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An overview of Monte Albán.

The Cultural Development Of the Valley of Oaxaca

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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

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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



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Tablet depicting a dancer at Monte Albán.

was founded atop a mountainous mass where the central valleys meet. The hill-top 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



each hilltop, bases of pyramids are covered with temples comprised of open spaces like patios and plazas. A great many residential terraces were built at the foot of each hill. The population increased a great deal, going as high as 30,000 inhabitants.

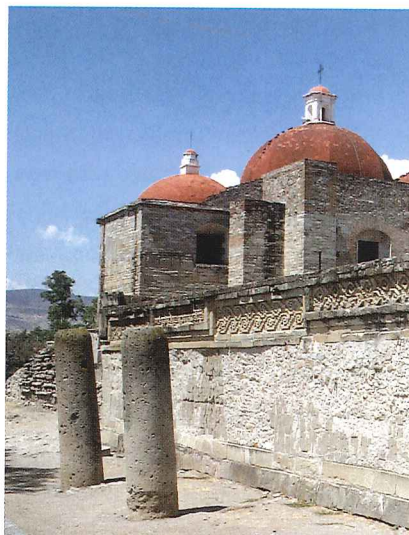
At that time, the city had roads, hydraulic works, walls, contention walls and storage shafts perhaps used to stock grain and seed. The society had specialized craftsmen, and trade increased significantly, particularly with Teotihuacan in central Mexico.

It was in this period that the most elaborate tombs were built under the patios of the houses in the form of stone boxes covered with stone slabs. In the environs of luxurious palaces, tombs have been found painted with ritual scenes of what may be priests or authorities, richly costumed, and glyphs and numerals narrating rituals or historic events. Human burials were accompanied by simple or sumptuous offerings according to the social rank of the individual, but one constant is the presence of funeral urns, clay boxes with images of people or gods, particularly Cocijo, the god of water.

After A.D. 800, Monte Albán was abandoned and construction ceased. It is not quite clear why the city was abandoned, but theories speculate that it may have been due to domestic strife, the depletion of natural resources, the authorities' loss of political and economic power, changes in trade routes and even incursions of enemies from the North. While by this time Monte Albán had stopped being the hegemonic center that for



Mitla's buildings are elaborate examples of pre-Hispanic architecture.



Spanish domination left its mark on Mitla.

centuries had dominated the region, it continued to be the object of minor occupations by groups of Mixtecs who utilized the ancient Zapotec tombs to bury their own dead; the clearest example is tomb 7.

The fall of Monte Albán made for the migration of its inhabitants who may have moved to other nearby places and founded new population centers, among

them Lambityeco, Zaachila, Macuilxóchitl, Teotitlán, Yagul and finally Mitla.

Mitla's buildings are very elaborate examples of pre-Hispanic architecture, in a class with Mayan rooms and palaces. The site is located in the eastern part of the Valley of Tlacolula and south of the natural limit formed by a system of hills and rough terrain. Mitla was at its splendid peak during the late post-classical period (A.D. 1200-1521) and its inhabitants witnessed the arrival of the Spaniards. The beauty of Mitla's monuments and its elegantly decorated mosaic fretwork has sparked the interest of locals and outsiders alike since then. It was not until the nineteenth century that an important number of travelers and explorers, mainly Europeans and Americans, began to visit Mitla.

Mitla's rooms are grouped around central, quadrangular patios, normally with entrances at the corners, making for private, restricted spaces, the administrative seat of kings and authorities. But it





Replica of Monte Albán's tomb 104. National Museum of History and Anthropology, Mexico City.

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also has other groups of constructions consisting of foundations and platforms creating open spaces like plazas for ceremonial use. Mitla's greatest achievement is undoubtedly the stone work. Enormous monoliths, lintels, columns and blocks were brought from several kilometers away to build the monuments. This indicates planning, the use of specialists and the existence of a leading class.

The finest and most elegant work was used in decorating the buildings: small cut stones were individually placed making fretwork friezes without using any mortar at all. In what is called the Column Group, practically all the walls are covered with fretwork designs, mainly geometric. The ornaments were also covered with lime plaster and painted red. The rooms in the Northern Group hold the remains of a multicolored mural similar to the Mixtec Codex, testifying to the influence of this ethnic group in Mitla.

Fretwork was not restricted to civic architecture; stone tombs underneath dwellings were also decorated with frets, but here, carved in. Tombs in the Mitla-style form of a cross have been found scattered over quite a large area; the tombs of Xaagá and San Lorenzo Albarradas are the clearest examples.

In the sixteenth century, Mitla witnessed the arrival of the Spaniards. Spanish domination left a deep mark on the city; the most direct consequence was the imposition of Catholicism in substitution of the indigenous gods. Some buildings of the old Zapotec center were dismantled to build a church dedicated to Saint Paul.

Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, parts of the pre-Hispanic sites were still occupied by the priest's house attached to the San Pablo church. In contrast to Monte Albán, Mitla did not die; it only changed, undeniable proof of the cultural continuity of the Zapotec people. **NM**

NOTES

- ¹ Marcus Winter, "La arqueología de los Valles Centrales," *Arqueología Mexicana* 5, no. 26 (Mexico City) (July-August 1997), pp. 6-14.
- ² Kent Flannery and Guilá Naquitz, *Archaic Foraging and Early Agriculture in Oaxaca, Mexico* (Michigan: Academic Press, Inc., 1986).

FURTHER READING

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