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The Fall of Teotihuacan

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Teotihuacan

Teotihuacan was a Mesoamerican city-state that was established around 100 BCE (Cowgill 1997: 129). Located near present day Mexico City, Teotihuacan was incredibly powerful and vastly populated at its peak. The population of Teotihuacan reached an estimated 100,000 people, making in the most densely occupied Mesoamerican city of its time (Cowgill 1997: 130). The leaders of Teotihuacan built many large and complex structures, such as the Sun Pyramid (shown below), the Moon Pyramid, and the Avenue of the Dead (Cowgill 1997: 130). These structures were created around 200-300 CE (Spencer and Redmond 2004: 191). The elites of the city also promoted a state sanctioned religion that focused on the worship of animalistic gods (Cowgill 1997: 148).



Teotihuacan was a powerful political and military entity in the basin of Mexico. The city controlled outposts and trade routes in the area surrounding it (Cowgill 1997: 134, Spencer and Redmond 2004: 190). Teotihuacan competed with neighboring cities for control of these areas (Spencer and Redmond 2004: 192). These conquered areas were sought after by Teotihuacan in order to gain access to their resources (Stanish 2001: 56). There is also archaeological evidence that Teotihuacan was a militarized state. A military was needed in order to control Teotihuacan's conquered areas (Carballo 2007: 183). Despite the presence of a strong military, Teotihuacan eventually went into decline around 600-700 CE (Cowgill 1997: 129).

Theories Overview

A variety of different theories have been proposed for the cause of the decline of Teotihuacan. Within this poster there is information on four of these theories. The first, promoted by archaeologist George Cowgill (1997), argues that Teotihuacan was destroyed by outsider invaders. Another theory, proposed by geologists Mathew Lachniet, Juan Pablo Bernal, Yemane Asmerom, Victor Polyak, and Dolores Piperno (2011), argues that drought caused the eventual decline of Teotihuacan. The third theory, supported by Ross Hassig (1992), states that the decline of Teotihuacan was caused by the deterioration of economic conditions. The last theory was devised by George C. Vaillant (1950) and argues that Teotihuacan dissolved because of an internal revolt against the elites controlling the city. The general arguments of these theories are outlined on this poster. The poster concludes with my analyses of the four theories and my thoughts about the cause of the decline of Teotihuacan.

Eminent Theories

Outside Invaders

One of the earliest theories proposed for the cause of the fall of Teotihuacan accused outside invaders. There is archeological evidence that the buildings of the elites in Teotihuacan were ransacked and burned (Cowgill 1997: 157). The proponents of this theory argue that this destruction was the work of raiding outsiders. These outsiders exploited the weakened condition of the once powerful city of Teotihuacan in order to destroy it (Cowgill 1997: 158). After this attack, Teotihuacan entered into an irreversible period of decline. Around 40,000 individuals continued to live in Teotihuacan after the attack. They are believed to have been either re-settlers of the area or survivors of the attack (Cowgill 1997: 158). Even though the site of Teotihuacan continued to be populated after the burning of the buildings, it was never able to regain its former glory and was soon politically dominated by other emerging powers in the area (Cowgill 1997: 157).



Economic Issues

Another one of the dominant theories regarding the fall of Teotihuacan concerns economic decline. Teotihuacan relied on trade goods and a strong economy with up to 1/3 of its residents working as artisans (Hassig 1992: 82). At around 500 CE, Teotihuacan's influence in surrounding areas began to weaken (Hassig 1992: 85). This was caused by Teotihuacan's reliance on trade goods from conquered outposts. Many of these conquered cities were far away from Teotihuacan, making them difficult to maintain and control (Hassig 1992: 86). As a result, cities once controlled by Teotihuacan became increasingly autonomous (Hassig 1992: 85). The cities did this by creating their own trading empires (Hassig 1992: 86). This devastated Teotihuacan's economy. Newly powerful cities in the region impeded the flow of goods entering Teotihuacan (Hassig 1992: 86). Because of this, Teotihuacan was no longer able to sustain the needs of its domestic population. This led to the destruction of the city by angry citizens and its subsequent decline (Hassig 1992: 89).



Drought

Some argue that drought caused the fall of Teotihuacan. There is evidence of dry conditions in the basin of Mexico that peaked around the time of Teotihuacan's fall (Lachniet et al. 2011: 259). This period of drought was caused by the El Niño southern oscillation, a meteorological process in which warm ocean temperatures in South America lead to a decreased amount of rainfall in the area (Lachniet et al. 2011: 259). Teotihuacan was especially susceptible to this drought because of their reliance on spring water (Lachniet et al. 2011: 259). They used this water for irrigation and domestic consumption (Lachniet et al. 2011: 261). Without it, the agriculturalists of Teotihuacan were not able to grow enough of their staple food crops, such as maize, which led to famine and disease (Lachniet et al 2011: 261). Because of these domestic problems, the population of Teotihuacan dropped and their regional influence was significantly diminished (Lachniet et. Al 2011: 260-261). These factors led to the overall decline of Teotihuacan.



Effigies of a storm god like the one shown above were found smashed in Teotihuacan. This archaeological evidence may imply that the people of Teotihuacan felt abandoned by this particular god during the drought (Lachniet et al. 2011: 261).

Class Rebellion

Many archaeologists believe that Teotihuacan fell because of a revolt against the leaders and elites of the city. A strain on resources angered the people of Teotihuacan and led them to lose faith in their leaders. Crop failure occurred as a result of the drying of streams in the area (Vaillant 1950: 77-78). This lack of food especially affected those in the lower class of Teotihuacan (Vaillant 1950: 77). As a result of this disparity of resources, Teotihuacan's inhabitants ransacked and burned the politically and religiously significant buildings in the city (Hassig 1992: 85). Because only areas of ritual importance were burned, Teotihuacan's elites either took part in the destruction or were unable to prevent it (Hassig 1992: 85). After the destruction of Teotihuacan, many residents moved to the neighboring city of Azcapotzalco (Vaillant 1950: 79). Teotihuacan was never able to regain its former power after this revolt.



Conclusion



I believe that the fall of Teotihuacan cannot be accurately explained by a single theory. Instead, I argue that a combination of elements contributed to Teotihuacan's decline. With the exception of the outside invaders theory, these theories can be used in conjunction in order to analyze the fall of Teotihuacan. The period of drought discovered by Lachniet et al. (2011) can be used to explain the famine that occurred at the end of Teotihuacan's existence. This famine, along with the deteriorating economic conditions described by Hassig (1992), may have contributed to the internal revolt described by Valliant (1950). More archaeological research is needed to be certain, but I believe that these three theories contain intrinsically related evidence which more accurately explains the fall of Teotihuacan than any singular theory can on its own.



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