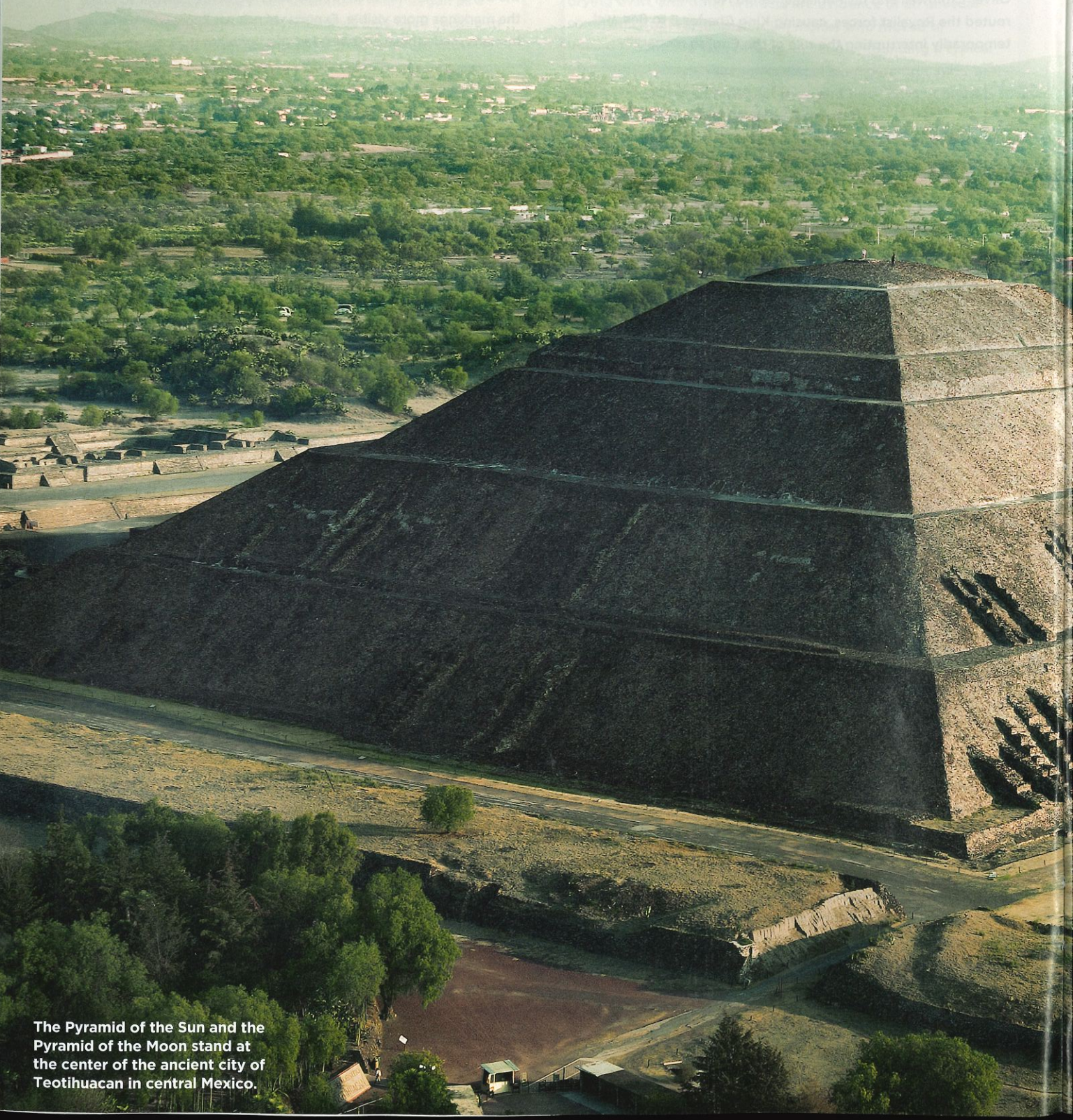


LIFE IN THE CITY OF

Inside the neighborhoods of Teotihuacan, Mesoamerica's first great metropolis

by **ZACH ZORICH**



The Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon stand at the center of the ancient city of Teotihuacan in central Mexico.

THE GODS





WHEN POPOCATEPETL, a volcano overlooking the southern Valley of Mexico, erupted in the first century A.D., it blanketed nearby cities and farmlands with thick layers of ash. The cataclysm forced people to abandon their homes in search of arable land. Many of those fleeing the consequences of the eruption eventually made their way to the Teotihuacan Valley, 70 miles north of the volcano, where there were only a few scattered farming villages. Here, over roughly a century following the eruption, these refugees and their descendants laid out an urban grid, dug an extensive irrigation network, and built the center of what would become, for a time, the largest city in Mesoamerica, known today as Teotihuacan. The most politically and economically powerful center in the ancient Americas until the Aztecs forged their

empire hundreds of years later, Teotihuacan owed its existence to the disaster of Popocatepetl's eruption. "The city itself didn't exist before the movement of fleeing people," says Linda Manzanilla, an archaeologist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico who has been excavating in Teotihuacan for four decades. She and her colleagues estimate that at its peak around A.D. 400, some 100,000 people called the city home.

Mesoamericans first began to live in urban centers around 1000 B.C., and by the time Teotihuacan was founded, a number of cities of up to 20,000 inhabitants flourished in what are now Mexico and Central America. But uniquely among the major ancient cities of the New World, Teotihuacan was a centrally planned, multiethnic settlement from its earliest days. The city was organized around a broad central avenue now called the Street of the Dead, along which residents built three towering ceremonial platforms that would become known as the Pyramids of the Sun, Moon, and Feathered Serpent. For more than 100 years, archaeologists digging in and around these structures have unearthed shell ornaments and stone and ceramic figures, as well as murals depicting rituals and mythic events. Most of the city's residents lived in large standardized apartment blocks, and artifacts show that people came from all over Mexico to trade with the Teotihuacanos. Monuments in Maya cities as far away as present-day Honduras record events that show that the people of Teotihuacan wielded political influence over much of Mesoamerica.

Today, Teotihuacan's monuments attract legions of tourists, but most of the city's streets and buildings remain hidden beneath centuries of accumulated soil. Archaeologists are now working in several of the great city's neighborhoods, each of



which had its own character. Excavations in three different districts—a well-appointed noble quarter, a thriving middle-class immigrant enclave, and a working-class neighborhood whose inhabitants plied a trade that was vital to the city's economy—are revealing what life was like for the people who made their fortunes in a city that went from being a safe haven for refugees fleeing a natural disaster to a vibrant cosmopolitan center. They are also showing how the tensions between the people and their rulers may have eventually spelled the massive city's end.

SEVERAL HUNDRED YARDS west of the Pyramid of the Sun, a team led by University of California, Riverside, archaeologist Nawa Sugiyama and her father, Saburo Sugiyama, of Arizona State University, is excavating a district known since the nineteenth century as the Plaza of the Columns. It was named for a set of stone columns that have since disappeared. The subtle rise and fall of the ground surface here conceals the remains of buildings that were once home to some of Teotihuacan's wealthiest citizens.

The Sugiyamas and their team have unearthed three buildings in the Plaza of the Columns. In one, they have discovered a cache of tools fashioned from human bone. "This is the first time I've seen anything like this," says Nawa Sugiyama. According to the Sugiyamas and their codirector, National Autonomous University of Mexico archaeologist Veronica



A 20-inch-tall standing human figure made of greenstone (left) and a 15-inch-long incised shell ornament (right) depicting a warrior or hunter were discovered inside Teotihuacan's Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent.

Ortega, such tools typically had important ritual functions in Mesoamerica. Their presence in the Plaza of the Columns could be grisly evidence for the high-status character of the district. "Human bone tools are not for everyone to have," says Nawa Sugiyama. "They are very specialized." How the people who lived in the Plaza of the Columns used these tools, though, is an open question.

Near the building that held the tools rises a large, unassuming hill covered with prickly pear cactus that contains the remains of the fourth-largest pyramid in the city, after the Pyramids of the Sun, Moon, and Feathered Serpent. The team has dug a narrow tunnel leading into the pyramid, which they stabilized with sandbags and thick wooden beams. Excavations here show that the pyramid was initially a small structure, but at two distinct times in later years, new stones were added to enlarge it. At the center of the pyramid, priests, or possibly other high-status Teotihuacanos, left a cache of artifacts as an offering to celebrate the first phase of the pyramid's construction, around the same time as the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon were built. The cache includes an intricately worked obsidian blade and other prestige goods similar to objects found in caches at the city's three larger pyramids. "The offering highlights that they had access to the very same quality materials as the people who were orchestrating the dedicatory rituals at the Moon Pyramid, Sun Pyramid, and the Feathered Serpent Pyramid,"



Small pyramids are arranged around a plaza at one end of the central avenue known as the Street of the Dead. The Pyramid of the Sun can be seen in the distance.

Teotihuacan's Stone Faces



Stone faces

Aztecs ventured to Teotihuacan in the fourteenth century and gathered ancient stone masks from the site to reuse as offerings in their own temples. Archaeologists have since unearthed dozens of such stone faces, most of which measure six to nine inches wide, from neighborhoods throughout the city. Many scholars assumed the masks, which have holes on their sides, were used during religious rites and then buried with the dead. Recently, anthropologist Jane MacLaren Walsh and mineralogist Timothy Rose, both researchers at the Smithsonian Institution, made a close study of more than 100 of the objects. They determined that the masks



Incense burner

were fashioned from limestone and three other types of stone found outside Teotihuacan's immediate territory. They also concluded that the objects were likely not masks at all. "They don't have any openings for seeing or breathing," says Walsh. "There's no way a human could possibly wear them." Furthermore, their research showed that the faces were found on the floors of temples, plazas, or rooms, not in burials.

Walsh and Rose believe the stone faces played a role in everyday rituals, and were perhaps displayed throughout Teotihuacan as the centerpieces of wooden dioramas that have since disintegrated. They note that ceramic incense burners from Teotihuacan known as "theaters" due to their ornate decoration feature small terracotta faces as their centerpieces. Teotihuacanos may have used the holes on the sides of the stone faces to tie them to larger wooden "sets" that perhaps resembled later Christian shrines. "When you walk in the older parts of Mexico City you see lovely statues of the Virgin Mary and saints," says Walsh. "The stone faces may have had a similar function." Their meaning may be lost, but the stone faces were probably a deeply familiar sight for Teotihuacanos going about their day.—*Eric A. Powell*

For more images, go to archaeology.org/stonefaces

says Nawa Sugiyama. Those rituals were probably important public spectacles meant to be seen by everybody living in the city. However, Nawa Sugiyama believes the ceremonies held at this smaller pyramid were private, intended only for the eyes of the high-status residents of the Plaza of the Columns, who may have included Teotihuacan's rulers.

To date, no recognizable depiction of a ruler has been uncovered anywhere in the city, leading to disagreements among scholars about the way Teotihuacan's 100,000 residents were governed. Saburo Sugiyama believes that the massive investments in monumental architecture and public rituals suggest that the city probably had a single ruler. But based on the way the city is divided by its main streets into four sections, Manzanilla thinks that it had four corulers who each governed one quarter of the city's 88 neighborhoods. She has proposed that beneath those four rulers was a second class of nobles who each oversaw a neighborhood. Other scholars think that the way Teotihuacan was governed may have changed over time.

Regardless of who ruled the city, multiple lines of evidence connecting Teotihuacan with the greater Mesoamerican world, especially that of the Maya, show that their power garnered them respect from near and far. One clear example of the close connection between Teotihuacanos and the Maya was found near the entrance of the main tunnel archaeologists dug into the small pyramid in the Plaza of the Columns. A side tunnel branches off, following the edge of what was the exterior of

the pyramid in A.D. 350, around the time the Teotihuacanos were at the height of their power. Excavations in the tunnel revealed the broken remains of decorated pottery rendered in a style employed by the Maya in the Peten region of Guatemala. According to Nawa Sugiyama, these vessels were high-status goods of a kind that might have been used in feasts held by the most powerful members of Teotihuacan society. She believes this is evidence of an important diplomatic meeting with representatives of a Maya city, and may suggest that an alliance was formed at a time when the rulers of Teotihuacan appeared to take a greater interest in their neighbors to the south.

More evidence of this type of high-level contact comes from the building directly north of the pyramid, where a mural was painted in the same Peten Maya style. Its creation would have required Maya artists to stay in Teotihuacan for weeks or months, and represents a substantial investment of resources for its sponsors. The mural seems to celebrate an especially important relationship—but one that didn't last. It is being recovered in pieces, and it appears someone in Teotihuacan went to a great deal of effort to tear the mural apart. "It looks like it went through a shredder," says Nawa Sugiyama.

The mural's destruction dates to the late fourth century A.D., which roughly coincides with events described on several stone monuments at the Maya city of Tikal in Guatemala's Peten rain forest. Inscriptions on some of Tikal's stelae record the arrival of a warlord from Teotihuacan named "Fire Is Born"

on January 16, A.D. 378. According to one inscription, the king of Tikal died, or more likely was killed, on that same day. Fire Is Born may have been a kind of regent who ruled Tikal on behalf of a man named Spear-Thrower Owl, who seems to have been a ruler of Teotihuacan. By A.D. 379, Spear-Thrower Owl's son was installed on the throne of Tikal, founding a new royal dynasty. These nobles who traced their descent to Teotihuacan made Tikal a regional power that defined the next several centuries of Maya geopolitics. This era was marked by unrelenting warfare between Tikal and rival Maya cities, as well as alliances with others that shifted over the centuries. For much of that time, some Maya leaders depicted themselves in attire that imitated that of Teotihuacanos, another clear sign of the city's enduring influence.

ABOUT A MILE AND A HALF south of the Plaza of the Columns lies an ethnically distinct neighborhood called Teopancazco. DNA analysis of 116 people buried there shows that while it was home to some Teotihuacan natives, it was also home to people from nearby central Mexican regions, as well as from 200 miles away on the Gulf Coast. The neighborhood was built around A.D. 200, well after the founding of Teotihuacan. Manzanilla's excavations here have revealed that Teopancazco was divided into distinct areas for carrying out rituals, producing crafts, and preparing food. She has also unearthed housing for soldiers and possible medical and administrative buildings. But the main businesses of Teopancazco, according to her research, were fashion and fishing.

Manzanilla's team has uncovered large numbers of bone needles, pins, and handles from paintbrushes that were likely used to decorate garments. Archaeologists have found pig-

ments for body and mural painting and an abundance of semiprecious stones such as pyrite, green quartz, and onyx that were used as ornaments for clothing. Manzanilla believes that the nobles of Teotihuacan came to Teopancazco to purchase costumes and ceremonial headdresses that were important for the rituals that likely sustained the nobles' legitimacy in the minds of regular people. Murals unearthed here depict dancing figures wearing the sort of garments that seem to have been a specialty of Teopancazco's residents.

The neighborhood also functioned as a major hub for traders who journeyed to and from the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific. Analysis of the skeletons buried in Teopancazco showed that some people used their front teeth to work with fibers, part of the process of making fishing nets. Tools for



Fragments of a ceramic vessel made by Maya potters were unearthed in the Teotihuacan neighborhood known as the Plaza of the Columns, one of the city's wealthiest districts.

fashioning the nets were also found in the neighborhood. Fish and shellfish from the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Coast were unearthed, as well as the remains of crabs and a crocodile from the coastal region of Veracruz. Three

individuals had a bone deformation in their ear canals that is caused by repeated diving in cold water, suggesting they may have lived near one of the coasts.

While the residents of Teopancazco had access to luxury goods such as semiprecious stones, they were far from wealthy. Their skeletons exhibited deformities that indicate the people frequently carried heavy loads and performed repetitive tasks such as throwing fishing nets or spears. The neighborhood itself may have been ruled by local nobles who controlled trade and manufacturing there and acted as go-betweens for the city's ruler or rulers. Though they may have ranked below the city's highest class, the rulers of neighborhoods such as Teopancazco probably played an important role in Teotihuacan's political life. And they may have yearned for more power than the aristocracy was willing to grant them.



A pyramid in the Plaza of the Columns neighborhood, now overgrown with vegetation, is the fourth-largest pyramid at Teotihuacan.

AT THE SOUTHERN EDGE of the city, a mile and a half from the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent, lies one of Teotihuacan's poorer neighborhoods. Tlajinga was a center for processing obsidian, one of the city's most important trade goods. Teotihuacan lies within a day's walk of two important obsidian sources, and obsidian workshops are found throughout the city. Boston University archaeologist David Carballo excavated one of the apartment complexes in Tlajinga that was devoted to obsidian tool production. The neighborhood artisans were not producing luxury items such as the intricately flaked "eccentric" blades that are found in offering caches or spear points used by warriors. Their work, instead, was focused on making the standardized obsidian cores from which blades for basic cutting tasks were struck. In spite of the quotidian nature of the cores, they were an important part of Teotihuacan's economic power. Everyone living in Mesoamerica at the time needed obsidian to make cutting tools, and Teotihuacan controlled access to the stone in the Valley of Mexico and beyond.

Producing mass quantities of obsidian cores was an arduous and unglamorous trade. Nevertheless, people in Tlajinga lived in the same type of standardized apartment complexes as most other Teotihuacanos. "Everyone had pretty decent housing," says Carballo. He estimates that up to 90 percent



Fragments of a Maya-style mural found in the Plaza of the Columns are evidence of close contact between Teotihuacan and the Maya world.

of the city's population lived in these multifamily apartments. The complexes were square or rectangular and ranged in size from about 100 to 400 feet on a side, with living structures and workshops arranged around a central courtyard. Comparing the amount of living space available to families is one way archaeologists can measure inequality within a society. By this metric, Teotihuacan was one of the most egalitarian urbanized societies in the world at the time. Differences in wealth can, however, show up in more subtle ways.

Carballo says that fewer structures in Tlajinga were built of cut stone than was typical in wealthier neighborhoods. Cut

stone was more labor intensive to produce than mudbricks, and was likely more expensive to buy. The people here also had less access to lime plaster, which was used to waterproof buildings. Still, some luxury goods such as marine shells and semiprecious greenstones were discovered at Tlajinga, as well as a ritual stone face, similar to many others that have been found across the city. (See "Teotihuacan's Stone Faces" on page 28.) These objects demonstrate that the residents of Tlajinga had access to the same markets as the people living in Teopancazco or the Plaza of the Columns. While the lives of the people of Tlajinga during the peak years of Teotihuacan's power were probably good, eventually something seems to have happened that led the city's lower classes, and possibly the residents Tlajinga, to revolt against their rulers.



A mural unearthed at Teotihuacan depicts a priest attired in a costume similar to ones made in Teopancazco, a neighborhood where fashioning elaborate clothing was an important source of income.

THE END OF TEOTIHUACAN'S most prosperous period came slowly—and then all at once. Archaeologists have found that, beginning around A.D. 450, the luxury goods that were the hallmarks of the city's economic power became scarce. Scholars are finding it difficult to tease apart the causes and effects of the city's decline. The population may have begun shrinking because the city's extensive irrigation system started to fail, or the irrigation system may have failed because

the population became too small to maintain it. Traders may have stopped making their way to Teotihuacan because it could no longer meet their demand for goods, or because other cities did a better job of meeting their economic demands.

The city's decline was accelerated by a fire that raged through its center around A.D. 550 or 600. This brought Teotihuacan's far-ranging influence to an end. Nawa Sugiyama describes the fire as an iconoclastic act, targeted at palaces, temples, and other buildings associated with the city's ruling class. She plans to investigate burned buildings in the Plaza of the Columns, and hopes to find more evidence of what triggered the conflagration. While the fire ravaged the Plaza of the Columns and part of Teopancasco, it did not reach Tlajinga. "The very purposeful burning at the center of the site suggests there is some sort of rejection of the governing authorities," says Carballo. Linda Manzanilla believes that the neighborhoods' local leaders may have risen up against the city's overlords in an attempt to seize power for themselves.

Another factor that might have played a role in Teotihuacan's demise is that residents may have been steadily moving to nearby settlements. Excavations at the site of Chicoloapan, 25 miles south of the city, show that what had been a village of a few hundred people grew quickly starting around A.D. 500. According to Sarah Clayton, an archaeologist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison who leads the Chicoloapan excavations, by the time Teotihuacan burned, Chicoloapan's population numbered in the thousands. Whether those people migrated from Teotihuacan or else-



An apartment complex (above) was recently unearthed in Teotihuacan's Tlajinga neighborhood, where a carved stone face (left) was also discovered.

where is unclear. No ceramic artifacts typical of Teotihuacan have been found at Chicoloapan, indicating that the people living there may have been culturally distinct from the city dwellers. In any case, by the time Teotihuacan burned, Chicoloapan was a sprawling, prosperous town.

Even after the fire, Teotihuacan wasn't completely abandoned. "People still lived there in the tens of thousands," says Carballo. "It's rare to get complete demographic decline." But the things that distinguished Teotihuacan in its heyday were gone. The distinctive apartment compounds were never built again. The city's influence on allies at Maya centers such as Tikal seems to have vanished. No one ever again built pyramids along the Street of the Dead. And no Mesoamerican culture constructed such a massive, centrally planned city until the Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico some 800 years later.

According to Aztec tradition, their kings made regular pilgrimages to the ruins of Teotihuacan, where they found farmers growing crops in the plazas at the foot of the Pyramid of the Sun. Teotihuacan was still a place that commanded awe and respect. In fact, the Aztecs regarded it as a supernatural source for their own political power, and gave the city the name it is known by today. In their language, Teotihuacan means "birthplace of the gods." ■

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Worked pieces of obsidian called cores were processed by artisans in Tlajinga. The cores were used to make cutting tools and were a source of Teotihuacan's prosperity.