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An overview of Monte Albán.

The Cultural Development Of the Valley of Oaxaca

Jorge Bautista Hernández Adrián Salinas Contreras***

GEOGRAPHICAL FRAMEWORK

The confluence of the Etna, Zimatlán and Tlacolula Valleys surrounded on four sides by large mountain ranges makes up the central part of Oaxaca state. The great plant and animal wealth of the Oaxaca region, the fertility of the soil, the climate and the existence of numerous water sources were undoubtedly central factors in indigenous peoples like the Zapotecs and the Mixtecs settling the

area. These peoples reached an advanced state of cultural development before the Spaniards arrived and founded cities like Dainzú, Monte Albán, Lambityeco, Yagul and Mitla. In pre-Hispanic Mexico, this land, its flourishing arts, medicine and writing, nurtured painters, goldsmiths, weavers, cutters of precious stones and architects.

THE PRE-HISPANIC ERA

The oldest vestiges of Man in the region are to be found in the Tlacolula Valley: a grooved arrowhead found near the San Juan Guelavía community testifies to the hunting of big game such as mammoth

and mastodon by paleolithic peoples who lived in the area approximately 10,000 years before Christ.¹ Between Yagul and Mitla are numerous caves and rocky overhangs that were used as homes and refuge for hunting and gathering bands of nomads. Here, stone instruments, organic remains, wall paintings and the first evidence of the domestication of plants have been discovered, dating from about 8000 B.C.²

Around 1500 B.C. a substantial change can be observed in the way of life of the inhabitants of the valley: the first villages were founded near the fertile alluvium, next to water sources like wells, rivers and streams. In this period, the most important villages were San José

* Archeologist, specialist in restoration of pre-Hispanic monuments. Currently working in the Monte Albán archeological site in Oaxaca.

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Monte Albán's ball game court.

Mogote, Tierras Largas and Hacienda Blanca, Abasolo, La Experimental, Barrio del Rosario (Huitzo) and Tomaltepec. The first pyramid bases, palatial residences and temples are to be found there, evidence of the division of the society into classes and the existence of leaders. Trade was beginning to become important and ceramic, shell, obsidian and jade objects brought from far-off regions like central Mexico, the gulf coast and the Mayan lands have been discovered there.

Around the year 700 B.C., Dainzú emerged as one of the leading centers of the Tlacolula Valley. It boasts constructions like mounds, platforms, palaces and a ball game court. A monumental tomb decorated with jaguar jaws speaks to the cult of the dead and how they were held sacred, which later culminated in the elaborate burials of Monte Albán and Mitla.

After 500 B.C. there began to be a notable contrast in the social dynamic of the village peoples, and Monte Albán



Tablet depicting a dancer at Monte Albán.

was founded atop a mountainous mass where the central valleys meet. The hilltop was leveled to make a large esplanade, around which the first monumental buildings were erected. The population grew rapidly and a great construction program began. Between 500 B.C. and 100 B.C., period I, the first stones carved showing nude individuals with Olmec traits, possibly captives, accompanied by glyphs

and numerals, were put up. Some authors argue that this is unequivocal proof of Monte Albán's military expansionism aimed against other lesser ranked centers.

By this time there was significant exchange of local and outside products. Clay receptacles in the shape of effigies similar to those found in other locations of the Mixtec Highlands like Monte Negro and Yucuita appeared in Monte Albán. Similarly, there is an entire sampling of ceramic items for domestic and ritual use, outstanding among which are little boxes, plates, pots and glasses.

From its founding, Monte Albán shows a clear tendency to portioning off areas related to different craft, public, religious, residential and funeral activities. Next to the ceremonial buildings are palaces, houses with tombs and offerings to accompany the dead, clear examples of an urban class society.

During period II, from 100 B.C. to A.D. 250, other buildings used for astronomical observation and time keeping were built in the great plaza, the heart of the Zapotec city. These are known today as monument J and building P. Inscriptions in stone continued to be a feature, but now accompanied by an abundance of the so-called "conquest tablets" that decorate building J, with a change in style in the carvings, referring to glyphs and numerals probably linked to the names of places dominated by Monte Albán.

By period III (A.D. 250 to A.D. 600), the city reached its greatest size, covering an area of 6.5 square kilometers. It covered all the surrounding hills, such as Gallo, Atzompa and Plumaje Hills. On

