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## CHAPTER TWO

### **Ignacio Bernal's Affirmation of Intercultural Admixing: Monte Albán as a Microcosm of Mesoamerica and Model for Modern Mexico**

“I wish to emphasize the circumstances that the bearers of all or almost all of the high cultures [of Mesoamerica] were made up of two or more groups which fertilized one another during their coexistence. At least Tenochtitlán, Tula, and Teotihuacan, the great highland capitals, were not inhabited by a single group, nor were the other cities in all probability. I believe that the mixture of two traditions is one of the most potent stimuli in the development of civilization and one of its most marked characteristics: There is a sort of internationalism within Mesoamerica.”

Ignacio Bernal, 1969<sup>1</sup>

For Alfonso Caso, the ruins of Monte Albán were, along with everything else, an ideal training ground for his students. It was, for instance, two archaeologists-in-training, Juan Valenzuela and Martín Bazan, who were on-hand for the seminal discovery of Tomb 7 in 1932; and a third student, Eulalia Guzman, arrived shortly after the initial exploration to play a similarly important role in the preparation of the materials for public exhibition.<sup>2</sup> In the subsequent years, numerous other archaeologists, including Jorge Acosta, Hugo Moedano, Ponciano Salazar, Armando Nicolau, Carlos Margain and Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla, all received invaluable on-site experience and training at Monte Albán with Caso before going on to

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\* Note that I have managed the footnotes in ways that respect “the first citation” (which is thus a full bibliographical citation) *in this chapter*, irrespective of whether that work was cited in a previous chapter. Also, to avoid confusion in this typescript, I have retained the quotation marks on all quotes, including those that are formatted as block quotations.

<sup>1</sup> Ignacio Bernal, *The Olmec World*, trans. Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 28.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Alfonso Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (México, D.F: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969), 13 and 44. Also on hand for the 1932 discovery of Tomb 7 was Caso's wife, María Lombardo de Caso.

work on various other sites and projects. The remains of the Zapotec capital were, in short, the classroom for a whole generation of Mexican archaeologists.

No one, however, illustrates this pedagogical pattern with greater distinction than Ignacio Bernal y García Pimentel (1910-1992) who, as a graduate student of Caso, just 14 years younger than his teacher, began several seasons of excavating at Monte Albán in 1941.<sup>3</sup> His masters thesis on the pottery of Monte Albán's two earliest periods was completed in 1946, and his doctoral thesis entitled "La cerámica de Monte Albán IIIa" appeared in 1949.<sup>4</sup> En route to a highly decorated career of his own, Bernal became, along with Acosta, Caso's premier collaborator in working out the basic chronology of the site; and he was Caso's co-author for

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<sup>3</sup> Ignacio Bernal, "Alfonso Caso 1896-1970," B.B.A.A. *Boletín Bibliográfico de Antropología Americana*, vol. 33/34 (1970-1971): 301-2, describes his first meeting with Alfonso Caso in 1941-1942, while taking a course he was teaching on the Archaeology of Mexico in the Escuela Nacional de Antropología. Arturo Oliveros, "Ignacio Bernal (1910-1991)," *Arqueología Mexicana* vol. I, núm. 3, (agosto-septiembre 1993), 35, notes that Bernal worked at Monte Albán with Caso from 1942 [or perhaps 1943]-1948, and then worked there again in 1953; but Bernal also worked at numerous other Oaxacan sites, for instance, at Yagul in 1954, 1955, 1959, 1960, 1961 and 1963. Also see Arturo Oliveros, "Ignacio Bernal (1947-1988): Vida y obra," *Cuadernos de arquitectura mesoamericana*, núm. 18 (Marzo 1992): 85-96. For more on Bernal's close relationship with Caso, also see Ignacio Bernal, "Caso en Monte Albán," en *Homenaje al Alfonso Caso*, organizing committee, Juan Comas, Eusebio Dávalos Hurado, Manuel Maldando-Koerdell, and Ignacio Marquina (México, D.F: Imprenta Nuevo Mundo, S.A., 1951) 83-89. Also regarding the relationship between Caso and Bernal, in the context of interview in which John Paddock had very flattering things to say about both of his major influences, he says, "The presence of Caso and Bernal, by the way, the first a Marxist and the second Catholic conservative, influenced many who, like me, met them when Mexican archeology reached great results. Despite their ideological differences, they always maintained a fraternal and respectful dialogue that allowed them to enrich their experience, unlike what happened in the United States, where the antagonism was very strong among professionals who thought differently..." Jamie Bali, "Entrevista a John Paddock: Testigo de su tiempo," *Arqueología Mexicana*, vol. 1, núm. 3 (agosto-septiembre 1993): 48.

<sup>4</sup> Ignacio Bernal, "La cerámica preclásica de Monte Albán;" unpublished masters thesis, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México, 1946; and Ignacio Bernal, *La cerámica de Monte Albán IIIa* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1949). Luis Vázquez León, "Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942," in *History of Latin American Archaeology*, ed. Augusto Oyuela-Caycedo, Worldwide Archaeology Series 15 (Aldershot, Hampshire, England and Brookfield, Vt.: Avebury, 1994), 84, notes that Bernal was "a prize student of Caso's and the second archaeological graduate (in 1946) [from INAH archaeology program]."

some of the absolutely foundational works on Monte Albán, most notably, *Urnas de Oaxaca* (1952),<sup>5</sup> *Culturas zapoteca y mixteca* (1962)<sup>6</sup> and “Ceramics of Oaxaca” (1965).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, according to standard genealogies of Oaxaca archaeology, it was to Ignacio Bernal that Caso, when moving onto other commitments, passed the torch, as it were. And then, by wide agreement, “For at least 40 years, until his death in 1992, Bernal was the undisputed dean of Oaxaca archaeology.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal, *Urnas de Oaxaca*, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Memorias del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia II), Secretaría de Educación Pública, México, 1952; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 3 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 145-697.

<sup>6</sup> Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal, *Culturas zapoteca y mixteca*, guión presentado por el doctor Ignacio Bernal y el doctor Alfonso Caso, publicado por el Consejo de Planeación e Instalación del Museo Nacional de Antropología, INAH/CAPFCE/SEP (México, D.F: enero, 1962); reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 239-78.

<sup>7</sup> Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal, “Ceramics of Oaxaca,” in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3: “Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica,” volume editor, Gordon R. Willey; general editor, Robert Wauchope (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 871-95; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 315-50.

<sup>8</sup> Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 28. They explain (*ibid.*) that, “With Caso’s retirement from excavation, the torch passes to Ignacio Bernal. Charming, erudite, and generous, a man of global vision with a keen sense of humor, Bernal envisioned the survey of the entire Valley of Oaxaca. Such a survey would put Monte Albán into perspective and answer many of the questions raised by the excavations there.” For a very helpful chronological summary of Bernal’s work on Oaxaca topics, see “Contributions of Ignacio Bernal to the Study of the Zapotec and Mixtec: A Minimal Survey,” compiled by John Paddock and Kent V. Flannery, in *The Cloud People: Divergent Evolution of the Zapotec and Mixtec Civilizations*, eds. Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus (New York: Academic Press, 1983), xxv-xxviii. Also see Kent V. Flannery, “Ignacio Bernal: 1910-1992,” *American Antiquity*, vol. 59, no. 1 (January 1994): 72-76; and Oliveros, “Ignacio Bernal (1910-1991),” 35-36. And for other retrospective comments on Bernal’s career, see *Homenaje al doctor Ignacio Bernal*, Leonardo Manrique C. and Noemí Castillo T., coordinadores (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1997), especially Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, “Semblanza del doctor Ignacio Bernal” (pp. 19-27); and the information about Bernal’s academic positions and publications assembled by his four children: Carlos, Concepción, Ignacio y Rafaela Bernal Vereá, “Currículum vitae y bibliografía” (pp. 29-49).

**I. FROM ALFONSO CASO TO IGNACIO BERNAL:  
MAJOR SIMILARITIES AND SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES**

The agreement, shared interests and commonalities between Caso and Bernal are, therefore, abundant. Both are, for example, great hands-on archaeologists, laboring at length in the excavationary trenches and ceramics workshops; both are fixated on chronological questions and thus on the stratigraphic data that can answer them. But neither is content to rely strictly on that disciplinary perspective or that sort of evidence. Bernal's remarks on his more comprehensive approach to the Olmecs apply as well to his research on Monte Albán and the Zapotecs:

“My fundamental interest lies in the history of a civilization, not its archaeology. I have based this study on archaeology, not because of a professional quirk. I have done so because, except for the last few centuries of the pre-Columbian era, that science is almost our only guide to understanding what took place in this part of the Americas where civilization flourished before the arrival of Europeans.”<sup>9</sup>

Both are, in other words, intently and intensely interdisciplinary far in advance of the vogue for that term. Bernal shared Caso's interest in the interpretation of hieroglyphic writing, whether on carved stones or the Mixtec codices, and in the ethnography of contemporary indigenous peoples; and Bernal actually exceeded his teacher as an art historian and perhaps as an ethnohistorian. In fact, his approach to archaeology, as he explains, capitalized at every opportunity on “the extraordinary wealth of written records both Indian or Spanish, or of the studies of the interpretation of early scripts, or in the history of art.”<sup>10</sup> And thus as contemporary histories of the field aptly conclude, “The work of such scholars as Alfonso Caso and Ignacio

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<sup>9</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ignacio Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology: The Vanished Civilizations of Middle America* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1980), 10, writes: “The tendency of ‘new’ archaeologists when looking at the archaeology of Mexico is to give preference to the techniques of the prehistorian, making little use of either the extraordinary wealth of written records both Indian or Spanish, or of the studies of the interpretation of early scripts, or in the history of art. My own view is that Mexican archaeology is best studied along a line that lies midway between the new archaeologists and the prehistorians, an opinion shared by archaeologists of the Middle East and other areas of ancient civilization in the Old World.”

Bernal on the Aztec, Zapotec, and Mixtec set the standard for the conjoined archaeological and historiographic studies of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cultures.”<sup>11</sup>

Also like Caso, while Monte Albán is Bernal's original point of departure, his first archaeological love, so to speak, he was always committed to locating the great Zapotec capital within both the broader context of Oaxaca and the even broader context of Mesoamerica. Thus in addition to intensive work at Monte Albán, he personally investigated literally hundreds of other Oaxacan sites both in the central valley and the Mixteca region;<sup>12</sup> and he undertook major projects, among elsewhere, at Teotihuacan and in the Olmec region, both areas of interest that would, as we'll see, have crucial impacts on the way that he understood Monte Albán. When he begins *The Olmec World* (1969) by noting that, as a matter of principle, his inquiry into this Gulf Coast people “is a study of Mesoamerica—Mesoamerica as a whole...”<sup>13</sup> he is actually describing a wide-framed approach that applies to nearly all of his work.

Moreover like Caso, Bernal is praiseworthy in his careful attention to small details as evidenced most indisputably in his meticulous studies of Oaxacan ceramics and the developmental changes in Zapotec funerary urns, which are a career-long preoccupation. But even more significant for our inquiries into his narrative (re)constructions of ancient Oaxacan history is the cosmopolitan Bernal's willingness to venture sweepingly bold, if thus vulnerable, ideas about, say, the global forces that presumably account for the rise and fall of all civilizations, the inherent flaws of theocracy and, most provocatively of all, as we'll note momentarily, the inevitably salutary consequences of interactions between very different cultures.

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<sup>11</sup> William L. Fash, “Anthropology: Archaeology,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, ed. David Carrasco, vol. I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>12</sup> Ignacio Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3: “Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica,” volume editor, Gordon R. Willey; general editor, Robert Wauchoppe (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 795, for instance, explains, “Of the 251 sites [in the Valley of Oaxaca] thus visited, I shall limit discussion to the 164 of which the pottery has so far been studied.”

<sup>13</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 1.

Even more impressive is his unsurpassed attention to the history of ideas about both Monte Albán in particular and Mexican archaeology more generally. As his student John Paddock wrote, “Bernal’s heroic *Bibliografía de arqueología y etnografía de Mesoamérica y el Norte de México*... includes a virtually total bibliography of ancient Oaxaca up to 1960.”<sup>14</sup> No one before or since has commented more thoroughly on the available sources and history of the study of Oaxaca and Monte Albán;<sup>15</sup> and his *A History of Mexican Archaeology* (1980) established a new level of methodological self-consciousness about what is at issue in researching and representing ancient Mesoamerican peoples.<sup>16</sup> All those works remain invaluable resources for the sort of queries into intellectual history that I am undertaking here.

And furthermore akin to Caso, Bernal was deeply committed to advancing not only the academic but also the wider public’s appreciation of ancient Mesoamerica. That he shared his mentor’s administrative capabilities is evidenced, for instance, in his leading role at the National Museum of Anthropology, for which he was director from 1962-1968 and 1970-1977, as well a long list of posts that include professor of archaeology at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City (1948-1992); cultural counselor of the Mexican Embassy in Paris, and permanent delegate to UNESCO (1955-1956); director of INAH’s Department of Prehispanic Monuments (1956-1958); and visiting professorships at more than a dozen universities. All these contexts presented Bernal opportunities to engage wide, diverse and non-specialist audiences. And thus in addition to his highly technical academic writing, he authored numerous site and museum guides, commentaries to accompany photographs, and books aimed at a general readership—all of which are invariably revealing of his heartfelt ideas about indigenous cultures.

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<sup>14</sup> John Paddock, “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica;” part II in *Ancient Oaxaca: Discoveries in Mexican Archeology and History*, ed. John Paddock (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970 [originally 1966]), 240.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, the section on “History of Archaeological Studies in Oaxaca,” in Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 790-94.

<sup>16</sup> Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*.



For Bernal, again similar to Caso, the study of ancient Mesoamerica had a valuable pertinence not only for scholars, but for everyone who aspires to understand human nature, the history of civilization and the workings of the world. And yet, that general relevance notwithstanding, also like Caso, Bernal, born in France and better-traveled than his mentor, was strongly committed to the notion that his research and writing on pre-Columbian cultures had an especial value and significance for the people of Mexico. In his resolute (if debatable) opinion, “With a few outstanding exceptions, Mexican archaeology is for the foreigner no more than an academic exercise in the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity. But it is part of the Mexican’s past, part of his very life.”<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, irrespective of their many shared interests and goals, Caso’s foundational work in sorting out the respective roles of Zapotecs and Mixtecs at Monte Albán—matters that prior to his path-breaking investigations were thoroughly muddled—afforded Bernal a quite different and more advanced starting point than his mentor. And thus, as we’ll see, for all that they have in common and for all of the same broad themes they are inclined to emphasize, Bernal is able to present a story of Monte Albán that is more complete, more fully consistent and considerably more venturesome than that of Alfonso Caso.

## **II. A GUIDING NARRATIVE THEME: MEXICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE FORTUITOUS CONSEQUENCES OF INTERCULTURAL ADMIXING**

Swiss journalist and aspiring art historian, Henri Stierlin, author of a 1968 volume entitled *Ancient Mexico* in series on “Architecture of the World,” is among the legion who express “deep gratitude to Professor Ignacio Bernal, Director of the Museo Nacional de Antropología of Mexico... [who] read the manuscript and provided invaluable advice and information about discoveries that are as yet unpublished.”<sup>18</sup> Bernal’s profound influence on

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<sup>17</sup> Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Henri Stierlin, *Ancient Mexico*, a volume in the Architecture of the World series (Cologne, Germany: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1968, 1994), 190. Beside Bernal, Stierlin in the same sentence expresses special thanks to Horst Hartung of the University of Guadalajara.

that widely-read generalist issues in two especially apposite points. First, Stierlin was fully persuaded by Bernal that:

“Everything in the pre-Columbian world resulted from influences and counter-influences; Middle American civilizations were closely related, despite different climates and geographical conditions, and despite the different uses necessitated by the individual materials of each region... Architectural unity is, in fact, only the outward and visible evidence of the strong cultural links that existed among apparently very different peoples.”<sup>19</sup>

And, second, if all of ancient Mesoamerica's distinctive art styles, cultures and even peoples “resulted from influences and counterinfluences,” Stierlin was also persuaded by Bernal that nowhere is that healthy cross-pollination more unquestionably evident than at the Zapotec capital of Monte Albán:

“Due to its situation the Zapotec civilization was not only a nucleus but also a crossroads for influences coming from the great pre-Columbian centers. It was therefore a zone of exchange, and its architectural role was to be specially significant, techniques and styles combining to produce highly original results.”

Situated on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec hinge between the Central Mexican and Maya zones, on the knot of the bowtie-shaped region of Mesoamerica, if you will, Oaxaca is, Bernal persuaded Stierlin, the quintessential context in which to observe the cultural intermingling that accounts for the entire region's greatest artistic and cultural achievements. Oaxaca is, according to Bernal, supremely Mesoamerican.

#### **A. ANCIENT PEOPLES AS MODERN MODELS: APPEALING PRE-COLUMBIANS, AMBIGUOUS RELIGIOUS PIETY AND ADVANTAGEOUS “CULTURAL FUSION”**

I will contend, then, that this bold proposition—that all of the best art and architecture in the pre-Columbian world “resulted from influences and counter-influences” and, even more generally, that the intersection of different Mesoamerican cultures has invariably produced “highly original results”—is the most inventive and most important of three especially prominent

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<sup>19</sup> Stierlin, *Ancient Mexico*, 131.

narrative themes in Ignacio Bernal's (re)construction of the history of Monte Albán. The first of the other two themes, a persistent emphasis that Bernal shares with Caso, is an invariably flattering depiction of essentially all pre-Columbian peoples. In Bernal's presentation, as will become evident, six different indigenous groups play crucial roles in the emergence, rise and fall of the great Zapotec capital; and, strikingly enough, all are depicted in nuanced but also overwhelmingly positive lights. In his plotlines, we will encounter skilled artists, architects, astronomers, empire-builders and theocrats, but there are none of the superstitious primitives, brutal barbarians or cruelly selfish sovereigns that populate many stories of the ancient Americas, including some that I will review later in this book. Every native group in Bernal's rendition—indigenous Oaxacans, Zapotecs, Olmecs, Mayas, Teotihuacanos and Mixtecs—is highly accomplished in one way or another; all exude dignity and engender respect; and thus all could be readily claimed by Mexicans as progenitors of a heritage from which they proudly descend.

The second ancillary theme, another thread that one can find also in Caso's work, is a recurrent ambivalence about religion. In Bernal's narrative syntheses, religious devotion is, on the one hand, an impetus to many of the greatest accomplishments of ancient Mesoamericans; religious piety is frequently cast as a kind of high-mindedness that mitigates personal ambition in favor of the public good and that spurs great subtlety in artistic, literary and philosophical expression. And, yet, on the other hand, Bernal also suggests that inordinate religious introspection, and specifically an extreme version of theocracy, is the root cause for Monte Albán's largely self-induced demise. In his intriguing story of decline and collapse, the great Zapotec capital is, in the end, threatened less by military invasion, social upheaval or ecological disaster than by the otherworldly preoccupations that, he thinks, caused rulers to lose perspective on the more practical fundamentals that had made their city livable and strong. On this front as well, then, Bernal's version of ancient Oaxacan history provides all audiences an occasion to wonder and perhaps worry about the mixed merits of religion; and those same scripts, moreover, provide specifically Mexican readers with rich resources to reflect, for instance, upon the large yet equivocal role of the Catholic Church in Mexican society. Like the overwhelmingly positive depiction of native peoples, his ambiguous presentation of religion has both a generalized relevance and a more specifically Mexican resonance.

Neither of those narrative themes is, however, nearly so prominent—nor so characteristic of Ignacio Bernal's interpretive accounts—as his assertions about the nearly certain rewards of what he terms “cultural fusion.” Again in the context of his book on the Olmecs, and with special reference to the triumphs of the great Central Mexican capitals, he makes explicit the generalized proposition that one can then discern implicitly at work across innumerable of his publications, including those that concentrate on Monte Albán:

“... I wish to emphasize the circumstances that the bearers of all or almost all of the high cultures [of Mesoamerica] were made up of two or more groups which fertilized one another during their coexistence. At least Tenochtitlán, Tula, and Teotihuacan, the great highland capitals, were not inhabited by a single group, not were the other cities in all probability. I believe that the mixture of two traditions is one of the most potent stimuli in the development of civilization and one of its most marked characteristics: There is a sort of internationalism within Mesoamerica.”<sup>20</sup>

The emergence of Teotihuacan greatness, for instance, depended, according to Bernal, on “the coming [together] of at least two clearly distinct groups or cultural influences: one from western Mexico and the other from the peoples who brought in the Olmec style.”<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Tula and the Toltecs' rise to prominence depended upon a merger of the esteemed old culture of Teotihuacan and the infusion of energy provided by invading “barbarians,” “who gradually absorbed part of the old heritage.”<sup>22</sup> And the meteoric ascent of the Aztec empire was, in Bernal's assessment, the consequence of “an extraordinary transaction, in which each part exchanged the products it possessed—the Toltecs, civilization; and the Chichimecs, armed force—[which] led in time to magnificent results.”<sup>23</sup> In his view, once again it required “the fusion of two forces, tradition and newness, to produce the Aztec empire.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Bernal, *Mexico before Cortez*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Bernal, *Mexico before Cortez*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> Bernal, *Mexico before Cortez*, 86.

<sup>24</sup> Bernal, *Mexico before Cortez*, 86.

Moreover, as Stierlin appreciated, if all of ancient Mesoamerica thrives on “a sort of internationalism,” Oaxaca wins special stature in Bernal’s eyes as “an area marked by diversity of natural environment and ethnic and linguistic composition,” and, on those grounds, deserves credit as “one of the zones most characteristically Mesoamerican...”<sup>25</sup> For him, Oaxaca, in the ancient past and at present, owing to its diverse ecology and medial setting at the crossroads of the Mesoamerica’s two halves, is a kind of microcosm and best test-case for the cultural intermingling that is “one of the most potent stimuli in the development of civilization.” Reeched in countless scholarly and popular introductions to Oaxaca, he observed that,

“Today [in Oaxaca], 14 languages are spoken, without counting the dialects which, at times, are almost unintelligible among themselves... The complexity of all this increases not only because the groups were numerous but because frequently they were mixed with each other.”<sup>26</sup>

In fact, according to Bernal, the Zapotecs owe their unique creativity not to an avoidance of cultural contamination but, oppositely, to their exceptional four-part hybridity! In his view—and his pre-Hispanic plotlines invariably bear this out—cultural and ethnic homogeneity is an almost certain prelude to stagnation; and, conversely, cultural cross-fertilization is a virtual guarantee of renewed vigor, creativity and innovation.

In this respect as well, Bernal’s hypothetical narrations of the ancient Oaxaca—which invariably celebrate cultural hybridity and intermixing—present scenarios that are provocative to all audiences and perhaps especially to Americans for whom there is, arguably, a persistent premium on ethnic “purity” (or “whiteness”) and, therefore, persistent ambivalence about the sort of cultural mixing that may eventuate variously in “mongrels,” “half-breeds” or “bastards.” On that note, one is reminded again of American Mayanist Sylvanus Morley’s widely popular propagation of sagas about a supposed “Toltec Conquest of the Chichén Itzá” wherein the invaded and the invaders are so completely different—the cerebral, sublime and peaceful Mayas counterpoised with the crassly violent Toltecs—that there was no prospect whatever of congenial

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<sup>25</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 788.

<sup>26</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 788.

rapprochement between the two groups.<sup>27</sup> And the great Harvard Mayanist Alfred Tozzer, while a far more careful scholar, nevertheless provides an even more elaborate and more pessimistic rendition of “irreconcilable polarity” at Chichén Itza wherein native Mayas and interloping Mexicans pass the baton of authority back and forth several times, but never are able to attain any sort of viable coexistence.<sup>28</sup> In both those historical (re)constructions, productive cultural admixing is an anathema and impossibility.

Those Toltec conquest of the Maya storylines are, then, the very opposite of Bernal's insofar as they rule out the prospect of cordial cross-pollination between different peoples. Bernal, by contrast, time and again presents scenarios that are more resemblant of British Mayanist Eric Thompson's “symbiotic polarity” explanation of the seeming “Toltecization” of Chichén Itza wherein the Central Mexicans who invade Yucatan, while drastically different from the indigenous Mayas, actually enter into a kind of mutually beneficial Maya-Mexican union that capitalizes on the respective talents of the virile invaders and their much more intellectually accomplished hosts.<sup>29</sup> The two groups complement and complete one another. That sort of alternative—which illustrates perfectly Bernal's posit about the invariably fortuitous outcome of intercultural commingling and fusing—is, as we'll see, repeated not just once but four times in his story of Monte Albán! And in that way, Bernal's rendition of the Zapotec capital provides, among other things, a perfect analogue for the Spanish-indigenous “cultural fusion” that issues in the modern Mexican nation.

## **B. ARCHAEOLOGICAL SYNTHESSES AND/OR MUSEUM DISPLAYS: COMPOSING AND EXTRACTING A FIVE-STAGE, SIX-ACTOR STORY OF MONTE ALBÁN**

As one of the lead excavators at Monte Albán, Ignacio Bernal, on the one hand, has at his command the very best and most current empirical information of his era; and he was, to be sure,

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<sup>27</sup> Lindsay Jones, “Conquests of the Imagination: Maya-Mexican Polarity and the Story of Chichén Itzá, Yucatan;” *American Anthropologist*; vol. 99, no. 2 (June 1997), 281-82.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, “Conquests of the Imagination,” 282-83.

<sup>29</sup> Jones, “Conquests of the Imagination,” 283-84.

committed to composing the sort of historical (re)constructions of Oaxaca that demonstrate rigorous respect for that data. In that respect, he shared Caso's scientific demeanor. Yet, on the other hand, he freely admits, "My account might have been very different, for one may draw varying interpretations, perhaps equally valid, for almost every archaeological or historical fact."<sup>30</sup> Bernal, in that respect, embraces rather than shies from his role as a creative storyteller.

Likewise, as one of the team, along with Caso and Acosta, who undertook both the actual spadework and the original interpretation of the ceramic data at Monte Albán, Bernal, on the one hand, has no superiors in his intimate familiarity with the particulars and problems associated with the chronology of the site; he more than anyone was directly involved in correcting, fine-tuning and augmenting Caso's initial five-part schematization of Monte Albán I, II, III, IV and V. Detail-oriented in the extreme, he concurred that nothing was more urgent than securing the ceramic stratigraphy-based chronology that could serve as the crucial first step toward fuller inferences about the events and peoples in the city's history. And nevertheless, in this respect, Bernal is the first to admit that, "the whole stratigraphy of the [Oaxaca] valley is artificial..."<sup>31</sup> All of these painstaking chronologic schemes are, he knows, useful but imperfect heuristics.

Bernal was, in other words, highly self-conscious about his interpretive narrations of the pre-Columbian past. His incessant manipulations and recombinations of the five basic Monte Albán stages, his insertion of "transitional" stages, and especially the fluctuating dates that he assigns to the respective stages—all correctives that reflect that these are actually overlapping ceramic "horizons" rather than consecutive chronological periods per se—are frustrating and sometimes puzzling for general readers. In lots of textbook and tourist-guide treatments, the famous five-part scheme is reduced, albeit with telling inconsistency, to a tidy succession of precisely dated "periods;" and I will reproduce some of those oversimplifications here. But

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<sup>30</sup> Ignacio Bernal, *Mexico before Cortez: Art, History, Legend* (Garden City, New Jersey: Dolphin Books, 1963), v; translation by Willis Bamstone of Ignacio Bernal, *Tenochtitlán en Una Isla* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1959). Bernal is in this case commenting on his historical (re)constructions of central Mexican groups, but the same principle applies to his work in Oaxaca.

<sup>31</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 801.

Bernal himself, depending on the scholarly or popular, early or later, context in which he is writing, invariably offers qualified and amended schemes and dates; and always there is good reason what might first appear to be chronologic contradictions or errors. As both a scientist and storyteller, both a careful scholar and committed popularizer, he frequently reminds readers that his hypothetical historical accounts are just that—provisional presentations that reflect the current status of his and others' unfolding understanding of ancient Mesoamerica. And thus importantly, while there are countless working drafts and scattered segments of his evolving ideas about the Zapotec capital, there is no full and finished version of the five-stage, six-actor rendition of Monte Albán's history that I am rehearsing here.

Instead of one book or article, then, numerous works provide resources from which to extract Bernal's complete narrative of Monte Albán. As early as 1957, he wrote a concise (38-page) guidebook on Monte Albán and Mitla, which opens with a four-page rendition of the history of the site.<sup>32</sup> Though the featured storiological theme about the rewards of cultural intermingling is not yet explicit, already in place in this super-succinct summary are his forgetive ideas about four successive intercultural collaborations at the mountaintop capital: an Olmec-influenced Period I, a Guatemala-influenced Period II, a Teotihuacan-influenced Period III, and the Period IV arrival of Mixtecs at the Zapotec city that provides yet one final exercise in cultural admixing.

Also helpful in fleshing out the entire script are Bernal's works focused on, respectively, Teotihuacan and the Olmecs, which frequently include significant digressions concerning Teotihuacano and Olmec influences in Oaxaca and Monte Albán.<sup>33</sup> Germane as well are the

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<sup>32</sup> Ignacio, Bernal, *Guía de Oaxaca, Monte Albán y Mitla* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1957); English translation by Pablo Martínez del Río published as *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide* (Mexico: Edimex, 1958). Later undated versions of this booklet have the title *The Oaxaca Valley, Official Guide, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, and omit mention of any author, but Bernal's text is the same.

<sup>33</sup> On Teotihuacan, see Ignacio Bernal, *Teotihuacan: Descubrimientos, reconstrucciones* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1963); and Ignacio Bernal, *Guía Oficial, Teotihuacan* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia Salvat Mexicana de Ediciones, 1985); English translation, Ignacio Bernal, *Teotihuacan* (Mexico City:



aforementioned pieces that he co-authored with Caso, as are those by their collaborator, Jorge Acosta, who largely endorses the same succession of events.<sup>34</sup> And very useful too are the more popular site-guides, handbooks and commentaries on photographs and on the holdings of the National Museum of Anthropology that Bernal also continued to write throughout his career.<sup>35</sup> Actually, because those less academic writings provide occasions for more concise, causal and perhaps candid accounts of Oaxacan history, these lay-targeted pieces are, in cases, particularly revealing of his working assumptions.

Be that as it may, none of these works is nearly so important as the more technical, though still concise, account of the region's pre-Columbian history that appears in the now-classic overview article that Bernal wrote for the *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, entitled "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca" (1965).<sup>36</sup> This is the definitive text. If Caso's *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* (1936) was the first general survey of Oaxaca archaeology, this article by

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Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia Salvat Mexicana de Ediciones, 1985). On the Olmecs, see most notably, Bernal, *The Olmec World* (1969).

<sup>34</sup> See, most notably, Jorge R. Acosta, "Preclassic and Classic Architecture of Oaxaca," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3: "Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica," volume editor, Gordon R. Willey; general editor, Robert Wauchope (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 814-36.

<sup>35</sup> Among more popular publications that also provide Bernal an occasion to narrate Oaxaca and Monte Albán history, see, for instance, Ignacio Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, text by Ignacio Bernal, photographs by Irmgard Groth (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968); Ignacio Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico as Seen in the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City* (New York: Harry N. Abrahams, 1968); Ignacio Bernal, *100 Great Masterpieces of the Mexican National Museum of Anthropology* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1969); and Ignacio Bernal, *The Mexican National Museum of Anthropology*, trans. Carolyn B. Czitrom (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968).

<sup>36</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca." 788-813. This important article was reprinted as a 144-page book (in Spanish): Ignacio Bernal, *Arqueología oaxaqueña*, Vidzu Series (México, D.F.: Oaxaqueños de Antes: Centro de Estudios de la Cultura Mixteca: Museo de Arte Prehispánico de México "Rufino Tamayo," 1992).

Bernal was, as Paddock notes, the second;<sup>37</sup> and thus no other piece is nearly so important for our present purposes.

Suitably authoritative as that HMAI synthesis comes to be regarded, it is, however, worth noting that both the structure and content of that article are quite fully anticipated in a jointly authored piece by Caso and Bernal entitled *Culturas zapoteca y mixteca* (1962),<sup>38</sup> not to be confused with Caso's earlier *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*. Though Bernal inserts an exceptionally thorough and helpful sub-section on the "History of Archaeological Studies in Oaxaca" near the beginning of the 1965 article,<sup>39</sup> the remainder of the HMAI synthesis, now credited solely to him (with a footnote expressing gratitude to Caso and Paddock "for valuable additions and corrections to the present work"<sup>40</sup>), is essentially a verbatim translation of the previous co-authored piece.<sup>41</sup> Likewise noteworthy, the 1962 article, apparently first delivered as a talk, is, intriguingly enough, framed as a set of guidelines and recommendations for the way in which the Oaxaca materials ought to be arranged in the then-new Chapultepec Park iteration of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, which opened in 1964.<sup>42</sup> (Recall that Bernal was the director of the museum in 1962-1968 and again 1970-1977.)

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<sup>37</sup> According to the "Bibliographic Note" in *Ancient Oaxaca: Discoveries in Mexican Archeology and History*, ed. Paddock, 240, Paddock's "Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica," part II of this volume, was only the third "general surveys of Oaxaca archaeology at any length," which was preceded by Alfonso Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* (1939) and Bernal's "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca" (1965).

<sup>38</sup> Caso and Bernal, *Culturas zapoteca y mixteca* (1962).

<sup>39</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 790-94.

<sup>40</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 794, note 3.

<sup>41</sup> Note also that some sentences and paragraphs from Bernal's little 1957 guidebook, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Guía oficial* are essentially repeated in the 1965 *Handbook of Middle American Indians* synthesis.

<sup>42</sup> Regarding the Oaxaca collection in Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology, Paddock, "Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica" (1966), 83, writes: "This material had been put in order by Bernal in the 1940s, but when it was moved from San Angel to the old Museum much of his long labor was undone. In reordering this collection [in 1963 and 1964] I have been, I think, the only person since Caso and Bernal to ponder, handle, and try to classify it all." Regarding the opening of the new National Museum of Anthropology in 1964, with Bernal as the first director,

Remarking on the convoluted publication history of this famous article is not, however, to suggest any impropriety in acknowledging credit among exceptionally close collaborators; not surprisingly, reading across Bernal's wide and varied oeuvre, one finds numerous innocuous instances in which sentences and whole paragraphs are repeated with minimal revision. Nonetheless, it is serendipitous for our present purposes that Bernal's supposedly definitive HMAI article was originally drafted together by Caso and Bernal as a set of prescriptions about how to arrange the Sala de Oaxaca in the then-new National Museum of Anthropology. The famous article is, in other words, an explicit reflection by the two leading figures in the field on how to tell a story of Oaxaca archaeology that is, on the one hand, sufficiently nuanced to be responsibly faithful to the available evidence and, on the other hand, sufficiently streamlined to engage the interest of a non-specialist museum audience.<sup>43</sup> Ironically, it is the museum director's seemingly banal task of displaying and annotating the available Oaxaca materials in a way that informs the Mexican and wider public about the most important features and history of that region that actually issues in the most authoritative and most revealing version of Bernal's Monte Albán narrative.

In fact, one might even surmise that, by tailoring their message for a lay clientele of museum patrons, tourists and schoolchildren, Bernal and Caso were collaborating to craft a Oaxacan contribution to the wider myth of Mexican national identity. This was technical archaeological work that also had a very public purpose. Already Caso had established the precedent of depicting ancient Mesoamericans in ways that made them highly appealing primogenitors to modern Mexico; and now Bernal reaffirmed and advanced that agenda by reworking the story in ways that did even more to celebrate the viability and virtues of combining indigenous and Spanish orientations into a single mestizo (or Mexican) identity. In short, by crafting a history of Monte Albán that features four successive demonstrations of the estimable rewards of "cultural fusion," Bernal provides an even more avowedly nationalist

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see Felipe Solís, "El Museo Nacional de Antropología y su historia," *Alquimia*, vol. 4, no. 12 (mayo-abril 2001): 33-37.

<sup>43</sup> Regarding the eventual organization of the Sala de Oaxaca, a.k.a. Hall 8, see Bernal, *The Mexican National Museum of Anthropology*, 95-101.

narrative than Caso's. In Bernal's rendering, the Oaxacan region—and, in fact, the single city of Monte Albán!—is not only a microcosm of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica; it is, moreover, a model for contemporary Mexico.

### **III. THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS: IGNACIO BERNAL'S HISTORICAL (RE)CONSTRUCTION**

We turn now to the particulars of Ignacio Bernal's actual plotline. He will, predictably, always organize his remarks on ancient Oaxaca according to the five-stage ceramic sequence that he helped Caso to develop. Yet from his earliest versions onward, that neat succession of five stages is repeatedly nuanced and complicated into variations like Periods I, II, II-III A, III A, IIIB-IV and V. (Appreciate that, again, the labels "Monte Albán I," etc. and "Period I," etc. are interchangeable; and again, as noted, even in Bernal's own writings, there is considerable slippage in the dates that he assigns to each of those periods.)

#### **A. THE VALLEY OF OAXACA IN ADVANCE OF MONTE ALBÁN: A DISTINCTIVE, INDEPENDENT AND STURDY CULTURAL PRESENCE**

Like Caso and every subsequent scholar, Ignacio Bernal concurred that, around 500 BCE, the first iterations of Monte Albán's Main Plaza were built atop a mountain that previously been site to no significant habitation. That key fact is never in doubt. Nonetheless, where all scholars will be challenged to explain Monte Albán's absence of modest beginnings and remarkably rapid ascent, the quandary is especially acute for Caso and Bernal because, in their era, they still has so little information about the peoples and circumstances in advance of the founding of the great capital. Bernal is certain that Period I pottery "is unquestionably the oldest culture at Monte Albán, since it is found on virgin soil..."<sup>44</sup> and he finds Period I pottery at numerous places elsewhere in the region. But, puzzlingly, after personally visiting some 251 Oaxacan sites prior to the 1965 synthesis, nowhere in the region can he find ceramics that are older.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 797.

<sup>45</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 795.

Therefore, while the more recent social histories of Oaxaca that we will encounter later build on evidence of human habitation in this region as early as the Late Ice Age (15,000-8000 BCE), Bernal had to admit that, “As far as we have been able to ascertain and save for the uncertain evidence of the hearths, man first appeared in the Valley of Oaxaca during the period which has been entitled Monte Albán I and must probably be placed between 700 and 300 B.C.”<sup>46</sup> In hindsight, this was an extreme misreckoning—mistaken by several thousand years!—an error that he would begin to correct as abundant new information was forthcoming during his long career. Nonetheless, his own comments on Oaxacan cultures in advance of Monte Albán I are, therefore, largely confined to tentative guesses and laments about discoveries yet to be made.<sup>47</sup>

In his 1965 synthesis, for instance, Bernal continues to describe the mapping of Oaxacan archeological sites as “disgraceful.”<sup>48</sup> In his opinion, “It seems extraordinary that such a favorable area for human development as the valley of Oaxaca was apparently not inhabited until so late. [But, thus far] we have no reliable data which could allow us to speak of Preceramic cultures there.”<sup>49</sup> And he muses that, “Even more extraordinary than the paucity of information about preceramic man in Oaxaca [i.e., groups in advance of Period I] is the lack of it for the earlier Preclassic subperiods.”<sup>50</sup> He does consider that he has grounds to hypothesize, albeit with some caution, that “Many millennia ago the Valley of Oaxaca was a great lake which gradually dried up,”<sup>51</sup> a prospect later proven to be untrue that would have provided a convenient explanation for the absence of older evidences of human habitation. More significantly, Bernal

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<sup>46</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 1-2.

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 152.

<sup>48</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 795.

<sup>49</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 796.

<sup>50</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 797.

<sup>51</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 1. Also see Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 794-95.

anticipates later ecological approaches by noting that, “the valley of Oaxaca provides all the conditions which suggest close correlation between geographical features and distribution of cultures.”<sup>52</sup> And from there, he contends, “we can make an important deduction: the whole valley of Oaxaca [with two small exceptions] has had a common history and is an ecological unit in which the same cultures have succeeded one another throughout in the same order.”<sup>53</sup>

Though distressed by the limited evidence, Bernal does, then, begin to make the case that Oaxacan culture, and certainly that within the central valley, constitutes a unity that is distinct from other Mesoamerican regions. Engaging, as did Caso, another question about which, as we'll see, there is much subsequent debate—namely, at what point may we legitimately consider central Oaxacan settlements to be “Zapotec”?—Bernal complains (and himself draws complaints) about an inordinate concern with the “ethnic baptism” of Oaxacan archaeological remains by adopting the following approach:

“Here we shall give ethnic names [e.g., Zapotec and Mixtec] only to those antiquities which in all probability were produced by historic peoples to which we link them; we shall not do this with cultures of earlier periods or for those whose connection with the historic horizon is not evident... Thus, we hope to free ourselves of the danger of false ethnic attributions without falling into the opposite extreme of making no linkages whatsoever between archaeological cultures and those of the historical or ethnographic horizon.”<sup>54</sup>

Accordingly, it will not be until so-termed Period IIIA that Bernal is willing to label the protagonists in his story of Monte Albán as “Zapotecs.” That is to say, in his view, neither the predecessors to the great capital—nor the founders of Monte Albán!—deserve the designation Zapotec. On the other hand, though, irrespective of how little is known of them at this point, Bernal's narrative does require that Period I and II Oaxacans were the bearers of a distinctive and strong cultural orientation, sufficiently independent both to differentiate them from other

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<sup>52</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 795.

<sup>53</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 795-96.

<sup>54</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 789.

contemporaneous Mesoamerican groups and to make them both creative and sturdy interlocutors variously with Olmecs, Mayas and Central Mexicans.

## **B. PERIOD I: THE EARLY ASCENT OF MONTE ALBÁN: INDIGENOUS OAXACAN FOUNDERS AND OLMECOID INFLUENCES**

While Bernal can provide few particulars about the eras in advance of the emergence of Monte Albán—and while he, like Caso, has no knowledge of the urban precedents at nearby San José Mogote, which become so important in later accounts<sup>55</sup>—he has an elaborate set of ideas about the circumstances of Period I at the actual site, which, he agrees, emerged in grand fashion atop a previously vacant mountaintop about 500 BCE. Like Caso, uncertain about the identity of the initial founders, he declines to speculate as to whether their motives for selecting this high and dry mountain site were primarily religious, political, economic or military—all alternatives that, as we'll see, have their eventual champions.<sup>56</sup> In fact, he does not really provide a story of the founding of Monte Albán per se. He does, however, venture a raft of observations about—and accolades for—the first few centuries in the great capital's history. Irrespective of the absence of any prelude to Monte Albán's advent—actually because of the absence of any clear precedents (of which he is aware)—Bernal's account of Period I Monte Albán showcases truly remarkable sophistication in several respects. No humble beginnings in this life history of the great capital!

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<sup>55</sup> It is ironic that, on the one hand, Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology* (1980), 178, suggests that the single greatest shortcoming of Caso's scheme concerns this early period, and owes primarily to his lack of awareness of the very important precedents to Monte Albán at the nearby site of San José Mogote, which was not appreciated until the 1970s. As we'll see, while San José Mogote is a major factor in all of the (re)constructions composed after that time. But, on the other hand, Bernal's own story of Monte Albán, like Caso's, is composed too early to make any mention of that paramount precedent to Monte Albán.

<sup>56</sup> Regarding the original mountaintop site selection of Monte Albán, Bernal seldom stresses the idea that ancient Oaxacans regarded this as a "sacred site," a notion that, as we'll see in chapter 7, will be crucial in, for instance, the Monte Albán story of Arthur Joyce. He does, nonetheless, lend some support to that idea when he writes, "To the people in the valley [Monte Albán] must have been the centre of the world, the place nearest the gods, where the great priests and nobles lived, the place to which they turned in prayer and supplication, the perfect fulfilment [sic] of their religious beliefs and of their desire for eternal life." Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 36.

## 1. An Absence of Small Beginnings: The Monte Albán Origins of Writing, Calendrics and Monumental Architecture

Again like Caso and almost all subsequent commentators, Bernal believes that the design of the Main Plaza was, right from the Period I beginning, purposeful and ambitious in the extreme: “The general plan of the great square already existed, together with its orientation toward the cardinal points.”<sup>57</sup> Likewise, he concurs, as all later scholars will, that the most prominent architectural construction of this period, located in the southwest corner of the Main Plaza, was the “Temple of the Dancing Figures” or “Building of the Dancers.” As he explains, “this structure,” in its earliest iteration, “consisted of a great talus decorated with rows of carved figures: a human being in a strange attitude was incised on each slab and it is to this strange attitude that the figures owe their name, the ‘Dancers’ [or *Danzantes*].”<sup>58</sup> Also noteworthy from this era are the innermost structures of the Northern Platform and some graves, which were “very simple, rectangular and provided with a flat roof.”<sup>59</sup> Though not more inclined than Caso to stress the military prowess of these early Oaxacans, he is more willing to affirm that the *Danzantes* may have been designed to commemorate “victory and war.”<sup>60</sup> Stronger, however, is his emphasis on Monte Albán I religion, which was, he thinks, quite elaborate insofar as, based on his study of funerary urns, “We know 10 gods, all masculine if we do not include the figures of naked women...”<sup>61</sup> Moreover, Period I carvings of fancily clad men, some with painted faces and bodies, tattoos, masks and false beards, together with evidence of dental mutilation and

<sup>57</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 151.

<sup>58</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 13.

<sup>59</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 154-55, summarizes Michael Coe's interpretation that “the *Danzantes* are nude because they represent captives and are exhibited in the usual Mesoamerican manner of representing unfortunate prisoners;” and then concurs that those *Danzantes* “may be forerunners of the Period II figures [i.e., the “conquest slabs” on Building J], and may represent—though in a different way—a similar idea: war and victory.”

<sup>61</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 798. For this period, as he will do for others, Bernal relies largely on funerary urns as diagnostics for the number and identity of “gods” that residents of each era presumably worshipped. That is, to be sure, a problematic strategy.



pyrite inlays, suggest public rituals that were already ornate and sophisticated.<sup>62</sup> And on the much debated question concerning if and when Monte Albán deserves an “urban” designation, Bernal writes, “At least since the end of Monte Albán I [i.e., about 300 CE] we are dealing with a city that presents many characteristics of civilization.”<sup>63</sup>

Also inclined, again like Caso, to heap abundant superlatives on the builders and residents of Monte Albán I, Bernal attributes to them several preeminent Mesoamerican “firsts,” at least three that are of enormous import. First, with respect to writing, he notes that, “as early as the first period many different glyphs were used in Monte Albán, 11 of them being calendrical,”<sup>64</sup> which prompts him to hypothesize that,

“Writing, on any appreciable scale, appears for the first time on stone at Monte Albán. Did the people of the Valley of Oaxaca invent this most important instrument of civilisation? It is hard to know, but they were certainly the first to use it.”<sup>65</sup>

Second, the combined antiquity and calendrical content of numerous of those Period I carvings lead him to believe that these “ancestors of the Zapotecs” had been inventors not only of writing but also the calendar;<sup>66</sup> for him, it is ancient Oaxacans, not Mayas, that deserve credit for Mesoamerica’s first sophisticated calendar. And third, in an even more intrepid claim, Bernal contends, furthermore, that the inhabitants of Monte Albán I were “the first people to build monuments of stone; so in a way they were also the originators of architecture.”<sup>67</sup> High praises for inventiveness and originality to be sure!

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<sup>62</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 798.

<sup>63</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 151.

<sup>64</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 798.

<sup>65</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 14.

<sup>66</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 14.

## 2. Mitigating the Mother Role of Olmecs: Oaxacan Autonomy from and Indebtedness to Gulf Coast Peoples

Bernal's most venturesome and subsequently controversial hypotheses concerning Period I Monte Albán involve his opinions with respect to the influence of Gulf Coast-based Olmecs, another region in which he established himself as a leading researcher. As noted last chapter, in 1942, at the second Round Table of the Mexican Society of Anthropology, which focused on the Olmecs, the majority of participants followed Alfonso Caso's lead in concluding that the Olmecs were the "mother culture" of Mesoamerican civilizations such as the Classic Mayas, Teotihuacanos and Zapotecs of Monte Albán.<sup>68</sup> According to this view, Olmecs, as "Mesoamerica's first civilization," dominated Formative-period culture, leaving their imprint on all of the presumably less advanced peoples with whom they interacted, Oaxacans among them; and thus Caso afforded the Olmecs a crucial role in all of Monte Albán's Period I innovations. Subsequent scholars would, as we'll see, counter these claims to the unique superiority of Olmecs with the alternate view that they were simply a "sister culture," rather than a "mother," to Oaxacans and others. This alternative stance argues that societies in several regions—the Morelos Valley, the Basin of Mexico and the Valley of Oaxaca—all had roughly contemporaneous societies of comparable complexity, and thus engaged Olmecs in something more like mutual interaction than dependency, subordination or mere imitation. And, not surprisingly, there are also Oaxacan scholars who opt for some middle ground between the so-called mother-culture and sister-culture models.<sup>69</sup>

Though Bernal is sometimes associated with Caso's view—and he does agree that Olmecs were "in many aspects... the mother of those to follow"<sup>70</sup>—his position, which he

<sup>68</sup> On the 1942 Round Table of the Mexican Society of Anthropology, see Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, 179-80; or Robert H. Cobean and Alba Guadalupe Mastache, "Mesoamerican Studies," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, ed. Carrasco; vol. 2, 277-78.

<sup>69</sup> See, for instance, Arthur A. Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 91.

<sup>70</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 13-14.

describes as “intermediate,” is actually closer to the sister-culture alternative.<sup>71</sup> By far the most high-profile “evidence” for Olmec influence at Period I Monte Albán is the dubiously labeled “negroid” features of the Danzante figures, which seem to bear a closer resemblance to the famous carved heads and faces in the Gulf Coast region than to any people or art in Oaxaca; and thus, as Bernal notes, “The relationship between the Danzantes and Olmec art has led to a number of controversies.”<sup>72</sup> Summarizing the range of opinions in the 1960s, he cites scholars who deny there is any actual similarity between the Danzantes and Olmec carvings, some who argue the dancing figures of Monte Albán are Olmec “in spirit and detail,” and a third camp that holds the Danzantes are “derived” from the Olmec.<sup>73</sup> Bernal’s own medial position with respect to the nature of the relationship between Period I Monte Albán and the Olmecs, a topic that he addresses repeatedly in numerous contexts, requires a careful balance in which he insists both on Monte Albán I’s considerable debt to the Olmecs but also on the Oaxacans’ autonomy from wholesale Olmec influence.

On the one hand, then, Bernal proposes with confidence that, “Although we do not know for certain who the inhabitants [of Monte Albán] may have been during this first period, they were undoubtedly influenced by the so called ‘Olmecs’ of the Gulf Coast...”<sup>74</sup> According to respective ceramic-based chronologies for the two areas, Monte Albán I is broadly contemporaneous with Olmec II, which corresponds to the efflorescence of the premier Olmec

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<sup>71</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 13, nuances what he means by an “intermediate” position as follows: “Actually I believe that the first signs of civilization are to be found on the Gulf Coast, in the area I call ‘Metropolitan Olmec.’ These first signs of civilization occur not only there but also at sites such as those in the highlands of Guatemala, which are not tropical and thus possess an entirely different habitat, even though they may be contemporaneous with the efflorescence of the Olmecs.” As Philip Drucker wrote in his review of Bernal’s *The Olmec World*, *American Anthropologist* 73 (1971): 1410, “Bernal never associated himself with any of the extremist interpretations of culture growth of the [Olmec] area...”

<sup>72</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 154.

<sup>73</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 154.

<sup>74</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 2.

sites of San Lorenzo and La Venta.<sup>75</sup> In an effort to bring some precision to his ideas about the timing and nature of Olmec influence, Bernal, drawing on the work of his masters thesis, divides Monte Albán I into three Phases (or pottery horizons) I-A, I-B and I-C, and then adduces Carbon 14 dates on the basis of which, he says, “it becomes evident that Phases A and B of this period are prior to Olmec presence, at least in a general sense, and in a certain way are independent of it.”<sup>76</sup> Based on that premise, then, about which he is somewhat tentative, the most significant Olmec influence did not transpire until Phase I-C, which is to suggest that the original site selection, founding and architectural conception of the mountaintop city were purely Oaxacan achievements, but that Olmecs then played a very substantial role in the latter segments of Period I Monte Albán's development. In any case, uncertain particulars aside, Bernal, on the basis of his sustained study of both areas, is fully persuaded that Olmecs eventually had a major—and salutary—impact on this initial era of the capital's ascent to greatness.

Yet, on the other hand—and here we begin to see the quintessential exercise of Bernal's foremost narrative theme—he will qualify his claim that “the first period of Monte Albán coincides with the great period of Olmec culture,” by insisting as well that, although the two cultures are related in a number of ways, “they are separate entities and neither actually copied the other.”<sup>77</sup> For him, Period I Oaxacans were, as we've noted, the independent and sturdy protagonists of his story who borrow ideas and inspiration from the Olmecs without, however, forfeiting or even compromising their home-grown tastes and values. In his view, “The prevailing style of Monte Albán [in Period I], therefore, can be considered a variant of the Olmec

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<sup>75</sup> Though there is considerable slippage in that dates that Bernal assigns to these periods in various contexts—he usually designates Monte Albán I as about 900-300 BCE and Olmec II as 1200-600 BCE—he is sometimes willing to describe them as “contemporaneous,” e.g., Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 108, 110 and 151-52.

<sup>76</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 152. On subsequent problems and limitations with this division of Monte Albán into three sub-periods or pottery horizons, something that Bernal apparently first did in his unpublished MA thesis (1946), see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 144. Though by reading Bernal's comments in *The Olmec World*, one can draw this conclusion that he thinks significant Olmec influence arrives in Oaxaca during Phase I-C of Period I and not before, he himself seems very tentative about that.

<sup>77</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 14.

and may be called the 'dancing figure style,' since the typical motif is to be found not only in stone but in clay and minor objects."<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless, based on the discovery of many objects "with very clear Olmec traits but of the general style of Oaxaca," Bernal asserts that,

"one more indication reinforcing my idea that Monte Albán and in general Culture I [i.e., Period I] of Oaxaca—although contemporaneous with Olmec II—are not derived from the Metropolitan zone [i.e., the Olmec Gulf Coast region] but from a local culture which only later became associated with the Olmec world. This explains why Monte Albán was more advanced in some aspects but behind in others compared to the Olmec, and of course the differences between the two."<sup>79</sup>

Period I Oaxacans were, in other words, for Bernal, by no means inferiors or supplicants to Olmec intruders. To the contrary (and contrary to Caso), Bernal considers that the Oaxacans were ahead of them in terms of hieroglyphic writing and calendrics, and their architecture was "certainly more advanced than that of the Olmec area."<sup>80</sup> Also, according to Bernal, though Oaxacans were well aware of Olmec culture long before the founding of Monte Albán, the initial impetus for a city atop this mountain was a strictly Oaxacan idea.<sup>81</sup> The genius of Monte Albán's Period I residents lay, consequently, according to this script, in their willing openness to respond creatively to the inspiration offered by Olmecs, who, Oaxacans had to admit, were their superiors in some respects. The happy result is, then, a hybridized style that nonetheless preserves the integrity of the Oaxacan original. That is to say, borrowing from and intermingling with Olmec culture greatly enhanced rather than diminished the estimable cultural and artistic

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<sup>78</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 167.

<sup>79</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 152.

<sup>80</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 151.

<sup>81</sup> In other words, though Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 152, opines that the most consequential Olmec influence came in Phase I-C, the latter portion of Period I Monte Albán (i.e., more than a century after the initial establishment of the mountaintop settlement), he also contends (*ibid.*, 167) that Oaxacans across the central valley had "Olmec connections [that] would commence with Olmec I," to which he assigns the dates 1500-1200 BC (i.e., well in advance of the onset of Monte Albán I). Actually, both because his ideas on the particulars of Olmec connections to Oaxaca change over time and because he is always careful to qualify his hypothetical assertions on the matter—as he is prone to say, "hypotheses remain just that"—we ought not make his position appear simpler and more definitive than it was.

creativity of native Oaxacans. On that basis of that premise, Bernal thus offers this summary view of the prevailing style of Monte Albán I:

“I believe [Period I Monte Alban] falls within the general Olmec tradition, but in no way can it be said that Monte Albán was merely a Colonial site, such as Tlatilco: it was the center of a vast area, not only refusing to imitate others but leading in such important aspects as writing, the calendar, and architecture... The Oaxaca style with its sphere of influence cannot be called ‘Colonial Olmec’ but Olmecoid in a sense. Monte Albán possessed a creativity and an individuality of its own.”<sup>82</sup>

This pleasing plotline of two highly capable but very different cultures collaborating to, in a sense, complete one another is, however, complicated by the fact that the Olmecs seem to take very little in return from the Oaxacan progenitors of writing, calendrics and fine architecture. As Bernal sees it, “influence flows mainly from the Olmec area into the Valley of Oaxaca...;”<sup>83</sup> but the reverse was not the case. And thus, irrespective of the originality and excellence of Oaxaca culture, Bernal is adamant that it not be described as a “mother culture.” Explicitly contravening that prospect, he writes:

“Actually, several reasons seem to argue against it. [Oaxaca culture] was a culture which did not diffuse and whose products, style, and knowledge rarely left its confines. I cannot claim to understand the reasons for this but archaeology indicates clearly that it is so. It may be supposed therefore that much was imported from outside and that Monte Albán is only an extraordinarily distinguished heir [to the Olmec region].”<sup>84</sup>

In sum with respect to Period I, then, Bernal categorically rejects intimations of a major mismatch in which powerful Olmecs dominate, cajole, impose or impress themselves and their culture on less sophisticated Oaxacans. Instead, he presents Period I Oaxacan-Olmec engagements as a mutual interaction between two very different but similarly strong and

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<sup>82</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 167. Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 799, summarizes his position this way: “We do not for a moment suggest that Monte Alban I culture was a simple copy or product of the archaeological Olmecs, but rather that the fundamental elements were the same and that there was some acculturation between the two during their development, although each produced its own individuality until they separated entirely in the subsequent stages.”

<sup>83</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 14.

<sup>84</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 167.

independent parties. Though Olmecs decline, for whatever reasons, to embrace ideas from Oaxaca, Oaxacans benefit enormously by their thoughtful and selective incorporation of elements from a culture that is majorly different from their own. And thus here we see the earliest—and perhaps most vivid—exemplification of the historiographical theme that dominates Bernal's entire narrative.

### **C. PERIOD II: THE CONTINUING ASCENT OF MONTE ALBÁN: A COMBINATION OF OAXACAN RECEPTIVITY AND MAYANOID STIMULATION**

While Bernal will point out important continuity in several respects between Monte Albán I and Monte Albán II, the break that separates these two stages is, it seems, clearer than that which divides any other two periods. So-termed Monte Albán I refers to a widely distributed ceramic style that was present at sites across Oaxaca and a time span (roughly 900-300 BCE), which both substantially precedes and succeeds the 500 BCE founding of the mountaintop capital; by contrast, the next period, Monte Albán II, which begins about 300 BCE and “lasted roughly until the beginnings of the Christian era,”<sup>85</sup> references a style that arose very quickly and is not nearly so widely distributed. Of the five main stages, Monte Albán II ceramics are found in the fewest sites outside of the capital, and then only at the largest Oaxacan settlements,<sup>86</sup> a limited distribution that led Bernal to believe that most smaller villages passed directly from Phase I-C to what he terms the “transitional Period II-III A” without ever actually participating in the Period II style or culture.<sup>87</sup> And he concurs with Caso, then, that this restricted distribution signals a cultural influence that was both foreign-born and confined to a few elite social groups—perhaps “an autocracy of rulers or priests who imposed their own ideas

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<sup>85</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 2. Often—e.g., Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico*, 97—he assigns Monte Albán II the dates 300 BCE-100 BCE.

<sup>86</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 799, explains, “In the valley of Oaxaca Period II (i.e., Monte Albán II) materials occur only at Caballito Blanco and at 23 other sites, almost all large [of course, Monte Albán included].”

<sup>87</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 800.

but did not constitute a majority..."<sup>88</sup>—which prevailed at the capital and strongly influenced other larger sites without, however, winning sway among the more general Oaxacan population.

### **1. Popular Continuity and Elite Innovation: An Emphasis on Religious, Artistic and Architectural Elaboration, not Military Prowess**

Within the city proper, according to Bernal, the Olmec-influenced Period I style, which had penetrated the sensibilities of the entire populace, persisted as a substratum beneath the newer Monte Albán II style, whose contribution is most apparent in major changes and constructions undertaken only in the central precinct.<sup>89</sup> Regarding the limited distribution of the Period II style, he writes,

“we are dealing with a new and different culture which retains many of its predecessor’s traits... Another clue in the same direction is that the changes occurred chiefly in the ceremonial life, whereas many of the more popular traits remained unaltered.”<sup>90</sup>

He, for instance, agrees with Caso that this was the era in which the Great Plaza, already an impressive public space, was much expanded and more fully leveled by eliminating rocky protuberances and filling natural hollows. In Bernal’s suitably appreciative description,

“This was titanic feat. Thus the builders managed to mold a perfectly flat surface some 1500 feet above the Valley of Oaxaca. It measured 3000 by 1300 feet and around it stands the monuments—built little by little—which were to surround the plaza.”<sup>91</sup>

Additionally during Period II, a ball court was added to the main area,<sup>92</sup> as was the arrowed-shaped and oddly aligned structure known as Building J (or Mound J), which Bernal surmised was “used for astronomical observations,” an assessment that would be reechoed and refined by

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<sup>88</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 800.

<sup>89</sup> See Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 166.

<sup>90</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 800.

<sup>91</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 161.

<sup>92</sup> Ignacio Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 161.



countless subsequent scholars.<sup>93</sup> Albeit narrowly circumscribed, Period II was, to be sure, a major building phase.

While the “Olmecoid” Danzante style, the hallmark of Period I, was now eliminated, Building J, the signature structure of Period II that was prominently located within the fully-flattened and stucco-covered Great Plaza, was decorated with numerous carved stone panels that, in Bernal's view, “probably are testimonials to successful campaigns of the lords of Monte Albán.”<sup>94</sup> And, in that respect, the Building J slabs may have both continued, “though in a different way,” the theme of war and victory that was expressed earlier via the contorted, seemingly tortured Danzante carvings and prefigured later stelae, which also seem to commemorate military leaders and successes.<sup>95</sup> That is to say, as in Period I, Bernal is willing to acknowledge the glaringly graphic Period II imagery, which many scholars will interpret as signs that the Main Plaza was being used primarily as a theater of intimidation in which Monte Albán rulers threatened subordinates and visitors into compliance with their militaristic ambitions. Again, however, also as in his account of Period I, Bernal soft-pedals the militarism of this era and instead emphasizes much more strongly the architectural and artistic prowess and innovations of Period II, which “is distinguished by great stone structures, at times almost Cyclopean in style, and also by columns built of a number of stones, and by a special kind of pottery which includes, for instance, four-legged vessels, fresco decoration and the earliest great urns.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico*, 97.

<sup>94</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 154.

<sup>95</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 154-55.

<sup>96</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 2. Regarding the highly original use of columns in Period II Monte Albán, see Doris Heyden and Paul Gendrop, *Pre-Columbian Architecture of Mesoamerica* (New York: Electa/Rizzoli, 1975), 176; and Henri Stierlin, *Ancient Mexico* (1994), 134-35, who contends that “The columns are without a doubt a Zapotec invention and date from Monte Albán II (shortly before the Christian era). They are one of the most important innovations of this civilization.” Both of those art historical accounts, like so many others, rely heavily on Bernal's interpretations of Monte Albán.

He, moreover, agrees with Caso that elaborations in glyphic writing—which they both consider one of the salient breakthroughs of Monte Albán I—continued apace with “no sudden interruption in passing from Period I to II.”<sup>97</sup> In addition, the tombs for which Monte Albán is so often noted continued to become more and more elaborate: “Funerary architecture too was developed; the dead, accompanied by offerings, were placed in box tombs and tombs with antechambers and vaulted ceilings.”<sup>98</sup> And it was largely on the basis of the abundance and wide variety of the anthropomorphically decorated clay urns recovered from those tombs that Bernal was able to launch his hypothesis that, for Monte Albán II, “we know of 15 gods, of which one is feminine...”<sup>99</sup> Irrespective of the problematic practice of identifying “deities” via the features on funerary urns—an exercise for which Bernal is the unrivaled master—he considers that, by this period, “we know that Cocijo, god of rain, Huehuetéotl, god of fire, a god wearing a bird mask over his face, and a bat god related to death were already being worshipped.”<sup>100</sup>

In sum, especially because Period II accomplishments came in the most visible (and most archaeologically enduring) features of the growing city, Bernal, like Caso, is fully persuaded that during this era the pattern of artistic, intellectual and religious innovation established in Period I persisted, and perhaps accelerated, in ways that enabled Monte Albán to stretch its lead as far and away the preeminent center in the region. In short, during Period II, the city's scale and influence continued their rapid ascent.

## **2. Oaxacan Resilience and Receptivity: Cooperative not Coercive Intercultural Exchange**

How then can Bernal account for this Period II escalation in artistic excellence and religious elaboration? Who was this “aristocratic minority” that, beginning about 300 BCE,

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<sup>97</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 800, quoting Alfonso Caso “Calendario y escritura de las antiguas culturas de Monte Albán,” in *Obras Completas de Miguel Othón de Mendizábal*, vol. I (México, D.F: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1947), 19.

<sup>98</sup> Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico*, 97.

<sup>99</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 801.

<sup>100</sup> Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico*, 97.

initiated all these changes? And from where did they come? Despite his respect for the capabilities of indigenous Oaxacans, he follows Caso in presuming there had to have been major interventions from outsiders other than the Olmecs, who are by this point on the decline;<sup>101</sup> and he also affirms Caso's suspicions that the Period II "newcomers" came from "the south." Noting the discovery of vessels in the tombs at Chiapa de Corzo in Chiapas that are "strikingly similar to those at Monte Albán II,"<sup>102</sup> Bernal explains that, "We believe that the most probable homeland of the bearers of the Monte Albán II culture was Chiapas or the Guatemala highlands; or the bearers may have come from the latter by way of the former."<sup>103</sup> Always wary of "the 'ethnic baptism' of archaeological remains," he still refuses to identify the Oaxacan residents of Monte Albán II as Zapotecs, and, apparently by the same token, he is unwilling to define these Period II interlopers as Mayas, though he does at points label them "proto-Maya" or "Mayanoid."<sup>104</sup>

Even more telling with respect to Bernal's narrative strategy are fluctuations in his depictions of the nature of this incursion from the south. While he invariably describes the Period I Olmec interactions as peaceable and cooperative, in his 1957 tourist pamphlet, he echoes Caso in opining that the Period II evidence of intruders "suggests that they were a small group of conquerors who imposed their sway over the earlier inhabitants although these did not disappear; probably the two groups mingled in the course of time."<sup>105</sup> That version, though it

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<sup>101</sup> For Bernal, Monte Albán II is contemporaneous with Olmec III. As Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 166-67, explains that "The [Monte Albán II] newcomers [from the south] added certain Olmec influences which were still alive but which did not necessarily proceed from the Metropolitan [Gulf Coast] zone. This becomes more apparent when we consider that Monte Albán II corresponded with Olmec III and even to a later time—when the Metropolitan zone was losing its importance."

<sup>102</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 166.

<sup>103</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 801. On the supposed Guatemalan origin of the Period II "newcomers," also see, for example, Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 2.

<sup>104</sup> Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico*, 95, for instance, uses "proto-Maya;" and Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 803, among several sources, uses "Mayanoid."

<sup>105</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 2-3. Regarding Caso's position on the nature of the Period II intrusion "from the south," Paddock, "Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica" (1966), 119, explains: "Some time ago Caso suggested that the Monte Albán II style might possibly have been imposed in the Valley of Oaxaca by conquest... As possible evidence, he cited the

does infer that the two groups eventually “mingled,” risks presenting the native Oaxacans as passive victims of foreign-born manipulations that were beyond their control; that is to say, it presents Oaxacans more as subordinates than equal partners in the so-termed cultural mingling. Bernal, however, mitigates that possibility in another version by replacing “conquest” with “imposition,” and thus writes:

“The carriers of Period II culture (at least at Monte Albán) were an aristocracy made up of chieftains or priests who imposed their ideas upon others. At the same time they did not constitute a majority sufficiently strong to wipe out the ancient culture [which had lots of Olmec influences], which continues to thrive among the masses.”<sup>106</sup>

It is, then, revealing in the extreme that in his later accounts of this era, including his authoritative academic synthesis for the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (1965), Bernal recasts the Period II interaction between indigenous Oaxacans and Mayanoid immigrants as a less coercive and more cooperative intercultural exchange. In fact, in the latter version, the vibrancy of Period II Monte Albán seems to owe largely to the fact it was a context of tri-cultural or even four-part intercultural synergy in which all four parties are painted in very favorable lights.

In that rendition—which is much more consistent with Bernal's dominant storiological theme—the Mayanoid southerners, instead of bullying the Oaxacans, provide a fresh stimulus to cultural creativity; these immigrants “brought or invented many elements of their own but went on using others that were characteristic of the previous period.”<sup>107</sup> And the native Oaxacans, instead of being conquered, persevere as the main actors who, just as they had in Period I, operate from a position of strength and openness, which allows them to borrow in thoughtful and

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upper-class and ritual character of Monte Albán II traits, their relatively sudden appearance in Oaxaca, and the presence of certain inscriptions in Monte Albán II style consisting of a place glyph with a head upside down below it... As Caso pointed out, this might be a statement of the conquest of the place named... [But Howard] Leigh has offered another possible explanation...” We will address John Paddock's endorsement of Howard Leigh's interpretation of the Period II Building J “conquest slabs” in the next chapter.

<sup>106</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 161.

<sup>107</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 800.

selective ways from outsiders who are very different from them. In this storyline, rather than resisting new ideas and practices, Oaxacans welcome and encourage outside influences. Moreover, though the formerly-powerful Olmecs were by now losing importance at home in the Gulf Coast “Metropolitan zone,” Bernal mentions three comingled sorts of Olmecoid influence that continue in Monte Albán II: It persisted as a “substratum” inherited from earlier inhabitants of the city;<sup>108</sup> it was reinforced by outlying Oaxacan groups who had earlier embraced Olmecoid elements, which they now brought to the capital;<sup>109</sup> and “the [Mayanoid] newcomers added certain Olmec influences which were still alive but which did not necessarily proceed from the Metropolitan zone.”<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, presaging the crucial role that Central Mexicans will play in Monte Albán's Classic era, Bernal considers Monte Albán II to be the period that showed “the first influences from Teotihuacan,” a fourth cultural influence that would not really be integrated or “assimilated” until Period III-A.<sup>111</sup>

In sum, then, both Bernal's popular and more scholarly accounts of Period II Monte Albán acknowledge the highly prominent “conquest slabs” on Building J, which seem, almost beyond doubt, to commemorate a succession of military victories; and he does entertain the prospect, which will be advocated by many subsequent scholars, that the rapid emergence and restricted distribution of the Period II style ought to be interpreted as strong indicators of a forcible takeover of the mountaintop capital by marauding outsiders. That is to say, he does give serious consideration to the political and militaristic motivations that may account for the Monte Albán II growth spurt. Likewise, Bernal's accounts of this era do introduce a very wide gap between a foreign-influenced “aristocratic minority” versus more fully Oaxacan “commoners” who remain attached to the older ways, a major discrepancy between elites and non-elites that, as we'll see, present-day scholars working from poststructuralist and subaltern perspectives will consider to be both highly troubling but also the key dynamic through which

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<sup>108</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 166.

<sup>109</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 801.

<sup>110</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 166.

<sup>111</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 800. On Teotihuacan influences in Monte Albán II, also see Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 161.

we can make sense of the history of ancient Oaxaca.<sup>112</sup> He does, then, lead us to believe that Period II culture was a strictly elite phenomenon, from which lower classes were quite fully excluded.

Bernal, however, arguably even more than Caso, invariably recasts this major growth phase in the capital's history in a very positive and non-coercive light; no laments here about imperious rulers or distressing disparities in power. In his accounts, the fabulous artistic, architectural, intellectual and religious innovations of Monte Albán II owe far less to self-aggrandizing rulers, sectarian ambitions or militaristic aggression than to synergistic, healthy and enlivening interactions between Oaxacans and people from several other Mesoamerican regions.<sup>113</sup> Again in Period II, the native Oaxacans are depicted as welcoming hosts rather than unwilling victims.

#### **D. PERIOD IIIA: EARLY CLASSIC MONTE ALBÁN: TEOTIHUACAN INFLUENCES, “CULTURAL FUSION” AND THE ORIGINS OF ZAPOTEC CULTURE**

With respect to so-called Classic-era Monte Albán, Ignacio Bernal, like Caso in his later renditions, is compelled to divide Period III into IIIA (about 200 CE-500 CE) and IIIB (about 500 CE-800 CE), which are roughly correlated with the Early and Late Classic.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, en route to his discussion of the full flowering of Classic-era Monte Albán, wherein Teotihuacan

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<sup>112</sup> Most notably, as discussed in chapter 7 of this book, Joyce's *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, relies on a “poststructuralist perspective” that constantly directs attention to the dynamic interactions between elites and non-elites throughout ancient Oaxacan history.

<sup>113</sup> It is notable that when Bernal provides quicker and more casual renditions of Oaxaca history—for instance in his accompaniment to the photographs in Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour* (1968)—he can essentially leave out this Monte Albán II era of Mayanoid influence, which is less crucial to his story than either the preceding Olmec influence in Monte Albán I or the Teotihuacan influence in Monte Albán III. In a synoptic case like that, he settles for a three-part account of Preclassic (Monte Albán I) to Classic (Monte Albán III) to Postclassic (Monte Albán IV).

<sup>114</sup> See, for instance, Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico*, 97. Less frequently—e.g., Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 2-3—he uses Period IIIA (300-500 CE) and Period IIIB (500-1000 CE), which implies a later date for Monte Albán's collapse.

influences will far outstrip Mayanoid ones, Bernal describes a Transitional II-III A Phase (roughly 100 BCE-200 CE) in which elements of those two cultures are simultaneously present in the city without, however, being well integrated; there is during this interim, in his words, a “grouping of elements of two cultures to form a transition without fusion between them...”<sup>115</sup> Where, as we saw, the Mayanoid elaborations of Period II were largely confined to the elite sectors of the city, the so-termed Transitional Monte Albán II-III A Phase is even more circumscribed insofar as it is present only in a few tombs where one can find respective Mayanoid and Teotihuacan style objects buried side by side.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, for Bernal, “The great importance of this [transitional] phase seems to lie in the fact that it marks the completion of the appearance of the elements which make up the style we call Zapotec.”<sup>117</sup>

### **1. “Cultural Fusion” Par Excellence: From Four-Party Conglomerate to the Birth of a Distinctive Zapotec Culture**

What Bernal terms the II-III A Transitional Phase presents, in other words, a kind of four-party conglomerate in which the purely Oaxacan founders of the Monte Albán have been joined by early Olmecoid influences, later Mayanoid influences and now later still Teotihuacan influences—but those four styles continue to exist somewhat independently from one another. That is to say, while the labels Monte Albán I, II and III A suggest successive chronological periods, they actually designate overlapping “cultures” and styles that, to this point, in Bernal’s assessment, remained very imperfectly synthesized into any holistic unity. Accordingly, it is a major highlight in his (re)construction of Oaxacan history when he maintains, provocatively enough, that the fuller amalgamation of those four elements eventually gives birth to “a new

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<sup>115</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 801. On this “transitional [II-III A] stage on the way to the Zapotec culture (100 BC-AD 200),” also see Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico*, 97; and note that even as early as Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Guía oficial* (1957), 3, he included this transitional phase in his Monte Albán narrative.

<sup>116</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 801, notes just one exception to the juxtaposition of distinctly Mayanoid and Teotihuacan style funerary objects during the Transitional II-III A Phase, namely, urns, which show elements of both styles.

<sup>117</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 801.

culture of its own," which Bernal is, at last, willing to label "Zapotec."<sup>118</sup> Yes, this is, for him, the birth of a distinct Zapotec culture! As he says, "I believe, indeed, that Period IIIA consists of the final fusion of Periods I and II, combined with ideas from Teotihuacan."<sup>119</sup>

Using this four-part cultural "fusion" as the starting point both for an identifiable Zapotec culture and for Period IIIA, Bernal explains,

"Historically, it is the moment when we can begin to speak of Zapotecs, since it is possible to demonstrate that there was a continuous cultural tradition in the valley of Oaxaca from that time until the Spanish conquest and, consequently, to the present day."<sup>120</sup>

That is to say—and this is another quintessential demonstration of his recurrent affirmation of cultural admixing—the very presence of the great Zapotec culture depends, from its earliest origins, not on the preservation of cultural or ethnic purity, but on quite the opposite: namely, a blending, mixing or, in Bernal's favorite term, "fusion" of Oaxacan, Olmecoid, Mayanoid and Teotihuacan features. Instead of being dominated, overrun, subsumed or "conquered" by any of these groups, Oaxacans allow themselves to be enriched and improved by each of those external influences. And thus, "Zapotec" culture owes both its distinctiveness and its very existence to the conjoined amalgam of four cultures that intersected at the mountaintop site of Monte Albán. The analogue between the admixed Zapotecs and the Spanish-indigenous fusion that gives rise to mestizo Mexico and a distinct Mexican national identity is, if not deliberate, nonetheless unmistakable.

In any case, then, the beginning of Period IIIA arguably marks no less than the greatest turning point in Bernal's Monte Albán narrative insofar as, prior to this era, the various constituent cultural elements, though all present in the city, remained disjointed from one

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<sup>118</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 802.

<sup>119</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 800.

<sup>120</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 802. Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 3, demonstrates that by 1957 he had settled on Period IIIA as the first era in which "We can safely hold that these people were Zapotecs..."



another; but after this—with the birth of a distinctive Zapotec culture!—there is clear continuity in style and culture that will persist all the way through to the city's collapse, and even after that into the colonial and contemporary eras. Following that grand cultural synthesis in the Early Classic, Bernal contends, “the later Zapotec periods make no change in the basic elements or fundamental style of the culture of Period IIIA.”<sup>121</sup>

## **2. The Teotihuacan and Monte Albán Relationship: Continuing Oaxaca Autonomy and Receptivity**

If, as Bernal suggests, influences from Teotihuacan were the crucial stimulus both to the birth of a discernable Zapotec culture and to the Monte Albán's greatest florescence, then he, like every subsequent archaeologist-author we will consider, must address head-on the still-heavily debated question of how best to characterize the relationship between Classic-era Monte Albán and the great Central Mexican capital. Here again, seemingly in order to maintain consistency in his broader storyline, Bernal must balance competing emphases. Therefore, on the one hand, he stresses the import of Teotihuacan influences in spurring a fresh burst artistic and religious creativity at Monte Albán. His account suggests that, without that infusion of outside energy, the efflorescence of Classic Monte Albán would never have happened; Oaxacans could not have accomplished this entirely on their own. On the other hand, Bernal always insists on the unique creativity, initiative and independence of indigenous Oaxacans. In his version, they are always the final arbiters of their own fate; never are Oaxacans the dupes, victims or subordinates of Teotihuacanos or, for that matter, any outside group. Accordingly, Bernal writes,

“We do not believe that Oaxaca was part of a possible Teotihuacan empire, because we are dealing with cultural influences which did not produce the Zapotec culture but merely modified it. Indeed most of the basic traits and those which endured were of local origin.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 802.

<sup>122</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 802.

In other words, the Period IIIA Oaxacan leaders are depicted in highly flattering ways as active borrowers, self-confident and pliable enough to be receptive to external stimuli without, however, compromising the integrity of their homegrown styles, beliefs and practices.<sup>123</sup>

Though that confident receptivity did not really extend to outlying Oaxacan areas,<sup>124</sup> it had bountiful ramifications within Monte Albán proper where there was “great activity, and many buildings were constructed during this period.”<sup>125</sup> The pottery of Monte Albán IIIA provides “the best illustration of this interesting state of affairs” insofar as Teotihuacan style ceramics were reworked according to local Oaxacan conventions in ways that issued in vessels, urns and design motifs that are “neither old survivals nor products of Teotihuacan,” but instead amalgamated new “Zapotec” forms.<sup>126</sup> That is to say, the merger of foreign and local ceramic styles eventuated in something greater and more original than the sum of the parts.

Moreover, that same Period IIIA pattern of pro-active borrowing is even more apparent in the Oaxacans' selective integration of Central Mexican features into their own style of

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<sup>123</sup> Regarding the nature of the Teotihuacan influence at Monte Albán (and also in Veracruz, Chiapas, Guatemala, and the West of Mexico), Bernal, *Teotihuacan*, 49, writes, “There, even though we find a strong Teotihuacan influence, it is an influence exerted over a local culture which did not lose its basic characteristics, although it did assimilate a great number of Teotihuacan elements.” Occasionally Bernal does make statements that suggest Period IIIA Teotihuacan influences *replaced* rather than *supplemented* earlier Olmecoid and Mayanoid influences; for instance, Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 802, says, “The only outside influence to be seen in Period IIIA comes from Teotihuacan; for the first time Monte Albán is connected with central Mexico rather than with the regions to the south and the southeast.” But more often he gives the impression that, with the onset of Monte Albán IIIA, all of these outside influences “fused,” and that formulation better serves his persist emphasis on the fortuitous consequences of cultural admixing.

<sup>124</sup> Regarding the limited regional distribution of Period IIIA, on the one hand, Bernal, “Archeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 802, says, “We have found [ceramic] remains of Period IIIA in 30 sites in the valley of Oaxaca. It should be possible to find them in many more.” On the other hand, *ibid.*, 802-3, says: “Outside of Monte Albán we do not know a single monument, sculpture, or mural painting belong to this period [i.e., Monte Albán IIIA], so its definition is based solely on that place.”

<sup>125</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 803.

<sup>126</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 803.

monumental building. The new and different architecture of Monte Albán IIIA, according to Bernal,

“directly derived from Teotihuacan, uses the slope and panel design; but it is far more than a variant, let alone a copy. It is an architecture of local inspiration even if it has borrowed elements from elsewhere. Thus, the vertical panels of the temples in Monte Albán run uninterruptedly round the entire building, whereas in Teotihuacan each one is closed at the corners to form a complete frame.”<sup>127</sup>

Instead of simply copying Teotihuacan forms, the Early Classic architects of Monte Albán are highly discerning in mining the great Mexican capital for ideas and inspiration they can utilize in designs that are uniquely their own. In Bernal's surmise, “Although the main outlines of the platforms are surely influenced by Teotihuacan, they have special features which enable us to speak hence forth of a Zapotec architecture.”<sup>128</sup> Moreover with respect to this judicious pattern of procurement, which is more aptly termed strategic appropriation than copying, Bernal concludes that, “Exactly the same appears to apply to the mural paintings, which, at Monte Albán, have been found in tombs.”<sup>129</sup> By contrast, writing and calendrics, areas in which the Oaxacans were presumably already far ahead of Teotihuacanos, “continue on their own lines...”<sup>130</sup> Never, in these stories, are the Zapotec designers interested in copying simply for copying sake.

In sum, then, Bernal presents Period IIIA Monte Albán as a vibrant and dynamically changing city in which the indigenous Oaxacans' combination of eager receptivity to outside influences and confidence in their own local conventions gave birth to one Mesoamerica's premier civilizations—the Zapotecs, a culture whose strength and vitality owed primarily from its strategic integration of features derived from innumerable other regions. To be sure, this era provides fabulous exemplification of his broader claims that “there is a sort of internationalism

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<sup>127</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 36.

<sup>128</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 803.

<sup>129</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 803.

<sup>130</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 803.

within Mesoamerica” and that “the bearers of all or almost all the high cultures [in this region] were made up of two or more groups which fertilized one another during their coexistence.”<sup>131</sup> In fact, his description of Early Classic Monte Albán’s creative admixing and synthesis is nearly tantamount to a second founding of the great mountaintop capital.

### **E. PERIOD IIIB: LATE CLASSIC MONTE ALBÁN: TEOTIHUACAN’S DEMISE AND THE ZAPOTEC’S THEOCRATIC SUCCESSES AND EXCESSES**

In Ignacio Bernal’s account, the transition from Monte Albán IIIA to Monte Albán IIIB is seamless insofar as the Zapotec city continues its pattern of growing sophistication and prosperity. Ironically, however—and the stuff of Shakespearean storylines—Period IIIB (roughly 500-800 CE) includes, in his rendition, both “the climax and the end of Monte Albán,”<sup>132</sup> both the city’s brightest flash and its crash, as it were. With the Period IIIA synthesis of Oaxacan, Olemecoid, Mayanoid and Teotihuacan elements into a unified and unique Zapotec culture, in a sense, all of the key ingredients were present; no other outside peoples or forces directly impinge on the Valley of Oaxaca. From here on, according to Bernal, Zapotec culture persists without major additions or modifications.<sup>133</sup> Instead, as he explains, “Period IIIB... is simply a modification of IIIA brought about by an event outside of the Zapotec culture, namely the disappearance of Teotihuacan.”<sup>134</sup> In other words, for Bernal, it is not a new ceramic style but rather the collapse of Teotihuacan that marks the interface between Periods IIIA and IIIB.

If the general relationship between Teotihuacan and Monte Albán is matter of much disagreement, the question of the connection (if any) between Teotihuacan’s collapse and Monte Albán’s Late Classic ascent, and then the Zapotec capital’s Postclassic decline, is a topic of even greater ongoing debate. In later chapters we will encounter still-currently-conflicting opinions

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<sup>131</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 28.

<sup>132</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 804.

<sup>133</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 802.

<sup>134</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 802.

that the two great capitals had largely independent histories,<sup>135</sup> that the Classic-era Zapotec capital was literally conquered and dominated by Teotihuacan,<sup>136</sup> and more middle-ground positions with respect to extra-regional interactions, which conclude that, “Although some form of hegemonic relations is a possibility... the evidence is more consistent with reciprocal economic and political relations between the rulers of Monte Albán and Teotihuacan.”<sup>137</sup> Not infrequently the collapses of Teotihuacan, Monte Albán and several Classic Maya centers are pictured as part of a generalized Postclassic crisis that encompassed the full Mesoamerican region; in that view, all the big capitals go down together. The timing and more still the causes of Teotihuacan's demise remain, therefore, widely disputed; and each stance significantly influences the assessment of the Oaxacan consequences of that Central Mexican disintegration. Indeed, it is telling for our inventory of alternative narratives of Monte Albán that present-day Mesoamericanists continue to hold such widely divergent opinions on a historical matter of such enormous consequence.

It is, then, not surprising that Bernal manages this prickly topic in cautious and somewhat elusive ways. Yet again—and again, it seems, in the service of his larger narrative of ancient Oaxacan history—he navigates between two seemingly contrary positions. On the one hand, he presents the collapse of Teotihuacan, which in his surmise “disappeared towards A.D. 650,”<sup>138</sup> as a matter of enormous gravity for Oaxaca, and presumably for all of Mesoamerica; and thus, as noted, he uses Teotihuacan's demise as the pivotal benchmark that separates Periods IIIA and

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<sup>135</sup> As we'll see upcoming chapters, nearly all subsequent Oaxacanists—e.g., John Paddock, Richard Blanton, (early) Marcus Winter, Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery—will refute the stance of Caso and Bernal that the emergence and development of Monte Albán depended in large ways on the involvements of Olmecs, Mayas, Teotihuacanos or other non-Oaxacans with the more local population

<sup>136</sup> Marcus Winter, “Monte Albán and Teotihuacan,” in *Rutas de intercambio en mesoamérica*, ed. Evelyn C. Rattray (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1998), 153-184.

<sup>137</sup> Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 205. Joyce, *ibid.*, 201-6, surveys various ideas about the relationship between Teotihuacan and Monte Albán.

<sup>138</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 35.

IIIB.<sup>139</sup> On the other hand, Bernal invariably minimizes Teotihuacan's actual control over Monte Albán. Never does he suggest that the Oaxacans were subject to Teotihuacan military domination or political hegemony; for him, Monte Albán was certainly not a colony of Teotihuacan. And while Bernal does occasionally wax about "long caravans [by which] the influence of the great city of the high plain was disseminated all the way to Central America" and about extent to which "Teotihuacan exported ceramic ware and diverse objects, which we have found in the tombs of Monte Albán,"<sup>140</sup> he does not suggest that Zapotecs were in any significant way dependent on Teotihuacan economically. Accordingly, he never presents a scenario in which, for instance, Oaxacans, once liberated from the stranglehold of Teotihuacan, were able to realize their formerly-stifled potential. In Bernal's account, Teotihuacan is a major source of artistic inspiration, but it is not an ally, nor an oppressor, nor a competitor with Monte Albán; and thus there is no obviously apparent way in which the collapse of Teotihuacan works either as a boon or a major misfortune for the Oaxacans. For him, the fall of Teotihuacan and the Late Classic ascent of Monte Albán are, it seems, roughly contemporaneous, but not directly related phenomena.

### **1. Contrastive Capitals: Militaristic and Expansionist Teotihuacanos versus Theocratic and Stay-at-Home Zapotecs**

In any case, if equivocal in connecting Teotihuacan's decline and Monte Albán's florescence, Bernal does make excellent use of the Mexican capital as a point of rhetorical contrast to the Period IIIB Zapotec capital. In his assessment,

"Perhaps the fundamental difference between the Zapotec culture and that of Teotihuacan is that while the latter was always seeking to expand and continuously penetrating into

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<sup>139</sup> For instance, though this is somewhat at odds with the version of events that I am presenting here, even Bernal, *Teotihuacan*, 55, suggests, "The fall of Teotihuacan provoked a chain-reaction which must have precipitated the fall of Monte Albán and the great mayan [sic] culture during the 9<sup>th</sup> century."

<sup>140</sup> Bernal, *Mexico before Cortez*, 45. On trade relations between Monte Albán and Teotihuacan, also see Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico*, 47-48.

other areas for trade or for war, the Zapotecs seemed to be quite happy in their valley and the other areas they occupied.”<sup>141</sup>

Reechoing his earlier comments about the one-way influence of Olmecoid culture on Oaxaca—and seemingly foreshadowing his ensuing comments about Oaxacan tendencies toward introversion—Bernal suggests a similarly imbalanced exchange wherein the Zapotecs' genius lies in their creative synthesis of ideas and elements from outsiders who, for their part, embrace and take home little from Oaxaca. While he is well aware of the famed “Oaxaca Barrio” at Teotihuacan, perhaps surprisingly, he does not capitalize on that enclave of Zapotec culture to make claims concerning Monte Albán's Central Mexican reach and influence.<sup>142</sup> Instead, he relies on a supposed contrast between an expansionist and militaristic Teotihuacan versus a much more introspective and peaceable Monte Albán in order to venture the bold assertion that the Late Classic Zapotec capital was, of all Mesoamerican capitals in all eras, the most thoroughly “theocratic.”

In other words, while we will later encounter vigorous arguments both for and against the prospect of Monte Albán's military, economic and “imperial” control of over large portions of southern Mexico, Bernal contends that, contrary to the imperialist ambitions of Teotihuacan, “the Zapotec state was never an empire.”<sup>143</sup> Rather than growing political or economic aspirations, Period IIIB Monte Albán's claim to distinction lay, according to Bernal, in the elaboration of its art and religiosity, so much so, in fact, that he hypothesizes that “it may have been far more theocratic than any of its neighbors.”<sup>144</sup> And he deploys several lines of evidence to support that intriguing contention. For instance, where his study of funerary urns had led him to posit that Period IIIA Zapotecs worshipped 30 or 31 gods, of whom seven are feminine,<sup>145</sup> he uses the same technique to conclude that the unprecedentedly ornate Period IIIB urns signal the worship

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<sup>141</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 38.

<sup>142</sup> Bernal, *Teotihuacan*, 36.

<sup>143</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 38.

<sup>144</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 38.

<sup>145</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 803.

of 39 gods, of which 11 are feminine;<sup>146</sup> more gods presumably connote stronger religious preoccupations. Likewise, the continuing elaboration of Monte Albán's tombs, another domain in which the Zapotec city far exceeded Teotihuacan, leads him to believe that "the cult of the dead assumed a more complex character in this period;"<sup>147</sup> and, furthermore, again contradistinct from the more politically engaged Teotihuacan, Bernal holds that, "The great importance attached to funerary rites, to death, to the afterworld, and to the gods points to a priest-led society."<sup>148</sup>

In short, though Teotihuacan was considerably bigger, richer and more politically influential, Bernal awards Monte Albán singular preeminence in the realms of religion and ritual: "Of course ceremonialism was prevalent in all of Mesoamerica, but in the Zapotec world it seems to have been more pronounced, enabling us to think in terms of a real theocracy."<sup>149</sup>

## **2. Ambivalent Assessments of Theocracy: Religio-Artistic Exuberance and Politico-Economic Impassivity**

While the attribution of "real theocracy" seems primarily another commendation of the Oaxacans, Bernal actually provides a deeply ambivalent characterization of this Period IIIB "priest-led society." On the upside, this is, in numerous respects, the very best of Zapotec culture: "The whole city appears to have been rebuilt; nearly all the monuments which can be seen today, as well as many glyphic inscriptions and tombs, belong to this period."<sup>150</sup> Sustaining the momentum of Period IIIA enhancements of the Great Plaza, it was during this period that, in

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<sup>146</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 806. His classic work on the correlation of Period IIIB funerary urns and "gods" appears in Caso and Bernal, *Urnas de Oaxaca*. But for summary comments on the topic, see Caso and Bernal, "Ceramics of Oaxaca," 889-93; and Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico*, 98.

<sup>147</sup> Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico*, 98.

<sup>148</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 38.

<sup>149</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 38.

<sup>150</sup> Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 804.



the judgment of Bernal (and nearly everyone else), “the architecture of Monte Albán reached its peak, the ground being leveled wherever necessary to erect its complex structures.”<sup>151</sup> Along with the unrivaled tombs, wall paintings and funerary accouterments, Period IIIB Zapotecs erected within the central precinct the most grandiose ballcourt, numerous temple bases decorated with distinctive panels having two superimposed bands, several sunken patios with altars in the middle, large buildings with columns, and unprecedentedly elegant stone residences that were presumably occupied by the theocratic aristocracy.

Moreover, while Bernal had been willing to grant Monte Albán urban status since the end of Period I,<sup>152</sup> with respect to Period IIIB he becomes far more insistent that Monte Albán was “a true city in the sense that a considerable number of people lived there” and not simply a “nonurban ceremonial center.”<sup>153</sup> At this point he is seemingly engaging the debate surrounding Mayanist J. Eric S. Thompson’s contention, which enjoyed wide support from the 1950s through the 1970s, that, while Central Mexicans had genuine cities, the great Classic Maya centers had been “ceremonial centers,” which were heavily visited on special ritual occasions, but largely devoid of permanent inhabitants and thus similarly absent the infrastructure and institutions that would have supported a fixed populace.<sup>154</sup> Bernal insists, by contrast to the “vacant city” model (which has proven inaccurate even in the Maya case), that although the Late Classic Zapotecs were deeply religious and absent of imperialist ambitions, they were nonetheless fully urban. In fact, though seldom willing to venture population estimates, Bernal was inclined to believe that

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<sup>151</sup> Bernal, *3000 Years of Art and Life in Mexico*, 98.

<sup>152</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 151.

<sup>153</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 804.

<sup>154</sup> See, for example, J. Eric S. Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954). For a fascinating review of the emergence of Eric Thompson’s “vacant city” model, less a product of his strictly academic than more popular—and more fully narrative—writing on the Maya, see Marshall Joseph Becker, “Priests, Peasants and Ceremonial Center: The Intellectual History of a Model,” in *Maya Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, eds. Norman Hammond and Gordon Willey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 3-20. Actually, it is noteworthy that Ignacio Bernal, while accentuating the religious preoccupations of Monte Albán, seldom if ever refers to the mountain capital as a pilgrimage destination, a theme that could have been serviceable in his broader narrative.

the distribution of inhabitants surrounding the urban hub of Monte Albán during this era was very similar to “the modern settlement pattern in the valley of Oaxaca... with a great many occupied towns.”<sup>155</sup>

Yet, if Period IIIB's theocratic orientation had spurred a plethora of artistic, architectural and urban excellence, on the downside, that “priest-led” outlook also carried within it the sort of Trojan horse that would ultimately be the city's undoing—namely “inordinate introspection.” According to Bernal, “Theocracies, as we know from many places in the world, do not seek to expand; they tend to be conservative and self-contained.”<sup>156</sup> Consequently, where, in his script, each of the previous eras in Monte Albán's history had been punctuated and invigorated by a major infusion of outside influence—first from the Olmec region, then the Maya zone, then from Teotihuacan—in this Late Classic era, the Zapotec rulers, in a sense, seemed to imagine that they now had within their marvelous capital everything that they needed; and the ever-more impressive appearance of their city reinforced that illusory sense of self-sufficiency. Bernal, therefore, tempers and counterpoises his extravagant praises for Period IIIB Monte Albán with accusations of a kind of arrogance and short-sighted self-importance, an imperious aloofness that was perhaps exacerbated by the dissolution of Teotihuacan, the only other center Zapotecs might have regarded as a peer or perhaps superior. In that sense, Bernal does link “the fall of Teotihuacan and the increasingly introspective attitude of the Zapotec culture.”<sup>157</sup> In his own apt summary lines,

“A characteristic of Period IIIB which is negative and therefore, perhaps, deceptive seems to be the cultural isolation of the Zapotec world. In contrast with the older periods, we found nothing at this time which comes from the outside. It appears that Zapotec culture turns in on itself and becomes detached from the stream of events in Mesoamerica.”<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 804.

<sup>156</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 38.

<sup>157</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 38.

<sup>158</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 805.

In Bernal's account, then, prior to some mid-point in Period IIIB, the mountaintop city had enjoyed, from its original founding, a largely uninterrupted trajectory of increasing strength and sophistication—a buoyancy that was, in every era, reenergized by the creative integration of new external influences. But now, with the Zapotecs having isolated themselves from additional outside involvements, turning their back on the rest of Mesoamerica, as it were, “Things had clearly begun to change between 650 and 700.”<sup>159</sup> His (re)construction, thereby, exemplifies a timeworn narrative pattern and a cautionary warning insofar as it suggests that within the Zapotecs' Late Classic theocratic successes—and excesses—were also the seeds of their Postclassic self-destruction. Thus while Teotihuacan's collapse provides the starting point for Period IIIB, it is Monte Albán's own precipitous decline that, in Bernal's scheme, marks the endpoint of that era and the inception of Period IV.

#### **F. PERIODS IV & V: POSTCLASSIC COLLAPSE: ZAPOTEC ISOLATIONISM AND SELF-DESTRUCTION, MIXTEC “SECULARIZATION” AND “NEW VIGOR”**

As in all renditions that rely on Caso's five-epoch scheme, it is the status of Monte Albán IV that requires the most convoluted qualification. Where the other “stages” are defined (primarily) by distinctive ceramic styles, recall that it is the collapse and abandonment of Monte Albán that mark the boundary between Periods III-B and IV; and this likewise marks the threshold separating the so-termed Classic and Postclassic eras, which prompts Bernal to explain that, for him, Period IV actually refers to the time span *after* the once-grand capital's demise (roughly 900-1521 CE). As he clarifies, “We have called this period, which lasts up to the Spanish Conquest, Monte Albán IV, although properly speaking Monte Albán no longer existed as a town of the living and political control was now vested in other towns in the Valley such as Zaachila, ETLA and Mitla.”<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 38.

<sup>160</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 3. Note that the dates and designations assigned to Monte Albán IV and Monte Albán V, two (mainly) ceramic-based periods for which the best information comes from Oaxacan sites other than Monte Albán, are especially variable. Sometimes Monte Albán IV is labeled “Early Postclassic” (roughly 750-950 CE) while Monte Albán V is labeled “Late Postclassic” (roughly 950-1521 CE). Depending on the context, Bernal himself sometimes (e.g., Caso and Bernal, “Ceramics of Oaxaca,” 889-95), he treats Period IIIB-

In his account of this long and largely uneventful stretch, following the terrific Period IIIB building spree, during Period IV neither is there any major new construction within the Great Plaza area nor are the existing buildings maintained; the process of transformation from a teeming city to an overgrown ruin had begun. Bernal correctly ascertains that, with the emergence of several mid-sized towns, the wider Valley of Oaxaca “must have been very thickly inhabited;”<sup>161</sup> but he recognizes also that the once-populous mountaintop city was at this point largely uninhabited, and instead visited only intermittently by various peoples, most notably Mixtecs, who reuse Classic-era Zapotec tombs to inter their own distinguished dead. Explicitly declining in his concise site guide to venture an opinion on the causes of collapse, he writes,

“Owing to a phenomenon as yet unexplained, at the end of Period IIIB, in other words probably toward the end of the tenth century A.D., Monte Albán was abandoned, although it might be more accurate to say that large buildings were no longer put up and that the old site became a great necropolis where numerous individuals were buried.”<sup>162</sup>

Bernal does, of course, concur with Caso that by far the most spectacular instance of this necrotic repurposing of the old capital is the far-famed Tomb 7. He agrees fully that it was Mixtecs who had deposited in an old Zapotec crypt both the remains of several individuals and some of the most breathtaking burial offerings ever recovered in the Americas.

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IV as a single unit, which he differentiates from Period V; in other instances (e.g., Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 804-13), addresses Periods III-B, IV and V independently. The guidebook alternative quoted here, in which Bernal defines Period IV as the full span from “toward the end of the tenth century A.D.” until the Spanish Conquest, is somewhat simplistic, especially insofar as it essentially eliminates a Period V. But for our present purposes, the key point is that “in Monte Albán the end of Period IIIB marks the termination of the construction of the city whereas Period IV is a time when Monte Albán was no longer a great center but when dominance had passed to other cities in the valley.” Caso and Bernal, “Ceramics in Oaxaca,” 889.

<sup>161</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 3.

<sup>162</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 3.

## 1. A Familiar Two-Part Theocratic Pattern: Self-Induced Vulnerability and Opportunistic Invaders

While this characterization of Period IV's centuries of general neglect and overgrowth is not controversial, the causes and circumstances that precipitate that situation remain contentious in the extreme. Bernal's unguarded musings about the downfall of Teotihuacan in a popular book on the Aztecs, if brief and non-technical, are nevertheless revealing of the sort of two-part mechanism of self-induced vulnerability that opens the way for opportunistic invaders, which he sees at work both there and at Monte Albán:

“This Teotihuacan world, guided by gods and priests, was a theocratic civilization which reached an unprecedented period of splendor. But as the centuries passed, the distinguished ruling class, as is bound to happen, became a dominating minority which oppressed rather than guided, and so the signs of decadence appeared. Toward the seventh century the city lost its creative power and began to fall apart internally. Its prestige diminished; then, as in Rome at the end of the Empire, it became easy prey for all those nomads who for many years had wished to take possession of the city.”<sup>163</sup>

According to this familiar two-stage model—which Bernal considers pertinent to Rome, Mesoamerica and presumably elsewhere—the virtually inevitable collapse of powerful capitals depends sequentially upon “internal decay,” which then makes them “easy prey” for avaricious outsiders. He sees a major discrepancy between the Central Mexican and Oaxacan cases insofar as, “Teotihuacan perished in the flames of a fire caused by a brutal conquest,”<sup>164</sup> while Monte Albán's demise involved less violent and more gradual abandonment. But, that large difference notwithstanding, his accounts of the closing episodes in both cities similarly conform to this two-part pattern wherein the crucial vulnerabilities are really self-inflicted, yet nonetheless pave the way for a coup de grace that is delivered by interlopers who had been awaiting their opening.

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<sup>163</sup> Bernal, *Mexico before Cortez*, 46. For generally consistent comments on the “internal weakening” and “excessive centralization” that led to Teotihuacan's collapse, see Bernal, *Teotihuacan*, 53-54.

<sup>164</sup> Bernal, *Mexico before Cortez*, 47.

Regarding the first stage in that process at Monte Albán, because Bernal imagines that the “priest-led society” of Period IIIB was even more preoccupied with religion and much less interested in political domination than the expansionist Teotihuacanos, he depicts a version of Zapotec “decadence” that has less to do with the inordinate bullying of subordinates than with a kind of narcissistic introspection. Having accentuated the extent to which Late Classic Zapotec culture “turns in on itself,” refusing any additional outside influences and becoming “detached from the stream of events in Mesoamerica,” he now opines, “I believe that this complete introversion was responsible for the marked aesthetic and technical decadence of Period IV.”<sup>165</sup>

The Zapotecs' greatest failing was, in other words, a self-imposed and self-defeating cultural isolation. Moreover, regarding the second stage of the process, wherein opportunistic outsiders exploit those self-induced weaknesses, the rising profile of Mixtecs—who to this point had played no significant role in his story of Monte Albán—provide Bernal an ideal counterpart to the “nomads” who, in his view, were responsible for sacking and burning Teotihuacan, which had similarly made itself pregnable. Prior to this point, Mixtecs would not have constituted a serious threat to the powerful Zapotecs; but the theocratic isolationism of Monte Albán IIIB had left them highly susceptible to attack.

## **2. Mixtec Opportunism: A Modernizing and Corrective Challenge to Zapotec Theocracy**

Though Bernal capitalized on and extended Caso's pioneering research on the Mixtecs, and they both aspired to an understanding of Monte Albán within the broader regional context, these western Oaxacans remain in the earlier segments of Bernal's (re)construction a kind of shadowy, largely irrelevant presence, insufficiently developed and too far away from the Valley of Oaxaca to have been a significant factor in the Zapotec capital's emergence and history. With the onset of Period IV, however, Mixtecs, still very imperfectly understood, become major actors who serve Bernal's narrative in several respects. Though he never credits Monte Albán with an empire per se and he is always tentative in his remarks about Mixtec history, Bernal does imply that, during the Classic era, Zapotecs had controlled a substantial portion of the Mixteca region,

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<sup>165</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 805.

an observation that actually is most prominent when he notes that, during Period IV, “The Zapotec world was shrinking, for it had lost the whole of the Mixteca and was soon to lose part of the great valley of Oaxaca as well.”<sup>166</sup>

In other words, while Bernal can locate no evidence of a distinctive Mixtec culture prior to the tenth century CE, he is confident that during Period IV they were becoming much stronger, more independent and more mobile, establishing a presence not only in the Oaxaca Valley but also direct connections with Toltec and Nahuatl peoples in Central Mexico.<sup>167</sup> In fact, though cautiously circumspect about the particulars, he concludes, daringly enough, that, “I believe that the fall of Monte Albán was in some way directly connected with these changes in the Mixteca and, indirectly, with the formation of the Toltec Empire.”<sup>168</sup>

Bernal's large but imprecise assertions about a major Mixtec role in the fall of Monte Albán would remain one of the most controversial aspects of his account. Almost everyone will agree there was a very substantial Mixtec presence in the Valley of Oaxaca during Periods IV and V, but whether they were actual conquerors or simply late-arriving itinerants who relocated into a void is a matter of ongoing debate. In either case, Bernal implies that the Mixtecs were successful in the central valley only because the Zapotecs had imploded on their own. Moreover—and more valuable for narrative continuity—in the same way that he used (supposed) contrasts between Teotihuacanos and Zapotecs as a means of fleshing out the (supposedly) uniquely theocratic orientation of Late Classic Monte Albán, Bernal makes rhetorical use of the Mixtecs as a virtual antithesis of the Zapotecs. Intriguingly, when they enter the story, he characterizes the Mixtec outlook as “very different in character, almost the opposite, from Zapotec culture.”<sup>169</sup> The two groups, each highly accomplished in its own way, had, for

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<sup>166</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 808.

<sup>167</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 808-9.

<sup>168</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 808-9. While, as we'll see, there is considerable subsequent debate about the Mixtecs' role (or lack thereof) in the demise of Monte Albán, few scholars have been inclined to pursue the possibility that the fall of Monte Albán was in any way connected with “the formation of the Toltec Empire.”

<sup>169</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 809.

instance, very different realms of artistic excellence: Mixtecs were not inclined to erect the sorts of large stone sculptures that one finds at Monte Albán, and in the realm of monumental architecture they were vastly inferior to “the excellence of the Zapotec as architects.”<sup>170</sup> Mixtecs were, however, far more skilled than the Zapotecs in the production both of “small and very fine objects,” including metalwork, as well as the suitably renowned painted codices, for which there is no Zapotec counterpart.<sup>171</sup>

More fascinating still—and even more illuminating with respect to Bernal's intricately wrought characterization of Classic-era Zapotecs—he proposes that,

“Perhaps the chief difference between [Zapotecs and Mixtecs] is that the Zapotec culture, even in its final stages, has all the feeling of the Classic, whereas the Mixtec is a ‘modern’ culture with all the qualities of the Postclassic. Its Toltec and Nahua connections, its aesthetic expression, its fundamental interests, and the lessening of the theocratic emphasis all impart these qualities.”<sup>172</sup>

Furthermore, the Mixtecs' (Postclassic) orientation is not only more “modern” than that of the (Classic) Zapotecs, it is, in Bernal's explicit phrasing, more “secular.”<sup>173</sup> In his view, “the most important feature of Mixtec culture, its pictographic books, contain historical matter and suggest a fundamental interest in the dynastic and military chronicle of local chiefs;” and thus while those codices exhibit “great artistic merit,” it is for him even more noteworthy that, “They deal with the doings of men rather than the worship of gods.”<sup>174</sup> Likewise in the realm of architecture, Bernal underscores the way in which Mixtecs seemingly jettisoned Zapotecs' theocratic priorities in favor of more worldly concerns by investing their most elaborate building

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<sup>170</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 809.

<sup>171</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 809.

<sup>172</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 809.

<sup>173</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 811.

<sup>174</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 809.



initiatives into “the dwelling of the chief rather than on that of the gods.”<sup>175</sup> And thus he contends, venturously enough, that,

“Mixtec influence appears, and not for this reason only, to have brought a considerable degree of secularization to Oaxacan culture, though it would be absurd to think that priestly power had disappeared or the worship of gods diminished.”<sup>176</sup>

In sum, perhaps emboldened by limited and uncertain information on the Mixtecs, Bernal concludes that, by extreme contrast to the ethereal propensities of the Classic-era Zapotecs, Mixtec culture “began a trend in Oaxaca toward concern with human affairs without losing, at the same time, its deep religious feeling.”<sup>177</sup> The Mixtecs, so he thinks, brought “secularization” to the Valley of Oaxaca.

### **3. One Last “Cultural Fusion”: A Fortuitous Encounter between Mixtec “Secularization” and Zapotec Religiosity**

To be sure, Bernal's casting of the Mixtecs as agents of secularization, and in that way a corrective to the theocratic excesses of the Zapotecs, raises a host of provocative questions to which I will return momentarily. And his suggestion that otherworldly Zapotec and worldly Mixtec cultures were “almost the opposite” reminds one again of the purported contradistinction between cerebral, time-worshipping Classic Mayas versus the aggressively political Postclassic Toltecs, which has sustained so many imaginative narratives of the largely fictive “Toltec Conquest of Chichén Itza” and the “Mexicanization of Yucatan.”<sup>178</sup> But just when it might seem

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<sup>175</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 811.

<sup>176</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 811. Bernal makes this comment in connection with the Mixtec architecture at Mitla rather than at Monte Albán, where Mixtecs, he writes, *ibid.*, 812, “did not build much.”

<sup>177</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 809.

<sup>178</sup> See Jones, “Conquests of the Imagination,” 275-90. Note, by the way, that Bernal's account of the contradistinct Zapotecs versus Mixtecs at points resembles what I describe in this article as “antagonistic polarity,” wherein Maya and Toltec differences are irreconcilable; and, at other points, Bernal's account resembles the sort of “symbiotic polarity” proposed by J. Eric S. Thompson wherein the starkly different Mayas and Toltecs are able to capitalize on their

that Bernal has deviated from his guiding narrative theme about the virtues of cultural admixing—and thereby put at peril the logically consistent “followability” of his narrative<sup>179</sup>—perhaps in favor a story that stresses Mesoamerica’s movement toward a kind of Postclassic “modernity,” he finds a way to draw us back to that central theme. Where in Periods I, II and IIIA, Bernal depicts the Zapotecs as the homebound protagonists who responded in creative and constructive ways to outside influences, now in Period IV, with their once-fabulous city abandoned and overgrown, they play a different—but not less fortuitous—role in intercultural interactions with the new-coming Mixtecs.

In this arc of Bernal’s storyline, the Zapotecs, though seemingly past their prime as artists and architects, are the stimulus rather than the receptors of a felicitous, if unlikely, interaction between two diametrically different cultural styles. In other words, while the Mixtecs built very little at Monte Albán—that is to say, they never attempted to refurbish or reinhabit the crumbling city, perhaps because the waterless mountaintop was at odds with their more pragmatic priorities—they did undertake major constructions at numerous outlying towns in the central valley, most prominently at Mitla and Yagul.<sup>180</sup> And in those cases, it is highly significant to Bernal—and yet again consistent with his advocacy for bi-cultural mixing—that the Mixtecs were able to achieve a level of architectural excellence that far surpassed anything they had accomplished in their Mixteca homeland. Though he entertains the possibility that the improvement might be ascribed to “the difference between the rich surroundings of the valley of Oaxaca and the poverty of the Mixteca,” he actually favors the more provocative proposal that, once the Mixtecs left their own country and thus interacted with peoples very different from

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respective strengths to create a whole—i.e., the great capital of Chichén Itzá—which is greater than the sum of the parts (*ibid.*, 283-84).

<sup>179</sup> On the “followability” of narrative, which depends upon a demonstration of its logical coherence from beginning to middle to end, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 152; or see my comments in the Introduction about what for a “good story.”

<sup>180</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 812, contends that “The Mixtecs did not build much [at Monte Albán], but they did build enough to prove their presence and their typical architectural style in what little we know of it.” (We should note, by the way, in that article he situates that Mixtec building in Period V rather than Period IV.)

themselves, they “gained a new vigor and a greater development.”<sup>181</sup> Instantiating one more time his signature storiological motif, Bernal hypothesizes that, “when the Mixtecs occupied parts of the great valley and came into contact with the Zapotecs directly, the interaction between the two groups produced great buildings like the palaces of Mitla and Yagul.”<sup>182</sup> For one final time in this sinuous saga of ancient Oaxaca, the “fusion” of different cultures—in this case, juxtaposing two constituencies that are supposedly committed to nearly antithetical goals and priorities—eventuates in “new vigor.”<sup>183</sup>

Regarding succinct denouement for his prolix (re)construction of Monte Albán, Bernal, depending on his purposes, handles the boundary between Period IV and Period V in various ways; but the best evidence for both of those Mixtec-dominated eras comes from sites *other than* the formerly-great Zapotec capital, which in every version remains at this point largely uninhabited and progressively overgrown. For him, the city's collapse at the end of Period IIIB was permanent and complete, save for some low-grade housing and the occasional reuse of the old Zapotec tombs.<sup>184</sup> Bernal, moreover, establishes a pattern that will be repeated in countless less thoroughgoing overviews in which he mentions, with little elaboration that, “The Aztecs reached the Valley of Oaxaca toward the end of the fifteenth century and established some garrisons, for example one in what is now the capital of the state;”<sup>185</sup> and Spaniards arrived in the area in 1521. But Bernal's work leads us to believe that neither of those final intruding groups took any special interest in the decaying old capital.

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<sup>181</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 810.

<sup>182</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 809.

<sup>183</sup> Regarding the highly impressive architecture of Mitla and Yagul, which displays many features from Monte Albán, now reworked in decidedly new ways, Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 811, concludes, “Doubtless they arose from the fusion of Zapotec and another style which might be Mixtec, but which for the present I think it safer to call Mixtecoid.”

<sup>184</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 804.

<sup>185</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 4.

<sup>185</sup> Bernal, *Monte Albán, Mitla: Official Guide*, 4

#### IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS: MONTE ALBÁN AS A MICROCOSM OF ANCIENT MESOAMERICA AND A MODEL FOR CONTEMPORARY MEXICO

By way of summation, then, Ignacio Bernal is impressive indeed as the first to craft a thoroughgoing narrative of the great Zapotec capital in the wake of Alfonso Caso's pioneering work. Though one must read selectively through several works to extract a full and uninterrupted plotline, he provides an eloquently coherent five-act, six-actor drama of Monte Albán's speedy rise, spectacular climax and self-initiated ruination. By Paul Ricoeur's criteria of "followability" and logically coherent "emplotment" that lead readers to "the pleasure of recognition,"<sup>186</sup> Bernal's thoroughly congruous story would be a strong contender for the very "best" narrative of Monte Albán, if only he had, perhaps toward the end of his career, presented the full scenario in a single book or article. Most commendable as an exercise in story-crafting is the ingenious way in which, in this scheme, the very same socio-cultural forces that account for the successive successes of each early era are likewise responsible for the eventual failure of the Zapotecs.

The depth and complexity both of his script and its main players issue in richly provocative compositions that are—like all great stories—amenable to many interpretations and suggestive of innumerable lessons. There are so many ways to read and interpret Bernal's deft rendition! And thus I conclude with remarks that revisit just three of the countless messages, admonitions and inspirations that one might draw from his version of events, all of which have universalistic relevance but also special salience for Mexicans.

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<sup>186</sup> Recall that these ideas about what makes for a "good story" were discussed in the Introduction. On the "followability" of narrative, see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 152; on "the pleasure of recognition," see *ibid.*, 49; and on the role of story-crafting or emplotment, see, *ibid.*, 53. For a summary of Ricoeur's position as it relates to archaeologically-based writing, see Mark Pluciennik, "Archaeological Narratives and Other Ways of Telling," *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 5 (December 1999), 654ff.

## **A. AFFIRMATIONS OF PRE-COLUMBIAN ANCESTRY: SIX INDIGENOUS GROUPS, EACH EXCELLENT IN ITS OWN WAY**

The initial observation concerns the intelligence and dignity that is attributed to the native actors in Bernal's story of Monte Albán. Six different indigenous groups play major roles, and all are depicted in distinctive, complex but nonetheless decidedly positive ways. There are no aboriginal buffoons, reprobates or despicable villains in this story. First, the indigenous Oaxacans responsible for the founding of Monte Albán, for example, have the temerity and talent to transform a vacant and waterless mountaintop into a great city; credited with Mesoamerica's first writing, first calendar and perhaps even first monumental architecture, these native Oaxacans have the combined humility and foresight to realize that their best efforts will be made even better via the integration of ideas from outsiders whose involvements they thus welcome rather than simply tolerate. Second, the Period I Olmecoid migrants of Bernal's description are even more famously innovative. They manage to spread their forgetive art styles and ideas not only to Monte Albán but across Mesoamerica; and while their most high-profile contribution is an abundance of Danzante carvings that seem to depict tortured and humiliated captives, in this story we are left with the impression that these Gulf Coast natives somehow accomplished their massively wide influence without ever resorting to violence.

Third, the Period II Mayanoid interlopers, though perhaps the least appealing of the lead actors insofar as their elitist sensibilities are never embraced in the lower reaches of Oaxacan society, are nonetheless credited with many and marvelous architectural additions to the Main Plaza area; their most renowned structure, Building J, though decorated with "conquest slabs" that seem to be intimidating public reminders of their military victories, is, in Bernal's account, even more credit-worthy for its display of astronomical interest and prowess. Fourth, the powerful Period IIIA Teotihuacano visitors, though more prone to empire-building than the milder-mannered Oaxacans, are presented not as threats or adversaries, but rather the bearers of the final cultural components that evoke the birth of a unique—and uniquely interblended—Zapotec identity.

Fifth, then, these Zapotec protagonists, the real heroes of this story, are savvy Oaxacans who had enriched and deprovincialized themselves by centuries of strategic borrowing and intermingling with each of the other groups; and thus they win credit for the capital's finest Period IIIB features. Their only large flaw, which turns out to be fatal, is inordinate religiosity, a seeming virtue that, when carried to extremes, leads them to self-destruction. The Zapotecs' demise is, thereby, depicted as tragic and lamentable, the consequence of a squandered potential rather than as just deserts for truly malevolent behavior. And finally, the sixth set of native actors, the late-coming Mixtecs of Periods IV and V, instead of marauding profiteers, are pictured as exquisite artists and codex composers who, though wisely avoiding the excesses of Zapotec theocracy in favor of a more clear-minded "modern" outlook, nonetheless borrow from and blend with the central Oaxacans in ways that lead them to successes in politics and architecture that they never enjoyed in their more ethnically homogeneous Mixteca homeland. The Mixtecs too enjoy the fruits of cultural cross-fertilization.

Like Caso, therefore, Bernal paints ancient Oaxacans, and for that matter, all pre-Columbian Mesoamericans, in a very favorable light. His historical (re)constructions are absent of childlike, superstitious and gullible primitives; every indigenous group he discusses is credited with subtlety, skills and sophistication in one cultural realm or another. In these stories, we are introduced to great artists, architects, astronomers, scribes, carvers and calendar-makers; all have impressive intellects; none are barbarian brutes. Also like Caso, Bernal does not deny that ancient Mesoamericans, Zapotecs among them, participated in warfare, conquest and human sacrifice; but never are these the attributes or activities to which he affords the greatest attention. Megalomaniac warlords and self-glorifying sovereigns—who will be leading actors in some of the later stories of Monte Albán I consider—make no appearance in Bernal's work. Though by no means sanitized—and not nearly so blatantly congratulatory as, for instance, Sylvanus Morley's sugary praises for the uncompromisingly gentle and good character of the Mayas—Bernal's accounts, like Caso's, present pre-Columbians whom all readers can admire and whom contemporary Mexicans can assuredly claim as a very proud heritage.

## **B. ACUTE AMBIVALENCE ABOUT RELIGION: THE VERY MIXED MERITS OF PIETY, CEREMONIALISM AND DEVOTION**

A second closing observation concerns the deep ambivalence about religion—and the very mixed merits of fervent religious devotion—that one might read out of Bernal's version of events. Though declining to make this a major theme in his Monte Albán (re)construction narrative, Caso had expressed his opinion that religion worked, for essentially all Mesoamerican peoples, both as a primary incentive for their successes in social integration, political expansion and artistic creativity, but also as “a fatal limitation” that eventually led to their downfalls.<sup>187</sup> In *The Religion of the Aztecs*, for instance, Caso opined that the splendor and then respective demises of the Mayas, Toltecs, Totonacs and Mixtecs all demonstrate a pattern wherein:

“Religion, which at first was an impelling force, became a bridle on creative effort in art and science, in political and social organization, and in the philosophy of life. The productions which emerged as a result of religious enthusiasm choked the creative personality of the individual and smothered all the possibilities of cultural development... [All of these groups] disappeared because they lacked an ideal of constant progress, an ideal that would have made them conceive life as more than a minute and invariable repetition of religious ceremonies to honor the gods.”<sup>188</sup>

According to Caso, then, in case after case, religion first energized Mesoamerican peoples, and then led them into a kind of blind alley from which they could never escape. It was, however, Ignacio Bernal who fleshes out in much fuller and more explicit ways how this view of religion's redoubled role may have worked in relation to both the rise and demise of Monte Albán.

Bernal, as we've seen, is meticulous in enumerating, primarily via his analysis of funerary urns, the increasing number of gods that were apparently worshipped in each successive

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<sup>187</sup> Alfonso Caso's assessment of the decidedly mixed virtues and liabilities of pre-Columbian religion is more apparent in his comments about Aztecs than the peoples of Oaxaca. See, for instance, Alfonso Caso, *The Religion of the Aztecs* (México, D.F.: Editorial Fray B. de Sahagun, n.d. [Spanish original, 1936]), 62.

<sup>188</sup> Caso, *The Religion of the Aztecs*, 62. The same lines, only slightly revised, reappear in Alfonso Caso, *The Aztecs: People of the Sun*, trans. Lowell Dunham (Norman: university of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 95-96.

Monte Albán era; and thus he implies that, in his view, each period in the city's history witnessed mounting, ever more refined religious investments and ideas. That trajectory leads him eventually to the highly provocative proposition that, by the Classic era, the Zapotecs' religious commitments had intensified to the point that Monte Albán, quite likely, had become "far more theocratic than any of its neighbors."<sup>189</sup> Though frequently reminding us that all ancient Mesoamericans had strong devotional inclinations and every sizable settlement had abundant temples, the Zapotec capital was, Bernal contends, a uniquely religious place. Recall, for instance, that he develops that theme by asserting that Zapotecs were decidedly more religious—and as a corollary, much less interested or astute in politics—than the similarly powerful Teotihuacanos; and thus with the Period IIIB collapse of Teotihuacan, the pious Zapotecs show no interest whatever in capitalizing on a power vacuum and vying for control of those areas that were now freed of Teotihuacan control. Instead, perhaps surprisingly, the Zapotecs do the very opposite by adopting an "increasingly introspective attitude,"<sup>190</sup> which, in Bernal's rendering, had both acutely positive and disastrously negative consequences.

On the positive side, Bernal positions these Late Classic-era religious preoccupations, and specifically the prevailing theocracy, as the stimulus to the very best art and architecture in a city that already had exceptionally high standards. The Zapotecs' extreme piety is, thereby, associated with a constellation of very appealing attributes: restraint in military aggression, commitments to the communal good and public works rather than to the acquisition of personal gain, purposeful contemplation and philosophical sophistication, and excellence in cultural and artistic expression. Yet, on the negative side, that same spiritual outlook was no less than the root cause of their eventual collapse. Now thoroughly preoccupied with otherworldly realities, the Period IIIB Zapotecs, who to this point had shown such excellent judgment in managing their affairs with other peoples, seem to lose perspective with respect to the hard realities of life; religion now works as the opiate that numbs their critical faculties and leads them into a kind of self-induced implosion. In this story, ironically enough, the once-great Zapotecs do not succumb

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<sup>189</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 38.

<sup>190</sup> Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 38.



to ecological disaster, disease, military conquest or social upheaval, but rather to inordinate religious compulsions.

In the Period IV act of his script, the denouement of his Monte Albán story, Bernal presents a healthy antidote to that religious extremism when the Mixtecs who arrive on the Oaxaca Valley scene are described as emissaries of “the secularization of Oaxacan culture;”<sup>191</sup> these western Oaxacans reject Zapotec theocracy in favor of a more worldly and “modern” orientation, which issues in renewed flurry of architectural excellence at Mitla, Yagul and several other Postclassic Mixtec cities. Yet again, however, Bernal feels compelled to add the qualification that, irrespective of the much more temporal tenor of Mixtec society, “it would be absurd to think that priestly power had disappeared or the worship of gods diminished.”<sup>192</sup>

In short, his (re)construction provides us a vivid and expansive—but highly ambiguous—depiction of ancient Oaxacan religion, which is therefore subject to innumerable interpretations. There are countless ways that readers of all nationalities might draft this story into the service of their respective enthusiasms and/or skepticisms about religion; but to imagine the Zapotecs’ tragic demise as a cautionary tale about the mixed merits the Catholic Church’s large role in Mexican society is certainly among the most obvious possibilities.

### **C. ADVOCACY FOR CULTURAL CROSS-FERTILIZATION: ANCIENT ZAPOTEC ADMIXING AS A MODEL FOR MESTIZO MEXICAN IDENTITY**

In any case, a third closing observation—the one that I’ve repeatedly stressed as the most distinctive and thus most noteworthy leitmotif in Bernal’s rendition—is his advocacy for cultural admixing and cross-fertilization; and in this emphasis, he does push past even Caso in crafting a story that has great utility in enhancing a sense of Mexican—or actually mestizo—national identity. In Bernal’s fully “followable” account, the native Oaxacans who found Monte Albán are a very capable and independent group whose greatest asset of all, so it seems, is their

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<sup>191</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 811.

<sup>192</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 811.

willingness to embrace and creatively borrow from a whole succession of outside groups. In Period I, those Oaxacans open themselves to the genius of Olmecoid peoples, which allows the city to get off to a strong and solid start. In Period II, the Oaxacans welcome and meld with Mayanoid peoples who, despite a much more elitist style of art and governance, provide the stimulus to a burst of fabulous art and architecture in the Main Plaza sector of the city.

Then in Period IIIA, the Oaxacans engage the powerful Teotihuacanos not as threatening adversaries or competitors, but as one more major resource for a next stage of invigorated artistic and cultural creativity. The Central Mexicans provide, then, the final crucial component that gives rise to the birth of what Bernal is willing, for the first time, to designate as a uniquely “Zapotec” culture and ethnicity. That is to say, the Zapotecs, the premier protagonists in the entire narrative, are, in their essential identity, a hybridized people—a unique amalgam of Oaxacan, Olmecoid, Mayanoid and Teotihuacano attributes, now, in his term, “fused” into a distinctive and highly compelling cultural and ethnic identity.

Bernal, in other words, anticipates the still-turbulent debate about how best to describe and assess the sort of cultural mixing that would subsequently be theorized variously as “syncretism,” “hybridity,” “creolization,” “transculturation” or even “multiculturalism.” And while one is hard pressed to find in Bernal’s work the sort of rigorously formulated theory of cultural intermingling that would content contemporary post-colonial theorists, he is nonetheless persistent in the extreme in advocating for his boldly sweeping proposition: “I wish to emphasize the circumstances that the bearers of all or almost all of the high cultures were made up of two or more groups which fertilized one another during their coexistence.”<sup>193</sup> This is the driving historiological theme that reappears in his accounts of the growth and success of each of the region’s premier ancient capitals: “I believe that the mixture of two traditions is one of the most potent stimuli in the development of civilization and one of its most marked characteristics: There is a sort of internationalism within Mesoamerica.”<sup>194</sup> And nowhere are the fortuitous consequences of “cultural fusion” and admixing more fully on display than in his multi-act,

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<sup>193</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 28.

<sup>194</sup> Bernal, *The Olmec World*, 28.

many-actor tale of the metamorphosis of a vacant Oaxacan mountaintop into the great Zapotec city of Monte Albán.

Moreover, if in his account, Monte Albán owes each of its successive spurts of cultural and artistic excellence to the cross-fertilization between Oaxacans and outsiders, the very same principle also explains the collapse of the great capital insofar, when as Period IIIB Zapotec culture “turns in on itself.”<sup>195</sup> By shutting themselves off, they set in motion the atrophy and decay that, according to Bernal, always result from xenophobic cultural and ethnic homogeneity. This story, instead of championing aspirations to “cultural purity” and the avoidance of “blood-mixing” or “mongrelization,” disparages those tendencies as short-sighted ambitions that are, in the end, invariably self-destructive. Whether undertaken as an act of defensiveness, chauvinism or hubris, the Zapotecs’ Late Classic decision to rely strictly on their own local cultural resources, however great, backfired in ways that lead Bernal to conclude that, “this complete introversion was responsible for the marked aesthetic and technical decadence of Period IV.”<sup>196</sup> Absent the welcoming engagement of outsiders that had sustained every previous era of Monte Albán’s trajectory to greatness, the formerly-vibrant capital was transformed into a sparsely inhabited necropolis, tellingly, a city for the dead rather than the living. And thus, if Bernal provides what might be read as a cautionary tale about the dangers of inordinate religious investments, he provides an even more dire warning of what can happen when a people has the audacity to prize their own ethnic rectitude over the vitality that invariably results from interactivity with cultures and populations very different from one’s own.

In final sum, Bernal echoes countless anthropologists, historians of religions and cultural critics by insisting that encounters with cultural difference are, by nature, overwhelmingly rewarding occasions. Cultural parochialism, as the Zapotecs learned, may provide short-term security, but, in the longer run, is certain to stultify. We needn’t suggest, then, that Bernal’s labyrinthine (re)construction of the history of Monte Albán is solely or deliberately a nationalistic analogue for the viability of a mestizo Mexican identity that embraces

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<sup>195</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 805.

<sup>196</sup> Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 805.

with equal enthusiasm its Spanish and indigenous roots, because there are so many alternate and more generalizable insights that one might glean from this well-wrought narrative. But that indictment of provincialism certainly is among the foremost lessons of Ignacio Bernal's skillfully wrought rendition of ancient Oaxacan history. While the time-tested rewards of intercultural admixing, by contrast, provide Mexicans both an explanation of their past and model for their future.