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Mediating Material Culture: The Tula–Chichen Itza Connection

Crystal Forrest

Archaeology is often misrepresented as an exact science. Indeed, the presentation of archaeological discoveries as fact is hard to avoid in a society that strives for concrete answers to questions of the human past. The recognition that archaeology is part of the larger fields of inquiry of anthropology and social science is therefore an important one. Through the scientific process of uncovering the material culture of past populations, the equally important process of interpretation is also involved. It is the excavator who gives meaning to the artifacts he or she unearths. Reconstructions of the past based on material recovered from the archaeological record are thus not only products of the social conditions giving rise to the original creation of these artifacts, but also of the modern social conditions in which they are recovered. What is particularly problematic about archaeological inquiry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is that these works are filled with positivist, colonialist assumptions that are neither recognized nor accounted for by the archaeologist originally interpreting the material. Granted, today archaeological interpretations are also the products of the intellectual milieu in which the individual archaeologist operates; however, attempts are increasingly made to account for and to acknowledge the biases of the researcher. Indeed, the academic critique of these interpretations is enough to push a publishing archaeologist to examine his or her own cultural and intellectual standpoint.

In this article, it is the recognition of the active role archaeologists play in systematically amassing information about the past, and in assigning that information a meaning and historical context, that frames the discussion of the similarities between the Postclassic Mesoamerican sites of Chichen Itza and Tula. From Desire Charnay’s original realization in the 1880s that these two sites, located 800 miles apart, displayed similar architectural styles and iconography (Diehl 1983), to recent cross-disciplinary studies of these parallels, opinions and interpretations of the Tula–Chichen Itza connection have been heavily influenced by social conditions.

In order to understand the formation of interpretations concerning Tula and Chichen Itza, a basic understanding of these sites is warranted. Tula, located in the Central Highlands region of Mexico, is believed to have been established around C.E. 960 by the Toltec (Adams 1996:274). Its history is complicated by later elaborate Aztec accounts that glorify both the city and its inhabitants (Jones 1993a). Nevertheless, it is estimated that the city grew to between 32 to 37 thousand people from the time of its formation as capital to C.E. 1200 (Adams 1996:276). The site includes monumental architecture such as elaborate temples, palaces, ball courts and plazas (Adams 1996). Evidence of a wall on the north and west sides, as well as violent iconography, have been used to legitimate the claim that Tula was a formidable military capital (Diehl 1983; Smith and Montiel 2001). At the end of the twelfth century C.E., Tula was abandoned and the city was destroyed; this was likely the result of both external and internal conflict as well as of population pressure (Adams 1996).

Chichen Itza, the larger of the two sites, is located in north central Yucatan, Mexico, and was probably a site of religious pilgrimage.
(Adams 1996:290). The Sacred Cenote, a large, cylindrical, natural sinkhole was the main attraction at Chichen Itza because of its religious significance (and possibly for its source of water). Dredging the Sacred Cenote has produced large quantities of highly prized objects and human bones, mainly dating from the Late Classic period. This would suggest that Chichen Itza was well established before contact with the Toltec (Adams 1996). Like Tula, Chichen Itza contains remnants of monumental architecture, though the quality of the craftsmanship and the scale of the projects far surpasses architecture at Tula (Adams 1996). What makes the architectural remains at Chichen Itza interesting is the division between “Old Chichen,” in the southern portion of the site, and “New/Toltec Chichen” (dating from around C.E. 987 to 1187) in the northern portion of the site (Jones 1993a:227). This stylistic division is unusual, particularly since New Chichen bears a striking resemblance in structure and organization to Tula (Diehl 1983). It is instructive here to note that New Chichen is also more closely associated with the Sacred Cenote, which interests those investigating Toltec presence at the site (Jones 1993a).

Interest in Toltec influence and possible occupation at Chichen Itza has proven to be enduring. The existence of similarities at geographically disparate sites has prompted much discussion. Though Chichen Itza’s main plaza around the Temple of Kulkulcan (the Castillo) in the New Chichen portion is grander and more eclectic, the main plazas at both sites share a number of common features (Adams 1996). They are both oriented 17 degrees east-of-north, they employ similar uses of architectural space, and they share the “same basic articulation of pyramid-lofted temples above a wide-open rectangular amphitheatric courtyard” (Jones 1993a:227). Furthermore, there are matching ball courts, each with their own “skull racks” and “dance platforms” (Adams 1996:291). Even Tula’s unusually open and spacious Burnt Palace has an equivalent at Chichen Itza. The Group of a Thousand Columns at Chichen Itza is very similar, though somewhat more elaborate (Adams 1996). Tula’s Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl (Kulkulcan) is also mirrored at Chichen Itza in the form of the Temple of the Warriors (Adams 1996).

Examples of architectonic sculpture at Chichen Itza and Tula also parallel one another. Quetzalcoatl (the Plumed Serpent), a common Toltec symbol, adorns columns and balustrades at both sites (Jones 1993a). Reclining chacmuls figures holding bowls over their stomachs, and “Atlantean” figures supporting tables or lintels, are found in large numbers at Chichen Itza and at Tula, but are relatively rare throughout the rest of Mesoamerica (Adams 1996:292). Further, militaristic architectural decoration is evident at both sites. Jaguar, processional warrior, ocelot, and eagle (consuming human hearts) iconography is common to both Tula and Chichen Itza (Adams 1996:292).

Given this abundance of similarities, it is hardly surprising that such a wealth of scholarship has been dedicated to theorizing about the connection between Chichen Itza and Tula. Although there are many theories, for the purposes of this article I will focus on three explanations. The first two, those of Alfred M. Tozzer and J. Eric S. Thompson, situate the Toltec influence at Chichen Itza within a context of invasion and conquest. The third, and most recent theory, that of Lindsay Jones, argues that perhaps Toltec influence was apparent at Chichen Itza without the accompanying presence of the Toltec themselves. Each of these theories arises out of particular bodies of knowledge and are based on particular sets of assumptions.

Alfred M. Tozzer’s explanation of the Toltec “conquest” of Chichen Itza is based both on archaeological evidence and on passages from the Chilam Balam of Chumayel (Tozzer 1957). The latter is an historical, colonial-era document apparently written in Maya languages, but using the Latin alphabet. It describes such topics as medicine, history and astrology (Adams 1996:4). Tozzer based his reconstruction of the relationship between Tula and Chichen Itza on one particular passage that reads: “three times it was, they say, that foreigners arrived” (Roys 1933:84). In combination with this three-fold invasion concept, Tozzer (1957) portrayed the Maya and Toltec as opposites. Where the Maya were peaceful and academic, the Toltec were brutal and barbaric; this helps to justify Tozzer’s contention that the Toltec did indeed invade Chichen Itza. He even went so far as to classify Chichen Itza’s material culture as either “pure Maya” or “Toltec-Maya” (Tozzer 1957:25).

Tozzer’s (1957) actual reconstruction of events postulates a see-saw relationship between the Toltec invaders and the Maya occupying Chichen Itza. This power struggle had five stages. In the first stage, beginning around C.E. 948, the Toltec invaders, led by Kulkulcan I, were exiled from Tula and went east to establish a new
they established the “hem1-sacrificing cults capital. This account of Kulkulcan’s exile is taken almost directly from Aztec legend (Carrasco 1982:103). Once at Chichen Itza, they established the “heart-sacrificing cults associated with the ball game and the feathered serpent” (Jones 1998:280), which the mild Maya abhorred. During the second period, the Maya regained control of the city for a brief amount of time, only to succumb to another wave of invaders. This time, it was the Mexicanized Itza from the Gulf Coast who took over (around C.E. 1145), led by Kulkulcan II (Tozzer 1957:35-45). The Maya recovered again in the fourth period, but were struck down again by the final surge of invaders, mercenaries from Tabasco. From this point on, the city declined in importance as people migrated south (Tozzer 1957). This chronology thus attempts to reconstruct the events of the last quarter of the tenth century C.E. until the abandonment of Chichen Itza in the twelfth century C.E.

There are a number of problems with this reconstruction and its accompanying assumptions. The first is that Tozzer relied heavily on the colonial documentation of the Chilam Balam of Chumayel. In this case, the Chilam Balam of Chumayel was created hundreds of years after the events it describes, and it reflects the interests and biases of its colonial authors. Tozzer also incorporated Aztec mythology that glorifies and exaggerates the power and influence of the Toltec, from whom they claimed descent (Adams 1996). Furthermore, Tozzer’s portrayal of the Maya at Chichen Itza as gentle and noble, may be a projection of stereotypes about rural people onto a population that was only slightly less concentrated in urban areas than Tula (Jones 1998). In addition, this portrayal may also reflect a retention of 17th to 19th century European ideas about the “civilized” nature of past cultures like the Maya in the New World and the Greeks in the Old World. Tozzer is also widely criticized for his reliance on the prevalence of Toltec and Maya “ethnic figurines” and gold disks from the Sacred Cenote depicting “ethnic” conflict as markers of the Toltec takeover or the resurgence of the Maya at Chichen Itza (Tozzer 1957:32). These figurines do indicate different influences, but they do not definitively indicate a takeover (Thompson 1959). More importantly, basing interpretations of conquest on the race or ethnicity of these figurines seems dubious considering the inherent ambiguity involved in such subjective measures.

J. Eric S. Thompson’s reconstruction of the Tula-Chichen Itza relationship differs in many ways from Tozzer’s interpretation. While Tozzer argued that the Itza, the “Mayanized Mexicans” from the Gulf Coast, were part of the secondary invasion of Chichen Itza, Thompson brought the Itza to the forefront of his explanation and credited them with contributing to a cultural fluorescence at Chichen Itza (Thompson 1970). This fluorescence was presumably brought on by the intermixing of the Itza with the Maya, who were already occupying Chichen Itza. Thompson characterized the Itza as opportunistic merchants who, in the tenth century, expanded their considerable influence to the Yucatan, conquering Chichen Itza around C.E. 918. Chichen Itza thus became a regional capital of the “Putun Itza Maya Empire” (Thompson 1970:3-15). At this time, Kulkucan I and his followers entered the picture, heading east from Tula (as in Tozzer’s reconstruction). Thompson argued that where the Kulkucan Toltec group and the Putun Itza first met was in Tabasco, and the Toltec were subsequently escorted to Chichen Itza. This productive meeting of Toltec prestige and Itza economic influence sparked another cultural fluorescence, in which the Toltec recreated the splendour of Tula at Chichen Itza (Thompson 1970:32-47).

Thompson’s theory is also somewhat problematic. On the one hand, the positioning of the Putun Itza as a central part of the explanation of the Tula-Chichen Itza connection contributes to the abandonment of the concept of the polarity between the Maya at Chichen Itza and the Toltec invaders. Whether or not this was intentional is dubious because, on the other hand, Thompson’s portrayal of the Putun Itza as able to conquer the Maya of Chichen Itza locates their power in their “Mexicanization” (Jones 1998:284). Essentially, this Mexicanization results in “moral decay,” at least from a Western standpoint, in that the introduction of the Itza at Chichen Itza incorporates “lewd, erotic” and violent sacrificial practices (Thompson 1970:20-21). Furthermore, Thompson’s characterization of the Putun Itza as a consolidated superpower is fallacious since the archaeological evidence indicates that they were probably “several related yet competitive Gulf Coast groups rather than a single unified people” (Miller 1977:22). Thompson’s theory is therefore perhaps too neat and organized.

Lindsay Jones’ interpretation of the relationship between Tula and Chichen-Itza is
radically different than those of Tozzer and Thompson. Jones argued that the occupants of Chichen Itza, whether Putun Itza or Yucatecan Maya, were the instigators of the architectural reproduction of Toltec motifs and themes at Chichen Itza (Jones 1993b). In his interpretation, ideas and architectural styles moved west to east, but actual people did not, and, more importantly, the meaning of these ideas and architectural styles changed in this movement. Whereas Tula responded to the unstable social and political conditions of Central Mexico in the Postclassic period with a "ritual-architectural program designed to terrorize and intimidate" (Jones 1993b:328), Chichen Itza used the same architecture in a different manner and for different purposes. The Putun Itza at Chichen Itza had built up a formidable centre of political and military clout, but perhaps they lacked respectability to go along with it. Therefore, the blatant reproduction of the grandeur of Tula may have been a move toward legitimizing their control and attracting people to the already important Sacred Cenote. In fact, the proximity of the main plaza to the Sacred Cenote, and the use of a grand processional sacbe to connect the two, perhaps hints at this attempt (Jones 1993b). Jones took this a step further, though, by arguing that reconsiderations of those architectural elements considered to be diagnostic only of Tula perhaps have Maya origins. As George Kubler notes, "Maya-Toltec" architecture at Chichen Itza appears now much more cosmopolitan and eclectic than the traditional comparison with Tula alone permits" (1961:76-77). In this case, Tula is no longer the sole inspiration for the design and layout of Chichen Itza, but rather a contributor to an enterprising attempt at stylistic synthesis.

Jones' argument also has some problems. Although physical evidence is not lacking for his explanation of events at Chichen Itza, it is definitely open to interpretation. This is evident in the prevalence of theories based on invasion. Also, Jones seems unable or unwilling to deal with the nature of the Putun Itza "invasion" of Chichen Itza. Was there a full-scale invasion? Was there subsequent integration of the Putun Itza with the Yucatecan Maya? How different were they to begin with, and were the Putun Itza as economically successful as Thompson imagined them to be? It seems that Jones' theory either relies heavily on certain aspects of the other two theories, or chooses to build only on one portion of the story of Chichen Itza.

All three theories concerning the Tula-Chichen Itza connection are clearly products of the social conditions in which they were devised. In evaluating Tozzer and Thompson's interpretations, remnants of a colonialist ideology can be detected. The tendency to characterize the Maya as "noble savages" makes it easier to justify past colonial and contemporary developmental endeavours in Mesoamerica that seek to complete the process of "civilization" (Sullivan 1989:131-137). It also serves to assure any guilt arising from the subordination of indigenous peoples, and serves to further marginalize them as "non-viable" in a modern context (Jones 1998:287). Both theories offer a commentary on the devaluation of "primitive" religion; Mexican influence on the "civilized" Maya religion results in a corruption of values (Jones 1998). Tozzer's sympathy for the Maya can potentially be accounted for by what Paul Sullivan calls the "long conversation" between the Yucatecan Maya and foreigners in post-war/revolution Mexico (1989:xv). The plight of the Maya in this context may have had some bearing on Tozzer's depiction of the Maya as victims of violence. Thompson's theory has the potential to be abused in that his depiction of the Putun Itza as a super-hybrid presents a situation in which multiculturalism and eclecticism leads to greater power and manipulative abilities (Jones 1998). Of course, these results were likely not the outcomes Tozzer and Thompson intended in crafting their theories; nevertheless, their interpretations do seem to represent an uncritical projection of modern views and attitudes onto the past.

Jones' theory, too, can be identified as the product of the social context in which it was devised. First of all, Jones has had the benefit of time. Archaeology is always changing, and Jones is able to incorporate a more secure set of data about Tula and Chichen Itza that was not available to Tozzer and Thompson. Furthermore, whereas the social conditions and intellectual assumptions underlying Tozzer and Thompson's theories detracted from their credibility, Jones' theory gains credibility through its innovative and cross-disciplinary interpretation. Jones frames his theory within the context of a hermeneutic investigation of the Tula-Chichen Itza connection. This technique, originally devised by historians of religion, involves the "study of the methodological principles of interpretation" (Diehl 1997:158). In particular, it attempts to decipher the concealed meanings of written texts.
Although the applicability of textual criticism as an anthropological methodology has been hotly debated, Jones' choice to apply it to the Tula-Chichen Itza problem does seem to widen the scope of inquiry in this case. Jones focused on the way that people experience monumental architecture, and, in this way, he recognized that individual experience may vary. From this standpoint, it becomes evident that the meanings assigned to superficially similar buildings in different places, in this case at Tula and Chichen Itza, are mutable in the hands of those who use them. Symbols can mean very different things in different contexts. It is this consideration of individual agency and the importance of context that sets Jones' theory apart from Tozzer or Thompson's theories.

The problem, and the challenge, of archaeology is that we may never know who is "right." Perhaps none of these theories will prove to be lasting, or perhaps each will contribute to the formulation of new theories based on subsequently recovered evidence. For now, the importance of Jones' contribution to the Tula-Chichen Itza situation lies in the important questions it raises concerning the way in which we evaluate the importance and stylistic similarity of monumental architecture. The process of gathering knowledge about the past is never exact; it is always mediated by the interests of the researcher and of the interests of the society that appropriates this knowledge. Thus, different approaches will produce very different results. In the cases of Tula and Chichen Itza, the analysis of differences in interpretation simultaneously contributes to our understanding of possible connections between the two and to the vitality of the archaeological endeavour in general.

References Cited


