

Great Events from History

The Ancient World

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Pasadena, California

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CONTRIBUTORS

Amy Ackerberg-Hastings
Independent Scholar

Richard Adler
University of Michigan - Dearborn

J. M. Adovasio
Mercyhurst Archaeological Institute

Mark Aldenderfer
*University of California,
Santa Barbara*

Emily Alward
Henderson, NV District Libraries

Earl R. Andresen
University of Texas at Arlington

James A. Arieti
Hampden-Sydney College

Mary Pat Balkus
Radford University

Carl L. Bankston III
Tulane University

Maryanne Barsotti
Independent Scholar

Rozmeri Basic
University of Oklahoma

Barbara C. Beattie
Independent Scholar

Katherine B. Beem
Independent Scholar

Tanja Bekhuis
TCB Research

Milton Berman
University of Rochester

Jon L. Berquist
Chalice Press

Melissa Betts
Independent Scholar

Sheena L. Binkley
Independent Scholar

Nicholas Birns
New School University

Jackie R. Booker
Claflin University

Erica Brindley
*University of California,
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Ben Brose
Stanford University

David L. Browman
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Kendall W. Brown
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Daniel C. Browning, Jr.
William Carey College

Jeffrey L. Buller
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Joseph P. Byrne
Belmont University

Jack Carter
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Cherie C. Castillo
University of Wisconsin—Fox Valley

James T. Chambers
Texas Christian University

Paul J. Chara, Jr.
Northwestern College

Frederick B. Chary
Indiana University Northwest

Mark W. Chavalas
University of Wisconsin—La Crosse

David Christiansen
Truman State University

Douglas Cloutre
Kennesaw State University

Carl W. Conrad
Washington University

Michael Coronel
University of Northern Colorado

Patricia Coronel
Colorado State University

M. Joseph Costelloe
Creighton University

Antonio Rafael de la Cova
Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology

David A. Crain
South Dakota State University

Thomas I. Crimando
SUNY College at Brockport

LouAnn Faris Culley
Kansas State University

John Coleman Darnell
Yale University

Frank Day
Clemson University

Rene M. Descartes
SUNY, Cobleskill

M. Casey Diana
*University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign*

Jeffrey W. Dippmann
Central Washington University

William J. Dominik
University of Otago

Marjorie Donovan
Pittsburg State University

David Allen Duncan
Tennessee Wesleyan College

Jennifer Eastman
Clark University

Samuel K. Eddy
Syracuse University

K Edgington
Towson University

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c. 500 B.C.E.-c. 700 C.E.

ZAPOTEC BUILD MONTE ALBÁN

Inhabitants of Monte Albán, one of the earliest and biggest cities in the Western Hemisphere, pioneered the construction of astronomically oriented public buildings; the use of adobe, stone masonry, and lime plaster; the development of a 260-day ritual calendar; and the carving and painting of hieroglyphs.

LOCALE: Monte Albán, Oaxaca, Mexico

CATEGORIES: Architecture; prehistory and ancient cultures

SUMMARY OF EVENT

Monte Albán, founded by the Zapotecs, was the first and largest urban center in the Oaxaca Valley of Mexico, reaching an extension of 12 square miles (31 square kilometers). The Y-shaped valley is 60 miles long by 15 miles wide (97 by 19 kilometers) and is surrounded by forested mountains. It has an altitude of 5,000 feet (1,524 meters), with little rainfall and a permanent dry condition. The Salado River and its tributaries provide irrigation for agriculture.

The entire urban complex, at the summit of a hill 1,320 feet (402 meters) high, covers 45 acres (18 hectares). Outcrops of sedimentary rock provided construction material for its many residences, palaces, temples, ball courts, stelae, and other structures. Less than 1 percent of the total area has been excavated. The Zapotec name for the metropolis is still unknown. Its current name derives from the conquistador Diego López de Monte Albán, who received this area as part of his *encomienda* (commissioned) territory in the sixteenth century. The city's central location on a hilltop implies its dominant role within the region.

Over the course of its twelve-hundred-year existence, which included a number of phases, Monte Albán reached a maximum population of about twenty-five thousand inhabitants. The urban phase, called Monte Al-

SEE ALSO: c. 600 B.C.E., Appearance of Zoroastrian Dithicism; 547 B.C.E., Cyrus the Great Founds the Persian Empire; 520-518 B.C.E., Darius the Great Conquers the Indus Valley; 520-518 B.C.E., Scylax of Caryanda Voyages the Indian Ocean.

RELATED ARTICLES in *Great Lives from History: The Ancient World*: Cyrus the Great; Zoroaster.

bán I, lasted from 500 to 200 B.C.E. The Protoclassic period, or Monte Albán II, lasted from 100 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. The Classic period, from 200 to 700 C.E., is divided into Monte Albán IIIa and IIIb. During the city's final phase, archaeological evidence implies political breakdown and depletion of resources.

In 500 B.C.E., at the end of the Rosario phase, there was a radical change in the Oaxaca Valley. San José Mogote, the largest community in the valley for more than eight hundred years, suddenly lost most of its population. This was possibly because of internal conflict. At the same time, some two thousand inhabitants left their villages on the valley floor to relocate on the slopes of Monte Albán. Soon afterward, about a dozen communities in the valley were established on defensible hilltops with walls.

Social stratification developed during Monte Albán I. There is no evidence that a supreme ruler existed but rather a privileged class of priests, warriors, rulers, and artists controlled other Zapotecs and their labor. A market flourished in Monte Albán, where imported goods such as obsidian, pottery, salt, lime, and other items were bartered.

The first permanent structure constructed during this era was Building L, containing the Wall of the Danzantes. The Spanish conquistadors mistakenly believed that these carvings of naked upright figures represented dancers. The wall contains four alternating rows of so-called dancers and swimmers, who appear in smaller rectangular blocks in an outstretched horizontal position. More than three hundred of these varied figures are recorded at Monte Albán. Each stone has a single naked male figure, eyes closed, mouth open, some with elaborate hairstyles, earspools, and bead necklaces. They could signify an awesome display of military strength or a historical narrative.

By 100 B.C.E., Monte Albán had gradually subjugated more than three hundred tribute-paying communities in the Oaxaca Valley to create the Zapotec empire. It cannot be determined how many of these towns were taken by military conquest, or how many weaker ones succumbed to colonization. The metropolis was protected by a long defensive wall 15 feet (4.6 meters) high and 60 feet (18 meters) wide on the easily climbed western slopes of the mountain.

During the second period, Monte Albán II (100 B.C.E.-200 C.E.), there were an estimated seven hundred Oaxaca Valley communities with some fifty thousand inhabitants, while Monte Albán's population had grown to ten thousand. New construction included the 8-acre (3-hectare) Main Plaza and a ball court, shaped like a capital I, with bilateral inclined surfaces of smooth stucco. There is a large increase in public buildings and temples, most of which are oriented toward the cardinal directions. The temple-patio-altar compound emerged as a ritual-ceremonial precinct. The largest of these is the Sunken Patio in the North Platform, measuring 54 yards (about 50 meters) on each side. A cistern was built in the Main Plaza. Drains lined with stone were used to evacuate inundations in the plazas and patios into dams and a large reservoir at the bottom of the hill.

Building J, an arrowhead-shaped structure, was constructed during this era. It has the ruins of a temple on top and its unusual shape is believed to be an astronomical indicator. Its outer walls contain about forty large slabs, weighing several tons each, with a variety of incised glyphs. Each depiction has a place glyph in the center, with an inverted adorned human head below it and a symbol unique to the slab above it. The glyphs are sometimes accompanied by a text with place-names and dates. Alfonso Caso, in charge of archaeological explorations at Monte Albán from 1931 to 1943, described these glyphs as signifying places conquered by Monte Albán. A contrasting theory is that the slabs commemorate important allied communities. A few recycled *danzante* stones also appear in sections of the Building J walls.

The classic era of Zapotec civilization is known as Monte Albán IIIa (200-500 C.E.) and IIIb (500-700 C.E.). The Oaxaca Valley population grew to 100,000 inhabitants distributed in some thousand communities. Zapotec art, symbols, and writing, which is limited to the elite families, flourished during this epoch, while carved stones are relatively rare. Monte Albán's twenty-five thousand residents occupied more than two thousand family homes of three different styles. They all have a common floor plan of rooms surrounding a central patio,

which contained a burial place, and roofs of wood beams and thatch. The simplest dwellings had wattle-and-daub walls with an open or semiclosed format. Their patios contained work areas, storage pits, ovens, and family graves. Intermediate-size homes, with adobe walls on stone foundations, had a central patio with adjacent rooms and a modest tomb. Elite families lived in grand-scale palaces. Rooms with thick walls and stucco floors surrounded an inner courtyard with stairways, an altar, and a decorative tomb. These burial chambers, including Tombs 103, 104, 105, 112, and 125 at Monte Albán, were adorned with colorful murals and contained offerings of elaborate funerary urns, carved bone, and jewelry.

The South Platform, containing carved stelae on its northern corners, was constructed during Period III. The Plain Stela and the *Lápida de Bazán* depict significant Teotihuacán elements. Strong political and cultural ties with Teotihuacán are reflected in the Monte Albán murals and the new scapulary *tablero* (vertical panel) architecture. Likewise, a Oaxaca residential section appears at



A rock carving at Monte Albán. (Corbis)

Teotihuacán, with Zapotec-style pottery, urns, and a tomb. A Monte Albán mural on Tomb 105 shows the Teotihuacán influence of profiled speech-scroll figures, with one wearing the goggles of the rain god.

The Zapotecs were animistic, believing in a pantheon of gods that included a supreme being and Cocijo, the water god. Cocijo's image is often depicted on urns. During this era there also appeared two other deities, the Wide-Billed Bird and a crocodile-like creature with an up-curved snout.

The demise of Monte Albán began by 600 C.E., the result of a scarcity of basic resources after the tribute system collapsed; possibly there was also a loss of ecological equilibrium. As the overextended Zapotec empire receded back to the Oaxaca Valley, by 700 C.E. Monte Albán was largely abandoned and fell into ruins. There is no archaeological evidence of warfare or wanton destruction. The Zapotecs then retreated into city-states, from where they fought against each other and against outside invaders such as the Mixtecs, who had been migrating into the Oaxaca Valley from the mountains of northwestern Oaxaca state.

SIGNIFICANCE

Monte Albán was the focal point of the Zapotec empire, which expanded outward from the city over the course of seven hundred years. The metropolis was a center of religious and political power. Its inhabitants developed a class society that confronted its neighbors with warfare

and diplomacy to maintain a system of trade and tribute. The Mixtecs would later adopt many of their cultural traditions and architecture.

—Antonio Rafael de la Cova

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SEE ALSO: c. 1500-c. 300 B.C.E., Olmec Civilization Rises in Southern Mexico; c. 300 B.C.E., Izapan Civilization Dominates Mesoamerica; c. 100 B.C.E.-c. 200 C.E., Zapotec State Dominates Oaxaca; 90 C.E., Founding of the Classic Period Maya Royal Dynasty at Tikal.

499-494 B.C.E.

IONIAN REVOLT

The Greek city-states of Ionia in Asia Minor revolted against their Persian rulers, an event that was the opening chapter of the Greco-Persian War, a war in which the Greeks were ultimately victorious.

LOCALE: Ionia (now in Turkey and Greece)

CATEGORY: Wars, uprisings, and civil unrest

KEY FIGURES

Aristagoras (d. 494 B.C.E.), tyrant of the Ionian city of Miletus, son-in-law of Histiaeus, and legendary instigator of the revolt

Artaphernes (fl. sixth-fifth centuries B.C.E.), brother of Darius and a satrap of Asia Minor, who helped suppress revolt

Cyrus the Great (550-486 B.C.E.), Persian king, r. 522-486 B.C.E.

Histiaeus of Miletus (mid-sixth century-493 B.C.E.), former tyrant of Miletus

Cleomenes I (d. c. 490 B.C.E.), king of Sparta, r. c. 521-c. 490 B.C.E.

SUMMARY OF EVENT

Ionia, in western Asia Minor (now Turkey), was made up of independent Greek-speaking city-states. The city-state, or polis, was the basic form of political, social, and economic organization in the Greek world, which included Ionia, the Aegean islands, and the Greek mainland. However, in the mid-sixth century B.C.E., Cyrus the Great established the Persian Empire, which expanded to