Archeological site report teotihuacan report examples

Law, Evidence

Abstract

This paper describes the Teotihuacan state-city thriving in the Basin of Mexico between 200 BC and 600 AD. A description of archeological findings at the site in Teotihuacan Valley offers an insight into political organization and everyday life of the powerful city. City features grid system and a large number of impressive structures. Its agriculture was highly reliant on systems of irrigation. A high demand for construction wood might have had a harming effect on local ecology and agriculture. The economy of Teotihuacan was based on market commerce including trading with areas as remote as Veracruz or Guatemala. Political power and religious institutions were probably closely interconnected but ritual and religious practice independent of state religion was also present and tolerated by the authorities.

Keywords: Teotihuacan, the Basin of Mexico, Teotihuacan Valley, irrigation

Archeological Site Report: Teotihuacan

In its glory days, the ancient state-city of Teotihuacan was the largest Mesoamerican city and one of the largest in the world. It started to flourish around 100 BC and lasted well into the 700s. By the year of 200 AD, the majority of population from the Basin of Mexico had already relocated to Teotihuacan. At its peak, the city numbered over 150 thousands inhabitants. Still, these numbers are not enough to illustrate the full size and power of the city. Its cultural influence for cultures that inherited it was vast. And the architecture of Teotihuacan was so impressive that Aztecs even thousand years since its decline believed its ruins were built by gods.

The size and density of the urban population of Teotihuacan was unsurpassed in Mesoamerica for at least six hundred years - until the rise of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan in the late 1400s. The city also featured the most impressive conglomerate of monumental structures; with a huge Sun Pyramid comparable in size with the largest of Egyptian pyramids, the Moon Pyramid, the Ciudadela complex that included the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, a long and broad Avenue of the Dead with a number of pyramids, and many more structures of various functions.

One thing is clear about the cultural history of Teotihuacan – it was not linear. The development of the city can be divided into several periods that lasted between 200 BC and 650 AD. Scientists are still not unanimous about the final date of its definite fall, but it is possibly lasted as far as 750 AD. There are fewer disputes about the decline of the city – after it lost its dominant status in late 600s, many of its buildings were looted and destroyed. It thus remained only as a remnant of once the greatest Mesoamerican urban center before its complete abandonment.

The first sharp rise of the population coincided with the construction of the Pyramid of the Sun, around 150 BC. The rhythm of growth was relatively fast; the number of citizens rose from around two thousands at 200 BC to 60, 000 at 100 AD, to reach its plateau of over 150, 000 around 600 AD. According to Adams (1991), there is strong evidence that this growth resulted from the concentration of most of the population of the Basin of Mexico in Teotihuacan, and not from an internal population explosion. Such mode of development also implies a centralized political control that

stretched from the city over the whole Basin of Mexico. Adams also observed a physical reorganization of population that happened around 400 AD and is characterized by building of some two thousand compounds of apartments where majority of Teotihuacan's population resided. A mapping project by Rene Millon (1970, 1973, and 1981) showed that the city spread over an irregular area of approximately eight square miles (cited from Adams, 1991). The city layout relied on the grid system of streets with the major avenue positioned on a north-south axis, known to present-day researchers as the Avenue of the Dead, which is also a name used by Aztecs. The north-south orientation of the main avenue is also characteristic for other urban centers under the influence of Teotihuacan rulers. The second most important avenue is positioned on the west-east axis, and it crosses the main street in the zone known as the Citadel. The intersection of the two streets was a religious, administrative and economic center of the city. In the urban area of Teotihuacan, streets, squares, markets, palaces, religious objects, apartment compounds, slums and the elements of an elaborate water system are clearly distinguished.

Figure 1 Rene Millon's map of the centar of Teotihuacan (Adams 1991)

Adams concluded that the city position was determined by the locations of springs, situated in the southwestern part of the urban area. Some of the water canals that remained to this day are still oriented to the grid of Teotihuacan, revealed by Millon's mapping project. Water from the springs was canalled to the fields, and possibly chinampas – agricultural beds on lakes typical for Mesoamerican agricultural practices. Separate sources of

water that supplied Teotihuacan were tributaries of the San Juan River. The river itself was canalled, passing through the city and surrounding the Citadel and the Great compound zone. It provided a waterway access all the way to the lakes on the southwest. Number of side canals and reservoirs provided access to water to citizens residing further away from the main waterways.

Most Teotihuacan buildings were constructed using a special building technique that utilized local materials. Adams (1991) described the technique as “ a kind of pudding made of chunks of porous volcanic stone (tezontle) set in a matrix of clay, gravel, and mortar (P. 223). Walls, floors and ceilings were plastered and then polished to achieve a gloss. Further inspection of building materials prevailing at the archeological site reveals a lot about the catastrophic events that marked the end of the city as well as possible ecological issues that followed its development.

Copious amounts of wood were utilized for the construction of various building elements of the structures. The researchers Margain (1971) and Marquina (1964) stated that due to amounts of wood used for the construction, fire hazard must have been very high (as cited in Adams 1991). As the evidence of those theories serves a blanket of ash found in most parts of central zone of the city, resulting from a huge fire at the time of its final destruction. Millon, on the other hand, speculated that a high demand for wood helped the demise of Teotihuacan leading to massive deforestation and eventually to erosion of agricultural soils (cited by Adams 1991). However, some recent researchers that invested more effort into studying the use of wood in Teotihuacan debated with Millon’s theory. Carmen

Cristina Adriano-Moràn and Emily McClung de Tapia analyzed the use of sixteen trees and shrubs characteristic for the Teotihuacan Valley based on charcoal recovered from different archaeological excavations and stated that, “ the analysis of the data shows a pattern of continuity in the utilization of taxa throughout the occupation” (2008). Their study concluded that a certain level of deforestation due to the use of wood might have occurred in various times in the city’s history, but since all types of trees were utilized at all times, it is likely that deforestation was partial, with patches of natural vegetation remaining.

Most solid data about agriculture in the Basin of Mexico relates to the Aztec rule in the sixteenth century. However, based on evidence of post-Teotihuacan agricultural practices, as well as circumstantial archeological evidence from the site itself, much can be reconstructed. It is well known that the irrigation played an important role in sustaining urban centers it the Basin of Mexico in pre-Columbian times. We already discussed convincing evidence about its importance for Teotihuacan. The orientation of the city in relation to the springs and the San Juan River tributaries strongly suggested the importance of irrigation for agricultural subsistence on top of floodwater management and water supply. Despite little direct evidence, there is a general agreement between the archeologists that irrigation made an important aspect of agricultural production in Teotihuacan Valley. There is, however, a debate about its scale. Among the researchers who discovered conclusive evidence of irrigation in Teotihuacan was Charlton (1977, 1990), who excavated canals of an irrigation system in the parts Teotihuacan Valley (cited by de Tapia 2000).

Most of investigators of Teotihuacan do not consider agriculture as the main economic activity that sustained its population. Pasztory (1997) considered the whole agglomeration of Mesoamerican cultures, at least at the time of Spanish conquest, as a predominantly one big market civilization (P. 40). There are reasons to believe that situation was very much the same at the peak of Teotihuacan. The region is placed in a temperate zone with 12 to 18°C and 500 to 800 mm of annual precipitation. In the Aztec times, cacao beans, that require tropical climate to grow, were used as a currency. To satisfy the demand, merchants had to import cacao beans from as far as Veracruz or Guatemala. William Sanders (1979) even considered the remote Kaminaljuyu site in Guatemala as a possible outpost for merchants of Teotihuacan (cited in Pasztory, P. 38). Theories of such long-distance commerce were confirmed when the archeological site of Matacapan was determined to be a Teotihuacan settlement (Pasztory 1997). Among very likely trade items imported to Teotihuacan were quetzal feathers, cotton, marine shells and various rare tropical goods. Sanders thought that the commerce of the city was based on local, but also on long-distance traders. Such merchants were known in the Aztec culture as pochteca, rich and semi-independent traders. Long distance traders in the Aztec empire were also employed to do work for state, diplomacy as well as espionage. It is unknown if Teotihuacan traders were anything like pochteca, but intensive long-distance trade was definitely present. Millon (1992) considered Teotihuacan commerce to be closely connected with the city’s role of a religious center (in Pasztory 1997, P. 40). A successful combination of pilgrimage and market activities was well documented in the Aztec times and remains in many

indigenous Mesoamerican communities to this day.

The social structure of Teotihuacan was relatively complicated - Millon (1981) distinguished several social classes (cited in Adams 1991). Farmers lived in and around the city and made a large segment of its population. Craft specialists made 5 to 10 percent of the population. Another considerable social group were foreigners - at least two barrios were designated for outsiders settled in the city. One was especially reserved for people from Oaxaca. Professions from the areas of religion, politics and warfare were reserved only for the Teotihuacan elite. Another possible elite profession was the long distance trade.

Relations between classes can only be assumed based on the depictions and murals. There was likely a huge social distance between the elites and the rest of society. There is a noticeable lack of scenes that depict specific individuals. Cowgill (1997) noticed that people were shown subordinated to deities, but not to other human beings, and drew a conclusion:” this has implications about the political system, or about how the system was represented, but it also suggests something about socialization of children and about preferred character traits.” Only rare murals, like the scenes from Tepantitla, show humans in free and playful poses. People are usually depicted in full clothing, with social insignia that often cover their faces, suggesting that individual freedom played little if any role in the Teotihuacan society. Cowgill also noted that so far no image has been discovered showing any sign of social resistance or unrest (1997).

Religion played a major role in the life of Teotihuacans and it can hardly be differentiated from the state. However, Pasztory (1992) argued that much of

rural religious practices existed within the city (cited in Cowgill 1997). Such practices were distinct from the state religion and were tolerated by the authorities. They were directed towards private, domestic and family matters. Among the objects likely to have been used in those rituals are stone masks, composite censers, and simple incense burners called “ candeleros”.

The state religion mainly focused on several important deities that represented the interests of the state. Among them were the Feathered Serpent, various Gods of the Underworld, and the Storm God, who is also the War God. All major deities had multiple aspects and in their depictions it is often not easy to recognize which picture depicts which god.

Precise organizational characteristics of Teotihuacan state are still unclear. Two structures – The Ciudadela and the Great Compound are quite unique and authors like Cogwill speculated they might have served as quarters for the ruler, he wrote that Ciudadela seemed like “ it was designed to serve a ruler who could command great resources but was accustomed to operating with a small staff” (1997). Cogwill also noted that Teotihuacan might not have been monarchy but an oligarchic republic comparable to late middle ages and renaissance Venetian Republic. However, the formal characteristics of the state, its rapid growth fueled by immigration, as well the architectural undertakings strongly indicate the presence of a firm central authority, relying on military force which was, at the zenith of Teotihuacan’s power, unparalleled in the Basin of Mexico.

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