

The pyramids of teotihuacan history essay



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Teotihuacan is situated in the central section of the Valley of Teotihuacan. The valley is in the northeastern part of the Basin of Mexico, a plateau over 2,000 meters high with a temperate semiarid climate. The later Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, grew up about 700 years after the collapse of Teotihuacan 60-km southwest on an island in the shallow lakes that spread in the Basin at that time. The Spaniards destroyed Tenochtitlan in the 16th century. Teotihuacan arose as a new religious center in the Mexican Highland around the time of Christ. The next two centuries were characterized by monumental construction, during which Teotihuacan quickly became the largest and most populous urban center in the New World. By this time, the city already appears to have expanded to approximately 20 square km, with about 60,000 to 80,000 inhabitants. The development of the city seems to have involved inter-site population movements, exploitation of natural resources, an increase in agricultural production, technological inventions, establishment of trading systems and other kinds of socio-political organizations, and attractive belief systems. The city was dominated by three enormous pyramids called “Pyramid of the Sun” and the “Pyramid of the Moon,” and the “Feathered Serpent Pyramid”. The Avenue of the Dead was the main street of Teotihuacan. The name stems from an early rumor that this was where the Teotihuacanos buried their kings. While most scholars have discarded this idea due to the lack of burials, others note the possibility that mummy bundles of ancestors once lined the “Avenue of the Dead”. It ran for more than 2.5 km, beginning at the Moon Plaza to the north and extending beyond the Ciudadela and the Great Compound complexes to the south. The avenue divided the city into two sections. Apartment compounds with pyramidal constructions were

arranged on both sides of the avenue, often symmetrically and sharing the same orientation. This highly planned city-layout suggests that the avenue may have been planned since its earliest phases of urbanization. The main sector of the avenue was evidently the section between the Moon Pyramid and the Rio San Juan channel. This part of the avenue was lined with long talud-tablero platforms. Access to flanking residential zones was confined to masonry stairways with balustrades. The width of the avenue varies significantly between different sections, ranging from 40 to 95 meters. A large long channel under the floor of the avenue gathered rainwater from neighboring architectural units and drained it into Rio San Juan. As originally built, the Sun Pyramid was approximately 215 by 215 meters at the base, and about 63 meters high. It was significantly enlarged at least twice in later periods, resulting in a final size of 225 meters along each side. The northern half of the city, the pyramid was located on the east side of the Avenue of the Dead. If the area of monumental construction between the Moon Pyramid and the San Juan Canal is regarded as the central zone of the city, the Sun Pyramid is located at its middle. In addition to its geographic centrality, a cave located under the structure indicates the importance of the pyramid. The Teotihuacanos altered the form of the cave by putting barriers along the narrow cave dwellings. They made offerings of food and performed rituals involving fire, water, fish and shells. The cave was viewed as the mouth to the underworld throughout all of Mesoamerica. The Aztecs later called Teotihuacan the birthplace of the Fifth Sun, the present era of time. This was the center of their creation myths certain scholars believe that the cave was used for ritual activities, and why the pyramid was constructed where it is today. The Sun Pyramid was also constructed so that its great stairway faced

westward. This was so it faces the point on the horizon where the Sun sets directly in front of it the day it first passes through the zenith. Also symbolic, the Pleiades, an important star cluster in the beliefs of Mesoamerican tradition, make its yearly appearance at this very point on the horizon. These two events reminded the Teotihuancanos of the change of season. This helped organize agriculture and religious activities. The Moon Pyramid is located at the northern end of the Avenue of the Dead, which was the main axis of the city. The pyramid, facing south, was built as the principal monument of the Moon Pyramid complex. The five-tiered platform was attached to the front of the Moon Pyramid. It is said that the present pyramid has interior structures within it. However, the pyramid remains as one of the least understood major monuments in Teotihuacan. The consolidated structures around the Moon Plaza demonstrate that the city was highly planned symmetrically and was integrated into the local geography. This may be realized by standing on the centerline of the Avenue of the Dead, namely on the main axis of the city. The top of mountain Cerro Gordo dominating the background of the Moon Pyramid, a pan-Mesoamerican notion that the pyramid represents a sacred mountain seems to have been an integral element of the city plan. The Avenue of the Dead begins at the Moon Plaza, which was surrounded by 15 pyramidal structures including the Moon Pyramid. The Quetzalpapalotl Palace lies Immediately to the southwest of the Moon Plaza. Like the Main Plaza in the Ciudadela, the Moon Plaza seems to have been one of the main ritual precincts of the city. The Ciudadela is a huge enclosure located at the geographic center of the city. It measures about 400 meters on a side (i. e. about 160, 000 m²), and the interior space is surrounded by four large platforms surmounted by

pyramids. The main plaza had a capacity of about 100, 000 persons without much crowding. One of the main functions of this closed huge space may have been ritual performance. Feathered Serpent Pyramid was the central pyramid of this large complex. Adorned with large sculptural heads, it was one of the most monumental structures in Teotihuacan. A major portion of the principal facade of the pyramid was later covered by the Adosada platform; afterward, the Feathered Serpent Pyramid was not clearly visible to people standing on the main plaza. The Feathered Serpent Pyramid was the third largest pyramid in Teotihuacan. Although significantly smaller than both the Sun Pyramid and Moon Pyramid, it was one of the most elaborate monuments in the city. The principal facade had been covered with carved blocks, including impressive three-dimensional sculptures. The construction of the monument – quarrying, transporting, arranging, and carving heavy stone blocks – represented a remarkably high-energy expenditure of the state. The Feathered Serpent Pyramid complex consists of the pyramid (stepped platform), its surmounting temple, and the Adosada platform, which was later built onto the main facade of the pyramid. All four sides of the pyramid had been covered by an elaborate facade of stone carvings which including a series of large sculptural heads. The facades that originally existed on the lateral and rear faces have been destroyed. Fortunately, the principal (western) facade of the pyramid was covered by the Adosada platform in ancient times, which was therefore uncovered in an excellent condition of preservation. Thanks to these conditions, we know that the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, measuring 65 meters on a side (about 4225 m² at the base), depicted important mythic-religious entities – Feathered Serpents and a form of sacred headdress. The pyramid was exactly square in

plan view, with sides about 65 meters long. In Nahuatl, the Aztec language, there is a strong affiliation to things that flow: water in rivers, the winding of a serpent, blood through the veins. Imagery of things that flow gives a visual statement of the sacred value of the nearby river at Teotihuacan. The Temple of the Feathered Serpent supports the iconography of this theme. Wavy lines are presented with curved seashells to illustrate the flowing motion. Also the body of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent god, is shown connecting the heads on the pyramid. There are 365 alternating faces on the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. This directly suggests the cyclical importance of the calendar, the flow of time. By AD 500, Teotihuacan had established a unique position for itself in the Valley of Mexico and possessed a prestige and power unprecedented in Middle American history. However, just as its art and architecture were reaching their full climax and trading activities were at a peak, the political, economic, and religious fabric of the city began to unravel. The first strains appeared about AD 650. A century later, Teotihuacan was a shadow of its former self. The population had declined so rapidly that the once-proud city was now little more than a series of hamlets extending over an area of about a square kilometer. Some great catastrophe apparently struck the city in AD 700, reducing its population to below 70,000. Many of its people moved eastward. The city was deliberately burnt and destroyed. Over the years, its buildings collapsed and the pyramids became overgrown with dense vegetation. Teotihuacan's decline was almost as rapid as its rise to prominence. Even so, eight centuries later, Teotihuacan was still revered everywhere as an intensely sacred place. However, no one remembered who had built it or that tens of thousands of people had once lived there. A huge city appears to have arisen without

antecedents. The single most important fact which archaeologists have learned about the Classic period in Mexico was the supremacy of Teotihuacan. As the urbanized center of Mexico, with high population and tremendous production, its power was imposed through political and cultural means not only in its native highland habitat, but also along the tropical coasts, reaching even into the Maya area. Its trading and tribute empire was comparable with the Aztec empire that eventually followed it. All other Mexican states were partly or entirely dependent upon it for whatever achievements they attained.

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