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SACRED SPACE

We know from the study of religions how the founding of ancient cities was imbued with a sacred and symbolic character. Historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1979) is clear in this respect. He explains how the place where the new city will be located is always preceded by landmarks or signs that sacralize the place. Sacred space is thus validated and clearly separated from the profane, or other surrounding space, which we prefer to call "space of less sacrality." As Eliade tells us:

The founding of the new city repeats the creation of the world; in fact, once the place has been ritually validated, a wall is raised in the form of a circle or square interrupted by four gates that correspond to the four cardinal points. . . . The cities, like the cosmos, are divided in four; in other words, they are a copy of the universe (Eliade 1979: 374).³

Various archaeological and symbolic indicators allow us to determine how the pre-Hispanic peoples of Central Mexico adopted a series of elements to clearly distinguish what we have called the "center of centers" or the fundamental center of the city—inasmuch as the city itself, in its totality, was conceived of as the center of the universe, inside of which was established this space of greater sacrality which, in turn, was an image of the cosmos. These internal spaces of the city are those that we will proceed to analyze in Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlan, although it is necessary to state that in Teotihuacan we see two centers with more or less similar elements: the Pyramid of the Sun and the Ciudadela. Therefore, we have suggested that, given its greater antiquity, the Pyramid of the Sun was the center of what we call the "old city," which subsequently was moved south to the site occupied by the Ciudadela and the Temple of the Feathered Serpents or of Quetzalcoatl.

We find the following elements present in both cities:

- a. A landmark or sign situating and constituting the fundamental, sacred center of the city.
- b. A principal building erected on this landmark or sign, which acquires the character of a sacred mountain where the distinct celestial, terrestrial, and underworld levels of the cosmos meet and the four cardinal directions emanate; thus its character as the center of the universe.
- c. The same orientation of this building or sacred mountain.
- d. The presence of water. Inside this sacred mountain are kept the water and maize kernels that provide sustenance for the community, which we see in its *altepetl* or "mountain of water" character, around which the settlement is organized.
- e. The presence of human sacrifice and a place of offering where the principal myths are repeated through ritual performance.
- f. A platform surrounding it or the buildings that give it its axis mundi quality. These platforms are elements serving to distinguish the sacred from the profane or less sacred space.

Now, we will examine each of these elements.

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THE LANDMARK OR SIGN FOR THE FOUNDATION OF THE CITY

In the case of Teotihuacan, archaeologists have found a cavity underneath the Pyramid of the Sun that is thought to be what motivated the construction of this monument. This cavity—whether natural or artificial, since Federico Mooser (1968) considers it a geological formation while Linda Manzanilla (chapter 2 of this volume) thinks it may be human-made—constitutes the sign indicating the place selected by the gods. Here it does not matter if the cavity is natural, artificial, or even a combination of the two, but rather that humans “discover” and make or adapt the place. What is important is the dual character of caves in the pre-Hispanic world: it was the birthplace of peoples—recalling Chicomoztoc, with which this cave shares certain characteristics (see Heyden 1975, 1995)—and at the time it was conceived as the entrance to the underworld; thus the duality of life and death is present there.

In the case of Tenochtitlan, the landmark or sign is the well-known image of the eagle perched on the cactus, in addition to certain earlier Toltec symbols that, we believe, the Aztecs appropriated to legitimate the sacred space. These include the streams of blue and red water, which is nothing other than the *atltlachinolli* or war symbol, along with the presence of the color white in fish, frogs, serpents, reeds, and cattails, which are the same symbols that the Toltecs saw in the sacred city of Cholula, if we accept what the *Historia toltecachichimeca* (1976) tells us (aspects that we have already mentioned on another occasion).⁴

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLO MAYOR

The location of the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan in relation to the cavity doubtless means that it was intentional and motivated by the previously stated reasons. Although we do not have written documentation for such early times that would tell us about the character of the “sacred mountain,” it has always been suggested that the massive Pyramids of the Sun and Moon imitate mountains in the surrounding landscape. The characteristic shape of the pyramids’ four *talud* sections seek this adaptation to the natural surroundings. Concerning the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, we definitely can draw upon a greater amount of information from sixteenth-century narrative accounts and pictographs, such as plate 1 of the *Codex Mendoza* (1992), where the center of the city is the place where the eagle is perched on the nopal cactus, and we know that the Templo Mayor was erected there at that center. We also have accounts of the founding of the city and how the separation of sacred and profane space was achieved by constructing the principal temple in the middle of the sacred precinct. As for its “sacred mountain” character, in this case it is invested in a singularity consisting of two mountains: Coatepec, or the sacred mountain where the battle between Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui takes place, and Tonacatepetl, or the mountain where maize kernels are guarded by the

assistants of Tlaloc, who presides over this part of the temple. In this way, the Templo Mayor resonates two principal Nahua myths, in addition to being the fundamental center of the universe in their cosmovision where the celestial levels and the underworld meet, and from which the four cardinal directions emanate.⁵

ORIENTATION OF THE PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

The Pyramid of the Sun, the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, and the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan are all oriented toward the west. Evidently, the movement of the stars, especially the sun, determined the position of these temples.