CHAPTER NINE

Early Transformations of Monte Albán's Main Plaza and Their Political Implications, 500 BC–AD 200

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In the field of Mesoamerican studies, the archaeological investigation of political institutions and processes based on the analysis of material culture has been approached from a number of perspectives (Inomata and Tsukamoto, this volume). These include, but are not limited to, the form of architectural units and their distributional patterns (Hirth 1995), performativity (Inomata 2006a), textuality (Sugiyama 1993), and the cultural biographical approach (Ashmore and Sabloff 2002). In this chapter we attempt to combine simultaneously some of these approaches, bearing in mind the ever-present problem of evidentiary scarcity. The nature of our data calls for the detection of patterns, but these are in turn based on deductions that stem from clues (Ginzburg 1980, 1989). We do have relevant data to assume, albeit indirectly, both performative and textuality approaches, but the bulk of the evidence is in the form of actual written texts and visual narratives set in architectural contexts associated with a plaza. As espoused by the cultural biographical approach, we take the inscribed evidence not as invariant signs with an essentialized and universal reading, but as ever-changing symbols whose interpretation was and continues to be contingent on a contextualized semiosis.

Inherent in the architectural design of most Mesoamerican plazas is their dual role as both enabling landscapes (open space) and bounding stages (enclosed space). The first quality bespeaks their multifunctionality and thus their simultaneous and sequential polysemy even within the same life-history; the second quality leads to regimented, controlled, and even restricted access (Tsukamoto, this volume). Given the Mesoamerican quadripartite conception

of the cosmos, plazas and their associated buildings materialized the center of such a worldview, and more often than not have evidence of ritual enactments and other performances conducted so as to "center" the world at those paramount axes. Either empty or full, Mesoamerican plazas created novel visual and auditory fields for human perception and must have provided a sense of awe and monumentality, even if the surrounding buildings were not necessarily majestic.[1]

Monte Albán's Main Plaza, which was one of the most formidable plazas of the Mesoamerican world, has been a fertile ground for interpreting how social institutions and ideas were architecturally embodied, and how modifications of the plaza in turn transformed those ideas and institutions (Blanton 1978; Hutson 2002; Joyce 2004, 2009; Winter 2001). More than a century of archaeological research has shown that the urban core of Monte Albán contains complex accretions of building activity; construction sequences are well understood for several buildings within the Main Plaza (Caso et al. 1967; Fahmel 1991; Winter 1994). A major challenge to modeling the dynamic history of the Main Plaza, however, is the difficulty in relating stratigraphically the localized architectural sequences of particular structures. Arguments that the Main Plaza reached a unified scheme as early as the Nisa phase (100 BC to AD 200) are based on the orientation and chronology of the structures now visible around the plaza (Blanton 1978:45; Paddock 1966:111). There is tantalizing evidence, however, of several features beneath the plaza, suggesting a different spatial configuration prior to the beginning of the Common Era.

The constant building and rebuilding episodes that can be attested in the archaeological record create as well the problem of understanding forms of visual communication that were inextricably related to the buildings that faced the plaza or were built within it (also see Cyphers and Murtha, this volume). Orthostats carved with semantic and phonetic writing covered the veneer façades of platforms and buildings so as to render veritable narratives. The jambs and lintels in the entryways to precincts or the columns and inner walls of enclosures were also inscribed so as to convey varied messages. Yet, only a handful of those contexts with writing remained in primary setting by the time modern investigations began. While the constituent elements of numerous dismantled architectural narratives have been found reused in structures built at a later time, certain clues have at times enabled their "virtual" reconstitution (Urcid 2001, 2005, 2011a, 2011b).

In this chapter, we use these clues to develop a preliminary assessment of the early architecture and associated narratives on the Main Plaza and how these architectural, semasiographic, and epigraphic programs were transformed through the first 700 years of urban life, from the settlement's founding circa 500 BC to circa AD 200. Our central question is: what can be inferred in terms of the political life of the city when viewing the history of the Main Plaza as a continuous transformative process (also see Tsukamoto, this volume)? We pay particular attention to key areas of the southern end of the Main Plaza where buildings with grandiose visual displays added to their monumentality. We argue that the creation of such novel landscapes was enmeshed in the political dynamism of the time (also see Inomata, this volume). As part of our argument, we summarize new interpretations that challenge long-held views of

Monte Albán's early architecture and imagery, particularly the meaning of the two major scriptural programs: the so-called "danzantes" of Building L-sub and the "conquest slabs" of Building J (Urcid 1994, 2011a, 2011b).

The Early Configuration of the Main Plaza

Monte Albán was founded circa 500 BC on a previously unoccupied hilltop in the center of the Valley of Oaxaca (Blanton 1978). Archaeological evidence from throughout the Oaxaca Valley indicates that this was a time of political crisis and conflict as well as the development of novel political and religious ideas and practices (Blanton et al. 1999:105–107; Joyce 2000, 2010:128–155; Marcus and Flannery 1996; Spencer and Redmond 2001; Urcid 2011a, 2011b; Winter 2001). One of the first activities carried out at Monte Albán was the construction of the Main Plaza complex, although its early configuration differed significantly from its final layout, which did not become apparent until circa AD 200. Based on indirect evidence, it now seems evident that during the first century of Monte Albán's occupation at least one structure of unknown size and configuration had been built displaying small carved stones with graphic conventions widely deployed at the time in several media throughout Mesoamerica (figure 9.1). One of these blocks (D-18b) was eventually recarved and placed in the façade of Building L-sub so that its earlier imagery was hidden from view.

By the Danibaan phase (550–300 BC), the Main Plaza consisted of an open space delimited by the western row of buildings and much of the eastern half of the massive North Platform (Winter 2001:284–286, fig. 5.4a). The plaza was created by leveling bedrock outcrops and filling in areas to create a flat surface, endeavors that involved considerable resources and labor. Public buildings constructed by circa 400 BC included Building L-sub along the southwestern end of the plaza, whose walls consisted of huge, multiton monoliths many of which displayed carved imagery (Batres 1902:28, Plate V; Caso 1935; Scott 1978a, 1978b). Building IV-sub along the northwestern end of the plaza was a massive platform that included a six-meter-high sloping wall (Acosta 1965:820, fig. 6a–6b). The Danibaan phase version of the North Platform consisted of an enormous architectural complex that encompassed much of the eastern half of the platform's final area and included structures that reached heights of 15 m above the Main Plaza. On top of the North Platform excavations recovered the remains of a temple that included an offering of dozens of fancy grayware serving vessels (Winter 2004:37) that may reference ritual feasting associated with building dedication ceremonies. The structures facing the Main Plaza were constructed of rubble fill quarried locally from the hills around Monte Albán (Winter 1989:42–43). By the Pe phase (300–100 BC), the Main Plaza had seemingly undergone further changes, but these later modifications were still significantly different than the layout of the plaza as we know it today. Some indirect clues suggest the existence at the time of another monumental building whose façade was decorated with finely incised orthostats. Eventually this structure was completely demolished and its inscribed orthostats reused to build three successive versions of Building J. It is this long-dismantled edifice

D-18b

D-46

Rollout drawing of the exterior surface of a
painted "kidney-shaped" vessel. San José
Mogote, tomb 2-95 (Rosario phase)

Tzutzuculi
Monument 2,
Chiapas

Partial rollout drawing of a painted
vessel from the Middle Formative.
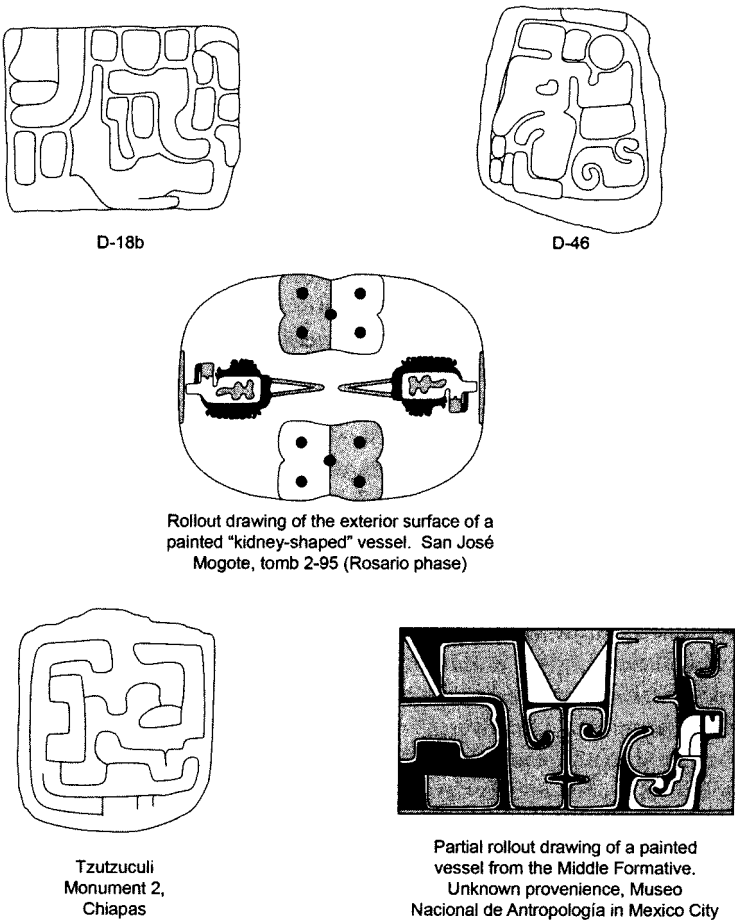Unknown provenience, Museo
Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City

FIGURE 9.1. The earliest known carved blocks from Monte Albán and their
comparison with Middle Formative carved and painted materials from other regions of
Mesoamerica. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias.

and Building L-sub that formed an important focus of monumental narratives
during the earlier life-history of the Main Plaza, and they constitute the core
of our analysis.

The Visual Program of Building L-Sub

Of the early buildings around the Main Plaza, Building L-sub constitutes the
most daring architectural endeavor of the early inhabitants of the city. Rising
6 m above the Main Plaza, and probably supporting a triad of edifices at the
top, Building L-sub made a bold visual statement of community effort and thus
identity (figure 9.2). Although previous interpretations view these monuments

as victims of human sacrifice (Coe 1962; Flannery and Marcus 1983; Joyce 2000; Marcus 1976; Marcus and Flannery 1996; Winter 1989), we interpret the program as a series of human figures that constituted a sodality organized around age-grades (see Urcid 2011a, 2011b). The young personages represented in the basal façade of Building L-sub were displayed in alternating rows, changing their facing direction so as to render their procession in a boustrophedon sequence that mimicked the ascent through the staircase leading to the upper structures. The presumed upper edifices, in turn, appear to have had their façades covered with depictions of three higher-ranking echelons of the sodality, including individuals wearing cut-shell necklaces, masked personages personifying the rain deity, and a paramount tier of senior adults who seemingly formed a council of elders. All the members of this age-grade organization are shown bleeding from their groins. Parallel to the allusion of self-sacrifice runs another visual trope: that of invoking ancestral spirits for oracular purposes related to warfare. This theme resorts to the pan-Mesoamerican convention of representing ancestors as horizontal figures shown above the living humans that are standing or squatting (figure 9.3). The varied postures of vertical and

Elders

J-61

J-54
Personages wearing an
oval-shaped pendant

N-22
Masked rain deity
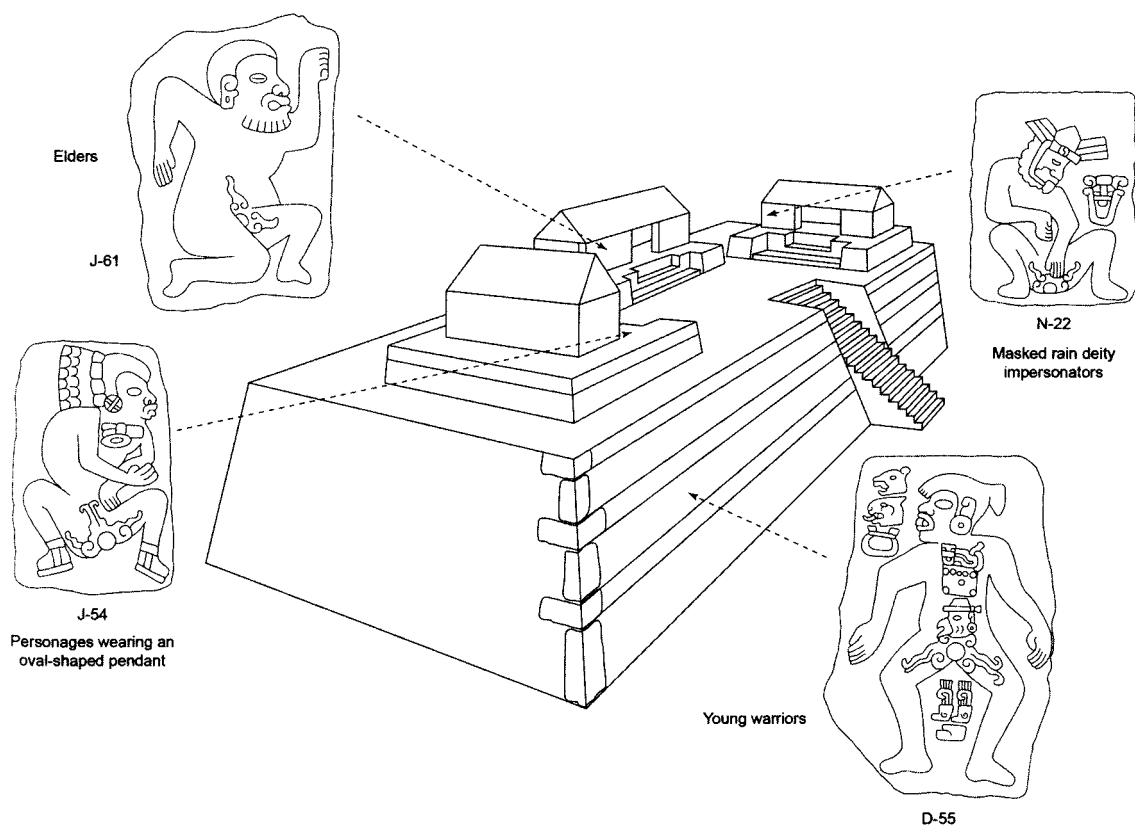impersonators

Young warriors

D-55

FIGURE 9.2. Hypothetical reconstruction of the grand narrative depicting an age-grade sodality in Building L-sub. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias.
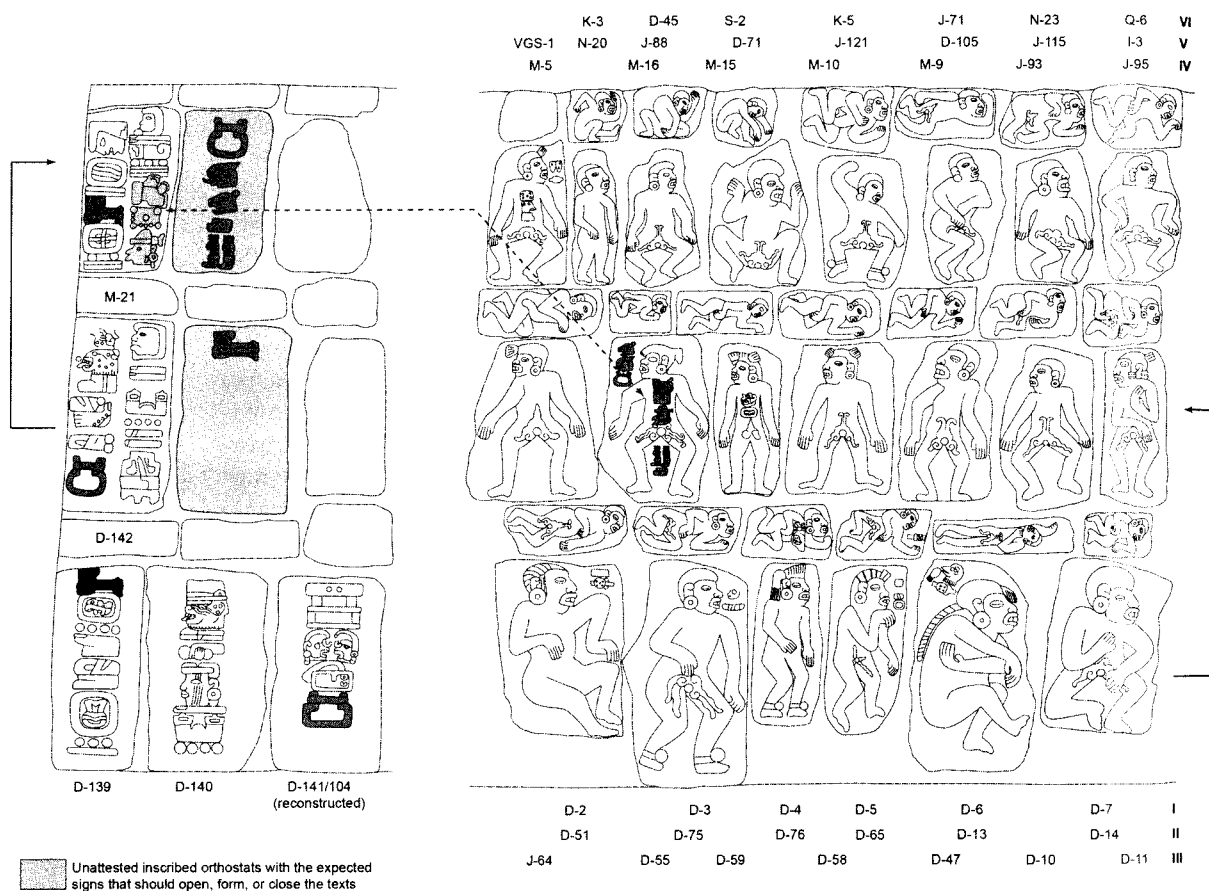
FIGURE 9.3. The texts inscribed in the cornerstones and the theme of living personages (*left*) and ancestral beings (*right*) in the alternating rows of the basal facade of Building L-sub. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias.

horizontal representations imbue the entire narrative with a sense of performance.[2] Some of the rendered figures have brief glyphic captions that convey their names phonetically. This monumental narrative, comprised thus far of nearly 250 carved orthostats, was complemented in the southeast angle of the basal platform with cornerstones carved with texts. These inscriptions, which also read in a boustrophedon sequence from bottom to top, appear to record the enthronement of two, perhaps three rulers throughout a span of forty-eight years, a chronological span rendered by means of Calendar Round dates.

There is a third theme, in addition to veiled references to bleeding of the genitals and ancestral invocation that was seemingly associated with the grand narrative in Building L-sub. Yet, its specific architectural setting within the building remains unknown (figure 9.4a). Four smaller and incomplete orthostats make reference to sacrifice by decapitation. At least three of these (D-78, D-123, and J-112) are accompanied by hieroglyphic captions. The fact that

one of the constituent signs in these inscriptions (a budding seed) is repeated suggests that, if the glyph has a nominative value, the stones would only name a single sacrificial victim. A reference to human sacrifice is also found in one of the cornerstones of Building L-sub where—following the statement of enthronement—is a seeming allusion to the defeat and decapitation of an enemy (Figure 9.4b).

By circa 100 BC, the architectural history of Building L-sub became entangled with the life-histories of other buildings. A third modification to the structure involved the construction of a broad staircase that abutted the earlier one (Villagra 1939). The new staircase incorporated several carved stones as steps, which by the time of their incorporation in Building L-sub were battered

D-78   D-123   7V-3 (reconstructed)   J-112

A

Tied royal headband

Jaguar head (decapitation is signaled by the small vertical lines in the neck)

Two fingers (a numeral)

Hand hitting with a war club

Lord

Jaguar (decapitated / enemy)
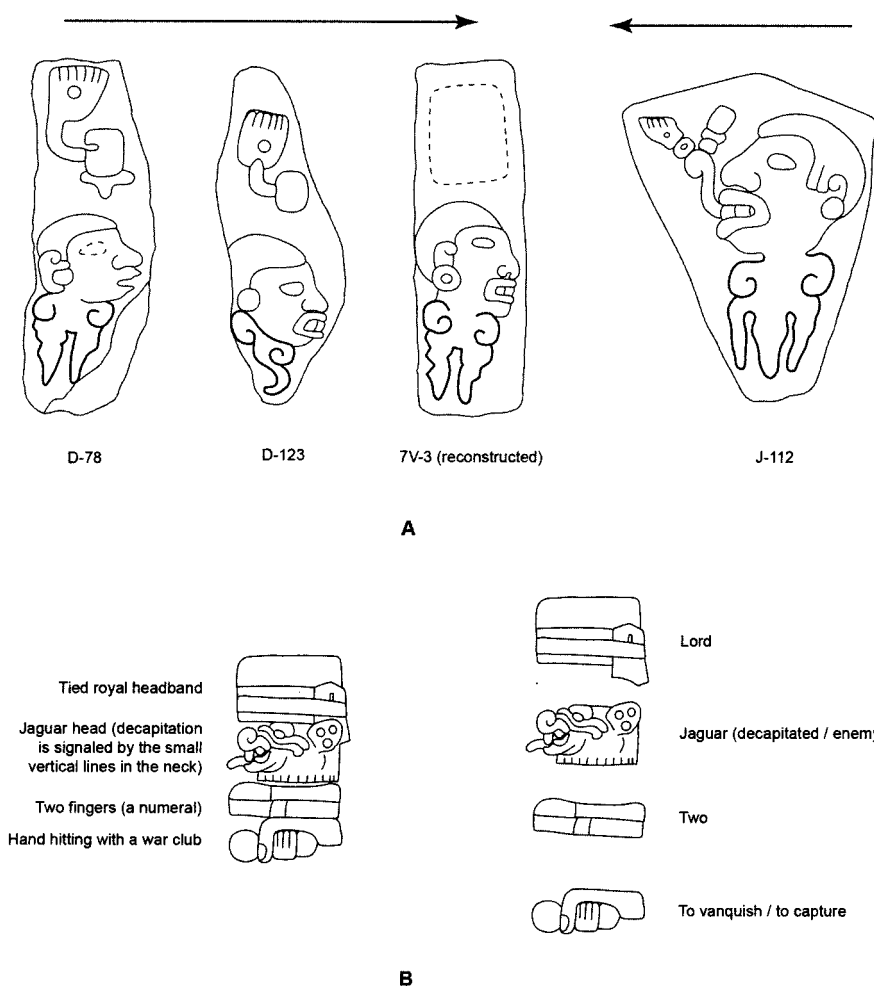
Two

To vanquish / to capture

B

FIGURE 9.4. (a) Monoliths carved with a head and a "blood" glyph; (b) possible logograms in the text carved on stone D-140 that seemingly refer to the conquest and decapitation of a lord named 2 Jaguar. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias.
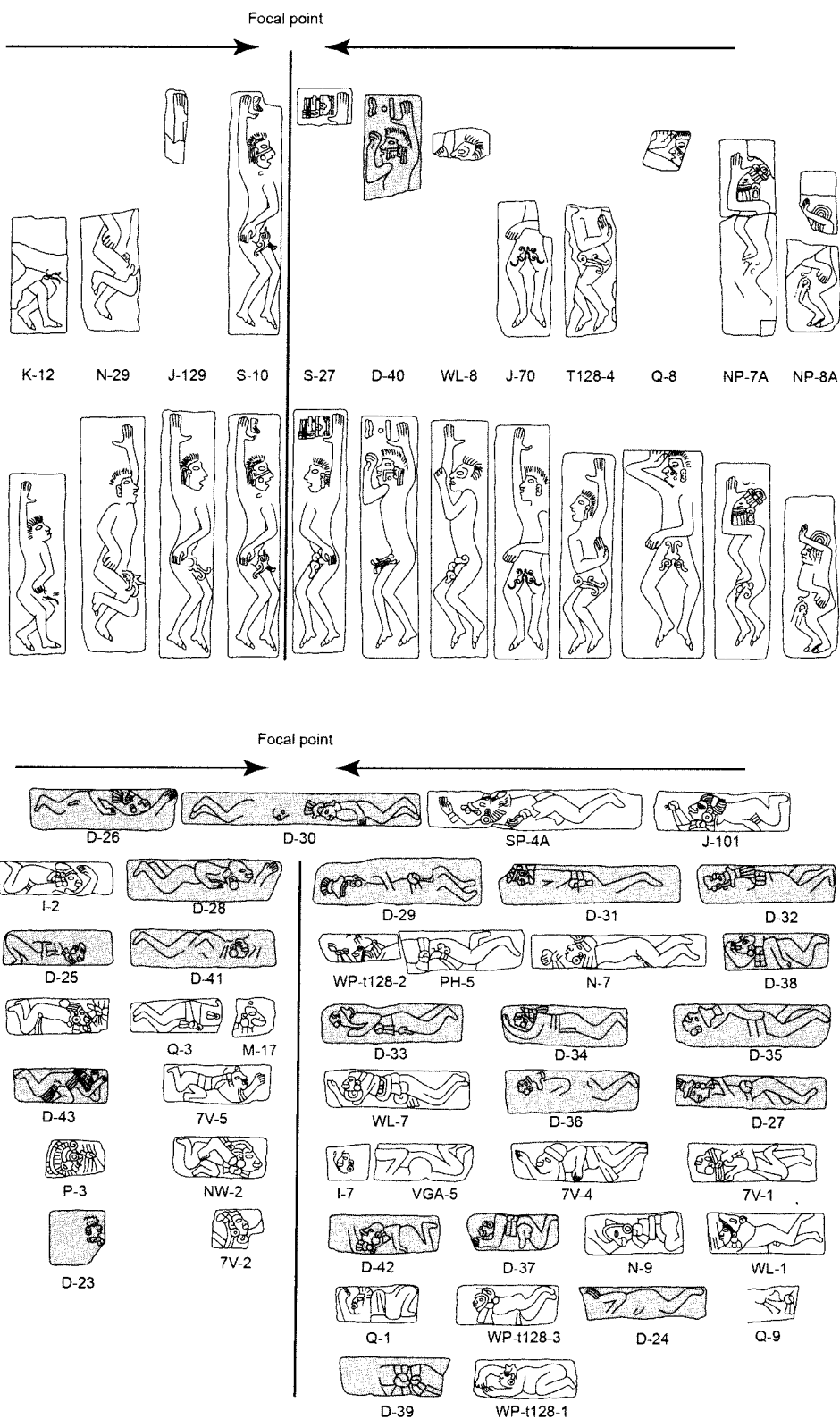
Focal point

K-12   N-29   J-129   S-10   S-27   D-40   WL-8   J-70   T128-4   Q-8   NP-7A   NP-8A

Focal point

D-26   D-30   SP-4A   J-101

I-2   D-28   D-29   D-31   D-32

D-25   D-41   WP-t128-2   PH-5   N-7   D-38

Q-3   M-17   D-33   D-34   D-35

D-43   7V-5   WL-7   D-36   D-27

P-3   NW-2   I-7   VGA-5   7V-4   7V-1

7V-2   D-42   D-37   N-9   WL-1

D-23   Q-1   WP-t128-3   D-24   Q-9

D-39   WP-t128-1

FIGURE 9.5. Carved monoliths from two dismantled architectural programs, some of which (in gray) were reused to build the steps of the broad staircase in front of Building L-sub. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias.

and incomplete, indicating that they came from the dismantling of narratives from other buildings (figure 9.5). While only a few of these carved blocks were reused in the construction of the staircase abutted to Building L-sub, others ended up as construction material in other coeval or later architectural projects. The dismantled narratives originally had similar themes to those in Building L-sub, showing personages engaged in bloodletting or as prone, ancestral figures. There is also some evidence indicating that, in tandem with this modification to Building L-sub, the presumed three structures atop the basal platform were rebuilt and their visual narratives replaced with others bearing almost identical themes as the previous ones.

The life-history of Building L-sub effectively came to an end circa AD 100. Although the structure was still standing at this time, the still extant carved orthostats in the basal facade may have been covered with stucco, just like the carvings re-used as steps in the staircase that was added during the earlier third modification. Much later, probably the middle of the third century AD, the southern half of Building L-sub was dismantled and its northern half covered by a new building (Building L). Thus, many of the carved orthostats in the façade of the basal platform of the building were reused in other coeval architectural projects, including the second of three major modifications to Building J located within the plaza to the east of Building L-sub. In addition to reused monuments from Building L-sub, Building J incorporated dozens of finely carved orthostats that must originally have been part of an earlier graphic program located within a building that was at least partially coeval with Building L-sub.

A Second Visual Program

Building J is unique not only because of its shape and function, but because throughout its three major building episodes, dating respectively to the Tani phase (AD 200–350), the Pitao phase (AD 350–550), and early in the Xoo phase (AD 600–700), the structure—more than any other building at Monte Albán—eventually amassed the largest number of reused inscribed stones (figure 9.6). In terms of spatial configuration and "affective power" accrued by the reuse of by then already ancient stones, the different versions of Building J appear to have acted as ancestor memorials analogous to a series of Classic period quadripartite architectural complexes found at Monte Albán and other sites in the Oaxaca Valley (Lind and Urcid 2010:308–309; Urcid 1995, 2011b:117, fig. 6.5).

But the construction of even the earliest version of Building J benefited in part from the dismantling of what must have been the second grandest of the early architectural narratives from Monte Albán. This narrative, comprised of many finely incised multiton orthostats would have been associated with a building that probably dated to the Pe phase (300–100 BC). The traditional interpretations that the finely incised stones record conquests by the ruling elite of Monte Albán (Caso 1938, 1947), name vanquished towns in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca (Whittaker 1992:12–13), or outline the subjugated territorial limits of the early Zapotec state (Marcus 1976, 1983, 1992) have assumed that the inscribed orthostats were originally related to Building J, and in the case of the last two authors, that Building J had a single construction phase. Again, we
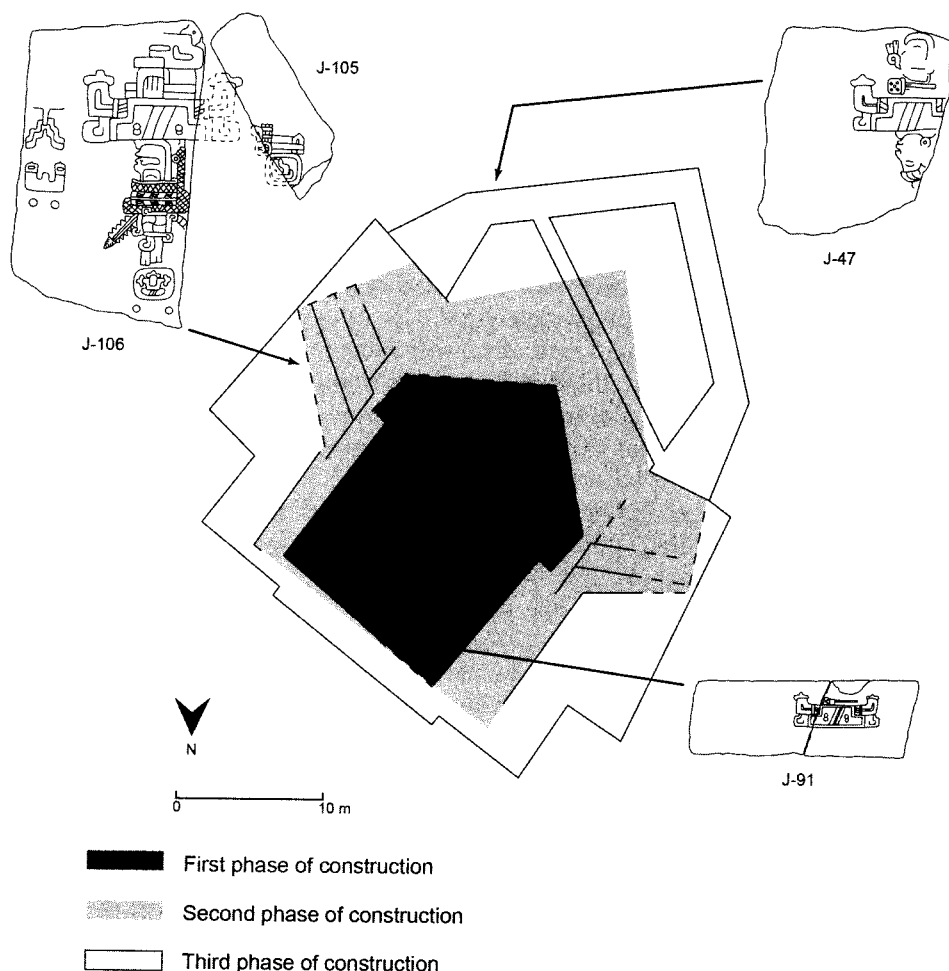
FIGURE 9.6. The three main construction phases of Building J. The finely incised orthostats, many of them already fragmented and eroded, were reused beginning with the first version of the building. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias.

suggest an alternative to these interpretations, positing instead that this second monumental narrative references revered individuals from Monte Albán.[3] We argue that the inscriptions differentially adhered to a glyphic formula that includes, in the center of the composition, a reference to a sector of Monte Albán, graphically rendered as "Hill-diagonal bands-noseplugs" (figure 9.7).[4] Inscribed above this toponymic reference are personal names. Below it appear calendrical names and inverted heads, some with their eyes closed, of those personages whose names bracket the sign "Hill-diagonal bands-noseplugs."

Most "hill" signs in the Zapotec corpus share the diagonal bands, but not the depiction of noseplugs. The latter, together with the sign "hill-diagonal bands" may be a synecdochical recourse meant to be read as "Hill-Lord(s)." The twentieth glyphic day name in the ancient Zapotec calendar (Lord) renders the face

of a personage often wearing a noseplug, and these sumptuary goods were of exclusive use by nobles and rulers (cf. Urcid 2001:211–213, 225, 245) (figure 9.8a). In the 1619 and the 1771 versions of the Mapa de Xoxocotlan (Ruiz Cervantes and Sánchez Silva 1997:25; Smith 1973:338, figure 162), the hill with the Main Plaza of Monte Albán is glyphically identified by a tomb door-slab, or a throne, and a feathered oval framing the depiction of a personage with a bird's helmet seated on a throne. The accompanying nahuatl (*teuhtli tepeque*) and mixtec (*yucu ani yya dzoco ñaña*) glosses literally translate, respectively, as "Hill of the Lord" and "Hill of the lords' palaces and tombs" (Jansen 1998:70–72).

The fragment of a monument with a "hill" sign (J-44), carved early in the Pitao phase (circa AD 400) and reused in the second construction phase of Building J, combines as infixes the signs "noseplug" and "heart." Other examples of the hill-heart place name occur in epigraphic contexts that undoubtedly refer to actual rulers from Monte Albán. Given the fact that the imagery of Jaguar-Lords depict them at times devouring hearts (a visual metaphor for sacrifice), the Zapotec name of the fourteenth day (*lache*) in the calendar documented by Córdova (1987 [1578]), a term that literally translates as "heart," could be a metonymy for "jaguar" (figure 9.8b). Thus, the carved monument J-44 seems to conflate the names of the two neighboring hills that in the two versions of the Mapa de Xoxocotlan are identified as "Hill of the Lords" (where the Main Plaza is located) and "Hill of the Jaguar" (the South Platform).[5]

In support of our view that the glyphs carved in the finely incised slabs above the "Hill of the Lords" are anthroponyms rather than toponyms is the fact that some of their constituent signs and combinations (one, two, or three signs at the most) resemble the captions that accompany the depiction of personages
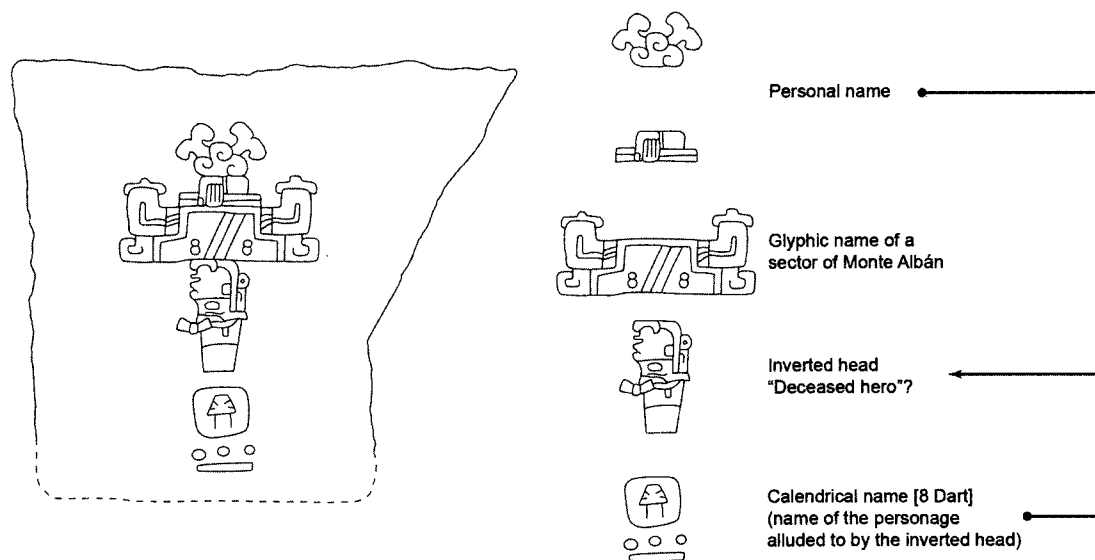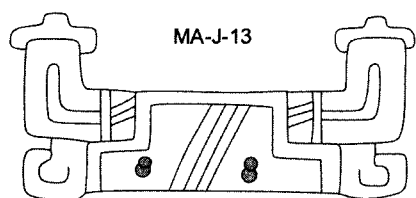

FIGURE 9.7. The central glyphic layout of the finely incised orthostats as rendered in monolith J-7. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias.
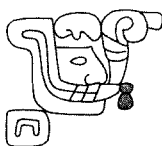
MA-J-13

"Hill-Lords"

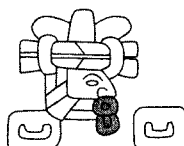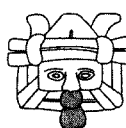CIC-1   ATZ-vase 6   SLM-351.1978.1   LGH-12539

MFR-8090   CRO-5   LGH-12565
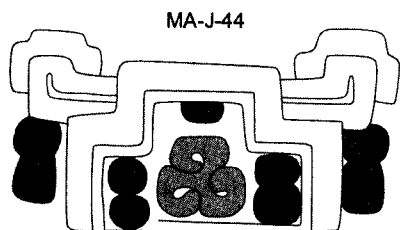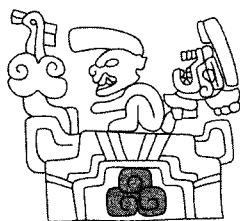
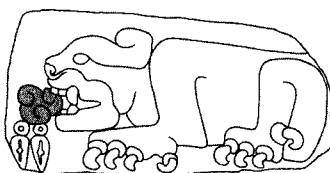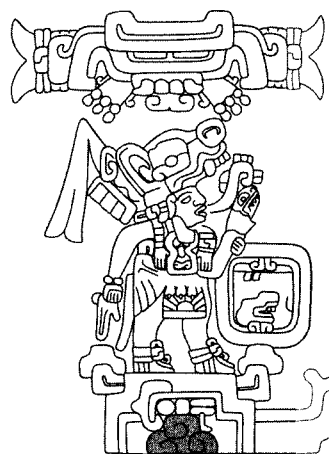MAS-4   LGH-7779   MA-TR20-t104 murals

A

MA-J-44

"Hill-Jaguar Lords"

MA-SP-8b

SJH-1

MA-VGS-1

B

FIGURE 9.8. Epigraphic evidence used to propose the reading of two toponyms from Monte Albán. (a) The iconicity of noseplugs; (b) the iconicity of the heart sign and other examples of its infixing to the hill glyph. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias.

NPW-1

J-16

Building L-sub

D-91   J-80   D-86   D-22   M-2

D-2   D-6   D-8   NPW-1   D-130

Building J

J-20   J-32   J-47   J-33   J-49
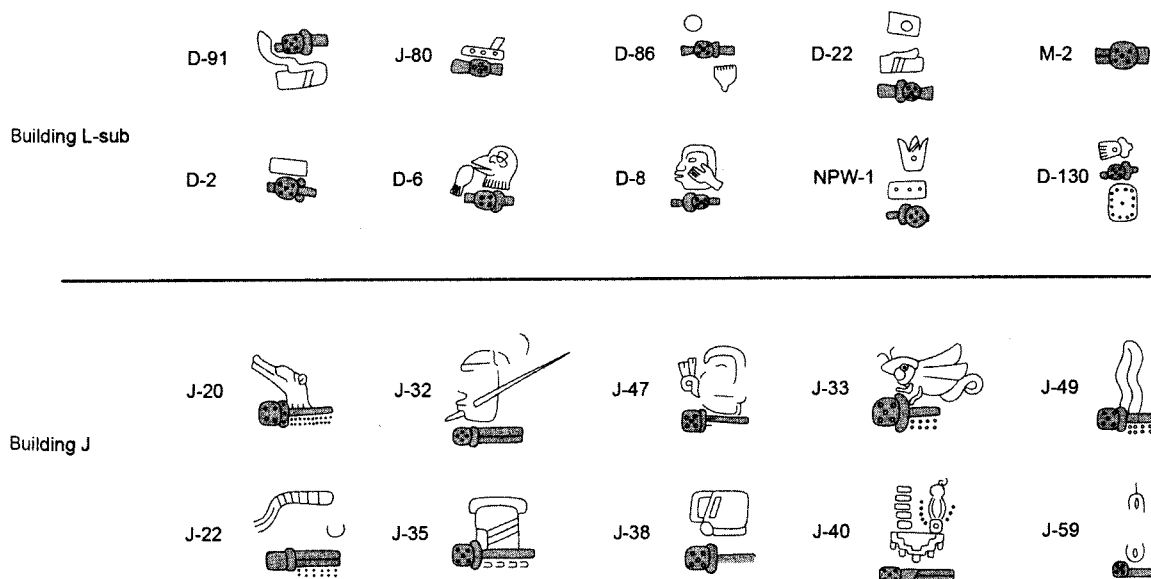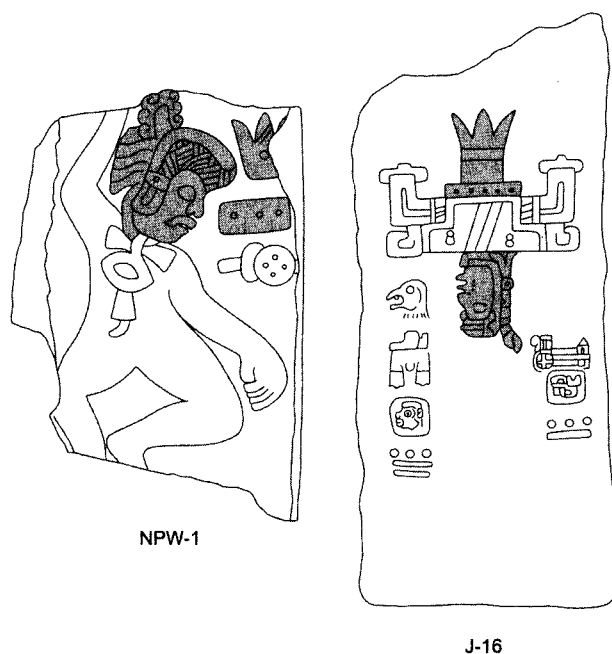
J-22   J-35   J-38   J-40   J-59

FIGURE 9.9. The glyphic compounds above the hill sign on the finely incised orthostats resemble in kind and combination the nominative captions that identify the personages in the narrative from Building L-sub (the glyphic compounds shown here share the sign "rattle" and have one more glyphs that vary among the inscriptions). Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias.

in the orthostats from Building L-sub (figure 9.9). Given this syntagmatic rela-
tion, and as Alfonso Caso argued long ago (1965:940), there is no doubt that
the glyphic captions on the carved orthostats from Building L-sub render the
personal names of the depicted individuals.

The interpretative work of Caso (1938, 1947) for the remaining portions of
the textual format inscribed in the finely incised stones posited that they made
reference to dead lords and thus to acts of conquest. Yet, even if one concedes
that the semantic value of inverted heads and closed eyes marks the ontological
status of being dead, an equally plausible reading that takes into account our
previous discussion of anthroponyms and toponyms, could denote "deceased,"
"fallen hero," or simply "revered ancestor." Categories of inverted heads, which
can be made based on their elaborate headdresses (Caso 1947:21–24, 85–90,
figs. 51–56), may signal some kind of ranked group identity.

There are good reasons to assume that the narrative comprised of finely in-
cised orthostats formed the façade of a basal platform similar to that of Build-
ing L-sub. Such a façade alternated rows of vertically and horizontally placed
megaliths, with the size of the former decreasing toward the top of the façade
(figure 9.10). Thus, we suggest that this other decorated basal platform and
Building L-sub were envisioned as complementary. For instance, the façade of
Building L-sub was decorated so that human figures covered the main surface,
and texts covered the cornerstones. Our reconstruction reverses this relation-
ship in the hypothesized narrative with finely incised orthostats, namely the
cornerstones had figural representations of rulers enacting sacrifice by decapi-
tation, although only one, Monument J-41, is currently known (Urcid and Win-
ter 2003:127) (figure 9.11). The rest of the façade's surface was covered with
megaliths carved with texts. Chronologically, the complementarity between the
two narratives also implies that they were at least partially coeval, unless the
platform with the finely incised orthostats resulted from social memory "in ab-
sence" (Connerton 1989, Rowlands 1993:145–146). That is, the building with
the finely incised orthostats could have been constructed based on recollec-
tions of Building L-sub and its associated narrative after the latter's had been
substantially modified by the beginning of the Common Era.

When looking at the pattern of dispersal of carved orthostats in both narra-
tives, there is another binary opposition. Once dismantled, the carved stones
from Building L-sub were widely dispersed and reused through time in many
construction projects, some of them even outside the Main Plaza (see Urcid
2011a:180, fig. 12). In contrast, the great majority of the known orthostats
from the second program were reused in the various rebuildings of Structure J.
Only three finely incised slabs or fragments have been found elsewhere, all in
nearby buildings such as the South Platform and System M. Such a comple-
mentarity between both narratives could imply that one may have been built
directly in front of the other, either at the spot where Building J was eventually
erected or farther east, under what eventually became Building Q. In fact, lim-
ited excavations in the mid-1980s revealed evidence of a structure beneath the
plaza and adjacent to the earliest version of Building J, although the architec-
tural configuration and size of that earlier structure was not obtained (Marcus
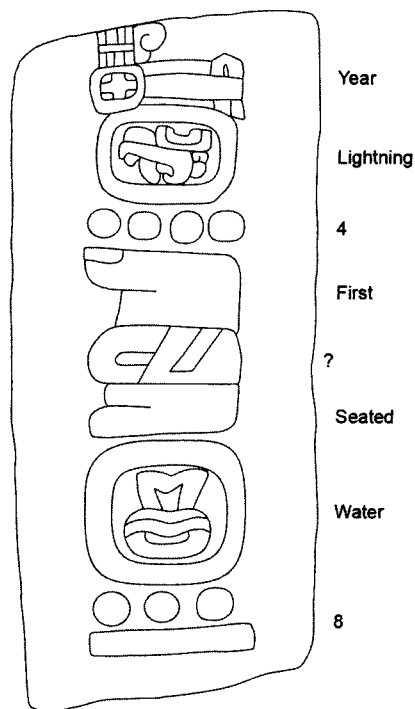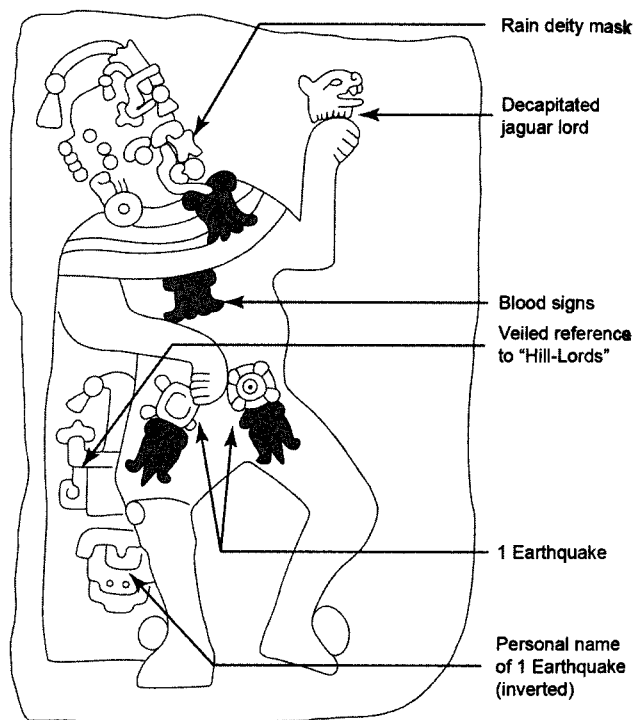Winter, personal communication 1989).
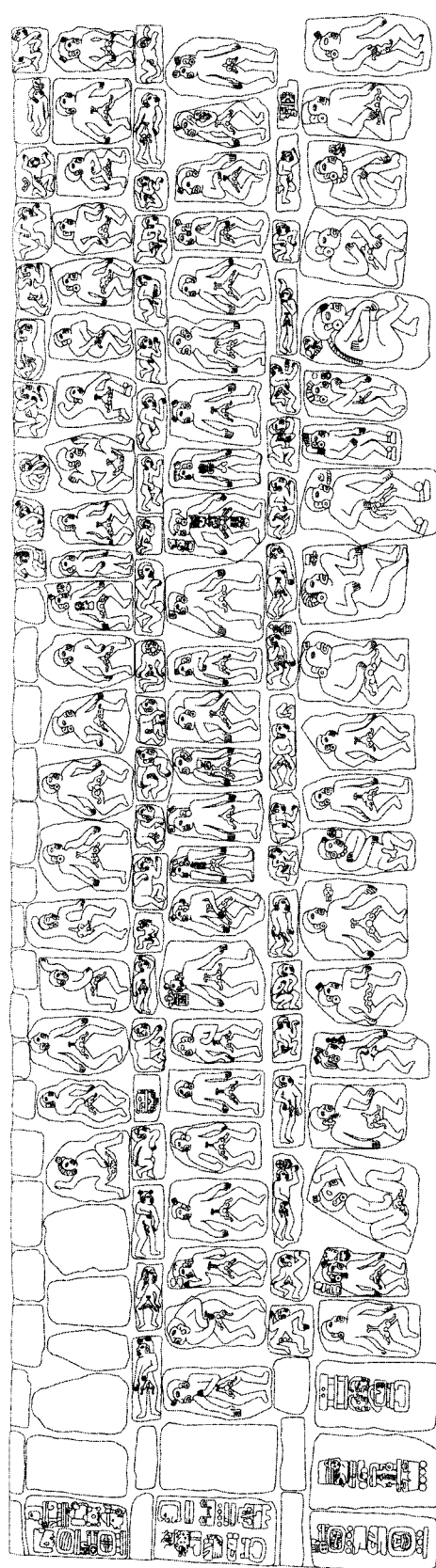
A
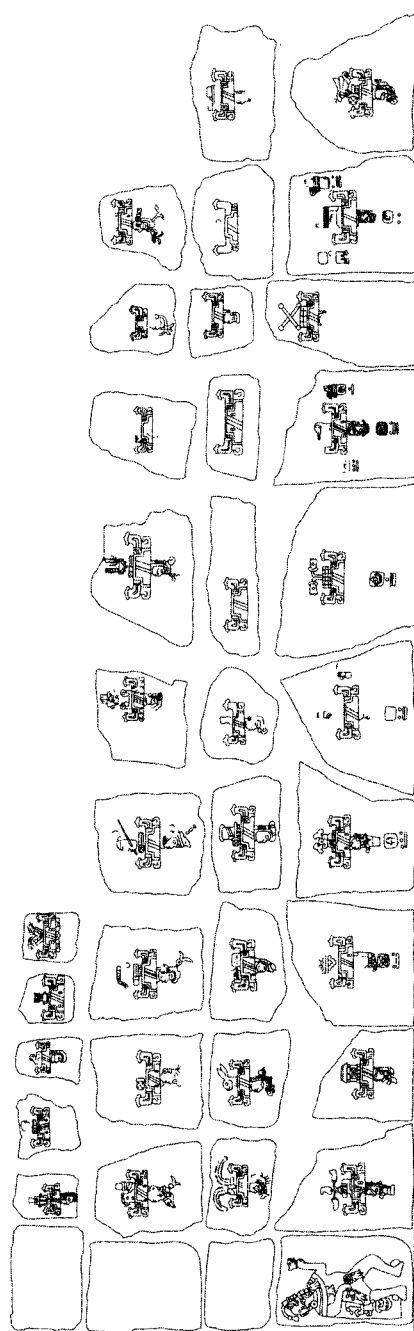
B

FIGURE 9.10. Portions of the hypothetical reconstructions of the architectural narratives from Monte Albán showing a similar construction technique of alternated vertical and horizontal blocks that decrease in size from bottom to top. (a) Building L-sub; (b) hypothesized platform's facade decorated with finely incised orthostats. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias.

Basal cornerstone of narrative
from Building L-sub [D-139]

Basal cornerstone of narrative with
finely inscribed orthostats [J-41]

Year

Lightning

4

First

?

Seated

Water

8

Rain deity mask

Decapitated
jaguar lord

Blood signs
Veiled reference
to "Hill-Lords"

1 Earthquake

Personal name
of 1 Earthquake
(inverted)

The text records the enthronement of Lord
8 Water on the Year 4 Lightning

The imagery portrays Lord 1 Earthquake
personifying the Rain God. It also alludes to
the decapitation of an enemy jaguar lord

FIGURE 9.11. Reversed complementarity between image and text in the cornerstones of both architectural narratives. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez Covarrubias.

The Political Significance of the Early Visual Programs on the Main Plaza

The architecturally contextualized reading of the two largest early narratives from Monte Albán, presented here, points to a tension between exclusionary and communal forms of authority (Blanton et al. 1996) during the early history of the city. Each narrative includes references to powerful rulers in their cornerstones, which reflects a more exclusionary form of authority. However, the majority of carvings in each narrative represents a more communal vision of authority with an age-grade sodality shown in Building L-sub and ranked groups of possible fallen heroes in the narrative with the finely incised orthostats. Ultimately, both narratives can be thought of as memorials with a focus

on the sacred aspects of warfare, including divining the outcome of battles via contact with ancestors, autosacrifice, human sacrifice, and the commemoration of heroes. We disagree with arguments that these monuments make reference to large-scale warfare and territorial conquest, however (see Joyce 2003; Workinger and Joyce 2009).

The Building L-sub program was probably polysemic with different components aimed at different audiences with variable degrees of phonetic and semantic literacy (Urcid 2011a). Sculptures in the east face of Building L-sub would have been visible to large groups of people on the plaza and stressed the ritual and military actions of lower-ranking people. Images of higher-ranking members of the military sodality, including elders and rain god impersonators, were located on buildings on top of the platform, which were probably restricted to higher-status audiences of both prominent commoners and nobles. Archaeological, architectural, semasiographic, and epigraphic data indicate that the early rulers of Monte Albán gained power via the elaboration of an ideology centered on human sacrifice and a primordial covenant between humans and the divine (Joyce 2000, 2004, 2010; Joyce and Winter 1996).

The decision by rulers to commission architectural monuments to bolster community well-being through sacrifice, instead of the self-aggrandizement of paramount and charismatic leaders, suggests that some of the societal uses of early architecture and writing in Oaxaca served the purpose of internal power-building strategies stemming from the potential factionalism of diverse constituencies (Urcid 2011a). These ideological representations would have misrepresented inequalities by promoting group solidarity and identity, the latter being crucial in the context of inter-community conflict and a new way of urban living. The evidence suggests that nobles shared politicoreligious power with communal organizations, which probably included high-ranking commoners as leaders (Joyce 2010:131–146). These two potentially competing forms of authority—communal and noble—carried inherent contradictions and potential points of tension. Evidence from Early and Middle Formative sites suggest that earlier forms of political authority in the Valley of Oaxaca were largely communal with little evidence for powerful rulers until the end of the Middle Formative (Blanton et al. 1999; Joyce 2010). Therefore, during the Late Formative, powerful nobles at Monte Albán could have threatened the traditional authority of communal institutions. In turn, communal authority would have constrained the power of the nobility. The representation of a relatively large council of elders, warriors, and religious specialists on the Building L-sub program includes rain deity impersonators and references to human and autosacrifice. Likewise, hieroglyphic inscriptions and early images of rulers (Monument J-41) also reference rain god impersonation, warfare, and sacrifice. 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 diviners, rainmakers, and scribes as well as activities related to the preparation for and conduct of warfare.

The possibility that the two largest earlier narratives from Monte Albán could have been coeval during the Pe phase (300–100 BC) opens the possibility of them being simultaneously the target of a major internal iconoclastic upheaval

during the Nisa phase (100 BC–AD 200). This event may have been related to what Blanton (1978:54–56) characterized as a mini-collapse, when Monte Albán saw a reduction in its extent and population, and when major defensive and/or control walls were built. At this time the Building L-sub monumental program was modified by tearing apart some of all of the narrative programs atop the basal platform. The building that originally displayed the finely incised orthostats was also dismantled, and the monuments were later reused in the three major construction phases of Building J. Apparently, other poorly understood narrative programs were also dismantled and a temple on the north end of the North Platform was burned (Winter 1994:15).

Other indications of internal turmoil include the construction of a defensive or monitoring wall around the most vulnerable slopes at Monte Albán as well as the relocation of people behind the wall from outlying parts of the site (O'Brien et al. 1982:207). It has usually been assumed that the wall was constructed to defend against external enemies, but it is also possible that it offered defense against internal factions and was a means of controlling movement into the city. Another indication of conflict comes from an architectural complex termed the Conjunto PNLP on the northwestern end of the Main Plaza. By the Nisa phase (100 BC–AD 200), the Conjunto PNLP acted as a control point for entry onto the Main Plaza (Martínez López and Markens 2004). The recovery of twenty-seven projectile points in the Conjunto PNLP suggests that coercive force was used to monitor access to the plaza.[6]

The destruction of the narrative programs at Monte Albán by dismantling structures, covering up carved stones, and breaking others to use as construction fill points to a major societal upheaval. Monte Albán eventually recovered from this upheaval, although inter-community conflict continued to play an important role in the social dynamics of the Central Valleys during the Classic period (Joyce 2010; Lind and Urcid 2010). Yet, from then on, more exclusionary forms of government prevailed, as attested by subsequent architectural narratives that memorialize the identity and deeds of singular historical figures.

Notes

1. We take the position that plazas and their surrounding buildings are a profitable unit of analysis. By focusing only on the open, flat spaces within larger architectural aggregates, one runs the risk of decontextualizing the way such bounded spaces were construed and used.

2. The features that commonly have been mustered in support of interpreting the human figures as depictions of sacrificial victims, such as the (1) closed eyes, (2) open mouths, (3) contorted body positions, (4) nakedness of the figures, and (5) signs indicative of mutilation, and specifically castration, are alternatively explained in this reinterpretation by assuming that (1) Mesoamerican modes of representation were capable of rendering varied states of being (e.g., closed eyes and open mouths as indexing pain or trance from self-bleeding penitence); (2) the representations of the human body were not meant to be realistic (i.e., if the figures were intended to be shown naked, why the omission of nipples and navels? [although the state of being mostly naked could be accounted for in terms of allowing the self-sacrificial blood to spill onto the floor and not

on the garments]); and (3) a comparative assessment of Mesoamerican semasiography indicates that usually when mutilation of body parts is referenced, both severed parts are shown (e.g., torso/decapitated head). Furthermore, we are unaware, either in pre-hispanic indigenous sources or in native/European colonial documents, of explicit references to castration as a treatment of prisoners of war. The perception that the human figures were rendered "contorted" stems to a large extent from viewing the carved stones in their nonprimary contexts. The heuristic and partial reconstruction of the façade of Building L-sub based on available evidence strongly suggests that the intent was to imbue the human figure with a sense of movement (see Urcid 2011a:182–183, figs. 13, 14). Ultimately, construing the bodily positions of the figures as contorted derives from an etic, even ethnocentric, perception of representational modes different from ours.

3. Other challengers to the traditional interpretation of "conquest slabs" include Buigues (1993:83, 108), who views the slabs as depicting "the earth monster [the hill glyph] swallowing dead rulers [the inverted heads]," and Carter (2006:78, 96–98) who posits that the textual format in the slabs "reads as so-and-so (a named individual) was at the mountain (Monte Albán) on such-and-such a date." Buigues and Carter, however, take for granted that the primary context of the finely incised orthostats was Building J.

4. Whittaker (1980:150–151) originally suggested the reading of this sign as "Ta-niquiecache" (Hill of the Precious Stone), a proposal that involves creating a linguistic term based on the direct, iconic interpretation of the signs. It also assumes—contrary to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cartographic evidence—that Monte Albán was designated in ancient times by a single, all-encompassing name.

5. The naming of the southern sector of Monte Albán as "Hill-Jaguar" in the Mapa of Xoxocotlan may have originated from decoupling metonymically a single ancient name (Hill-Lords) for the Main Plaza. Another possibility is that by the early seventeenth century, the probable exposure of Monument SP-1, which depicts a jaguar-lord and was embedded in the northeast corner of the South Platform (see Urcid 2001:319, fig. 5.30), motivated the naming of the southern sector of Monte Albán as "Hill-Jaguar."

6. Although there has been much debate involving whether the open space of the Main Plaza could have been used for staging marketplace exchanges on a rotational basis, we agree with Blanton (1978:63–64) that throughout its history the Main Plaza was mostly secluded for the high-ranking elites and probably only accessible to the general public during important ceremonies. Blanton's (1978:85–87) survey of Monte Albán detected a large open space (area 16) on the northeast slope of the main hill bounded by major mounded groups on terraces 278, 1306, and 938 (N5E8 and N5E7) that could have better served as the stage for a daily marketplace in the city.

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Edited by
KENICHIRO TSUKAMOTO
and **TAKESHI INOMATA**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF
ARIZONA PRESS**

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