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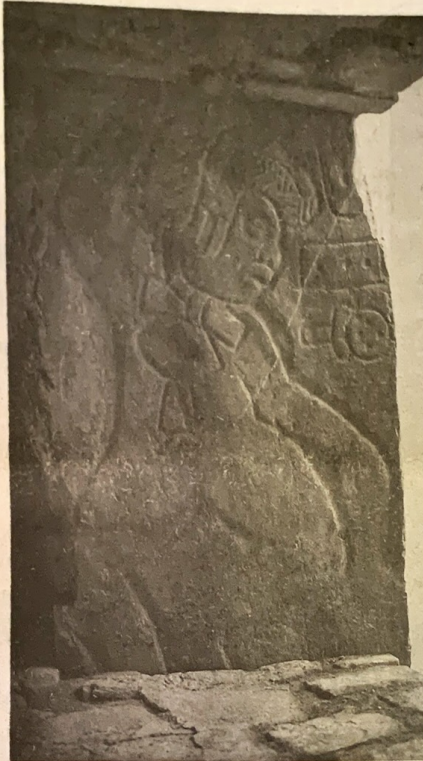
August 1996

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Prehispanic Oaxaca

The State of Oaxaca in southern Mexico is considered one of the principal culture areas of prehispanic Mesoamerica, along with the Maya region, the Gulf Coast, West Mexico and Central Mexico.

Archaeologists have documented human occupation in Oaxaca as far back as 10,000 years ago. Prior to the Spanish conquest in A.D. 1521. There was a long sequence of cultural evolution, beginning with simple hunter-gatherer groups and culminating in complex civilizations. Cultural plurality characterizes Oaxaca. Today as in the past at least 14 ethnic-linguistic groups live in Oaxaca: Zapotec, Mixtec, Amuzgo, Trique, Chatino, Mixe, Zoque, Chinantec, Mazatec, Cuicatec, Chocho, Nahuatl, Chontal and Huave. Recent change has brought about the virtual extinction of two others, Ixcatec and Popoloca. These groups all have prehispanic roots in Oaxaca; their origins can be studied through archaeology. For over 60 years, since 1931 when Alfonso Caso initiated his Monte Alban excavations, Oaxaca has been the scene of intensive archaeological investigations. Recent work has continued in the now traditional regions—the Valley of Oaxaca and the Mixteca Alta—and also in the Cañada, the Isthmus, the Mixteca Baja and the Coast with salvage work in additional regions.



Montealban archeological site

kilometers and presents a mosaic of altitude, climate, fauna and vegetation. Since at least late prehispanic times the Zapotecs and Mixtecs have been the most numerous ethnic-linguistic groups in Oaxaca.

Archaeologically, the Zapotecs and Mixtecs are often taken as representatives of Oaxaca, since other prehispanic cultures have not yet been documented in much detail. For centuries Zapotecs and Mixtecs have inhabited key geographical regions, generally with an abundance of productive, flat and well-watered land relative to other groups. Zapotec culture emerged and flourished in the Valley of Oaxaca while Mixtec culture developed in the Mixteca Alta, the Mixteca Baja and the Coastal Mixtec region. Both groups achieved sophisticated levels of artistic development.

The Zapotec and Mixtec regions are larger than those of other groups, have the most archaeological sites and are relatively accessible. The cultural precocity of the Mixteca was probably due in part to its geographic position between the Valley of Oaxaca and Central Mexico. The Coastal Mixtec region, southwest of

Continued on Page 3

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The mountainous State of Oaxaca covers over 94,000 square

Prehispanic Oaxaca

Continued From Page 1

the Valley became important only in later times. Oaxaca's prehispanic cultural sequence, like those of other areas of Mesoamerica, can be divided into four major stages. It is generally accepted that human beings entered the New World from Asia via an ancient land bridge across the Bering Strait. Expanding outward, groups moved south into what is now Canada, the United States and Mexico, then farther south to Central and South America. The sequence in Oaxaca begins with the Lithic stage which includes a period of Paleoindians (9,500-7,500 years before Christ) and the Archaic (7,500-2,000 B.C.). The earliest inhabitants documented in Oaxaca were Paleoindians. They also probably lived on smaller game and collected plant foods. A chipped stone projectile point is the oldest artifact recorded thus far from Oaxaca and its style suggests the early colonizers were related to the mammoth hunters of the Clovis culture from western North America.

The Archaic period is character-

ized by small nomadic groups of foragers who subsisted by hunting deer, rabbit, doves and other birds, and collecting wild fruits, nuts and plants. Along with related groups elsewhere in highland Mexico, they contributed to plant domestication by practicing horticulture and selecting unusual and especially productive varieties of the genetically variable ancestors of corn, beans, squash, chile, avocado, tomatoes and others. Some varieties became domesticated, that is, dependent upon humans, and relatively more productive, eventually providing the subsistence base for large populations. Between 2000-1500 B.C. the first permanent village communities formed in Oaxaca, beginning the Village stage which lasted until about 500 B.C. Populations increased, new settlements were formed and new regions were colonized. Agricultural technology consisted of planting by hand; alluvial lands were cleared of brush and trees, and pointed digging sticks were used to perforate the soil. Early villages are situated on low rises out of reach

Continued on Page 4

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of flood waters, but close to a water source for domestic use. Adjacent floodplains could be cultivated year-round because of the high water table. The earliest documented villages to date in Oaxaca are Hacienda Blanca, San Jose Mogote and Tierras Largas in the northwest or ETLA branch of the Valley of Oaxaca, located next to what is still some of the best agricultural land in Oaxaca's highland valleys.

Territories were established and some ethnic and linguistic differences began to form, perhaps due in part to the separation and isolation of groups. Production of ceramic vessels and figurines accompanied the emergence of villages. Some are shown as pregnant and have elaborate hairdos. Male figurines and ceramic vessels with symbolic designs appear in highland Oaxaca at the same time the Olmec culture flourished on the Gulf Coast in Veracruz and Tabasco. The period of Olmec influence lasted some 300 years

(1200-900 B.C.) followed by a period of local innovation in the Valley of Oaxaca (900-500 B.C.) with population increase, development of formalized social inequality and beginnings of specialized knowledge in astronomy and calendrics. The formation of the first urban centers in small cities around 500 B.C. marked a major change in prehispanic Oaxaca. The Urban stage, divided into Early Urban (500 B.C.-A.D. 200/300) and Late Urban (A.D. 200/300-800), is characterized by communities of up to several thousand inhabitants, monumental architecture, use of calendar and writing, and clear status differentiation among the groups in society. This meant leaders and commoners in Early Urban times, and by the Late Urban, probable class distinctions including a ruling class, second level administrators, commoners, and in some cases slaves. Monte Alban, Oaxaca's first city and one of the oldest cities in the New World, was built by people

Continued on Page 5

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Continued from Page 4

from the Valley of Oaxaca atop a cluster of hills in the center of the valley. Current theories suggest that competition among villagers may have led to the founding of Monte Alban. Perhaps conflict among opposing groups within the large community of San Jose Mogote caused a split, and one group founded Monte Alban.

By Late Urban times small cities were present in most other regions of Oaxaca. There was a hierarchy of communities. Not everyone lived in urban centers, some lived in villages, ranchos, or isolated households. Leaders lived in urban centers which were the focal points of development of ethnic identity. Art in various media—ceramic vessels, urns and braziers, carved stones, carved bones, lapidary work and architecture—proliferated with the formation of urban centers. This florescence was related to various factors. For one, the large concentrations of people made possible monumental architectural works at a scale unattained in the Village stage because of limited man power and organization. The leaders developed distinctive mechanisms to assure their power. One may have been the promotion of an ideology emphasizing a sense of potential danger or insecurity in order to maintain loyalty of the commoners. These dangers may have been largely fictitious. In early times Monte Alban had about 10,000 to 15,000 inhabitants; no rival of near such size existed in the southern Mexican highlands.

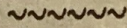
Nevertheless, a prevalent theme in the early art of Monte Alban is one of conflict, manifested especially in the "danzantes" and the Building J "conquest slabs." The danzantes commemorate conflicts: some are beheaded individuals, some are perhaps prisoners, others may be enemies and some apparently are leaders. They were incorporated, along with symbols for dates and actions, into one or several sets of related stones or "programs" in large, slightly sloping walls in open areas apparently in public view. The Building J slabs in a similarly visible wall indicate conquest or subjugation of other communities by Monte Alban. Another mechanism of power and control was through specialized knowledge.

The zapotecs were precocious in the elaboration of knowledge of astronomy and calendar, and they codified their understandings in writing. They not only registered cycles of such obvious phenomena as the Sun and Venus in their passages, but also may have created the ritual cycle of 260 days which apparently is not based on natural astronomical observations but instead is an invented, cultural cycle controlled by specialists. Religion is a third area through which leaders could have maintained social control. Ceramic urns and braziers with anthropomorphic figures appear in archaeological deposits in early urban times. They depict human-like beings wearing masks and

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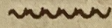


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Prehispanic Oaxaca

Continued from Page 5

costumes. The masks are perhaps symbolic and work like filters to change and enhance the meaning of spoken words. These ceramic figures appear to be part human, part-deity, of non-human and greater-than-human character and power. The end of the Early Urban stage around A.D. 200-300 was a particularly dynamic time involving relations with other regions. The Zapotecs established links with Teotihuacan; around A.D. 200 Zapotec astronomy and knowledge was evidently used for setting up a formal orientation of the great metropolis of Teotihuacan. Around the same time a Zapotec barrio or neighborhood was established at Teotihuacan. Relations with Teotihuacan may have influenced the formalization of Zapotec socio-political organization.

During Late Urban times, gods and symbols became standardized and evidently widely accepted by the commoners. The best preserved stela measures 2.7 meters (8 feet, 9 inches) and apparently stood atop a stairway platform facing out toward the Main Plaza at Monte Albán. It may have fallen during an earthquake and was never reset. This stela was one of the last great artistic expressions at Monte Albán. The power of elite families apparently did not last beyond this time around A.D. 800, and for this or perhaps other reasons, Monte Alban was abandoned. During the Late Urban stage, the distinctive Nuiñe culture formed in the Mixteca Baja (Nuiñe means "hot

country" and is the name for the region in Mixtec). Recent explorations at the site of Cerro de las Minas, Huajuapán de León, have documented a regional style of archaeological materials: square based urns with representations of the Old Fire God, painted in red, orange, black, green and yellow; mold-made figurines and whistles of mica-laden clay; and vessels of the same clay with especially common use of the hemispherical annular based bowl.

Contemporaneous communities in the Mixteca Alta such as Etlatongo, Huamelulpan, Yucuita, Yucunadahui and others may have been in a buffer region between the Valley of Oaxaca and the Mixteca Baja. These sites show relatively less elaborate cultural remains with fewer urns and carved stones than the other regions. Around A.D. 800 Monte Alban and other urban centers in Oaxaca were largely abandoned. Monumental construction ceased and these communities no longer functioned as political and cultural foci. The centuries from A.D. 800-1200 are a kind of dark ages for archaeology in Oaxaca: few data have been recorded and it is not clear what was happening. The cause of this change remains to be determined. Possibilities include alterations in the environment, crop failure due to drought or disease, or social and political change. Around A.D. 1200 in Oaxaca and elsewhere a great cultural flourishing began. This is the City-state

Continued on Page 7

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Prehispanic Oaxaca

Continued from Page 6

stage characterized by appearance of a pan-Mesoamerican system of symbols, a new form of calendared notation, polychrome ceramics, use of codices or historical and religious picture manuscripts by the elite, presence of metal and luxury objects of turquoise and other precious stones. Luxury items were restricted to elites and used as symbols of power, exemplified best by the jewelry found in Tomb 7 at Monte Alban. As population increased the Mixtecs expanded to the coast region previously inhabited by Chatinos: Tututepec became an important center under the dominion of the famous Mixtec ruler 8 Deer "Tiger Claw." The Mixtecs also expanded into the central part of the Valley of Oaxaca, establishing communities at Cuilapan, Xoxocotlán and other towns. Zapotecs expanded to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and formed communities, for example, at Guiengola which became a mountain top fortress site, and in Tehuantepec.

The population of Oaxaca grew to an estimated 1.5 to 3.0 million in-

habitants and archaeological sites are numerous in all regions of the State.

While there were underlying commonalities in agriculture and everyday life, some local stylistic variation was reflected in domestic tools, especially pottery and distinct groups in this period had somewhat different customs. Chinantecs and Mazatecs, for example, used caves for burials, while Mixtecs used "sotanos" or small subsurface pits, and Zapotecs used pits or shallow graves.

These examples of communities and costumes are outweighed, however, by the unknown aspects of prehispanic Oaxaca. Only further study and care in protection and conservation of archaeological sites will permit more detailed study and appreciation of this rich prehispanic heritage.

- Written by Marcus Winter. Translated by Susan Wald Taken from the book "Regional Museum Treasures" Copyright 1994.

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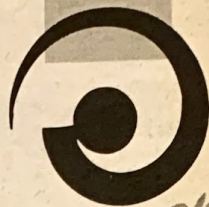
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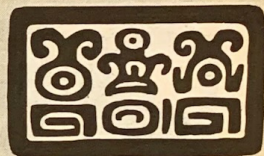
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