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11

# Tollan Cholollan and the Legacy of Legitimacy During the Classic-Postclassic Transition

Geoffrey G. McCafferty

Recent cultural-historical syntheses of the Mexican central plateau have represented Cholula, the *other* great urban center of the Classic period, in one of two ways. In some studies, Cholula has been considered as a secondary center within the larger Teotihuacan empire, sometimes even as a sister city (e.g., Adams 1991; Weaver 1993). In such a scenario, Cholula is perceived as a faint carbon copy of Teotihuacan, with little to offer in comparison to its grander sibling. Alternatively, Cholula has been recognized as a separate polity (Miller 1996; Millon 1988), but with a material culture considered to be an "impoverished" imitation of Teotihuacan (Dumond and Müller 1972:1209). In this scenario, too, it is unnecessary to look further because Teotihuacan is bigger, better, and far more accessible. To a considerable extent, the same analogy applies to the Postclassic period as well, and thus Cholula has tended to reside in the shadows of Teotihuacan, Tula, and Tenochtitlan.

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My objective is not necessarily to bring Cholula into the spotlight, but to at least bring it out from the shadows. Specifically, I will consider Cholula in relation to Teotihuacan during the Classic period, examining dynamic strategies through which Cholulteca art and architecture communicated cultural affiliation and difference with its neighbor in the Basin of Mexico. Furthermore, I will outline Cholula's historical trajectory into the Postclassic to argue that whereas the Mexica looked to a mythical Tollan for legitimation, perhaps in partial reference to Teotihuacan, Tollan Chollollan provided the cultural continuity to transform the Classic into the Postclassic. Finally, I will consider the roots of Cholula's cultural longevity that allowed it to survive the "collapse" of other centers, to propose an alternative model that combines religion and trade in a unique blend that materialized as the Mixteca-Puebla stylistic tradition and was linked inextricably to the cult of Quetzalcoatl (Ringle, Gallereta Negrón, and Bey 1998; see also López Austin and López Luján, chapter 1 of this volume; and Nicholson, chapter 4 of this volume).

## Cholula as Axis Mundi

Cholula is located in the Puebla/Tlaxcala Valley, east of the Basin of Mexico and on the outskirts of the sprawling modern city of Puebla (Figure 11.1). It is situated on the floor of a broad and exceedingly fertile plain, noted by colonial chroniclers as among the most productive agricultural regions in New Spain (Bonfil Batalla 1973; Rojas 1927). In pre-Hispanic times, the well-watered area even included a marshy lake to the northeast of the city that probably attracted migratory waterfowl and may have permitted *chinampa* agriculture (Messmacher 1967; Mountjoy and Peterson 1973). Cholula sits atop an excellent clay source, from which ceramics were produced well into the twentieth century (Bonfil Batalla 1973). Brick making remains an economically important (though archaeologically destructive) industry. Finally, Cholula is positioned on crossroads linking the Basin of Mexico, the Gulf Coast, the Tehuacan Valley, and the Mixteca Baja, and as a consequence the city developed into an important mercantile center (Durán 1971: 138–139, 278; Pineda 1970).[1]

These resources, however, fail to explain why Cholula arose as an important religious center, the site of the Great Pyramid, or Tlachihualtepetl ("man-made mountain"), the largest and oldest continuously used shrine of the pre-Columbian world (Figure 11.2) (Marquina 1970; McCafferty 1996a and n.d.). When the Great Pyramid was begun in the Terminal Formative period, its nascent ceremonial complex was probably no different from dozens of comparable small centers throughout the Puebla/Tlaxcala region (García Cook 1981). But something happened, such that Cholula flourished while other centers within the eight-hundred-square-kilometer area that became the Cholula kingdom were abandoned (Lind 1995).

Two "cosmo-magical" principles, to borrow a term from Paul Wheatley (1971), provide clues as to why Cholula became such an important center. First, the Great Pyramid was built over a natural spring, a cosmic opening into the underworld (cf. Heyden 1981). Waters from the spring still flow out to the east of the pyramid, and a small chapel on the side of the mound covers a deep well that allows modern worshipers to sample the sacred waters. Pre-Hispanic access to the underworld



may have been available via tunnels into the pyramid, mentioned in Sahagún's (1950–1982, Introductory Volume: 48) account of the pyramid long before archaeologists began their own tunneling (Marquina 1970: 33). A chamber deep in the heart of the pyramid may have been used for ritual communion with the supernatural (Eduardo Merlo, personal communication; McCafferty 1996a: 5), and remains of a possible "tunnel" with pre-Columbian architectural features is exposed on the northeast side of the pyramid.

The second clue involves the orientation of the Great Pyramid itself. The pyramid is aligned at 24°–26° north of west (Marquina 1970; Tichy 1981: 223), facing the setting sun at the summer solstice. At that time of year, the sun sets behind the twin volcanoes Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl, which therefore block out the fading sun's rays and focus the dying light on the Great Pyramid on the longest day of the solar year. A temple atop that pyramid would be the last point illuminated in the valley, and would be visible from throughout the region.

Interestingly, when Fray Diego Durán wrote about the Great Pyramid in the mid-1500s it was in a chapter on mountain worship (1971: 259). Petitioners as-

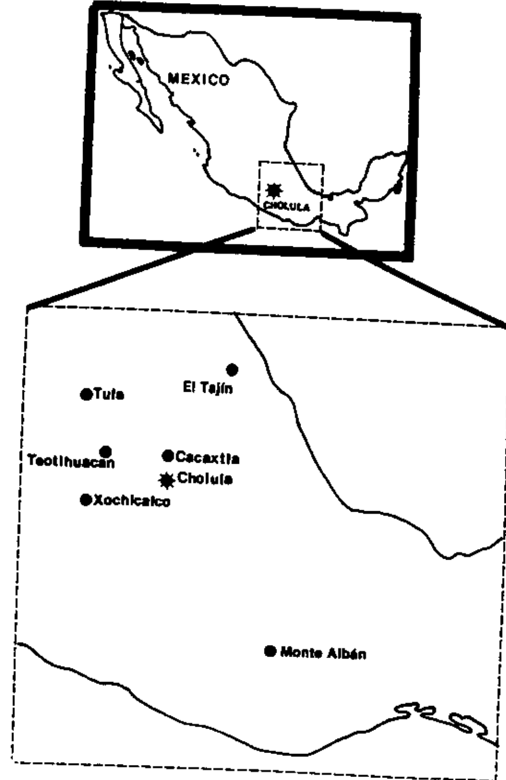


Fig. 11.1. Map of central Mexico, showing Cholula and some of its major eontemporaries during the Classic-Postclassic transition.

cended the pyramid to pray to the Lord of Created Things, that is, the solar deity Tonacatecuhtli. The Great Pyramid is identified in several colonial manuscripts as 7 Flower (Simons 1968: 65–66, lám. 4; *Historia tolteca-chichimeca* 1976: 9v–10r, 14r), the calendrical name for the Mixtec solar deity that parallels Tonacatecuhtli (Furst 1978:164). It is therefore likely that at least during the Postclassic period the pyramid was associated with the primordial sun, though the orientation of the pyramid suggests that this meaning may have considerable time depth.

By building an earthen pyramid, a "man-made mountain," over a spring, the ancient Cholultecas physically created an *altepetl*, or "water-mountain," the fundamental concept of the central Mexican polity (Lockhart 1992; also Matos Moctezuma, chapter 6 of this volume). By constructing a mountain over a spring, the Cholultecas also created Coatepetl, a "serpent hill" like a cosmic elevator shaft linking the underworld with the heavens (Gillespie 1989: 87). As Davíd Carrasco (1992: 135) has described it: "The [Great P]yramid was believed to be the opening to celestial forces as well as the covering over the primordial waters of the underworld." Finally, the Great Pyramid became Sustenance Mountain, a source of fertility and abundance that during the Classic period may have been associated with the Teotihuacan Great Goddess (Berlo 1993; Manzanilla, chapter 2 of this volume).

It is unclear what sociopolitical processes went into the emergence of Cholula as a religious center—we simply have not yet conducted enough problem-oriented research focused on addressing the question. One thing that is obvious,

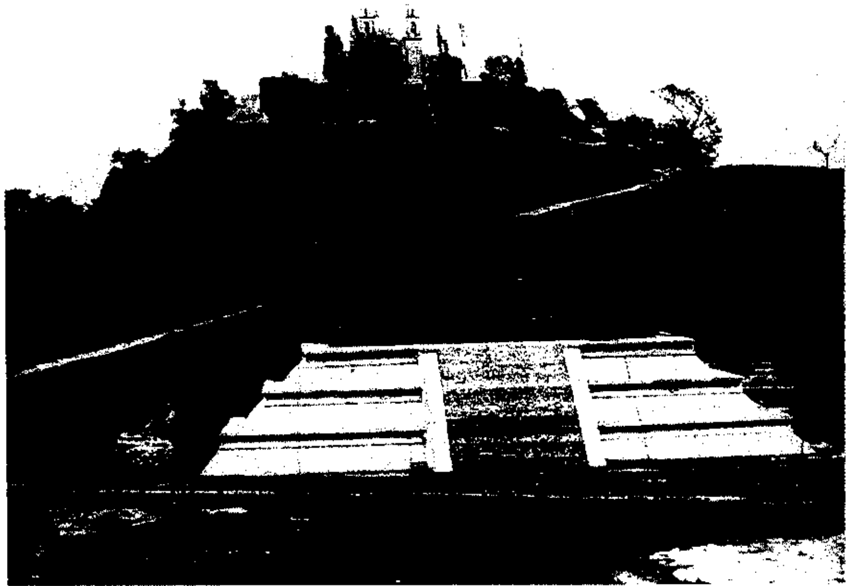

Fig. 11.2. The Great Pyramid of Cholula, from the west, showing Stages 3 A, B, and C as well as the Church of the Virgen de los Remedios on top of the pyramid.



however, is that Cholula was built around a fundamental principle that was in some ways similar to, but in others different from (and perhaps even intentionally contrasted with) Teotihuacan. The Great Pyramid, the urban grid of Cholula, and even field boundaries throughout the Cholula kingdom are oriented at 24°–26° north-of-west (Marquina 1970; Tichy 1981: 223), and are therefore clearly differentiated from the orientation of Teotihuacan and its hinterland. This was undoubtedly an important factor in the construction of the symbolic landscape relating to state-level ideology, though the specific meanings of the material discourse remain to be explicated.

### The Great Pyramid of Cholula

The Great Pyramid, *Tlachihualtepetl*, is the best-known monument from Cholula. In a recent reinterpretation of its construction history, I argue that the Great Pyramid was built in four major stages, plus at least nine partial modifications (Figure 11.3) (McCafferty 1996a). The ceremonial precinct was built up over a 1,700-year period between approximately 500 B.C.E. and 1200 C.E., though it must be emphasized that the Cholula chronology remains problematic (McCafferty 1996b). Since the pyramid continued as an important shrine during the Late Postclassic period, and later became a major pilgrimage site dedicated to the Virgen de los Remedios (Olivera 1970), the Great Pyramid continues as an axis mundi after at least 2,500 years.

Throughout this long history, however, meanings accrued and became transformed as the Great Pyramid evolved as a dynamic symbolic landscape (McCafferty n.d.). Just as the grid orientation may have expressed a discourse of difference relative to Teotihuacan, architectural and decorative elements of the pyramid sometimes shared Teotihuacan canons, but sometimes they were quite distinct. Following Debra Nagao (1989), the "public proclamations" of Cholula monumental architecture were an ongoing dialogue about affiliation and discord.

Stage 1 of the Great Pyramid, for example, featured Teotihuacan-style *talud-tablero* architecture with *tablero* murals of a skeletal head, depicted frontally, with a larval body stretched to the side (Marquina 1970: 39, lám. 1) (Figure 11.4). This may represent cyclical death and rebirth through metaphoric reference to a butterfly's life-cycle (Berlo 1983). The configuration of a frontal head and profile body, however, also recalls the *tablero* of the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent at Teotihuacan. Through architecture and monumental art, the builders of this initial stage of the pyramid may have claimed political/ideological affiliation with Teotihuacan.

The second stage of the Great Pyramid is like no other in Mesoamerica (Margain 1971: 69). It measured 180 meters on a side, rising in nine levels to 35 meters in height, where an upper platform measured 90 meters square (Marquina 1970: 39). What is unique about this structure is that each side is made up entirely of steps, so that access to the top would have been possible from any direction. There was a prominent raised stairway of fifty-two steps on the north side of the pyramid. The use of such cosmologically significant numbers as architectural units implies yet another level of meaning for this incarnation of the Great Pyramid. Yet, while the calendrical principles expressed may have some relationship to

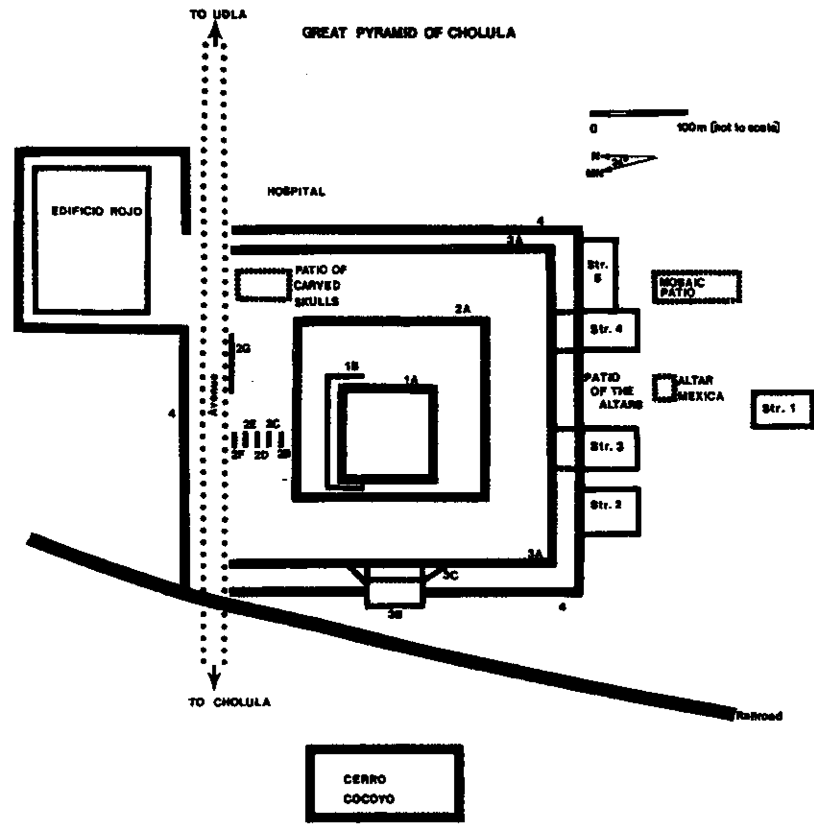


Fig. 11.3. Plan view of Great Pyramid showing construction stages.

the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent at Teotihuacan (López Austin, López Luján, and Sugiyama 1991; also see Sugiyama, chapter 3 of this volume, and Taube, chapter 10 of this volume), the architectural medium of that message was distinct. Affiliation with Teotihuacan may have been symbolically rejected as Cholulteca architects chose to ignore the *talud-tablero* style that had become iconic of the Teotihuacan canon to experiment with alternative forms, including the four-sided pyramid that was later prominent at Maya sites such as Chichén Itzá. In fact, a late modification (Stage 2G) features a painted *tablero* of black rectangles outlined in white, resembling the Temple of the Niches at El Tajín (Marquina 1970: 40–41), suggesting that during this period cultural affiliations may have already been oriented toward the Gulf Coast.

Stage 3A of the Great Pyramid expanded to 350 meters on a side, and reached a height of about 65 meters (Marquina 1970: 41). Note that this is over twice the volume of Teotihuacan's Pyramid of the Sun. Architectual façades again used a Teotihuacan-style *talud/tablero* form. The chronology of this construction phase is problematic, however, though it has been been assumed that the presence of



the *talud-tablero* architecture indicates contemporaneity with Teotihuacan. But if Stage 2G is related to a Tajínoid Gulf Coast influence (as is the Edificio Rojo, discussed below), then, based on new dates from El Tajín (Brueggemann and Ortega Guevara 1989), Teotihuacan may have been declining if not already abandoned at the time that Stage 3A was built. Though far from conclusive, it may be that the architects of Stage 3A were attempting a symbolic "proclamation" of Cholula's role as legitimate heir to Teotihuacan's cosmic centrality.

Besides the Great Pyramid, several other Classic-period pyramids still exist throughout Cholula, rising like islands in a sea of urban development. Cerro Cocoyo (now known as Acozoc) lies due west of the Great Pyramid, across a wide clearing that was most likely the central plaza of the Classic ceremonial center. To the southwest is a tall adobe nucleus—all that remains of another pyramid whose façades have been stripped away, presumably to make adobe bricks. Northeast of the Great Pyramid is the Edificio Rojo, a large pyramid platform with a well-preserved staircase and stucco façade bearing stylistic similarities to El Tajín (Rex

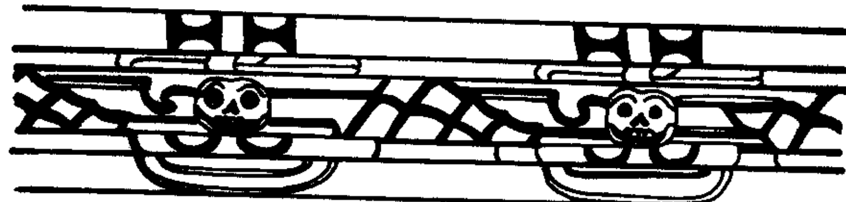

Fig. 11.4. "Chapulin" mural from Stage 1B of Great Pyramid.

Koontz, personal communication). It is well-preserved because the structure was engulfed by the Epiclassic expansion of the "man-made mountain." Across town, about 2 kilometers west of the Great Pyramid, is the Cerrito de Guadalupe, whose base is also made of a nucleus of adobe brick, indicating that this may be yet another unexplored pyramid. Cortés (1986: 75) noted over 430 temples in Cholula at the time of the Conquest, and many of these may have originally been Classic-period structures. Yet while there is considerable evidence for monumental construction, the settlement size for Classic-period Cholula was only about 4 square kilometers, with an estimated population of perhaps 20–25,000 (McCafferty 1996b: 304).

Aside from architectural comparisons, evidence to evaluate interaction between Cholula and Teotihuacan during the Classic period has been scant. Both Eduardo Noguera (1954) and Florencia Müller (1970, 1978), in their respective volumes on Cholula ceramics, noted similarities in pottery and figurine styles between the two areas. Noguera pointed to greater similarities in the Early Classic, noting that the Cholultecas may have been ethnically related to the people of Teotihuacan, but he suggested that there was greater divergence between the two cultures later in the sequence (Noguera 1954: 188).

## The R–106 Classic Household

In 1993, rescue excavation R–106 by Arqlgo. Sergio Suárez C. of the INAH Centro Regional de Puebla encountered a Classic-period house, dubbed the "Transito" site, within the urban zone of Cholula (McCafferty and Suárez C. 1994). Four radiocarbon samples date the occupation to the Late Classic, between 400 and 650 C.E. (McCafferty 1996b). Architectural features and material culture from the Transito site now provide an unprecedented opportunity to compare Cholula domestic practices with those of Teotihuacan.

The house was small, with only two rooms separated by a well-formed doorway (Figure 11.5). Intrusive middens and other postdepositional disturbances (and a lack of time) hindered further delimitation of the structure, but exterior walls were identified on the west and east sides, while exterior features were located to the south. The house floors were made of a thick stucco; the low remains of adobe walls also had remnants of plaster. Outside the structure wall on the west was a high density of obsidian production debris, probably refuse from a workshop (Edelstein 1995). Because the floor was less than 50 centimeters beneath the ground surface, plow disturbance had thoroughly mixed artifacts above the floor,

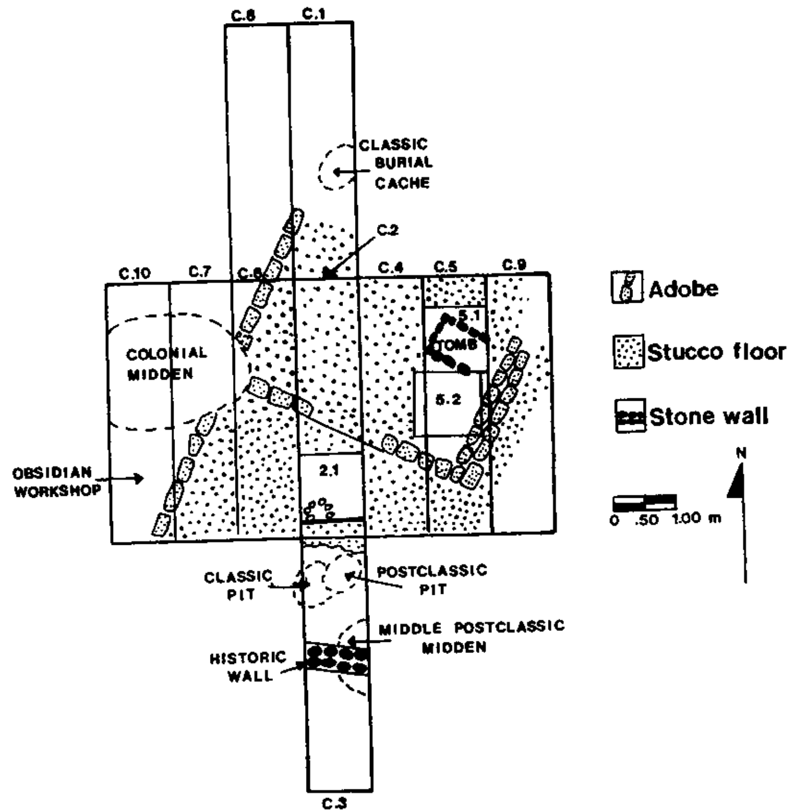


Fig. 11.5. Plan of R-106 excavation.



to the extent that there were even plow scars in the plaster surface. In order to obtain a more representative sample of artifacts with which to date the structure, a series of 1 meter by 1 meter units were excavated through the floor in areas where the unbroken floor surface indicated the potential for sealed deposits.

By chance, the first test pit encountered an area where several earlier stucco floors had been removed in antiquity in order to excavate down to a burial chamber. This crypt's walls were lined with stone on three sides, while on the unlined west end it extended slightly under the exterior structure wall. Fragmentary skeletal remains of two secondary burials were found on the earthen floor of the tomb, while the excavated context of superimposed floors and sequential tomb entry suggested that the interments may have been from different generations of the same lineage (McCafferty and Suárez 1994). Six Tepontla Burnished Gray Brown vessels were found in a niche hollowed out beneath the structure wall. Other items included two greenstone beads, an obsidian projectile point, a bone spindle whorl, and several figurines. Most of these items, however, were located in the fill above the burials so it is unclear if all were, in fact, offerings. The material remains from the tomb, tomb fill, and from the other pits beneath the house floor included unmixed artifacts from the Classic period. Ceramic types included a monochrome serving ware (Tepontla Burnished Gray Brown), an orangish utilitarian ware (Acozoc Tan Orange), and Teotihuacan Thin Orange, including several variations that may be local imitations (McCafferty 1996b: 307). Strong similarities exist between these types and Classic Teotihuacan ceramics in vessel form and surface treatment. Teotihuacan Thin Orange comprised about 8 percent of all rim sherds found beneath the house floor. Figurines were also stylistically similar to Teotihuacan, especially for the Tlamimilolpa and Xolalpan phases (Charles Kolb, personal communication).

Obsidian from beneath the floor and from the workshop debris was nearly all green (Edelstein 1995), and therefore was obtained from the Cerro de las Navajas source near Pachuca, Hidalgo. Notably, obsidian waste flakes represented all phases of the reduction sequence, including flakes with external matrix indicative of the initial phase of the core preparation process. This suggests that Cholula may have had direct access to Pachuca sources that bypassed the suggested Teotihuacan "monopoly" (Santley 1983).

Extrapolating from the R–106 evidence suggests that Cholula and Teotihuacan may have shared certain fundamental elements of domestic culture, including pottery styles and certain foodways, obsidian resource procurement areas and redistribution networks, and household ritual as indicated by the figurines (cf. Brumfiel 1996). This suggests that the two populations were culturally similar and may have shared ethnic origins.

Yet other factors present important differences. Several components of Teotihuacan material culture are absent at R–106 (and are very rare at Cholula in general), such as *candeleros* and other censer types representative of Teotihuacan's state religion (Berlo 1982). The Transito site structure walls were aligned at 24° north of west, conforming to the grid orientation of Cholula but in contrast to Teotihuacan. The building was probably a single-family dwelling, based on its simple, two-room floor plan, in further

apartment compounds common to Teotihuacan. The mortuary practice of secondary burials in a prepared, stone-lined tomb is unknown from Teotihuacan (Serrano S. 1993; but see García Cook, Arias M.G., and Abascal M. 1976 for a comparable stone-lined crypt from Tlaxcala). Single-family houses with well-built tombs such as that found at R–106 imply a very different conception of the individual and lineage than that of Teotihuacan (cf. Cowgill 1993). These data suggest that despite fundamental cultural similarities an ideology of distinction may have existed between Cholula and Teotihuacan during the Late Classic period whereby political and state-level religious differences were projected, perhaps to mask deeper cultural patterns.

### Classic-postclassic Continuity at Cholula

Throughout the central plateau, the end of the Classic period represents a time of dramatic change, including the abandonment of ceremonial centers associated with the "old" regime. So although Teotihuacan remained the principal population center of the Epiclassic Basin of Mexico, the ceremonial structures along the Avenue of the Dead were desecrated and destroyed (Millon 1988). Traditional interpretations of Cholula's ceremonial center have followed this model, too, with explanations of volcanic eruption, flooding, and general social upheaval all used to account for a hypothetical abandonment of the Great Pyramid and perhaps even the city itself (Dumond and Müller 1972; García Cook 1981; García Cook and Merino C. 1990; Mountjoy 1987; Müller 1978; Suárez C. and Martínez A. 1993; but see Sanders 1989).

I disagree, and instead argue for a model of cultural continuity as originally proposed by Noguera (1954) and Marquina (1951), based on their initial research results. Under this interpretation, Cholula continued as an important ceremonial center throughout the Classic to Postclassic transition, albeit with substantial change in material culture, probably as the result of changing ethnic composition and religious orientation.

During the Epiclassic, major additions were made to the exterior of Stage 3 of the Great Pyramid on at least the south and west sides, particularly at the Patio of the Altars (McCafferty 1996a). The patio was built up in a sequence of six construction stages bounded by long platforms, the earliest of which were attached to the Teotihuacan-style *talud/tablero* of Stage 3A. The platform façades retain a similar style of greca-decorated taluds throughout the construction sequence (Acosta 1970a). It was on an early phase of the Patio of the Altars that the famous Bebedores mural was painted, depicting 50 meters of drunken revelry (Marquina 1971; Müller 1972).

The "Altar Mexica"[2] is located about 3 meters beneath the surface of the final phase of the Patio of the Altars (Figure 11.6). It contained skeletal remains of several ceremonially interred individuals (López A., Lagunas R., and Serrano S. 1976), with Cocoyotla Black-on-Natural ceramics that clearly indicate that the altar dates to the Epiclassic period (McCafferty 1996b). This "late" pottery should not be considered an anomaly, since similar ceramics were encountered as an offering beneath Altar 2 of the Patio of the Altars (Acosta 1970b), and at Edificio 1 south of the Patio (Matos and López V. 1967). In fact, a stratigraphic profile



indicates that virtually all of the deposition in this area was post-Classic (Müller 1970: 132, fig. 22). So although lacking absolute dates for support, or even many primary depositional contexts for independent confirmation, I contend that much of the southern ceremonial precinct was built following the end of the Classic period.

Decoration at the Patio of the Altars is in an eclectic style that combines traits from the Gulf Coast, Mixteca Alta, and even the Maya region (McCafferty n.d.). Carved stone stela/altar groups feature volute borders around blank central panels in a style strongly reminiscent of El Tajín (Acosta 1970c). Murals with polychrome diagonal bands, and architectural *taludes* of continuous grecas are both typical architectural elements in Mixtec painted manuscripts (McCafferty 1994). An extensive "mat" motif on the *tablero* of Pyramid Stage 3B may also relate to Mixtec iconography, but the most vivid archaeological parallels come from Maya sites such as Copán and Chichén Itzá (Fash 1991: 130–134). Another mat motif from Cholula was depicted as a polychrome mural at the Patio of the Altars (Marquina 1970: lám. 3). A final mural of note was a polychrome feathered serpent (Acosta 1970d).

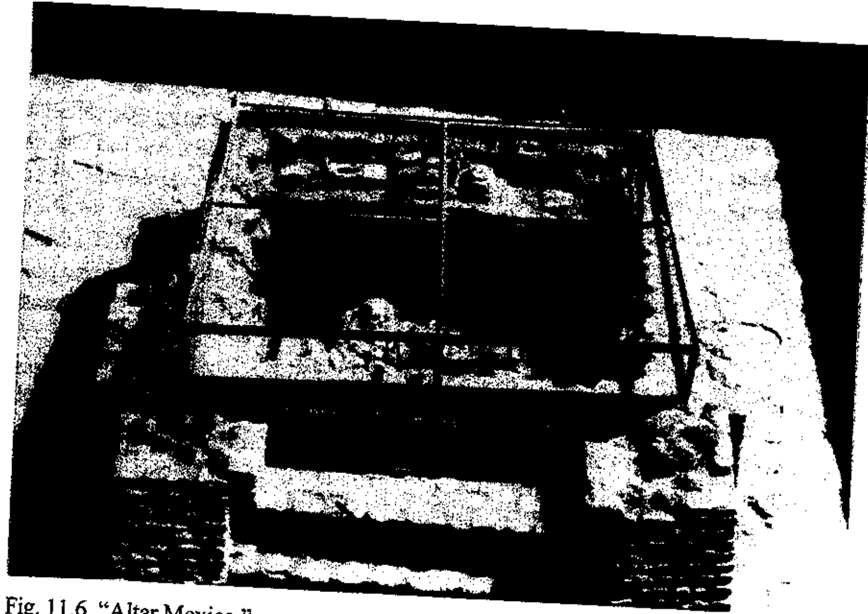

Fig. 11.6. "Altar Mexica."

Stylistic information from the ceremonial precinct proclaims a dynamic program of affiliation. Upon a Teotihuacan-style *talud-tablero* architectural background (Stage 3A), diverse styles were overlain in a palimpset of multi-ethnic internationalism.

### The Olmeca-Xicallanca at Cholula

The presence of possible Gulf Coast and Maya influences at Cholula during the Epiclassic period is notable because it corresponds with ethnohistorical accounts of the arrival and settlement at the city by members of the

ethnic group, with probable ties to the southern Gulf Coast. According to Ixtlilxochitl (1975–1977, I: 530–531), Cholula was inhabited by "giants," or *quinametinime*, when the Olmeca-Xicallanca arrived and defeated them. The "giants" are generally interpreted as the ancestral Teotihuacanos (Davies 1977: 46). The Olmeca-Xicallanca then built the Great Pyramid (or at least the final stages of it) with the help of their lord Quetzalcoatl, and resided in Cholula until the destruction of the Third Age of the World by wind.

Clearly this legend is steeped in myth, but there may be important kernals of historical fact wrapped in fancy. Feathered-serpent imagery at the Patio of the Altars, for example, is the first known appearance of Quetzalcoatl iconography at the Great Pyramid,[3] though it later became prominent on polychrome pottery of the Postclassic period. The arrival of Quetzalcoatl's cult at Cholula and its coincidence with the final building phases of the Great Pyramid suggest that changes in the material culture relate to ethnic change associated with the arrival of the Olmeca-Xicallanca.

Gulf Coast and Maya stylistic elements at the ceremonial center may also indicate cultural importations. The vivid murals at the nearby site of Cacaxtla support a theme of ethnic conflict involving individuals displaying Maya physical and iconographic traits (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994; McVicker 1985; Quirarte 1983), and the site was identified as a stronghold of the Olmeca-Xicallanca in colonial accounts (Abascal et al. 1976; Muñoz Camargo 1948). At Cholula, an elaborate burial from a platform on the south side of the Great Pyramid contained an adult male with distinctively Maya-style tabular oblique cranial deformation and teeth inlaid with greenstone and pyrite that Sergio Suárez C. (1985; McCafferty 1992a) interprets as a Maya merchant/priest. Additionally, early polychrome pottery from Cholula features close similarities to ceramics from Isla de Sacrificios, Veracruz (McCafferty 1996b).

All of this evidence suggests intriguing possibilities as to cultural changes that may have taken place in Cholula following the end of the Classic period. Extracting history from myth is a delicate balancing act, and the legendary Olmeca-Xicallanca are a particularly ephemeral group to identify (Chadwick 1966; Davies 1977; Jiménez Moreno 1942; Olivera and Reyes 1969). The name suggests an origin in the southern Gulf Coast, around the port-of-trade known as Xicalango, located near the mouth of the Coatzalcoalcos River. Thus they may have been related to the Chontal and/or Putún Maya, and were associated with long-distance coastal traders (Webb 1973). I suggest that the Olmeca-Xicallanca were the culture brokers who transformed Classic canons into the international style of the Postclassic, and Cholula was the crucible in which the metamorphosis transpired.

### The Patio of the Carved Skulls

The *Historia tolteca-chichimeca* (1976) depicts the arrival of Nahua Tolteca-Chichimeca in Cholula in the Early Postclassic period, ca. 1200 C.E. The Tolteca-Chichimeca encountered the Olmeca-Xicallanca at Tollan Chollollan Tlachihualtepetl, "the Great City of Cholula and the Man-Made Mountain." In a scene depicting the Great Pyramid (*Historia tolteca-chichimeca* 1976: fol. 7v) (Figure 11.7), the two lords of the Tolteca-Chichimeca meet one of the two high-



priests of the Olmeca-Xicallanca, the Aquiach Amapane, at his palace on a platform of the Great Pyramid. Based on the orientation of the spring flowing from beneath the pyramid, it can be inferred that the palace is on the northeast corner of the mound (McCafferty 1996a).

Eduardo Noguera (1937) excavated a palace on the northeast corner of the Great Pyramid in the 1930s, and among other things he discovered the Altar of the Carved Skulls, a miniature pyramid altar that is nearly identical to the Altar Mexica from the south side of the Great Pyramid. The Altar of the Carved Skulls contained the skeletal remains of two adults, a male and a female, with exotic grave goods including Cocoyotla Black-on-Natural vessels similar to those from the Altar Mexica to further support their contemporaneity. The altar was located in a courtyard, with staircases to raised platforms on at least two sides (Figure 11.8). Interestingly, while the courtyard was oriented at 24° north of west, consistent with the Cholula ceremonial zone, the Altar itself was oriented at 16°, more typical of Teotihuacan's and Tula's alignment.

In 1994, Sergio Suárez C. directed small-scale excavations at the patio surrounding the Altar of the Carved Skulls during consolidation of the platform (McCafferty 1996b: 310–312; McCafferty and Suárez C. 1995). Six stages of construction were identified, including an earlier altar that was partially demolished when the later patio was built. The patio seems to have been just one phase of a

Fig. 11.7. Great Pyramid Tlachihualtepetl, showing location of the palace of Aquiach Amapane (*Historia tolteca-chichimeca* 1976: folio 7v).

long sequence of palace construction on the platform, where both earlier and later structures are identifiable from exposed floor surfaces. This sequence suggests continuous occupation of a prominent and undoubtedly prestigious location on the side of the Great Pyramid, but also a succession of change. Judging from the occupants of the Altar of the Carved Skulls, the altars may have been ancestral shrines for lineage founders. If so, then the partial demolition of Altar 2 when the courtyard was remodelled could indicate a dynastic change. Because the "new" altar was then built to a distinctive orientation, it may again suggest claims on the Teotihuacan legacy.

The material evidence from the Patio of the Carved Skulls excavation reveals a surprising combination of Classic and Postclassic elements. The two most important serving wares present are Tepontla Burnished Gray Brown, the major type found in Classic contexts such as the Transito site, and Cocoyotla Black-on-Natural, the bichrome sometimes referred to as Aztec I Black-on-Orange. Also

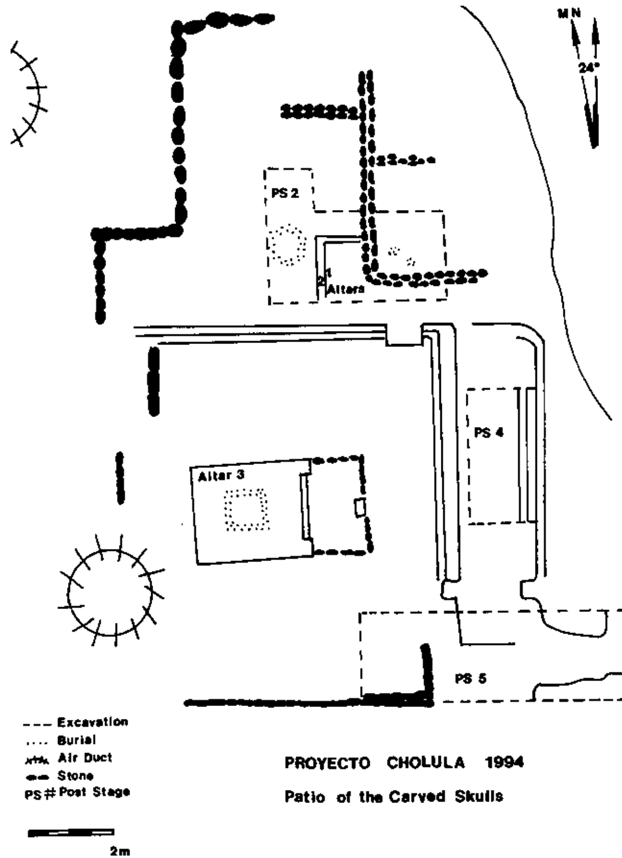


Fig. 11.8. Plan of Patio of the Carved Skulls excavation.



present were flat-bottomed bowls with stamp-impressed designs (*fondos sellados*), that also continue into the Early Postclassic period. The predominant utilitarian ware was the Classic period Acozoc Tan Orange, but significant amounts of Postclassic Momoxpan Orange and San Andrés Red were also present. The co-occurence of Classic and Early Postclassic diagnostics associated with all six of the construction stages argues for a gradual transition between Classic and Postclassic populations, and not a dramatic cultural break caused by site abandonment.

Other aspects of the material culture provide additional information on the cultural processes of the transition. Import pottery, though rare in the small samples recovered, indicated that contact with the Gulf Coast may have been more significant than with the Basin of Mexico—only a single sherd of Mazapan Red-on-Buff was recovered. Figurines are flattened and mold-made, and generally represent females. One fragment of a figurine headdress features a floral band in a pattern very similar to the figurines discovered at Xochitecatl near Cacaxtla (Serra Puche 1996; Spranz 1982). Green obsidian is almost absent from the Patio of the Carved Skulls (Edelstein 1995), in marked contrast to the pattern at the Transito site, and the predominant gray and black obsidians probably come from sources in the Orizaba area between Puebla and the Gulf Coast.

Archaeological evidence from the Patio of the Carved Skulls supports a reorientation of foreign interaction toward the Gulf Coast, even as symbolic statements via architectural orientation proclaimed affiliation with Teotihuacan. This pattern parallels the "public proclamations" of the architectural program of Stage 2 of the Great Pyramid, with stylistic elements associated with the Gulf Coast and only later, in Stage 3A, a return to Teotihuacan-style *talud-tablero* façades. It also suggests a gradual integration of new elements with the established canons of the Classic period. It must be pointed out, however, that this was a very small-scale investigation, and these interpretations will remain tentative until additional research can take place.[4]

### Origins of the Mixteca-Puebla Tradition at Cholula

Noguera (1954: 219–224) noted that polychrome pottery was fairly common on the surface of the Great Pyramid, but was absent from its interior. Only a single sherd of Cholula polychrome was found at the Patio of the Carved Skulls, but it was prominent in other parts of the northeast platform. The origin of the polychrome ceramic tradition has been a source of confusion in cultural-historical reconstructions of Postclassic Cholula (McCafferty 1994; Nicholson 1982; Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994; Smith and Heath-Smith 1980). Noguera (1954) distinguished three Postclassic phases based on distinct polychrome assemblages. Müller (1978) viewed all polychromes as occurring in the Late Postclassic Cholulteca III phase, beginning in 1325 C.E. As a result, contexts with polychrome were dated as *late*, and thus few Early Postclassic assemblages were recognized, leading to the conclusion that Cholula was depopulated until the Late Postclassic (Dumond and Müller 1972; Müller 1978).

Several recent studies have challenged Müller's sequence for the origins of Cholula polychrome. Primary depositional contexts from the Universidad de las

Américas identified assemblages with very different concentrations of polychrome types, suggesting that they did not all occur at the same time (Barrientos 1980; Lind 1994; McCafferty 1992b; Mountjoy and Peterson 1973). Suárez C. (1994) excavated a well with polychrome and Black-on-Natural pottery dating to 900–1000 C.E., based on two radiocarbon dates. Based on a seriation of domestic contexts from the UA–1 site, the Postclassic can now be divided into five phases, each with a distinctive ceramic complex (McCafferty 1992b, 1994, 1996b).

As a result of this research, we can now suggest that polychrome pottery was being produced at least by 900 C.E. (and therefore the Patio of the Carved Skulls predates this development). These early polychromes correspond to an incipient form of what would become the Mixteca-Puebla stylistic tradition (Figure 11.9). Based on the cultural mix in Cholula at this time, it can be inferred that the Mixteca-Puebla style was a product of the combination of Gulf Coast and Oaxacan elements with canons from Classic Cholula. The Mixteca-Puebla tradition became the "international" style of the Postclassic (Robertson 1970), the iconographic vocabulary of elite communication and religious representation (Nicholson 1960 and 1982; Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994).

### Late Postclassic Cholula

With the arrival of the Tolteca-Chichimeca groups ca. 1200 C.E., the Great Pyramid of Cholula lost its primacy as the focus of Cholula's religious administration. A new ceremonial center was built in what is now the plaza of San Pedro Cholula, with the major pyramid dedicated to Quetzalcoatl (*Historia tolteca-chichimeca* 1976; Marquina 1970; Rojas 1927). The Great Pyramid retained some importance, as mentioned above in relation to mountain worship, and also as a shrine to a rain deity, Chiconauquiahuitl (9 Rain) (Rojas 1927).

There is some evidence that the abandonment of the Great Pyramid was not a peaceful transition. The sculptures of the final phase of the Patio of the Altars were thrown down, shattered, and then scattered (Acosta 1970b). An Early Postclassic house at UA–1 was burned, and over 100 projectile points were discovered in the small area excavated (McCafferty 1992b), suggesting possible warfare. No finished façade has ever been found for the final stage of the Great Pyramid, suggesting that it was either never completed, or else it may have been stripped off for later construction purposes (McCafferty 1996a). If the stripping

| *Phase* | *Dates* | *Complex* |
|---|---|---|
| Late Chololian | 1400–1520 C.E. | UA-79 Feature 10 |
| Early Chololian | 1200–1400 C.E. | UA-70 midden |
| Late Tlachihualtepetl | 1050–1200 C.E. | UA-1 Structure 1 |
| Middle Tlachihualtepetl | 900–1050 C.E. | San Pedro well |
| Early Tlachihualtepetl | 700–900 C.E. | Patio of Carved Skulls |

Table 11.1. Postclassic Chronology and Ceramic Complexes.

Fig. 11.9. Early Postclassic polychrome with portrait of figure in feathered headdress (Ocotlan Red Rim subtype Cristina Matte, UA–1 #10927).

of a captive was an act of humiliation and a pan-Mesoamerican indication of defeat (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994), could the stripping of a pyramid be evidence that it too was in disgrace? Leonardo López Luján (1998) notes that the pyramid of Tlatelolco was kept in a state of filth and disuse after its city's defeat by the Tenochca; perhaps a similar concept was at work at the Great Pyramid. Following the indigenous description of a pyramid as a *cue* (Diáz del Castillo 1963: 19), derived from *cueitl* ("skirt"), perhaps removing the dressed-stone façade was the metaphoric equivalent of "undressing" the pyramid.

Late Postclassic Cholula was the center for the cult of Quetzalcoatl, and ethnohistoric accounts provide abundant evidence for its religious significance (Durán 1971; Rojas 1927; Sahagún 1950–1982, book 1; Torquemada 1975–1983; see also Nicholson, chaper 4 of this volume). Bernal Diáz de Castillo (1963: 202) noted that the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl was taller than the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan. Nobles from throughout central Mexico came to Cholula for political legitimation (Rojas 1927), while the Tenochca lords went to great lengths to smuggle nobles from Cholula into their own coronation ceremonies (Durán 1994). Peregrinations to the Temple of Quetzalcoatl were so extensive that Spanish chroniclers described Cholula as the Rome or Mecca of New Spain (Rojas 1927; Sahagún 1950–1982, Introductory Volume). In the 1581 *Descripción de Cholula*, Gabriel de Rojas (1927) commented that many of the houses in the city were empty, reserved for the periodic visits of foreign nobles during religious festivals. As a center of

priestly knowledge, Cholula probably housed an extensive library of genealogical codices as well as religious texts such as the *Codex Borgia* (Nicholson 1966).

Ethnohistorical accounts also describe the administrative organization of the pre-Hispanic city (Rojas 1927; summarized in Carrasco 1971; Lind 1990). Dual high priests, the Aquiach and the Tlalchiach, administered the the religious affairs of the state, especially those associated with the temple of Quetzalcoatl. Civic matters were controlled by a council of elders, probably lineage heads representing different *calpultin* (lineage-based neighborhoods). Additional political organizations probably also existed, resulting in factional competition. Díaz del Castillo captured a hint of this complexity when he wrote that, following the Cholula massacre at the hand of Cortés and his followers, "certain *Caciques* and *papas* of Cholula [came forth] who belonged to other districts and claimed to have taken no part in the plot—for it is a large city and they were a separate party or faction" (1963: 200). It is very possible that these other factions were descendants of the Olmeca-Xicallanca, living in what is now San Andrés Cholula (Olivera and Reyes 1969).

In addition to the religious importance of Cholula, it was also a major commercial center. *Pochteca* merchants affiliated with the cult of Quetzalcoatl-Yacatecuhtli traveled throughout Mesoamerica acquiring precious objects to exchange in the Cholula marketplace (Durán 1971; Pineda 1970), and in the process they distributed objects of the Mixteca-Puebla style. Bernardino de Sahagún (1950–1982, book 9) recorded detailed information on the organization of the *pochteca* from a perspective of Aztec state-control, but the organization of merchants at Cholula seems to have been more open to individual initiative. Long-distance entrepeneurs journeyed for years at a time to acquire wealth that they then used to finance religious ceremonies dedicated to Quetzalcoatl.

Postclassic Cholula was organized around dual principles of religion and trade. Although it did take part in the "flowery wars" in opposition to the Triple Alliance (Durán 1994), militarism never seems to have been an important facet of its political strategy. Instead, Cholula maintained prestige based on its religious preeminence relating to Quetzalcoatl, its international economy funded by the *pochteca* using Mixteca-Puebla iconography as currency, and its historical legacy dating back to the age of the giants.

## Conclusion

The model of Postclassic Cholula and its political economy is quite different from that of other pre-Columbian states. Cholula was organized around a religious administration of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, closely linked to long-distance trade. It seems to have developed a unique strategy for establishing a far-flung empire based around religion, using the material media of ceramics, textiles, featherwork, and metalwork, all symbolically charged with Mixteca-Puebla iconography for use in elite communication.

In this respect, Cholula may have been distinct from the better-known political models of the Aztec or Maya. Militarism was never an important theme in the iconography of Cholula. In fact, a better comparison might be Polanyi's model of a port-of-trade (Berdan 1978; Chapman 1957), a neutral territory on the fringe of



more "powerful" states where merchants from even warring kingdoms could interact in safety. The merchants, however, were protected under the evangelical umbrella of the cult of Quetzalcoatl, and their stock in trade, exotic objects crafted in the Mixteca-Puebla style, served to spread that cult as they created a prestige economy of elite goods, what Mary Helms (1995) calls the "kingly ideal." An ethnographic analogue to this process may be found in Islamic Africa, where the Hausa created a commercial "diaspora" that included religious icons along with other items (Curtin 1984).

This model may have deep historical roots, dating back into the Classic period, but it crystallized in the Epiclassic. With the arrival of the Olmeca-Xicallanca, Cholula became the highland hub of an international trading empire, probably connected with the other great port-of-trade described in colonial sources, Xicalango. Through the combination of trade and religion, Cholula was able to not only survive the sociopolitical upheavals of the Classic-period collapse, but, through dynamic transformation, reinvent itself as a new entity based on cultural diversity, supernatural authority, and international trade.

How does this model relate to the Teotihuacan canon of statecraft? Archaeological evidence from Teotihuacan clearly indicates that it was created around cosmological principles, establishing itself in the Early Classic period as an axis mundi revolving around the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon. Far-flung pockets of Teotihuacan-style iconography indicate that the ideas, if not the actual Teotihuacanos, were internationally recognized sources of legitimacy (Fash and Fash, chapter 14 of this volume), while distribution of Teotihuacan-controlled consumer goods such as green obsidian and Thin Orange pottery suggests a commercial network that may have been comparable to the Postclassic *pochteca*. In sum, Teotihuacan seems to have relied on religion and trade as the machinery of empire. Cholula may therefore provide a model, with ethnohistoric detail, for understanding the inner workings of Classic Teotihuacan.

The end of Teotihuacan as a ceremonial center is dramatically documented by the burning and destruction along the Avenue of the Dead (Millon 1988), ushering in what has been called the "Classic collapse." In contrast to previous models that suggested that Cholula itself was similarly diminished (e.g., Dumond and Müller 1972; Mountjoy 1987), recent evidence indicates that the Cholula ceremonial precinct flourished during the Epiclassic period, with new construction at the Great Pyramid and the Patio of the Altars. Furthermore, in contrast to the architectural elements that marked an ideology of distinction from Teotihuacan in the Classic period, the rulers of Cholula overtly emphasized Teotihuacan forms in the Epiclassic as a symbolic proclamation that Cholula had inherited the symbolic authority of its neighbor. Cholula emerged from the Classic period as the primary religious center of central Mexico, the Rome of Anahuac. Through mythic memory of the *quinametinime*, Cholultecas reinforced their historical legacy while asserting dominance over the "giants." Nobility from throughout Mesoamerica sought legitimation from Cholula, either by actually visiting the shrine of Quetzalcoatl on pilgrimage to make offerings and thereby receive recognition of their authority, or symbolically by consuming and displaying objects using the Mixteca-Puebla iconographic vocabulary.

The cultural longevity of Cholula was not based on static norms, however. At least by the Postclassic period, it was a multicultural society that celebrated its international atmosphere. Tollan Chollan Tlachihualtepetl was a dynamic city that based its legacy on historical roots from the Classic period, but affirmed its legitimacy through cosmological principles manifested in the Great Pyramid and embodied in Quetzalcoatl. As such, Cholula offers important insights into the possible structure of earlier empires, such as Teotihuacan.

## Notes

1. As Davíd Carrasco points out, "crossroads" can signify more than simply an intersection of exchange networks, but also include the cultural interactions that occur at a market center. Thus Cholula would have been a hub of diversity where innovative cultural combinations would have developed.

2. The so-called Altar Mexica contained Cocoyotla Black-on-Natural vessels that were identified as similar to Aztec I Black-on-Orange ceramics, and thus the feature acquired the "Mexica" misnomer, even though it dates to approximately five hundred years before the Late Postclassic Aztec culture.

3. Iconography relating to Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl also appears at this time on stamp-impressed grater bowls (McCafferty, Spencer, and Suárez Cruz 1998).

4. Additional investigations at the Patio of the Carved Skulls and associated areas of the platform were planned for 1999. These excavations will concentrate on exploring the transition between the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic, particularly through the development of Mixteca-Puebla–style polychrome pottery.

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