AN OLD HISTORY,
AND THE ORIGIN OF STATE INSTITUTIONS IN OAXACA, MEXICO

(Em português p. 145)

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The rise of a state in pre-Hispanic Oaxaca has been the focus of attention of many scholars since the late sixties, when archaeology committed itself to a more anthropological perspective. Before that, culture historical archaeology set its aims at discovering, dating and describing the past of a virtually unknown region of south central Mexico. The achievements of these early years of excavation were not only spectacular, but also essential to the construction of an evolutionary scheme for all of Mesoamerica. Too strict a theory and methodology, however, were soon to show their shortcomings when younger generations discovered that most items recovered earlier had scarcely been studied in depth. More detailed analyses of these materials have proven useful to revalue previous conclusions and necessary to advance new hypotheses about the development of Zapotec society. A semiotic approach to major sculpture and figurative vessels, on the other hand, has opened access to Panofsky's iconological level of analysis and to the kind of messages that were conveyed through these images.

With an eye on more specific contexts and narrower time spans it is now possible to assertain that it was not a haughty, militaristic elite which imposed state institutions at Monte Alban, around the year 0 AD. As was mentioned before, shortcomings in A. Caso's view of Monte Alban's Mound J slabs have given way to a more viable interpretation which proposes the integration of Oaxaca's central valleys through the cooperation of various local chieftains. This latter model is strengthened by a line of evidence that reveals the intrusion of numerous southern concepts and materials at the end of phase Monte Alban I, and the arrival of people who must have fled climatic deterioration in the Maya lowlands and furthered a worldview that supported new social and political forms of organization in Oaxaca.

I

The Classic Zapotec state existed for approximately 900 years before it broke down into a series of independent, but interconnected entities (*cacicazgos*). During this long time span it actively pursued common goals with other regions, allowing for Mesoamerica's cultural integration. On the local level, social interaction was based on strategies that furthered ethnic understanding and a balanced use of its resources.

From a distant perspective, the rise of such an organization poses numerous interrogations. In the course of time political entities reach a crossroad where major civilizational processes and the need to construct a regional identity call in question their participant's freedom of action. For a traditional archaeologist this is not a problem: a descriptive approach to the material record furnishes enough information to comprehend the norms through which the ancestors of modern ethnic groups attested their identity. Everything else would be the result of foreign influences. More recently, however, many archaeologists have started to focus on the kind of strategies with which societies operate. Based on K.V. Flannery's paper on *The Cultural Evolution of Civilizations* (1972) a series of discussions have exhausted the matter, casting doubts on the possibility to identify the profits a society draws from linealization or segregation.

Now then, although both of these strategies can further our understanding of regional dynamics from a "high-elevation flyer" perspective (Willey 1991), they are also prone to be too restricted, exclusive and contradictory. The cause of this lies in their sportive nature, and in the way they are codified and applied. To pretend that they are readily accesible, and their benefits easily ascertainable is an illusion that obscures the fact that they are power instruments employed by contending interest-goups within a society. For this reason some authors prefer a definition of social complexity that is not tied to the control of knowledge and information, or to the notion of progress and predestination. They would say it is the outcome of choices made freely by all those members of a society who desire a different form of organization. This view does not exclude those cases in which leadership turns into a necessity,

especially when a region gets involved in processes of a larger scale. Both situations will stand forth in the kind of institutions selected, in the way they link the interior with the exterior, and in the trade-offs or compromises that derive from this selection.

Against this background, J. Vicent (1991) argues in favour of a more critical position towards the nature of archaeological knowledge. In this respect, theory building and application should not be confused with the Philosophy of Archaeology, whose aims lie in the realm of knowledge itself. Unfortunately, philosophical methodology also jeopardizes the interpretation of human experience, limiting the perspectives of archaeological research. This situation becomes clear in N. Rescher's (1995) dissertation on the principles of this discipline. "Philosophy does not have a distinctive object of study", he says, "because everything is relevant to its occupation, and its task to offer a kind of *expositio mundi*". Thus, Philosophy "looks for that systematic integration of knowledge which Science promised at its outset and never has accomplished due to its overspecialization". This does not mean that Rescher dismisses knowledge in detail. As he eagerly adds, "no kind of information about the world is superfluous to Philosophy ... The problem is – and always has been – the confusion that rises from the richness of our data ... What we owe to these data is respect, not acceptance ... Our duty is to give meaning to our cognoscitive compromises and furnish them with coherence and unity, as far as this is possible ... This leads to a cleansing and trimming procedure that reduces our compromises to the point where consistency is restored". But, does respect allow a true understanding of other people? As it seems, these postulates turn Philosophy into an agent who keeps law and order in our cognoscitive efforts, and for that sake into the police of our thoughts. Are we willing to see how others assasinate our object of study before we research it in detail?

In his proposition Vicent (1991:31) supports the development of a Critical Theory in Archaeology, based on the historical and socially determined character of the discipline itself. A. Nielsen (1995:54), on the other hand, argues in favour of our need "to defend the possibility of developing a theory of artifact variability that conceives of production as a social process, adheres to the causal

priority of power relations in explanation, and still maintains the materialist focus on behavior-artifact interaction advocated by behavioral archaeology". Taking as a baseline his concept of social power, or "the ability of actors to pursue goals", and considering that "every action intrinsically implies the application of means or resources in order to attain results" (Ibid:49), a critical theory in archaeology also serves as a gateway into lost worldviews and their material manifestations. In other words, it can show us the way into the network of meanings that proved advantageous for a society, and how they were expressed in the archaeological record.

By the same token, the path leading to the adoption of state institutions necessarily included a series of cognoscitive maps which have to be discovered before we understand how innovations were woven on to habitual patterns of behaviour. However, as the majority of oriental traditions recognize, knowledge is not accessible through the contrastation of successive phenomena. It is their alternating aspects, which are coupled like the front and back of a coin, or a sound and its echo, what opens the way to our comprehension. From a Oaxacan perspective this would imply that changes observed between the archaeological periods Monte Alban I and II do not relate to alternating strategies of social organization. Instead, the material record bespeaks a mutation in the cummulative process of dialectically linked responses which led to new inter-group relations and forms of cultural expression.

II

Most archaeologists would agree that Monte Alban was founded on an uninhabited hill above the valley-floor of central Oaxaca around the years 500-400 b.C. (Fahmel 1994). This date, as well as others mentioned in this text, fits into the chronological framework elaborated for the ceramics of Monte Alban (Caso, Bernal & Acosta 1967) and widened to include the sculpture and monumental architecture of this site.

During its first period of occupation the site was densely settled in its north-central sector (Blanton 1978), leaving open the area that centuries later was to become the main precinct. Nevertheless, on its southwestern corner a monument was dedicated to numerous individuals depicted on its building

stones (Caso 1947). These *Danzantes*, as they are usually known, wear insignia that suggest their membership in different levels of the dominant hierarchy (Zehnder 1977).

The economy of this chiefdom (Spencer 1982) was based on agriculture, although its privileged situation in the middle of three valleys allows for other interpretations. Due to Oaxaca's unreliable weather-conditions, in the long run Monte Alban could have asserted its central position through the coordination of large parts of the region's economy (Fahmel 1994).

Other constructions of this time period have been discovered in deep strata of the building sequence. Several associated tombs have furnished ceramic offerings, including elaborate vessels or "funerary urns" decorated with images of the most esteemed deities. The prevalence of Cocijo, a god that is still worshipped as the Lord of wind and lightning, and Ruler of the rainy and the dry seasons suggests a strong tie with the environment and its potentials for the production of food (de la Cruz 1995, Fahmel in press). The god with a serpent mask was also linked to agricultural activities, but less frequently represented. The god with a broad-beaked bird helmet shared his headdress with tiger-face braziers, while anthropomorphic braziers apparently represented the god of fire.

Towards the beginning of our era a new period, called Monte Alban II, spread over the larger sites in the valleys (Bernal 1965). Its material evidences include ceramic forms and styles, architectural and sculptural elements, and epigraphic traits that were introduced from southeastern Mesoamerica. At Monte Alban, new spatial concepts gave way to the construction of an astronomical commemoration complex in the middle of the main precinct. Similar building-arrangements can be found in several sites of the Maya lowlands, in the central depression of Chiapas and later on at Teotihuacan (Fialko 1988, Laporte 1988, Fahmel 1991, 1995). In all these cases a large pyramid faces a long platform with three rooms, behind which the sun or a special star rises or sets on specific days of the year. In some instances these groups include a ball court, where players mimicked the movement of the sun between the northern and the southern skies (Fahmel 1994) [fig. 1].

The display of this sacred geography must have comprised a group of social actors who actively pursued the introduction of a solar worldview in Oaxaca. Before it was put into practice, however, it had to be conciliated with a conception of time linked to the annual cycle and its rainy and dry seasons. This conception, on the other hand, required changes in the face of a growing population and a more ambitious administration. The similarity between this commemoration complex and the one at Teotihuacan also suggests an intensive production system based on two agricultural cycles. Their coordination probably implied complementary work schedules, a wider exchange system and more complicated itineraries. The establishment of state institutions, in turn, would have centered on aspects of their administration and their public validation. The construction of Mound J contributed to these ends linking social hierarchies to the sun's zenith-nadir axis, while the commemoration complex emphasized horizontal integration (Fahmel: Ibid).

Mound J's carved stones were originally reckoned by A. Caso (1947) as Conquest slabs, and have been interpreted this way ever since. Yet, it is still unclear how militarism could have furthered long-lasting alliances throughout Oaxaca. Based on a formal approach, iconographic analyses of these reliefs have read their constituent elements as "Town name – Hill – Dead person" [fig. 2a] forgetting other examples of inverted heads which not necessarily refer to deceased persons. Furthermore, there is no other sign indicating the conquest of these towns, as it is usual in Postclassic codices [fig. 2b]. Finally, the intrusion of numerous concepts and material traits from southeastern Mesoamerica (Bernal 1950, 1965, Fahmel 1991) poses serious problems to the hypothesis that Monte Alban was defending its borders and recording its victories (Spencer 1982, Marcus 1983, Marcus & Flannery 1996) within a building-group that proclaimed a new order based on cooperation.

Figurative vessels took part in this new worldview, as will be maintained in the discussion, especially those related to the Underworld and god 5F (Caso & Bernal 1952) [fig. 3]. Represented like an old man, this deity wears eliptical plaques on either side of its face simulating large jaguar ears. Also related to this feline is the knot hanging on its

chest, as if it were a pectoral [fig. 4]. Its eyes are decorated with plaques in the shape of the hill or mountain glyph (Caso & Bernal: Ibid). Its headdress includes a spotted turban-like element and two protruding points which C. Coggins explains as two columns of smoke (1983:58). "At Monte Alban", she says, "this is clearly a misunderstood convention that must have been adapted from a region where Old God censers burned copal internally. In the Maya region", she adds, "sun and jaguar symbolism ... (refers) ... to the nighttime location of the sun under the earth, in its nocturnal jaguar aspect". The effigy censer found in burial 10 at Tikal "combines all of these symbols, with the addition of bird elements. This grotesque old man's ears are covered by Ix signs that denote the jaguar of the Underworld" (Ibid: 56). On the basis of J.E. Thompson's work Caso and Bernal (1952:197) establish ties with the Maya god of number seven and the Nahua *Tepeyolotl* or Heart of the Mountain. The figure censer found at Tikal also "presents on his open palm a head that Clancy calls a JC head because it invariably has jaguar ears and a cruller, or twisted fillet, surrounding its eyes ... This head is also found on the two Tikal stelae (Nos.29, 36) that are earlier than Stela 4, and they may be the accesion stelae of preceeding reigns" (Coggins 1983:57). Curiously, the *Danzante* cataloged as number 41 by A. Caso (1947), and found in Monte Alban's Mound J, carries a similar head in his hands.

As C. Coggins mentions for the Tikal censer, Old God representations include a narrow and curved beak over their nose, or a large mask in the shape of a bird (Caso & Bernal 1952). Such a headdress was used by Zapotec rulers at the end of Monte Alban's period II, and shown on a carved side of the Smooth Stela (*Estela Lisa*) (Acosta 1958-59). In addition, two insignia resembling the broad-beaked bird and the jaguar with a broad-beaked bird helmet were placed on top of this mask [fig. 5]. Does this mean that rulers in Oaxaca identified themselves with the jaguar of the Underworld and the Heavenly bird?

Discussion

Events that took place in Oaxaca between the years 100 b.C and 100 a.C. undoubtedly were of a very complex nature. One should remember that during this time span the archaeological period called Monte Alban I came to an end, giving way to period II and a new set of culture traits in the valley's larger sites (Bernal 1965). Monte Alban's population and infrastructure grew considerably (Blanton 1978, Fahmel 1990, 1991), implying new forms of organization and the establishment of state institutions. Mounds P, H, and a ball court occupied the central portion of the main precinct, honouring the astronomical commemoration complex and its relation to a worldview that was based on the sun's movements along the horizon. Mound J was incorporated into this group, setting out its facade on a line with Mound P [fig. 1]. A passageway in its rear was partially left open towards the sky, suggesting an astronomical function or the observation of the sun (Caso 1938). Should the latter have been the case, the definition of a zenithal axis would have implied the conceptualization of its opposite direction, i.e., the nadir, a world-region postclassic Mesoamericans related to the nocturnal sun and to water contained in the mountains (Aramoni 1990, Knab 1991). If these ideas go back to the beginning of our era, it is no surprise that Zapotec artists emphasized the representation of nightly animals including jaguars, frogs and bats, or the construction of basins, dams, and subterranean channels and passageways (Caso & Bernal 1952, Blanton 1978, Fahmel 1991, Martinez & Winter 1994).

Now then, in the absence of elements that could sustain the interpretation of Mound J's reliefs as conquest scenes, these representations may well refer to individuals of high rank who had something in common with the Underworld. This idea is borne out by their finery and association with the mountain glyph. Their inverted position, on the other hand, can be compared with that of representations found at Izapa, on the Chiapanec coast, which are roughly contemporaneous. Stela 25 of this site, for example, depicts the earth-crocodile upside down, introducing its jaws into the underworld to nourish the tree that carries a heavenly bird (Lee & Lowe 1968) [fig. 6]. During the Classic period, prestigious Maya rulers set up stelae to commemorate their deeds and their distinctions, including the title *Ahau-te* or Lord Tree. As Lords of Heaven and Earth (Baudez 1995) they remind us of Zapotec rulers who used the mask of old god 5F and the broad-beaked bird helmet [fig. 5]. Iconographic relationships between Oaxaca and

the coast of Chiapas introduce an additional line of thought, interconnecting this new worldview with natural phenomena and the environment. According to Caso & Bernal (1952) Cocijo, god of lightning, was the main Zapotec deity throughout the Classic. His effigy stood for the second day of the ritual calendar, symbolizing wind and fire (Fahmel in press). During period II, however, his image almost disappears from the archaeological record, together with the serpent mask god, giving entry to god 5F and other deities affiliated to the Underworld [fig. 7]. At the same time, the Maya lowlands were suffering from a drought (Dahlin 1983, Gunn, Folan & Robichaux 1995) that apparently led to the abandonment of early settlements and the emigration of their ruling families. Did some of them find a more propitious environment in Oaxaca's highlands, and did they influence the process that led to the rise of a Zapotec state? If we assume that the divine order legitimizes social institutions, can we deduce that Monte Alban's elites recast the old pantheon promoting lesser deities into a worldview that proclaimed southeastern forms of interaction? Who exactly was depicted on Mound J's carvings?

Proceeding from the fact that a state represents a political order, social power as defined by Nielsen (1995:49) requires a formal expression to further its interests and solve its disputes. The problem in archaeology is how to disentangle the fabric of power relations that allows certain persons to be spokesmen for a society. The carvings on the "Smooth Stela" from Monte Alban clearly represent a ruler fulfilling his sovereign's duties somewhere between the years 200-500 a.C. [fig. 5]. But, who were the political leaders and who the functionaries? And what did the political scene look like around the year 0 AD? If we follow the iconography and the inscriptions that belong to this time period it could well be that the title Lord of Heaven and Earth existed by the end of Monte Alban I (Caso & Bernal 1952). However, it was not until period II that it was placed within a widely accepted worldview emphasizing the Underworld and an incumbent elite. Considering how strongly Prehispanic rulers identified with their gods, it is likely that many of the dignitaries represented on Mound J carried out sacred and secular functions the way we know it from contemporary shamans. In his paper on the role of indigenous American

shamans, N. Saunders (1983:115-119) points out that "The Shaman when acting as Curer spans both the religious and social spheres. By curing the Shaman reinforces and maintains social cohesion". Furthermore, in certain instances "the social validity of the Shaman's functions are bound to have ... political importance. Given also the fact that the sacred and secular are intextricably bound together and that the facts of social and cultural reality are a result of the Shaman's ability to intercede with and manipulate the constituent parts of the spirit world, this may be an all too obvious point. A Politician is a manipulator of social circumstance – the Shaman by controlling the spirits thus manipulates the mechanism which itself is believed to produce social circumstance". Moreover, if shamanism "is a mechanism for exercising social control for political ends then it must have quasi-judicial functions also. A skillful Shaman exercises control over inter-relationships and individual behaviour ... Political and legal roles are two sides of one coin and if shamanism is a mechanism which helps preserve the form of society and maintains it in working order then a Shaman must fulfill judicial obligations to that society".

A. Medina's analysis of cargo systems and the men of knowledge in the highlands of Chiapas (1987:158-165) deepens the conceptual framework through which this element of indigenous political and religious structure has to be studied. Although its cohesive value is beyond question, he says, "functionalism has stressed the maintainance of communal social integration neglecting processes of change implicit in every society. Change does not call for mechanical responses to social pressures but for a series of decisions and internal readjustments that require individual and collective creativity. This can be shown through the activity of those religious specialists, the men of knowledge, who are mentioned in Chiapanec ethnographies as the 'principals', 'ancestors' or 'old men', and otherwise as the 'shaman', 'sorcerer' or 'curer' ".

Taking these observations to a more general level of discussion, some attention should be paid to the conditions that motivated a major change in the valleys of Oaxaca. The search for prime movers is usually full of disenchantments (Sapio & Nalda 1991:116). The accumulation of adverse responses in the dialectical relationship between Monte Alban

and its neighbors, however, may be an answer to the adoption of state institutions. Placing the agenda in Monte Alban's hands, its associates would have drawn benefits from common decisions and a more active relationship with adjacent regions (Bernal 1965, Acosta 1965, Fahmel 1990). The religious and pluriethnic character of these institutions, on the other hand, would have contributed to the development of cultural traits that were in accordance with the network of meanings constructed along the roads of Mesoamerica. In this respect, G. Willey's comment on Wallerstein's world system concept (1991:209) is a welcome reminder that no cultural situation can be understood in isolation. As he outspokenly realizes, "the world systems of industrial states do not replicate ancient mesoamerican or Peruvian horizontal integration systems, ... (yet) ... both share that potential for growth and complexity that make the interconnected whole as something greater than the sum of its parts".

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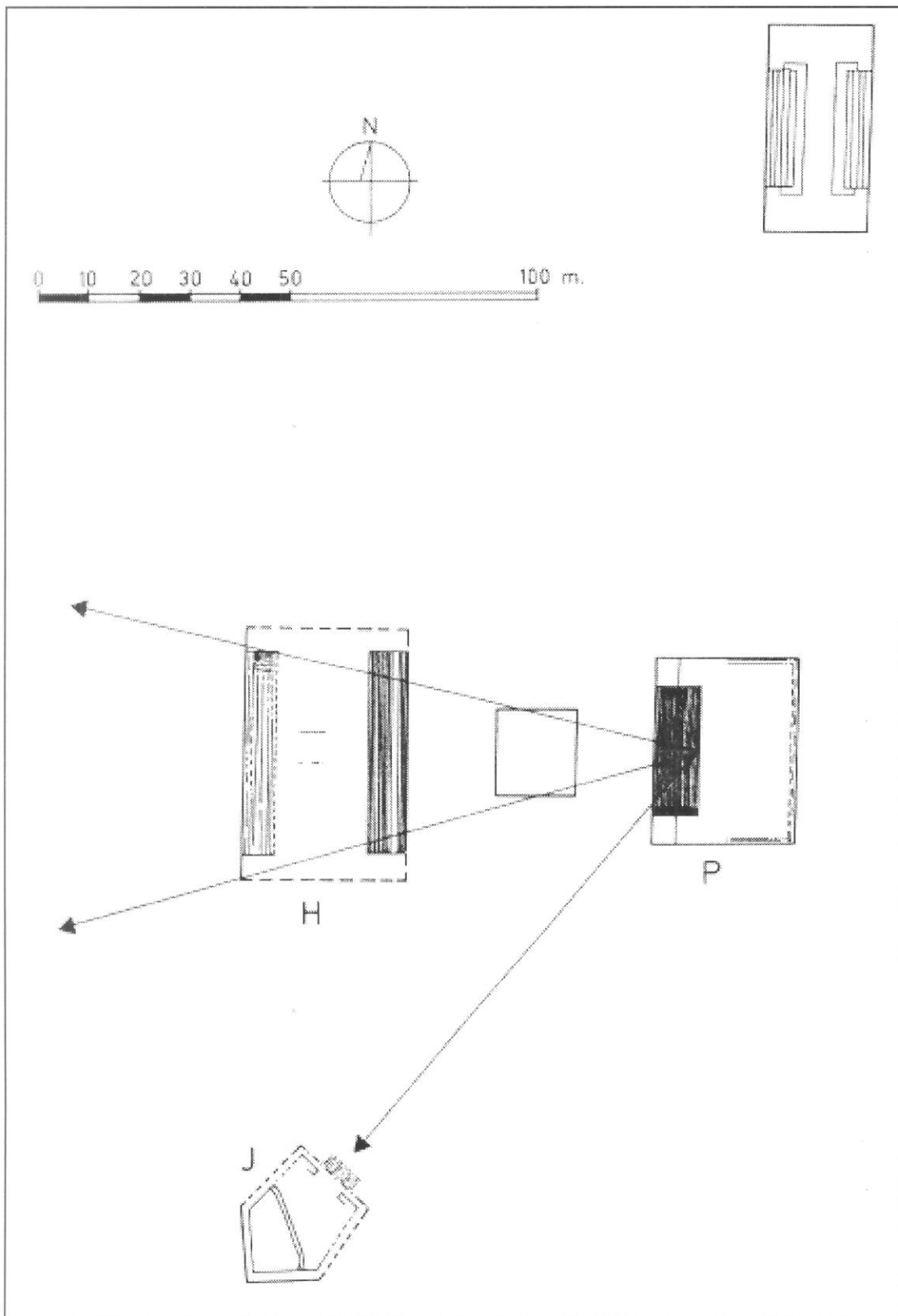
Fig. 1 - Outline of Monte Alban's astronomical commemoration complex, including Mound J.
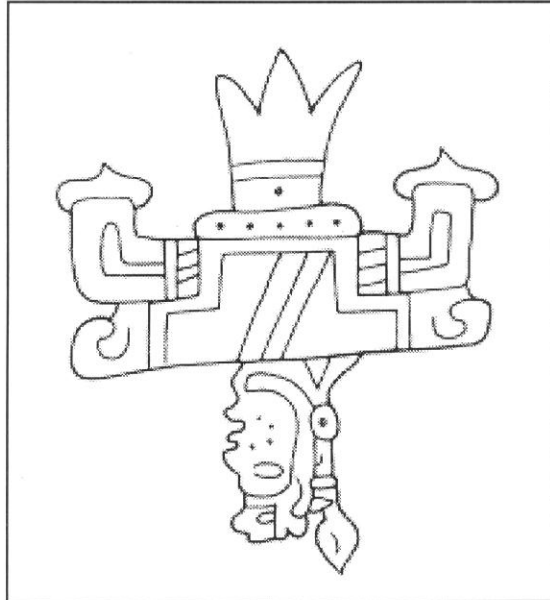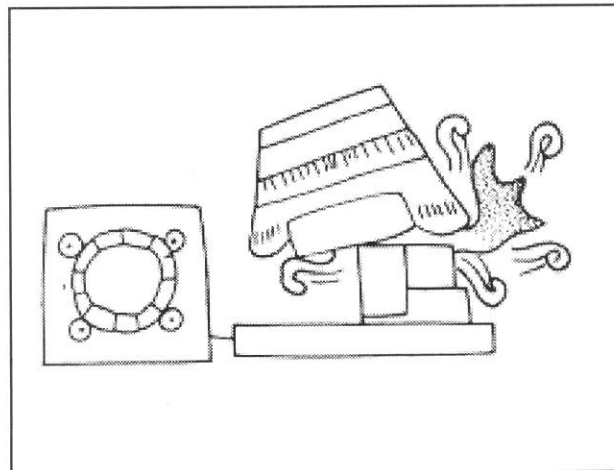
Fig. 2(a) - Relief carved on slab 16, Mound J, Monte
Alban (according to A. Caso, 1947).

2(b) - Depiction of a conquered place, as it was painted in
Codex Mendoza (1938).

Fig. 3 - Funerary urn with the image of old god 5F, found in tomb 1, Loma Larga, Oaxaca.
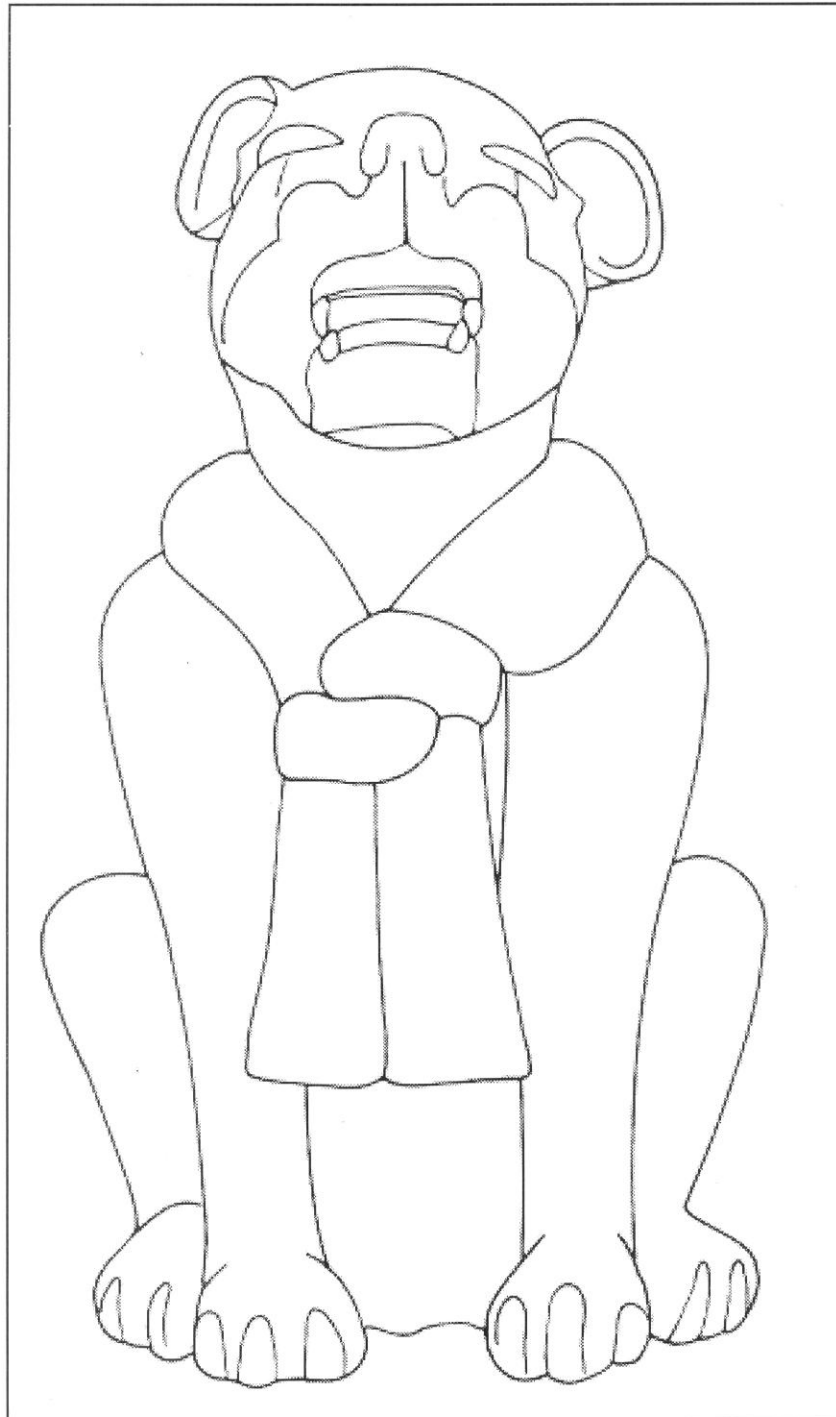
Fig. 4 - Clay sculpture in the form of a jaguar, found on the western platforma of the main precinct, Monte Alban, Oaxaca.

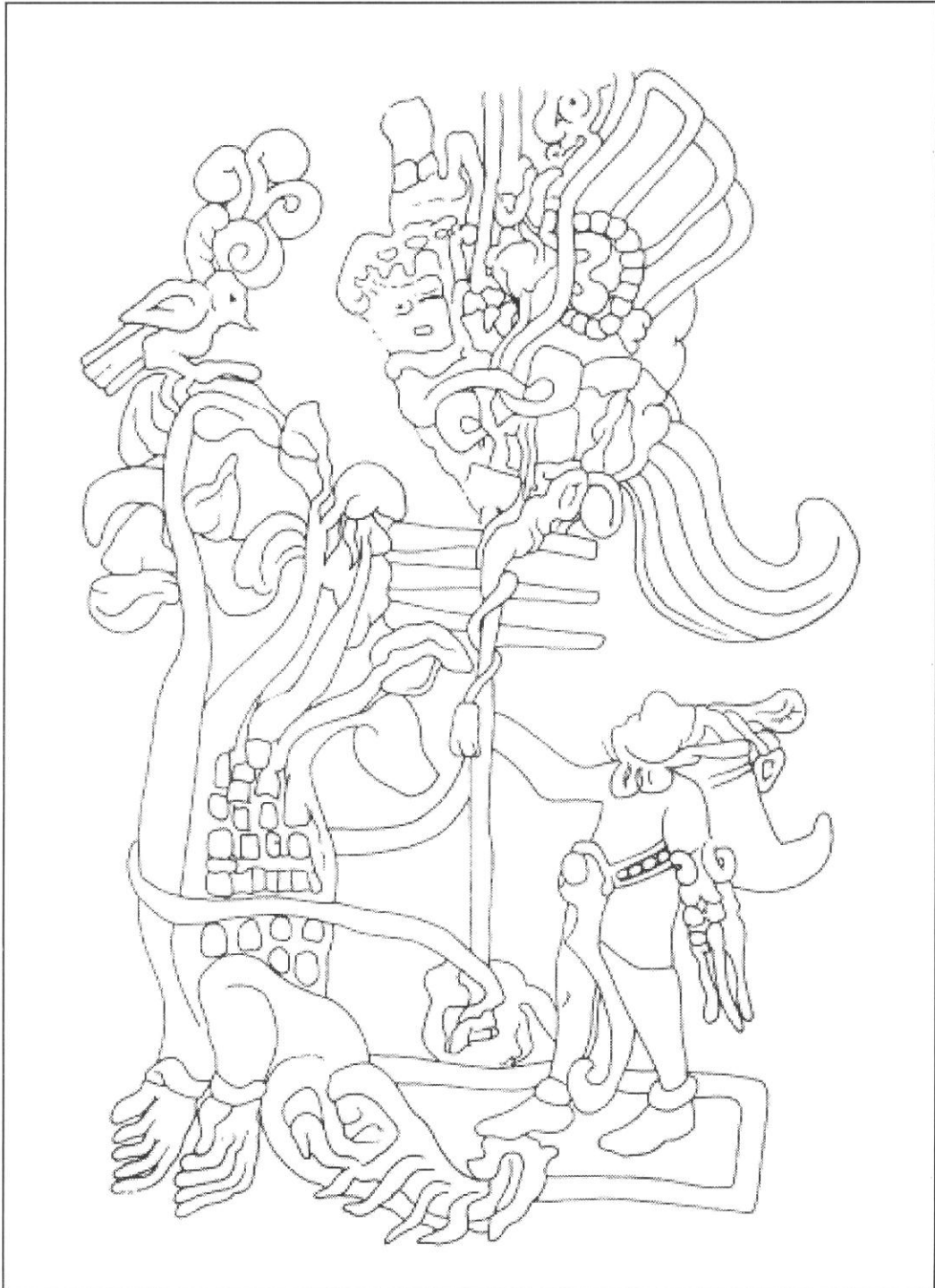Fig. 5 - Detail of the carving of the Smooth Stela from Monte Alban (according to J. Acosta, 1958-59).

Fig. 6 - Relief carved on stela 25 from Izapa, Chiapas (according to Th. A. Lee & G.W. Lowe, 1968).
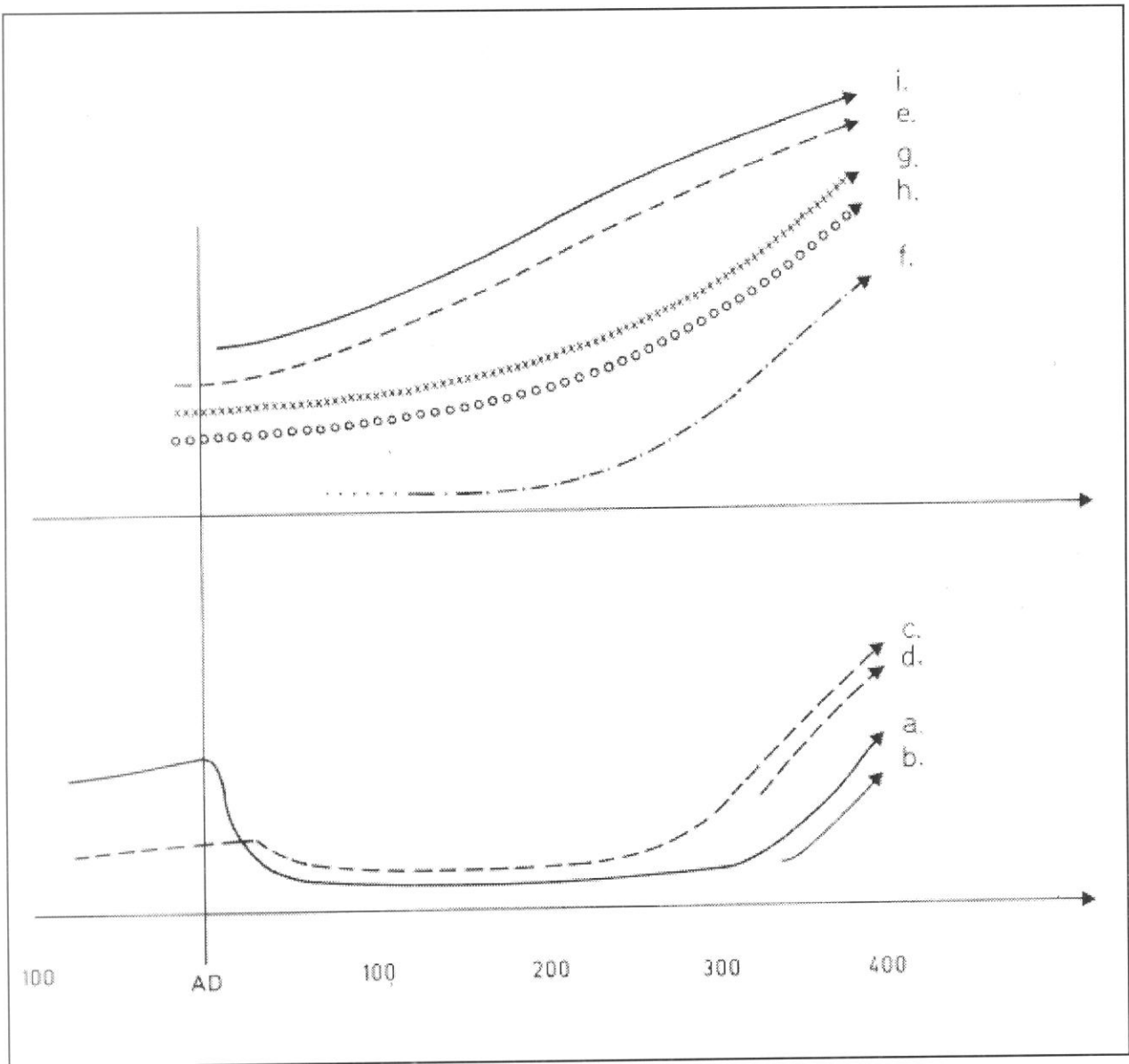
Fig. 7 - Relative behaviour of central Oaxaca's most common figurative vessels and funerary urns during periods I and II (according to A. Caso & I. Bernal, 1952).

    a. Cocijo

    b. God with the head of Cocijo in its headdress

    c. God with a serpent mask

    d. Companion urn

    e. Jaguar sculptures

    f. Old god 5F

    g. God with a broad-beaked bird helmet

    h. Brazier with a tiger head (sic) and a broad-beaked bird mark

    i. Bat sculptures