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Men's and Women's Ritual in Formative Oaxaca

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Ancient ritual is a fascinating topic, but unfortunately one in which speculation tends to outstrip solid archaeological data. Archaeologists can attempt to reconstruct ancient rituals only under certain conditions. Unless they are able to open broad horizontal exposures, locate a wide range of units (caches, features, burials, dooryards, patios, house floors, and public buildings), excavate such units in their entirety, and piece-plot all artifacts *in situ*, they have to be very lucky to find evidence for ritual. In Oaxaca we have been able to isolate such units in the ground and to subject the data to a wide range of analyses. Even so, I cannot accomplish as much as the editors of this volume would like.

EARLY VILLAGERS IN THE VALLEY OF OAXACA

After thousands of years of a seminomadic lifeway involving hunting, wild plant collecting, and incipient agriculture, the ancient Zapotec of the Valley of Oaxaca finally settled down, establishing themselves in hamlets on the valley floor (Fig. 1).

The oldest known sedentary community, San José Mogote, was founded between 1700 and 1400 b.c. by farmers using pottery and artifacts that define our Espiridión complex (Marcus 1983a: 42–43; Flannery and Marcus 1994: 45–54). This complex is known from one house at the village, and our only Espiridión “ritual” artifact is a miniature ceramic mask of a feline. Apart from suggesting the antiquity of masks and feline motifs in the Mesoamerican highlands, it tells us little.

Villagers of this period planted maize, squash, pumpkins, beans, chile peppers, and avocados, and continued to collect wild plants such as maguey, prickly pear, West Indian cherry, and hackberry. They also hunted deer, rabbits, peccary,

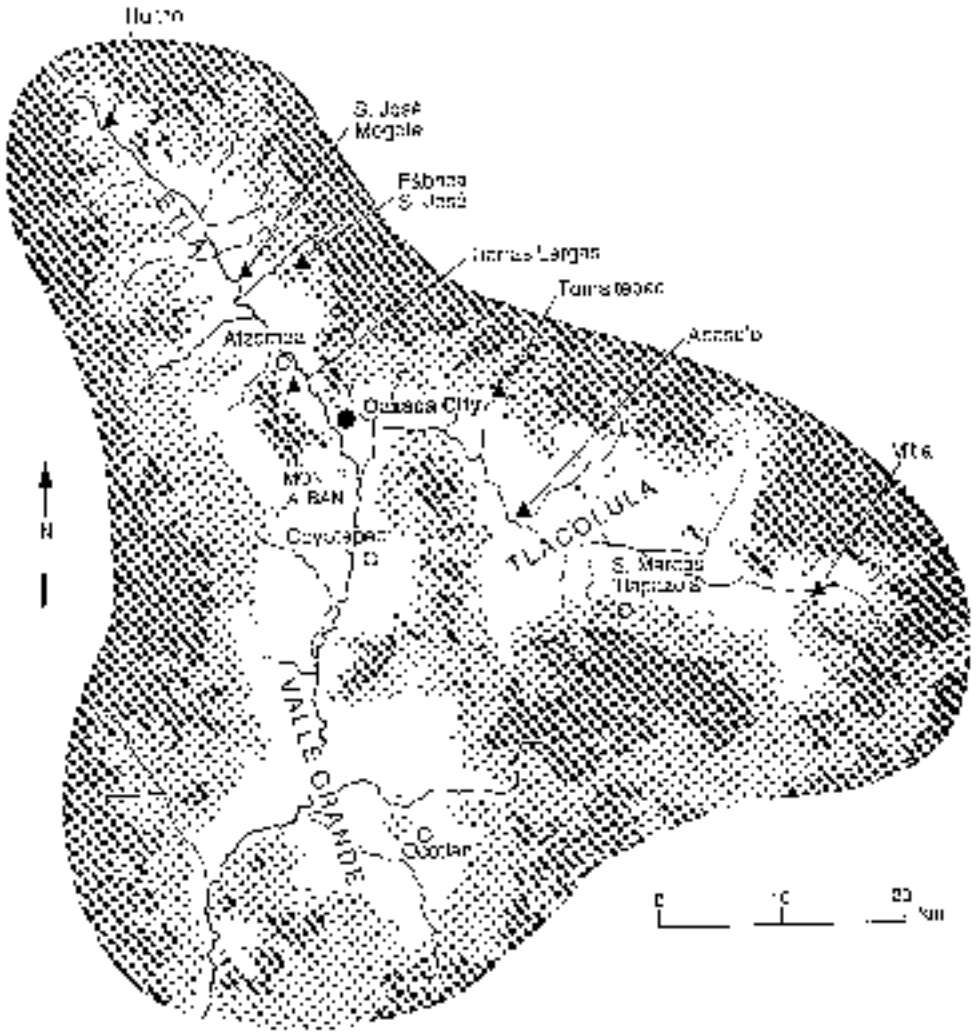


Fig. 1 The Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico, showing Early Formative sites mentioned in the text.

gophers, opossum, raccoons, mud turtles, quail, and doves, and raised domestic dogs for food.

A window into ancient society opens during the Tierras Largas phase, 1400–1150 b.c. During this phase the valley's population grew to an estimated 400 to 600 persons. They lived in 19 hamlets of 1–3 ha each and in one 7 ha village, San José Mogote. Our evidence suggests that this was a time when society was egalitarian and villages were autonomous. It is during the Tierras Largas phase that we can first detect differences between men's and women's ritual.

Building Types

Based on linguistic terms used by the ancient Zapotec to classify their buildings, we might expect to find three different types of structures for the Formative period. The terms for all three structures begin with the word for house, *yoho* (Córdova 1942). The simplest structure was the lean-to or ramada (*yoho yaha* or *yoho yaa*); more permanent was the thatched hut (*yoho quixi* or *yoho caba*); and the most permanent was the lineage or descent group's structure (*yoho tija*).

Of these three types of structures, the house was the most frequently encountered in the early villages of the Valley of Oaxaca. By 1350 b.c. early villages included houses that were 3–4 m wide and 5–6 m long, with walls of wattle-and-daub, pine posts that supported a thatched roof, and a clay floor with a surface of sand. These houses were probably equivalent to the *yoho quixi* or *yoho caba*. The door was usually on one of the long sides, and some houses had a stone threshold (*toayoho*; from *toa*, threshold, and *yoho*, house). Other stones were occasionally used in the foundations of the wattle-and-daub walls. In some houses we recovered silica exoskeletons of reed mats that had been placed on the house floors.

Men's ritual appears to have been conducted at small public buildings which look like forerunners of the *yoho tiya*, or "lineage house," of the later Zapotec. These small public buildings were probably analogous to Men's Houses in societies like those of Melanesia, and they contained no evidence of women's activities or tools. It appears that women's ritual was practiced in and near the home, the *yoho* of later Zapotec society.

This pattern—men's ritual being conducted in the "lineage house" and women's ritual being practiced in the house—continued into the San José phase, 1150–850 b.c. By that time the population of the valley had grown to an estimated 2,000 persons, living in 40 hamlets of 1–5 ha and in one village of 60–70 ha (San José Mogote). During the course of the San José phase, the construction of public buildings and the use of ritual paraphernalia escalated.

Both men's and women's ritual involved ancestors, but there were differences. Women seem to have been more concerned with recent ancestors, especially female ancestors. Men were more concerned with the spirits of remote ancestors, including those of supernatural apical ancestors. Women's ritual involved divining and the manipulation of figurines. Men's ritual involved blood-letting, dancing in costumes, and the use of ritual plants such as tobacco and jimson weed (*Datura* spp.).

By the end of the San José phase, it becomes increasingly difficult to recognize differences between men's and women's ritual because the emergence of hereditary differences in rank gradually began to flood the symbolic system with information on *status* differences. The differences between men's and women's ritual activities thus became masked by an increase in information about the differences between high- and low-status families. It is also the case that smaller communities began to lose their autonomy as they became satellites of larger villages. These larger communities eventually monopolized a great deal of the ritual activity formerly carried out by individual families. This appropriation of ritual by large regional centers ultimately impoverished the ritual inventories of hamlets.

A FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING RITUAL

In this chapter I will build on three principles expressed years ago in *The Early Mesoamerican Village*: (1) although we cannot directly observe Formative rituals, we can recover the places where they were performed; (2) ritual must be performed over and over, in prescribed ways, to be valid; and (3) such repetitive performances lead to patterning of ritual artifact discard (Flannery 1976). I will further divide ritual into three main components: (I) its content, (II) its loci of performance, and (III) its performers.

I. *Content* refers to the subject matter of the ritual. Among the ethnohistoric Zapotec, the content of many rituals involved invoking the spirits of deceased ancestors and addressing *pée* (the vital force) within powerful components of the cosmos, such as Earth and Sky. Earth was frequently addressed in its active form, *Xoo* or Earthquake. Sky was frequently addressed in its belligerent form, *Cociyo* or Lightning. It is no accident that Earth and Sky became two of the earliest symbols depicted on Oaxaca pottery: Earth/Earthquake versus Sky/Lightning (Marcus 1989: 169–174).

II. *Locus of performance* refers to the place where rites were performed. The house, the graveside, the agricultural field, the mountaintop, and the public building were among the loci used by the ancient Zapotec. For example, sixteenth-century Zapotec farmers made offerings and sacrifices in their fields

(*tiquillaya quela*), particularly on the occasion of the harvest (*totinijea*) or when petitioning to Lightning, requesting that he pierce the clouds to send rain to earth (*peni quij cocijo*).

Among the neighbors of the Zapotec (such as the present-day Mixe of Ayutla), offerings are still made to Lightning to secure rain and good crops (Beals 1945, 1973: 92; Lipp 1991). A turkey is killed in the middle of the field just before planting; a round hole is excavated; tortillas and tamales are placed in the hole. Then the blood of the turkey is sprinkled over the tortillas and tamales, and the hole is covered up. A preplanting ceremony conducted at Mixistlán involves burying young dogs, eggs, the blood of chickens, lime, and ashes. At Ayutla, turkey sacrifices and offerings are made in a cave above the town at different times—when the corn tassel first appears, when the first ears are formed, or if an animal is damaging the fields (Beals 1973: 93).

Villagers in Santo Domingo Albarradas, near Mitla, characterize some of their rites as designed “to feed the earth.” Thus, during times of drought, four turkeys (two male, two female) are killed so that their blood can soak into the earth (Parsons 1936: 216). This act is part of a pattern among the Zapotec and Mixe, who say they make offerings and sacrifices at planting time “to honor the earth” and “to feed the earth.”

Because we have not excavated in agricultural fields or on mountaintops in Oaxaca, we have not found such ritual loci. In addition, such rituals might leave few remains because their key elements are perishable. We have, however, recovered ritual data from houses, gravesides, and public buildings.

III. The *performers* of ritual among the ethnohistoric Zapotec were priests, rulers, and ordinary men and women. During the earliest stages of the Formative, of course, there were no priests or rulers; thus ordinary men and women were the performers of all rituals. During the later stages of the Formative, an elite emerged and (as already mentioned) appropriated many ritual activities formerly conducted by ordinary men and women.

MEN'S RITUAL

One of the loci for ritual during the Tierras Largas and early San José phases was a one-room public building, too small to hold all the members of the community (Fig. 2). These structures were probably used by a subset of the villagers—fully initiated males—who met periodically to petition their ancestors for aid in agricultural production, community events, and perhaps even intervillage raiding.

These early structures, of which we have found about ten, never contain domestic artifacts, figurines, or any tools one might associate with women. They do contain sharp obsidian flakes that could have been used for autosacrifice,

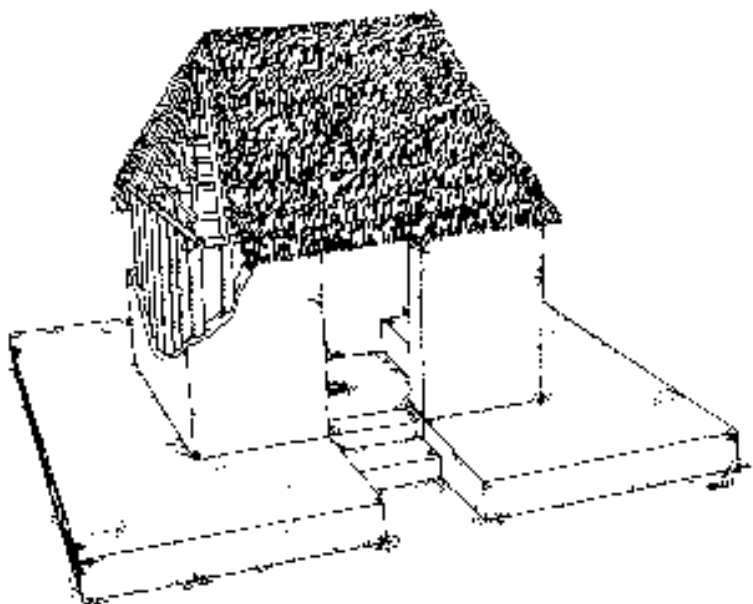


Fig. 2 Example of a Men's House (Structure 6) at San José Mogote.
Drawing by David Reynolds.

and they have lime-filled pits that may be associated with the use of narcotic plants.

These Men's Houses, some with radiocarbon dates as early as 1350 b.c., differed from ordinary residences in a number of ways. First, they were all oriented 8 degrees west of true north, an orientation shared by later public buildings in Oaxaca and other regions of Mesoamerica but not by ordinary houses. It is worth mentioning that these buildings provide our first evidence for such an orientation anywhere in Mesoamerica, antedating buildings of similar orientation at La Venta by more than half a millennium (Marcus 1989: 163). Thus our old notion of ritual influence emanating from the Gulf Coast was premature; both the Valley of Oaxaca and the Pacific Coast of Chiapas seem to have had public architecture at a time when none is known from the Gulf, and the 8 degree orientation was clearly established in the highlands long before we have any evidence for it in Veracruz or Tabasco (Flannery and Marcus 1994: 385–394).

The Tierras Largas phase Men's Houses contained two to three times as many posts as ordinary houses and were given a coat of lime plaster inside and out. The floor was also surfaced with lime plaster, in contrast to the floors of ordinary

houses which were of stamped clay covered with a layer of sand. Several of the Men's Houses had a centrally placed, lime-plastered storage pit built into the floor, a feature not encountered in ordinary residences. These pits were filled with powdered lime, possibly stored for later use with ritual plants such as *quèeza* (tobacco) or *nocuanacohui* (*Datura*) or perhaps even for rituals of purification—the Zapotec employ the same word (*teáaya*) for “to purify” and “to whiten with lime” (Marcus and Flannery 1978; Marcus 1989: figs. 8.5 and 8.6 top).

Another place for men's ritual was at graveside. Toward the end of the Tierras Largas phase we see our first examples of seated burials, all middle-aged males (Fig. 3). Given the importance of seated burials in later Mesoamerican societies, we suspect that these are the burials of senior men who had earned a measure of respect in Tierras Largas society. The seated burials are so tightly flexed as to suggest that each was kept as a bundle (Fig. 4). No women were treated in this way, and the majority of male burials were in the extended position (Fig. 5).

During the subsequent San José phase, differential treatment of men becomes more striking. At this time we see the first depictions of Sky/Lightning and Earth/Earthquake carved or incised on the ceramics of the region (Figs. 6–8; see also Flannery and Marcus 1994: 135–286). When such vessels were placed with burials of individuals old enough to have their gender identified, they occur *only* with men. Vessels with Lightning or Earthquake motifs are also found with infants too young to have their gender determined; we assume that these are males, since other infants were buried with miniature versions of the pottery typically found with adult women.

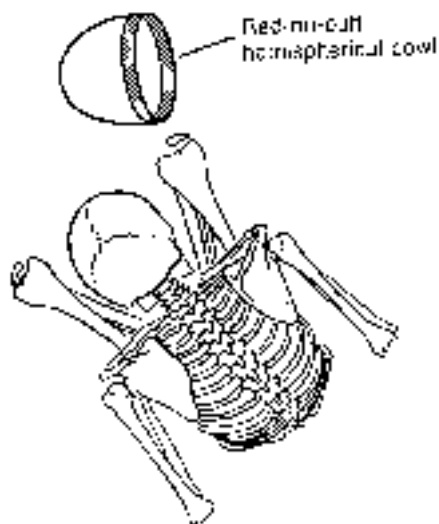


Fig. 3 A man over age 40, buried in the seated position, near a Men's House at San José Mogote (Tierras Largas phase).

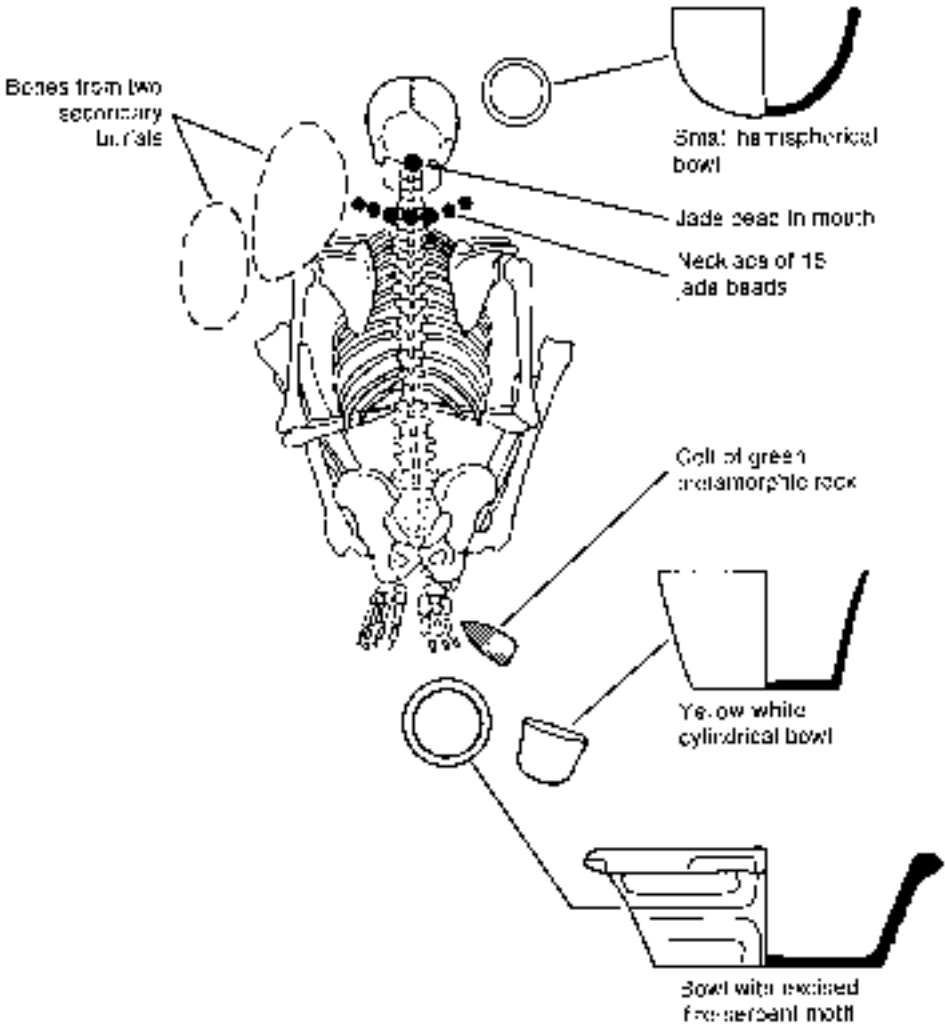


Fig. 4 A man 30–40 years old, buried tightly flexed at Tomaltepec in the Valley of Oaxaca. He was accompanied by two secondary burials and a bowl with Sky/Lightning iconography (San José phase).

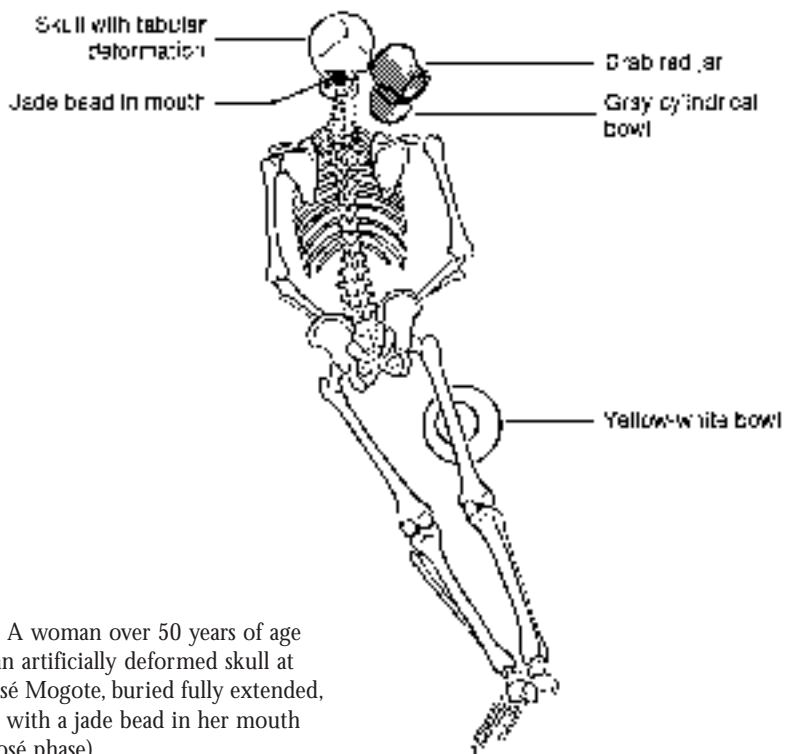


Fig. 5 A woman over 50 years of age with an artificially deformed skull at San José Mogote, buried fully extended, prone, with a jade bead in her mouth (San José phase).

Thus motifs of Lightning and Earth seem to have been associated with males from birth, but they were also associated with different residential wards at San José Mogote. Sky/Lightning was associated with Areas A and C, while Earth/Earthquake was associated with Area B (Marcus 1989: table 8.1; Flannery and Marcus 1994: chaps. 14, 16). Hamlets of 1–3 ha were evidently too small to contain members of both descent groups; at such communities only one of the motifs was used.

In Oaxaca, Earth can be depicted as a mask with a feline mouth and a cleft skull, representing a fissure in the earth left by Earthquake; abstract versions are also known (Fig. 6a). Earth is less frequently depicted as a crocodile foot (Fig. 7a). Sky is depicted as Lightning, a “serpent of fire” whose eyebrows are flames (Fig. 8b–e). In the more stylized versions, the face of the serpent is indicated by excised bars, the flame brows by incised sine curves, and his gums by inverted U’s (Fig. 8b–c). More complete inventories of these motifs can be found in Flannery and Marcus (1994: chap. 12).

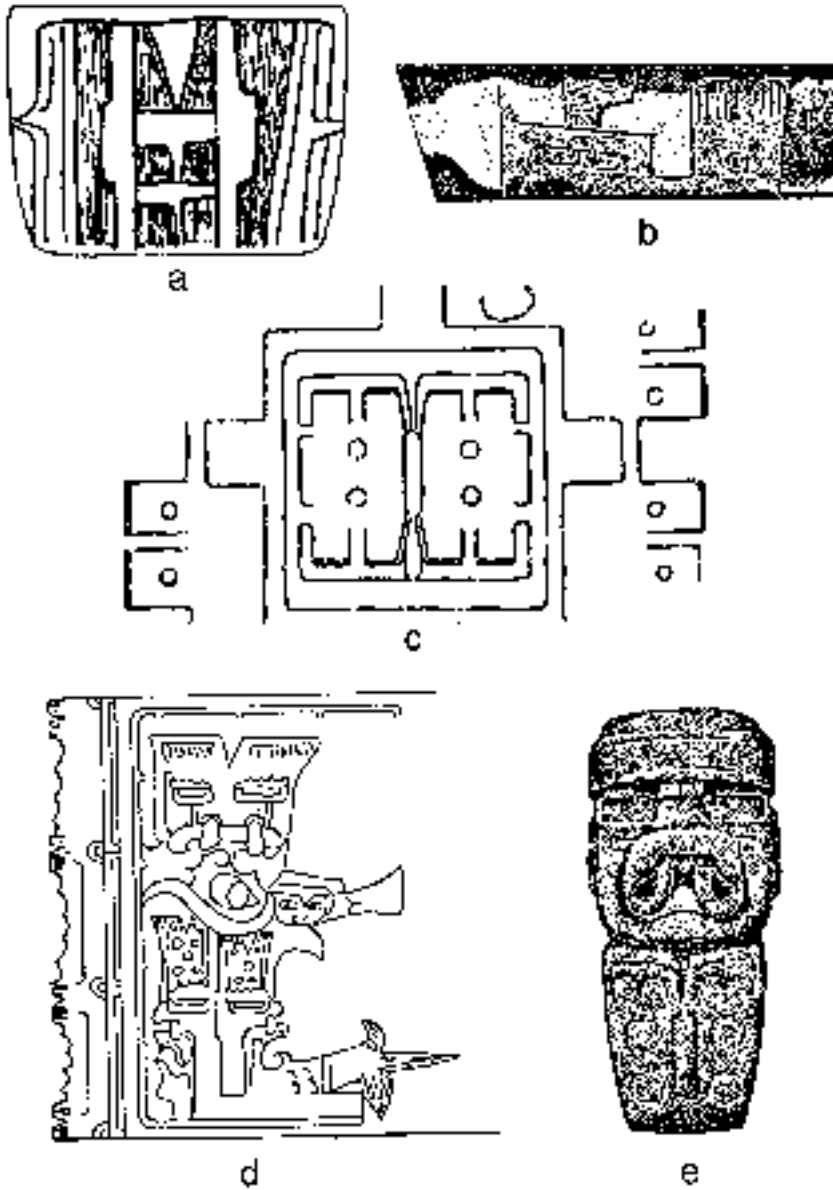


Fig. 6 Depictions of “Earth” and the “Four World Directions”: (a) cleft-and-bracket version of Earth from Oaxaca vessel (after Flannery and Marcus 1994: 175); (b) cleft-and-gum/“shark” motif from Copan vessel (after Fash 1991: fig. 33); (c) cleft, tab, and four world directions from vessel at San José Mogote (after Marcus 1989: fig. 8.15); (d) were-jaguar, cleft, and Four World Directions from Tlatilco vessel (after Niederberger 1987: fig. 439); (e) were-jaguar, cleft, and Four World Direction motif on figurine (after Covarrubias 1957: fig. 32).

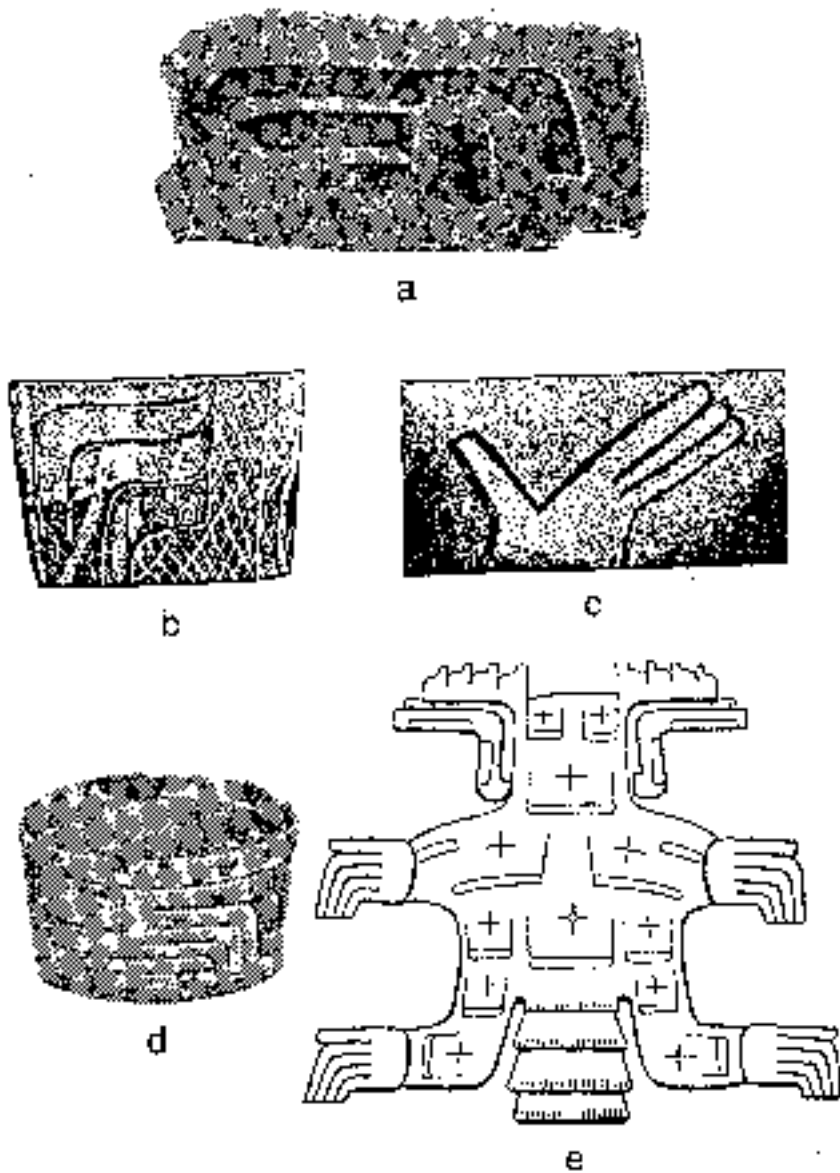


Fig. 7 Depictions of Earth as crocodile's foot: (a) impression of roller stamp from San José Mogote (after Flannery and Marcus 1994: 295); (b–c) vessels from South Platform, Copan (after Fash 1991: fig. 33); (d) ceramic vessel, provenience unknown (after Covarrubias 1957: 78); (e) crocodile skin worn by seated male figurine from Atlihuayan, Morelos (after Covarrubias 1957: fig. 21).

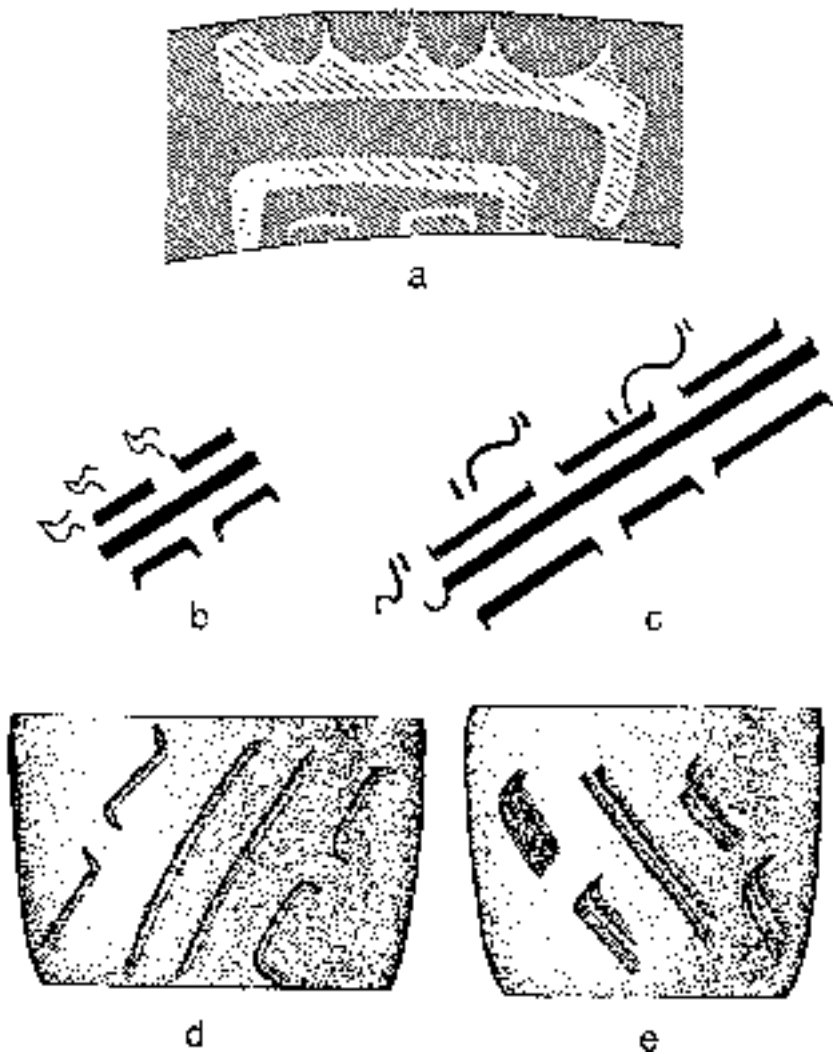


Fig. 8 Depictions of Sky/Lightning on pottery vessels: (a) from North Platform, Copan (after Fash 1991: fig. 33); (b-e) eyebrow flames, *raspada* bars, and gums of Lightning from Oaxaca (after Flannery and Marcus 1994: 141, 181).

The Earth/Sky Dichotomy in Other Regions

Oaxaca was not the only area of Mesoamerica where early descent groups show this dichotomy between the descendants of Earth and Sky. At Copan, Honduras—far to the south of Oaxaca—burials of the Uir phase (900–400 b.c.) show an analogous dichotomy (see also Joyce, this volume).

At Copan, William Fash (1991, n.d.) has uncovered two cobblestone platforms of the Uir phase, built near each other and formerly supporting pole-and-thatch structures. Below the South Platform were the graves of 15 individuals. Below the North Platform were the graves of another 32.

Ceramic offerings depicting Earth were restricted to the South Platform. At Copan, Earth was represented not by a feline mouth and cleft skull (as in Oaxaca), but via the symbol erroneously called the “paw-wing” motif (Fig. 7b–c). This symbol, as pointed out by Covarrubias (1957) and Grove (1984: 126), is actually the foot of a crocodile (Fig. 7e). This use of a crocodile’s foot to stand for the whole crocodile is an example of *pars pro toto* (Fig. 7d). The crocodile’s foot is an appropriate representation of Earth for the Maya, because they pictured the earth’s surface as a floating crocodile (Thompson 1950: 11, 133; 1970: 216–218). While Oaxaca potters also used the “crocodile foot” motif, their preferred version of Earth was *Xoo*, the Earth’s angry state.

Vessels depicting Sky were restricted during the Uir phase to Copan’s North Platform. Here the motifs are surprisingly like their Oaxaca counterparts, emphasizing excised (*raspada*) and incised Lightning symbols (Fig. 8a). Even the vessel shapes, which included tall bottles and cylinders, are similar to those of highland Mexican sites such as San José Mogote, Tlatilco, and Tlapacoya (Flannery and Marcus 1994: chap. 12).

Other variables reinforce the Earth/Sky dichotomy at Copan. South Platform graves featured cists or capstones, while North Platform graves did not (Fash 1991: 68–70). Jade was also found much more frequently in the North Platform, that is, with the “descendants of Sky/Lightning.”

The use of the Earth/Sky dichotomy at sites as widely separated as San José Mogote and Copan suggests that we may expect more examples of it in the intervening area. We should remember, however, that only the largest and most important sites in each region are likely to have examples of *both* descent groups.

WOMEN’S RITUALS

Although there is no sign of women’s tools or activities near our early public buildings, we do find evidence for women’s ritual in three places: the house (*yoho quixi* or *yoho coba*); the associated ramada or lean-to (*yoho yaha* or *yoho yaa*); and the surrounding dooryard. These activities are be-

lieved to include (1) divination by the casting of beans or maize kernels, and (2) communication with recent ancestors through the use of small solid figurines.

Let us begin with divination, which—by analogy with ethnohistoric descriptions—may have been carried out in special basins in the dooryard of the house. Such basins were waterproofed with a layer of lime plaster, then painted in one of the colors associated with the four Zapotec world directions: red, yellow, white, or black. Two such painted basins were discovered in the yard of a San José phase house, Household C3, at San José Mogote (Fig. 9). East of the house was a red-painted basin, while a yellow-painted basin lay 3 m to the south. The red-painted basin was 1.2 m in diameter and recessed 5 cm into the ground; it had been mud-plastered, given a waterproof coating of lime, then painted red with specular hematite. The yellow-painted basin was similar in every way except color. Whether there were once four basins—each painted a different color and oriented to one of the four world directions—is not known, since exposing the relevant areas of the yard would have required the destruction of a later building (Marcus 1989: fig. 8.20).

We know from sixteenth-century documents that Zapotec diviners sat on a mat and cast maize kernels onto the surface of a water-filled basin, noting whether they fell or floated in groups of 2, 3, 5, or 13. This use of water (*niça*) for casting lots was called *tiniyaaya niça*, and it was used to determine the cause and cure of illnesses affecting household members; to predict whether a particular day was auspicious for planting or marriage; or to assign a name to a newborn child. We suspect that the painted basins of Household C3 may have served for such divination (Fig. 10).

Zapotec women also petitioned their recently deceased ancestors for guidance, often doing so in or near the house where that ancestor had lived. We suspect, on the basis of ethnographic analogy, that small solid figurines—of which we have found hundreds in household context—provided the medium to which the spirits of specific ancestors could return during this petitioning. Women preferred to petition their female ancestors, which may account for the fact that the majority of these figurines are women.

Tierras Largas phase figurines occurred in relatively few styles; more effort was expended depicting elaborate hairdos than facial features. Thus, while the spirit of a specific ancestor was probably thought to inhabit each figurine during the ritual for which it was made, we do not believe that a serious attempt was made to make the face of each figurine resemble that specific person. The hairstyle, the ornaments, and other secondary features were probably considered specific enough.



Fig. 10 Seated on a mat near her house, this Zapotec woman is divining, throwing corn kernels into a water-filled basin to see how many will float and how many will sink. Drawing by John Klausmeyer.

There are many agricultural village societies in which the role of contacting recent ancestors falls to women. In the naming and mourning ceremonies of the Cubeo of northwest Amazonia, specific ancestors are invoked “by name and by specific kinship reference, as the mother or the grandmother of the sib” (Goldman 1963: 191). Some activities associated with invoking the ancestors are secret, while others are not; for the former, the home would be a logical venue. This rule of secrecy often applies to musical instruments, such as the flute and trumpet, as well. These bear the names of ancestors, and when the instruments appear, a specific ceremonial role is assigned to women. For example, in mourning rites the ancestor trumpets sound their notes of grief, and the women respond with their own wailing. “That is, when the Ancients enter the maloca [residence] they naturally establish a relationship with the women of the house” (Goldman 1963: 191).

THE EMERGENCE OF RANK

During the San José phase, our ability to separate men’s and women’s ritual becomes complicated by the emergence of status differences. These differences affected public buildings, ordinary houses, figurines, and artifact assemblages.

Our data suggest a continuum of status differences in San José Mogote, rather than a division into actual strata as occurred during the era of the Zapotec state. Houses showed a continuum from simple wattle-and-daub structures (like House 13 at San José Mogote) to well-made whitewashed residences with attached ramadas or lean-tos (like Houses 16–17 at the same site) (Flannery and Marcus 1994). The higher a family's status, the greater the likelihood that their house would show evidence of pottery from other regions and of marine shell, mica, jade, and abundant deer bone.

Burials also show a continuum of status, with men and women buried with variable amounts of jade, magnetite, and marine shell. While some individuals might be buried with only one jade bead in the mouth, others had up to three beads and two jade earspools. In a cemetery at Tomaltepec in the Valley of Oaxaca, Michael Whalen (1981) recovered almost 80 San José phase primary and secondary burials. Most primary burials were fully extended face down, but one group of six adult males stood out as different because they were tightly flexed in a kneeling position (Fig. 4). Although representing only 12.7 percent of the cemetery, these six males received 88 percent of the jade beads, 50 percent of the vessels with carved Sky or Lightning motifs, and 66 percent of the stone slab grave coverings in the cemetery.

Finally, both men and women of high status often had their heads artificially deformed. Since this procedure must be done while the individual is a child, the right to deformation must have been inherited rather than achieved.

Differences in Figurines and Burials

Both figurines and burials began to show intriguingly similar evidence for status differences during the San José phase. A limited number of figurines appear in stereotyped positions that seem to reflect *authority*; most of these are adult males, seated, with hands on knees (Fig. 11). A much larger number of figurines, both male and female, appear in positions that would seem to reflect *obeisance* or *subordination*. They are shown with arms folded across their chests and in a fully extended position (Fig. 12). A correspondingly large number of men and women were buried fully extended, face down, with arms folded across their chests. Many fewer burials were seated and tightly flexed (or kneeling and tightly flexed), and all of the latter were adult males (Fig. 13). These tightly flexed males were high-status people who may have been wrapped up as bundles to facilitate later reburial.

Next to a high-status residence (House 17) at San José Mogote we found four figurines forming a ritual scene, buried beneath the floor of a lean-to (called "House 16" in the field). We suspect that this scene depicts a high-status



Fig. 11 (*above*) San José phase figurine of a man seated in a position of authority (Burial 35 at Tomaltepec, Oaxaca; height = 8.1 cm). Drawing by John Klausmeyer.

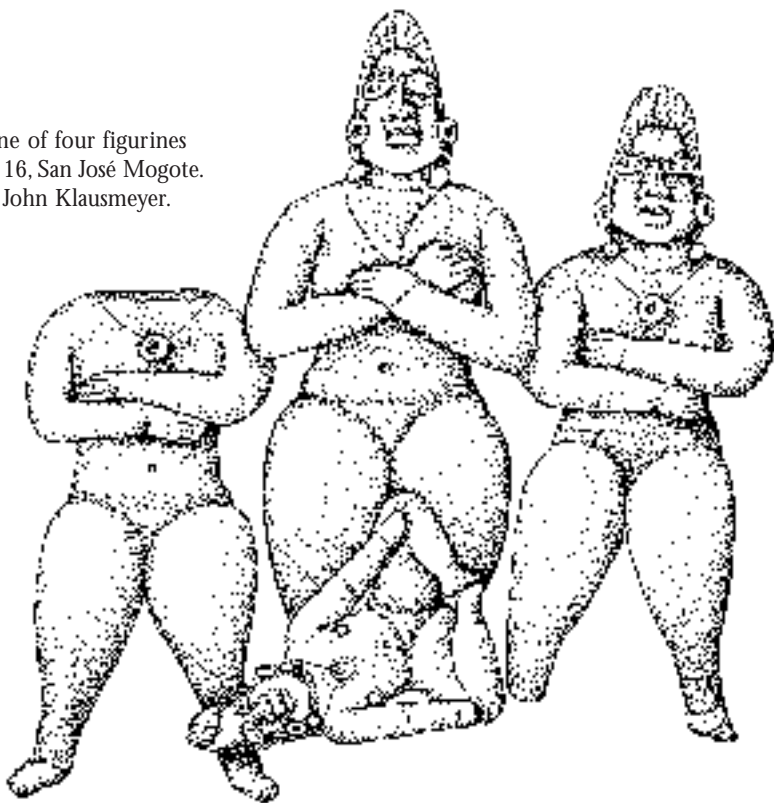


Fig. 12 Figurine of a person in a subordinate "obedience" posture from House 16, San José Mogote (San José phase). Drawing by John Klausmeyer.



Two male figurines tightly flexed for burial, San José Mogote (San José phase).
Drawing by John Klausmeyer.

Fig. 14 Scene of four figurines from House 16, San José Mogote.
Drawing by John Klausmeyer.



multiple burial (Fig. 14). Three of the figurines were in the most common burial position of the period—fully extended, arms folded across their chests. While these three individuals lay supine in the scene, the fourth figure—also a male—was seated atop the other three. This arrangement is reminiscent of some chiefly burials from the Coclé site in Panama. For example, Grave 26 from Coclé featured a chiefly male seated atop a layer of 21 fully extended, face-down subordinates (Lothrop 1937: fig. 31). Strengthening this analogy is the fact that at San José Mogote we also find miniature four-legged stools, small ceramic versions of the ones on which Panamanian chiefs were buried. We suspect that our miniature stools were for use with seated figurines.

To the south of the figurine scene, and below the floor of House 17, was a middle-aged woman buried with two jade earspools and three jade beads. (For all we know, she may have been the woman who arranged the figurine scene in the lean-to adjacent to her house.) Her residence contained additional artifacts for use in ritual, including stingray spines (and other fish spines) for bloodletting, ceramic dance masks, and abundant marine shell. There were also vessels imported from the Basin of Mexico and possibly from Morelos (Marcus 1989; Flannery and Marcus 1994).

Since this figurine scene from San José Mogote is somewhat earlier than the famous Middle Formative figurine arrangement from La Venta (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: fig. 38), it indicates that such scenes were part of a long-standing tradition in Mesoamerica. By Middle Formative times at La Venta, however, the figurines were of jade and serpentine, and the scene was in a public, rather than household, context.

Changes in Public Buildings

The emergence of ranking during the San José phase also affected public buildings. By perhaps 1000 b.c., small buildings like the “lineage houses” or Men’s Houses of earlier times had begun to disappear. They had given way to much larger and more spectacular public buildings, often serving more than one community. It is still unclear whether these Formative buildings should be called “temples,” but they are certainly more complex than the Men’s Houses of the Tierras Largas phase.

For one thing, their construction involved much more labor. The “lineage houses” of the Tierras Largas phase could have been built by a dozen men in a matter of weeks. The largest public buildings of the San José phase sat on platforms requiring tons of earthen fill and hundreds of man-days of labor. By the end of the phase, planoconvex or “bun-shaped” adobes were being produced by the hundreds to construct retaining walls for fill, and many tons of heavy

boulders were being brought to the site so that the outer surfaces of the platform could be built of dry-laid stone masonry. Many limestone and travertine boulder stones were brought from communities at least 5 km from San José Mogote, suggesting that these smaller villages were no longer autonomous; they had become satellites of San José Mogote and were contributing manpower and materials to a larger chiefly center.

Structures 1 and 2 at San José Mogote are examples of this more elaborate architecture (Fig. 15). Each structure apparently served as the pyramidal platform for a public building. Both were contoured to a gentle slope coming down from the hill on which most of the later ceremonial architecture of San José Mogote was built. Each platform was different, a rough-and-ready structure adapted to the slope without much concern for bilateral symmetry or straightness of walls. The public buildings atop the platforms had largely eroded away. What remained were a few patches of hard-packed, almost burnished clay floor which indicated where the perishable buildings had been (Flannery and Marcus 1994: 370).

Structure 2 stands a meter high and may once have spanned 18 m. The structure's irregular eastern edge was faced with boulders, some local and some brought in from as far away as Rancho Matadamas and Fábrica San José. Two

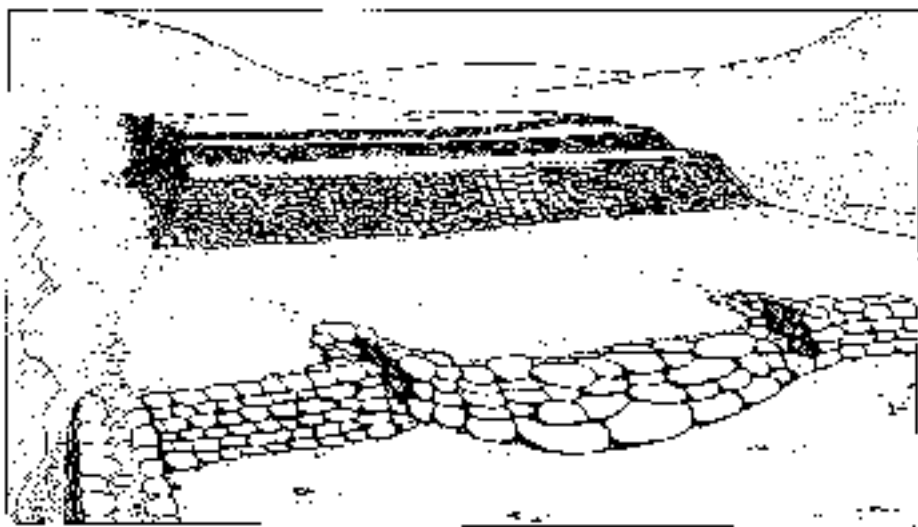


Fig. 15 Reconstruction of Structures 1 and 2, San José Mogote.
Drawing by David W. Reynolds.

carved stones, one depicting a feline and the other a raptorial bird, had fallen out of a nearby wall; both display a local, rather than pan-Mesoamerican, style (Marcus 1976a; Flannery and Marcus 1983: fig. 3.7).

The east face of Structure 2 contained our earliest stone stairways. Each was so narrow that only one person at a time could have been accommodated. The North and South Stairways were inset into the wall and consisted of three to seven steps. Despite the informality of these buildings, it is worth noting that stone masonry, stone stairways, adobes, and lime plaster were largely unknown at this time on the Gulf Coast. This fact further reinforces the impression that our earlier notions of Gulf Coast influence were overly enthusiastic (Marcus 1989: 193–194; Flannery and Marcus 1994: chap. 20).

These late San José buildings are clearly more monumental than those of the Tierras Largas and early San José phases. The most likely explanation is that the responsibility of public construction had shifted from small groups of initiated men to a hereditary elite whose sphere of influence transcended the local community. From this point on in our sequence, we see more impressive displays of manpower by the elite and correspondingly less evidence for ordinary men's ritual.

The Disappearance of Women's Ritual

Women's ritual was also affected by the emerging elite monopoly of ritual activity. The small solid figurines that had played so great a role in Early Formative household ritual decreased in number after 700 b.c. and virtually disappeared by 200 b.c.

Simply put, the recent ancestors of ordinary people were no longer as important as they had been at the egalitarian village level. Their place was taken by the well-known Zapotec effigy urn, a venue to which the spirits of the departed elite could return. Invoking the spirits of ancestors continued to be an important component of Zapotec ritual, but now it was mainly noble ancestors who were invoked (Marcus 1983b). Divination continued to be important, but it was eventually conducted by full-time priests. Thus the rise of the Zapotec state partially closed the window through which we had glimpsed ordinary men's and women's social identity.

The Legacy of Earlier Times

With the wisdom of hindsight, we can see traces of the old Formative ritual system surviving in readapted form during the Classic period. Zapotec rulers continued to claim descent from *Cociyo* or Lightning, the most frequently depicted supernatural force in Zapotec art. And *Xoo* or Earthquake, that symbol

of Earth in its most animate and belligerent form, became one of the days of the Zapotec 260-day calendar (Marcus 1976b).

In the modern era, with Pre-Columbian elite culture largely peeled away by the Spanish Conquest, we can once again see ordinary Zapotec men and women engaging in ritual. Many still pray to Earth and Lightning, still conduct divination, still make blood sacrifices, still believe that different colors are associated with the four world directions.

Ask a Zapotec farmer in Mitla where the four colors of indigenous corn—white, yellow, black, and red—came from, and he will tell you they were created by Lightning, who put a grain of a different color into four separate sacks so that the Zapotec could have four colors of corn (Parsons 1936: 330). Mitleños will also point to a small lizard called a *chintete* and tell you that if you burn him in a fire, he will be resurrected as Lightning (Parsons 1936: 335–336). It is an amazing survival of man's three-thousand-year relationship with the angriest, most active version of Sky.

DISCUSSION OF OAXACA DATA

Ritual, social identity, and cosmology were related in ancient Oaxaca, but their relationship—and archaeological visibility—changed over time. In the Tierras Largas phase, one's identity seems to have depended on (1) whether one was a man or woman, and (2) whether one was initiated or not. Initiated men met in "lineage houses" to engage in rituals from which women and uninitiated males were probably excluded. Women conducted rituals within and near the household, invoking ancestors and engaging in divination. It is doubtful that any women were excluded from this ritual; indeed, one of the differences between men's and women's ritual is that men's is more competitive and exclusionary. By the early San José phase, some deceased men and boys were identified as descendants of Earth or Sky by their burial vessels, and some women consulted their household's ancestors by arranging figurines of them in ritual scenes beneath the floors of their houses.

With the emergence of chiefly society between 1150 and 850 b.c., social identity began to change. Now one's birth into an elite family was at least as important as one's achievements or degree of initiation. Positions of authority and subordination were revealed both in figurine posture and gesture and in burial position and ritual. The use of sumptuary goods and foreign imports escalated. Elite families took over the construction of public buildings, transforming them from modest Men's Houses into grander temples of regional significance.

At 1100 b.c., to show that a burial was descended from Lightning would have identified the individual as (1) a man and (2) a member of a large descent

group. By 200 b.c., to show descent from Lightning was to identify a member of the nobility. At 1100 b.c., men and women had rituals with different *content* and *loci of performance*. By a.d. 300, elite men and women were shown walking together, side by side, in polychrome murals depicting the procession exiting from a royal funeral. The difficulty of documenting social identity—even if we limit ourselves to a single region like the Valley of Oaxaca—is that we are aiming at a target that moves and evolves over time.

The Search for Wider Significance

We have seen that some patterns of men's ritual in early Oaxaca find analogues in men's ritual at early Copan. It is more difficult to find analogues for women's ritual because so few early household units have been excavated elsewhere in Mesoamerica.

My reading of the literature, however, suggests that many practices of Formative women find analogues in village societies elsewhere in the world. In this chapter I will discuss only one of those areas, village China. China is a long way from Mesoamerica, and I am not suggesting that it can serve as a model for the Mesoamerican Formative. Rather, I suggest that we may have, in both areas, independent examples of a widespread pattern in which exclusionary groups of men honor more remote ancestors, while inclusionary groups of women honor more recent ancestors.

During the Neolithic period (5000–3000 b.c.), in the middle Yellow River basin, hundreds of early villages are known. Those that have been extensively excavated (Chiang-chai, Pan-p'o, and Pei-shou-ling) are about 5 ha in area. The pottery at this time displayed incised symbols, interpreted as being comparable to clan emblems used by the later Shang. These emblems are individual characters, often on the black band near the rim of the vessels, and, significantly, many depict fish or other animals. In other words, they may be the Chinese equivalents of the crocodiles, fire-serpents, and were-jaguars associated with men's burials in Mesoamerica.

In later periods in China, animals continued to be important as lineage emblems, playing roles in ritual and in communicating with the Sky, Earth, and the dead (Chang 1980: 209). The Shang-period Chinese (1200–1000 b.c.) depicted animals on bronze vessels, including dragons or snakes. Such depictions were called *wu*, a term that has been translated "animal offerings." According to K. C. Chang (1983: 65):

to make animal offerings was a concrete means of achieving communication between heaven and earth, the dead and the living. We thus

come to the inevitable conclusion that the animal designs on Shang and Chou bronzes are iconographically meaningful: they are images of the various animals that served as the helpers of shamans and shamanesses in the task of communication between heaven and earth, the spirits and the living.

Significantly, in ancient China we see the ancestors honored at the same three loci we saw in Formative Oaxaca: (1) special Men's Houses called "Ancestral Halls," to which women were denied admission; (2) the home, where all women's ritual was practiced (Freedman 1980: 83–85); and (3) the graveside, where the ancestors were buried with vessels whose animal agent motifs helped communicate with Earth and Sky. The intimacy between the living and the deceased was not broken by death, and their relationship continued to be one of reciprocity.

As in our reconstruction of women's ritual in Formative Oaxaca, the ancestors honored in the house were the recently deceased whose living descendants still occupied the structure. Household ritual did not include ancestors farther removed than four generations, and most were much more closely related. In contrast, the ancestor worship that took place in the Ancestral Hall involved a longer sequence of ancestors, one that could even lead back to the lineage founder.

What integrated these two phases of ancestor worship was the fact that some ancestors, originally buried in the cemetery and honored in the household, could later be lifted out of "household context" to be honored in the Ancestral Hall. Once there, an ancestor's worship became "more impersonal," for in the hall he was endowed with a more remote and less individualized personality. As Freedman (1980: 84) expresses it: "Once an ancestor had been placed in the shrine belonging to a hall he had ceased to be an object of personal devotion and had become part of the ritual centre of a lineage segment."

Freedman's analysis shows us that men's and women's ancestor worship, though it took place in different loci, was in fact part of a multistage program. An individual might be honored for several generations in the home, in a very personal way, by women who knew his individual characteristics. After several generations passed, there would be no one left who actually knew him. At that point he could be transported to the Ancestral Hall to be honored by men for whom he was an impersonal, nonindividualized, more distant member of a larger descent group.

If this situation provides an analogy for Mesoamerica, it may help to explain two phenomena: the deliberate breaking and discarding of small solid figurines around houses and the appearance of seated male bundle burials near Men's Houses. If household veneration of immediate ancestors lasted only a few gen-

erations, there would come a time when the small solid figurines of these ancestors would no longer be needed. They could then be broken, or even have their features battered off to keep anyone from using them, as was apparently done with figurines at La Victoria, Guatemala (Coe 1961: 92). Also, if the remains of important men were eventually to be transferred near the Men's House (= Ancestral Hall) after a period of veneration in the home, it would make sense to keep them tightly bundled in the seated position in preparation for that transfer.

Finally, the Chinese data provide evidence for divination practices analogous to the *tiniyaaya niça* we think Zapotec women practiced in shallow water-filled basins. Chinese divination, however, was performed by using the bones of animals. Diviners used either a turtle (usually the plastron, less often the carapace) or the scapula of a cow; the former is known as *plastromancy* and the latter as *scapulimancy*.

Although divination predated the Shang dynasty, it was during the Shang era that we see standardized preparation of such "oracle bones." First, diviners drilled a series of evenly spaced holes on the backs of the bones; then they applied heat to produce cracks. These cracks provided a basis around which diviners or scribes incised the record of divination. Diviners carved out some of the cracks to make them more visible, and many were filled with red or black pigment to make them clearer.

Scholars suspect that only those times when a Shang ruler's predictions proved to be true were deemed worthy of permanent recordkeeping. For example, one oracle bone says: "The ruler, reading the cracks, said 'if a child is born on a *ting* day, that is good; if it is a *keng* day it will be very good.'" Then the actual birth was recorded. Another bone says: "the ruler, reading the cracks, predicts danger." This was followed by verification: "on the 8th day there were arriving clouds . . . and the coming of a rainbow." For the Chinese, those were indeed signs of danger (Keightley 1989).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Ritual, as interesting a topic as it may be, remains one of the most difficult behaviors to document and interpret archaeologically. Even in the Valley of Oaxaca, where we have thousands of bits of piece-plotted information from a wide variety of contexts, there are gaps that can only be bridged by ethnographic analogy.

At the egalitarian, or autonomous village stage (1400–1150 b.c.), I have divided ritual information into three components: its content, its loci, and its performers.

Women's ritual seems to have been conducted in the house, the adjacent lean-to, and the surrounding dooryard. The recently deceased ancestors—both males and females, but especially females—appear to have been the focus of much of this ritual. Small solid figurines, sometimes arranged in ritual scenes, evidently provided a venue to which the spirits of the ancestors could return; in that venue they were probably consulted, petitioned, and involved in the ongoing affairs of their descendants. Women also made figurines of animals (principally dogs and birds), which may have served the ancestors as “animal agents” like those described for China.

Women may also have been involved in *tiniyaaya niça*, divination by casting maize kernels onto the surface of shallow, water-filled basins. Suitable basins were found in the dooryard of an Early Formative household, painted in two of the colors (red, yellow) associated with the four great world directions. There is no reason to believe any women in the village were excluded from any of the rituals discussed, since they conducted them in their own households.

Men, on the other hand, evidently conducted their ritual in a lime-plastered, astronomically oriented Men's House or “lineage house” apart from their residences. These buildings were so small that only a subgroup of the village's men, presumably “initiates” of some kind, could have entered them. We therefore assume that men's ritual was more exclusionary than women's, with certain men being allowed into ritual society based on achieved status.

Men's Houses had no figurines, no associated shallow basins, no hearths, and no domestic artifacts. They did, however, contain lime-filled pits. This lime may have been for mixing with powdered tobacco, jimson weed, morning glory, or some other ritual plant described in the ethnohistoric record. No such lime-filled pits have been found with any of the ordinary households we have excavated, suggesting that women (and uninitiated men) did not participate in the associated rituals.

Near some of these Men's Houses or “lineage houses” we found seated burials of tightly bundled middle-aged men. Perhaps, therefore, after a period of ritual veneration in the household, certain important men were moved to a position near the Men's House in which they had once practiced rituals. This practice would be analogous to the Chinese tradition (presented earlier by way of comparison) in which some ancestors are honored in the household by women for a few generations, then transferred to the Ancestral Hall. If the Chinese example is relevant, we should look for clues that Formative Mesoamerican ancestors were treated (1) as personalized individuals while honored in the home, but (2) as impersonal and less individualized ancestors when buried near the “lineage house.”

After the appearance of inherited rank in the villages of Oaxaca, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate men's and women's ritual, because the archaeological record is flooded with information on differences in rank. One still finds abundant use of small solid figurines, ritual basins, and small Men's Houses well into the San José phase (1150–850 b.c.). One also suspects that men's ritual was exclusionary, since certain men were buried with vessels depicting Earth or Sky, while others were not.

As public buildings grew larger and more elegant, however, and as households began to display stronger and more flamboyant evidence of status paraphernalia, it is clear that a great deal of ritual was being taken away from ordinary villagers by ritual specialists. By 700 b.c., Zapotec society came to be run by elite families with deformed skulls, jade and mother-of-pearl ornaments, luxury drinking vessels, and abundant trade goods. These families participated more heavily in ritual than did families of lower status, and the public buildings at which they performed those rituals were now of regional, rather than local, significance.

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