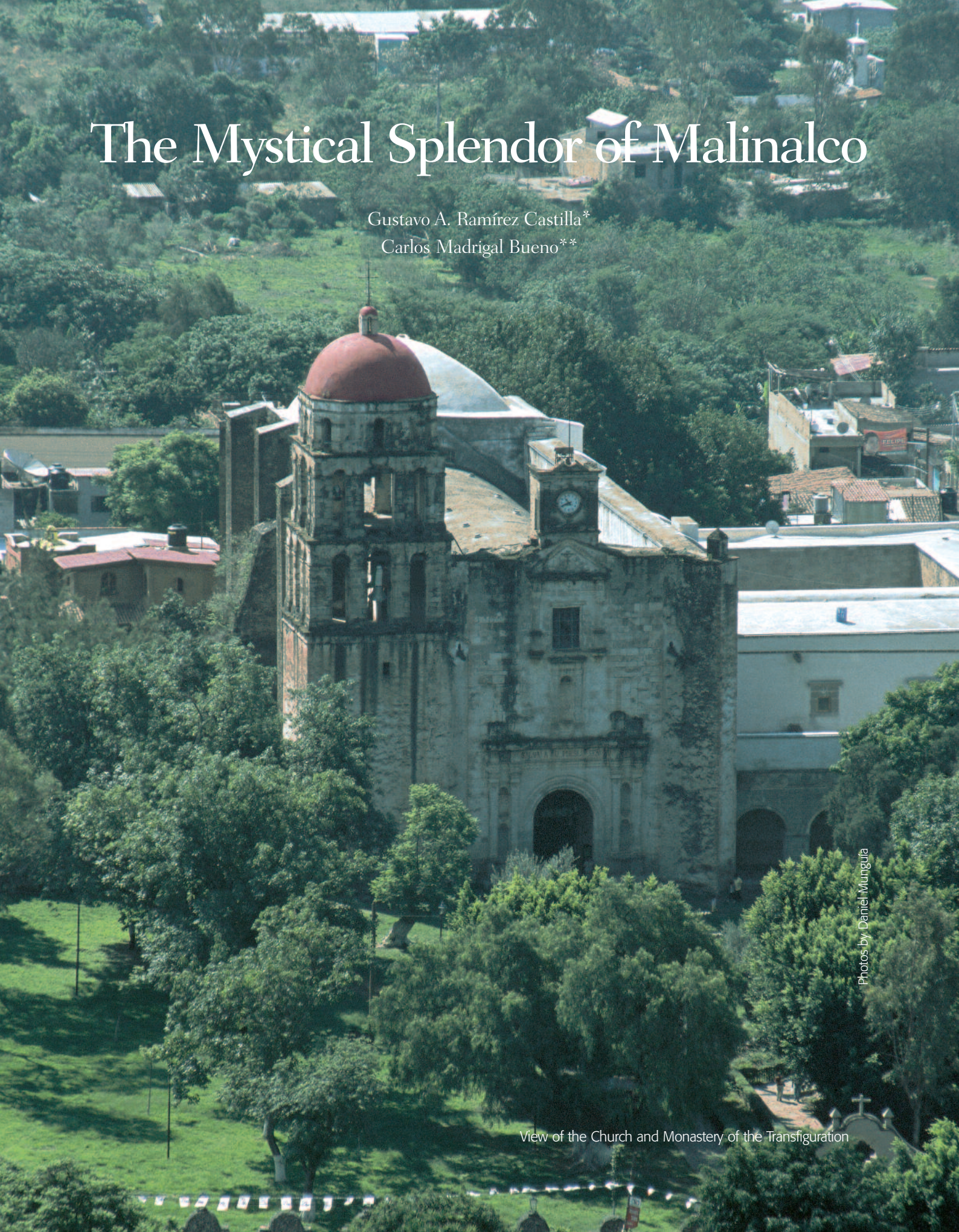


The Mystical Splendor of Malinalco

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Photos by Daniel Munguía

View of the Church and Monastery of the Transfiguration

THE PRE-HISPANIC ERA

Positioned on the east side of Matlalac Heights, a mountain range that runs north-south separating the valleys of Malinalco and Tenancingo, the Hill of the Idols rises majestically flanked by the canyons of Santa Mónica or Rincón de San Miguel and Rincón de Techimalco. The Hill of the Idols has a particular geological structure, composed of alternating layers of volcanic and andesitic detritus that form a sedimentary rock both soft enough to be molded by the human hand and at the same time resistant to the inclemencies of the weather.

The particular topography of the Malinalco Valley, formed by peaks and canyons rising capriciously out of the mountain, makes for scenery

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that evokes cosmic planes: Tlalocan, the paradise of the rain god Tláloc; Tanmoachan, the birth place of Quetzalcóatl, god of the wind; or Chicomoztoc, the Place of the Seven Caves, where the Mexica and their sister tribes originated. The thick, low brush, typical of warm, humid climates, completes the scenery: in summer, shining emerald, washed by copious rains, and during the dry season, amber, burned by the blazing sun, the two sides of a single coin that infinitely recreate the dual cycle of life and death to which our ancestors were so devoted.

In 1935, Zacatecas-born archaeologist Don José García Payón, climbed to the top of the hill with the firm intention of drawing back the veil of its mysteries. At 120 meters, he discovered the remains of ancient temples and palaces carved into the rock, unique in all of the Americas, comparable only to the monolithic temples of Petra, Abu Simbel or Nash-i-rustam. After long digging, he uncovered walls, steps, the remains of a mural and



Malinalco's ceremonial center.

imposing sculptures, revealing the Mexica as the creators of this wonder.

However, the history of Malinalco did not begin there. In the higher part of the hill, at 220 meters, recent exploration has revealed the remains of huts and skeletons of the first inhabitants. The domestic materials are related mainly to two neighboring regions: Tlahuica ceramics, linked to the Cuernavaca Valley, to the southeast, and Matlatzica ceramics, associated with the Valley of Toluca, to the north, both in the early post-classical period between A.D. 900 and 1200. Some vessels, however, from the classical period of the Mexico basin (A.D. 250 to 600) suggest earlier occupation.

The most recent establishment involves the Mexica, who conquered the region shortly after 1476, when the hosts of Axayácatl, the ruler of Tenochtitlan, came with the aim of establishing a military outpost that would control the tribute to the Mexica capital at this point, where important lines of communication among the Valleys of Toluca and Cuernavaca and the north of Guerrero crossed.

By 1520, Malinalco suffered a second military invasion because of the help it had given to Tenochtitlan during the siege by the Spanish army. Hernán Cortés' troops under the command of Andrés de Tapia razed the town, stopping short the carving of new buildings in the ceremonial center.

With time, the forest covered the remains of the settlement. Only the efforts of the seekers of the past would rescue the previously imposing fortress from oblivion. The main body of the site is situated on the part of the hill known as Cuauh-tinchan. It is made up of 12 structures arranged on an artificial plateau, surrounded by walls on the south and the east. The center is composed of three buildings, the Cuauhcalli or "house of the eagles," a ceremonial site consecrated to the initiation of elite warriors of the Mexica army, and Buildings II and VI, a pyramid-shaped temple dedicated to Tláloc, god of water, and a split-level temple with a circular room.

To the east is another set of buildings known as Tzinacalli, or "house where the burners are located," because it has two square burners, and



The Cuauhcalli, where the initiation of elite warriors took place.

Building IV or the Temple of the Sun, a large rectangular space carved into the rock with a built-in bench along its walls suggesting its possible use for mass ceremonies dedicated to the "star king." In addition, we find Building V, a circular platform barely 30 centimeters high where ostensibly gladiator battles took place.

It is said that in the interior of the Cuauhcalli, the most important military ceremony of the initiation took place. The young aspirant to an eagle or jaguar warrior climbed to the temple on a 13-step stairway flanked by imposing feline sculptures and a standard bearer. At the threshold of the temple he found himself face to face with Zipac, the monster of the earth, whose open maw welcomed him into the cave of the underworld, extending his serpentine tongue as a carpet. Access to the room was guarded by two monoliths, one representing an eagle warrior poised on a serpent with arrow-shaped feathers and the other, the jaguar knight, standing on a



Church and Monastery of the Transfiguration.

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drum. After tense moments of waiting, the youth was called to by a voice in the interior of the temple; for the first and only time, he would have the privilege of experiencing the mysterious underworld. Magnificently carved on a bench around the circular room were a pair of eagles with unfolded wings, situated on each side of a third relief representing the jaguar. On the back of a third eagle standing in the center of the room, on a lower level, the aspirant showed his courage by practicing the painful self-sacrifice: with eagle or jaguar claws, depending on his vocation, and thorns and cords or sharp obsidian razors, he perforated different parts of his body. He stained thin strips of *amate* bark paper with his own blood and burned them in the *cuauhxicalli*, a receptacle carved out of the floor to burn offerings. Thus, transformed into columns of smoke, the bloody strips were the favorite delicacy of the gods. After long hours of penitence and prayer, after the harsh trial

by resistance, he came back to the earthly world strengthened, ready to devote himself completely to war: he was now an initiate.

HISTORICAL AND TRADITIONAL MALINALCO

By the sixteenth century, blood ran into the valley; indigenous and Spanish blood that seemed to justify the long decades of preparation of the eagle or jaguar warriors, who, nonetheless, could not overcome the Spanish steel and gunpowder. Malinalco, "the place of the twisted grass," was never again what it had been. Another form of worship, this time of a languid crucified god, imposed itself, condemning the ancient temples to oblivion. But, from the same quarries the rock was extracted for able indigenous architects, under the direction of the clergy, to erect churches or monas-

teries, places of worship no less imposing, consecrated to self-sacrifice, penitence and pain.

The area was devastated by war until the arrival of the evangelizing Franciscan Friars Jorge de Ávila and Juan de Cruzarte in 1543. The foundation of the New Spain city began with the construction of the open chapel and Convent of the Trans-

of the oldest neighborhoods is San Guillermo; the little chapel is known affectionately as “San Guillermito,” or “Little Saint William,” and has an isolated bell tower.

Santa Mónica has a raised chapel and is on the outskirts of the old center of the town, dating from the sixteenth century. It was built on a pre-His-



Lateral exit and small chapel of the Monastery of the Transfiguration.

From the same quarries the pre-Hispanic builders had used, the rock was extracted for able indigenous architects to erect imposing churches or monasteries.

figuration of Jesus Christ. The open chapel has seven arches symbolizing the seven days of Creation.

Twenty-eight years later, the Church of the Divine Savior was built. The walls of the interior passageway were decorated with a mural that mixed indigenous and Spanish motifs. In this task, *tlacuilos* may have participated, indigenous painters who before the Conquest had done the codices.

By 1578, Spanish edicts dictated the construction of housing in New Spain with the new orthogonal floor plan, using two axes that intercepted at the center, something by no means easy in Malinalco given the unevenness of the terrain. At the center of the axis was the Church and Monastery of the Transfiguration, surrounded by two blocks on each side and one to the north. This plan divided the city into four quadrants, creating neighborhoods, each with its own church consecrated to a patron saint that gave its name to the area. One

panic foundation. La Soledad, from the seventeenth century, is the only one with a cross-shaped foundation.

The church of the neighborhood of San Juan Bautista was built to enhance the main access to the town in 1712. The Santa María Mother of God Chapel, despite its simple facade, has columns decorated with small niches, and its decoration is an incipient baroque, although it was changed slightly during the nineteenth century.

The chapel in the San Martín Caballero neighborhood continues to be one of the best examples of Malinalco’s popular baroque. Although construction on it began in the seventeenth century, the facade was not finished until 1765. The Saint Peter the Apostle Church was built in the seventeenth century; its austere facade bears a main entrance flanked by columns and topped by an arch. The open chapel is off to one side.

The last neighborhood, San Andrés, founded at the same time as its chapel, toward the end of the eighteenth century, has a simple facade. The neo-classical doorway is framed by two columns holding up an architrave around the access itself.

Experienced indigenous labor, accustomed to the rigor demanded of their own recent monumental religious architecture, was used to build the first churches.

Civil architecture also followed the Spanish models. In the historical perimeter of the city, buildings were erected that were monumental both in proportion and quality of construction. The Portal House is a prime example, situated on the main plaza, with its characteristic semi-circular arches and cylindrical buttresses in the shape of pylons. Less spectacular, but typical, are the single-story

dwellings and the vernacular houses in which elements of the indigenous tradition prevail, such as adobe; but both make use of techniques and materials developed during the colonial period, like roof-tiles, brick, flagstone floors, wooden windows or doors and wrought-iron work.

Religious festivals maintain the community's link to its origins, reinforce its faith and form the basis for an explosion of phenomena rooted in the indigenous and mestizo tradition, between pandemonium and mystical fervor. The celebrations of Easter Week, the Divine Savior and Our Lady of Guadalupe, as well as those of each patron saint, are very important.

In its mysticism, Malinalco fuses past and present, manifest in the grandeur of its buildings. The oft-cited meeting of two worlds produces here one of its most genuine expressions. **MM**



The remains of murals and imposing sculptures reveal the hand of the Mexica culture in Malinalco.