

their connection through trade and perhaps marriage alliances with Teotihuacan (about A.D. 1–700), a contemporary classic-era site and society in north-central Mexico. By A.D. 200, Teotihuacan was a full-fledged indigenous metropolis with a commercial empire that facilitated first the development and then later the unification of numerous major polities that came to encompass peoples as far away as the Gulf Coast as well as Mexico's southernmost regions.

By all accounts the city of Teotihuacan was unique. Vast yet urbane, Teotihuacan has no known precedent in terms of sheer size, aesthetic refinement, or political ideology in all Mesoamerica. At its height, Teotihuacan epitomized all the best of the classic era's sophistication. Legend holds that Teotihuacan (a Nahuatl term signifying "where the gods lived") was where native deities first sacrificed themselves for the benefit of humans. Pyramids built upon or enclosing womblike caves corroborate local creation myths about the societies who first populated the region. There was in Teotihuacan an intimate association between gods and humans, and certainly their deities had a major influence on the lives of the large number of people who inhabited Teotihuacan over the course of at least five centuries. Indeed, their pyramids, temples, statuary, and murals commemorate a near pantheon of spiritual beings. In fact, and contrary to practices elsewhere in Mesoamerica, religion outweighed dynastic politics at Teotihuacan. No longer is the city believed to have been an idyllic paradise free of strife and violence of any sort. But neither was a warmongering lineage-based dynasty the center of life at Teotihuacan.

Although the people of Teotihuacan were surely ruled by native kings, who at one point dominated a population numbering close to 200,000 citizens, they apparently felt no great need for permanent public display of either their sovereignty or their individual accomplishments. Rather, if they appear at all in visual or oral history records, humans are most often deity impersonators. In beautifully painted murals of Teotihuacan-like universes, miniature figures with scroll-shaped designs in front of their mouths representing speech sing in praise of the munificence of the city's gods, who provided an abundance of rain and sunshine, flora and fauna. While familiar Mesoamerican counting and calendar systems were known and used in Teotihuacan, it seems that most other sacred knowledge there was theologically oriented. Even their monolithic stone sculptures, temple facades, and ceramicware were fashioned after deities.

Prevailing in the pantheon were images of a rain god (Tlaloc or Tláloc) and a water goddess (Chalchihuitlicue) a sun god and a moon goddess, an old fire god, and, of course, the omnipresent feathered serpent (Quetzalcoatl or Quetzalcóatl). Most ominous was Xipe Totec (Our Flayed Lord), the god of spring and renewal, whose deity impersonator actually wore the flayed skin of a sacrificed human.

This pervasive interest in religion should not be taken to imply that Teotihuacan was without the usual top-heavy bureaucracy of rulers and priests, along with cadres of councillors, merchants, and artists. The city monopolized obsidian along with other valuable commodities that were exchanged within the extensive trade emporium. Not uncommonly, guilds of craftsmen from distant centers at Monte Albán or Veracruz were relocated to Teotihuacan, where they oversaw the production of exotic goods that were otherwise unavailable domestically. As expatriates they made important contributions to the heterogeneous culture of the cosmopolitan city. At least one major district was set aside for the enterprise of Zapotec artisans.

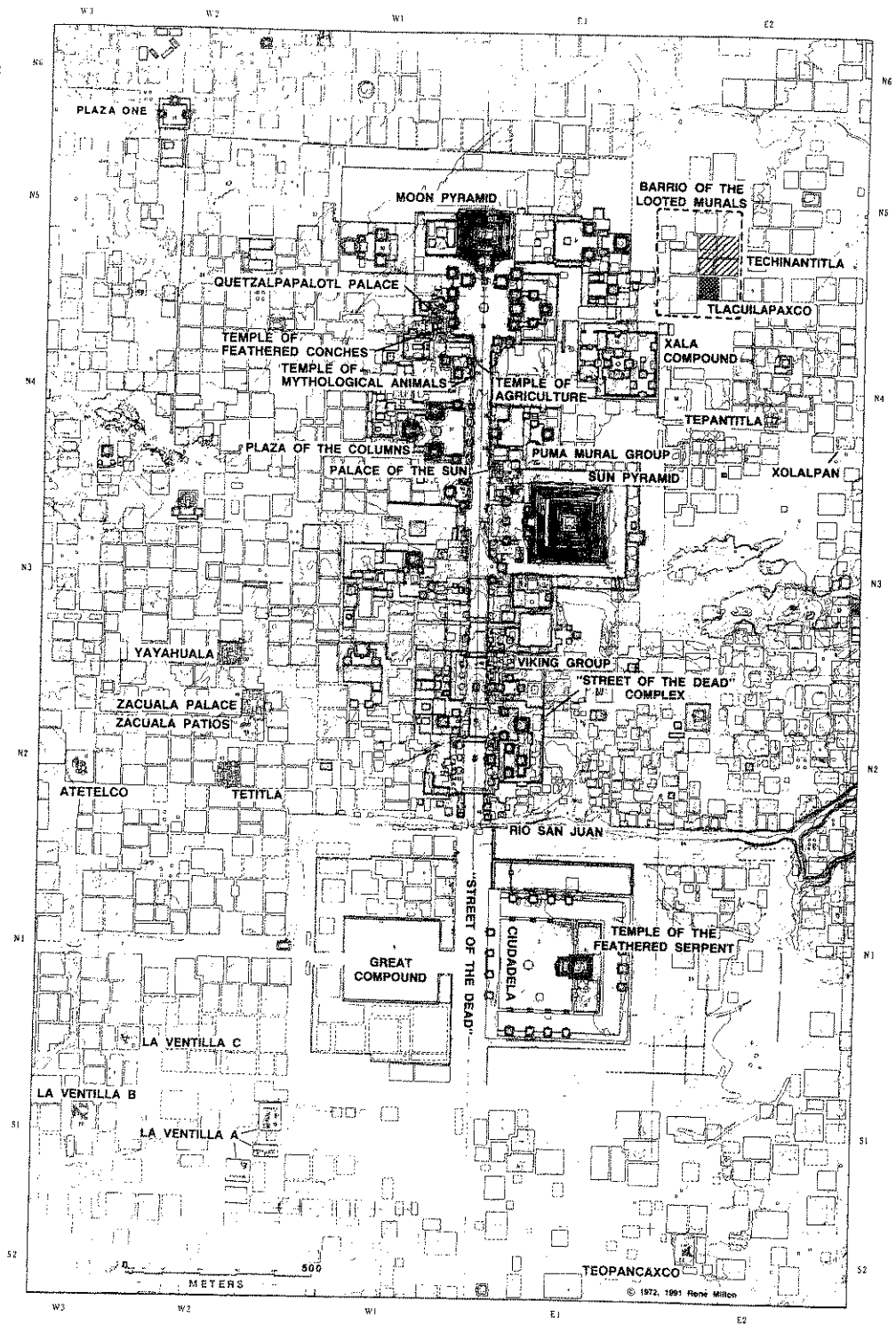
Of all Teotihuacan's contributions to Mesoamerican culture, however, the most lasting was that of urban planning and architecture. Many indigenous societies in Mexico considered the number four to be a sacred quantity. Based upon what became the pattern for many successor states, some researchers postulate that Teotihuacan was divided into city quarters. Archaeological evidence indicates that the huge pyramids of the sun and moon were erected first along a central north-south axis, following a grid pattern.

Construction priorities in Teotihuacan then shifted to residential and temple structures. Each subdivision was made up of large square apartment complexes, some comprising as many as 175 units. Low-roofed, single-storied, and windowless, these apartments had fabric-covered doorways that opened onto well-ventilated, well-lit patios, which doubtless served a great variety of social functions. Each apartment had stately columned foyers that led to spacious lower-level courtyards. The buildings' stone facades were wonderfully worked with low-relief decorative designs.

These apartments were likely extended family compounds or clusters of accommodations for kin housed separately around a single patio. We know little of daily life in and around Teotihuacan, but most individuals were certainly involved in farming and other such activities in support of the city. The average man at Teotihuacan is thought to have been about 1.61 meters tall (about 5 feet 3 inches); a woman's height was approximately 1.45 meters (about 4 feet 9 inches). Their life expectancy is somewhat generously estimated to have been between 35 and 40 years.

The city's rulers probably lived in a separate area adjacent to the temple dedicated to the worship of Quetzalcoatl, now called the Ciudadela. A palace structure often included as many as 45 rooms along with atriums and courtyards, with ceremonial platforms nearby. It is in the palaces that the most exquisite murals are found, telling reminders of the inhabitants' ongoing preoccupation with the profound relationship of their deities to the natural world.

The center of the classic-era city of Teotihuacan (Teotihuacán) encompassed some seven square kilometers. This diagram reveals urban planning around the central "Street of the Dead," or "Great Avenue," along with numerous palaces, temples, courtyards, and residential and manufacturing districts as well as the famed Temple of the Feathered Serpent.



Other motifs portray disquietingly fierce coyotes and jaguars, symbols that may be indicative of a militancy that would be institutionalized during the post-classic period. Other sectors of the city were designated solely for the manufacture of a plethora of items for trade and domestic consumption. However, the importance of obsidian during the classic era cannot be overstated, for at Teotihuacan at least 350 shops to work the material are known to have existed.

Shortly after A.D. 500, Teotihuacan's large population began to contract, and within a century key areas of the city were defaced by fire. What precipitated the downfall of a city of such grandeur and magnitude has yet to be determined. Whether directly related or not to Teotihuacan's decline, the influence of other quite extraordinary classic-era sites, such as Cholollan (today's Cholula), to the east, and Monte Albán, in the south-central region, among many others, also diminished over time. As with the great classic Maya capitals, these centers lost their influence and shrank demographically and territorially.

Over time, displaced groups, some migrating from the north, moved into the region and began to fill the void with their own still evolving and quite foreign social and political practices. Eventually, though, the outsiders would establish new capitals and dominions. Into what is known as the postclassic period, Mesoamerican society would never again achieve the general level of cultural sophistication that exemplified classical Teotihuacan or any of its contemporaries. Mexico's golden age was already in the past.

As had been the case in central Mexico since the beginnings of the Olmec civilization about 1500 B.C., a particular state might prevail politically and economically, but its preeminence depended upon the prosperity of a full complement of other polities for their trade, tribute (in some instances), and social alliances. For many, this was an advantageous relationship, jeopardized only when outsiders threatened the status quo.

The years following the fall of Teotihuacan were marked by cycles with influxes of outsiders who spoke different languages and had distinct cultures. No one knows the origin of these newcomers, called Chichimeca (Chichimecs)—a term of disputed definition—by the settled, more sophisticated societies in central Mexico. Nahuatl legends state that the Chichimeca came from Mexico's northern frontier, where human survival depended on hunting and gathering, sometimes over great distances. Characterized as a "desert culture," the Chichimeca subsisted with rudimentary material goods and by moving from place to place. Each group set out on its own, some already having leaders, one of whom was a "god carrier" with a deity bundle on his back. Of course, the Chichimeca also carried bows, arrows, and other weapons for hunting as well as for defense against marauders.

These natives might stay at a place for a few years to plant and harvest crops before pressing on. And following their calendar system—with regularity, apparently—they conducted their sacred fire ceremonies and "tied up their years" as part of the 52-year cycle described earlier. Their indigenous histories, called annals, are filled with stories of their trials and tribulations in the decades and

even centuries of their peregrinations as various of the groups worked their way toward the fertile lands in central Mexico. Centuries later, the great kingdoms of Tetzco and Chalco would exalt the qualities of the Chichimeca—ruggedness, fortitude, success—and resurrect the name to dignify their highest-ranking lord and king, who became the “Chichimeca lord.”

What distinguished these intruders from their classic-era predecessors was their militancy. Most notable among the intruders were the Toltecs, who established their capital at Tollan (Tula) a site some 60 kilometers (35 miles) southwest of Teotihuacan. The mythohistories tell of early Tula’s patrician ruler-priest Topiltzin, who was devoted to the worship of the peace-abiding cult of Quetzalcóatl. Benevolent and well loved by his subjects, Topiltzin Acxiti Quetzalcóatl, as he came to be known, was nevertheless tricked by the vengeful, ruthless deity Tezcatlipoca. It is said that, most unbecomingly, Topiltzin committed incest and engaged in other lascivious activities. Ashamed because of the dishonor he brought on Tula’s rulership, the king went to the Gulf Coast and departed by sea to exile sometime toward the end of the 10th century. In another version he was cremated upon arriving at the coast, then appeared in the heavens as Venus, the morning star.

These popular accounts convey little about the Toltec warrior cults, their actual warfare, or the practice of human sacrifice that was becoming commonplace. They do tell, however, of social conflict and factionalism, and help to explain in part the fall of Tula. As mentioned, when the Toltecs dispersed, some sectors joined forces with the Mayas and other central Mexico-influenced groups to establish their rule at Chichen Itza in Yucatan. Other Toltec descendants participated in the formation of the Quiche and Cakchiquel kingdoms that dominated the highlands of Guatemala well into the 16th century. The majority of the Toltecs, though, apparently stayed in central Mexico, relocating to sites such as Cholula (Cholollan), where they joined already settled groups and constructed one of the largest pyramids in all the Americas to perpetuate the worship of Quetzalcóatl.

It is the Toltec capital itself that exemplifies the indigenous beliefs and practices in the postclassic period (about A.D. 900–1150). Almost standard in Mesoamerica by this time were its pyramids, temples, ball courts, residential structures, altars, and monolithic stone columns or stelae. But at Tula the dramatic stone pillars are in the form of fearsome serpents and intimidating human warriors in full regalia. Even more awesome are the larger-than-life Chacmool, stone-carved humans holding basins to receive human hearts. Decorative motifs on temple walls portray images of Toltec military legions and their orders of the eagle, jaguar, and coyote. Skull racks and a painted serpent wall depict human sacrifice and cannibalism.

Gone were the reverential deity impersonators singing in glory of life and nature from the days of Teotihuacan. There was now no place for such worship at Tula, as was seen by the outcast king Topiltzin Acxiti Quetzalcóatl. These gods demanded more: War was the lifeblood of the Toltecs.

As at Teotihuacan, obsidian was the Toltecs' economic mainstay. Especially important by this time were the sharp glasslike points for weapons such as the *atlatl*, darts, and clubs, as well as the finely worked ceremonial knives that were used to extract hearts from sacrificial victims.

Toward the end of the 12th century, it is probable that internal strife combined with new waves of invaders from the north contributed to the end of Toltec supremacy. Tula had already been pillaged and burned, but its greatness remained permanently committed to the historical memories of its successors.

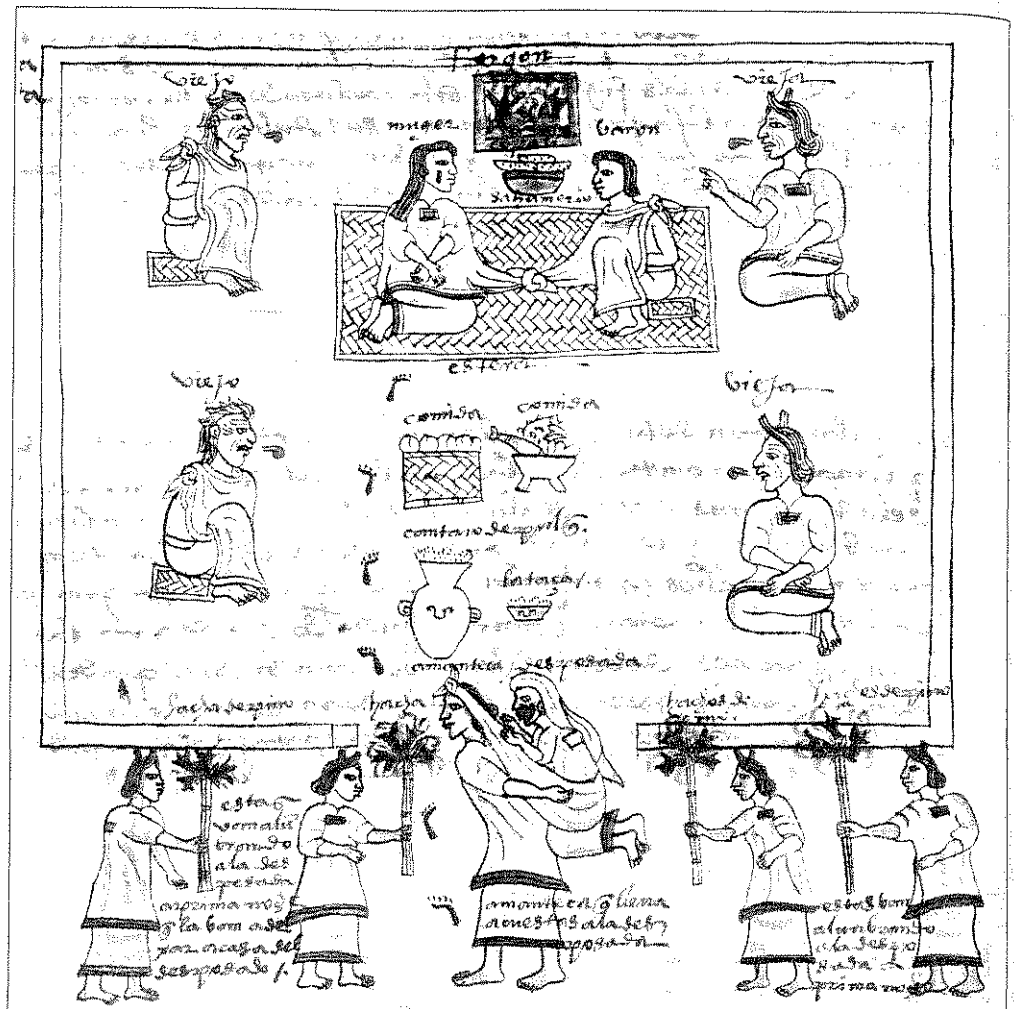
Although it was much influenced by Teotihuacan and its obsidian empire, the contemporary capital of Monte Albán in south-central Mexico was somewhat off the beaten path and thus in some ways suffered less of a chronological and cultural break than other such centers at the end of the classic period. Long inhabited by Zapotec speakers who independently and very early developed their own writing system, Monte Albán was first among numerous Zapotec capitals in Oaxaca. Architecturally, the Zapotecs' temples, platforms, and altars reflect a classic but somewhat modified *talud-tablero* pattern (an architectural feature where progressively sloping walls are interrupted with horizontal panel insets at each level), enhanced with elaborately worked exterior geometric designs.

As one might expect, most of the deities were similar to those at Teotihuacan and elsewhere, but with Zapotec names. Additionally, Monte Albán is known for the Danzantes, an arresting formative period parade of stone-carved wall panels showing some 150 representations of dead nude male figures. Perhaps signifying the conquest of former kings and thus serving as a warning for everyone else, the Danzantes are haunting reminders of the cycles of violence and upheaval that societies suffered even during the earliest years of Mesoamerican history.

Monte Albán ceramicware was as rich and varied as any, with many pieces taking the form of urns fashioned after local deities. Not uncommonly, vases, urns, and other pottery were included as funeral offerings in burial chambers, along with the immolated remains of humans. The Zapotecs' tombs, more than 170 of which have been excavated, are especially revealing of these people's worldview, for the chambers were lavishly decorated and filled with splendid gifts. Murals cover the walls in commemoration of their gods and the dignity of the recently deceased ruler. Moreover, written inscriptions in the form of hieroglyphs were ubiquitous at Monte Albán from formative times, although most of the glyphs have yet to be deciphered. Quite clearly, Zapotec intellectual developments influenced numerous societies, such as the Mayas in the south and in the east near Cacaxtla and Tlaxcallan, as well as other groups at their satellite manufacturing center in Teotihuacan.

Within their own sphere, the Zapotecs had established political alliances with another powerful group, the Mixtecs, in order to wage war against an enemy kingdom in Tehuantepec. Later the ties between the Zapotecs and the Mixtecs were secured through marriages between the royal houses of the two groups. Ultimately, as successors to the Zapotecs' realm, it was the Mixtecs who seemed to perfect the practice of marriage across political boundaries as a principal means of

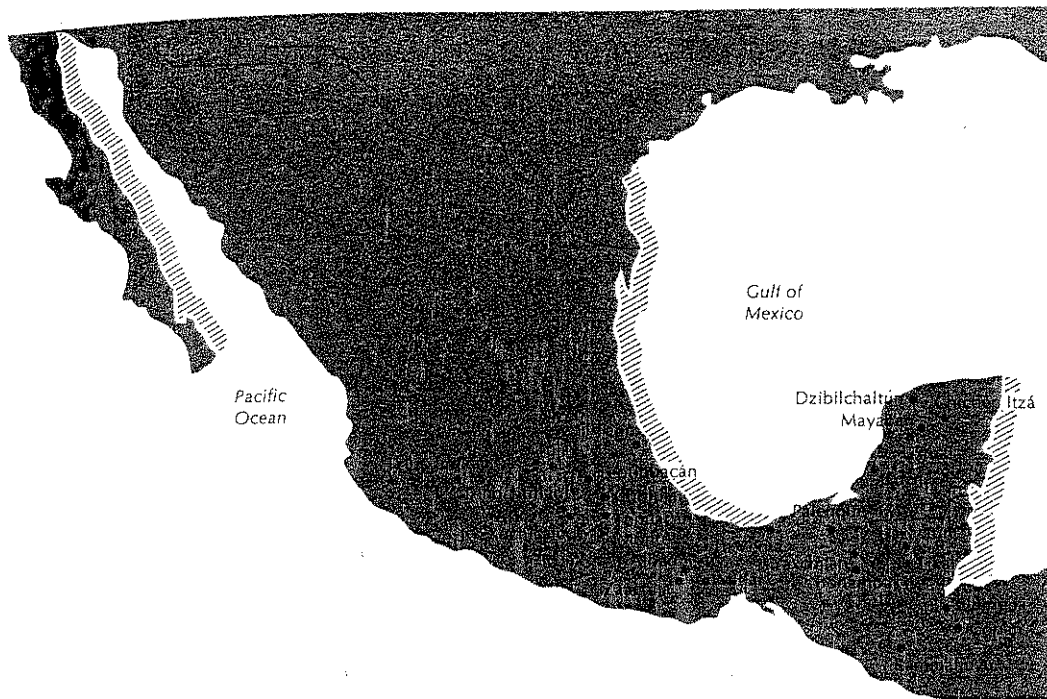
An early 16th-century Mexica Tenochca marriage scene. The bride and groom literally "tie the knot" as elders give advice to the couple. The marriage between the fifteen-year-old girl and the significantly older man was arranged by a matchmaker.



consolidating the area under each ethnic group's control. Once that was accomplished, lineages became so exclusive that, often enough, siblings married each other to singularize dynastic rule.

In postclassic Mesoamerica, Mixtec intellectuals—artists, architects, and scholars—established prestigious powerful enclaves in which they elaborated upon the legacy of their predecessors. At Mitla, for example, the intricate design and ornamentation of the temple complex were unparalleled. Their decorative art, whether in crystal, jade, gold, bone, or ceramic, was delicate and refined. And their codices were masterpieces in the manner of literary texts providing a history of their personal and political development. Some that have survived serve as precious, lasting records of Mixtec high society.

As with the ruler of the Mayas, the Mixtec rulers' authority derived from the culture's sacred books, written historical and genealogical accounts that typically traced back over centuries. It is likely that each dynastic house maintained its own records and used them to legitimate the lineage, keep track of time, and



Principal
Archaeological Sites
in Mesoamerica.

follow the mandates of their deities. Mostly pictographic, the images in these texts likely served as encoded mnemonic devices for a king, priest, or laureate who elaborated the records in a high discursive style at political and religious ceremonies. During these grand occasions, musical festivities in the form of song and dance were still traditionally a part of each auspicious presentation, and everyone was brought into the celebration in one way or another as they not only shared in the retelling of their glorious history but also doubtless learned about all that was new for their society on that particular day.