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From Teotihuacan to Tenochtitlan: Their Great Temples

By Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, translated By Scott Sessions

ANTECEDENTS

One of the cities whose characteristics have always attracted attention, even after being buried by the sands of time, is, without a doubt, Teotihuacan. We already know of the Aztecs' periodic visits in pre-Hispanic times to revere the ancient urban center, for even though it was covered with earth and vegetation, the general plan of the city, as well as the monumental complexes of the Ciudadela and the great mounds of the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon, had not disappeared. Moreover, if ceramic fragments bearing witness to the site's occupation are found here and there today, in Aztec times they must have been even more abundant and have caught the attention of new groups who saw ancestral traces without knowing with complete certainty who had created them. Thus, what was the work of humans became the work of the gods to later groups who came to know the site. From here to myth there is only one step: the old city becomes imbued with sacrality, and an extraordinary act will take place: the creation of the Fifth Sun brought about by the sacrifice of the gods.

On many occasions, we already have discussed how the quest to know more about the City of the Gods induced the Aztecs to excavate at the site. No less than forty Teotihuacan objects have been found in different offerings at the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan (López Luján 1989). Moreover, there is also imitation in the city's plan itself, organized as it is into four major barrios, and the presence of *talud-tablero* buildings and mural painting remind us of those at Teotihuacan. Furthermore, a sculpture of the Old God appeared near the Aztec Templo Mayor in the same position that a representation of Huehueteotl was found at Teotihuacan. To all this we suggest adding something of great importance, which is the purpose of the present study: the location, orientation, and characteristics of the principal buildings that mark or indicate the center of the city itself, the axis mundi, from which the four directions of the universe emanate. We will speak more about this later in the chapter.

After the European Conquest, indigenous buildings were destroyed. Teotihuacan, already buried after a little more than seven centuries of abandonment (except for minor occupations in a few places in the city) was not an object of this destruction, but rather attracted the attention of some sixteenth-century chroniclers who made reference to it. What is interesting about this is that these chroniclers became aware of the myth of the birth of the Fifth Sun in Teotihuacan. Thus, we read in the works of Bernardino de Sahagún (1995), Diego Muñoz Camargo (1995), the *Leyenda de los Soles* (1995), and elsewhere (see Matos, ed. 1995), about the myth that undoubtedly caused the tallest monuments in the city to be named the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon as well as assigned their dedication to these two astral bodies, even though today we are able to find associations to other important elements.

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In the seventeenth century, we have an event of great importance for the history of archaeology: Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, the learned Mexicanist, tried to excavate at the Pyramid of the Sun. Lorenzo Boturini has left us a record of Sigüenza y Góngora's attempt in his *Historia general de la América Septentrional* (1746):

This ancient hill was perfectly square, whitewashed, and beautiful, and one used to climb to the top by way of some steps, that today cannot be seen, for having been filled in by their own ruins and earth deposited by the winds, upon which trees and thistles have sprouted. Nevertheless, I was on it and out of curiosity measured it, and, if I am not mistaken, it is two hundred *varas* tall. Thus I ordered that it be recorded on a map that I have in my archive, and walking around it I saw that the celebrated Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora had tried to bore his way into it, but had encountered resistance (Boturini 1995: 49).¹

Along with Boturini's remarks, we must also mention those of another traveler from the end of the century, Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri. In his *Giro del mondo*, published in 1700 in Italy, we see how he visited the site and made several assertions that had no relation to reality, though one of them has recently attracted interest. He mentions that some of the caves found in Teotihuacan are artificial, that is, made by human hands. The traveler tells us:

Indeed it is certain that there where they were was previously a great city, as evidenced by the extensive surrounding ruins, and by caves, artificial as well as natural, and by the quantity of mounds thought to be made in honor of the idols (Gemelli Careri 1995: 47-48).²

In subsequent centuries, authors such as Francisco Clavigero (1780-1781, 1995), Alexander von Humboldt (1811, 1995), Frances Calderón de la Barca (1843, 1995), José María García (1860), and Ramón Almaraz (1865, 1995) would mention Teotihuacan in their writings. Almaraz, as part of the Report of the Pachuca Scientific Commission, wrote in 1865 that he had visited the site and made the first map using precision instruments. He also referred to topics such as the orientation and construction of the pyramids and was the first to mention the "rampart" (*muralla*) that surrounds the Pyramid of the Sun. Closer to our times are the works of Désiré Charnay (1885) and Leopoldo Batres (1906, 1995) himself. Along with Batres's discoveries at the end of the nineteenth century, such as the Temple of Agriculture murals on the west side of the so-called Street of the Dead, we must add his work beginning in 1905 to shed light on the Pyramid of the Sun. The

investigations initiated by Manuel Gamio in 1917, presented in his monumental *La población del Valle de Teotihuacán* (1922), and considered the first in modern Mexican anthropology, deserve separate mention. From this moment on, many researchers and institutions—foreign as well as Mexican—have carried out work in Teotihuacan, offering valuable contributions to the understanding of the urban center (see Matos, ed. 1995).

Now let us begin our study of the aforementioned topic—"From Teotihuacan to Tenochtitlan: Their Great Temples"—in which we will speak of the buildings that we think had the role of the symbolic "center" in the two cities. Although they are separated by at least six centuries, they will be joined together by a series of characteristics that we already have discussed in previous studies (see Matos 1994, 1995a).