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PART I

ROOTS, COLONIALISM AND CONFLICT

CHAPTER I

PRE-COLUMBIAN CULTURES OF MEXICO

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I. THE CLASSICAL PERIOD: THE RISE OF GREAT CIVILIZATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The golden age of Mexico, the florescence era known as the Classic Period, is a time when great civilizations with arts and sciences reach their highest refinement. This Classic span is generally thought to cover between A.D.300-900. Literacy begins very early; dates were recorded in terms of the 52-year Calendar Round and in the Gulf Coast the Long Count was used. From the Olmec period, now a crystallized complete pantheon shared by all Mexicans, surfaces abstract representations of Rain, Fire, Sun and Moon in sculpture and paintings. These were not gods per se but manifestations of the Great Spirit Force; thus they paid homage to them since they were basic forces affecting everyday life.

Care must be taken not to place particular characteristics on a people simply because such a notion may have taken place, e.g., warfare. It is doubtful that any civilization in the world flourished without some type of military defense. This, however, does not make a nation warlike nor imperialistic. The notions of militarism were introduced by the Spanish, who projected this into their writings as participants of a war machine and an imperialistic European tradition. On the other hand, it must be remembered that not all tribes were peaceful; many, for different reasons, represent the attacks that have befallen high civilizations as was the case with *Tollan* (Tula). The early Mexican Amerigenous cultures raised numerous buildings, decorated with beautiful frescos; produced pottery and figurines in unbelievable quantity and covered everything with sculptures. Farming continued now with new irrigation methods; there is also the intensification of sharp social cleavages throughout Mexico and the consolidation of the ruling groups. It has been assumed that the mode of government was theocratic and to some extent religious as a way of looking at the cosmos but not in superstitious, medieval ways of the European; rather it was viewed as a science in view that the priests were also the astronomers and scientists. Neither did the scientists-priests have total power; they were an integral part of the educational system along with other important rulers of government.

THE URBAN CIVILIZATION OF *TEOTIHUÁKAN*

Teotihuákan was perhaps the greatest city of all ancient Mexico; even *Moktekuzoma Xokoyotzin* made pilgrimages there during late Aztec times. Memories of its greatness have been kept after the Conquest. Here in symbol, the forces came together to give light to the New Sun (age), the Fifth Sun. Governments were established, the lords or ruler-scientist-priests were "wise men, knowers of occult

things, possessors of the traditions". The pyramids were said to have been built as a resting place for the great lords; these were build by giants who lived in those days.¹

The metropolis covered nine square miles and was fully urbanized about the time of Christ on a grid plan consistently oriented 15 degrees, 25 minutes east of true north.² The city was laid out in quarters with the major axis running north to south for a distance of four miles. The Pyramids of the Sun and Moon measure 225 meters long and as little as 70 meters high. Of interest is a cave underneath the Pyramid of the Sun that was discovered by accident in 1971. The cave is a natural lava tube running 100 meters in an easterly direction six meters beneath the pyramid, in from a stairway on its main axis, reaching a multi-chambered terminus shaped something like a four-leaf clover.³

Teotihuákan, by the sixth century, will reach a population of 200,000 at its maximum, making it the sixth largest city in the world. The city was cosmopolitan; in the west there was a Oaxacan ward; in the east a ward for businessmen from lowland Veracruz and Maya areas. The palace compounds were residences of the lords of the city; typical of what a palace layout might be, the palace of *Xolalpan* was a rectangular complex of about forty five rooms and seven forecourts; these border four platforms, which are arranged around a central court. The court was depressed below the general ground level and was open to the sky, with a small altar in the center. Air and light were admitted through a roof and rainwater could be drained off. Doorways were rectangular and covered by a cloth. The walls of palaces were adorned by magnificent frescos. The most famous is at *Tepantitla*, were a large fresco in blue, red, yellow and brown covers an entire wall representing a paradise ambiance of *Tlalokan* or the symbol of rain and its creative beauty.

In the *Teotihuákan* pantheon, there are many representations in sculpture of the forces of the Great Spirit; *Tlalok* --Rain Force; *Ketzalkóatl*--a creative force associated with intelligence, *Metzli*--representation of the Moon Force and *Xipe Totek*--symbol of the annual renewal of vegetation. Particularly common are the stone effigy incense burners in the form of the Ancient Fire Force, *Huehuetéotl*.⁴ Additionally, a colossal statue is found of *Chalchiuhtlikue*, representing the "feminine" aspect of the Rain Force, related to *Tlalok*. Early Classic *Teotihuákan* culture is characterized by the cylindrical pottery vase with three slab-shaped feet, a fitted lid and handles in the shape of a bird. Other characteristic forms in clay include vessels shaped like a flower, large polychrome incense burners, mold-made figurines of men and representations of transcendental forces. Obsidian chipping reached new heights of elaboration with the production of spear and dart points as well as human effigies. The *Teotihuákan* state controlled great deposits of green obsidian; over 350 obsidian workshops existed near present-day Pachuca, Hidalgo alone. Bone needles and bodkins testify to the manufacture of clothing and basketry; paintings reveal that men wore loincloth and/or a type of kilt with sandals and women, the pull-over *huipil* and underskirt.

Writing existed both for ritual and administrative use as witnessed on the pottery and in the frescos; it is known that the bar and dot numeration (used later by Toltecs and Aztecs) was used in the 260-day count (almanac year). Diet consisted of small-cobbed maize, common and runner beans, squashes, pumpkins, husk tomatoes, prickly pear cactus, avocados, amaranth and a large variety of wild plants. The important food animals were deer, rabbits, turkeys, wild ducks and geese. Irrigation systems were in use and there is evidence of a chinampa or "floating garden" cultivation.⁵

Its success is also linked to its long-distance trade and influence, even in regions as remote from the capital as the Gulf Coast, Oaxaca and the Maya area. *Teotihuákan* art has been found in the highlands of Guatemala and in Tikal. Who were these people?; the origin is in question from Totonac to Otomí to Popoloca. What is clear are the affinities between *Teotihuákan* and Toltec-Aztec sacred and secular features, i.e., the *Uto-Azteka-Metzikak* features. The city will meet its end by A.D.700 through deliberate burning and destruction. Archeologically, tombs after A.D. 600 no longer stock refined products of *Teotihuákan*. Some suggest internal crisis or long-term political and economic malaise;⁶ however, the cyclical idea of birth and rebirth inherent in pre-Columbian cultures is probably a more plausible explanation.⁷ Severe climactic changes associated with the calendar may also have played a role in the desertion of the city.⁸

CACAXTLA AND XOCHIKALKO--THE MAYAN LINK

After the disintegration of the *Teotihuákan* empire in A.D.700, there appears to be a more active interrelationship with the Maya and the highland Mexican. *Cacaxtla* is one of a number of hilltop sites in the Puebla--Tlaxcala border area that was controlled by "the people of the region of the rubber" and the "people of the land of calabashes".⁹ The latter had an important trading town controlled by the Putun-

speaking Maya, seafaring merchants whose commercial interest ranged from the Olmec country through the entire coast of the Yucatán Peninsula as far as the shore of Honduras. The murals of *Cacaxtla* are thoroughly Maya but the flat-roofed architecture is not and there are similarities to the coeval palaces of *Xochicalco* and the later Tula. The artwork is highly symbolic with eagle, jaguar, serpent, maize, bird and sea animals juxtaposed for meaning at metaphysical levels as interpreted by the sage scientist-priests. *Xochicalco* similarly shares this connection, founded about A.D. 700, it had extensive foreign contacts with the Maya area, Zapotec, Mixtec Oaxaca and Classic Central Veracruz. Near the ceremonial plaza and not far from the Temple of the Feathered Serpent is a cave transformed as an underground observatory with a man-made tube to the surface where in two days of the year a beam of sunlight penetrates the shaft to the observatory floor.¹⁰ Moreover, *Xochicalco's* ball court with its Maya-like I-shape has the same dimensions as the ball court at Tula of the Toltecs centuries later.

THE CLASSIC VERACRUZ CIVILIZATION

A large number of finely carved stone objects found in the Gulf Coastal plain in its own unique style characterize Classic Veracruz. Some are elongated, others "yoke"-shaped, cylindrical or headdress designs. An important center lying five miles southwest of Papantla is *El Tajin*; its nucleus covers about 60 hectares but subsidiary ruins are scattered over several thousand hectares. Occupied in the Early Classic, its peak activity was towards the close of the late Classic (A.D. 600-900). Most impressive is the Pyramid of the Niches, a four-sided structure with unusual symmetry with the solar days (365) on the sides and inside a duplicate pyramid of the outer. Relief panels exhibit winged dancers, eagle-like warriors, ceremonial ball court rituals and bar-and-dot numerals with day glyphs testifying to the literacy of this civilization.

Death and sacrifice has been greatly misunderstood by Westerners. It begins with the superstitious colonial chroniclers and clerics and is echoed by art historians and modern researchers of pre-Columbian peoples.¹¹ Death and sacrifice are associated with the spirit and not the body as was the case with medieval Europeans. Death means rebirth; it is constant in nature and in our actions as human beings; it is not to be looked at from a literal sense, but rather from a transcendental metaphysical framework. Sacrifice requires fasting, meditation, giving in prayer and ritual. Blood letting (not leading to physical but spiritual transformation [death]) from particular spiritual zones was a type of sacrifice alluded to in *El Tajin* as well as other high civilizations.¹²

An exuberant style of pottery from Central Veracruz named *Remojadas* pottery reveals much ethnographic formation of this period. Figures cast in clay molds with paint are subjects, both male and female, animal and human: infantile boys and girls with laughing faces and filed teeth; ballplayers, lovers or friends in swings, warriors, symbolic representations of forces, i.e., death, rain, light. Most notable is pottery showing the use of wheels and the understanding of its principle albeit in clay figurines.

The end of *El Tajin* was by fire, similar to *Teotihuacán*. Common tradition suggests that it was conquered by Chichimec nomadic barbarians from the highlands circa A.D. 1300.

CLASSIC MONTE ALBAN

The civilization of Monte Alban in the Valley of Oaxaca during Classic times was the product of Zapotecan-speaking peoples. Oaxaca was sufficiently isolated during the Classic Period and its people were left to themselves to populate their own territory, building site after site. By the close of the Early Classic (Monte Alban III), there were no less than 200 sites in the Valley of Oaxaca. The buildings have architecture in common with *Teotihuacán*, stuccoed and beautifully painted. It contained large plazas, stairways, ball courts and grandstands. In the subterranean parts of pyramids, 170 tombs have been discovered; they contain elaborate chambers, fine frescos, hieroglyphs, clay urns; the style is characteristic of *Teotihuacán* and the pantheon of symbolic representations of forces are shared with the Mexican peoples: Rain Force (*Cocijo*), the Maize Energy (*Pitao Cozobi*), the Life Force (*Ketzalkóatl*), the Old Fire Force (*Huehuetéotl*) and possibly the feminine aspect of the Rain Force, (*Chalchiuhtlikue*). Although there are no surviving codices, glyphs appear everywhere in sculptured relief, on funerary urns and walls, both at the principle site and at other Monte Alban centers. By A.D. 700, the capital was largely abandoned with no signs of conflagration.

THE CLASSIC COLLAPSE

When *Teotihuacán* disintegrated in the seventh century, the unifying force in Mesoamerica was gone, and with it, widespread inter-regional trade. The Late Classic saw increasing fractionalization, each culture moving along its own lines. By A.D. 800, the powerful but never unified Maya city-states began to disintegrate. However, the Putun or master traders (Olmec-Xicallanca) appear to have prospered during these times as they are in contact with both the Central Mexicans and declining Maya rulers. No one is

certain regarding the identifying factor for the collapse. Some point to an agricultural collapse (due to a climactic change), some to pressure from the barbarians from the north. In the end, it is more probable that multiple forces came together cyclically to announce the end of these civilizations but only to bring forth new ones in the Post-Classic Period.

II. THE POST-CLASSIC PERIOD: THE TOLTEKAH CONFEDERATION

After A.D. 900 a new mode of organized life emerged; the

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