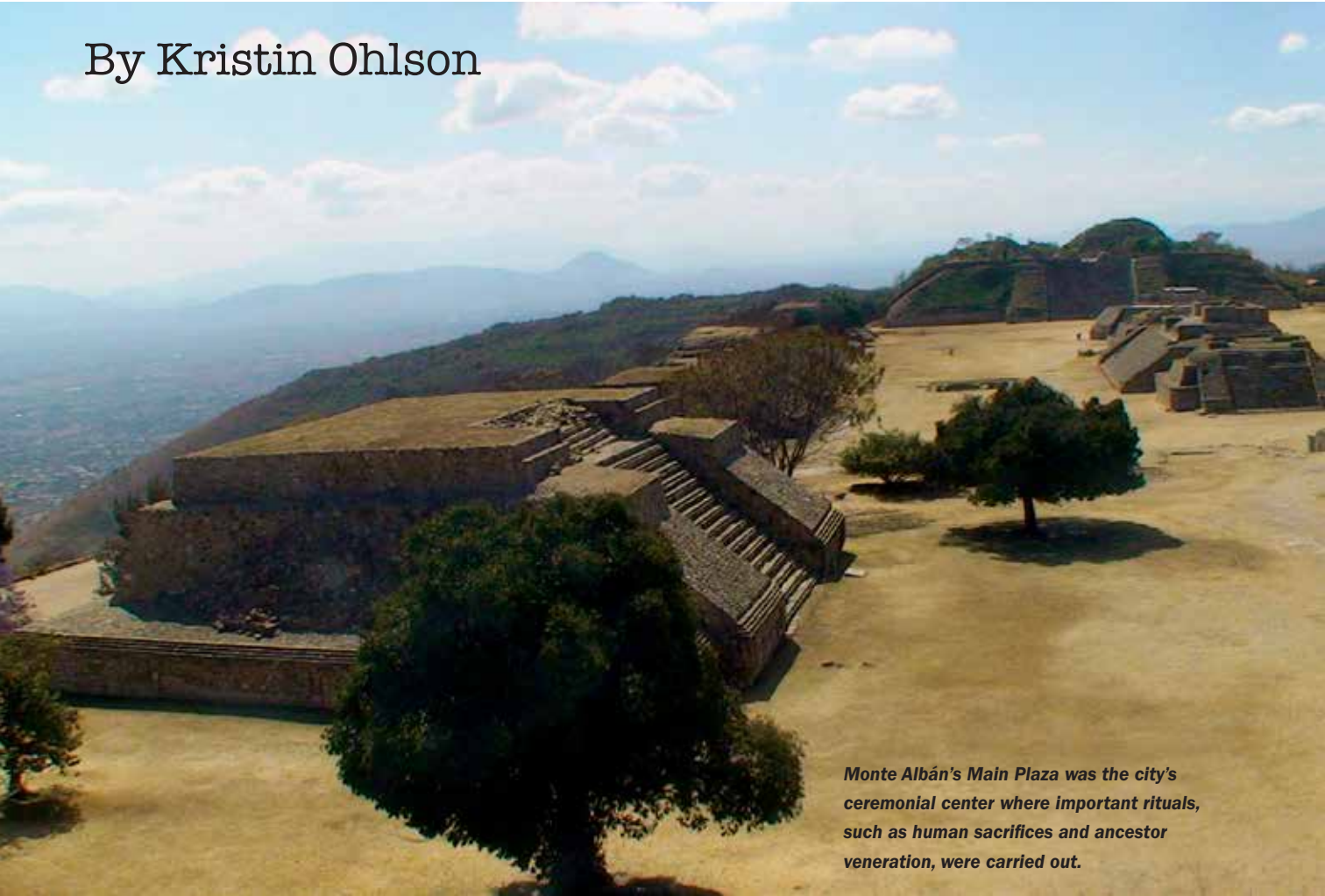


# A Tale Of Two Cities

By Kristin Ohlson



*Monte Albán's Main Plaza was the city's ceremonial center where important rituals, such as human sacrifices and ancestor veneration, were carried out.*

**D**uring the dry season, when they weren't tending their crops, thousands of people left their villages in what is now the Río Verde Valley in the Mexican state of Oaxaca and headed towards Río Viejo, a larger community situated near the Verde River and the Pacific Ocean. Beginning around A.D. 50, they built what would become one of the largest structures in all of prehispanic Oaxaca: a massive earth-and-stone acropolis the size of seven football fields. It rose some twenty feet above the surrounding plain and supported two structures more than fifty-feet high.

Archaeologists Arthur Joyce of the University of Colorado Boulder and Sarah Barber of the University of Central Florida have uncovered the distinct construction styles of at

least five work groups at the acropolis who are thought to have hailed from different villages. Someone had clearly succeeded in forging alliances and winning allegiances within the region, marshaling the kind of labor needed to build this magnificent structure.

But their power waned quickly. Other Mesoamerican urban centers with monumental architecture on Río Viejo's scale—such as Monte Albán in the Valley of Oaxaca, now a day's drive from Río Viejo—became regional sites of great power and authority that lasted many centuries. However, Río Viejo dwindled into obscurity in 100 years. Joyce and Barber's investigations have led them to a surprising conclusion as to why. In the Río Verde Valley, they argue, vibrant

It's generally thought that religion contributed to political and social unification in ancient times, but research in southern Mexico indicates that wasn't always the case.



religious practices in the villages—especially communal burials of the dead under the floors of public buildings—rooted people to the villages and prevented Río Viejo's elites from consolidating power in the urban center.

Archaeologists tend to think that big transitions like the building or abandonment of cities stem from factors like economics, politics, warfare, and environmental challenges. "Those explanations weren't adding up," says Joyce, who has spent thirty years conducting research in the Río Verde Valley. "But in the last twenty years, some archaeologists have been increasingly looking at the interconnection of religion with social life and seeing it as central to social change."

The assumption has been that religion tends to build

unity and institutionalize authority. But Joyce, Barber, and others have a different perspective. In Mesoamerica, these scholars are paying particular attention to indigenous worldviews in which interactions with the divine were part of everyday life. In post-Conquest narratives, native people explained to Spanish scribes that they viewed the world as rippling with life and purpose: mountains, streams, plants, and other natural things were not only alive, they possessed souls.

Even buildings were given life as a result of elaborate rituals that "ensouled" them. Once alive, the buildings received ritual offerings by the people that used them. These buildings were like members of the community as well as places for beseeching the gods. "The indigenous people didn't see



*Human burials (above) were the most significant ensouling rituals. This flute made of bone (below) was found at an elite burial in Yuguë.*



SARAH BARBER

the world in separate boxes the way we do: religion versus politics, or sacred versus mundane,” Joyce says. “Where we might see the building of a church as a mundane thing and the rituals in the church as sacred, the distinction would be blurred for native people.”

Given that religion was so tightly connected to everything else in the lives of these indigenous people—to politics, economics, agriculture, trade, and domestic life—it could be a tremendous force in both driving and hindering social change. Sometimes religious ceremonies were conducted on a larger scale and in grander places, like the acropolis or the Main Plaza at Monte Albán. Religion was also exploited by aspiring leaders to gain influence. In fact, Barber believes religion may be the driving force in the formation of Mesoamerican cities.

“The more I study this, the more I think early urban societies look like religious phenomena,” she says. “They were places where people could more effectively encounter the divine, both because of the architecture and layout of urban spaces and because people with special skill sets—rulers, priests, other practitioners—lived there. Getting in touch with the gods was one of the major factors influencing people’s choices.” But sometimes this attempt to scale up was not successful, and this is what Barber and Joyce believe happened in Río Viejo. Instead of a tool for unification, they argue that religion can also be “a crucible of tension and conflict,” as they wrote in a recent paper that was published in the journal *Current Anthropology*.

In the Río Verde Valley, villagers practiced religious rituals long before the development of the elite who organized the building of the Río Viejo acropolis. At several smaller sites throughout the valley, Joyce, Barber, and their colleagues have uncovered the remains of other public buildings with ample evidence of significant ritual activity. In Cerro de la Virgen, Yugüe, Cerro de la Cruz, and San Francisco de Arriba, they have found artifacts from ritual feasting as well as offerings and human bones underneath, or near, where the feasts took place.

At San Francisco de Arriba, the objects buried under the floor were especially lavish: 500 beads, pendants made of greenstone and rock crystal, fragments of iron ore, and tiny jars that had been locally produced. At Cerro de la Virgen, they found 260 ceramic cylinders cached in granite-slab compartments buried beneath a floor at the edge of the public plaza. Another offering included a cylindrical vessel that was more than two-feet long, while a third offering featured a stone rain deity mask. In fact, Joyce says it’s hard to dig a test pit in a public building at one of these smaller sites without finding a big cache of either bodies or goods.

“I have a grad student, Jeff Brzezinski, who just finished a dissertation project at Cerro de la Virgen,” Joyce says. “He was digging in a ceremonial area and started finding all these offering vessels and granite slabs. He stopped digging after he found 90 vessels, because excavating and curating those things takes a long time. But he could have kept digging and kept getting more and more vessels.”



Carved stone slabs from a building on Monte Albán's Main Plaza show people performing autosacrifice and invoking their ancestors.

Joyce and Barber believe these are examples of ritual caching to give the buildings a soul as well as to “feed” them through their years of use. One of Barber’s very first Río Verde Valley excavation finds suggested this kind of ritual feeding: in Yugüe, she uncovered a cooking jar which had been filled with mussels and broken pottery, placed in a pit with dirt piled up to the jar’s neck, and then set on fire.

“Who were they feeding?” she says. “They were clearly leaving these things as offerings and not feeding themselves. The only interpretation is that this is food being left for the place. That matches with the literature saying that buildings and temples have souls and needs, and that you feed them to build a relationship.”

Human burials were the most important of these ensouling rituals. As in many cultures around the world, these people regarded the dead as powerful advocates who had already passed out of the corporeal world and could help them speak to the gods. Villagers gathered to open the floors of their ceremonial buildings and deposit the bodies of their ancestors—thereby implanting their souls into the space—often pushing aside the bones of a previous burial to make room for the new arrivals. The elite were sometimes buried with commoners, adding their extra clout with the gods to the mix. In Yugüe, for instance, the bones of a young man who showed no evidence of hard labor, wore a decorative iron-ore mirror as a pendant, and held a fancy flute—all indications that he was a ritual specialist and a member of the elite—were mixed with the bones of commoners.

Having excavated Río Viejo’s acropolis for four years, Joyce and Barber found evidence of feasting, but no hint that ensoulment and feeding rituals took place there. This leads them to conclude that despite Río Viejo’s powerful rulers and its appeal as a religious center, the villagers had established such deep ties to their local ritual spaces that they would not abandon them for the city. They were not going to leave the bones of their ancestors behind. The leaders at Río Viejo could persuade the villagers to build the acropolis and come for an occasional feast, but nothing more. The people remained in their villages, largely beyond the leaders’ control.

Things played out very differently in Monte Albán. The city lies on a majestic mountaintop commanding a view of the Valley of Oaxaca. The Main Plaza was built to hold several thousand people, with a north-south orientation that could incorporate important astronomical events. Joyce suggests the city was established by people who abandoned other communities in the valley. Even some 1,000 years after its collapse, Monte Albán remains powerfully numinous. “Anyone who visits there today feels as if they’re among the gods,” Barber says. “People went back there to conduct rituals long after the collapse, even people of different ethnicities.”

In the Valley of Oaxaca, excavations show that people buried their dead under the floors of their homes rather than using them as community offerings to ensoul public ceremonial spaces. As a result, there was less to hold them to the



ARTHUR JOYCE

*This elite Monte Albán residence included an elaborate stone masonry tomb. It's an indication of the wealth and power of the city's early rulers*



**An offering of ceramic vessels in granite-slab compartments was discovered at Cerro de la Virgen.**

ritual spaces in their villages. By the Late Formative Period (400-150 B.C.), the site had grown to a population estimated to be as high as 20,000 people.

Despite the city's ultimate success under a series of hierarchical rulers, archaeological evidence suggests that religion also created some friction in Monte Albán's early days. While there were elite dwellings near the plaza, separate burials in elaborate tombs, and some inscriptions carved into cornerstones referring to rulers and human sacrifice—there weren't grand monuments or portraits dedicated to the ruling class. Instead there were hundreds of stone slabs with the images of naked men, many with blood flowing from their genitals, set into the walls of one building on the plaza. These images have traditionally been viewed as sacrificial victims to the elites, but more recently archaeologist Javier Urcid from Brandeis University has argued that they represent a group of warriors, ranked by age, committing the ritual act of auto-sacrifice as a way to communicate with ancestral spirits and deities. In their recent article in the edited volume *Mesoamerican Plazas: Arenas of Community and Power*, Urcid and Joyce concluded that these images affirmed the existence of distinctive elite and communal religious authorities at Monte Albán.

"If these stones were a political statement by a ruling elite regarding their conquest and sacrifice of humans, the victor would be shown prominently," says Urcid. "But here, everyone is engaged in the same activity and there is no

figure that is more prominent. I see this as a representation of a community, rather than a statement about unequal access to power."

By A.D. 200, though, the power struggle between the hierarchical elites and communally-oriented institutions seems to have been resolved in favor of the elites. The stones depicting the warrior group were removed from the buildings, and some were reused in other architectural projects or buried, suggesting that there may have been some sort of struggle for control. No polity is ever without conflict, but the elite of Monte Albán—masters of both religion and politics—were able to hold the city together for many centuries.

What fascinates other archaeologists is how Joyce and Barber, with their extensive body of work in Oaxaca, have illuminated the push-pull that religion can have on social change. "Their work is unique in that it considers how belief systems and ritual practices had very real effects on the degree to which certain political experiments were successful," says Stacie King, an archaeologist at Indiana University who studies mortuary practices. The outcomes of "novel experiments" such as Monte Albán and Río Viejo are uncertain and depend of various factors, she says. "This is what is new and exciting about this work."

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