# Animating Public Buildings in Formative-Period Oaxaca

Political and Ontological Implications

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ARCHAEOLOGISTS, ETHNOGRAPHERS, AND ethnohistorians are increasingly recognizing the prevalence of practices in both ancient and modern Mesoamerica through which vital, life-giving forces were manifest and exchanged among animate entities including earth, rain, maize, mountains, ancestors, humans, deities, and buildings (e.g., Barber and Olvera Sánchez 2012; Harrison-Buck 2012, 2015; Joyce and Barber 2015; López Austin 1988, 1989; Monaghan 1995, 2000; Stross 1998; Vogt 1976). Relations among these entities could be simultaneously sacred, practical, and inseparable from everyday life (Hutson and Stanton 2007). Drawing on ethnographic and ethnohistoric research as sources of analogy to explore the Pre-Columbian past, archaeologists have begun to investigate what Eleanor Harrison-Buck (2015) calls the "animic cosmos." Yet archaeologists have generally focused on a generic understanding of such practices and their ontological implications, which has been dominated by research on Aztec and Maya religion. This is undoubtedly in

part the result of the paucity of comparative work by Mesoamerican ethnographers and ethnohistorians. As John Monaghan (2000:26) argues, "comparative work on Mesoamerican religion is so thin that at this point it is more productive to concentrate on what is generally true about Mesoamerican theology than to focus on the variables which may account for differences." Likewise, these practices are often seen as instantiating a broad overarching ontology, which risks falling into a new structuralism with a stable and enduring ontological base, constraining the ways in which people reproduced and transformed social life. As argued by Edward Swenson (2015), however, ontologies are products of social negotiation and are not necessarily determinative of materialities, ideologies, practices, or political formations. Archaeologists are beginning to consider how ontologies are multimodal and activated situationally within different social-material contexts (Harris and Robb 2012; Harrison-Buck 2012; Joyce and Barber 2015; Loren, this volume). Ontologies can also at times
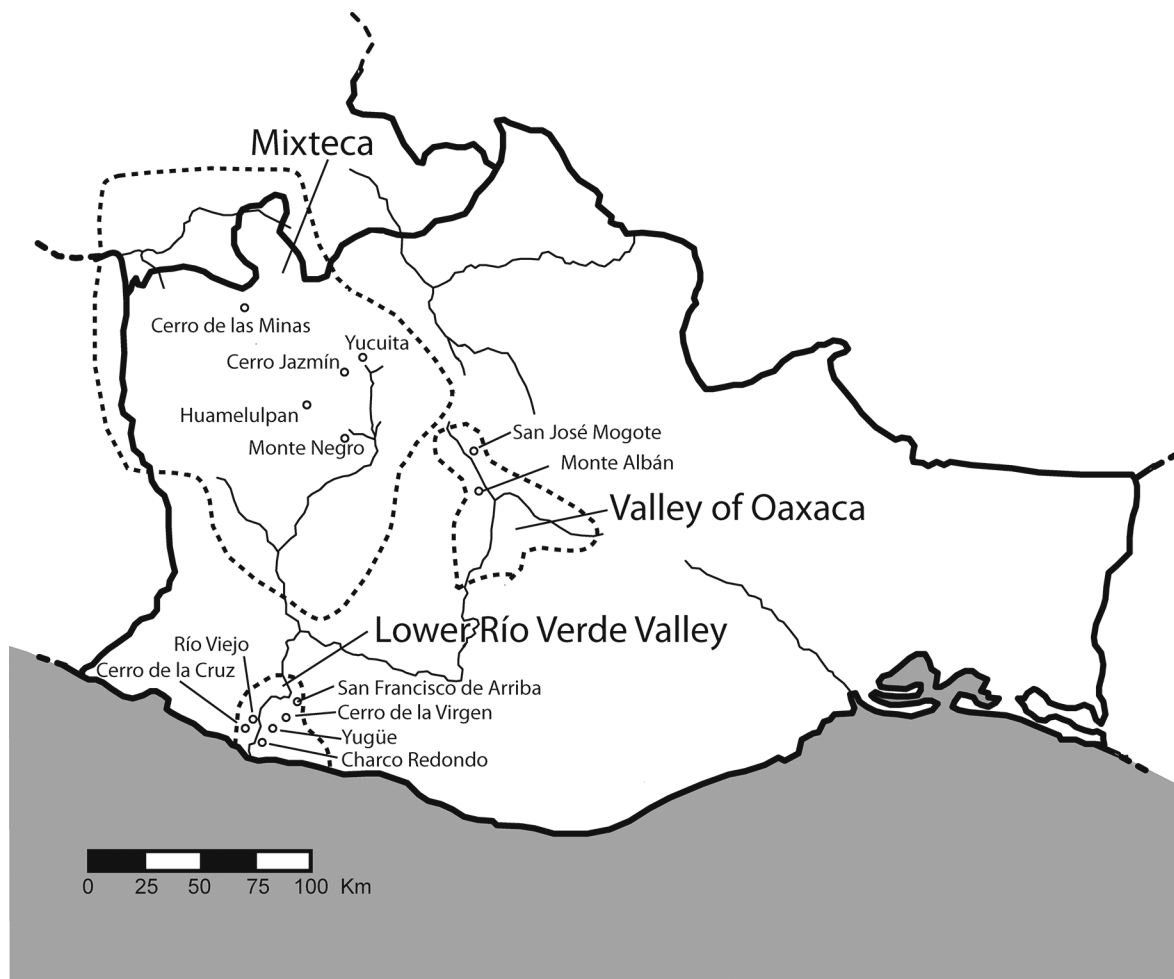
figure 11.1

Map of Oaxaca, showing regions and archaeological sites mentioned in the text. Map by Arthur Joyce.

be authorized and regulated by social authorities, leading to pressures for uniformity (Harris and Robb 2012).

In this chapter, I explore variability in later Formative-period (700 BCE–300 CE) animating practices in Oaxaca with a focus on the animation, feeding, and de-animation of public buildings. By public buildings, I refer to nonresidential architectural settings, often monumental in scale, that were loci of ceremonial practices with participants ranging from large groups to more limited and exclusive engagements. Although public gatherings also occurred at residences, I omit considerations of domestic settings in order to narrow the focus of the chapter. Drawing on ethnographic

and ethnohistoric analogies, I compare evidence for these practices in three regions of Oaxaca: the Valley of Oaxaca, the lower Río Verde Valley, and the Mixteca (Figure 11.1). The analysis examines the Formative period because in all three regions this period has been a major focus of research and because data are more accessible and systematically reported. The findings show that animating practices associated with public buildings varied greatly among these regions. I consider how this variability was entangled with political life and if these differences reflect alternative understandings of personhood relating to either humans, buildings, or both. I begin with a discussion of some of the complexities of understanding indigenous

Mesoamerican concepts and practices of animation, drawing largely on ethnographic and ethnohistoric evidence.

Animating Practices in Mesoamerica

In Mesoamerica, social life was enmeshed with a wide variety of living entities animated by vital, life-giving forces (Furst 1995; López Austin 1988, 1989; Monaghan 1995, 2000; Stross 1998). Because vital forces could be transferred, transformed, and concentrated among beings, social life was constituted not simply through the interactions of people but also through ongoing relations among people and other-than-human animate beings. Based on ethnohistoric documents, it is clear that there was no unitary animating force similar to the soul. The Aztec identified three vital forces: *tonalli*, *teyolia*, and *ihiyotl* (Furst 1995; López Austin 1988). Likewise, *ch'ulel* among the Maya is multifaceted and divisible (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Harrison-Buck 2015:117–118; Hutson et al., this volume; McAnany, this volume), and some of its aspects share properties with Aztec vital forces (Furst 1995:153–154; López Austin 1988:219–230). Similar beliefs in multiple animating forces and their distributed nature are found in other indigenous groups in Mesoamerica, including the Mixe and Chatino of Oaxaca (Greenberg 1981:91–92; Lipp 1991:43–46).

Being imbued with vital forces did not mean that all animate entities were equivalent or human-like. As noted by ethnographers, ethnohistorians, and archaeologists, different beings manifest different kinds and degrees of these forces (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:181–185; López Austin 1988, 1989; Monaghan 1995:197–198). Certain beings, especially deities and rulers, concentrated vital forces beyond those of others, which gave them greater power and ability to affect the world (see Hutson et al., this volume). The properties and capacities of animate beings to transfer, transform, link, and concentrate vital forces were not necessarily inherent to particular objects or actions, but were created through relations among diverse entities and the acts that assembled them, requiring

that people and other animate beings engage with the various animate aspects of their world in myriad ways. Scott Hutson and colleagues (this volume) make this point in their discussion of personhood among the Maya. Maya persons, whether human or other-than-human, are constituted through ongoing relations with people, ancestors, deities, and other animate entities, including acts of animation involving the transfer of vitality (Stross 1998; cf. Loren, this volume). Personhood, like life more generally, can, therefore, be assessed along a gradient (Hutson et al., this volume).

Power infused relations among animate entities, including humans (Brown and Emery 2008; López Austin 1988, 1989; McAnany 1995; Monaghan 2000, 2009). The most powerful entities included what María Nieves Zedeño (2009) terms "index objects," which had the ability to transfer vitality to other beings, and entities that could communicate and mediate between animate beings, what Timothy Pauketat (2013) terms "witnesses." In Mesoamerica, index objects included dripping water, blood, spit, breath, marine shells, wind, jade, obsidian, and speleothems (Brown and Emery 2008; Harrison-Buck 2012; Mock 1998), while entities such as mirrors, flutes, human hearts, and images of deities had the ability to connect different realms of existence, allowing gods and ancestors to view and interact with the living and vice versa (Barber and Olvera Sánchez 2012; López Austin 1989:123–124; Olivier 2003:240–265). Buildings were often considered to be powerful animate beings that assembled varied entities such as people, divinities, ancestors, celestial bodies, life, death, and time, thereby constituting broader communities (Joyce and Barber 2015; Stross 1998). People, including rulers and religious specialists, were also powerful mediators, assembling and concentrating animate entities (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Schele and Miller 1986). Ancestors, as well as the "living," were seen as animate beings with abilities to impact the world, and this relationship continues for many Native Americans today (McAnany 1995).

Relations among people and other beings were often negotiated and transformed through ritualized practices (sensu Bell 1992). These practices

included a wide range of acts through which vital forces were transferred, transformed, and concentrated among animate entities (Brown and Emery 2008; Joyce and Barber 2015; Monaghan 1990, 2009; Stross 1998). I term these acts "animating practices." For example, the vitality of humans and other beings, including deities, could be merged and dispersed, as with Aztec "man-gods" and nagualism (López Austin 1988; see also Kosiba, this volume). Upon death, the vital essence of the Aztec "man-god" was dispersed to different destinations, including returning to the deity from whom it originated. As social personae, many other-than-human beings went through a life cycle that included birth and death and was often marked by ritualized acts through which vital forces were transferred (Stross 1998). Another practice sometimes associated with animate other-than-human beings like buildings was the act of "feeding" or giving sustenance to maintain the animateness of things, just as humans must eat to live (McAnany, this volume; Stross 1998:33). Monaghan (1995) argues that eating and feeding are fundamental practices that materialize and reiterate social relationships within the household and the community.

Sacrifice in Mesoamerica can also be considered a form of animating practice involving transactions of vitality between humans and divinities, typically where it is released from one animate being to sustain, feed, or animate another (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:202–207; López Luján 2005:35–37). In Aztec ethnohistory, for example, deities hungered for vital forces and, if these were not received through sacrifice, might languish to the point of no longer maintaining the cosmic order (López Austin 1988). The blood of sacrificial victims was, at times, smeared on wooden and stone figures to feed the deities within (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:202). In addition to blood sacrifices, a wide variety of offerings also transferred vitality to deities (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:204; López Luján 2005:35–37). Copal incense, maize dough, jade, and other objects were burned to release their force. Offerings were emplaced in public buildings to animate and sustain them as living beings (Mock 1998). Temples were often associated with particular deities and

acted as portals through which divinities were contacted (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:204; Matos Moctezuma 1988). At least some tribute payments made to rulers were referred to as "sacrifices" (Monaghan 2009). Like deities, rulers could also be revitalized through sacrificial blood (López Austin 1988:251–252). Of course, the fact that rulers could take on the guise of deities, incorporate aspects of the essence of the deity, and become what Alfredo López Austin (1989) terms a "man-god" shows that the distinction between rulers and deities could be decidedly fuzzy.

Transactions of the vital force in sacrifice activated and recapitulated a sacred covenant between humans and deities that was established as a fundamental aspect of the cosmic creation. In both ancient and modern Mesoamerican creation stories, the current world was the result of a sacred covenant whereby people petitioned deities for agricultural fertility and prosperity in return for sacrificial offerings (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:65–66; Monaghan 1990; Tedlock 1996). Since humans literally consumed the gods as maize, earth, and rain, both sides of the exchange can be seen as forms of sacrifice through which vital forces were transferred. As argued by Monaghan (1990, 2009), death itself was a sacrificial act through which people fed the gods. López Austin (1988:321) argues that the act of depositing the dead in the earth "was a direct delivery of the body to the lords of vegetation and of rain. It was like sowing a seed that would germinate beneath the ground and grow inside of the hollow, sacred mount, from which surged the water that fed all the rivers and all the clouds." Because sacrifice was a debt owed to the gods for the creation of the current world, humans were in a decidedly inferior position in these transactions. The sacred covenant, therefore, establishes sacrifice as a fundamental condition of human existence involving relations of debt and merit between humans and the gods (Monaghan 1990, 1995).

Animating practices are probably best documented archaeologically for buildings, including public buildings and residences (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Joyce and Barber 2015; Mock 1998). Birth rites, usually conceptualized as rituals of

animation, dedication, or ensoulment, and death rites, termed rituals of closure or termination, continue to be carried out in houses by many indigenous Mesoamerican groups (Greenberg 1981; Mock 1998). It is not surprising, therefore, that public buildings were loci of animating practices often involving the emplacement of objects such as ceramic vessels, jade, and the remains of humans and animals whose vital forces were transferred to the structure (Mock 1998). Like that of humans, the vitality of buildings and associated objects at death could also be released through burning and breakage (Stross 1998; Stanton, Brown, and Pagliaro 2008).

Animating practices were often elements of more complex ritual sequences involving other kinds of ceremonial acts unrelated to the transferal of vitality. An example of the complex ritual sequences associated with the animation of buildings can be seen among the Tzotzil Maya. Linda Brown and Kitty Emery (2008) point out that the different components of houses (posts, thatch, daub) come from the animate earth and forest and so are alive even before any human involvement. Drawing on Evon Vogt (1976), Brown and Emery argue that ritualized practices associated with house construction include offerings made to repay the earth for the use of these materials, as well as practices designed to "ensoul" the building so as to incorporate it into a social order. The offerings made to the Earth Lord involve the sacrifice of chickens by the builders, who bury the remains in a hole beneath the center of the house floor and pour chicken broth and sugarcane liquor on the roof, which is followed by a ritual meal. These are seen as acts of feeding, which continue through the life of the house, and if not properly carried out, the house may pursue vengeance against the occupants. The ensouling of the building requires a ritual specialist and the raising of a house cross, additional sacrifices to the Earth Lords, travel to sacred mountains where offerings are made to ancestral gods, and another ritual meal. These acts provide the house with an "inner soul" through the transferral of the vital force, *ch'ulel*, and so can be described as an animating practice involving both humans and divinities (see Kosiba, this volume; McAnany, this

volume). This example illustrates the complexity of actors and actions associated with the raising of a house. Humans were clearly involved in the actions designed to feed and ensoul the house, although in this case the primary agents in the act of animation were deities.

In Oaxaca, animating practices associated with buildings are best documented ethnographically for the Chatino, and these resemble the patterns discussed for the Maya (Greenberg 1981:85–98). During house-raising ceremonies, several offerings, including food, fine china, and a sacrificed chicken, are placed into pits dug into the floor. The initial offering in the center of the house feeds its "heart," where the life force burns. Later subfloor offerings are given to the house altar and to the Fire God, who embodies the ancestors whom one feeds and from whom one is fed. Elsewhere in Mesoamerica, ethnographic data demonstrate variation in the means through which buildings are animated (e.g., La Fuente [1977] 1949; Lipp 1991; Mock 1998).

Based on ethnohistoric and ethnographic examples, the animating practices that are the most archaeologically visible will be those that involve the emplacement of offerings beneath the floors of public buildings in order to animate the structure. Making somewhat simplistic assumptions and acknowledging that animating practices are far more diverse than those associated with buildings, I propose three means of differentiating among offerings involved in the animation, feeding, and termination of public buildings. Offerings emplaced during the initial construction or sequential rebuilding or remodeling of public buildings are likely to have been the result of acts of initial animation. These acts include those that bring to life the inanimate, as well as those that assemble (sensu DeLanda 2016) already animate entities into emergent relational fields involving personhood, community, and urbanity, among others (Hutson et al., this volume; Joyce n.d.; Joyce and Barber 2015). Offerings sequentially emplaced through time, independent of episodes of building and remodeling, are more consistent with acts of feeding and nurturing buildings and associated divinities. Evidence of practices that closed public buildings

and released their vital forces should occur around the time of abandonment. In archaeological and ethnographic contexts in Mesoamerica, termination ceremonies often include some combination of the covering of buildings with sediment and the destruction of structures and associated objects (Becker 1993; Hutson et al., this volume; Mock 1998; Stanton, Brown, and Pagliaro 2008). Using these analogical tools in the following sections, I use archaeological data from later Formative-period Oaxaca to describe variability in the assembled entities and acts through which public buildings were animated, sustained, and closed.

Animating Public Buildings in the Valley of Oaxaca

The Valley of Oaxaca is the largest highland valley in southern Mexico and has been inhabited by Zapotecs probably since at least the Formative period. Evidence for later Formative-period animating practices associated with public buildings in the Valley of Oaxaca comes primarily from San José Mogote and Monte Albán.

The earliest evidence of animating practices in the Oaxaca Valley comes from San José Mogote and is associated with Mound 1 (Figure 11.2), which was a platform built over a natural hill at the beginning of the Middle Formative–period Rosario Phase (700–500 BCE) (Marcus and Flannery 1996). Mound 1 faced a large open plaza and significantly exceeded the scale and prominence of earlier buildings. The plaza allowed for the involvement of greater numbers of people in public ceremonies, although the platform's summit would have been restricted. The scale and organization required to build Mound 1 suggest that the leaders of the community wielded greater power, although at the time of its construction clear evidence for hereditary status distinctions is lacking (Blanton et al. 1999:36–42; Joyce 2010:111–117).

Shortly before the construction of the initial version of the platform on Mound 1 (Structure 19B), at least five pits were dug into the surface of the hill and filled with secondary human interments

covered with red pigment (Flannery and Marcus 2015). Accompanying the burials were ceramic vessels, a figurine, two bowls made from marine shells, jadeite beads, and a fish otolith (Figure 11.3). Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus (2015:104) suggest that these were higher-status youths who were honored by being interred prior to the construction of an important temple. I suggest that these are also the first clear examples of offerings associated with animating rituals in buildings viewed as living, other-than-human divine beings. They are consistent with patterns seen throughout Mesoamerica in which offerings are emplaced prior to or at the onset of building construction (Joyce and Barber 2015; Mock 1998). The pits in Mound 1 also contain items that have been identified as index objects with animating properties identified in archaeological, ethnohistoric, and ethnographic cases, including red pigment, marine shell, greenstone, and human bodies (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Harrison-Buck 2012; Mock 1998).

Following the construction of Structure 19B, a temple (Structure 28) was built on top of the platform (Flannery and Marcus 2015:141–147). Ceramic vessels found in the fill of Structure 19B, as well as the contents of another pit, are likely candidates for offerings involved with the animation of either Structure 19B or Structure 28. The pit contained three ceramic vessels, a bowl carved from a limpet shell, and a possible gourd vessel. In each of the corners of the recessed floor of the temple, people placed an offering of a single ceramic vessel.

At circa 500 BCE, people from San José Mogote and surrounding communities founded the mountaintop city of Monte Albán, which rapidly grew into the region's largest community (Marcus and Flannery 1996). One of the earliest activities at Monte Albán was the construction of the site's ceremonial center, located in the Main Plaza precinct, which far exceeded in scale Mound 1 at San José Mogote (Figure 11.4). Public buildings were built around the Main Plaza, and many were the foci of animating practices, as well as other kinds of ritualized acts.

Later Formative-period offerings at Monte Albán show continuities and differences in animating practices relative to Rosario Phase San José

figure 11.2
Mound 1 at San José Mogote. Photograph by Arthur Joyce (Joyce and Barber 2015:fig. 6 © The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research).
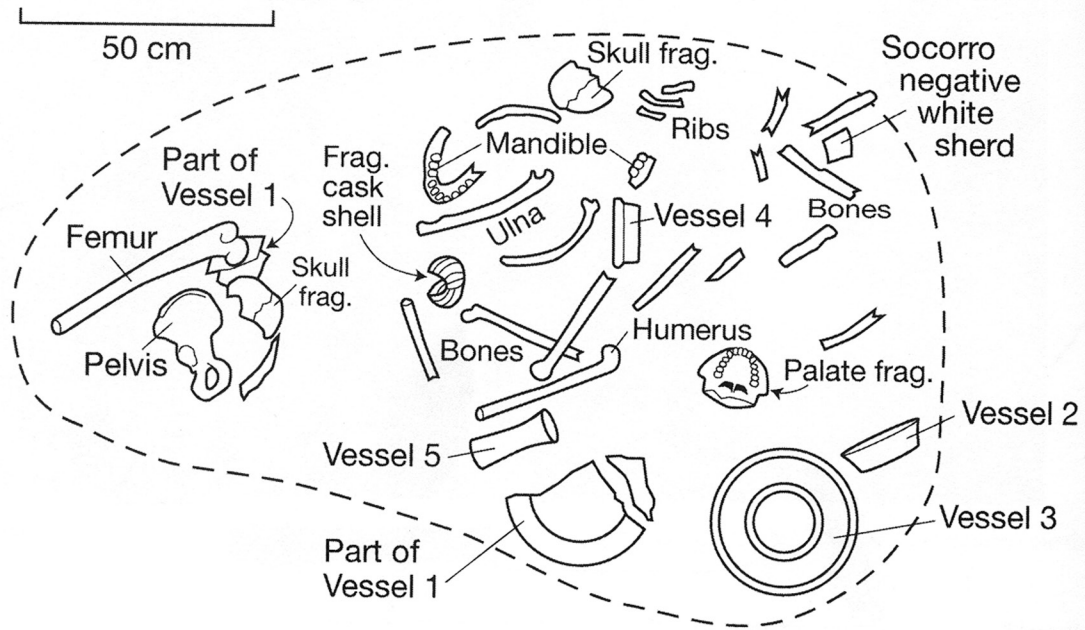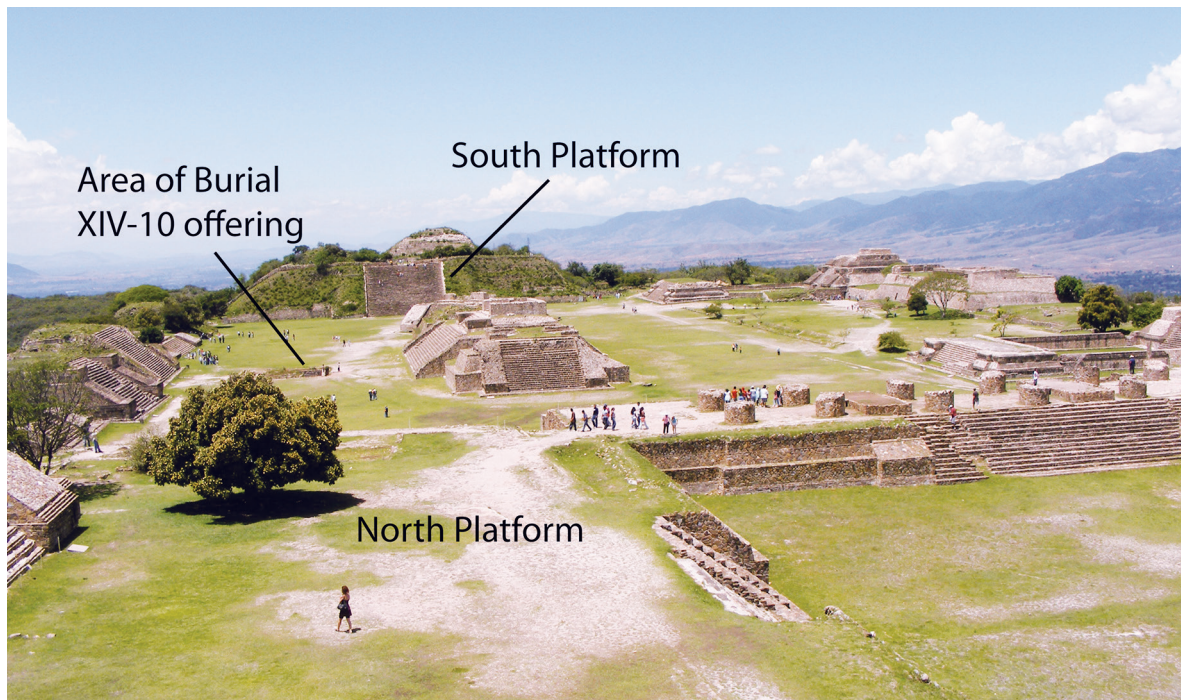

figure 11.3
Plan view of Burial 66, a secondary burial intrusive into Stratigraphic Zone F of Mound 1 at San José Mogote (Flannery and Marcus 2015:fig. 6.6).

Area of Burial
XIV-10 offering
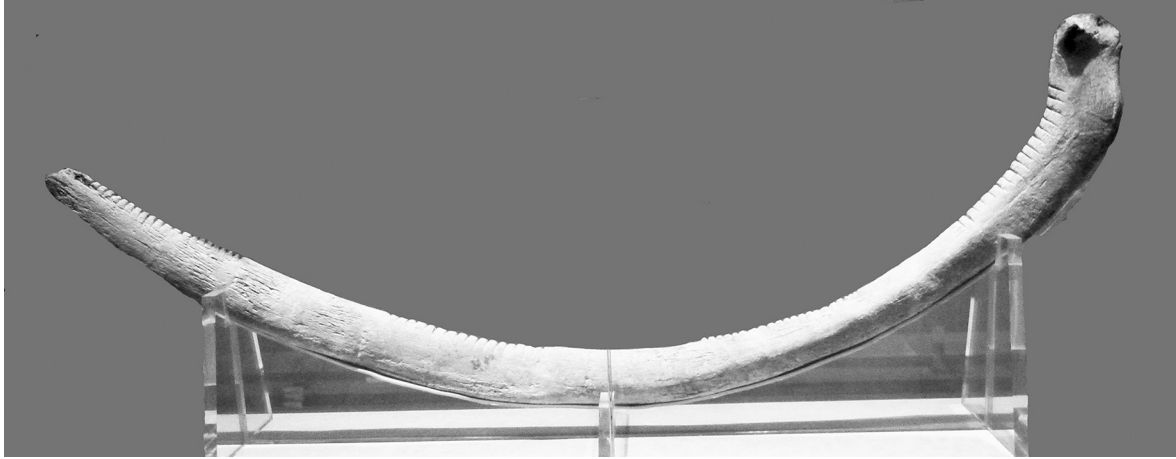
South Platform

North Platform

figure 11.4
The Main Plaza of Monte Albán. Photograph by Arthur Joyce (Joyce 2010:fig. 5.3).

Mogote. Animating practices associated with public buildings at Monte Albán ranged from ritualized acts involving the emplacement of modest offerings of a few ceramic vessels or human burials (Caso [1935] 2003:268, [1939] 2002:177–178; Caso and Bernal 1952:58, 151) to incredibly elaborate offerings featuring exotic and highly valued objects, both locally made and imported. For example, an offering beneath the temple on Building VG on the North Platform included six ceramic vessels, two necklaces of greenstone and shell, a mother-of-pearl mosaic, and the skeletons of two women who may have been sacrificial victims (Marcus and Flannery 1996:183). An offering associated with a probable public building on the southeastern end of the North Platform consisted of ceramic bowls, two bird effigy vessels, an anthropomorphic vessel, twenty-three stone balls, and two whale ribs (Figure 11.5) that had been notched so as to make them into musical instruments (Caso, Bernal, and Acosta 1967:103–105). In another temple on the North Platform, an offering box contained a

ceramic bowl, a shell, two jade ear ornaments in the form of flowers, and the remains of two mosaic masks, one of jade and turquoise and the other of pyrite and shell (Caso, Bernal, and Acosta 1967:138).

A series of offerings was placed in two stone-lined pits that penetrated into the Nisa Phase (100 BCE–200 CE) version of the South Platform (Figure 11.6) (Gámez Goytia 2002). One of the pits had an offering consisting of eighty-one unfired cylindrical vessels coated with cinnabar, twenty-six with lids, and a greenstone bead. The other pit had at least three periods of use, beginning with the placement of five unfired hollow clay cylinders and four lids. A second offering placed above the first consisted of fourteen bowls and a shell pendant. Above these vessels were two unfired clay objects; one contained a greenstone bead covered in hematite and cinnabar, while the other was covered in hematite. The repeated placement of offerings in the pits suggests that they were used in the ongoing feeding of the South Platform as an animate being. It is possible that the vessels held food or drink or some other
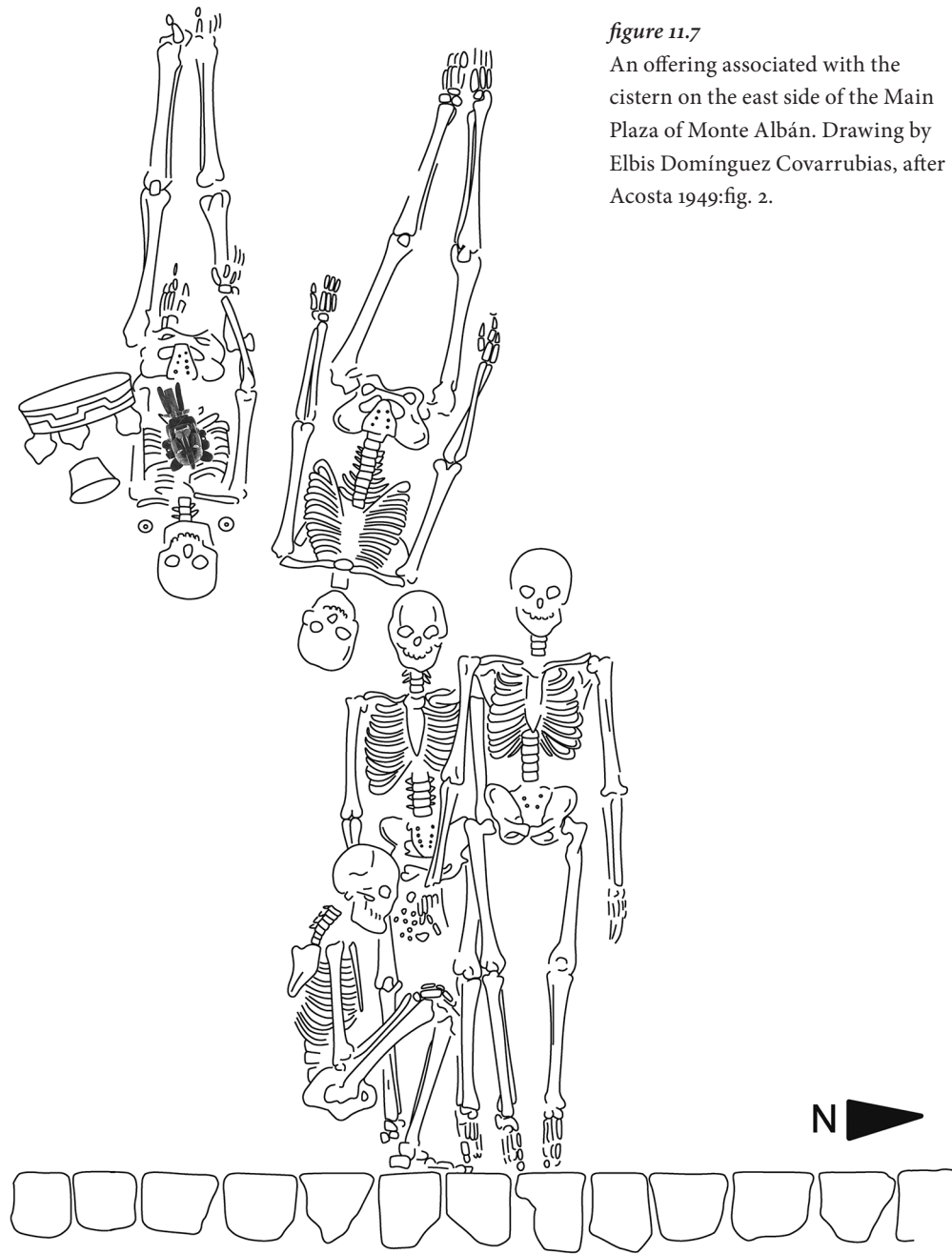
figure 11.5
A whale rib from an offering in the North Platform at Monte Albán. Photograph by Arthur Joyce.

Nisa-phase offerings, including unfired ceramic vessels, greenstone beads, and a shell pendant

0   50
cm
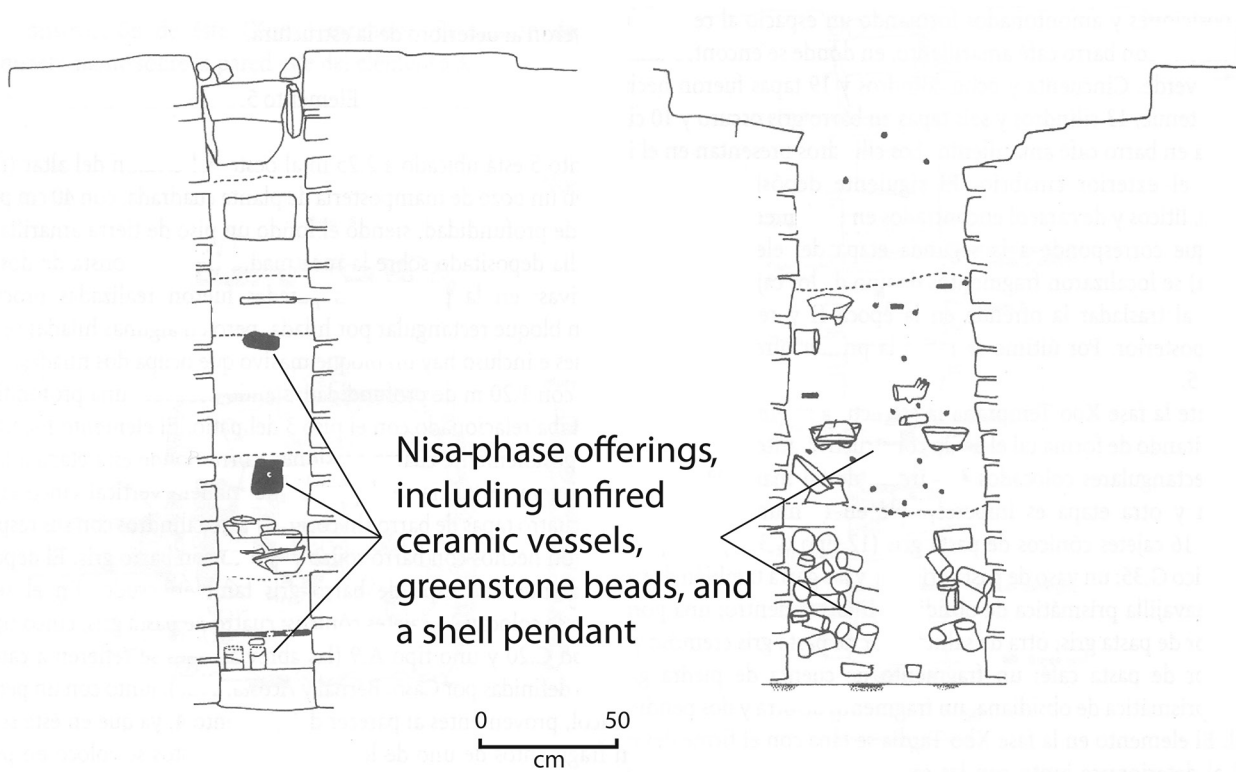
figure 11.6
Stone-lined pits with offerings in the South Platform (Gámez Goytia 2002:figs. 7 and 8).

substance that nourished the building. It is also possible that the cinnabar and hematite were iconic references to sacrificial blood, as they were in the Maya region (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:244).

The most elaborate later Formative-period offering was Burial XIV-10, found on a stone pavement on the eastern side of the Main Plaza (Acosta 1949). It contained two adult males, two adult females, and a subadult accompanied by ceramic vessels and ornaments of jade, marine shell, and pearl (Figure 11.7). The males were interred wearing stone mosaic pectorals, including an elaborate jade bat mask with eyes and teeth of marine shell (Figure 11.8a). Interments like this one are unusual at Monte Albán since it is rare to find burials in public settings, leading several scholars to suggest that

a   b

figure 11.8
Objects included in the offering associated with the cistern on the east side of the Main Plaza of Monte Albán (not to scale): a) jade bat mask; and b) ceramic box incised with the glyph for "water" and images of maize sprouts. Photographs by Arthur Joyce.

the interments may have been sacrificial victims (Flannery 1983:104; Joyce 2010:156). The offering was emplaced at the time of the closure and burial of an elaborate stone cistern and may have been associated with termination rituals. Excavations in the vicinity of the burial yielded five ceramic boxes with lids that may also have been deposited during the termination ritual (Urcid 2011). The boxes were incised with the glyph for "water" and images of maize sprouts (Figure 11.8b). Found near the cistern

was evidence for ritual feasting, including ovens that contained hundreds of small bowls and extensive evidence of burning (Marcus Winter, personal communication, 2017).

During the Nisa Phase at San José Mogote, a series of two-room temples was built on Mound 1, and although some were poorly preserved, others included offerings frequently placed in stone boxes (Flannery and Marcus 2015). Several offerings associated with the temples included possible sacrificial

Vessels depicting women personifying the Rain Deity

Ancestor personifying the Rain Deity

Fragments of a bone flute and deer antlers

Adobe box

Maize personified

Sacrificed quail
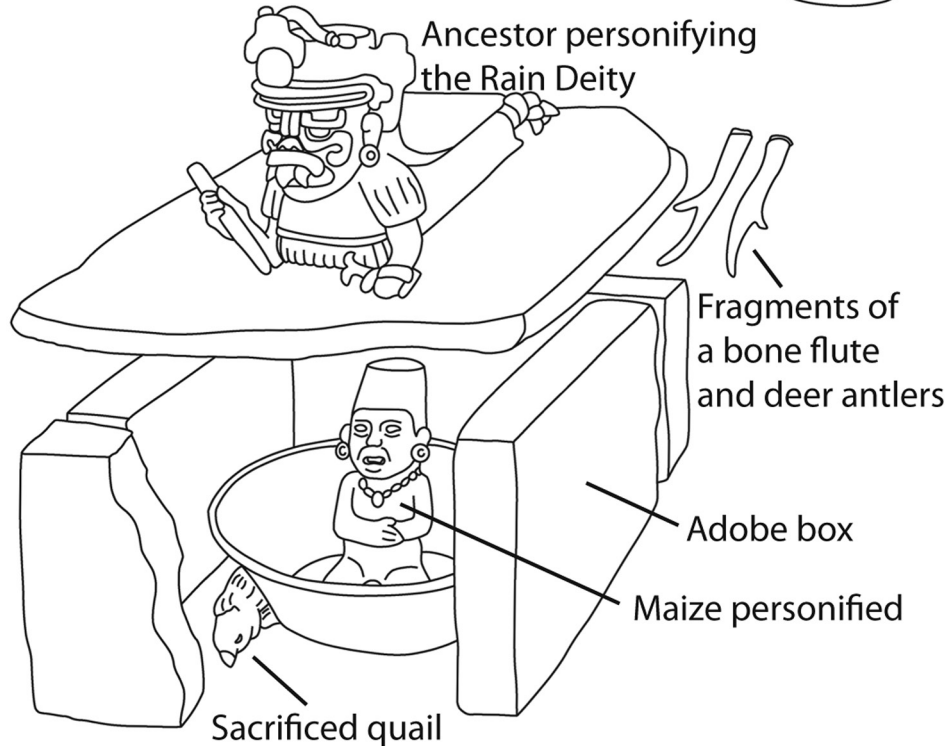
figure 11.9

An offering of an adobe box and effigy vessels from Structure 35 at San José Mogote. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias, after Urcid 2009:fig. 2.

victims or ancestors. For example, interred beneath Structure 36 were the partial remains of a child who may have been cooked and eaten (Flannery and Marcus 2015:233), along with an adult secondary burial. A ceramic vase and a skull with its atlas vertebra still attached were discovered in the fill of Structure 13. Subfloor offerings in Structure 19 included a stone masonry box containing an incense brazier depicting the Old God or God of Ancestors and four turtle shells. Nearby was the burial of a woman and child stuffed into a small pit and accompanied by ceramic vessels, mother-of-pearl buttons, and stone beads.

The most elaborate offerings on Mound 1 were associated with Structure 35 (Flannery and Marcus 2015:246–273). A stone box beneath the inner room of the temple contained two jadeite statues; the largest was nearly half a meter tall and depicted a naked male who, Flannery and Marcus (2015:264) argue, may have represented a sacrificial victim. Beneath an area of Structure 35's floor showing evidence of intense burning, presumably of incense, was an adobe box, as well as a tableau of anthropomorphic ceramic effigy vessels and other objects (Figure 11.9). Javier Urcid (2009) argues that the central vessel embodied an ancestor manifesting

the Rain God and holding a lightning bolt in one hand. The vessel lay on top of the adobe box. The ancestor was assisted by four anthropomorphic vessels depicting women who also personified the Rain God. Sitting in a bowl within the box was a vessel depicting the personification of maize. Adjacent to the bowl were the remains of a quail, possibly sacrificed to petition the Rain Deity for fertility. Just outside the box were fragments of a bone flute and a pair of deer antlers. Urcid (2009) interprets this tableau as depicting an element of the Zapotec creation narrative related to the Rain God, who is assisted by lesser attendants from the four quarters of the world, freeing maize from the mountain of sustenance to feed humanity.

The later Formative-period evidence from the Valley of Oaxaca is consistent with practices designed to animate, terminate, and possibly feed public buildings. Of the three types of animating practices, acts that animated public buildings during their initial construction were most strongly supported by the evidence, although it was not always possible to determine the exact context of offerings, especially at Monte Albán. Data from the cistern on the east side of the Main Plaza suggest termination ceremonies. The only features that seem consistent with acts of feeding are the South Platform offerings sequentially deposited in pits.

Although the details and scale of the offerings vary, the objects within the offerings reference a relatively restricted set of themes. Common materials had semiotic associations with humans merging with deities (deity masks and vessels depicting the personification of the Rain Deity), sacrifice/ancestors (human and animal remains, red pigment), water/rain (shell, greenstone, whalebone), maize and fertility (greenstone, vessels depicting maize personified, flower ornaments), and perhaps food and drink (ceramic vessels and possibly their contents). Taken together, these materials invoke the sacred covenant whereby humans offer sacrifices to deities in return for rain, maize, and ultimately sustenance. In many cases, the offerings assembled objects that referenced sacrifice with others that referenced fertility, such as greenstone and shell accompanying human bodies or ceramic

vessels covered with red pigment. I interpret the offerings as means through which vital forces were transferred through sacrifice, whether to animate buildings, deities, or both. The ability of the objects bundled within the offerings to transfer vital forces was enhanced by the presence of both index objects and witnesses. Some of the more elaborate offerings likely activated the covenant as offering and simultaneously cited liturgical narratives related to the covenant. In particular, the offering associated with Structure 35 at San José Mogote depicts the story of the Rain God providing maize to people in return for sacrificial offerings.

Most of the public buildings where offerings were found were in highly restricted locations that would have limited the number of participants, although others may have been able to observe from a distance. Such a spatial separation contributed to social distinctions likely related to status, as well as access to the divine. This applies particularly to the summit of Mound 1 at San José Mogote and the North Platform at Monte Albán (Figure 11.10). The use of exotic and valuable materials in many of the offerings—often imported from distant regions and including jade, marine shell and pearl ornaments, whale ribs, elaborate anthropomorphic vessels, deity masks, cinnabar, important ancestors, and sacrificial victims—also suggests that participants were restricted to the nobility. The presence of offerings in the public buildings suggests that they were living, divine beings and community members. The close proximity of elite residences to public buildings at both San José Mogote and Monte Albán (Flannery and Marcus 2015; Joyce 2010) implies that nobles were caretakers of these animate buildings and had primary access to them. This new centrality of the ruler in the entanglements through which divinities were contacted would have been a source of great political and spiritual power. Other offerings were more modest. One or two ceramic vessels emplaced in fill during the construction of a public building could represent the more informal actions of workers or ceremonies carried out by small groups of commoners.

A few of the offerings were made in places that would have allowed for large audiences to

figure 11.10
The North Platform at Monte Albán. Photograph by Arthur Joyce.

participate without obvious spatial barriers, especially ceremonies involving the cistern at Monte Albán and to a lesser extent the South Platform offerings. The evidence suggests that the cistern offering was dramatic and impressive in scale, involving a complex set of ritualized practices such as the interment of prominent people and perhaps human sacrifice, as well as ritual feasting.

Overall, the evidence from the Formative-period Valley of Oaxaca indicates that animating practices associated with public buildings were largely a prerogative of the nobility and carried out in restricted settings. As I discuss in the next section, animating practices in the lower Río Verde Valley differed from the patterns seen in the Valley of Oaxaca.

Animating Public Buildings in the Lower Río Verde Valley

The lower Río Verde Valley, located on the Pacific Coast of Oaxaca, was likely inhabited by Chatino speakers until the arrival of highland Mixtecs

around 1100 CE (Joyce 2010). The earliest evidence for animating practices associated with public buildings dates to the Late Formative Minizundo Phase (400–150 BCE). During the Terminal Formative period (150 BCE–250 CE), an urban center developed at Río Viejo on the west bank of the river, which grew to 225 ha. Practices involving initial animation, feeding, and closure occurred in public buildings at multiple sites in the region (Joyce and Barber 2015). Public buildings also typically have evidence for large-scale ritual feasts, which may have been carried out in conjunction with animating acts.

Evidence of animating practices carried out during the initial construction or sequential remodeling of public buildings was found at San Francisco de Arriba and Cerro de la Virgen. At San Francisco de Arriba, people left ritual caches in the fill of different construction phases of a restricted public building on the site's acropolis (Workinger 2002:185–214). Most of the offerings consisted of several ceramic vessels. The largest offering, however, consisted of 356 greenstone beads, twenty-seven rock-crystal beads, 109 beads of an unidentified stone, two greenstone bird-head pendants, two rock-crystal pendants,

fragments of iron ore, nine locally produced miniature gray ware jars, and disarticulated animal bones. At the hilltop site of Cerro de la Virgen, a series of animating offerings was also discovered in a small and spatially restricted public building (Structure 1) reached by a stairway east of the site's large public plaza (Brzezinski, Joyce, and Barber 2017). An elite family, perhaps the community's rulers, lived in a residence only 30 m south of Structure 1 (Barber 2013). The earliest of the offerings was placed beneath the center of the initial version of Structure 1 and consisted of a small stone figure, two miniature stone thrones, a broken but nearly complete stone Rain Deity mask, fragments of a second mask, and several ceramic vessels (Figure 11.11). The stone figure exhibits a "mantle" that covers the back of the human figure and resembles the silk and husk of a maize cob, suggesting an image of personified maize (Figure 11.12). All of the stone objects with the exception of the figurine were intentionally broken during or prior to emplacement. Given that vital forces are divisible (Furst 1995), it is possible that the breaking of the objects was an act of sacrifice designed to transfer their life force to the building (Stross 1998).

Subsequent versions of this building were animated primarily through the emplacement of ceramic vessels in platform fill.

The most impressive offerings in terms of scale involved the ongoing feeding and sustenance of public buildings as animate beings, often carried out in accessible spaces. At the site of Yugüe, Sarah Barber (2013) excavated a public building that contained a series of offerings emplaced through time. One offering included twenty ceramic vessels and another consisted of fifty low-fired, coarse brown ware cylinders (Figure 11.13). A third offering consisted of two cooking jars buried beneath an occupational surface. The presence of shellfish in one of the jars suggests that human food was used as a form of sustenance provided to the divine and raises the possibility that vessels appearing empty when excavated once contained perishable food items.

The most impressive offering related to the feeding of a public building comes from a patio associated with a public complex (Complex A) adjacent to the large ceremonial plaza at Cerro de la Virgen (Brzezinski 2015). The offering covered 62 m² and included 260 ceramic vessels in

figure 11.11
Terminal Formative–period animating offering beneath Structure 1 at Cerro de la Virgen: (a) stone objects (Brzezinski et al. 2017:fig. 5); (b) offering in situ (Joyce and Barber 2015:fig. A.18). Photographs by Jeff Brzezinski.

figure 11.12
A stone figure depicting the personification of maize. Photographs by Jeff Brzezinski.

granite-slab compartments that were emplaced over an extended period of time (Figure 11.14). Additional offerings consisting largely of ceramic vessels and granite slabs have been found in other public buildings on and near the plaza, including one that yielded eighty-two whole vessels in an excavated area of only 4 m² (Brzezinski 2019). The granite-slab compartments occur only at Cerro de la Virgen and illustrate how practices associated with the emplacement of offerings varied somewhat from community to community in the lower Río Verde Valley (Joyce and Barber 2015). It is possible that the granite-slab compartments, like the stone boxes in the Oaxaca Valley, facilitated the revisiting of particular offerings after their initial emplacement (also see Hutson et al., this volume).

Cemeteries and isolated burials found in public buildings may have also involved the transference of vital forces to sustain and animate buildings (Figure 11.15). Communal cemeteries have been discovered in public buildings at Cerro de la Cruz, Yugüe, and Charco Redondo (Barber et al. 2013; Joyce 1994), often in close association with evidence of ritual feasting and offerings (Joyce and Barber

2015). If death itself was a sacrificial act through which people fed the gods (López Austin 1988:321; Monaghan 1990, 2009), then human interments in cemeteries could have been animating offerings as well. Although cemeteries are rare in other parts of Mesoamerica, bodies were, at times, interred in public buildings, including victims of human sacrifice (Schele and Freidel 1990; Sugiyama 1989). Bodies buried in cemeteries in the lower Río Verde Valley were frequently disturbed by later interments, much like sequential offerings of ceramic vessels. Indeed, caching and burial share a number of characteristics that have led archaeologists to see parallels between the two practices (Becker 1993; Hendon 2000). For example, Marshall Becker (1993) has argued for treating burials and caches as "earth offerings" of analogous, if not identical, meanings. Considered in the context of animate buildings, the interment of the dead in public spaces may represent a sharing or transference of vital forces between different kinds of community members: the living, the dead, other-than-human animate spaces, and deities.

Like the human bodies themselves, offerings that accompanied burials in cemeteries may have

figure 11.13
An offering of low-fired
ceramic vessels at Yugüe:
a) offering in situ (Joyce
and Barber 2015:fig. 3a);
and b) ceramic vessels
(Joyce and Barber 2015:fig.
A.28). Photographs by
Sarah Barber.

a

b

figure 11.14
Sections of the Cerro de la Virgen offering. Photograph by Jeff Brzezinski (Joyce and Barber 2015:fig. 3b).

nourished the buildings. Although most interments were unaccompanied by offerings, a few notable ones were present. A young man in the cemetery at Yugüe, who was probably a high-status ritual specialist, was interred wearing a pyrite mirror and holding an elaborately incised bone flute (Barber and Olivera Sánchez 2012). The complex iconography represents a personified image of the flute as an animate entity whose breath or voice makes manifest an ancestor impersonating the rain deity for purposes of agricultural fertility, as suggested by references to maize, rain, and wind (Figure 11.16). Like the flute, the pyrite mirror, as well as inlays of pyrite in the teeth of another interred individual, may have also been a witness that allowed deities or ancestors to communicate with the living and vice versa (Olivier 2003:240–265).

Surprisingly, and in contrast to the public buildings at outlying sites like Cerro de la Virgen and Yugüe, the acropolis at the urban center of Río Viejo lacks evidence for practices that would have animated and fed the building (Joyce and Barber 2015). The acropolis was by far the largest structure in the region (Figure 11.17), and its construction likely required the mobilization of labor from nearby communities, as well as from Río Viejo (Joyce, Levine, and Barber 2013). Despite large-scale excavations over the course of four field seasons, however, offerings meant to animate or sustain the building are virtually unknown. It is possible that offerings involving the initial animation of the acropolis lie deeply buried in its earliest construction levels. Sequential offerings designed to feed and sustain buildings at other sites, however, are always located in accessible places near the surface of public buildings and should have been easily exposed by the excavations. The only ceremonial practices that are visible on the acropolis are those related to ritual feasting and termination ceremonies.
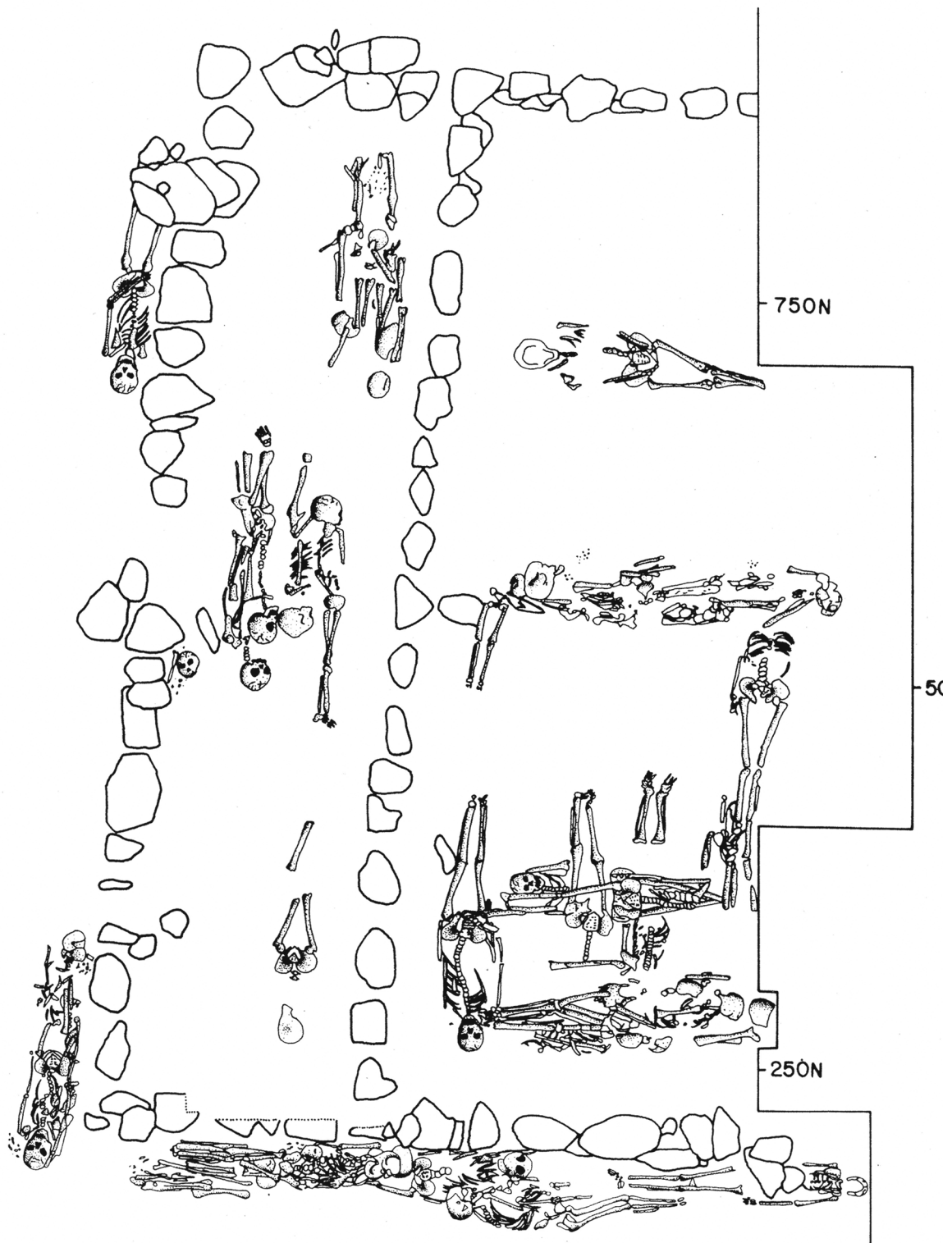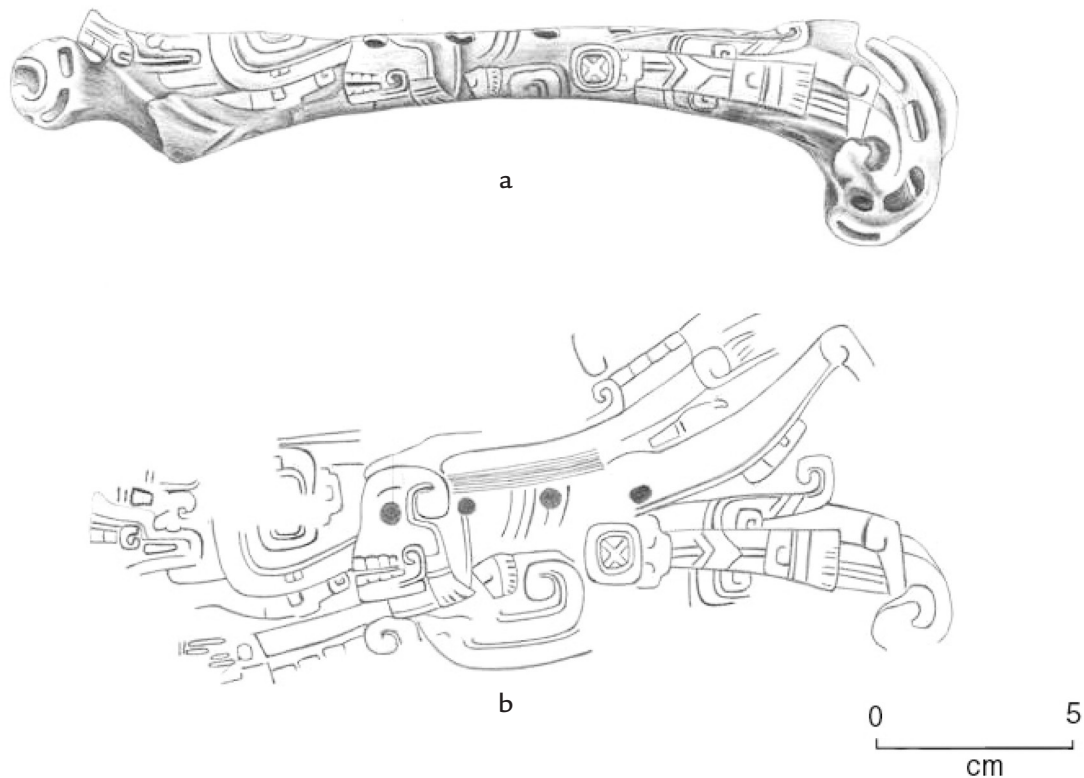
figure 11.15
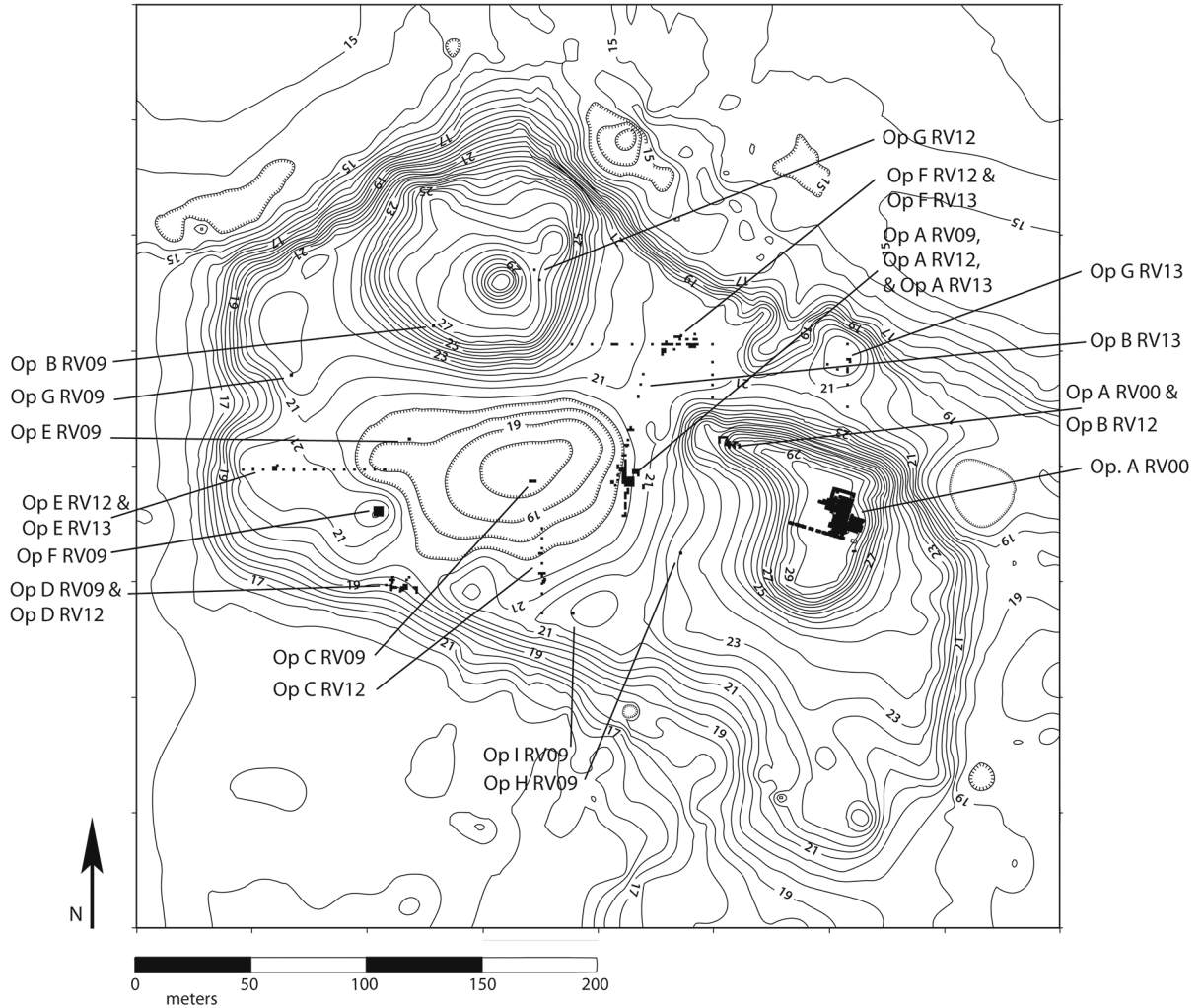The cemetery at Cerro de la Cruz (Joyce 1994:fig. 9).

figure 11.16
An offering of an incised bone flute from the burial of a ritual specialist at Yugüe: a) a drawing of the flute (Barber and Olvera Sánchez 2012:fig. 6a); and b) a rollout of the imagery (Barber, Sánchez, and Olvera 2009:fig. 4).

Termination rituals were carried out during the later Formative period in the lower Río Verde Valley probably as a means of releasing vital forces from buildings and associated objects. In most cases, these included relatively modest rituals in restricted public settings involving the destruction of the building by fire and the emplacement of modest offerings in pits (Barber 2013; Brzezinski 2015). On Río Viejo's acropolis, termination practices were much larger in scale and were carried out over a significant period of time, perhaps several decades (Figure 11.18). The acropolis was terminated and abandoned at the very end of the Terminal Formative period, as Río Viejo declined in size and political prominence (Joyce 2010). Termination ceremonies involved the burning of public buildings, followed by the capping of the acropolis by thin fill layers, some containing high densities of broken ceramics. In several areas, pits were then dug into these fill layers in which sherds and whole or partial vessels were placed.

These practices resemble evidence of termination ceremonies found in other parts of Mesoamerica (e.g., Hutson et al., this volume; Mock 1998; Stanton, Brown, and Pagliaro 2008).

Overall, the evidence from the lower Río Verde Valley shows that animating practices were carried out in public buildings throughout the region and included both the interment of objects and perhaps human bodies (Joyce et al. 2016). The scale of some offerings, particularly involving the sustenance of public buildings, far exceeded the Formative-period offerings in the Valley of Oaxaca. In fact, at Yugüe, San Francisco de Arriba, and especially Cerro de la Virgen—sites where public buildings have been extensively investigated—most areas of Formative-period public space that were excavated yielded impressive subfloor offerings. The scale of both human bodies and offerings emplaced in public buildings is distinctive relative to practices elsewhere in Mesoamerica. Curiously, the one

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Op G RV12

Op F RV12 &
Op F RV13

Op A RV09,
Op A RV12,
& Op A RV13

Op G RV13

Op B RV13

Op A RV00 &
Op B RV12

Op. A RV00

Op B RV09

Op G RV09

Op E RV09

Op E RV12 &
Op E RV13

Op F RV09

Op D RV09 &
Op D RV12

Op C RV09

Op C RV12

Op I RV09

Op H RV09

N

a

b

figure 11.17

The acropolis at Río Viejo: a) a topographic map showing the locations of excavations; and b) a photograph of the acropolis. Drafted and photographed by Arthur Joyce.

figure 11.18
Termination rituals at the Río Viejo acropolis: a) the remnants of a burned building; and b) a pit filled with broken ceramic vessels. Photographs by Robert Markens and Jeff Brzezinski.

a

b

exception to this pattern in the lower Río Verde Valley region was the acropolis at Río Viejo.

Our data suggest that public buildings viewed as living, divine beings were central to the constitution of community in the lower Río Verde Valley (Joyce and Barber 2015). Animating practices instantiated communities as people, ancestors, deities, witnesses, and index objects came together in ceremonies that transferred vital forces to public buildings or released those forces at closure. The interment of human bodies in public buildings linked these structures to the households and families from which the deceased originated, while ornaments linked offerings to living bodies. The interment of locally made pottery tied public buildings to the varied producers and production

loci of the vessels. Feasts, perhaps associated with animating ceremonies, instantiated community in commensalism, creating bonds and obligations much like modern indigenous fiestas do in Mesoamerica (Greenberg 1981; Monaghan 1995). In feasting, people shared in the sustenance provided by deities in return for acts of sacrifice as defined by the sacred covenant.

At the same time, animating practices in more restricted public settings, such as on the acropolis at San Francisco de Arriba or Structure 1 at Cerro de la Virgen, likely instantiated social distinctions related to status and access to the divine. The evidence suggests that these ceremonies were carried out by nobility with most of the community excluded. Structure 1 at Cerro de la Virgen was located in close spatial proximity to an elite residence, implying that the residents may have been primarily responsible for the care of the animate building. Offerings included exotic imported goods (greenstone, stone masks) and works that required specialized skill to manufacture (stone artifacts in Structure 1 at Cerro de la Virgen), which were typically restricted to the elite. Although none of the offerings seem to communicate liturgies to the same extent as the Structure 35 offering at San José Mogote, they certainly contain references to the sacred covenant in the form of iconography and substances referencing the Rain Deity, sacrifice, and possibly personified maize (Brzezinski, Joyce, and Barber 2017).

Animating Public Buildings in the Mixtec Highlands

The highland Mixteca region is located to the west of the Valley of Oaxaca and was inhabited by Mixtec-speaking peoples in the Pre-Columbian era, as it is today. During the later Formative period, perhaps a dozen urban hilltop centers emerged in the Mixteca, and public architecture has been excavated at Yucuita, Monte Negro, Cerro Jazmín, Huamelulpan, and Cerro de las Minas (Acosta and Romero 1992; Gaxiola 1984; Pérez Rodríguez et al. 2017; Winter 1982, 2007).

Unlike in the Valley of Oaxaca and the lower Río Verde Valley, evidence from the Mixteca indicates that animating practices may not have been associated with public buildings at this time, since offerings have not been reported (Acosta and Romero 1992; Gaxiola 1984; Pérez Rodríguez et al. 2017; Winter 1982, 2007). At Monte Negro and Cerro Jazmín, the burning of some public buildings at the time of their abandonment, as well as instances of whole vessels left on the floors of temples, raises the possibility of termination rituals (Acosta and Romero 1992:75–87; Pérez Rodríguez et al. 2017), although this pattern is not common at other sites and could have resulted from other kinds of abandonment processes. Possible animating offerings in the Mixteca are limited to human interments found in a few public buildings (Acosta and Romero 1992; Jeffrey Blomster, personal communication, 2017; Pérez Rodríguez et al. 2017), and four skulls with holes drilled in the forehead for suspension accompanied by an elaborate offering associated with an altar at Huamelulpan (Gaxiola 1984:47–55). More excavations are needed in public buildings before we can be definitive about the lack of animating practices, however.

Conclusions

The results of this comparative study show major variation in Formative-period animating practices in public buildings in Oaxaca. In the Valley of Oaxaca, animating practices were largely restricted to the elite and involved exotic and highly valued objects. In the lower Río Verde Valley, practices involving the initial animation of public buildings, especially if they were spatially restricted, were likely limited to elites and involved special offerings, while those associated with the ongoing sustenance of buildings appear to have been accessible to the larger community. In the Mixteca, clear evidence for animating practices has not been found. Needless to say, the data from the three regions show that animating practices varied greatly.

One question raised by this review is whether the variability in animating acts simply reflects

different means through which vital forces were transferred to buildings based on similar understandings of the nature of being, or did this variation instantiate significantly different ontologies (cf. Kosiba, this volume; Swenson 2015)? Taking into consideration all of the animating entities bundled in offerings within public buildings in the Valley of Oaxaca and the lower Río Verde Valley, I see a considerable degree of overlap (e.g., ceramics, greenstone, human and animal remains, bodily ornaments, deity masks, objects depicting personified maize, etc.). One element with significant variation, however, is the human agents contributing to animating practices. In the Valley of Oaxaca, such acts appear to have been carried out primarily by elites, while in the lower Río Verde Valley the broader community and elites were entangled in the materialities through which public buildings were animated. This raises the possibility that what distinguished the nature of nobles and non-nobles, especially in regard to how they related to other animate entities, differed in the Valley of Oaxaca relative to the lower Río Verde Valley. Specifically, nobles in the Valley of Oaxaca had abilities that allowed them to contribute to animating agency, while commoners did not. It is also possible that the ontological aspects of the animating abilities of elites were to some extent authorized by political authorities. This does not appear to have been the case in the lower Río Verde Valley, where elites and commoners alike contributed to and engaged with animating agencies.

The data from the Mixteca seem even more puzzling, although Monaghan (1998:50) anticipated the results of this study based on his ethnographic research. He found that among the contemporary Mixtecs of Nuyoo, all things were viewed as alive, with the exception of burned rocks (Monaghan 1995:98). Why then would buildings or other things need to be animated (Monaghan 1998:50)? He anticipates at most a simple offering to the Earth Lords at the onset of construction, rather than specifically animating practices. Although I am not arguing for continuity between one small section of the Mixteca today and a much larger area two thousand years ago, the parallel is intriguing. Does

the lack of evidence for animating practices in the Mixteca also suggest a distinct ontology, such that life was the initial state of being for nearly all entities or that humans lacked the agency to transfer vital forces to buildings? If so, then public buildings in the Mixteca also seemingly lack evidence for the kinds of relationships that constitute personhood among the Maya (Hutson et al., this volume). In contrast, some of these relationships, involving the care and nourishment of public buildings, can be seen in the Formative-period Valley of Oaxaca and in the lower Río Verde Valley region.

Ontological questions aside, the evidence strongly indicates that animating practices had political implications, at least in the Valley of Oaxaca and the lower Río Verde Valley (Joyce and Barber 2015). In both regions, animating practices were among a suite of religious innovations that developed during the later Formative period, including the massive scaling up of public architecture and ceremony, human sacrifice, and the earliest manifestations of divinities like the Rain God. Regardless of why buildings began to be subjects of animating practices, the people and other-than-human beings that came together to animate these buildings increasingly differentiated nobles and commoners and contributed to unequal wealth and political power.

Public buildings themselves were likely important sources of political power, particularly for elites in the Valley of Oaxaca who engaged with animate buildings in ceremonial performances and acted as their caretakers. As instantiations of the animating forces that were transferred to and concentrated within public buildings, these structures were powerful beings and likely conduits between humans and the divine. The spatially restricted settings, exotic materials, and specialized knowledge and abilities that were fundamental components of animating acts in the Valley of Oaxaca made nobles central to the practices through which public buildings were animated. These features were evident even in some of the earliest animating practices at San José Mogote and only became more prominent with the founding of Monte Albán as assemblages involving nobles and public buildings increasingly

mediated between people and divinities. The centrality of nobles in animating practices was established, whether it was a result of their inherent being or simply because elites had the knowledge, influence, connections, and economic resources to sponsor the construction of public buildings and acquire the exotic materials necessary for their animation. The presence of modest offerings in construction fill at Monte Albán leaves open the possibility that commoners made animating offerings, if only informally.

In the lower Río Verde Valley, special staging, restricted participation, exotic objects, and special knowledge and abilities are also evident in practices involving the initial animation of buildings such as at Structure 1 at Cerro de la Virgen (Brzezinski, Joyce, and Barber 2017). As in the highlands, these practices contributed to the increasing differentiation of coastal elites from commoners. The materiality of animating practices on the coast, however, was more constraining in this regard relative to conditions in the highlands. As argued by myself and Barber (2015), public buildings were central to the assemblages that constituted local communities like Cerro de la Cruz, Yugüe, and Cerro de la Virgen. Although local leaders were prominent in the initial animation of these buildings, the larger community was involved in their ongoing feeding and sustenance through the emplacement of the bodies of ancestors, as well as ceramic vessels and their contents. The persistence and durability of the bones of ancestors and ceremonial offerings emplaced within public facilities at outlying sites tightly bound community members—local elites and commoners alike—to these animate buildings who, as social beings, were community members as well. The construction of the acropolis at Río Viejo engaged people from multiple communities in a large-scale collective works project and created the capacity for reorganizing and expanding the scale

of assemblages that could have stabilized a politically centralized polity and driven greater inequalities in wealth, status, and access to the divine, as it did in the Valley of Oaxaca. At the same time, people were pulled away from their obligations to local community members, including public buildings, creating sites of tension and potential conflict between local and regional collectivities and authorities. These tensions are seen in the lack of offerings in the acropolis, which would have directly competed with the feeding of public buildings in local communities. The result was that the multi-community links and centralized political authority that could have come to define a polity were fleeting and unstable, and Río Viejo collapsed shortly after its emergence as a political center.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that animating practices in Mesoamerica could be highly variable in both their expression and political implications. While animating practices associated with public buildings facilitated political inequality and centralization in the Valley of Oaxaca, the materiality of animate buildings constrained the scaling up of political authority in the lower Río Verde Valley.

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