

however, need to consider the possibility that the degrees of internalization of these religious ideas by diverse social members during the prehispanic period may have been quite different from those after the Spanish conquest, when a stark opposition to Christianity and the colonial regime forced indigenous agents to consciously commit themselves to certain versions of religious propositions. We need to consider the possibility that meanings of religious acts in prehispanic Mesoamerica may have been highly fluid, diverse, incoherent, and polysemic. I do agree that different narratives and practices in the lower Río Verde Valley and the Valley of Oaxaca that Joyce and Barber discuss are important factors affecting the divergent trajectories of these regions. But at the same time, I suspect that the degree and way of standardization and the coexisting diversity and incoherence within individual communities may be equally important aspects that conditioned courses of social change. This nature of standardization and diversity deserves further inquiry.

I would like to add that the Terminal Formative was a time of significant social change not only in Oaxaca but also in other parts of Mesoamerica. At the onset of this period, Teotihuacan became a powerful center in central Mexico, and in southern Mesoamerica, many centers, including El Mirador, Kaminaljuyu, and Takalik Abaj, accelerated the process of political centralization. The end of the Terminal Formative was marked by political disintegration, as Joyce and Barber describe for the lower Río Verde Valley. While Teotihuacan and Monte Albán continued to prosper, many centers in southern Mesoamerica, such as El Mirador and Kaminaljuyu, collapsed. We need to examine whether shared religious or other social practices affected these patterns or whether external factors, such as climate change, played a more important role.

Our understanding of Mesoamerican religions is still limited, and their diverse aspects and their relations to social processes need to be further examined. This stimulating article by Joyce and Barber represents an important step in this regard and encourages us to explore this critical issue.

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Religious Practice in the Ancient Americas and the Ontological Turn

In this article, Joyce and Barber make the argument that long-standing religious practice in ancient Oaxaca, Mexico, both constrained and entailed particular social and political transformations during key moments in the histories of

coastal Oaxaca and the Valley of Oaxaca. Both regions have been well documented by long-term archaeological research and offer ample excavated archaeological contexts to provide evidentiary depth. The theoretical basis for the argument skillfully grafts together contemporary anthropological theories on relational ontologies, inscription, materiality, and residential burial, which allows the authors to explain processes of change in varying contexts. As such, Joyce and Barber present a model that could be applied to other places and other parts of the world. Importantly, religion plays a central role in both creating opportunities for action and limiting choices.

The archaeological data detailed in this article are derived from excavations undertaken by Joyce and Barber (and others) in coastal Oaxaca during the past three decades and then paired with reinterpretations of archaeological data from Valley of Oaxaca sites excavated by various archaeologists since the 1930s. The Valley of Oaxaca case study is an outgrowth of arguments that were first published in this journal by Joyce and Winter (1996), which Joyce has since elaborated (Joyce 2000, 2004; Urcid and Joyce 2014). In this argument, following a “crisis” and power vacuum at San José Mogote, Monte Albán elites established a new political capital at Monte Albán, which took advantage of Monte Albán’s importance as a sacred place. They erected sculptural programs along an open plaza that emphasized communal religious practices, feasting, warfare, and sacrifice. Through time, communal participation eroded as Monte Albán nobles gained power within and beyond the valley.

In the current article, the Valley of Oaxaca phenomena are compared to those of the lower Río Verde to show how the religious institutions and sudden events in the Late Formative Valley of Oaxaca (and, specifically, at San José Mogoté) left room for a successful (elite) reinterpretation of religious practice with the settlement of Monte Albán. In the lower Río Verde, by contrast, religious rituals that had taken place in regional centers during the Late Formative (both feasts and mortuary rites) involved physical emplacement of things (bodies and offerings) in public spaces that made those places meaningful and powerful. Local nobles appear to have drawn their power from connections to these ritual spaces and the activities that produced them. Thus, when some nobles tried to shift focus to Río Viejo and build a cohesive polity with that site as its regional capital, the enterprise was unsuccessful. Ultimately, elites at Río Viejo were unable to overcome peoples’ connections to ancestors whose worship and devotion was physically bound (“entrapped”) to particular spatial contexts. According to Joyce and Barber, the inability of the new leaders to subvert divisive practices and bring people together at Río Viejo explains why the Río Viejo polity quickly collapsed. By comparison, the Monte Albán polity had greater longevity and success.

The comparison between the two regions is compelling. Nonetheless, I find it curious, and somewhat disconcerting, the degree to which the ultimate fate of these experiments in

early complexity—one successful, the other not—depended in large part on the kinds of religious rituals that were common in each region leading up to these moments. Residential burial and the emplacement of offerings in coastal Oaxaca set the stage for future possibilities, while the lack of similar practices in San José Mogote (and Late Formative Oaxaca, in general) gave elites more flexibility in rebranding religion. Were these experiments therefore decided before they even began? What might people (elites and nonelites alike) have done differently to effect different outcomes? Further, the degree to which the model works depends on the robusticity of contextual information from archaeological contexts. While the archaeological work in coastal Oaxaca is convincingly detailed within and across the region, I am less sure that we understand well what was happening at San José Mogote and other valley sites during this transition, in spite of the decades spent in search of answers. It remains frustratingly difficult to trace Monte Albán's earliest days and is challenging (if not impossible) to determine a detailed sequence of events using archaeological data from disparate contexts across the much larger Valley of Oaxaca.

The ontological turn that we are experiencing in archaeological theory (as in anthropology more widely) gives us the chance to bring religion and religious practices in the ancient Americas front and center as major factors with critical roles to play during times of transition. It is clear that the material practices associated with religious belief were entangled in multiple ways that both created and complicated political complexity—not just at Monte Albán and Río Viejo but also at sites across the Americas and, no doubt, in other parts of the ancient world.

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This article compares state formation in two well-known archaeological regions in Oaxaca state, the Valley of Oaxaca, and the lower Río Verde drainage. The comparison is of interest because the two groups, Zapotecs and Chatinos, are linguistically and culturally related. Despite these affinities, their histories followed divergent paths resulting in different potentials for urban life. I confine my remarks to two issues.

1. One of the striking aspects of the lower Río Verde tradition is the emphasis on communal burials, as revealed in Late and Terminal Formative communities such as Yugué. Together with feasting and the construction of public places, these collective activities appear to have had the effect of muting the ambition of emerging elites and strengthening the sentiments of local identity. During the Terminal Formative, leaders of Río Viejo appropriated labor from sur-

rounding communities to build the enormous acropolis. Public buildings of a ritual nature, nondomestic middens, and a large oven (among other evidence) on the acropolis suggest to the authors that it served principally as a place for periodic regional communal feasting; attachments of villagers to their community appear to have limited population aggregation at Río Viejo. What appears to be absent from the Río Viejo inventory is any direct evidence—palaces, burials, or caches—of the ruling elite who ordered the acropolis's construction. Also, where are the houses and burials of Río Viejo's commoners? Although excavation is slow work and the acropolis and site are enormous, it is important to demonstrate proof of these elements of society. Without them, one cannot discard an alternate but unlikely scenario that Río Viejo was built by elites and their followers living in outlying communities, periodically assembling there for communal feasts.

2. The authors argue that rulers at Monte Albán acted as intermediaries between commoners and the supernatural realm. Perhaps treatment of this elite intermediary role could be expanded by (1) considering a long-enduring class of prehispanic imagery that directly expresses notions of political power and legitimacy at Monte Albán and other valley sites (this is the image of a lord or lady standing/sitting atop a platform) and (2) by incorporating aspects of contemporary Zapotec worldview from ethnographies (Barabas 2006; De la Cruz 2007; De la Fuente 1977; González Pérez 2013; Parsons 1936). Here I refer to the "Mountain of Sustenance," which the authors mention in passing. I (Markens 2014; Martínez López, Winter, and Markens 2014, chapter 1) argue that political power of rulers was based in part on control of symbolic resources stored in a Mountain of Sustenance. Although evidence for the model is derived from Classic period evidence, it may be applicable to the Middle Formative, where this representation of power appears at San José Mogote when the first palace for the center's rulers was constructed atop the main pyramid (Urcid 2009).

Zapotecs today hold widespread beliefs about prominent hills near the community, especially those that contain caves and a source of water. The most important beliefs for this discussion are twofold: (1) the hill is a storehouse of water, plants, and animals that sustain the community; and (2) the resources are the property of a supernatural being called the Dueño (Owner) who resides within the hill and whose permission must be sought before undertaking procurement activities.

Archaeologists argue that the Mountain of Sustenance was at times replicated in temple and residential architecture. This was the case for the Valley of Oaxaca, where palaces come to incorporate architectural elements normally associated with temples: pyramidal bases and broad staircases sometimes enclosed within balustrades. Examples include the residence of Tomb 103 at Monte Albán, the palace atop Structure 195 at Lambityeco, Mound 35 at Macuilxóchitl, and Mound A at Zaachila, among others. By the Classic, rul-