CHAPTER SIX

Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus's "Actor-Centered" Story of
Oaxacan Social Evolution: Charismatic Leadership and an Illusion of Control

"What happened next was the least predictable event in the history of the Valley of Oaxaca… The great emergent novelty of 500-200 BC was urban society, something without precedent in Mesoamerica. As we have seen, however, the path taken by the founders of Monte Albán was not the only possible path to urbanism; it was the result of decisions made in the context of a specific cultural-historical setting."

Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, 1996[1]

With work of Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, we return to the esteemed lineage in Oaxaca archaeology that runs from Alfonso Caso to Ignacio Bernal and John Paddock, Flannery's teacher; and thus the threads, or better webs, that connect their renditions of ancient Oaxaca with previous (re)constructions are extensive and tangled. Though the co-authored text on which I concentrate in this chapter—Flannery and Marcus's *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley* (1996)—was produced considerably after Richard Blanton's *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (1978), Blanton was actually Flannery's student, as was Marcus, whose first area of in-depth concern was the Maya. These three are, then, less successors than largely contemporaneous colleagues and collaborators, all of whom share many opinions, including, as we've seen, their discontent with much of Marcus Winter's work.

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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.

[1] Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 241.

Acknowledging his teacher in numerous prefaces, Blanton, for instance, credits Flannery "for instructing my colleagues and me in the essentials of Oaxaca archaeology;"[2] and Flannery returns the compliment to his student-become-colleague with frequent references and appeals to Blanton's work. As noted in chapter 4, Flannery's Prehistory and Human Ecology of the Valley of Oaxaca Project, which began in 1964, provided the impetus for Blanton's Prehistoric Settlement Patterns of the Valley of Oaxaca Project, which started in 1971.[3] The two major projects were, in other words, conceived and conducted as complementary. Joyce Marcus, an archaeologist with strong interests in Maya epigraphy (and Andean studies), shifted focus to Oaxaca and braced the collaboration especially in several major ways. In 1973, she joined Flannery as co-director of the Human Ecology Project; and also, beginning in 1971, she initiated a third complementary long-running project focused on the area's carved monuments and hieroglyphs, entitled "Zapotec Monuments and Political History." By the mid 1990s, Flannery and Marcus could reminisce that,

> "All three of these projects have worked in concert for more than two decades, yielding better results through the collaboration than they could have alone. To be sure, there are occasional conflicts between various sets of data... Despite these conflicts—inevitable when multiple lines of evidence are used to attack a common research problem—all three projects described above are in agreement 90 percent of the time."[4]

Though that may be an over-generous estimate of the extent of consensus, all three have, then, worked in close collaboration in the Valley of Oaxaca since the 1970s and, as one reviewer notes, they "draw on a mutually accepted body of data, much of it acquired through their own research, and employ many of the same interpretive

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[2] Richard E. Blanton, *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (New York: Academic Press, 1978; Clinton Corners, NY: Percheron Press, 2004), "Prologue to the Percheron Press Edition," vi.

[3] Regarding the different but interrelated agendas of the two projects, see, for instance, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec* Civilization, 29.

[4] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 29.

techniques."[5] Nonetheless, for present purposes, it is Flannery and Marcus' *differences* with Blanton—differences that may qualify more as family squabbles than the sort of acrimonious exchanges they have had with Winter—that will be of greatest interest. Most of all, it will be important to appreciate that these authors are presenting an account of Monte Albán's past that is significantly different not only from Blanton's, but from any previous version.

As we engage their very original (re)construction of Oaxacan history, one set of qualifications is especially salient. Because, both independently and together, Flannery and Marcus have published so much for so long about pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, it is possible, if not always easy, to chart significant shifts and meanders in their opinions, interests and approaches to ancient Oaxacan history. Irrespective of a wealth of journal articles, even if one simply considers the three-step path marked by their jointly-edited *The Cloud People: Divergent Evolution of the Zapotec and Mixtec Civilizations* (1983), *Debating Oaxaca Archaeology* (1990), which was edited by Marcus but with major contributions by Flannery, and their co-authored *Zapotec Civilization* (1996), there are numerous instances of self-criticism and rethinking. They are among their own toughest critics. And the pattern of self-correction continues in abundant later publications as they not only respond to the emergence of new data (and to critics' reactions to their work), but, moreover, experiment with alternate theoretical frameworks and points of departure.

In that sense, the Flannery-Marcus collaborations, to their great credit, constitute something of a moving target for summary and assessment. Informed readers can often ascertain which of the two voices is dominating at various points in their jointly-written works; and Marcus also eventually produced a single-authored synthesis entitled *Monte Albán* (2008), which appeared only in its Spanish translation, that introduces some

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[5] Robert N. Zeitlin, "Two Perspectives on the Rise of Civilization in Mesoamerica's Oaxaca Valley," *Latin American Antiquity*, vol. 11, no. 1 (March 2000): 87. This is a review of Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and Linda M. Nicholas, *Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), which nonetheless devotes nearly equal attention to reviewing Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization* (1996).

significant changes.[6] Nonetheless, for present purposes—that is, a survey of storytelling about Monte Albán—I focus on the single grand synthesis that appears in their co-authored *Zapotec Civilization.*

For a minority audience familiar with the nuances of these archaeologist-authors' work, then, *Zapotec Civilization* provides an occasion to track ways in which earlier arguments and interpretations have now been recast in a flowing narrative of 10,000 years of Oaxaca social evolution; and the synthesis presents, at points, an opportunity to muse at the ingenious ways in which two scholars have together presented ideas on which they have less than perfect agreement. Instead of that fine-toothed version of intellectual history, however, I focus on the actual storyline and characters that drive the account of Monte Albán's origin and ascent that appears in this book. By stark contrast to Winter's non-narrative style and the technical tomes that have emerged from Blanton's settlement surveys (and by contrast to other works by Marcus and Flannery), *Zapotec Civilization* offers an abundance of technical detail in a work that is commended by more than one reviewer for being "written in refreshingly jargon-free language, making [the book] accessible to archaeological neophytes but full of insights for professionals."[7] Indeed, given its ample illustrations and large format, some worry that the book could be too quickly dismissed as "a coffee table adornment," not a fate that vexes either Winter's or Blanton's work.[8]

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[6] Joyce Marcus, *Monte Albán*, translated to Spanish by Lucrecia Orensanz Escofet y Adriana Santoveña (México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, Fideicomiso Historia de las Américas, 2008).

[7] Zeitlin, "Two Perspectives on the Rise of Civilization in Mesoamerica's Oaxaca Valley," 87. Robert N. Zeitlin, "Explaining Civilization," *Science*, New Series, vol. 273, no. 5279 (August 30, 1996): 1178-1179, which is a review strictly of *Zapotec Civilization*, repeats similarly approving comments about the both serious and accessible nature of the book. Also, George L. Cowgill, untitled review of Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, in *Latin American Antiquity*, vol. 8, no. 2 (June 1997): 162, similarly opines that, "The text is not highly technical and one need not be a Mesoamericanist to appreciate it; it should be intelligible to anyone with even a moderate general archaeological background, and, with certain reservations, it is a good book for students, serious undergraduates, as well as graduates."

[8] Zeitlin, "Explaining Civilization," 1178.

Moreover, where Winter's popular overview was a departure from his more technical publications and Blanton's *Monte Albán* was an early-career foundation that he would subsequently refine and reconsider for decades, *Zapotec Civilization* is a synthesis that emerges after decades of reflection and reconsideration, something more akin to a final, if still duly tentative, statement on these matters. Furthermore, as we'll see, Marcus and Flannery, for better of worse, embrace their dual role as scholar-storytellers with an ease much greater than either Winter or Blanton or, for that matter, greater than any previous commentator on the ancient Zapotec capital. Here Paul Ricoeur's themes of well-crafted "emplotment" and the composition of a "followable" narrative are fully in evidence.[9] Despite a considered decision to withhold comment on the city's decline and aftermath, they spin what is arguably the most elaborate, copious narrative (re)construction of the history of Oaxaca and Monte Albán that appears in any single work.

I. AN "ACTION THEORY" APPROACH: REIMAGINING ZAPOTECS AS RATIONAL, PRAGMATIC, SELF-SERVING "SOCIAL ACTORS"

Zapotec Civilization includes, then, among many features, a sweeping but also very detailed story of the Zapotec capital that is significantly different from any version that had preceded it. Among the other narrative options inventoried in this book, it has by far the most in common with Richard Blanton's earlier and Arthur Joyce's later renditions; and, as usual, the differences among those three—which are notable and interesting in the extreme—derive far less from debates over data than from notably different theoretical assumptions and underpinnings. As these co-authors are forthright in conceding, "All archaeologists who study the evolution of society from hunting-gathering

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[9] On the essential role of story-crafting or so-termed "emplotment," see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), vol. 1, 53; and on "followability" and "the pleasure of recognition," see Ricoeur, ibid., 49 and 149-55.

bands to archaic states do so within the framework of a theory."[10] The distinctiveness of their story of Monte Albán depends, therefore, to a significant extent, on the abundance of new information that they have, especially data concerning settlement patterns in the areas outside of Monte Albán proper, much of which they themselves collected. But the uniqueness of their plotline and protagonists depends far more on the theoretical framework and presuppositions on which they build that story.

Unlike most students of ancient Oaxaca, all of whom operate with *implicit* theories of human nature and social action, Marcus and Flannery work to be *explicit* about the theoretical perspective at work in their synthesis.[11] Over time favoring various permutations of an "ethnohistorically based sociopolitical approach,"[12] they adopt in *Zapotec Civilization* the perspective of "action theory." This is, they explain, "a theoretical framework that arose during the 1980s. It has been called 'practice theory,' 'praxis,' or 'action theory,' and it comes in several versions…"[13] While a primary interest in "social evolution" remained intact, the appeal of so-termed action theory lay especially in its apparent correction to "some of the more static and formal frameworks" of the "ecological-functionalist" archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s, that is, approaches that "seemed to leave little room for human to be more than cogs in a machine" (and approaches, by the way, for which Flannery had been among the leading advocates).[14]

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[10] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 29.

[11] See Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 29-32.

[12] Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, "Science and Science Fiction in Postclassic Oaxaca: Or 'Yes, Virginia, There is a Monte Albán IV,'" in *Debating Oaxaca Archaeology*, ed. Joyce Marcus, Anthropological Papers of the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, no. 84 (Ann Arbor: 1990), 198.

[13] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 30. The remainder of that quote reads: "We will refer to 'action theory' since the term 'praxis' sets our teeth on edge. We will also limit ourselves to the version thoughtfully described by anthropologist Sherry Ortner a decade ago. This version is significant because it has awakened in anthropologists a greater interest in history than they had previously. Anything that can awaken an interest in history should also be good for archaeology."

[14] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

Not unlike Blanton's methodological change of heart,[15] therefore, it was discontent with the prevailing cultural ecology paradigm, or what they term "environmental determinism" or "ecological-functionalist archaeology," that led Marcus and Flannery in search of alternate points of departure. Commenting critically on their own previous theoretical commitments, they explain:

> "[B]y 1990 it was clear that evolutionary anthropology (as well as archaeology) needed further rejuvenation. The most frequently heard complaint was that explanations of prehistoric change had become deterministic, relying too heavily on ecological pressures and too little on human decisions. A framework was needed that would give individual humans, or 'actors,' a greater role to play in social change. Action theory offers that kind of framework."[16]

More specifically, they embrace (sometimes with the vigor of converts) the version of action theory advocated by anthropologist Sherry Ortner, who explains that such a perspective "seeks to explain the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we may call 'the system' on the other."[17] In their own words,

> "This 'system' includes not only the natural environment in which humans find themselves, but their own culture—that set of beliefs, cosmologies, ideologies, customs, and traditions that shape their goals. It also has a prior history, whose trajectory was determined not simply by factors beyond the control of humans, but also by *decisions made of their own free will*."[18]

That is to say, from this theoretical point of departure, it is too simple to imagine that environmental and/or cultural conditions alone determine social changes. Instead,

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[15] Regarding Blanton's methodological change of heart, see the sub-section entitled "From Cultural Ecology to Central Place Theory: 'Primate Centers' versus 'Disembedded Capitals,'" in chapter 4.

[16] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 30-31.

[17] Sherry B. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984), 148; quoted by Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

[18] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31; italics added.

ecological and cultural circumstances create situations or challenges for which there are a spectrum of viable solutions, among which enterprising individuals make thoughtful and self-interested decisions concerning which of those alternatives to pursue. According to this permutation of action theory, the course of social evolution is neither predictable nor mechanist; nor does it conform to generalized "evolutionary stages." Alternatively, it is imperative to appreciate that "many changes can take place through the actor's own decisions."[19] From this view, the considered choices of "charismatic leaders" can have profound "evolutionary" consequences.

A. MEDIATING PRE-HISPANIC OAXACANS' STRANGENESS AND FAMILIARITY: THE PRACTICALITY OF "THE ANCIENT ZAPOTEC MIND"

Adopting this version of action theory as their alternate starting point—and thus determining to re-imagine the ancient Oaxacans as initiative-taking, decision-making "actors"—leads Marcus and Flannery to atypical resolutions of two very large tensions that all interpreters of the Mesoamerican past are, as I've noted, compelled to address, if usually only implicitly. First is the inevitable problem of conceiving ancient Zapotecs as a distinct and unique people, and perhaps a distinct ethnicity (as Paddock's account suggests) versus a willingness to imagine that Zapotecs were essentially a people like other peoples, with basic priorities not drastically different from those of, say, ancient Greeks, twentieth-century Asians or even present-day Americans (as Blanton's and Winter's approaches suggest).

Well aware that large risks as well benefits come with the adoption of either stance—and though, as we'll see, this is a tension that remains imperfectly resolved in their story—these authors entertain both possibilities. On the one side, in the interest of respecting the uniqueness of these ancient Oaxacans, their opening chapter has a section on "The Ancient Zapotec Mind" in which they attempt to sketch "the broad outlines of

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[19] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

the cognitive system" with which these people presumably operated.[20] These provocative 14 paragraphs, which draw on Joyce Marcus' earlier work, propose several ways in which these ancient Oaxacan actors did indeed have a culturally-specific and decidedly "non-modern" mode of thinking: "Zapotec religion was animatistic… In Zapotec cosmology, everything alive was deserving of respect… Even time was alive…"[21] We are apprised, moreover, that, in the distinctively Zapotec mental universe, "deceased rulers were thought to metamorphose into clouds… and it appears that each town was venerating its own deceased rulers—*not* a pantheon of Zapotec 'gods.'"[22] Furthermore, unlike Blanton or Winter, they do weigh in on the infamous debate about the ethnicity of builders of Monte Albán by opining that, "We believe that the occupants of the Valley of Oaxaca became recognizably 'Zapotec' sometime between 400 BC and AD 100."[23] That is to say, they (again more like Paddock) locate the emergence of a distinctive Zapotec ethnicity, and thus presumably a distinctive Zapotec outlook on the world, in the era of Monte Albán I as opposed to Caso's and Bernal's decision that nothing prior to Monte Albán III was really deserving of the label Zapotec.

Yet, on the other side, in tension with this aspiration to appreciate the cultural and "religious" specificity of the builders of Monte Albán, "modern action theory" discourages researchers from imaging that ancient peoples conducted themselves, and made their most important decisions, on the basis of priorities that would strike present-day researchers as impractical, non-rational or otherwise "weird." That strand of their argument, then, closely resembles Blanton's and even Winter's tack insofar as, from an

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[20] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 18-21. With respect to their concern for this set of issues, see also Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, "Cognitive Archaeology," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 3 (1993): 260-70; and Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, "Ancient Zapotec Ritual and Religion: An Application of the Direct Historical Approach," in *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology*, eds. Ezra B. W. Zubrow and Colin Renfrew (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 55-74.

[21] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 19.

[22] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 19.

[23] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 27.

action theory perspective, it is much more suitable to build models of the past based on the assumption that the protagonists had entirely "normal" and largely "secular" priorities. Exercising that inclination—which is by far the stronger of the two options in *Zapotec Civilization*—Marcus and Flannery argue for the benefits of approaching pre-Columbian Mesoamericans, just as one would any other human population, namely as:

> "'actors' who are conceived as essentially individualistic, self-interested, rational, and pragmatic. These actors go after what they want, and what they want are things that are materially and politically useful for them, given the cultural and historical situations in which they find themselves."[24]

In other words, action theory, among other correctives, counters the tendency—an impulse to which, in varying degrees, Caso, Paddock and countless other amateur and professional commentators have been subject—to "exoticize" ancient peoples by attributing to them some sort of "archaic consciousness," "cosmomagical mentality" or "savage mind." These action theorists are hesitant to assume that people in any context actually make impractical or self-defeating choices on the basis of what Caso termed "some religious motive."[25] Yet, where Blanton was inclined to absent any role for religion, Marcus and Flannery afford "religion" a more prominent role, though one that is invariably in the service of advancing political interests and thus (almost) never allowed to lead Zapotec rulers into choices that were socially or economically imprudent.

That is to say, instead of attributing them ethereal and otherworldly priorities, they (mainly) encourage us to imagine ancient Oaxacans, not unlike people in all cultural contexts, as pragmatic and politically motivated decision-makers whose choices, even in long hindsight, would strike contemporary readers as decidedly "normal." This version of action theory, in short, pushes us to conceive the builders of Monte Albán as familiar rather than strange.

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[24] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

[25] Alfonso Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," *National Geographic* original page 492/*Obras* reprint page 55.

B. MEDIATING INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE AND SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS: AN

    UNPRECEDENTED EMPHASIS ON PERSONAL LEADERSHIP CHOICES

       Be that as it may, Marcus and Flannery offer a similarly telling resolution to a second fundamental and unavoidable tension that arises from, to borrow Emile Durkheim's formulation, the fact that humans are, by nature, *homo duplex* insofar as all people are challenged by competing individual versus social inclinations.[26] Earlier Oaxaca archaeologists might, in principle, have concurred that specific individuals, notably dynamic rulers or military leaders, probably did play decisive roles in shaping the course of the capital's history. Caso, for instance, hoped and expected eventually to identify the individuals buried in Tomb 7;[27] and advances in the decipherment of Maya glyphs, which allowed scholars in that field to identify more and more specific rulers, fueled expectations that the same would eventually happen in the Oaxaca region. But the archaeological record alone did not reveal those identities, and thus it is not surprising that Caso's, Bernal's, Paddock's, Blanton's and Winter's respective stories of Monte Albán are almost completely absent of any reference to any specific individual.[28]

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[26] On Emile Durkheim's notion that people in all contexts are, by nature, "*homo duplex*" insofar as they are, at once, social beings and individualistic beings, and thus that the most elemental challenges of human life, therefore, entail successfully mediating the inherent inclination toward the acceptance of social mores with an often competing inclination to serve one's individualistic interests, see, for example, Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated from the French by Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1965 [originally published 1915]), 29.

[27] See, for instance, Alfonso Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969), "Prologo," 11-16.

[28] Like the others, Richard Blanton's story of Monte Albán is also notably absent of specific individuals, but he explains that omission in a different and somewhat stronger way. Again pressing his point about the atypicality of Monte Albán, Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 128, for instance, argues that, in early Monte Albán, unlike the "individual-oriented polity" characteristic of most fledging states, references to any specific leaders were deliberately avoided; and he notes (ibid.) that, even during the 400-years of Period III, the fact that only five specific rulers were named in public monuments continues to make Monte Albán something of a special case in its avoidance of references to specific rulers. In his view, then, that very few individuals have been identified at Monte Albán is a less a consequence of the shortcomings of the available data than of the fact that, just as one would expect in a "neutral" disembodied capital,

Moreover, the ecological-functional models of the 1960s and 1970, which especially accentuate the ways in which social changes arise in response to environmental conditions, tend to focus almost strictly on generalized cultural processes and group dynamics; and thus, from those theoretical perspectives, the prospect of attributing the direction of large social changes to the choices and activities of specific individuals became even less likely.

Action theory, however, entails, among other things, a reaffirmation of the role of individuals and individualistic decisions in the course of social evolution. From this view, studies of cultural contexts for which there *is* much stronger data about the activities of individual leaders reveal that group dynamics alone can seldom account for the historical development of a city or state; even the largest trajectories of social evolution owe in very significant ways to the choices and decisions of individual persons, particularly aggressive and enterprising leaders. Embracing an "actor-centered" perspective, therefore, leads Marcus and Flannery to propose a story of Monte Albán in which individual Oaxacan leaders—although still largely anonymous persons—enjoy an unprecedentedly large role. According to this view, ancient Oaxacans, again presumably like people everywhere, were not simply content to occupy their requisite positions in society; they, on occasion, asserted themselves as individuals or, in the term on which these co-authors rely so heavily, "actors."

In sum, then, certainly these pre-Hispanic Oaxacans were, in Durkheim's term, social beings who were in large ways constrained by what Ortner terms "the system;" but the much stronger and more distinctive emphasis in *Zapotec Civilization* is a serious appreciation of the possibility of non-compliance wherein "Aggressive actors... can change the system..."[29] Determined to counteract the ecological-functional tendency to reduce ancient Zapotecs either to "cogs in a machine" or to a homogeneous "biological

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there were very well-considered inhibitions against the public glorification of specific rulers, apparently because such partisan favoritism might jeopardize league unity.

[29] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

population" that reacts mechanically to environmental circumstances, Marcus and Flannery push the pendulum in the opposite direction by conceiving of those them as individualistic, self-interested "agents" who, not infrequently, made "decisions of their own free will."[30] And accordingly, they provide us with a story of Monte Albán in which the willful and independent decisions of Oaxacan individuals—charismatic leaders, if you will—play a far greater role than they had in any previous account of the city's history.

II. A GUIDING NARRATIVE THEME: ILLUSIONS OF CONTROL VIA THE PARADOX OF THOUGHTFUL DECISIONS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

The proposition that Oaxaca social evolution depends in crucial ways on the initiative of individualistic, willful Zapotec decision-makers raises one more tension, or perhaps near-paradox, that is worthy of note before turning to the particulars of Marcus and Flannery's fulsome synthesis. This intriguing incongruity, a recurrent glitch of sorts, provides, I wager, the single most important—and most poignant—guiding theme for their entire narrative. This ironic and thought-provoking leitmotif—which gives the Zapotec leader-protagonists the air of tragic Greek heroes who, though exceptionally capable leaders, very seldom succeed in their ambitions—affords their story a kind of universalistic appeal. In fact, owing to the provocative recurrence of this seeming contradiction throughout their (re)construction of Oaxacan history, a reader need not be either familiar with, or even particularly interested in, ancient Mesoamerica in order to extract a very compelling life-lesson from *Zapotec Civilization*.

A. PERSONAL INITIATIVE AND UNPREDICTED OUTCOMES: ESCAPING FROM AND ACQUIESCING TO "THE SYSTEM"

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[30] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

On one side of the paradox, while at points it looks suspiciously as though these Oaxacan protagonists have been imbued with a large dose all-American self-reliance and non-conformity to social conventions, Marcus and Flannery hold in foreground the crucial role of personal initiative throughout all episodes in their 10,000-year story; and one of their means of doing that is by consistently referring to the ancient Oaxacans as "actors." The term is both contributive to their action theory perspective but also potentially misleading. By "actors," they want to stress that these were persons who took action; these Oaxacans are the opposite of passive; were it not so grammatically ugly, "actioners" might be a more suitable term. By contrast, they most definitely do *not* want to imply that there were actors in the sense of persons who were playing roles in some "social drama;" these leaders exist within social systems against which they frequently rebel. To imagine that the builders of Monte Albán subordinated their own personal interests and creative aspirations—or perhaps forfeited their own "agency" and control— in order to follow some conventionalized social script is nearly the opposite of what these co-authors want to accentuate. Instead, they want to bring to the fore the extent to which ancient Oaxacans leaders were active, enterprising decision-makers who thus asserted their self-interest in ways that had profound ramifications for how Zapotec civilization "evolved" (though evolution no longer seems quite the right word). These ancient Oaxacan "actors" were, in a very important sense, writing their own script and making their own highly independent choices.

On the one hand, then, it would appear that this so-termed "actor-centered" perspective attributes to ancient Oaxacans a far larger share of personal initiative and control over their destiny than we had seen in any earlier story of Monte Albán; Marcus and Flannery reject with even greater vehemence than Blanton had (or Joyce will) the presumption that the emergence of the great capital can be explained in terms of biological populations responding to ecological opportunities. The generalized processes of "the system" cannot account for the specific course of Oaxacan history. Yet, on the other hand—and this is where the near-paradox arises—they insist time and again that the highly considered decisions that Zapotec actors make nearly always have "*un*intended

long-term consequences."[31] Irrespective of the cunning and astute leadership of these master tacticians, things never turn out exactly as planned; the impersonal forces of the so-termed system invariably do assert themselves. And thus accident, serendipity, happenstance, even good and bad luck, and thus both adventitious and inopportune surprises, play a huge role.

It is, in other words, an intriguing irony of this version of action theory—and therefore of this story of Monte Albán—that, on the one hand, the willful decisions of ancient Zapotecs are crucial for the way in which their society evolves; but, on the other hand, the most significant consequences of those thoughtful exercises in personal initiative are invariably ramifications that were neither intended nor expected. In fact, action theory of this sort predicts—and the Marcus-Flannery narrative will instantiate—a kind of cyclical pattern wherein deliberate and strategic decisions, presumably by the leaders of respective groups, inevitably lead to unintended outcomes and thus new challenges, which precipitate more deliberate decisions, which thus lead to more unintended consequences, and so on and so forth. That is to say, though the specific identities of these decision-making leaders never emerge from the archaeological record (a troublesome absence, to be sure), the interpretation of that record depends upon the assumption of those leaders' pragmatic and strategic manipulation of events.[32] Yet, from this action theory perspective, to restate again the recurrent paradox, those leaders' apparent control over the course of Zapotec social evolution is something of an illusion (my term not theirs) insofar as their strategic choices invariably eventuate in unforeseen—sometimes fortuitous, sometimes disastrous—results. In short, these leaders are somehow attributed both *lots more* and *considerably less* control over the course of events than we have seen in any previous story of Monte Albán.

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[31] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

[32] At this point, there is an intriguing parallel between Blanton's narrative and that of *Zapotec Civilization* insofar as the former adopts a model of "disembedded capitals" that requires an "external threat, which he thus has to assume existed in ancient Oaxaca even when he has great difficulty identifying that threat. By the same token, Marcus and Flannery adopt a model that entrepreneurial charismatic leaders, which they too must assume existed in ancient Oaxaca even though they have great difficult identifying them.

B. THE POIGNANCY OF UNPREDICTABILITY: SPECIFIC OAXACAN HISTORIES AND UNIVERSALISTIC PERPLEXITIES

A (re)construction of Oaxacan social evolution that is built on this ironic tension between strategically considered decisions and unanticipated consequences has great narrative appeal. That juxtaposition bespeaks a tension present, for instance, in numerous Native American mythologies between a creator or Earthmaker figure who makes thoughtful and concerted efforts to put the world in order only to see time and again his efforts undermined by a Trickster figure who wildly subverts and disrupts that order, reminding everyone that, ultimately, the world is incomprehensible, beyond human understanding and control.[33] As in this story of Oaxacan social evolution, the consequences of the Trickster's unpredicted and unpredictable disruptions are often disastrous, but, on occasion, those ramifications are fortuitous in the extreme, allowing people good fortune that they neither expect nor deserve. The imperfect correspondence between careful choices and their consequences in this story of Monte Albán, like a kind of challenge to the perfect regularity of karma, raises all sorts of universalistic perplexities about the trepidation and/or excitement of living in an only partially predictable universe, about personal initiative and destiny, about arrogance and humility, and so forth.

In fact, this tension between confident certainty and duly humble tentativeness appears at yet one more level insofar as, at moments, Marcus and Flannery seem to be arguing for the definitive "correctness" of their interpretations, and they seem to be persuaded that they are taking steps toward "the truth" about "what really happened" at Monte Albán. At some junctures, they seem certain that they have gotten it right. At other moments, however, they are explicit in adopting a much more modest stance of

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[33] On this tension between Earthmaker and Trickster, see, for example, Lawrence E. Sullivan, "Multiple Levels of Religious Meaning in Culture: A New Look at Winnebago Sacred Texts," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1982): 221-47, with special attention pages 227-30.

contingency wherein they are content to propose that, *if* one departs from the presuppositions of action theory (as opposed, for instance, to the presuppositions of ecological functionalism), *then* one might arrive at this version of the events and motivations that gave rise to the great city of Monte Albán.[34] In those moments, they embrace the role of storyteller that many archaeologists hope to avoid. Whether such qualifications are candid disclosures or maybe preemptory strikes at their critics, adopting that hypothetical tone—together with the adoption of the guiding paradox of highly calculated decision-making that always has unanticipated ramifications—allows Marcus and Flannery to craft a story of Monte Albán that is both original and highly evocative even for readers who do not share the authors' interest in ancient Oaxaca.

III. THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS:
KENT FLANNERY AND JOYCE MARCUS'S HISTORICAL (RE)CONSTRUCTION

We turn now to Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus's more specific version of events, which, tellingly, requires the longest of my seven summaries of Monte Albán's emergence and history.

A. THE FORMATIVE, PRE-URBAN ERA: OAXACA IN ADVANCE OF MONTE ALBÁN

The Monte Albán narrative that emerges from *Zapotec Civilization* is new and different largely because of the unique presuppositions that action theory entails. But this version also departs from those of Caso, Bernal and Paddock (and has much in common with that of Blanton) because of its alternate framing, both in terms of space and time. Regarding space, on the one hand, like Blanton, Flannery and Marcus widen the geographical frame insofar as it is the broader Valley of Oaxaca rather than the site of Monte Albán per se that interests them, although analyzing that wider region was really

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[34] For instance, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 171, in their summary paragraph on Monte Albán I, make explicit that reliance on an ecological functionalist perspective *could* lead to one set of conclusions about Monte Albán's earliest phase while reliance on action theory *could* lead to an alternative set of conclusions.

the aspiration of all these scholars. On the other hand, Marcus and Flannery, actually narrow the geographical setting of the story insofar as they, unlike Caso and Bernal, share Blanton's opinion that neither people from the Gulf Coast region nor the Maya zone played a crucial role in any chapter of the Monte Albán story; and even the Teotihuacan influence, while granted a larger role, is depicted as non-coercive and indirect. Thus pan-Mesoamerican dynamics, perhaps surprisingly, have a lesser (not greater) part in this story than they had in older versions. Also strikingly different, *Zapotec Civilization* (again like Blanton's *Monte Albán*) has almost nothing to say about the Mixteca region, that is, the homeland of the Mixtecs, who had figured so large in the renditions of each Caso, Bernal and Paddock.[35] Theirs is, then, unlike Winter's attempt to treat the whole of the Oaxaca region, primarily a story of the three-armed Valley of Oaxaca.

Likewise, regarding the temporal frame of their story, Marcus and Flannery shift the context forward so that, on the one hand, as we will see momentarily, they deliver an unprecedentedly rich account of the centuries *in advance* of Monte Albán's emergence. Where Caso and Bernal both lament the absence of data for earlier periods, and thus are consigned to accounts begin sometime about 500 BCE (i.e., with the beginning of Monte Albán I), they, like Blanton and all later scholars, have at their disposal a raft of newer data on prehistorical settlement patterns, much of it deriving from their own work, which allows them to craft a narrative of Oaxaca social evolution that has roots all the way back

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[35] There are two related reasons why Marcus and Flannery (like Blanton) tell a story of Monte Albán that scarcely mentions the Mixtecs. First, despite venturing a strong opinion that "the occupants of the Valley of Oaxaca became recognizably "Zapotec" sometime between 400 BC and AD 100," Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 27, explicitly shift their emphasis away from inquiries into "ethnogenesis," that is, attempts to ascertain that point in an archaeological record when an ethnic group (e.g., the Zapotecs or Mixtecs) first becomes recognizable, and toward the study of Oaxacan "social evolution." As a consequence, they do not share Caso's and then Bernal's and Paddock's intense interest in the identifying the historical relationship between the Zapotecs and the Mixtecs. For two, because they opt in this book to focus on the emergence and ascent to dominance of Monte Albán (i.e., Periods I, II and III), but largely forego comment on the city's decline and demise (i.e., Periods IV and V), the story simply ends prior to the era in which Mixtecs seem to have become a strong factor in the Valley of Oaxaca.

into the Late Pliestocene or Ice Age.[36] Thus their story of Monte Albán begins, in a
sense, with the ancestors of the American Indians crossing the Bering Strait into the New
World, perhaps 15,000 to 20,000 BCE.[37] On the other hand—and this is a major
limitation—following their richly textured treatment of this very long prelude to Monte
Albán, and then similarly elaborate accounts of the city's origin and climb to dominance
in the Valley of Oaxaca, their story comes to an abrupt halt. In other words, with respect
to the much-debated eras of decline usually designated as Monte Albán IV and V, they
explain, "So complex is the later history of Oaxaca that this is a good place to end our
discussion."[38]

Though that decision is disappointing in a narrative sense, Joyce Marcus' single-
authored *Monte Albán*, which does address those later periods,[39] confirms these authors'
confidence that the same action theory propositions on which they reply to explain Monte
Albán's ascent provide a means of accounting as well for the capital's demise. And as
we'll see, even *Zapotec Civilization* provides abundant clues for an actor-centered
account of the city's collapse and aftermath.

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[36] Recall that Paddock, "Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica," 88-91, has comments on
"Early Man in Oaxaca" in advance of Monte Albán I, but the thinness of that section
shows just how little information on the topic was available prior the settlement surveys
of Flannery and Blanton.

[37] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 41ff. Also see Kent V. Flannery, Joyce
Marcus, and Stephen Kowalewski, "The Preceramic and Formative in the Valley of
Oaxaca," in *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 1,
"Archaeology," volume editor, Jeremy Sabloff; general editor, Victoria Bricker (Austin:
University of Texas Press, 1981): 48-93.

[38] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 244.

[39] Marcus, *Monte Albán*, chaps. 8-9.

1. Long Before Monte Albán: Early Oaxacan Social Evolution via Deliberate Decisions and Unintended Consequences

While the site of Monte Albán plays no special role in the first 9000 years of Oaxacan social evolution, Marcus and Flannery's account of the innumerous episodes that lead eventually to the great city provides them an opportunity to illustrate that recurrent pattern wherein—just as action theory would predict—thoughtful, strategic and self-interested decisions by the leaders of respective groups inevitably result in unintended consequences, and thus new challenges that will require more strategic choices. Over and over the pattern is the same. For instance, they explain that, during the last Ice Age, the first people to reach Oaxaca, descendants of peoples who had entered the New World via the Bering Strait several centuries earlier, lived by hunting wild game and collecting wild plants.[40] Though these "prehistoric actors" had several options open to them, "They had chosen to deal with risk at a group level, escaping drought through a strategy of high mobility."[41] Widely dispersed for most of the year, they also chose, on occasion, to come together for larger communal hunts, a practice that led to both the desired outcome of harvesting more game, but also the unanticipated consequence of challenging these ensembles to develop the rudimentary social institutions that would facilitate the sharing of food. That is to say, already in the late Ice Age, the characteristic cycle of thoughtful choices and unpredicted ramifications had begun.

By 8000 BCE, in the so-termed Archaic period, the climate had warmed, which created new environmental conditions—including the oscillation of dry winters and rainy summers that continues to organize life in the Valley of Oaxaca—which again presented

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[40] On the late Ice Age in the Valley of Oaxaca, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 3, especially pages 42-43, and his summary comments on page 236.

[41] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 236.

not one but several plausible strategies for survival.[42] In this case, the ancient Oaxacan actors' chosen "strategy against risk" was a pattern wherein, during lean times of year, they hunted and gathered as small family groups and then, during times of abundance, "they came together at larger camps where the risk was shared by the group."[43] Albeit a deliberate decision to follow such a strategy, each half of that rotational pattern had unintended consequences that would persist into subsequent, more settled village life: The roving portion of the year established an enduring precedent wherein "the family was the basic unit of harvest and storage;"[44] and the larger seasonal camps, which invariably had an area set aside to be used as "ritual space," established a pattern wherein many social and ceremonial functions were deferred until that time of year.

Over the millennia of the Archaic era (roughly 8000-2000 BCE), this seasonal rotation between foraging as families during part of the year and then, in times of greater abundance, coming together to form larger groups was perfected with ever greater effectiveness. Eventually, however, Oaxacans made a strategic choice that would have huge and irreversible repercussions. Enterprising and self-interested leaders decided to augment the availability of certain plants—first gourds, squash and pumpkins, and later beans and the most impactful of all, early species of maize—by planting them near their camps.[45] In yet another perfect demonstration of the cycle of deliberate choices and largely accidental outcomes, the momentous ramifications of this creative initiative— namely, the emergence of agriculture in the Valley of Oaxaca—could not possibly have been anticipated by the enterprising individuals that put them in motion. As Marcus and Flannery explain: "Eventually agriculture became an almost irreversible process since

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[42] On the so-termed Archaic period (8000-2000 BCE) in the Valley of Oaxaca, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 4 and their summary comments on ibid., 236-37.

[43] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 237.

[44] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 237.

[45] On the emergence of agriculture in the Valley of Oaxaca, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 5. They discuss the controversy over the absolute dates for the beginnings of agriculture on ibid., 68.

the newly created domestic races [of plants] could not survive without human assistance, and the humans in turn were beginning to rely more and more on the domestic races."[46]

The considered decision to cultivate plants carried with it, in other words, a surfeit of both fringe benefits and unanticipated burdens.[47] Upon discovering the advantages of planting a substantial portion of one's food, formerly semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers now embraced the option of living year-round in villages, and "by 1700-1200 BC the occupants of the Valley of Oaxaca were living in larger settlements than ever before."[48] Opting to make maize farming their most important economic activity thereby changed both settlement patterns and social institutions forever.[49] Instead of seasonal aggregations of families, ancient Oaxacans were now living permanently in larger groups, some with as many as 50-100 persons. This arrangement, of course, led to major technical improvements in the means of planting, weeding, harvesting and storing food; but Marcus and Flannery point also to three more indirect and less calculated challenges.[50] First, village life resulted in substantial declines in infant mortality rates and shorter spacing between births, which led to significantly increasing populations. Second, where disputes between semi-nomadic families could have been resolved simply by parting company, life in permanent settlements required developing more involved means of resolving conflicts, which required the creation of new social institutions. And third, because only about 10% of the valley had the ecological conditions suitable for these early agricultural techniques, groups had to develop techniques to compete for and protect the best farming land, which likewise led to previously unknown social and perhaps military configurations. In short, the shift toward agriculture, one of the seminal

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[46] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 66.

[47] On the initial challenges of village life in the Valley of Oaxaca, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 6, "Learning to Live in Villages."

[48] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 73.

[49] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 71.

[50] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 73, enumerate these three "unintended consequences" of shifting from a semi-nomadic lifestyle to permanent villages.

transitions in the whole story, had more plentiful and complicated rippling effects than anyone—including those who initiated it—could ever have imagined.

2. Still Before Monte Albán: Charismatic Leadership, Inklings of Urbanism and Precedents to the Great Zapotec Capital

The next episode, the so-termed Tierra Largas Phase (1400-1150 BCE), is notable most of all because it includes a set of circumstances and choices that led to the emergence of San José Mogote, the area's first large settlement and concentration of population, located less than 20 kilometers north of the eventual site of the Monte Albán.[51] Seriously underappreciated prior to Flannery's 1970s excavations, San José Mogote then emerged as far and away the most direct precedent to the Zapotec capital, an antecedent to Monte Albán that Caso, Bernal and Paddock had all suspected but lacked the solid information to actually locate.[52] San José Mogote—after this a crucial component of every story of Monte Albán—could, in fact, make viable claims for several of the "firsts" that are usually awarded to its more famous successor, including even the enormous distinction of Mesoamerica's very first city. Though Marcus and Flannery will reserve that accolade for Monte Albán, their discussion of the forms of leadership and social organization that gave rise to San José Mogote provides additional very important foreshadowing, which will make their account of mountain city's shockingly sudden beginnings much more plausible.

Relying on the strength of post-1960s settlement pattern data to refine their population estimates, they contend that, while the Tierra Largas Phase experienced demographic increases of five to tenfold over the Archaic period, the entire population

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[51] On the Tierra Largas Phase in the Valley of Oaxaca, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 7, "Creating Prestige in Egalitarian Society."

[52] See Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *Excavations at San José Mogote 1: The Household Archaeology: Prehistory and Human Ecology of the Valley of Oaxaca*, Memoirs of the Museum of Anthropology (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005).

the Valley of Oaxaca at this point was still on the order of only 700 people.[53]

Furthermore, that settlement data reveals great unevenness in the distribution of those

people among the three arms of the valley wherein the sparsest settlement was in the

Tlacolula subvalley and there was a cluster of four hamlets in the center of the Valle

Grande, which remained otherwise largely vacant. In the Etla region, however, the

smallest subvalley, more than half the region's total population was concentrated in nine

communities, including San José Mogote, which, with an estimated population of 170-

186 persons, was by far the largest.[54]

This disproportionate population in the Etla subvalley could be explained, in part,

by the combination of its high quality of soil (so-termed "Class I land") and its fortuitous

proximity to forested mountains that provided both wood for construction and access to

wild plants and game, which continued to supplement the now mainly agricultural diet.[55]

Nonetheless, consistent in their unwillingness to attribute the course of social evolution

strictly or even primarily to "the system," Marcus and Flannery propose that

environmental factors alone are not adequate to account either for the concentration of

people in this subvalley or, even less, for the disproportionately large size of San José

Mogote.[56] Instead, pointing especially to the unprecedented existence at San José

Mogote of non-residential buildings or "Men's Houses," which they regard as "analogous

to the *yolam* of the [New Guinea] Mountain Ok or the *kiva* of a Southwestern Pueblo,"[57]

they accentuate, unlike any previous account, the crucial role of "charismatic leadership":

> "… an actor-centered approach forces us to recognize that someone planned the
> construction of each of these buildings, organized and fed the labor force, directed
> the work, and took credit for it. San José Mogote must therefore have had a
> succession of self-selected, socially ambitious leaders who know how to turn their

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[53] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 78, 84.

[54] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 78-79.

[55] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 80-81, 83.

[56] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 81.

[57] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 87.

hard-won agricultural surplus into prestigious public works. Such men, the ethnographic record tells us, accumulate more than their share of wives, kinsmen, and affines, as well as a body of followers who do their bidding in return for favors and reflected glory. It was probably this kind of leadership, and not simply Class I land, that attracted nine clusters of families to San José Mogote during the Tierra Largas phase."[58]

Again then, it was the deliberate decisions of beguiling and self-interested leaders—individual "actors" that Marcus and Flannery suspect have much in common with the "Big Men" of New Guinea who "become leaders solely through their own ambition and achievements in food production, group activities, intervillage warfare, and ceremony"[59]—that made the decisive difference. But, during the Tierras Largas Phase, the influence of these resourceful leaders remained limited in two significant ways: First, though they note that the Oaxacan villagers of this era were involved in trading relationships with the Basin of Mexico, the Tehuacán Valley of Puebla and other regions of northern Oaxaca, they find no evidence that the influence of San José Mogote leaders, however charismatic, extended beyond the bounds of this couple-hundred-person settlement.[60] At this point, these were strictly local leaders. Second, though this period was characterized by "escalating ritual needs,"[61] most notably in connection with the veneration of ancestors, they do not think that there was any notion of "inherited authority." That is to say, in this era, ambitious village leaders were considered to enjoy the support of "supernatural forces," but that otherworldly privilege was not something that those leaders could pass on to their descendents. During the Tierras Largas Phase, the charismatic influence of a leader lasted just as long as that individual's life.[62]

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[58] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 88.

[59] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 77.

[60] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 91.

[61] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 84.

[62] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 92.

In the next era, however, the San José Phase (1150-850 BCE), both those throttles to leadership would be removed as ancient Oaxacans made the transition from "egalitarian societies" to "rank societies" (or "simple chiefdoms").[63] During this period, the Valley of Oaxaca witnessed much accelerated and even more asymmetrical growth in population. They estimate that, "The number of communities doubled, to about 40; the estimated population more than tripled, to at least 2000."[64] Still the greatest share of people lived in the Etla subvalley, and, moreover, San José Mogote grew to such an extent that perhaps half of the population of the entire valley lived at or very near this one site.[65] The next largest village in the valley was less than one tenth its size! Furthermore, the main settlement was surrounded by some dozen smaller communities that encircled San José Mogote "like tiny satellites caught in its gravitational pull."[66] And still, by the way, the eventual site of Monte Albán was wholly uninhabited.

Again there are environmental factors that help to explain San José Mogote's fabulously escalating growth, for instance, some new irrigation techniques;[67] but once again, Marcus and Flannery are unwilling to accept these systemic, "strain-related" factors as the most significant. Instead, yet again they accentuate the strategic, "interest-related" maneuvering of ambitious village leaders who, at this point, initiated changes that extended their respective spheres of authority in two significant ways. First, where previously leaders had made claims to the *support* of supernatural forces, now they

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[63] On the emergence of "rank society" in the Valley of Oaxaca, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 8, "The Emergence of Rank and the Loss of Autonomy." Regarding "simple chiefdoms," which is worth noting because later in their story they will invoke the technical designations "complex chiefdom" and "maximal chiefdom" (as well as those of "kingdom" and "state"), see ibid., 25, 108, and 195.

[64] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 106.

[65] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 106.

[66] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 108. They also use the similar astronomical analogy that smaller communities surrounded San José Mogote "like moons orbiting a star" (ibid.).

[67] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 106-7.

claimed actually to have *descended* from those "ancestral celestial spirits," most notably, from either the Earth or the Sky.[68] That enhanced strategy of legitimation was significant especially insofar as it established the then-new ideological principle that leaders could pass their authority on to their descendants, which is to say, there had been a transition from "egalitarian society," in which status differences were *achieved*, to a "rank society," in which the members of certain families *inherited* an elite status immediately from birth."[69] Among the large repercussions of that new way of understanding (or, more properly, *representing*) "the genealogical relationship between humans and celestial spirits" was the emergence of the notion that power could reside in royal lineages and thus be manipulated via strategic marriage alliances, both concepts that would prove to be hugely important at Monte Albán.[70]

Second, where previously even the most charismatic of San José Mogote's leaders had enjoyed no influence beyond the bounds of their own respective settlement, Marcus and Flannery see signs of emergent regional control during this era. The escalating scale of public architecture and the configuration of satellite communities around the main village of San José Mogote suggest that the leaders of this period had succeeded in persuading hundreds of people that the benefits of living near this aggregation of population outweighed "the loss of village autonomy" that came by locating within its growing sphere of influence. Here we see, in other words, echoes of the sort of regional cooperation that plays large in Blanton's account of "disembedded capitals." Now, for the first time, according to this script, local leaders could organize labor on a regional

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[68] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 95-96, 240.

[69] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 93, explain that, by contrast to "egalitarian society" in which status is *achieved*, "hereditary inequality," which entails the *inheritance* of status is the hallmark of "rank society."

[70] I nuance the term "understanding" with "representing" because, as I'll discuss in the Closing Thoughts to this chapter, Marcus and Flannery's prevailing intimation is that these leaders were *perpetrating* and *using* a notion of inherited status that their own rational inclinations did not allow them to actually believe.

scale, and thus undertake construction projects of unprecedented scale.[71] In short, the

seeds of regional political integration and monumental architecture, both of which

derived largely from the self-interested decisions of aggressive leaders—and both of

which would prove to be of paramount importance in this account of the emergence of

Monte Albán—had been sown.

3. Just Before Monte Albán: Increasing Greed, Selfishness, Contestation, Violence and Aggression

Among the collateral consequences of rank society and regional political

aspirations in San José-Phase Oaxaca were intensified competition and conflict among

communities. As Marcus and Flannery explain, "Once hereditary ranking has emerged in

any region of the world, we can expect the path of social evolution to be even more

volatile and disorderly than before."[72] Perhaps not surprisingly, then, in the final two

episodes of their long prelude to the birth of Monte Albán, the Valley of Oaxaca is

increasingly depicted as an environment of contestation, violence and aggression. They

reject the widely held notion that at this level of chiefdoms (that is, in advance of

kingdoms and states), social evolution moves forward by largely peaceful means.[73] Thus

where Caso's, Bernal's, Paddock's and even Winter's syntheses are notably, maybe

suspiciously, devoid of explicit references to pre-Columbian violence and conflict, the

remainder of this account will feature violent coercion and competition as, by far, the

most crucial mechanisms of social change. Even Blanton, who places a "regional

military league" at the very center of his account, nonetheless leaves readers with the

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[71] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 110.

[72] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 111.

[73] For instance, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 121, quote Robert L. Carnerio, "The Nature of the Chiefdom as Revealed by Evidence from the Cauca Valley of Columbia," (1991) as follows: "A commonly held view among anthropologists is that chiefdoms arose by peaceful means… The Cauca Valley [of Columbia], however, challenges this view… It points to the fact that chiefdoms were born out of war, were powerful shaped by war, and continued to be heavily involved in war as they evolved." Then they contend that, "what [Carnerio] says is equally true of the Valley of Oaxaca."

prevailing image of Oaxacans cooperating to fend off a "shared external enemy;" the military preoccupations of his protagonists are directed primarily at adversaries from other regions. By contrast, this portion of the Marcus-Flannery narrative—including the origins of Monte Albán—depends on ever-mounting hostilities among the various groups *within* the Valley of Oaxaca. In their account, Oaxacan neighbors win no exemption from one another's bellicosity.

Consistent with the mounting role of violence, they also describe increasingly more coercive and truculent leadership styles. That is to say, while I argued in chapter 4 that Blanton's account holds open some small possibility that the ancient Oaxacan leaders can be assessed as altruistic and tolerant, these co-authors seem to take pains to rule out any hint of generosity or compassion in their Oaxacan sovereigns. As in Blanton's rendition, the ancient Oaxaca leaders of this era are impressive and appealing for their creative wherewithal and innovative strategies of hegemony; these politically astute and entrepreneurial native actors suffer from none of the stereotypes of superstitious and naïve "primitives." Yet, even more than in Blanton's account, they emerge as distressingly one-dimensional and duplicitous. In this version of the events, the ancient leaders are motivated almost solely, it seems, by the acquisition of power and control, especially the control over human labor. For instance, regarding the strictly political motivations of the chiefs of San José Mogote, Marcus and Flannery dispel any quasi-romantic notion that these were civic-minded leaders who coordinated the construction of temples as contexts in which to express reverence, or perhaps acquiescence, to deities who might then reciprocate by granting good fortune to the community. That is to say, they reject even before he presents it, the notion of a "sacred covenant" that we will encounter next chapter in Arthur Joyce's account. By contrast, they contend that,

> "It is worth noting that San José Mogote's leaders [of the San José Phase] did not actually *need* the limestone or travertine [that they demanded from surrounding communities], since they were sitting on a source of volcanic tuff. Almost certainly it was the *manpower* that they wanted to control. As Edward Schortman

and Patricia Urban have recently said, 'the goal of all elites is to control the labor and surplus production of as many subordinates as possible.'"[74]

In short, these pre-Columbian rulers—who show no sign of the heartfelt religious inclinations depicted in the work of Caso, Bernal, Paddock or Joyce, and who are even more meanly materialist than those in Blanton's work—actually seem to find satisfaction in intimidation. For them, temples are contexts in which to manipulate people, not placate deities.

In any case, with Marcus and Flannery's penultimate episode prior to the emergence of Monte Albán, the so-termed Guadalupe Phase (850-700 BCE), this volatile competition escalates at an even more rapid rate.[75] The population of the valley, now estimated at 2000-2500, had continued to grow; the Elta subvalley remained the most densely populated; and San José Mogote continued to be far and away the largest community.[76] Nonetheless, heretofore unrivaled San José Mogote now faced the emergence of several competing centers—and thus several competing chiefs and elite families—most notably those of Huitzo, which lay some 16 kilometers to the northwest.[77] The principal dynamic at this point, then, was a kind of scramble for influence among these rival chiefs wherein "the culturally defined goals of a leader were to have as many farmers, craftspeople, and warriors under his control as possible."[78] Greed and selfishness were the watchwords of this mode of leadership; and two sets of strategies were apparently most serviceable in winning the desired advantage in this precariously

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[74] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 110; Marcus and Flannery's italics. The quote within this quote comes from Edward Shortman, Patricia Urban, et al, *Sociopolitical Hierarchy and Craft Production: The Economic Basis of Elite Power in a Southeast Mesoamerican Polity, Part II* (1992), 3.

[75] On the Guadalupe Phase in the Valley of Oaxaca, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 9.

[76] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 112.

[77] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 110-12.

[78] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 240.

rough and tumble context. The first involved manipulative means of "alliance building," for which the most effective ploys seem to have been hypogamy or bride exchange and the accumulation of favors via conspicuous giving, especially the sponsorship of large feasts.[79] Along with these savvy political maneuverings and exchanges, however, a second set of strategies relied more on brute force, which, as we will see momentarily, emerged as the prime strategy of choice in the next phase.

The final interval in advance of the emergence of Monte Albán—the site of which still remained completely vacant—the so-termed Rosario Phase (700-500 BCE), witnessed further intensification of the same competitive processes.[80] They estimate that the increasing population of the valley now reached about 4000 persons, unevenly distributed in some 70-85 communities; and the Etla subvalley, still dominated by San José Mogote, which had about 1000 residents, continued to be the most populous, well integrated and economically robust.[81] The other two arms of the valley were, however, gaining ground. Mirroring the settlement pattern of the Etla region, both the Valle Grande and the Tlacolula subvalley had grown to 700-1000 people, and by now each had it own major population center surrounded by numerous smaller settlements.[82] With more strong players in the mix—both "paramount chiefs" who ruled the largest centers and ambitious "subchiefs" who headed the second-tier settlements—competition became ever more fierce.

Thus, where conflict and competition between groups had been significant throughout this (re)construction narrative, Marcus and Flannery now adduce via several

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[79] On strategic hypogamy or bride exchange, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 113-15; on alliance building via the sponsorship of large feasts, see ibid., 115-16.

[80] On the Valley of Oaxaca during the Rosario Phase (700-500 BCE), see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 10.

[81] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 123-25.

[82] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 125-26.

lines of evidence that warfare, albeit of a distinct and limited sort, had become more prevalent in the Rosario Phase than ever before.[83] Buildings at nearly all the larger sites show signs of deliberate burning and destruction. Moreover, consistent with their "actor-centered approach," they continue to present the personal ambition, selfishness and greed of individuals as the principal motivations behind this endemic fighting. In their characterization, the warfare of this era is not motivated by commitments to any religious ideology or ethnic identity; rather than superstitious, fanatical or even ideological, these leaders are depicted as pragmatic and levelheaded. Readers are dissuaded from imagining that this was any version of "holy war" or cosmologically timed ritual combat. Nor do these co-authors see this incessant fighting as motivated by the acquisition of land, which was still plentiful in the valley; these are not the wars of conquest that will figure large later in their story. They explain, in fact, that unlike states, chiefdoms such as those of the Oaxaca Valley during this phase,

> "do not have the manpower or political structure to conquer and hold onto others' land. They may therefore content themselves with burning a rival village, destroying its temple or Men's House, killing its chief, then returning home to torture or sacrifice a few prisoners."[84]

This was, in other words, a kind of hit-and-run warfare that was motivated most of all by two related factors: personal aggrandizement and the control of "manpower" required to grow crops, produce crafts and build temples. Again working by analogy to contexts for which there is fuller data, they explain,

> "Chiefly warfare usually results from competition between paramounts [i.e., paramount chiefs], or between a paramount and his ambitious subchiefs. Paramounts try to aggrandize themselves by taking followers away from their rivals. Ambitious subchiefs try to replace the paramount at the top of the hierarchy."[85]

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[83] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 124.

[84] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 124.

[85] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 124.

4. An Ongoing Pattern of Selfishness and Serendipity: Ever-Escalating Violence and the Inadvertent Creation of a "Buffer Zone"

Depicted in the way, the Rosario Phase, the last prior to the actual emergence of Monte Albán, provides, among other things, yet another quintessential demonstration of the action theory pattern wherein village leaders, who conduct themselves as aggressively self-interested decision-makers par excellence, were faced with the unanticipated— sometimes salutary, sometimes severe—ramifications of their choices. As Marcus and Flannery explain, "One unintended consequence of our actors' strategies was the creation of a system featuring relentless competition and periodic violence."[86] That is to say, in a kind of tragically ironic sense—and this, I'd contend, exemplifies the guiding theme in their whole narrative synthesis—all of these cagey initiatives to seize control and build alliances had culminated in an environment more precarious than the fertile Valley of Oaxaca had ever been. Ironically, as mastery over the natural environment had increased, the threat from other humans had increased even faster. Ostensible control over their world had actually led to unprecedented perilousness and insecurity.

In a context of endemic raiding, defense and constant vigilance now emerged as priorities of the highest order.[87] More and more settlements were located on defensible hilltops, which were then fortified with stone walls, a configuration that Marcus and Flannery regard as crucial in the now-imminent site selection of Monte Albán.[88] While there were increasingly more elaborate displays of public art—notably, carved figures at San José Mogote that closely resemble the famous "Danzante" figures that would appear at Monte Albán—they are as certain as Blanton that these depict "sacrificed captives," which thus provide evidence not only of abundant raiding but also an incentive for

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[86] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 240.

[87] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 241, explain in their summary of the Roasrio Phase that, "The need for defense had now become as crucial a variable as the need for Class I land."

[88] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 124.

publicly humiliating and intimidating one's adversaries.[89]   Moreover, the hieroglyphic day-names beneath those carved figures, which presumably announce the identities of the vanquished enemies, provide a sure sign both that "The 260-day calendar clearly existed at this time," and, in fact, that the Rosario-era Oaxacans had already invented a form of writing.[90]   Yet, where Alfonso Caso deployed these intellectual and artistic innovations as some of his strongest evidence of the gifted and sublime character of the ancient Oaxacans, the authors of *Zapotec Civilization*, not more prone than Blanton or Winter to gush over the intellectual prowess of these people, take an almost antithetical interpretive tack by focusing on the martial content of this early writing as more supposed support for its creators' single-minded preoccupations with dominating and degrading their neighbors:

> "Like so many patterns of the Rosario phase, this first example of Zapotec writing appears in the context of chiefly competition. It appears that Zapotec writing was born of that competition, and went on in later times to become a weapon in the power struggle of rulers."[91]

Albeit a particularly glib exercise of the action theory perspective, from that view, Marcus and Flannery can quickly dismiss even the invention of writing as yet another tool or "weapon" in the aggressive competition among individualistic, self-promoting leaders.

In any case, these interpreters maintain that the constant challenge of holding one's enemies at bay had another consequence of even greater moment for the emergence of Monte Albán:

> "One way that raiding can affect settlement is by forcing abandonment of regions that cannot be defended. Often a buffer zone, or 'no-man's land,' develops

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[89] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 129-30.

[90] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 130.

[91] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 130.

between warring chiefdoms. Such a zone seems to have arisen at the juncture of the Valle Grande, Etla, and Tlacolula subvalleys during the Rosario phase."[92]

In other words, now that each of the three arms of the Valley of Oaxaca had its own dominant settlement—San José Mogote in the Etla region, San Martín Tilcajete in the Valle Grande and Yegüih in the Tlacolula subvalley[93]—and given that there was still a relative abundance of quality land in the valley, all parties left vacant a buffer zone or so-termed "no-man's land" at the intersection of the three subvalleys. Though in the Rosario Phase, this intermediary crossing place was apparently too risky to settle, as we'll see, in yet a different sort of irony, this empty space included the mountain that would eventually become one of the most prized and densely populated zones in the whole of Mesoamerica—namely, Monte Albán.

Be that remarkable transformation as it may, one final aspect of the *Zapotec Civilization* rendition of the developments that lead to Monte Albán requires comment before turning to the actual origins of the city. At several points, Marcus and Flannery articulate an uneven balance insofar as, on the one hand, they remind readers that, "We do not wish to leave the impression that all of this social evolution took place within the boundaries of the Valley of Oaxaca, unaffected by developments elsewhere in Mexico."[94] Even for these phases in advance of Monte Albán, they find lots of evidence of trade and interaction between central Oaxacan peoples and those of the Basin of Mexico, the Valleys of Morelos and Tehuacán, the Chiapas Mayaland and the Gulf Coast Olmec

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[92] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 124.

[93] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 125-26.

[94] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 117. This quote come in the context of a discussion of "Oaxaca's Relations with Other Religions of Mexico" during the Guadalupe phase (850-700 BCE); but they, for instance, end their account of the Rosario Phase (700-500 BCE) with a discussion of the Valley of Oaxaca's connections with "Developments Elsewhere in Mexico" (ibid., 134-38), which makes similar sort of argument.

region, interactions that lead them to conclude that no Mesoamerican rank society arose in isolation: "all borrowed ideas on chiefly behavior and symbolism from each other."[95]

Yet, on the other hand, where Ignacio Bernal repeatedly accentuated the vitality that issued from Oaxaca's involvements in these interregional interactions (and, conversely, the stagnation that accrues when cross-regional relations are absent), Marcus and Flannery consistently downplay the importance of those interactions. They explicitly reject the notion that any region of Mesoamerica was "the 'mother culture' from which the others sprang;"[96] and, again in direct contrast to Caso and Bernal, they take special pains to reject the notion that the Olmecs had any disproportionate role in the formation of Oaxacan society.[97] In their view, each of these areas had its own agenda, its own "tastes," its own trajectory and, presumably, its own entrepreneurial, decision-making leaders: "We see [Zapotecs and Olmecs] as 'sister cultures' that arose simultaneously through many of the same processes, although we also believe that those processes were accelerated by the fact that all were in contact with each other."[98] Nonetheless, countering Blanton's call for an "interregional approach" with something more like a region-specific perspective, they maintain that, "we do not believe that the evolution of chiefly society in Oaxaca was caused by events outside the valley…"[99] For them, it is the highly competitive dynamics *within* the Valley of Oaxaca that matter most.

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[95] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 119.

[96] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 120.

[97] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 138.

[98] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 120. This quote refers specifically to the parallel developments at San José Mogote, Chalcatzingo in the Valley of Morelos and San Lorenzo in the Olmec area; but it is an accurate reflection of their wider sentiments about Oaxaca connections with other areas.

[99] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 117.

B. THE EARLY PERIOD I ORIGINS OF MONTE ALBÁN: UNPREDICTED AND UNPRECEDENTED URBANISM

At very long last, then, Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery's account turns to the emergence of Monte Albán, in their view, "the least predictable event in the history of the Valley of Oaxaca," and thus quintessential exemplification of the unpredictability of Oaxaca social evolution.[100] Their elaborate rendition of the origins of the capital is, in lots of respects, very similar to Richard Blanton's. In fact, the extensive cross-fertilization of projects and publications—and the way in which *Zapotec Civilization*, by the authors' own description, fleshes out the "skeletal outline" of the city's origins that Blanton had provided[101]—make it very difficult to determine who first proposed various components of the respective stories (an exercise in assigning credit that, fortunately, is not part of the present agenda). Nonetheless, beyond simply giving a more exhaustive and much more readable reiteration of themes that one has to dig out of Blanton's *Monte Albán*, Marcus and Flannery also resculpt the origin story in ways that conform more fully to their action theory model.

1. The Mechanism of Urban Origins: A Startling and Stupendous, but not Aberrant Instance of Synoikism

This rendition of Oaxacan urban genesis displays a major tension wherein the origin and early career of Monte Albán was, on the one hand, an absolutely unique and truly stunning episode and, on the other hand, the degree to which the founding of the mountain capital was simply an excellent example of processes of city formation that

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[100] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 241.

[101] Though *Zapotec Civilization* has only four explicit (and brief) references Blanton's work, Marcus and Flannery give credit to Blanton for the interpretation of Monte Albán's origins that they provide in chapter 11, "The Monte Albán Synoikism," insofar as they write, "The Settlement Pattern Project [i.e., the major project headed by Blanton] has provided a skeletal outline of what happened" (ibid., 139). Recall also that they contend that the respective projects of Blanton, Marcus and Flannery are "in agreement 90 percent of the time" (ibid., 29).

have transpired with considerable frequency in numerous other contexts, most notably ancient Greece. On the one side, then, they much enhance the drama and intrigue of their version by accentuating, as had Blanton and most others, the extent to which the emergence of the fabulous capital was both "startlingly rapid" and unprecedented, even to the point of seeming anomalous. The founding of Monte Albán was, in this strand of their discussion, by no means the inevitable outcome of earlier events, and thus, despite a 9000-year preamble, they can still present the birth of the city as a sudden and highly surprising turn of events. A mountain that apparently enjoyed no special prestige during thousands of years of activity in the general area now—with amazing speed—becomes among the most prized real estate in all of Mesoamerica. In their words,

> "By the late sixth century BC the Valley of Oaxaca stood on the threshold of a great transformation. It was about to witness the birth of an urban society, one of the New World's earliest. That society was to appear with startling rapidity and without precedent, having had no earlier urban societies after which to model itself."[102]

From nothing, the new city bolts to prominence. As in Blanton's and nearly all earlier renditions, Monte Albán is depicted, then, irrespective of San José Mogote precedents, as largely bereft of humble beginnings. Marcus and Flannery rely on his population figures to similarly stress the stunningly swift Period I transformation from an uninhabited mountaintop to "one of the largest cities in the New World at the time."[103] They note the tenfold leap in the population of the wider Valley of Oaxaca, from just 4000 in the Rosario era to some 50,000, roughly one third of which lived at the newly emergent Monte Albán;[104] and they likewise concur that, by the latter portions of Period I, the fledgling Monte Albán was encircled by over 700 communities, most with less than

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[102] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 139.

[103] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 139-40.

[104] For the Rosario phase population estimate, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 124; for the Late Period I population estimate of 17,242 for Monte Albán, see ibid., 139.

150 residents but a few that approached 2000 people.[105] Moreover, like Blanton, they exercise due suspicion about the timeworn notion of an "urban revolution," before also concluding that, "in the case of Monte Albán it seems appropriate."[106] Thus, where most earlier scholars were ambivalent about assessing this initial phase as genuinely "urban"—recall that John Paddock, for instance, describes Period I Monte Albán as a "pre-urban community"[107]—*Zapotec Civilization* reechoes Blanton's view that this was a speedy process of urban genesis wherein the founders almost immediately went to work on the first version of the grandly-conceived Main Plaza that remains visible today.[108] Marcus and Flannery have no doubt that, in its very first iteration, Monte Albán qualified as a city, quite likely Mesoamerica's very first.

Furthermore on this side of the tension, like Blanton and opposite Winter, the Marcus-Flannery version accentuates that the founding and rapid ascent of Monte Albán were, in numerous respects, completely unique, a starkly idiosyncratic departure from previous patterns and processes. By contrast to the environmentally propitious siting of earlier and other contemporaneous Oaxacan settlements, they underscore the extreme improbability of thousands of people resettling atop a waterless mountain. Additionally, taking an even more "Oaxacacentric" view than Paddock or Blanton, they insist that Monte Albán was a completely independent invention, the consequence of events and decisions undertaken *within* the Valley of Oaxaca. For them it is crucial that Monte Albán was *not* patterned after any tried-and-true model borrowed from Olmecs, Teotihuacanos, Mayas or anyone else;[109] San José Mogote was an important precedent,

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[105] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 145.

[106] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 140.

[107] Paddock, "Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica," 91-110, has a sub-section entitled "Pre-Urban Communities: Monte Albán I." Remember also that Paddock (ibid., 99) notes that, "We have described these first settlers on Monte Albán as pre-urban, but a good case can be made for granting them urban status…"

[108] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 140.

[109] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 154, among other places, explicit reject earlier opinions about the foreign-born inspiration of Monte Albán I.

but this was something very different and on a vastly larger scale. Accordingly, they emphasize not only the speed, but also the innovativeness and unlikelihood—the "emergent novelty"—of the transformation of empty space into pre-Columbian urbanism:

> "What happened next [around 500 BCE] was the least predictable event in the history of the Valley of Oaxaca. Were we writing about paleontology rather than archaeology, it would be appropriate to use the biological term of 'emergent novelty'… Somehow the leaders of several thousand people, many of them living in the Etla region of the valley, convinced them to leave their villages and found a city on a 400-m mountaintop… The great emergent novelty of 500-200 BC was an urban society, something without precedent in Mesoamerica."[110]

Yet, on the other hand, for all the ways in which the emergence of Monte Albán was novel and beyond prediction, Marcus and Flannery continue to argue that the actors and events of Oaxacan social evolution were, from the perspective of action theory, by no means aberrant. Extraordinary as Monte Albán's ascent was, the fast climb reflects widespread patterns. One more time the characteristic cycle of deliberate decisions, unintended consequences and more deliberate decisions provides them a heuristic means of explaining ancient Oaxacan history in terms of processes that are well documented in other contexts. In this case, they find their most instructive analogy in the much-studied processes of "urban relocation" in ancient Greece and, specifically, in the concept of "synoikism."[111] As they explain, synoikism—a term derived from the Greek *oikos*, "home," and *syn*, "together"—refers to the process "during which whole groups of villages left their rural settings and came together to form a city where none had previously existed."[112]

As you'll recall, Blanton had invoked the notion of synoikism (or, as he termed it, "synoecism") as means of advancing his presentation of Monte Albán's origins as a

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[110] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 241.

[111] See Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 11, "The Monte Albán Synoikism."

[112] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 140.

"disembedded capital" that arose in response to an external threat;[113] Marcus and Flannery, however, not only provide a much more full exposition of the synoikism concept, they also reconfigure it in ways that make it fully complementary with their wider reliance on action theory. To that end, they enumerate four basic qualities of synoikism, each of which they think strengthens the viability that Monte Albán originated in this way. First, while their two prime analogies are the "agglutinated cities" of Megalopolis and Syracuse, they stress this is a process that happened again and again in the formation of ancient Greek cities: "synoikism is not a rare event."[114] Consequently, that there was a synoikism in Oaxaca is by no means farfetched. Second, they note that, perfectly aligned with their actor-oriented perspective, synoikism is "a process that is set in motion by specific human actors."[115] Thus where Blanton spoke of the perpetrators of synoikism only in vague and very general terms, which implied collective decision-making, they put charismatic, albeit elusive, individual leaders at the very center of their narrative: The role of key individuals in the Greek examples "should remind us that important leaders—whose names we will unfortunately never know—must have been behind the Monte Albán synoikism."[116]

Third, consistent with their stance that the specific direction of Oaxaca social evolution depends most of all on the strategic and self-interested decisions of individual leaders, they are impressed that, in those Greek examples, people did not relocate for environmental, agricultural or economic (or, for that matter, religious) reasons:

> "There was a great cost involved in moving so many people, and the primary motivation in every case seems to have been political. Rulers engage in

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[113] On Blanton's use of the term and concept of "synoecism," see, for instance, Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 63-64, 134, and my comments in chapter 4.

[114] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 142. Note that I have borrowed, but somewhat renumbered, the "characteristics of synoikism which might be of significance to our Oaxaca case" that they enumerate on ibid., 142-43.

[115] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 142.

[116] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 142.

synoikism to 'build power,' or to create a city strong enough to preserve its autonomy in the face of external threat."[117]

In other words, they not only explicitly rule out cultural ecological explanations of Monte Albán's seemingly odd site selection; additionally, irrespective of their comments about an ancient Zapotec mindset—and irrespective of occasional allusions to Monte Albán as a "sacred mountain"[118]—they share Blanton's complete dismissal of the possibility that religion, or some sort of cosmomagical attraction to a "sacred site," had played any role whatever in the counterintuitive decision to build the new city atop a waterless mountaintop. To the contrary, the protagonists of this account have priorities that are even more patently "secular" and "political" than those in Blanton's script. Accordingly, Marcus and Flannery not only reaffirm his insistence that the apparent drawbacks of the site's inaccessibility were actually overridden by its great virtues as a militarily defensible location—that is to say, they retain Blanton's idea that the foundation of the city was a *defensive* strategy "in the face of external threat"—but they also interject their own stronger emphasis on the more aggressively *offensive* motives of rulers who are determined to "build power."

And fourth, in a vintage instance of unintended—but fortuitous—consequences, they note that, despite the fact the synoikism involves selecting new urban sites on predominantly political grounds, those site-selection decisions, albeit inadvertently, nearly always result in propitious economic effects.[119] This too, as we will see momentarily, is something they think happened at Monte Albán.

2. Early Period I Events and Actors: Preemptive Diplomacy and a Strategic Migration from San José Mogote to Monte Albán

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[117] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 142.

[118] E.g., Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 139.

[119] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 143.

Clearly, then, the *Zapotec Civilization* version of Early Period I events resembles that of Blanton, but with very pronounced skews, amendments and additions. In this revamped rendition, as we've seen, the stage for the "great transformation" to urbanism had been set at the end of the Rosario Phase, about 500 BCE, when the population of the Valley of Oaxaca was divided among three "chiefly societies of unequal size," which were in vigorous competition with on another. San José Mogote in the Elta subvalley remained the largest and strongest, with perhaps 2000 inhabitants; but the increasingly vigorous polities of San Martín Tilcajete in the Valle Grande subvalley and Yegüih in the Tlacolula subvalley had grown to the point that the three communities existed in a kind of tense standoff, a holding pattern that had been facilitated by leaving empty the central locale that Monte Albán would come to occupy.

At this point, Marcus and Flannery bring a new and more specific dimension to their script by assigning a hugely prominent role to the leaders of San José Mogote, whom they see as the eventual founders of Monte Albán. As the lead actors of this portion of the story, the "chiefs" of San José Mogote had enjoyed supremacy in the region for over 800 years, though with the growth of competing centers in the other two subvalleys, these leaders were increasingly less secure. Thus while these co-authors, like Blanton, are persuaded on the basis of the Greek analogies that the relocations associated with the processes of synoikism invariably come in response to "an external threat," they provide a decidedly new and different solution to the old problem that had so vexed him—namely, identifying the initial threat that led to the founding of Monte Albán[120]— by accentuating the local antagonisms among the three Oaxacan subvalley chiefdoms. Conceding that they cannot rule out the possibilities that the sense of endangerment derived from Central Mexico, the Olmec area or the Maya zone, they (like Blanton in 1978) are very doubtful of major influences from any of those regions.[121] Alternatively,

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[120] Regarding Blanton's fluctuating views on the initial threat that precipitated the founding of Monte Albán, see Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 126, or chapter 4 of this book.

[121] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 154.

they propose that the leaders of San José Mogote were responding to pressure perpetrated by other Oaxacans from the neighboring two subvalleys. That is to say, by identifying the decisive threat as more local and more specific than that in either Blanton's original or revised accounts of this era, the crucial dynamics of Marcus and Flannery's story, for better or worse, transpire fully within the three-armed valley. In this rendition, unlike any previous version and at odds with increasingly interregional approaches, all of the key protagonists—and all of the *antagonists—*are natives of the Oaxaca Valley.

According to this origin story, then, as the leaders of San José Mogote felt more and more threatened by the growing strength of their Oaxacan neighbors, they initiated a gigantically ambitious preemptive strategy that entailed first building new alliances in order to form "a powerful confederacy of villages in the Etla region and central valley."[122] In other words, leaders alleviated threats by transforming potential adversaries into allies, a sly ploy that provides Marcus and Flannery a significantly revised way of imaging the "regional military league" of Blanton's account. Then, in perhaps the most startling, and arguably most problematic, segment of this story of urban genesis, these leaders initiated a major relocation from their Etla homeland to the defensible mountaintop site of Monte Albán where they had to start essentially from scratch to build the new "capital of this confederacy." [123]

Improbable as this immense redistribution of people and power in valley may seem, it allows Marcus and Flannery to make sense of otherwise puzzling settlement data that suggest that, almost simultaneously, several villages in the Etla region, including San José Mogote, suddenly lost nearly all of their population while the previously unoccupied site of Monte Albán, which lay in the vacant "no-man's land," experienced "a sudden and

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[122] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 154.

[123] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 154. They entertain the alternate possibility that, instead the leaders of San José Mogote establishing Monte Albán to block the other two subvalleys, "the populations of the Tlacolula and Valle Grande regions might have established Monte Albán to block the expansion of San José Mogote." (ibid., 154) On the same page they explain why they find the first alternative more compelling.

massive settlement."[124] Thus, while they propose a different underlying threat, their scenario is like Blanton's account of a so-termed disembedded capital insofar as the origin of the city depends upon a major demographic shakeup wherein the formerly dominant center of the region was essentially abandoned at the same time that an empty "buffer zone" was beginning the rapid transformation into one of Mesoamerica's premier capitals.

3. Two Narrative Adjustments: Similarly Astute but More Ruthless Rulers and More Ethnically Homogeneous Residents

We see, then, that having adopted the same "skeletal outline" for Monte Albán's origins as Blanton, Marcus and Flannery flesh out the plotline and protagonists in intriguingly different ways. Of two especially provocative adjustments, the first involves the variously positive and negative valences they attach to the character and motivations of the San José Mogote leaders and their new allies. On the one hand, this audacious initiative, which required convincing hundreds of people to join company with former adversaries and to leave their traditional homelands in order to resettle on a barren mountaintop, seems to demonstrate a remarkable exercise of diplomacy and persuasion. In that respect, as at some points in Blanton's account, we meet protagonists who are compelling, even heroic, insofar as they are depicted as exceptionally charismatic individuals who have both the vision to imagine such a grand plan and the political aplomb to achieve it. In fact, by accentuating the role of the aggressive chiefs who ostensibly initiated this massive relocation from Oaxaca's premier capital of San José Mogote in order to found a brand new bigger and better capital at Monte Albán, this portion of their story evokes images of an inspired and inspiring prophet leading his people through the wilderness to a promised land and a new beginning. (That is an element of their account that will reappear in Arthur Joyce's rendition next chapter.)

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[124] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 139.

Yet, on the other hand, these Marcus and Flannery seem even more determined than Blanton to thwart any tendency to follow Caso's lead in romanticizing the Oaxaca leaders; and thus, instead of visionary prophets or even thoughtful statesmen, the main actors are consistently depicted as coolly calculating political operatives, unencumbered by either religious sentimentalities or ethnic-cultural loyalties. Where Blanton's version allowed us to imagine the founding of Monte Albán as an exercise of pan-valley unity rallying against an extra-valley threat, these action theorists paint the founding as a kind of Machiavellian power grab. Instead of uniting against outside threats, the Oaxaca Valley of this version is itself an increasingly perilous context of violent and cutthroat competition in which the most ruthless rule; followers' participation in this new "confederacy" was, based, it seems, more on coercion than enthusiasm. There may have been some camaraderie born of journeying together into the vacant buffer zone; but, in this depiction, the original settlers of Monte Albán were bound only by were affiliations of expedience. In terms that they again borrow from the literature on Greek synoikism, this was a "forcibly integrated populace" that had come together with the express purpose of "resisting a threat."[125]

Having positioned the acquisition of power as these protagonists' first priority and warfare as their principal means for acquiring it, Marcus and Flannery can marshal several lines of evidence in support of those themes. Regarding the infamous site selection of the capital, for instance, like Blanton, they dismiss as unworthy of discussion the possibility that these clear-minded leaders considered the mountain to have some sort of intrinsic allure like the so-termed Sacred Cenote, which accounts for Chichén Itzá's location. And though concurring with Blanton that the remote location was a kind of "no-man's land," instead of accentuating the appeal of its economic and commercial "neutrality" or "disembeddedness," which thus served leaders' diplomatic initiative to unite the valley, they make the more blunt argument that the site had just one redeeming feature: it was a natural fortress.[126] In their account, as raiding and warfare in the valley

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[125] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 141.

[126] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization,* 151.

escalated, Monte Albán's very considerable practical disadvantages were finally outweighed by this one great virtue. Their founders are, in other words, less interested in diplomacy than simply holding a military advantage.

Moreover, where Blanton stressed the complete uniqueness of Monte Albán's siting, Marcus and Flannery argue that the positioning of the future Zapotec capital was simply the most prominent instantiation of a general pattern of increasing militarization insofar as, during this period of movement and transition, more and more of the valley's population was relocating to defensible mountain sites, most of which were then augmented with humanly-constructed walls and barriers.[127] Thus while they look to Blanton's work for certain evidence of an extensive system of walls around Monte Albán in later periods, they are also willing to go past Blanton in speculating that, "It would not surprise us to learn that the older wall was begun at the time the city was founded…"[128] In short, according to their interpretation, everything about the original location and configuration of the capital demonstrate the work of founders who have the sole intention of forcibly garnering and maintaining as much control as possible. In their view, timeworn musings that Monte Albán was founded as a "sacred city" were completely wrong while guesses that it was, from the outset, a "fortress city" were completely correct.

In any case, a second significant adjustment in their origin-via-synoikism story has to do with the unity and diversity of the initial settlers of the site, and thus with the slippery issue of ethnicity. Though affording a privileged role to the leaders of San José Mogote, they reaffirm Blanton's conclusion that three discrete clusters of Early Period I ceramics signal that "Monte Albán was founded by at least three groups of colonists who

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[127] Regarding the trend in this era toward defensive and fortified sites, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 151, note that: "… by the end of Monte Albán I, more than a third of the valley's population lived at such sites. The trend began in Monte Albán Ia… By Monte Albán Ic the number of sites on defensive hilltops had increased to thirteen, with walls visible on the surface of at least six…"

[128] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 150.

established separate residential areas."[129] And, by embracing the notion that this was "the capital of a confederacy," they concur that, from the beginning, the citizenry of Monte Albán was characterized by marked diversity.

Yet, on the other hand, as we've noted, Marcus and Flannery directly refute the stance of Caso and Bernal that the emergence of Monte Albán depended in large ways on the involvements of Olmecs or other non-Oaxacans with the more local population. They insist, by contrast, that the inhabitants of early Monte Albán were homogeneous insofar as all were natives of the Valley of Oaxaca. Moreover, though explicitly shifting the focus away from questions of "ethnogenesis" (and toward the study of social evolution),[130] they explicitly reject Blanton's intimation that members of the regional alliance from different parts of the Oaxaca Valley constituted different "ethnicities." That is to say, irrespective of the unprecedented shuffling and redistribution of various groups throughout the valley in the era immediately in advance of the emergence of Monte Albán, they contend that the continuities with earlier periods "indicate that we are dealing with the same ethnic group."[131]

Thus, while Marcus and Flannery concur with Caso, Bernal and Paddock that the original founders of Monte Albán do *not* deserve the label "Zapotec"—as we'll see, they locate the emergence of that identity later in Period I—they contend that all parties involved in the confederacy that founded the capital did share a single "ethnicity." In other words, this version depicts the original makeup of Monte Albán as decidedly heterogeneous—but within much tighter bounds than had Caso or Bernal and with different assessments about "ethnic identity" than Blanton.

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[129] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 144.

[130] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 29.

[131] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 144.

4. Yet Another Danzante Interpretation: Evidence of Single-Minded Militarism, Continuity with San José Mogote and Ethnic Homogeneity

Just as in every previous account of Early Period I Monte Albán, it is a creative interpretation of the infamous Danzante figures that provides Marcus and Flannery their foremost evidence of their characterization of this era. They rely on the much-debated carvings to bolster at least three interrelated aspects of their scenario of Monte Albán synoikism. First, predictably, they agree with Blanton that to imagine these much-discussed carvings as anything other than "depictions of slain or sacrificed enemies" is nonsense;[132] and thus, for them, the Danzantes (a term they fastidiously avoid) provide the most unmistakable evidence of the single-mindedly militaristic agenda of the original designers of the Great Plaza. Commenting on the "huge display" wherein the side-by-side placement of hundreds of these near life-size figures dominated the city's acropolis, they contend that, if the builders of Monte Albán I were highly accomplished artists, they nonetheless confined the lion's share of their talents to celebrating their military victories and intimidating their would-be adversaries:

> "When all 300-plus carvings of captives [i.e., the so-termed Danzantes] were still in place in the original stage of the Building L [a.k.a. the Dancers Building], it must have been one of the most awesome displays of military propaganda in all of Mexico. How motivated were Monte Albán's earliest leaders to intimidate their enemies with this display? Consider that these carvings amount to 80 percent of the monuments known from the entire 1200-year heyday of the city."[133]

Second, they remind us that near-replicas of these Danzante slabs have been found at San José Mogote, which thereby bolsters their claim for that as the original home of the builders of this new city.[134] And third, in the most novel dimension of their Danzante interpretation, they present the ill-named figures as more evidence of the ethnic homogeneity of the city's founders. In other words, despite the fact that the seemingly

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[132] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 151.

[133] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 153.

[134] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 151-53.

"Olmecoid" features of the persons depicted on these slabs had been one of the most oft-cited signs of strong outside influences during Monte Albán I, Marcus and Flannery are not persuaded that any of the images of brutalized figures qualify as "foreigners": "For various reasons, we do not think that the slain enemies on Building L [i.e., the figures in the Danzante carvings] came from the Basin of Mexico, the Gulf Coast, or the Central Depression of Chiapas."[135] In their analysis, "no hairstyle or ornament shown on the slain captives looks foreign to Oaxaca."[136] Furthermore, they opine that the hieroglyphic captions on the Danzante slabs—hieroglyphs that Caso had repeatedly claimed were of "a completely different style" from later Zapotec inscriptions[137]—"refer not to places but to *personal names*," and, in their surmise, "when a prisoner was identified by his personal name rather than a place glyph, he was a rival from within the same ethnic group."[138] That is to say, they contend that the lords of Early Monte Albán I were showcasing victories over their near neighbors rather than distant enemies.

In sum, then, the Marcus-Flannery account of the founding of Monte Albán is both surprisingly similar and significantly different from those of Caso, Bernal, Paddock, Winter, Joyce and even their colleague Blanton. On the similarity side, the important precedent of San José Mogote notwithstanding, they join the consensus that Monte Albán was Oaxaca's first true city, which grew very quickly with almost nothing that could qualify as humble beginnings. And irrespective of insistences that all the key parties were from the Valley of Oaxaca, and thus shared a single (proto-Zapotec) ethnicity, they concur that Monte Albán was, from its earliest beginnings a place of meeting, mixing and synthesis.

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[135] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 154.

[136] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 154.

[137] See, for instance, Caso, "Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932," *Obras* reprint page 183.

[138] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 154; their italics.

Yet as regards the crucial differences, instead of an inspiring foundation story in which different groups bring out the best in one another or in which, as Blanton suggests, the toleration of religious and ethnic differences allows a newly formed confederation to cultivate unity and stand strong against a common adversary, Marcus and Flannery's reliance on action theory leads them into a darker and much less flattering depiction of the actors and events that gave birth to Monte Albán. Their account of urban genesis via synoikism provides them an occasion to deliver a series of sobering suppositions including that the relevant "confederacy" and alliances were fully coerced and simply expedient, that only under great duress do people cooperate with one another, that no other mechanism is nearly so important in social evolution as warfare and that, in ancient Oaxaca (and presumably everywhere else), no motivation even begins to supersede personal self-interest. As we'll see, in later eras, when the city was more secure, the ominous Danzante display of "slain or sacrificed enemies" was disassembled and covered over, and Monte Albán's public art began to reflect a more diversified agenda of later leaders. But the original conception of the city, according to this unromantic depiction, was the work of thoroughly self-serving powerbrokers who responded to threats with louder and more vicious threats of their own.

C. THE LATE PERIOD I TRANSITION FROM CHIEFDOM TOWARD STATE: INADVERTENT ZAPOTEC ETHNOGENESIS

Following their elaborate and iconoclastic account of the origins of the great Zapotec capital and Early Monte Albán I, Marcus and Flannery provide a much more streamlined treatment of Late Monte Albán I, a period that in their scheme runs from about 300 BCE to 100 BCE.[139] Despite taking great pains to insist that their interest is in social evolution *without stages*, their discussion of this era nonetheless focuses on one question: How and when did Monte Albán make the transition from "chiefdom" to "state"? In other words, while they are willing to consider Early Period I Monte Albán as "Oaxaca's first city," the bar for "statehood" is somewhat higher. By their assessment,

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[139] On Late Monte Albán I, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 12.

Rosario-Phrase society, which immediately preceded Monte Albán I, "shows virtually no evidence of state institutions;" but Monte Albán II society, which is directly at odds with that of Marcus Winter, "has virtually all of the evidence of for statehood that an archaeologist could want."[140] For them, "That makes Monte Albán I the crucial period of time during which the state must have been forming."[141]

They believe that, following its emergence via "deliberate, and relatively rapid, resettlement of rural populations on a defensible hill," Monte Albán began almost immediately on the expansionist trajectory that would carry the settlement through the transition from a "chiefdom" to a "state" that controlled much of the region. Just as Monte Albán leaders had no real models for the urban configuration that they had adopted, this would be a "pristine or first generation state" insofar as there were no pre-existing states, at least none in the immediate area, on which they were patterning their expansion. Though suitably hesitant to pinpoint the date at which the new city made that transition to statehood, Marcus and Flannery maintain that "it must have been largely complete by Late Monte Albán I. By that time, even areas well outside of the valley were feeling the effects of Monte Albán's expansion."[142] That is to say, they see the full duration of Monte Albán I as an era of non-stop growth and expansion wherein the city went from literally nothing to near-complete domination of an area larger than the whole Valley of Oaxaca. For this era, the cliché that the only constant was change is apt.

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[140] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 155. Recall that Marcus Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* (Oaxaca de Juárez: Carteles editores, P.G.O., 1989, 1992), 63, contends that "evidence for what some have described as a militaristic, imperial state is flimsy at best." In his view, as discussed in chapter 5, Monte Albán at no time attained statehood status.

[141] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 155.

[142] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 155.

1. Hawaiian-Oaxaca Parallels: Leadership Decisions, Manpower Advantages and a Not-Inevitable Transition to Statehood

Resources for the study of Monte Albán I are limited because nearly all of that era's buildings were covered over, most by several layers of subsequent construction, and only a few have been excavated. However, not adverse to cross-cultural analogies, where Marcus and Flannery drew their principal model of urban genesis via synoikism from ancient Greece, they look to Polynesia, specifically Hawaii, for an instructive model of state formation.[143] As they explain, in the late 1770s, when first encountered by Capital Cook, the Hawaiian Islands, seemingly not unlike Rosario-era Oaxaca, were the site of contestation between numerous rival chiefs; but then, over the next several decades, largely owing to the "relentless fighting" of an ambitious leader named Kamehameha, control of the islands was consolidated "into a single military kingdom under the rule of one man."[144] Capitalizing on the fact that Hawaii is one of the few contexts in which Westerners were on hand to watch and document the process of transition from chiefdom to state, they point to four particularly pertinent parallels between the Polynesian case and what they imagine was happening in the Valley of Oaxaca during Late Monte Albán I.

First, they see a general sameness in the sequence of events wherein one major chiefdom, or at least one major faction within a chiefdom, undertakes a kind of two-step process toward eventual domination of all competitors: Just as Kamehameha succeeded first in seizing control of the entire island of Hawaii and then eventually all of the other islands in the archipelago, the leaders of San José Mogote first seized control of the defensive hilltop of Monte Albán, which subsequently became their base of operations from which to win control of the entire Oaxaca Valley.[145] Likewise, leaders in both contexts used similar means of exploiting the advantages of their first sphere of domination—respectively, the large island of Hawaii and the Monte Albán

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[143] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 155.

[144] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 157.

[145] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 157.

mountaintop—in order to extend that domination over a much larger area: In Kamehameha's case, he ordered the intensification of agriculture in O'ahu's Anahulu Valley, which gave him a means of feeding and augmenting the large numbers of troops with which he eventually dominated all of the other islands. In Marcus and Flannery's view, Kamehameha's agriculture coup is parallel to the "piedmont strategy," an ingenious irrigation system whereby the early leaders of Monte Albán were able not only to feed that newly relocated population but also to greatly enhance their demographic advantage over all other Oaxaca constituencies.[146] Thus in both cases—that is, in Kamehameha's eventual domination of the Hawaiian Islands and in Monte Albán's eventual subjugation of the Oaxaca Valley—a sheer manpower advantage was key to success.

Second, they look to the well-documented exploits of Kamehameha to make the point that, in their view, chiefdoms do not simply "turn into" states; and thus they avoid, for instance, the seeming naturalness of a formulation such as "a chiefdom evolved into a state…"[147] Just as they insisted that the origin of Monte Albán was not the inevitable result of what had happened earlier, they now stress that Monte Albán's transition to statehood was not inevitable. Instead, consistent with their actor-oriented view that these so-termed "evolutionary changes" inevitably depend upon the activities of aggressive leaders, they explain that, "We believe that states arise *when one member of a group of chiefdoms begins to take over its neighbors*, eventually turning them into subject provinces of a much larger polity."[148] In their assessment, strong, self-serving leaders played a crucial role in both contexts.

Third, they use the Hawaiian example to make a point about "transitional societies": "Such societies occur at moments of rapid evolution, between periods of

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[146] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 157. On the "piedmont strategy," also see ibid., 146, 148 and 169-70.

[147] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 157.

[148] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 157; their italics.

stability or slower evolution."[149] Thus while Marcus and Flannery are critical of reifying evolutionary "stages" such as chiefdom and state,[150] they do see those as conditions of relative stability when compared to the status of societies in transition, betwixt and between those plateaus. Not unlike Victor Turner's notion of "liminal" periods of history, transitional societies—of which Monte Albán I is a prime example—are contexts of both special precariousness and special creativity.[151] But, where the Hawaiian transition from chiefdom to state required some four decades, the implication here is that the entire 400-year duration for Period I Monte Albán qualifies as a "transitional society"—not an unreasonable claim for an era that begins with the establishment of a city where none had existed and leads to domination of the whole valley.[152]

Fourth and finally, the better-documented Hawaii situation provides Marcus and Flannery another opportunity to extol the general virtues of action theory over alternate approaches. Where ecological functionalism could attribute the emergence of the Hawaiian state to a growing population's competition over limited farmland, and where a "natural selection model" might focus on the big island's unique access to firearms and European advisors, neither of those explanations is adequate to explain the Polynesian evidence and the crucial role of Kamehameha's aggressive leadership.[153] Action theorists, however, *do* appreciate the importance of individual human actors and specific leadership decisions, and, according to these co-authors, that principle ought to be applied even in archaeological contexts in which the specific identities of those leaders escape us. Thus in their surmise, "Without question there must have been leaders like

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[149] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 157.

[150] See Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 236.

[151] See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969) especially chap. 3, "Liminality and Communitas."

[152] Regarding the kind of liminal or "in-between" status of Period I Monte Albán, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 171, write "Monte Albán I was a society in transition from chiefdom to state, and cannot be fitted easily not one of these evolutionary stages."

[153] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 157-58.

Kamehameha involved in the Monte Albán synoikism and the creation of early Zapotec states, but we will never know their names."[154]

2. Momentum toward Statehood: 400 Years of "Spectacular Demographic and Militaristic Expansion"

In any case, whether Period I Monte Albán qualifies as a state is, of course, largely contingent on how one defines that term. Again impaired by the limited access to buildings of this period, and declining to insist on a pat definition, Marcus and Flannery inventory several of the usual diagnostics of statehood—though with mixed results. For instance, regarding the sorts of public and residential architecture that usually signal statehood styles of leadership, they come to the largely negative conclusion that "Monte Albán I society had plenty of elite residences, but thus far no evidence of a palace in which a king might reside."[155] The evidence with respect to Monte Albán I funerary architecture is similarly ambiguous: There were "high-status burials" but nothing so elegant as the royal tombs of latter eras.[156] Regarding the demography and settlement patterns that usually denote statehood, they pursue the suggestion that chiefdoms tend to have "settlement hierarchies" with three levels or tiers of communities—towns, large villages and small villages—while states add a fourth level, namely, cities.[157] Although Monte Albán itself, with its more than 5000 residents, is the only "city" in the Oaxaca Valley during this era, they nonetheless arrive at the lukewarm conclusion that while "one gets the sense that a four-tiered settlement hierarchy was indeed emerging during the course of Monte Albán I," a large percentage of the population remained clustered very near the paramount city, and that is a configuration more characteristic chiefdoms than states.[158] Therefore, as we will see in a moment, they believe that it would not be

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[154] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 158.

[155] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 161.

[156] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 161.

[157] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 162.

until Monte Albán II that these different tiers of communities are organized into the sort "lattice of nested cells" characteristic of state-level regional integration.[159]

In short, they find so many signs that Late Period I Monte Albán was moving in the direction of statehood and domination of the Valley of Oaxaca that completion of that trajectory seems inevitable. Spectacular beginnings had created unstoppable momentum for the next stages. As in the case of Kamehameha's accumulation of an overwhelming edge over his Hawaiian competitors, the leaders of Late Monte Albán I had amassed such a disproportionate share of the valley's population that no one could forestall for long their steamrolling expansion. Be that as it may, they feel compelled to present their conclusion about just how far that process had gone by the end of Monte Albán I with a measure of tentativeness:

> "More research is needed before we will fully understand Monte Albán's relationship to its hinterland at this time. We suspect that Monte Albán I was a 400-year period of spectacular demographic and militaristic expansion, beginning with the urban relocation at 500 BC and proceeding to subjugation of the entire Valley of Oaxaca by 100 BC. Outlying areas, both in the valley and in the surrounding mountain, were probably brought under Monte Albán's hegemony by the combination of [a] alliance building, [b] population settlement, and [c] military force, with those who resisted ending up as the corpses on carved stones."[160]

3. Unintended Consequences of the "Piedmont Strategy": Military Motives but Cultural, Artistic and Intellectual Ramifications

Narratively speaking, however, whether Monte Albán achieved statehood during the end of Period I or near the beginning of Period II is not nearly so intriguing as another component of the *Zapotec Civilization* account of Late Monte Albán I. From an actor-

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[158] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 164-65.

[159] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 173-75; I will address point again in the next sub-section.

[160] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 165.

centered view, if the Monte Albán I transition from chiefdom to state depends on strong and strategic leadership decisions, the same now-familiar pattern applies insofar as those deliberate decisions invariably eventuate in unforeseen consequences. In this account, the movement toward statehood is, paradoxically, both under and out of the control of Monte Albán's leaders. Nevertheless, the unanticipated repercussions that Marcus and Flannery mention are large and, in this case, exceedingly fortuitous. Again somewhat reminiscent of Ignacio Bernal's posit that early Monte Albán was vitalized by the interactions between peoples of different cultural backgrounds, they note that,

> "One unintended consequence of bringing together thousands of people in a new city can be an explosion of arts and crafts, especially when so many people are forced to abandon agriculture."[161]

This kind of flourishing of intellectual and artistic life occurred in several of those instances of Greek synoikism and, not surprisingly, the relocation of so many people into Monte Albán also created an ambience of cultural inventiveness and possibility. In their view, "Early Monte Albán was such an environment, and its sponsorship of craftspeople penetrated even to the towns in the hinterland."[162]

In other words, where action theorists will stress the ways in which the so-termed piedmont strategy of canal irrigation was originally designed as an efficient means of feeding Monte Albán's growing population and thus of amassing the manpower necessary for military adventuring, Marcus and Flannery also note the less deliberate but more salutary and wide-ranging consequences of this highly effective means of food-getting. The efficiency of that irrigation technique "forced" (or perhaps freed) many people from agricultural labor, allowing them to pursue other sorts of work, notably various sorts of crafts. Accordingly, even though the deliberate incentive both of founding and feeding the city was to amass military might, Monte Albán I witnessed a kind of happy convergence of at least three factors: An unprecedented diversity of

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[161] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 158.

[162] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 158.

peoples of different cultural backgrounds who presumably stimulated and challenged one another, an unprecedented diversity of non-agricultural artisans and craft specialists, and an unprecedentedly large population of consumers to support that new wealth of craft specialization.

In this portion of the *Zapotec Civilization* script, we are confronted, then, with a particularly vivid instantiation of the ironic interplay between flatly self-interested and pragmatic leadership choices that spur, seemingly almost by accident, what Marcus and Flannery describe as a great burst of cultural, artistic and intellectual inventiveness. In the realm of pottery, for instance, this period spawns an impressive diversity of vessel shapes and sizes, including highly distinctive "effigy bottles" fashioned into anthropomorphic depictions of *Cociyo* or Lightening, "the most powerful supernatural ever depicted in Zapotec art."[163] In the realm of calendrics, they are persuaded that both of the Zapotec calendars—a 365-day "secular" calendar and the 260-day ritual calendar or *piye*—had come into use.[164] And in the realm of writing, Monte Albán I had stelae with hieroglyphic inscriptions that "provide one of Mesoamerican's earliest examples of a 'pure text' of eight hieroglyphs in two columns."[165] Thus, while the Period I leaders of this (re)construction tend to appear as power-hunger brutes, they create, if largely inadvertently, the conditions for considerable intellectual and artistic innovation. These self-aggrandizing militaristic leaders were accidental patrons of the arts, as it were.

Moreover—and this points to another significant difference between this version and those of Caso and Bernal, both of whom are unwilling designate anything prior to Monte Albán III as "Zapotec"—Marcus and Flannery contend that, "What emerged during Monte Albán I was an art style distinct from that of any other region, a style so closely associated with the Valley of Oaxaca that it is generally referred to as

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[163] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 158-59.

[164] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 159-60.

[165] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 158.

Zapotec."[166] Furthermore, the iconography and hieroglyphic writing on the stelae of Monte Albán I suggest to them that "we are dealing with a group of people who spoke an early version of Zapotec and practiced an early version of Zapotec religion."[167] And, additionally, "Combined with our evidence for *Cociyo* in pottery sculpture, these stelae leave little doubt that we are dealing with people who were ethnically Zapotec."[168] That is to say, in addition to a distinctive Zapotec art style and perhaps a significantly new language and a new religion, they counter Blanton's unwillingness to weigh in on the old ethnogenesis question by venturing that it was (probably) this dynamically transitional era that evoked the origins of a distinct Zapotec ethnicity.[169]

On the one hand, then, this portion of Marcus and Flannery's narrative, surprisingly, provides strong resonances with Caso's and Bernal's emphases on the invariably fortuitous consequences of admixing peoples of different cultural

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[166] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 158.

[167] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 155.

[168] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 160. It may be worth making the clarification that while, as we've noted, Marcus and Flannery believe that all of the Rosario-era Oaxacan competitors and thus all the original founders of Monte Albán were of the same ethnicity (see ibid., 144), they are making a point here about the emergence of a distinctive *Zapotec* ethnicity, that is, an ethnic orientation with strong continuity with colonial and contemporary Zapotecs.

[169] Elsewhere Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 27, write that, "We believe that the occupants of the Valley of Oaxaca became recognizably 'Zapotec' sometimes between 400 BC and AD 100." That half-millennium window, which provides them lots of leeway in locating the emergence of a Zapotec ethnicity, runs from the end of Early Monte Albán I (500-300 BCE) through mid-Monte Albán II (150/100 BCE-200 CE). The quotations that I have used in this section suggest that they favor locating it in Monte Albán I; and at points (e.g., ibid., 171), that contend that, "by the end of Monte Albán I the entire valley was under Monte Albán's hegemony and Zapotec ethnogenesis was in flower." But at other points in their text (e.g., ibid., 242) they seem to favor locating the emergence in Monte Albán II. Irrespective of understandable imprecision in locating the origins of a distinct Zapotec ethnicity in the archaeological record, the stance of Marcus and Flannery is like that of Paddock, who also locates that origin near the beginning of Monte Albán, and different from those of Caso and Bernal, who locate the origin of Zapotec ethnicity in the Period III climax of Monte Albán.

backgrounds, and it even reechoes Paddock's suggestion that the urban environment of Monte Albán provided a kind of stimulus and incubator for the blossoming of a distinct Zapotec cultural-ethnic identity that remains intact in present-day villages.[170] This segment of their story might therefore, like those earlier versions, provide a resource variously for praising the artistic and intellectual accomplishments of native Oaxacans, for affirming a mestizo identity, and/or for asserting a Zapotec cultural and ethnic ownership of the Monte Albán ruins.

On the other hand, however, the action theory slant, which brings to the fore the unsavory motivations of the protagonists, largely undermines any celebration of the themes of cultural integrity, artistic inventiveness and the against-all-odds triumph of ethnic continuity. In this actor-centered plotline, relentless self-interest and cut-throat competition are the driving motivations from which everything else is derivative. Ironically, perhaps disturbing, even the ethnogenesis of the Zapotecs is among the largely inadvertent side-effects of the political and military machinations of the city's leaders. This is, for better or worse, not the sort of story of origins that a people is likely to tell about themselves. In this script, poignantly enough, all of Monte Albán I's seminal innovations in art, calendrics and writing—innovations that Alfonso Caso could champion as evidence of the high-mindedness and sophistication of early pre-Columbian Oaxaca civilizations—are consigned to the ambiguous status of "unintended consequences."

D. THE PERIOD II TRANSITION FROM STATE TOWARD EMPIRE: POLITICAL CLIMAX BEFORE CULTURAL FLORESCENCE

Moving on to their rendition of Period II, though Marcus and Flannery, as we'll see, use the term advisedly, their description of a "Zapotec empire"—which subsumed an area more than five times as large as the Valley of Oaxaca!—will strike many students of

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[170] On Paddock's view of Monte Albán as kind of incubator, see especially the section entitled "Closing Thoughts: An Expendable Zapotec Capital, but an Essential Zapotec Cultural-Ethnic Identity" in chapter 3.

Monte Albán as the most unexpected component of their entire (re)construction.[171]

Predictably, they reject the contentions of Caso and Bernal that the new ceramic style of

Monte Albán II (100 BCE-200 CE) signals a special Maya influence by arguing instead

that the most important factors in Oaxaca social evolution remained overwhelmingly

local. And they contest the shared opinion of Caso, Bernal and Paddock that Monte

Albán II was marked by a dramatic but elite transformation, the impact of which was

confined to "an autocracy of rulers or priests who imposed their own ideas but did not

constitute a majority."[172] Instead, they describe the era as a largely unbroken continuation

of the encompassing processes of growth and expansion that had characterized Monte

Albán I. But their assessment of the extent and eventual outcome of those continuing

processes comes as a major surprise.

In their view, where state-level status may or may not have been achieved during

Period I, "During Monte Albán II there can no longer be any doubt that Oaxaca society

was organized as a state, and an expansionist state at that."[173] Thus, where Winter claims

that Monte Albán never attained statehood and Blanton characterized Monte Albán II as a

time of "retrenchment" wherein weakened external threats resulted in a weakened capital,

Zapotec Civilization counters with a presentation of Period II as the era in which Monte

Albán's sustained surge led to by far the widest sphere of influence that the city ever

enjoyed. So discrepant are these respective assessments of Monte Albán II that readers

of the alternate versions have to wonder if these archaeologist-authors are really

describing the same 300-year period.

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[171] As in the case of Monte Albán I, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, devote two chapters to Monte Albán II: chap. 13, "The Emergence of the Zapotec State," and chap. 14, "Colonization and Conquest." Ibid., 207, provides a map of the territory subsumed by "Zapotec expansion during Monte Albán Ic-II" wherein the actually Valley of Oaxaca is less than 20% of the whole area of influence.

[172] Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 800.

[173] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 172.

1. A Surprising Pre-Classic Climax: Certain Statehood, Single-Minded Leaders, Spectacular Growth and Maximal Regional Influence

Having argued for the Late Period I emergence of a distinct Zapotec ethnicity, Marcus and Flannery can now begin to rely less on cross-cultural analogies and more on "direct historical" extrapolations from sixteen-century and present-day accounts of Zapotecs, which, together with more ample archeological data, enables richer descriptions of Monte Albán II architecture and ritual.[174] Disappointingly, however, their characterizations of Period II leaders are not less generalized than previous eras. In fact, they now push the tenants of action theory so far that the troubling tendency to depict the Zapotec rulers as largely one-dimensional figures—selfish people like all people, overwhelmingly preoccupied with the acquisition of power and besting their rival rulers—is, if anything, accentuated in their account of this era. Also, the leitmotif of a paradoxical play of deliberate decisions and unintended consequences is somewhat muted insofar as this arc of the story depicts aggressively self-interested leaders who are largely succeeding in getting precisely what they want, at least for the time being. In the Period II segment of this rendition of Oaxaca history, leaderly control is depicted more as a reality than an illusion.

In any case, as this portion of their story unfolds, the leaders of Monte Albán II exploit their already-insurmountable supremacy over all rivals in the valley, and thereby continue to widen the gap between themselves and any potential competitors. Once Monte Albán had amassed the political and military apparatus of statehood—which no one else in the area had—they had little difficulty transforming the surrounding chiefdoms into "subject provinces."[175] Exploiting their advantage to ever greater

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[174] On their understanding of the difference between "ethnographic analogy" and the "direct historical approach," see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 32. As they explain (ibid., 185), "For Monte Albán II, we need not rely as heavily on [cross-cultural] ethnographic analogy to reconstruct religious rituals as we did for earlier periods. So similar were some of the rituals of Period II to those of the historic Zapotec that we can turn instead to the direct historical approach."

[175] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 195.

advantage, Period II rulers, we're told, embarked on a period of nearly spectacular growth in which they not only won hegemony over the entire Valley of Oaxaca, but, moreover, began to extend their control far beyond the valley. Marcus and Flannery find support for this assertion of Monte Albán's stupendous Period II success in two demographic trends that are at first puzzling, then revealing. In both cases, they interpret that data very differently than Blanton had.

First, the Late Period I chiefdom-like configuration of 155 settlements clustered very near to Monte Albán dissipated during this era; and thus while the population of the city proper continued to grow, the central region of the Valley of Oaxaca actually lost considerable population, plummeting to just 23 communities. In fact, the number of people in the entire valley seems to have dropped from 51,000 in Late Monte Albán I to just 41,000 in Monte Albán II.[176] For Blanton, this signals a conjoined weakened threat and thus somewhat curtailed capital.[177] Marcus and Flannery, however, contend that this substantial decline of population in the proximity of the fast-growing city is actually a completely predictable consequence of Monte Albán's mounting strength, which issued in the sort of four-tiered "lattice of nested cells" that is characteristic of "an administrative hierarchy so well integrated that towns encircle the capital city at very regular distances; in turn, large villages encircle towns at regular (and shorter) distances."[178] In other words, the declining population of the central valley, in their view, reflects the fact that, instead of an upstart clawing for its existence, Monte Albán had by now become the "capital city" of a vigorous young state. Instead of micromanagers, the

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[176] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 172.

[177] See Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 41-44; or chapter 4 in this book.

[178] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 174. In the state-style "four-tiered hierarchy" of Period II, Monte Albán remained the only city, but there were six towns or "regional administrative centers" with something on the order of 1000-2000 inhabitants, at least 30 large villages with 200-700 persons, and some 400 small villages with less than 200 residents. Ibid., 173-74.

Monte Albán II leaders had established an efficient chain of command that had enabled them to delegate authority, and thus to bring more and more territory under their sway.[179]

A second, even more counterintuitive demographic observation comes in their startling contention that the Monte Albán state actually achieved its greatest territorial limits, not during Period III, the so-termed Classic era, but rather during Period II, which continues to be variously glossed as "Pre-Classic," "Proto-Classic," "Terminal Formative"[180] or sometimes, as in Winter's account, the "Early Urban stage" that will develop into the bigger and better "Late Urban stage" of Monte Albán III.[181] In other words, while they will reaffirm the conventional view that the actual capital city did not attain its greatest population nor its architectural and artistic apex until Period III, they make the dissentient case that Monte Albán, in fact, enjoyed a substantially wider sphere of regional influence during Period II. Irrespective of a seemingly odd disjunction between the unfledged elaboration of the capital and its utmost territorial reach, Marcus and Flannery regard this too as largely predictable insofar as Monte Albán II exemplifies another widespread phenomenon: "A characteristic of many early states was that their initial appearance was followed by a period of rapid, almost explosive growth, during which they reached their maximum territorial limits."[182] Later, following this initial overreach, and as conquered provinces in a sense "catch up" with their conquerors, they break free; and this is precisely what they will describe in their account of Monte Albán

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[179] For summary comments on this sort strategic chain of command that allowed Monte Albán leaders to control increasingly large territories, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 243. Also, note the contrast between Marcus and Flannery's view and that of Ignacio Bernal who maintained that, of all five of the main stages, Monte Albán II is found in the fewest places: "In the Valley of Oaxaca Period II [i.e., Monte Albán II] materials occur only at Caballito Blanco and at 23 other sites, almost all large [of course, Monte Albán included]." Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 799.

[180] See, for instance, the chronology table in Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 29.

[181] See the chronology table in Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archeological Record*, 128.

[182] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 195.

III.[183] In Period II, however, the leaders of Monte Albán are enjoying the largest discrepancy between their recent advances and their neighbors' persistence at the level of chiefdoms; this is the era of the greatest mismatch, as it were. Moreover, given the action theory depiction of aggressive Oaxaca leadership, we can be certain that the Monte Albán sovereigns in this story will exploit that discrepancy to the fullest extent possible. Overreaching is perfectly in character for the protagonists of this (re)construction.

And thirdly, they, moreover, bolster the case for this vigorous Period II expansion by adducing two complementary lines of evidence to argue that colonization, heretofore underestimated, could have been at least as important as military conquest in winning that immense territorial influence. For one, reinterpreting the so-termed "conquest slabs" on Building J, they suggest that several panels that lack upside-down heads "could mean that some provinces joined Monte Albán voluntarily, or were colonized rather than conquered."[184] And for two, appealing also to more solidly archaeological evidence of "an abrupt change" to Monte Albán II ceramic styles in numerous outlying communities, they conclude that the rulers of Monte Albán, continuing a trend begun in Period I, were working to establish "a north-south 'corridor of influence' between Tehuacán—the gateway to Central Mexico—and the Pacific Coast, the gateway to the tropics. At its peak in late Monte Albán II, that corridor may have included 20,000 km^2 of the subject territory."[185]

In sum, then, by stark contrast to Blanton's suggestion that Period II was a somewhat lethargic hiatus in-between the more aggressively expansionist Periods I and III, Marcus and Flannery present Monte Albán II as an era of still-rapid expansion that issued in control over an enormous area, several times larger than the Valley of Oaxaca.

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[183] Regarding the downsizing of the Monte Albán empire during the era of the city's Period III florescence, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 206, or the upcoming discussion in this chapter.

[184] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 196.

[185] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 206.

And, therefore, according to this iconoclastic hypothesis, if by "empire" one means a state that "incorporates people other languages and ethnic groups," then they find it plausible to argue that Monte Albán, still in advance of its Period III prime, was the capital of a Period II "Zapotec empire," though one of modest proportions as compared, for instance, to the subsequent Aztec empire.[186]

2. Manufacturing Royal Lineages: Overbearing Leaders and/or Overbearing Applications of Action Theory

In the context of all this outward expansion and adventuring, Marcus and Flannery describe developments within the actual capital city that are also highly impressive and diverse though, in their view, always devoted to the same political purpose. While agreeing that Monte Albán had a grand conception from its very beginning—in fact, the city was grand in the imagination of the San José Mogote leaders even before it was founded—they also share the conventional opinion that it was during Period II that the layout of the city really materialized: "Monte Albán II saw an enormous increase in types and numbers of public structures… we are awed by the explosion of public architecture in Period II."[187] As they describe it, the urban complex of Monte Albán II would be immediately recognizable to persons familiar with the ruins as they presently stand:

> "During this era the rulers of Monte Albán leveled a huge area, 300 m north-south and 200 m east-west, paving it over with white stucco to create the city's Main Plaza. In places where natural outcrops of bedrock were too high to be leveled, the latter served as nuclei for major buildings. One north-south line of structures provided the eastern border of the plaza, another line provided the western border, and a third line covered a series of outcrops in the center of the plaza."[188]

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[186] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 206.

[187] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 178.

[188] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 178.

Also during Monte Albán II, the northern limits of the plaza were established by the massive North Platform, "which swallowed up several Period I buildings."[189] Grand as the original conception had been, it was not grand enough for the leaders of this era's vigorously expanding state.

From their perspective, then, where the conception of Late Period I still reflected lingering investments in the social "ranking" associated with chiefdoms, the abundant architectural innovations of Monte Albán II—most notably, the appearance of "royal palaces," which presumably housed a growing nobility, and the increasingly more elaborate tombs where that nobility was presumably buried—reflect the full transition to the sort of stratified society characteristic of an "archaic state."[190] The most salient difference is that, in chiefdoms, there is "a continuum of differences in rank from bottom to top," with "people being ranked in terms of their genealogical distance from the paramount chief;" in archaic states, by contrast, there is "an actual genealogical gap between the stratum of nobles and the stratum of commoners."[191] The latter arrangement—which amounts to the creation of the notion of "royal lineages"—greatly enhances the authority of leaders, who now qualify as "kings" rather than "chiefs," insofar as it creates an inviolate boundary between royalty and non-royalty and, moreover, ensures that royal authority will be passed onto one's genealogical descendants.

As regards their storyline for Monte Albán II, Marcus and Flannery concede that there are many possible scenarios that could have precipitated this enhancement of authority. They, however, predictably enough, propose "an actor-centered explanation" wherein, once again, ancient Oaxacan leaders are credited with an almost lethal combination of keen foresight and unremitting self-interest. In this scenario, the most enterprising among the Monte Albán chiefs undertook deliberate measures to ensure that

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[189] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 178.

[190] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 180-81.

[191] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 181.

their offspring would retain their power, namely, by marrying the highest ranking women available. Eventually, following several generations of these strategic marriages, kinship ties between the upper and lower ranking members of society would have been completely severed, the notion of a royal lineage would have been in place and, at that point, the authority of Monte Albán's royal families would have been largely insured.[192] In Weberian terms, these savvy leaders had the wherewithal to deliberately transform a chiefly system of "personal charisma" into a state or kingship system of "inherited charisma" (or "charisma of office"), which far better served the interests of themselves and their descendants.[193] In Marcus and Flannery's terms, the elites of the Valley of Oaxaca "figured out how to further solidify their privileged status by preventing vast numbers of their countrymen and women from marrying them. The result was a society in which a gulf of class endogamy yawned between two strata."[194]

Additionally, in some of their most strained (and thus least persuasive) deployments of the action theory perspective, they suggest that these same sly leaders further connived, by a wide spectrum of different strategies, to create an ideological superstructure that would support this means of perpetuating their privilege:

> "This new division of ruling and commoner classes, like the earlier emergence of hereditary rank, had to be rationalized plausibly or it would not be accepted. The solution was a new ideology in which nobles and commoners were seen as having separate genealogical origins."[195]

It is not entirely clear whether they think that the Monte Albán leaders were trying to persuade themselves of their legitimacy or simply working to manipulate the "commoners" via this "new ideology;" that is to say, these authors frequently imply the

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[192] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 181. For a more concise and arguably more clear summary of this portion on their story, see ibid., 242.

[193] See Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

[194] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 242.

[195] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 242.

extreme reductionist position wherein the rulers themselves do not really believe in the religio-cosmological system that they are perpetrating strictly for political gain. But, in either case, they interpret essentially all aspects of Monte Albán II iconography as evidence that the elite worked to provide an elaborate supernatural justification for the continued hegemony of their family lineages:

> "Nobles were descended from Lightening, the angry form of Sky, now iconographically depicted as *Cociyo*. They wore images of Lightening in their headdresses, and when they died they metamorphosed into flying figures who joined their supernatural ancestors in the clouds. Commoners, on the other hand, were only descended from other commoners."[196]

Indeed, Marcus and Flannery construe every feature of Monte Albán II's major architectural, artistic and "religious" enhancements as a "rationalizing" means of reinforcing the authority of Monte Albán nobles. Even hieroglyphic writing, which became significantly more elaborate and more prominent in Monte Albán II, was, according to their uncharitable interpretation, first and foremost, "a tool of Oaxaca's ruling class," a means of "propaganda by which the nobility announced and maintained this new rationale for their continued domination."[197]

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[196] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 242. The gap between nobility and commoner, between rulers and ruled, was widened even further by the creation of two distinct modes of speech: "Accompanying this two-class system was a dichotomy of noble speech and commoner speech. Noble speech was not only true but elegant, depicted iconographically by an elaborate speech scroll; commoner speech was full of lies and confusion." Ibid., 242.

[197] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 242, contend "The visual form of noble speech was hieroglyphic writing, carved on stone monuments at places like Monte Albán. This writing, first used [in Monte Albán I] to record the names of rival chiefs slain or sacrificed, went on to become a tool of Oaxaca's ruling class. It was used in their endless competition of leadership, prestige, territory, tribute, and politically advantageous marriages. It was also used to advance royal propaganda, either vertically (between noble and commoner) or horizontally (among nobles)."

3. Imagining Propagandistic Purposes at Every Turn: Ballcourts, Two-Room Temples and Building J

This sequence of the *Zapotec Civilization* narrative, then, wherein Monte Albán II leaders marshal every available resource to assert their self-interest, evinces a particularly blunt application of the action theory paradigm. Consequently, in many respects, it is much less compelling as a thoroughgoing interpretation of this period in the city's development than as a kind of thought experiment—what these authors term, an "invitation" to imagine[198]—in which they attempt to reinterpret all of this era's most notable artistic and architectural innovations in ways that support the presuppositions of an "actor-centered explanation." In addition to dispatching Monte Albán II's impressive iconography displays, its unprecedented numbers of "royal palaces," its more elaborate tombs and its notable advances in hieroglyphic writing in that fashion, Marcus and Flannery similarly address ballcourts, two-room temples and the famous Building J in ways that also reduce those three multi-faceted forms to little more than instruments of propaganda.

First, with respect, for instance, to the famous I-shaped ballcourts, which they concur initially appeared at Monte Albán and other Oaxacan sites during Period II, they interpret the standardization of the shape as a sign that "we are dealing with an 'official game.'"[199] They acknowledge that there are myriad ways in which the ballcourt phenomenon might be interpreted—with reference, for instance, to Zapotec notions of cosmology, astronomy or mythology—but, for their purposes, only an explicitly political explanation is worthy of elaboration:

> "Why would the early Zapotec state invest in the construction and standardization of I-shaped ballcourts, in effect promoting an 'official' game? No one is sure, but some scholars believe that the ballgame played a role in conflict resolution between communities. It has been suggested that when two opposing towns competed in a state-sponsored athletic contest, held on a standardized court at

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[198] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 32.

[199] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 190.

their regional administrative center, the outcome of the game might have been taken as a sign of supernatural support for the victorious community. This, in turn, might lessen the likelihood that the two towns would actually go to war."[200]

Second, their extended discussion of the Period II emergence of the two-room temple configuration, some twenty of which were now located around the Main Plaza, follows a similarly political tack in accentuating the growing gulf between royalty and "ordinary people."[201] Drawing on the strong continuity between these ancient structures and the same-shaped Zapotec *yohpee* described in sixteenth-century Spanish accounts, they argue the transition from one-room to two-room temple plans "was likely done to accommodate full-time priests who lived in the inner room of the temple."[202] Thus while Marcus and Flannery entertain the possibility that these sanctuary spaces were site to esoteric propitiations and sacrifices of animals and people, their stronger emphasis is on the extent to this full-time priesthood was an agent of royal interests who "took a great deal of ritual out of the hands of Zapotec laymen."[203] And while they concede that the elaborate temples may ostensibly have been commissioned as "an act of royal piety," they favor an interpretation wherein the system of secret passages and entrances actually facilitated a kind of ritual prestidigitation—"spellbinding displays by priests dressed as giant birds, emerging dramatically from tunnels"[204]—that was designed to trick and intimidate commoners into believing that the royalty really were descended from Lightening and then, following death, were transformed into "Cloud Persons."[205] Again, ostensible acts of religious devotion are actually political ploys.

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[200] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 191.

[201] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 179-80, notes that, "San José Mogote had at least ten such temples in Period II; Monte Albán may have had twice that many."

[202] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 182.

[203] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 182.

[204] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 185.

[205] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 186-88.

And third, their treatment of the famed Building J, Monte Albán II's most renowned new feature, is even more telescoped in the service of demonstrating that the urban plaza had been modified in ways that made it a more and more effective context for the dissemination of political propaganda and intimidation. On the one hand, as noted earlier, they largely reaffirm Caso's and Blanton's contention that the so-termed conquest slabs on Building J provide scholars—just as they would have provided first-century visitors to the Main Plaza—some of the most vivid reminders of Monte Albán's military prowess. In that respect, they concur with Blanton that Building J provided a new extension of the equally grisly display of the humiliated Danzantes figures that had dominated the plaza in Period I. Yet, on the other hand, also like Blanton but unlike virtually every other account of Building J, from technical treatments to tourist pamphlets, these authors decline even a passing mention of the oddly-shaped structure's unmistakable astronomical alignments. The omission is telling.

As we've noted, Caso, and dozens after him, have pointed to this apparent astronomical sophistication as among the surest signs that "Epoch II of Monte Albán marked a new step in the development of the cultures of Oaxaca."[206] In fact, Building J's juxtaposition of "conquest slabs" and celestial referencings provided Caso an ideal occasion to praise the builders of this era of the city for a "balanced proficiency" of talents and interests—both in politico-military expansion, but also in more cerebral matters such as the movements of the stars and planets. It is, of course, not surprising that, like Blanton, Marcus and Flannery, focus on the explicitly political conquest slabs and soft-pedal (or actually fully ignore) the astronomical dimensions of Building J. They, again like Blanton, apparently regard the recurrent claim that this was an ancient observatory to be either too obvious or too absurd to merit discussion. In either case, however, the complete omission of even a nod to the highly distinctive shape and alignment of this building is telling of just what an *un*balanced, one-dimensional depiction of the Monte Albán II leaders they are providing. In this story, we meet Oaxacan rulers who display a disturbingly "unbalanced proficiency."

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[206] Alfonso Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, El Libro de la Cultura (Barcelona: Editiorial González Porto, 1936), 22; my translation.

4. Axiomatic Action Theory and Competitive Authoritarianisms: Cross-fertilizing Zapotec and Maya Leadership Styles

Finally, with respect to the timeworn topic of Monte Albán II's interactions with areas outside of Oaxaca, an issue too prominent for them to ignore, the *Zapotec Civilization* authors are even more ingenious in preserving and advancing the tenants of action theory. Also as noted repeatedly, for Caso and Bernal, among the most distinctive features of the Monte Albán II era was a shift from the predominantly Olmeciod influence of Monte Albán I to a "Mayanoid" influence; in Bernal words, "We believe that the most probable homeland of the bearers of the Monte Albán II culture was Chiapas or the Guatemala highlands; or the bearers may have come from the latter by way of the former."[207] Steadfast in their opinion that non-Oaxacan peoples and places played only ancillary roles in Oaxaca social evolution (and only indirectly engaging older ideas about Monte Albán II's supposed debt to the Maya zone), Marcus and Flannery do agree that there are striking parallels between the contemporaneous Period II developments in the Valley of Oaxaca and the ecologically very different area of Chiapas, specifically the urban layout of Chiapa de Corzo. The appearance in Chiapas of several of the same innovations observed in Monte Albán's second period—for instance, governmental palaces, royal tombs and two-roomed temples that are "provocatively similar"[208]— suggests to them that the political and religious institutions of an "archaic state" were emerging in the Maya zone as well.[209] Likewise, just as they had acknowledged a modest measure of outside influence on the earlier evolution of chiefly societies in Oaxaca, they concede that, "the archaic Zapotec state did not arise in a vacuum either."[210]

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[207] Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 801.

[208] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 191-94.

[209] Regarding an important difference between the Oaxaca and Chiapas cases, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 191, note that, "unlike Monte Albán, Chiapa de Corzo [in Chiapas] was not created by synoikism, nor was it in a defensive locality. It grew from a village whose history goes back before 1000 BC."

[210] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 191.

In their view, the respective leaders of Monte Albán II and Chiapa de Corzo, though neither in close collaborations nor in head-to-head competition, were very well aware of what was happening in each other's area.

Be that as it may, Marcus and Flannery's actor-oriented interpretation of those Period II Oaxaca-Chiapas parallels and the interactivity between the two regions presents an intriguingly twisted version of Caso's and Bernal's celebration of the stimulating effects of Oaxaca-Maya cross-cultural interactions. They first point to the fact that contemporaneous and remarkably similar archaic states had arisen in the mountains of central Oaxaca and in the much warmer and wetter lowlands of Chiapa de Corzo as yet more evidence of the futility of trying to explain social evolution in terms of environmental factors: "ecological functionalism explains little of what happened."[211] Alternatively, from their action theory perspective, to understand the parallel socio-cultural developments in these two areas one needs to look not to the respective natural environments, which are very different, but instead to the dynamics of competitive leadership, which are very much the same. That is to say, they attribute the similarities between Period II Monte Albán and Chiapa de Corzo primarily to a supposal that, in both contexts, aggressive leaders were involved in highly contentious battles to win and perpetuate their authority: "We can show that competition for positions of leadership was so violent in both regions that Chiapa de Corzo's palace was burned, and Monte Albán built defensive walls."[212] In this script, then, the processes that led to emergent states at Monte Albán and at Chiapa de Corzo are largely independent of one another— with only one very important exception: "Each region knew the other's political strategies, and neither region's elite would allow themselves to be outdone."[213]

In the end, then, by contrast to Ignacio Bernal's inspiring image of the cross-fertilization of Oaxaca and Maya societies that spurs Monte Albán II leaders to far

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[211] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 194.

[212] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 194.

[213] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 194.

surpass what they might have accomplished had they remained more fully isolated, these action theorists provide us a picture of duplicitous Monte Albán II leaders who borrowed only one thing of consequence from their Chiapas counterparts—new and more efficient means of duplicity. In a kind of bleakly ironic means of mutual support, Maya and Zapotec leaders inspired one another to more thorough domination of their respective subordinate populations. The startling prospect of a widely influential "Zapotec empire" notwithstanding, this is indeed a very different and decidedly darker narrative of Monte Albán II.

E. THE PERIOD III "GOLDEN AGE" OF THE ZAPOTECS: GROWING CITY, SHRINKING STATE

With Marcus and Flannery's treatment of Monte Albán III (200-700 CE), by all accounts the city's "the golden age," we encounter again a much more provocative instantiation of the paradoxical play of deliberate leadership decisions and unintended consequences.[214] During Period II, the Monte Albán they describe enjoyed such a disproportionate advantage over any other constituency in the region—sheer size was still its greatest asset—that the capital city's range of territorial control grew and grew with only minimal resistance. In that era, strategic leadership decisions invariably met with predictably fortuitous results. At the onset of Monte Albán III—or more properly, Monte Albán IIIA (200-500 CE)—the so-termed Early Classic era, the largely setback-free expansion of Monte Albán II continued unabated. Already the largest city in the southern Mexican highlands, the Zapotec capital would remain so for the next 500 years.

To maintain and extend their supremacy, shrew Monte Albán leaders continued to rely on a "tripartite strategy of colonization, conquest, and diplomacy" wherein they sent large numbers of colonists into areas that were in no position to resist, they militarily

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[214] Marcus and Flannery's principal account of Monte Albán III, which is devoted largely to Monte Albán IIIA (200-500 CE) and only sparingly treats Monte Albán IIIB (500-700 CE), appears in chap. 15, "The Golden Age of Zapotec Civilization;" but their most effective narrative (re)construction of this era actually appears in their final summary chap. 16, specifically, ibid., 243-44.

crushed those regions that did resist, and "when their expansion came up against that of a rival civilization the size of Teotihuacan's, they used skilled diplomacy."[215] Via this efficient combination of military might and well-considered restraint, Monte Albán had made itself one of the three or four most prominent players in the entire Mesoamerican world. As they explain:

> "Classic Zapotec civilization existed in a larger system beyond the dreams of the most ambitious actors of earlier periods. The enormous demographic advantage of Monte Albán had led to a reshaping of Mesoamerica by the fourth century AD. Their 'greater system' now stretched beyond the Valley of Oaxaca to include neighbors like Teotihuacan, the Mixtec, and the people of Chiapas."[216]

A trajectory of perpetual expansion is, however, certain eventually to reach its limit, and indeed that happened during the course of Period IIIA. Yet, instead of a simple over-expenditure of resources, Marcus and Flannery describe a scenario that is far more intriguing—and far more consistent with their conception of action theory. Ironically, Monte Albán's very carefully choreographed manipulation of surrounding settlements had the unintentional but inevitable consequence of schooling those "subject provinces" both in the general prospect of domination and in the specific means of effecting such domination. Inadvertently paving the way for resistance to their own authority, Monte Albán had engendered its vassals with precisely the mindset and the skills that they would need to break free of vassalage. If seemingly unforeseen by Monte Albán's leadership, Marcus and Flannery see this as a pattern that is widespread among fast expanding, and then subsequently contracting, states:

> "Taking advantage of its higher population, military strength, and greater degree of political centralization, Monte Albán had turned dozens of outlying regions into tribute-paying provinces. Ironically, however, Monte Albán's self-interested development of these provinces… had given those regions the very skills they needed to get stronger. By AD 400 [that is, by mid-Monte Albán IIIa] these regions were more centralized, more skilled at alliance building, more highly populated, and eager for autonomy. Gradually they began to break away from the

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[215] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 243.

[216] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 243.

grip of Monte Albán. The frontiers of Zapotec civilization were being rolled back to a point closer to the Valley of Oaxaca."[217]

This portion of their (re)construction provides, in other words, an especially strong exemplification of the so-termed illusion of control insofar as Monte Albán leaders' self-interested and pragmatic strategies of domination worked masterfully but, at the same time, had nurtured the seeds of their own undoing. Moreover, though Marcus and Flannery seldom address "the agency of commoners" that will be so important in Joyce's account, this ironic episode—in which the (relatively) short-term exploitation of peoples turned out to be their longer-term empowerment—could be read as a cautionary tale that speaks to the limits of centralized state control and maybe to even broader concerns with humility, arrogance, justice and just retribution. A provocative "payback" plotline to be sure.

1. Classic-Era Monte Albán: Considered Consolidation and Predictably Unpredictable Consequences

In any case, as those peripheral communities gained strength, acquired their own proficiency in statecraft and warfare, and thus became bona fide threats to Monte Albán, the capital's leaders were faced with a new challenge—to which they responded in characteristically self-interested, "rational" and pragmatic ways. Now surrounded by formerly subordinate settlements that were increasingly hostile and increasing well equipped to act on their hostility, Monte Albán was forced to devote more of its resources to defense; the settlement data shows, in fact, that by the end of Monte Albán IIIA, defensibility rather than Class I farm land had become the first priority in settlement selection.[218] Following centuries of Monte Albán's near-complete monopoly, the Oaxaca

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[217] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 243.

[218] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 244, note that: "By AD 500 [i.e., the date commonly used to mark the boundary between Monte Albán IIIa and IIIb], roughly 64 perfect of the estimated 115,000 citizens of the Valley of Oaxaca lived at 38 defensible sites." Also see ibid., 228.

region was again becoming more hotly disputed territory. More and more preoccupied on the home-front, Monte Albán's outward expansion came to a halt.

Moreover, the capital's long-reliable "tripartite strategy" for dealing with adversaries was reduced to two policy choices: warfare or diplomacy, the latter of which took on an unprecedented importance. In this contentious environment, the colonization of acquiescent regions, formerly Monte Albán's cheapest and easiest means acquiring influence, was no longer an option.[219] Furthermore, besides forestalling any additional expansion, the leaders of Monte Albán made a considered decision to downsize, as it were, opting for a reluctant tradeoff wherein "they chose to give up some of the more distant provinces in order to consolidate their grip on their core physiographic region."[220] Though the rapacious protagonists in this story would never voluntarily cede any portion of their control, the Monte Albán elite reasoned, it seems, that they could actually have more power by managing less area, but in more commanding ways.

Calculated as this tradeoff was, it led to a kind of redoubled irony insofar as the cycle of deliberate decisions and unintended consequences, in a sense, made yet another loop. In other words, this portion of the *Zapotec Civilization* narrative describes how the pragmatic ploy of relinquishing some their peripheral communities in order to consolidate Monte Albán's hold on more proximate areas alleviated one problem, but, inadvertently, resulted in a new, different and substantially greater threat. As noted earlier, the fast expansion of Monte Albán's influence in Period II had actually precipitated a decline in the population immediately surrounding the capital city; in Period IIIA, however, once Monte Albán had, in a sense, abandoned their control over the periphery, people flooded back into the seemingly greater security and opportunities of the central area. So extensive was this redistribution of population that, in their

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[219] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 230.

[220] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 244; also see ibid., 230.

assessment, it spurred two largely new urban concentrations whose populations "almost rivaled" that of Monte Albán, which at this point had an estimated 16,500 persons.[221]

Both cases bring to the fore sites that had not played a prominent role in earlier stories of Monte Albán; and in both cases, there is a somewhat odd discrepancy between the extremely important role that Marcus and Flannery ascribe to these places in Period III history and the extreme brevity with which they address them. First is Jalieza, "the most impressive of those new cities," which was located on a naturally defensible hilltop in the southern Valle Grande, about 20 kilometers southeast of Monte Albán, a strategic vantage from which it "could monitor traffic through a major pass between the Valle Grande and Tlacolula regions."[222] Although this new city of Jalieza never rivaled the architectural splendor of Monte Albán, a Period IIIA population estimated at 12,835 did approach that of the contemporaneous Zapotec capital (and in the wake of Monte Albán's eventual Period IV decline, they maintain that Jalieza became the largest city in the Valley of Oaxaca).[223] Second, while no similarly large community dominated the Tlacolula subvalley, they endorse the view that in the center of that region was a tight cluster of four towns—Dainzú, Macuilxochitl, Tlacochahuaya and Guadalupe—which had a combined population of about 12,292 persons.[224] Together these four settlements constituted "a dispersed Tier 1 community," also within 30 kilometers of Monte Albán, which provided a second major challenge to the main capital.[225] At this point, then, each of the three arms of Oaxaca Valley again had a "Tier I central place" with between 12,200 and 16,500 persons, "spaced roughly within a day's walk from each other."[226]

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[221] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 226, 244.

[222] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 226.

[223] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 234.

[224] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 244.

[225] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 226.

[226] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 227.

In other words, while Monte Albán retained its status as the foremost city in the valley throughout the remainder of Period III—in fact, it continued to grow to its peak population of perhaps 24,000 during Period IIIB[227]—not only had the territorial reach of the mountaintop city's control diminished significantly, it now faced two strong competitors literally at its doorstep. Again ironically enough, Monte Albán's seemingly conservative policy of contraction and consolidation had resulted in a situation that in many ways resembled the three-way face-off of the late Rosario Phase—with one strong settlement in each of the three subvalleys—which had led to Monte Albán's original founding via synoikism. In fact, the radical redistribution of population is sufficiently similar to prompt Marcus and Flannery's tentative suggestion that Jalieza's spectacular growth during this period "may even provide us with a second example of synoikism, or urban relocation."[228]

In any case, while Monte Albán's splendor and population continued to grow, the capital's status now dropped from the virtual monopoly it had enjoyed in Period II to that of the first among a trio of estimable contenders for control of the region. For the remainder of Period III, Jalieza, along with the Dainzú-Macuilxochitl-Tlacochahuaya-Guadalupe cluster, competed with the revered old capital city; but, in this rendition of Oaxaca history, "Never again would one of those concentrations dominate the valley as Monte Albán had for 500 years."[229] Therefore, in short—and in another highly suggestive storiological theme—the urban plaza of Monte Albán reached its apogee of size and elaboration, not when it was enjoying singular supremacy, but rather when it was being pressured by two aggressive young competitors. In a sense reviving Blanton's

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[227] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 234. Regarding Period III population estimates for the wider area, they suggest (ibid., 234) that, "The population of the Valley of Oaxaca [during Monte Albán IIIb]—difficult to estimate in light of the similarity of Monte Albán IIIb and IV ceramics—was undoubtedly above 100,000." Likewise relevant is their earlier suggestion (ibid., 225) that, "The population of the Valley of Oaxaca rose to an estimated 115,000 persons during Monte Albán IIIa. This growth was accompanied by tumultuous changes in the distribution throughout the valley."

[228] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 244.

[229] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 244.

recurrent contention that Monte Albán's fluctuating strength and vigor was always directly proportional to the external threats to which it was responding, this portion of Marcus and Flannery's account likewise suggests that competition, and maybe a measure of insecurity, actually spurred the old capital to its greatest exuberance.

2. A Postclassic-like Classic Era: Generic Action Theory Leaders and Leadership Styles

At the risk, then, of finding irony at every turn in this (re)construction of Monte Albán's history, it is more than a little surprising that the "golden age of the Zapotec civilization" corresponds to an era in which the capital's empire-building ambitions are being scaled back and compromised. Given the so-labeled Classic period's unlikely juxtaposition of *a Zapotec capital city* that was ascending to its greatest size and splendor with *a Zapotec sphere of influence* that was on the decline, how, then, do Marcus and Flannery characterize Period III Monte Albán proper? What did the Classic-era urban plaza itself come to look like? And what went on there?

Even more than for Monte Albán II, they are able to capitalize both on the abundance of accessible Period III archaeological remains—indeed, the great majority of what one presently sees at the site are Period III constructions and remodelings—and on the very strong continuity between the Monte Albán residents of this era and their post-Conquest Zapotec counterparts. Thus, on the one hand, the *Zapotec Civilization* descriptions and interpretations of this period are more extensive, more specific and, one might suspect, more reliable than for any previous era. Nonetheless, on the other hand, their continued commitments to action theory lead them into characterizations of the Period III capital and its leaders that, if fully consistent with the presuppositions of that theoretical starting point, are actually more generalized and less culturally distinctive than in nearly all previous treatments of Classic-era Monte Albán. Here again, the similarities with Blanton along with the differences from Caso, Bernal and Paddock are very apparent; and here again it is much easier to see how the Monte Albán protagonists

conform to generic propensities for self-serving violence than to more culturally specific inclinations of the "ancient Zapotec mind."

Two features of their account of this era are especially telling in this respect. For one, while Marcus and Flannery do, on occasion, follow the convention of referring to Monte Albán III as the "Classic" manifestation of the city, their depiction of this period participates in very few of the qualities routinely associated with that long-contested label. Though more resilient in popular than academic literature, the once-standard view held that so-designated Classic-era Monte Albán, like Classic-era Teotihuacan, was a largely peaceful and prosperous "theocratic state" wherein writing, iconography and monumental architecture would all have been directed toward "hieratic matters and the worship of gods of agriculture and fertility."[230] The "Postclassic," by contrast, which is usually correlated with Monte Albán IV and V (periods that *Zapotec Civilization* addresses only in the briefest terms), connotes a sort a cultural decadence wherein in militarism dominates all of other concerns, "a stage in Mesoamerican cultural history when settlements were ruled by military leaders, when warfare became extremely important, and when expansion conquest states based on the exaction of tribute became important."[231] By their attachment to the tenants of action theory, Marcus and Flannery, however, reject the notion that any era, in Oaxaca or anywhere else, actually conformed to that idealized notion of the conflict-free, "theocratic Classic." According to the main thrust of their account, "religion" *in any period* is little more than a gloss for political ambitions, and "priests" invariably emerge as agents of politico-military leaders who before, during and after Monte Albán III operated with priorities far more like those typically associated with the Postclassic than Classic. Thus, in a sense, their entire (re)construction has a very "Postclassic" feel to it.

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[230] Joseph W. Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs: Princes, Priests, and Peasants* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 27.

[231] Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 27.

For two, owing to their assumption that the leaders of every era exercised the coercive and militaristic tendencies usually attributed to the Postclassic, they see no significant differences between leadership styles of Monte Albán III and previous periods. Instead of falling prey to a tendency to wax romantic about a qualitatively different "florescence," an era in which Zapotec culture is finally allowed to "blossom" and reach its full potential, this is a story of Monte Albán III elite who have precisely the same coolly calculated priorities and aspirations as their Period I and II counterparts. Just as Blanton had insisted on the unwavering sameness of the militaristic orientation of Monte Albán and its leaders from origin to collapse, Marcus and Flannery would have us believe that the "ritual-architectural priorities" of Monte Albán III are virtually identical to those of the previous era.

Not surprisingly, then, in this action theory narrative, almost by definition, virtually all of Monte Albán III's public art, not unlike that of Period II, is devoted, in one way or another, to the legitimation of political authority. As the Zapotec capital gained a measure of maturity, one might expect that its artistic program would become more nuanced and diversified; and the dismantlement of the huge Danzante display seems to support that view. In this account, however, the entire Period III urban plaza continues to be, in very large part, a venue for the dissemination of, to borrow their term, "royal propaganda."[232] Instead of a Classic-era Monte Albán elite that is more self-confident, more "religious" or perhaps more concerned with the public welfare of their people—a prospect that never appears in this script—we are presented with Zapotec leaders who are ever more preoccupied with manipulation and self-promotion.

3. "Royal Propaganda": More Intimidation, More Fabricated Semi-Divine Lineages, Same Old Priorities

The myriad ways in which Marcus and Flannery see this being accomplished can be (re)arranged into three broad sorts of strategies, only the third of which constitutes, in

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[232] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 221.

their description, an innovation not prominent in earlier eras.[233] First, just as in earlier eras, they, like Blanton, accentuate those features of Monte Albán III's public art that are devoted to legitimating authority via the blunt intimidation of potential adversaries. In precisely the tradition of Monte Albán I's huge display of degraded and mutilated Danzante carvings and Monte Albán II's similarly explicit "conquest slabs," Period III features completely unsubtle depictions of the sort of humiliation that those who resist the authority of Monte Albán's can expect. For instance, six stelae set within the wall of the South Platform, apparently positioned there as part of the rites inaugurating a new Monte Albán III ruler, provide graphic depiction both of the city's military heroes, dressed in "the kind of full animal costume given to warriors who had distinguished themselves in battle," and of their prisoners, who are shown nearly naked with their arms tied behind their backs, each standing on a place glyph that presumably identifies the vanquished region from which he came.[234] Especially threatening is Stela 4 of this group, which "shows a noble warrior conquering a region by driving a spear into its place sign. The curious object in his right hand may be a type of cord used to tie their prisoners' arms behind their backs."[235] In short, even if these sorts of explicit public displays of victory, defeat and degradation are neither as numerous nor as prominent in Monte Albán III as in they had been earlier periods, Marcus and Flannery are certain to bring them to our attention.

Second, the *Zapotec Civilization* account of Monte Albán III inventories a whole series of ways in which public art, architecture and iconography continue to reinforce and advance the notion of semi-divine royal lineages, which are ostensibly descended from Lightening, and thus on a wholly different plane from merely human commoners. There were, in other words, strenuous efforts to stretch wider still the gap between royal rulers and "ordinary people." Variations on this theme are, in fact, presented as the root cause

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[233] This (re)arrangement of myriad Monte Albán III means of legitimating political authority into three broad strategies is mine rather than Marcus and Flannery's.

[234] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 217-18.

[235] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 218.

of nearly every stylistic innovation of this period. There were, for instance, more numerous and elaborate royal residences, most of which seem to have been designed from the outset also as royal tombs from which deceased royalty could continue to conduct their still-quite-active afterlives.[236] The continuing accentuation of hierarchy is also reflected in palace layouts in which "no two rooms have their floors at exactly the same level. This may have been a way of ensuring that the *coqui's* head was higher than anyone else's, even when he was asleep."[237] Many of Period III's most sumptuous royal tombs—some of which contained a single individual, others a marital pair and others numerous bodies that were added over time—were located beneath these residences.[238] In numerous instances, the antechambers of these tombs were site to additional offerings in subsequent periods, an ongoing devotion that suggests to Marcus and Flannery that the tombs' occupants were regarded as "royal ancestors," who, even after death, were still deserving of respect and still, in a sense, exercised a measure of authority.

Regarding Period III's ever-greater preoccupation with royal lineages, and thus ancestor worship, among the most persuasive components of this account is a reassessment of the famous and abundant "funerary urns" that were found in these royal tombs. While earlier scholars, most notably Ignacio Bernal who devoted great attention to these urns, identified these highly individualized anthropomorphic images as "gods" in a growing Zapotec pantheon,[239] Marcus and Flannery make an alternate case that is both more plausible and much more consistent with their actor-centered view: "Today we believe that most of [these urns] represent venerated ancestors of the main individuals in the tomb… It is also the case that the figures on most urns, even when grotesquely

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[236] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 208.

[237] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 209.

[238] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 211-16.

[239] The standard work is Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal, *Urns de Oaxaca*. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Memorias del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia II), Secretaría de Educación Pública, México, 1952; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 3 (México: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 145-697.

masked, are undeniably human behind their disguises."[240] In other words, where Caso

and Bernal presented these renowned urns, which really are the signature items of

"Classic-era" Monte Albán, as perhaps their strongest (and definitely most photogenic)

evidence of that era's theocratic and otherworldly concerns, these co-authors flatly reject

the claim that the anthropomorphic urns represent supernaturals. Determined to depict

the Monte Albán leaders' priorities as fully pragmatic and decidedly this-worldly (as

opposed to chimerical and religio-mystical), they contend that the highly individualized

urns depict specific Zapotec rulers, that is, "real humans who metamorphosed into the

heroes and heroines of legend."[241]

Moreover, by way of further dislodging any romantic notions that the abundance

and variety of these renowned urns denotes an increasingly well-stocked roster of

Zapotec deities, Marcus and Flannery bring to the fore the explicit imagery of warfare

and conquest that is designed into many of the ceramic containers. A funerary urn from

Tomb 103, for instance, a royal burial place beneath one of those elaborate palaces, has

them reaching for a rhetoric that can convey the brutality of its imagery:

> "The Zapotec ruler sits on his throne in the guise of a warrior, holding a staff or
> war club in his right hand. In his left he grasps the hair of an enemy's severed
> head, as he peers through the dried skin of a flayed enemy's face."[242]

In short, the very same funerary urns on which Caso and Bernal had relied so

heavily to make their case about the supposedly worshipful priorities of Monte Albán III

are deployed in this version as evidence that Classic-era rulers were not less preoccupied

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[240] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 210.

[241] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 210.   While Marcus and Flannery insist
that the urns represent historical individuals rather that gods, they nuanced that claim be
maintaining that the figures depicted, "were humans who acquired, through death and
heredity, some of the attributes of the supernatural." Ibid., 210.

[242] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 209.

with war, violence and militaristic control than were their counterparts in either earlier or later eras.[243]

4. Reassessing the Teotihuacan-Monte Albán Connection: "Skilled Diplomacy" and the Pretense of Support

The *Zapotec Civilization* treatment of a third means of enhancing political authority—via the strategic display of references to Teotihuacan—demonstrates even greater dexterity in (re)shaping familiar descriptions of Period III features into an iconoclastic storyline that conforms to the action theory paradigm. Precisely as they had for each previous episode, Marcus and Flannery concede that "the events of Monte Albán III did not take place in a vacuum. With upstart polities nipping away at their outer provinces, the Zapotec rulers crafted diplomatic relations with the other superpowers of their world."[244] Nonetheless, if acknowledging that Monte Albán's involvement in the wider Mesoamerican world was mandatory at this point, they reiterate yet again their strong conviction that the most important factors in Oaxacan social evolution, including during Period III, are those that arose *within* the Oaxaca region. In defense of that claim, they earlier rejected purported Olmec influences on Monte Albán I and Maya influences on Monte Albán II, opting instead to explain undeniable cross-regional parallels during those eras in terms of similar but largely independent leadership choices in each area. The great prominence of Teotihuacan-like features in Period III Monte Albán, an important component of all substantial accounts of the city's history, cannot, however, be deflected so easily. A bit more interpretive maneuvering is required in this case, though these authors prove themselves fully adequate to the task.

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[243] Furthermore, in a less persuasive extension of their discussion, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 210, use their reassessment of these funerary urns in order to advance their argument about the still-growing gap between Monte Albán III's nobility and commoners.

[244] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 231.

Though relying on much of the same data from which Blanton deduced that the "external threat" of Teotihuacan was far and away the most significant factor in stimulating the Period III florescence of Monte Albán, Marcus and Flannery assess the connection between the two great centers in a very different way. On the one hand, they accept the conventional assessment that Period III Monte Albán and Teotihuacan had extensive interactions; that much is indisputable. They explain that Teotihuacan, which, of course, had expansionist ambitions of its own, underwent "spectacular growth" during the second century CE (that is, toward the end of Monte Albán II), and thus in Period III would have been "many times larger than Monte Albán."[245] During the Classic era, Teotihuacan and Monte Albán were by no means equals. Choosing their words carefully, they contend that the great Mexican capital exercised different sorts of influence in different regions of Mesoamerica, only one of which applied to the Oaxaca capital: "Teotihuacan *colonized* areas as far away as Matacapan [on the Veracruz Coast]; *established an enclave* at Kaminaljuyú [in the Guatemalan highlands]; and *sent ambassadors to visit* both Monte Albán and the Lowland Maya."[246]

Thus, on the other hand, Marcus and Flannery join Blanton and even Paddock in soundly rejecting suggestions that Teotihuacanos exercised any coercive authority on Monte Albán. But, at the same time, they accentuate Monte Albán's autonomy in ways that directly contradict Blanton insofar as they intimate that the Oaxaca capital would have attained an equally grand climax during Period III even if Teotihuacan had never existed. For them, the fortunes of the Zapotec capital always depend overwhelmingly on local Oaxaca Valley dynamics in which Teotihuacan plays only a peripheral role. In this version, then, somewhat implausible as it may seem (and notably reminiscent of Paddock's take on the topic), Zapotec leaders seem to have full control in choreographing the nature and extent of the much larger Central Mexican capital's involvement in their city. Where Teotihuacan "colonized" and presumably conquered many territories, and where Period III Zapotecs established a residential "Oaxaca barrio" at Teotihuacan, the

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[245] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 231.

[246] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 231; italics added.

Teotihuacan presence at Monte Albán is described as that of "visiting ambassadors." That is to say, rather than dominating or settling in the Zapotec city, Teotihuacan occasionally sent emissaries who approached the Oaxacan capital with the sort of respect and discretion that they would afford an equal (which Monte Albán certainly was not).[247] Marcus and Flannery support this claim of mutual respect by citing the widely-quoted surmise of Teotihuacan scholar René Millon that, while the Zapotecs were only one of many groups to establish residential barrios in the capital, "there was a kind of 'special relationship' between Teotihuacan and Monte Albán, one that was 'closer and of a different kind' than relations between Teotihuacan and other foreign cities."[248]

In other words, strikingly enough, in a presentation of pre-Columbian history that features warfare as the most consequential of all social processes, we are told that, "Through it all, there is no evidence that Monte Albán and Teotihuacan ever went to war with one another."[249] In the context of this rendition of events, it is easy to see why pragmatic Monte Albán III leaders, already in the process of downsizing their territorial holdings, would avoid a fight that they could not win; it is much less obvious why Teotihuacan did not exercise its apparently very large advantage. For Marcus and Flannery, the answer lies, not surprisingly, in astute Zapotec leadership decisions or, more specifically, in their "skilled diplomacy." A carved stone monument known as the Lápida de Bazán, found in the fill of a later temple mound at Monte Albán, provides their most tangible evidence that Period III Zapotec leaders, though militarily overmatched, managed to persuade Teotihuacan rulers that it was in their best interest to exempt Monte Albán from their imperial ambitions:

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[247] In the context of their discussion of the "Oaxaca barrio" at Teotihuacan, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 223, note that "No comparable barrio of Teotihuacanos has ever been found at Monte Albán."

[248] René Millon, *Urbanization at Teotihuacan, Mexico*, vol. 1, *The Teotihuacan Map*, part 1: Text (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), 42; quoted in Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 233. Marcus and Flannery, ibid., note that "Most archaeologists assume that the people of the Oaxaca barrio [at Teotihuacan] were middlemen in some kind of trade between the two regions. Clear evidence of commodities traded, however, has yet to be found…"

[249] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 233.

"We interpret the Lápida de Bazán as the record of a 'summit meeting' between the representatives of two great cities 350 km. apart. It was presumably through diplomatic agreements like this that Monte Albán and Teotihuacan remained at peace with each other, while both expanded against weaker ethnic groups."[250]

Moreover, besides simply staving off Teotihuacan via skilled diplomacy, Marcus and Flannery explain how savvy Monte Albán III leaders found ways to actually capitalize on their (largely fictive) relationship with a city much greater than their own. That is to say—and this is the most ingenious dimension of their comments on the connection between the Mexican and Oaxacan capitals—they interpret the ample Teotihuacan allusions in the public art and architecture of Monte Albán III *not* as signs of weakness, as though the Zapotec leaders had been forced to compromise their autonomy and acquiesce to the demands or tastes of a foreign power. The Oaxacan actors in this story are neither intimidated nor manipulated by their much more well-endowed Altiplano counterparts. Quite to the contrary, these visual references to Teotihuacan are interpreted as evidence of yet another characteristically self-promotional means whereby the rulers of Monte Albán III reasserted their supremacy over Oaxacan commoners and even more over other Oaxacan nobles who would dare to challenge their authority.

Though presumably a frequent ploy, a stela depicting Period IIIA Monte Albán ruler 12 Jaguar with eight visitors from Teotihuacan, ostensibly in "a demonstration of support for the new ruler," provides their best exemplification of the selective borrowing and display of elements from the Mexican capital in order to further a Zapotec leader's own political ambitions.[251] Although it seems equally plausible to interpret such scenes

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[250] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 233.

[251] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 217. Note that, among numerous building projects that seem to have been commissioned expressly to confirm 12 Jaguar's "right to rule" on the Period IIIA occasion of his inauguration were monuments that fall into each of the three broad strategies for legitimating authority that we have discussed: (1) Some carvings showcase his prowess in war and depict captives being prepared for sacrifice; (2) others monuments work to demonstrate 12 Jaguar's noble lineage and descent from previous Zapotec rulers; and (3) still others like the stela depicting 12 Jaguar in the company of eight visitors from Central Mexico, which publicize ostensible relationships between Monte Albán rulers and Teotihuacan.

as evidence that 12 Jaguar was being manipulated by Teotihuacan—that is, that he was a pawn in the political machinations of a foreign power—Marcus and Flannery argue that the Zapotec noble himself was the active instigator of this Central Mexican imagery, which worked especially as "horizontal royal propaganda" that was designed to "make sure that his fellow nobles knew that he had the support of Teotihuacan."[252] In sum, just as Oaxaca rulers finagled their genealogies in order to fabricate royal lineages, they maneuvered to gain advantage via public announcements of Teotihuacan's endorsement even when the veracity of that support was doubtful in the extreme.

5. Transforming Obstacles into Opportunities: Cagey Oaxacan Rulers and Cagey Archaeologist-Authors

Interpreting the abundance of Teotihuacan imagery in Classic-era Monte Albán in this creative, not altogether implausible fashion provides a kind of microcosm of the construction not only of Marcus and Flannery's rendition of Period III but of the entire *Zapotec Civilization* narrative. The interpretive and rhetorical strategy works at two levels, which are intriguingly parallel. At one level—for the 12 Jaguar and other Monte Albán III Zapotec leaders, that is, the main pre-Columbian actors within the story—this version of events shows them transforming a potential liability, namely, their clear inferiority to the Teotihuacanos, into an opportunity. Exercising the combination of ingenuity and sinister self-interest that the Oaxacan protagonists have displayed throughout the story, these nobles realize that they cannot defeat Teotihuacan militarily, and thus to engage them in that way would be self-defeating. Via "skilled diplomacy," however, the most shrewd among the competing Zapotec elites manage not only to hold the Central Mexicans at bay but to create (the appearance of) relationships with the powerful Teotihuacanos, relationships that they could then use to advance their own political ambitions. In this script, instead of *being used* by Teotihuacan, as many other

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[252] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 221. They make a distinction between "vertical royal propaganda," which is directed by nobles toward commoners, versus "horizontal royal propaganda," which is directed by nobles toward other nobles; and suggest that the Teotihuacan imagery belongs largely to the latter category.

regions of Classic-era Mesoamerica were, Monte Albán III rulers, purportedly like no other group, *used* Teotihuacan.

At another level—for the archaeologist-authors of the story—this ingenious interpretation of the abundant Teotihuacan allusions transforms evidence that is potentially damaging to their wider argument concerning Monte Albán's independence into an opportunity to reaffirm again the main tenants of their action theory perspective. In other words, where the undeniably strong Teotihuacan influence at Monte Albán III presents the prospect that the development of the Zapotec capital was, after all, much dependent on the interventions of non-Oaxacans, these authors find a way to interpret those "foreign" elements as yet more evidence that the course of Oaxacan social evolution depended overwhelmingly on the initiative of aggressive local leaders. Unlike the timeworn contentions that Olmecs, Mayas and Teotihuacanos all made crucial contributions to Monte Albán—and also unlike Blanton's assertion that the fluctuating strength of the Zapotec capital was closely linked to that of the Mexican capital—in Marcus and Flannery's rendition of events, even the Monte Albán III leaders remain fully independent, selectively appropriating only those foreign elements that serve their own political purposes. These Period III Zapotec leaders are in serious competition only with other Oaxacan leaders.

Moreover, unlike the widespread tendencies to explain the course of ancient Oaxacan history simply in terms of *generalized* social and ecological processes, this ingenious take on Monte Albán III's abundant Teotihuacan imagery provides yet another occasion to insist upon the often-decisive role of *specific* individuals who made creative, aggressive and self-interested leadership decisions. For Marcus and Flannery, a chance to report on the sly way in which 12 Jaguar and other Zapotec rulers were able to massage their inferiority to Teotihuacan into a political advantage provides an ideal demonstration of a principle that lies at the very heart of their "actor-centered approach." In this story, if there is one qualitative difference between Monte Albán III sovereigns and their earlier Oaxacan counterparts it is that they have become more adept administrators and diplomats, less dependent on brute force and more reliant on "skilled

negotiation." But that change, if anything, brings these Zapotec nobles into more perfect conformity with the portrait of "actors [who] go after what they want, and what they want are things that are materially and politically useful for them."[253] For action theory, and thus for these co-authors, these are just the sorts of leaders that determined the course of Monte Albán's history.

F. THE PERIOD IV & V DECLINE AND ABANDONMENT: IMAGINING AN "ACTOR-CENTERED" ENDING TO THE ZAPOTEC CAPITAL

The *Zapotec Civilization* narrative ends abruptly. Following fulsome renditions of the circumstances leading to the Zapotec capital's emergence and ascent as one of Mesoamerica's great powers, Marcus and Flannery make their own considered compromise in opting *not* to address the Monte Albán's decline and abandonment (in this work).[254] They concur with the prevailing opinion that, "After reaching its maximum population during Period IIIb, the city of Monte Albán declined precipitously in size and importance, and the heyday of Zapotec civilization was over."[255] Their comments on Period IV (roughly 700-1000 CE) and Period V (roughly 1000-1521 CE) are, however,

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[253] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

[254] Joyce Marcus' single-authored *Monte Albán* (2008) does devote a short chapter to each Periods IV and V; and there we find a predictable cautionary note that despite "a common myth" that ancient cities such as Luxor, Ur and Babylon, Wari and Tiahuanaco, Palenque and Teotihuacan suffered some type of natural disaster like a flood, earthquake or plague, "the truth is that almost all these great cities, including Monte Albán, declined for political reasons" (ibid., 172; my translation). But the narrative in that synthesis is significantly different, for instance, insofar as Marcus entertains as causes of Monte Albán's decline not only "internal" political changes within the Valley of Oaxaca—i.e., the rise of competing "Level II" centers and "powerful noble families" in each of the three arms of the Oaxaca Valley (Jalieza in the Valle Grande subvalley; Cuilapan in the Central subvalley; several including Lambityeco and Mitla in the Tlacolula subvalley; and perhaps even Atzompa, right next to Monte Albán)—but also "external" factors, most notably the decline of Teotihuacan, which is a prospect more consistent with Blanton's account than *Zapotec Civilization* (ibid., 161-62). Accordingly, my comments about Monte Albán's collapse are based strictly on what one can glean from *Zapotec Civilization*.

[255] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 225.

confined to a handful passing comments about a convoluted "Postclassic" scenario in which Monte Albán's once-centralized control of the valley is undermined by numerous contending centers, all vying for their respective spheres of influence. Given the tangle new actors and storylines, they apologize that, "The fall of Monte Albán and the subsequent history of the Valley of Oaxaca cannot be told here, as they would fill a book of equal length."[256]

1. Leadership Decisions and the Decline of Monte Albán: Outmaneuvered and/or Outmaneuvering Themselves

Marcus and Flannery do nonetheless provide a few tantalizing hints as to where their Monte Albán IV and V story, if told, would go:

> "From this point on, the story of Zapotec civilization was to become much more complicated. Instead of one historic trajectory for the Valley of Oaxaca, each of the [three] population concentrations mentioned above had its own. One trajectory [i.e., Monte Albán's] led to marriage alliances with the Mixtec, bringing foreign nobles into the western valley. Another [i.e., the four-settlement cluster of Dainzú-Macuilxochitl-Tlacochahuaya-Guadalupe] led to the sacred city of Mitla in the eastern valley. Still a third [i.e., Jalieza's], begun at Zaachila in the southern valley, saw the Zapotec battling an Aztec army on the Pacific Coast."[257]

In their view, then, an actor-centered story of Monte Albán's decline and abandonment would be cumbersome; but they see nothing about the demise of the city that would, in principle, seriously undermine their confidence in the presuppositions of action theory. To the contrary, just as the willful and self-interested decisions of individuals played a crucial role in the city's emergence and ascent, it would have been the deliberative choices of Oaxaca leaders that precipitated the city's decline. Moreover, given their description of a Period IV Valley of Oaxaca that includes re-intensified competition among numerous growing urban centers, each with its own enterprising rulers and "royal families," one would not be surprised by a story of collapse that

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[256] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 234.

[257] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 244.

featured either astute leadership choices by Monte Albán's competitors or less-than-astute decisions by the Monte Albán elite themselves, or, more likely still, a combination of both. Indeed, Marcus and Flannery, albeit briefly, do allude both to the possibility that the rulers of the grand old capital were outmaneuvered by vigorous young rivals and the alternate possibility that the Monte Albán royals, in a sense, may have outmaneuvered themselves.

Regarding the former prospect—wherein Monte Albán was overwhelmed, or maybe undermined, by either local or "foreign" interlopers—they note, for instance, that, "Jalieza, though never as impressive architecturally as Monte Albán, became the largest city in the Valley of Oaxaca during Monte Albán IV;"[258] and they make the completely plausible suggestion that the same aggressive leadership that built Jalieza "may have hastened the decline of Monte Albán."[259] Other growing Zapotec cities in the area presumably offered additional, if somewhat lesser challenges. Likewise, despite the fact that they, surprisingly enough, have managed to tell their entire saga of Oaxaca social evolution with scarcely a mention of Mixtecs, there is no question that large contingents of Mixtecs moving from western Oaxaca into the central valley would have to make a prominent entrance into the story during Periods IV and V. The influx of Mixtecs into the Valley of Oaxaca is, in fact, the factor that does most to complicate the history of these final periods. It is, therefore, not difficult to imagine an actor-centered script in which assertive Mixtec leadership decisions played an even larger part in Monte Albán's demise than did more local challenges like that of Jalieza (though that is not a view that these authors support).[260]

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[258] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 234.

[259] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 244.

[260] For their exceedingly brief comments on the Mixtec presence in the Valley of Oaxaca during Period IV, see Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 229-30. Marcus, *Monte Albán*, chap. 14, provides a fuller account of the Period V Mixtec presence in the Monte Albán area.

The other possibility, however—that Monte Albán's collapse owes primarily to a major failure of leadership, some sort of "bad choices" on the part of its own rulers—raises even more intriguing narrative prospects. Crafting that version of Monte Albán's demise requires some extrapolation beyond Marcus and Flannery's own comments. Their action theory perspective does, nonetheless, provide intimations of a kind of breakdown, or perhaps even "backfire," of the Monte Albán rulers' most well-worn and effective means of legitimating and advancing their authority, namely, via perpetuating the notion that they were of more-than-human descent. As these co-authors explain, the Monte Albán elite, not unlike leaders in countless cultural contexts, "masked" and thus deliberately mystified themselves in both literal and figurative ways:

> "Rulers [of Monte Albán] had a variety of masks, so many that one wonders if their faces were ever seen by commoners. Rulers in many cultures have disguised themselves to maintain the myth that they were not mere mortals, and the Zapotec kings seem to have had numerous costumes depending on the situation."[261]

This strategic masking of their human identity in order to cultivate (the pretense of) a super-human identity, and thus open a huge gap between semi-divine Zapotec nobility and merely human commoners worked masterfully, we're told, through most of Periods II and III. The Marcus-Flannery rendition also implies, however, that this ploy, along with the attenuate preoccupation with royal lineages, was being intensified through the third period until, at some point, the Zapotec elite were seduced by their own "royal propaganda," whereupon they began to make decisions that were neither realistic nor politically effective. Long the very epitome of cool and "rational" efficiency, Monte Albán IV leaders became "full of themselves," as it were. One plausible ending to this actor-centered story—which resounds the inordinate "introversion" that is featured in Caso's and Bernal's accounts[262]—could be, therefore, a kind of self-seduction, or self-delusion, wherein Monte Albán rulers came to believe that they were indeed semi-divine, which led to poor political choices and, eventually, to the downfall of Monte Albán. In brief, and in the one final exemplification of the same old pattern, deliberate—but, in this

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[261] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 209.

[262] See, for instance, Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 805.

case, highly imprudent—leadership decisions led the direst of all "unintended consequences": the collapse and abandonment of the once-great Zapotec capital.

2. Self-Deluding Propaganda: Monte Albán Rulers as Resources rather than Agents of Political Manipulation

In this (imagined) version of Monte Albán's demise we encounter yet more of the layered ironies and more of the support for the heuristic merits of action theory that one finds throughout the entire (re)construction narrative. According to this hypothetical ending, during the city's final phases, on the one hand, settlements formerly under Monte Albán's control, or more properly the *leaders* of those settlements, mimicking their masters, as it were, began to reject the authority of the once-powerful capital's rulers and to assert their independence. During Period IV, as Marcus and Flannery explain, "Areas south and east of Monte Albán seem to have been the first to break away, while Etla stayed loyal to the old capital for a while."[263] These former subordinates, then, would seem to have been increasingly less impressed and less intimidated by the Monte Albán elites' claims to semi-divine status. Yet, on the other hand, at precisely the same time, Monte Albán elites themselves were becoming *more* impressed, arguably more self-deluded, by their own rhetoric of noble lineages and descent from Lightening.

That scenario of self-obsession—wherein, ironically enough, the only people any longer persuaded by Monte Albán's royal propaganda are the propagandists themselves—is actually reminiscent of Ignacio Bernal's contention that the Zapotec capital's demise depended largely on a kind of self-imposed isolation wherein the once out-reaching city "appears to have turned in on itself and forgot its neighbors."[264] This is a new permutation of the old two-part pattern of self-induced vulnerability and opportunistic invaders that is among the most frequent means of explaining the collapses

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[263] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 234.

[264] Ignacio Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," 806.

of Monte Albán, Teotihuacan and other increasingly top-heavy capitals.[265] Moreover, in that scenario, we find perhaps the most intense iteration of the so-termed illusion, or now perhaps *delusion*, of control: The Monte Albán rulers in this storyline fatally over-estimate their significance not only in the Oaxacan world but, in a sense, in the cosmos; as their city crumbles, they learn that they are, after all, only people like other people. Or perhaps more to the present point, this version of Monte Albán's demise could also work to illustrate the sort of life lesson that action theory is likely to teach us, namely, that claims to divine descent are formidable means of statecraft and maintaining privilege—but only so long as the rulers wielding those claims remain cognizant of their invented status. Even the most aggressive and self-serving leaders require at least a measure of humility to retain power.

Furthermore, this hypothetical ending would provide yet one more instance in the spiraling irony that (re)appears so often throughout this actor-centered narrative. In this depiction of Period IV, just as the formerly "rationalist" and clear-minded Monte Albán elites were losing sight of the fact that their claims to semi-divine status were strategically useful but ultimately phony, leaders in the newly independent communities surrounding the old capital were discovering for themselves just what an effective political ploy claiming supernatural descent—especially descent from the long-revered noble lineages of Monte Albán—could be. In other words, Marcus and Flannery's brief comments on the continued importance during Period IV of genealogy as a means of legitimating authority speak to an irony wherein the leaders of formerly subordinate communities, in this era, simultaneously rejected the authority of Monte Albán, but nonetheless built their own claims to authority on the basis of a supposed hereditary connection to the ancestral rulers of the old Zapotec capital:

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[265] See, for instance, comments on the "internal weakening" and "excessive centralization" that led to Teotihuacan's (and, by extension, Monte Albán's) collapse in Ignacio Bernal, *Mexico before Cortez: Art, History, Legend* (Garden City, New Jersey: Dolphin Books, 1963), 46, and Ignacio Bernal, *Teotihuacan* (Mexico City: INAH-Salvat, 1985), 53-54, both of which were referenced in chapter 2.

"Despite their emerging importance, the lords of those towns [i.e., Cuilapan, Zaachila, Lambityeco, and Mitla] still wrapped themselves in Monte Albán's aura by preserving many of its traditions. One of the most frequently encountered monuments of Monte Albán IIIb-IV was the 'genealogical register,' a carved stone placed in a tomb antechamber to inform other nobles about the deceased's ancestors. We have no doubt that, were a large enough sample of these registers available, we would find some Period IV nobles trying to trace their ancestry back to the dynasties of Monte Albán."[266]

That is to say, in yet a different twist on the "illusion of control," this rendition of Period IV would describe a Monte Albán whose actual political influence was disappearing, but whose symbolic prestige remained much more resilient. Instead of *agents* of their own political manipulations, the renowned royal lineages of Monte Albán were now becoming *resources* for political manipulations of other emergent cities. Presumably, however, if the heads of these up-and-coming communities are to fit the action-theory profile of successful leaders, they, unlike the self-deluded lords of the fast-declining Monte Albán IV, remained fully aware that their claims to divine descent were to be used rather than actually believed.

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS:
THREE LEADERLY TENSIONS OF SPECIFIC AND GENERAL INTEREST

Marcus and Flannery's (re)construction of Oaxaca social evolution provides, then, a stirring story that is, in large part, about leaders and leadership—but one that is vulnerable to a couple of large charges. First, critics can complain that, despite great strides in attending to the previously neglected "agency" and "free will" of individual albeit anonymous rulers, this is a tale of top-down autocrats who, so we are led to believe, neither entertain input nor encounter resistance from the non-elites who are, after all, the vast majority of the population. There is, in this account, almost no sign of the likewise overlooked "agency of commoners," which, as we'll see next chapter, is the foremost corrective in Arthur Joyce's rendition of the same historical context.

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[266] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 234.

Second, *Zapotec Civilization* invites suspicions among those hermeneutical readers who have the skeptical sense that, quite frequently, what these archaeological narratives present as evidence-based conclusions may actually be restatements of the theoretical presuppositions with which the authors began. That is to say, critical readers might well contend that Marcus and Flannery's greatest success comes in the fulfillment of a kind of "thought experiment" wherein they demonstrate that, in the hands of creative and well-informed narrator-interpreters, "practice theory" can indeed provide a viable explanation of nearly all features of the archaeological and art historical record. And yet, the application of that "action theory" framework to every ancient Oaxacan circumstance seems, at points, ingenious but heavy-handed, an over-correction that replaces an environmental determinism with an alternate sort of politically-based determinism.

Be that as it may, these co-authors do, without question, present a highly provocative, often iconoclastic contribution to the oeuvre of Monte Albán narratives that evokes countless interpretations, as one reviewer puts it, not simply for students of ancient Oaxaca, but likewise for those "archaeological neophytes" who are more generally interested in the role of charismatic leadership in social evolution. [267] By contrast to Winter's non-narrative account, from which it requires far greater ingenuity to elicit generalized lessons, theirs is the sort of storiologically rich presentation that stimulates many and diverse insights, ideas and questions—not only, but especially, about rulers and rulership. Moreover, the strength of *Zapotec Civilization* as a resource for thinking about these large topics is enhanced immeasurably by the fact that, like all excellent stories, there is a measure of ambiguity, even contradiction, in their characterization of the Oaxacan ruler-protagonists. Of several equivoques about their hypothetical sovereigns, three tensions are especially suggestive.

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[267] Zeitlin, "Two Perspectives on the Rise of Civilization in Mesoamerica's Oaxaca Valley," 87.

A. COMPELLING VERSUS DESPICABLE LEADERS: PROPOSING INSPIRING MODELS AND/OR ENGENDERING CYNICISM

In a first and unmistakable tension, the leaders we meet in this synthesis are alternately admirable and despicable. On the one hand, they have precisely the combination of audacious creativity and imagination, but also the discipline, talent and strength to accomplish great things. Where Paddock presented us with ancient Mesoamericans who are "strikingly impractical," with an "extraordinary devotion to esthetic principles,"[268] these Oaxacan rulers are clear-minded realists, task-oriented leaders who focus on results. They are bold and daring agents of change, unwilling to settle for the status quo. Following thousands of years of village-level cultural stability, it is not ecological factors but the intrepid initiative and foresight of individual Big Man-like leaders that launch Oaxaca onto a trajectory of urban, state and even empire reorganization. Unprecedented developments at San José Mogote, and later the mass migration from that center to found a city of unprecedented proportions on the previously vacant mountain of Monte Albán, entail leadership decisions of stupendous verve, vision and daring—and these leaders made it work! In that respect, these are the sorts of charismatic "great men" behind whom pre-Columbian peoples willingly threw their support and who, therefore, provide compelling models for contemporary leaders in all contexts. In that regard, Marcus and Flannery's Oaxacan leaders engender respect and inspiration rather than mere nostalgia.

On the other hand, these sovereigns are nasty and cut-throat, self-promoting to the point of being contemptible. Where the leaders of Blanton's Oaxacan "regional confederacy" seem to be agents of the general good insofar as they tolerate religious and ethnic differences in order to cultivate Oaxacan unity and stand strong against a common adversary, in *Zapotec Civilization*, constantly we encounter leaders who put their personal interests ahead of the collective interest. These are rulers for whom no measure of power and influence is enough; always they want more; greed, avarice and unslakable

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[268] Paddock, "Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica," 152.

ambition are their signature qualities. Eventually the sovereigns of Monte Albán come to rely more on diplomacy, fictive genealogical claims and marriage alliances to legitimate and enhance their authority; but the raw display of military force—in the Period I Danzante figures, the Period II "conquest slabs" on Building J, and in the "royal propaganda" displayed on Period III stelae—is their preeminent strategy of state-crafting.

In this darker assessment, the protagonists are neither models nor advocates for moral and ethical propriety; and nor are they law-givers or enforcers. They are instead plain bullies who never show any sign of interest in the public welfare or opinions of their constituents. As leaders who settle for resigned acquiescence rather than bona fide loyalty, there is none of the cooperation and mutual respect between elites and non-elites that we will see next chapter. Their relation to their "subjects" is one of callous condescension and exploitation; these rulers, it seems, enjoy intimidation for its own sake. In short, in this strand of the story—which is the dominant one—we meet pre-Columbian models of selfish, corrupt and interest-peddling leadership, a presentation that spawns a cynicism about leaders in general, which may well extend to distressed skepticism about leaders in other contexts, including contemporary Mexico.

B. Religious versus Irreligious Leaders: Exemptions from and/or Investments in "the Ancient Zapotec Mind"

On a second equivoque, while religion, again by contrast to the central role that it will enjoy in Joyce's account, plays only a modest part in this story of Monte Albán, the narrative poses a tension between two very different ways of imagining these leaders' investments in the so-termed "ancient Zapotec mind," a discrepancy that can probably be traced to dual authorship. On the one side is a flatly reductive view of religion wherein these rulers care about nothing except the acquisition of political "power" and perhaps the control of manpower so that their public appeals to deities and claims to divine ancestry are never more than pragmatic means for the consolidation and acquisition of more power. From that hyper-skeptical view, all of the iconographic and architectural features from relief sculptures in the Main Plaza to ballcourts, royal palaces, elaborate

tombs and Building J—forms that others describe as expressions of cosmological commitments—are, in this account, ultimately propagandistic ploys aimed at manipulating the masses. Even the origins of hieroglyphic writing was, firstly, "a weapon in the power struggle of rulers."[269] Unlike most descriptions of traditional contexts, say, in India where the religious authority of Brahmin priests supersedes the civic authority of kings, in this rendition, Monte Albán priests are subordinates who do the bidding of rulers rather than the other way around.

On this side, more tellingly still, we are given the impression, after the fashion of very brusque "first-Foucault" assessments of religion,[270] that these savvy and duplicitous rulers were not themselves "true-believers" in the cosmomagical chicanery that they use to seduce the less critical, more naïve general public. When these unsentimental and aspiritual pragmatists present "religious" rationales for their various activities or when they mask their merely human identity in order to cultivate (the pretense of) a super-human identity, these are considered political maneuvers, subterfuge, contrivances and delusions that rulers perpetrate without themselves taking to heart. In fact, instead of idealists or even ideologues, these calculating Oaxaca leaders are characterized as "essentially individualistic, self-interested, rational, and pragmatic;"[271] they are pictured as "pre-moderns" who have a decidedly modern mindset, strategists who operate with a very generic psychology of self-interest that is indiscernible from those of Greek, Polynesian, Asian or American leaders. In short, according to this line of argument— again the dominant line—if there was a discrete sort of "ancient Zapotec mind," the rulers were largely exempt from it.

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[269] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 130.

[270] On the distinction between blunt "first Foucault" readings versus more nuanced "final Foucault" readings, see Ivan Strenski, "Religion, Power, and Final Foucault," *Journal of the America Academy of Religion*, vol. 66, no. 2 (summer 1998): 345-68.

[271] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

On the other hand, however, there is a less prominent, arguably more interesting strand in this history of Oaxaca wherein Monte Albán leaders join commoners with full participation in a culturally specific Zapotec outlook that entails distinctive ways of conceiving of space, time, divinity, life and death; and thus rulers too truly believe in the "propaganda" that they perpetrate. In this alternate view, they are strange instead of familiar, religious instead of secular. Those far less frequent moments, which actually sound more like Paddock and Joyce than Blanton, present Oaxacan rulers who perpetrate a claim to divine descent, not simply as a matter of political expedience, but because, for them, it is fully within the realm of plausibility that they actually are descendants of Lightening, and thus quite deserving of great privilege. But, as noted in our reflections on Monte Albán's collapse, in this story, when rulers embrace this more cosmomagical mindset, they are led immediately to self-defeating political decisions.

In any case, *Zapotec Civilization* really does provide, then, in unequal measure, two very different depictions of the same Oaxaca rulers. Generally speaking, in the early episodes, from the Ice Age all the way thorough Monte Albán I—that is to say, when Marcus and Flannery are compelled to depend overwhelmingly on cross-cultural analogies variously to ancient Greece, Asia and Polynesia—the Oaxacan protagonists emerge as largely generic human leaders, fitted to the characteristic action theory profile of self-interested, rational pragmatists. The leaders in these early chapters show almost no signs of ethereal interests or investments in religion. But later, in the accounts of Monte Albán II and even more Period III—that is to say, those eras for which their interpretations of the pre-Columbian city depend increasingly on extrapolations from early Spanish and present-day ethnographic descriptions of Zapotecs, resources that these scholars regard as far more reliable[272]—the leaders become less generically human, more

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[272] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31, address the relative merits of "bridging arguments" made via "ethnographic analogy," which entails drawing on cross-cultural contexts that historically unrelated to ancient Oaxaca, versus the "direct historical approach," which involves extrapolations from contexts that are historically related; and they likewise express their obvious preference for the latter approach whenever possible. Also see, ibid., 185, where they explains that, "For Monte Albán II, we need not rely as heavily on [cross-cultural] ethnographic analogy to reconstruct religious rituals as we did for earlier periods. So similar were some of the rituals of Period II to those of the historic

specifically Zapotec and also more inclined to "religious" sentiments. In other words, earlier portions of the story are crafted from the perspective of a skeptical "hermeneutics of suspicion" that is almost fully dismissive of religion; but, in the latter portions, a more generous "hermeneutic of retrieval," which takes more seriously the otherworldly inclinations of rulers, makes an appearance. The transition in perspective, which represents a kind of compromise between two strongly opinionated co-authors, is, however, intermittent and incomplete so that, at points, we encounter somewhat awkward juxtapositions of the two depictions.

A concise demonstration of the two competing views comes, for example, in the description of Monte Albán III leaders' motivations for sponsoring the construction of temples. The short paragraph opens with the non-controversial proposition that, as in many archaic states, "it was undoubtedly the rulers who commissioned the temples, provided the building materials, and fed the workmen."[273] Then, however, Marcus and Flannery propose, in rapid succession, two very different sorts of motives that prompted leaders to sponsor these temples. First, in complete accord with the action theory perspective, they contend that, "This underwriting of temple construction was *supposedly* an act of royal piety, but *its hidden agenda* was often to outdo rival lords and impress the commoners."[274] That skeptical line, then, presents us with coolly judicious Monte Albán leaders who might play along with the pretense of piety, but only insofar as it advances their own partisan interests. The very next sentence, however, attributes to those same rulers a more supernaturalist mindset wherein they ostensibly commissioned temples with the genuine intent of soliciting the assistance of their dead, now-deified ancestors: "…some [Monte Albán III rulers] may have even dedicated temples to ancestors who

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Zapotec that we can turn instead to the direct historical approach." And they stress the even greater the continuity between Monte Albán III and the historic Zapotecs: "So many of the institutions known from Zapotec ethnohistory are present that it is possible to rely mainly on the direct historical approach [and little on ethnographic analogy]." Ibid., 208.

[273] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 223.

[274] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 223; italics added.

could intercede with Lightening on their behalf."[275] At that point, we meet true-believing Monte Albán leaders who are, it seems, fully committed to the substance as well as the pretense of piety. And, moreover, in those moments we encounter these co-authors in a more phenomenological mode, making a concerted effort to take seriously the distinctively Zapotecan mindset wherein deceased ancestors and forces of supernature such as Lightening actually are quite influential in Oaxacan affairs.

While certainly these are two viable ways of crafting a story of Monte Albán, they depart from very different starting points; they are built on different assumptions about human nature, social evolution and religion; and they conceive of the role of the scholar-narrator in quite different ways. In short, they play, as it were, by different methodological ground rules. The two are *not* really compatible alternatives; and their discrepancies demonstrate again the fundamental premise of *Narrating Monte Albán* that how one (re)constructs the history of the Zapotec capital is largely determined by the presuppositions that one brings to the available evidence. Uncritical readers may not even notice the slippage; and skeptics of religion might forgive those occasional lines that depict the usually modern-minded and calculating Zapotec protagonists "waiting for the Lightening to intercede on their behalf" as momentary lapses, rhetorical flourishes or perhaps vestiges of Marcus's earlier writings that were incompletely integrated into this later actor-centered synthesis. But, be that as it may, the presence of the two contrastive and unequal strands, if methodologically disconcerting, definitely does enrich *Zapotec Civilization* as a multivocal resource for reflecting on the general dynamics of leadership, especially religious leadership.

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[275] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 223. The way the relevant paragraph is written, it might be plausible to conclude that Marcus and Flannery are arguing that *some* Monte Albán III rulers were skeptics and others were true-believers in the Zapotec cosmological system, though that would require a very generous reading.

C. COMMANDING VERSUS UNAVAILING LEADERS: DELIBERATE DECISIONS, UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES AND THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL

Finally, a third and most poignant tension related to what I have called the "illusion of control" is consequent of the endless spiral of deliberate decisions that invariably result in unintended and surprising consequences. On the one hand, these leaders are, by all appearances, commanding and supremely self-confident tacticians. That they act in purposeful ways, and that their actions really do matter to the course of Oaxacan social evolution, are central tenants of this version of action theory. Instead of impulsive actors, one imagines key leadership teams meeting in the pre-Hispanic counterpart of war-rooms to carefully strategize how best to achieve their militaristic and political objectives. In that respect, then, these rulers convince themselves—and readers of this account are convinced—that they really are "in control," exercising their "free will" and directing the course of Oaxacan events in thoughtful and efficient ways.

But, on the other hand, at least over the longer course of events in this story, things never turn out precisely as these leaders plan; frequently their best efforts prove unavailing and ineffectual. Leaders can challenge and channel but never fully escape "the system," which "includes not only the natural environment in which humans find themselves, but their own culture—that set of beliefs, cosmologies, ideologies, customs, and traditions that shape their goals." [276] Personal initiative is always mediated by a flow of history that no individuals can predict or control. Accordingly, repeatedly reinforcing what I've argued is the primary leitmotif of this entire storiological composition, again and again, the outcomes of leaders' meticulously considered choices are substantially different than anticipated.

Sometimes the unanticipated ramifications are tremendously fortuitous; leaders get lucky, so to speak. In Archaic-era Oaxaca, for instance, a considered decision by the leaders of small groups to pool their resources for collective hunts achieved the desired

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[276] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31; italics added.

outcome of harvesting more game, but likewise precipitated the larger and less anticipated challenges of developing the social institutions necessary to orchestrate those hunts and share the food.[277] And later in the Archaic period, enterprising leadership decisions to augment the availability of certain species by planting them near their seasonal camps had the momentous if unplanned consequence of opening the way to agriculture and thus village life.[278]

Likewise, in the grandest demonstration of the surprisingly happy outcomes, the original synoikism founding of Monte Albán was a preemptive political ploy by which San José Mogote leaders hoped to forestall competition from growing centers in the other two subvalleys; but the sensational and far-reaching fruits of their move to the vacant mountaintop have to have exceeded everyone's expectations. The Period I "piedmont strategy" of irrigation, for example, which was designed as an efficient means of feeding Monte Albán's growing population in order to amass the manpower necessary for military adventuring, not only succeeded in those respects; it also had the unanticipated but highly salutary side-effect of bringing together different peoples and releasing them from mundane agricultural activities in ways that sparked the intellectual, artistic and architectural accomplishments for which the Zapotec capital is so renowned. Time and again in this account, choices and decisions made expeditiously on the basis of political and military priorities blossom into unforeseen outcomes of a highly serendipitous sort. Even the distinctively Zapotec cultural-ethnic identity that remains in play today in Oaxaca villages emerged as a kind of inadvertent byproduct, a fringe benefit if you will, of rulers' expedient strategizing.

Sometimes, however, the unexpected consequences are deleterious, even disastrous; leaders are, to no fault of their own, unlucky, as it were. The well-considered and immensely successful Period II initiative to bring more and more tribute-paying

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[277] See Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chap. 4 and their summary comments on ibid., 236-37.

[278] See Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, chaps. 5 and 6.

provinces into Monte Albán's sphere of influence, for instance, by Period IIIA, had the unanticipated effect of schooling those communities in the militarism and statecraft that transformed them from subordinates to unmanageable adversaries. In that ironic case, the connivery of Zapotec rulers worked marvelously in the short (actually several-hundred-year) run, but eventually sowed its own undoing by giving "those regions the very skills they needed to get stronger" until "gradually they began to break away from the grip of Monte Albán."[279] Ironically, by asserting their control over these outlying communities, leaders provided their vassals the knowledge and skills that made them uncontrollable. Shrewd exploitation, contradictorily, eventuated in self-defeating empowerment.

Or, by the same token, the pragmatic Period IIIB leadership decisions to downsize and consolidate so that, despite a smaller area of regional influence, the Monte Albán rulers could have tighter management worked well for a few generations; but again, in the longer run, that consolidation precipitated unexpected population realignments that led to the growth of competing centers at Jalieza in the Valle Grande subvalley region and in the area of Dainzú in the Tlacolula subvalley, both of which then reemerged as serious rivals to Monte Albán's earlier monopoly. Again in that case, a seemingly prudent decision to scale back in order to retain control eventually exacerbated a loss of control.

In sum, then, if we again put aside assessments of historical accuracy and explore the more universalistic implications of this context-specific story of 10,000 years of social evolution in southern Mexico, we are presented a narrative of exceptional piquancy, even paradox, no less than a poignant meditation on the human condition. We are persuaded by this plotline that human history does *not*, as environmental determinist models suggest, unfold according anonymous and generalized processes; and social evolution certainly does *not* conform to predictable stages. The creative and interested initiative of specific individuals—rulers who take control!—channels the flow of social evolution into one of innumerable alternative routes. It is both exciting and perplexing to

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[279] Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 243.

imagine that were we by some time-travel magic able to turn the clock back to the Archaic-era, the arrival of a few transient families into the Oaxaca region, the ensuing developments over the next ten millennia are almost certain to transpire in profoundly different ways; and thus we might well be confronted with a version of Oaxaca culture that is unrecognizable. We learn from this creative (re)construction that history is unique and one-time; and the boldly assertive protagonists of this story of Monte Albán allow us to believe that human actors are, in large very measure, the makers, masters and controllers of their own destiny.

And at the same time, the story constantly undermines that anthropocentric confidence. A tale of irrepressibly arrogant, greedy and selfish rulers, ironically enough, actually delivers a message of modesty and humility insofar as we learn that no amount manipulative forethought is adequate to control the trajectory of social evolution, which is invariably volatile, irregular and unforeseeable. The world of ancient Oaxaca, and to that extent the world at large, emerges as a place that is only partly orderly and never fully predictable; Earthmaker's efforts at organization are invariably subverted—or sometimes enhanced—by Trickster's caprice. Alternately exhilarating and distressingly unfair, unanticipated outcomes sometimes provide undeserved good fortune and sometimes unwarranted misfortune. In Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery's highly stimulating story of Monte Albán's history, the estimable mastery and authority that the leaders of ancient Oaxaca exercise is, ultimately, only an illusion of control.