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The Teotihuacan State

Urbanism and Power

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Parapet of a battlement in the shape of Tláloc. Teotihuacan.

Not only was Teotihuacan the first of the great urban centers of the Basin of Mexico, but, as a result of the needs arising from managing and maintaining the most prestigious and powerful city of the Classic period, it also devel-

oped complex forms of sociopolitical organization. This is shown in its great size, the diversity and sophistication of its culture, the complexity of its urban organization, its clear dominance of nearby areas and the influence it exercised over more remote areas of Mesoamerica.

Teotihuacan was the first large-scale urban area in Central Mexico. It covered an area of approximately 20 square kilometers, housing 60 percent of the population of the entire Basin of Mexico at the time. It was among the largest of all pre-industrial population centers; different cal-

culations put it at between 40,000 and 200,000 inhabitants. It was a multi-ethnic city, a strategic site because it possessed resources like obsidian, a manufacturing center, a center for trade in luxury goods, the capital of a singular state, a planned settlement, a model of the cosmos, laid out in accordance with the four cardinal points, an underworld and a heavenly sphere.¹

The elements of its urban planning were established from the Tlamimilolpa phase (A.D. 200-350):² perpendicular, parallel streets and avenues organized in a highly planned, orthogonal grid dividing the city

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into four great sectors; a very efficient drainage system as well as water deposits at different points in the city; public and administrative buildings located along the Avenue of the Dead; a singular form of domestic life in multi-family dwellings where the inhabitants—all kin—shared residences and trades, as well as neighborhoods for craftsmen and foreigners (the Oaxaca Neighborhood, the Gulf Coast Merchants' Neighborhood and, probably, a neighborhood of people from Michoacán).

William Sanders, Jeffrey Parsons and Robert Santley submit that in addition to Teotihuacan, the Basin of Mexico had 10 provincial centers, 17 large villages, 77 small villages and 149 hamlets.³ The rural population of the northern half of the basin, particularly the Cuauhtitlan-Tenayuca sector, was four times that of the southern half. Given that the population of the Chalco-Xochimilco area was smaller and more homogeneously distributed, Sanders, Parsons and Santley think this resulted from relocating people from the old centers of power and authority to the large city.

This author considers that the rise of Teotihuacan was more related to volcanic activity in the southern part of the Basin of Mexico in the first century of the Christian era: not only did Xitle cover Cuicuilco with lava, but the Popocatepetl belched ash and pumice stone, gravely affecting the Puebla-Tlaxcala settlement, an area which already contained cultural traits that were magnified in Teotihuacan. This therefore caused demographic shifts whereby a great many inhabitants of different parts of the Basin of Mexico and Puebla-Tlaxcala concentrated in the Teotihuacan Valley,

perhaps because it had strategic raw materials (like obsidian or the volcanic scoria and basalt used in construction) and springs, as well as being the shortest access route between the Gulf Coast and the Basin of Mexico and bordering on the Texcoco lake system region.

The construction of such spectacular monuments as the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon and the Temple of Quetzalcóatl is linked to the intention of creating a magnificent scenario of symbolic power, a sacred center that could be the perfect model of a civilized city.

Teotihuacan's regular layout, its organization into neighborhoods, the beautiful crafts produced there and its extraordinary murals were part of that *tollan*⁴ that may well have rapidly become mythical.

Alfredo López Austin conceives of Teotihuacan as the first place where kinship organization was transformed into a state in which the old heads of clans separated themselves into an autonomous group of bureaucrats, administrators and distributors of goods: that is, nobles.⁵ The birth of the



Disk with the face of Tlaloc. Site Museum, Teotihuacan.



Detail of Mural 2. Patio 2, Tepantitla area, Teotihuacan.



Pyramid of the Moon, main facade. Archeological zone Teotihuacan.

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state would have derived from the existence of groups of different origins and the exercise of power over a given territory.

SOCIOPOLITICAL ORGANIZATION

It is a paradox that despite much archeological information, Teotihuacan's sociopolitical organization is still unknown. According to different Teotihuacan pictorial representations, priests probably enjoyed the highest social position; they can be recognized pictorially by, among other things, their bags of copal. These personages frequently appear in anonymous processions, strewing seed and other symbols of fertility on the ground. This author thinks the government of Teotihuacan was collectively exercised by a group whose most frequently represented function is that of the priesthood and which was not immune from internal power struggles, as can be seen in the elimination of the Temple of Quetzalcóatl group around A.D. 250.

The high priests of the collective government were probably the heads of conic clans structured in districts of the city who represented the different groups living there.⁶ What is clear is that this type of government is similar to the kind that existed in the Indus Valley, which boasted planned cities like Teotihuacan.

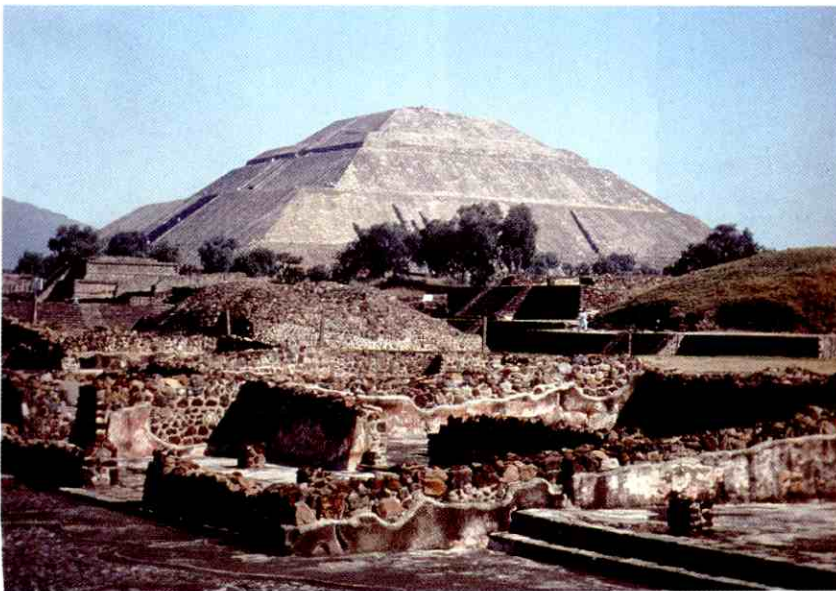
In contrast with other Mesoamerican centers, where the feats of the dynasties are reproduced iconographically and with glyphs on stelae and lintels and in other places, in Teotihuacan the emphasis is more on the position than on the individ-

ual.⁷ The non-existence of iconographic representations narrating outstanding events in the lives of particular dynasties, of royal tombs, of the names of kings, etc., leads one to think that Teotihuacan was the great anomaly of the Mesoamerican Classic period. Perhaps the emphasis on territory, understood as the Teotihuacan colonial enclaves located at the four cardinal points, with the sacred, powerful city at the center, masked the structure based on lineage.

Recently too much emphasis has been placed on the presence of the military in Teotihuacan,⁸ but the concrete data available is scarce. For example, scholars point to the more than 200 victims sacrificed at the base of the Temple of Quetzalcóatl as an indicator of militarism. I have criticized this position since, in addition to the fact that it was unique in the history of Teotihuacan, we do not know who those sacrificed were: whether they were from Teotihuacan or not, whether they were from the upper class, warriors, artisans or peasants. Some have said they were weapon-bearing



Fragment of a parapet representing Tlaloc. Site Museum, Teotihuacan.



Pyramid of the Sun. Archeological zone, Teotihuacan.



Detail of Mural 2. Portico 2, Tepantitla area, Teotihuacan.

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warriors, but that does not explain the graves filled exclusively with women. Only at the end of Teotihuacan history do people appear armed with throwing weapons (see, for example, the paintings at Ate-telco), perhaps marking the prelude to the competitive environment of the epi-Classic period. Armillas suggested that the Citadel was at one time the religious and administrative center of the city and perhaps also the residence of those in government.⁹ The residential compounds to the north and south of the Temple of Quetzalcóatl, however, differ very little from those close to the Avenue of the Dead or in other parts of the city, and we do not know what would distinguish them from that of other residential areas.

TEOTIHUACAN INFLUENCE

Clearly, Teotihuacan was the largest and most important city of the Basin of Mexico and the whole Central Highland, and it inaugurated a kind of settlement in which a great urban sprawl dominated the rural areas. A still-unproven hypothesis postulates the idea that El Portezuelo and Azcapotzalco were dependent secondary centers.

The valleys bordering on the Basin of Mexico clearly show the presence of people from Teotihuacan from the time of the Tlamimilolpa phase. In the Valley of Toluca, Teotihuacanos colonized new areas with different resources. A corridor of 80 Teotihuacan sites united the metropolis with Cholula in the Puebla-Tlaxcala valley to the south and east of La Malinche. In the valley of Morelos, particularly in the region of the Amatzinac River, Teotihuacan control spurred important demo-

graphic changes: the division into two areas characteristic of the Late Formative period became a system dominated by a single regional administrative center, San Ignacio.

Beyond the valleys surrounding the Basin of Mexico, mention should be made of Teotihuacan enclaves distributed along the four cardinal points in areas rich in strategic resources: Kaminaljuyú, the Guatemalan highlands, with the obsidian mines of El Chayal, and which probably supplied Teotihuacan with jadeite and other green stones; Chingú, in the valley of Tula, with its limestone used to make stucco; Maticapan, in the Tuxtla region of Veracruz which probably exported fine clays, cotton blankets, the feathers of exotic birds and jaguar skins; and perhaps sites in Michoacán, like the ones in the area of Tingambato or Tres Cerritos, which may have provided Pacific sea mollusks and Michoacán obsidian.



Reconstructed patio and rooms of the Temple of Quetzalpapálotl, Teotihuacan.

In this author's opinion, other areas of Mesoamerica, like Monte Albán, may have had political alliances with Teotihuacan; this can be deduced from different stelas and stone tablets. Other settlements in Veracruz and the south of Puebla preferred relations of frequent exchange. New lines of research seek to evaluate some attempts by Teotihuacan or its enclaves to begin private dynasties in important Mayan capitals like Tikal or

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Silhouette cup with crenelated legs, decorated with the figure of Tláloc, Teotihuacan.



Temple of Quetzalcóatl (detail). Archeological zone, Teotihuacan.

There is evidence that the Teotihuacanos mined resources like cinnabar in the Sierra Gorda mountain range of Querétaro and perhaps in San Luis Potosí, different green stones and serpentine in Guerrero and probably also malachite and other mineral compounds in the Chalchihuites, Zacatecas, area.¹⁰

Copán. Clara Millon considered certain personages pictured with tasseled head-dresses representatives of the Teotihuacan state abroad.¹¹

THE DECLINE

We know that the central part of the city was burned and sacked at the time of the fall of Teotihuacan in approximately A.D.



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Multicolored jug. Site Museum, Teotihuacan.

650, and that some time later massive migration began out of the Basin of Mexico, perhaps the first migration of the *pipiles* toward Central America. René Millon has suggested that among the causes of the decline of Teotihuacan were bad political and economic management, a resistance to change, an inefficient and incompetent bureaucracy and the deterioration of trade networks.¹²

Taking into consideration the different factors mentioned as causes of the collapse, we might imagine the following scenario: the city had grown too much, encroaching on the alluvial plain and thus making it dependent on Texcoco and Iztapalapa for its food supply. At the same time, the great consumption of wood for roofs and as fuel for different activities (particularly the production of lime) caused a deterioration in the environment surrounding the city, and deforestation

internal revolt that included the burning of the administrative and religious center was aimed at the governing elite. Very probably groups from the south of Puebla who used Teotihuacan's distribution channels to sell their pottery and crafts also propiciated the collapse since seemingly the supply routes to the city were also closed.¹³ **MM**

NOTES

¹ Linda Manzanilla, "Teotihuacan: Urban Archetype, Cosmic Model," ed. Linda Manzanilla, *Emergence and Change in Early Urban Societies* (New York: Plenum Press, 1997), pp. 109-131.

² René Millon, "Teotihuacan: City, State and Civilization," ed. Jeremy A. Sabloff, *Archaeology. Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians 1* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 198-243.

³ William T. Sanders, Jeffrey R. Parsons and Robert S. Santley, *The Basin of Mexico. Ecological Processes in the Evolution of a Civilization* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

⁴ *Tollan* is a Nahuatl word used to refer to a big settlement or metropolis.

⁵ Alfredo López Austin, "La historia de Teotihuacan," *Teotihuacan* (Mexico City: Citicorp/Citibank, 1989), pp. 13-35.

⁶ Manzanilla, op. cit., 1997.

⁷ George L. Cowgill, "State and Society at Teotihuacan, Mexico," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997): pp. 129-161.

⁸ Cowgill, op. cit.

⁹ Pedro Armillas, "Northern Mesoamerica," in ed. Jesse D Jennings and Edward Norbeck, *Prehistoric Man in the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 291-329.

¹⁰ Linda Manzanilla, "The Economic Organization of the Teotihuacan Priesthood: Hypotheses and Considerations," ed. Janet C. Berlo, *Art, Ideology and the City of Teotihuacan* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 1993), pp. 223-240.

¹¹ Clara Millon, "Painting, Writing and Polity in Teotihuacan," *American Antiquity* 38, no. 3 (1973): pp. 294-314.

¹² René Millon, "The Last Years of Teotihuacan Dominance," eds. Norman Yoffee and George L. Cowgill, *The Collapse of Ancient States and Civilizations* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1988), pp. 102-164.

¹³ Linda Manzanilla, op. cit., 1997.



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Reconstruction of a small temple. Atetelco area, Teotihuacan.

brought soil erosion and a drop in phreatic levels. As this was happening, there was a prolonged drought along the entire Neovolcanic Axis. If we take into account that those governing the city presented themselves as the ones responsible for making rain and guaranteeing the fertility of the land, we may understand why the