

LEVELED BOOK • U

# Teotihuacán



Written by Angelo Díaz

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## Focus Question

Why has Teotihuacán captured the interest of so many people?

## Words to Know

archaeologists  
artifacts  
cultures  
drought  
erode  
excavating

immigrants  
influence  
murals  
pyramid  
reservoir  
shrine

Front cover: Pyramid of the Moon

Title page: An ancient mural in Teotihuacán

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# Teotihuacán



## Table of Contents

The Great and Mysterious Teotihuacán .....	4
Built to Impress .....	5
Digging Up the Past .....	7
Immigrants Make the City Grow .....	9
Archaeologists Dig Deeper .....	11
Collapse .....	12
Extreme Climbs and Long Walks .....	13
Discoveries Keep Coming .....	15
Glossary .....	16



The largest structures at Teotihuacán are the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon.

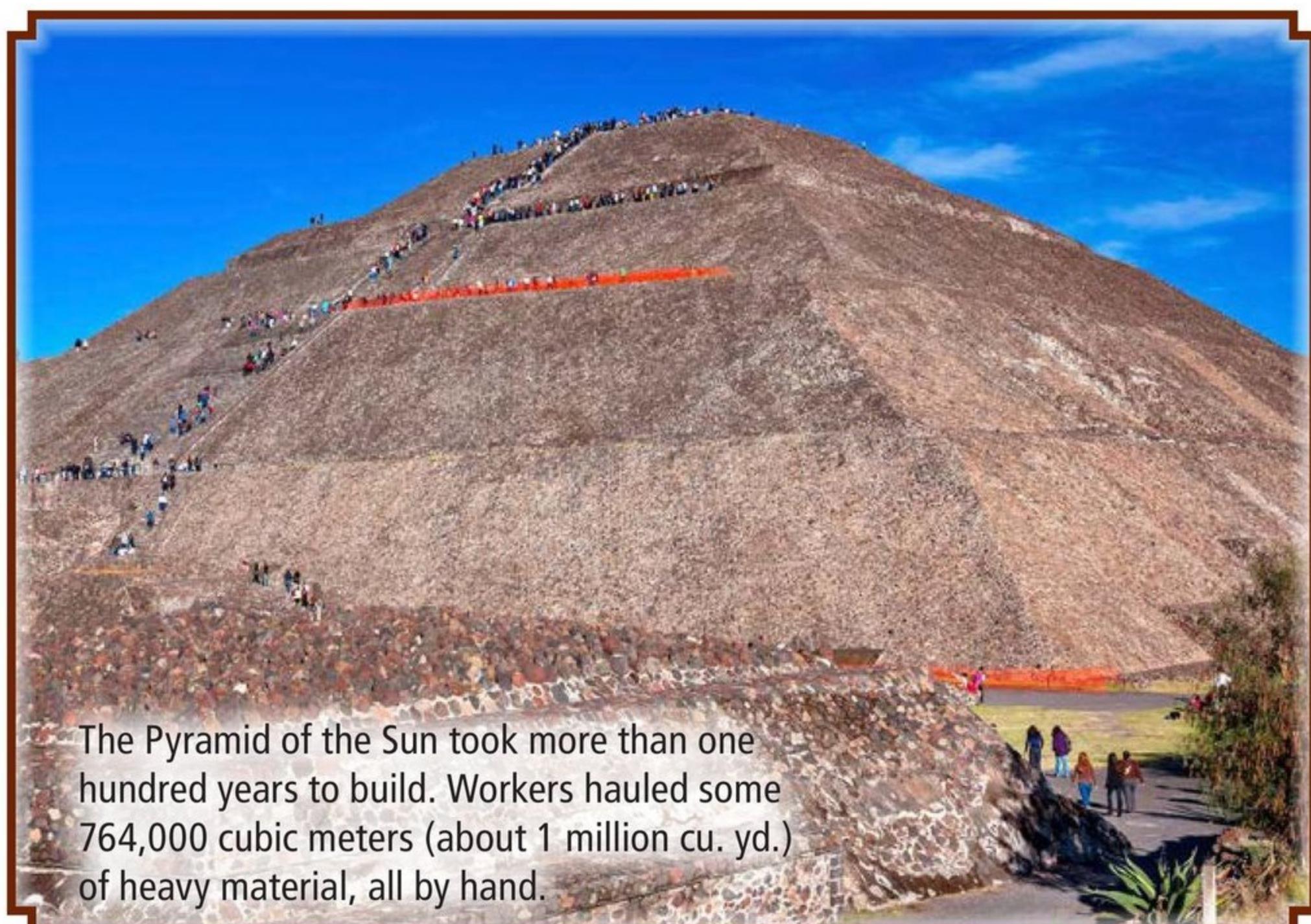
## The Great and Mysterious Teotihuacán

When the Spanish first came upon the ruins of Teotihuacán (tay-oh-tee-wah-KAHN) in the 1700s, they were amazed. People living in the area told Spanish explorers it was built by a race of giants who came from the heavens long ago. Looking around, one might believe that was true. The Pyramid of the Sun is the third-largest ancient **pyramid** in the world. Close by, the Pyramid of the Moon is not much smaller. To this day, people stand before the pyramids and wonder who built them. The answer is a mystery.

## Built to Impress

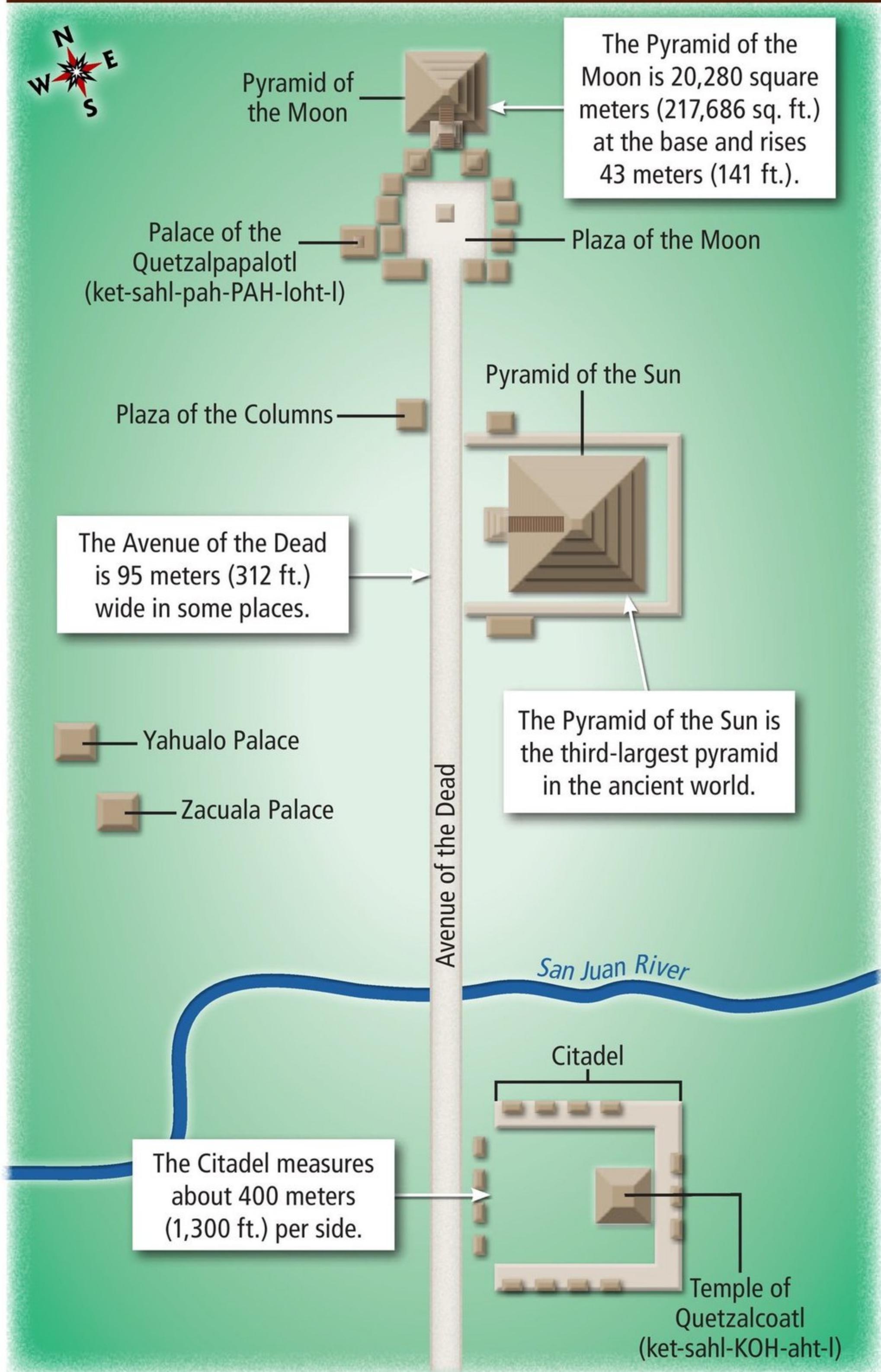
Teotihuacán rulers demanded huge projects. Workers moved the San Juan River in order to build the massive pyramids. The plazas were large enough to hold tens of thousands of citizens, with room for visitors. The population was between one and two hundred thousand people. In its day, Teotihuacán was the largest city in the Americas and one of the largest on Earth. The vast city covered 20 square kilometers (8 sq. mi.), and its **influence** reached all the way into what is now Honduras.

Today, Teotihuacán is one of the most studied and visited sites in Mexico.



The Pyramid of the Sun took more than one hundred years to build. Workers hauled some 764,000 cubic meters (about 1 million cu. yd.) of heavy material, all by hand.

## Teotihuacán's Ceremonial Center





From the top of the Pyramid of the Moon, visitors can see the vast Avenue of the Dead. It was named by the Aztecs, who mistook the structures next to the avenue for tombs.

## Digging Up the Past

We call the people who built the city Teotihuacanos. The name comes from the Aztecs, a people who came upon it long after the Teotihuacanos were gone. We do not know what the Teotihuacanos called themselves or their city. We do not know what language they spoke, where they came from, or the names of any of their powerful rulers. What we do know comes from **archaeologists**. They continue to dig around buildings and find **artifacts** that teach us about the people who made them.

Archaeologists tell us that when the first settlers arrived around 400 BCE, they found two very important resources: water and good soil. Teotihuacán is in a flat basin surrounded by mountains. Inside the basin is good soil for farming. Enough water tumbles down the mountains for people to use for their personal needs and to grow their crops.



A student from Arizona State University's lab at Teotihuacán carefully digs up and analyzes artifacts (left). Archaeologists found obsidian knives in the shape of snakes with feathers in 2004 (right).

There was another resource nearby—obsidian. This volcanic rock was highly valued for making sharp knives as well as deadly spearheads and arrowheads. Merchants from Teotihuacán most likely traded their obsidian with people many hundreds of miles away.

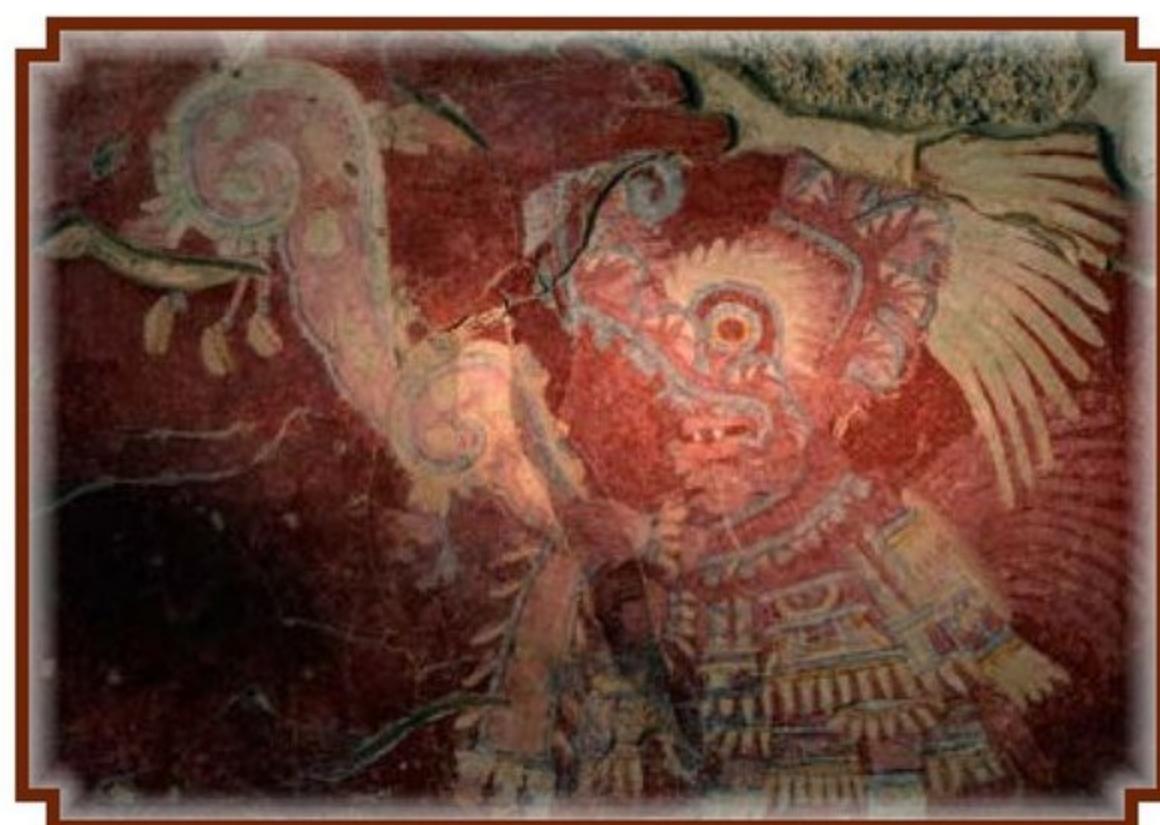
In the first few hundred years, Teotihuacán grew—but slowly. Then, in the first century CE, a huge volcanic explosion nearby caused people to flee by the tens of thousands. Evidence suggests that many came to Teotihuacán. In 320 CE, another nearby volcano blew, and more people came. All these new people were **immigrants**. They had their own languages and religions. They were welcomed, and their arrival brought big changes to Teotihuacán.

## Immigrants Make the City Grow

With the population growing, more housing was needed. The rulers carefully planned the city. First, they ordered farmers to move their fields farther away. Then they ordered about two thousand brand-new apartment buildings. When archaeologists found the first one, they thought they had discovered a palace. These apartments were unlike any others in the world. The spaces were large, expertly built of stone, and painted with beautiful **murals**. Inside each building were courtyards, porches, kitchens, a temple, and fifty or more rooms that housed between sixty and one hundred people. They brought in fresh water from a **reservoir**, and drains took used water away. People lived well in Teotihuacán.

Clues from artifacts and murals tell us that immigrants formed ethnic neighborhoods where they made traditional pottery and other items. They also brought goods from their homelands.

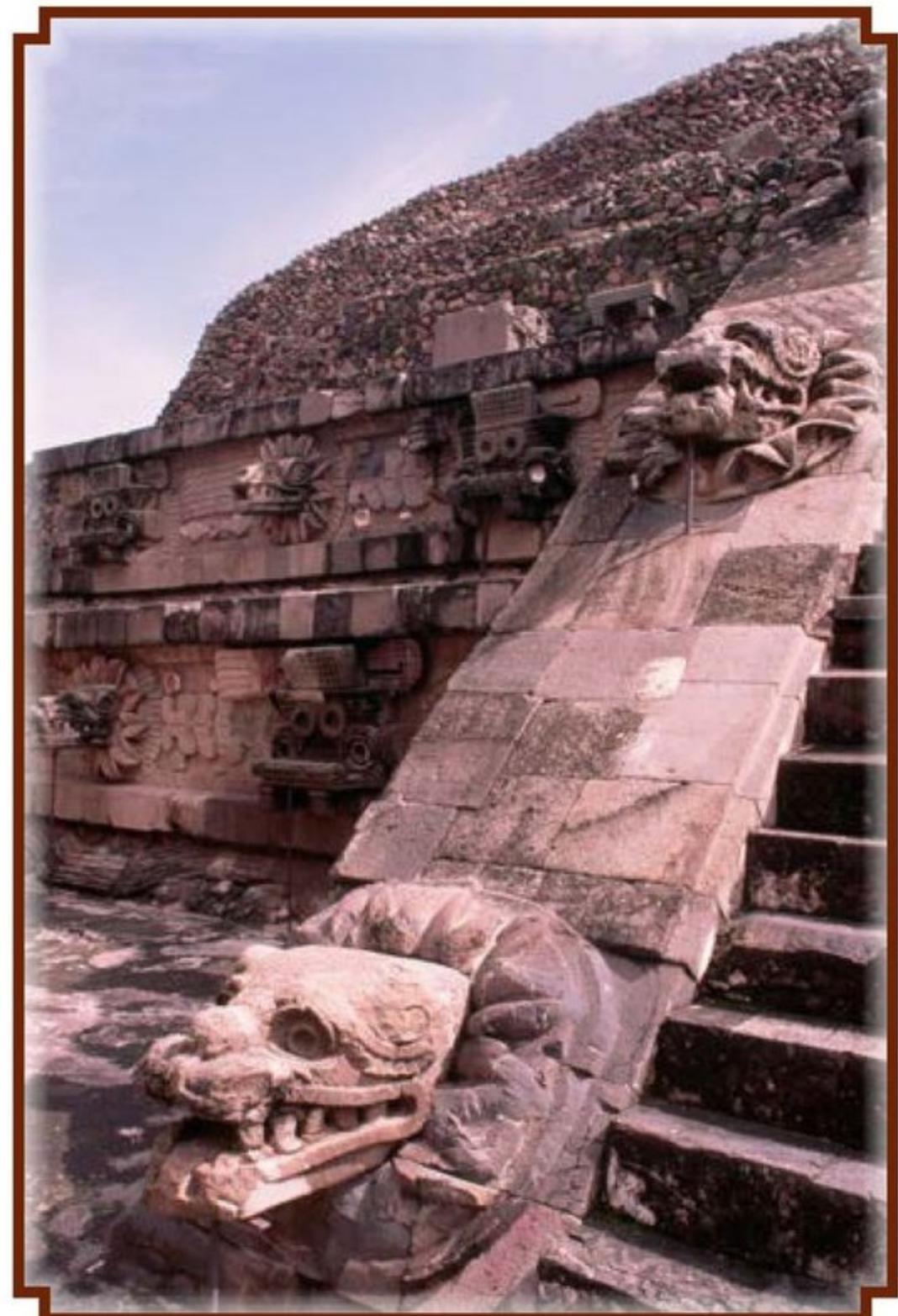
Part of a mural from a compound in Teotihuacán shows a chanting priest.

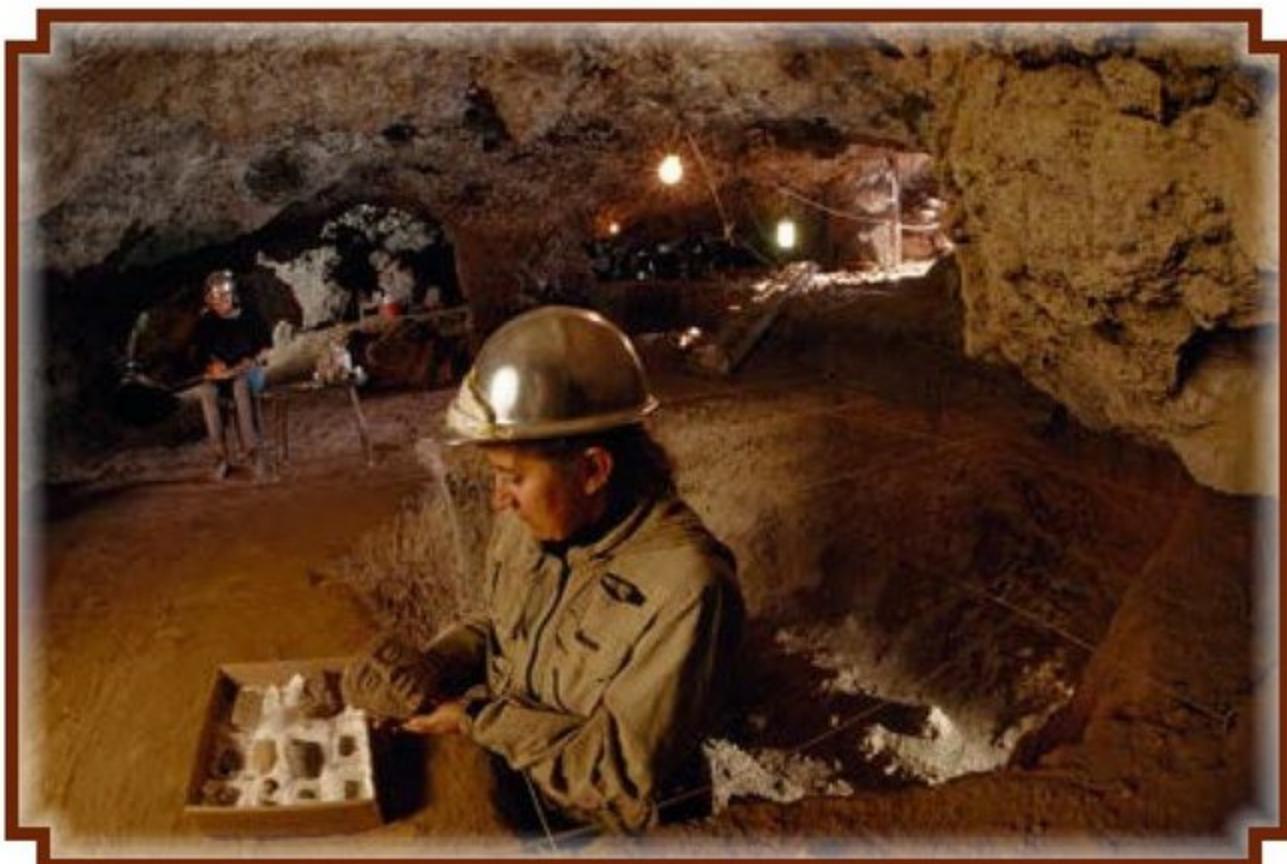


The Maya brought jade, cacao for making chocolate, and prized feathers for headdresses. Immigrants from the Gulf Coast brought dried fish, salt, and beautiful seashells. Others from the east brought cotton that they wove into cloth and then sewed into fine clothing. Immigrant neighborhoods made Teotihuacán a center for all sorts of expensive goods.

The rulers also ordered older buildings rebuilt to match their new plan. Every structure in the city had to line up on a grid that was exactly 15.5 degrees east of true north. With this alignment, the Pyramid of the Sun faces the point on the horizon where the Sun sets on August 13. Many cultures believed the world was formed on that day. Whether that's true is a mystery. We do know that Teotihuacán was one of the most highly planned cities in the world.

Sculptors carved the 4-ton (3.6 metric ton) stone heads at the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, which was built in 200 CE.





An archaeologist examines artifacts found near the Pyramid of the Sun.

## Archaeologists Dig Deeper

In 1971, a cave was discovered under the Pyramid of the Sun that was used as a **shrine**. Evidence suggests that caves were sacred to the people of Teotihuacán, who may have believed the gods were born in caves and worked there to make the world we live in. The name Teotihuacán means “place where the gods were born.” Maybe the pyramid was built to honor the site of the sacred cave underneath.

When archaeologists began to dig within the Pyramid of the Moon, they found burials of people with precious objects of jade and obsidian. The remains of animals such as pumas, rattlesnakes, eagles, a wolf, a falcon, and an owl were found, too. Experts think that the people and animals were killed as offerings to the gods. The people believed that by doing this, the gods would bring rain for crops and power to the city’s rulers.

## Collapse

The many warriors who protected Teotihuacán were strong and dressed as deadly animals. However, they could not protect Teotihuacán from destruction. Or, as some evidence suggests, they were among those who attacked and burned the temples and smashed the statues. We do not know. What we do know is that a **drought** caused food shortages, and people began to leave the city. Then, after centuries of wealth and power, Teotihuacán fell. People fled, the pyramids became overgrown with weeds, and the greatest city in the Americas became a ruin.

### Eight Hundred Years of Greatness

400 BCE First settlers arrive

150 BCE The city of Teotihuacán is established

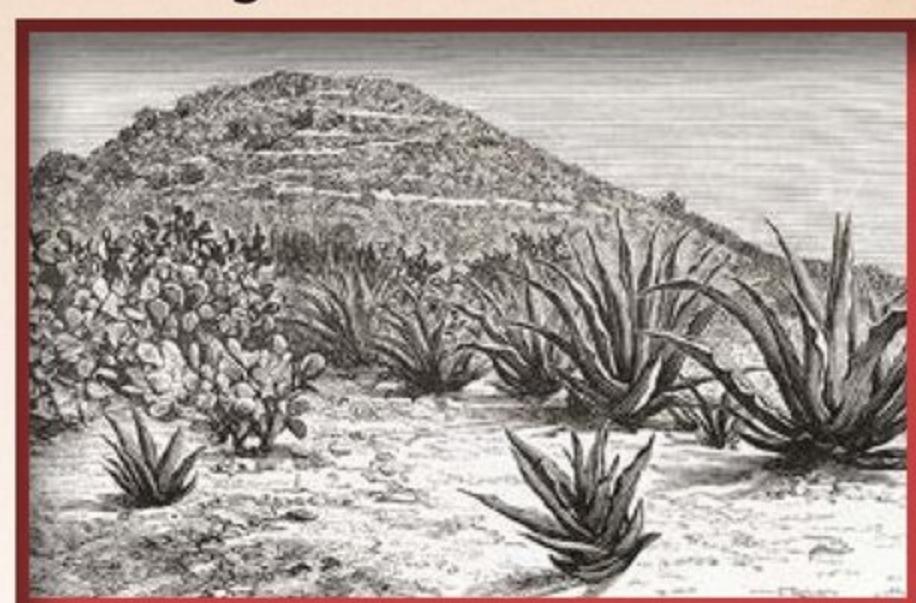
50 CE First wave of immigrants following the eruption of a nearby volcano

100 CE Building of Pyramid of the Sun begins

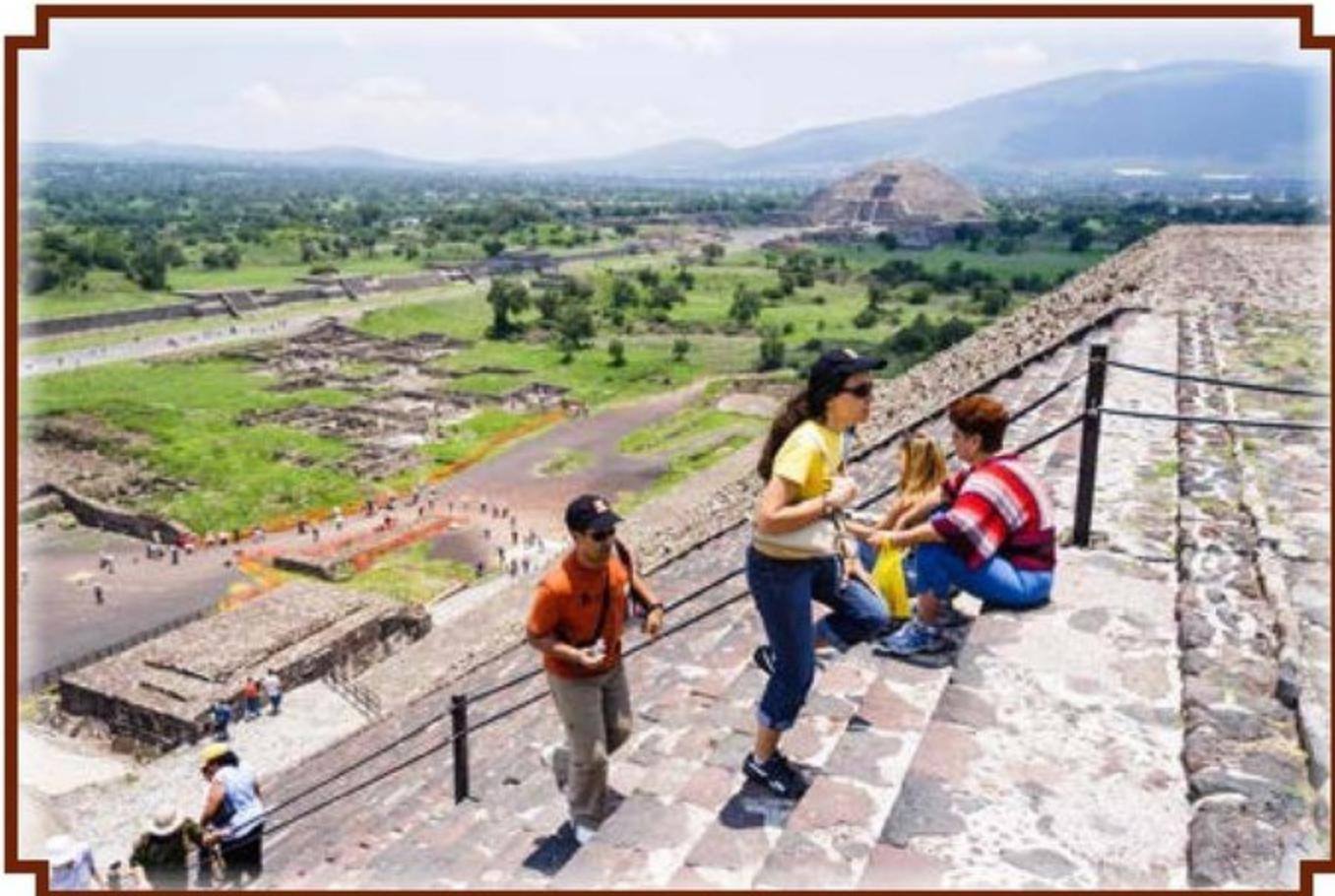
200 CE Building of two thousand apartment compounds begins

320 CE Second wave of immigrants following the eruption of another nearby volcano

550 CE Teotihuacán collapses



Before repairs began, the huge stone pyramids were overgrown with plants.



Each step of the Pyramid of the Sun is about 30 centimeters (1 ft.) high.

## Extreme Climbs and Long Walks

Imagine walking up the Avenue of the Dead. Everything around visitors is designed to make them feel small, and the design works as well today as it must have almost two thousand years ago. When people finally reach the Pyramid of the Sun, they have traveled up the steepest steps they have ever climbed—all 248 of them—to experience the thrilling view from the top.

For a shorter walk and no stairs, visitors can go to the museum and walk on a glass floor over a scale model of the whole site—pyramids and all.

Teotihuacán is the most visited site in Mexico. Visitors get an overview at the museum's model of the site.



In 1987, Teotihuacán was named an important world site by UNESCO, an organization that helps protect it. Even so, the many visitors, along with wind and rain, continue to **erode** the structures. But the greatest threat to the site today may be developers, or builders. In 2004, one developer received permission to build just outside the park. By law, the company had to report any artifacts dug up during construction, but it didn't. Instead, it trucked the priceless artifacts to the dump because that was faster and easier. These actions led to years of investigation.



In the Teotihuacán museum, visitors can see beautiful artifacts such as urns (above) and incense burners (right) that have been unearthed at the site.





Sergio Gómez



Sergio Gómez and his team unearthed artifacts such as these small carved figures in 2003. Experts hope to learn much more from the team's discoveries.

## Discoveries Keep Coming

There is much to see and explore at this ancient place. In 2003, archaeologist Sergio Gómez visited Teotihuacán during a heavy rainstorm. The rain was a life changer for Gómez. It was early morning when he arrived to find a small sinkhole in front of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. To explore the hole, he tied a rope around his waist, and several people lowered him deep into the darkness. Far below, Gómez discovered a tunnel that had been sealed 1,800 years ago. It was a discovery of a lifetime. Today, Gómez and his team are **excavating** the tunnel, inching their way toward its end under the temple. So far they have dug up seventy-five thousand artifacts. Who knows what they will discover at the tunnel's end?

## Glossary

<b>archaeologists</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	scientists who study the remains of ancient cultures (p. 7)
<b>artifacts</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	any objects made or used by humans long ago (p. 7)
<b>cultures</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	particular societies with their own ideas and customs (p. 10)
<b>drought</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a long dry spell with little or no rainfall; a water shortage caused by low rainfall (p. 12)
<b>erode</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	to wear away rock or soil by water, wind, or ice (p. 14)
<b>excavating</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	uncovering or digging out (p. 15)
<b>immigrants</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people who come to live in a new country, especially for the purpose of settling there (p. 8)
<b>influence</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the ability to affect people or things (p. 5)
<b>murals</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	large works of art, usually paintings, created directly on walls (p. 9)
<b>pyramid</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a large building with three or more sides shaped like a triangle, usually built by an ancient society to serve as a tomb or monument (p. 4)
<b>reservoir</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a large tank or lake used for collecting and storing water for human consumption or agricultural use (p. 9)
<b>shrine</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a place that is considered a special or holy tribute to a person or a god (p. 11)

# Teotihuacán

A Reading A-Z Level U Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,273

## Connections

### Writing

Write a letter to Sergio Gómez stating your position on whether he should continue exploring Teotihuacán. Be sure to include at least three reasons to support your position.

### Social Studies

Research to learn more about the Pyramid of the Sun and another pyramid from the ancient world. Make a diagram that shows both pyramids and compares their purpose and physical characteristics.

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