

Tzintzuntzan

Tzintzuntzan is an endearing, admirable and fantastic place. Its name is a little difficult to pronounce. Its sound is intimately related to its meaning. Tzintzuntzan means place of the hummingbirds. This city, at its most important moment of occupation in 1200 A.D., hosted up to 40,000 people.



The first thing that calls our attention is the beautiful location, a few miles from Lake Patzcuaro in Michoacán. Many cities were developed close to this lake; this way they could take advantage of all the lake's resources. The view from this pre-Hispanic city is privileged and the proximity to the lake allowed for close relations and communication with other contemporary cities.

The most important building in Tzintzuntzan is monumental and on this platform diverse activities were carried out that were related to the ceremonies and rituals that their rulers performed in honor of their deities. There were also living areas for the elite in power.



The rest of the population lived in rural villages or neighborhoods which were distributed on artificial terraces built on the slopes of the hills. According to the latest archaeological data, the surface that was occupied by the population was more than 900 hectares.

In addition, a network of roads has been located that interconnected not only the different spaces of the city but also the city with other important settlements. Other nearby cities are: Ihuatzio, Jucato, Cótiro, Itziparámuco and Uricho. These names, even though they are a little difficult to pronounce, are very interesting because they refer to the language that is still spoken in Michoacán today, the Purépecha.

Surely you have heard these two words when they refer to the population of Michoacán and the language that was spoken since pre-Hispanic times: Tarasco and Purépecha. These two words refer to the same culture that settled in the West of Mexico, particularly in the states of Michoacán and Jalisco. Often there can be confusion because in reality they refer to the same cultural group and also to the language that was spoken since then.

When the Spanish arrived in this region in 1533, they began to use the term Tarasco, while the name they used to call themselves was Purépecha. I believe it is more prudent to use the Purépecha name; however, nowadays these terms can be mixed and even confused.

The Purépecha culture is rich and alive. Today there are more than 150,000 active speakers and the geographic area where it is spoken includes the states of Michoacán, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Guerrero, state of Mexico and Mexico City. This is due to migrations.

Returning to Tzintzuntzan, in architectural terms, it is possible to identify a certain type of construction that is circular or semi-circular and to know how it is laid out. The name of this type of construction is Yácata and is only used for this region and for this culture.



Yácata, Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán

The last Purépecha ruler was Tangoxoan III. When the Spaniards arrived in the city of Tzintzuntzan, he was alive, which is why there are many colonial references to the encounter between the Spaniards and the Purépecha.

It is curious to note that there are two other architectural groups that also belong to the city of Tzintzuntzan but have Catholic names, Santa Ana and San Pablo. The reason is that in these groups, chapels were built, and in these chapels certain saints or saints who were their patrons/protectors, in this case Santa Ana and San Pablo, served as the patron saints since

colonial times and were worshipped. This is a sample of the military and spiritual conquest that were simultaneously occurring.

Both in the residential areas and in the main square, bronze objects were found. This was a unique feature of the pre-Hispanic Purépecha people. This material, the way they extracted it, and the casting processes speak of an outstanding technology.

In the museum of the site, it is possible to admire a great diversity of objects. Among them: projectile tips, knives and obsidian knives as well as the use of other materials such as shell, gold and copper.

As noted earlier, one of the uses given to the structures was ceremonial. The deity to which these rituals were dedicated was the god of fire.

In technological aspects, it is known that the Purépecha extracted material from the nearby mines and the main governor, named Cazonci, directly controlled all the production processes for the metallic objects. These objects had different uses, among which were for rituals, symbolism and prestige for society.

Copper mining, milling and smelting activities were carried out directly at the mines while refining took place in human settlements. Thanks to these vestiges, it is possible to emphasize the persistence in the technology used since pre-Hispanic times until our days.

If it were possible to identify some singular and unique characteristics of each Mesoamerican culture, in the case of the Purépecha, these characteristics would be:

- The value that is given to copper is a sumptuary good which brought prestige to society and allowed a commercial network related to this material.
- The most important god is the god of fire to whom they dedicate a number of rituals and ceremonies.
- Circular constructions are called yácatas.

It is rarely possible to make a reconstruction of how a place was and how the culture was living before the arrival of the Spaniards. However, in the case of Tzintzuntzan, it is possible because

when the Spaniards arrived the city was alive and it was possible to make a record of their writing and their own narratives. This made it easier for them to adapt to the new system imposed by the Spaniards.

Thanks to this tradition it is possible to access maps, codices, vocabularies, dictionaries, and lists of tax payments and land tenure, just to mention some of the topics that are possible to analyze thanks to the records that exist about the Purépecha during the colonization process.

This is an invitation to continue discovering and learning from the rich legacy they left behind and to value the traditions and expressions that are still alive, such as the technology used in copper production. (See the article on Santa Clara del Cobre in the Folk Art section.)



Panoramic view of the Patzcuaro Lake and Tzintzuntzan



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