



1. Monte Albán, Oaxaca (Mexico).
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PURPORTED SACRALITY

THE AMBIGUOUS PAST AND IRONIC PRESENT OF A SOMETIMES SACRED MESOAMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL-TOURIST SITE

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This contribution is a modest - and still highly tentative¹ - portion of a much larger project that charts a 2500-year 'architectural reception history' of the archaeological-tourist site of Monte Albán, Oaxaca, Mexico, a spectacular mountaintop site that was formerly the grandiose capital of a pre-Columbian Zapotec empire but now stands as a partially reconstructed ruin.² The notion of an architectural reception history depends upon an acknowledgement that built forms - say, the innumerable pyramids and platforms of this once-fabulous ancient city - do not have intrinsic meanings that remain stable over time. From this perspective, buildings in and of themselves do not 'mean' anything. This approach moreover undermines the notion, common though it may be, that select sites and buildings - again Monte Albán provides a prime example - have some sort of intrinsically 'sacred' quality that, once discovered or ritually imposed, remains forever stable and secure.

Alternatively, the composition of a so-called architectural reception history requires appreciating that the usages and meanings of built (and natural) forms - and even the purportedly sacred status of those forms - are situational or 'eventful' insofar as they arise and change over time. From this view, in principle, all architecture is 'contested' inasmuch as, from the earliest moments of a building's creation, users begin to attribute to the building a range of conflicting and competing

¹ A much-revised written version of a Power Point presentation delivered at a congress at Leuven, Belgium (September 26-28, 2007) entitled 'Loci Sacri: Sacred Places and Their Secrets', this contribution includes still-emergent ideas that very well may change as I continue my research on the large and complex site of Monte Albán. Be forewarned that this is indeed an early and highly tentative portion of a still-ongoing project.

² For a fuller account of what is at issue in an 'architectural reception history', see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, I, chap. 12.

meanings, the great majority of which depart significantly from the intentions and expectations of the persons who originally designed that structure.³ It is prudent to imagine, for instance, that even when Monte Albán was a young and vibrant city its public monuments would have engendered significantly different responses among elite and common constituencies, among Zapotec residents and non-Zapotec visitors, among men and women, etc. While this sort of contestation over architectural meanings is, in most instances, mild and inconsequential, in the case of very prominent, long-standing public monuments - like the two-millennium-old structures at Monte Albán - the disparity of successive usages and interpretations can be extreme, surprising and hard-fought. In these cases, then, the original intentions of designers and builders - that is to say, the idealized aspirations that are often (though, I'd say, incorrectly) privileged as 'the real meanings' of a building - are reduced to simply one early moment in a largely unpredicted and unpredictable succession of diverse and transient uses and understandings of the built forms.⁴

Appreciation of that transience and instability could, I suppose, eventuate in a distressing sensation of the 'meaninglessness of architecture'. But that appreciation might also - and this is the alternate direction I'd prefer to go - eventuate in a provocative realization that the centuries-old buildings of a place like Monte Albán have likewise been subject to centuries of 'revalorization', that is, hundreds of years of creative and interested uses, re-uses and arguably mis-uses, or at least usages that are very different from the deliberative expectations of the original builders of those monuments.⁵ In other words, instead of ignoring or lamenting those departures from the intentions of architects and designers, I opt for the more plainly empirical tack that accepts that such departures do indeed happen, and then, as a historian of religions, I work to include that range of alternate apprehensions in my historical account of the place. From this perspective, writing the architectural history, or, more properly, writing *the history of the architectural receptions* even of a single built form is much more complex, but also more interesting than one might at first expect. From this perspective, an 'architectural reception history' is no more and no less than a record of the succession of creative and interested 'revalorizations' of the monuments in question.

Owing to its exceptionally long, complicated and still very much ongoing history of reception, the archaeological-tourist site of Monte Albán provides an especially apt context in which to exercise this approach. As a means of orienting readers with respect to what is likely an unfamiliar Mesoamerican site, I first provide some very basic background on Monte Albán and the Oaxaca region of southern Mexico, paying special attention to the prevalent, if not very well considered, assertion that Monte Albán is a 'sacred site'. Second comes a sketch of the very broad contours of the pre-Columbian history of the site during which time Monte Albán emerged and ascended to become the prepotent capital of one of Mesoamerica's most extensive empires, only to eventually decline and be totally abandoned. That is to say, even during a large

³ Regarding the notion of 'contested space', see the editors' introduction to Chidester & Linenthal, eds., *American Sacred Space*.

⁴ See Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, I, chap. 12.

⁵ Regarding the notion of 'revalorization' and the creative and interested reuse or misuse or preexisting architectural forms, see *Ibid.*

portion of Monte Albán's pre-Hispanic reception career, the once-vibrant city lay dormant and overgrown. Third, I provide a similarly brief overview of Monte Albán in the wake of the sixteenth-century arrival of Spaniards in Oaxaca until the early twentieth century, a long but largely uneventful portion of the reception history during which the neighbouring pre-Columbian site of Mitla attracted far more attention than the still-deserted Monte Albán. Fourth comes an equally attenuated account of the circumstances wherein, in the 1930s, the long-silent and neglected Zapotec capital was eventually excavated, substantially reconstructed and then showcased both as one of Mexico's most prized cultural treasures and one of the republic's foremost engines of tourism. Fifth and finally, a brief conclusion highlights the irony that, in all likelihood, during the nearly three-millennium history of the site, the place has never been more appropriately designated as a 'sacred site' than it is at present. In a sense, the purported sacrality of Monte Albán has worked as a kind of self-fulfilling designation.

MONTE ALBÁN, OAXACA: PRE-COLUMBIAN ZAPOTEC CAPITAL AND PURPORTEDLY SACRED SITE

'Mesoamerica' refers to that culture area composed of the southern two-thirds of Mexico along with Guatemala, Belize and most of Honduras, an area that in its entirety is very rich with pre-Columbian ruins and remains. If one thinks of Mesoamerica as a kind of bow-tie-shaped region, then the eastern wing of that bow-tie, which includes the Yucatan peninsula along with the rain forest of southeastern Mexico and Guatemala, is the Maya zone while the western wing is the Central Mexican zone, which includes the great site of Teotihuacán as well as the homelands of the Toltecs and Aztecs. The Oaxaca region - which includes the two great sites Monte Albán and Mitla, both of which are featured in the present discussion - constitutes a smaller, highly distinctive but somewhat lesser known third zone that sits on the knot of the bow-tie, as it were, down in that narrowest portion of southern Mexico where the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean squeeze within 250 kilometres of one another on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Oaxaca is, then, a distinct cultural region as well as the name of a Mexican state, the colonial and present-day capital of which is Oaxaca de Juárez (a.k.a. Oaxaca City), which lies just a few kilometres from the site of the pre-Columbian capital of Monte Albán. When, in the 1920s, the Mexican government acquired the land on which the ruins of Monte Albán lie, land that prior to that time was simply being cultivated like the rest of the surrounding farmlands, attention was focused on the so-named Grand Plaza, the principal civic and ceremonial portion of the ancient city that includes numerous pyramids and platforms situated around an enormous, artificially flattened plaza a couple of hundred meters on a side. For most visitors this splendid mountain-top complex remains the sum total of Monte Albán, a partially reconstructed system of stairways, ball courts, temples, tombs and stelae that one can tour in a couple of hours. However, the ancient city actually stretched out several kilometres in each direction. Indeed, given the site's proximity to a conurbation of roughly a half million

people whose population has doubled since the 1980s, the archaeological remains of Monte Albán enjoy the mixed blessing of easy access for visitors and increasing vulnerability to urban sprawl. That Oaxaca's largest city and largest archaeological site sit side by side poses a wealth of both possibilities and problems.

While it would be wrong to describe Monte Albán and Oaxaca as obscure - because the great Zapotec capital, which was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, will appear on everyone's list of the top four or five most impressive archaeological sites in Mexico - this region of Mesoamerica, together with the Zapotecs and Mixtecs who were responsible for these famed ruins, has not received the same level of scholarly or public attention as those of the Mayas or Aztecs. It is also noteworthy that, along with Chiapas, which is just to the east, Oaxaca is the state with the highest proportion of indigenous people, who make up as much as 60-70% of the population; and while the Zapotecs and Mixtecs are most numerous, there are at least 16 or 17 different indigenous groups in the area, speaking innumerable different languages, which accounts for the familiar claim that Oaxaca is Mexico's most ethnically diverse state. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Oaxaca is also the poorest state in Mexico, aside from Chiapas; and therefore, neither is it surprising that this is one of the regions from which enormous numbers of people, especially young people, have emigrated to the United States in search of employment. Thus, at this point, the two principal sources of income in Oaxaca are the remittances that Oaxacans working north of the border send home to their families and tourism, with Monte Albán surpassing several Pacific beach resorts as the single largest tourist attraction. It is, in fact, impossible to overstate the decisive role that tourism has played - and continues to play - in decision-making about the exploration and management of the ruins of Monte Albán.

While the entire Oaxaca region is replete with pre-Columbian remains - indeed nearly every village has its own local archaeological treasures - Monte Albán is, then, by far, the most prominent and most heavily visited site in the region. Moreover, since the mid-1990s, not inconsequentially in the wake of the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and aggressive measures by the Oaxaca state government to increase both domestic and international tourism, the number of visitors to Monte Albán has jumped to unprecedented levels, which continue to increase each year. The only Oaxacan archaeological site to rival Monte Albán's public profile is Mitla, which is located about 50 kilometres to the southeast. While (as we will see momentarily) Monte Albán was vacant and abandoned for hundreds of years, the ruins of Mitla, which, though far less extensive than those at Monte Albán, are renowned for an abundance of elaborate geometric facades, lie amidst a Zapotec village that has been continuously inhabited from pre-Columbian times until the present. Accordingly, throughout the colonial era - and especially in the wake of Alexander von Humboldt's effusive and widely read accounts of the Mitla ruins in his *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (1811)⁶ - Mitla was the pre-eminent

⁶ For his comments on Oaxaca, including extended comments about the ruins of Mitla, but almost nothing about Monte Albán, see von Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, II, 235-242. Although many secondary sources suggest the contrary, Humboldt himself never actually visited Oaxaca.

archaeological tourist attraction in Oaxaca and, arguably, in all of Mexico, attracting vastly more attention and greater numbers of Mexican, American and European visitors than did Monte Albán. Since the 1930s, however - that is to say, once extensive excavation and reconstruction had begun at Monte Albán - the relative prominence of the two sites reversed, as the photogenic mountaintop capital attracted a larger and larger share of both academic and public attention. At present, for most travellers Mitla, still a quaint if intensely touristic Zapotec village, is simply a day-trip from Oaxaca City, which they undertake following a visit to the main attraction of Monte Albán.

In addition to being Oaxaca's largest and most vigorously promoted tourist attraction, Monte Albán is also routinely, if incautiously, characterized as the region's most 'sacred place'. The standard visitors' pamphlet distributed at the site, for instance, provides the stock assertion that, "To visit Monte Albán means entering a sacred space ...".⁷ Also, the fact that Monte Albán - not unlike Teotihuacán, Chichén Itzá, Xochicalco and numerous other large Mesoamerican sites - now annually receives its largest number of visitors at the spring equinox suggests that many travellers, both from other parts of Mexico and other countries, are coming to the old Zapotec capital for more devotional than strictly historical or recreational reasons.

Often-reiterated and largely taken for granted, this assignment of 'sacred' status to the Monte Albán ruins could reflect any number of connotations and motivations. In some cases it is an ontological claim, namely that the place has some sort of intrinsic and permanent 'cosmomagical' quality.⁸ But often it is a rather more modest assignation of cultural and/or aesthetic appreciation. The label may, for instance, be little more than a means of acknowledging the fabulous technological and architectural accomplishment that Monte Albán represents, and thus a means of arguing that the site deserves suitably respectful care and preservation. In that case, 'sacred' would signify little more than 'special' or 'exceptional'. Or perhaps conceiving of Monte Albán as a sacred place reflects a not-unfamiliar version of romantic primitivism in which the pre-Columbian past is idealized as a long-ago era when unspoiled and 'mystic-minded' natives were fully attuned to the rhythms of the cosmos and when all endeavours of such great scale arose from supposedly 'religious' rather than utilitarian or financial incentives. In that case, assigning Monte Albán sacred status works as a kind of critique of the secular and materialistic tendencies of the modern world.

Often, however, designations of sacred status reflect more overtly (or maybe more insidiously) political and economic motivations. As we come to appreciate, for instance, the important ways in which these archaeological sites have been utilized as resources in the construction of a unifying Mexican national narrative, we can also appreciate the advantages of imagining the indigenous builders of Monte Albán as 'deeply religious', as opposed to, say, heathens or brute imperialists, insofar as that provides a way of, at once, domesticating the indigenous component of Mexico's past and appropriating that component into a Spanish-Indian mestizo identity.

⁷ Site pamphlet by Nelly M. Robles García entitled *Monte Albán*, 19.

⁸ I borrow the term 'cosmomagical' from the work of Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, in hopes both of carrying a positive rather than condescending valence to native beliefs about the ruins and of avoiding some of the baggage associated with the terms 'religious' and 'sacred'.

In that case, the purportedly sacred status enhances the pride and reverence with which Mexicans acknowledge the indigenous dimension of their national character and identity. Or from an even more sceptical perspective, perhaps labelling Monte Albán as a 'sacred mountain' has been a savvy promotional ploy designed to enhance the charisma and tourist appeal of the place. In that case, construing and perhaps commodifying the site as 'sacred' affords Monte Albán a special cachet that greatly increases the value and 'culture capital' of the very poor state's pre-eminent tourist attraction.

In any event, irrespective of the frequency with which Monte Albán is today glossed as a 'sacred site', even the speediest rendition of the Zapotec capital's 2500-year history introduces major qualifications to that designation.

MONTE ALBÁN'S PRE-COLUMBIAN HISTORY: A NOT-PARTICULARLY SACRED SITE

Regarding its origins, unlike many of Mesoamerica's ancient cities that evolved from ceremonial centres into sites of more fully urban habitation, the mountaintop site on which Monte Albán would eventually be built does not seem to have been a destination of any special pilgrimage traffic prior to about 500 BCE when the earliest of many iterations of its Grand Plaza was constructed.⁹ In fact, one of the especially intriguing features of Monte Albán's history is that this city seems to have no humble beginnings; from the start the conception of the architectural complex was hugely ambitious, and thus the site went, it seems, directly from vacant to grandiose all in one stroke.¹⁰ Moreover, where, for instance, Teotihuacán's great Pyramid of the Sun was positioned over a much revered, four-petalled cave and where the great Maya capital of Chichén Itzá was built adjacent to an enormous natural well termed the Sacred Cenote - both the cave and the well were apparently prized as portals to the underworld and thus particularly propitious sites at which to offer prayers and petitions to the gods - Monte Albán, though picturesque, has no outstanding natural feature that could have been construed as a 'hierophany' or manifestation of the sacred.¹¹ Alternatively, the selection of this site, which is not quite the tallest mountain in the area, seems to have depended almost exclusively on its militarily strategic location at the intersection of three valleys. In short, it is difficult to make the case that Monte Albán was originally conceived as a 'sacred place'.

⁹ Historian of religions Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, xviii, argues persuasively here and in numerous publications that the model of urban genesis outlined by urban geographer Paul Wheatley in which the centripetal and centrifugal dynamics of pilgrimage around ceremonial centres lead eventually to the formation of truly urban centres applies very well to numerous of Mesoamerica's ancient cities, most notably, Teotihuacán. But Monte Albán, by contrast, does not seem have followed that pattern.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Marcus & Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 11.

¹¹ Regarding the much-discussed notion of a 'hierophany' or place where the sacred is considered to have manifested itself, see Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, chap. 1.

During the several centuries in which Monte Albán made its ascent to the dominant Zapotec capital - that is, during the eras that Alfonso Caso, the great Mexican archaeologist who led excavations at the site from 1931 to 1958, would designate as Monte Albán I, II and III (roughly 500 BCE-750 CE)¹² - the Grand Plaza was expanded and rebuilt on numerous occasions. During this long and eventful era, there is no question that the political might and prestige of the place increased many-fold as the Zapotecs manoeuvred their way to control of a vast territory. Moreover, the monuments and iconography display ample evidence of artistic refinement, calendrical and astronomical sophistication, as well as a venturesome Zapotec inclination to borrow ideas, materials, styles and techniques from all over Mesoamerica, notably from the Olmec, Maya and Teotihuacán regions. Classic-era Monte Albán was, then, a highly cosmopolitan place that both depended upon and exercised influence upon nearly the whole of the Mesoamerican world. But there is little to warrant the belief that the more specifically 'religious' stature of the city was greatly enhanced, or that Monte Albán ever came to be seen as a 'sacred city' in the sense that Chichén Itzá or Cholula, for instance, are repeatedly described as revered pre-Columbian (and colonial-era) pilgrimage destinations.

On the contrary, although the abundant public art of Monte Albán pursued this theme in an ingeniously wide variety of ways, the agenda of the city's sculpture, iconography and architecture seems to have been decidedly one-dimensional, aimed overwhelmingly at the legitimization of political authority. For instance, in every era of the main plaza area, there was an abundance of graphic images seemingly designed to intimidate people, and thereby to remind residents and visitors in the most vivid way possible of the dire consequences of resisting the authority of the lords of Monte Albán. Most notable in this respect are the infamous carvings of contorted human figures, initially identified as ritual dancers (or *Danzantes*) but now more often interpreted as captives or defeated enemies whose public castration and humiliation are being recorded as an unsubtle warning to subsequent generations of would-be resisters. In the earliest era of the city's ascent, some 300 of these grisly carvings were mounted on a single imposing façade; and in a later era, the same threatening motif was reiterated in the so-termed 'conquest slabs' on Building J, which, like the *Danzantes*, gave public display to contorted, castrated individuals who have been identified as among the specific adversaries that Monte Albán had defeated during its climb to pre-eminence.¹³ Additionally, there is an abundance of imagery connected with the notion of 'royal lineages', which leaves little doubt that ambitious Zapotec leaders of Monte Albán took every opportunity to solidify and enhance their sovereignty by connecting themselves with deities and perhaps promoting their own divine status.¹⁴ In fact, a very large percentage of all the public monuments in the Grand Plaza were, it seems, erected specifically in the interest of

¹² Versions of Alfonso Caso's five-part scheme for pre-Columbian history of Monte Albán are repeated in nearly every publication about the site. See, for instance, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 26-29.

¹³ Regarding the so-termed *Danzante* carvings, see Marcus & Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 150-153. Regarding the so-termed 'conquest slabs' on Building J, see *Ibid.*, 195-197.

¹⁴ See *Ibid.*, chap. 15.

inaugural ceremonies, that is, ceremonies designed to authorize and legitimize a transition of authority and thereby authorize the reign of a new ruler.

In sum, then, during its long and distinguished urban phase (or actually several phases), Monte Albán emerged as one of Mesoamerica's premier religious-civic spaces, the main 'public square', as it were, of the Zapotec state that controlled most of this area. One might debate whether the lords of Monte Albán who orchestrated the grim ritual-architectural program of this Great Plaza were intent on fulfilling a heartfelt sense of cosmic responsibility or whether they were more duplicitous and self-interested in creating a kind of mountaintop forum for religious-political propaganda and intimidation, a place of blunt coercion and manipulation. In either case, if by a 'sacred place' one means a site to which people are drawn voluntarily and enthusiastically, a place where visitors come in order to cultivate some sort of special relationship with their gods or to partake in some special access to sacred energies, then the Zapotec capital during its prime hardly fits those criteria. Classic-era Monte Albán was an architectural space that issued a cold threat rather than a warm welcome.

The causes and circumstances of Monte Albán's post-classical demise (in Caso's terminology, the eras of Monte Albán IV and V) remain very uncertain, if much discussed. Unlike Teotihuacán or numerous Maya capitals that were apparently decimated in one violent episode, Monte Albán, perhaps having overexploited the ecological resources of the Valley of Oaxaca, lost population more gradually, until the city was almost completely abandoned by 800 or 850 CE. After that, the mountaintop was never again the site of significant habitation. That is to say, when Spaniards arrived in Oaxaca in 1521, they encountered a Monte Albán that had been vacant and overgrown for several hundred years. During that interim, Mixtecs from western Oaxaca moved into the area to displace Zapotecs as the most populous group in the central valley. Yet, rather than make any concerted effort to restore or inhabit the dilapidated structures of the old capital, Mixtecs settled around the skirt or fringes of the mountain of Monte Albán. They did, nonetheless, make occasional forays into the once great city, especially to bury people. By far the most notable instance of this re-utilization - or 'revalorization' - of the overgrown site as a kind of necropolis is the famed Tomb 7; as we will see, when Alfonso Caso and his team re-discovered Tomb 7 in 1932, this was by far the most consequential and spectacular find ever made at Monte Albán.¹⁵ As Caso recognized immediately, this same crypt structure had been used twice: the tomb was originally built during the so-termed classic era by Zapotecs as an elite burial site. But then, long after the city had been abandoned, post-classic-era Mixtecs had opened up a several-centuries-old Zapotec tomb, removed most of the Zapotec human remains, and deposited the remains of six of their own Mixtec leaders, along with a fabulous cache of gold and jade jewellery, the immense wealth of which accounts for the singular fame of this discovery.

Spectacular as the Mixtec reutilization of Tomb 7 was, it was also a spectacular anomaly. Over the next 30 years, Caso would eventually excavate more than 200 more tombs, but he never found another remotely like Tomb 7. In other words, while the

¹⁵ For a popular account of the discovery of Tomb 7, written within weeks of when the discovery was made, see Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America". For the definitive discussion of Tomb 7 and its contents, see Id., *El tesoro de Monte Albán*.

Mixtecs of this era apparently did regard Monte Albán as a ‘sacred place’ insofar as it was a site suitable to bury a few of their leaders, and while the then-abandoned site was, in a sense, available for the taking, it is more notable that the Mixtecs seem to have shown only lukewarm interest in the place. Here again, Chichén Itzá provides a telling contrast insofar as there is much evidence that, even hundreds of years after its collapse as a working capital, the site remained a place of great prestige. Especially in times of drought and difficulty, Maya pilgrims travelled to its abandoned ruins and Sacred Cenote, which continued to be regarded as the most auspicious site at which to venture their propitiations to the gods of rain. At Monte Albán, by contrast, aside from Tomb 7, there is no abundance of Mixtec burials in the old ruins, no signs that Mixtecs made significant efforts to repair the buildings in the Great Plaza and, in fact, no evidence even of regular or extensive visitation. Moreover, probably toward the end of the fifteenth century, Aztecs invaded the Valley of Oaxaca; and while the probably limited extent of their influence continues to be debated, it is salient in the present discussion that the Aztecs also largely ignored the mountaintop site of old Monte Albán, and instead established their outpost a few kilometres away alongside the Río Atoyac, at the present site of Oaxaca City. Seemingly, the political and military dynamics that had once made Monte Albán such a strategically compelling site had changed, and at this point the riverside location proved far more appealing.

In sum, then, though it is conceivable that post-classic reverence for the place has simply not survived in the archaeological record, it would appear that, for the most part, during the long era from the demise of the Zapotec capital until the arrival of Spaniards, the indigenous people in the area showed very little interest in the formerly great Zapotec capital. Thus, to assess Monte Albán as a ‘sacred site’ during this long period again requires lots of qualification.

MONTE ALBÁN’S POST-CONTACT AND COLONIAL-ERA HISTORY: AN OBSCURE SACRED SITE

With the sixteenth-century arrival of Spaniards in Oaxaca, there were, of course huge changes. Nonetheless, the quiet obscurity of the site of Monte Albán seems to have remained fully intact. The ruins lay within the territory awarded to conquistador Hernán Cortes by the King of Spain in 1532; and the colonial city of Oaxaca, which quickly became the most important place in southern Mexico, was built atop the Aztec settlement, literally within sight of Monte Albán. Early colonial references to Monte Albán are, however, sparse¹⁶; neither Cortes nor any of his countrymen seem to have taken any special notice of this set of ruins. In fact, tumultuous and transformative as this period was for Mexico and for Oaxaca, the next 250 years of Monte Albán’s architectural reception history would prove to be decidedly uneventful.

¹⁶ Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca”, 790, elaborates on his observation that, “The Oaxacan region is one of the poorest in Mesoamerica in colonial publications about its pre-Columbian past.”

As noted earlier, throughout the entire colonial era, the ruins in the still-occupied Zapotec village of Mitla gained increasingly wide international prominence, while the much larger but fully abandoned site of Monte Albán attracted very little attention. It is telling, for instance, that when, in 1802, Don Luis Martín and Colonel de Laguna undertook what is generally considered the first major exploration of pre-Columbian ruins sponsored by the Mexican government, the Oaxaca portion of their explorations focused on Mitla, and they made the first extant drawings of those ruins, but they apparently did not even visit Monte Albán.¹⁷ The more significant 1806 expedition headed by Belgian soldier Guillermo Dupaix, which was initiated and funded by Carlos IV's aspiration for a complete survey of the pre-Columbian monuments of New Spain, did venture beyond Mitla to Monte Albán, where Mexican artist Luciano Castañeda made exacting drawings of the mounds and sculptures that would remain the authoritative sources on the site for generations.¹⁸ Dupaix and Castañeda, however, represented an early scientific mode of exploration that declined to speculate as to the original, ostensibly religious uses of the monuments, let alone as to the prospect that there might be something intrinsically 'sacred' about the place. As Ignacio Bernal explains, Dupaix was content to "confine himself to recording, factually and without fanfare, all the discoveries he made. The result was a descriptive itinerary, arranged in short sections explaining his activities; it is almost a journey of his travels ..."¹⁹ In this disciplined and empirically-oriented work, then, we find few if any attributions of sacrality to the dilapidated old city.²⁰

Throughout the latter two-thirds of the nineteenth century, aside from occasional treasure hunters, Monte Albán remained vacant and unexcavated. Yet, at this point, the ruins of Oaxaca did begin to attract an ever-increasing, if oddly mixed stream of explorers and antiquarians. For our present purposes, that motley succession of visitors, more amateur than professional investigators, prompts two observations, both of which stand in radical contrast to the situation today. For one, in virtually every case, Mitla remained the primary destination, while a visit to Monte Albán, if it happened at all, came as a kind of afterthought. The huge contrast between Mitla's still-growing nineteenth-century fame and Monte Albán's continued obscurity is signalled, for instance, by the freewheeling account of Gustavus Ferdinand von Tempsky.²¹ A Prussian soldier and adventurer with neither academic credentials nor pretences, von Tempsky regarded Mitla as the highlight of his entire three-year excursion from San Francisco to El Salvador (1853-1855); and yet, despite great curios-

¹⁷ See *Ibid.*, 791.

¹⁸ See Dupaix, *Antigüedades mexicanas*.

¹⁹ Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, 93.

²⁰ Dupaix's text and Castañeda's drawings of the Monte Albán and other sites were subsequently republished in Irish antiquarian Lord Kingsborough's multi-volume *Antiquities of Mexico* (1830), which had the mixed virtues of bringing Monte Albán to the attention of a much wider European audience but also involving the site in the Kingsborough's freewheeling speculations that Mexico's pre-Columbian monuments, Monte Albán included, had been built by various of the Lost Tribes of Israel. In that theory, disreputable even in its own day, Monte Albán was, then, conceived as 'sacred site,' but in a highly eccentric way.

²¹ von Tempsky, *Mitla: A Narrative of Incidents and Personal Adventures on a Journey in Mexico, Guatemala, and Salvador*.

ity about pre-Columbian ruins, he managed to spend several days exploring Oaxaca City without ever once being advised that he ought to spend an hour walking up the hill to the site of Monte Albán. Ironically - but probably not atypically - von Tempsky left Oaxaca raving about Mitla and completely oblivious of Monte Albán's existence.

Though French explorer Désiré Charnay brought both a far more scholarly preparedness to his explorations of Oaxaca's ruins and the ample funding of Napoleon III, under whose auspices he made three major expeditions to Mexico between 1858 and 1882, his accounts reflect the same imbalance. He did make a point of visiting both sites; but Charnay too followed the timeworn pattern of devoting the lion's share of his energies to the ruins of Mitla while affording Monte Albán little more than a cursory walkthrough.²² The first to photograph Mitla (in 1859), Charnay's fabulous and widely reproduced images were hugely influential in enhancing the reputation of that site, while his brief and completely unillustrated comments about Monte Albán probably reinforced impressions that there was little of interest to see there. Among numerous additional examples, Mitla enjoyed the same privilege in the work of British painter, artist and "Victorian gentlewoman" Adela Breton who, though better known for her paintings of Maya sites, made a trip to Oaxaca in June of 1894.²³ Like Charnay, Breton visited both sites; but also like Charnay, she found Mitla a worthy subject in her case for several paintings rather than photographs, while she was content to leave a quick summary of her visit to Monte Albán wholly unillustrated.

The case of British writer D.H. Lawrence, another aficionado of Oaxaca, moreover, confirms that the same radical discrepancy in Mitla's and Monte Albán's respective profiles remained intact well into the twentieth century. Lawrence spent the 1924-1925 winter in Oaxaca City, which provided a background for his novel *The Plumed Serpent* and inspiration for several of the essays in *Mornings in Mexico*; and, though often criticized for his poetic license with respect to Mesoamerican history, he displayed considerable interest in learning about indigenous culture and religion.²⁴ It is, therefore, entirely predictable that he undertook the standard daytrip to the Mitla ruins, with which he was suitably impressed. But it is also perplexing that, during his entire stay in the area, despite considerable urging, he never once could be persuaded to make the short jaunt up to Monte Albán.

Lawrence's indifference to the once-great Zapotec capital is, however, less baffling when one reviews *Terry's Guide to Mexico*, the travellers' handbook on which he relied (though not without fairly frequent complaints). First published in 1909 and then repeatedly updated clear into the 1970s, the 1920s editions of *Terry's Guide* at Lawrence's disposal (and indeed the versions published up until the early 1930s) devoted an entire chapter to the "Excursion to Mitla", which was presented as mandatory for every Oaxaca tourist.²⁵ By contrast, those same editions of this pre-

²² See Charnay, *Cités et ruines américaines* and Id., *The Ancient Cities of the New World*. Mitla is the very last site treated in the latter volume (Ibid., 500-512), and Charnay also includes a few comments on Monte Albán, which he erroneously attributes to the Toltecs (Ibid., 499-500).

²³ See McVicker, *Adela Breton*, 24.

²⁴ Parmenter, *Lawrence in Oaxaca*, provides a detailed account of Lawrence's time in Oaxaca, especially during the winter of 1924-1925.

²⁵ See, for example, Terry, *Terry's Guide to Mexico*, 535-543.

eminent guidebook had just one eight-line paragraph on Monte Albán in which it was estimated that “A good walker can make the trip [from Oaxaca City, to and from the ruins] easily in a day”, as well as noting that horses and bicycles are readily and cheaply available; but then comes a warning that, “Unless the traveller is interested in archaeological remains, the trip [to Monte Albán] will hardly repay him ... The view [back into the city] is attractive, but an almost equally comprehensive vista may be had from Cerro del Fortín with less exertion and expenditure of time.”²⁶ In sum, then, throughout the entire colonial era all the way until the early 1930s - that is, until Alfonso Caso’s momentous discovery of Tomb 7 - it was common wisdom among both Mexican and foreign travellers that Mitla was a world-renowned destination, not to be missed, while Monte Albán was of interest only to the most enthusiastic of archaeological enthusiasts.

A second observation concerning nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century apprehensions of Monte Albán, which also stands in radical contrast to current apprehensions of the site, concerns the absence of any loudly voiced assertion that this is a somehow inherently ‘sacred site’.²⁷ That is to say, virtually all explorers during this period, again both amateurs and professionals, express deep appreciation for the artistic and technical accomplishments of the ruins of Oaxaca; many even express awe; but for almost none does this appreciation translate into suggestions that these are, in any currently relevant sense, ‘sacred places’. Furthermore, there is a characteristically ‘modern’, positivistic tenor to the reports of this era²⁸, which essentially demands that both casual and more disciplined commentators reject the widespread beliefs and traditions of nineteenth-century indigenous Oaxacans concerning an inherent cosmomagical efficacy that resides in the sites and remains of Monte Albán and Mitla.

Fredrick Ober, for instance, an American publicist who became fascinated by archaeology and made three trips south of the border between 1882 and 1885, by his own admission more a tourist than a scholar, provides blunt instantiation of a widespread pattern. On the one hand, he entitled a chapter of his *Travels in Mexico and Life Among the Mexicans* (1885) “The Wonderful Palaces of Mitla”, in which he surmises that both the architectural marvels of that site and “the extensive mounds and fortifications of Monte Albán ... proclaim the former existence [in Oaxaca] of a wonderful civilization”.²⁹ Following his effusive praise for the artistic merits of the Oaxaca ruins, Ober cannot, however, resist mocking the beliefs of the contemporary Zapotec residents concerning the (religious) efficacy of these sites and ruins, which they regarded as both exceptionally auspicious and dangerous places. He specifically ridicules the native belief that whoever hugs the circular monolith in the Mitla ruins known as the ‘Pillar of Death’ will die before the sun goes down. As if to reconfirm his modern sensibilities in the face of native superstitions, Ober explains that, “to the

²⁶ Ibid., 534.

²⁷ While I cautioned readers that this entire contribution is highly tentative, little more than a written version of a working slide presentation, this is a portion that I am especially apt to rethink in future versions.

²⁸ Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, chap. 7, “Positivism (1880-1910)”, comments on the modernist tenor of archaeological reports produced in this era.

²⁹ Ober, *Travels in Mexico and Life Among the Mexicans*, 531.

horror of our Indian guides, each of our party took particular pains to embrace the pillar most affectionately, and still we live”.³⁰

Eduard Mühlenpfordt, a German businessman with mining interests in Oaxaca as well as a position as the director of public roads that allowed him to visit and carefully draw many of the state’s ruins during the 1830s, Mitla and Monte Albán among them, provides another among countless exemplifications of the same radical discrepancy between, on the one hand, glowing assessments of techniques and artistry of the ancient monuments and, on the other hand, a thorough lack of patience for the “cultural degeneracy” of the present-day indigenous people that he encountered.³¹ Accentuating the lack of continuity between pre-Hispanic and nineteenth-century Oaxacan populations, he considered the latter neither capable caretakers of the precious monuments nor reliable informants as to original meanings and uses of those structures. In his view, Oaxaca’s Indians, who continued to hold these sites in high esteem, had neither a special entitlement to nor any special knowledge of the ancient ruins. Thus for Mühlenpfordt, like countless others of this era, it was entirely possible - indeed it was the only responsible path for a thoughtful modern-day critic - to sing the praises of pre-Columbian feats of engineering and, at the same time, wholly reject local intimations that those buildings and sites had any ‘real power’ that had to be either respected or feared. In the reports of this era, we frequently find anecdotal accounts of native beliefs in ‘curses’ and legends about the ill-fortune that would befall those who would remove items from these pre-Columbian sites, and especially from tombs; but those accounts are nearly always quickly followed, as they were in F.A. Ober’s work, by pat, and patently modern, dismissals of the silliness of such native folk wisdom. In other words, at this point, on the one hand, native Oaxacans - who were, it is true, largely uninformed about the original significances and uses of the ancient buildings - had ‘revalorized’ the ruins in ways that attached all sorts of magical and/or sacred efficacy to the sites; but, on the other hand, for non-native explorers, those Indian attributions of sacrality were baseless, only demonstrating the unhealthy endurance of a quaintly pre-modern mentality.

Not surprisingly, then, those scholars of this era whose interests in Oaxaca ruins eventuated in large museum collections - most notably, Mexican doctor Fernando Sologuren along with American archaeologist and museum curator Marshall H. Saville, each of whom amassed huge stores of relics that included many objects from Mitla and Monte Albán³² - display no signs of guilt or compunction, let alone fear about the religious-cosmic ramifications of trafficking in those pre-Columbian goods. On the contrary, in advance of any sustained public discussion on matters of cultural patrimony, they seem to take for granted that these pre-Columbian items, including human remains, are valuable as objects of historical, artistic and perhaps cultural

³⁰ Ibid., 537.

³¹ Regarding the large discrepancies between Eduard Mühlenpfordt’s very positive assessment of Oaxaca’s ruins and his very negative assessment of Oaxaca’s nineteenth-century Indians, see Ramírez Castaneda, “Mitla, fatasía y realidad”, 40-41.

³² On Fernando Sologuren, see, for example, Sellen, “La colección arqueológica del Dr. Fernando Sologuren”. On Marshall H. Saville, see, for example, Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, 156, 177-178.

significance, which are, therefore, most responsibly housed in private collections and museums. That those objects are ‘religious relics’ that have genuine power or that ought to be returned to the descendants of their makers, or even the notion that those objects belong to the cultural patrimony of Mexico, are perspectives that did not yet have widespread currency. In this period, Mexican public officials were, in the main, no more prone than foreign investigators to take seriously suggestions that these sites and objects were ‘sacred’ in the sense that they had special cosmomagical powers; and nor had those officials yet fully embraced the notion that these sites and objects were ‘sacred’ in the sense of Mexican national treasures. It is telling, for instance, that, as late as 1880, Frenchman Désiré Charnay was able to make an arrangement with the Mexican government in which, if he gave one-third of all the objects that he recovered in his excavations of numerous Mexican sites to the republic’s National Museum, then he could retain the other two-thirds to dispose of as he pleased.³³ Given subsequent (and current) debates about the protection of Mexican cultural patrimony, this was a remarkable agreement.

MONTE ALBÁN’S MORE RECENT HISTORY: AN EVENTUALLY SACRED SITE

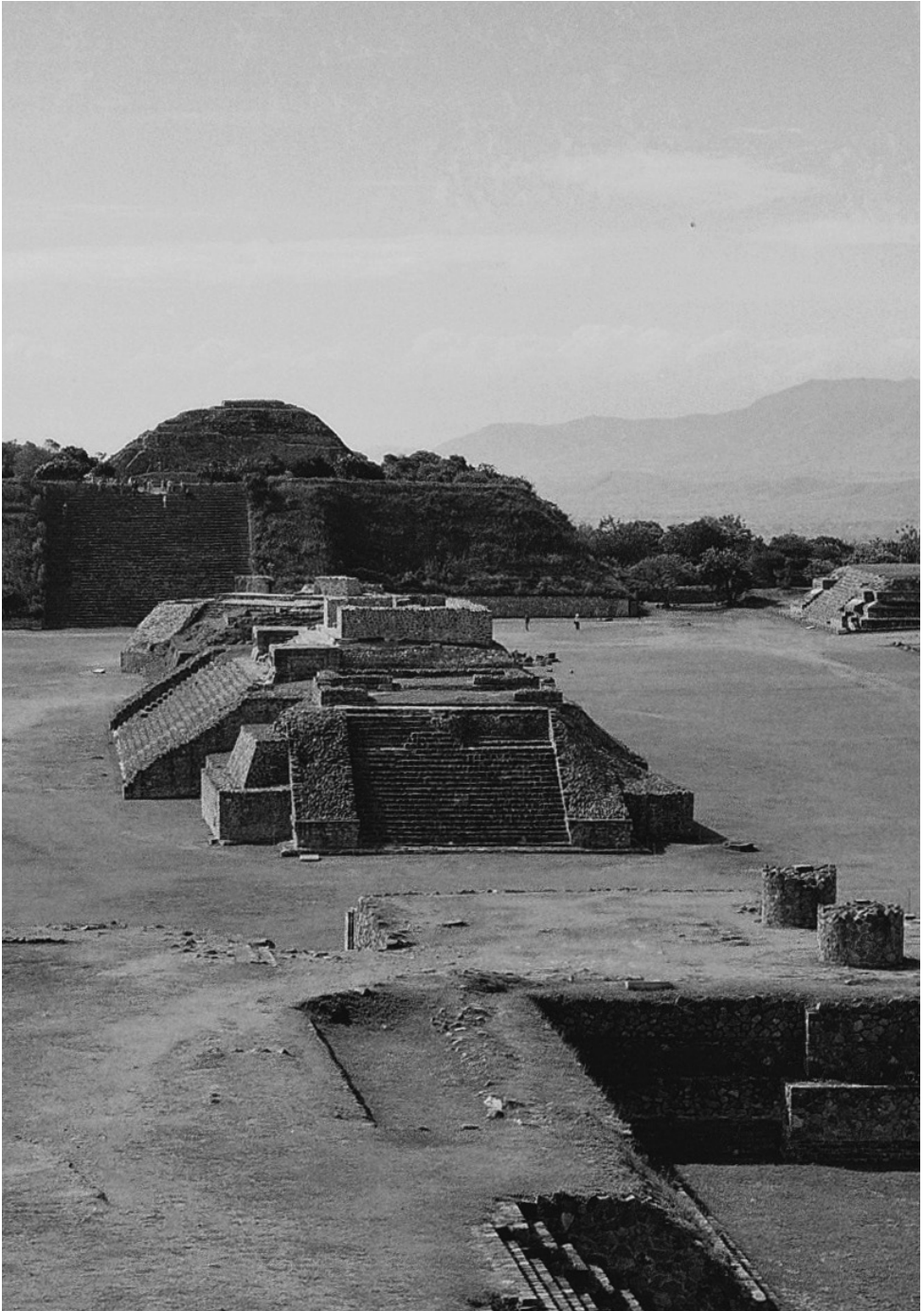
With the Mexican presidential administration of Porfirio Díaz, the “maker of modern Mexico”³⁴, himself born in Oaxaca City, governmental attitudes and policies with respect to pre-Columbian sites and objects changed in momentous ways. Aside from a hiatus as governor of Oaxaca between 1880 and 1884, the controversial and immensely influential Díaz was president of Mexico from 1876 until 1911, when control was finally wrested from him in the Mexican Revolution. Along with a host of aggressive measures designed to enhance Mexico’s profile in the world, Díaz was arguably the first to combine an appreciation of the very large role that archaeological ruins, if properly managed, could play in the construction and dissemination of a unifying national identity for modern Mexico with the political clout to operationalize that vision. Pursuant to that goal, Díaz created the position of Inspector of Archaeological Monuments in 1885, to which he promptly appointed his close friend and former comrade in arms, Leopoldo Batres.

Disrespected by his more academic contemporaries and even more maligned in hindsight by historians of Mexican archaeology, Batres was a military man with only modest training in the increasingly professionalized discipline of archaeology.³⁵ His greatest credential for the uniquely powerful inspectorship post lay, it seems, in the robust manner with which he embraced Díaz’s dual initiative of nationalism and modernization. On the one hand, this initiative entailed celebrating in all possible

³³ See point 9 in the 17-point agreement that Charnay negotiated with the Mexican government in 1880, in Morales Moreno, *Orígenes de la museología mexicana*, 196.

³⁴ I borrow this designation from the highly flattering, largely uncritical biography of Porfirio Díaz by his British friend, Tweedie, *The Maker of Modern Mexico*.

³⁵ On Batres, see Vázquez León, “Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology”, 70-73.



2. Monte Albán, Oaxaca (Mexico).
[www.travellife.org]

ways the cultural accomplishments of Mexico's pre-Columbian past. In the view of Diaz and Batres, Mexicans' sense of themselves and their modern destiny could be immeasurably enhanced through embracing their pre-Hispanic roots. In their view, Mexican mestizos had missed an opportunity to claim the wealth of the Mesoamerican past as an essential component of their distinctive national identity; and, in this respect, archaeological sites and museums provided the pre-eminent contexts in which to undertake that strategic re-appropriation of the splendid artistic and intellectual achievements of ancient Aztecs, Mayas and Zapotecs. Indeed, Diaz and Batres imagined a scenario in which the most prominent pre-Columbian sites could be configured or reconfigured - or 'revalorized' - as nothing less than outdoor museums, that is, pedagogical and patriotic forums in which the Mexican public, especially the youth of Mexico, could be educated about, and thus inspired by, the cultural excellence of their indigenous ancestors.

On the other hand, given their commitments to modernizing Mexico, Diaz and Batres were infamously impatient and intolerant of contemporary indigenous life, which for them persisted as the most serious obstacle to the sort of 'progress' toward cultural and economic parity with Europe and the United States to which they aspired. Especially mindful of international opinion, the Porfiriato worked to showcase ancient indigenous civilization as the surest proof of Mexico's potential for a bright future and prominent place on the world stage; yet, at the same time, the Diaz regime shunned the traditional lifeways and beliefs of present-day Indians, which remained, from their progress-oriented view, the republic's most dire embarrassment. In other words, then, while Diaz and Batres initiated an unprecedented appreciation of archaeological sites as cultural and nationalistic resources for Mexico - and in that important if somewhat skewed sense, they did appreciate those ruins as 'sacred sites' - they were no more inclined than their predecessors to take seriously indigenous beliefs about the intrinsic religious-magical potency of the ancient sites and monuments. If anything, Diaz and Batres were even more condescending and dismissive of those native sensibilities. In their version of 'liberal' thinking, the Catholic Church espoused an unhealthily antiquated set of religious beliefs, and the 'folk Catholicism' in which the Indians of this era had (re)located their affection for the ruins was an even less acceptable option as they moved into the twentieth century.

Be that as it may, it is a further testament to the stature of Mitla that, in 1901, Batres selected this as the site of his earliest large-scale project.³⁶ Owing to Batres' extensive if incautious reconstruction efforts, a case could in fact be made that Mitla was Mexico's first government-sponsored archaeological-tourist site. The ambiguous legacy of Batres' activities reflects the widely discrepant investments that various groups had in these ruins at the turn of the century. Besides attracting an increasing stream of foreign visitors, Mitla remained at this point perhaps Oaxaca's premier pilgrimage destination for Indians from surrounding areas, who, not unlike the Zapotec townspeople, revered the old structures, and especially the so-termed Pillar of Death, as a highly efficacious place both to offer prayers and to communicate with the

³⁶ See Schávelzon, "Historia de la conservación en el valle de Oaxaca".

dead.³⁷ Perhaps ironically, however, the early-twentieth-century indigenous population of Mitla also seems to have regarded the ruins as completely ordinary insofar as they routinely, and with little hesitation, continued to scavenge building materials from the pre-Columbian constructions, which were in increasingly poor repair. In that sense, Mitleyenos were not only blasé about their internationally renowned ruins, they themselves constituted by far the greatest threat to the famed monuments. Moreover, Mitleyeno residents were becoming increasingly aware that the ruins constituted an economic resource insofar as they attracted relatively affluent tourists to whom they could sell goods and services; and thus, irrespective of the ruins' religious-magical efficacy, they had begun to commodify them in strategic ways. In short, native beliefs that the ruins possessed 'sacred' and cosmomagical properties did little to immunize the old buildings from very pragmatic and even patently commercial reutilizations.

Batres, of course, thoroughly rejected indigenous claims to religious-magical efficacy for the Mitla ruins. In fact, with a characteristic lack of subtlety, he usurped any local control of the site by embedding into the ruins an engraved sign, which remains in place today, that was essentially a threat directed at the Mitleyeno natives, warning that anyone who dared deface these monuments would be "consigned to the federal authorities ... who would issue a penalty commensurate with the extent of the defacement ..."³⁸ Nor, to the deep regret of more academic archaeologists, was Batres fully committed to the recovery of historical detail; and nor did he have high standards of accuracy in reconstructing the buildings. Thus while Batres' insertion of metal reinforcements in the old stone constructions did succeed in forestalling the continued collapse of the buildings, his rambunctious approach to construction/reconstruction both destroyed a lot of historical information and left considerable confusion as to which portions of the ruins were original and which were the work of Diaz's Inspector of Archaeological Monuments. But these were not large concerns for Batres. His goal was the cultivation of a more general effect that would transform Mitla into a kind of gallery or museum-like forum of public instruction in which visitors could appreciate the accomplishments of pre-Columbian culture, which he construed as an essential component of a modern Mexican identity. Although without the elaboration that would characterize many subsequent deployments of this strategy, this was an early attempt at reconfiguring (or 'revalorizing') archaeological ruins into a controlled environment that would support the dissemination of Diaz's version of a mestizo foundation narrative, the cosmogonic myth of a nation-state in which the achievements of Mexico's past could inspire ever greater achievements in the nation's future. In an important sense, then, Batres was rejecting one conception of 'sacred space' and one religious cosmology only to replace it with a similarly faith-based religio-political alternative.

³⁷ Regarding the status of Mitla as a pilgrimage destination in the early twentieth century, see Parsons, *Mitla*, 232 ff.

³⁸ The entire carved plaque, which remains in place in the ruins today, reads as follows: "Aviso: Esta prohibido escribir letreros en los muros de estos edificios asi como rayar ensuciar las construcciones y arrancar piedras de ellas. El infractor de esta disposicion sera consignado a la autoridad federal para que se le aplique la pena correspondiente. El inspector gral y conservador de los monumentos arqueologicos, Leopoldo Batres".

If the celebrated ruins of Mitla provided an ideal venue for the exercise of this religious-nationalistic agenda, the still-overgrown Monte Albán presented Batres with quite a different sort of challenge. Subsequent to his flurry of activity at Mitla, he rushed off to similarly framed projects at other prominent sites such as Teotihuacán and Xochicalco; but, ironically in hindsight, he apparently did not see in Monte Albán the same sort of potential for the creation of a major tourist destination, and thus took a different tack. Rather than undertake major excavations and reconstruction initiatives at Monte Albán, in 1902 Batres gathered up the biggest and best stelae that he could locate at the site - some 28 of them - and transported those carved stone monuments from Oaxaca to the National Museum in Mexico City where they could be displayed to a far more numerous and presumably more appreciative audience than was possible at the site of Monte Albán itself.³⁹ In other words, among President Díaz's related strategies for the promotion and unification of Mexico was the creation of a world-class archaeological and anthropological collection in the capital - another sort of civic sacred space - which could exhibit exemplary pre-Columbian specimens from across the republic. Thus, if building something tantamount to an outdoor museum at Mitla was one way to deploy the archaeological remains of Oaxaca as a resource for the construction of a Mexican national identity, hauling the finest of Monte Albán's monuments to the National Museum was an alternative ploy to the same end. Yet, removing all of the most impressive monuments had the secondary consequence of making the actual site even less compelling to visitors. Perhaps inadvertently, Batres at once enhanced Monte Albán's reputation and reconfirmed its obscurity.

Another indirect but highly fortuitous consequence of transporting those stelae to Mexico City was to put them at the disposal of Alfonso Caso, at that point a young employee of the National Museum. Prior to this era, no one had been able to provide an even remotely reliable explanation of the pre-Columbian history of Monte Albán. Caso, however, largely via a careful study of the writing on those carved stones, made great progress in resolving what to this point had been total confusion as to the relationship between and the respective roles of Zapotecs and Mixtecs in the history of the city. His seminal work on the topic, *Las esteles zapotecas* (1928), moreover, enabled Caso to secure the support necessary to undertake the first really extensive and systematic excavations of Monte Albán.⁴⁰ The next sequence of events reads like an adventure tale in which Caso and his small team began work at Monte Albán in October of 1931, excavating a few mounds and especially looking for tombs. Then on 6 January 1932 - that is, within some ten weeks of starting the project that would end up running for another three decades - at about 4 p.m., Caso's team broke through to discover the famed Tomb 7, where they found the human remains of a half dozen individuals along with a spectacular abundance of gold, jade and turquoise objects. In subsequent years, Caso's group would excavate well over 200 tombs at Monte Albán, but none would be nearly as rich as the one that they discovered within some 100 days of starting the project. The Tomb 7 discovery proved, in fact, to be no less than

³⁹ Though he does not explicitly mention Batres' name, Rickards, *The Ruins of Mexico*, 105, for instance, notes that, "About twenty-eight of the big sculptured stones which have been found [at Monte Albán] have been removed to the National Museum in Mexico City ...".

⁴⁰ Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas*.

the most consequential event in the past millennium of the ancient city's reception history.

The discovery of Tomb 7 was front-page news across Mexico; and, by October of 1932, Caso had an article in the *National Geographic Magazine* - dramatically entitled "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America" - which brought the old Zapotec capital to the attention of an American audience for the first time. Estimable historical value notwithstanding, it was, for better or worse, the wealth of the booty accompanying the skeletons that made this tomb uniquely sensational, especially in the eyes of the broader public. Be that as it may, the ramifications with respect to Oaxacan tourism were enormous and immediate; after centuries of existing quietly in the shadow of Mitla, Monte Albán suddenly emerged as Oaxaca's premier archaeological attraction. Ironically - because the long-buried treasure had been removed for safe-keeping within days of when Caso found it - people now wanted to visit the site of the fabulous discovery.

Appreciating not only the historical significance of the Tomb 7 find but also the political and economic potential for developing the site, Mexican politicians, notably Lázaro Cárdenas, president of Mexico from 1934-1940 and arguably the most influential of Mexico's twentieth-century leaders, famous for nationalizing Mexico's petroleum reserves, took a special interest in Monte Albán. Cárdenas and Caso, Mexico's pre-eminent president and Mexico's pre-eminent archaeologist, forged an alliance that would be of great benefit to both men for years to come; and no project was a more direct recipient of that powerful collaboration than the exploration and development of Monte Albán. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Caso's Monte Albán project received the support necessary not only to excavate large portions of the mountaintop site and thereby secure, for the first time, a basic chronology for the ancient capital, but also to undertake the massive reconstruction work that was necessary to transform the desolate mounds into the manicured archaeological tourist destination that one sees today. In short, the oft-cited analogy to Heinrich Schliemann's ballyhooed discovery of Troy is flawed in several but not all respects; the discovery of Tomb 7 really did launch both Alfonso Caso's career and Monte Albán's prominence into wholly different orbits.

While Alfonso Caso and Leopoldo Batres are, in many respects, the polar opposites of Mexican archaeology - routinely depicted as the best and worst in the history of the field - they are, with respect to the present topic, remarkably similar. To be sure, Caso had immeasurably higher academic standards with regard to the collecting historical information than Batres; Caso was vastly more cautious in his reconstruction decisions than Batres; and where Batres' version of rebuilding seriously muddled the pre-Columbian and rebuilt components of Mitla's buildings, Caso pioneered a technique that still enables even casual visitors to discern which portions of Monte Albán's structures are original and which are the work of modern restorers. Where Batres contributed almost nothing of lasting value with respect to the interpretation of the sites that he excavated, Caso integrated archaeology, ethnohistory, epigraphy

⁴¹ Note, for instance, the story about "The Indians of Oaxaca [who] believe that whoever explores a tomb is punished by the spirits of the dead and may become bewitched", which Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America", 496, introduces only to reject as quaint 'folklore'.

and ethnography in ways that set new standards of rigor in all those fields. Moreover, Caso, who would eventually (in 1949) found the Instituto Nacional Indigenista expressly for the study and improvement of the lives of Mexico's indigenous peoples, demonstrated infinitely greater respect and empathy for the present-day Indians than had the notoriously condescending Batres.

Yet, for all their differences, Caso shared with Batres a characteristically modern mindset that would not allow him to accept native claims as to the cosmomagical properties of Oaxaca's ruins. Perhaps upgrading the evaluation of those indigenous beliefs from nonsense to culturally informed misconceptions, Caso showed no greater compunction than his predecessors about removing bones and objects from the pre-Columbian structures. Like his much less scholarly predecessors, Caso believed that native tales about the curses, spirits of the dead and "bewitching" that would befall anyone who tampered with the ancient tombs deserved to be recounted - but only because of their "excellent folklorist characteristics", not because those warnings contained any measure of truth (in the sense of ontological credibility).⁴² Thus in Caso's work - like countless commentators before and after him - the operative assumption is that these ancient cities *were* sacred sites *in the eyes of the ancient Zapotecs*; but Caso was not more willing than Batres to affirm that Mitla and Monte Albán have any intrinsic and still-active religiosity.

Even more significantly, Caso is like Batres in his career-long conviction that archaeological sites, if properly configured, could and should be frontline resources in the promulgation of a unifying Mexican national identity.⁴² A first-rate scholar, Caso was, like Batres, also a Mexican patriot, fully convinced that archaeology, in addition to its more strictly academic merits, had a vital public role to play. Yet, where Batres had targeted Mitla as Oaxaca's most promising site for the orchestration of his version of an archaeological-tourist destination, Caso now realized that it was Monte Albán that presented far greater potential both in terms of historical information and as a vehicle to civic pride and identity. Thus, where many present-day archaeologists are deeply ambivalent about the touristic development of archaeological sites, Caso was from the beginning a great proponent of developing Monte Albán into a major tourist attraction; indeed, his popular articles on the site read almost like promotional material for Oaxaca tourism.⁴³ And where late-twentieth-century archaeologists became increasingly sceptical about the tradeoffs of going beyond excavation to rebuild pre-Columbian structures, Caso was fully convinced from the beginning that major reconstruction was crucial to cultivating a dramatic sense of Monte Albán's Grand Plaza that non-specialist tourists and Mexican schoolchildren could appreciate.

Moreover, while the respective Batres-Diaz and Caso-Cardenas alliances existed on opposite sides of the Mexican Revolution, and thus operated in very different political climates, they were equally adamant that the pre-Columbian remains belonged first and foremost to the cultural patrimony of Mexico. That is to say with respect to a tension that remains very much evident today, Caso persisted in the belief that both local and international claims to the ruins are superseded by those of the

⁴² Regarding his vision of archaeology's public role, see, for instance, Caso, "¿Por qué deben conservarse los restos de una vieja civilización?"

⁴³ See, for example, Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America".

Mexican nation-state. In fact, during the 1930s and 1940s, American archaeologists sponsored by the Carnegie Institution of Washington were allowed to take the leading role in the excavation of many Maya sites, most notably Chichén Itzá; but in the case of Monte Albán, Caso and his Mexican team maintained full and hands-on control. Though informed by the orientation of the so-termed International School, Caso shaped his Monte Albán project into the paradigm of what came to be known as the “Mexican School of Archaeology”, an approach in which the major decision making about the management of pre-Columbian sites was put under governmental (rather than university or museological) control.⁴⁴ It is, for instance, profoundly significant that it was at precisely the same time that Caso was involved in his most intensive work at Monte Albán that he founded (in 1939) and then became the first director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), the now-gigantic Mexican federal bureau that continues to have oversight over the preservation, protection and promotion of the entirety of Mexico’s archaeo-historical and anthropological heritage.⁴⁵ Indeed no site provides nearly so revealing a microcosm of Caso’s vision for INAH, and for the management of Mexico’s ‘cultural patrimony’, as does Monte Albán. In short, under his magisterial guidance, the centuries-neglected Monte Albán was transformed into one of Mexico’s pre-eminent national treasures, an integral part of the republic’s heritage and identity - and, to that extent, a ‘sacred site’.

CONTEMPORARY MONTE ALBÁN: AN INCREASINGLY CONTESTED SACRED SITE

From the mid-twentieth century to the present - decades that lie largely outside the frame of the present discussion - claims regarding the purported sacredness of Monte Albán continued to be made with ever greater frequency, but perhaps even less discipline. As Monte Albán’s prominence continues to grow, it is entirely predictable that stake-holders in the ruins also multiply as more and different audiences, each with its own interests and perspectives, venture competing conceptions and demands for the management of the site.⁴⁶ Although I cannot offer here a thorough treatment of the present-day competition for both physical and interpretive control of Monte Albán, contestation that is more intense than ever, I end by simply pointing toward four trends or ways of constructing (or reconstructing) the history of Monte Albán, that is, four alternative ways in which the ruins of the ancient capital are presently being ‘revalorized’. Each construes the place as a ‘sacred site’, but in decidedly different ways. All four notions of sacrality have long and tangled roots in the previous eras that I have discussed.

⁴⁴ See Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, 177-178.

⁴⁵ On Caso’s original vision and rationale for INAH, see Vázquez León, “Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology”, 74-78.

⁴⁶ For a wealth of competing views about the present-day status of Monte Albán, see Robles García, ed., *Sociedad y patrimonio arqueológico en el valle de Oaxaca*; and Machorro Flores, ed., *Monte Albán: conciencia e imaginación*.

First, Alfonso Caso's way of treating Monte Albán as a kind of 'sacred' national treasure, a cultural resource and ancient model for the modern Mexican nation-state, though not without its critics, has had great endurance. Later Mexican archaeologists, most notably Ignacio Bernal, who succeeded Caso as the leading Mexican scholar of ancient Oaxaca, built on and refined Caso's story of Monte Albán's history in ways that made it even more serviceable as a foundation narrative for mestizo identity. In Bernal's thoroughgoing (re)construction of Monte Albán history, the earliest successes of the city (i.e., the Monte Albán I period) were due to the collaborative efforts of Oaxaca Zapotecs and Gulf Coast Olmecs; the ascending fortunes of the capital in the Monte Albán II period depended upon similarly collaborative engagements between the Oaxaca Zapotecs and Maya peoples; and the Monte Albán III florescence of the city was facilitated by more intercultural collaboration, this time between Zapotecs and the Central Mexicans of Teotihuacán.⁴⁷

Providing an unmistakable analogue to the Spanish-indigenous cultural synthesis that had given birth to the mestizo Mexican national identity, Bernal argued, in other words, that cultural vitality - whether in the pre-Columbian world or in modern Mexico - depended upon intercultural admixing. Not surprisingly, then, as if to offer Mexicans a warning, in Bernal's version, the collapse of Monte Albán (something Caso had never explained) is attributed to the city's elite leaders' eventual xenophobia and unwillingness to look outward for inspiration and new ideas. In other words, in Bernal's rendition of Monte Albán history, the ancient capital - not unlike the Spanish-Indian republic of Mexico - had grown and thrived by strategically blending attributes of several cultural origins, and thus, once Monte Albán took an isolationist tack, the city atrophied and stagnated until eventually (in Monte Albán IV) most of the Zapotecs simply left and went elsewhere. It is unclear whether Bernal crafted his archaeological-historical account of Monte Albán with the express purpose of reinforcing a Mexican identity, and subsequent (re)constructions are less overt in their patriotic analogies; but there is no doubt that the grand site continues to engender great national pride. In short, the notion that Monte Albán is somehow distinctively and especially 'sacred' *for Mexico and Mexicans*, a notion that was clearly evident in Leopoldo Batres' era and much enhanced during the decades of Caso's dominance, remains very much intact.

Second, by contrast to this idea that Monte Albán holds some special, perhaps unique, significance for the people of Mexico, is the notion that the ancient site is - or at least *was* - sacred in a more generic and more strictly historical sense. This is assuredly the most prevalent and least contentious stance. In this non-controversial view - which is widely evident both in present-day technical accounts of Oaxaca archaeology and the abundant tourist literature - authors are content to argue (or simply assume) that the monuments of Monte Albán, not unlike countless elaborate artistic and architectural creations around the world, were expressions of the 'religious' beliefs of the ancient people who built them; but this perspective makes no claim as regards the presently sacred status of the site. This very widespread view may carry positive, romanticizing valences insofar as the splendours of Monte Albán are construed as remnants of a time when people were more duly attuned than we are

⁴⁷ See Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca".

today to religio-cosmic aspects of the world; or the intimations may be more negative insofar as the huge scale and bluntly intimidating iconography of the Grand Plaza are construed as a cautionary tale about the excesses and dangers of fanatical religious belief. Yet, in either case, the lessons of Monte Albán are conceived as generically human rather than specifically Mexican. This usually tacit assumption that the ruins alert us to insights and problems of pan-human concern - along with the relativizing assumption that the Zapotec capital was 'sacred' in a socio-cultural but not ontological sense - has been commonplace among foreign visitors to Oaxaca since the early colonial era. And this view was, moreover, reconfirmed by Monte Albán's 1987 designation as an UNESCO World Heritage Site following which the case is made on a daily basis that the ruins of the ancient city are of great consequence not simply for Mexicans but for humanity at large. This remains the default position for most 21st-century visitors to the site.

A third and very different way of arguing for the 'sacredness' of Monte Albán issues from the contemporary indigenous people of Oaxaca. It is difficult to characterize this view with any precision, both because of the great diversity of perspectives among Oaxaca's large native population and because there is, at present, considerable fluctuation in the way that this position is being conceived and expressed. Nonetheless, drawing inspiration concerning 'ethnic self-consciousness' from both Maya and international indigenous rights movements - very different sorts of indigenous attitudes toward the ruins from those encountered by Batres in early twentieth-century Mitla - Oaxaca natives are making increasingly articulate arguments that they have a special connection, and thus a special entitlement to access, to the state's pre-Columbian ruins, Monte Albán included.⁴⁸ Implicit in this argument, unlike the previous two options, is a contention that Monte Albán is indeed 'sacred' in an ontological and permanent as well as simply a socio-cultural sense. From this view - or this version of 'revalorizing' the ancient monuments - Monte Albán *was* a sacred place in pre-Columbian times, thus it *presently is* a sacred place and, moreover, it *will remain forever* a sacred space which, therefore, ought to be afforded suitable protection and respect.

Additionally, then, this cosmological argument is, in more and more cases, translating into political and economic complaints concerning the ways in which various federal and state governmental agencies, and especially offices of tourism, have exploited the commercial potential of sites like Monte Albán, thereby disregarding, perhaps even defiling, the intrinsically sacred quality of those places. From at least some versions of this stance, the appropriation of Monte Albán into the Mexican national identity is simply one more version of neo-colonial cultural theft; and the touristic development of such sites, another area in which Monte Albán qualifies as Oaxaca's prime offender, constitutes an even more egregious insult against the sanctity of the place. Presently, the indigenous people of Oaxaca remain less well organized than their Maya counterparts in expressing these concerns; nonetheless, Oaxacan officials are certain to hear increasingly loud and articulate versions of this

⁴⁸ See, for instance, de la Cruz, "Monte Albán, ¿espacio sagrado zapoteco o sólo sitio turístico?".

argument, along with more shrill demands for greater native access to Monte Albán, in the very near future.

A fourth, even more heterogeneous and therefore even more difficult to characterize collection of arguments for the sacrality of Monte Albán issues from what might be called, for lack of a better term, 'New Age' revalorizations of the site. The diverse and eclectic spectrum of views under this heading includes countless variations on the notion that the site has inherent cosmic properties or energies, which, though long forgotten, have never dissipated. If assessments of Monte Albán from Guillermo Dupaix through Caso are decidedly 'modern', this set of views has a more 'post-modern', less positivistic tone. Despite ostensible sympathy for native complaints concerning the desacralization of the site, the proponents of this jumbled set of positions are, for the most part, non-native Mexicans, Americans and Europeans. In the past two decades, virtually all of Mesoamerica's most prominent archaeological sites - Monte Albán included - have been attracting fast-growing numbers of such visitors who arrive with more 'spiritual' than historical interests, especially on the occasion of spring equinoxes; but, several mitigating factors have kept the ancient Oaxaca capital, thus far, in a second tier of sites in this respect. Monte Albán, for instance, lacks Teotihuacán's proximity to Mexico City, which is a crucial factor in that site's attracting more than 90,000 people for the spring equinox of 2007. Despite the fairly extensive astronomical alignments built into its Grand Plaza, Monte Albán has no archaeo-celestial spectacle to match the serpent-of-light phenomenon on Chichén Itza's Castillo pyramid, which likewise attracts tens of thousands of visitors each spring equinox. And the old Zapotec capital, irrespective of its picturesque setting, lacks the rainforest mystique that does much to augment the appeal to 'New Agers' of Maya sites like Palenque and Tikal. Be that as it may, each year more and more of these religious-cultural tourists are making their way to Monte Albán.

Reactions to the growing flow of these spiritual travellers are as mixed as the constituency itself. Largely indifferent as to the dubious academic credibility of many of the theories that circulate among them, tourism concerns in the Oaxaca de Juárez area are prepared to do all they can to bolster their numbers; and, as noted earlier, since the mid-1990s, owing in large part to tourism industry initiatives, visitor attendance at Monte Albán has spiked precipitously. Indigenous activists have to be ambivalent about the surge of spiritual seekers who, on the one hand, share their conviction that this is a place of inherent cosmomagical power, but who, on the other hand, have very different cultural sensibilities and political loyalties than do the Indians of Oaxaca. Furthermore, where the INAH officials who presently oversee both the exploration and management of the site are inclined to make concessions to the mounting indigenous interests in Monte Albán, they are, it seems, thoroughly unsympathetic with so-termed New Age visitors, visitors whose enthusiasm for the ruins is, from the perspective of either rigorous scholarship or cultural preservation, very poorly informed. Predictably, those who are most serious about the preservation of Monte Albán are, therefore, doing what they can to forestall rather than encourage this version of spiritually motivated tourist traffic. And from the perspective of a historian of religions, it is both notable and ironic in the extreme that, at present, the seemingly greatest threat to the formerly-impregnable capitals of ancient Mesoamerica is devotional enthusiasm. Designed originally to host the state ceremonies

that would impress and intimidate visitors to the Zapotec capital, the once-imposing Grand Plaza of Monte Albán is now imperilled perhaps most of all by the quirky ritualizing inclinations of present-day 'pilgrims'.

In sum, cross-purposes intersect on every front. Never in the past 3000 years has this mountaintop complex attracted greater attention and wider acclaim; and never have the meanings of Monte Albán been more hotly contested. Nonetheless, if one means by a 'sacred site' a place that is endlessly evocative, the catalyst to a ceaseless succession of creative and interested revalorizations, then the widely purported claims to the sacrality of Monte Albán are, now more than ever, most assuredly well deserved.