

**OUTLINE OF
CHAPTER ONE**

The Unfolding of Alfonso Caso’s Story of Monte Albán: From Tales of Discovery to a Five-Stage History of the Zapotec Capital.....	37
I. The Foundations of a Monte Albán Narrative: Identifying the Protagonists and Formulating the Plotline.....	40
A. Initial Impressions and Forward-Looking Ambitions: Monte Albán Emerging from the Shadow of Mitla.....	43
B. Disentangling the Mixtecs and Zapotecs: Epigraphic Analysis as a Crucial First Step.....	46
1. Zapotec Monuments and Mixtec Codices: Entirely Different and Distinct Cultures.....	47
2. Emerging Narrative Themes: Imagining Monte Albán as a Strictly Zapotec City.....	51
C. Excavation Begins and Tomb 7 Emerges: A Discovery that Changes Everything.....	53
1. The Earliest Narrations: An Interim Tale of Personal Discovery and a Provisional Story of Monte Albán.....	55
2. Scholarship and Publicity: Academic versus Popular Renditions of the Tomb 7 Discovery.....	62
II. The Inception and Revisioning of a Monte Albán Narrative: Reconsidering the Roles of Zapotecs, Mixtecs and Others.....	70
A. A New Problem and an Old Problem: Reconsidering the End and the Beginning of Zapotec Monte Albán.....	69
1. Revising the Story of Late Monte Albán: Finding a Place for Mixtecs in the Zapotec City.....	70
2. Revising the Story of Early Monte Albán: Danzante Anomalies and Intimations of a non-Zapotec, non-Mixtec Third Party.....	72
B. Ascertaining the Mixtec Role in a Zapotec City: Tomb 7 as Instructive but Anomalous.....	78
1. Two Versions of Zapotec-Mixtec Interaction at Monte Albán: Successive and/or Contemporaneous Cultures.....	80
2. Reasserting Zapotec Primacy and Fine-tuning the Mixtec Role: The Prospect of a Mixtec Invasion.....	82
III. The Prototype for All Subsequent Monte Albán (Re)construction Narratives: Settling on a Five-Epoch Saga of the City.....	86

A. Chronology via Ceramic Stratigraphy: From Three-Stage Sketch to Five-Stage Scheme.....	86
B. The Very First Synthesis of Oaxaca Archaeology: Caso's Prototypic Statement of the Five-Epoch History of Monte Albán.....	92
1. A Primer on Stratigraphic Method: The Endurant Ambiguity of Successive Periods versus Overlapping Ceramic Styles.....	95
2. The Five Stages Elaborated: Monte Albán within the Broader Context of Mesoamerica.....	98
a. Epoch I: Prefiguring an Olmec Role in the City's Founding.....	99
b. Epoch II: Mayanoid Stimulus to a Great but Brief Florescence.....	102
c. Epoch III: A Grander Teotihuacan-Stimulated Florescence.....	104
d. Epoch IV: A Gradual Rather than Sudden Decline.....	105
e. Epoch V: A Mixtec Presence of Still-Uncertain Sorts.....	107
C. Technical Adjustments and Popular Enhancements: Answering the Exuberance of Mayanist Aficionados.....	109
1. A Five-Epoch Ode to the Ancient Zapotecs: Pre-Columbian Oaxacans as Even Greater than the Classic Mayas.....	110
a. Epoch I: Fabulously Skilled and Sublime Oaxacan Founders.....	114
b. Epoch II: Well-Balanced Zapotec Artist-Intellectual-Politicians.....	116
c. Epoch III: Oaxacan Excellence Born of Cultural Symbiosis.....	117
d. Epoch IV: Multiple, But Still Uncertain Causes of Collapse.....	118
e. Epoch V: Mixtecs as Also Excellent in their Own Ways.....	119
2. Alternative Routes to Cultural Excellence: Maya Isolationism versus Zapotec Interactivity.....	120
IV. Closing Thoughts: The Content and Context of a Mexican Story of Monte Albán.....	122
A. Ongoing Corrections and Readjustments: The Resilience of an Untidy Five-Stage Scheme.....	123
B. The Content of Caso's Story of Monte Albán: Four Unresolved Issues of Major Import.....	127
C. Contextualizing Caso's Story of Monte Albán: Personal, Professional and Political Incentives.....	130

CHAPTER ONE

The Unfolding of Alfonso Caso's Story of Monte Albán: From Tales of Discovery to a Five-Stage History of the Zapotec Capital

“What the Carnegie [Institution of Washington Maya Research Program] did for the Maya zone, the explorations at Monte Albán and elsewhere, directed by Alfonso Caso, did for the Valley of Oaxaca. Until almost the end of the ‘twenties nothing coherent had been done in this area. It is true that descriptions of Mitla had existed for many years, also that a number of objects had found their way into private collections, but this did not add up to a historical sequence. No distinction had even been made between the Zapotec and Mixtec styles, to say nothing of all the other peoples of the area whose distinctive styles were not even known.”

Ignacio Bernal, 1980¹

Miguel León-Portilla's obituary of his senior colleague, “Alfonso Caso (1896-1970),” reiterates, exactly as one would expect, a truly remarkable record of accomplishments by Mexico's most influential and decorated archaeologist.² Caso,

* 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 Ignacio Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology: The Vanished Civilizations of Middle America* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1980), 177.

² Miguel Leon-Portilla, “Alfonso Caso (1896-1970),” obituary in *American Anthropologist* 75 (1973): 877-85. For much of the same biographical information, along with a thorough bibliography of Caso's works, also see Ignacio Bernal, “Alfonso Caso 1896-1970,” B.B.A.A. *Boletín Bibliográfico de Antropología Americana*, vol. 33/34 (1970-1971): 301-14. See additionally, Ignacio Bernal, “Caso en Monte Albán,” en *Homenaje al Alfonso Caso*, organizing committee, Juan Comas, Eusebio Dávalos Hurado, Manuel Maldando-Koerdell, and Ignacio Marquina (México, D.F: Imprenta Nuevo Mundo, S.A., 1951) 83-89.

younger brother of renowned philosopher and writer Antonio Caso, had, for instance, by age 23, earned a law degree from the National University of Mexico, and the next year an MA in philosophy from the same institution. He taught there for some time on the Faculty of Law and also at the National Preparatory School, of which he became director in 1928. But then, still a very young man, he switched directions toward anthropology and archaeology and, by 1930, was appointed Professor of Ethnology at the School of Philosophy and Letters of the University and soon thereafter Head of the Department of Archaeology at the National Museum, which he would eventually direct and substantially reorganize. The fortuitous recent assemblage and re-publication of his many of writings in a twelve-volume set entitled *Obras de Alfonso Caso* (2002-2007) reaffirms for a new generation of readers his astounding range and productivity as an archaeologist, epigrapher and anthropologist.³

In addition to his more strictly scholarly accomplishments, that obituary continues with appreciations of Caso's truly stunning achievements as a master administrator. He is credited with creating, in 1937, the Mexican Society of Anthropology and, in 1939, no less than the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), which remains the primary institution devoted to the research, protection and promotion of Mexico's archaeological, anthropological and historical heritage. Among the much-attenuated list of additional posts are terms as president of the National University of Mexico and head of the Ministry of Public and Historical Properties. Deeply devoted to the study and appreciation of contemporary as well as pre-Columbian native peoples, in 1949, Caso was also largely responsible for the creation of the National Indianist Institution, which enabled him to establish a number of Coordinating Indian Centers in various regions of Mexico. Like every enumeration of Caso's accomplishments and accolades, this obituary

³ Appreciation of Alfonso Caso's immense but invariably scattered collection of writings is greatly facilitated by the reprinting of dozens of his most important works in a 12-volume set entitled *Obras de Alfonso Caso* (México. D.F.: El Colegio Nacional, 2002-2007). Because these reprinted versions are easier to access, with few exceptions, the page numbers cited here refer to the respective volumes in that fabulous collection.

provides unassailable evidence that he was of man of enormous intelligence, administrative skill, vision and “untiring energy.”⁴

Additionally and less expectedly, however, León-Portilla's eulogy also includes what was ostensibly Caso's own autobiographical account, indeed a kind of personal foundation narrative, concerning his initial enthusiasm for Mesoamerican ruins. Describing a period of young adulthood when Caso was on Faculty of Law at the National University of Mexico, but before he had really taken up archaeology or anthropology, León-Portilla explains that, “The following is an anecdote we heard from him”:

“When he was in his late twenties, he visited the archaeological zone of Xochicalco in the State of Morelos. His contemplation there of the ancient monuments awakened him not a superficial curiosity but a real interest in knowing the meaning of the glyphs, the antiquity of the archaeological vestiges, and, in a word, their true cultural and historical significance. That was for him the turning point. With his well-trained critical eye, he set himself to read the available scientific contributions. He also registered as a student at the courses given at the National Museum. He finally became the most distinguished student of professor Hermann Beyer. In a few years he was so well versed in the subjects related to his new vocation that in 1930 he was appointed Professor of Ethnology at the School of Philosophy and Letters of the University, and soon also the Head

⁴ Though a thoroughgoing and critical biography of Caso remains to be written, more useful information appears in David Carrasco and Leónardo López Luján, “Caso, Alfonso,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*, ed. David Carrasco (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), vol. I, 148-49. For some usefully critical comments on Caso, see Luis Vázquez León, “Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942,” in *History of Latin American Archaeology*, ed. Augusto Oyuela-Caycedo, Worldwide Archaeology Series 15 (Aldershot, Hampshire, England and Brookfield, Vt.: Avebury, 1994), 74-78. Also, for additional background information on Caso, see the following four articles in *Homenaje al Doctor Alfonso Caso* (México, D.F.: Imprenta Nuevo Mundo, S. A., 1951): Ignacio Marquina, “La Obra del Doctor Alfonso Caso,” 21-31; Ignacio Bernal, “Caso en Monte Albán,” 83-89; José de J. Núñez y Domínguez, “Líneas de un perfil del doctor Alfonso Caso,” 293-97; and Manuel Toussaint, “Recuerdos de excursiones y viajes con Alfonso Caso,” 401-15. Also see John Paddock, “Semblanza: Alfonso Caso (1986-1970)—Un apunte,” *Cuadernos de Arquitectura Mesoamericana*, núm. 7 (April 1986): 83.

of the Department of Archaeology at the National Museum. In 1931, he initiated his long-lasting project of archaeological research in Monte Albán, Oaxaca...”⁵

The study of Mesoamerican ruins was, then, a somewhat delayed enthusiasm for Alfonso Caso and one that he would always see within a much broader context of the study of epigraphy, history and, moreover, the appreciation of Mexico's unique heritage and identity. And, as we'll see, nowhere is that combination of commitments more spectacularly evident than in his decades-long investigation and interpretation of Monte Albán.

I. THE FOUNDATIONS OF A MONTE ALBÁN NARRATIVE: IDENTIFYING THE PROTAGONISTS AND FORMULATING THE PLOTLINE

If, according to this personal cosmogony, Alfonso Caso's germinal enthusiasm for pre-Columbian ruins took root during a visit to the Central Mexican site of Xochicalco, it was, of course, the similarly scenic site of Monte Albán that would become his life-long preoccupation. To describe the Oaxaca site in advance of Caso's interventions as a “total mystery” is the sort of hyperbole that the situation merits. Certainly local populations had stories about the place and its plethora of largely overgrown monuments, but scholarly understandings of the place were still in their earliest infancy. Too little was known to venture any historical hypotheses whatever. Even unsteady foundations of a Monte Albán narrative were absent when Caso entered the scene.

While, as León-Portilla observes, Caso would not formally begin his decades of work at Monte Albán until 1931, his initial firsthand encounters with the site apparently came some five years earlier. There had been intermittent surveys and explorations during the nineteenth century; but in 1901-1902, Leopoldo Batres, Mexico's Inspector of Archaeological Monuments during the Porfiriato, undertook the first substantial government-sponsored excavations at Monte Albán, an initiative about which Caso

⁵ León-Portilla, “Alfonso Caso (1896-1970),” 877.

would subsequently be very critical.⁶ Confining his explorations largely to the building atop the South Platform, the front portion of the base of the North Platform and the so-called Palace of the Dancers—and, unlike his extensive work stabilizing and restoring the ruins of Mitla, declining to make any improvements that would enhance a tourist's site-visit to Monte Albán—Batres gathered up at least a dozen of the most impressive carved stone monuments, which he immediately sent to Mexico City.⁷ In his view, the Mexican public could best experience the wonders of Monte Albán, not at the remote site, but at the National Museum in the capital of the republic. Following that vigorous collecting spree, the Main Plaza was allowed to revert to its long-time use as a conveniently flat farm field for the nearby villages of San Martín and Xoxocotlán, a prosaic repurposing well captured in early twentieth-century photos of maize growing in the former ceremonial precinct.⁸

In 1925, the Departamento de Monumentos Prehispánicos, a forerunner to the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), was created;⁹ and, in 1926, Manuel Gamio, recently named by Mexico's first popularly elected president, Plutarco Elías Calles, to the post of Sub-secretary of Education, succeeded in getting federal

⁶ See Leopoldo Batres, *Exploraciones de Monte Albán* (México, D.F.: Casa Editorial Gante, 1902).

⁷ Batres, Batres, *Exploraciones de Monte Albán*, 32, says, "About the end of May [1902] I finished this successful exploration [in the area around the South Platform]. I brought to the city of Mexico the most important monuments discovered, except for the large stone with the seated tiger on it [a reference to a monolith that Caso, what a South Platform cornerstone that Caso *Las esteles zapotecas*, *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 53-54, labels and discusses as Estela 1]." On Batres's work at Monte Albán, see, for example, Nelly Robles García, *Monte Albán: History, Art, Monuments* (México, D.F.: Monclém Ediciones S.A. de C.V., 2004), 14-15. I will note momentarily discrepancies concerning how many monuments Batres hauled away from the site.

⁸ Constantine George Rickards, *The Ruins of Mexico* (London: H.E. Shrimpton, 1910), plate following page 108. For similar photos of Monte Albán as it would have appeared at the time of Caso's visits in the 1920s, see Fernandez Benítez, "Tumba 7 de Monte Albán," in *Arqueología Mexicana*, vol. I, núm. 3 (agosto-septiembre 1993), 29 and 34.

⁹ Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, 186.

control of Monte Albán, which finally thwarted the use of the Main Plaza as arable land. Gamio had grand plans for an ambitious set of excavations at Monte Albán that would parallel the major archaeological project in which he had been involved at Teotihuacan, and thus would, among other things, reflect the perspectives that he had acquired during his doctoral studies with Franz Boas at Columbia University. This forward-looking plan, an investigatory strategy that was far more amenable to Caso than Batres's approach, was, however, forestalled by political events; and Gamio never was directly involved in work at the Oaxacan site.¹⁰ Thus, in 1926, when Caso took his first hard look at the site, apparently in the company of an Italian archaeologist named Callegari,¹¹ Monte Albán had just come under a federal guardianship so new that he encountered in the center of the ruins the plowed furrows and canes that remained from the final harvest in this uniquely picturesque cornfield. But no systematic archaeological efforts had been undertaken since Batres's activities more than two decades earlier. At this point, the acclaimed ruins in the Zapotec village of Mitla, 30 miles to the southeast, remained, far and away, the region's premier archaeological attraction.

¹⁰ See Ignacio Bernal, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3: "Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica," volume editor, Gordon R. Willey; general editor, Robert Wauchope (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 792; and Fernandez Benítez, "Tumba 7 de Monte Albán," in *Arqueología Mexicana*, vol. I, núm. 3 (agosto-septiembre 1993), 30. This article is an excerpt from Fernandez Benítez's five-volume, often reprinted *Los indios de Mexico*, originally published in 1968. On Manuel Gamio, also see Vázquez León, "Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942," 80-81; and Susan Drucker-Brown's Introduction to Malinowski, Bronislaw and Julio de la Fuente, *Malinowski in Mexico: The Economics of a Mexican Market System*; edited and with an introduction by Susan Drucker-Brown (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 22-23.

¹¹ Fernandez Benítez, "Tumba 7 de Monte Albán," 28-34, provides a journalistic narrative account of Caso's initial 1926 encounters with Monte Albán, complete with quotes that he attributes to Caso himself. The reference to the Italian architect is at *ibid.*, 30.

A. INITIAL IMPRESSIONS AND FORWARD-LOOKING AMBITIONS: MONTE ALBÁN EMERGING FROM THE SHADOW OF MITLA

Present-day visitors to the spectacular carefully choreographed archaeological-tourist site of Monte Albán may find it difficult to imagine that prior to the mid-1930s—that is to say, before the sweeping repair and restoration of the site initiated by Alfonso Caso—Mitla, with its world-renowned geometric facades, was considered the insuperable showpiece of Oaxacan ruins while Monte Albán was but an untended ancillary attraction, worthy of a visit only for specially interested aficionados. Seemingly without exception, every nineteenth-century account of Oaxaca travel, whether by thoughtful scholars such as Frenchman Désiré Charnay, German Eduard Seler and American William Henry Holmes or by more adventure-seeking excursionists like Prussian soldier and painter, Gustavus F. von Tempsky, or American publicist Frederick A. Ober, positions Mitla as the archaeological highlight of the journey. Only some of these intrepid travelers even take the time to visit Monte Albán, which, if they do, gets much attenuated description; and many of these accounts decline even to mention the mountain site, irrespective of its much greater proximity to Oaxaca de Juarez (a.k.a. Oaxaca City), which is certain to have been their primary base of operations.¹²

¹² Traveler accounts demonstrating the far higher profile of Mitla than Monte Albán during the nineteenth century are abundant in the extreme. For instance, Désiré Charnay, *The Ancient Cities of the New World, Being Voyages and Explorations in Mexico and Central America from 1857-1882*, trans. J. Gonino and Helen S. Conant (New York: AMS Press, 1973); originally published in 1887, devotes chap. XXIV fully to Mitla and includes numerous of the earliest and suitably famous photographs; by contrast, his comments on Monte Albán, which he attributes to the Toltecs(!?), are confined to a couple of unillustrated pages, *ibid.*, 499-500. Eduard Seler and wife Caecilie Seler, who undertook two field seasons to Oaxaca, one in 1887/1888 and another in 1895, provide a 50-page account of Mitla in Eduard Seler, *Les ruines de Mitla* (1906), but a much briefer description of Monte Albán; on their time in Oaxaca, see Adam T. Sellen, “La colección arqueológica del Dr. Fernando Sologuren,” in *Acervos: Boletín de los Archivos y Bibliotecas de Oaxaca*, número 29, otoño-invierno 2005, 9-11. William Henry Holmes, *Archaeological Studies Among the Ancient Cities of Mexico*, publication 16, Anthropological Series, vol. I, no. I (Chicago: Field Columbia Museum, 1895, 1897) 210-88, provided splendid panorama drawings of both Mitla and Monte Albán, but far fuller commentary on the former. Gustav Ferdinand von Tempsky, *Mitla: a Narrative of Incidents and Personal Adventures on a Journey in Mexico, Guatemala, and Salvador in*

The contrastive treatment of Mitla and Monte Albán in the highly influential *Terry's Mexico: Handbook for Travellers*, which was crucial in the choreography of so many Europeans' and Americans' early twentieth-century experiences of Oaxaca, reveals, and indeed substantially contributed to, the continuing fame of the former and obscurity of the latter. From the original 1909 edition clear through numerous updated versions in the 1930s—in other words, in all editions that appeared prior to Caso's 1932 discovery of Tomb 7, at which point Monte Albán's profile would be hugely enhanced—*Terry's Mexico* gave elaborate instructions on a mandatory excursion to the ruins of Mitla, which were described as “among the most interesting and most accessible of the Mexican ruined cities,” positively “well deserving of a visit...”¹³ But about an optional side-trip to Monte Albán, this preeminent guidebook said:

“Unless the traveller [sic] is interested in archaeological remains, the journey will hardly repay him. The level hill-top shows evidences of having been the centre of a considerable population in ancient times. There are rock-carvings, the remains of fortresses and whatnot. The view is attractive, but an almost equally comprehensive *vista* may be had from the *Cerro del Fortin* [at the edge of Oaxaca City], and with less exertion and expenditure of time.”¹⁴

It is telling, for instance, that D. H. Lawrence, who spent much of 1924 and 1925 in Oaxaca—and who was an assiduous observer of indigenous markets, though not so

the Years 1853 to 1855: With Observations on the Modes of Life in those Countries (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1858), by his title, perpetuates the impression that Mitla is the most significant of all Central American ruins and does not even mention Monte Albán. And American publicist Frederick A. Ober, *Travels in Mexico and life among the Mexicans* (Boston: Estes & Lauriat, 1883, 1885, 1887), 531-50, while making no pretense to be a scholar, provides an extended description of his time at the Mitla ruins, which included hugging the so-termed Column of Death, but apparently never even visited Monte Albán.

¹³ T. Phillip Terry, *Terry's Mexico: Handbook for Travellers*, second edition revised (London: Gay and Hancock, Ltd., 1911), 534.

¹⁴ Terry, *Terry's Mexico: Handbook for Travellers*, second edition revised (1911), 534. This paragraph was repeated in the numerous editions of this travel guide clear through until the 1930s, that is to say, until developments in the wake of Caso's 1932 discovery of Tomb 7 entirely transformed the profile of Monte Albán.

enthusiastic about archaeological ruins—complied with Terry's advice to make the obligatory day-trip to Mitla. But despite living more than a year literally within sight of the ancient Zapotec capital, he was, it seems, never once persuaded to undertake the much shorter jaunt out of Oaxaca de Juarez to visit Monte Albán.¹⁵

In precisely the same era, Alfonso Caso, by contrast, would, according to Fernandez Benítez's rhapsodic account of the young scholar's first serious engagements with the site, each morning make the hour and a half walk from Oaxaca City to Monte Albán where he could find himself nearly alone among overgrown structures. Then, after taking photographs and drawing stelae and monuments, he would walk back in the afternoon.¹⁶ In Benítez's generous retelling, where others saw disrepair and remnants of a long-bygone era, the ambitious Caso discerned a fabulous opportunity. In words Benítez attributes directly to him, the dozens of unexplored mounds, tombs, patios and terraces "were simply waiting for the archaeologist..."¹⁷ Like Gamio, Caso concurred immediately that Monte Albán was a more valuable research venue than Mitla, which deserved every bit of the scholarly attention that was being lavished on Teotihuacan.

Indeed, as we'll see, affording Oaxacans and the Oaxaca region their overdue respect within broader Mesoamerican history would emerge as among his foremost narrative themes. And unlike Leopoldo Batres, Caso imagined that even for a lay public the most rewarding experience of the ancient capital could, of course, be had on-site, amidst thoughtfully restored pre-Columbian monuments. Yet, irrespective of a far more studious appreciation of the ancient city than his Porfirian predecessor, Caso, in 1926,

¹⁵ Ross Parmenter, *Lawrence in Oaxaca: A Quest for the Novelist in Mexico* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., 1984) provides an exceptionally detailed account of D. H. Lawrence's activities while in Oaxaca in 1924-1925; *ibid.*, 71, describes, for instance, how Lawrence was invited on an excursion to Monte Albán on 6 January 1925, but declined for health reasons to go. Seemingly, Lawrence's indifference to Monte Albán was reinforced by *Terry's Guide to Mexico* on which he relied heavily, though not without frequent complaints. See, for instance, *ibid.*, 171-72.

¹⁶ Benítez, "Tumba 7 de Monte Albán," 30.

¹⁷ Benítez, "Tumba 7 de Monte Albán," 30.

had no more satisfactory reply than Batres to the looming question about who had built Monte Albán. Both remained under the sway of the uncertain assertion that the builders belonged to some vaguely defined, seemingly hybrid “Mixteca-Zapoteca culture.”¹⁸ And at this point Caso had no fuller narrative than Batres to account for the rise, florescence and decline of the once-imposing city.

Thus while he was not uninterested in the much more high-profile ruins at Mitla, where he would subsequently undertake numerous projects, Caso had the vision to grasp immediately, contrary to prevailing popular perceptions, that Monte Albán was the site of far greater consequence not only for archaeo-historical inquiry, but also a resource for his paired ambitions of building a personal career and making a large contribution to formation of a post-Revolutionary Mexican national identity. As Caso would come to realize, pre-Columbian Monte Albán had no humble beginnings, and nor, according to retrospective accounts, was he ever inclined to see the investigation of the ancient capital as less than a project of enormous scale, import and rewards.

B. DISENTANGLING THE MIXTECS AND ZAPOTECAS: EPIGRAPHIC ANALYSIS AS A CRUCIAL FIRST STEP

No one demonstrates better than Alfonso Caso the symbiotic interactions between archaeology and epigraphy. The leading Oaxacan archaeologist of his era was also the unrivaled pioneer in the decipherment of both the region's abundant carved stone monuments and its painted manuscripts; he was, few dispute, “the closest thing to a Renaissance man that Oaxaca [scholarship] has ever had.”¹⁹ Thus while, in the wake of

¹⁸ Note that while Batres, *Exploraciones de Monte Albán*, expresses numerous incautious ideas about the Zapotecs—e.g., that “the Zapotecas flourished in Yucatan” (ibid., 9)—he does assert, on the basis of writing that he found at the site, that “this great city, now in ruins, had been built by Zapotecas” (ibid., 37).

¹⁹ 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), 191.

his initial 1926 reconnaissance of the site, it would take Caso some time to secure the access and resources necessary to launch the scale of excavations that he imagined, he could begin immediately an unprecedentedly thorough study of Monte Albán's carved stone monuments. This path-breaking epigraphic effort, which issued in *Las estelas zapotecas* (1928), would, as we'll see momentarily, provide an enormous advance in the understanding of Monte Albán—even before Caso was allowed to turn one spade of earth, as it were.²⁰

1. Zapotec Monuments and Mixtec Codices: Entirely Different and Distinct Cultures

Caso's first great work trained on the Oaxacan capital was, then, *Las estelas zapotecas*, an ambitious attempt to locate, classify and interpret to fullest extent possible every one of the extant carved inscriptions from Monte Albán and associated sites.²¹ Impressively thorough in his three-year search, Caso managed to locate some 40 carved monuments, which would provide the crucial basis for his landmark study.²² Owing to the robust collecting efforts of Leopoldo Batres, twelve of the 15 Monte Albán stelae that

²⁰ Regarding the significance of Caso's *Las estelas zapotecas*, see, for instance, Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, 178, who opines that it, "marks the beginning of the acquisition of basic knowledge of the [Oaxaca] region's archaeology."

²¹ Alfonso Caso, *Las estelas zapotecas*, Publicación de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (México, D.F.: Monografías del Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía, 1928). The entire work is reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 2 (México, D.F.: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 3-171; and it is page numbers from this 2002 *Obras* reprint that I will be citing.

²² Caso, *Las estelas zapotecas* (*Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 53-87), gives a stone by stone catalog that includes not only his interpretive analysis of each monument, but also its present status and location. Alfonso Caso, "Las exploraciones en Monte Alban: Temporada 1931-1932" (México, D.F.: Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, 1932), publicación núm. 7; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 2 (México, D.F.: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 173-258 (on p. 176), says that he spent three years working on this Project.

Caso studied were by that time in the National Museum in Mexico City;²³ only three of the Monte Albán stelae he discusses remained in situ. Likewise, many of the carved stones from other sites were also by then either in the National Museum or in the Museum of Oaxaca; a few survived only in photographs or in casts that had been made for the Chicago Exposition of 1893;²⁴ and one had found its way to the Museum of Natural History of New York.²⁵

Several carved lintels, jambs and monuments did, however, remain in their original locations, either at Monte Albán or other Oaxaca sites; and for lots of the others, including the major monuments that Batres had shipped to Mexico City, the provenance was fairly well established. Moreover, the topographic site plan that Caso published in *Las esteles zapotecas*, which had actually been drafted in 1924, would provide a serviceable map for visiting Monte Albán today;²⁶ major architectural configurations are outlined with impressive accuracy. In other words, while the carved monuments of Monte Albán had been scattered and ill-treated, and while the great majority of the structures from which they had been extracted were in serious disrepair, Caso was equipped with an excellent command of the layout of the site and a fairly secure knowledge of where most of the carved monuments had been located within that plan.

Be that as it may, in the 1920s, Caso had virtually no academic precedents on which to construct his interpretive analyses of these carved stones. In the general area of

²³ See Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas; Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 53-66. Rickards, *The Ruins of Mexico*, 105, contends, "About twenty-eight of the big sculptured stones which have been found [at Monte Albán] have been removed to the National Museum in Mexico City;" but certainly Caso's count is more reliable.

²⁴ Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas; Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 75.

²⁵ Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas; Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 74.

²⁶ Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas; Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 89. Caso, *ibid.*, 53, n., thanks the head of la Dirección de Arqueología, ingeniero José Reygadas Vértiz, for the use of this excellent topographic plan; but the actual drawing on page 89 is dated 1926 and signed by Ing. Mariano Tirado Osario.

Zapotec writing, he could acknowledge with approval research on painted murals that had been found in Oaxaca tombs undertaken by American archaeologist Marshall Saville (1867-1935),²⁷ the work of German ethnologist, linguist and archaeologist Walter Lehmann (1878–1939) on the Oaxaca codices or so-termed “Mixteco-Zapotec paintings,”²⁸ and perhaps most notably the writings of German scholar Eduard Seler (1849-1922) on the Zapotec calendar and the Mitla wall paintings.²⁹ But Caso was also accurate in bemoaning that, prior to 1927, no one had undertaken a serious study of the signs and designs carved on the stelae, buildings and tombs of central Oaxaca, Monte Albán included.³⁰ And even more important in our present search for the emergence of a thoroughgoing narrative that corresponds to the ruins of Monte Albán, Caso was similarly justified in observing that no one even begun to disentangle what continued to be described in vague and confused ways as a single “Mixtec-Zapotec” culture. Nor were there any empirically reliable solutions forthcoming from present-day indigenous Oaxacans. To this point, there had been, in other words, no remotely satisfactory reply to the most basic of all questions: Who built Monte Albán? Even a widely agreed upon *misunderstanding* was lacking.

To his benefit, Caso's absence of scholarly predecessors in the interpretation of Zapotec and Mixtec glyphs freed him of obstacles that slowed the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphs. Though the glyphs and inscriptions in that area had received considerably

²⁷ Regarding Caso's use and appreciation of Marshall Saville's “Exploration of Zapotecan [sic] Tombs in Southern Mexico,” see Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas; Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 6.

²⁸ Walter Lehmann, “Les peintures mixteco-zapotecs et quelques documents emparentés;” cited in Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas; Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 5.

²⁹ Regarding Caso's use and appreciation of Seler's “The Mexican Chronology, with Special Reference to the Zapotec Calendar” and “*Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Amerikanischen Sprach und Alterthumskunde*,” see, respectively, Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas; Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 11 and 18.

³⁰ For Caso's own reflections on both the state-of-the-art in advance of his *Las esteles zapotecas* and the significance of that work, see Caso's comments quoted in Benítez, “Tumba 7 de Monte Albán,” 31.

greater attention, their interpretation was stalled for decades by the insistences of Sylvanus Morley and J. Eric S. Thompson that Maya writing was wholly preoccupied with astronomical and otherworldly themes; they contended, in other words, and overwhelmed most of their contemporaries with the intransigent view that the Maya hieroglyphs, ostensibly the work of time-worshipping astronomer-priests, were thoroughly non-historical and apolitical.³¹ It was not until Tatiana Proskouriakoff's persuasive and then-iconoclastic work in the 1950s that scholars began to accept widely that Maya glyphs were, after all, preponderantly concerned with recording the history of actual events, groups and individuals.³² Caso, by contrast, realized immediately that the writing inscribed on Zapotec stelae addressed genuine persons and political events, and thus was highly serviceable in the solution of historical problems. In this respect Caso was a couple of decades ahead of his Mayanist colleagues, who would eventually concur that Maya glyphs too, while indeed depicting many deities and cosmological concerns, are overwhelmingly preoccupied with conquests, alliances and matters of genealogical succession among rulers.

Moreover—and hugely significant—Caso's interpretation of these stelae enabled him to deliver something that had eluded all earlier students of ancient Oaxaca: a definitive differentiation between pre-Columbian Zapotecs and their Mixtecs counterparts. While there was a general willingness to accept that the abundant ruins in the region had been built by the ancestors of Oaxaca's large and diverse indigenous population, there was a complete lack of clarity concerning the historical relationship between the area's two largest ethnic groups. The hyphenated Mixtec-Zapotec label was telling of the confusion and of a prevailing sense that both were apparently components of some larger cultural whole. Caso, however, came to the groundbreaking realization that Zapotecs and Mixtecs, though perhaps overlapping and interacting in significant

³¹ On the history of the decipherment of Maya writing, see Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992).

³² See Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, chap. 7; and Char Solomon, *Tatiana Proskouriakoff: Interpreting the Ancient Maya* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

ways, were two profoundly different pre-Columbian groups, each of which left its most distinctive legacy in a very different genre of evidence. He argued, in short, on the one hand, that the stone stelae of Monte Albán that were the focus of his 1928 study are Zapotec, and that Mixtecs had played no role whatever in creating those carved monuments; and, on the other hand, the famed Oaxaca painted codices are thoroughly Mixtec, and owe nothing whatever to the Zapotecs.³³

By now too obvious to stir much reaction, this fundamental distinction provided a gigantic advance over previous commentators by establishing the distinct and very separate identities of the two primary protagonist groups in all of the Monte Albán narratives that Caso and others would subsequently compose. He was certain that both Mixtec and Zapotec cultures had developed largely within Oaxaca; and, contrary to prevailing views, he argued from the outset that both were in some respects superior to the better known Aztecs and Mayas. But he was equally certain that they were two quite different cultural strains. Though, as we'll see, the similarities, differences, historical and ethnic connections—and/or the lack thereof—between Oaxaca's two foremost indigenous groups would remain to this day matters of serious contention, never again could scholars blur Mixtec and Zapotec into a single cultural constituency. This was, to be sure, a major turning point in crafting an empirically sound rendition of ancient Oaxaca history.

2. Emerging Narrative Themes: Imagining Monte Albán as a Strictly Zapotec City

Furthermore, though *Las estelas zapotecas* culminates in lists and classifications rather than a thoroughgoing Monte Albán narrative, Caso does make several interrelated posits that will figure large in all subsequent (re)construction stories. Each of these postulates not only had the crucial effect of differentiating Zapotecs from Mixtecs, but also afforded the heretofore neglected Zapotecs a status commensurate with, in some

³³ Though Leopoldo Batres's comments on Zapotec writing are problematic and unreliable, it is noteworthy that, based on the inscriptions he encountered at Monte Albán, in 1902, he did anticipate Caso's conclusion that "that great city, now in ruins, had been built by the Zapotecs." Batres, *Exploraciones de Monte Albán*, 37.

respects greater than, the much more widely appreciated Teotihuacanos, Aztecs and Mayas.

For one, regarding the timing and historical relationship between the two main groups, Caso insisted that, at least in the Valley of Oaxaca, the Zapotecs *preceded* the Mixtecs. He says, in fact, that “Zapotec chronology shows a great antiquity, because some aspects appear to be similar with the Old Empire of the Mayas.”³⁴ For two, along with great antiquity, Caso accentuates the impressive ingenuity of the Zapotecs by arguing that they were largely independent and in some important ways ahead of their more famous neighbors in the Maya zone or Central Mexico. He wrote, for instance, that “Zapotec writing differs from that of the Maya or Mexicana although it is definitely related to both... Other dates make possible that the Tonalamatl [i.e., the 260-day ritual calendar that was eventually embraced by both Aztecs and Mayas] was invented in Oaxaca.”³⁵ Already in place, then, were the very large claims that both writing and the ritual calendar—and indeed urbanism and thus a host of major socio-cultural accomplishments—had their earliest manifestations not in the more celebrated Maya zone, but rather in Oaxaca.

And, for three, commensurate with these hypotheses about Zapotec antiquity, independence and inventiveness, Caso—in 1928—attributes the great ruins of Monte Albán quite fully to the stela-building Zapotecs, and thereby almost completely absents the codex-crafting Mixtecs from the city's history. And, in reverse, he discerns no Zapotec involvement in the extant pictographic codices. In his view:

“The stelae of Monte Albán, Zaachila, etc., that appear in *Las esteles zapotecas* have a great similarity with the funeral urns that have been found in the Zapotec region of the state of Oaxaca and are different from all of the codices presently known. For that reason we have to think that Monte Albán was a Zapotec city and that there does not remain a single codex from that culture.”³⁶

³⁴ Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas*; *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 51; my translation.

³⁵ Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas*; *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 51; my translation.

³⁶ Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas*; *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 51; my translation.

At this point, then, albeit with due tentativeness, Caso did have an unambiguous reply to that central question about the identity of the builders of Monte Albán: they were, in short, Zapotecs. As we'll see momentarily, he would, in short order, be compelled to nuance this blunt claim that Monte Albán was a strictly Zapotec city. But the then-new assertion that Zapotecs alone were the proper architects and residents of Monte Albán—and thus that Mixtecs were, at most, interlopers, squatters or visitors—is recurrent motif in nearly all of Caso's accounts of the city. Troublingly, though, even he himself would for decades express reservations about that simple solution.

C. EXCAVATION BEGINS AND TOMB 7 EMERGES: A DISCOVERY THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

“Groundbreaking,” if accurate, is an ironic descriptor of Alfonso Caso's *Las estelas zapotecas*. This 1928 study of Zapotec writing, by a scholar who would become Mexico's most renowned archaeologist, was based overwhelmingly on carved stones that were, by the time he encountered them, already in museums; it involved no actual excavation. Moreover, while providing an enormous breakthrough in disentangling the historical relationship between Zapotecs and Mixtecs, the seminal work on glyphic writing arguably raised more questions than it answered—questions that, Caso said, could only be answered via far more in-depth investigations at that the actual site of Monte Albán. In this work, he established that a major component of Mexico's pre-Hispanic cultural heritage—a site and a people that in many ways superseded either the Mayas or Aztecs!—remained largely untouched by the scholarly investigators. For the ambitious young Caso, then, *Las estelas zapotecas* served as the springboard that provided both the intellectual incentive and the persuasive nationalist rhetoric for launching a major archaeological initiative at Monte Albán.

In other words, as Caso described the situation, there was a serious lacuna, especially in public awareness, both within and outside of Mexico: “For the great majority of people who are not specialists in the field of ancient history, there existed in

pre-Columbian Mexico only two peoples: the Aztecs, who inhabited the altiplano, and the Mayas, who flourished in Yucatan and Central America.”³⁷ Yet, directing attention to his study of Zapotec writing, Caso now had formidable evidence to argue that, “Nevertheless, there were numerous other independent peoples that had developed cultures that were, in many respects, superior to those of the Aztecs and Mayas, and first among those other cultures are the Mixtecs and the Zapotecs.”³⁸ Caso also noted that, unless some initiative was taken in the study of ancient Oaxaca, the discrepancy would continue to widen insofar as impressive archaeological work was already being done not only at Aztec sites but also at Teotihuacan; and, in the Maya zone, excavations and analyses, “principally by American institutions,” were making solid advances.³⁹ Oaxaca archaeology, by contrast, lagged far behind. But, based on all he had learned in the preparation of *Las esteles zapotecas*, Caso could present Monte Albán as a virtually guaranteed archaeological investment, certain to bring to light—and to public attention—to another huge facet of the pre-Columbian cultural accomplishment that had been to this point sadly neglected.

With this argument, Caso's case was successfully made and a rapid-fire sequence of developments ensued. In 1929, he maneuvered the permission and funding to start excavating at Monte Albán. In 1930, fortuitously, the section of the Pan-American Highway that passed through Oaxaca, within a couple of miles of Monte Albán, was completed, which greatly facilitated access to the area. Less fortuitously, on January 14, 1931, large portions of Oaxaca de Juarez were devastated by a major earthquake, which thus delayed the start of the archaeological project; nevertheless, in October of 1931,

³⁷ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 175; my translation.

³⁸ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 175; my translation.

³⁹ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 176; my translation.

Caso began his first of what would become 19 seasons of Monte Albán excavations.⁴⁰ Numbering the tombs in the order in which he explored them, the first six of more than 200 that he would eventually explore yielded notable but fairly modest remains. Then, however, the seventh tomb, which he and his small team opened in the late afternoon of January 7, 1932, proved truly life-altering! One of the earliest of Caso's countless renditions of this most famous episode in Mexican archaeology reads:

“We made an opening near these first finds, and soon the sound of our picks warned us that there was a cavity below and that we were directly over the roof of a tomb; but before coming to the stones of the burial vault, we still had to break through a second layer of stucco... Through the narrow aperture, lighted by a flash light, I could see a human skull and next to it two vases, one of which seemed to be of black clay with an extraordinary polish... My eagerness to behold the wonders of our discovery spurred me to extraordinary effort, and I finally succeeded in overcoming the difficulties of the narrow opening...”⁴¹

Yes, with that discovery and initial descent into Tomb 7, everything changed.

1. The Earliest Narrations: An Interim Tale of Personal Discovery and a Provisional Story of Monte Albán

Without question, then, that fateful winter day in 1932 marks the single most important episode both in the career of Alfonso Caso and in the exploratory history of Monte Albán. From then on the former law professor would forever be “the discoverer of Tomb 7.” In addition to the enormous lift to his personal reputation, he proved masterful in parlaying that acclaim into the warrant for major work at the ancient capital.

⁴⁰ For a retrospective enumeration of the main objectives with which Caso began his excavations at Monte Albán in 1931, see Alfonso Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (México, D.F: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969), 12.

⁴¹ Alfonso Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic Magazine* vol. LXII (October 1932), 487-512; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 49-84. Because the *National Geographic* article is widely accessible, I will in the case of this one article cite page numbers both from the original and in reprinted versions, e.g., this quote comes from original, 497498; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 63.

Within months of the discovery, Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas would visit the site, enter into a long-term friendship with Caso, and lend major support to the next stages of exploration.⁴² The quiet obscurity of the mountain ruins was permanently disrupted; and, at last, Oaxaca archaeology could begin to catch up to its Central Mexican and Maya counterparts. As one somewhat ambivalent critic explains the enormous and ongoing ramifications,

“...Caso discovered his Troy at Monte Albán in 1932. With this ‘cultural capital’ he initiated his meteoric intellectual and political career. Unlike Batres and Gamio, it transformed him into the prototype of the future batches of anthropological-functionaries who continue to characterize both the Mexican school of archaeology and Mexican archaeology in general.”⁴³

While Caso's full and formal report on the far-reaching find, *El Tesoro de Monte Albán* (1969), would not appear for almost four decades, just a year before his death, immediately in the wake of his first descent into the famed tomb, he wrote a flurry of preliminary accounts of the momentous discovery and its consequences. In quick succession articles appeared not only in Mexican journals, but also in such internationally popular venues as *The Illustrated London News*, *Natural History* and *National Geographic Magazine*.⁴⁴ Though the thirty-six year old was already acknowledged as

⁴² Regarding the friendship between Caso and Cardenas, see, for instance, “Imágenes históricas de la arqueología en México, siglo XX,” special issue of *Arqueología Mexicana* (avril 2001), 52. On the necessity of presidential support for Mexican archaeological projects, which Caso enjoyed, also see Vázquez León, “Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942,” 71.

⁴³ Vázquez León, Luis, “Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942,” in *History of Latin American Archaeology*, ed. Augusto Oyuela-Caycedo, Worldwide Archaeology Series 15. (Aldershot, Hampshire, England and Brookfield, Vt.: Avebury, 1994), 83.

⁴⁴ For example, the following six articles, all of which appeared in 1932 within months of the discovery of Tomb 7, and all of which are in many ways redundant, are reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002): [1] Alfonso Caso, “La tumba 7 de Monte Albán es mixtec,” *Universidad de México*, IV: 20 (June 1932), 117-50; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 11-37. [2] Alfonso Caso, “Las últimas exploraciones de Monte Albán,” *Universidad de México*, t. V, núms. 25 y 26, (México, 1932): 101-7; reprinted in *Obras*:

“the authority in the field of Oaxaca archaeology,”⁴⁵ this spate of popular publications was in many ways a coming-out party both for Caso and even more so for Monte Albán. Academic audiences could wait; suddenly Caso and the ancient Zapotec capital were front-page news, and he seized the moment.

From the outset, his vigorous efforts to publicize and win support for of his archaeological initiatives depended especially on two presentational strategies. First, every rendition of the Tomb 7 discovery accentuated the seeming financial value of the recovered relics, which Caso, though surprised, immediately identified as of Mixtec rather than Zapotec origin (a subsequently debated point to which I will return shortly). While lots of archaeological discoveries are deemed “priceless” on artistic and/or historical grounds, the 121 gold objects—more than 3.5 kilos worth!—and 24 silver items with a total weight of 325 grams, though only the most glamorous of hundreds of

El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 39-48. [3] Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America.” [4] Alfonso Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels: An Analysis of the Historical Significance of Monte Albán Treasure The Ritualistic Meaning of the Ancient Mixtec Inscriptions” [sic]; *Natural History*, vol. 32, no. 5 (September-October, 1932), 464-80; reprinted in *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 85-112. [5] Alfonso Caso, “Los hallazgos de Monte Albán;” *Mexican Folkways*, vol. 7, no. 3 (July-September, Mexico, 1932): 114-28; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 113-28. And [6] Alfonso Caso, “Las tumbas de Monte Albán;” *Anales del Museo Nacional de Arqueología*, IV Epoca, vol. VIII, núm. 4 (octubre-diciembre 1933): 641-48; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 129-42. My citations for all six of these articles will be using the page numbers from the 2002 *Obras* edition, which provides easier access to all of those pieces. For additional works published immediately in the wake of the Tomb 7 discovery, also see [7] Alfonso Caso, “The Monte Albán Treasures,” *The Illustrated London News* (London: April 2, 1932); and [8] Alfonso Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932” (México, D.F: Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, 1932), publicación núm. 7; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 2 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 173-258. Also, for extensive photos of the Tomb 7 discovery, see a full issue devoted to “El Tesoro de Monte Albán: Catálogo visual,” *Arqueología Mexicana*, edición especial número 41 (diciembre, 2011).

⁴⁵ Vaillant, Foreword to Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 85.

elements recovered from Tomb 7, were constantly celebrated for their real cash value.⁴⁶ This one discovery quadrupled the number of gold objects known to archaeologists. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, from the earliest newspaper accounts to the subsequent academic treatments, terse guidebook descriptions, and even Caso's final scholarly treatise on the topic, virtually all descriptions of the funerary accouterments recovered from Tomb 7 employ the distasteful label of "tesoro" or treasure.⁴⁷

And yet, if evoking intimations of a kind of institutionalized grave robbing, classing the offerings that had accompanied the remains of ancient Oaxacan rulers as "booty" and a "bonanza" is tellingly honest. What, after all, made Tomb 7 so special? Its apparent monetary appraisal. In virtually all accounts, the special prestige of Tomb 7 is correlated less with the historical information that it provides—lots or other Monte Albán discoveries are equally revealing in that respect—but with its supposed pecuniary worth. If recognition of the artistic and historical merits of the find required some expert knowledge, its hypothetical resale value was something that was impressive to everyone. The Tomb 7 treasures provided Caso his best evidence that ancient Oaxacans were, contrary to prevailing views, peers or perhaps superiors to the more celebrated Aztecs or Mayas.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Alfonso Caso, "Lapidary Work, Goldwork, and Copperwork from Oaxaca," *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3, "Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica," volume editor, Gordon R. Willey; general editor, Robert Wauchope (London: University of Texas Press, 1965), 923, first notes how few pre-Columbian gold and silvers objects are persevered in the Museo Nacional de Mexico and other collections, and then estimates that the 121 gold objects found in Tomb 7, which had a total weight of 3 kilos 598.7 grams, "quadrupled the number of gold objects known to us; the silver ones found in the tomb are practically the only ones recorded... In Tomb 7 we found 24 silver objects with a total weight of 325 grams. The scarcity of silver objects is explained by the fact that in its native state silver is much rarer than gold and is more easily destroyed." Caso, *ibid.*, 923-928, then specifies the nature of these gold and silver objects.

⁴⁷ Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (1969).

⁴⁸ Mayanist Herbert J. Spinden, "The Royal Tombs of Southern Mexico," *The Brooklyn Museum Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2 (April 1932), 56, writing within months of the Caso's discovery of the Tomb 7 treasure, opens his article by opining that, "the finding of gold and jewels at an archeological site is apt to be a calamity of the first order as far as science is concerned... Sensational finds sometimes have political consequences seriously

In any case, a second ploy to capitalize on the opportune discovery is even more to the point of our present discussion. Crucial both to Caso's political and public relations initiatives as well as to his own efforts to "make sense" of the ruins was the composition of a narrative that could account for the fabulous tomb within the broader history of Monte Albán. Tomb 7, in other words, momentous in innumerable respects, posed a huge rhetorical challenge. Ironically, having persuasively argued that the complexities of ancient Oaxacan history could be revealed only via long and careful archaeological investigation, the stunningly quick disclosure deprived Caso of any opportunity to ponder and cogitate over the emerging evidence. Instead of step-by-step progress, the serendipitous discovery had vaulted Caso and the ancient city into the spotlight of the archaeo-historical world. Thus, literally just weeks from the start of the multi-year Monte Albán project, he was required to deliver to colleagues and journalists a synthesis that was both true to the very preliminary excavations and compelling to a general public, including possible financial backers of more work at Monte Albán. Caso was, in a sense, provided an audience—far too large and interested an audience to keep waiting—before he had a certain story to tell.

Master diplomat as well as researcher, Caso would manage his command performance with a rapid succession of 1932 articles, at least six of which are worthy of mention, that tell what amounts to two competing, or more often complementary, stories of Monte Albán. Regarding the first, Caso, of course, worked to bring up-to-date his still highly tentative (re)construction of the pre-Columbian comings and goings at Monte Albán. He had to provide the best available answers to the obvious journalist questions about who had built the city. What sort of lives had they lived there? Whom and what

interfering with scientific work which is international and without eye to profit..." But perhaps anticipating the way in which Caso turns a potential "calamity" to his great advantage, Spinden, *ibid.*, 62, also expresses confidence that "Dr. Caso... is especially well fitted for explorations in this field." Noteworthy also in this article is Spinden's atypical and again perhaps prescient skepticism about Caso's identification of the Mixtecs as the makers of the gold artifacts (see *ibid.*, 60), a hypothesis that, as we'll see, carries the day for several decades.

were buried in Tomb 7? And, in reply to the inevitable query, what had led to the collapse and abandonment of the fabulous mountaintop capital?

Though, to this point Caso had been afforded less than 20 weeks of on-site investigations, several features had already come to light that forced him to reconsider the set of answers that he had offered to those questions in *Las estelas zapotecas*. Most dramatically—and we will return momentarily to a more full discussion of this historical challenge—having largely excluded the Mixtecs from the story of the great Zapotec capital of Monte Albán in that earlier work, Caso now had to come to terms with the surprising realization that it was, so he immediately opined, Mixtecs who had crafted and buried the Tomb 7 treasure.⁴⁹ That is to say, having largely eliminated Mixtecs from his account of the high-sited city, he now had to find a way to re-involve those non-Zapotecs in the history of Monte Albán. Though some present-day archaeologists will regard this as the most high-profile error in any (re)construction of Monte Albán's history—in other words, they consider Caso simply wrong in his emphatic attribution of the Tomb 7's famous contents to Mixtecs—that will become the standard view that continues to be repeated in virtually every textbook, guidebook and oral account of the site.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Writing 50 years later about the initial reception of Caso's assignment of the Tomb 7 "treasure" to Mixtecs, John Paddock, "Reflexiones en torno a la Tumba 7 de Monte Albán, cincuenta años después de su descubrimiento," en *Cuadernos de Arquitectura Mesoamericana*, núm. 7 (1986), 3, notes that, "This hypothesis was rejected by the great majority of archeologists, and Caso died in 1970 without having seen it widely accepted or definitively shown to be correct." But then Paddock, *ibid.*, who, as we'll see in chapter 3, has his own very partisan (now not well accepted) ideas about a "Mixtec invasion," contends that, in the wake of manuscript evidence uncovered in the 1980s, "Caso's interpretation of Tomb 7 was at last confirmed in the documents of Macuilxochitl, the Codex Nuttall, and the Lienzo de Guevea." As I explain in the next footnote, few contemporary Oaxacanists would agree. (This short article also includes fascinating comments on the personal attacks that Caso received in the wake of the Tomb 7 discovery and on major aspects of the Tomb 7 find that Caso kept secret even from Ignacio Bernal.)

⁵⁰ Recall that in this book I make no pretense to describe the latest, and thus shifting, state-of-the-art on these archaeological matters; but the question of who deposited the fabulous treasure in Tomb 7 is an especially perplexing and thus noteworthy case. On the one hand, at present, while Caso's proposition that the marvelous offerings were deposited by Mixtecs remains the standard line in textbooks and tourist literature,

At any rate, in addition to his reworked historical account, Caso also began to tell a second, brand new and very different sort of Monte Albán narrative—namely, his much more personal story of discovery. Where an accurate account of pre-Columbian past was elusive in the extreme, this adventitious adventure story had presented itself on a kind of silver platter. Caso, to his happy surprise, was both eyewitness to and main actor in the drama of uncovering what continues to be described as the wealthiest find in the history of American archaeology. This was archaeology at its most exciting, even histrionic. Given the combination of the splendor of the Tomb 7 remains, the speed with which they had offered themselves up, together with Caso's youth and the exotic alpine setting, it is perhaps no surprise that he provides a moment-by-moment rehearsal of where he, his two student-assistants and his wife, Mariá Lombardo de Caso, were standing at each phase of the discovery, what they saw first, and what they said to one another.

It is a romantic and provocative circumstance that could, on the one hand, have a broad appeal to anyone, an adventure story of seemingly universal allure. Yet, on the other hand, it was also a story with special appeal to Mexicans insofar the objects that Caso was unearthing put the art of their ancient ancestors on each footing with, to borrow

seemingly no archaeologist working in Oaxaca is any longer willing to reaffirm Caso's claim that the depositors were Mixtecs. The prevailing view, if by no means consensual, instead attributes those offerings to Zapotecs, perhaps from the nearby Zaachila area where very similar funerary offerings have been found, who had adopted Mixtec art styles. But, on the other hand, somewhat surprisingly, no scholar seems anxious to seize the limelight for exposing the great Alfonso Caso as wrong in one of his central claims. For instance, Cira Martínez López, "La residencia de la tumba 7 y su templo: elementos arquitectónico-religiosos en Monte Albán," in *Religión de los Binnigula'sa'*, Víctor de la Cruz and Marcus Winter, coordinators (Oaxaca, México: Fondo Editorial, IEEPO, 2001), 219-72, describes the thorough reinvestigation of Tomb 7 that was undertaken as part of the Monte Alban Special Project, 1992-1994; but then she concludes: "We still do not know who deposited this treasure: Zapotecs, Mixtecs, or Zapotecos mixtequizadas (i.e., Zapotecs who had already acquired mixed Mixtec elements) who lived in Monte Albán area..." Ibid., 265; my translation. In the cautious view of Martínez López, it will require careful testing of bone fragments from the three leading contenders—(1) Postclassic populations of Zapotecs in the Valley de Oaxaca, (2) Mixtecs in the Valley of Oaxaca and (3) Mixtecs of the Mixteca region—which could then be matched with bone fragments in the offerings, to resolve the issue. Ibid.

his own analogies, “the finest productions of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Chinese.”⁵¹ Where the story of pre-Columbian Monte Albán would emerge in halting and uncertain ways over the next several decades, this full-blown tale of Monte Albán discovery was immediately available and highly serviceable in winning the support that Caso required.

2. Scholarship and Publicity: Academic versus Popular Renditions of the Tomb 7 Discovery

The interlacing and juxtaposition of these two sorts of stories—the historical (re)construction narrative and the more personal story of discovery—are perhaps most evident in a composition that served first as Caso's official report on that initial 1931-1932 season of work at Monte Albán,⁵² and then, in an abridged and significantly retouched version, reappeared in the October 1932 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, a mere eight months after the Tomb 7 discovery.⁵³ The latter version carried the suitably splashy title, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America;” and the subtitle, “A Tomb in Oaxaca, Mexico, Yields Treasures Which Reveal the Splendid Culture of the Mixtecs,” thereby exposed the ironic reversal wherein the Mixtecs who, just four years earlier, had been largely excluded from the Monte Albán story in Caso's *Las esteles zapotecas*, had now seized top billing.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 512; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 83.

⁵² Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932.” Note that, with some three decades of hindsight, Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (1969), chap. 1, 19-33, also provides an overview of the goals and accomplishments of that first (1931-1932) season of exploration at Monte Albán, which is more well illustrated with drawings as well as photographs than original report on this season. The remaining eight chapters of that work (pp. 36-240) constitute Caso's final and fullest comments on Tomb 7.

⁵³ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original pages 487-512; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 49-83.

⁵⁴ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America.”

Comparing the two significantly different permutations of this article, the very first substantial piece that Caso wrote in the wake of the Tomb 7 discovery, is revealing. In the original excavationary report, which is one kind of politically strategic as well as scholarly document, delivered to one sort of specialist audience, it is the pre-Hispanic (re)construction narrative that has priority. But, with the reframing and editing of the *National Geographic* version, which is of course aimed a vastly larger and more popular audience, the emphases are reversed so that it is the tale of the dashing young archaeologist that is front and center.⁵⁵ Preceded in that uniquely high-profile publication by only two earlier articles on Oaxaca, one in 1910 and another in 1927, both of which had predictably devoted the greatest share of archaeological attention to Mitla, this is the piece most responsible for first bringing Monte Albán, Zapotecs, Mixtecs—and Alfonso Caso—to the attention of Americans.⁵⁶

Both renditions of the seminal article begin with a politically astute Caso dutifully acknowledging the institutions and individuals who had funded the work, and then reassuring them that the great expectations for Monte Albán have only grown greater after the first round of digging.⁵⁷ Indeed that sense of promise and anticipation about

⁵⁵ For another narrative (uncritical) account of the discovery of Tomb 7, which focuses more on the discoverer Caso than the discovery itself, see the 42-page booklet, Mildred Kyle Madsen, *The Seventh Tomb of Monte Albán* (copyright 1982 Mildred Kyle Madsen). She concedes (p. 8) that, “For us, Dr. Caso became a personal hero, and the work he did there [at Monte Albán] seems to us one which everyone in the world should know and honor;” and regarding the native workers’ reputed affection for Caso, she writes (p. 11), “They all revered Alfonso Caso. They more than revered him; they loved him dearly. He was the source of everything good that had come into their lives.” Also included, for instance, are anecdotes about Caso’s three young children who were at the site during that fateful first season.

⁵⁶ The two previous articles on Oaxaca were Jeremiah Zimmerman, “Hewers of Stone,” *National Geographic Magazine* vol. XXI, no. 12 (December, 1910): 1002-19; and Herbert Corey, “Among the Zapotecs of Mexico: A Visit to the Indians of Oaxaca, Home State of the Republic’s Great Liberator, Juárez, and Its Most Famous Ruler, Díaz,” *National Geographic Magazine*, vol. LI, no. 5 (May 1927): 501-53.

⁵⁷ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 176; and Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 487-88; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 51-52.

future discovery is perhaps the central thrust of the entire essay. Caso is preparing the way, and working in highly overt ways to secure additional support, for what promises to be a very long-term project. To that end, his official report documents the already impressive progress by providing thorough descriptions of the specific excavations of, respectively, the North Platform, three mounds and nine tombs (details of which are omitted from the *National Geographic* version);⁵⁸ then he devotes roughly half of the 30-page report to the most impressive discovery of all—Tomb 7 and its spectacular contents. Perhaps surprisingly, but likely with Caso's encouragement, the *National Geographic* version retained the explicit and extended efforts at additional fund-raising with which the official write-up ends. Following his grand discovery, which he wrongly assumed would be the first many such opulent windfalls, Caso now had even stronger grounds for promising the near-certainty of quick returns on one's investment:

“Hundreds of tombs, some probably as rich as Tomb 7, remain unexplored, and magnificent edifices covered by vegetation and rubble await the archaeologist. The Mexican Government, which is working simultaneously at various other archaeological sites, will dedicate greater resources this year to the exploration of Monte Albán. But if the support of private individuals should back up official action, its excavations would be realized much more quickly, and would solve interesting questions not only in the history of Mexico, but all America.”⁵⁹

If markedly blunt in his appeals for funding, Caso, with characteristic diplomacy, thereby worked to balance the specifically Mexican significance of Monte Albán investigations with their more broadly American import. In his view, the citizenry of the United States too ought to feel a special investment in these Oaxacan discoveries.

Furthermore, both renditions of the article—and both Monte Albán narratives—are enhanced by repetition of Caso's already-persistent contention that the much-underestimated Zapotecs and Mixtecs are every bit as deserving of attention and respect

⁵⁸ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 173-258.

⁵⁹ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 512; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 83. The identical lines appear in Spanish in Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 206.

as are Aztecs and Mayas, the latter of which were especially familiar to the *National Geographic* readership. To be sure, in the Oaxacanist public relations campaigns of the 1930s, it was the Mayas, the privileged group in American sensibilities, that constituted the most serious competition to Zapotecs. In the magazine version, the case for equal attention was made much more emphatic by headline-like subtitles—"Aztec and Maya Not the Only Cultured Early Americans" and "Little Known Heretofore About the Zapotecs"—that were inserted into Caso's scholarly text. By deleting details of the less spectacular finds, *National Geographic* afforded the glamorous Tomb 7 even a larger share of the article; and, seemingly in an attempt to liven up a dry report, the largest single addition was a quaint anecdote that Caso introduced by explaining,

"The Indians of Oaxaca believe that whoever explores a tomb is punished by the spirits of the dead and may become bewitched. For that reason, when I uncovered Tomb 7 and no traces of sorcery made their appearance, there sprang up in Oaxaca several tales, one of which I mention because of its excellent folkloristic characteristics."⁶⁰

While most of Caso's writing, to his large credit, avoids condescending depictions of the either ancient or contemporary native peoples, the uncharacteristically patronizing paragraph reads as follows:

"It is related that one night, when I was in the central plaza of Monte Albán, a well of crystal water opened up at the foot of one of the monuments, and in the middle of it floated a red vessel made from a gourd shell, inside of which was a gilded fish. Instead of being frightened by this marvel, I caught the jug and the fish within it; whereupon the fish informed me of the location of the treasure of in Tomb 7. Therefore it was not strange that one to whom the fishes of Monte Albán had spoken should be in no danger of having a spell cast upon him when uncovering the tombs!"⁶¹

It is difficult to be certain which of these editorial decisions ought to be attributed to the Mexican archaeologist and which to the American publisher. Nonetheless, it

⁶⁰ Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," *National Geographic* original, 496; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 60.

⁶¹ Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," original, 496; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 60-61.

would appear that, at this point, Caso was more inclined—and definitely much better prepared—to tell stories about himself than about ancient Monte Albán. Suitably cautious about overreaching his data, and thus putting either his own or the project's credibility at risk, he really did not yet have a thoroughgoing story of the pre-Columbian occupants and events of Monte Albán to tell. But he did have a wonderful first-person account of discovery; and for him, it was urgent that he told that tale in such a way that it read as—and, in fact, *became*—the first installment of what he hoped and expected would be a much longer saga of exploration.⁶² In that initiative, he and *National Geographic* were perfect partners. Together they, for instance, removed from Caso's earlier report all of the numerous references to Leopoldo Batres's 1901-1902 work at Monte Albán, thereby enhancing the not-entirely-accurate image of an archaeologist-explorer making the very first inquiries into a pristine, previously unstudied site. Also, where Caso's plainspoken report of his initial entry into Tomb 7 had read, "I was determined, despite difficulties, to descend also through the narrow opening...", the magazine version was glossed as, "My eagerness to behold the wonders of our discovery spurred me to extraordinary effort, and I finally succeeded in overcoming the difficulties of the narrow opening..."⁶³ And where the official report said that more than 300 objects from the tomb had been catalogued, the nearly contemporaneous *National Geographic* account amps the number to 500.⁶⁴

⁶² Another abridgment of Caso's "Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932," more staid than the *National Geographic* version, is Caso, "Los hallazgos de Monte Albán." This version of the article, which was published in *Mexican Folkways*, also in 1932, contributes nothing that is not in the other articles except for a much-less well circulated photo of explorer-archaeologist Caso standing in the entryway to Tomb 7 wearing a pith helmet and holding a cigarette (*Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 114); that photo, and actually all of them in this article, are credited to Roberto A. Turnball [sic; I think it should be Turnbull] who is identified as a representative of las Noticias Paramount en México.

⁶³ Compare Caso, "Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932" (*Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 190; my translation) and Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," *National Geographic* original, 498; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 63.

⁶⁴ Compare Caso, "Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932," *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 194; and Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," *National Geographic* original, 505; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 70.

Moreover, the two versions' respective approaches to photography could scarcely have been more different. Committed to completeness and detail, Caso's initial report included a dozen meticulous line drawings and four dozen state-of-the-art photographs of the various finds, nearly twice as many photos as would appear in the more popular article. But all of those images are appended to the end of the report, labeled in terse if accurate ways and, presumably in accord with the relevant scientific conventions, carefully devoid of any living human being.⁶⁵ By contrast to this clinical and non-narrative approach, the *National Geographic* photos and the flowery captions that accompany them were deployed to tell a Monte Albán story—but *not* the story of the pre-Columbian Zapotecs or Mixtecs. Instead the photo captions recount and embellish the story of discovery. To that end, 14 of Caso's images of the highly photogenic Tomb 7 splendors are reproduced,⁶⁶ but then augmented by a majestic panorama view of the ostensibly "untouched" ruins, which is labeled with a dubiously melodramatic caption that reads,

"Mysteries of the Ages Await the Excavations at Monte Albán: In the vast unexplored area are hundreds of mounds, many of them doubtless rich in relics of forgotten civilization and promising stupendous possibilities for future discovery. Fortunately, the author found the field untouched save for a few tombs that had been opened and emptied of their contents."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ The majority of the photographs appended to Caso report (see Caso, "Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932," *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 89-169) depict objects against a black background so that they appear to be suspended in space, with absolutely no sense of context or, more frustrating still, scale.

⁶⁶ Of the 14 photos of objects from Tomb 7 (see Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," *National Geographic* original, 495, 497, 500, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 510 and 511; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 59, 60, 68, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81 and 82) ten are taken by Caso and the other four are taken by Roberto A. Turnbull. (Regarding this photographer, in Caso, "Los hallazgos de Monte Albán," *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 113, Roberto A. Turnball [sic] is identified as a representative of las Noticias Paramount en México, and given credit for all of the photos in that article.)

⁶⁷ Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," *National Geographic* original, 489; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 51.

And the editors enhance the atmosphere more still by interjecting color photographs of contemporary Zapotecs doing the dances and making the crafts that “retain much of the skill of their ancestors.”⁶⁸

Likewise Caso and the other scholar-explorers, as lead protagonists in the treasure-hunt story, are, oppositely to the original report, extensively depicted and thus personalized. There is a photo of the robust but bookish Caso, perfectly cast as the tallest on the crew and the only one “wearing spectacles,” together with his team of collaborators and shovel-welding laborers.⁶⁹ Another shows Caso consulting with the Chief of the Archaeological Department of Mexico at the base of a stairway on which at least ten men are working.⁷⁰ And a third endlessly reproduced photo, which had to have been carefully staged, depicts Caso's wife and his student Juan Valenzuela inside Tomb 7 reenacting their discovery and documentation of the treasure.⁷¹ The punchy subtitles that are inserted into Caso's text do even more to give his composition the air of a dashing adventure yarn. A section entitled “Opening the Treasure Tomb” is followed by the strategic interspersion of headings that chronicle each stage in the process of discovery: “First Object Revealed by Flash Light is Human Skull,” “Floor of Tomb Gleams with Jewels” and “Work Goes on All Night.” Then another set of subtitles inventories the booty: “Dampness Had Destroyed Many Objects,” “Necklaces of Gold, Pearl, Turquoise,” “The Question of Jade in Mexico” and “The ‘Jaguar-Knight’ Breastpiece.”

⁶⁸ Those two subtitles appear on Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 487; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 49-50; the photographs to which I refer are on *National Geographic* original, 490 and 491; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 52 and 53; and the quotation comes from the caption of the latter photo.

⁶⁹ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 493; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 56.

⁷⁰ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 498; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 64.

⁷¹ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 501; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 69. This photo is attributed to Dr. Alfonso Caso.

In sum, then, where the *National Geographic* account of the ancient inhabitants of Monte Albán is sparse and notably devoid of any guess at chronology, the initial reconnaissance of Tomb 7 is assayed with hour-by-hour precision.⁷² In an issue that he happened to share with President Calvin Coolidge congratulating Amelia Earhart on her recent trans-Atlantic flight, Caso could hold his own as an intrepid explorer. At this early stage, while his story of pre-Columbian Monte Albán was still in the making, and thus still too uncertain for public consumption, Caso could rely on an interim story of personal discovery to generate interest and support.

II. The Inception and Revisioning of a Monte Albán Narrative: Reconsidering the Roles of Zapotecs, Mixtecs and Others

By the end of his first season of excavation, arguably the most extraordinary and eventful in Alfonso Caso's remarkable career, the Zapotecs had emerged as the prime protagonists of a Monte Albán (re)construction narrative, which still remained to be written. Sharing with the public not only his fabulous discoveries, but also his uncertainties about the full ramifications of what he had found, Caso assembled the pieces of the historical puzzle in tentative ways that allowed him to test, experiment and rethink how they came together. In these next phases, urgent to make sense of the fast-emerging new evidence but also cautious not to conclude too much too soon, he builds, then dismantles and rebuilds, a series of provisional scenarios about how Mixtecs and other ancient Mesoamericans had played supporting roles to his leading Zapotec actors. At this point, the now-famous archaeologist was, it seems, his own foremost conversation partner and critic. No one else was weighing in with alternatives.

⁷² Regarding Caso's personal story of discovery, note that Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (1969), which was published more than 30 years after the discovery, has a chapter on "Como se encontro la tumba 7" (How Tomb 7 was Found), 36-55.

A. A NEW PROBLEM AND AN OLD PROBLEM: REVISED VIEWS OF LATE AND EARLY ZAPOTEC MONTE ALBÁN

While it is, therefore, the narrative of personal discovery that dominates “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” the popular piece does nonetheless mark an interestingly transitional phase in the evolution of Alfonso Caso’s story of ancient Oaxaca. It was apparent even in this rushed and lay-targeted presentation that the boldly simple assertion of *Las esteles zapotecas* that “we have to think that Monte Albán was a Zapotec city”⁷³ would need to be qualified both on the front end of the city’s history and in its latest stages. That is to say, if the Tomb 7 discovery evoked what Caso termed “a new problem” about Mixtec involvements in the later stages of the Zapotec capital,⁷⁴ the results of that legendary first season also forced back to attention an older problem about the apparently non-Zapotec identity of the creators of the so-termed Danzante carvings, highly distinctive statuary that seemed to belong to the city’s earliest era. This second problem, in other words, raised the prospect that the Zapotecs may not, after all, have been the original or sole founders of their mountaintop capital. Caso would, however, concentrate on the new challenges posed by the Mixtec remains in Tomb 7 before eventually revisiting the old enigma of the Danzantes.

1. Revising the Story of Late Monte Albán: Finding a Place for Mixtecs in the Zapotec City

First, then, with respect to the most unanticipated interpretive challenge to arise from the 1931-1932 season of excavations—a challenge that seem to bear on Monte Albán’s later stages—Caso’s immediate (if now-contested) recognition that the contents of Tomb 7 were primarily Mixtec forced him to reconsider his previous conclusion that

⁷³ Caso, *Las esteles zapotecas*; *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 51; my translation.

⁷⁴ See Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 204; and Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 512; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 83.

they had played no significant role in the city's history. Bluntly phrased, Mixtecs, whose strongest presence was in western Oaxaca not the central valley, did not belong here. Thus, from a lay frame of reference, Tomb 7 was most newsworthy because of the loads of jade, turquoise, gold, silver and bone regalia; but from Caso's own archaeo-historical perspective, the even more startling news was the fact that the great majority of these splendid objects were, it seemed certain to him, of Mixtec rather than Zapotec origin. That is to say, from the moment that he first laid eyes on its contents, he knew that this tomb had (at least) two generations of use, which had probably been separated by several hundred years. In his own words,

“I believe that Tomb 7 was used on two occasions, first by the Zapotecs, who built it, and afterward by the Mixtecs. The latter removed the bodies and other objects which were in the tomb, leaving only a few of these small clay vessels, and later filling the tomb with dirt until the entrance was blocked. Then they came out through the roof and sealed the exit with a stone bearing Zapotec inscriptions, which had previously been used in the first burial to seal the entrance.”⁷⁵

Thus, irrespective of the artistic merits and spectacular wealth of its contents, and irrespective of its giant public relations value, the discovery of Tomb 7 also evoked “a new problem.” On the one hand, the great bulk of the first-year excavations had reconfirmed Caso's opinion that Monte Albán was “*principally* a Zapotec city;”⁷⁶ but, on the other hand, he now had to explain why, then, Mixtecs were buried in the Zapotec city.⁷⁷ In other words, after Caso had so persuasively disconnected the Zapotec and

⁷⁵ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 512; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 82-83. For the nearly identical original version of these lines, see Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 204.

⁷⁶ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 204; italics added.

⁷⁷ In his original report, Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932” (*Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 204; my translation), ventures two explanations of the Mixtec remains in Tomb 7, which, along with all the jewelry, included nine presumably Mixtec skeletons: “Maybe it is a regal family that was surprised in an ambush by Zapotecs or the Mexicanos [i.e., the Aztecs who eventually occupied the area] or perhaps it is the tomb of some great man who had been killed in war.” Those speculations, which

Mixtec strains, the re-used Tomb 7 was forcing them back together. The Mixtecs were, it seemed, going to demand a somewhat greater part in the story of Monte Albán after all.

2. Revising the Story of Early Monte Albán: Danzante Anomalies and Intimations of a non-Zapotec, non-Mixtec Third Party

Second, though of less urgent interest to Caso in 1932 than the brand new challenge of making sense of Tomb 7, there was another vexing topic that also received somewhat more expansive treatment in the *National Geographic* than it had in the original report. By contrast to the apparently late arrival of Mixtecs, this second problem—which concerned the infamously misnamed Danzante (or Dancer) figures—forced reconsideration of the very earliest developments at the site. Eventually, over 300 of these highly distinctive stone sculptures of deformed human beings in various twisted, contorted, maybe dance-like poses, would be found around the site; and, as we'll see, every historical (re)construction narrative of Monte Albán has to account for them.⁷⁸ But the famous carvings came to light in slow, eccentric and intermittent ways. In 1806, Guillaume Dupaix, a Belgian traveler commissioned by Spanish monarch Charles IV to inventory the ancient ruins of New Spain, unearthed several of the sculptures; and the drawings made by Luciano Castañeda, the artist who accompanied him, continue to be

Caso seems subsequently to have abandoned, were omitted from the *National Geographic* version of the article.

⁷⁸ John F. Scott, *The Danzantes of Monte Albán*, Studies in Pre-Columbian Art & Archaeology, no. 19 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, 1978), part I, 21-29, has a history of ideas about the Danzante carvings from the era of Dupaix forward. Heather S. Orr, “Danzantes Building L at Monte Albán,” Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) website, (2002), 14-17, provides a concise and helpful synopsis of that history ideas about Danzantes. But by far the most thoroughgoing inventory of ideas about these sculptures, before also presenting a daringly iconoclastic interpretation of their significance, appears in Javier Urcid, “Los oráculos y la guerra: el papel de las narrativas pictóricas en el desarrollo temprano de Monte Albán (500 a.C.-200 d.C.),” en *Monte Albán en la encrucijada regional y disciplinaria: Memoria de la Quinta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, eds. Nelly M. Robles García y Ángel I. Rivera Guzmán (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2011), 174-77.

frequently reproduced.⁷⁹ In 1902, Batres relocated the same and other such figures; and, though claiming simply to be repeating the widely-used colloquial name for these objects, he routinely gets credit (or actually blame) for designating them Danzantes or Dancers, a label that almost no subsequent scholars, certainly not Caso, would endorse, but that nearly all have been resigned to using.⁸⁰

In any case, during that first season, among the features that Caso's team had come across in its excavations of the huge North Platform stairway, "the widest in America," were more of these so-termed Danzante figures, which in that context had been not on display but rather re-used simply as construction materials.⁸¹ While these particular carvings were a new discovery, the existence of very similar sculpted slabs around the site was known to everyone who had visited Monte Albán since Dupaix's era. In fact, as nearly every publication on Monte Albán continues to reaffirm, the eerie Danzante carvings provide an irresistible photo opportunity; and thus *National Geographic*, which termed them "one of the strangest finds at Monte Albán" (another phrase not in Caso's original report),⁸² included a couple of his photos of them, one with the not-inaccurate caption that "Grotesque Reliefs on Stones in the Walls Present a Problem."⁸³

⁷⁹ Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, 93-100, for instance, discusses Dupaix and *ibid.*, 98, reproduces three of Luciano Casteneda's Danzante drawings, which he criticizes because they were "altered and 'embellished' to suit the aesthetic fashion of the time." *Ibid.*, 100. And Nelly Robles García, *Monte Albán: History, Art, Monuments* (México, D.F.: Monclém Ediciones S.A. de C.V., 2004), 12, 13 and 14, for instance, discusses and reproduces some of Luciano Castaneda's drawings of what would come to known as the Danzante figures.

⁸⁰ Batres, *Exploraciones de Monte Albán* (1902).

⁸¹ By contrast to seemingly reverent and purposeful Mixtec reuse—and thus "revalorization"—of the Zapotec Tomb 7, the reuse of Danzante slabs in the North Platform simply as building materials in

⁸² Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," *National Geographic* original, 492; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 55.

⁸³ Two of Caso's own photos of these Danzantes, the first captioned "Grotesque Reliefs on Stones in the Walls Present a Problem," appear in Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest

Though perhaps surprised to find these figures treated so unceremoniously in the North Platform, Caso was, of course, very familiar with other Danzante carvings, particularly because many of them included his special preoccupation, glyphic writing. Yet, based on his extensive study of all available Oaxaca inscriptions, he had already taken a firm stand that the Danzante carved stones were of “a completely different style” from Zapotec inscriptions.⁸⁴ In fact, curiously enough, Caso's fabulously thorough *Las esteles zapotecas*, which had included extensive comments on the connections between Zapotec writing and that of the geographically distant Mayas and Aztecs, has absolutely nothing to say about the infamous Danzante carvings, which were literally leaning against the Monte Albán stelae with which that book is principally concerned. Though apparently excluded from his study because he was so certain they were not Zapotec, in hindsight, declining even to mention them is a troublesome, telling omission.⁸⁵

In any case, in his official report on the 1931-1932 season, Caso hedged on the original significance or intent of the famously distorted figures. Unwilling to use the timeworn term “Danzante,” he was never remotely impressed with Batres's suggestion

Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 496 and 502; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 61 and 70.

⁸⁴ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 183.

⁸⁵ One can imagine several reasons for the complete omission of the Dazantes from Caso's *Las esteles zapotecas*, though all are tentative and none really seem adequate. For instance, it could be that he found the Danzantes simply irrelevant to his project because they were so different in style that they shed no light of Zapotec writing, though that seems implausible. It is also possible that, at that point, he simply hadn't formulated a position on the Danzantes, and thus opted not to discuss them. A more suspicious assessment of the omission, however, is that Caso, even in the 1920s, had come to conclusion that the writing on Danzantes was both much older and very different than that of the Zapotec inscriptions, and thus signaled that Monte Albán had been inhabited by some pre-Zapotec civilization; but to address that would have compromised the clarity of his point-by-point conclusions in *Las esteles zapotecas*, which focus especially separating Mixtecs and Zapotecs, and affording the latter near-complete credit for the great city of Monte Albán.

that the carvings represented dancers or perhaps swimmers connected to the uncertain prospect of prehistoric lake in the Valley of Oaxaca. Alternatively, he suggested that perhaps they depict buffoons or jesters, perhaps indigenous “magnates,” or maybe sick persons who had come to Monte Albán in search of a cure.⁸⁶ And the magazine version explored that intriguing possibility with a bit more narrative fullness and flair, though similar tentativeness:

“Who were the authors of these writings [i.e., the glyphs on the Danzante slabs], and why did they prefer to show cripples in their sculptured stones?... Was it the intent to ridicule certain enemies? Or should we see in these sculptures a representation of the sick who came to the temple in which there was a god who performed miraculous cures? Could Monte Albán have been at one time a kind of Lourdes?”⁸⁷

If uncertain of their original intent, Caso was, however, willing to conclude with total confidence not only that these carved slabs had been salvaged from some older building, but also, significantly enough, that they were the work of *other-than-*

⁸⁶ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 184.

⁸⁷ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 492-93; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 57. It is worth noting, by the way, that some publications continue to (mis)credit Caso with an inordinately “romantic” assessment of the Danzante carvings and, by extension, their Zapotec creators. For instance, Richard Orlandini, *The Oaxaca Letters of Richard Orlandini, 2004-2008*, ed. Bill Sanders (Miami, Florida: BoonieLiving Press, 2008), 114, an archaeologist who worked a couple seasons (1966-1968) as a field supervisor on the Prehistory and Human Ecology of the Valley of Oaxaca Project, which was directed by Kent Flannery, suggests that Caso “was enthralled with the Roussouian [sic] concept of the gentle ‘noble savage’...” On that supposed basis, Orlandini (ibid.) contends that, the so-termed Danzantes, “according to Caso and others that came later... were interpreted to be the culmination of the art forms of ‘the peace-loving Zapotecs,’” a naïve conception that Orlandini suggests prevailed until a more realistic reassessment of Oaxacan archaeology was undertaken via the ecological approaches of the 1960s. This is simply wrong in at least two respects. First, as just noted, Caso was always circumspect in his assessment of the Danzantes and never (aside from a popular article discussed below) remotely inclined to accept that they represented dancers. Second, and more importantly, as we will see momentarily, though Caso depicts the builders of Monte Albán in very positive terms, he does not (again with the exception of that one popular article) advance the simplistic notion that they were averse to conflict, political maneuvering and even human sacrifice.

Zapotecs.⁸⁸ As he opined, “Since [the Danzante carvings] do not represent the characteristics of Zapotec sculpture, I do not believe that they belong to the same civilization that constructed the Great Platform.”⁸⁹ In his own 1932 reports, Caso cautiously avoids assigning dates either to the Danzantes or any other Monte Albán features; he declines to speculate whether the reused sculptures had been scavenged from a nearby structure in the Great Plaza or from somewhere much farther away from the site; and he does not use the term “negroid,” which was frequently applied the Danzante sculptures. But less cautious accounts written at nearly the same time are revealing of speculations on all of those matters that were, it seems, under consideration. Regarding Caso's then-recent North Platform discoveries, *Frances Toor's Guide to Mexico* (1934), for instance, says,

“Very large stones serve as the case for the platform, many of them carved with negroid types, named by the archaeologists ‘The Dancing People,’ because their attitudes indicate dancing and for want of a better name. It is apparent that these stones were brought there from elsewhere, because some of them are upside down, and the figures have been cut away to make them fit. There is no record of any negro tribe inhabiting Mexico before the Conquest, excepting a legend in Yucatan of a cruel negro people; hence this is a problem for future study. The age of these carvings of the Dancing negroids, is estimated at 3,000 years, and the Monte Albán at 2,000.”⁹⁰

And Leone and Alice-Leone Moats' *Off to Mexico* (1935), another popular travelogue, has nearly verbatim remarks on the “large stones which, strangely enough, are carved with figures of a distinctly negroid type.”⁹¹ These authors are, however, more emphatic (though definitely wrong) that the Danzantes found in the North Platform had been

⁸⁸ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 184.

⁸⁹ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 492; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 57.

⁹⁰ Frances Toor, *Frances Toor's Guide to Mexico*, 2nd edition (Mexico City: n.s., 1934), 166-67.

⁹¹ Leone and Alice-Leone Moats, *Off to Mexico* (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), 117.

transplanted from a distant rather than nearby structure: “There is no doubt that they were brought from some other part of the country, for not only have they been cut away to fit and some have been placed upside down, but they are estimated to be a thousand years older than the city.”⁹²

Caso himself, by contrast, has the sort of scholarly long-view that avoids public speculation on questions for which he expects more reliable solutions in the near future; and he seems never to have embraced the notion that the Danzante slabs had been hauled up to Monte Albán from some distant location. Nonetheless, his certainty (at that point)—which actually had emerged in the composition of *Las estelas zapotecas*, several years prior to the season-one excavations—that the Danzantes were both considerably older than most of the main Monte Albán structures and *not* Zapotec raised a huge, if understated, qualification to his earlier assertion that “Monte Albán was a Zapotec city.”⁹³ Conveniently absenting this problem from his seminal work on Monte Albán's stelae, Caso was now intimating that, in advance of the Zapotecs, there was a “different civilization”—a third party that was neither Zapotec nor Mixtec—who had occupied the site, built large buildings and undertaken a version of glyphic writing, albeit one that was profoundly unlike that of their Zapotec successors. And if that was the case, then nearly all of the “firsts” concerning writing, calendrics, monumental architecture and perhaps even urbanism that he was inclined to award to the Zapotecs actually belonged to someone else! That would be, most definitely, a major not minor adjustment to the story.

By his report on the fifth and sixth excavation seasons (1936-1937), during which Caso's team discovered 30 new Danzante sculptures and completed the reconstruction of the Temple of the Danzantes (Building L), he had begun to second-guess his earlier view that these carvings and the writing on them were of a cultural origin very different from

⁹² Leone and Moats, *Off to Mexico*, 117.

⁹³ Caso, *Las estelas zapotecas*; *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 51; my translation.

that of the later Zapotecs.⁹⁴ And thus, seemingly more in dialogue with himself than any else, he wrote:

“The discovery of Zapotec hieroglyphics [in 1936], together with the figures of [30 more] Danzantes, is a fundamental fact that demonstrates the unity of culture during the first epochs of Monte Alban and belies the theories that held the absolute difference between the civilization of these dancers and the civilization called Zapotec.”⁹⁵

Caso, as we'll see, would eventually (after 1939 but before 1942) arrive at a solution to the enduring Danzante problem that attributed their peculiar style to extensive Olmec interactions with Zapotecs. That always-debated resolution, while ceding original progenitor status for numerous major innovations to an Olmec “mother culture,” also, ingeniously enough, allowed the Zapotecs to recover a large share of their prestige as the founders of Monte Albán. But since, in 1932, he was much more preoccupied with the Mixtec issue, we turn back to that part of story.

B. ASCERTAINING THE MIXTEC ROLE IN A ZAPOTEC CITY: TOMB 7 AS INSTRUCTIVE BUT ANOMALOUS

Content for the time being to leave aside the question of the Danzantes and the prospect of a pre-Zapotec civilization at Monte Albán, Caso continued to devote great energy to “the new problem” of the Mixtec presence at the site, and thus more broadly the historical relationship between Mixtecs and Zapotecs. In a yet another 1932 article,

⁹⁴ Alfonso Caso, *Exploraciones en Oaxaca; quinta y sexta temporadas 1936-1937*, publicación núm. 34, Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia (Tacubaya, D.F., México: Impreso en la Editorial “Cvltvra,” 1938); reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 3 (México: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 1-143. Throughout, my citations to this work refer to the *Obras* reprint version; for instance, comments on work in the area of the Temples of the Danzantes during season 5 (1936), appears in the *Obras* reprint on pp. 5-7.

⁹⁵ Caso, *Exploraciones en Oaxaca; quinta y sexta temporadas 1936-1937*, *Obras* reprint, vol. 3, 7; my translation.

“La tumba 7 de Monte Albán es mixteca” [“Monte Albán's Tomb 7 is Mixteca”],⁹⁶ an English translation of which appeared in *Natural History* as “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels: An Analysis of the Historical Significance of the Monte Albán Treasure the Ritualistic Meaning of the Ancient Mixtec Inscriptions” [sic], Caso alludes to his *National Geographic* overview and, as usual, fastidiously acknowledges his main funding sources. He explains, however, that he is now pursuing a much more pointed agenda: “I wish... in the present article to discuss a specific point, but one very important to the find [of Tomb 7]: To what indigenous civilization do the objects belong?”⁹⁷

Once again, Caso's dual expertises in archaeology and epigraphy are on display. Also, he cannot resist another quick iteration of the drama of discovery: “...before entering this discussion, let me briefly relate how we found the tomb and made the excavation.”⁹⁸ But then, as a means of addressing this more specific issue, he embarks on a rigorously detailed discussion of comparative Mesoamerican systems of writing and calendrics. Only someone very well versed in the art and inscriptions of Mayas, Aztecs and Teotihuacanos as well as those of Zapotecs and Mixtecs could make the connections and contrasts that Caso draws. Again, however, the glyphs on the Danzante slabs are a notable omission from the discussion. Nonetheless, to his credit, Caso puts in doubt the very categories of “Zapotec” and “Mixtec,” and raises a controversial question about the point in the pre-Columbian past (if any) at which those contemporary designations are really apt, thereby introducing a qualification and a debate about the “ethnic baptism” of archaeological remains that will, as we'll see, run for decades.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, paying

⁹⁶ Caso, “La tumba 7 de Monte Albán es mixteca;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 11-37.

⁹⁷ Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 88.

⁹⁸ Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 88.

⁹⁹ Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels” (*Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 97), for instance, notes that, “Before entering into the discussion of the objects in the later burial [i.e., the second use of Tomb 7], I wish to define what I mean *archaeologically* by the term *Zapotec*.” (Caso's italics) More than 30 years later, Ignacio Bernal, “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca,” 788-790, will likewise begin his seminal article with a set of qualifications about the way in which he applies the ethnic labels Zapotec and Mixtec to various archaeological features.

special attention to those objects from Tomb 7 that, “having hieroglyphs, will permit us to study them,” most notably, the abundantly carved bones and inscribed objects made of gold and silver,¹⁰⁰ Caso reiterates, now in even stronger terms, his earlier conclusion that all of these objects owe to the Mixtec re-use of a tomb that had been originally built by Zapotecs. As he explains,

“The year sign, the day signs, the portrayals of gods, animals, and symbols as shown on the objects from Tomb 7 of Monte Albán are similar to those from the Mexican and Mixtec codices, and *totally different* from those which we find on Zapotec urns and stelae.”¹⁰¹

1. Two Versions of Zapotec-Mixtec Interaction at Monte Albán: Successive and/or Contemporaneous Cultures

This closer look had, in other words, strongly reaffirmed Caso's original contention that the treasure of Tomb 7 belonged to a Mixtec style that was very different not only from the Zapotec style of the tomb configuration from which the treasure was recovered, but indeed from all of the urns and stelae found at Monte Albán. And Caso would never waver from that opinion. In fact, more than thirty-five years later he would still be repeating virtually verbatim lines from this article.¹⁰² In the early 1930s, he was, however, entertaining what he regarded as the only two plausible historical scenarios—actually two very different (re)construction stories of Monte Albán—that could account for that discrepancy in styles. With respect to the relationship between Zapotecs and Mixtecs, “We are forced,” he wrote, “to accept one of the two following hypotheses.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 100.

¹⁰¹ Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 111; Caso's italics.

¹⁰² See Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (1969), 235, for lines that are virtually identical those that I quoted in the previous paragraph.

¹⁰³ Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 111.

In the first interpretive option, the so-termed Zapotec and Mixtec styles correspond to “two *successive* phases of one culture” so that “what we call Zapotec is merely an older style which was replaced by a new one which we call Mixtec.”¹⁰⁴ In other words, according to this first scenario, Monte Albán, for its entire duration, had been inhabited by a single culture that had adhered to a “Zapotec style” when they built the great majority of the city, but then, in the city’s final phases, switched to a “Mixtec style.” By contrast, in the second interpretive option, Zapotec and Mixtec are styles that correspond to two *contemporaneous*, or at least significantly overlapping, cultures—as Caso puts it, “coexistent manifestations of diverse cultures.”¹⁰⁵ In this second scenario, then, Zapotecs and Mixtecs were pre-Columbian contemporaries who were competing for access to ancient Oaxaca’s resources and territories. In that case, the Tomb 7 findings reflect the Mixtecs’ probably forcible entry into the perhaps declining Zapotec city of Monte Albán.

Willing to think aloud, as it were, Caso is cautious in saying, “... to decide in favor of one of these alternatives we need more excavation and above all stratigraphical excavation [which will secure the relevant chronology].”¹⁰⁶ But he is also candid in signaling his strong preference for the second possibility. Although he still had just five months of Monte Albán excavation under his belt, Caso boldly asserted that, “... as long as no new discoveries are made, I think it is [suitable] to consider that the two styles, Zapotec and Mixtec, belong to distinct tribes who jointly occupied Oaxaca, and that in the last centuries before the [Spanish] conquest Monte Albán was a frontier city between these irreconcilably hostile tribes.”¹⁰⁷ He stops short of positing a Mixtec invasion of the

¹⁰⁴ Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 111-12; italics added. The last three paragraphs of this article, which articulate Caso’s two alternate hypotheses, are very important but not very clearly expressed. In an attempt only to make clearer Caso’s own position, I have reversed the order of the two options.

¹⁰⁵ Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 112.

¹⁰⁶ Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 111.

¹⁰⁷ Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 112. The *Obras* version of this sentence contains an obvious error: “...I think it is meet to consider

Zapotec-dominated Valley of Oaxaca, but already there were early intimations of that motif, which will become a very important and controversial component of his (and, as we'll see, a few other scholars') subsequent stories of the final eras at Monte Albán. In short, already in 1932, Caso's full-blown and uniquely influential narrative of Monte Albán was taking shape.¹⁰⁸

2. Reasserting Zapotec Primacy and Fine-tuning the Mixtec Role: The Prospect of a Mixtec Invasion

Caso's forthright preference for the alternative wherein Zapotecs and Mixtec were coexistent and very different competitors, published in the very first year of Monte Albán excavations, would prevail, albeit with various amendments, in all of his subsequent (re)constructions of ancient Oaxacan history. In that sense, the swashbuckling drama of discovery in which Caso was the main protagonist was decidedly anticlimactic; no subsequent chapter would carry nearly the cloak-and-dagger clout of that first season of excavation. His oft-repeated prediction that many tombs as grand as Tomb 7 would come to light proved to be flat wrong; and, moreover, his efficiency in disentangling the divergent Mixtec and Zapotec styles meant that no subsequent discovery over the next 18 seasons would really surprise Caso in the way that Tomb 7 had. Monte Albán had, it seemed, handed over many of its largest secrets in very short order. From this point

that..." Based on the Spanish version of the article, I have substituted "suitable" for "meet."

¹⁰⁸ Actually, it is somewhat surprising that, 35 years later, in his final work on Tomb 7, Caso, *El tesero de Monte Albán* (1969), 236, borrows lines verbatim from "La tumba 7 de Monte Albán es mixtec" (1932) in order to argue once again that there are two historical hypotheses that could explain the nature of the Tomb 7 remains, i.e., exactly the same two hypotheses that he presented in 1932. Then he concludes, again just as he had in 1932, that "... the hypothesis wherein the second burial in Tomb 7 ought to be attributed to the Mixtecs appears to us, *for the time being (por ahora)*, the most acceptable." *Ibid.*; my translation; italics added. In other words, to the end of his career, Caso continued to express a measure of tentativeness about his uniquely famous (now-debated) hypothesis concerning identification of the Tomb 7 remains as Mixtec; or, more likely, though *El tesero de Monte Albán* was not published until 1969, it actually reflects ideas that were largely crafted more than three decades earlier.

forward, his process of drafting a comprehensive narrative of Monte Albán was, with occasional exceptions, cumulative and steady; and while he began with no strong precedents, he proceeded with no strong competition. It would be decades before anyone would or could issue any serious challenge to Alfonso Caso's thinking on Monte Albán.

Be that as it may, once Caso was confident that Zapotecs and Mixtecs had shared time at Monte Albán, his project found a somewhat unlikely counterpart in that of American archaeologist Alfred Tozzer, the leading voice on Chichén Itzá during the first decades of the twentieth century and a key participant in the massive Carnegie Institution of Washington project based there beginning in 1923. Ignacio Bernal may be correct in asserting that, "What the Carnegie did for the Maya zone, the explorations at Monte Albán and elsewhere, directed by Alfonso Caso, did for the Valley of Oaxaca;"¹⁰⁹ but, actually, as I will note periodically, the largely contemporaneous investigatory histories of Chichén Itza and Monte Albán present a fascinating study in contrasts. In fact, while Caso seldom makes direct reference to the Carnegie's Chichén Itzá project, it is apparent that his Mexican-directed Monte Albán initiative was in many ways conceived as a deliberate alternative to the largely American-led approach to the great Maya capital. Nevertheless, Caso's preoccupations with sorting out the respective Zapotec and Mixtec roles at Monte Albán were notably similar to those that would give rise to Tozzer's posthumously published opus, *Chichén Itzá and its Cenote of Sacrifice: A Comparative Study of Contemporaneous Maya and Toltec* (1957) insofar as Tozzer too imagined that he was dealing with a great urban capital that had issued from the interactions between two decidedly different, probably deeply antagonist groups.¹¹⁰ Thus, for decades, Tozzer's first interpretive step with respect to every Chichén Itzá feature and find was to assign it either to the Yucatec Mayas, who he believed had first occupied the site, or to

¹⁰⁹ Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, 177-78.

¹¹⁰ See Alfred Tozzer, *Chichén Itzá and its Cenote of Sacrifice: A Comparative Study of Contemporaneous Maya and Toltec*, *Memoirs of the Peabody Museum*, vols. 11 and 12 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).

the Central Mexican Toltecs, who had, in his view, arrived much later as conquering invaders (a view that has since then proven historically untenable).¹¹¹

Be that as it may, given Caso's inclination toward the second of the two hypotheses he'd posed—the scenario wherein Mixtecs and Zapotecs were coexistent and competing groups—among his basic most concerns, not unlike Tozzer's sorting of Chichén Itzá into its Maya and Toltec components, was to ascertain which aspects of Monte Albán belonged to each respective group. Tozzer and Caso, however, faced radically different situations to the extent that Tozzer operated with the assumption (which, in hindsight, was quite incorrect) that roughly half of Chichén Itzá, so-termed “Old Chichén,” owed to the indigenous Mayas while the other half, what he termed “New Chichén” or “Toltec Chichén,” was the work of the Central Mexican invaders. Caso, by contrast, even after he began to afford the Mixtecs a significant place in Monte Albán's history, was imaging a much less even split between the two sets of ancient Oaxacans. Always he imagines Zapotecs as the primary shareholders with Mixtecs occupying some much lesser secondary role.

Caso's early position on the unequal roles is clear, for instance, in “Las Tumbas de Monte Albán” (1933). In this presentation to El Primer Congreso Mexicano de Historia en Oaxaca (the First Mexican Congress on Oaxacan History), Caso, like a parent concerned that he may have spoiled one of his many children—namely, Tomb 7—with inordinate attention, addressed the other 34 Monte Albán tombs that had been explored by the end of a second season of excavation.¹¹² While these other tombs contained many

¹¹¹ See Lindsay Jones, “Conquests of the Imagination: Maya-Mexican Polarity and the Story of Chichén Itzá, Yucatan;” *American Anthropologist*; vol. 99, no. 2 (June 1997), 282-83.

¹¹² Alfonso Caso, “Las tumbas de Monte Albán,” *Anales del Museo Nacional de Arqueología*, IV Epoca, vol. VIII, no. 4 (octubre-diciembre 1933), 641-48; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 129-42. The *Obras* version (p. 129) explains that this was work presented at the Primero Congreso Mexicano de Historia en Oaxaca. (Again for this work, I will be citing page numbers from the *Obras* reprinted version.)

of the funerary urns that would become another signature of the site and revealed lots about the funerary customs of the Zapotecs, which thus became the heart of Caso's presentation, those burial chambers also accentuated the uniqueness—in fact, it seemed, the anomaly—of Tomb 7. None of the other tombs contained Mixtec persons or objects; all were thoroughly Zapotec, which prompted Caso to remind his audience at the outset of the paper that the Mixtec occupants of Tomb 7 were “foreigners in the city of Monte Albán that ought to be considered a great Zapotec metropolis.”¹¹³ In short, through the 1930s—and actually for the remainder of his career—Caso's initial contention that Monte Albán was “*mainly* a Zapotec metropolis”¹¹⁴ not only remained intact; it grew ever more emphatic.

Furthermore, if Caso was already completely certain that the Mixtec contribution to the archaeological remains at Monte Albán, albeit spectacular, was very small, the same presentation reveals that he was also beginning to formulate tentative ideas about both the timing and the nature of the Mixtec intrusion into the Zapotec capital. Had it been peaceful or violent? Had they come in several waves or just one isolated event? And had the Mixtecs arrived at Monte Albán before or after the Zapotec city had begun its decline? Though something of a sidebar to his plainly empirical reportage on recently discovered tombs that had proven to be strictly Zapotec, and though much fuller answers to these questions were in the offing, Caso ends that 1933 article with provisional replies to those all those questions and, by the way, with one of his earliest written references to “Mixtec invasions”:

“The discovery of Tomb 7 and the stratigraphic explorations that we have undertaken in the area of Nazareno [a few kilometers to the north of Monte Albán] demonstrate to us that on some occasion, if not several occasions, the Mixtecs arrived to dominate Monte Albán, when there still existed in the place a very developed Zapotec culture.”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Caso, “Las tumbas de Monte Albán;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 129; my translation.

¹¹⁴ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 204; my translation, italics added.

¹¹⁵ Caso, “Las tumbas de Monte Albán;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 142; my translation.

In short, reflecting the snarl of questions about Mixtec involvements in the Zapotec capital that Caso would be reconsidering for his entire career, in the early 1930s, he was, on the one hand, minimizing Mixtec involvements in Monte Albán by stressing the singular nature of the Mixtec remains in Tomb 7. But, on the other hand, he was affording them a major role by raising the possibility that invading Mixtecs had played a very significant part in the city's eventual collapse. Though presently prevailing views suggest that Caso was quite wrong on both these matters—which thereby provides another piquant instance wherein a top-tier archaeologist is musing over and providing interpretations of “events” that never actually transpired—both of these aspects of “the Mixtec problem” would continue to be debated for decades.

III. THE PROTOTYPE FOR ALL SUBSEQUENT MONTE ALBÁN (RE)CONSTRUCTION NARRATIVES: SETTLING ON A FIVE-EPOCH SAGA OF THE CITY

By this point, then, more and more of Alfonso Caso's tentative hypotheses were being transformed into bona fide, strongly held opinions about what had actually happened in ancient Oaxaca. To date, there was still no widely shared narrative that could account for the rise, flourishing and demise of Monte Albán; and certainly no one had ventured to write a thoroughgoing synthesis of pre-Columbian Oaxaca social history. But now Caso was on the cusp of providing both. And once he came forward with his rendition of the relevant protagonists and plotlines, it would establish a host of precedents that remain, albeit with debated correctives, intact today.

A. CHRONOLOGY VIA CERAMIC STRATIGRAPHY: FROM THREE-STAGE SKETCH TO FIVE-STAGE SCHEME

In the early 1930s, the still-tentative state-of-the-art story of Monte Albán—which to say, Alfonso Caso's version of events—was, at least implicitly, composed of three decidedly unequal episodes: The first, which remained very vaguely defined, concerned the possibility of a pre-Zapotec, non-Mixtec culture that corresponded to the Danzante

carvings. By the early 1940s, Caso would be persuaded that it was Olmecs that had provided that seminal “foreign influence” during this earliest era; but, for now, Olmecs still played no significant role in his story of ancient Oaxaca. Second was a presumably long and very productive Zapotec phase (or set of phases) that accounted for the lion’s share of the mountaintop ruins. Third and finally, sometime towards the end of the city’s existence but prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, the Mixtecs had apparently made an appearance at Monte Albán.

Though these three episodes were a seemingly natural fit to the widely prevalent rubric of Preclassic, Classic and Postclassic—and though those terms do occasionally appear especially in Caso’s more popular writings—he wisely resisted importing that tripartite scheme into the Oaxaca context. While the standard image of a bell-shaped rise, climax and fall carried both qualitative and chronological implications that may (or may not) have shed light on the history of pre-Columbian Central Mexico and the Maya zone, it was, Caso seemed to appreciate, certain to distort the story of the ancient Zapotecs. In fact, to this point, still without the radiocarbon 14 dating methods, which did not emerge until the 1950s, Caso fastidiously declined to assign any of these ancient Oaxacan peoples or events even to particular centuries, let alone to specific dates.

Caso himself was, of course, the least content with his timeworn reliance on strategically vague phrases like “in days gone by,”¹¹⁶ “untold centuries ago”¹¹⁷ or “in the last centuries before the conquest.”¹¹⁸ And thus, from the very beginning of formal work at Monte Albán, establishing a chronological sequence for the site was the foremost priority; and, unlike Batres but like Manuel Gamio, Caso was fully committed to the emergent methods of ceramic stratigraphy (discussed momentarily) as the best available

¹¹⁶ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 487; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 49.

¹¹⁷ Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 145.

¹¹⁸ Caso, “Reading the Riddle of Ancient Jewels;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 112.

means for securing that chronology.¹¹⁹ Spectacular tomb finds and monumental architecture generated the most public interest, but it was broken and discarded pottery that provided the privileged data with which he and key collaborators Ignacio Bernal and Jorge Acosta, his eventual co-authors for *La Cerámica de Monte Albán* (1967), began to work out the chronology of the site and indeed the whole Valley of Oaxaca.¹²⁰

By the mid-1930s, then, based in very large part on the stratigraphic ceramic studies with which he, Bernal and Acosta were preoccupied, Caso was willing to begin experimenting with an early version of the five stages or “Épocas” of pre-Columbian Oaxaca history, which would allow far greater chronological precision, at least with respect to relative if not absolute dates. To be sure, in the history of storytelling about Monte Albán, though lacking the splash of another great tomb discovery, the emergence of the subsequently ubiquitous five-fold scheme was a major turning point! From then on, arguably even now, instead of simply differentiating between Zapotec and Mixtec, the first order of interpretive business with respect to any archaeological find in the

¹¹⁹ The origins and early history of stratigraphic methods in Mesoamerican archaeology is a matter of much discussion and contention. See, for instance, David L. Bowman and Douglas R. Givens, “Stratigraphic Excavation: The First ‘New Archaeology,’” *American Anthropologist* 98 (1) 1996: 80-95; and Daniel Schávelzon, “The Origins of Stratigraphy in Latin America: The Same Question, Again and Again,” *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1999): 1-10. In the context of Monte Albán we can note that, though Leopoldo Batres’s made some unsupportable claims to have discovered stratigraphy (see Vázquez León, “Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942,” 73), his 1901-1902 excavations did not rely on stratigraphy. Manuel Gamio, by contrast, is one of the earliest strong advocates of stratigraphy, and thus his 1926 plan for excavations at Monte Albán would certainly have featured stratigraphy, though, as we noted, those plans were thwarted; and thus Caso was the first apply stratigraphic methods, which were absolutely central to his project.

¹²⁰ While Caso was, it seems, confident that archaeology—specifically stratigraphic excavation—would deliver the most reliable chronological information, he, as Mayanists were much more wont to do, did entertain some attempts at the dating of Monte Albán monuments via hypothetical correlations of pre-Hispanic and Western calendars. See, for example, Alfonso Caso “Calendario y escritura de las antiguas culturas de Monte Albán,” in *Obras Completas de Miguel Othón de Mendizábal*, vol. I (México, D.F: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1947).

Valley of Oaxaca or, for that matter, anywhere in Oaxaca, the Mixteca region included, was to assign it to one of these five stages.¹²¹

Though Caso's report on the explorations of the 1934-1935, the fourth season of excavation, was still completely devoid of *absolute* dates, even of the most tentative sort, he was developing a detailed *relative* chronology based on Monte Albán's ceramic remains, and thus building up correlations with the ceramic schemes being formulated in other Mesoamerican areas.¹²² Notably then, in his enumeration of the most significant accomplishments of the 1934-1935 season, Caso could report that "We can establish already five principal epochs in the ceramic remains of Monte Albán and relate them with those in the ceramics of Mitla."¹²³ Moreover, he could state with optimism that,

"Future explorations, and the stratigraphic studies to be undertaken by Eduardo Noguera and Eulalia Guzmán will, without doubt, establish subdivisions in this provisional classification; but already we can say with certainty that Monte Albán was inhabited for many centuries by people of the Zapotec culture..."¹²⁴

¹²¹ As we will observe in chapter 5, Marcus Winter is perhaps the most outspoken about the severe distortions of applying to all regions of Oaxaca a five-part chronological periodization that is based on the ceramics of Monte Albán, and thus is he also most determined to respect the regionally-specific chronologies of different areas.

¹²² Alfonso Caso, "Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1934-1935" (México, D.F: Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, 1935); reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 2 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 259-348. (Again for this work, I will be citing page numbers from the *Obras* reprinted version.) Note that this is the report for the fourth season of explorations at Monte Albán. The report for the first season (1931-1932) is widely cited; but precision in documenting precisely when Caso and team settled on certain schemes and interpretations is compromised by the fact that reports for second and third were not made widely available in the same way.

¹²³ Caso, "Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1934-1935;" *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 294; my translation.

¹²⁴ Caso, "Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1934-1935;" *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 294; my translation.

Then, also within his summary remarks on that fourth season, Caso—in less than two pages—enumerated the five stages as he conceived of them in 1935.¹²⁵ The first epoch, which he at this point labels “archaic Zapotec” (*zapoteca aracico*), though distinctive, resembled a ceramic style found in the Valley of Mexico and probably corresponds to Danzante carvings. In other words, there was some slippage insofar as the Danzantes, instead of denoting some “different civilization” that had preceded the Zapotecs, were now being attributed to “archaic Zapotecs;” and he still makes no mention whatever of a possible Olmec influence in this earliest era. The second epoch, which is also Zapotec though assigned no specific name, is a style that resembles the cultural complex that Samuel Lothrop and George Vaillant had named Q and “in which one notices a clear relationship with the Maya culture.”¹²⁶ This correlation of the second period with a Maya (or sometimes “pre-Maya” or “Mayanoid”) influence is a new hypothesis, which will remain in place in (nearly) all of Caso's and Bernal's subsequent (re)constructions.

The third epoch, likewise Zapotec, is characterized by the abundant use of a distinctive gray pottery, often with serpent motifs. While he sees some continued Maya features in this era, decidedly more important is his assertion that this period shows far greater influences from Teotihuacan, another major feature of all of his ensuing accounts. A fourth and last Zapotec epoch was characterized by, among numerous features, unpolished black or brown funerary ceramics, which were at that point less thoroughly documented than the three earlier styles. Moreover, unlike the others, Caso associates this fourth epoch not only with a ceramic style but also *a historical event*—namely, the supposed abandonment of the city—an ingenious solution to a difficult problem that, as every subsequent chapter will remind us, creates confusion and disagreement that persists

¹²⁵ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1934-1935;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 294-95.

¹²⁶ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1934-1935;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 294; my translation.

even now.¹²⁷ To be sure, this ill-advised preempting of ceramic-based distinctions with a tenuous historical hypothesis, which Caso does in only one case, is the root of a problem concerning the much-debated contrast (or actually lack thereof) between the ceramics of so-termed Periods IIIB and IV, a glitch in Caso's scheme that will resurface in every attempt to address the quagmire of a Classic-to-Postclassic transition in central Oaxaca.

In any case, finally, following these “four Zapotec epochs”—and in something of an adjustment to his earlier thoughts on “a Mixtec invasion”—Caso describes the fifth epoch as one in which there appears to have been “a Mixtec occupation” of the slopes surrounding the mountain on which Monte Albán sits. He, however, offers this very important qualification:

“... but the presence of this ceramic style is very superficial, indicating an occupation of short duration; and, moreover, this ceramic style was not found in the buildings of the Grand Plaza, nor in the cemetery to the north, which demonstrates that they were already abandoned when the Mixtecs came to Monte Albán.”¹²⁸

In other words, from this 1935 vantage, having turned up only modest archaeological evidence of Mixtecs in the Monte Albán area, Caso was now tending to

¹²⁷ Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, “Science and Science Fiction in Postclassic Oaxaca: Or ‘Yes, Virginia, There is a Monte Albán IV,’” 192, praise Caso's pioneering work on Monte Albán's ceramics, but also make the case that, “One of his very few mistakes was his decision to try and make the break between Periods IIIb and IV correspond to an event, namely, the supposed ‘abandonment’ of Monte Albán.” They explain Caso's probable rationale for that making that choice in his report of the 1934-1935 season of exploration, at which point he imagined the “abandonment” of the site as far more complete than he would subsequently come to believe; but they aptly note (and over the next six chapters I will demonstrate) that, “This decision has led to confusion for decades.” *Ibid.*, 193. In their view, once Caso became aware that Monte Albán was not entirely vacated until literally centuries later he “could have saved future generations of archaeologists a lot of grief” if he had revised his scheme accordingly (*ibid.*); as we will see, however, once Caso and his team committed themselves to this original five-part scheme, they made lots of revisions but never abandoned that main chronological framework.

¹²⁸ Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1934-1935,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 294; my translation.

see their presence in the Zapotec city as somewhat later, lesser and less directly confrontational than he had earlier suspected. Be that as it may, this two-page summary of his five-stage scheme—merely slipped in as item number six in a list of the 13 most significant advances in season four!—though still absent any absolute dates, marks a decisive turn in narrating the history of the great capital. From now on, Monte Albán's history was a drama with five acts.

B. THE VERY FIRST SYNTHESIS OF OAXACA ARCHAEOLOGY: CASO'S PROTOTYPIC STATEMENT OF THE FIVE-EPOCH HISTORY OF MONTE ALBÁN

By the next year—that is to say, within a mere half decade of beginning intensive excavation at Monte Albán—Caso was prepared to deliver a much more detailed version of this basic five-fold script in his landmark work, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* (1936).¹²⁹ Rightly vaunted as no less than the very first thoroughgoing synthesis of Oaxaca archaeology, this is a work directed not only to the scholars who read his seasonal reports but also to a far wider public audience.¹³⁰ In fact, the amply illustrated 70-page text,

¹²⁹ Alfonso Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, El Libro de la Cultura (Barcelona: Editorial González Porto, 1936). This important work subsequently appeared in editions that were more widely circulated than the 1936 original edition (and which made no reference to that original edition). Consequently, this work is often cited with a somewhat later publication date: For instance, the much-cited bibliography in *Ancient Oaxaca: Discoveries in Mexican Archeology and History*, ed. Paddock, 391, simply cites the 1939 edition; and Nelly Robles García and Alberto Juárez Osnaya, *Historia de la Arqueología en Oaxaca* (Oaxaca: Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas, 2004), 230, simply cites the 1942 version. But, in the context of a discussion of the evolution of Alfonso Caso's story of Monte Albán it is important to appreciate this as a piece that originally emerged in 1936. Be that as it may, the page numbers I am citing come from the following (1939) edition, which is the same but more readily available than the (1936) original: *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* (México, D.F: Ediciones Encuadernables de *El Nacional*, 1939). Note also, by the way, these later editions describe Caso as the Director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), but Caso did not hold that post until 1939, the year in which INAH was first created. A reprint of the entire work (but with different page numbering) appears in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 5 (México: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 579-631.

¹³⁰ John Paddock's Bibliographic Note in *Ancient Oaxaca: Discoveries in Mexican Archeology and History*, ed. Paddock, 240, cites Caso's *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* as

which was in 1942 republished in “a series of volumes intended to provide Mexican schoolteachers with simple but sound teaching materials,”¹³¹ has more the character of a textbook overview of the full body of available knowledge on pre-Columbian Oaxaca than anything else that Caso would ever write.

In other words, irrespective of the usual qualifications about the need for more investigation, less than five years from his discovery of Tomb 7, Caso considered himself adequately equipped to provide a comprehensive, if still provisional, depiction of all of the principal aspects of the history and culture of ancient Oaxaca, a full account of the history of Monte Albán included. In some ironic senses, what seemed fairly clear at this point in the study of ancient Oaxaca would become less so with future investigations. Absent—or almost absent—from this serious summary treatment are Caso's anecdotal accounts of personal discovery; actually, based strictly on this cool third-person text, readers would not even know that its author was himself the lead excavator of the ongoing Monte Albán project. Absent also, or at least much tempered, are the hyperbolic praises of the pre-Columbian Oaxacans and sometimes affected analogies to Egypt, Greece and China. This is a serious and sober attempt to depict the state-of-art in a way

the earliest of the only three “general surveys of Oaxaca archaeology at any length” that had been written prior to 1970. The other two—Ignacio Bernal's “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca” (1965) and John Paddock's “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica” (1966)—will be featured and compared in chapters 2 and 3 of this book. Also note, by the way, that an English version of Caso's *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* appeared as Alfonso Caso, “The Mixtec and Zapotec Cultures,” trans. John Paddock, *Boletín de Estudios Oaxaqueños*, núms. 21-22, eds. Douglas Butterworth and John Paddock (Mitla, Oaxaca, México: Frissell Museum of Zapotec Art and the Centro de Estudios Regionales, 1962), 1-34. In advance of his 1962 translation, Paddock (*ibid.*, ii) explains that, “Alfonso Caso's *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* was published [actually republished] in 1942 by *El Nacional* as one of a series of volumes intended to provide Mexican schoolteachers with simple but sound teaching materials. It attempted to introduce some anthropological viewpoints, to summarize a very little-known aspect of Mexican archeology, and to counter the anti-Indian propaganda which had once been very widespread.”

¹³¹ John Paddock, Introduction to *Boletín de Estudios Oaxaqueños*, núms. 21-22-23 (agosto 19, 1962): ii. In *ibid.*, núm. 21, pp. 1-33, Paddock provides an English translation of roughly half of Caso's *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*.

that could both bring scholars up to date and orient the lay readers who were looking for the first time at ancient Oaxaca.¹³²

Following brief summaries of Oaxaca's geography, ethnography and history, the workmanlike text is broadly divided between the Zapotecs and the Mixtecs. Concise sections summarize each group's respective history, religion, system of numeration and writing, calendrics, funerary customs, architecture, sculpture and ceramics. Line drawings of hieroglyphs and photos of finds from Monte Albán and Mitla illustrate each of these themes. The short book ends with a three-page "Synthesis of the Mixtec and Zapotec Cultures" in which Caso explains that "the two great cultures of the state of Oaxaca," though seemingly derived from the same very ancient cultural basis, had developed into profoundly different and largely antagonist groups, who were thus locked in "an irreconcilable struggle that only the Spanish conquest could forestall."¹³³ It is not until the final couple paragraphs of the otherwise staid text that Caso shifts into a more exuberantly promotional mode in order to argue that Oaxaca—owing to its uniquely "varied mosaic of indigenous nationalities" and its abundant vestiges of "pre-Columbian civilizations that, in many respects, had never been superseded by any other people in the New World"—is the most important place in all of Mexico for the study of anthropology, philology, ethnology and, of course, archaeology!¹³⁴

¹³² It is also noteworthy that Caso's remarks on Zapotec religion in *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 25-26 (Paddock's translation), provide an atypically strong emphasis on their essentially "monotheistic" outlook wherein "The Zapotecs worshipped a supreme god who was above all the other deities; this god was the creator... Many of their gods, and others we have not mentioned, seem to have been only aspects of the principal deity, and therefore Zapotec polytheism was more apparent than real." His stress on monotheism in this popular text, if somewhat inconsistent with his depictions of Zapotec polytheism in more technical works, is, I think, consistent with his attempts to depict Zapotecs as intellectually sophisticated, which I address in the Closing Thoughts to this chapter.

¹³³ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 66; my translation.

¹³⁴ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 66; my translation.

At the very end, Caso reverts to the tried and true strategy of invoking the still-recent discovery of Tomb 7 as certain evidence of “what we can expect from future archaeological excavations and what an urgent matter it is for the History of America to devote even more resources to these explorations.”¹³⁵ Irrespective of that final flourish, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, both in terms of its structure and its content, provides a kind of prototype for innumerable overviews that Caso, his students and his students' students would write; and it is, of course, their presentations that are the prototypes for nearly all subsequent overviews and guidebooks.¹³⁶ Though by now infrequently cited, in all likelihood, no other source has been more influential, both directly and indirectly, in the framing of the twentieth and now twenty-first century story of Monte Albán.

1. A Primer on Stratigraphic Method: The Endurant Ambiguity of Successive Periods versus Overlapping Ceramic Styles

As befits the textbook style of *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, Caso prefaces his exposition of the five respective stages in “The History of Monte Albán” with an explanation of the logic of the stratigraphic method on which that quinate configuration is based. In other words, in more popular treatments, Caso was content, or more likely resigned, to presenting the five “épocas” as though they were successive *periods of time*, thereby suggesting that these were sequential chapters in the history of the city to which absolute dates might eventually be applied. In this teacherly text, however, he aspires to

¹³⁵ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 67. By contrast to the largely constrained text, in the final lines of the book Caso returns to the more exuberant campaigning for additional Oaxaca archaeology that is present in many of his other works: “Buried cities, like Achiutla and Tilantongo, cannot wait any longer for the methodical and scientific exploration that will reveal to the world treasures that hope will be quite superior to the discoveries already made, and new data that will permit the writing of a history of Oaxaca that is based on the interpretation of the indigenous monuments of remote epochs.” Ibid., 67; my translation.

¹³⁶ For instance, as we will see in the next chapter, despite the three decades that separate them, the continuity between Caso's *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* (1936) and Ignacio Bernal's “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca” (1965) is startling and perhaps somewhat disturbing.

greater precision by explaining that those stages actually correspond to five different *pottery styles*, some of which were, at least in part, contemporaneous. Moreover, while the five stages will routinely be designated Monte Albán I, Monte Albán II, etc. since it is from that site that he derives the fullest sequence, he ascertains the same pottery styles at other Oaxacan sites, though sometimes appearing in different timeframes.¹³⁷ As we'll observe again and again, this ambiguity wherein the five *ceramic styles* (along with other sub-divisions and transitional stages that will emerge) connote, but do not really define, *periods of time* per se will pose a permanent problem for narrating the history of Monte Albán.

Be that as it may, in order to clarify the means by which the stratigraphic method had been used to determine the chronological ordering of architectural features at Monte Albán, Caso provides a cross-section diagram of a pyramid that had been enlarged several successive times, and then explains that,

“One custom of the ancient Mexican and Central American Indians has given us a secure method that permits the archaeologist to study the development, the evolution and the decline of these indigenous cultures. Owing to a religious motive, or to the arrival of new people, or perhaps for other reasons of which we are ignorant, it is certain that in all of Mexico and Central America we encounter what has been called the superimposition or overlapping of structures. An old temple was utilized as the nucleus of a new construction that was superimposed on the first, and then on that second temple a third was superimposed, and so forth.”¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Regarding the ambiguity as to whether the five stages refer to periods of time and/or styles of pottery, Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (1969), 16, explains his final stance by noting that while each of the periods is defined by a distinctive ceramic style, Monte Albán I, II, III and IV denote *successive* periods, but Monte Albán IV and V denote styles that were, at least in part, *contemporaneous*. That picture is complicated more by the fact that once Caso introduced the distinction between Monte Albán IIIA and Monte Albán IIIB (discussed later in this chapter), he was compelled to explain (e.g., *ibid.*, 15-16) that there is really no difference between the respective ceramic styles of Monte Albán IIIB and that of Monte Albán IV; therefore, in that one case, the distinction is based on an important event, namely, the Zapotec abandonment of, or at least cessation of building at, Monte Albán. It is, then, it is hardly surprising that lay audiences and authors frequently over-simplify and misrepresent these categories.

¹³⁸ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 17-18; my translation.

Each of these layers of construction, Caso continues, inevitably contains fragments (*tepalcates* or potsherds) of the distinctive style of vessels that its builders used.

Accordingly, he writes,

“if we dig a shaft in the mound, as is indicated in the drawing, and have taken care to separate the *tepalcates* [or potsherds] that appear between the floors of earth, flagstones, or stucco (and that correspond to the floors of the temples) it is possible to know which of the ceramics were used in the different epochs of construction; which of the epochs was earlier than the other and, if we know the ceramics from other places, to establish the cultural relations with other peoples, to study the reciprocal influences and to determine the periods of florescence and decline, of domination and submission.”¹³⁹

Subsequent generations of Oaxacan scholars will express skepticism about this extreme reliance on the correlation of various architectural features and cultures with discarded pottery;¹⁴⁰ and the almost constant slippage between *ceramic styles* and *historical periods* will, as subsequent chapters demonstrate, remain a continuing source of confusion and ambiguity. But, in 1936, Caso could maintain that, “ceramic stratigraphy, modeled on the study of the layers of earth, is today the practically universal method of archaeologists...”¹⁴¹ Moreover, reaffirming his own crucial reliance on this approach, he could assert that, “Using this method of stratigraphy, we have been able to distinguish in Monte Albán five epochs of ceramics that were related to the construction of the temples and the tombs.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 18; my translation.

¹⁴⁰ Regarding skepticism about stratigraphy as a means dating Oaxaca finds, an excellent starting point is, for instance, Maarten Jansen, Peter Krofges, Michel R. Oudijk, *The Shadow of Monte Albán: Politics and Historiography in Postclassic Oaxaca, Mexico* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies, 1998), 13, note 2.

¹⁴¹ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 20; my translation.

¹⁴² Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 20; my translation.

On the other hand, however, still without radiocarbon dating or any other means of ascertaining actual dates, Caso continued to labor with the huge qualification that stratigraphy was providing *relative* rather than an *absolute* chronology; and thus, even in this vanguard synthesis, he continued to abstain completely on the assignment of dates to the respective five epochs. Nonetheless, correlating the ceramic sequences at Monte Albán with those that had been worked out for other regions of Mesoamerica had provided Caso with his principal strategy for determining the sorts of cross-regional relationships that would figure so largely in his (re)constructions.

2. The Five Stages Elaborated: Monte Albán within the Broader Context of Mesoamerica

Following that lesson in stratigraphic method, the account of Monte Albán that one encounters in *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* is familiar, but also new and fuller in several important respects.¹⁴³ This is another major milestone in storytelling about Monte Albán. In this version, Caso retains his position that Monte Albán was the great accomplishment of a Zapotec culture that had developed principally in central Oaxaca. But, presaging a theme that will become much more prominent in subsequent iterations—and that will, as we'll see next chapter, become absolutely central in colleague Ignacio Bernal's rendition of Monte Albán history—Caso has already committed himself to a (re)construction narrative wherein developments and successes of the great capital depend at least as much, perhaps more, on external influences than on internal developments within Oaxaca.

By stark contrast, for instance, to his American contemporary Sylvanus Morley's incessant (rhetorically useful but historically untenable) insistence that the Classic Mayas had attained every bit of their greatness without any influence from the outside,

¹⁴³ Of course, the main body of this version of Caso's Monte Albán story is expressed in the section entitled "La Historia de Monte Albán" (ibid., 17-25); but other noteworthy elements appear elsewhere in the text, including in the section on the Mixtecs.

especially without any intervention from Central Mexicans,¹⁴⁴ Caso depicts the Zapotecs as very much engaged with the peoples and cultures both to the Central Mexican north and the Maya southeast. In that sense, even in this 1936 version, Caso's account of Monte Albán was a Mesoamerican—and, to that extent, a “Mexican”—story rather than simply a Oaxacan story. Though always concerned to give Oaxacans their just due, he is even more concerned in this version to accentuate this broader context of interactions and involvements; and thus he insisted that, “The cultures of the peoples of Oaxaca—the Mixtecs and Zapotecs—had intimate contact with the other cultures of Mexico and Central America, therefore, we find many elements in common among Mayas, Teotihuacanos, Mixtecs, Zapotecs, Totonacos, etc.”¹⁴⁵

a. Epoch I: Prefiguring an Olmec Role in the City's Founding

In any case, Epoch I is again associated with the makers of the contorted Danzante figures, though in this more formal rendition Caso declines to use that misleading label to refer to carvings that, he thinks, have nothing to do with dancing or swimming.¹⁴⁶ Though this is the city's earliest phase, he strongly insists that its builders were “by no means primitive.” To the contrary, the still-unnamed founders of Monte Albán were great architects, and he notes that the hieroglyphs on the Danzante slabs, although still indecipherable, provide certain evidence that these people were familiar with a sophisticated ritual calendar.¹⁴⁷ Moreover—and this is the first of several instances in which Monte Albán's fate owes largely to outside influences—Caso explains

¹⁴⁴ On Morley's claims concerning the supposed isolation and independence of Maya culture, see, among numerous examples, a section entitled “A Unique Laboratory for the Study of Early Civilizations,” in Sylvanus G. Morley, *The Ancient Maya*, second edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1947), 14.

¹⁴⁵ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 25.

¹⁴⁶ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 20. Momentarily, I will discuss a more popular article by Caso in which he does, atypically, entertain the notion that the Danzantes do represent swimming or dancing figures.

¹⁴⁷ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 20.

that, because there are no traces of earlier vestiges of this Epoch I culture, “we have to conclude that its inhabitants did *not* develop this culture in Monte Albán or, for that matter, in the valley of Oaxaca. Rather they came from some place that, to this point, remains unknown.”¹⁴⁸

This is, to put it mildly, a major caveat! Based on stylistic affinities with both the ceramics of Central Mexico and of the Gulf Coast Olmec region, Caso proposes these as the two leading contenders for that other-than-Oaxaca place of origins.¹⁴⁹ In either case, as a narrative motif, the suggestion that the original founders of Monte Albán were “foreigners” who brought their culture to this mountaintop site largely intact has huge ramifications. In this version, like most others, Monte Albán has no humble roots; from its beginning it derives from a grand conception—but not one that was indigenous to central Oaxaca! Moreover, if the grand vision for the city came from elsewhere, this is a scenario that not only deprives Zapotecs of the status of Mesoamerica’s first urban people but, moreover, seems to undermine Monte Albán’s claim (a claim that Caso among others liked to make) to be the earliest, or the original, site of Mesoamerican urbanism.

By the early 1940s—that is to say, shortly after he had composed the synthesis in *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*—Caso would make his choice that the crucial “foreign” influence during Epoch I was Olmec rather than Central Mexican. Indeed, he emerged as the premier spokesperson for the ever-controversial view that Olmecs were not only Mesoamerica’s earliest civilization, but the “mother culture” of the entire region. As he contended in a famous statement at a 1942 conference on the topic, “This great [Olmec] culture, which we encounter in ancient levels, is without a doubt the mother of other cultures, like the Maya, the Teotihuacano, the Zapotec, that of El Tajín, and others.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 20; my translation; italics added.

¹⁴⁹ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 21.

¹⁵⁰ Alfonso Caso, “Definición y extensión del complejo ‘Olmeca,’” in *Mayas y Olmecas: segunda Reunión de mesa redonda sobre problemas antropológicos de México y Centro América* (México, D.F: Talleres de la Editorial Stylo, 1942), 42. Also see Alfonso Caso,

To be sure, seminal discoveries and interpretations of Olmec materials in the late 1930s by archaeologist Matthew Stirling and art historian Miguel Covarrubias persuaded Caso that the Olmecs really had predated and strongly influenced most other Mesoamerican civilizations;¹⁵¹ we can, therefore, imagine that Caso's embrace of the controversial mother culture thesis had, in his mind, solid historical moorings. But more skeptical readers of the Caso corpus might observe as well that, with respect to his historiographical composition, the emergence of this set of ideas about the grand influence of the Olmecs also provided an exceptionally fortuitous solution to the problem of the seemingly "non-Zapotec" Danzantes, which had vexed Caso since the 1920s.

The supposedly prevenient Olmecs provided, in other words, the last major protagonists that Caso fit into his historical (re)construction of Monte Albán, which would continue to be refined but never again radically disrupted. To these Olmec

"Existió un imperio olmeca?" in *Memoria del Colegio Nacional* vol. 5, núm. 3 (1965): 11-60.

¹⁵¹ See Matthew W. Stirling, "Discovering the New World's Oldest Dated Work of Man," *National Geographic*, vol. 76, no. 2 (1939): 183-218; Matthew W. Stirling, "An Initial Series from Tres Zapotes, Vera Cruz, Mexico," *National Geographic Society Technical Papers, Mexican Archaeological Series*, vol. I, no. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1940); and Miguel Covarrubias, "Origen y desarrollo del estilo artístico, 'Olmeca,'" in *Mayas y Olmecas* (Tuxtla Gutiérrez: Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología, 1942), 46-49. Regarding Oaxacan specialists' mixed reception of Covarrubias' work, which helps to explain the mixed reception of Caso's endorsement of Covarrubias, John Paddock, "Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica," 240, writes: "A major event in the history of Oaxaca archaeology was the publication in 1957 of *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America*, in which Miguel Covarrubias gave two full chapters to ancient Oaxaca. In spite of an alarmingly freewheeling approach that frightens most archaeologists, Covarrubias combined an immense fund of knowledge with an artist's insight, making up in creativeness what he lacked in discipline. Unhappily, the captions are often in error, since the author did not live to correct them." In any case, regarding the very strong agreement between Covarrubias and Caso (and Bernal), Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America*, organizes his chapter "The Valley of Oaxaca" on the basis of the art that presumably belongs to each of the Monte Albán I-V stages, including reference to the IIIa versus IIIb periods (on p. 154). He, like Caso and Bernal, stresses at every opportunity the theme that Monte Albán flourishes and changes on the basis of outside influences—"Olmec' in the first two periods, in Teotihuacan and Maya style in the third period, and typically late Mixtec style in the fifth period." *Ibid.*, 151.

migrants from the Gulf Coast he could attribute the “foreign” inspiration of the Danzantes for which he had been searching. Be that as it may, it is important to note, contrary to frequent mischaracterizations, that even as Caso eventually came around to the view that, “Without doubt the sculpture of this first Monte Albán period [i.e., the style of the so-called Danzante carvings] has close connections with the Olmec style of La Venta and Tres Zapotes,” he would always qualify that by insisting that, “but still it is an individual and characteristic style which should not be confused with the southern style of Veracruz and Tabasco...”¹⁵² In other words, even though Caso did eventually afford the Olmecs a crucial role in Epoch I Monte Alban, he would never cede to them the role of founders per se. Instead of a plain imposition of Olmec styles, the great capital emerged, he argued, as a creative synthesis of Olmec influences and indigenous Zapotec styles, a kind of “cultural fusion” that, as we’ll see next chapter, Ignacio Bernal would flesh out in more elaborate and polished ways. The 1936 *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* version was, however, composed prior to the insertion of that final narrative puzzle piece; and, in that sense, the famous overview was out of synch with Caso’s own views within a few years of its publication.¹⁵³

b. Epoch II: Mayanoid Stimulus to a Great but Brief Florescence

In any case, Epoch II at Monte Albán, according to the 1936 account, was likewise notable especially for outside influences, although from a source that was both different and easier to identify. Again based especially on ceramic evidence, Caso

¹⁵² See Alfonso Caso, “Sculpture and Mural Painting of Oaxaca,” in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3: “Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica,” volume editor, Gordon R. Willey; general editor, Robert Wauchoppe (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 849-70; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 279-314. This quote comes from *Obras* reprinted version, p. 289.

¹⁵³ Also regarding Caso’s final opinion the nature of Olmec influence in Epoch I Monte Albán, see, for instance, Caso and Bernal, *Culturas zapoteca y mixteca* (1962), 250-51, though that jointly authored piece blurs the disagreement between him and Bernal, who, as we will see next chapter, never concurred with Caso that the Olmecs were Mesoamerica’s “mother culture” per se.

detects involvements during this period with what he now calls the “pre-Mayas” or (rather than Mayas) who had been located in Belize and in the Peten of Guatemala.¹⁵⁴ Nonetheless, as in the earlier period—and, in fact, at every point in this version of the Monte Albán story—the city benefits rather than suffers from the introduction of elements from outside the Valley of Oaxaca. Regarding Epoch II, though Caso will later suggest the Mayanoid impositions came via violent conquest,¹⁵⁵ here he depicts a fairly smooth transition in which local components of the previous era are retained while, at the same time, alternative influences from the Maya zone stimulate “a great florescence in the arts.”¹⁵⁶ For instance, by contrast to the simpler flat-roofed tombs of Epoch I, the tombs of Epoch II are more elaborate and have angular roofs; larger, more varied, more realistic and more beautiful urns are produced during this era; the system of glyphs and writing also showed marked advances; and, among numerous architectural innovations, the construction on the uniquely shaped Building J suggests an adeptness at astronomical observation.¹⁵⁷ All these advances, according to Caso, signal that “Epoch II of Monte Albán marked a new step in the development of the cultures of Oaxaca.”¹⁵⁸ Yet, at the

¹⁵⁴ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 21.

¹⁵⁵ Regarding Caso's position on the nature of the Period II intrusion, Paddock, “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica” (1966), 119, explains: “Some time ago Caso suggested that the Monte Albán II style might possibly have been imposed in the Valley of Oaxaca by conquest... As possible evidence, he cited the upper-class and ritual character of Monte Albán II traits, their relatively sudden appearance in Oaxaca, and the presence of certain inscriptions in Monte Albán II style consisting of a place glyph with a head upside down below it... As Caso pointed out, this might be a statement of the conquest of the place named...”

¹⁵⁶ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 22; my translation.

¹⁵⁷ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 22. Seemingly the first to attribute astronomic significance to the arrow-shaped structure, his most direct, though still brief, comments on Building J appear in Alfonso Caso, *Exploraciones en Oaxaca; quinta y sexta temporadas 1936-1937*, publication núm. 34, Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia (Tacubaya, D.F., México: Impreso en la Editorial “Cvltvra,” 1938); reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 3 (México: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), section on “Montículo J,” 12-20. (Again in this case I will cite page numbers from the *Obras* reprinted edition.)

¹⁵⁸ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 22; my translation.

same time, Caso notes, and most subsequent scholars will agree, that, “this second period does not appear to have lasted long because the objects that correspond to it are quite rare and of limited distribution within the ancient city.”¹⁵⁹

c. Epoch III: A Grander Teotihuacan-Stimulated Florescence

According to this version, the transition to Epoch III—eventually termed by many as the “Classic era”—entails a somewhat more abrupt transition, though it is noteworthy that, in his 1936 rendition of Monte Albán's history, conquest and invasion play (almost) no role. Once again, the principal mechanism of change and improvement seems to be not internal development but, instead, the arrival of outsiders or at least influences from outside. In fact, in this story—and this is a motif that Bernal will accentuate even more—the interaction and mixing of cultures seems always to have positive ramifications. The Monte Albán of this era, for instance, according to Caso, was characterized by a “double influence”: For one, it was definitely connected with Teotihuacan, which was simultaneously flourishing in the Mexican altiplano; and, for two, significant influences were also being exercised by the great Maya cities of southeast Mexico and Central America.¹⁶⁰ The fortuitous interaction of Teotihuacan, Maya and Oaxacan components was melded into a distinctive Zapotec style that issued in, what Caso assesses as, “indubitably the highest splendor of the city.”¹⁶¹

By contrast to the short second epoch, he thinks this third period lasted “several centuries.” (Note, however, that this version was crafted in advance of Caso's division of this long period into Monte Albán IIIA and IIIB.) The majority and, by most assessments, the best of the Monte Albán's buildings and tombs were constructed in this third era, and the city presumably reached its greatest population. Caso continues to

¹⁵⁹ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 22; my translation.

¹⁶⁰ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 22-23.

¹⁶¹ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 23; my translation.

cautiously (if not entirely) avoid transferring the Mayanist rubric of “the Classic” into Oaxaca; but he does judge this to be an era of unsurpassed excellence:

“The abundance of beautiful jades, urns and sculptures indicate the wealth and the power of the city during this period. The painted tombs also belong to this era and we can say that the great majority of Zapotec objects that exist in museums and private collections derive from Epoca III of Monte Albán.”¹⁶²

In short, while not rejecting his earlier view that the first four periods all qualify as “Zapotec,” he now makes the subsequently controversial point that Epoch III marks not only the clear climax of the city but also the first emergence of a distinctively Zapotecan style. That Epoch III gave birth to a unique Zapotec style, and thus perhaps unique Zapotec identity, is, as we’ll see, an idea that John Paddock and others will underscore even more strongly; and, in fact, both Bernal and Paddock are reticent to term any feature of Monte Albán prior to Epoch III as genuinely “Zapotec.” Furthermore, Caso’s praise for this third era lays the foundation that will allow others to characterize this as both the most sophisticated and most “pious” era in Monte Albán’s history; Covarrubias, for instance, intending to accentuate rather than controvert Caso’s conclusions, will contend that “The art of period III is essentially mystic and decorative, austere and stylized, with a powerful personality, despite the strong Teotihuacan influence that pervaded it.”¹⁶³ This idea that religion played a uniquely important (albeit ambivalent) role in the third era is another feature of this 1936 account that has a still-enduring legacy.

d. Epoch IV: A Gradual Rather than Sudden Decline

Regarding Epoch IV, Caso continues to assess this as the last of the four Zapotec periods, though he is, on the one hand, direct and certain that Monte Albán had by this time entered an era of precipitous decline. As Covarrubias characterizes Caso’s view,

¹⁶² Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 23; my translation.

¹⁶³ Miguel Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 152-53.

this is “a period of frank decadence.”¹⁶⁴ Indeed, though Caso had, it seems, already begun to mitigate his earlier ideas about Monte Albán's total abandonment in favor of a more gradual and incomplete depopulation, he retained the (problematic) correlation of Period IV not only with a ceramic style but also the historical downturn of the city.¹⁶⁵ He opines that most of the temples had been abandoned and although there were a few new tombs, they were considerably less well constructed.¹⁶⁶ At this point, Caso says, the once-dominant center was eclipsed by smaller but more vibrant Oaxaca Valley cities: “Monte Albán had lost its importance as a metropolis and as a religious center... Zaachila and Mitla were now the new centers of attraction in the Zapotec nation.”¹⁶⁷ On the other hand, however, in a very notable omission, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* avoids any speculation on the forces or causes of that decline. The prospect that the city had been sacked or overrun (by Mixtecs or anyone else) is eliminated insofar as, unlike each of the previous three periods, Caso finds no evidence of significant involvements between Monte Albán and peoples outside of central Oaxaca during this era. Instead, the implication is that the Monte Albán's demise owed almost completely to internal factors; but he declines, for now, to venture a strong opinion on the specific causes of Monte Albán's apparent (“Postclassic”) lethargy.

¹⁶⁴ Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America*, 156. Note, however, that while Covarrubias attributes this “frank decadence” of Period IV to “strife with more aggressive new invaders of the Valley of Oaxaca—the Mixtecs,” Caso's *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, does not attribute the Period IV decline to Mixtec involvements in the area. Alternatively, in this version, as I note momentarily, Caso locates the first arrival of Mixtecs in Epoch V.

¹⁶⁵ On Caso's problematic correlation of Monte Albán IV and the supposed abandonment of the site, discussed in a previous note in this chapter, see Marcus and Flannery, “Science and Science Fiction in Postclassic Oaxaca,” 191-96.

¹⁶⁶ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 23.

¹⁶⁷ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 24; my translation.

e. Epoch V: A Mixtec Presence of Still-Uncertain Sorts

Finally, again in this version, Epoch V marks the Mixtecs' first appearance at Monte Albán. Reaffirming themes that emerged in *Las esteles zapotecas* (1928), Caso accentuates the profound and largely irreconcilable differences between Zapotecs and Mixtecs. He does allude to an earlier episode in which Zapotecs had allied with Mixtecs to combat the shared enemy of the Mixes;¹⁶⁸ and later in Epoch V the two Oaxacan groups would, he thinks, join forces in trying to forestall an Aztec invasion into the area.¹⁶⁹ But unlike the fortuitous cross-cultural exchanges in earlier chapters of the story, Zapotecs and Mixtecs are depicted, in the main, as thoroughly and hopelessly antagonistic, cooperating only as an occasional necessity. Their broader relationship is, in this rendition, one of fierce combat all the way until the arrival of the Spaniards.¹⁷⁰

As regards an eventual Mixtec presence at Monte Albán, Caso, of course, presents the (supposedly) Mixtec treasure of Tomb 7 as his most dramatic archaeological evidence; but, beyond that, he can still point within the ancient capital only to a few other modest Mixtec burials and to some characteristically Mixtec black and polychrome ceramics.¹⁷¹ No major or, for that matter, minor constructions at Monte Albán could be attributed to Mixtecs. Based on that sparse evidence, Caso's brief narrative treatment of this late era, seemingly by design, continues to hold open two quite different ways of conceiving of the Mixtecs' relationship to the once-great Zapotec city. In a sense, it would appear that he had still not settled on a solution to "the new problem" that had issued from the Tomb 7 discovery of 1932.

¹⁶⁸ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 15.

¹⁶⁹ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 16, 24.

¹⁷⁰ On the relationship between Mixtecs and Zapotecs, Caso, irrespective of these occasional military alliances, especially accentuates their irreconcilable differences; see, for example, *ibid.*, 66. Nonetheless, with respect to similarities, Caso (*ibid.*, 20-21, 65-66) does contend that "the two great cultures of Oaxaca" appear to have derived from a shared, Epoch I cultural background.

¹⁷¹ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 24.

Thus, regarding a first alternative, Caso describes how the Mixtecs, who had heretofore been contained in the mountains to the west of the Oaxaca Valley, eventually, in Epoch V, “broke that barrier and seized Monte Albán.”¹⁷² Elsewhere in the book he reaffirms this prospect of a forcible takeover by suggesting that the many-centuries Zapotec occupation of Monte Albán lasted “*perhaps* until the Mixtec invasions made it impossible to maintain possession of this great sanctuary;”¹⁷³ and, again with a qualification, he writes, “The decadence and ruin of the sacred city of Monte Albán *probably* dates from these [Mixtec] invasions.”¹⁷⁴ At points, then, it does appear that the Caso of 1936 thinks that the Mixtecs had, after all, played a significant and violent role in the demise of Zapotec Monte Albán. Nonetheless, in contrast to this image of a forced Mixtec entry into the city, this text’s most direct exposition of the “history of Monte Albán” depicts the decline of the city as an Epoch IV circumstance in which the Mixtecs exercised no significant influence whatever. Moreover, in this much-cited account of Epoch V, Caso avoids the phrase “Mixtec invasion” in favor of the more benign “Mixtec occupation.”¹⁷⁵ Thus, by another reading of the same book, Caso’s 1936 stance is that the Mixtecs were more like scavengers, squatters or opportunists who played no important part in Monte Albán’s collapse and took only a passing interest in the largely abandoned site once they did move into the Valley of Oaxaca. This ambiguity is telling of a large problem that he never fully resolves.

In any case, that sort of cautious indecision on this huge topic of the Mixtec role—or lack thereof—in the demise of Monte Albán is yet one more way in which *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* is, for better or worse, a prototypical text. Distressingly, both Caso’s own latter work and, indeed, nearly all subsequent and even present-day

¹⁷² Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 24; my translation.

¹⁷³ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 14; my translation; italics added.

¹⁷⁴ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 16; my translation; italics added.

¹⁷⁵ Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, 24.

syntheses of Oaxacan archaeology continue to follow this early example of waffling on the causes of Monte Albán's collapse. As later chapters will show, there is still nothing close to consensus on this momentous matter.

C. TECHNICAL ADJUSTMENTS AND POPULAR ENHANCEMENTS: ANSWERING THE EXUBERANCE OF MAYANIST AFICIONADOS

Be that as it may, once Alfonso Caso had committed himself to the five-stage scheme of *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*—arguably a heuristic framework on which he settled a bit too soon—he and his colleagues would be willing to split and recombine periods, and to introduce some so-termed transitional periods; but he would never abandon the basic five-epoch outline. Occasional heretics notwithstanding, after 1936, that the pre-Columbian history of Monte Albán and the Valley of Oaxaca had five main stages was gospel. Now the task was to nuance, refine and disseminate that scheme.

The fifth and sixth seasons of Monte Albán excavations (1935-1937), for instance, continued to be ambitious and productive in the extreme. Still there were lots of clear targets in need of investigation and new discoveries continued to be abundant.¹⁷⁶ Likewise, fixing the chronology via ceramic stratigraphy remained a first priority. As regards reaffirmations of the five-stage framework, Caso could, on the one hand, conclude his especially detailed report of these seasons with the confident surmise that, “the division of Monte Albán by [five] epochs has been confirmed again with certainty...”¹⁷⁷ Additionally, he now considered that intimate and constant contact between Epoch III Monte Albán and Teotihuacan had been established with such thoroughness that it would be impossible for anyone to study either of these two cultures

¹⁷⁶ Caso, *Exploraciones en Oaxaca; quinta y sexta temporadas 1936-1937; Obras* reprint, vol. 3, 1-143.

¹⁷⁷ Caso, *Exploraciones en Oaxaca; quinta y sexta temporadas 1936-1937; Obras* reprint, vol. 3, 144; my translation.

in isolation.¹⁷⁸ On the other hand, although Caso had never imagined perfect symmetry between the five stages, the new stratigraphic results persuaded him of a greater imbalance than he imagined:

“The discoveries of these seasons have demonstrated to us that Epoch III of Monte Albán was of major duration, probably several centuries, and that during that era the city had great splendor. Although we cannot yet divide this epoch into two periods, already we note differences in style that will permit us to make that division.”¹⁷⁹

As usual, then, Caso ended his report by looking forward: “We hope next season permits us to divide this Epoch III into chronological periods and, moreover, even to specify Monte Albán's connections with the Mixtec and Teotihuacan cultures.”¹⁸⁰

1. A Five-Epoch Ode to the Ancient Zapotecs: Pre-Columbian Oaxacans as even Greater than the Classic Mayas

True to prediction, during the next season, Caso's team would divide the long third period between Epochs IIIA and IIIB, roughly the Early Classic and Late Classic periods (addressed later), which continues to be part of virtually all Monte Albán (re)constructions.¹⁸¹ In the meantime, however, Caso produced another of those much

¹⁷⁸ Caso, *Exploraciones en Oaxaca; quinta y sexta temporadas 1936-1937; Obras* reprint, vol. 3, 144.

¹⁷⁹ Caso, *Exploraciones en Oaxaca; quinta y sexta temporadas 1936-1937; Obras* reprint, vol. 3, 143; my translation.

¹⁸⁰ Caso, *Exploraciones en Oaxaca; quinta y sexta temporadas 1936-1937; Obras* reprint, vol. 3, 144; my translation. Recall that Caso had made a similar prediction in 1934-1935 season, “Future explorations, and the stratigraphic studies that will be undertaken by Eduardo Noguera and Eulalia Guzmán, will without doubt establish subdivisions in this provisional [five-stage] classification.” Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1934-1935;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 294; my translation.

¹⁸¹ See Alfonso Caso, “Resumen del informe de las exploraciones en Oaxaca, durante la 7a y 8a Temporadas 1937-1938 y 1938-1939,” *Vigésimoséptimo Congreso Internacional de Americanistas*, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, SEP, tomo II (México, 1939), 159-87; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y*

less technical, and thus much more aggressively narrative, summaries of current ideas about Valley of Oaxaca archaeology. By contrast to his staid seasonal reports and to the seriously constrained *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” which appeared in 1938 in *Mexican Art and Life*, an English-language magazine explicitly designed to promote life in Mexico for Americans, is a short and sensationalist ode to the greatness of Monte Albán and its inhabitants.¹⁸² Given the author's usually measured style, the incautious article seems also to have suffered in its translation from Caso's Spanish; there are many spelling and grammatical errors. Though the incentives behind such a plainly promotional piece are somewhat difficult to know, the rhetorical style is so similar to that of Sylvanus Morley, head of the enormous ongoing Maya project that was based at Chichén Itzá, that one has to suspect that Caso was, in a sense, answering Morley's gushing praise of Classic Mayas with his own accolades of the ancient Oaxacans. The Zapotecs, for whom the Mayas would always constitute the most serious competition for public affections, especially among North Americans, were, in his view, still not getting their due respect.

In 1936, four years after Caso had showcased his project in “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” Morley had published his own *National Geographic* piece, “Yucatán, Home of the Gifted Maya: Two Thousand Years of History Reach Back to Early American Temple Builders, Corn Cultivators, and Pioneers in Mathematics,” which in many ways, perhaps more successfully, did for Chichén Itzá and

Zapotecas, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 153-85. (Again for this article I will be citing page numbers from the *Obras* reprinted version.)

¹⁸² Alfonso Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” in *Mexican Art and Life*, no. 4 (October 1938): 307-11; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 143-52. (Again for this article I will be citing page numbers from the *Obras* reprinted version) Based on the photographs that Caso includes in this article, it seems to have been written either during or shortly after the seventh season of explorations, 1937-1938. Though structured in a way that presumes the five-stage framework, this article makes explicit reference only to the first couple of “stages” or “periods.” The article also appeared as: “Monte Albán, An Archaeological Zone of World Wide Renown,” *Bulletin Panamerican Union*, en español, inglés y portugués, vol. XL-I [sic] (1939): 307-11.

the Mayas what Caso's article had aimed to do for Monte Albán and the Zapotecs.¹⁸³ Where Caso, a far more rigorous scholar, was occasionally prone to wax poetic about the Zapotecs and Mixtecs, Morley, the ultimate publicist-scholar, beginning in the 1910s, never missed an opportunity to promote his assertion that the Mayas were "the most brilliant cultural expression of ancient America."¹⁸⁴ For Morley, the Classic Mayas were "the Greeks of the New World,"¹⁸⁵ a gentle, nature-worshipping people who could do no wrong. In his sometimes-ridiculously overwrought assessment, for instance, contemporary Mayas retained the good nature of their pre-Columbian ancestors insofar as "they are cheerful, friendly, not quarrelsome even when drunk, exceedingly clean, home-loving, and, when the need arises, industrious."¹⁸⁶

Morley's principal rhetorical strategy for enumerating the gifts of these near-perfect people was to divide bowtie-shaped ancient Mesoamerica into two main parts, and then contrast the peace-loving and contemplative Mayas in the southeastern half of the region with the militaristic, politically aggressive and ritualistic Aztecs and Toltecs who had occupied Central Mexico in the northwestern half. In his view, the remarkably violence-free success of the Mayas owed in large part to the fact that they had been allowed to develop in a kind of uncontaminated isolation from their much rougher neighbors, a kind of cultural purity that also made them ideal objects of scientific study. As Morley explained in the *National Geographic*:

¹⁸³ Sylvanus Griswold Morley, "Yucatán, Home of the Gifted Maya: Two Thousand Years of History Reach Back to Early American Temple Builders, Corn Cultivators, and Pioneers in Mathematics," *National Geographic*, vol. XLL (July-September 1936): 591-644.

¹⁸⁴ Morley, "Yucatán, Home of the Gifted Maya," 593. Morley (*ibid.*, 644) changes just one word in later "the Maya civilization the most brilliant cultural achievement of ancient America."

¹⁸⁵ Morley, "Yucatán, Home of the Gifted Maya," 593, is among countless places that Morley praises the Maya as the "Greeks of the New World."

¹⁸⁶ Morley, "Yucatán, Home of the Gifted Maya," 641.

“Because of its almost complete isolation, the [Yucatan] peninsula was selected by the Carnegie Institution of Washington, more than two decades ago [i.e., in 1913], as a center for the intensive study of American aboriginal civilization. Foreign influence having been reduced to a minimum, Yucatan is an excellent ‘laboratory case’ for such a study.”¹⁸⁷

Conveniently then, Morley could attribute any unsavory element of Mayas' cultural profile—say, human sacrifice or a penchant for coercive political authority—to the unhealthy “foreign” influence of Central Mexicans.¹⁸⁸ Ancient Oaxacans, who had lived on the knot of the Mesoamerican bowtie, seemingly because their presence might somehow dilute the stark polarities on which his argument rested, were scarcely even mentioned in Morley's work. In Morley's free-swinging promotion of all things Maya, while Aztecs and Toltecs are explicitly damned, Zapotecs and Mixtecs are damned by omission.

Caso was, of course, at odds with Morley on virtually every one of these extravagant claims for the Mayas.¹⁸⁹ In his view, it was ludicrous, an irresponsible distortion of the historical record, to imagine telling the story of ancient Mesoamerica without affording a major role to the ancient Oaxacans, peoples who not only “had developed a culture in some respects superior to that of the Aztecs and Mayas,” but who, moreover, “probably constitute the link which united peoples of the central plateau with

¹⁸⁷ Morley, “Yucatán, Home of the Gifted Maya,” 591.

¹⁸⁸ On the “Mexican Period” wherein the peaceful prosperity of the “Maya Renaissance” were interrupted, see Morley, “Yucatán, Home of the Gifted Maya,” 617-31.

¹⁸⁹ Mexican Alfonso Caso and American Sylvanus Morley would have been in quite direct competition to secure funding for their respective projects not only from the Mexican government but also from the Carnegie Institution of Washington. With respect to the latter, note that by the fifth season of excavations at Monte Albán (in 1936) the Carnegie Institution had been added to the list of donors (see Caso, *Exploraciones en Oaxaca; quinta y sexta temporadas 1936-1937; Obras* reprint, vol. 3, 3); and he also acknowledges the support of the Carnegie Institution in seasons seven and eight (see Caso, “Resumen del informe de las exploraciones en Oaxaca, durante la 7a y 8a Temporadas 1937-1938 y 1938-1939,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 3, 153).

those of Yucatan and Central America.”¹⁹⁰ Yet, if Caso and Morley had very different styles of diplomacy, academic dispositions, national affiliations and profoundly different conceptions of ancient Mesoamerica, in an article like “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” Caso shows himself willing, at least on occasion, to borrow a page from the American’s playbook and himself embrace the role of scholar-publicist.¹⁹¹

a. Epoch I: Fabulously Skilled and Sublime Oaxacan Founders

In the blithe iteration of the Monte Alban’s history that appears in this 1938 piece, the sober description of each the five epochs expounded in *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* was reworked in ways that suited Caso’s now more public and Zapotec-promotional purposes. Starting the article with a particular aplomb, it is Epoch I that draws perhaps the most surprisingly exuberant recasting. According to this version, which is still absent any mention of Olmec influence,¹⁹² Monte Albán is fabulous from its earliest beginnings. The Danzante figures that Caso had described in other contexts variously as deformed and contorted “cripples,” possibly “buffoons,” perhaps sick persons in search of a Lourdes-like cure, or maybe conquered enemies who were being humiliated and

¹⁹⁰ Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 487; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 50.

¹⁹¹ Note, by the way, that even in this 1938 article, Caso was still hoping to find another tomb to rival that of Tomb 7: “Hundreds of tombs, rich in jade artefacts and ceramics, dot the flanks of the Sacred Mountain, and at the lower levels, where the Mixtecs settled, one may yet unearth polychrome vases and metal objects.” Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 152.

¹⁹² Note that later, in the 1940s, when Caso becomes a staunch advocate for the conception of the Olmecs as Mesoamerica’s “mother culture,” Morley and Mayanist colleague J. Eric S. Thompson would, predictably enough, be the staunchest critics of that position, a hypothesis that posed another challenge to their ideas concerning Maya autonomy and credit for the region’s greatest intellectual achievements, including writing and the ritual calendar.

parodied,¹⁹³ are, in this article, amazingly enough, attributed exceptional grace of movement. Moreover, with respect to the original builders of Monte Albán and their artful Danzante creations, he now writes in Morleyesque tones:

“A swarming and wealthy population, equipped to decide on and carry through work of such magnitude, must assuredly have flourished in the Valley of Oaxaca untold centuries ago, so many indeed, that history holds no record of those primitive dwellers in the land and even legend and tradition are dumb; but there are their works to speak for them; those stone blocks carved in the semblance of human figures, commonly called ‘Dancers’ because they express movement with such perfect skill that one at once realizes that they *are* dancers, their outline is so pure and so full of life, and at the same time so natural, that in this sense they excel [sic] the cleverest creations of the Mayas and Aztecs.”¹⁹⁴

As though enjoining a kind of contest to determine which indigenous Mesoamericans had made the prettiest and most sublime objects, Caso, again resembling Morley's style, goes so far as to deride the “bizarre” aesthetics of the Aztecs and Mayas, which are not nearly so appealing as those of the ancient Oaxacans:

“The ceramics of those ancient peoples [i.e., the Epoch I inhabitants of Monte Albán] are in accord with their degree of culture. Massive vases, that because of their sheer beauty of form appeal to us much more strongly than the bizarre creations of the priestly cultures of Mexico and Central America; dishes decorated with animals' heads, unbelievable in their stark realism or figurines that by exaggerating expression reach heights of sly and humorous caricaturism [sic].”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ See, for example, Caso, “Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America,” *National Geographic* original, 492-93; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 57; or Caso, “Las exploraciones en Monte Albán: Temporada 1931-1932,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 2, 184. Recall that in Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, *Obras* reprint, 20-21, he had avoided using even the name “Danzantes,” probably, first, because he did not think that these figures had anything to do with dancing and, second, because it was Leopold Batres who assigned these figures that misleading name, and Caso was concerned to put his own work on a more serious and disciplined plan than that of Batres, whose methods he routinely criticizes. Ironically, in “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” Caso opts for an approach that resembles that of Batres in style and content.

¹⁹⁴ Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 145; Caso's italics.

¹⁹⁵ Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 145.

Furthermore, besides their superior artistic tastes, these Epoch I proto-Zapotecs, whom Caso (again by contrast to Morley) credits with the invention of the sophisticated *Tonalpohualli* ritual calendar, are assessed as more intellectually gifted than the Mayas, less cruel than the Aztecs and more reasonable, that is to say, less preoccupied with ritual and priestly authority, than either of those peoples.¹⁹⁶

b. Epoch II: Well-Balanced Zapotec Artist-Intellectual-Politicians

In this version, following these not-humble beginnings, “came a second period of great splendor.” Now declining even to mention the Maya influence he had described elsewhere (a particularly telling omission), Caso describes Epoch II Monte Albán this way:

“Magnificent tombs decorated with fresco paintings, urns reproducing life size heads of princes and high priests, ceramics in which the wide range of types and ornaments shows the mastery of technique by the artificer [sic], jade and obsidian work evidencing the wealth of the great lords and the skill and the genius of humbler workers, all these do we find.”¹⁹⁷

In this period, the Zapotecs, unlike Morley's and Eric Thompson's strictly mystic-minded Classic Maya, are attributed balanced proficiency both in matters of war and polity *and* those of the arts and intellect. Thus, on the one hand, “Victories gained by Monte Albán over other cities were recorded and figures of local deities carved with hands behind their

¹⁹⁶ The lines that make this case for this superiority of the ancient Oaxacans over the Mayas and Aztecs are somewhat garbled: “And this archaic culture [i.e., that of Epoch I at Monte Albán] that flourished at a time when the great Maya civilization had not yet arisen, even then held the secret of its ritual and magic calendar, the celebrated *Tonalpohualli*, that was later destined to acquire a precision equal to that of the Maya Calendar itself and was called upon to preside over, with inexorable rites, the cruel ceremonies by which the Aztecs implored favors of their gods.” Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 145.

¹⁹⁷ Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 145-47.

backs...”¹⁹⁸ But, at the same time, the second period was an era of intellectual accomplishment:

“A system of hieroglyphics developed and a writing with phonetic character was actually evolved... The Zapotec priests, about that time, erected an astronomical observatory in the center of the Great Square, and from it they followed with intent gaze the movements of the sun and moon, and the stars in their immutable courses, and haply [sic] embodied the soul of the people in fear.”¹⁹⁹

That is to say, besides entirely omitting his own ideas about Maya contributions to this period, Caso depicted Zapotecs as the far better-rounded of the two cultures. By contrast to Morley's absurdly impractical intellectual-pacifist Mayas, the Zapotecs of this version balanced their estimable ethereal interests with worldly talents in social organization, statesmanship and even militarism.

c. Epoch III: Oaxacan Excellence Born of Cultural Symbiosis

The next section of Caso's 1938 magazine article, which addresses the long and climactic third epoch, describes Zapotec excellence lifted to greater excellence: “... then Monte Albán flourished as a Zapotec metropolis for many long centuries.”²⁰⁰ What is especially notable here—perhaps the most interesting component of the whole article—is his explanation of *why and how* the Zapotecs achieved such splendor and cultural sophistication. While the notion was implicit in *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, here he is

¹⁹⁸ Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 147.

¹⁹⁹ Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 147. It is notable that, contrary to his own earlier and later accounts, in this article, Caso declines to attribute any of the Epoch II Zapotec excellence to the influence of Mayas or pre-Mayas. Had he done so might have strengthened his argument (discussed momentarily) that the Zapotecs benefitted by openly engaging other cultures rather than by being isolationists; but to do so might also have undermine his argument that the Zapotecs are generally “superior” to the Mayas.

²⁰⁰ Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 148.

more explicit about the processes of cultural borrowing and symbiosis that account for Monte Albán's highest florescence. Importantly, Caso's attribution of Zapotec greatness is the very antithesis of Morley's oft-repeated contention that the Classic Mayas had achieved their greatness, and moreover that their culture had a special integrity, because they had developed in complete isolation from any other Mesoamerican civilization. According to Morley, the Mayas' "purely Maya" cultural achievements had required no outside assistance from anyone, least of all Central Mexicans (a position that is, of course, historically no longer viable).²⁰¹

By contrast to the supposed virtues of self-induced isolation, Caso attributes the greatest era at Monte Albán to the fact that the Zapotecs had done precisely the opposite—that is, that they had entered into a series of stimulating exchanges with other peoples, cultures and ideas. In fact, Caso suggests that, throughout their long history, Zapotec originality and creativity had invariably thrived rather than suffered from their interactive relations with other Mesoamerican cultures. Thus, not inconsequentially, Monte Albán's fullest flowering was also the period in which the reciprocal exchanges among Oaxaca, Central Mexico and the Maya zone were most apparent. In praise of the Epoch III Zapotecs' impressive blend of borrowing, originality and supposed interregional influence, Caso writes, "The arts of writing, pottery, sculpture and the cutting of jade, all show traces of alien influences, but Monte Albán in turn stamps its own ideas on Teotihuacan and the Maya cities."²⁰²

d. Epoch IV: Multiple, But Still Uncertain Causes of Collapse

Regarding Epoch IV and the collapse of the city, this loose little article is noteworthy also for way that Caso inventories three alternative explanations for Monte Albán's demise, something else that he had declined to do in *Culturas mixteca y*

²⁰¹ Morley, "Yucatán, Home of the Gifted Maya," 591.

²⁰² Caso, "Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown," *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 148.

zapoteca. He nonetheless continues to avoid throwing his estimable weight behind any single option. For one, he suggests that the city's decline might be somehow connected to the growth of great Mexican cities to the north and Maya cities to the south. Second, he offers a more ecological explanation, which many scholars continue to find the most persuasive: "perhaps also uninterrupted cultivation of the land, ever more intensely tilled to feed a population that multiplied under the protection afforded by a higher civilization and power, exhausted the soil and crops began to fail."²⁰³ And third, still undecided about precisely what role the Mixtecs ought to play in this part of the story, he continues to entertain the possibility that, "Perhaps, also, the Mixtec warriors who hovered on the outer slopes of the sierra pressed ever more hardly on Monte Albán in order to seize the fertile valley of the Zapotecs."²⁰⁴ But even in a casual article of this sort, Caso avoids premature conclusions: "These are but suppositions that archaeological exploration gradually will confirm or contradict, but there is no doubt that decline did set in."²⁰⁵

e. Epoch V: Mixtecs as Also Excellent in their Own Ways

Finally, regarding Epoch V, Caso reiterates his certainty that, "The erstwhile metropolis had surely sunk to the status of a second-rate city. The golden age of the Zapotec civilization had passed away for all time."²⁰⁶ By now, he says, the nearby but smaller cities of Mitla and later Zaachila had both surpassed Monte Albán in importance, and Mixtecs had flooded into the Valley of Oaxaca. Moreover, he continues to hold open the two possible characterizations of the unprecedentedly large Mixtec presence during this era: The arrival of the Mixtecs may indeed have been the sort of "invasion" that was

²⁰³ Caso, "Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown," *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 148.

²⁰⁴ Caso, "Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown," *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 148.

²⁰⁵ Caso, "Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown," *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 148.

²⁰⁶ Caso, "Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown," *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 150.

a significant cause of Monte Albán's decline or, alternatively, the Mixtecs may simply have been opportunists who capitalized on the already seriously compromised status of Zapotec civilization in order to claim some new territory. Either way, by the era leading up to the arrival of Spaniards, they enjoyed the upper hand:

“The Mixtecs had taken possession of the valley and were on the point of destroying the Zapotec power, when the Spanish conquest surprised these two great races of Oaxaca in the last act of age-old contest and definitively fixed the limits which both Mixtecs and Zapotecs were to live down to our own day.”²⁰⁷

Nonetheless, again contrastive to Morley's debasing of the Toltecs invaders of the Mayaland as one-dimensional brutes, proficient at war and little else, Caso maintains that these Mixtec interlopers, who like the Toltecs have strong Central Mexican affiliations, “represented an extraordinarily refined culture, as is shown by the perfection of all their artefacts, codices, carved wood and bone, jewels of gold or jade, feather mantels and mosaics.”²⁰⁸ He acknowledges, in other words, that despite the fact that the respective cultures of the Mixtecs and Zapotecs are very different and apparently irreconcilable, each is excellent in its own way.

2. Alternative Routes to Cultural Excellence: Maya Isolationism versus Zapotec Interactivity

In sum, then, the *Mexican Life and Art* article might seem to be a kind of flimsy throwaway, and assuredly this is not Alfonso Caso at his scholarly best and most careful; parts of the piece engender doubt that Caso himself actually wrote it, and we can be certain that he did not exercise final editorial control. Nonetheless, the 1938 magazine story of Monte Albán—especially by its stylistic resemblances but also stark substantive contrasts to Morley's work—is highly revealing of two narrative themes that figure very

²⁰⁷ Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 150.

²⁰⁸ Caso, “Monte Albán: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 150.

large in the Mexican-made accounts of Caso and Bernal, but, as we'll see, much less so in those of subsequent American archaeologist-authors.

First, though the article does have (atypically) disparaging comments about Aztecs and Mayas, the actual story of Monte Albán paints all of the pre-Columbian actors in a highly flattering light. Instead of the familiar arc of humble "Preclassic" beginnings that are followed by a great "Classic" florescence and then "Postclassic" decadence, in this almost sentimental rendition, the skilled creators of the sublime Danzante carvings are followed by the cosmopolitan and supremely accomplished Zapotecs, who are eventually displaced by the different but "extraordinarily refined" Mixtecs. Pre-Columbian central Oaxaca is, thereby, depicted as the site of rotating excellences, and Caso issues not one word of criticism or disparagement about any of the principal parties. Accordingly, unlike more ambivalent depictions of the main actors that we will encounter in later scholars' work, the wonderfully accomplished and well-rounded protagonists in this story provide contemporary Mexicans with some very compelling ancestors. And, second, in this Monte Albán narrative, by contrast to Morley's stress on the ostensible "cultural purity" of the Mayas, the Zapotecs' successes in every era are enhanced, not damaged, by their engagements with other cultures. And thus, in that sense, as Bernal's own version will demonstrate even more clearly, the history of Monte Albán can provide a powerful pre-Columbian model for the sort of cross-culture sharing and admixing that gives birth to a "mestizo" national identity, which once again required clarification and bolstering in twentieth-century, post-Revolutionary Mexico.

In short, if Caso was dueling with Morley in order to persuade the American public that the Zapotecs are every bit as fascinating as the Mayas, that is a contest that Caso will never win; and the article's title, "Monte Albán, An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown," probably remains more of an aspiration than a reality. For a host of reasons, Mayas will always enjoy greater international acclaim than Zapotecs. But if the goal is to provide an account of the Zapotec capital that strongly affirms modern Mexico's pre-Columbian roots, together with an endorsement of the value of culture intermixing, then this little article would be a very apt exemplar.

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS:

THE CONTENT AND CONTEXT OF A MEXICAN STORY OF MONTE ALBÁN

Although the broad contours of Alfonso Caso's script would, from here on, remain largely intact, the seventh (1937-1938) and eighth (1938-1939) seasons—which included more work at Monte Albán itself but also excavations at two sites in the Mixteca region and at nearby Atzompa and Mitla—did require him to continue revising and nuancing his five-part scheme.²⁰⁹ Following the frenzied first years, the pace of discovery had begun to slow, so that, as Caso explains, “A great part of the available funds were employed in the consolidation and (re)construction of structures that had been explored in earlier seasons.”²¹⁰ Now the priority was preparing the site for public visitation. Nonetheless, during these seasons Caso's team unearthed, along with innumerable architectural features, more Danzante figures; more glyph-inscribed monuments, including Stelae 18, one of the largest monoliths ever found in Mexico; more evidence of human sacrifice; 13 more tombs, variously well stocked with offerings; and, of course, ever more of the ceramic evidence that was crucial to securing the chronology.²¹¹ Those abundant discoveries reaffirmed many hypotheses, but undermined others.

²⁰⁹ Caso, “Resumen del informe de las exploraciones en Oaxaca, durante la 7a y 8a temporadas 1937-1938 y 1938-1939;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 153-85. The two Mixtec area sites explored during these seasons were Yucunudahui and Monte Negro.

²¹⁰ Caso, “Resumen del informe de las exploraciones en Oaxaca, durante la 7a y 8a Temporadas 1937-1938 y 1938-1939;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 167; my translation.

²¹¹ Regarding the discovery of more Danzantes, more stelae, and more evidence of human sacrifice, see Caso, “Resumen del informe de las exploraciones en Oaxaca, durante la 7a y 8a Temporadas 1937-1938 y 1938-1939;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 169. Regarding the 13 tombs discovered in these seasons, see *ibid.*, 181-83.

A. ONGOING CORRECTIONS AND READJUSTMENTS: THE RESILIENCE OF AN UNTIDY FIVE-STATE SCHEME

The considerable flux that remained in Caso's opinions is evident, for instance, in his reflections on two not-small matters. For one, the ceramics in newly discovered Tomb 11, which bore surprising resemblances to both Epoch I and Epoch V styles, left him considering the unsettling possibility that Mixtecs may have played an important role, not simply at the end of the Monte Albán saga, but also at the very beginning.²¹² And, for two, Caso was likewise forced to second thoughts on the similarly large matter of Monte Albán's relationship to Mitla, which he had long imagined was a fully Mixtec city that had arisen during the Zapotec capital's Epoch IV decline. In that respect, excavations of the so-termed Geodesic Vertex Group compelled him to issue an outright retraction of his long-held stance that Monte Albán and Mitla appear to be "two totally different cities" that ought to be attributed to "two completely distinct cultures."²¹³ With further excavation at both sites, Caso now realized that he, like nearly everyone else, had been misled by the very different appearances of the two present-day ruins.

Contrary to expectations, as more and more of Monte Albán's earlier structures were uncovered, there emerged more and more surprisingly similar counterparts to nearly all of Mitla's characteristic features, including the famed geometric mosaic facades. Eventually, in a rare use of italics, Caso concluded that: "We can now say, to the contrary of what was formerly affirmed, that *there is nothing in Mitla that cannot be found in Monte Albán, although sometimes in rudimentary form*, which verifies that Monte Albán was the place from which came the elements that later would form the

²¹² Caso, "Resumen del informe de las exploraciones en Oaxaca, durante la 7a y 8a Temporadas 1937-1938 y 1938-1939;" *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 181-82.

²¹³ Caso, "Resumen del informe de las exploraciones en Oaxaca, durante la 7a y 8a Temporadas 1937-1938 y 1938-1939;" *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 176; my translation. Note, by the way, that Caso (*ibid.*, 179) cites himself as the person that had primary responsibility for this excavation of the Geodesic Vertex Group (la Sistema del Vértice Geodésico), which is notable as a sign that he was still involved at that hands-on level, though presumably less so after this.

characteristics of Mitla.”²¹⁴ Instead of a fully Mixtec city, Caso had begun to anticipate more current ideas that Mitla was a primarily Zapotec city, which may or may not display some Mixtec revisionings.

In any case, as regards the ongoing refinement of Caso's five-part framework, this seventh and eighth season report is even more significant insofar as he followed through with his plan to subdivide the very long Epoch III into what he termed Epoch IIIA and Epoch IIIB (or, interchangeably, Monte Albán IIIA and Monte Albán IIIB), which refer roughly to what others will call the Early Classic and Late Classic.²¹⁵ In this report the transitions both in terminology and periodization are tellingly incomplete; but he provides a chart that demonstrates the five key stages with which he was working at that point were: [1] Monte Albán I, [2] Monte Albán II, [3] Monte Albán IIIA, which is presented as a free-standing category, [4] Monte Albán IIIB and Monte Albán IV, which have been combined into a single category of ceramics, though the latter refers to the time when the city was largely abandoned, and [5] Monte Albán V, which he terms the Mixtec period.²¹⁶ The seemingly peculiar arrangement had the virtue (and liability) of retaining the familiar five stages while responding to new data.

²¹⁴ Caso, “Resumen del informe de las exploraciones en Oaxaca, durante la 7a y 8a Temporadas 1937-1938 y 1938-1939; *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 177; Caso's italics, my translation.

²¹⁵ Caso, “Resumen del informe de las exploraciones en Oaxaca, durante la 7a y 8a Temporadas 1937-1938 y 1938-1939;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 153-86. Though this represents an awkwardly incomplete transition in terminology, it is also noteworthy that in this report the categories that Caso had heretofore labeled as Época I, Época II, Época III, etc. are now, about half the time, designated as Monte Albán I, Monte Albán II, Monte Albán III, etc. He thereby sets a precedent wherein Epoch I, Period I, Stage I and Monte Albán I will subsequently be used as essentially interchangeable terms, a usage that exacerbates the ambiguity of relying on heavily overlapping ceramic styles or horizons to address consecutive periods of time.

²¹⁶ Caso, “Resumen del informe de las exploraciones en Oaxaca, durante la 7a y 8a Temporadas 1937-1938 y 1938-1939;” *Obras* reprint, vol. 1, 165. Caso, in a rationale that will be frequently repeated by Bernal, explains that the ceramics of Monte Albán IIIB and Monte Albán IV are nearly the same, and thus in that respect can be merged; but, complicating the status of these categories as ceramic styles rather than historical periods, in this case, the key difference between these two stages is that the city was

By the time Caso presented his fully mature synthesis of Monte Albán's history in *Culturas zapoteca y mixteca* (1962), which was co-authored with Bernal, there are eight stages: [1] Monte Albán I, which finally includes a discussion of Olmec influence; [2] Monte Albán II; [3] Transitional Monte Albán II-III A; [4] Monte Albán III A, an Early Classic period of peak artistic excellence; [5] Transitional Monte Albán III A-III B, which further nuanced the long third period; [6] Monte Albán III B, which corresponds to a Late Classic era; [7] Monte Albán IV, which is again disconnected from the previous era; and [8] Monte Albán V, which runs clear to the arrival of Spaniards.²¹⁷ In later writings, depending on whether he is focused on Monte Albán's ceramics, architecture, sculpture, mural painting, lapidary, gold or copper work, Caso would employ some permutation or subset of those eight categories.

In other words, had he waited longer to settle on the basic divisions, the scheme could have been more streamlined and the labels more tidy; and, more specifically, had Caso avoided demarking Period IV on the basis of Monte Albán's supposed collapse rather than the more strictly ceramic evidence that he used in other cases, a great deal of subsequent confusion might have been averted. But, having committed himself in the mid-1930s to the basic five-part scheme, which then became entrenched in all of his work on Oaxaca, Caso and his team were willing to slice, dice, recombine and qualify its component parts without, however, abandoning the famous quintuple configuration.

largely abandoned during the later. Regarding the problematics of correlation of Monte Albán with a historical event as well as a ceramic style, discussed earlier, see Marcus and Flannery, "Science and Science Fiction in Postclassic Oaxaca," 191-96.

²¹⁷ Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal, *Culturas zapoteca y mixteca*, guión presentado por el doctor Ignacio Bernal y el doctor Alfonso Caso, publicado por el Consejo de Planeación e Instalación del Museo Nacional de Antropología, INAH/CAPFCE/SEP (México, D.F: enero, 1962); reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 239-78. (Again for this work, I will be citing page numbers from the *Obras* reprinted version.) Notably, this article, unlike any other that I have referenced so far, includes some radiocarbon dates, and thus early attempts to assign actual dates to the respective periods.

Revisiting the famed five-part configuration in the 1980s, Bernal's opined that, aside from problems with respect to Monte Albán's earliest beginnings, "the other periods as defined by Caso have stood the tests of both time and increasing knowledge of the area and, except in some matters of detail, are still considered sound."²¹⁸ And Richard Blanton's more unpartisan assessment of the five-period ceramic sequence is equally affirming:

"Caso et al, in fact, have done a magnificent job in making sense out of the stratigraphic confusion that is typically present in ancient buildings at Monte Albán. Although future stratigraphic research will undoubtedly produce finer periodization, in reality the essence of the problem is inherent in the ceramic sequence itself..."²¹⁹

Later, in chapters 5 and 7, will we encounter Oaxacan archaeologists who endeavor to tell the story of Monte Albán without reference to this five-stage plan;²²⁰ and most professional Oaxacanists currently rely on alternate schemes and phase names that better reflect the current state-of-the-art concerning Oaxacan ceramic studies.²²¹ But even those reworked formulations, of course, rely constantly on cross-referencing to Caso's foundational arrangement.

²¹⁸ Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, 178.

²¹⁹ Richard E. Blanton, *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (New York: Academic Press, 1978; Clinton Corners, NY: Percheron Press, 2004), 28-29.

²²⁰ As I will discuss in chapter 5, Marcus Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* (Oaxaca, Mexico: Carteles editores, P.G.O., 1989, 1992), 128, has a chart that explains the correlation between the four-stage chronological scheme that he uses and Caso's five-stage scheme, which he largely avoids. And as I will discuss in chapter 7, Arthur A. Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 297, note 7, explains his reliance on more recent revisions of the ceramic sequence developed by Alfonso Caso and his colleagues, and thus his non-use of Caso's timeworn five-part scheme.

²²¹ For a clear presentation of the now-widely used alternative ceramic phases and names (as they relate to Caso's five stages), see, for instance, Table 1.1 in Javier Urcid, *Zapotec Writing: Knowledge, Power and Memory in Ancient Oaxaca* (2005), 197; <http://www.famsi.org/zapotecwriting>.

B. THE CONTENT OF CASO'S STORY OF MONTE ALBAN: FOUR UNRESOLVED ISSUES OF MAJOR IMPORT

Be that as it may, consider finally some reflections, first, on the *content* of Alfonso Caso's accounts of Monte Albán history as a narrative (re)construction and then on the *context(s)* in which that story-crafting was undertaken.

First, with respect to the content of Caso's story of Monte Albán—the “emplotment” and “followability” of Caso's narrative, so to speak²²²—while he continued for decades to refine his five-part scheme, in hindsight, it is striking, on the one hand, how quickly he came to the main tenants of his (re)construction narrative. In *El tersoro de Monte Albán* (1969), his definitive work on the Tomb 7 discovery that did not emerge until the very end of his life, he was able to repeat verbatim numerous lines that are essentially lifted from his spate of 1932 articles. In many respects, Caso's career-long of involvement with Monte Albán was characterized by the reaffirmation of his hunches and first impressions; seldom did he feel required to make retractions like that one concerning an alternate view of Mitla's relation to the Zapotec capital.

On the other hand, Caso's story of Monte Albán, as a dramatic script for interested non-scholars, is ultimately unsatisfying insofar as there is a handful of very large questions that he was never able to resolve. His circumspection about overreaching the data left unanswered several of the most obvious queries that inquisitive tourists, for

²²² Recall comments in the Introduction about hermeneutical narrative theorist Paul Ricoeur's use of the terms “emplotment” and “followability” whereby audiences are rewarded with “the pleasure of recognition,” and thereby enabled the sense that they have, in some significant way, solved the mystery of the long-abandoned site. 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. For comments that apply Ricoeur's insights directly to archaeologically-based writing, see Mark Pluciennik, “Archaeological Narratives and Other Ways of Telling,” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 5 (December 1999), 654. Also see Cornelius Holtorf, “Meta-stories of Archaeology,” *World Archaeology*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2010): 381-93.

instance, continue to ask even during their very first visit to the site. Instead of wrong answers—like many of the flatly incorrect, though storiologically fascinating conclusions that archaeologist-storytellers deliver at Chichén Itzá—Caso, to his credit, largely abstained on at least four topics that would be required to give his Monte Albán plotline the beginning, middle and end of a well-composed, “followable” novel.

For one, Caso never delivers a satisfying story of Monte Albán's founding. Prior to work at San José Mogote in the 1970s, among the greatest challenges for every Oaxacan scholar-narrator, Caso included, was to account for a city that emerged on such a large scale with such a grand conception, seemingly without any clear precedent. Though his eventual, always-controversial posit of crucial Olmec involvements in Epoch I gave Caso a provisional explanation for the highly sophisticated but seemingly non-Zapotec system of writing on the abundant Danzante figures, a problem that had perplexed him since the 1920s, Caso's take on both “the who” and “the why” of Monte Albán's original founding remained unsettlingly vague.²²³ Second, while Caso was, in principal, determined to study Monte Albán within the broader context of Oaxaca and Mesoamerica, his understandable focus on the mountain capital never led him to a rewarding reply concerning the extent of Monte Albán's political influence and the still-debated question of whether or not the Zapotecs ever controlled an “empire.”²²⁴

²²³ Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology*, 178, for instance, suggests that the single greatest shortcoming of Caso's scheme concerns this early period, and owes primarily to his lack of awareness of the very important precedents to Monte Albán at the nearby site of San José Mogote, which was not appreciated until the 1970s. Ironically, as we'll see, while San José Mogote is a huge factor in all of the (re)constructions composed after that time, Bernal's own story of Monte Albán, like Caso's, is composed too early to make any mention of that paramount precedent to Monte Albán.

²²⁴ Themselves very much concerned, as we'll see in chapter 6, with ascertaining the fluctuating extent of Monte Albán's political influence, Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 28, note that, following Caso's initial focus on the mountain capital, it would be Ignacio Bernal who did more to broaden the view beyond Monte Albán.

Third, while Caso's first major contribution to Oaxacan studies was to disentangle Zapotec monuments and Mixtec codices, even in the final permutations of his Monte Albán narrative, disconcertingly, those are the only two of Oaxaca's innumerable indigenous groups that play significant roles; other Oaxacan communities, of which he was very well aware, are never connected to the goings-on in the great mountaintop city. Moreover, as we seen, irrespective of (or perhaps because of) his persistent efforts to make sense of Mixtec history, he always vacillates on the Mixtecs' variously large or largely incidental role at the Zapotec capital, especially in its era of decline.²²⁵ And thus fourth, with respect to inevitable questions about Monte Albán's demise, while commendable in avoiding monocausal explanations, Caso never presents a definitive opinion on which factors are most important in the city's collapse, and, therefore, leaves us with a story that ends as vaguely as it began.²²⁶

²²⁵ Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 7, notes that Caso's focus on just two Oaxacan groups "is understandable given the spectacular nature of Zapotec and Mixtec sites and artifacts, and the fact that most excavations in Oaxaca had been concentrated in the Zapotec and Mixtec regions. However, it was as if other groups in Oaxaca had no distinctive pre-Hispanic origins or developments." As we'll see in chapter 7, Arthur Joyce, like Winter, is another who consistently aims to include other groups in his account of ancient Oaxaca history.

²²⁶ By the way, the important matter of Caso's take on the role of religion in Monte Albán's ascent and, perhaps even more importantly, the city's demise will be addressed more fully the second of my three books on the Zapotec capital, *The Religion of Monte Albán*. Be that as it may, I should note here that Caso, in yet another theme that Ignacio Bernal will reecho and amplify (and thus that I will discuss next chapter), has a decidedly ambivalent assessment of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican religion. For instance, in Alfonso Caso, *The Religion of the Aztecs* (México, D.F.: Editorial Fray B. de Sahagun, n.d. [Spanish original, 1936]), 61-62, he opines: "Religion was the preponderant factor and was the basic cause even in those activities such as sports, games and war which, to us, seem quite divorced from religious sentiment. Religion regulated commerce, politics and conquest, and intervened in all acts of the individual, from the day he was born until the hour when priests burned his body and buried his ashes. It was the supreme motive of all individual acts and was the underlying reason for the life of the State itself... But if religion was for the Aztec the force and reason for his life, ... on the other hand, it placed a fatal limitation on his culture, just as it did, though in lesser proportion, on all the Indian cultures of Mexico and Central America." Thus in the case of Monte Albán, Caso, on the one hand, credits Zapotec religion with the inspiring and stabilizing force that accounts for many of the capital's artistic, social and political triumphs; but, on the other hand, he likewise attributes to an inordinate investment in religion a kind of top-heavy "theocracy" that leads to the capital's eventual demise.

In short, Caso's standards of rigor enabled a highly original, compelling and historically viable story of Monte Albán, but one that left unanswered some of the most obviously pressing questions. Thus, setting aside momentarily the important matter of empirical accuracy, *strictly as a narrative composition*, his prototypic story of the Zapotec capital—on which all successors rely—is, paradoxically, by far the most influential but also the least complete of the seven alternatives addressed in this book. Without either a clear beginning or certain ending, Caso's narrative fails to meet Paul Ricoeur's criterion of logical coherence or "followability" wherein, in order to deliver "the pleasure of recognition," a story must present the sort of "emplotment" or plotline in which "the end result or situation can be understood as the logical or at least plausible consequence of previously described situations or conditions."²²⁷ From Ricoeur's view, "good stories" of Monte Albán—that is, those that provide people a sense that they have begun to understand the relevant actors and events—must be logically consistent from start to middle to end. Relying on essentially the same data, Ignacio Bernal, as we'll see next chapter, finds a clever way to attribute both the rise and fall of Monte Albán to the very same cultural dynamics, and thus masterfully meets that criterion; but Caso's cautious and thus, at points, incongruous rendition does not. Ironically, Caso's legendary thoroughness did not really eventuate in a thoroughgoing narrative of the ancient capital.

C. CONTEXTUALIZING CASO'S STORY OF MONTE ALBÁN: PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL AND POLITICAL INCENTIVES

At any rate, if we think somewhat more suspiciously about external factors that impinge on the composition of this version of Monte Albán history, there are

²²⁷ Recall that these ideas about what makes for a "good story" were discussed in the Introduction. On the "followability" of narrative, see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 152; on "the pleasure of recognition," see *ibid.*, 49; and on the role of story-crafting or emplotment, see, *ibid.*, *ibid.* 53. The quote comes from a summary of Ricoeur's position as it relates to archaeologically-based writing in Mark Pluciennik, "Archaeological Narratives and Other Ways of Telling," *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 5 (December 1999), 654.

innumerable different *contexts* in which one might locate Caso's storiological efforts. For instance, in three key respects, the contrasts between the roughly contemporaneous investigatory histories of Monte Albán and Chichén Itzá are again informing.

First, placing this story within *the context of the person and personal career of its author*, Alfonso Caso—supremely talented, ambitious, accomplished and thus influential—was, in the wake of the Tomb 7 discovery, a celebrity archaeologist and a public figure. Where it served his larger purposes, the former lawyer was willing to shift attention from the discoveries to the discoverer. His life-sized statue continues to greet every visitor to the site and, even now, he, like few serious scholars, remains the suitable subject of a Spanish-language children's book; Caso is a true Mexican hero.²²⁸ As noted, his rendition of the actions and actors that account for Monte Albán are built on no important precedents; he started in the 1920s nearly from scratch and in a climate of total confusion concerning the respective roles of Zapotecs and Mixtecs in the ancient city. And then, beginning with the single-handed breakthroughs in *Las esteles zapotecas* (1928), authored the story of ancient Oaxaca that would hold the field for decades. Though always assembling capable teams and collaborators, Caso's decipherment of Monte Albán's stelae and history was a great individual achievement, which thereby launched, legitimated and sustained his path to a uniquely powerful position within the Mexican academy.²²⁹

Caso and his version of events had, during his era, no serious competition. At Chichén Itzá, by contrast, the competing viewpoints of Sylvanus Morley, Eric Thompson and Alfred Tozzer, all very strong personalities and all relying on essentially the same

²²⁸ Manola Rius Caso, *Alfonso Caso: Explorador de Monte Albán*, illustrations by Theresa Bronn (México, D.F.: Giraluna, 2004).

²²⁹ Regarding Alfonso Caso's unique influence on the formation and direction of Mexican archaeology, see, for instance, Andrés Medina Hernández, "La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma," en *Comovisión mesoamericana: Reflexiones, polémicas y etnografías*, Alejandra Gámez Espinosa and Alfredo López Austin, coordinadores (México: El Colegio de México, Fideicomiso Historia de las Américas, 2015), especially pp. 62-64.

information, issued in several profoundly different stories about the Maya and Toltec interactions that had purportedly eventuated in that great city.²³⁰ But, from the late-1920s through the mid-1960s, Caso, for better or worse, enjoyed a near-monopoly on the interpretation of Monte Albán. Accordingly, by contrast to the *mélange* of both fact-based and flaky renditions of Chichén Itzá's history to emerge in the past century, tale-telling about Monte Albán has been much more constrained, in large part because Caso's (re)construction—and his commanding presence—not only forestalled more fanciful stories of the Zapotec capital, but also delayed the appearance of any serious scholarly alternatives until he had left the scene. For 50 years, Caso's version of events was *the* story of Monte Albán.²³¹

Second, within *the context of Mesoamericanist studies*, Caso's long career spans from just after the emergence of Mexican archaeology as a professionalized discipline through an enormously eventful half-century of intellectual and institutional developments; and nearly all of those crucial developments reflect his uniquely powerful influence and perhaps clout. It is, therefore, not surprising that his methodical disentanglement of Monte Albán's convoluted history provides a kind of microcosm of a number of emergent and future trends in the field. Routinely described as the antithesis of Leopoldo Batres's amateurish approach to archaeology and the torchbearer of Manuel Gamio's more scientific approach, the founder of INAH, for instance, made Monte Albán excavations the prime exemplar of then-new stratigraphic methods, and thus the

²³⁰ See Jones, "Conquests of the Imagination."

²³¹ Pedro Armillas' wry comment about Caso's "hegemonic influence" on the eleven Round Table meetings organized by the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología between 1941 and 1966, each devoted to a pressing and controversial matter in Mesoamerican archaeology, is even more accurate with respect to Caso's domination of the interpretation of Monte Albán: "From the first [Round Table meeting in 1941], the tables were not round; they had a head and there was Caso... If he did not say anything, if he did not take positions, there was discussion; but once Caso intervened and took a position, the discussion was over. Whatever Caso said was accepted, albeit reluctantly, because of his stature." Pedro Armilla quoted in José Luis de Rojas, *La aventura intelectual de Pedro Armillas: Visión antropológica de la Historia de América* (Zamora, Michoacán, México: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1987), 137; cited by Medina Hernández, "La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma," 77.

requirement to proceed on the basis of secure chronology and careful documentation.²³² Moreover, reaching conclusions about the ancient city that were attainable only via his exemplary integration of epigraphic, art historical and more strictly archaeological evidences, Caso pioneered the sort of multidisciplinary strategies that subsequently become standard.²³³

Furthermore, as an example of early twentieth century Mesoamericanist storytelling, Caso's rendition of the Zapotec capital is particularly notable—and again highly contrastive to contemporaneous Chichén Itzá stories—for a balance that, on the one hand, brings much greater and overdue attention to the crucial role of pre-Columbian Oaxaca and Oaxacans, who were almost completely absented from the two-party Maya-Mexican stories of the Yucatan capital. After Caso, Mesoamerica had three rather than just two major sub-regions. And, on the other side of that balance, by contrast to untenable presumptions of the Classic Mayas' near-total isolation from all other groups, Caso's attention to the prospect of important Olmec, Maya and especially Teotihuacan influences at Monte Albán enabled a forward-looking appreciation of the whole Mesoamerican region as a distinctive but interactive cultural unit. In other words, though complaints that the achievements of Aztecs and Mayas are unfairly privileged over those of Mixtecs and Zapotecs will, as we'll see, remain a constant refrain among Oaxacan

²³² Regarding stratigraphy, Monte Albán and Chichén Itzá again pose a strong contrast insofar as, at Monte Albán, Caso began his excavations with a long-vacant, largely undisturbed site, which made it an ideal venue for ceramic stratigraphy. Chichén Itzá, by contrast, literally split down the middle by a main Yucatan roadway, had been site to so many undisciplined nineteenth and early twentieth century digging projects that the ceramics were disrupted in ways that largely prevented the sort of stratigraphy work that was so successful at Monte Albán. Accordingly, irrespective of the vast amounts of work that have been done at Chichén Itzá, the chronology for that ancient city remains among the most poorly understood of any major Mesoamerican site.

²³³ Nelly Robles García, *Monte Albán: History, Art, Monuments*, 16, for instance, comments that, "Caso's project was one of the most complete works in the sphere of anthropology of the time... The lengthy explorations and analyses were carried out by highly talented investigators, who formed one of the first multidisciplinary teams for the study of archeology..." See Vázquez León, "Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942," 74-78, for a somewhat more critical assessment of Caso's agenda within the context of Mexican archaeology.

specialists, Caso's efforts gave an enormous lift to the region's scholarly profile. But also, at the same time, by locating the accomplishments of Monte Albán and the Zapotecs within the wider frame of Mesoamerica, Caso prefigured the presently prevailing views that we can make sense of individual sites in Oaxaca and elsewhere only by locating them with broader regional networks.

And third, placing his narrative efforts within *the context of early and mid-twentieth century Mexican political history*, while Caso was in many methodological respects the very antipode of Batres, he—yet again unlike his American and British counterparts at Chichén Itza—was not less committed than the Porfiriato Inspector of Archaeological Monuments to utilizing the wealth of pre-Columbian ruins as resources for the construction of a modern Mexican national identity.²³⁴ Where the Carnegie Mayanists imagined an international audience, the efforts of Caso, who came of age in the early years of post-Revolutionary Mexico, were trained most on his countrymen. From his earliest essays of the neglected site in the 1920s, he, it seems, envisioned the mountain remains not only as a locus of historical research but also of public education; from the outset he aspired to a pedagogical venue for foreign visitors, but even more for Mexicans who were insufficiently appreciative of their marvelous pre-Hispanic heritage. The friendship and crucial support that he enjoyed from President Lázaro Cárdenas was based in large part on agreement that the study, restoration and promotion of pre-Columbian sites—the Oaxaca capital among the very top tier—was in the national interest.²³⁵ For Caso, configuring the site as a tourist destination, or perhaps more

²³⁴ Regarding the perhaps surprising continuity between Batres and Caso in this respect, see Vázquez León, "Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942," 70-72.

²³⁵ See Vázquez León, "Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942," 71, notes that, since the Batres era, "government archaeology has had the obligation to win current government executives' sympathy in order to carry out its large-scaled excavation projects. The important projects have always been dedicated by the president of the republic and his ministers." Also with respect to Caso's support of institutional policies and an approach to archaeology that advances the revolutionary nationalism of the Cardenista regime, see Medina Hernández, "La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma," 97-98, 109.

accurately a kind of outdoor museum of Mexico's indigenous past, was always an essential part of the agenda;²³⁶ and, as noted earlier, he saw immediately that Monte Albán had far greater potential in that regard than Mitla.²³⁷

Contemporary critics of "the Mexican School of Archaeology," of which Caso is the foremost exemplar, express due concerns about the manipulations that result from a circumstance in which "governmental archaeology had become the only means for doing and thinking about archaeology;"²³⁸ and there is no question that Caso had large patriotic investments. Moreover, the fact that control of both the excavation and image-making at Chichén Itzá had been, in large part, ceded to American researchers who geared their efforts to international visitors, seems to have intensified Caso's commitment that Monte Albán should be a project owed, operated and appreciated foremost by Mexicans.

²³⁶ The qualified way in which Caso was an advocate for "tourism" deserves greater attention. For instance, Nelly Robles García, "The Concept of Cultural Resource Management," *Society for American Archaeology Bulletin*, vol. 16, no. 3 (May 1998): n.p., comments that, "The perception of monumental archaeology as a source of inspiration and education for all the people, a perception that drove the formation and activities of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) in the 1930s, appears to have been replaced by a new set of priorities centering on tourism. Although archaeologists receive criticism for 'working for the tourist,' the subject of tourism has become a subject of concern among academics and researchers only during the past decade..."

²³⁷ For a retrospective view of the main objectives with which Caso began his excavations at Monte Albán in 1931, see Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (1969), 12. For a more general statement concerning the public value of archaeology, see, for instance, Alfonso Caso, "¿Por qué deben conservarse los restos de una vieja civilización?" in *Arqueología Mexicana*, ; vol. I, núm. 3 (Agosto-Septiembre 1993): 50-56; originally published in *Cuadernos Americanos*, vol. I, núm. 3 (Mexico, 1942), 123-37.

²³⁸ Vázquez León, "Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942," 82-83, discusses how the quite different academic, museographic and governmental traditions of Mexican archaeology were, during Caso's era, all subsumed into the third (i.e., "governmental") way of conceiving the field. Also see two recent dissertations that engage these issues: Ellen Hoobler, "The Limits of Memory: Alfonso Caso and Narratives of Tomb Assemblage from Monte Albán, Oaxaca, Mexico, 500-800 and 1931-49 CE," PhD dissertation in Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, 2011; and Zahra Marie Moss, *The Golden Treasures of Monte Albán: Mexican Representation and Exhibition Controversy, 1933-1936* (University of Arizona, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012).

Be that as it may, a site-visit to Monte Albán during the Caso-era was definitely less distorting than one to Chichén Itzá for at least two reasons. First, by contrast to the heavily worked Yucatan capital wherein numerous major (re)building initiatives left visitors completely baffled as to which features were original constructions and which were modern (re)constructions, Caso—dually committed to showcasing Zapotec civilization and to rigorous historical accuracy—invented a technique, still in use today, that made it perfectly apparent even to inexpert tourists which portions of structures were pre-Columbian and which elements had been recently rebuilt.²³⁹ For him, even casual visitors are entitled to “a true story.” And second, while visitors to Chichén Itzá would have been treated to Morley's and Thompson's sometimes absurdly glowing depictions of the astronomer-priest Mayas, Caso's narratives (with the exception of some popular articles I've discussed) provide far more realistic depictions that address not simply the Zapotecs' calendrical, architectural and artistic accomplishments, but also their involvements in a measure of human sacrifice, forcible conquest and political manipulation. Irrespective of his deep appreciations of Oaxacan cultures and peoples, his descriptions are, in the main, laudably evenhanded.

In final sum, then, Caso, though not fully exempt from the Mayanists' exoticizing excesses, as a rule, opts for more balanced characterizations of Monte Albán's builders and residents, quite likely on the pragmatic grounds that more rounded depictions are actually more effective in reaffirming the intelligence and dignity of these pre-Columbian progenitors to the Mexican republic. Moreover, while Caso certainly was open and direct about utilizing the photogenic ruins of Monte Albán to engender Mexican pride and identity, his foremost successor, Ignacio Bernal, to whom I turn next, is, perhaps surprisingly, far more susceptible to accusations of weaving the history of the Oaxaca capital into an avowedly nationalistic (re)construction narrative that presents ancient

²³⁹ Caso's practice of inserting pebbles in the mortar of the rebuilt portions of Monte Albán's structures, thereby clearly differentiating them from the original portions that had been unearthed rather than rebuilt, continues to be used, for instance, at the ongoing refurbishment of nearby Atzompa.

Zapotecs as the ideal prototypes for an admixed mestizo identity. For Alfonso Caso, those rhetorical goals, while compelling, are never allowed to supersede aspirations to empirical accuracy.