



Teotihuacan and Classic Mesoamerica

By Bennett Sherry

During the Classic Period of Mesoamerica, huge cities arose in the Yucatan and in the Mexican Highlands. These cities challenge many assumptions about ancient urbanization.

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Introduction—No Nile? No problem!

Most of the world's earliest cities have something in common. They arose near big rivers. Cities need farms to grow large amounts of food. Rivers make farming a lot easier.

Rivers were key to the growth of many urbanized societies. An urbanized society is one that develops large cities. In most places, urbanized societies first formed near major rivers. Take Egypt, for example. Big cities would not have been possible without the Nile. But some places do not fit this pattern. They developed urbanized societies without big rivers.

Mesoamerica is one major example. Today, this region consists of Mexico and Central America. Mesoamerica doesn't have many large rivers. Yet, some of the earliest and largest cities in the Americas developed there. During the Classic Period,¹ Mesoamerica became one of the most urbanized regions on Earth. The Classic Period ran from 100 CE to 900 CE.



A map of Mesoamerica showing the position of Teotihuacan and cities controlled by (green and black) or allied with (yellow) Teotihuacan. By Yavidaxiu, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Classic Maya

There are few rivers in Mesoamerica. The soil is poor. Yet, the Maya overcame these problems. The Maya lived between Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and Guatemala. They built reservoirs and canals which redirected and stored water. This water system allowed them to grow all the food they needed. In turn, this allowed cities to grow large. At their high point, the various Maya city-states held about 14 million people.

¹ Historians break history into different periods. They use different periods for different regions. For Europe, they talk about the ancient, medieval, and early modern periods. Chinese history is divided into dynasties. For Mesoamerica, historians use yet another set of periods. It includes the Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic periods.



The ruins of Tikal, in the Guatemalan lowlands. Tikal was one of the largest Maya cities. Once home to tens of thousands of people. By Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, CC BY-SA 3.0.

So what led to their downfall? The people of these city-states depended on the water system. That system was controlled by a ruling class of kings and priests. Then a series of droughts arrived in the ninth century. Once there was no more water, the ruling class could no longer hold on to power. It lost its control over the population. After that, everything fell apart.

The Maya people didn't disappear. Today, millions of them still live in Central America and Mexico. But many of the great Maya cities were destroyed.



The Dresden Codex, one of the few surviving Maya manuscripts. Public domain.

Teotihuacan: City of the Gods

The city of Teotihuacan was the largest city in Mesoamerica during the Classic Period. We do not know much about the people that built this city. Its people left no written records. Our only clues are the stones of ruined buildings, some artwork, and burial chambers.



Teotihuacan, facing north. The Pyramid of the Sun is in the foreground, the Pyramid of the Moon in the background. The Temple of the Feathered Serpent is just off-screen at the bottom of the photo. By JOMA-MAC, CC BY-SA 3.0.

By the fifth century CE, Teotihuacan was home to 200,000 people. It was one of the largest cities in the world at the time.

The people of the city built three large pyramids. Today, these are still standing. One is called the Pyramid of the Sun. It is the world's third-largest pyramid. Its top may once have been a temple to the god of fire. Another is called the Pyramid of the Moon. The Pyramid of the Moon contains burial chambers filled with statues alongside the bones of humans and animals. The third is the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, which was a center of Teotihuacan's social life.



(From left to right) The Pyramid of the Sun, Pyramid of the Moon, and the plaza of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. Left: From the Minneapolis College of Art and Design Library, CC BY 2.0. Middle: By Ricardo David Sanchez, CC BY-SA 3.0. Right: Public domain.

Teotihuacan sits in the Mexican highlands. The dry season there lasted eight months. The people of Teotihuacan overcame this problem. Like the Maya, they built wells and canals. During the rainy seasons, these were used to collect water. During the dry seasons, they were used to water crops.

Origins of Teotihuacan

We don't know much about the people who built Teotihuacan, but we can make some educated guesses based on information and artifacts that we do have. Teotihuacan was the most important center of trade in Mesoamerica. Its huge market was filled with goods. Its streets were filled with merchants from distant cities.

Why was Teotihuacan such a major trading center? Obsidian. Obsidian is a black volcanic glass. It was used for making tools and weapons. Because there was little metalworking in Mesoamerica, obsidian was very important. Teotihuacan controlled most of the obsidian in the region.

There may have been another reason Teotihuacan grew so large. It may have been an important religious site.

People from all over Mesoamerica moved to Teotihuacan. Many arrived as enslaved prisoners of war.

Teotihuacan society was divided into upper and lower classes. Large palaces were built around the pyramids. There were thousands of smaller apartments around the city. These housed the city's workers.



An obsidian blade from Teotihuacan. By Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 3.0.



The Palace of Quetzalpapalotl, in Teotihuacan, built in the fifth or sixth century CE. It was rediscovered by archeologists in 1962 and restored by the Mexican government in 2011. By Jarek Tuszynski, CC BY 4.0.

Teotihuacan may have been the center of a huge empire. It may have conquered several of the Maya city-states. But there is no way to be sure. Not enough records of those times remain.



*A view of Teotihuacan showing the Avenue of the Dead leading to the Pyramid of the Moon.
By Ricardo David Sanchez, CC BY-SA 3.0.*

Mystery of collapse

Teotihuacan fell around 550 CE. The fall came after a huge fire. The fire destroyed much of the city. Its cause is uncertain.

A fire alone generally doesn't mean a society's end. So, the reason for Teotihuacan's fall remains a mystery. Some scholars blame foreign invaders. Others believe the city became less important as trade lessened. Some believe there was an uprising of the people against the ruling class. Others say Teotihuacan fell because of drought. They believe it began to rain so little the city could not feed its people.

Even after its fall, the influence of Teotihuacan lived on. The Aztecs based many of their buildings on what they found in Teotihuacan. Their religion was influenced by Teotihuacan too.

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