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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 it 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).

Eminent Theories

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).

Outside Invaders

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.

Drought

Class Rebellion

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

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.

Economic Issues

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.

References


