

## Monumentality, Elite Tombs, and Domestic Memories: Understanding Social Formation at Monte Albán

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*In this work, we will present the elements that allows us to identify social differentiation at Monte Albán, as a reflection of an advanced society and one of the most sophisticated civilizations in the Americas as was the Zapotec. We will discuss concepts of scale, monumentality, city and elite tombs and their paraphanelia, as well as, the diverse discoveries of the formal composition of residences, such as the principal indicators of social differences among the inhabitants of the capital city of the Zapotec. These tangible materials have allowed us to advance our archaeological understanding of Monte Albán and established fixed elements for indicating the markers of elite life in the social pyramid and profuse rituality that was practiced in the city.*

*On the basis of carefully excavated contexts at Atzompa recently, we are able to reconstruct ritual life, and we propose elements for differentiating public ceremonies done in the center of the city and its plazas, from those done in private, at the family level, which took place in the family temples. These are formal architectural elements that indicate different social levels. In addition, we propose that the gods Cocijo (rain), Bat, and Jaguar were the most important deities in Zapotec cosmogeny.*

*The recent archaeological discoveries in an elite barrio at Atzompa allows us present new elements and arguements to contrast to what we currently know of Monte Albán, in such a manner that we present an extention of the elite areas of the same city. While simiar, offer also important differences for determing the level of dependence that Atzompa showed towards the capital, or if possible, we can discuss some autonomy of the barrios implicit in the urban proposition.*

*En este trabajo se presentan los elementos que nos permiten interpretar la diferenciación social en Monte Albán, como reflejo de una sociedad avanzada y una de las civilizaciones más sofisticadas de América, como lo fue la Zapoteca. Se discuten conceptos de Escala, Monumentalidad, Ciudad y Tumbas de élite y su parafernalia, así como los diversos hallazgos de la composición formal de las residencias, como los principales indicadores de las diferencias sociales entre los habitantes de la ciudad-capital Zapoteca. Estos rasgos tangibles han permitido avanzar en el conocimiento arqueológico de Monte Albán y establecer elementos fijos para identificar marcadores de la vida de las élites en la pirámide social y profusa ritualidad que mantuvo a la ciudad.*

*En base a los contextos cuidadosamente excavados en Atzompa recientemente, se llega a escudriñar la vida ritual y se proponen elementos para diferenciar los ceremoniales públicos realizados en el centro de la ciudad y las plazas, de aquellos privados, de nivel familiar, que se llevaron a cabo en los Templos Familiares, componentes*

*formales de la arquitectura de las residencias de los diferentes niveles sociales. Aún más, se propone que los dioses Cocijo (lluvia), Murciélagos y Jaguar hayan sido los más importantes dentro de la cosmogonía zapoteca.*

*Los recientes descubrimientos arqueológicos en el Barrio de élite de Atzompa nos permiten presentar nuevos elementos y argumentos para contrastar lo que hasta ahora se conocía de Monte Albán, de tal manera que, se presenta una imagen extendida de dos áreas de élite en la misma ciudad, mismas que, aunque similares, no dejan de ofrecer diferencias importantes para determinar el grado de dependencia que Atzompa tuvo de la capital, o si es posible hablar de cierta autonomía de los barrios implícita en la propuesta urbana.*

The image of Monte Albán, a city on the top of a hill, constitutes perhaps the best example of the Sacred Place, or the materialization of the Mesoamerican cosmogony cult related to the mountain landscape (López & López, 2001; Broda et. al., 2007). Through a long-lasting urban and ritual construction project that took at least thirteen centuries (500 B.C. to 850 A.D.), the Zapotecs consolidated Monte Albán, their capital, as the axis mundi, the navel of an entire civilization. In order to do so, they not only chose a landscape constituted by a series of hills located at the center of the flat Valleys of Oaxaca, but modified them to perfect the shape of those hills in order to create their impressive sanctuary, which at the same time, was the political capital and economic center of the Zapotec world.

In Monte Albán there was no room for simplistic architecture; every single construction built across the centuries was monumental, as monumentality was the normal expression for a ritual world that consolidated religion, power, knowledge, and control over the entire territory of what is today the state of Oaxaca and beyond. Monumentality is reflected in scale, construction and social organization. Every building in the Principal Plaza was devoted to certain public or private rituals so they had to be massive and tall, maintaining harmony with the entire built and natural landscape. At the same time, builders had to respond to the architectural and technical requirements presented by the effects of a seismically active region.

As we learn more about the construction systems, the more we realize enormous investment in human energy, planning, knowledge, social stratification, and leadership that was needed to achieve the goal of creating this monumental world. Recent excavations shed light on the extended construction processes required in order to organize the city as an urban center, sanctuary, market, and above all as the political capital of a true state. So important was the value of this place, that about 500 B.C. the modification of the hill's shape was initiated, representing one of the most ambitious long-term urban projects ever carried out in the Americas. This Mesoamerican ceremonial center constituted a heart, the place of power and religion; at least 1300 years of constant construction is reflected in Monte Albán, fueled by the unquestionable duality of life-death, dark-light, pyramid-plaza, or construction-void.

### **The city**

According to human ecologists (Blanton, 1978, 2004; Marcus & Flannery, 1996; Marcus, 2008), the formation of the city of Monte Albán is the result of the evolution of a complex society. However, it was not unilinear development but reflected a process of adaptation and creativity drawn from the built environment (Blanton, et.al., 1993, pp. 14). This city was created through the unification of the several villages in the Valley of Oaxaca (Marcus & Flannery, 1996) to fulfill the need of a settled leadership,

or ruling class that based its power on religion. Overall, the most important goal was the consolidation of a ruling class or the physical expression of social stratification.

The location and shape of the city was at the confluence of the three valleys of Oaxaca (Etla, Tlacolula and Valle Grande), centered on three hills (Monte Albán, Atzompa and Monte Albán Chico) rising at least 500 meters up from the valley floor. (Figure 17.1) At Monte Albán, by 500 B.C. the Zapotecs started modifying the hilltop, accomplishing the perfect leveling of an enormous central plaza of 60,000 square meters (300 meters N-S by 200 meters E-W) by 200 B.C., to create the ceremonial, sacred place, a common destination for all Zapotec. (Figure 17.2)

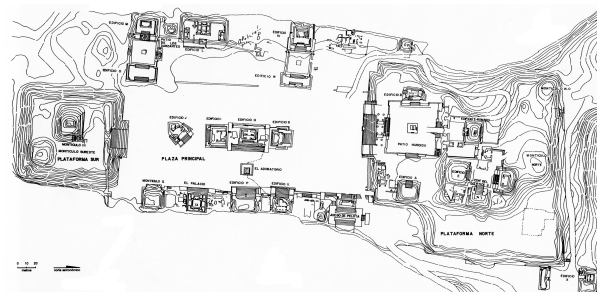
Based on the lifespan, size, and geographic influence of the site, it is not unreasonable to think of Monte Albán as the religious center for the Zapotec, similar to what we think on the Vatican for Roman-Christian Catholics, or Mecca for Muslims. The remainder of the city emerged through periods on different hills surrounding the Plaza. Each of them was a monumental compound considered the center of “barrios,” the principal locations for these barrios were identified by Blanton (1978) at Cerro del Gallo, Atzompa, El Plumaje, El Mogollito, Monte Albán Chico, and El Paragüito. Surrounding each center (Figure 17.3), along the slopes were more than two thousand agricultural and residential terraces, built as productive areas that assured the city’s survival. Production from these terraces was supplemented by tribute paid by the conquered communities from the regions around Oaxaca, subjugated by the incipient state. As we can still see at Building J (dated 200 BC to 200 AD), traces of sculpted stelae depict the many territories conquered by Monte Albán (Caso, 1928; Whittaker, 1981; García Moll et al., 1986). Other urban features, e.g. roads, irrigation canals, dams, defensive walls, and sanctuary caves were distributed around the city center, enabling it to function as a whole.

**Figure 17.1.** *Map of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, Mexico. Location of Atzompa in relation to Monte Albán. (Atzompa Archaeological Project Archive. INAH).*

ZONA ARQUEOLÓGICA DE MONTE ALBÁN EN LOS VALLES CENTRALES

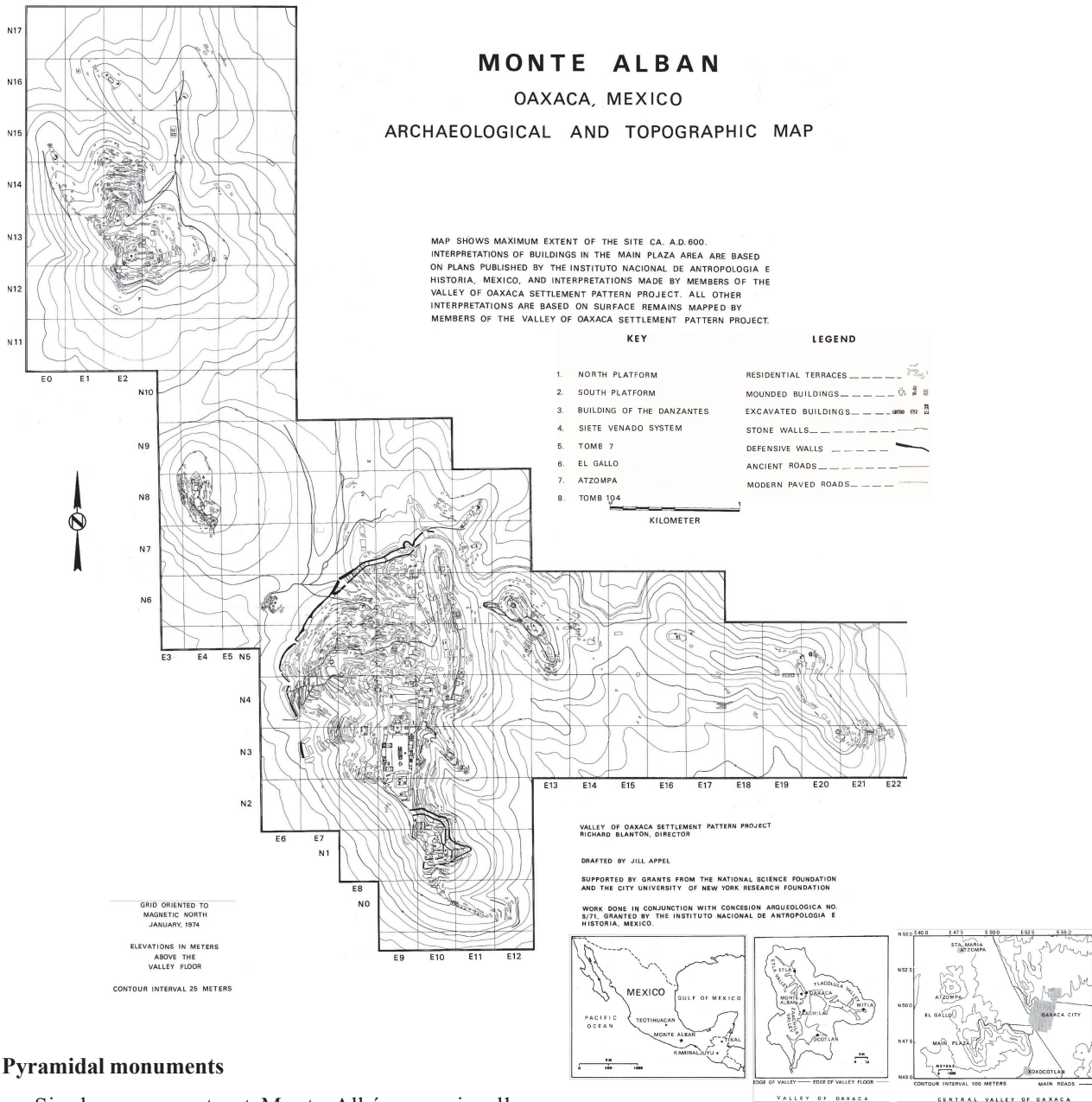


**Figure 17.2.** *Topographic map of the Great Plaza at Monte Albán, Oaxaca, Mexico. (Atzompa Archaeological Project Archive).*



**Figure 17.3.**

*Monte Albán archaeological map. (Blanton, Richard E. 2004).*



### Pyramidal monuments

Single monuments at Monte Albán are visually recognized by their typical pyramid-shape profile platforms, representing the sacred mountains carrying the temples on top. However, those buildings do not mean to be understood or read separately but as a group or groups of “mountains” perfectly aligned, combining “mountains” and empty areas as they understood their cosmos. Zapotec builders drew on their extensive knowledge of Mesoamerican construction

systems, and particularly on their exceptional expertise in stone masonry using local materials, assuring that when the construction of a new temple was decided, the construction teams already knew about the plan, shapes, function, and many other details on how a proper temple should look and be built.

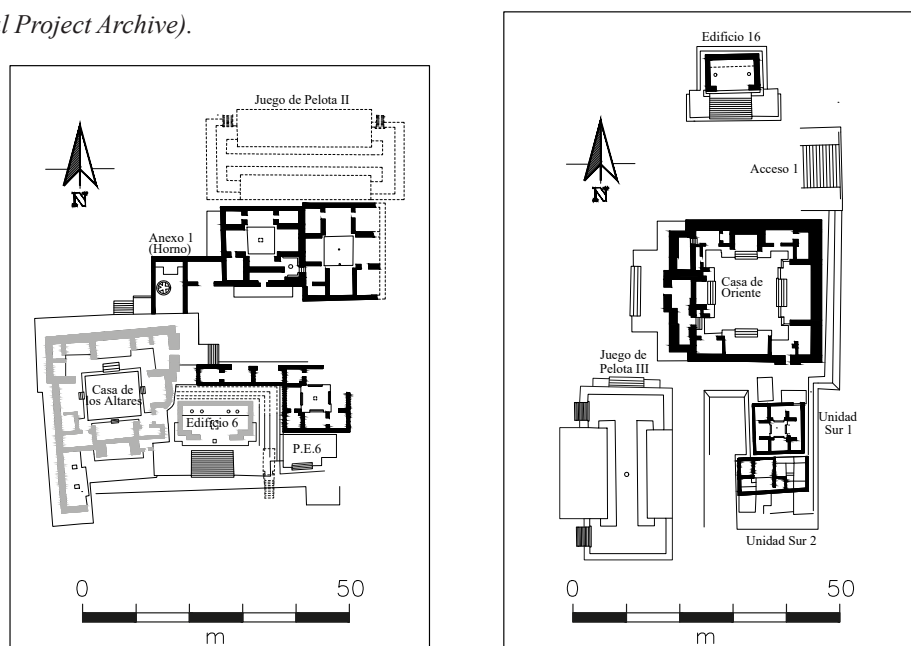
## Scale

Consistent with their dedication to the worship of supra-human deities each monument at Monte Albán honored a basic principle of scale (not human) but in monumentality appropriate to gods such as Cocijó, the Rain God, the Jaguar God, the Bat God, and many other deities devoted to life and death, war, agriculture, storms, earthquakes, among others in their ritual life. Attention to cosmogony, not humans, defined monumentality. However, the height of the built environment never broke the landscape mountain lines, keeping a respectful relationship between construction and natural sky limits. Human construction, even of temples, could not intrude on natural boundaries. A different treatment was reserved for the palaces, or the places where top-level dignitaries lived. Those were human-scale constructions, with rather small rooms and inner open patios. A general square plant was the basic form. However, each palace or high-status residence was designed to meet its inhabitants needs in terms of number of rooms, and maybe the nature of the family, or single

basic family, extended family, or multi-familiar (Robles & Mendoza, 2016). The recently-excavated residences in Atzompa shed light on the understanding of the actual configuration, distribution, sizes and scales of palaces, in contrast with what was interpreted years ago by Caso, 2003, Marcus, 2008, pp.110; Winter,1986, pp. 353-370 and others. Casa de Oriente, Casa de los Altares, re-excavated by the current Atzompa Project, and Casa del Sur are among the newly investigated high-status houses. (Figure 17.4) Partially excavated by Jorge R. Acosta, Casa de Oriente and Altares have been found to be more complex and complete than originally interpreted. The basic components of a palace were defined through excavations by the Atzompa Project; features such as patios, rooms, specialized activity areas (pottery making), service structures, temazcal (sweat bath), small ball court, and the family temple (Robles and Mendoza, 2016, pp. 156), the latter defined the existence of permanent constructions for the performance of a private ritual life.

**Figure 17.4.**

*Architectural plans of Residences Casa de Oriente and Casa de los Altares at Atzompa, Oaxaca, Mexico. (Atzompa Archaeological Project Archive).*



### Public/Private rituals

It had been understood that pyramid-shaped buildings were dedicated to several cults in Monte Albán and Mesoamerica. Pyramids then were interpreted as temples; however, in the city centers there was a mix of both pyramids and low one-story buildings, a fact that gives us the idea of domestic architecture mixed with that devoted to the gods, their proper paraphernalia for collective worship and public ceremonies. At the Central Plaza of Monte Albán and up to the North and South Platforms we find more than twenty different temples, grouped in three main sacred spaces: the Main Plaza, the North Platform and the South Platform. There is no question that the Main Plaza was the center of Zapotec ritual life. This huge plaza is the most sacred space, surrounded by geometrically defined lines of buildings at the East-West limits, with three central pyramids. (Figure 17.5) The open space is of approximately 60 000 square meters, a very generous area that easily could hold about twenty thousand people in occasional massive ceremonies for local and visiting participants. However, each ceremonial building includes a defined space that could serve for a public but, very select attendance. Each of them could hold a gathering of at least one thousand people for their cult; good examples of those are the Complex IV and Complex M, with their own confined yards and stairs that could receive a significant number of people.

**Figure 17.5.**

*The Great Plaza at Monte Albán, Oaxaca, Mexico. View from South to North. (Atzompa Archaeological Project Archive).*



Other important ceremonial spaces include the two main constructions delimiting the Plaza and the two most important pyramid-shape platforms (North and South), constructions that represent an extraordinary commitment of human energy. These gave access to an upper level of temples. At 12 and 15 meters high respectively, these boundary platforms supported a number of temples that were built above the Plaza, where their height gave the desired effect of a dramatic change of scale. Although we still do not know much about the actual ceremonies, archaeology has provided a number of effigies found over several years of research. Cocijo has the strongest presence among the effigies. He represents the Rain God, water, and lighting. His importance and constant presence along the life of Monte Albán goes accordingly with Tlaloc, the Rain God for Teotihuacan and later sites in the central Basin of Mexico; and Chaac, same god among the Maya. (Figure 17.6)

**Figure 17.6.**

*Effigy vessel of Cocijo, the Monte Albán's Rain God, excavated at Atzompa, Oaxaca, Mexico. (Atzompa Archaeological Project Archive).*



Also the Jaguar and the Bat were protective deities that permeate both ritual and daily Zapotec life. It has been suggested that, the city was originally named the Jaguar's Hill, that however, has not been proven. The importance of the Jaguar among the Zapotecs is reflected in the many feline traits that appear in the original art, as early as Monte Albán I or 500 BC in ceramics and carved stones. Its image was linked to the power of earth and its fertility, and its roar was considered the voice of the mountain. A famous Jaguar figure was found just outside the Plaza, as it was likely discarded after its useful life, during the end of the Preclassic period (around 100 B.C.-200 A.D.). (Figure 17.7)

**Figure 17.7.**  
*Monumental Jaguar effigy. A ceramic masterpiece from Monte Albán, Oaxaca, Mexico. (National Museum of Anthropology, INAH).*



The Bat is an early god linked to darkness and knowledge. The most famous of its representations, a green jade mosaic of 25 articulated pieces representing the Bat was found in the Central Plaza, just outside the central adulatory, near Mound II (Acosta, 1949). (Figure 17.8) The three deities, Cocijo, Jaguar, and Bat were permanent images throughout the life of the great city. Recent excavations in Atzompa had shown the recurrence of the Jaguar during the late Classic, associated to the most prominent temple (Robles, et.al. 2016). This means that all around Monte Albán, a shared iconography, or the sharing of values and sacred deities is evident.

**Figure 17.8.**  
*The Bat God, a jade and sea-shell assembled piece from Monte Albán, Oaxaca, México. (National Museum of Anthropology, INAH).*



## Elite Tombs

The archaeological contexts where rituals are clearly associated to religion without doubt are the tombs. Funerary chambers at Monte Albán are for archaeology extraordinary sources for understanding social stratification, as they carry distinguishing social markers. They allow us see social classes, mortuary rituals, gendered treatments, associated technologies and paraphernalia, besides many other aspects of ritual life as well as data on sex, diet, health/diseases, deposition patterns and associated architecture.

The close to 250 tombs excavated throughout Monte Albán over its period of archaeological investigations of more than ninety years -taking into account that Dr. Alfonso Caso started excavating tombs since 1928, had given archaeologists and bio-archaeologists the extraordinary opportunity of ordering data in different kinds of categories such as shape, architecture, decoration, period, funerary offerings, diseases, to name some possibilities (Rubín de la Borbolla, 1969; Bernal, 1979; Márquez y González, 2018; Robles & Mendoza *ibid*; Higelin et.al. 2017).

Tombs undoubtedly direct us to evidence of a stratified society, accordingly from the funerary treatment we can discern a cosmogony, social classes, and roles played in society. Monte Albán tombs were located under houses, preferably under the central patios, showing a clear representation of the life-death cycle, with the living caring for their dead. Every chronological period in the city had its own features, according with Paddock (1966), tombs from early period I were “little more than stone or adobe boxes.” Tombs from period II had, for the first time, peaked or vaulted roofs and side niches, features that remained for subsequent periods. Period III tombs were the most advanced in architectural terms, not only larger in size, but some with sculpted decoration on the façades and mural paintings in the interiors (Paddock, 1966:140). The Classic (100-500 AD) is the best-known period for burials

and tombs at the city; earlier funerary contexts are usually covered by subsequent buildings, or even removed in later times.

Tombs 104 and 105 in Monte Albán, as well as tomb 242 in Atzompa give the best examples of elite tombs. All three of them were built and used during the late Classic or Monte Albán IIIb-IV (500-850 AD), providing unique opportunities to examine the visible pattern of elite treatments of the latest period.

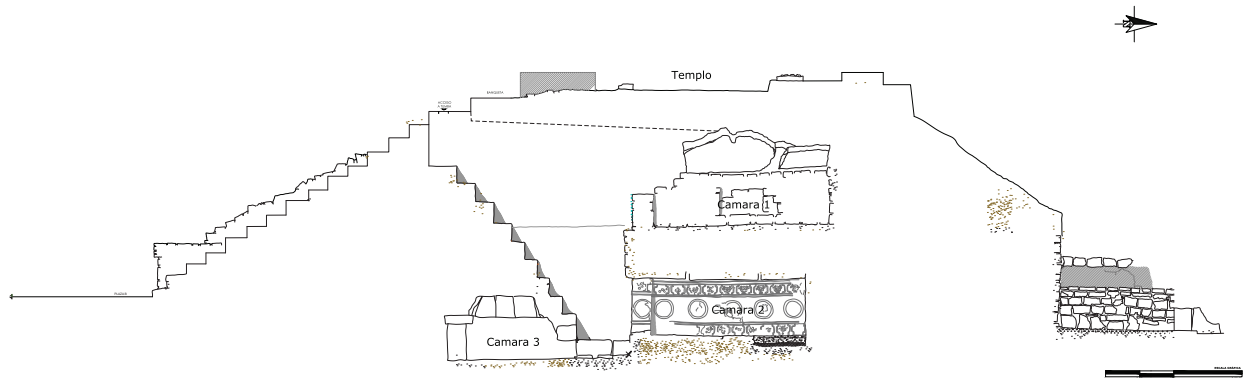
Tombs 104 and 105 have been widely known in the literature; each of them representing the most exquisite murals that accompany the dead, and were devoted to high-ranking persons, perhaps rulers of the city (De la Fuente, 2008; Caso, 1942; Paddock, 1966). The mural's motives relate to worshiping, processions, priests, or performing ritual activities in a realistic style. However, Tomb 242, located in Atzompa, in several ways broke with the pattern evidenced at Monte Albán, not only in the formal architecture, but artistically as well. This funerary chamber was built under a pyramid-shape basement constructed as a part of the mortuary context attached to the main residence or Casa de los Altares. Inside, it held three funerary chambers whose entrances were distributed along a stair cube, although each was built and used in different times. Chamber 1 contained an intact burial of two individuals (male and female) in primary context, and one of the best sets of accompanying urns or effigy vessels composed of the 8 Earthquake (Ocho Temblor) and Lady Water (Señora Agua) effigies, and two exquisite polychrome figures (Robles, Pacheco and Olvera, 2015). (Figure 17.9A, 9B)

Chamber 2 was a simple box-shape chamber, with flat roof and no niches. However, its jambs and internal walls are covered with murals depicting abstract art. The abstract motifs refer to the Earth Monster, and evoke the ballcourt's plan. Great moon circles are the central motifs, accompanied by what could be a jaguar's pawprints.



**Figure 17.9A.**

*Architectural profile of the Tomb 242 mound and interior chambers from Atzompa, Oaxaca, México. (Atzompa Archaeological Project Archive).*



**Figure 17.9B**

*The 242 funerary mound in relation to the residence Casa de los Altares at Atzompa, Oaxaca, México. (Atzompa Archaeological Project Archive).*



Along the walls, like in Monte Albán, there is a clear line dividing the upper and lower worlds. This chamber had depictions of calendar names on the back wall that were intentionally erased in later times. The tomb was emptied and vandalized at the end of its use. (Figure 17.10A, 10B)

Chamber 3 was built above Chamber 2. A large funerary construction with exquisite vaulted roof and large side niches; from the façade there are the two jambs, but the rest was intentionally destroyed. If the chamber was ever used is unknown, as in the archaeological context there were only minor vestiges. However, in terms of the funerary traditions, Chamber 3 was built above Chamber 2. A large funerary construction with exquisite vaulted roof and large

**Figure 17.10A.**

*Interior of the Tomb 242. Chamber 1 stone-constructed walls and vaulted roof. Atzompa, Oaxaca, Mexico. (Atzompa Archaeological Project Archive).*



**Figure 17.10B.**

*Interior of the Tomb 242. Chamber 2 mural paintings on ballgame motifs. Atzompa, Oaxaca, Mexico. (Atzompa Archaeological Project Archive).*



side niches; from the façade there are the two jambs, but the rest was intentionally destroyed. If the chamber was ever used is unknown, as in the archaeological context there were only minor vestiges. However, in terms of the funerary traditions, the 242 Tomb in Atzompa represents a new concept both in architecture and mortuary systems for the city. It is the first example of a formal pyramid-shape basement and temple devoted to the funerary aspect of a family, or lineage, that was still occupying the proper house of the Casa de los Altares residence.

#### **Funerary Urns.**

Also known as effigy-vessels or accompanying urns, these are unique pieces of art characterize the mortuary system in Monte Albán. The concept of the dead needing to be accompanied by their tangible goods, such as carrying food and liquids for their passing to the underworld, is clearly shown in the funerary urns and their contexts. A chronological sequence of these objects was offered by Alfonso Caso and Bernal as early as 1952, from his

works both in ceramics and specifically in urns we know about the most important ornamental characteristics. Urns were basically containers for liquids or sometimes food or burned offerings, as they meant to accompany the deceased. They were heavily ornamented with effigies and gods' traits. Sometimes they represent persons with ornaments, clothing, and, above all, identifying iconographic traits. Perhaps during the period IIIb-IV, Atzompa was a site of the production of these exquisite objects, as we found, besides 8 Earthquake, a great variety of finely made urns at this urban center, a town that still today is dedicated to the production of large amounts of pottery vessels and fine clay jewelry. A rare urn, beautiful and illustrative of the combination of iconographic traits, is a jaguar-serpent-eagle, and possibly pheasant (faisán) effigy vessel found in a domestic context at Atzompa (Figure 17.11, 17.12). The challenging iconography of the object shows the implicit need of mixing deities in protecting supernatural beings in order to get the most security in the afterworld. In this sense, Atzompa is still a tremendous source of iconographic knowledge and a living center of ancient pottery techniques.

### Residences.

A recent publication (Robles & Mendoza, 2016) reported an updated version of elements of urban residences. Contrary to the earlier interpretations already cited (Marcus, 2008; Winter, 1986) on the sizes and formal architecture of upper class houses, we argue that those had greater complexity in architecture, shape and functions than previously believed. Two main residences at Atzompa (Casa de Oriente and Casa de los Altares) showed novel patterns and elements that had not been documented before, such as the coexistence of two or more houses in the same compound (service houses); the clear attachment of small ball courts (family size), and the family temple, characteristics that show us the need they had for the

**Figure 17.11.**

*Jaguar-Serpent-Eagle effigy vessel from Atzompa, Oaxaca, Mexico. (Atzompa Archaeological Project Archive).*



**Figure 17.12.**

*The funerary Eight-Earthquake effigy vessel, excavated at Chamber 3, Tomb 242, from Atzompa, Oaxaca, Mexico. (Atzompa Archaeological Project Archive).*



performance of private (family) rituals and worshipping, as opposed to the public ceremonies performed in the open areas temples.

These two main residences, and Casa del Sur, currently under excavation, have shown their undeniable relationship with ballcourts, perhaps for private rituals and/or training. Let us remember that the residence of Tomb 105 at Monte Albán is also spatially related to what had been called “small juego de pelota”, a family temple inside the main house, and houses around, similarly to those excavated in Atzompa. This exposes an architectural and distributive pattern inside the residences as well as outside areas and facilities that had not been recognized before. Thus, elite houses at Monte Albán reveal being significantly more complex than imagined in previous research.

### **Preliminary conclusions**

As a final thought, the relationship between monumentality in constructions and settings are clearly tied to public ritual life in Monte Albán. There are, however, at the level of elite residences, clear signs of a private counterpart, a very active and permanent family-level or private ritual life performed at the family temples. Rituality for the dead implied the modification of the house’s distribution and temporarily function, due to the funerary rituals that were performed inside the house, at the tombs’ patios and chambers in Monte Albán. Tomb 242 at Atzompa broke that pattern and for the first time an entire pyramid-shape basement was built on top of the funerary chambers, separate from the proper house.

The recent discoveries at Atzompa will tell us a lot more on elite privileges at Monte Albán than we ever knew before.

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