HE ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

The explorations of the Moon Pyramid Project, conducted from 1998 to 2004, have given archaeologists a better understanding of how the second largest monument in the ancient city of Teotihuacan was built. Painstaking systematic excavation of long tunnels into its interior revealed a long sequence of construction expansion from the modest start of the pyramid around 100 CE to the city’s collapse in about 550 CE. The majestic forty-six-meter-tall platform currently visible corresponds to the seventh and final stage of this sequence and it encloses in its interior six smaller, superimposed buildings (see S. Sugiyama and Cabrera Castro, 74–81). For descriptive purposes, these buildings have been designated with arabic numbers from 1 to 7, from the smallest and oldest to the largest and most recent.

Our explorations also revealed that at least three of the seven buildings of the Moon Pyramid—numbers 4, 5, and 6—contained amazing ritual deposits, buried by the ancient Teotihuacanos to celebrate and consecrate each new enlargement. After eight years of intensive archaeological work, we recovered five burials from inside the pyramid—numbered 2 to 6—almost all of them composed of a wide variety of artifacts, plants, animals, and human beings (fig. 10.1; see also fig. 9.7). They were invariably found in the construction fill and aligned on the city’s north-south axis. Burials 2, 3, and 4 were found at the base of the pyramid—at the natural tepetate bedrock level—while burials 5 and 6 were at the summit and near the center of the pyramid, respectively. It is worth noting that none of them were deposited in hollow chambers like those found at sites in Mesoamerica ranging from Tenochtitlan and Monte Albán to Palenque. In contrast, once the rite of inhumation was completed, at Teotihuacan it was customary to fill the receptacles with tons of earth and stone, which resulted in tragic consequences for the future preservation of the materials. Following is a brief summary of these ritual deposits and a discussion of their possible functions and symbolism.

Burial 2

Burial 2, at the base of the pyramid, is one of the richest and most complex of the deposits exhumed at Teotihuacan to date (fig. 10.2). The Teotihuacanos placed it just north of the northern facade of Building 3 during the construction of Building 4, an enlargement dated to around the first half of the third century CE. Explored in 1998–1999, this burial rested on a thin layer of mud laid directly on the bedrock, and it was limited by a quadrangular stone enclosure that measured 3.5 × 3.5 × 1.5 meters.
In this deposit we discovered the complete skeleton of an individual who had been sacrificed and offered to the building. The corpse was found in a seated position, leaning on the east wall and facing toward the west. His arms were positioned behind his back with his hands together, as if they had been tied at the wrists. According to bioarchaeological studies, the individual was a male, forty to fifty years old. The data from the analysis of stable oxygen isotopes in the bone and dental phosphate reveal that the subject spent his childhood in a place other than Teotihuacan. Therefore, he may have been a foreigner captured in battle and later sacrificed to the pyramid. Significantly, the skeleton displayed two greenstone earflares and a beaded necklace, which suggest his high social status.

The individual was accompanied by a lavish offering that consisted of hundreds of artifacts in obsidian, jadeite and Guatemala (a type of chalcedony), shell, ceramic, fiber, slate, and pyrite. There were also dozens of animals from both the Teotihuacan region and tropical and coastal zones. The identified species included two complete pumas and one wolf, in addition to two puma skulls. There were also nine golden eagles, a prairie falcon, a crow, a horned owl, and at least six rattlesnakes, as well as numerous mollusks. It is worth adding that the puma and wolf skeletons were found in wood cages, and one of the two pumas was associated with excrement remains, which indicates that these mammals were buried alive (see N. Sugiyama, 90–93).

In the center of Burial 2, we also found an unusually complex array of objects and materials that had clearly been placed in a deliberate and parallel manner. Two of them consisted of a greenstone figured paired with an obsidian figure (cats. 99, 101–103); one of the greenstone figures appears to be female, while the other is likely male. The offering with the male figure was placed at the east of the chamber, and that of the female figure was at the very center, suggesting it was the focus of the entire burial. The nearby presence of a necklace of shell carved to resemble...
FIG. 10.3 Burial 3. Ink drawing by Saburo Sugiyama
FIG. 10.4 Burial 4. Photograph by Shigeru Kabata
FIG. 10.5 Burial 5. Photograph by Hirokazu Kotejawa
human teeth (cat. 100), and the skeletons of three rattlesnakes and a golden eagle, underscore its importance. Both of the greenstone figures are in turn each surrounded by nine big obsidian blades organized in a radial pattern. A third grouping, placed between the pairs of figures and obsidian blades, included other equally symbolically charged objects: a slate disk, obsidian projectile points, and a ceramic Storm God jar (cat. 104). Taken as a whole, and in comparison to other offerings from the Moon Pyramid and the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, these three groupings comprise a complex statement about the cosmological and martial aspects of the Teotihuacan state, and the sacrifices required to maintain its authority.

Burial 3
This burial also stands out for its richness and complexity (fig. 10.3). It was deposited north of the northern facade of Building 4 during the construction of Building 5, around 300 CE. The materials in Burial 3 were found in 1999 in the interior of a quadrangular pit measuring 2.5 meters on each side and 1.5 meter deep that was excavated by the Teotihuacanos in the bedrock layer. The deposit contained the mortal remains of four individuals who, like the individual in Burial 2, seem to have been sacrificed to the building, as evidenced by their arms behind their backs, wrists together, and fibers on both their extremities and their jaws, perhaps the remains of ties and gags. The bodies of individuals 3-A, 3-B, and 3-C were arranged parallel to each other, in an extended position on their backs, oriented east-west with their heads toward the east. In contrast, individual 3-D was found in a lateral flexed position on his left side. The four were all male, but they were from different age groups at the moment of death: 3-A was about thirty-five years old; 3-B, from eighteen to twenty years of age; 3-C, around twenty-five years old; and 3-D, close to fifteen years. According to isotopic analysis, they were foreigners, perhaps immigrants who moved to Teotihuacan, or war captives.

The jewels worn by individuals 3-A, 3-B, and 3-C are similar to those worn by the sacrificial victims found in the Feathered Serpent Pyramid: 3-A displayed a pair of round shell earflares; 3-B possessed two small round earflares, a nose ornament in the shape of a serpent rattler, and a beaded necklace, all made of greenstone (cat. 113); 3-C had a pair of small round shell earflares and a necklace with representations of maxillae made of the same material; and 3-D lacked any ornaments. These differences in grave goods might indicate that the individuals belonged to different classes or sociopolitical groups.

Just as in Burial 2, the four individuals were accompanied by a general offering that included hundreds of artifacts in obsidian, jadeite and Guatemala, shell, fiber, slate, and pyrite. What stood out from the faunal remains are the skulls of fourteen wolves, three pumas, and possibly one jaguar, which still retain the first few cervical vertebrae. This indicates that the heads were severed from the body when they were still covered with soft tissue. During the archaeological exploration we also
recovered the complete skeleton of what seems to be a roadside hawk, as well as various species of seashells.

We located two concentrations of artifacts right in the middle of the pit. Each included a carved greenstone anthropomorphic sculpture, several beads also made of greenstone, a sea snail shell and numerous smaller seashells, and obsidian objects including anthropomorphic eccentrics, projectile points, and blades. The two greenstone sculptures mentioned are miniatures of exceptional quality that represent dignitaries each seated in a cross-legged position, wearing a headdress, loincloth, and removable earflares (cats. 111–112).

Burial 4
This burial, discovered and explored in 2000, was deposited north of the northern facade of Building 5, precisely when Building 6 was being constructed over it, around 350 CE. Unlike those of Burials 2 and 3, the offerings in Burial 4 were placed directly in the earth and rocks of the construction fill (fig. 10.4).

The content of Burial 4 was limited to seventeen human skulls with the first cervical vertebrae in anatomical position, in addition to a supplementary vertebra that belonged to an eighteenth individual. Apart from these skeletal remains, no other associated materials were uncovered. Despite the deplorable condition of these materials, painstaking bioarchaeological analysis was successfully conducted, revealing that almost all of the sacrificed individuals were young men, under thirty-five years of age. We can see different types of cranial deformation and dental mutilation (this latter practice was atypical of the population at Teotihuacan), which suggests that the victims may have come from diverse origins and might have been members of high social status. In consonance with this interpretation, isotopic studies indicate that most of them were foreigners who changed their place of residence in the course of their lives, perhaps as a result of their work, such as trade, warfare, or diplomacy.4

As part of the expansion ceremony for the pyramid, these individuals lost their lives one by one, when their necks were violently broken, perhaps with a club or a stone axe. Then their heads were severed from the dead bodies with extremely sharp obsidian blades. These heads were taken to the foot of the back facade of the pyramid and placed in the fill of the new building enlargement, all at the same level in a roughly rectangular area. Many of them were positioned upright, with the neck placed downward. Finally, a fine layer of red pigment was spread on the offering, which was covered over with large irregular stones.

Burial 5
Burial 5 is quite different from the preceding examples in terms of architectural position and content (fig. 10.5). It was discovered in 2001 when the upper portion of Building 5 was explored. The excavation of a south–north tunnel on the central axis of the pyramid revealed that the floor was broken at the north end of the summit. The fractured area was rectangular in shape and measured six meters on each side: it was the edge of the enormous pit containing Burial 5, which had been filled with tons of earth and stones. A meticulous analysis of the context revealed that the floor was never repaired; the fill for the cavity continued above, beyond its upper edge. At the same time, a topographic survey showed that Burial 5 was located exactly at the three-dimensional center of Building 6. This information supported the idea that the deposit was made to commemorate the closing of Building 5 and the erection of the second-to-last enlargement of the pyramid, around 350 CE. The pit was composed of four rough talud walls, which in fact were built of tepetate blocks cut when the hole was excavated to become the receptacle for the deposit. Therefore, its interior space narrowed as it descended to the square, flat base, which was 3.5 meters under the upper edge.

As in the case of all ritual deposits in the Moon Pyramid, the archaeological materials were concentrated at the base of the cavity. What stood out were the complete bodies of three individuals: 5-A, located in the middle of the western end of the pit; 5-B, near the southwest corner; and 5-C, in the center of the northern end. Each of the three was seated cross-legged and facing the west, with hands rested one on top of the other, directly over their feet. This position evoked majesty and high rank virtually throughout Mesoamerica, and in iconography it was a position used exclusively by deities and elites in power. As a result of diverse studies, we know that the individuals in Burial 5 were males who died at an advanced age: 5-A was between fifty and sixty years of age; 5-B, between forty-five and fifty-five; and 5-C, between forty and forty-five. According to the preliminary results of isotopic analysis, the individuals were probably all foreigners.5

Individuals 5-A and 5-B were seated next to each other. Significantly, they wore almost identical ornaments, made of jadeite and Guatemala from the Motagua Valley. Each of them had a set of grave goods that consisted of a pair of large round earflares, a necklace with twenty-one globular beads (or perhaps twenty beads, with the twenty-first being a bead that had been deposited in the mouth of each individual), and a spectacular bar-shaped pendant customarily worn by Maya rulers (cat. 118). In other words, these two individuals were attired at the moment of their death as figures related to Maya dynasties. This suggests there were much more intense, direct, and complex relations between the Maya and the people of Teotihuacan than we had imagined until now, at least among the elites of both societies in the fourth century CE.

The personal ornaments of 5-C were highly distinctive. This individual, spatially set apart from 5-A and 5-B, had a badly deteriorated stick beside his right arm, perhaps the remains of a staff, a scepter, or a spear-thrower. He wore two large shell disk earflares with jadeite appliqué. In addition, he displayed a complete necklace composed of rectangular shell plaques and disks, also made of shell with jadeite appliqué. Although there are no completely identical necklaces in Classic period Mesoamerican iconography, we can find important analogies both at Teotihuacan and in the Maya area. The rich attire of 5-A, 5-B, and 5-C was complemented by long whitish grassy fibers and diminutive obsidian eccentrics in the shape of human beings, serpents, and blades. These materials were distributed regularly behind the head and back of each
person, with a greater concentration in the central area of the pit.

In front of the three skeletons, we discovered bones—in anatomical position—of animals that could have symbolized the individuals’ alter egos. The possibility also remains that they might also have formed part of their names, or appellatives for their lineage, political, military, or religious affiliations. Thus, 5-A was directly associated with a golden eagle, while 5-B and 5-C were each connected to a puma.

In addition to the ornaments and animals associated with the three cross-legged individuals, we located numerous offerings dispersed throughout the pit. In the center, immediately behind 5-A and 5-B, there was an anthropomorphic jadeite figurine also modeled in a seated cross-legged position and with his own ornaments made of the same materials as those of the cadavers: two earflares, a pectoral, a necklace with nine diminutive beads, and another necklace with nine large globular beads (cats. 115–117). The figure was covered with a weaving of grasslike fibers and surrounded by different types of shells, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic obsidian miniatures, pyrite remains, and small serpent skeletons. Near the east wall of the offering we found a trumpet shell (cat. 114); shell beads and earflares; a large anthropomorphic eccentric, projectile points, and blades made of obsidian; greenstone beads, pendants, earflares, and T-shaped plaques known as resplandores (tiny headdresses); small slate disks; a polished artifact in an unusual cylindrical shape; grassy fibers; and serpent skeletons. Finally, at each of the four corners there was a group of obsidian blades.

The cause of death of these three high-ranking individuals remains to be clarified. It is difficult to say with any certainty if they died in a conflict, or if they were captured and taken to Teotihuacan expressly to consecrate the next-to-last enlargement of the Moon Pyramid. Another possibility is that one of the individuals died and, as a consequence, two of his high-ranking servants received the honor of being sacrificed to accompany him to the otherworld.

Burial 6

In view of what we had detected in Burial 5 in the three-dimensional center of Building 6, we undertook new explorations in 2003 in search of an earlier ritual deposit in the central portion of Building 4. We opened a tunnel toward the north in the upper part of the adosada platform, which was added on to the front of the pyramid. As a result of the strict regularity of Teotihuacan liturgy, our predictions were fulfilled when we detected what would be designated Burial 6, even though it was found not exactly in the three-dimensional center but, for reasons that are not entirely clear, rather slightly toward the north of the central point of Building 4. This deposit dates approximately to the first half of the third century, when Building 4 was constructed, and it
is contemporary with Burial 2. It is framed by rough walls, which form a rectangular receptacle measuring 5 × 4.5 × 2 meters.

Burial 6 included twelve sacrificial victims, apparently all of them adult males (fig. 10.6). Just as in Burials 2 and 3, they were interred with their arms tied behind their backs. They can be divided into two major groups, taking into account the presence or absence of personal ornaments, as well as the way the corpses were treated. The first group was composed of 6-A and 6-B; these individuals occupied the central axis of the deposit, were placed in a flexed position, and wore lavish ornaments. Individual 6-A had two earflares, a beaded necklace, and a perforator made of jadeite (cat. 109), which might have been a tool for autosacrifice; in addition, in his mouth he had a tubular pendant and jadeite beads. In contrast, 6-B had two worked shell valves near his ears; he also had a jadeite perforator (cat. 110), an obsidian sacrificial knife, and a complex necklace made of shell plaques, decorated with representations of human maxilla also made of shell, similar to those seen from the Feathered Serpent Pyramid.

The second group consisted of ten skeletons that we registered as individuals 6-C to 6-L. They were located near the north wall of the burial, distributed irregularly and in random positions, which suggests that their bodies were tossed in one on top of the other. It is notable that all of them lacked the skull and the first cervical vertebrae, and were not associated with any ornaments.

In addition to the individuals described, the deposit contained numerous artifacts, almost all of them concentrated on the northern portion of the north–south axis. The most interesting of all the complexes of offerings was carefully placed before the twelve sacrificial victims. On the tamped-down bottom of that burial we discovered a rectangular receptacle measuring 5 × 4.5 × 2 meters.

Consecration Deposits at the Moon Pyramid

To be able to assess the implications of the ritual deposits explored by the Moon Pyramid Project over the course of seven field seasons and to offer a more cogent explanation of the meaning of the discoveries, several more years of detailed analyses of the materials and archaeological contexts are necessary, as well as the processing of huge amounts of samples and data. Nevertheless, we believe it is possible to offer at this time some preliminary conclusions.

The first group was made up of the depictions of the universe that were built in the framework of consecration ceremonies held at each architectural enlargement of the pyramid to imitate the cosmogonic actions of the gods.

The second conclusion has to do directly with the impressive tempo-spatial continuity of massive human sacrifices to dedicate major buildings at Teotihuacan. Recently, certain authors have disputed the significance of the discovery of more than 117 individuals sacrificed at the dedication of the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, suggesting it was a unique event in the city’s history. However, by taking into account the Moon Pyramid data, what is immediately clear is that this type of massive sacrificial event was carried out repeatedly to sanctify each stage of this building, at least between 200 and 350 CE. Furthermore, if we analyze the problem in a much larger context, we realize that the deeply rooted and widespread Mesoamerican custom of consecrating religious structures through the sacrifice and interment of large numbers of human victims was perpetuated from the Middle Preclassic to the Late Postclassic, from the Maya city of Uaxactún to Tzintzuntzan, the Purepecha capital in Michoacán. In other words, the burials described here are new examples of a recurrent phenomenon that has a long temporal duration of sweeping geographic dimensions.
The third conclusion is related to the victims’ identities. Osteological analysis of the DNA and strontium and oxygen isotopes carried out to date on the sacrificial victims from the Feathered Serpent and Moon Pyramids indicate an extremely broad preference for subadult and adult males who were not from Teotihuacan. This information, together with the weapons, attire, and bellicose symbols often associated with the corpses, points to the identification of most of these individuals as military men, fundamentally war captives. In the specific case of Burial 6, we know that the twelve sacrificial victims were all adult males. Ten of them were treated with extreme brutality: their wrists were bound, they were sacrificed and decapitated, and finally they were thrown into the deposit without any further consideration. The complete absence of personal ornaments further underscores the degrading treatment they were given. We should bear in mind that nudity in Mesoamerica was a symbol of military submission and humiliation.  

The fourth conclusion is connected to the dozens of animals interred in the Moon Pyramid burials. Only felines, canids, birds of prey, and rattlesnakes were found. It is highly significant that there were no examples of rabbits, deer, dogs, geese, quails, and armadillos, which were so common in apartment compounds at Teotihuacan. Carnivorous mammals and birds of prey tend to be associated directly with warfare and sacrifice in Teotihuacan mural painting, ceramics, and sculpture. In many cases they are given certain anthropomorphic features, at the same time that they are shown heavily armed or equipped with large sacrificial knives skewering hearts. Therefore, these images have been interpreted as metaphoric allusions to military orders similar to those that will be seen later at Tula and Tenochtitlan.

If our reasoning is correct, the Moon Pyramid offerings attest to the enormous importance of warfare and sacrifice from early dates and throughout the history of Teotihuacan, especially in the religious ideology that upheld state power. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that despite the existence of a public state discourse where explicit scenes of sacrifice and warfare were shunned, the Teotihuacanos frequently conducted human sacrifice on a massive scale and were involved in a setting of endemic warfare, just as the Zapotec and Maya, who were their contemporaries.

Seen as a whole, the finds at the Feathered Serpent and Moon Pyramids contradict the idyllic vision of a peaceful Teotihuacan state, led by ascetic priests who exercised political functions and redistributed the economic surplus among the city’s inhabitants. Quite the contrary, an abundance of solid evidence attests to the importance of collective human sacrifice and warfare in this society. From this renewed perspective, the people of Teotihuacan take on the very real, earthly, and belligerent characteristics of not only their Mesoamerican contemporaries, but also, unfortunately, the entire human race.

NOTES
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Pereira and Chávez 2006.
7 N. Sugiyama et al. 2013.
8 López Luján 2005; López Luján 2006; López Luján 2015.
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CITY OF WATER
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CITY OF FIRE

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