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Danzantes of Building L at Monte Albán



Research Year: 1994

Culture: Zapotec

Chronology: Classic

Location: Oaxaca, México

Site: Monte Albán

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Abstract

The supporting grant provided by FAMSI in January of 1994 enabled me to continue my studies at the important PreColumbian city of Monte Albán until the end of March, 1994.

I had worked in a voluntary capacity at Monte Albán since September 1993, under the direction of Marcus Winter, for the Proyecto Especial Monte Albán. My FAMSI project was conceived due to the imminent need to record excavations undertaken in the North Tunnel of Building L, to determine the construction sequence of this structure, and to document the poorly known area north of Building L (Area L-North).

The Danzantes wall of Building L at Monte Albán is perhaps the sole structure at this site with its sculptural program in primary context. The Danzantes sculptures are pecked figures with some hieroglyphs carved on the surface of removable stone slabs or blocks which faced rubble core structures as revetment walls. Some slabs have been recarved with two or more Danzantes. The Danzantes figures are considered by several researchers to represent sacrificed individuals, probably captives of war (refer to discussion in Orr 1997). This type of carving dates to the Late Formative period and seems to appear with the foundation of Monte Albán. The profusion of these carvings (more than 300 known) indicates an emphasis on this form of power during the initial development of the mountain-top capital city. Clearly, an understanding of how these carvings functioned in the architectural-sculptural programming of early Monte Albán is critical to discussions of elite political strategy and the Late Formative political configuration of the city and other valley centers with which it interacted. The Danzantes wall is the sole location in which the Danzante carvings are found in situ. The wall has been built over and modified. The original structure which it faced has been buried and truncated by later construction activities. Earlier excavations in the area yielded important data, however, the explorations of the Proyecto Especial provided a unique opportunity to determine the construction sequences of the area and to reconstruct the type of structure decorated by Danzantes carvings and how such structures functioned in ritual. In addition, the area between Building L and System IV (Area L-North, Figure 4), which bore a significant relationship to the Danzantes building in its early stages of construction, was cleared, consolidated, tested, and recorded by myself and supervising archaeologist Miroslava Zúñiga Vásquez.

Resumen

La beca de apoyo otorgada por FAMSI en enero de 1994 me permitió continuar con mis estudios en la importante ciudad precolombina de Monte Albán hasta fines de marzo de ese mismo año. Había estado trabajando como voluntaria en ese sitio desde septiembre de 1993, bajo la dirección de Marcus Winter, para el Proyecto Especial Monte Albán. Mi proyecto para FAMSI fue concebido debido a la inminente necesidad de registrar las excavaciones emprendidas en el Túnel Norte del Edificio L, para determinar la secuencia constructiva de esta estructura, y para documentar el área poco conocida al norte del Edificio L (Área L-Norte).

El muro de los Danzantes del Edificio L de Monte Albán es tal vez sea la única estructura del sitio que tiene su programa escultórico en su contexto primario. Las esculturas de los Danzantes son figuras picadas en la piedra con algunos jeroglifos grabados en la superficie de losas de piedra removibles, o en bloques que miraban

hacia un núcleo estructural de ripio como muros de revestimiento. Algunas losas habían sido re-esculpidas con dos o más Danzantes. Varios expertos son de la opinión que las figuras de los Danzantes representan individuos sacrificados, probablemente cautivos de guerra (véase la discusión en Orr 1997). Este tipo de esculturas está fechado para el período Formativo Tardío y parece hacer su aparición con la fundación de Monte Albán. La profusión de estas tallas (se conocen más de 300), muestra un énfasis en esta forma de poder durante el desarrollo inicial de esta ciudad capital asentada en lo alto de la montaña. Está claro que llegar a entender cómo funcionaban estas tallas en el programa arquitectónico-escultural de la primera Monte Albán, constituye un punto crítico para las discusiones sobre las estrategias políticas de la élite y la configuración política de la ciudad en el Formativo Tardío, y de otros centros del valle con los cuales interactuaba. El muro de los Danzantes es la única localización en la cual los grabados de los Danzantes se encuentran en situ. El muro ha sido reconstruido y modificado. La estructura original que tenía enfrente ha sido enterrada y truncada por actividades constructivas posteriores. Las excavaciones practicadas en el área con anterioridad han arrojado datos de importancia, y sin embargo, las exploraciones del Proyecto Especial representaron una oportunidad única para determinar las secuencias constructivas del área y para reconstruir el tipo de estructuras decoradas con tallas de Danzantes y el papel que jugaban dichas estructuras en los rituales. Además, el área comprendida entre el Edificio L y el Sistema IV (Área L-Norte, [Figura 4](#)), que tenía una relación importante con el edificio de los Danzantes en sus primeras etapas de construcción, fue despejada, consolidada, excavada, y registrada por mí y por la arqueóloga supervisora Miroslava Zúñiga Vázquez.

Submitted 08/01/1994 by:

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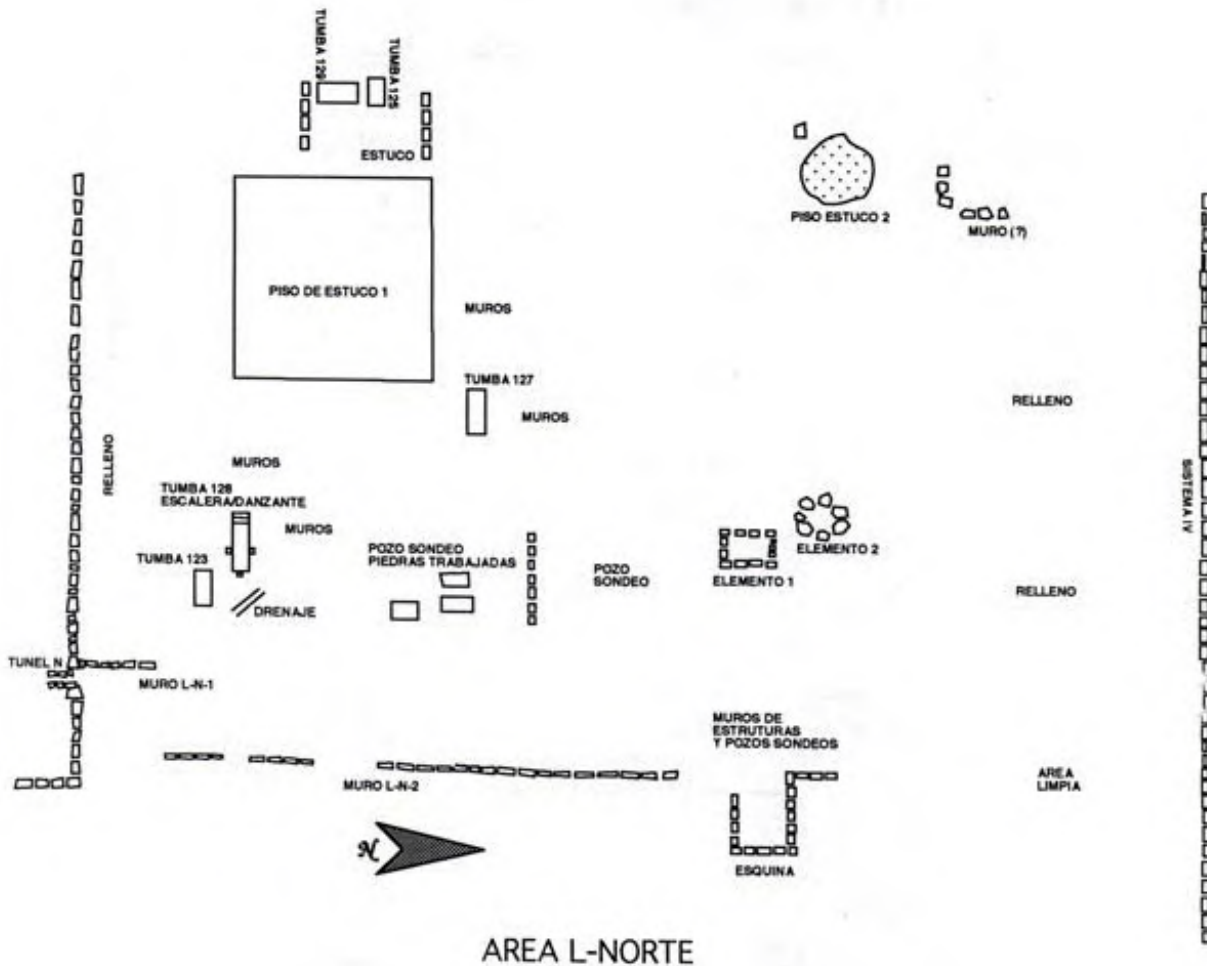


Figure 4. Area L-North, map drawn prior to cleaning, as part of the proposal for work in the area.

Introduction: Monte Albán

Monte Albán is located on the ridges of a series of five hills at the junction (Central Valley) of the three arms of the Valley of Oaxaca (Etla, Zaachila, and Tlacolula) near modern-day Oaxaca city (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The great city was founded atop the steep-sided mountain about 400 m above the valley floor around 500 B.C. Neither earlier excavations (see Caso, Bernal, and Acosta, 1967; Bernal, 1965:797), nor recent explorations by the Proyecto Especial Monte Albán 1992-1994 (Marcus Winter, personal communication, 1993; 1994a) have revealed cultural materials predating this epoch. However, it is clear that the site location itself, particularly the ridge upon which the North Platform was constructed, was probably a sacred mountain-top shrine in earlier periods (Marcus Winter, personal communication, 1994). The location is naturally defensible and probably had a local water supply in antiquity, although none exists today. The steep, rocky sides of the hill would have made farming on any scale

and John Justeson, 1994 Zapotec Workshop, Xth Annual Texas Meetings, Austin). Iconographic analysis thus plays a central role in our understanding of the carved and painted images of this region and is, in fact, a primary tool for interpretations of PreColumbian Zapotec culture in the Valley of Oaxaca.

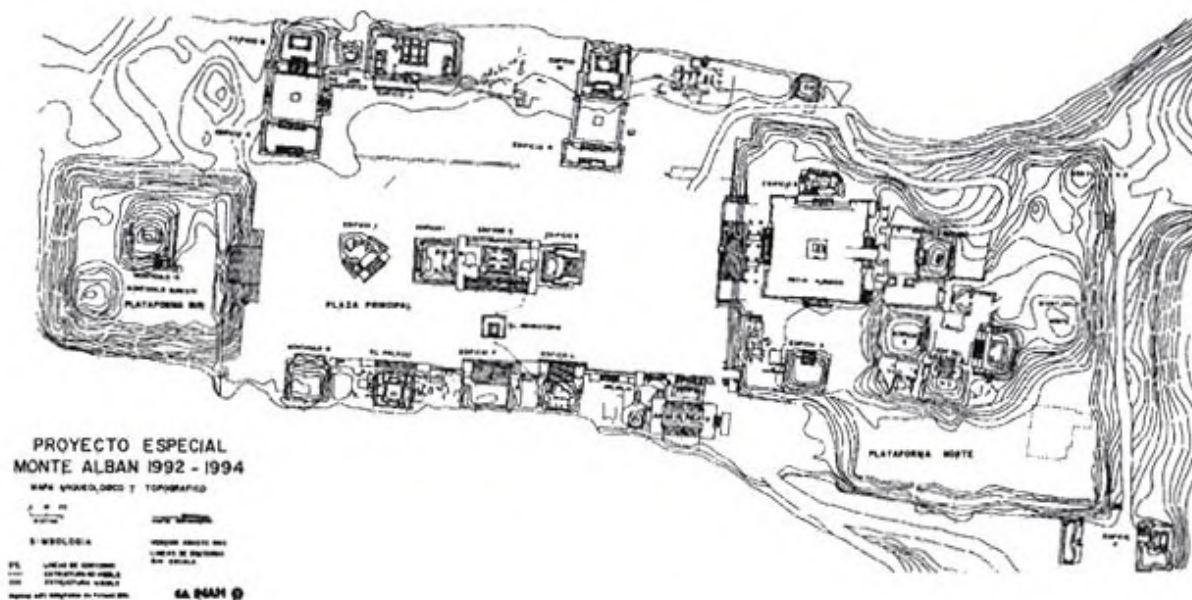


Figure 2. Proyecto Especial archaeological and topographical map of Monte Albán.

The Danzantes carvings at Monte Albán and the carved ballplayers of Mound A at the site of Dainzú represent the two largest Late Formative corpi of monumental sculpture in the Valley of Oaxaca. Particularly in consideration of the significance of iconography to research in this field, it will be clear in the following discussion that the importance of Building L (the Danzantes Building) at Monte Albán cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, explorations undertaken to increase our understanding of this structure and its function have special value to Mesoamerican studies as a whole.

Building L

Sequential construction over the ca. 1300-year period of occupation at Monte Albán has largely obscured the Formative period configuration of the site (Monte Albán I: 500 B.C. – 200 B.C., Monte Albán II: 200 B.C. – A.D. 200) (Figure 3). However, earlier excavations and recent finds by the Proyecto Especial have revealed extensive Monte Albán I and II construction concentrated in the areas of the North Platform and the western flank of the Main Plaza (Acosta, 1965; Caso, 1938; Winter, 1994 a and b)

([Figure 2](#)). An early date (Period II) has also recently been encountered for the South Platform (Gustavo Gamez, personal communication, 1994).

The earlier excavations of Caso and Acosta revealed features which are of particular interest to my own investigations. A Monte Albán I platform structure and temple was found inside the Classic configuration of Mound K, the largest component of System IV (Acosta, 1965). The characteristic Period I talud-sloping wall of the structure is 6 m high and the temple has two rubble masonry columns. The wall is formed of uncarved monumental stone slabs, upwards of a meter in dimension. The construction method is identical to that of the Danzantes wall (below), in that rows of vertically set stones alternate with rows of horizontally set stones. The platform wall may have been an extension of the Danzantes platform wall, originally appearing as one structure, or may represent another similar structure of a type preferred in the period. At the time this report was written and submitted in 1994, the Proyecto Especial mapping crew is scheduled to take orientations and measurements from Area L-Norte-Muro 1 (see below), the Danzantes wall, and the Monte Albán I wall inside of Mound IV. These orientations should provide data which will enable a more precise interpretation of the relationship of these features to one another.

FASES PARA MONTE ALBAN		
FECHAS APROXIMADAS	FASE	NUMERO DE FASE
1521 - 1600 dC	Convento	
1200 - 1521	Chila	
800 - 1200	Liobaa	Monte albán IV
500 - 800	Xoo	Monte Albán III b
200 - 500	Pitao (transición)	M. A. II - IIIa
100 aC- 200	Niza	M.A. II
400 - 100 aC	Pe	
500 - 400	Danibaan	M.A. I (Ia Ib Ic)

Figure 3. Chronology of Monte Albán, ceramic sequence.

An early adobe frieze (MA-A/Sub-1) located under the patio of Building A in the Southeast corner of the North Platform (Acosta, 1965:816; see diagram in Caso, Bernal, and Acosta, 1967; Urcid, 1994b:64-65), has important implications for interpretations of Late Formative sculptural-architectural programming at Monte Albán (Figure 5). The high relief adobe carving comprises a band of repeating water motifs (Urcid, 1994b:64) surmounted by a truncated register with feather-like designs which also appear to have repeated. The sole published photograph of the frieze shows a portion of the wall which is now destroyed due to tourist traffic (see Acosta, 1965:816). At the time of the writing of this report, the restoration team of the Proyecto Especial had begun the conservation of the entire monument. Arthur Joyce suggests that the context of the frieze was a long,

rectangular niche open to the Main Plaza (personal communication, 1993). Clearly, the platform functioned as a performance area, similar in concept to the stage-like settings of Late Formative - Early Classic Maya structures with enormous stucco masks flanking stairways (e.g. Uaxactún Structure E-VII-sub, H-X-Sub-3, Cerros 5C-2nd, El Mirador El Tigre Pyramid and Dante Pyramid, etc.; see Schele and Freidel 1990 for discussion of this type of structure). I believe that, like the Maya edifices, and significantly, like the Danzantes Building and Mound A at Dainzú, the vibora frieze communicated specific messages in terms of sacred geography and the central role of elite interaction between the human and supernatural worlds. The most outstanding feature of the extant adobe sculpture is a bifid element flanked by projecting goggle-like forms. This element is clearly related to the characteristic serpentine tongue and goggled eyes of Cocijo, the Zapotec Rain-Lightning deity, as found in the effigy urns from this area (see for e.g. Caso and Bernal, 1952; Urcid, 1992). Masson (1994) has demonstrated that Zapotec elite costumed themselves in the guise of Cocijo to facilitate communication with the ancestors. The ancestors in turn could assist in bringing the fertilizing rains (Orr and Masson, 1992; Masson, 1994). Ritual performance within the decorated niche made explicit its symbolism.



Figure 5. The so-called Vibora high relief adobe frieze of the P.S.A., North Platform, Monte Albán. Drawing by Javier Urcid; notations and editions by Heather Orr.

Possibly the most significant known Period I structure is Building L, or the Danzantes Building ([Figure 2](#) and [Figure 8](#)) located in the southwest corner of the present Main Plaza. The full dimensions of this edifice may never be known, as it is presently completely buried by the Classic structure and was clearly truncated by later construction to the North and South. The well-known Monte Albán I Danzantes wall ([Figure 6](#)) with its sculptures of debased, possibly sacrificed victims or captives, was initially recorded and exposed by Dupaix (1806), Sologuren and Belmar, and Leopold Batres (Batres, 1902; see Moll, G., D.W. Patterson Brown, and M. Winter, 1986:12). Excavations were conducted in the area under Alfonso Caso during the Monte Albán Project, 1931-1949 (Caso, 1938 field notes on microfilm I.N.A.H.-C.R.O.; Acosta, 1935; 1948; 1965; Scott, 1978). From the interior of Building L, the wall extends south beyond the Classic dimensions of the structure. In this area, referred to as Mound L', the original pyramidal platform was truncated and overbuilt during Classic times. Test pits excavated in this platform and in the so-called Patio de los Danzantes yielded Period I dates (Marcus Winter, personal communication, 1993; 1994). Caso's investigations exposed a stairway above the stepped platform and buried inside the Classic façade of

Building L. The eleven steps of this feature terminate in a flat stucco platform with earth fill above ([Figure 8](#)). Bernal dated the sherds from this fill to late Monte Albán I (Scott, 1978:32). A test pit was sunk from the stucco platform to bedrock, 7.05 m below, leading Acosta to suggest that this was the first structure erected in the area (Acosta, 1948:12; Scott, 1978:32). Along the stucco platform a spur tunnel was dug to the south, encountering two burials with probable Period II greyware offerings (Scott, 1978:33). No tunnel or test excavations have been made behind the Danzantes wall within the interior of Building L (Scott, 1978:32). The problem of construction sequence is immediately apparent, i.e.: what is the relationship, in terms of building phases, of the Danzantes wall to the stepped platform, and the interior stairway? Additionally, what was the configuration of the original structure? The area with which my research was concerned at the site, the North Tunnel, was originally excavated then reburied by Caso ([Figure 7](#), [Figure 8](#), [Figure 9](#), [Figure 10](#)). This area presents a further challenge to the reconstruction of the structure, since an additional stairway was uncovered (see copy of the Project Report for full discussion).



Figure 6. Drawing of the Danzantes wall from Batres (1902). From Scott 1978.

The Danzantes wall is comprised of huge removable rectangular slabs, designated as "orthostats" by Robertson (1983), which have crudely pecked figural designs. The wall is invaluable in that it is the sole structure where these sculptures exist *in situ*, in primary context. The remainder of the 300-plus Danzantes carvings are found as

reused construction materials within the Classic constructions of Building L and throughout the area of the Main Plaza. Therefore, the sole means of reconstructing the original contexts of these works is through the Danzantes wall. Furthermore, only through additional investigations in the area, such as those conducted by the Proyecto Especial, can the original Danzantes Building be reconstructed and understood in terms of function and architectural programming.

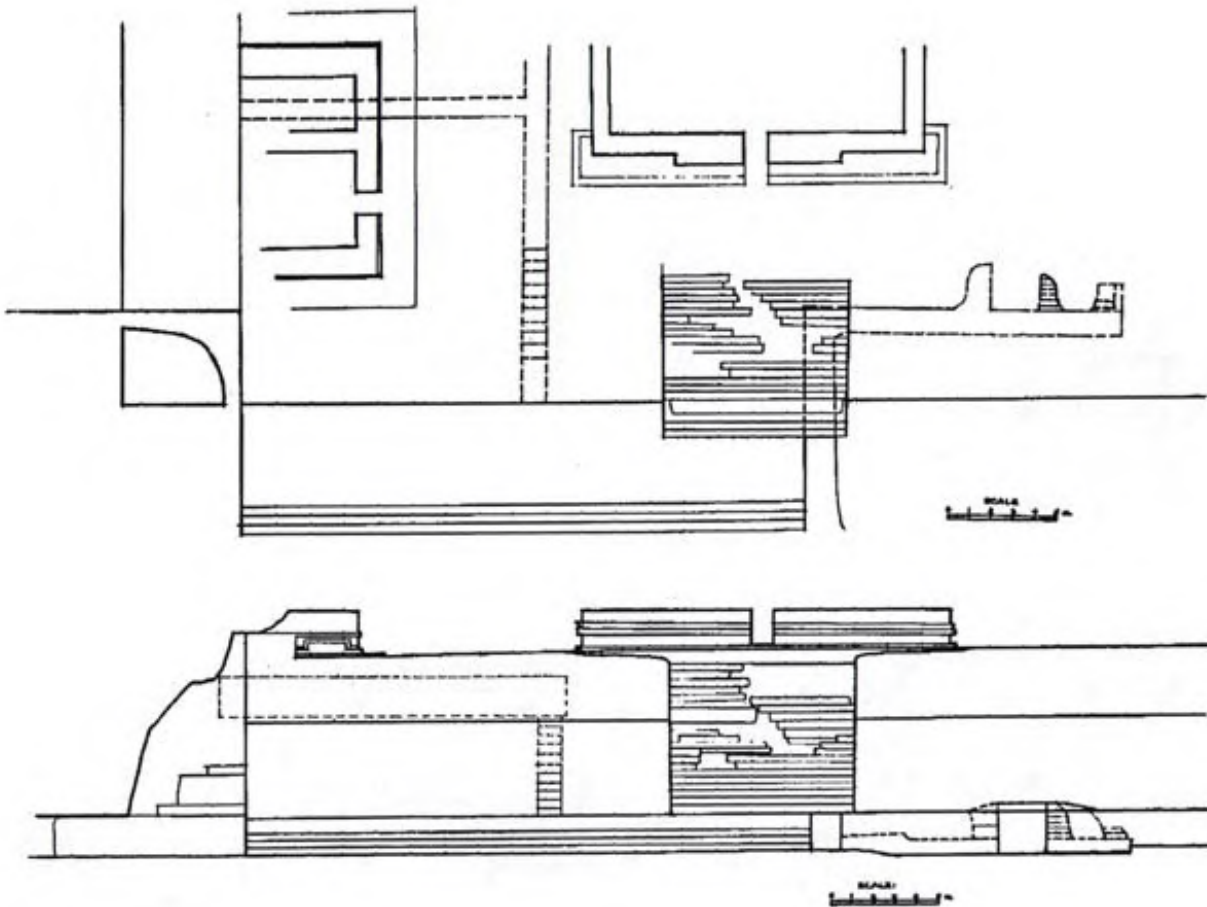


Figure 7. Drawing of Building L-North Tunnel excavations undertaken by Juan Fernandez de la Vega, under the direction of Alfonso Caso. From Scott 1978.

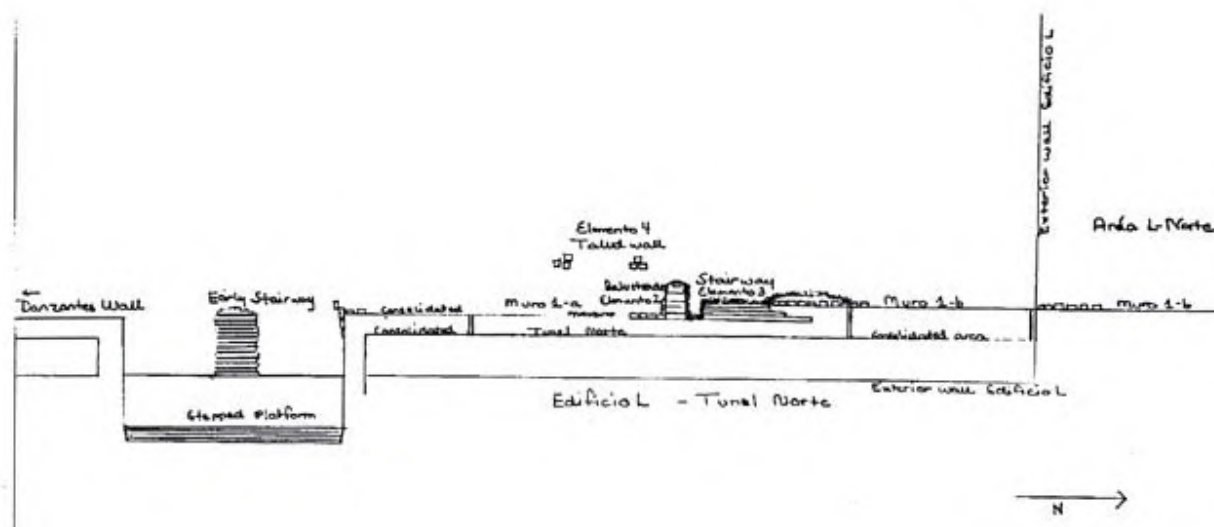


Figure 8. Plan of Building L, showing the Danzantes wall, the stepped platform, the early interior stairway, the North Tunnel and its features, Area L-North. Drawing by Heather Orr, submitted with report on Area L-North Building L-North Tunnel to the Proyecto Especial.

The reuse of carved stones such as the Danzantes is characteristic of PreColumbian Zapotec building techniques and has been discussed in terms of building dedication (Masson and Orr, 1992; 1998). One other carving of the Danzantes type is known elsewhere in the Valley of Oaxaca, at the site of San José Mogote. Monument 3 at this site is a large bas-relief carved stone which was buried in the Rosario Phase corridor between Structures 19 and 14 (Flannery and Marcus, 1990). Marcus has argued in detail for the slain captive reading of the figure on this stone (1976; 1980) and has interpreted the glyph between this personage's legs as his calendrical name One Xoo, or "One Earthquake" (cf. Urcid's reading as *Loo*, "Eye" 1992). Flannery and Marcus (1990) have shown that the stylized stream projecting from the victim's disemboweled trunk flows off the side of the stone precisely as it would on an altar. Urcid (1992; 2001) has identified the circle and triangle "blood symbols" (Flannery and Marcus, 1990) which form the termini of the blood streams as the glyph for blood, found throughout the Valley of Oaxaca and in the Oaxacan Coastal region. The stone was likely reused, since it has clearly been broken in one corner and may originally have faced a rubble core structure such as Building L at Monte Albán (Urcid, 1992; Winter, 1989; cf. Flannery and Marcus, 1990).

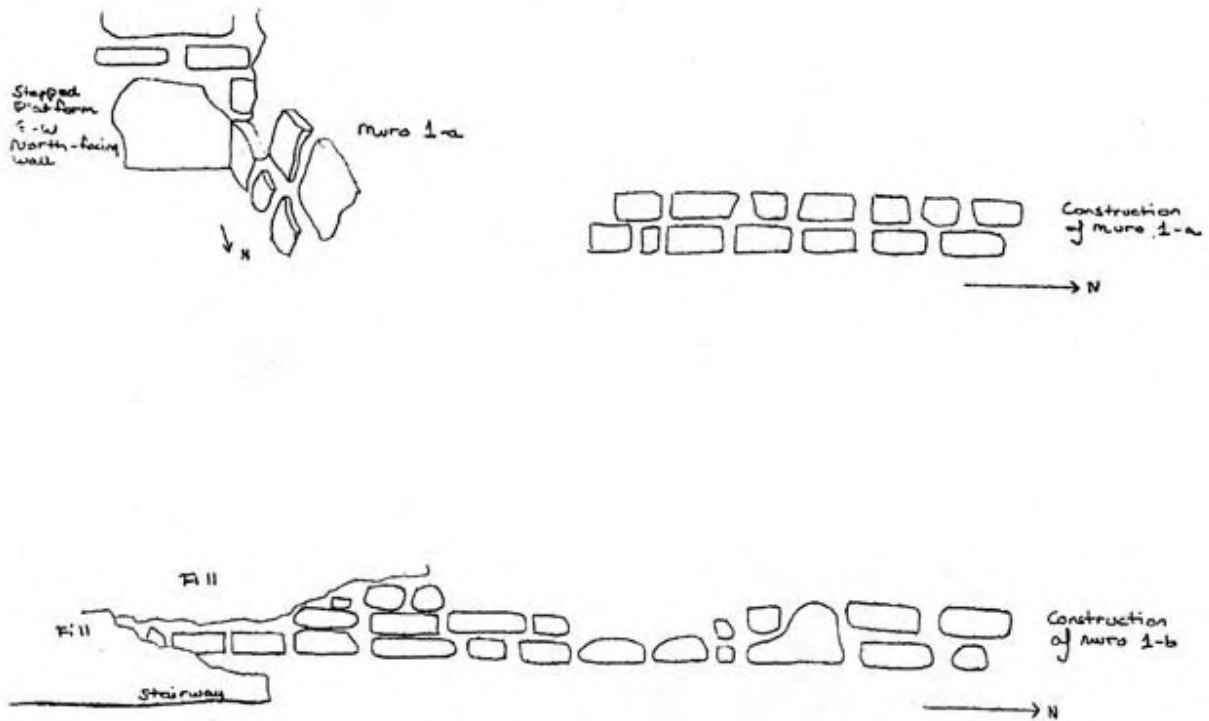


Figure 9. Building L-North Tunnel-Wall 1 a and b, showing construction technique. Drawing by Heather Orr, for Project report.

The Danzante sculptures comprise two broad categories of composition, which have had unfortunate misnomers attached to them. Figures carved in an upright position have been referred to as Danzantes, or "dancers" and those carved to be displayed horizontally have been termed nadadores, or "swimmers." Although the original implication of this nomenclature has been revised in the literature, the term Danzantes is used to refer to the sculptures generally. The Danzantes wall is a revetment wall which covered the façade of Building L. The slabs were originally set in rows of upright Danzantes slabs alternating with rows of horizontal "swimmer" slabs (Scott, 1978; Marcus, 1980). Javier Urcid suggests that the stones were carved *in situ* (personal communication, 1993). Characteristically these sculptures represent nude, limp, sometimes disfigured personages. The eyes are closed, mouths open, teeth are sometimes prominent; the figures wear varying costume elements. Naming glyphs, dates, and some texts are found with several figures, sometimes decorating the bodies (see Urcid, 1992). Several researchers have noted that a number of these carved figures are shown with flowery blood scrolls issuing from the genital area, indicating castration. Although not all scholars are in agreement with such an interpretation, it is quite possible that these represent degraded dead victims of Zapotec warfare (refer e.g. to discussion in Orr 1997).

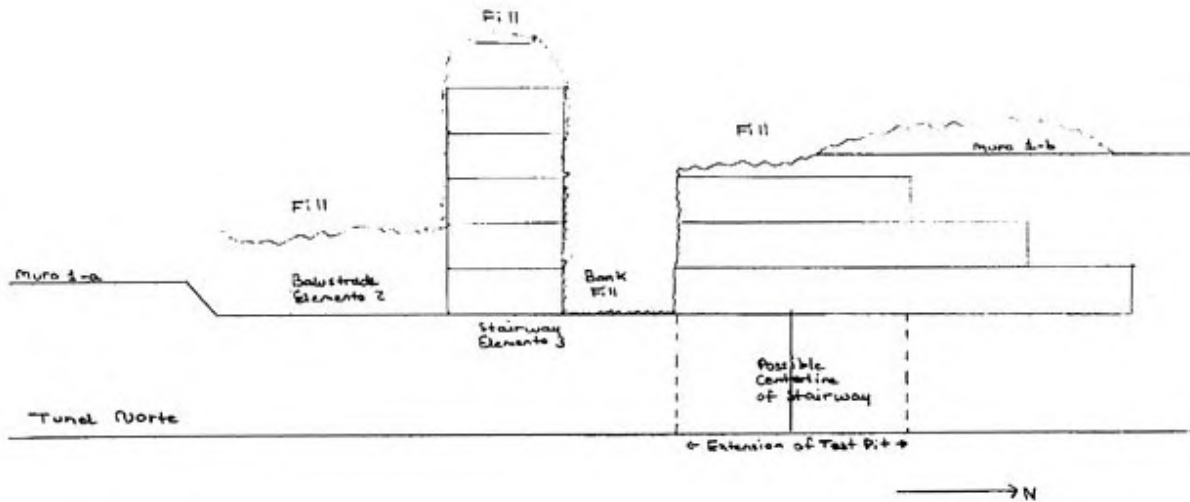


Figure 10. Building L-North Tunnel-Stairway (Elemento 3). Drawing by Heather Orr, for Project report.

Marcus (1976) suggests that these slabs need not represent rival chiefs or nobles, but probably portray lesser villagers taken in raids and skirmishes. This is not consistent with the careful depiction of ornaments, particularly earspools, on most Danzantes. Although many have been stripped of their regalia, this is clearly indicated—for example, holes are delineated in the earlobes where earspools were probably removed following capture. It can be assumed that these ornaments were of elite materials such as jade or obsidian. Robert Blanton (1976) posits that there did not exist a fully centralized power at Monte Albán early in Period I. In this respect, Marcus (1976) interprets the Danzantes as a ritual and symbolic display of potential power—intended by Monte Albán’s newly-founded elite as a way of legitimizing their as yet uninstitutionalized power. However, these are debased images of individuals rather than symbols of potential victims. This is the earliest, originally probably the grandest, and certainly the most extensive monument in the Mesoamerican tradition of displaying captives of war, exemplified in such monuments as the captive sculptures in the Palace of Palenque and the murals of Bonampak (Marcus, 1976; 1980; Flannery and Marcus, 1983; 1990).

Doing the Danzante: A History of Interpretations

A history of theories about the meaning of the Danzantes has been detailed by Scott (1978). With appropriate editions and the inclusion of recent studies, a synopsis of Scott’s discussion is presented here:

Binigulaza

The Binigulaza, or "ancient people of the clouds" are the distant ancestors of the Zapotec people (Parsons, 1936; Cruz, 1936). These giants were turned to stone when the sun first rose (Cruz, 1936). Local Oaxacan folklore refers to the sculptured figures of Building L and elsewhere at Monte Albán as the *Binigulaza* (e.g. see Gómez-Ramírez 1997).

Leopold Batres (1902)

Batres was the first to use the term "dancers" in print, following Dupaix; although he stated that he was using the colloquial name for these objects. The name actually refers to the disjointed and contorted poses of the figures.

Agustin Villagra (1939)

Villagra carried out the first serious analysis of the Danzantes and postulated a commemorative function for the sculptures on the basis of their identifying hieroglyphs. However, Villagra seriously believed that the horizontal Danzantes were swimmers. He supported his interpretation with the bridge-spouted *ollas* from Tomb 111 which have relief figures whose modelled heads turn to one side while their engraved arms seem to bend in a crawl or sidestroke. Wavy lines on these vessels appear to indicate water and the faces are very similar to the Danzantes. Villagra further alluded to Father Burgoa's 1674 account that the Valley of Oaxaca once had a lake and concluded that swimming must have been a "common sight." However, Villagra eventually gave up this interpretation and postulated another, that Monte Albán art used two different types of representation: one explanatory (with glyphs) and one decorative (those without glyphs)—which would then presume that all of the Danzantes without glyphs had no meaning.

Alfonso Caso (1946; 1947)

In his seminal study of the glyphs of Preclassic Monte Albán Caso avoided an interpretation of the meaning of the Danzantes and focused his attention on the glyph slabs of Mound J. These he deciphered in general terms as being glyphic representations of conquered towns, combining three elements: an inverted head, a hill glyph, and a hieroglyphic place name. The individual markings of the inverted heads were taken to signify different kings of the conquered sites, the hill as generally meaning "town" or place, and the glyph on the uppermost part, which in Period III appears within the hill, as naming the conquered local. Secondary texts, comprising calendrical and non-calendrical glyphs often accompany these conquest statements. Caso further described glyphs and other markings on the bodies of the Danzantes as tattooing, and

the markings around the groin as "sexual tattooing." In more recent interpretations, Caso's analysis of the glyphic slabs of Mound J as representing conquered towns has been cited to support the slain captives theory of the Danzantes and to demonstrate a continuity of meaning between the Danzantes Building and Mound J (Scott, 1978; Marcus, 1976). The glyphs accompanying the Danzantes have also been shown to name the figures and/or give dates (Marcus, 1976; 1980; 1983; Urcid, 1992).

Eusebio Davalos Hurtado (1951)

Davalos accepted Caso's idea of "sexual tattooing" but emphasized that this accompanies the absence of genitals. He explored the various uses of castration and emasculation in history and noting the deformations in the Danzantes, attributed them to the effects of castration at different ages. The purpose of this castration was posited to be initiation into the Monte Albán priesthood and as sacrifice—either as an offering to the deities of fertility or to insure a successful harvest. For this reason, some Danzantes are represented in priestly regalia. By analogy with a Russian sect, Davalos suggested the initiates danced themselves into an emotional frenzy prior to the sacrifice, thus accounting for the dance-like postures of the Danzante slabs. In reward for their sacrifice, the initiates received decorative scarification surrounding the genital area and were immortalized by sculpture. As Scott points out, no Middle American group has any ethnological or archaeological record of practicing castration, either to ensure crop fertility or as a requirement of priesthood. Moreover, the Danzantes are hardly noble portraits of heroic figures, but rather, are images of degradation and ugliness.

Peter Furst (1968)

In his important study of shamanism in Middle America, Furst collected ethnographic data from all over the Americas and examined ecstatic trances and asexuality among shamans with the purpose of solving the meaning of the Olmec were-jaguar representations. He also referred to the Danzantes and suggested that the flower-like scrolls which replace their sexual organs, as well as the absence of sexual organs on the were-jaguar figurines, is metaphorical rather than literal and symbolizes celibacy rather than the recording sexual atrophy or castration. Scott points out that in Zapotec, the word for flower (*qui*) and that for genitals (*xqui*) are practically the same, so the elaborate scroll may be a glyphic euphemism (Scott, 1978:26). This postulation, however, still presupposes that the Danzantes are priests or shamans, and does not explain their limp poses and nudity.

Mario Pérez-Ramírez (1963)

Pérez-Ramírez claimed that the Danzantes were representations of pathological cases, revealing different bodily defects and bodily ailments—indicating the early development

of New World medicine. The Danzantes were carved to preserve "the defects that were most remarkable so their descendants might find the explanation of the ailments that mystified them."

Michael Coe (1962)

Coe was the first to suggest in print that the Danzantes represented slain corpses and the flowery scrolls castration.

John Scott (1978) and Joyce Marcus (1976; 1980)

Marcus and Scott were the first writers to follow Coe's hypothesis and have since produced important work for the interpretation of the militaristic iconography of Monte Albán.

Javier Urcid

Urcid believes that certain of the Danzante carvings, in particular those referred to by Scott as "Tumbler Danzantes," represent nobles letting blood from their genitals in ritual autosacrifice (personal communications, 1992 and 1993). Urcid has further patterned out the various styles of Danzante sculptures in groups which he believed formed sculptural programs, decorating individual structures (n.d.).

The Danzantes of Monte Albán and the Ballplayers sculptures of Mound A, Dainzú

The Danzantes potentially represent select moments from the sequential narrative of captive-taking and sacrifice. Furthermore, they are rendered entirely within the conventions of pan-Mesoamerican iconography for the depiction of prisoners and sacrificial victims (Coe, 1964; Marcus, 1974; 1976; 1983; Flannery and Marcus, 1991; Scott, 1978; cf. Schele and Miller, 1986; refer also to more recent discussions in Joyce and Winter, 1996; Joyce, 2000; Orr, 1997).

I believe that the stylistic categories of Danzante carvings are not arbitrary, but rather, that they indicate different events within the entire warfare-sacrifice ritual (Orr, 2001b). For example, Marcus has argued convincingly that Danzantes used as stairway risers are permanent representations of humiliated captives, being physically and conceptually trodden upon by their victors (1974; 1976; Flannery and Marcus, 1991).

Masson and I (1992; 1998) have suggested that many horizontal Danzante carvings are analogous in posture and symbolism to the so-called "flyers" found especially in Olmec

and Late Formative Maya iconography. These latter are interpreted as depictions of individuals undertaking ritual shamanic passage into the Otherworld, or represent Otherworldly beings and ancestors (see Reilly, 1989; 1990). The sensation of flying or swimming is experienced during ritually induced shamanic trance. The shaman crosses the threshold to the supernatural realm while in trance; non-specialists are only able to enter this realm through their death (Eliade, 1974). Danzantes in the flying pose may be symbolically making this journey following death, as sacrifices to the Otherworld (Masson and Orr, 1992; 1998). Karl Taube compares these Danzantes with Maya iconography, particularly an Early Classic Maya monument, Tikal Stela 29, which explicitly shows the captive beneath the feet of Great Jaguar Paw in the flyers pose (personal communication, 1992; see Schele and Freidel, 1990:Fig. 4:14).

The Dainzú ball players are characteristic of Zapotec architectural sculpture. Bernal (1968) and Scott (1978) have both compared the Dainzú program to the Danzantes of Monte Albán. The carvings are pecked onto the surface of flat monolithic slabs which essentially face the rubble core of the structure. The sculptures of Mound A are in secondary or tertiary context, however, probably were originally intended for this structure. Like the Danzantes "programs" and the Monte Albán South Platform sculptures (as hypothetically reconstructed in their secondary context by Urcid, 1992; 1994a), the ball players represent specific moments from a ritual sequence, frozen as a didactic billboard,¹ in this case, a fixed ball game with human sacrifice as the final outcome (Orr, 1997; 2001a and b; n.d.). As Joyce Marcus has pointed out, this type of architectural programming relies upon staged, ritual interaction by religious practitioners with the structures themselves to reveal the full significance of the imagery (Marcus, 1974; Flannery and Marcus, 1983; 1991; see also Scott, 1978; Schele and Freidel, 1990). The physical ascent of structures such as Building L (in its earliest Phase I configuration) and the practice of ritual sacrifice in relation to such structures with Danzantes carvings, would both elucidate and enhance the meaning of these contorted, humiliated, and mutilated victims.

To view *additional information please visit the Kerr PreColumbian Portfolio: "[Rubblings from the site of Dainzú](#)"* by Ruth Hardinger.

Report submitted to the Proyecto Especial Monte Albán 1992-1994

January to March 1994, for Area L-North, Building L-North Tunnel

Explorations in the North Tunnel of Building L during 1993 by the Proyecto Especial Monte Albán reexposed a stairway (Edificio L-Tunel Norte, Elemento 3) with balustrade (Ed. L-Tunel N., Elemento 2) which was initially excavated (then covered over) by Juan Fernandez de la Vega, under the direction of Alfonso Caso (Scott, 1978:34; Acosta,

¹ "Didactic substitute images, reproductions made to teach...tell no stories as such. Rather, they are tableaux, frozen moments in time and space, like waxworks, which instruct by their existence." (Gowans, 1981:70)

1948:4) ([Figure 2](#), [Figure 7](#), [Figure 8](#), [Figure 9](#), [Figure 10](#), see plan, alzados, and profiles in project file). Six steps have been exposed in a new E-W trench; a bank of earth separates the trench from the originally excavated four steps (plan on file). A wall runs to the south of the stairway (SE 01 degree) (Area L-Norte, Muro 1-a) where it meets the E-W north-facing wall of the stepped platform of Edificio L. These walls were consolidated by Caso; however, several meters of the northern section of Muro 1-a were left unconsolidated and were covered over with earth.

Additional excavation in this area revealed two groups of *in situ* stone blocks several meters above the tunnel floor and to the south of the balustrade (Ed. L-Tunel N., Elemento 4). The stones are set on a slope and indicate the original presence of a talud-sloping wall in this area. Excavations have not revealed a matching talud wall to the north of the stairway; it can be proposed, however, that the stairway was flanked by two talud walls.

New excavations to the north of the stairway uncovered another N-S east-facing low stone wall (NW 03 degrees) (Area L-Norte, Muro 1-b), not excavated by Caso (see plan on file). Muro 1-b continues north of the present exterior wall of Edificio L. The area has been cleaned, however, further excavations are necessary to document the northern extent of the wall. In March, 1994 test pits (Area L-Norte, Pozo 1 and Pozo 2) were excavated behind and in front of this wall just outside of Edificio L, yielding Monte Albán I ceramic samples (see report on Area L-Norte, by Miroslava Zúñiga Vásquez).

The stairway (Ed. L-Tunel N., Elemento 3) covers Muro 1-b; 1.05 m of this area has been exposed ([Figure 8](#) and [Figure 10](#), see plan on file). Originally, a complementary northern alfarda, truncated during later construction, may have covered an additional section of this wall. Clearly, the stairway and alfarda represent a somewhat later construction sequence than Muro 1-b. Muro 1-b is located 80 cm west of the northeast corner of the basal stair (point 0 on the plan). In contrast, Muro 1-a is recessed from this point of the stairway by 28 cm (see plan). A differential of 52 cm thus exists in the distances from point 0 of the two walls.

Minimal variation is evident in the construction techniques (i.e. arrangement of stones) used for Muro 1-a and Muro 1-b ([Figure 9](#)). Muro 1-a trails off to a basal line of brick-sized stones which discontinue beneath the talud wall (Ed. L-Tunel N., Elemento 4). The E-W north-facing wall of the stepped platform of Edificio L was constructed earlier than the Muro 1-a, since several stones of Muro 1-a overlap those of the stepped platform wall.

The relationship between the stairs and balustrade, the talud-sloping wall, and Muro 1-a is unclear. Muro 1-a, now truncated, was vertical to a 90 +/- degree angle. This wall and the talud wall are not a coeval construction, but represent two separate features. A line of gradually recessed stone blocks abutting the alfarda indicate a direct association between the latter and the talud-sloping wall. It therefore appears that the talud wall and Muro 1-a belong to different construction sequences. Ceramic samples have been taken from the fill above Muro 1-a, the alfarda, the stairway, and Muro 1-b, and are currently awaiting analysis. The excavation of test pits in the fill above and behind these

features would represent a serious hazard to the stability of tunnel, since the fill is comprised primarily of loosely compacted earth. Consolidation is planned for this part of Tunel Norte, following the completion of work in the area.

Hypothetical construction sequence

Muro 1-b. Possibly of the same construction phase as Muro 1-a, however, the jog of .52 m needs to be accounted for. Date from external test pits Pozos 1 and 2: Monte Albán I.

Muro 1-a (?).

Stairway with balustrades (southern balustrade *in situ*) and talud-sloping walls on the north and south flanks (Ed. L-Tunel N., Elementos 3, 2, and 4) This construction sequence may represent a large platform structure with central stairway and plain, sloping façade walls similar to the external façade of Edificio L as it stands today.

The Danzantes wall predates the stepped platform of Edificio L. The stepped platform predates Muro 1-a. Therefore the construction sequence of this area may be as follows:

Danzantes wall. A large pyramidal platform structure with monumental stone façade identical to the Period I internal construction of Mound IV.

Stepped platform of Edificio L. The stairway above this feature which was excavated by Caso is probably coeval with the addition of the stepped platform rather than with the Danzantes wall construction as proposed by Caso and Scott (1978).

Pyramid platform extension represented by Muro 1-a (possibly coeval with Muro 1-b or slightly postdating and incorporating another structure).

Stairway with balustrades and talud-sloping walls.

Proposal for additional studies

The importance of Edificio L-Tunel Norte, Muros 1-a and 1-b, and Elementos 2, 3 and 4, cannot be underestimated for our understanding of Period I constructions in this area. The relationship between the features in Tunel Norte and the Danzantes platform is still, however, somewhat unclear. For example, how can we visually reconstruct this structure: was this one large pyramidal platform with two stairways, a stepped platform extension, and one wall with a sculpted façade? Why haven't reused Danzantes carvings been recovered from Tunel Norte? Does the Danzantes wall continue behind the stepped platform extension in truncated form; and, if so, are there additional Danzantes sculpture in this area? An exploratory tunnel extending either south from

Muro 1-a to the Danzantes wall, or north from the Danzantes wall to Muro 1-a may yield significant data and will address these questions.

Although ceramic samples have been taken from the fill above the Tunel Norte features, accurate dating is best obtained from test pit excavations—which would be hazardous in this specific area. However, a test pit to bedrock in the tunnel floor facing these features will yield useful data regarding construction and dating. Evidence from Caso's excavations and more recent explorations by the Proyecto Especial indicate that offerings are frequently made on the center line directly in front of central stairways of temples. The earliest such known offerings date to Period II (South Platform Mound III, Mound G). Therefore, most promising location for a test pit would be on the center line of the Elemento 3 stairway, 1/2 m x 1 m ([Figure 10](#)). This excavation would test for: depth of bedrock, constructions activity in the area, dating, and possible offerings associated with the stairway.

During Caso's excavations in Area L-Norte, a trench was dug partway exposing the exterior extension of Muro 1-b. Our project has included clearing this trench. However, the precise northern limit and configuration of Muro 1-b is as yet unknown. It would be useful to our understanding of the Formative structures in this area and the construction sequence of Edificio L, to follow this wall to its limit.

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[Figure 1](#). Topographical regional map, showing Oaxaca, Monte Albán and surrounding communities.

[Figure 2](#). Proyecto Especial archaeological and topographical map of Monte Albán.

[Figure 3](#). Chronology of Monte Albán, ceramic sequence.

[Figure 4](#). Area L-North, map drawn prior to cleaning, as part of the proposal for work in the area.

[Figure 5](#). The so-called Vibora high relief adobe frieze of the P.S.A., North Platform, Monte Albán. Drawing by Javier Urcid; notations and editions by Heather Orr.

[Figure 6](#). Drawing of the Danzantes wall from Batres (1902). From Scott 1978.

[Figure 7](#). Drawing of Building L-North Tunnel excavations undertaken by Juan Fernandez de la Vega, under the direction of Alfonso Caso. From Scott 1978.

[Figure 8](#). Plan of Building L, showing the Danzantes wall, the stepped platform, the early interior stairway, the North Tunnel and its features, Area L-North. Drawing by

Heather Orr, submitted with report on Area L-North Building L-North Tunnel to the Proyecto Especial.

[Figure 9](#). Building L-North Tunnel-Wall 1 a and b, showing construction technique. Drawing by Heather Orr, for Project report.

[Figure 10](#). Building L-North Tunnel-Stairway (Elemento 3). Drawing by Heather Orr, for Project report.

Minor citation updates have recently been made to this bibliography; otherwise the entries reflect only the research and publications at the time of the writing and submission of this paper.

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