

NOTES ON A SACRED PLACE CALLED "THE COATLAN" BY THE AZTECS

There is a large plaza at Teotihuacan which lies at the the foot of the so-called Temple of the Moon. This Temple looms like a mountain at the northern terminus of the great north-south ceremonial way and is almost certainly a man-made model of that mountain named by the Aztecs "Tenan" meaning "Our Mother" or "Mother of Stone". As a sacred enclosure the plaza is second in size only to the Ciudadela situated toward the southern end of the ceremonial road, by far the most prominent thoroughfare through the city of Teotihuacan. The Aztecs named it "The Road of the Dead". Although the original name of the north plaza is lost to us, the significance of the space must have been clearly understood by the Aztecs. We know they had the most profound respect for Teotihuacan even though its ancient structures had lain in ruins for untold centuries before Aztec nomads entered the Valley of Mexico.

Like the mountain, Tenan, the plaza and its principal temple must have honored the Teotihuacani mother goddess, the giver of life and the devourer of the dead. She had many names and manifestations for the Aztec people. Her most prestigious Aztec name was probably "Cihuacoatl", "Woman-serpent", and we know that, in their capital city of Tenochtitlan, her temple with its enclosure was called the "Coatlan" and the "Tlillan".

Coatlan means "the Place of Serpents". The Serpent is the supreme symbol of the life force but, as in the case of poisonous snakes, it is also associated with the power to cause death. Her Tlillan Temple was "the Place of Blackness" always associated with night, death and the underworld. In the Aztec mind, however, it was from such dark places that new life always emerged.

As with their own Coatlands everywhere, the Aztecs must have viewed the Plaza of the Moon as a the place of origins and endings, both womb and tomb. It was the enclosure where Scott and I believe the original fire brazier burned, out of which according to Aztec tradition, the Fifth Sun was born.

We think that this birth occurred here and not in front of the so-called temple of the Sun or the Ciudadela as most scholars believe. This is because of the plaza's profound associations with the North Star which mythically existed even before the birth of the god of fire who was to determine the cardinal directions for world. It is the only stellar body that does not move but is the center around which all the stars in the heavens revolve, making a vast celestial "skirt" that was deified as the goddess Citlalinicue, "Stars are her skirt". In spite of all its many other stellar associations the very stationary nature of the North Star, of course, links it with death, but in the dualistic native american mind death was as intimately associated with the source of new life as the dead, bone-like corn seed that will some day give birth to a new plant.

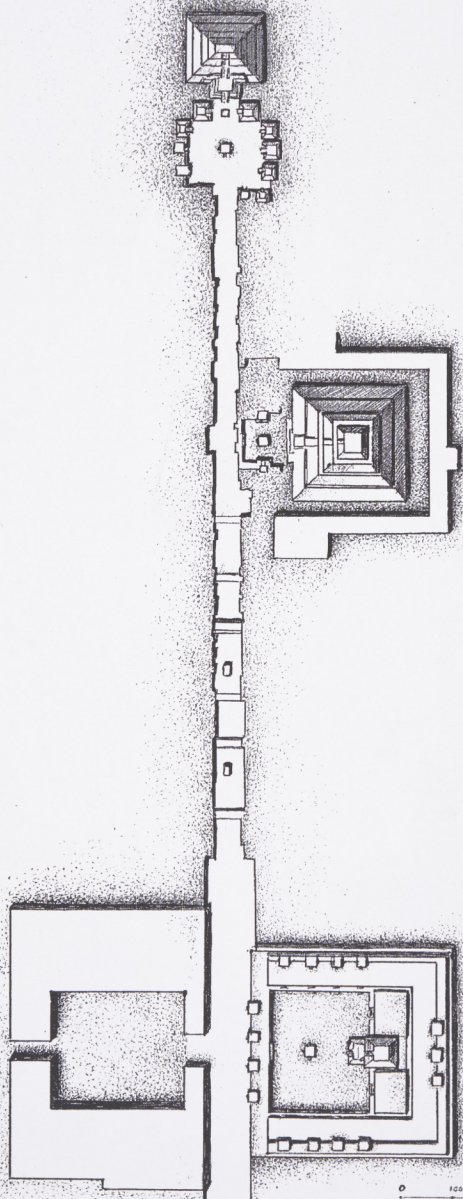
The famous Aztlan homeland paradise from which the Aztecs began their long migrations and Chicomoztoc, "The Seven Caves" which gave birth to the various Aztec tribes, are legendary sites of the north. The calendrical sign for the North is the Tecpatl, the Flint Knife which the Aztecs may have carved to resemble a gourd seed. The Aztecs began their great migration in the year One Tecpatl. Huitzilopochtli, the tribal god of the Mexica Aztecs, was born in a One Flint Knife year. As the most important stone capable of making the sparks to create sacred fire, the flint knife has always been associated with new fires and hence with beginnings. In fact it was instrumental in creating the God of Fire himself, the first god among the sixteen hundred terrestrial deities that the knife brought in to the world at Teotihuacan according to one Aztec myth.

The name "Teotihuacan" in the nahuatl language means "Place Where Gods are Created". This came about when the stellar goddess Citlalinicue gave birth to the Flint Knife, itself a star god. Like a meteor it fell to earth and cleaved an opening from which the sixteen hundred gods emerged, the God of Fire being the first. (The descent of the knife can be seen as a graphic model for the planting of a seed). Aztec mythic tradition says that this occurred not only at Teotihuacan but also at the seven caves of Chicomoztoc. Since Chicomoztoc was defined by its northness in Aztec myth, and thus the traditional place of their beginnings, it follows then that in the Aztec mind the Chicomoztoc of Teotihuacan must lie at the city's north at the northern terminus of the Miccaotli, the Avenue of the Dead. We believe that, in spite of the caves found under Teotihuacan's Temple of the Sun further south, the site of the Sun's birth must have been in the north at the plaza of beginnings and endings, what the Aztecs would have called the Coatlan of Teotihuacan.

Remember, that when the sun emerged from the sacred fire place after the self-immolation of the pustulled god Nanahuatzin, the myths say that it lacked direction and movement. As a celestial deity its stillness made it resemble only one other god in the heavens - the North Star. It was the fire god who decided that the sun would rise in the east and set in the west, its movement made possible by Ehecatl the god of the winds.

This happened, however, only after all the newly-created gods sacrificed themselves in the sacred fire place. When this was done the sun was given direction and motion. It was also given the calendrical name of "Nahui Ollin" which means "4-Movement". This date-name honored both the day of the Sun's birth and appropriately the day of its death. Thus began not only the Sun's daily east to west rising and setting but also its annual north to south and south to north journey which would give mankind the seasons for rain and planting, the seasons for harvesting and war. These origin myths established permanently the need for sacrifices to keep the sun in motion to make human life possible.

In our studies of various other cities dating from at least formative Olmec times to the European Conquest we have observed many sites with prominent south to north ceremonial ways terminating at plazas and/or northern temples facing south that must have been "Coatlans" or places of beginnings and endings. There is intriguing evidence in Tenochtitlan's Templo Mayor of a major South-facing structure in the north indicated by a triple stairway found around 1900 under the colonial house of the Marqueses de Apartado. It quite possibly would have terminated the south to north ceremonial way. The Nuremburg Map of 1524, when corrected, also shows a major building at the north. It is known that Moctezuma II considered the remodelling of the Coatlan of Tenochtitlan one of the most important achievements of his reign. In Scott's and my opinion the Coatlan was the most sacred site in the Recinto Sagrado of Tenochtitlan. This will be the subject of an essay in depth in our forthcoming book "The One Reed Year." We will deal not only with the Goddess and some of her more important manifestations, but also with the life and death symbolism of the Coatlan and important stellar imagery that will hopefully add to our understanding of the Aztec view of the cosmos and how it defined their destiny. We will also try take a fresh look at some of the traditional interpretations of Teotihuacan art and its relationship to Aztec imagery and myth as evidenced by the archaeological investigations of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco Cholula and other major post-classic cities.



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