

David Carrasco, *The Aztecs:
A Very Short History*

Splendid cities before the Aztecs

In the centuries prior to the Mexica migrations into the Basin of Mexico, there were several great urban settlements, which became the centers of political power and sacred authority in central Mesoamerica. The most outstanding were Teotihuacan, Tula, and Cholula. Each had profound influences on the history and identity of Tenochtitlan. This urban lineage became evident when Mexican

archaeologists dug into the layers of the foundations of the Great Aztec Temple (1390s–1521 CE), beginning in 1978. They discovered sculptures, masks, and architectural styles representing a more ancient cultural fabric of diverse peoples, urban places, and complex religious traditions going back a thousand years before the rise of Tenochtitlan.

Even though the earliest shrine found at the Great Aztec Temple dates from the mid-fourteenth century, archaeologists found abundant evidence that the Aztecs had a deep cultural memory carried by priests, rulers, and artists who claimed descent and legitimacy from Toltec Tula (900–1100 CE) and Teotihuacan (1–550 CE). For example, two “Red Temples,” excavated on the south and north sides of the main pyramid, have architectural styles and murals that represent the symbolism of ancient Teotihuacan. And several prominent sculptures at the Great Aztec Temple are direct imitations of sculptures made in Tula, seventy miles to the north of Tenochtitlan, and associated with Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent ruler-god remembered as the originator of the calendar, ritual practices, and wisdom. These sculptures found in the heart of the Aztec city reflect Toltec era art styles that had spread far and wide to various regional capitals in Mesoamerica. The depth of this historical concern is reflected in one tantalizing discovery in a burial cache at the Great Aztec Temple of a mint-condition Olmec mask dated from around 1000 BCE. But most of all, the Aztecs turned to Teotihuacan, City of the Gods, for inspiration, political authority, and mythic legitimacy.

Teotihuacan: city of the gods

If there was one ancient city that attracted the attention of its contemporaries *and* its successors in Mesoamerica it was the massive capital of Teotihuacan (1–550 CE). It certainly attracted the attention of the Aztec ruling house and especially the two Motecuhzomas, Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina (1440–63) and his nephew Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin (1502–20). The first

Motecuhzoma, who managed a substantial expansion of Aztec landholdings and military domination, commissioned the building of a large ritual platform along the Street of the Dead in Teotihuacan, in front of the gigantic Pyramid of the Sun. Even though the ancient city, located to the northeast of Tenochtitlan, was already largely in ruins by Motecuhzoma I's time, the place was viewed as the true cultural and political hearth of subsequent city-states and peoples. The Aztecs did some archaeology of their own, digging up prized caches of objects (including ritual masks) and then burying them at their Great Temple. The second Motecuhzoma, believing that the city had been built and populated by giants, made periodic visits to the site to pay homage and draw religious legitimacy from the sacred ancestors residing there. In Mexica creation mythology, Teotihuacan was the place of the spectacular creation of the Fifth Sun, the cosmic era in which the Aztecs resided.

What impressed the Aztecs when they visited the site, even when it was largely abandoned, was its monumentality and its superb urban design, murals, architecture, and artwork, showing that these ancients had a ritual life dedicated to agriculture, warfare, ballgames, deities, dynasties, and sacrificial burials. When Bernardino de Sahagún interviewed Aztec elders in Tenochtitlan during the 1550s, they recited for him the great creation myth linking their own city and era to the dawn of time in Teotihuacan. Reading the myth today, we know that the Aztecs were talking as much about how they saw themselves as how they saw their ancestors carrying out sky-watching, prayer, ceremonies, and ritual sacrifices to their many gods.

The younger native scribes, listening to their elders talking to Sahagún, recorded a story that began in the mythic past, fifty-two years after the previous cosmic age had collapsed into darkness: "It is told that when all was in darkness, when yet no sun had shown and no dawn had broken, . . . the gods gathered themselves there at Teotihuacan. They spoke . . . 'Who will take it upon himself

to be the sun, to bring the dawn?'" The story tells of two volunteers who stepped forward before the sacred hearth where a fire had been burning. Two gods, Nanahuatzin (Pimple One) and Tecuciztecatl (Lord of Snails) prepared themselves for ritual self-immolation. The virile Lord of Snails approached the fire several times but became frightened by the intense heat. The Pimple One then came forward with courageous resolve and cast himself into the fire, his body crackling and sizzling. The other god followed, and the two emerged from the fire in the forms of powerful animals—an eagle and a jaguar—that later became the patrons of the two main Aztec warrior groups.

Then, in a gesture that was crucial to the Aztecs when thinking about the great ancestors of Teotihuacan, other gods sacrificed themselves in the fire and under the sacrificial knife to give life and energy to the sun. The sun was born on the eastern horizon and, after wobbling in the sky for a period of time prior to more sacrifices, it ascended the sky and began its long pattern of passages through the heavens and the underworld. The Aztecs came to believe that this cosmic event of *incremental sacrifice*—the ritual increase from sacrificing one individual to sacrificing many individuals followed by the rising of the sun—brought the cosmos they now inhabited into being.

Known today as "The Pyramids," Teotihuacan is the most visited archaeological site in the Americas. Visitors can see not only that it contained monumental architecture, including the so-called Pyramids of the Sun and of the Moon and the great Street of the Dead, but they learn that the entire city was designed as an image of the cosmos. In a special way, Teotihuacan's beginnings parallel a key symbol in the later Aztec story of origins in Chicomoztoc, for Teotihuacan had its beginnings in a cave. Excavations carried out in the 1970s showed that directly beneath the largest building in the site, the Pyramid of the Sun (the third largest pyramid in the world, next to the giant structure at Cholula and the Great Pyramid of Giza) lie the remains of an ancient tunnel, cave, and

shrine area that served as one of the earliest centers for rituals and offerings to the gods of the underworld.

Throughout Mesoamerican history, caves were valued as the place of origin of ancestral peoples who were identified with the life-giving forces found in seeds, water, and terrestrial beings. Caves were also “passageways” to the underworld, and rituals performed in caves could symbolically transport human beings into the realms of the world below. The cave beneath the Pyramid of the Sun was decorated and artificially reshaped to form a four-petaled flower. The Teotihuacan Mapping Project, a massive research program carried out in the 1970s, revealed that the entire inhabited space of the city was laid out by its planners and architects as a four-part metropolis, which conformed in various ways to the structure of the cosmos. The city’s hundreds of residential, ritual, and commercial buildings were organized into an intricate grid pattern emanating from the north–south “Street of the Dead” (named by archaeologists) and the east–west avenue which crossed at right angles in the center of the city.

By around 450 CE, Teotihuacan had become the dominant city-state of central Mesoamerica, populated by more than 150,000 people. Ongoing archaeological work at the site reveals that the prestige of this capital’s buildings, mural art, ritual spectacles, and political power influenced many cities and towns within and beyond the central plateau of Mexico, including the mighty Zapotecs in Oaxaca and the Maya kings of distant Copán in northern Honduras. Since 2000, new evidence has shown that Teotihuacan’s power to influence major political decisions and alliances extended to the rituals and architecture of the royal house of Copán. Its influence also extended through time, reaching into the minds of the Aztecs and other communities of the sixteenth century.

Although many parts of Teotihuacan were excavated in the twentieth century, it has only been since the 1980s that

archaeologists have discovered significant ritual burials *inside* its major ceremonial structures. In the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl archaeologists found a host of sacrificial victims with their hands bound behind their backs, wearing necklaces of human mandibles. Alongside these individuals were objects pointing to the ritual cults of fertility and warfare that remained the fundamental foci of religious and political life up to and throughout the Aztec empire. Work at the Pyramid of the Moon uncovered similar sacrificial remains, along with precious jades from the Maya area. At the present time, new excavations underway inside the gigantic Pyramid of the Sun should tell us more about the prestige, ritual life, and extensive reach of this “Abode of the Gods” whose style of life both haunted and inspired the Aztecs when they were building their own ceremonial precinct seven hundred years later.

Tollan: city of the Feathered Serpent

When Bernardino de Sahagún and other investigators queried the Aztec elders about their history, they were repeatedly told about a magnificent kingdom called Tollan or Tula where the great Toltecs had been ruled, before being abandoned, by a priest-king named Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (Our Young Prince, the Plumed Serpent). In fact, from the twelfth century on in Mesoamerica, a rich tradition of stories, songs, paintings, and sculptures concerning the inspiring career and achievements of Quetzalcoatl survives. Sahagún’s informants recalled that “Truly with him it began, truly from him it flowed out, from Quetzalcoatl, all art and knowledge.” In Aztec times, their high priests were given the title of “Quetzalcoatl,” and they taught their children the story of his kingdom as well as his loss of power and disappearance into the eastern sea and his prophesied return.

The sacred history of the Toltecs and Quetzalcoatl celebrated the brilliance and stability of a great city-state, which one text calls the “Great Tollan.” The Aztecs claimed that the “Tolteca were wise.

Their works were all good, all perfect, all wonderful, all miraculous; their houses beautiful, tiled in mosaics, smoothed, stuccoed, very marvelous." This passage sounds remarkably similar to Bernal Díaz del Castillo's dreamy descriptions of Tenochtitlan and points to the prestige the Toltec capital held in Aztec memory. Reflecting their own sense of purpose, the Aztec stories about the Toltecs celebrated the unparalleled agricultural abundance and cultural achievements that linked gods and humans closely together. All "the squashes were very large, and some quite round. And the ears of maize were as large as hand grinding stones, and long. They could hardly be embraced in one's arms." The cotton fields glowed in many colors including "chili-red, yellow, pink, brown, green, blue, verdigris color, dark brown, ripening brown, dark blue, fine yellow, coyote-colored.... All of these came exactly so; they did not dye them." This paradise on earth was peopled by the finest artists, featherworkers, architects, and astronomers who were revered for having invented the calendar and who aligned the city with the cardinal directions of the universe. And in the center of all this abundance, cultural creativity, and skill stood Quetzalcoatl, the great Aztec ancestor, who was "looked upon as a god. He was worshiped and prayed to in former times in Tollan, and there his temple stood; very high, very tall. Extremely tall, extremely high."

The site that archaeologists identify with the Toltec kingdom, however, appears much more modest in size and splendor than what the Aztec elders eulogized to Sahagún. Spread out over several hilltops in the present-day Mexican state of Hidalgo, Tula, while impressive with its ceremonial center of palaces, pyramids, ballcourts, carved friezes, and monumental sculpture, is dwarfed by the city of Teotihuacan, which collapsed several centuries before the rise of Toltec Tula. Could it be that the Aztecs were recalling traditions of urban greatness reaching back through the Toltec kingdom of the tenth to the twelfth centuries and grasping the urban image of magnificent Teotihuacan but calling it Tollan?

Cholula: the pilgrimage capital

Cholula, the third city of these great Mesoamerican precursor capitals, was still socially active and politically influential in Aztec times, unlike Teotihuacan and Tula-Tollan. This pilgrimage capital still contains the largest pyramid in the world and is located on a plain just east of two of Mesoamerica's most significant volcanoes, Iztaccihuatl (White Woman) and Popocatepetl (Smoking Mountain). When Cortés and the Spaniards made their decision in 1519 to march across the mountains and valleys to Motecuhzoma's Tenochtitlan, they learned from their Tlaxcalan allies that Cholula stood in their way. Cholula was one of the oldest inhabited cities in the Americas, and its illustrious history was partly due to its strategic location in the center of the Puebla-Tlaxcala region, which opened transportation pathways to more southern and eastern sections of Mesoamerica. Both Cortés and Díaz del Castillo marveled at the number of religious buildings it had. Cortés wrote that "it is the city most suited for Spaniards to live in that I have seen" in Mexico, and they compared it to Valladolid, Spain. What impressed the European invaders were the thousands of pilgrims visiting Cholula's shrines, temples, and marketplace. It reminded them of Rome and Mecca, the sacred pilgrimage centers par excellence of Christianity and Islam.

As with almost all regional capitals in Mesoamerica, Cholula was a compact ceremonial center with pyramids, temples, palaces, grand staircases, an acropolis, stelae, and murals. The supreme role played by its Great Pyramid, Tlachihualtepetl (Man-Made Mountain) is often mentioned in the surviving literature and is also evident in the archaeology. Well before the Spaniards entered the city, the Great Pyramid had been expanded to 1,165 feet wide—larger than any of the great pyramids of Egypt. Constructed over the course of a 1,700-year period, its cosmic significance includes the fact that, like the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan, it was situated above a natural spring, likely

considered by locals as a route to the underworld and the world of Tlalocan. Waters still flow from this spring in an easterly direction, and a small Christian shrine on the side of the pyramid has a well where modern-day pilgrims gather holy water. During its second phase, the Great Pyramid was aligned at 24–26 degrees north of west so that when the sun set behind Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl on the summer solstice, its rays illuminated a specific temple at the top—an epiphany that was visible throughout and beyond the city. Today an important Christian pilgrimage church dedicated to the Virgin of Remedies sits atop this great pyramid.

The Aztecs
The worship of Quetzalcoatl, however, was not limited in any way to the Toltec site of Tula-Tollan; it played a major role for more than a thousand years in Cholula's religious and political life. A colonial official, an eyewitness to daily life in Cholula in the decades following the Spanish arrival, recalled that in the early mornings of festival days, groups of Cholula's citizens and pilgrims from other towns came to the ceremonial city carrying offerings of chickens, rabbits, quail, copal, perfume, fruit, and flowers. This wider reach of Cholula is reflected in the great diffusion of its distinctive ceramics and its shrines dedicated to deities of other communities.

All three great ceremonial capitals, predecessors to the "Great Tenochtitlan," contain monumental architecture imbued with mythic stories and religious symbolism serving as focal points for socially stratified communities ruled by sacred elites. When the Mexica arrived from Chicomoztoc and Aztlan into the Basin of Mexico, they encountered a long-standing urbanized way of life, which was organized by Toltec remnant city-states competing with each other for dominance over the ecological and social resources and surpluses of the region.

When social scientists realized the time depth and geographical spread of urbanism in Mesoamerican history, they also began to ask larger questions about other origins and evolutions, such as

when and how human beings first came into the Americas and settled in the Basin of Mexico.