

# 8 Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca

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During the period from 300 B.C. to A.D. 800 Mesoamerica's political landscape was dominated by numerous complex urban centers. The earliest and largest city in the southern Mexican highlands was Monte Alban in the Valley of Oaxaca (Fig. 8.1). Monte Alban was founded about 500 B.C. and rapidly grew into the largest community in the Oaxaca Valley (Joyce and Winter 1996). The founding of Monte Alban represented a vast increase in polity scale as measured by the area and population that were under the political authority of the ruling elite. Monte Alban was both a political capital and a sacred center reflecting the interconnectedness of political power and religion in ancient Mesoamerica. By the Classic period (A.D. 200–800), the city covered 650 ha with an estimated population reaching perhaps 30,000 people (Blanton 1978). The polity ruled by Monte Alban's nobility had by this time developed into a state. At approximately A.D. 800, the state collapsed and the city declined rapidly in population.

Most studies of Monte Alban have focused on elite relations with other polities, both within and outside of the Oaxaca Valley, to explain its history of sociopolitical development. For example, researchers have argued that interpolity conflict triggered the founding and early growth of Monte Alban (Blanton et al. 1999; Marcus and Flannery 1996; Spencer 1982), while the city's collapse has been linked to the decline of Teotihuacan, viewed as an external threat that maintained social cohesion in the Oaxaca Valley (Blanton 1983). In these models, nobles are seen as directing the course of social change in response to competition or threats from other polities. While interpolity interaction was clearly important, these models undertheorize the complex changes in culture and sociopolitical relations within the Monte Alban polity, which account for historical developments in the Valley of Oaxaca.

The theoretical perspective through which I address social relations in ancient Oaxaca is derived from practice theories (Ortner 1984). Practice theories view social processes as resulting from the ongoing recursive relationship between agency

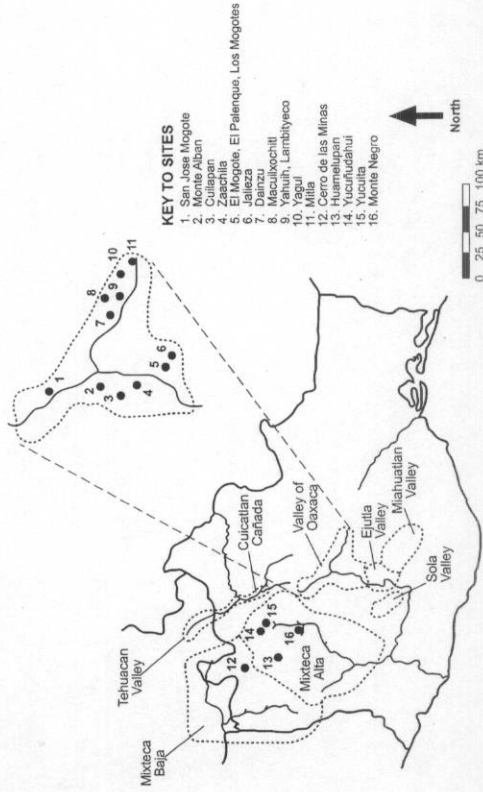


Figure 8.1. Map of Oaxaca showing sites and regions mentioned in the text

and structure. The structurally conditioned and situated practices of agents at all levels of society create patterns of social behavior, which in turn reproduce or change structure, thereby creating the setting for future action. Following Giddens (1979:88–94), I define power as the transformative capacity of an agent to achieve an outcome, which can either reproduce or change social systems and structure. Ideology, as an aspect of structure, often justifies or legitimates domination, although subordinates are able to see through and resist dominant ideologies to varying degrees (Joyce et al. 2001).

In this chapter, I consider how the negotiation of power among noble and commoner classes contributed to changes in the scale and complexity of the Monte Alban polity. Since political power in ancient Mesoamerica was created, legitimated, and negotiated largely through religious beliefs and practices (Joyce 2000; Schele and Freidel 1990), I focus on the construction of sacred spaces and the ongoing ritual practices within those spaces. The religious and political center of the Oaxaca Valley was the Main Plaza at Monte Alban, a huge public plaza surrounded by temples and palaces that housed nobles and ruling institutions. In complex societies, constructed landscapes, especially monumental spaces like Monte Alban's Main Plaza, are important aspects of structure that both shape and are shaped by social action (Ashmore and Knapp 1999). I argue that, beginning with the initial construction of the Main Plaza at ca. 500 B.C., the architectural arrangement and symbolism of buildings, plazas, and monumental art created a sacred geography that cosmically sanctified authority by positioning nobles as powerful intermediaries between commoners and the divine forces that created and maintained the cosmos. Monte Alban's Main Plaza, like ceremonial precincts in many ancient

cities, served as an *axis mundi* where cosmic planes like earth, sky, and underworld intersected (Ashmore 1991; Wheatley 1971).

The power of the Main Plaza at Monte Alban, however, did not derive just from the ideas that it embodied, but was produced and experienced through the practices that took place there (Ashmore and Knapp 1999). I argue that the creation, use, and alteration of Monte Alban's Main Plaza embodied changes in power and domination in the Valley of Oaxaca. During Monte Alban's first several centuries people participated in emotionally charged ritual performances, often invoking the cosmic creation, through which they came to identify with and incorporate in their dispositions ideological messages about their place in the social and cosmic order. By the Classic period, however, nobles were diverging from earlier principles of sacred geography as the Main Plaza was used less for large public ceremonies that engaged commoners, and more as an elite residential precinct and an area for private ceremonies. The disengagement of commoners from state ceremonies may have weakened their allegiance to rulers and been a factor in the collapse of the Monte Alban state at around A.D. 800. The remainder of this chapter considers the relationship between monumental spaces and the construction and negotiation of politico-religious power in the Oaxaca Valley. The discussion begins with the period immediately preceding the city's founding and considers changes in sacred space and power until the collapse of the polity at ca. A.D. 800.

### The Founding of Monte Alban

The Valley of Oaxaca is a semi-arid highland valley that includes the largest area of flat, agriculturally productive land in Mesoamerica south of the Basin of Mexico. At the time of the Spanish Conquest, Zapotecs were the primary inhabitants of the valley. Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggest that Zapotec-speakers have lived in the valley for several thousand years. The Oaxaca Valley is y-shaped, consisting of three connected arms: the Etla Valley to the north, the Valle Grande to the south, and the Tlacolula Valley to the east. Monte Alban is located on several hills in the center of the valley where the three arms meet. The city was founded about 500 B.C. during a period of great political change in Oaxaca and throughout Mesoamerica. Within a few hundred years of its founding, Monte Alban grew into the most powerful political and religious center in southern Mexico. To understand the early development of the site, however, one must consider social developments during the centuries prior to the founding of Monte Alban.

The largest community in the Valley of Oaxaca prior to 500 B.C. was San Jose Mogote in the Etla arm, which reached 70 ha by 700 B.C. Archaeologists have debated precisely when complex societies with hereditary social inequality developed in Oaxaca (Blanton et al. 1999; Marcus and Flannery 1996), although most researchers agree that they had emerged during the Middle Formative (850–300 B.C.); almost certainly by 700 B.C. San Jose Mogote was the dominant center in the valley, controlling a three-tiered settlement hierarchy that included perhaps a dozen subject communities in the Etla arm.

The power of the nobility at San Jose Mogote, as in complex societies throughout Mesoamerica, was based on the belief in their abilities as ritual specialists (Joyce 2000; Marcus and Flannery 1996). While all people could communicate with the divine forces and deities that were believed to control the cosmos, nobles were seen as intermediaries between commoners and the supernatural, leading important religious ceremonies involving shamanism, sacrifice, and ancestor veneration. Mesoamerican cultural principles allowed nobles to have sacred knowledge and objects that were unavailable to commoners. Sacred knowledge and materials therefore gave nobles the ability (power) to affect the cosmos in ways that commoners could not.

Middle Formative elites at San Jose Mogote conducted public rituals on Mound 1, a natural hill architecturally modified into a huge platform 15 m high on which several temples were built. Mound 1 was one of the first monumental ceremonial precincts built in the Oaxaca Valley. One of the most potent means for contacting the sacred realm during the Middle Formative was through the autosacrificial letting of blood by piercing parts of the body such as the lips, tongue, or genitals. Sacrifice was a key theme in Mesoamerican creation myths as recorded in many sixteenth-century indigenous documents, including the *Mixtec codices Vienna* and Nuttall, the *Quiche Maya Popol Vuh*, and in Mexican (Aztec) writing and oral literature. These documents recount the story of a sacred covenant whereby people agreed to offer sacrifices to the deities in return for fertility and prosperity, although only nobles could carry out the most potent forms of sacrifice (Joyce 2000; Monaghan 1990). Religious ceremonies were often carried out in the context of ritual feasts sponsored by nobles. In return for the ritual services and generosity of the elite, commoners offered their allegiance and provided goods and labor as tribute. Thus, the structure of Middle Formative Oaxaca included a kind of social contract between elites and commoners: elites used their special ritual abilities to contact the sacred realm on behalf of all people, while commoners provided tribute and allegiance in return. Religious beliefs were ideological in that they legitimated the prestige and power of nobles. Commoners, however, contributed to the social negotiation of power since they had some choice over which nobles they supported. Commoners could also express resistance by contacting the sacred via household rituals without the assistance of elites.

Another source of power for Middle Formative elites was through relationships with nobles from other parts of Mesoamerica. Evidence from San Jose Mogote indicates that nobles exchanged materials, ideas, and perhaps mates with elites from other important Middle Formative sites in Mesoamerica, including San Lorenzo and La Venta on the Gulf Coast, Tlatilco in the Basin of Mexico, and Chalcatzingo in the Valley of Morelos (Blanton et al. 1999:46; Marcus and Flannery 1996:119). Prestige goods acquired through long-distance trade as well as those produced by local craftspeople were used by elites to create alliances with nobles from other communities. Exotic goods obtained through long-distance exchange, such as obsidian and stingray spine bloodletters, shell ornaments, and jade were important objects used in ritual performances. Prestige goods produced locally and traded to nobles from other regions included elaborate pottery vessels probably used in ritual feasting.

The latter part of the Middle Formative, from about 700–300 B.C., was a time of political upheaval throughout much of Mesoamerica that disrupted networks of long-distance interaction. This period witnessed the decline of many of the most important Middle Formative centers of population and political power. In the Gulf Coast, the huge Olmec center of La Venta as well as the smaller center of San Lorenzo were virtually abandoned. In the central Mexican highlands, Chalcatzingo, Teopantecuanitlan, and Tlatilco declined and were largely abandoned. Monumental construction activities at Chiapa de Corzo in the central depression of Chiapas declined for a time and other regional centers such as La Libertad were abandoned. On the Pacific coast, the huge site of La Blanca decreased in size. The factors responsible for the decline of these Middle Formative centers are not clear, although conflict and the disruption of inter-elite interaction networks are indicated in many regions.

In the Valley of Oaxaca, the period from 700 to 500 B.C. was a time of conflict and political instability, especially for the elites of San Jose Mogote (Joyce 2000). Warfare within the Oaxaca Valley is suggested by a high frequency of structures destroyed by fire and by 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. 1989:70–75). At approximately 600 B.C., a temple on Mound 1 at San Jose Mogote was burned to the ground, suggesting that the most restricted and ritually important part of the site was penetrated by a raiding party (Marcus and Flannery 1996:129). Survey data indicate that San Jose Mogote was losing population, with the site decreasing from 70 ha to 34 ha by 500 B.C. (Kowalewski et al. 1989:72–77). These data suggest that many commoners were expressing resistance, withdrawing support from the rulers of San Jose Mogote, and leaving the community. At the same time, competing centers in the Oaxaca valley, especially Yéguil in the Tlacolula arm and El Mogote in the Valle Grande, were increasing in size, with the latter growing to 25 ha (Spencer and Redmond 2001:217). It is not certain why these competing centers were gaining power, although the decline of traditional exchange partners like La Venta and Chalcatzingo may have decreased the ability of San Jose Mogote's nobles to acquire prestige goods used for ritual performances and to cement alliances with other elites. This may have allowed competing elites in the valley to gain power by establishing exchange relationships with new centers that were emerging at this time.

Monte Alban was founded about 500 B.C. in the midst of this political crisis. Similarities in architecture, iconography, and mortuary practices between San Jose Mogote and Monte Alban indicate that people from the former site founded the latter. At the same time, many sites in the Etla arm declined in size or were abandoned indicating that Monte Alban's founding population included people from several communities within the former San Jose Mogote polity (Kowalewski et al. 1989:91).

The founding and early development of Monte Alban represented a dramatic transformation in the Oaxaca Valley's social system. By 300 B.C., 200 years after the founding of the hilltop center, Monte Alban far exceeded any other site in the valley in size, population, and scale of monumental architecture. During the Late For-

mative (300–100 B.C.) the city grew to cover 442 ha with an estimated population of 17,242 (Blanton 1978:52; Kowalewski et al. 1989:130), and the population of the valley as a whole increased an estimated 27-fold (Kowalewski et al. 1989:123–126). While nobles lived near the Main Plaza on the summit of Monte Alban, commoners lived on residential terraces on the slopes of the hill. The rulers of the city were successful in defeating their Oaxaca Valley rivals, and by the Terminal Formative (100 B.C.–A.D. 200) Monte Alban had developed into a state polity with a bureaucracy able to administer a five-tiered settlement hierarchy that probably encompassed the entire valley. Social inequality increased during this period, with elites living in large, architecturally elaborate houses near the ceremonial precincts of sites. Upon death nobles were interred in tombs, with elaborate offerings, often including dozens of ceramic vessels, jade, and ornamental shell.

The archaeological evidence indicates to me that the founding of Monte Alban was a response to the political crisis facing people in the Etla arm, especially the loss of power experienced by nobles from San Jose Mogote. Defensive concerns were one reason for establishing the site. Its location on a series of hills in the center of the Oaxaca Valley made it a natural fortress. During the Late Formative (300–100 B.C.), a defensive wall was constructed around portions of the site (Blanton 1978:52–54). The wall reached heights of 4–5 m and was up to 20 m thick. Depictions of sacrificial victims, probably war captives, on carved stone monuments at Monte Alban as well as evidence for the military conquest of the El Palenque site in the Valle Grande are more direct indications of warfare (Spencer and Redmond 2001).

Defensive concerns alone, however, cannot explain the dramatic social transformation that occurred with the founding and early development of Monte Alban (Joyce 2000). In addition to hostile neighbors, the nobles who founded Monte Alban were also faced with a major decline in followers and the disruption of trade and alliances with elites from distant regions. The problem wasn't simply defense, but responding to the more general social disruptions and insecurities of the period that were causing the loss of followers. Moving the community to a defensible hilltop would not have led to the growth of the urban center if people continued to express dissatisfaction by "voting with their feet" and shifting their allegiance to other nobles.

Given the dramatic increase in the population of Late Formative Monte Alban relative to Middle Formative San Jose Mogote, commoners as well as nobles must have chosen to move to Monte Alban. Commoners were largely economically self-sufficient, and there is little evidence suggesting that people moved to Monte Alban for material gain. In fact the establishment of Monte Alban probably had a negative effect on the economic circumstances of many people, since data indicate an increase in tribute payments to the nobility (Joyce and Winter 1996) and there is evidence that some communities may have become materially impoverished (Blanton et al. 1999:8). Living on the infertile slopes of Monte Alban probably would have required people to travel a greater distance to work their agricultural fields. It is unlikely that, at 500 B.C., rulers had the military might to force thousands of people to move to the hilltop center. Instead, there must have been some

inducement for commoners to support the rulers and institutions of Monte Alban. Given the ideological significance of religious belief for creating and legitimating political power in the Middle Formative, it seems likely that religion played a role in the founding and early development of the city. The loss of followers at San Jose Mogote indicates that the traditional means nobles had used to attract followers and mobilize resources were declining in effectiveness. In the following section, I argue that, in addition to defense, Monte Alban was founded as a ceremonial center designed to communicate with the sacred realm in new and more powerful ways so as to reverse the fortunes of the people, both nobles and commoners, who founded the site.

### Monte Alban as an *Axis Mundi*

The first large-scale communal construction project at Monte Alban involved building a monumental ceremonial precinct that housed politico-religious institutions and was a stage for public ceremonies (Acosta 1965). The ceremonial precinct consisted of the Main Plaza complex, 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 (Fig. 8.2). 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 initial version of the Main Plaza, dating from 500 to 100 B.C., consisted of only the plaza itself, along with the western row of buildings and much of the eastern half of the North Platform. The central and eastern rows of buildings and probably the South Platform do not appear to have been built until the Terminal Formative (100 B.C.–A.D. 200).

The early version of the Main Plaza represents a great increase in the scale of monumental architecture and sacred space relative to San Jose Mogote. Public buildings constructed during Monte Alban's first few centuries included Building L along the southwestern end of the Main Plaza, whose walls were built with huge monoliths many of which were carved with representations of sacrificial victims. Building IV-sub along the northwestern end of the Main Plaza included a 6-m-high sloping wall. The Late Formative version of the North Platform consisted of a huge architectural complex that encompassed much of the eastern half of the platform's final area and included structures that reached heights of 15 m above the Main Plaza. East of the North Platform was Area A3, which consisted of a series of terraces with platforms on which were built several high-status residences. The effort expended on constructing the Main Plaza complex shows that religion, as well as warfare, were important concerns for the early inhabitants of Monte Alban.

The symbolism and spatial arrangement of architecture and iconography around the Main Plaza, suggest that the site was founded as a cosmogram that symbolized the Zapotec version of the cosmos (Joyce 2000). Like monuments at other ceremonial centers in Mesoamerica and throughout the world, the Main Plaza complex was built as an *axis mundi* creating a point of communication and

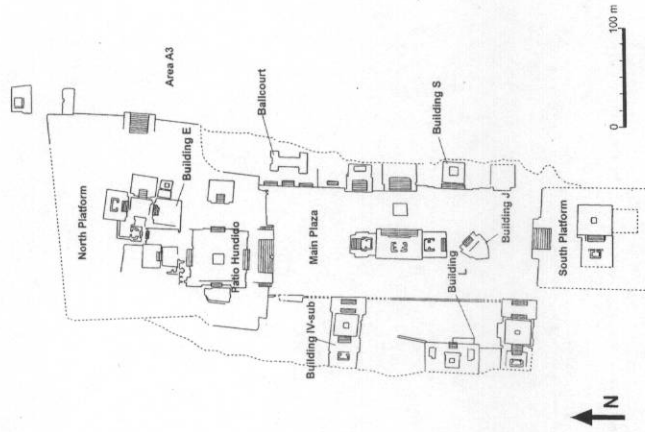
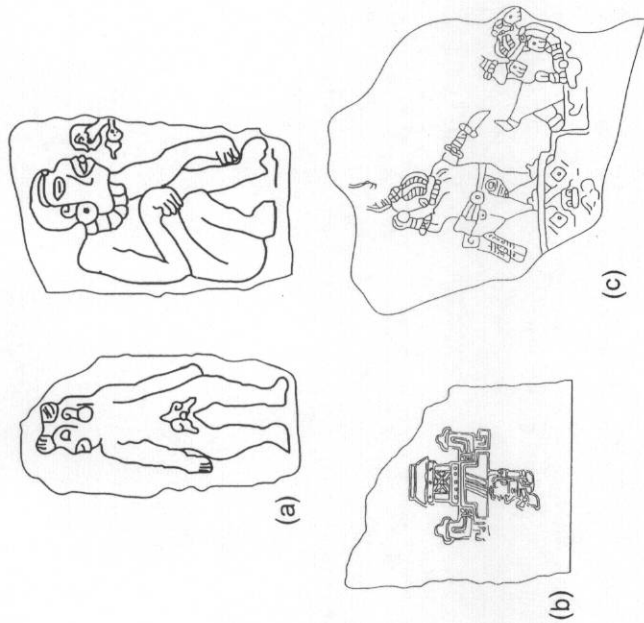


Figure 8.2. Plan of the Main Plaza at Monte Alban

mediation between the human world and the supernatural otherworld. Iconographic, archaeological, ethnographic, and linguistic research has demonstrated that some Mesoamerican pyramids were considered sacred mountains of creation (Schele and Freidel 1990). Since Monte Alban's Main Plaza was built on the top of an imposing mountain that rose over 300 m above the valley floor, it is likely that the entire ceremonial precinct may have been considered a sacred mountain. Several of the early buildings incorporated large portions of the natural hill, thereby crafting a modified cultural version of the original hilltop. From its earliest years, the sacred geography of Monte Alban resembled other Mesoamerican cities where the cosmos was rotated onto the surface of the site's ceremonial center such that north represented the celestial realm and south the earth or underworld (Ashmore 1991; Sugiyama 1993).

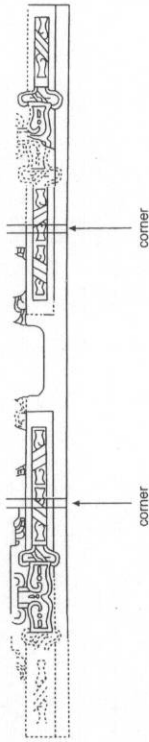
The southern end of the Main Plaza contained iconographic references to sacrifice, warfare, and earth or underworld. Building L was the location of a gallery of carved stone monuments that included nearly 400 portraits of sacrificial victims, probably war captives (Fig. 8.3(a)). In Mesoamerican beliefs, sacrificial victims would go into the earth at death. These monuments, known as the *danzantes*, represent the single largest corpus of carved stones for Late Formative Mesoamerica



**Figure 8.3.** Late/Terminal Formative carved stones from Oaxaca: (a) danzante sculpture from Monte Alban Building L (redrawn from Scott 1978); (b) Building "conquest slab" from Monte Alban (redrawn from Caso 1947; fig. 41); (c) Dainzu ballplayers (redrawn from Orr 1997; fig. 2.26)

and constitute roughly 80 percent of the total monument record from Monte Alban. The danzantes, along with a slightly earlier (ca. 600–500 B.C.) carved stone (Monument 3) from Mound 1 at San Jose Mogote, provide the earliest evidence for human sacrifice in Oaxaca. The danzantes depict men, often in contorted poses, with closed eyes, who are naked except for elaborate headaddresses, which suggests that they were captured nobles. Forms of sacrifice that appear to be represented on the danzantes include heart sacrifice, genital mutilation, and decapitation. The genital mutilation apparent on many danzantes suggests a combination of earlier forms of autosacrifice with death sacrifice. Some of the danzantes have short hieroglyphic texts, including dates in the 260-day ritual calendar. The Building-L gallery included one representation of a noble who may have been supervising the sacrifices, although like many of the danzantes, it was later removed and reused in other buildings at the site.

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* (Fig. 8.4) located beneath the southeast corner of the North Platform (Acosta



**Figure 8.4.** *Viborón* frieze from the North Platform at Monte Alban (redrawn from Urcid 1994; fig. 7)

1965:816; Orr 1997). The frieze dates to the Late Formative (300–100 B.C.) and consists of a sky band with scrolls similar to the s-scroll raincloud motif (Reilly 1996:36). The sky band is broken by serpentine figures, similar to Cociyo, the Zapotec lightning (sky) deity. Scrolls that may represent clouds 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 *viborón* frieze covers the sides of what appears to have been a sunken court. In Mesoamerica, sunken or enclosed plaza areas and ballcourts often symbolized infraworld interfaces. It is possible that the sunken court represented a "sky cave" entrance to the otherworld.

The majority of high-status residences and tombs were concentrated in areas around the North Platform, creating an elite-ceremonial precinct that was spatially segregated from the rest of the community (Joyce 2000). The placement of elite residences around the northern end of the Main Plaza symbolically linked nobles and noble ancestors to the celestial realm. Upon death, nobles were buried in formal masonry tombs beneath the patios of elite residences, while commoners were buried in simple graves or stone-lined cists. The interment of elites in formal tombs, which first occurred at San Jose Mogote in the century prior to the founding of Monte Alban, allowed for noble ancestors to be contacted via tomb re-entry ceremonies (Miller 1995). During the Postclassic period (A.D. 800–1521) the remains of Oaxacan nobles were often kept as mummy bundles in sacred caves and temples, where they were consulted as oracles. Tombs at Monte Alban often 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 also the deification of noble ancestors. An increasing association between elite residences and religious symbols and artifacts further indicates that nobles were gaining greater control of politico-religious ideas, practices, and institutions (Joyce and Winter 1996:36).

By 100 B.C. this early version of the Main Plaza was in place with its cosmic symbolism and references to the creation and regeneration of the world through sacrifice. Similarities between the sacred geography of Monte Alban, La Venta, Chalcatzingo, and Chiapa de Corzo (Clark 2001) suggest that Zapotec elites may have appropriated ideas about sacred space from those earlier centers, many of which were in decline when Monte Alban was being founded. For example, Middle Formative Chalcatzingo like Monte Alban is aligned along a north–south axis with

references to rulers/ancestors to the north and themes of sacrifice and fertility to the south (Grove 1999). In the northern sector of Chalcatzingo's ceremonial precinct are stelae with iconographic representations of rulers as well as a sunken court containing a tabletop throne. To the south, on Cerro Chalcatzingo, are a series of bas-relief carvings in a processional arrangement with themes of human sacrifice and rain. The uppermost bas-relief in the processional arrangement is Monument 11, which depicts an elite personage seated in a mountain cave with rain falling from clouds. The cave is depicted as a sectioned quatrefoil, which closely resembles the Zapotec hill/place glyph first found at Monte Alban during the Late/Terminal Formative (see below).

Beyond spatial symbolism, Monte Alban's Main Plaza was an arena where thousands of people participated in dramatic public rituals organized and led by the nobility, which probably included sacrifice, bloodletting, processions, shamanism, dance, divination, feasting, and ancestor veneration (Joyce 2000; Orr 1997). People standing on the Main Plaza would have been physically and psychologically engaged in the proceedings. Until the Terminal Formative, the Main Plaza was open on its eastern side, making activities on the plaza both accessible and easily visible to commoners living on the terraces below. The archaeological record indicates both continuity and innovations in ritual beliefs and practices through which people petitioned supernaturals for prosperity. In the structural setting of the time, the Main Plaza ceremonial precinct as well as innovations in ritual practices like human sacrifice would have allowed nobles to communicate with the supernatural realm in powerful new ways to reverse the political crises of the time and defeat their enemies. The evidence for the increasing religious significance of noble ancestors, especially their interment in formal masonry tombs, further suggests that elites were struggling to find new ways to communicate with the sacred. New religious cults are indicated by the first occurrence of effigy vessels depicting deities like Cociyo, the Old God, and the Wide-Billed Bird deity (Blanton et al. 1999:105-107; Winter 2001:286-287). Blanton and his colleagues (1999:105) have suggested that the increasing standardization and perhaps mass production of Gray Ware pottery vessels may have been the result of their use in large-scale ritual feasting.

Human sacrifice in particular would have provided both a ceremonial spectacle and, at least during the first few centuries of Monte Alban, would have been a new and exotic form of ritual practice. Through captive sacrifice, nobles both re-enacted the creation myth and renewed the current world by petitioning supernaturals for fertility and prosperity on behalf of all their followers. Human sacrifice was a more dramatic and potent means to communicate with the supernatural realm than earlier practices of autosacrifice and would have been a means by which nobles demonstrated both their power and generosity to supporters. In this new version of the sacred covenant, warfare was linked to sacrificial practices through which the sacred covenant was enacted. The danzantes gallery, with its nearly 400 depictions of sacrificial victims, was constructed so that the images could be viewed as processions moved past Building L (Orr 1997) and would have continually communicated the significance of human sacrifice and warfare as well as the coercive power of the nobility.

Public ritual performances would have created powerful psychological forces that affected people's dispositions by binding them to the rulers, the symbols, and the new social order at Monte Alban. The choice of an unoccupied hilltop in the center of the valley for this new ceremonial center distanced Monte Alban from traditional centers of settlement and politico-religious power. As argued by Blanton (1978), this "disembodiment" may have made Monte Alban more attractive as a political and religious center to people throughout the valley, enhancing the ability of the site's nobles to gain followers and mobilize labor and resources as tribute. Because Monte Alban is visible from much of the valley floor, its power as a sacred mountain and a political center would have been present in the everyday lived experiences of people throughout the region. The creation of a corporate identity linked to Monte Alban is evident both in evidence for public rituals, but also in the huge volume of monumental building activity. The construction of the Main Plaza complex represents active and unconcoerced commoner involvement in the ceremonial center that served to enroll them in the new structural principles embodied in the sacred geography of the site. The creation of shared identities and alliances with people throughout the valley is indicated by the construction of public architecture and high-status residences similar to those from Monte Alban in many valley communities during the Late/Terminal Formative (Marcus and Flannery 1996; Spencer and Redmond 2001). Warfare may also have united people since it was no longer waged just to defeat competing elites and obtain tribute, but was conducted to capture sacrificial victims that in the Zapotec belief system ultimately contributed to human prosperity (Joyce and Winter 1996:38-39). Since commoners were increasingly dependent on nobles for ritual communication with the sacred realm, the possibility of the capture and sacrifice of nobles by competing elites had dire consequences for all people.

Commoners who aligned themselves with Monte Alban would have gained from their association with this powerful political and religious center. The tremendous population explosion in and around Monte Alban after the site's founding suggests that the new beliefs and practices attracted many people from valley communities. The innovative ideas, institutions, and practices of the first several centuries of Monte Alban initially may have been conceived at least partially in corporate terms. Ironically, however, commoners who were contributing their allegiance, resources, and labor to construct and support the ceremonial center and its nobles were also contributing to their own subordination (Joyce 2000). Sacred public spaces, unifying ritual practices, labor appropriations, and centralizing beliefs were increasingly appropriated by the nobility and would soon come to embody and affirm dominant ideologies that constrained the agency of commoners. Many of the innovations in ritual practices and spatial structure communicated the increasing separation of elite and commoner identities. The special role that elites played as shaman and sacrificers dramatically communicated and reinforced their identities as mediators between commoners and the sacred. Sacrificial practices would have been especially important in communicating the power of nobles to contact the sacred realm, since in prehispanic Mesoamerica nobles performed the most potent forms of sacrifice, especially human sacrifice. Monumental buildings around the

Main Plaza would have served as stages elevating and separating nobles from the commoners on the plaza below. This separation would also have been communicated by the visible association of elite residences, tombs, and the North Platform symbolizing the linkage between nobles and the celestial realm. Elite identities were also symbolized by control of exotic artifacts such as urns and incense burners, and knowledge including hieroglyphic writing and calendrics.

Some people and communities, however, chose not to align themselves with Monte Alban. In particular, people living in the Valle Grande and Tlacolula arms of the Valley of Oaxaca were traditional competitors with the Etla nobles who founded Monte Alban. At least some communities in the Oaxaca Valley attempted to remain independent, although as Monte Alban's size and power grew, independence became increasingly risky as shown by the *danzantes*, which probably depict elites captured in warfare. Spencer and Redmond (2001) have found evidence that the Late Formative Valle Grande center of El Palenque was conquered and a high-status residence and temple were destroyed by fire. Late Formative migrations of people from the Oaxaca Valley to the nearby valleys of Ejutla, Miahuatlán, and Sola, as well as into mountainous regions (Marcus and Flannery 1996:199–203), may also have been expressions of resistance to the authority of Monte Alban.

Overall, human sacrifice and the more general appropriation of religious ideas, spaces, and practices by nobles during the late Middle Formative (500–300 B.C.) and Late Formative (300–100 B.C.) increased their power to attract followers, mobilize resources, defeat competitors, and interact with the sacred. A reason for the dramatic growth in the scale of the Monte Alban polity may have been the popularity of the sacred principles and practices that were a central motivating factor for the early inhabitants of the site. It is doubtful, however, that the founders of Monte Alban could have foreseen the dramatic increase in the scale of the polity as people moved to the hilltop center (Joyce 2000). The huge population concentrating at Monte Alban 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 to gain control of agricultural land. The ritual innovation of human sacrifice would have further legitimated military expansion and conquest. Provisioning problems also led to the short-lived piedmont strategy that involved population expansion and agricultural intensification in the piedmont (Kowalewski et al. 1989:123–126). Productive intensification by commoners increased the demand for labor, making it advantageous to have larger families, which further drove population growth. People in some communities 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. People may have developed markets to provide a central location to obtain products manufactured by specialists. These and other unanticipated problems created by the increasing scale of the Monte Alban polity likely contributed to the development of new administrative institutions, leading to the emergence of the state (Kowalewski et al. 1989; Spencer 1982).

### Political Consolidation in the Valley of Oaxaca

By the Terminal Formative (100 B.C.–A.D. 200) the rulers of Monte Alban, through social negotiation, religious persuasion, and military conquest, had extended their authority over the entire Valley of Oaxaca and probably also over the contiguous valleys of Ejutla, Miahuatlán, and Sola. A five-tiered settlement hierarchy had developed in the Oaxaca Valley, with lesser nobles at subregional and local centers who were tied to Monte Alban through political obligation and probably kinship. Lower-order centers had their own public administrative precincts where rituals were carried out by the resident nobility. Beginning in the Late Formative, Monte Alban's rulers engaged in warfare with polities in surrounding regions (Joyce and Winter 1996). Some sparsely populated regions such as the Cuicatlan Cañada (Spencer 1982) and mountainous areas around the Oaxaca valley appear to have been conquered by Monte Alban and incorporated into a small empire. Some researchers have argued that Monte Alban's empire eventually encompassed 20,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Marcus and Flannery 1996), although in many areas evidence for conquest is weak or nonexistent (Zeitlin and Joyce 1999). Monte Alban's expansion into other regions was part of a more general pattern of interpolity warfare at this time. Terminal Formative elites throughout the Oaxacan highlands and beyond appear to have been trying to gain control of long-distance trade routes through which they could establish alliances and gain access to prestigious goods and ideas. The political landscape in Late/Terminal Formative Mesoamerica was very dynamic, with new regional powerhouses like Monte Alban, Teotihuacan, El Mirador, Izapa, and Tikal vying with smaller centers for prestige and dominance over long-distance interaction. Another reason to engage in warfare was to obtain sacrificial victims required for important state rituals.

At Monte Alban, elite appropriation of ritual ideas, spaces, and practices continued as nobles increasingly consolidated power. During the Terminal Formative, early versions of the South Platform and the eastern row of buildings were constructed, effectively closing off the Main Plaza (Winter 2001). The central row of structures was also built, which served to further restrict and channel traffic during ritual performances. By closing off the Main Plaza nobles were able to more effectively control access to and the use of the ceremonial precinct. Beyond the Main Plaza, the defensive walls surrounding portions of the site could have been used to control the flow of people. Control of space was reflected on a smaller scale by the Zapotec two-room temple, which was a common form of public architecture from the Terminal Formative until the time of the Spanish Conquest. Two-room temples consisted of a smaller outer room where priests received people and performed ceremonies, and a more private back room restricted to ritual specialists. In addition to the control of space, the development of the ritual calendar, which dates to at least the Middle Formative, allowed nobles to increasingly control time. Important religious ceremonies were often timed according to cycles in the 260-day ritual calendar and certain types of warfare were initiated according to the cycle of Venus (Schele and Freidel 1990).

Terminal Formative additions and alterations to the Main Plaza (Acosta 1965; Winter 2001) reinforced the basic themes of sacred geography. Building J in the southern end of the plaza continued the themes of sacrifice, warfare, and the underworld. Set into the foundations of Building J in a processional arrangement, were over 50 carved stone slabs known as the "conquest slabs" that depicted places conquered by Monte Alban (Fig. 8.3(b)). Many of the slabs depict the severed head of a captured ruler extending down beneath the terrestrial hill glyph with vegetation sprouting from the top of the hill sign. The association of sacrifice, warfare, and agricultural fertility is clearly represented. Since the Zapotec hill glyph may have been derived from the depiction of caves as sectioned quatrefoils, as seen at Middle Formative Chalcatzingo, the "conquest slabs" may also reference the descent of sacrificial victims into the underworld via a cave portal.

In the North Platform, the *viborón* court was built over, but an even larger sunken court, the Patio Hundido, was constructed in the southern end of the platform. Elite residences continued to be concentrated to the north of the Main Plaza and by this time some were being constructed on the North Platform itself. One of the elite residences on the North Platform had a larger number of rooms and a more complex layout than other high-status residences of this period. High-status residences were also located in some areas of Monte Alban beyond the Main Plaza, probably indicating the emergence of the pattern of neighborhoods or barrios that was clearly present by the Late Classic (A.D. 500–800).

A ballcourt was built during the Terminal Formative on the northeastern corner of the Main Plaza. Ballcourts, like sunken courts, were seen as portals to the underworld and were associated with warfare, sacrifice, and the negotiation of political relations with foreign polities (Gillespie 1991). Ballcourts were often placed on spatial boundaries both between polities and, as in this case, between ceremonial spaces and the outside world. The Main Plaza ballcourt was located at what was probably the primary entrance point to the plaza, since by the Late Classic period, if not before, three roads came together just east of this area (Blanton 1978:63–66). Elsewhere, ballcourts were built both in the ceremonial precincts of political centers and along the edges of the valley.

During the Terminal Formative, public architecture and ceremonial spaces that housed the politico-religious institutions and nobles of the state were also built at smaller centers in the Valley of Oaxaca (Marcus and Flannery 1996:172–191; Spencer and Redmond 2001). Terminal Formative two-room temples, ballcourts, and high-status residences have been identified at several sites in the valley, including San Jose Mogote, Cuilapan, and Los Mogotes. Second-order political centers in each arm of the valley exhibited public architecture and iconography that resembled the capital at Monte Alban. For example, at San Jose Mogote, which had recovered to become a secondary administrative center for the Etla arm, the ceremonial precinct was built as a nearly identical copy of Monte Alban's Main Plaza. At Dainzu in the Tlacolula arm, toward the end of the Terminal Formative, nobles constructed a gallery of carved stones on a monumental building at the base of Cerro Dainzu depicting victorious ballplayers dominating defeated ones (Fig. 8.3(c)). As argued convincingly by Orr (1997), the Dainzu gallery exhibited a

similar theme to that of the danzantes since versions of the prehispanic ballgame involved a kind of staged mock-combat ritual leading to the eventual sacrifice of defeated ballplayers, who usually were war captives. Petroglyphs on Cerro Dainzu are similar to the gallery of carved stones at the base of the hill except that defeated ballplayers are depicted as decapitated heads.

The similarities in public art and architecture between Monte Alban and its lower-level political centers indicate the emergence of a state bureaucracy (Kowalewski et al. 1989). State-sponsored rituals at ceremonial precincts in lower-order sites throughout the valley would have been important in connecting people in the peripheries to the capital and its rulers. Kertzer (1988) argues that rituals can provide powerful means for integrating diverse factions within complex societies by reifying politico-religious institutions and creating shared experiences that emotionally connect people to state symbols, institutions, and practices. Orr (1997) has argued that pilgrimages to Monte Alban, as well as processional rituals on the Main Plaza, would have been effective mechanisms for social integration. Since Zapotec nobles had little direct control over the subsistence economy, state integration was achieved largely through ritual practices, although by the Terminal Formative the military could have provided a means of coercion.

By the end of the Terminal Formative Monte Alban had been the dominant center in the Oaxaca Valley for 700 years. The sacred geography of the Main Plaza was a symbol of, as well as a stage for, ritual practices that proved extremely successful in attracting followers and integrating an increasingly larger and more complex polity. By A.D. 200, however, the Main Plaza was becoming spatially segregated and controlled by the nobility. This trend would continue during the Classic period as the rulers of Monte Alban shifted their focus away from rituals that emphasized communal identity and toward self-aggrandizement.

### Elite Appropriation of Sacred Space

In the highlands of Oaxaca the Formative to Classic period transition was a time of interpolity conflict and political instability (Joyce and Winter 1996). At about A.D. 200, the urban centers of Yucuita, Monte Negro, and Huamelulpan in the Mixteca Alta region declined, perhaps due to conflict, and Monte Alban's rulers retreated from the Cuicatlan Cañada (Spencer 1982). Archaeologists argue that the huge urban center of Teotihuacan in the Basin of Mexico may have by this time posed a sufficient threat to the people of the Oaxacan highlands to trigger a political retreatment and the lessening of interpolity hostilities (Spencer 1982:255). While Winter (2001) suggests that Monte Alban was conquered by Teotihuacan, the data at present support the exchange of prestige goods, ideas, and personnel between the two great powers, although competition and conflict cannot be ruled out. At Teotihuacan, a group of Zapotec nobles resided in an apartment compound where they made Oaxaca-style ceramics and buried their dead in a Zapotec-style tomb. Elites from Teotihuacan may also have resided for periods at Monte Alban (Winter 2001). Regardless of the exact relationship between Monte Alban and



Teotihuacan, the Oaxacan highlands were politically stable with centers like Monte Alban, Yucuñudahui, and Cerro de las Minas maintaining their prominence through the Classic period. Perhaps in part because of the political stability of the Classic period, Zapotec nobles increasingly represented their personal power, rather than communal themes of warfare and sacrifice, in monumental art and architecture at Monte Alban.

To some extent, Classic period building projects at Monte Alban maintain earlier patterns of sacred geography (Acosta 1965; Winter 2001). The North Platform continued as a focus for symbolism related to the celestial realm, nobles, and noble ancestors. During the Classic period the North Platform was marked by numerous depictions of the "jaws of the sky" motif on carved stones (Urcid 1992). This motif referred to noble descent and the divine home of elite ancestors in the celestial realm (Miller 1995:11). Elite residences continued to be concentrated on and around the North Platform. On the South Platform, a program of stone monuments carved around A.D. 500–600 depicted a Zapotec ruler presiding over six bound captives presumably destined for sacrifice (Urcid 1992). These carved stones were later reused in the final construction phase of the South Platform so their original location is uncertain, although it was likely on that platform.

Archaeological and iconographic evidence indicates, however, that during the Classic period nobles increasingly diverged from earlier principles of sacred geography, iconographic themes on monumental art, and related aspects of ideology. Prior to the Classic period public art focused on themes of sacrifice and warfare with very few depictions of rulers. Formative period iconography may reflect an ideology that attempted to conceal the relationship between sacrifice, warfare, and elite interests. The role of nobles appears to have been muted in iconography, which perhaps instead symbolically stressed communal involvement in and benefits from warfare and sacrifice. As the Classic period progressed, nobles at Monte Alban and other sites in the Oaxaca Valley increasingly erected portraits of themselves and their ancestors in public art. This pattern can be seen as early as the end of the Terminal Formative with the Dainzu ballgame program, which depicts several victorious nobles in addition to defeated ones destined for sacrifice. Along with the South Platform program and its focus on bound war captives, carved stone monuments from the Early Classic and the early part of the Late Classic at Monte Alban included depictions of processional scenes commemorating living nobles and their ancestors (Urcid 1992), a possible diplomatic meeting between a Zapotec lord and an emissary from Teotihuacan (Marcus and Flannery 1996:233), and a scene of divination by a Zapotec noble (Orr 1997:259). Several Classic period carved stones depicting nobles and noble ancestors have been found on the South Platform. While none of these monuments has been found in their primary context, their distribution suggests that depictions of nobles and noble ancestors were no longer restricted to the northern part of the Main Plaza complex.

The breakdown of the strong association between nobles and the North Platform is seen in the distribution of elite residences. While elite residences continued to be concentrated around the North Platform, during the Early Classic period a high-status residence was also built in the southwestern corner of the plaza just west

of the South Platform. By the Late Classic this area included at least ten residences, some with tombs, although no more than five residences were occupied simultaneously. Elaborate palace complexes were built directly facing each other on the southern end of the Main Plaza (Building S and Building L). On the southeastern end of the plaza was Building S, which included three contiguous patio groups and was the largest of the Late Classic palaces. By the end of the Late Classic the number of residences around the Main Plaza was far greater than in earlier periods. In addition, each of Monte Alban's barrios also had resident nobles. The data suggest that by the Late Classic the population of nobles and their retainers had increased considerably.

The construction of noble residences throughout the ceremonial precinct suggests that the Main Plaza was becoming a focus of elite domestic activities and was less frequently used as an arena for large-scale public ceremonies. This hypothesis is supported by Blanton's (1978:63–66) study of the spatial organization of Monte Alban, which indicates that by the Late Classic the Main Plaza was largely closed off. The main access points were probably the northeastern and southeastern corners of the plaza since the other corners were blocked by elite residences. Another major change in the spatial configuration of the Main Plaza during the Late Classic was the construction of several temple-patio-altar (TPA) complexes. The TPA consisted of a temple elevated on a platform that faces a patio with an altar in the center. In most cases, access to the TPA was restricted either by building a wall around the patio, sometimes with a smaller platform on the side opposite the temple, or by constructing a sunken patio. While TPAs like the Patio Hundido on the North Platform date back to the Terminal Formative, they are rare until the Late Classic. During the Late Classic at least ten TPAs were located at Monte Alban, and others occur at administrative centers in the valley such as at Lambityeco. At Monte Alban, two TPAs were built on the west side of the Main Plaza, which effectively segregated portions of the plaza creating restricted ceremonial spaces. This trend toward restricted ceremonial spaces is found in administrative centers throughout the valley (Kowalewski et al. 1989:262–263).

A shift away from large-scale public ceremonies and toward restricted, private ones is indicated by a contextual analysis of monumental art. As the Classic period proceeded, there were fewer carved stones made for placement in public settings. Earlier stone monuments, including many *danzantes* and "conquest slabs," were taken from their original locations, reset in building foundations, and often plastered over, in most cases probably as parts of building dedication ceremonies (Masson and Orr 1998). After about A.D. 500, however, most newly carved stones at Monte Alban and other sites in the valley were set in highly restricted locations such as on the North Platform, or were carved as lintels and door jambs for tombs. Genealogical registers were the most common type of carved stone monument of the Late Classic. These carved stone slabs are generally smaller than earlier monuments, and the few that have been found *in situ* were mostly in tombs. An exception is Stela MA-VGE-2, which is large relative to typical genealogical registers, measuring 276 × 100 × 25 cm, and was found on the southern side of Building E on the North Platform (Fig. 8.5). Genealogical registers depict several generations

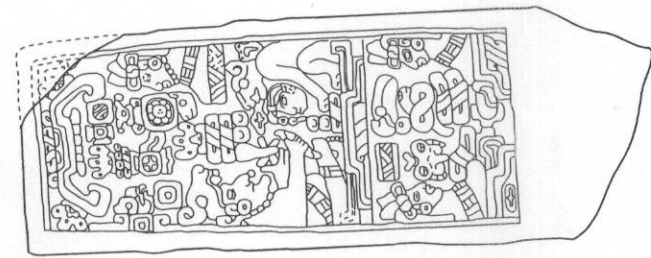


Figure 8.5. Stela MA-VGE-2 from Monte Alban (redrawn from Urcid et al. 1994: fig. 3A)

of nobles, sometimes showing marriage scenes or rituals related to ancestor veneration. Both males and females were depicted as principal figures suggesting that women as well as men were ruling elites (Urcid et al. 1994), a pattern that continued into the Early Colonial period. Another form of elite art that dates largely to this period is the painted murals found in the most elaborate tombs in the valley, which depict scenes of ancestor veneration (Miller 1995). Genealogical registers and tomb murals have been recovered from sites throughout the valley and not just at Monte Alban.

The dominant theme in Late Classic elite art was genealogical relations and ancestor veneration rather than human sacrifice and warfare as it had been in the Formative. The data on both spatial organization of ceremonial space as well as the context and iconography of monumental art suggest that, by the Late Classic, Zapotec nobles were less concerned with large-scale public ceremonies and more focused on rituals involving restricted audiences of other elites. The concern with genealogy and ancestors, especially in the context of tomb rituals, suggests that establishing genealogical linkages to powerful ancestors was crucial in negotiating and legitimating political power, including claims to land and other resources. The death of a ruler would have been a time of crisis and struggle over succession,

requiring the establishment of genealogical relations and the renegotiation of alliances. Genealogical sequences indicate that lines of succession were traced back to powerful ancestors through both male and female lines, a pattern seen in the Early Colonial period among Zapotec nobles (Urcid et al. 1994:34).

It is not clear what factors may have caused this shift toward rituals restricted to noble audiences and away from public ceremonies, although several factors can be hypothesized. By the Classic period the Oaxaca Valley was politically stable and the ideological principles of the Zapotec state were well established. Political stability may have lessened the necessity of large-scale ceremonies that engaged people in dealing ritually with insecurities like those of the Middle Formative, and lessened the motivation to communicate ideological principles to commoners. By the Late Classic the nobility had grown in size and the social setting had become highly factionalized with numerous subregional centers led by lesser nobles such as at Lambityeco, Jalieza, Yagul, and Macuilxochitl (Kowalewski et al. 1989). Monte Alban itself was divided into various barrios, each led by an elite family (Blanton 1978). The collapse of Teotihuacan around A.D. 700 would have lessened the role of Monte Alban's nobles in negotiating relations with this powerful neighbor to the north. Without the potential threat of Teotihuacan, local nobles may have increasingly asserted their independence and distanced themselves from Monte Alban. I argue that these factors led to intense competition among noble factions throughout the valley, which was negotiated ritually in highly restricted settings where genealogical relations and alliances could be worked out without undermining elite authority in relation to commoners. Nobles were able to maneuver for power through alliances and by strategic marriages allowing individuals to claim descent from several powerful ancestors through multiple lines of descent.

Ironically, an unintended outcome of competition among the nobility may have been to create conditions that increased commoners' penetration of the dominant ideology. The decrease in public ceremonies would have meant that commoners had less access to the supernatural realm and were less actively engaged in the kinds of dramatic ritual performances and shared experiences that created a sense of belonging and identity with state symbols, rulers, and institutions (Kertzner 1988). If local nobles were actively competing and attempting to undermine the authority of Monte Alban, then central unifying symbols, especially surrounding the rulers of Monte Alban, would have been further confused. The absence of Teotihuacan as a unifying threat may also have contributed to commoners becoming more distanced from the capital and its rulers. Under these circumstances, tribute payments to Monte Alban may have been increasingly resisted and refused both by local nobles and commoners alike. Future research should investigate the possibility that commoners increased household ritual activities that allowed them to contact the sacred and offset their decreasing involvement in public ceremonies.

Increasing factional competition among nobles, along with commoner resistance, may have contributed to the collapse of the Monte Alban state. By A.D. 800 the city was in decline with its people relocating to other parts of the valley and its nobles supplanted by other elites. Political centers that may have been aligned with Monte Alban, such as Lambityeco, also collapsed. Centers like Mitla, Yagul, and Zaachila

became major powers in the fragmented political landscape of the Postclassic period (A.D. 800–1521). While Monte Alban would remain a sacred mountain until after the Spanish Conquest, it would never again be an important political center.

### Conclusions

The founding and early development of Monte Alban represents one of the most dramatic transformations in social relations and structure in prehispanic Mesoamerica. In the 200 years prior to the founding of the urban center, San Jose Mogote was the largest site in the valley at 34ha with an estimated population of 564 people (Kowalewski et al. 1989:77). Public buildings along with a high-status residence were concentrated on a single platform (Mound 1) and its rulers were losing power relative to competing polities in the valley. By the Late Formative Monte Alban covered 442ha with an estimated population of 17,242 (Kowalewski et al. 1989:130). The civic-ceremonial center of the site was the Main Plaza complex with its huge public plaza, numerous temples, high-status residences, and hundreds of carved stone monuments. By the Terminal Formative, the city had defeated its competitors in the valley and was expanding into nearby regions. The rulers of the hilltop center continued to govern the Oaxaca Valley until the polity's collapse at A.D. 800. By this time, Monte Alban had been the dominant center in the southern Mexican highlands for 1,300 years.

Much of the archaeological research on the social history of the Valley of Oaxaca has stressed the role of elite power-building and interregional interaction in the origins and development of the state (Marcus and Flannery 1996; Spencer and Redmond 2001). These scholars argue that Monte Alban was founded and grew into a state as nobles responded to interpolity conflict by developing new institutions to organize a larger social system initially for defense. The construction of plazas, temples, ballcourts, and palaces is viewed simply as a correlate of the administrative institutions of the state. In the process of state formation, elites consolidated power and enhanced their wealth. This perspective tends to view only elites as actors able to affect social systems. While interregional relations and power-building elites are important, these models fail to adequately consider the complexity of social relations within polities. These scholars effectively reify the Monte Alban state as an administrative organization strategically designed by nobles and imposed on commoners to deal with interpolity conflict.

Practice theory forces us to consider all people as social agents and to view history as the outcome of struggle, negotiation, competition, and cooperation among actors. In this chapter, I have argued that the development of the Monte Alban state was a result of the consequences, intended and unintended, of the ongoing actions and interactions of elites and commoners alike. The model developed here is admittedly hypothetical and will no doubt be modified as it articulates with the empirical record. The model, however, provides a more complete and humanistic view of social relations during the history of the Monte Alban polity.

Monte Alban was founded not as a great city and state capital, but as a new community where people hoped to deal more effectively with immediate contingencies

in their lives. Problems faced by Etla nobles just before the founding of the hilltop center included the loss of followers, prestige, and long-distance interaction partners, as well as increasing interpolity competition. For commoners who chose to remain loyal to those nobles, there was a decline in the prestige of their community and in its ability to communicate with the sacred, as well as increasing threats from the outside. Nobles and their followers built the Main Plaza complex as an *axis mundi* to more effectively communicate with the otherworld and reverse their fortunes. The monumental spaces and buildings constructed on the Main Plaza symbolized the longstanding Zapotec view of the cosmos, but with a scale and grandeur that far exceeded anything previously in the Oaxaca Valley. Innovations in ritual practices, especially human sacrifice, were also developed to petition the sacred realm for prosperity. The hilltop location and walls provided defense against enemies.

While Monte Alban's nobles undoubtedly hoped to reverse the loss of followers and gain power, it is unlikely that they strategically planned to build a novel administrative organization to dominate the valley. This view leaves unexamined the agency of commoners and how they may have contributed to social process. Political organizations like states are symbolic constructs that are produced and reproduced through the ongoing negotiation and struggle of nobles and commoners. I argue that commoners gave their allegiance to Monte Alban and its rulers and relocated to the hilltop center in large numbers because they found the symbolism of the sacred mountain and the ritual performances on the Main Plaza to be compelling. Emotionally charged rituals linked people's identities to the symbolism of Monte Alban as embodied in its sacred geography, art, and nobility, creating a new corporate identity. The significance of the Main Plaza complex was not just that it reflected a new form of political organization. The plaza was part of the structural setting by which social practices gained their vitality; it was a product of new practices, but in turn shaped the dispositions of people who participated in its ceremonies or looked up at it from the valley floor in awe or fear.

While rulers could not have foreseen the great increase in the scale of the Monte Alban polity, they apparently took advantage of it to defeat competitors and to enhance their wealth and power. Through time, nobles increasingly appropriated religious ideas, spaces, and practices and were able to consolidate and expand their power. Even before the founding of Monte Alban, nobles were seen as having special ritual abilities and were mediators between people and the sacred. The religious innovations of the first several centuries of Monte Alban, especially human sacrifice and the deification of noble ancestors, made commoners increasingly dependent on elites for communication with the supernatural realm. These structural changes were internalized as distinctive elite and commoner identities. As the scale of the polity grew, nobles developed institutions to collect tribute, provide defense, enact state rituals, and organize *corvée* labor. These administrative institutions were not strategically planned, but were developed *ad hoc*, as state rulers, lesser nobles, and commoners negotiated both anticipated and unanticipated social circumstances. The success of the nobility was seen in their increasingly larger and more elaborate residences, ornate tombs, and wealth. The size of the noble class appears to have grown, and by the Classic period powerful elites were found not just at Monte Alban but also at secondary centers in the valley.

As a symbol of the Zapotec cosmos where rituals were performed that invoked the sacred covenant and re-enacted the cosmic creation, elite appropriation of the Main Plaza was perhaps the most significant act in power consolidation. Beginning in the Terminal Formative the plaza was increasingly closed off and controlled by the nobility. By the Classic period, nobles were diverging from the principles of sacred geography that had been so important in the initial layout and ritual use of the precinct. The Main Plaza was used less for large public ceremonies that engaged commoners, and more as an elite residential precinct and an area for private ceremonies. The appropriation of the Main Plaza may have been a response to increasing independence and competition among lesser nobles, especially following the collapse of Teotihuacan. Commoners, however, had built and maintained the Main Plaza as well as other architectural complexes that housed the institutions and rulers of the state. By the Classic period, commoners were increasingly excluded from important ceremonies and sacred spaces, while they continued to provide tribute. Given the political and military power of Classic period nobles, commoners probably had little ability to actively rebel against these structural changes, although they may have resisted them in more subtle ways (Joyce et al. 2001).

The combination of inter-elite conflict and commoner disengagement may have been an important factor in the collapse of Monte Alban. The disengagement of commoners from state ceremonies could have weakened their allegiance, especially to the distant rulers of Monte Alban. When the social and political relations that linked Oaxaca Valley elites began to crumble in factional competition around A.D. 800, commoners may have declined to support nobles. While the initial success of Monte Alban was a result of the engagement of commoners in rituals, labor projects, and military actions that came to be important symbols of the state, the polity's collapse may have been an unintended outcome of their exclusion from these same symbolically, emotionally, and politically laden practices.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

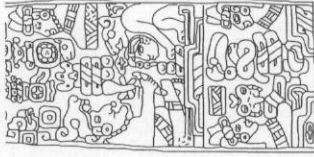
I would like to thank Julia Hendon and Rosemary Joyce for inviting me to participate in this volume. I would also like to thank Cathy Cameron, Steve Lekson, Cynthia Robin, Payson Sheets, and Marcus Winter for comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

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## The Archaeology of History in Postclassic Oaxaca

John M. D. Pohl

The historical source in which I specialize is a series of Pre-Columbian-style pictographic manuscripts or “codices” painted by the scribes of Mixtec Indian kings who dominated much of Oaxaca throughout Mesoamerica’s Postclassic period from A.D. 950 to 1519. When I first began studying these remarkable books over 25 years ago as a graduate student in an interdisciplinary archaeology program, I was searching for ways to integrate approaches to the study of Pre-Columbian civilizations through archaeology, ethnohistory, and art history. I was absolutely fascinated with the way the codices portrayed a purely indigenous form of history, but I questioned how such a unique database could be employed as a predictive source of cultural behavior and tested archaeologically. The tendency at the time was for Mixtec specialists to tailor their interests according to the composition of their data, in other words the archaeologist might be interested in ceramics for the development of a chronology of culture change, the ethnohistorian might be interested in social structure, and the art historian might be interested in religion. It seemed to me that these varying approaches illuminated cultural complexity but rarely solved a joint problem. Lewis Binford always advocated that any interdisciplinary approach to archaeology would only prove effective as long as investigators were able to ask the same questions of the varying data sets (Binford 1972). I decided to direct my questions to a topic that concerned all three subdisciplines: landscape.

Codices like Nuttall and Vindobonensis contain veritable inventories of hills, plains, rivers, towns, and other landscape features. Remembering what Laura Bohannan (1952) had written about the integral connection between lineage hierarchies and territorial distribution in traditional societies, I began to work out a research design that employed a study of descent among Mixtec royal dynasties together with what appeared to be a pattern of shifting settlement distribution. The results of my study became the nucleus of a settlement pattern survey of the southern Nochixtlan Valley in which I demonstrated that what the Mixtecs celebrated as acts of world creation, cosmic war, and the miraculous deeds by divine ancestors

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# Mesoamerican Archaeology Theory and Practice

*Edited by*

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Rosemary A. Joyce

2004



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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
 108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK  
 550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2004 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Mesoamerican archaeology: theory and practice / edited by Julia A. Hendon and Rosemary A. Joyce.

P. cm. — (Blackwell studies in global archaeology)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-631-23051-3 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-631-23052-1 (alk. paper)

1. Mayas—Antiquities. 2. Mayas—Material culture. 3. Mayas—Social life and customs. 4. Indians of Mexico—Antiquities. 5. Indians of Central America—Antiquities. 6. Excavations (Archaeology)—Mexico. 7. Excavations (Archaeology)—Central America. 8. Mexico—Antiquities. 9. Central America—Antiquities. I. Hendon, Julia A. (Julia Ann) II. Joyce, Rosemary A., 1956— III. Series.

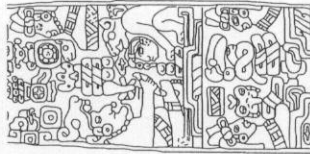
F1435.M557 2004  
 972.81'016-dc21

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10 on 12.5 pt Plantin

by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd, Hong Kong  
 Printed and bound in the United Kingdom  
 by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

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 Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:  
<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com>



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