7 The founding of Monte Albán
Sacred propositions and social practices

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The founding of Monte Albán at about 500 BC in the Valley of Oaxaca (Figure 7.1) was one of the most dramatic social and political developments in the history of Pre-Columbian civilization. During Monte Albán's earliest period of occupation, Period I in the Oaxaca Valley ceramic chronology (500 – 100 BC), the site grew to become one of the largest in Mesoamerica at the time (Blanton 1978: 36). Social complexity also rose dramatically and included the emergence of distinct noble and commoner classes (Joyce 1997; Kowalewski *et al.* 1989). The power of Monte Albán's nobility was in part built on ideological changes and the increasing control of politico-religious knowledge and institutions (Joyce and Winter 1996; Marcus and Flannery 1994). The social and political changes set in motion by the founding of Monte Albán established the general framework of urban Oaxaca Valley society that would continue until the collapse of the Monte Albán polity around AD 800.

Most current models for the founding and early development of Monte Albán focus on interpolity competition and conflict as a major causal factor in the establishment of the urban hilltop center. These models argue that Monte Albán was founded in response to threats posed by competing polities either within the Valley of Oaxaca (Marcus and Flannery 1996) or in neighboring regions (Blanton 1978: 40). The case for interpolity competition as a factor in the founding of Monte Albán is compelling. However, viewing the founding of Monte Albán as solely a society-wide response to an external threat underplays the complex changes in intrasocietal social practices that constituted this major transformation. This article elaborates on my previous work on agency, ideology, and power in the founding and early development of Monte Albán (Joyce 1997; Joyce and Winter 1996). I explore the founding of Monte Albán based on a theoretical perspective rooted in practice theory (Ortner 1984; Sewell 1992) that examines the intrasocietal dynamics of social change.

Agency, structure, power, and ideology

Practice theories argue that sociocultural change results from human agency (Archer 1996; Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979, 1984; Hodder 1991; Sewell 1992; Shanks and Tilley 1988). Agency refers to the actions of individual social actors embedded within a broader socio-cultural and ecological setting (for other views, see Pauketat, Shackel, this volume). Individuals have motivation, purpose, and interests while entities like social groups, coalitions, and institutions do not have goals beyond those that are negotiated by their members (see Bell 1992; Giddens 1979: 94–5). Agency, however, does not imply a voluntarism in which atomistic individuals are driven solely by personal motivations. Agency cannot be considered apart from its structural context. Structure consists of principles and resources
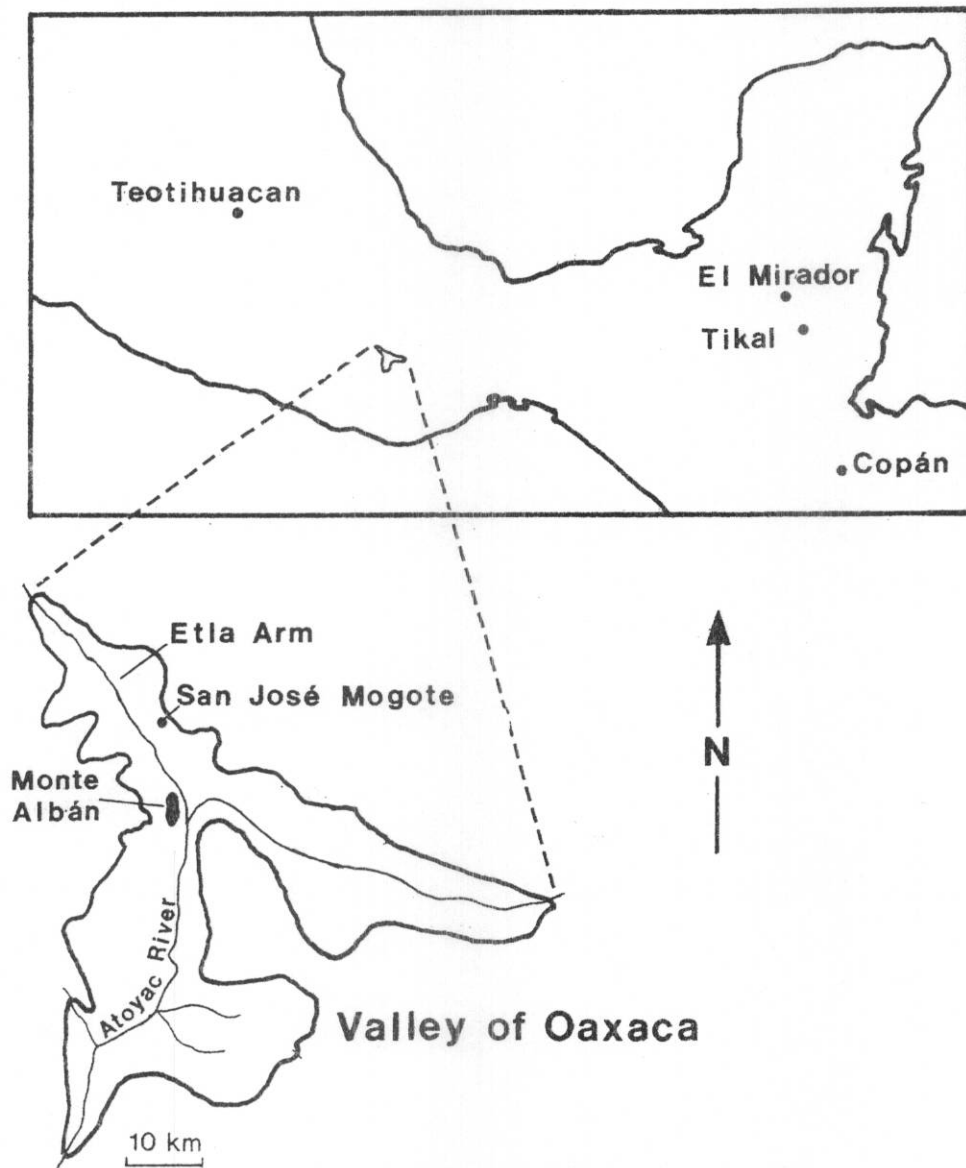
Figure 7.1 Map of Mesoamerica showing sites mentioned in the text

that both enable and constrain agency such as religious beliefs or prestige goods. Principles include symbols and meanings as well as rules for behavior that are learned, both directly and indirectly, from the people with whom one interacts. In Bourdieu's (1977) terms, structure is interiorized in the dispositions of individual actors as habitus. These dispositions, however, are not simply the imprinting of structural principles on the individual mind. To fully understand agency we must also consider human psychology and how personality develops in interaction with the structural environment (Cowgill, this volume; Ortner 1984). Likewise, principles are neither rigid nor inflexible and there is constant negotiation

and struggle over structures of signification, legitimation, and domination (Giddens 1979). Individual agents are, thus, decentered subjects whose identities are in part determined by their structural settings, but who are competent and knowledgeable about those settings. The interests of individual actors and their strategies for achieving those interests will be both enabled and constrained, but not entirely determined, by the structural setting, especially through various affiliations with interest groups like class, kinship, gender, faction, polity, community, and ethnicity (Cowgill, this volume; also Brumfiel 1992; Brumfiel and Fox 1994; Earle 1991; Gero and Conkey 1991; Hodder 1991; McGuire 1992).

Social systems, or patterns of social behavior within groups, are the outcome of regularized practices. In turn, regularized practices imply rules about how one should behave, although different actors may infer somewhat different rules, expectations, and proscriptions from their understandings of the structural setting (Giddens 1979). As products of unique histories, agents can distance themselves from rules and creatively strategize to alter system and structure (Hodder, this volume; Ortner 1984). Therefore, it is the structurally conditioned and situated actions of individuals that result in social systems and which in turn reproduce or change structure, thereby creating the setting for future action. Imperfect knowledge, unacknowledged conditions, and the often unpredictable outcomes of social action, however, can result in unintended consequences over which agents have no control.

In this view of the agency–structure dialectic, power is the transformative capacity of an agent to achieve an outcome which can either reproduce or change system and structure (Giddens 1979: 88–94). Power, however, is not a possession of individuals. The transformative capacity of agents is determined by the compromise struck between their creativity, skill, and awareness of the world along with structures of domination that create asymmetries in access to resources. All people have some power, even if it is in the form of passive resistance, thus the consequences of the actions of even the least powerful can affect system and structure (Walker and Lucero, Shackel, this volume). In the works of Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977), structural contradictions, especially those actualized in conflict, often lead to change. Contradictions usually revolve around major social categories such as class, gender, ethnicity, and community affiliation. However, ideology as an aspect of structure, often conceals domination so that contradictions do not automatically lead to conflict. In turn, subordinates always have some degree of penetration of dominant ideologies (Shackel, this volume). In addition, as will be demonstrated in the case study to follow, dominant ideologies often provide the framework in which subordinates can resist (Scott 1990).

Power and the sacred covenant in prehispanic Oaxaca

The structures of domination that contributed to political power among the Otomanguean-speakers of Oaxaca, as well as among other prehispanic Mesoamericans, involved sacred propositions (Drennan 1976a; Marcus 1989; Monaghan 1994; Schele and Freidel 1990). Ethnographic and ethnohistorical evidence can be used to unlock the meanings of these sacred propositions for prehispanic peoples. While ritual practices and the political significance of religious belief have changed, there is considerable evidence suggesting that basic beliefs about the relationship of people to the sacred, especially the important role of sacrifice, have persisted from the Formative period (1800 BC – AD 200) to the present (Marcus and Flannery 1994; Monaghan 1994; Schele and Freidel 1990).

At the time of the Spanish Conquest, Otomanguean religion was based on the belief in a vital force that animated all living things (Marcus and Flannery 1994; Monaghan 1994,

1995). For the Oaxaca Valley Zapotec, this vital force was known as *pée*. *Pée* was manifest not only in living things but in a range of natural and supernatural forces/deities. The most powerful of Otomanguean deities, representing the two great halves of the cosmos, were associated with the earth and sky/rain/lightning. In her treatment of Otomanguean religion and ideology in the Formative period, Joyce Marcus (1989) has focused on the role of ancestor worship in the creation and legitimation of elite power. She argues that the power of nobles was legitimated because elite ancestors were closely associated with supernatural forces, especially the powerful forces associated with earth and sky. Living Zapotec elites, acting as ritual specialists, could access these supernatural forces by contacting their ancestors through various petitions and offerings.

While elite ancestors were important in Oaxacan religion, I would like to stress the ideological implications of another element of Pre-Columbian religion. Building on the work of John Monaghan (1990, 1994, 1995), the central aspect of Otomanguean and other Mesoamerican religions can be understood as a covenant formed between humans and the supernatural forces/deities that control the cosmos, especially those of earth and sky. The covenant is a creation myth setting out the fundamental relationships between humans and the sacred. Versions of this creation myth are central themes in many sixteenth-century indigenous documents, including the Mixtec codices (Vienna and Nuttall), the Quiché Maya *Popol Vuh*, and in Mexica writing and oral literature (Hamann n.d.; Monaghan 1990, 1994; Taggart 1983; Tedlock 1986). Iconographic representations of portions of this creation myth have also been found on sculpture as well as painted pottery and murals that date to the Formative and Classic periods (Schele and Freidel 1990). Versions of the sacred covenant are still found among traditional Mixtec communities in Oaxaca (Monaghan 1994, 1995). Mixtec creation stories speak of the dawning of the current sun and the destruction of the *ñuhu*, the immortal and uncivilized "stone people" of the previous creation. The first Mixtecs emerge from a cave or a cleft in the earth. Mixtec ancestors form a covenant with the powerful deities of earth and rain/sky allowing them to practice agriculture. The covenant is necessary because the turning of the soil and the harvesting and consumption of maize, the daughter of the earth and rain, causes the deities great pain. In return for being allowed to practice agriculture, humans are required to sacrifice their bodies in death, going into the earth where they are assimilated by the deities. The contemporary Nuyooteco Mixtecs studied by Monaghan (1990: 562–3) describe this covenant by saying: "we eat the earth and the earth eats us."

The covenant establishes relationships of debt and merit between humans and the sacred, with sacrifice as a fundamental condition of human existence (Monaghan in press). In prehispanic Mesoamerica there were many forms of sacrifice in addition to offering bodies to the earth in burial. People invoked the covenant through a variety of sacrificial practices, including human sacrifice and the autosacrificial letting of blood by piercing parts of the body such as the tongue or genitals (Boone 1984; Schele and Miller 1986). Many offerings of goods and labor made to the nobility also appear to have been conceived of as forms of sacrifice (Monaghan 1994: 23). By activating this covenantial relationship through sacrifice, agents actively petitioned supernaturals to bring fertility.

Mesoamerican elites occupied a special place in relation to the sacred covenant and the acts of sacrifice it required. In several versions of the covenant the ancestors who made the first sacrifice to the earth and sky were elite priests (Hamann n.d.; Monaghan 1990). Human and autosacrifice performed by and on the bodies of nobles were the most potent form of sacrifice (Boone 1984; King 1988; Schele and Miller 1986). Thus, sacrifice was a kind of social contract between commoners, elites, and supernaturals (Monaghan 1994: 23)

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The covenant was a key aspect of prehispanic ideologies since it established and reinforced both the hierarchical relationship between people and deities and that between commoners and nobles (Monaghan 1994). The interests of the elite were universalized by linking their ritual practices to the maintenance of fertility and the prosperity of all people. Noble status was reified by tracing the close relationship between elites and the sacred to the dawn of the current creation. Commoners, however, were not entirely dependent on elites for contact with the sacred since they could perform rituals, including certain forms of sacrifice, independent of the nobility.

Many key elements of the sacred covenant have a deep history in Mesoamerica and can be considered examples of the long-term structure of meaning (Hodder 1991: 83–94). Evidence for autosacrificial bloodletting (Flannery 1976a; Grove 1987; Joyce *et al.* 1991) and indications that elites acted as intermediaries between commoners and supernaturals (Grove and Gillespie 1992) date to the Early Formative period (1800 – 850 BC). There is possible Early Formative iconographic evidence for the division of the supernatural into realms of earth and sky (Marcus 1989; Reilly 1996). Iconographic and burial evidence for human sacrifice, however, is very limited until the end of the Middle Formative (Angulo 1987; Clark *et al.* n.d.: 17; Reilly 1989: 16; Sedat and Sharer 1984). Most Middle Formative (850 – 500 BC) iconographic representations of human sacrifice are located in settings with little available space, suggesting restricted participation in rituals associated with these images (Grove and Angulo 1987; Reilly 1989: 16).

While practices involving the sacred covenant can be traced far back in Mesoamerican prehistory, it is clear that significant changes occured in how the covenant was defined and in the power relations that it constituted (see Conrad and Demarest 1984; Grove and Gillespie 1992; Joyce and Winter 1996; Monaghan 1994; Schele and Freidel 1990). In particular, the period from the late Middle Formative through the Late Formative, between roughly 700 and 100 BC, was a time of major changes in power relations in Oaxaca and other regions of Mesoamerica that were in part driven by struggle over peoples' relations to the sacred.

System/structure in Middle Formative Oaxaca

Archaeological research in the Valley of Oaxaca has provided a detailed picture of the structural and social system setting among competing chiefdoms of the Middle Formative period (Blanton *et al.* 1993; Drennan 1976b; Feinman 1991; Flannery 1976b; Marcus 1989; Marcus and Flannery 1996; Whalen 1981). The dominant center was San José Mogote located in the northern, or Etla, arm of the valley. San José Mogote had been the largest community in the region since the beginning of the Early Formative due, in part, to its advantageous location in the most fertile area of the valley. By the Guadalupe phase (850 – 700 BC), San José Mogote had reached a size of 70 hectares (ha), making it roughly twenty

times larger than any other settlement in the valley (Flannery and Marcus 1983a). A cluster of about a dozen sites in the Etla arm appear to have been communities subject to San José Mogote elites.

As in other chiefdoms, the power of Middle Formative Oaxacan elites appears to have been manifest in their ability to attract followers either directly or through alliances with subordinate elites at other sites. Marcus and Flannery (1996: 93 – 120) argue that elite generosity was an important factor in commoners' decisions to align themselves with particular elites and provide labor and resources. Elites demonstrated their generosity by providing gifts to followers, including prestige goods and food, presumably during ritual feasting. The exchanges of prestige goods and perhaps intermarriage, were used to cement alliances with other elites. There is little evidence, however, that elites had either direct economic control over land or centralized stores (Feinman 1991), and until the Rosario phase (700 – 500 BC) there is little evidence that they had significant coercive power.

Religious principles appear to have been a key to defining generosity, and therefore power, in Middle Formative chiefdoms of Oaxaca (Feinman 1991; Marcus 1989). Archaeological evidence suggests that the agency of people at all status levels involved contacting the sacred through ritual practices, including autosacrifice (Flannery 1976a; King 1997). However, ritual paraphernalia, especially exotic goods obtained from distant regions, were more abundant in excavations of high status households (Flannery 1976a; Marcus 1989). In particular, certain kinds of exotic bloodletting implements, such as stingray spines, were associated with elites (Marcus and Flannery 1994: 62). These data suggest that some elites carried out special sacrificial rituals which may have been another form of generosity used to attract followers. As delineated in the sacred covenant, Middle Formative elites may have been seen as having a closer relationship to the supernatural forces that controlled the cosmos, especially those of earth and sky (Marcus 1989).

While commoners were able to conduct various rituals, they also may have contacted the sacred indirectly, by "sacrificing" goods and labor to elites in return for special ritual services. At chiefly centers, commoners contributed their labor to construct public buildings for communal ritual performances presumably led by elite ritual specialists (Marcus and Flannery 1996). By the Guadalupe phase (850 – 700 BC), public buildings consisted of impressive wattle-and-daub temples built on pyramidal platforms measuring up to 2 m in height and 15 m wide. The rituals perfomed in these buildings probably attracted people from surrounding communities and presumably were directed by elites.

In Middle Formative Oaxaca, sacrifice in the context of the sacred covenant appears to have been a key idiom in the construction and negotiation of both elite and commoner agencies. Religious beliefs were ideological, in that they legitimated the advantages that elites had in terms of acquiring surplus goods and labor. Commoners, in turn, gained from their association with powerful elites. Elites attracted followers both by providing access to prestige goods and by conducting important rituals. Commoners had the means to express either allegiance to or distance from particular nobles through their choice of those to whom they sacrificed goods and labor. Commoners could also express resistance to elite authority by contacting the sacred without the assistance of elite ritual specialists.

In many chiefdoms, the need to attract clients without significant coercion creates intense factional competition among elites (Earle 1978, 1991: 13; Redmond 1994). Paramount chiefs have to guard against raids by competing chiefs from other polities, as well as against rebellions by subordinate elites. The fact that San José Mogote was by far the largest community in the Oaxaca Valley from the Tierras Largas phase (1450 – 1150 BC) until the end of the Rosario phase (700 – 500 BC) suggests that elites at the site were

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successful in coalition building in the face of interelite competition. In fact, until the Rosario phase, there is little evidence in the Valley of Oaxaca for warfare (Marcus and Flannery 1996), suggesting that interpolity conflict was limited to low-level raiding. It was advantageous for commoners to settle at San José Mogote to gain access to prestige goods, potent rituals, and perhaps defense against occasional raids. The large coalition that San José Mogote elites built, in turn, reinforced their ability to mobilize labor and resources, construct impressive public buildings, defend against raids from competing chiefs, and forge exchange relations with nobles from distant polities. Through much of the Formative period, the rulers of San José Mogote appear to have been the most powerful in the valley. Yet, by the Rosario phase evidence suggests increasing interelite and factional competition. At San José Mogote, these developments created a political crisis for elites and their followers.

A political crisis at San José Mogote

During the Rosario phase (700 – 500 BC), immediately preceding the founding of Monte Albán, the Oaxaca Valley was occupied by several competing polities, probably complex chiefdoms (Kowalewski *et al.* 1989). The dominant center in the valley continued to be San José Mogote, but evidence suggests that its rulers were struggling to maintain control of their coalition of supporters in the face of intensifying factional competition.

Survey and excavation data from the Oaxaca Valley suggest increasing competition, including warfare, among nobles and their followers (Marcus and Flannery 1996). Evidence for warfare includes a high frequency of structures destroyed by fire and a sparsely occupied buffer-zone separating the Etla arm of the valley from the two other arms which were occupied by competing polities (Kowalewski *et al.* 1989: 70–5). Status competition may explain the large increase in monumental building activities taking place at San José Mogote and other sites (Flannery and Marcus 1983a; Kowalewski *et al.* 1989: 78). At San José Mogote, public buildings were concentrated on Mound 1, a natural hill architecturally modified into a huge platform (Flannery and Marcus 1983a). Mound 1 supported a large wattle-and-daub temple built on a substructure (Building 28). During the Rosario phase, the temple on Building 28 was burned to the ground, perhaps as a result of raiding (Marcus and Flannery 1996: 129). If Marcus and Flannery are correct, then the most restricted and ritually important part of the site had been penetrated by a raiding party.

While it is not clear why factional and inter-elite competition increased during the Rosario phase, such competition would have created problems for nobles and commoners alike. As one response, San José Mogote nobles may have increased their demands for goods and labor from commoners, as suggested by the increase in the scale of monumental construction on site. In turn, commoners had a number of potential strategies for dealing with the hardships created both by conflict and by increasing elite demands for goods and labor, which would have been burdensome even if viewed in sacrificial terms. Commoners could have intensified agricultural production to provide resources to nobles. Some commoners may have withdrawn from elite sponsored ceremonies and communicated with the sacred solely through private household rituals (King 1997; Marcus and Flannery 1994), although they might have risked sanctions from elites. Archaeological data suggest, however, that many commoners in the Etla arm of the valley resisted increasing elite demands by "voting with their feet." San José Mogote declined from roughly 70 ha during the Guadalupe phase to 33.7 ha by the Rosario phase (Kowalewski *et al.* 1989: 72–7) and population in the Oaxaca Valley as a whole was more evenly distributed, suggesting that

the Etla arm lost some of its demographic advantage (Blanton *et al.* 1993: 66).[1] The combined evidence for a decline in the population of commoners, along with greater monumental construction activities, suggest increased per capita labor demands at San José Mogote.

This loss of followers apparently created a crisis for nobles at San José Mogote. Immediately following the burning of the Structure 28 temple, archaeological evidence suggests major changes in the use of Mound 1 that may have been the result of an elite response to this political crisis. After the temple was destroyed, a series of high-status residences were built over the ruins (Flannery and Marcus 1983a). Ritual objects associated with these residences included an obsidian bloodletter and a ceramic effigy brazier (Marcus and Flannery 1996: 131–3). Also associated with these elite residences were two tombs, the first formal stone masonry tombs known in the Oaxaca Valley. These data represent a significant change in the use of Mound 1, from an area strictly for public ceremonial activities to a combination of public politico-religious buildings and elite residences in a distinct precinct.

Yet another possible elite response to increasing factionalism during the late Rosario phase concerns human sacrifice. The first good evidence for ritual human sacrifice in the Oaxaca Valley is found on Mound 1 at San José Mogote (Marcus and Flannery 1996: 129–30). Monument 3 (Figure 7.2) on Mound 1 depicts a naked man with eyes closed. The trilobe heart glyph is shown on his chest with blood emanating from the heart, indicating that he was a sacrificial victim. The person on Monument 3 is identified as 1-Eye, his name in the 260-day ritual calendar.[2] If Monument 3 is correctly dated to the late Rosario phase (cf. Cahn and Winter 1993), it would be the first example of a *danzante* sculpture. The *danzantes* consist of over 310 carved stones at Monte Albán that, like Monument 3, depict sacrificial victims (Figure 7.3). Given that the *danzantes* are shown naked except for head gear, most researchers agree that they were humiliated war captives (Coe 1962; Marcus 1976; Scott 1978). In addition to the iconography of Monument 3, a burial interred under a wall of one of the high-status houses on Mound 1 has been interpreted as a sacrificial victim (Flannery and Marcus 1983a: 58).

The creation of an elite-ceremonial precinct on Mound 1, coupled with the evidence for human sacrifice, suggests a change in structural principles involving the sacred covenant. Based on the available data, these developments seem to have been part of a creative, though perhaps risky, elite strategy to bolster commoner support and reinforce their coalition. The demographic decline at San José Mogote suggests that the traditional means that Etla nobles used to attract followers and mobilize resources, by appeal to the covenant, were no longer as effective as they once were. Commoners appear to have been resisting elite demands to increase sacrificial offerings of goods and, especially, labor. In response, nobles acted, still through the sacred covenant, to provide supporters with a more potent form of sacrificial offering: human sacrifice. By offering human sacrifices to the deities of earth and sky, nobles at San José Mogote were demonstrating both their ritual potency and their generosity to supporters. In terms of the sacred covenant, the innovation of human sacrifice would have been familiar to commoners and would have been an attempt to make their allegiance to nobles appear more attractive.

Elite generosity would have been especially evident if the new practice of human sacrifice was also restricted largely to captured elites (Boone 1984; Freidel 1986). While human sacrifice may have been known from other regions, the Mound 1 data at San José Mogote represent the earliest evidence for such rituals in Oaxaca. Given the physical setting of Monument 3, the audience for these sacrifices may have been restricted, much like the

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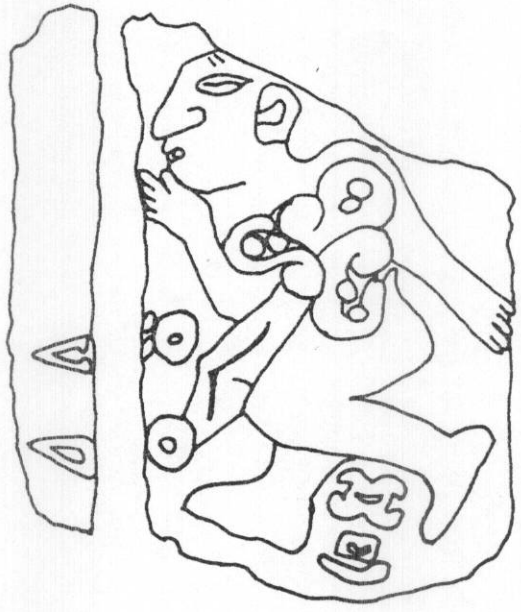hile human
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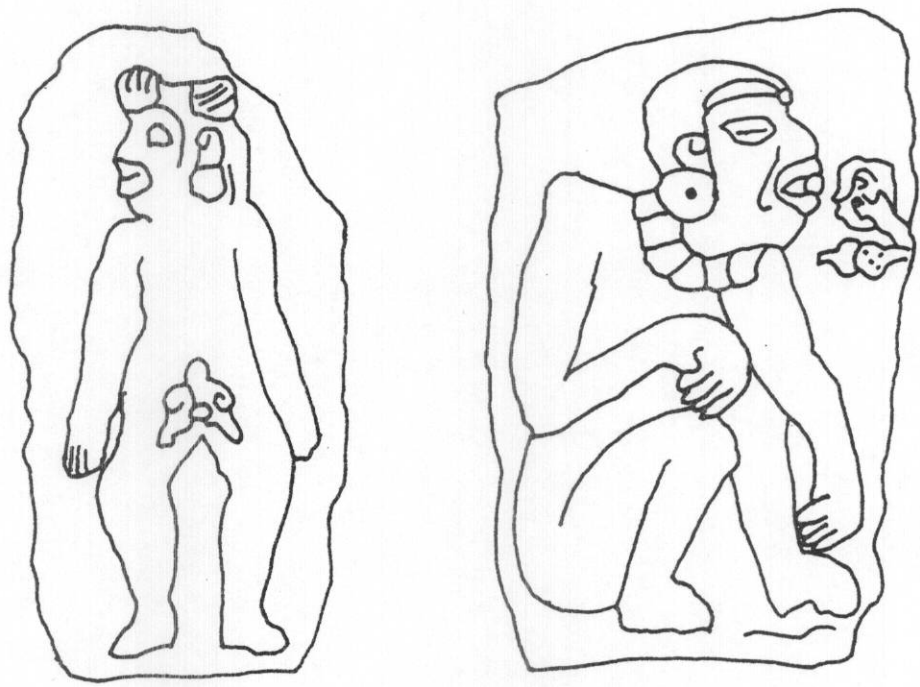Source: redrawn from Flannery and Marcus 1998a: Figure 3.10

Figure 7.3 Late Formative danzante portraits from Monte Albán

Source: redrawn from Scott 1978

setting of Middle Formative iconography dealing with human sacrifice in other parts of Mesoamerica (Grove and Angulo 1987; Reilly 1989: 16).

A strong indication that the changes of the late Rosario phase (ca. 600 – 500 BC) involved manipulation of ultimate sacred propositions is the change in the orientation of new buildings erected on Mound 1. The structures built on Mound 1 after the burning of the temple were all oriented 3° to 6° east of north which represents a change from the 8° west of north orientation of earlier public buildings throughout the valley. By 500 BC, 3° to 6° east of north would become the dominant orientation of public buildings at Monte Albán (Peeler and Winter 1992). In prehispanic Mesoamerican world views, there was a close association between site orientations and layouts, the movement of celestial bodies/deities, and conceptions of time (Ashmore 1991; Sugiyama 1993).

Despite the attempt of nobles to alter sacred propositions and the social practices that they implied, no major social transformation occurred at San José Mogote. In about 500 BC, monumental construction activities on Mound 1 ceased and the site may have declined still further in size (Kowalewski et al. 1989: 89–90; Marcus and Flannery 1996: 139). Other Rosario phase sites in the Etla arm also declined in size or were completely abandoned (Drennan 1976b; Flannery and Marcus 1983b; Kowalewski et al. 1989: 91; Winter 1972). At the same time, the hilltop center of Monte Albán was founded and rapidly grew into the largest community in the Valley of Oaxaca.

It is not clear why the people who were embracing this new set of beliefs and practices left San José Mogote to found Monte Albán. Factional competition and conflict may have been so intense that a more effective location for defense was sought (Blanton 1978; Marcus and Flannery 1996). The promotion of a new view of the sacred covenant may have been resisted by a significant proportion of people in the San José Mogote polity, in effect creating a legitimation crisis and necessitating a move to a new location. It may also have been difficult to construct a new discourse that would come to legitimize the power relations of the emerging Monte Albán state literally on the foundations of the earlier San José Mogote chiefdom. Nobles who were attempting to alter the principles and practices of the sacred covenant were apparently not entirely successful in consolidating power at San José Mogote. Their move to Monte Albán ultimately resulted in a structural transformation that profoundly altered systems of social relations in Oaxaca in ways that even the founders of the site did not forsee.

The founding of Monte Albán

Monte Albán was founded about 500 BC on a previously unoccupied series of hills in the center of the Valley of Oaxaca. Similarites in public architecture and elite residences between San José Mogote in the late Rosario phase (ca. 600 – 500 BC) and Monte Albán in Period Ia (500 – 300 BC) indicate that elites from the former site made the decision to establish the latter (Flannery and Marcus 1983b; Winter and Joyce 1994). Almost immediately after its founding, Monte Albán far exceeded any other site in the Oaxaca Valley in size, population, and scale of monumental architecture (Blanton 1978; Kowalewski et al. 1989; Winter and Joyce 1994). By the end of Period Ia, Monte Albán covered 320 ha with a mean estimated population of 5,250 (Blanton 1978: 36). Regional population also rose dramatically from a mean estimate of 1,835 people during the Rosario phase (700 – 500 BC) to 14,650 by Period Ia (Kowalewski et al. 1989: 90). As is argued later, a key reason for the dramatic growth in population at Monte Albán may have been the popularity of the sacred principles and practices that were a central motivating factor for the early inhabitants of the site.

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Evidence from Monte Albán suggests that an important goal of the earliest inhabitants was to construct a ceremonial center that symbolized the version of the sacred covenant developed at San José Mogote during the previous century. The founders of Monte Albán initiated a program of monumental building that far exceeded anything previously seen in Oaxaca (Winter and Joyce 1994). The civic-ceremonial center of the site was the Main Plaza, a huge public plaza measuring roughly 300 m north–south by 150 m east–west. In its final form the Main Plaza was bounded on its north and south ends by high platforms supporting numerous public buildings (Figure 7.4). The eastern and western sides of the Main Plaza were defined by rows of monumental buildings; a third row of structures ran north-to-south through the center of the plaza. The Period I version of the Main Plaza consisted of only the western row of buildings along with much of the eastern half of the North Platform (ibid.). While fill was used during Period I to create a flat surface on the eastern end of the Main Plaza, no buildings appear to have been constructed there until Period II.

The pattern of architecture and iconography in and around the Main Plaza shows that the new version of the sacred covenant was a central organizing principle for the founders of Monte Albán (also see Masson *et al.* 1992: 12; Orr 1994; Winter 1994: 22). The sacred geography of Monte Albán resembles other Mesoamerican cities such as Tikal, Copán, and Teotihuacan, where the cosmos is rotated onto the surface of the site's ceremonial center so that north represents the celestial realm and south the earth or underworld (Ashmore 1991; Sugiyama 1993: 123).

The southern end of the Main Plaza contained iconographic references to earth, sacrifice, and warfare. Building L was the location of the more than 310 *danzante* portraits of sacrificial victims. The *danzantes* represent the largest single corpus of carved stones for Late Formative Mesoamerica and constitute roughly 80 percent of the total monument record from Monte Albán. The energy expended on the *danzantes* suggest the significance of this new form of ritual. Sacrificial victims would go into the earth at death. The genital mutilation apparent on many *danzantes* suggests a combination of earlier forms of auto-sacrifice with death sacrifice. The sacrifice of captives was one way for nobles to open portals to the underworld (Masson *et al.* 1992) and activate the covenant, thereby assuring fertility and prosperity for themselves and their followers. In this new version of the sacred covenant, however, warfare and human sacrifice became notable themes. The Period II (100 BC – AD 200) "conquest slabs" from Building J spell out the covenantial relationship even more overtly, with the decapitated head of a captured ruler extending down beneath the terrestrial hill glyph and vegetation sprouting from the top of the hill sign (Figure 7.5). Ballgame rituals probably also played a part in this newly configured warfare and human sacrifice-based covenant (Orr 1997), and it is during Period I that the earliest ballcourts are found in the Oaxaca Valley (Kowalewski *et al.* 1991).

The North Platform included iconographic references to sky, rain, and lightning. The earliest celestial reference is found with the stucco frieze known as the "viborón" located beneath the southeast corner of the North Platform (Acosta 1965: 816; Urcid 1994: 64–5). The frieze dates to Period Ic (300 – 100 BC) and consists of a sky band with scrolls similar to the s-scroll rain cloud motiff (Reilly 1996: 36). The sky band is broken by serpentine *cociyo*-like figures that appear to be representations of the sky-dwelling rain serpent. A pair of cloud scrolls form the mouth and bifid tongue or fangs. Rain issues from the figure's mouth, and its goggle eyes resemble those of Tlaloc, the later Central Mexican rain deity.

The symbolism of the cosmos and the sacred covenant resonating in the layout of the Main Plaza clearly marked Monte Albán as a mountain of creation, a common concept in

Figure 7.4 Monte Albán's main plaza

Labels within the map:
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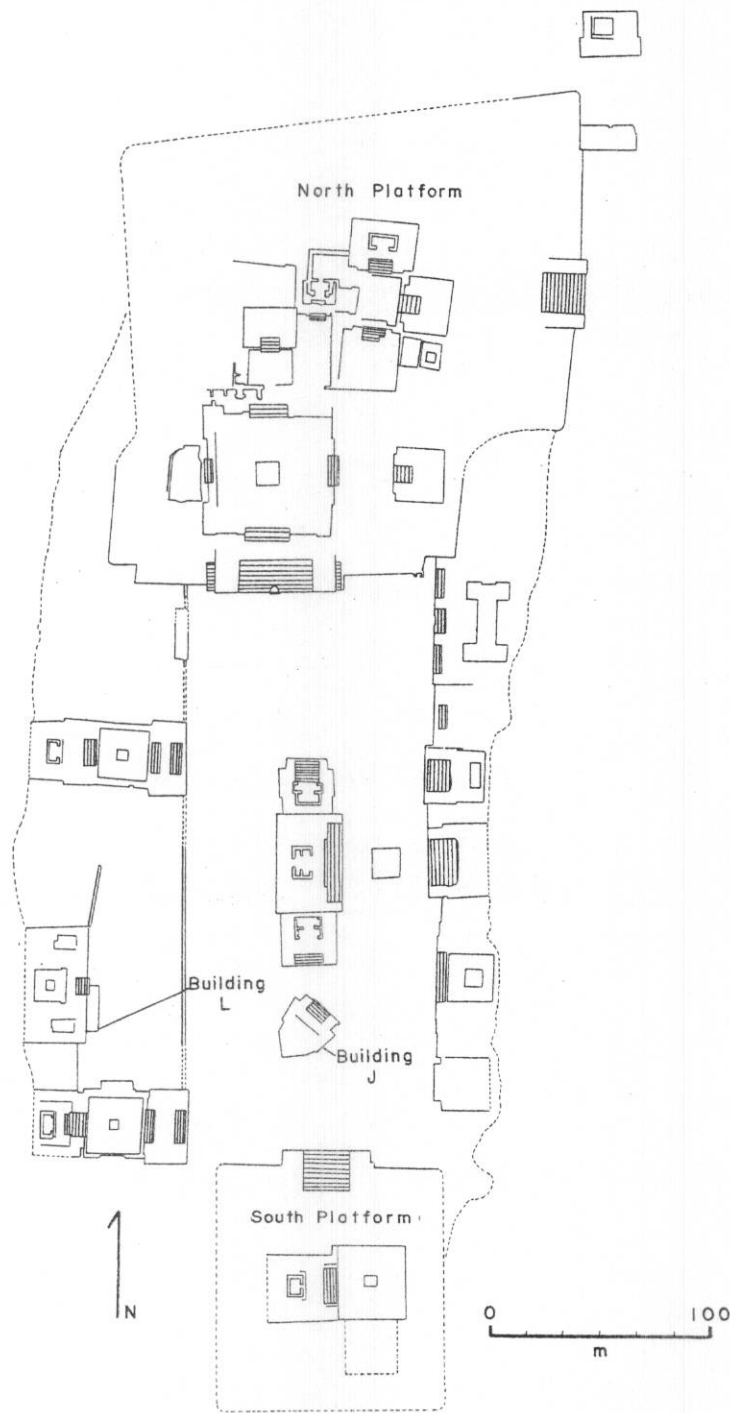
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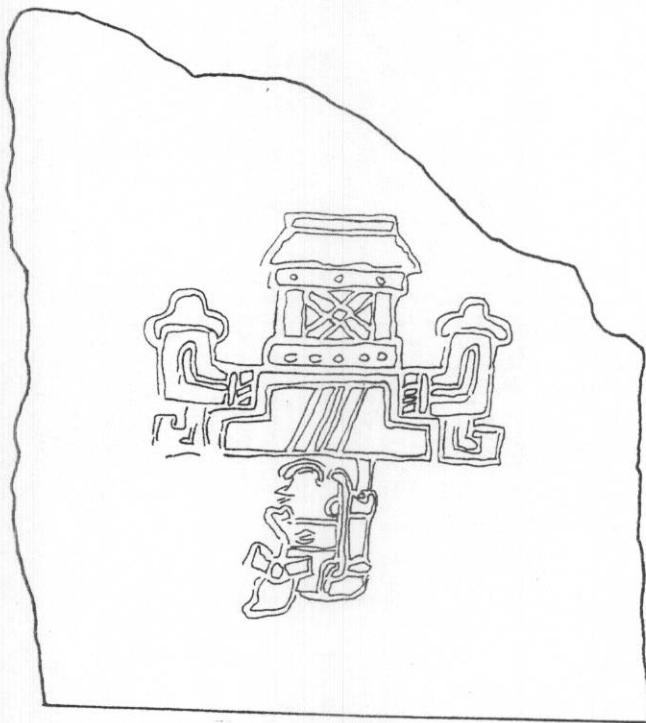
Figure 7.5 Building J conquest slab from Monte Albán

Source: redrawn from Caso 1947: Figure 41

Otomanguean world views (Monaghan 1995: 108; Parsons 1936). The Main Plaza, however, was not just an architectual symbol of the sacred covenant. It was a public arena where thousands of people participated in rituals that invoked the sacred covenant. Commoners standing on the Main Plaza would have been physically engaged in the proceedings. These rituals may have also included commoners presenting material offerings to nobles. In such a setting, simultaneously public and symbolic, the new practices involving human sacrifice would have been dramatic events graphically enacting and renewing the covenant. The effects of ritual drama and mass psychology on participants would have created powerful psychological forces (Caspary 1993; Kertzer 1988), affecting people's dispositions by binding them to the rulers, the symbols, and the new social order centered at Monte Albán.

While the actual practice of human sacrifice may have been restricted to nobles, the construction of the Main Plaza and its elaboration with symbolic imagery, as well as the sacrificial rituals perfomed there were clearly viewed and experienced in communal terms. The huge volume of monumental building activities during the early years at Monte Albán represents active and uncoerced commoner involvement that served to enroll them in the new version of the sacred covenant as embodied in the ceremonial center. Commoners were very much an active part of the political changes occuring at Monte Albán. Yet, as insightfully argued by Timothy Pauketat (this volume), the unforseen tragedy was that commoners were also inadvertently contributing to their own subordination. Monumental buildings housed politico-religious institutions that would soon come to embody and affirm

dominant ideologies that constrained the agency of commoners. While these institutions may have originally been conceived at least partially in corporate terms, unifying ritual practices, labor appropriations, and centralizing beliefs were increasingly appropriated by the nobility alone.

Attempts by nobles to dominate religious ideas, institutions, and practices may first be seen with the construction of the elite residence on Mound 1 at San José Mogote discussed previously. It is with the architectural layout of Monte Albán, however, that we see elites increasingly appropriating sacred ideas, institutions, and practices to serve their political ends. For example, as early as Period Ia elite residences and tombs were concentrated in areas around the North Platform (Martínez Lopez *et al.* 1996: 236; Winter and Joyce 1994), indicating an association between the celestial realm, nobles, and noble ancestors. Tombs built in this area contained effigy vessels depicting *Cociyo*, the Zapotec lightning (sky) deity. These data suggest not only an increasing association of nobles with the celestial realm, but the deification of noble ancestors as well (Marcus and Flannery 1996: 159). This association of living nobles and their ancestors with *cociyo* suggests that some elites were "Rain people." Among the Mixtec today, the "Rain people" (or *tenuvi*) act as shamans, priests, and sacrificers who possess special ritual powers (Monaghan 1995). That nobles were gaining control over ritual practices in addition to human sacrifice is suggested by an increasing association between elite residences and religious symbols and artifacts during the Late/Terminal Formative (Joyce and Winter 1996: 36).

The interment of elites in formal masonry tombs, first seen at San José Mogote and immediately after that at Monte Albán, can be interpreted in sacrificial terms. Starting between 600 and 400 BC, nobles did not sacrifice their bodies at death in the same way as commoners. Instead, their bones remained in tombs and were not assimilated by the earth in the same way as the remains of commoners. As a result, nobles could directly consult their ancestors by reopening the tomb and performing appropriate rituals (Miller 1995). The separate and accessible resting place of elites in tombs may have helped deify noble ancestors. The Mixtec codices also show that during the Postclassic and Early Colonial periods the remains of nobles were often kept as mummy bundles in sacred caves and temples, where they acted as priestly oracles (Byland and Pohl 1994). Perhaps the earlier tomb burials were precursors to the caves of the Postclassic.

Human sacrifice, interment in stone-masonry tombs, and the close association of elite residences and public politico-religious buildings were means by which the identity of nobles came to be marked as fundamentally separate from that of commoners (Joyce and Winter 1996; Marcus 1992). By the Late/Terminal Formative period (500 BC – AD 200) a separate noble identity and set of practices were increasingly evident. Elite identities were symbolized by control of exotic artifacts such as urns and incense burners, and of knowledge including hieroglyphic writing and calendrics. Enemies also would have been redefined not just as competitors in inter-elite and factional conflict, but in sacred terms as potential sacrificial victims. As competing factions began to adopt these ideological changes they also became a threat as potential capturers and sacrificers of Monte Albán's nobility. Warfare was no longer being waged just to defeat competing elites and obtain tribute, but to capture sacrificial victims that would ultimately contribute to human fertility and the politico-religious role of elites. Since commoners were increasingly dependent on nobles for ritual communication with the sacred, the possibility of the capture and sacrifice of nobles by competing elites had dire consequences for all people. This more sacred form of warfare may have further united people of the Monte Albán polity (Joyce and Winter 1996: 38–9).

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It is likely that as people increasingly associated nobles with the sacred, sacrifices of goods and labor were made directly to elites (see Monaghan 1994). Elites could then appropriate larger proportions of communal sacrifices of goods and labor for their own use, leading to rising social inequalities (Joyce 1997). However, the relative scarcity of nobles represented in monumental public art, at least until Period IIIb (AD 500 – 800), may reflect an ideology that attempted to conceal the relationship between communal sacrifice and elite interests (Joyce and Winter 1996: 37). Overall, human sacrifice and the more general appropriation of sacred principles, institutions, and practices by nobles altered the ideological aspects of the sacred covenant and increased the power of elites to attract followers, mobilize material resources, defeat competitors, and interact with the sacred.

While the power of Monte Albán's nobles increased during the Late/Terminal Formative, it is unlikely that they administered the entire valley until Period II (100 BC – AD 200) or Period IIIa (AD 200 – 500; Kowalewski *et al.* 1989). Data suggest that resistance to social and structural changes continued to be expressed by some commoners and competing elites. For example, the *danzantes* at Monte Albán probably depicted competing nobles from within the Oaxaca Valley. Moreover, the Late/Terminal Formative population expansion into the mountains north of the Oaxaca Valley (Drennan 1983) and into the Miahuatlán (Markman 1981), Ejutla (Feinman and Nicholas 1990), and Sola (Balkansky 1997) valleys may represent commoners actively resisting these ritual innovations and the greater sacrificial demands being placed on them. Period I female figurines that exhibit stylistic continuity with Middle Formative ones may even represent household-level resistance to elite appropriation of ritual activities (King 1997: 43).

Structural changes in ideological principles and social practices led to many unanticipated outcomes in Oaxaca Valley systems of social relations. It is doubtful that the founders of Monte Albán could have forseen the dramatic increase in the scale of their polity as people moved to the hilltop center. The huge population concentrating at Monte Albán created provisioning problems that forced elites to mobilize food from commoners in the valley. The provisioning problem may have encouraged nobles to conquer and incorporate independent communities in the valley to gain control of more agricultural land. Provisioning Monte Albán also led to the short-lived piedmont strategy that involved population expansion and agricultural intensification in the piedmont (Kowalewski *et al.* 1989: 123–6) but triggered landscape degradation (Joyce and Mueller 1997). Productive intensification by commoners also increased the demand for labor, making it advantageous to have larger families, but further driving the tremendous population growth of Period I. Furthermore, some people began to specialize in certain crafts, such as ceramics and stone tools, taking advantage of the fact that most commoners would have had less time to carry out the full array of productive tasks that they had previously undertaken (Feinman *et al.* 1984; Kowalewski *et al.* 1989: 149–51). Markets may have been developed to provide a central location to obtain products manufactured by these specialists (Feinman *et al.* 1984). Finally, the increasing importance of warfare probably gave elites both the ideological justification and military apparatus to use coercive force against their own subjects as well as against enemies (Joyce and Winter 1996: 38–9). While human sacrifice may have initially been seen by followers as a form of elite generosity, it probably came to act as a kind of terror tactic. These and other unanticipated problems created by the increasing scale of the Monte Albán polity probably contributed to the development of new administrative institutions, further leading to the emergence of the state (Joyce 1997; Kowalewski *et al.* 1989; Spencer 1982).

The social transformation in the Oaxaca Valley was apparently part of a broader structural transition in Mesoamerica involving the negotiation of elite and commoner power

relations through the sacred covenant. Towards the end of the Formative period, human sacrifice became an important form of elite-controlled ritual practice in many regions (Freidel 1986; Joyce and Winter 1996; Sugiyama 1993). At the same time, emerging urban centers like Teotihuacan, El Mirador, and Tikal exhibited sacred programs conceptually similar to Monte Albán's. These programs involved the layout of public architecture and iconography showing the relationship between nobles and the sacred, especially as activated through the sacrifice of war captives (Ashmore 1989; Freidel 1986; Freidel and Schele 1988; Schele and Freidel 1990; Sugiyama 1993). Oaxaca Valley nobles were thus not only engaged with their own followers in a negotiated discourse on the sacred, but also with elites from many parts of Mesoamerica.

Conclusions

Practice theory with its emphasis on active, knowledgeable agents and the intrasocietal dynamics of social change provides a more sophisticated approach to understanding historical transformations such as the founding of Monte Albán than more passive/externalist accounts (see Clark, this volume). By considering the interplay of agency and structure, and by locating the agency of commoners, the model developed here – while admitedly hypothetical – provides a richer and more human-centered view of the social changes in Oaxaca between 700 and 100 BC. An important advantage of an agency perspective is that it peoples the past not just with powerful nobles, but with knowledgable commoners who also contributed to history.

The model developed here views the founding of Monte Albán as an outcome of struggle over human, material, and symbolic resources that structured power relations, especially a set of fundamental sacred propositions embodied in Mesoamerican creation myths. The outcome of this struggle included profound changes in the social construction of agency involving alterations in social categories such as commoner, elite, enemy, community, and faction. By repositioning themselves relative to the sacred, through a new set of sacrificial principles and practices, elites and commoners, first at San José Mogote and later at Monte Albán, negotiated a new body of knowledge through which agency and power were constructed.

The events leading to the founding of Monte Albán began with the development of new ritual practices to deal strategically with immediate contingencies in the lives of people. Elites struggled to develop new ways of attracting coalitions of commoner supporters, while commoners sought to resist excessive demands by the nobility and to align themselves with those elites who would provide material and ritual benefits. The nobles that began to perform human sacrifice during the Rosario phase at San José Mogote were creatively changing the cultural principles and social practices that largely constituted power relations. Yet the development of human sacrifice should not be viewed simply as a calculated response by nobles at San José Mogote to deal with a political crisis triggered by increasing commoner resistance as well as inter-elite and factional competition. Innovations in sacrificial principles and practices were developed as an accommodation to commoner resistance to elite demands for goods and labor based on pre-existing forms of sacrificial power. Human sacrifice provided a potent new means of activating peé on the behalf of all people. The cultural rules of the late Middle Formative that privileged elite ritual practices, as well as the relative disadvantage that commoners had with respect to social, religious, and material resources allowed elites to monopolize the practice of human sacrifice. Commoners, however, could communicate with the sacred by providing materials and labor as forms of sacrifice to the community as well as to the nobility.

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Monte Albán was founded, in part, as a symbol of the altered sacred covenant as well as an arena for the performance of the new human sacrificial rituals engendered by these ideological changes. Commoners were drawn to Monte Albán because this change in the sacred covenant spoke to their interests as well as those of the elite. While nobles probably led the faction that founded Monte Albán, it was commoner labor that built the ceremonial center. Commoners, however, were contributing to their own subordination by constructing the buildings that housed the institutions and sacred practices that would come to embody a dominant ideology (see Pauketat, this volume). Human sacrifice and the more general appropriation of sacred ideas, institutions, and practices by nobles altered the ideological aspects of the sacred covenant and increased the power of elites to attract followers, mobilize material resources, defeat competitors, and interact with the sacred.

Practice theory also helps us understand the unintended consequences of small-scale actions for which no one can take credit. Unintended consequences of the actions of both elites and commoners at the end of the Formative probably included the development of the first city in the Mexican highlands, population growth, craft and military specialization, markets, the separation of noble and commoner identities, and perhaps many of the administrative changes that led to the formation of a state polity. Like many key developments in human history, the emergence of Monte Albán as a city and as a state capital could not have been forseen by the site's founders.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 Marcus and Flannery (1996: 125) disagree with the Oaxaca Valley Settlement Pattern Project (Kowalewski *et al.* 1989: 72–7) on the size of Rosario phase settlement at San José Mogote. The former estimate that the Rosario phase community covered 60–65 ha.
2 The glyph on Monument 3 would also be the earliest example of hieroglyphic writing and the ritual calendar if it dates to the late Rosario phase. Writing and the calendar represent other innovations in ritual ideas and practices that were developed by nobles at this time (Joyce and Winter 1996: 36).

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