

El Tajín

First Approximations Of a Civilization

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Base for a cylindrical trivet cup.

The Proto-Classical period (A.D. 0-350) began in the first century of our era on the coasts of what is now Veracruz. At that time, a culture inherited from the Late Formative period was still prevalent. The known world had not changed a great deal; ceramic traditions were still practically the same and the thick, black sets of dishes were still used in celebration of local religious rites.

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However, those same potters would soon recreate the very early forms of Teotihuacan ceramics. Although no more than crude imitations of the vessels from Central Mexico, they could not hide a different, unprecedented origin from the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The Teotihuacan cultural style would permeate the arts of the first elites of El Tajín, Cerro Grande and Morgadal Grande, located in the flood plains of the Cazonos and Tecolutla Rivers. In the mid-Proto-Classical period, the transformations that took place in the Early Classical period, the Cacahuatal phase (A.D. 350-600) were about to manifest themselves,



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Relief from the Pyramid of the Niches.

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transformations that would serve as the basis for a vigorous regional culture that preceded the El Tajín civilization's greatest flowering by a couple of centuries.

Everything took time. Almost the entire Proto-Classical period, the Teocolutla phase, had to go by before there was a real integration of the ceramic forms that point to the participation of the Teotihuacan cultural sphere and whose cultural model could have been disseminated by the neighboring city of El Pital. Perhaps the clearest and earliest of these changes was the abandonment of several Formative period settlements. The kind of links that existed among them does not seem to be known, giving first place to a different group of small hamlets that developed on the tops of the hills at the expense of the abandonment of the oldest settlements. The failure—if it can be called that—of the Pre-Classical world could only have been

plotted in the nearby Nautla River basin.

El Pital, skirted by the waters of the Nautla River, was the great metropolis of the Proto-Classical and had certainly not gone unnoticed by its neighbors. During the second half of the Teocolutla phase a series of cultural elements were added to the new kind of settlements that show traces of their antecedents in the Nautla River basin. All evidence seems to point to an accentuated process of rearrangement of the populations as well as the introduction of a new kind of pottery of Teotihuacan inspiration, made certainly for the local elites. These were manifestations of a complex process of assimilation and cultural definition. Even though many details are still not clear, it is not unlikely that El Pital had promoted the entire transformation. The Tlahuanapa Stream, one of the main tributaries of the Teocolutla River, had become a trade route



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near the Czones River, where El Tajín is located. On the stream traveled *floreros*, cylindrical trivets with rectangular bases, and individual candleholders, all of which were part of the Teotihuacan cultural sphere and in the trading of which El Pital surely participated. The stream ended up carrying most of the region's trade. The elites of the early El Tajín, Cerro Grande and Morgadal Grande settlements not only must have based themselves on the new economic status of the Proto-Classical, but also promoted the development of craftsmen inspired in Teotihuacan and based on their own technological experience of the local pottery of the Late Formative period.

The taste for all things from Teotihuacan, for the cultural manifestations of Central Mexico, would not indiscriminately change the form of the objects required by these very early elites. The creation of a new ceramic

repertory would be linked to the transformation of the elite's ritual behavior. At that time (about A.D. 280), many things were changing.¹ The emphasis placed on the reproduction of those vessels, very different from the oldest pottery traditions of the coastal plain, points to an elite that had opted for recreating a cultural model of Teotihuacan extraction that placed it on the threshold of the Teotihuacan "modernity."

It is not unlikely that the demographic readjustments of the Proto-Classical period were stimulated by the incorporation of an as yet unprecedented economic model that emphasized long-distance trade and probably emanated from the neighboring Nautla basin. These new kinds of trade links that also included the distribution of the obsidian from the far-away Pachuca, Altotonga and Zaragoza deposits,² may well have influenced the change in the location of settlements and the emergence of an elite based

The elites of the El Tajín region turned the ball game into the very center of their rituals.



Gerardo Vázquez/IE

Tlaloc (detail) from Arroyo del Arco.

on control of trade. The increase in the population that seems to characterize Morgadal Grande in the Proto-Classical and the Early Classical may well be explained by a new hierarchy among the settlements. On the Tlahuanapa stream travelled the material goods of other cultural models. On the eve of the Late Classical, the pottery included in trading activities may have been mainly Teotihuacan in origin.

The commercial dominance that El Pital seems to have exercised over the flood plains of the Tecolutla and Cazonas Rivers stimulated the development of a vigorous regional culture that we now understand as the direct predecessor of the classical culture of El Tajín. The Morgadal Grande elites' rites and their material expression ended up by irreconcilably distancing themselves from a cultural sub-strata inherited from the Late Formative. The "refined" culture of the elite must have used different vehicles for expression, so different that only among themselves, the early El Tajín and Cerro Grande elites, could the image of the Teotihuacan Tláloc have found a place. The iconographic signs that served to express it can be found on the surface of a group of cups destined for the elite's exclusive consumption and on the stone of the oldest ball game courts, the most eloquent of the buildings destined for the exaltation of the political power of these ancient rulers.

Everything seems to indicate that the elites of the El Tajín region, who participated in the Teotihuacan cultural model during the Cacahuatal phase, turned the ball game into the very center of their rituals. By definition, rulers were considered players. Their stone images emphasize their players' clothing that constituted the symbol

of the institution they represented. In fact, this association would last —although with changes in symbols— until the year A.D. 1100, when the last reliefs were carved in El Tajín. These elites had chosen a cultural model that separated them irremediably from their origins and favored the unprecedented concentration of power probably based on the control of trade. The formalization of new trade routes fostered an entire strategy to control roads, particularly at major river crossings, which could only with great difficulty be forded anywhere else. The settlements grew rich and before the middle of the Cacahuatal phase had an administrative area in the highest part of the ancient cities where —if I am not mistaken— there were buildings dedicated to the cult and the stone images of the elites themselves. Everything points to the idea that the proliferation of elites that dominated only a part of the trade routes led to a certain instability in the political definition of the territory. Borders had to be set and reset periodically. However, they all recognized the same cultural model and a single artistic style, none other than that of the classical El Tajín culture. ■■■

NOTES

¹ The radiocarbon dating has been done in the BETA ANALYTIC, INC. laboratory in Miami, Florida, with the participation of Dr. Darden Hood and Dr. David Miller.

² The neutron activation studies of the obsidian deposits from which the archeological pieces from Morgadal Grande originally came were done by Dr. Dolores Tenorio and Melania Jiménez with the participation of archaeologist Ricardo Leonel Cruz Jiménez in the laboratories of the National Institute for Nuclear Research. They currently continue in the University of Tokyo under the supervision of Dr. Motoyuki Matsuo and Dr. Akihito Kuno.

The commercial dominance of El Pital stimulated the development of a vigorous regional culture that was the direct predecessor of El Tajín.



José Luis Cruz Romero/IE

Individual candleholder from the Cacahuatal Phase.