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CHAPTER FOUR

Richard Blanton on Monte Albán as a “Disembedded Capital”: A Story of Militarism, Regional Cooperation and Religious Neutrality

“As I see it, the foundation of a regional political capital at Monte Albán at the juncture of the Middle and Late Formative Periods was due to military tension between societies in the Valley of Oaxaca and those in adjacent regions. A military league in the valley would not only have served to protect, but, through aggressive expansion, could have generated revenues to support the new political institution and its capital. Because the cojoining [sic] valley polities retained considerable local autonomy..., the new capital had to be placed in such a way as to please everyone involved, and not drastically alter the political or economic status quo.”

Richard E. Blanton, 1978¹

While John Paddock’s edited volume, *Ancient Oaxaca: Discoveries in Mexican Archeology and History* (1966), would for years continue to be routinely cited as the state-of-the-art, its publication actually coincided with a major shift in the prevailing approach to the study of the region’s past—a shift from site-specific studies to more widely regional approaches. As noted, Alfonso Caso had, from the outset of his Monte Albán project, acknowledged the necessity of understanding the capital within the broader region, and thus undertook numerous side projects elsewhere in the Valley of Oaxaca and in the Mixteca region; and Ignacio Bernal, also as I’ve noted, carried forth that initiative by investigating dozens of sites around Oaxaca. The incentive to more regional studies was, in principle, not a new idea.

* 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 Richard E. Blanton, *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (New York: Academic Press, 1978; Clinton Corners, NY: Percheron Press, 2004), 107.

Nonetheless, two major and interrelated research projects did mark wholly new levels of scale and sophistication in regional archaeology. The first was the Prehistory and Human Ecology of the Valley of Oaxaca Project, begun in 1964 and projected to last into the 21st century, which was directed by Kent Flannery, who was joined by Joyce Marcus as co-director in 1973.² (I will revisit that undertaking in chapter 6.) The second was the Prehistoric Settlement Patterns of the Valley of Oaxaca Project, a related and similarly long-running initiative designed to undertake the first systematic survey of the entire valley, which was started in 1971 and headed by Flannery's student, Richard E. Blanton, who was subsequently joined by Gary Feinman, Laura Finsten, Stephen Kowalewski and Linda Nicholas.³

Both projects were indebted to ideas about “cultural ecology” first formulated and debated in the 1940s and 1950s by Leslie White and Julian Stewart, and then implemented in Mesoamerica during the 1960s in the “systematic settlement pattern survey method” utilized by William Sanders (who would eventually become, as we'll see shortly, one of Blanton's most vocal critics) in his extensive studies of Teotihuacan and the Valley of Mexico undertaken.⁴ Both Oaxaca projects were, therefore, committed to

² Regarding the different but interrelated agendas of the two projects, see, for instance, Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 29. Also see see Gary M. Feinman, “The Last Quarter Century of Archaeological Research in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca,” *Mexicon*, vol. 29, no. 1 (February 2007), 4-5.

³ Blanton, *Monte Albán*. Blanton's “Prologue to the Percheron Press Edition,” v-viii, provides a concise account of the circumstances and goals of his Prehistoric Settlement Patterns of the Valley of Oaxaca Project, including its close relationship to the Flannery's Prehistoric and Human Ecology of the Valley of Oaxaca Project.

⁴ On his indebtedness to “cultural evolutionary ideas from Leslie White and Julian Stewart,” see, for instance, Richard E. Blanton, “Theory and Practice in Mesoamerican Archaeology: A Comparison of Two Modes of Scientific Inquiry,” in *Debating Oaxaca Archaeology*, ed. Joyce Marcus, Anthropological Papers of the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, no. 84 (Ann Arbor: 1990), 1. And on his direct debt to William Sanders, with whom he considers himself “extremely fortunate” worked in Valley of Mexico as a graduate student, see *ibid.*, 4.

an understanding of Monte Albán within the broad regional network of cities, towns and villages of which it was a part. And, though independent initiatives, the two highly ambitious surveys would intersect, interact and cross-fertilize in all sorts of complicated ways, far more often coming to conclusions that were in agreement than at odds.

Prevailing compatibility notwithstanding, for the present purposes, we benefit by differentiating between two different narrative strains—two very different stories of Monte Albán, as it were—each of which appears in several variations. Also, though this order puts a student ahead of his teacher, pursuant of our present interest in appreciating the alternate stories of the great Zapotec capital, it helps to address first the narrative strain for which Richard Blanton is most responsible, and then in chapter 6 return to that of Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus.

I. A MARVELOUS STORY, INELOQUENTLY TOLD:

HARD DATA, METHODOLOGICAL DIGRESSIONS AND CAUTIONARY QUALIFICATIONS

Without question, Richard Blanton's *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (1978), the first of three large volumes to report on the Valley of Oaxaca Settlement Pattern Project, is among a handful of the most original and significant works ever produced on Monte Albán.⁵ The book has been enormously influential and, in a host of subsequent publications, Blanton and his collaborators continue to rely upon (albeit, as we'll see, with due revision) both the detailed data and

⁵ Blanton's *Monte Albán* (1978), which presents the results of the surface survey of Monte Albán, is the first of three large volumes to report on the Valley of Oaxaca Settlement Pattern Project. Complementing the first volume's focus on Monte Albán proper, the other two address outlying portions of the valley. The second is Richard E. Blanton, Stephen Kowalewski, Gary Feinman, and Jill Appel, *Monte Albán's Hinterland, Part I: The Prehispanic Settlement Patterns of The Central and Southern Parts of the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico*, memoir 15, Museum of Anthropology (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1982); and the third is Stephen A. Kowalewski, Gary M. Feinman, Laura Finsten, Richard E. Blanton, and Linda M. Nicholas, *Monte Albán's Hinterland, Part II: The Prehispanic Settlement Patterns in Tlacolula, Etila and Ocotlán, the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico*, memoir 23, Museum of Anthropology (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1989).

the large principles on which that study is based. Likewise indisputably, a marvelous and highly provocative story of the Oaxaca capital's origins and evolution resides within that benchmark study. As he later described the tenor of his own work,

“The settlement pattern data that I collected, combined with information and epigraphic studies collected by other researchers, allowed my narrative to portray a sense of what it must have been like to live in a community that was the political and cultural capital of an early state.”⁶

Nonetheless, understandably given the technical genre, the presentation of that “narrative” is halting in the extreme. The flow of this story of Monte Albán is, for instance, constantly interrupted by long digressions concerning the methods by which Blanton reached his conclusions and qualifications as to why his (re)construction scenarios may well collapse upon further scrutiny. Instead of premature certainty, he is prone to recurrently cautionary reminders such as “the question cannot yet be definitely answered...,” “there is no definitive reason for adopting either the higher or lower [population] figures...,”⁷ or even, “This interpretation is no doubt oversimplified and potentially faulty...”⁸ The tentative style is both commendable and disconcerting. Moreover, Blanton's 100-page synthesis is followed by over 300 pages of appendices that even specialists in the field find “very difficult to digest.”⁹

Additionally, where Caso, Bernal and Paddock were, as we've seen, forthright and not infrequently effusive in expressing their great admiration for the builders of Monte Albán, Blanton evinces cool evenhandedness. “It is not,” he writes, “our intention

⁶ Blanton's 2004 “Prologue to the Percheron Press Edition,” *Monte Albán*, v.

⁷ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 44.

⁸ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 95.

⁹ William T. Sanders and Robert S. Santley, Untitled review of *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital*, by Richard E. Blanton, *Science* 202 (1978): 304, from whom I borrow the line “very difficult to digest,” write that “Although Blanton must be commended for publishing all his data, the information tabulated in these sections [i.e., the 10 Appendices] is regrettably not very useable.”

to promote the greatness of one particular society or people;”¹⁰ and thus he declines to embellish the protagonists of his narrative either with praise for their creativity nor, for that matter, condemnation for their excesses. According to inordinately blunt assessments of the shift in basic assumptions that came with the ecological archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s, older views that had pictured the builders of Monte Albán as “a peace-loving gentle Zapotec people, who in complete accord with their immediate neighbors, quietly developed increasingly more complex societal structures,” were supplanted by more skeptical, even cynical assessments wherein

“the Zapotecs of Monte Albán were eventually revealed for what they really were: a nasty bunch of imperial-minded expansionists, controlling by force of arms, large sections of the Valley of Oaxaca and suppressing a substantial part of the population of the Valley.”¹¹

And while Blanton is careful to avoid that sort of loaded language, the logic of his account does nonetheless require the Zapotecs to be conceived as political pragmatists rather than artists or abstract thinkers. His effort to respect and understand ancient Oaxacans depends upon (re)imagining them as “normal” rather than strangely appealing or unappealing.

¹⁰ Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski and Linda M. Nicholas, *Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1. I should note that while I am primarily concerned with the story of Monte Albán that Blanton delivered in his *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (1978), I will on occasion, especially toward the end of this chapter, allude to later and sometimes co-authored works in which he reiterates or somewhat alters his views—most notably, Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, and Richard E. Blanton, Stephen A. Kowalewski, Gary M. Feinman, and Jill Appel, *Ancient Mesoamerica: A Comparison of Change in Three Regions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹¹ Richard Orlandini, *The Oaxaca Letters of Richard Orlandini, 2004-2008*, compiled and minimally ed. Bill Sanders (Miami, Florida: BoonieLiving Press, 2008), 114. As explained in chapter 1, the blunt contrast of Orlandini and many others accuses Caso of a rosy and romantic view of “the peace-loving gentle Zapotecs,” which actually appears only in a very small sampling of his popular works. As a rule, though Caso does depict the builders of Monte Albán in very positive terms, he does not advance the simplistic notion that they were averse to conflict, political maneuvering and even human sacrifice.

Moreover, where Blanton, like his predecessors, is impressed with the enduring cultural continuity between the pre-Columbian inhabitants of Monte Albán and their present-day indigenous counterparts, he pushes aside the much-debated question as to the ethnic identity of the builders of Monte Albán as one that is of “relatively little interest;” in his view, “their presumed identity should have no influence on archeologists’ analysis and interpretation.”¹² In fact, though his famous book carries the subtitle *Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital*, he fastidiously avoids referring to Monte Albán as a “Zapotec” city. That is to say, Blanton, unlike Caso and Bernal, seems little interested in providing pre-Columbian protagonists that can serve to engender great pride in the pre-Hispanic heritage of contemporary Mexicans; and nor, unlike Paddock, is he inclined to provide a story that enables present-day Zapotecs to claim some special credit or entitlement with respect to Monte Albán. His version of scientific problem-solving and theory-testing does not show any inclination to reconfigure sentiments or policies concerning contemporary indigenous people in Oaxaca nor to engender ethnic pride among Zapotecs.¹³ Though I will argue in closing thoughts to this chapter that his story of Monte Albán *could be* highly serviceable in those pride-inducing respects, these are simply not among his (explicit) concerns.

Furthermore, as a consequence of Blanton's theoretical orientation, he explains the rise and fall of Monte Albán almost completely in terms of generalized processes rather than specific events or individuals; and, therefore, as Flannery and Marcus will later complain, the pre-Columbian characters in his story are disappointingly faceless and abstract. His frequent reliance on cross-cultural analogies serves well in fleshing out the plotline, but also exacerbates the impression of generic human actors who are seemingly absent any distinctively Oaxacan or even Mesoamerican frame of mind like that which figures so large in Paddock's account. And finally, historians of religions cannot help but notice that, where the great majority of both amateur and professional commentators, including Alfonso Caso, routinely assert that everything that ancient Mesoamericans did

¹² Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 29.

¹³ See Blanton, “Theory and Practice in Mesoamerican Archaeology,” 1-16.

was informed by their supposedly sweeping spiritual predilections, Blanton swings to the opposite end of the spectrum by absenting religion any significant role. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine another rendition of ancient Oaxaca in which religion, either as a creative impulse or as an instrument of political manipulation, is paid less attention. Neither pre-Columbian mystics nor theocratic priests make any appearance in this carefully tempered account.

In sum, then, with respect to our present concern—namely, storytelling about Monte Albán—this very important book poses both great promise and serious challenges. Exceptional as his contribution is, Blanton, unlike Paddock, neither aspires to, nor succeeds in delivering, the sort of narrative presentation that will capture a wide audience.¹⁴ That is to say, by Paul Ricoeur's criteria of successful story-crafting, the technical presentation, on the one hand, deprives all but the most patient and discerning readers "the pleasure of recognition" that he associates with adept "emplotment," or the composition of a plotline that captures imagination and holds interest via a combination of plausibility with a measure of uncertainty about the eventual outcome of the story.¹⁵ Some suspense is required to make a narrative compelling. But, on the other hand, Blanton's version, despite the decided lack of "character development" and irrespective of the narrative self-sabotage that comes with frequent methodological digressions, when

¹⁴ Though Blanton, *Monte Albán*, is more committed to a technical exposition of the results several years of field research than to crafting an easily accessible story of the ancient city, it is noteworthy that (in his 2004 Prologue to the original work) he does argue, with good reason, that the book merits re-publication because, "The settlement pattern data that I collected, combined with information from excavation and epigraphic studies collected by other researchers, allow my *narrative* to portray a sense of what it must have been like to live in a community [i.e., Monte Albán] that was the political and cultural capital of an early state." Blanton, *Monte Albán*, v; emphasis added.

¹⁵ Recall that these ideas about what makes for a "good story" were discussed in the Introduction. On the "the pleasure of recognition" that successful narratives provide, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 49; and on "emplotment" or story-crafting, see *ibid.* 53. For a discussion of Ricoeur's ideas about narrative as they relate to archaeologically-based writing, see Mark Pluciennik, "Archaeological Narratives and Other Ways of Telling," *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 5 (December 1999), 654ff.

carefully considered, actually does provide just the sort of juxtaposition of believability and subversion of expectations that is characteristic of “good stories.” And, furthermore, Blanton, I will argue, does indeed, like Ignacio Bernal, present a scenario in which precisely the same general principles account for both the rise and demise of great Oaxacan capital. There is a consistent logic that informs the beginning, middle and end of this history of Monte Albán—and, to that extent, his version of events is, in Ricoeur’s term, eminently “followable.”¹⁶

In short, even if a “tough read” for most non-specialists, Richard Blanton’s *Monte Alban* does, after all, furnish an account of the full duration of pre-Columbian Monte Albán that is thoroughgoing, fascinating and very different from any previous (or subsequent) version. To be sure, as I hope to demonstrate, within Blanton’s technical and tentative tome resides a wonderfully exciting tale of ancient Oaxacan ingenuity and state-crafting. Here, albeit concealed within a very measured social scientific idiom, we encounter high drama and emplotment of a daringly original sort.

II. GUIDING NARRATIVE THEMES: “DISEMBEDDED CAPITALS,” EXTERNAL THREATS AND THE PRAGMATIC VIRTUES OF NEUTRALITY

Though replete with zigs, zags, qualifications and later revisions, Blanton’s sometimes convoluted story of Monte Albán has one steady central proposition: The ancient Oaxacan city was, in his famous phrase, a “disembedded capital,” that is to say, a deliberately disengaged or “neutral” urban space, which arose in response to, and then declined in the absence of, an “external threat.” Thus, in stark contrast to the succession of invariably enlivening encounters between native Oaxacans and outsiders featured in Ignacio Bernal’s account, Blanton describes a great capital that owes its vitality, indeed its very existence, to the perceived threats posed by peoples who reside outside of the Valley of Oaxaca. Where Bernal depicts Oaxacans as welcoming hosts, who thrive on the stimulation that engagements with Olmecs, Mayas and Teotihuacanos provide, the

¹⁶ On the “followability” of narrative, see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 152.

Oaxacan founders of Monte Albán in Blanton's account are, almost oppositely (and thus more like Paddock's identity-protecting Zapotecs), determined to steel themselves against the competition and menace that those outsiders pose.

A. NO PRESSURE, NO BUOYANCY: EXTERNAL THREATS AS THE PRIMARY IMPETUS FOR A "DISEMBEDDED CAPITAL"

Though it is not an attractive analogy—nor one that Blanton himself deploys—the pattern of urban genesis, growth and decline that he describes evokes the image of someone blowing up a balloon, wherein the air being forced in is the so-termed external threat to the Valley of Oaxaca, while the consequent size and firmness of the balloon corresponds the fluctuating size and buoyancy of the capital city of Monte Albán. Prior to any air (or in the absence of any external threat), the balloon (like Monte Albán prior to about 500 BCE), is either non-existent or, at best, exists only as a site of great potential that is as yet fully unrealized. At that point, the eventually grand capital is like an airless balloon; no one lives on the mountaintop site of the future city and nothing noteworthy happens there.

Yet as an external threat to the region mounts, the capital, like a balloon being inflated, rapidly transforms into something large, substantial and buoyant. The capital requires external pressure to grow; but once that growth begins, expectations for the mountain settlement are vastly exceeded and, like a firm and also somewhat uncontrollable balloon, the place takes on an intriguingly unpredictable trajectory or "bounce" of its own. When, however, the threat decreases somewhat, as though a bit of air were released from the balloon, the size and strength of the capital likewise decreases; less external pressure eventuates in a less vibrant capital. But with a resumed threat, the capital resumes growing again. Moreover, while the prospect of a big rush of air (or a heightened external threat) strong enough to burst the balloon poses a daunting prospect that is quite relevant to this (re)construction of Monte Albán's history, in Blanton's story, the collapse of the city was neither sudden nor violent. Instead, in this script, the demise of the formerly fabulous city comes as the sort of anti-climax that occurs when all the air

is allowed to escape (or the external threat subsides), and thus the balloon goes limp. In this story, Monte Albán's vitality is ironically contingent on the vitality of the Valley of Oaxaca's adversaries; and thus when those enemies lose their heft, so disappears the *raison d'être* of Monte Albán. In the absence of external pressure, the once-great city is simply vacated and allowed to fall into ruin. The capital entirely deflates, as it were.

B. MONTE ALBÁN EXCEPTIONALISM: THE ANOMALY, IMPROBABLE SITING AND RAPID RISE OF MESOAMERICA'S FIRST CITY

Not himself given to such strained analogies, Blanton presents his quite original portrait of Oaxaca's past—a picture that depicts the great innovation of urbanism as arising in response to perceived external threats—in a familiar frame. Though expressing his frustration with the exceptionally long and often unrevealing segments in Caso's famous five-period sequence, limitations that he sees as inherent in ceramic stratigraphy,¹⁷ as noted in chapter 1, he nonetheless commends Caso, Bernal and Jorge Acosta for a “magnificent job in making sense out of the stratigraphic confusion that is typically present in ancient buildings at Monte Albán.”¹⁸ Blanton, therefore, like nearly everyone else, embraces a qualified version of the familiar five phases (and sub-phases) as the framework on which he builds his narrative.¹⁹ Instead of attacking his predecessors and claiming to rectify their mistakes, he considers his work to be “a natural extension of the research of these Mexican archaeologists and Flannery's project.”²⁰

¹⁷ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 26-28.

¹⁸ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 28.

¹⁹ Because Blanton is concerned less with changes in ceramic styles per se than changes in population size and settlement distribution, for him, there are, in cases, breaks within Caso's five periods that are more consequential than the breaks at the end of periods. For instance, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 41, explains why he see the break between Periods Early I and Late I as more significant than the break between Period Late I and Period II, and thus combines his treatment of the later two into a single chapter.

²⁰ Blanton's 2004 Prologue to Blanton, *Monte Albán* (1978), vi.

Aspiring to understand the continuities and changes in settlement patterns across the full Valley of Oaxaca and throughout the full history of Monte Albán, Blanton is nevertheless particularly preoccupied with the circumstances of the capital's original foundation, which he assesses as the second of "the four great episodes in the entire history of the valley."²¹ Accordingly, he devotes the largest share of his discussion to Period Ia or what he terms "Period Early I," which he concurs with Bernal runs from roughly 400 or 500 BCE to 300 BCE.²² Though seldom guilty of Oaxaca chauvinism, Blanton joins those who award Monte Albán the distinction of being, arguably, both the first and the fastest growing urban development in Mesoamerican history. He repeatedly contends that Monte Albán "may well have been the earliest Native American settlement that we could call a city."²³ (In later work, discussed toward this chapter's end, his primary concern shifts from the origins of the city to the origins of Mesoamerica's first state, though for him those are largely interchangeable.)

In his account, then, it is very important that Monte Albán arose as a city and regional capital in advance of Teotihuacan; indeed, as we'll note momentarily, it is a crucial (and controversial) part his argument that Monte Albán and Teotihuacan were very different sorts of capitals that emerged and functioned in very different ways. Moreover, his extensive settlement surveys lead him to agree with Caso and Bernal both that, prior to about 500 BCE, the mountain site of Monte Albán had been completely

²¹ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 129, assesses the emergence of the Monte Albán state (ca. 500 B.C.) as the second of "the four great episodes in the entire history of the Valley [of Oaxaca]"—having being preceded by the transition to sedentary village life (ca. 1500 B.C.) and followed by the 16th century Spanish conquest and the 20th century incorporation of the valley into the global economy of the modern world system.

²² Blanton's systematic (1978) discussion of "The Origins of Monte Albán" is the 8-page chapter 2 in Blanton, *Monte Albán* [1978], 33-40. He and his colleagues repeat essentially the same version of events in Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 66-74; and Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1991], 48-67.

²³ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, p. vi. Also see Richard E. Blanton, "The Rise of Cities," in *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 1, volume editor, Jeremy Sabloff; general editor, Victoria Bricker (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981): 392-400.

uninhabited and that the city's initial rise to prominence had been meteoric rather than gradual. To be sure, this remarkably swift rise from obscurity to (apparent) supereminence presents both one of the most exciting aspects of this Monte Albán story and one of Blanton's most vexing interpretive challenges. That is to say, though equipped with much fuller information about the eras in advance of Monte Albán, he too has to explain how and why this vacant hilltop was transformed so quickly into Mesoamerica's largest concentration of population.

In Blanton's assessment, Monte Albán's spectacular beginnings occurred in a Period Early I context of major growth and expansion throughout the Oaxaca region. Along with Monte Albán, he locates dozens of Early I sites in central Oaxaca, enough to hypothesize a fourfold increase over the number of settlements present during the preceding Guadalupe (800-600 BCE) and Rosario (600-500 BCE) Phases.²⁴ Nonetheless, by widening to a more regional view, he was also able to appreciate just what a fully unique case Monte Albán was. According to Blanton, Monte Albán was exceptional—even anomalous—in at least four respects.

The first two bear on the seemingly improbable site selection. For one, the site of Monte Albán, unlike those of most contemporaneous settlements, is not, he notes, at all well-suited for farming. With respect to the huge issue of water, the high-perched site “was not located with any deep, well-watered alluvial zone in mind, nor is it adjacent to any irrigable tributary stream;”²⁵ and with respect to terrain, it is a steep-sided mountain that rises some 400 meters above the valley floor, making it some the least appealing topography in the area for farming.²⁶ He has to conclude, in fact, that, “No natural resource is present on Monte Albán that would have attracted so large a population.”²⁷

²⁴ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 35-36.

²⁵ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36.

²⁶ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36.

²⁷ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36.

For two, the inaccessible site of Monte Albán was, in his view, equally ill-suited to serve as a regional market or place of redistributive commodity exchange,²⁸ a major point on which, as we'll see next chapter, Marcus Winter is in diametric disagreement.²⁹ According to Blanton, there are no advantages and lots of disadvantages to hauling trade goods up and down this steep mountain terrain. In short, understating the curiousness and irregularity of the site selection, Blanton, notes that, unlike every virtually other contemporaneous Oaxacan community, "its location is not a practical one from the point of view of provisioning or economic exchanges."³⁰

Regarding a third anomalous characteristic, Blanton's settlement surveys confirmed that, even in its earliest era, Monte Albán was exceptional insofar it was by far the largest settlement in the region, both in its area of occupation and its population, which he estimates at already somewhere between 3500 and 7000.³¹ (And note, by the way, that Blanton is responsible for most of the population estimates on which everyone else will rely.) The next largest Period Early I site, San José Mogote, seems to have covered only about 15% of the area occupied by Monte Albán and had just a fraction of its population.³² And fourth, in a more interpretively bold (and thus more contestable) claim, Blanton argued in 1978 that "Monte Albán in Period Early I was unusual vis-à-vis other valley communities in having a large and unique group of carved stone monuments."³³ He maintained, in other words, that early Monte Albán's public carvings—most notably, the so-termed Danzantes—were distinctive both for their quantity and quality. Since Blanton concurred with the prevailing opinion that the

²⁸ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36.

²⁹ On Monte Albán as a supposedly ideal site for a region market, see, for instance, Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 36, or chapter 4 of this book.

³⁰ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36.

³¹ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 35

³² Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36.

³³ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36.

infamous Danzante carvings, of which there were more than 300, belong to this period, his assertion that Monte Albán had a greater number of stone monuments than any other Oaxaca site was a straightforward observation, which would remain intact throughout subsequent iterations of his scheme.

C. MILITARISTIC PREOCCUPATIONS AND RELIGIOUS NEUTRALITY: MONTE ALBÁN AS AN ANTI-SACRED PLACE

Blanton's initial assessment as to the unique content of those carved monuments was, however, both more intriguing and more vulnerable. In the 1978 version, he made the case that Monte Albán's Period Early I carved monuments, including but not limited to the Danzantes, were different from those of other contemporaneous (as well as earlier and later) Oaxaca sites insofar as they were "purely military in theme," and thus entirely absent of allusions to ritual or religion.³⁴ That is to say, while he accepted the conventional view that the public art of other Oaxacan sites, not unlike settlements in nearly all contexts, did depict matters of cosmology, mythology and divinity—and while he was willing to concede that "there were undoubtedly rituals and religious beliefs among the population of Monte Albán"³⁵—he nevertheless proffered the highly iconoclastic opinion that Monte Albán's uniquely abundant Period Early I monumental sculpture did *not* address those topics. Indeed, he wrote then that, "The absence of ritual iconography in the monumental sculpture of Monte Albán is a singular fact, since we know that most 'primitive' administrative institutions are heavily religiously sanctified."³⁶ In other words, by contrast to ubiquitous claims, very prevalent both in advance and in the wake of Blanton's work, that Monte Albán was revered as a "sacred place," Blanton makes the nearly antithetical argument that the specialness of the place—and its singular success—resides, in large part, in its irreligiousness or careful avoidance

³⁴ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 39.

³⁵ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 39.

³⁶ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 37.

of any religious point of view whatever. In 1978, he was making the iconoclastic argument that Monte Albán was a kind of anti-sacred space.

In any case, Blanton would, as we'll see, later retract this most intriguing posit that Monte Albán was, in its essential and pragmatically well-considered conception, "religiously neutral." Yet in his original version—and indeed in every subsequent rendition—the broader notion of Monte Albán's very self-conscious and highly disciplined neutrality, not simply in matters of religion but in several respect, is a featured element of the story. If, in the broadest strokes, Blanton argues that the principal problem or challenge that issued in the great Oaxaca capital was a perception of external threats, then he argues as well that the principal solution or strategy with which ancient Oaxacans took collective action was the creation of an urban environment of neutrality—that is to say, a "disembedded capital"—from which they could mount an effective defense against their adversaries. The next sections ought to provide some clarity with respect to how precisely Blanton sees the problem of external threats and the solution of disciplined neutrality fitting together, and how working with that combination allows him to explain the otherwise unlikely site selection of the great capital. These two pillars—the necessity of outside adversaries and the pragmatic virtues of neutrality—will nonetheless remain stable not only in all permutations of Blanton's narrative, but in each of his accounts of Monte Albán's respective periods of growth and/or decline.

III. FROM CULTURAL ECOLOGY TO CENTRAL PLACE THEORY: "PRIMATE CENTERS" VERSUS "DISEMBEDED CAPITALS"

Arguably, then, what Blanton terms "the site's bizarre location"³⁷ provides both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity for crafting a thoroughgoing and original story of Monte Albán. And, for him, the notion of Monte Albán as a "disembedded capital"—that is, a regional capital that had been conceived deliberately and strategically as a "neutral site," a site ill-suited and unwanted either for agricultural

³⁷ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36.

or commercial activities—would prove to be the narrative key whereby he could transform the seemingly anomalous into the thoroughly plausible. This is a site whose appeal was, ironically enough, no appeal. His eventual conclusions, however, depended on a methodological conversion of sorts, a shift from the presuppositions of “cultural ecology” toward those of “central place theory.”

A. THE LIMITS OF CULTURAL ECOLOGY MODELS: CRUCIAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TEOTIHUACAN AND MONTE ALBÁN

In the late 1960s and 1970s, when Kent Flannery and Blanton conceived their plans for regional surveys of Oaxaca, the dominant theories for explaining how and why complex societies had developed in the Mesoamerican past were those of so-termed cultural ecology wherein the changing spatial relations of communities, population growth and political control were all ultimately connected to the efficient exploitation of available natural resources. Though there were many variations on the theme, the most elaborate versions of this model of state (and urban) genesis, which emerged in connection with William Sanders' settlement pattern surveys of Teotihuacan, advanced “the contention that the rise of social stratification and the state are ultimately due to population pressure leading to agricultural intensification, which in turn leads to social differentiation and the need for centralized resource management.”³⁸ Blanton, who as a graduate student worked with Sanders in the Valley of Mexico, had been among those greatly impressed by the utility of the ecological model in explaining Teotihuacan's emergence and development; and, as noted earlier, Flannery's and Blanton's theoretical orientation, and especially their commitment to regional rather than site-specific analyses, owe directly to those cultural ecology models.³⁹

³⁸ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, xxviii.

³⁹ Regarding both his direct indebtedness to and his reservations about cultural ecology models of archaeology, see Blanton's 2004 Preface to his 1978 *Monte Albán*, xxvii; and Blanton, “Theory and Practice in Mesoamerican Archaeology,” 1-12.

Yet, as Blanton and colleague Stephen Kowalewski learned more about Monte Albán—and specifically when they became increasingly more certain that the great Oaxaca capital, unlike Teotihuacan, had been located at a site that was decidedly *undesirable* for agriculture—they were compelled to conclude that “Monte Albán and the Valley of Oaxaca were anomalous in relation to cultural ecological theory.”⁴⁰ Actually, contrary to initial expectations, by the 1980 completion of his several-year Valley of Oaxaca Settlement Pattern Project, Blanton would argue that the profound differences between Monte Albán's role in the Valley of Oaxaca versus Teotihuacan's role in the Valley of Mexico constituted no less than “the most exciting and theoretically significant result of our survey work in Oaxaca.”⁴¹ In other words, the cultural-ecological accounts of Teotihuacan's formation and development that were formulated by Sanders, Gerald Parsons, René Millon and others shed great light on that of Monte Albán—but, most poignantly, because the evolutions of the two capitals were so different rather than so much the same.⁴²

Though this would remain a principal point of contention, Blanton argued that the ecologically-based explanations of Teotihuacan's origins and development, which he was in the main willing to accept for the Mexican capital, were *not* transferrable to Monte Albán.⁴³ To the contrary, those materialist explanations made it even more challenging

⁴⁰ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, vii.

⁴¹ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 109.

⁴² Critical of Blanton's interpretations in several respects, Sanders and Santley, Untitled review of *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital*, by Richard E. Blanton, 303, among other things, express their doubts that Monte Albán and Teotihuacan really are that fundamentally different. Robert S. Santley, “Disembedded Capitals Reconsidered,” *American Antiquity* 45 (1980), 141-43, voices the same opinion that the dynamics of state formation, respectively, in the Valley of Oaxaca and the Basin of Mexico were much more similar than Blanton argues that they were.

⁴³ Regarding the much-discussed schism between William Sanders and his team working in the Valley of Mexico, who remain ever-faithful to cultural ecological models, versus Blanton and his team working in the Valley of Oaxaca, where they came to adopt alternate theoretical frames, see Blanton, “Theory and Practice in Mesoamerican Archaeology,” 1-12. Blanton, who was initially surprised by the negative reaction to his

to explain what, after all, had driven the decision to establish a new Oaxacan capital in this demographically and environmentally marginal setting. Especially as the findings of Blanton and his colleagues persuaded them that “the new center prospered, grew rapidly, and remained the regional political capital for another twelve hundred years,”⁴⁴ they were compelled to explain the success of such a seemingly inauspicious selection of sites. Why had environmental settings that were in many respects so similar as the Valley of Mexico and the Valley of Oaxaca issued in respective regional capitals that were so drastically different?

B. ENHANCED ROLES FOR HUMAN AGENCY AND CENTRAL PLACE THEORY: TWO VERY DIFFERENT TYPES OF REGIONAL CAPITALS

In pursuit of alternate models of state and city formation that could help to address these questions, Blanton made two interrelated shifts in orientation that would lead him to a highly distinctive and original story of Monte Albán. For one, he looked away from the cultural ecological perspectives and toward more “political economic” theories, which forced to attention fundamentally different presuppositions about human nature and motivations, and thus about the evolution of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican societies. In Blanton’s assessment, the cultural ecologists were inclined to “see human populations as biological entities situated in local environments that provided varying degrees of possibility for agricultural intensification;” accordingly, “groups well situated

work, argues that the disagreement actually reflects competing commitments to “two modes of scientific inquiry, described [respectively] by philosophers of science Thomas Kuhn and Karl Popper” (ibid., 1). According to that argument, where Sanders subscribes to Kuhn’s model of “paradigmatic science,” which works in the defense of a particular theory or paradigm (in this case, cultural ecology models), Blanton subscribes to Popper’s notion that “scientific research is aimed at falsification of theories, in part or whole” (ibid., 2), which required him, in light of the Oaxaca data he unearthed, to reject strictly cultural ecology models in favor of alternate theoretical models.

⁴⁴ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, pp. vii-viii.

to increase their production were increasingly able to dominate others and establish stratified societies and centralized governing institutions.”⁴⁵

Alternatively, so-termed political economic theory afforded a substantially larger role to “human agency” or to creative and deliberative thinking, if you will. As Blanton phrases it, “Rather than viewing humans primarily as biological populations in their environments, political economic theory assumes that *social actors* are capable of devising and implementing political strategies that could have profound social and demographic consequences.”⁴⁶ Thus, in this view, the protagonists of pre-Columbian social evolution emerge as rather more complicated and more cerebral, though no less pragmatic and only somewhat less self-interested. Instead of simply exploiting environmental resources, and thus winning advantage over other populations, these protagonists are “social actors,” capable of politically strategic decision-making, in which the maximal utilization of natural resources is but one of several driving forces. As we will see in chapters 6 and 7, Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, and then more recently Arthur Joyce, would all embrace versions of “action theory” (or “practice theory”) that lead them to press this shift toward seeing ancient Mesoamericans as creative “social actors” even further than Blanton had; and thus they will be led to stories of Oaxacan social history that depart even further from those of cultural ecologists.

In any case, in a second shift in perspective, Blanton appealed to what was then regarded as “a relatively new approach in anthropology based largely on the powerful central place theory of geography,” a theoretical stance built on the notion that “the focuses of central institutional transactions are a society’s system of cities and towns—its

⁴⁵ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, p. vii. Regarding his strong discontents with “the problems inherent in the cultural ecologist’s scheme” and their reliance on “assumptions that are demonstrably faulty,” see also Richard E. Blanton, “Cultural Ecology Reconsidered,” *American Antiquity* 45 (1980): 145-49.

⁴⁶ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, p. viii; emphasis added.

central place hierarchy.”⁴⁷ Ever in search of explanations for what he considered to be the radical contrast between Monte Albán and Teotihuacan, Blanton relied on insights from central place theory in order to posit two fundamentally different types of regional capitals, each of which arises in a different way and each of which occupies a different position in the hierarchy of central places within its respective region.⁴⁸

The first and perhaps most obvious option is a “large primate center” in which the administrative and commercial functions of a region are combined in a single urban capital. So-termed primate centers expand their hegemony via the elimination of what had been local centers, usurping their “central place functions” until one large, multi-functional center dominates the region so completely that the growth of lower-order centers is forestalled.⁴⁹ In Blanton’s view, it was this process of “primate settlement distribution” that issued not only in Teotihuacan, Mesoamerica’s first and quintessential exemplar of a primate center, but also in the subsequent Central Mexican capitals of Tula and, to a lesser extent, Tenochtitlán, each of which similarly combined into a single

⁴⁷ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, xxviii. For earlier comments on his incentive “to borrow from the central place theory of geography” in order to formulate a working definition of cities, see Richard E. Blanton, “Anthropological Studies of Cities,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976), 252ff. It is, by the way, notable that in that article Blanton alludes to a parallel between his work and that of urban geographer Paul Wheatley insofar as both have borrowed from central place theory in order to arrive at a “regional approach to the definition of cities” (ibid., 253). This is intriguing insofar as that similarity is offset, as we’ll see, by the fact that the two represent extreme opposites inasmuch as (early) Blanton affords religion no role in the formation of cities (Monte Albán included) while Wheatley affords religion and “cosmomagical thinking” a crucial role in the formation of cities. See Paul Wheatley, *Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1971), chap. 3.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 105-07.

⁴⁹ For summary comments on the topic, see Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 105. For his earliest formulation of the distinction between “primate centers” and “disembedded capitals,” see Richard E. Blanton, “The Origins of Monte Albán,” in *Cultural Change and Continuity*, ed. Charles Cleland (New York: Academic Press, 1976); and Richard E. Blanton, “Anthropological Studies of Cities,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976), 255-58.

capital city much of the region's political control and economic activity.⁵⁰ But Blanton maintained that the Valley of Oaxaca, by contrast, was at no time so thoroughly dominated by a multi-functional primate center.⁵¹

The second, seemingly less obvious type of regional capital, also drawn from central place theory but, in Mesoamerican studies, always associated with Richard Blanton's exposition of Monte Albán, is notoriously termed a "disembedded capital," wherein the locus of regional decision making is largely divorced from the center of manufacturing and commercial activity.⁵² Such capitals—of which, even in Blanton's view, Monte Albán is apparently Mesoamerica's only outstanding example—are, in other words, "disembedded" insofar as their functions are confined to administrative and/or political decision-making, while they are largely uninvolved in the more utilitarian matters of commerce and production. While primate centers dominate and thus largely decimate local centers in the surrounding area, these special-function disembedded centers, alternatively, are "located in such a way as to avoid 'distortion' of the region's central place hierarchy. Local polities retained a considerable degree of autonomy."⁵³ Consequently, both the growth and decline of this sort of regional capital, according to Blanton, "would have had less impact on settlement patterns [than had been the case around Teotihuacan] since it was disembedded from the region's central place hierarchy."⁵⁴ That is to say, when a primate center like Teotihuacan or Tula collapses, it

⁵⁰ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 105.

⁵¹ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 109.

⁵² Blanton's earliest expositions of the notion of a "disembedded capital" come in Blanton, "The Origins of Monte Albán" (1976) and Blanton, "Anthropological Studies of Cities" (1976); but by far the most famous treatment appears in Blanton, *Monte Albán* (1978), chap. 2.

⁵³ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 105-6.

⁵⁴ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 105.

is devastating for the entire region; but when a disembedded capital—like Monte Albán—collapses, the wider ramifications are far less dire.⁵⁵

There is, then, not inconsequentially, a perfect match between Blanton's theoretical construct of the disembedded capital and his archaeologically-based conclusions concerning the history and status of Monte Albán. Each of the site's four oddly atypical attributes—(a) its unsuitability for farming, (b) its similar unsuitability as a regional market, (c) its rapid growth at time when the rest of the region was also growing, and (d) the supposed absence of any distinct religious orientation—are all perfectly consistent with the notion of a disembedded capital. The seamless fit between a general model and a single Mesoamerican case did not go unchallenged, especially by the cultural ecologists from whom Blanton's view had parted company.⁵⁶ Some critics

⁵⁵ Oddly enough, Richard E. Blanton, Jill Appel, Laura Finsten, Steve Kowalewski, Gary Feinman and Eva Fisch, "Regional Evolution in the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico," *Journal of Field Archaeology*, vol. 6, no. 4 (winter 1979), 177, immediately following a paragraph that repeats Blanton's view that Monte Albán was founded as a disembedded capital (without, however, using that term), there is a sentence that reads: "During its initial period of occupation, Monte Albán was not only the largest site in the Valley, it was also a *primate center*, meaning that it was more than twice the size of the next largest settlement" (emphasis added). Later in the same article, we read that Period II Monte Albán "was still a large, primate city" (p. 379); Period IIIA Monte Albán "was no longer 'primate'" (p. 382); during Period IIIB, "the Valley's regional organization was highly primate" (p. 382); and in summary conclusion, "The [Oaxaca Valley] regional system was dominated by a single primate center throughout most of the sedentary period." (p. 389). By the same token, Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, despite a summary of the emergence of Monte Albán as a disembedded capital, again without using that term (pp. 66-75), makes a passing reference to Monte Albán as "a large, complex city, a *primate center*..." (p. 103; emphasis added). These are apparently glitches that owe to joint authorship (and maybe slippage in the definition of primate center), because Blanton himself is insistent that Monte Albán was *not* a so-called primate center.

⁵⁶ The following are six of the most prominent critical assessments of Blanton's conception of Monte Albán as a "disembedded capital": [1] Sanders and Santley, Untitled review of *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital*, by Richard E. Blanton, 303-4, provide a concise but pointedly critical review in which they reject Blanton's view primarily by disputing his interpretation of his Monte Albán field data. [2] William T. Sanders, Untitled review of *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Capital Zapotec Capital*, by Richard E. Blanton, *American Scientist* 67 (1979): 617, summarizes the same concerns. [3] Santley, "Disembedded Capitals Reconsidered," 132-144, provides a much more thoroughgoing discussion in which he not only takes

questioned whether Monte Albán actually conformed to the model of disembedded capitals, which is to say they took issue with the specifics of Blanton's analysis of the Oaxaca data; and other skeptics, like Robert Santley, contended that the very notion of a disembedded capital was "a specious concept," which thus could not be found in any historical context.⁵⁷ But where Blanton's subsequent work is filled with adjustments, self-corrections and revisions, once he had embraced the basic notion of Monte Albán as

issues with Blanton's interpretation of the data, but, moreover, argues that the very concept of a disembedded capital is "a specious construct." [4] William T. Sanders and Deborah L. Nichols, "Ecological Theory and Cultural Evolution in the Valley of Oaxaca," *Current Anthropology* 9 (1988): 33-52, provides the lengthiest critique of many aspects of Blanton's findings from a cultural ecological point of view. [5] Gordon R. Willey, Untitled review of *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns of the Ancient Zapotec Capital*, by Richard Blanton (New York: Academic Press, 1978), *The Hispanic America Historical Review*, vol. 59, no. 3 (August 1979): 505-506, provides perfunctory comments on what he refers to as "the author's convincing interpretation" (ibid., 505). [6] But Gordon R. Willey, "The Concept of the 'Disembedded Capital' in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 35 (1979): 123-37, takes Blanton's work as the point of departure for a much more thorough consideration of the viability state formation via "disembedded capitals" not only in Mesoamerica, but also in Peru, Greater Mesopotamia, Egypt and China, before expressing his doubts that states have even, in any context, been formed according to the processes that Blanton describes: "From all of this it seems that voluntary confederation for the purpose of founding a 'neutral' 'disembedded' center or capital was a rare—and perhaps non-existent—process..." (ibid., 134). In the end (ibid., 135), Willey opines that his comparative survey leads him to think that Robert Santley's critical assessment of Blanton's work is correct.

⁵⁷ Santley, "Disembedded Capitals Reconsidered," 132ff. In a much less technical and to that extent less significant discussion, Orlandini, *The Oaxaca Letters of Richard Orlandini, 2004-2008*, 115, inadvertently raises a very different sort of reason that some deconstructionists might be suspicious of Blanton's enthusiasm for the notion of a disembedded capital. In the view of Orlandini, who worked three seasons (1966-1968) on the staff of Kent Flannery's Human Ecology of the Valley of Oaxaca Project, among the most important contributions of that era's ecological archaeology was to reveal an area "that was devoid of habitation and probably served as, in the parlance of the '60s and '70s in Vietnam, a 'DMZ' (Demilitarized Zone) between Monte Albán whoever was occupying the site at Suchilquitongo/Huitzo." In other words, one might entertain the possibility that, at just the time Blanton was crafting his interpretation, the notion of so-called demilitarized zones was in the air, so to speak, and thus became somehow more viable in explaining ancient Oaxaca.

a disembodied capital, this central claim would remain a constant in all of his, along with numerous of his colleagues', stories of the origins and growth of the Zapotec capital.⁵⁸

IV. THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS:

RICHARD BLANTON'S HISTORICAL (RE)CONSTRUCTION

Consider next, then, the more specific succession of events with which Richard Blanton fills out his captivating account of the strategic emergence, stupendous success and eventual irrelevance of the "disembodied capital" of Monte Albán.

A. THE PERIOD I ORIGINS OF MONTE ALBÁN: LOCAL CONCESSIONS, REGIONAL COOPERATION, ETHNIC INTEGRATION AND RELIGIOUS NEUTRALITY

Instantiating perfectly the idea of a disembodied capital, the sequence of events that, according to Blanton's proposal, accounts for the emergence of Monte Albán is highly intriguing, not least because it seems so improbable. Though the script is entirely absent individual personalities, in this version of Monte Albán's origins we are

⁵⁸ Three key venues in which Blanton and his colleagues responded directly to critics and defended the assessment of Monte Albán as a disembodied capital are the following: First, Blanton, "Cultural Ecology Reconsidered," 145-51; and Stephen A. Kowalewski, "Population-Resource Balances in Period I of Oaxaca, Mexico," *American Antiquity* 45 (1980): 151-64, provide direct replies to Robert Santley's critical comments which appear in the same volume. Second are the following four replies: Richard E. Blanton, "Comment on Sanders and Nichols, 'Ecological Theory and Cultural Evolution in the Valley of Oaxaca,'" *Current Anthropologist* 29 (1988): 52-54; Gary M. Feinman and Linda M. Nicholas, "Comment on Sanders and Nichols, 'Ecological Theory and Cultural Evolution in the Valley of Oaxaca,'" *Current Anthropologist* 29 (1988): 55-57; Kent V. Flannery, "Comment on Sanders and Nichols, 'Ecological Theory and Cultural Evolution in the Valley of Oaxaca,'" *Current Anthropology* 29 (1988): 57-58; Stephen A. Kowalewski and Laura Finsten, "Comment on Sanders and Nichols, 'Ecological Theory and Cultural Evolution in the Valley of Oaxaca,'" *Current Anthropology* 29 (1988): 59-60. Third, additional responses appear in *Debating Oaxaca Archaeology*, ed. Joyce Marcus, Anthropological Papers of the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, no. 84 (Ann Arbor: 1990). Blanton's 2004 Prologue to the Percheron Press Edition of *Monte Albán*, p. viii, enumerates what he regards as both the most important critiques of his work and the most important rejoinders.

confronted with founders of remarkable perspicuity, foresight and precociousness. In this (re)construction, the Oaxaca capital is replete with ingenious and unprecedented innovations! Concisely put, Blanton contends that, “at roughly 400 or 500 B.C. a panregional polity or a confederacy was formed in the Valley of Oaxaca, manifested by the construction of a new capital on the top of Monte Albán.”⁵⁹ Blanton's unprecedentedly thorough surveys of the area's settlement patterns reconfirmed earlier impressions that, in advance of these developments, the site had been essentially vacant. His surveys and calculations, moreover, issue in population estimates for Period Early I (500-300 BCE) of about 5000 residents and for Period Late I (300-200 BCE) of roughly 17,000, which is to say, the site had blossomed from vacant obscurity to well over half its maximum population and roughly 68% its peak area by the end of the first period.⁶⁰ Where Monte Albán's early growth is routinely termed meteoric, in this version, even that exuberant term is understated.

This spectacular rate of growth, which Blanton attributes to “some combination of increased fertility and immigration,”⁶¹ was without precedent in the pre-Columbian world. The concentration of people at one site represented not only a radical demographic contrast to the relatively dispersed and stationary population that had characterized the Valley of Oaxaca during the preceding several hundred years, it also marked both a rate of growth and a single-site population never before attained in

⁵⁹ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 39.

⁶⁰ Once Blanton arrived at his initial population estimates for each of Monte Albán's periods, he (along with most other scholars) has been inclined to repeat those with few changes in subsequent publications. For instance, the original Period Early I population estimate of 3500 to 7000 inhabitants discussed in Blanton, *Monte Albán* [1978], 35, is, for instance, reiterated without change in Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 53-54, where he adds caveat, “[we] take the middle value of about 5,000 as the best estimate of population for the period.” Regarding his Period Late I population estimate, see Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 44, 108, where he provides the figure of “roughly 10,200 to 20,400,” and Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 53, where he opts for the median figure of “an estimated 17,000.”

⁶¹ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 55.

Mesoamerican history.⁶² Fascinatingly, then, Blanton not only reconfirmed but actually accentuated the still-prevailing view that Monte Albán had no humble beginnings; he finds, for instance, no evidence that the site was initially a pilgrimage destination that grew incrementally as had Teotihuacan, Cholula or Chichén Itzá. Instead, this capital leapt from nothing to Mesoamerica's highest concentration of population in record time, a unique surge from obscurity to preeminence that Blanton was willing to designate as "Mesoamerica's first instance of an 'urban revolution.'"⁶³

1. A Oaxacan Regional Alliance: Cooperative Responses to a Supposed but Elusive External Threat

In his view, then, the scale and explosion in growth at Monte Albán were too large to attribute to any single group. An innovation of that magnitude had to have been a large-scale collaborative effort involving numerous groups in the Valley of Oaxaca, an association of relatively autonomous constituencies that Blanton variously terms a "regional confederacy," a "regional military alliance," a "military league" and a "panregional polity."⁶⁴ As a means of explaining how and why such a widely collaborative arrangement could have formed in Period Early I Oaxaca, he appeals to the vastly better documented circumstances that led to the founding of early Athens—and particularly to the notion of urban genesis via "political synoecism" wherein "previously autonomous villages or even whole ethnic groups accepted the dominance of a single

⁶² Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 55.

⁶³ Though the term "urban revolution" does not appear in Blanton, *Monte Albán* [1978], Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 57, concludes a discussion of this initial period of dynamic growth by surmising, "It is therefore reasonable to propose that Monte Albán's growth reflects Mesoamerica's first instance of an 'urban revolution.' It was admittedly, a small-scale one."

⁶⁴ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 37-39. With respect to this major Period Early I turning point in Oaxaca cultural evolution, Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 26, repeats the notion that, "The 'kick' initiating this set of changes was the formation of a pan-valley military league or alliance, centered at the newly founded regional capital."

political center without relocating to that center.”⁶⁵ He concedes that, “In some cases, the reasons for synoecism are not entirely clear;”⁶⁶ but he argues that the situations that seem most apt to explain the unprecedented emergence of a Oaxacan confederation, and thus of Monte Albán, are those in which “urban relocation as military synoecism was carried out to organize a polity for defense against a major invader.”⁶⁷ In short, Blanton was persuaded—and would remain persuaded throughout all of his revisions to the story of Monte Albán—that the region-wide collaboration that gave rise to the great capital emerged in response to some “common external enemy.”⁶⁸

Yet, while Blanton's narrative (re)construction demands an external threat (or actually a succession of various external threats), one of his most serious problems—and thus one of the issues on which he fluctuates most—is the identity of that initial threat that prompted the formation of the Oaxaca “military league” and then, subsequently, the

⁶⁵ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 63. There is a little slippage concerning when (and who) first explicitly embraced the notion and/or terminology of “synoecism” (or in the term Marcus and Flannery favor, “synoikism”) to explain the origins of Monte Albán. In Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 63-64, he discusses the overlapping notions of “political synoecism,” “physical synoecism” and “military synoecism,” the first and last of which he thinks apply to Monte Albán's origin; and in the “Bibliographic essay” appended to the same work (p. 134), he maintains that, “Monte Albán's foundation as an example of synoecism was proposed in [the 1978 work, Blanton, *Monte Albán*].” In that 1978 book, however, *the idea*, including the appeal to the example of early Athens, is present (e.g., p. 37), but *the actual term* “synoecism” does not appear. Likewise, in Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 66-67, explains the origins of Monte Albán with reference to early Athens, but does not invoke the term “synoecism” (nor, for that matter, the term “disembedded capital”). Indeed, the idea but not the term “synoecism” was already present in Blanton, “The Origins of Monte Albán” [1976]. Be that as it may, Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 134, also notes that “This idea [of synoecism] is also discussed in Marcus and Flannery ([*Zapotec Civilization*,] 1996: chap.11); and, as we will see in chapter 6, Marcus and Flannery give synoecism (or actually “synoikism”) such a prominent place in their account of Monte Albán's origins that they are the ones most often associated with the term.

⁶⁶ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 63.

⁶⁷ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 64.

⁶⁸ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 37.

league's construction of a capital at Monte Albán. Though Blanton believes, as we'll see, that in Period III (roughly 200-600 CE), Teotihuacan would pose a major challenge to the Oaxaca capital, he rules out the possibility that the initial Period Early I threat came from Central Mexico because, in his view, at that stage, the urban initiative at Monte Albán was developing in advance rather than in the wake of that at Teotihuacan.⁶⁹ Teotihuacan was not yet, in this early era, a threatening presence. Likewise, where Oaxacan interactions with Olmecs and then Mayas were absolutely crucial factors in Caso's and Bernal's stories of early Monte Albán, they are, strikingly, non-factors in Blanton's version. Thus, having ruled out all of the likely suspects, as it were, Blanton posits in 1978, albeit tentatively, a more proximate and more diffused threat born of sporadic invasions by "peripheral societies [that] might have increasingly viewed villages in the comparatively plush Valley of Oaxaca as convenient sources of grain (and labor)."⁷⁰ This portion of his account, which is distressingly vague, brings to mind images of roving "barbarian hordes," raiding the presumably more culturally sophisticated valley dwellers.

Even Blanton himself never seems fully convinced by this explanation of the elusive "external threat" that the synoecism model requires; and thus, still mulling over the problem twenty years later, he admits the imperfection of the analogue to synoecism at early Athens because, in his words,

"No known group inside or outside of the Valley of Oaxaca would have [in Period Early I] posed a military threat on the scale of the Persians, the Athenians, or the Carthaginians. Period I Monte Albán was the only large-scale polity in the southern highlands. Even beyond that area, no known polity was large enough to represent such a threat."⁷¹

⁶⁹ See Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 40. During Period Early I, a Central Mexican threat would have to have come from Cuicuilco rather than Teotihuacan, an idea that Blanton finds unpersuasive.

⁷⁰ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 40. Also, see *ibid.*, 107.

⁷¹ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 64.

Yet, if Blanton is insistent on Period I Monte Albán's unique stature and level of advancement—and thus the absence of competition from a peer city anywhere in Mesoamerica—his story is likewise predicated on the notion that the Oaxaca capital thrived only when it was significantly imperiled. In this rendition of Monte Albán history, as in our balloon analogy, an external threat is required for the city to attain and then retain buoyancy; and thus, in 1999, Blanton reached for two, or actually three, other possible ways to account for “the common enemy” that gave the Oaxaca military league and its growing capital a *raison d'être*. First, he retrieves his earlier idea about the threat of “peripheral societies” by suggesting that “Mountain dwellers coming down to raid villages in the agricultural superior valley might have been a persistent problem,” though he admits that there is still no solid evidence of such mountain groups.⁷² Second, he raises a prospect that will become more prominent in later work (discussed momentarily): “A better but still speculative possibility of a significant external threat is raiding campaigns launched from other chiefdoms in Puebla, Morelos, Veracruz, the Mixteca Alta, or the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.”⁷³ And finally, proposing that perhaps the motivating threat was more generalized, he entertains the prospect that the military league and its disembedded capital were formed “not so much to defend against any particular enemy as respond more effectively to threats posed by an increasingly chaotic, militaristic world.”⁷⁴

2. Concessions and Compromises of Four Sorts: Locational, Commercial-Economic, Ethnic and Religious Neutrality

Irrespective of his ongoing difficulties in identifying the initial threat, Blanton, perhaps surprisingly, is never dissuaded from certainty that such a common enemy did exist. He relies, therefore, on the synoecism notion of collaborative response to a shared threat in order to hypothesize that, at some point toward the end of the Rosario Phase

⁷² Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 64.

⁷³ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 64.

⁷⁴ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 66.

(600-500 BCE), immediately in advance of Period Early I, relatively autonomous local groups in the Valley of Oaxaca were willing to concede a significant measure of their independence in order to do their respective parts in orchestrating the new regional polity. Though critics will find this seeming abdication of personal and local interests in the service of the greater good of the valley to be among the least plausible segments of his story, Blanton, consistent with his unromantic depiction of ancient Oaxacans, is determined to present the apparent sacrifice as the consequence of completely pragmatic rather than altruistic decisions. In what is arguably the most venturous portion of his entire story, he imagines that these Oaxacans were sufficiently savvy to realize not only that they would be vastly stronger if they pooled their resources, but, moreover, that in order to maintain harmony and cooperation among all parties in the regional federation, group decisions had to observe the non-partisan “neutrality”—neutrality of several sorts—that is such a crucial feature of Blanton's story of Monte Albán's emergence and ascent. Blanton's ancient Oaxacans are, it seems, highly political but ideologically pliable and pragmatic.

In any case, without explicitly enumerating them as such, Blanton's (re)construction entails at least four variations on the pragmatic virtues of neutrality. First, it is the incentive to what he terms “locational neutrality” that explains the counterintuitive site selection wherein a place that is, in virtually all practical respects, unappealing becomes the most appealing choice for the location of a disembedded capital. No one in the regional alliance would have regarded the appropriation of the obscure mountain as a loss or infringement: “An unused, economically marginal hilltop was chosen as the site, ideal because it was away from existing centers, yet central to the valley as a whole.”⁷⁵ Second, that Monte Albán manufactured no goods for export and, unlike virtually every other community in the valley, was unable even to produce sufficient food for its own population, and thus compelled to rely on taxation, might initially seem to have evoked resentment among those groups that were forced to subsidize the capital; but Blanton makes the opposite case, arguing that seeming lack of

⁷⁵ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 108.

productivity was a version of “commercial-economic neutrality,” which removed the capital from competition with local commercial centers, and thereby engendered their loyalty and support. As Blanton explains,

“Regional capitals of the sort that I refer to as ‘disembedded,’ need not to be located optimally from the point of view of agricultural or other resources since they are supported by taxation, nor is it necessary for them to be located satisfactorily for marketing or production since such centers usually lack such functions, at least on a regional scale. In fact, such centers are often located purposely in neutral, marginal locations.”⁷⁶

Though perhaps odd comparative analogues to the ancient Oaxacan capital, in his original work, Blanton cites as his strongest parallels Washington D.C. and Brasilia, in his view, “both disembedded capitals [that] demonstrated this locational pattern” in which the regional center was explicitly located in a way that grants a special advantage (or disadvantage) to none of the more local centers that lie within its “social catchment zone.”⁷⁷ In subsequent work he continued to make the same argument by augmenting his list of analogies with Ottawa, Canada; Canberra, Australia; New Delhi, India; the Hague; and “even ancient Jerusalem,” all of which were deliberately located in “neutral sites.”⁷⁸ Unlike “primate centers” that commandeer the prime real estate and thereby disenfranchise nearby local centers, these disembedded sites represent an ostensibly kinder and gentler version of regional integration wherein neutrally located capitals avoid either promoting or offending local interests, and therefore retain the support of all parties in the wider area. In other words, if Monte Albán’s deliberately ineffectual approach to the exploitation of natural resources and economic productivity posed something of a Mesoamerican anomaly—and if its locational and economic neutrality appeared especially anomalous from the perspective of cultural ecology—Blanton summoned

⁷⁶ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36.

⁷⁷ Regarding his 1978 deployment of the examples of Washington D.C. and Brasilia, see Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36; regarding addition of the notion a “social catchment zone,” see Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 51-52.

⁷⁸ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 65-66.

numerous cross-cultural examples to demonstrate the Oaxaca capital's conformity to a pattern of urban development that had been tried and proven in numerous other contexts.

In any case, a third variation on the neutrality theme, which is a more uneven presence in Blanton's narrative, is what might be termed Monte Albán's ethnic neutrality. His settlement surveys reveal that, in the city's earliest configuration, the Main Plaza, which was a non-residential space from the outset, was surrounded by three distinct residential areas or barrios.⁷⁹ Though cautiously tentative on this topic, he entertains the notion that the three barrios may have been home to representative league members from the three subvalleys that converge at Monte Albán, and even poses of the possibility that the capital was, by design, site of a kind of multi-ethnic tolerance and interactivity wherein "Residents in each *barrio* would have been close to members of others to facilitate communication, but could maintain ethnic identities by living in separate localities on the hilltop."⁸⁰

He, moreover, stresses that the apparently ethnically-distinct barrios never dissolve into a more unified residential pattern; to the contrary, as the city grows over the next several hundred years, more distinct barrios emerge until there are, by Period IIIB, 15 identifiable residential districts, which remain intact until the city collapses.⁸¹ That is to say, by stark contrast to Paddock's suggestion that Monte Albán was the fertile but largely homogeneous context that gave birth to the unique gifts of Zapotec cultural-ethnic identity, Blanton is suggesting that the founders of the city—perhaps for the first time in Mesoamerican history—had managed to create a situation in which ethnic groups could, on the one hand, participate in an inter-ethnic alliance that benefited them all and, on the

⁷⁹ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 37.

⁸⁰ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 38.

⁸¹ See Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 46, 63. Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 75-93, provides a detailed one-by-one description of each of the 15 barrios in which he makes no mention of ethnicity; Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 61, however, continues to entertain the idea of correlating Monte Albán's barrios with respective parts of the valley, but also continues to acknowledge that the evidence is uncertain.

other hand, retain their more particularistic ethnic and cultural identities. So-termed primate centers, by contrast, presumably would have been far less tolerant of this version of pre-Columbian multiculturalism.

Fourth, the way that Blanton's 1978 story of Monte Albán's origins extends this principle of expeditious neutrality into the realm of religion is, for historians of religions, especially intriguing, if also problematic. In his initial rendition—though this is, we'll see, a component of the narrative that he will subsequently revise—the Oaxaca capital wins distinction for yet another unprecedented innovation insofar as it was established not only as a site of locational, economic and ethnic neutrality, but also as Mesoamerica's first zone of "religious neutrality." That is to say, according to the narrative in Blanton's *Monte Albán*, the diversity of Oaxacans responsible for the great capital were united by a common political and military purpose—namely, defense (and eventually offense) against the external threat posed by outsiders to the Valley of Oaxaca. Yet, in matters of "religious belief and ritual practices," not unlike ethnicity (and thus language), they were a heterogeneous lot with neither a willingness nor expectations of cultivating consensus. Therefore, even to try for religious unity would have been a tactical error, which they wisely avoided. Again exercising the concerted neutrality characteristic of disembedded capitals, instead of advocacy for any distinctive religious commitments, which might have offended adherents of differing beliefs and practices, the protagonists of this (re)construction adopted a strategic silence, apparently a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" policy, if you will.

3. Pragmatic Religious Tolerance: Political Consensus without Religio-Ideological Consensus

Ironically, then, Blanton's (original) narrative both dismisses the role of religion in the origins of Monte Albán—insofar as the founders select a completely strategic and not at all "sacred" location for their grand capital—but at the same time elevates religion to the most important and "touchy" of all issues for ancient Oaxacans, the sole topic on which they cannot expect to arrive at any widely-shared compromise or consensus. In a

summary of his 1978 theory of the foundation of Monte Albán, Blanton rehearses his argument this way:

“I hypothesized that a neutral institution, such as a military league, that serves to join together a group of otherwise autonomous societies, is not likely to be associated with a single deity or set of deities, since the cojoining [sic] societies may vary in their supernatural beliefs and ritual practices, such that a consensus in such matters would be difficult to achieve.”⁸²

That supposed avoidance of the uniquely contentious topic of religion, moreover, provided Blanton an explanation as to “why militarism is by far the dominant theme in Monte Albán’s carved stone monuments, whereas such monuments from other valley centers often have ritual themes.”⁸³ In order to foster the necessary neutrality that could hold together an alliance of groups with “a variable mix of beliefs in the supernatural”—a problem that neither religiously homogeneous “local centers” nor hegemonic “primate centers” are compelled to address—Blanton argues that the savvy founders of Monte Albán realized from the very beginning that “Religious themes were probably best avoided in the iconography that advertises league activities, such as that in the *Danzantes* gallery.”⁸⁴ He adds the qualification that,

“This is not an argument for the nonexistence of religion or religious beliefs at Monte Albán, but instead one implying that no single supernatural being is likely to be associated with the capital center. There is abundant evidence, in fact, at Monte Albán, for ritual and supernatural beliefs.”⁸⁵

⁸² Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 79-80. Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1981], 70, reiterates in even more clear terms Blanton’s 1978 position on religious neutrality.

⁸³ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 80.

⁸⁴ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 37.

⁸⁵ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 80. Regarding the “abundant evidence” for ritual and supernatural beliefs at Monte Albán, Blanton, *ibid*, notes that “Caso and Bernal (1952) describe the representations of deities, especially on funerary urns, that they encountered in their stratigraphic excavations of the city.” In chapter 2, I expressed my reservations about the conclusions concerning religion, “gods” and deity worship that Caso and Bernal draw from those funerary urns.

Be that as it may, he nonetheless insists that, in his assessment, “there was no state church or single deity associated with the military federation...”⁸⁶

In this account of urban origins, then, the founders of Monte Albán spearhead a host of innovations that appear both politically astute, but also, if almost inadvertently, sociologically progressive. Their primary initiative is a military defense plan that ostensibly benefits all Valley of Oaxaca residents—but, fortuitously enough, they also facilitate without monopolizing the valley's economic activities; they cultivate ethnic integration without demanding conformity; and they are even credited with anticipating something like a separation of church and state, wherein “religion” is a private (or at least group-specific) affair that communities might practice on their own, but that will not be allowed to intrude upon “league activities.” Scholars of religions have to doubt the implicit assumption that, for ancient Oaxacans, as for post-Enlightenment Europeans, “religion” constituted as distinct sphere of life that might be disconnected and set aside from ostensibly more practical political matters; and I will return at the end of this chapter to the fascinating prospect that, along with the successful integration of several different ethnic groups, a very large part of the innovative genius of Monte Albán was its commitment to religious neutrality, an idea about which Blanton himself will have second thoughts. This is, however, most assuredly, one more of the distinctive and provocative aspects of his story of the city's origins.

⁸⁶ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 81. Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 70, reiterates the same argument concerning the stark contrast between the abundance of militaristic images in the iconography of Early I Monte Albán's Main Plaza versus the apparent absence of religious imagery, though that summary is even more clear in attributing to the founders the striking logic that, on the one hand, “a frightening display of terror tactics at the capital” could generate compliance among league members, but that, on the other hand, “valley communities... may not have tolerated interference with their religious activities.”

B. THE UNWAVERING FUNCTIONS OF MONTE ALBÁN: ADMINISTRATIVE DECISION- MAKING AND/OR MILITARISTIC INTIMIDATION

If, according to Blanton's 1978 script, the promulgation of a distinct religion or ideology (two terms that he is willing to use largely interchangeably⁸⁷) was never a priority at Monte Albán, and if there were never aspirations to economic dominance of the valley, what purpose then did this highly elaborate capital serve? What went on in this city and, most particularly, in its immense plaza?

For Blanton, Monte Albán was, in short, a "special function community," presumably unlike any other that Mesoamerica had seen to that point.⁸⁸ He repeatedly stresses that the Main Plaza was never an ordinary residential zone; and he also rejects or, more properly, simply declines to address the standard claim that the great plaza had been designed primarily for "religious activities." A notable absence, the notion that this was construed as a "sacred place" is never up for debate in Blanton's account. Instead, he contends that the Main Plaza was, from its initial conception, "a special area, lacking general habitation... delimited by buildings that appear to have had civic or elite residential functions."⁸⁹ As regards the increasing elaboration of these "civic functions," he notes that the major structures of the plaza were repeatedly covered over, enlarged and remodeled; he is, in fact, among the most fully informed experts on the fluctuations in the size and settlement patterns of the capital. Yet, in his view, for all that changed, the essential character of the activities that transpired there was remarkably stable: "I have argued that throughout Monte Albán's history the Main Plaza was a special area, a military showcase and a center of league activities."⁹⁰ He thinks, then, that the central

⁸⁷ On the largely interchangeable use of "religion" and "ideology," see for instance, the sub-section entitled "Art, ideology, and ritual" in Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 101-107.

⁸⁸ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 37.

⁸⁹ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 35.

⁹⁰ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 58.

portion of Monte Albán was one sort of place, hosting one (or maybe two) sorts of activities, from beginning to end.

Teotihuacan specialist George Cowgill, by contrast, accentuates the ways in which, as that regional center grew larger and more secure in its regional domination, the role of the capital city itself continued to change and evolve. Precisely in the spirit of what I term the “revalorization” of standing architecture, he explains, for instance, how Teotihuacan’s famed Ciudadela outgrew its original function as a site for day-to-day administration of the city’s affairs civic administration until it eventually came to serve in an almost exclusively “symbolic” role as the physical embodiment of Teotihuacan’s stability and strength; that is to say, the use and significance of the city’s main structures were seriously transformed over time.⁹¹ As we’ll note subsequent chapters, Marcus and Flannery’s rendition of Monte Albán’s evolution proposes similar functional shifts and realignments as the Oaxaca capital’s measure of influence waxed and waned; and Arthur Joyce’s version enumerates an even more complex succession of very different usages of the Main Plaza.

Blanton’s account is, however, much simpler in this respect. Though among his main research initiatives is to chart changes over time in the city and its surroundings, and he provides ample details in that regard, the broader tenor of his narrative describes how the founders of Monte Albán came forward with a marvelously inventive plan for the sort of capital from which they could orchestrate a regional alliance, and thereby forestall external threats—and that initial vision remained intact for the full duration of the city. When that threat subsided, when the pressure was released from the balloon, as it were, that vision became irrelevant so that the city deflated and ceased to exist. The conception of the great city was fixed rather than flexible.

⁹¹ George Cowgill, “Rulership and the Ciudadela: Political Inferences from Teotihuacan Architecture,” in *Civilizations in the Ancient Americas: Essays in Honor of Gordon R. Willey*, ed. Richard M. Leventhal and Alan L. Kolata (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 329-32.

With respect, then, to what Blanton terms the “civic-ceremonial” activities that transpired in the Main Plaza (or to what I term Monte Albán’s “ritual-architectural priorities”), his narrative gives the impression that they remain virtually unchanged from Period Early I (500-300 BCE) through the end of Period IIIB (roughly 600-700 CE), that is, when the capital went into steep decline.⁹² Indeed, if we accept Blanton’s rendition, which is unpersuasive on this point, the use of Monte Albán’s renowned central precinct displays truly remarkable, millennium-long continuity.

1. Oaxacan Statesmen and/or Bullies: Early Monte Albán as an Impartial Court of Appeals and/or a Theatre of Intimidation

While Blanton hypothesizes an unwavering purpose for the great capital—and his measured social scientific style prevents him from either explicitly congratulating the Monte Albán founders for their accomplishments or reproofing them for excesses—his account does waver between two very different functions for the Main Plaza. Both are intimately connected to the wider military agenda of the regional polity, and Blanton no doubt sees both as part and parcel of the same initiative. Nevertheless, as narrative themes, each connotes a quite different sense of the character of the story’s main actors, and depending on which of the two alternatives a reader is inclined to emphasize, a very different image of the ancient capital and its inhabitants emerges. From one view, the Oaxacan protagonists emerge as cerebral, creative and forward-looking statesmen, worthy models of contemporary initiatives in socio-cultural integration; but when the other function is foregrounded, the lords of Monte Albán loom as little more than early Mesoamerica’s most ambitious bullies. Blanton’s intricately wrought narrative makes available both possibilities.

With respect to the more flattering depiction of Monte Albán’s leaders, having argued that it was a place of economic, ethnic and religious neutrality—a place that consumed substantial goods but produced very little—Blanton suggests repeatedly that

⁹² Regarding his use of the term “civic-ceremonial hierarchy,” which does not appear in his 1978 work, see Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 61, 69 and 128.

the capital's primary functions were "administrative." The city was founded as, and remained until its demise, the "center of regional decision making for a regional confederacy," an assessment that Blanton ventured as early as 1976, which would remain a steady component of all his subsequent versions.⁹³ Where this administrative, decision-making function is front and center, the notion of "disembeddedness" connotes a kind of disciplined aloofness, suggesting that the capital was deliberately disconnected from the more prosaic and partisan aspects of life, commerce and military combat included. From a position of neutrality, Monte Albán could not only coordinate the valley's military operations but also regulate its economic affairs and adjudicate disputes among market participants.⁹⁴ Monte Albán, in this view, served as a kind impartial court of appeals, which won the respect and support of the surrounding communities by avoiding competition with them rather than by browbeating them. At these points, then, we are presented with a capital that, unlike anywhere else in the valley (and perhaps unlike anywhere else in Mesoamerica), was a bastion of ethnic and religious tolerance. Pressing this view, Monte Albán takes on the quality of a mountain retreat where juridical and maybe legislative functions prevailed, perhaps a kind of pre-Columbian parliament that enabled the impartiality that could transcend local interests in favor of the collective interests of the regional alliance.

Or, pressing this side even harder—and keeping in mind the numerous ways in which Monte Albán presented radical innovations in statecraft and urban living—Blanton's narrative enables the view that the capital might even have been a "think tank" of sorts, a place deliberately designed to cultivate new ideas and experiments in governance and social engineering. Albeit a set of rosy conjectures of which Blanton himself would not approve, this notion that Monte Albán was a kind of elite, distinctively intellectual and multicultural meeting place—a flattering set of attributes that some

⁹³ See, for instance, Blanton, "The Origins of Monte Albán;" or Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 36-37.

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 28.

(re)constructions have attributed to Xochicalco⁹⁵—is strengthened at those numerous points where Blanton emphasizes the highly restrictive access to the Main Plaza. Taking issue with John Paddock's seemingly obvious suggestion that the Main Plaza was “a generally accessible, public area,” designed to impress and intimidate a steady flow of visitors, Blanton argues instead that the configuration of roads, walls and entrances not only precluded the use of the Main Plaza as a market, it also severely limited any sort of general access.⁹⁶ Alternatively, and again counterintuitively, he argues that “the plaza was a relatively closed, secluded area, not a public place into and out of which there would have been abundant traffic flow.”⁹⁷ Moreover, during the city's prime, despite its very extensive architectural and sculptural embellishments, he believes that the plaza actually became less rather than more publicly accessible: “I have argued... that [during Period IIIB] the Main Plaza was a segregated, closed elite administrative place, access to which was only by way of three small and easily controlled entrances.”⁹⁸ In these moments, then, we are led to believe, however improbable, that the rulers of Monte Albán eschewed the panache and propagandistic pageantry that one associates with totalitarian states in favor of a more quietly deliberative means of plotting the course that will serve the collective interests of the entire valley.

⁹⁵ Noting representations of seemingly Maya as well as Mexican individuals at the Xochicalco, George Kubler, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 72-73, for instance, alludes to the prospect that this place had been site of some sort of “congress” of learned men from numerous regions who together undertook a correction of the calendar periods.

⁹⁶ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 63-66.

⁹⁷ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 66.

⁹⁸ Blanton, *Monte Albán* [1978], 99. Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 94-95, frames the inaccessibility of the Main Plaza in more hyperbolic and less appealing terms: “Major roads by passed the Main Plaza, the entire plaza complex could be entered only through three narrow, easily guarded openings—which strongly suggests that it was open only to a select group of people. Thus the average citizen of Monte Albán in IIIB probably had no more opportunity to view the interior of the Main Plaza than the average American of today has to view the innermost interior of the CIA headquarters.”

2. Monte Albán as a “Military Showcase” and “Frightening Display of Terror Tactics”: A Familiar Argument

By contrast to this image of Monte Albán as home to large-minded, forward-looking parliamentarians, Blanton frequently assesses the Main Plaza in darker and more explicitly violent terms, less as an elite decision-making center than as a veritable forum of militaristic intimidation. Though references to human sacrifice are scant in Blanton's account, he proposes that the plaza presented, “A frightening display of terror tactics... [which] would also help to legitimate the early state's authority.”⁹⁹ This much more familiar strain of his discussion presents Monte Albán as precursor to the sort of ritual spectacle orchestrated by the Aztecs in the plaza of their Templo Mayor wherein, according to numerous scholarly interpretations, the Mexica went to extreme measures to choreograph not only all aspects of the ceremonial histrionics, but also the composition of the audience.¹⁰⁰

The Aztecs rites, and their public sacrifice of captive warriors, were, in others words, designed in large part to impress and intimidate potential adversaries as to the dire consequences of resisting the rulers of Tenochtitlán, and much of Blanton's analysis urges us to believe that Monte Albán's rulers used precisely the same ritual-architectural tactics. Impressed that “No other site in the valley [of Oaxaca] had a ceremonial concourse and public architecture as large as Monte Albán's,” and recalling his earlier observations concerning the uniquely disproportionate amount of military imagery, Blanton, especially in his later (1999) work, proposes that Great Plaza had been designed to host “important ceremonial activities” not unlike those staged by the Aztecs.¹⁰¹ The very antithesis of the impartiality and religio-ethnic tolerance, the agenda of these lords

⁹⁹ Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 70.

¹⁰⁰ On the carefully choreographed ritual theatrics of the Aztec, see, for instance, David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

¹⁰¹ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 63. As far as I know, Blanton never make the explicit analogy to the Aztecs.

of Monte Albán is narrow-minded and tendentious in the extreme insofar as they preside over “the capital of a political institution that had a broad regional scope, but that was limited largely to matters of offense and defense.”¹⁰² In this view, the overriding, nearly sole, purpose for the creation of Monte Albán and its magnificent plaza was to facilitate military domination.

His concurrence with Caso (and essentially everyone else) that the earliest iterations of the Main Plaza had been dominated by the Danzante gallery—which, in its original configuration, featured an enormous façade displaying hundreds of the nearly life-sized, mutilated and distorted figures—provides Blanton his strongest evidence that militarism and intimidation were likely the guiding incentives for the original founding of the capital. Well aware of the range of interpretations these notorious figures had evoked, Blanton sees their “true” significance as crystal clear. He concurs in 1978, as he would twenty year later, with Michael Coe’s view that “[the] distorted pose of the limbs, the open mouths and closed eyes indicate that these were corpses, undoubtedly chiefs or kings slain by the earliest rulers of Monte Albán...”¹⁰³ For Blanton, the Danzante building was “a massive public display of what are likely to have been war captives.”¹⁰⁴ In his view, the builders of Monte Albán were not the first Oaxacans to utilize this kind of “militaristic communication medium in carved stone”—that is to say, they are not innovative in this respect—but they did execute the threatening ploy on an unprecedented scale.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, the Danzante gallery—which he repeatedly terms a “military showcase” or “trophy-case”¹⁰⁶—provides the foremost evidence of his argument that the

¹⁰² Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 57.

¹⁰³ Michael Coe, *Mexico* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 95-96; quoted in Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 35. The quote is repeated in Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 69-70; and Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 62, once again quotes Coe to make the case about the militaristic nature of the Danzantes.

¹⁰⁴ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 62.

¹⁰⁵ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 62.

¹⁰⁶ On the recurrent description of the Danzante gallery as a “military showcase,” see, for example, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 39, 47, 58 and 63.

monuments of Period I Monte Albán, and thus the original orientation of the regional confederation, were “purely militaristic.”¹⁰⁷

In sum, then, it certainly plausible that Monte Albán functioned both as the decision-making capital of a pan-regional polity and as the preeminent “showcase” of a “military league.” As a narrative, Blanton’s account is much enriched by including the two contrastive, but not mutually exclusive alternatives. For audiences inclined to see ancient Mesoamericans, or perhaps all people, as hyper-competitive and self-interested, it is the latter strand of the story that will be most appealing; from that vantage, the builders of the Monte Albán emerge as very familiar militaristic opportunists, and the ancient capital appears as a quite rough and regular place. Summoning parallels to that sort of bellicosity, both inside and outside of Mesoamerica, is easy. Yet for those determined to cast Monte Albán and its builders in a more favorable—and more exceptional light—it is the former thread of the story that will provide the richest resource. That narrative strand, which provides an image of the lords of Monte Albán as highly inventive and concerned more with collective than individual interests, if harder to accept, is, to be sure, Blanton’s more original and provocative contribution to storytelling about the Oaxaca capital.

C. THE PERIOD II RETRENCHMENT OF MONTE ALBÁN: WEAKENED EXTERNAL THREATS, THUS WEAKENED CAPITAL

In either case, once Blanton had settled on working hypotheses that provide him with a satisfactory explanation of Monte Albán’s origins, he could deliver an account of the next millennium of the city’s history that, though nuanced in lots of respects, largely conforms to the same general principles. In this presentation, no subsequent developments are, to borrow his term, quite so “epochal” in the valley’s history as the original founding of the mountaintop capital.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ On the “purely militaristic,” or at least preponderantly military, orientation of early Monte Albán, see, for example, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 35, 39, 58, 79-80, 107-108; or Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 62-63.

¹⁰⁸ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 48.

Blanton describes, for instance, how, during Period II (200 BCE-300 CE), leveling and major construction on the Main Plaza continued apace, until the general aspect that one sees today, including an early version of the Main Plaza ballcourt, was largely completed.¹⁰⁹ Concurring with the earlier assessments of Caso and Acosta as to which buildings belong to this era, Blanton agrees that the most dramatic new feature was the centrally located, distinctly arrowed-shaped Structure J. While he reaffirms Paddock's observations about the building's near uniqueness, Blanton is not inclined to accentuate the novelty of this structure nor its significant departure from earlier styles of construction.¹¹⁰ Nor is he predisposed, like Caso, Bernal and countless more recent commentators, to seize upon the building's astronomical alignments as a warrant to applaud the mounting intellectual sophistication of the Period II Monte Albán residents.¹¹¹ Instead, Blanton stresses the continuity in purpose between the 40 some "conquest slabs" on Structure J, most which Caso had correlated with specific Period II military victories, and the earlier Danzante gallery. Transferring the very same descriptor from the older building to the new one, Blanton contends that, "Structure J appears to have been the Period II version of the military showcase, replacing or perhaps supplementing the *Danzantes* building..."¹¹² In his view, there can be no doubt that the

¹⁰⁹ On the Period Late I and Period II construction of the Main Plaza, see Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 45-46, 108, as well as Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 61, where he largely reconfirms his earlier assessments.

¹¹⁰ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 47.

¹¹¹ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 47, acknowledges that Anthony F. Aveni and Robert M. Linsley, "Mound J, Monte Albán: Possible Astronomical Orientation," *American Antiquity* 37 (1972): 528-540, "have now interpreted the building as an astronomical observatory;" but, seemingly resistant to the then-new field of archaeoastronomy, he is unwilling (in 1976) affirm their conclusions.

¹¹² Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 47. Besides "military showcase," Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 63, also refers to Structure J as "a military trophy case." That he focuses so completely on the "conquest slabs" while essentially ignoring the astronomical features of Structure J (noting only that "some have interpreted the building as an astronomical observatory," *ibid.*, 47) is a particularly clear instance of Blanton's determined effort to depict the ritual-architectural agenda of Monte Albán as more one-dimensional than others (myself included) imagine that it actually was.

new and different constructions were facilitating the same unwavering functions: “Obviously the Main Plaza continued, during the Late and Terminal Formative Periods [i.e., Periods Late I and II], to be the special area where the bulk of the community’s monumental construction [sic] was evident and where military successes were advertised.”¹¹³

The Period II eventuality that poses the greatest interpretive challenge is Blanton’s discernment of an apparent decrease in population, a decline of which his predecessors were not aware (and lots of his successors are unpersuaded). According to his rigorous settlement surveys, the steep demographic spike of Period I eventually leveled off, and then, in the second period, there was probably a “slight decline” in population as well as some retrenchment in the city’s boundaries.¹¹⁴ Blanton notes, moreover, that the number of “conquest monuments” erected in Period II was substantially less than during Period I;¹¹⁵ and, perhaps even more tellingly, during this era a variety of walls, some low but in places several meters high, were built around much of the community’s perimeter, including a large wall along the city’s exposed north, northwest and west edges.¹¹⁶ His excavations reveal the construction of this new system of walls had created a small reservoir, too small to have done much to alleviate

¹¹³ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 47.

¹¹⁴ In 1978, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 41-44, provides a detailed explanation of why some interpretations of his survey data suggest a “slight decline” in Period II population while other interpretations of the same data suggest a slight increase over Period Late I. He concludes, *ibid.*, 44, “there is no definitive reason for adopting either the higher or lower figures, but I favor the lower values...” Thus, in 1978, he estimates the Period II population to have been “roughly 9650 to 19,300 as a maximum [as opposed to his estimates of roughly 10,200 to 20,400 for Late I].” Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 44.

¹¹⁵ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 54, notes “While the number of conquest monuments erected during Period I exceeds 300, only 40 such stone carving were produced during Period II (Caso 1947), as far as we know.” But, as I suspect he would agree, it is glib to rely on a simple count between the 300 (Period I) Danzante carvings versus the 40 (Period II) “conquest slabs” on Building J as means of ascertaining the relative strength of the city. These are, to be sure, very different sorts of carved monuments.

¹¹⁶ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 52-54, 108.

practical concerns about water; and he entertains the possibility that the numerous walls had “*gatelike* functions, indicating, perhaps, an interest among the community’s administrators in regulating and/or taxing traffic flow.”¹¹⁷ But his stronger inclination is that the walls served primarily to defend the community from invaders, in which case “we may infer that Monte Albán’s military dominance over the region was weak or nonexistent.”¹¹⁸ That is to say, following the breakneck acceleration of the capital during Period I, both its population and military ascendancy seem, according to Blanton, to have lagged during Period II.

Not only is this a very different from the brief and elitist picture of Period II provided by Caso, Bernal or Paddock, Blanton’s assessment of the retrenchment and decline of Monte Albán during this era, albeit a slowdown of modest proportions, is, as we’ll see, among his largest points of disagreement with Marcus and Flannery, who imagine that capital actually attained its widest influence during this era.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, given his assessment of the data, Blanton is challenged to explain why the initial growth of the capital tailed off at this point. In 1978, predictably enough, he appeals to the same logic of synoecism and collaborative responses to external threat, and even to the explicit analogy of Early Athens with which he had explained Monte Albán’s origins. He argues in his original version, for one, that because disembedded capitals, by nature, allow the

¹¹⁷ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 52; his italics. Also see, *ibid.*, 108.

¹¹⁸ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 54. Summarizing his view of Period II, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 108, says, “All this seems to suggest that, for a while at least, there had been an attempt to increase the city’s self-sufficiency, and defense from invaders may have been a problem...” He makes similar summary comments about Period II, at *ibid.*, 55. The prospect that the Period II city was *decreasing* in size in response to endemic invaders, of course, seems plausible; but that scenario also stands somewhat at odds with Blanton’s primary narrative theme wherein the stronger the external threats, the stronger the capital became.

¹¹⁹ Even in 1978, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 55, noted that others, specifically Joyce Marcus, provide “a contrary [and rather more glowing] interpretation of Monte Albán’s fortunes during the latter part of the Formative [i.e., during Period II].” I will revisit this major difference of opinion concerning Blanton’s versus Marcus and Flannery’s assessments of Period II in chapter 6.

retention of a great deal of autonomy among the local communities on which they rely for support, such capitals are prone to great fluctuations; we ought not be surprised, therefore, to see considerable inconsistency in Monte Albán's size and strength.¹²⁰ And, for two, again appealing to the early Athens analogue, he contends that disembedded capitals, also by nature, are really only important in times of distress:

“One might expect that the funding of military league and thus the league capital might be reduced during periods of relative peace. If this were the case, the capital population might decline and new sources of income might have to be developed, precisely what seems to have happened to Monte Albán [during Period II] just prior to the Classic Period.”¹²¹

In short—and in perfect consistency with the central theme of his original Monte Albán narrative—a decline in the intensity of the external threat could be expected to result, in relatively short order, in a proportional decline in the strength of the associated disembedded capital. Recalling once more the balloon metaphor, a decrease in incoming pressure is certain to precipitate a commensurate decrease in the firmness and buoyancy of the city.

Though this initial explanation of the Period II stall accords perfectly his larger narrative, Blanton was still troubled by uncertainty as to the identity of that initial external threat; and thus to conjecture that the unidentified hazard had slackened was doubly uncertain. It is not surprising, therefore, that, by 1999, while Blanton had grown more confident in his assessment of a population decline during Period II, he and his colleagues were attributing the change in Monte Albán's fortunes to a couple of alternate factors: First, they now hypothesize that “forest clearing and farming in the piedmont immediately surrounding Monte Albán may have prompted environmental degradation in that rather delicate zone, which in turn led to the community abandonments and population losses.”¹²² And, posing a second, perhaps complementary, cause of the

¹²⁰ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 56.

¹²¹ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 56.

¹²² Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 110.

decline, they also suggest that the Period II lords of Monte Albán had, in a sense, switched from defense to offense, and thus devoted more of their attention to the conquest and extraction of tribute from outside the Valley of Oaxaca, which in turn eventuated in “less pressure on households [within the capital] to increase their production.”¹²³ If adding nuance to the story, these entirely plausible revisions also somewhat blur the clean lines of Blanton's original formulation of a perfect correspondence between the intensity of the external threat and the consequent strength of Monte Albán.¹²⁴

D. THE PERIOD III CLIMAX OF MONTE ALBÁN: STRONGEST EXTERNAL THREATS, THUS STRONGEST CAPITAL

At any rate, with the onset of Period IIIA (i.e., the Early Classic period, roughly 200-450 CE), as Monte Albán recovered its vigor and resumed the climb toward its peak size and strength, identifying the motivating external threat no longer poses any problem. According to Blanton (and at odds with older depictions of the Classic era as time of general peace and prosperity), beginning about 200 or 300 CE, the activities of “expansionist Teotihuacan,” in his view, “a massive city... larger than any ever built by American Indians,”¹²⁵ instigated a climate of military tension that was felt across the full

¹²³ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 110.

¹²⁴ The summary of Period II Monte Albán that appears in Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 83-88, also attributes the population decline to the observation that “Period II was the only period in Monte Albán's which in which it embarked on significant imperial ventures outside the Valley of Oaxaca” (ibid., 83). However, irrespective of population declines, that version also depicts this more as an era of prosperity than decline: “Period II in the Valley of Oaxaca can be viewed as a kind of ‘golden age,’ in which the intense pressures to increase levels of household production and reproduction that characterized Period I were absent” (ibid., 87); and it also suggest that this era of Oaxacan prosperity might have continued indefinitely had it not been for the emergence of Teotihuacan (ibid., 88). While that seems plausible, the notion that Period II Monte Albán experienced a “golden age” in the absence of any serious external threat does undermine the broader storyline in which there is a perfect correspondence between the intensity of the external threat and the consequent strength of Monte Albán.

¹²⁵ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 108.

reach of Highland Mesoamerica. A “primate center” par excellence, Teotihuacan’s immense influence, in Blanton’s view, took two—or actually three—very different forms: In many contexts, the Central Mexican capital’s clout was apparent in stylistic elements or exchange objects, suggesting a trade relationship. But in other venues—Kaminaljuyú in the Guatemalan Highlands is Blanton’s prime example—Teotihuacan’s influence was more direct, undoubtedly reflecting the actual conquest and dominance characteristic of primate centers.¹²⁶

1. Teotihuacan’s Crucial Role in Monte Albán’s Florescence: A Military Threat, not a Cultural Stimulus

In Blanton’s account, then, though Teotihuacan had begun its surge toward urban and state formation later than Monte Albán, and though its mechanism of growth and influence had been very different, the Mexican capital had, by this period, well exceeded any size and influence that the Oaxaca capital would ever attain. Thus, in his view, Monte Albán would have been the more senior but considerably weaker partner in the interactions between the two regional capitals. Moreover, Blanton argues, on the one hand, that we can be certain that “the rich Valley of Oaxaca would have been a prime target for those in Teotihuacan who were directing the expansion of the empire;” yet, on the other hand, he shares the opinion of Bernal, Paddock and most others, Marcus Winter, as we’ll see, not included, that, “unlike Kaminaljuyú, Monte Albán never became part of that empire.”¹²⁷ It is indeed crucial to his story that the leaders of Monte Albán were thoroughly successful in holding off the expansionist ambitions of the much larger and stronger Teotihuacan.

Furthermore—and more surprisingly—Blanton doubts that Teotihuacan and Monte Albán were ever particularly close trading partners, a position he can support by noting that, though there are Teotihuacan stylistic influences in both Monte Albán’s

¹²⁶ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 57.

¹²⁷ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 57. Also see, *ibid.*, 108.

pottery and architecture, “overall, this influence is diffuse and generic.”¹²⁸ Even in Period III, when the Central Mexican influences are most pronounced, only a few specific ceramic categories show Teotihuacan influences, and, tellingly, “no building at Monte Albán was ever built in the precise style of Teotihuacan.”¹²⁹ In short, even at its most intense, the Teotihuacan influence on Monte Albán's material culture appears to Blanton (as it had to Paddock) to have been limited and highly circumscribed, considerably less rather than more than one might at first expect.

While Blanton is, then, in perfect agreement with earlier assessments that Period III Monte Albán had somehow managed both to engage and to stave off Teotihuacan's massive influence, he has, as we'll see momentarily, a very different way of characterizing the sort of Oaxacan-Mexican interactions that had made that possible. Recall, for instance, that Alfonso Caso attributed the Period III florescence, in large part, to ancient Oaxacans' willingness to reach out and borrow from numerous “foreign” sources—including but not limited to Teotihuacan—while at the same time retaining their own cultural identity and autonomy. In Caso's words, “The arts of writing, pottery, sculpture and the cutting of jade [during Period III], all show traces of alien influences, but Monte Albán in turn stamps its own ideas on Teotihuacan and the Maya cities.”¹³⁰ Elaborating on the same notion, Ignacio Bernal similarly observed that Period III Monte Albán ceramics and architecture drew upon but did not mimic Teotihuacan styles, and thus he likewise depicted the lords of Monte Albán as astutely borrowing from the Central Mexicans without “selling out,” as it were. And Paddock, even more determined to depict the ancient Oaxacans as the masters of their own destiny, also deployed the notion of a kind of arm's length embrace wherein prudent Monte Albán leaders found a

¹²⁸ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 57.

¹²⁹ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 57.

¹³⁰ Alfonso Caso, “Monte Alban: An Archeological Zone of World-Wide Renown,” in *Mexican Art and Life*, no. 4 (October 1938): 307-311; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 143-152. This quote comes from the *Obras* reprint page 148.

dexterous way to engage and borrow from the “foreign” Teotihuacanos while at the same time retaining their autonomy and, in his view, superiority.¹³¹

Blanton is, as we've seen, much less interested than Caso, Bernal or Paddock in applauding the creativity and fortitude of ancient Oaxacans; but he is no less clever in utilizing the quite restricted Teotihuacan influence on Period III ceramics and architecture as a resource in the service of the main theme of his decidedly different Monte Albán narrative. In his rendition, the significant but limited allusions to Teotihuacan suggest that the lords of Monte Albán had successfully evaded the two principal sorts of influence that the Mexican capital had exercised on so many other regions: Monte Albán was neither conquered by nor, to any serious extent, commercially entangled with Teotihuacan. The large looming presence of Teotihuacan had, nonetheless, exercised an enormous influence on Period IIIA Monte Albán—but of a third sort:

“While Teotihuacan's influence is barely identifiable at Monte Albán in the artifactual and architectural senses, *it was no doubt present in the form of military threat*. This probably more than any other factor explains Monte Albán's growth beginning in Period IIIa (ca. A.D. 200-400) and continuing into Period IIIb (ca. A.D. 400-600).”¹³²

This is, then, the paramount demonstration of the general principle wherein strong threats lead to creative and strong responses. The imposing presence of Teotihuacan on the horizon, though daunting in the extreme—or indeed precisely because it was so daunting—had an enlivening effect on Monte Albán. In a kind of twisted version of the creative spark that Bernal imagines the Mexican capital provided, the Teotihuacan of Blanton's story threatens, rattles, challenges, maybe even frightens the Oaxacans to take some preemptive action. The regional military league that had presumably lost a measure of relevancy in Period II now had a “common enemy” of the most estimable sort, and

¹³¹ John Paddock, “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica,” part II in *Ancient Oaxaca: Discoveries in Mexican Archeology and History*, ed. John Paddock (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970 [originally 1966]), 127.

¹³² Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 57; italics added.

thus the league, according to Blanton, received unprecedented “funding,” thereby enabling the capital to grow and develop in unprecedented ways:

“During the long span when Teotihuacan was a prominent feature of the cultural environment of Mesoamerica, the IIIa and IIIb Periods in the Valley of Oaxaca, Monte Albán grew, and more and more massive construction was carried out in the Main Plaza... By Period IIIb the city had reached its maximum population of about 15,000-30,000—virtually all terraces on the surface today were occupied.”¹³³

In this era of renewed growth, as the capital reached its pinnacle of size and strength, virtually all of the buildings in the Main Plaza were yet again enlarged and elaborated. Nevertheless, true to his main storyline, Blanton ascertains no significant change in the essential function and character of the place. He, for instance, rejects the arguments that, during the Classic era, the Main Plaza took on a larger role as “a distribution point for products produced by craftsmen in the city.”¹³⁴ In his view, Monte Albán’s formerly modest role in craft production and market activities, perhaps counterintuitively, was *not* significantly increased during the city’s florescence; and nor was the capital any less dependent on surrounding communities for food.¹³⁵ To the contrary, precisely as the city had been since its initial inception, Period III Monte Albán remained the context for a unique—and uniquely narrow—set of activities. Precisely consistent with the vision of its founders (and radically different from Teotihuacan), Monte Albán, even in the era of its peak development, remained “a special-function community, a regional political capital, disembedded from the remainder of the region’s

¹³³ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 108.

¹³⁴ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 63, takes issue with the argument presented Marcus Winter and William Payne, “Hornos para cerámica hallados en Monte Albán,” *Boletín del Instituto Nacional e Antropología e Historia*, núm. 16 (1976): 37-40.

¹³⁵ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 95-96, for instance, notes that, “All things considered, I doubt that there was much ceramic production at Monte Albán. In fact, by comparison, there was little production within the city of any type... Monte Albán was definitely a lightweight, from the point of view of craft production, by comparison with its contemporary in the valley of Mexico, Teotihuacan...”

economic and political central place hierarchy.”¹³⁶ That is to say, Blanton holds firm in his view that the main priority that outstripped all else—indeed, the sole reason for the capital's existence—was maintenance of a regional military league that could forestall the sort of threat that the great and powerful Teotihuacan posed.

2. Oaxacan Statesmen and/or Warriors: Religious Neutrality, Multi-Ethnic Tolerance and/or Militaristic Opportunism

Be that as it may, Blanton's account of Classic-era Monte Albán continues, albeit inadvertently, to provide intimations of the two contrastive characterizations of the capital and its leaders that I mentioned earlier. On the one hand, especially when he is accentuating the marked contrast between Teotihuacan and Monte Albán, he reasserts the more winsome, perhaps even inspiring, image wherein the Oaxaca capital is described as a site of religious neutrality and multi-ethnic tolerance, a disengaged decision-making center. He concludes, for instance, that the original arrangement of three ethnically distinct barrios had, by Period III, been elaborated into 14 distinct residential sectors, each of which presumably represented of a relatively autonomous component of the regional alliance.¹³⁷ Then, in a moment of uncharacteristic speculation, he capitalizes on the fact that the Period III Main Plaza was ringed by 14 mid-sized buildings—“6 along the west side of the plaza, 3 in the middle, and 5 along the east side”—in order to propose that, “Perhaps each of these units and/or the societies that each barrio may have maintained a building on the Main Plaza for the purposes of housing elites who were the league representatives.”¹³⁸ At moments such as these, Blanton lends support to the amiable characterization of the lords of Monte Albán as thoughtful parliamentarians,

¹³⁶ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 96.

¹³⁷ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 46, for instance, writes, “I conclude preliminarily, based on what little excavated evidence exists, along with trends in building orientations, that the barrio organizational pattern persisted from the time the city was founded until its collapse at the end of Period IIIb...”

¹³⁸ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 63. Blanton, *ibid.*, 69, repeats this idea about fourteen “representative buildings.”

orchestrating something akin to a representative democracy wherein the overmatched communities of Oaxaca put aside ethnic and religious difference in favor of the collaborative cooperation that could, against the odds, stave off the threat of their totalitarian neighbor to the north. At these junctures in his story, the lords of Monte Albán have the appeal of astute diplomats and perhaps freedom-fighting underdogs.

Yet, on the other hand, a louder chord in Blanton's narrative reinforces the more predictable, less savory characterization of the leaders of Classic-era Monte Albán as militaristic opportunists who are no less self-interested, impatient and violence-prone than their Teotihuacan counterparts or, for that matter, the famously uncharitable Aztecs. Where this chord is sounded, any intimation that the sovereigns of a "disembedded capital" are somehow fundamentally different, perhaps more kindly and magnanimous, than the leaders of a "primate center" vanishes. He acknowledges, for instance, that the Main Plaza iconography of Period III does bring a measure of innovation—most notably, stelae portraying bound captives and perhaps a slight, though still very limited, willingness to depict individual rulers.¹³⁹ Yet, just as he assessed the Period II "conquest slabs" on Structure J as little more than a latter-day version of "military showcase" of the Period I Danzante gallery, he now contends that Period III's abundant images of captives in poses of submission demonstrate perfect continuity with the earlier public sculpture. In his predictable surmise, the larger threat had prompted a more elaborate response, but the ritual-architectural agenda had remained fully constant: "Continuing into Period III militarism is the dominant iconographic and epigraphic theme in carved stone monuments."¹⁴⁰ Thus, while a narrative focused on Monte Albán is likely to cast the

¹³⁹ Emphasizing that the Monte Albán depiction of individual leaders, which was absent in earlier eras, is still very limited in Period III, Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 128, writes: "Later, during Period III, several Monte Albán rulers are named in public monuments in and around the Main Plaza, but they number only five during this 400-year period..."

¹⁴⁰ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 63. There is, it seems, something of an incongruity between Blanton's emphasis on the highly restricted access to the Main Plaza versus his emphasis on the extent to which the iconographic program of that plaza was designed to display military prowess and triumphs, an agenda that could presumably succeed only if large audiences were allowed, or perhaps even forced, to see that iconography.

Oaxacan protagonists in a considerably more sympathetic light than their Central Mexican antagonists—and Blanton's narrative certainly does that—one can be sure that he would warn against assigning the status of hero or villain to either party.

E. THE PERIOD IV COLLAPSE OF MONTE ALBÁN: NO EXTERNAL THREAT, THUS NO CAPITAL

In any case, Blanton's insistence on the unwavering and uni-functional status of Monte Albán provides him with a readymade, unequivocal explanation for the decline and collapse of the great capital. Following extensive discussions of the Oaxaca capital's origins and ascent, his comments on the Postclassic Periods IV and V are, therefore, far more spare, with the matter of the city's demise dispatched in a few paragraphs.¹⁴¹ For him, the collapse of Monte Albán is a specific case that perfectly demonstrates a general principle: Disembedded capitals are, by nature, "special function communities," designed for the express, nearly sole, purpose of forestalling external threats. Deliberately located and configured outside of the economic and commercial networks within which they lie, such capitals are, moreover, by nature, highly dependent upon surrounding communities for life's practical necessities, and, therefore, vulnerable in the extreme. Presenting something almost like a Wizard of Oz effect, the majestic façade of a disembedded capital, far more fragile than it appears, is simply a screen maintained via the representatives of a regional military league whose real loyalties lie elsewhere.¹⁴² Ironically, these sorts of decision-making centers are actually managed and sustained by decisions made in periphery. And, in the not-unlikely event that those peripheral communities opt to withdraw support and cease "funding" of their capital, administrative centers of this sort have no chance of continued survival. Created as a consequence of

¹⁴¹ On the collapse of Monte Albán, see Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 101-9. Also see Richard E. Blanton and Stephen Kowalewski, "Monte Albán and After in the Valley of Oaxaca," in *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 1, volume editor, Jeremy Sabloff; general editor, Victoria Bricker (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981): 94-116.

¹⁴² The allusion the Wizard of Oz is mine rather than Blanton's.

thoroughly pragmatic threat assessments, disembodied capitals are prone to similarly expeditious abandonment once those threats abate.

Given Monte Albán's supposed perfect match to that model, it comes as no surprise that, in Blanton's view, once the imposing specter of Teotihuacan vanished and Oaxacans no longer felt threatened by the Mexican capital, Monte Albán's disintegration was also imminent. Thus where the collapse of Teotihuacan is often depicted as opening the way for other centers such as Cholula, Xochicalco, El Tajín and eventually Tula, paradoxically enough, in Blanton's (re)construction, the loss of that mighty adversary deprived Monte Albán of any reason for existing. The two great capitals, therefore, go down together. As he explains:

“The collapse of Teotihuacan, beginning in the seventh century A.D. and complete by the middle of the eighth, resulted in the demise of its Oaxacan counterpart Monte Albán. The political institution centered there [at Monte Albán] was an expensive one to support, and once it had lost its major reason for existence, was probably no longer provisioned.”¹⁴³

In the wake of Teotihuacan's collapse, predictably, the Main Plaza was the first portion of the city to be abandoned and allowed to fall into disrepair; no improvements were made there following Period IIIB.¹⁴⁴ And though the settlement data becomes more difficult to assess in Periods IV and V, Blanton is confident that the city had embarked on a demographic tailspin from which it would never recover. From here on, Monte Albán's end was foregone.

Blanton does introduce a couple of factors that complicate the worrisomely slick storyline wherein, immediately following Teotihuacan's disappearance as a threat, thoroughly practical and unsentimental Oaxaca leaders willingly pull the plug, as it were, on their once-fabulous capital and simply walk away with neither hesitations nor regrets. For instance, while he is certain that the collapse of Teotihuacan was, far and away, the

¹⁴³ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 108.

¹⁴⁴ See Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 58, 66, 103.

most significant cause of Monte Albán's downfall, he notes as well the possibility of more local factors that may have contributed to the abandonment of the capital. Specifically, he entertains the prospect that rapid population growth during Period IIIB had created greater competition for agricultural land in the Valley of Oaxaca, and that "This would have placed a strain on the adjudicative authorities in the valley, perhaps further reducing the desire to support a military alliance which no longer had a crucial role."¹⁴⁵ Also, he suggests that, over time, the elaboration of the capital had engendered resentment from the surrounding communities whose labor sustained the top-heavy administrative institutions, which had experienced "eventually diminishing returns to scale;"¹⁴⁶ having retained a large measure of autonomy, those communities now asserted that autonomy to break free of what were perceived as inordinate obligations to Monte Albán. That is to say, village-based Oaxacans simply withdrew their support from a capital to which they had never had heartfelt or "religious" attachments.

Additionally, while Blanton is certain that the fall of Teotihuacan spelled inevitable doom for Monte Albán, in his version, the ill-fated old capital did offer up a few last gasps. He surmises, for instance, that during Period IV (750-1000 CE), despite the Main Plaza having been abandoned and despite major demographic drops, "a substantial population" continued to reside on the lower portions of the mountain where they undertook "another round of building of defensive walls;"¹⁴⁷ and he also suspects that, by Period V (1000-1520 CE), despite a population decline on the order of 80%, the remaining residents had become "more commercially oriented" than in other periods.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 103.

¹⁴⁶ Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 29.

¹⁴⁷ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 101, 108.

¹⁴⁸ Even more tentative than usual, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 101, estimates the maximum population for Period V to have been about 2774-5549, a drop of nearly 82% from the Period IIIb maximum. Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 108, restates the same conclusion when he writes, "The magnitude of that decline cannot be traced precisely, but we do know that by Period V Monte Albán had a population equivalent to about 18% of its Period IIIb maximum."

In other words, though Monte Albán had lost its primary purpose for existing as the administrative center of a regional military league, a few stalwart inhabitants apparently did make efforts to transform their former capital into a more “normal” community, that is, one that was more agriculturally and economically self-sufficient. Yet, that initiative had to contend with the famously inconvenient and “neutral” mountaintop site selection, which provided insurmountable obstacles, until remaining residents eventually drifted off to more environmentally amenable portions of the Valley of Oaxaca, allowing the site of Monte Albán to resume its original obscurity. The mountaintop was, in Blanton's surmise, by all but the most exceptional criteria, an inhospitable and very impractical place to live.

In sum, then, irrespective of these few mitigating factors, Blanton's (1978) story of Monte Albán, like that of Ignacio Bernal, has great clarity and symmetry. The same set of forces and processes that account for the meteoric beginnings of the capital—the same pressures that inflated the balloon, as it were—can also account for its subsequent fluctuations as well as its anti-climatic demise. In this version, the Oaxaca capital, majestic and powerful in so many respects, was also thoroughly inflexible. Thus, once the original function for which it had been designed became irrelevant, like an over-specialized tool, it could serve no other purpose. In this version, Period IV Monte Albán was obsolete and irrelevant, a white elephant of monumental proportions, which was, therefore, allowed to slip into ruin. Yet, again fully consistent with the general pattern of disembedded capitals, the demise of the once-great capital was not nearly so catastrophic for the rest of the Oaxaca region as one might expect; certainly the ramifications of its disappearance were not so dire (or, depending on your perspective, so fortuitous) as those associated with the collapse of the “primate center” Teotihuacan. In this story, secondary centers or relatively autonomous “mini-states” elsewhere in the Valley of Oaxaca, no longer in need of the old capital's protection and now released from their burdensome obligations to subsidize its bulky administrative structure, actually benefit rather than suffer from the dissolution of Monte Albán.¹⁴⁹ There is, as in both Paddock's and

¹⁴⁹ See, for instance, Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 100.

Joyce's (re)constructions, depending on one's perspective, a kind of "silver lining" to only-seemingly disastrous demise of the old capital.

In any case, the ancient Oaxaca protagonists of Blanton's narrative are, then, pragmatic, enterprising and, so it seems, largely unencumbered by cosmomagical concerns from the beginning to the end of the story. Thus, just as he declined even to mention the prospect that the original site selection had been based on the supposedly "sacred" allure of the mountain, a notion with which so many stories of Monte Albán begin, Blanton also declines any comment concerning the Postclassic transformation of the working capital into a sacrosanct necropolis, which was revered and visited by Zapotecs or the Mixtecs that moved into the area. A notable omission, absent from this account is any mention whatever of Tomb 7, which, since Caso's era, had been a standard way to formulate the denouement of Monte Albán's story. In his original rendition of events, Blanton's reticence to assign a consequential role to religion, in any sense of the term, is, for better or worse, consistent from start to finish.

F. LATER REVISIONS TO THE SAGA OF DISEMBEDDEDNESS: FROM REGIONAL TO INTERREGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Richard Blanton's *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (1978), which evoked ample criticism and then defenses from the author and others, would remain the foundation for all of his subsequent writing on the site. Following this pioneering statement, his perspective is characterized far more by continuity than changes of heart.¹⁵⁰ Along with numerous more technical publications, the textbook *Ancient Mesoamerica: A Comparison of Change in Three Regions* by Blanton, Stephen A. Kowalewski, Gary M. Feinman and Jill Appel (1981), for instance, includes a concise and readable summary of the cultural evolution of the Valley of Oaxaca that is highly consistent with the original work. More interesting for the present

¹⁵⁰ Blanton's 2004 Prologue to his *Monte Albán* (1978), viii, enumerates both the most significant articles to criticize his work and those in which he and his colleagues reply. I have noted all of these articles earlier in this chapter.

inquiry into stories about Monte Albán are, however, some revisions or at least shifts in emphasis that appear, albeit in sketchy outline form, in *Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State* (1999), which Blanton co-authored with Feinman, Kowalewski and Linda M. Nicholas.¹⁵¹ Published in a series designed to “offer the general reader accessible introductions to important archaeological sites,”¹⁵² the prevailing continuity makes a few changes especially intriguing.

For instance, having grounded all of his early work in a theoretical commitment to look beyond the mountaintop site proper by adopting a more “regional approach,” in *Ancient Oaxaca*, perhaps predictably, Blanton and his colleagues espouse an approach that is wider still, and thus advocate the seemingly inevitable shift to what they termed an “interregional perspective.”¹⁵³ Hardly a surprise given Blanton's insistence on the crucial links between Monte Albán and Teotihuacan, they argue the advantages—even necessity—of studying Monte Albán in the context of the whole of Mesoamerica, a perspective that they described in 1999 as a “new framework” or a “new theoretical

¹⁵¹ The most direct expression of the alternate story that I am addressing appears, albeit it in summary form, in Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 120-27. The entire book provides the more general background to that alternate story.

¹⁵² Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], ii. Where Blanton, *Monte Albán*, focused on the process that led to Oaxaca's first *city* and *regional capital*, the 1999 work focused overwhelmingly on the processes of *state* formation; but Blanton treats these as essentially interchangeable processes.

¹⁵³ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 121. Regarding discontent with the regional perspective that had informed his major Oaxaca project, Richard E. Blanton and Gary Feinman, “The Mesoamerican World System,” in *American Anthropologist*, New Series, vol. 86, no. 3 (September 1984): 673, note that, “we gradually came to the conclusion that although we had learned much about the growth of Zapotec civilization in the Valley of Oaxaca, still it appeared to be the case that changes we and others had documented could be only partially understood in terms of processes operating at the regional scale.” In order to rectify that problem and adopt a more “macroregional,” Blanton and Feinman explore the utility of Immanuel Wallerstein's “world systems” approach to Mesoamerica. In *Ancient Oaxaca*, explicit discussion of so-called world systems theory is confined to a boxed paragraph on p. 5; but the incentive to understand the Oaxaca region within the context of “larger interactive systems”—i.e., their “interregional perspective”—reflects very similar theoretical concerns.

direction.”¹⁵⁴ In addition to simply widening the view, this perspective entails special attention not only to the interactions between cities or city states, but, even more, the interrelations between regions or “regional polities.” From this perspective, it is the competition and interaction between large regional zones—say, between the respective Valley of Mexico and Valley of Oaxaca—rather than between individual settlements—say, Monte Albán and Teotihuacan—that is of greatest consequence. Furthermore, according to Blanton and his co-authors, “The adoption of an interregional perspective highlights the evolutionary variable that we call boundedness,” by which they mean the protection and “management of exchanges” across regional borders or boundaries.¹⁵⁵ From this new frame, then, arguably the most significant forces and processes in the formation of pre-Columbian states—Monte Albán included—are those that have to do with the creation, and then maintenance, of the boundaries between the half dozen largest regions of ancient Mesoamerica.

1. “Intensified Regionalism” and “Boundary Maintenance”: A Wider and Longer Prelude to the Origins of Monte Albán

Though retaining the conventional date of about 500 BCE for the origins of Monte Albán proper—and embellishing rather than rejecting the prized notion of Monte Albán as a disembedded capital—this newer (re)construction of events requires both a longer chronological prelude and a wider, pan-Mesoamerican geographical frame before arriving at a discussion of the beginnings of the Oaxaca capital per se. In this amended version, it is important to appreciate that in the period between 1200 and 900 BCE (i.e., in the Early Formative period), not just the Valley of Oaxaca, but the whole Mesoamerican world was in the midst of the major transformations that would lead

¹⁵⁴ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 120-21.

¹⁵⁵ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 121. Regarding the strong continuity between this view and his earlier work, it is worth noting that Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], e.g., 70, already makes reference to preoccupations with “regional boundary maintenance.”

eventually to the formation of cities and states.¹⁵⁶ Prior to this era, though there were countless agriculturally based, relatively egalitarian settlements across Mesoamerica, there were no urban or pre-urban regional centers; and thus, in these authors' assessment, the boundaries between regions—e.g., the Valley of Oaxaca, the Basin of Mexico, the Gulf Coast, the Pacific Coast of Chiapas and highland Morelos—were relatively open and permeable.¹⁵⁷ During the subsequent transitional period, however, with the onset of the earliest phases of what Blanton and his collaborators terms “core-periphery interactions” in many regions, including in the Valley of Oaxaca and several others, there emerged for the first time “head towns,” monumental constructions and more institutionalized patterns of social inequality.¹⁵⁸ The one-way developmental path toward the emergence of cities and states had been broached.

While this portion of the story conforms to very familiar ways of conceptualizing the evolution toward urbanism and state formation in Early and Middle Formative Mesoamerica, what is distinctive in the 1999 account is the recognition not only of roughly contemporaneous emergent centers in each of several regions—e.g., Chalcatzingo in Morelos, La Venta on the Gulf Coast, Izapa on the Pacific Coast of Chiapas, Cuicuilco in the Basin of Mexico, etc.¹⁵⁹—but also the discovery of an abundance of settlements in a different “category of centers that evidently served as boundary sites...”¹⁶⁰ Thus, according to this updated view, the Mesoamerican evolution toward statehood entailed not only the emergence of the widely acknowledged “head towns” or regional centers, but also a much less well appreciated sort of “perimeter settlements” or “peripheral centers,” which were presumably positioned to control or

¹⁵⁶ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 121.

¹⁵⁷ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 121.

¹⁵⁸ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 121. On “the evolution of a core-periphery system,” see *ibid.*, 126-127.

¹⁵⁹ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 123.

¹⁶⁰ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 126.

monitor respective regions' boundaries at crucial points of entry.¹⁶¹ Blanton and his team note, for instance, that in the Valley of Oaxaca, after 700 BCE, during the Rosario period—that is, during the centuries and decades just before the founding of Monte Albán—several of this sort of well-fortified boundary sites were strategically located at the main entry points to the valley.¹⁶² That is to say, at least in the case of the Oaxaca region, a seemingly well-coordinated constellation of peripheral settlements designed specifically to protect the boundaries of the region had developed *in advance* of the founding of a dominant regional capital, namely, Monte Albán. And, while these co-authors think that Oaxaca was likely “precocious” in its development of this sort of regional cooperation, they stress that it was neither unique in this respect nor was Oaxaca developing this new regional integration without a clear sense of what was happening outside the Valley the Oaxaca.¹⁶³ Energetic responses to external threats remain a crucial factor in this revised narrative.

In any case, by asserting this revised “interregional perspective,” the era between 700 and 300 BCE—routinely identified as “a time of dramatic population growth, political development, agricultural intensification, and perhaps increased military concern” across Mesoamerica¹⁶⁴—emerges also as an era of much intensified regionalism. This new viewpoint thus reveals that, along with these other major changes, Mesoamerica was being transformed from a largely homogeneous whole, in which boundaries between regions were relatively open and permeable, into a world in which six or eight large regions were both increasingly well integrated and increasingly

¹⁶¹ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 122.

¹⁶² Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 122.

¹⁶³ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 125, 130, describes Monte Albán as “precocious” insofar it was Mesoamerica’s first state, which, in their view, makes the Oaxaca capital especially important for understanding the more general processes of state formation.

¹⁶⁴ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 123, cite several general overviews of Mesoamerican archaeology that characterize this period in this way.

preoccupied with regional “boundary maintenance.”¹⁶⁵ In their account of this era, it was becoming more and more apparent that to be safe and viable in this hotly contested Mesoamerican world, respective regions would have to coordinate and consolidate their interests and resources. Consistent with Blanton's earlier views, the populations of each area—Oaxaca included—were, then, apparently responding to “external threats” insofar as they were coming to the realization that individual settlements, even very strong ones, would simply not have the strength to stand against adversaries that had developed more widely collaborative strategies of offense and defense. In short, in the era between about 700 and 300 BCE, there was a new and unprecedented incentive for the coordination and consolidation of regional interests, which invariably entailed efforts to secure the borders of one's own region.

2. A Revised “Inter-Regional” Story of Monte Albán's Origins: Three Old Themes Reprised and Refined

This special attention to the “boundedness” of regions provides Blanton and his colleagues the background for an amended (re)construction of the emergence of Monte Albán that both introduces some new elements while nonetheless preserving most of the salient features of his original story. Three points of continuity within the revision are especially deserving of note.

First, in the revised story, Monte Albán remains a top contender for the status of both Mesoamerica's earliest city and earliest state insofar as it was in the Valley of Oaxaca that people first rose to the challenge of developing a regional polity focused on an urban capital.¹⁶⁶ In this version, eventually all of the main regions, including the Valley of Mexico, would come to parallel decisions concerning the necessity both of a

¹⁶⁵ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 126.

¹⁶⁶ Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 44, provides the forthright assessment that, “Monte Albán was Mesoamerica's first city, and long remained one of its largest cities.” Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 130, reverts to slightly a slightly hedged assessment: “Monte Albán was perhaps the first city to emerge in Mesoamerica.”

dominant regional capital, for instance Teotihuacan, and of strategically located, fortified sites at the boundaries of their respective regions; but it was, in all likelihood, Oaxaca where these developments had their first expression. Blanton and his co-authors propose a couple of broad geographical factors to account for Monte Albán's "precociousness" in this respect. For one, owing to its medial location within Mesoamerica, the Rosario-era forces leading to regionalism were arguably more rather than less intense in the Oaxaca region than elsewhere: "The population of the Valley of Oaxaca, at the center of Mesoamerica, had to adjust and respond to these changes."¹⁶⁷ And, for two, the topographical configuration of the three-armed Valley of Oaxaca, which is more naturally self-contained than other regions of Mesoamerica, lent itself to the sort of "boundedness" via the creation fortified perimeter settlements that played such a crucial role in the "core-periphery interactions" that Blanton considers integral to state formation.¹⁶⁸ Thus while these authors, unlike Caso, Bernal and Paddock, are reticent to attribute any special measure of creativity or resolve to ancient Oaxacans, they do nonetheless, as Blanton had in his original story, award the builders of Monte Albán the distinction of Mesoamerica's first urbanites.

Second, though the revised narrative does seem to mitigate the contrast between "primate centers" and "disembedded capitals," the newer version nevertheless allows Blanton to preserve his central notion that Monte Albán was a perfect instance of the latter category insofar as the capital had been created in response to an "external threat."¹⁶⁹ Granted, he has to reconceptualize the nature of the initial external threat that gave rise to Monte Albán; but this is a fortuitous change inasmuch as even Blanton had never been fully persuaded by his own argument that it was raiders and invaders from the growing number of small settlements at the edges of the valley that had precipitated the

¹⁶⁷ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 112.

¹⁶⁸ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 126-27.

¹⁶⁹ In is notable, for instance, that Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 62-66, has a subsection entitled "Monte Albán as a disembedded capital" in which they provide a concise summary of Blanton's 1978 views, which are presented as fully consistent with the perspective of that newer book.

grand innovation that was Monte Albán. In the old story there was a worrisome asymmetry between the modest threat and the spectacular response. In the revised version, however, he rejects his earlier suggestion and instead argues that the “perceived challenges” to which the builders of Monte Albán were responding were not the outlying border communities themselves, but rather the increasingly better integrated regional centers that lay beyond those borders.¹⁷⁰ In short, revisiting the question of Monte Albán's origins from a more interregional perspective not only reaffirms Blanton's original ideas about the crucial role of external threats in the emergence of disembedded capitals, it provides him a much more compelling reply to the long-vexing question concerning the identity of that initial threat that gave rise to the great Oaxaca capital.¹⁷¹

And third, the amended story allows Blanton to retain, and even bolster, his original ideas concerning the very well-considered—and strictly utilitarian—logic of the site selection of the Zapotec capital. Thus, while the decision to locate Monte Albán in such agriculturally and economically incommensurate place continues to demand explanation, Blanton also continues to find most of his original arguments serviceable. For instance, with the notion of a disembedded capital still intact, this version, like the original, has Monte Albán arising as the consequence of an impressively ingenious, albeit thoroughly pragmatic, set of choices. Yes, those innovations may have come in response to perceived military threats; but, just as in the 1978 script, the origins of Mesoamerica's first city-state owe to a spectacular act of cooperative statesmanship and foresight, which was seemingly motivated (at least at the outset) more by self-defense than violent aggression or any sort of expansionist aspirations. Furthermore, because these authors continue to explain Monte Albán's origins in terms of broad processes without reference to any individual leaders, *collective* decision-making is foregrounded while personal

¹⁷⁰ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 126.

¹⁷¹ By the same token, revisiting the role of external threats in Monte Albán's Period III climax from a more “interregional” perspective might lead one to reassess Monte Albán's primary adversary as the regional polity of the Valley of Mexico rather than as the capital city of Teotihuacan per se; but this would cause no serious disruptions to the Blanton's 1978 comments on that matter.

ambition plays no apparent role. Still the story is absent the ruthlessly self-interested rulers who will figure so large in Flannery and Marcus' account. It is, alternatively, the seemingly more generous incentive to serve and respect all members of the Oaxaca regional coalition that prompted builders to select a "neutral" site that was "disembedded" from, and thus non-competitive with, the regular economic-commercial network of the valley. In all these respects, Blanton's old and new accounts of Monte Albán's origins are in perfect accord.

3. The Cult of Cocijo as a Cosmological Common Denominator: A (Somewhat) Enhanced Role for Religion

Major continuities notwithstanding, what is different in the revised storyline—a change of particular note to scholars of religions—is the alternate way in which the latter version addresses the role of religion in Monte Albán's conception and early success. By radical contrast to other renditions we'll encounter later, most notably that of Arthur Joyce, Blanton continues to ignore entirely the possibility that native perceptions of Monte Albán as a "sacred mountain" played any role whatever either in the initial site selection or the ongoing history of the capital. But he is nevertheless persuaded of the need to make some fairly large adjustments with respect to his ideas about the supposed "religious neutrality" of early Monte Albán. In 1978 (and 1981), as noted earlier, Blanton hypothesized that Monte Albán's builders, like those of disembedded capitals generally, had avoided undue conflict among their diverse constituency by deliberately and wisely abstaining on matters of religion. Though he acknowledged that signs of religion were present in various of the capital's private and funerary contexts, he made the bold, maybe brash, argument that Monte Albán's public art was "purely militaristic in theme" and, therefore, unlike virtually every other Oaxacan site—and, in fact, unlike most other "'primitive' administrative institutions" around the globe—wholly devoid of

religious themes.¹⁷² At that point, Blanton was willing to maintain that, “The absence of ritual iconography in the monumental sculpture of Monte Albán is a singular fact...”¹⁷³

In 1999, though he remains convinced of the overwhelmingly militaristic preoccupations of Monte Albán's iconography, quintessentially apparent in the Danzante carvings and Structure J conquest slabs, Blanton does reconsider, perhaps at the urging of his co-authors, his earlier claim that “there was no state church or single deity associated with the [Monte Albán-based] military confederation.”¹⁷⁴ In the amended version, we find the quite different assertion that, as part of its “state-building strategy,” the governing elite of the region appropriated and then became the strongest advocates for the cult of Cocijo, “the Zapotec representation of lightning-clouds-rain,” whose symbols were the prominently displayed both in the ceramic and public art of Monte Albán.¹⁷⁵ The new script goes so far as to propose that, “The increasing frequency [during Monte Albán Period Late I] of vessels that may have been used for ritual feasting reflects the rise of a new religious and ritual system...”¹⁷⁶ By contrast to earlier assertions about disciplined neutrality in these matters, this 1999 rendition argues that, for the entire history of the capital and indeed throughout the entire geographical reach of the capital's influence, the Monte Albán elite were vigorous in their promulgation of a distinctive religious position:

¹⁷² As discussed earlier in this chapter, see Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 37-39, 79-80.

¹⁷³ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 37.

¹⁷⁴ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 81.

¹⁷⁵ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 105. Note that the comments in this book on religion, which are more extensive than those in Blanton's *Monte Albán* [1978], are nonetheless largely confined to a sub-section entitled “Art, ideology, and ritual” (ibid., 101-107) and a summary paragraph on ibid., 128. That is to say, religion is by no means a prominent concern even in this later work.

¹⁷⁶ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 105. Regarding their interchangeable use of the terms “religion” and “ideology,” note that what is described on ibid, 105, as “a new religious and ritual system” is termed on ibid., 128, “the new ideological system.”

“With the growth of the Valley of Oaxaca state of Period I, Cocijo imagery was promoted at all levels of society, from the households in smaller communities to the most important rituals carried out in their temples and in the houses of the powerful families at the most important centers, including Monte Albán.”¹⁷⁷

In other words, though in the revised version, religious concerns remain a non-factor in the capital's site selection—in neither account do Blanton or his colleagues regard the prospect that Monte Albán might have been perceived as something like an *axis mundi* to be worthy even of a scant mention—the new account does propose that religion, and specifically devotion to Cocijo, was among Monte Albán's most prominent features.

Be that as it may, what at first seems like a very significant shift in interpretive course, upon more careful consideration, is largely consistent with Blanton's original, if somewhat overstated, position concerning the capital's astute commitment to religious neutrality. As we are told in *Ancient Oaxaca*, an embrace of the cult of Cocijo reflected something more like the appeal to a religious common denominator than the promotion of any distinctive partisan position:

“The Cocijo cult was a universalizing ideology that was not particular to a single place, dynasty, or segment of society. The cult was based on older, widely shared beliefs, but in Period I Cocijo was magnified into the most important supernatural force. His cult subsumed the earlier symbolism of fire-serpent and earthquake under a unifying concept of fertility and renewal.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 107. Also see *ibid.*, 128, where they elaborate on their contention that, “We think that the promulgation of the Cocijo cult helped to legitimate the new authority at Monte Albán...”

¹⁷⁸ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 105-7. On the one hand, the description of the Cocijo cult as “a universalizing ideology,” which therefore presumably unified the various populations within the influence sphere of Monte Albán, affords to Cocijo a role something like the unifying role that has been attributed to Quetzalcoatl, who is depicted with such prominence at sites like Xochicalco, Tula and Chichén Itzá. On the use of devotion to Quetzalcoatl as a means of integrating otherwise disparate Mesoamerican groups, see, for instance, Alfredo López Austin and Leonardo López Luján, “The Myth and Reality of Zuyuá: The Feathered Serpent and Mesoamerican Transformations from the Classic to Postclassic,” in *Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, eds. David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones and Scott Sessions (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 21-84. On the other hand, as is persuasively argued in David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec*

That is to say, though Blanton and his co-authors refer to the cult of the Cocijo as a “new ideological system”¹⁷⁹ (and there is little precision in terms of what qualifies as “religion” in either the old or new story), certainly they are describing a version of devotion that has less the character of a “state church” than a set of generic cosmological commitments that was presumably shared by all Oaxacan groups and societal levels. Thus for the leaders of the Oaxaca military league to have aligned themselves with Cocijo veneration was not nearly so much an exercise in religious conversion than precisely the sort of strategically conciliatory statecraft that Blanton originally attributed to the Monte Albán elite. These rulers were shrewd in picking their battles, and enforcement of a specific religious outlook was, it seems, not one worth fighting. Thus, in sum, irrespective of a new way of talking about the religious (or ideological) tendencies of the leaders of the Oaxaca regional alliance, the protagonists of the 1999 version are neither less pragmatic nor more religiously dogmatic than their counterparts in the 1978 version.

If Blanton was compelled, perhaps grudgingly, to afford religion a larger role in the latter narrative, in this story of Monte Albán, otherworldly investments or enthusiasms are never important motivating factors. In the old and new versions alike, the Oaxacan capital is founded, maintained and then subsequently abandoned by clear-minded, unsentimental political actors.

Tradition, revised edition (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), chap. 2, Quetzalcoatl seems to have been a distinctively *urban* symbol, while the discussion of Cocijo in Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 105-7, implies that the Zapotec god was equally relevant to urban and non-urban contexts.

¹⁷⁹ Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 128.

**V. CLOSING THOUGHTS: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE
FOR OAXACAN PRIDE AND MULTI-ETHNIC IDENTITY**

By his own description, Richard Blanton's *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (1978) is not a work aimed at general audiences; and no lay readers would dispute its limited appeal. The broad contours of the marvelous story of the ancient capital contained in that detailed report are constantly interrupted by qualifications, methodological digressions and a superabundance of "raw data," which together obfuscate the same plotline that they support. The two subsequent, similarly technical volumes that report on the Valley of Oaxaca Settlement Pattern Project's work in "Monte Albán's hinterlands" or, for that matter, the abundant journal articles in which Blanton and his colleagues engage criticisms of their work, do little to make that narrative account of the Zapotec capital more widely accessible.

Moreover, numerous general textbooks on Mesoamerican and Mexican history acknowledge Blanton's interpretation of Monte Albán as a disembedded capital, but usually in elliptical ways that are confined to a paragraph or at most a couple of pages.¹⁸⁰ Countless commentators borrow Blanton's population estimates, though without situating them in any broader narrative context; and, likewise, numerous guidebooks and site pamphlets allude to Blanton's settlement surveys in the context of quick reviews of the history of Monte Albán studies, but make no effort to address the substance of his work. Perhaps the most readable versions of the story are the amended summaries that I have just discussed, which appear in the jointly-authored *Ancient Mesoamerica: A Comparison*

¹⁸⁰ Blanton's Prologue to the 2004 Percheron Press Edition of his *Monte Albán*, viii, notes the following general Mesoamerican and Mexican history textbooks that have repeated his notion of Monte Albán as a "disembedded capital": Richard E. W. Adams, *Prehistoric Mesoamerica*, revised edition (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 236; Robert M. Carmack, Janine Gasco, and Gary H. Gossen, editors, *The Legacy of Mesoamerica: History and Culture of a Native American Civilization* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 54; Lynn V. Foster, *A Brief History of Mexico* (New York: Facts on File, 1997), 36; Alfredo López Austin and Leonardo López Luján, *Mexico's Indigenous Past* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 85; and Jeremy A. Sabloff, *The Cities of Ancient Mexico: Reconstructing a Lost World* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 50, 54.

of Change in Three Regions (1981) and *Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State* (1999); but those books are designed for pedagogical purposes that also disrupt and undermine the narrative flow.¹⁸¹ In short, irrespective of suitably frequent nods to the general notion of disembedded capitals, outside of fairly narrow archaeological circles, the finer and fuller contours of Blanton's highly elaborate story of Monte Albán remain distressingly little known.

Although unlike Caso, Bernal and Paddock, Blanton does not cater to public audiences—and certainly not to specifically Mexican readers—the slim circulation of his fascinating storyline constitutes a missed opportunity for that wider readership. His evocative rendition of Monte Albán history, albeit requiring some resourceful and creative interpretation, could, I'd wager, serve constructive purposes especially for those largely-non-academic audiences with some vested in interest in the current status of the archaeological-tourist sites and/or indigenous peoples of the Oaxaca region. That is to say, while aside from explicit efforts to utilize Monte Albán as a specific case to understand better the more general processes of cultural evolution and state formation,¹⁸² it is difficult to locate an ulterior sub-text in Blanton's version of events. And yet, though

¹⁸¹ For instance, Michael E. Smith, Untitled review of *Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State*, Richard E. Blanton et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 6, no. 2 (June 2000): 326, commends this volume as “a compact and attractively produced book;” but he also notes a couple of problems that are significant for my present concerns insofar they detract from the presentation of a clear and readable “story” of Monte Albán: For one, Smith (ibid.), contends that, “the book is flawed by stylistic and editorial problems. The prose sounds as if it were written by committee... Several topics are introduced anew more than once, and the later passages fail to refer back to the prior sections. This is confusing to students...” This problem is apparent (to me), for instance, in the disjunction between the section on pp. 62-65, which rehearses Blanton's 1978 view on the origins of Monte Albán as a disembedded capital and pp. 120-127 in which the authors introduce as somewhat revised scenario. Also, for two, Smith (ibid.) notes that, “In several places the authors take pains to criticize particular interpretations of Oaxacan cultural evolution without explicitly stating who they are arguing with or why. These cryptic sections distract from the flow of the presentation, and their purpose may be puzzling to many readers...”

¹⁸² See, for instance, Blanton et al, *Ancient Mesoamerica* [1981], 1; and Blanton et al, *Ancient Oaxaca* [1999], 1.

few non-academics seem to have capitalized on it, his (re)construction of Monte Albán, like others, stands as a freely available narrative resource that *could* be put to the service of innumerable contemporary political agenda.

In this respect, Blanton's own personal political and religious commitments (or lack hereof) are largely irrelevant. Moreover, as I've noted, his provocative plotline has a special multivocality that enables nearly antithetical characterizations of the ancient Oaxacan protagonists—either as astute and tolerate statesmen or as plain militaristic bullies. Accordingly, advocates on all sides of current debates about, for instance, the management of the Monte Albán ruins and the presentation of Oaxaca's cultural identity could—if they knew this rich story more fully—find resources that might be useful or, at times, troublesome in building support for their respective positions.

Consider, first, dimensions of his account that could be worrisome for indigenous activists and then ways that his synthesis might also be highly valuable for them.

A. IN NO SENSE A “SACRED PLACE”: DEMYSTIFYING THE ANCIENT ARCHITECTS AND APPEAL OF MONTE ALBÁN

First, those who would, for instance, like to champion the special virtues either of the indigenous peoples of Oaxacan and of the site of Monte Albán would meet with a couple of large obstacles in Blanton's unromantic (re)construction. For one, the Oaxacan protagonists of his account are, in most respects, thoroughly ordinary and, to that extent, unremarkable. Via his “interregional” approach, he suggests they are not different from other Mesoamericans and, even more poignantly, via his liberal reliance on analogies to ancient Greece and elsewhere, he implies that ancient Oaxacans were in no significant way different from peoples in other global contexts. By his critique of cultural ecology, he does disrupt the notion that the founders of Monte Albán were simply a “biological population” who, not unlike other species, were working to exploit their natural environment. But in his alternate depiction of them as “political actors,” a shift that we will see even more prominently in the Marcus-Flannery and Joyce accounts, we are left

with ancient Oaxacans who often appear as generic opportunists, impressively sharp-minded and militarily adept though nonetheless just one more exemplar of the natural self-interest that is supposedly characteristic of all people in all contexts.

That is to say, where Paddock was determined to show how Zapotecs are virtual antipodes of modern Americans and significantly different even from their Mixtec cultural siblings, Blanton is equally determined to depict the builders of Monte Albán as entirely “normal” and reasonable in their outlook; unwilling to deploy the monumental ruins as a symbol of ethnic pride or identity, he is reticent even to refer to those builders as “Zapotecs.” Likewise, where Caso and Bernal were concerned to rehabilitate and elevate the image of indigenous Oaxacans relative to the more famous Aztecs and Mayas, Blanton fastidiously avoids any praise of their trans-political artistic and intellectual accomplishments; he is resolute in his reluctance to reiterate, or even to acknowledge, the stock accolades about Monte Albán's excellence in astronomy, mathematics, sculpture and painting. And as Marcus and Flannery will complain, there are absolutely no individual actors in this account of shrewd collective decision-making. In short, Blanton's unwillingness to gush over or in any way exoticize the ancient Oaxacans, while certainly a healthy corrective, also leaves the lead characters of his story as somewhat bland and one-dimensional, nameless political operatives who could have operated with similar acumen in any context. These Oaxacan protagonists are, for better or worse, not a very special people.

For two, Blanton's account could prove even more troublesome for those many people who would want to argue, for whatever reason, that there is something intrinsically special about the site of Monte Albán, which ought therefore to be preserved and protected not simply as a matter of historical interest but as a “sacred place.”¹⁸³ Indeed, his presentation undermines that position at every level. His scientific demeanor

¹⁸³ With respect to arguments that Monte Albán ought to be respected as an intrinsically sacred place, see, for instance, Victor de la Cruz, “Monte Albán, ¿espacio sagrado Zapoteco o solo sitio turístico?,” in Nelly M. Robles Garcia, ed., *Sociedad y patrimonio arqueológico en el valle de Oaxaca: Memoria de la Segunda Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán* (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2002), 145-56.

shows no sign that he or his colleagues would themselves entertain for a moment the possibility that the mountain actually exudes or attracts some sort of “cosmic energy.” More damaging still, his account challenges the nearly ubiquitous assumption that pre-Columbians regarded the lofty site as sacrosanct. In his view, as I’ve noted repeatedly, its original selection depended on the fact that this mountain lay in an uninhabited “no-man’s land.” That the place was centrally located but unused, unwanted and unrevered—that is to say, nearly the opposite of a renowned sacred place—made it the ideal spot for a disembedded capital.

Moreover, Blanton never makes the suggestion that, over the several hundred-year history of the working city, its residents came to regard the mountaintop as more sacred. In his description, the city’s “religious neutrality” or, in later versions, its generalized support for devotion to Cocijo are depicted as expedient political strategies rather than heartfelt sentiments. Thus his presentation of the city’s demise makes no mention of nostalgia or regret upon having to leave the place. In fact, in Blanton’s story, this great capital has a kind of disposability. Unlike Teotihuacan and numerous Maya capitals, it was never forcibly conquered, sacked or destroyed; the site was, in a sense, simply discarded. Furthermore, though he may concur that there was some late reuse of the site, he omits from his account the standard Postclassic denouement wherein Mixtecs and others prized the abandoned city as an auspicious place to bury their dead. Thus, unlike Chichén Itzá, whose Sacred Cenote continued to attract pilgrims long after the demise of that working capital, Blanton’s rendition gives the impression that, once Monte Albán collapsed, and once a few rear-guard attempts to keep the old settlement alive failed, no one paid any special attention to the site.

In other words, then, a (re)construction in which pre-Hispanic populations neither selected this particular mountain because any religious properties nor retained any interest in that locale once its urban era ended casts very serious doubt on frequent arguments that Oaxaca’s indigenous people have some abiding connection to Monte

Albán that must, therefore, continue to be respected.¹⁸⁴ For worse or better, based on Blanton's account, the claims of contemporary native communities for a special access or entitlement to the site seem more like recently concocted political ploys than the expression of long-standing concerns. Furthermore, his demystifying depiction implies that any "spiritual connection" that contemporary non-Indians—for instance, the abundant "New Age" aficionados who rate Monte Albán "one of the eight best places in Mexico to celebrate the spring equinox"¹⁸⁵—may feel with the hilltop site, either on that or any other day of the year, is wholly the consequence of their own imaginations. Based on Blanton's presentation, the devotional enthusiasms of present-day tourist-pilgrims have no correspondence whatever to anything that the pre-Columbian residents of Monte Albán would ever have believed or done.

In sum, Blanton, unlike the great majority of commentators, gives us no reason to believe that ancient Oaxacans ever felt that sort of "religious" affection for, or connection to, this now-cherished plot of mountain real estate. And thus, this narrative of a Oaxacan disembedded capital, while compelling in many respects, also leads one to the disconcerting conclusion that, if Monte Albán is today treasured by the indigenous people, mestizos and/or foreign visitors as a "sacred site," that is a relatively new phenomenon.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Again, see de la Cruz, "Monte Albán, ¿espacio sagrado Zapoteco o solo sitio turístico?"

¹⁸⁵ "The 8 best places in Mexico to celebrate the spring equinox," <http://geo-mexico.com>; visited June 12, 2015.

¹⁸⁶ Note, by the way, that in my very early reading about Monte Albán, I was impressed by this intriguing prospect that the "sacredness" of the mountain was a largely modern rather than pre-Columbian sentiment. See, for instance, Lindsay Jones, "Purported Sacrality: The Ambiguous Past and Ironic Present of a Sometimes Sacred Mesoamerican Archaeological-Tourist Site," in *Loci Sacri: Understanding Sacred Places*, eds. T. Coomans, H. DeDijn, J. DeMaeyer, R. Heynickx & B. Verschaffel, KADOC Studies on Religion, Culture & Society, no. 8 (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2011), 169-93. I no longer hold many of the views expressed in that 2011 article, which was fashioned a few years in advance of that.

B. A MODEL OF RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC TOLERANCE: ACCOMMODATING PERMANENT DIVERSITY VERSUS CULTURAL ADMIXING

On the other hand, while undermining many of the stock accolades about a “sacred city” and its especially reverent pre-Columbian inhabitants, Blanton’s narrative (re)construction could, I’d argue, provide an exceptionally useful exemplar and inspiration for several sorts of contemporary audiences. Consider, for instance, how his novel depictions of ancient Oaxacan leaders’ thoughtful management of the potentially explosive matters of religion and ethnicity present models that could prove very appealing both to present-day policy makers and social critics. First, by demoting religion to a nearly inconsequential factor in the story of Monte Albán, he provides a narrative resource that is ideal for those that would like to champion the accomplishments of ancient Oaxacans and the great value of the mountain site—on the basis of *other than* their religious significance.

Again venturing extrapolations Blanton himself is not likely to make, audiences could discover in his account a model of something like areligious (or maybe “pre-religious” or even “post-religious”) leadership, governance and statesmanship. Indeed, the pragmatic avoidance of any specific religious orientation that Blanton attributes to the managers of Monte Albán provides a kind of pre-Columbian prototype for rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos’ insistence that, in order to engender wide support among Protestants, Catholics, Maya traditionalists and secular-minded supporters, autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas must avoid religious dogmatism.¹⁸⁷ In Marcos’ considered and experience-based opinion, which seems to reecho that of Blanton’s ancient Oaxacan protagonists, deep religious commitments far more often divide than unite communities; and thus “religious neutrality” is the most prudent, respectful and workable policy for generating and maintaining inclusive political coalitions. Where

¹⁸⁷ See, among many possibilities, *The Zapatista Reader*, edited and with an introduction by Tom Hayden (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002). I have no reason to believe that Subcomandante Marcos is familiar with Blanton’s account of ancient Oaxacan social history.

religion fractures communities, shared investments in the more tangible matters of health, education, security and economic viability can bring people together.

Reading Blanton's account to that purpose, one might note that, even in 500 BCE, the Monte Albán founders, who were determined to put the interests of the wider Oaxacan region ahead of their more personal and local interests, realized (just as Marcos concludes) that religion and "ethnicity" would be forces of division rather than regional unity; and thus they fashioned a capital that was "neutral" in both respects. This characterization of state formation thereby undermines all sorts of stereotypes concerning the sovereigns of a supposedly theocratic Monte Albán in which, as Caso maintained, "some religious motive" was the basis of everything.¹⁸⁸ Alternatively, these Monte Albán rulers, though never treated as individuals, are depicted in highly appealing ways as pragmatic not ideological, rational not superstitious, innovative not tradition-bound, tolerant not totalitarian, and collectivist not self-interested.

Moreover, in addition to his iconoclastic depiction of religion's non-role, Blanton's comments about Monte Albán's supposed policy of ethnic tolerance provide grounds for similarly constructive interpretations, especially for those concerned to present the Oaxaca region as identifiable and admirably unique within Mexico. This strain of his story resembles that of Ignacio Bernal insofar as both depict the ancient Oaxacan builders of Monte Albán as masterful in transforming the challenge of ethnic diversity from a potential liability into perhaps their greatest strength. In both versions, interactions between different ethnicities (and thus presumably different religions) sparked the energy and originality that allowed the city to grow. Blanton's (re)construction, however, departs from Bernal's in two very important ways: First, where Bernal advances the notion of creative synergy among ethnic groups by applauding the successive *interregional* syntheses of Oaxacans with Olmecs, Mayas and then Teotihuacanos, Blanton's story has a narrower geographical focus insofar as he describes how Monte Albán provided an occasion, for the first time, to mediate

¹⁸⁸ Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," *Obras* reprint page 492.

intraregional ethnic and religious differences among the various communities of the Valley of Oaxaca. Nevertheless, in this story, the distinctive pan-Oaxacan regional identity that Bernal asserted and that Paddock reaffirmed in even stronger terms find yet another reaffirmation.

Second—and yet more storiologically significant—by contrast to Bernal's account of a ethnic-religious admixing into a new whole, a pre-Columbian pattern that seems ideally suited to engender a unified Mexican national identity, Blanton's is a story of ethnic-religious tolerance wherein people of different ethnicities and religions learn to work together and collaborate to a shared purpose without any expectation of changing one another. Instead of blending ethnicities into a new (mestizo-like) synthesis, Blanton, well in advance of popular preoccupations with "multiculturalism," describes a scenario in which ethnic and religious diversity is accepted as a constant feature—and indeed a valuable asset—of Monte Albán from its origins to its collapse. Rather than aspiring to create one new synthetic religion or ethnicity (or anything akin to a "melting pot"), the disembedded capital accommodates a kind of permanent religious and ethnic diversity. Bernal and Blanton provide, in a sense, two different models of identity politics, and Blanton's is arguably the more progressive.

C. PRE-COLUMBIAN PRECEDENTS FOR TODAY'S GUELAGUETZA: NARRATIVE

RESOURCES FOR OAXACAN PRIDE AND EXCEPTIONALISM

That is to say, the unity-and-diversity dynamic implied by Blanton's depiction of Monte Albán's ethnically discrete barrios together collaborating in the management of the great Oaxacan capital and thus the region is, among other things, strikingly similar to the image of perfectly balanced unity and diversity presently promoted by the state's Secretariat of Tourism Development in their annual Guelaguetza folkloric fiesta, "the star tourist attraction of the year in Oaxaca."¹⁸⁹ Formerly a popular celebration in which people from the seven regions of the state would converge on Oaxaca City in order to

¹⁸⁹ Kristin Norget, *Days of Death, Days of Life: Ritual in the Popular Culture of Oaxaca* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 232.

dance, socialize and celebrate the harvest, the state government took control of the Guelaguetza festival in the 1970s and transformed it into a lavish tourist affair that could serve dual purposes of boosting the economy and providing a forum in which to showcase Oaxaca's unique role within the wider Mexican national imagination. In 1975, the state built an immense amphitheater overlooking the city specifically to host the thousands of Mexican and foreign visitors who now attend the annual Guelaguetza extravaganza. According to the official promotional literature, the festival provides a yearly reminder that the respective representatives of the seven sub-regions, though each unique unto themselves, are siblings, united by a common bond with the state of Oaxaca:

“More important than this Folkloric gathering is the spirit that animates men and women from distinct places, distinct languages and distinct races to sing together in brotherly love with a sense of unity and fraternity with a great lady of, Oaxaca.”¹⁹⁰

Though the Guelaguetza is now routinely criticized for its highly contrived and commercialized presentation of Oaxaca's identity as uniquely multi-ethnic but nonetheless harmonious,¹⁹¹ the organizers—who are determined to claim pre-Columbian roots for their contemporary festival—miss an opportunity in not tying their annual spectacle more closely to Blanton's story of Monte Albán. Indeed, of all available alternatives, Blanton's narrative synthesis is the most serviceable in this respect. Despite the fact that nearly all of the Guelaguetza performers are by self-description Catholics, there is an insistence that this is “a non-religious occasion,” a strategic appeal to neutrality designed to avoid controversy and widen participation precisely like the ploy that Blanton attributes to the founders of Monte Albán.

¹⁹⁰ Brochure distributed in 2000 by Oaxaca de Juarez's Secretariat of Tourism Development; quoted by Norget, *Days of Death, Days of Life*, 232.

¹⁹¹ See, for instance, Norget, *Days of Death, Days of Life*, 232-35; and Jesús Lizama Quijano, *La Guelaguetza en Oaxaca: Fiesta, relaciones interétnicas y procesos de construcción simbólica en el contexto urbano* (México, D.F.: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 2006).

Moreover, the tourist office's claim that contemporary residents of the state have not only deep and abiding commitments to their *local* ethnic (or village) identities, which seems entirely predictable, but also to their *regional* identity with the "great lady of Oaxaca," a much less likely allegiance, finds an ideal counterpart in Blanton's story.¹⁹² He contends that Monte Albán too was populated by people with shared loyalties both to the respective outlying communities from which their ancestors, sometimes hundreds of years previously, had come and to the great Oaxacan capital. Furthermore, just as the Guelaguetza promoters accentuate at every opportunity the wide variety among the performers' modes of dance, dress and speech—indeed Oaxaca is constantly advertised as Mexico's most ethnically diverse state—in Blanton's view, the leaders of Monte Albán, instead of taking measures to convert or homogenize residents, prized and thus preserved the diversity of the city's numerous groups, all of whom were ostensibly persuaded that they were participating in a pan-Oaxacan venture that was greater than the sum of its parts. In his view, generating a religio-cultural consensus was never a goal at Monte Albán. Whether historically accurate or not, the wise and forward-looking sovereigns in Blanton's story seem to have anticipated the purportedly modern realization—and practical benefits—of tolerating all religions and ethnicities while granting preferential treatment to none.

In sum, those that would eulogize the builders of Monte Albán for purportedly making all of their decisions on the basis of cosmomagical or "spiritual" priorities have to be disappointed by Blanton's (re)construction; and those that would ground their appreciation of Monte Albán in the presumption that it is intrinsically, or even traditionally, a "sacred site" must find his depiction of events troubling, even offensive. But for an audience in search of a pre-Columbian model for multi-ethnic and multi-religious harmony—and especially for an audience that is hoping to position the Oaxaca region as a quintessential exemplar of such tolerance and cooperation—arguably no

¹⁹² A potential glitch in this analogy is that where the rhetoric of the Guelaguetza accentuates statewide Oaxacan identity, thus including the Mixtec, coastal and isthmus regions, Blanton's story features a somewhat narrower regional identity that applies only to the Valley of Oaxaca.

version of the story of Monte Albán provides a richer narrative resource than Richard Blanton's tale of the rise and fall of Mesoamerica's premier "disembedded capital."