and cultivated the seeds of change that ultimately led to the strong, widespread Andean states, including innovations that eventually spread over geographic and social space. The purpose of most innovations we can see at Chavín was to create objects, actions and spaces to reinforce a belief-system-dependent authority structure. Yet, many of these new elements would be the underpinnings of a much broader technical change. Thus, the later uses to which the innovations were put can be considered mostly as unintended consequences. In fact, the original intent was precisely to avoid the dispersion of their use and knowledge of them beyond ranking cult members. Many elements of Chavín were fundamental in later, somewhat more secular political organizations based more on coercive control than on convincing measures. Later innovations were probably driven by different stimuli and strategies. While competition hardly disappears between political units in the Andes, it changes in character. From an admitted position of temporal chauvinism, I argue that the range, extension, creativity and originality of the belief-system-driven innovations of the Formative are an exceptional development along the human trajectory.

2 Religion and Political Innovation in Ancient Mesoamerica[1]

ARTHUR A. JOYCE AND SARAH B. BARBER

The Mesoamerican Formative was a time of profound transformation in all aspects of social life. Following thousands of years of experimentation with domesticates by mobile horticulturalists, the initial Early Formative (ca. 1800–1200 BCE) saw the establishment of sedentary communities and agriculture. Within just a few centuries, the emergence of these complex societies, although debate continues about religion and its significance in social change.[2]
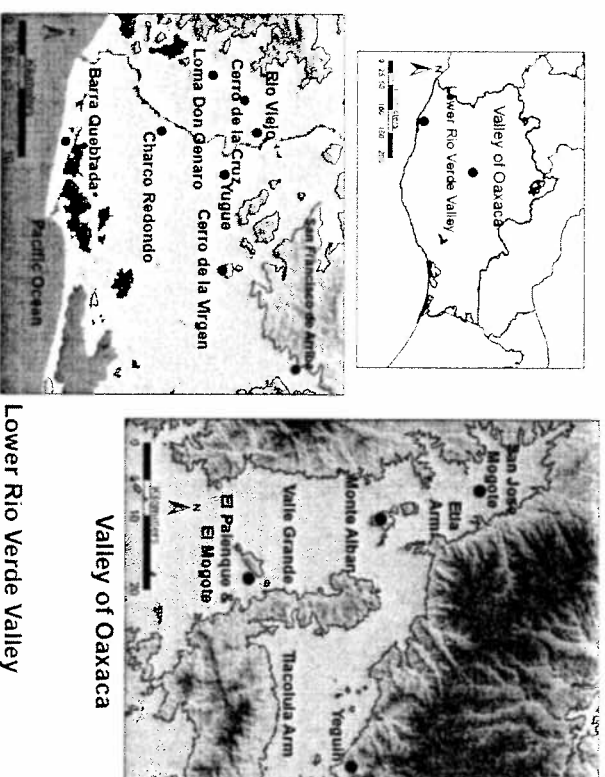

Figure 2.1 Map of the lower Rio Verde Valley and the Valley of Oaxaca showing sites mentioned in the text.

In this chapter, we use an approach based on theories of power, practice and materiality to address the interplay of religion and politics during the later Formative period through a comparison of two regions in the Mexican state of Oaxaca: the lower Rio Verde Valley on the Pacific coast and the highland Valley of Oaxaca (Figure 2.1). We argue that in both regions, religious belief, practice and the material items and settings in which religion was enacted were crucial to the political changes of the period. Yet our two regions had dramatically divergent later Formative histories that point to different roles for religion in political innovation. In the lower Verde, religion was a conservative force, constraining innovations that could have led to political centralization. In contrast, in the Valley of Oaxaca, we find that religion fostered innovations that would eventually give rise to a politically centralized polity with its seat of government at the city of Monte Albán. Both regions also show that religion was not necessarily a unifying factor in social change as has often been assumed, but instead could be a crucible of tension and conflict through which political innovations were produced. This comparative study leads us to consider the broader historical factors that contribute to understanding when religion can constrain or enable political innovation. We begin with a discussion of the theoretical perspective through which we approach religion and politics.

Theorizing Religion and Politics

Archaeological research in Mesoamerica has typically examined the role of religion in the integration of complex societies and the legitimation of political hierarchies. Political integration and legitimation are often viewed as necessitated by an increase in hierarchy and the scale of political control resulting from more general cultural evolutionary processes. The role of religion in these scenarios is secondary to what are considered general causal factors driving the evolution of social complexity such as warfare,[3] the control of key resources[4] and the obligations and influence gained by status-seeking aggrandizers.[5]

Our focus is on the role of religion in political innovation during the Formative period, but we take a more dynamic view of political process consistent with the theories of power, practice and materiality on which we draw.[6] Rather than viewing religion as a set of social and material relations that arise to stabilize developing political hierarchies, we view religion as a fundamental component of the complex negotiations—simultaneously social, material and spiritual—from which early centralized polities developed.[7] By innovation, we refer to the widespread implementation of novel and interconnected ideas, practices and materials. We do not, however, attach any assumptions that innovations necessarily involve progress or the unfolding of universal cultural evolutionary stages. We define political centralization as the concentration of political authority in a cohesive set of ruling institutions that typically operates from one or a small number of urban or suburban settlements, referred to in archaeology as political centres. In addition, centralization involves the expansion of political authority by ruling institutions over broad regions and large populations,

generating large-scale social identities through which people in multiple communities acknowledged shared social, economic and political relationships. Participation in political relations, however, would have differed substantially among polity members.

In pre-Hispanic and early colonial period Mesoamerica, religion involved a series of sacred propositions that delineated the relationship between people and the divine world of deities and ancestors.[8] Yet religious belief, experience and practice were difficult to disentangle from most aspects of daily life including agriculture,[9] trade and exchange,[10] domesticity,[11] rubbish disposal,[12] politics[13] and identity.[14] This entanglement of religion with other dimensions of social and material life can be linked to the relational ontologies of Native Americans,[15] which blur the boundaries between the natural, cultural, material and divine worlds in contrast to their differentiation in modern Western worldviews. We cannot effectively address pre-Hispanic religion, therefore, without considering the entangled and often diffuse networks of religious belief and practice as well as the places and things that both carried sacred meanings and were fundamental to religious practice.

Although we are interested in tracing the relationship between religion, identity and political institutions and authority, we wish to avoid relying on these concepts by anchoring them solidly within the material world and human-thing entanglements.[16] Material things play an indispensable role in the constitution, stabilization and transformation of society and hence are inextricably caught up in the kind of political transitions we examine in this chapter. In ancient Mesoamerica, complex societies were co-produced, materially anchored and given a degree of stability and persistence through the work of many things linked to religion such as public plazas and buildings, carved stones, burials, bloodletters, divinities and musical instruments. Although many of these items represented social distinctions and the many institutions that were fundamental to the constitution of society, as discussed in this chapter, things were more than simply symbols of a pre-existing social reality. Rather, things were co-producers of society through their entanglements with people. It is through material entanglements such as these that the larger-scale social identities that defined a polity came to be, along with changes in political institutions and authority that resulted in political centralization.

By using terms like *entanglement*, *enmeshment* and *assembly*, we suggest that social life derives from enabling and constraining relations among people and things. In certain instances, people and things become so tightly intertwined that the possibilities for social change are severely limited unless there is a dramatic unravelling of these relations – a condition that archaeologist Ian Hodder terms *entrapment*.[17] In contrast, human-thing entanglements can also foster creativity and innovation because things have spatial and temporal properties that make them unpredictable and unstable. Rather than assuming highly integrated political formations, we explore how entanglements through which political authority and power were constituted may have been multiple, overlapping and potentially in conflict. We begin by considering the development and collapse of an incipient regional polity in the lower Rio Verde Valley on Oaxaca's Pacific coastal lowlands.

The Río Verde emerges from a narrow canyon in the Sierra Madre del Sur mountains of Mexico onto a broad coastal valley approximately 20 kilometres north of the Pacific Ocean. Archaeological evidence indicates that as early as the Late Formative (400–150 BCE), public buildings in the lower Río Verde Valley were central to the constitution of communities. Communal practices associated with public buildings, including ritual feasting, cemetery burial and collective labour projects defined local groups consisting of multiple households and perhaps entire communities.[18] The evidence for communal rituals and labour projects and the lack of indications of a strong social hierarchy suggests that the dominant locus of authority and identity during the Late Formative was communal rather than hierarchical and exclusionary.

Political developments culminated during the Terminal Formative (150 BCE–CE 250) with the emergence of an urban centre at Río Viejo that extended over 225 hectares.[19] Increased inequality is evident in mortuary offerings, domestic architecture, ceremonial caches and monumental buildings. During the Terminal Formative, collective labour projects and public rituals continued to be a focus of communal identity. Monumental buildings were constructed at Río Viejo and at least nine other sites.[20] The most impressive public buildings were located at Río Viejo, especially the site's acropolis, which was one of the largest buildings ever constructed in pre-Hispanic Oaxaca.

At outlying sites such as Cerro de la Virgen, Yugüe and San Francisco de Arriba, communal ceremonies associated with monumental public buildings and spaces continued and expanded in scale from the Late Formative, including mortuary rituals in cemeteries, feasting and the ceremonial emplacement of communal offerings.[21] Ritual offerings often consisted of hundreds of items including ceramic vessels or beads made from greenstone and crystal that were sequentially emplaced within public buildings. Taking views of indigenous ontology into account, both the emplacement of ritual offerings and the burial of human remains in cemeteries should be understood from the perspective of religious rituals designed to 'ensoul' and sustain public buildings as non-human, animate beings and as community members.[22] The interment of human bodies and ceramic vessels in public buildings can also be seen as forms of sacrifice through which people petitioned divinities for agricultural fertility and well-being.[23] In Mesoamerican creation stories, the current world was the result of a sacred covenant between humans and the divine, often forged through warfare, whereby people petitioned deities for agricultural fertility and prosperity in return for sacrificial offerings.[24] The ultimate sacrifice was that people agreed to go into the earth at death. Viewed in this light, acts of sacrifice were cosmogenic in that they re-enacted the cosmic creation and renewed the world.
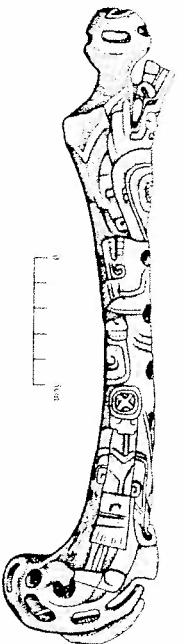
The assemblages of living people and things such as ancestors, ensouled buildings, deities, ceramic vessels and greenstone beads that constituted and distinguished community came together and were centred on public buildings. For example, the construction and use of public buildings created shared connections to a physical place on the landscape, which we believe was viewed by pre-Columbian people as a living, non-human, divine being that required sustenance in the form of the dead and other items such as ceramic vessels. The interment of human bodies in public buildings in turn linked these structures to the households and families from which the deceased originated. The interment of locally made pottery entangled public buildings with the varied producers and production loci of the vessels, while imported items like greenstone created ties to the people and places from which these things were obtained, some undoubtedly distant, powerful and sacred. Feasts brought together people in commensalism, creating social bonds and obligations much like modern, indigenous fiestas do in Mesoamerica.[25]

Time and history also came together at public buildings in ways that constituted community. For example, public buildings at Yugüe, Cerro de la Virgen and San Francisco de Arriba were the product of hundreds of years of collective labour. Even after their completion, public buildings made of earthen architecture required continuous physical maintenance in the face of the elements. Public buildings also required spiritual maintenance in the form of acts of 'feeding' with the bodies of the dead and with offerings. The bones of ancestors and items interred as offerings exposed during subsequent ceremonies indexed collective rituals carried out in the past. These interred materials referenced the history of human devotion to the divine and its importance for renewing community and cosmos.

Our evidence suggests that while the kinds of entanglements that defined communities across the region were generally consistent, there were clear differences among sites in the specific materials and practices through which community identity was constituted. For example, among the Terminal Formative sites excavated in the region, there was considerable variation in site orientations and construction techniques of monumental buildings. Variation in the kinds of objects used in ceremonial caches indicates a pattern of regional idiosyncrasy in the use of public buildings.[26]

Political authority was embedded in and tightly constrained by communal entanglements centred on public buildings. Excavations in outlying communities indicate that the authority of local leaders depended in part on specialized religious knowledge, abilities and implements.[27] For example, the most elaborate burial yet discovered in the region was an adolescent male from Yugüe who was interred wearing an iron ore pectoral and holding an incised flute made from a deer femur (Figure 2.2a). This individual was likely a local elite and a ritual specialist with the ability to contact divinities and other non-human beings. Evidence that elites had specialized ritual roles also comes from a ceremonial cache in a restricted public building at Cerro de la Virgen, which included a stone mask depicting a rain deity (Figure 2.2b). A high-status house excavated at Cerro de la Virgen was spatially associated with the site's ceremonial complex. The marking of elite bodies via adornment and prestigious objects at Yugüe, as well as the elaborate architecture and special setting of the high-status house at Cerro de la Virgen, demonstrate the increasing visibility of high status among local elites. The interment of prestige goods in communal burials and offerings in public buildings, however, were practices that transformed hierarchy into

expressions of traditional communal principles because valuables became collective resources.[28] Likewise, the interment of elites in community cemeteries upon death, simultaneously highlighted their difference from non-elites and their membership in a local collectivity. By obtaining the most powerful items through which communities met their obligations to the divine, local nobles would have become powerful actors within entanglements that constituted community. Nevertheless, it appears to us that political authority and expressions of high status were constrained by their dependence on the obligations of elites to their communities. Although the position of local elites seems to have been enhanced during the Terminal Formative, contradictions and tensions between community and authority were more acute at the regional level.

Evidence suggests that during the Terminal Formative, the rulers of Río Viejo were able to extend their influence to surrounding communities. The construction of Río Viejo's massive acropolis, which became the ceremonial centre of the site by the late Terminal Formative, would have required the mobilization of a large labour force.[29] At this time, the acropolis consisted of a platform rising at least six metres above the floodplain and supporting two large substructures both of which stood at

(a)

(b)

Figure 2.2 Religious objects from the Terminal Formative in the lower Río Verde Valley: (a) Carved bone flute found with a burial at Yugüe; (b) Rain Deity mask from an offering at Cerro de la Virgen.

least sixteen metres high. Based on estimates of the labour needed to construct the acropolis, we have argued that workers must have been drawn from both Río Viejo and surrounding communities.

Yet, beyond collective labour, there is only limited evidence for activities that would have continued to draw large numbers of people to Río Viejo after the acropolis was built. Despite four major field-seasons of excavation, the only ceremonial practices that are clearly visible on the acropolis are those related to ritual feasting.[30] Evidence from middens and a large earth oven indicate that both large-scale and repeated food consumption was taking place and that the feasts were not restricted to the elite. Ritual feasting would have drawn people away from ceremonial activities in their home communities. The increase in obligations of feast participants at both the local and regional levels could have taxed people's abilities to generate surpluses and led to social tensions and conflicts just as feasting can do in modern Mixtec communities in Oaxaca.[31]

The lack of human interments and offerings in the acropolis highlights a surprising difference between the acropolis and the public buildings we have examined at outlying sites. The ceremonial objects and human remains that fed and animated public buildings, and embedded history and community in places elsewhere in the region were not present on the acropolis. These sacred objects were already removed from circulation and entrapped within public buildings in local communities and could not simply be appropriated by the rulers of Río Viejo. Another difference between the acropolis and public buildings at outlying sites is the absence of direct evidence for rulers and non-royal nobility at Río Viejo's ceremonial centre. We have yet to find a noble residence on the acropolis, and there are no stone monuments with the portraits of rulers or elaborate tombs at this time as have been recorded in other regions of Mesoamerica. Instead, we see evidence for regional political authority in the distribution of the population, in the coordination required to underwrite monument construction and in the sponsorship of large-scale feasts and possibly other rituals on the acropolis.

The evidence from the lower Verde therefore suggests to us that religious belief and practice were central to the political changes of the later Formative. At this time, local community identity and authority were constituted through entanglements involving living people, ancestors, ensouled buildings, deities and ceremonial offerings. By the Terminal Formative, people from different communities in the region had begun to participate in the construction and ritual use of the acropolis and rulers of Río Viejo had gained some degree of political influence over multiple communities. At the same time, the sacred and material obligations people had in their local communities to sustain non-human, divine beings in the form of public buildings as well as their social obligations to other people created through ritual feasting together countered incentives to establish ties to regional rulers and places. The acropolis at Río Viejo along with public buildings at outlying sites must have become sites of struggle and negotiation among people in the region. The result of these social tensions surrounding religion, community and polity was that multi-community links were impeded to the degree that Terminal Formative Río Viejo challenges the limits of what might be defined

as a polity. A crucial aspect that constrained the creation of multi-community relations and identities was the physical entrapment of the bones of ancestors, offerings and divine beings within public buildings in local communities. Since the Rio Viejo polity collapsed probably within a handful of generations following the construction of the acropolis, it appears that these tensions were not resolved. By CE 250 the acropolis was abandoned, Rio Viejo declined in size and a period of political fragmentation began.

Monte Albán: Religion as a Catalyst of Political Innovation

The semi-arid Valley of Oaxaca is the largest highland valley in southern Mexico. Archaeological research shows that by the Late Formative a centralized polity had emerged in the valley with its political seat at the city of Monte Albán.[32] As in the lower Verde, in the Oaxaca Valley religion played an important role in the initial political centralization. Although public buildings afforded a point of reference through which local and multi-community affiliations were defined, unlike in the lower Verde, they were also enmeshed in a broader process by which access to the sacred increasingly became mediated by polity rulers.

Religion and Community Prior to the Founding of Monte Albán

In the Valley of Oaxaca, the origins of the region's first centralized polity with its political seat at Monte Albán can be traced to developments centred on the earlier site of San José Mogote.[33] The Middle Formative (700–500 CE) ceremonial centre at San José Mogote was located on a massive platform built over a natural hill. Known as Mound 1, the platform rose fifteen metres high and faced a large open plaza. On the summit of Mound 1 a number of public buildings were constructed. Unlike public buildings in the lower Verde, those in the Oaxaca Valley were not locations of communal cemeteries. Instead, people were interred in their residences, which means that rituals designed to contact ancestors via their remains were spatially and conceptually dispersed in contrast to the communal pattern seen in the lower Verde. The modest nature of the dedicatory offerings associated with Mound 1 suggests that rituals of ensoulment may have been restricted to a small number of participants in contrast to similar rituals in the lower Verde.

At about 600 BCE, events centred on Mound 1 unfolded that accelerated social changes and contributed to the beginnings of hereditary status distinctions in the Valley of Oaxaca and perhaps, ultimately, the founding of Monte Albán.[34] At this time, a temple on Mound 1 (Structure 28) was burnt to the ground. Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery argue that the destruction of the building was the result of intercommunity conflict, which would indicate that the most restricted and religiously important part of the site was penetrated by a raiding party.[35] Since the temples on Mound 1 were undoubtedly important religious structures, the destruction of Structure 28 could have triggered a crisis for the entire community by interfering with people's access to the divine. Following the destruction of the temple, major changes are evident in the use of Mound 1, probably initiated by one or more of the leading families in the community. These changes involve innovations in religion and their relationship to social status and political authority.

Immediately after the destruction of Structure 28, archaeological evidence shows that rather than rebuilding the temple, a series of architecturally elaborate high-status residences were constructed over the ruins.[36] The orientation of buildings was shifted from 8° west of north to 3–6° east of north, which would soon become the dominant orientation of public buildings at Monte Albán. In pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica there was a close association between site orientations and layouts, the movement of celestial bodies/deities and conceptions of time. Another innovation associated with these residences was the region's first formal stone masonry tombs, which shows that prominent people were now buried in special locations that differentiated them from non-tomb interments. We know from later times that living descendants directly consulted the bones of ancestors through tomb-reopening ceremonies. Tombs made the ancestors more salient to the living both as divine beings and because their bones became accessible and potent ritual objects.

A potentially more significant object from Mound 1 is Monument 3, which was discovered in a corridor between two public buildings (Figure 2.3). Monument 3 depicts a naked sacrificial victim with eyes closed and with blood emanating from the trilobe heart glyph on his chest. The individual's calendrical name or the name of his captor is also shown. There has been considerable debate concerning the age of this monument based on archaeological context and stylistic features.[37] If the radiocarbon dates reported by Marcus and Flannery correctly date the monument, then it would belong to this period and represent the earliest evidence in Oaxaca for human sacrifice, writing and calendrics.[38]

The evidence from Mound 1 indicates the emergence of the first hereditary nobles in the region and reveals that status was strongly associated with religion. After 600 BCE, elite identity and status were defined in part by the association that people of high status had with sacred buildings, which by this time may have been viewed as living, ensouled beings. Social distinction was thus created not only episodically during public ceremonies, but instead continuously through the quotidian practices of dwelling. The discovery of ritual paraphernalia in the residence, including obsidian bloodletters and an anthropomorphic effigy brazier, along with evidence for new forms
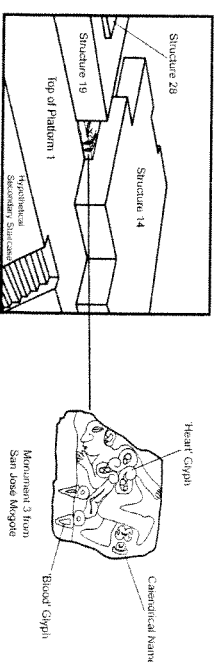

Figure 2.3 San José Mogote Monument 3.

of religious practice such as tomb rituals and perhaps human sacrifice, suggest that the inhabitants may have included ritual specialists. These are strong indications that through their roles as ritual specialists, rulers were becoming mediators between people and the divine. Entanglements that defined the San José Mogote community were now reordered such that elites as well as their houses, ancestors and ritual items were more central to the networks through which the community and perhaps a broader polity were constituted.

San José Mogote, however, did not continue as a focal point in the innovations in religion and politics that were catalysed by the destruction of the temple. At about 500 BCE, monumental construction on Mound 1 ceased and the site may have declined still further in size. Many Middle Formative sites surrounding San José Mogote also declined in size. The people who left San José Mogote and nearby communities founded a new political and religious centre at Monte Albán.[39] As discussed in the next section, the changes in religion and politics that began at San José Mogote were further extended and transformed at Monte Albán.

Religion and Political Innovation at Monte Albán

Monte Albán is located on several hills in the centre of the Oaxaca Valley. The site was founded about 500 BCE and rapidly grew into the largest community in the valley, extending over 442 hectares with an estimated population of 10,200 to 20,400 by the Late Formative.[40] One of the earliest activities at the site was the construction of a ceremonial centre located on the Main Plaza precinct, which was an unprecedented labour project (Figure 2.4). The initial version of the Main Plaza consisted of the plaza, along with the western row of buildings and much of the eastern half of the massive
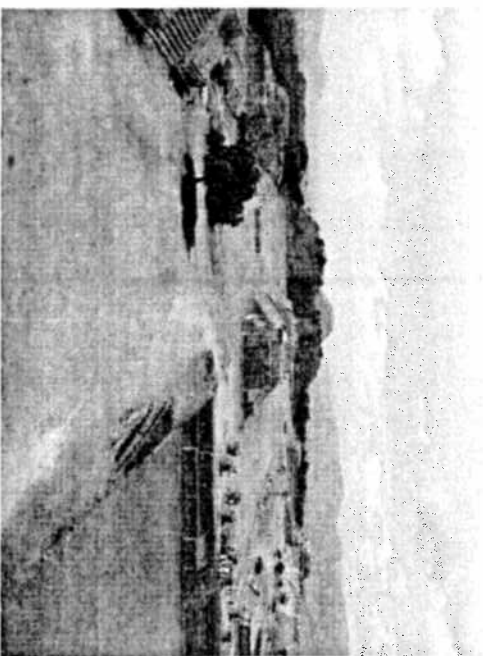
Figure 2.4 The Main Plaza of Monte Albán.

North Platform.[41] The scale, accessibility, openness and symbolism of the Main Plaza indicate that it was constructed as an arena where thousands of people could participate in public rituals. Many public buildings on the plaza were ensouled with offerings, including human burials and ceramic vessels, although most were modest in scale, suggesting restricted ceremonies similar to those at San José Mogote.[42] Since Monte Albán's Main Plaza was built on the top of an imposing mountain, it is likely that Zapotecs considered the entire ceremonial precinct as a sacred mountain of creation and sustenance.

The symbolism and spatial arrangement of architecture and iconography suggest that the Main Plaza symbolized the cosmos where rituals could be performed that re-enacted and commemorated the cosmic creation.[43] During the Late Formative, the plaza resembled ceremonial centres at other Mesoamerican cities where the cosmos was rotated onto the surface of the site such that north represented the celestial realm and south the earth or underworld. The southern end of the plaza contained iconographic references to sacrifice, warfare, ancestors and the underworld as represented by two iconographic programmes (galleries of multiple carved stone monuments that are meant to be 'read' as a group and that may have constituted a narrative). The first was located in Building L-sub, which contained a gallery of nearly 400 carved orthostats (large stones set upright in the building's façade). Although they were traditionally interpreted as victims of human sacrifice, Javier Urcid has recently reinterpreted the programme as a warrior sodality carrying out autosacrificial rituals to invoke the ancestors in preparation for battle (Figure 2.5a–c).[44] The cornerstones of
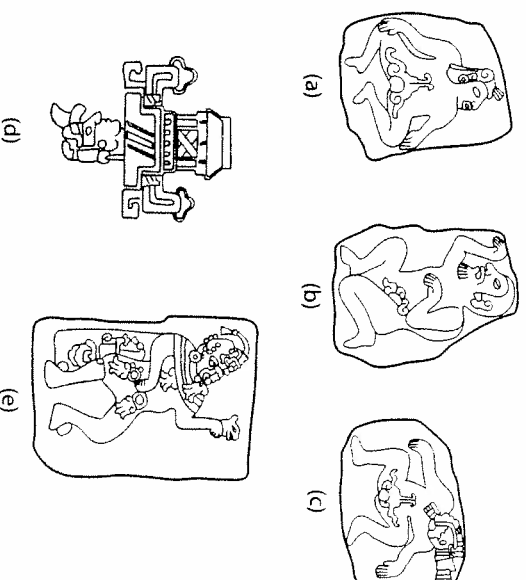
(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

(e)

Figure 2.5 Late Formative period carved stone monuments from Monte Albán's Main Plaza: (a) Young adult from the first rank in the lower row of Building L-sub; (b) Elder with beard from the upper rank of Building L-sub; (c) Rain god impersonator from the upper rank of Building L-sub; (d) Slab depicting possible revered ancestor; (e) Monument J-41.

the programme contained short hieroglyphic texts that refer to at least three rulers, their enthronements, genealogical statements and the defeat and decapitation of an enemy. Decapitation sacrifice is also referenced by four depictions of severed heads. The second iconographic programme consisted of approximately fifty finely incised slabs that may refer to revered ancestors (Figure 2.5d). Their original location is not precisely known, although most were later reset in Building J.[45] A possible cornerstone from the programme (Monument J-41) depicts the only portrait of a ruler known for this period who is shown performing human sacrifice through decapitation while dressed in the guise of the rain deity (Figure 2.5e). In contrast to the southern end of the plaza, a frieze on the North Platform included iconographic references to sky and rain as well as Cocijo, the Zapotec rain deity.

The archaeological evidence raises the possibility that the founding and early development of Monte Albán was related to a new political and religious movement that began during the Middle Formative at San José Mogote. The archaeological and iconographic evidence indicates that cosmogenic ceremonies like human and autosacrifice as well as ancestor veneration, divination, feasting and ritual preparations for warfare were carried out on the plaza.[46] As a place of cosmic creation and renewal where the planes of earth, sky and underworld intersected, the Main Plaza was an *axis mundi* and a powerful divine entity in its own right. In particular, the ritual innovation of human sacrifice was a potent means through which the sacred covenant was activated to petition divinities for fertility and prosperity on behalf of the community. Ritual specialists who organized and led ceremonies on the plaza would likely have been equated with important actors in creation narratives, especially the rain deity. New religious beliefs and practices are indicated by the first occurrence of effigy vessels depicting deities like Cocijo, the Old God and the Wide-Billed Bird deity.

The impetus for this religious movement probably included political developments both local and macro-regional. Innovations in religious belief and practice may have been one means through which people responded to the declining fortunes of San José Mogote. Similarities in the organization of ceremonial space, religious symbolism and hieroglyphic writing suggest that people at Monte Albán appropriated religious ideas and practices from earlier political centres like La Venta in the Gulf Coast, Chalcatzingo in Central Mexico and Chiapa de Corzo in the Chiapas Central Depression.[47] The collapse of many of these political centres towards the end of the Middle Formative may have reshuffled far-reaching relationships involving the movement of goods, people and ideas. The situation was fraught with potential for innovation because the unravelling of historically important social and material relations demanded management and stabilization. What resulted was a new city, founded on an uninhabited hilltop completely dissociated from earlier spatial and social relations. In this new and very compelling location for human–divine engagement, there was both physical and conceptual space to create novel institutions and large-scale social affiliations. The rapid growth of Monte Albán suggests that people were drawn to the religious and political innovations occurring in the urban centre, rather than being coercively compelled.

The social identities of people living in and around Monte Albán were no longer defined just by affiliations with their families and communities, but were increasingly enmeshed with the political and religious actors, institutions and implements at Monte Albán, especially its Main Plaza complex. Yet, the entanglements centred on the plaza do not seem to have extended throughout the Valley of Oaxaca as a whole. Differences in ceramic styles and monumental architecture suggest that the sites of El Mogote and Yegüih were centres of independent polities.[48] Evidence also indicates that Monte Albán periodically attacked El Mogote and the nearby site of El Palenque.

Religion and the Negotiation of Political Authority

The innovations in religion and politics during the early years of Monte Albán clearly benefited the nobility and contributed to rising inequality and separation of noble and commoner identities. Archaeological evidence indicates, however, that both newer forms of hierarchical authority and more traditional forms of communal leadership vied for political influence.[49] For example, the Late Formative iconography and spatial organization of the Main Plaza complex downplayed the political authority and the ritual role of rulers. Although nobles lived near the ceremonial precinct and directed public rituals, there were few overt representations of rulers and there were no high-status residences directly facing the plaza. Other than the portrait on Monument J-41, rulers were represented solely in the hieroglyphic inscriptions on the cornerstones of the Building L-sub programme, which were probably understandable only to the literate nobility. Instead of the authority of rulers, the plaza emphasized public buildings, public spaces and cosmic symbolism including images depicting sacrifice, divination, ancestors, deities and warfare-related rituals. Communal authority was represented by the members of the warrior sodality shown performing autosacrifice on Building L-sub, arranged according to age and achieved status with higher-ranking members, including bearded elders and rain god impersonators, located on the top of the platform and lower-status members placed in the lower levels close to the plaza surface (Figure 5a–c). The Main Plaza, therefore, would have constrained the ability of rulers to monopolize religious and political authority.

The two potentially competing forms of authority – communal and noble – carried inherent contradictions and latent points of tension. Powerful nobles threatened the traditional authority of communal institutions, while the latter constrained the power of the nobility. Although only rulers were clearly associated with human sacrifice, commoners were shown performing autosacrifice and invoking ancestors. If the rain god impersonators from Building L-sub were non-nobles, as argued by Urcid, then both higher-status commoners and rulers were able to embody the deity. These data suggest that the settings in which hereditary nobles and communal organizations negotiated and contested political authority probably included public rituals and access to special ceremonial roles like rain god impersonator, as well as activities related to the preparation for and conduct of warfare.

By the Terminal Formative, however, the rulers of Monte Albán were increasingly gaining authority in the interrelated fields of religion, politics and economics. At Monte Albán, new construction projects restricted access to the Main Plaza and the building of high-status houses directly on the plaza indicate greater elite control over the ceremonial centre. At the same time, the rulers of Monte Albán increasingly forged political and economic ties with other communities in the valley through coercion and the control of social valuables. The conquest of El Palenque suggests that Monte Albán's rulers used coercion to force communities into compliance.[50] Evidence indicates that the rulers of Monte Albán also controlled the manufacture of social valuables such as fancy cream-ware ceramics and shell ornaments that were used to create debts and obligations with people in outlying communities.[51] Both cream-ware ceramics and coercive force were also enmeshed with religion. Fancy cream-wares often exhibited designs symbolizing the rain deity, and warfare was, at least in part, motivated by the need to obtain captives for human sacrifice.

Evidence from the end of the Terminal Formative suggests that tensions between communal and hierarchical forms of authority may have erupted in a political upheaval at Monte Albán.[52] At this time, both of the major iconographic programmes on the Main Plaza were dismantled and some monuments were defaced and buried under new buildings. Since these iconographic programmes probably represented communal forms of leadership, their dismantling and destruction may directly reflect the suppression of communal authority. A temple on the North Platform was also burnt, and a wall for defence and/or monitoring of access was built around parts of the site. By the Terminal Formative, the rulers of Monte Albán had expanded their influence in the Oaxaca Valley beyond the central valley area through a combination of alliance, religious persuasion and military conquest, although the nature and extent of their political control is unclear. By the Early Classic, more exclusionary and hierarchical forms of authority gained prominence over competing forms of leadership.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have considered the role of religion in later Formative political innovations in the lower Río Verde Valley and the Valley of Oaxaca. Rather than viewing religion as secondary to what are typically seen as causally prominent economic and political factors, we argue that in both regions, religious belief, practice and the material items and settings in which religion was enacted were central to the political changes of the time. In both regions, religion was at the core of the entanglements through which community, polity and political authority were negotiated and at times contested. These entanglements were focused on public buildings and spaces and assembled people from different communities and varying statuses as well as entities such as ancestors, deities, offerings, sacrificial victims, burials and feasting foods. Yet, our case studies demonstrate dramatically divergent outcomes that point to different roles for religion in political innovation depending on culturally and historically contingent circumstances.

In the lower Río Verde Valley we argue that religion was a conservative force constraining innovations that could have led to political centralization. As early as the Late Formative, public buildings were a focal node in the entanglements that constituted communities. The construction of the acropolis engaged people from multiple communities in a large-scale collective works project and created the potential for reorganizing and expanding the scale of entanglements that could have constituted a politically centralized polity. At the same time, the persistence and durability of the bones of ancestors and ceremonial offerings emplaced within public buildings at outlying sites created conditions of entrapment. The sacred and material bonds and obligations people had in their local communities to sustain non-human, divine beings in the form of public buildings, as well as their social obligations to other people created through ritual feasting, countered incentives to establish ties to people, place and authority at the regional level. The construction and use of the acropolis coupled with the physical entrapment of the bones of ancestors, offerings and divine beings within public buildings in local communities created sites of tension and conflict between local and regional collectivities and authorities. The outcome was that the multi-community links and centralized political authority that could have come to define a polity were fleeting and unstable. Río Viejo collapsed probably within only a few generations of its emergence as a political centre.

In the Valley of Oaxaca we also found that religion and especially public facilities were central to entanglements that constituted community and political authority. In contrast to the lower Verde, however, religion was less constraining in the Oaxaca Valley and, instead, fostered political innovations. In particular, in contrast to the lower Verde, the bones of ancestors were distributed in family residences rather than entrapped within public buildings, and rituals of ensoulment did not engage large numbers of people. The burning of the temple at San José Mogote and the broader political crisis catalysed an unravelling of religiously focused entanglements among community members, buildings and the divine. The innovations that followed at San José Mogote included the appropriation of Mound 1 by community leaders, the interment of elites in tombs, the increasing role of elite ritual specialists as mediators between people and the divine and the reorientation of the site to a new sacred axis. The result was that elites as well as their houses, ancestors and ritual implements came to be more central to the entanglements that constituted the San José Mogote community. These innovations were also the means through which hereditary status was institutionalized for the first time, setting the stage for the emergence of powerful regional rulers.

This process of innovation and reordering of entanglements continued and accelerated with the founding of Monte Albán. The Main Plaza was constructed as an axis mundi and mountain of creation where public rituals could be performed that re-enacted the cosmic creation. The plaza brought together people from Monte Albán and the surrounding communities for the enactment of established ceremonies like ancestor veneration and feasting along with new rituals like human sacrifice. At the same time, political and religious leadership were increasingly linked such that political

authorities and institutions, both communal and hierarchical, mediated between people and the divine. What resulted was a centralized polity with Monte Albán as its political seat. Monte Albán provides a clear contrast to Río Viejo in that centralized political authority and multi-community political relations and identities were far more tenuous in the lower Verde. Like at Río Viejo, however, newer forms of hierarchical authority at Monte Albán were in dynamic tension with more traditional forms of communal leadership. During the Late Formative, these tensions were successfully negotiated by downplaying the political authority and ritual role of hierarchical rulers, while foregrounding polity identity and communal forms of authority. By the Terminal Formative, the political, religious and economic reach of the rulers of Monte Albán expanded through their increasing domination of the Main Plaza, military coercion and the control of prestige goods. Another catalytic event seems to have occurred towards the end of the Terminal Formative when tensions between communal and hierarchical forms of authority erupted in some sort of conflict. Unlike at Río Viejo, hierarchical authority at Monte Albán triumphed.

More broadly, our analysis suggests new avenues of inquiry into the relationships between religion and political innovation in ancient societies. The reasons why religion could be so constraining in the lower Verde, but leave openings for innovation in the Oaxaca Valley, have to do with historically contingent factors involving the ensoulment of public buildings, the storage of the remains of ancestors and the centrality of rulers in relation to the divine as well as the unfolding of catalytic events such as the burning of the temple at San José Mogote.

Our case studies, however, provide some clues to the kinds of entanglements that may be more binding on political innovation. It seems to us that it was the salient, material connections between people and local community in the form of the remains of ancestors and offerings ritually emplaced in public buildings that was most constraining of the creation of broader regional identities and forms of authority in the lower Verde. The presence of the bones of ancestors and communal offerings in public buildings materially anchored social memories that engaged the entire community. In the Valley of Oaxaca, we do not see the same degree of enduring material connections between people and local places. At San José Mogote and Monte Albán, there were certainly material embodiments of community in the form of public facilities, but these were linked to people largely through periodic experiences such as participating in the construction of monumental buildings and public ceremonies. On the other hand, what may have made the events at San José Mogote so catalytic was the dramatic and unexpected destruction of the temple on Mound 1 – a highly visible and seemingly durable material entity that was central to the entanglements that constituted community. Finally, as shown for both regions, religion could generate tension and conflict rather than the cohesion so often assumed in models of early complexity. Our results suggest that it may be more productive in cases of early political centralization to consider whether religion is, in fact, often a source of conflict to be overcome rather than a unifying ideology.

3 Religious Innovation at the Emerald Acropolis: Something New under the Moon

TIMOTHY R. PAUKETAT AND SUSAN M. ALT

Among the ancients, a city was never formed by degrees, by the slow increase in the number of men and houses. They founded the city at once, all entire in a day ... [and it] was always a religious act.

(Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, 1864)

Fundamental relationships between religion and innovation, specifically as these were intertwined at the founding moments of ancient cities, are poorly understood. In the last twenty years, religion has become a focus of considerable concern in archaeology.[1] But many archaeologists assume that religion is best defined as a set of codified conservative beliefs that endure despite the actions of people and the turnings of the world. Certain archaeological approaches to religion are even ethnocentric, hung up on religions as institutions and orthodoxies, swaying analysts to ignore the unofficial, quotidian, magical and spiritual practices of people less often depicted in official art and iconography.[2]

Formal, belief-bound, institutional definitions of religion inhibit considering the religious dimensions of many kinds of relationships between people, places, things and more. This is particularly problematic in non-modern historical eras where people related to the world as if their histories, identities and futures were bound to non-human sentient beings or other animate powers.[3] In those times and places, people lived and breathed their religions daily. Their actions were infused with religious associations and metaphors that in some way referenced, invoked or presenced numinous powers. Did such entanglements underwrite the first cities?

Certainly, the first cities in their respective regions almost all came about during premodern eras when religion was not distinguished from politics, economics or society.[4] Thus it should be no surprise that, according to the classic treatise by Fustel de Coulanges (1864), the early cities of the Mediterranean were founded on religious principles, if not actually established by the gods themselves working through human beings, places or things. We can take his point further.

In the case of the indigenous pre-Columbian city of Cahokia in the Mississippi valley of North America, we find that the qualities of specific substances and landforms east of the soon-to-be city converged with other primal forces – ancestral spirits and landforms/ deities of the night sky – in ways that *caused* this singular indigenous experiment in

Religion and Innovation

Antagonists or Partners?

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