

The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: A Reassessment of the Similitude between Tula, Hidalgo and Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Part II

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Lindsay Jones

THE HERMENEUTICS OF
SACRED ARCHITECTURE:
A REASSESSMENT OF THE
SIMILITUDE BETWEEN
TULA, HIDALGO AND
CHICHEN ITZA,
YUCATAN, PART II

The first portion of this article (published in *History of Religions* 32 [February 1993]: 207–32) began by addressing a set of general methodological concerns about the nature of the experience of sacred architecture and argued that, rather than reflecting on *the meanings of buildings*, historians of religions would be well served by constituting their interpretations of sacred architecture in terms that were described as “*ritual-architectural events*.” Applying that general strategy to the reconsideration of the specific historical problem of the startling similitude between the architectural ruins of two pre-Columbian cities (i.e., Tula, Hidalgo and Chichen Itza, Yucatan), that initial portion of the essay ended by crediting the initial “discovery” of this resemblance in architectures to nineteenth-century French expeditionary Désiré Charnay. This second portion of the essay 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 architectural events rather than buildings.

STORIES OF CONQUEST, INVASION, AND ALLIANCE

Into this rather easygoing [Yucatan Maya] milieu came the Toltecs, with such catalytic effects over Mesoamerica that stories concerning them were almost universally encountered by the Spaniards five hundred years later. In Yucatan the Toltec conquest changed the Maya

way of life considerably more than did the Spanish. [GEORGE W. BRAINERD, 1956]¹

Never has the Spenglerian theme of “raw man” conquering effete “over-civilized man” been so well illustrated as in the Toltec Conquest of the Maya. [VICTOR W. VON HAGEN, 1948]²

If only grudgingly crediting the reckless Frenchman with the initial “discovery,” no one since Désiré Charnay has denied that a preternatural resemblance between the ruins of Tula, Hidalgo and those of Chichen Itza does, in fact, exist. With the advent of a far more disciplined Middle American archaeology in the early decades of the twentieth century,³ the initiative to explain the Tula-Chichen connection does, however, witness enormous leaps in sophistication and subtlety. And yet if these more rigorous efforts effectively trash what Charnay described as his “beautifully simple” pan-Toltec theory, the tendency to explain the coincidence in architectures by reference to some sort of story about a so-termed Toltec Conquest of the Maya actually intensifies rather than diminishes. Synthesizing the architectural and textual evidences in a myriad of ingenious ways, the early generations of professional Americanists, particularly those working on the Maya side of the equation, invariably continued to appeal, in one fashion or another, to the presupposition that there was a fundamental discontinuity between the pre-Columbian peoples of Central Mexico and those of the Maya zone, and to the old story line that, at some point in the pre-Columbian past, for some reason, a contingent of Mexicans (or Toltecs) had come rampaging out of the Central Plateau into Yucatan, whereupon they built (or forced the indigenous Maya to build) the presumably non-Maya, Tula-like portion of Chichen Itza (i.e., so-called Toltec Chichen).⁴

The number of storiological variations on the so-termed Toltec Conquest of the Maya—all versions of which depend on a great deal of

¹ Sylvanus A. Morley and George W. Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1956), pp. 79–80. I attribute the quote to Brainerd because it appears in his 1956 revision of Morley’s *The Ancient Maya* but not in the 1946 original. In the same vein, see George Brainerd, *The Maya Civilization* (Los Angeles: Southwest Museum, 1954), pp. 79–88.

² Victor Wolfgang von Hagen, *Maya Explorer: John Lloyd Stephens and the Lost Cities of Central America and Yucatán* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1948), p. 220.

³ On the development of Middle American archaeology see, among others, Ignacio Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980); and Gordon R. Willey and Jeremy A. Sabloff, *A History of American Archaeology*, 2d ed. (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1980).

⁴ Throughout this article I use the conventional term “Toltec Chichen” to refer to the large plaza in the northern portion of the site as a matter of convenience, but with serious reservations (and at the risk of perpetuating what seems to me to be a serious misconception) because it at present appears that essentially all of the features at Chichen Itza that are commonly ascribed to Toltec and Central Mexican peoples were actually built by someone else, namely, the Yucatecan Maya.

imagination to flesh out the scanty historical record—is for a long time essentially equal to the number of researchers commenting on the problem, but among the earliest, most thoroughgoing, and most enduring renditions is that of the irrepressible Sylvanus Morley.⁵ Totally enamored of everything Maya (he terms the Maya “the Greeks of the New World”) and vigorously disdainful of all things Central Mexican—“the Toltecs and Aztecs were the Romans who did no more than crudely copy the culture of the Maya”⁶—Morley crafts an elaborate archaeohistorical story wherein, following the catastrophic collapse of the Classic Maya Empire in the Peten region, Maya refugees (presumed to be the Itza) came north to build the strictly Maya portion of Chichen Itza (i.e., “Old Maya Chichen”). According to Morley, for some unspecified reason, these Itza Maya eventually abandoned the site and moved into the southwestern part of the Yucatan Peninsula, where they encountered a group of wandering Central Mexican exiles under a leader named Kukulcan (a Maya variant of Quetzalcoatl). These dislocated Mexicans were, in a sense, converted, “becoming completely Mayanized in speech and perhaps even culture,” whereupon this hybrid coalition of Old Empire Maya (or Itza) and renegade Mexicans returned to Chichen Itza to build that portion of the city that looks so much like Tula (i.e., “New Toltec Chichen”), fashioning the site for the first time into a truly powerful capital and the locus of a short-lived Maya renaissance that Morley terms the Second or New Maya Empire.⁷

Likewise formulating most of his ideas in the 1910s and 1920s, Herbert Spinden provides a roughly similar rendition of the pre-Hispanic events around Chichen Itza.⁸ Thomas Gann, Morley’s traveling partner, embellishes the story with even less restrained eulogies to the Maya as “joyous, peaceful, care-free, art-loving children of nature” who flourish

⁵ Morley formulates most of his opinions about the Maya (including the notion of two Maya empires) in the 1910s, but these ideas find their fullest exposition in Sylvanus Morley, *The Ancient Maya* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1946).

⁶ Robert L. Brunhouse, *Sylvanus G. Morley and the World of the Ancient Maya* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), p. 169, comments on Morley’s admiration for the Maya and disdain for Central Mexican culture.

⁷ Morley, *The Ancient Maya*, pp. 50–97.

⁸ Spinden concurs with Morley’s notion that Chichen Itza was the focus of what they both term the Second (or New) Maya Empire, but his ideas about Quetzalcoatl and the Central Mexican connection are unique. In Spinden’s bizarre and convoluted reconstruction, Quetzalcoatl, one incredible human being, is born in Central Mexico but spends his impressionable youth in Yucatan, where he eventually conquers Chichen Itza in 1191 C.E. (Quetzalcoatl is one and the same with Hunac Ceel in that episode); and then, at the late date of 1220 C.E., Quetzalcoatl supposedly returns with the Itza to found Tula, Hidalgo in the image of Chichen Itza (Herbert J. Spinden, *Ancient Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*, Handbook Series no. 3 [New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1917], pp. 149, 167–75). Thomas Athol Joyce, *Maya and Mexican Art* (London: The Studio, 1927), like Spinden, a proponent of Maya primacy, holds that the Feathered Serpent cult originated in the Maya zone (specifically at Copan) and then moved east to west to Central Mexico (i.e., Teotihuacan).

in a kind of sociointellectual utopia, contaminated only by the overspill of repugnant practices from Central Mexico.⁹ And tour guides at Chichen, adding their own creative adornments, continue to recite variations of Morley's two-empire story daily. Yet, even in Morley's day, serious scholars could see that the imaginative Old Empire/New Empire scheme was an impossible distortion of the actual historical events.¹⁰

Considerably more temperate in his pre-Hispanic (re)constructions than Morley, Spinden, or Gann, Alfred M. Tozzer, the dominant figure in Maya studies from the 1910s through the early 1950s, provides a far more thoroughgoing treatment of the Tula–Chichen Itza problem. Tozzer, a tremendously influential figure, considered the perplexing relationship between the indigenous Maya of Yucatan and the “Toltecs” of Central Mexico to be the preeminent problem in Middle American studies and so made this the pet project of his prodigious, half-century career. The synthesis of this lifetime of ethnohistorical, ethnographic, art historical, and archaeological Maya research—ever with an eye to Chichen Itza and the indomitable “Maya-Toltec problem”—appeared in the posthumously published two-volume tour de force *Chichen Itza and Its Cenote of Sacrifice: A Comparative Study of Contemporaneous Maya and Toltec* (1957).

Tozzer polarizes the Maya and Mexican (or so-called Toltec) elements of the site even more than his predecessors. In his wondrously elaborate five-stage (re)construction of the story of Chichen Itza, the two groups pass the baton of authority back and forth, as the indigenous Maya are supposedly overwhelmed by Mexican invaders, not just once, but fully three times: first by Toltecs from Tula under a leader named Kukulcan I (i.e., Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl), second by “Mexicanized” Itza from the Gulf Coast led by a leader named Kukulcan II, and a third time by Mexican mercenaries from Tabasco.¹¹ Tozzer methodically bifurcates all of Chichen Itza's art and architecture between the militaristic Mexicans, harbingers of human sacrifice, sodomy, and idol-

⁹ Thomas Gann, *In an Unknown Land* (1924; reprint, Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1971), p. 87, says that human sacrifice and “quasi-ceremonial religious cannibalism [were among] the many evil practices introduced among the Maya by the Mexicans.”

¹⁰ For most Mayanists, the discovery in the 1920s of a profusion of inscribed stelae at Cobá (near Chichen Itza) with dates as old as those in the Peten area thoroughly discredited Morley's Old Empire/New Empire scheme. On the demise of that scheme, see Leo Deuel, *Conquistadors without Swords: Archaeologists in the Americas* (New York: Schocken, 1967), pp. 295–99.

¹¹ 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), p. 53, correlates these three Mexican invasions with a passage in the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* which reads, “Three times it was, they say, that foreigners arrived.”

atry, and the indigenous Maya, who emerge from the traumatic cycles of submission and recovery as sympathetic but very vulnerable victims. Corroboration for this “Virginia reel of alternating Maya and Mexican regimes” depends particularly, however, on the dubious assumption that a predominance of “Toltec ethnic figures” in a building’s artistic decoration is evidence that the Toltecs were in control when it was erected and, similarly, that an abundance of “Maya ethnic figures” in the iconography marks a Maya resurgence.¹² Tozzer himself is nowise certain about the convoluted rotational scheme that emerges from these efforts, and, somewhat ironically (given that Tozzer is ever acknowledged as the doyen of the Toltec-May problem), in its particulars, this grand arrangement at no time enjoys a strong following among professional Mesoamericanists.¹³

J. Eric S. Thompson, after flatly concluding that Tozzer’s solution to the Tula-Chichen problem “doesn’t make sense,” alternatively contributes a similarly thoroughgoing rendition of Quetzalcoatl and the Toltecs’ connection to the Yucatecan capital in 1954, followed by another even more elaborate version of the story in 1970.¹⁴ In nearly all previous versions of the Chichen Itza story, the mysterious Itza people for whom the site is named had been relegated to the status of a relatively insignificant third party in what amounts to essentially a two-contestant conflict between Maya and Mexicans. The great innovation of Thompson’s renditions of the Chichen drama (particularly the 1970 version) is, however, that, for the first time, instead of bit players, the elusive Itza are featured as the prime movers behind the florescence at Chichen Itza. According to Thompson, the Itza (or “Putun Itza Maya,” as he identifies them), originally based in the interjacent Gulf Coast region, were fabulously accomplished warrior-merchants who, by the

¹² J. Eric S. Thompson, review of *Chichen Itza and Its Cenote of Sacrifice*, by Alfred M. Tozzer, *American Journal of Archaeology* 63 (1959): 119–20, concludes that what he terms Tozzer’s “Virginia reel of alternating Maya and Mexican regimes . . . doesn’t make sense.” Thompson is particularly critical of Tozzer’s presumption that an abundance of “Toltec ethnic figures” in the iconography of a building implies that it was built by Toltecs.

¹³ Charles E. Lincoln, “The Chronology of Chichen Itza: A Review of the Literature,” in *Late Lowland Maya Civilization: Classic to Postclassic*, ed. Jeremy A. Sabloff and E. Wyllys Andrews V (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), provides a thorough discussion of Tozzer’s basic premises and his tremendous influence on ideas about Chichen Itza, as well as noting that “archaeologists were never entirely comfortable with [Tozzer’s] basically art historical reconstruction of events” (p. 144). Michael Coe has been perhaps the most faithful to Tozzer’s rendition of the Chichen story; see Michael Coe, *The Maya*, 3d ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), pp. 121–37.

¹⁴ J. Eric S. Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), pp. 116–39, and *Maya History and Religion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), pp. 3–47. The 1970 rendition is most relevant to the present discussion.

tenth century C.E., controlled a vast commercial network that encompassed all sides of the Yucatan Peninsula, and then, eventually extending their sway away from the coast, these same enterprising Itza conquered a number of inland Yucatecan centers, including preeminently Chichen Itza (about 918 C.E.), which subsequently became a distinguished regional capital in this giant Putun Itza Maya empire.¹⁵ Meanwhile, so Thompson's story goes, Quetzalcoatl-Kukulcan had been run out of Tula; fleeing from his Central Mexican enemies, the exiled priest-king and his Toltec retinue were welcomed into Tabasco by the flourishing and already strongly Mexicanized Putun Itza (about 987), and then promptly ushered to Chichen Itza by these rich and genial hosts. This fortuitous alliance between the Itza and the Toltecs (a kind of symbiotic twist on the old notion of Maya-Mexican polarity) catapulted Chichen to its zenith as a political capital. With the sponsorship of their wealthy Putun Itza backers, the Toltecs recreated a bigger and better version of that which they had lost at Tula—that is, the so-termed Toltec Chichen. In Thompson's surmise, the Itza-Toltec coalition engineered "a kind of new Toltec empire" that singularly dominated Yucatan, promoting the cult of Quetzalcoatl-Kukulcan and the commercial interests of Toltec Chichen Itza from Tabasco to Honduras.¹⁶

Thompson's compelling yarn of compensatory cooperation—still, in its broadest strokes, a drama of Mexican might squashing (or at least totally refiguring) the gentle Maya—was heralded as the new gospel on the sister city relatedness and, accordingly, reiterated both in most subsequent syntheses of Yucatecan culture history as well as by scholars working on the connection between Tula and Chichen Itza from the Central Mexican side.¹⁷ And yet, if Thompson's daring Putun hypothesis, for the first time, fetches the Gulf Coast peoples (specifically the Itza) from backstage and gives them their due in the limelight (and, thus, defines a new benchmark in the history of the Tula-Chichen problem), almost all critical Mayanists have been (and remain) skeptical about the neatness and extravagance of Thompson's claims for the Putun Itza.¹⁸

¹⁵ Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, pp. 3–47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

¹⁷ On the Maya side, all of the following espouse Thompson's Putun hypothesis: Muriel Porter Weaver, *The Aztecs, Maya, and Their Predecessors* (New York: Seminar, 1972), pp. 195–228; Joseph W. Ball, "A Coordinate Approach to Northern Maya Prehistory: A.D. 700–1200," *Ancient Antiquity* 39 (1974): 85–93; and John S. Henderson, *The World of the Ancient Maya* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 202–33. And two of the most important commentators on Tula, namely, Nigel Davies, *The Toltecs until the Fall of Tula* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), pp. 217–26; and Richard A. Diehl, *Tula: The Toltec Capital of Ancient Mexico* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1983), pp. 144–52, likewise endorse Thompson's explanation of the Tula-Chichen connection.

¹⁸ Thompson's iconoclastic Putun theory has provoked an enormous amount of debate. For instance, Arthur G. Miller, "Captains of the Itzá: Unpublished Mural Evidence from

In any event, for all their wild variability, each of these ingenious (re)constructions of the story of the infamous Toltec Conquest of the Maya—and there are many, many more permutations on this basic script¹⁹—persists, like Charnay, in the notion that, at some point in the pre-Columbian past, a Tula-based contingent of Toltecs, presumably led by some figure named Quetzalcoatl (or Kukulcan), made the 800-mile trek from Central Mexico to the Sacred Cenote, where they fashioned a new set of buildings modeled directly after their original capital at Tula. A significant minority has worked to explain Tula-Chichen similitude in terms of a reverse (i.e., west-to-east) migration from Yucatan to Central Mexico—most significant is George Kubler's iconoclastic contention that Toltec Chichen was the original and that Tula was the copy or "a colonial outpost of Chichen Itza"²⁰—but even these

Chichén Itzá," in *Social Process in Maya Prehistory: Studies in Honor of Sir Eric Thompson*, ed. Norman Hammond (London: Academic Press, 1977), p. 222, complains that the Putun "loom as supermen" when, in fact, they probably constituted several related yet competitive Gulf Coast groups rather than a single unified people. For different and more methodological criticisms of Thompson, see, e.g., Anthony P. Andrews and Fernando C. Robles, "Chichen Itza and Coba: An Itza-Maya Standoff in Early Postclassic Yucatan," in *The Lowland Maya Postclassic*, ed. Arlene F. Chase and Prudence M. Rice (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), p. 62; and R. E. W. Adams, "Maya Collapse: Transformation and Termination in the Ceramic Sequence at Altar de Sacrificios," in *The Classic Maya Collapse*, ed. T. P. Culbert (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973), pp. 156–58.

¹⁹ Tozzer, *Chichen Itza and its Cenote of Sacrifice*, pp. 254–55, nn. 23, 24, 26, 27, has a helpful (though still very confusing) summary of some of the various reconstructions and periodizations for the era of so-called Toltec Chichen Itza that appeared in the 1940s and 1950s; besides Morley and Eric Thompson, Wyllys Andrews IV, Pedro Armillas, Ignacio Bernal, Alfonso Caso, Alfred Kroeber, H. E. D. Pollock, Herbert Spinden, William Strong, and Gordon Willey each offer at least one scheme.

²⁰ Kubler originally presents his iconoclastic hypothesis in George Kubler, "Chichén Itzá y Tula," *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 1 (1961): 47–79, and he sticks with the same unpopular formulation right through to the present; see, e.g., George Kubler, *Art and Architecture of Ancient America*, 3d ed. (New York: Penguin, 1984). (Methodologically, it is noteworthy that Kubler's approach to the Tula-Chichen problem is exactly consonant with his more general position that the first order of business for an art historian is to locate a work of art with respect to its historically related precedents and echoes; see George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962].) The direct and famous response to Kubler's iconoclastic views is Alberto Ruz Lhuillier, "Chichén Itzá y Tula: Comentarios a un Ensayo," *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 2 (1962): 205–23. Reviewing the extreme positions of that era of scholarship—namely, Jorge Acosta's opinion that Chichen Itza was a thoroughly non-Maya, integral part of Tula Toltec culture, and Kubler's antithetical opinion that Tula was simply a colonial outpost of Chichen—Ruz argues for the more conventional position that the relationship between the two cities is more complex, but that it is essentially a case of *west-to-east*, that is, Tula-to-Chichen movement. Methodologically, it is ironic that Ruz especially criticizes Kubler for relying too exclusively on *formal* parallels (and not considering the ethnohistorical sources), since Kubler would eventually become the harshest critic against overreliance on strictly formal commonalities in Mesoamerican art.

inverted (re)construction scenarios similarly depend upon the literal movements of people.²¹

In sum, whether the agents of the “Mexicanization of Yucatan” are portrayed as a migrating superrace (à la Charnay), as a kind of roving barbarian horde who thrash the more benign and intellectual Maya (à la Morley, Tozzer, and most of their contemporaries), or as displaced idealists who need only fiscal backing to operationalize their religioartistic vision (à la Thompson), these Mayanists invariably conclude that the buildings of Tula and Chichen Itza mirror one another because they were built by (or at least designed by) the same “Toltec” people, to be used in the same ways, to express the same religious intentions, and to serve as backdrops for the same religious rituals. In short, the simple presumption continues to be that, because the two sets of buildings look alike, each carries the same religious meanings.

CONTROVERTING EVIDENCES

A variety of new fieldwork, research interests, and analyses have begun to bring about wholesale changes in the ways in which scholars view the growth of ancient Maya civilization. This is an exciting time in Maya archaeology, although there is much uncertainty about how all the new pieces of knowledge about the Maya will fit together. Such uncertainty is particularly evident in regard to the post–A.D. 800 era in Maya development. [JEREMY A. SABLOFF AND E. WYLLYS ANDREWS V, 1986]²²

The tale of Toltec conquest of (or collusion with) the Maya at Chichen Itza, in all its various manifestations, is an intriguing and wonderful story to be sure. Disappointingly, however, at least from the perspective of archaeological script writing, the glamorous histrionics of the Toltecs sweeping into Yucatan and effecting a complete reorientation of pre-Columbia life have proven to be better drama than historical reconstruc-

²¹ For example, in regard to theories of “reverse,” or east-to-west, migration from Chichen Itza to Tula, a small guide book by Jose Diaz Bolio, *Ruines de Chichén Itzá* (currently sold around Yucatan), perpetuates the theory that the Plumed Serpent cult originated among the Maya, traveled north to Mexico, and then was brought back to Yucatan in a more sophisticated form. Considerably newer and more thoroughgoing is the theory of Mexican archaeologist Roman Piña Chan, though he too cites only a couple of his antagonists (i.e., Eric Thompson and Samuel Lothrop) and none of his precedents in arguing that the cult of Quetzalcoatl originated in Xochicalco but entered back to Yucatan only *after* flourishing in Chichen Itza; the case is neither well documented nor convincing (Roman Piña Chan, *Chichén Itzá: La Ciudad de los Brujos del Agua* [Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980]; also see Roman Piña Chan, *Quetzalcóatl: Serpiente Esplumada* [Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977]).

²² Jeremy A. Sabloff and E. Wyllys Andrews V, “Introduction,” in Sabloff and Andrews, eds., *Late Lowland Maya Civilization*, p. 3. This volume is enormously helpful in reviewing state-of-the-art (1986) ideas about Yucatan culture history and Chichen Itza.

tion. In hindsight, when a rigorous hermeneutics of suspicion is exercised, essentially all of these storiological attempts to explain the sister city similitude in terms of a literal “Mexicanization” (or “Toltecization”) of the Maya would seem to be manifestations of *Western imaginings about Native Americans* rather than the “accurate” or “objective” recountings of the pre-Hispanic past that their ingenious authors claim to have been writing. In fact, in the wake of a very energetic and sophisticated revision of even the most basic ideas about pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, not only have the dubious and contradistinct stereotypes of the Toltec warrior and the Maya intellectual begun to unravel, even more disconcertingly, Americanists are at present confronted with the stunning possibility that this most dramatic and notorious event in the saga of ancient Mesoamerica, recounted in every standard textbook—the so-called Toltec Conquest of the Maya—in fact never happened!

Following a storm of revisionist Mesoamerican scholarship over the past two decades (particularly in the Maya area), consensus is difficult to find, but developments in several fields have been especially important in disenfranchising the conventional explanation of Tula-Chichen similitude via a Toltec Conquest of the Maya. First, in the realm of archaeology, several sweeping reappraisals of ancient Mesoamerica—(1) the refutation of the old contrariety between Maya “semiurbanism” and the “true cities” of Central Mexico,²³ (2) the demonstration of a common formative ancestry shared by Maya and Mexican peoples alike,²⁴ and

²³ Chichen Itza (like the neighboring Yucatecan site of Mayapan) was for a long time considered “non-Maya” because of its densely packed urban layout. The thinking was, in other words, that Central Mexicans must have imposed this urban organizational pattern on the more rural-oriented Maya; see, e.g., H. E. D. Pollock et al., *Mayapan, Yucatan, Mexico*, Carnegie Institute of Washington Publication 619 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1962). The rise and fall of this notion that the Maya were “semiurban” (i.e., that they had “vacant cities” or “ceremonial centers” rather than “true cities”) is complex indeed; but, in any event, as of the 1970s, scholars generally agreed that Maya centers were *not* just sporadically occupied ceremonial centers, but essentially preindustrial cities in their range of functions and in many aspects of their form, and moreover, that Maya urbanization was a result of local emergence, *not* a “foreign” mode of integration forcibly imposed by Central Mexicans. See, e.g., William A. Haviland, “A New Population Estimate for Tikal, Guatemala,” *American Antiquity* 34 (1969): 429–33, and “Tikal, Guatemala and Mesoamerican Urbanism,” *World Archaeology* 2 (1970): 186–98; Christopher Jones et al., “Tikal: An Outline of Its Field Study (1956–1970) and a Project Bibliography,” in *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 1, ed. Jeremy A. Sabloff (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); and Gordon R. Willey, “Recent Researches and Perspectives in Mesoamerican Archaeology: An Introductory Commentary,” in Sabloff, ed.

²⁴ Alfred Kidder was among the earliest Americanists to challenge the popular notion that the Maya were a special case and to promote an appreciation of the fundamental continuity between Maya and Mexican peoples. On Kidder’s contribution in this regard, see Gordon R. Willey, “Alfred Vincent Kidder,” *National Academy of Science, Biographical Memoirs* 39 (1967): 304–5; and Richard B. Woodbury, *Alfred V. Kidder* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), pp. 65–67.

(3) the dismantling of the notion of Maya isolationism in favor of a fresh appreciation of their vigorous involvement in superlocal systems of trade and communication²⁵—have worked together to cast a new paradigm of pan-Mesoamerican unity and Maya-Mexican interrelatedness rather than drastic discontinuity between the two peoples. Even more damning to the fabled encounter at Chichen Itza between otherworldly Yucatecans and worldly Mexicans has been a wholesale reassessment of Maya art and religion, epitomized by Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller's *Blood of Kings* (1986) and by Schele and David Freidel's *A Forest of Kings* (1990) wherein the adulatory old stereotypes of the Maya are subverted by a set of shocking reversals. The reimaged Classic Maya of Schele, Miller, and Freidel, rather than chaste time-worshipping contemplatives, are unabashedly political, fascinated by death, by mind-altering drugs, and, most of all, by blood sacrifice—a version of Maya spirituality that is, if dark and unlovely, eminently more characteristic of wider Mesoamerica.

Major research efforts trained more specifically on the northern Yucatecan ambience in which Toltec Chichen Itza arose have done even more to dismantle the familiar notion that the Maya were passive victims in the Mexicanization process. Archaeologists' twin reappraisals (1) of the infamous "collapse" of the Classic Peten Maya and (2) of Postclassic Yucatan, typically dispraised as an era of "internal dry rot in Maya culture" during which the Maya were easy pickings for the Mexican intruders, have demonstrated that neither the disjunction between the southern and northern Maya, nor the radical cleavage between the "Classic" and "Postclassic" eras is nearly so drastic as once presumed. In sum, the native Yucatecan Maya, long conceived as cowering subordinates (or abstruse philosophers), have been refigured as worldly and capable entrepreneurs, essentially equal partners in their dealings with Central Mexicans. And, furthermore, in the most startlingly iconoclastic reconsideration of all, Chichen Itza (including the

²⁵ Where Morley's tremendously influential *Ancient Maya* (1946), for instance, emphasized the autonomy and near total isolation of the Maya from Central Mexico, more recent studies accentuate the considerable and sustained interactions (particularly trading interactions) between the Maya and Central Mexicans. See, e.g., Gordon R. Willey, "External Influences on the Lowland Maya: 1940 and 1975 Perspectives," in Hammond, ed., pp. 57–75; and Arthur G. Miller, "A Brief Outline of the Artistic Evidence for Classic Period Cultural Contact between the Maya Lowlands and the Central Mexican Highlands," in *Middle Classic Mesoamerica: A.D. 400–700*, ed. Esther Pasztory (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 63–70. The study of Mesoamerican trading systems has become a major subspecialization, and there is an immense fund of recent literature; for an expansive discussion, which includes remarks on both some of the older misconceptions and on the state-of-the-art hypotheses, particularly as they relate to the era and area of Chichen Itza (and also a helpful set of bibliographical references), see David A. Freidel, "Terminal Classic Lowland Maya: Successes, Failures, and Aftermaths," in Sabloff and Andrews, eds. (n. 13 above), pp. 409–30.

so-called Toltec portion of the site) has, as of 1986, been elevated from its conventional status as the foreign-born Mexicanized aberration of a decadent Postclassic epoch to that of a genuinely indigenous Classic Maya city!²⁶ This rehabilitative vision, in other words, portrays the Tula-like plaza of so-called Toltec Chichen *not* as the bastard offspring of a coerced union of Mexican and Maya stocks, but as a legitimate heir to the great Maya centers of the Peten region.

Augmenting further these iconoclastic developments in archaeology, iconographical and epigraphical studies of the inscriptions at Chichen Itza by David Kelley, Michel Davoust, Jeff Kowalski, and others are similarly demonstrating Chichen's essential continuity with other Maya sites.²⁷ Likewise, ethnohistorical studies, specifically those by Munro Edmonson, now suggest that the *Books of Chilam Balam* (which were so important in the formulation of the story of the Toltec Conquest of the Maya) actually refer to antagonisms between various Yucatecan Maya groups rather than to a Mexican invasion of the Maya, thus displacing another pillar of the conventional scenario of the Mexicanization of Yucatan.²⁸ And, from the ranks of art history, George Kubler, Arthur Miller, and Clemency Coggins (albeit in quite different ways) each mitigate the polarity between Maya and Mexican at Chichen Itza by discerning an artistic and architectural program that is essentially integrated and even self-consciously synthetic.²⁹

²⁶ I take 1986 as a significant date because *The Lowland Maya Postclassic*, ed. Chase and Rice (1985), continues to locate Toltec Chichen Itza within the Early Postclassic while the other major reassessment of this era of Maya culture history, *Late Lowland Maya Civilization*, ed. Sabloff and Andrews (1986), argues that the most important discontinuity in late Maya civilization comes in the wake of the collapse of Chichen Itza rather than with its emergence as a major center, and thus relocates Toltec Chichen Itza in the Terminal Classic period. Of course, as both of these works amply demonstrate, the reassessment has been a slowly evolving process that depends as much on the reevaluation of the Peten Classic Maya as on the study of Chichen Itza itself.

²⁷ See David H. Kelley, "Kakupacal and the Itzas," *Estudios de cultura Maya* 8 (1986): 255–60, *Deciphering the Maya Script* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), and "Notes on Puuc Inscriptions and History," in *The Puuc: New Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence Mills (Pella, Iowa: Central College, 1982); Michel Davoust, "Les premiers Chefs Mayas de Chichén Itzá," *Mexicon* 2 (1980): 25–29; and Jeff Karl Kowalski, "Lords of the Maya," *Expedition* 27 (1985): 50–60.

²⁸ See *The Ancient Future of the Itza: The Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin*, trans. and annotated by Munro S. Edmonson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); and *Heaven Born Merida and Its Destiny: The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, trans. and annotated by Munro S. Edmonson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

²⁹ See George Kubler, "Serpent and Atlantean Columns: Symbols of Maya-Toltec Polity," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 41 (May 1982): 93–115; Arthur G. Miller, "'The Little Descent': Manifest Destiny from the East," in *Actes du XLII Congrès International des Américanistes* (Paris, 1976), pp. 221–36, and "Captains of the Itzá" (n. 18 above); Clemency C. Coggins, "New Fire at Chichen Itza," in *Primer Coloquio Internacional de Mayistas* (Mexico, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1985), pp. 427–84, and "A New Sun at Chichen Itza," in *World Archaeoastronomy*, ed. Anthony Aveni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 260–75.

The cumulative effect of all these reconsiderations is devastating for the historical viability of the wonderful old story of the Toltec Conquest of Chichen Itza. These recently rejuvenated controversies are not quibblings over minutiae; instead, they are paradigm-rattling amendments, all still subject to debate, but which betray an uncertainty and dissentience about even the most basic historical events and processes that eventuated in the spectacular architecture of Toltec Chichen Itza. What is certain at this point, however, is that the old story of Toltec Chichen as the consequence of a face-to-face confrontation between two diametrically opposed types of Indians has lost its ring of credibility and "truth." The archetypes and images that for so long sustained the chess game of pre-Columbian historical (re)construction have been undercut. The lead role played by the peaceful, introspective, victimized Maya of Morley, Tozzer, and Thompson has been recast with the politically astute, blood-obsessed Maya of Schele, Miller, and Freidel, and the old script no longer makes sense.

A WORKING HYPOTHESIS: ALLUREMENT RATHER THAN CONQUEST

The whole question of Toltec influence and Chichen Itza needs to be reopened and investigated. [KENNETH L. BROWN, 1985]³⁰

AN ALTERNATIVE STORY OF CHICHEN ITZA

At present, then, with Charnay's naive pan-Toltec theory long rejected and with the glamorous old scenario of the Toltec Conquest of the Maya largely discredited, rather than lay to rest the issue of the twin architectures of Tula and Chichen Itza, the startling revisions bring a revitalized urgency to the same old problem—Why then do these two distant places look so much alike? And, where research developments on the Central Mexican side of the pair may have forced some significant revision of ideas about Tula, on the Yucatecan side, iconoclastic discoveries about the Maya have thoroughly shredded conventional notions about Chichen Itza. Accordingly, as we stand now at the threshold of a new phase in the Tula-Chichen problem, any progress will depend upon coming to terms with this drastically different, emergent vision of Yucatan's most famous ruins. In short, the story of Chichen Itza must be rewritten once again.

If the present generation of scholars is more timorous than its predecessors in its storytelling about Chichen Itza, and if there really is no strong consensus at the moment, there is general agreement that the Yucatecan Maya should be recast as instigators rather than victims,

³⁰ Kenneth L. Brown, "Postclassic Relationships between the Highland and Lowland Maya," in Chase and Rice, eds. (n. 18 above), p. 280.

and, thus, that Toltec Chichen, instead of a last-gasp Mexicanized aberration, should be reconfigured as the native accomplishment of outward-looking, internationalizing, commercially and militarily adept Maya peoples—"a fresh start on a new and untried trajectory."³¹ Moreover, while most contemporary Mesoamericanists are simply sidestepping the quagmire of Tula-Chichen connectedness for the time being, the collapse of the stereotypical opposition between the gentle Maya and the bloodthirsty Mexicans, besides totally overhauling our picture of Chichen Itza, is likewise demanding a thorough reconsideration of the special relationship between the sister cities. The formal similarity between the architectures of Tula Grande and so-called Toltec Chichen Itza remains unmistakable—even the drastic reassessments have not undermined Charnay's realization that there is some special relationship between the two ceremonial plazas³²—yet it now seems exceedingly unlikely that Chichen Itza was ever an extension or "colonial outpost" to the Tula Toltec empire or, for that matter, was ever in any military or economic sense accountable to a Central Mexican-based authority (and the possibility, à la George Kubler, that Tula was ever a "frontier garrison" of Chichen is even less plausible). In fact, if one accepts the momentous shift in perspective of late, the entire story of Chichen Itza can be (re)constructed quite adequately outside the old paradigm of Maya-Mexican polarity, and without the confrontational spectacle of a military or even peaceful Toltec Conquest of the Maya.³³

According to a more viable (if less spectacular) working hypothesis, the destiny and shape of Toltec Chichen were, in all likelihood, controlled and choreographed from northern Yucatan by Yucatecan Maya (or perhaps by Putun Itza Maya from the Gulf Coast region to the west) but certainly *not* by Central Mexican renegades. It is not necessary to imagine that the architectural design of La Gran Nivelación at Chichen Itza was forcibly imposed upon the Yucatecans, nor, reversing the direction of influence, is it any longer viable to presume that the architectural forms of Toltec Chichen were exported to Tula. More probably, in a hypothesis that endorses a third option—an option that is only beginning to be seriously considered—the Tula-like attributes at Chichen Itza seem to be the consequence of the Yucatecan Maya's self-motivated

³¹ For a helpful discussion of the reassessment and new appreciation of the Postclassic period see the preface to Chase and Rice, eds.

³² There has, however, been an increasing appreciation that the architecture of Toltec Chichen likewise has affinities to many pre-Columbian sites other than Tula, Hidalgo (discussed momentarily).

³³ I am *not* attempting at this point to create an original version of the Chichen story so much as to imagine a rendition that takes seriously the radical new developments in Mesoamericanist studies; the following narrative proposal is, consequently, highly tentative.

borrowing and imitation of the Central Mexican capital, a west-to-east movement of ideas and architectural styles rather than of peoples. In short, it now appears that the lords of Chichen freely and intentionally copied the art and architectural forms (though not necessarily the intentions and meanings!) of Tula, Hidalgo.

If the pre-Hispanic story is rewritten according to this more reasonable alternative, the notorious “Mexicanization” (or “Toltecization”) of Chichen emerges as a process of the Yucatecan Maya’s acting rather than being acted upon. Furthermore, given the much more worldly reconfiguration of the Maya and David Freidel’s recent postulate that “the primary economic event in Maya civilization was the pilgrimage-fair, a regular and periodic gathering of locals and nonlocals in central places for purposes of religious celebration and exchange,”³⁴ in this new version of the story, the florescence at the City of the Sacred Cenote appears as an instance of what Victor Turner terms “pilgrimage structuration,” that is, a circumstance wherein a constituency of entrepreneurially adept Maya, probably from the Gulf Coast (or perhaps some confederation of Maya groups), seized control of Chichen’s venerable Sacred Well.³⁵ With the resources and mobility to choose between a number of Yucatecan sites, the ecohierophanic prestige of the Sacred Cenote, together with the steady pilgrimage traffic that it generated, made Chichen the most appealing location for a new inland capital.

In this reconfigured scenario—still hypothetical at best—the new lords of Chichen, hardly patsies to Toltec exploitation, are pictured as militarily intimidating and commercially successful in the extreme. Yet, while they had won an impressive political and mercantile hegemony, apparently the enterprising sovereigns of Chichen were not nearly so successful in winning the respect of the less well endowed ambient population. Since they were wealthy and relatively secure in the temporal realm (particularly in contrast to the historical Toltecs of Tula, for instance), the fundamental problem for the rulers of Toltec Chichen Itza, so it would seem, was one of respectability and legitimation, a *nouveau riche* dilemma not unlike that which would haunt the fabulously affluent but infamously unpopular Aztecs several centuries

³⁴ Freidel, “Terminal Classic Lowland Maya,” p. 415. In the same vein, also see David Freidel, “The Political Economics of Residential Dispersion among the Lowland Maya,” in *Lowland Maya Settlement Patterns*, ed. Wendy Ashmore, School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), pp. 371–82.

³⁵ Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), describe “pilgrimage structuration” as the routinization and institutionalization of an ecstatic, liminal sacred journey, “the domestication of a salvific quest”; see particularly pp. 26, 171, 188, 196–201, 231–34.

later (a historical circumstance for which there are vastly better textual sources).

INTERPRETIVE IMPLICATIONS: ALLUREMENT, NOT CONQUEST

This alternative rendition of the Chichen sage, still mired in controversy, nevertheless leads to an imagination of the pre-Columbian ritual-architectural events at Toltec Chichen that is radically different from those of Charnay, Morley, Tozzer, or Eric Thompson. Rather than a ritual-architectural program of domination and conquest that bespeaks military intimidation and announces the dire consequences of resistance—presumably the principal initiative of the civic ceremony at Tula Grande—the leitmotif of Toltec Chichen’s architecture (as Kubler, Miller, and Coggins have each argued in different ways)³⁶ would seem to be that of reconciliation, accommodation, and synthesis between the various commercial interests and diverse ethnic constituencies that frequented this cosmopolitan pilgrimage and trading center. Thus, where Tula was forced to respond to its ever precarious situation in Central Mexico with a ritual-architectural program designed to terrorize and intimidate, by contrast, the ritual-architectural events of Toltec Chichen were responding to a very different sort of problem. Since the rulers of Chichen were not literally embattled so much as simply disreputable, the incongruity between Chichen’s estimable material wealth and its deep sense of insecurity (perhaps something like the “cosmic paranoia” experienced by the Aztecs)³⁷ manifested itself in a ritual-architectural program that was desperately concerned to announce order and respectability, that expended itself most of all in appearing legitimate and pedigreed, that, in short, nearly begged to be taken seriously. In other words, when we think back to the little boy’s fascination with the angel in the cathedral at Cuernavaca (see part 1 of this article), the problem of “*architectural allurement*,” that is, the problem of being respected and engaged seriously as a partner in conversation, would seem to have a special piquancy in the case of Toltec Chichen Itza.

Thus, to state the interpretive implications of this alternative rendition of the Chichen story in another way (and to begin retrieving ideas from the initial methodological portion of this essay), this hypothetical scenario suggests that the solution to the problem of Tula-Chichen architectural similitude lies *not* in the mechanism of conquest but, instead, in the mechanism of allurement. According to this amended

³⁶ See above, n. 29.

³⁷ David Carrasco, “Templo Mayor: The Aztec Vision of Place,” *Religion* 2 (1981), p. 279, uses the term “cosmic paranoia” advisedly in regard to the Aztecs’ sense of their precariousness in the world.

script, what is genuinely exceptional about the architecture of Toltec Chichen is *not* the wholesale transference of a Central Mexican architectural agenda into the Maya zone, but rather the remarkable diversity and ingenuity with which the great plaza of Chichen pleads its legitimacy and beckons the committed participation of its pre-Columbian patrons. The reproduction of Tula-like architectural elements was assuredly an important factor in the design of Toltec Chichen but, rather than the essential determinant, this imitative agenda was only one of several components in the remarkably elaborate crafting of an aura of order and respectability. In their efforts to redress the specter of illegitimacy, the architects of Toltec Chichen invoked their great material resources and cosmopolitan experience not only to appropriate the prestigious Toltec heritage from Central Mexico but, likewise, to borrow from a wide range of other pre-Columbian ceremonial centers as well (centers in the Peten Maya region, the Puuc Maya region, the Gulf Coast, and Oaxaca, as well as Central Mexico), and then grafted these eclectic borrowings together with a whole series of what might be termed “*strategies of architectural allurement.*”

STRATEGIES OF ALLUREMENT AT CHICHEN ITZA

Pursuing allurement rather than conquest as the decisive factor behind Toltec Chichen’s ritual-architectural design, it is possible (at least for argument’s sake) to distinguish four complementary but quite distinct modes or strategies of architectural allurement. First, the most obvious and presumably most effective strategy of allurement was, of course, the appropriation of the Sacred Cenote. This uncannily circular sinkhole, an architectural feature honed by natural rather than human agencies, had apparently, for centuries prior to the construction of Toltec Chichen, been a highly revered pilgrimage destination for pre-Columbian peoples who traveled from all over the area to deposit their offerings in its murky, perpetually filling waters.³⁸ In Ralph Roys’s apt phrasing, “Chichen Itza was at one time not only the greatest and most powerful city in Yucatan, but it was a sacred city as well, a center of pilgrimage to which people flocked from every part of the peninsula and from foreign countries also to make offerings of gold, incense, copper, precious stones and human victims. The city owed its reputation for sanctity to its cenote, or natural well, which was believed to be inhabited by the gods and the spirits of the illustrious dead.”³⁹ Thus, by tethering itself

³⁸ For an accounting of items recovered from the Sacred Cenote, see *Cenote of Sacrifice: Maya Treasures from the Sacred Well at Chichén Itzá*, ed. Clemency Coggins and Orrin C. Shane III (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984).

³⁹ *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, trans. and ed. Ralph L. Roys (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), p. 173.

via a paved processional avenue to the Sacred Cenote, Toltec Chichen effected a masterful stroke of architectural allurement and, thereby, gained perhaps its most potent measure of appeal and legitimacy.

The resilient ecohierophanic prestige of the Sacred Cenote had, in other words, both long preceded and far outlasted the comparatively ephemeral heyday of Chichen as an important political capital. Yet during the city's florescence the plaza of Toltec Chichen was umbilically joined to the Sacred Cenote by a grand processional way, some ten meters wide and 300 meters long, that extended from the principal stairway of the huge Castillo pyramid to the edge of the venerable well. Epitomizing the twofold structure of familiarity and innovation that characterizes ritual-architectural events generally, the union of the esteemed old cenote with the new, humanly constructed architectural forms of Toltec Chichen was, among other things, an astute instigative maneuver. With the construction of the Castillo pyramid and its surrounding plaza, pilgrimage from the hinterlands of the Maya zone to the Sacred Cenote, already a centuries-old obsession, now climaxed in a direct confrontation, not only with the Sacred Well but, likewise, with the whole religiocivic arena of Toltec Chichen. The pilgrims were treated to (or forced into) a face-to-face confrontation with the imperial majesty of the new lords of Chichen and a realization that, like it or not, the new-fledged agenda of these sovereigns was inextricably bound up with the unfailing traditional power of the Sacred Cenote.

A second strategy of allurement, designed to enhance still more the intrinsic magnetism and respectability of the Sacred Cenote, involves a rigorously intense and thoroughgoing program of ritual-architectural homologization, or unification of space and time—an agendum which is evident most of all in the design of the Castillo pyramid. Endeavoring to present an aura of incontestable stability and conformity to cosmic order in the built as well as natural features of the city, the immense Castillo pyramid that dominates Toltec Chichen is, in effect, a huge calendar in stone. In fact, the great Castillo so meticulously homologizes architectural space and calendrical time as to provide a kind of didactic text for the space-time machinations of the northern Maya.⁴⁰ Seemingly in fear of anything random, each of the four radially symmetrical stairways has ninety-one steps, which, together with the shared final step up to the temple, makes 365, corresponding to the days of the solar year; each side of the pyramid has fifty-two niches or panels, equated to the

⁴⁰ John B. Carlson, "A Geomantic Model for the Interpretation of Mesoamerican Sites: An Essay in Cross-cultural Comparison," in *Mesoamerican Sites and World-Views: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 16–17, 1976*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1981), pp. 179–87, provides one of the more thorough discussions of the calendrical symbolism of the Castillo.

Mesoamerican fifty-two-year cycle; the body of the substructure has nine major stepped levels, presumably representing the nine levels of the Maya underworld, or “nine-night calendar count” (or, possibly, the notion of nine “hours” of the night)⁴¹ and, as those nine tiers are divided by a stairway, there are eighteen sections on each side of the pyramid body, corresponding to the eighteen months in the Maya calendar. Moreover, the four stairways themselves are correlated to a cycle of four years, which ended with the north stairway (the one that points toward the Sacred Cenote), and, rounding out this vigorous program of space-time unification, the roof of the Castillo’s temple was apparently rimmed by twenty ornaments that correlate with the Mesoamerican vigesimal (or base twenty) counting system.⁴²

Furthermore, were these detailed space-time referencings not enough, the general conception of the perfectly symmetrical Castillo vividly exemplifies the notions of a cosmological-architectural center, “a pivot and four quarters,” a central *axis mundi*, *omphalos*, or sacred mountain, an anchoring hub for the spokes that radiate out into the periphery of the capital city of Chichen Itza.⁴³ Natural solar time, calendrical time, and mythical time, along with ritual-architectural space and political space, all coalesce in the amazingly self-conscious spatiotemporal arrangement of the Castillo. There are, in short, in the whole history of sacred architecture, few more plenipotent representatives of Eliade’s conception of “microcosmic” architecture than Chichen Itza’s Castillo.⁴⁴

In this context, however, to challenge and extend somewhat Eliade’s familiar notion of the homologization of architecture and calendars, this unmistakable demonstration of space-time unity and cosmic wholeness should be appreciated as the “beginning,” or as the point of departure, for the Castillo’s ritual-architectural events rather than as the sum total

⁴¹ E. C. Krupp, “The Serpent Descending,” *Griffith Observer* 46 (September 1982), pp. 10–20.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴³ Mircea Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954); Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971); and David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); each repeatedly discusses architectural *axes mundi* and the categories of center and periphery in ways that are definitely relevant to the Castillo.

⁴⁴ Carlson’s expansive interpretation of the Castillo addresses the “cave-in-sacred-mountain character” and potential rebirth symbolism of the small grotto, womblike temple that sits atop the Castillo’s mountainous pyramidal base; furthermore, comparing the Castillo to Mount Meru, Mesopotamian ziggurats, and *ch’omson-gdae* of seventh-century Korea, Carlson considers that the great pyramid was not only a cosmologically designed “completion symbol,” but also, being “geomantically located” in relation to other natural and constructed features at the site, a potential participant in rites of augury and prediction. See Carlson, pp. 179–85. His discussion is more provocative than precise on these issues but, nonetheless, very interesting.

of their significance. In other words, this display of fidelity to cosmic dictates serves as that requisite conservative component—the *component of allurements*—that initiates or sets in motion the ritual-architectural events of Toltec Chichen. By demonstrating its integral involvement in the very rhythms of the universe, the cosmogramatically designed Castillo pyramid worked to allure pre-Columbian visitors to Chichen away from their status as “spoilsports” and into the ritual game. The fastidious cosmoarchitectural order of the pyramid worked, in other words, to open visitors to the kind of “suspension of disbelief” or receptive vulnerability that is essential if the experience of sacred architecture is to evolve into anything like productive, transformative hermeneutical reflection.

A third strategy of architectural allurements at Toltec Chichen, in a sense overlaid on this rigorous program of homologization, involves a similarly elaborate evocation of natural celestial phenomena, an effect that is most dramatically exemplified by the integration of the seasonal movements of the sun into the ritual-architectural agenda of the Castillo. In a cultural environment where the four cardinal directions are routinely respected in the layout of ceremonial centers, the Castillo, somewhat surprisingly, is skewed twenty-three degrees east of north, a positional anomaly that was for a long time explained as a roughly cardinal orientation that had been twisted slightly so that the prominent northern stairway of the pyramid would aim directly at the Sacred Cenote. Yet, toward the middle of this century (that is, once the Castillo had been reconstructed by modern archaeologists), it became apparent that about an hour before sunset on the day of the vernal (or autumnal) equinox the shadow cast by the nine main tiers of the pyramid substructure forms an undulating, serpent-like line along the balustrade of the Castillo’s north stairway. (Several archaeologists and guides are arguing over who was the first to recognize this phenomenon.)⁴⁵

In any event, as sunset approaches on this special day, the distinctive zigzag pattern of light and shadow becomes a sequence of seven well-formed isosceles triangles, stretched out corner to corner along the descent of the stairway, appearing like a diamond-backed snake

⁴⁵ For conflicting opinions as to the initial “discovery” of the Castillo serpent of light phenomenon, see Jose Diaz Bolio, *La Serpiente Emplumada: Eje de Culturas* (Mérida: Registro de Cultura Yucateca, 1955), and *La Serpiente de Luz de Chichén Itzá* (Mérida: El Mayab, 1982); Luis E. Arochi, *La Pirámide de Kukulcán: Su Simbolismo Solar*, 6th ed. (Mexico, D.F.: Panorama, 1987); and Krupp, p. 13. Jean-Jacques Rivard, “A Hierophany at Chichén Itzá,” in *Miscellaneous Series*, no. 26 (Greeley: University of Northern Colorado, Museum of Anthropology, 1971), deserves credit for calling attention to the Castillo equinox event and describing it as a “hierophany” with explicit reference to Eliade. Carlson, pp. 187–89, summarizes Rivard’s position, calling him, by the way, “probably the first” to discuss the Chichen serpent of light.

viewed from the side as it disembarks from the Castillo temple and heads down toward the ground, an effect redoubled by the giant carving of a serpent head at the base of the stair, which likewise catches the sunlight.⁴⁶ Over the span of some two hours each twentieth of March (or September), given that clouds do not intervene, this massive “serpent of sunlight” slithers, so it appears, down the Castillo, presumably off toward the Sacred Cenote. In the climactic moments, the entire north side of the pyramid is shadowed except for the chain of seven triangles and the stone serpent head, which are brightly illuminated by the sun, a stunning visual effect that would seem to correspond with Bishop Diego Landa’s sixteenth-century description of the traditional Maya rites of *Xul*, wherein, each spring, to quote Landa, “they said and considered it as certain that Kukulcan [i.e., the Feathered Serpent] came down from heaven . . . and received their services, their vigils and offerings. They called this festival *Chic Kaban*.”⁴⁷

This magnificent architecturally contrived “solar equinox hierophany” of light and shadow, the “Castillo equinox event,” if you will, is not wholly unprecedented in Mesoamerican architecture, and scholars have since postulated a number of similar, somewhat more modest astroarchitectural effects even within the Castillo itself.⁴⁸ As an astro-engineering coup, it is stunning, and the affective power on the assembled audience must have been tremendous—it is worth noting that, even in the 1980s and 1990s, each spring several thousand people crowd into the great plaza of Chichen to witness this solar-architectural phenomenon. Yet, in the context of a discussion of ritual-architectural instigative strategies, the descending serpent of light could likewise be assessed as a colossal manipulation, an intriguingly ingenious gimmick, the somewhat crass architectural prestidigitation expected of a well-heeled society desperately begging for a hearing.⁴⁹

This may be an inordinately harsh assessment of the equinox event, but, in any case, besides the appropriation of the Sacred Cenote, and

⁴⁶ Arochi, pp. 82–83, has pictures of several species of snakes that would, in profile, give this appearance of successive triangles.

⁴⁷ Diego de Landa, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan*, trans. and ed. Alfred M. Tozzer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941), p. 158. Tozzer’s annotated remarks on the widespread belief in the descent of the feathered serpent are particularly astute given that he was writing prior to the restoration of the Castillo and was, seemingly, totally unaware of the light and shadow effect on the pyramid; see p. 143, n. 686.

⁴⁸ See Arochi. Anthony Aveni, who holds perhaps the most authoritative opinion in these archaeoastronomical issues, is dubious about much of Arochi’s work relative to the Castillo equinox phenomenon and, in fact, skeptical that the light and shadow effect itself is more than a marvelous, though unintentional, coincidence (A. Aveni, personal communication).

⁴⁹ Coggins, “A New Sun at Chichen Itza” (n. 29 above), p. 14, considers the descending serpent of light to be an element of the New Fire Ceremony celebrated at Chichen Itza.

besides these intense programs of space-time homologization and astronomical alignment, Toltec Chichen bolsters its instigative program with a fourth sort of plea for serious consideration—the one that bears most directly on the problem of Tula-Chichen similitude—namely, by systematically borrowing architectural elements from a wide range of other esteemed Mesoamerican ceremonial centers and then synthesizing these collected elements into one eclectic built form. For all the considerations, retractions, and reversals in regard to the status of Chichen Itza, there is, even now, no question that Toltec Chichen bears far greater resemblance to Tula Grande than any other Mesoamerican site. All the banterings about the supposed nature and direction of the influence (particularly the well-known debate between George Kubler and Albert Ruz)⁵⁰ have, however, almost inadvertently, exposed a whole series of architectural features at Toltec Chichen that seem to have been borrowed from sites *other than* Tula, Hidalgo.⁵¹

Ever working to locate art forms with respect to their historical antecedents and subsequent imitations, Kubler particularly is helpful in this recognition of Toltec Chichen's ambitious architectural eclecticism.⁵² In the context of his iconoclastic arguments for an east-to-west, Chichen-to-Tula movement, he argues that many of the architectural elements at Chichen Itza—for example, (1) the famous serpent columns, (2) the reclining *chacmool* statues, (3) the caryatides or “atlantean” figures with their upstretched arms, (4) the jaguar iconography and ubiquitous warrior figures, and (5) the round Caracol structure—all distinctive motifs that, since Charnay's era, had been considered definitive diagnostics of the Quetzalcoatl-Kukulcan cult and the Mexicanization of Yucatan, may actually originate in the Maya area rather than at Tula.⁵³ Moreover, expanding the cosmopolitan *œuvre* of Toltec Chichen, Kubler argues that a number of other architectural features—most notably Chichen's *talud-tablero* pyramid bodies and the highly

⁵⁰ Davies, *Toltecs until the Fall of Tula* (n. 17 above), pp. 202–17, provides a helpful (if somewhat incomplete) summary of the Kubler-Ruz debate.

⁵¹ As regards the wider internationalism of Chichen, Tozzer, *Chichen Itza and Its Cenote of Sacrifice* (n. 11 above), p. 18, deserves credit for recognizing as long ago as the 1940s that “many of the resemblances found at Chichen Itza seem to be far more widely distributed in Mexico than those definitively associated with the single site of Tula.” These intimations have been confirmed since then.

⁵² For a discussion of the methodological approach that sustains his stupendous art historical career, see Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (n. 20 above). His lifelong agenda is remarkably consistent.

⁵³ Kubler, “Chichén Itzá y Tula” (n. 20 above). In the same article (pp. 76–77) Kubler says, to paraphrase his Spanish, “The ‘Maya-Toltec’ architecture of Chichen Itza appears now [1961] much more cosmopolitan and eclectic than the traditional comparison with Tula alone permits.” In other words, I am relying heavily on Kubler's work at this point without, however, accepting his historical hypothesis that Chichen Itza was the original source and Tula was the receptor, that is, “a frontier garrison” which modeled *after* rather than *for* Chichen Itza.

distinctive colonnaded halls—actually find their precedents in the pre-Columbian centers of the Oaxaca region rather than in Tula, Hidalgo.⁵⁴

Alberto Ruz, the most direct respondent to Kubler's heretic claims, holds closer to the party line and rejects the claim of a Maya provenance for most of the so-called Toltec features at Chichen Itza. However, in the context of the ensuing debate—a debate that, twenty-five years later, is not yet at rest—Ruz (like Kubler) furthers the case for a genuinely cosmopolitan Toltec Chichen by arguing that a number of the salient characteristics of its architecture issue from sources other than either Tula or the Classic Maya.⁵⁵ For instance, Ruz considers that the controversial column form, so prominent at both Tula Grande and Toltec Chichen, originated neither in Central Mexico nor the Maya area but rather in Oaxaca; he holds that the seventeen degrees east of north orientation of the buildings at Toltec Chichen, the *talud-tablero* articulation of its pyramids, and perhaps even the whole “man-bird-serpent” concept (i.e., the famous Quetzalcoatl-Kukulcan feathered serpent motif) were actually the direct legacy of Teotihuacan, not necessarily mediated through Tula; and Ruz hypothesizes that the notorious ball game complex and the decapitation rites depicted in the reliefs of Toltec Chichen's Great Ball Court (reliefs that Tozzer had claimed depicted hostilities between the invading Toltecs and indigenous Maya) actually arose in the medial coastal region of El Tajin, Vera Cruz and then disseminated in the directions of both Tula and Chichen.⁵⁶

Since these famous debates in the 1960s, the argumentation over who copied whom has continued unabated, and, if definitively settling little else, the controversial backtracking of Toltec Chichen's art and architectural forms—the bewildering complexity of which has only been brushed here⁵⁷—has, nevertheless, successfully challenged the singularity and simplicity of Tula's role as the antecedent to the great Yucatecan capital. The researches of Kubler, Ruz, and a host of art historians since then confirm that Toltec Chichen's eclectic refashioning owes a special indebtedness to Tula, but—and this is the point that was

⁵⁴ Ibid. In the context of this article and Kubler, “Serpent and Atlantean Columns” (n. 29 above), Kubler also notes a number of Chichen's somewhat less significant architectural borrowings from sites *other than* Tula.

⁵⁵ Most important, see Ruz, “Chichén Itzá y Tula” (n. 20 above). Also see Alberto Ruz Lhuillier, “Influencias Mexicanas sobre los Mayas,” in *Desarrollo Cultural de los Mayas*, ed. Evon Z. Vogt and Alberto Ruz Lhuillier (Mexico, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1964).

⁵⁶ Ruz, “Chichén Itzá y Tula.”

⁵⁷ The Kubler-Ruz debate is really just, so to speak, the tip of the iceberg; for more details (and more bibliography) on the indomitable controversy over the provenance of various architectural elements at Chichen Itza, see Lindsay Jones, “The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: A Reassessment of the Similitude between Tula, Hidalgo, and Chichen Itza, Yucatan” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1989), pp. 594–605.

so long neglected—they likewise demonstrate that the synthetic catalog of architectural elements is hardly confined to borrowings from that Central Mexican capital.⁵⁸ When the Yucatan Maya are reimagined as aggressive and well-endowed acquirers rather than victimized contemplatives and the story of Chichen Itza is recast in terms of allurements rather than conquest, La Gran Nivelación emerges as a genuinely cosmopolitan architecture, arguably the most cosmopolitan in Mesoamerican history,⁵⁹ and, moreover, Tula emerges not as the sole prototype for Toltec Chichen but, instead, as the most important of several prototypes or reservoirs of ritual-architectural imagery on which this remarkably ambitious project of borrowing and synthesis draws.

In sum, then, the stunning range of seemingly deliberate archaisms at Toltec Chichen was not simply a case of imitation for lack of originality, nor was it a conquistadorial imposition. Together with the appropriation of the Sacred Cenote and the intense programs of homologization and celestial alignment, the pastiche of distinguished architectural allusions at Toltec Chichen would seem to be part of *an aggressive program of ritual-architectural solicitation*, an elaborately crafted, highly self-conscious architectural presentation of worldly proficiency and otherworldly credibility intended to draw even the most reluctant patrons of Chichen into involvement in its ceremonial occasions. Bound to inspire mixed reviews, Toltec Chichen, at its worst, was an opportunistic, desperate attempt by a constituency of nouveau riche Maya warrior-merchants to expropriate the prestige of its predecessors and neighbors and to seduce its audience with crass eclecticism, vulgar ostentation, and what amounts to cosmoastronomical gimmickry. At its best, Toltec Chichen represents ancient Mesoamerica's strongest and boldest effort to synthesize all the best of pre-Columbian architecture into one integrated whole.

In either case, this multilayered fashioning of ritual-architectural allurements worked to ensure that pre-Columbian traders and pilgrims from the reaches of the Mesoamerican world, even on their first visit to the City of the Sacred Well, would be confronted with something familiar, relevant, and important to them. The architects of Chichen worked to choreograph, in Gadamerian terms, a “continuity of tradition” or an experience of “self-reconciliation,” thereby canceling disinterest as an option and transforming the invitation to participate in Toltec

⁵⁸ To reiterate, I am siding with the historical hypothesis of neither Kubler nor Ruz, but rather benefiting from the work of each of them in documenting architectural archaisms at Toltec Chichen which come from sites *other than* Tula, Hidalgo.

⁵⁹ Chichen's strongest competitor for the title of “the most cosmopolitan pre-Columbian city” would seem to be Xochicalco, Morelos; see, e.g., the discussion of cultural and architectural syntheses at Xochicalco in Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire* (n. 43 above), pp. 126–33.

Chichen's ritual-architectural proceedings, however distasteful, into an irrefusable offer. And if there is a serious flaw in this near-frenetic organizational self-consciousness, this onslaught against the trifling and random, it is that it protests too much; it bespeaks unconfidence and overcompensation. Toltec Chichen's agenda of self-legitimation is so extreme, its multiplication and layering of strategies of allurements so elaborate, that, in the end, it betrays insecurity rather than inspiring confidence.

CONCLUSION: DECEPTIONS IN FORM

Continuous form does not predicate continuous meaning, nor does continuity of form or meaning necessarily imply continuity of culture. [GEORGE KUBLER, 1970]⁶⁰

Having paced through (1) a set of general methodological recommendations about the hermeneutical experience and interpretation of sacred architecture, (2) a brief outline of the exciting, if awkwardly transitional, state of the problem of Tula–Chichen Itza similitude, and (3) an alternative hypothesis about the puzzling phenomenon of Toltec Chichen that features “architectural allurements” rather than military conquest, we come to a close with none of Charnay's cocksurety that the mystery of sister city relatedness has finally been laid to rest. Battling the old problem around in this new way is not, however, without considerable rewards—both historical and methodological.

For all their variability, the older solutions to the problem of Tula–Chichen relatedness, from Charnay to Eric Thompson, each presumed that the formal similarity between the two architectures was sure evidence that both sets of buildings had been built (or at least designed) by the same ethnic group, to be used in the same ways, to speak the same sorts of religiopolitical messages, and to function as architectonic contexts for the same sorts of ceremonial occasions. Reconstituting the study of Tula's and Chichen's monuments in terms of *ritual-architectural events*—that is, insisting that these monuments be assessed not simply in terms of their formal and technical attributes, nor their ages, nor even the cultural attainments of the builders, but rather as dynamic and super-abundant participants (i.e., “players” or “conversation partners,” if you

⁶⁰ George Kubler, “Period, Style and Meaning in Ancient American Art,” in *Ancient Mesoamerica: Selected Readings*, ed. John A. Graham (Palo Alto, Calif.: Peek, 1981), p. 22. Kubler is discussing Erwin Panofsky's “principle of disjunction”—a principle derived from the observation that medieval European art borrowed the *forms* of classical antiquity but assigned to them entirely different *meanings*—and the applicability of this principle to the study of ancient Mesoamerican art; Kubler is particularly warning against relying too heavily on “ethnographic analogy” to extrapolate from one Mesoamerican historical context to another.

will) in pre-Hispanic ceremonial occasions—reveals, however, that the exalted formal similitude between the great plazas of Tula Grande and Toltec Chichen is deceptive in the extreme. Tula Grande and Toltec Chichen do, most assuredly, look a lot alike. More hermeneutically sensitive scrutiny reveals, however, that not only were the respective historical situations that produced these twin plazas very different, but, moreover, the mirroring architectural forms played different sorts of roles (or occupied different positions) in ritual-architectural events that likewise worked to express very different meanings. In short, the famed similarity in architectural forms masks a much more important *dissimilarity* in ritual-architectural priorities.

Tula, on the one hand, was the first major Central Mexican center to rise out of chaos following the collapse of Teotihuacan. Enjoying neither the broad-based commercial network nor the singular prestige of its distinguished predecessor, Tula represented a gallant attempt to retrieve order.⁶¹ A city literally clawing for its existence, Tula Grande's religio-civic architectural events were expressly dedicated to synthesizing the city's internal ethnic diversity so as to stand united against the unflagging eternal competition and, more specifically, to promoting the Toltecs' daring new concept of authority, then largely unprecedented in Mesoamerica—namely, that hegemony rightfully belongs to those with military supremacy. Reflecting the city's embattled success, the architecture of Tula is flashy and grandiose but shoddily constructed—"these buildings were meant to impress but not to last"⁶²—as the ubiquitous iconography of fully armed warriors, dismembered skeletons, and voracious, skull-chomping jaguars expressed to the masses in no uncertain terms the bloody consequences of resisting Tula Toltec authority.

Toltec Chichen, on the other hand, according to today's most plausible (re)construction scenario, was presumably founded from a position of far greater material wealth and stability than Tula ever enjoyed. In its prime, the vibrant pilgrimage and trading center of Chichen Itza was a cosmopolitan hub that hosted continual comings and goings, but whose wealthy sovereigns encountered problems of *unrespectability* and *insecurity* not unlike those that would plague the Aztecs in their similarly meteoric rise to preeminence in Central Mexico several hundred years later. In a city already remarkable for its material affluence and commercial domination, the ritual-architectural events of Toltec

⁶¹ See Davies and Diehl (both n. 17 above).

⁶² Miguel Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (New York: Knopf, 1957), p. 273. Covarrubias's dispraise for Tula's architecture is echoed by a host of other scholars, e.g., Laurette Séjourné, *Burning Water: Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico* (Berkeley: Shambala, 1976), pp. 83–84; Weaver (n. 62 above), p. 212; and Coe (n. 13 above), pp. 141–42.

Chichen were dedicated most of all to self-legitimation and to unification of the very disparate collection of pilgrims and merchants who had a stake in the bustling urban center.

It is, therefore, in regard to the message or the content of their respective ritual-architectural events that Tula Grande and Toltec Chichen contrast most sharply. Despite conventional wisdoms that Toltec Chichen is an expression of the rampant “secularization” and militancy of the invading Toltecs (a notion based both on distorted images of pre-Columbian Native Americans and on fallacious historical [re]constructions), and notwithstanding the fierce Tula-like images of warriors, human sacrifice, and battle that are so abundant in Toltec Chichen, the ritual-architectural events at the Yucatan capital, in all likelihood, did *not* announce the martial intimidations, the ultimatum of acquiescence or death, that issued from Tula civic ceremony. Instead, quite to the contrary (in accordance with the alternative rendition of the Chichen story elaborated above), the religiocivic events at Toltec Chichen delivered a declaration of (or, at least, the hope of) unity, reconciliation, and integration among the remarkably diverse conglomeration of pre-Columbian peoples who had come under the sway of the City of the Sacred Cenote.⁶³ To that end, the Maya lords of Chichen invoked every conceivable *strategy of allurement*, including an aggressive campaign of architectural eclecticism that borrowed from a wide sampling of other pre-Columbian centers, but most especially from the Toltec capital of Tula.

If these historical eventualities are accepted as working hypotheses, the similitude between Tula’s and Chichen’s architectural forms—a similitude that has so successfully camouflaged the more essential divergences between the religioarchitectural priorities of these two sites—can be explained in terms of a kind of “disjunction” or “reduction” wherein similar formal elements occupy different positions, or play different roles, in the ritual-architectural events of each Tula Grande and Toltec Chichen.⁶⁴ In brief, then, the hallmark sister city parallels—serpent columns, atlantean statues, iconography of jaguars and fearsome warriors, and so on—belong, in Tula Grande, to the second

⁶³ With respect to hypotheses about Chichen’s explicit agenda of unification and synthesis, see, e.g., Miller, “Captains of the Itzá” (n. 18 above); Coggins, “New Fire at Chichen Itza” (n. 29 above); and Kubler, “Serpent and Atlantean Columns” (n. 29 above). Each makes the case in a quite different way.

⁶⁴ While the famous similitude between the architectures of Tula and Chichen is *not* an instance of the “law of disjunction” in precisely Panofsky’s and Kubler’s sense of the term, their cautioning postulate that “continuous form does not predicate continuous meaning” (see above, n. 60) is very relevant in exposing how a remarkable commonality at the level of *artistic form* could, for generations, mask an even more significant contrariety between the respective *artistic meanings and intentions* (and ritual programs) of the two cities.

or “back” half of those ritual-architectural events (i.e., to the component of innovation or new, transformative information). At Tula, these architectural forms are the bearers of a clear and substantive message that alerts the ritual participants to their practical responsibilities in relation to Tula Toltec leadership and hegemony; they articulate, in unmistakably blunt terms, the unenviable choice of acquiescence to Toltec authority or death.

By contrast, the nearly identical architectural forms, incorporated afresh at Toltec Chichen, have, in a sense, “dropped” or been reduced from components of variation and content to the status of constituent elements in a remarkably elaborate conservative, leading, or instigative component. In the context of Toltec Chichen, the serpent columns, the iconography of warriors, jaguars, and so forth are transformed from radical components of “otherness” and new information to that of conservative components of allurements; these architectural elements constitute the foreshadowing rather than the climax of Chichen’s ceremonial agenda. In short, they move from the “back” half of the two-fold pattern of ritual-architectural events to the “front” half. Largely stripped of their intimidating content—a threatening message that Toltec Chichen needn’t speak—the old Tula forms join in amazing admixture of ritual-architectural instigative strategies that work to begin rather than to complete the ceremonial events of Toltec Chichen.

It may be somewhat glib to surmise that, where the forbidding imagery of jaguars and warriors was part of a ritual-architectural program of military intimidation at Tula, by contrast, at Chichen, the virtually identical motifs were part of a plea for unity and synthesis (and the experience of Mesoamericanists over the past century teaches us not to attach ourselves too steadfastly to our pre-Hispanic [re]construction stories). But, methodologically speaking, there is no question that the formal resemblance between the two cities has been highly deceptive. By focusing on the formal attributes of buildings rather than *the human experience of buildings*, on architectural objects rather than *architectural events*, scholars have been seduced into a kind of facile comparison that neglects the uniqueness of each of these places—a methodological failing that is, by the way, hardly unique to the problem of Tula-Chichen similitude.

In any event, even more difficult to assess than the original intentions behind the pre-Columbian ritual-architectural events at Toltec Chichen Itza is the extent to which those events succeeded, the extent to which the audience was drawn into the proceedings and convinced by the synthesizing agenda of Toltec Chichen. That the ruins of Chichen Itza continue, even now, to draw hundreds of visitors each day as Mexico’s most thriving tourist-archaeological site testifies, in

some eccentric way, to the success of Toltec Chichen's original agenda of architectural allurements. And yet, to end this essay in the same methodological spirit in which it began, and to continue to hold in the foreground the multivocality and surplus of meanings that reside in every religious building (and particularly in these age-old pre-Columbian monuments), one feels confident in imagining that, for all Toltec Chichen's meticulously crafted strategies of allurements and control, in even the most assiduously choreographed of its pre-Hispanic ceremonial occasions, there would have been little Maya boys (or girls) off to the side, fascinated by some diminutive stone bird, or flower, or deity image. And, in these spontaneous, untutored conversations between children (or adults for that matter) and the peripheral monuments of Chichen's great plaza, we would have been reminded that the connection between architectural forms and their meanings is never fixed and secure, that from the moment of its construction, Toltec Chichen—like sacred architecture everywhere and always—had broken free from the careful intentions of its builders and come to mean things and to announce significances that had never even occurred to its architects.

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