MONTE ALBAN

The Valley of Oaxaca lies in a mountainous area of southern Mexico, roughly between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. Although some archeologists believe a large lake once covered part of the Valley and cite existing swamps as their evidence, there is no very clear indication that such a lake existed, at least during the time of man's habitation there.

Several stone implements, probably attributable to early pre-ceramic nomadic peoples, have been found in the Oaxaca Valley. The first period for which we have evidence, however, of large-scale habitation of the Valley is Monte Alban I, sometime between 100 and 500 B.C. The remains of this period lie directly over the bedrock of Monte Alban, the mountain adjacent to the present city of Oaxaca. Monte Alban I pottery has also been found at other sites in the Oaxaca Valley, as well as in Puebla, Veracruz and Guerrero. In addition, there are extremely strong stylistic similarities between Monte Alban I and the Gulf Coast Olmec. At least one scholar claims that Olmec traits, primarily the were-jaguar and the trapezoidal mouth, originated in the Oaxaca area and diffused toward the coast.

During Monte Alban I, a group of people whose origins are unclear took possession of the Valley of Oaxaca and began a building program on top of Monte Alban. This was an extraordinary undertaking, because there was no source of water other than rainfall on the mountain top nor much possibility for growing food. In order to carry out a building program that was almost certainly planned during this period, the entire mountain top had to be artificially leveled, an undertaking reminiscent of the building of Olmec San Lorenzo. During the Monte Alban I period, the population buried some of their dead in tombs with offerings of pottery.

Before the period ended, they had built the Mound of the Danzantes, and had erected stone monuments bearing calendrical inscriptions similar in some respects to those of the Maya, to the south and west. The plan for the whole site was laid out during this time.

Between 300 and 100 B.C. -- the Monte Alban II period -- building on the site intensified, and several large buildings as well as the paving of the Great Plaza (in itself an enormous undertaking) date from this time. As in other Mesoamerican civilizations, during this period the older buildings were rebuilt and enlarged, probably in accordance with the 52-year cycle. It is during this period that Monte Alban became a true urban center, with division of labor and certainly priestly, artisan and agricultural

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classes, as well as a military one. Trade with other areas of Mesoamerica is virtually a certainty.

Monte Alban IIIA—the period between 100 and 300 A.D.—is marked by influences from Teotihuacan in the north. Whether Teotihuacans arrived by way of conquest or trade we have no way of knowing, but they were accompanied by a progressive elaboration of pottery forms, ritual and building. In the great urban center of Teotihuacan, we now find a "ward of Oaxaca," where presumably a group of Oaxacan traders, aristocracy, workmen or even exiles lived.

From 300 A.D. until about 800, in the Monte Alban IIIB period, the outside influences from Teotihuacan, the Gulf Coast and the Maya areas appear to have been assimilated into a distinctive Zapotec style. Period IIIB is the best known of all the stages of Monte Alban. It was a time of artistic flowering, particularly in the early centuries, and certainly the time of the greatest population in the Oaxaca Valley, probably greater than that of the present. Toward the end of the period, however, the pottery shows a distinct deterioration in craftsmanship, and many mold-made works appear.

By 900 A.D., new building construction had stopped, and the older buildings were no longer being maintained or repaired. By this time the center had been virtually abandoned, although burials continued. Monte Alban had become in effect a place inhabited by the gods and the dead.

Sometime after 900 A.D., a new group of people, the Mixtecs, appear in the archeological record of Monte Alban, replacing the Zapotec style and religion with their own. Although their cities were elsewhere in the Valley, they buried some of their most important dead in Monte Alban, sometimes in old Zapotec graves.

The Mixtecs are known for their codices—books written on deerskin. The extant codices deal with historical events, genealogies, calendrical events, and religion. They are also noted for their extraordinary skill in mosaic (as seen in Mitla, their capital), their polychrome pottery, and their jewelry. The latter two were used as grave offerings in the Monte Alban graves, as well as in other burials in the Oaxaca Valley. The clearest evidence of their esthetic and religious concerns is found in the aristocratic burials at Monte Alban. We have almost no idea of how the poor lived, but the aristocracy and/or priesthood were surrounded by splendor.
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1. Map of Mexico showing culture areas; Monte Alban indicated.


3. View of Great Plaza, Monte Alban, looking from North Platform toward South Platform. On left are structures containing a ball court and palaces; in the center the central Mound; straight ahead is the largely unexcavated South Platform. On the right are group M, the Danzantes Mound, and System IV. Mound J is behind the Central mound. The site was built on a mountain top which was leveled. There was apparently no water at the site nor any source of food, and all provisions had to be carried up to the acropolis.

4. North barrier platform. Monumental stairway and balustrades in the form of ramps. This was a platform behind which a cluster of pyramids surround a sunken plaza.

5. Sunken plaza behind North Platform. Note columns, upper left. Commonly used at Monte Alban to support roof.


7. Stele 9 at foot of monumental stairway of North Platform. Carved all over, probably at a late date.


9. Carved stone used as facing on North platform, undoubtedly from a much earlier building, possibly from the "Danzantes" stairway. "Swimmer" type.


11. Ball court; note drainage area below niche.

12. Niches occur in northeastern and southwestern corners of the ball court. Their use is not known. They may have been used to hold equipment for the game, for an image of a god, or could have been the goals.

13. East side of plaza; south entrance to structure; interior stairs leading to top of building.

14. Detail of stairway.
15. Detail of stairway ceiling. Note construction of vault.

16. East side of plaza with adoratorio or altar, in process of reconstruction. Connected by underground tunnels to structure in rear and to central mounds.

17. "Adoratorio", showing ancient rebuilding. Connected by underground tunnel to Central Platform, probably so that priests could pass unseen from one area to another.

18. Central mound. Originally three temple-pyramids, possibly the most sacred part of the acropolis.

19. Detail of stairway reconstruction. Monte Alban was rebuilt many times in the course of its 1,500 years of existence. On the left, a stairway which was part of an earlier building than that on the right, which was superimposed in the course of enlarging the structure.

20. Mound 5. Probably a dwelling, with small chambers surrounding a patio. Cruciform tomb under the floor of the patio.


22. Southwest corner of South Platform. Four stelae remain.

23. Detail of Stela 1, (on left). A weathered bas-relief of a man wearing an elaborate headdress, seated on a place glyph resembling a mountain. On the right side of the stela are glyphs resembling Maya calendrical glyphs.

24. Detail of Stela 2. A man wearing an elaborate headdress and a full jaguar costume, including the tail, stands on a place glyph, his hands, which terminate in jaguar claws, tied behind him. In front of him are glyphs.

25. Stelae 3 and 4, South Platform. Stela 3 represents a man dressed as an animal (opossum?) with hands tied behind his back, standing on a place glyph.

26. Detail, Stela 4. Warrior named 8 Deer (the glyph is beneath his right arm) stands on a place glyph which is pierced with the lance in his left hand. The headdress and the speech glyph resemble those at Teotihuacan. Eight Deer is a dominant figure in later Mixtec literature. The small stones used in the mortar indicate archeological reconstruction.
27. Mound J. An arrowhead-shaped building whose point is oriented to the southwest. It differs from all other buildings at Monte Alban and resembles only one other structure in Mesoamerica, which is nearby. One of the earlier structures at Monte Alban, it was built around 275 B.C. It is crossed by a vaulted tunnel which has an opening at the top. A building directly opposite the point contains a doorway which in 275 B.C., aligned with the rising point of Capella, a bright star which in early morning announced the day of zenith passage of the sun at Monte Alban, an extremely important day in ancient Mesoamerica.

28. Mound J. Facing on walls. The carving is similar to that of the Danzantes Mound and may have been taken from that mound in the construction of Mound J.

29. Mound J. Detail. This is a place glyph above an upside-down human head. It probably commemorates a conquest, either actual or mythological.

30. Mound J. Detail. A figure similar to those of the Danzantes, probably a hanged man.

31. Group M. Complex of barrier platforms. As usual in Mesoamerica, buildings were plastered and painted, often red.

32. Group M and the Danzantes Mound. "The Gallery". Carved slabs were found between these two structures. The Danzantes Mound was originally faced with rows of sculpted panels which were later covered by another building or reused in other constructions at the site.

33. Gallery. These carvings, made in the Monte Alban I and II periods, were made by abrasion and stone tools. Named the Dancers because of their sometimes distorted bodies, it is more likely that many of them, particularly those with closed eyes, are dead. Some have what may be tattoos on their arms, some suggest genital mutilation or malformation, some wear helmets similar to those on the monumental Olmec head, and many resemble the Olmec carvings. Their function and symbolism are unknown.

34. Mound of the Danzantes. The top bas relief is a "swimmer", probably of later date than the one below. The bottom sculpture has a stylized body with possible genital mutilation, and may represent a corpse.
35. Danzante wearing a helmet similar to the Olmec.

36. Danzante. Glyph representing a date or place in right-hand upper section.

37. Helmeted danzante with tattoo on upper arm.

38. Danzante of a different physical type, with a beard and an aquiline nose. This strongly resembles some Olmec sculptures. People who look very much like this may be seen in the indigenous population of present-day Oaxaca.

39. Danzante, possibly representing castration, with calendrical glyphs similar to Maya.

40. Danzante. This slab was found attached sideways to the building, as seen.

41. Calendrical glyphs near side entrance to the Mound of the Danzantes. Note the red paint.

42. Bas reliefs lining passageway.

43. Danzante inside Mound of Danzantes. The face strongly resembles the Olmec "weeping infant" face.

44. Facade of Mound of the Danzantes. This building, the oldest at Monte Alban, was rebuilt many times, possibly at the end of 52-year cycles. The bas reliefs probably date from the earliest building and may later have been discarded or used in other buildings.

45. Entrance to Mound of Danzantes, from later period. Note carving of "swimmer" to left of doorway.

46. Carving from Mound of the Danzantes. This is a representation of two figures, possibly an adult and child, a common Olmec theme.

47. Tomb 104. Most of the tombs at Monte Alban were first built by the Zapotecs and later rebuilt or reused by later people, the Mixtecs. Many appear to have been dwellings, with several rooms surrounding a patio, underneath which is a cruciform tomb.

48. Entrance to tomb. Above the doorway is a niche containing an urn representing a god.
49. Clay jar. Monte Alban I. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

50. Braziers (clay) with Olmecoid faces. Monte Alban I. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

51. Clay effigy vessel in form of monkey. Monte Alban I. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

52. Clay box, incised and painted. Monte Alban II. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

53. Clay offering found buried in the Great Plaza. This is a parrot, perhaps symbolizing the sun, singing in a cage. Monte Alban II. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

54. Mask of Bat God, made of separate pieces of jade. Found buried in adoratorio in the Great Plaza. Monte Alban II. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

55. Life-size painted figure of jaguar with a scarf. Monte Alban II. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

56. Zapotec grave offering of painted clay vase in the form of a vertebral column. Monte Alban II. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

57. Painted clay vessel with mammiform supports. Monte Alban II. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

58. Polychrome funerary urn. From Tomb 77. Monte Alban II. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

59. Funerary offering in the form of a goddess. Note stone or shell insets in eyes. Monte Alban IIIA. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

60. Zapotec clay offering found in patio of the house built over Tomb 103. The scene is one of a funeral. The small seated figure on the left is the Old God of Fire, found in Teotihuacan and in Veracruz. Monte Alban IIIA. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

61. Detail of offering. The figure on the left probably represents the deceased. The figures in the rear are priests. Their headdresses are removable. The small figures are musicians. Monte Alban IIIA. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.
62. Clay figurine of a woman dressed in a skirt, headdress made of a shawl wrapped in a turban around her head, and a huipil-like garment. Her garb is similar to some worn in Oaxaca today. Monte Alban IIIB. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D.F.

63. Funerary urn. God in serpent mask. Monte Alban IIIB. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D.F.

64. Funerary urn. God Cocijo in serpent mask. Monte Alban IIIB. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D.F.

65. Clay figurine of a bearded man, possibly representing the god with a bow in his headdress. The beard was added after the figurine was modeled. Note the subtle modeling of the body under the clothes. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D.F.

66. Vessel with figure of porter with load. The life of cities like Monte Alban and Teotihuacan, where a similar vessel was found, depended upon the muscles and willingness of people like this. Found in a Zapotec tomb near Oaxaca. Regional Museum of Oaxaca.

67. Rock crystal vase from Tomb 7 at Monte Alban. This was a Mixtec intrusive burial in a Zapotec tomb. The Mixtecs are known for their great artistic and technological skills. Monte Alban V. Regional Museum of Oaxaca.

68. Alabaster jar. Mixtec, from Tomb 7, Monte Alban. Tomb 7 contained a treasure of Mixtec artifacts. Regional Museum of Oaxaca.

69. Pearl necklace. Mixtec, from Tomb 7, Monte Alban V. Regional Museum of Oaxaca.

70. Incised bone. Mixtec, from Tomb 7, Monte Alban. (Note 2 profiles facing one another in the center.) Monte Alban V. Regional Museum of Oaxaca.


74. Small gold and jade object in the form of a parrot head. Mixtec, from Tomb 7, Monte Alban. Monte Alban V. Regional Museum of Oaxaca.

75. Gold pectoral, Mixtec, from Tomb 7. Represents, according to Caso, a Tiger Knight. The dates are the years 10 Wind and 11 House; the day is 2 Flint. The year sign is the entwined AO in the two lower areas. Monte Alban V. Regional Museum of Oaxaca.

76. Sectional gold pectoral, Mixtec, from Tomb 7. The top section, according to Caso, represents a ballgame, probably symbolizing the sun's journey across the sky during the day. The next section represents the sun; the next, the moon, which is symbolized by a flint knife; and the last, a toad, symbol of the earth. Monte Alban V. Regional Museum of Oaxaca.

77. Clay mask, representing the duality of life and death. Found in a grave near Oaxaca. Mixtec. Monte Alban V. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

78. Mixtec vessel. Polychrome. The figures on this vessel are similar to those in the Mixtec codices. Similar vessels are found at Cholula, Monte Alban V. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.

79. Mixtec vessel with hummingbird. Polychrome. From Yaachilan. Monte Alban V. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, D. F.