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# From House Societies to States

Early Political Organisation from Antiquity  
to the Middle Ages

*Edited by*

Juan Carlos Moreno García

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# Chapter 7

## Neighbourhoods as ‘house societies’ in ancient Teotihuacan, central Mexico: Exclusionary organisations in a corporate social and political environment

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### **Introduction**

The first large urban site in central Mexico was the metropolis of Teotihuacan, dating to the first six centuries AD (Millon 1973). Located in the northern part of the Basin of Mexico, this 20 km<sup>2</sup> settlement (Fig. 7.1) covered most of the floor of the Teotihuacan Valley. It constituted an anomaly, as it was an orthogonal city (with a strict urban grid) housing a multi-ethnic population (Millon 1973), with a corporate organisation at the top and bottom of this society (Manzanilla 1996; 2009; 2017a; 2018a). Furthermore, it was a huge metropolis, surrounded by rural sites.

The Valley of Teotihuacan was occupied during the Late and Terminal Formative periods by villages, such as Cuanalan (400–80 BC), with nuclear families living in 25 m<sup>2</sup> wattle-and-daub huts located around pebbled courtyards where troncoconical storage pits and burials were found. A vast array of resources from the lake, the lacustrine plain and the sierra was found (Manzanilla 1985).

During the 1st century AD, the Popocatepetl volcano erupted and tonnes of lapilli covered Late Formative sites on the eastern slope of the volcano (Plunket and Uruñuela 1998). The inhabitants of these sites had to evacuate, and many of them most probably fled to the Teotihuacan Valley, a gradually sloping valley where water springs, volcanic materials for construction, obsidian and other resources made possible the emergence of an urban settlement. Soon after, migrants from Oaxaca brought a new technology: lime processing. Other migrants, from Veracruz, profited from the unique position of the Teotihuacan Valley as the easiest route of transit from the Gulf Coast to the Basin of Mexico (Millon 1973). Afterwards, migrants from western Mexico came to live in the western end of the city. Thus the ‘ethnic neighbourhoods’ (Manzanilla 2012a) were established on the periphery of the metropolis

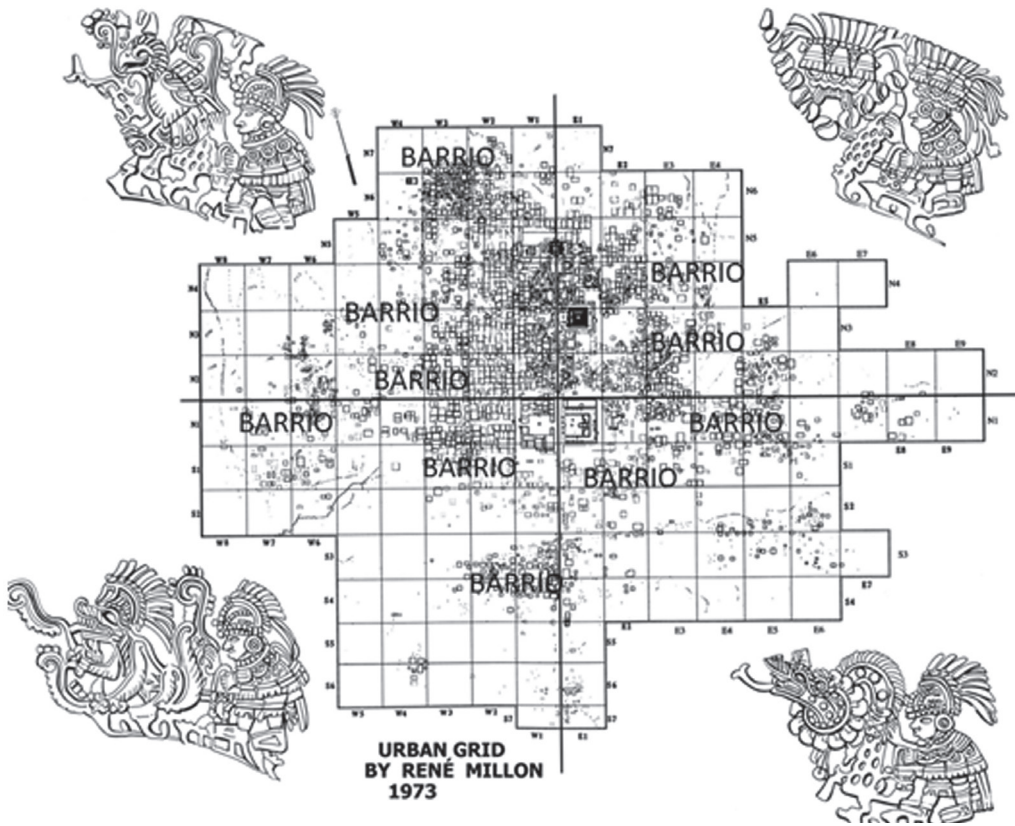


Figure 7.1. Map of Teotihuacan, showing the four districts proposed by Manzanilla (2009) (base map from Millon 1973).

Since the Tlamimilolpa phase (AD 200–350), the urban grid (15° 17' azimuth) conveyed a sense of order in this multi-ethnic metropolis. My reconstruction of the structure of this city has the following elements (Manzanilla 2009; 2017a; 2018a):

1. The 'ethnic neighbourhoods' were set in the periphery of the city, in the first sector reached by each group when migrating from its region of origin: the Oaxaca barrio; the merchants' barrio, with people from Veracruz; and a small Michoacán enclave.
2. The city itself may have been divided into four districts (Manzanilla 2009; 2017a; 2018a), each one with an emblem: felines, birds of prey, canids and serpents. Following my hypothesis of co-rulership (Manzanilla 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2008; 2009; 2017a; 2019), from these districts emerged the four lords that formed the ruling council of Teotihuacan, as represented in the famous vessel found by Sigvald Linné (1942: 68).
3. In each district, various neighbourhoods have been found (circa 22 in the city as a whole; Froese *et al.* 2014). These neighbourhoods consisted of a coordination centre

as the seat of the intermediate elite (see Elson and Covey 2006 for this concept) managing the neighbourhood, the guard or military personnel, the attached multi-ethnic and multi-specialised craftsmen anchored in the neighbourhood centre, and other workers, as my excavations at Teopanacazco have shown (Manzanilla 2006; 2012a; 2012b; 2015; 2017a; 2017b; 2018b; 2020). The neighbourhoods are the most dynamic element of Teotihuacan society, exhibiting an exclusionary organisation (see Blanton *et al.* 1996 for the term ‘exclusionary’). Each neighbourhood formed alliances with sites situated along particular corridors heading towards areas rich in sumptuary and foreign raw materials and goods (Manzanilla 2011). Each neighbourhood also competed with the other neighbourhoods in Teotihuacan with these displays of exotic goods.

4. Around each neighbourhood centre, a series of apartment compounds were set, each one containing a corporate group with different households dedicated to a particular activity, as my excavations in Ozttoyahualco 15B:N6W3 have shown (Manzanilla 1993; 1996; 2009). For the first time in central Mexico, we are seeing multi-family compounds, where each household has an apartment with a kitchen, a storeroom, dormitories, porticoes for work, service patios and ritual courtyards. Each household venerated a particular patron god (Manzanilla 1993; 1996). This fact may indicate that the nuclear families may not have been related through kinship.

### The Teotihuacan neighbourhoods as ‘house societies’

The ‘*maison*’ as a social group is characterised by Lévi-Strauss (1982: 174) as ‘a corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods, and its titles down a real or imaginary line...’. In some groups, these names may be related to ancestral and collective names derived from a mythical founder; territorial names as places of origin; and honorific items that convey power, authority or prestige.

Following this line of thought, Gillespie (2000a: 1) argues that a ‘house society’ is a large, corporate group organised by shared residence, subsistence, means of production, origin, ritual actions or metaphysical essence; it is a collective entity where individuals share economic, social, political and/or ritual relations (Gillespie 2000a: 6), or, to use the terms employed by Bonte and Izard (1991: 435): a ‘house society’ represents a temporal or prolonged alliance between social groupings to create social units of a new type with advantages to all.

Following Gillespie (2000a: 2), the social group is also represented by the objects related to it: relics, tombs, emblems, masks, attire, etc., and by hunting, fishing, and gathering territories (Gillespie 2000a: 3; 2000b: 25–26), as well as migration traditions, foundation stories or ancestral sanctuaries, names and titles, dances and songs, and ritual (Gillespie 2000a: 12).

As I have stated before, I consider that each Teotihuacan neighbourhood with its intermediate elite formed alliances with particular regions in Mesoamerica; with caravans stopping in allied sites, each barrio brought to the city a different array of

foreign raw materials and sumptuary goods, as well as migrants who were attached in the neighbourhood centre. Thus festivities, emblems, indexical (in Blanton's term; Blanton 1994) attire and headdresses were specific to each barrio, and the multi-ethnic group may have been structured like a 'maison' in the sense suggested by Lévi-Strauss (1982). Neighbourhoods were the most dynamic intermediate social groups in Teotihuacan.

### *The economic aspect*

My model to explain the affluence of local and foreign flora and fauna in Teotihuacan involves two aspects centred in the neighbourhood centres of the city:

1. Local products flowed from villages in the entire Basin of Mexico and the eastern Valley of Toluca to each barrio's periodic (weekly) and informal market (the *tianguis*). I suspect that the urban population had kinfolk in the villages, so their involvement in the weekly market in each barrio may have also involved participation in rituals and festivities. To the *tianguis* came maize, beans, squash, chilli, tomatoes, amaranth, *Chenopodium*, Mexican cherries, reeds and wood, as well as waterfowl, freshwater fish, different species of rabbits, hares, deer and domestic animals (turkeys and dogs). It may be that obsidian from the Otumba and Pachuca areas, as well as construction materials, were also brought to the informal market to one side of each neighbourhood centre (Manzanilla 2017d).
2. Foreign fauna, flora, raw materials and products came to the neighbourhood centre through the caravans organised by the intermediate elite of each barrio. Particularly in the Teopanazgo neighbourhood centre, which that I excavated over the course of 13 field seasons (1997–2005) (Manzanilla 2012b; 2017b; 2017c; 2018b; 2020), my collaborators and I identified 14 varieties of marine fish; crocodile; crabs; turtles; various species of birds; felines; lagomorphs; deer (Manzanilla 2017c; Rodríguez-Galicia 2010); and marine molluscs from the Gulf Coast, the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean (Velázquez-Castro *et al.* 2012; 2018), as well as cotton cloths and cotton threads from Veracruz (Manzanilla *et al.* 2011); volcanic shards from the Altotonga region in Veracruz (Barca *et al.* 2013); various rocks and minerals from Puebla, Morelos, Guerrero and the Motagua region in Guatemala (Melgar-Tísoc *et al.* 2012; 2018); and pottery from the Mixtequilla region in Veracruz, from Puebla, Tlaxcala, and Guerrero (Aguayo 2018). These products served as a competitive display between barrios in Teotihuacan. The caravan system also brought migrants to the Teopanazgo neighbourhood centre from Veracruz, Chiapas, Puebla, Hidalgo and Tlaxcala (Manzanilla 2011; 2015; 2017b; 2020), most of whom were multi-craft specialists who were attached to each neighbourhood centre. From oxygen isotopes, we have been able to establish that most (53.8%) of the formal burials were local people from the Basin of Mexico and the Valley of Teotihuacan; 17.94% were from lower altitudes than Teotihuacan; a further 17.94% came from the Gulf Coast of Mexico; and 10.2% arrived from higher altitudes than Teotihuacan, perhaps the Cofre de Perote or Pico de Orizaba (Manzanilla 2020). Analysis of strontium isotopes (Manzanilla 2012b; 2017b; 2020) from a sample of 27 individuals indicates

that more than one third (37.03%) were migrants; eight (29.62%) were local; five (18.51%) came from sites along the corridor towards Veracruz; and four were returnees (14.81%) (Manzanilla 2020).

In the Teopancazco neighbourhood centre, many foreign goods came from Veracruz due to the alliances forged with a corridor of allied sites situated towards the Nautla region in the Gulf Coast, which included perhaps Calpulalpan and Xalasco. The existence of these alliances is supported by the symbolic elements related to the ocean found at Teopancazco, as seen below. Other barrios in Teotihuacan had different economic, social and symbolic connotations.

As I have noted before, each neighbourhood centre had various multi-family apartment compounds around it, housing the city's corporate groups of workers. The families in each apartment compound were devoted to a particular activity, constituting the domestic scenarios of the corporate groups (Manzanilla 1993; 1996). It seems that there were no guild barrios in Teotihuacan; each of these c. 22 social units was more or less independent.

The coordination centre had functional sectors (Fig. 7.2): a ritual one located in the centre, with a huge ritual courtyard, an altar and a large temple; the sector housing the guard; a craft sector to manufacture items directly related to the intermediate elite managing each neighbourhood; a possible administrative area; an alignment of kitchens and storerooms to feed the workers; the domestic quarters of the nobles heading the barrio; a possible medical facility; and an open sector attached to the compound, for the informal weekly market, perhaps for dyeing cloths, for garbage and dung recollection, and for harbouring peasants from the production villages on days when barrio festivities were held (Manzanilla 2009; 2012b; 2018a; 2018b).

It is possible that in the barrio centres that were organising dependent labour, different social groups converged for economic, administrative and ritual reasons, similar to an *oikos*, as described by Pollok (2002: 117 et seq.) for Mesopotamia. The dependent labour in Teopancazco was primarily devoted to crafting the same attire and headdresses as are depicted in the main mural painting of the site (see De la Fuente 1996), intended for the intermediate elite heading the barrio. A garment-making sector was located in the north-eastern sector of the barrio centre, where the cotton cloths brought from Veracruz were united and decorated with marine plaques made of shell, crab, turtle and other marine elements, being a particularity of this barrio. Many bone needles, pins, perforators and awls were found within this barrio, as well as the raw materials used to craft the attire and headdresses (Manzanilla *et al.* 2011). The symbolic codes impressed in each attire referred to the particular neighbourhood from which the intermediate elite wearing it came, constituting an indexical means to identify the elite.

Other crafts were also manufactured at Teopancazco, including nets and baskets, painted pottery and lacquered ceramics.

In the caravan system organised by each neighbourhood, multi-specialised craftsmen were summoned from the allied sites and brought to the barrio as

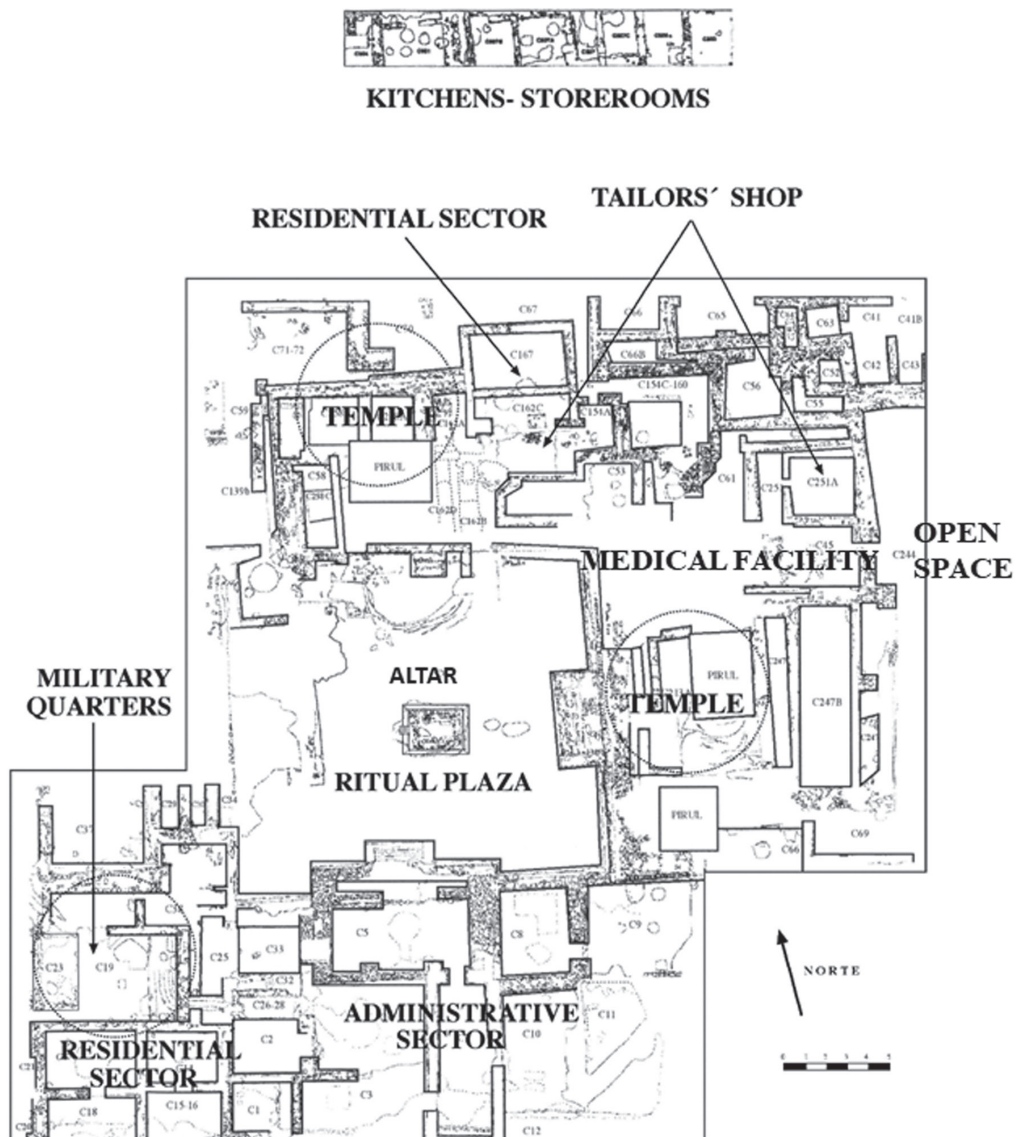


Figure 7.2. Plan of the Teopanacazco neighbourhood centre with its functional sectors (Manzanilla 2012b; 2017b; 2018b) (drawing by Linda R. Manzanilla and Rubén Gómez-Jaimes).

attached workers. Through activity markers in the skeleton (enthesopathies), we could recognise 8 garment makers or painters; 3 divers, who may have brought the different marine shells to the compound; 25 persons softening fibres, those who threw nets to catch the 14 varieties of marine fish brought to Teopanacazco; and 19 individuals who carried heavy weights, some of whom were the porters who carried loads of cloths, pottery, raw materials and other products in their backs with

the *mecapal* (Manzanilla 2017b; 2020). Some of the workers may have been squatting (13 individuals) or kneeling (5 individuals) for long periods of time, perhaps suggesting harsh work, and a further 9 individuals (3 of whom were women) may have thrown nets or darts (Manzanilla 2015; 2020).

A sample of 29 individuals were analysed by means of ancient DNA, and the results pointed out that the four haplogroups (A, B, C, and D) of Mesoamerica were present at Teopancazco, implying great biological diversity (Manzanilla 2015; 2017b; 2020).

The workers from Teopancazco were fed by daily rations (Manzanilla 2011) of maize-based food (*tamales*, *tortillas*, *atole*) and meat from domestic animals (turkeys, dogs) also fed with maize, as seen in the stable isotope analysis (Casar *et al.* 2017). Eighteen individuals buried as formal burials were analysed for trace elements. Some showed evidence of a terrestrial desertic diet, many (6 from Teotihuacan times, and 3 from the Epiclassic period) of a terrestrial non-desertic diet, and 5 of a marine component in their diet (Mejía 2011).

### **The social aspect**

The intermediate elite heading the Teopancazco neighbourhood centre at Teotihuacan had different roles in the compound:

1. They performed different rituals: planting ceremonies, as seen in the main mural painting of the site, found in the 19th century (Fig. 7.3), as well as fishing rituals that evoked the activities carried out in the Nautla region in Veracruz, from which 14 varieties of fish were caught.
2. They accompanied the caravans heading towards Veracruz (Fig. 7.4) wearing the three-tassel headdress depicted in one of the painted vessels of the site (Fig. 7.5).
3. They also supervised the military personnel that acted as a guard in the compound and was based in the south-western portion of the neighbourhood centre.



Figure 7.3. The main mural painting from Teopancazco (drawing by Adela Bretón based on the archive from the project ‘La pintura mural prehispánica en México’, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México).

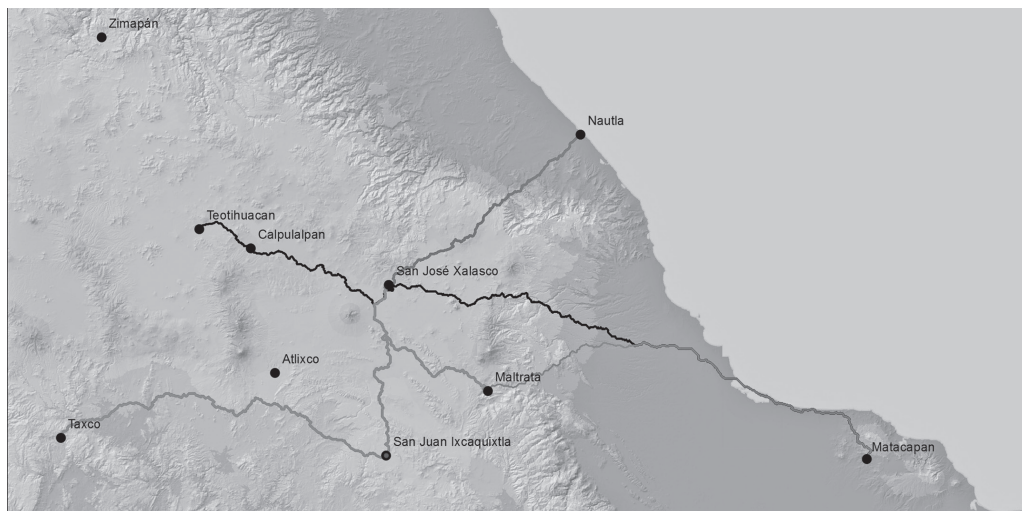


Figure 7.4. Map showing Teopanczco's route to the Nautla region in Veracruz (map by Linda R. Manzanilla and Gerardo Jiménez; from Manzanilla 2011).



Figure 7.5. Depiction of a tassel headdress on a vessel from Teopanczco (photo by Rafael Reyes).

4. Two elite adolescents found in burial 105–108 may have participated in rituals involving painting their bodies with four-petal motif seals with galena, cinnabar, jarosite found in miniature vessels in that burial (Doménech-Carbó *et al.* 2012; Vázquez-de Agredos *et al.* 2012; 2018).

Each neighbourhood centre seems to have had a guard to prevent conflicts in a multi-ethnic environment. The one at Teopancazco had its barracks and sanctuary in the south-western portion of the compound. In that sector, a 7-year-old elite local infant who may have already been training for the military was buried in a pit together with a miniature theatre-type censer, a figurine of a military person with an attire that may be detached element by element (sandals, pectoral, headdress, shield), and an elite figurine (Manzanilla 2012b; 2018b; 2020).

The individuals buried in the Teopancazco neighbourhood centre of Teotihuacan may be divided into four groups: the local population, migrants from the corridor towards the Gulf Coast of Mexico, migrants from afar (Veracruz, Chiapas), and the returnees (Teotihuacanos who had been in foreign lands for many years of their life but had returned to the city, where they died) (Manzanilla 2015; 2017b).

The neighbourhood centres seem to have been scenarios for men, as 85% of the adults buried at Teopancazco were male individuals. The female adults were only 15% of the adult population, and most of them were foreign multi-craft specialists, who may have competed with the males working in the compound (Manzanilla 2020; 2017b). Of the 111 individuals preserved, 36 were perinatal, neonatal, and infant individuals; in the north-eastern portion of the compound, there seems to be a medical facility where an alignment of babies who died during birth was placed. Three adult individuals had dental modification, one female had a pyrite incrustation, five individuals showed tabular erect cranial modification, and two individuals displayed the foreign tabular oblique cranial modification (Alvarado-Viñas and Manzanilla 2018), which only elite individuals had.

With respect to palaeopathologies, 32.4% showed evidence of nutritional stress, particularly in their early years (many had porotic hyperostosis, some had *criba orbitalia*, seven had enamel hypoplasia, and two had scurvy). There were also some cases of periostitis, osteomyelitis and arthropathies (Manzanilla 2020). The fact that many experienced nutritional stress during their youth may imply that they migrated (as most immigrants do) to have access to better living conditions, which the neighbourhood centres offered through the food rationing system (Manzanilla 2011).

### ***The symbolic aspect***

The most important component of the neighbourhood centre of Teopancazco at Teotihuacan was the ritual one; the large plaza had a surface of 275 m<sup>2</sup>, larger than any of the domestic ritual courtyards in the apartment compounds. The altar was located in its centre, and the large temple located along the eastern flank of the plaza had an upper precinct with a surface of c. 57 m<sup>2</sup>. The chemical trace in the stucco floor of the patio evidenced that the planting ritual depicted in the main mural painting

(see Fig. 7.3; De la Fuente 1996) implied that the priestly figures walked to the four cardinal points and to the corners of the plaza (Pecci *et al.* 2010). The priests threw *Salvia* seeds with organic liquids while walking. In many possible neighbourhood centres of Teotihuacan, mural paintings with similar planting ceremonies are found.

In the plaza, pits containing refuse from communal banquets were found, most of which involved eating marine fish, perhaps in *tamales* (corn buns). The fact that sand was placed in the north-eastern corner of the plaza, and that the altar had a net, as seen in the mural painting, suggest that other ceremonies involved 'catching fish' with the net. Analysis of the habitats of the marine fish in the Nautla region of Veracruz indicates that one of the species (the *bobo* fish) could only have been caught on November 1 and 2, when these fish swim to estuaries to spawn. So the fishing ceremonies and further feasting at Teopanaczo may have taken place in mid- or late November (Manzanilla 2017c).

In some other sectors of the compound, particularly the north-eastern upper sector, evidence of foreign rituals was found, dated to the middle of Teotihuacan's history, around AD 350: 29 adult individuals were decapitated, and each head, together with the first three cervical vertebrae, was placed in a crater (mostly with cinnabar or galena) and topped with a bowl or plate. They were placed in pits (with 1, 2 or 17 heads) in a sector in front of a destroyed temple of the Tlamimilolpa period (AD 200–350) (Manzanilla 2009; 2012b; 2017b; 2018b; 2020). This ritual is not local, but originates in the Mixtequilla region in Veracruz, where Drucker (1943) found something similar.

During analysis of the Teopanaczo neighbourhood centre as a '*société à maison*', some key elements stood out:

1. The attire and headdress crafted in the garment-making sector and depicted in Fig. 7.3 were made with cotton cloths from Veracruz, which were united with cotton thread and decorated with insignia and incrustations made from marine molluscs and other marine animals. George Kubler (1967) called this dress 'the priest of the ocean'. This neighbourhood centre had a special economic and symbolic relation to the ocean, particularly to the region of Nautla, in Veracruz. From this region came 14 varieties of marine fish, crabs, crocodile, crested herons, cotton cloths, manufactured products, volcanic shards and persons. If the nobles of this barrio walked through the city of Teotihuacan wearing the attire depicted in the main mural painting of the site, the inhabitants would recognise them as coming from this neighbourhood centre.
2. The facial portions of some mammals were detached and set in the headdress, as depicted in the main mural painting (see Fig. 7.3). Many different feathers were also set in it; different birds were caught to provide the feathers of the imposing frame surrounding the mammal's face. Some instruments for folding *Amate* paper from the tree *Ficus insipida* were also found (Manzanilla *et al.* 2011).
3. To underline the relation to the Gulf Coast of Mexico, volcanic shards brought from Altotonga, Veracruz, to Teopanaczo (Barca *et al.* 2013; Pecci *et al.* 2016) were

used to create the floors of the compound, even though there is volcanic glass in central Mexico.

4. Orange lacquered pottery from the Mixtequilla region in Veracruz was imported to Teopancazco, but other vessels were imitated, stressing the Veracruz connection.

I consider that the Teotihuacan neighbourhood centres were dynamic social entities displaying particular identity symbols which could be recognised by the population of the metropolis. As each of the centres had attire with different items attached, each forged alliances to different sectors of Mesoamerica, each displayed a different spectrum of sumptuary goods and foreign raw materials and each competed with the others in these displays, it is my impression that each multi-ethnic neighbourhood centre was the base of a '*société à maison*' with significant economic, social and symbolic peculiarities.

Furthermore, it is my impression that the emblem representing the Teopancazco group was a fish, depicted in the famous 'Mythological Animals' mural painting' (see De la Fuente 1996). Teopancazco was located in the district of the Feathered Serpent (see map in Manzanilla 2009), so it is understandable that in that particular mural painting, the only animals not contesting the serpents are the fish, that is, their allies.

The group of the Feathered Serpent (located in the south-eastern district of Teotihuacan) seems to have been evicted from the metropolis when its main temple in the Ciudadela (the Feathered Serpent Temple) was intentionally destroyed in the 4th century AD. At that time, termination rituals are seen at Teopancazco (Manzanilla 2012b; 2018b), involving the decapitation of 29 individuals in a ritual similar to that found in the Mixtequilla region in Veracruz. After the main elite of this group was banished from Teotihuacan, the Teopancazco neighbourhood centre continued to be a place related to the ocean.

### Concluding remarks

Teotihuacan was a first-generation state. I have termed this particular type of state 'an octopus-type state' (Manzanilla 2017a), in which the huge metropolis is the head and the corridors of ally sites are the tentacles. Each tentacle is managed by a particular neighbourhood centre and its intermediate elite. Teopancazco is only one of several such centres; others may have been Tepantitla (in the north-eastern district), Xolalpan (also in the north-eastern district), and Zacuala (in the south-western district). The La Ventilla 92–94 neighbourhood or district centre, also located in the south-western district, stands out due to the fact that each functional sector is located in a separate compound.

In my interpretation of Teotihuacan society, each neighbourhood, with its intermediate elite, attached workers and personnel was organised as a 'house society', with strong economic, social and symbolic ties. Each one had particular festivities, emblems, attire and headdresses, as well as alliances to sites located in corridors heading towards certain regions in Mesoamerica from which they pulled in exotic

goods, foreign raw materials, flora and fauna, as well as people who migrated to that particular neighbourhood to act as attached workers.

The alleged autonomy of each neighbourhood in constructing alliances, amassing sumptuary goods and foreign raw materials, competing with other neighbourhoods, embracing particular symbols and attire and organising particular festivities may have formed a threat to the ruling council. The ruling elite is austere compared with the intermediate elite, with its lavish displays. If the ruling council tried to control (too late, I may add) the excessive independence of the neighbourhoods, these entrepreneurial individuals reacted violently (Manzanilla 2017a; 2018a). A revolt against the scenarios of the ruling elite has been assessed by AD 570 (Manzanilla 2019; 2015; 2017a; 2017b; 2003a; 2003b). All the structures of the Street of the Dead were burnt at high temperatures, the sculptures were shattered into many pieces, and the central core of the city was abandoned, until the Coyotlatelco Epiclassic people reoccupied it to loot it (Manzanilla 2019; 2005). Soon after, the Teotihuacanos emigrated from the urban settlement, perhaps to the sites where they fostered alliances.

The contradiction between a corporate organisation at the base (the corporate groups in the apartment compounds) and at the summit (the ruling council) of this society versus the exclusionary behaviour of the intermediate elite in the semi-autonomous neighbourhood centres made Teotihuacan society vulnerable to other phenomena at the end of the Xolalpan period (AD 420–570): a long-lasting drought; severe effects of the urban sprawl in its environment (over-exploitation of water sources, deforestation, soil erosion); and possible conflicts with neighbouring polities to the east.

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