

Book Reviews

The Prehistory of Oaxaca

The Cloud People. Divergent Evolution of the Zapotec and Mixtec Civilizations. KENT V. FLANNERY and JOYCE MARCUS, Eds. Academic Press, New York, 1983. xxviii, 392 pp., illus. \$74.50. A School of American Research Book. Based on a seminar, Santa Fe, N.M., Oct. 1975.

Oaxacan archeology received international recognition in the 1930's with the excavation of the spectacular site of Monte Albán by Alfonso Caso, who demonstrated the importance of the Zapotecs and Mixtecs in Mesoamerican culture history. Caso, along with a number of other prominent Mexicanists, such as Ignacio Bernal, laid the foundation for the study of modern Oaxacan archeology. Bernal, to whom the volume under review is dedicated, not only contributed to this field through survey, extensive writing, and excavations at such important sites as Cuilapan, Yagul, and Dainzú but also encouraged John Paddock, Ronald Spores, and Kent V. Flannery, among other scholars, to devote their efforts to this area. As a result, Oaxaca is now recognized as a crucial region in the New World and one in which Prehispanic cultures developed that were equal in complexity and scope to those of Aztec, Maya, and Inca. It has also become one of the most important locales for the development and testing of models and theories in American anthropology.

The Cloud People, edited by Flannery and Joyce Marcus, illustrates the many contributions to Oaxacan archeology made by North American scholars since the 1960's. It is the result of over a decade of survey, excavation, and other original research. More specifically, it is the result of a seminar held in 1975 at which a number of scholars assessed the status of Oaxacan archeology and documented the development of the Mixtec and Zapotec cultures from earliest times until the Spanish conquest.

The book is neither a compilation of essays nor a general synthesis on Prehispanic Oaxaca but lies somewhere between these two types of work. It is divided into 10 chapters that are further

subdivided into 100 papers labeled "topics." Of these, the editors contributed 44, either singly, together, or in combination with others. There are 13 additional contributors, the bulk of the materials being by Spores, Paddock, Drennan, Kowalewski, Blanton, and Robertson, each of whom contributed to five or more topics. Topics vary in length from 16 pages to around 200 words. Some are well developed, whereas others are little more than footnotes, presumably added to provide rounded coverage.

Of the 10 chapters—which cover such subjects as "The common origin of the Mixtec and Zapotec" (chapter 2), "Monte Albán and Teotihuacán" (chapter 6), and "Mixtec and Zapotec at the time of the Spanish conquest" (chapter 9)—three constitute over 200 of the 362 pages (excluding an appendix on radiocarbon dates from Oaxacan sites added by Drennan) of text. Predictably, these longer chapters cover "The Formative village and the roots of divergence" (chapter 3) and "The origins of the state in Oaxaca" (chapter 4)—subjects to which Flannery, Marcus, Blanton, and Kowalewski have devoted the majority of their research—and "The Postclassic balkanization of Oaxaca" (chapter 8)—the specialty of Spores, Paddock, and Robertson.

Chapters 3 and 4, which comprise 29 topics, demonstrate that Oaxaca had an important pre-Monte Albán sequence, a fact that was unknown to Caso and Bernal, and provide explanations for the rise of Monte Albán as a central Oaxacan metropolis. Included in these chapters is a discussion of the development, and nature, of a Zapotec writing system in the Formative period. Marcus, who contributes four topics on this theme, shows that Oaxaca had one of the earliest writing systems in Mesoamerica, a fact that was recognized by Caso at least as early as 1928. She also argues that the writing system displayed regional variation prior to the emergence of Monte Albán around 600 B.C., when it began to undergo a standardization, a factor clearly related to the increasing domination of this city over the Oaxacan sphere. This idea is not here presented for the first time, however, as Marcus has developed it in a

number of other publications. In fact very little of the material in these two chapters is published here for the first time. Perhaps because of the long delay in publication, Flannery, Blanton, Kowalewski, Drennan, and Spencer have already discussed the data given here elsewhere and in more detail.

Chapter 8 presents topics also well known to Oaxacanists and raises a theme in the development of which Caso and Bernal played primary roles—the relative importance of the Zapotecs and Mixtecs in Postclassic Mesoamerica and the specific relationships of these two linguistic groups. And, though this long chapter (106 pages) includes some new findings—such as Mary Elizabeth Smith's identification of the provenience of the Codex Selden—much of it is a summary of previously published material. Marcus's paper on the Postclassic Zapotec rulers (topic 89), for example, is based largely on older materials such as a 1908 paper by Eduard Seler. Paddock reiterates many of his well-known views. However, his contribution was written before some of his publications that are part of a larger examination of new documentary sources, including the "discovery" of important pictorials that relate Zapotec and Mixtec sources on a more specific level than had previously been possible (see, for example, vol. 23 of the *Papers in Anthropology* published by the University of Oklahoma and his recent monograph in the *Vanderbilt University Publications in Anthropology*). In addition, much of the discussion of the archeology of "historic" sites in the Oaxacan area, which is based on new surveys by Flannery, Blanton, and Kowalewski, results in "negative" conclusions. The many allusions to Toltec, Mixtec, and Aztec "influences" on the Valley and Isthmus regions, found in such sources as Burgoa and Durán, can neither be supported nor rejected by the archeological evidence.

A related observation about chapter 8, as well as the following section on Oaxacan ethnohistory, is that there is perhaps too much dependence on well-known sources, such as Burgoa and the *Relaciones Geográficas*, as opposed to unpublished archival materials. This is less true of the topics on the Mixtec by Spores and Mary Elizabeth Smith than it is of those on the Zapotec covered by Flannery, Marcus, and Paddock. But even in the Mixtec case this volume gives less attention to the many studies of the Mixtec codices than is perhaps deserved, since great progress has been made in this field in recent years.

On the whole, however, this chapter,

like other chapters in this volume, provides an excellent overview of general problems, detailed interpretations, and data available for the study of Oaxacan archeology and Precolonial ethnohistory. And it provides a convenient assemblage of materials for the reader who has more than a casual interest in Mesoamerica. It is also a useful supplement and updating of the Oaxacan portions of the *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, including the more recent archeological supplement to that series. *The Cloud People* is well illustrated with accurate drawings of sites, monuments, and sources—there are no photographs—although it does not include a list of illustrations. The index is very general, with limited entries and no indexing of authors cited. The bibliography is extensive and up-to-date.

The whole work is organized around the concept of “divergent” evolution, which Flannery believes to be more useful than a “general” evolutionary model that emphasizes major cultural transformations from one stage to another and that has been the dominant paradigm in North American archeological circles over the past decade. Theoretical discussions at the beginning and end of the volume employ analogies taken from biological evolution and, unlike Flannery’s other works, include a minimum of satirical characterization. However, one may question his casual dismissal of much ethnological work in Oaxaca with a sweeping “snowball in Hell” metaphor, and his plea for a new self-esteem among archeologists seems unnecessary.

Further, though the divergent evolutionary model seems most useful for depicting the initial differentiation of Zapotec and Mixtec cultures from a common Formative base, it is not always appropriate for characterizing other periods of Oaxacan history. In their introduction to the chapter on Postclassic Oaxaca, Flannery and Marcus admit that “the Aztec, Mixtec, Cuicatec, and Zapotec were in continual contact and conflict, borrowing from each other at an accelerated rate” (p. 218), a process they refer to as “parallel evolution.” This latter concept also seems to have but limited applicability. In the opinion of this reviewer, what the authors describe is, rather than a parallel evolution of Mixtec and Zapotec cultures, a situation in which Postclassic Mesoamerican regional elites were but components in a single “social system” or “world,” sharing “culture” despite the fact that the elites of various regions were in conflict and competition with one another. The unit that was evolving was thus

much larger than any single regional entity or local cultural manifestation.

That alternative interpretation notwithstanding, this volume is a monumental contribution to Oaxacan archeology and ethnohistory. For scholars it will stand as the place to begin and as the standard reference work for many years to come. Further, the editors have achieved a simplicity of writing style throughout that does not obscure technical details and arguments and will make the book comprehensible to the general reader and to undergraduate students. It should be read by anyone with an interest in Mesoamerica or Oaxaca.

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Myth and Urbanism

Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire. Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition. DAVID CARRASCO. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983. xii, 234 pp., illus. \$20.

The Mesoamerican deity Quetzalcoatl has always been a source of inspiration and controversy for scholars. Although he has been the subject of a large number of studies, there is no definitive synthe-

sis. Legend, god, or man, Quetzalcoatl has proven to be an elusive target. Carrasco uses the techniques and perspectives of history of religion, anthropology, and urban geography to explore the nature and character of the complex symbolism of Quetzalcoatl particularly with respect to the development of urbanism.

Following the views of Mircea Eliade and Paul Wheatley, Carrasco regards the “traditional city” as primarily a center of rites and ceremonies in which religion mediates the interaction of priestly elites and the ecological complex in which the city is located. The worldview involved (cosmo-magical thought) presupposes an intimate connection between the orderly motion of the heavens and the rhythm of life on Earth. Cities are symbols in which the macrocosmos is mirrored by the spatial layout of the city. The ideal city would contain a quintessentially sacred center in the form of a temple or temple pyramid. This locale represents an *axis mundi*, that is, the center of the world, intersection of all the world’s paths, the meeting point of heaven, earth, and hell. This identification of the city (and of its rulers) with the order of the cosmos serves to legitimize their power and authority.

The premise of the book is that Quetzalcoatl and the symbolism associated with him have played a large role in the organization and legitimization of the



“Quetzalcoatl in his wind god aspect as depicted in the Codex Magliabecchiano. Note the conch shell buckle, wind god mask, and four-quarter design of the shield.” [From *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*]