

**OUTLINE OF
CHAPTER ONE**

**Allurement via Homologized Architecture:
Monte Albán as Cosmic Mountain, Microcosm and Sacred Center**

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CHAPTER ONE

Allurement via Homologized Architecture: Monte Albán as Cosmic Mountain, Microcosm and Sacred Center (Priority I-A)

“The symbolic and religious significance of mountains is endless. Mountains are often looked on as the place where sky and earth meet, a “central point” therefore, the point through which the *Axis Mundi* goes, a region impregnated with the sacred, a spot where one can pass from one cosmic zone to another... The mountain, because it is the meeting place of heaven and earth, is situated at the centre of the world, and is of course the highest point of the earth. That is why so many sacred places—“holy places,” temples, palaces, holy towns—are likened to “mountains” and are themselves made “centres,” becoming in some magic way part of the summit of the cosmic hill.”

Mircea Eliade, 1958¹

“All Mesoamerican peoples defined themselves in terms of sacred mountains, and it is also acknowledged that the Nahuatl concept of the *altépetl* had corresponding organizational structures in Oaxaca and the Maya lowlands.”

William L. Fash and Leonardo López Luján, 2009²

“Like monuments at other ceremonial centers in Mesoamerica and throughout the world, the Main Plaza [of Monte Albán] was built as an *axis mundi* creating a point of communication and mediation between the human world and the supernatural otherworld.”

Arthur A. Joyce, 2004³

* 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 section. 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 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 99-100.

² Editors’ introduction to *The Art of Urbanism: How Mesoamerican Kingdoms Represented Themselves in Architecture and Imagery*, eds. William L. Fash and Leonardo López Luján (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2009), 6.

³ Arthur A. Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” in *Mesoamerican Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, eds. Julia A. Hendon and Rosemary A. Joyce (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 198-99.

This chapter is devoted to asking and answering the question: How and to what extent is the so-termed homology priority (I-A) relevant to Monte Albán.⁴ As outlined in *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, I use “homology priority” or “homologized architecture” largely as a kind of shorthand for Mircea Eliade’s famously broad theory of “sacred space.” One concedes to some defensiveness in beginning a twenty-first-century analysis of the great Zapotec capital with a mode of phenomenological analysis that many regarded as outmoded in the 1980s and that few archaeologists have ever found persuasive. But I strongly disagree with that dismissal, on grounds that I hope will become apparent. And, moreover, since still no one has undertaken a sustained Eliadean interpretation of the Monte Albán, that seems a significant gap worth filling—especially if we treat that heuristic exercise as a beginning rather than anything like the culmination of this study. Certainly no interpretive panacea, Eliade continues to provide present-day Oaxacanists boundless avenues of inquiry and interpretation.

The Layout of the Chapter: From Presumptions of “Religiosity” to Thematic Categories, Diachronic Arguments, and Critical Reflections on the “Sacredness” of Monte Albán

As regards the agenda and layout of the chapter, there are four very uneven sections. Section one prefaces the main discussion with a brief inventory of the persistent presumptions of travelers and scholars that Monte Albán was originally constructed, above all, as a “religious capital” and a “sacred place,” claims that have been issued with far more enthusiasm than precision. The second and third sections, the main body of the chapter, refine those incessant and important, if frequently impressionistic, assessments of Monte Albán’s “profound religiosity” by tracking across the relevant material in two directions. Section II works in a thematic and synchronic mode to inventory the relevance of three primary components of

⁴ For the broader rationale that underwrites this chapter, see Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), vol. II, chap. 14, “Homology: Microcosmic Images of the Universe (Priority I-A).” For a fuller enumeration of the general questions concerning homologized architecture for which I am here working to provide Oaxaca-specific replies, see Jones, *ibid.*, vol. II, “Appendix: An Expanded Morphology of Ritual-Architectural Priorities,” 296-98; or see the relevant portion of that Appendix that is included in the present work.

Eliade’s highly influential model of sacred space, which remains the obvious point of departure on this topic: that is, his respective ideas (1) about “heterogeneous space” and hierophanies, (2) about a constellation of issues subsumed under the term *imago mundi*, and (3) about the even more oft-cited notion of *axis mundis* or the symbolism of the center and cardinal directions.⁵ All three of those propositions are closely interrelated and subsumed in the notion that Monte Albán was conceived as a “cosmic mountain,” a conception that was greatly enhanced via an ambitious program of “homologized” design and building.

For many scholars of religion, this discussion of several of Eliade’s most well-worked categories may be a path of inquiry too heavily travelled to merit much attention. But that set of sections is nonetheless intended as both a practical primer on those much-debated issues, especially for non-religionists, and a point of departure for the more detailed interpretations of the religion(s) of Monte Albán that follow. To that end, I adopt over and over a three-step, general-to-specific approach, which will reappear in every subsequent chapter, wherein I consider each respective theme first as a broadly cross-cultural phenomenon, second as a notion that applies across the whole of Mesoamerica, and finally as a category relevant (or, in some instance, notably *irrelevant*) to the unique case of Oaxaca and Monte Albán.

Section III, in order to elaborate more fully on that Monte Albán-specific component of the discussion—which is, after all, the primary initiative of this project—complements the synchronic (or thematic) discussion of three Eliadean categories with a diachronic (or historical) discussion focused exclusively on the ancient Zapotec capital. This somewhat shorter portion of the chapter revisits the same issues in a more historical or chronological way by exploring the relevance of the three pillars of Eliade’s model of sacred space—that is, those three aspects of “homologized architecture”—across the duration of Monte Albán’s emergence, flourishing and decline as a regional capital. To date, this line of argument has been explored most fully by archaeologist Arthur A. Joyce; and while he makes absolutely no explicit reference to Mircea

⁵ Note that this three-part arrangement follows closely the four-part pattern of questioning for the homology priority (I-A) that is laid out in “Appendix B: An Expanded Heuristic Framework of Ritual-Architectural Priorities,” though, in this case, I have combined the second and third categories that appear in that appendix, which thus leaves me with three rather than four main variations on the homology theme.

Eliade or to the phenomenological history of religions, according to Joyce’s compelling re-reading of the evidence, it is an enthusiasm for cosmic mountains and sacred spaces that accounts, in very large part, for Monte Albán’s initial site selection, its rapid rise to prominence and also its eventual demise. Accordingly, that portion relies heavily on Joyce’s (re)construction of the history of the site.⁶

Finally, section IV reestablishes a precedent from *Narrating Monte Albán* by ending this and every chapter with “Closing Thoughts” that summarize the most salient points and the way this topic fits in which my larger interpretive argument. In this case, those closing comments entail a more critical take on Eliade’s outlook wherein I contend that all of these aspects of “homologized design” actually serve primarily, not as the full agenda of Monte Albán’s architectural program, but rather as “strategies of ritual-architectural allurement,” which initiate innumerable more substantive “ritual-architectural events.” Enroute to those summational remarks, though, I start the chapter with an array of very mixed academic and amateurish adulations for the supposed “sacredness” or “religiosity” of the Zapotec capital’s conception and career.

**I. MONTE ALBÁN AS “SACRED SPACE” PAR EXCELLENCE:
PROFESSIONALIZED AND POPULAR ACCOLADES, AFFIRMING ASSUMPTIONS
AND OCCASIONAL SKEPTICISM**

Paired with the ubiquitous accolades for Monte Albán’s remarkable unity of conception are equally prevalent presumptions, from both professional scholars and lay visitors, that the foremost purpose of the site was as “a religious center.” The mountaintop capital, which strikes nearly everyone as too grand to have served merely prosaic purposes, is, even for those not familiar with the work of the Romanian historian of religions, a first-order exemplar of what Mircea Eliade would describe as an *axis mundi*, or a point of ontological transition between the

⁶ Recall that Lindsay Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán: Seven True Stories of the Great Zapotec Capital of Southern Mexico*, chap. 7, “Arthur Joyce’s Poststructural Rereading of Oaxacan Social History: A Story of Sacred Spaces, Rituals and the Agency of Commoners,” provides a much fuller summary of Joyce’s (re)construction of Monte Albán history than the synopsis I provide in section III of this chapter.

world of humans and that of the gods. Though Monte Albán is not a featured example in Eliade’s fulsome theorizing about “sacred space” and “cosmic mountains”—heuristic formulations that I will in this chapter utilize rather than defend—it very well could be.⁷

Working to summarize all available accounts of Monte Albán as of the 1880s, Hubert H. Bancroft, for instance, was led to conclude that “the plateau was probably in aboriginal times a strongly fortified holy place, sacred to the rites of the native worship...”;⁸ and during his brief nineteenth-century visit, William Henry Holmes’s first inclination also was to assess Monte Albán not only as a city and a stronghold, but also “a sacred place.”⁹ Initiating his explorations

⁷ While Eliade seldom, if ever, mentions Oaxaca or Monte Albán in his strictly academic writing, Mircea Eliade, *No Souvenirs: Journal, 1957-1969*, trans. Fred H. Johnson, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), 237-59, describes a 1965 “winter in Mexico” that included a brief visit to the site. Accompanied for the most part by Italy-born Mesoamericanist Laurette Séjourné, Eliade spent Jan. 29-Feb. 19, 1965, in Mexico City where he taught a course on South Asian religions, gave some public lectures and attended “Round Table” meetings that enabled him to meet, among others, Paul Kirchhoff and Jiménez Moreno (*ibid.*, 239-48). On the last day of those meetings, Eliade (then 57) met Alfonso Caso (then 70). This only potentially fascinating encounter between giants in their respective fields—perhaps emblematic of the disconnect between archaeologists and religionists described in the Preface—prompted Eliade to write simply, “At our table, Dr. Caso and the Frenchman [an ethnologist working on a thesis about the Voladores or ‘flying men’ of Veracruz] spoke without stopping. I rested...” (*ibid.*, 249-50). Eliade, again accompanied by Séjourné, spent Feb. 24-26, 1965, in Oaxaca, where, along with visits to several prominent churches and museums in Oaxaca de Juárez, he made the standard day trips to Mitla and Monte Albán. Though I will argue in this chapter that Monte Albán is a stupendous exemplar of nearly all of Eliade’s favorite themes about “sacred space,” of the Zapotec mountain capital he wrote just one page, which simply reiterates things that a guide had told him (*ibid.*, 258-59). Eliade ends his brief comments about Monte Albán by noting, “I should have written down more closely my conversations with Dr. Caso last week” (*ibid.*, 259).

⁸ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Native Races*, vol. IV, *Antiquities* (San Francisco: The History Company, Publishers, 1886), 384. Bancroft, who never visited Oaxaca, bases his description of Monte Albán primarily on the writings of Guillermo Dupaix, Juan B. Carriedo, Johann von Müller and Désiré Charnay.

⁹ William Henry Holmes, *Archaeological Studies Among the Ancient Cities of Mexico* (Chicago: Field Columbia Museum, 1895, 1897), 226, was atypical and forward-thinking in being immediately impressed not only with the site’s apparent religious and military significance, but also its genuinely urban status: “In ancient times the Monte Albán district was no doubt densely populated, and this mountain was a favorite seat—not a fortress simply, or even a sacred place devoted exclusively to worship and burial, but an actual city, the center of population of an

of the ruins in 1902, Mexico’s first Inspector of Archaeological Monuments, Leopoldo Batres, likewise took for granted that it had been a *cuidad santa*, holy city or “Mecca,” and that most of its monuments were “of religious character;”¹⁰ and even the usually cautious Alfonso Caso, from his earliest writings about the hilltop ruins in the 1930s, while acknowledging the site’s appeal as a natural fortress, likewise referred to Monte Albán as “a sacred city.”¹¹

Caso’s archaeological contemporary Eduardo Noguera concurred that Monte Albán was less a military command post or seat of political authority than “a religious capital... a city of great religious importance;”¹² and art historian Miguel Covarrubias also agreed that Monte Albán’s greatest salience lay not in its military or political heft, but as “a great religious city.”¹³ Ignacio Bernal was even more insistent—and more influential—in arguing that Monte Albán, by explicit contrast to the imperial ambitions of Teotihuacan, was a place at which religious priorities superseded militaristic motives. Contrary to subsequent averments by Richard Blanton, Kent Flannery, Joyce Marcus and others about Monte Albán’s largely political aspirations and successes,¹⁴ Bernal maintained that, unlike Teotihuacan, “the Zapotec state was

agricultural people which utilized the valleys, and terraced and planted every square yard of available ground up to the crests of the mountains.”

¹⁰ Leopoldo Batres, *Exploraciones de Monte Albán* (México: Casa Editorial Gante, 1902), 7, 8.

¹¹ Alfonso Caso, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, *El Libro de la Cultura* (Barcelona: Editorial González Porto, 1936), 38; reprinted in Alfonso Caso, *Obras: El México Antiguo: Mixtecas y Zapotecas*, vol. 5 (México: El Colegio Nacional, 2002), 608.

¹² Eduardo Noguera, “Cultura Zapoteca,” en *México Prehispánico: Culturas, deidades, monumentos*, Antología de *Esta Semana-This Week*, 1935-1946, ed. Emma Hurtado (México, D.F.: Rafael Loera y Chavez, 1946), 237.

¹³ Miguel Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 144.

¹⁴ Regarding the elaborate (re)construction of Monte Albán’s history in Richard E. Blanton, *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (New York: Percheron Press, [1978] 2004), which features the site’s status as a “disembedded capital” and thereby absents religion any significant role, see Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 4; and regarding the alternative (re)construction of Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, which also affords political motives a far larger role than religious motives, see *ibid.*, chapter 6.

never an empire.”¹⁵ Rather than growing temporal or economic authority, Classic-era Monte Albán’s claim to distinction lay, according to Bernal, in the elaboration of its art and religiosity, so much so, in fact, that he hypothesized that “it may have been far more theocratic than any of its neighbors.”¹⁶

Nearly all mid-twentieth-century scholars followed Ignacio Bernal’s lead. Herni Stierlin, for example, relied primarily on Bernal’s claims concerning Monte Albán’s uniquely theocratic disposition to appraise it in the 1960s “a sacred acropolis... the sacred capital of the Zapotecs;” “with its lack of fortifications, it was,” Stierlin concluded, “primarily a center of worship...”¹⁷ Similarly impressed by the centrality of its location at the intersection of the three valleys together with an apparent lack of battlements, Hans-Dietrich Disselhoff and Sigvald Linné describe Monte Albán as “the sacred city and place of pilgrimage” for “the diligent and god-fearing Zapotecs.”¹⁸ Also writing in the 1960s, for Justino Fernández, it is not only “a splendid architectural achievement,” but also “a great temple city centre with pyramids and other religious and civic buildings...”¹⁹ In 1967, Leo Deuel too restates the then-prevailing view that, “Despite its easily defensible, fortress-like topography, Monte Albán presumably never served any military purpose—no weapons to speak of have been found in the burials—but was one of those

¹⁵ Ignacio Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, text by Ignacio Bernal, photographs by Irmgard Groth (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 38.

¹⁶ Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 38. Regarding Ignacio Bernal’s ideas about the uniquely “theocratic” character of the Zapotec capital, see the section entitled “Period IIIB: Late Classic Monte Albán: Teotihuacan’s Demise and the Zapotecs’ Theocratic Successes and Excesses” in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chapter 2. Note also that Bernal’s student, John Paddock, went even further in explaining the seemingly unlikely site selection of Monte Albán in terms of the Zapotecs’ religio-aesthetic investments in a devotion to the sublime, which trumped mere practicality and economic efficiency. I argue, though, in *ibid.*, chap. 3, that the thoroughly non-Western Zapotec protagonists of Paddock’s (re)construction are even more preoccupied with art than with religion per se.

¹⁷ Henri Stierlin, *Ancient Mexico* (Cologne, Germany: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1968), 132.

¹⁸ Hans-Dietrich Disselhoff and Sigvald Linné, *The Art of Ancient America: Civilizations of Central and South America*, revised edition (New York: Greystone Press, 1966 [originally 1960]), 52.

¹⁹ Justino Fernández, *Mexican Art* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1967 [originally 1965]), 12.

vast religious shrines and places of pilgrimage raised by American men to their demanding gods."²⁰ In the 1970s, Doris Heyden and Paul Gendrop consider that Monte Albán, grander and more monumental in conception than Mitla, deserves distinction not only as "the sacred city of Zapotecs" but, moreover, in its later years, as "the first Mesoamerican necropolis."²¹ And Paul Westheim, yet another art historian, made his case that Monte Albán was "a city of temples, a religious center for the masses" by contrasting its "architecture of empty spaces" to the tightly confined precincts of Mitla, which he saw as a more exclusivistic and specialized site for the burial and visitation of Zapotec kings and noblemen.²²

More popular writers have been even readier to wax romantic about the overwhelmingly religious character of Monte Albán. Aldous Huxley, for example, while disdaining nearly every aspect of the 1930s Oaxaca that he experienced, nonetheless praised Monte Albán as "incomparably magnificent," "a city of the gods," "the High Place of the Zapotecs [which] remains extraordinarily impressive."²³ Huxley, moreover, broaches a recurrent assessment of the elevated site's combination of a stupendous view with its seemingly equal liabilities as a practical place of habitation by opining that "Monte Albán was evidently the cathedral of a whole Zapotec diocese. A cathedral without a cathedral town... Monte Albán was a city of the

²⁰ Leo Deuel, *Conquistadors without Swords: Archaeologists in the Americas* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 199.

²¹ Doris Heyden and Paul Gendrop, *Pre-Columbian Architecture of Mesoamerica* (New York: Electa/Rizzoli, 1975), 67, 203.

²² Paul Westheim, *The Art of Ancient Mexico* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1965), 202-6. Monte Albán was, in his assessment, "a ceremonial city [around which] extends a complete sacred zone, scattered with tombs and pyramids built over subterranean funerary niches." *Ibid.*, 202. The ideas in this book were formulated somewhat earlier than the 1965 publication date suggests insofar as Westheim (1886-1963), a German-born student of art history under Heinrich Wölfflin, lived in Mexico from 1941 until the end of his life. The book, originally written in German, was translated into Spanish by Westheim's wife and collaborator, Mariana French, and appeared as *Arte Antiguo de México* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1950).

²³ Aldous Huxley, *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1934), 260-61.

gods—visited by men and women, not permanently inhabited.”²⁴ This idea that Monte Albán was strictly a “ceremonial center,” or a site of occasional pilgrimage rather than a fully functioning city, though soundly rejected by nearly all serious scholars,²⁵ comported perfectly with popular enthusiasms that “Monte Albán was built for a single purpose: to exalt man into communion with divinity.”²⁶ That appraisal was bolstered by Zapotec author Wilfrido Cruz’s oft-repeated observation from the 1940s that the site is sometimes referred to by local Zapotec speakers as Danibaan, “Hill of the Tiger” or “sacred mountain.”²⁷ And, based on her travels in the

²⁴ Huxley, *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, 260.

²⁵ Focusing his comments on the Maya zone, Marshall Joseph Becker, “Priests, Peasants, and Ceremonial Center: The Intellectual History of a Model,” in *Maya Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, eds. Norman Hammond and Gordon R. Willey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 11-14, attributes the idea that major Classic Maya sites had been periodically visited “ceremonial centers” rather than fully functioning cities to the singular influence of the popular (as opposed to more technical) writings of J. Eric S. Thompson. But the history of ideas about Monte Albán suggests that many non-academic observers were, on their own, drawing similar conclusions. Unlike in the Maya zone, however, Oaxacanist scholars have very seldom made the case that Monte Albán was not a true city, even if they have relied on quite different criteria to make that judgment.

²⁶ Helen Augur, *Zapotec* (Garden City, New York: Dolphin Books, Doubleday & Company, 1954), 122.

²⁷ Wilfrido C. Cruz, *Oaxaca recondita: Razas, idiomas, costumbres, leyendas, y tradiciones del Estado de Oaxaca, México* (México, D.F.: Linotipograficos Beatriz De Silva, 1946), 157-64. On the much-discussed topic of the earlier place names for Monte Albán, also see Víctor de la Cruz, “Monte Albán, ¿espacio sagrado zapoteco o sólo sitio turístico?,” en *Sociedad y patrimonio arqueológico en el valle de Oaxaca: Memoria de la Segunda Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2002), 150, where de la Cruz comments on the conclusions of Wilfrido C. Cruz, Ignacio Marquina and Maarten Jansen, who has more recently relied on a map of Xoxocotlán to reaffirm the prospect that the city was known as “Hill of the Jaguar.” On that last possibility, see Maarten Jansen, “Monte Albán y el origen de las dinastías mixtecas,” in *Memoria de la Primera Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán: Procesos de cambio y conceptualización del tiempo*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2001), 149, where he says, “With the help of the map of Xoxocotlán, the sign of Monte Albán can be identified in the Mixtec codices [as] ‘Monte que se abre-insecto-recinto de carrizos,’ which is subject to several translations.” For more extended reflections on the various original name(s) of Monte Albán that appear in Mixtec codices, see Maarten Jansen, “Monte Albán y Zaachila en los Códices Mixtecos,” in *The Shadow of Monte Albán: Politics and Historiography in Postclassic Oaxaca, Mexico*, edited by Maarten Jansen, Peter Krofges, and Michel R. Oudijk (Leiden: Research School CNWS, School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies, 1998), 67ff. Also, Alfonso

1950s, American journalist and historical writer Helen Augur maintained that the ancient capital was “created in a spirit of religious exaltation, and its beauty has the enduring quality of its purpose. It was a place of pilgrimage for many peoples, perhaps the first Mecca of our continent.”²⁸

During the 1970s and 1980s, however, such exuberant evaluations of the metaphysical motives that ostensibly account for Monte Albán, as we’ll see, engendered more scholarly skepticism than support. During that era, ostensibly corrective assumptions that the Zapotec capital owed its existence primarily to political rather than religious forces, especially the initiative of self-serving rulers, held sway.²⁹ Nonetheless, in 1981, architect and planner Horst Hartung ventured that,

“By about 650 or 600 B.C., Monte Albán had been founded, maybe for functional reasons, and perhaps even because of demographic pressure; but, in my opinion, the religious necessity and urge to build a corresponding environment, combined with the world-view and its structural expression, seem to have been of equal—or at least basic—importance.”³⁰

Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969), 14, has an extensive discussion of possible origins of the name “Monte Albán.” And Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 5-6, has a summary discussion of the etymology of the name Monte Albán in which he mentions the usual suspects, Wilfrido Cruz included. This, however, is only the tip of an iceberg of debate on this naming issue.

²⁸ Augur, *Zapotec*, 103. Deuel, *Conquistadors without Swords*, 199, is yet another of many who concluded (wrongly) that, “Unlike Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico or Chan-Chan in coastal Peru, [Monte Albán] does not seem to have been a true urban center, though aerial observation has reported possible traces of humble settlements on the mountainsides. But since there was no water nearby, one may well doubt whether the area could ever have attracted any sizable number of inhabitants.”

²⁹ See, for example, Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chaps. 4-6, on the thoroughgoing historical (re)construction narratives offered by Richard Blanton, Marcus Winter, and co-authors Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery, all of which contend that religion, variously defined, was *not* the leading impetus for the conception and history of the Zapotec capital.

³⁰ Horst Hartung, “Monte Albán in the Valley of Oaxaca,” in *Mesoamerican Sites and World-Views*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1981), 43. While I find Hartung’s position compelling, I should register some discontent with his intimation that “religious necessity” is at odds with the “functional reasons” for founding Monte Albán.

And since then, Mesoamericanists working in numerous contexts—notably, Mayanist Wendy Ashmore and Aztec specialist David Carrasco—have renewed interest in questions of “sacred space” and “sacred landscapes.”³¹ Focused specifically on Oaxaca, Heather Orr, for example, reasserts, with excellent warrant, the assessment that the hilltop site enjoyed great prestige, and even exuded “spiritual magnetism,” as a pilgrimage destination perhaps prior to and definitely long after its zenith as a great regional capital.³² Archaeologist Marcus Winter, though usually attributing the site selection to its ecological and commercial appeal rather than either religious or military virtues,³³ likewise entertains the prospect that, “In the pre-urban Village stage, Monte Albán itself, as a striking and centric hill, may have functioned as a sacred place before it became an urban community;” it is even plausible, Winter thinks, that Monte Albán was “used as a place of pilgrimage—perhaps as Zempoatépetl does among the Mixes today...”

³¹ *Mesoamerican Sites and World-Views: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 16th and 17th, 1976*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 1981) constitutes an early and forward-thinking engagement of these issues. Among numerous more recent works that bring to the fore issues of “sacred space and landscape,” see, for instance, Wendy Ashmore, “Site-Planning Principles and Concepts of Directionality Among the Ancient Maya,” *Latin American Antiquity* vol. 2, no 3 (1991): 199-226; *Archaeologies of Landscape: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Wendy Ashmore and A. Bernard Knapp (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Wendy Ashmore, “Decisions and Dispositions: Socializing Spatial Archaeology,” *American Anthropologist* vol. 104, no. (2002): 1172-83; *Landscape and Power in Ancient Mesoamerica*, eds. Rex Koontz, Kathryn Reese-Taylor, and Annabeth Headrick (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001); David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmvision and Ceremonial Centers*, second edition (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2014); and *The Art of Urbanism: How Mesoamerican Kingdoms Represented Themselves in Architecture and Imagery*, eds. William L. Fash and Leonardo López Luján (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2009).

³² Heather S. Orr, “Procession Rituals and Shrine Sites: The Politics of Sacred Space in the Late Formative Valley of Oaxaca,” in *Landscape and Power in Ancient Mesoamerica*, eds. Rex Koontz, Kathryn Reese-Taylor, and Annabeth Headrick (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001), 55-79. Orr, *ibid.*, 58, borrows the term “spiritual magnetism” from James Preston, “Spiritual Magnetism: An Organizing Principle for the Study of Pilgrimage,” in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press), 33ff.

³³ See, for instance, Marcus Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* (Oaxaca, Mexico: Carteles editors, P.G.O., 1992 [originally 1989]), 34-35; or, for a summary of the (re)construction narrative of Monte Albán that can be extracted from that work, see Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 5.

because, "even if that was the case, we would not necessarily find much archaeological evidence."³⁴ And, of late, Arthur Joyce, on whose view I will elaborate later in this chapter, has authored numerous articles that extend his early conjecture that,

"The Monte Albán hilltop itself may have been a sacred monument, visually and perhaps symbolically dominating the valley... The Main Plaza, with its impressive public buildings visible throughout much of the valley below, would have been a kind of permanent, immovable source of prestige and sacred power that could not have been accessed by other elites except through cooperation with Monte Albán's rulers or conquest."³⁵

Moreover, of late, indigenous scholar-activists have been even more insistent on Monte Albán's privileged status an inherently "sacred place." In their view, though largely abandoned more than 1200 years ago, the site continues to provide a quintessential exemplar of the legal definition ratified at the 1997 National Meeting on Legislation and Religious Rights of the Indigenous Peoples of Mexico wherein "sacred place" was officially designated as "a natural or architectural space where indigenous peoples communicate with deities and ancestors in order to obtain material and/or spiritual benefit."³⁶ In a polemical piece entitled "Monte Albán: Zapotec Sacred Space or Only a Tourist Site?," Zapotec historian and poet Víctor de la Cruz, for instance, makes a vigorous (language-based) argument that the sacrality of this mountain, not unlike other places revered by the *binnigula'sa*, or Zapotecs, is inherent and permanent; and thus none of the tripled efforts at "legalized dispossession" first by Spanish colonizers, then by evangelizers, and now by agents of globalization who favor commercial over devotional interests is sufficient to

³⁴ Marcus Winter, "Religión de los *Binnigula'sa*': la evidencia arqueológica," in *Religión de los Binnigula'sa'*, Víctor de la Cruz y Marcus Winter, coords. (Oaxaca, México: Fondo Editorial, IEEPO, 2001), 64; my translation.

³⁵ Arthur A. Joyce and Marcus Winter, "Ideology, Power, and Urban Society in Prehispanic Oaxaca," *Current Anthropology*, vol. 37, no. 1 (1996), 37-38.

³⁶ Yuri Escalante Betancourt, Ari Rajbsbaum Gorodezky, y Sandra Chávez Castillo, coords., *Derechos religiosos y pueblos indígenas*, Memoria del Encuentro Nacional sobre Legislación y Derechos Religiosos de los Pueblos Indígenas de México (México: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1998), 145; quoted by Víctor de la Cruz, "Las creencias y prácticas religiosas de los descendientes de los *Binnigula'sa*,'" in *Religión de los Binnigula'sa'*, Víctor de la Cruz y Marcus Winter, coords. (Oaxaca, México: Fondo Editorial, IEEPO, 2001), 320; my translation.

eradiate the enduring religious prestige of the place.³⁷ According to this argument, *once sacred, always sacred*. In the view of de la Cruz, the sacred status of Monte Albán is innate and unalienable—what Eliade would term the trans-cultural consequence of a “manifestation of the Sacred” rather than the product of merely human decisions—and, therefore, indigenous people, who are uniquely attuned to the special energy of the place, deserve proprietary access to the site.³⁸ Yes, for scholar-activists of that ilk, Monte Albán’s inherent sacrality remains fully intact.

II. MONTE ALBÁN AS “SACRED SPACE” AND “COSMIC MOUNTAIN”: A SYNCHRONIC VIEW

In short, then, the erstwhile notion that Monte Albán was, and perhaps is, a specially “religious” site—long simply assumed, then largely rejected—is now back in vogue. To begin thinking more deeply and more critically about that proposition, consider in turn the Oaxaca-specific relevance of three of the most prominent features of Mircea Eliade’s general model of “sacred space,” a term still more often linked to him than anyone else.³⁹

³⁷ De la Cruz, “Monte Albán, ¿espacio sagrado zapoteco o sólo sitio turístico?,” 45-156. This article was reprinted in *Monte Albán: Conciencia e imaginación*, Jorge Machorro Flores, Compilador (Oaxaca, México: Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, 2004), 150-53; but I will cite page numbers from the 2nd Round Table volume, which is the original.

³⁸ De la Cruz, “Monte Albán, ¿espacio sagrado zapoteco o sólo sitio turístico?,” 151, supports this claim to Monte Albán’s inherent sacred status with a direct citation of Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 16-17. But, as noted momentarily, de la Cruz, *ibid.*, 152 [my translation], also makes the seemingly contradictory claim that it was not a “manifestation of the sacred” but humans, namely the *binnigula’sa’* or Zapotecs “who originally sacralized this space...”

³⁹ For a concise, self-summarizing overview of his theory of sacred space and homologized architecture, see, for example, Mircea Eliade, “Sacred Architecture and Symbolism,” in Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 105-29.

A. MONTE ALBÁN AS HETEROGENEOUS SPACE AND HIEROPHANY: DISCOVERED AND/OR HUMANLY CONSTRUCTED MOUNTAINS OF SUSTENANCE

Regarding a first pillar of his theory, while Eliade maintains that people with a “modern consciousness” experience the world as uniformly neutral with respect to religion, he is adamant that those who subscribe to an “archaic ontology”—a non-modern mode of thinking that he would ascribe to all of the protagonists in the history of ancient Oaxaca—experience the natural landscape as heterogeneous, partly sacred and partly not so. In his words, “For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others.”⁴⁰ Indeed, among the foundational—and most controversial—of Eliade’s assertions is that “sacred places” are, from a traditional perspective, the site of “hierophanies,” that is, places at which some god, or some numinous power, *really* has manifested itself, and thus that some places and features of the landscape *really* are imbued with a religious energy not characteristic of the wider landscape.⁴¹ In his terms,

“Every kratophany [or manifestation of power] and hierophany [or manifestation of the sacred] transforms the place where it occurs: hitherto profane, it is henceforward a sacred area... A sacred place is what it is because of the permanent nature of the hierophany that first consecrated it.”⁴²

According to this phenomenological perspective, the sacrality of particular sites and features of the landscape is *not*, after the fashion of Emile Durkheim or, more recently, Jonathan

⁴⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1959), 20.

⁴¹ On hierophanies, or “the ‘irruption’ of the Sacred into the profane,” see, among countless relevant possibilities, Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 21; or Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1963), 6. Note, by the way, that, grammatically, the term “hierophany” can refer both to *the one-time act or occurrence* of a manifestation of the sacred or to *the place* (e.g., Monte Albán) at which such an occurrence is understood to have happened, which thus considered to have a lasting “sacred” quality. Regarding criticism of the notion of hierophany, see, for instance, Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot,” in his *Map is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 92ff.

⁴² Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 367-68.

Z. Smith, a matter of social consensus, cultural conditioning or even acts of ritual consecration.⁴³ According to Eliade, no merely human activity is adequate to transform ordinary places into sacred ones. Thus, in his view, sacred places are never, properly speaking, “chosen” or “constructed” by people. Instead, it falls to *homo religiosi* to search about—and to “discover”—those already intrinsically, supernaturally potent places where sacred reality has made its presence felt, and then to orient themselves and their architectural construction projects with respect to those specially charged sites.⁴⁴ Arguing for the relevance of that means of sacred site selection among the numerous contemporary Oaxacan communities that he has studied, ethnographer Miguel Bartolomé, for instance, looks to Eliade’s formulations to contend that, “for indigenous societies, the sacredness of a place or figure derives from an irruption of power proper in that place or in that figure.”⁴⁵ In that sense, a rewarding orientation entails positioning oneself with respect to “found” rather than “constructed” hierophanic places.

⁴³ In criticism of the notion that sacred places are discovered rather than created, see Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” in his *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 54ff.; or Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), chap. 1, “In Search of Place.”

⁴⁴ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 369. Regarding a Oaxaca-specific example of “specially charged sites,” which may carry either positive or negative valences, Ubaldo López García, “Conceptualización vernácula en lugares sagrados,” en *Sociedad y patrimonio arqueológico en el valle de Oaxaca: Memoria de la Segunda Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2002), 204 (my translation), explains: “Each village [in the Mixteca region] has its special places that were studied and classified by the ancestors as good or bad, and this quality is what determines the benignity or malignity of the site... We understand ‘the sacred’ by either option insofar as some sites are classified as good because they give health, love, money and things that are asked for; and some sites are classified as bad because they rob the spirit, sicken people, make animals evil and do not allow them to grow.” In either case, the good or bad qualities of a place are, as Eliade stresses, “discovered” rather than “made” or “constructed” by people.

⁴⁵ Miguel Alberto Bartolomé, “Elogio del politeísmo: las cosmovisiones indígenas en Oaxaca,” en *Bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca: Memoria de la Cuarta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2009), 623-24; my translation. Note, by the way, that, among Oaxacanists, Bartolomé provides perhaps the most methodologically informed use of Eliade’s work. In that respect, see also Miguel Alberto Bartolomé, “Un mensaje político de los mitos: La mitología de privación en Oaxaca, México y América Latina,” en *Cosmovisión mesoamericana: Reflexiones, polémicas y etnografías*, Alejandra Gámez Espinosa and Alfredo López Austin, coords. (México: El Colegio de México, Fideicomiso Historia de las Américas, 2015), 217-18, 241, where he applies Eliade’s

1. Sacred Mountains as a Cross-Cultural Phenomenon: The Intrinsic Sacrality of High Places

Of the innumerable landscape features that are especially prone to win this privileged sacred status—caves, crags, rocks, large trees, springs, lakes, waterfalls and sky phenomena—

notions of myth as exemplary to contemporary Oaxacans. Nonetheless, among other Oaxacanists who likewise explicitly appeal to Eliade’s work, I enumerate the following seven examples: (1) Ethnographer Alicia M. Barabas, in numerous of her works, makes explicit and well-informed use of Eliade’s ideas and terminology. See, among numerous examples, Alicia M. Barabas, “Cosmovisiones, mitologías y rituales de los pueblos indígenas de Oaxaca,” en *Cosmovisión mesoamericana: Reflexiones, polémicas y etnografías*, Alejandra Gámez Espinosa and Alfredo López Austin, coords. (México: El Colegio de México, Fideicomiso Historia de las Américas, 2015), 241; and Alicia M. Barabas, “Cosmovisiones y etnoterritorialidad en las culturas indígenas de Oaxaca,” *Antipoda: Revista de Antropología y Arqueología*, núm. 7 (julio-diciembre 2008), 2. (2) Zapotec scholar Víctor de la Cruz who makes frequent (though often uncritical) use of Eliade’s terminology and work. See, among numerous examples, Víctor de la Cruz, “Introducción a la religión de los *binnigula’sa*,” en *Religión de los Binnigula’sa*, Víctor de la Cruz y Marcus Winter, coords. (Oaxaca, México: Fondo Editorial, IEEPO, 2002), xiii-xxxiv. (3) Ethnographer Raúl Matadamas, “La arqueología y el presente en las comunidades oaxaqueñas,” en *Sociedad y patrimonio arqueológico en el valle de Oaxaca: Memoria de la Segunda Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2002), 113-25, who uses Eliade to accentuate the decidedly non-Western outlook of contemporary indigenous Oaxacans, especially concerning conceptions of natural environment; specifically concerning “sacred places,” see *ibid.*, 116. (4) Mixtec scholar Ubaldo López García, “Conceptualización vernácula en lugares sagrados,” 195-209, who uses Eliade to interpret the conceptualization of sacred sites in the Mixteca region. (5) María de los Angeles Ojeda Díaz, “El orden en el caos. Los arquetipos divinos en códices mixtécas,” 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), 678-79, who uses Eliade to argue for important parallels between Mixtec cosmology “not only with other traditions of Old Mexico, but also with ancient civilizations such as India, China, Sumerians, the Greek.” (6) Mexican ethnomusicologist Gonzalo Sánchez Santiago, “El canto de los ancestros. Símbolos sonoros en la práctica ritual zapoteca,” en *Bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca: Memoria de la Cuarta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2009), 664, who uses Eliade in the context of a discussion of Oaxacan whistles that emulate the rounds of animal spirits. And (7) Roberto Zárate Morón, “Símbolos prehispánicos y ritos contemporáneos de creación y nacimiento en el sur del Istmo de Tehuantepec,” 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), 177-78, who, as I note below, uses Eliade’s work in relation to *axis mundis* and centers in his interpretation of “cosmic mountains” in southern Oaxaca.

none is more prominent in Eliade’s writing, and none more relevant to our present discussion, than mountains.⁴⁶ As noted, he maintains that, “The symbolic and religious significance of mountains is endless... The mountain, because it is the meeting place of heaven and earth, is situated at the centre of the world, and is of course the highest point of the earth.”⁴⁷ He explains that, owing to this inherent correlation between height and transcendence, “many sacred places— ‘holy places,’ temples, palaces, holy towns—are likened to ‘mountains’ and are themselves made ‘centres,’ becoming in some magic way part of the summit of the cosmic hill...”⁴⁸ Then, in his characteristically comparative way, Eliade assembles a plethora of exemplars of “high places impregnated with sacred forces,” from the Palestinian Holy Land, to Sumeria, Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Java, China and elsewhere.⁴⁹ But there is, moreover, no question that religious prestige of mountains is relevant as well to Mesoamerica.

2. Sacred Mountains in Mesoamerican Cosmivision and Oaxaca: *Altepete* as Sources of Abundance and Conceptions of Polity

Assuredly, few would contest the observation that, “All Mesoamerican peoples defined themselves in terms of sacred mountains...;”⁵⁰ in that context, one’s place is invariably one’s place in relation to the surrounding mountains. Arguably, however, the most important and distinctively Mesoamerican variation on the theme is what Aztecs referred to as an *altépetl*

⁴⁶ José Alcina Franch, *Calendario y religión entre los zapotecos* (México, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1993), 119-21, enumerates a list of some 40 “natural places used by Zapotecs for sacred or cult purposes” of which by far the greatest number are hills or mountains and caves; only two on the list, a lagoon and a spring, are water features. While caves, which are nearly as ubiquitous in Oaxaca as mountains, is another top-tier exemplar of Eliade’s notion of hierophany, that is a topic to which I will return in chapter 11, concerning the so-termed sanctuary priority (III-D).

⁴⁷ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 99-100.

⁴⁸ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 100.

⁴⁹ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 100-2.

⁵⁰ Editors’ introduction to *The Art of Urbanism: How Mesoamerican Kingdoms Represented Themselves in Architecture and Imagery*, eds. William L. Fash and Leonardo López Luján (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2009), 6.

(plural, *altepeme*), that is, a “hill of sustenance” or, literally, a “mountain of water.”⁵¹ Though derived from Aztec sources, there is general consensus that “the Nahuatl concept of the *altépetl* had corresponding organizational structures in Oaxaca and the Maya lowlands.”⁵² And with respect to the interpretation of Monte Albán, the notion of *altépetl*—to which I will return time and again throughout this project—has a doubly relevant significance insofar as it refers both to a distinct way of conceptualizing the potency of mountains, especially in relation to fertility and rain, and, at another level, to a distinct conceptualization of polity. Consider each of those options in turn.

a. Altépetl as a “Water-Mountain” or “Hill of Sustenance”: The Existential Allure of Cosmic Mountains

First, in the former, more generic sense, the pan-Mesoamerican complex of ideas connected to *altepeme*, or “mountains of sustenance,” derives, according to Alfredo López Austin, largely from the agricultural lifestyle that began to take shape in Preclassic egalitarian villages; and then the profound investment in “cosmic mountains” persisted not only through the formation and decline of Mesoamerican cities and states, but even into the present-day native communities across the region, Oaxaca included.⁵³ In fact, likely, every pre-Columbian Oaxacan community was associated with a particular “hill of sustenance;” and while maps and codices across Mesoamerica come to use a bell-shaped hill sign, often with plants sprouting out from the respective sides of the hill, to designate landmarks and places, both Alfonso Caso and Joyce

⁵¹ Xavier Noguez, “Altépetl,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*, ed. David Carrasco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), vol. 1, 12-13.

⁵² Editors’ introduction to *The Art of Urbanism*, eds. Fash and López Luján, 6. Regarding Maya counterparts of the *altépetl*, see, for instance, Karl Taube, “Flower Mountain: Concepts of Life, Beauty, and Paradise among the Classic Maya,” *RES* vol. 45 (2005): 69-98.

⁵³ Alfredo López Austin, “Los mexicas y su cosmos,” in *Dioses del México Antiguo*, ed. Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (México: Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso, 1996), 21-43. Also see Johanna Broda, Stanislaw Iwaniszewski, y Ismael Arturo Montero, coords., *La montaña en el paisaje ritual* (México, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes, y el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2001, 2007).

Marcus suspect that the Zapotecs were the first to utilize “the hill sign” as a means denoting landmarks and place names.⁵⁴ Moreover, a distinctly Oaxacan expression of the idea, which emerges on ceramic bowls from the Late Preclassic period, comes in the two-part “composite symbol” of the so-called “stepped fret,” which is famously prevalent at Mitla, among elsewhere.⁵⁵ By Robert Markens’s persuasive semiological analysis, the stair-like component of the greca signifies a mountain, while the spiral component signifies a swirling eddy, and thus water—together an efficient depiction of a “water-mountain” or “mountain of water.”⁵⁶ And, as noted momentarily, the current indigenous devotion to local mountains that is abundant across Mesoamerica—and that which ethnographer Alicia Barabas explicitly identifies with Eliade’s notion of hierophanies—is especially apparent in Oaxaca.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Joyce Marcus, “How Monte Albán Represented Itself,” in *The Art of Urbanism: How Mesoamerican Kingdoms Represented Themselves in Architecture and Imagery*, eds. William L. Fash and Leonardo López Luján (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2009), 103. On the deep history of this “toponym” of pyramids and sacred mountains in the Oaxaca region, also see Robert Markens, “La transición del Clásico al Postclásico en el Valle de Oaxaca: hacia las causas y consecuencias de una crisis política,” 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), 519.

⁵⁵ According to Robert Markens, “El significado de la greca escondada en la imaginaria prehispánica de Oaxaca: Una base del poder político,” *Cuaderno del Sur, Revista de Ciencias de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS)*, año 18, núm. 35 (julio-diciembre 2013), 69 (my translation), “The *xicalcolihqui* or stepped fret appears for the first time in Mesoamerica among the *binngula’sa* ‘or the prehispanic Zapotecs of the Valley of Oaxaca during the Nisa Phase or the Monte Albán II Period (100 BC-200 AD) of the Late Preclassic period (300 aC-350 AD) when it is painted or engraved on the external walls of ceramic cylindrical bowls.” For an extended and much earlier discussion of the origin, development and meaning of the stepped fret motif, see Hermann Beyer, “El origen, desarrollo y significado de la greca escalonada,” *El México antiguo*, tomo 2, núms. 3 y 4 (México, 1924): 61-121. And, engaging Beyer and others on the topic, Westheim, *The Art of Ancient Mexico*, 99-123, for instance, devotes a full, widely comparative chapter to “The Stepped Fret.”

⁵⁶ Markens, “El significado de la greca escondada en la imaginaria prehispánica de Oaxaca,” 69-70. Markens, *ibid.*, 70, in passing, links the Oaxacan stepped fret to the Aztec *altépetl* imagery. Somewhat surprisingly, he does not identify any stepped frets at Monte Albán, but nor does he rule that out.

⁵⁷ Barabas, “Cosmovisiones y etnoterritorialidad en las culturas indígenas de Oaxaca,” 2. That article and Alicia M. Barabas, *Dones, duenos y santos: Ensayos sobre religiones en Oaxaca* (México, D.F.: Porrúa/Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2006), chaps. 1-3, are

By its temporal endurance and geographical distribution, the *altépetl* conception of mountains as “water dispensers” is, then, a prime component of the “hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican cosmovision. And the conception of a water-mountain is, moreover, as we’ll see again and again, a consummate feature of “ritual-architectural allurement,” an existential common denominator of sorts, because this is something with which all peoples across the region are intimately familiar. More specifically, as López Austin explains with respect to a Oaxacan example of his own, the contemporary Huaves villages in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec:

“In the traditional conception these mountains are not solid bodies, but hollow prominences that cover an intricate sacred space in which the amount of goods that human beings have to receive is regulated. This space is imagined as a vast domain, a kingdom, a temple, in some cases a refuge within which the ancient gods continue to work secretly from the arrival of the evangelizers. Thus, the Huaves believe that the goddess Mijmeor Kaan, ‘The Virgin of the Stone,’ continues to protect her people from her underground mansion, Monopostioc, whose name means ‘The church that is inside the mountain.’”⁵⁸

Paradoxically immovable and fluid, solid and aqueous, inanimate and animated, *altepeme*—aptly described as “huge inverted funnels, hollow and filled with the water that made life possible”⁵⁹—are, I will argue in a moment, perfect exempla of what Eliade means by “religious symbols.”⁶⁰

Strengthening that case, additional contemporary examples from the intensely mountainous region of Oaxaca abound. Lynn Stephen, for example, notes that the famed weaving village of Teotitlán del Valle, only 35 kilometers from and arguably settled in advance

among numerous places that she discusses the huge import of orientation with respect to mountains for contemporary indigenous Oaxacans. More generally on the prevalence of present-day Mesoamerican rituals trained on sacred mountains, see, for instance, Alfredo López Austin y Leonardo López Luján, *Monte Sagrado—Templo Mayor* (México D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia y Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2009), 15-17.

⁵⁸ López Austin y López Luján, *Monte Sagrado—Templo Mayor*, 17; my translation.

⁵⁹ Robert Markens, “La transición del Clásico al Postclásico en el Valle de Oaxaca,” 518.

⁶⁰ Mircea Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, eds. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 86-107.

of Monte Albán, takes its Zapotec name, *sxía*, meaning “under the rock,” from its position beneath a mountain, currently called *xiabets* (brother rock), where both ancient and contemporary Teotitecos “went to worship their gods and idols.”⁶¹ And Markens recounts the traditions of the nearby Zapotec village of San Mateo Macuilxochitl, also just east of Oaxaca de Juárez, concerning their imposing local hill called Danush, which provides both “the sacred core of the old city” and a focus of present-day worship.⁶² As he explains,

“Residents say many things about their beliefs of Danush including that the interior of the hill is hollow and humid, and that it contains a treasure of gold coins stored in pots. In addition, they believe that a huge plumed serpent leaves the hill for a few hours on the eve of the New Year.”⁶³

In Markens’s view, contemporary beliefs about gold coins are probably a colonial-era “distortion” of the pre-Columbian notion that this hill, like others in the Oaxaca region, was not only a link between the terrestrial world and the sky, but also a source of natural abundance, which was guarded by a “water serpent” who resided within it.⁶⁴ And even more to our present point, he contends that images of mountains that are engraved on a set of five Late Preclassic ceramic boxes that Caso and his colleagues found in Mound H of the Main Plaza constitute “conclusive evidence that the concept of the mountain of sustenance or sacred mountain appeared in the public religious rites of Monte Albán.”⁶⁵ Likewise, Javier Urcid finds evidence

⁶¹ Lynn Stephen, *Zapotec Women: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Globalized Oaxaca*, second edition (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 113-14, notes that, “According to local legend and several sources mentioned by Joseph Whitecotton [*The Zapotecs: Princes, Priests, and Peasants* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 158, 312n], Teotitlán is associated with a sun god in the form of a bird that descended from the heavens to his temple...”

⁶² Markens, “El significado de la greca escondada en la imaginaria prehispánica de Oaxaca,” 71.

⁶³ Markens, “El significado de la greca escondada en la imaginaria prehispánica de Oaxaca,” 70; my translation. For related and fuller comments on Macuilxochitl and Danush, see Markens, “La transición del Clásico al Postclásico en el Valle de Oaxaca,” 515-23.

⁶⁴ Markens, “El significado de la greca escondada en la imaginaria prehispánica de Oaxaca,” 71; and Markens, “La transición del Clásico al Postclásico en el Valle de Oaxaca,” 517.

⁶⁵ Markens, “La transición del Clásico al Postclásico en el Valle de Oaxaca,” 519; my translation. Markens goes on to hypothesize that, “If the concept of sacred mountain was still in force [at Monte Albán] even earlier than the Late Preclassic, it could have served as a powerful

in the iconography of Monte Albán funerary contexts, specifically Tomb 104, of “mountains of substance” and the symbolism of “world centering” that form an important (I’d say, alluring) component of the narrative program that abets the ancestor veneration that will become so prominent in chapter 7 discussions of the commemoration of the dead (priority II-D).⁶⁶

Roberto Zárate Morón’s comments on the sacred mountain of Dani Guíaati (or Cerro Blanco) near the contemporary southern Isthmus town of Asunción Ixtaltepec and the cave replete with pictographs on that mountain known as *Ba’cuana*—a term that he translates as “the place of sustenance very delectable”—go even farther in revealing the multivalence and complexity of Oaxacan reverence for sacred mountains.⁶⁷ He notes (with specific reference to Eliade) that mountains like Cerro Blanco are “considered *the center of the world*, the place where they join heaven, earth and hell;” but then he observes additionally that Cerro Blanco was and is considered *a place of origins* insofar as it was “the first true mountain that emerged from the primordial waters of the inaugural day of the cosmos” and *a symbol of fertility* insofar as this is “the soil that contained the nutritive seeds and fertilizing waters that fed the first human beings.”⁶⁸ Moreover, in terms that speak directly to the notion of mountains as hierophanies, Zárate Morón observes that, “the sacred mountain of Cerro Blanco was and is considered as *the goddess and the great mother*, with *Ba’cuana* [i.e., the cave] conceived as her feminine belly and

symbol and a stimulus for the foundation and sudden growth of Monte Albán on the crest of a high mountain, somewhat withdrawn from the water resources and flat land for cultivation.” Ibid.; my translation. And in that respect, he notes also that his view concerning the forces that account for Monte Albán’s success are quite compatible with those of Arthur Joyce’s and Javier Urcid’s ideas about the ways that Zapotec rulers capitalized on their mountaintop setting to position themselves as “intermediaries between the supernatural and commoners.” Ibid.; my translation.

⁶⁶ Javier Urcid, *Zapotec Writing: Knowledge, Power and Memory in Ancient Oaxaca* (2005) <http://www.famsi.org/zapotecwriting>, 61.

⁶⁷ Zárate Morón, “Símbolos prehispánicos y ritos contemporáneos de creación y nacimiento en el sur del Istmo de Tehuantepec,” 177-79, discusses the difficult etymology of the term “*Ba’cuana*” before concluding that it means something like “the place of sustenance things very delectable” or “place, tomb, cave or guarantee of the things of sustenance very delectable and sacred.”

⁶⁸ Zárate Morón, “Símbolos prehispánicos y ritos contemporáneos de creación y nacimiento en el sur del Istmo de Tehuantepec,” 177-78; my translation, italics added.

womb which the Sun, which is conceived as male, introduces himself as her male counterpart,"⁶⁹ and, furthermore, Cerro Blanco is consequently *a place of healing* on the summit of which local healers continue to conduct rites to restore the emotional and physical health of locals.⁷⁰

Joyce Marcus too reechoes that multivalence of mountains' meanings by observing that,

"Mountains in Oaxaca seem to have had multiple functions, serving as sacred landmarks, natural territorial boundaries, refuge areas, defensible promontories, and ritual altars. The Zapotecs considered mountains to be living, sacred beings. Like the highland Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantán, today's Zapotec anthropomorphize mountains, labeling them with the same terms used for the human body..."⁷¹

And ethnographer Raúl Matadamas also affirms this conception of mountains as human bodies by citing contemporary Mazatecos in the villages near Huautla de Jiménez in northern Oaxaca who "consider that stones are bones, earth is meat, and vegetation is skin or clothing of the hills,"⁷² and indigenous Oaxacans from San Pedro Jaltepetongo who hold that their local hill "is like a person: it has a head, it has a body and it has feet; the head sends orders to the body, the

⁶⁹ Zárte Morón, "Símbolos prehispánicos y ritos contemporáneos de creación y nacimiento en el sur del Istmo de Tehuantepec," 194; my translation, italics added. I will return to this example and this notion that sacred mountain is itself conceived as divinity or goddess in chapter 4 on the divinity priority, II-A.

⁷⁰ Zárte Morón, "Símbolos prehispánicos y ritos contemporáneos de creación y nacimiento en el sur del Istmo de Tehuantepec," 180; my translation, italics added.

⁷¹ Joyce Marcus, "How Monte Albán Represented Itself," in *The Art of Urbanism: How Mesoamerican Kingdoms Represented Themselves in Architecture and Imagery*, eds. William L. Fash and Leonardo López Luján (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2009), 102. According to Marcus, *ibid.*, 102-3, "In Zapotec, the summit of a mountain is called its head; the sides are its ribs; the front is its face; the back is its back; and the base of the hill is its foot (Robert MacLaury, personal communication, June 1978)..."

⁷² Matadamas, "La arqueología y el presente en las comunidades oaxaqueñas," 120; my translation.

body does all the work, and the feet support everything...”⁷³ In Marcus’ view, given the persistent anthropomorphization of Oaxaca mountains and the continued practice of personalizing every prominent peak, “Long before Monte Albán became an urban center, it seems likely that the hill itself had a Zapotec name.”⁷⁴

In fact, to anticipate a rich theme that I will explore more fully in chapter 4 relative to the commemoration of divinity (priority II-D), there is a host of layered and overlapping ways in which mountains are “personified,” “divinized” or otherwise connected to “the gods.”⁷⁵ We will encounter, for example, evidence not only that mountains are conceived as “cosmic axes” for interacting with deities that reside far-off in a celestial realm (a possibility to which I return momentarily), but also that mountains are, as the previous allusions to “water serpents” and “great mothers” suggest, residences to deities, and thus places to meet gods (or perhaps royal ancestors) face-to-face, as it were.⁷⁶ Furthermore and even more fascinatingly, there is abundant

⁷³ Matadamas, “La arqueología y el presente en las comunidades oaxaqueñas,” 120; my translation.

⁷⁴ Marcus, “How Monte Albán Represented Itself,” 102. On the much-debated topic of the pre-Columbian and indigenous names for the site of Monte Albán (which I mentioned in an earlier footnote), Marcus, *ibid.* 102-3, notes, “The name of the city we call Monte Albán is not given in any ethnohistorical document. However, there is some evidence indicating how the Zapotec conceptualized cities and mountains... According to the Spanish priest Juan de Córdova, the Zapotec term for ‘city’ or ‘populated place’ was *quiche*. A capital was called *quechecoqui* (city + hereditary lord) and considered the primary town where the ruler resided. Another Zapotec term was *quechetaonabiy*, or ‘great walled city.’ Both terms (*quechecoqui* and *quechetaonabiy*) may have been applied to Monte Albán, but there is no way to confirm this suggestion... It is possible that the main hill of Monte Albán took its name from a legendary martial pair, two primordial founders named Lord 1 Jaguar and Lady 2 Maize...” Among numerous others, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 5, comments on this elusive question of the site’s original name, noting especially Caso’s success in tracing a name meaning “Hill of the Jaguar” back to at least the 17th century.

⁷⁵ All of the possibilities to which I allude in this paragraph are discussed more fully in chapter 4 of the commemoration of divinity (priority I-A) in a subsection entitled “Divination of the Natural Landscape in Oaxaca and Monte Albán: Three Ways of Understanding the Relations between Mountains and Divinity.”

⁷⁶ Andrés Medina Hernández, “La cosmovision nahua actual,” en *La religion de los pueblos nahuas*, ed. Silvia Limon Olivera (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2008), 195; my translation, italics added.

evidence that Oaxacans, in cases, regarded mountains themselves as actual living deities. José Alcina Franch, for instance, presents innumerable references from the *Relaciones Geográficas* to support his contention concerning Oaxacan beliefs not simply in the generalized association between hills and gods, but in “*the true divinity of the hill.*”⁷⁷ In Andrés Medina Hernández’s phrasing, for Mesoamericans, “mountains are living entities to which are attributed loving and contentious relationships;”⁷⁸ or, in Molly Bassett’s analysis, mountains are “thunder-talkers” or “talk-makers” insofar as, according to native explanations, “When it thunders, it is as if this hill also answers. It also responds. That’s the way the hill is.”⁷⁹ *Altépetl* water-mountains, in that case, are living, communicative, even social beings with whom people enter into reciprocal relations that pose obligations on both sides. Each of these permutations of the mountains’ sacred status, not interchangeable but also not mutually exclusive, will reemerge later.

b. Altépetl as a City-State or Territorial Political Unit: The Hegemonic Utility of Cosmic Mountains

In any case, if the reverence for “mountains of sustenance” is, at one level, a ubiquitous and enduring feature of the “the shared substrate” of Mesoamerican cosmivision, at another level, the notion of an *altépetl* also denotes a more specific way of conceptualizing the geographical limits and system of governmental organization characteristic of many pre-Columbian indigenous city-states, villages or towns.⁸⁰ In this narrower and more political guise, an *altépetl* refers to the basic political and territorial unit wherein people understand themselves to exist in relation to the bureaucratic authority that resides on the mountain.⁸¹ According to

⁷⁷ José Alcina Franch, “Los dioses del panteón zapoteco,” *Anales de Antropología* 9 (1972), 33; my translation, italics added.

⁷⁸ Medina Hernández, “La cosmivision nahua actual,” 195; my translation.

⁷⁹ Molly H. Bassett, *The Fate of Earthly Things: Aztec Gods and God-Bodies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 22-23, quoting one of the native women with whom she interacted in Veracruz.

⁸⁰ See López Austin, “Los mexicas y su cosmos,” 21-43; and Noguez, “Altépetl,” 13.

⁸¹ James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford

James Lockhart’s influential analysis, an *altépetl* thus refers to a territory and a place of agricultural sustenance and cosmological significance, but also to “an organization of people holding sway over a given territory.”⁸² Geopolitically, the *altépetl* was minimally defined by a “territory, a set ... of named constituent parts, and a dynastic ruler or *tlatoani*.”⁸³ As a rule, established *altepeme* would further be characterized by a central market, by a central temple dedicated to a patron god particular to the ethnic identity of the *altépetl* who was known as “heart of the community,” and by a ruler whose palace was the religious, martial and political capital of the community, “pivotal point in the territorial organization of the *altépetl*.”⁸⁴ Thus, while *altepeme* were commonly multiethnic, communal allegiance was maintained through symbols that solidified a communal identity, overriding differences in ethnicity, language, religion and occupation.⁸⁵

Kenneth Hirth characterizes that conception of polity, which applied to Oaxaca as well as the Aztec world, as follows:

“The three primary components of these *altépetl* were the ruler, his supporting population, and the geographic territory that supported them. What is important in conceptual terms is that there is no separation between urban and rural space. The *altépetl* very often

University Press, 1993), chap. 2, based on the Aztec context, defines *altépetl* as a “sovereign state” characterized by four basic elements: [1] a delineated territory of varying size; [2] an autonomous government; [3] a predetermined set of named constituent parts, including wards within the center and large and small outlying communities; and [4] a dynastic rulership.

⁸² Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest*, 14.

⁸³ Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest*, 15.

⁸⁴ Jack A. Licate, “The Forms of Aztec Territorial Organization,” in *Historical Geography of Latin America: Papers in Honor of Robert C. West*, eds. William V. Davidson and James J. Parsons (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, School of Geoscience, 1980), 36-38.

⁸⁵ Licate, “The Forms of Aztec Territorial Organization,” 38. Also see Joyce Marcus, “Place Names and the Establishment of Political Territories,” in her *Mesoamerican Writing Systems: Propoganda, Myth, and History in Four Ancient Civilizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 153-89.

represents the community as a whole with no division between areas of settlement and their surrounding agricultural lands...”⁸⁶

In Eliadean terms, therefore, the urban center together with the inhabited periphery that comprise an *altépetl* likewise constitute a “cosmos,” an orderly world focused on a mountain center, beyond which the surrounding territory remained as chaos.

While the territory controlled from the Aztec Templo Mayor—a pyramidal structure that was explicitly conceived as a replica of the mythical mountain of Coatepec, birth place of patron deity Huitzilopochtli—provides the most unmistakable expression of the *altépetl* concept,⁸⁷ numerous large centers have been persuasively interpreted as *altepeme*. Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, for instance, maintains that both the Pyramid of the Sun and the Feathered Serpent Pyramid in the Cuidadela at Teotihuacan “symbolized the center of the universe and represented sacred mountains and their potential as an *altépetl* (‘water-mountain’), positioned within the community as deposits of water and grain to be used for sustenance.”⁸⁸ Regarding the enormous pyramid at Cholula, Geoffrey McCafferty holds that, “By building an earthen pyramid, a ‘man-made mountain,’ over a spring, the ancient Cholultecas physically created an *altépetl*, or ‘water-mountain,’ the fundamental concept of central Mexican polity.”⁸⁹ Barbara Fash too notes how

⁸⁶ Kenneth G. Hirth, “The *Altépetl* and Urban Structure in Prehispanic Mesoamerica,” in *El urbanismo en Mesoamérica—Urbanism in Mesoamerica*, eds. William T. Sanders, Alba Guadalupe Mastache, and Robert H. Cobean (México City and University Park: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia and Pennsylvania State University, 2003), 69. Both Lockhart’s and Hirth’s ideas about the *altépetl* concept are cited in the editors’ introduction to *The Art of Urbanism*, eds. Fash and López Luján, 6-8. Regarding this more political conception of the *altépetl*, also see Bernardo García Martínez, “El *altépetl* o pueblo de indios: Expresión básica del cuerpo político mesoamericano,” *Arqueología Mexicana* vol. VI, núm. 32 (julio-agosto 1998): 58-65.

⁸⁷ See López Austin y López Luján, *Monte Sagrado—Templo Mayor*, which explores at length the sense in which the main temple of the Aztec was conceived as a cosmic mountain and *altépetl*.

⁸⁸ Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, “Configuration of the Sacred Precinct of Mexico-Tenochtitlan,” in *The Art of Urbanism*, eds. Fash and López Luján, 424-25.

⁸⁹ Geoffrey G. McCafferty, “Tollan Chollan and the Legacy of Legitimacy During the Classic-Postclassic Transition,” in *Mesoamerica’s Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*,

temple-pyramids at Copán and other Maya sites were identified by their iconography as “human-made mountains,” which provided both an important source of water and sustenance as well as “an axis of communication with the gods and ancestral spirits.”⁹⁰ And Doris Heyden reaffirms the wide distribution of the water-mountain concept by glossing *altépetl* with the understated but important phrase, “an ideal place for settlement.”⁹¹

In all these instances, humanly constructed pyramid-mountains, every bit as potent as their natural counterparts, provide both the cosmological and political center of a wider regional authority. (And note, by the way, that I will return repeatedly to this counterintuitive assertion that the *altepeme* sacred mountains built by people can have all of the qualities of a “natural” *altépetl*.)

3. Sacred Mountains at Monte Albán: Two Key Points about Hierophanies and Cosmic Mountains at the Zapotec Capital

At any rate, by way of summation with respect to this first variation on the homology priority (I-A), of the innumerable fresh insights about the supposed “religiosity” of Monte Albán to which Mircea Eliade’s well-worn formulations and terminology concerning heterogeneous space and hierophanies—and especially his comments on “cosmic mountains”—can take us, I emphasize just two.

eds. David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 344.

⁹⁰ Barbara W. Fash, “Watery Places and Urban Foundations Depicted in Maya Art and Architecture,” in *The Art of Urbanism*, eds. Fash and López Luján, 236.

⁹¹ Doris Heyden, “From Teotihuacan to Tenochtitlan: City Planning, Caves, and Streams of Red and Blue Waters,” in *Mesoamerica’s Classic Heritage*, eds. Carrasco, Jones, and Sessions, 181.

a. *Altepeme as “Religious Symbols”*: *Presystematic Ontology and the Juxtaposition of Water and Mountains*

For one, regarding the symbolic status of Monte Albán, the Zapotec capital is a perfect example of virtually all that Eliade has to say about the hierophanic and intrinsic prestige of sacred mountains, not less illustrative of his main themes than his own select examples. That the site qualifies as a hierophany in the sense of having been *chosen* first by the gods, and only later *discovered* by humans, is difficult to dispute;⁹² and Eliade’s contention that, from the perspective of an “archaic consciousness,” living in close and interactive proximity to a sacred mountain is among the foremost means of making life meaningful and “real” finds no more persuasive confirmation than the Mesoamerican penchant for conceiving of their communities as *altepeme*. Moreover, the notion of an *altépetl*, by its juxtaposition of two elemental components—mountains and water—is a fantastic demonstration of “the symbolism of sacred space” or, more specifically, of four unique capabilities that Eliade uses to differentiate genuine “religious symbols,” whereby “the sacred reveals itself,” from mere “signs” or “emblems.”⁹³ Consider a quick comment on each of those four special attributes.

First, the water-mountain dyad is an ideal demonstration of Eliade’s postulate that religious symbols have a singular capability for expressing something profound, existential and “real” that is not expressible in ordinary language. *Altépetl* is the quintessential exemplar of a *difrasismo* in the sense of a grammatical pairing of two quite separate words that together give a

⁹² In a rare (and debatable) application of Eliade’s terminology to Monte Albán, Damon E. Peeler and Marcus Winter, *Sun Above, Sun Below: Astronomy, Calendar, and Architecture at Monte Albán and Teotihuacan* (Oaxaca: Instituto Oaxaqueño de Culturas e Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2010), 26, use the term “an interesting hierophany” to refer not to a divinely selected natural feature, but rather to the apparently deliberately choreographed experience engendered by the play of light and shadow on Building J. I will revisit this astro-architectural effect in chapter 3 relative to the astronomy priority, I-C.

⁹³ Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 98-103, actually enumerates six unique capabilities of religious symbols, which I have slightly rearranged into a list of four.

symbolic means of expressing a single metaphorical unit;⁹⁴ but the image of an *altépetl* is not shorthand for an insight that could be articulated in some other way. That is to say, while I and others repeatedly refer to the *altépetl* “concept,” it is not simply a compelling idea that someone “thought up” and others embraced. Alternatively, it is an expression of a widely shared experience of the Mesoamerican landscape and lifestyle. In Eliade’s terms, the *altépetl*, like other religious symbols, expresses “a presystematic ontology,” an insight or judgment about the world and about human existence that was not, and could not be, originally formulated in concepts; and thus only much later did it lend itself to second-order conceptualization.⁹⁵ In López Austin’s compatible terminology, the notion of an *altépetl* was “a product of daily life in agricultural societies... shaped in a *rational, though unconscious*, manner through the action of humans facing nature and themselves.”⁹⁶ According to Eliade, only via symbols can such existential awarenesses—which “unveil the miraculous, inexplicable side of life”—be expressed and then pondered and appreciated.⁹⁷

Regarding a second of Eliade’s criteria, the *altépetl* trope, like all genuine religious symbols, is, as noted by Zárate Morón and Marcus, fabulously multivalent insofar as it has an ability to express not just one but many different meanings. The water-mountain pairing is, therefore, “inexhaustible” insofar as it cannot be reduced to any single and definitive interpretation, a perpetually pregnant quality that is among the primary reasons for its wide

⁹⁴ Bassett, *The Fate of Earthly Things: Aztec Gods and God-Bodies*, 194, for instance, uses *altépetl* as her first example of “the effect of a *difrasismo*, ‘pairing two metaphors which together give a symbolic means of expressing a single thought.’”

⁹⁵ See Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 99. As Eliade explains, “it is not a question of a reflective knowledge, but of an immediate intuition of a ‘cipher’ of the World. The World ‘speaks’ through the symbol of the Cosmic Tree [or the Cosmic Mountain], and this ‘word’ [sic] is understood directly. The *World* is apprehended as *life*, and in primitive thought, *life is an aspect of being*.” *Ibid.*, 98; his italics.

⁹⁶ López Austin, “Cosmovision,” 269; italics added. In other words, though without the technical language of phenomenology, López Austin shares the characteristic phenomenological emphasis that “religion” is a response to “lived experienced” rather than to intellectual speculation.

⁹⁷ Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 98.

currency among ancient and contemporary Mesoamericans.⁹⁸ Third, in connection to the notion of homology that is accentuated next section, the *altépetl* symbol, owing to its multivalence, has a unique capability of expressing the unity, interrelatedness or correspondence among seemingly unrelated elements of existence. Juxtaposing water and mountains discloses the not-obvious synchronization of biological, astrological, climatological, agricultural and socio-cultural processes; and, as noted in the Introduction, it is “this capacity of religious symbolism to reveal a multitude of structurally coherent meanings” that enables a symbol like the *altépetl* to affirm “a perspective in which heterogeneous realities are susceptible of articulation into a whole.”⁹⁹ *Altepeme* stand, literally and figuratively, at the center of, in López Austin’s phrase, “a systemic complex,”¹⁰⁰ or, in Eliade’s term, “a structurally coherent ensemble,”¹⁰¹ which makes the world an orderly and meaningful place to reside.

And fourth, as an outstanding exemplum of what Eliade considers “perhaps the most important function of religious symbolism,” the water-mountain pairing—which is evident also in the two components of the so-termed stepped fret—demonstrate the unique capability of expressing contradictions and/or paradoxes, “conflicting structures of ultimate reality [that] are otherwise quite inexpressible.”¹⁰² This beguilingly odd coupling juxtaposes the immovable and the fluid, the solid and the formless, the hard and the wet, mountains that reach high and water that always finds the lowest point; a mountain of sustenance gives but also withholds; it is a reservoir of abundance, but one that shares its provisions only if people conduct themselves properly, and sometimes not even then. For Eliade, while mountains are the reliably intransigent centers of world, water is “uniquely capable of expressing the pre-formal, the virtual, the

⁹⁸ Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 99-100.

⁹⁹ Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 99.

¹⁰⁰ López Austin, “El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y la tradición mesoamericana,” 59; my translation.

¹⁰¹ Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 100.

¹⁰² Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 101.

chaotic;”¹⁰³ and thus when formless (chaotic and ever-moving) water is paired with the stability of mountains, together they express one of his Eliade’s preminent themes, the *coincidentia oppositorum* or coincidence of opposites, which acknowledges “an existential tension” that arises as one realizes that the nature of divinity is simultaneously benevolent and terrible, creative and destructive, generous and wrathful, solar and serpentine.¹⁰⁴ This is, he says, an inescapable and paradoxical realization for which no concepts are adequate, and thus that religious symbols alone can engage.

In short, one is hard pressed to find any historical phenomenon in any cultural context that better exemplifies Eliade’s notion of a multivalent and inexhaustible “religious symbol” than the *altépetl* water-mountain. Moreover, while participating in the widespread and enduring tradition of orientation with respect to Oaxaca mountains as sources of natural abundance—which includes countless sites like Cerro Danush and Dani Guíaati at which Oaxacans continue to make propitiations for rain, fertility, health and good fortune—Monte Albán also provides the prime exemplar of a much smaller sample wherein the *altépetl* becomes a center of polity, an urban center with very substantial socio-economic control over the surrounding areas. Monte Albán was, at least during its long run as a regional capital, both a religio-ritual center and a civic-bureaucratic center; and it was, in either case, to use Wheatley’s term, “a cosmo-magical symbol.”¹⁰⁵ As Eliade says, “it is not as a *mountain* that it is venerated, but as a *hierophany*, that is, a manifestation of the sacred.”¹⁰⁶ And thus to the extent that ancient Oaxacans lived with a clear and strong sense of orientation in relation to that “cosmic hill,” the overall conception of the site is, in Eliadean terms, profoundly and unmistakably “religious.”

¹⁰³ Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 98. For extended comments on the symbolism of water, also see Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 188-215.

¹⁰⁴ Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 102; also, of innumerable places that he discusses the *coincidentia oppositorum*, see Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 419-20.

¹⁰⁵ Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), 414-19.

¹⁰⁶ Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 95; his italics. In this quote I have substituted “mountain” for “tree.”

b. Monte Albán as Discovered and Made Sacred Space: Architectural Enhancements of a Hierophanic Place

Additionally, regarding a second large point to extract from Eliade’s well-weathered comments on heterogeneous space and hierophanies, while the grand pyramids at Teotihuacan, Cholula, Tenochtitlan and various Maya sites may present the most oft-cited exemplars of the *altépetl* conception of polity, it is important to note that all of those places feature humanly constructed cosmic mountains, that is, man-made pyramid-mountains. And though the notion of regional polity at work in those sites may apply at least in the broad strokes to Monte Albán, the Zapotec capital, by contrast, represents Mesoamerica’s foremost example of a sacred mountain that was, in the Eliadean sense, not so much created as actually “discovered.” That is to say, instead of building their cosmic mountain from the ground up, as it were, the founders of Monte Albán, unlike Teotihuacanos or Aztecs, chose as their primary place of habitation a natural topographic feature already replete with supernatural qualities—an unmistakable hierophany—and then made this special place vastly more special via a battery of ambitious architectural modifications.¹⁰⁷ In short, Eliade helps us to see that the Great Plaza, arguably more than any other site in Mesoamerica, is a sacred place found *and* made.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Regarding the extreme preference of living very near or, better yet, directly on top of a mountain, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 3, notes with respect to the residential clusters surrounding the Main Plaza that, “Hilltop or hillside locations were so desired by the occupants of the ancient city that once the readily habitable space on the major hill was fully colonized, new settlement took place not on the adjacent flat plain at the hill’s base, but on the nearby unused hilltops and slopes instead.” Also stressing the orientation of Mesoamerican centers with respect to mountains (though also not relying on the notion of an *altépetl*), Horst Hartung, “Monte Albán in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 55, explicitly discusses the contrast between the “mass-space relation” at Monte Albán, where “it is a delimited space—the Great Plaza—which creates the ensemble,” versus “the idea of a pyramid crowned by a temple (e.g., the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacan) that constitutes a small volume.” In his view (*ibid.*, 59), “The particular appreciation of space at Monte Albán—with the notion that the ceremonial center was ‘lifted up into space,’ with views down into the valley—depends on depth and the implication of height. This depth-height relation can be compared to the rugged landscape of the Sierra of Oaxaca where villages are situated on high hills, separated by almost-vertically cut deep ravines.” Hartung, *ibid.*, 59, n. 8, also ventures the more generalized (and more suspect) proposition that, “Active and motivated people are inclined to prefer far-distance views from their homes and/or workshops. The early settlers of Monte Albán selected a place where this was possible, as can be verified at the site and, in particular, on the northern slope of the mountain.” I will revisit this question of “the

Furthermore, this dual status as both a *found* and a *constructed* sacred space will be the ground for a plethora of other distinctive qualities about the great Zapotec capital. For example, here forecasting another theme that will be among the featured conclusions in chapter 4 on the ritual-architectural commemoration of divinity (priority II-A), the initially quite surprising realization that humanly-constructed *altepeme* are as fully potent as natural *altepeme*, together with Eliade’s also counterintuitive emphasis on the willingness to acknowledge “the multiplicity of centers,”¹⁰⁹ has profound ramifications for how we understand the symbolism of sacred mountains at Monte Albán. Together those two observations enable us to appreciate that, at the largest scale, as noted here, Monte Albán is one enormous capital city built atop one huge *altépetl* water-mountain.

But those paired observations also alert us to the irony noted by many commentators that the ascent to Main Plaza actually culminates in the sensation of being on a flat place rather than a peak. As Jorge Hardoy, for instance, contends, upon entering the wide open space of that Main Plaza, instead of simply exploiting the panoramic vistas, an important feature of the precinct’s conception is “its negation of topography and natural environment;”¹¹⁰ and thus one’s gaze is actually directed to the array of symmetrically arranged artificial mountains that ring that absolutely flat amphitheatric space. As we’ll learn, that ceremonial precinct, by Period IIIB or the Xoo Phase, had more than two dozen temples—every one them with a sanctuary situated on a mountain-like constructed pyramid base. And thus, in another respect, the Zapotec capital was

mass-space relation at Monte Albán” more fully and more critically in chapter 8 relative to “theatrical ritual contexts (priority III-A).”

¹⁰⁸ Víctor de la Cruz, “Monte Albán, ¿espacio sagrado zapoteco o sólo sitio turístico?” 151-52, perhaps inadvertently, speaks to Monte Albán’s status as both discovered and constructed sacred space when he argues at one point that the mountain site exemplifies the position that sacred spaces “are not the result of human choice, but rather places where extraordinary manifestations of the supernatural powers have occurred” and yet, a few lines later, argues that “it was the *binnigula’sa*’ [or Zapotecs] who originally sacralized this space...”

¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 379.

¹¹⁰ Jorge E. Hardoy, *Pre-Columbian Cities*, trans. Judith Thorne (New York: Walker and Company, 1973 [Spanish original, 1964]), 109.

not just one humongous nature-made *altépetl*—though it certainly was that!—but actually a whole constellation of humanly-constructed *altepeme*-based temples. Every individual temple also capitalizes on the “allure” of water-mountains.

In chapter 4, I will unpack more fully the way in which both the siting of the whole city atop a nature-made *altépetl*, and then the siting of each of dozens of individual temples atop humanly-constructed *altépetl*-foundations, participate in the twofold pattern characteristic of all meaningful and productive ritual-architectural events.¹¹¹ But for now, I resume discussion of the homology priority (I-A) by turning attention the second main variation of the theme—namely, the conception of an *imago mundi* and the sense in which Monte Albán was configured as a microcosmic replica of the universe at large.

B. MONTE ALBÁN AS *IMAGO MUNDI*: MACROCOSMIC MODELS, MICROCOSMIC CITIES AND THE UNIFICATION OF SPACE AND TIME

A second means of refining prevalent presumptions that Monte Albán was conceived preponderantly as a “religious place” entails consideration of a set of issues subsumed under what Mircea Eliade terms *imago mundis*, that is, the urge to create buildings and spaces that replicate on a reduced scale the structure of the wider world or cosmos. As I work again from his general model to the relevant Oaxacan specifics, recall that, according to Eliade, nothing serves quite so well to provide the “access to the sacred” craved by the *homo religiosus* as maintaining an intimate relation with origins and “first times.”¹¹² From the perspective of the “archaic ontology,” the initial occurrence of any prominent activity, all of which are understood

¹¹¹ In chapter 4 on the ritual-architectural commemoration of divinity (priority II-A), I treat the sense in which individual temples participated in the symbolism of *altepeme* in the sub-section entitled “Architectural Expressions of Divinity Attributes at Monte Albán: The Complementarity of Temple Substructures and Upper Sanctuaries;” and I address the parallel twofold dynamic at the scale of the entire city in the very last sub-section, which is entitled “Contentious Academic Theories but Complementary Historical Phenomena: Meaning-Making Juxtapositions of Alternate Divinity Conceptions.”

¹¹² Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 1-6.

to have transpired in *illo tempore*, the “primordial time” prior to the emergence of humans—for instance, the original or primordial occasions of planting, harvesting, praying, copulating and cooking undertaken by the gods in “the Time before time”—establishes a paradigmatic model that “religious man” feels compelled to emulate in his earthly life.¹¹³

1. *Imago Mundis* as a Cross-Cultural Phenomenon: Microcosmic Replications of the Macrocosm

For traditional communities to maintain a meaningful orientation in the world does not, therefore, require inventing new and different patterns and practices, but rather faithfully reiterating those precedent-setting “mythical archetypes.”¹¹⁴ That is to say, while modern audiences prize the supposed “originality” of unprecedented and individualized artistic expressions, for “archaic” populations, it is, by contrast and perhaps counterintuitively, the imitation and reiteration of mythical models that are experienced as supremely creative, and thus intensely satisfying, insofar as they enable *homo religiosi* to participate in the original creativity of the gods. Even in the Hebrew Bible, Moses, as he was about to erect a tabernacle, was warned by God to avoid any sort of idiosyncratic novelty and, alternatively, to “See that you make all things according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain of Sinai.”¹¹⁵ Moreover, by that non-modern logic, as Eliade stresses in his signature work, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, the cosmogony proper—that is, the original creation of the cosmos—provides the paramount model for all subsequent acts of creation, be they the weaving of rugs or blouses, the carving of wood, the casting of pottery, the design of social institutions, the building of houses or, most significantly in the present discussion, the layout of villages and cities.¹¹⁶ The cosmogony is the paradigmatic example for all subsequent acts and inventions by the gods, and then by humans.

¹¹³ Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 27-33.

¹¹⁴ Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 6-11.

¹¹⁵ Hebrews 8:5.

¹¹⁶ Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 17-20.

If, from an Eliadean frame, all meaningful acts of creativity are, in principle, reiterations of the original creation of the world—that is, “*every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as [its] paradigmatic model*”¹¹⁷—then all of the material products of that reiterative creativity are, to some significant extent, “replicas of the cosmos,” downsized microcosms of the larger macrocosm.¹¹⁸ Consequently, the satisfaction that is derived from such imitative acts of creation is reflected at all sorts of scales, from coins, carvings, ceramics and clothing to individual houses, temples and shrines. And even more germane to our current concerns, urban geographer Paul Wheatley relies on Eliade, along with René Berthelot’s compatible notion of “astrobiological thinking,” to describe a tendency for entire cities, especially urban capitals and even whole kingdoms, to be constructed as scaled down “*imago mundis*”:

“[T]hose religions which hold that human order was brought into being at the creation of the world tend to dramatize the cosmogony by reproducing on earth a reduced version of the cosmos. Sacrality (which is synonymous with reality) is achieved through the imitation of a celestial archetype, as a result of which such religions can be powerful transformers of landscape, sometimes to an extreme degree... [T]here was thus a tendency for kingdoms, capitals, temples, shrines, and so forth, to be constructed as replicas of the cosmos”¹¹⁹

Drawing his examples especially from “traditional, pre-industrial cities” in Asia, but also in Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, Africa, South America and Mesoamerica (especially Teotihuacan), Wheatley, in a discussion entitled “The City as a Cosmo-Magical Symbol,” accentuates the prevalence of urban layouts that display “an intimate parallelism between the mathematically expressible regimes of the heavens and the biologically determined rhythms of

¹¹⁷ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 45; his italics.

¹¹⁸ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religions*, 379.

¹¹⁹ Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, 417.

life on earth."¹²⁰ In Wheatley's view, adages about "on earth as in heaven" find intense expression in the city designs of innumerable cross-cultural contexts.¹²¹

2. *Imago Mundi* in Mesoamerican Cosmivision and Oaxaca: The Earthly Replication of Perfect Cosmic Order

That this pattern of microcosmic urban organization applies to Monte Albán is incontestable. At the Oaxacan capital, as we've noted, the designers begin, in a sense, with a huge headstart by situating their capital atop a hierophanic water-mountain, a natural geologic feature that was considered not only a reservoir of sustenance and "the center of the world" but also "a place of origin."¹²² Nonetheless, exploiting that advantage to the fullest, by their extreme refashioning of the natural topography, which really gets underway in Period II, Oaxacan planners embark upon the "sacralization" or "cosmicization" of an already potent sacred mountain that are required to make the site conform even more perfectly to the gods' original creation of the universe. Indeed, few circumstances demonstrate in more spectacular fashion either Wheatley's apt allusion to "powerful transformers of landscape"¹²³ or Eliade's contention that, "religious man feels the need always to exist in a total and organized world, in a cosmos."¹²⁴ As evidenced by the symmetry and unity of design about which visitors continue to rave, topographic irregularities and anomalies, which might threaten the presentation of perfect order, were not allowed to stand.

¹²⁰ Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, 414.

¹²¹ Applications of Wheatley's work specifically to Oaxaca are few. But note that Joseph W. Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs: Princes, Priests, and Peasants* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 290-91, n. 11, comments favorably on Wheatley's critique of Gordon Childe's theory of urbanism. And Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca," 216, includes Wheatley's *Pivot of the Four Quarters* in his bibliography, but does not really engage the substance of his work.

¹²² Zárate Morón, "Símbolos prehispánicos y ritos contemporáneos de creación y nacimiento en el sur del Istmo de Tehuantepec," 177-78.

¹²³ Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, 417.

¹²⁴ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 44.

In fact, though Eliade does not engage the historical particulars of Monte Albán, he provides his own take on the old question of its site-selection appeal as a natural military stronghold versus more explicitly religious priorities by suggesting that such traditional capitals’ greatest defenses were not primarily targeted against invading human enemies, but rather against chaos. In his words,

“Any destruction of the city is equivalent to a retrogression to chaos... It is highly probable that the fortifications of inhabited places and cities began by being magical defenses; for fortifications—trenches, labyrinths, ramparts, etc.—were designed to repel invasion by demons and the souls of the dead rather than attacks by human beings.”¹²⁵

By this interpretation, in reworking the natural mountain into a thoroughly ordered cityscape, the designers and builders were replicating the paradigmatic creative activities of the gods that had issued in the origin of the world. They undertake, in other words, a vintage demonstration of the Eliadean postulate that “*settling in a territory is equivalent to founding a world.*”¹²⁶ The city of Monte Albán is unique and autonomous world unto itself, but one that is precisely patterned after the wider cosmos.¹²⁷

While this line of argument derives from Eliade’s general model, it likewise comports in a more culturally specific way with “the cosmovision approach,” which also, as López Luján and Fash remind us, “emphasizes the symbolic roles of cities as human replications of the cosmos.”¹²⁸ Again as noted in the Introduction, among the fundamental parallels between Eliade’s description of the orientation characteristic of the “archaic consciousness” and Alfredo López Austin’s account of Mesoamerican cosmovision is what others have termed a “cosmological conviction,” that is, a “locative” confidence in an all-encompassing world order

¹²⁵ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 48-49.

¹²⁶ Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane*, 47; his italics.

¹²⁷ Note that I will return to this theme of architecturally reiterating the cosmogony in chapter 5 relative to the first of four main variations on the ritual-architectural commemoration of sacred history, priority II-B.

¹²⁸ Editors’ Introduction to *The Art of Urbanism*, eds. Fash and López Luján, 3.

and a commitment to attune all dimensions of existence to that order.¹²⁹ Eliade terms this “a congruence among all aspects of life”¹³⁰ and López Austin calls it “a systemic complex,” which enables a holistic and interactive experience of every dimension of the natural and supernatural world.¹³¹

It is this confidence in a deep structural unity that embraces all of the seemingly disparate realms of existence that accounts for those fabulously elaborate systems wherein various parts of the built environment are correlated with—or homologized to—particular durations of time, spatial directions, celestial bodies, biological species, colors, body parts, systems of polity and/or mythico-historical events.¹³² Via that sort of system of correspondences or homologies, an architectural context such as Monte Albán can become, in an important sense, a kind of crystallizing summation and demonstration of the all-embracing integration characteristic of the wider universe. The capital, besides *following* a cosmic model, *is* itself an exemplary model, replete with homologies that display the connections among every element of the world and every other element.

¹²⁹ See that section of the Introduction entitled “Homologized Systems and Cosmic Harmony: Cosmivision and Religious Orientation as Overarching, Unifying Forces.”

¹³⁰ Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 99.

¹³¹ López Austin, “El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y la tradición mesoamericana,” 59.

¹³² By way of clarification of the somewhat elusive term “homology,” which I use as the umbrella term for all of the issues in this first chapter, it refers here to “a system of correspondences, or a set of qualities or attributes that correspond in relative position, structure, etc.”; homology thereby provides a way to describe the relationship (or correspondence) between religious symbols and that to which those symbols refer. By “homologized system” I refer to schemes like that among the Pawnee wherein the northwest direction corresponds to (or is homologized to) the color yellow, the weather phenomenon lightening, the animal mountain lion, and the cottonwood tree; the northeast corresponds to black, thunder, bear and elm; the southeast corresponds to red, clouds, wolf and willow; etc.

3. *Imago Mundis* at Monte Albán: Respecting and Replicating an All-Encompassing World Order

If all this seems a bit general and abstract, consider next some of the more specific and concrete ways in which the built forms and features of Monte Albán—at every scale and in all sorts of mediums—both respect and then replicate this notion of an all-encompassing world order. At the tiniest of scales, Alfonso Caso provides the glamorous example of a gold pectoral—that is, a 219 millimeter-long ornamental piece that presumably hung from one’s neck over the breast or chest—which he found in Tomb 7 and which, in his view, is not simply jewelry, but also “a document [that] represents the universe as it was known to the natives of Mesoamerica.”¹³³ The uppermost of four sections of the necklace, which are joined by gold rings that enable a “pleasant jingle,” displays the well-known I-shaped *tlachtli* (ball-court) symbol, which, because the ballgame entails a reenactment of the movement of the heavenly bodies, Caso associates with the sky. Dangling below that, the second part of this pectoral is a round plaque that represents the sun disc surrounded with blood and with a skull in the center. On the third plaque, within a square frame, is a flint knife with eyes and a wide-open mouth, behind which smoke and fire, an ensemble that Caso recognizes from the Codex Borgia and elsewhere as attributes of the moon and the black Tezcatlipoca, the night god par excellence. And the fourth plaque is another square frame in which appears the earth monster whom the Aztecs call Tlaltecuhli. In sum, together the four elements in this linear rather than symmetrical breastplate thereby represent, by Caso’s surmise, “from top to bottom, the sky, the sun, the moon, and the earth—a sort of cross-section of the universe.”¹³⁴

Among Caso’s fuller inventory of the hundreds of gold, silver, copper, jade, bone and ceramic objects that he found in Tomb 7, there are many more that also reflect an incentive to

¹³³ Alfonso Caso, “Lapidary Work, Goldwork, and Copperwork from Oaxaca,” *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3, “Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica,” vol. ed. Gordon R. Willey, gen. ed. Robert Wauchope (London: University of Texas Press, 1965), illustrated on p. 924, fig. 55, discussed on pages 926-27. The same gold pectoral is illustrated and discussed at greater length in Alfonso Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969), 95-97.

¹³⁴ Caso, “Lapidary Work, Goldwork, and Copperwork from Oaxaca,” 927.

replicate the structure of the universe. In other elite tombs, arrangements of urns and funerary offerings (which I will address in chapters 4 and 7) are very often clear representations of the cosmos; and the iconography on carved stones and murals likewise presents abundant exemplars. At a larger scale, tombs themselves, especially those shaped like a cruciform, I-shaped ball courts and the conventionalized temple-patio-alter (TPA) complexes all provide marvelous examples of architectural configurations that express this version of the homology priority (I-A)—and all are forms to which I will return later in this work. But for now I concentrate on several ways in which this microcosmic theme expresses itself in the wider layout of Monte Albán.

a. Homologized Building at Monte Albán: The Unification of Architectural Space and Calendrical Time

First, among the most tangible and well-appreciated means by which the designers of Monte Albán respect and replicate the cosmic order entails a unification (or homologization) of calendrical time and architectural space, two phenomena that may, at first, seem quite unrelated. The Zapotec capital, on the one hand, does not have any buildings that display the unification of calendars and architecture with the blunt clarity of El Tajín’s Pyramid of the Niches, where 365 recessed compartments provide an unmistakable correlation to the days of the solar year,¹³⁵ or Chichén Itzá’s Castillo, which has so many obviously calendrical referencings that it could well function as a kind of didactic text for the space-time machinations of the northern Maya.¹³⁶ Yet,

¹³⁵ Regarding the unmistakable calendrical symbolism of the Pyramid of the Niches, see, for instance, George Kubler, *Art and Architecture in Ancient America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 137-41.

¹³⁶ John B. Carlson, “A Geomantic Model for the Interpretation of Mesoamerican Sites: An Essay in Cross-Cultural Comparison,” in *Mesoamerican Sites and World-Views*, ed. Benson, 179-87, provides one of the more thorough (among countless) discussions of the calendrical symbolism of the Chichén Itzá Castillo wherein a total of 365 steps on its four stairways is an obvious correlate to the solar year; 52 niches or panels on each side of the pyramid are equated with the 52-year cycle; and nine major stepped levels presumably represent the nine levels of the Maya underworld, or a “nine-night calendar count,” or, possibly the notion of nine “hours” of the night; etc. Also see Ismael Arturo Montero García, Jesús Galindo Trejo, and David Wood Cano, “El Castillo en Chichén Itzá: Un Monumento al Tiempo,” *Arqueología Mexicana*, vol. XXI, núm. 127 (mayo-junio, 2014): 80-85. Lindsay Jones, *Twin City Tales: A Hermeneutical*

on the other hand, Damon Peeler, Marcus Winter and Miguel Bartolomé help us to see that the architects of Monte Albán did utilize an abundance of less obvious, more nuanced strategies for synchronizing time and space. In their assessment (to which I will return in each of the next two chapters):

“Time management was closely related to the use of space in Monte Albán. The wise astronomers of Mount Albán resorted to calendrical proportions to create “sacred spaces.” ... By combining time and space in the structures of the Main Plaza, the center of the city became a sacred space that reflected, at the same time, the cosmic [or otherworldly] and social [or this-worldly] spheres.”¹³⁷

More specifically, Peeler and Winter maintain that the inhabitants of Monte Albán, or at least the intellectual elite, operated with three overlapping time counts: a 260-day ritual calendar, the 365-day solar calendar and 584-day calendar based on the cycles of Venus.¹³⁸ All

Reassessment of Tula and Chichén Itzá (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995), 377-89, provides a discussion of the unification of architecture and calendars at Chichén Itzá; and *ibid.*, 217-19, provides a much briefer account of those at El Tajín.

¹³⁷ Marcus Winter y Miguel Bartolomé, “Tiempo y espacio en Monte Albán: la construcción de una identidad compartida,” in *Memoria de la Primera Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán: Procesos de cambio y conceptualización del tiempo*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2001), 67; my translation.

¹³⁸ Damon E. Peeler, “Los orígenes zapotecos de la astronomía y los calendarios mesoamericanos,” en *Monte Albán: Estudios Recientes*, Marcus Winter, coord., Contribución No. 2 del Proyecto Especial Monte Albán 1992-1994 (Oaxaca de Juárez: Centro INAH-Oaxaca, 1994), 55-61, describes insights about the integration of calendar counts and architectural constructions that emerged in the context of the mapping work carried out during Monte Albán Special Project 1992-1994, overseen by Marcus Winter—including the utilization of three numbers (260, 365 and 584) in the layout of the Main Plaza area. See especially Peeler’s plan drawing (*ibid.*, 57, fig. 1), which specifies places that each of those numbers is translated into a spatial distance. Marcus Winter, “Religión de los *Binnigula’sa*’: la evidencia arqueológica,” in *Religión de los Binnigula’sa’*, Víctor de la Cruz y Marcus Winter, coords. (Oaxaca, México: Fondo Editorial, IEEPO, 2001), 68, elaborates on the significance of those three numbers. Winter makes similar points about these three overlapping calendars in Marcus Winter, “La religión, el poder y las bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca Prehispánica,” en *Bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca: Memoria de la Cuarta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2009), 515. On this topic, also see Damon E. Peeler y Marcus Winter, *Tiempo sagrado, espacio sagrado: astronomía, calendario y arquitectura en Monte Albán y Teotihuacan* (Oaxaca, México: Instituto Oaxaqueño de Culturas, 1993); and Peeler and Winter, *Sun Above, Sun Below: Astronomy*,

three calendrical cycles were "derived from observations of the sky," which is to say, all three are based on cosmic or celestial rhythms.¹³⁹ Moreover, in each case, pre-Columbian designers "turned time into space" by replicating the respective time counts in the sizing and distances between various constructions in the center of the city. Those proportions of 260, 365 and 584 were, for instance, utilized in the oddly shaped Structure J (to which I will return in chapter 3) and in the dimensions of the main I-shaped ballcourt, which was in itself a microcosmic unification of space and time insofar as "the movement of the ball on the court has been considered symbolic of the passing of time."¹⁴⁰

Even more notable is the suggestion of Winter and Bartolomé that both the overall dimensions of the Main Plaza and the widths of the huge staircases at its south and north ends, neither quite symmetrical as noted earlier, were also based on those calendrical calculations.¹⁴¹ Instead of assessing the unequal stairway dimensions simply as clever ploys to give the impression of perfect symmetry, the apparent irregularities are, in their view, part of a meticulous and wider plan to synchronize space and time wherein the wide staircases are sized in ways that "show calendrical proportions."¹⁴² As these authors explain,

Calendar, and Architecture at Monte Albán and Teotihuacan (2010), both of which I will discuss more fully in chapter 3 relative to the astronomy priority, I-C.

¹³⁹ See Winter, "Religión de los *Binnigula'sa*": la evidencia arqueológica," 68-69; or Peeler y Winter, *Tiempo sagrado, espacio sagrado*.

¹⁴⁰ Winter y Bartolomé, "Tiempo y espacio en Monte Albán," 67, n.6; my translation. Peeler, "Los orígenes zapotecos de la astronomía y los calendarios mesoamericanos," 56 (my translation), uses the same phrase, "time has become space" in arguing for the calendrical basis of the dimensioning of Monte Albán's two main ballcourts. On the proportional dimensioning of those two ballcourts, also see Peeler and Winter, *Sun Above, Sun Below*, 4-7.

¹⁴¹ Peeler and Winter, *Sun Above, Sun Below*, 7-9, also discuss the relevance of the 260 to 365 astro-calendrical ratio or proportion in the respective widths of the large stairway at the north end of the Main Plaza and the nearby, narrower stairway that leads down into the Sunken Patio (Patio Hundido).

¹⁴² Winter y Bartolomé, "Tiempo y espacio en Monte Albán," 67, n.6. In that footnote, they also make the very intriguing observation that some of the calendrically proportioned staircases are "spaces of transition that unite flat spaces."

“temporal notions were projected towards spatial notions, configuring a shared unit of meaning. This coincides with the contemporary conceptions of some indigenous Mesoamerican groups, whose languages reflect this significant unity between space and time... The foregoing can be interpreted as a projection of the cosmic order onto the social order, causing the cosmos or meaningful order of the universe to be associated with [or replicated in] the nomos or meaningful order of society.”¹⁴³

Again consistent with both Eliade’s model and Mesoamerican cosmovision, ostensibly disparate aspects of reality—like space and time, or celestial rhythms and social practices—are united in an integrative and microcosmic system and, thereby, otherwise merely human activities attain a rewarding trans-human significance.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Winter y Bartolomé, “Tiempo y espacio en Monte Albán,” 67; my translation. Again, Peeler, “Los orígenes zapotecos de la astronomía y los calendarios mesoamericanos,” fig. 1, 57, is useful in clarifying the specific spatial counterparts to these calendrical numbers.

¹⁴⁴ Note, on the one hand, that I find Marcus Winter’s ideas, developed in conjunction with Damon Peeler and Miguel Bartolomé, on the unification of space and time to be among the most persuasive and important means of understanding the symbolic layout of Monte Albán, and thus I return to those ideas repeatedly in these first three chapters. On the other hand, a feature of Winter’s work on the layout of the city center that I find far less persuasive comes in Marcus Winter, “Social Memory and the Origins of Monte Albán,” *Ancient Mesoamerican*, vol. 22, no. 2 (September 2011): 393-409. In that piece, he argues that the regularities that Monte Albán shares with La Venta and Chiapa de Corzo—e.g., [1] the same basic configuration, [2] alignment to the cardinal directions, [3] bilateral symmetry, [4] harmonic proportions, [5] fixed measurements, [6] the same length intervals and [7] identical sizes (ibid., 401)—signal that the original conception of the Oaxaca capital was based on “an imported template” from those one or both of those sites, probably reaching central Oaxaca via the Mixe-Zoque area (ibid., 402-3). By way of explaining how Monte Albán’s layout came to have these features, and capitalizing on a notion of “social memory,” Winter, ibid., 403, writes, “Use of La Venta or the MFC [Middle Formative Chiapas] model implies that someone, probably one or several Zapotecs from highland Oaxaca or Mixe-Zoques from the southern Isthmus, saw and remembered the La Venta layout,” and then replicated it in Oaxaca. I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, especially via the work of Eliade and Wheatley, that those same features—all vintage exemplifications of the homology priority, I-A—reappear independently in innumerable “traditional cities” around the globe, and thus needn’t have reached Monte Albán via “an imported template.”

b. Monte Albán as Microcosm: Mirroring the Cosmos, the Human Body, the Social Order and the Wider Landscape

Space-time correlations notwithstanding, there are numerous different, but compatible, ways that the layout of Monte Albán reflects the *imago mundi* theme. Arthur Joyce, for instance, foregrounds the socio-political implications of the longitudinal layout of the city center, together with the respective iconography that is located at the respective ends of that north-south configuration. In his view,

“From its earliest years, the sacred geography of Monte Albán resembled other Mesoamerican cities [such as Tikal, Copán and Teotihuacan] where the cosmos was rotated onto the surface of the site’s ceremonial center such that north represented the celestial realm and south the earth or underworld.”¹⁴⁵

According to this interpretation, the southern end of the Main Plaza, which included the Danzante Building with its infamous display of “nearly 400 portraits of sacrificial victims,” is dominated by “iconographic references to sacrifice, warfare, and earth or underworld.”¹⁴⁶ By contrast, the North Platform—and most notably the so-termed *viborón* frieze with motifs “similar to Cocijó, the Zapotec lightning (sky) deity”—“included iconographic references to the sky, rain, and lightning.”¹⁴⁷ In that sense, the full layout of the city is like a microcosmic map in which south is homologized with down, death, sacrifice, the earth and underworld, while north

¹⁴⁵ Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 199. Note, by the way, similar ideas appear in Arthur A. Joyce, “Poder sacrificial en Oaxaca durante el Formativo tardío,” in *Memoria de la Primera Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán: Procesos de cambio y conceptualización del tiempo*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2001), 97-110; and Arthur A. Joyce, “Monte Albán como encrucijada material y simbólica en la antigua Oaxaca,” 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), 50.

¹⁴⁶ Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 199. Note that I will return to a fuller discussion of the infamous Danzantes figures—which uses Joyce’s own work, together with that of Javier Urcid, to put in doubt their identification as “sacrificial victims”—in chapter 5 relative to the commemoration of sacred history, priority II-B.

¹⁴⁷ Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 201.

corresponds to up, the sky and rain-related phenomena like clouds and lightening. Joyce accentuates, moreover, that most of the elite residences are concentrated in the north end of the Main Plaza, which “symbolically linked nobles and noble ancestors to the sky.”¹⁴⁸ That sort of spatial and socio-hierarchical scheme, in other words, makes a visible (ritual-architectural) argument that the elite owe their privilege and authority, not just to temporal circumstances or military might, but to their relative place in the cosmos.

Suggesting another symbolic layer, Mixtec scholar Ubaldo López García’s comments on indigenous Oaxacans’ tendency to “use their own body to orient themselves and everything in the world, both the tangible and the intangible,” make it likewise plausible that Monte Albán was laid out, or perhaps subsequently perceived, on the model of the human physique.¹⁴⁹ In that case, the north would have been conceived as the head, the “positive” or thoughtful decision-making sector, which matches quite logically with the general assessment that the North Platform was the elite residential and governmental precinct of the city. The south was the foot, which, by contrast, is associated with “the one that does not think, the one that goes where they carry it, the one that loads, the one that only serves to displace the body, the one that does not generate [or take initiative] by itself but is directed...”¹⁵⁰ In that orientational scheme, the east would have been correlated with the right hand and side, “the human side, the generous, good side,” which points to where the sun rises, “the side of light, heat, illumination and truth;” and the west would have been homologized to the left hand, which points to where the sun dies or hides, and thus is associated with “the side of darkness, the side of death, the negative side.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 201.

¹⁴⁹ López García, “El tiempo y la cosmovisión *Ñuu Sari*,” 292; my translation. In his discussion of contemporary Mixtec conceptions of the human body and cosmos, López García makes no direct reference to Monte Albán. Nonetheless, recall also the comments from Raúl Matadamas, “La arqueología y el presente en las comunidades oaxaqueñas,” 120, cited earlier in this chapter, concerning indigenous Oaxacan conceptions of hills and mountains as human bodies with heads, bodies and feet.

¹⁵⁰ López García, “El tiempo y la cosmovisión *Ñuu Sari*,” 292; my translation.

¹⁵¹ López García, “El tiempo y la cosmovisión *Ñuu Sari*,” 293; my translation. Recall, by the way, though her remarks do not quite match Ubaldo López García’s scheme, Joyce Marcus, “How Monte Albán Represented Itself,” 102-3, observes that, “The Zapotecs considered

Additionally, while the core of Monte Albán definitely mirrors the structure of the entire universe, it may also have been “microcosmic” at various smaller scales. Richard Blanton, for example, observes that, during the Period IIIB, the Zapotec capital consisted of 14 *barrios* or neighborhoods and, at the same time, the Main Plaza was site to 14 main buildings: six along the west side, three in the middle and five along the east side.¹⁵² That coincidence leads him to entertain the possibility that the ceremonial precinct was a microcosm of the social order of the wider city insofar as “Perhaps each of these units and/or the societies that each barrio may have represented maintained a building on the Main Plaza for the purposes of housing elites who were the league representatives.”¹⁵³

Also feasible and, in fact, more persuasive is the possibility that the Main Plaza was designed to mirror the natural topography of the surrounding valleys, not unlike the way in which the profile of Teotihuacan’s Pyramid of the Sun replicates, on a reduced scale, the natural shape of Cerro Gordo.¹⁵⁴ In this respect, art historian Mary Ellen Miller notices that,

“the cadence of elevation to depression in the manmade structures on the west side of the plaza—to take one instance—so precisely repeats the rhythm established by the western range of the mountains that the Monte Albán acropolis becomes a microcosmic replica of the surrounding valley of central Oaxaca. If such a view is still apparent today, we can only imagine how much more vivid it must have been for the people of the time.”¹⁵⁵

mountains to be living, sacred beings... today’s Zapotec anthropomorphize mountains, labeling them with the same terms used for the human body. In Zapotec, the summit of a mountain is called its head; the sides are its ribs; the front is its face; the back is its back; and the base of the hill is its foot (Robert MacLaury, personal communication, June 1978)...”

¹⁵² Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 63.

¹⁵³ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 63.

¹⁵⁴ On Teotihuacan’s relationship to Cerro Gordo, see, for instance, Anthony F. Aveni, *Skywatchers: A Revised and Updated Version of Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 230.

¹⁵⁵ Mary Ellen Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica: From Olmec to Aztec* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 83-84. Besides the much-noted example of the Pyramid of the Sun mirroring Cerro Gordo at Teotihuacan, Barbara W. Fash, “Watery Places and Urban Foundations Depicted in Maya Art and Architecture,” in *The Art of Urbanism*, eds. Fash and López Luján, 236, notes

And by the same token, architect Horst Hartung observes that, “at Monte Albán the horizon line of the mountains to the west is similar to the contours of the structures in the main part of the center,” a mirroring of the built environment with the natural landscape that he thinks was “done consciously.”¹⁵⁶

All of these prospects, even if some are more tentative than others, seem to express “a perspective in which heterogeneous realities are susceptible of articulation into a whole, or even integration into a ‘system.’”¹⁵⁷ The acclaimed “unity of conception” at Monte Albán really does reflect a circumstance in which all sorts of orders of reality—architectural space, calendrical time, social hierarchies, colors, directions, body parts, weather phenomena and natural landscapes—are coordinated and unified.

4. Two Key Points about *Imago Mundi* and the Architectural Replication of an All-Encompassing World Order

In sum, therefore, with respect to this second Eliadean theme of *imago mundi* and the incentive to replicate, in every realm and at every scale, an all-encompassing world order, two observations about the ostensible “religiosity” of Monte Albán are especially noteworthy.

that “Numerous scholars [e.g., Elizabeth Benson, Johanna Broda, Nicholas Dunning, William Fash, Leonardo Lopez Lujan, David Grove, Doris Heyden, Linda Schele and Peter Mathews] have shown that ancient Mesoamerican cities and ceremonial complexes were conceived as architectural replicas of the sacred landscape...” More specifically, John Pohl, <http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/sites/monteAlbán.html>; accessed 3-3-2018, likewise notes that, “Looking down the axis of the main plaza [of Monte Albán] one is struck by how the site plan mirrors the layout of the Valley of Oaxaca itself. This was probably intentional.”

¹⁵⁶ Hartung, “Monte Albán in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 50. He made the same observation earlier in Horst Hartung, “Monte Albán—Concepto espacial de un centro ceremonial zapoteco,” *El Boletín del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas y Estéticas*, núm 19 (diciembre 1974): 9-27.

¹⁵⁷ Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 99-100.

a. Monte Albán as a “Religiously” Motivated Project: Expressions and Reinforcements of Mesoamerican Cosmovision

First, though this is a conclusion frequently reached on somewhat sentimental and uncritical grounds, I would maintain, on the theoretical and definitional bases laid out here, that all aspects of the ancient capital were both inspired by and inspiring of the unifying Mesoamerican cosmovision. That is to say, while we may or may not be persuaded that some portions of Monte Albán are “more religious” than others—for instance, the customary assumption that the Main Plaza was devoted to explicitly ritual and ceremonial concerns while the collection of structures on the North Platform reflects more civic and political priorities—the prospect that Monte Albán was an *imago mundi* urges us to appreciate and affirm that the entire site was a “religiously” motivated project. Religion, as conceived in this project, permeates all aspects of the city.

Following that interpretation, the entire core area of Monte Albán was a paragon of order, bastioned against chaos, a fully controlled environment ideally suited to living what Eliade terms “the sanctified life” wherein all seemingly prosaic activities, “at the same time, share in transhuman life, that of the cosmos or the gods.”¹⁵⁸ What may be diluted and compromised in the periphery is made crystal clear in the center. And recall that, for Eliade, living on that sort of “twofold plane” wherein all of human activities correspond precisely to their divine patterns is the highly rewarding “mode of being in world” that he sees as the very crux of “religion.”¹⁵⁹ To the great extent that the city is a perfectly ordered “little cosmos”—a place of intensely lucid orientation—*everything* built and done within it conforms to archetypal models and is, therefore, important and satisfying; the meticulous layout of Monte Albán exemplifies perfectly López Austin’s notion that, “The cosmovision, though never explicitly formalized, was reflected in *all* concrete realms of human activity...”¹⁶⁰ And thus while critical religionists might be expected to discredit and temper the ballyhooed claims concerning Monte Albán’s essentially “religious

¹⁵⁸ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 167.

¹⁵⁹ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 14-16.

¹⁶⁰ López Austin, “Cosmovision,” 269; italics added.

character," appreciating the myriad of ways in which capital illustrates the *imago mundi* theme, surprisingly enough, actually reaffirms those avid assessments. In fact, viewed from this line of argument, Monte Albán is a "sacred space" par excellence, for which no accolades of its religiosity are too extreme.

b. Monte Albán as a Ritual Context: Ongoing and Diligent Ritualizing as a Means of Maintaining World Order

Secondly, we can take yet another cue from Paul Wheatley to appreciate that the entire core of Monte Albán was likewise, of necessity, a "ritual context" insofar as the preservation of that (appearance of) immaculate cosmic order would have been a very high maintenance project for which ritual would have provided the paramount strategy of conservation and upkeep. In other words, even the most perfectly configured and built "cosmo-magical city" was constantly vulnerable to decay and disorder, which could be staved off only by diligent ritualizing:

"In the astrobiological mode of thought, irregularities in the cosmic order could only be interpreted as misfortunes, so that, if a city were laid out as an *imago mundi* with the cosmogony as paradigmatic model, it became necessary to maintain this parallelism between macrocosmos and microcosmos by participation in the seasonal festivals that constituted man's contribution to the regulation of cyclic time..."¹⁶¹

As Winter and Bartolomé explain, the integration of three different calendrical rounds into the architectural forms, besides contributing to the overall unity of the plaza, also "enabled the programming of annual cycles of festivals and rites," which reinforced the unification of space and time.¹⁶² Indeed, as should become apparent in subsequent chapters, built forms, however meticulously conceived and constructed, become purveyors of meaning only in the context of ceremonial occasions or what I term "ritual-architectural events."

¹⁶¹ Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, 417.

¹⁶² Winter, "Religión de los *Binnigula'sa'*: la evidencia arqueológica," 68-69; my translation.

C. MONTE ALBÁN AS *AXIS MUNDI*: THE SYMBOLISM OF THE CENTER AND EARTHLY ACCESS TO CELESTIAL REALMS AND BEINGS

In any case, a third, closely related and even more oft-cited component of Mircea Eliade's model of sacred space is the notion of *axis mundis* and the symbolism of the center. To again work from the phenomenological general to the Oaxacan specific, if, for Eliade, "religion" is a mode of orientation, that sense of bearing nearly always entails positioning with respect to a center: "Because the body exists in space, any man orients himself by the four horizons and stands between the above and below. He is naturally the center."¹⁶³ Countless rites conducted by American Indians and other native peoples begin by acknowledging the four directions, and thereby positioning oneself at (or as) the center. Moreover, from the perspective of the "archaic mentality," the original creation of the world "took place from a center," and the prestige of such places, which are incontestably sacred and well-ordered, is, therefore, enduring.¹⁶⁴ "The center is," according to Eliade, "pre-eminently the zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality;"¹⁶⁵ and, as such, "Attaining the center is equivalent to a consecration, an initiation; yesterday's profane and illusory existence gives place to a new, to a life that is real, enduring, and effective."¹⁶⁶ Accordingly, the journey from periphery to center is, for Eliade, no less than a passage from chaos to cosmos, from profane to sacred, from ordinary to exceptional.

1. The Symbolism of the Center as a Cross-Cultural Phenomenon: The Multiplicity of World Centers and Points of Ontological Transition

To underscore another point to which I will frequently return, Eliade stresses, furthermore, that, irrespective of the seeming contradiction, the acknowledgement of one world center does not preclude other centers. To the contrary,

¹⁶³ Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 136.

¹⁶⁴ Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 18.

¹⁶⁵ Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 17.

¹⁶⁶ Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 18.

“Every dwelling, by the paradox of the consecration of space and by the rite of its construction, is transformed into a ‘centre.’ Thus all houses—like all temples, palaces, and cities—stand in the selfsame place, the centre of the universe. It is, we must remember, a transcendent space, quite different in nature from profane space, and allows of the existence of a multiplicity and even an infinity of ‘centres.’”¹⁶⁷

Unphased by the apparent inconsistency of multiple cosmic centers, roving tribes, settled villagers, city dwellers, mendicants, magicians, merchants and kings all make the bold assertion that they reside at “the center of the world.”¹⁶⁸ That the same audacious claim resurfaces in so many disparate contexts persuades Eliade of, “an inescapable conclusion that *the religious man sought to live as near as possible to the Center of the World.*”¹⁶⁹ What he terms “the *homo religiosus*’ need always to exist in a total and organized world, in a cosmos” is met nowhere more fully than when residing at a center;¹⁷⁰ and, conversely, denial of access to a center entails a kind of crisis of disorientation—that is, a religious crisis—an absence of being and meaning that makes life, if not intolerable, at best dull and “profane.”

Closely related, a so-termed *axis mundi* is defined, according to Eliade, as a center in the sense of a site of “ontological transition.” That formulation speaks to ways in which an *axis mundi* is a point, interstice or gateway of sorts at which access among various cosmic levels—earth, heaven and underworld—is enabled, “an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible,” and thus a place at which humans can engage with supernaturals.¹⁷¹ *Axis mundis* are, therefore, spatial loci that facilitate temporal transformations insofar as “every contact with a ‘centre’ involves doing away with profane time, and entering the mythical *illud tempus* of creation.”¹⁷² Sometimes *axis mundis* are described as pillars in the

¹⁶⁷ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 379.

¹⁶⁸ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 42-47.

¹⁶⁹ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 43; his italics.

¹⁷⁰ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 44.

¹⁷¹ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 36-37.

¹⁷² Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 378.

sense of structural members that "support the sky;"¹⁷³ and more often they are conceived as ladders or passageways that enable access between cosmic realms and communication with deities that are not otherwise attainable. Interactions between humans and gods that are difficult, even impossible, in the periphery are achievable at the center.

Additionally, Eliade elicits examples that guide us to see how this notion of a world center, like the *imago mundi* theme, can work at all scales. At the most modest permutation, he recounts the much-debated case of the wandering Achilpa of Australia who carried with them the *kauwa-auwa*, or sacred pole, a portable *axis mundi*, "so that they should never be far from the Center and should remain in communication with the supraterrrestrial world."¹⁷⁴ But then he demonstrates how the same principle of building around a "cosmic axis," and thereby transforming the surrounding territory into an orderly and habitable world, is at work in the construction of simple houses or grand palaces (e.g., Algonquin dwellings or the Forbidden City), individual shrines or temples (e.g., the Jerusalem Temple or Borobudur), cities or capitals (e.g., Jerusalem, Peking or Rome) and even entire countries (e.g., Palestine or China)—all of which are conceived as occupying the center of the world.¹⁷⁵ Again concerned to explore the relevance of Eliade's model to urban spaces and capitals, Wheatley, in his master work *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, explains how the impetus to transform one's capital into an *imago mundi* and "an imitation of a celestial archetype" invariably entails identifying a central point, "the holy of holies," as it were, and then building outward in each of the four directions.¹⁷⁶

Furthermore, it is highly notable for the present discussion that, where trees, columns, ropes and vines are frequently imagined as *axis mundis*, Eliade's numerous discussions of the

¹⁷³ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 36.

¹⁷⁴ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 43-44. Smith, *To Take Place*, 1-23, as a means of critiquing the presuppositions at work in Eliade's notions of sacred space and *axis mundi*, devotes nearly an entire chapter to a critical discussion of his account of the Achilpa people's investments in their *kauwa-auwa* or sacred pole.

¹⁷⁵ See Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 374ff.

¹⁷⁶ See Wheatley, "City as Symbol," 10; or Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, 418.

topic, not unlike those concerning hierophanies and *imago mundis*, even more often look first to mountains as sites "that express the connection between heaven and earth."¹⁷⁷ And again both natural mountains, like Mount Sinai or Mount Carmel, and humanly constructed "replicas of the cosmic mountain," like Babylonian ziggurats or those countless Hindu temples that are constructed on the model of the mythical Mount Meru, can, according to Eliade, serve equally well as *axis mundis*:¹⁷⁸

"Since the sacred mountain is *an axis mundi* connecting earth with heaven, it in a sense touches heaven and hence marks the highest point in the world; consequently the territory that surrounds it, and that constitutes "our world," is held to be the highest among countries."¹⁷⁹

Again then, where peoples in many contexts are charged with *building* a pyramid-mountain axis, the Zapotecs had *discovered* a preexistent hilltop hub of nature's design and supernature's intervention, a peak "where the break-through from plane to plane has been effected by a Hierophany."¹⁸⁰ And thus this concept of a vertical sacred axis, like that of an *imago mundi*, had redoubled relevance at the heavily remodeled mountain site of Monte Albán.

2. The Symbolism of the Center in Mesoamerican Cosmivision and Oaxaca: Cardinal Directionality and Crosses

Few topics are less constested than the observation that Mesoamericans, generally speaking, conceive of the world in terms of four quarters and a center; and no image is more frequently presented to support that claim than the page of the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* that shows the 9 Lords and the 260 days of the *tonalpohauilli* sacred calendar assigned to the four cardinal directions, along with the species of trees and birds, colors, "sky-bearers" and

¹⁷⁷ See, for instance, Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 38; Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 375ff.; and Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 11-17.

¹⁷⁸ See Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane*, 38-40; Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 11-13; and Eliade., *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 375.

¹⁷⁹ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 38.

¹⁸⁰ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 36.

dispositions that are assigned respectively to north, south, east and west. Buttressing his presentation of the topic with that endlessly reproduced codex image, H. B. Nicholson, for instance, explains that, in the cosmology of the Aztecs,

"From the center of the earth (*tlalxico*, the "navel") four quadrants extended out to the four directions (*nauhcampa*)... These four cardinal directions, with the Center, played a highly important cosmological role, as a fundamental principle of organization of a multitude of supernaturalistic concepts. At each direction stood a sacred tree, upon which was perched a sacred bird... Other animals, such as jaguar, serpent, and rabbit, also occasionally were assigned to the directions... Finally, each direction had good and bad, fertile and infertile associations (e.g., in one common scheme: East, good, fertile; North, bad, barren; West, generally unfavorable, too humid; South, indifferent)."¹⁸¹

In Nicholson's incontestable surmise, which applies to all Mesoamerican peoples, not just Aztecs, "Space and time were intimately related, even blended, in the late pre-Hispanic central Mexican *weltbau*, which is well illustrated by the assignment of the four year signs, the 20 day signs, and the *tonalpohualli* trecenas to the four directions."¹⁸² Variations on that basic four-part horizontal layout of the universe, albeit with different directional associations, reappear across Mesoamerica.

More specifically with respect to Oaxaca, ethnographer Alicia Barabas has amply documented "the processes of territorial appropriation" carried out by the present-day indigenous groups of the region wherein the heavens, earthly world and underworld are linked by a world center, *axis mundi* or "point of significant densification... that is endowed with magical and therapeutic powers."¹⁸³ Recognizing that pre-Columbian sites and contemporary settlements in

¹⁸¹ Henry B. Nicholson, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 10, "Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica," part I, vol. eds. Gordon F. Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal, gen. ed. Robert Wauchop (London: University of Texas Press, 1971), 403-5. Nicholson, *ibid.*, 405, has a chart that succinctly summarizes the Aztec conception of the four quarters of the universe and their associations.

¹⁸² Nicholson, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," 404.

¹⁸³ Barabas, "Cosmovisiones y etnoterritorialidad en las culturas indígenas de Oaxaca," 6; my translation. Of many additional places that she addresses the prominence and import of the symbolism of four quarters and a center among contemporary indigenous Oaxacans, often with direct reference to Eliade's notion of an *axis mundi*, see Barabas, *Dones, duenos y santos*, 16, n.1, 21, 22, 36, 38, 46, 57-61, 64-66, 70, 78, 82, 85, 91, 96-97, 105, 117-19, 130-1, and 140-1.

Oaxaca participate in the symbolism of the center is not, however, an insight that required Mircea Eliade's prompting. As early as 1901, pioneering Mesoamericanist Zelia Nuttall, for instance, in an enormous work comparing Old and New World civilizations, which actually began as "a short monograph... treating the origin of the native swastika or cross symbols," comes to her own conclusions about an apparently universal preoccupation with four-quartered symbolism, ancient Mesoamericans included.¹⁸⁴ Looking to a high-profile Oaxacan example for support of her thesis, Nuttall focuses on the cruciform tombs beneath many of Mitla's "palaces," for which she finds counterparts not only in cross-shaped tombs at Copán but also "the so-called 'Greek' cross." Especially illustrative of her general premise is the one case at Mitla in which a large circular stone column, referred to as the Pillar of Death (or, sometimes, the Pillar of Life), is positioned at the intersection of the four arms of a crypt:

"It is impossible not to recognize the symbolism of the pillar situated in the centre of a structure, the form of which symbolizes the Four Quarters and the fundamental identity of the column occupying the centre of the Mitla chamber..."¹⁸⁵

Folklorist Elise Clews Parsons, whose extended stays in Mitla during the 1920s and 1930s enable a far richer understanding of the place, has more skeptical and intriguing comments about Zapotecs' investments, or lack thereof, in centers and cardinal directionality. On the one hand, she is bemused that Mitla Zapotecs, unlike other native groups she had studied, had an

¹⁸⁴ Zelia Nuttall, *The Fundamental Principles of Old and New World Civilizations: A Comparative Research Based on a Study of the Ancient Mexican Religious, Sociological, and Calendrical Systems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1901), 4.

¹⁸⁵ Nuttall, *The Fundamental Principle of Old and New World Civilizations*, 513. As part of her globally comparative project, Nuttall, *ibid.*, continues on with unwarranted confidence about the symbolism of pre-Columbian pillars by noting, "Details associated with the great pillar which stood in the Great Temple of Mexico, and the 'pedestal' erected on the hill of justice at Guatemala definitely show that, in ancient America, the column was associated with star-cult, with the administration of justice and central celestial and terrestrial government. Investigation has shown that precisely the same ideas were associated with the circular, square or octagonal columns of Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Japan..." For a more contemporary take on Mitla's so-called Pillar of Death (or Pillar of Life), a colonial name for a pre-Columbian feature, see, for instance, Lindsay Jones, "Zapotec Sacred Places, Enduring and/or Ephemeral: Reverence, Realignment and Commodification at an Archaeological-Tourist Site in Southern Mexico," *Culture and Religion*, vol. 11, no. 4 (December 2010), 350ff.

evidently poor "sense of direction" and at most a half-hearted concern for the cardinal directions.¹⁸⁶

"In the tales, as in practical life, the sense of direction is but feebly expressed... The European cardinal directions are either not used at all by the Zapoteca I have met or used with uncertainty. This lack of proper terms of direction is puzzling, being neither characteristically European nor characteristically Indian."¹⁸⁷

That observation leads one, surprisingly enough, to doubt the applicability to Zapotecs of Wheatley's universalizing proposition that, "The techniques of orientation necessary to define sacred territory within the continuum of profane space involve an emphasis on the cardinal compass directions."¹⁸⁸ On the other hand, though, Parsons notes that Mitla is widely referred to by residents and Serranos in the surrounding mountain towns as "the middle of the world, *mitad del mundo*," and thus an important pilgrimage destination.¹⁸⁹ She also observes how Zapotec curendaras, or healers, routinely begin their rites by "calling the corners" or praying in the four directions.¹⁹⁰ She quotes Fray Burgoa's reference to a valiant Zapotec warrior who was buried in a fashion that enabled him to apotheosize as "lord over the cardinal directions, east, west, north, and south and guard the vassals and the lands of his uncle," which, in Parsons' view, provides a

¹⁸⁶ Concerning her primary Mitla Zapotec "informant" and travel partner, Eligio Santiago, Elsie Clews Parsons, *Mitla: Town of the Souls and Other Zapoteco-Speaking Pueblos of Oaxaca, Mexico* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 314, writes: "Eligio knew the Spanish terms for the cardinal points but he found difficulty in applying them. Eligio knew his routes, but I got the impression that he as well as other townspeople had little 'sense of direction'..."

¹⁸⁷ Parsons, *Mitla*, 314, 491. Parsons, *ibid.*, 314, notes that, "the terms for the cardinal points... are: *labhia*, side up (east); *ladhiyet*, side down (west); *laddanro*, side mountain big (north); *laddanberg*, side mountain comb or jar (south). Plainly these terms describe merely directions from Mitla, not directions in general." Concerning some other 20th-century Mesoamericans' non-investment in European versions of directionality, Parsons, *ibid.*, n.25, 491, quotes Robert Redfield's observation that "Cardinal directions are not commonly used at Tepoztlán..."

¹⁸⁸ Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, 418.

¹⁸⁹ Parsons, *Mitla*, 1.

¹⁹⁰ See, for instance, Parsons, *Mitla*, 122, 285 and 313.

hint as to shape of the famous cruciform tombs.¹⁹¹ And, most prominently, she comments at length on the Mitla persistent veneration of crosses, which are features that reflect a Spanish Catholic ploy to take possession of indigenous sacred places was, nonetheless, embraced by Zapotecs with extreme enthusiasm.¹⁹²

Crosses—an efficient means of defining a center via two intersecting lines—were, then, a non-native colonial imposition, but one for which pre-Columbian precedents greatly facilitated the reception.¹⁹³ Eduard Seler, for instance, opined that, traditionally, for Mesoamericans, “The cross was an image of the unity of the world insofar as, horizontally, it symbolizes the four cardinal points and, vertically, its intersection means the up and down.”¹⁹⁴ That is to say, while the ubiquitous Spanish Catholic practice of planting crosses on mountains, cave entrances or pyramid-bases from which they had expunged an aboriginal temple provided a simple, often effective means, of appropriating traditional sacred places, natives in Oaxaca and elsewhere, in a kind of creative subaltern response, appropriated the appropriation, so to speak, to embrace

¹⁹¹ Parsons, *Mitla*, n.57, 214.

¹⁹² Regarding the colonial imposition of crosses, Parsons, *Mitla*, 520-21, for instance, makes the unassailable observation that, “No doubt it was the [Dominican] padres who had crosses raised at all the places known or suspected to be associated with aboriginal cults...” And regarding the subsequent Mitleyeno embrace of crosses, Parsons comments at length about large and prominent examples like the so-termed Cross of Miracles (ibid., 219, plate XXIX; 233-38; 235, plate XXXI, fig., 8; 285-88) and more intimate examples like the Palm Sunday practice wherein “Every [Mitla] householder will place a little cross of *palm bendita* above his door, for the holy palm is a charm against lightening” (ibid., 266).

¹⁹³ Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 11, comments in his characteristically empathetic way on Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors’ penchant for planting crosses as a “religiously inspired” means of taking possession of the lands they conquered: “The setting up of the Cross was equivalent to a justification and to the consecration of the new country, to a ‘new birth,’ thus repeating baptism (act of Creation).” More specific to Oaxaca, Víctor de la Cruz, “Las creencias y prácticas religiosas de los descendientes de los *Binnigula’sa*,” 295 (my translation), comments on the Spanish appropriation of indigenous sacred spaces by planting crosses, which he sees as “one of the most direct examples of the juxtaposition of the elements of the Catholic religion over those of the Mesoamerican religion.”

¹⁹⁴ Eduard Seler quoted and reaffirmed by Zárate Morón, “Símbolos prehispánicos y ritos contemporáneos de creación y nacimiento en el sur del Istmo de Tehuantepec,” 184; my translation.

crosses as their own most prevalent markers of special places. In a piece on the vernacular conceptualization of sacred places in Oaxaca, Mixtec scholar Ubaldo López García, for instance, explains that, presently, “at the entrance or exit of each [Mixtec] town we always see a cross; these points are considered as sacred or strategic.”¹⁹⁵ He reaffirms that, prior to the arrival of Spaniards, “there were no crosses of the Catholic sort;” but he also stresses that there were “other symbols, similar to the cross,” most derived from the human body, that greatly expedited the native embrace of cross forms. And, in fact, eventually, “the Catholic cross came to substitute for any symbol that the [indigenous Oaxacan] people considered sacred,” Christian or otherwise.¹⁹⁶ Crosses—which, even when vertical, are emblematic designations of centers—thus come to mark both negatively and positively charged places in addition to other spots that are understood, more explicitly in the sense of *axis mundis*, as “strategic points of communication.”¹⁹⁷ And it is very easy to imagine that the same inclinations to orient oneself with respect to multiple “centers” obtained as well in ancient Oaxaca.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Ubaldo López García, “Conceptualización vernácula en lugares sagrados,” en *Sociedad y patrimonio arqueológico en el valle de Oaxaca: Memoria de la Segunda Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2002), 203.

¹⁹⁶ López García, “Conceptualización vernácula en lugares sagrados,” 203.

¹⁹⁷ López García, “Conceptualización vernácula en lugares sagrados,” 204.

¹⁹⁸ Along with her countless references to the importance of the symbolism of the center and four quarters among contemporary indigenous Oaxacans, Barabas also has many references specifically to the use of crosses to mark places of special potency and also the boundaries of communities and houses. See, for example, Barabas, “Cosmovisiones y etnoterritorialidad en las culturas indígenas de Oaxaca,” 7; and see many references in Barabas, *Dones, duenos y santos*, such as “Crosses, as points of significant densification, are considered gateways to the levels of the universe, thresholds of entry and exit to circulate between the town and the mountain. Crosses usually mark centers but also indicate the main frontiers of the community or municipality. They serve as powerful landmarks that mark the limits of the town and its lands with those of the neighbors and close the borders of the milpas and the communities, and at the same time protect the roads and their crossroads. [In contemporary Oaxacan communities] crosses are usually renewed periodically, sometimes every year or coinciding with the change of authorities...” Ibid., 63-64; my translation.

3. The Symbolism of the Center at Monte Albán: Religious Centers, Sacred Axes and Areligious Disembedded Capitals

In any case, to search after “the Symbolism of the Center” at Monte Albán is an exercise in the obvious. We have noted that the Main Plaza is more elongated than round or square, that there are numerous deviations from perfect cardinality and, moreover, that the three buildings closest to its physical center of the acropolis do not constitute the sort of dominant focal point that one sees, for instance, in Tenochtitlán’s Templo Mayor or Chichén Itzá’s Castillo. Nevertheless, countless commentators—again irrespective of Eliade—have assessed the Zapotec capital as a symbolic center of one sort or another. Impressed by “the sense of perfection and permanence that only rarely is to be found anywhere in the world,” Ignacio Bernal, for instance, imagined that,

“To the people in the valley [Monte Albán] must have been the centre of the world, the place nearest to the gods, where the great priests and nobles lived, the place to which they turned in prayer and supplication, the perfect fulfillment of their religious beliefs and their desire for eternal life.”¹⁹⁹

Henri Stierlin bolsters his assessment of the Main Plaza as a “sacred center” by noting that it has, at once, “a centripetal plan” insofar as the esplanade or open space is bordered on all sides by buildings that are directed inward toward the center and “a centrifugal arrangement” insofar as the three buildings in the middle have facades and staircases that are directed outward from the center.²⁰⁰ Likewise, as tour guides point out daily, Monte Albán is positioned precisely at the intersection of the three lobes of the Valley of Oaxaca: Eta, Tlacolula and Zimatlán (or Central). Thus, even before one stone had been laid, this was, in ways that few large sites duplicate, a vista-producing topographic center, a pivot of three valleys, as it were.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Bernal, *Ancient Mexico in Colour*, 36.

²⁰⁰ Stierlin, *Ancient Mexico*, 132-33.

²⁰¹ Also, by the way, as one sort of explanation of Oaxaca’s seemingly disproportionate abundance of writers, poets, musicians, historians, politicians, reformers and painters, including many of prime historical importance, Mexican art critic Teresa del Conde, Oaxaca: Five Painters,” in *Nine Contemporary Oaxaca Painters* (Oaxaca: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de

Examples of axiality and the relevance of the four compass points at Monte Albán are equally omnipresent. Archaeologist Arturo Oliveros, for one among many, repeats the stock assessment that ancient Zapotec architects were much concerned to lay out the city in relation to the cardinal directions.²⁰² Robert Markens hypothesizes that five ceramic boxes found in Mound H of the Main Plaza had been arranged as a four-quarter and center diagram of the cosmos, and, moreover, that such a configuration comports with the Zapotec concept of the four *coccids* or rain gods that, according to Javier Urcid, dominate the four cardinal directions.²⁰³ And Maarten Jansen directs attention to depictions in the *Codex Yuta Tnoho* (or *Codice Vindobonensis*) and other pictorial manuscripts that “describe the founding within Oaxacan landscapes of ceremonial centers that represent the four directions and the center,” an impulse that one has to suspect was in play at Monte Albán.²⁰⁴ Furthermore, in addition to Monte Albán’s many highly conspicuous expressions of axiality, Gustavo Gámez Goytia discerns an invisible line or “sacred axis” that, though out of view, was acknowledged and reinforced by strategically placed offerings that were deposited at each stage of construction in many of the main structures.²⁰⁵ Even subterranean offerings to the gods were arranged along a kind of “center line.”

Oaxaca, 1997), 8, makes the passing observation that “Some areas in the state have been described as magnetic, as ‘navels of the world.’”

²⁰² Arturo Oliveros, *Guía de Monte Albán* (Mérida, Yucatán, México: Codice Ediciones, 1996), 14.

²⁰³ See Markens, “La transición del Clásico al Postclásico en el Valle de Oaxaca,” 523; and Urcid, *Zapotec Writing*, 156.

²⁰⁴ Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen, “Inauguración de templos y dinastías. La piedra grabada de Nuú Yuchi,” en *Bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca: Memoria de la Cuarta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2009), 587; my translation. Also see Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen, “The Four Quarters of the Mixtec World,” in *Space and Time in the Cosmivision of Mesoamerica*, ed. Franz Tichy (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1982), 85-95.

²⁰⁵ Gustavo Gámez Goytia, “El eje sagrado en Monte Albán: Elemento central de la arquitectura religiosa Zapoteca,” in *Religión de los Binnigula’sa’*, Víctor de la Cruz y Marcus Winter, coords. (Oaxaca, México: Fondo Editorial, IEEPO, 2001), 200.

Likewise with respect to the ubiquity of the symbolism of four quarters and a center, Urcid's very detailed analysis of the iconography, especially of Tomb 104 at Monte Albán and Tomb 7 at Cerro de la Campana, Suchilquitongo, leads him to a host of very specific conclusions before coming, at the very end of the work, to the more general observation that:

"An important feature of the Zapotec 'cultural code' that became evident throughout the exegesis of inscriptions in monumental and domestic contexts is the quadripartite conception of time and space. This enduring normative structure of world centering evidently pervaded all social practices, mundane and special purpose."²⁰⁶

In his view, the fact that residential Zapotec house layouts replicate that quadripartite conception "imply that such a norm became ingrained in individuals through the habits of daily live;" and then ancient Oaxacans extended that same pivot-and-the-four-quarters sensibility to ritual practices of all sorts,

"from the preparation of cornfields, to mortuary practices and their physical staging (tomb layout and distribution of niches, or architectural configuration of mausoleums), to reiterations of origins with tableaux of effigy vessels, to rituals of enthronement."²⁰⁷

By that universal relevance from domestic to public contexts, from utilitarian to ritual contexts, and even from contexts of the living to those of the dead, the symbolism of the center provides a feature of allurement that is eminently familiar and respected by all segments of society.

Lest, however, we concede too quickly the exceptionless enthusiasm for the symbolism of the center, recall, as noted earlier, architect Alejandro Mangino Tazzer's antipathetic opinion that, aside from Teotihuacan, pre-Columbian architects had little interest in axiality and right angles.²⁰⁸ And he is similarly iconoclastic concerning "centers" insofar as he disputes the prevailing assumption that pre-Columbian designers relied on "the concept of radial vision" wherein some stationary built form is imagined as the permanent and immobile center.

Alternatively, Mangino Tazzer argues for what he sees as a distinctly Mesoamerican "itinerant

²⁰⁶ Urcid, *Zapotec Writing*, 156.

²⁰⁷ Urcid, *Zapotec Writing*, 156.

²⁰⁸ Alejandro Mangino Tazzer, *Arquitectura Mesoamericana: relaciones espaciales*, 2 ed. (México, D.F.: Editorial Trillas, 2006), 190.

vision" in which the human observer is the ambulatory center whose perspective changes as one "penetrates in movement" the various plazas and spaces of a site.²⁰⁹ How this decidedly "eventful" notion of moving "centers," which is easier to ascertain in the Maya zone than in Oaxaca, might apply to Monte Albán is, if not obvious, worth considering.

Be that as it may, arguably, there has been considerably more informed and sustained debate concerning Monte Albán's status as a political center than as a religious one. In that respect, Richard Blanton, basing his views largely on the "central place theory" prominent in geography during the 1970s, on the one hand, came to the conclusion that Monte Albán and Teotihuacan both qualify as "nuclear centers" insofar as both were major loci of innovation and socio-cultural change during most of the pre-Hispanic period.²¹⁰ On the other hand, however, contrary to his initial expectations, Blanton was eventually impressed most of all by the profound differences between the two huge capitals.²¹¹ According to his later analysis, Teotihuacan was a "primate center" in which administrative and commercial functions were, as per usual, combined in a single urban capital; but Monte Albán, of fundamentally contrastive conception in Blanton's assessment, was a much less common sort of "disembedded capital," the role of which was confined to administrative and political decision-making, while it was largely uninvolved in the more utilitarian matters of commerce and production.²¹² Moreover, in the context of a discussion about the site's supposed religiosity, it is noteworthy that so-termed disembedded

²⁰⁹ Mangino Tazzer, *Arquitectura Mesoamericana*, 87-88. Mangino Tazzer, *ibid.*, 88, considers that La Venta, unlike Teotihuacan or essentially all Maya sites, is the atypical Mesoamerican site where "radial vision" does apply. And, as I noted earlier, Mangino Tazzer's general assessments are strongly influenced by his studies of Maya sites and very little, it seems, by Oaxacan sites.

²¹⁰ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, xxviii-xxiv. For a summary of the vigorous debate about what sort of "center" Monte Albán was (and was not), see Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, the section in chapter 4 entitled "From Cultural Ecology to Central Place Theory: 'Primate Centers' versus 'Disembedded Capitals.'"

²¹¹ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 109.

²¹² Blanton's earliest expositions of the notion of a "disembedded capital" come in Richard E. Blanton, "The Origins of Monte Albán," in *Cultural Change and Continuity*, ed. Charles Cleland (New York: Academic Press, 1976), 223-232; and Richard E. Blanton, "Anthropological Studies of Cities," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976): 249-64. But by far the most famous treatment appears in Blanton, *Monte Albán* (1978), chap. 2.

capitals—of which even Blanton thinks Monte Albán was Mesoamerica’s sole exemplar—owe much of their success as centers of political administration to the fact that they are largely neutral with respect to religion, which more often divides than unites competing constituencies. And thus, from that interpretive frame, Monte Albán emerges, ironically enough, as a kind of *areligious* center, a place where strong opinions about cosmology and divinity are *not* allowed to be voiced.

4. Two Key (and Cautionary) Points about *Axis Mundis* and the Symbolism of the Center at Monte Albán

In sum, then, on this third variation on the homology priority (I-A), I deliver a somewhat mixed assessment. On the one hand, observations about Monte Albán’s status as a sacred and symbolic center have been exceptionally common; but, on the other hand, it is not until the interpretations of Arthur Joyce, beginning in the early 2000s, that the terminology and logic of *axis mundis* and “cosmic mountains” were applied to Monte Albán in a thoroughgoing and sustained way—and even in that case, notably, Joyce proceeds without any explicit appeal to the work of Mircea Eliade. Yet, before turning to a brief synopsis of how those Eliadean concepts might underwrite a historical (re)construction of Monte Albán’s founding, ascent and collapse, I highlight just two of the innumerable ways that Eliade’s weathered and revered old discussion of the symbolism of the center could both curtail and enrich our understanding of Monte Albán as a “sacred place.” Both entail cautions against being lulled by his decided preference for ontological over political explanations; and both thereby prefigure this chapter’s Closing Thoughts on “ritual-architectural allurement.”

a. Ontological and/or Political Motives for Living at the Center: Existential Meaning and/or Hegemonic Control

First, where an uncritical reading of Eliade’s lyrical language on *axis mundis* as portals that enable escape from the merely terrestrial could leave the impression that *homo religiosi* are drawn to sacred centers like Monte Albán as places at which they can bask in ontological plenitude and a uniquely deep sense of being—and that may well be accurate, at least in part.

Aside from ritualizing, reiterating mythical models and thereby enjoying “access to the sacred,” Eliade has little say about what people actually do at such privileged locations. But we ought to keep in mind that sacred centers, especially urban capitals, are, besides reservoirs of existential meaning, also places of action, places where people come to get things done, to take initiative, exercise authority and undertake constructive, often self-interested, accomplishments. Monte Albán is not only a place of comological prestige, but even more importantly a place of possibility, a place where deeds and designs that are impossible elsewhere become possible. Sacred centers, as should become more clear in subsequent chapters (and as few contemporary commentators have failed to note), are places of political as well as ontological heft.

b. Restricted Access to the Center: The Rewarding but Arduous Journey to a Sacred Center

And second, while Eliade’s emphasis on the multiplicity of centers suggests that, at one level, it is quite easy for everyone to access a sacred center—every house, hut and hovel is potentially an *axis mundi*—we need to appreciate that he stresses also that access to prestigious centers is frequently restrictive, difficult and fraught with obstacles.²¹³ In the context of his comments on Dani Guíaati in the southern Isthmus region, Roberto Zárate Morón, for instance, invokes Eliade’s work to make the point that, though Oaxacan sacred mountains enable access to other realms, one must accept also that “the passage to the center is full of dangers, is an arduous and difficult road, constituting a rite of passage from the profane to the sacred, so that only initiates or consecrated persons can have access.”²¹⁴ In Eliade’s own description, the excursion to a sacred center is invariably guarded by labyrinth-like gauntlets, which transform the journey into an “initiation” that entails both large risks and larger rewards:

“The way [to a sacred center] is arduous and fraught with peril because it is, in fact, a rite for passing from the profane to the sacred, from the passing and illusory to reality and eternity, from death to life, from man to god. To reach the ‘centre’ is to achieve a

²¹³ On this tension between ease and difficulty in reaching sacred centers, see Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 380-82; and Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 25-26.

²¹⁴ Zárate Morón, “Símbolos prehispánicos y ritos contemporáneos de creación y nacimiento en el sur del Istmo de Tehuantepec,” 177-78; my translation.

consecration, an initiation. To the profane and illusory existence of yesterday, there succeeds a new existence, real, lasting and powerful.”²¹⁵

For Eliade, the stakes are very high insofar as the full satisfaction of *homo religiosi* is forestalled when they are denied access to the center; and because the rewards of visiting the center of the world are so great, the journey to reach such a prestigious pivot is “a difficult trial in which not all are fitted to triumph.”²¹⁶ Lots of aspiring initiates are excluded; they do not reach the sacred center.

Again then, Eliade’s phenomenological language and choice of terms concerning the restrictive access and “difficult trial” of traveling to a sacred center accentuate the existential rather than socio-economic issues that are at issue. His own interest lies primarily with the ontological rather than political transformations that *axis mundis* can facilitate. But he does, nonetheless, prompt us to think about the ways in which control of access to a prestigious sacred center like Monte Albán constitutes as well a kind of socio-political and economic “capital” or commodity in the sense of a very tangible asset, practical and this-worldly currency that, as we’ll see, Zapotec leaders can exploit in myriad ways.

III. MONTE ALBÁN AS SACRED SPACE AND COSMIC MOUNTAIN: A DIACHRONIC VIEW

Now shifting from a synchronic to a more diachronic consideration of these Eliadean themes, this section reflects upon the role of religion, sacred space and homologized architecture in relation to the history of Monte Albán. Paying much fuller attention to changes over time, here I explore how the homology priority (I-A) was relevant (or not) to different periods in the city’s emergence, development and decline. Providing secure replies to these questions is, as noted, complicated by the fact that the alternative historical (re)constructions inventoried in *Narrating Monte Albán* present not only alternate versions of the pre-Columbian events, but also decidedly different conceptions of “religion,” which actually derive from fundamentally

²¹⁵ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 382.

²¹⁶ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 381.

disparate theories of human nature.²¹⁷ To be sure, each of the seven most prominent stories of Monte Albán's rise, climax and fall summarized in that earlier book is predicated on different assumptions about just what forces are most important in human decision-making, and thus in social evolution. And, therefore, each historical account leads us to quite different conclusions as to the relative importance of such Eliadean topics as cosmic mountains, microcosmic architecture and the symbolism of the center.

A. COMPETING CONCEPTIONS OF RELIGION AND NEGLIGIBLE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS OF THE HOMOLOGY PRIORITY (I-A)

Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal, for instance, locate the "religion" of Monte Albán primarily in its priest-led institutions, which are focused largely on patronizing a pantheon of gods.²¹⁸ In their (re)constructions of Monte Albán history, that priestly bureaucracy first guides the capital to its most impressive cultural, artistic and political achievements; but, eventually, the same institutions become overbearingly "theocratic" and "inordinately introspective," and thus non-responsive to the needs of the populace in ways that lead to the capital's demise.²¹⁹ In Caso and Bernal's deeply ambivalent conception of religion, it is both Monte Albán's strongest asset and most serious liability; from their view, investments in religion were for the Zapotecs, as for the Aztecs, initially an invigorating impetus, but then, in Caso's telling term, "a fatal flaw."²²⁰ Nevertheless, by assigning religion, as they conceive it, a prominent role in each the rise, success and implosion of Monte Albán, Caso, and even more artfully Bernal, provide what narrative

²¹⁷ Note that, as in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, I use the parentheses in "historical (re)construction" to keep in the foreground that all of these storiological renditions of Monte Albán history are, in my view, the imaginative "constructions" of archaeologist-authors rather than mere statements about the empirical "facts" on which those accounts are based.

²¹⁸ I will engage more fully Caso's and Bernal's notions of "religion" and "gods" in chapter 4 on the divinity priority, II-A.

²¹⁹ For critical summaries of Alfonso Caso's and Ignacio Bernal's (re)constructions of Monte Albán history, see, respectively, Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chaps. 1 and 2.

²²⁰ Alfonso Caso, *The Aztecs: People of the Sun*, trans. Lowell Dunham (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 95. Recall that this book is an expanded version of Caso's *La religión de los aztecas* (1936).

theorist Paul Ricoeur would describe as a satisfying and "followable" story insofar as their historical narrative of the ancient Zapotec capital has a congruous beginning, middle and end.²²¹ For them, religion, is, in other words, crucial in each stage of the city's history, which gives their accounts a cogent logic and plausibility. But their conception of religion as a largely institutional matter and an inescapable defect is, to be sure, very different from Mircea Eliade's conception of religion as "a mode of being in the world" or Alfredo López Austin's formulation of an all-embracing Mesoamerican cosmovision. And thus, if one follows Caso's or Bernal's historical (re)constructions of Monte Albán, questions of sacred space and homologized architecture remain only deep in the background.

Caso and Bernal's successor, John Paddock, by contrast, operates with a conception of "religion" that is much closer to the Eliadean view insofar as he largely disconnects religion from institutional concerns, about which he too is highly ambivalent, and emphasizes instead the unique "religio-artistic sensibilities" of the Zapotecs, which Paddock assesses in the most flattering terms.²²² Not unlike Eliade's view that the *homo religiosus* of traditional contexts is intent on participating with "the sacred" or "the exceptional," Paddock maintains that pre-Columbian Zapotecs operated with priorities that are nearly opposite those of twentieth-century Americans who "demand material-mechanical explanations for everything."²²³ Alternatively, he ventures that, "Ancient Mesoamerican culture was strikingly impractical on two counts: its indifference to (or contempt for) technology, and its extraordinary devotion to esthetic

²²¹ On the notion of a "followable" story, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 149-55. Ricoeur's understanding of "followability" is summarized by Mark Pluciennik, "Archaeological Narratives and Other Ways of Telling," *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 5 (December 1999), 654: "[followability is] the way in which the story receives overall coherence, the way in which it unfolds so that the end result or situation can be understood as the logical or at least plausible consequence of previously described situations or conditions." For more on how "followability" applies to archaeological narratives like Caso's and Bernal's, also see the Introduction to Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*.

²²² Regarding John Paddock's conception of religion as a religio-artist sensibility and how that plays into his narrative (re)construction of Monte Albán history, see Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 3.

²²³ Paddock, "Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica," 152.

principles.”²²⁴ Thus while the Zapotecs of Paddock’s imagination are arguably much more preoccupied with art—and with the “beatific” aspects of life—than with religion per se, he attributes their unobvious decision to build a great capital atop an inconvenient mountaintop to their deep desires to create “an enormous work of art,” which was made even more rewarding by the huge expenditure of labor that was required to create it.²²⁵ In his view, religio-artistic priorities supersede utilitarian ones. Consequently, while Paddock does not really broach the questions of “cosmic mountains” or “sacred space” (neither a term he is inclined to use), he does provide a historical plotline that is very different from either Caso or Bernal and far more consistent with Eliade’s presuppositions about religion. And to that extent Paddock, perhaps unwittingly, anticipates several of the broad themes that we will observe momentarily in Arthur Joyce’s (re)construction of Monte Albán history.

Numerous later twentieth-century (re)constructions of Monte Albán history, concerned to avoid the “exoticizing” of Zapotec sensibilities that they discern in their predecessors, are most notable for telling stories of the ancient capital’s founding and fall in which religion enjoys little or no part whatever. Richard Blanton’s *Monte Albán* (1978), for instance, by stark contrast to any preceding interpretation, presents the extreme case of a version of Monte Albán history in which religion plays virtually no role, and thus nor do the dynamics of sacred space. Focused on questions of politics and statecrafting, his rendition of the emergence and decline of “a disembedded capital” would lead one to believe that the homology priority (I-A) is of little consequence in the city’s history.²²⁶ And Marcus Winter’s *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* (1992), while directly at odds with many of Blanton’s conclusions, also presents an account of Monte Albán’s rise and decline in which ecological factors and the strategic control of natural

²²⁴ Paddock, “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica,” 152.

²²⁵ 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]), 153.

²²⁶ For a critical summary of Richard Blanton’s (re)construction of Monte Albán history, see Jones, *Narrative Monte Albán*, chap. 4.

resources are far more consequential than any "religious" factors.²²⁷ As we have seen and will continue to see, many of Winter's other works do suggest much larger roles for religion and ritual in Monte Albán's history; but this synthesis stresses the even-handed and pragmatic nature of ancient Oaxacan lifestyle choices rather than venturing hypotheses about their otherworldly interests, anxieties or enthusiasms.²²⁸ Accordingly, that little book too proposes a historical scenario in which the homology priority (I-A) is a virtual non-factor.

Additionally, Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery's *Zapotec Civilization* (1996), while providing a version in which religion plays a more complicated role in the governance and configuration of Monte Albán—frequently as a tool with which savvy rulers manipulate the masses—are insistent that our best chance of understanding the motivations of Zapotec leaders depends upon viewing them as self-interested political pragmatists who never allow metaphysical concerns to cloud their socio-economically astute initiatives in diplomacy and regional control.²²⁹ At points they do accentuate the workings of "the ancient Zapotec mind" in ways that reecho Eliade's view of "the archaic consciousness," and, as we've seen, Marcus especially is attentive to many of the topics relative to homologized architecture; to that extent, they are very helpful in identifying Zapotec concerns for "cosmic mountains," microcosmic ritual spaces and other forms of symbolic place-making. But Marcus and Flannery, at least in their large synthesis, provide a history of the city in which the impetus for those constructions is

²²⁷ For a critical summary of Marcus Winter's (re)construction of Monte Albán history, see Jones, *Narrative Monte Albán*, chap. 5; but note also that, in other works, Winter does, as I have noted already, attribute broadly "religious" factors a larger and more consequential role in the configuration of Monte Albán.

²²⁸ Regarding the very limited role of religion in *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, Winter does comment briefly of the respective role of religion in each of four major stages (see, for instance, *ibid.*, 25, 34 and 85-87); he makes a rare reference to "cosmovision or the view of the human being and his position in the universe" (p. 86); and he apparently considers the "outward expression" of "symbol systems" and perhaps "rituals" somewhat more accessible areas of inquiry (see, for instance, pp. 86-87). But, in this little book, he intimates that "religion" and "religious beliefs" are less visible in the extant archaeological record, and thus an area of speculation that an archaeologist of his ilk is not inclined to enter. As noted, and as we'll see, Winter has much fuller comments about religion at Monte Albán in numerous other works.

²²⁹ For a critical summary of Marcus and Flannery's (re)construction of Monte Albán history, see Jones, *Narrative Monte Albán*, chap. 6.

always primarily about gaining political advantage and only secondarily, if at all, about the exercise of an urge for something akin to "access to the sacred." Their narrative account thereby leads one to imagine that political priorities not only exceed, but overwhelm, those of homology.

B. ARTHUR JOYCE'S ALTERNATE STARTING POINT: THE AGENCY OF COMMONERS AND THE RELIGIOSITY OF EVERYONE

Arthur Joyce's *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (2010), a broad synthesis of the entire region from which one can extract a more specific account of Monte Albán, presents, therefore, the first thoroughgoing (re)construction of the capital that lends primary importance to these issues of sacred space and cosmic mountains.²³⁰ Advancing those concerns also in a host of complementary articles, he presents scenarios in which locating and/or building sacred mountains, *axis mundis* and microcosmic ritual contexts are among the leading priorities in every era of Oaxacan social evolution, the history of Monte Albán included.²³¹ And while I am at the moment more concerned to use Joyce's work as a resource for considering the relevance of homologized architecture during the various phases of Monte Albán's history than as an object of critical reflection, I nonetheless comment quickly on his somewhat oddly paired investments in poststructural theory and a much-heightened role for religion, two perspectives that are more often at odds than working in tandem.²³² Together these

²³⁰ For a critical summary of the (re)construction of Monte Albán history that Arthur Joyce provides in his *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (2010), see Jones, *Narrative Monte Albán*, chap. 7. My brief remarks on Joyce's work here are directly indebted to my fuller treatment in that chapter.

²³¹ Among numerous articles in which he explores these issues, see Arthur A. Joyce, "The Founding of Monte Albán: Sacred Propositions and Social Practices," in *Agency in Archaeology*, eds. M. Dobres and J. Robb (London: Routledge, 2000), 71-91; Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca," 192-216; and Arthur A. Joyce, "The Main Plaza of Monte Albán: A Life History of Place," in *The Archaeology of Meaningful Places*, eds. Brenda J. Bowser and María Nieves Zedeño (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009), 32-52.

²³² Here I am drawing directly on methodological issues that I discuss more fully in my discussion of Joyce's work in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 7. There I explain in greater detail why I regard his (carefully acknowledged) appeal to poststructural theory and his (largely unacknowledged) appeal to the phenomenological strain of the history of religion as "an odd juxtaposition."

two methodological adjustments prove highly consequential for every episode in his version of the story of Monte Albán.

Regarding that first corrective, Joyce, by self-description crafting a work that is "more heavily theorized than other books on ancient Oaxaca,"²³³ delves deeper than earlier Oaxacan archaeologists into poststructural, feminist and subaltern theories, which together direct him to special concerns for individual and collective "identity construction," gender and sexuality dynamics, as well as status differences and disparities of power.²³⁴ Those influences lead Joyce not only to reaffirm Marcus and Flannery's emphasis on the "agency" of ancient Oaxacan elites, but, additionally, to place an even stronger emphasis on the creative initiative of non-elites or, for lack of a better term, "common people." Informed by voluminous debate about the applicability of thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci and Judith Butler to archaeological theory, Joyce supports the wary premise that "All societies are permeated and constituted by relations of power, which cannot be established or implemented without the production and circulation of knowledge."²³⁵ But he is even more fully persuaded that, in southern Mexico as elsewhere, "Dominant ideologies provide openings for negotiation, contestation, and resistance because they usually include some form of social contract that delineates obligations of ruling authorities to their subjects."²³⁶ In his iconoclastic view, it is actually commoners, not rulers, who are most impactful in guiding the course of pre-Columbian Oaxacan social history.

Regarding the second, less well-acknowledged theoretical corrective, by this special attention to "the agency of commoners," Joyce introduces a set of explicitly political concerns not present in Eliade's work, but also, if somewhat indirectly, reaffirms the premises of Eliade and López Austin that "religion," rather than primarily the top-down matter implied by Caso, Bernal and others, is a concern shared by all strata of society. He concurs that everyone is

²³³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, xiv.

²³⁴ See Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 17-34 and 284-94.

²³⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 28.

²³⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 31.

“religious.” In Joyce’s account—but in Eliade’s terminology—all ancient Oaxacans were equally *homo religiosi* with both the irrepressible urges and the wherewithal to configure their lives and “mode of being in the world” in ways that enable ongoing interactions with “the sacred.” Joyce contends, for instance, that indigenous Oaxacans espoused a “religion” that “was based on the belief in a vital force that animated all ‘living’ things;”²³⁷ for them, he writes, “earth, mountains, and the rivers are therefore not considered parts of the physical environment separate from humans, but have agency and are connected with people and deities via the sacred life force.”²³⁸ In fact, though his presuppositions about religion, “the sacred” and “power” are more Durkheimian than Eliadean—and though he declines to make use any theories drawn from Religious Studies per se²³⁹—by one reading, Joyce too, like Eliade and Paddock, presumes that broadly “religious” sensibilities supersede more plainly political ones. Adopting an alternate starting point that leads to a very different account of Monte Albán’s history, Joyce’s Oaxacan protagonists, by contrast to Blanton’s or Marcus and Flannery’s cagey political pragmatists, find nothing so urgent nor so satisfying as “communication with the sacred.”²⁴⁰ And thus in this rendition, religion, conceived in this more populist fashion, is a primary rather than ancillary factor.

²³⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 56.

²³⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 56.

²³⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 32, provides a nearly unique exception to Joyce’s avoidance of scholars with a primary specialization in the study of religion with a passing reference to Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); but there is scant sign that Bell’s very important work has had a significant influence on his approach to religion or ritual. At the same time, Joyce cites the social scientific work, David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), though likewise without elaboration.

²⁴⁰ Joyce is not explicit concerning the way that he regards the category of “the sacred,” which he uses interchangeably with “the divine” and occasionally “the supernatural.” One can imagine that he adheres to the social scientific position that “the sacred” is a cultural construction rather than an ontological reality; but his usage of term, perhaps surprisingly, is actually similar to that of phenomenologists who exercise epoché or “bracketing” insofar as they withhold judgment on the question of the existence or non-existence of “the sacred.” I have more to say about the fundamentally different approaches to other peoples’ claims about things supernatural utilized by social scientists versus phenomenologists at the outset of chapter 4 on the divinity priority, II-A.

In short, religionists will be startled by work that makes such ample use of the phraseology of “the sacred,” “the divine,” “sacred space,” “cosmic mountains” and “*axis mundis*” without ever acknowledging of the phenomenological strain of the history of religions that is so germane to Joyce’s hypotheses; and thus one wonders if he is aware of the hot contestation that has swirled around reliance on those Eliadean categories.²⁴¹ Yet, for him, as for most Oaxacanists, providing a direct link to the work of Mircea Eliade is of little concern. In any case, whether those omissions are assessed as a quibble or a quagmire, there is no question that Joyce provides the strongest and best-informed clues for how the homology priority (I-A) figured large in the history of ancient Oaxaca and Monte Albán. And thus it is to a concise chronologic overview of that issue that I turn now.

1. Before Monte Albán: Discovered and/or Constructed Sacred Spaces in the Archaic and Formative Eras

Arthur Joyce’s version of events, though more complex than this quick summary may imply, provides a way of imagining nearly the whole duration of pre-Columbian Oaxacan history as a series of quests for orientation with respect to sacred places and spaces wherein, consequently, the homology priority (I-A) is highly prominent in every episode.²⁴² According to that thread of his (re)construction, centuries, even millennia, in advance of any settled communities, nomadic Oaxacans were displaying the complementary tension between “discovering” and “making” sacred places. Predictably, he concludes that Archaic-era hunters and gatherers were impressed by what Eliade would term the hierophanic, divinely initiated properties of springs and caves, which were “portals to the underworld,” and mountains, which were “associated with rain and cosmic creation.”²⁴³ More intriguing, however, are his

²⁴¹ By my reading, Joyce, irrespective of his heavy reliance on terms and ideas that almost all scholars correctly connect to Mircea Eliade’s work, never once cites him, which may be a deliberate attempt to distance himself from the controversies surrounding Eliade and his work.

²⁴² Having provided a quite detailed summary of Joyce’s historical (re)construction in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 7, I settle here for a highly attenuated overview, sometimes drawing whole sentences from that fuller summary, that focuses on questions related to sacred space and homologized architecture.

²⁴³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 61.

observations about permanent sites expressly for the “reverential treatment of the dead” some 6000 years in advance of the founding of Monte Albán,²⁴⁴ and more noteworthy still is the discovery in the Valley of Oaxaca of “an open area of 20 m by 7 m delineated by parallel rows of boulders” that dates from 6650-5050 BCE, which, in his assessment, may have been “a ritual space, probably a dance ground,” that is to say, another sort of fixed sacred space built by nomadic people.²⁴⁵ Already in the Archaic period, Oaxacans were, he thinks, constructing as well as discovering “ritual contexts” in which to abet their interactions with the divine and perhaps with revered ancestors.

With the Early Formative emergence of agriculture and “the origins of sedentism,” Joyce sees continued confidence among villagers that “landscape features like caves and mountains were imbued with sacred properties,”²⁴⁶ but again, of even greater note is that village life “allowed for more intensive manipulations of space through the construction of permanent architecture.”²⁴⁷ This is, in fact, a major turning point in Oaxacan social history insofar as every subsequent settlement will include public “ceremonial precincts,” which feature the sorts of homologized organizational principles we have discussed here. Most prominently, at San José Mogote—eventually the largest settlement in the region and Monte Albán’s most important precedent—the ample non-residential structures that Marcus and Flannery identified as “Men’s Houses,” and thus venues for the exercise of charismatic authority, are, Joyce argues, “better interpreted as ritual buildings associated only with a select part of the village.”²⁴⁸ In other words, he contends that, just as soon as Oaxacans enjoyed sedentary lifestyles, they began to devote substantial energy and resources to

“the erection of physical or symbolic barriers, especially around public ceremonial precincts, that restricted the times and place of interaction allowing for control over both

²⁴⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 69.

²⁴⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 69.

²⁴⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 73.

²⁴⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 73.

²⁴⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 81.

the content and preservation of social discourse and the creation of meaning and memory.”²⁴⁹

In brief, from the start of Oaxacan village life, though these ritual precincts were first specific to multi-family barrios and only later genuine “ceremonial centers” utilized by the entire community²⁵⁰—something that seems to have happened first at San José Mogote²⁵¹—erecting ritual contexts “beyond the household,” presumably in order to facilitate fuller “interactions with the divine,” was a top priority.

In Joyce’s view, those ceremonial precincts, which we can assume were configured as microcosms, hosted ritual occasions that served two quite different sorts of purposes. First, at a cosmological level, collective ritual provides Oaxacans their premier occasion to negotiate with gods. I will return in later chapters to the debatable claim, which Joyce borrows from John Monaghan, that, for indigenous Oaxacans, the fundamental relationship between people and the divine was understood as “a sacred covenant that established relations of debt and merit between humans and the gods, with sacrifice as a fundamental condition of human existence.”²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 73.

²⁵⁰ Actually Joyce is, at points, tentative as to whether or not the Early Formative “ritual buildings” accommodated the full or partial populace of a village; e.g., Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 82, opines, “The ritual buildings at San José Mogote are the strongest indicator of practices that engaged multiple households, although it is not clear whether they served only the Area C barrio or the entire community.” Elsewhere (e.g., *ibid.*, 98-100) he is more adamant that full community involvement in “ceremonial centers” did not arise until the later Early Formative.

²⁵¹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 98-100.

²⁵² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 60. With respect to the notion of “sacred covenants,” which is so important in Joyce’s version of events, he credits John D. Monaghan, *The Covenants with Earth and Rain: Exchange, Sacrifice, and Revelation in Mixtec Society* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), who provides very persuasive, ethnographically-based evidence of that concept among the contemporary Mixtec community of Santiago Nuyoo, located in the Mixteca Alta region. Nonetheless, based on the way that pre-Columbian *impersonal* conceptions of divinity were, in colonial contexts in across the Americas, frequently transformed into more *personal* conceptions, which were presumably more amenable European Christian sensibilities, one has to suspect that the notion of a “covenant” was a colonial rather than pre-Columbian means of conceptualizing the relations between people and gods. These are issues I will discuss more fully in chapter 4 on the divinity priority (II-A) and chapter 10 on the propitiation priority (III-C).

Nevertheless, Joyce repeatedly asserts that Oaxacans’ primary and deliberate motivation for ritualizing—and thus for constructing sacred places—was to “communicate with the supernatural” or, more specifically, as befits this notion of a contractual relationship, to honor one’s “covenantal obligations” to the gods and then to collect one’s due rewards. Though the legalistic connotations of a covenant are somewhat at odds with Eliade’s view of archaic interactions with “the sacred,” this scenario is largely consistent with his ideas about the rewards of constructing sacred places and thereby meeting “cosmic responsibilities.”

Secondly, pursuant of his ideas about ongoing social contestation, Joyce says that these ritual spaces likewise provided the prime contexts in which elites and common people negotiated among themselves; and thus these were also the main ambiances in which enterprising individuals emerged as leaders. If humans and gods are bound in a reciprocal contractual relationship, so too are Oaxacan rulers and commoners, according to Joyce, joined by a “social contract.”²⁵³ Given his subaltern sensibilities, he rejects the notion that social identities, gender roles, discrepancies of status and power are ever simply assigned by the elite and accepted by passive non-elites. To the contrary, all of these hierarchical ascriptions are contested and negotiated—and ritual contexts provide the paramount venues for those ongoing transactions and interventions. The group rituals undertaken in “sacred spaces” are, in other words, sites of social as well as cosmological negotiations wherein commoners are manipulated, but also empowered. And, owing to these paired purposes for collective ritual, Joyce suggests that the smooth functioning Oaxacan society, from the Formative period forward, depends upon the construction of the sorts of architectural contexts—that is, built expressions of the homology priority (I-A)—wherein both human-with-divine and elite-with-commoner negotiations can be staged and undertaken.

²⁵³ See, for instance, Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 27-32; or Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 212.

2. The Site-Selection and Founding of Monte Albán: A Cosmic Mountain Discovered and Enhanced

Turning next to the infamous question of Monte Albán's site-selection and founding, Joyce continues to make the atypical case that while violence, militarism, political self-interest and ecological factors are all consequential, none is so important as this need for venues in which to maintain ongoing relations with the divine as well as to mediate elite-commoner relations. Thus while he shares the now-standard (though not uncontested) view that the seminal events that set the table for Monte Albán's prodigious emergence transpire at nearby San José Mogote, he interprets those circumstances in ways that again accentuate the crucial role of sacred spaces and, to that extent, homologized architecture.

Though here I greatly simplify a complex and controversial situation, which also sets an important precedent for what (he thinks) will happen at Monte Albán, by Joyce's reading, San José Mogote had been, since the late Early Formative period (i.e., by 850 BCE), site to a centrally located, community-wide ceremonial precinct, which "probably could have accommodated hundreds of people during ritual performances," that is to say, the entire populace of that community as well as visitors from surrounding ones.²⁵⁴ From its initial inception, that ritual plaza, arguably the very first of its scale and kind in Mesoamerica, had served both of the purposes just discussed; and thus, in the early going, the elite and commoners had cooperated in their respective roles with respect to maintenance of "the sacred covenant."²⁵⁵ At that point the ritual plaza was doing both its cosmological and social work, so to speak.

Eventually, however, so Joyce's version of events goes, high-handed San José Mogote nobles began to appropriate the formerly inclusive sacred precinct for their own more private purposes, thereby excluding the non-elites from access to the architectural space that also provided them "access the sacred."²⁵⁶ However, demonstrating their independence and agency,

²⁵⁴ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 100.

²⁵⁵ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 98-100.

²⁵⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 111.

these disenfranchised commoners, during the Rosario phase (700-500 BCE), rather than acquiesce to a situation in which they were now deprived of that which actually made life most worth living—namely, interacting with the sacred—they simply “voted with their feet,” as Joyce says, and left the old capital in search of an alternate site where their ritual needs could be more satisfactorily met.²⁵⁷ Accentuating their primarily spiritual discontents and aspirations, Joyce refers to these migrants—the eventual founders of Monte Albán—as “a new religious movement that engaged a broad spectrum of the people who set out to build a ceremonial center on the sacred hilltop.”²⁵⁸

The question of Monte Albán’s founding provides, accordingly, the ideal venue in which to exercise Joyce’s two major theoretical correctives. For one, rather than the initiative of powerful and manipulative leaders, Joyce depicts this migration as a kind of populist movement in which non-elites are the primary initiators of the move; and, for two, he contends that their primary motivations are genuinely religious. In this story of Monte Albán’s founding, which is radically at odds with images of self-serving rulers exploiting the manpower of commoners to serve their own political ambitions,²⁵⁹ we encounter a disgruntled but religiously inspired group of former San José Mogote residents, presumably with some capable leadership but composed mainly of “people other than nobility,” who, in pursuit of a fresh start, relocate to a vacant mountain. The San José Mogote emigrants in this version are not frightened or cowering refugees, but rather a strong-willed faction, unwilling to abide the excesses and neglect of

²⁵⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 127.

²⁵⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 131. On the prospect that “Monte Albán was founded by adherents of a new social and religious movement in reaction to the political crisis of the late Middle Formative,” see also *ibid.*, 141. And concerning his fuller ideas on the origins of Monte Albán, see Joyce, “The Founding of Monte Albán;” Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca;” and Joyce, “The Main Plaza of Monte Albán.”

²⁵⁹ Regarding the notion that controlling “manpower” was a principal incentive in the histories of both San José Mogote and Monte Albán, see, for instance, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 110, 124 and 157-60.

"covenantal" obligations perpetrated by that center's leaders.²⁶⁰ And given those motivations, they opted for a site, which was literally within sight of their previous home, that had both intrinsic appeal as an *axis mundi* and a "cosmic mountain" and the potential for even greater architecturally-enhanced appeal as a bigger and better replica of the now-desecrated San José Mogote ceremonial plaza. In short, estimable military advantages notwithstanding, the mountain location of the unprecedentedly ambitious new capital owes foremost to religious incentives.²⁶¹

With that backstory, Joyce then describes the initial conception and configuration of Monte Albán in ways that historians of religions will recognize as conforming perfectly to Eliade's generalized model of the manner in which traditional peoples in innumerable cultural contexts have organized their "sacred spaces." Indeed, Joyce makes direct reference to all three of the main homology themes discussed earlier. Regarding "heterogeneous space" and hierophanies, he stresses, for instance, that "Zapotecs considered the entire ceremonial precinct as a sacred mountain of creation and sustenance,"²⁶² and thus by positioning their capital on a hierophanic mountaintop they have likewise positioned themselves for privileged "access to the sacred." Regarding the notion of "*imago mundis*" or "microcosms," Joyce observes that, in several different respects, "the symbolism and spatial arrangement of the architecture and iconography suggest that the Main Plaza symbolized the Zapotec version of the cosmos."²⁶³ And

²⁶⁰ Here I am somewhat oversimplifying Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 130, on the four main "factors that motivated the move to Monte Albán," the third of which is "the development of a religious movement..."

²⁶¹ Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca," 198, in a portion of the article entitled "Monte Albán as an Axis Mundi," summarizes his position as follows: "In the following section, I argue that in addition to defense, Monte Albán was founded as a ceremonial center designed to communicate with the sacred realm in new and more powerful ways so as to reverse the fortunes of the people, both nobles and commoners, who founded the site."

²⁶² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 134.

²⁶³ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 134. Regarding the *imago mundi* theme, recall also the ideas from Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca," 201, cited earlier, concerning Monte Albán's layout as a microcosmic map in which south is homologized with down, death, sacrifice, the earth and underworld, while north corresponds to up, the sky and rain-related phenomena like clouds and lightning, and thus is connected with authority and noble ancestors who are also "linked to the sky."

regarding the notion of an "*axis mundi*," Joyce argues repeatedly that Monte Albán was conceived and perceived as the sort of "sacred center" or, in Eliade's language, a "point of ontological transition" at which human beings can pass from the "profane" earthly context into rewarding engagements with "the sacred."²⁶⁴

For Joyce, Monte Albán was, then, a radical new beginning, a project "with a scale and grandeur that far exceeded anything previously in the Oaxaca Valley;" and yet, more to the Eliadean point about the replication of mythical paradigms, it was the unprecedentedly huge exercise of a very familiar agenda, which "symbolized the longstanding Zapotec view of the cosmos."²⁶⁵ In López Austin's language, the new capital was a clear and faithful expression of the enduring "hard nucleus" of Mesoamerican cosmovision. Moreover, when Joyce opines that this sort of microcosmic conception of the Monte Albán's Main Plaza made it the ideal setting "where rituals could be performed, reenacting and commemorating the cosmic creation,"²⁶⁶ he is reaffirming not only Eliade's relentless emphasis on the paramount significance of cosmogonies, but, moreover, the Eliadean notion that all of this cosmic symbolism is, in very large part, the backdrop to ritual performance.²⁶⁷ Joyce agrees, it seems, that all of this homologized architectural symbolism comes to life, so to speak, only in ritual.

3. The Ascent and then Demise of Monte Albán: From Inclusive Main Plaza to Exclusive Main Plaza

As a venturesome and "followable" retelling of the history of Monte Albán, even more compelling is the way in which Joyce is able to depict what I term the homology priority (I-A),

²⁶⁴ Time and again, especially in Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca," and more sparingly in Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, Joyce explicitly argues that "monumental buildings and public building plazas that were built as *axis mundi* or points of communication and mediation between humans and the divine." *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁶⁵ Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca," 213.

²⁶⁶ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 134.

²⁶⁷ See, for example, Eliade, "Sacred Architecture and Symbolism," 112-15.

not only as the principal incentive for the capital's founding and ascent, but also for its eventual demise. In this account, the plan to build an *imago mundi* atop a cosmic mountain succeeds to a degree that surprises even its prime instigators:

"While rulers could not have foreseen the great increase in the scale of the Monte Albán polity, they apparently took advantage of it to defeat competitors and to enhance their wealth and power... As the scale of the polity grew, nobles developed institutions to collect tribute, provide defense, enact state ritual, and organized corvée labor. These administrative institutions were not strategically planned, but were developed ad hoc as state rulers, lesser nobles, and commoners negotiated both anticipated and unanticipated social circumstances."²⁶⁸

To again simplify complex circumstances, in Periods I and II, as in the early going at San José Mogote, Monte Albán's Main Plaza was, in other words, an inclusive ritual space wherein nobles and commoners together collaborated in their respective roles to maintain their side of the human-divine sacred covenant; in that respect, public ritualizing was meeting the requisite cosmological goals. And, moreover, at this point, Joyce presents a scenario in which hereditary nobles and communal organizations were involved in constant and healthy contestations of political authority; and thus in that respect, socio-political needs were also being met. These rulers, like the early leaders of San José Mogote, seemingly understood the limits of their hegemony in the face of non-elites who persistently asserted their agency and interests; and whether for pragmatic or genuinely humble motives, they moderated their self-interest and won authority overwhelmingly on the basis of their (perception as) indispensable mediators between the populace and the divine.²⁶⁹ Instead of forced compliance, in his view, "commoners gave their allegiance to Monte Albán and its rulers and relocated to the hilltop center in large numbers because they found the symbolism of the sacred mountain and the ritual performances in the Main Plaza to be compelling."²⁷⁰ It was in this early era, then, when the microcosmic ritual precinct, and thus the entire sacred city, were working best.

²⁶⁸ Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca," 213.

²⁶⁹ Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca," 213.

²⁷⁰ Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca," 213.

Eventually, however, in the ironically designated Classic era (300-800 CE), yet again reiterating the San José Mogote precedents, Monte Albán rulers overstep their authority and begin to exercise more exclusionary control over the Main Plaza. During this stretch, Joyce tells us, the commoner protagonists of the story transition from enthusiastic involvement in the city’s religio-civic ritual proceedings to disillusionment and then disengagement. That is to say, if Monte Albán’s ceremonial precinct had originally been an inclusive space—a site of widely public rituals wherein peoples of all social standings could engage the sacred, express their concerns, negotiate social power and, in that way, acquire a sense of belonging to the corporate identity of the capital—that workable but always tenuous accommodation of inherently conflicting communal and exclusionary models of authority was increasingly stressed. For Joyce, the opening into the Classic era (i.e., Period III), then, provides a sequence of events very reminiscent of the beginning-of-the-end at San José Mogote insofar as the Monte Albán nobility now took a series of steps to consolidate their authoritarian control over the ceremonial center, high-handed maneuvers that had the untoward effect of alienating the wider populace.²⁷¹ Again the crucial dynamic was strained relations between elites and non-elites—that is, a broken “social contract”—and again it was a turning point from which there was no return.

Increasingly excluded from the Main Plaza except on now-infrequent community-wide ritual occasions, commoners again exemplify Joyce’s dominant subaltern storiological theme by refusing to settle for merely passive resentment. Instead, non-elite Oaxacans exert the sort of “agency” and creative resilience that allow them to turn an ostensibly unfortunate barrier into a bridge to new levels of social autonomy and occupational flexibility. Where in the Early Classic, disaffected commoners rebelled against the exclusionary practices of the Monte Albán elite, in the Late Classic, now even more disenfranchised, commoners, just as they had at San José Mogote, exercised their independence and simply left the mountain capital in favor of sites where they would be better able to fulfill their still-strong sense of religious or “covenantal”

²⁷¹ Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 194, explains, “By the Classic period, however, nobles were diverging from earlier principles of sacred geography as the main plaza was used less for large public ceremonies that engaged commoners, and more as an elite residential precinct and an area for private ceremonies. The disengagement of commoners from state ceremonies may have weakened their allegiance to rulers and have been a factor in the collapse of the Monte Albán state around 800 A.D.”

obligation.²⁷² Excluded from full participation in religio-civic life of the great capital, but unwilling to acquiesce to that marginal status, they took the initiative to move elsewhere. And thereby, non-elites again find a way, against the odds, to reclaim their role as the leading actors in Joyce’s (re)construction narrative, emerging as eminently resourceful and at least as shrewd as the nobles. But without non-elites’ support, the demise of Monte Albán was inevitable. This voluntary emigration scenario explains, in other words, the capital’s gradual rather than sudden decline along with the concomitant Postclassic emergence of less centralized, more egalitarian communities in other parts of the Oaxaca Valley.

In sum, then, though Joyce’s account is less one-dimensional than my terse summary, he presents a (re)construction plotline in which genuinely religious aspirations—which can only be met with the physical support of homologized sacred spaces!—is the leitmotif that accounts for each the site-selection, the spectacular success, and the eventual decline of Monte Albán. In this version, which puts the homology priority (I-A) in first place, religiously fervent but discontent San José Mogote emigrants capitalize on the availability of a vacant “cosmic mountain” as the most propitious site for their new capital, which then flourishes in ways that exceed expectations. In Joyce’s rendition, public ritualizing in the Main Plaza is not a ploy to support more bona-fide political priorities, but rather the truly rewarding religious practice, the base motivation, that enables, almost serendipitously, extreme success on those more socio-economic fronts. And then conversely, the exclusion of commoners from participation in those collective rituals—in Eliade’s terms, the denial of access to the sacred center—precipitates a crisis that is less economic or sociological than genuinely religious. The incapacity to interact with the divine triggers a crisis of disorientation of the sort that creative *homo religiosi* simply cannot tolerate. And thus non-elites, whose verve and initiative drive this entire version of events, take steps to move away, build new ritual contexts and, via that pro-active strategy, recover a more rewarding “mode of being in the world.”

In this story, which nuances Caso and Bernal’s old notion that it was the elite’s self-serving theocratic excesses that brought the city down, the so-termed collapse of Monte Albán is

²⁷² Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 249-50.

not a consequence of military defeat nor ecological crisis. Alternatively, the capital’s demise results from the short-sighted self-indulgence of rulers who monopolized the Main Plaza as a forum in which to impress one another, and thereby deprived the wider populace access to their most prized sacred space. Introducing an element of irony into this spellbinding (re)construction narrative, egoistic nobles, in a sense, squandered their most valuable resource—the mountaintop *axis mundi*—which was the real basis of their appeal; and thus ever-recalcitrant and resourceful commoners were again compelled to exercise their “agency” by withdrawing their support for the polity of Monte Albán. Access to a microcosmic sacred space in which to honor one’s covenantal obligations to the gods, was, for Zapotec commoners, not a luxury nor an idealistic diversion, but rather the supreme requirement for a rewarding life, something they could not live without. In short, even the most beautifully homologized sacred precinct has little appeal if it cannot be utilized as working ritual context.

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS:

“THE TWOFOLD MECHANISM OF ARCHITECTURE” AND HOMOLOGIZED ARCHITECTURE AS “A STRATEGY OF RITUAL-ARCHITECTURAL ALLUREMENT”

In closing, I end this and all chapters with brief comments about how the present theme—in this case, “homologized architecture” and the homology priority (I-A)—fits into the larger argument. To that end, recall that, in *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, I make the case that “ritual-architectural events,” and thus the ritual-architectural agenda of a major urban ceremonial complex like Monte Albán, are composed of two complementary but very different components.²⁷³ According to that argument, invariably, the successful transmission of meanings and ideas in any such ritual-architectural program depends upon the interplay of *a conservative, reassuring component of order*, in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s term, a “continuity of tradition,” or, in my term, an element of “allurement,” and, on the other hand, *a disconcerting component of*

²⁷³ See Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 4, “Order and Variation: The Twofold Pattern of Ritual-Architectural Events.”

variation or, as befits an occasion of hermeneutical reflection, a component of “otherness,” “strangeness” or new information.²⁷⁴

Countless theorists provide support for this notion of the necessitous juxtaposition of order and variation, predictability and surprise, reassurance and challenge, or conventionality and innovation. Artist and critic Adrian Stokes, for instance, argues that it is the pairing of the familiar, or “the smooth,” which invites participation, and the challenging, or “the rough,” which forces people to learn something new and/or to confront realities they had not faced before, that gives the experience of architecture its “bite.”²⁷⁵ Or, according to architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz, the meaning-making of architecture depends upon first conforming to expectations or “probability systems,” which set people at ease and impress them with the reliability and thus authority of the architectural situation; and only after that can architects expect to undermine, and thereby extend, those expectations by presenting new ideas with which audiences were previously unfamiliar.²⁷⁶ Architecture that lacks this initial component of reassurance by departing too fully from expectations and conventions can be dismissed as simply weird, eccentric, not-to-be-taken-seriously and, therefore, meaningless. Both predictable conventionality, which engenders interest and respect, along with unpredictability, which variously invigorates or vexes, must be present. Bluntly put, ritual-architectural choreographers—pre-Columbian Zapotec designers included—must convince people to listen before they can expect to be heard.

²⁷⁴ Regarding “the continuity of tradition,” see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. W. Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 140; and in Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 5, see the sub-section entitled “The Continuity of Tradition and the Indispensability of Allurement.”

²⁷⁵ See Adrian Stokes, *Smooth and Rough* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1951), 59; or Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 4.

²⁷⁶ See Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1965), 34, 41; and again see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 4, for an inventory of numerous theorists, including Norberg-Schulz, who maintain in one way or another that meaningful experience of art and architecture depends upon first meeting viewers’ expectations and then undermining, and thereby extending, those expectations.

Gadamer, who persuades me that the never-static meanings of built forms emerge in the context of hermeneutical situations—most notably, rituals—in which humans engage buildings in “to-and-fro dialogical conversation,” provides yet another consonant way to think of this “twofold mechanism of architecture.”²⁷⁷ If we rely on his model of an interactive dialogue, the first or “front-half” component entails the “allurement” whereby buildings and contexts make themselves inviting and worthy conversation partners; this welcoming quality is required to get the participatory dialogue (or the ritual) started, as it were. And the latter or “back-half” component, the “requisite enlivening effect,” refers to the topics about which people and monuments “converse” once the event is underway; this is the element of the ritual-architectural situation that presents new and specific information that I will eventually address in Part II under the rubrics of the commemoration of divinity (priority II-A), of sacred history (priority II-B), of politics (priority II-C), and of the dead (priority II-D).²⁷⁸ But the three chapters of Part I focus on the prerequisite component of allurement; and this first chapter is specifically on the notion of orientation via homology (priority I-A), a set of issues that, as we’ve seen, is most famously expressed in Mircea Eliade’s theory of sacred space. In short, everything discussed thus far belongs to the so-termed “front-half” or leading component.

²⁷⁷ Regarding his definitive discussion of the notion that occasions of hermeneutical understanding—including the experience of architecture—are best understood on the model of dialogical, two-way “conversations” (or “games”), see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 97-105; but he summarizes those thoughts repeatedly, for instance, in “On the Problem of Self-Understanding,” 53-54, and “Man and Language,” 66, both in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). On the same metaphors applied more directly to the experience of architecture, also see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 3, “Conversation and Play: The Eventfulness of Architecture.”

²⁷⁸ Regarding the “enlivening effect” of architecture, see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 140; or Joel Weinsheimer, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 126-27, where Weinsheimer does his best to summarize Gadamer’s “concept of decoration” within which the so-termed enlivening effect arises. Also see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 4.

A. ALLUREMENT AND “THE FRONT-HALF” OF THE RITUAL-ARCHITECTURAL SITUATION: THE NECESSITY OF FAMILIARITY, LEGITIMACY AND THUS AUTHORITY

In a chapter on “homologized orientation,” it is, therefore, crucial to emphasize that these well-worked themes of hierophany, *imago mundi* and *axis mundi*, even taken together—and as important as they may be—are only one element of the much wider ritual-architectural program of Monte Albán. Where Eliade’s work may lead readers to think that the material expression, and then subsequent experience, of these versions of homologized architecture are the full *raison d’être* of Monte Albán’s massive building project, I want to demote them, in a manner of speaking, to “strategies of ritual-architectural allurement” that belong to the “front-half” of that building agenda. Homologized architecture is, I have argued, a highly felicitous means of expressing, and thus engendering, a particular sort of orientation that is consistent with the “hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican cosmovision; and, to that extent, it is a profoundly “religious” undertaking. But I accentuate here the twofold mechanism wherein effective architecture both orients and then disorients, beckons and then withholds, soothes and then surprises, reassures and then transforms. In Part II, I will return to those topics of “productive disorientation” and the disconcerting surprises and transformations that issue from Monte Albán’s architecture and rituals; but for now I am stressing that everything discussed in this chapter (and the next two) is, by contrast, unsurprising and even predictable—which is precisely what is required to instigate or initiate successful ceremonial occasions in the Main Plaza.

That is to say, even if we accept Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus’s assessment that the emergence and stupendous success of the great Zapotec capital was “a great novelty” and “the least predictable event in the history of the Valley of Oaxaca,”²⁷⁹ one must agree also with Arthur Joyce that the layout of Monte Albán was the unprecedentedly huge exercise of a very familiar agenda, which “symbolized the longstanding Zapotec view of the cosmos.”²⁸⁰ My method of argument for the relevance of each of Eliade’s three main themes has been to note how a cross-culturally generalized “pattern in comparative religion” finds somewhat more

²⁷⁹ Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 241.

²⁸⁰ Joyce, “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca,” 213.

specific expression in the pan-Mesoamerican cosmovision, and then again particularly vivid exemplification in Oaxaca and Monte Albán. By this general-to-specific argumentation, to locate one's capital atop a "cosmic mountain" and configure the Main Plaza as a "little cosmos" is, then, a patentedly *unoriginal* approach, a highly conservative expression of the "the tried-and-true," albeit it "with a scale and grandeur that far exceeded anything previously in the Oaxaca Valley."²⁸¹

But, perhaps counterintuitively, that *unoriginality* is exactly what an effective strategy of allurement demands. Monte Albán's pervasive homologized scheme, to the extent that it works, convinces audiences, particularly the "common people" who feature so large in Joyce's account, that the activities undertaken in the Main Plaza, are not merely "made-up" by leaders, but rather are fully traditional, divinely sanctioned, and thus irrefutably legitimate. Patterned after cosmic models and "primordial archetypes," the layout of the capital—and the ritual events that transpire in the sacred precinct—enjoy (the appearance of) divine rather merely human authority.

In other words, extreme conventionality in the sense of thorough consistency with the general Mesoamerican cosmovision is the essential prerequisite to expression of a more substantive agenda that really is new and innovative. Following Eliade's tack, the experience of living in a city that was situated at an *axis mundi* and configured as an *imago mundi* would have been profoundly and continually rewarding insofar as even seemingly prosaic activities, because they reiterate "primordial models," would have been "religiously" gratifying.²⁸² But more to the present point, even first-time Mesoamerican visitors to the Zapotec capital would have found themselves "at home" insofar as they encounter a huge and magnificent expression of the very same cosmological presuppositions and concerns that are shared by all peoples of the region. Even on that first visit, instead of a strange place, the Main Plaza would have had the familiarity and "legibility" that makes it a relevant and compelling "conversation partner," a place where

²⁸¹ Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca," 213.

²⁸² On the rewards of "the sanctified life," wherein all activities mirror their cosmic and mythical counterparts, see, as noted earlier, Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 167.

radical new messages are delivered in a very familiar idiom.²⁸³ By its extensive cosmogrammatical references, Monte Albán issued the sort of invitation to participate that pre-Columbian Mesoamericans could not ignore, an irrefusable offer to take seriously the messages and directives, however disconcerting, that were communicated in the Main Plaza’s ceremonial occasions. Like designers in all contexts, Zapotec architects and ritual choreographers, innovative as they may have been, were, in short, keenly aware of the indispensability of this component of allurement.

B. MISTAKING STRATEGIES OF ALLUREMENT FOR SUBSTANTIVE CONTENT: UNPRECEDENTED SCALES BUT FULLY FAMILIAR THEMES

To clarify, then, I am *not* advocating for a rejection of Mircea Eliade’s empathetic phenomenological approach in favor of more skeptical and politicized perspectives, which is the methodological route that many Mesoamericanists take. I am *not* at all willing to see the extensive homologized architectural design at Monte Albán as simply a subterfuge, or ploy, undertaken by rulers to manipulate the masses. In my view, the cosmogrammatic layout is a thoroughly heartfelt expression of a particular religious orientation; and, for me, much of the appeal of Arthur Joyce’s work stems from his apparent willingness, unlike that of most of his archaeologist-colleagues, to entertain seriously that possibility. But I *am* insisting that those sorts of “cosmo-magical” design features be repositioned not as the crux or climax of the city’s ritual-architectural agenda, but instead as “strategies of allurement” or means of instigating effective ceremonial occasions.

In fact, with these premises in mind, arguably the most frequent error in interpreting Monte Albán’s “sacred architecture”—aside from the even more fundamental methodological error of presuming that built forms have stable, once-and-for-all meanings—is mistaking components of allurement for components of substantive content. When, for instance, the

²⁸³ In fact, if López Austin leads us to believe that all pre-Columbian Mesoamericans participating in the “hard nucleus” would have found Monte Albán familiar and legible, Eliade’s stance pushes even farther to suggest that all *homo religiosi* of any cultural background, to the extent they operated with an “archaic consciousness, would likewise have found the cosmogrammatic layout of Monte Albán legible and meaningful. But that may be a stretch.

buildings enclosing a ritual context are decorated with stepped frets (that is, stylized images of water-mountains), we error in imagining that the ritual-architectural events undertaken there were wholly or even primarily concerned with communicating ideas about *altepeme* or “hills of sustenance.” Those are insights already well known by all of the Mesoamerican ritual leaders and participants, which would not, therefore, have been fresh or revelatory; that is “old news” rather than the new and transformative information that effective rituals present—and stepped frets, therefore, belong to the “front-half” rather than “back-half” of the ritual-architectural situation. Because such stone decorations, along with sturdy monumental buildings, are so much more enduring in the archaeological record than the transient words, sounds, smells and movements of pre-Columbian ritual-architectural occasions, there is a predictable tendency to misconstrue and overemphasize their importance. I contend, however, that most of those fixed forms are purveyors of allurement rather than communicators of substantive content. Stepped frets, as one example among many, are part of the background ambience that helps to start the ritual-architectural event rolling, so to speak, rather than to articulate its climax.

By the same token, none of the features described under the rubric of homologized architecture (priority I-A) is a radical departure from longstanding Mesoamerican cosmological conventions; none of these design choices is remotely outlandish. To the contrary, all of these homologized elements are, to the relevant audiences, familiar rather than strange; and thus they too belong to the alluring front-half rather than substantive back-half of those occasions. For instance, the initial decision to locate the new capital on a cosmic mountain that provides special access to otherworldly realms and beings conforms to a long-established practice rather than a new one; and, accordingly, that strategic siting is not a matter of innovative content, but allurement. Likewise, the Period II flattening of the mountaintop and paving of the Main Plaza—that is, the building initiative that transformed raw terrain into a downsized replica of the universe, a project of massive ambition and expense—is similarly a matter of allurement. The configuration of the entire complex into a microcosm that seems to mirror not only the Mesoamerican conception of the macrocosmos, but also the wider landscape, and perhaps the proportions of the human body, is also the expression and restatement of themes already common knowledge to all who participate in the Mesoamerican cosmovision, which is to say, everyone who is involved in building, inhabiting and visiting the Zapotec capital. Even the

subtle replication of calendrical proportions in the sizing of the North and South Platform stairways and in the proportions of the Main Plaza, albeit dependent on esoteric information not shared by all, serves to enhance the overall symmetry and appeal of the ceremonial precinct in ways that all indigenous Oaxacans could appreciate. In brief, all these are symbolic features that assured potential ritual participants that the ensuing occasions, and the new messages they do communicate, are worthy of their very serious attention.

We ought, then, to appreciate, again perhaps counterintuitively, that it is the initiative to make the city “alluring” (in my technical sense of that term) that, so it seems, demands by far the greatest share of the energies and resources of Monte Albán’s designers and builders. Fashioning the mountaintop into a “little cosmos” is both very expensive and very laborious. And, moreover, because that initiative issues in the sort of monumental built features that have the greatest staying power in the archaeological record, those built forms are liable to demand an even larger share of our interpretive attention than they actually deserve. Our respect and admiration for the accomplishment of Monte Albán need not be diminished by the realization that there is nothing newfangled or even particularly daring about its investments in hierophanies, microcosms and the symbolism of the center. All of these features of homologized architecture are, we should note, conservative and generalized features that reflect the ubiquitous concerns of all Mesoamericans and perhaps even all *homo religiosi*. The built expressions of the homology priority (I-A) are, in very large measure, “patterns in comparative religion” that are *not* specific to Monte Albán.

In sum, therefore, as will become more apparent in Part II—when I do shift attention to the more specific “back-half” of Monte Albán’s ritual-architectural program—effective rituals (which by no means all ceremonial occasions are!) educate and transform participants in significant ways; rituals apprise people of obligations and privileges of which they were previously unaware, or perhaps had become neglectful. But expressing that transformative information in convincing ways depends upon first transforming what Hans-Georg Gadamer terms uncommitted spectators, or half-hearted “spoilsports,” into committed participants, or

“players” in the ritual game.²⁸⁴ “The game [for instance, a Zapotec ritual in the Main Plaza] is underway,” Gadamer says, “when the individual player [for instance, a Zapotec commoner] participates in full earnest, that is, when he no longer holds himself back as one who is merely playing, for whom it is not serious.”²⁸⁵ Or in Paul Ricoeur’s compatible language, the ritual has a chance of success only when people are willing to put themselves at risk, to submit themselves to the sort of “hermeneutical wager” that makes them open and vulnerable to challenging new ideas.²⁸⁶ To get commoners to “play along” with the ritual events in the Main Plaza was, however, as Zapotec designers seem to have fully appreciated, a profound and difficult task; and thus we need to appreciate just how much of Monte Albán’s extant architecture was devoted to those efforts in allurement.

To that end, I move next to consideration of allurement via conventionalized architecture (priority I-B) and then via astronomically-aligned architecture (priority I-C), both of which are complementary rather than antagonistic with homologized architecture (priority I-A). All three, separated from one another only as a heuristic convenience, actually work together—but overwhelmingly as elements of the front-half of Monte Albán’s ritual-architectural program.

²⁸⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 92. On the importance and seriousness of play, Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Play of Art,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), says, “The imposition of rules and regulations that only count as such within the closed world of play... is indeed so universal a structure that we might well consider the directness of play to be characteristically human...” On the analogy between the experience of architecture and play (which complements the analogy to conversation or dialogue), also see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 3, “Conversation and Play: The Eventfulness of Architecture.”

²⁸⁵ Gadamer, “Man and Language,” 66.

²⁸⁶ On the notion that acts of human understanding—for instance, the receptivity and acceptance to new ideas in the context of pre-Columbian Zapotec rituals in Monte Albán’s Main Plaza—depends upon people putting themselves at risk and accepting a kind of “hermeneutical wager” insofar as, in order to reap any benefit, participants (e.g., Zapotec commoners) must surrender a measure of their independence and commit themselves to serious consideration of the alternatives that are presented in “the closed world of the ritual-architectural event,” see Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 355ff. Again, along with Gadamer’s comments on the seriousness of play, Ricoeur’s compatible ideas are addressed in Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 3.