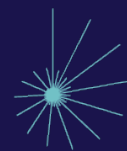


Religion and the Emergence of Civilizations in the Americas

March 2021

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I. INTRODUCTION

Archaeologists have usually sidestepped the religious practices and beliefs of prehistoric peoples; artifacts that were not obviously functional in terms of everyday life could be classified simply as “ritual,” implying that they were beyond archaeologists’ ability to explain or understand. The extraordinary variety of religious expression that anthropologists had documented was more or less ignored by archaeologists. Some archaeologists speculated on religious practice with simplistic hypotheses about magic, shamanism, fertility, or hunting. Generally, archaeologists thought that in the absence of texts they could do little more than recognize the traces of ritual and some of the symbols associated with religious belief.

But the problem is fundamentally one of our own making: “religion” is a category that has, in historical terms, only recently become part of the western vocabulary; we have become accustomed to the dualist view of the religious and the secular (and often an equally oppositional conflict between religion and science). Yet, for more than a century anthropologists, missionaries, and merchants have been reporting a bewildering range of forms of religious expression encountered among contemporary non-western peoples. In recent decades, attitudes to the study of religion have changed, and researchers from several different disciplines, among them archaeologists, have been exploring the nature of religion in historic (ancient Greece and Rome, Egypt and Mesopotamia, for example) and prehistoric (in the case of the Americas, pre-Columbian) times. Interest in the evolution of religion has grown and become a subject fit for serious academic investigation. As in any new and multidisciplinary field, there are at first various and different approaches and little coherence: at the most basic level, there is no common definition of religion itself.

To begin to understand the nature of religion in the historic or prehistoric periods, we must adopt a more inclusive conception of religion than we generally have today, one that accounts for a wide range of human history and culture. The American sociologist Robert Bellah, in his last major book on the evolution of religion, offers a practical, flexible definition: religion is a system of symbols that, when enacted by human beings, establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations that make sense in terms of an idea of a general order of existence (Bellah 2011: 2). But however we define it, we can only get so far by talking about religion in the abstract. If we want to have any deep understanding, we must dive into the particulars of a specific community at a specific time. This review consists of three case studies on the relationship between religion, innovation, and power in the pre-Columbian Americas.

Professor Donald Yerxa, director of the Templeton-funded research project, Religion and Innovation in Human Affairs, has edited a book that explores three pre-Columbian archaeological sites (Yerxa 2016). The researchers involved have given us an insightful introduction to an ancient understanding of religion. Despite the distances in space and time between the three archaeological sites, these pre-Columbian societies shared a common body of ideas about themselves and their world. They treated actions, artifacts, materials, features of the landscape, the world, and ultimately the cosmos as animate (or, if you like, spiritual) elements in the world with which their own lives were intimately bound. They

could communicate with them and through them, and their communion with them was an obligation of their existence.

The project involved three groups of researchers who have been working in North America (Cahokia, directly across the Mississippi River from modern St. Louis), Mesoamerica (the Valley of Oaxaca and the lower Río Verde Valley), and South America (Chavín de Huántar, Peru). In all three cases, there is a long history of archaeological investigation. But for the Templeton-funded project, those leading the research were specifically interested in questions that concern the relationship between religion and the socio-political transformations of the Formative period.

Archaeologists working on the pre-Columbian past in some parts of the Americas must contend with a vast stretch of time. The first hunter-gatherer peoples arrived before 12,000 BCE, and the first Europeans didn't arrive until the 16th century CE. Five centuries have elapsed since Columbus came to the Americas, but the human saga has been unfolding there for at least 125 centuries. It is hard to fathom.

For the sake of convenience, archaeologists have generally divided pre-Columbian time into three broad periods—Archaic, Formative, and Classic. The Classic period is so named because it is the time of the great American civilizations of South and Meso-America: the Inca, Maya, Aztec, Olmec, or Zapotec, represent the Classic period. The Formative period is the period of many centuries leading up to the emergence of the kingdoms and empires of the Classic period; it was the formative time when the characteristics of those civilizations can be seen to develop. The Formative begins with the emergence of sedentary societies whose economies are based on cultivated crops, replacing the mobile hunter-gatherer societies of the Archaic period. From the formulation of the terms Archaic, Formative, and Classical, it has been assumed that the Formative period contained the growth in the womb, as it were, of what was to become at birth a classic example of a civilization.

The three projects collaborating in this research program belong in the Formative period, but the formative processes and the first emergence of classic states did not occur in sync throughout the Americas, and in large parts of the Americas the first Europeans found no state-level societies. Unfortunately for those of us who think of history in terms of periods dated in calendar years, the Formative begins and ends at different dates in the different parts of the Americas.

Archaeological research projects that have been engaged in the investigation of large and complex sites that represent the Formative period can feel overwhelming. Archaeologists have been working for many years, gradually accumulating information and slowly learning to make sense of the histories of large, complex sites. Behind the investigations of today's excavators, there is a huge amount of work and many publications by earlier generations of archaeologists. Here we are concerned with the questions investigated by three contemporary teams, drawing sparingly from earlier researchers. The massive monuments and their complex histories represent prehistoric cultures that are alien to our cultural sense of history: we can easily be amazed by them, but it is difficult to grasp the different cultural frames within which they functioned. And it is immediately apparent that the religious canons

that drove the design, construction, and use of those impressive monuments require us to confront notions of religion and the role of religion that are beyond our experience.

The work that has taken place in all three projects has focused on the relationship between religion and the formative stages of the first large-scale, hierarchically organized societies in the Americas. They are essentially concerned with the relationship between religion and socio-political transformation. And in all three case-studies, the researchers are convinced that religion was central, all-encompassing, and fundamental to the implementation of transformative political innovation and social and economic developments.

The three communities exhibit remarkable similarities and parallels when one remembers that the three sites are in distinct parts of North, Central and South America, and the scenarios were enacted at different times. In studying them, the researchers enjoyed some advantages. First, they were able to piggy-back on the long history of archaeological investigation of the great monumental sites. Second, the deciphering of the Mayan script opened up the history of the Mayan states and its peoples' complex thought-world. The later Formative period in Meso-America leads into the emergence of the Mayan state. In every way there is a cultural continuity between the Formative and the first Classic states, and that makes it possible and reasonable to extrapolate back from the early states to the late Formative period. Third, what has been learned by anthropologists from indigenous American peoples (plus the historical record from the first European contacts) opens the way to a new understanding of religion in pre-Columbian societies.

To explore the thought-worlds of the indigenous peoples, we have to set aside two familiar dualist categories. Where we commonly differentiate religious beliefs from religious practices, in those pre-Columbian worlds, as among other indigenous peoples, the dichotomy between belief and practice makes no sense: we need to recognize that in their world religion was “inherently lived, experienced, and practiced such that it cannot be conceptualized as disembodied ideas or beliefs” (Joyce 2017: 6). Again, where we naturally differentiate and segregate religion from daily life, the religious from the secular, for those pre-Columbian societies and their indigenous successors “religious belief, experience, and practice are difficult to disentangle from most aspects of daily life, including agriculture . . . , trade and exchange . . . , craft production . . . , domesticity . . . , rubbish disposal . . . , identity . . . , and most importantly . . . politics” (Joyce 2017: 7). In today's world and in recent western history, the dichotomy between religion and the secular involves the separation of powers (in many states, a constitutional separation) between church and state. In those pre-Columbian societies, ritual practice was the means for the production, negotiation, appropriation, and contestation of power. Although none of the societies in the three case studies were kingdoms or states (they were all in the formative stages of such political entities), they were large-scale societies that involved politics and political organization, and there were clearly élites. The argument of the various researchers is that religion was the means through which political life was constituted.

A distinctive and essential feature of those pre-Columbian ontologies is what the anthropologists and archaeologists call “bundling.” This way of being in the world views religion as inherently lived,

experienced, and practiced such that it cannot be conceptualized as disembodied ideas or beliefs, or as represented in rituals. From this perspective, religious belief and practice as well as the material items and settings in which religion was enacted are inseparable. And such ontologies are also “relational,” in that they consider many or all phenomena in the world as animate. People and things within their world engaged in meaningful relations that worked both ways. Maria Zedeño, an anthropologist who studies the cultures and languages of contemporary and historic indigenous North American peoples, has published with the archaeologists involved in this research (Zedeño 2016). She refers to a capacity to possess a life-force or soul as “animacy,” the capacity for becoming a person and behaving like one, implying that objects, like people, engage in social exchange (Zedeño 2009). That idea underpins the description of certain burials or caches within structures in ceremonial centers that we will come across later: the interment of the body or the deposition of a special ceramic vase was the investment of the spirit of the offering, described as the “ensoulment” (almost akin to feeding) of the building (Joyce and Barber 2015).

Over time in the Formative period, sustained social relations grew up with certain phenomena that became familiar and powerful, whether it was a spondylus shell, an “ensouled” building, a mountain, the cycle of the sun’s or the moon’s movements in the sky, a particular kind of ceramic vessel, a smoking pipe, or a powerful narcotic or consciousness-altering substance. In different societies at different times what may seem to us to be a number of completely arbitrary and unconnected phenomena constitute a particular “bundle” of things that guarantee the success of religious ritual comprising a reciprocal relationship between humans and “others.”

Arguing from the physical evidence supported by historical or ethnographic analogy, the archaeologists reconstruct a world of ideas, beliefs, and practices that are alien to most of us. It is a world in which people locate themselves and their practices in relation to cosmic time and space (governing, for example, the layout and celestial orientation of monuments and complexes of monuments, and the calendrical timing of rituals and festivals). It is a world populated by animate beings and things; in addition to superhuman beings, even buildings and sacred objects were treated as animate beings. Thus, what we would describe as religious belief, experience, and practice was embedded within and intimately entangled with most aspects of daily life, whether in the cultivation and harvesting of crops in the fields, in craft production, and especially in politics and social identity. Timothy Pauketat and Susan Alt, the leaders of the research at Cahokia and the Emerald Acropolis, write, “Power imbued and defined various phenomena, substances, things, places, and people, and it becomes the object of our concern as it was “bundled”—which is to say assembled, enchained, gathered, entangled, or emplaced in and as them” (Pauketat and Alt 2016: 52). We commonly think of shared religion as a socially integrating force—rituals as symbolic expressions of deeper truths, or, like a coronation ceremony, the means by which royal power is legitimated. In the pre-Columbian cultures, ritual was the very production, negotiation, and constitution of life and power.

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II. CAHOKIA

The majesty of Cahokia (see map, Fig. 1), with its many mounds and flat-topped earthen pyramids, is at once blindingly obvious, and at the same time tragic (Pauketat and Emerson 1997; Pauketat 2004; Pauketat 2009; Pauketat and Alt 2015). During the late 11th century CE, Cahokia began and then expanded within a single generation into a settlement of urban scale on the east bank of the Mississippi. Its location, close to the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, was strategic, the same as the later city of St. Louis, which has partly overbuilt Cahokia's remains. Although Cahokia has long been known, it has long been disregarded. What survives is only a fraction of what once was there.



Fig. 1 The three “precincts” that make up the city of Cahokia.

Within the space of two or three lifetimes, Cahokia exploded from a village of a few hundred, perhaps a thousand, people into a vast settlement with a population of many thousands, perhaps twenty or even thirty thousand. The city was made up of three distinct, separate precincts. One lay immediately across the Mississippi River from modern East St. Louis, but its many earthen pyramidal mounds and residential areas were destroyed in the nineteenth century with the expansion of the city of St. Louis. On the other side of the Mississippi River channel was a second precinct, which had at least fifty earthen pyramids and thousands of simple pole-and-thatch houses, also mostly destroyed by urban development. The largest precinct with the most monumental constructions lay 4 kilometers to the northeast. It possessed as many as 120 flat-topped pyramidal mounds, great plazas, a kilometer-long causeway, and many more buildings. At its core, at either end of the axial causeway, were two massive

earthen pyramids and shrine complexes more than a mile (1.6 km) apart. The northern pyramid, which has become known as Monks Mound, was originally at least 100 feet (more than 30 m) in height, topped with large temples built of wood that were roofed with thatch. The largest of the temples had a floor area of more than 4,300 square feet (400 m²). There were also the residences and storehouses that were the preserve of a religious élite. At the foot of the northern pyramid was a square plaza of leveled ground surrounded by earthen embankments enclosing an area of 50 acres (20 hectares), large enough to accommodate the whole population of the city. And stretching south again to the southern cluster of pyramids and temples was a raised causeway. All around the area of the city were more pyramids that were once topped with wooden temples and other buildings. Everything was laid out with a compass alignment of 5 degrees east of north. Alignment of major religious buildings and complexes on the cardinal points of the compass set them squarely in relation to the cosmos.

The population lived in simple rectangular wooden houses with thatched roofs that were built in a new and brilliantly efficient way. In previous times, people dug a line of pits to hold upright wooden posts that would frame the walls: now, they used hoes to dig a wall trench that outlined the house, constructed wall panels flat on the ground, and then raised them into place.

Around the city were towns, villages, and scattered farms. But there were also outlying pyramid and shrine complexes, the largest of which, the Emerald site, was about 15 miles (24 km) from the city, to which it was linked by a causeway. Recent research has shown that the causeway served as a processional way bringing crowds of people to ceremonies and feasts at the Emerald acropolis (Skousen, Larson et al. 2020).

Archaeologists have been excavating parts of Cahokia for almost a century (the first organized, large-scale investigations were carried out in the 1930s as part of the New Deal). Now the chronology of the city is well defined. Most of it was constructed in an amazing burst of creativity and physical labor between 1050 and 1100 CE (AD). At about the same time (around 1100 BCE) across the wider Mississippi region, small village settlements were being abandoned as people came together to form larger settlements. They were on a smaller scale than Cahokia, and it is clear from their earthen pyramids, shrine complexes, and ritual objects that they were inspired by Cahokia, whether by the arrival of Cahokians, or by returning pilgrims. The explosive growth of Cahokia and the many small settlements that sprang up around it represent an extraordinary influx of population that increased the general population density of the region by an order of magnitude.

Cahokia did not spring up from nowhere. Human habitation in the Mississippi valley had a long prehistory (Steponaitis, Kassabaum et al. 2015). As far back as 3500 BCE, there were settlements in Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico coastlands that possessed clusters of earthen mounds. Between 100 BCE and 400 CE the Hopewell tradition or culture was a sophisticated interaction sphere of related societies that covered much of the east and midwest of the present United States. The Hopewell peoples built mounds and shared similar ritual objects, made from exotic materials that were exchanged all around that vast region (Struever and Houart 1972; Braun 1986). Archaeologists can

trace the cultural progression through the centuries, but Cahokia represents something whose ambitious scale had no precedent.

The civilization of Cahokia, for a brief time, spread throughout eastern North America, between the Gulf coast and the Great Lakes. The analysis of the inward and outward migration of people, and the carrying of ceramics and other artifacts to and from Cahokia, form a specialized subject of research (Emerson, Hedman et al. 2020; Watts Malouchos 2020). But, after 1200 CE, there are signs of organized violence. Some sites were destroyed by fire while in others there are large-scale fortifications against outsiders. Cahokia itself was depopulated by about 1400 CE although the remnants of the population of the region continued many of Cahokia's cultural and symbolic practices. These were the indigenous peoples whose languages and traditions were recorded by early European travelers and settlers. The arrival of European settlers set off another episode of depopulation, as the indigenous population fell victim to epidemic diseases to which they had no immunity. Until the middle of the twentieth century, many of the monuments of Cahokia were flattened and destroyed to make way for the city of St. Louis, or to maximize space for agriculture.

The New Research

Recent excavations at the Emerald Acropolis have completely changed the picture of the founding of Cahokia and added a new dimension to our understanding of the religious ideas and practices that animated it. The Emerald Acropolis is at its base a natural hill about 24 kilometers from the center of Cahokia itself. The hill is a ridge of Pleistocene glacial drift materials that stands some 15 meters (50 ft) above the Mississippi floodplain. It was chosen to be the site of a new kind of religious complex, a shrine complex, as the excavators have called it. Its elevation gave people a clear 360 degree view of the horizon, against which the rising and setting points of the moon could be charted. The ridge, by chance, was aligned roughly northeast to southwest. Its sides were sculpted to make it somewhat more rectangular in plan. On its flattened top earthen pyramids were formed and shrine buildings were constructed in two linear arrangements aligned on the moon's maximum north moonrise and maximum south moonset. As the moon reaches its maximum moonrise position on the horizon, it appears to come to a "lunar standstill" for a few weeks, before beginning to reverse the direction of moonrise. Knowledge of the 18.6-year lunar cycle is evidenced by the alignment of earlier monuments of the Ohio-Hopewell peoples, in the first four centuries CE. But the Emerald Acropolis was the perfect location for observing a series of other phenomena, such as the summer and winter solstices, and the interaction between the lunar cycle and those solstice positions on the horizon. Moreover, from the Emerald Acropolis there were hills on the visible horizon that could serve as "markers" of a whole series of solar and lunar events. And there are surface indications that suggest that there were constructions on at least the four main hills; Blue Mound to the northeast and College Hill to the southwest mark the primary alignment on the 18.6-year lunar cycle, with Brown Mound and Summerfield Ridge marking the orthogonal (at right angles) alignment. Water was also an element in the beliefs and practices of the peoples of the region, and there was a spring at the foot of the Emerald Acropolis.

On the modified and flattened top of the Emerald Acropolis were flat-topped pyramid mounds and substantial shrine buildings in two parallel alignments on the main lunar standstill points. Compared to Cahokia itself, there were far more shrines and mounds than regular dwelling houses: roughly a quarter of all the buildings on the Emerald Acropolis were truncated pyramidal mounds or shrines. And the simple, single-roomed, square or rectangular buildings, while they resembled the domestic dwellings of Cahokia structurally, were strangely different: they lacked domestic fixtures such as cooking hearths, and there was very little of the debris of domestic life in and around them. Altogether, the Emerald Acropolis had a quite short life of about 150 years, but within that time many of the ordinary simple buildings seem to have been repeatedly replaced and rebuilt. The excavators concluded that the Emerald Acropolis was never permanently occupied but was the scene for massive gatherings for important festivals along the lunar cycle. The researchers also took the opportunity to investigate the trackway between the Emerald Acropolis and the center of Cahokia. At the time of the first European settlers, it was used as a cart track. But the question was whether it had originally been made to serve the processional movement of people to and from the ceremonies at the Emerald Acropolis. The excavations have shown that the track had two periods of use, so its original creation and use almost certainly belong in the short life of Cahokia and the Emerald Acropolis (Skousen, Larson et al. 2020).

One more observation is of great importance for the story of Cahokia. The incremental changes in the carefully made and decorated ceramics and other artifacts have allowed the archaeologists to calibrate the history of the region into 25- or 50-year periods. Thus, rapid expansion of Cahokia into a settlement of urban proportions dates from about 1050 CE, and its period of maximum power and influence extends to about 1200 CE. The dating evidence from the Emerald Acropolis (Figs. 2, 3) shows that the planning and execution of the shaping of the natural hill, the flattening of its top, and the construction of the first buildings dates a little before 1050 CE. It therefore appears that the *raison d'être* of the whole enterprise was the Emerald Acropolis; it linked the land to momentous points in the lunar and solar cycles. It appears that Cahokia, North America's first urban center, was situated so as to be adjacent to the Emerald Acropolis. The location of the Emerald Acropolis was of primary importance, and the city of Cahokia fell into place as the main population center.

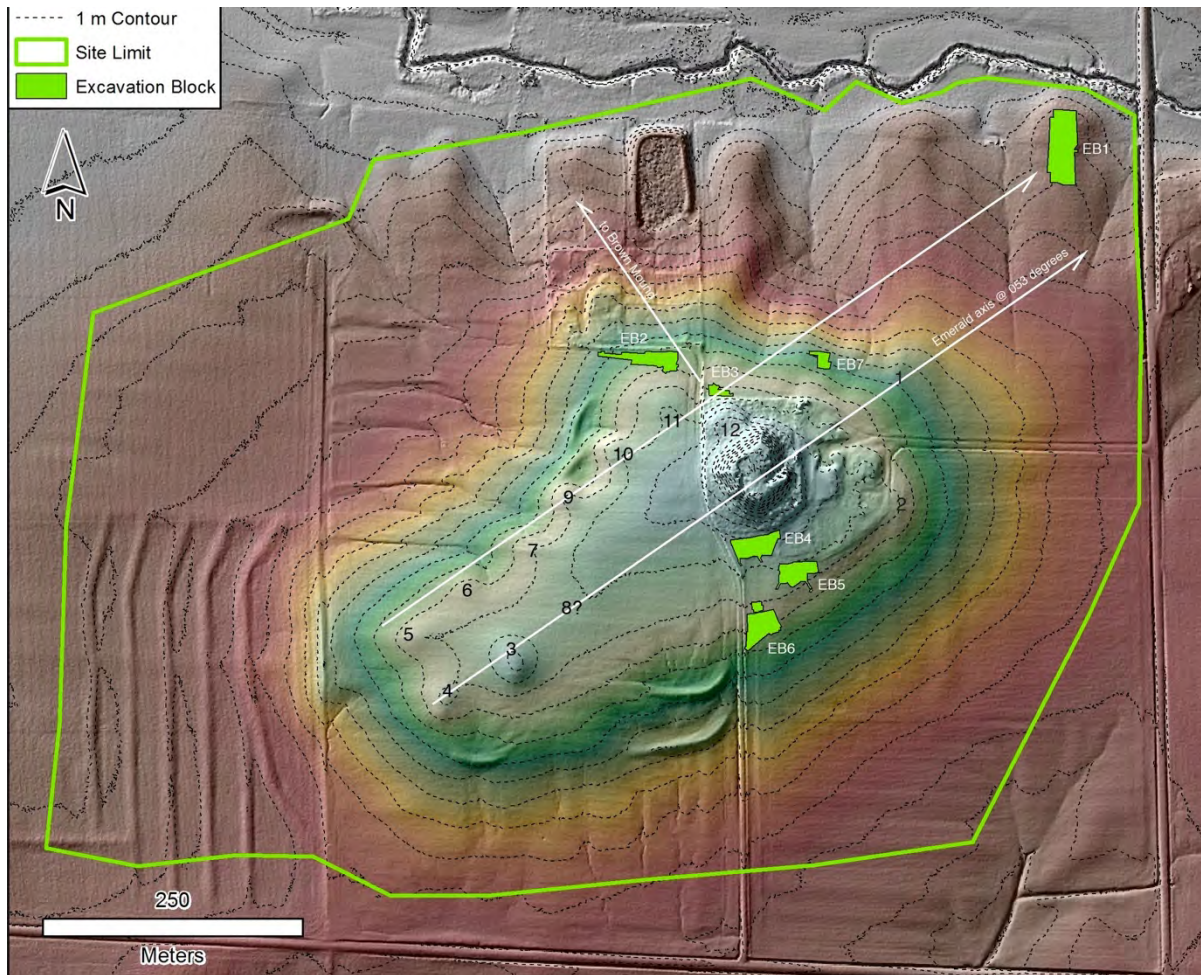


Fig. 2 The Emerald Acropolis showing the lunar alignments of the mounds that were constructed on the flattened ridge of the natural hill.

Knowledge of ceramic styles has also allowed the archaeologists to recognize how Cahokia attracted population from across a vast area of North America; the incomers brought with them some of their own pottery and other characteristic objects. And conversely the form of their Cahokia mounds and associated buildings, and Cahokia-style ceramics, have been recognized among the broken potsherds excavated at other sites far to the north and south. The pottery is a proxy for the presence of people who had spread from Cahokia. The sites where such pottery has been found also have flat-topped mounds and shrines, which suggests that the inhabitants enthusiastically adopted the ideology that was brought to them by Cahokian “missionaries,” or that they learned as pilgrims at Cahokia (see Fig. 4).

Recent research at the Trempealeau site in modern-day west-central Wisconsin (Pauketat et al. 2015b), and its sister site, Fisher Mounds, suggests strongly that both were built by Cahokians. The ceramics and other artifacts, combined with radiocarbon dating, indicate that both were established at or just before CE 1050, and abandoned by 1100. Both these sites occupy dramatic landforms in view of the river and close to concentrations of burial mounds of the immediately preceding period. Cahokian-style wooden buildings at these sites produced nearly pure Cahokian artifact assemblages—pots, chert, sandstone abraders, Cahokia points, and more—imported from the lower Mississippi region. Artifact

densities were low, indicating short-term uses. While the platform mound complex at Trempealeau was a one-off construction event, the simple wooden buildings alongside the mound were reconstructed several times within the short lifespan of the site. The conclusion reached by the archaeologists is that people from Cahokia made repeated returns to both Fisher and Trempealeau, involving an arduous 1,000-kilometer journey by river and overland travel.

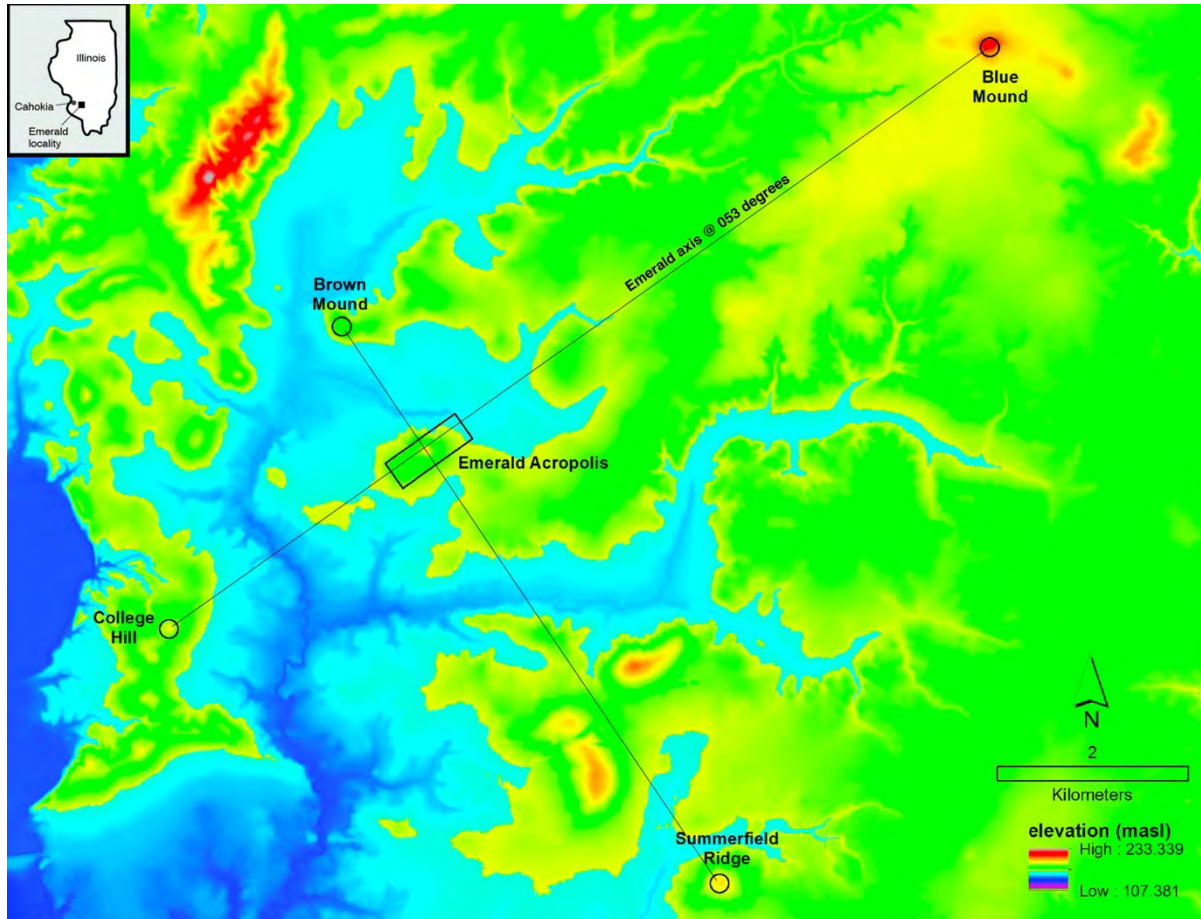


Fig. 3 The alignments of the Emerald Acropolis with prominent hills on the horizon. There are surface indications that there were mounds and shrines on those hills.

Recent salvage excavations at the Carson site in northwest Mississippi (Mehta and Connaway 2020), about 750 river kilometers downstream from Cahokia, have revealed a monumental center with evidence of large and small earthen mounds, an extensive palisaded village, and a bundle-burial mortuary complex. The buildings and the artifacts confirm that, shortly after CE 1050, Cahokians traveled almost as far southward as northward. The centripetal attraction that drew population to Cahokia in the first place was balanced by a centrifugal spread of Cahokian people, Cahokian goods, and Cahokian influence. The sophistication, convergence and spread of Cahokia's culture appear to be unique to the peoples of early North America.

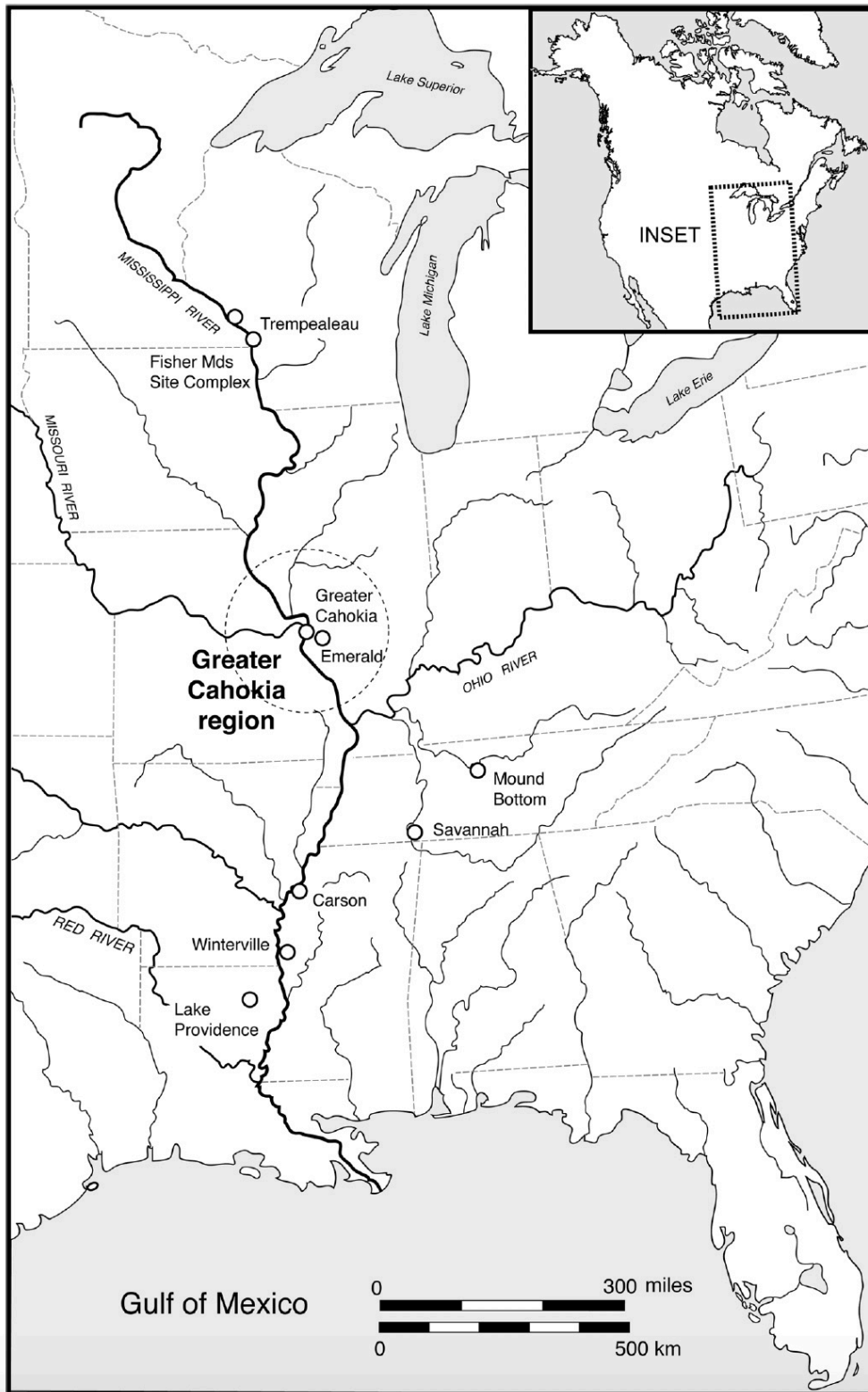


Fig. 4 The greater Cahokia region, showing the locations of Trempealeau and the Carson site that are mentioned in the text, together with other sites that are clearly connected with Cahokia.

The brilliance of Cahokia, the Emerald Acropolis, and the other satellite shrine complexes was brief. By 1100 CE the huge array of public works that had begun around 1050 CE were essentially

complete—although for a century or so additional mounds and shrines were added, with ceremonies and feasting at the Emerald Acropolis. After 1200 CE activity begins to decline, according to the evidence, and over the following century Cahokia’s population of tens of thousands dispersed. There followed a period of fragmented, small-scale societies and endemic warfare.

When Spanish explorers first reached the region in the mid-16th century CE, they met people living in small towns that were centered on one or more earthen truncated pyramids, each of which had a wooden temple on its top, surrounded by houses for the élite. In the surrounding countryside, they encountered small villages and farmsteads of people growing maize and other crops. How Cahokian society was structured and how Cahokia functioned as a society at an urban scale remain unclear. There must have been a social class that maintained the traditional knowledge, and there must have been leadership that performed or supervised project management and logistics for the great public works. Housing for the élites and their artifacts are identifiable. We conjecture that religion was inseparable from government and the organization of society and the economy and that leaders, whether shamans or priests, devised the rules that governed the people’s lives (Pauketat and Alt 2015: 9). What is clear is that the people who created Cahokia and the Emerald Acropolis, the tens of thousands who devoted their lives to them and devised elaborate cults and ceremonies, shaped the landscape, and obtained exotic materials for making symbolic artifacts, were pursuing an extraordinary complex of religious ideas about the place and role of humanity in the cosmos.

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III. RÍO VERDE VALLEY AND THE VALLEY OF OAXACA IN CENTRAL MEXICO

The second case study compares the developmental trajectories of societies in two different regions of southern Mexico through the late Formative period. The cultural history of the Oaxaca Valley in the highlands of Mexico has been the focus of research excavations and surveys over more than half a century (Flannery and Marcus 1976; Marcus and Flannery 1996; Joyce and Barber 2015). In this region the Formative period led to the foundation of the city of Monte Albán, the political and religious center where the Zapotec kingdom and empire developed. Underpinning much of the research has been the investigation of the historical sequence, to discover the processes of social and political evolution. The American anthropologist Elman Service (1962), who classified societies as organized in bands, tribes, chiefdoms, or states, performed the groundwork. Others, in particular Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, tested and refined Service’s theoretical evolutionary scheme against evidence from their fieldwork.

Recent work in the highland Valley of Oaxaca has been led by Sarah Barber and Arthur Joyce, who have also worked in the lower Río Verde valley, near Mexico’s Pacific coast. Their interest has been the role of religion within the socio-political evolution of the Formative period. Ceremonial centers with complexes of monumental pyramids and temples characterize both regions, and over time the complexes increased in scale and elaboration. There is good reason to think that there was competition

among the several centers in each region as they sought to emulate one another in terms of the prestige of their religious ceremonies and their monumental ceremonial centers. The later Formative period centers that competed for religious leadership in the lower Río Verde region, however, did not lead to the emergence of an urban center and there is no sign of power wielded by hereditary dynasties at the peak of a social hierarchy. Joyce and Barber have sought to unravel the stages of development through the later Formative period in the lower Río Verde region, and to explain how leadership in religion did not lead to the emergence of an urban center where overtly political powers ruled, as was the case in the highland Oaxaca Valley.

The history of human settlement in the Oaxaca Valley (Fig. 5) has been charted from the earliest small, mobile foraging bands (at least 12,000 years ago), through the beginnings of the cultivation of plants (pumpkins and the predecessor of maize, teosinte, around 9,000 years ago), to the appearance of sedentary village communities around 1500 BCE (the beginning of the Formative period) and on through the Classic period of Zapotec civilization (Flannery 1976; Flannery and Marcus 1983; Flannery 1985; Marcus and Flannery 1996). The Formative period was marked by rapid population growth, intensified cultivation of a wider range of plants, and the emergence of many of the attributes that later became characteristic of Zapotec civilization. The valley inhabitants were clustered in a number of small villages (some of them still occupied today), but, as the Formative period went on, one village, San José Mogote, emerged as much larger than the others, accounting for about half of the valley's total population.

The mountain-top city of Monte Albán, which was set up to succeed the site of San José Mogote, had a late foundation. It occupied a strategic location (Oaxaca de Juárez, the contemporary regional capital, was founded only a few kilometers away) and was to be the central, controlling site where the Zapotec kingdom emerged in the last three or four centuries BCE (Flannery and Marcus 1976; Marcus and Flannery 1996). The Valley of Oaxaca lies in the southern highlands of Mexico at an elevation of 1,500 meters. The Río Atoyac and its tributary, the Río Salado, come together to produce a Y-shaped valley with 700 square kilometers of flat land, surrounded by forested mountains. The region's settlement history goes back to the arrival of hunter-gatherers when the Pleistocene gave way to the Holocene about 12,000 BCE. The Formative period, which starts around 1500 BCE, began with the explosive development of a number of small village settlements whose inhabitants lived by intensive farming of maize, teosinte, pumpkins, chilli peppers, and avocados; the hunting of deer, peccary, and rabbit; and the harvesting of a variety of wild products such as acorns, hackberries, black walnuts, mesquite beans, prickly pear cactus fruit, and agave (Flannery and Marcus 1976).

Across the Formative centuries, characteristic attributes of the historic Zapotec evolved. By 1000 BCE one settlement, San José Mogote, had grown in size and eminence among the other settlements. In this landscape background of small, egalitarian communities, San José Mogote stood out. Its population was probably two or three times larger than the other villages, and a substantial area of the site was given over to the construction of major public buildings. The site continued to grow rapidly to cover more than 20 hectares with a population of 80 to 120 households. As much as a tenth of the settlement's area was occupied by monumental public buildings, which ranged from massive platforms

of adobe brick to boulder-faced pyramidal terraces with small flights of steps. The settlement was divided by gullies into residential wards, within which there are indications of emerging differences in social rank. Certain wattle-and-daub houses were set on platforms of puddled adobe, and some people were buried with beads and ear spools of jade.

Ritual paraphernalia, such as fish spines (for piercing the tongue in blood-letting rituals), and imitations made from whittled animal bone, were found in a variety of contexts, including in individual households and among the public buildings. Conch-shell trumpets were rare and are found mainly near the public buildings. Musical instruments such as turtle-shell drums, antler drumsticks, and deer-scapula rasps were used at public buildings and found in household storage pits. Flannery and Marcus have suggested that some belonged to "dance sodalities." There are figurines of masked dancers, and examples of pottery masks, as well as costume components such as armadillo shell, crocodile mandible, and macaw wing bones and feathers. The exotic origins of many of these materials indicate the existence of interregional circulation networks that later came to serve economic exchange between regions.

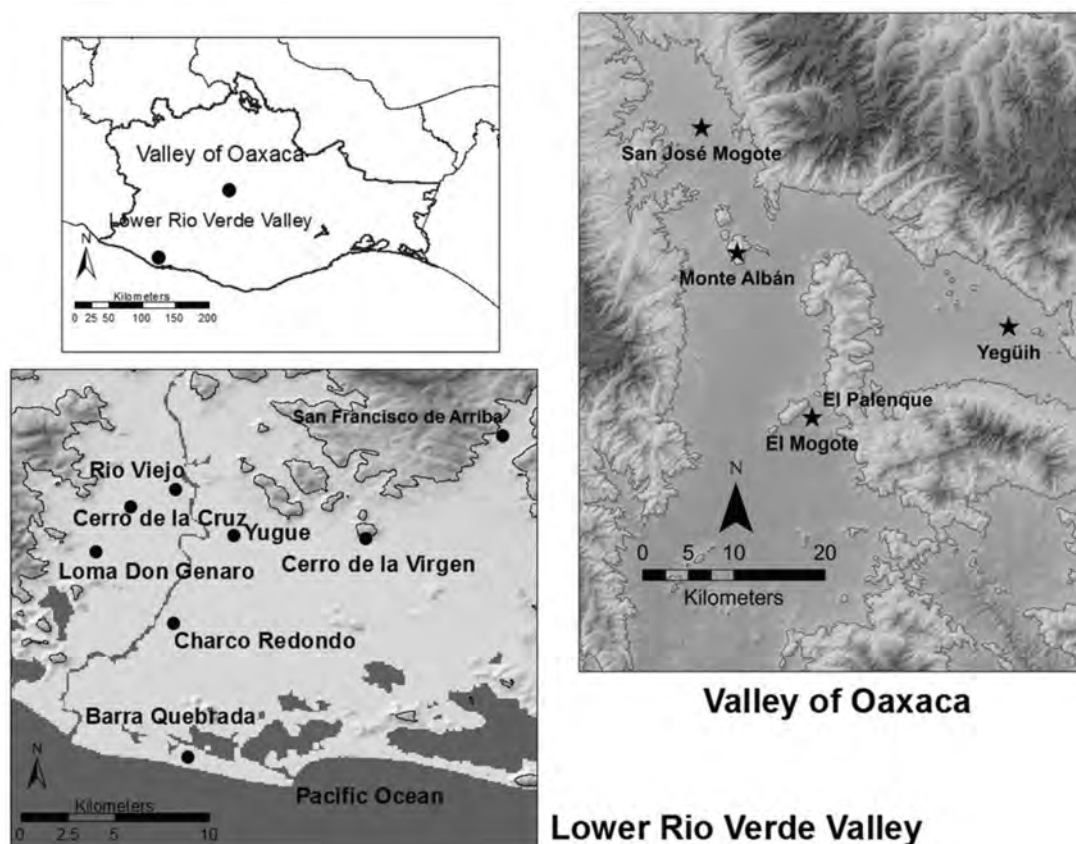


Fig. 5 The main sites in both the Valley of Oaxaca and the Lower Río Verde valley

The first task here is to describe the sequence that had already been worked out for the Valley of Oaxaca. Then we review the results of study at sites in the lower Río Verde valley, before returning to the Valley of Oaxaca in order to look at the innovations in religion and how they supported the

transformation of an élite whose status was built on their religious leadership into an emergent regional political power ruled by kings.

As the research of Flannery and Marcus had shown, there was a long history of settlement in the Valley of Oaxaca. For many centuries San José Mogote was simply one among several small villages whose households subsisted on the produce of their fields and gardens. Everything revolved around the household, including rituals that involved figurines and family burials. Sometime around 1200 BCE, San José Mogote began to grow, to become the largest settlement in the valley. Significantly, it acquired a monumental ceremonial center. San José Mogote continued to grow until around 600 BCE, when it was reaching its peak size of 40 hectares and an estimated population of 100 to 200 households. A major reorganization of the public buildings took place. A complex of stone masonry buildings was created, oriented to the cardinal compass points. The lower walls were constructed from squared masonry blocks, each weighing up to two metric tons. San José Mogote saw the emergence of privileged families, who lived in larger houses, practised head-shaping, and gave their dead distinctively rich burials. The burials were accompanied by specially produced ceramics, covered in symbols representing the vital forces of Earth and Sky. Also around this time there is evidence of the rise of several other, smaller centers within the Valley of Oaxaca. San José Mogote had rivals, and there are signs that the competition led to warfare.

A major shift began around 500 BCE with the founding of Monte Albán, the city that was to become the focal point of Zapotec civilization for more than 1,000 years. San José Mogote, which had been the major population center in the valley, and the site of a major ceremonial complex, rapidly declined into obscurity. Its population left to be the first inhabitants of what was to become Monte Albán. Three or four other smaller centers also decline at this time, and perhaps their populations helped Monte Albán quickly reach a population estimated at around 5,200. This rapid shift in population and settlement, from dispersed localized settlements to a central urban site in a previously unsettled area, has been referred to as the “Monte Albán Synoikism” by Marcus and Flannery (1996). Monte Albán covers at least 8 square kilometers, a landscape sculptured to accommodate huge temples, ballcourts, tombs, palaces, residential terraces, and defensive walls. As the central place of the Zapotec kingdom it was both its capital city, seat of its kings, and its ritual and ceremonial center. It continued to expand, and the Zapotec kingdom grew to be a major empire.

The trajectory in the Lower Río Verde region through the later Formative period was different and is less well known. The archaeological evidence indicates that from around 400 BCE, ceremonial public buildings became central to the constitution of communities. Monumental centers were constructed at Río Verde and at least nine other settlements in the region. What they had in common were the communal practices associated with the community’s public buildings; collective labor was required for their construction, maintenance, and reconstruction, and they were also the locations for ritual feasting, and for cemetery burial. However, each community’s public buildings were different in various ways from the others; there is diversity in site orientations, construction techniques, and in the kinds of objects in ceremonial caches. In that way they defined groups consisting of multiple households and perhaps entire communities. On the other hand, there is no evidence for the existence

of social hierarchies of power or authority at any of the sites with ceremonial centers, which suggests that authority and identity was communal rather than hierarchical and exclusionary.

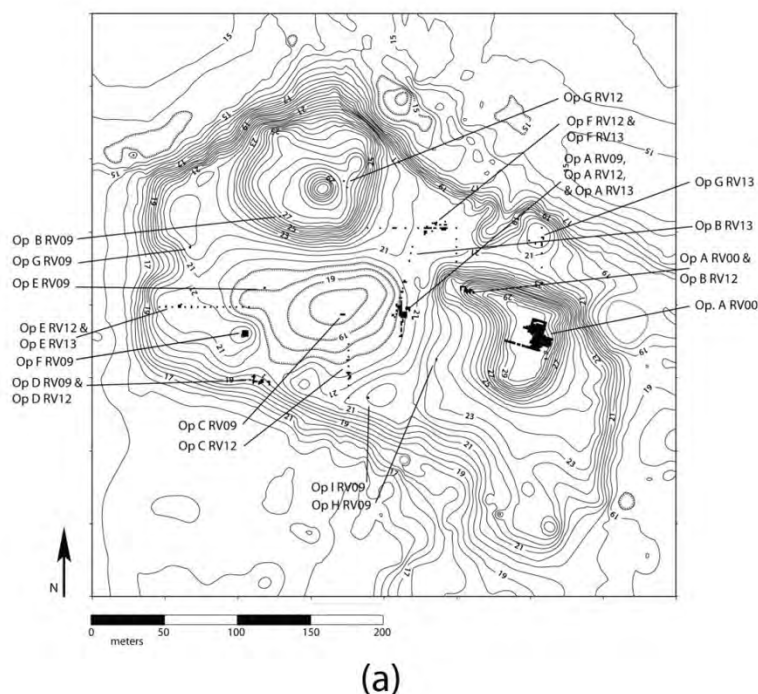


Fig. 6 The acropolis of Río Viejo. Since its monuments were earthen mounds, the site has eroded. The location of the major monuments can still be made out in the contours. Excavation operations are marked in black.

Between 150 BCE and CE 250, Río Viejo became an urban center extending over 225 hectares. The ceremonial center was of impressive size, one of the largest anywhere in the province of Oaxaca (Fig. 6). Now there was increasing inequality evident in mortuary offerings, domestic architecture, ceremonial caches, and monumental buildings. Nevertheless, collective labor projects and public rituals continued to be a focus of communal identity. At the other settlements with ceremonial centers, things continued as they had always been, with communal feasting, cemetery burials, and deposits and caches of various kinds. Excavations in some of the smaller sites show that there were local leaders whose authority depended on specialized religious knowledge and implements. At one site, for example, there was the elaborate burial of an adolescent male who wore a pectoral made from iron ore; in one hand he held a flute made from a deer femur that was elaborately decorated with incised

symbols (Fig. 7). That an adolescent enjoyed high status suggests that status was ascribed (that is, inherited) rather than achieved; and that suggests that there existed a hereditary élite. At another site excavators found a ceremonial cache in a restricted space in the ceremonial center, which included a stone mask depicting a rain deity. At a third site a high-status house has been excavated; it was closely associated with the ceremonial center. The marking of élite bodies by adornment, prestigious objects, and the elaborate architecture and special setting of the high-status house indicate the existence of high-status local élites. In general, however, élite individuals were buried in the community cemeteries; their burials highlighted their difference and high status, but the location of their burials confirmed their affiliation to their local community.

The rulers of Río Viejo sought to extend their influence and control the surrounding communities. The construction of their massive “acropolis,” the ceremonial center of the site in this period of political ambition, would have required the mobilization of a labor force beyond the capacity of the city’s population. The acropolis consisted of a massive platform at least six meters tall, on which were two large substructures, both of which stood at least a further sixteen meters tall. Surprisingly, no elaborate burials or caches of special objects have been found on the new acropolis, but there was plentiful evidence for the holding of many ritual feasts. No palatial houses have been found, and there are no stone monuments with the portraits of rulers and no elaborate tombs. In short, Río Viejo did not develop effectively as a controlling regional center, and there are no signs of an emerging and controlling élite. At the other centers in the region, religious traditions continued; people continued to “feed” and “animate” their ceremonial centers with the ritual objects and human burials that embedded history and community at the center of their lives. The sacred and material obligations to sustain nonhuman, divine beings by having public buildings in local communities seems in the end to have blunted the ability of the rulers of Río Viejo to extend their power across the region. Their new acropolis with whatever ceremonies and symbolism it was associated was unable to assert itself as a new, magnetic politico-religious center. The Río Viejo proto-state collapsed within a few generations; its population drained away and by 250 CE the site was abandoned.



Fig. 7 Bone flute with elaborate symbolic decoration. It was part of the equipment with which a young male was buried at Yügüeh, one of the second-tier sites in the lower Río Verde valley.

Viejo depopulated and multiple local centers continued to exist in the region. So we should return briefly to Monte Albán to see if we can identify how it made itself the center of power and the birthplace

of the Zapotec civilization. In fact, we should look back a little further, to the last chapter in the history of San José Mogote, the predecessor of Monte Albán.

At the beginning of the Formative period, from 1500 BCE, the Valley of Oaxaca was a landscape of small villages and hamlets, each consisting of a few households dependent on the crops that they grew. San José Mogote began as a cluster of nine such hamlets, but, from the outset, this cluster was distinctive: in an open space in one of the cluster of hamlets there was a small, square building that was not simply another house. For reasons that are unclear, it was repeatedly torn down and rebuilt. Flannery and Marcus believe that it was a men's house, or the meeting house for a special group of initiates. From about 1200 BCE San José Mogote had begun to grow to be the pre-eminent center of settlement in the Valley of Oaxaca (Fig. 8). It also acquired the first ceremonial center. Prior to this, there is little sign of ritual or religion. The dead were buried beside the house where they had lived or in a village cemetery; there are no burials that show special status, and there is no uniformity in the way that the body is laid for burial. The creation of a ceremonial center implies that the community has come to subscribe to a communal view on the necessary rituals of their lives.

Archaeology can rarely reconstruct what went on in a ceremonial center, still less who was involved and what they did; in the many centuries since they were abandoned so much had been eroded away. Many of the shrine buildings were made of wood, which has entirely decayed; and where there was a stone building, it is impossible to retrieve information from the bare floor of an empty building. There are signals from elsewhere, however, that indicate great changes in society and its relations with the supernatural world. At the time when San José Mogote first acquired a ceremonial center there are changes in the burials, both at San José Mogote itself and in other settlements in the valley. Flannery and Marcus (1996) point to a differentiation between male and female burials; for the first time there are ceramics with painted motifs that can be recognized as early forms of the Zapotec glyphs for Earth (and the power of the earthquake) and Sky (and the power of lightning), which are found exclusively with male burials. Reading back from what is known from Spanish accounts of Zapotec beliefs, Earth and Sky (whose powers were shown in earthquakes and lightning) were the two poles of the cosmic world. In later times, and likely from these earlier times, people understood themselves to be descended from supernatural beings identified with either Earth or Sky. Hence, the families who made up one settlement would be related in their belief in common descent. San José Mogote was different from the other settlements: the hamlets from which it was originally formed had grown into different quarters of the larger settlement, and the male burials in the different quarters were accompanied by ceramics that referred to either the Earth or the Sky.

There are also signs of the beginnings of the formation of social differences of status, both in the burials and in the terracotta figurines. Some bodies are distinguished by their exotic adornments, such as ear plugs, pectorals, or necklaces of jade. And there are two classes of clay figurines: some, seemingly male, are seated cross-legged with their hands on their knees, while others are standing figures with arms crossed over their chests, which has been interpreted as a gesture of obeisance. The seated position of some of the figurines is mirrored in some burials of apparently high-status individuals, where the body was placed in the grave seated cross-legged or seated with knees drawn up under the chin. The fact

that there are some burials of children or adolescents with exotic ornaments and elaborate ceramics indicates that high status was by right of birth and not by achievement. This is the formation of the two-tier structure of Zapotec society, which was recognized by the Spanish as nobles and commoners.

Over the following centuries, while San José Mogote was the major center in the region, other settlements began to grow and develop their own ceremonial centers. Around 600 BCE there are signs of turmoil and destruction right at the center of the ceremonial buildings of San José Mogote. Although we cannot be sure, it is most likely that the destruction was the result of conflict with other centers in the valley, which resented the attempts of San José Mogote to assert its prominence.

Rebuilding took place immediately, but, rather than rebuilding the temple, the new buildings, which were aligned on a different orientation, included architecturally elaborate high-status houses. Among the contents of the houses are elaborate ritual objects such as obsidian blood-letters (and ritual bloodletting is known from later times to be associated with the obligations of the elite class of nobles). Associated with these residences are formal stone masonry tombs, showing that prominent people were now buried in special locations that differentiated them from the normal interments. It is known from later times that living descendants consulted the bones of ancestors through tomb-reopening ceremonies. Tombs made the ancestors more salient to the living both as divine beings and because their bones became accessible and potent ritual objects. Another significant find was a sculptured threshold stone (Fig. 9) that depicts, for the first time, a naked human sacrifice, together with, for the first time, glyphs that may, also for the first time, be calendrical signs. The archaeologists conclude that we are seeing the emergence of a class of hereditary nobles whose status was bound up with religion. They describe how elite identity and status were defined by the association of people of high status with the sacred buildings, which by this time may have been viewed as living, ensouled beings. Through their roles as ritual specialists, the new rulers were mediators between people and the divine.

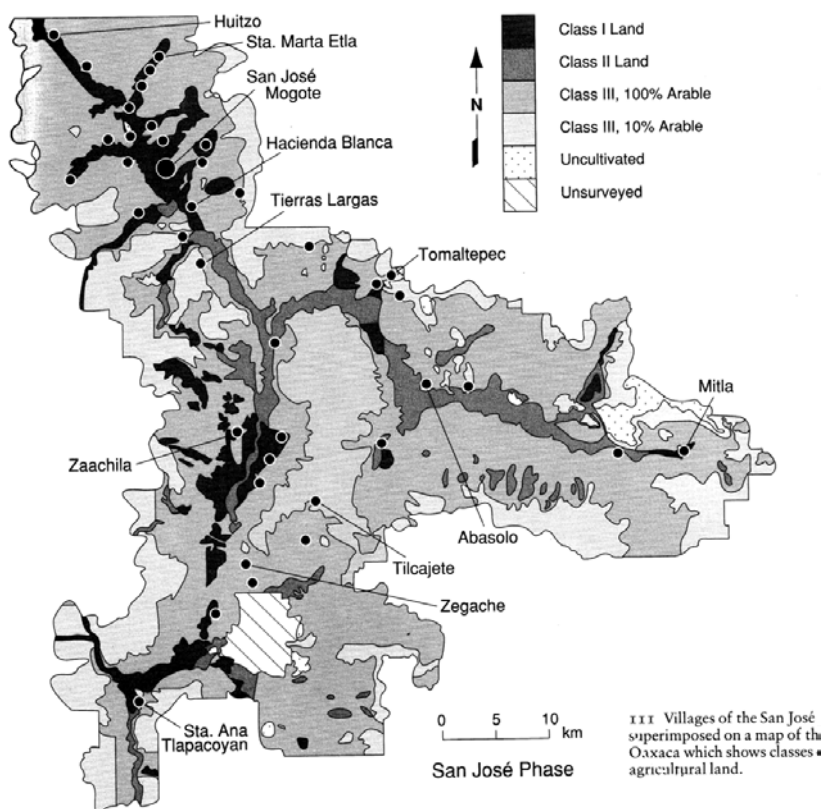


Fig. 8 Map of the highland Valley of Oaxaca, showing settlements that were contemporary with the expansion in importance of San José Mogote, which is situated near the top left of the map. San José Mogote sits at the center of the largest area of the most productive land in the whole valley.



Fig. 9 A sculptured stone from the ceremonial center of San José Mogote, showing a dead prisoner, who has been disembowelled (the blood is flowing from his body around the edge of the slab). Between his feet are two "glyphs" giving his date-name, the earliest evidence of writing, and of giving names in terms of the Zapotec calendar.

Around 500 BCE, monumental construction at San José Mogote ceased and the site contracted, as did many of the surrounding settlements. The people who left San José Mogote and the other communities founded a new political and religious center at Monte Albán. The changes in religion and politics that began at San José Mogote were further extended and transformed at Monte Albán, which was a deliberately founded new center of unprecedented size. With an area of more than 442

hectares it rapidly acquired an estimated population of 10,200, which soon doubled to 20,400 (Figs. 10, 11).

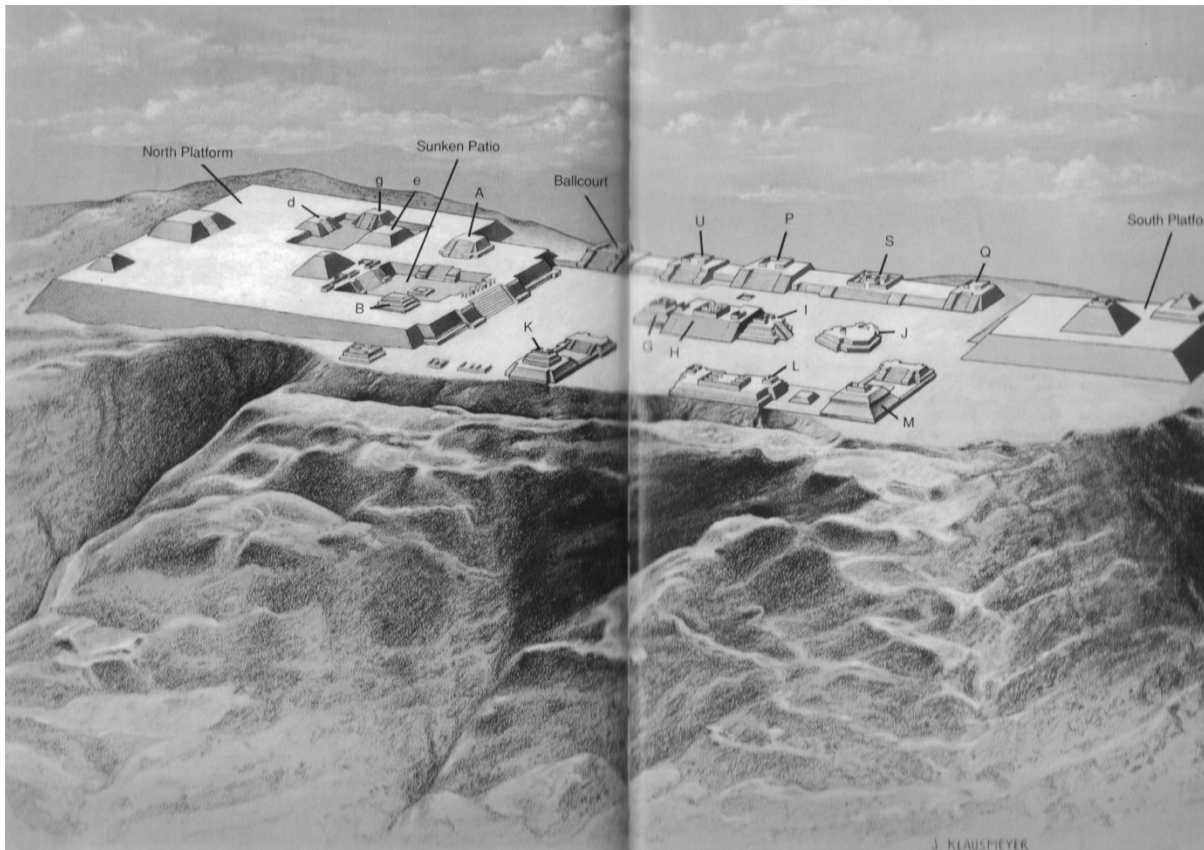


Fig. 10 The main plaza of Monte Albán in its developed form. Over time some of the original buildings were enlarged, and more buildings were added. For scale, the distance between the North Platform and the South Pyramid is about 300 meters.

So much of the design and the scale of work at the new site was on an unprecedented scale, incorporating many significant innovations. At the outset, massive construction work was initiated on a huge ceremonial center located around the Main Plaza, which was plainly designed as an arena where thousands of people could participate in public rituals. Many of the public buildings around the plaza were “ensouled” with offerings, including human burials. The site of Monte Albán was on the top of a mountain that dominated the surrounding valley floor. The symbolism and spatial arrangement of the buildings and the associated iconography of carved reliefs probably symbolize the cosmos, a place where rituals were performed that re-enacted and commemorated the cosmic creation. Monte Albán was not unique in this Late Formative period, as there are ceremonial centers at other Mesoamerican cities of this period where the idea of the shape of the cosmos was modeled onto the site with the north representing the celestial realm and south the Earth or underworld.

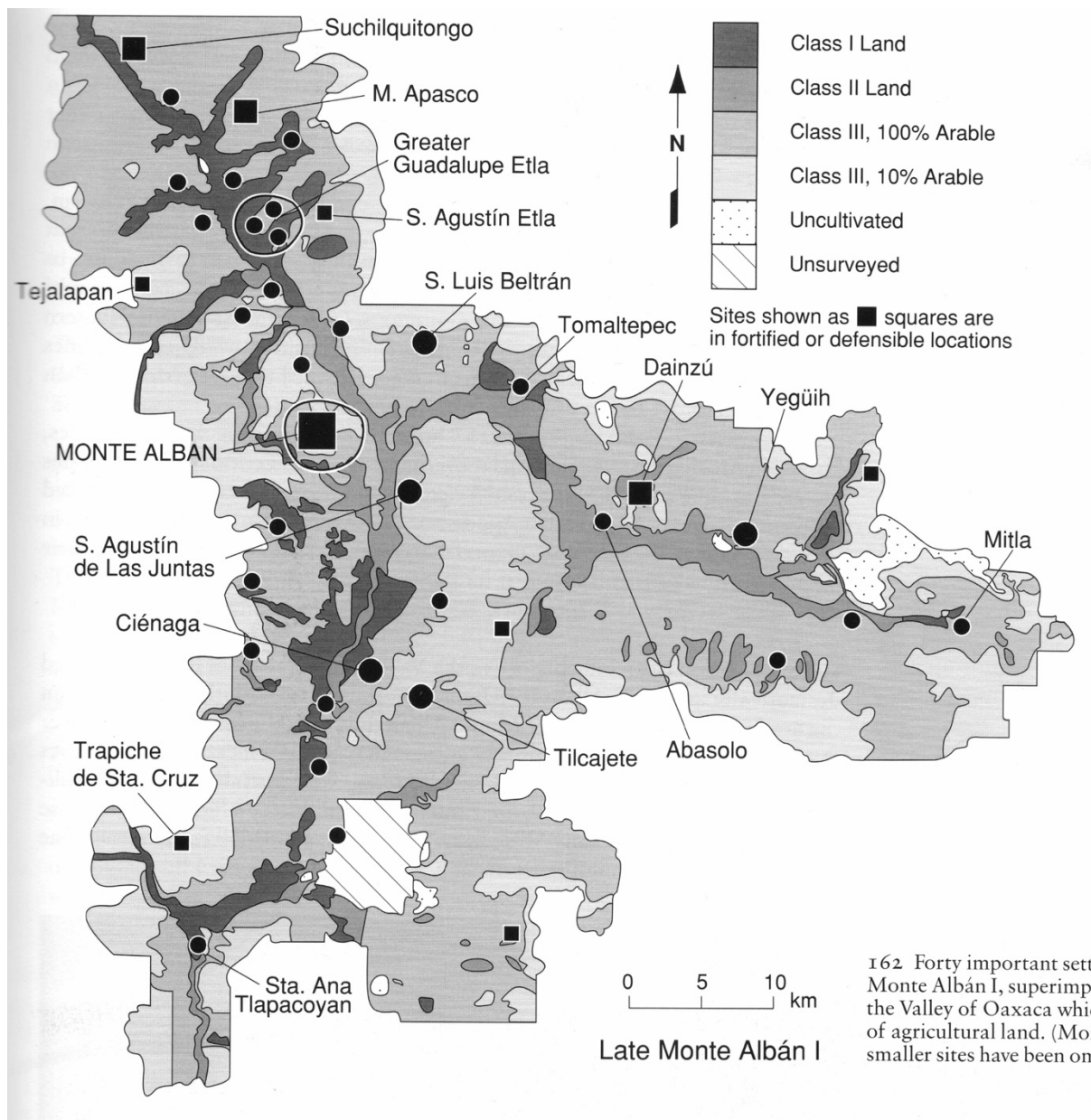


Fig. 11 The Valley of Oaxaca showing the location of the new center at Monte Albán. Its strategic location at the center of the valley system is clear. Note the locations of the various fortified locations (shown as black squares), demonstrating the ability of Monte Albán to exercise regional control. Note also that Monte Albán is situated on mountainous (impressive) land of poor agricultural potential. Its population relied on irrigated terraces in the surrounding piedmont, and doubtless on food supplies from around its "territory."

Because the main structures of the center of Monte Albán were expanded or encapsulated within even bigger structures, information about the original form and function of the main plaza is mostly buried within later, grander structures or is inaccessible (Urcid and Joyce 2014). The iconography found with the massive North Platform of the Main Plaza referred to the sky and rain, and what can be recognized as the Zapotec rain deity. The iconographic references at the southern end of the plaza referred to sacrifice, warfare, ancestors, and the underworld. In a gallery in one building is a series of 400 orthostats with representations of men who were once identified as slain captives from enemy armies,

but recent research suggests the frieze depicts a warrior sodality carrying out auto-sacrificial (the killing of oneself) rituals in preparation for battle (Urcid and Joyce 2014: 152-4). Associated with the imagery are short hieroglyphic texts that refer to at least three rulers, their genealogy, enthronement, and the defeat and decapitation of an enemy (Fig. 12).

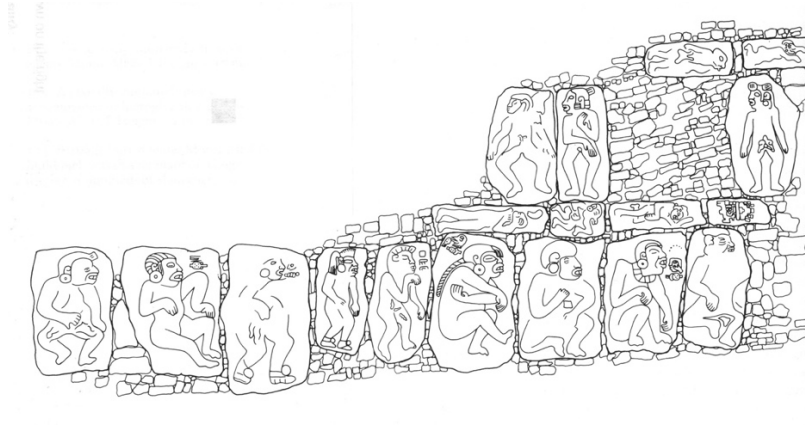


Fig. 12 Some of a tiered frieze of relief slabs embedded into the wall of an early building in the ceremonial center that was later buried within an even larger building. Originally identified as dancers, the figures were later thought to be slain and sometimes mutilated enemies. Recent research suggests that they are part of a hierarchically structured series.

Urcid and Joyce (2014) attempt a general reconstruction of the early structure as a 6-meter-tall platform with three shrines (Fig. 13).

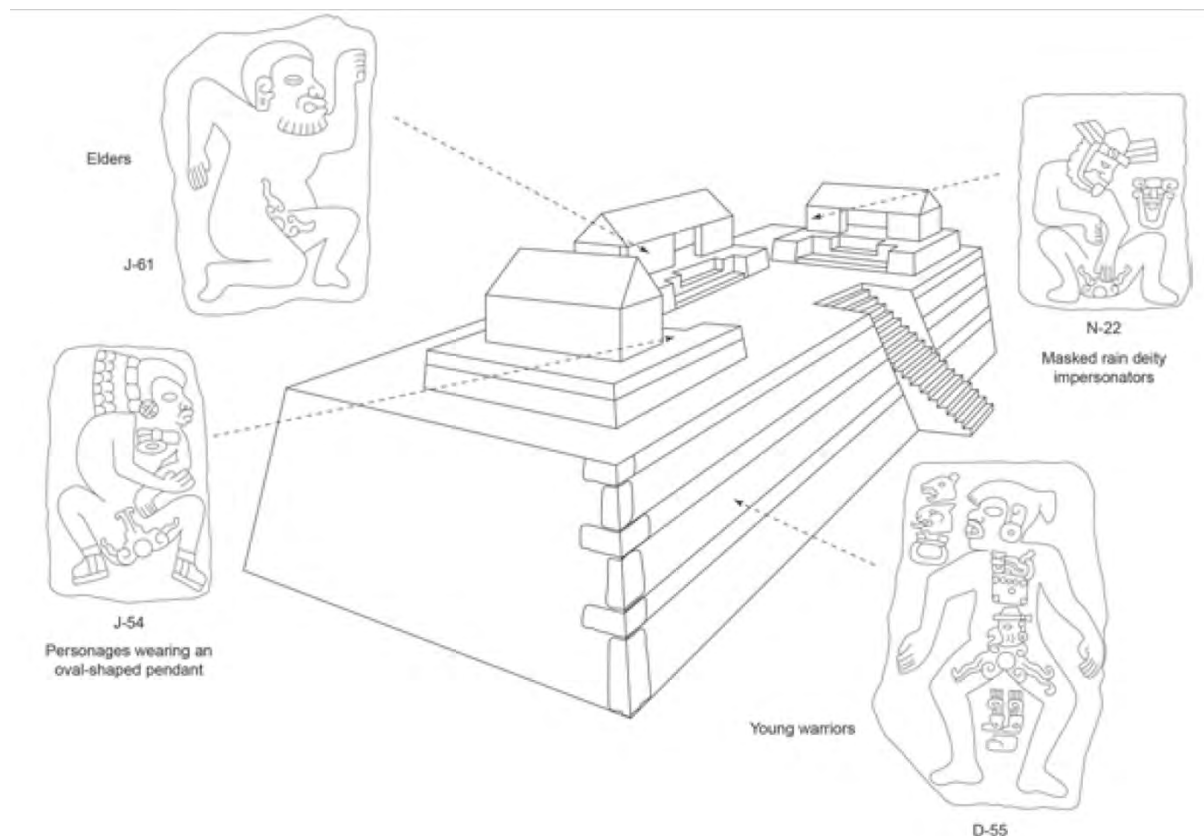


Fig. 13 Reconstruction of one of the early buildings on the plaza of Monte Albán, with the location of friezes of figures. Urcid and Joyce (2014) believe that the friezes mirror a procession ascending the staircase to the temples at the top.

The many relief slabs may be seen to depict the participants in a ritual, starting from the rows of men at the bottom, who they believe to be members of an age-grade sodality preparing to go to war. Above them are the figures of high rank (see Fig. 12), masked impersonators of the rain god, a person whose high status is shown by his pendant, ear plugs, and head-dress, and bearded elders.

The archaeological and iconographic evidence indicates that ceremonies included human sacrifice as well as auto-sacrifice (the killing of oneself), ancestor veneration, divination, and feasting. These ceremonies took place on the plaza, together with ritual preparations for war. The archaeologists also describe it as “a place of cosmic creation and renewal where the planes of earth, sky and underworld intersected, . . . an *axis mundi* and a powerful divine entity in its own right” (Joyce and Barber 2018: 38) (see Fig. 14). They also point to the ritual innovation of human sacrifice as a powerful means of enacting the sacred covenant whereby the gods were petitioned to ensure fertility and prosperity on behalf of the community. Monte Albán represents a remarkable socio-political revolution that was carried out by means of an intensive development of traditional religious practices, beliefs, and materials. Maintaining traditional rituals and symbolism, the old forms were given new meaning in terms of social status and political intention. Although the new center of Monte Albán brought together a population from well beyond the site of San José Mogote, it was not without rivals; there is evidence that there were at least two other incipient power centers, and evidence also of outbreaks of warfare. In this early phase of the history of Monte Albán, the innovations in religion and politics were beneficial to the nobility; there was rising inequality and a clear separation of noble from commoner identities. The ritual role of rulers and their political power are scarcely visible in the iconography. There are few overt representations of rulers and there were no high-status residences directly facing the plaza.



Fig 14. Panorama across the main plaza of Monte Albán, emphasising the scale of public works that transformed the rugged landscape and created the massive, stone-faced mounds.

By the beginning of the Terminal phase of the Formative period, from 150 BCE, the rulers of Monte Albán were gaining increasing authority in religion and political and economic control, extending across the region. New constructions restricted access to the Main Plaza, and, for the first time, high-status houses were built directly on the plaza, indicating elite control over the ceremonial center. At the end of the Terminal Formative, however, it seems that tensions between communal and hierarchical forms of authority may have erupted into political upheaval. Both major iconographic programs on the Main Plaza, which probably represented a more communal form of leadership, were dismantled and some monuments were defaced and buried under new buildings. From the beginning of the succeeding period, around 250 CE, the rulers enforced more exclusionary and hierarchical forms of authority, ensuring their prominence over any competing forms of authority among the nobles. The Zapotec kingdom had begun in earnest.

Reflecting on the different trajectories of the two regions, the lower Río Verde and the Valley of Oaxaca, the researchers took a particular interest in the relationships between religion and political innovation. Why religion could be so constraining in the lower Verde, but leave openings for innovation in the Oaxaca Valley, they concluded, was due to historically contingent factors involving

the ensoulment of public buildings, the storage of the remains of ancestors, and the centrality of rulers in relation to the divine in the Valley of Oaxaca. At San José Mogote and then at Monte Albán the emergent ruling élite identified themselves with the religious centrality of the ceremonial center. By contrast, in the lower Río Verde settlements, high-status individuals, who can be identified by their burials, remained part of their communities, being buried in their community cemeteries. The events that led to the burning of the temple at San José Mogote were perhaps catalytic in precipitating a dramatic development of the political process. In the lower Río Verde, when the region might have come together around the formation of the ambitious innovations at the potential regional center of Río Viejo, the bones of their ancestors and the ceremonial offerings within their public buildings at the different local centers created conditions of “entrapment” (Joyce and Barber 2015). To have transferred their allegiance to the emergent regional center at Río Viejo would have meant abandoning the bones of their ancestors who were “ensouled” where they had lived. The bonds and obligations people had in their local communities outweighed the incentive to establish ties to people, place, and authority at the regional level. By contrast, the innovation and reordering of religious and political entanglements had already begun at San José Mogote, was accelerated with the founding of Monte Albán, and intensified with its growth as a regional power center.

For reasons that remain obscure, the population of many settlements in the Valley of Oaxaca joined the people of San José Mogote in creating a great new center at Monte Albán. Although there were certainly warriors among the young men of San José Mogote, it is difficult to imagine that what Flannery and Marcus have called the Monte Albán “synoecism” of the whole region could have been brought about by force or threat of force by the San José Mogote élite. And, when the massive Monte Albán ceremonial center was created, and the power of Monte Albán was projected through a network of secondary centers, and defended by strategically placed fortified settlements (see Fig. 11), it is significant that the centrality of that power was expressed in the cosmic centrality of the ceremonial center, its buildings, and its rituals and feasts. While there were high-status houses around the ceremonial center (and later within the center), no palace of a king has been identified, or any kind of citadel that encapsulated the force of a central authority. Everything was lived and done through the religious center. Incidentally, while the Zapotec state had hereditary rulers (kings), there is little or no sign that either developed San José Mogote or early Monte Albán was governed by “chiefs:” the social evolutionary progression outlined by Service (band—tribe—chiefdom—state; Service 1962) is not followed in the Valley of Oaxaca, where religious leaders led to the power of “kings”. It is significant that Zapotec rulers spent a period of religious training before taking office, and the other leading figures in the Zapotec state were high priests from noble families.

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IV. CHAVÍN DE HUANTÁR, PERU

Chavín de Huantár in the highlands of Peru (Figs. 15, 16, 17), now a UNESCO World Heritage site, has been known and under investigation for more than a century (Burger 1984; Burger 1992; Conklin

and Quilter 2008). Recent research has been aimed at understanding the 3,000-year-old monumental temple site in the context of innovation in the development of Andean religion and society.

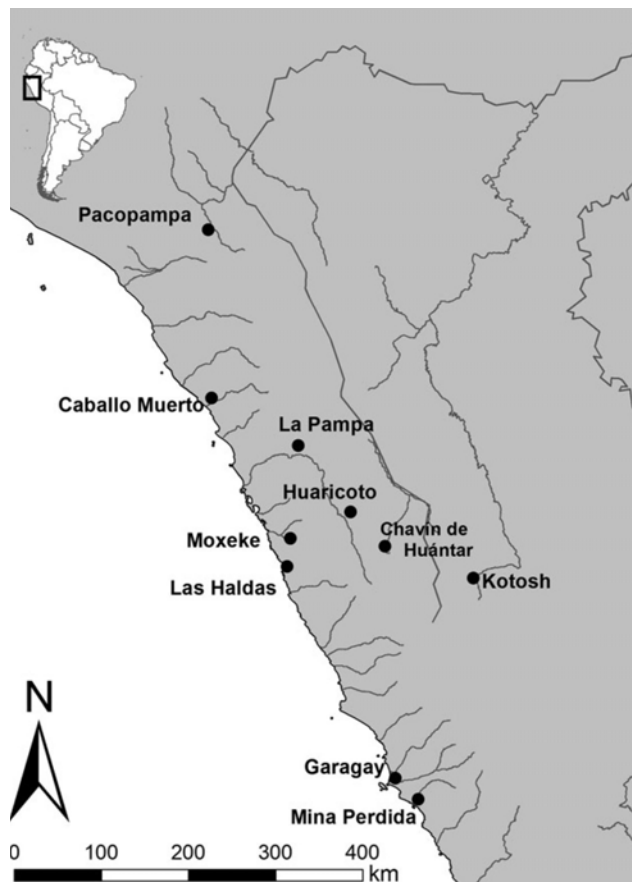


Fig. 15 Map locating Chavín de Huántar among other contemporary sites in Peru

Chavín de Huántar fits into the Middle and Late Formative period of the Andean region, commencing around 3000 BCE, when small settled communities began building what can be interpreted as temples within their settlements. From around 1200 BCE, and especially from 800 BCE, a consistent pattern emerges among the various sites, with monumental structures and a common material culture. This period in the Central Andes comes to an end around 500 BCE. The considerable innovations in both material culture and ritual are directly associated with what are clearly major ceremonial centers and with what the archaeologists interpret as significant changes in social and political organization.

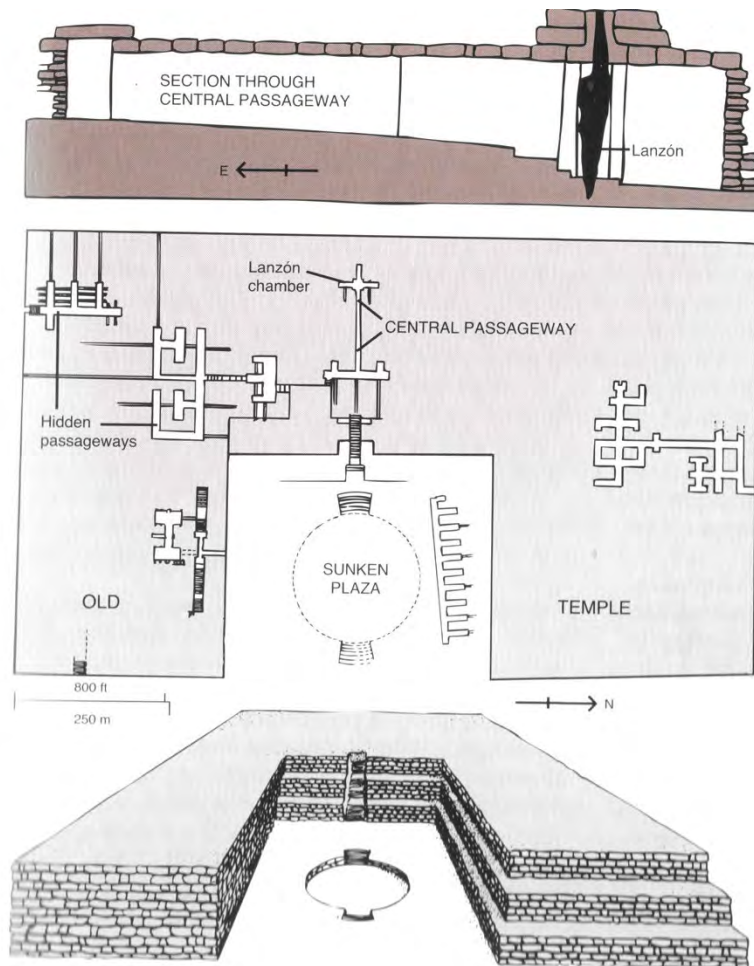
There had been a small settlement at Chavín de Huántar for many centuries before the building of the earliest complex of monumental constructions, around 1200 BCE. These are remarkable in several ways. The religious monuments seem out of proportion to the quite small area of the settlement that surrounds them. If the monumental structures of the ceremonial center were constructed by the people of the settlement, a very significant part of their labor and skills must have been devoted to its service over many centuries; and that surely implies that the ceremonial center and its rituals gave meaning to their lives.



Fig. 16 Aerial view of the landscape within which Chavín de Huántar was built (at 1 on the photo). A fast-running river emerges out of the mountains and meets another river coming from the left of the photo. It was a landscape prone to flooding and dangerous landslides (the largest of which is at 2 on the photo). It seems to be designed to arouse elements of fear and suspicion among visitors unfamiliar with such a location.

At the end of the Formative period, it seems that the ceremonial center at Chavín de Huántar lost its central function in the lives of the people, as is the case with other sites with ceremonial centers in the whole Andean region. People began to build houses within the sacred area, borrowing and recycling stone from the abandoned monuments. For the archaeologist, it would have been better if, when the ceremonial center ceased to function, the population had simply packed up their personal belongings and walked away, leaving everything as it was. Even so, the centuries of abandonment would have gradually erased or degraded the traces of the center's use. Archaeologists also have to learn to live with what their predecessors have done; by the standards of today, the excavation methods of the first archaeologists were primitive, and their documentation of their work and discoveries make frustrating reading for today's archaeologists. Like many sites that attracted attention in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chavín de Huántar suffers from the under-recording of earlier investigations. Necessarily, therefore, there are many questions, some of them quite fundamental, that cannot be answered satisfactorily. That these monumental complexes were the arenas for religious rituals is clear enough, but the nature of those rituals, and whether they were inclusive (i.e., the general population participated) or the preserve of a cultic élite of some kind is debated. Some have seen them as oracle centers or pilgrimage destinations. Cumulatively, from the several ceremonial centers of the period,

there is evidence that the elaborate architectural complexes, with their monumental reliefs and sculptures, were where strikingly costumed individuals paraded with (to our eyes) extraordinary paraphernalia, and where various psychoactive plant extracts were ingested.



*Fig. 17 The first phase of buildings consisted of substantial platforms around three sides of an open square, within which there was a sunken, circular plaza. The platforms and the walls around the circular plaza were faced with cut-stone masonry. Some of the internal galleries within the platform mounds are shown above the reconstruction drawing. And, at the top, there is a section through the gallery that leads to the tall, sculpted monolith, *El Lanzón*.*

We should see Chavín de Huántar as one of several ceremonial centers that, in general terms, share architectural forms and material culture. But each center is different in patterns, styles, icons, and technology. While they are part of a common pattern of cultural evolution and function, each is distinctive in detail: they were independent, parallel centers that interacted with each other in different ways. At Chavín de Huántar, as at other ceremonial centers, excavators have found highly decorated ceramic, stone, bone, and shell artifacts and decorative minerals that were brought from other places and carefully deposited in caches within the complex. Some of the objects and materials came from as far away as 1,000 kilometers. There also is evidence for the spread of elements distinct to the Chavin center to other centers to the north and south. At Chavín de Huántar and contemporary ceremonial

centers, in addition to the evidence for long-distance movements of prized materials and highly decorated artifacts, elements of the iconography became diffused through what can be identified as an interaction sphere, an extensive network of ceremonial centers that engaged in exchange, emulation, and competition. These elements included the use of (locally available) plant-based hallucinogenic substances and elaborate ceramics that were used in ritual deposits. There are common elements in the iconography, such as impressive and dangerous animals, large felines, snakes, raptorial birds, and caiman-like creatures, and humanoid figures incorporating threatening elements of the aggressive animals just mentioned, such as fangs, claws, talons, or hooked beaks.

At first the main architectural elements of the Chavín de Huántar ceremonial center consisted of three substantial platform mounds around three sides of a square area, within which there was a sunken, circular plaza (Fig. 17). Around the sides of the circular plaza, large stone slabs bore symbolic carved reliefs. Below and through the complex there were water channels and galleries accessed by steep stairways. Another distinctive feature of Chavín de Huántar is the facing of the steep walls of the platform mounds with cut masonry.

At some stage quite late in its history the center of the ceremonial complex was shifted, and an even more impressive array of platform mounds was constructed around the sides of an even larger sunken plaza (Fig. 18).

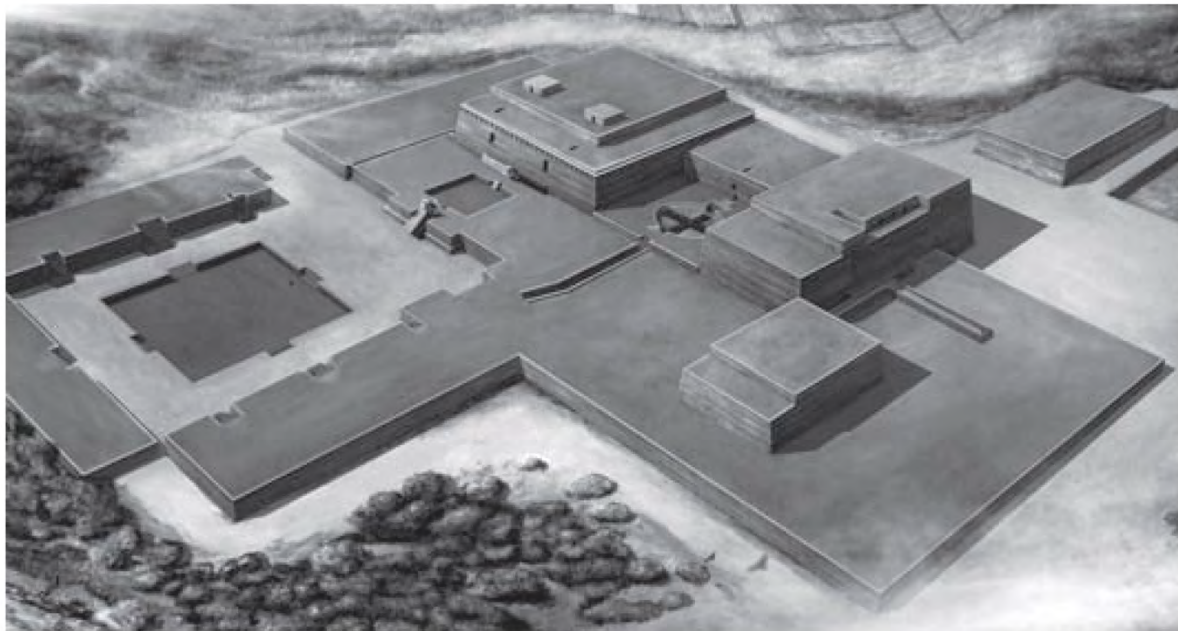


Fig. 18 The later expansion of the ceremonial center. The early-phase platforms around the circular plaza are at the upper right; the new platforms are at the lower left, built around a huge, sunken plaza within a plaza.

While the story can be conveniently related in these two constructional stages, recent research has revealed at least fifty major construction events. The associated settlement was quite small, and repeated labor demands are almost unimaginable. Even more extraordinary are the public works that

were necessary for the expanded ceremonial center. Unbelievable as it may seem, the people set about increasing the limited amount of valley bottom land by moving the course of the tributary river that joined the main river as it emerged from the mountains. Rick suggests that this was part of a pattern of willingness to confront natural risk for the sake of audacious site expansion (Rick 2016: 16). The expansion of the center's layout, which involved considerable engineering to channel dangerous floods, contrasts with the alternative, which would have been to start a new set of buildings nearby, where the challenges and risks were lower. Rick suggests that the leadership of Chavín de Huántar may have deliberately accepted this challenge as a way of demonstrating their alignment with the powers of nature.

Especially from about 800 BCE, a new consistency emerges among the ceremonial centers of the region in terms of highly organized patterns of monumental structures and material culture. At Chavín de Huántar and many other regional sites, this comes to an end by about 500 BCE. Rick argues that this last phase of the Formative period at Chavín de Huántar and elsewhere saw considerable innovation in both materials and rituals, ones wherein the ceremonial centers were at the center of significant changes in socio-political organization. If Chavín de Huántar was to compete within the “interaction sphere” (see Section V, Afterword) of regional ceremonial centers, it needed to do so within the generally accepted mode; in today's marketing jargon, it needed “unique selling points.” Ceramics were an important medium; there is evidence that special ceramic products were highly prized, and were ceremonially deposited at temple sites, sometimes far from where they were made. The problem is to identify the place of manufacture, but there is a class of “complex stamped” ware that is particularly elaborate in its surface decoration. This ceramic ware seems to have been devised and manufactured exclusively at Chavín de Huántar, where it is common; it occurs at other contemporary centers, but not frequently. At Chavín there are relief-sculpted slabs that depict men carrying a particular form of large spearhead. The same large spearheads occur as occasional finds uniquely at Chavín. Where 5-centimeter stone spearheads were the norm, the Chavín spearheads were up to 25 centimeters in length. Their manufacture was extraordinarily difficult and skilled, involving the flaking and grinding of exceptionally hard, high-quality flint. Rick argues that these are innovations that had some association with rituals and required a major investment in labor and specialist skill, recognizable to visitors from elsewhere.

Two types of graphic stone sculpture are exclusive to Chavín de Huántar, both in terms of their technical qualities and what they represent. The sculptors at Chavín de Huántar uniquely framed their flat relief slabs, such as those that line the wall of the sunken circular plaza (Fig. 19).



Fig. 19 One of the relief slabs that surround the sunken circular plaza. A particular feature of the relief slabs of Chavín de Huántar is their rectangular framing; how the sharp cutting of the angles was achieved still puzzles the archaeologists.

And there are also many three-dimensionally carved stone heads that were designed to project their fearsome faces from walls (Fig. 20).

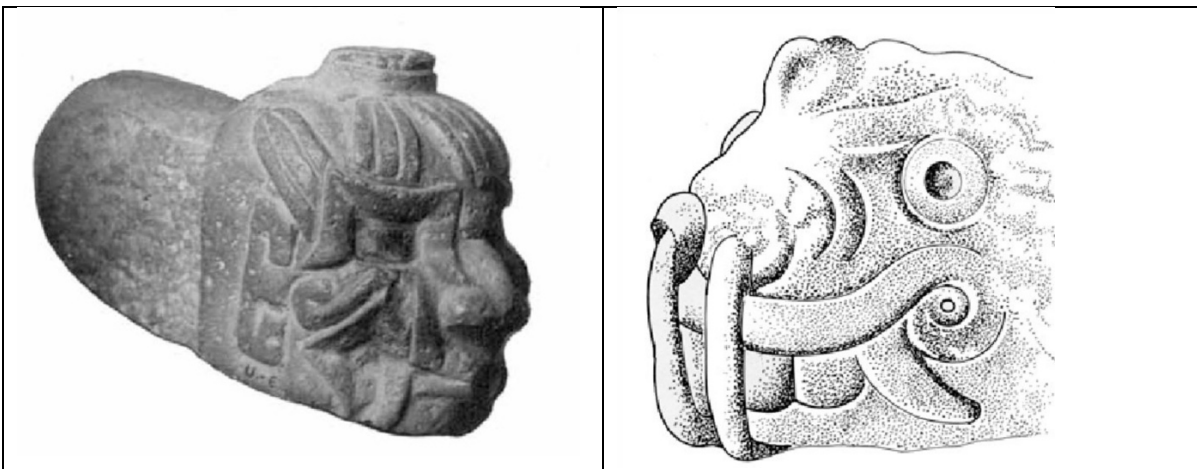


Fig. 20 Two examples of tenon heads. They were made from a light grey granite that was brought from a distance. They not only project from the wall, but contrast with the local dark grey-brown stone that was used for the cut-stone masonry. The head on the left has streaming eyes, while the head on the right has mucus pouring from its nostrils. The heads combine human with feline features, particularly the emphasized fangs. They are thought to depict people under the influence of psychoactive drugs who are morphing from human into (divine) feline form.

Chavín de Huántar used elements of its natural environment to its advantage. As already remarked, the inhabitants had long used irrigation channels to extend and improve their cultivable land; they

also needed to cope with occasional floods by means of drainage channels or storm drains. But their investment in the construction of an elaborate and extensive network of underground water canals below and through the core of the ceremonial center is quite extraordinary and unique. Several kilometers of underground channels have been discovered, and it is clear that much more remains to be excavated and explored. These channels could not have been added to the design; the implication is that subterranean encounters with rushing water were part of the original plan, and the channels were created before work began on the main constructions of the ceremonial center. The underground water channels intersect with superbly constructed galleries, reached via several staircases. And there are numerous ducts that link galleries, and often ducts are aligned with one another to produce channels through which sound or light could be projected. Acoustic research has shown that the ducts do indeed produce strange sound effects. It seems that there was extraordinary knowledge invested in the design of underground labyrinths within which the people who were being led through them would experience unexpected sounds and perhaps also reflected light. One duct provides lighting on the front of a tall sculptured monolith that still stands in its original location in one of the long galleries. What must be added to the sensory effects is the use of psychoactive drugs, for which there is evidence in the representation of drug plants and the side effects of the drugs, as well as the presence of the paraphernalia of drug use (Fig. 21).



Fig 21 Relief sculpture of a humanoid figure (note the clawed hands and feet, the snakes around the head and at the belt). The figure holds what appears to be a particular species of local cactus that can produce a powerful psychoactive substance.

The complex has some strange features that are still not understood. For example, at various points in the underground galleries there are deposits of broken (sacrificed?) objects or materials, including gold,

ceramics, carved bone, and stone vessels. Conspicuous among these are the many deliberately smashed pieces of obsidian, a prized black volcanic glass material the nearest source for which is hundreds of kilometers away.

Through the later Formative period at Chavín de Huántar, greater and greater efforts were made to elaborate the experience of those who participated in the cultic rituals. To keep or improve its place among the competing ceremonial centers required constant innovations, improvements, and enhancements. To successfully compete with other centers, Chavín de Huántar depended on attracting an emerging élite, many of whom no doubt had the choice of which cult to invest in. The success of Chavín de Huántar lay in its ability “to competitively create new, costly, inimitable, and ever more impressive technologies, contexts and actions to be employed in more convincing ritual activities, in spaces that evoked another world in which social differentiation was intrinsically justified” (Rick 2016: 25).

The creation and development of the ceremonial complex of Chavín de Huántar, devising the scenarios for the cultic rituals, requires a range of specialist engineering skills and advanced knowledge. As well as the religious and cult knowledge, there must have been considerable logistical skill to organize, direct, and support the workforce. It is also impossible to imagine that the subterranean rituals at Chavín de Huántar could have involved the population at large, even that of the relatively small settlement that Chavín de Huántar was. There are various clues that indicate that experiencing the underground venture through narrow galleries was the preserve of an élite, most of whom would be visitors (pilgrims) from other centers. There is no sign at all of the existence of powerful leaders that could have commanded the repeated episodes of intense labor; what the general population experienced that persuaded them to give of so much physical labor is unclear. Somehow, we see at Chavín de Huántar the development of religious belief systems that had everything to do with the evolution of more structured, differentiated, and hierarchical societies and cultivated the seeds of change that ultimately led to the strong, widespread Andean states.

This may seem to pose a difficult paradox: the ceremonial center must have involved an enormous amount of organized labor to create a cult center, in which only a few people could participate. Within societies there must have been a group with specialist knowledge in diverse fields, and there are images at various centers of elaborately dressed figures engaged in rituals. The evidence of ritual deposits at the different centers indicates that people from one center visited others and participated in the local cult ceremonies, including the depositing of special artifacts and prized materials. Pulling together the different clues, it becomes quite clear that the ceremonial centers were the preserve of a high-status élite. There was a natural stimulus for innovation, as each élite no doubt quickly adopted “advances” encountered at cult centers. There would also be an incentive to keep the technologies, inventories of most effective rituals, formulas for psychoactive substances, and other special knowledge secret. Rick concludes that the Chavín de Huántar élite should be understood as an elaborate form of secret society (Rick 2016: 25). In general, the Formative period in the Andean region saw the development of religious belief systems and massive ceremonial centers that enabled the emergence of structured, differentiated, and hierarchical societies that ultimately led to the widespread Andean states. The

question is whether the élites at centers such as Chavín de Huántar were already a hereditary ruling class.

Relying on the work of the sociologist Steven Lukes (1978), Rick discusses the distinction between (asymmetric and dominating) power on the one hand and (collective) authority on the other (Rick 2004). He argues that a dominating ruler or élite could not have ruled by force over many centuries, requiring the labor of the population while reserving the rituals and the cult to themselves. Indeed, there is no sign of a ruler or any such élite subgroup with a monopoly of power. The foundations of the belief system seem to have engaged the whole of Chavín de Huántar society. Rick suggests that what we see at Chavín de Huántar was a development from an aboriginal shamanistic cult. But, as the ceremonial center first appeared, and then as it was progressively developed, expanded, and elaborated, he makes a strong case for the takeover of control by a manipulative élite. Rick concludes that the development of the ceremonial center and its practices supported a progressive restructuring of the overall organization of society, but the élite maintained their status by virtue of their exclusive hold on the ceremonial center and its rituals (Rick 2016). There is no sign of a descent into intercommunal conflict and warfare. The emergence of kingdoms followed sometime after the demise of the Chavín de Huántar ceremonial center, and it remains unclear why the centuries dominated by great ceremonial centers and their complex rituals came to an end. Around 500 BCE ordinary housing began to take over parts of the abandoned plazas. A similar decline has been observed at other ceremonial centers in the Andean region. It was followed by the emergence of hilltop settlements protected by fortification—a very different world.

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V. AFTERWORD

For me, there is an intriguing parallel between my research and that reviewed here. It is not surprising that the U.S. archaeologists involved in the three case studies share a common view of the nature and role of religion. And it is intriguing that cultural phenomena in three very different parts of the Americas share a common cultural language—similar monumental structures grouped in similar monumental settings, with similar ideas of cosmic alignment, similar rituals, similar ideas of sacred bundles, pilgrimage, etc. My own work has been in the emergence of the Neolithic in southwest Asia. If we were to apply the American terms to the prehistory of southwest Asia, we would say that the earliest Neolithic, beginning around 12,000 years ago, was the start of a Formative period. I have been fascinated to see how much of the analysis of the cultural evolutionary process within the Formative period is readily applicable to the archaeology that I know best. To give one example, I was closely associated with the last, great book of the French prehistoric archaeologist, the late Jacques Cauvin (I worked closely with Jacques to produce the English language edition) (Cauvin 1994; Cauvin 2000). Cauvin's thesis was that about 12,000 years ago, at the beginning of the Neolithic, there began a cognitive-cultural revolution, which preceded and prepared the way for the beginning of farming economies. That cognitive-cultural revolution brought about the beginning of the idea of gods as human-like, supernatural, powerful beings. Since Cauvin's untimely death, my own research has

sought to develop, extend, and reframe his ideas in the context of cultural niche construction theory. Since Cauvin died in 2001, there have been more archaeological discoveries, as well as rapid developments in the field of cultural evolutionary theory.

In the early Neolithic of southwest Asia, one of the areas of greatest difficulty is understanding how these first fully sedentary communities functioned. On the one hand it is often claimed that these societies were, like their mobile hunter-gatherer band predecessors, egalitarian; but a few have argued that they were organized as simple chiefdoms, and so were not egalitarian. A key site in this question is Göbekli Tepe in southeast Turkey, which its first excavator, Klaus Schmidt, believed was a center for the whole region. There people from many communities came together to build and rebuild huge, circular ceremonial buildings, whose carved monoliths combined human features with relief representations of many dangerous animals, together with snakes and scorpions. Following the lead of Cauvin, Schmidt proposed that these were temples, implying that the figures represented by the monoliths were supernatural beings. The creation of the massive circular structures at Göbekli Tepe poses the same question as has been investigated in the three research programs discussed here: who were the leaders in these non-hierarchically organized societies who had the status that enabled them to galvanize the efforts of the whole society? The answer from these three research groups is that the emergent elite were those to whom their society entrusted the design, construction, and management of their religious ceremonial centers. I look forward to being able to learn more from the work of American archaeologists on the nature of the Formative and the emergence in essentially egalitarian societies of leaders whose status was built on their role within communal religious affairs, and apply these ideas in my own work.

Finally, I add a note on what I think could shed more light on the functioning of the great ceremonial centers of the Formative period. As I have read, I have been reminded of Colin Renfrew's idea of the peer polity interaction sphere (Renfrew 1986). In his research on the early Bronze Age of the Aegean, he had noted the emergence of a series of what he called "early state modules" (Renfrew 1972), sites that were in some senses proto-urban, or the forerunners of later city-states or kingdoms. The source of Renfrew's idea was undoubtedly the Hopewell interaction sphere that operated in the eastern half of the United States between 200 BCE and 300 CE, long before the emergence of Cahokia. What he wanted to understand was the causes for the changes that brought about the emergence of increasingly complex societies. In his formulation of the principles of the peer polity interaction sphere, Renfrew noted that most early states did not exist in isolation, but rather they emerged within an extensive region as parallel autonomous centers (peer polities) that shared "structural homologies" (as an example for which, incidentally, he chose the ceremonial centers of the Classic Mayan civilization with their pyramids and plazas). He proposed that the primary driver of change was not the innovations created within any individual society but the interaction, the relationships and contacts, between societies of relatively equal standing.

Renfrew's peer polity interaction sphere model was widely adopted by archaeologists working in different contexts worldwide, including, in a reflux movement, for the Hopewell interaction sphere (Braun 1986) and for competing Mayan states (Sabloff 1986). I believe that the peer polity interaction

sphere model is a good framework for understanding the Formative period situations of all three research programs. Renfrew outlined characteristic interactions under three headings: competition (including warfare) and particularly competitive emulation, symbolic entrainment, and increased exchange of goods. Competitive emulation, he proposed, might be seen in the ever-greater displays of wealth or power to achieve higher inter-polity status. Symbolic entrainment was his label for the tendency of a more developed symbolic system, or distinctive elements of a leading symbolic system, to be adopted into a less developed system. The process of symbolic entrainment is linked with the third process, the increased exchange of goods, especially when prized goods and materials are part of the display of high status. While the research programs for the three projects have been concerned with the particularities of major sites, the Oaxaca research (and, to a lesser extent, the research on Chavín de Huántar) has mentioned the relations between regional centers. I have been struck by the way that the nature of those relations between (competing) local or regional centers might be explored in terms of Renfrew's terms of competitive emulation, symbolic entrainment, and the increased flow of special kinds of artifacts or materials—something else that I would like to further explore.

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