Bridging the Gaps

Integrating Archaeology and History in Oaxaca, Mexico

A Volume in Memory of Bruce E. Byland

EDITED BY DANNY ZBOROVER AND PETER C. KROEFGES

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Mythstory and Archaeology

Of Earth Goddesses, Weaving Tools, and Buccal Masks

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GEOFFREY'S MEMORIES OF BRUCE BYLAND AND THE TAMAZULAPAN SURVEY

Shortly after publishing our "Engendering Tomb 7" paper (M McCafferty 1994), I was accosted by a Real Oaxacan Archaeologist "what gives you the authority to write about Oaxaca!?" Bruce Bylanc of the credit and blame. On a cold and dreary day in State Colleg way back in 1977, my former college roommate Dave Reed ran student Bruce posting notices in the Anthropology Department of on his archaeological survey project in the Mixteca Alta. Always ı ture and looking to get out of the snow, my buddy Dave signed on altruism, signed me up, too. I promptly quit my job digging ditche (the job for which my BA in ancient Near Eastern archaeology be and flew south. Over the next eleven months I wandered the hills a Tamazulapan Valley in Bruce's considerable shadow.

The Tamazulapan Valley survey was run on a shoestring, as exem weekends when we visited Richard Blanton's posh Valley of Oaxa to splash in the pool, play volleyball with Oaxacan aristocracy, and opulence. In Tamazulapan we shared a two-room house behind tl ened at dawn by the bell and loudspeaker (which played only C and with our lab in the pig pen that we shared with Henrietta un demise and consumption (figure 5.1). Shortly after that sad occasic

FIGURE 5.1. Bruce Byland with Carel McCafferty in the Tamazulapan ceramic laboratory. Photo by Geoffrey McCafferty.

swelled with the arrival of a summer team of Tennessee volunteers; we remodeled the Henrietta Suite for the newbies.

The Tamazulapan Valley is located on the western edge of the Mixteca Alta, adjacent to Teposcolula, Yanhuitlán, Coixtlahuaca, and Huajuapan de Leon further west. Bruce had originally planned a more comprehensive study that would have included a survey of the Teposcolula Valley as well as more intensive surveys of select sites encountered during the general reconnaissance. These plans were mostly abandoned due to time constraints, though the Pueblo Viejo site outside of Tamazulapan was subjected to more-intensive survey using a survey grid of the site center (figure 5.2). Another innovation that Bruce introduced was the use of 30- meter transects intervals, based on the typical size of a "household cluster"; thus the research design hoped for the identification of all site types at the house level or greater.

Before initiating the project, of course, it was necessary to obtain our INAH permit, and because of the recent election of the Echeverría government, the process was delayed. Consequently we spent a month or more in Oaxaca city, waiting. We stayed at the old Mansion Imperial hotel on the *Parque el Llano* near the current INAH offices. Among other things, we worked in the Cuilapan bodega to rebag artifacts from Ron Spores's Nochixtlán survey that had been scattered by a recent

FIGURE 5.2. Bruce Byland, Deb McCafferty, and Ken Jones survey the "Pueblo Viejo." Photo by Geoffrey McCafferty.

earthquake. Considering the rudimentary ceramic sequence of the time, this was a very useful task, and when we finally hit the field we were armed with the practical knowledge that: if painted, it's Postclassic; if incised, Preclassic; and if neither, Classic. Woefully, thirty-five years later the practical wisdom for field identification is not much more developed.

Byland's survey recognized 228 sites in the Tamazulapan Valley, ranging from isolated features such as a maguey roasting pit to fortified hilltop sites, and from a dry cave off the road toward Coixtlahuaca with Early Formative pottery to remains of the Colonial chapel at Pueblo Viejo. The major site of Yatachio, outside of the congregated town of Tamazulapan, the elite houses on the ridge above Tejupan, and the large obsidian-processing site at Yucuchicano are among other sites crying out for more investigation. One of the "aha!" moments came when Ron Spores brought us an image of Colonial Tejupan from the *Relaciones Geográficas* and we spent evenings comparing the map with the survey data, identifying roads, palaces, and defensive walls on the mountain citadel. This integration of ethnohistorical and archaeological data shaped both of our career paths and may have contributed in some small way to the conceptualization of this volume. Much of the Tamazulapan

myself, though for brief periods the group featured such notables as Chip Stanish and Larry Gorenflo. My sister Deb even joined us for a month and commemorated her experience by creating a Mixtec codex of the project.

Every time I revisit the Tamazulapan Valley and its generous people, I yearn to continue Bruce's program. And maybe one day I will set aside my other projects and do just that. Meanwhile, Sharisse and I continue to putter on the fringes of Oaxacan archaeology, using codices and other armchair resources to keep in touch with the field and its practitioners. Thanks, Bruce!

FEMALE EARTH/FERTILITY CULTS AND SACRED LANDSCAPES

Shared religious themes are one of the important linkages that support the idea of Mesoamerica as a common cultural area (Kirchhoff 1952). One particularly prominent characteristic is the representation of members of the female earth/fertility cults from across the region and through time. For example, aspects of the young goddess, affiliated with the moon, sexuality, and domestic crafts (especially spinning and weaving) are clearly parallel in the goddesses Xochiquetzal of the Aztecs, Ix Chel of the Maya, and 13 Flower of the Mixtecs (Nicholson 1971; Sullivan 1982; Tate 1999).

Another parallel is that aspect of the cult relating to the earth and the cycle of birth and death. The most detailed description of this goddess comes from the Aztecs, where Cihuacóatl (literally "woman-serpent") was described in the Florentine Codex and the *Primeros Memoriales* (Klein 1988). For example, the goddess Cihuacóatl was associated with both death and rebirth. When delivering a baby, the Aztec midwives would tell the laboring mother to "be like the brave warriors, like Cihuacóatl and Quilaztli" to capture the baby (Sahagún 1950–1982, Book 6:167). Cihuacóatl was known to wear white face paint, like a skull, and obsidian earspools (Sahagún 1997). She carried a weaving batten, or *tzotzopaztli*, that in the hands of a female priestess could be used as a sacrificial knife. Small amaranth-dough effigies were ceremonially cut open with battens during mountain worship (Sahagún 1950–1982, Book 2:29).

A characteristic of Cihuacóatl, at least in the pictorial manuscripts such as the Codex Magliabechiano (1983) and Codex Borbonicus (1979), was the costume element of a skeletal buccal mask. In these scenes the goddess is shown with what appears to be a human mandible as her lower jaw, while carrying a batten as her diagnostic staff (figure 5.3). Cecelia Klein (1988) has written extensively about Cihuacóatl, especially of the multiple roles of the goddess and her priestesses. While the goddess herself took on the attributes described above, relating to

Figure 5.3. Cihuacóatl, with characteristic skeletal mandible, in the Codex Magliabechiano (1983:45). Illustration by John M.D. Pohl.

death and childbirth, priestesses of her cult served as oracles and political advisors (see also Pohl 1984). In a third element of this complex, the military advisor to the Aztec *tlatoani* held the office of Cihuacóatl, as represented in the Durán Codex (1971) where the *tlatoani*, or first speaker, observes a sacrificial ritual while accompanied by his Cihuacóatl, as denoted by the small glyph of a female head and serpent. Tlacaelel was a prominent Cihuacóatl under several of the early Aztec rulers and received his title and insignias of office as a result of leading a victorious conquest of city-states in the southern Basin of Mexico where the goddess Cihuacóatl was revered (Klein 1988).

John Pohl (1984) has pointed out parallels between the Aztec goddess Cihuacóatl and the Mixtec Lady 9 Grass, a prominent character in several codices where she fills at least two of the prominent roles of Cihuacóatl. For example, in the "War of Heaven" depicted in the Codex Nuttall, Lady 9 Grass is shown with a skeletal head and axe as she battles the "Stone Men" along with the Mixtec culture hero Lord 9 Wind. In this scene from mythical time, she is portrayed as one of the primordial deities engaged in establishing the Mixtec world. In other scenes, however, the skeletal-jawed Lady 9 Grass is depicted at the Temple of Skull, perhaps Chalcatongo, where she acts as an oracle and political counsel to visiting mortals such as Lady 6 Monkey of Jaltepec. For example, after being insulted by the "flinty words" of her enemies in the Codex Selden (1964), Lady 6 Monkey is counseled by 9 Grass and then attacks, captures, and sacrifices her opponents (figure 5.4). In the Codex Nuttall, a dispute between Lady 6 Monkey and Lord 8 Deer is resolved at the Temple of Skull by Lady 9 Grass.

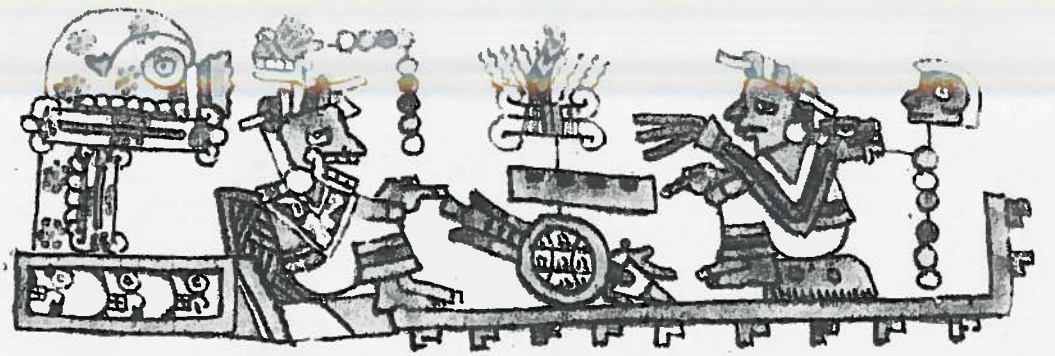

FIGURE 5.4. Lady 9 Grass giving council at the Temple of Skull (Codex Selden 1964:7). Illustration by John M.D. Pohl.

The goddess herself is characterized by the deity in full skeletal head, while the political office-holders are more simply depicted by the skeletal mandible. Possibly related to this symbol is the calendar sign for "grass," which in the Mixtec system of notation is represented as a tuft of long grass emerging from a skeletal jawbone. Skeletal jaws are also a prominent feature in Maya calendrics, representing a framing element in the head variants of numerals 14 through 19, though this may be a coincidental parallel between the two calendrical systems.

Spinning and weaving were other activities intimately related to female productivity, but metaphorically were also linked to sexual intercourse and reproduction (Sullivan 1982). If marriage was a necessary act for a woman to acquire *yee*, or reproductive power, could spinning and weaving be an alternative, or surrogate, method for a woman to charge her political powers? This could therefore relate to the codical representation and mortuary practice of interring spinning and weaving implements as symbolic testimony of female power.

An example of spinning and weaving tools as emblems symbolic of lineage and political power is presented in a story recorded in Mitla in the 1930s (Parsons 1936:222–223, 324–328). The characters include Sus Ley (an old female supernatural), her husband (the earth/fertility god), her brother (the rain god), and Sus Ley's adopted son and daughter. The adopted children killed Sus Ley's husband and then fled the widow's wrath, taking her weaving tools with them. Sus Ley and her brother followed in close pursuit. Whenever it seemed that Sus Ley and her brother were going to catch the two children, they threw down one of the weaving tools, which became mountains in the path of the pursuing kin. The children eventually escaped after creating a new cultural landscape, and they became transformed into the sun and the moon.

Several points are of interest. First, the story is about two competing lineages. The younger lineage steals the weaving tools of the rival matriarch—her symbols

of power. The young usurpers use these tools to create their own landscape, which repels their political rivals. For the Mixtec, at least, geographic space was inextricably tied to the lineage that ruled it (Pohl and Byland 1990). In creating its own landscape, the younger lineage created its own domain and placed itself prominently in the cosmos as the sun and moon.

Similar interrelationships are found among the Mixtec and the Huichol. Landscape revelation as a prerequisite to the initiation of celestial movement is found in the Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus (1974). This creation story is divided into two main sections. In the first, the culture hero Lord 9 Wind raises the waters from the surface of the earth to reveal the Mixtec landscape for the first time. Nine and a half pages of the codex list the place signs of the revealed geography. This revelation is concluded by a ritual featuring sixteen knotted cords, a "knot-bound" mountain and, finally, symbols of the three layers of the revealed Mixtec cosmos (Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus 1974: 38). If the Mixtecs did conceive of the landscape as woven, then it would be consistent for a knotting ritual to formalize it, just as the warp threads of a cloth woven on a backstrap loom must be knotted to prevent unraveling. With the geography stabilized, the second half of the Mixtec creation story—the first rising of the sun and the initiation of *yee* circulation throughout the cosmos—could begin.

Another solar/weaving/landscape trope is found in contemporary Huichol cosmology (Schaefer 1990). Each unit of the Huichol loom is associated with a specific feature of the ritual landscape, with the various battens and heddle bars named after specific mountains or communities. These loom parts were ordered from east to west (top to bottom), and thus the loom becomes a veritable map of geographic space, recreating the path of the sun as it follows the peyote trail. The use of spinning and weaving tools as modifiers of both Mixtec and Zapotec place glyphs may be specific references to a "woven" landscape.

Could there be a deeper, supernatural significance as well, perhaps relating to an earth goddess who "wove" the earth's surface into a cultural landscape (cf. Klein 1982)? The characteristic association between the Aztec earth/fertility goddess Cihuacóatl and weaving battens, and Lady 9 Grass with a weaving pick (Codex Nuttall 1975:20-II), may parallel this theme. Were weaving tools necessary to ceremonially reconfigure the dynastic/geographical structures? By considering the possible ties between dynastic foundations, the landscape, and weaving tools, the actions of Lady 3 Flint (Shell Quechquemitl) on page 15 of the Codex Nuttall (1975) may be explained (figure 5.5). In the scene that fills two-thirds of the page, Lady 3 Flint and her husband have arrived for the first time at the Temple of the Ascending Serpent. This is to be the capital of their new kingdom. At the center of the scene, Lady 3 Flint and two priests stand at the foot of the Mountain of Sand

FIGURE 5.5. Lady 3 Flint (Shell Quechquemitl) "weaving" the cultural landscape of Ascending Serpent place (Codex Nuttall 1975:15). Illustration by John M.D. Pohl.

and present offerings to this focal point of the landscape. Lady 3 Flint holds an incense brazier in one hand and a decorated weaving pick in the other. Like the children in the legend of Sus Ley, she utilizes a weaving tool to transform the landscape into a home for her new lineage.

By interpreting the potential for weaving tools to function as symbols of gathering, consolidation, and transformation, women were identified as those members of the marriage unit who held the power to create a lineage, and symbolically to reconfigure the cultural landscape. As individual married women came into their own symbolically as powerful political players, their stereotypical tools of production functioned as material metaphors for the consolidation of lineage and landscape. Female power in ancient Oaxaca was conceived as a force that could quite literally weave the fabric of a new kingdom together or sever the cords of alliance between one polity and another.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

From an archaeological perspective, material correlates of spinning and weaving tools and buccal masks have been found in prominent ritual contexts and provide important insights into the possible roles of members of the earth/fertility deity complex. All were found together at Tomb 7 of Monte Albán by Alfonso Caso (1969), but other elements have been found in tombs from Zaachila and Mitla, as well as in other deposits. Bone weaving tools have been discussed in previous

articles (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994, 2003) and include small battens and picks, sometimes elaborately carved with Mixtec codex–style imagery, but in other cases undecorated.

Skeletal jaws have been discovered and may offer some additional insights. Several buccal masks were uncovered in the famous Tomb 7 of Monte Albán, one of the richest burials known from the pre-Columbian world, which was excavated by Alfonso Caso in 1932 (Caso 1969). The principal skeleton of Tomb 7, Individual A, was interred in a flexed, seated position against the west wall of the two-chambered, east-west oriented tomb (Caso 1969; McCafferty and McCafferty 1994). Individual A has ambiguous sexable characteristics but was interpreted as male by Caso and his physical anthropologist Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla, though we have since suggested a possible female identification based in part on female grave goods (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994). An engendered interpretation of the associated objects, including numerous pieces identifiable as part of a spinning and weaving kit, is clear: these correspond well with characteristic traits of the Postclassic female earth/fertility deity complex (McCafferty and McCafferty 1991). Diagnostic artifacts include thirty-four carved bone tools resembling small weaving battens, as well as spindle whorls, onyx and crystal spinning bowls, and a carved bone comb. A large gold amulet depicts a spider, an animal that is closely related to spinning and weaving in Mesoamerican mythology (Taube 1983) and that is specifically mentioned in Mixtec lore as the inspiration used in primordial times to "invent" the spinning technique.

Two objects from Tomb 7 specifically relate to Sahagún's (1997) description of the Aztec goddess Cihuacóatl: turquoise mosaic inlays in a batten and weaving pick parallel his description of the goddess's tools from the *Primeros Memoriales*, and finely polished obsidian earspools are a costume element of Cihuacóatl. As noted previously, weaving battens are one of the central symbols of the goddess, and the intricately carved battens from Tomb 7 were likely powerful icons of the cult. One of the carved bones actually depicts a female, Lady 9 Reed, holding an object that Caso (1969:192) identified as a batten. Lady 13 Flower similarly holds a batten and spindle with whorl in the Codex Nuttall (1975:19), though the deity 9 Grass, most similar to Cihuacóatl, does not use this symbol.

Included among the scattered bones of nine individuals in Tomb 7 were five additional mandibles, described as being perforated and painted for ceremonial use (Caso 1969:61; Rubín de la Borbolla 1969). These were identified as belonging to adult male individuals, and all came from Region 6 of the tomb, farthest from Individual A (McCafferty and McCafferty 2003). These would be the physical manifestations of the buccal masks illustrated in the codices. Interestingly, one of the most famous of the gold objects from Tomb 7 depicts an individual with a

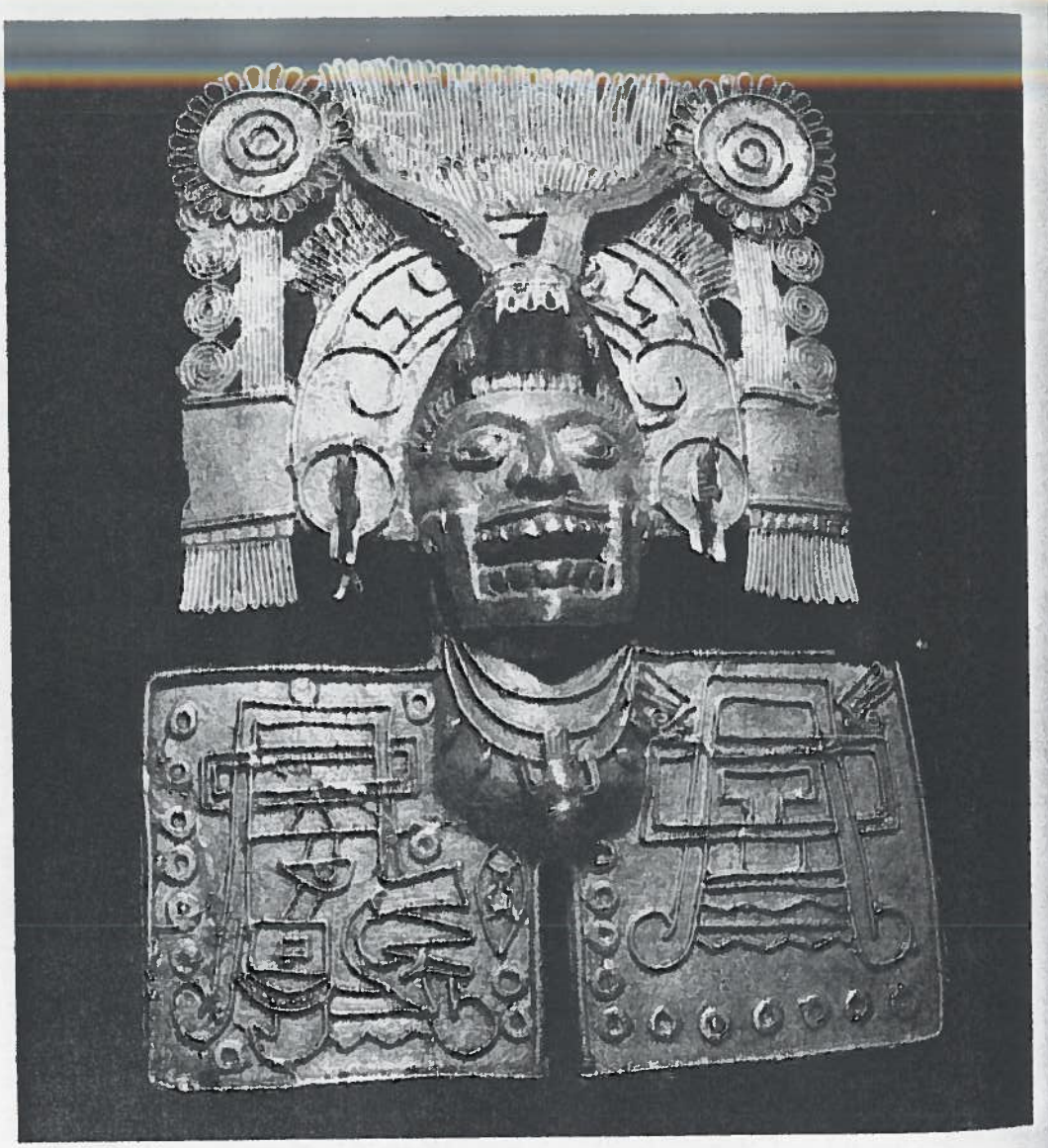

FIGURE 5.6. Golden pendant showing face with skeletal mandible from Tomb 7, Monte Albán. Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca. Photo by Danny Zborover.

skeletal jaw (figure 5.6) and wearing a headdress similar to the one worn by Lady 3 Flint/Shell Quechquemitl (Codex Nuttall 1975:14), who wears spindle whorls in her headdress.

Another object found in Tomb 7 that ties in with the skeletal theme was an incense burner made out of a human skull with a hole cut out of the crown of the head. It was covered with an amaranth-dough paste, known as *tzoalli*, which acted as glue for small mosaic plaques of jade, turquoise, and shell. Notably, one of the perforated and painted mandibles was found in association with this skull incense

FIGURE 5.7. Carved human mandible. Museo Rufino Tamayo, Oaxaca City. Photo by Danny Zborover.

burner (Caso 1969:61). Similar skull idols are known from the Codex Nuttall (1975:6, 10), where they are associated with Lady 9 Monkey. Numerous extra pieces of shell were found that may have come from similar *incensarios*, perhaps of more perishable materials such as pure *tzoalli* or wood.

Other decorated mandibles are known archaeologically and may have served as buccal masks in ceremonial contexts, or perhaps as other costume elements. Winter and Urcid (1990) point out that one of the individuals depicted in a stucco relief from Lambityeco wears a human mandible on his forearm, while in other scenes human long bones are carried, perhaps as symbols of inheritance. An elaborately carved mandible was found at Eloxochitlan, in the Mazatec region of northern Oaxaca. It features a floral motif in a cartouche, identified as Glyph D from the *Ñuiñe* calendrical system, and also a numerical element of a single dot, indicating the number 1 (Winter and Urcid 1990). A similar carved mandible is on display at the Museo Rufino Tamayo in Oaxaca (figure 5.7).

In recent excavations at the site of Macuilxóchitl in the Valley of Oaxaca, another fragment of a carved human mandible was found. The project was part of highway expansion between Oaxaca and Mitla, and excavations took place at several mounds along the right of way (Markens et al. 2008). All of the mounds dated to the Late Classic Xoo phase (600–900 CE), but also featured Early Postclassic Liobaa phase (900–1200 CE) ritual activities, perhaps relating to ancestor veneration. For

FIGURE 5.8. Carved human mandible from Macuilxóchitl. Photo by Geoffrey McCafferty.

example, an adolescent was buried on the north-facing staircase of Mound 36 at the midpoint, suggesting ritual interment, and common artifacts found in the post-abandonment fill were long-handled incense burners, miniature vessels, and urn fragments. Mound 55 was probably a temple, based on its small size and steep sides. Ceremonial objects such as the aforementioned *sahumadores* and miniatures were common, and a large fragment of a hollow ceramic jaguar figure was found at the base of the staircase. Also found was a carved human mandible, featuring intricately carved bird images among volute designs (figure 5.8).

CONCLUSIONS

The combination of ethnohistorical and archaeological data can provide a richer perspective on the pre-Columbian past. Greater reliability can be gained for interpretations of the prehistoric or protohistoric past using the direct historical approach (Marcus and Flannery 1994). More typically, however, ambiguous or even contradictory evidence muddies what we generally hope to be clear insights.

Spinning and weaving tools used for the symbolic creation of the cosmos or modified human mandibles are examples of this. Was the metaphoric association of weaving with sexual reproduction invoked by members of the earth/fertility cult during other acts of creation? Were buccal masks worn as part of a ritual mask, as insignia for priestesses of the earth/fertility cult? Or as arm bands to signify lineage? Or were they part of complex icons of the deity herself? Did the association of the mandible with oracles, as in Codex Selden (1964), indicate that they could communicate with deified ancestors? The complexity of these possible interpretations is precisely what makes this an interesting exercise. Past cultures were varied, and finding simplistic solutions is just that: overly simplistic. We recognize and celebrate the diversity represented by this fascinating data set and offer the study of the mythstory and archaeology of buccal masks as an example of the wonderful potential for a multidisciplinary approach to Oaxacan archaeology.

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