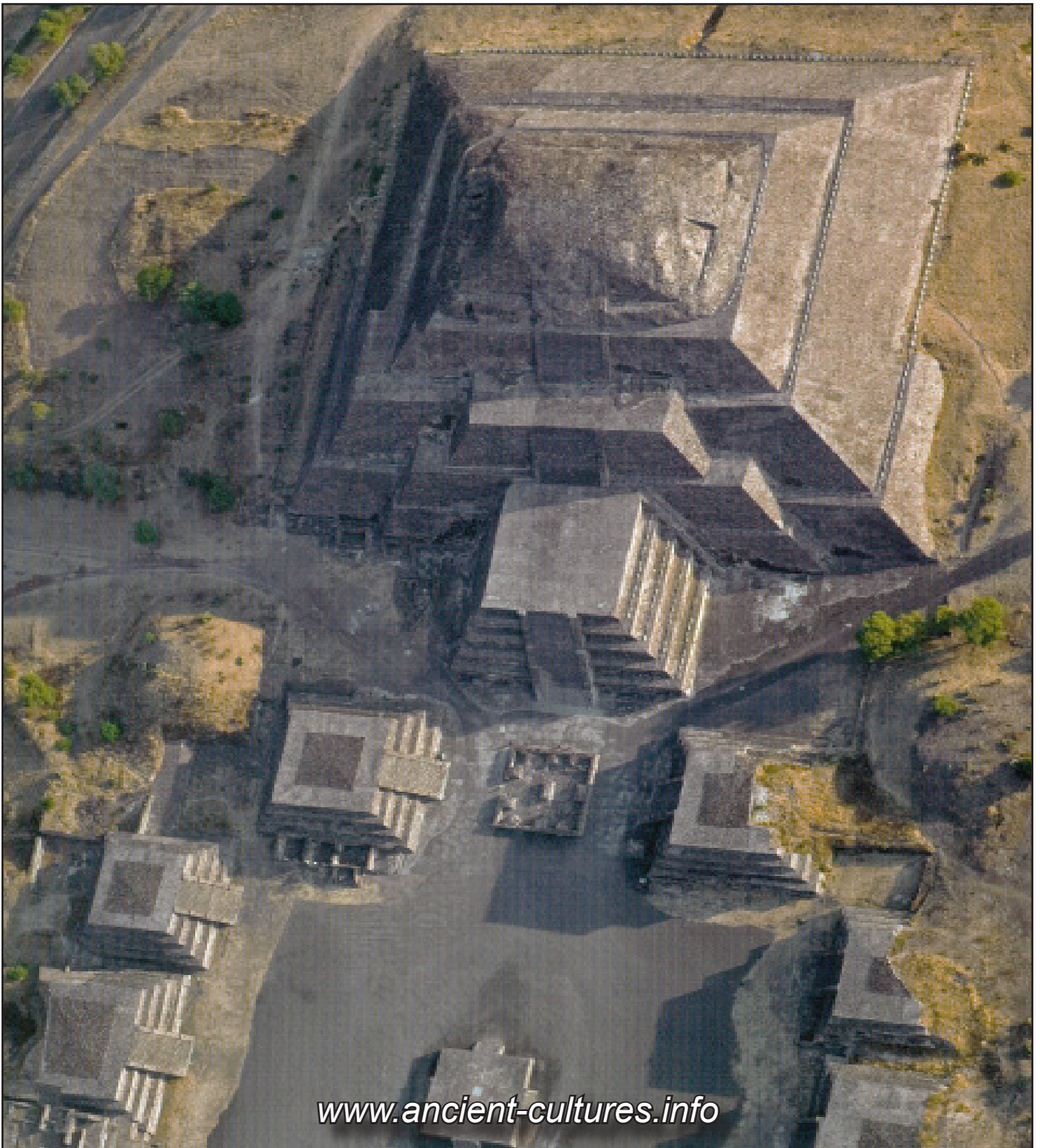


# Teotihuacan

## City of Gods





Many have seen the impressive images of the giant pyramids and assume that this extensive ruined city, located only fifty kilometres from modern day Mexico City, was once the capital of the Aztecs. However, that is not correct. When the Aztecs arrived in Teotihuacan, the huge city adorned with towering pyramids, was abandoned and partly in ruins.

#### ***Model for the Aztecs***

The Mexica, as the Aztecs actually are called, were so impressed that they gave this ancient city in their language the name Teotihuacan, meaning where one becomes a god or simply the City of Gods. Despite building comparatively smaller pyramids in their own capital, Tenochtitlan, located just fifty kilometres away in the middle of Lake Texcoco, the Aztecs considered Teotihuacan as the birthplace of their gods and culture, venerating it.

#### ***Geographical Location***

The Teotihuacan plateau is situated at an elevation of 2,300 metres, surrounded by several volcanic mountains. To the north lies Cerro Gordo, to the west Cerro Colorado and Chiconautica with Lake Xaltocan to the north and Lake Texcoco to the south, and to the south lies Cerro Patlachique. All mentioned mountains are around 3,000 metres high.

#### ***Early Settlement Traces***

The flat plateau has been permanently inhabited since 600 BC, with early traces of settlements dating back over a thousand years. Due to the early human immigration of the continent, it is speculated that even older traces of Stone Age hunter-gatherer tribes might be

found here.

#### ***Significant History***

The extensive ruined city captivates visitors with its monumental architecture, detailed urban planning, unique buildings, numerous sculptural elements on structures, distinctive stonemasonry, and mystical wall paintings. Fifteen pyramids were built in total, including three very large ones, indicating an unprecedented cultural development at that time. Since the builders of Teotihuacan did not know any writing at that time, their names and origins remain unknown. They were also unfamiliar with metal. So the Bronze Age did start much later on this continent.

#### ***Peaceful Coexistence***

As early as 300 BC, there was a large city called Cuicuilco a hundred kilometres southwest of Teotihuacan. It covered four hundred hectares and had a population of ten thousand. For a hundred years, both cities coexisted peacefully. Perhaps they benefited from each other through trade? The plain between them, populated by small villages, extended over five hundred square kilometres, with the Rio San Juan providing essential water for the fields that sustained them.

#### ***Long Flourishing Period***

Teotihuacan's heydays began around 100 AD and lasted for over five hundred years. The city expanded to over twenty five square kilometres, and at its peak, it housed up to 200,000 inhabitants. Around 750 AD, for unknown reasons, Teotihuacan was finally permanently abandoned. An eruption of a near-



by volcano was not the cause, but perhaps prolonged droughts and resulting dissatisfaction among the population with their leadership might have led to an uprising. This is suggested by recent research. In 1987, Teotihuacan was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to its vast size and several colossal pyramids.

#### *Detailed Urban Planning*

The ruling elite of Teotihuacan early on began detailed planning for their growing city. They opted for a geometric principle with a layout in a square grid pattern. The Rio San Juan, flowing through the city, was naturally adjusted to the grid and canalized.

#### *Crossed Axis*

Following the principle of dividing the city into quarters, the two main axes were laid out from north to south and east to west, along which the most important ritual buildings were constructed. Did this division have a cosmic or political rationale? The rest of the square grid was divided into neighbourhoods with various residential districts and subdivisions in many housing and working complexes.

#### *Special Ritual Buildings*

At the north end of the main axis were erected the Moon Pyramid and the Quetzalpalotl Palace, as well as the Jaguar Palace and the Palace of the Feathered Sea Snails. In total, five significant palaces have been identified so far. We do not know which rulers lived there, as rulers were not depicted in any of the many mural paintings.

At the south end, the Great Complex and the Temple of Quetzalcoatl were built. In the centre, a walled citadel with a temple and palace was erected. The Sun Pyramid, with a large ritual plaza and a priest's house, lay next to the centre of this super wide main axis. Why were there so many ritual plazas? Could it have been a theocratically governed society?

#### *Tallest Pyramid*

Measured by volume, the Sun Pyramid was the second-largest pyramid after the Pyramid of Cholula near Puebla, but still the tallest structure on the entire continent. This complex, like many others, was separated







from the rest of the city by a wall. What does this imply? Were there social differences? We will come back to this question.

### ***Sun Pyramid***

This massive pyramid was built around 100 AD above an ancient, important underground cave used for rituals. A passage of over a hundred meters still leads to this sacred cave. Approximately one million cubic meters of stone were used in a single construction phase for this super pyramid. With a length of two hundred thirty metres and a height of sixty-five metres, it ranked among the five tallest pyramids in the world, following the Egyptian pyramids in Giza. It was also the first major construction project in Teotihuacan. Today, five steps are visible, but initially, there were only four. In 1906, it was mistakenly believed that there were five steps, and it was restored accordingly.

### ***Ritual Cave***

A broad staircase leads from the lateral ritual plaza to the Sun Pyramid. At its top platform once a small temple existed. The pyramid was constructed using basalt stones and adobe bricks. It was plastered and painted on the exterior, although the plaster and paint are no longer visible. In 1968, the entrance to the ritual cave was discovered. Artifacts from both Teotihuacan and Aztec times were found here.

Archaeologists speculate that rituals related to water, life and death were held here, possibly even the first human sacrifices before the pyramid were built. Pyramids were typically dedicated to a deity, but due to the lack of surviving paintings, this cannot be precisely



determined. Experts believe it may have been erected for the Great Mother and fertility goddess Chalchuihtlicue.

### ***Moon Pyramid***

Construction of this pyramid began approximately simultaneously with the Sun Pyramid, but its construction took over a hundred years and was carried out in seven phases as multiple overbuilt structures and expansions. Around 50 AD, a small initial ritual building with a square footprint of about twenty meters was constructed. Two superstructures with sides of thirty metres followed around 150 AD. In the fourth phase fifty years later, a new construction was initiated behind it, with the first sacrificial graves.

### ***Further Superstructures***

Three more buildings on top followed, featuring an impressive talud-tablero facade that is challenging to describe but much better captured in the pictures. Ultimately, its base measured hundred fifty metres, and it reached a height of forty-five metres. The tunnels and chambers inside, where animal and human burials were discovered, are most interesting. So far, eleven tunnels with a total length of three hundred fifty metres have been discovered.

### ***Tlaloc or Chalchuihtlicue?***

Archaeologists assume that the Moon Pyramid was dedicated to the important storm and rain god Tlaloc. Perhaps it was also the great mother goddess Chalchuihtlicue, as her sculpture once stood in front of the Moon Temple and was transported to Mexico City in





1889 to be exhibited there. She represents the goddess of rivers and fertility and can still be seen there today alongside many other figures from the many different Mexican high cultures.

#### *Great Citadel*

The Citadel was erected in the centre and is surrounded by a two kilometre long wall. Its height prevents any insight, and there is only one entrance without any monumental gate. Which surprises us regarding its importance. Large platforms with broad stairs were built in all four directions. A cosmic reference is recognizable in many places in the city.

#### *Central Ritual Plaza*

The central assembly courtyard for rituals was excavated and could accommodate 100,000 people. However, the most significant structure here was the Pyramid and Temple of the Feathered Serpent. In the citadel, nineteen pyramid-like platforms were built, along with three large residential buildings, presumably for the ruling class or priesthood. They were



adorned with murals featuring cosmic motifs. In the citadel, archaeologists also discovered fountains and two irrigation systems for fresh and wastewater.

#### *Feathered Serpent Pyramid*

With a side length of sixty-five metres, this was a significant pyramid with a temple on top of seven platforms. Due to its paramount importance, this pyramid was adorned with friezes, faces and figures, all of which were once vibrantly painted. Archaeologists found that it was constructed in three phases, with continuous expansions and embellishments. Surprisingly, it was not plastered and was built from stone blocks. Here, the talud-table-ro architectural style with reliefs and decorative figures, characteristic of Teotihuacan, was first applied.

#### *Human Sacrifices*

The primary ritual pyramid was named after the sacred bird Quetzalcoatl and was mainly used by the ruling class for human sacrifices. The exact reason for this is not yet clear. Some scientists speculate that these were so-called



ritual construction sacrifices. Over two hundred graves have been found in excavations so far, most of them serving for multiple burials after sacrifice ceremonies. In one grave, over twenty skeletons with hands tied behind their backs were discovered.

### *Decapitations?*

Archaeologists also unearthed decapitated skeletons. Was the cruel ritual of extracting the living heart, later well known among the Aztecs, already practiced here? Or were these just ritual construction sacrifices to appease the gods? This is a possible theory, as the various sacrificial graves are related to the different construction phases of the pyramid and buried therein.

### *Sacrificial Burials*

In phase four of construction, a buried man with bound hands was found alongside various killed animals in one grave. These included two pumas, a wolf, two puma skulls, twelve different birds, six snakes, as well as shells and many sea snails. The latter had a highly ritualistic character and were also used as musical instruments. Surely, their sound held special significance during rituals, perhaps invoking the gods or calling the population to the ceremonies.

### *Additional Burials*

In grave one of construction phase five, four human sacrifices were found along with skulls of fourteen wolves, three pumas and a jaguar. In grave two of the same phase, twelve human sacrifices were counted again, two of them richly adorned and likely belonging to

the upper class. Warriors were also sacrificed, as indicated by burial offerings and clothing. The other ten were found decapitated. In phase six, seventeen people were sacrificed and covered in vermillion. Why there were increasingly more sacrifices with each following construction phase is still not clear.

### *Details of Sacrifices*

Most of the sacrificial victims were men of all ages and social backgrounds. However, some women and animals were also sacrificed. The latter included pumas, jaguars, wolves, coyotes, owls, eagles, hummingbirds and snakes. The extensive and luxurious grave offerings included intricate small human figurines.

### *Many Burial Offerings*

Grave offerings included ceramic containers, shells, snails, obsidian artefacts, jewellery, spearheads, knives and figurines made of various stones. Based on clothing remnants and jewellery offerings, it can be assumed that people from all social classes were sacrificed in these important pyramids.

### *Grave Offering Deposits*

Archaeologists were particularly surprised by some burial gifts. Several beautifully arranged obsidian knives were placed in pairs in a circle. Their elaborate, serpentine shape with many small serrations on both sides of the blade clearly identifies them as significant ritual knives. Others resemble a lightning bolt, symbolizing possibly the storm god Tlaloc. Several teeth with inlays were also interesting for archaeologists, likely serving as decorative elements in Teotihuacan.





### *Avenue of the Dead*

The north-south axis, where the Sun Pyramid and Citadel were located, was Teotihuacan's main street and about hundred meters wide. It was lined with countless ritual buildings on both sides, including many platforms with broad stairs and temples, smaller pyramid groups, administrative and residential buildings for the upper class. Despite all this information we have today, only ten percent of Teotihuacan has been excavated so far.

### *Xalla Palace*

In recent years, archaeologists have also unearthed a special palace complex. All significant buildings are located in the centre, including Xalla north of the Sun Pyramid. The complex consisted of thirty buildings and eight large plazas used for gatherings and various rituals. The excavation finds attest to the significance of this palace, including intricate jewellery and rare musical instruments made of bone and clay, as well as artifacts made of green obsidian, likely reserved for rituals and priests.

### *Planned City Layout*

The residential quarters consisted of smaller walled housing units for multiple families. These were arranged in groups with their own small temples, forming individual neighbourhoods. The over two thousand residential complexes varied in size and amenities, indicating social differences. They housed specialist artisans, potters, painters, construction labourers, masons, stonecutters, farmers and simple porters.

However, there were also complexes for the upper class, including priests, administrators and of course, warriors. The main construction materials included volcanic tuff, andesite and basalt. Stonemasons used very hard tools made of diorite and nephrite. Discoveries included items such as plumb bobs, polishing tools, rubbing boards and a palette with depressions for mixing numerous colours.

### *Special Residential Complexes*

The Tlamimilolpa complex, for example, consisted of nearly two hundred rooms connected by narrow corridors. Complexes like Tetitla, Zacuala and Yayahuala were slightly larger at five thousand square metres than the typical complexes with three thousand square





metres. They were adorned with murals and housed up to forty families. They worked in the same complex they lived in.

### *Immigrant Traders*

There were also neighbourhoods for immigrant ethnic groups such as Zapotec, Mixtec and Maya, all were engaged in active trade with Teotihuacan. In the northwest of the city were the oldest districts with a high residential density and temples from the early period. Here, houses were still made of wattle and daub walls and adobe bricks. In the southwest, irrigated fields with sparse settlement of farming families were located.

### *Who Ruled Teotihuacan?*

After learning so much about the impressive pyramids, temples and palaces, we come to one of the most important questions. Who ruled Teotihuacan? There are four theories that all could fit and might have alternated over time. Un unusual but most interesting concept. Was it an oligarchy of wealthy merchant clans? Or did a theocratically oriented community with a dominating priesthood control the population through numerous rituals? Other archaeologists see the possibility of a military power with multiple chieftains. Or did a god-like leader rule here, as in most high cultures in Mesoamerica?

### *Merchant Oligarchy?*

Trade in the monopolized commodity obsidian made Teotihuacan great and allowed the construction of many monumental buildings to demonstrate power internally and externally. The city's division into quarters, as well as several palaces and walled residential and work complexes, suggests a distribution of power among merchant clans. The neighbourhoods where various ethnic groups such as Zapotec, Mixtec and Maya lived could be another indication of a multicultural, economically oriented administrative structure of merchant families. Significantly, the numerous murals lack typical depictions of rulers. Therefore, it could well have been a trade-based oligarchy.

### *Theocratic State?*

Teotihuacan is strongly religious and ritualistic in all aspects. The many temples, numerous gods, huge pyramids and large assembly squares indicate intense worship of deities. In





addition to the solar calendar, there was also a ritual calendar with 260 days. Furthermore, cosmic motifs are evident in many murals. The priesthood must have played a crucial role, as their knowledge was undoubtedly essential for the construction of many sacred structures. However, recent studies suggest that the priesthood was not a ruling class but rather employed, perhaps by the merchant clans or the military chieftains.

#### *Military State?*

Warriors were depicted in various forms and lived in special complexes. Scientists suspect that there were different warrior groups distinguished by their totem animals, including jaguars, coyotes, eagles, owls and hummingbirds. Animals also represented gods and were depicted with so-called speech bubbles with clear ritual significance, resembling elongated and decorated tongues. Archaeologists refer to some figures and paintings, for example, as Coyote Warriors. Were there different warrior units here belonging to an ethnic group or merchant clan? Both could have been oligarchically structured.

#### *Principle of Single Rule?*

Following the most prevalent principle in Mesoamerica, Teotihuacan must have been ruled by rulers. However, there is no usual cult of personality with specific depictions and ruler-related chronology. Over hundred hieroglyphs have been recognized so far, but not yet been deciphered. They also do not indicate such a ruling system. Also, no royal tombs have been found.

Considering an assumed thirty rulers over the Teotihuacan period, this is surprising. There are also no names of rulers from Teotihuacan mentioned in Maya inscriptions. Only two names were mentioned in typical Maya style when Tikal was conquered presumably by Teotihuacan military chieftains. Please see our following article about Teotihuacan.

#### **History Details**

Archaeologists have divided the historical development in the Teotihuacan Valley into phases based on the style of easily datable ceramic artefacts. For a better understanding of the development of the Teotihuacan Culture, we have recorded the various phas-





es with their unfolding and cultural progress.

#### ***Cuanalan Phase 550 to 150 BC***

At this time, there were only small farming villages in the valley. However, by 300 BC, Cuicuilco in the southwest was already a growing city. Few excavation results for Teotihuacan are available from this period. But it can be assumed that people already lived on this site. Either their settlement traces are buried under the city, or they were completely destroyed for new constructions, as they obstructed the divine plan of the city.

#### ***Patlachique Phase 150 to 0 BC***

During this time, archaeologists observed a continuous influx from the regions of the Gulf and Pacific coasts. Teotihuacan already had up to 40,000 inhabitants and measured eight square kilometres in size. A volcanic eruption destroyed the city of Cuicuilco, located about hundred kilometres away, and many refugees came to Teotihuacan, leading to rapid expansion. A significant upswing began with the construction of the Moon Pyramid and the initial structure of the Sun Pyramid.

#### ***Tzacolli Phase 0 to 150 AD***

Grid-based city planning began, the Sun Pyramid was further enhanced, the Moon Pyramid was expanded and plastered, the broad north-south axis, now called the Avenue of the Dead, was laid out and small temples on platforms were constructed on both sides all along it. There was a rural exodus to the growing city, but perhaps these many people were also needed for the work intensive construction of the large pyramids.

At this time, the population grew to up to 80,000 and the city's expansion reached twenty square kilometres. An urban living style emerged around 100 AD. However, the houses were not yet made of stone. Later, the city did not really grow in size any more, but became denser with its growing population.

#### ***Miccaotli Phase 150 to 250 AD***

The city now consisted of four major districts divided by the main crossed axis. Many cult and administrative buildings were constructed along the Avenue of the Dead. Often, old structures were destroyed to build new ones and building material reused. The magnificent main axis was enormously wide with nearly hundred metres. The Moon Pyramid was ex-





panded, complexes with three pyramids each were built in the east and west and the Citadel was placed in the centre, with all previous buildings there being removed. The important Temple of the Feathered Serpent Quetzalcoatl was erected, becoming the site of most human sacrifices. Archaeologists found graves with over two hundred victim burials. The city grew to up to 100,000 inhabitants.

#### *Late Tlamimilolpa Phase 250 to 350 AD*

Teotihuacan's great heyday began. The city-state was now a major power in all of Mesoamerica and the population grew to almost 200,000 without the city expanding any further. Teotihuacan became the largest production and trade centre in Mesoamerica. Agriculture now played a lesser role in its economy. Adobe houses were replaced by stone complexes for multiple family clans. The city was built up and became densely populated. Some structures were even built into the super-wide Avenue of the Dead.

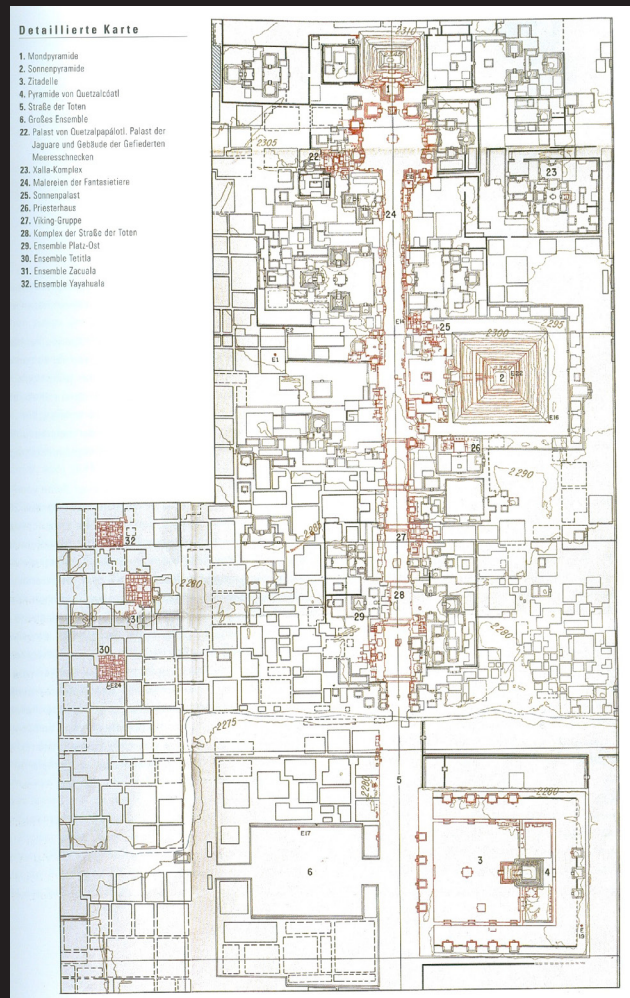
Over two thousand residential and work complexes emerged, surrounded by walls with only one entrance. Several families of up to hundred people, lived and worked here. Flourishing long-distance trade brought many traders from other cultures to the city. The cultural influence of Teotihuacan extended over a thousand kilometres to the Maya city-states in the southern lowlands, such as powerful Tikal.

#### *Early Xolalpan Phase 350 to 450 AD*

Teotihuacan reached its peak, with far-reaching cultural influence throughout Mesoamerica, alongside the mighty Tikal, to the famous Maya strongholds of Copan in Honduras and Kaminaljuyu in Guatemala and even to North America, reaching the Hohokam Culture in present-day Arizona.

#### *Late Xolalpan Phase 450 to 550 AD*

At this time, there were six social classes. Some archaeologists suspect that this was an oligarchy of various wealthy merchant dynasties without a king. They probably inhabited the Zacuala Palace. The upper class also included important priests and administrators. For defence purposes, there were different military troops led by chiefs who played a crucial role and inhabited their own complexes, such as Teopancaxco. Other ar-





archaeologists speculate that Teotihuacan was neither an oligarchy nor a theocracy but had a military power structure. However, none of these assumptions have been securely proven. Therefore, it is still assumed that Teotihuacan was ruled by a leader, as was typical in Mesoamerica at that time. Perhaps the deciphering of the few Teotihuacan hieroglyphs found a few years ago will clarify this important question.

#### *Metepc Phase 550 to 650 AD*

No new large construction projects were undertaken any longer. Important buildings, such as the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, were deliberately set on fire and sculptures were intentionally destroyed, but there are no traces of any external attacks. Was it a ritual act, as already known from the Olmec Culture? Or a rebellion against the ruling elite? Some scientists suspect the latter, as there were droughts due to climate change and the many human sacrifices no longer appeased the gods.

According to the then widespread belief, this was the fault of the ruler who had lost his important contact with the gods. This might explain a recent discovery of construction of walls in front of the stairs of the temples and pyramids to prevent ritual actions.

#### *End of Teotihuacan*

Around 750 AD, archaeologists suspect the final decline and abandonment of Teotihuacan. Only farmers inhabited the surrounding area afterward. For two hundred years, there was a power vacuum until the Toltecs started to control the region.

This was followed by the Tula Culture from 950 to 1100 AD. Then, from 1325 AD, a three-city alliance of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztecs, Texcoco and Tacuba emerged. Later, Teotihuacan became a pilgrimage site for the Aztecs who believed that their gods and culture was born in Teotihuacan.

#### *Summary*

It is surprising how little we know about this intriguing high culture in Mesoamerica. It is not surprising that only ten percent of the ruins have been excavated so far. Mexican archaeologists have focused more on the numerous Maya sites in the jungles of Yucat-





an and Peten than on Teotihuacan, situated just fifty kilometres from modern day Mexico City. Since the mighty pyramids alone are already a tourist magnet, we still do not know the real ancient name of the city and its builders or the language they communicated in. And their hieroglyphs have neither been deciphered yet.

Our second article on amazing Teotihuacan deals with its flourishing long-distance trade and economic relations with other high cultures such as the Maya, as well as life in Teotihuacan.

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