

*Mountain of Heaven,
Mountain of Earth:
The Great Pyramid of
Cholula as Sacred Landscape*

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The pre-Columbian cultures of Mesoamerica practiced a form of geomancy in which elements of the natural environment attained supernatural significance and were used to structure the cultural landscape. Thus caves, springs, mountains, and other natural formations were transformed into "cosmo-magical symbols" (Wheatley 1971) relating to mytho-religious beliefs. Caves and springs served as portals into the Underworld, whereas mountain peaks communicated with the multilayered heavens (Heyden 1981). Incorporating these supernatural phenomena into the cultural landscape served to legitimate the authority of the dominant group while harnessing the symbolic power of the supernatural. The creation of a ceremonial center that drew upon cosmological forces acted to focus supernatural power into the sacred precinct as an *axis mundi*, or pivot for the world dimensions around which all creation revolved (Wheatley 1971). Within the Mesoamerican worldview that recognized a quincunx, or five-directional universe, this pivot included both vertical and horizontal dimensions joined at the center (Carlson 1981).

For the Aztecs of Late Postclassic central Mexico, this worldview was best illustrated through the mythical Coatépec, a portal linking spatial, temporal, and supernatural distance (Reese-Taylor and Koontz, chapter 1 in this volume). Susan Gillespie described the *coatepetl*, or serpent hill, as:

an Aztec Tower of Babel with its base on earth and its summit connecting the earth to the sky. It linked people on the surface of the

earth with the gods in the Upperworld beyond them . . . Coatepec represents a point of continuity between the terrestrial and celestial spheres. Finally, the fact that it was a "serpent" hill shows its mediating qualities, for serpents were viewed as connectors of the vertical layers of the cosmos throughout Mesoamerica (1989:87).

The Aztecs manifested this mythological concept in the real world by decorating their pyramids, notably the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, with serpent imagery. Coatépéc, the hill upon which the patron deity Huitzilopochtli was born and where he defeated the cosmic forces of the moon (as Coyolxauhqui) and stars, was the *axis mundi* of the Aztec cosmos.

The Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent at Teotihuacan can be interpreted as another serpent hill, dedicated to control over calendrical and cosmological events (López Austin et al. 1991). The facade of the early temple is decorated with feathered serpents, each carrying a *cipactli* earth monster in reference to the mythical creation and ordering of time. The Feathered Serpent deity, later known as Quetzalcoatl, was an important mediator between celestial and terrestrial spheres, particularly in its role of legitimating kingly authority (Gillespie 1989:216) and promoting priestly knowledge (Nicholson 1971; D. Carrasco 1982).

The tunnel located beneath the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan (Heyden 1981; Manzanilla et al. 1996) provides further evidence of a geomantic phenomenon used in site organization. Based on Linda Manzanilla et al.'s recent reinterpretation, the cave beneath the Pyramid was originally a mineshaft for procuring building materials for pyramid construction. It was culturally modified into the shape of a four-petaled flower with a long tunnel leading to the west at the same orientation as the Teotihuacan urban grid. The chamber is remarkably similar to colonial depictions of the Nahua origin myth for Chicomoztoc (Kirchoff et al. 1976:Folio 16r), and it has been suggested that Teotihuacan may have served as a prototype for a related origin myth.¹ While the cave and associated tunnel may have been abandoned at the end of the Classic period, Teotihuacan remained an important ritual site throughout the Postclassic period, and Aztec artifacts were discovered within the tunnel (Heyden 1981), suggesting that it may have been used for oracles or other ceremonies (Manzanilla et al. 1996).

Complementary processes are found at the other great ceremonial center of the central highlands: the Great Pyramid of Cholula. In some ways the history of Cholula is similar to that of Teotihuacan, although in others it is quite distinct. Unfortunately, the histories of the two centers have been so closely linked that the unique characteristics of Cholula have of-

ten been lost in the shadows of its neighbor. *Tlachihualtepetl*, or "man-made mountain" as the Great Pyramid was known at the time of the Spanish Conquest, is by volume the largest construction from pre-Columbian Mesoamerica (Marquina 1970a; McCafferty 1996a). It is also the oldest continuously used ceremonial structure in the Americas, and as such can be viewed as a palimpsest of iconographic information accumulated during a period of 2,500 years.

This paper peels back the layers of meaning in order to reveal the dynamics of socioreligious connotations that have been proclaimed (cf. Nagao 1989) from the Great Pyramid by different peoples and for different purposes. Here I summarize iconographic evidence from the Great Pyramid to interpret the symbolic content of the pyramid and its surrounding ceremonial precinct. Implicit is an assumption that stylistic manipulations were purposeful and relate directly to identity strategies of the elites who directed the monumental construction efforts that resulted in the changing face of the pyramid. These transformations reflect political, ethnic, and religious affiliations, including Cholula's wavering relationship with Teotihuacan, the arrival of ethnic Olmeca-Xicalanca from the Gulf Coast, and the rise of the cult of Quetzalcoatl.

Cholula and the Great Pyramid

Cholula is located in the Puebla/Tlaxcala Valley, east of the Valley of Mexico and about 100 kilometers southeast of Teotihuacan (Figure 11.1). Cholula was famous at the time of the Spanish Conquest as the center for the cult of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl (Rojas 1927:160-161; Durán 1971:131; Torquemada 1975-1983, Volume 1:385-387), the Feathered Serpent god associated with the wind, the planet Venus; priestly knowledge; and *pochteca*, long-distance merchants. Dual high priests of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (the Aquiach and Tlalchiach) presided over a vast religious empire while representing celestial and earthly domains (Rojas 1927; P. Carrasco 1971:21-22). Nobles from central Mexico came to Cholula to offer tribute to these priests and in exchange received legitimation of their authority. *Pochteca* merchants traveled throughout Mesoamerica, making the Cholula marketplace a center for exotic goods (Durán 1971:129) and distributing elaborately decorated and symbolically charged objects in the Mixteca-Puebla stylistic tradition (Nicholson 1982; McCafferty and McCafferty 1994).

The Puebla valley around Cholula was noted as among the most fertile agricultural land in Mexico during the Colonial period, producing boun-

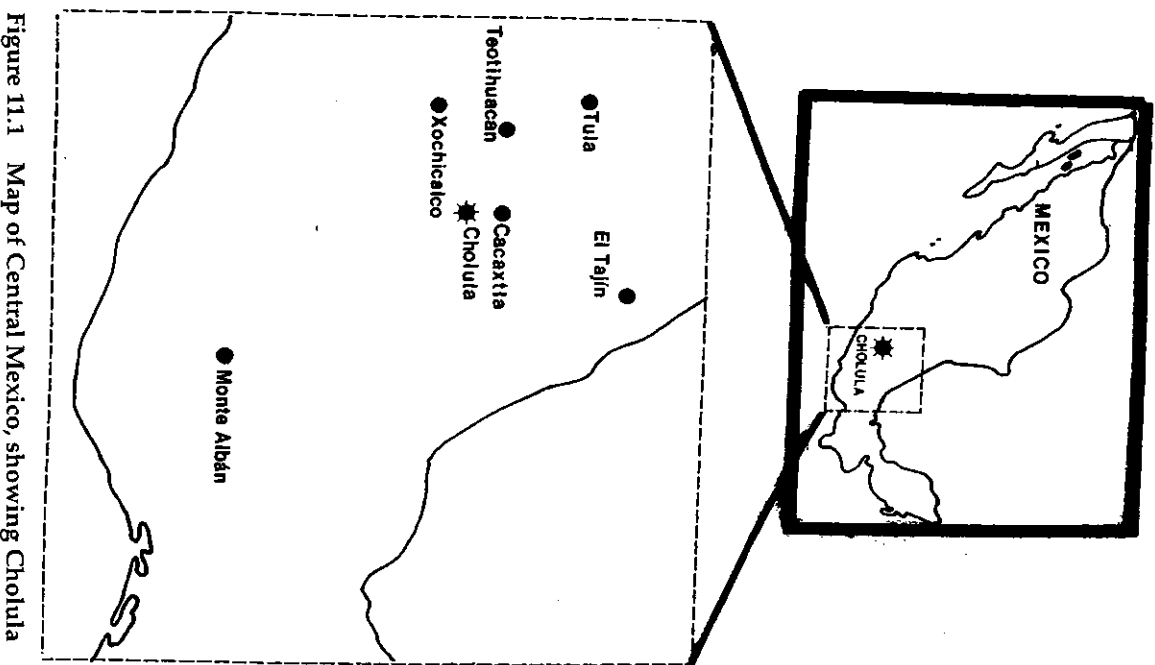


Figure 11.1 Map of Central Mexico, showing Cholula

tiful harvests of corn, beans, maguery, and chilies before the Conquest (Rojas 1927; Bonfil Batalla 1973; Super 1988). Surrounded by snow-covered volcanoes, the alluvial valley enjoys an abundance of water resources, permitting irrigation agriculture during the dry season. In the pre-Hispanic period, several streams converged with the Atoyac River to

form a swampy lake just east of Cholula (Mountainoy and Peterson 1973) where *chinampa* agriculture may have been practiced (Messmacher 1967a). An additional local resource is the clay subsoil that until recently was an excellent material for pottery making (Noguera 1954; Müller 1978). It is still exploited for intensive brick production (Bonfil Batalla 1973).

The Great Pyramid is the principal architectural feature of Cholula (Figure 11.2). It measures more than 400 meters on a side and covers about 16 hectares at its base (Marquina 1970a; McCafferty 1996a). The platform mound measured at least 65 meters in height, but the maximum height is obscured by modifications made in constructing the Colonial period church on its summit. The Great Pyramid was built in a series of four major construction phases spanning a period of about 1,500 years. The earliest evidence for construction dates to the Late Formative period (Noguera 1956; Müller 1973), and active pyramid construction was finally suspended at the end of the Early Postclassic period when an ethnic invasion resulted in the partial abandonment of the ceremonial center and the construction of a "new" Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl in what was to become the plaza of San Pedro Cholula (Olivera de V. and Reyes 1969; *Historia Tlaxcala-Chichimeca* 1976:Folio 26v-27r; McCafferty 1996b). Ritual use of the Great Pyramid continued during the Late Postclassic period, however, as a shrine to a rain deity, Chiconauquiahuitl, and as the site of ceremonial burials (Lagunas R., Serrano S., and López A. 1976). It continues up to the present when the colonial church dedicated to the Virgin of the Remedies is considered (Olivera de V. 1970).

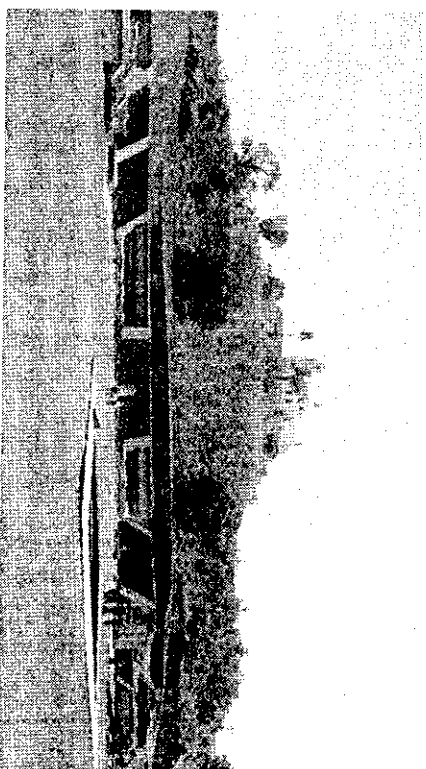


Figure 11.2 The Great Pyramid of Cholula from the south

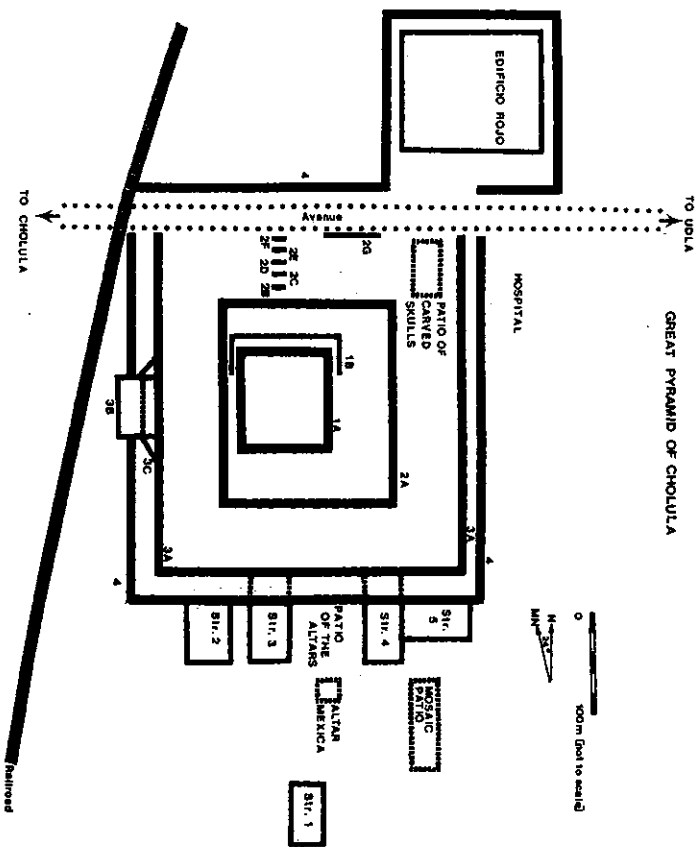


Figure 11.3 Plan of the construction sequence of the Great Pyramid

Archaeological investigations have concentrated on the Great Pyramid since 1931, with several intensive periods of exploration as well as short-term salvage work (Noguera 1937, 1954; Marquina 1939, 1951, 1970b, 1975; Messmacher 1967; Müller 1978; Suárez C. 1985; Paddock 1987; Suárez C. and Martínez A. 1993; summarized in McCafferty 1996a). Because of the enormous size of the pyramid, early phases of construction were explored using tunnels—more than eight kilometers of tunnels expose building facades and follow stairways relating to the major stages of construction and subsequent modification (Figure 11.3). Additional excavations exposed and reconstructed platforms and plazas on the south and west sides of the pyramid, including the Patio of the Altars. As a result of these extensive archaeological investigations, a wide range of information has been recovered. The objective of this study is to weave together archaeological, architectural, art historical, and ethnohistorical data to inter-

pret the meaning content of the Great Pyramid at different stages in its history. Because the existing information is often fragmentary, this chapter can only be a preliminary reading, and as new information becomes available, these interpretations should be critically reevaluated.

Artistic Program of the Great Pyramid

Middle and Late Formative settlement patterns for the Cholula region consisted of a mosaic of small mounded sites at intervals of 5–10 kilometers, including Acatepec, Coronango, Coapan, and Cholula itself (García Cook and Merino Carrón 1987). A settlement survey of Formative Cholula indicated that it may have covered an area of about 2 square kilometers, with monumental architecture in at least three separate areas (McCafferty 1984, 1996b). Eduardo Noguera (1956) discovered Late Formative (El Arbolillo I/Zacatenco I phase) ceramics in the construction fill of the earliest level of the Edificio Rojo, located to the northeast of the Great Pyramid, representing perhaps the earliest construction at the ceremonial center. In fact, the original ground surface beneath the pyramid was littered with Formative period pottery (Noguera 1954:199–200). Mound building ceased at other sites in the immediate vicinity during the Terminal Formative period, suggesting that by about 200 BC Cholula was the predominant center in the valley (García Cook 1981; García Cook and Merino Carrón 1987). At about this time, the first phase of the Great Pyramid was built.

What factors conspired to promote Cholula to preeminence over this nascent kingdom? Why was the Great Pyramid begun at a time when other pyramid mounds were abandoned? Certainly Cholula had a favorable location relative to environmental resources (Mounfroy and Peterson 1973), but other sites had comparable access to fertile farmland and water resources. Instead, Cholula was apparently able to establish the Great Pyramid as an *axis mundi*, a cosmo-magical center connecting the Underworld to the heavens. It was this symbolic resource that distinguished Cholula from its neighbors and eventually enabled it to dominate the region.

The Great Pyramid is located over a spring, which flows from beneath the mound east into the former lake. Thus the Pyramid embodies the concept of *altepētēl*, literally a water-mountain, that for later Nahuas was the metaphorical term for “kingdom” (Lockhart 1992).² The spring is clearly depicted in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976:folio 7v) where it is shown



Figure 11.4 The Tlachihualtepetl mound with spring (Kirchoff et al. 1976:Folio 7v)

emerging from a cave beneath the pyramid (Figure 11.4). A modern shrine on the east side of the Pyramid covers a deep well leading down to the spring, which is still a prominent feature of the symbolic landscape.

No actual cave is known from beneath the Great Pyramid, but Bernardino Sahagún (1950–1982, *Introductory Volume:48*) mentioned caves and tunnels within the Great Pyramid in the Colonial period, and a network of tunnels connecting the pyramid with other pre-Columbian buildings remains part of local oral tradition. Architectural remains of a pre-Columbian corbeled arch were visible until recently in a road-cut on the northeast side of the pyramid as possible evidence for original tunnel construction. The symbolic center of the pyramid may have been discovered during archaeological tunneling in the 1970s (Eduardo Merlo, personal communication 1999). This chamber is now referred to by Cholula residents as the energy center of the pyramid.

One clear distinction between the Great Pyramid and the monumental architecture of Teotihuacan is the orientation. In contrast to the grid alignment of Teotihuacan at 16° east of north, urban Cholula and the

Great Pyramid are oriented at 26° north of west (Marquina 1970a; Tichy 1981:221), where the pyramid faces the sunset on the summer solstice. The distinction in site orientation between the two urban centers suggests that they were not organized around shared cosmological principles. In fact, a geographic boundary based on these site orientations distinguishes Teotihuacan-related sites from what would have been the Cholula kingdom (Tichy 1981).

The contrast between the two sites is more profound than simple orientation, however. Several theories have been proposed to account for the orientation of Teotihuacan, including astronomical observations relating to the Pleiades (Carlson 1981:188; Heyden 1981). With the Great Pyramid of Cholula facing the setting sun on the longest day of the year, the shrine atop the mound would be the last spot illuminated by the drying sun. It is likely, therefore, that the Great Pyramid of Cholula was related to the supernatural sun as well as the calendrical cycle.

The first construction of the Great Pyramid (Stage 1a) measured 120 meters on a side and 17 meters in height (Marquina 1970b). Low walls are preserved from the temple precinct on top of the pyramid, which measured 19 meters on a side. The pyramid facade used a talud/tablero style reminiscent of Teotihuacan, or more locally, Tlalancalca (García Cook 1981). A series of painted motifs on the tablero of Stage 1b (a minor modification of the original construction) depicts skeletal insects (Figure 11.5), possibly larval butterflies in the process of metamorphosis (Marquina 1970a). The configuration of the frontal face with the body extending out to the side is reminiscent of the Temple of the Feathered Serpents at Teotihuacan.³ The symbolism of transformation relates to the Mesoamerican concept of cyclical death and rebirth (Klein 1975), whereas the butterfly imagery could relate to the female earth/fertility complex, including its association with the warrior cult (Sullivan 1982; Berlo 1983).

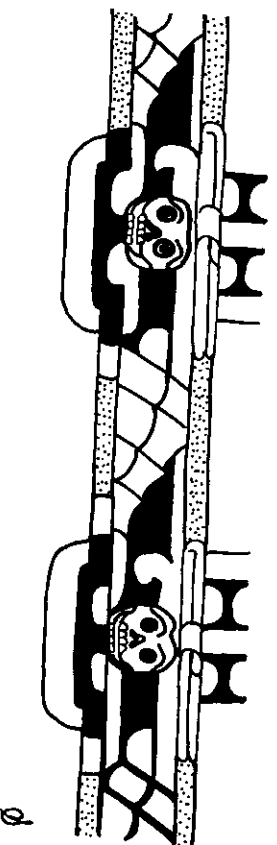


Figure 11.5 Chapultin mural from Stage 1b (after Marquina 1970b:Lamina 1)

The second complete rebuilding of the Great Pyramid (Stage 2a) measured 180 meters on a side and 35 meters in height (Marquina 1970a). The structure was unique in central Mexico because it consisted of stairways on all sides (Margain 1971:69), reminiscent of the *kan witz* four-sided pyramids of the Maya area and notably distinct from contemporary architecture at Teotihuacan. A set of 52 raised stairs on the north side is an obvious reference to the 52-year cycle of the combined solar and 260-day ritual calendars. The calendrical significance provides a further analogy to Teotihuacan's Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent based on the recent interpretation of the Feathered Serpent iconography in relation to Aztec myths of Quetzalcoatl and the creation of the calendar (López Austin et al. 1991).

Several fragmentary building façades represent modifications to the pyramid structure (Stages 2b–2g), particularly on the north side of the mound, perhaps indicating that this was the major axis of ceremonial activity during this time period. The Edificio Rojo is located to the northeast of the Great Pyramid and may represent part of a plaza group with this axis of the pyramid. A set of raised stairs similar to those on Stage 2a of the Great Pyramid occurs on the south facade of the Edificio Rojo, further suggesting that these structures may have been contemporary.⁴ The excellent preservation of the Edificio Rojo is a consequence of its having been completely engulfed by a later expansion of the Great Pyramid. The building's name derives from an unpublished account of red painted figures on the tableros of the platform (Sergio Suárez C., personal communication 1999).

Several painted murals have been discovered within the Great Pyramid that relate to Stage 2 facades. One segment depicts two serpents' heads, colored blue with black spots (Figure 11.6; Villagra Caletti 1971:148). Between the serpents is a yellow jaguar with what may be a net over the feline. Although this mural is now badly damaged, the description of the mural by Villagra Caletti recalls the netted jaguars of Teotihuacan. Another mural features a black-on-white checkerboard pat-



Figure 11.6 Mural with jaguars and serpent

tern. This occurs on the west side of the Great Pyramid on what has been called the Edificio Totonaco (Marquina 1970a:41), in part because the checkerboard is reminiscent of the Temple of the Niches at El Tajin. A second example of this pattern is in the Southeast Plaza associated with an early phase of the Patio of the Altars (Acosta 1970a:50).

A third major rebuilding of the Great Pyramid (Stage 3a) is revealed on the west and south sides of the mound. This structure measured approximately 350 meters on a side, with a height of 65 meters (Marquina 1970a). Although it has not been completely documented, this may have been the final complete phase of construction because subsequent evidence for expansion was only in the form of an adobe nucleus that lacked any evidence for finished surfaces. The talud/tablero architecture of Stage 3a is quite similar to that of Teotihuacan and is also found on an early building south of the pyramid. These Teotihuacanoid platforms are associated with an extensive mosaic patio (Acosta 1970d:66), remnants of which have been found in dispersed sections of the ceremonial complex.

Projecting out from the Stage 3a talud/tablero is Stage 3b, which apparently begins at an earlier level of the pyramid construction sequence (Figure 11.7).⁵ A hole in the Stage 3a facade reveals evidence of an earlier stairway, suggesting that this may have been a major axis of ritual activ-

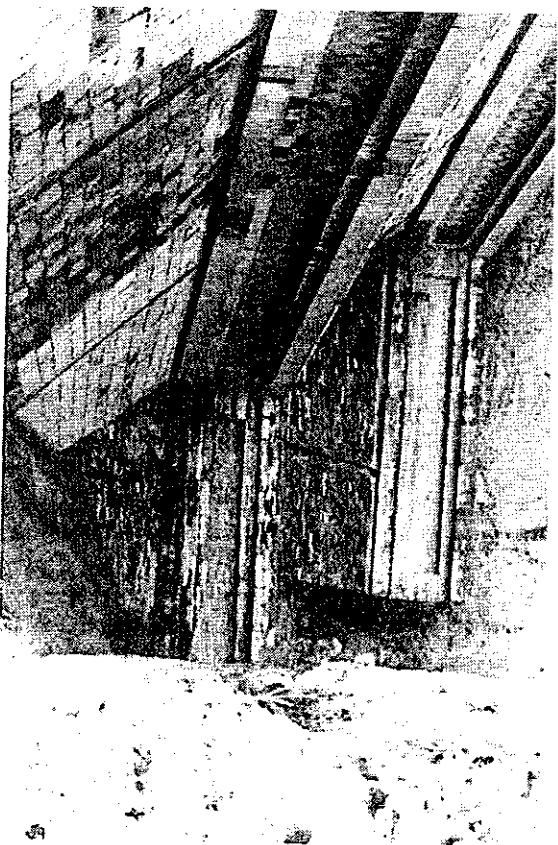


Figure 11.7 Stage 3b emerging from Stage 3a

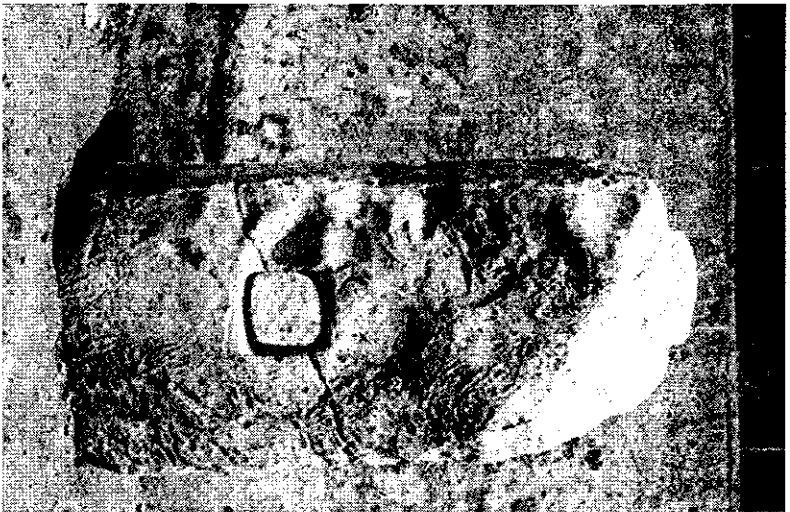


Figure 11.8 Monolith with rectangular hole

ity with considerable time depth. The decorative characteristic of Stage 3b is a carved panel on the *tableros* in the form of a woven mat. Another mat motif, possibly representing red and blue feathers, appears on a polychrome mural from Phase 3-2 of the *Patío* of the *Altars* (Marquina 1970a:Lamina III).

The mat motif is a pan-Mesoamerican symbol for kingship and political authority, with examples from Mixtec, Aztec, and Maya iconography. *Nanpatecutli*, an avatar of Tlaloc, was the Aztec patron of the mat-makers and was also lord of the four directions (Sahagún 1950–1982, Book 1:45). As an architectural motif, the House of the Mat at Copán is the best comparison, although it is also common in the Yucatán. Translated into Maya as *Popol Na*, the House of the Mat has been interpreted as a political council house (Fash 1991:130–134). In both Mixtec and Aztec representations, rulers are depicted seated on woven mats. The visual impact of ritual per-

formance on an engraved mat panel would have legitimated the action to the audience below.

A crude monolith stands in front of the staircase of Stage 3b (Figure 11.8). It is approximately 4 meters in height, with a rough surface and a rectangular knob on its top surface. The monolith has a rectangular hole through the lower half. A partially excavated stone altar is located near its base. No published account of this feature exists to describe the excavated context of the monolith, but it is possible that it may have functioned as a device for astronomical observations relating to the setting sun at the solstice. For example, a strategically placed vertical rod erected on the Cerro Cocoyo (also known as Cerro Acozoc) mound west of the intervening plaza would cast a shadow through the rectangular hole and onto the horizontal slab/altar at sundown of the solstice.

A subsequent architectural feature (Stage 3c) later removed the front portion of Stage 3b, including the staircase, to cover this west face of the pyramid with a rounded facade made of steep taludes in at least two levels (Figure 11.9). These facades feature jagged stones that project out from the surface beyond the level of the stucco facing, giving the appearance of a “hill of knives” similar to those illustrated in the pre-Columbian Mixtec codices (e.g., *Codex Nuttall* 1975:19). Consolidation and recon-



Figure 11.9 Stage 3c, with Stage 3b in background

struction of Stage 3b resulted in the partial dismantling of this later structure during the *Proyecto Cholula* in the 1960s.

These early stages of the Great Pyramid span a period of more than 1,000 years, with Stage 3a probably dating to the Epiclassic period. During this span, the pyramid's architectural program fluctuated in its similarity to the canons of Teotihuacan (McCafferty 1999b). Following Debra Nagao's (1989) conception of visual imagery as "public proclamation," this suggests shifting claims of affiliation by the Cholula elites as they negotiated their own cultural identity. During the construction of Stage 2, innovations relating to Gulf Coast style began to appear, possibly indicating the arrival of Olmeca-Xicalanca groups from Veracruz. Although the chronology of the Pyramid sequence is still poorly defined, this would suggest that the subsequent construction of the Stage 3a talud/tablero postdates the fall of Teotihuacan and so may be a statement on the part of the Cholula elite that they were heirs to the Teotihuacan legacy (even though for much of the Classic period they denied that relationship). Additional modifications such as the carved mat motif of Stage 3b, however, relate to the innovative style that later became known as the Mixteca-Puebla tradition (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994).

The Patio of the Altars Complex

The Patio of the Altars is a large open plaza immediately south of the Great Pyramid (Acosta 1970a), at the base of what may have been the main south staircase. The patio is bounded by two long platforms extending south from the base of the pyramid, where they attach to the facade of Stage 3a. The patio was renovated on at least six occasions, but the format of the ceremonial space remained essentially unchanged as a three-sided enclosure open to the south with a series of ritual areas, including altars, platforms, and sculpture.

The patio derives its name from two monolithic altars dating to the final phase of the complex. Altar 1, on the east side of the patio, is paired with a large upright stela to form a stela/altar group (Figure 11.10) (Acosta 1970b). Altar 2, opposite Altar 1 on the west side of the patio, is another large horizontal slab (Acosta 1970c) that was placed on an elevated platform so that it was above the level of Altar 1. It was probably paired with an upright stela to form a complementary stela/altar group. The base of a stela, designated Altar 3, was found in the fill behind Altar 2, but because the upper portion was located at the base of the staircase of the pyramid, the stela was reconstructed at the north end of the patio (Figure 11.11) (Contreras 1970).⁶ These two stela/altar groups could have

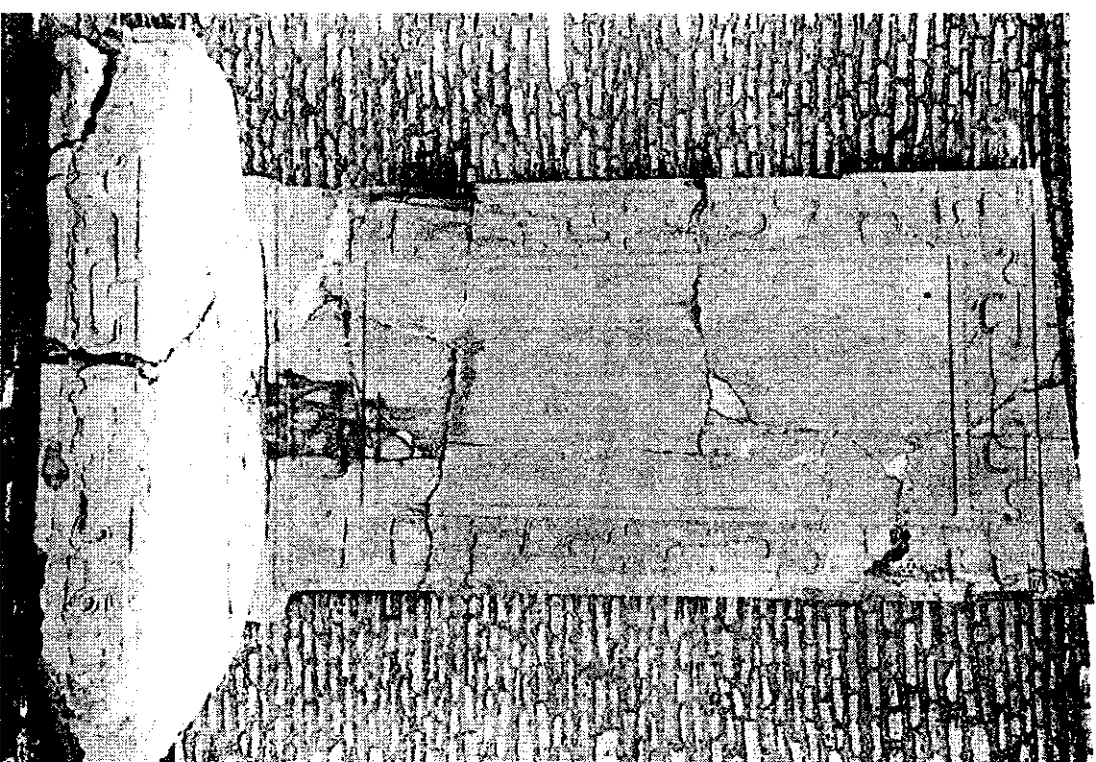


Figure 11.10 Altar 1

served as thrones for the dual priests of the Olmeca-Xicalanca. They are aligned with the solstitial sunset so that Altar 3 (if placed behind Altar 2) would have cast a shadow onto the stela of Altar 1.⁷

Both the altar and stela of Altar 1, as well as the stela known as Altar 3, were decorated with interlaced volutes around the borders of the large stones. These volutes have been identified as typical of Gulf Coast

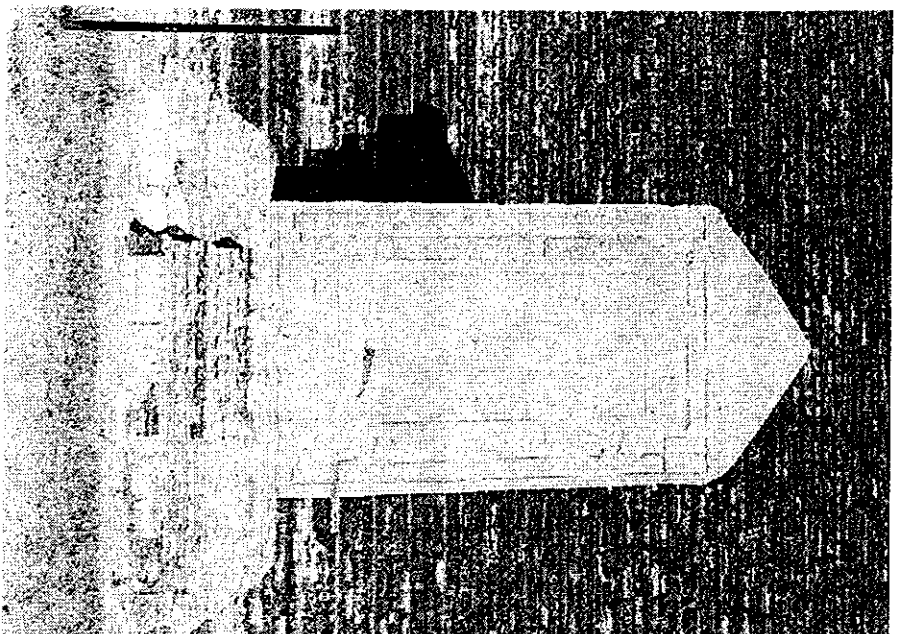


Figure 11.11 Altar 3

iconography, such as is found at El Tajin (Acosta 1970b:102).⁸ Altar 2 features a more elaborate variation with interlaced serpents in place of volutes (Figure 11.12).

Stylistic similarities between the Epiclassic/Early Postclassic ceremonial center and the Gulf Coast are abundant and indicate strong interaction between Cholula and the Gulf. New pottery types appear at this time that include imitations of Gulf Coast types, even the earliest polychrome types (McCafferty 1996b). Sergio Suárez C. (1985) identified a burial from the Great Pyramid that he interprets as a Maya merchant/priest based on distinctive cranial and dental mutilation and grave goods. The elaborate polychrome murals of Cacaxtla show clear



Figure 11.12 Interlaced serpents on Altar 2

Gulf Coast and Maya influence, and the relationship between Cacaxtla and Cholula has long been argued (McVicker 1985; see also García Cook and Merino Carrón 1990; McCafferty and McCafferty 1994).

The taludes of the pyramid and associated platforms were decorated with a greca pattern of interlocked "T"s (Figure 11.13). This relates to the greca horizon identified for the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic periods from the Gulf Coast, Oaxaca, and Yucatán (Sharp 1978), with its closest parallel with the architectural facade of the Castillo Pyramid at Chichén Itzá. Within the Mixtec tradition of symbolic notation, the greca frieze was interpreted as *ñuu*, signifying metropolis, and was therefore synonymous with the Nahuatl Tollan (Smith 1973:38–39). In Mixtec codices *ñuu* was a common motif on place glyphs involving architectural features. The massive staircase of the Great Pyramid rising above the greca frieze could therefore be perceived as a visual metaphor for *ñuu ndiyo*, "city of the stairs," the Mixtec name for Cholula (Smith 1973:72, n.98; see also McCafferty and McCafferty 1994:58).

A prominent place sign from the Mixtec codices has been glossed as "Cattail Frieze" because it combines both the *ñuu* frieze and the *tule* cattail signs (Smith 1973; Pohl 1994; Jansen 1996). Because one of the prominent acts that occurred at Cattail Frieze was a nose-piercing ceremony (Caso 1966:13), a rite that also occurred at Cholula (Figure 11.14) (Rojas 1927; Kirchoff et al. 1976:Folio 21r), it is plausible that Cattail Frieze was

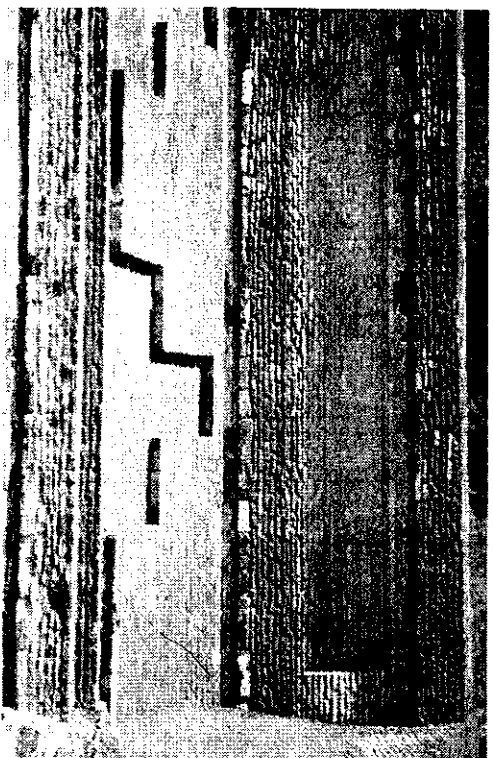


Figure 11.13 Greca frieze along Patio of the Altars



Figure 11.14 Nose-piercing ceremony at Cholula
(Kirchoff et al. 1976:Folio 21r)

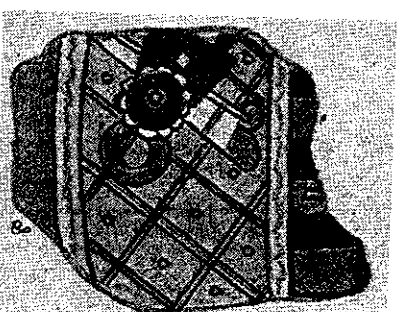
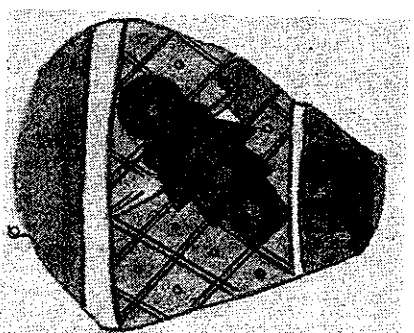


Figure 11.15 Cholula polychrome shards with nose-piercing implements

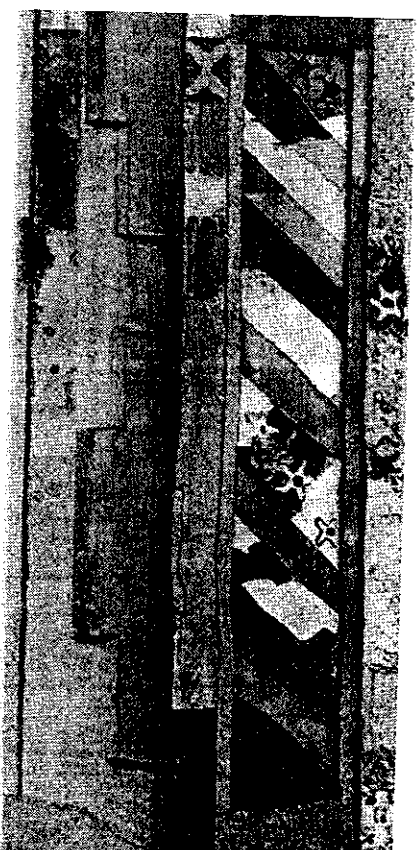


Figure 11.16 Mural with diagonal bands and stars
(after Marguina 1970b:Lamina II)

an alternative name for Postclassic Cholula that emphasized its multilingual, cosmopolitan nature. Codex-style nose ornaments and bone perforators appear as decorative elements on Cholula polychrome pottery (Figure 11.15), further supporting the association.

In addition to the greca pattern on the taludes of the Patio of the Altars, murals were painted on the *tableros*. One common motif is of multicolored diagonal bands with star patterns (Figure 11.16). The diagonal motif is identical to that found in Mixtec iconography to indicate stone/earth (Smith 1973) and is often incorporated into place glyphs and to indicate “stone people.” In the *Codex Nuttall* (16-1), for example, Lady 3 Flint en-

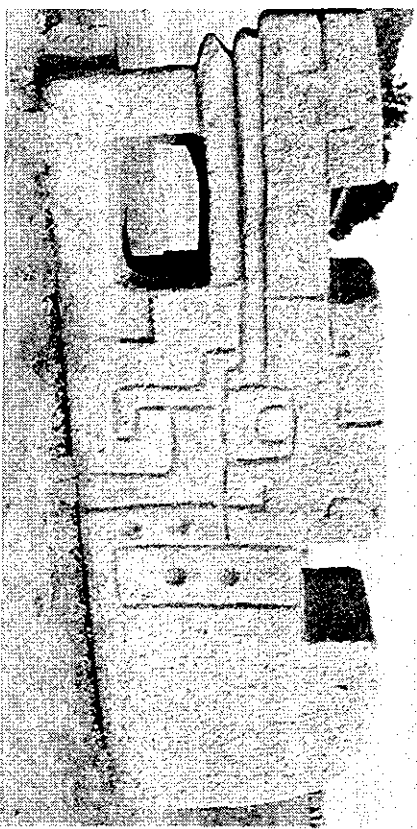


Figure 11.17 Serpent head from balustrade

ters into a mountain of stone that is further identified by lunar/uterine crescents (Millbrath 1988). The Cholula murals follow this model with the addition of superimposed stars, thus creating a visual metaphor for the Great Pyramid as a "mountain of heaven and mountain of earth/stone."

A polychrome feathered serpent mural associated with an early phase of the Patio of the Altars was found in the southeast plaza (Acosta 1970d:66). This is the clearest reference to Quetzalcoatl at the Great Pyramid, and unfortunately no illustrations of this mural have been published.⁹ Other serpent imagery includes the interlaced serpents around Altar 2 and a large stone sculpture in the Patio of the Altars of an open-mouthed serpent with exposed fangs. Another elaborately carved serpent head features a key-stone connector that may have made it part of a serpent staircase (Figure 11.17) or even into the wall of a ballcourt similar to the Mixtec *yavui*.

The Postclassic association of Quetzalcoatl with Cholula is clearly established through ethnohistorical accounts (Rojas 1927; Durán 1971; Torquemada 1975–1983, Volume 1:387) and iconography on polychrome ceramics, but it was more explicitly associated with the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl from the Late Postclassic ceremonial center (Díaz del Castillo 1963:202; Durán 1971:133). According to one mytho-historical account, the fourth pre-Columbian age was dominated by the Toltecs who built a

great pyramid at Cholula that was dedicated to Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl as a deification of the high priest and prophet of the Olmeca-Xicalanca after Cholula and its Great Pyramid were destroyed at the end of the third age (Ixtilxochitl 1975–1977, Book 1:529–530). Following this mythical association, the significance of Quetzalcoatl at the site would have increased after the abandonment of the Great Pyramid.

The most famous murals of the Cholula ceremonial complex are the so-called *Bebedores*, or drinkers, located on the earliest stage of the Patio of the Altars (Marquina 1971; Müller 1972). The *Bebedores* extend for 60 meters in length along the tablero of the west platform (Structure 31-A) that extends out from the pyramid face. These murals feature a sequence of anthropomorphic figures drinking from cups and bowls while seated around large vessels, presumably containing intoxicating and perhaps hallucinogenic *pulque* (Figure 11.18) (Müller 1972; Kubler 1990:64–5). The figures wear simple loincloths, but with earplugs and often elaborate turban headdresses. Although some smaller figures stand as servants, the main characters are generally represented as sprawling on a flowered carpet. At least one figure has an animal head representing a bird, and another resembles a monkey; two dogs and a bee are also included in the panel. The weirdly detailed figures suggest



Figure 11.18 Bebedores murals

the act of transformation, perhaps with the inebriated priests changing into their *magical* animal spirits.

The *Bebedores* murals are poorly understood both in terms of their iconography and their contextual relationship to the ceremonial complex. The ritual use of *pulque* among the Aztecs was closely associated with the goddess Mayahuel, a member of the earth/fertility complex. Florencia Müller (1972) identified parallels between the mural and a *pulque* ceremony recorded in the Mixtec Codex Vindobonensis (J. Furst 1978:202-203; Anders et al. 1992).¹⁰

The *Bebedores* are unique in Mesoamerican mural art. Some of the human figures resemble Teotihuacanoid figurines, including to some extent the small human figures from the Tlalocan mural of Tepanitla. Stylistically, the Early Postclassic murals from Las Higueras, Veracruz, are the most similar in terms of proportion and costume elements. As a narrative panel of life-size figures, the *Bebedores* resemble the Battle Mural of Cacaxtla (and perhaps the Edificio Rojo), although stylistically they are quite dissimilar.

The Patio of the Altars complex presents an eclectic mix of iconographic styles, including Teotihuacan-style talud/tablero architecture, Gulf Coast volutes, and Mixtec codex-style mural and architectural motifs. It is during this Epiclassic/Early Postclassic period that Cholula became a crucible out of which evolved the Mixteca-Puebla stylistic tradition (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994). The artistic program presented at the Patio of the Altars documents the origins of this development.

The Great Pyramid in the Late Postclassic Period

Violent ethnic change occurred in Cholula with the arrival of Tolteca-Chichimeca groups at the end of the Early Postclassic period (Olivera de V. and Reyes 1969; P. Carrasco 1971; Kirchoff et al. 1976). This is seen archaeologically at the Patio of the Altars, where the megalithic stone stelae were smashed and scattered. At UA-1, located about 1 kilometer east of the Great Pyramid, the Early Postclassic Structure 1 was burned, and a high concentration of projectile points was associated with the living surface, suggesting that the house was destroyed by warfare (McCafferty 1992). This destruction level may therefore relate to the overthrow of the Olmeca-Xicallanca by the Tolteca-Chichimeca, ca. 1200 AD (Olivera de V. and Reyes 1969; McCafferty 1996b, 1999a).

The Great Pyramid itself may have been desecrated. A final building phase (Stage 4) is represented by an adobe brick shell that encased previ-

ous construction. No outer facade from this period has been discovered, implying that either this final stage was never completed, or else that the outer layer of stone and stucco was removed for the construction of the new ceremonial center around the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl. Within the Mesoamerican ideology of warfare and conquest, captives were often depicted nude as a symbol of humiliation (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994). Stripping away the outer facade of the Great Pyramid may therefore have carried symbolic overtones as well as being a practical source for valuable building materials.

The ceremonial center of Cholula was shifted in the Late Postclassic period to what is now the *zócalo* of San Pedro Cholula (P. Carrasco 1971; Kirchoff et al. 1976; Lind 1990). The new Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl was described by the Spanish *conquistadores*, including Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1963:202), who said that it was taller than the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán (see also López de Gómara 1964:130). The pyramid was razed soon after the Spanish Conquest to be replaced by the Cathedral of San Gabriel on the east side of the square (Marquina 1970a:31).

Colonial chroniclers such as Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía (1951) and Gabriel de Rojas (1927) provided descriptions of the Great Pyramid as it appeared in the sixteenth century, and as it was perceived in local tradition. Rojas described the Pyramid as a hill made of ancient adobes. Motolinía commented that it was planted in small plots of corn, with rabbits and snakes living on the slopes. On top of the mound was a pre-Columbian shrine dedicated to Chiconauquiahuitl, or 9 Rain (Rojas 1927), a rain deity that in the Mixtec religion was represented as analogous to the Aztec goddess Chalchiuhtlicue (Caso 1979:426). The *Descripción de Cholula* records that children were sacrificed on an altar to bring the rain (Rojas 1927:162-163).

Motolinía (1951) recorded the legend that the Great Pyramid was built by the ancient Cholutecas as a Tower of Babel to reach heaven (see also Durán 1971:257). God stopped them by bringing on a great storm and hurling down a huge stone in the shape of a frog (see also Simons 1968:29). A similar account of the Tower of Babel is still related in San Andrés Cholula, although now the messenger of God is St. Michael, who struck the pyramid with his great sword, shattering the peak to form the smaller pyramids in the surrounding area.

A colossal head found in the Patio of the Altars may correspond to a carved stone frog altar associated with the shrine of 9 Rain (Figure 11.19). The round eyes and thick lipped, toothless mouth is strongly reminiscent of a toad.¹¹ In this context it is notable that representations of the Great Pyramid in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (Kirchoff et al. 1976:Folios 7v,



Figure 11.19 Colossal head from Patio of the Altars

9v–10r, 14r, 26v–27r) consistently depict a large toad atop the pyramid. Toads were symbolically associated with fertility and regeneration in Mesoamerican religion (P. Furst 1981), especially as represented by the earth/fertility goddess complex. Sahagún (1950–1982, Book 2:62) described a ritual in which baked frog effigies were dressed in a woman's skirt and further decorated with blue face paint, in imitation of Chalchitlicue.¹² Toads were also perceived as heralds for the rain god because in central Mexico toads croak at approaching storms; in this regard they parallel Ehecatl, the wind god, who blows prior to a storm.

The *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (Kirchoff et al. 1976) provides Early Colonial period illustrations of the Great Pyramid as a natural hill covered with grass (Figure 11.20). In addition to the toad perched atop the mound, seven flowers are depicted near the summit, suggesting a calendrical association.¹³ The date 7 Flower is somewhat ambiguous: It was the calendrical name for a Mixtec solar god and also for the Nahuatl deity Xochiquetzal. The Mixtec 7 Flower was analogous to the central Mexican creator god Tonacatecuhli (Caso 1979:441–442), the male half of the bisexual Ometeotl unity who was linked to fire, maize, and particularly the sun. As the male component of the Ometeotl divine pair, Tonacatecuhli would have been paired with a female earth/fertility deity such as Chalchitlicue or Xochiquetzal.

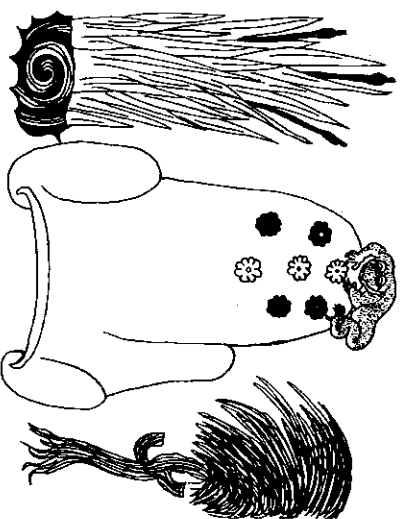


Figure 11.20 Great Pyramid with frog glyph and 7 Flower calendrical name (Kirchoff et al. 1976:Folio 14r)

Xochiquetzal was the goddess associated with sexuality and the arts; she also had solar attributes (McCafferty and McCafferty 1999). She was associated with Tonacahuatl, the female half of the Ometeotl complex and therefore the consort of Tonacatecuhli (Sullivan et al. 1997:140–141, n.16). She is identified with the day 7 Flower in the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, Book 4:7; Quinones Keber 1995:187), the calendar date associated with embroiderers for whom she was patroness. She is prominent during the Atamalualiztli ceremony held at Cholula, where she is depicted weaving with her back strap loom connected to a flowering tree, perhaps in reference to Tamoanchan (Sahagún 1993:Folio 254r). In a Cholula (Sahagún 1950–819, Book 2:177–178). The identification of the Great Pyramid with the glyph 7 Flower may therefore represent both Tonacatecuhli and Xochiquetzal as the supreme Ometeotl duality.

In 1535, Motolinía (1951:138–139) was called upon to exorcise the Great Pyramid because repeated attempts to raise a cross on the summit had failed because of storms and lightning. He excavated and found many buried idols, including giant conch shell trumpets (see also Rojas 1927). After removing these and warning the local people, Motolinía was able to erect a large bell, and the lightning stopped.

Diego Durán described the Great Pyramid in a section of his *Book of the Gods and Rites* that dealt with mountain worship during the month of Tepeilhuitl: "This hill was much hallowed; there were the usual and unceasing adoration, the prayers, the great sacrifices, offerings, and slaying of

men" (1971:257). During this festival, mountain images were made out of amarantth seed, decorated to resemble earth and water deities, and consumed. Durán went on to add that the purpose of mountain worship was to ascend to a level from which to pray to the "Lord of Created Things, the Lord by Whom They Lived," a reference to Tonacatecutli. This tradition compares well with the widespread association of the Great Pyramid with the Tower of Babel. It also provides a conceptual link with the Nahua *axis mundi* of Coatépec, the serpent hill that acted as a portal connecting the mortal world with supernatural realms (Gillespie 1989:87).

A final ritual important for pre-Columbian Cholula that included the Great Pyramid was during the Atamalqualiztli ceremony that took place every eight years. Atamalqualiztli, or "the feast of the water tamales," was dedicated to Centeotl, the young maize god, and was observed as a time of fasting in which corn was allowed to rest (Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 2:177-178). Cholula is mentioned prominently in the colonial accounts of the ritual (McCafferty and McCafferty 1995). A detailed illustration of the festival in the *Primeros Memoriales* includes a drawing of the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl alongside the Great Pyramid (Figure 11.21) (Sahagún 1993:Folio 254r). The pyramid features twin *tlaloque* rain spirits on its summit, along with a knotted *mactlatl* loin cloth with rounded ends in the style identifiable of Quetzalcoatl. A possible cave inside the mound features a face over a glyph consisting of a paw with claws and four dots, perhaps a calendrical date for 4 Jaguar.¹⁴

Following the Spanish Conquest, the Great Pyramid continued as a religious center when the shrine to the Virgin of the Remedies was built (Olivera de V. 1970). This was one of the principal icons carried by the *conquistadores*, but in its new home it soon took on indigenous meanings. Within the context of local usage, the Virgin presides over curing and especially rain and fertility. The annual pilgrimage to the shrine is one of the largest in contemporary Mexico, with as many as 350,000 visitors attending the September fair in order to climb to the shrine on the pyramid (Olivera de V. 1970). The Virgin of the Remedies periodically descends from the pyramid to visit different parish churches in the Cholula urban zone in rituals that unify the diverse *barrios* of the city (Bonfil Batalla 1973). Colonial period representations of the Virgin show her emerging from a maguery plant (Durán 1971:230), in a motif very similar to that of the pre-Columbian goddess Mayahuel.

Apart from the religious significance of the shrine of the Virgin, the Great Pyramid itself remains an important symbol of the Cholula community. Early accounts and drawings of the pyramid mound attest to its

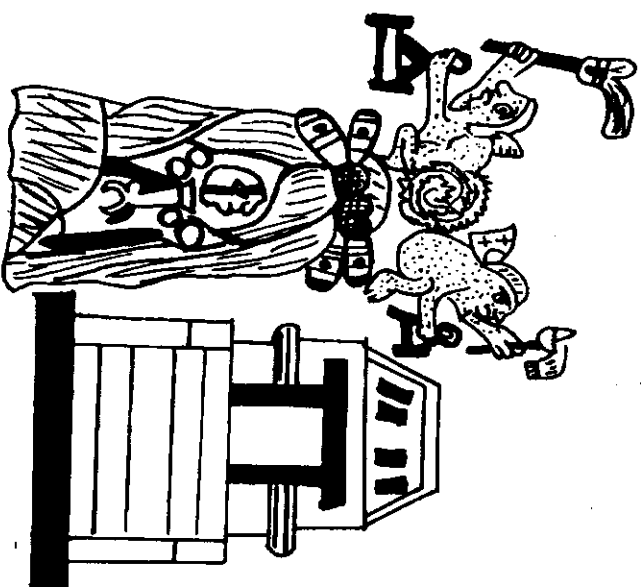


Figure 11.21 Detail of the Great Pyramid in Atamalqualiztli ceremony (Sahagún 1993:Folio 254r)

prominence. An image was even reproduced onto mid-nineteenth-century transfer print pottery as part of the movement to create a Mexican national identity. In recent years heated and even violent conflict has continued between the neighboring communities of San Andrés and San Pedro Cholula over the historical origins of the Great Pyramid. Ethnohistorical and ethnographic evidence indicates that this rivalry may date back to the ethnic invasion at the end of the Early Postclassic period, with the two communities maintaining to some extent their separate Olmeca-Xicallanca and Toltteca-Chichimeca identities (Olivera de V. and Reyes 1969; McCafferty 1999a). At stake are the economic resources of tourism associated with the archaeological zone and the annual fair. On a more profound level, the question relates to the origins of the community and ancestral claims to the symbolic resources of the pyramid. The struggle over the Great Pyramid is currently an important political issue because the urban development of Cholula directly threatens the archaeological site, and competing factions of merchants, politicians, citizens, and archaeologists all search for a common ground to settle these issues.

Conclusions and Speculation

The Great Pyramid of Cholula has undergone numerous structural changes in its long history, both in terms of its architectural and its symbolic composition. A diachronic perspective on the evolving cosmological meanings of the pyramid offers valuable insight into the history of Mesoamerican religion, as well as provides important clues into the role of religious ideology in the organization of the Cholula polity. Unfortunately, the available data on the Great Pyramid is so fragmentary that solid conclusions are few and rather tentative, and so we are left with a range of speculation.

During the period of active pyramid construction, a variety of iconographic motifs were employed: Larval insects metamorphosed into skeletal images; intoxicated priests became transformed into animal spirits; the juxtaposition of terrestrial and celestial motifs established the pyramid as a corridor linking the natural and supernatural worlds (this was reinforced by the geomantic placement of the pyramid over a spring); architectural elements proclaimed power over time and the calendar, repeating mat motifs made an international statement of political authority; and the south stairway on a greca frieze became a 200-foot-tall place glyph for the city. The Great Pyramid was a complex symbolic statement of cosmological, political, and religious messages directed to a multinational audience. An overarching theme was of passage between states of being, precisely the ideas embodied in the *coatpetl* concept as a portal linking the different planes of existence.

Numerous themes occur at the pyramid: transformation, rain/fertility, feathered serpents, calendrical cycles, and political authority. Even though these themes are found at other ceremonial centers of Mesoamerica, they do not easily fit into a single ideational model, nor should they be expected to. With the long duration of occupation/utilization of the Great Pyramid, including several changes in ethnic composition for the surrounding city, the rituals and symbolic meanings associated with the pyramid undoubtedly underwent profound changes as well. With all this potential for variation, it becomes significant when themes remain constant over long periods of time. Such an example of continuity might relate the *pulque* ritual depicted in the *Bebedores* mural when linked to the representation of the Virgin of the Remedies as the pre-Columbian *pulque* goddess Mayahuel.

Another long-lasting significance of the pyramid relates to water resources. The geomantic reason for building the pyramid, and perhaps

even for the rise of Cholula as a ceremonial center, was the spring beneath the mound. The spring was still prominently illustrated in the early Colonial *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* and is now an important shrine on the side of the mound. For the Aztecs, the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue was associated with water from the earth, with springs emerging from her womb:

[These [rivers] . . . issue from the goddess named Chalchiuhtlicue . . . [Mountains were only magic places, with earth, with rock on the surface; they were only like ollas . . . they were filled with the water which was there. If sometime it were necessary, the mountains would dissolve; the whole world would flood. And hence the people called their settlements *altepetl* (Sahugún 1950-1982, Book 11:246).

According to the Tlaxcalteca account of the Cholula massacre (Muñoz Gamargo 1948), the Cholultecas believed that if anyone attacked the holy city, the pyramid would burst open, and flood waters would wash away the attackers.

The Great Pyramid was also associated with water from the sky, as represented through the deity 9 Rain and the general mountain-worship theme discussed by Durán (1971). Mountains were the domain of the god Tlaloc and his *tlaloques*, or dwarf water spirits, who are depicted on the Great Pyramid in the *Primeros Memoriales* (Sahagún 1993:Folio 254r). One of the important reasons that pilgrims still attend the Cholula fair is to petition the Virgin for rain. Skyrockets fired from the summit of the pyramid are now used to summon the rain.

If earthly waters emerge from beneath the pyramid, and celestial waters are controlled from the summit, then the Great Pyramid itself would be a material and symbolic pathway connecting the Underworld with the Uppperworld. The mediation between heaven/earth, sun/moon, and male/female is at the core of the Ometeotl principle of divine duality, embodied by the deities Tonacatecutli and Tonacacihuatl/Xochiquetzal. Both of these deities were identified at the Great Pyramid by their calendrical name 7 Flower, which can therefore be identified as Tonacatepetl, "mountain of sustenance" (see also Manzanilla et al. 1996:255).

The concept of the Great Pyramid as a passageway linking the Underworld with the Uppperworld is repeated in the historic tradition of the pyramid as a New World Tower of Babel. It also leads back to the Aztec model of a serpent mountain, or *coatpetl*, as a mediator between the vertical layers of the cosmos (Gillespie 1989). As David Carrasco observed:

"The [Great Pyramid] was believed to be the opening to celestial forces as well as the covering over the primordial waters of the underworld" (1982:135). Ultimately, attempts to interpret the contextual meanings of the Great Pyramid result in more questions than solutions. Too little research has been done at the site, too little of what has been done has been adequately analyzed, and too little of that has been published. Was the Great Pyramid of Cholula an *axis mundi* for the pre-Columbian cultures of central Mexico? Based on such empirical criteria as overall size, longevity, and historical tradition, the answer is an unqualified yes. But to understand how and why the symbolism was acted out in practice, I can simply emphasize the need and urgency for further study.

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Notes

1. Similar humannmade, or at least modified, caves with flower-shaped chambers have been discovered in the Tepic region of Puebla, near the source of the *Historia Toltteca-Chichimeca* account (Patricio Davalos, personal communication 1999).
2. A continuation of the same motif may be present on the tablero of Stage 3b on the west side of the Great Pyramid (Sergio Suárez Cruz, personal communication), although this is probably from a later stage of construction.
3. Amalucan, another Formative period site on the eastern frontier of the Cholula kingdom, apparently attempted a similar claim to symbolic significance as its inhabitants channeled an irrigation canal beneath the principal pyramid in an effort to establish it as an *altepetl*.
4. Rex Koontz (personal communication 1999) points out that this is an architectural trait also present at El Tajín.
5. Stage 3b is known as the Edificio Toltteca, not for its cultural affiliation but because of the liberal use of Toltteca-brand cement in its reconstruction. In fact, the front portion of this building, including its staircase, was removed in antiquity when Stage 3c was built, and therefore the reliability of the reconstructed front facade is unclear. In an earlier publication (1996a), I suggested that Stage 3b postdated Stage 3a, but on closer inspection of the joints between the two structures it is apparent that Stage 3a was built onto the existing Stage 3b.
6. Altar 3 was erected at the base of the pyramid staircase during excavation in the 1960s, even though the lower half was found near Altar 2 (Contreras 1970:111). It is equally plausible, therefore, that the stela was originally attached to Altar 2 as a complementary stela/altar group (McCafferty 1996a:10), although Acosta (1970c) considered and rejected this possibility because of the size difference between the two monumental slabs.
7. The top of Altar 3 angles to a triangular point so that its shadow could have served as a sensitive measuring device of the solstice, conceptually similar to a sundial.
8. It is also very similar to painted volutes recently found at the La Ventilla compound of Classic period Teotihuacan (Rubén Cabrera, personal communication).
9. No evidence of this mural can be found at the archaeological zone, although remnants of murals are stored in tunnels of the Great Pyramid.
10. Based on representations of the ceramic vessels in the murals and actual archaeological vessels, Müller (1972) suggested that the murals dated to ca. 200 AD. Alternatively, reinterpretation of the pyramid construction sequence, especially the Ratio of the Altars, indicates that the murals date to the Epiclassic period, between 600-900 AD (McCafferty 1996a).
11. The head is also similar to a carved stone *nihui*, a Mixtec water spirit, that was found at San Juan Dixui in the Mixteca Alta (Byland and Pohl 1994:11-12, Figure 3).
12. Until recently, dried toad effigies were a popular tourist item sold in Cholula. They were usually posed and mounted in a scene, such as in a cantina or as mariachis.

13. The Great Pyramid is also identified as 7 Flower in Folios 9v-10r and 14r of the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976), although there are only 6 flowers in Folio 7v, perhaps because the paw of the frog is obscuring the other flower. Map 2 of the *Mapas de Cuauhtinchan* also identifies the Great Pyramid as 7 Flower (Simons 1968:65-66).

14. Jansen (1996) has discussed the association of the Chichimec Lord 4 Jaguar, who appears prominently in the Mixtec codices as an ally of Lord 8 Deer "Jaguar Claw" and who may also appear in Nahuatl texts from Puebla/Tlaxcala as Nacxtil, an avatar of Quetzalcoatl. It was 4 Jaguar who perforated 8 Deer's septum at Cat-tail Frieze, which Jansen identifies as Cholula. The jaguar paw and numeral 4 may represent the Great Pyramid from the Atamalculiztli ceremony as the site of 4 Jaguar.

A Sense of Place at Chichén Itzá

CYNTHIA KRISTAN-GRAHAM

For more than a century, archaeologists, art historians, ethnohistorians, and epigraphers have been studying Chichén Itzá, and a new picture of that site is emerging. Ongoing excavations indicate that Chichén Itzá is larger in area than was ever imagined, with a much more complex layout and more diverse inventory of buildings and imagery. Moreover, it appears that this late Maya capital that was home to a diverse group of Maya peoples forged a new social order with innovations in governance and public art and architecture. Although earlier Maya history has been reconstructed as a series of regional kingdoms based on royal genealogy, episodic warfare, and conquest, Chichén Itzá seems to have pioneered a new form of rulership shared among elite lineages that transcended dynastic and ethnic boundaries and that valued the rules of cooperation as much as the rules of engagement.

However, our picture of Chichén Itzá is not quite complete. A few crucial ingredients not usually considered as part of the study of Chichén Itzá proper—notably the conception of the site as a spatial nexus and the place of the original populace—can deepen an understanding of this ancient center. This emphasis on space follows recent advances in philosophy, architectural history, geography, and archaeology, wherein space is understood as a crucial link between people and social formation and as a catalyst for memory. Together, citizenry and space can be examined by asking several questions: 1) how does the plan of Chichén Itzá—essentially a constellation of terraced architectural platforms connected by a network of roads—intersect with habitation and ritual? 2) how are principles of self, family, and community embedded in the architectural landscape? and 3) how are social relations fostered and reproduced in the settlement?