The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: A Reassessment of the Similitude between Tula, Hidalgo and Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Part I
Author(s): Lindsay Jones
Source: History of Religions, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Feb., 1993), pp. 207–232
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062996
Accessed: 14-06-2017 17:29 UTC

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.
Once upon a time, a summer Sunday in 1987, I found myself sitting in the back of the huge fortress-like cathedral in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico. The place was hot and packed full when the priest made his dramatic entrance. Dressed in elaborate vestments and swinging his incense decanter, he led a very formal procession down to the altar space and then, to the oddly appropriate background music of mariachi guitars, the celebration of the Eucharist began. More memorable than the actual mass, however, was a little Mexican boy, some three feet tall, who wandered in the aisle in front of me and who became fascinated with a little relief carving of an angel that, conveniently enough, was precisely the same height as this young Mexican. And so, while this meticulously choreographed mass with music, vestments, scriptural readings, and holy sacraments was being performed for hundreds of people in the congregation, this little boy spent the hour in the side aisle involved in a very animated conversation with this same-sized stone angel. He greeted her nose-to-nose, put his hands all over her, interrogated her, and then stepped back fully expectant, so it seemed, of a response.

AGENDA: METHODOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL PROBLEMS

This untutored exchange between the little boy and the 400-year-old stone angel, a ritual-architectural event of compelling simplicity, a
hermeneutical conversation in which a human being questioned an architectural monument and then listened for its answer, provides the image that sustains this twice-titled essay.1 Aspiring to address both a general methodological issue and a more specific historical one, this essay discusses each of the two titles individually and then presents a working hypothesis that draws the theoretical and historical concerns together.

The first title—"The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture"—refers to a set of general theoretical and methodological concerns, that is, sweeping cross-cultural concerns about sacred architecture in any historical context: for example, What is sacred architecture in general? What is the mechanism of sacred architecture? How does architecture "mean" things? And how does the experience of architecture work to change people and their vision of the world? Moreover, this first title refers to the general methodological problems inherent in the study of sacred architecture: for example, What are the potentialities and the limitations of sacred architectures as data for the study of religion? Or, more general still, what are the potentialities and limitations for relying on any sort of nonliterary, artistic, archaeological, or performative sorts of evidences for the study of the history of religions—a field that, after all, has typically legitimated itself via the interpretation of literary texts, that is, written words.2

By contrast to these rangy methodological issues about the human experience of sacred architecture and the hermeneutical interpretation of sacred architecture, the second title—"A Reassessment of the Similitude between Tula, Hidalgo and Chichen Itza, Yucatan"—refers to a much more specific historical problem, a famous and infamous problem in Mesoamerican archaeology related to the uncanny resemblance between the architectural remains of two pre-Columbian cities that lie some 800 miles apart but that find no such similar counterparts anywhere in between. In other words, the "problem" of the similitude between the architectures of Tula, Hidalgo and Chichen Itza, Yucatan—or simply the "Tula-Chichen problem"—assuredly among a handful of the most enduring and most significant debates in the Mesoamerican field, lies in explaining the nature of the historical relatedness between

---

1 This article is the first installment of a two-part essay; the second half will appear in the May 1993 issue of History of Religions. The arguments I present need to be assessed in the context of the entire piece.

2 These are particularly poignant questions for the study of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican religion because there is, on the one hand, an enormous fund of architectural and archaeological evidences—i.e., ruined monuments—yet, on the other hand, particularly in the Maya area (other than the abundant hieroglyphic inscriptions), a near-total void of contemporaneous written texts. Accordingly, in the Maya zone, architecture becomes, by its handsomeness and by default, the datum of priority.
these two far-flung twin cities. In short, why do these two sets of pre-Hispanic buildings look so much alike when nothing between looks that way?

The conventional explanation of Tula-Chichen Itza relatedness, although there has never really been a consensus on the historical particulars, holds that, at some point in the pre-Columbian past (perhaps the ninth or tenth century C.E.), a small but fiercely militant contingent of Toltec renegades from Tula marched out of their central Mexican homeland into the Yucatan Peninsula, where they overpowered the more intellectually predisposed Maya and then built (or forced the indigenous Maya to build) that portion of Chichen Itza that so resembles the original Toltec capital of Tula. Despite burgeoning evidence that this tawdry tale of the so-called Toltec Conquest of the Maya corresponds only faintly, if at all, to anything that actually happened in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, scholars and tour guides alike continue to recite variations of this glamorous story with vigor and conviction. Nevertheless, while the historical problems about who was where when (let alone why) are fascinating in their own right—and a primer on those specific problems is forthcoming in the next few pages—it is the methodological even more than the historical dimensions of this famous debate that are fascinating to the comparative historian of religions. And with that as a segue, the discussion returns to that initial set of broadly theoretical issues about the hermeneutical experience and the hermeneutical interpretation of sacred architecture.

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS: THE HERMENEUTICAL EXPERIENCE OF ARCHITECTURE

Like mothers of men, the buildings are good listeners. [ADRIAN STOKES, 1951]3

In the last analysis, Goethe's statement "Everything is a symbol" is the most comprehensive formulation of the hermeneutical idea. It means that everything points to another thing . . . the universality of the hermeneutical perspective is all-encompassing. [HANS-GEORG GADAMER, 1964]4

Hermeneutical reflection arises from the encounter with strangeness or otherness. By the grace of hermeneutics, distant meanings are brought close, strangeness becomes familiar, and bridges arise between the


once and the now. When the sense of a text, an action, or an institution is immediately self-evident understanding proceeds unimpeded; interpretation is noncontroversial and no hermeneutical reflection is required. But the sense of symbols and of religiohistorical phenomena is nearly always more elusive, at once beckoning us to understand and yet withholding the abundance of their meanings. This elusive doubleness of meaning—a conjoined familiarity and foreignness—gives rise to hermeneutical inquiry. Hermeneutical reflection involves, in other words, a circumstance in which a person feels interested or compelled to make sense of something or someone but in which the process of understanding meets resistance because the meanings of the situation are somehow obscured. When the process of human understanding meets resistance, that is, when meanings are not immediately apparent, the hermeneut is cast into a kind of questioning and being answered, a cycle of projection and revision as one catches glimpses of the object or circumstance of his/her attention, makes guesses or hypotheses about that circumstance, and then eventually has those guesses either confirmed or rejected after moving into position for a better view.

This sort of to-and-fro conversation process of hermeneutical understanding may find its most technical and most self-conscious expression in the interaction between scholars and the arcane texts that they aspire to decipher. Gadamer (among others) argues convincingly, however, that this sort of dialogical process of understanding applies not simply to the scholar’s critical interpretation of texts but to any circumstance in which human beings have invested themselves in understanding objects and phenomena whose meanings are not immediately clear. Moreover, to cite Gadamer’s own prime example (and to recall the quaint image of the little Mexican boy interrogating the stone angel), nowhere is the notion of dialogical, interactive, to-and-fro hermeneutical reflection more applicable than in the human experience of sacred architecture, in the human confrontation with a cathedral, a mosque, or a Mesoamerican pyramid whose fund of potential meanings is intriguing and profound but not at all obvious.


6 In the context of his discussion of the open and “eventful” character of works of art, Gadamer says that “we shall find the most plastic of the arts, architecture, especially
THE SUPERABUNDANCE OF ARCHITECTURE

[Mesoamerican] architecture goes beyond metaphor; it is the space of power, sacred and secular; it is the meeting place of the real and the supernatural. Architecture becomes deity, as a ruler becomes a god. Architecture transcends the manifest elements of which it is composed in a way that is awesome to the imagination. [ELIZABETH P. BENSON, 1985]7

We have only to interpret that which has a multiplicity of meanings. [HANS-GEORG GADAMER, 1961]8

Thus the experience of art—and most especially the experience of architecture9—not only falls within the sweep of hermeneutical reflection, it wins a priority in Gadamer's exposition of understanding because the experience of art lays bare that which is less obvious in other realms of understanding. According to Gadamer, works of art and architecture are available to endless reinterpretation and revalorization because they hold within them inexhaustible reservoirs of "ontological possibility"; the work of art "stands open for ever new integrations" and buildings, like works of art, are loci from which "strangenesses" perpetually emerge. Thus, in remarks that are particularly relevant to the centuries-old architectural ruins of Mesoamerica, Gadamer argues: "The creator of a work of art may intend the public of his own time, but the real being of his work is what it is able to say, and this being reaches fundamentally beyond any historical confinement. In this sense, the work of art occupies a timeless present."10

Owing to this superabundance of meanings, religious monuments, especially those that endure over a long stretch of time, have a kind of autonomy, an independence or unpredictability, a "personality" of sorts. Religious buildings arise as human creations, but they persist as


9 It has been commonplace to attribute to architecture a special status among the arts by virtue of its unique complementary participation, on the one hand, in the "functional" realm of utility (i.e., shelter) and, on the other hand, in an aesthetic realm that transcends the merely practical. In the same vein, Gadamer, Truth and Method, pp. 138–42, considers architecture to be the paramount exemplar of the revealment-concealment interplay that characterizes all hermeneutical reflection because a work of architecture is both a very accessible element of the practical sphere of utility and a genuine work of art with an "excess of meaning."

life-altering environments; they are, at once, expressions and sources of religious experience. As both created and creator, a religious building manifests the aspirations and intentions of its builders, yet the meaning of a building “not occasionally, but always” surpasses those original intentions.\(^{11}\) For all the careful intentions of architects, buildings—religious, civic, or otherwise—invariably (and usually almost immediately) spring free from those carefully contrived programs of meaning and begin to evoke feelings and ideas that had never even occurred to their original designers. We can well imagine, for instance, that whatever idiosyncratic issues about which the Mexican boy and the stone angel were conversing, it was not a conversation that had been anticipated by the seventeenth-century builders of the cathedral.\(^{12}\)

The superabundance of religious monuments has profound consequences not simply for the experience of sacred architecture but, likewise, for the academic interpretation of sacred architecture. Appreciating the inherent versatility and inexhaustibility of, for instance, a pre-Columbian pyramid both threatens and enlivens its interpretation. The malleability, openness, and character of possibility within religious buildings ensures a wealth of meanings that will never be given over in their description as static constructional forms; in other words, even the most rudely honed megalithic menhirs do not just stand there mute and available for their once-and-for-all analysis as objects. Wrenched from its relatedness to human beings and to some particular function or ceremonial occasion, a religious building loses its meaning, or, more likely, its diverse meanings are set adrift without context or perspective. Moreover, beyond the flux in meanings and functions between different ceremonial occasions at a single monument, the decipherment of sacred architecture is complicated more still because, invariably, the built environment simultaneously evokes a range of disparate meanings from the heterogeneous constituency that is experiencing it—obviously, for instance, the clergy, the committed laypersons, and the casual tourist each have very different experience of the mass in the Cuernavaca cathedral. Like actors in an intricately choreographed pageant, individuals and social factions play different roles and bring different preparations to their respective experiences of the architectonic world, and, not surprisingly, their sentiments and perceptions of that world are similarly variegated.

\(^{11}\) I borrow this phrase from Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 280, where he is speaking of the inexhaustibility of texts.

\(^{12}\) In the phrasing of architectural semiology, “certain ‘symbolic’ functions, especially in ancient architecture, survive the obliteration of their actual connotative and denotative functions”; in other words, the original intention of a building is but the first of countless re-creations. See, e.g., Francoise Choay, “Urbanism and Semiology,” in *Meaning in Architecture*, ed. Charles Jencks and George Baird (New York: Braziller, 1969), p. 31.
That religious buildings invariably overstretch the original intentions of their builders to mean many different things in different historical epochs to different people, or even to the same person during different ritual circumstances, seems painfully obvious (whether we learn this from Gadamer or dozens of other theorists). Nevertheless, the failure to acknowledge the incontestable multivocality of monumental architecture has been perhaps the foremost obstacle in the resolution of the Tula-Chichen problem. Neglecting all too often to consider either the diversity of ritual circumstances in which various monuments must have participated or the diverse disposition of the various human actors (and fixating instead on the formal and technical properties of buildings),\textsuperscript{13} the art historical and archaeological literature on pre-Columbian architecture (and Tula and Chichen Itza are hardly exceptions in this regard) is overbrimming with presumptions as to the meaning of this pyramid, or the significance of that serpent motif, or the “real” message of this elaborate staircase.

Alternatively then, if historians of religions are to transcend this preoccupation with the formal attributes of buildings and if we are to appreciate that the meanings of religious buildings are never disembodied from the situational context in which those meanings arise, then it is essential that we shift the inquiry away from the study of buildings per se, that is, physical forms of granite, limestone, wood, steel, or whatever, and concentrate instead (in the spirit of Gadamer’s inquiry into the “ontology of works of art”) on the \textit{human experience of buildings}. In other words, because buildings do not have one fixed meaning (“religious” or otherwise) for all people in all times, it is essential that any study into the meanings of sacred architecture be constituted not in terms of static buildings (as though there were somehow one meaning per architectural form) but rather in terms of occasions, ritual circumstances—or “ritual-architectural events,” if you will—in which the buildings are active participants and some subset of the reservoir of potential meanings arises from those built forms.\textsuperscript{14} It is not, after all,\hfill

\textsuperscript{13} Irwin Panofsky’s discussion of “the law of disjunction”—a principle derived from the observation that medieval European art borrowed \textit{forms} from classical antiquity but assigned entirely different \textit{significations} to those forms—illustrates in a quite different way both (1) that the hinge between architectural form and meaning is never locked tight and, consequently, (2) that to study and compare various architectures strictly on the basis of their formal attributes is certain to lead to serious mistakes; see Panofsky, \textit{Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art} (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksells, 1960); also see George Kubler, “Period, Style and Meaning in Ancient American Art,” \textit{New Literacy History} 1 (1970): 127–44, for a concise summary of Panofsky’s “principle of disjunction” as it applies to Mesoamerica.

\textsuperscript{14} Thus, where historians of religions have typically appealed to Gadamer’s notion of to-and-fro hermeneutical reflection to discuss the potential for overriding the strangenesses between themselves and the people they are studying (e.g., to reflect on the possibility of
the type of stone from which the little angel in the Cuernavaca cathedral is carved, nor the sculpting technique, nor even the original intention of the sculptor that most interests the historian of religions; nor is it the Mexican Catholic orientation of the little boy nor his psychological disposition that is decisive (though all these things are certainly of interest). In the end, it is the total hermeneutical situation—the ritual-architectural event constituted by (1) a human being, (2) an architectural monument, and (3) an occasion that draws the person and this monument into interaction—on which the attention of the historian of religions must be trained.

THE CONCEPT OF A RITUAL-ARCHITECTURAL EVENT

In every condition of humanity, it is precisely play, and play alone that makes man complete; man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is wholly Man only when he is playing. [FRIEDRICH VON SCHILLER]15

The back and forth movement of the game has a peculiar freedom and buoyance that determines the consciousness of the players. It goes on automatically—a condition of weightless balance. [HANS-GEORG GADAMER, 1962]16

To reiterate, the concept of a ritual-architectural event arises as a heuristic alternative to conventional interpretations of art and architecture at Tula, Chichen Itza, and elsewhere that would presume to retrieve the meaning of this ancient sanctuary or the “real” intention of that pyramidal temple. In short, a ritual-architectural event encompasses the situation that includes (1) the actual built form, (2) human beings heavily burdened with expectations, traditions, and religious opinions, merging our horizons with those of the pre-Columbian Maya), the notion of dialogical hermeneutical reflection is similarly characteristic of the pre-Columbian Maya’s perception of the strangeneses in their own historical context. This alternative methodological stance, in other words, depends on a recognition that—and this is the crucial point—the universality of hermeneutical reflection is manifesting itself on two levels here: first, in the experience of superabundant sacred architecture and, second, in the interpretation of the experience of sacred architecture. At the first level, historical cases of revalorized architectural forms, transfigured meanings, fluidity in function, and a multiplicity of expectations and apprehensions among the users of architecture (like those just discussed) testify indubitably that hermeneutics is operating in the experience of sacred architecture. Moreover, at the second level, the scholarly interpretation of those historical cases is equally an occasion for hermeneutics. Thus, to say it again, the interpretation of sacred architecture is an exercise in hermeneutical reflection on a circumstance that is itself an exercise in hermeneutical reflection.

and (3) the ceremonial occasion that brings buildings and people into to-and-fro involvement with one another. Constituting the study of sacred architecture in terms of ritual circumstances (i.e., situations or happenings rather than physical objects) shifts the emphasis away from the examination of architectural forms and toward the interpretation of the experience of architecture. Moreover, this methodological adjustment abides by Gadamer’s warning that to interpret the experience of architecture either in terms of the subjective attitude of the human observer or in terms of the physical attributes of the building condemns one to miss that which is most important—namely, the “buoyancy,” the movement or the interactive “play” between people and buildings.17 Insisting on the interactive relation between superabundant architecture and its users, religious buildings emerge not as static objects of reflection (as if a building had but one thing to say), but, more appropriately, as dynamic and flexible partners in conversation (or “players” in a game) who both respond variously and provoke a wide range of responses from those who are experiencing them. The very same Maya pyramid temple, for instance, will speak one message in the context of a New Fire Ceremony, a quite different message in the context of a coronation, and something very different again on the occasion of a first-fruits ceremony. Accordingly, it is not sufficient to compare the ruins of Tula and Chichen Itza simply on the basis of their formal attributes, their construction techniques, or even the cultural attainments of their builders; instead, insofar as the archaeological record permits, the buildings of Tula and Chichen Itza must be contextualized in relation to the human users who brought with them their characteristic preunderstandings and in relation to the particular and various ceremonies—or various ritual-architectural events—that transpired there.

By insisting on the intrinsically dialogical (or gamelike) nature of the experience of architecture and by acknowledging the inevitable flux between physical forms and their meanings, the concept of a ritual-architectural event, in other words, makes it less appropriate to imagine a Mesoamerican native (or an archaeologist for that matter) craning his neck to decipher the once-and-for-all meaning of some inanimate, inert pyramid than to conceive of that Native American and the pyramid as mutual partners in lively conversation (or active players in a brisk game) that will, before its end, transform them both.

Thus, besides appreciating the interdependent relatedness between monuments and humans, conceiving of the experience of architecture in terms of the metaphors of conversation and game (i.e., in terms of

17 Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 104.
the concept of ritual-architectural events) has the advantage of emphasizing the sense in which the experience of architecture is productive and transformative, that is, how both the human and the architectural participants can be profoundly changed.\textsuperscript{18} According to Gadamer, the productivity of the experience of art or architecture depends on a willingness to make a commitment or to accept a risk. If there is to be a transformation, persons entering the closed world of the work of art (or architecture) must commit to abiding by the “rules of the game,” that is, to entertaining seriously the alternatives and possibilities that the work of art presents. To be transformed (or to grow), people must surrender cautious disinterest and expose themselves to as yet unknown consequences. One who skirts the rules and declines to give serious consideration to the alternatives presented by the work of art remains an outsider, in Gadamer’s terms, a spoilsport rather than a player in the game.\textsuperscript{19} Gadamer says, “The game is underway when the individual player participates in full earnest, that is, when he no longer holds himself back as one who is merely playing, for whom it is not serious.”\textsuperscript{20}

Where individuals do willingly accept the rules of the game, loosening their intransigent confidence in their current view of the world and giving serious and sympathetic consideration to the alternatives presented in the art, the experience can, according to Gadamer, become genuinely productive; the productive and transformative experience of art entails, in his terminology, an “increase in being” as things and ideas that were not, come to be. Similarly, in the gamelike exchange between buildings and persons, both experience productive transformations: the significance of the monument grows and changes as unprecedented combinations of potential meanings emerge, and the human participant is transformed and awakened as older preunderstandings and foreconceptions are replaced by previously unimagined alternatives. Thus, rather than relaxation or idyllic repose, ritual-architectural events—as well demonstrated by the cases of Tula and Chichen Itza—can be forums of jolting surprise, of daring experimentation, and of vicarious participation in frighteningly unfamiliar


\textsuperscript{19} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, p. 92.

ways of knowing and being. In the experience of sacred architecture complacencies are interrupted and aspirations and awarenesses heightened or, at the very least, reorganized.21

THE MECHANISM OF ARCHITECTURE

It is exactly that blend of the traditional and the inventive which makes the work of art both understandable and interesting. [TERENCE GRIEDER, 1982]22

It is essential, then, that the interpretation of the ruins of Tula and Chichen Itza (or any sacred architecture for that matter) be constituted in terms of ritual-architectural events rather than the more customary “meaning of buildings.” We must, in other words, look beyond the obvious formal commonalities between Tula and Chichen Itza to appreciate both the dialogical, “eventful” character of the experience of sacred architecture and, moreover, the potential those occasions have for transforming both monuments and people. And, as we will see momentarily, such an approach eventuates in a very nonconventional assessment of the relationship between these two formally resemblant pre-Columbian cities. Yet, even more pertinent to a sensitive reconsideration of the problem of Tula–Chichen Itza relatedness is the question of how these human/monument conversations get started, that is, the question of the initiation or the instigation of ritual-architectural events. What was it about the diminutive stone angel in the cathedral that captured the interest of the young boy? Why was this little stone form so intriguing, so alluring to the boy while all the prestidigitations of the incense-slinging priests and the mariachi musicians were so easily ignored? Or, to state the problem more generally, why do people who routinely walk in and

21 Consider, e.g., four very vivid examples of the transformative potential of the experience of sacred architecture: (1) the young initiate’s experience of ceremonial death and then rebirth by the entry and exit of the Greek labyrinth, “a symbolic milieu that represented both a grave and a womb,” as described by Philippe Borgeaud, “The Open Entrance to the Closed Palace of the King: The Greek Labyrinth in Context,” History of Religions 14 (August 1974): 1–27; (2) the transformative experience of Mount Meru temples, in which “to approach Meru is to change one’s spiritual state; to arrive at the top is to transcend particularities of state altogether”; I. W. Mabett, “The Symbolism of Mount Meru,” History of Religions 23 (August 1983): 64–83; (3) the experience of Aztec coronation as a “royal rite of passage” in which the Templo Mayor “formed the central stage and touchstone”; Richard F. Townsend, “Coronation at Tenochtitlan,” in The Imagination of Matter, ed. David Carrasco (Oxford: B.A.R., 1989), pp. 155–88; or (4) the Japanese Buddhist experience of pilgrimage along a sacred network of roads or through various mandala temples that became “the basis for a complete change in the pilgrim’s consciousness and perspective on the universe. . . . The pilgrimage was an exercise in rebirth and magical transformation”; Allan Grapard, “Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness: Toward a Definition of Sacred Space in Japanese Religions,” History of Religions 20 (February 1982): 195–221.

out of buildings everyday without ever feeling remotely interested in investing themselves in anything like a hermeneutical conversation with those buildings feel compelled, on some rare occasions, to pause and to reflect seriously about the meanings and potentialities that reside within some architectural form? What is it about some buildings that encourages (or, on occasion, demands) that we take them seriously, that we engage them in conversation?

Gadamer's work again, with some qualification, provides an instructive lead into the issue of the instigation and mechanism of architectural events. Gadamer contends that architecture is singularly adept at transforming and enlarging the "worlds" of humans because of what he calls (somewhat misleadingly) the "concept of decoration." He writes, "Architecture gives shape to space. Space is what surrounds everything that exists in space. That is why architecture embraces all other forms of representation: all works of plastic art, all ornaments. Moreover, to the representational arts of poetry, music, acting and dancing it gives their place. By embracing all the arts, it everywhere asserts its own perspective. That perspective is: decoration."23 By "decoration" Gadamer points to the architectural creation of appropriate and efficacious contexts, felicitous spatial arrangements that embrace art and human activities—that is, ritual-architectural events. But the "perspective of decoration" makes architecture more than a stage. In elaborating the nature of architectural decoration, Gadamer rejects the usual Kantian distinction between "a proper work of art" and "mere decoration" and presents in its stead something more like Paul Wheatley’s notion of the complementary "centripetal" and "centrifugal" functions of ceremonial centers and traditional cities.24 According to Gadamer, the nature of decoration in architecture consists of performing a twofold mediation, "namely to draw the attention of the viewer, to satisfy his taste [a centripetal sort of function], and then to redirect it away from itself to the greater whole of the context of life which it accompanies [a centrifugal sort of function]."25

Imagine, for instance, the experience of a pre-Columbian Mesoamerican visiting for the first time the gory pageantry of human sacrifice in the great ceremonial plaza of the Aztecs at Tenochtitlan: the twofold mediation implies that the visitor first experiences the allurement of the Templo Mayor pyramid and is drawn, even sucked, into its proximity and then, following what Gadamer calls a significant "transformation of his being," is redirected away. In this most extreme scenario the pre-Columbian visitor, originally repulsed by the notion of ritual killing, is

23 Gadamer, Truth and Method (n. 6 above), p. 139.
yanked from the complacency of his home world into the resplendently grizzly event of Aztec human sacrifice. Once engaged with the proceedings at the pyramid, the visitor is “played” hard, in a sense, issued an irrefusible offer to see the world in a new light, and so experiences a radical revision of his projections of the world, perhaps even coming to an endorsement of the urgent agenda of massive human sacrifice.

Albeit an ultraistic circumstance, the transformative mechanism that operates in this hypothetical rendition of human sacrifice on the Aztec pyramid caricatures the pattern and mechanism that operates in all effective ritual-architectural events. The potency of a ritual-architectural event depends, in other words, on the juxtaposition and interplay of (1) a conservative, reassuring component of order—that is, in Gadamer’s terms, “a continuity of tradition”—and (2) a disconcerting component of variation, or, as befits an occasion of hermeneutical reflection, a component of “otherness.” In other words, the generalized pattern of ritual-architectural events is twofold: first, a requisite element of familiarity that allures and instigates the human involvement, something about the architecture that is appealing and deemed worthy of serious consideration, and, second, an element of strangeness, or the evocative presentation of unfamiliar alternatives.

Accordingly, for an architectural event to be productive and transformative, preunderstandings and expectations cannot be perfectly realized. The requisite component of conservatism and familiarity must be counterpoised to an element of disorientation and deviation from predictability. Once the dialogue between the visiting Mesoamerican and the pyramid is instigated, it must be dialogue about something—the visitor must learn something he or she had not known before. As in the case of music, the conservative or “stylistic” component must be complemented by a creative deviation from style. A melody that conforms perfectly to the style and is thus completely consonant with expectations is neither meaningful nor meaningless; it is, according to Leonard B. Meyer, neutral with respect to meaning: “Musical meaning arises when our expectant habit responses are delayed or blocked—when the normal course of stylistic mental events is disturbed by some form of deviation.”

Thus, for Meyer, the key to making meaningful (and, by his reckoning, “great”) music is grounded in a kind of intentional disorientation that he calls “planned uncertainty.” Similarly, David McAllester considers that

the potency of Navajo music depends on a juxtaposition of repetition and
variation in which “such modes of variation as interruption, alternation,
return, pairing, progression, transaction, and ambiguity . . . may be seen
as contrapuntal to the theme of repetition.”27 Planned uncertainty in
music finds direct architectural analogues in Bernard Rudofsky’s concept of “in-
tended irregularity” and in Chinese feng-shui planning, which militates
against perfect regularity and axiality by holding that any straight lines of
flow, whether in water courses, mountain ranges, valleys, or streets, are
dangerous because they carry “noxious influences.”28 In the same vein,
each of the “processes of imaginative modification” that Herbert Spinden
finds working in Maya art and architecture—that is, simplification, elab-
oration, elimination, and substitution—is a necessary and productive
counterpoint to perfect predictability.29 E. H. Gombrich’s notion of “mak-
ing and matching” (or “schema and revision”) in the experience of art is
directly relevant to this productive interplay of order and variation.30 And,
likewise, Christian Norberg-Schultz aptly describes the fruitful conse-
quences of stifled expectations and disorientation in the experience of ar-
chitecture using Whiteheadian terms: an architectural system “should be
characterized as a system of probabilities . . . it warrants order as well as
variation. . . . Order and variation belong together, as a ‘variation’ which
does not refer to an order is an arbitrary and meaningless fancy which
tends to destroy the existing architectural system. An order which does not
allow for variation, on the other hand, leads to known banal cliches.”31

27 David McAllester, “The First Snake Song,” unpublished manuscript, quoted in Gary
Witherspoon, “Beautifying the World through Art,” in Native North American Art His-
tory, ed. Zena Pearlstone Mathews and Aldona Jonaitis (Palo Alto, Calif.: Peek, 1982),
pp. 207–26. In the same article, Witherspoon seconds McAllester by commenting on the
“compulsive power” of Navajo music: Witherspoon says that “the repetitive nature of
many Navajo songs is adorned with and enlivened by various modes of variation.”
28 See Bernard Rudofsky, The Prodigious Builders (New York: Harcourt Brace Jo-
vanovich, 1977), p. 104; and Jeffery F. Meyer, “Feng-shui of the Chinese City,” History
Interpretation of Mesoamerican Sites: An Essay in Cross-cultural Comparison,” in Me-
soamerican Sites and World-Views, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumb-
arton Oaks, 1976), pp. 176–77, also has a very interesting discussion of feng-shui
planning, “symmetrophobia,” and “the conscious avoidance of perfection.”
29 Herbert J. Spinden, A Study of Maya Art: Its Subject Matter and Historical Develop-
ment (New York: Dover, 1975), pp. 38–43.
30 Gombrich, (n. 18 above).
31 Christian Norberg-Schultz, Intentions in Architecture (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT
Press, 1965), p. 187. Norberg-Schultz relies heavily on sociological concepts and ter-
minology drawn from Talcott Parsons and on the language philosophy of Ludwig Witt-
genstein and Jean Piaget; thus, he tends to see architecture as both derivative and
supportive of socialization. Nevertheless, his concern for socialization is not altogether
unlike Gadamer’s concern for tradition. Moreover, there is an even stronger parallel
between Gadamer’s notion of the interplay of projection and revision and Norberg-
Schultz’s ideas about expectation and (un)fulfillment in the experience of architecture.
Accordingly, Norberg-Schultz’s attempt to provide a “satisfactory theory of architecture
that is capable of covering all possible historical contexts” is highly relevant.
Therefore, if the experience of a pyramid (or other sacred monuments) is to be a genuinely productive and meaningful ritual-architectural event, the expectations that the visitor brings will not be affirmed. Rather more likely, the visitor is battered in a tide of unanticipated, disturbing (or perhaps exhilarating) realizations that significantly alter one’s conceptions of himself, the pyramid, and the world.  

**ARCHITECTURAL ALLUREMENT AND COERCION**

In every instance of art we receive a persuasive invitation . . . to participate more closely. [**Adrian Stokes**, 1965]  

Whatever is brought into play or comes into play no longer depends on itself but is dominated by that relation we call the game. [**Hans-Georg Gadamer**, 1962]

Despite rejoinders about the seriousness of play, Gadamer’s remarks about the experience of art and architecture are, nonetheless, liable to connote a kind of carefree romp, essentially a voluntary, self-motivated sort of process. This final methodological section emphasizes (much more than Gadamer does) that participation in ritual-architectural events is not an issue of free choice or even self-conscious decision. More aptly, sacred architecture, particularly in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, works a kind of seduction that can compel even the most reluctant spectators into participatory and transformative involvement.

As regards people’s enthusiasm for some works of architecture and total disinterest in others, countless theorists have acknowledged similarly that any transaction of meaning in the experience of art (written texts included) depends on the initial fulfillment of conventionalized expectations that allow people to find something familiar, reassuring, and orienting in the work of art. Employing a Freudian analysis, Adrian Stokes, for instance, conceives of the experience of art as a kind of

---

32 Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s remarks on the perilous yet productive experience of an alien environment are appropriate here; he writes, “Experience is the overcoming of perils. The word ‘experience’ shares a common root (per) with ‘experiment,’ ‘expert,’ and ‘perilous’. To experience in the active sense requires one to venture forth into the unfamiliar and experiment with the elusive and the uncertain. To become an expert one must dare to confront the perils of the new.” Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 9.


35 As regards the seriousness of play, Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Play of Art,” in Robert Bernasconi, ed. (n. 8 above), p. 130, says, e.g., “Those who have looked deeply into human nature have recognized that our capacity for play is an expression of the highest seriousness.”

36 With respect to the transformative experience of literature, Giles Gunn’s exposition of “hypothetical otherness” in *The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion and the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 52–91, argues for
reunion with one's mother, or as a suckling at a breast, so that involvement with certain works of art (or certain buildings) comes in response to a "compelling invitation" or an "emphatic, identificatory pull" that he terms the "incantatory process in art." Notable among scholars of Mesoamerica, Herbert Spinden developed an elaborate psychoevolutionary theory of art in which art was required first to comport with the group "psyche," that is, to reinforce the shared value system, and then from there to effect "progress" and the advancement of civilization; and George Kubler similarly concedes this decisive role of conventionalized tastes and preunderstandings in the experience of art and architecture by employing Irwin Panofsky's concept of the "mental habits" of different historical contexts. In Gadamer's intricate language, the initial experience must be simultaneously one of self-forgetfulness and reconciliation with self: "Precisely that in which he loses himself as spectator requires his own continuity. It is the truth of his own world, the religious and moral world in which he lives, which presents itself to him and in which he recognizes himself... so the absolute moment in which the spectator stands is, at once, self-forgetfulness and reconciliation with self.

The hermeneutical conversation between the Mexican boy and the stone angel, for instance, would seem to have been initiated on precisely these grounds. In the massive cathedral and the elaborate performative context of mariachi music, scented smoke, and pontificating priests, this child chanced upon some small element to which he could really relate—an angel, albeit stone, precisely his size, receptive to his touching, and somehow approachable by its familiarity. In this stone angel he apparently saw something of himself; he found some point of identity that allured and encouraged him to engage this monument in conversation. The small boy's encounter with the similarly short angel was initiated, in the more technical language of hermeneutical philosophy, on the basis of "self-reconciliation," on the basis of something

37 See especially Stokes, Smooth and Rough (n. 3 above) and Invitation in Art. Salient excerpts from both these works are reprinted in Image in Form.


40 Gadamer, Truth and Method (n. 6 above), p. 113.
familiar, assuring, dependable, and relevant that announced to the child that this cherubic statuary had something to do with him.

Having worked full circle back to the anecdote of the boy and angel, this methodological prolegomenon winds down with two generalized conclusions about the human experience of sacred architecture or, more properly, about the *instigation* of hermeneutical reflection on sacred architecture. And from there, it is on to the specific problem of the uncanny similitude between Tula and Chichen Itza.

First, as the preceding range of cross-disciplinary illustrations amply testifies, the productive interaction between conventionality and innovation, between order and variation in art and architecture has *not* been neglected—in fact, scholars working in all sorts of different contexts have echoed Tatiana Proskouriakoff’s observation that “the [Maya] artist . . . had to rely in his work on the affective qualities of novelty, and to achieve a proper balance between the traditional and the new to win the appreciation of his work.”41 The more subtle implications of this productive interplay between “the traditional” and “the new” for the experience of sacred architecture (and for the concept of a ritual-architectural event) have *not*, however, been so unanimously appreciated. In short, the crucial point is the decisive role of history and tradition. As variation must necessarily be embedded in order, so too ritual-architectural events are necessarily embedded in historical traditions. The absolute necessity of a conservative, stabilizing component of tradition with which the spectator finds some identity reins in the superabundance of sacred architecture; the transactions of meaning within architectural events are, in a sense, legislated by the strictures of history and tradition. In brief, not all possibilities are available to all persons in all circumstances.42

Or, to state it somewhat differently, without a continuity of tradition, that is, without the centripetalizing or *alluring* function that characterizes the so-called concept of decoration, the architecture’s power is disenfranchised. Unless this quality of allurement or magnetism or invitation is present in the architecture in one form or another—and the

41 Tatiana Proskouriakoff, *A Study of Classic Maya Sculpture*, publication no. 593 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1956), p. 3. Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, pp. 80–82, considers Adolf Göller, an architect and psychologist of artistic form in Stuttgart (ca. 1880), to be the first to consider systematically the productive interplay of order and variation in art and the first to make the observation that “familiarity breeds contempt.” Certainly the discussion, if “nonsystematic,” is much older.

42 This is an exceedingly complex issue. While some theorists locate the origin of the orderly, conservative component in the “socialization process” and others imply it arises from “psychological habits,” artistic conventions, or possibly individual idiosyncrasies, Gadamer argues for the more appealing alternative that one’s preunderstandings and expectations are grounded in what he calls “tradition.”
The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture

cross-cultural study of sacred architecture demonstrates a multitude of strategies for effecting this allurement—human beings will not feel compelled to pause and invest themselves in hermeneutical reflection on that architecture. Where this quality of allurement is not present (and usually it is not) no hermeneutical conversation begins. There is no serious consideration of the possibilities and meanings that reside within a sacred, symbolic monument, no to-and-fro interaction; nothing happens; no one is changed; there is no transaction of meanings, no conversation; the architecture remains silent.

The importance of this conservative, familiar element that sets in motion the ritual-architectural game cannot be overemphasized for the historian of religions because, in so many historical contexts, architecture takes its characteristic form precisely in the interest of instigating the participatory involvement of reluctant spectators. In all sacred architecture, but particularly in the public monuments of Mesoamerica (and I would wager most particularly in the case of Chichen Itza), the greatest energy is expended on strategies to get people involved, to convince people that the architecture is relevant to them, that the messages within it are their messages. Where the instigatory strategies succeed, visitors are lured from their status as disinterested spoilsports and swept into the buoyancy of the game. Where the instigatory strategies fail, the visitors can simply pass by with casual disinterest—there is no ritual-architectural game and no transaction of meaning.

Moreover—and this is the second concluding point—the decision to involve oneself in committed interaction with an architectural monument is not simply a matter of free choice or casual curiosity. Where Gadamer's metaphors of conversation and paly tend to imply that the exchanges that people have with works of art and architecture are born of inquisitiveness or perhaps of some innate human penchant for perpetually expanding one's horizons (as though strolling through an art museum were the best exemplification of the experience of art)—it is essential to realize that, constructed and framed in the appropriate way, sacred architecture, particularly in the context of its ritual usage, has the power to yank people into involvement, to insist on their participation, to coerce their serious consideration of the meanings and messages of that architectural event. Particularly in instances like the elaborately choreographed religiocivic proceedings that transpired in the public plazas of Tula and Chichen Itza, participation in ritual-architectural events and serious reflection on the meanings that reside in those religious monuments is, more often than not, compulsory. The invitation to participate is, in other words, quite often an irrefusable offer.

To reiterate and close this initial section, the role of allurement and coercion as counterpoints to the superabundance of architecture comes...
clear in the structure of what amounts to a five-stroke methodological program: (1) hermeneutical reflection is acknowledged as a universal process for understanding otherness; (2) sacred architecture, being superabundant and thus replete with “othernesses,” is experienced as an occasion of hermeneutical reflection; (3) this experience of sacred architecture is dialogical (or “playful” and gamelike) and thus must be interpreted in terms of “ritual-architectural events” and not reduced to objects. Then come a couple of qualifications with respect to the instigation or initiation of ritual-architectural events: (4) the transformative mechanism of ritual-architectural events depends on the consideration of the challenging and novel possibilities that superabundant architecture offers, but that process can commence only where the unfamiliar variations are juxtaposed with a component of familiarity, tradition, or allurement; and finally (5) that component of allurements is often presented in such a fashion that participation in the transformative experience of an architectural event is not voluntary but mandatory and the consequences not pleasurable but disconcerting in the extreme.

HISTORICAL PROBLEMS: THE SIMILITUDE BETWEEN TULA AND CHICHEN ITZA

The shortest line by land between the two sites [i.e., Tula and Chichen Itza] is not less than 800 miles. . . . To the peoples of Middle America in the tenth century the distance was immense. . . . Yet there are the closest resemblances in the sculptural art, the architecture, the planning of religious symbolism, and even the details of costume, ornaments, and weapons of the two cities. The extraordinary fact is that nowhere between central Mexico and Yucatan have buildings in this distinctive style been found. [J. Eric S. Thompson, 1954]43

Having laid that much of a methodological backdrop, the stage is set for a reassessment of the similitude between Tula, Hidalgo and Chichen Itza, Yucatan, a fresh take if you will on the hoary old problem of the uncanny resemblance between the architectures of two very distant pre-Columbian cities, or, more properly, between two huge ceremonial plazas—respectively, Tula Grande and what scholars have termed “Toltec” Chichen Itza.

Tula, on the one hand, the capital city of the Toltec empire, is by far the smaller and less complex of the two sites. It is located in central Mexico, some 40 miles northwest of present-day Mexico City. The discernment of this impressive Tula-based empire—ever embattled but, nevertheless, the most potent and well-integrated polity of its era—was forestalled for

generations by confusion between the events of literal history and those of the quasi-historical traditions of the Aztec documentary sources. (There are no extant Toltec written sources.) The Aztec sources eulogize "Tollan" (or "Tulan") as the fabulous primordial city of the equally fabulous "Toltecs," the place where cotton grows in colors, where the prosperous citizenry stokes its fires with surplus corn, and where priest-king Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl presides with perfect justice and insight over his eminently capable Toltec vassals. In the past several decades, however, archaeologists and ethnohistorians have sufficiently disentangled the literal from the fantastic to retrieve a fairly secure chronology for the site and an assurance that Tula, Hidalgo was, in fact, the capital of a historical Toltec empire of major proportions in the tenth through twelfth centuries C.E., the locus of a distinct politicocultural florescence after the collapse of Teotihuacan and in advance of the rise of the Aztecs.

Chichen Itza, on the other hand, some 800 miles to the east of Tula in the Yucatan Peninsula, is much larger and quite probably the most complex of all Mesoamerican sites and has inspired even more controversy. Excavated and reconstructed with more commercial than academic motives, the history of this most famous of tourist-archaeological sites, which serves as the frontispiece for hundreds of Mexican travel brochures and the backdrop for among the spiciest (if most imaginary) stories about the natives of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, remains, in fact, ironically among the least well understood. Chichen Itza, literally "the mouth of the well of the Itza people," owes its name and its high-profile reputation largely to a naturally formed sinkhole or "cenote" that, without the benefit of any human sculpting or alteration, forms an almost perfectly cylindrical shaft, 150 feet across, 60 feet from its edge to the water, and another 40 feet from the water's surface to the perpetually filling bottom. Whether reckoned as an accident of nature or the architecture of supernature, as though a giant cork had been drawn out of the earth and discarded, the Sacred Cenote of Chichen Itza was presumably a highly revered pilgrimage destination both hundreds of years prior to Chichen's florescence as a great capital city and hundreds of years after its decline.

44 For a discussion of the Aztec traditions of Tollan's perfection under Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, see Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain, trans. (from Aztec) Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles Dibble, 2d rev. ed. (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research and University of Utah, 1978), bk. 3.

As spectacular as the “Cenote of Sacrifice,” the humanly constructed monuments of Chichen Itza are made particularly intriguing by the glaring disparity between the architectural remains located, respectively, in the northern and southern portions of the site. The buildings of the southern sector of Chichen—typically referred to as “Maya Chichen” or “Old Chichen”—bear an obvious likeness to other Maya ruins in the Yucatan area. Yet, in sharp contrast, the great plaza surrounding the huge Castillo pyramid in the northern sector, located directly adjacent to the Sacred Cenote—variously (and problematically) termed “Toltec Chichen,” “New Chichen,” or “La Gran Nivelación”—although somewhat larger and more elaborate than its Central Mexican counterpart, is uncannily similar to the ceremonial plaza of Tula Grande, hundreds of miles to the west in the Valley of Mexico.46

Consider some of the most obvious formal parallels. Although the so-termed “Toltec” Chichen is bigger, more complex, and more eclectic (and much more controversial) than Tula Grande, the two public plazas share the same general approach to architectural space, the same 17 degrees east-of-north orientation, and the same basic articulation of pyramid-lofted temples above a wide-open rectangular amphitheatric courtyard. Moreover, whole buildings find mirroring counterparts: there are matching ball courts, complete with analogously positioned attenuate tzompantli (or skull racks) and tribunes or “dance platforms” at each site; the exceedingly unusual colonnaded halls of Tula’s Palacio Quemado (or Burnt Palace), featuring an interior spaciousness rarely found in Mesoamerican architecture, find even more elaborated counterparts in the Group of a Thousand Columns at “Toltec” Chichen; and Tula Grande’s Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl, in perhaps the

46 By far the most thorough treatment of the problem of the similitude between Tula and Chichen Itza is Alfred M. Tozzer, Chichen Itza and Its Cenote of Sacrifice: A Comparative Study of Contemporaneous Maya and Toltec, Memoirs of the Peabody Museum, vols. 11 and 12 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1957). By way of demonstrating the longstanding notoriety of the problem, note that, already in the mid-1950s, Tozzer (ibid., p. 266, n. 39) was able to generate a list (which he considers incomplete) of some thirty scholars who had addressed the architectural similarities between Tula and Chichen Itza, all of whom are indebted either directly or indirectly to Désiré Charnay: Daniel Brinton (1868, 1887); A. Garcia y Cubas (1873); D. Reynolds (1904); Eduard Seler (1909); Herbert Spinden (1913); Walter Lehmann (1922, 1938); Sylvanus Morley (1931); Earl Charlot, and Ann Axtel Morris (1931); Sigvald Linné (1934, 1942); Eric Thompson (1934, 1941); Alfonso Caso (1940, 1941); Jorge Acosta (1940, 1941); Enrique Palacios (1941, 1945); Wigberto Jiménez Moreno (1941); Ignacio Marquina (1941, 1951); Gordon Ekhholm (1941); Alberto Ruiz Luzuiller (1945); D. E. Wray (1945); Eduardo Noguera (1946); J. A. Vivo (1946); José Pijoan (1946); Hugo Moedano Koor (1947); R. B. Weitzel (1947); Pedro Armillas (1950); Karl Ruppert (1952); and Gordon Willey (1953). Since that time—and at present—virtually every synthesis of Mesoamerican cultural history includes at least perfunctory remarks on the architectural parallels between Tula and Chichen Itza.
most stunning identity of all, finds its near-perfect analogue in Chichén's magnificent Temple of the Warriors.

The parallels between the architectural sculpture of Tula Grande and "Toltec" Chichen are equally dramatic: most famously, both sites are graced with innumerable columns and balustrades formed of down-flying serpents, the very signature of "Toltec" culture and its legendary patron, Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent; each site is similarly endowed with several pairs and rows of elaborately clad "Atlantean" stone men of varying sizes who support lintels or tables on their up-stretched arms; and the singularly distinctive chacmool statues, reclining humanoid figures with awkwardly craned necks and bowls held over their stomachs, rare elsewhere in Mesoamerican architecture, are found in abundance at these two sites. And finally, in the architectural decoration, the friezes and columns of "Toltec" Chichen are embellished with bas-reliefs of jaguars and regally dressed warriors in procession and with gorily veristic images of ocelots and eagles devouring human hearts—all graphically militaristic themes that are (at least according to conventional assessments) atypical of the Maya area but virtually interchangeable with the architectural decoration at Tula.

In short, for all the other mysteries and uncertainties associated with these two sets of ruins, even the most casual tourist going from one site to the other, as though experiencing a sense of déjà vu, cannot help but be struck by the uncanny similitude between Tula and Chichen Itza.

**THE INITIAL "DISCOVERY"**

It was in the temple [i.e., Chichen's Castillo] that the striking analogy between the sculptures and the bas-reliefs of the [Central Mexican] plateaux with those of Chichen was first revealed to us. . . . The balustrade on the grand staircase consists of a plumed serpent like those forming the outer wall of the temple in Mexico. . . . Further, the two columns of the temple facade furnish a still more striking example: the bases represent two serpents' heads, whilst the shafts were ornamented with feathers, proving that the temple was dedicated to Cukulcan (Quetzalcoatl). These shafts are almost an exact reproduction of a Toltec column we unearthed at Tula. . . . The two columns are found three hundred leagues from each other, separated by an interval of several centuries; but if, as we firmly believe, the Tula column is Toltec, the other must be so too, for it could not be the result of mere accident. [Désiré Charnay, 1887]47

Each generation of modern Mesoamericanists has ruminated on this stunning coincidence in architectural forms, but the prize for the first to recognize the remarkable resemblance between Tula and Chichen Itza seems to belong to a Frenchman, Désiré Charnay, a swashbuckling expeditionary who, in the era of the French intervention in Mexico (around 1889), received very substantial financial backing as Napoléon III endeavored to match in Mexico the archaeological triumphs that Napoléon Bonaparte had effected some decades earlier in Egypt. Maligned both by his more staid antiquarian contemporaries and even more by Mesoamericanists since then,\footnote{Charnay did not enjoy the respect of his contemporaries: Teobert Maler (1880s), e.g., compares his own accomplishments in the Maya area to those of Charnay's expedition and gloats about "the great failure of Désiré Charnay, which with great resources and noise [sic] has done nothing! [In Paris, they] are laughing at Mr. Charnay," quoted by David Grant Adamson, The Ruins of Time (New York: Praeger, 1975), p. 193; and F. A. Ober, Travels in Mexico (San Francisco: Dewing, 1884), p. 110, decries the single-mindedness of \textit{Les Anciennes villes du Nouveau monde}, saying, "[Charnay] has ingeniously twisted every discovery into a 'proof' of his pet [Toltec] theory, which unfortunate manner of working vitiates all the labor heretofore done." And, likewise, any retrospective praise of Charnay has been, at best, highly qualified: e.g., Adamson, p. 193, says, "Charnay was the nineteenth century's equivalent of those intrepid impresarios of the remote or primitive who lead television teams into the jungles or mountains"; and the commendation of Ignacio Bernal, \textit{A History of Mexican Archaeology} (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), p. 127, is characteristically backhanded: "[Charnay's] conclusions may be based on false premises, but for the first time the Maya and the Mexicans of Central Mexico were seen as a unity, and their joint territories as a superzone." Leo Deuel, \textit{Conquistadors without Swords} (New York: Schocken, 1967), pp. 176–77, more generous in his assessment, applauds Charnay's commonsensical conclusions of an indigenous and relatively recent origin for the ruins and says, "Though modern archaeologists are wont to consider his writings somewhat 'extravagant,' they have been forced to tacitly accept some of his deductions, foremost his identification of Tula in the state of Hidalgo with Tula [i.e., Tollan] of the Toltecs," and says, furthermore, in reference to the issue that wins Charnay a kind of de facto paternity for the Tula–Chichen Itza problem, that Charnay "was probably the first to observe the close resemblances between Tula and Chichen Itza in the Maya territory, nearly a thousand miles away." Even Tozzer, p. 188, the eventual doyen of the problem of the "Mexicanization" or "Toltecization" of Yucatan, grudgingly concedes that, "only partially right in his ideas, [Charnay] must be given credit for being one of the first to point out the strong Mexican influence at Chichen."} Charnay's \textit{Les Anciennes villes du Noveau monde: Voyages d'explorations au Mexique et dans l'Amerique centrale (1857–1882)} is a charming, if at times baffling, conglomeration of anecdotes about the spicy food and eager maidens that he encountered in his travels, woven together (often in the same paragraph) with claims about the "pure objectivity" and "theoriless description" with which he is surveying the ancient ruins of Middle America.\footnote{Or see Charnay, \textit{The Ancient Cities}. In the preface to this work Charnay explains that he is, by design, a popularizer, giving his work "the dual form of a journal as well as a scientific account." Keith Davis, \textit{Désiré Charnay (1828–1915): Expeditionary Photographer}} Precariously (and not always successfully) balancing his dilettantish exuberance with the just-emerging requirements of a more
positivistic archaeology, astraddle what Gordon Willey calls the "speculative period" and the "descriptive-classifying period" of Americanist archaeology, it is obvious on the basis of his own writings that Charnay embarked on his grand Mexican expedition not only with unprecedented financial resources but also with a host of preconceived and very intransigent ideas about the main actors and historical developments in the ancient Mesoamerican past (ideas culled primarily from the colonial writings of Spanish chroniclers, in other words, from written sources that especially articulate the Aztec perspective on Mesoamerican history, or at least Aztec perspectives as represented through the heavy glosses of the Spanish friars).

Most important, Charnay fashioned his (re)construction of the pre-Columbian past on the basis of the stories that the Aztecs had told about their marvelous (and mythicohistorical) ancestors—the Toltecs—an ancient people who, according to the Aztecs, were responsible for the invention of all that was good and wonderful in the Mesoamerican world. The Aztecs described the Toltecs, their supposed predecessors to hegemony in the Valley of Mexico, as the quintessential craftsmen, the quintessential warriors, the quintessential statesmen, and the quintessential athletes or tlanquacemilhuime, that is, "they that crook the knee all day," walking endlessly without fatigue. The Toltecs were portrayed, in short, as a perfect people for whom nothing was difficult. According to Aztec traditions, the peerless Toltecs lived in the equally perfect city of Tollan, ruled with perfect insight and benevolence by Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, a priest-king who bore the name of the most famous of all Mesoamerican mythological heroes, Quetzalcoatl, the "Plumed Serpent."

All was wonderful in Tollan, so the Aztec legend goes (actually there are many variations of this story), until Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl was tricked into drinking a very potent concoction, ostensibly to preserve his youth, but that instead made him drunk and lustful so that he

---

(Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), has studied Charnay particularly in regard to his contributions to photography but likewise provides a valuable resume of his life and travels. In a more popular than academic work, Peter Tompkins, Mysteries of the Mexican Pyramids (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 141–64, devotes an entire (and very flattering) chapter to the career of Charnay.


51 For "Toltec" history, Charnay relies particularly on the writing of Ixtlilxochitl, Veytia, Ramirez, and Clavigero; in the Maya area, Landa's Relacion is his principal source. See Charnay, pp. 12, 76–78.

52 H. B. Nicholson, "Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl of Tollan: A Problem in Mesoamerican Ethnohistory" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1957), is still the most thorough survey of the various ethnohistorical references to the tradition of Quetzalcoatl, Tollan, and the Toltecs.
defiled, of all women, his own sister. From the shame of this horrible transgression, although he had been maliciously duped, the Aztec traditions explain that Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, nonetheless, was forced to leave his beloved city of Tollan and migrate with a troop of his most faithful followers to an indefinite destination, typically described only as “somewhere in the east.”

The sources differ somewhat on the particulars of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl’s prosperity and subsequent exile. By now, however, virtually all Mesoamericanists acknowledge, in one way or another, that the Aztecs were playing fast and loose with the historical “facts” about their Toltec predecessors as part of an astute strategy to concoct for themselves the sort of prestigious ancestry that could legitimate their own imperial ambitions as the “new Toltecs” of the Valley of Mexico. In other words, the current academic consensus (although there continues to be major disagreement on these issues) holds that, while the Aztec stories about their marvelous predecessors may be based to some extent on the actual exploits of the inhabitants of Tula, Hidalgo (or perhaps the inhabitants of Teotihuacan), the people and events in what has come to be known as the “Quetzalcoatl-Tollan tale” actually belong to the realm of myth rather than history (although that distinction proves especially murky in the case of these pre-Columbian traditions).

Nevertheless, Charnay, rambunctious in theorizing as well as travel, easily afforded the legends of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and Tollan a very literal historicity and, moreover, on the basis of a week’s digging around the actual ruins of Tula, Hidalgo, was able to announce with dauntless confidence that these were, in fact, the actual ruins of the magnificent Toltec city of Tollan to which all the traditional Aztec sources refer. From there, Charnay leapt to a “pan-Toltec theory” in which the exiled Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and his faithful followers roamed around the Mesoamerican landscape founding a series of cities, each modeled after the original Tollan at Tula, Hidalgo.

Just a few months later (in 1882), when Charnay’s expeditioning carried him, by his reckoning, along the path of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl into the Yucatan Peninsula and eventually to the overgrown plaza of Chichen Itza’s giant Castillo pyramid temple, he was stunned and thrilled to find a remarkable coincidence between the architectural forms of the City of the Sacred Cenote and those of the 800-mile-distant

53 Laurette Séjourné, *Burning Water: Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico* (Berkeley, Calif.: Shambala, 1976), e.g., argues that the fabulous Tollan of the Aztec sources corresponds to the site of Teotihuacan rather than Tula, Hidalgo. David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) elaborates that position in a rather more sophisticated fashion.

54 Charnay, pp. 75–103.
Tula, Hidalgo—a coincidence that, apparently, had never before been recognized (presumably because no other modern observer had ever visited both sets of ruins) and a coincidence that, in the surmise of the ever-confident Charnay, confirmed irrefutably the pan-Toltec theory that he had extracted from the textual, documentary sources. The buildings of Tula and Chichen Itza looked alike, according to Charnay, because they were built by the same people—namely, the Toltecs. Moreover, he simply assumed that the two sets of buildings had been used in the same way, that they formed the backdrop to the same rituals, that they expressed the same religious intentions, and, presumably, that they carried the same religious meanings.

* * *

Note: Part II of this article (to be published in the May 1993 issue of History of Religions) continues with the twentieth-century intellectual history of the problem of Tula-Chichen similitude, before concluding with an alternative hypothesis about the sister-city resemblance that respects this notion of interpreting sacred architecture in terms of ritual-architectural events rather than buildings.

The Ohio State University