

1080

el tlacuache

CENTRO  INAH MORELOS

June 23th 2023



Portal to the Underworld Chalcatzingo, Morelos, Mexico

Mario Córdova Tello & Carolina Meza Rodríguez

Portal to the Underworld Chalcatzingo, Morelos, Mexico

An Unexpected Journey and Return to Mexico

Mario Córdova Tello & Carolina Meza Rodríguez

In memory of archaeologist David C. Grove

W

e are honored to dedicate this article in memory of a great archaeologist, a tireless researcher of the Olmec culture, and a person who devoted his effort and passion to the investigation of the Pre-Columbian archaeological site of Chalcatzingo in Morelos, Mexico. David Grove published numerous articles and books about his excavations and discoveries, including the now famous Ancient Chalcatzingo (Grove 1984, 1987).

His work centered on Chalcatzingo, one of the oldest settlements in the state of Morelos, Mexico, and he left us the responsibility of protecting and preserving this archaeological site, an important obligation that we humbly accept. We were sorry to learn of Grove's passing on May 24th, 2023, but we were pleased to know that he departed this world knowing that Monument 9 was returning to its place of origin, an appropriate farewell to our colleague and friend.

The story of Chalcatzingo Monument 9, with its more than 60 years outside of Mexico, was circuitous and often unpredictable. Beyond the technical details, we will talk about the monument's journey and its return to Mexico, ultimately to Chalcatzingo, the place of its creation and depictions of ancestral beliefs. Among the participants of this history, some will remain nameless while others are identified as representatives of institutions that made the celebrated repatriation possible.

In the mid-twentieth century, interest in Mexican archaeology was rapidly expanding, and the looting and sale of Mexico's archaeological heritage was widespread. These conditions were caused by a growing interest in the ancient cultures of Mexico. Researchers were eager to learn more about the indigenous past of Mexico, and looters increased their activities to satisfy the escalated demand of collectors who coveted the magnificent relics and artifacts that had accompanied the numerous ceremonies, rituals, and daily lives of the ancient peoples. It was not until 1972, however, that a heritage protection law was created to address the plundering and sale of Mexico's patrimony that was occurring throughout the country. This legislation remains in force today.

David Grove and people of Chalcatzingo discovering Monument 12, known as "El Volador" Chalcatzingo, Morelos, 1972.
Fototeca Juan Dubernard, Centro INAH Morelos.





Susan D. Gillespie, Carolina Meza Rodríguez, Teresita Majewski, Jorge Angulo Villaseñor and David C. Grove. Chalcatzingo Morelos, Mexico, 2012. Photography: Joanna Morayta Konieczna.



Often, after discreetly observing activities at archaeological excavations and their discoveries, looters would covertly remove items from their place of origin to supply collectors with the pre-Columbian art of Mexico. Looters literally stole Mexico's archaeological heritage and provided it to the international art markets.

The Spanish occupation of Mexico that began in the 16th century, led to the persecution and discrediting of Mexico's ancient people and cultures. These factors contributed to the loss and demeaning of Mexico's native heritage that reduced its social value. Spanish domination devalued the intrinsic meaning of our collective memories and discredited our origins. Exceptions to this process, however, existed in certain places such as Oaxaca, Chiapas, and the Yucatan peninsula where deep rooted traditions and customs continue to the present day.

Chalcatzingo Morelos, Mexico, 2012.
Photography: Joanna Morayta Koniexzna.



The discovery and recognition of Chalcatzingo as an archaeological site was made in 1932 by a report from the people of the community that referred to the finding of a "King" that was carved on a large rock face. Because of the report, the first record of stone monuments at Chalcatzingo was made by one of the pioneer archaeologists of Mexico: Eulalia Guzman.

In the mid-1900s, a farmer in the community of Chalcatzingo uncovered a large carved stone, which at first, was not considered of much importance since the hill (as the locals call it) had many similar stones. The silence of the farmer who found the monument and the clandestine activities of those who removed it from the site have not only damaged the artifact but disrupted the archaeological investigation of the context in which it was discovered and diminished the interpretation of its purpose and meaning to the ancient society.





Pages 6 and 7. Panoramic of the Chalcatzingo archaeological site and the hills, 2022.
Photography: Chalcatzingo project collection.



The looters fled from Morelos with the 'Portal to the Underworld,' later identified as Monument 9. Making the situation more problematic was the fact that researchers and others did not know at the time that the object had been taken from the site. It was during extensive fieldwork in Morelos that David Grove visited Chalcatzingo and learned of the existence of Monument 9 and published his findings in the journal *American Antiquity* in 1968 (Grove 1968). At the time of the publication, the monument was on display in a history exhibition in the museum at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in Ithaca, New York. Later in 1972, Monument 9 was known to be in an exhibition entitled 'Before Cortés' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The stone sculpture was then transported to several other exhibitions but, unfortunately, we do not have any information on these exhibits. It was returned to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute Museum, in 1992. The monument was later removed from display and its whereabouts were not known.



People continued to visit the archaeological site of Chalcatzingo to learn about the cultural history of one of the oldest settlements in central Mexico. The site contained numerous carved stone depictions that are associated with the Olmec of the Southern Gulf Coast of Mexico, who some consider to be Mesoamerica's Mother culture. Monumental stone carvings of a King (today known as Monument 1, the "giver of water"), several felines, personages dressed in symbolic regalia, and a cosmological great feathered serpent were located along the north side of the hill at Chalcatzingo. It is thanks to visitors to Chalcatzingo from Mexico and around the world that interest in the studies of the origins of the people who carved these stone monuments at Chalcatzingo developed.



Left, photograph of Monument 9 at the exhibition *Before Cortés*, A Centennial exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (September 1970 to January 1971) (from *Before Cortés Sculpture of Middle America*, 1970:79). The sculpture was loaned by the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York, where it was exhibited as can be seen in the photograph on the right (from *Mexico in the World of Art Collections*, 1994:36).

This attention resulted in the first major archaeological project at the site that was directed by archaeologists David Grove and Jorge Angulo between 1972 and 1974. These investigations were a crucial moment in the history of Chalcatzingo and Monument 9. It was Grove, or Don David as the villagers called him, who was the first person to realize that a monument was missing in Chalcatzingo, and he estimated it had been absent from its homeland for more than 10 years. The carved stone had travelled to the United States of America apparently to satisfy the request of an American collector. Collecting artifacts of the past has been a common practice throughout human history. Although this behavior may explain the reason, it does not justify the collecting of archaeological heritage.

Following Grove's 1968 publication and the exhibitions in New York, Monument 9 was recognized as a symbolically-rich sculpture that had originated in Chalcatzingo. The academic and public communities were informed that the monument had been looted, literally kidnapped from its original place of creation and was hostage in a foreign country.

Over the next 15 years, the sculpture became widely publicized and acknowledged in the archaeological community. In 1987, Don David (Grove) placed an image of Monument 9 on the cover of his book *Ancient Chalcatzingo*. Because of the publications and exhibitions, the monument became known internationally. Even though it was recognized that the monument had been illicitly confiscated from its place of origin, there were no appeals from authorities or institutions for its return to Mexico. Another 18 years would pass without any attempts or requests for its return.

David Grove pointing to monument 3, Chalcatzingo Morelos, 2012.
Photography: Joanna Morayta Koniexzna.



A new archaeological project began in Chalcatzingo in 2003, under the direction of archaeologist Mario Córdova. The purpose of the project was to expand the knowledge of one of the oldest human habitations in the state of Morelos, and to better understand the archaeological vestiges of the ancient culture. Córdova began the conservation of the area occupied by the archaeological site. He improved roads and trails, excavated and reconstructed the ancient architecture, and restored and protected the stone carvings (Córdova Tello et al. 2019; Córdova Tello and Meza Rodríguez 2007; Córdova Tello 2016). Conditions at the archaeological site were greatly improved and it became known for the exceptional experiences afforded to visitors.



At the beginning of the project, Córdova also recognized the lack of narrative and descriptions relating to the numerous carved stone monuments at the site. He assembled information from previous research and new findings from the current work to present the history of the site along with its monuments and artifacts. Another fundamental objective of his work was to investigate the whereabouts of the 'Portal to the Underworld' and search for ways it could be recovered and returned to its place of origin.

David Grove in the excavations of the archaeological site in 1972.
Fototeca Juan Dubernard, Centro INAH Morelos.



It was on August 8, 2005, that Cordova began the search for Monument 9 by requesting support from the Public Registry of Monuments and Archaeological Zones and the National Coordination of Legal Affairs of INAH. He assembled a bibliographic and photographic archive that would support his proposed request. With the support from authorities such as Lic. María del Perpetuo Socorro Villarreal and Archaeologist Silvia María del Socorro Mesa Dávila of INAH, he began to seek further assistance in his search. One of the first to respond was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE) which, through its legal consultants in particular Pedro Luis Alegría Echeverría and Daniela Jácome, took the first steps to investigate the legal situation of Monument 9. They carried out their own investigations with the institutions and researchers who had knowledge of the monument. Their findings would later be strengthened with information compiled by INAH; the SRE of Mexico; and the Manhattan District Attorney's Office in New York in 2022.



Since 2005, a series of communications between specialists sought to find where Monument 9 was located in the USA. The answer was achieved in 2008, through the joint effort of INAH and the SRE's consultancy, when it was revealed that Monument 9 was in the possession of a private collector. The ensuing process to request its repatriation would prove to be complex. At the time the object had been taken from Mexico, there was no law to protect it. Thus, its departure could be considered legal at that time. It took another 15 years of persistent and convincing arguments on the importance of Monument 9's repatriation to its place of origin by Córdoba for the SRE to take up the issue again through its legal consultant Alejandro Celorio Alcántara.

Arrival of monument 9 of Chalcatzingo, for exhibition at the Regional Museum of the Villages of Morelos, Palace of Cortés, May 2023.
Photography: Luis Gerardo Peña Torres.





Monument 9 of Chalcatzingo, packed before exhibition at the Regional Museum of the Villages of Morelos, Palace of Cortes, May 2023.
Photography: Luis Gerardo Peña Torres.

There were many more people, who shall remain anonymous, that intervened on behalf of Monument 9's investigation and repatriation. The successful repatriation was due to the testimonies of researchers, specialists, and people of the community who were at Chalcatzingo in the 1950s or had direct knowledge of the monument. We are infinitely grateful for their contributions. A special thank you goes to the investigation and intervention of the agents of the Antiquities Trafficking Unit of Manhattan District Attorneys in New York who assembled a robust file of information that justified the return of the archaeological monument. Without their experience and hard work this repatriation would not have been possible. Due to their efforts and the cooperation of all the individuals and agencies, Monument 9 'the Portal to the Underworld,' is now on display at the Regional Museum of the Peoples of Morelos, in the Palace of Cortés, Cuernavaca, Morelos.

The 'Portal to the Underworld' has returned from a long journey. Back in Mexico, it resumes its role as a symbol of the cultural roots of the land and people for which it was created. Monument 9 represents the memory of its origin and heritage that holds a special place in the ancient cultures in Mexico.

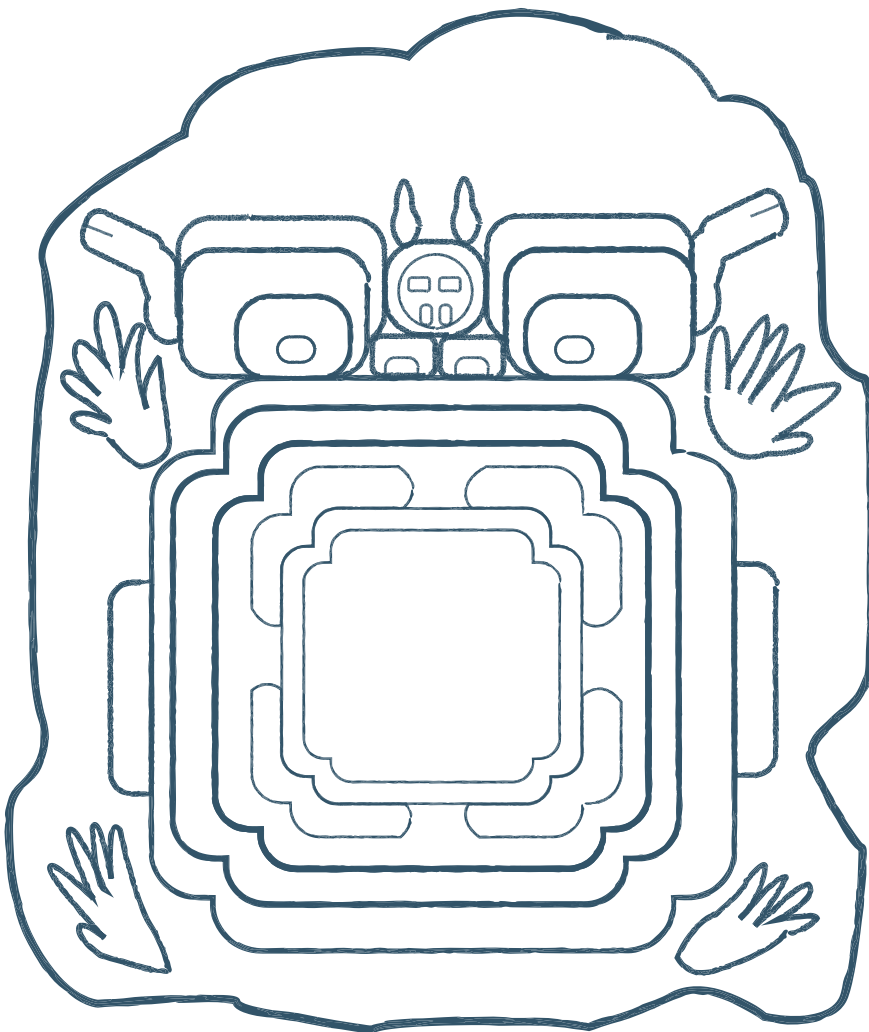


Illustration: Baruch Quiroz, 2023.



Editorial coordinator
Raúl Francisco González Quezada

Connect with us:



/Centro INAH Morelos

SUPLEMENTO CULTURAL
el tlacuache
CENTRO  INAH MORELOS

**Dissemination organ
INAH Morelos community**

Editorial Board

Erick Alvarado Tenorio
Giselle Canto Aguilar
Eduardo Corona Martínez
Raúl Francisco González Quezada
Mitzi de Lara Duarte
Luis Miguel Morayta Mendoza
Tania Alejandra Ramírez Rocha

*The authors are responsible
for the contents*

Karina Morales Loza
Coordination of dissemination

Emilio Baruch Quiroz Tellez
Editorial design

Technical and operational support
**Centro de Información
y Documentación (CID)**

Travis Doering
English text correction

Comments and Suggestions
difusion.mor@inah.gob.mx

Front cover:
Monument 9 of Chalcatzingo, May 2023.
Photography: Luis Gerardo Peña Torres.

Back cover:
Monument 9 of Chalcatzingo, within
Regional Museum of the Villages of Morelos,
Palace of Cortes, its current venue.
Photography: Erick Alvarado Tenorio,
May 25, 2023.

Centro INAH Morelos
14 Mariano Matamoros Street,
Acapantzingo, Cuernavaca,
Morelos.

CULTURA
SECRETARÍA DE CULTURA

