

An Introduction to Monte Alban and Zapotec History

Imagine, one morning you are walking up the hill, returning to your archaeological dig, when a team member races up to you and shows you a startling treasure he has just found! This happened to Alfonso Caso on January 6, 1932 at the ancient Zapotec city, Monte Alban on a hillside overlooking Oaxaca, Mexico. Senor Valenzuela ran up to Dr. Caso and yelled, “Guelaguetza!” (which means “gift” in the Zapotec language), placed a beautiful jade collar around his neck and showed him a conch shell trumpet. The team couldn’t wait to explore further! They dug for hours and finally their shovels hit stone that echoed with a hollow sound, indicating that there was a chamber below.



The conch shell was used as a ritual instrument

They slid through a small hole in the ground and dropped into the tomb beneath. As they shined their lanterns around the chamber, they could not control their exclamations, the floor glittered with gold, silver, pearls, jade and turquoise. Working through the entire night without sleeping, the team collected artifacts and bones, after noting exactly where they had been placed in the tomb. Dr. Caso

knew that there had never been a discovery anywhere in the Americas to equal this treasure. He continued to work in Monte Alban for over twenty years, piecing together the mysteries of the people who lived there.



A gold brooch (clasp) found in Tomb Seven

Origins

Thousands of years before Dr. Caso excavated Tomb 7, people settled the area from present day Mexico to Honduras, which archaeologists call Mesoamerica. We do not have a written record from these ancient peoples. So, archaeologists collect artifacts, things people made or used, for clues about how they lived. Very early evidence from Mesoamerica includes 10,000 year-old spear tips and 8,000 year-old seed collections found in caves. How do you think these people survived?



Map of Mesoamerica

Before the Zapotecs came to power in the Oaxaca Valley, other people built settlements around Mesoamerica. One important early people was the Olmec culture, located on the east coast of the

present day state of Veracruz, Mexico. During the period, 1500-500 BCE, many aspects of Mesoamerican culture, such as the writing system and calendar, the ballgame and many of the gods were first recorded by the Olmecs. They also carved giant heads, (probably of their leaders) as heavy as 40 tons! Olmec culture spread to other areas of Mesoamerica, including Oaxaca.



Olmec "colossal" head

Village Life

In the valley of Oaxaca, San Jose Mogote was the central Zapotec village with a population of around 1,000 people at its largest. Early villagers lived in small family groups. They planted crops and cooked food on patios just outside their houses. Archaeologists know what they ate, because they discovered remains of corn cobs, beans, avocados, tomatoes, squash and animal bones in garbage pits near the houses. Other artifacts that gave clues about village life include musical instruments, such as pottery whistles and ceramic figures that represent gods and religious ceremonies. Even during these early times, there was communication between various regions of Mesoamerica. People in Oaxaca traded with the Olmecs and



State of Oaxaca, Mexico
Map of ancient Zapotec sites
(with present day Oaxaca City)

other groups, and common symbols have been found on artifacts from different regions.

Monte Alban and Zapotec Culture

Around 500 BCE, Zapotecs left their smaller villages and gathered together in a central location. Some experts believe that they wanted a hillside city that overlooked the valley and was protected from attack. Others believe that they moved in order to be closer to their gods in the sky. Whatever their motivation, Zapotecs established the first large city in Mesoamerica, Monte Alban. They flattened the



Monumental architecture in Monte Alban

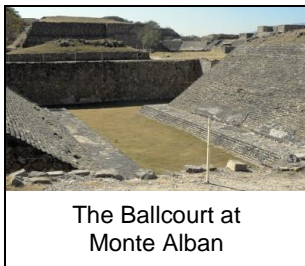
entire hilltop to create a long flat area for their temples and Grand Plaza. Imagine how difficult that work would have been without modern tools! Some of the large structures in Monte Alban, like the Ballcourt, date to 100 BCE and the temples and monuments were built over the following hundreds of years.

Remains of houses show us that urban Zapotec society was stratified, meaning that some people had more wealth and power. They lived in large stone palaces and were buried in painted tombs and surrounded with beautiful pottery and jewelry. Others lived in simple houses and worked in the fields below. They grew food for the many people who lived in the city (as many as 30,000 people!). There were also artists and traders, since Monte Alban likely had a very large marketplace for food and goods. Though there were noble families, there was no king or queen. A council of people made decisions for the community. Religious leaders also had a great deal of influence since religion was a part of everything the Zapotecs did.

Zapotec people developed a writing system that we can still see on stone carvings and ceramic artifacts. From reading those glyphs, or symbols, archaeologists know that Zapotecs used a system of mathematics and studied astronomy (the movement of the stars and planets).



Building J, may have been built to point to certain stars.



The Ballcourt at Monte Alban

The Mesoamerican ballgame was played all over the region. It is the world's first recorded team sport. Monte Alban has an I-shaped ballcourt with sloping walls. The players probably hit the ball against the sides of the court to knock it into their opponents' section. There is no evidence to tell us exactly how Zapotecs played the game. We do know that the ball came from the Olmec region (where rubber trees grew), and that much later European conquistadores were surprised at how high Mesoamerican balls bounced!

The End of an Era

Zapotecs lived in Monte Alban for over 1,000 years. But evidence shows that they abandoned the city around 750 CE. We can only theorize (make educated guesses) about why they left Monte Alban and moved to smaller settlements around the Oaxaca Valley and beyond. Many experts believe that the city had grown too large to support itself. The people depleted, or used up, the surrounding natural resources. The forests had been cut down and the land produced less food. Even though the Zapotecs had an advanced system to drain and collect water, it could not support all of the people living in Monte Alban. Without easy access to water and food, the Zapotecs left.

Though the Zapotecs left the city, this was not the end of the story. There were other cultures living in the area, including the Mixtecs. They did not move in to the empty city. But they used it for religious ceremonies. They also buried their leaders in tombs that were originally built by the Zapotecs. In fact, when Alfonso Caso opened Tomb 7, he knew that the beautiful gold jewelry was made by Mixtecs, not Zapotecs. He also found Zapotec ceramics from an earlier time period in the same tomb. This helped him see that he was digging through layers of history to fully understand the story of Monte Alban. Today, Zapotecs and Mixtecs still live in Oaxaca and proudly share their cultural heritage with the rest of the world.