**Station 1** --  **The Zapotecs and Monte Albán Oaxaca**

**The Cloud People, the Zapotecs of Monte Alban**

The Zapotecs, known as the Cloud People, dwelt in the southern highlands of central Mesoamerica, and more specifically, in the Valley of Oaxaca, which they inhabited from the late Preclassic period to the end of the Classic period (500 BCE – 900 CE). Their capital was at Monte Albán, which is located on the top of a hill near modern-day Oaxaca City. From Monte Albán they dominated the southern highlands, spoke a variation of the Oto-Zapotecan language, and profited from [trade](http://www.ancient.eu/trade/) and cultural links with the [Olmec](http://www.ancient.eu/Olmec/), Teotihuacan and [Maya](http://www.ancient.eu/Maya/) civilizations (Cartwright 2013).

The Zapotec religion was polytheistic and highlighted fertility and agricultural deities. The principal deities were included Cocijo (the rain god, who had a human body with jaguar and serpent features with a forked tongue), who later became very similar to the rain deity, Tlaloc, of the Aztecs. There was also Coquihani, the god of light, who required human sacrifices in some of their rituals. Other important gods were the Bat-god, the god of corn and fertility; Beydo, god of seeds and wind; Pitao Cozobi, the corn god; Copijcha (symbolized by the macaw), the god of the sun and war; Coquebila, god of the earth's center; Huechaana, a mother goddess also associated with hunting and fishing; Kedo, god of justice; Pixee Pecala the god of love; and Coqui Xee, the creator god who represented infinity (Cartwright 2013). The deities of many Mesoamerican societies, such as that of the Zapotecs, were often represented as having both male and female personas, as well as no obvious genders, such as Ndan, the androgynous[[1]](#endnote-1) god of the oceans.

Many times rulers take credit for building monumental temples, and they often have the building named after them. The leaders of the Zapotecs were no exception. However, we need to understand that many of these structures were built by the common laborer and craftsman. Many times the craftsmen were paid, but the ordinary men were expected to give a labor service to build these ceremonial centers in their own communities as well as in urban centers such as Monte Albán. Often times this forced labor was expected to be done in exchange for the alleged benevolence[[2]](#endnote-2) from the ruler and their gods. We believe this work was seen as a reciprocal worship obligation to the gods and their earthly representatives, the rulers and the priests.

Monte Albán was planned from the start as a ceremonial center, which was a city-like center usually run by priests and rulers, in which people from surrounding areas gathered to practice the ceremonies of their religion, often at large temples and plazas built specifically for this purpose. In fact, the Zapotec name for Monte Albán (“white mountain,” in Spanish), was *Dani Biaa,* which means "sacred mountain." On the leveled mountaintop, laborers erected great pyramids, temples, and plazas. Two miles (3.2 kilometers), of walls were built around the city center, apparently to separate the sacred or the elite (ruler-priests) from the rest of the population. The population in 200 B.C.E. had reached an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 people. The hillsides were terraced, with huge steps were cut into them, and many of the common people of Monte Albán lived on the hillside terraces, outside the city walls. At its peak, Monte Albán had a population of about 35,000 people.

Also facing the plaza is the Palace of the Danzantes, a large temple built between 500 and 200 B.C.E. In it are stone slabs with carvings of naked men in odd, contorted (twisted or bent) positions. Each slab has a name glyph at the head level of the portrait. At one time archaeologists[[3]](#endnote-3) believed the slabs depicted dancers: hence the name *danzantes,* (dancers). Now most experts agree the carvings represent the dead bodies of leaders of other cities and towns that the Zapotecs had captured in combat and then sacrificed to the gods.[[4]](#endnote-4) The *danzante* stones are monuments to Monte Albán's military strength and conquests. They are one of the oldest sets of stone carvings found in Oaxaca. These carvings, while impressive to the visitor, were also meant to help the conquered understand the might and power of the rulers at Monte Albán. It was at Monte Albán where the power of the Zapotec rulers was constructed to intimidate those visitors who were often the unfortunate captives. These stone carvings with a single object of bloodletting and castration were not of a joyful dancer, but victims of a power ceremony. Some historians also believed they were carved as a political timeline.[[5]](#endnote-5)

As a part of the nature worship, the people of early Mesoamerica developed a calendar based on 20-day months. A system of 13 numerals and twenty day names was repeated in sequence, sort of like a wheel or gear within a larger gear, with the smaller wheel of 13 numbers interacting with the larger one of 20 day signs, resulting in combination after a full rotation cycle in 260-day year. All of this was based on the cycles of the moon, so it is called a “lunar year.” It began with the Olmecs, considered to be the first complex Mesoamerican society, and is still continued by some indigenous groups today. The 260-day calendar use of a number and symbol combination was applied to the naming of children and events. So for instance a child may have a name 7 Serpent, which is the day of that child’s birth. On the day of the birth of the child, the parents would consult a priest who would foretell in a general way the destiny of the child. There were unlucky days that regulated what people did on those days. The Zapotecs also employed a standard 365 day calendar based on the cycles of the sun. This was the “solar year,” which functioned alongside the ceremonial lunar calendar.

To help students understand the calendar and its association with naming practices, share with them this website at Mexicolore: <https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/ask-us/how-to-choose-an-aztec-name>

A short YouTube video on Monte Albán and the so-called *danzantes* can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZJ-6RBJ9ds>

Additional video footage of Monte Alban: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8El_ofIDHF8>

For further support in explaining sacrifice in association with conquests made by the Zapotecs, please have them look at the images on this web page, which shows the carvings interpreted to be conquests of other city-states:

<https://uncoveredhistory.com/mexico/monte-alban-the-conquest-slabs/>

The curriculum designer, Howard Krug, is also providing some of his own photographs.

1. Vocabulary

   Basically it means having characteristics of both sexes or attributes of male and female or having no clear gendering. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Usually refers to someone in power that gives an act of the kindness or generous gift. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. These are scientists, who excavate, examine artifacts, remains, and monuments of past human life to understand and interpret ancient peoples.

   Sources

   \*\*http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/suic/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?zid=b204038bac

   139a4800dbc95ed1829d82&action=2&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CCX3424400035&userGroupName=clea26856&jsid=37930498808346b5408d8dda67e7a51c [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. \*Interview with Stephanie Wood. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. \*\*From a conversation with Robert Haskett

   Pictures taken by Howard Krug ---

   Danzante dancer 1

   Danzante dancer 2

   Danzante dancer 3

   Sample of Zapotec Writing

   Ball court at Monte Alban

   Monumental Architecture 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)