Tula was the post-Classic capital of the Toltecs. According to Michael D. Coe, the Toltecs, along with the Teotihuacanos and the Aztecs, were the only unifying forces in pre-conquest Mexico.

The origins of the Toltecs are hidden in legend, but it seems likely that the builders of Tula were a mixture of tribal groups who came from outside of central Mexico, either from the north or west. It seems clear that they had some form of irrigation to support agriculture in a rather arid area.

The semi-legendary leader of the Toltecs, Mixcoatl, had conquered central Mexico, including what was left of Teotihuacan, by about 940 A.D. and founded a capital at Culhuacan. His son was Ce Acatl Tohilizin, who on becoming high priest of the Feathered Serpent, as well as king, took the name of the god, Quetzalcoatl. In 980, Quetzalcoatl moved the Toltec capital to Tula, the meaning of which is "the place of the Reeds." There he ruled for 19 years. During his reign the very populous center, Tula, was planned and built, and it is likely that irrigation of the land was extended. Trade with other areas was extensive, as evidenced by exotic artifacts.

Quetzalcoatl was opposed, probably from his arrival, by a religious faction of the original inhabitants of Tula, worshippers of the fierce god Tezcatlipoca, "Smoking Mirror," who demanded human sacrifice rather than the sacrifice of snakes and butterflies wanted by Quetzalcoatl.

In a power struggle marked by uprisings, the Tezcatlipoca faction won, and the priest-king Quetzalcoatl and his followers were forced to leave Tula in 987 A.D. After a short stay at Cholula, they left by sea for Yucatan. In legend, before his departure, Quetzalcoatl, a tall, bearded man, promised his followers that he would return. With the arrival of Cortez some 500 years later, Quetzalcoatl's promise was recalled; Cortez was certainly aided by the fact that by chance he arrived from the east in the year 1 Acatl, the year Quetzalcoatl promised to return.

When the Toltecs, led by Quetzalcoatl, arrived at the Yucatan Peninsula, they must have first settled in some location where they learned the Maya language. They later began a migration which led to the conquest of the Mayan center of
Chichen Itza. There the Toltecs built a new center whose architectural elements were a blend of the Toltec style of Tula and the native Mayan style. Because there are so many elements at Chichen Itza which are identical to those at Tula, albeit more refined (the Chacmool, the serpent columns, the Atlantean figures, the sculptured and painted banquettes in colonnaded structures), it seems clear that architects from Tula were among the group who invaded the Mayan area. The god of the new Maya-Toltec site is of course Quetzalcoatl, whose name is translated into the Maya Kulkuklcan, or "Feathered Serpent."

At the earlier capital, Tula, building went on for many decades, ruled by a succession of kings and priests. The reign of the last ruler, Huemac, was marked by droughts and rebellions, perhaps by conquered groups, perhaps by the people who were forced to support an ever-growing group of priests and warriors. It is likely that the food resources of Tula were chronically over-extended, a common occurrence throughout Mesoamerica. In any case, Huemac was forced to flee from Tula in 1168. The final fall, and devastation by burning of Tula came in 1224, as a result of the invasion of the weakened center by northern barbarians.

At its high point, Toltec influence, artistic, religious and cultural and probably military, extended over a vast area of Mesoamerica. After their disappearance as a group, the Toltecs lingered on in legend as great artisans, builders and warriors, from whom a later barbarian group, the Aztecs, claimed descent.
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1. Map of Mesoamerica.


3. Pyramid C, largely unexcavated, from the Great Plaza facing east. To the right of the pyramid is an unexcavated building, and to the left is a small shrine probably built by the Aztecs after the Toltecs abandoned Tula.

4. Construction detail of Pyramid C, showing the Toltec proportions of tablud and tablero, which differ radically from those at Teotihuacan, for example. Note the steepness of the tablud. The projecting tenons held the facing of stone and stucco.

5. Drainage in rear of Pyramid C.

6. The Great Plaza. On the left is the Pyramid of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, or Quetzalcoatl, which closes the north end of the plaza.

7. In front of the pyramid is the Great Vestibule, or Palacio Quemado, a columned structure which may have housed a market or served as an administrative center, or both.

8. The Pyramid of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli. This was a temple dedicated to the god and hero figure Quetzalcoatl, in his guise of the god of the dawn, or Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli.

9. Atlantean figures on top of Pyramid. Carved from basalt, these figures are nearly 15 feet tall. They are constructed in four sections in a mortice-and-tenon system. These figures were buried under the pyramid at some time before the arrival of the Aztecs. They represent warriors (or possibly Quetzalcoatl himself), and carry a bundle of darts and an atlatl (spear thrower). Together with carved columns in back of them, these sculptured figures served to support the roof of the temple. Similar figures appear later in Toltec Chichen Itza in the Yucatan but the later sculptures lack the grandeur and force of these.

10. Front view of Atlantean figure.

11. Side view showing darts or spears.
12. Detail of face. The hollows for the eyes and mouth may have been filled with obsidian or bone insets.

13. Detail of head. The headpiece consists of a band of stars holding feathers.

14. Back of Atlantean figure. This may be a shield which represents either the sun or a trophy head. Note the paint remaining in the eyes. All of the carved surfaces at Tula were painted.

15. Detail of Atlantean figure. Note the attention paid to the knots and foot gear. Also note the remaining paint. On the sandals are serpents.

16. Monumental plumed serpent columns, similar to those in the Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza, supported the lintel at the entrance to the temple. This may be part of the plumage of one of the columns.

17. Behind the Atlantean figures, also serving as supports for a now non-existent roof, are carved square columns.

18. Detail of column, all of which are similar or identical. Above the standing warrior's head is a cipactli symbol, possibly representing a crocodile.

19. Detail of column. Note the warrior's feathered serpent headgear, surmounted by another serpent. There appears to be more attempt at realism in these columns than in the Atlantean figures.

20. A third type of column on the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl is a round one which uses stylized plant forms and water symbols, the cross section of shells. Note the remaining paint.

21. All of the columns, as well as the Atlantean figures, were constructed with mortice and tenon.

22. This small figure was a support for an altar in the Temple of Quetzalcoatl. One earlier form of this was used about 1000 years earlier on the Gulf Coast in an altar from Potrero Nuevo. Museum at Tula.

23. Rear view of altar support. The figure probably wears the quilted "armor" which Cortez encountered in Mexico.
24. When the Temple of Quetzalcoatl was built, it was completely faced with carved and stuccoed stone. This area, which was below ground until recently, is the only preserved section. The tenons on the side of the Temple served to support the facing.

25. A procession of coyotes and jaguars banded the base of the temple, as well as eagles and a deity.

26. Some of the animals have collars. The eagles are devouring hearts, from which three drops of blood flow. The animals probably represent warrior groups.

27. A deity, probably Tlaloc. Note bifurcated tongue and fangs.

28. The Coatepantli, or Wall of the Serpents, in the foreground, and Ball Court No. 1 in the background. The view is to the north from the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl. The wall is approximately 130 feet long and 8 1/2 feet high.

29. Detail of Coatepantli, which depicts a band of serpents devouring a skeletal form. This may be symbolic of the sun devouring the night. Above the wall is a band of water symbols. The mosaic step-fret design is common in Mixtec Mitla and other southern sites.

30. Detail. Traces of paint remain. It is likely that colors had specific meaning and were associated with the cardinal directions and with gods.

31. Hall of the Columns. These three sections of colonnaded porticos may have housed a palace. The corrugated roofs protect the remaining painted stucco.

32. Hall of the Columns. Near the Temple of Quetzalcoatl is a Chac Mool, messenger to the gods.

33. View of Hall of the Columns. The columns supported a roof, probably thatched. The very large enclosure may have served both as a market and as an administrative center. The entire floor was plastered. The pit next to the Chac Mool was a fire pit.

34. The Chac Mool. These curious figures are common in Toltec sites. They are portrayed supine with a stone knife bound to the left arm, square earplugs (similar to those of the Atlantean figures and uncommon elsewhere), and always holding a container with a depression, almost certainly for offerings.
35. Detail. The lumps on the side of the nose may be small lumps of jade inserted under the skin.

36. Détail of column construction. A wooden post was covered with rubble and faced with river stones. It was then stuccoed and painted.

37. Surrounding the Hall of the Columns is a stone banquette, on the base of which is carved a procession of carved, painted figures, probably representing priests, merchants, ball players and so on. Note the painted blue, yellow, red and white serpent band on the top.

38. Détail of banquette. The figure on the left may be a ball player, while the figure on the right wears the fringed loincloth and feathered headdress of the Atlantes. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia y Historia, Mexico, D.F.

39. View of Ball Court No. 2. It is about 350 feet long, the largest in the Mexican plateau. Note the altar or adoratorio on the left, and the Tzompantli, or skull rack, the long, low platform in front of the ball court. Here, presumably, skulls of sacrificed ball players were displayed. The ball court was oriented in a north-south direction.

40. Ball Court No. 2. A columned structure, probably a small temple, forms the outer wall.

41. Ball Court No. 2. The projecting tenons on the sides held a carved facing. Although no rings were found on the walls, they probably existed.

42. Stone found in center of Ball Court No. 2. This was connected with the scoring or the ritual of the game, or possibly with human sacrifice following the game.

43. Ball Court No. 1. Smaller than Ball Court No. 2, this was oriented in a east-west direction.

44. Ball Court No. 1. Both excavated ball courts at Tula are I-shaped and have well-defined end zones. There are at least four more ball courts at Tula, still unexcavated. Ball Courts 1 and 2 were built with excellent drainage, which is still functional.

45. Bas relief from the walls of Ball Court No. 1, a ball player in his playing gear. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia y Historia, Mexico, D.F.
46. Standard bearer in form of jaguar from ball court at Tula. Note the collar and heart. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia y Historia, Mexico, D.F.

47. Standard bearer in form of personage. Note the similarities to the Chac Mool face and earplugs. Museum at Tula.


49. Bas relief from Tula, showing a heart with three drops of blood, pierced by spears. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia y Historia, Mexico, D.F.

50. Smoking pipes from Tula. Note rattlesnakes on stem of larger one. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia y Historia, Mexico, D.F.

51. Clay figurine, possibly mold-made, of Tlaloc priest from Tula. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia y Historia, Mexico, D.F.

52. Painted stone offering box from Tula. Note marine shells. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia y Historia, Mexico, D.F.

53. Plumbate vase from Tula, probably imported from Guatemala. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia y Historia, Mexico, D.F.

54. Plumbate effigy vessel. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia y Historia, Mexico, D.F.

55. Urn from Tula, probably a representation of Tlaloc. Note tears, a rain symbol, and handles similar to the square ear ornaments of the Chac Mool. Museum at Tula.

56. Vessel found at Tula, probably made at Cholula. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia y Historia, Mexico, D.F.

57. Brazier with skulls. Museum at Tula.


59. Human face wearing a coyote headdress, made from pottery, obsidian and mother of pearl. From Tula. 14 cm. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia y Historia, Mexico, D.F.

60. Human face, front view.