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## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Marcus Winter's Story of Strategic Resource Management: Monte Albán as Part and Parcel of a pan-Oaxacan Social Evolution**

“Trade and interaction with groups in these other areas [of Mesoamerica] counterbalanced the cultural diversity engendered by geographic separation in pre-Hispanic Oaxaca. Hence the play of two trends—diversity in the emergence of culturally and linguistically distinct groups, and unity through interaction and communication among the groups—formed the peoples and cultures of ancient Oaxaca.”

Marcus Winter, 1989<sup>1</sup>

Marcus Winter, since the 1970s a leading voice on Oaxacan archaeology, stands outside of the direct lineage from Alfonso Caso to Ignacio Bernal, John Paddock, Kent Flannery, Richard Blanton and their students. As part of his doctoral studies in anthropology and archaeology at the University of Arizona, Winter wrote a dissertation on Tierras Largas, a Formative-period site in the Etla arm of the Valley of Oaxaca, just a few kilometers from San José Mogote and thus Monte Albán.<sup>2</sup> The first of his abundant publications explicitly on Monte Albán issued from excavations that he undertook in the residential zone of the ancient city in 1972 and 1973, just a year after Blanton had begun

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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> Marcus Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* (Oaxaca, Mexico: Carteles editores, P.G.O., 1992 [originally 1989]), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Winter, *Tierras Largas: A Formative Community in the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico*; dissertation submitted to the Department of Anthropology, the University of Arizona, 1972.

his settlement pattern study of the Zapotec capital.<sup>3</sup> That Blanton's seminal 1978 book on Monte Albán makes several references to this early project, usually with more skepticism than approval,<sup>4</sup> provides a kind of presage to subsequent contentions among the most prominent figures in the field. As we'll see, many of Winter's interpretations not only depart from the earlier positions of Caso, Bernal and Paddock but, moreover, stand in diametric opposition to the largely contemporaneous ideas of Blanton, Kent Flannery, Joyce Marcus and Arthur Joyce, all of whom directly, albeit for different reasons and with mixed measures of subtlety, take issue with aspects of his work. Those in need of a reminder about the extreme, not modest, disagreement that characterizes competing views of ancient Oaxacan history—and thus competing assessments of the history and significance of Monte Albán—will find one in the whirl of mixed reactions to Winter's writings.

Instead of a university home-base, Winter has long been employed as a researcher in the Archaeology Section of the Oaxaca Regional Center of the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), a position from which he has launched both major and minor excavations at countless sites, and thus dozens of highly technical publications. Fulltime in Oaxaca for his entire career, Winter has firsthand knowledge not only of every major investigation undertaken in the region, but likewise the innumerable sorts of salvage archeological projects that accompany road construction and urban development. That rare breadth of knowledge has enabled—maybe required—him to be the “go-to” contributor on an exceptionally wide range of sites and topics to innumerable edited volumes both on the region and on broader themes across Mesoamerica. In short, few if any scholars have published more on Oaxaca archaeology in the past 40 years than Marcus Winter; and, therefore, the fact that the short synopsis,

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus Winter, “Residential Patterns at Monte Albán, Oaxaca, Mexico,” *Science* 186 (1974): 981-87; and Marcus Winter and William Payne, “Hornos para cerámica hallados en Monte Albán,” *Boletín del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, no. 16 (1976): 37-40.

<sup>4</sup> See Richard E. Blanton, *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (New York: Academic Press, 1978; Clinton Corners, NY: Percheron Press, 2004), 63, 88 and 95-100.

*Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* (1989, 1992), on which this chapter focuses, was written quite early in that still-unfolding oeuvre is grounds for numerous important qualifications.

Arguably most notable, that early overview preceded Winter's coordination of the Proyecto Especial Monte Albán, 1992-1994, which issued in a whole series of important edited volumes that gave him and others reason to reassess many long-held ideas about the Zapotec capital.<sup>5</sup> For instance, where the (re)construction narrative of Monte Albán embedded within Winter's guidebook-like synthesis, which holds our current attention, affords Teotihuacan the smallest role among any of the alternate accounts that we engage in this book, he would eventually assess the relationship between the two great capitals very differently. In the wake of the Monte Albán Special Project he came to believe that, at the beginning of the Classic period, as part of a broader pattern of imperial domination by Teotihuacan that stretched to regions as distant as the Maya sites of Kaminaljuyú in Guatemala and Tikal in the Petén lowlands, forces from the Central Mexican capital actually conquered, occupied and controlled Monte Albán.<sup>6</sup> This is, in other words, a momentous rather than modest readjustment, which alerts us to Winter's continued willingness to alter his views on some major and well as minor aspects of Oaxaca's ancient history.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Marcus Winter, ed., *Monte Albán: Estudios Recientes*, Contribución No. 2 del Proyecto Especial Monte Albán 1992-1994 (Oaxaca: Centro INAH Oaxaca, 1994); and Marcus Winter, ed., *Escritura Zapoteca Prehispanica: Nuevas Aportaciones*, Contribución No. 4 del Proyecto Especial Monte Albán 1992-1994 (Oaxaca: Centro INAH Oaxaca, 1994); and Marcus Winter, ed., *Entierros Humanos de Monte Albán: Dos Estudios*, Contribución No. 7 del Proyecto Especial Monte Albán 1992-1994 (Oaxaca: Centro INAH Oaxaca, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> See Marcus Winter, "Monte Albán and Teotihuacan," in *Rutas de intercambio en Mesoamerica*, ed. Evelyn C. Rattray (Mexico City: University Nacional Autónoma de México, 1998), 153-84. Arthur A. Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 201-6, for instance, summarizes Winter's stance on Teotihuacan's supposed Classic-era conquest on Monte Albán and then, though conceding that "the possibility of hegemonic domination cannot be entirely excluded" (p. 205), provides his own very different model of Teotihuacan-Monte Albán interactions, which I will discuss in chapter 7.

Also, given that exceptionally prolific, still-emerging record of research and writing, it is in some respects lamentable (perhaps particularly from Winter's own view), that in pursuit of yet another distinctive contribution to the corpus of stories about Monte Albán, I concentrate here on his most popular, least technical work, namely, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*. Instead of the crowing achievements on which I focus in most other chapters, this is a kind of sidebar to the many much more specific pieces he has authored, including many that respond to research that was unavailable when this book was written. Produced by an archaeologist-author whose ongoing work literally in the trenches and ceramic collections, has, to his credit, led to continuing changes of opinion, this succinct synthesis, much-read and much-criticized, cannot be considered an accurate depiction of Winter's current opinions on several large matters.

But to qualify and reiterate yet again the goal and tenor of the present project, it is not the career nor even the state-of-the-art stance of Marcus Winter, but the story of Monte Albán that emerges from his popular synthesis, that concerns us here. And, admittedly, adding insult to injury, by working to highlight at every turn how his broad overview bears specifically on the mountain capital I am precisely reversing Winter's initiative to contextualize, perhaps even submerge, the history of Monte Albán into his much wider and longer treatment of the whole region. In short, my fixation on narrative accounts of the Zapotec capital presents an agenda that is much narrower and quite different from his. Apologies to Dr. Winter.

**I. TOURIST GUIDE AND/OR TEXTBOOK: POPULAR AUDIENCES,  
BUT A NON-NARRATIVE AVOIDANCE OF DRAMA AND HYPERBOLE**

Though by no means Marcus Winter's full and final statement on the pre-Columbian history of the region, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* provides, nonetheless, yet another substantially different and very widely circulated way of telling the story of ancient Oaxaca. The original version appeared in 1989, with a very slightly

revised, continuously reprinted second edition emerging in 1992.<sup>7</sup> Both editions are 128 pages long. Actually, instead of shifts in perspective or updates on new discoveries, the most significant difference between the two editions involves the switch from a two-staple publication format, which signaled that this was a very large “tourist pamphlet”—as Winter’s detractors insist on referring to it<sup>8</sup>—to a more standard book binding, which transforms the virtually identical text it into a slim volume that seems to carry a bit more scholarly authority.

The in-between guidebook-textbook genre of Winter’s synthesis complicates its assessment. For the most part soaring over the large contours of nearly a dozen centuries of Oaxacan pre-history, the discussion occasionally hones in on quite technical matters such as an inventory of a half dozen varieties of polychrome pottery;<sup>9</sup> and it is likewise revealing, that while his treatment of the renowned sites of Monte Albán and Mitla is briefer than many much smaller guidebooks, his text frequently alludes to other Oaxacan sites too obscure to appear even on the maps that he himself provides. That is to say, he

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<sup>7</sup> Regarding changes between the first (1989) and second (1992) editions of Marcus Winter’s *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, the only three changes of any note are the new section on archaeoastronomy, which required the omission of a line drawing of Monte Albán tomb façade (pp. 115-16); a new paragraph on the Coixtlahuaca Lienzos (p. 80); and the change and elaboration of caption for a photograph of the Mitla church (p. 100).

<sup>8</sup> Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, “Borrón, y Cuenta Nueva: Setting Oaxaca’s Archaeological Record Straight,” in *Debating Oaxaca Archaeology*, ed. Joyce Marcus, Anthropological Papers of the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, no. 84 (Ann Arbor: 1990), 17-69, devote much of this article to expressing extreme discontent with—and then working to rectify—the way their work is (mis)represented in Winter’s *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, which they repeatedly refer to as a “tourist guide,” “booklet” or “pamphlet.” They take issue both with many of Winter’s “facts” as well as his theoretical approach. In the same volume (pp. 191-205), Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, “Science and Science Fiction in Postclassic Oaxaca: Or, ‘Yes, Virginia, There is a Monte Albán IV,” is likewise very critical of Winter. I will at points in this chapter refer to various of their specific concerns, though that will constitute only a small subset of their criticisms of Winter.

<sup>9</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 82.

addresses lots of places that no casual traveler will ever visit, and treats surprisingly lightly some that are certain to be included in every itinerary.

Thus, on the one hand, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* poses as a popular, non-technical account designed for general readers, especially tourists on the road in Oaxaca. In its guise as a handbook for travelers, it includes, for instance, information about driving distances to various archaeological sites, the availability of hotels and restaurants along with the locations and schedules of museums.<sup>10</sup> And, as a contribution to the Minutiae Mexicana Series of travel guides, aimed at a lay audience who may be otherwise fully unacquainted with Oaxaca's geography and archaeology, one might be inclined to grant Winter greater leniency and license here than is required in evaluating his raft of more fully academic publications. In that sense, the absence of footnotes or bibliographic references, along with the avoidance of comment on most (but not all) scholarly controversies about ancient Oaxaca, are judicious choices; and, from that slant, one might argue that the diatribes that some critics have leveled against this book are unfair, demanding that the concise commentary serve a purpose for which it was never intended. Forced into such broad strokes and such compacted summaries, some gaps and apparent contradictions are inevitable and thus forgivable.

On the other hand, wide target-audience notwithstanding, Winter adopts a sober textbook tone. In fact, it is ironic that of all the major syntheses, Blanton's included, this one, which is seemingly the most directly aimed at tourists, is also the one that enforces the tightest strictures against speculation and the narrowest standards of "scientific objectivity." Evenhanded to the extreme, he fastidiously avoids hyperbole or any qualitative assessment of the people or cultural productions of ancient Oaxaca. No pre-Columbian building, object, practice or person is ever congratulated for excellence or aspersed for impropriety. There is nothing remotely sensationalizing, romanticizing or "mythologizing" in the tone. Winter, not unlike Blanton in this respect, anticipates

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 101.



(which is not to say avoids) criticism by constantly inserting qualifications about limited data and the multiplicity of viable interpretations.

Moreover, irrespective of the popular venue in which it appeared, this little “guidebook” is routinely cited in scholarly works, and the case could be made that no published treatment of archaeological information is exempt from the requirements of accuracy either on historical matters or in the representation of other scholars’ work.<sup>11</sup> From that view, notwithstanding its fast and wide sweep, the text neither requests nor deserves a reprieve from the normal standards of academic rigor. In any case, this concise and handy book, not least because it is both inexpensive and largely jargon-free—backpack and bus ready, as it were—is quite likely the most widely read account of Oaxaca’s ancient past. And on those grounds alone it deserves our careful attention.

## **II. A CORRECTIVE TO ALFONSO CASO’S TWO-PARTY NARRATIVE: LOCATING MONTE ALBÁN WITHIN A WIDER AND LONGER STORY OF PRE-HISPANIC OAXACA**

Irrespective of its exceptional success in gaining a wide readership, as a “followable” narrative rendition of the history of Monte Albán, Winter’s account is severely limited—for two quite different reasons.<sup>12</sup> Consider each in turn.

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<sup>11</sup> It may be worth noting that when, in a brief encyclopedia article on Monte Albán, Winter himself enumerates a dozen of the most important sources, including three that he authored or coordinated, but he does not include *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*. See Marcus Winter, “Monte Albán,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, ed. David Carrasco (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), vol. 2, 340.

<sup>12</sup> On the “followability” of narrative, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 152. On the application of Ricoeur’s ideas about narrative to archaeologically-based writing, see Mark Pluciennik, “Archaeological Narratives and Other Ways of Telling,” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 5 (December 1999), 654ff.

### A. A NON-NARRATIVE STYLE: THE AVOIDANCE OF SPECULATION AND THE ABSENCE OF STORIOLOGICAL APPEAL

For one, as just noted, telling an exciting story or stretching the available data into the sort of yarn that would inspire either Oaxacans or mestizo Mexicans, or, for that matter, pique the imagination of foreign nationals, is not, it seems, among the tasks that Winter sets for himself. To the contrary, his commitments to ostensible neutrality and to caution in not overreaching the uneven data eventuate in an account that lacks either a well-sustained storyline or, even more distressing, any strong and well-developed protagonists. He provides little in the way of gripping plot twists and nothing in the way of compelling personalities. Accordingly, Winter, even more than Blanton, makes himself a prime target for Marcus and Flannery's complaints about those scholars who explain social evolution strictly in terms of general systems and processes, "relying too heavily on ecological pressures and too little on human decisions."<sup>13</sup> The distinct identities and personal qualities of individual kings and queens, specific heroes and villains, are, as Winter reminds us, not easily adduced from "the archaeological record" on which he relies; and thus, aside from one ethnohistorically-derived allusion to Mixtec ruler 8 Deer "Tiger Claw,"<sup>14</sup> there are absolutely no references to any pre-Hispanic individuals. It is, in that sense, a drama without actors.

Instead of imaging the wise, wily, wicked and world-changing rulers that we will meet next chapter, Winter, not unlike other "ecological-functionalist" archaeologists, attributes the unfolding of Oaxaca's social evolution to broader sorts of socio-economic forces and processes, most notably, to the exploitation of available natural resources. His ancient Oaxacans have practical rather than power-hunger or pious priorities. It is additionally ironic, then—because Winter would subsequently author and initiate some of the most sustained discussions of pre-Columbian Zapotec religion, including period-by-

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<sup>13</sup> Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 30-31.

<sup>14</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 78.

period commentary on developments in both “personal or domestic religion” and “public religion” at Monte Albán<sup>15</sup>—that he omits almost entirely from this synthesis any discussion of religion and ritual, either as motivations for monumental architecture or as mechanisms of socio-political control.<sup>16</sup> Much more inclined to present the decision-making of ancient Oaxacans as sensible and pragmatic than as either politically manipulative or strangely exotic, this account ventures very little about their otherworldly interests, anxieties or enthusiasms. That is to say, Winter declines to provide the sort of *explicit* theory of human nature or characterization of “the ancient Zapotec mind” with which some accounts begin.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, it will become clear that he does operate with an *implicit* assumption that human beings, and thus social evolution, presumably in all contexts, are, at base, guided by the competitive use and control of available sources of food, water, building materials, etc. In this (re)construction, the rise, triumphs and

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<sup>15</sup> Regarding work in which Winter does focus directly on pre-Columbian Zapotec religion, for a discussion of the full Oaxaca region, see, for instance, Marcus Winter, “Religión de los *Binnigula'sa'*: la evidencia arqueológica,” in *Religión de los Binnigula'sa'*, Víctor de la Cruz y Marcus Winter, coordinación (Oaxaca, México: Fondo Editorial, IEEPO, 2001), 45-88; and for a discussion focused specifically on the dynamics of religion in the history of Monte Albán, see Marcus Winter, “La religión, el poder y las bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca Prehispánica,” en *Bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca: Memoria de la Cuarta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2009), 503-27. Also see, Marcus Winter, Robert Markens, Cira Martínez López, and Alicia Herrera Muzgó de López, “Shrines, Offerings, and Postclassic Continuity in Zapotec Religión,” in *Commoner Ritual and Ideology in Ancient Mesoamerica*, eds. Jon C. Lohse and Nancy Gonlin (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2007), 185-212.

<sup>16</sup> Regarding the very limited role of religion in *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, Winter does comment briefly of the respective role of religion in each of four major stages (see, for instance, *ibid.*, 25, 34 and 85-87); he makes a rare reference to “cosmovision or the view of the human being and his position in the universe” (p. 86); and he apparently considers the “outward expression” of “symbol systems” and perhaps “rituals” somewhat more accessible areas of inquiry (see, for instance, pp. 86-87). But, in this little book, he intimates that “religion” and “religious beliefs” are less visible in the extant archaeological record, and thus an area of speculation that an archaeologist of his ilk is not inclined to enter.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 18-21, 31; or see my account of their work in chapter 6.

collapse of Monte Albán, and indeed of all of Oaxaca's towns and cities, are, for instance, attributed to "increased competition, and formalization and regularization of use and ownership of resources."<sup>18</sup>

And while Winter and his like-minded colleagues have well demonstrated that sort of the theoretical frame of reference can explain a great deal—and it may very well be empirically correct—it is not the sort of approach that, as he also demonstrates, results in a winsome or suspenseful narrative. It is difficult to imagine that readers of this book experience what Paul Ricoeur terms "the pleasure of recognition" that emerges from a well-wrought narrative.<sup>19</sup> In short, while Winter says that "this book tells the story of human life in Oaxaca from the time of those first arrivals to the coming of the Spaniards,"<sup>20</sup> given the author's commitments to scholarly caution and reserve, storycrafting is not the forte of *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*.

#### **B. "A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW" OF ANCIENT OAXACA: CONTEXTUALIZING MONTE ALBÁN AND LOOKING PAST ZAPOTEC AND MIXTECS**

Regarding a second limiting factor—which might also be assessed as the greatest virtue of Winter's treatment—his account undermines the nearly ubiquitous presumption that the rise and fall of Monte Albán must be the foremost features of any story of ancient Oaxaca. That is to say, he, in a sense, demotes the great Zapotec capital from prima-donna status to that of part-and-parcel of a much wider and longer arc of Oaxacan social evolution; and in that respect we find a somewhat unlikely parallel in Paddock's presentation wherein the collapse of Monte Albán is an important but not fatal factor in the persistence of Oaxaca culture and identity. In fact, while Winter arranges his ten-millennium script within a four-stage chronological framework (which I will address in a

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<sup>18</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> On "the pleasure of recognition" with which audiences of a "followable" narrative are rewarded, see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 49, 53 and 152.

<sup>20</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 4.

moment), the famed mountaintop site is, surprisingly enough, a complete non-factor in all but one of those stages.

This demotion—or, better, contextualization—of the story of Monte Albán within a wider synthesis of pre-Hispanic Oaxaca is deliberate and sustained throughout the entire book. For instance, in a brief but very helpful review of the history of the study of pre-Hispanic Oaxaca, which begins with Gulliermo Dupaix's 1806 expedition, Winter reminds readers that the lion's share of archaeological work done by Alfonso Caso and his direct descendents, Bernal and Paddock included, focused on the high-profile sites in the Valley of Oaxaca, Monte Albán of course preeminent among them; but then Winter is also careful to mention some of their projects in the Mixteca region.<sup>21</sup> His quick overview of the more recent archaeology likewise accentuates the increasing share of attention that various lesser known regions of Oaxaca have received since the 1950s.<sup>22</sup> Then, when Winter notes the “major shift in Oaxaca archaeology” that began in the 1960s with the intensive settlement surveys of Flannery, Blanton and their associates, he again stresses that, though trained primarily on the Valley of Oaxaca, this work has also had the effect of enabling a re-visioning of the region's past that both looks far wider than the main urban centers and far deeper into prehistory than the 500 BCE origins of Monte Albán.

Additionally, when Winter discusses the establishment in 1972 of the Centro Regional de Oaxaca, a local office of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History in Oaxaca de Juarez with which he has been affiliated for several decades, he especially accentuates that center's initiative not simply to continue exploration and monitoring of the state's world-famous ruins, but also to undertake the more prosaic salvage operations and surveys that are essential to his aspiration of “a comprehensive view of pre-Hispanic Oaxaca.”<sup>23</sup> That is to say, Winter consistently emphasizes that the

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<sup>21</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 8.

darker corners of Oaxaca's prehistory, both in terms of space and time, are not less worthy of exploration, and not less revealing, than the glitzier limelight of its famed capitals—and that more wide-angled perspective is definitely reflected in the way that he engages and presents the Monte Albán material.

Given that anti-elitist outlook, Winter, for example, not only acknowledges an enormous debt to Caso, he also registers as his largest discontent the way in which “the brilliant Mexican archaeologist” and his collaborators told a story of ancient Oaxaca that focused inordinately on the rise and decline of the region's most eye-catching urban sites. In Winter's view, Caso and his generation “offered a vision of pre-Hispanic Oaxaca synonymous with ancient Zapotec and Mixtec cultures alone... [I]t was as if other groups in Oaxaca had no distinctive pre-Hispanic origins or developments.”<sup>24</sup> He concedes that, “given the spectacular nature of Zapotec and Mixtec sites and artifacts, and the fact that most excavations in Oaxaca [prior to the 1950s] had been concentrated in the Zapotec and Mixtec regions,” it is entirely understandable that scholars in that era would have told the story in this way.<sup>25</sup> But with the much increased knowledge both of numerous other Oaxacan regions and the much deeper pre-history of the area, the time had arrived (by 1989) for a rendition of the region that did more suitable justice to what he terms “the cultural complexity and variability of pre-Hispanic Oaxaca.”<sup>26</sup>

Consequently, Winter's principal corrective—an agenda that shapes his entire account—is to look past the celebrated sites of the Zapotecs and Mixtecs in order to provide a longer, wider and more fully textured depiction of the whole of Oaxaca. He aspires, in other words, to an account that more adequately represents the region's immense diversity of ethnicities, languages, settlement styles, art, architecture and religion. Instead of a two-party drama, then, he wants his little book to trace the pre-Hispanic roots not only of Zapotecs and Mixtecs, but also “Chinantecs, Cuicatecs, and

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<sup>24</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 7.

many other groups who still inhabit Oaxaca and who continue to play a role in the evolution of the state and the Mexican nation.”<sup>27</sup>

Laudable and fair-minded as the goal of a rounder and more complicated portrayal of Oaxaca may be, the result, for better or worse, is a very seriously diminished role for Monte Albán. By exercising the urge to compensate for the disproportionate share of the attention that the Zapotec capital enjoys in most overviews of ancient Oaxaca—or perhaps because he assumes that the story of Monte Albán is sufficiently well-known to require less reiteration—Winter delivers a treatment of the ancient city that is fragmented and highly attenuated. In that sense there may be a kind of overcorrection. In this (re)construction, instead of their customary role as the starring players, Monte Albán and its Zapotec inhabitants, again for better or worse, are reduced to the status of one among numerous examples of ostensibly pan-Oaxacan trends.

Accordingly, despite the fact that other publications guarantee that Winter has well-formed opinions on all phases of the ascent and decline of Monte Albán—a site at which he has considerable firsthand archaeological experience and has elsewhere described in great detail<sup>28</sup>—to find a complete history of the famous city in this book requires jumping from here to there, and in the end there are still major gaps in the story. In short, though replete with information, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, irrespective of its popularizing aspirations, neither aims to—nor succeeds in—providing a complete and compelling narrative history of Monte Albán.

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<sup>27</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, as noted earlier (and of special interest to scholars of religion), Winter, “La religión, el poder y las bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca Prehispánica,” 503-27, unlike *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, presents a concise foundation-to-collapse account of Monte Albán that, also unlike the guidebook version, pays special attention to role of religion in each phase of the capital's ascent and decline.

### **III. TWO IRREFUTABLE BUT UNREMARKABLE NARRATIVE THREADS: CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND THE INTERPLAY OF DIVERSITY AND UNITY**

If Marcus Winter is, then, only partially willing to embrace the posture and protocol of a storyteller, and thus the majority of his book is devoted to non-narrative descriptions of the attributes of various stages in Oaxaca's development, there are a couple of leitmotifs or narrative threads that do run through the entire text. Both are consequent of his aspirations to a more inclusive synopsis of ancient Oaxaca, and both depend upon observations concerning the inescapable tension between difference and similarity. That is to say, one engages the play of diversity and sameness over time and the other over space or geography.

#### **A. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE OVER TIME: MONTE ALBÁN AS A MERE CHAPTER IN THE LONG HISTORY OF OAXACA**

First, in the realm of change over time, like Marcus and Flannery, Winter has both the wherewithal and the archaeological data to begin his (re)construction far earlier than had Caso, Bernal or Paddock; and thus like most later syntheses, Winter takes as his point of departure the very first arrival of human beings in Oaxaca, which he locates sometime around 10,000 BCE. Accordingly, in this story, as we will see momentarily, Monte Albán's roughly 1200 years of habitation (500 BCE-750 CE) is reconfigured, not as the great climax of the story, but, alternatively, as one notable chapter—indeed something of a departure—which is preceded by some 9000 years of Oaxacan social evolution in which the mountaintop site plays no role and postdated by another eight pre-Hispanic centuries in which the by-then-abandoned site is again irrelevant.

Moreover, while Winter honors his commitment to address the full duration of the pre-Hispanic era by working through a timeline that terminates with a brief account with the arrival of Spaniards in Oaxaca, along the way he also intersperses occasional



allusions to contemporary indigenous life in Oaxaca—and always to the same purpose.<sup>29</sup> These elliptical asides are, in every case, devoted to accentuating the persistence of beliefs, practices and technologies that emerged thousands of years ago in the pre-Columbian past, but that remain very much intact in present-day Oaxacan villages. That is to say, one narrative thread, albeit thin and only intermittently visible—an emphasis that was similarly prominent in Paddock's very different account—is Winter's assertion that, irrespective of gigantic changes in lifestyles, settlement patterns, populations sizes and perhaps the beliefs and practices of the elite classes, there is a very important cultural continuity, perhaps something like an essential Oaxaca identity or core, that persists from the region's earliest village settlements through to the present, and thus remains very vital even today.

#### **B. CONTINUITY AND DIVERSITY ACROSS REGIONS: MONTE ALBÁN AS A MERE SUB-AREA WITHIN ANCIENT OAXACA**

The second leitmotif, about which Winter is much more emphatic derives from a parallel sort of observation about diversity and sameness across the spatial or geographic reach of Oaxaca. Invoking the familiar, perhaps even clichéd, formulation of an interplay between multiplicity and unity, he resounds the emphasis on Oaxaca's "great environmental diversity," which, in his ecological view, ultimately accounts for the similarly extensive diversity of Oaxacan cultures, languages and ethnicities.<sup>30</sup> In the same way that he complains that over-attention to Zapotecs and Mixtecs has resulted in neglect of the state's innumerable other indigenous groups, Winter takes issue with the conventional tourist-speak that Oaxaca consists of seven regions, and instead opts for a "finer division" among 14 distinct "geographic provinces," one of which is the Valley of

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<sup>29</sup> For suggestions of significant continuity between pre-Hispanic and contemporary Oaxaca practices, especially at the village level, see, for example, Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 19, 20, 24, 76, 87, 100 and 112-14.

<sup>30</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 9.

Oaxaca, which he further divides in six “sub-areas.”<sup>31</sup> That is to say, he cautions constantly against any homogenizing depiction of Oaxaca.

At the same time, however, Winter persists in seeing the whole Oaxaca region as a significantly unified region that, along with Central Mexico, Western Mexico, the Gulf Coast and the Maya region, constitutes one of the five main sub-regions of Mesoamerica. At that level, Oaxaca is, as Blanton maintains in his later work, one among several largely autonomous regions that together constitute the interactive components of the wider Mesoamerican culture area.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, in the refrain that he will reissue in every chapter, Winter accentuates that, “an interplay of two trends—[1] diversity in the emergence of culturally and linguistically distinct groups, and [2] unity through interaction and communication among the groups—formed the peoples and cultures of ancient Oaxaca.”<sup>33</sup>

Winter's treatment of Monte Albán is understated and halting, then, because it is composed largely in the service of this larger theme concerning the “complementary interplay” of Oaxaca's diversity and unity. He cannot avoid positioning the great Zapotec capital as a singularly grand phenomenon; but the primary adjustment and corrective in his version will be a continual insistence that the extensive cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity within ancient Oaxaca requires, for one, much greater attention to *groups other than* the Zapotecs and Mixtecs, and, for two, much greater attention to information gleaned from *sites other than* the grand urban centers, of which Monte Albán clearly is the paramount example. Thus, instead of a script in which the Zapotec builders of Monte Albán hold the spotlight and thus leave everyone and everywhere else in the shadows, Winter aspires to a summary that embeds the story of the

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<sup>31</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 10-11. Winter, *ibid.*, divides the Valley of Oaxaca into the following “sub-areas”: the Etla valley, the Tlacolula valley, the Zimatlán or Southern valley, the Ocotlán and Ejutla areas, and the Miahuatlán valley.

<sup>32</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 13.

ancient Zapotec capital within a wider, more complicated depiction of what he terms, “the cultural complexity and variability of pre-Hispanic Oaxaca.”<sup>34</sup>

### **C. FOOD-GETTING AS THE PRIMARY MOTIVATION: MONTE ALBÁN AS A CONSEQUENCE OF ENTIRELY ORDINARY INCENTIVES**

Unlike Alfonso Caso, then, for whom Monte Albán is a premier vehicle to showcase the artistic and intellectual sophistication, and indeed the dignity and integrity of the ancient city's founders in ways that would make modern Mexicans proud to claim them as ancestors, Winter gives us protagonists whose guiding motivation is, it seems, finding enough to eat. Unlike Paddock's assertions about the aesthetic preoccupations and “striking impracticality” of ancient Mesoamericans,<sup>35</sup> in this rendition, religious, artistic and even political concerns all seem to follow in the wake of these highly practical, even gastro-intestinal priorities. Unlike Bernal, for whom each wave of success at the Zapotec capital reinforces the virtues of inter-cultural admixing, Winter depicts Monte Albán's Zapotecs as much engaged with other Oaxacans and non-Oaxacans, but nonetheless declines to espouse any larger lesson about the fortuitous ramifications of hybridized identities.

Moreover, unlike Blanton, who presents us with the fascinating irony that the seeming unappeal of the mountaintop site actually made this the ideal location for a “disembedded capital,” Winter's description of the city's rise and fall features no surprising twists, turns or similarly provocative unlikelihoods; to the contrary, the seemingly slow and steady evolution that one encounters in his account presents nothing far-fetched, preposterous or even hard to swallow. And unlike Marcus and Flannery's utilization of Monte Albán as a kind of test-case for theoretical postulates of “action theory,” or Arthur Joyce's experimentation with the difference that departing from

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<sup>34</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> John Paddock, John, “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]), 152.

“poststructural” assumptions makes, Winter’s lay-targeted synthesis displays no (explicit) interest in demonstrating the merits of any broader method or approach, except perhaps that of an ecological basis for cultural development.

Alternatively, Winter is content to argue that various Oaxacan groups were different but similar. That is to say, his highly ambitious embrace of the full length and breadth of pre-Hispanic Oaxaca, has, it seems, the contrastively unassuming goal of persuading us (a) that contemporary Oaxacan natives have deep and abiding continuity with their antecedents of several thousand years past, and (b) that the various indigenous inhabitants of Oaxaca, whether in ancient or present-day times, are highly diversified but nonetheless united by a shared affiliation with the region. These assertions are difficult to dispute. Yet, at the same time, Winter demonstrates just how difficult it is to push that timeworn diversity-versus-unity formulation to more rewardingly specific observations. Readers of this book would, for instance, be hard pressed to adduce even one way, aside from language and place of residence, that Zapotecs are different from Mixtecs, let alone from Chinantecs or Cuicatecs; nor could readers of this version discern even one way, aside from geography, that Oaxacan culture is different from that of Central Mexico or the Maya zone.

In short, the reiterative stress on the interplay of diversity and unity provides Winter a sufficiently strong and reliable frame on which to arrange his ample information; but a stimulating historiographical strategy it is not. Though this is the best-seller among the alternatives we consider in this book, it is, I dare say, narratively speaking, also the dullest major synthesis of ancient Oaxaca. Highly plausible, yes; but by no means rip-roaring or spell-binding.

#### **IV. THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS:**

##### **MARCUS WINTER’S HISTORICAL (RE)CONSTRUCTION**

While this eminently reasonable version lacks the sort of plotline and protagonists that most lay readers will find gripping—and while dramatic “emplotment” is not one of

Marcus Winter's primary goals—consider next the more specific course of events and evolutionary developments that he describes.

### **A. THE LITHIC STAGE—LONG BEFORE MONTE ALBÁN: THE DEEP HISTORY OF OAXACA'S REGIONAL DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY**

Determined to tell the story of all of ancient Oaxaca and not just another tale of the Zapotecs, Mixtecs and their most famed urban sites, Winter—not unlike essentially all contemporary scholars in this respect—insists that his account start much earlier than the 500 CE origins of Monte Albán. Seemingly experimenting with the heuristic utility of numerous chronological schemes, Winter, even when describing essentially the same sequence of pre-Columbian events, relies in different contexts on different periodizations of Oaxaca's ancient past.<sup>36</sup> In *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, however, as befits

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<sup>36</sup> Regarding Marcus Winter's utilization of different periodizations of ancient Oaxaca in different contexts, note that, in addition to the four-part chronological scheme that he uses in *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* (1989, 1992)—and that I am discussing here—in his four-page “Oaxaca: panorama arqueológico,” in *Arqueología Mexicana*, Agosto-Septiembre 1993; vol. I, núm. 3, pp. 17-20, he relies on a somewhat different five-part scheme: (1) Primeros pobladores (10000-2000 BCE); (2) Aldeas (villages) (1600-500 BCE); (3) Ciudades Tempranas (500A.D.-250 CE); (4) Centros Urbanostradíes (280-800 CE); and (5) Ciudades-Estados [City States] (1200-1521 CE). In his entry on “Monte Albán” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures* (2001), he utilizes a slightly amended version of the conventional five-stage periodizations, which leaves him with the following seven stages: (1) Pre-urban Phase; (2) Period I (500 BCE-100 BCE); (3) Period II (100 BCE-350 CE); (4) Period IIIA (350 CE-500 CE); (5) “The Xoo phase” (500 BCE-800 CE), which Winter, *ibid.*, 339, explains, avoids the confusion generated by two consecutive numbers naming a single ceramic period, IIIB-IV; (6) Period V (800-1521 CE), which he also terms the Early Postclassic Period; and (7) Late Postclassic Period (1250-1521 CE). Or, in a jointly authored article that adopts a very different, explicitly Durkheimian theoretical orientation, Winter adheres to a usefully simplified three-part periodization of Monte Albán's 1300-year history: The first, which corresponds to the era of Monte Albán I and II (500 BC to 250-350 AD), is characterized by a regional expansionist policy and almost constant growth of the city; in the second, which corresponds to Period IIIA (250-350 to 500 AD), there is a marked presence of Teotihuacanos in Monte Albán, the expansion was cut off, monumental construction tailed off and the population of the city declined; and the third so-termed Xoo phase (500-800 AD), which corresponds to IIIB-IV of Caso, Bernal and Acosta, is marked a re-birth and great flowering of Zapotec culture. Marcus Winter y Miguel Bartolomé, “Tiempo y espacio en Monte Albán: la construcción de una identidad

an introductory overview, he utilizes a streamlined four-part presentation, augmented by several sub-categories, which runs as follows: Lithic stage (10,000 BCE-1500 BCE), Village stage (1500 BCE-500 BCE), Urban stage (500 BCE-750 CE) and City-State stage (750 CE-1521).<sup>37</sup>

This unencumbered four-stage arrangement, though neither original nor unique to southern Mexico, has the advantage of corresponding to (apparently) significant changes across the wider Oaxacan context, not simply in the Valley of Oaxaca. The concise scheme could prove puzzling to some readers because of its deviation from the conventional Caso-derived division of ancient Oaxacan history according to the five-stage rubric of “Monte Albán I, II, IIIa, IIIb-IV and V” on which all of our previous archaeologist-authors have relied (and which I will, in the interest of the sort of horizontal reading across chapters described in the Introduction, reinsert into the relevant subtitles of this chapter).<sup>38</sup> But Winter's commitment to respect the diversity across the whole of Oaxaca requires him to reject the stock reliance on a periodization that is based on the ceramics of the central valley, and most of all on excavations at Monte Albán. For him, continued dependence on the five Monte Albán stages is a symptom of precisely the elitist bias he is trying to rectify.

Moreover, this four-stage plan largely steers clear of the connotations that come with the timeworn Preclassic-Classic-Postclassic terminology, a rubric that Winter also avoids, presumably because that phraseology likewise reinforces the presumption that the essential story of ancient Oaxaca is that of the rise, florescence and fall of the great

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compartida,” in *Memoria de la Primera Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán: Procesos de cambio y conceptualización del tiempo*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2001), 65ff. Elsewhere, as suits the occasion, he relies on yet different periodization breaks and nomenclature

<sup>38</sup> The correlation of various chronological schemes is, as we've noted, always provisional. But, as clarified by the chart on Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 128, roughly speaking, “early Early Urban” is Monte Albán Period I, “later Early Urban” is Period II, “early Late Urban” is Period IIIA, “later Late Urban” is Period IIIB-IV, and the “City-State Stage” is Period V.

mountain capital. Winter's choice of periodization schemes is, in other words, a perfect demonstration of his diversity-and-unity theme insofar as it allows him both to acknowledge that somewhat different ceramic-based chronologies pertain in each of Oaxaca's half dozen sub-regions, but also to arrange his story within a four-part configuration that is relevant across the full region.<sup>39</sup>

### **1. A Very Long Pre-Ceramic Prelude to Oaxacan Village Life: 8500 Years of Hunting and Gathering**

Winter's point of departure is the so-termed Lithic stage—also known as the Pre-ceramic stage “because stone tools are the most common preserved artifacts, and ceramics were absent”—which is subdivided between the Paleo-Indian period (10,000 BCE-7000 BCE) and the Archaic period (7000 BCE-1500 BCE).<sup>40</sup> That is to say, his story starts very early and very slowly insofar as the Lithic stage, which begins with the earliest human habitation of the Oaxaca region, is more than ten times longer than any of subsequent stages, but also the least eventful. At the opening of the Paleo-Indian period, the sum total of Oaxaca's population was “probably 200 to 300 people at most,” who hunted animals with stone-tipped spears and foraged for wild plant foods.<sup>41</sup> Archaeological evidence, though slim, suggests that small nomadic groups in the Valley of Oaxaca may have hunted and trapped not only smaller animals like deer, antelope, rabbits and birds but also big game such as mammoths, mastodons, Pleistocene horses, and other extinct fauna, fossilized remains of which are proudly displayed in many of Oaxaca's village museums.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> With respect to way in which he correlates his four-part scheme with the respective ceramic-based sequences for six different Oaxaca regions, see the chart on Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 128.

<sup>40</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 15.

Around 7000 BCE, the start of the so-designated Archaic period, the climate in Oaxaca apparently warmed, which, together with the demise of the Pleistocene megafauna, seems to have required a reorientation of subsistence patterns by hunter-gatherer groups. The relative abundance of rock-shelters near Mitla constitute some of the best known Archaic sites, but these were apparently just temporary camps where people prepared food and perhaps exploited the area's chert, which was well suited to making chipped-stone projectile points and tools.<sup>43</sup> Still there were no sites of permanent habitation. Instead, Winter supports the view that, during most of the year, people lived in small groups or "micro-bands" composed of nuclear or small extended families that followed available food sources; occasionally, however, when food sources were more abundant, groups assembled temporarily into somewhat larger "macro-bands."<sup>44</sup> He believes, moreover, that these macro-bands may have, in cases, had the foresight to plant wild beans and squash in the areas to which they expected to return and gather the next year, a hypothesis about the "gradual centralization of food sources" that constituted an important early step in the direction of agriculture and plant domestication.<sup>45</sup> Irrespective of these rudimentary moves toward a more settled way of life, during this span of some 8500 years, the eventual site of Monte Albán, while perhaps one more hunting-ground, was in no way remarkable.

## **2. Continuity from Lithic Stage to Present-Day: The Deep Roots of Oaxacan Cultural Unity and Diversity**

In sum on this earliest period, then, owing to the scant evidence, Winter tenders few intimations about Lithic-stage society or religion, and thereby leaves us with protagonists who seem little concerned with anything beyond control over their nutritional and housing needs. With lots of land and very few people, he does not even mention warfare, political intrigue or competition of any sort. Nonetheless, Winter does

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<sup>43</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 16-17.

<sup>45</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 18.



find a way to establish a very deep historical basis for his narrative theme concerning the interplay of unity and diversity. He concludes, on the one hand, that commonalities among the widely dispersed population, at least those groups that trafficked in the highland areas, were participating in the “Tehuacán tradition,” which stretched to the northwest to include the Basin of Mexico along with the present-day states of Puebla, Hidalgo and Queretaro.<sup>46</sup> In that sense, the Archaic-era Oaxacans were both similar among themselves and participants in wider Mesoamerican patterns; that is to say, there was a regional-wide Oaxacan cultural unity during this Pre-ceramic era.

Yet, on the other hand, Winter also begins to build a similarly deep foundation for his emphasis on Oaxacan heterogeneity by noting that, even in the Lithic stage, and despite the very small populations, distinct cultural groups were forming insofar as, “according to linguistic analysis, diversification of the Otomangue family had begun by 4400 B.C.”<sup>47</sup> Consistent with his ecological presuppositions, he hypothesizes that this variegation in language was related to greater dependence on cultivated food, which led to population growth and increased sedentariness, which in turn may have increased the isolation of some groups, thus promoting linguistic variation. This is, in other words, a way of addressing in a more nuanced fashion (and assigning to it a much earlier date) what Paddock termed the “divergence” of various groups, most notably Zapotec and Mixtec “branches,” from a shared Oaxacan ancestry, a process of diversification that he too ultimately attributed to the region’s highly diverse ecology.<sup>48</sup>

Where Paddock imagined that this process of diversification began about 2000 BCE, in Winter’s account, Oaxaca’s regional diversity began to emerge around 4000 BCE. Additionally, foreshadowing his emphasis on the extreme depth of continuity between pre-Hispanic and contemporary native communities, Winter, though avoiding the old controversy about the origin and history of a distinct “Zapotec ethnicity,”

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<sup>46</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Paddock, “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica,” 232.

nonetheless argues for (at least genetic) continuity between Lithic-stage and present-day inhabitants of the region when he notes that “it is likely that the Pre-ceramic occupants of Oaxaca were direct ancestors of the Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Chinantecs, and other groups present there now.”<sup>49</sup> This rendition of very ancient events, again like Paddock’s and Blanton’s, could, then, provide an excellent resource for contemporary Oaxacan regional identity and pride insofar as, though Lithic-stage protagonists have on-going interactions with peoples outside of Oaxaca, following the initial migration into the region of “probably no more than a few families,”<sup>50</sup> perhaps as early as 10,000 BCE, Oaxacan culture was almost entirely homegrown. Already Oaxaca was a distinctive area, with several different but related groups.

#### **B. THE VILLAGE STAGE—STILL BEFORE MONTE ALBÁN: FROM NOMADISM TO SEDENTARY LIFE, SLOWLY EN ROUTE TO URBANISM**

Winter terms the second large block in his four-part scheme the Village stage (1500 BCE-500 BCE) in acknowledgement of the seminal shift from nomadic to permanent settlement that characterizes this era. With much more ample archaeological evidence, he can begin to flesh out at least somewhat the plotline and the protagonists, though in this stage as well the site of Monte Albán will remain entirely irrelevant. This 1000-year span corresponds roughly to what many term the Early and Middle Formative periods, and thus the stretch that Blanton, Marcus and Flannery, Joyce and others, when discussing developments in the Valley of Oaxaca, address under the four respective (ceramic-based) headings of the Tierras Largas, San José Mogote, Guadalupe and Rosario Phases, all of which precede Monte Albán’s Period I.<sup>51</sup> Winter, however, again absenting Monte Albán any privileged status, opts for a scheme that divides the so-

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<sup>49</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, the respective chronological charts in Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 29; Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 25; and Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 16.

termed Village stage into three shorter sub-stages, which carry tellingly asymmetrical names.<sup>52</sup>

During the first, the Red-on-Buff Horizon (1500-1200 BCE), so-named for painted decoration on the pottery that characterizes this sub-stage both in Oaxaca and elsewhere in Mesoamerica, semi-transient lifestyles were replaced by more fully sedentary ones. In Winter's description of this transition in Oaxaca, "Villages became well established; this was the first period of major population expansion. As populations grew, communities fissioned and new villages were founded in the same region."<sup>53</sup> Yet, rather than hypothesizing direct evolution into urban configurations, Winter stresses conservatism and continuity: "Innovations in social and political organization which might have led to growth within communities, apparently did not occur."<sup>54</sup> Discerning a gradual rather than an abrupt transition—in fact, aside from Monte Albán's rapid and complete collapse (and, as we'll see, the odd disconnect between the Early City-State-stage hiatus and the spectacular Late City-State stage), there are no abrupt cleavages in this version of the Oaxaca story—he estimates that the villages of this era had from three to ten households; and while there is evidence of some 30 such settlements in the Valley of Oaxaca, the site of Monte Albán was not among them.

Winter is, however, unwilling to cast his lot with any single explanation for the momentous transition to village life. He cautions that "it was not simply agriculture that marked the change from nomadism to permanent settlement," but likewise makes the not-daring observation that "plant cultivation and food storage, must have been directly

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<sup>52</sup> Winter's "Village Stage" corresponds to the four successive Valley of Oaxaca phases that are usually termed the Tierras Largas, San José, Guadalupe and Rosario. Again, to see that and other correlations between Winter's four stages (and numerous sub-stages) and the conventional periodizations of various regions of Oaxaca, see the chart on Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 128.

<sup>53</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 27.

involved in making sedentary life possible.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly non-committal about the agents of the change, he admits that, “We don’t know if hunter-gatherers in several regions gradually adopted a sedentary way of life or if immigrants from other areas established the first villages. Perhaps both occurred.”<sup>56</sup> Though indecisive about the forces and parties responsible for this new way of life, Winter is confident that the result does reaffirm his theme about “the complementary trends of unity and diversity” insofar as, according to his surmise, these small villages, on the one hand, began to develop distinctive local linguistic and cultural patterns, but, at the same time, they all participated in exchange networks that linked them with other Mesoamerican places, both within and beyond the bounds of Oaxaca.<sup>57</sup>

The second subdivision of the Village stage is the Olmec Horizon (1200-850 BCE), a designation that signals that this was the era in which the Olmec culture flourished on the Gulf Coast of Veracruz. Winter, however, joins the prevailing consensus (together with Blanton, Marcus and Flannery, and Joyce) in rejecting the one-time popular stance of Caso and Bernal that had afforded the Olmecs a special role in the story of Oaxaca and thus in the early stages of Monte Albán. Alternatively, Winter simply accentuates the appearance in Oaxaca during this era of “a group of pan-Mesoamerican symbols” that, while perhaps especially prominent in the Gulf Coast region—and thus often (mis)construed as distinctly Olmec—actually occur throughout Mesoamerica.<sup>58</sup> Winter contends that the appearance of these “related and standardized designs” is “the beginning of written expression, a key feature of Mesoamerican civilization,”<sup>59</sup> which is noteworthy because, as we’ll see, he considers writing to be one of the crucial diagnostics of urbanism; but, in his view, the utilization of those symbols is

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<sup>55</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 21.

<sup>56</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 21.

<sup>57</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 27-28.

<sup>58</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 28.

unique neither to the Olmecs nor to Oaxaca. In other words, at this point in his story, it is the characteristically Mesoamerican status of the Oaxacan protagonists—that is, their sameness and involvements not only with one another but with contemporaneous peoples across Mesoamerica—that is most prominent.

### **1. Evolution toward Urbanism: Village Diversification via Centralization and Community Specialization**

Be that as it may, Winter also assigns two other significant and interrelated changes in village life to this so-termed Olmec Horizon, both of which balance the stress on pan-regional unity by underscoring the growing diversification among Oaxacan regions and communities. For one, he considers that the seeds of urbanism were planted inasmuch as there was an increasing tendency toward “centralization” in the Canada, Mixteca Alta and Valley of Oaxaca, wherein “several small villages were abandoned while relatively large central villages emerged.”<sup>60</sup> Winter, like Marcus and Flannery (and now almost everyone), will surmise that during this final phase in advance of urbanism—at which point the site of Monte Albán remained a place of no special consequence—the most significant centralization in the Oaxaca Valley was at San José Mogote.<sup>61</sup>

Winter, however, offers no strong theory of urban genesis like Blanton's narratively exciting account of a Oaxacan version of “political synoecism” (discussed last chapter) wherein participants in a “regional military alliance” collaborate in the creation of a “disembedded capital;”<sup>62</sup> nor does he enjoin anything like Marcus and Flannery's

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<sup>60</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 30-31.

<sup>62</sup> See Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 37-39; Richard E. Blanton, Richard E., Stephen A. Kowalewski, Gary M. Feinman, and Jill Appel, *Ancient Mesoamerica: A Comparison of Change in Three Regions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 26; Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and Linda M. Nicholas, *Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 63; or chapter 4 in this book.

much different but equally histrionic appeal to the processes of “synoikism” (discussed next chapter) wherein, supposedly at the direction of daringly entrepreneurial leaders, “whole groups of villages left their rural settings and came together to form a city where none had previously existed.”<sup>63</sup> In stark contrast, Winter offers a much more prosaic and tentative storyline. In his considered (but none-too-satisfying) assessment, the tendency toward centralization may have been due either to “intervillage conflict” or, alternatively, to “the greater political and economic benefits of living in a large community.”<sup>64</sup> But he elaborates on neither of those two very different causal explanations and, again exercising characteristic caution, he concedes that the reasons behind this seminal shift toward more centralized settlement patterns are “unclear.”<sup>65</sup>

Be that as it may, a second Olmec-era step toward urbanism involves a movement from largely interchangeable and predominantly egalitarian villages, in which “there appear to have been no great disparities between households in economic, political, or social status,”<sup>66</sup> toward “specialization” in which respective villages began to distinguish themselves by exploiting specific local resources and focusing on the manufacture of specific goods. Most notably, at San José Mogote, unlike other villages, local craftsmen worked the native iron that is present in the ground and stream beds of the Etna Valley into small “mirrors” that were inlaid in wooden or shell frames, presumably to be worn as pendants, and then exchanged this distinctive neckware with communities as far away as Morelos and the Gulf Coast of Veracruz.<sup>67</sup> That is to say, at least some Olmec-Horizon Oaxacan villages were able both to cultivate a measure of distinctiveness and to remain very actively engaged in the broader integration of a pan-Mesoamerican trade system—a

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<sup>63</sup> Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 140. Also see chapter 6 in this book.

<sup>64</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 29-30.

<sup>65</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 29-30.

<sup>66</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 23.

<sup>67</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 30.

balance that again conforms perfectly to Winter's recurrent theme of the interplay between diversity and unity.

The third and final subdivision of the Village stage corresponds to the pre-Monte Albán eras that others term the (Middle Formative) Guadalupe and Rosario Phases, but which, consistent with his stress on Oaxacan diversification, Winter calls "Regionalization" (850-500 BCE). In this era—which immediately precedes the emergence of Monte Albán—the tendencies toward centralization and specialization intensified to an extent that some areas of Oaxaca "emerged as culturally distinct and presumably politically autonomous regions."<sup>68</sup> Though only the most notable of seven regions within Oaxaca to emerge as "culturally distinct and politically autonomous" during this era, the Valley of Oaxaca now came to encompass about 80 communities, most of which were hamlets or villages that included only about 25 residents; together that gave the valley a population of about 2,000, an estimate not much different from those that Blanton along with Flannery and Marcus provide for this stage.<sup>69</sup>

According to Winter, at this point, San José Mogote stretched its lead as the region's uniquely large and powerful community with some 500 inhabitants and presumably with "some kind of economic, political, and ceremonial control over nearby villages."<sup>70</sup> Additionally—though he studiously avoids classifying it as a city—Winter does propose that San José Mogote was probably responsible for Oaxaca's first "large civic-ceremonial buildings" as well as being the site at which the egalitarian village structure first gave way to clear signs of status differences; this emergent hierarchy was evident, for instance, in the contrast between simple wattle-and-daub houses and at least one much more elaborate residence that was presumably occupied by an elite family.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 30.

<sup>69</sup> See Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 30, and Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 112.

<sup>70</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 30.

<sup>71</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 30.

Winter makes the narratively exciting suggestion that “these status differences indicate formation of a culturally distinct local polity within the Valley of Oaxaca, foreshadowing the emergence of the urban center of Monte Albán;”<sup>72</sup> but then he relieves his account of any panache with a characteristically cautious qualification that, “More excavation is needed to determine how elite families functioned within a community at this time, and exactly what San José Mogote’s dominant role was.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, once again, instead of proposing a compelling storyline, Winter resorts to his unity-and-diversity formula to conclude that “Regionalization in the period 850-500 B.C. was counterbalanced, just as in previous periods, by interregional trade networks.”<sup>74</sup>

## **2. The Village-Stage Origins of Present-Day Oaxacan Life: Thousands of Years of Continuity**

In sum, then, with respect to the pre-urban Village stage, while Winter can be commended for his avoidance of speculation, this portion of his account provides only a slightly more satisfying profile of the ancient Oaxacans than he was able to adduce for their Lithic-stage predecessors. For instance, the material evidence does allow Winter to propose that “ritual and ceremonial activities were important aspects of village life in ancient Oaxaca,” but he is unable to ascertain anything uniquely or even distinctively Oaxacan about this era’s beliefs and practices.<sup>75</sup> To the contrary, relying for his conjecture about Village-stage “religion” primarily on two sorts of archaeological evidence—i.e., abundant ceramic figurines and domestic burial practices—Winter posits that the propitiatory concerns of these villagers were essentially identical with those

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<sup>72</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 31.

<sup>73</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 30-31.

<sup>74</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 31.

<sup>75</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 25.



present “among most peoples,” Mesoamerican or otherwise.<sup>76</sup> Still these Oaxacan protagonists are entirely generic agriculturalists.

Though it remains difficult to see anything specifically Oaxacan, or even distinctively Mesoamerican, about the bland protagonists of this portion of Winter's story, he is able get much more specific in his assertions of continuity between them and contemporary Oaxacans. Recchoing John Paddock's observations about the very strong parallels between the archaeological record and present-day native communities, Winter alludes to at least five related aspects of contemporary Oaxaca life that, he thinks, were in place already in the Village stage: First, increasingly elaborate burial practices suggest that still-cherished investments in ancestor worship, together with involved beliefs about life after death, were already taking hold.<sup>77</sup> Second, the configuration of distinct villages contributed to the diversification of languages that remains in Oaxaca. Third, that already “each village had a distinct identity,” suggests that then—as now—the identity of the greatest consequence was not an ethnic or regional belonging, but instead one's connection to a specific village.<sup>78</sup> Fourth, while the emergence of agriculture seemingly provided greater security, it also insured that “much of daily life revolved around obtaining and preparing food,” precisely as it does today.<sup>79</sup> And fifth, Winter sees strong continuity between the numerous domestic practices and technologies—e.g., cooking vessels and the clay griddles used to bake tortillas—that emerged in this period but remain very much the same as those currently in use.<sup>80</sup>

In short, by accentuating the abundant aspects of Oaxacan life that both emerge millennia before there is any activity at Monte Albán and persist for centuries after the

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<sup>76</sup> Winter, *Monte Albán: The Archaeological Record*, 25-26.

<sup>77</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 25-26.

<sup>78</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 24.

<sup>79</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 24.

<sup>80</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 24.

city's abandonment, Winter deprives the mountain capital of any special status in the origin of those enduring features. That is to say, while there may be some cache in contemporary indigenous Oaxacans claiming that they can trace many of their beliefs and practices "all the way back" to the ancient Zapotec capital, he demonstrates what a severe understatement that actually is. In this very widely-framed story, intriguingly enough, Monte Albán and the sort urban lifestyles and institutions that the great capital will generate are actually deviations from the main flow of Oaxaca culture rather than the source or headwaters of that flow.

**C. [PERIODS I AND II] THE EARLY URBAN STAGE—MONTE ALBÁN'S ORIGIN AND ASCENT: URBAN GENESIS VIA ENVIRONMENTAL APPEAL AND COMMERCIAL ACUMEN**

While Winter's four-stage narrative is (mainly) characterized by smooth transitions rather than abrupt breaks, the so-termed Urban stage—twelve centuries that he subdivides into the Early Urban (500 BCE-250 CE), which covers the periods conventionally known as Monte Albán Periods I and II, and the Late Urban (250 CE-750 CE), which corresponds to Monte Albán Periods IIIA and IIIB-IV—is by far the most highly eventful span.<sup>81</sup> This 1200-year interval encompasses the full rise, reign and decline of the Zapotec capital of Monte Albán. In other words, determined to provide "a comprehensive view of pre-Hispanic Oaxaca"<sup>82</sup> in which the acclaimed career of Monte Albán is but one component, Winter compresses the entire history of the Zapotec capital into a single chapter, albeit the longest in his book; and even then the narrative trajectory is interrupted, fragmentary and, at times, contradictory. Be that as it may, at (nearly) every opportunity, Winter will couch his comments about the specific site of Monte Albán under some more general rubric that allows him to depict the mountaintop capital

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<sup>81</sup> With respect to the correlation between Winter's four stages and the conventional five-stage division of Monte Albán's history, see the chart on Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 128.

<sup>82</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 7.

less as a special case than as the most prominent instance of patterns and processes that were present at a host of Oaxacan urban sites.

### **1. An Epochal Turning Point?: Monte Albán as Oaxaca's First, Biggest and Perhaps Only True City**

Despite prevailing efforts to depict Monte Albán as more normal than exceptional, Winter, at points, cannot help but accentuate the singularity of the mountain capital. Most notably, in a decision that constitutes one of the key differences between his and the Marcus-Flannery or Arthur Joyce versions, Winter retains the conventional view that stresses the *discontinuity* between San José Mogote, which in his view never qualified as a city, versus Monte Albán, to which he, like so many others, awards the title “the first urban center in Oaxaca.”<sup>83</sup> Stressing that the early pre-Hispanic urban centers of Oaxaca “had a special character” that “cannot be compared in magnitude to such 20<sup>th</sup> century metropoloi as Mexico City, Paris or London,” he enumerates four criteria that distinguish the “cities” of this era from the “villages” of the previous stage—and in all four respects, while San José Mogote’s status is equivocal, Monte Albán sails over the bar, as it were.<sup>84</sup>

First is the obvious criterion of population size; where Oaxaca’s village communities usually had no more than 200 inhabitants, “Monte Albán and other early urban centers grew to 2,000 or more shortly after their founding.”<sup>85</sup> Following its fast start, Monte Albán alone then grew to proportions that dwarfed San José Mogote and all other so-termed urban centers. Second is monumental architecture, which, while present to some degree at San José Mogote, also reached unrivaled new levels at the Zapotec capital. Third, in a less obvious correlation, Winter associates the emergence of cities with the development of writing, which is also most evident in the uniquely abundant

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<sup>83</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 32.

<sup>84</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 32.

<sup>85</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 32.

carved monuments at Monte Albán. And fourth, arguably the root of the other three criteria, is social stratification, the rudiments of which were present in the Village stage and at San José Mogote but which likewise emerged with unprecedented elaboration in Monte Albán.<sup>86</sup>

There is, then, some significant slippage in Winter's characterization of the sixth-century BCE emergence of Monte Albán. His larger purpose, it seems, is to depict the origins of the capital as a simply another episode in the much longer story of pre-Hispanic Oaxaca, a noteworthy circumstance but not the spectacular anomaly that we encounter in other scholarly treatments; in that respect, he provides the very antithesis to Marcus and Flannery's surmise that Monte Albán's emergence was "the least predictable event in the history of the Valley of Oaxaca."<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, Winter does assess Monte Albán's founding as a uniquely weighty event, the initial coalescence of these four conditions of urbanism, which set off a sea-change in the social and settlement patterns of the entire region wherein, "by approximately A.D. 300 urban centers were present in nearly all regions of Oaxaca."<sup>88</sup> That is to say, on the one hand, the main thrust of Winter's version of events—as one should appreciate even more in a moment—is his tendency to mitigate the uniqueness of Monte Albán by depicting it as simply the earliest, albeit grandest, among innumerable smaller but essentially similar pre-Hispanic Oaxacan cities in what became an urban-dominated context. And yet, on the other hand, at points, he drifts toward the more hyperbolic (and more conventional) depiction of the founding of the Zapotec capital as an epochal turning point—the momentous birth of Oaxaca's first true city!

In fact, at points, Winter goes so far as to suggest that Monte Albán, which he concurs would grow to a peak population of some 25,000-30,000 inhabitants, was not only much larger than any community in the Mixteca region, it was Oaxaca's sole "first-

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<sup>86</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 32.

<sup>87</sup> Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 241.

<sup>88</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 32.

level center,” and thus the only settlement that is, during any pre-Columbian era, properly deserving of the designation “city.” According to that strain of his presentation, other large communities such as Dainzii, Cerro de la Campana and Lambityeco that flourished in the separate branches of the Valley of Oaxaca during the Early Urban period—that is, settlements with from 500 to 3,000 inhabitants—were merely “second-level centers,” which “might best be called towns;”<sup>89</sup> and even the largest of the other Late Urban sites of Mitla and Yagul qualify only as “second or third-level centers.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore, if we focus on that strand of his story, the entire so-termed Urban stage—indeed the entire duration of pre-Hispanic Oaxacan history—ironically enough, had lots of “urban centers” but just one true city.

Though stressing the uniqueness of Monte Albán and the enormity of the gap between it and its nearest competitor is actually a more normal way to tell the story of ancient Oaxaca, it does undermine Winter's wider argument that the great capital is best understood as a part rather than as the pinnacle of the region's development. Careful readers will, then, simply have to live with that kink in the storyline.

## **2. An Ecological Explanation of Urban Genesis: Monte Albán's Unremarkable Origins and Predictable Ascent**

In any case, Winter's more specific account of Monte Albán's origins—a component of *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* that has received especially harsh rebukes from his critics<sup>91</sup>—is truer to his prevailing narrative strategy insofar as his story

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<sup>89</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 34.

<sup>90</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 34.

<sup>91</sup> Flannery and Marcus, “*Borrón, y Cuenta Nueva: Setting Oaxaca's Archaeological Record Straight*,” 52-60, take issue with any attempt to explain the origins of Monte Albán via its supposedly compelling environmental features—what they ridicule as the “the ‘best farm land’ theory” (p. 54)—without taking due account of the militaristic factors they regard as far more important. In their view, William Sanders and his students make this error, but they reserve their strongest criticism for what they describe

of Oaxacan urban genesis avoids any intimation that the emergence of the Zapotec capital was some extreme enigma, which therefore depended upon a convoluted convergence of exceptional personalities and circumstances. For instance, by diametrical contrast to Richard Blanton's provocative contention that Monte Albán was a "disembedded capital"—that is, a regional administrative center that had been deliberately located at a site ill-suited and unwanted either for agricultural or commercial activities<sup>92</sup>—Winter attributes both Monte Albán's site selection and its rapid ascent to what he assesses as the location's abundant utilitarian advantages. Unlike Marcus and Flannery who trace the emergence of Monte Albán to an ironic combination of aggressively deliberative leadership choices and "unintended long-term consequences,"<sup>93</sup> Winter explains the city's origins according to the very same sensible decision-making, prosaic forces and general processes that account for Oaxaca's other developments; and thus he hazards no suggestion that Monte Albán's success depended upon either specific rulers or qualities of leadership. In short, where many scholars treat Monte Albán as a great mystery, which must have been consequent of some "perfect storm" of rare personalities and/or eventualities, Winter's story makes it a much less remarkable place, which therefore requires a fairly unremarkable explanation.

Be that as it may, Winter enumerates three important (and overlapping) preconditions for Monte Albán's emergence. First, by the Rosario Phase, though San José Mogote was the only Oaxaca Valley center with sufficient economic and political control over nearby settlements to deserve special note, there was a growing population composed of some 50 small villages in the Valley of Oaxaca, and thus, apparently, increasing competition for quality land.<sup>94</sup> The second two preconditions are directly at

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as, "Easily the most amusing theory for the founding of Monte Albán [which] appears in Winter's guidebook." (p. 54)

<sup>92</sup> See Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36ff., or see the discussion of Blanton's story of Monte Albán earlier in chapter 4 of this book.

<sup>93</sup> See, for instance, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31, or see the discussion of Marcus and Flannery's story of Monte Albán in chapter 6 of this book.

<sup>94</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 34.

odds with Blanton's assessment of the mountaintop site as a "bizarre location" that was appealing, paradoxically enough, because of its absence of practical virtues.<sup>95</sup> Number two is Winter's contention that "the Monte Albán area was particularly favorable with respect to such resources as clay suitable for pottery, chert for stone tools, salt, and limestone used in preparing corn."<sup>96</sup> In his view, this enabled some residents to augment their normal crop cultivation with a craft specialization, and thus an item for trade. And, the third set of preconditions that Winter imagines—all components of which will be explicitly rejected, even ridiculed, by his critics<sup>97</sup>—likewise speaks to what he sees as the site's unique environmental attributes:

"in the center of the valley the uninhabited island of hills that later became Monte Albán offered [a] firewood, [b] space for house construction, [c] land for rainy-season cultivation, and [d] springs with water for domestic use. All of this made it an attractive place for settlement."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36.

<sup>96</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 35.

<sup>97</sup> Flannery and Marcus, "Borrón, y Cuenta Nueva: Setting Oaxaca's Archaeological Record Straight," 54-56, describe as "silliness" both Winter's enumeration of Monte Albán's supposed environmental attractions such as firewood, space for house construction, springs for water, clay suitable for pottery, etc. and his suggestion that it "was the logical place to build a market."

<sup>98</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 35. For instance, by contrast to the usual suggestion that the mountain site was completely without natural water, Winter, *ibid.*, 114, maintains that, "Natural springs in the barrancas and on the hillsides would have supplied Monte Albán's early inhabitants with water. However, these sources would have diminished as the population grew and the mountain was deforested..." Marcus C. Winter, "Exchange in Formative Highland Oaxaca," in *Trade and Exchange in Early Mesoamerica*, ed. Kenneth G. Hirth (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 208-10, provides consistent but slightly earlier views on "the conditions favorable for settlement" that led to the original site-selection of Monte Albán, though in that article he also adds that "One of the determining factors for the location of Monte Albán within the Valley of Oaxaca may have been the availability of adequate supplies of building materials. The demand for building stone for both civic and residential construction would have been substantial, and the location of Monte Albán on a hilltop rather than the valley floor may have been governed by the accessibility of rocky outcrops where materials could be readily mined." *Ibid.*, 214, note 8.

In other words, where Blanton (and nearly everyone else) stress the *unlikeliness* of Monte Albán's site selection—a stance that leads to a labyrinthine and fascinating story—Winter takes a nearly antithetical stance that the site was a completely obvious choice, which thus directs him to nothing in the way of a convoluted narrative rationale.<sup>99</sup> In Winter's view, so it seems, involved scenarios about “disembedded capitals,” multi-ethnic confederacies, visionary leadership decisions or the allure of a mountaintop “axis mundi” are, in very large part, superfluous solutions to a mystery that does not exist. Again then—and keep in mind that I am, for now, leaving aside the very large question of historical accuracy—Winter is, for better or worse, providing us a story in which neither the protagonists nor their decision-making is in any way remarkable.

### **3. The Priority of Commerce over Warfare: Kinder, Gentler and Strictly Homegrown Oaxacan Founders**

Moreover, though Winter affirms the standard notion that the site had been wholly uninhabited prior to 500 BCE—and though he is in agreement with Blanton, Marcus, Flannery and others that religion *per se* played no significant role either in the capital's siting nor in its early success—he dilutes the drama of Monte Albán's famously meteoric ascent from nothing to urban grandeur by suggesting that, in the initial move to the site, “one or several small communities were founded on the slopes of Monte Albán.”<sup>100</sup> That is to say, in this atypical story, Monte Albán, like nearly all urban configurations, *does* have some modest beginnings.

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<sup>99</sup> Regarding contrastive assessments of Monte Albán's mountaintop siting, it is perhaps worth noting that both John Paddock and Marcus Winter reject the stock assumption that the site selection was anomalous or “weird”—but for almost opposite reasons. Paddock, “Ancient Oaxaca in Mesoamerica,” 152-53, as noted in chapter 3, concurs that the site is highly inconvenient, but argues that such an incommodious site is fully consistent with the ancient Oaxacans' “extraordinary devotion to esthetic principles,” which stand in stark contrast to modern Western preoccupations with efficiency and expedience. Winter, by contrast, makes the case that the site actually does have a fully utilitarian appeal.

<sup>100</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 35.



With respect to the identity of the settlers-founders, Winter declines to engage the timeworn question of whether or not they qualify as “Zapotecs” but nevertheless entertains two possibilities. One suggestion is that “they were people from San José Mogote who left because of internal conflict.”<sup>101</sup> This first option, like the Marcus-Flannery and Joyce versions, identifies the founders as a highly homogeneous group from the nearby community, but is drastically different from their account insofar as, instead of the boldly strategic relocation that we will read about in the next two chapters, Winter opines that Monte Albán’s founders were disenfranchised “losers” who had been forced out of San José Mogote. The second option—wherein the founders were “villagers from Tierras Largas, Xoxocotlán, and other communities around the base of Monte Albán who may have been in conflict with villagers from San José Mogote and ETLA Valley”<sup>102</sup>—opens the very different and more interesting (and more Blanton-like) possibility that Monte Albán was founded by a somewhat heterogeneous alliance of people from numerous nearby villages. But, yet again, Winter pleads cautious uncertainty about both the settlers’ precise origin and “what mechanisms provoked their move.”<sup>103</sup> Either of his alternatives is, however, very different from those of Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal—both of whom held that outside stimuli from Olmecs, and later Mayas and then Teotihuacanos, were crucial factors in Monte Albán’s emergence and rapid ascent—insofar as Winter insists (in this respect more like his strongest critics) that the original settlers were native Oaxacans who made a short rather than long journey to the site. Winter is, then, among those for whom the origin, and indeed the entire evolution of the city, are almost completely autochthonous, homegrown Oaxacan phenomena.

Additionally, while Winter acknowledges that the mountaintop site had the advantage of being “naturally defensive,”<sup>104</sup> his synopsis diverges sharply from Marcus

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<sup>101</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 35.

<sup>102</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 35.

<sup>103</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 35.

<sup>104</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 36.

and Flannery's depiction of the Oaxaca Valley ambience in which Monte Albán emerged as a context of incessant fighting, hit-and-run raiding and viciously hardball political maneuvering. Instead, though disinclined to romanticize the ancient Oaxacans, Winter paints a much more concordant and placatory picture of their Early Urban-stage interactions by positioning trade and commerce as, by far, the most significant factors in Monte Albán's initial success. While he sees especially lucrative environmental features as the leading factors in the original site selection, he attributes the spectacular growth of the city to its unique suitability as a commercial center. Again diametrically opposed to the views of Blanton, Marcus and Flannery—all of whom are emphatic that Monte Albán's mountaintop location made it terribly incommodious as a market—Winter maintains that:

“Because of its central location, Monte Albán was the logical place to establish a market and coordinate other intercommunity activities. Specialized products—pottery, chert, salt, lime, and others—were brought to Monte Albán and made available through the market to other communities. Once the market was established, Monte Albán's growth was exponential.”<sup>105</sup>

In Winter's view, then, the rapid growth of the city, which by 100 BCE (i.e., by Monte Albán II or the mid-Early Classic period) had reached about 10,000 inhabitants, was a consequence of immigrants who came, not from far away, but from nearby villages in the Oaxaca Valley; and, he contends, moreover, that those immigrants' principal impetus for moving was economic opportunism rather than militant coercion or any sort of religious allure.<sup>106</sup> Also, since nearly all these Early Urban-stage arrivals came from

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<sup>105</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 36.

<sup>106</sup> Regarding a somewhat different way of describing the initial appeal and success of Monte Albán, in a 2001 article focused on Zapotec religion, Winter, “Religión de los *Binnigula'sa*: la evidencia arqueológica,” 66 [my translation], writes, “it is most likely that [the founding of Monte Albán] was stimulated by competition between communities in the valley and perhaps with groups outside the valley. The capital was successful because of its central and defensive location, and above all, for his ability to attract people, through three elements: [1] militarism and force, [2] trade and [3] religion.” In this version, Winter is willing to entertain the prospect that “Monte Albán itself, as a striking and centric hill, may have functioned as a sacred place before it became an urban community” (ibid, 64; my translation); and he states more definitely that, from its earliest construction, “the Main Plaza, the center of the city, was a sacred place for the

villages in the Oaxaca Valley, the make-up of the early capital was ethnically and linguistically diverse, but within narrowly (central) Oaxacan bounds, a modest admixing that nonetheless contributed to the emergence of “new forms of social and political organization and ceremonial integration.”<sup>107</sup> Therefore, unlike those various renditions that attribute much of the city's creative innovation to the exceptional diversity of peoples who were involved, in this account, neither Olmecs nor Mayas play any role whatever; and while Winter acknowledges the eventual existence of a “special relationship” between the Zapotec capital and Teotihuacan,<sup>108</sup> nor do Central Mexicans play any consequential part in the city's evolution (nor, as we'll see, in its collapse).<sup>109</sup> In that sense, Winter's (re)construction is even more “Oaxaca-centric” than Paddock's and, therefore, does not work nearly so well as Bernal's to reinforce the supposedly virtues of cultural and ethnic admixing.

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inhabitants and also for the pilgrims” (ibid., 67; my translation). Be that as it may, the presentation of this era in *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, minimizes militarism, declines comment on religion and, thereby, places the overwhelmingly emphasis on trade.

<sup>107</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 36.

<sup>108</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 63-66.

<sup>109</sup> While the streamlined version of events in *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* is notable and atypical in its avoidance of comment on the much-debated Teotihuacan influences at Monte Albán that figure large in nearly all accounts of Period IIIA, in other writings Winter affords Teotihuacan a far larger role in the Zapotec capital. This is not the place to rehearse Winter's robust changes of opinion on the matter; but note, for instance, that, by contrast to his earlier view that the Teotihuacan influence was peaceful, Marcus Winter, “Monte Alban and Teotihuacan,” in *Rutas de intercambio en Mesoamerica*, ed. Evelyn C. Rattray (México, D.F.: University Nacional Autónoma de México, 1998), 153-184, ventures the prospect of a forcible Teotihuacan conquest of Monte Albán, a view that he reiterates in numerous subsequent articles.

#### 4. Founders and Allies, not Victims: Yet Another Interpretation of the Danzante Carvings and “Conquest Slabs”

Like every commentator, Winter espouses an interpretation of the famed (and eminently flexible) Danzante figures and the “conquest slabs” on Building J that supports his respective rendition of Monte Albán’s early history. To that end, he concurs with Caso and nearly everyone else that the so-called Danzantes, albeit ill-named, belong to Period I (or the early Early Urban stage in Winter’s scheme); and he accepts the prevailing opinion that most of the 300 carved stones had originally been mounted on a single wall in the southwest corner of the Main Plaza. Likewise he reaffirms the standard judgment that, “The danzantes appear to be portraits, not abstractions.”<sup>110</sup> But then he rejects the propositions that the contorted figures variously represent dancers, sick and deformed people or ecstatic priests; and, furthermore, consistent with his incentive to minimize the role of militarism in the city’s birth and trajectory, he is even more adamant in repudiating the widely held opinion that the carvings depict humiliated and slain captives. Alternatively, according to Winter,

“A more likely interpretation is that the wall shows individuals and events related to the founding and early years of Monte Albán. In other words, the wall (and perhaps the entire platform) was a commemorative monument narrating Monte Albán’s history. To read it, one would have to reconstruct the order in which the stones were originally placed.”<sup>111</sup>

In Winter’s atypical view, then, the Danzante carvings represent the founders of Monte Albán, that is, revered human beings whose odd postures can be attributed not to torture or humiliation but instead to “artistic convention.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 52.

<sup>111</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 54.

<sup>112</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 54. Winter’s interpretation is also atypical insofar as he argues that, “The large, elaborate danzantes [dancers] are probably high-status individuals; in contrast, their smaller size and horizontal position suggest that at least some of the nadadores [swimmers] represent the general populace.” *Ibid.*, 52. Elsewhere, however—for instance in Winter, “Religión de los *Binnigula’sa*”: la evidencia arqueológica,” 68-69, and Winter, “La religión, el poder y las bases de la complejidad

On the one hand, this minority stance that the Danzantes were stylized representations of the heroes rather than the victims of Monte Albán's early successes is another component of Winter's account that is summarily rejected by this critics.<sup>113</sup> On the other hand, his rejection of the prevailing view may yet prove prescient to the extent that it finds qualified support in Javier Urcid's startlingly different but highly persuasive reassessment of the Danzantes, which also rejects the majority notion that the carvings represent tortured and slain captives whose reiterative public display was designed to intimidate would-be dissenters to the rulers of Monte Albán.<sup>114</sup> Be that as may, it is more relevant to the present discussion to observe how Winter's interpretation of the famous carved stone definitely does serve his synoptic (re)construction, firstly, because it attenuates the importance of militarism. Moreover, and perhaps even more importantly, this interpretive take allows him to (re)position one of Monte Albán's signature features not as unique, but instead as a leading example of a much wider Oaxacan tradition of graphic representation. That is to say, Winter concedes that the huge display of Danzante

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social en Oaxaca Prehispánica," 508-9—he does entertain the more widely shared possibilities that the Main Plaza, in addition to functioning as a market and mass meeting area, also, at least in its southern portion, served as “an area for the commemoration of military success,” and, moreover, that at least some the so-termed Danzante figures do, after all, probably represent sacrificed captives.

<sup>113</sup> Regarding Winter's posit that the Danzantes represent “the founders of Monte Albán,” Flannery and Marcus, “*Borrón, y Cuenta Nueva: Setting Oaxaca's Archaeological Record Straight*,” 59-60, who share the view that the Danzantes represent slain or sacrificed captive, object that, “Winter does not provide us with a hypothesis as to why the occupants of Monte Albán (in contrast to other Mesoamerica people) would depict their revered founding fathers in the nude...;” and then they provide a mocking suggestion as to what such a hypothesis might require.

<sup>114</sup> The startling and persuasive reinterpretation of the Danzante figures (or orthostats) presented by Javier Urcid, “Los oráculos y la guerra: el papel de la narrativas pictóricas en el desarrollo temprano de Monte Albán (500 a.C.-200 d.C.),” in *Monte Albán en la encrucijada regional y disciplinaria: Memoria de la Quinta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, eds. Nelly M. Robles Garcíá and Angel Iván Rivera Guzmán (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2011), 163-237, is far more throughgoing than Winter is able to provide in his little guidebook. And while they are very different insofar as Urcid's continues to accentuate the priority of warfare, Winter and Urcid are alike in rejecting the prevailing view that the carved figures represent slain captives.

carvings was a singular case insofar as “This was the first time in Oaxaca, or anywhere in Mesoamerica, that an entire gallery of human portraits was produced,”<sup>115</sup> and it was arguably the earliest and maybe the only such display on that enormous scale.<sup>116</sup> But Winter’s special emphasis is to demonstrate that these famed carvings are less than unique—and more typically Oaxacan—both by pointing out (what he sees as) similar carvings at other roughly contemporaneous Oaxacan sites, notably the Ballplayer carvings at Dainzú,<sup>117</sup> and by arguing that the Danzante Wall’s means of graphically depicting a narrative history, complete with time, place, actors and events, was actually “analogous to the cloth and animal-skin codices of later times.”<sup>118</sup> In that way, if not very persuasively, Winter is able to reinforce again his recurrent diversity-and-unity theme by acknowledging the singularity of Monte Albán, but also underscoring the participation of the city’s public monuments in wider pan-Oaxacan artistic and cultural conventions.

By the same token with respect to the so-termed conquest slabs on Building J, Winter is willing, with some qualification, to accept the usual assignment of this structure to Period II (in his scheme, later Early Urban); but, predictably, he takes issue with Caso’s still widely shared view that the some 40 carved panels represent places conquered by Monte Albán.<sup>119</sup> Though providing no well developed correlation between his interpretation of the stone carvings and his comments about the forces and events that led to Monte Albán’s prosperity in this early era, Winter does reinforce his stance that commercial acumen was far more important than military aggression by arguing that,

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<sup>115</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 54.

<sup>116</sup> Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 129-30, 153-54, for instance, point to earlier precedents for Monte Albán’s Danzante Wall at San José Mogote, specifically Monument 3, which, though not a wall-sized display on the scale of Monte Albán’s, is an observation that would actually help Winter to make his case about the Danzante Wall as a component of a wider tradition of graphic representation.

<sup>117</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 55.

<sup>118</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 52-53.

<sup>119</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 54.

“the Building J slabs commemorate towns that played important roles as allies rather than as enemies in the early history of Monte Albán.”<sup>120</sup> Moreover, he observes that “an interesting similarity is that both the Danzantes Wall and Building J incorporate *multiple* representations, that is, there are numerous carvings and they show many different people (danzantes) or communities (Building J Slabs).”<sup>121</sup> By contrast, he contends that most of the carved stones of later periods depict *single* individuals or events, a discrepancy that leads him to the uncharacteristic speculation that, “The multiplicity of Early Urban stage stone monuments [at Monte Albán] may reflect a pluralistic, open government.”<sup>122</sup>

This atypic interpretive flourish reverses the more widely held view that, over time, as Monte Albán became more secure, its rulers relied less, not more, on force and totalitarian control than they had in the city's earliest years; but this is not the sort of conjecture on which Winter will elaborate nor even insist. Instead, he is more concerned to demonstrate that the Building J reliefs, like the Danzante carvings, conform to rather than deviate from wider Oaxacan conventions; and thus he juxtaposes his brief discussions of the Monte Albán stones with examples of Early Urban-stage carved stones not only elsewhere in the central valley but also in the Mixteca Alta.<sup>123</sup> Invariably, for Winter, it is Monte Albán's normalness rather than its specialness that is most deserving of note.

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<sup>120</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 54.

<sup>121</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 55; italics added.

<sup>122</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 55.

<sup>123</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 55-56. Note, however, that on the topic of the Building J reliefs, as with respect to the militaristic uses of the Main Plaza and Danzante imagery, Winter's 2001 article, “Religión de los *Binnigula'sa*: la evidencia arqueológica,” 69 [my translation], likewise shows greater willingness to entertain the standard position that, “the nearly 60 engravings on the carved slabs of the building represent places conquered or subjugated by Monte Albán...”

**D. [PERIODS IIIA AND IIIB-IV] THE LATE URBAN STAGE—MONTE ALBÁN'S PEAK AND DECLINE: FROM TRADING RELATIONSHIPS TO TRIBUTE DEMANDS, THEN COLLAPSE**

Winter's succinct treatment of Monte Albán's climax and collapse provide more occasions to accentuate the same general themes. Though never providing a sustained chronological storyline, his intermittent comments on the transition from what he terms "Early Urban times" to "Late Urban times" at Monte Albán concur with the standard view that "Period IIIb-IV (A.D. 500-750) saw a great flourishing of Zapotec art, symbols, and writing;"<sup>124</sup> yet, as in the rest of his account, Winter's special concern is to paint this as a Oaxacan "fluorescence" that includes—but is not limited to—the great mountaintop capital. In his synthesis, Early Urban Monte Albán, which had enjoyed unrivaled dominance in the region, during the Late Urban stage remained the principal city and its population expanded to 25,000, roughly 25% of the central valley's entire population. Surprising however, the great capital's relative control actually decreased inasmuch as "some of the second-level centers (Huijazoo, Lambityeco, and others) may have competed with Monte Albán for political power, maintaining some degree of economic independence."<sup>125</sup> In other words, where, in many versions of the story, a ferocious young Monte Albán claws its way to a more secure and thus less violent Classic-era prime, Winter's account reverses that by attributing Monte Albán's initial (Early Urban) surge of growth and prosperity far more to skill in commerce than to military coercion, but then depicts the Late Urban Oaxacan world as increasingly violent and competitive.

That is to say, in Winter's (re)construction—in which access to basic resources is always the preeminent motivating factor—"Early Urban society in Oaxaca was flexible,

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<sup>124</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 59. Note, by the way, that Winter's reliance on the terms "Early Urban times" and "Late Urban times" bears almost no relationship to the distinction between "(theocratic) Early Urbanism" versus "(militaristic) Late Urbanism" on which Paddock relies so heavily. See Paddock, "Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica," 112, or chapter 3 in this book.

<sup>125</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 63.



dynamic, and open,” in large part because modest-sized populations had relatively easy access to such necessities as land, water, firewood, building materials, wild plants and wild animals.<sup>126</sup> Growing urban populations, however, meant much greater competition for those basic resources and thus resulted in a host of socio-economic changes, perhaps most significantly, “the implementation of a tribute system in which dependent communities were required to contribute goods and services to the urban centers.”<sup>127</sup>

Reechoing, albeit in a highly attenuated way, something akin to the “central place theory” to which Blanton appealed,<sup>128</sup> Winter thus describes a pan-Oaxacan transition toward ever-greater urban centralization, which he believes took place not only in the Valley of Oaxaca but also in the Mixteca and “probably elsewhere” in the region.<sup>129</sup> Though, for him, the root motivation is invariably “the formalization and regularization of use and ownership of resources,” Winter continues to position commerce (broadly speaking) not warfare as the primary factor in the increasing consolidation of Oaxacan populations; but he also describes a shift from the voluntaristic trade of the Early Urban stage to a coerced tribute that became firmly established by Late Urban times.<sup>130</sup> In his description, this tribute system, which has the air of a kind of region-wide protection racket from which virtually no Oaxacan community could escape participation, smaller villages were compelled to contribute goods and services to larger urban centers—especially Monte Albán—in exchange for “protection and the right to participate in the markets and ceremonies at the urban centers.”<sup>131</sup> Attempts at non-compliance with this

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<sup>126</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 41.

<sup>127</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 41.

<sup>128</sup> On Richard Blanton's utilization of so-termed central place theory, see Blanton, *Monte Albán*, xxviii; Richard E. Blanton, “Anthropological Studies of Cities,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976), 252ff; or the discussion of Blanton's story of Monte Albán in chapter 4.

<sup>129</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 41.

<sup>130</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 41.

<sup>131</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 41.

tribute network led to conflict and the use of force, which had the eventual effect of transforming a formerly flexible Early Urban society into a more formalized, rigid, hierarchical and violence-prone Late Urban world in which essentially everyone in Oaxaca lived under the influence of a constellation of large and small urban centers. But still, the root cause for conflict was competition for resources not, as Marcus and Flannery maintain, self-aggrandizing leaders.

### **1. Demoting Monte Albán from Special to Normal: The Zapotec Capital's Participation in Wider Oaxacan and Mesoamerican Patterns**

Describing this gradual but hugely consequential transformation toward urban centralization as a pan-Oaxacan phenomenon allows Winter to remove the pretense of uniqueness from nearly every one of the usual diagnostics of Monte Albán's (Period IIIB) zenith as a capital city. For instance, with respect to increasingly hierarchical social structures, Winter marshals the abundant archaeological evidence of three different kinds of Late Urban residences at Monte Albán, each featuring more substantial construction materials and increasingly elaborate means of burial, as featured evidence that, by this era, there were at least three distinct social classes—not just here, but in all of Oaxaca's urban centers.<sup>132</sup> And with respect to Late Urban politics and economics, Winter implies that Monte Albán exercised the greatest measure of control and extracted tribute from the widest range, but, in yet another head-on contrast to Marcus and Flannery's interpretation, he counters their view by arguing that “evidence for what some have described as a militaristic, imperial state is flimsy at best.”<sup>133</sup> In other words, Winter concedes that, beginning in the Early Urban stage and increasingly in the Late Urban, Monte Albán-based Zapotecs did venture out and “colonize” numerous sites in the Valley of Oaxaca and surrounding mountains; but, continuing to position commerce ahead of militarism, his succinct discussion suggests that these outlying communities were more trading partners, or perhaps tributaries, than actual subordinate satellites of the capital

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<sup>132</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 41.

<sup>133</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 63.

city.<sup>134</sup> In his view, “political organization at Monte Albán in Period IIIb-IV was indeed fragile.”<sup>135</sup> That is to say, he thinks that Monte Albán, even at its apex, had a wider but not fundamentally different or stronger sphere of politico-economic influence than that of other Late Urban Oaxacan urban centers.

Likewise, Winter inventories all of the outstanding architectural features of Monte Albán's florescent period—e.g., the layout of its Main Plaza, the building materials and construction techniques, the free-standing platforms, arrowhead-shaped buildings, temples, patio and altar configurations, ballcourts and water control system—and then, in every instance, he juxtaposes Monte Albán's famous forms with less spectacular and lesser known, but essentially similar, parallels from numerous smaller Late Urban Oaxacan cities.<sup>136</sup> Even with respect to his discussions of symbols, writing and religion, though in these cases he is more willing to limit the scope of his generalizations from all of Oaxaca to “the Zapotec area,” that is, the Valley of Oaxaca and surrounding mountains, Winter nonetheless invariably assesses the glyphs and carvings of Monte Albán, not as revealing special cases, but as examples of more widely circulated means of depicting history and power.<sup>137</sup> He notes, for instance, that while the city's Early Urban art and writing were communal and public—as in the cases of the Danzante Wall or carved slabs on Building J, which were on display for all to see—in Late Urban times, elaborate carvings were found only in the private residences and tombs of the Zapotec elite, who presumably “monopolized use of symbols and products of artistic craftsmen;”<sup>138</sup> he, however, then correlates that shift not to the specific history of Monte Albán, but rather to a wider changeover throughout the whole Zapotec region. By the same token, his comments respectively on stuccoed sculptures, carved stone door jambs,

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<sup>134</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 63.

<sup>135</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 70.

<sup>136</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 42-48.

<sup>137</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 48-49.

<sup>138</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 59.

painted murals and carved stone slabs—again in every case—subsume the specific site of Monte Albán within the wider evolution of the Zapotec area.<sup>139</sup> In other words, again and again he demotes the celebrated features of the Zapotec capital to the most prominent exemplifications of some broader Oaxacan pattern or tendency.

In sum, then, Winter's discussion of Late Urban centralization and tribute largely deflates the uniqueness of Monte Albán in any respect other than sheer size—knocking the region's trophy-piece off its pedestal, if you will—and thereby provides him one more occasion to reaffirm his perennial proposition about Oaxacan diversity and unity, actually (if unsystematically) at three levels. At the smallest scale, the respective villages within the orbit of an urban center—say, those communities within Monte Albán's orbit—each retain some distinctive independence, but also garner a measure of unity via their shared relations with the central city. Second, at a mid-level—that is, at the scale of the full Oaxaca area—the intensified “regionalization” of the Late Urban stage issued in nine distinctive sub-regions, each of which has its own local centers, so that, on the one hand, Monte Albán was the “local center” of a somewhat autonomous Zapotec sub-region;<sup>140</sup> but, on the other hand, via its involvements in interregional trade and political alliances, the Monte Albán-dominated Zapotec sub-region also participated in the wider cultural unity of the Oaxaca region.<sup>141</sup>

And, furthermore, at a third and largest scale, Winter acknowledges not only Oaxaca's coalescence as a distinct region within Mesoamerica during the Late Urban stage, but also the “interregional interaction” whereby Monte Albán and Oaxaca continued to be active participants in the wider cultural area of Mesoamerica writ

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<sup>139</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 60-61.

<sup>140</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 62.

<sup>141</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 62.

large.<sup>142</sup> In this era, then, his by-now formulaic phrase—“the two processes of diversity and unity were in play”<sup>143</sup>—actually applies at three different levels.

## **2. Monte Albán's Collapse: Exhausting Natural Resources and Overextending Tribute Demands, or Maybe Not**

Finally, with respect to the irrepressible question of Monte Albán's demise, which in Winter's scheme corresponds to the end of the twelve-century Urban Age (about 750 CE), his comments, though even more elliptical and tentative, reassert yet again that the great city Zapotec capital's career was just one prominent chapter of a much wider and longer Oaxacan drama. Having argued that the availability of natural resources and the dynamics of commerce and tribute were crucial in Monte Albán's initial site selection and subsequent rise to prominence, Winter suspects that these same two factors were critical in the city's decline. First, on the matter of resources, he argues that while the mountain site's original appeal had been based largely on its combination of lucrative environmental features—specifically, abundant firewood, water from hillside springs and nearby alluvial farmland—several hundred years of heavy habitation in the area had decimated all of those positive attributes.<sup>144</sup> Accordingly, with respect to the second key factor, to compensate for these local scarcities, Monte Albán had stretched—or actually over-stretched—its tribute demands on outlying communities; but because, in Winter's assessment, the Zapotec capital never was a military powerhouse, it lacked the martial wherewithal to enforce its increasing demands on increasingly recalcitrant tributary communities. Consequently and predictably, sometime in the eighth century, “the system collapsed.”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 63-66. Not surprisingly, Winter, in this book, conjectures that the special relationship between Monte Albán and Teotihuacan was based on trade, specifically of obsidian, which was produced at the Central Mexican city but does not occur naturally in Oaxaca.

<sup>143</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 62.

<sup>144</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 70.

<sup>145</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 70.

Though that two-pronged explanation is largely consistent with his interpretation of Monte Albán's ascent, Winter cannot persuade himself to accept this scenario of decline—because it leaves unexplained why other sites in the Valley of Oaxaca, various urban centers in the Mixteca region and even Teotihuacan also collapsed at about the same time. In his view, it is essential to appreciate that the abandonment of Monte Albán corresponded with roughly contemporaneous abandonments of the Mixteca Alta city of Yucuñudahui and, in fact, essentially all of Oaxaca's urban centers.<sup>146</sup> That is to say, Winter is so adamantly committed to the notion that “Monte Albán was not an isolated case” that he feels compelled to find “some pan-regional phenomenon, probably widespread climatic change and drought, or possibly an epidemic,” that can explain the simultaneous collapses of all of these formerly-thriving urban centers.<sup>147</sup>

Consistent with his attribution of essentially all of Monte Albán's successes and problems not simply to Oaxacans, but more specifically to local Oaxaca Valley Zapotecs, Winter feels no requirement even to mention the prospect that the great capital was undone by an invasion of outsiders; in his rendition, that Mixtecs or some other foreign interlopers brought the city down is not even among the viably contending explanations. Yet, opting to the end for guardedness over hyperbole, Winter closes his brief discussion of Monte Albán's demise not with a narrative climax or cliffhanger, but with another admission of uncertainty and a concession that, “Whatever it was, any such catastrophe remains to be demonstrated.”<sup>148</sup> In sum, for better or worse, Winter's (re)construction of the great Zapotec capital ends with the same cautious indeterminacy—and the same lack of narrative verve—that it began.

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<sup>146</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 71.

<sup>147</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 70.

<sup>148</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 70.

**E. [PERIOD V] THE CITY-STATE STAGE—MONTE ALBÁN'S REVERSION TO  
IRRELEVANCE: THE PROSPECT OF UNPRECEDENTED POST-CLASSIC PROSPERITY**

Marcus Winter's intriguing account of a fourth and final pre-Hispanic era, the City-State stage (750 CE-1521)—an interval that roughly corresponds to Monte Albán Period V—is arguably the most provocative in the whole book. Here he presents the highly unexpected possibility that the ballyhooed city of Monte Albán played no role whatever in the most heavily populated, politically stable and well-organized segment in all of ancient Oaxacan history! At this point, the usually prosaic plotline takes some exciting, if improbable, turns. Especially unsuitable for what he proposes, Winter avoids the “Postclassic” label that is frequently assigned to this period, which he describes as very different from what preceded, but by no means degenerate. Indeed, his treatment of this stage—which speaks to another segment of his work that has been vigorously criticized<sup>149</sup>—comes as a heady surprise, which delivers yet another set of blows to the mountaintop capital's widely-presumed prestige as the pinnacle of the region's pre-Columbian past.

**1. The Emergence of City-States: Unprecedented Population Surges and Region-wide Political Stability**

The sequence of events that Winter proposes for the 800-year City-State stage—a scenario that is complicated and difficult to accept either historically or narratively—has two uneven and starkly different segments. The Early City-State period (i.e., 750 CE-1250 CE), termed the Liobaa Phase in more current schemes, is ill-named insofar as this 500-year stretch, which opens in the wake of Monte Albán's collapse, is marked by an

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<sup>149</sup> For criticism of Winter's depiction of the City-State Stage, see Marcus and Flannery, “Science and Science Fiction in Postclassic Oaxaca,” 196, who maintain that, while many people are confused about the era of the Classic-Postclassic transition, Winter is “one of the most confused.” As they point out (*ibid.*, 191-96), the continuing difficulty in understanding and describing this era is, among other things, part of the ongoing legacy of Caso's confusion about the status of Monte Albán Period IV, which I address in chapter 1 and elsewhere in this book. I will note in a moment where their greatest objections to Winter's depiction of this era lie.

extreme scarcity of archaeological data, and thus no sign of so-termed city-states.<sup>150</sup> Conceding his puzzlement at this huge gap, he nonetheless proffers a tentative explanation that, predictably, features ecological factors: “One possibility is that the Urban stage ended with a drastic decline in population, perhaps due to drought or agricultural failure.”<sup>151</sup>

This provisional hypothesis of a kind of oddly fallow half-millennium, which Winter fleshes out more fully in other contexts, has proven wholly unpersuasive to his critics;<sup>152</sup> and it, moreover, introduces a perplexing disjunction wherein the bizarre five-century hiatus of depopulation and stagnation is then followed by the spectacular developments of the Late City-State stage (i.e., 1250-1521), that is, the final 300 years in advance of the arrival of Spaniards, a stretch termed the Chila Phase in more current schemes. Even leaving aside the severe disagreements among archaeologists about “what really happened” during the vexing transition from Classic to Postclassic eras, the disjuncture between these two sub-stages is the portion of Winter’s (re)construction that careful readers will find most narratively implausible. Here there is a kind of “followability” glitch; as an unfolding story, it simply does not seem to make sense.

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<sup>150</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 75-76.

<sup>151</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 77.

<sup>152</sup> Winter addresses this apparent 500-year gap in the archaeological record (750 CE-1250 CE), more fully in Marcus Winter, “From Classic to Post-Classic in Pre-Hispanic Oaxaca,” in *Mesoamerica After the Decline of Teotihuacan: A.D. 700-900*, eds. Richard A. Diehl and Janet Catherine Berlo (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1989), 123-30. Marcus and Flannery, “Science and Science Fiction in Postclassic Oaxaca,” 196-98 and 201-3, though training their attention primarily on that article rather than the brief treatment of topic in his “guidebook,” are, to put it mildly, highly critical of Winter’s assertion that the seeming gap corresponds to a “mass abandonment” of the Valley of Oaxaca during that era. It is, in any case, Winter’s proposal of “a drastic decline in population” at the end of the Urban Stage rather than his ideas about a huge increase in population during the City-State Stage that has been most heavily criticized.



Be that as it, the Late City-State stage, in acute contrast to the preceding sub-stage, presents an abundance of archaeological evidence, which is made even stronger by pertinent ethnohistoric sources from the Mixtec region that were unavailable for any previous era.<sup>153</sup> Capitalizing on this unprecedented wealth of data, Winter hypothesizes both a truly stunning increase in Oaxaca's population as well as the emergence of new and very different sort of center-and-periphery arrangement, "a new political organization" wherein city-states functioned as "independent kingdoms," each with "a population of several thousand people distributed among various settlements, within a recognized territory."<sup>154</sup> As he explains,

"The term 'city-state' is used here to convey not only the idea that small cities were the principal communities, but also the existence of state-level government. By definition, a state is an autonomous political unit encompassing several communities within a well-defined territory, has centralized government, a social and political hierarchy, and the power to tax (or exact tribute from) its members."<sup>155</sup>

Winter's most secure support for this new organizational structure and veritable population boom comes from the Mixtec Alta region, where the number of archaeological sites doubled and the estimated population "more than tripled from 6,000 to 20,000;" and, consequently, roughly half of the major City-State-stage sites to which he directs attention are in that western region.<sup>156</sup> But, consistent with his aspirations to a pan-Oaxacan conspectus, he surmises that the same new state-level governmental forms and nearly the same surges in population obtained as well along the Pacific Coast and in the Valley of Oaxaca. In fact, while the site of Monte Albán itself remained entirely uninhabited, three central valley settlements—Mitla, Yagul and Zaachila—blossomed; and there was apparently a fourth smaller city-state in the Xoxocotlán area, which lies

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<sup>153</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 77-81.

<sup>154</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 71.

<sup>155</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 71.

<sup>156</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 71-72.

just a few kilometers downhill from the Great Plaza ruins of the old capital.<sup>157</sup> In his assessment, Oaxaca's population now soared to a maximum of 1.5 to 2.5 million people, "roughly three times larger than the Urban stage population."<sup>158</sup>

That is to say, while no single settlement ever again approached Monte Albán's scale, the sum total of the Oaxaca Valley's population reached vastly unprecedented heights. Furthermore, while there were occasional conflicts among these city-states, Winter observes a major shift away from the location of Urban-stage settlements on defensible hilltops to the siting of principal City-State towns in the valleys, where they were more vulnerable to attack but also nearer to major rivers and the best farmland—a realignment in settlement patterns that he contends was enabled by this era's considerably more peaceable and stable political environment.

## **2. Regularizing Monte Albán: A City but not a State, a Forerunner but not the Apex of Ancient Oaxacan History**

Though Winter's profuse assessment of these mid-sized urban centers and the final three centuries of Oaxaca's pre-Columbian social evolution describe an era in which almost nothing happens at the actual site of Monte Albán, which was by then permanently abandoned, it nevertheless raises numerous issues that are highly instructive in fleshing out the distinctiveness of his (re)construction of the Zapotec capital. Consider, for example, four points, each of which not only bears on this last stage, but likewise provides a means of summarizing some of the most salient features of Marcus Winter's "regularizing" rendition of Monte Albán's history and significance.

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<sup>157</sup> Though Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, makes a couple of references to the likelihood that it was "people living around" the nearby site of Xoxocotlán that, during the City-Stage Stage, took the greatest interest in Monte Albán—i.e., they were responsible both for Tomb 7 (see *ibid.*, 74) and for the re-use of the site as a fortress (see *ibid.*, 73)—he also provides this qualification: "The unexcavated archaeological site known as Mogotes de Bartolan is probably the best candidate in the Cuilapan-Xoxocotlán area for the principal town of a Mixtec city-state." (*Ibid.*, 95.)

<sup>158</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 71.

First, where the prevailing, seemingly inarguable opinion is that Monte Albán “has virtually all of the evidence for statehood that an archaeologist could want,”<sup>159</sup> Winter, as we’ve seen, takes the iconoclastic stance that Monte Albán at no time in its history qualified as the center of a “state” per se. Recall that, in his view, “evidence for what some have described as a militaristic, imperial state is flimsy at best...”<sup>160</sup> Alternatively, Winter postulates that, with a peak population of 25,000-30,000 residents, Monte Albán was, on the one hand, vastly larger than any of the two dozen capitals of the Oaxacan “city-states” that would emerge in its wake, settlements that, ironically enough, he fastidiously avoids terming “cities” in favor of labels such as “principal towns” or “main communities.”<sup>161</sup> By that obvious criterion of scale, Monte Albán was their clear superior. But, on the other hand, he also believes that the Zapotec capital lacked the measure of political control over a well-defined territory that is required to qualify, properly speaking, as a “state.” In other words, at its peak, Monte Albán had, in Winter’s assessment, a much wider—but also considerably looser—reach than these subsequent city-state centers; thus by the less obvious criterion of regional control, the mountain capital was actually inferior to its later and much smaller counterparts. And to imagine that Monte Albán was, in any respect, less than ancient Oaxaca’s greatest city will take most readers off guard.

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<sup>159</sup> Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 155.

<sup>160</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 63. For another discussion of the important features that distinguish “city states” from “cities,” as he uses these terms, see in Marcus Winter, “Oaxaca: panorama arqueológico,” in *Arqueología Mexicana*, vol. I, núm. 3 (agosto-septiembre 1993): 19.

<sup>161</sup> Aside from this one reference to the capitals of “city-states” as “small cities” on Winter, *Oaxaca, The Archaeological Record*, 71 (quoted above), Winter refers to those centers not as “cities” but by terms such as “principal towns” or “main communities” (e.g., *ibid.*, 71, 72), presumably to signal that none of these City-State Stage settlements reached a size nearly so large as Monte Albán (though likely they many were at least as large as numerous of the smaller Urban Stage “cities”).

Second, Winter's surprisingly generous depiction of this Late City-State stage, among other things, effectively smashes the framing of ancient Oaxaca's story according to the conventional Preclassic-Classic-Postclassic sequence, a still-common practice (at least in lay circles) that perpetuates the impression that Period IIIB Monte Albán represents the apex of a bell-curve-shaped model of the region's pre-Hispanic cultural ascent, climax and decline. Alternatively, Winter provides a much less symmetrical and more complicated picture of the Oaxaca's social evolution wherein, among numerous knots and wrinkles, there is a kind of discrepancy between a cultural, artistic and urban "florescence" (an evaluative term he would not use), which did emerge at Late Urban (i.e., Period IIIB) Monte Albán, versus by far the greatest flourishing in population and in statecrafting, that is, a kind of "political florescence," which occurred as much as 800 years later in the Late City-State stage (i.e., Period V). In this rendition, intriguingly, Oaxaca's "best" art and architecture does not, so it seems, correspond to its "best" functioning polity.

Thus, in relation to his summation of early Oaxacan history via the rubric of Lithic, Village and Urban stages, the old designations "Preclassic" (roughly 1500 BCE-200 CE) and "Classic" (roughly 200 CE-750 CE), terms that Winter wisely avoids, are *not* wholly inappropriate; for that stretch, he does describe a centuries-long cultural, intellectual and artistic ascent that peaks at Period IIIB Monte Albán. But the well-worn designation "Postclassic" (roughly 750 CE-1521)—which invariably connotes an era of cultural decline, decadence and disrepair—is an entirely unbecoming label for his depiction of Oaxaca's final pre-Hispanic stage, which, in this account, includes definitely the most well-populated and arguably the most well-organized era in the region's entire history. In this unconventional overview, even in the central valley, Period V is actually far more populous and considerably more peaceable than Period IIIB! In other words, though Winter, unlike many of his less cautious predecessors (and contemporaries), avoids qualitative rankings of Oaxaca's respective cultural accomplishments, he does raise the highly provocative and unpredicted prospect that Monte Albán was a forerunner rather than the exemplar of Oaxaca's most impressive era of general prosperity. And that too is, especially for public audiences, a quite stunning reassessment.

Third, irrespective of his (seemingly improbable) description of the City-State-stage decimation and then explosion in population—which constitutes the most decisive break in his otherwise quite smoothly evolving storyline—Winter nevertheless finds ways to again reaffirm his insistence on the juxtaposition of sameness and difference over time by arguing for substantial cultural continuity even through this era of extreme change. He acknowledges, for instance, the absolute end of some of the *elite* aspects of Monte Albán culture, notably most of the distinctive elements of Zapotec writing; but, at the same time, he argues for very strong continuity in the languages and cultural elements of *non-elites* between the previous eras (before the gap) and the Late City-State stage (after the gap and long after Monte Albán's complete abandonment).<sup>162</sup> And he even implies something like Ignacio Bernal's suggestion of a trend toward "secularization" in this era when he writes, "In a sense, the City-State stage can be seen as the reverse of the Village stage. Now, instead of all men being subject to the gods, the gods were subject to a few men;"<sup>163</sup> but he nonetheless argues for great continuity between earlier eras and City-State religious and ritual activity "at the household level," for instance, with respect to "rites involving curing and petitions for rain and fertility."<sup>164</sup> He contends, in other words, just as many others have, that unmistakable discontinuities at the upper reaches of society are matched by greater, if less easily discernable, continuity among lower social classes and domains.

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<sup>162</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 76-77.

<sup>163</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 86. Regarding Bernal's suggestions of "secularization" and "modernization" in this Postclassic era, trends that he (unlike Winter) explicitly associates with Mixtecs and their arrival in the Valley of Oaxaca, see Ignacio Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3, "Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica," volume editor, Gordon R. Willey; general editor, Robert Wauchoppe (London: University of Texas Press, 1965), 809-11, or chapter 2 of this book.

<sup>164</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 87.

### 3. From Modest Interest to No Interest: Mixtec, Aztec and Spaniard Indifference toward the Site of Monte Albán

Fourth, while Winter has to concede that Urban-stage Monte Albán was a singular phenomenon, he nonetheless describes how, during the City-State stage, the once-prized mountain reverts to complete obscurity. Ashes to ashes, as it were. Regarding the interminable problem of Mixtec involvements in this era, he references the enduring controversy wherein “One extreme viewpoint holds that there was a Mixtec invasion and conquest of the [central] valley; the other extreme denies Mixtec presence.”<sup>165</sup> Though declining to enjoin that debate in a direct way, Winter's summary suggests, on the one hand, that Mixtecs, whether conceived as invaders, trading partners or prospective tributaries, were of very little consequence in any portion of Monte Albán's history. Despite some trafficking of goods and ideas between Urban-stage Monte Albán and both the Mixtec Baja and Mixtec Alta regions,<sup>166</sup> he, as I've noted, felt no need even to mention Mixtecs as a contending factor in Monte Albán's decline. For him, the Zapotecs' demise was entirely their own doing.<sup>167</sup>

On the other hand, Winter does agree that, during the latter part of the City-State stage, Mixtecs played an unprecedentedly prominent role in the affairs of central as well as western Oaxaca.<sup>168</sup> His plotline has large numbers of Mixtecs moving into “a triangular area” that included the long-abandoned site of Monte Albán; but he also endorses the conventional view that, following the end of the Urban stage, no new

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<sup>165</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 94.

<sup>166</sup> See, for instance, Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 63.

<sup>167</sup> In Winter's view, irrespective of considerable region-wide interactions, and thus ongoing interactions between all of Oaxaca's major groups, Zapotecs alone were responsible for the origin, flourishing and fall of Monte Albán. In that sense, he reechoes—and actually amplifies—the 1928 posit of Alfonso Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas*, *Obras* reprint page number 51 (discussed in chapter 1 of this book) that Monte Albán was, from beginning to end, “a strictly Zapotec city.”

<sup>168</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 93-94.

residences were ever built at the site and no significant efforts were ever made, by Mixtecs or anyone else, to refurbish the monumental structures of the Great Plaza. And he likewise affirms, though without much enthusiasm, the standard opinion that Tomb 7 provides the most conspicuous evidence that the ruined city was, at least to some extent, revered as a “sacred place,” and thus, on occasion, was put to use as a burial ground.<sup>169</sup> But Winter sees the swank Tomb 7 as a rare exception, and, accordingly, avoids the oft-used term “necropolis,” which would seriously overstate the extent of the City-State-stage veneration for the site that he imagines.<sup>170</sup>

Alternatively, for Winter, contrary to most versions, the deeper Mixtec investment in the mountaintop site during the City-State stage—and the one that better fits with his wider characterization of this period—is the seldom discussed possibility that they appropriated the old ruins for use as a military fortress. While he paints this final pre-Hispanic stage as more politically stable and peaceful than the earlier Urban stage, he notes also that most of the valley centers were paired with nearby hilltop fortresses that “provided vantage points and would have offered temporary refuge, especially for women and children, during raids on the town.”<sup>171</sup>

Yagul and Mitla perfectly exemplify that pattern; and though that complementary pairing of a residential center and military fortress is much less evident at the ruins of Monte Albán, he contends that a wall built over the north edge of South Platform was part of the refashioning of the unkempt Great Plaza area into “an enclosed, defensive

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<sup>169</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 74. Winter, *ibid.*, 96, even exercises some skepticism about the standard assessment that the fabulous reburial accouterments can be attributed to Mixtecs.

<sup>170</sup> More consistent with prevailing views in his 2001 article, Winter, “Religión de los *Binnigula'sa*: la evidencia arqueológica,” 85, does acknowledge that the remains of “Postclassic” offerings at several places around Monte Albán signal that people continued to regard the largely abandoned mountain site with reverence even during this City-State State.

<sup>171</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 73.

area.”<sup>172</sup> This late and little remodeling project is, he thinks, evidence that “Monte Albán was apparently used as a fortress in Late City-State times, probably by people living around Xoxocotlán.”<sup>173</sup> In other words, though Winter is not one to labor over the poignancy of the situation, his version suggests a wistful contrast wherein Monte Albán’s once-grandiloquent ceremonial-commercial-residential Main Plaza was now demoted to the status of a parapet overlooking one of Oaxaca’s more modest city-states. In that case, unlike the “religious” incentive to bury elite rulers in the old city—and, in fact, more like the unsentimental repurposing of a cathedral as a warehouse—the “Postclassic” appeal of the formerly revered site was almost strictly utilitarian and militaristic.

In any event, Winter honors his commitment to provide a synthesis of ancient Oaxacan history that addresses not only the full breadth of the region but also the full duration of the pre-Columbian era by including short sections both on the mid-fifteenth century incursions of Aztecs into Oaxaca and sixteenth-century arrival of Spaniards—though, predictably, in neither case does Monte Albán even deserve a mention. In his account, both sets of invaders encountered Oaxaca during the Late City-State stage, which is to say, long after Monte Albán had ceased to exercise any significant influence or even attract any attention. Winter appeals to his own excavations in the vicinity of Oaxaca City to take issue with the standard view that Aztecs established a garrison at the site of present-day capital, but he agrees that they probably did exact tribute from Mitla and the other city-states in the Valley of Oaxaca.<sup>174</sup> He sees, however, no evidence that ruins of Monte Albán, unlike the similarly abandoned remains of Teotihuacan that the Aztecs so revered as “the City of Gods,” enjoyed any special prestige or interest.

Winter’s account furthermore suggests that, irrespective of the Aztec overlay, the City-State polity was still very much intact when Spaniards arrived in Oaxaca just a few

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<sup>172</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 73.

<sup>173</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 73.

<sup>174</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 90-92.



months after Hernán Cortés' 1521 defeat of the Aztecs at Tenochtitlán.<sup>175</sup> Indeed, he maintains that, "Oaxaca's languages and cultures were never more rich and diverse than at the time of the Conquest."<sup>176</sup> Yet, from a Spanish view, Monte Albán, unlike Cholula, whose great pyramid the Conquistadors had commandeered for their own Catholic proselytizing efforts, was not an indigenous pilgrimage site worthy of expropriation. Nor, unlike the nearby tombs of Mitla, did the mountaintop ruins attract attention as a possible treasure trove worthy of looting. In sum, according to Winter's brief (re)capitulation of these last two episodes, like most other accounts, neither the incursion of the Aztecs nor the onset of Spanish colonialism made one iota of difference with respect to the status of the dormant capital. Yes, ashes to ashes.

**V. CLOSING THOUGHTS AND NARRATIVE THEMES:  
REGULARIZING THE RAVE-INDUCING CAPITAL OF MONTE ALBÁN**

In sum then, Marcus Winter, if largely avoiding melodramatics and repeatedly interrupting his narrative flow with cautious qualifications about limited data and interpretive contingencies, nevertheless follows through with his self-imposed task of producing a small book that "tells the story of human life in Oaxaca from the time of those first arrivals to the coming of the Spaniards."<sup>177</sup> His penchant for the undramatic makes it somewhat difficult to extract more generalized "life lessons," and readers may not even be able to discern a clear sense of Monte Albán's history, which occupies only a small place in his wider synthesis of ancient Oaxaca. To craft an allegory, let alone a cosmogonic myth, is not part of this archaeologist-author's agenda. Be that as it may, as a distinctive contribution to the corpus of stories about Monte Albán, Winter's account is most outstanding—and importantly different from any other version that we consider—for the way in which it regularizes the usually rave-inducing city. That is to say, this account stands out as a genuine alternative among all of the other versions most of all

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<sup>175</sup> See Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 75.

<sup>176</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 100.

<sup>177</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 4.

because of his concerted effort to demonstrate that Monte Albán is *not* really the special or exceptional place that it is routinely considered to be.

**A. AN EPIC PLOTLINE PEOPLED BY BLAND PROTAGONISTS: NOTHING SHOCKING,  
LITTLE REMARKABLE**

Narratively speaking, Winter's wide-framing strategy presents a pronounced contrast between an epic plotline and despairingly weak character development. The 10,000-year panoramic saga of Oaxacan social evolution begins with the Pre-ceramic Lithic stage in which the whole region was populated by a handful of nomadic families, "200 to 300 people at most,"<sup>178</sup> and crescendos to a City-State-stage population that may have reached 2.5 million. This grand story arc thereby spans from opening episodes in which all of Oaxaca's material culture could have been carried under one arm to the creation, and then total collapse, of one the world's most impressive urban complexes. It is a set of circumstances that could be—as other chapters well demonstrate—recounted with great panache, swagger and élan.

Yet Winter's presentational tack is nearly the opposite. Instead of persuading audiences that what transpired in pre-Columbian Oaxaca, at Monte Albán included, was truly remarkable, or that the perpetrators of those ancient events were persons of exceptional imagination and fortitude, the initiative here, it seems, is to deliver a sober, "scientific" and entirely unsensationalizing rendition of the relevant forces and processes. Irrespective of what has to be assessed as a spectacular set of transitions and accomplishments, Winter provides us with neither a sequence of events, nor even less with protagonists, that inspire wonder or awe. In this (re)construction, in which the Late City-State-stage population surge may be the most startling episode, nothing and no one is really shocking, exotic, heroic or horrific. In fact, almost nothing that happens even qualifies as extraordinary.

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<sup>178</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 14.

Winter's characterization of the ancient Oaxacan protagonists, for instance, avoids excesses in both directions. Even when addressing the earliest activities of Lithic-stage hunters and gatherers, he steers clear of pejorative judgments that would denigrate them as "primitive," barbaric or greedy. Unlike the ingenious but wholly unscrupulous political operatives that we will meet next chapter, the pre-Hispanic Oaxacans of Winter's account have less interest in power and self-aggrandizement than material and nutritional stability. In this iteration, Monte Albán's success owes surprisingly little to warfare or personal ambition; and, though the Zapotec center comes increasingly to rely on tribute, it never qualifies as the focus of a totalitarian state or empire. Winter consistently stresses economic over more strictly political forces, and thus neither tyrannical nor benign despots make an appearance.

More notable still is Winter's unwillingness to lavish any congratulations or praise on his main actors. Unlike Caso, Bernal, Paddock and so many others who intersperse their writings about ancient Oaxacans with seemingly heartfelt celebrations of the Zapotecs' subtle artistry and ingenious feats of engineering, Winter avoids acclamation, effusive or otherwise, for anything that the pre-Hispanic Oaxacans did or made. His descriptions of their architecture, for instance, are flatly empirical, sparing any of the laudatory adjectives that accompany nearly every description of the site. He devotes one of his longer sections to pre-Hispanic Zapotec writing, but, unlike Caso, does not seize upon the complexity of that symbology as an occasion to praise the Zapotecs' ostensibly special cerebral gifts.<sup>179</sup> His discussion of Zapotec calendrics and their distinctive ways of reckoning time and of locating events in time passes up the oft-taken detour that would stress just how differently these ancient people conceived of the world than do modern Westerners.<sup>180</sup> And while his single largest addition to the second edition is a new section on "Archaeoastronomy [at Monte Albán]," he declines that perfect opportunity to commend indigenous celestial knowledge.<sup>181</sup> Even in his

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<sup>179</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 48-52.

<sup>180</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 49-52.

<sup>181</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 115-16.

numerous references to Tomb 7 and its famously exquisite contents, rather than echo the usual accolades, Winter retreats to the third-person and reports that, “Its contents *have been called* among the richest treasures of the New World...”<sup>182</sup> His sense of science, it seems, does not allow any (explicit) aesthetic judgments; and thus, for better or worse, one encounters neither condescending nor congratulatory assessments of Mesoamerica’s native peoples, pre-Columbian or contemporary.

Likewise in the realm of religion, which he considers “an elusive area of archaeological inquiry,”<sup>183</sup> we meet with no images remotely connoting “heathen savages” who might be accused of relying on religious fanaticism either to make sense of the world or to manipulate others. Winter, for instance, avoids all references to human sacrifice,<sup>184</sup> something that even Caso occasionally acknowledges and that Arthur Joyce, for instance, will afford great import in his rendition of early Monte Albán’s meteoric success; and thus Winter transfers into Oaxaca none of the stereotypical tropes of blood-obsessed Aztecs. Moreover, never once do we even hear the familiar claim that Monte Albán was a “theocracy.” Equally absent are glamorizing images of “noble savages” or mystically inclined, nature-worshipping Indians like that those that prevailed for so long in popular accounts of the Classic Mayas; Winter’s little book is not, we can guess, a

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<sup>182</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 74; italics added.

<sup>183</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 59. I commented at the outset of this chapter both on the very limited role of religion in this book and on Winter’s much fuller treatment of religion in subsequent work, perhaps most notably Winter, “La religión, el poder y las bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca Prehispánica,” in which he makes a sharp distinction between “domestic religion,” which is a constant throughout Monte Albán’s history, and “public religion,” which does not emerge at the capital until the Nisa phase (i.e., the Terminal Formative or Period II) and is largely diminished by the Peche and Xoo phases (i.e., the Late Classic or Period IIIB).

<sup>184</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: the Archaeological Record*, 88, makes the sole passing reference to human sacrifice in the whole book in the context of his discussion of City-State Stage artifacts found in Blade Cave in the Mazatec-speaking area around Huautla, which included “chert knives [that] are similar to those used by the Aztecs for performing human sacrifices, and the obsidian blades may have been used for ritual blood-letting.” Ibid., 87, also refers to “blood letting,” which is “documented archaeologically as early as the Village stage,” but not human sacrifice.

favorite among “New Age” audiences intent on retrieving the esoteric truths of an imagined pre-Columbian spirituality. Though religion is a constant (if shadowy) presence across Winter’s multi-stage account—and though he concludes that, along with their political and market functions, Monte Albán and other urban sites were the “religious centers within their respective regions”<sup>185</sup>—he invariably positions religion (however vaguely defined) as an ancillary rather than primary factor in the evolution of ancient Oaxaca.

In other words, just as Winter’s protagonists are not especially intellectually or artistically gifted, nor does he depict them as particularly preoccupied with otherworldly matters. Echoing his main critics on this point, he (implicitly) rejects any vestige of the idea that these ancients operated with a “pre-logical mentality” or an “archaic consciousness.” By stark contrast either to Paddock’s art-loving and “impractical” ancient Oaxacans<sup>186</sup> or to the preoccupation with maintaining “an ongoing relationship with the divine” that Joyce will attribute to Monte Albán’s founders,<sup>187</sup> the actors in Winter’s synthesis are, even from a modern Western perspective, eminently pragmatic and entirely normal. There is really nothing strange or, for that matter, especially appealing or worrisome about them. Instead of inspiring heroes or disquieting anti-heroes, they are, it seems, simply regular folks responding to regular life challenges.

## **B. A STORY OF STRATEGIC RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: MONTE ALBÁN AS PART AND PARCEL OF OAXACAN CULTURAL CONTINUITY**

If these founders and builders of Monte Albán were, then, not particularly ruthless, nor uncommonly smart or spiritually adept, to what does Winter attribute their successes (and failures)? In a phrase, sound resource management. People, in Oaxaca like everywhere, are, he intimates, driven most by their practical and nutritional needs.

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<sup>185</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: the Archaeological Record*, 34.

<sup>186</sup> See Paddock, “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica,” 152, or chapter 3 of this book.

<sup>187</sup> Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 63.

According to his reportage, the mountaintop site was originally selected on the merits of its proximate and abundant natural resources; the city grew and thrived because of the dynamic commercial context afforded by that constellation of environmental features; and the great Zapotec capital collapsed once those ecological assets were exhausted and overextended. Certainly lots of the details remain imperfectly known, but there is, he implies, no great mystery here, and thus no need to hypothesize exceptionally charismatic leadership or breathtaking vision. Apparently uninterested in providing an inspiring foundation myth either for Oaxacans or for the broader mestizo Mexico public, Winter presents capable but vanilla protagonists who are impressive for their (mainly) efficient management of Oaxaca's natural resources. But, aside from that, there is little else to recommend them as revered ancestors.

Irrespective of the absence of anything like the Zapotec exceptionalism that we detected in Paddock's treatment, Winter's synthesis, in a narrative sense, surprisingly enough, does most resemble that earlier overview insofar as they both accentuate the very strong continuity that runs clear through from the Village stage to present-day indigenous life in Oaxaca. Though he occasionally undermines this theme,<sup>188</sup> in the broad strokes of Winter's story, while the socio-economic patterns associated with the nomadic hunting and gathering of the early Lithic stage are *not* enduring, the emergence of agriculture and permanent village settlements, a development that Winter locates prior to 1500 BCE, brings with it a wide array of practices, technologies and thus presumably ideas that, in his words, "persisted in later times and are still present today."<sup>189</sup> Early Village-stage household arrangements, burial practices, attitudes towards the land—for instance, integrations of the yearly agricultural cycle with the human lifecycle of birth, puberty,

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<sup>188</sup> See, for instance, *Winter, Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 86, on the notable discontinuity between the Village Stage and the City-State Stage, which is, in some senses, its "reverse;" but even in there, Winter almost immediately counters with remarks that stress the continuity between the two eras "at the household level."

<sup>189</sup> *Winter, Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 20.

marriage and death—remain, as Winter repeatedly reminds us, very much intact in contemporary indigenous communities.<sup>190</sup>

Consequently, the ten-millennium sweep of this story gives readers pause to consider that urban life at Monte Albán—according to Winter, the only true city in the region's whole pre-Columbian history<sup>191</sup>—was, in an important sense, a kind of interlude or exception to the greater continuity of Oaxacan village life, which stretches out for centuries before and after the twelve-century occupation of the mountain capital. Rehearsing a familiar theme, he posits major changes in religious orientation of the elite classes during the Urban and City-State stages, but argues for overwhelming continuity among the greater populace. In that regard, Winter's account reechoes an oft-heard complaint that the infamous rubric of a "Maya Collapse," which really only applies to collapse of the great Maya cities and the infrastructure of the nobility, fails to appreciate the tremendous resilience of Formative-period, agriculture-based Maya beliefs and practices in the indigenous communities of contemporary Chiapas and Guatemala; and in that respect also, his ecology-based description of Monte Albán's collapse may deliver a familiar lesson about the inherent vulnerabilities of urban life.

Furthermore, irrespective of his much more prosaic depiction of the Oaxacan main actors, Winter, like Paddock, presents the demise of Monte Albán less as the catastrophic climax that marks the end of full-blown Zapotec civilization than as one more episode, perhaps even a felicitous corrective that eliminates elitism and returns the flow of Oaxacan life to its more normal course. That is to say, for both Winter and Paddock, the twelve-century career of Monte Albán is, despite frequent presentations to the contrary, a highly notable chapter that ought not be mistaken for the full story of

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<sup>190</sup> Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 25.

<sup>191</sup> As we've noted, Winter is frustrating inconsistent in his use of the term "city," and thus as some points (e.g., *ibid.*, 32), he makes the familiar suggestion that Monte Albán was the largest of numerous pre-Hispanic Oaxacan "cities;" but at other points (e.g., *ibid.*, 34), he makes the more intriguingly atypical assessment that Monte Albán, as the region's sole "first-level center," was also ancient Oaxaca's only "true city."

ancient Oaxaca. Consequently, they both undermine the usually-taken-for-granted assumption that Classic-era Monte Albán represents the singular pinnacle of ancient Oaxacan social history; and, in Winter's case, the supposed special prestige on the mountain capital is even more seriously mitigated by his description of a considerably more populous, peaceful and prosperous Late City-State stage that emerges in its wake.

Still, in Winter's rendition, like Paddock's, the main rhetorical thrust is less on change than on continuity—sameness over time—at least among the general population. Likewise, while he recurrently underscores Oaxaca's extreme linguistic and ethnic diversity, he is far more successful in demonstrating the unity and sameness that encompasses Zapotecs, Mixtecs and all other Oaxacan groups, including the residents of Monte Albán. He builds a case that nearly all of the great capital's celebrated art and architecture, as well as all of its social institutions and intellectual innovations, were actually permutations of forms that can be found elsewhere in Oaxaca. As a perfect exemplification of his primary organizing principle, Monte Albán is a component of the diversity, but even more assuredly a participant in the cultural unity, that has characterized Oaxaca for thousands of years. Aside from the city's unprecedentedly huge scale, it is not an anomaly, either within the region or the broader history of urban habitation. Rather than “the least predictable event” in Oaxaca's history,<sup>192</sup> the founding and even the siting of Monte Albán comport perfectly with tried and true patterns of resource management.

In final sum, by foregrounding at every turn the ramifications that Winter's synthesis has for our thinking about Monte Albán, I precisely reverse his initiative to contextualize the history of great capital within a much broader and longer story of ancient Oaxaca. Instead of imaging Monte Albán as a stupendous aberration, he provides the quintessential example of the sort of analysis in which pre-Hispanic Oaxaca was populated by very regular people who did very regular things, among them the creation of an enormous city atop a mountain in the central valley, which enjoyed a strong 1200-

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<sup>192</sup> Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 241.



year run before the very regular processes of an over-stressed ecology issued in its demise. In that sense, his little guidebook-textbook may have the character of a wet blanket that extinguishes most of the hyperbole and exoticism routinely heaped on Oaxaca's premier World Heritage Site. But, by depicting the great Zapotec capital as simply part-and-parcel of Oaxaca's wider social evolution, Marcus Winter does provide us a storiological option that is, if neither exciting nor glamorous, nonetheless decidedly different from any other contribution to our inventory of Monte Albán narratives.