

## Cerro Bernal, Chiapas as an Embodiment of a Mesoamerican Sacred Mountain

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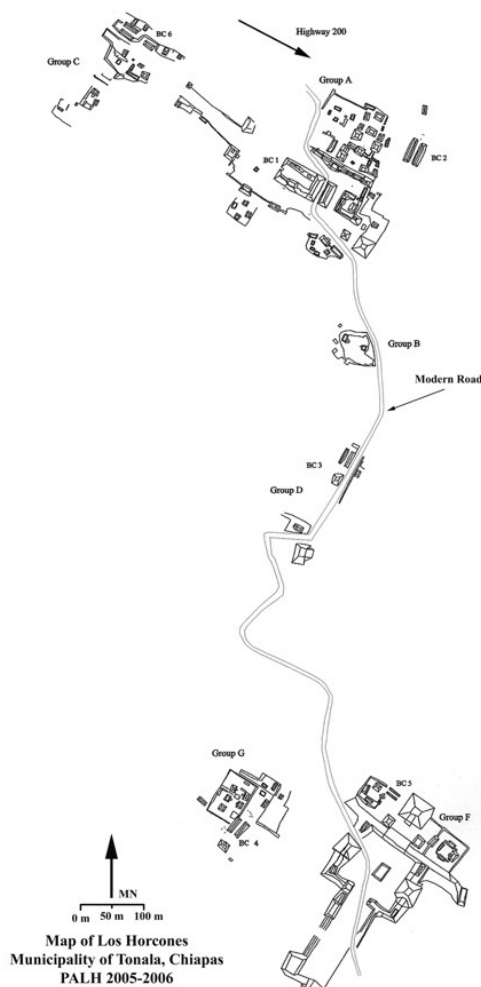
*Cerro Bernal, located on the southern Pacific coastal plain is a striking feature on the landscape. Archaeological sites such as Los Horcones, an Early Classic center with strong ties to Teotihuacan, the great Central Mexican metropolis, point to the strategic location of the mountain from which the estuaries and the overland trade route could be controlled. Beyond its strategic functions, Cerro Bernal contains important features that allowed it to fit well within the known archetypes of sacred landscapes well known throughout Mesoamerica. Archaeological, iconographic, ethnohistoric, and ethnographic evidence reveal that Cerro Bernal was more than a strategic landscape. It was a sacred mountain, a place of abundance, and terrestrial paradise, not unlike the mythical Tlalocan. Its dramatic peak that drew the rain clouds whose moisture fed the Río Horcones and the estuaries at its foothills made it an ideal altepetl—water mountain. In this chapter, I explore the religious significance of this sacred mountain.*

*El Cerro Bernal, ubicado en la planicie costera sur del Pacífico es un monumento llamativo en este paisaje. Sitios arqueológicos como Los Horcones, un centro del Clásico Temprano con fuertes vínculos a Teotihuacán la gran metrópoli de México central, señala la localidad estratégica de esta montaña de donde las rutas de comercio terrestre y de los estuarios fueron controladas. Mas allá de estas funciones estratégicas, el Cerro Bernal tiene importantes características que le permiten encajar bien con los arquetipos del paisaje sagrado bien conocidos por todo Mesoamérica. Evidencias arqueológica, iconográfica, etnohistórica y etnográfica revelan que el Cerro Bernal fue mas que un paisaje estratégico. Fue un monte sagrado, un lugar de abundancia, y paraíso terrenal parecido al mítico Tlalocan. Su pico dramático atrae a las nubes cuya humedad y lluvia alimentan el Río Horcones y los estuarios y sus estribaciones lo conforman como in altepetl ideal—una montaña de agua. En este ensayo, exploro el significado religioso de este monte sagrado.*

Since 2005, the Proyecto Arqueológico Los Horcones (PALH) has been investigating this important center located in the municipality of Tonalá, Chiapas largely looking at its role as an important interaction node in the region during the Early Classic (AD 250-650). Archaeological research conducted by earlier scholars and more recently by the author has focused on the strategic location of Los Horcones (Figure 24.1) as an important factor for understanding its relations with Teotihuacan, the Maya region, and the Gulf Coast (García-Des Lauriers, 2005, 2007, 2012a, 2012b, 2016, 2020; Navarrete, 1976, 1986; Taube, 2000).

**Figure 24.1.**

*Map of Los Horcones, Chiapas (Drawn by H. Fukuhara & C. García-Des Lauriers).*



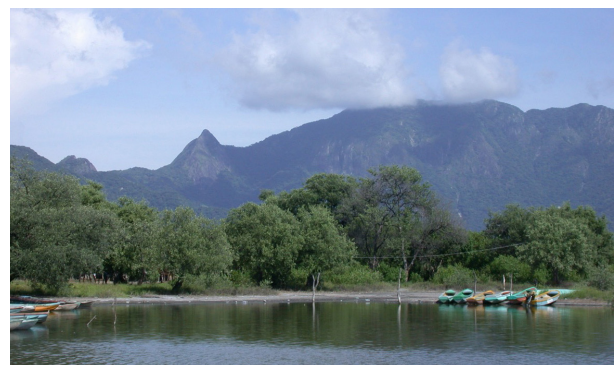
While conducting research there, local residents shared with me stories of the importance of Cerro Bernal and its natural features as ideologically potent elements of the landscape (Figure 24.2). In 2013, I interviewed several long-time residents of Cerro Bernal and Tonalá, and recorded some of the stories that form part of the local folklore of this mountain. The overarching consensus is that “el Cerro de Bernal esta encantado,” Cerro Bernal is enchanted. The qualities that continue to make this mountain a repository of legendary stories, were not overlooked by people in the past. In this paper, I will combine the information gathered from these ethnographic interviews, research on Mesoamerican sacred landscapes, and the archaeology of Los Horcones to make the argument that from Precolumbian to contemporary times Cerro Bernal has been more than just a strategic landscape—it was an embodiment of the Mesoamerican concept of the sacred mountain.

### “El Cerro Bernal esta Encantado”

While doing archaeological work at Los Horcones, local residents shared many stories about Cerro Bernal its natural beauty, resources, and legends. In July of 2013,

**Figure 24.2.**

*Photo of Cerro Bernal as seen from La Polka, Chiapas (Photo by C. García-Des Lauriers).*



I recorded some of these stories in an attempt to create a dialogue between the present and the past. My informants are Aucencio “Don Chencho” Zambrano Arreoloa who is the memory of Cerro Bernal and has lived there since he was an infant, over 80 years now. His wife Marta moved there in the 1970s when she married Don Chencho. Don Felix de los Santos Gonzalez is a local landowner and resident of Cerro Bernal for over 30 years and recently “entered the road” to borrow a Maya phrase, and Ricardo Lopez Vassallo, a proud resident of Tonalá, local historian, and advocate for the preservation of cultural sources. During this process, many stories emerged about happenings on Cerro Bernal—events that people say happened, that happened to them, or to relatives. One important detail that all of the informants shared is that “el Cerro de Bernal esta encantado”—Cerro Bernal is enchanted, it is a place where strange phenomena are observed, where apparitions frighten, and where people go and sometimes do not return.

In order to summarize the ethnographic information, I will organize the stories and information thematically. The stories were related via informal interviews and long chats discussing the landscape of Cerro Bernal, how that landscape changes throughout the year, people’s relationship and understanding of archaeological sites and any stories or myths that people know about the mountain.

### **Pacts with the Devil**

Stories of pacts with the devil are well known throughout contemporary Mexican folklore, and Cerro Bernal has its own stories about apparitions of a man or figure interpreted to be the devil. Don Chencho related that a man with bright shiny spurs, riding a beautiful white horse, and wearing a large imposing hat appeared to his father while he was bathing on Cerro Bernal. After this encounter, the strikingly attired man disappeared without a trace. The story related is not unlike well-known versions of

a mounted devil known as “El Sombreron” (Coutiño, 2011; Flores Estrada, 1998, pp. 39-41; Pineda del Valle 2004, pp. 73-79). In fact, Ricardo López Vasallo also mentioned the popularity of this story in the rural communities of Tonalá. In addition, Don Chencho related stories about people who had made pacts with the devil. People with money had white cattle and horses, they seemingly had lots of money, but could not enjoy it, and instead were often disheveled. This wealth is not inheritable and when the pacted person dies, their family is left with nothing. Zambrano emphasized that white was the color associated with the devil, hence the white cattle.

### **Stories of Fire**

Both Felix de los Santos and Don Chencho related to me that Cerro Bernal regularly burns, especially in the dry season the mountain is prone to fires. When I interviewed them in 2013, both mentioned that the mountain had burned recently. Along with these fires caused by electrical wires, accidents, lightening or the relentless heat of the Tonalá region, among other potential causes, are fires that burn without explanation or fire that falls out of the sky.

Perhaps one of the most common stories is of a ball of fire that appears in the sky. Felix de los Santos and Don Chencho both had witnessed the appearance of these balls of fire or related that their workers had told them about the appearance of balls of fire in the sky. Ricardo López Vasallo recounted a story about a family from San Francisco Potrerillo were sitting on their patio chatting after dinner and suddenly a ball of fire appeared. They became terribly frightened as it seemed to head right for them and then suddenly it turned and landed on Cerro Bernal.

The mountain, I am told is also a magnet for lightening. The ball of fire might be a meteorological phenomenon called ball lightning (Singer, 1971). Ball lightning can vary in color from red, yellow, white, blue or green and unlike

other forms of lightning can stay stationary and exist for seconds even minutes (Springer, 1971). This phenomenon, would make quite an impression on the local community trying to make sense of it. The movement described by my informants for this ball of fire certainly describes this meteorological phenomenon, and ancient and modern minds would have been awestruck in its presence.

### **Tricksters and Transformations.**

Another group of stories record instances of transformations and trickster figures that appear out of nowhere on Cerro Bernal. Don Chenchó related a story about his son, the one that likes to hunt and an indigenous man who worked for them at the time. They had gone hunting at night and they found an armadillo. One of them shot at the armadillo and it fell, but then it started to move around and his son tells the helper to go and grab it before it gets away. As his helper got closer the armadillo thrashed more and more and finally, when he arrived to fetch it, it was gone. In its place was a little blond boy.

Marta Zambrano told me of another story involving her eldest son, when he was a young boy. He was sent to fetch the horse and when he approached the mountain he saw some fruit. While he tried to get the fruit, a little boy that appeared dancing on the rock. He arrived home, scared and related the happening to his mother and grandmother, about the dancing boys that called to him.

The sudden appearance of children or the transformation of animals into people or vice versa are also common themes in Mexican folklore. These are related to much deeper notions of animal co-essences known as way for the Maya region and *nahual* to the Aztec (Grube & Nahm, 1994; Martínez, 2006). The deep connections between people and animal spirits can be both positive and negative and these tricksters are often found in the forest or just beyond the limits of a town or settlement (Taube, 2003).

The forest or *monte* can be the place of spooks as can mountains and caves (Taube, 2003). It is thus not entirely surprising that when in the forest or near Cerro Bernal at the edges of ranches in rural areas, people tend to encounter these unexplained phenomena.

### **Caves and Fruits**

One of the most popular stories about Cerro Bernal is about the presence of a cave full of fruits. All of my informants related this story. The version that they recount is one where upon entering, one sees beautiful things. Fruits of all kinds that one can consume while there, eating to one's fulfillment, but if you try to take them out of the cave you will get lost or simply will not be able to take them out of the cave. Don Chenchó related that his father told him this story, and that one night while out he entered the cave and saw beautiful things, and took him to see this cave. They went and saw it, but it did not open up like his father claimed to have seen.

Antonio Cruz Coutiño (2011, pp. 181-82), Cesar Pineda del Valle and Ana Maria Rincon (2002) recorded a version of this story. The story is of a family that decided to move to a finca near Cerro Bernal. They were advised to keep watch over their children, because every family who had lived there in the past had lost their children. In this case, children were sent to collect firewood and while out, they came upon a road to the mysterious mountain. The children heard a voice that invited them to continue walking, but their father's voice called them back. However, after some days, the boy's curiosity won him over, and he went to investigate. The boy entered a cave where he could hear other children playing and screaming, and his father never heard from him again. The father asked for help, looking for this cave where his son had wondered off to, but alas no one ever found it. However, people traveling near Cerro Bernal report hearing children's voices as they pass,

and because of these mysterious happenings describe this mountain as being occupied by the devil.

### **Taking of Souls**

One last group of stories or really more like sayings is that Cerro Bernal takes people--their souls. Marta Zambrano reported to me that while riding home in a *combi*, a popular form of collective transportation, one day a lady overheard that she was going to Cerro Bernal. The woman was surprised and then mentioned that her son-in-law lived on Bernal. Marta asked who her son-in-law was because she did not know her, and the lady replied that he had died by strangulation, and that the devil had taken him to Bernal. Don Chencho reported that his grandfather related to him that in times past you might run into people working, herding goats. He described the herders,

They were dead already those that were around there, that's why people say, when others die, and they were on wrong paths, they say "Bernal has them, the devil already has them."

The mountain as a repository of souls, either those who made pacts with the devil, children whose souls were taken by the mountain, or others whose wrongful deaths left them to live on Cerro Bernal for eternity.

### **From the Present to the Past: Cerro Bernal as a Sacred Mountain**

Dolores Aramoni's book, *Los Refugios de lo Sagrado: Religiosidad, conflicto y resistencia entre los zoques de Chiapas* is put together from her own ethnographic work and intensive archival research of documents dating from the 15th to 18th centuries (Aramoni, 1992). In 17th century documents a man named Nicolas de Santiago is being investigated for being a witch, and in it he confesses

knowledge of several locations where "superstitions were practiced, among those mentioned ... Cerro Bernal on the coast... among others" (Aramoni, 1992, pp. 199). Cerro Bernal and others mentioned in the document, including Tres Picos, also on the coast and near Tonalá, are sites where indigenous people went to conduct rituals and where strange phenomena were recorded (Aramoni, 1992, pp. 199).

Recent archaeological research takes us further back in time and suggests that the enchanted mountain idea has very deep Precolumbian roots. Barbara Voorhies, Douglass Kennet, and Holly Moyes, published results of work conducted at Cerro Bernal in a series of cave sites on the southern side of mountain (Voorhies et al., 2012). Many of these so called "caves" as my informants and Voorhies and colleagues mention are more like rock shelters. Voorhies et al. (2012) note that the geology of the region is not conducive to the formation of large caves systems like those you get in the Maya region for example. While the goal of finding Archaic vestiges of early habitation and use did not bear fruit so to speak, they did find evidence of rituals in the caves and rock shelters. Much of the material culture found in the cave sites dates to the Late Formative to Early Classic and among these one stood out in part because of its location, near a spring. Inside this cave known as Casa de Piedra (TON-8) they also discovered a feature interpreted as a *haltun* or water collecting receptacle and faded paintings on the wall suggesting that, along with its proximity to a spring, this cave had ritual functions. The clear link between caves as sources of water and wind and as sites of ritual seems to be borne out here in this archaeological example.

My work at Los Horcones also provides some tantalizing clues as to a Precolumbian origins for the understanding of Cerro Bernal as a sacred mountain. Stele 3 from Los Horcones, currently located in the main plaza

of the municipal head Tonalá, has become an important symbol of local identity (Figures 24.1 & 24.3). The stele was first discovered by Carlos Navarrete in the 1970s and more recently has been analyzed by Taube as an example of Teotihuacan writing outside of the city, and by the author as an index of Teotihuacan identity at this Pacific Coast of Chiapas site (García-Des Lauriers, 2005, 2007, 2012a; Navarrete, 1976, 1986; Taube, 2000). Moreover, its original location reported on by Navarrete and further verified by Don Chenchó, suggested the evocation of a Teotihuacan identity at the central ceremonial core of Los Horcones. One important question posed by this stele is what was Tlaloc doing here, on this mountain? Why does his presence seem so fitting in this verdant landscape?

My contention, following the work of the eminent scholar, Alfredo López Austin, is that the characteristics of Cerro Bernal allowed local residents in his words to replicate Tlalocan as a projection onto this sacred mountain. Ethnohistoric sources describe Tlaloc as the heart of the mountain and Tlalocan as a deified hill (López Austin, 1997, pp. 202). Tlaloc himself is both a god of waters, storms and fertility, but also is a terrestrial deity associated with the underworld and war (López Austin, 1997, pp. 214; Pastory, 1974). Tlaloc's name itself suggests these connections to the earth, being translated as "Path Beneath the Earth," effectively a cave by Duran (1984, pp. 1, 81), with other scholars also noting connections to earth in the root of his name (López Austin, 1997; Sullivan, 1994). In the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* (1965: 30-31), Tlaloc is described as the lord of "hell" more a reference to the Precolumbian underworld than to the Christian one. He is a provider, a god of fertility, but also one that wields the destructive forces of lightning and thunder. Tlaloc embodies the Mesoamerican duality of life and death, and the idea that one cannot exist without the other—that from life comes death comes life in a perpetual

cycle.

Tlalocan, his domain, is a mythical place, but also one that can be found or recreated on earth. The mythical Tlalocan is an underground place, according to some sources (Broda, 1982; López Austin, 1997, pp. 215), while the *Florentine Codex* describes this place as a location where one can find much wealth, agricultural fruits, flowers, and is the home of the *tlaloque* (Sahagún 2012, Bk 3, folio 27v-28r). Along with representing a verdant place, it was also a realm of the dead, especially for those that died of water related illness or those chosen by Tlaloc (López Austin, 1997, pp. 216). Tlalocan is further described as a verdant mountain and storehouse of water and rain, and "was replicated as a projection into sacred places, hills, and temples" (López Austin, 1997, pp. 226). As López Austin (1997) notes, the concept of a water mountain or *altepetl*, a well-known metaphor for settlement or town, is in part a reference to Tlalocan.

So how does Cerro Bernal embody these concepts of Tlalocan? This mountain has foothills that extend all the way to the estuaries on the south and the Río Horcones and other smaller streams run down the mountain on the north side (Figures 24.2 & 24.4). Don Chenchó reported to me the existence of mineral springs on Cerro Bernal where people picnic and delight in drinking the bubbly water. Stories of caves and known caves with archaeological evidence of water rituals have been located here. During the rainy season, the verdant landscape, with the jagged peak glistening with water evoke an image of Tlalocan. During the dry season, its verdant greenery wilts into yellows and browns evoking those endless cycles of death and rebirth. However, perhaps the most compelling evidence is that on this enchanted mountain lived Tlaloc, at least as far as we can tell, since the Early Classic when Stela 3 was erected (Figure 24.3).

### Preliminary Conclusions

Cerro Bernal is a beautiful place, a strategically located place, but most of all a sacred mountain. The notions that this mountain was ideologically potent has deep Precolumbian roots that have survived through the conquest and Christianization of the region. The stories collected among the present-day residents are part of the memory of this landscape that continues to shape how people understand the mountain and engage with it. It is still thought of as a place where strange phenomena occur, where the devil may take souls and where sounds may send a chill down your spine. These ideas are reflections of deep memories shaped by history, but ones that go back to ancient times when Los Horcones was a terrestrial Tlalocan marking this mountain as this rain deity's realm. Archaeological remains located in caves show the importance of these natural features to the ideological image of the mountain itself, and colonial documents show that this mountain remained an important site of indigenous ritual practices, especially those not condoned by the Catholic church. Perhaps the statement that summarizes best is "El Cerro Bernal esta encantado," Cerro Bernal has been and continues to be a sacred Mountain.

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**Figure 24.3.**

*Stele 3, Los Horcones (Photo by C. García-Des Lauriers).*



**Figure 24.4.**

*Photo of waterfall, Cerro Bernal, Chiapas (Photo by C. García-Des Lauriers).*



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- (All of my informants gave me written permission to use their names, share, and publish their stories with proper attribution.)