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MATTHEW H. ROBB

WITH RUBÉN CABRERA CASTRO, DAVID M. CARBALLO, GEORGE L.
COWGILL, JULIE GAZZOLA, SERGIO GÓMEZ CHÁVEZ, CHRISTOPHE
HELMKE, LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN, DIANA MAGALONI, LINDA R.
MANZANILLA, JESPER NIELSEN, NELLY ZOÉ NÚÑEZ RENDÓN, HILLARY
OLCOTT, MEGAN E. O'NEIL, ALEJANDRO SARABIA GONZÁLEZ, NAWA
SUGIYAMA, SABURO SUGIYAMA

AND

ERIKA CARRILLO, LAURA FILLOY NADAL, NIKOLAI GRUBE



PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JORGE PÉREZ DE LARA ELÍAS

WITH NEW MAP ILLUSTRATIONS BY
HILLARY OLCOTT



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THE XALLA PALACE IN TEOTIHUACAN



ALLA IS LOCATED 235 meters to the north of the Sun Pyramid (fig. 15.1). Since 1997, it has been under research by my Teotihuacan: Elite and Rulership. Excavations at Xalla and Teopancazco Project; as of this writing, approximately 15 percent of it has been extensively excavated (fig. 15.2). This site may have been one of the seats of power for ancient Teotihuacan: it has an unusually large size in the context of the city, with a surface of approximately 55,000 square meters. Also, it is not located along the Street of the Dead, but 235 meters east from this avenue, providing a sense of privacy; it is isolated by a double wall about three meters wide that would have allowed watchmen to walk around it.

The palace has eight plazas and approximately twenty-nine buildings/platforms.¹ It was perhaps a multifunctional palace with precincts that may have housed some of the members of the ruling elite of Teotihuacan, possible decision-making areas, ritual sectors, a royal treasury for foreign mica from Oaxaca, an area for attached craftsmen, and some domestic sectors.²

Xalla's Main Plaza

The main plaza (Plaza 1) consists of four equivalent elevated precincts, each set at a cardinal point around a temple in the center. These four precincts had iconographic elements related to different deities: the northern one (E1) related to the Fire God and also included figurines of pregnant women, which suggests a deity related to female fertility; the eastern one (E2) to the Thunder God; the southern one (E3) to the Mountain God; and the western one (E4) perhaps to the Goddess of Water. This last is surmised from the foundation offerings of Miccaotli times (100–170 CE). These offerings were set in small pits when the site was founded, with later constructions built on top; they include marine conch shells, so-called “spiny oyster” or *Spondylus* shells, and a necklace of large beads made of jade from the Motagua Valley in Guatemala.

These four pyramidal structures set around a temple in the center of the plaza may be an architectural representation of the four-petaled flower.³ Following Alfredo López Austin’s suggestion that the four-petaled flower may have been the emblem glyph of Teotihuacan, the materialization of this symbol in the main plaza of Xalla could identify a major decision-making locus for the ruling elite of Teotihuacan.⁴

There are numerous traces of the great fire that was the first episode of a revolt against the ruling elite that marked the onset of the collapse of Teotihuacan. Archaeomagnetic dating, as well as radiocarbon dating in other sites excavated by my projects in the city, place this great fire around



FIG. 15.1 Aerial photograph of Xalla. Photograph by Marco Silva

FIG. 15.2 Xalla's excavated sectors. North is downward.
Photograph by Marco Silva

550 CE.⁵ In this revolt, not only were the main architectural complexes of the ruling elite burned, but also the sculptures found in them were shattered.⁶ Traces of them were found on the floors of the main precincts and in the main ritual plaza.

Structure 1

The structure to the north (E1) has its facade to the south. Its upper precinct (E1C1) was approximately 11.25 by 10.5 meters, with a 3.35-meter-wide access corridor that connected to its portico. Even though my project has not excavated its stairway, we infer its presence on the southern side, based on the access to the upper precinct. Its roof may have been decorated with *almenas* (merlons), as we found some stepped red *almenas* in its upper precinct.

On the stucco floor, we recovered twenty-three fragments of a shattered Fire God stone sculpture. The main fragments lay under carbonized wooden beams of *Pinus aff. pseudostrobus* or *ayacahuite* (yellow pine), suggesting that the burning roof collapsed onto the already broken sculpture. Some fragments were found four meters from the legs, indicating the sculpture's violent dispersal. Various examples of pottery figurines depicting pregnant women were found.⁷ These elements may suggest that this structure was dedicated to feminine fertility, an association underscored by an untouched offering of marine shells (a *Spondylus* shell and various *Chama* shells), which were fertility symbols in Teotihuacan. Also among the offerings were greenstone, jadeite, and shell beads; an enthroned figurine with a three-tassel headdress and yellow pigment; an articulated figurine with orange pigment; a seated male figurine; and figurine legs and arms, together with an unfinished curved obsidian knife, and sixteen slate sheets—eleven large and five small.

The western pillar in E1 had a dedicatory offering before the pillar was set; in the bottom of the pit, seventy-three unused prismatic blades were found, along with slate, mica, conch shells, a greenstone bead,



FIG. 15.3 Tlaloc censer found in Structure E2. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City. Photograph by Rafael Reyes

and six pebbles. By archaeomagnetic dating, we know that the last floor of this precinct may have been set in Late Xolalpan times (ca. 425–450 CE) and was burned around 537–560 CE, as was the case with the other three structures of the main plaza.⁸

This structure also shows evidence of looting in the Coyotlatelco phase (650–850 CE) and in modern times. With respect to the looters and squatters in the Coyotlatelco period, not only the main central five-by-six-meter pit of the upper precinct may be attributed to them, but also a stone circle that was fifty centimeters above the upper floor, such as may be seen in other structures in Xalla (E3, E3 east, the staircase of E4). The rear wall of E1 is nonexistent, perhaps as a result of the looting of mural paintings in the beginning of the 1960s. Other walls, particularly the western one, had looting pits at two-meter and four-meter intervals, and a sardine can was found in the northwestern corner of the precinct.

Structure 2

Structure E2 is located to the east and dedicated to the Storm God; it faces west, as is the case for the Sun Pyramid. The structure is approximately 3.78 meters high from the base to the floor of the upper precinct, and its staircase with *alfardas* (low balustrades) is 7.30 meters long north-south. The facade has *talud-tablelero* architecture painted in red. It has a large stuccoed area on top, with six red-painted pillars—two in its rear wall, two in the center, and two in the access corridor from the portico. A Teotihuacan censer with Storm God goggled figures and waterdrop representations (fig. 15.3) was found near one of the pillars, on the floor of the entrance to the structure's upper precinct. Fragments of Storm God vessels were found in the retaining wall to the north, and fragments of Storm God censers also were found at the base in the southeastern corner of the structure, perhaps thrown from the building's summit. The floor, where some of the roof's carbonized wooden beams had fallen, showed evidence of burning around 550 CE.

E2 originally had a mosaic of carved and polychromed stone fragments depicting felines coming out from a portal, with the paws projected to the front (cat. 182). To the sides of these felines were decorations of flower and vine elements. Felines are frequently represented in the northeastern district of Teotihuacan, dominated by the Sun Pyramid. The presence of feline sculptures in Xalla's main temple underscores this connection.

To the north of E2, a large drainage canal was found, and one of the crowning stones was a slab originally decorated with what seems to be a representation of sticks or reeds tied in bundles. This slab may have decorated an earlier construction phase (perhaps related to the substructures), and was apparently reused to cover the canal. Here there was also evidence of Epiclassic and modern looting. Structure E2 was cut by an east-west two-meter-wide looting trench probably excavated by immigrants coming from the Bajío region during the Coyotlatelco phase, as was the case for the trench cutting in half the central temple (E9). Coyotlatelco censers were found on top of the floor of the upper precinct. Inside the looting trench of E2, evidence of two substructures



FIG. 15.4 Fresco fragment (Mountain God), Teotihuacan, ca. 650–750. Denver Art Museum Collection, Department acquisition funds, 1965.202

FIG. 15.5 Triple-mountain imagery in pottery found in E3. Photograph by Linda R. Manzanilla

partially disturbed by the looting was found: one, located to the north (E102B), is more than five meters long by 3.26 meters wide and has a tall stuccoed *talud*. The other one (E102A), found in the center of the looting trench, was a small platform sixty-two centimeters tall, with three large stone stairs located at its eastern facade. It was built on top of small pits cut into the volcanic tuff (*tepetate*), some of which held stone tools made of volcanic rocks. Inside the looting pit, a ritual offering set in a niche contained carbonized wooden stems.

Structure 3

Structure E3 is located in the southern side of the main plaza. The upper precinct, measuring 10.7 by 8.7 meters, was painted in red. It had a portico to the north, and the access corridor between it and the precinct was 3.5 meters wide. The roof may have been decorated with *almenas*. Its facade was located to the north, but there were no hints of the staircase (which may have been dismantled to reuse the stone), except for the upper part of one of the *alfardas*.

In the upper precinct were a set of pillars in the center and another in the access corridor from its portico. There are hints that an altar was once attached to the no-longer-extant rear wall, which may have been detached for the looting of mural paintings. As described below, the representations of the Mountain God in mural paintings at the Denver Art Museum (fig. 15.4) and at the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire of Brussels may have been detached from this structure or perhaps a similar one.⁹

In the Denver Art Museum's mural painting, series of mountains are represented in front of the god. These mountains are flanked by elevations, possibly with projectile points inside. In the extensive excavations of E3, I found a dismantled or looted altar containing large pottery objects with representations of mountains (fig. 15.5), as well as a wide variety of obsidian projectile points at different levels in the looting pits in the upper precinct. The chin and teeth of a funerary mask were found in a small pit. It is possible that the broken marble anthropomorphic sculpture (shattered into more than 160 pieces) found in the upper precinct of this structure also may have been a representation of the god (cat. 183). Its legs showed signs of arrows, as if the figure had been injured by them, or perhaps an attribute of his name. The head, torso, arms, and legs were found on the floor of the precinct or directly above it, but other fragments were found inside the large pit most probably dug by the Epiclassic Coyotlatelco groups who looted the site. The wide variety of plant macrofossils found in this structure, unlike in the other structures in the main plaza, could relate to attributes of the Mountain God, who holds plants in his hands in the mural depictions.

The looting pits of the upper precinct of E3 also reveal evidence of a substructure (E103) with orange-colored painted stucco or maybe two substructures that were severely damaged by the looting. A greenstone plaque was found near them.

A series of rooms, porticoes, and elevated courtyards was attached to the eastern side of E3, now under investigation. To date, no other structures in Xalla have revealed these architectural elements at their

sides. These lead me to suggest that the personage who embodied the Mountain God may have been a ruler of another ethnic group and thus required living quarters attached to his precinct.

Structure 4

Structure E4 is located to the west. Its facade and red-painted staircase are located on its eastern side. The 546-square-meter platform exhibits *talud-tablero* architecture except in the western flank, where only a *talud* is set. Its red-painted upper precinct is 11.2 by 9.6 meters, with an access corridor to a portico set to the east. Two pillars, each 95 centimeters in diameter, are set in the center. Evidence of burning appears on the stucco floor, where large portions of carbonized wood from the roof were found. Archaeomagnetic dating of the floor sets its last renovation in Late Xolalpan times, ca. 488–550 CE.¹⁰

Two sets of twin substructures (possibly of Miccaotli times) are in its core, as well as a foundation offering dated by radiocarbon as ca. 150 CE. This last is contained within a small pit excavated in the corridor between the substructures, some centimeters above the volcanic tuff, and includes a necklace of large Motagua jade beads,¹¹ *Spondylus* shells from the Pacific Ocean, and a conch shell from the Caribbean. E4 was built on top of it.

There is multiple evidence of Epiclassic Coyotlatelco-phase looting: a huge circular pit was dug in E4's red-painted staircase, and a circle of stones was also set there; another circle surrounding ash and animal bones was set in the back. Coyotlatelco looting pits were also found in the upper precinct. The leg of a young adult (Burial 1) was found on top of the platform. Inside one of the looting pits, many disrupted remains of a thirty- to forty-year-old woman (Burial 2B) were found, some of them surrounded by another stone circle. It is difficult to conclude if it is a Coyotlatelco burial or a disrupted Teotihuacan one; I favor the last interpretation. The remains were associated with animal bones, fragments of figurines, many marine mollusks, and polished stones.

Structure 9

The temple (E9) in the center of the main plaza of Xalla had five construction phases, each new phase enveloping the previous one. Each side of the last construction level measures approximately fourteen meters. Originally this was a small altar, which grew to a painted room surrounded by *talud-tablero* painted walls. Its facade is located on the western wall, facing E4, and each of the last three construction levels (probably dated to ca. 290, 350, and 475 CE by archaeomagnetic dating) displayed a small staircase. It may have been crowned with *almenas*.

The inner sanctuary of the third construction level of E9 is a room of painted walls with different colors superimposed: one seems to be polychrome, with two shades of green, orange, black, and red; another, dark blue. In the third construction level, four (perhaps five) small pits were found, aligned north-south; small plain greenstone stelae were possibly set in them (we found the fragments of these in the fill). The temple had an east-west looting trench, which we attribute to the Epiclassic Coyotlatelco looters, after the city fell. Inside this trench, Burial 3 was

found: a robust and tall male adult, twenty to twenty-four years of age, who appears to have carried heavy weights when living and may have been placed in the trench with his hands tied.

Plaza 5 and the Attached Craftsmen

The ruling elite of Xalla had “attached craftsmen” working in Plaza 5: lapidary craftsmen, painters, garment-makers, carpenters, and perhaps also potters, embedded socially and architecturally into the compound. Most of them may have been working in small adobe rooms, surrounded by higher rooms where the overseers watched their activities.

One of the outstanding specialized activities found at Xalla is mica cutting. Some of the higher rooms surrounding Plaza 5 had large plaques of mica on the floor or attached to the lower portions of rear walls. Together with the offering in the so-called Viking Group, the name given to a compound on the eastern side of the Street of the Dead near the Sun Pyramid (3:N3E1) where archaeologists recovered some thirty-five kilograms of mica, Xalla held most of the mica that came from Oaxaca to Teotihuacan.¹² At present, thirty-seven kilograms of mica have been found from Xalla, about ten kilograms of which were stored in Structure 12, a tumulus located in the northwestern sector of Xalla.

Structure E12: The Treasury of Mica

The large tumulus (E12) to the northwest of Xalla had no upper floor and was elongated on the north-south axis. It contained layers of earth with greenstone beads; worked bone; slate; many small and large disks, triangles, and trapezoidal plaques of mica; mica powder; and dispersed human bones, tools, and censer *adornos* (clay ornaments). All of this material covered two twin substructures (E112A and E112B), with a one-meter corridor between them, where in Xolalpan times a large treasury of geometric mica plaques was placed.

Conclusion

Excavations still ongoing are revealing increasing information about the Xalla Palace. It was looted by the Epiclassic Coyotlatelco groups and was also occupied by the Aztec. In the beginnings of the twentieth century, stone was taken from Xalla by inhabitants who constructed their homes with this material. Later on, in the sixties, mural paintings seem to have been looted from the site: there are traces of whole walls missing from structures E1 and E3, as well as from the substructure in E11. Coins from the early sixties, as well as glass, metal, sardine cans, and soft-drink bottles are evidence of this modern looting. Xalla may also have been a dumping area for other excavation sites, as we see in René Millon's map.¹³

However, for the ruling elite of Teotihuacan, Xalla appears to have had importance as a multifunctional palace. Such a designation is suggested by the concentration there of raw materials from afar (particularly the 37 kilograms of mica from Oaxaca) and the existence of embedded craftsmen working for the palace. Large jade beads from the Motagua region are also present, perhaps gifts from the Maya elite to the developing Teotihuacan elite, as early as 150 CE. The formal architectural plan of the compound and the elaboration of a monumental plaza

in a manner that could represent the four-petaled flower, possibly the emblem glyph of Teotihuacan, may suggest a major decision-making place for Teotihuacan. In addition, the existence there of sculptures and iconography of the main deities of Teotihuacan point to its significance. And finally, the evidence of looting of mural paintings perversely assigns distinction to Xalla in ancient Teotihuacan.

Xalla may have been a palace for the ruling elite of Teotihuacan; at first I thought that the four structures set to the cardinal points in the central plaza might have been the precincts of the possible four rulers of the metropolis. Another possibility is that two of them (the one representing the Thunder God, and the one related to the Mountain God, as well as their female counterparts) may have gathered at Xalla to decide on state affairs, organize the supply of mica from Oaxaca for the city's elite, represent major deities, and perform rituals.

NOTES

- 1 Manzanilla and López Luján 2001.
- 2 Manzanilla 2001; Manzanilla et al. 2017.
- 3 Manzanilla 2008.
- 4 López Austin 1989.
- 5 Soler-Arechalde et al. 2006; Beramendi-Orosco et al. 2009.
- 6 Manzanilla 2008.
- 7 Manzanilla 2009b.
- 8 Soler-Arechalde, Terán-Guerrero, and Barrera 2013.
- 9 Paulinyi 2009. The Denver Art Museum acquired the mural from dealer Al Stendahl in 1965, who claimed it came from the same compound as fragments now at Dumbarton Oaks and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. These are associated with Tetitla and Atetelco, respectively.
- 10 Soler-Arechalde, Terán-Guerrero, and Barrera 2013.
- 11 Ruvalcaba-Sil et al. 2008.
- 12 Armillas 1944. The Viking Group is named for the Viking Foundation, which funded the excavation.
- 13 R. Millon 1973.

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Page 200: The Sun Pyramid overlooking the Palace of the Sun, Teotihuacan

Page 418: View of the Sun Pyramid, Teotihuacan
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