

**OUTLINE OF THE  
PREFACE**

<b>Mediating Religious Studies and Oaxacanist Studies</b> .....	xv
I. An Alternate Starting Point: Reconceptualizing Monte Albán as an Enduring Work of Sacred Architecture.....	xxvi
II. A Three-Book Plan: Aspects of an Ongoing Ritual-Architectural Reception History of Monte Albán.....	xxxiii
III. A Disciplinary Divide: The Distressing Disconnect between Religious Studies and Oaxacanist Studies.....	xxxvii
IV. A Felicitous Combination: The Hopeful Promise of Bridging Religious Studies and Oaxacanist Studies.....	xlvi

## PREFACE

### Mediating Religious Studies and Oaxacanist Studies

“So great was [the importance of religion] that there is no exaggeration in the assertion that [the Aztecs’] entire existence revolved around religion and there was not a single act, either public or private, which was not covered by religious feeling.”

Alfonso Caso, 1936<sup>1</sup>

“No archaeologist who works for any length of time among the ancient civilizations of Mesoamerica can fail to be impressed by the role of religion played in those complex societies. At the same time, Mesoamerican archaeologists, like prehistorians everywhere, have suffered from the fact that archaeology has no agreed-upon theoretical or methodological framework for dealing with prehispanic religion. The result is that some archaeologists have chosen to ignore religion while concentrating on subsistence, settlement, and economy. Still others... unrestrained by the rigorous methodologies which have been developed from the study of subsistence and settlement, have allowed enthusiasm and imagination to turn ancient religion into a personal fantasy.”

Joyce Marcus, 1978<sup>2</sup>

“A monumental work [of architecture], like a musical one, does not have a “signified” (or “signifieds”); rather, it has a *horizon of meaning*: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore, by means of—and for the sake of—a particular action.”

Henri Lefebvre, 1991<sup>3</sup>

---

\* Note that I have managed the footnotes in ways that respect “the first citation” (which is thus a full bibliographical citation) *in this Preface*, and then repeat that practice in each respective chapter throughout the book. Also, to avoid confusion in this typescript, I have retained the quotation marks on all quotes, including those that are formatted as block quotations.

<sup>1</sup> Alfonso Caso, *The Religion of the Aztecs* (México, D.F.: Editorial Fray B. de Sahagún, n.d. [Spanish original, 1936]), 61. Caso’s views about the prominence of religion among the Aztecs are largely consistent with his views about religion among pre-Columbian Zapotecs and Mixtecs.

<sup>2</sup> Joyce Marcus, “Archaeology and Religion: A Comparison of the Zapotec and Maya,” *World Archaeology*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1978): 172-91; reprinted in *Ancient Mesoamerica: Selected Readings*, ed. John A. Graham (Palo Alto, California: Peek Publications, 1981), 297-311. This quote comes from page 297 of the reprinted version; and the article to which Marcus alludes is Alberto Ruz Lhuillier, “Lo que se sabe y lo que no sabe de Palenque,” *Revista del Sureste*, año II, no. 5 (1977): 14-17.

Not exempt from the sense of awe that the spectacular mountain site of Monte Albán inspires in all visitors, a scholar of religion's encounter with the ample remains of the great Zapotec capital triggers a tumble of more field-specific questions: *Why build an urban ceremonial center atop this inconveniently high hilltop? What part did religion play in the site selection? What sort of "sacred space" is this? Does this qualify as "sacred architecture"?* *What "myths" did the inhabitants tell? What "gods" did they worship? What conceptions of life and afterlife did they hold? What sense of right and wrong? What rituals did they did they perform? What role did religion and ritual play in the agenda of the rulers? What role in the life of commoners? What role in the city's rise and demise?* And those religionists, like myself, who are more theoretically inclined, have to ask: *What can this unique place teach us about the general history of religions? What theories of religion are strengthened by this remarkable case? Which theories topple in the face of such a special specimen? And what conceptions of religion, ritual and sacred architecture help us most in making sense of these plentiful pre-Columbian remains?* The following chapters, dare I say, aim to engage, if not settle, all of those questions.

**I. AN ALTERNATE STARTING POINT:  
RECONCEPTUALIZING MONTE ALBÁN AS  
AN ENDURING WORK OF SACRED ARCHITECTURE**

This project presents a fresh, iconoclastic and sometimes contentious way of looking at the pre-Columbian city of Monte Albán. Challenging the customary, seemingly-incontestable designation of the remains of the great Zapotec capital as "an archaeological site," I proceed with the alternate proposition that these ruins are most profitably conceived as "an enduring work of sacred architecture," a prospect that presents advantages I will discuss at length.<sup>4</sup> This is the

---

<sup>3</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, Mass: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 222; italics his.

<sup>4</sup> In this fundamental reconceptualization of Monte Albán, I am informed, for instance, by John E. Hancock, "The Newark Earthworks as 'Works' of Architecture," in *The Newark Earthworks: Enduring Monuments and Contested Meanings*, eds. Lindsay Jones and Richard D. Shiels (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 153-63, in which historian of architecture

second in a set of three books on the religion and architecture of the famed Oaxacan site, all of which depart from that alternative starting point. All three are the work of a historian of religions, a mainstream academic but self-described outsider to Oaxacan studies, who ventures into a topic that has been (and is) dominated by archaeologists and, to a lesser extent, by art historians, ethnohistorians and epigraphers.

Long devoted to the cross-culturally comparative analysis of broadly religious buildings and constructions, I construe the study of Monte Albán's religion as, in very large part, the study and interpretation of the site's wealth of architectural remains. Architecture, broadly construed, provides, far and away, the most abundant and revealing evidence. In fact, my initial and then abiding attraction to this Mesoamerican context has depended in great measure on a fascination with the methodological challenges of ascertaining the religious outlooks and practices of peoples for whom we have abundant material remains—like the magnificent architectural constructions at Monte Albán!—but very limited textual resources, or "sacred texts," of the sort on which scholars of religion usually rely. Pre-Columbian Oaxacan writing, as we'll see especially in chapter 5, while highly impressive in numerous respects and more prevalent than many might assume, is far less plentiful than the architectural evidence on which this investigation primarily relies.

As a historian of religions, my alternate approach requires reconsideration of numerous fundamental assumptions not only about the ever-vexing category of "religion," but also concerning the nature of architecture and its large role in the making and transacting of religious meanings. Perhaps most importantly, in engaging the estimable challenge of coming to know a group's religion chiefly on the basis of their built forms, I have frequently affirmed, and then worked to conduct my inquiries of sacred architecture in concert with, Martin Heidegger's provocative claim that "A building, a Greek temple [or, for that matter, a Zapotec pyramid],

---

Hancock demonstrates the advantages of approaching the Hopewell earthworks of Newark, Ohio, not simply as an archaeological site, as its routinely the case, but also and alternatively as what Martin Heidegger termed a "work of art (or architecture)." *Ibid.*, 157.

portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rocky, fissured valley..."<sup>5</sup> I concur, in other words, with what only seems to be a very dreary diagnosis that built forms, including the stupendous structures of Monte Albán, in and of themselves, mean nothing.

Consequently, reflecting on that crucial but perhaps counterintuitive assertion, I have had to accept that the usually taken-for-granted goal of searching after "the meaning of pre-Columbian buildings" is simply not philosophically viable; and even more decisively for those many investigators—myself among them—who claim to be interested in "what really happened" at Monte Albán, the quest after "the real meaning" of the site's monumental structures cannot possibly lead us to empirically accurate results. That buildings have intrinsic, once-and-for-all meanings that scholars might recover is, as Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer teach us, and as I have explained at length in my own writing on "the hermeneutics of sacred architecture," based on a fundamental misconception concerning the status of both architectural works and "meanings."<sup>6</sup> Mining buildings for their meanings issues, at best, in a kind of fool's gold. Peoples' relations to their built environments simply do not transpire in that way.<sup>7</sup> Pre-Columbian temples, palaces and pyramids are not "things with meanings" that have been implanted in them by their human designers and builders, "true significances" that thus stand there, ready for discovery and decipherment by subsequent generations.<sup>8</sup> The pursuit of purportedly "original meanings" is, therefore, *not*, as Oaxacanists have so often presumed, the route to an empirically accurate account of the ancient Zapotec capital.

---

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, "On the Origin of the Work of Art," in Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, edited and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20. Heidegger drafted the text of this much-discussed essay between 1935 and 1937, then reworked it for publication in 1950 and again in 1960.

<sup>6</sup> Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*, originally published in 2000 by Harvard University Press as two volumes, was reissued in 2016 by the ABC International Group as a set of seven slim books. Throughout I will be citing the original edition.

<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, regarding the way in which people's interactions with their built environments do transpire, see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, especially part II, "The Mechanism of Architecture."

<sup>8</sup> See Heidegger's section on "The Thing and the Work" in "The Origin of the Work of Art," 4-19.

Alternatively, as Gadamer cautions, the original intentions of architects are only the earliest in an ongoing and largely unpredictable succession of the meanings, the first episodes in the unfolding and frequently surprising lives, or “*architectural reception careers*,” engendered by designers’ even most carefully wrought architectural creations.<sup>9</sup> Buildings—especially of the remarkably enduring sort that one encounters at Monte Albán—have complex, unpredicted and unpredictable life-histories or biographies.<sup>10</sup> And, to borrow from art historian Erwin Panofsky, the unfolding of their meanings throughout those long lives is “tortuous, fortuitous, full of uncertainty, past echoes, and unexpected turns. [The succession of meanings engendered by a substantial work of architecture] does not possess a logic; it has no constant direction, no goal.”<sup>11</sup> Seldom, probably never, do the actual apprehensions of substantial built forms conform perfectly, or even preponderantly, to the idealized expectations of their designers; and thus in virtually no case do such forms have just one stable meaning. Instead, architectural meanings are situational or, in my favored term, “eventful,” insofar as they emerge in relation to specific audiences and specific occasions—a kind of perpetual fluidity of meanings that anyone who is interested in providing empirically accurate accounts of what happened in and around these architectural constructions must acknowledge. Consequently, while I will leave this site-specific study of Monte Albán largely unencumbered with yet more generalized ruminations on why I

---

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. W. Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 91ff.; or Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 2, “Dancing Menhirs: The Superabundance and Autonomy of Architecture.” The quote at the head of the Preface from Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* also speaks to the complex and frequently unpredicted way that enduring works of architecture invariably come to mean many things not intended or imagined by their creators.

<sup>10</sup> Note that by here stressing the remarkable endurance of the architectural forms of Monte Albán I do not mean to limit appreciation of the constantly evolving and changing physicality of the architecture of the city. At other points, then, I will stress the undeniable realization that the architecture of Monte Albán is more of a dynamic process, ever in flux, than a stable and enduring form. But for my present point about the ongoing, open-ended “ritual-architectural reception careers” of Monte Albán structures, I stress the fluctuating uses and meanings of relatively stable built forms.

<sup>11</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan, “Ideology and Iconology,” trans. Rebecca West, in *The Language of Images*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 16-17, includes these phases in his synopsis of Erwin Panofsky’s work.

jettison the familiar, assumptive goal of recovering "the real meanings of buildings" in favor of working to reconstitute "*ritual-architectural events*" wherein innumerable sorts of meanings arose at the great Zapotec capital, that is the theoretical approach that will obtain throughout the project.<sup>12</sup>

If avoiding in this work an overabundance of generalized theorizing, I do, however, from the outset, want to put in doubt—or at least destabilize somewhat—the ostensibly self-evident assumption that Monte Albán is, first and foremost, "an archaeological site." There are, to be sure, many viable ways to conceptualize these mountaintop architectural remains—for instance, as an "archaeological ruin," as a formerly vibrant Mesoamerican city, as a tourist attraction, a "sacred place," an outdoor museum, a prized component of Mexico's cultural patrimony and resource for Mexican national identity, or as an UNESCO World Heritage Site. All those alternatives, though less incontestable than they may seem, have merit and direct attention to key features of the site; each of those conceptualizations opens a distinctive path of inquiry that comingles promise with liabilities. Monte Albán is, without question, a cultural and artistic resource, an inspiration to novelists, poets and muralists. It is, moreover, a political asset and an economic engine for contemporary Oaxaca; nothing attracts more tourists and money to the region. And most seemingly unassailable of all, Monte Albán presents a site of archaeological research, and thus a historical and educational resource. But, of course, to state the painfully obvious, the ancient builders did not imagine themselves to be building a research facility or laboratory display of their lives; and, therefore, to conceive Monte Albán as such is simply one more, albeit a particularly prominent and apparently well-intentioned, modern appropriation of the ancient site. To conceptualize Monte Albán as "an archaeological site" is, in short, one choice among many rather than a *fait accompli*.

Aware, then, that there are other possibilities, I will wager that for a historian of religions like me—that is, a scholar who is ultimately interested in the plainly empirical history of the place—Monte Albán is most profitably reconceptualized, albeit atypically, not as an archaeological site, but as *an enduring work of architecture*. Indeed, I find it crucial to

---

<sup>12</sup> On the foundational concept of a "ritual-architectural event," see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 3, "Conversation and Play: The Eventfulness of Architecture."

appreciate the ancient city as a work of sacred architecture with plenipotent meanings that continue to emerge throughout the 2500-year “*ritual-architectural reception history*” of the site.<sup>13</sup> Even while largely abandoned, overgrown and dilapidated for the last half of that span, Monte Albán persists as a provocative, “autonomous and superabundant,” and, therefore, meaning-inducing, architectural work.<sup>14</sup>

Accordingly, what happened at Monte Albán between 500 BCE and 700 BC—that is, during its pre-Columbian prime, the primary target of nearly all archaeologists’ concerns—interests me greatly; but what has happened since then, and the new meanings that these ancient monuments continue to evoke through the colonial and modern eras likewise belong to the “architectural reception history” of Monte Albán. Accordingly, these ancillary meanings, which include the interpretations of scholars, are likewise of great interest to me; and pursuant of that interest, I will frequently undertake what may seem to some as digressions into the fascinating *history of ideas and scholarship* concerning Monte Albán, a point on which I elaborate momentarily. As I explained at length in my earlier book on Monte Albán, the fact-based but also imaginative (re)constructions of modern-day scholars are fascinating components of that architectural reception history;<sup>15</sup> and though it will be more the topic of my third book than this second one, I also regard as important and worthy of consideration the plethora of twentieth- and twenty-first-century “revalorizations” that archaeologists tend to routinely dismiss as irrelevant, quirky, incidental, politicized or simply plain wrong, and, consequently, not part of “the real

---

<sup>13</sup> On the merits of conceptualizing a so-termed “archaeological site” alternatively as “an enduring work of architecture,” see Lindsay Jones, “The Ambiguity of ‘Sacred Space’: Superabundance, Contestation, and Unpredictability at the Earthworks of Newark, Ohio,” in *Place and Phenomenology*, ed. Janet Donohoe (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 97-100. On the notion of a “ritual-architectural reception history,” see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 12.

<sup>14</sup> On the notion of enduring architecture as “autonomous and superabundant,” see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. II, chap. 2.

<sup>15</sup> See Lindsay Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán: Seven True Stories of the Great Zapotec Capital of Southern Mexico*.

history” of Monte Albán.<sup>16</sup> If the goal is a thoroughgoing and empirically accurate account of these architectural remains (and, yes, that is my goal), then all of those variously ragged, imaginative and exploitative reuses of the ruins are also important components of the interpretive story, as it were.

At any rate, the very large difference made by this alternate starting point—namely, reconceptualizing Monte Albán as an enduring work of architecture—ought to become clear as I move ahead. Note for now, though, that this triad of books brings to my historian-of-religions’ interpretation the great Zapotec capital three atypical kinds of preparedness and special interest: First in my background in cross-culturally comparative Religious Studies, which is augmented by a preoccupation with theories and methods for the study of religion;<sup>17</sup> second is a complementary preoccupation with the workings of “sacred space” and sacred architecture, again across cultural contexts; and, third, I proceed with a special concern for the history and historiographical efforts of Mesoamerican archaeologists, an interest born especially of my earlier work on the Maya capital of Chichén Itzá and then reinforced by my inquiries into the very rich and complex history of the study of Monte Albán.<sup>18</sup> In all three of these respects, especially the first two, my academic orientation is different from that of virtually all of the Oaxacan specialists, on whose work I nonetheless rely heavily.

---

<sup>16</sup> On the concept of “revalorization” as it applies to sacred architecture, see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 12, “Multifarious Revalorization: The Composition of Ritual-Architectural Reception Histories;” or Lindsay Jones, “Revalorizing Mircea Eliade’s Notion of Revalorization: Reflections on the Present-day Reuses of Mesoamerica’s Pre-Columbian Sites and Architectures;” in *Remembering/Reimagining/Revalorizing Mircea Eliade*, eds. Norman Girardot and Bryan Rennie; a Special Issue of *Archaevs: Studies in the History of Religions XV* (Bucharest: Romanian Association for the History of Religions, 2011), 119-59.

<sup>17</sup> Note that I capitalize “Religious Studies” when referring to the professionalized academic field but not when referring to the more generic study of things generally considered to be “religious.” That same logic requires me also to capitalize, in some instances, History of Religions, Mesoamerican Studies, Oaxacan Studies and Anthropology.

<sup>18</sup> In the Preface to Lindsay Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán: Seven True Stories of the Great Zapotec Capital of Southern Mexico*, I explain more fully these three kinds of preparedness and special interest that I bring to this set of three books.

On this third point—that is, a special concern for the history and historiographical efforts of Mesoamerican archaeologists—appreciate that all three books are concerned not only with the recovery of pre-Columbian realities, but with *the ongoing history of ideas* about Monte Albán. Owing to a deep fascination with the continuing succession of judgments and surmises about Monte Albán—older, outmoded and occasionally outlandish theories of the Zapotec capital very much included—the varied and valued investigators who have concentrated on Oaxaca are, for me, nearly as interesting as the region’s pre-Columbian history. Never do I imagine, apparently obvious as this too may seem, that cutting-edge and better-informed interpretations simply radiate their empirically less sound predecessors.

Consequently, instead of treating Monte Albán as the sort of archaeo-historical puzzle that can be eventually solved—as though one “correct answer” will emerge and wipe out all the earlier “mistakes”—I see the remains of the Zapotec capital as a source of ongoing inspiration, yes, an enduring work of architecture. And thus, invariably, there is much to be learned from explanations that once seemed “right” but turned out “wrong.” In fact, to me, the history of formerly-fresh ideas about Monte Albán is not less revealing, and thus not less significant, than the latest theories about the place, newer propositions that are likewise certain to fall eventually into the ever-higher heap of “older” ideas about the place. Every generation of Oaxacanist investigators has embraced opinions that their successors end up rejecting, a palliative pattern that is sure to continue. And thus, no, never do I aspire to “get things right” in a way that will allow us to forget previous interpretive “errors.” In short, for me, new interpretations supplement rather supplant earlier hypotheses in the ongoing “ritual-architectural reception history” of Monte Albán with which I am primarily concerned.

## **II. A THREE-BOOK PLAN:**

### **ASPECTS OF AN ONGOING RITUAL-ARCHITECTURAL RECEPTION HISTORY OF MONTE ALBÁN**

All three books—but most especially this one, which grew to proportions perhaps more resembling a kind of extended Monte Albán study guide than a book per se—are motivated by the theoretical program that I laid out in *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience,*

*Interpretation, Comparison* (2000), which thereby provides the methodological prolegomena for the entire project. All three, as noted, approach so-termed "archaeological ruins" not simply as remnants of the ancient past, but as enduring and living works of architecture. Each book, however, has a decidedly different agenda.

The first one—*Narrating Monte Albán: Seven True Stories of the Great Zapotec Capital of Southern Mexico*—provides an inventory and critical reading of the seven most prominent ways in which the pre-Columbian history of the emergence, florescence and decline of the ancient capital has been told. Though declining to embrace any of those seven versions of Monte Albán's history as authoritative in a way that illegitimizes the others, that book was essential preparation insofar as it both provides a general sense of the historical circumstances that account for the Monte Albán ruins and also puts readers on notice as to what is at stake in the various "historical (re)constructions" of the ancient capital. In that book we learn that for nearly any question concerning "what actually happened" at Monte Albán—and why that happened—there are at least seven still-viable answers; a master narrative of the site, which silences the alternatives, remains to be written. Moreover, that first book, which is frequently referenced in this one, demonstrates, among other things, that the severe disagreements among leading Oaxacanists about the role of religion—or the lack thereof—in Monte Albán's rise, climax and demise are, in nearly all cases, actually disagreements about the nature of "religion" itself and, therefore, its variously large or small role in social evolution.

I regard this second book—*The Religion of Monte Albán: Reflections on an Enduring Work of Sacred Architecture in Oaxaca, Mexico*—as the most important of the three. This is the sort hermeneutically interpretive treatment of the ancient city that I originally set out to write, but that I could not undertake before years of preparatory reading and reflection. But in contrast to the discourse analysis that drives the first book, this one turns attention more directly, and in rather more original ways, to the pre-Columbian architecture and religion(s) of Monte Albán. Its agenda, outlined more fully at the end of the Introduction, is based on the simple hermeneutical premise that only by asking strong and provocative questions can one arrive at strong and provocative interpretive results; and the correlatable theoretical complaint is that archaeologists

have tended to operate with a very limited slate of questions about both ancient Oaxacan architecture and religion.

To broaden and deepen the range of interpretive options, I therefore borrow from *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture* a pattern of questioning via eleven “*ritual-architectural priorities*” that are at work in all sorts of cultural contexts, but relevant in distinctive ways at Monte Albán.<sup>19</sup> Following that interrogational course, beyond standard queries about when the structures were built, who built them and what purposes they served, I plumb the cross-cultural history of sacred architecture for more nuanced and less obvious lines of inquiry about ways in which the Monte Albán’s architectural configurations may have replicated images of the cosmos, expressed complex geometrical schemes and/or been aligned to various celestial phenomena; ways in which ritual-architectural events at the Zapotec capital expressed ideas about divinities, sacred histories, political authority and/or reverence for the dead; and ways in which architectural configurations abetted those ceremonial occasions variously as amphitheatric stages, as objects of contemplation, as venues of propitiation and/or sometimes as protective sanctuaries that screened out more prosaic distractions. In each case, I work from general inquiries about the workings of sacred architecture to Monte Albán-specific answers. The results of those eleven successive lines of questioning are the eleven somewhat free-standing essays that compose this second book.

And the third book—tentatively entitled *The Reception History of a Ruin: The Ongoing Life of a Long-Abandoned Pre-Columbian Capital in Southern Mexico*—begins with the end of Monte Albán as a powerful regional capital (circa. 700 CE), and then explores the status and import of the Zapotec “ruins” during the Postclassic, colonial, modern and contemporary eras. Where more strictly archaeological studies of Monte Albán are targeted, quite predictably, on the eras in which it was a living city, this third book is trained on the still-fascinating career of the

---

<sup>19</sup> Regarding the general pattern of questioning that organizes this specific study of Monte Albán, see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. II, chap. 13, “A Morphological Agendum: Organization by Ritual-Architectural Priorities.” As I explain later, Appendix B of the present work, “An Expanded Heuristic Framework of Ritual-Architectural Priorities,” enumerates some 30 pages of the specific questions that will bring to bear, and then endeavor to answer, in this course of this second book.

ancient buildings following the demise of the once-great capital, the afterlife of the architecture, so to speak; this is a kind of cultural history of Monte Albán. Indeed, long after the mountaintop city ceased to be a political power and substantial seat of habitation, its monumental architecture continued, albeit with fits and spurts, to exercise great allure on native Oaxacans and then on the very mixed succession of Mexican, European and US visitors who began, by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, to arrive in increasing numbers. The architectural reception history of Monte Albán continues.

That final book of the trilogy thus charts not only the history of academic investigation of Monte Albán, but also, following Alfonso Caso's 1932 landmark discovery of Tomb 7, the so-termed "richest archaeological find in America,"<sup>20</sup> the site's rebirth as one Mexico's premier tourist destinations. Following a millennium of largely dormant obscurity, with that ironic rejuvenation as again Oaxaca's most high-profile real estate, Monte Albán emerges as an inexhaustible resource for the construction of a modern Mexican identity, an engine of economic development, and an inspiration for novelists, artists, metaphysically inclined seekers and political activists. Here the focus is the latter half of its 2500-year architectural reception history, but with special attention to unpredicted, intriguing, still-continuing vitality and versatility of the monumental remains during the past 100 years. This third book will, then, make perhaps the most vigorous case that, beyond simply an archaeo-historical feature of the ancient past, Monte Albán remains an enduring work of architecture that continues to enliven and inform contemporary Oaxaca.

---

<sup>20</sup> See Alfonso Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," *National Geographic Magazine* vol. LXII (October 1932), 487-512. Reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 1 (México, D.F.: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 49-84.

**III. A DISCIPLINARY DIVIDE:  
THE DISTRESSING DISCONNECT BETWEEN  
RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND OAXACANIST STUDIES**

As an outsider and latecomer to the study of Monte Albán, my efforts to master the relevant literature—an aspiration, of course, never fully realized—has depended on a roughly chronological reading protocol.<sup>21</sup> At the outset, instead of starting with current controversies and state-of-the-art analyses, I sought a long view of the issues by working to read, first, a large share of the scattered works on Monte Albán and Oaxaca prehistory that preceded the singularly significant research efforts of Alfonso Caso beginning in the 1920s. Then I (re)read Caso’s own most important works more or less in the order in which he wrote them, and worked to do the same for Ignacio Bernal and John Paddock.<sup>22</sup> That sequential reading order next led me through the most prominent works on Monte Albán written in the 1970s through the 1990s,<sup>23</sup> and eventually to the only beginning-to-end synthesis of pre-Columbian Oaxacan history written so

---

<sup>21</sup> Among the key factors in my initial selection of Monte Albán as a research focus, along with the intrinsic appeal of the place, was my impression that there was a kind of intermediate (that is, rich but not overwhelming) body of relevant scholarly literature that dealt with the Zapotec capital. Central Mexican sites Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlan, like most of the most prominent Maya sites, had, it seemed, generated more secondary literature than a latecomer could ever manage; and highly compelling sites like Xochicalco and El Tajín, though definitely substantial enough as pre-Columbian sites, had not generated the body of scholarly sources for the sort of work I had in mind. While not too surprisingly, I eventually discovered that the literature broadly pertinent to Monte Albán actually may qualify after all as “overwhelming,” my initial impressions in this respect were accurate—i.e., Monte Albán is the ideal site to undertake the “ritual-architectural reception history” to which I aspire.

<sup>22</sup> Note that the prospect of re-reading Alfonso Caso’s works in roughly the order in which he wrote—which is the fascinating exercise that informs my chapter on “The Unfolding of Alfonso Caso’s Story of Monte Albán: From Tales of Discovery to a Five-Stage History of the Zapotec Capital” in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*—is made vastly easier by a 12-volume set entitled *Obras de Alfonso Caso*, edited by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (México, D.F.: El Colegio Nacional, 2002-2007), which reassembles many of Caso’s scattered work and reorders them (in the main) by their publication dates.

<sup>23</sup> Here I refer especially to the earlier works of Richard Blanton, Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, and Marcus Winter, who continues frequent publication on topics relative to Monte Albán; along with an abundance of work by others in the 1970s through the 1990s.

far in the twentieth-first century.<sup>24</sup> Ideas about Monte Albán I had formulated in the first couple years of my reading, collapsed and changed after the some five years of work on the first book.<sup>25</sup> And now, after another half dozen years working through the relevant literature, the most current research included, I continue to alter my ideas about "what mattered most" to the builders, residents and visitors who frequented the mountaintop city.<sup>26</sup> New research continues to emerge quickly, and there is more to know than I can possibly master.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, while I continue to prize (and worry over) my status as an outsider, I am assured by scholars who have devoted to full careers to Oaxacan Studies that I have by now a command of the relevant literature that equals or exceeds that of most Oaxacan specialists.

In any case, while *Narrating Monte Albán* required me to come to terms with the older academic literature on the site, as a kind of disciplined review and point of departure for this second book, in 2015, I set myself the task of reading or, in numerous cases, re-reading, from

---

<sup>24</sup> Here I refer to Arthur A. Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), and suggest that while there is an abundance of recent work on Oaxaca and Monte Albán this is the only twenty-first century work that attempts a beginning-to-end synthesis of the pre-Columbian history of the region. For my critical summary of the (re)construction of Monte Albán history that emerges from this work, Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 7, "Arthur Joyce's Poststructural Rereading of Oaxacan Social History: A Story of Sacred Spaces, Rituals and the Agency of Commoners."

<sup>25</sup> For instance, a following paper that I wrote very earlier in my reading of Monte Albán (i.e., prior to encountering any work by Arthur Joyce), contains a methodological stance that I continue to embrace but specific views about the ancient capital that abandoned soon after that: Lindsay Jones "Purported Sacrality: The Ambiguous Past and Ironic Present of a Sometimes Sacred Mesoamerican Archaeological-Tourist Site," in *Loci Sacri: Understanding Sacred Places*, edited by 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.

<sup>26</sup> In the forthcoming Introduction I will elaborate on my selection of "that which matters most" as the working definition of religion on which I rely throughout this project.

<sup>27</sup> Note that any claim to have "mastered" the academic literature relative to Monte Albán is complicated by that fact that even the most important books and articles are very widely scattered among prominent and obscure English-language and Spanish publications; and thus just to discern what is available, and then what is most significant, is a challenging and never-ending task. Still I continue to encounter many works of note that escaped my earlier bibliographic efforts; and accordingly, I keep on looking, as they say.

front to back, the volumes that had emerged from five Monte Albán Round Table symposia, scholarly conferences undertaken respectively in 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2009.<sup>28</sup> Together these Round Table collections provide a windfall of well over 100 articles, some 2600 pages of text and illustrations on topics relative to Monte Albán.

Those that have the endurance to work through those variegated volumes will be amply rewarded not only with lots of information about Monte Albán, but also a window into the diverse cast of scholars who have taken a special interest in the place. Each of the Round Tables, which were coordinated by then-INAH Director of the Monte Albán archaeological zone, Nelly M. Robles García, was arranged around a guiding theme: "Processes of Change and Conceptualizations of Time" (1998), "Society and Archaeological Heritage in the Oaxaca Valley" (2000), "Political Structures in Ancient Oaxaca" (2002), "Bases of Social Complexity in Oaxaca" (2004) and "Monte Albán at Regional and Disciplinary Crossroads" (2009).<sup>29</sup> Though some of the leading voices on Monte Albán did not participate in these conferences, and though some of the contributors are only tangentially interested in the great Zapotec capital, the cumulative effort is varied and impressive in the extreme. Evincing the robust, sometimes ragged, unevenness that comes with juxtaposing veteran researchers and some very young ones,

---

<sup>28</sup> Of the 112 total articles in the Monte Albán Round table volumes, all but a couple in the first volume are in Spanish. The five volumes, each of which emerged from two to five years after the symposium on which it is based, are as follows: Nelly M. Robles García, ed., *Procesos de cambio y conceptualización del tiempo: Memoria de la Primera Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2001); Nelly M. Robles García, ed., *Sociedad y patrimonio arqueológico en el valle de Oaxaca: Memoria de la Segunda Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2002); Nelly M. Robles García, ed., *Estructuras políticas en el Oaxaca antiguo: Memoria de la Tercera Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2004); Nelly M. Robles García, ed., *Bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca: Memoria de la Cuarta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2009); and Nelly M. Robles García y Ángel I. Rivera Guzmán, eds., *Monte Albán en la encrucijada regional y disciplinaria: Memoria de la Quinta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> There was additionally a sixth Monte Albán Roundtable Symposium, June 29-July 2, 2011, on the theme of "Diversidad Cultural Prehispánica y Contemporánea en Oaxaca," for which the papers were never published as a group, but several of which have surfaced in various venues.

as well as including the work of several indigenous scholars,<sup>30</sup> claims to present “avant-garde academic work, both national and foreign, which fosters scholarly discussion, the exchange of knowledge and the continuous dialogue among specializations”<sup>31</sup> are not unwarranted. But as regards the study of religion, the Round Table volumes are also not without some very telling skews.

Undeniably, for a historian of religions like myself—that is, a reader for whom one broad question constantly looms over all of the more specific insights, namely, *How are these Oaxacanist scholars defining and conceptualizing “religion”?*—the Monte Albán Round Table volumes are equally intriguing and concerning. For instance, the introductions to each volume applaud the internationalism of the contributors—every symposium includes Mexican, North American and a few European scholars—and all include appeals to the necessity of an ever-widening “interdisciplinary approach,” a goal predicated on confident surmises like those in Nelly Robles’s opening remarks at the Third Round Table:

“By taking into account the perspectives of archeology, ethnohistory, history and linguistics, we now know much more about the forms of organization of the pre-Hispanic and colonial societies of Oaxaca and the interrelations between them and other Mesoamerican areas.”<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Regarding Monte Albán Round Table contributors who accentuate their status as indigenous scholars and/or native speakers of an indigenous Oaxacan language, see for example, the articles by Raúl Matadamos Díaz in the First, Second, Third and Fifth Round Tables; by Francisco Carrera González (co-authored with Sebastian van Doesburg) in the First Round Table; by Juan Cruz (co-authored with Sebastián van Doesburg) in the Second Round Table; by Ubaldo López García in the First, Second and Third Round Tables; and by Víctor de la Cruz in the Second, Third and Fourth Round Tables.

<sup>31</sup> This description, which locates these Monte Albán meetings in the tradition of earlier Palenque and Teotihuacan Round Tables, comes from then-Director General of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), Sergio Raúl Arroyo García, “Presentación,” en *Estructuras políticas en el Oaxaca antiguo: Memoria de la Tercera Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2004), xii; my translation.

<sup>32</sup> Nelly M. Robles García, “Introducción,” en *Estructuras políticas en el Oaxaca antiguo: Memoria de la Tercera Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2004), xv.

The Fifth Round Table Symposium was expressly devoted to expanding that interdisciplinary purview by fostering interactions between archaeological viewpoints, “which, in contemporary times, are not isolated but interacting with other scientific disciplines related to the humanities, and depending more and more on the hard sciences, which has undoubtedly led to a less speculative archaeology.”<sup>33</sup> The aspiration was, in other words, a wide but asymmetrical interdisciplinarity in which archaeology, suitably enough, enjoys a clear priority while history, ethnohistory, linguistics, ethnography, epigraphy and, increasingly, “the hard sciences” are the most oft-cited complements. Promising as that sounds, for historians of religions who are accustomed to attending meetings—sometimes with thousands of participants, most of whom describe their primary disciplinary affiliation as “Religious Studies”<sup>34</sup>—it is notable, though not too surprising, that religion specialists are never singled out as desirous interdisciplinary conversation partners. Virtually no Oaxacanist, it seems, laments the absence of experts on studying and conceptualizing religion<sup>35</sup> (and the impending reception of this book

---

<sup>33</sup> Robles García, Nelly M. y Angel Iván Rivera Guzmán, Introducción a *Monte Albán en la encrucijada regional y disciplinaria: Memoria de la Quinta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García y Ángel I. Rivera Guzmán (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2011), 11; my translation. In a less optimistic, perhaps more candid, assessment of the current state of interdisciplinarity in Oaxacan studies, Nelly Robles writes elsewhere, “the archaeologists [working in the Oaxaca regional center of INAH] feel themselves isolated from others in anthropology, to the point of having almost no academic contact with the social anthropologists, ethnographers, ethnohistorians, and linguists working in the same center. This estrangement has two sources. One has to do with different allocations of time, as archaeological heritage conservation keeps them in the field 70 percent of the time. The second source is that the archaeologists of the Oaxaca Center consider the other specialists—most of whom hold a masters or doctorate—as belonging to a different social class.” (<http://www.saa.org/AbouttheSociety/Publications/TheManagementofArchaeologicalResourcesinMexico/TheNationalInstituteofAnthropologyandHistory/tabid/1104/Default.aspx>; accessed 10-10-2017)

<sup>34</sup> For instance, the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion routinely attracts over 10,000 attendees, many of whom describe their primary interests as theological but more of whom consider their first disciplinary affiliation “Religious Studies.”

<sup>35</sup> Exceptions to this broad and pessimistic assessment appear, for instance, in Oaxacanist ethnographer John D. Monaghan, “Theology and History in the Study of Mesoamerican Religions,” in *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 6, Ethnology, volume editor, John D. Monaghan; general editor, Victoria Reifler Bricker (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 25, opines and then provides some notable support for the view that, “anthropologists no longer monopolize the discussion of [Mesoamerican] religion. In addition to

is liable to prove again that, for most Oaxacanists, even a small dose of comparative religion and hermeneutical theory is more than they can stomach).

Be that as it may, numerous individual Round Table articles do address religion-related topics.<sup>36</sup> Virtually none, however, reflects a familiarity with the key debates that have driven the field of academic of Religious Studies for the past several decades;<sup>37</sup> and nor are contemporary developments in ritual studies, another relevant and thriving sub-field, seriously engaged.<sup>38</sup> Very

---

the sophisticated contributions by art historians, divinity scholars, historians, linguists, and others, the clergy, often taking the parish as a unit of analysis, have begun to produce accounts of the beliefs and practices of the peoples of Mesoamerica for the first time since the Colonial period."

<sup>36</sup> Regarding other Monte Albán Round Table contributions that directly address religion-related topics, also see, in addition to the articles noted in this paragraph, the following six articles: (1) Alicia Herrera Muzgo Torres, "Objetos rituales encontrados asociados al adoratorio de la Plataforma Sur," First Round Table, pp. 329-38; (2) Víctor de la Cruz, "Monte Albán, ¿espacio sagrado zapoteco o sólo sitio turístico?," Second Round Table, pp. 145-56; (3) Ubaldo López García, "Conceptualización vernácula en lugares sagrados," Second Round Table, pp. 195-210; (4) Víctor de la Cruz, "Cambios religiosos en Monte Albán a fines del periodo Clásico," Third Round Table, pp. 159-74; (5) Roberto Zarate Morón, "Símbolos prehispánicos y ritos contemporáneos de creación y nacimiento en el sur del Istmo de Tehuantepec," Third Round Table, pp. 175-204; and (6) John Monaghan, "Sacrificio y poder en Mesoamérica," Fourth Round Table, pp. 181-98.

<sup>37</sup> To broach a difficult topic, it is worth noting that historically, especially between the 1960s and 1980s, claims that the History of Religions (or Religious Studies) constitute a unique and autonomous "discipline" were usually predicated on the claim that "religion" is a unique, autonomous and "*sui generis*" phenomenon, which therefore requires the special attentions of approaches designed expressly to respect the "irreducibility of religion." According to that argument, the "discipline" of the History of Religions provides a level of insight not present in the "reductionist" approaches to religion of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, economists, etc. On this claim to the so-termed irreducibility of religion, see, for instance, Mircea Eliade, "A New Humanism" and "The History of Religions in Retrospect: 1912 and After," in Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 1-36. At present, very few scholars of religion continue to insist on the *sui generis* nature of religion, and thus Religious Studies is, I concur, more accurately described as a "field" than a "discipline" per se. This does mean, however, that specialists in the academic study of religion do not have a unique contribution to make to interdisciplinary conversations about topics like Monte Albán.

<sup>38</sup> Regarding an infrequent example of a Mesoamerican archaeologist who does engage ritual studies, Rosemary A. Joyce, "Religion in a Material World," in *Religion and Politics in the*

few articles, for instance, reflect an awareness of the methodological concerns that one would encounter in an undergraduate course on Theories and Methods in the Study of Religion of the sort I, like someone in virtually every Religious Studies program in America, have taught for years. The Fourth Round Table (2004) did include as one of four sub-themes “Social Development and Religion.” Papers in that section by Marcus Winter, Arthur Joyce, Manuel Esparza, Víctor de la Cruz, Maarten Jansen and Miguel Alberto Bartolomé provide a short list of Oaxacan specialists who have, at least on occasion, devoted more sustained attention to the study of religion.<sup>39</sup> All of them become, thereby, especially valued resources for the present project.<sup>40</sup>

---

*Ancient Americas*, eds. Sarah B. Barber and Arthur A. Joyce (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 141-64, makes good use of leading ritual theorist Catherine Bell, as well as gesturing toward the very lively discussion of “material religion” that is presently underway in religious studies.

<sup>39</sup> See the following six articles in *Bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca: Memoria de la Cuarta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Robles García: (1) Marcus Winter, “La religión, el poder y las bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca Prehispánica” (pp. 503-27), which may still be the most sustained effort to chart changes in religion across the long history of Monte Albán; (2) Arthur A. Joyce, “La Acrópolis de Río Viejo: una biografía de lugar” (pp. 529-53); (3) Manuel Esparza, “De naguales, vírgenes madres y demás seres extraños: lo racional de esos conceptos” (pp. 555-69); (4) Víctor de la Cruz, “Los múltiples nombres y formas de Pitao” (pp. 571-82); (5) Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen, “Inauguración de templos y dinastías. La piedra grabada de Nuú Yuchi” (pp. 583-99); and (6) Miguel Alberto Bartolomé, “Elogio del politeísmo: las cosmovisiones indígenas en Oaxaca” (pp. 601-42). The extended methodological reflections in this last paper, by Bartolomé, provide perhaps the strongest exception among the 114 articles in the five Round Table volumes to my complaints that these papers do not engage current theoretical debate in religious studies; this one does.

<sup>40</sup> Manuel Esparza, once director of Oaxaca regional center of INAH and later director of the Oaxaca state archives, is the exception insofar as, while his paper in this volume explores the prospect of applying recent developments in cognitive and neurobiological approaches to ancient Oaxacans—and that does represent a highly fashionable trend in religious studies—aside from this, little of his writing really bears on the religion of Monte Albán. By contrast, Víctor de la Cruz (1948-2015), a native Zapotec speaker born in Juchitán, Oaxaca, with a unique profile that includes credentials as a lawyer, award-winning poet, researcher specialized in Oaxacan studies, and author of a PhD dissertation at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México that was published as *El pensamiento de los binnigula’sa’: cosmovisión, religión y calendar con especial referencia a los binnizá* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2007), has perhaps the strongest claim to a professionalized training in religious studies; and references to his important work will appear at numerous points in this book. But, as his prolific and provocative writings demonstrate, even he is not really attuned to the late twentieth-century and current developments in academic religious studies.

Nonetheless, estimable scholarly accomplishments notwithstanding, two of them are archaeologists, two anthropologists, one an ethnohistorian, and the other a linguist and poet. Despite making major contributions that will be addressed at some length in this book, none is really a scholar of religion by primary training, which is much more importantly a matter of perspective than credential.

Likewise, the Fifth Round Table (2009) opened with a keynote address by anthropologist and ethnohistorian Michael Lind on "The State Religion of Monte Albán and the Cociyo Priests of Lambityeco."<sup>41</sup> That plenary piece includes among the most thorough and articulate reviews of the much-debated topic of Zapotec conceptions of divinity (something to which I will return in chapter 4) as well as providing a prelude to Lind's path-breaking *Ancient Zapotec Religion: An Ethnohistorical and Archaeological Perspective* (2015).<sup>42</sup> Focused on Zapotec religion at the time of the Spanish Conquest, which is to say long after the collapse of Monte Albán, that essay

---

<sup>41</sup> Michael Lind, "La religión estatal de Monte Albán y los sacerdotes de Cociyo de Lambityeco," en *Monte Albán en la encrucijada regional y disciplinaria: Memoria de la Quinta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, eds. Nelly M. Robles García y Ángel I. Rivera Guzmán (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2011), 17-42.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Lind, *Ancient Zapotec Religion: An Ethnohistorical and Archaeological Perspective* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015). Regarding his slim predecessors in focusing on ancient Oaxacan religion, Lind, *ibid.*, 4, considers that, "Compared to Nahua and Maya religions, the study of Zapotec and Mixtec religions are [sic] in their infancy and lack the volume of documentation available for study." As a sign of the limited scholarly attention that Oaxacan religion has attracted, Lind, *ibid.*, 3, locates his work with respect to only three previous works on Zapotec religion: (1) Eduard Seler, "The Wall Paintings of Mitla," in Eduard Seler et al., *Mexican and Central America Antiquities, Calendar Systems, and History*; translated under the supervision of Charles P. Bodwitch; Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 28 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), 243-324; (2) an unpublished 1910 manuscript by Martínez Graciada that, "also deals with Zapotec religion, although it lacks the scholarly approach of Seler;" and (3) a collection of articles on various aspects of Zapotec religion that includes a Spanish translation of Seler's work, Víctor de la Cruz y Marcus Winter, coords., *La religión de los binnigula'sa'* (Oaxaca: Fondo Editorial, Instituto Estatal de Educación Pública de Oaxaca, 2002). Actually, the only previous single-authored, book-length study of Zapotec religion is Víctor de la Cruz, *El pensamiento de los binnigula'sa': cosmovisión, religión y calendar con especial referencia a los binnizá* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2007), which is a modified doctoral dissertation for which Miguel León-Portilla served as adviser with archaeologist Marcus Winter and linguist Thomas C. Smith Stark as committee members.

is vigorously interdisciplinary insofar as it combines careful analyses of the relevant sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish colonial documents and the archaeological record; Lind thereby establishes a new bar with respect to the study of ancient Zapotec religion. But this too is work that operates without significant engagement of current (or past) theoretical debates among Religious Studies professionals.<sup>43</sup> It is, therefore, harsh but not inaccurate to say that Oaxacan Studies remain uniformed by any development of any form of academic Religious Studies during

---

<sup>43</sup> The very careful attention to Zapotec ethnohistorical and archaeological materials in Lind's *Ancient Zapotec Religion* is, unfortunately, not matched by a complementary attentiveness to the conceptualization of "religion." For instance, in the context of some quick definitions in his Introduction, Lind writes, "*Ideology* represents the ways that members of a sociocultural system interact with regard to ideas. Ideology encompasses religion" (ibid., 2; italics his); but neither that view of religion (as strictly a matter of ideas[?]) nor even the term "ideology" is really apparent in the book. A couple of paragraphs later, he presents the more sociologically functional view that, "Herein, Zapotec religion is conceived as a shared worldview that helped to integrate Postclassic Zapotec city-state culture" (ibid., 3), a point to which he returns in his final conclusion (ibid., p. 352); but that too is not a sustained view of religion throughout the book. Lind is explicit (if somewhat puzzling) in stating that the purpose of his book does *not* include examining Zapotec religion's "underlying theological principles" (a somewhat obscure phrase he repeats no less than six times in a single paragraph on ibid., 4), which certainly would be a goal for most scholars of religion. The most urgent aspect of Lind's prefatory comments on Zapotec religion (ibid., 8-10) is to side with "the traditional view" that Zapotec religion was "characterized by a pantheon of gods and a hierarchical priesthood" and against Joyce Marcus's alternate view that Zapotec religion was largely (he says, she says, *solely*) "animatistic," and thus less invested in personal "gods" than impersonal supernatural forces. (I will explore this contentious topic at length in chapter 4 relative to what I term "the divinity priority, II-A.") In short, religionists have to be frustrated by Lind's lack of methodological clarity and self-consciousness about the nature and workings of "religion," which for him remains, in Benson Seler's term, "a folk category" insofar as Lind seems to understand religion as a distinct sphere of Zapotec life that, while difficult to define, is ostensibly quite easy to identify when one sees it. His seemingly benign assumption that some things Zapotecs think and do are "religious" while other apparently "political," "social" or "economic" matters are "not-religious" is, as serious scholars of religion know, fraught with problems. Nonetheless, on the positive side, far more helpful is Lind's enumeration of five key topics relative to ancient Zapotec religion to which he endeavors to provide more "comprehensive discussion" than they have previously received: (1) Zapotec deities, (2) the priesthood, (3) religious rituals and ceremonies, (4) the nature of Zapotec temples and (5) the sacred and solar calendars that regulated many ritual and religious activities. Ibid., xvii-xviii, 4. Though along with his limited conceptualization of "religion," Lind's manner of interpretation is also a perfect exemplification of the oversimplification that Zapotec built forms have fixed, once-and-for-all meanings, his comments on each of those five topics will prove very useful in my subsequent discussion. As noted in the text, irrespective of all my criticisms, his work does set a new bar for the study of ancient Zapotec religion—exceptionally helpful in many respects.

the past half century; and engagements with anthropological theories of religion are very limited as well.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, from the perspective of a historian of religions, Oaxacan archaeologist Kent Flannery’s wry assessment of his field, initially issued in 1976, remains as true today as when he wrote it:

“Mesoamerican archaeology has absolutely no coherent and consistent theoretical framework by means of which ritual or religion can be analyzed and interpreted. This being the case, it’s every man for himself, and [one archaeologist’s] guesses are as good as anyone’s.”<sup>45</sup>

In short, for the Round Table volumes, as for Oaxacan Studies more generally, religion is a topic of interest but not a field of specialized study. Compelling as the results may be, simply to talk about “religion” from the perspective of an archaeologist or art historian, without engaging the relevant methodological issues, is neither an exercise in Religious Studies nor in interdisciplinarity; to date, however, there is little evidence that the theoretical contributions of religionists are of any concern to Oaxacanists. Moreover—here assigning at least equal blame to the religionists’ side of the disciplinary divide—unless I were inclined to claim an exemption for myself, one is hard pressed to find scholars trained first and foremost in Religious Studies who have devoted sustained attention to pre-Columbian Oaxaca. In sum, with scant exceptions, the two disciplinary streams have yet to intersect.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> With rare exceptions that I will occasionally point out, one is hard pressed to find any reference to works, old or newer, written by specialists in religion; in is telling, for instance, and a leading Oaxacan archaeologist goes to the Merriam-Webster dictionary for a definition of “religion.” In chapter 4 on the commemoration of divinity (II-A), for instance, I will make the case that the presently most promising and theoretically informed insights about indigenous Oaxacan religion come not from archaeology or ethnohistory, but from ethnography rather, for example, the work of Miguel Bartolomé and John Monaghan.

<sup>45</sup> Kent V. Flannery, “Interregional Religious Networks,” in *The Early Mesoamerican Village: Updated Version*, ed. Kent V. Flannery (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2009), 331. This book was originally published by Academic Press in 1976, where the same quote appears on a slightly different page.

<sup>46</sup> Regarding one of those notable exceptions, see the uniquely large collection of entries on aspects of Mesoamerican religions that appear in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, revised 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., editor-in-chief Lindsay Jones (Detroit, Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), which is the standard reference work for Religious Studies. David Carrasco served as the area editor with oversight of this portion the heavily revised encyclopedia. Though based on very different conceptions of

**IV. A FELICITOUS COMBINATION:  
THE HOPEFUL PROMISE OF BRIDGING  
RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND OAXACANIST STUDIES**

There is, then, an infrequently crossed gap between the fields of Mesoamericanist Studies and Religious Studies, with scholars on both sides exemplifying the old adage that even the best-informed experts seldom know what they don't know. Accordingly, for us Religious Studies

---

"religion," and though only infrequently concerned directly with Oaxaca, a block of eight "Principal Articles" appear together in volume 9: (1) Miguel León-Portilla, "Mesoamerican Religions: Pre-Columbian Religions" (vol. 9, 5879-95); (2) Hasso von Winning, "Mesoamerican Religions: Formative Cultures" (vol. 9, 5895-97); (3) Doris Heyden, "Mesoamerican Religions: Classic Cultures" (vol. 9, 5897-5906); (4) H. B. Nicholson, "Mesoamerican Religions: Postclassic Cultures" (vol. 9, 5906-14); (5) Veronica Gutiérrez and Matthew Restall, "Mesoamerican Religions: Colonial Cultures" (vol. 9, 5914-23); (6) Robert S. Carlsen, "Mesoamerican Religions: Contemporary Cultures" (vol. 9, 5923-33); (7) Doris Heyden, Yolotl González Torres, and David Carrasco, "Mesoamerican Religions: Mythic Themes" (vol. 9, 5933-39); and (8) Yolotl González Torres, "Mesoamerican Religions: History of Study" (vol. 9, 5939-46). Other relevant "Supporting Articles" in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion* include: (9) Ximena Chávez Balderas, "Afterlife: Mesoamerican Concepts" (vol. 1, 148-52); (10) Heather S. Orr, "Ballgames: Mesoamerican Ballgames" (vol. 2, 749-52); (11) Anthony F. Aveni, "Calendars: Mesoamerican Calendars" (vol. 3, 1355-60); (12) Gerardo Aldana, "Cosmology: Indigenous North and Mesoamerican Cosmologies" (vol. 3, 2008-10); (13) Ximena Chávez Balderas, "Funeral Rites: Mesoamerican Funeral Rites" (vol. 5, 3241-45); (14) Christine Eber and Christine Kovic, "Gender and Religion: Gender and Mesoamerican Religions" (vol. 5, 3411-15); (15) H. B. Nicholson, "Iconography: Mesoamerican Iconography" (vol. 7, 4311-15); (16) Arnd Adje Both, "Music: Music and Religion in Mesoamerica" (vol. 9, 6266-71); (17) Kay A. Read, "Rites of Passage: Mesoamerican Rites" (vol. 11, 7810-13); (18) Paul Gendrop, "Temple: Mesoamerican Temples" (vol. 13, 9065-67); (19) Lawrence E. Sullivan, "Tricksters: Mesoamerican and South American Tricksters" (vol. 14, 9357-59); (20) Hugo G. Nutini, "Day of the Dead" (vol. 4, 2227-31); (21) David Stuart, "Maya Religion" (vol. 9, 5795-5800); (22) Richard A. Diehl, "Olmec Religion" (vol. 10, 6817-20); (23) Jacques Galinier, "Otomi Religion" (vol. 10, 6926-28); (24) Paul Friedrich, "Tarascan Religion" (vol. 13, 9001-2); (25) Philip P. Arnold, "Tlaloc" (vol. 13, 9213-14); (26) Hugo G. Nutini, "Tlaxcalan Religion" (vol. 13, 9214-16); (27) Hanns J. Prem, "Toltec Religion" (vol. 13, 9221-25); and (28) Roberto Williams-Garcia, "Totonac Religion" (vol. 13, 9253-55). Additional Aztec-related entries, all written by David Carrasco, include: "Aztec Religion" (vol. 2, 715-20); "Coatlicue" (vol. 3, 1841); "Huitzilopochtli" (vol. 6, 4155-56); Quetzalcoatl" (vol. 11, 7556-57); "Tezcatlipoca" (vol. 13, 9093-94); "Human Sacrifice: Aztec Rites" (vol. 6, 4185-91); and "Kingship: Kingship in Mesoamerica and South America" (vol. 8, 5172-78). In this course of this book, I will refer to a large percentage of these entries, which seem to be very seldom accessed by Mesoamericanists.

scholars, who operate with our own distinct rubrics and assumptions, the alternate expertise of non-religionists writing about religion is quickly apparent; and seldom are religionists favorably impressed by what “outsiders” to their field say and imply about religion. By the same token, however, I know full well that archaeologists will recognize immediately by my hermeneutical pattern of inquiry and my choice of terms that I am, like a halting non-native speaker of their language, not one of them. Never am I mistaken for an archaeologist. The two fields (by no means unified among themselves) have, understandably enough, deep and important disagreements about what qualifies as viable evidence, as sound methods of interpretation and, most importantly, as rewarding conclusions;<sup>47</sup> and thus habitual homilies about the virtues of interdisciplinary cooperation remain, in that respect, more imagined than enacted. One hopes for a kind of reciprocal complementarity; but, in candor, I have frequently described most of my encounters with archaeologists, only half in jest, as occasions of “unrequited love” insofar I as rely constantly and extensively on their work—which I respect enormously!—and yet, in return, they want nothing of the *Religionswissenschaft*-informed reflections that I offer to them.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Regarding very different assessments as to what qualifies as rewarding conclusions, *religionists*—who are accustomed to investigating contexts in which matters of chronology and the identity of the key protagonists are much more easily apparent—tend to find archaeologists’ surmises about the chronologic order of events, along with careful descriptions of excavated features and objects, however accurate and hard-earned, to be pedestrian, that is, points of departure for interpretation rather than satisfying conclusions in themselves. *Archaeologists*, by contrast, tend to find religionists’ interpretations, which frequently entail demonstrating the applicability of some larger theory or pattern, to be speculative, perhaps intriguingly imaginative but not reliable. While these are imperfect generalizations, the interpretive efforts of religionists most resemble that strain of so-termed post-processual archaeology associated with Ian Hodder’s *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and thus one can imagine that archaeologists who support that sort of “hermeneutical archaeology” will be more receptive to religionists’ interpretations (like mine) than will those who advocate for more strictly “scientific” approaches to archaeology.

<sup>48</sup> Additionally, regarding very different attitudes toward the value of cross-cultural comparison: While the acknowledgement of similarities *and* differences among far-spaced contexts is a fundamental feature of the history of religions (or *Religionswissenschaft*) approach that undergirds this project—and thus is a crucial feature in every chapter of this book—even so broad-thinking a Oaxacan archaeologist as Ignacio Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology: The Vanished Civilizations of Middle America* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1980), 127, found the comparison of Oaxacan monuments to buildings elsewhere in the world to be “insufferable.” Likely, then, neither Bernal nor his contemporary archaeologist counterparts would not find the persistently comparative approach of this book palatable or helpful.

That experience gives me little confidence that this project will enjoy a favorable reception among the archaeological faithful; and, alternatively, if this work is aimed at scholars of religion with a special interest in Oaxaca, that constitutes, at this point, an even smaller and less promising audience. To be sure, if we chide Mesoamericanists for ignoring the arguably thriving field of Religious Studies, we can issue equally strong complaints that comparative religionists, ostensibly interested in the fully cross-cultural range of religious expressions, all too seldom complement their surveys of the so-termed "world religions" with any significant acknowledgment of the wealth of Mesoamerican religious traditions. And if that oversight is true of Aztecs and Mayas, it is doubly pertinent with respect to neglect of religions in the Oaxaca region.

Entrenched disciplinary divides notwithstanding, I end this Preface and begin this book on an emphatically positive note by arguing that, while this non-intersection of fields represents a large disappointment, it also constitutes an even greater opportunity. Yes, there is reason for great optimism! Indeed, my ideal reader is that emergent scholar, maybe a graduate student, casting about for an area of specialization, who is inspired to develop paired expertises in Religious Studies and Mesoamericanist Studies. The prolific example of historian of religions and Aztec specialist David Carrasco, for instance, provides unassailable evidence of the opportune application of history-of-religions approaches to Mesoamerican materials, even if such work is despairingly rare, again especially in the case of Oaxaca.<sup>49</sup> And the potentialities for those who follow Carrasco's example, and really engage seriously the two fields, are limitless.

To date, the inclination of religionists to take up Mesoamerican materials, which no one can dispute are every bit as inherently fascinating as those of any region on the globe, continues to meet with one especially daunting obstacle—the nature of available evidence. That is to say,

---

<sup>49</sup> Of innumerable works by this author that demonstrate the rich prospects of relying on history of religions approaches to (re)interpret the Aztecs, the collection of essays in David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), may represent the nearest counterpart to the eleven essays of which this book is composed.

in my experience, it is the relative scarcity of the sort of "sacred texts" and documentary evidence with which the majority of scholars of religion are most adept that provides the root cause why dozens of fledgling religionists elect to concentrate, for example, on India, China, Japan or the Ancient Mediterranean for every one that endeavors to build a career on the study of Mesoamerican religion. Too often the root assumption among religionists—which I challenge throughout this book—is that the "religion" of a people is expressed most fully and accurately in their written sources; and thus most religion scholars, textual exegetes by training, continue to presume that without contemporaneous literary sources one simply cannot know the religious orientations of ancient Oaxacans. Consequently, religionists remain reticent to tread into a field where secure conclusions seem inevitably elusive. And, as noted, still-apt but also highly distressing observations in the 1970s that "Mesoamerican archaeology has no agreed-upon theoretical or methodological framework for dealing with prehispanic religion"<sup>50</sup> do little to assuage the hesitations of scholars of religion to engage this field.

Nevertheless, as I enter a second decade exploring the apposite materials, I grow ever more convinced that Oaxaca, and particularly Monte Albán, do provide an ideal venue in which to exercise, experiment with and develop fresh approaches to the study of religion. Both sides of the non-equation can benefit greatly from the efforts of the other. The evidentiary perils, while daunting, are not so severe as many of my religionist colleagues presume. For instance, the spectacularly abundant archaeological materials on Monte Albán still represent excavations of only some 15% of the site, so that archeologists working there and in neighboring sites continue to provide a constantly fresh fund of new information; and, at the same time, religionists are awakening to the severe limitations of their text-preoccupations with veritable explosion of interest in "materialist (but not Marxist) approaches" to religion that should help them to capitalize on this ever-richer fund of archaeological evidence.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, irrespective of the

---

<sup>50</sup> Marcus, "Archaeology and Religion: A Comparison of the Zapotec and Maya," 297.

<sup>51</sup> The discussion of "materialist (but not Marxist) approaches" to the study of religion will be a major concern in chapter 10 relative to what I term "the propitiation priority, III-C." For introduction to the pertinent issues, though, see the vigorous and polemical discussion in Hans Belting, Pamela Klassen, Birgit Meyer, Christopher Pinney and Monique Scheer, "An Author Meets Her Critics: Around Birgit Meyer's 'Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Toward a Material Approach to Religion,'" *Religion and Society*, vol. 5, no. 1 (September 2014): 205–54.

absence of exact counterparts to Abrahamic “sacred scriptures” or to the huge corpus of Maya hieroglyphs, Oaxaca, and more specifically Monte Albán, does present remarkably abundant glyphic and iconographic “texts” on engraved stones; and while Alfonso Caso established Zapotec hieroglyphic writing and calendrics as an area of major concern since the 1920s, Javier Urcid’s prolific and ongoing work make this presently an arena of momentous advancement.<sup>52</sup> Likewise the study of Oaxacan mural painting, especially in tomb contexts, advances with great promise.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, while no Oaxaca source matches the thoroughness of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s Aztec-focused *General History of the Things of New Spain* (a.k.a. *The Florentine Codex*), there are substantial, if not numerous, colonial-era accounts by Spanish priests and administrators that bear directly on the matter of Zapotec religion;<sup>54</sup> and there is also an impressive number of pre-Columbian and colonial-era Mixtec codices, along with village-specific *lienzos*, that provide explicit information about the final stages of Monte Albán’s career as a regional capital, which have likewise been subject to intense and promising scrutiny.<sup>55</sup> Additionally—and this can hardly be overstated—ongoing ethnographic studies of Oaxaca’s

---

<sup>52</sup> In chapter 5 relative to what I term “the sacred history priority, II-B,” I will address at length both older approaches to Zapotec writing, including that of Alfonso Caso and later Joyce Marcus, as well as abundance of newer work by the current leader in the topic, including, among many works, Javier Urcid, *Zapotec Hieroglyphic Writing*, Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology, no. 34 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001); and Javier Urcid, *Zapotec Writing: Knowledge, Power and Memory in Ancient Oaxaca*, Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI, 2005), <http://www.famsi.org/zapotecwriting/>.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Arthur G. Miller, *The Painted Tombs of Oaxaca, Mexico: Living with the Dead* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and the collection of essays in Beatriz de la Fuente, coord. *La pintura mural prehispánica en México*, vol. III, Oaxaca, tomos III & IV (México, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> Of innumerable works that engage colonial-era accounts of Oaxacan religion, which will be a major topic of discussion in chapter 4 relative to “the divinity priority, II-A,” especially notable among many works is Lind, *Ancient Zapotec Religion: An Ethnohistorical and Archaeological Perspective*.

<sup>55</sup> Of innumerable relevant works engaging the Mixtec codices that will be cited later in this book, for instance, in chapter 5 relative to “the sacred history priority, II-B,” see, for example, Maarten Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, *Encounter With the Plumed Serpent: Drama and Power in the Heart of Mesoamerica* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2007).

uniquely abundant and vibrant present-day indigenous communities present another invaluable resource.<sup>56</sup>

Accordingly, given these converging lines of evidence—all of which garner substantial attention in the subsequent chapters—my initial impressions that there was a manageably concise body of literature on Monte Albán gives way to the realization, happily enough, that the fund of pertinent publications is immense and fast growing. As noted, mastery of the relevant materials remains, for me, an elusive aspiration. While Central Mexican sites like Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlán, along with numerous Maya sites, continue to attract far more public and scholarly attention, the Monte Albán Round Table volumes present only the tip of a swelling iceberg of interpretive scholarship on ancient Oaxaca. Moreover, unlike the Caso-dominated half decade, which lay such a strong foundation for Oaxacan Studies, one discovers now a panoply of well-informed differences of approach and opinion; as demonstrated by the widely divergent views surveyed in *Narrating Monte Albán*, laying hold of a prevailing party-line, even on matters of the largest import, is difficult. Healthy, if sometimes acrimonious, disagreement on Oaxacan prehistory prevails now more than ever. Furthermore, where the processual archaeologists of the 1960s and 1970s, while making huge progress on all sorts of chronologic and demographic fronts, turned attention away from religion, various post-processual approaches demonstrate much renewed interest in the dynamics and import of religion in the social history of the region.<sup>57</sup> Attention to religion is once again in fashion in Oaxacan Studies! And more promising still is the mounting, if still-nascent, enthusiasm on both sides for “materialist approaches,”

---

<sup>56</sup> Regarding innumerable ethnographic works on Oaxacan indigenous communities that will be cited, for instance, in chapter 4 relative to “the divinity priority, II-A,” especially notable are Miguel Alberto Bartolomé, “Elogio del politeísmo: las cosmovisiones indígenas en Oaxaca;” and Alicia M. Barabas, *Dones, duenos y santos: Ensayos sobre religiones en Oaxaca* (México: Porrúa/Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2006).

<sup>57</sup> Regarding (re)constructions in Oaxacan history in which religion again plays a paramount role, see, among numerous works by Arthur A. Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), which is discussed at length in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 7.

which undermine the privileged status of textual sources as the only truly reliable means of recovering religious priorities.<sup>58</sup>

In short, therefore, even if slippage and lack of clarity as to conceptions of “religion” persist, and even if scholars of religion remain largely unsolicited guests in Oaxacan academic circles, they arrive at the discussion of Monte Albán to find a veritable banquet of questions and possibilities. Consequently, I hope in this work to prove to myself and others that the general History of Religions and Oaxacan Studies do indeed provide the felicitous combination that I believe they do. For all their shortcomings, these essays represent my best efforts of several years devoted to making that Oaxacanist-religionist marriage work.

---

<sup>58</sup> Regarding the current vogue for “materialist approaches,” working from the archaeological side, see, for instance, Julian Droogan, *Religion, Material Culture and Archaeology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); and Arthur A. Joyce, “New Directions in the Archaeology of Religion and Politics in the Americas,” in *Religion and Politics in the Ancient Americas*, eds. Sarah B. Barber and Arthur A. Joyce (New York: Routledge, 2018), especially pages 8-11. And for three strong examples of a near-avalanche of advocacy for “materialist approaches” issuing from the religious studies side, see: (1) S. Brent Plate, Birgit Meyer, David Morgan and Crispin Paine, “Editorial Statement,” in *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2005): 4-9; (2) Manuel A. Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and (3) Jennifer Schepher Hughes, “Cradling the Sacred: Image, Ritual, and Affect in Mexico and Mesoamerican Material Religion,” *History of Religions* 56, no. 1 (August 2016): 55-107.