacatlan Urban Development Plan defined the buffer zone within which urban use was prohibited; this prevented incursion into the setting of the site for the construction of a tourist facility, proposed by State and Federal agencies in the early 1980s.

In 1982 the Ministry of Public Works (SAHOP) and the General Directorate for Organization and Works at National Parks for Public Recreation prepared the Park Protection Plan for the Xochicalco Archaeological Zone, which prescribed development proposals relating to the protection and operation of the Zone and criteria for its management.

The 1995 Morelos State and Municipal Urban Development Programme established regulations to control unauthorized settlement in ecological protection areas, of which the Xochicalco Archaeological Zone is one.

The INAH Morelos Regional Centre has a general management plan for the efficient protection and management of the site.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The first archaeological excavation took place at Xochicalco in 1909, when restoration work was carried

out on the Pyramid of the Plumed Serpents. The central zone was surveyed in 1923 and registered in the National Archaeological Inventory in 1927.

Excavations were subsequently carried out in 1934-39, 1941-51, 1960-70, and 1984-86, in each case conservation and consolidation work being performed on the excavated and associated structures.

In 1992-94 a major campaign, the Xochicalco Archaeological Special Project, was financed by INAH. This was one of twelve such projects dedicated to archaeological sites that were actual or potential World Heritage sites. This work has been continuing as part of the regular management programme.

The Special Project involved the conservation and consolidation of both structures excavated earlier and those revealed by current work. A considerable amount of scientific research was carried out in search of appropriate conservation materials and techniques and better drainage of the site. A forestry rehabilitation programme resulted in the planting of much of the site with authentic native flora.

Authenticity

The authenticity of Xochicalco may be adjudged to very high. There has been a policy of anastylosis consistent with the precepts of the 1965 Venice Charter in operation for many years. Some of the earlier reconstruction work, notably that of the Pyramid of the Plumed Serpents in the early years of the present century, is somewhat questionable in contemporary terms, but it may be considered to have a historicity of its own.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Xochicalco in August 1998.

Qualities

Xochicalco is the best preserved and most complete example of a fortified urban settlement from the troubled Late Classic and Epiclassic periods of the archaeology of Mesoamerica.

Comparative analysis

Contemporary settlements include El Tajín, Uxmal (both on the World Heritage List), and Cacaxtla. However, Xochicalco differs significantly from these sites because of the exceptional way in which diverse cultural elements from the Central Highlands, the Gulf Coast, and Yucatán are brought together and fuse to create a new and distinctive style.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

Inscription on the World Heritage List would inevitably result in a considerable increase in visitor numbers, not least because Xochicalco is within reach of Mexico City by road. INAH should take steps to ensure that adequate provisions are made for the reception of these increased numbers. The existing facilities are acceptable

for the present level of visitors but would be overstrained if these were to increase significantly.

Brief description

Xochicalco is an exceptionally intact and well preserved example of a fortified political, religious, and commercial centre from the troubled period of AD 650-900 that followed the breakdown of the great Mesoamerican states such as Teotihuacan, Monte Alban, Palenque, and Tikal.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iii and iv*:

Criterion iii Xochicalco is an exceptionally well preserved and complete example of a fortified settlement from the Epiclassic Period of Mesoamerica.

Criterion iv The architecture and art of Xochicalco represent the fusion of cultural elements from different parts of Mesoamerica, at a period when the breakdown of earlier political structures resulted in intensive cultural regrouping.

ICOMOS, September 1999