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1. When Geothermal Was Still in the Minds of the Gods of Teotihuacán

by
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So, WHERE WAS TEOTIHUAÇAN?

There was no sun, nor stars, nor space before time began. There was neither earth, nor moon, nor air, nor light before the gods of Teotihuacán drew the coordinates of the sky. There was no primordial chaos; there was only night and void, barely broken by impalpable specks of cosmic dust.

So, WHERE WAS TEOTIHUAÇAN?

The Madrid Codex does not say, nor do other ancient texts of cosmogony. Nevertheless, we would like to think Teotihuacán really existed before time began: up beyond the sky, in a place reached only by the roots of thought.

Why the gods and goddesses met first in Teotihuacán, or why they met at all, never is explained in the Codex. Were they bored, wandering in the dark with only the light of their minds, or melancholic from the solitude of immense nothingness?

One god, certainly the wisest and most influential, called his brothers and sisters together up there in Teotihuacán. Perhaps after talking, learning how useless they felt, they agreed together to create the world.

The one who had called the meeting set to work. Directing his gaze on the horizon, beyond the portals of the heavens, he projected a thought and created the dawn, which gave birth to the sun.

A goddess gathered the cosmic dust that hindered the flight of the gods through the void. Then not knowing where to put it, she piled the dust in a corner of Teotihuacán. Now the heavens and the void stood limpid, but the pile of dust detracted from the perfection of Teotihuacán and the gods compressed the dust and carried it beyond the dawn.

Another god thought the inert dust might be useful and, with the help of the others, set off explosives, shattering the dust into small bodies. The fragments flew so far apart that they never came back together, a great engineering feat.

But the random form of each fragment did not please a goddess who had stayed in Teotihuacán, watching with the spirit of an architect. She knew that once the fragments were shaped into spheres and polished, they would reflect the light of the dawn. So she called together all the gods and goddesses and they began the task, finishing just as the sun left the womb of the dawn.

Morning came and light shone on Teotihuacán and in the skies around it; but it was a faded, uniform light with no contours or edges. A diaphanous light, weak and cold. Where were the shadows and contrasts? Where were heat and the colors of the rainbow? Much remained to be done.

The god who had called the meeting knew this, but since the others were satisfied, the work ended and each went back to wandering alone through the embryonic universe. The sun stood still on the horizon, motion and space were lacking, and life remained in the mind of the god who knew that work had only begun.
Teotihuacán remained deserted and time passed. How much time? Perhaps a second, perhaps a day, perhaps billions of years; who can say? There was still no Milky Way, the stars of the Bear shone with faded light, and the rhythm of time was not marked by the Earth circling the sun.

We have to think that the gods turned melancholic, roaming through the primordial universe still so cold. Summoned by the most farsighted among them, they gladly returned to Teotihuacán. This time there was less discussion. Each knew better how to complete the task, and they worked with enthusiasm.

The god who had created the dawn was first. He ordered the sun, the first star, to rise and start its journey along the vault of the sky. At first just the sun had light and heat of its own, formed as it was in the womb of the dawn.

The spectacle was fascinating and stately, and the gods and goddesses were entranced. They looked for the spheres of the architect goddess and held them, infusing them with heat and light, making more stars to fill the sky, arranging them into constellations, galaxies, and swarms of comets.

One of the gods, with the spirit of a topographer, looked for a reference to fix the positions of the stars to each other. He placed the beginning of the celestial axes in the center of Teotihuacán, tracing from there coordinates for the heavens. Pivoting on the main axis, he spun around with his arms outspread and imparted a slow rotation to the world, and motion and space were born.

Then a god noticed the sun’s mane of tousled hair. He trimmed off the longest curls and threw them into space. Luckily, the wisest brother noticed. Worried about the fate of the curls, and rightly so, he gathered them together while the others finished the universe. He pressed and molded each curl into a ball and arranged the balls around the sun like a crown on the head of a king. He set the balls into dual motion, spinning each around itself as it spun around the sun, and so the planets were born.

For the planet he would call Gaea, meaning “Earth,” he had a special plan, slightly risky but full of promise. He inserted a red-hot core into the center, covering this with shells of rock to hold
the heat. He shaped the last shell with care, digging trenches for water and places to keep ice in reserve. He cloaked Gaea in a tunic of air whose folds would hold the clouds and the wind.

He patterned the rhythms of time by the seasons and established the cadences of day and night. At last, he offered Gaea a pearl in a setting outside the tunic, safe from the insults of the wind. He gave the pearl a name as dear to the gods of Teotihuacán as that of the sun—the moon. Truly, the work was finished. All life needed was ready: light, air, water, land, and heat. Gaea, the Earth with internal heat, no longer was just an idea in the minds of the gods.

One detail was lacking. Where was Teotihuacán? Should it stay outside of space, up beyond the portals of the heavens, or should a trace, a memory, come to Gaea?

The god who had called everyone together decided. He placed Teotihuacán on Gaea, at the projection of the celestial zenith. Then he set Gaea’s continents in perpetual drift, letting the site move endlessly on the Earth, holding the memory of the first meeting of the gods. Now he flew far from Teotihuacán beyond the confines of the sky, where he found the others waiting.

Today Teotihuacán is on the North American continent, near Mexico City. Someday, it will be elsewhere on another continent; perhaps a future codex will mention where.
Indians watch a volcanic eruption from a canoe. The painting, titled Mount St. Helens by Paul Kane, depicts this active Cascade Range volcano in the Northwestern United States. Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada.