

The Main Plaza of Monte Albán

A Life History of Place

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This chapter traces the 2,500-year life history of place of the Main Plaza at Monte Albán, from the site's founding through its major period of occupation as a political and religious center, its Postclassic and colonial "afterlife" as a place of creation, and its contemporary standing as a World Heritage Site, center of tourism, and symbol of Oaxacan and Mexican national identity. The ancient Zapotec city of Monte Albán was founded about 500 BC in the Valley of Oaxaca (Figure 3.1) and quickly grew into the first urban center in the southern Mexican highlands (Blanton 1978; Joyce 2000; Marcus and Flannery 1996). One of the first activities at the site was the construction of the Main Plaza precinct that housed politico-religious institutions and provided a stage for public ceremonies (A. Joyce 2000, 2004).¹ Monte Albán served as a political capital and sacred center until its collapse at ca. AD 800. The Main Plaza, however, did not remain static. It was continuously modified over its 1,300 years as an urban ceremonial and administrative center. After the collapse of the Monte Albán polity, when the majority of its population abandoned the site and its buildings turned to ruins, it continued as a sacred place for burying nobles and making ritual offerings. Despite the catastrophic impact of the Spanish conquest and the suppression of indigenous religious beliefs, documents and local myths show that indigenous people continued to believe in the sacred character of the Main Plaza well into the colonial period.

To examine the life history of place of the Main Plaza at Monte Albán, I integrate archaeological, epigraphic, iconographic, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic data. I follow Ashmore (2002:1178) in defining life history of place as the examination of people's recognition, use, and modification of a particular place over the full time span of its existence. I am interested in the history of material and symbolic transformations of the Main Plaza as well as the practices, identities, and power relations implicated in these transformations. I also consider continuities in meaning, arguing that throughout its life history, the Main Plaza was seen as a place of creation and a focal point for communal identity.

Theoretical Perspective

In this chapter, I consider how the life history of the Main Plaza at Monte Albán relates to changes in the interrelationship of meaning, practice, power, identity, and memory in the Valley of Oaxaca. The way people organize space and particularly how they conceptualize and alter ceremonial space are important aspects of structure that both shape and are shaped by social action (Ashmore 2002; Barrett 1999; Bourdieu 1977; Bradley 1987, 1993; Giddens 1979; Joyce 2000; Knapp and Ashmore 1999; Wheatley 1971). In Mesoamerica, recent archaeological research has shown that the architectural arrangement of ceremonial precincts at cities like Monte Albán, Teotihuacán, Copán, and Tikal materialized a shared view of

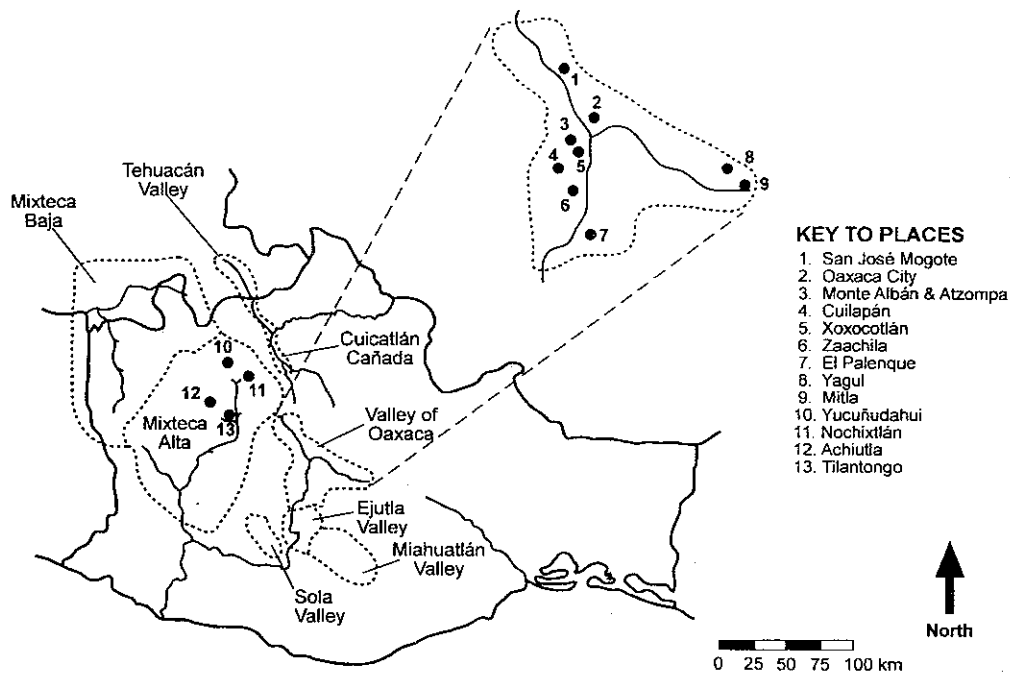


FIGURE 3.1. Map of Oaxaca showing sites and modern communities mentioned in the text.

the cosmos that was shaped by local political history (Ashmore 1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; A. Joyce 2000, 2004; Love 1999; Schele and Guernsey Kappelman 2001; Sugiyama 1993). These ceremonial precincts were often seen as places of cosmic creation and served as axis mundi where cosmic planes of earth, sky, and underworld intersected. Pyramids, in particular, were viewed as sacred mountains (Schele and Freidel 1990:71–72). This sacred geography sanctified authority by positioning nobles as powerful intermediaries between commoners and the divine forces that created and maintained the cosmos. The creation, use, and alteration of monumental ceremonial spaces like the Main Plaza, therefore, embodied changes in power and relations of domination and subordination in the complex polities of ancient Mesoamerica.

The power of ceremonial precincts, however, was not derived just from the ideas that they embodied but was produced, experienced, maintained, and transformed through the practices of people (Ashmore and Knapp 1999; Bradley 1998). Rituals in temples and public plazas included sacrifice, ancestor veneration, processions, divination, and dance. Many of the ceremonies organized and performed by nobles reenacted the cosmic creation and were means

of petitioning deities for fertility and prosperity on behalf of their people (Ashmore 2004b; Freidel et al. 1993; Joyce 2000). Religious practices were, therefore, in part ideological, creating a social contract where nobles performed the most important rituals, while commoners provided allegiance and tribute in return. The meaning and symbolism of ceremonial precincts, as well as the social practices carried out within these places, contributed to the production of social identities (Ashmore 2004b; A. Joyce 2004). By participating in emotionally charged ritual performances, people came to identify with their places in the social and cosmic order. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in how points of tension and conflict along status divisions were embodied in the Main Plaza, recognizing that other dimensions of social difference such as age, gender, and occupation were also important and should be further investigated.

As people move through, act in, and experience ceremonial centers like the Main Plaza they create social memory while inscribing social meaning on place (Connerton 1989). The physical arrangement and symbolism of buildings, plazas, courtyards, roads, and other architectural features channeled the movement and experiences of actors and therefore strengthened

and focused memories. By manipulating space through the erection of physical or symbolic barriers around ceremonial precincts, elites restricted interaction between members of different groups to times and places of their choosing so as to control both the content and presentation of social discourse and the creation of meaning and memory (Hegmon et al. 2000; Hillier and Hanson 1984). Examples of the control of ceremonial space by elites include the initial construction of bounded monumental ceremonial spaces throughout Mesoamerica in the Middle/Late Formative period (Grove 1999; R. Joyce 2004; Love 1999; Ringle 1999), the construction of *sacbeob* or raised roads by the Maya to channel the flow of pilgrims into ceremonial centers (Ringle 1999), and the serpent wall surrounding and limiting access to the Mexica Templo Mayor precinct at Tenochtitlán (Brumfiel 1998; Hamann 2003a).

The ongoing use and alteration of monumental space transformed the meanings they embodied, although in ways that reflected the past, creating a life history of place (Ashmore 2002:1177–1179; Bradley 1998). Recently, John Barrett (1999) has described the creation of these life histories as involving the inhabitation of landscapes. Transformations of inhabited landscapes, including constructed monuments, involve the reworking of established meanings and the politics of their control. Even after their primary period of construction and use, monuments continued to hold meanings that were informed by their earlier histories (Bradley 1998; Sinopoli 2003), as exemplified by the Mexica performance of rituals at Teotihuacán, which they viewed as the place of the gods where time began. Bradley (1993) has referred to this as the “afterlife of monuments,” recognizing that ruins and abandoned monuments remain a part of cognized landscapes even though periods of social disruption and abandonment enhance the opportunity for altering the meaning of ceremonial places (Knapp and Ashmore 1999:19).

The Main Plaza as a Political and Religious Center

Monte Albán was founded about 500 BC and within a few hundred years grew into the most powerful political and religious center in southern Mexico (Blanton et al. 1999; Joyce 2000; Marcus

and Flannery 1996). By AD 200, the rulers of the city succeeded in overcoming their Oaxaca Valley rivals as Monte Albán became the capital of a complex polity that probably encompassed the entire valley. Settlement pattern research shows that at its demographic peak from AD 500 to 800, Monte Albán covered 650 ha with an estimated population of 15,000–30,000 (Blanton 1978:58). The city continued as the primary center in the Oaxaca Valley until its collapse at about AD 800, when the site was largely abandoned (Winter 2003).

Throughout Monte Albán's long history as a political capital, the Main Plaza precinct was the ceremonial-administrative center for the city and the Oaxaca Valley polity as a whole (Figure 3.2). In its final form, the Main Plaza consisted of a huge plaza measuring roughly 300 m north–south by 150 m east–west and bounded on its north and south ends by high platforms supporting numerous public buildings (Figure 3.3). The eastern and western sides were defined by rows of monumental buildings; a third row of structures ran north to south through the center of the plaza.

I argue that the Main Plaza was constructed as an axis mundi and a mountain of creation where people ritually petitioned deities for fertility and prosperity. Initially, the plaza was a place of community engagement in social practices, especially rituals, which contributed to the creation of a larger-scale corporate identity. Through time, however, nobles increasingly closed off and controlled access to the Main Plaza (A. Joyce 2004), transforming it from a largely public ceremonial space to an increasingly restricted elite residential area.

Communal Identity and Sacred Authority (500–100 BC)

Monte Albán was founded during a period of political crisis and conflict in the Valley of Oaxaca and beyond. Major political centers were in decline, like La Venta in the Gulf Coast lowlands and Chalcatzingo in the central Mexican highlands, while new political centers were emerging. In the century preceding the founding of Monte Albán, San José Mogote, the most powerful community in the Oaxaca Valley, lost population, and competitors may have raided the site's ceremonial



FIGURE 3.2. Photo of the Main Plaza of Monte Albán looking south with the North Platform in the foreground and the South Platform in the background. The North Platform's Patio Hundido is foreground right.

center, perhaps burning a temple (Joyce 2000; Marcus and Flannery 1996:121–135). Demographic changes as well as similarities in architecture, iconography, and mortuary practices indicate that people from the San José Mogote polity founded Monte Albán (Flannery and Marcus 1983a).

One of the first activities carried out at Monte Albán was construction of a Main Plaza precinct. The initial version, dating from 500 to 100 BC, consisted of the plaza itself, a western row of buildings, and much of the eastern half of the North Platform (Winter 2001:282–288). Even during its first few centuries, the scale of the Main Plaza far exceeded earlier ceremonial spaces in the Valley of Oaxaca, suggesting that the plaza was built to communicate with the otherworld in new and more powerful ways in response to the political crisis facing the site's founders. The hilltop location of Monte Albán also provided a defensive advantage during this period of conflict. Defensive concerns are suggested by the construction of a wall around the most vulner-

able parts of the site by the Terminal Formative (100 BC–AD 200).

The symbolism and spatial arrangement of architecture and iconography suggest that the Main Plaza was founded as a place that symbolized the Zapotec cosmos, where rituals could be performed to reenact the primordial creation (A. Joyce 2000, 2004). The plaza was built on top of an imposing mountain that rises over 300 m above the valley floor, and it is likely that the entire ceremonial precinct was considered a sacred mountain of creation. The layout and iconography of the plaza resembled the quadripartite division of Mesoamerican ceremonial centers, which attached particular symbolic values to the cardinal directions and the axial center. At Monte Albán, as at many ceremonial centers, meanings assigned to the northern and southern directions were more clearly marked, with north representing the celestial realm and south, the earth or underworld (Ashmore 1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; Sugiyama 1993). The eastern and western directions

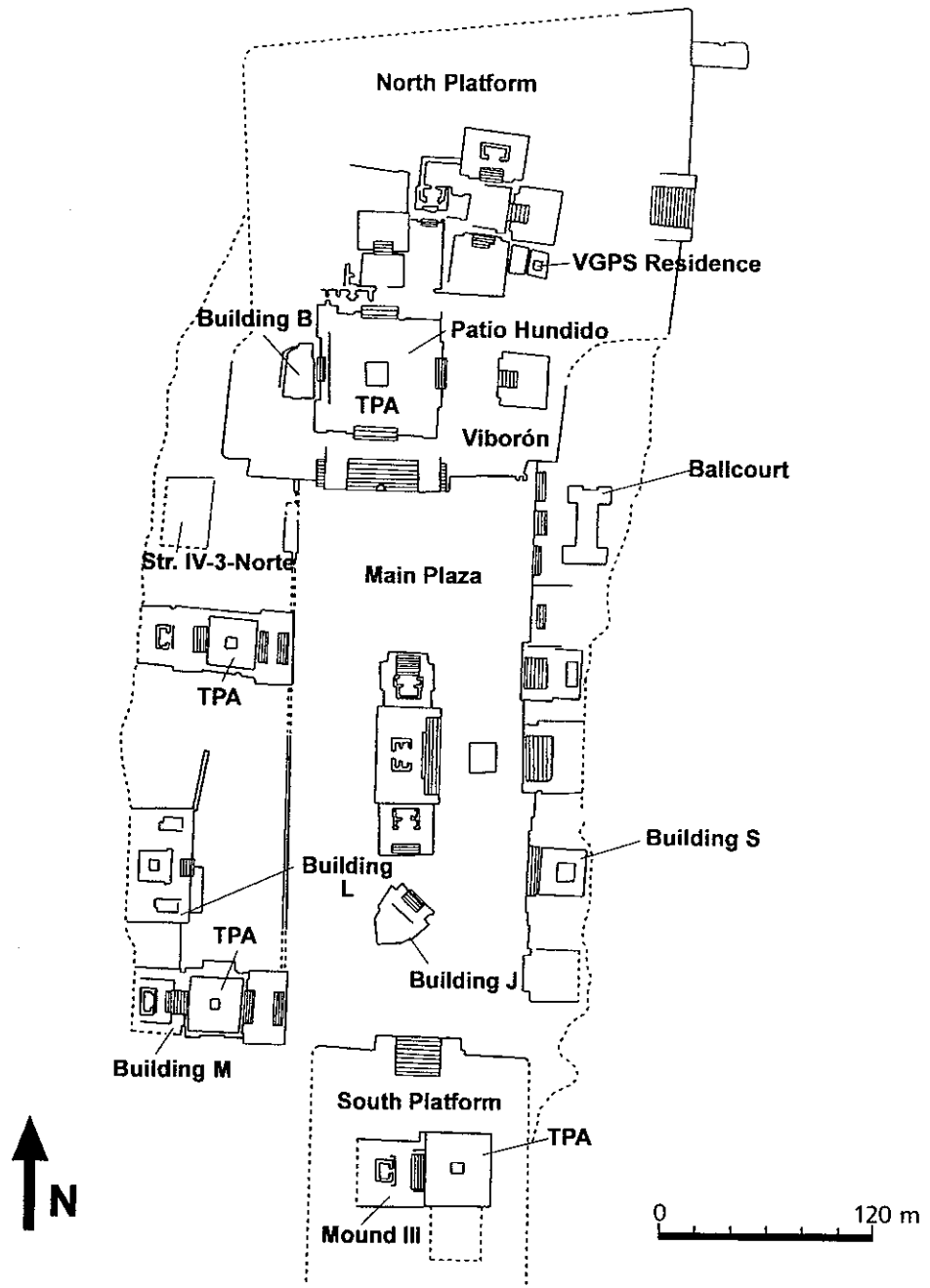


FIGURE 3.3. Plan of the Main Plaza at Monte Albán (TPA = temple-patio-altar complex).

may mark the rising and setting of the sun, respectively, while the axial center would represent the earthly world of the living.

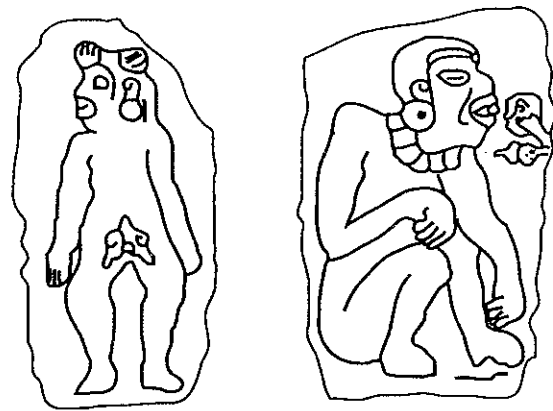
The southern end of the Main Plaza contained iconographic references to sacrifice, warfare, ancestors, and earth or underworld. Building L-sub was the location of a gallery of carved stones known as the *danzantes* (Figure 3.4a) that in-

cluded more than 350 monuments with references to warfare, human and autosacrifice, and invocations of ancestors for warfare-related oracular purposes (Scott 1978a; Urcid 2008). Mesoamericans believed that sacrificial victims went into the earth at death (Joyce 2000).

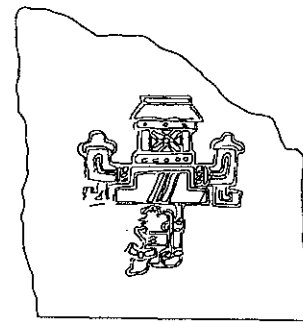
Conversely, north represented the celestial realm, and the plaza's northern monuments in-

cluded iconographic references to sky, rain, and lightning. For example, a celestial reference is found in the stucco frieze known as the *viborón* or serpent (Figure 3.5) beneath the North Platform (Orr 1997). The frieze consists of a sky band with scrolls similar to the S-scroll rain cloud motif and serpentine figures resembling the Zapotec rain/lightning deity, Cocijó, with rain issuing from the figure's mouth. The frieze covers the sides of what appears to have been a sunken court. In Mesoamerica, sunken or enclosed plazas and ballcourts often symbolized interfaces between the world of the living and the sacred otherworld of deities and ancestors.²

The scale, accessibility, openness, and symbolism of the Main Plaza indicate that it was constructed as an arena where thousands of people of different social statuses and from different communities participated in public ceremonies. Until the Terminal Formative, the Main Plaza was open on its eastern side, making activities on the plaza accessible to commoners living on the terraces below. Ceremonies blended traditional rituals such as autosacrificial bloodletting, ancestor veneration, divination, and feasting with new practices like human sacrifice (Blanton et al. 1999:105–107; Joyce 2000; Orr 1997, 2001). The *danzantes* gallery with its depictions of sacrifice was constructed so that the images could be viewed during processions (Orr 1997). Sacrificial practices, especially human sacrifice, were particularly significant in contacting the otherworld, reenacting the cosmic creation, and renewing the world (Freidel et al. 1993; Joyce 2000; Monaghan 1990, 1994; Schele and Freidel 1990). In Mesoamerican creation stories, the current world was the result of a sacred covenant between humans and the gods whereby people petitioned deities for agricultural fertility and prosperity in return for sacrificial offerings. New religious cults are also indicated by the first



a.



b.

FIGURE 3.4. Formative period carved stones from Monte Albán: (a) *danzante* sculptures from Building L (redrawn from Scott 1978b); (b) Building J "Conquest Slab" (redrawn from Caso 1947: Figure 41; images not drawn to scale).

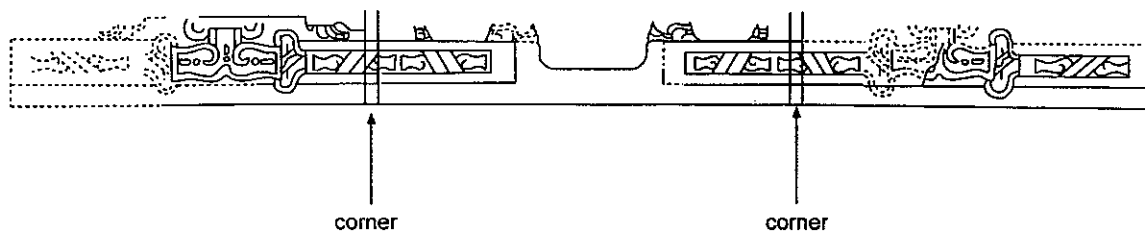


FIGURE 3.5. "Viborón" frieze from the North Platform at Monte Albán (redrawn from Urcid 1994b: Figura 7).

occurrence of effigy vessels depicting deities like Cocijó, the Old God, and the Wide-Billed Bird deity (Blanton et al. 1999:105–107; Winter 2001: 286–287).

The founding of Monte Albán, the construction of the Main Plaza, large-scale public rituals, and warfare were activities undoubtedly organized and led by nobles. Even before the founding of Monte Albán, the belief in nobles' religious authority, as well as their control over prestige goods and tribute, was a major aspect of their power (Grove and Gillespie 1992). An increasing association between elite residences and religious symbols and artifacts during the early years of Monte Albán indicates that nobles were gaining greater control of politico-religious ideas, practices, and institutions (Joyce and Winter 1996:36). Human sacrifice was a new, dramatic, and potent means for nobles to communicate with the divine and demonstrate both their power and their generosity to supporters. At Monte Albán, residences of the nobility were concentrated around the North Platform, creating an elite-ceremonial precinct that was spatially segregated from the rest of the community and which symbolically linked nobles and noble ancestors to the celestial realm.

Though nobles lived near the Main Plaza during the Formative, there were few explicit representations of local elites, and no high-status residences directly faced the plaza.³ The emphasis was on public buildings, public spaces, and cosmic symbolism including images depicting sacrifice, warfare, and the celestial realm. The Main Plaza seems to have stressed the symbols of an emerging corporate identity while muting representations of rulers. The choice of an unoccupied hilltop in the middle of the valley for this new ceremonial center had the effect of distancing Monte Albán from traditional centers of settlement and politico-religious power, making the site a more effective symbol for new social formations. The initial construction of monumental buildings would have engaged people in emerging corporate structures, since it appears likely that labor was contributed voluntarily (Joyce 2000). The Main Plaza was visible for great distances so that its power as a sacred mountain and political center would have been present in the everyday lived experiences of people throughout the region.

The Main Plaza would have engaged people not just during public rituals but, in fact, would have continuously communicated aspects of dominant ideologies, although the plaza's accessibility presented possibilities for the discursive penetration of these beliefs as well (Hutson 2002).

Public ceremonies in the Main Plaza organized and led by nobles and participated in by large groups of commoners created powerful memories that bound people to the rulers, the symbols, and the new social order centered at Monte Albán. Public ritual performances contributed to the production of larger-scale corporate identities internalized in people's dispositions and externalized in social practices like contributing tribute, allegiance, and labor to the polity. Evidence suggests that warfare may have increased in scale at this time, which could also have united people behind rulers and ruling institutions (Joyce and Winter 1996). The creation of shared identities and alliances with people in other valley communities is indicated by the construction of public architecture, high-status residences, urns, and monumental art similar to those from Monte Albán in many sites during the Late/Terminal Formative (Marcus and Flannery 1996; Orr 1997; Spencer and Redmond 2001; Whalen 1988).

At the same time, the ritual performances and symbolism of the Main Plaza contributed to an increasing separation of noble and commoner identities. The special role that elites played as religious specialists dramatically reinforced their positions as mediators between commoners and the sacred. Monumental buildings would have served as stages elevating and separating nobles from the commoners on the plaza below. The separation of status groups would have been reinforced by the visibility of elite residences and the North Platform, symbolizing the linkage between nobles and the celestial realm. Elite identities were also symbolized by their control of exotic artifacts and knowledge such as urns, incense burners, hieroglyphic writing, and calendrics. The nobles' appropriation of religious ideas, spaces, and practices increased their power to attract followers, mobilize resources, defeat competitors, and interact with the sacred.

While people were increasingly incorporated into a larger-scale political formation, which

by the Terminal Formative can probably be described as a state (Marcus and Flannery 1996), there undoubtedly were different degrees of compliance with the rulers, institutions, and practices centered at Monte Albán. Commoners and nobles in some parts of the valley actively resisted the emerging political structures and rulers of Monte Albán (A. Joyce 2004). For these people, the Main Plaza may not have been recognized as a sacred place and would have been viewed much differently than it was by those who willingly participated in ritual performances at Monte Albán. As Monte Albán's size and power grew, independence and resistance became increasingly risky. Spencer and Redmond (2001) have found evidence that the independent center of El Palenque was conquered by Monte Albán and a high-status residence and temple were destroyed by fire. As discussed in the next section, the rising power of the rulers of Monte Albán is also indicated by evidence that nobles began to exert greater control over the Main Plaza and the ritual practices carried out there.

*Elite Appropriation of
the Main Plaza (100 BC–AD 800)*

By the Terminal Formative (100 BC–AD 200) and continuing through the Classic period (AD 200–800) the rulers of Monte Albán acquired political and religious authority over the entire Oaxaca Valley (Marcus and Flannery 1996). Elite appropriation of the Main Plaza was perhaps the most significant act in power consolidation. The Main Plaza became spatially segregated and increasingly controlled by the nobility as rulers shifted their focus away from rituals that emphasized communal identity and toward self-aggrandizement. The plaza was used less for large public ceremonies that engaged commoners and more as an elite residential precinct and an area for restricted ceremonies.

Early versions of the South Platform and the eastern row of buildings were constructed during the Terminal Formative, effectively closing off the Main Plaza (Winter 2001). The central row of structures was also built, which served to further restrict and channel traffic. Control of space was reflected at a smaller scale by the Zapotec two-room temple, where restricted rituals were carried out by Zapotec priests.

During the Terminal Formative, additions and alterations to the Main Plaza reinforced the basic themes of sacred geography (A. Joyce 2004). Building J in the southern end of the plaza continued the themes of sacrifice, warfare, and the underworld. During the Late Formative or early Terminal Formative, approximately 50 carved stone slabs were set in a monumental building whose original location is not certain, although it was probably in the southern end of the plaza because later in the Terminal Formative the slabs were reset in the walls of Building J (Urcid 1994a). These slabs have been interpreted as depicting places conquered by Monte Albán (Figure 3.4b). 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. Part of the Building J program also included a representation of a local noble shown in the act of decapitation sacrifice (Urcid and Winter 2003:127). 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. Structure IV-3-Norte, located on the northwestern corner of the Main Plaza, was the first elite residence built directly on the plaza, although its entrance faced north rather than east onto the plaza (Barber and Joyce 2006). A ballcourt was built on the northeastern corner of the Main Plaza at what was probably the primary entrance point (Blanton 1978:63–66).

By the Classic period, Zapotec nobles throughout the Oaxaca Valley increasingly represented their personal power in portraits of themselves and their ancestors, rather than communal themes of cosmic creation and renewal (A. Joyce 2004). Depictions of nobles and noble ancestors were no longer restricted to the northern part of the plaza. Classic period monuments from the South Platform include a program of carved stones depicting a ruler presiding over bound war captives (Figure 3.6a; Urcid 1992:397–408), processional scenes commemorating living nobles and their ancestors (Urcid 1992:405), and a possible scene of divination by a Zapotec noble (Orr 1997:259). Other Classic period depictions of nobles or

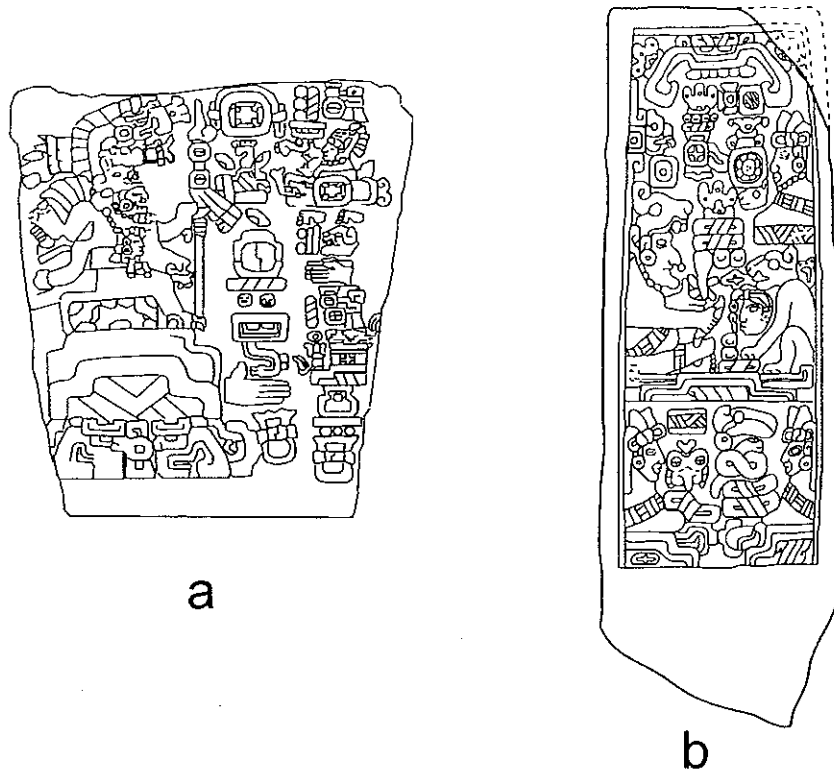


FIGURE 3.6. Classic period carved stones from Monte Albán: (a) South Platform monument showing a ruler (redrawn from Urcid 2001: Figure 5.30A); (b) Stela MA-VGE-2 (redrawn from Urcid et al. 1994: Figura 3A; images not drawn to scale).

noble ancestors have been found in the North Platform and other areas of the Main Plaza precinct (García Moll et al. 1986; Urcid 1994b, 2001; Urcid et al. 1994).

The Main Plaza increasingly became a focus of elite domestic activities and presumably was used less frequently as an arena for large-scale public ceremonies (Barber and Joyce 2006; A. Joyce 2004; Winter 2003). While elite residences continued to be concentrated on and around the North Platform, during the Early Classic period a high-status residence was built adjacent to the plaza just west of the South Platform. By the Late Classic this area included at least 10 residences, although no more than five were occupied simultaneously. Building S, the largest Late Classic elite residence, was built on the southeastern end of the plaza. An elite residence was also built on top of the 9-m-high platform of Building L, which had previously supported a temple (Winter 2003:109).

Other changes in the spatial configuration of the Main Plaza during the Late Classic involved both its external access and its internal layout. Blanton (1978:63–66) shows that by the Late Classic the plaza was largely closed off. People would have entered the plaza from highly restricted access points, enhancing the ability of nobles to monitor and control entry into the ceremonial center (Martínez and Markens 2004). The plaza itself was divided by the construction of 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 or by constructing a sunken patio. Since the patios were far smaller than the Main Plaza, fewer people could have participated in ceremonies in the TPAs. Two TPAs were built on the west side of the Main Plaza, effectively segregating portions of the plaza, creating restricted ceremonial spaces.⁴ Activities

within the patio would have been hidden from the view of people outside. In addition to TPAs, the Late Classic also witnessed a major increase in the construction of two-room temples (Martínez 2002), which created additional restricted ritual spaces.

Another indication of the appropriation of ceremonial space by elites is the incorporation of a two-room temple into the Tomb 7 residence, a high-status house first constructed during the Terminal Formative (Martínez 2002). During the latter half of the Late Classic the western end of the residence was rebuilt as a two-room temple. The temple was built directly over a tomb that opened onto the patio, thereby associating the temple with the ancestors of the elite family that occupied the residence. This created one of the first architectural complexes in the region that formally united a high-status house with a public building (Barber and Joyce 2006:239).

The evidence indicates that the political practices of the nobility were focused less on elite-commoner relations and more on political relations among nobles. By the Late Classic, most newly carved stones at Monte Albán and other Oaxaca Valley sites were set in highly restricted locations. Genealogical registers depicting several generations of nobles, sometimes showing marriage scenes or rituals related to ancestor veneration, were the most common type of carved monument (Figure 3.6b). When found in situ, these carved stone slabs are mostly in tombs or other highly restricted locations (Urcid 2005). Similarly, painted murals that date largely to this period depict scenes of ancestor veneration and genealogical relations and are found in the most elaborate tombs in the valley, especially from several high-status residences north of the North Platform (Miller 1995). The concern with genealogy and ancestors, particularly in the context of tomb rituals, suggests that establishing genealogical linkages to powerful ancestors was crucial in negotiating and legitimating political power (Urcid 2005:147–154). 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. Both TPAs and subpatio tombs may have been interfaces where restricted groups of elites con-

tacted the sacred realm. The trend toward the construction of TPAs and restricted ceremonial spaces is found in administrative centers throughout the valley (Kowalewski et al. 1989:262–263).

Several explanations can be suggested for the shift away from large-scale public ceremonies and toward restricted ones. By the Classic period political authority and ideological principles in the Oaxaca Valley were well established. The institutionalization of political power may have lessened the necessity for large-scale ceremonies that engaged people in the symbols, rulers, and institutions of the polity. By the Late Classic the nobility had grown in size, and the social setting had become factionalized, with numerous sub-regional centers led by lesser nobles (Kowalewski et al. 1989; Lind 1994). Monte Albán itself was inhabited by various barrios, each led by an elite corporate group (Blanton 1978). The collapse of the Basin of Mexico state of Teotihuacán around AD 600 would have lessened the role of Monte Albán's rulers in negotiating relations with this powerful polity. Without the potential threat of Teotihuacán, local nobles may have asserted their independence and distanced themselves from Monte Albán's rulers (Blanton 1983; Urcid 2005:155). I have argued that these factors led to competition among nobles 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 (A. Joyce 2004:211). 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.

The appropriation of the Main Plaza by nobles would have inscribed new meanings on the ceremonial precinct. By the Late Classic the plaza was no longer primarily a public space that embodied the earlier corporate symbolism that signaled inclusion and the celebration of communal relations with the sacred. Instead, the plaza was increasingly residential as well as a ceremonial space for restricted rituals. Interaction with the otherworld was now focused around the sacred power of nobles, especially through contact with their ancestors. The construction of noble houses

and the erection of portraits of rulers violated the earlier sacred geography, with its focus on cosmic symbolism, warfare, and human sacrifice. By the Late Classic, many of the earlier iconographic programs that communicated these themes, such as the *danzantes* and the Building J "conquest slabs," had been partially dismantled, reset in building foundations, and often plastered over (Caso 1938, 1939:173–174).

Nobles and commoners would have experienced the Main Plaza in very different ways. For nobles, the plaza was now both a ceremonial and a residential area. Noble families and perhaps retainers would have carried out their everyday domestic activities in and around the Main Plaza. The bulk of the plaza may no longer have been a liminal space for contacting the sacred realm, with TPAs creating restricted ceremonial spaces that were removed from everyday life and the domestic sphere. For commoners, the decrease in public ceremonies on the Main Plaza meant that they were less actively engaged in the kinds of dramatic ritual performances and shared experiences that created a sense of belonging and identity with the symbols, rulers, and institutions of the polity (A. Joyce 2004). If local nobles were actively competing and attempting to undermine the authority of Monte Albán, then central unifying symbols, especially surrounding the rulers of Monte Albán, would have been further weakened. The Main Plaza would have embodied an increasing separation, and perhaps tension, between the identities of commoners and rulers as well as between center and hinterland. Competition among the nobility and the disengagement of commoners from state ceremonies could have had the unintended outcome of weakening the allegiance of commoners and lesser nobles to rulers and ruling institutions, especially to the distant rulers of Monte Albán.

At the end of the Late Classic archaeological data suggest that the site's nobles were increasingly isolating themselves from the general population as people began to leave the city and as ruling institutions failed (Blanton 1978:100; Winter 2003). At this time, many of Monte Albán's elite residences were abandoned or were rebuilt on a smaller, more modest scale. Several new high-status residences were built in the Main Plaza precinct in very restricted locations,

often protected by walls (Winter 2003:108–111). For example, the VGPS residence on the North Platform had a diagonal adobe wall that blocked the view of the house from people below (Figure 3.7). Residences throughout the site became increasingly enclosed and inwardly focused during the Late Classic, perhaps due to rising social tensions and divisions, especially between competing nobles and/or commoners (Hutson 2002:68–69; Winter 1974).

By AD 800 Monte Albán was in decline, with its people leaving the city and relocating to other parts of the valley. The causes of the collapse have been debated, although many researchers agree that factional competition was an important factor (A. Joyce 2004; Kowalewski et al. 1989:251; Lind 1994; Winter 2003:116). I argue that commoner disengagement was probably another key factor. When the social and political relations that linked Oaxaca Valley elites began to crumble in factional competition, commoners may have declined to support nobles, especially the rulers of Monte Albán. While the initial success of Monte Albán was a result of the engagement of commoners in rituals, labor projects, and military actions that came to be important symbols of the polity, its collapse may have been an unintended outcome of people's exclusion from many of these same symbolically, emotionally, and politically charged practices. Monte Albán would remain a sacred mountain until after the Spanish conquest, but it would never again be an important political center.

The Main Plaza as a Pre-Sunrise Place of Creation

During the Postclassic period (AD 800–1521) the area in and around the Main Plaza continued to be viewed as a sacred space where important rituals were carried out. The archaeological record demonstrates three different types of social practices in the Main Plaza precinct during the Postclassic (Herrera 2002; Winter 2003): (1) residential, as shown by the construction of a single house west of the South Platform; (2) defensive, as shown by the construction of a defensive wall over the South Platform; and (3) ritual, as shown by offerings and burials placed in earlier ceremonial structures. The evidence suggests that, like the ruins of other Classic period cities, Monte

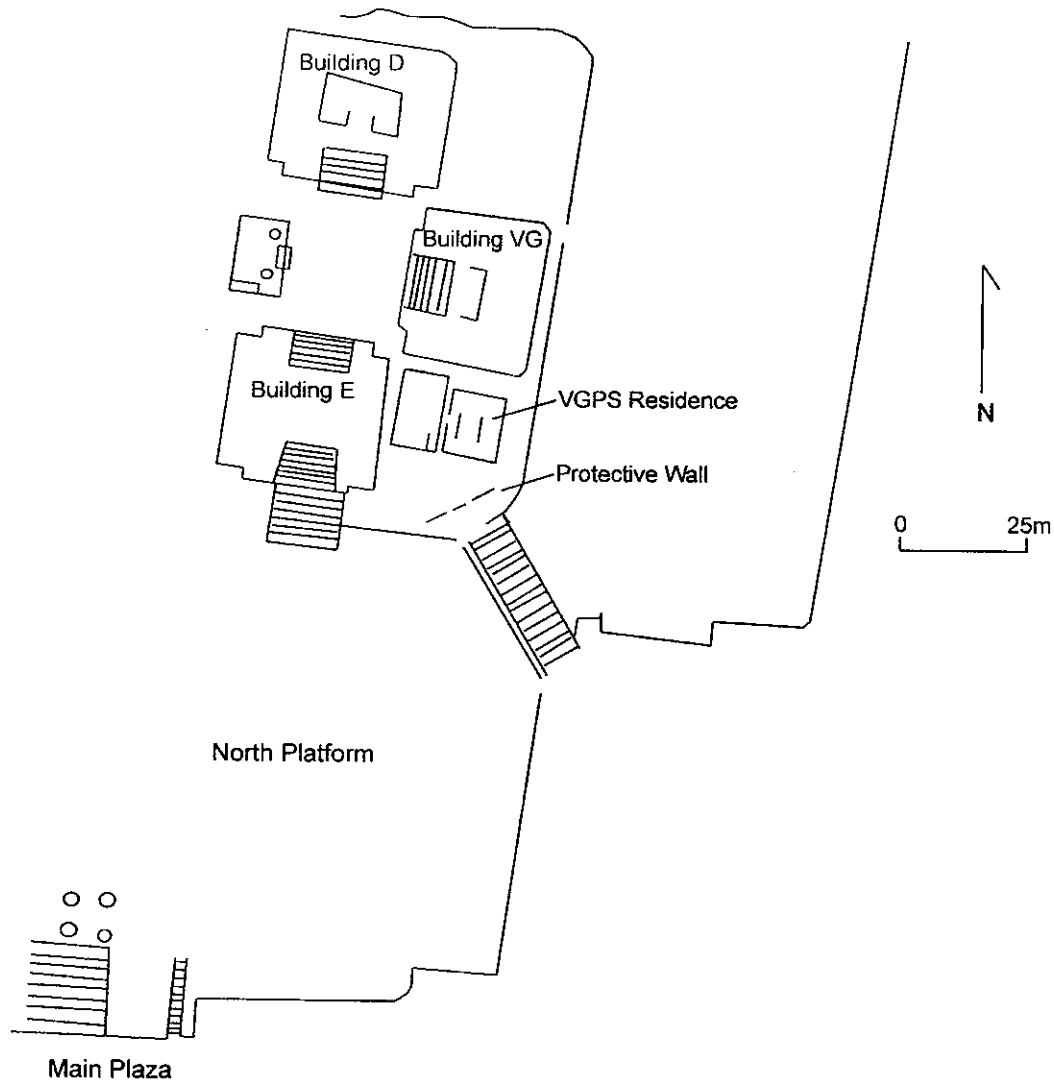


FIGURE 3.7. VGPS residence and protective wall from Monte Albán's North Platform (redrawn from Winter 2003:Figure 8.5).

Albán and especially the Main Plaza were remembered and celebrated as a place of creation where people continued to ritually contact the sacred realm (Hamann 2002). Colonial-period representations continued to depict the Main Plaza as a place of creation, and stories into the twentieth century viewed it as a place of powerful sacred forces.

*Social Memory and the Early Postclassic
Ritual Use of the Main Plaza (AD 800–1200)*

During the Early Postclassic the Main Plaza precinct was largely abandoned. Winter (2003:114) excavated a single Early Postclassic residence

in the area west of the South Platform where numerous Late Classic residences had been located. Ceremonial offerings indicate that people continuously returned to the Main Plaza to communicate with deities and ancestors using a narrowly prescribed set of ritual practices. Ritual deposits were relatively uniform both in content and in placement, with offerings left in reused tombs and TPAs (Herrera 2002). The most common objects in ritual deposits were miniature ceramic vessels, *penates*, and obsidian blades, all of which can be associated with death, sacrifice, and ancestors. Obsidian blades were used for autosacrificial bloodletting. Penates are small

anthropomorphic stone figures that depict dead people with their eyes closed, possibly mummy bundles. Miniature ceramics were mostly utilitarian bowl and jar forms along with *sahumadores* (incense burners). Ethnographic data from Oaxaca indicate that miniature objects, including ceramic vessels, are used as offerings in mortuary rituals and as sacrificial offerings at sacred places such as caves, ruins, altars, mountaintops, and near prehispanic carved stones to petition deities for health and well-being (Bartolomé and Barabas 1982:230; Herrera 2002; Heyden 1975:345; Parsons 1936:314). The sacred places where miniatures have been left in the ethnographic present are all viewed as otherworld interfaces where deities and ancestors are contacted, like prehispanic TPAs and tombs. Sahumadores suggest the burning of incense as a sacrifice to the gods, as has been done from the colonial period to the present day (Ashmore, this volume; Brown 2004; Monaghan 1995:221).

Early Postclassic ritual deposits were recovered in TPAs in the North and South Platforms (Herrera 2002). Over 2,000 objects were recovered in fill over Building B, which constitutes the western side of the North Platform's Patio Hundido, the largest TPA at the site (Caso et al. 1967:399–403; Herrera 2002:351). In the South Platform TPA, thousands of objects were recovered above the altar and in the fill over the stairway and sides of Mound III, which, like Building B in the North Platform, made up the western side of the TPA. Offerings of miniature vessels were recovered from Building M, which formed the western side of a TPA on the southwestern end of the Main Plaza, and in the 7 Venado system south of the South Platform, which included a TPA (Herrera 2002:362–363). The offerings in the TPAs were not a single deposit but, rather, were the result of repeated rituals over the course of several centuries from the end of the Late Classic through the Early Postclassic (Winter 2003:115). In addition to offerings in TPAs, the contents of several subpatio tombs from Classic period residences around the Main Plaza were removed, and then offerings of miniature vessels and penates were left (Martínez et al. 2002; Winter 2003).

Offerings deposited in and around the Main Plaza show how memory and tradition produced continuities in meaning despite the disjunctive

social changes of the Early Postclassic. The TPAs and tombs in which offerings were placed were considered interfaces to the sacred realm and were the most restricted and perhaps most sacred ceremonial spaces of the Late Classic, indicating that Early Postclassic ritual activities were based on social memories of the earlier uses and meanings of the site. In the case of the North and South Platform TPAs, Early Postclassic ritual deposits were left over an earlier sacred axis dating back to the Terminal Formative (Gámez 2002), suggesting an even deeper social memory. Oral and perhaps written histories would have transferred social memories of the ritual significance of TPAs and tombs through the generations. Ritual practices inscribed more permanent continuities in meaning and memory, with Early Postclassic offerings once again marking the plaza as a sacred place where sacrificial offerings were made to activate the sacred covenant and petition deities for fertility and prosperity.

Yet ritual practices also transformed memory and meaning in ways that reflected the new social order of the Early Postclassic. The high frequency of ritual offerings and the use of common objects such as miniature utilitarian ceramics and obsidian artifacts suggest that common people participated in the rituals. It may be that after the collapse of Monte Albán, commoners reclaimed the Main Plaza, which they had originally built and which they were increasingly excluded from during the Classic period. The removal of human remains from high-status tombs and their replacement with offerings seem more likely to have been carried out by the descendants of the tomb occupants and therefore by families descended from the Classic period nobility (Winter 2003:115). At present it is difficult to assess the nature of Early Postclassic inequality (Oudijk 2002:75), although the data suggest that the social hierarchy may have been significantly reduced (Markens 2004:432–433). A reduction in hierarchy would be consistent with the impression that rituals on the Main Plaza were less restricted than they had been during the Classic period. The data indicate that despite the fragmented political relations of the Early Postclassic, the ceremonies on the Main Plaza referenced a shared history and identity as descendants of the ancestors who resided at the site.

*The Late Postclassic: Nobles Reappropriate
the Main Plaza (AD 1200–1521)*

By the Late Postclassic the Oaxaca Valley was broken up into about a dozen independent polities, each ruled by a great house centered on a hereditary ruler (Kowalewski et al. 1989; Oudijk 2002; Pohl 2003a, 2003b). The political landscape was dynamic and factionalized, with the fortunes of polities waxing and waning depending on success in warfare and the establishment of marital alliances with other ruling houses. Prehispanic and early colonial-period documents record numerous such marriages, including several between Zapotec houses of the Valley of Oaxaca and Mixtec houses of the Nochixtlán Valley to the north.⁵

At Monte Albán a small community arose along the lower slopes of the site about 1 km north of the Main Plaza (Blanton 1978:101–103). While people were not living in the plaza, it continued to be treated as a sacred place where offerings were made and mortuary rituals carried out. Offerings continued to be left in TPAs, although fewer objects were left relative to the Early Postclassic (Caso et al. 1967:447–460).

A defensive wall built over the South Platform converted this area into a fortress like others found on hilltops above Late Postclassic communities such as Mitla and Yagul. These fortresses were places where surrounding communities retreated both during times of war against local enemies and when Aztec armies invaded. Ethnohistoric evidence shows that the Valley of Oaxaca was conquered and incorporated into the Aztec Empire during the last few decades before the Spanish conquest (Marcus 1983).

Noble and commoner identities were more clearly marked in ritual deposits and burials than they had been in the Early Postclassic. The focus of noble ritual returned to the area north of the North Platform. Several Classic period tombs in this area were reused for the interment of Late Postclassic nobles (Caso 1982; Winter 1995), and an offering of a mosaic mask and copper bells was left in the fill above the patio over Tomb 105 (Miller 1995:88–105). By far the most elaborate of the interments was in Tomb 7. The tomb itself was built as early as the Terminal Formative but was reused during the Late Postclassic to inter at least nine people. One of the most elaborate

offerings ever discovered in the Americas, including hundreds of artifacts of gold, silver, copper, amber, jet, coral, shell, obsidian, turquoise, rock crystal, ceramic, and *tecali* along with more than a dozen bones carved with codex-style images (Caso 1982), accompanied these burials. The tomb was opened on multiple occasions during the Late Postclassic, probably for rituals and the placement of additional interments (Middleton et al. 1998). McCafferty and McCafferty (1994) make a strong argument that the tomb and its occupants were associated with the Mesoamerican Mother Goddess complex. The reuse of this particular tomb suggests the commemoration of a deeper memory of the significance of the architectural complex associated with Tomb 7. As discussed above, the Late Classic building above Tomb 7 was highly unusual in incorporating a two-room temple within a high-status residence (Barber and Joyce 2006:239). The interment of multiple individuals with one of the most spectacular offerings ever discovered in Mesoamerica shows that in the Late Postclassic this location continued to be viewed as a special place.

Beyond the area of the Main Plaza, flexed and seated low-status burials were intrusively interred in areas that were no longer occupied but which contain the remains of Late Classic residences (Caso et al. 1967:447; Martínez 1998:293–298). Like the reuse of tombs by noble families, it is possible that these interments represent claims to land through assertions of descent from important ancestors who resided at the site.

Monte Albán was therefore a site of fortifications, burials of powerful elites, and shrines, all of which are consistent with patterns recognized by Pohl and his colleagues (1997) for special locations on community boundaries depicted in Late Postclassic and early colonial manuscripts. The codices (indigenous prehispanic-style manuscripts) record the territorial claims of Late Postclassic polities, while boundaries shown on *lienzos* (colonial indigenous maps) record claims of important towns, often referencing territorial claims dating back to the prehispanic era. Boundaries are shown by a series of pictographs demarcating natural features such as mountains, rivers, and caves as well as fortifications, ballcourts, burial places, and shrines. Boundaries include neutral locations where people from competing polities met, such

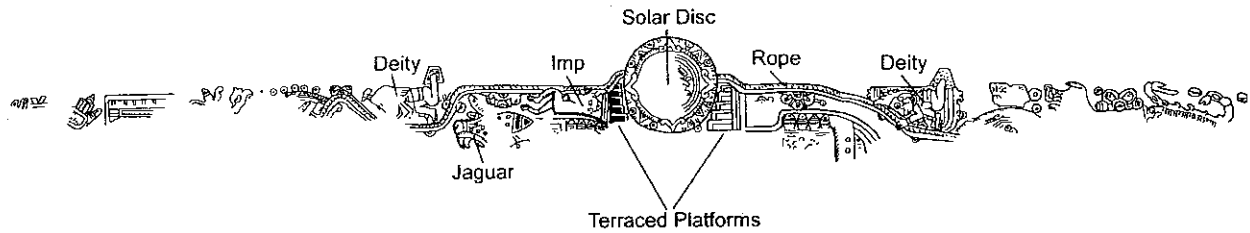


FIGURE 3.8. Arroyo Group lintel painting from Mitla (redrawn from Pohl 2005).

as border markets and sacred places. Ruined sites are also depicted as boundary locations and sacred places often inhabited by powerful deities, showing that Late Postclassic peoples saw ancient ruins as important elements in their cultural constructions of landscape (Hamann 2003b).

Late prehispanic and early colonial documents show some ruined sites as pre-sunrise places of creation (Hamann 2002, 2003b; Pohl 2003a). These places of creation were usually ruined hilltop sites that had major Classic period occupations like Monte Albán. In Mixtec belief, the creation of the current world began with the destruction of an earlier age following a cataclysmic war termed the “War of Heaven” by most codical scholars, though more appropriately interpreted as the “War with Earth, War with Rain” (Hamann 2002). The codices depict the war as fought by gods and Mixtec ancestors against rock-skinned stone men and rain-descending cloud men. The war ended in a sacred covenant between Mixtec ancestors and the gods of Earth and Rain. This covenant establishes cosmological debts to the gods, which are repaid through sacrifice. Through sacrificial offerings people petition the deities for agricultural and human fertility (Monaghan 1990). Following the establishment of the covenant, the current world began with the first sunrise of the new era and the founding of the major Late Postclassic ruling houses. In twentieth-century Zapotec and Mixtec myth, the first sunrise petrified the stone men inhabitants of the earlier age, which people often identify as prehispanic carved stone monuments (Hamann 2002:355; Parsons 1936:216, 454).

Unfortunately, codices that might have recorded Zapotec creation stories from the Oaxaca Valley did not survive the Spanish conquest. Pohl (1999, 2005), however, has shown that preserved

portions of painted lintels from the palaces at Mitla record codex-like narratives of multiple creation sagas. The preserved section of the painted lintel on the Arroyo Group palace (Figure 3.8) records a Zapotec creation story similar to the first-sunrise narratives recorded in the Mixtec codices. The lintel features a celestial band broken by a large solar disk at the center of the composition directly over the doorway. The disk emerges from between two terraced temples, each set upon the back of a jaguar ornamented with flint knives. Two ropes are attached to the right and left sides of the solar disk and are grasped by deities that are descending from clefts in the sky. An implike figure, resembling the stone men of the Mixtec codices, grasps the rope to the left of the solar disk. Two ancestors beside a hill glyph that Pohl (2005) identifies as the place sign of Zaachila are further to the left, below the sky band.

The location of the creation event as two terraced temples from a “jaguar place” may reference Monte Albán’s Main Plaza (Pohl 2002, 2005). People from the town of Xoxocotlán below Monte Albán knew the site as Cerro del Tigre, or Hill of the Jaguar (Bradomin 1955; Cruz 1946). Monte Albán is depicted as the Hill of the Jaguar in several eighteenth-century maps from Xoxocotlán and a colonial-period painting of the coat of arms from Cuilapan (Smith 1973:202–208; Whittaker 1980: 166–169). The Xoxocotlán map names 10 of the hills associated with Monte Albán. The Hill of the Jaguar represents the South Platform. As in the Arroyo Group lintel, the Cuilapan image shows a large sun rising over the Hill of the Jaguar, marking it as a place of creation. As late as the end of the nineteenth century, Castellanos (1989) was told that the Main Plaza was called Kehyik-anyi or “Plateau of the Sun” in the Mixtec dialect from Xoxocotlán. Whittaker’s (1980:162) reporting of

an informant's statement of seven caves/tombs below the Main Plaza is reminiscent of Mixtec and Aztec belief that the origin point from which their ancestors emerged was a place translated as "Seven Caves" or "Cave Seven" (see Monaghan 1995:210). Orr (1997:115–116) reports Zapotec informants who believe that carved stones from Monte Albán are examples of pre-sunrise giants that were turned to stone at the creation of the current world. Elsie Clews Parsons (1936:216) recorded myths of pre-sunrise stone people at Mitla in the early 1930s; one informant told Parsons that the stone people "lived here when the first sun came out. The ancient ones built the ruins before there was any sun" (1936:454).

The Mixtec codices date the time of the War with Earth, War with Rain and the dawn of the new era to the tenth century or the Early Postclassic (Byland and Pohl 1994:14; Hamann 2002). Several scholars have argued that the "War with Earth, War with Rain" is an account of the violent collapse of Classic period polities such as the one centered at Monte Albán, followed by the emergence of the smaller, fragmented polities of the Postclassic (Byland and Pohl 1994; Jansen 1998). The problem with this literal interpretation of the codices is that the timing of the war is a century or two later than the fragmentation of the Late Classic states. Data from highland Oaxaca (Markens 2004:432–433; Winter 2003), while still problematic, also suggest that Postclassic polities did not emerge directly out of the Late Classic political centers. The Early Postclassic appears to have been a time of reduced inequality, with ruling families having lost much of their wealth and power.

Instead, I argue that the codical creation stories are retroactive fifteenth- and sixteenth-century accounts of the collapse transformed by the political realities of the Late Postclassic. The codices as well as the creation stories on the Mitla lintels depict the War with Earth, War with Rain as occurring amid the ruins of Late Classic cities like Monte Albán. The war results in the destruction of an earlier, immoral age followed by the first sunrise of a new, moral, and properly ordered era and the founding of Late Postclassic royal houses (Hamann 2002; Pohl 2002). Hamann (2002:359–360) argues that these creation stories transformed memories of the collapse in ways

that legitimated the authority of Late Postclassic nobles. The codices legitimated noble authority by showing that the royal houses of polities like Zaachila and Tilantongo had existed since the creation of the current world. Noble ancestors participated in the events of the creation and the formation of the sacred covenant that established the fundamental relations between people and the gods. The identification of the Main Plaza as a place of creation represents a second appropriation of the ceremonial precinct by the nobility, although in this case it was an appropriation of the plaza's past to legitimate political relations in the Late Postclassic present.

In the fragmented and contentious political landscape of the Late Postclassic, Monte Albán brought together nobles and commoners from different communities both physically and symbolically (Pohl et al. 1997:227). As a pre-sunrise place of creation, Monte Albán allowed for wider kinds of integration through shared rituals and perhaps as a neutral marketing location and fortress for defense against common enemies. As a place of creation, the Main Plaza embodied a shared origin and ancestry of Zapotec peoples throughout the valley, although one that legitimated noble authority and internalized distinct elite and commoner identities. That the Zapotec creation at Monte Albán is portrayed on one of a series of painted lintels at Mitla, which also include depictions of Mixtec and Tolteca-Chichimeca creation stories, reflects an even wider identity shared among Late Postclassic nobles (Pohl 1999, 2002).

Colonial Period to the Present: The Main Plaza Goes Global (AD 1521–2006)

Despite the massive depopulation and cultural disruptions resulting from the Spanish conquest, the Xoxocotlán maps and the Cuilapan coat of arms show that well into the eighteenth century the Main Plaza was being depicted as a place of creation, embodying indigenous religious belief and social memory of the prehispanic past. Colonial maps from Xoxocotlán and San Juan Chapultepec (now part of Oaxaca City) show that Monte Albán continued to be identified as a boundary location (Smith 1973:202–210). Continuity with the prehispanic past suggests resistance

to the suppression of indigenous belief by Spanish colonial authorities.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries scholars interested in the prehispanic past such as Guillaume Dupaix, Eduard Muhlenpfordt, Désirée Charnay, William Henry Holmes, and Eduard Seler visited Monte Albán and wrote about the site. Recognition of indigenous peoples and the prehispanic past did not emerge as an important aspect of a Mexican national identity until the independence movement of the early nineteenth century (Fowler 1987:233–234). Following independence, however, concepts of indigenous culture and history declined in representations of state identity. It was not until the revolutionary period of the first two decades of the twentieth century that *indigenismo* reemerged as a major aspect of Mexican national identity. The promotion and appropriation of indigenous culture and history by the Mexican state involved idealizing the prehispanic past and emphasizing the continuity of past and present Mexican peoples.

Part of this reemphasis of the indigenous past involved sponsoring the first large-scale systematic archaeological projects in Mexico, beginning with Manuel Gamio's excavations at Teotihuacán. To their credit, many archaeologists of the period, such as Gamio and Alfonso Caso, recognized the devastation of the Spanish conquest. In the mid-1920s, Gamio suggested that Monte Albán should be the focus of archaeological explorations, and he arranged with the nearby towns for the area of the Main Plaza to be ceded to the state. In late 1931, Caso began major excavations. With the discovery of Tomb 7 in early 1932, Monte Albán burst onto the world stage, with the Western press traveling to the site to view the excavations and interview Caso (Benítez 1993:34). Paramount Studios shot a short film of the tomb, and Caso quickly authored a report, which appeared in the October 1932 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*. Caso continued fieldwork at Monte Albán with his colleagues Ignacio Bernal and Jorge Acosta until 1958. Part of Caso's work involved reconstructing the Main Plaza and opening the site as a major tourist center.

Beginning with Caso and continuing to the present, archaeological research has reinterpreted Monte Albán from the perspective of twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarly archaeologies,

and the site has become a focus of debate on problems such as state formation and collapse, early urbanism, and ancient empires (e.g., Blanton et al. 1999; Caso 1932; Flannery and Marcus 1983b; Joyce 2000; Joyce and Winter 1996; Marcus and Flannery 1996; Robles 2001a, 2001b; Winter 1989). The interpretations of archaeologists have been reinscribed onto the site through reconstruction and reconsolidation, primarily in and around the Main Plaza. The opening of the site to tourism has allowed people from much of the world to experience and interpret Monte Albán. Groups ranging from politicians, to scientists, to New Age spiritualists as well as indigenous Oaxacans now claim the site as a symbol of their diverse identities.

Archaeological projects in and around the Main Plaza have brought archaeologists and local Zapotec people together, where they have exchanged ideas about the nature, history, and meaning of the site. Caso recounts a story told shortly after the discovery of Tomb 7 that shows how his work was viewed by indigenous people in the context of the sacred qualities of the site:

It is related that one night, when I was in the central plaza of Monte Albán, a well of crystal water opened up at the foot of one of the monuments, and in the middle of it floated a red vessel made from a gourd shell, inside of which was a gilded fish. Instead of being frightened by this marvel, I caught the jug and the fish within it; whereupon the fish informed me of the location of the treasure in Tomb 7 [1932:496].

In a curious parallel, objects used in the foundation ceremonies depicted in the Mixtec codices include both gourd vessels and fish. Since Caso's work in the 1930s, Oaxaca Valley Zapotecs, especially from the communities of Xoxocotlán and Cuilapan, have been hired as workers on archaeological projects, thereby reflecting the contemporary power relations of Oaxaca. The descendants of the builders of the Main Plaza are now the workers excavating and reconstructing the site under the direction of scholars trained in Western, scientific archaeology.

Monte Albán and especially the Main Plaza continue to be recognized by local people as places with sacred properties. Archaeologists have

found evidence of recent ritual activities such as the remains of sacrificed chickens, foodstuffs, votive candles, and modern ceramic vessels (Caso 1932:493; Orr 1997:115–117; Marcus Winter, personal communication 2003). The South Platform in particular is identified as a “place of the devil” where people go to trade their souls for money (Orr 1997:117–119). Looter’s trenches dug into structures on the South Platform are viewed as sacred caves, and archaeologists have found evidence of curing rituals within the trenches. Monte Albán also continues to be a boundary site, with local communities contesting ownership of the land with each other, the state government, and archaeologists. Monte Albán is a symbol of indigenous identity and resistance, which includes the use of archaeological research by indigenous scholars (de la Cruz 2004).

Increased tourism and the engagement of the site in processes of globalization, however, have begun to further broaden the appropriation of Monte Albán in ritual activity and identity formation. In 1987, stressing continuity between the prehispanic past and the present, the archaeological site of Monte Albán, along with the colonial city of Oaxaca, was inscribed onto the U.N. Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage List as a place of “outstanding universal value.” In August 1987, Monte Albán was the scene of New Age rituals conducted to celebrate the “Harmonic Convergence” marking the culmination of a cycle of history. Today Monte Albán is simultaneously a symbol of indigenous identity and history, Mexican national identity, worldwide human achievement, and New Age spiritualism.

Conclusions

Since the founding of Monte Albán at ca. 500 BC, the Main Plaza has gone through a complex history of construction, use, modification, abandonment, reuse, and reconstruction that has been continuously inscribed onto the buildings, ritual deposits, tombs, burials, and other historical traces at the site. The life history of the plaza embodies transformations in sociopolitical relations, ideology, and identity in the Valley of Oaxaca and beyond. The plaza has been a symbol of new social orders and of the collapse of old ones, demonstrating the complex ways in

which meaning is inscribed in the spatial relationships and symbolism of architectural and archaeological remains. Yet the history of the Main Plaza should not be viewed simply as a passive reflection of changing social relations. As people moved through the plaza or viewed it from afar, their experiences with its meaning and symbolism as well as the practices carried out there were important aspects of social structure internalized as memory and disposition.

A consideration of the life history of place focuses attention on the ways in which power relations were inscribed in and reinforced by the symbolic and spatial patterning of the Main Plaza. The Main Plaza’s life history makes clear that throughout its time as the ceremonial center of a political capital, the plaza embodied the power of rulers and ruling institutions. The evidence also suggests that there were other ways of experiencing the plaza beyond those of the nobles who increasingly appropriated the ceremonial precinct for their own aggrandizement. Conflict among Oaxaca Valley polities in the first few centuries after the site’s founding indicates that many people in the valley were resisting incorporation by Monte Albán. As they defended their community against the forces of Monte Albán, the people of El Palenque must have viewed the ceremonial precinct, visible on a distant hilltop, in a very different way than people engaged in ceremonies on the Main Plaza. Monte Albán’s success in defeating competitors in the Oaxaca Valley and beyond was in part due to the emphasis on communal affiliation and engagement in symbolism and ritual practice in the ceremonial center. By the Classic period, however, commoners were increasingly excluded from the Main Plaza and were less engaged in the kinds of large-scale public rituals for which the plaza was initially constructed. Some commoners and lesser nobles may have come to experience the transformation of the Main Plaza into an embodiment of elite aggrandizement as a symbol of the neglect of moral responsibilities of the rulers of Monte Albán (Jansen 2004:135).

Despite the collapse of Monte Albán as a political center at ca. AD 800, the Main Plaza continued to be viewed as a sacred mountain of creation where important rituals were carried out. The life history of Monte Albán exemplifies points made

by scholars such as Barrett (1999) and Bradley (1993, 1998) that ruined monuments do not simply disappear from the landscape but are reinterpreted in their afterlives. Early Postclassic people who traveled to the Main Plaza to make ritual offerings moved through the center of a once-powerful city that was abandoned and falling into ruin but still held sacred power through its associations with the otherworld, including the presence of the ancestors who had once inhabited the site. The Main Plaza seems to have once again been accessible to commoners, embodying the less hierarchical identities of the Early Postclassic. By the Late Postclassic social practices, reflecting a fragmented and increasingly competitive political landscape, transformed the plaza into a boundary site that brought together people from multiple communities in the valley both physically and symbolically. Ritual practices mediated interpolity conflict and reproduced a broader social identity that reflected common historical ties to Monte Albán. This shared history and identity was also reflected in the belief in the Main Plaza as a pre-sunrise place of creation. The plaza once again embodied elite authority, not by reference to the cosmic symbolism of buildings that housed rulers and ruling institutions but, instead, by reference to the ruined buildings of an earlier creation that was destroyed in the first sunrise of a new era that established the ruling dynasties of the Late Postclassic.

The representation of the Main Plaza as a pre-sunrise place of creation continued into the colonial period despite massive depopulation, forceful oppression, and the suppression of indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Depictions of Monte Albán as a place of creation no longer legitimated the authority of nobles but, rather, symbolized indigenous identity and resistance to European acculturation and oppression in part by referencing the prehispanic past. Over the past century Monte Albán has been claimed by other constituencies, becoming a symbol of Mexican national identity, the advance of archaeological science, worldwide humanistic achievement, and New Age spiritualism. The diverse views of Monte Albán held by these groups embody contemporary struggles: local-global, indigenous-colonialist, modernism-postmodernism, among others.

The Main Plaza has embodied change and transformation, but it is also possible to recognize long-term continuities in the meanings ascribed to the plaza. From the founding of Monte Albán, the evidence indicates that the Main Plaza was viewed as an axis mundi where the sacred covenant could be enacted and the cosmic creation could be reenacted in powerful ways. Another aspect of the long term may ironically involve a kind of continuity through disjuncture in indigenous discourses on disruptive social change. As argued by several scholars (Byland and Pohl 1994; Hamann 2002; Jansen 1998), Mesoamerican peoples invoked the past to explain the disjunctive break in power relations represented by the Classic period collapse. The royal houses of the Late Postclassic legitimated their rise to power in part by appropriating the past and explaining their origins in the cataclysmic destruction of an earlier era and the first sunrise of a new age. The life history of Monte Albán records an even earlier disjunctive break in social relations, that of the founding of the site at ca. 500 BC. Like the Classic-to-Postclassic transition, the social crisis of the late Middle Formative saw a dramatic break with the past, as represented by the movement from valley floor sites and the founding of Monte Albán, the development of new religious beliefs and practices, and the construction of the Main Plaza (Joyce 2000). The dramatic social changes that accompanied the founding of Monte Albán may have been explained by reference to a cataclysmic creation event inscribed in the sacred geography of the Main Plaza that also served to legitimate the authority of rulers by associating them with the creation and renewal of a new era. The Middle-to-Late Formative and the Classic-to-Postclassic transitions may therefore represent a kind of continuity in indigenous discourses on disjunctive social change in the framework of cyclical views of time and history.

The continuity in the meaning and symbolism of the Main Plaza supports Hamann's (2002) arguments concerning structures of the long term in Mesoamerican tradition. Drawing on Sahlin's (1996), Hamann argues for long-term continuity in the interconnected ideas of cyclical time whereby past eras have been destroyed in world-transforming cataclysms creating a new social

order, a transformation accompanied by the creation of sacrificial original debts to the divine. Hamann (2002:367) takes issue with recent criticisms of the idea of structures of the long term by social theorists focused instead on disjuncture and the pliability of cultural meanings to strategic manipulation, especially under conditions of colonialism and modernity. Contra Hodder (2002), Hamann's view of structures of the long term rejects essentialist positions that see long-term structures as fundamental and unchanging (e.g., Braudel 1980).

The life history of the Main Plaza shows that while views of creation and the sacred covenant have persisted, the social practices that reproduce these continuities in meaning as well as their social and political significance have changed dramatically through the centuries. The social and political significance of the Main Plaza has also changed radically (A. Joyce 2004). The plaza has at various times embodied communal power, the divine authority of the Classic period nobility and later on the Late Postclassic royal houses, and still later, resistance to Spanish colonialism. Given the power of the symbolism of the Main Plaza, it has also been a site of struggle, whether involving tension between a traditional communal ethos and aggrandizing nobles of the Classic period, between competing royal houses of the Late Postclassic, or more recently between social constructions of indigenous and national identities. As a site of struggle, the Main Plaza has been strategically transformed both physically and symbolically to advance particular interests, as when the hilltop was first converted from a

natural to a cultural monument (Joyce 2000) and when it was increasingly appropriated by Classic period nobles.

Yet, through the *longue durée* of the Main Plaza's life history, it has persisted as a place of creation and a material symbol of enduring ideas concerning cyclical creation, sacrifice, and sacred debt. These ideas and the practices that reproduce them have been dynamic and changing, but a central theme has persisted. Factors that account for these enduring structures include the ways in which they were materially inscribed in art, architecture, offerings, and burials; how they were embedded in varied relational fields; and perhaps their sacred qualities. The recent history of the Main Plaza indicates, however, that even these long-term structures may now be undergoing change. While more isolated communities in the Mixteca Alta have maintained traditional beliefs that represent Hamann's (2002) long-term structures (see Monaghan 1990, 1995), Zapotec peoples in the Oaxaca Valley have in recent years been subjected to more intensive forces of globalization, including access to television, the Internet, tourism, and migration. It is my impression that these processes are contributing to the increasing transformation of indigenous discourses on Monte Albán as Oaxaca Valley Zapotecs engage with alternative discourses, including those of scientific archaeology. Regardless of the present state of structures of the long term, the Main Plaza of Monte Albán has continued for its 2,500-year history as a powerful symbol of indigenous identity in the Valley of Oaxaca.

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Notes

1. I examine the civic-ceremonial center of Monte Albán, which I refer to as the Main Plaza precinct. The precinct includes the Main Plaza proper, the buildings immediately surrounding the plaza, and the area north of the North Platform, which includes the highest concentration of high-status residences at the site as well as additional public buildings. I term this area the Main Plaza precinct because the plaza was its focal point.

2. Many researchers assume that sunken courts, especially ballcourts, are associated primarily with the underworld. Recent iconographic and epigraphic studies have shown, however, that sunken courts are more broadly associated with, and were seen as, opening into diverse aspects of the otherworld (Freidel et al. 1993:350–355). It is not surprising, therefore, that the earliest sunken courts at Monte Albán are associated with the northern part of the Main Plaza, with its references to the celestial realm.
3. A possible residential structure of unknown date has been identified beneath System IV in the northwestern end of the Main Plaza (Javier Urcid, personal communication 2006).
4. The two TPAs that created restricted ceremonial spaces in the Main Plaza had patios enclosing 625 m² in the case of System IV and 784 m² for System M. In contrast, the Main Plaza covers 45,000 m².
5. A marital alliance between a Mixtec prince of Yanhuitlán and the daughter of a Zapotec king resulted in the immigration of a large group of Mixtec peasants into the Valley of Oaxaca to work the land of the prince. They settled in lands at the southern base of Monte Albán, and after the conquest their descendants moved to the towns of Cuilapan and Xoxocotlán, where they produced a number of important documents that refer to Monte Albán as a sacred site and a community boundary (Smith 1973).

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