

Examining the Symbolic Constructs of Cholula's Great Pyramid

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In October of 1519, as Hernán Cortés' troops traveled from Tlaxcala to Tenochtitlan, a gigantic edifice heralded the proximity of Cholula. Abandoned for nine centuries, it appeared as a hill, but its name betrayed its human construction: Tlachihualtépetl ("man-made hill"), today known as the Great Pyramid. From its summit one could appreciate the urban grid harboring administrative buildings, schools, workshops, the market, some 40,000 houses and nearly 400 temples. Of these, that of Quetzalcóatl—the local titular deity for over four centuries—attracted thousands of pilgrims, including foreign caciques who came to receive the facial piercings for the ornaments of their new office.

We do not know the antiquity of Cholula's authority to validate foreign investitures, but the sequence of the Great Pyramid, the largest pre-Columbian mound by volume in the Americas (400m on a side and 60m high), reveals that at least its sacred quality does have a long history that transcended political, ideological, and ethnic changes, and expresses the unique character that made Cholula comparable—according to the sixteenth-century Spaniards—to Rome and Mecca. The roots of that sacredness appear to date back to the first century, when after a colossal eruption of Popocatepetl volcano, the first monumental stage of the Tlachihualtépetl was raised; but although the motives behind this construction would confer Cholula with a special renown, they do not explain how this fame would increase over time.

The analysis of the pyramid's development can help with that enigma. Between 1931 and 1971, Ignacio Marquina excavated almost 10km of tunnels in it, determining that it had various sub-structures and outlining their shapes and chronology. Our mapping has refined that information, recording that there are a minimum of eight major stages from the first to seventh centuries, and making viable their morphological characterization.

On other occasions we have addressed how the new data contribute to understand how Cholula generated its sacred aura, perspectives that here we summarize emphasizing the Great Pyramid's symbolic constructs: its unifying origin in the post-eruption reconfiguration; its development and the inclusive strategy expressed by its architecture; and its attention to the human and the divine. We then outline how the incessant construction over six hundred years at the Tlachihualtépetl indicates that the religious magnetism reported in Colonial times must have identified Cholula since the first century; and how the design of the pyramidal complex and its references to the underworld and to Popocatepetl suggest its dedication to the volcano and its "self-designation" as the center of the cosmos.

En octubre de 1519, habiendo las huestes de Hernán Cortés dejado Tlaxcala rumbo a Tenochtitlan, una gigantesca edificación les anunciaría la proximidad de Cholula. Abandonada por nueve siglos, parecía una loma, pero su nombre traicionaba su confección humana: Tlachihualtépetl (“cerro hecho a mano”), hoy llamado Gran Pirámide. Desde su cima podía apreciarse la retícula urbana albergando edificios administrativos, escuelas, talleres, el mercado, unas 40,000 casas y casi 400 templos. De estos, el de Quetzalcóatl —deidad tutelar local desde cuatro siglos atrás— atraía miles de peregrinos, incluyendo caciques extranjeros que acudían a que les hicieran las horadaciones faciales para portar los ornamentos de nuevos cargos.

No sabemos la antigüedad de esa potestad de Cholula para validar investiduras foráneas, pero la secuencia de la Gran Pirámide, el montículo precolombino americano de mayor volumen —400m por lado y más de 60m de altura—, revela que al menos su calidad sacra sí tiene una larga historia que trascendió cambios políticos, ideológicos y étnicos, y expresa el singular carácter que hizo a Cholula equiparable, según los españoles del siglo XVI, a Roma y Meca. Las raíces de esa sacralidad parecen remontarse al siglo I, cuando tras una colosal erupción del volcán Popocatepetl se erigió la primera etapa monumental del Tlachihualtépetl; pero aunque los motivos para dicha construcción conferirían a Cholula una notoriedad especial, no explican cómo ésta se acrecentaría centuria tras centuria.

El análisis del desarrollo de la pirámide puede ayudar en ese enigma. Entre 1931 y 1971, Ignacio Marquina excavó en ella casi 10km de túneles, fundamentando que tenía varias subestructuras y bosquejando sus formas y cronología. Nuestro mapeo ha refinado esa información, registrado que hay mínimamente ocho etapas mayores del siglo I al VII, y viabilizado su caracterización morfológica.

Otras veces hemos abordado cómo los nuevos datos contribuyen a entender cómo Cholula generó su aura sacra, perspectivas que aquí resumimos enfatizando los constructos simbólicos de la Gran Pirámide: su origen unificador en la reconfiguración post-erupción; su desarrollo y la estrategia incluyente que su arquitectura expresa; y su atención a lo humano y lo divino. Esbozamos después cómo la incesante construcción durante seis siglos en el Tlachihualtépetl indica que la atracción religiosa reportada en la Colonia debe haber identificado a Cholula desde el siglo I; y cómo el diseño del complejo piramidal y sus referencias al inframundo y al Popocatepetl, sugieren su dedicación al volcán y su “autodesignación” como centro del cosmos.

On a mid-October day in 1519, people in the western Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley must have paused their chores to admire the unusual troops heading south: Tlaxcaltecan Indians, and others whose attire signaled varied origins, escorted a group of pale individuals, some on foot and others mounted on strange beasts, and whose never-before-seen clothing and weapons shimmered under the autumn sun. The Spanish army commanded by Captain Hernando Cortés and bound for Tenochtitlan, must have been a spectacle worthy of attention, more perhaps because of the curiosity to verify the spreading rumors about the arrival of exotic human beings, with discolored skin and unintelligible language, than for the foreboding that the Mesoamerican world would soon be dramatically transformed.

After the caravan left behind the Tlaxcalan domains, it is easy to imagine that someone among the European's indigenous allies must have pointed out the elevation that, from a distance, heralded the proximity of Cholula (Figure 18.1), one of Mesoamerica's most sacred cities: an ancient and gigantic construction, once majestic, and to which the decay from almost nine centuries of abandonment had given the appearance of just another of the hills that here and there punctuated the plains. Nevertheless, exposed fragments of adobe and stone betrayed its human manufacture (de Benavente, 1969, p. 51), as did its name: Tlachihualtépetl or "handmade hill" (de Rojas, 1927, p. 160), today called the Great Pyramid (Figure 18.2).

At that time, the enormous mound, eroded and covered with vegetation, was crowned only by a modest decrepit shrine (de Benavente, 1969, p. 52) to Chiconahui Quiahuitl, "He who Rains Nine Times" (de Rojas, 1927, p. 162), without revealing the many superimposed constructions that formed it. From its summit one could grasp Cholula's splendor: its grid-iron plan that hosted administrative buildings, schools, workshops, and around 40,000 homes

Figure 18.1.

Location of Cholula in Puebla, Mexico; below, the center of the prehispanic city as illustrated in the sixteenth century Mapa de Cuauhtinchan 1, showing a reticulated Tlachihualtépetl to signal it was a man-made hill (redrawn from Solís & Velasquez, 2006, p. 30).

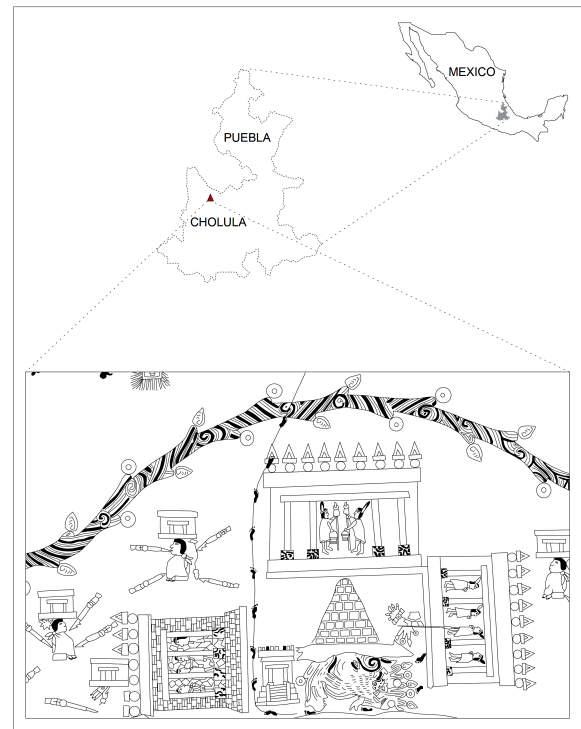


Figure 18.2.

Aerial view from the south of the Tlachihualtépetl (photo by Shigeru Kabata, Tetimpa Project archive).



(Cortés, 1975, p. 45); and its lively market where foreign and local goods circulated, like the region's coveted cochineal that gave a brilliant garnet tint, and the magnificent Cholultecan ceramics, which were used even by the Aztec emperor in Tenochtitlan (Díaz del Castillo, 1974, p. 167). But what most astonished Cortés (1975, p. 45), was the quantity of temples, almost 400. The greatest of these, nearby to the northwest and dedicated to the patron deity Quetzalcóatl (de Rojas, 1927), had been raised under Toltec rule since almost four centuries before, when it had replaced the cult at the Great Pyramid. The Quetzalcóatl precinct afforded an enormous attraction for thousands of pilgrims, including rulers from distant regions, who, upon inheriting their realm, journeyed to this city so that its high priests could pierce their ears, nose, and/or lower lip to insert the ornaments that would ratify their new authority (de Rojas, 1927), and some of them even kept their own palaces in this metropolis (de Benavente, 1969, p. 39).

As modern Cholula covers the vestiges of the ancient settlement whose beginnings reach back to 1000 B.C. (Plunket & Uruñuela, 2018, p. 24; Uruñuela et al., 2009, p. 138), we do not know the longevity of Cholula's role in validating foreign sovereigns. Nonetheless, the sequence of the Great Pyramid is like a stone and adobe document that mirrors the settlement's social evolution, and its study shows that at least its quality as a sacred place does seem to have had a long history that was preserved in local memory, transcending political, ideological, and even ethnic changes. The Tlachihualtépetl, whose almost 400m-square base and more than 60m elevation (Marquina, 1990, pp. 123-124) make it volumetrically the largest pre-Columbian monument on the American Continent, would express, from its beginnings and throughout its different stages, the trajectory that would convert Cholula into such an illustrious sanctuary that, the Spaniards who beheld it in the sixteenth century, compared it to the Rome of

Christianity or the Mecca of Islam (de Rojas, 1927).

The roots of that holy aura appear to date back to the beginning of our Era, linked to the consequences of a colossal eruption of Popocatepetl Volcano (Panfil, 1996; Plunket & Uruñuela, 1998) that altered the cultural trajectory in the Mexican Highlands. The cycle of new creation that arose to confront this calamity witnessed the birth of the first monumental stage of the Great Pyramid (Uruñuela et al., 2009). However, although—as we shall see—the reasons that prompted that edifice were of sufficient weight to then give Cholula a special stature (Plunket & Uruñuela, 2006; Uruñuela et al., 2013), they are not enough to explain how it conserved and increased, century after century, its reputation as an acclaimed and teeming pilgrimage hub.

The analysis of the Tlachihualtépetl's growth can help unravel this enigma, but while its imposing presence drew the attention of travelers and explorers after the Conquest, it was not until between 1931 and 1971 that the excavations directed by Ignacio Marquina ([Ed.], 1970) perforated it with almost 10km of tunnels (de la Luz & Contreras, 1968) and provided the fundamental data to show that it had been subject to several constructive moments with a *sui generis* morphology; yet, given their complexity, their specific form and dating were only roughly outlined. In recent decades, our mapping has refined this information and established that the sequence consists of at least eight main stages, spanning from the first century until the end of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh, recovering also the morphological, dimensional and chronological characterization of these.

Considering monumental architecture as a materialization of governmental power, on other occasions we have addressed how the new interpretations enabled by this work contribute to our understanding of Cholula's rise as a sacred city, a quality that it maintains even today

(Plunket & Uruñuela, 2018; Uruñuela & Plunket, 2018). Taking into account both the objectives of the Out of Eurasia project, and that perhaps many colleagues who study other cultures in other places and times may not be familiar with Cholula, we will first offer some context.

The Origins of the Tlachihualtépetl

Cholula is the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in Mesoamerica. Yet, until the beginnings of our Era, it was just one of several villages on the valley floor; larger sites tended to be located closer to the piedmont. Thus, Cholula had a millennium of unexceptional life before it became a city. And its history would have been another, perhaps less famous, if during the second half of the first century A.D. a Plinian eruption of Popocatepetl had not intervened (Plunket & Uruñuela, 1998, 2006; Uruñuela et al., 2009).

The explosion produced an almost 30km-high column whose collapse deposited 3.2km³ of pumice over 240km² northeast of the crater, and then, a lava flow altered the hydrology of the area (Panfil, 1996). Thousands of families fled from the slopes and moved down to communities that would have to confront unexpected challenges caused by the migratory influx; some 40km from the crater, just outside the hazard zone, Cholula was one of those recipient localities (Plunket & Uruñuela, 2006; Uruñuela et al., 2006).

The catastrophe not only compelled the rearrangement of the settlement pattern but, accordingly, a socio-political reconfiguration. With the abandonment of most of the primary centers after the disaster, the scenario, until then controlled by competing chiefdoms, shifted towards a concentration of population and power at Cholula, converting it into the region's key community, and initiating its path as an urban cult center whose sacredness would become legendary (Plunket & Uruñuela, 2018).

It is no coincidence that the first monumental version

of the Great Pyramid, Los Chapulines, was initiated in the years after the eruption. Undertaking a large project to placate the divine anger expelled by the volcano could take advantage of the extra workforce constituted by the refugees and, at the same time, produce a symbol of common identity for the heterogeneous society formed by immigrants and locals (Uruñuela et al., 2009). From Los Chapulines onwards, certain distinctive traits would characterize the successive stages of the mound (Uruñuela et al., 2006, 2009, 2013; Uruñuela & Plunket, 2018); as they differ from those of other Mesoamerican pyramids, we will recapitulate them.

1) The fundamental one is that the Tlachihualtépetl is not properly a pyramid. Its morphology is much more intricate and consists of a complex of connected structures: a central pyramidal module with multiple buildings attached to each of its four sides.

2) Second, even the central module was unlike other pyramids: a) as an axis mundi, it did not have one main façade but four; b) it was asymmetrical; c) it privileged the message conveyed by its global form over the precision of the details; d) instead of a single staircase, the several stairways on its four facades and leading to huge terraces that could accommodate hundreds of parishioners stated an inclusive message, which was reinforced by the open space on its summit; e) that inclusive character is also reflected in its manufacture, as it shows the collaboration of diverse crews or individuals with different techniques and/or abilities; f) each stage left exposed some section of its predecessor, as if to validate the continuity between the old and the new; g) each stage is not just a larger reproduction of the previous, and sometimes even the style radically changed; and h) two themes constant throughout the sequence are the references to the Underworld and the link with Popocatepetl.

The Tlachihualtépetl's Sequence

With those traits in mind, we can now briefly attend the sequence we have reconstructed up until now (Figure 18.3) and our main observations about its symbolic constructs (Plunket, 2012; Plunket & Uruñuela, 2018; Uruñuela et al., 2006, 2009, 2013; Uruñuela & Plunket, 2018, 2020; Uruñuela & Robles, 2012)¹. Marquina's (1970, 1990) results presented three major building cycles for the central module, yet, the more than 5km of tunnels that we have already mapped show at least eight.

The first monumental stage, Los Chapulines, actually covered a small platform—La Olla—that already demarcated the settlement's ceremonial core prior to the eruption. Los Chapulines articulates an ecumenical message, not only by its combination of volumes and large open spaces and its multiple staircases—that remind us of the so-called acropolis of southern Mesoamerica—but also through its ornamentation (Figure 18.4, top). On its north façade, bands of human skulls, painted by different hands, adorn the sixth and seventh tiers and the small Chapulincitos Platform on the fourth. These bands, facing the direction that later cultures associated with the world of the dead (León-Portilla, 1963, p. 57), seem to be a massive communication effort that linked the building with the Underworld and the ancestors, a topic easily understandable by locals and refugees, as ancestor veneration was an ancient Mesoamerican tradition. The skulls do not represent particular individuals, they are anonymous, a congregation of generic ancestors that could anchor, on this “man-made hill”, a new common identity, a bond for a mixed population in which the prior importance of village genealogies had to be rearranged to configure a new society.

Another allusion to the Underworld is found in Los Chapulines' architectural plan, as the upper three tiers seem to represent, in cross-section, a shell—an element

associated with that watery realm—and a cave—a portal to it (Figure 18.4, bottom). Could these be references to a later Náhuatl name of the Underworld: *in atlan in oztoc* (in the water, in the cave) (Montes de Oca, 2009, p. 227)?

The dedication to Popocatépetl is also recognizable. Although Los Chapulines has four facades, its largest stairway is located on the western one, facing the volcano that had just so violently transformed life in the valley.

Over the next five hundred years, the sacred city that was a shelter after the eruption would materialize its prestige and religious power by expanding the monument that, towards the end of the first century, apparently had succeeded in placating nature's rage and in generating a unifying identity.

The third stage, Los Tableros Lisos, emulated the morphology of Los Chapulines, but its north flank added an elevated plaza facing Popocatépetl. A plaza in this area would be maintained in the following superstructures.

The fourth stage was the Escalonado 1, with an innovative design. Its nine tiers—perhaps a reference to the nine levels of the Underworld—were covered on all sides by steps, thus inviting free access and intensifying the participative message previously expressed by the several staircases.

Contemporary with the Escalonado 1, a palace extending south from the central module exhibits the Bebedores Mural, a 56m-long and 2m-high composition of 112 individuals drinking an alcoholic beverage. We are still virtually reconstructing it (Figure 18.5), but we have identified at least seven different painters; thus, this was also a collaborative effort.

Another important aspect is that, at least from the Escalonado 1 onwards, the entire sequence of buildings attached to the south side of the central module was decorated with motifs related to the Underworld (Figure 18.6). Vertical and inverted T's form a play of cave-

Figure 18.3.

Isometric northwest view of the central module's sequence according to our mapping (we are still working on Stages 6, 7 and 8, and on many of the extensions towards the fourth directions).

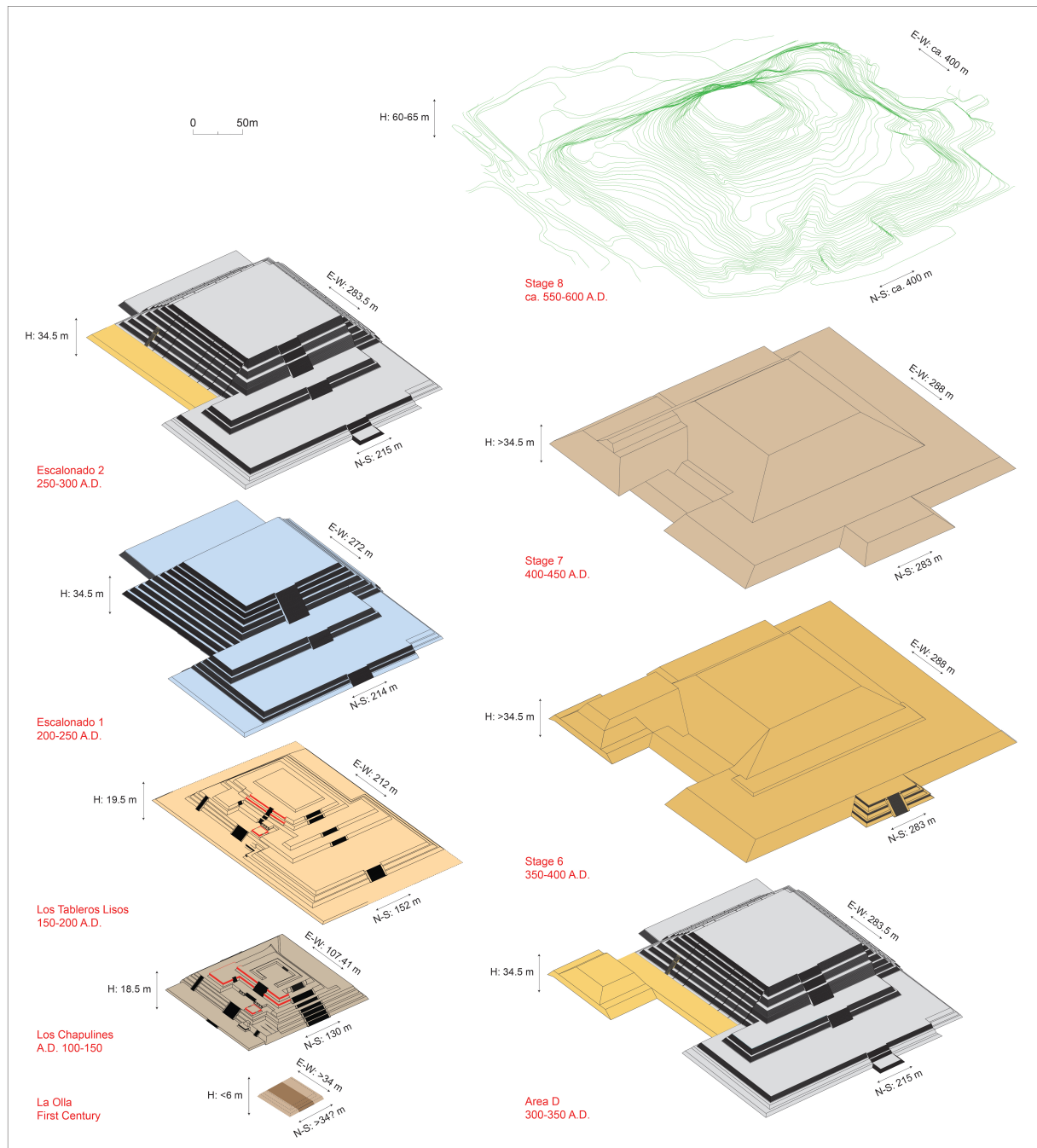


Figure 18.4.

Los Chapulines. Top: Isometric view of the building. Bottom: Plan of the building, showing in cross-section a shell (in blue) and a cave (in brown). (Drawings based on Uruñuela et al., 2006, Fig. 13, and Uruñuela et al., 2009, Figs. 5, 12)

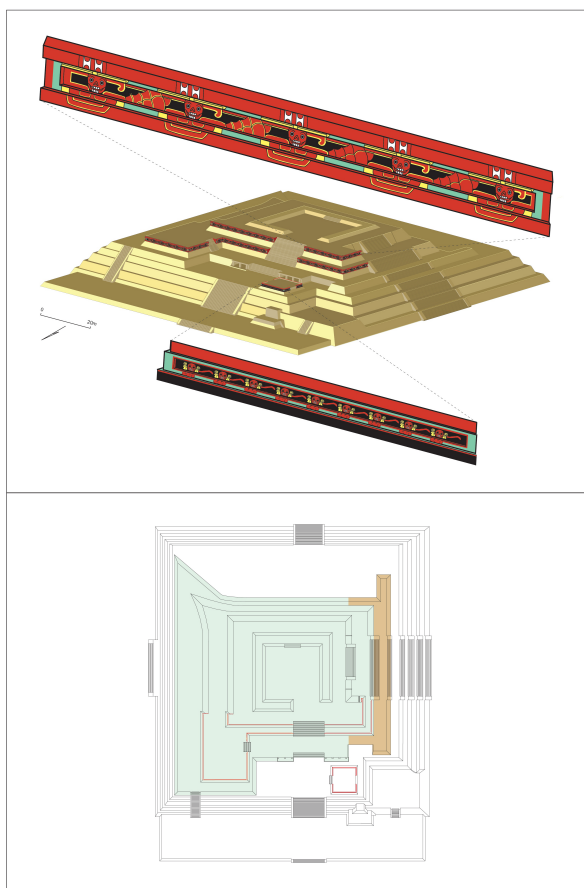


Figure 18.5.

Detail of the Bebedores Mural (drawing by Gabriela Uruñuela).



mountain; and starfish set on diagonal bands, indicating stone, might illustrate the Náhuatl metaphor *atl-tépetl* (the water, the hill) which means city-state (Dehouve, 2016, pp. 60-61), or, in a polyvalent sense, the starfish, animals from the primordial sea, could again cite the Underworld.

The fifth stage, the Escalonado 2, repeated the design of the Escalonado 1, but attached a small platform to the elevated western plaza. Towards the end of the Escalonado 2's existence, a flight of 52 steps—a reference to a full cycle of Mesoamerica's solar calendar—was superimposed on its north side; where these stairs lead to, still remains a mystery.

Between the fifth and sixth stages there was a vast amount of construction in Area D, at the northeast corner of the Tlachihualtépetl. Those buildings were eventually annexed to the central module.

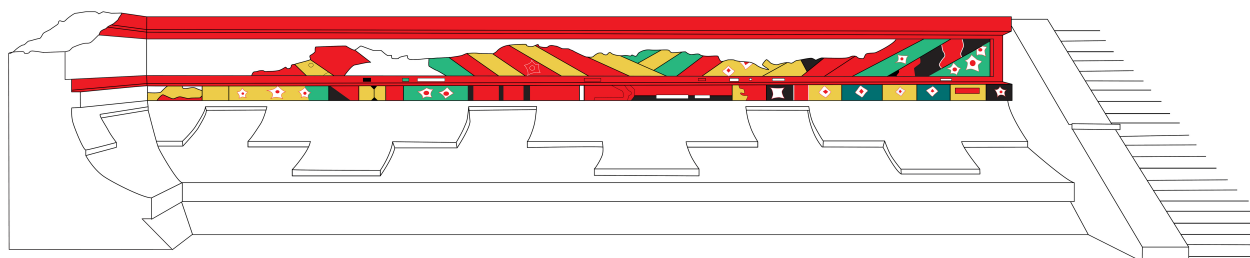
We can only offer a sketch of the sixth and seven stages since we have not finished mapping them. In the sixth, its new version of the abutting platform on the west is the so-called Toltec Pyramid—not because of any ethnic association but a reference to the cement brand used in its restoration. Regarding the seventh, it apparently enlarged only the lower half of the monument, and its western abutting platform was dismantled during Marquina's explorations to leave visible the earlier "Toltec Pyramid" (Marquina, 1970, p. 41).

The eighth stage was the last in the central module, and it was the one Marquina used to obtain the dimensions of 400m-square base and more than 60m elevation by also including the buildings attached to it. Its stone facing was removed in prehispanic times, but its adobe core, visible today, in conjunction with Bandelier's (1976, Plates XIII and XIV) nineteenth-century drawings (Figure 18.7), shows that it too had a radial design with four facades.

In the times of Stage 8, around the turn of the seventh century, the Central Highlands were in turmoil. The

Figure 18.6.

Ornamentation on the buildings of the pyramidal complex's south side (redrawn from Rodríguez, 2006, p.154).



Tlachiuhaltépetl was subjected to an irreverent fury that is apparent in the profanation of the four stone monuments in the Patio of the Altars on the south side of the pyramidal complex (Figure 18.8). These monoliths were originally arranged in two altar-stela sets, one on the east side and one on the west, and Marquina's project called them *teoicpallin* (Salazar, 1968, p. 8), sacred seats or thrones. On the east pair, intertwined volutes that recall the metaphor *ayahuitl-in poctli* (the mist, the smoke) (Sullivan and Knab, 1994, p. 207) evoke a deceased ruler's glory and thus the world of the ancestors. On the altar of the west, plumed serpents, symbols of authority, undulate through cloud scrolls. Given the antipodal positioning of the pairs, one could have been used for the enthronement of new leaders, and the other for the funerals of deceased sovereigns. The violation of these monuments before they were finished evidences a severe ideological crisis, and we can assume that it provoked a significant decrease in donations to the sanctuary, eventually leading to its neglect.

However, unlike other cities affected by the chaotic climate of that period, Cholula was never abandoned; instead, it perpetuated, even until today, its sacred status acquired at the dawn of our Era. To us, this was possible

Figure 18.7.

The Great Pyramid according to Bandelier: cross-section on top and plan at bottom (north towards top) (re-drawn and simplified from Bandelier, 1976, Plate XIII, Figs. 4-5).

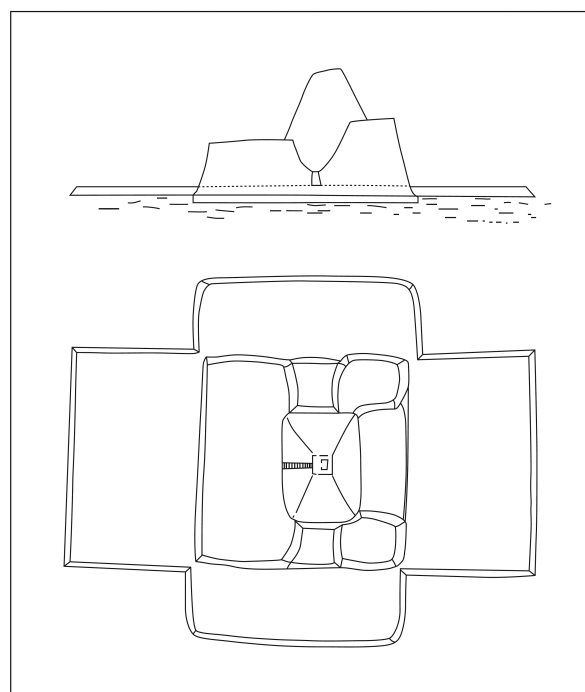
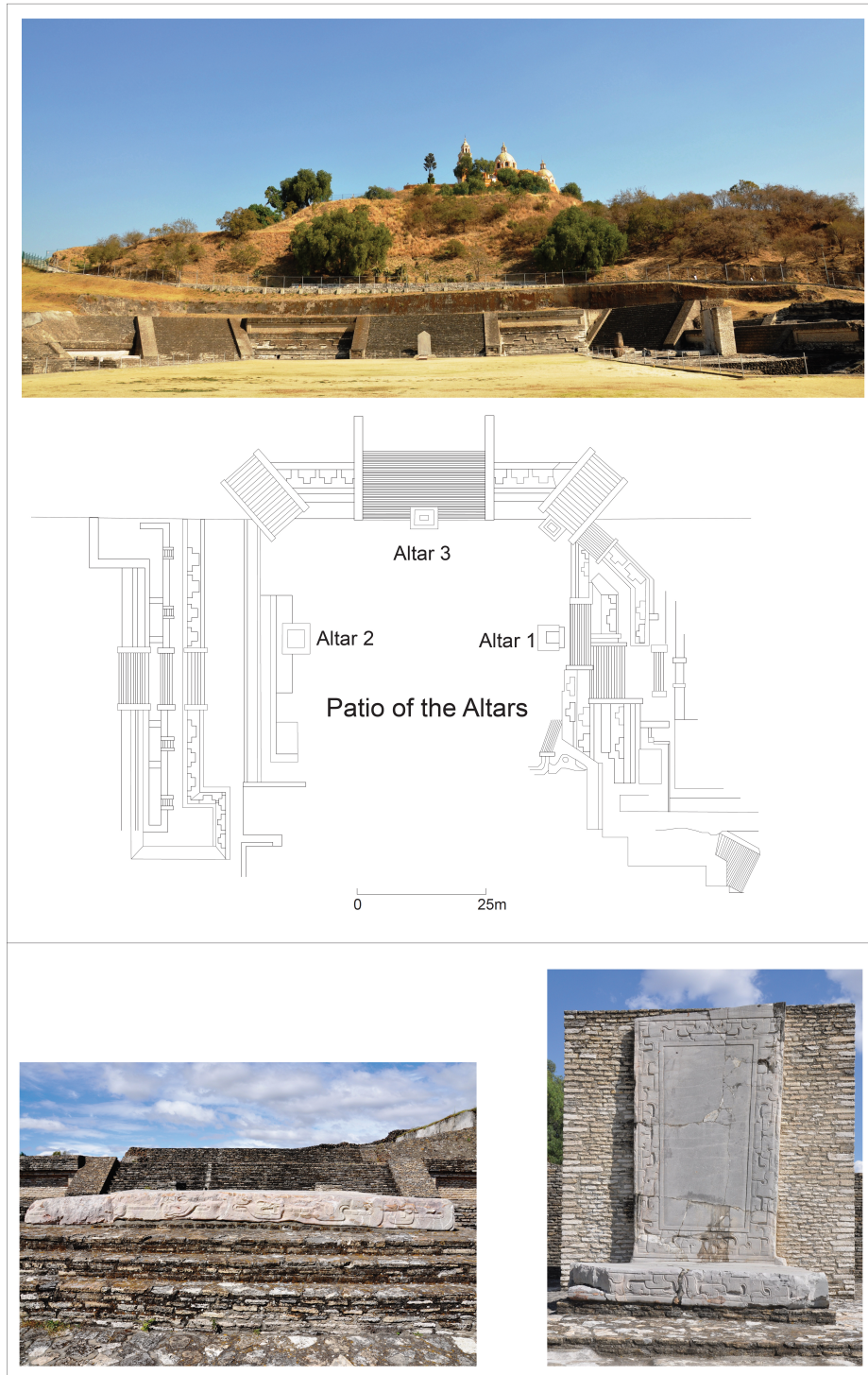


Figure 18.8.

South side of the Tlachihualtépetl, with corresponding plan of the Patio of the Altars. Bottom: Altar 2 (left) and Altar 1 (right).



due to the strategy that Cholula used—and still does: while accomplishing the mission to propitiate the supernatural, be sure to actively incorporate the community. The Tlachihualtépetl's supernatural references are related to the Underworld, a very ancient belief so fundamental to all Mesoamericans, that it could function as what Harari (2015, Position 645) calls a “mythical glue” to bind together large numbers of otherwise dissimilar groups of individuals. To reinforce that tie in practice, the message of inclusion was made apparent all through its sequence, both in its manufacture by heterogeneous crews, as in the message of its morphology that, countering the exclusion of other pyramids, indicates that the bulk of the population could access the monument, not only the officiants and their attendants. These projects, with so many access points and large open spaces, were meant to motivate collective ritual observation and participation.

Final Comments

Cholula shared with many other cultures from different periods and places the impulse to erect monumental religious buildings—perhaps not only because the materialization of power validates governmental stability, but maybe also because the employment of a suprahuman scale might be a more appropriate expression for the veneration of superhuman entities—but the Great Pyramid has a peculiarity. The radiocarbon dating and the ceramic chronology for the first six stages and for the initial constructions in Area D, indicate building cycles of about half century each, and perhaps it would not be too far-fetched to propose that the main stages were built every 52 years. Still, countless modifications were made to its main stages (for instance, Stage 6 had more than 10 major renovations). Many of those alterations were covered by new structures even before they were completed. Thus, throughout its entire history, this was an unfinished project,

always lively, always under construction.

Given the lack of written records (there are no glyphs in Cholula until several centuries after the Tlachihualtépetl's last stage), how would the donations and labor required for those unceasing building activities over such a very long term have been recorded and administered? How were gifts appraised, materials calculated and bought, or salaries determined? This makes us think of the Sumerians, who employed standardized bowls as fixed measurements of barley that could be used to evaluate specific goods and services (Harari, 2015, Position 2795-2804). Could the immense amount of apparently homogeneous brown bowls at Cholula have been used in a similar fashion? This question perhaps could be addressed by a statistics-loving archaeologist younger than us.

On the other hand, and more to the point of the Out of Eurasia project, why was this constant process of creation perpetuated by the various successive authorities who produced the always-growing Tlachihualtépetl? That building rhythm must have required vast amounts of resources provided by the faithful. To us, it indicates that the intense religious attraction reported in the sixteenth century must have been an attribute of Cholula since the early substructures of the Great Pyramid, and that perhaps the incessant construction was a mechanism to visibly guarantee to worshippers the rightful use of their donations and, thus, stimulate their future generosity.

Of course, the continuous activity could have been prompted also by the spiritual interest to permanently propitiate the Tlachihualtépetl's holy patron, but another pending enigma is that the scarce iconography on the monument does not indicate if it was consecrated to a particular god. Indeed, the representation of deities in Cholula before the tenth century is almost non-existent.

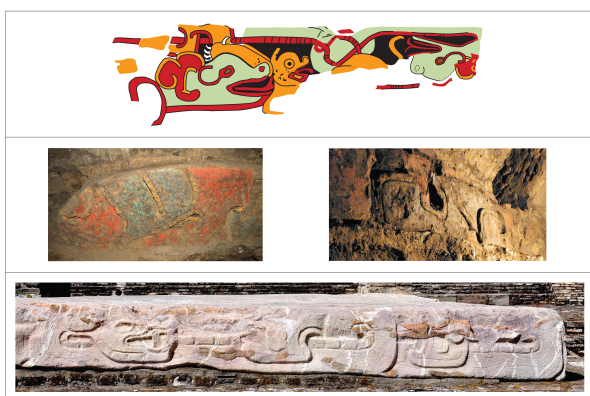
At the pyramidal complex, plumed serpents are portrayed only in three cases, and none seem to manifest

the god of the Pyramid (Figure 18.9). One is the Jaguar Platform—a first century building that was left visible on the southwest corner of the later Escalonados—painted with feathered ophidians defeating jaguars; given the subsequent exclusion of these felines from Cholula’s iconography during the epoch of the Tlachihualtépetl’s construction, it is plausible that this refers to a confrontation of human power groups symbolized by their emblems. Another case is on the Chapulincitos Platform, also from the first century, and the third instance appears in the sixth or seventh century on one of the Patio of the Altars’ monuments; in these two cases, both suitable locations to inaugurate a new ruler, the plumed serpent seems to have been employed as a symbol widely recognized in Mesoamerica to validate authority.

This aniconic panorama is even more intriguing when we turn to the Bebedores Mural. The scene it illustrates has been traditionally interpreted as a mundane event; however, isolated arms descend from the frame, giving the liquid to

Figure 18.9.

Plumed serpents (not to scale) at the Tlachihualtépetl. Top to bottom: Detail of the mural on the Jaguar Platform; Chapulincitos Platform (left: detail with green feather; right: volutes through which the red body of the serpent undulates); section of Altar 2 with plumed serpent writhing through scrolls.



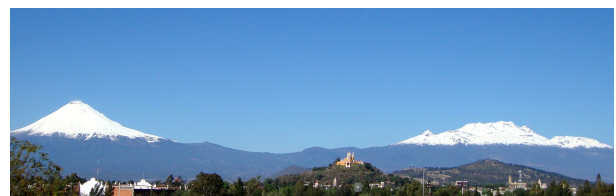
the individuals (see Figure 18.5). Why were the bodies to whom they belong not shown? Considering that the main reference of the scant iconographical information on the different stages of the pyramidal complex is not to particular gods but to unearthly dimensions, to us, those arms were depicted to figuratively express the action of giving from a non-material realm, not to insinuate supernatural beings.

Who was, then, the deity that deserved the construction of the largest prehispanic monument in the American Continent? Throughout the Tlachihualtépetl’s sequence, the architectural language constantly expresses a link with Popocatépetl. This majestic still-active volcano (Figure 18.10), with an imposing height of more than 3.2km over the valley floor, was an evidently animated component of nature. Without doubt, those traits must have made it the sacred mountain par excellence both locally and well beyond the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley. It would be too broad for this paper to expound the several aspects of the Great Pyramid that indicate that it was built to represent the volcano and, by extension, the most sacred of the sacred mountains in the Central Highlands, so we will focus only on one feature: its layout.

López Austin (this volume) presents a masterly description of the Sacred Mountain concept in Mesoamerica. As he explains, the mountain and its

Figure 18.10.

At the center, the Tlachihualtépetl crowned by the Catholic temple of the “Virgen de los Remedios”; Popocatépetl in the background on the left.



surroundings were frequently represented as a quincunx (a composition of five elements, one in each corner and one in the middle, symbolizing the center of the earth's surface and the four cardinal points or the four corners of the world). In every stage of the Tlachihualtépetl's sequence, each of its four facades has a different morphology and ornamentation, and each shares its particular traits only with the buildings attached to it. Adding to the central module the extensions projecting from each facade, the whole design has five components, a quincunx-like format (we still need to map many of the extensions, but this layout is apparent in Bandelier's sketch [see Figure 18.7]), thus making sense of the ostensible distinctions among the four sides of the complex, since each one would epitomize a different world direction. If the central module was intended to represent the Sacred Mountain Popocatepetl, there is no need to seek another divine entity for the dedication of the monument.

Moreover, if that were the case, it would not only explain the strange morphology that makes the Tlachihualtépetl so unlike any other Mesoamerican pyramid, but it would also vindicate the enormous religious attraction that Cholula exerted. Erecting pyramids to represent sacred mountains was a deeply-rooted tradition in Mesoamerica, but Cholula went beyond that, not only creating in the built landscape a colossal reproduction of the impressive volcano, but successfully incorporating to it a peculiar architectural arrangement to ostentatiously declare that there was the center of the cosmos. As its history shows, this was a convincing statement.

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¹As the intention of this paper was to introduce the themes we are working on to the members of the Out of Eurasia project, this section is a simplified assemblage of data that we have already published focusing on diverse topics. Thus, to avoid repetitive self-citations, here we provide the list of references used for this compilation, instead of individually citing them in each case.