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PREFACE

The Special Interests of an Outsider to Oaxacan Studies

This book is the first in a set of three on the religion and architecture of the great Zapotec capital of Monte Albán.¹ While I am hopeful that it will enjoy an existence of its own, this is, as it were, the book that I was compelled to stop and write before I could complete two others on which I had been working for several years. It is an inventory—and a kind of critical reading—of the seven most thoroughgoing ways in which the story of Monte Albán has been told, a hermeneutical exercise that is, in my view, mandatory preparation before moving forward to more venturesome theoretical interpretations and alternate ways of conceptualizing the 2500-year history of the great mountain capital of Oaxaca. This book is, in short, groundwork that prepares the way for a pair of more interpretively daring works on the ancient Zapotec city.

Unassuming expectations for the first volume notwithstanding, some back-story for this trilogy of books on Monte Albán is in order. Long eyeing from afar the fabulous mountaintop site, one of Mexico's premier archaeological-tourist destinations and a strong contender for the most photogenic ruins in Mesoamerica, I embraced the great Zapotec capital as a mid-career interest. My intuitions that, for a historian of religions like me—one with a special interest in the long and eventful lives of monumental ruins—Oaxaca might provide the ideal venue to test a host of larger ideas, methods and theories about sacred architecture, have been constantly reaffirmed, indeed over and over exceeded, by the boundless opportunities that this still-understudied region presents. My first extended stay in Oaxaca de Juarez, the capital city that has Monte Albán on its outskirts, began during the summer of 2006. That entry into a new field corresponded, fatefully enough, with so-termed “El Conflicto,” a seven-month standoff between the

¹ The second of the three books is entitled *The Religion of Monte Albán: Ritual-Architectural Conceptions and Receptions at the Great Zapotec Capital of Southern Mexico*; and third is tentatively entitled *The History of a Ruin: The Ongoing Life of a Long-Abandoned pre-Columbian Capital in Southern Mexico*.

Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) and the Mexican government that resulted in some two dozen deaths and, for me, a much-accelerated appreciation of just what a vibrant and complex place Oaxaca is. I have returned nearly every year since then, as well as setting for myself the task, which I of course vastly underestimated at the outset, of mastering the relevant bibliography on the region and especially on Monte Albán. All of my thinking about Oaxaca and its premier pre-Columbian capital, happily enough, remains a work in progress.

Irrespective of unslacking interest, I concede, then, to arriving as a latecomer and persisting as an outsider to the tangle of lineage lines among Mexican, North American and European Oaxacan specialists that reaches back to the path-breaking efforts of Alfonso Caso, arguably Mexico's greatest archaeologist. I am a mainstream American academic, but admittedly on the margins of Oaxaca studies. Over the past hundred years, a coterie of expert excavators and interpreters, Caso only the first and foremost among many, has supplanted total confusion as to when and by whom the grand structures of Monte Albán were built with volumes of well-informed historical data.² Since the 1920s, Oaxacanists have thereby transformed a slew of dilapidated, vegetation-shrouded structures into one of Mexico's most revealing and revered public displays of pre-Hispanic cultural history; to non-archaeologists, their research efforts in deciphering and reconstructing a city that was abandoned more than a millennium ago can appear no less than miraculous. And thus daring to comment critically on the efforts of scholars who have devoted whole careers to the investigation of the Oaxaca region, an outsider's perspective is in lots of respects vulnerable and, in this case, duly self-conscious. In fact, the plentiful fund of archaeology-based literature on Monte Albán became more

² On the rich history of the study of archaeology in Oaxaca and specifically at Monte Albán, see, for instance, Nelly M. Robles García, "Historia de la Arqueología de Mesoamérica: Oaxaca;" in Eduardo Matos Moctezuma et al, *Descubridores del pasado en Mesoamérica* (Ciudad de México: Antiguo Colegio de san Ildefonso, 2001), 111-34; Nelly M. Robles García and Alberto Juárez Osnaya, *Historia de la Arqueología en Oaxaca* (Oaxaca: Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas, 2004); and Gary M. Feinman, "The Last Quarter Century of Archaeological Research in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca," *Mexicon*, vol. 29, no. 1 (February 2007): 3-15.

dauntingly impressive as I combed through it again and again, engendering along the way an increasing measure of respect and humility.

But in other regards, the view of a historian of religions and comparativist—someone with an alternate disciplinary orientation that is long overdue in its engagement of this Oaxacan material—enjoys the advantage of unaffiliated liberty, an absence of archaeological allegiances and a distanced perspective that reveals problems and assumptions that those closer to the ground may have come to take for granted. Flying high over a landscape, if obscuring many details, enables a perspective that is simply unavailable to those laboring in the trenches, as the especially apt saying goes. The atypic perspectives and interrogations of a comparative religionist, if easily ignored by more specialized scholars of the area, can nevertheless provide a healthy antidote and challenge to habitual ways of thinking about the timeworn topics of Oaxacan social history. This is, in any case, a modest contribution to the history of ideas about Monte Albán that comments on major contributions.

**I. THE PREOCCUPATIONS OF A HISTORIAN OF RELIGIONS:
SCRUTINIZING “RELIGION,” ARCHITECTURAL MEANING
AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL STORYTELLING**

As a fairly seasoned historian of religions, three sorts of preparedness especially inform my belated interest in the ruins of Monte Albán.

**A. CONCERNS ABOUT THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF “RELIGION”: ASPIRATIONS TO
METHODOLOGICAL CLARITY AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS**

First, a background in the general and cross-culturally comparative study of religions, including several years overseeing a heavily revised second edition of Mircea Eliade’s 16-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion*, accounts for both special preoccupations and frequent discontents concerning the much-disputed role of religion in the history of

the great Oaxacan capital.³ Revisiting those debates—which, as we’ll see, sometimes place religion at the very heart of the ancient city’s *raison d’être* and sometimes take pains to afford it no role whatever—reminds one constantly that a scholar of religions brings alternate and underrepresented questions to a field that is richly populated by archaeologists, art historians, epigraphers and anthropologists. For a religionist like me, nothing is more important than, to use a phrase that I will frequently repeat, *methodological clarity and self-consciousness concerning what is the academic study of religion is and is not about*. And in a body of literature so impressively rigorous in other respects, the lack of clarity, self-consciousness and consistency with which commentators on Monte Albán have conceptualized just what they mean by “religion,” along with collateral concerns like ritual practice, interactions with “gods,” funerary practices, creation myths and “sacred space,” is troubling in the extreme to scholars of religion who make precision on those matters a first priority. There is, without question, lots of room for improvement on that front.

First, therefore, while it is the second of the three books on Monte Albán—*The Religion of Monte Alban: Reflections on an Enduring Work of Sacred Architecture in Oaxaca, Mexico*—that focuses directly and almost fully on the religion of the pre-Columbian city, I will in the present volume be paying some special attention to the supposed role, or lack thereof, that each of the archaeologist-narrators in question attributes to religion in the ascent, florescence and decline of the Zapotec capital.

B. CONCERNS ABOUT MEANINGS OF MONUMENTAL ARCHITECTURE: THE SUPERABUNDANCE AND AUTONOMY OF ENDURING BUILT FORMS

A second preoccupation bears more on the interpretation of Monte Albán’s monumental architecture than its religion. In this respect, the broadly framed theoretical

³ The original was *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 16 vols., Mircea Eliade, editor in chief (New York: Macmillan, 1987). The second edition of *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 15 vols., Lindsay Jones, editor in chief (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005) includes more than 3200 entries, most of which were amply revised and nearly 600 of which were completely new.

agenda that I laid out in *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (2000), a project that explores the workings of religious architecture in all sorts of cross-cultural contexts, occasions serious discontents with the often blunt and reifying ways that Oaxacan specialists have and continue to write about the purported “meanings of monuments,” which provide such a large share of nearly every interpretive account of the site.⁴ My hermeneutical outlook, which is heavily informed by the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, influences that are quite completely absent from Oaxacan studies, may seem contentious at first insofar as it puts in doubt the very notion that buildings have meanings per se, and positively rejects the prospect of meanings that remain stable either for their myriad different audiences or the long stretches of time that these built forms endure.⁵ To assume, however tacitly, that the original design intentions of Monte Albán’s Great Plaza, of grand conception even from its earliest beginning about 500 BCE, were fully realized and then remained in place for the full 1200-year habitation of the city, or to assume that all pre-Columbian Mesoamericans—elites and commoners, residents and occasional visitors—experienced that majestic plaza space in precisely the same way, entails more generalizations than I am willing to accept.

To the contrary, from my more Heideggerian interpretive frame, it is crucial—especially if one aspires (as I do) to a thoroughgoing and empirically accurate account of Monte Albán’s history—to appreciate the much less tidy multiplicity of changing usages and more audience-specific meanings of those built forms. In my view, architectural meanings are always contingent or “eventful,” specific to some particular (type of) audience on some particular (type of) occasion, especially ritual occasions. Quite different architectural meanings emerge, for instance, within the respective contexts of

⁴ See Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*, two volumes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁵ For another discussion of the oft-misconstrued meaning-making mechanisms of architectural “ruins,” see Lindsay Jones, “The Ambiguity of ‘Sacred Space’: Superabundance, Contestation, and Unpredictability at the Earthworks of Newark, Ohio,” in *Place and Phenomenology*, ed. Janet Donohoe (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 97-123.

stately coronations, public human sacrifices and/or New Year's festivals, along with other sorts of agriculturally-based rites that transpire in precisely the same architectural ambience. In Gadamerian phrasing, the "superabundance and autonomy" of substantial works of architecture enable an ongoing and excitingly unpredictable succession of "creative and interested revalorizations," including the "discovery" of scores of meanings that their designers never intended nor anticipated.⁶

And thus even if we could succeed in ascertaining the deliberative motives of Monte Albán's designers, that would be a highly idealized rather than empirically accurate description of the way in which the ancient city was actually experienced. In fact, as I became aware of all that has transpired on this Oaxaca mountaintop in the past two thousand years, it became apparent that few places demonstrate more vividly art historian Erwin Panofsky's cautionary insistence that the ever-unfolding succession of uses and significances evoked by enduring architectural configurations like those at Monte Albán—the site's "ritual-architectural reception career," if you will—is "tortuous, fortuitous, full of uncertainty, past echoes, and unexpected turns. It does not possess a logic; it has no constant direction, no goal."⁷ Constantly—including in the many centuries after Monte Albán had ceased to function as a working city—its built forms have continued to evoke new meanings and usages that, however quirky and disconnected from original intentions, constitute important components of the site's history.

Secondly, then, the present work is largely absent of the explicit theorizing on the meaning-making mechanisms that constitutes the largest share of *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*; and it will not be until the third of the three books—tentatively

⁶ See Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience*, vol. I, especially chap. 12, "Multifarious Revalorization: The Composition of Ritual-Architectural Reception Histories."

⁷ Giulio Carlo Argan, "Ideology and Iconology," in *The Language of Images*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 16, provides this apt summary of ideas that appear in Erwin Panofsky's classic work, *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

entitled *The History of a Ruin: The Ongoing Life of a Long-Abandoned pre-Columbian Capital in Southern Mexico*—that I explicitly compose the sort of “architectural reception history” that tracks and accentuates the “revalorative” usages and meanings of the enduring architectural features of Monte Albán in both pre-Hispanic and post-Hispanic eras. But I want, nonetheless, even in the present work—in the interest of empirical accuracy—to avoid the too-simple fiction of perfect continuity between Monte Albán’s initial conception and its dozen-century ascent and then decline as a major regional capital (an error that is, we’ll see, committed by only some of the archaeologist-narrators inventoried in this book).

C. CONCERNS ABOUT THE WRITING OF ANCIENT HISTORY: ARCHAEOLOGICAL (RE)CONSTRUCTION AND “THE POETIC ACT OF EMPLOTMENT”

Finally, the third preoccupation that I bring to my studies of Monte Albán, the most pressing of all for this first volume in the set, concerns the extent to which archaeologically-based “historical reconstructions” actually derive from creative storytelling, “narrativization” or what Paul Ricoeur terms “the poetic act of emplotment.”⁸ On this controversial topic I am informed especially by my earlier special interest in both the pre-Columbian and investigatory histories of the great Maya capital of Chichén Itzá, which therefore provides an impetus and counterpoint to many of my reflections on Monte Albán. More specifically, my previous inquiries into that similarly high-profile Maya site engender a paired sensitivity and skepticism concerning the extent to which ostensibly historical accounts of ancient Mesoamerican cities, including those crafted by the leading Mayanist scholars of the day—in that case, by Sylvanus Morley, J. Eric S. Thompson, Ralph Roys and the famously cautious Alfred Tozzer—are by no means the simply fact-based reports they might at first appear to be.⁹

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), vol. I, 21-22.

⁹ See Lindsay Jones, *Twin City Tales: A Hermeneutical Reassessment of Tula and Chichén Itzá* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995).

Alternatively, upon closer inspection of the literature on Chichén Itzá, I was forced to realize that even the most rigorous archaeological writing inevitably blurs the lines of fact and fiction far more completely than either authors or audiences would like to admit. In that Yucatecan context, for instance, the irrefutable similarities between Chichén Itzá's architecture and that of the distant Toltec capital of Tula, together with some venturesome readings of the colonial-era *Books of Chilam Balam*, enabled mid-twentieth-century Mayanists to compose a raft of scenarios about a spellbinding confrontation between invading Toltec warriors and indigenous Maya mystics. The possibility that the Yucatan capital had been site to a cataclysmic collision between two fundamentally different sorts of Indians proved nearly irresistible. By the 1980s, however, though the actual history of Chichén Itzá remained elusive, it had become indubitably clear that the richly assorted accounts of a "Toltec Conquest" of the gentle Mayas describe a circumstance that, in fact, never happened! By then serious scholars were in near-complete agreement that this tale of savage Toltec savages attacking noble Maya savages, fascinating as that prospect may be, bears very faint resemblance to anything that ever transpired at the so-termed City of the Sacred Well.¹⁰ And yet, even more tellingly, these captivating stories continued to be retold daily by Chichén Itzá tour guides and enjoyed by busloads of tourists. Even today, as any visitor can testify, those histrionic but fictive conquest accounts remain very much in circulation.

On this third topic, then, the frenzy of story-crafting and storytelling surrounding Chichén Itzá exceeds that associated with Monte Albán, which, owing to the uniquely dominant influence of Alfonso Caso, has evoked a narrower spectrum of narrative (re)constructions. And there are, as we'll see, innumerable very different factors that guide the roughly contemporaneous trajectories of the Yucatan and Oaxacans capitals from clusters of crumbling and overgrown monuments at the start of the twentieth century into two of Mexico's most heavily-trafficked archaeological-tourist destinations. To be sure, Chichén Itzá and Monte Albán are contrastive in many very important ways.

¹⁰ See Lindsay Jones, "Conquests of the Imagination: Maya-Mexican Polarity and the Story of Chichén Itzá, Yucatan;" *American Anthropologist*; vol. 99, no. 2 (June 1997), 275-90.

But the disconcerting willingness at Chichén Itzá to persist in rehearsing stories of the site that no serious scholar can any longer regard as historically viable puts me on alert that even the most scrupulous academic archaeology-based accounts—whether of sites in the Maya zone, Oaxaca or elsewhere—invariably carry valences, interests, prejudices and presuppositions that belong more to their authors than to the ancient peoples they are purportedly describing. As this inventory of Monte Albán narratives will demonstrate, the appeal of gripping and ingratiating stories not infrequently trumps the demands of historical rigor.

In sum, then, I came to Oaxacan studies mid-career and with the distinctive interests and apprehensions of a historian of religions. Three pairs of enthusiasms and concerns stand out. First, so deeply impressed with the accomplishments of Oaxacanist archaeologists, I am much less at ease with the conceptualization and interpretation of “religion” that has accompanied their historical explanations. Second, while I am deeply impressed by the skill and subtlety with which interpreters of Monte Albán, equipped with very limited documentary sources, have capitalized on the material evidence that pre-Columbian architectural remains provide, I am discontent with tacit assumptions about the stability of connections between built forms and their meanings. And third, though I am very much impressed by the aptitude and ingenuity with which Oaxacanists have fashioned highly fragmentary evidence into coherent narratives that account for the beginning, middle and end of Monte Albán, I remain deeply skeptical that their wonderful (re)constructions are merely accounts of “what actually happened” at the hilltop capital. Each of the seven stories of Monte Albán under consideration is, I hope becomes apparent, about far more than the events and peoples that gave rise to the Zapotec capital. Indeed, it is on this last point—the dynamics of narrating the history of the site—that this book will make its largest contribution to the history of ideas about Monte Albán.

**II. ESSENTIAL PREPARATION FOR
MORE VENTUROUS INTERPRETATIONS OF MONTE ALBÁN:
SELF-CRITICAL READING AND THE HISTORY OF IDEAS**

Finally and more generally, a note of self-justification. That the present book may be judged by some as decidedly derivative and unoriginal—that is, dismissed as a mere recounting of other scholars' accounts of the history of Monte Albán—is predictable but, I think, unfair. While countless books and even tourist pamphlets on Oaxaca begin with a few pages on the investigatory history of the relevant sites, something that I concur is always a welcomed addition, I find in the pertinent literature nothing remotely like this present work; every chapter presents what I consider discoveries and significant revelations that less close readings of these same archaeological accounts of ancient Oaxaca fail to disclose. Captured years ago by my initial reading of Benjamin Keen's *The Image of the Aztec in Western Thought* (1971), a marvelous book unlike any I had ever seen or imagined before, I came to appreciate that this sort of critical scholarship, which turns the lens back on ourselves and challenges us to pay fuller attention to the presuppositions and socio-cultural baggage that we and our academic predecessors have brought to the interpretation of indigenous peoples, is not derivative, but highly original. Instead of just fascinating, fun and quirky, as Keen's work first appeared to me, I came to see it as deeply serious and important, indeed crucial to our supposed understandings of ancient Mesoamericans.¹¹ Every field has a requirement to attend to the history of ideas that accounts for its current strengths and weaknesses. Oaxacanists, however, have too seldom undertaken this sort of self-critical reading and second order reflection—the thinking about how to think about ancient Oaxacan history—that puts in doubt their basic assumptions and operating frames; and this book takes a step in that direction.

More specifically, this seemingly secondhand inventory of archaeological narratives more than earns its mettle insofar as, in the early stages of my reading and

¹¹ Benjamin Keen, *The Image of the Aztec in Western Thought* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971).

research into Monte Albán, I was quite baffled by the diversity and disagreements among the accounts of the capital's history. I wondered, for instance, were there two major versions of Monte Albán's history? Or six or ten or fifteen? Who should we believe? And how can we account for the frequently major discrepancies? Are these archaeologist-authors debating theoretical models or historical facts? What outside forces drive these polemical debates? What differences do the national origins of scholars make? How can students applaud their teachers and then present nearly antithetical opinions? What can we make of the polite and notably impolitic challenges that Oaxacanalists present to one another? Are these institutional, methodological or personal antagonisms? Is the discernment of Monte Albán's past cumulative or a series of one fresh start after the next? Are they making progress toward an eventual consensus and solution? Or must we settle for a half dozen viewpoints on every key question?

With the completion of this work, however, I now have, if by no means a definitive account of Monte Albán's history, answers to all those questions. And thus while I originally saw this work as essential preparation for the more ambitious and opinionated interpretations of the site's architecture and religion that I continue to pursue, it has proven to be just that. I am persuaded now that every major site—all of which have evoked multiple and very different storiological (re)constructions—needs and deserves a book like *Narrating Teotihuacan*, *Narrating Palenque*, *Narrating Cholula*, etc. If your only response to this work is, "Okay, but which of these stories is correct?" then you have missed my point entirely. In that case, fine. Please, just set the book aside; never cite it; and resume your positivistic pursuit about *what really happened* at the ancient capital of the Zapotecs. But I am hopeful that, for at least a few, these reflections on the challenges of writing about a ruin, which is also what I'll term "an enduring work of sacred architecture," spur somewhat fresher lines of inquiry. They have for me.