

The Zapotec-Imperialism Argument: Insights from the Oaxaca Coast¹

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Over four decades ago, Angel Palerm and Eric Wolf, in a now classic paper (1957), offered an explanation for why only five "key areas" of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica had evolved into enduring centers of what they termed "massed economic and demographic power." They argued that aside from a necessary degree of agricultural

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potential, the most critical factor in this developmental process had been the ability of these centers to establish "symbiotic" economic relationships with their ecologically distinct hinterlands. The symbiosis between center and periphery was typically initiated through trade, but at some point relationships became asymmetrical when the burgeoning centers realized that their outlying sources of supply could be more effectively exploited through military conquest or colonization. A date of around 500 B.C. was assigned to the beginning of this stage of development. The highland Valley of Oaxaca was specifically mentioned as a key area, and the adjacent Pacific coast was identified as one of the areas that provided the requisite ecological diversity.

The Palerm and Wolf reconstruction anticipated a hypothesis favored by most prehistorians currently working in the Valley of Oaxaca to account for the growth of the Zapotec state at Monte Albán. Founded about 500 B.C., Monte Albán rapidly developed into the urban capital of highland Mexico's first state polity (Blanton 1978, Joyce and Winter 1996, Marcus and Flannery 1996). By the Terminal Formative period, 100 B.C.–A.D. 200, the Zapotec rulers at Monte Albán are thought to have embarked on a campaign of hinterland subjugation motivated by a desire for greater quantities of ornamental seashells, tropical fruit, and other exotic goods. Tribute, according to the imperialism hypothesis, was deemed a more effective means of extracting wealth from Monte Albán's former exchange partners. We review this hypothesis and examine it specifically as it relates to interaction between the Valley of Oaxaca and two of its lowland sources of supply along the Pacific coast: the Lower Río Verde Valley and the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec (fig. 1). Finally, drawing on parallels from other examples of early state development, we evaluate whether the imperialism hypothesis can fully account for Monte Albán's relationship with its various hinterland neighbors.

SUPPORT FOR THE ZAPOTEC-IMPERIALISM HYPOTHESIS

The most direct archaeological evidence that the Zapotec conquered or colonized places for the purpose of economic exploitation comes from the Cuicatlán Cañada, located about 100 km northwest of Monte Albán. Excavation and surface survey conducted by Elsa Redmond (1983) and Charles Spencer (1982) produced evidence of violent settlement destruction, social disruption, rural population relocation, agricultural alteration, and foreign occupation, all of which were attributed to Zapotec conquest and direct administration of the region.

The Cuicatlán investigation was, in part, inspired by Joyce Marcus's (1976, 1983, 1992) epigraphic study of the so-called conquest slabs on Building J at Monte Albán. Previously, Alfonso Caso (1947) had proposed that the approximately 50 carved stones set into the exterior walls of the odd, arrowhead-shaped building referred to provinces conquered by the Zapotec. On each of the carvings is a "hill" sign above which are one or more

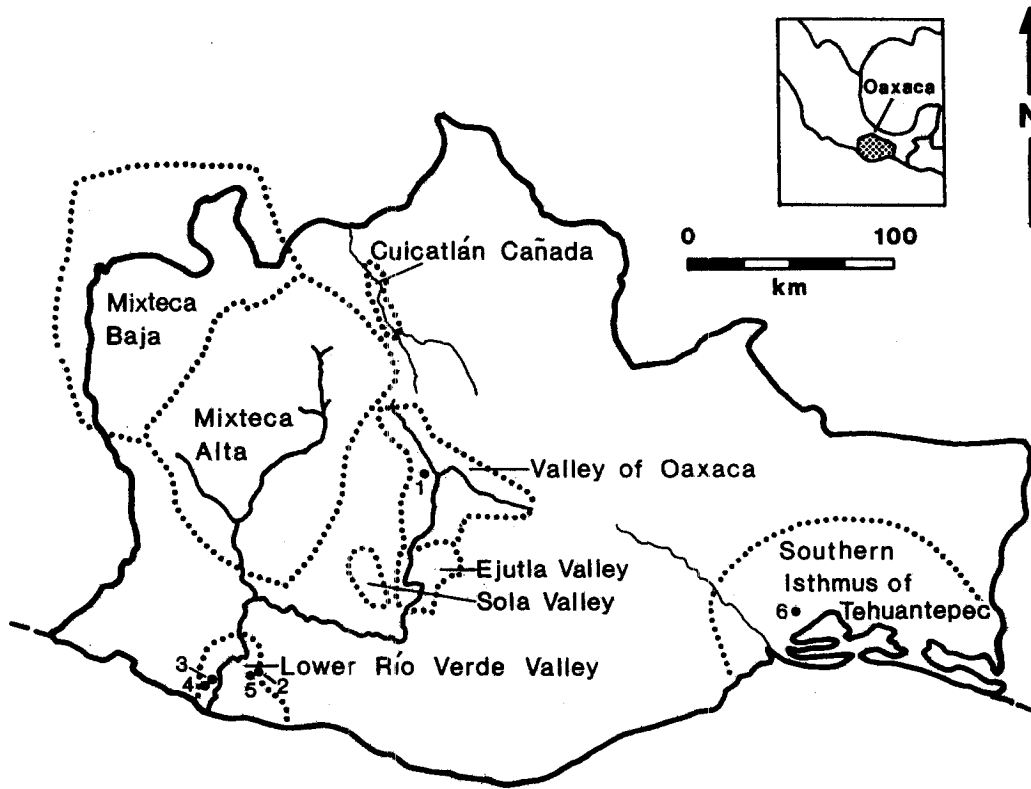
glyphs identifying a specific place. The bottom segment of some but not all of the carvings—the part below the "hill" sign—incorporates the outline of an inverted human head. Caso had proposed that these upside-down, closed-eye heads depicted the dead rulers of the conquered places. Marcus and Flannery (1996:197) suggest that the distinction between the slabs that include the effigy head element and those that lack it is that the latter refer to places subjugated by means of colonization rather than military conquest. Convinced that the place glyphs on the slabs refer to identifiable geographic landmarks delineating the outer boundaries of the Zapotec empire, Marcus has been working on pinpointing these places. Her approach has been to compare the carved toponyms with ones found in the Codex Mendoza, a 16th-century Aztec tribute list. Doing so, she has tentatively identified seven such places (Marcus 1992:395–96). One she interprets as the Cuicatlán Cañada.

Bearing directly on the question of Zapotec presence on the Oaxaca coast is another of Marcus's identified toponyms, the one she associates with Tututepec, located about 20 km inland (fig. 2). Unfortunately, the base of the Tututepec slab, an important potential source of textual information about that region's relationship with Monte Albán, is missing. The slab is the only one so far associated with a coastal locality and is believed by Marcus and Flannery (1996) to refer to a mountain landmark in the region of Tututepec, near the archaeological site of San Francisco de Arriba. The site lies on the northeastern boundary of the Lower Río Verde Valley, one of two coastal regions where we have carried out a series of archaeological investigations.

The other Oaxaca coast region where we have conducted field research is the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The region lies just beyond the estimated 150-km boundary of the Zapotec empire and has not been linked with any of the deciphered Building J toponyms. Its major settlement, Laguna Zope, has, however, been recognized as a likely supplier of ornamental seashells and possibly other goods to settlements in the Valley of Oaxaca dating back to the early Formative (Flannery and Schoenwetter 1970; Pires-Ferreira 1975; Zeitlin 1978, 1979, 1993).

Around 200–100 B.C., just when the Zapotec are thought to have been engaged in their imperialist venture, many outlying regions of Oaxaca, among them the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the Lower Río Verde Valley, experienced the intrusion of a distinctive grayware ceramic style clearly related to the pottery of Monte Albán (e.g., Gaxiola 1984; Joyce 1991a, 1993a; Spencer 1982; Zeitlin 1979, 1994). In excavations in both the southern Isthmus and the Lower Río Verde Valley, Monte Albán-related grayware dating to this period accounts for nearly half the ceramic assemblage.

Close ceramic relationships between the Valley of Oaxaca and the Cuicatlán Cañada that include not only grayware but imitations of Monte Albán creamware have been cited as evidence of Zapotec conquest of that region (Redmond 1983:116–17). Indeed, Marcus and



PACIFIC OCEAN

FIG. 1. Map of Oaxaca indicating places discussed in the text. 1, Monte Alban; 2, San Francisco de Arriba; 3, Río Viejo; 4, Cerro de la Cruz; 5, Tututepec; 6, Laguna Zope.

Flannery assert that "Zapotec expansion is confirmed by the large number of neighboring regions whose pottery sequences show an abrupt change to the Monte Albán style" (1996:206). Subjugation, they argue, is demonstrated in "those regions whose previously autonomous ceramics are literally swamped or replaced by Monte Albán gray wares" (p. 199). This notwith-

standing, they feel that Tehuantepec, despite its large intrusive grayware component, was too distant to have had any direct relationship with Monte Albán. The northern part of the Lower Verde region they see as having been subjugated by Monte Albán, while sites on the Lower Verde's floodplain they interpret as having remained independent although perhaps intimidated by the Zapotec empire (pp. 201-2).

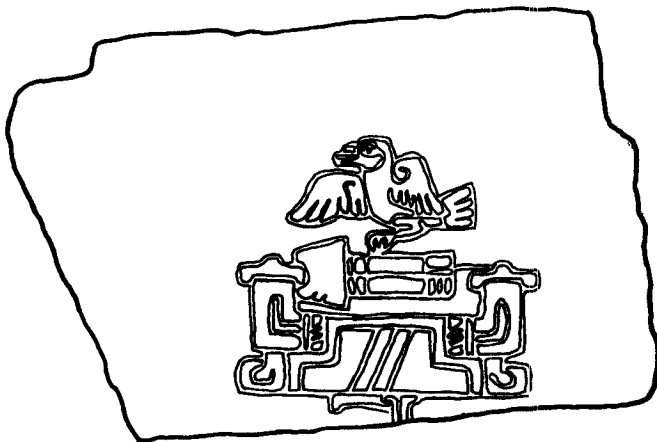


FIG. 2. Tututepec conquest glyph (redrawn from García Moll, Brown, and Winter 1986).

THE OAXACA COAST DURING THE LATE/TERMINAL FORMATIVE

Given the above background, it became a central objective of our recent archaeological research in both the Lower Río Verde Valley and the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec to help clarify the role Monte Albán played in the sociopolitical development of these peripheral coastal regions. In the Lower Verde region the field component of this research included archaeological excavation at 12 sites, a regional site reconnaissance, and a full-coverage surface survey over an area of 70 km² (Joyce 1991a, b, 1993a; Joyce, Winter, and Mueller 1998; Workinger and Joyce 1996). Recent and prior work on the southern Isthmus has included excavation at 3 sites, regional site reconnaissance, and a full-coverage survey of over 100 km² (Zeitlin 1979, 1990, 1993, 1994; J. Zeitlin 1978).

The developmental trajectories of these two regions differed somewhat, in part because of their dissimilar physiographies. The Lower Verde region is on the stretch of Mesoamerica's Pacific seaboard characterized by rugged mountains descending to the sea (West 1964). While a narrow beach zone follows much of the shoreline, regions within this section of the coast tend to be isolated from one another. Data are lacking that would indicate to what extent the people of the Lower Verde communicated with coastal groups to the west; we do know that there is little evidence of contact with the southern Isthmian region to the east (Joyce 1993*a*). As for communication with the highland Valley of Oaxaca, resource complementarity may in part account for the observed interaction that occurred between these two environmentally contrasting zones during the Late/Terminal Formative. River courses and mountain trails, some utilized to this day, would have been the likely routes of communication.

Physical conditions change markedly at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where the slopes of the Sierra Madre del Sur recede and the Pacific shoreline is transformed into a broad coastal plain. The open environment extends southeast into the fertile region of the Pacific littoral known as the Soconusco. From the southern Isthmus, an easily traversed depression extends north to connect only 200 km away with the Gulf Coast and regions beyond. Interaction with highland regions flanking the Isthmus is also uncomplicated. Following riverbeds and natural passageways, contact with the Valley of Oaxaca and highland Chiapas is evidenced from Early Formative times onward (Zeitlin 1978, 1979). The southern Isthmus was a virtual crossroads of communication in Mesoamerica.

According to Marcus and Flannery, Monte Albán's ambition for territorial control was driven by a desire to "establish a north-south 'corridor of influence' between Tehuacán—the gateway to Central Mexico—and the Pacific Coast, the gateway to the tropics" (1996:206). The most practical corridor from Monte Albán to the tropics would have been southeast, to the broad open plains of the southern Isthmus, rather than through the mountainous, isolated Oaxaca coast to the west. The Aztecs, centuries later, were well aware of this, as is demonstrated by their numerous military and diplomatic efforts to control the Tehuantepec region.

Evidence for two- or three-tiered settlement hierarchies, ascribed status differences, elite control of prestige goods, and large-scale construction activities indicates that by the Late Formative period, from 400 to 100 B.C., both the southern Isthmus and the Lower Verde region were the locus of chiefdom-level polities (Joyce 1991*a, b*, 1994; Zeitlin 1978, 1990, 1993), as was the Valley of Oaxaca (Marcus and Flannery 1996). Our investigations suggest that the exchange of prestige goods played an important role in the political economy of these societies.

Prestige-goods procurement, controlled by elite members of each society, was implemented through a network of interregional cultural and material exchange

that had begun to take form over 1,000 years earlier, in the Early Formative (Blake 1991, Flannery 1968, Hirth 1984, Pires-Ferreira 1975, Zeitlin 1978). By means of this exchange network, elites acquired the goods they desired both as status symbols and for local redistribution to high-ranking members of subsidiary lineages in return for their allegiance and economic support. Among the items known to have passed through the network were ornamental marine and freshwater shells, stingray spines, iron-ore mirrors, semiprecious stones, mica, and fancy pottery. In addition, it is likely that many other goods, unpreserved in the archaeological record, were so distributed. Cacao, sea salt, feathers, textiles, pelts, salted fish and shrimp, tropical fruit, púrpura dye, and cotton are just some of the coastal lowland products known to have been exported to the highlands during later periods of prehistory (Ball and Brockington 1978, Paso y Troncoso 1981, Whitecotton 1992).

Both shell ornaments and unworked shell have been recovered from Late Formative burials in the Lower Río Verde Valley, although there is currently no indication of any local export industry (Joyce 1991*a*). On the southern Isthmus, evidence for large-scale procurement of ornamental seashells and production of shell ornaments has, as noted above, been found at Laguna Zope (Zeitlin 1978, 1979). By the Middle Formative period, 800–400 B.C., Laguna Zope had grown into one of Oaxaca's largest communities, its development undoubtedly stimulated by its significant role in the shell industry. During the subsequent Late/Terminal Formative, from 400 B.C. to A.D. 200, the industry apparently came under the exclusive control of the settlement's elite population (Zeitlin 1993:96–97). We know that during that time ornamental shells from the Pacific coast were reaching the Valley of Oaxaca (Whalen 1981:103; Winter 1984:204–5), the Ejutla Valley (Feinman and Nicholas 1993), the Mixteca Alta (Winter 1984:206–7), and as far northwest as the Cuicatlán Cañada (Spencer 1982:171).

There is little material evidence to reveal the kinds of items that the Late Formative-period Monte Albán elite exchanged for coastal products. While not usually considered a prestige item, obsidian was often under the distributional control of the elite and probably moved through the same prestige-goods exchange network as other exotic commodities (Joyce 1991*a*:277; Spencer 1982:167–74; Whalen 1981:85–87; Zeitlin 1978). Late Formative-period obsidian recovered from the southern Isthmus and the Lower Verde was dominated by material originating from the Orizaba, Guadalupe Victoria, and Zaragoza sources in Veracruz-Puebla and the Paredón and Otumba sources in the Basin of Mexico. Both the Veracruz-Puebla and the Basin of Mexico obsidian could have reached the Oaxaca coast via the Oaxaca Valley, although alternative trade routes are also possible (Joyce et al. 1995; Zeitlin 1978, 1979, 1982).

One item definitely reaching the Lower Río Verde from the Valley of Oaxaca was ornate gray-paste pottery (fig. 3; Joyce 1991*a, b*). Excavations at the sites of Cerro

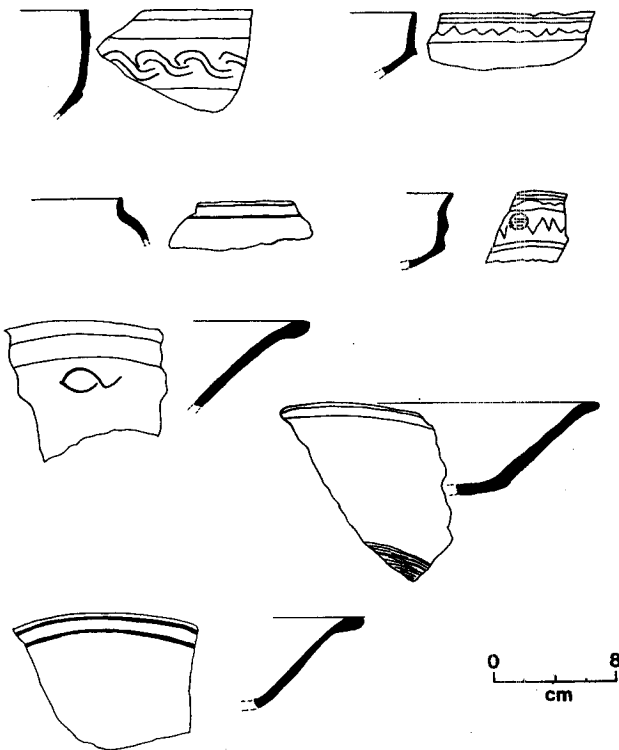


FIG. 3. Late Formative Río Verde grayware imports from the Valley of Oaxaca.

de la Cruz and Río Viejo recovered 278 fragments of imported Monte Albán grayware serving vessels in contexts associated with high-status or ritual activities. The most common grayware categories were well-burnished bowls with fine-line incising that belong to types G.16 and G.17 in the Valley of Oaxaca ceramic typology (Caso, Bernal, and Acosta 1967). During the Terminal Formative, at the time the Valley Zapotec are thought to have been engaged in their campaign of conquest, the importation of this Monte Albán grayware nearly ceased (Joyce, Winter, and Mueller 1998:114). In contrast, the southern Isthmus does not appear to have received any Monte Albán export pottery, despite evidence that the region was a major supplier of ornamental seashells to the highland center. We do not know what material goods, if any at all, the Zapotec were sending down to the Isthmus in exchange for the products they were obtaining.

Despite the lack of pottery imports, by the Terminal Formative in both the Lower Verde (fig. 4) and the southern Isthmus (figs. 5, 6), locally made variants of Monte Albán grayware became one of the dominant regional ceramic types (Joyce 1991a; Zeitlin 1979, 1994). The gray pottery manufactured on the coast does not, however, precisely replicate that of the Oaxaca Valley. Río Verde ceramic categories such as outleaning/out-flaring-wall bowls with incised interior rim-lines and occasionally combed bases (Joyce 1991a) and the spouted effigy vessels from the southern Isthmus (Zeit-

lin 1979) are quite similar to Monte Albán types, but most of the coastal graywares display regionally distinctive formal and decorative attributes. Indeed, a study comparing the stylistic attributes of Monte Albán pottery with contemporaneous wares from the Mixteca Alta, the Mixteca Baja, the Cuicatlán Cañada, the Lower Río Verde, and the southern Isthmus indicates that, with the exception of pottery from the Cuicatlán Cañada, precise similarities are limited (Joyce 1993b).

In both the Lower Verde region and the southern Isthmus—and perhaps elsewhere in Oaxaca—grayware appears to assume the role of a local fancy pottery, complementing a vernacular tradition of utilitarian brownwares in the Lower Verde region and differentially fired black-and-white ware on the southern Isthmus. On the Oaxaca coast at least, there is no evidence that the intrusion of the Monte Albán-related grayware style, notwithstanding its occurrence in high frequencies, indicates subjugation. Our survey and excavation data do not indicate such local disruptions in sociopolitical organization, agricultural and/or manufacturing production, religious practice, architectural tradition, or settlement pattern as might be expected had there been a Zapotec imperial takeover and direct administration of these coastal Oaxaca regions similar to that claimed for the Cuicatlán Cañada (Redmond 1983, Spencer 1982), Sola Valley (Balkansky 1997:14), and Ejutla (Feinman and Nicholas 1990:231) regions.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON ZAPOTEC IMPERIALISM

Comparative data from other early empires in Mesoamerica and elsewhere support our conclusion that similarities in ceramic styles are not a reliable indicator of hinterland subjugation (e.g., Lind 1987:97–98; Schreiber 1992:263; Stark 1990). The lack of pottery-based evidence for conquest does not, however, lead us to conclude that the Oaxaca coast remained completely beyond Zapotec influence. We realize that military conquest is notoriously difficult to identify archaeologically, even where its occurrence is confirmed by written records (Marcus and Flannery 1996:198–99; Zeitlin 1993). We cannot assume, however, that because conquest or colonization has been identified at some Oaxaca localities all the outlying Zapotec sources of economic support would have been similarly subjugated. Imperial rulers in other early states pursued a variety of tactics to control or influence their peripheries (e.g., Algaze 1993, Blanton 1996, Schreiber 1992, Sinopoli 1994, Stark 1990). These ranged from territorial conquest and direct administration (as was said to have been the fate of the Cuicatlán Cañada) to indirect hegemonic control achieved largely through the cooperation of local leaders (as was the stratagem within much of the Aztec empire) and asymmetrical alliances with local elites, often cemented by intermarriage and gift exchange.

The Aztec example may be particularly instructive, for even with a military potential much more formidable

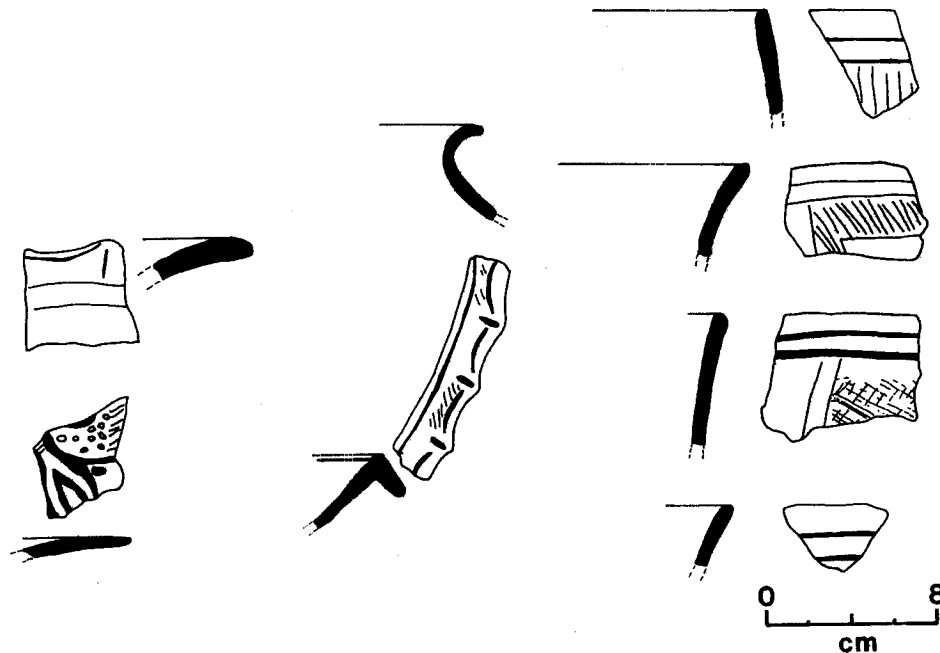


FIG. 4. Locally made Terminal Formative grayware from the Río Verde region.

ble than the Zapotec the Aztecs rarely maintained on-site control over their provinces (Berdan et al. 1996, Hassig 1988). Negotiation and threat were the primary means the Aztecs employed to secure the receipt of tribute, their main interest in hinterland regions. Warfare, usually in the form of a swift but savage assault, was a last resort. The intent was to teach a lesson to those with the temerity to defy their efforts at economic hegemony. Aztec administrators sometimes were, sometimes were not, permanently posted to regions they conquered. Normally, as long as the requisite tribute was forthcoming, outlying provinces were allowed to maintain a degree of local autonomy. Alternatively, where conquest of peripheral regions whose goods were desired was judged impractical or overly costly, trade relationships were maintained.

In a first effort to discern the variables that may have dictated a diversity of tactics on the part of Monte Albán in addressing its growing need for exotic goods from the coast, let us briefly return to our study of the Lower Río Verde region and the southern Isthmus. On the basis of current evidence we can acknowledge that in its relationships with at least some regions Monte Albán displayed an element of belligerence. However, practical limitations to the geographic extent and military potential of the Monte Albán empire must be recognized. The total Terminal Formative-period Valley of Oaxaca population—women, children, the elderly, and the infirm included—has been estimated at about 40,000 persons, of which fewer than 15,000 resided at Monte Albán proper (Blanton et al. 1993). Given the relatively modest pool of people available for military service or colonization, it seems unlikely that the 50-odd localities represented on the Building J conquest slabs, places

spread out over a 20,000-km² territory, would have all been targets of long-term, direct imperial administration. Marcus and Flannery recognize the possible existence of multiple approaches to resource access on the part of an expansionary Zapotec state (1996:198). Zapotec excursions for the purpose of territorial acquisition were probably directed toward a limited number of small, weakly organized polities, such as the one in the Cuicatlán Cañada.

Another Zapotec option for increasing hinterland productivity might have been through economic pressure, by withholding or threatening to withhold goods for which the Valley of Oaxaca served as a distributional hub. The Lower Verde, located at the end of a transportation link emanating from Monte Albán, would have been particularly vulnerable to the restriction of supplies moving between coast and highlands. Thus, when the flow of obsidian and imported pottery to the Lower Verde declined during the Terminal Formative (Joyce 1991a:524–34), we might attribute this loss to Zapotec interference. Economic pressure of this sort would have been less costly than military intervention. By the Terminal Formative the regional center of Río Viejo had grown to cover at least 225 ha, making it a formidable obstacle for an invading army. Alternatively, interpolity conflict in the regions between the Valley of Oaxaca and the coast may have disrupted exchange routes, resulting in the observed decline in obsidian and imported pottery reaching the Lower Verde. A Zapotec incursion into the Sola Valley, which lies between the Valley of Oaxaca and the Lower Verde region, is one such conflict that may have occurred (Balkansky 1997).

A similar Zapotec tactic of economic interference applied to the southern Isthmus would have been less suc-

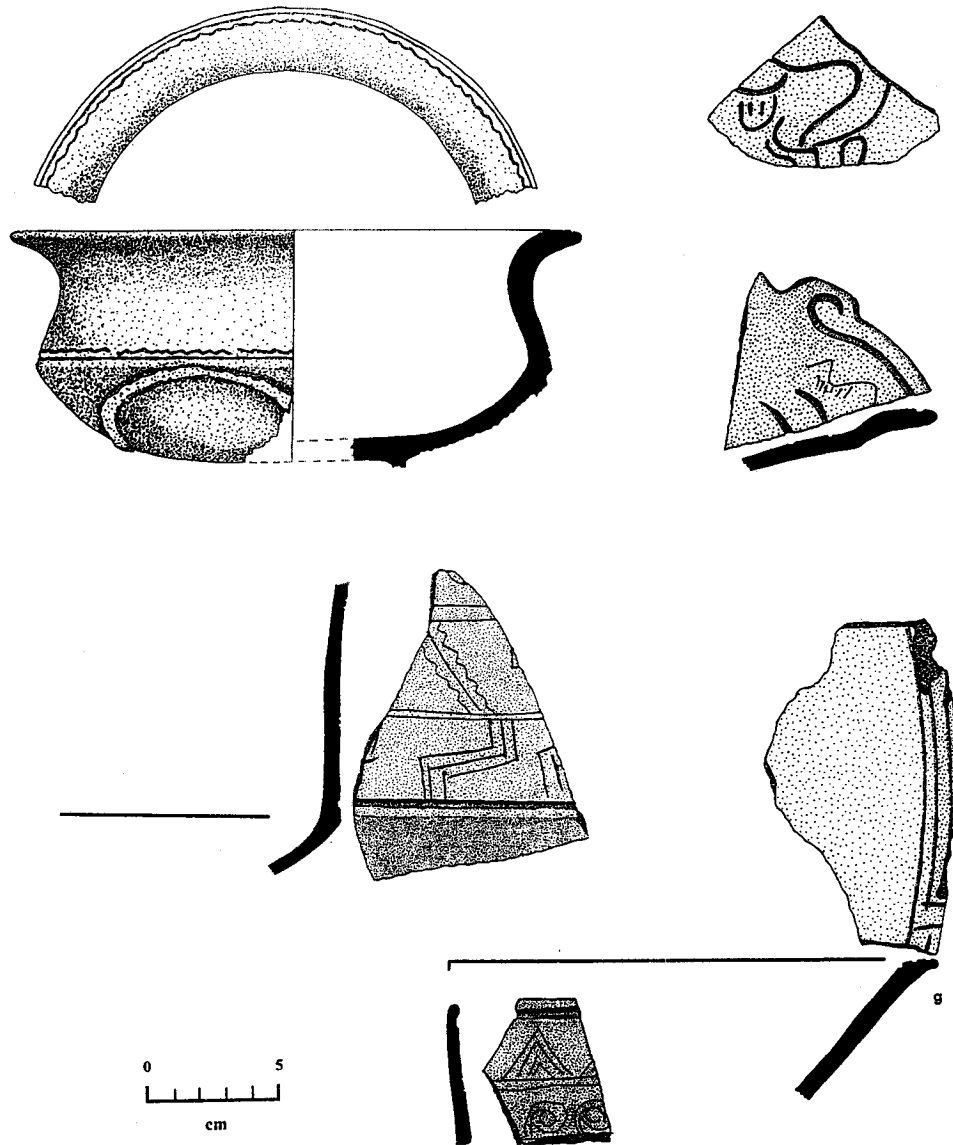


FIG. 5. Locally made Late and Terminal Formative grayware from the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

cessful, since that region had a variety of alternatives for exchange partners. As an indication of these options, we find no evidence for a Terminal Formative decrease in the availability of obsidian on the southern Isthmus despite the fact that by the end of the period Guadalupe Victoria, previously the major source of supply, no longer served the region. The cutoff of Guadalupe Victoria obsidian is of particular relevance, since a likely route of its travel to the southern Isthmus would have been through the Valley of Oaxaca. Replacing Guadalupe Victoria was an alternative source at Zaragoza (Zeitlin 1978, 1982). The Terminal Formative switch to Zaragoza obsidian, which would most likely have been conveyed to the Tehuantepec region over a lowland route running down the Gulf Coast and across the short trans-isthmian depression, may reflect a response to a

curtailment of supplies passing through the Valley of Oaxaca.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A model that recognizes greater variability in Monte Al-bán interaction with neighboring regions suggests a broader interpretation of the Building J "conquest slabs" than one that has them all identifying places conquered or colonized. Some of the toponyms may have referred to places where the Zapotec were exerting control through alliances backed by military or economic threat. Others may have indicated regions the Zapotec had raided but had not yet been successful in subduing. Still others may have served as little more than a wish list. As Marcus has noted, "Military propaganda made



FIG. 6. Late Formative grayware stirrup-spout vessel from the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec with upper segment in the form of an animal head, possibly a monkey. An almost identical grayware vessel from Monte Albán is illustrated in Caso, Bernal, and Acosta (1967:fig. 90).

up an enormous part of later Mesoamerican writing and claims of victory were often exaggerated" (1992:442).

One might also wonder why the hinterland neighbors of Monte Albán would crave pottery of a style associated with a place that intended to exploit them. In reflecting on this seeming incongruity, it must be remembered that by the Terminal Formative Monte Albán-style grayware had been around for at least several hundred years. When the popularity of this pottery first spread beyond the Valley of Oaxaca, relationships between the Zapotec capital and its hinterland exchange partners were probably less exploitative, and emulating the flourishing Zapotec center of civilization would have afforded a degree of prestige. Under those circumstances it is easy to imagine why the grayware horizon expanded to the full extent of the Oaxaca interaction sphere and in some cases far beyond.²

2. A recent study grant from the American Museum of Natural History has given one of us (Zeitlin) the opportunity to examine a previously unanalyzed collection of pottery from the archaeological site of Paredón. Located near the modern town of Tonalá, in coastal Chiapas, Paredón lies over 125 km to the southeast of the

By the Terminal Formative, despite an increasingly hostile sociopolitical environment, grayware variants, produced in many localities, may simply have become a generic fine pottery throughout Oaxaca. Its great abundance and widespread occurrence in sites such as Laguna Zope on the southern Isthmus and in the Lower Río Verde region indicate that its use was not restricted to higher-ranking members of society. Nor does its broad geographic distribution throughout Oaxaca offer a simple measure of the extent of the Terminal Formative-period Zapotec empire.

Although the precise nature of Monte Albán's political and economic relationship with its coastal neighbors at the end of the Formative era is still far from clear, there are no current indications of the imposition of the kind of territorial imperialism that has been argued for the Cuicatlán Cañada and other outlying regions of Oaxaca. Given the distance of the southern Isthmus and Lower Río Verde regions from Monte Albán, the difficulties of long-distance travel, the size and complexity of the societies involved, and the relatively modest scale of the Late/Terminal Formative Zapotec polity, it does not strike us as odd that these two coastal regions appear to have remained autonomous during the period of reported Zapotec expansionism.

We believe that the precise nature of Late/Terminal Formative-period Zapotec interaction with their many neighbors will eventually reveal itself as varied and complex. The full complexity and extent of this economically motivated interaction is, however, unlikely to be determined by information gleaned from investigations in the Monte Albán homeland. Rather, it will require the acquisition and thoughtful analysis of much more of those elusive, multifaceted archaeological survey and excavation data from peripheral places, such as those on the Oaxaca coast, with which the Zapotec interacted. When patterns of similarities and differences in environment, natural resources, distances from the Zapotec capital, population dynamics, regional economy, local leadership, social organization, ceremonialism, and other factors emerge from such studies, we will have the basis for a better understanding of the various ways in which relationships between the Zapotec center and periphery were structured.

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southern Isthmus and fully 320 km from Monte Albán. The collection, excavated in 1960 by Matthew Wallrath, contains a startlingly large percentage of gray pottery closely related to the Late/Terminal Formative grayware of Monte Albán.

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