

Zapotec Empire

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Archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence from Oaxaca, Mexico, suggests that Zapotec-speaking peoples may have formed small empires during the pre-Hispanic era (Joyce 2010). A possible empire was centered on the Late Formative period (300 BCE–200 CE) city of Monte Albán in the Oaxaca Valley. The existence of this empire, however, has been the focus of a major debate. Stronger support is available for a coastal Zapotec Empire centered on the Late Postclassic (1200–1522 CE) city of Tehuantepec.

Debate concerning Late Formative Zapotec imperialism is focused on Monte Albán and its interactions with surrounding regions. Monte Albán was founded in c.500 BCE on a series of hilltops in the Valley of Oaxaca. By the Late Formative, the community had grown into an urban center covering 442 hectares with a population estimated at 15 000. Most researchers agree that evidence for warfare increases during the Late Formative in the Valley of Oaxaca and nearby highland regions. Warfare is suggested by the presence of possible defensive walls and trophy skulls at several political centers along with shifts in settlement to defensible hilltops (Marcus and Flannery 1996; Redmond and Spencer 2006; Joyce 2010). Debate surrounds the nature and scale of warfare along with the extent to which Monte Albán may have come to politically control surrounding regions.

Archaeologists working in the Oaxacan highlands argue that during the Late Formative Monte Albán expanded militarily, eventually conquering and administering

an empire covering 20 000 sq. km. This empire is thought to have included the Central Valleys (i.e., the Valleys of Oaxaca, Ejutla, and Miahuatlán) and surrounding areas such as the Cañada de Cuicatlán as well as regions to the east and south extending to the Pacific coastal lowlands, particularly the lower Río Verde Valley. These researchers argue that Monte Albán's rulers pursued a strategy of territorial conquest and imperial control through the use of a large, well-trained, and hierarchical military that pursued extended campaigns and established hilltop outposts, garrisons, and fortifications (Redmond and Spencer 2006: 383). Evidence that Monte Albán conquered and directly administered outlying regions, however, is largely limited to iconographic interpretations of a series of carved stones at Monte Albán known as the "Conquest Slabs" and debatable similarities in ceramic styles among these regions (e.g., Marcus and Flannery 1996).

Other archaeologists question the imperialism model (e.g., Workinger and Joyce 2009; Joyce 2010, 2014). These researchers point out that little archaeological evidence is available in most of the regions within the proposed Monte Albán Empire and question the interpretation of the "Conquest Slabs." A large-scale archaeological project in the lower Río Verde Valley has found no evidence of significant warfare or a Monte Albán imperial presence (Joyce 2013). It is highly questionable that a polity the size of Monte Albán could have controlled a territorial empire covering 20 000 sq. km given the logistical difficulties of conquering and administering such a large area in the mountainous landscapes of southern Mexico. In addition, comparative archaeological evidence shows that similarities in ceramic styles are poor indicators of an imperial

presence (Stark 1990). Although Monte Albán probably defeated communities and established a degree of political influence within the Central Valleys, it is unlikely that the polity controlled an empire.

Better evidence for Zapotec imperialism comes from archaeological and ethnohistorical research focused on the Late Postclassic period just prior to the Spanish Conquest (Zeitlin 2005; Joyce 2010). At this time, political factionalism and conflict in the Valley of Oaxaca led Zapotecs to expand into the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec on the coast of Oaxaca. Settlement pattern data in the southern Isthmus indicate the dislocation of local Zoquean communities by the invading Zapotecs. Zapotecs established a ruling dynasty at Tehuantepec, which quickly grew into a major urban center, estimated at 25 000 people. Excavations by Zeitlin (2005) in an outlying barrio of Tehuantepec show the presence of traditional Zapotec religious, political, and domestic practices including a two-room temple. The Zapotecs also established a hilltop fortress at Guiengola where archaeological research has recorded impressive defensive walls, remains of low-status houses, and a ceremonial center with large platforms, a ball-court, tombs, altars, and a high-status residential precinct.

Early colonial indigenous and Spanish documents suggest that the rulers of Tehuantepec consolidated control over the eastern coast through conquest and alliance formation (Zeitlin 2005). In 1522, following the arrival of the Spanish, Lord Lachi, the Zapotec ruler of Tehuantepec, agreed to ally with the Spanish against Tehuantepec's enemy, the Mixtec Empire of Tututepec. The alliance was short-lived, however, and Zapotecs like other Native Americans were soon decimated by disease and European oppression.

SEE ALSO: Aztec Empire; Mixtec Empire

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FURTHER READING

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