

# Teotihuacan

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**O**urs is a totally urban civilization. While many cities of the past are of particular interest, it is surely early urban centers that exert the greatest fascination.

Teotihuacan was the archetypal city of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, a paradigm of civilized living on the central plateau. During its period of

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splendor (the first seven centuries A.D.), Teotihuacan was the most important settlement in the Basin of Mexico, comprising 50 to 60% of the entire population, with the remainder living in rural areas.

Teotihuacan was the principal pilgrimage center and dominated the rest of the region both politically and economically. Evident signs of urban planning, special districts for craftsmen and foreigners, public

services, housing units and an area of 20 km<sup>2</sup> capable of sustaining several tens of thousands of inhabitants identify it as a true city.

Teotihuacan was built in the valley of the same name for a number of reasons; local grey obsidian deposits and nearby green obsidian deposits in the Sierra de las Navajas (obsidian being the basis of pre-Hispanic technology), several dozen fresh-water springs in the southeast of the valley, the proximity of Lake Texcoco and the fact that it offered the easiest access to the Basin of Mexico from the Gulf Coast.

The valley had clay soil for making pottery, basalt, pyroclast and tuff for building, land for growing



Temple of Quetzalcóatl and Tlaloc.





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Moon plaza.

crops on the San Juan River alluvial plain and other resources provided by the mountain slopes.

The city of Teotihuacan achieved its final shape in approximately 300-400 A.D. There had previously been a densely populated center in the waterless northeast of the valley, as though the Teotihuacans had kept the alluvial plain for growing crops. However, it is strange that they did not build near the springs.

A series of tunnels and caves under the northern part of the city has recently been explored. The system was probably man-made and created by the Teotihuacans by extracting pyroclast and basalt from the volcanic ash cones buried in the valley. The city and its pyramids were built from this material.

However, some of the caves probably held water, which might

explain the presence of this first urban center in a cave setting, so far from a permanent water source. Once the city was built, the tunnels may also have

been used for ritual purposes, probably connected with *Tlalocan*, the underworld of Tláloc, the city's god. We expect to find offerings and



Quetzalpapalotl patio.

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Temple of agriculture.

storehouses associated with the earth's fertility, and also graves.

Teotihuacan might have been called "the colorful city." Numerous painted murals decorated its stucco

walls. The lime coating used as a surface for paintings and for covering both floors and avenues came from the limestone brought from Tula, Hidalgo.

To produce lime, the Teotihuacans had to burn the limestone, and in doing so, they deforested a good part of the valley's surroundings. The wood was not only used for producing lime but also for building roofs, as well as domestic and craftsmen's fuel. This marvellous city, where sacred time and space were created, served as a model for subsequent civilizations; some of its main features are described below.

**The existence of streets and avenues**

Avenida de los Muertos was the main avenue crossing the city from north to south. It has been suggested that another avenue should run from east to west, starting in the center of the Citadel, stretching east for more than 3 km and west of the Grand Complex for over 2 km. Together they would cut the city into quadrants, making the Citadel in the center particularly important.



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Citadel.



Most houses were built along the streets, which ran parallel or perpendicular to the evenly-spaced main avenues. Remains of houses built on a grid, facing 15° north by east, can still be seen several kilometers from the city center on nearby slopes.

The city was plotted using markers in the shape of concentric circles with crosses; these can be found on the nearby hills and in the city itself. The angle of the Pyramid of the Sun has been attributed to astronomical reasons, especially the setting of the Pleiades in front of the structure.

### Water supply and drainage system

Apparently there were both drinking water and sewage systems. The latter fed its run-off through a tank 200 m northeast of the Pyramid of the Moon. Water from the stream descended through the section between Coronillas and Gordo Hills.

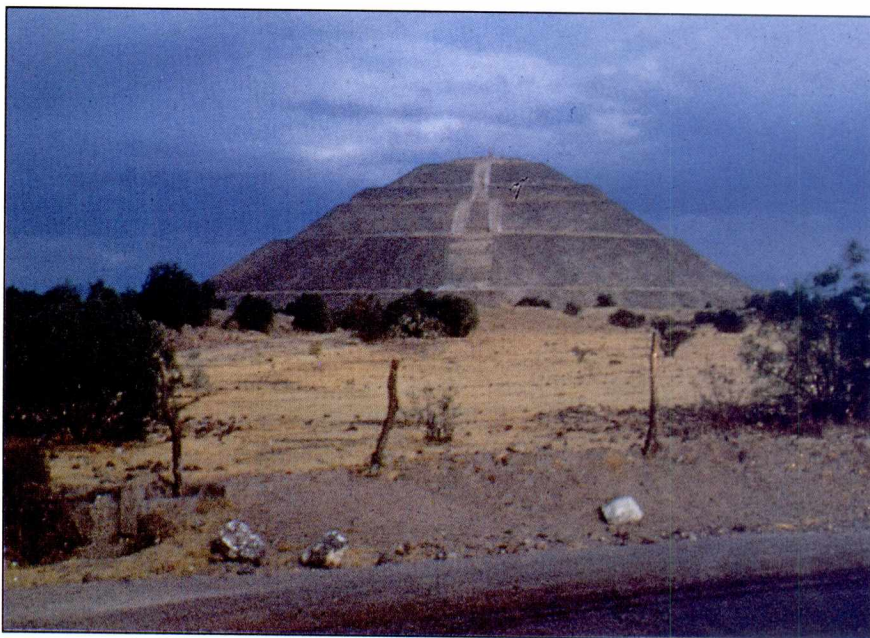
Building these systems involved channelling the San Juan River to fit the city grid, as well as straightening the meandering San Lorenzo River to prevent sudden, disastrous flooding.

The system of internal drainage included a vast network of underground channels that flowed into a central channel running under the main avenue and emptying into the San Juan River.

### Administrative and political buildings

There are administrative and political buildings along the Avenida de los Muertos. However, owing to a lack of available data, it is difficult to define their precise function.

Recent excavations have unearthed two residential complexes north and south of the Temple of Quetzalcóatl that may have served as some kind of political center. It has been suggested that at some time they may have been the city's religious and administrative center



Sun pyramid.

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as well as perhaps the city governors' residence.

However, these structures differ very little from others along the Avenida de los Muertos and are not substantially different from the residential buildings around the center.

The Grand Complex, facing the Citadel, on the other side of the Avenida de los Muertos, is the largest structure in the city, covering a larger area than the Citadel. It consists of two wings, (north and south), with street-level entrances on the Avenida de los Muertos, while to the east and west they surround a huge open space.

René Millon's hypothesis is that the square may have been the location of the city's largest market and that this may have been the institution that integrated Teotihuacan society. However, there is no concrete evidence to support this hypothesis.

### Residential buildings

There is a series of residential buildings around the central part of the city: Tlamimilolpa, Xolalpan, Atetelco, Tepantitla, Tetitla, Zacuala and La Ventilla, among others.

These buildings generally have several rooms at different levels

around open courtyards. They contain domestic shrines and the whole complex is enclosed by an outer wall.

Interestingly, these structures were based on a 57m. module, with multiples and submultiples. Thus Millon suggests that there were three types of complex that could house twenty, fifty or a hundred people respectively.

They may have been occupied by corporate groups of the same trade, since it has been observed that different craftsmen lived in separate housing areas.

Another feature of these complexes is that they were designed with privacy in mind. Each building was set away from the street with windowless outer walls. The inner courtyards were unroofed, allowing light and air as well as rain, to reach the inside of the complex.

The Teotihuacans cultivated three varieties of corn, black and large kidney beans, various types of squash, chile, tomatoes, amaranth, edible greens and prickly pears. They ate fruit such as the capulin cherry, the fruit of the Mexican hawthorn, and perhaps white sapodilla. They gathered wild potatoes, bulrush, purslane, and acacia.



Animal protein was provided by rabbit, hare, deer, fresh-water fish and aquatic birds, although they also ate turkey and dog.

The Basin of Mexico is a predominantly volcanic area, meaning that the Teotihuacan communities had basalt, andesite and pyroclast to use for building. There was grey obsidian in the northeast part of the Teotihuacan Valley, and green in the Sierra de las Navajas in Pachuca.

Cotton, strangler fig bark paper and avocado, jadeite, turquoise and serpentine, together with precious bird feathers and other resources came from areas outside the basin.

#### Craftsmen's districts and areas

Crafts are attested to by numerous obsidian workshops. This craft soon became specialized, even to the type of object made. Some workshops produced small prismatic razors while others made spearheads and knives. The main obsidian area was west of the Pyramid of the Moon. Other workshops that have been discovered produced pottery, figurines, precious or polished stones, and slate objects.

There are districts in the city that contain abundant pottery shards made elsewhere than Teotihuacan, leading some researchers to assume that these were residential areas for foreigners. Examples include the "Oaxacan district" in the southeast of the city and the "Merchants' district" in the eastern sector.

This last district was recently excavated by UNAM researchers who found round, adobe structures and tombs with Mayan and Gulf Coast pottery. Thus, Teotihuacan was a cosmopolitan city, with foreign residents, that had established numerous links with distant corners of Mesoamerica.

It has been suggested that political alliances were formed with Monte Alban in Oaxaca; and Teotihuacan colonies established in Maticapan (Veracruz), Kaminaljuyú (Guatemala) and perhaps Tingambato (Michoacan) and Altavista (Zacatecas), and that the city interfered in the politics of Mayan cities such as Tikal. The valleys of Puebla-Tlaxcala, Toluca and Morelos seem to have been under Teotihuacan's control.

Unlike other urban centers in Mesoamerica that were ruled by

governors and dynasties, government and administration in Teotihuacan were probably in the hands of the priests.

There have been countless hypotheses concerning the end of the Classical period: epidemics, invasions, internal conflicts, environmental disasters, blocked trade routes. The fact remains that Classical urban life collapsed; there were population drifts towards Central America and vice versa. The next phase, the Post-Classical period, was dominated by military conquests and tributes. Mexico City is the megalopolis of today. It is interesting to note that one of the greatest urban phenomena in pre-industrial times, Teotihuacan, was also set in the Basin of Mexico. Both ends of a historical process have had to face excessive rural-urban migration, an over-extended water supply, soil erosion, deforestation, over-population and other phenomena that lead to reflection on the future of urban life on this planet.

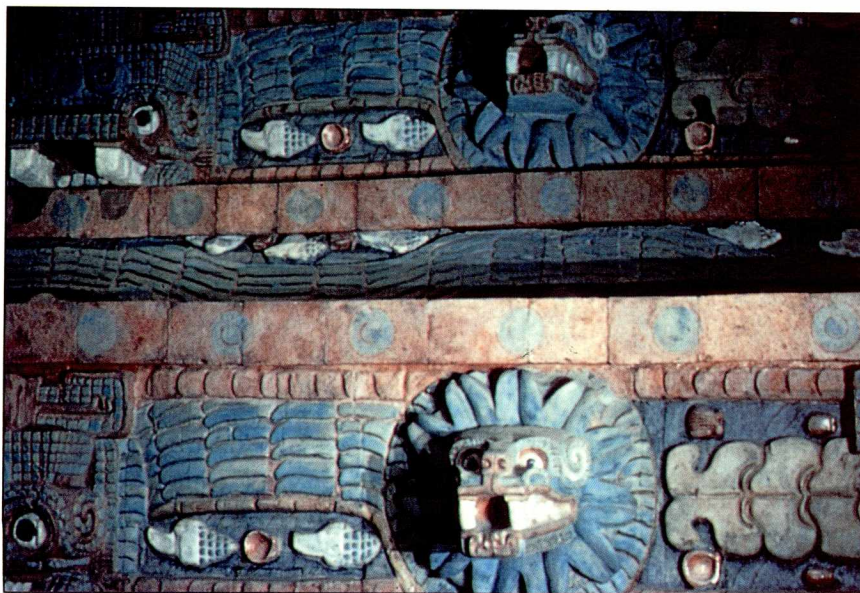
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Temple of Quetzalcóatl (detail of the plumed serpent).