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The Architecture of Statecraft at Ancient Tula

Research Year: 1999

Culture: Toltec

Chronology: Early Post Classic

Location: Highland México

Site: Tula

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Introduction

I traveled to México to research and photograph Tula, Hidalgo, and related sites for an in-progress book about the Tula art tradition. I took both black/white and color prints. Some were transferred to CD-Rom in order to make reconstructions of what some buildings in Tula Grande—particularly the Vestibule in front of Pyramid B and Building 3 (*the Palacio Quemado*)—may have originally looked like with in situ polychromed relief sculptures that are now mostly lost or destroyed. This will help us to understand what Tula Grande may have looked like in the Early Postclassic period, before the site was abandoned and then looted by the Aztecs in the Late Postclassic period.

I also visited a number of sites in the Bajío, North México, and West México that had historic ties to Tula. I found that these regions participated in a shared architectural tradition with Tula that included colonnaded halls and sunken patios (*patios hundidos*). Most of these sites (including La Quemada, Zacatecas, and a cluster of sites in the Bajío) are not thoroughly published. It was important to photograph these sites in order to show that Tula is part of a larger regional and supra-regional architectural tradition. I am not concerned with constructing a genealogy of these architectural features, but rather with asking why this cluster of traits transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. And, as an art historian, I am interested in the practical as well as symbolic

aspects of architecture, including narrative and ritual referents and overall symbolic import.

My research project dovetailed with a colloquium that I co-organized with Jeff Karl Kowalski of Northern Illinois University—"Rethinking Tollan, Chichén Itzá, and Tula"—that was held at Dumbarton Oaks on February 19-20, 2000. The colloquium consisted of a small number of speakers and invited audience members from Canada, the United States, and México who are actively involved in approaching the "Tula-Chichén Itzá problem" from a spectrum of disciplinary and methodological vantage points. The results will be published in a Dumbarton Oaks volume that I am co-editing. My colloquium paper was entitled "Coming to Terms With Tula"; many of the ideas presented were the result of FAMSI-sponsored research. My paper has several foci:

Ethnohistory

Many 16th century accounts mention a place called Tula, Tollan, or cognates of these words; but these sources *may* or *may not* refer to Tula, Hidalgo. After reading the early Central Mexican sources that H.B. Nicholson has deemed the most reliable for grasping a Late Postclassic-contact era sense of the Mesoamerica past, it seemed that only one source actually refers to Tula in Hidalgo. That source is Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*; Sahagún visited Tula sometime in the 1540s and provides a general, yet accurate, description of Tula Grande. He calls the site he visited Tula and the people there Tultecs in contrast to a mythical place that he calls Tollan, and that is populated by a people he calls Toltecs. Sahagún thus made a clear distinction between Tollan and Tula, and between Toltecs and Tultecs, but later writers did not follow his lead.

Semantics

There is a mountain of confusing terms surrounding Tula and Chichén Itzá. The word "Toltec" is used so frequently and loosely that it has long since had any systematic meaning. In the literature, "Toltec" has been used to describe: an inhabitant of Teotihuacán or Copán; an heir of Teotihuacán; a vague Epiclassic-Early Postclassic culture from Central México; an inhabitant of Tula, Hidalgo; and an inhabitant of the mythic Tollan. The same is true for the place name of Tollan. As a corrective to this situation, it may be useful to systematize our terminology. Inhabitants of the mythic Tollan might still be called Toltecs, but the actual populace from Tula, Hidalgo, can be called "Tula Toltecs," "Toltecs from Tula," or, after Sahagún, "Tultecs."

Tula and Chichén Itzá

Since Désiré Charnay explored Tula in the 1880s and noted striking parallels with Chichén Itzá, there have been few studies devoted solely to the Tula art tradition. Following Charnay, most studies have been limited to exploring what is similar and what is not between the two sites, but there have been few queries into the "deep meaning" of the Tula art tradition.

The Tula Art Tradition and the Colonnaded Hall-Sunken Patio Architectural Complex

As a corrective to the previous point, I explored one facet of the Tula art tradition; this was the core of my paper. I argued that some architectural features that we have come to think of as a joint Tula-Chichén Itzá development actually are found closer to Tula's homeland. Here is a summary of my argument:

- Colonnaded halls (I define this as more than two rows of stone columns in a relatively large hall in civic-ceremonial centers) are relatively rare in Mesoamerica; they appear in North México (La Quemada and Alta Vista in Zacatecas); a few sites in Central México (including Tula and Tingambato, Michoacán); and a few sites in Yucatán (most notably at Chichén Itzá). They frame one side of a main plaza; they have restricted access; many have benches that could have served as seats, altars, and/or platforms for displaying tribute and booty; and they were ritual in nature, (the colonnaded halls in Zacatecas were the sites of massive human sacrifice; those in Tula were the loci of group rituals involving processions and possibly also tribute payment).
- Sunken plazas likewise have a relatively restricted appearance in Mesoamerica; they appear at La Quemada and Alta Vista in Zacatecas; Tula; many sites in the Bajío (for example, Huandacareo, Michoacán; San Miguel Viejo, Guanajuato; San Juan del Río, Querétaro); and the Occidente (Teuchitlán, Jalisco). Sunken plazas usually serve as the main plaza at sites that vary in size from small to vast; and they are usually located near ball courts. Although early forms of sunken plazas can be found in Oaxaca and at Teotihuacán, many scholars (for example, Efraín Cárdenas García) think that the Bajío is the point of origin for sunken patios in that area, the Occidente, North México, and probably also Tula as well. Cárdenas García reasons that since the Bajío had an unbroken tradition of sunken patios going back to at least the Preclassic period, and was in close contact with Tula and other sites in Hidalgo, the Bajío is the logical area to have introduced the sunken patio form into Hidalgo. Other connections between Tula and the Bajío, according to Robert Cobean and others, include ceramics, lithics, and general plans of civic-ceremonial centers. There is also some speculation whether some of Tula's inhabitants were actually from the Bajío.

- At Alta Vista, La Quemada, and Tula, there is a chain of replication that includes colonnaded halls and sunken patios; and at these sites and smaller settlements in Michoacán and the Bajío, there is a chain of replication that includes sunken patios. Considering that Alta Vista, La Quemada, and Tula were homes to large and powerful polities who were involved in extensive long-distance exchange networks, it is plausible that the colonnaded hall-sunken patio complex was a hallmark of trading entrepôts in North México and on the northern fringes of Mesoamerica. While direct and sustained contact between these three centers has not been demonstrated, it would appear that there was some sort of symbolic contact and interchange that marked the sites as loci of power and exchange.
- There is evidence at La Quemada, Tula, and elsewhere of drainage systems in sunken patios. On a practical level, such systems may have helped to avoid flooding. But this also indicates that water did accumulate in these central sunken patios, and I cannot help but wonder if these patios may have symbolized a lake, an ancestral point of emergence, or perhaps even a Tollan or reed-place. Sites with this architectural-symbolic feature would have been marked as latter-day Tollans and loci of political legitimacy.
- Along these lines, it is interesting to note that at La Quemada, a network of roadways radiates out from the site center; it has been presumed that these roads functioned as lines of exchange and communicate with secondary and tertiary centers. But such roads also have a symbolic dimension, perhaps reinforcing the importance of migration myths and rituals that are so common in Mesoamerica, and which would be particularly associated with sites that had a Tollan-like status. At Tula, this link between migrations and ancestry is manifest in another way. In Building 3, which is a series of colonnaded halls with central sunken patios, bench friezes that represent males in procession line the rooms. One referent of these processions may be migrations, and perhaps processions that took place in their rooms may have acted out ancestral migrations.

Summary

I quote (sans references and endnotes) from the conclusion of my colloquium paper to summarize my main points:

The three architectural features discussed above—colonnaded halls, sunken patios, and pyramid enclosure walls—probably have their origin as an architectural unit or set in the Bajío or another area of North México. These features seem to be part of a larger tradition that includes Late Classic-Early Postclassic ceramics, lithics, and general plans for civic-ceremonial centers similar to those in the Tula region. How can we account for these Northern traits at Tula? Instead of offering an evolutionary scenario of how these features came to Tula, I would prefer to focus on the symbolic aspects of a Tula-North México shared architectural tradition regardless of the ultimate origin of the colonnaded

hall-sunken patio unit. I am not suggesting that Tula Grande was comprised of a majority of North Mexican architectural elements; rather, the apparent Northern features are fundamental to the plan and symbolism of the Tula Grande plaza, and we need to scrutinize the cultural connection between the two.

On a very general level, we could say that Tula Grande, tempered by its variegated population, encoded a memory or quoted from the North in their capital. But Tula shared some other affinities with North México, specifically with Zacatecas. The most striking parallels to Tula Grande are Alta Vista and La Quemada; all three centers were entrepôts of foreign exchange, and were bases for long-distance trade and possibly even diplomatic relations with other regions. Might it be that colonnaded halls and sunken patios in some way relate to such social functions? I have previously suggested that merchants are represented at Tula in the Vestibule that leads from Pyramid B to the Tula Grande plaza, and that this was the likely locus of merchant rituals and processions that were in some way connected with that building as well. However, there is no evidence for mass burials here, as there is in colonnaded halls at Alta Vista and La Quemada (we are still not sure if these sacrifices occurred when the sites declined and were abandoned, or perhaps earlier).

Building 3 at Tula is unique, for it conflates the colonnaded hall and sunken patio into one structure. Since the patios are not more than a few inches below floor level and cannot hold more than a few people, they seem to be miniature versions of true sunken patios. The sunken-patio-colonnade hall form at Tula may have had a range of uses. Hers suggests that in North México, especially at La Quemada, each kin group had its own sunken patio for political and/or ritual use; she suggests the same might be true at Tula and Chichén Itzá. This is a plausible explanation, and it relates a specific architectural form to a specific function. This also indicates a possible link between North México, Tula, and the Maya area. John Fox has suggested that the long house form in Highland Maya sites (which includes pillars, columns, benches, and altars) were used by kin groups for kin-based rituals. The Temple of the Warriors Complex at Chichén Itzá is generally similar to this form and to the Classic Maya *popol nah* ("mat house" or council house), as is the Pyramid B complex at Tula. Diehl, in fact, identified Building 3 as a council house. Other suggestions of the building's function include an administrative center and a palace. The last suggestion is intriguing, because the sunken patio with buildings very generally echoes later palaces, for example the palace illustrated in the *Mapa de Quinatzin*...

There are other ritual referents of Building 3. The benches with projecting altars that run around the interior walls could have served as seats and surfaces on which to display food for feasting, offerings, or tribute. Offerings of jade, ceramics, and shell are buried beneath the floors, and it is possible that the small sunken patios could also have been used as receptacles for tribute and offerings, perhaps from merchants, ambassadors, and other ritual participants...

Architecture, perhaps more than imagery, tends to be closely related to how people act and think in cognitive and symbolic terms. We move in, out, and around buildings in constant and casual ways, and may be unaware of the deep impact that architecture

has on our sense of self, community, and place. Given the social interaction and the relative temporal and geographic proximity of Tula, Alta Vista, La Quemada, and the Bajío, it is likely that some of the residue of function and meaning links their shared architectural features. Very possibly the regions shared, at least on a general level, associations between the colonnaded hall-sunken patio units with commerce and ancestral origins.

The discussion of Northern connections with Tula brings us back to an earlier concern with terminology. The literature refers to the inhabitants of Tula/Tollan, as well as the artisans and builders there, as "Toltecs." Yet, the close connection between Tula, the Bajío, and Zacatecas, and the later date of Tula Grande, suggests that the colonnaded hall-sunken patio unit may have originated in an area that Braniff and others call the "Gran Chichimeca." This might be of little concern if our field did not hold onto labels so dearly and attribute ethnic associations to the term "Toltec" in addition to chronological ones. My reading of some architectural features of Tula Grande suggests that, even if the colonnaded hall-sunken patio did not originate in North México, these features linked Tula with the North in a formal and ritual nexus. Ironically, building types that are called "Toltec" according to traditional nomenclature may also be called "Chichimec." This is but one example of how terms and concepts used without rigor or consistency may unwittingly scuttle our delicate navigation among ethnohistory, art history, and archaeology.

Finally, this reading of Tula Grande proceeded from an analysis of the archaeological data, without assuming a priori that Tula was the Tollan, home to Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, the base of an empire that conquered Chichén Itzá, or a Yucatec Maya conquest state in Central México. Instead, I have focused on a unique set of architectural features that can, in part, be understood through the intersection of art history and archaeology. In this way I hope both to broaden the viewpoint through which we see Tula Grande and to reconfigure the traditional spatial and cultural boundaries of the Tula-Chichén Itzá issue to include other areas of ancient México.

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