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Ritual Sacrifice and the Feathered Serpent Pyramid at Teotihuacán, México

Research Year: 1997

Culture: Teotihuacán

Chronology: Middle to Late Pre-Classic

Location: Teotihuacán, México

Site: Teotihuacán

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Introduction

Teotihuacán is an immense Mesoamerican city that flourished in the Basin of México between about 100 B.C.E. and 650 C.E. For much of that time it covered about 20 square kilometers, with a population estimated around 100,000. Arrayed for over two kilometers along the broad Avenue of the Dead are the immense Sun and Moon Pyramids, the Ciudadela complex, and scores of smaller complexes of pyramids, platforms, and plazas. Surrounding this are over 2000 sizable and substantially built multi-apartment residential compounds. The extent of territory politically subjugated by Teotihuacán is still unclear, but its influences are manifest throughout nearly all of Mesoamerica.

After more than a century of archaeological work, most of the ancient city remains unexcavated, and only a tiny fraction has been excavated according to modern standards. The Feathered Serpent Pyramid (also known as the Temple of Quetzalcóatl), located within the Ciudadela, is the third largest pyramid in the city and is unique for the massive stone reliefs and three-dimensional sculptures that once covered all its sides (see the Teotihuacan Web site, hosted by Archaeological Research Institute, Anthropology Department, Arizona State University, for this and other illustrations, at <http://archaeology.asu.edu/teo>). Important early excavations were carried out here by Gamio and Marquina between 1917 and 1922 (Gamio, 1922). After that the Feathered Serpent Pyramid received limited archaeological attention until the large-scale project directed by Rubén Cabrera, of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia between 1980 and 1982 (Cabrera *et al.*, 1982a; 1982b; 1991). Cowgill (1983)

published a discussion and interpretation of the whole Ciudadela complex, based on the information then available. In connection with Cabrera's project, Saburo Sugiyama (1989) reported the discovery of 18 sacrificial victims in a long pit just south of the pyramid. This strongly suggested that additional important burials were to be found, and in 1988-89 Sugiyama, Cabrera, and Cowgill carried out further excavations at the pyramid. Additional major burials were found outside the pyramid, and tunneling into the pyramid revealed still more. Results have been reported and discussed in a number of publications, including Cabrera (1998), Cabrera and O. Cabrera (1991), Cabrera and Cowgill (1991; 1993), Cabrera, Cowgill, and Sugiyama (1990), Cabrera, Cowgill, Sugiyama, and Serrano (1989), Cabrera, Sugiyama, and Cowgill (1991), O. Cabrera (1995), Cowgill (1992a; 1992b; 1997; 1998; 2000), Cowgill and O. Cabrera (1991), Serrano, Pimienta, and Gallardo (1991), Stuart-Williams *et al.* (1996), Sugiyama (1991; 1992; 1993; 1998a; 1998b; 2000; n.d.), and White, Longstaffe, and Law (2001). Remains of some 137 individuals were found at ground level or in pits dug into sterile subsoil. Taking into account additional mass burials of victims found in further INAH work in 1993-94 and likely patterns in unexcavated parts of the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, it is evident that about 200 victims were sacrificed at the time the pyramid was built, probably early in the third century A.D. Many of these were males associated with numerous spear and dart points and rather elaborate military attire. Others were young women, with fewer surviving offerings. Still others, mostly or all males, had fewer military associations but rich offerings suggesting relatively high status. Large pits both inside and outside the pyramid had been extensively looted in early times. There are scarce remains of rich offerings, including some ceramics (nearly absent in the unlooted burials). These large pits included additional sacrificial victims. Whether they also included any non-victims, such as rulers or high priests, remains unclear because of the looting. In any case, these discoveries revealed a previously unsuspected scale of human sacrifice at a relatively early stage in Teotihuacán's history and clear evidence of early warfare-related symbolism and, very likely, actual military activities.

We have worked for some years on a final report, to be published bilingually, with English and Spanish texts, jointly by the University of Pittsburgh and INAH. The first volume is a report of the excavations. One or possibly more additional volume(s) will report on the analyses of various materials and other topics. Much work for the volume of excavation reports was completed prior to our applying for FAMSI support. We requested funds from FAMSI for three tasks: work on final ink drawings, translations of English texts into Spanish and Spanish texts into English, and laboratory analyses of stable oxygen isotopes in the bones and teeth of sacrificial victims, as an aid in determining their places of origin.

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Results

We have still not completed final translations and editing of all texts, although a great deal of this textual work has been accomplished through FAMSI-supported work by four translators, Agustin Menchaca, Debra Nagao, Kim (Jilote) Goldsmith, Teresa Jiménez, and Oralia Cabrera. All but two or three of the ink drawings for the excavation report volume have been completed, principally by Veronica Moreno, with one by Linda Countryman. Both of these tasks are now at a stage where what remains to be done can be completed without further outside support. Results of the oxygen isotope analyses have been published in a series of papers by Christine White (of the University of Western Ontario) and her associates (Stuart-Williams *et al.*, 1996; White, Longstaffe, and Law, 2001). These analyses indicate that many of the victims spent most of their lives in a variety of places outside Teotihuacán, including some places where the ratio of 16O to 18O was significantly higher than at Teotihuacán and other places where the ratio was lower. This could mean that the victims were captives resulting from battles fought some distance from Teotihuacán, but, because of the uniformity and relative richness of their attire and associated offerings, I think it more likely that they represent foreigners in the service of a Teotihuacán ruler, especially as elite guards, a practice for which there is ample evidence in other early states. Further work, funded from other sources, is underway to get more information on oxygen isotope ratios in other parts of Mesoamerica and to combine it with data on strontium isotope analyses and other kinds of information that should lead to much better understandings of the origins and life-histories of the victims. These results will in turn have an important bearing on the nature of Teotihuacán sacrifice and the city's relations with other parts of Mesoamerica.

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