

The ancient mind

Elements of cognitive archaeology

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COLIN RENFREW

and

EZRA B. W. ZUBROW



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Ancient Zapotec ritual and religion: an application of the direct historical approach

JOYCE MARCUS and
KENT V. FLANNERY

This chapter is dedicated to José Luis Lorenzo, whose thoughtful advice in 1979 led to the discovery of the temple sequence below Structure 13 at San José Mogote

We see today a growing interest in cognitive approaches to archaeology, a genuine desire to reach back for the mental templates that underlie human behaviour. While this interest is surely commendable, we should guard against two possible negative outcomes. One such outcome would be the conversion of cognitive archaeology into a fad or a narrow speciality that ignores all other aspects of prehistory. The other would be the delusion that our search for the ancient mind is a recent advance for which our generation is solely responsible.

To avoid the first pitfall, we prefer to speak not of 'cognitive archaeology' but rather of 'holistic archaeology', a discipline in which cognitive variables would be given equal weight with ecological, economic and sociopolitical variables. As far back as 1976 we called for 'a framework for analysis which is neither a mindless ecology nor a glorification of mind divorced from the land' (Flannery and Marcus 1976a: 383).

To avoid the second pitfall, we remind ourselves that many previous generations of archaeologists were just as interested in topics such as ideology, cosmology, iconography and religion (e.g. Caso 1945, 1958; Thompson 1950, 1966, 1970, 1973). Consider, for example, the brilliant writings of Frankfort *et al.* (1946) on the mind of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia nearly half a century ago. Even the so-called 'processual archaeologists' of the 1960s and 1970s, with their love of subsistence, optimal foraging, human ecology and locational analysis, did not always ignore the roles of ideology and cosmology in shaping

human societies. To be sure, some archaeologists concentrated so hard on the way prehistoric societies provisioned themselves with food and *matériel* that they allowed the realm of the mind to be claimed by humanists.

When processual archaeologists – most of whom are anthropologists – waive their right to include cosmology and ideology in their reconstructions, one gets the kind of dichotomy which we have seen in Mesoamerica: anthropologists writing about settlement and subsistence, while humanists write about religion and cosmology. And the humanists, for the most part, do not have the ecological and evolutionary perspective of the anthropological archaeologists. Thus we have Aztec gods like Tezcatlipoca and Tlaloc projected back onto Formative societies such as the Olmec (e.g. Covarrubias 1942; M. D. Coe 1973), and polytheistic state religions used as models for the early village religions which preceded them by 2000 years (e.g. Joralemon 1971). In this paper, we will try to show that ideological and cosmological principles evolved (and were readapted over time) as Mesoamerican cultures went from egalitarian village societies to ranked societies or chiefdoms, and finally to urban civilizations.

No archaeologist who works for any length of time with the Indians of North, Middle, or South America can fail to see the important roles that religion, cosmology and ideology have played in shaping their societies (Marcus 1978). The problem comes when we try to decide by which *scientific method* we will study those subjects. It is simply not enough to rely on one's intuition and assert what we believe to be true, as some of our humanistic colleagues have done of late. Cognitive archaeology needs a methodology, just as 'settlement and subsistence archaeology' does.

Potentially, there are a number of methodological approaches that could be used. In this chapter, we will combine three which we feel suit the problem of ancient Zapotec ritual and religion. These approaches are (1) the Direct Historical Approach; (2) the analysis of public space and religious architecture; and (3) the contextual analysis of religious paraphernalia.

The Direct Historical Approach

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, New World archaeologists used ethnographic data from elderly living informants, as well as ethnohistoric records, to interpret the archaeological sites they were excavating. For a long time this approach constituted a traditional method, although it had not been given a formal name.

Classic examples of the method can be found in Arthur C. Parker's *Archaeological history of New York* (1922); William Duncan Strong's *An introduction to Nebraska*

archaeology (1935); and William A. Ritchie's two works, 'The Algonkin sequence in New York' (1932) and 'A perspective of Northeastern Archaeology' (1938). Finally, in an article entitled 'The Direct-Historical Approach in Pawnee Archaeology', Waldo R. Wedel (1938) gave the approach its name.

The Direct Historical Approach (DHA) was seen as a way of working back in time from the known to the unknown, using ethnographic and ethnohistoric data to interpret prehistoric remains. For example, both Wedel and Strong used Pawnee ethnographic and ethnohistoric data to enhance their reconstructions of the protohistoric and Upper Republican cultures of Nebraska, which preceded the historic Pawnee. Archaeologists using the approach made it clear that they felt most comfortable with their reconstructions when they could show *continuity from the archaeological record to the ethnographic present* – in other words, when they could plausibly show that the same ethnic and linguistic group had continuously occupied the area from prehistoric to historic times.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the DHA only emphasizes continuity while ignoring change, even in such supposedly 'conservative' areas as ideologies, religious beliefs and ritual institutions. The fact is that most American archaeologists, especially since the 1930s, have been concerned with both continuity and change. For example, Strong's (1933) paper on 'The Plains culture area in the light of archaeology' documents the way the introduction of the horse from Europe transformed Plains horticulturalists into mounted nomads. Indeed, one reason the approach was so widely used at that time is because so many archaeologists of Strong's generation were well-rounded anthropologists who knew ethnology and ethnohistory as well as they knew archaeology.

In southern Mexico, both Alfonso Caso (1932, 1966) and Ignacio Bernal (1949, 1958, 1965, 1966) used ethnohistoric data on the Zapotec and Mixtec of Oaxaca to enhance their reconstructions of prehistoric cultures in that region. The Valley of Oaxaca is one of those 'fortunate' areas (from the perspective of archaeology) where there was great continuity from prehistoric to Spanish Colonial times. In 1983, a group of our colleagues joined us in taking advantage of that continuity to trace the Zapotec and Mixtec civilizations out of their common ancestral culture (Flannery and Marcus 1983). In that symposium, we used a kind of DHA to the Oaxaca region, looking for both continuity and change through time.

One reason ritual and religion could be seen as appropriate themes for a DHA in Mesoamerica is that the ethnohistoric and ethnographic data from that region emphasize how conservative and slow to change those aspects of culture

were. Within the realm of the sacred, a high premium was placed on maintaining tradition and preserving anachronisms. Despite long-term continuity, however, one can see adjustments being made over time as the sociopolitical infrastructure of society evolved.

Architecture and the public use of space

A second approach to recovering cognitive information from prehistory lies in the study of changing patterns of public architecture or the use of public space, where many religious and ideological principles are expressed in physical remains (e.g. Flannery and Marcus 1976a, 1976b). For example, the careful excavation of a sequence of superimposed temples at sites such as Kaminaljuyú (Kidder, Jennings and Shook 1946), Uaxactún (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937; Smith 1950) and Tikal (W. R. Coe 1990) has given us data on the evolution of Maya temples and the range of activities that took place on their floors. Later in this chapter we will present a comparable sequence of temples from a secondary administrative centre within the Zapotec state centred at Monte Albán, Oaxaca.

Contextual analysis of ritual paraphernalia

A third approach to the study of ancient ritual and religion is the 'contextual analysis' defined and described by Flannery (1976) for Formative Oaxaca villages. This type of analysis is based on Rappaport's (1979: 176) observation that ritual *must be performed*, and that to be valid it must be performed over and over again in certain prescribed ways. This means that those artefacts used in ritual should exhibit a pattern of use and discard which is non-random and yields insights into the nature of the ritual itself. In other words, although religious beliefs are mental constructs which cannot themselves be directly recovered archaeologically, those beliefs may direct ritual practices which are performed with artefacts that *can* be directly recovered. In this paper we will show that certain artefacts left behind in Zapotec temples reflect rituals of human and animal sacrifice which follow from the religious beliefs recorded in ethnohistoric documents.

Relationships among approaches

Let us now briefly review the three approaches used in this paper and the way in which they are related. First, our DHA begins with descriptions of the ideology, religion and ritual practices of the Zapotec of Oaxaca, Mexico, as they were described by the sixteenth-century Spaniards. This historic information gives us some insight into the cognitive world of

the Zapotec, as well as certain expectations about the kinds of public buildings and ritual artefacts we might find in the archaeological record. We can then examine the archaeological record to see if, and when, such buildings and ritual paraphernalia appear, and whether their form and pattern fit our expectations.

It seems to us almost certain that some of our expectations will be met and others will not; it also seems likely that the archaeological record will contain unexpected types of information, for which the Spanish accounts do not prepare us. Resolving the contradictions between our ethnohistoric expectations and our archaeological observations will be one challenge of the method; another will be to decide whether those cases in which our observations and expectations fit are genuine continuities, or only superficial similarities.

Zapotec ethnohistory

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents written by the Spaniards (or by Indian nobles at the Spaniards' request) constitute a very rich body of material for the study of prehispanic philosophy, religion and ideology. Among these documents are (1) Spanish friars' accounts of 'pagan' religious practices such as human and animal sacrifices, incense burning and bloodletting; (2) dictionaries of indigenous languages, containing many religious and philosophical terms; (3) answers to standardized questionnaires (*relaciones*) elicited from indigenous nobles between 1579 and 1581 at the request of the Spanish throne; (4) prehispanic and early Colonial native maps on deer hide or cloth; and (5) prehispanic and early Colonial manuscripts (*codices*) that contain calendric, ritual, genealogical and pilgrimage data.

While these documents are rich in detail, their use requires a careful attempt to 'factor out' Colonial Spanish prejudices. After all, many of the Spaniards were missionaries whose goal it was to eliminate 'heathen' practices which they regarded as barbaric and repugnant. The Spaniards also had Classical Greco-Roman religion as their subconscious paradigm for 'pagan' beliefs, and tended to speak of things such as 'pantheons of gods' when they were more likely seeing lists of deified royal ancestors (Marcus 1978, 1983a, 1983b).

The principal ethnohistoric sources for Zapotec religion date from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and were written by Spanish friars and administrators. First and foremost as a source was Fray Juan de Córdova, who in 1578 published both a dictionary (*Vocabulario en Lengua Zapoteca*) and a grammar (*Arte en Lengua Zapoteca*) which contained important data on religion (Córdova 1578a, 1578b). His work built on that of his superior, Fray Bernardo de Alburquerque, who had arrived in Mexico around 1535.

By 1540, Fray Alburquerque was the vicar of Tehuantepec and the city of Oaxaca. Fray Juan de Córdova joined Alburquerque in 1547 in the convent of Antequera (modern Oaxaca City). Both friars learned Zapotec well, since their conversion of the Indians required them to master the language in all its subtlety. Alburquerque wrote an important manuscript (*Doctrina Cristiana en Lengua Zapoteca*) which was never published, but was used by other friars in their sermons. Ultimately, Córdova was assigned to the convent at Tetícpac (modern San Juan Teitipac), and later was named vicar at Tlacochahuaya in the Valley of Oaxaca (see Fig. 7.1).

A second source on Zapotec religion is the work of Fray Gonzalo de Balsalobre (1656; Berlin 1957; Marcus 1983b) who from 1634 to 1665 was a priest in what is today Sola de Vega, Oaxaca. Balsalobre recorded 'survivals of pagan beliefs', eliciting some of his data from a Zapotec *cacique* or native lord who had been baptized 'Diego Luis'.

A third source are the works of Fray Francisco de Burgoa (1670, 1674), whose two seventeenth-century books supply important data on Zapotec religion. Still a fourth major source are the well-known *Relaciones Geográficas* (Paso y Troncoso 1905, vol. IV), written between 1579 and 1581 by Spanish scribes who were completing questionnaires at the behest of Charles V of Spain.

Zapotec religion

From the ethnohistoric sources given above, it appears that sixteenth-century Zapotec religion had at least four principal features. First, it was an *animatistic* religion, which attributed life to many things we consider inanimate. Second, it emphasized the worship of natural forces, such as lightning and earthquake. Third, one of its fundamental components was reverence for human ancestors, especially royal ancestors. And fourth, man's relationship with great natural forces and supernatural phenomena was governed by reciprocity: each supernatural blessing required an appropriate sacrifice by the recipient.

Ironically, anthropologists have often associated most of these features with 'primitive' societies. Complex societies, such as chiefdoms and states, have often been assumed to have one of two kinds of religions – either monotheism or an elaborate pantheon of gods and goddesses, often in human form. These preconceptions are the result of our Greco-Roman bias and do not fit the religions of most prehispanic civilizations.

Natural and supernatural forces

The Zapotec had a concept of vital force that distinguished 'living' from 'nonliving' matter. They used the word *pèe* or

pi, a word which can be translated as 'breath', 'spirit' or 'wind', to designate this vital force. Anything lacking *pèe* was considered inanimate and could be manipulated by technology, such as the irrigation systems used for rainwater after it had reached the ground. However, the clouds from which rain came were conceived of as animate, and therefore had to be approached through religious ritual.

Anything with *pèe* – a river in flood, the moon, the foam on top of a cup of hot chocolate, or a bolt of lightning – could move, and thus was considered alive and sacred. All items with *pèe* were deserving of respect and could not simply be manipulated; they had to be addressed respectfully during ritual, and a reciprocal relationship established with them.

The Zapotec addressed items with *pèe* by invoking the life force within them. For example, they used the expression '*Pitào Cociyo*'¹ or 'Great Spirit [within] Lightning' to

petition Lightning to pierce the clouds, to send rain down to earth where it could be directly manipulated by humans; as long as the rain stayed up in the clouds, man could not utilize it for his own purposes. They used '*Pitào Xòo*' or 'Great Spirit [within] the Earthquake' when asking Earthquake to stop shaking the earth. In return for the granting of these requests, the Zapotec made appropriate offerings of their own blood, of incense, of food, of sacrificed animals and humans, and of non-perishable exotics such as jade, shell, obsidian and so forth.

Most deserving of respect were great universal forces, such as the lightning and earthquake mentioned above, and also fire, wind, hail and clouds (Fig. 7.2). In fact, clouds were regarded as the beings into which Zapotec ancestors – *penigòlazaa*, 'old people of the clouds' – had metamorphosed after death. Royal ancestors, in particular, were

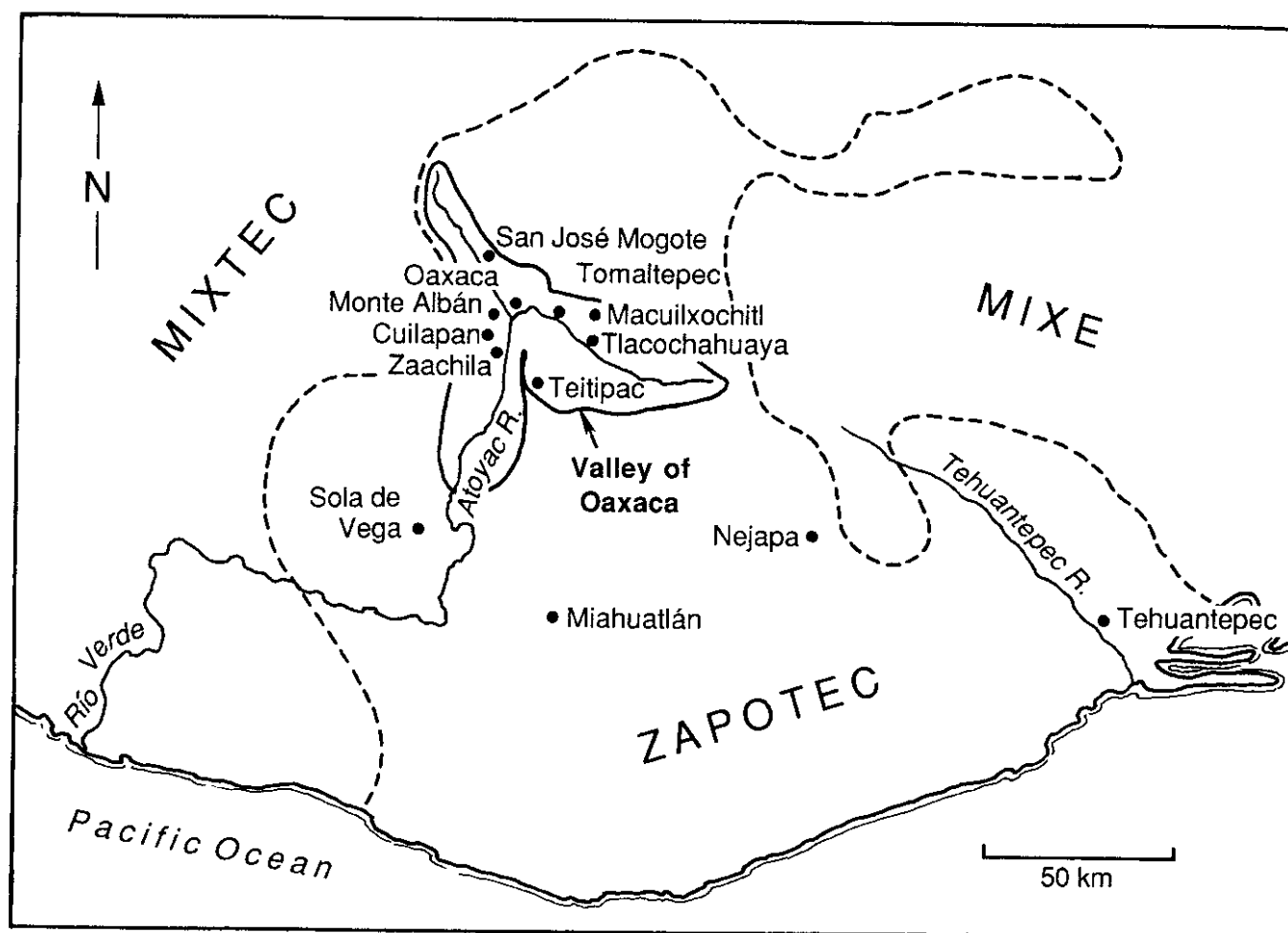


Fig. 7.1. The heartland of Zapotec civilization was the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico, which lies some 380 km southeast of Mexico City at an elevation of 1500 metres. By the time of the Spanish Conquest, however, Zapotec speakers had spread northeast into rugged mountains, and south and east to the Pacific Coast. On this map, which gives localities mentioned in the text, the irregular dashed line separates the Zapotec from speakers of Mixtec or Mixe languages.

thought to have the power to intercede with powerful supernaturals on behalf of their descendants on earth, but only if those earthly descendants made the appropriate offerings and petitions. Something was offered in anticipation of a request being met, and also in return for a concession. The kinds of offerings ranged from food and drink to one's own blood, a sacrificed quail, a turkey, a child or an adult human, depending on the request, the severity of one's need or the magnitude of one's gratitude. The smoke from burning incense was thought to rise upward until it eventually reached the clouds; so, too, did the smoke from a human heart burned in a charcoal brazier.

Just as the smoke from burning incense was a way of communicating with royal ancestors and supernatural beings, various narcotics were used by the Zapotec to communicate with the spirit world. One of these was *Datura* or *pinijchi-pitào* ('ghost of the great spirit'), with which the Spaniards said the Zapotec 'saw visions' (Marcus and

Flannery 1978: 73–4). Others included tobacco (*Nicotiana* sp.) and hallucinogenic mushrooms (*Psilocybe* sp.), the latter generally taken only by very experienced religious specialists because an overdose could be toxic.

As the transformation of deceased royalty into clouds demonstrates, the concept of metamorphosis from one life form to another was an important concept in Zapotec philosophy and religion. Partially metamorphosed figures are frequently seen in Oaxaca art (Fig. 7.3), and an example from our own excavations will be given below.

Finally, some rituals among the Zapotec were calendrically scheduled. Like other Mesoamerican peoples, the Zapotec had two calendars, one secular (365 days) and one ritual (260 days). The 260-day ritual calendar was called the *piye*, a term whose initial phoneme suggests that it had *pée* or vital force. Thus ritual time was alive, it moved, and its calculations were in the hands of religious specialists. The 260-day calendar was divided into four equal parts called *

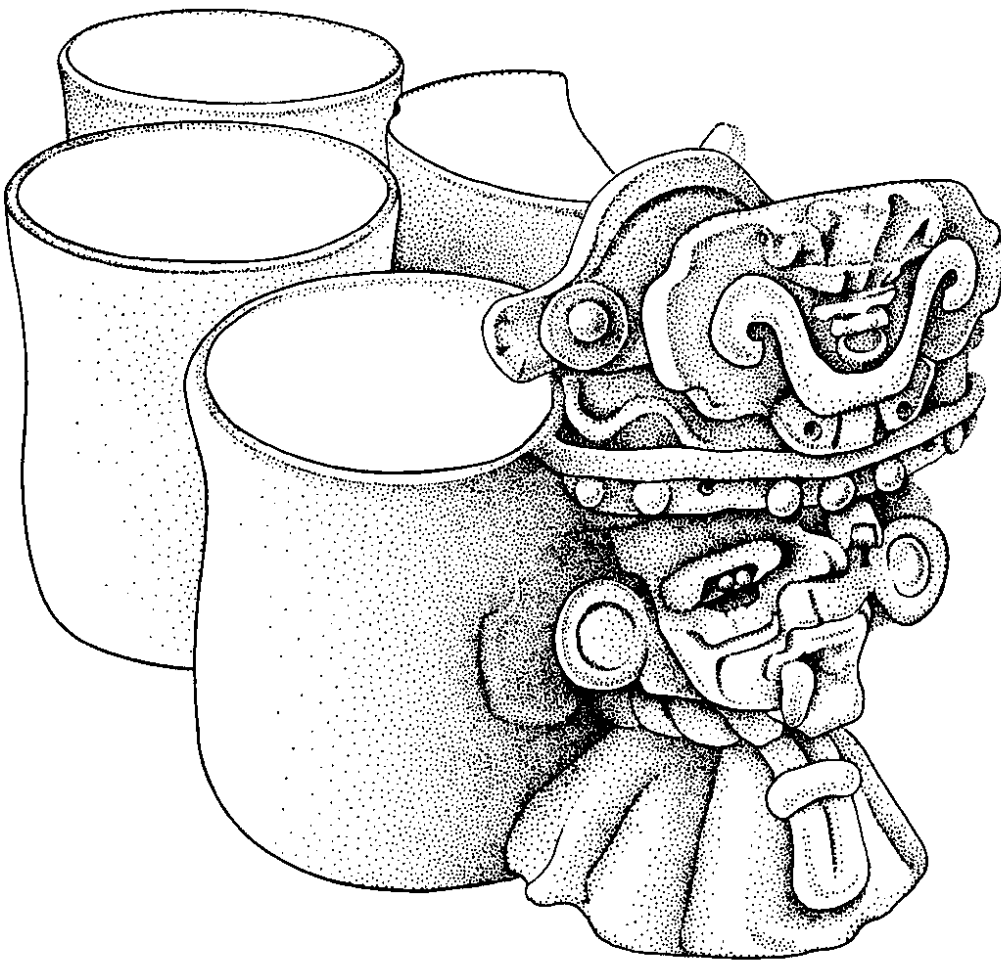


Fig. 7.2. Zapotec effigy vessel showing an anthropomorphic Cociyo, or Lightning, with 4 containers on his back. Ethnohistoric data suggest that these containers were for rain, wind, hail and clouds, the major elements associated with Lightning. Height of piece, 15 cm. (Drawn from a photo in Caso and Bernal 1952: Fig. 54.)

cociyos or 'lightnings', each 65 days long. Another name used for these 65-day periods was *pitào*, or 'great spirit'.

On a cosmological level, the Zapotec world was divided into four great quarters, each associated with a colour. The main axis of this division was the east-west path of the sun, the result being that many ancient maps have east at the top, and many temples face east or west.

Archaeologically recoverable features of Zapotec religion

Before beginning our search for ritual or religious data in Oaxaca prehistory, let us consider those features of Zapotec religion that might be archaeologically recoverable. One of the most obvious would be the standardized two-room temple known as *yoho pèe*, 'sacred house' or 'house of the vital force'. At the time of the Spanish Conquest, such temples were manned by full-time priests. To the less sacred outer room came persons who wished to make an offering; the actual sacrifice would be performed by full-time specialists in the more sacred inner room. No layman was allowed to enter the inner room, while the priests rarely left it (virtually 'living in it', according to ethnohistoric sources).

The Zapotec priesthood had a hierarchy of high priests (*uija-tào*), ordinary priests (*copa pitào*), lesser religious personnel, and young men educated to enter the priesthood (*bigaña*). One seventeenth-century source (Burgoa 1674) says that the high priest or *uija-tào* had as his chief function the consultation with the supernatural on important matters,

and then the transmitting of this information to his assistants and to others down the hierarchy. This high priest had the power to place himself into an ecstatic state (possibly with the aid of drugs), and he believed what he saw in his visions. The Zapotec ruler treated the high priest with great respect, principally because the latter had close contact with the supernatural and could see into the future. The ruler often turned to his high priest for advice and followed it diligently (Seler 1904: 248). Some of the high priests were, in fact, brothers or other relatives of the ruler.

Hierarchically below were other priests, also recruited from the nobility. At the lowest level were diviners (*colanij*), who probably were not always drawn from the nobility. These diviners usually interacted directly with the common people, helping them with individual decisions – whom to marry, when to marry, the naming of one's children, when to plant, etc. Such diviners took the decision-making out of the hands of the individual and left the decision up to 'fate' or 'fortune', whose will was determined by casting lots (often with maize kernels or beans) in groups of 2s, 3s, 4s, and so forth.

The ancient Zapotec distinguished between two kinds of blood: flowing blood (*tini*) and dried blood (*rini*). Flowing blood was preferred for a whole range of rituals, and it was collected on papers, feathers and other perishable items for inclusion in caches. While special priests sacrificed humans and animals, almost all Zapotec practised autosacrifice of small amounts of their own blood, using distinctive paraphernalia such as stingray spines, shark's teeth, obsidian lancets and leaf spines of maguey (*Agave* sp.) to perforate veins or skin. Some priests even let their fingernails grow long in order to use them as bloodletting instruments. When the act of bloodletting – removing blood from the fleshy parts of the body, especially the ears and tongue (Burgoa 1674) – was completed, the person would leave his bloodletting paraphernalia in a cache or in the temple itself. Since the blood itself was often caught on grass, feathers, papers placed in a basket, and other perishable materials, such offerings would be difficult to recover archaeologically. However, slips of bark paper similar to those used to catch drops of flowing blood have been found in the deposits of dry ritual caves (Moser 1983).

Many animals, including quail, turkeys, deer and dogs, were offered in sacrifice. Quail were considered especially appropriate for sacrifice because the Zapotec regarded them as 'clean' or 'pure' animals. That is because the Zapotec observed quail drinking from dew drops; even today, Zapotec who observe them doing so comment that quail 'will not drink dirty water'. In Oaxaca, the two quail most frequently encountered are the Montezuma quail (*Cyrtonyx montezumae*), which inhabits pine-oak forests, and the

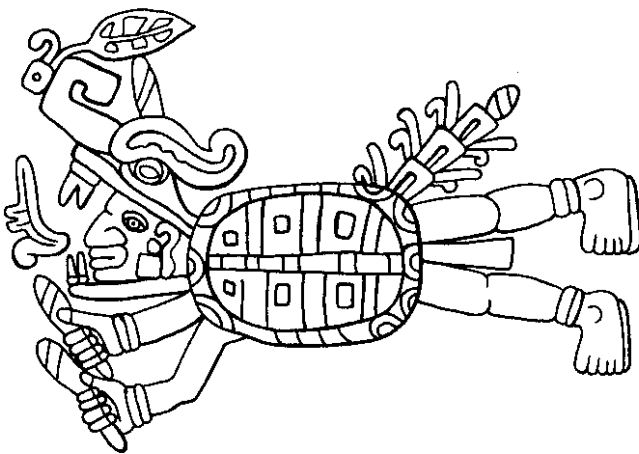


Fig. 7.3. Flying 'cloud person' modelled in stucco on the wall of a late prehistoric tomb from Zaachila, Oaxaca. Sixteenth-century Oaxaca peoples conceived of the clouds from which their ancestors had descended as flying turtles (Marcus 1983d: 195), which explains the turtle carapace on the flying figure.

common Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*), which inhabits the weedy borders of maize fields (Fig. 7.4).

Evidence for human sacrifice is also clear in the ethno-historic record. For example, sixteenth-century information indicates that infants, children and adults were sacrificed to Lightning, the most powerful supernatural depicted in Zapotec art. Slaves and captives taken in war were the most common adult sacrifices, with specially-trained priests cutting out their hearts with leaf-shaped flint or obsidian daggers while the victim was still alive. This was done so that the heart would still be beating, i.e. it would still possess *pèe* when offered to Lightning.

The Zapotec accompanied their rituals with the burning of incense (*yàla*), believing that the aromatic smoke rose to join with the clouds in the sky above – an effective way to address one's ancestors so that they could intercede on one's behalf. The resin of the copal tree (*Bursera* sp.), which is native to the Valley of Oaxaca and much of southern Mexico, was a preferred incense.

Given this brief discussion, it should be clear what some of the archaeologically preserved evidence for ancient Zapotec religious ritual might be. First, we might expect to find two-room temples, often oriented to the east–west axis of the sun. Second, we should look for the braziers in which offerings of incense (and sometimes human hearts) were burned. Third, we should look for flint or obsidian daggers of the type used in human sacrifice, and for the kinds of smaller tools used in ritual bloodletting – stingray spines, shark teeth, obsidian lancets and so on. Fourth, we should look for the skeletal remains of those animals regarded as appropriate for sacrifice, such as quail, dogs, turkeys, deer and others. Fifth, we should look for the use of ritual drugs such as *Datura*, *Psilocybe*, or even *Nicotiana*, which might

appear among the archaeological plant remains. Sixth, we should look for evidence of the 260-day *piye* or ritual calendar. Seventh, we should look for depictions of Lightning, Earthquake, and other supernatural beings in the art of the ancient Zapotec. Finally, we should look for evidence of ancestor worship and the metamorphosis of ancestors into *penigòlazaa* or 'cloud people'. If any or all of these features are present, it may be possible to reconstruct parts of ancient Zapotec religion by use of the Direct Historical Approach.

Obviously, some of the elements on this list are likely to be harder to find than others. There are also major unanswered questions about their relationships. When the Spaniards arrived, all these features were part of an impressive complex of religious practices engaged in by hundreds of thousands of Indians sharing a common language and political system. Did all the features of this complex appear at once, or did they appear one by one during the long archaeological record in Oaxaca? If the latter were the case, in what order did the features appear, and does that order tell us something about the course of Zapotec cultural evolution? Finally, does the archaeological record give us any additional information, not mentioned by the Spanish chroniclers of the sixteenth century? In the remainder of this paper, we look back over three millennia of Oaxaca prehistory in an attempt to answer those questions.

Early evidence of Zapotec ritual

As we look back over Oaxaca's archaeological record, we can see that the various elements of Zapotec religion did *not* all appear simultaneously. Some were in evidence almost as soon as permanent village life began, while others did not appear until after the state had formed. Moreover, even those elements which appeared early did not remain static over time; they were reworked and reinterpreted as ideologies changed with each stage of cultural evolution.

One of the first practices for which we have indirect evidence is the ritual use of narcotics. At least one of Oaxaca's early villages has a stratigraphic sequence of small public buildings which may be analogous to the 'men's houses' used by egalitarian village societies elsewhere (Flannery and Marcus 1990: 23–9). A significant feature of such buildings was a small, centrally placed circular pit filled with finely powdered lime (Flannery and Marcus 1990: fig. 2.3). This lime might have been stored for ritual purposes, such as mixing with narcotics like tobacco. The use of tobacco was widespread among the Zapotec, and is mentioned in sixteenth-century *relaciones* from Macuixochitl, Miahuatlán, Nejapa and other places in Oaxaca (Paso y Troncoso 1905). Unfortunately, actual

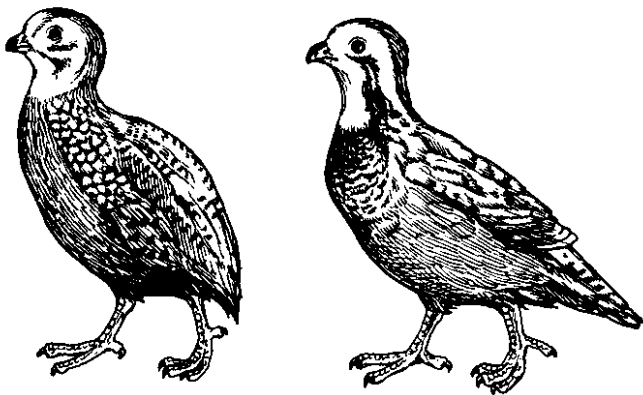


Fig. 7.4. The two species of quail most often sacrificed in Zapotec temples. Left, the Montezuma quail (*Cyrtonyx montezumae*). Right, the common Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*). Both birds are 20–25 cm in total length.

macrofossils of *Nicotiana* have not yet been found in archaeological contexts.

Prismatic obsidian blades of the type used for ritual bloodletting appear in the archaeological record by 1150 BC, but owing to the many purposes to which these tools could be put, they cannot be used as proof of bloodletting. A better case can be made for the stingray spines which appear between 1000 and 850 BC (Fig. 7.5a). In a previous contextual analysis of ritual paraphernalia, Flannery (1976) showed that during this period, autosacrifice had begun to reflect emerging hereditary inequality: relatively high status individuals used genuine stingray spines, lower status

individuals used imitation stingray spines whittled from deer bone, and very high status elites of the Mexican Gulf Coast used imitation stingray spines carved from jade (Flannery 1976: fig. 11.7). Now we can add the fact that between 700 and 500 BC, high status individuals in both Oaxaca and the Valley of Morelos used imitation stingray spines chipped from large obsidian blades (see Fig. 7.5b and Parry 1987: 125–31).

It is also during the period 1150–850 BC that lightning first appeared in Oaxaca art. Marcus (1989) has suggested that certain designs on the pottery of this period reflect a dichotomy between sky and earth, with sky represented by

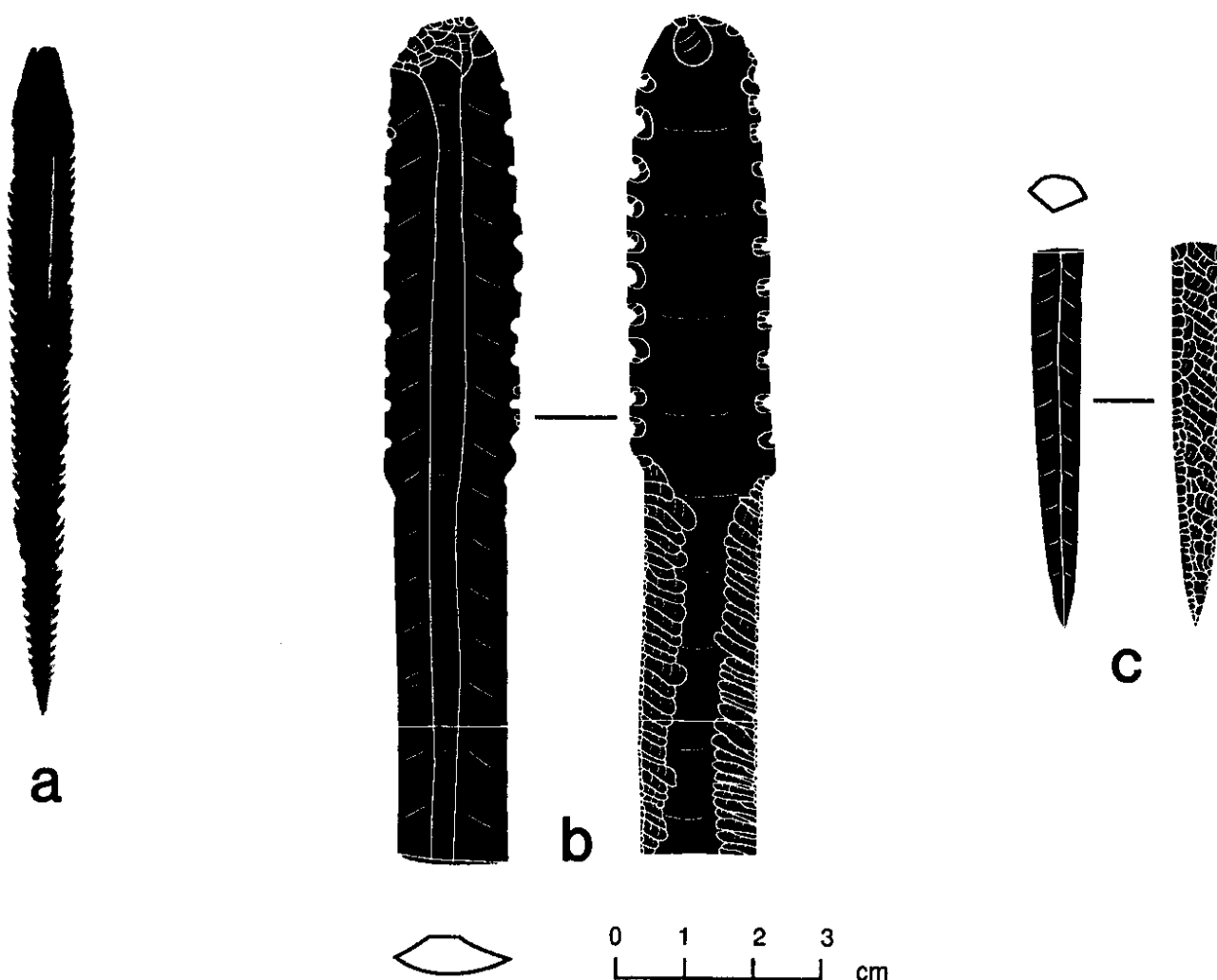


Fig. 7.5. Artefacts used in ritual bloodletting (autosacrifice). a, spine from the tail of a stingray (family *Dasyatidae*), House 17, San José Mogote (900–850 BC). An attempt has been made to drill a hole in the base, presumably so that it could be worn around the owner's neck. b, basal half of a large, broken, imitation stingray spine made from an obsidian blade, Structure 28 patio, San José Mogote (600–500 BC). c, tip of an obsidian bloodletting lancet (600–500 BC). (b, c redrawn from Parry 1987: fig. 52).

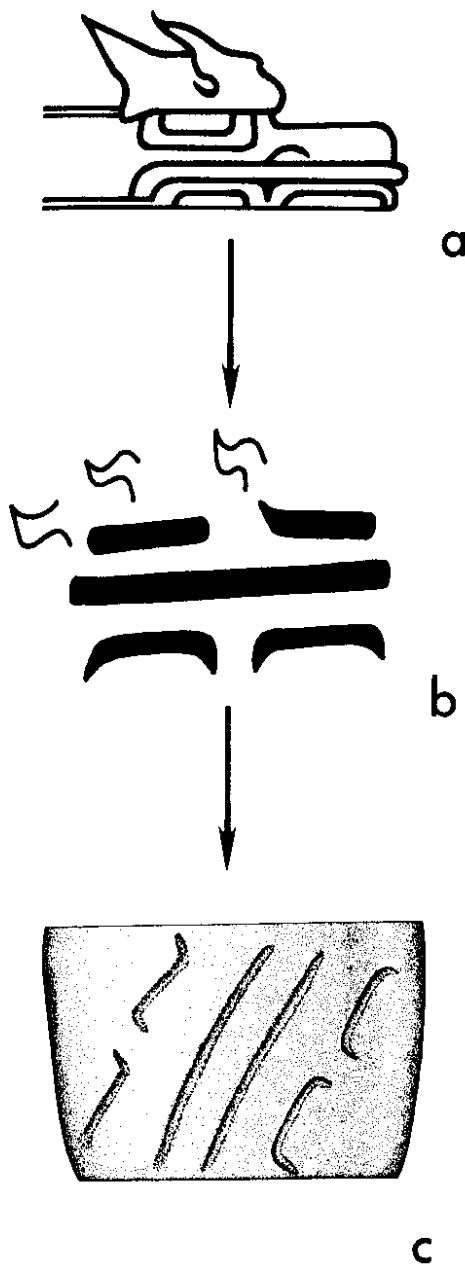


Fig. 7.6. Representations of the 'fire-serpent' or 'sky-dragon' in the art of 1150–850 BC. a shows a naturalistic representation found on pottery at sites near Mexico City. b shows an abstract version carved on pottery vessels in Oaxaca, where the serpent's gums become inverted Us and his eyebrow flames become simple curving lines. c shows a burial vessel from Oaxaca with an even more abstract version of b.

lightning (the 'fire serpent' or 'sky dragon') and earth represented by the 'were jaguar' or 'earth monster'. As shown in Fig. 7.6, lightning could be represented as a realistic serpent with flames rising from his eyebrows, or by a stylized design where U-elements represent the serpent's gums and sine curves represent his eyebrow flames. While certain artistic representations of this supernatural force were specific to Oaxaca, they were apparently only local versions of what seems to have been a pan-Mesoamerican motif (Marcus 1989). It would therefore not be accurate to refer to these early motifs as representing a specifically 'Zapotec' deity.

Another ritual behaviour of this period was the use of small, handmade pottery figurines to create ritual scenes. Because some of these figurines were posed in the most common burial position of the period, we have argued elsewhere that they may depict deceased ancestors (Flannery and Marcus 1976a). Even today, when such figurines are found by the Zapotec of Tehuantepec, they are referred to as *penigòlaza*, 'old people of the clouds' (Marcus and Flannery 1978: 55; Marcus 1983b: 347). Assuming that we have interpreted those figurines correctly, they would constitute our first evidence for the important role played by the ancestors in Zapotec religion.

Several new elements appeared between 700 and 500 BC, when the archaeological site of San José Mogote had become the largest settlement in the Valley of Oaxaca. By that time, San José Mogote was the ceremonial centre for a network of some 18–20 villages in the northern part of the valley, serving an estimated 1,300–1,400 persons. A carved stone monument located between two public buildings on the site's most prominent pyramidal mound gives us our oldest depiction of a human sacrificial victim, possibly a captive taken in raiding (Fig. 7.7). The victim is shown naked but with a complex scroll covering his chest, possibly depicting blood issuing from an open wound like that made for removal of the heart during sacrifice. Between his feet are two hieroglyphs which give the day '1 Earthquake' in the Zapotec *piye* or 260-day ritual calendar (Marcus 1976). While this may be the personal name of the victim (taken from the date of his birth), its significance here is that it shows that by this period the ritual calendar was already in existence.

The rise of the Zapotec state

A major turning point in Zapotec prehistory was the founding of Monte Albán, the fortified mountain-top city which, for roughly a millennium, was the capital of the Zapotec state (Blanton 1978). While Monte Albán was founded some time around 500 BC, it is not until its second



Fig. 7.7. Top view and eastern edge of Monument 3 at San José Mogote, a carved stone which depicts a sacrificed individual with the date (or personal name) '1 Earthquake' between his feet. A ribbon of blood runs east from the complex scroll design on his chest and ends in two stylized drops which run down the edge of the stone.

archaeological period, Monte Albán II (200 BC–AD 100) that we see overwhelming evidence for the diagnostic characteristics of an archaic state.

During Monte Albán II, Monte Albán was a city of 416 hectares, with an estimated population of 10,650–19,000 persons. Below it was a hierarchy of settlements with at least four tiers: secondary administrative centres of up to 70 hectares, tertiary centres of 2–8 hectares, and more than 400 small farming villages with no apparent administrative functions.

At the top two tiers of this hierarchy were rulers who lived not merely in elite residences, but in actual palaces whose construction required *corvée* labour. At the top three tiers of the hierarchy there were standardized, two-room temples which fit the description of the Zapotec *yoho pèe*, or ‘house of the vital force’, seen at the time of the Spanish Conquest. Each consisted of a more sacred inner room, to which we presume only the priests had access, and a less sacred outer room, to which we presume other worshippers could come. Although both rooms had doorways flanked by columns (Fig. 7.8), the inner room had a narrower doorway and was reached only after a step up of 20–30 centimetres above the level of the outer room. At its peak, Monte Albán’s Main Plaza may have had twenty such temples; San José Mogote, a secondary centre during Period II, had ten; and Tomaltepec, perhaps a tertiary centre, had a single temple.

Other archaeological manifestations of the Zapotec state were ball courts (more than one at the capital, usually only one at secondary centres); royal tombs with ceramic effigies of apotheosized royal ancestors at both the capital and secondary centres; and monuments at the capital commemorating military conquests. These monuments included a list of more than forty places evidently conquered by Monte Albán between 200 BC and AD 100 (Marcus 1980, 1983c: 106–8; 1988). Monte Albán – only one of several communities located on defensible hilltops during this period – had 3 kilometres of defensive walls built along the gentler and more easily climbed slopes of the mountain. In other words, by c. 200 BC we are dealing with an urban, expansionist, militaristic state with royal families living in palaces, priests directing a state religion in standardized temples, and royal ancestor worship. By now the depictions of Lightning in Zapotec art were no longer generalized ‘fire-serpents’ or ‘sky-dragons’, but recognizable depictions of the powerful supernatural *Cociyo* (Fig. 7.9).

More temples have been excavated at Monte Albán than at any other Oaxaca site, but much of this excavation was carried out in the 1930s and 1940s and has never been published in detail. There is evidence that some temples had important offerings under their floors or in their foundations, perhaps left during ‘rituals of sanctification’ (Rappaport

1971, 1979) which converted secular ground into sacred ground. For example, in Mound ‘g’ – the pyramidal platform for a temple of such limited accessibility that it may have been used only by the Zapotec royal family – archaeologists found two skeletons, probably both female, associated with a mother-of-pearl mosaic, two necklaces of greenstone and

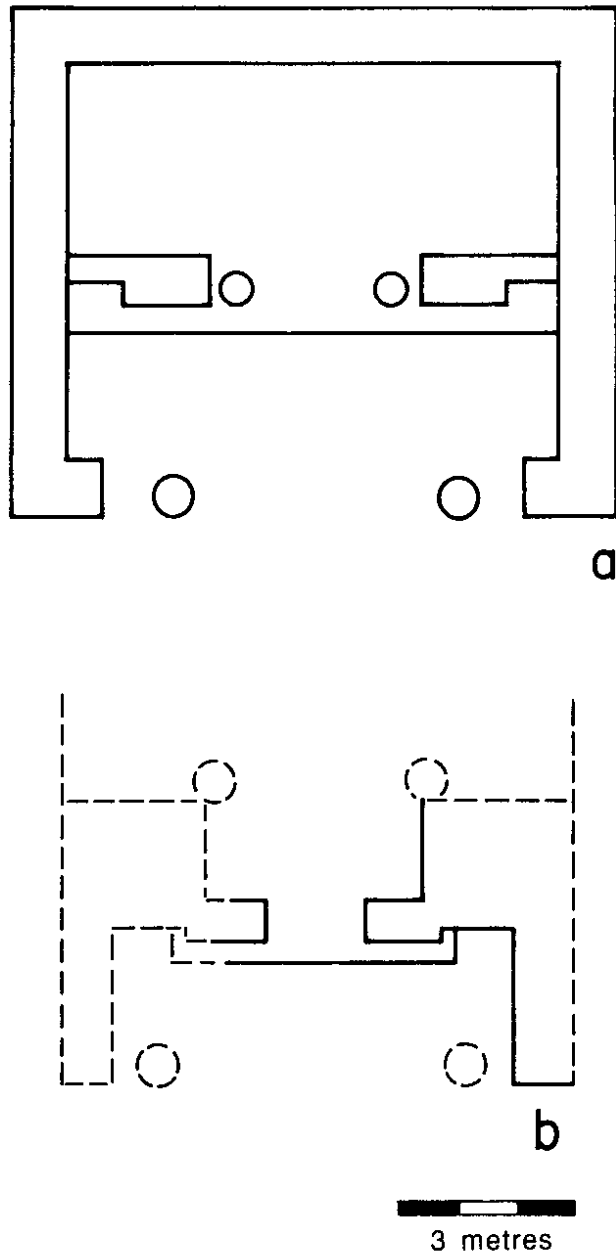


Fig. 7.8. Ground plans of Zapotec temples, with circles representing columns. a, temple found in Mound X, Monte Albán (Caso 1935). b, temple found in Mound I-bis at Cuilapan (Bernal 1958). (Redrawn from Marcus 1978: fig. 2.)

shell, and six pottery vessels. At a depth of 9.5 metres inside Building I – the platform for a more accessible temple in the Main Plaza – was a Monte Albán II offering inside a stone masonry ‘offering box’ typical of Zapotec temples. This

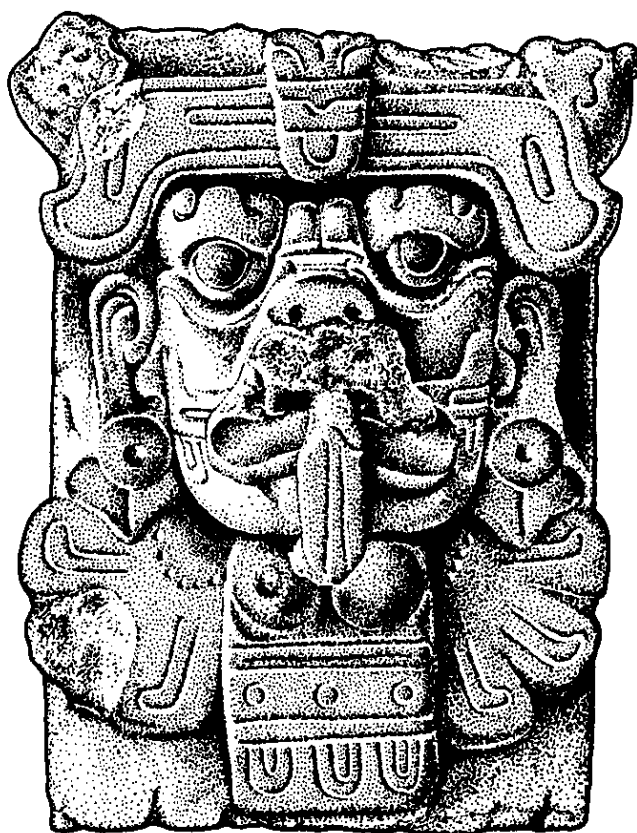


Fig. 7.9. By Period I of Monte Albán, according to Caso and Bernal (1952: 24), there were representations of Lightning which are recognizable as the supernatural Cociyo of Zapotec ethnohistory. This battered fragment of a larger vessel from the Valley of Oaxaca shows an anthropomorphic figure with the typical buccal mask, serpent tongue, flat nose and gaping mouth of Cociyo; note also the heavy, serrated eyebrows, which probably evolved from the flame eyebrows of the earlier ‘fire serpent’. At this early date (perhaps 300 BC), depictions of Cociyo did not yet have the protruding fangs of later versions like those shown in fig. 7.16. (Drawn by John Klausmeyer, from an illustration by Abel Mendoza (Caso and Bernal 1952: fig. 26).)

offering included a necklace of marine shell, flower-shaped jade ear ornaments, two mosaic masks (one of jade and turquoise, the other of iron pyrite and shell), and a bone carved in the shape of a chess pawn (Flannery 1983: 103–4). Below and around the offering box were the remains of sacrificed birds, unfortunately never identified. It would be interesting to know if they included quail, doves, macaws or turkeys.

Even the temples at secondary centres, such as Cuilapan (Bernal 1958) and San José Mogote (see below) had important subfloor offerings. For example, a temple in Mound I-bis at Cuilapan (Fig. 7.8b), excavated by Saville in 1902, had a dedicatory offering which included an apparent sacrificed child covered with hematite pigment and accompanied by 17 jade figurines, 400 jade beads, 35 marine shells, 2 pottery ear ornaments, and disintegrated mosaics of shell, obsidian and hematite (Bernal 1958: 25). Interestingly enough, such offerings are not described by the sixteenth-century Spaniards, who saw the final temple at each community but were not present when the foundations were laid and the dedicatory offerings deposited.

Temples at San José Mogote

Some of the details of Zapotec ritual can be inferred from a sequence of Monte Albán II temples on Mound 1 at San José Mogote. This series of three stratigraphically superimposed buildings – Structures 36, 35, and 13 – was excavated by Marcus during two field seasons, 1974 and 1980.

The sequence of temples appears in Fig. 7.10. Structure 36, the oldest, dates to the very beginnings of Monte Albán II (200 BC–150 BC?). It measured roughly 11 m × 11 m and was slightly T-shaped, the inner room being smaller than the outer. Interestingly enough, both columns flanking the inner doorway and all four columns flanking the outer doorway were tree trunks of baldcypress (*Taxodium* sp.), covered first with a layer of small stones and then white stucco. So hardy is this wood that much of it was still preserved in identifiable form in the column bases below the floor. (Unfortunately *Taxodium* is not much help for radiocarbon dating, since individual trees can live 1000 years.)

Other details of Structure 36 included a niche in the south wall of the outer room, in which the priests may have stored an incense burner – or one of those Zapotec effigy vessels the Spaniards (drawing on their European background) called ‘idols’ or ‘demons’. The floor of the temple was burned or stained grey with smoke wherever incense burners had been allowed to sit for any length of time, and the circular stains from this activity allowed us to see which areas had been favoured locations for burning copal. Especially common were sooty circles in the centres of the inner and outer rooms,

signs of burning along the back wall of the inner room, and stains atop the step between the outer and inner rooms. The white-plastered interior walls of the temple bore geometric designs in polychrome paint like those seen on certain stuccoed ceramics of Monte Albán II (see Caso, Bernal and Acosta 1967: Lám. III–IV).

Structure 35, built over the deliberately razed and levelled remains of Structure 36, dated to the middle of Monte Albán II (c. 50 BC?). It was larger than Structure 36 (measuring roughly 12 m × 13.5 m) and also slightly T-shaped like its predecessor. In the rubble layer between the two buildings we recovered occasional bird bones, including the remains of a Montezuma quail which might have been sacrificed in the earlier temple. Structure 35 was the best preserved of the temples on this spot and will be described in detail below. Its columns – one on either side of the inner and outer doorways – were made from large stones stacked one above the other and surrounded by small, stony rubble covered over with

white stucco. Evidently these rubble columns, also characteristic of later Zapotec temples, had now replaced tree trunks.

Finally, above the deliberately razed and levelled remains of Structure 35, sat Structure 13. This temple dated to the end of Monte Albán II (AD 100–200?). Though poorly preserved, it seems to have measured about 15 m × 8 m and to have been rectangular rather than T-shaped. Its columns – two flanking the inner doorway and four flanking the outer doorway – were of rubble with a core of larger stones, like those of Structure 35. One of the building's most distinctive features was a basin 75 cm in diameter and 22 cm deep, built into the floor near the southeast corner of the inner room. There were no signs of burning in this basin; on the basis of ethnohistoric analogy, it may have served either (1) to hold water for washing the artefacts of sacrifice, or (2) to receive blood from some type of sacrifice.

Structure 35

Like Structure 36 below it, Structure 35 had circular stains on its floor in certain places where incense burners had been fuelled with charcoal. Fig. 7.11 shows an artist's conception of the temple, with incense burners set in the most frequently burned or stained areas. (The artist's placement of those *incensarios* is only designed to indicate the most favoured locations, since we doubt that so many burners would all be in use at one time. Indeed, it is possible that certain locations were appropriate for some rituals and not for others.)

While most Zapotec temples that we have excavated appear to have been swept periodically (with the debris dumped in extraordinarily large cylindrical or bottle-shaped trash pits in the talus slope behind them), in the case of Structure 35 we were lucky enough to find some artefacts still on the floor. All those artefacts, as shown in Fig. 7.12, were in the extreme southern part of the smoky, windowless inner room, and especially its southwest corner – perhaps an area where the shadows were deepest, and the final sweeping was less thorough. The artefacts – all of obsidian – included two broken, leaf-shaped bifacial daggers of the type usually called 'sacrificial knives', the tip of a bifacial lancet, forty-two prismatic blades and five flakes (Fig. 7.13). While the lancet and prismatic blades are artefacts usually associated with autosacrifice (ritual bloodletting) by priests, the bifacial daggers are of the type shown in scenes of human sacrifice. This collection of tools, evidently overlooked when the floor was swept for the last time, probably represents only a tiny fraction of what was used during the lifetime of the temple.

The most spectacular artefacts of Structure 35, however, were not found on the floor or in nearby trash pits. They lay

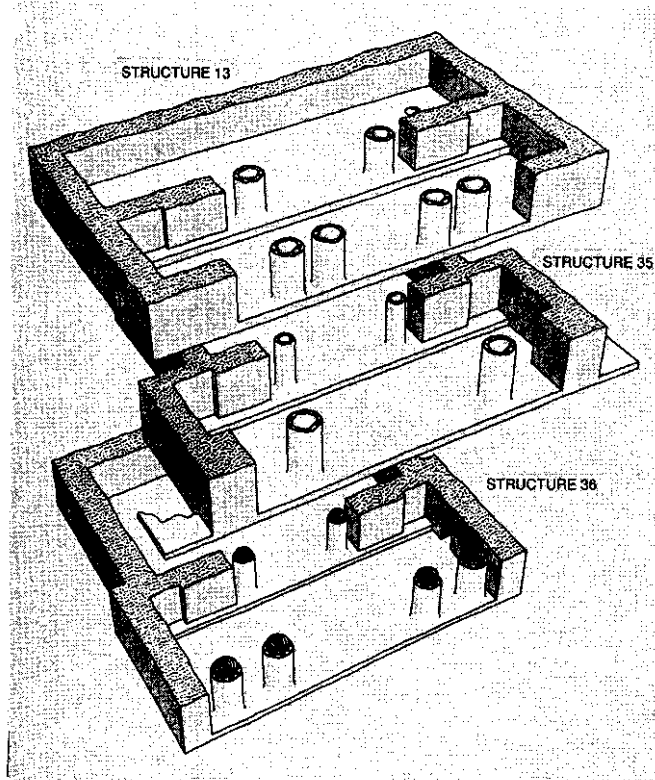


Fig. 7.10. Reconstruction drawings of superimposed Monte Albán II temples on Mound I, San José Mogote. All temples face west. The artist has preserved the actual position of each building above or below the others, while exaggerating the vertical separation slightly so that the layout of the lower temples can be seen clearly. (Drawing by D. West Reynolds.)

in the offering boxes beneath the floor, where they had been left following 'rituals of sanctification' at the dedication of the temple.

There were five offering boxes below Structure 35. Two of these – Features 92 and 93 – lay below the northern and southern halves of the outer room. No artefacts were discovered in either, but this may only mean that their contents were perishable. Feature 93 contained two bones of quail, including *Cyrtonyx montezumae*.

Under the northern half of the inner room were two stone masonry offering boxes, Features 94 and 95, arranged in the form of a T (Fig. 7.14). Feature 95, the larger, contained no artefacts. Feature 94, the smaller, contained two jade statues, two jade beads and several small fragments which could have been by-products of jade-working.² All objects lay in a dense vermillion powder which appeared to be hematite or

ochre. The larger of the two statues was 49 cm tall, while the smaller measured around 15 cm (Fig. 7.15).

The larger statue stands stiffly erect, arms held rigidly at his sides, his feet ending in flat soles with no delineation of toes. He has the typical slab-shaped ears common in Monte Albán II and the lobes are pierced, perhaps for perishable ornaments which have since disintegrated. The top of his head has a drilled hollow which could have held the base of a perishable headdress. This allowance for ear and head ornaments, combined with the fact that the figure is clearly a nude male, raises the possibility that he represents a sacrificed noble carved in jade.

The smaller figure also stands erect and has its earlobes drilled to receive ornaments; its neck is drilled through from side to side, possibly so that the figure could be worn as a pendant. Its hairdo, which features two isolated locks on

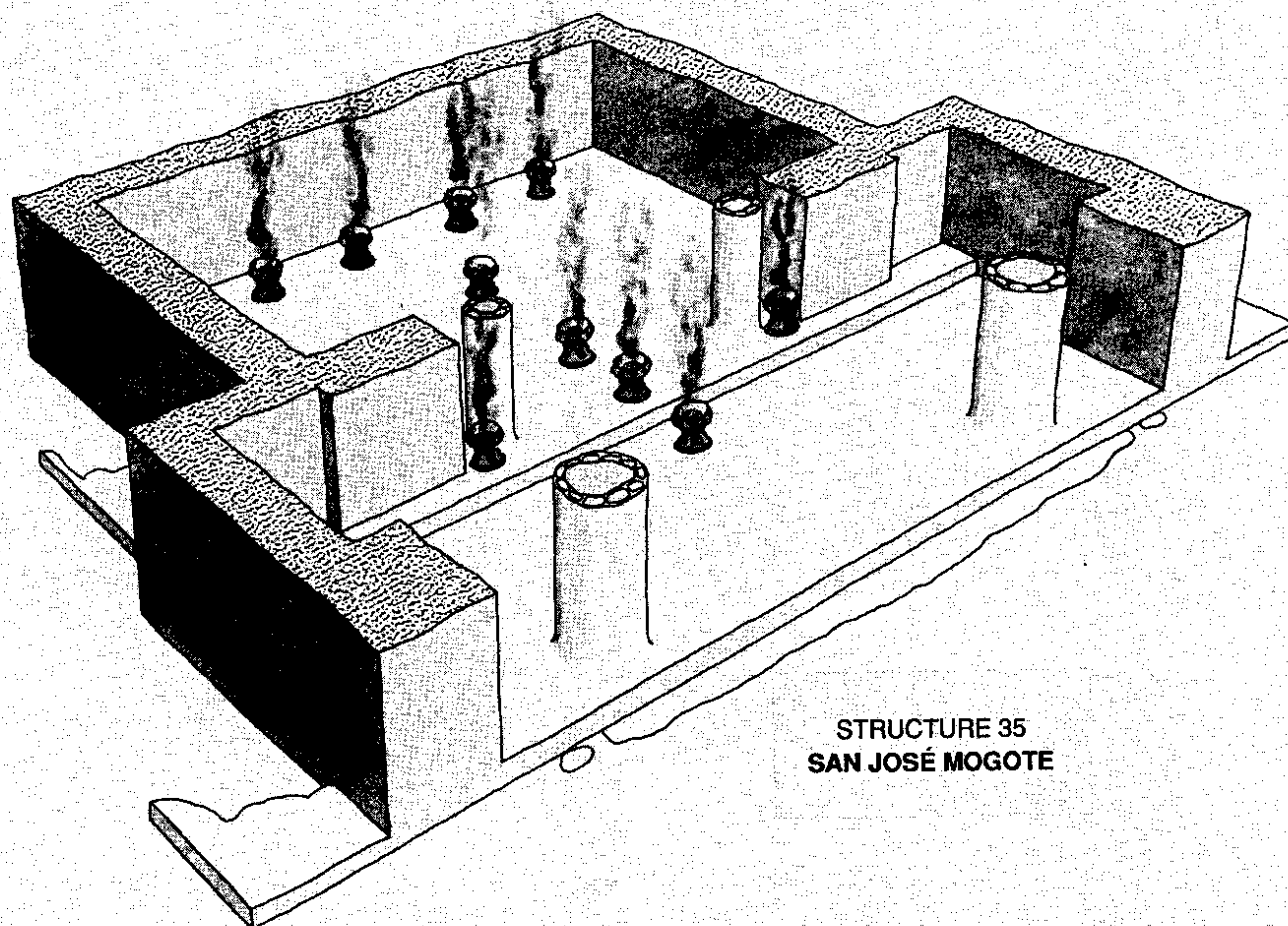


Fig. 7.11. Artist's reconstruction of Structure 35 at San José Mogote, a Monte Albán II temple. Incense burners are shown on those parts of the floor which displayed the highest frequency of repeated burning and soot-staining. (Drawing by D. West Reynolds.)

each side of the head, resembles that of the sexually-mutilated prisoner called 'Danzante 12', a carved stone monument from Monte Albán (Caso 1965: fig. 3). Although no sex organs are depicted on the smaller statue, the figure appears to be a male. We cannot claim to understand the full meaning of the Feature 94 offering, but it certainly involved many hours of invested craftsmanship. Perhaps these two figures were intended to 'stand in' for a pair of sacrificed elite males. If so, their semiprecious raw material gave them one advantage over human victims: they would never decay in the ground.

Under the south half of the inner room of Structure 35 was Feature 96, an offering box made of adobes rather than stone. This more complex offering consisted of seven ceramic pieces arranged in the form of a scene, with each piece held in place by the earthen fill of the box. An artist's reconstruction of the scene is shown in Fig. 7.16.

At the centre of the scene was a miniature tomb whose walls were made of adobes set on edge, and whose roof was a slab of volcanic tuff. Inside this miniature tomb was an open bowl, and inside the bowl was an effigy vessel of the type known colloquially to Oaxaca specialists as an *acompañante* because of its frequent occurrence in tombs.³

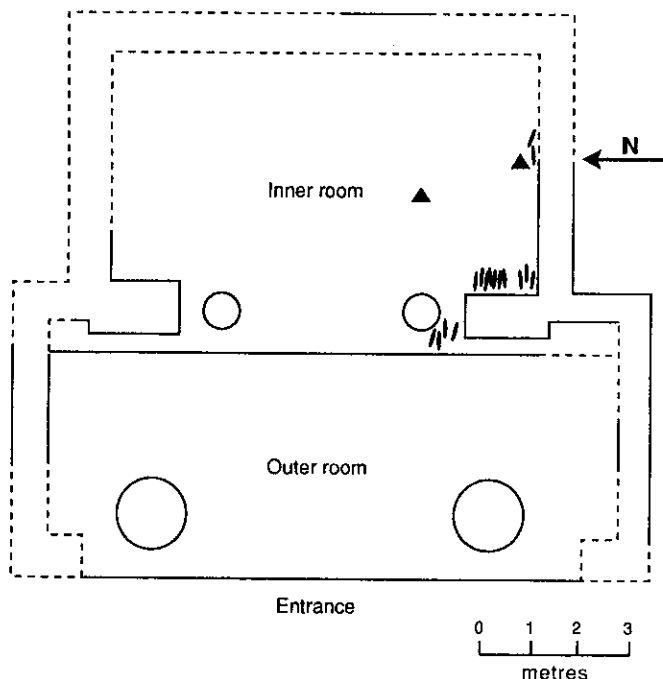


Fig. 7.12. Plan of Structure 35 temple, with the locations of obsidian artefacts on the floor shown by symbols. The black triangles are broken bifacial daggers, while the short black dashes schematically represent concentrations of obsidian blades. (Redrawn from Parry 1987: fig. 49.)

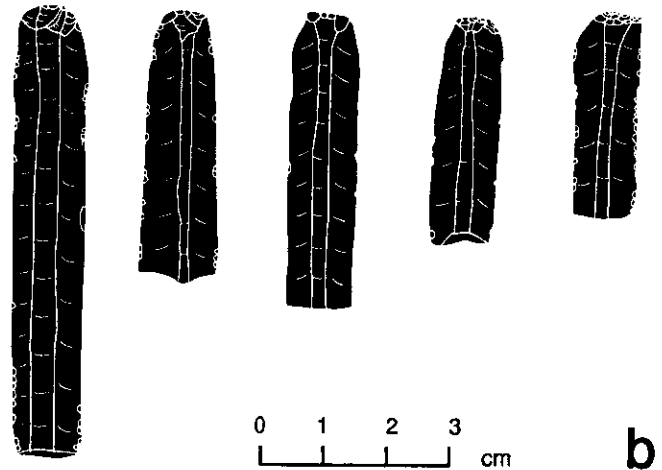
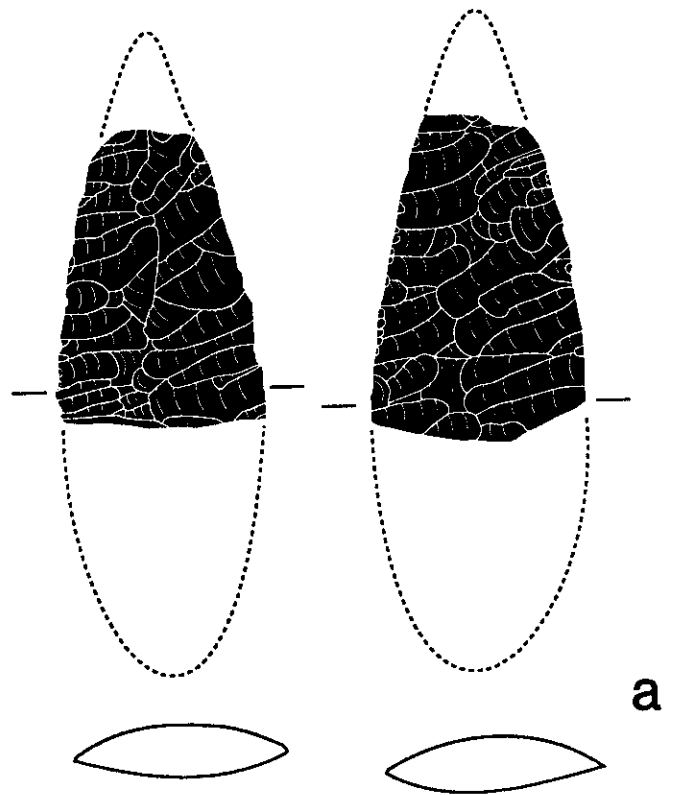


Fig. 7.13. A sample of obsidian artefacts found on the floor of Structure 35 (see fig. 7.12). a, fragments of broken bifacial daggers. b, examples of prismatic obsidian blades. The dagger blades in a would originally have been hafted. (Redrawn from Parry 1987: figs. 50, 51.)

Resting against the north side of the open bowl was the complete skeleton of a sacrificed Bobwhite quail (*Colinus virginianus*). Immediately to the south of the volcanic tuff slab was a pair of deer antlers, like those used by the Zapotec to play the indigenous turtle shell drum.

The *acompañante* is a human figure, identified as a member of the hereditary nobility by his large, spool-shaped ear ornaments and a necklace which probably represents jade beads. He kneels with his arms folded across his chest – an arm position seen in Oaxaca burials for thousands of years – and has dry red pigment on his face and arms. Both the red pigment and the arm position suggest that he may represent a buried noble of some kind, with the bowl serving as the floor of his tomb and the stone slab as its roof.

Lying full length on the roof slab of the miniature tomb is a flying human figure with a long cape flowing behind him. He wears a facial mask depicting *Cociyo* or Lightning, his feet are in sandals, and his anklets bear 'dog-collar' spikes of the type frequently seen on Zapotec incense burners. In his

right hand he holds a wooden stick, and in his left he holds a bifid serpent tongue whose base is so long that it wraps around his wrist. There are several reasons why these objects may symbolize the relationship between lightning, rain and agriculture. First of all, the Zapotec words for 'young maize' and 'serpent' are homonyms (*zee* or *ziy*), with one frequently standing in for the other. What we may see here is a figure masked as Lightning, carrying an agricultural dibble stick in one hand and the tongue of a serpent (metaphoric of newly-sprouted maize) in the other.

The symbolism of *Cociyo* is reinforced by the four ceramic effigies who sit in a row behind the flying figure, witnessing the scene. Each figure is shown as a kneeling woman with a grotesque *Cociyo* mask and a set of ear ornaments which vary from figure to figure. Almost

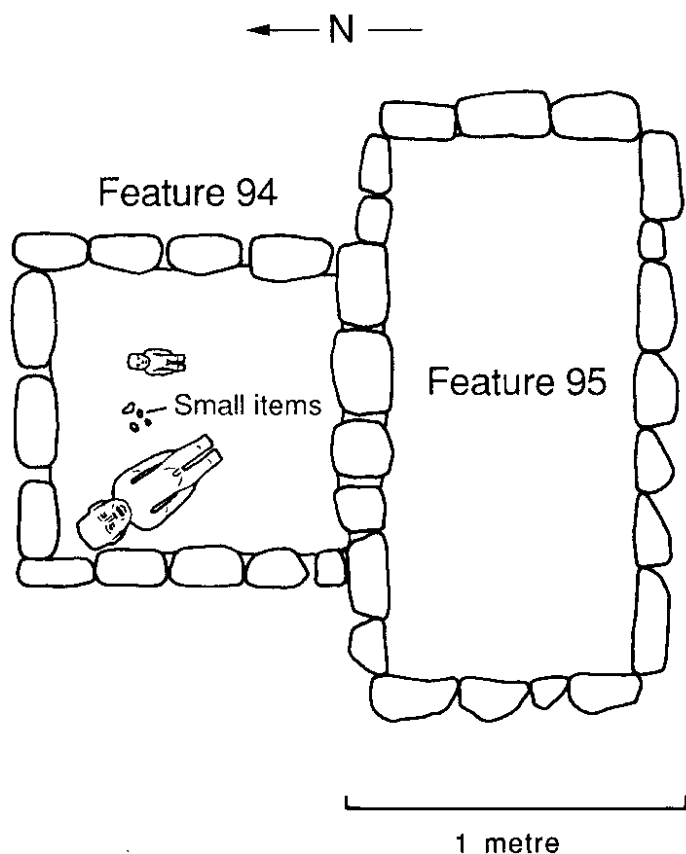


Figure 7.14. Features 94 and 95, two stone masonry offering boxes found below the floor of the Structure 35 temple. Feature 94 contained the two jade statues shown in fig. 7.15.



Figure 7.15. Two jade statues from Feature 94, San José Mogote. Height of larger figure, 49 cm.

certainly these women – each of whose heads is a hollow receptacle – represent clouds, rain, hail and wind, the four elements which we already saw accompanying Cociyo in Fig. 7.2.

What this scene may depict is the metamorphosis of a deceased Zapotec lord into a ‘cloud person’ or flying figure who is now in contact with Lightning. The flying figure could be a royal ancestor of the kneeling man in the miniature tomb or, just as likely, he may represent the partial metamorphosis of that very same buried noble, caught by the sculptor at a stage where his body is still that of a human, but his face is Cociyo’s and he now can fly. It is frustrating indeed to look at this scene and realize that there must be much more information contained in it, even more than the ethnohistoric documents can help us decipher.

Before leaving Feature 96, we should point out that scenes of this type were evidently not rare at other Zapotec archaeological sites. We have seen numerous pieces, which also appear to have been part of arranged scenes, in museums and

private collections of Zapotec art. Unfortunately, because they were found by looters rather than professional archaeologists, the pieces have been divided among different collections and their relationship destroyed, so that one can only guess what the original scene looked like.

Summary and conclusions

Many of the ethnographically known elements of Zapotec ritual and religion can be found in the archaeological record, some as far back as the origins of village life. At this early stage, however, many of those elements appear as generalized features or ritual artefacts shared with several other Mesoamerican ethnic groups. Not until Monte Albán II (200 BC–AD 100), when the state had formed, do we finally see all those elements come together as a ‘package’ that resembles sixteenth-century Spanish descriptions of Zapotec religion. Clearly, therefore, what the Spaniards were describing was *Zapotec state religion*; we know much less about the household ritual conducted by commoners.

As early as 1350 BC, public buildings had storage pits for powdered lime that may have been used with narcotics or hallucinogens. By 1000 BC we see possible depictions in art of lightning and earthquake, and ritual scenes composed of small solid figurines that may represent ancestors. Stingray spines for ritual bloodletting were also present by that time, and between 700 and 500 BC, elite individuals were using obsidian artefacts chipped to resemble such spines. By 500 BC, we also have evidence for human sacrifice and the 260 day ritual calendar, two additional elements of Zapotec ritual.

A new plateau was reached by 200 BC, when standardized two-room temples became widespread at major sites. Those buildings match our sixteenth-century descriptions of temples in whose inner rooms the *bigaña*, or Zapotec priests, actually resided. The *bigaña* are described as letting their own blood with prismatic obsidian blades, and using flint or obsidian daggers to sacrifice slaves and war captives. They are also said to have sacrificed quail and turkeys, and to have burned great quantities of incense. Evidence for all these activities has been archaeologically recovered at temples like Structure 35 at San José Mogote. It is accompanied by the disappearance of many of the elements of pre-state religion, such as small solid figurines and depictions of the ‘fire-serpent’ and ‘were-jaguar’.

What the Spaniards did not tell us – presumably because it took place before their arrival – is that the Zapotec had turned secular ground into sacred ground by placing valuable, labour-intensive offerings in the foundations of their temples. It remained for archaeologists to discover this. The DHA therefore, lies at the interface between

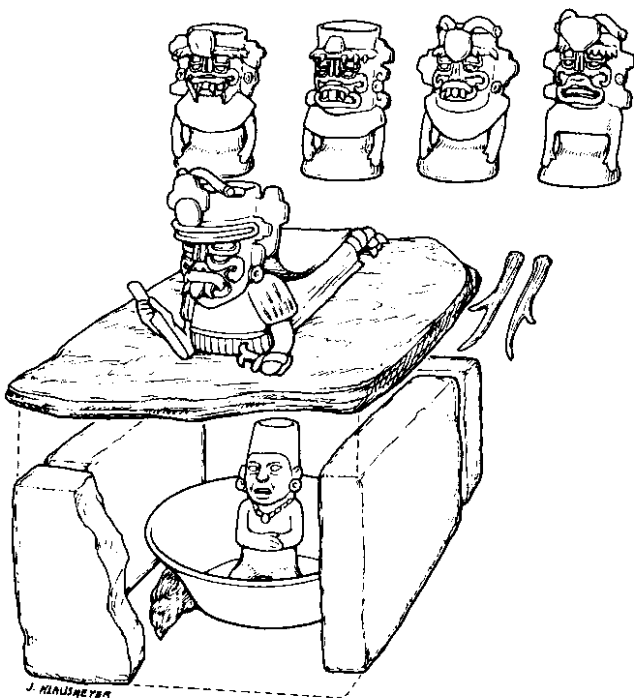


Fig. 7.16. Artist's reconstruction of the ritual scene from Feature 96, an offering box below the floor of the Structure 35 temple. The scene consisted of a miniature adobe tomb with a stone roof, containing a pottery bowl, a ceramic effigy, and a sacrificed quail; a flying figure on the tomb roof, with a pair of deer antlers nearby; and four grotesque effigy figures in the background (see text). (Drawing by John Klausmeyer.)

archaeology and history. First, ethnohistory tells us what a temple should look like and accurately predicts that we should discover obsidian blades, sacrificial knives, incense burners and quail. Archaeology then reveals unpredicted offerings beneath the temples, but ethnohistory gives us some clues for interpreting them. In the case of Feature 96 at San José Mogote, it suggests that we are seeing metamorphosis, a major career transition of deceased royalty. Ethnohistory makes us less surprised that metamorphosed 'cloud people' wear the grotesque mask of Cociyo – the most powerful supernatural seen in Zapotec art, the version of Lightning preferred by the Classic Zapotec state.

The longer we work with the Zapotec, the more indebted we feel to the earlier generation of anthropological archaeologists who pioneered the DHA. Of course, our debt also extends to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spaniards, without whose accounts it would be impossible to interpret meaning, symbolism, ideology and context in Zapotec archaeological remains. 'Cognitive archaeology' is not easy under any circumstances, but it is made easier when there is so much continuity between prehistoric and historic cultures.

Notes

- 1 Córdoba (1578a) spelled Lightning *Cocijo*, which has for years been the standard spelling. However, he also made it clear that he was using the Latin *j* in his dictionary, reflecting the pronunciation *co-ci-yo*.
- 2 'Jade' is used colloquially here for jadeite, nephrite, and related metamorphics, since there is no true jade in Mexico.
- 3 In some Zapotec tombs, *acompañante* figures are so numerous as to seem almost analogous to the *ushabtis*, or servant figures, seen in Egyptian tombs. However, their earpools and necklaces make it clear that they are not depictions of commoners and therefore do not represent servants.

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