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Life, Death, and Divinity: Preserved Embodiments in Zapotec Effigy Vessels

Introduction

This paper will introduce Zapotec culture, affixing the society's location in space and time, and offer an overview of their religious beliefs and cosmovision before exploring the iconography and functionality of Zapotec effigy vessels or urns as a whole and then specific to the two objects from the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) collection. Both vessels, though distinct in terms of symbolism, depictions, and therefore differing in function to some degree, share many similarities. Varying degrees of scholarship have been conducted on the different life stages of Zapotec effigy vessels from their creation, ritual use, and final entombment. In this paper, those previous findings will be organized, presented, and brought into conversation with each other to offer both a holistic understanding of how these objects were important to the culture and what specific roles the two urns from WCMA served, in addition to offering a more informed estimate of their origins.

Many of the ceramic creations of the Zapotecs were discovered and added to museum collections before modern archaeological excavations, which has left many objects with unknown exact provenances. Additionally, Sellen notes in his catalog of Zapotec effigy urns that “[fakes] are pervasive in almost all private and public holdings of pre-Columbian artifacts” and

few collections have been subject to thermoluminescence testing.¹ However, this paper will also definitively establish the authenticity of these two urns.

Zapotec Overview

Nestled in the Valley of Oaxaca, the Zapotec people emerged as a distinctly recognizable state from approximately 500 BCE until the Spanish conquest in 1521 CE. They called themselves *Ben 'Zaa*, or “Cloud People,” due to their belief that their elites descended from the sky (and would return there), as did their Mixtec neighbors, which indicates that the two groups may have shared a common origin.² Their territories in the Southern Mexican highlands were defined by environmental diversity: altitudes, irrigation techniques, and soil types vary greatly throughout the larger valley, but most regions had suitable conditions for all-important maize cultivation.³ Zapotec civilization sprouted from synoikism of early decentralized polities into a powerful empire in Southern Mexico after the founding of their major urban center, Monte Alban around 500 BCE.⁴ Gradually differentiated from their mountain-dwelling neighbors to the north and south, the Valley Zapotecs continued to spread their influence throughout the Y-shaped Oaxaca valley until their Classic Period apex during Monte Alban III or Pitao/Peche phases⁵ (approx. 200-700 CE). The “Golden Age” of Zapotec civilization was marked by high

¹ Adam T. Sellen, “Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy Vessels,” FAMSI: Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., accessed April 13, 2019, <http://www.famsi.org/research/zapotec/index.html>.

² Joseph W. Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 23.

³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴ Many sources tend to conflict over the exact origin dates for Monte Alban and a distinctly Zapotec civilization due to the dispersed nature of their origins throughout the Valley of Oaxaca and similarities between Mixtec peoples and other neighbors during their earliest Formative period.

Richard E. Blanton, “Zapotec Civilization,” in *The Oxford Companion to Archaeology*, ed. Brian M. Fagan, (Oxford UP, 1996).

⁵ There are two ‘schools’ of chronological ordering among leading scholars who have studied the Zapotecs: the first method of identifying periods of Zapotec civilization comes from Caso, Bernal, and Acosta (1967) and makes use the name of their most prominent city, “Monte Alban,” followed by a roman numeral and a lowercase letter in some

social stratification between different “estates” of priests, warriors, nobility, and commoners, which was reinforced by access to monumental architecture in their capital city.⁶ Distinct districts for sacred buildings and elites demarcated a sharp divide between the powerful Zapotec elites and priests from the rest of the population of the city. Probably as much as ninety five percent of the population belonged to the “commoner” class, which means that the elaborate temples, tombs, and palace complexes left behind at Monte Alban were reserved for a mere sliver of the total population.⁷ Zapotec civilization declined during Monte Alban IV or Xoo phase (600-800 CE) when their war machine grinded to a halt and quelled the extent of their capacity to conquer surrounding peoples, which coincided with a slow drain of their principal city (though it was never fully abandoned).⁸ The Zapotecs are still renowned for their prowess with ceramics and left behind a large body of work that mostly consists of effigy vessels and funerary urns⁹, which were all created between about 300 BCE and 800 CE in the Pe and Xoo phases, or from Monte Alban Ib/c through Monte Alban IV.¹⁰ Although their prominence as an empire has long since faded, Zapotec-speaking indigenous peoples have remained in Oaxaca to the present day and have continued to make important impacts on modern Mexican politics and culture.¹¹

cases. Sellen has adapted a “ceramic chronology” from Lind (1994) that organizes the phases of time in Zapotec for the purpose of better identifying the period in which specific effigy urns were created and buried. I will make use of both chronological orderings for the rest of this paper in the interest of providing both an accurate political and ceramic-based record.

Adam T. Sellen, “Oaxaca Valley Chronology,” FAMSI: Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., accessed April 13, 2019, <http://www.famsi.org/research/zapotec/index.html>.

⁶ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 142.

⁷ Antonia Foias, PowerPoint Presentation and in-class discussion, accessed April 13, 2019.

⁸ Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *Zapotec Civilization*, (Thames and Hudson, 1996), 283.

⁹ Constantine G. Rickards, “Monograph on Ornaments on Zapotec Funerary Urns,” *Journal de la Societe des Americanistes*, (1938), 147-148.

¹⁰ Sellen, “Oaxaca Valley Chronology,” accessed April 13, 2019.

¹¹ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 3-6.

Zapotec Religion and Cosmivision

The Zapotecs belonged to a rich religious tradition that permeated every aspect of their lives. As with many other Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican societies, their universe was divided into four quarters, with a center that could be identified along the main axis of the sun's path from east to west.¹² Additionally, the cosmos was split into a thirteen-layered heaven known as the "House of the Sky" and nine-layered "House of the Underworld" below the surface of the earth. Gods and royal ancestors inhabited the sky realm while common ancestors dwelled in the underworld.¹³ Their religion was animatistic: the Zapotecs believed in a supreme being, Coqui Xee or Coquixilla, "who created everything but was not himself created" and represented an infinite power from which all other deities— especially the thirteen gods of the sacred calendar— were "but aspects, attributes, or refractions." He was also referred to as Pije Xoo¹⁴, or "source of time," and was so "incorporeal" that no images were ever associated with him. The Zapotecs had a wide pantheon of other gods in addition to this supreme being, the chief among them Cociyo¹⁵, or Lightning. Both imagined as an anthropomorphized deity with command of lightning, clouds, rain, maize fertility, and the five cardinal directions (including the zenith), Cociyo was not only the most powerful deity below the Coqui Xee, but also imagined to be the patron god of the Valley Zapotecs.¹⁶

¹² Flannery and Marcus, *Zapotec Civilization*, 223.

¹³ Michael Lind, *Ancient Zapotec Religion*, (Boulder: Colorado UP, 2015), 70-71.

¹⁴ Lind refers to this supreme creator god as Liraa Quitzino, or "God Thirteen."
Lind, *Ancient Zapotec Religion*, 56.

¹⁵ Due to the interchangeability of spellings found in all source documents, this paper may make use of both "Cociyo" and "Cocijo" in reference to lightning or the deity associated with that particular phenomena.

¹⁶ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 162-165.

Another pillar of Zapotec religion is the vital force of *pée*, or “breath/wind” which animates every living and moving part of nature. All living beings, including animals, clouds, earth, running water, or “even the foam on a cup of *pulque* or chocolate,” (anything endowed with *pée*) are “deserving of respect” and as such must be “approached through ritual and reciprocity.”¹⁷ As was the case for other Mesoamerican indigenous peoples, rituals (particularly involving bloodletting or sacrifice of some sort) were required to sustain the land and the gods in exchange for nourishing humans with sustenance from the earth. For the Zapotecs, “even time was alive” and returned in cycles, stemming from their 260-day sacred calendar¹⁸, which was distinct from the 365-day solar calendar. The sacred calendar was divided into 65-day quarters called *piye* or *cociyo*, once again meaning “lightning,” which reinforces the supremacy of Lightning as the greatest power below the supreme entity. Each *piye* was assigned to one of the four corners of the universe and paired with one of twenty day names connected to other animals or natural phenomena.¹⁹ At birth, every Zapotec “received a calendrical name” derived from the names of deities and other living forces, which connected to them to an “alter ego,” or co-essence called *huechaa* or *huichaa*. These co-essences could take the form of animals, plants, or natural phenomena and were by no means limited to only elites or gods, but the higher-power entities in the universe definitely had much more powerful alter egos than commoners.²⁰

Ritual and religious action were tied closely together with the social and political hierarchy because Zapotec cosmology reinforced the idea “that nobles and commoners had had

¹⁷ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 170.

¹⁸ The Zapotec sacred calendar has been considered unique from other Mesoamerican calendrical systems due to its divisions and antiquity. Scholars such as Alfonso Caso and Eduard Seler seemed to believe that it is “perhaps the oldest calendar in Mesoamerica.”

Ibid., 170.

¹⁹ Flannery and Marcus, *Zapotec Civilization*, 223.

²⁰ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 168.

separate origins far back in time.”²¹ One of the most misunderstood aspects of Zapotec religion by the 16th-century Spaniards was royal ancestor worship. Thousands of names were recorded by conquistadors and missionaries for suspected deities, but these names were often localized to specific city-states because they were the names of nobles who had died rather than gods. While commoners might appeal to their more immediate predecessors for small acts of favor, all Zapotecs revered the royal lineage, for nobility represented the true “Cloud People,” who ascended to the heavens after death. It then became the duty of nobles and commoners alike to sustain these venerated royal ancestors, maintaining their favor so that they might “intercede on their people’s behalf with the great supernatural forces who ran the world.”²² This practice, along with a strict hierarchy of state-sanctioned temple priests, support the notion that religion “served to legitimize the elite” and “create a unifying force within any given Zapotec city-state.”²³ On the most holy days, all members of society would celebrate together with feasting and worship, which was “an important integrative force” that continued to support the larger state.²⁴

Iconography and Symbolism

Zapotec effigy vessels were created in a variety of different styles and depicted a wide array of deities and ancestors, relying upon glyphs and elaborate decorations to identify the entity being depicted and to communicate various religious meanings. Their symbolism became more advanced and intricate in the Classic Period, when the urns began to be made in much higher quantities for funerary and ritual purposes. Each of these vessels have two components:

²¹ Flannery and Marcus, *Zapotec Civilization*, 225.

²² *Ibid.*, 225.

²³ Lind, *Ancient Zapotec Religion*, 351.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 351.

an urn-like container “fronted by a figural representation.” The decorations and figural representations on the front of the effigy vessels are the primary concern for studies relating to iconography and symbolism.²⁵

Despite a rich collection of studies relating to the iconography of Zapotec effigy vessels dating back to the early twentieth century, there is still “little consensus on what the effigies symbolize and how they relate to ancient religion and ritual.”²⁶ Early interpretations of the urns from Alfonso Caso, Ignacio Bernal, and Frank Boos in the mid-twentieth century suggest that the most elaborate effigies “represent gods from a complex pantheon.”²⁷ Almost three decades later, Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery challenged this original theory regarding the effigy depictions by “[questioning] the existence of deities among the ancient Zapotec,”²⁸ instead arguing that all vessels represented ancestors, even the most elaborate urns with extensive costumes. This view, while true in many regards, does not reflect the depth of what may actually be depicted, according to Sellen, who notes the connection between “the entities in the Zapotec calendar day-name list and the complexes of masks and costumes worn by the figures depicted on the urns.” He believes that “Zapotec effigy vessels represent ancestors who are impersonating²⁹ deities represented in the ancient calendar,”³⁰ which succinctly combines both schools of

²⁵ Gary Feinman, “6: The Iconic Zapotec Urn and its Disappearance,” *Zapotec Archaeology* (blog), June 1, 2010, <http://expeditions.fieldmuseum.org/zapotec-archaeology/blog/6-iconic-zapotec-urn-and-its-disappearance>.

²⁶ Sellen, “Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy Vessels,” accessed April 13, 2019.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ This is not the most precise term for what depictions of ancestors may be doing, as Zapotec conceptions of divinity and deification are much more complex than mere “impersonation” by elites or priests. Rather, it is more likely that the effigies do indeed represent an ancestor in costume, but this localized embodiment of a deity would more precisely be seen as the manifestation of the god or life force layered over the essence of the ancestor. This idea will be elaborated upon later in the paper.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

thought (Marcus & Flannery vs. Caso, Bernal & Boos) and seems to more accurately describe the real nature of effigy iconography.

Although the difference between venerated ancestors, priests, and deities is often uncertain due to shared names and co-essences, there is a certain “predominance of deities associated with agriculture and fertility”³¹ depicted in Zapotec effigies, as would be expected for many Mesoamerican cultures. It is also no surprise that Cocijo is by far the most well-represented god among all forms of Zapotec art, especially funerary urns. As noted by Whitecotton, “his representations extend from period I through period IV” and surpass any other deity in number. In addition to the lord of lightning and rain, other popular depictions include the god Pitao Cozobi, who reigns over maize or “abundant sustenance,” and many other lesser deities comprising the larger “Maize Complex.”³² Interestingly enough, rare depictions of deities outside of the religious traditions of Oaxaca and Zapotec pantheon, including Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc from the Teotihuacán tradition, have also been found in tomb excavations. In total, researchers have identified forty four different categories of effigy vessels, each representing a distinct deity or essence associated with the sacred calendar.³³ These categories are distinct from more obviously human depictions of ancestors and actors that represented scenes of everyday life, including “acrobats, jugglers, ball players, merchants, priests, warriors, musicians, soothsayers, farmers, and porters” or ceramic animals or architectural models.³⁴

³¹ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 52.

³² *Ibid.*, 53.

³³ Although Lind only identified 14-16 distinct deities, these categories likely represent different aspects of deities, corresponding to different name-day identities.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

Decoration was an integral, defining component of each figure because even for cast-molded figures in sets, very few were exactly identical.³⁵ Ornamentation consisted of a variety of paints (red and white were the longest lasting and evidence of such paint “is one of the surest signs that [a] specimen is genuine”³⁶), headdress adornments such as “chinstraps, plumes, topknots, and ribbons,” and body coverings, including “cloaks, breechclouts, and bracelets” as early as Monte Alban II.³⁷ It seems that during Monte Alban III, vessels became more standardized in style between different localities³⁸ and increasingly complex, with larger, more elaborate decorative elements and symbols to identify the representations. In many Classic Zapotec urns, human proportions also became distorted to emphasize the head and face (along with any adornments) over the torso, limbs, and the rest of the body.³⁹ This became particularly true as the standard seated, cross-legged position became standard for Zapotec funerary urns depicting males (women were shown in a different, gender-specific kneeling position).⁴⁰ While proportions grew less realistic, “features of dress and costume, including nose ornaments, ear plugs, medallions and jewelry, [and] hair styles... are realistically portrayed.” Along with more embellishments, human figures were also depicted with protruding stomachs, “cleft palates, cataract-infested eyes, exaggerated nipples, and sunken cheeks, displaying toothless grins and dental mutilations”⁴¹ to show ancestors in their most realistic form rather than idealized versions. Furthermore, glyphs and other symbolic elements used to identify royal ancestors or deities

³⁵ Rickards, “Monograph on Ornaments on Zapotec Funerary Urns,” 148.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁷ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 43-44.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁰ Rickards, “Monograph on Ornaments on Zapotec Funerary Urns,” 150-151.

⁴¹ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 54.

became much more prominent, especially for the headdresses or masks that became the central focus of effigy figures.⁴²

Object 1: Funerary Vessel with Effigy of Cociyo

(WCMA 76.29.2.B)



Figure 1: Front View WCMA

76.29.2.B

This first object, from the Williams College Museum of Art collection (Fig. 1), is a ceramic funerary urn crafted from the characteristic grey clay of the Oaxaca valley region (though other colors and types of clay were more prevalent across different localities⁴³). This effigy, complete with headdress and mask, clearly depicts Cociyo, the deity “associated with rain and storms who is often represented in rituals relating to the agricultural cycle of corn.”⁴⁴ Though not quite as elaborate as other Cociyo figures, this vessel is still rich in symbolism meant to identify Cociyo and expand upon the ritual purposes of the urn.

The object reflects distorted proportions that became commonplace by Monte Alban III, as the head (including mask and headdress) of this figure occupies more space and visual focus

⁴² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴³ Rickards, “Monograph on Ornaments on Zapotec Funerary Urns,” 150.

⁴⁴ Adam T. Sellen, “Storm-God Impersonators from Ancient Oaxaca,” *Ancient Mesoamerica*, (Cambridge UP, 2002), 3.

than the seated body below. This trend extends to many Mesoamerican art styles and relates to Maya depictions of ancestors/deities as well because the head is “the locus of identity” and therefore integral to understanding who or what exactly is being depicted.⁴⁵ Identifying symbols or glyphs were often concentrated to the head as well, particularly when connected to a specific calendrical day-name or co-essence. However, this importance extends far beyond the superficial understanding of being able to identify a deity or ancestor effigy because for the Maya, Zapotec, and other Mesoamerican people, “essence transfers along with resemblance.”⁴⁶ An image or portrait of a particular person or entity’s face/head “does not so much mimic aspect of identity as realize them.”⁴⁷ In other words, the effigy figure “both resembles and *is* the entity it reproduces.”⁴⁸ This understanding of Classic Mesoamerican religious understanding is reinforced by the reluctance of modern descendants of these peoples to have their pictures taken (as evidenced by Dr. Allen Sandstrom’s discussion of his ethnographic experiences⁴⁹), for a picture steals part of their vital force or vitality much in the same way that a Classic Zapotec effigy urn would encompass the *pée* of a deceased ancestor or god.

The headdress and mask that dominate much of the visual focus for this effigy figure are adornments layered onto the ancestor to show that the human beneath (assuming that Sellen’s assessment of ancestor “impersonation” is correct) has been transformed into Cociyo. These adornments (facial mask and headdress) reflect a concept similar to the Aztec *teixiptla*, or localized embodiment of a god, and are a much less gruesome alternative to the flayed skin of sacrificial victims customarily used for Aztec “impersonation” of deities. Not only is the

⁴⁵ Stephen Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube, *Memory of Bones*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁹ Allen Sandstrom, class discussion, April 5, 2019.

additional attire necessary for this ritualized invocation and embodiment of a god to occur, but as Bassett notes, *teixiptlahuan* must be animated through painting (which could possibly have worn off this figure over time), dressing, or the “opening” of their eyes or mouths. As will be explored in further depth below, both the eyes and mouth of this figure have features that would lend the effigy greater animacy and thus transform the “human body into a god-body.”⁵⁰

As with many other headdresses used in depictions of Cociyo, the top of the urn is nearly concealed by a spread of frontal feathers, which “seem to have been [the Zapotecs’] favorite decorative feature,”⁵¹ according to Rickards. Immediately below the feathers, appears a set of elements named Glyph C by scholars (Fig. 2). At the top of Glyph C lie two serpent heads, necks curving upwards and then parallel, diverge outwards in opposite directions. The imagery of the double serpent is connected to Cociyo through the similarities between the glyph and Zapotec terms for “young maize” and “serpent” (*zee, ziy, ziye*), which is also reflected by the fact that these two concepts share the same day-name in the twenty-day sequence in the sacred calendar.⁵² Sellen also suggested a direct connection between these spreading serpent heads and the “two curved leaf-like forms, decorated with what appears to be eyes that stream out from each side” of the kernel glyph for maize as a result of the close associations between serpents and corn. While the *zee* day-sign may not be present in this effigy, Sellen also identified “another context for the kernel glyph” in which the spreading serpent heads are “arranged [with

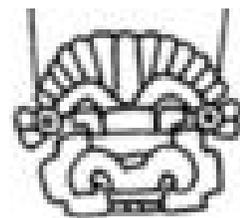


Figure 2: Glyph C in

Headdress (from Sellen, “Sowing the Blood with Maize,” 2011, 79, Fig. 9)

⁵⁰ Molly H. Bassett, *The Fate of Earthly Things*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 153.

⁵¹ Rickards, “Monograph on Ornaments on Zapotec Funerary Urns,” 150.

⁵² Flannery and Marcus, *Zapotec Civilization*, 224.

kernels] in a neat row above the glyph C in *Cocijo*'s headdress."⁵³

Immediately below the double serpent heads appears glyph C, directly associated with Cociyo and his sacred day name, *lape/lappe* or *ape/appe*, signifying water/cloud/rain, in the center of the headdress. Among effigy depictions of Cociyo, this is the most common identifier. Glyph C, "water," also ties Cociyo as Storm God with maize fertility, because he is the harbinger of irrigation which sustains the holy crop.⁵⁴ To some, Glyph C represents a bowl with water overflowing it. Additionally, Glyph C has also been imagined as a depiction of "a stylized jaguar," a theme which is continued in the mask of Cociyo as well.⁵⁵

Below this symbol-rich headdress, the mask of the figure contains additional identifiers and meaning. At the top of the facial mask, above each eye, are two elements that have a hat-shape (or inverted T), which depict clouds. Cociyo's connection to rain, obviously emphasized through this symbolism, is even more important than his connection to lightning because of the function of these vessels (which will be explored in greater depth in the next section of this paper) in agricultural rituals.⁵⁶ Between these cloud-encompassed eyelids lies a prominent snub nose, with what appears to be ornamental nose plugs above it. The agricultural symbolism of the mask is also found in the large ear flares/spools and the sprout-like protrusions on either side of the mask and above the ear flares. While large ear spools are often decorated with the Zapotec blood glyph in other effigy urns, since bloodletting through the ears was one of the primary methods of ritual autosacrifice,⁵⁷ no such glyphs can be found streaming down from

⁵³ Adam T. Sellen, "Sowing the Blood with the Maize: Zapotec Effigy Vessels and Agricultural Ritual," *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 22, (Cambridge UP, 2011) 79.

⁵⁴ Sellen, "Storm-God Impersonators from Ancient Oaxaca," 7-8.

⁵⁵ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 55.

⁵⁶ Sellen, "Sowing the Blood with the Maize," 72.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

the ear flares on the WCMA urn. However, although no blood glyph is present on this figure, the protrusions above the ear flares depict young maize sprouting, which reaffirms the connection between Cociyo and the growth of the Zapotecs' principal source of sustenance.⁵⁸ As will be discussed below, these protrusions above the ear flares also hint to the agricultural rituals in which this effigy urn may have been used.

Additional components of the mask relating to the eyes and mouth of Cociyo increase the animacy of the figure and suggest even more avenues through which the identity of the lightning deity was actualized in this effigy. Below cloud-shaped eyelids lie the actual eye and pupil on either side of Cociyo's face. Both the actual incised-shape of the eye and the pupil are small compared to many other important features of the face, which could support the idea that paint would have been used to increase their size and vitality for the onlookers. The pupils are small, but deep, to the degree that they could have easily housed inlays or small jewels. As Bassett suggests with regard to Aztec effigies, ritual animation would "[endow] the embodiment with life" through the placement of precious stones in the eyes of the idols because "the stone's reflective surfaces caught the light and dazzled the onlooker"⁵⁹ as if the stone had sight. Even without an inlay, the fact that the eyes were open and receptive to the outside world would have been enough to animate this depiction of Cociyo. Moreover, the mouth featured below the snub nose has two components which also help identify and animate this effigy: fangs and a bifurcated tongue. Although the fangs, located immediately above the tongue, are eroded or broken, it appears that there were at least two, potentially three or four originally. These fangs lessen Cociyo's anthropomorphic appearance, but also connect to associations—founded on the similar

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁹ Bassett, *The Fate of Earthly Things*, 146-150.

sound of a jaguar’s roar and a thunderclap— between the jaguar and lightning.⁶⁰ Surrounding those fangs is a wide “buccal mask” ending with a bifid tongue protruding downward, both of which are common features found in Zapotec effigies of the Storm God. Figure 3 provides the general shape of this widely-found buccal mask. The split tongue, a clear feature of serpents, links again Cociyo with serpents, maize, and agricultural ritual.⁶¹ Furthermore, lightning itself was imagined by the ancient Zapotecs as a serpent’s tongue lashing out from the sky to the earth.

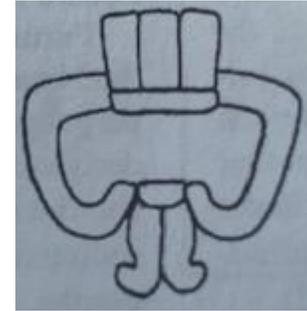


Figure 3: Buccal Mask found in effigies of Cociyo (from Sellen, “Storm-God” Impersonators of Ancient Oaxaca,” 2002, 7, Fig. 3)

Aside from the elaborate headdress and mask, other aspects of the effigy’s design provide further insight into the identity of the deity depicted. Streaming out from behind the mask

seems to be long hair,

indicated by the grooves on the inside of the element.

Additionally, the figure is wearing a necklace with fifteen spherical beads and has a striated cape draped over its shoulders and torso. The body of the figure is heavily anthropomorphized, with two hands that spread out over the knees with a notably smaller differences in finger lengths, and feet with clearly marked digits. The limbs of the figure are unornamented and unremarkable except for their generally human appearance. From the side-perspective



Figure 4: Side View WCMA 76.29.2.B

⁶⁰ “Urn in the Form of Cociyo, God of Lightning and Rain,” *Collections Search*, Kimbell Art Museum, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://www.kimbellart.org/collection/ap-198509>.

⁶¹ Sellen, “Storm-God Impersonators from Ancient Oaxaca,” 7.

(Fig. 4), it is clear that these front pieces were attached to the central urn after the urn itself was formed, which will be expanded upon in greater detail for purposes of functionality. The flat piece curving outward toward the onlooker is a loincloth, which covers two perfectly crossed legs, with unrealistically rectangular feet. Such attire for the body of effigy figures is commonplace, but the clothing is not nearly as ornate as others, while the limbs are also much less adorned with additional bracelets or glyphs than in other effigies, suggesting that this depicts an ancestor who might have been of second-tier elite descent.⁶²

Comparison 1: AP 1985.09

This object from the Kimbell Art Museum is another Zapotec ceramic urn depicting Cociyo (Fig. 5). It has been dated by the museum to 400-500 CE, or the Pitao period within Monte Alban IIIa. Its identity is conveyed through “an amalgam of facial elements forming a powerfully sculptural mask.” This effigy shares many similar characteristics, especially in regard to iconography, with WCMA 76.29.2.B. The Kimbell Museum’s description notes that the “two-part forms enclosing the eyes represent crops, and by extension, the precious water needed to grow crops” and the “doubly plugged nasal extension,” which developed from “earlier snouted deity elements that combine jaguar and snake allusions— the roar of the jaguar with the



Figure 5: Cociyo Urn AP 1985.09 (from Kimbell Art Museum collections site)

⁶² Rickards, “Monograph on Ornaments on Zapotec Funerary Urns,” 150.

reverberation of thunder.” Moreover, this figure also has “three fangs... [which] cover a bifurcated tongue, like the almost invisibly flashing tongue of a snake,” which in turn “symbolizes the lightning bolt.” Finally, the observation records that “the dress is as much that of a priest as of a deity,” which supports earlier interpretations of ancestors, elites, or priests who may have worn costumes to become Cociyo for ritual purposes being immortalized in their effigy urn in this mixed form as a layered depiction of the deity. However, the loincloth is much more elaborately detailed than WCMA 76.29.2.B and the overall style of the limbs and body seems to be slightly more anthropomorphic. The Kimbell urn is also carefully smoothed and seems to have remains of red paint. A third difference is that the Kimbell urn does not have a glyph-bearing headdress, in contrast to the WCMA object. This difference in detail could be explained by the difference between statuses of the two individuals immortalized as Cociyo, if

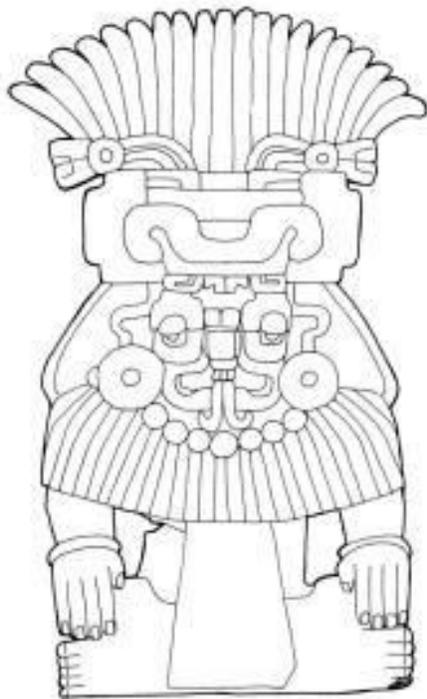


Figure 6: Cociyo Urn DAM 1977.186 (from Sellen,

“Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy Urns”)

this were a high-level priest and the first urn is more of a lower level elite.⁶³

Comparison 2: DAM 1977.186

This object from the Denver Art Museum (Fig. 6) is confirmed to have originated from 500-600 CE, which places its origins in the Peche phase of Monte Alban IIIa. Sellen’s comments on this urn are sparse, but it is evident that this effigy resembles WCMA 76.29.2.B *extremely* closely, with almost all aspects of the headdress, mask, and

⁶³ “Urn in the Form of Cociyo, God of Lightning and Rain,” Kimbell Art Museum, accessed April 11, 2019, .

body adornments appearing nearly the same. The effigy is an obvious depiction of Cociyo, verified by the presence of a large, central Glyph C in the headdress, cloud-shaped eye coverings, double nose plugs over a snub nose, three fangs and a bifid tongue protruding below the mouth, and potential depictions of sprouting corn above the ear flares. All of these features mirror the WCMA urn's decorations and it seems that this effigy even shares nearly identical features for the body of the elite/ancestor who is sharing this form with the deity (same striated cape, beaded necklace, plain loincloth, human hands, and equally rectangular feet).⁶⁴ The only noticeable difference between this figure and WCMA 76.29.2.B are the bracelets on each wrist and the proportions of Glyph C on the headdress, but the overwhelming similarities suggest that the WCMA piece could more accurately be from the Peche phase of Monte Alban IIIa as well.



Figure 7: Cociyo Urn M.2010.115.306

(from LACMA collections site)

Comparison 3: M.2010.115.306

This object from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is also from the Peche phase of Monte Alban IIIa, 500-600 CE and was found at Monte Alban or nearby (Fig. 7). Though the style of this effigy is noticeably different than the previous figures, there are still many obvious repeated symbols which confirm the depiction of Cociyo, such as the prominent Glyph C, which dominates the entirety of the headdress as no

⁶⁴ Sellen, "Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy Vessels," accessed April 13, 2019.

feathers appear. Additionally, the eyes are still encased by cloud-like shapes, despite having very different pupils. This depiction also features a snub nose, with double nose plugs above and three fangs below, in addition to what appears to be another buccal mask and bifid tongue.⁶⁵ Though this mask and headdress may look quite different in color and layout than the piece from WCMA, Sellen notes that “the quantity and variability of masks worn by many of the figures on the Zapotec effigy vessels” supports the notion that many of these effigies depict ancestors or elites/priests in costume rather than direct depictions of the deity itself (particularly because there is so much variety even from effigies found in similar locations and time periods).⁶⁶ Its torso coverings include a large milpa glyph, which can frequently be found on a pectoral plate on urns depicting Cociyo, but the meaning is subject to many unsupported theories, so it is currently unknown why that glyph may be associated with Cociyo, aside from obvious the connection between rain and agricultural fertility.⁶⁷ There is clearly faded green/blue paint residue on the buccal mask, ear flares, and pectoral glyph of this urn, which supports the assertion that many of these urns were painted with colors beyond the color of the clay from which they were formed.

Comparison 4: KAISER 1

This object, also recorded in Sellen’s database, is from the private collection of William F. Kaiser and also dated from the Peche phase of Monte Alban IIIa, 500-600 CE (Fig. 8). The



Figure 8: Cociyo Urn KAISER 1 (from Sellen, “Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy Urns”)

⁶⁵ “Cociyo (Rain Deity) with Glyph C Headdress,” *Collections Search*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, accessed April 14, 2019, <https://collections.lacma.org/node/1903394>.

⁶⁶ Sellen, “Storm-God Impersonators in Ancient Oaxaca,” 10.

⁶⁷ Sellen, “Sowing the Blood with the Maize,” 80-81.

posture of this figure is slightly more elaborate than the piece from WCMA, including that the god is holding a pot with a glyph for maize sprouting from the top. However, the mask and headdress contain all of the same components, apart from a completed blood glyph earring hanging down from the left ear flare. Additionally, this urn is missing both the right ear flare and right part of the bifid tongue, but there are signs which suggest that the mask had these complete features originally. The subtle differences between this object and the object from WCMA only serve to emphasize the connection between depictions of Cociyo and agricultural ritual, particularly relating to the fertility of maize.⁶⁸

Object 2: Seated Figure Vessel

(WCMA 76.29.1)

The second WCMA effigy urn (Fig. 9) is much less elaborate than the first object, but it is clearly anthropomorphic, which suggests that it has greatly different symbolism from the first piece, which was adorned with a mask, headdress, and identifying glyphs.



Figure 9: Front View WCMA 76.29.1

While no supernatural features are on this piece, it still communicates important messages about Zapotec religion and worldview. Moreover, many similarities remain between certain aspects of this object and the aforementioned figures, which reinforces general trends among all effigy urns.

⁶⁸ Sellen, "Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy Urns," accessed April 15, 2019.

While this figure has only some sort of band wrapped around its head and long flowing hair instead of a headdress, the overall head and face are still much larger than they realistically should be, which reaffirms the idea that the head is the central point of focus for all Zapotec effigy urns, even if the face is extremely anthropomorphic and may even be nonspecific to any one particular person.⁶⁹ Facial features on this effigy are prominent and large, particularly the eyes and mouth, due to the connection between animacy and those two aspects of the face which can increase the vitality and life of such a figure. The pupils of this figure are also deep enough to have supported inlays, although in the absence of inlays, there is still a large surface area to bring them to life through bright painting. Similarly, the lips part to expose teeth, which portray the mouth in a very open and animate position.⁷⁰ One major difference between the facial features of this figure and WCMA 76.29.2.B come from the nose as well— this nose is also quite prominent, but definitely anthropomorphic and chipped at the end, whereas the nose of Cociyo is depicted as a snub and therefore non-human. Despite many attempts to find information regarding the piece which protrudes from the right side of the face, there were no concrete examples where this phenomena also existed. Consequently, there are no known iconography related to this decoration except for speculation that it may be part of a buccal mask⁷¹, or perhaps an instrument used in bloodletting rituals. Finally, it could also simply be an ear placed unrealistically low on the side of the head.

⁶⁹ Basset, *The Fate of Earthly Things*, 153.

⁷⁰ “Vessel in shape of seated figure.” *Collections Search*, Williams College Museum of Art, accessed April 17, 2019, <http://egallery.williams.edu/objects/22146/vessel-in-shape-of-seated-figure?ctx=8864bdf4-1deb-4b92-a46c-e0fd3bb62490&idx=96>.

⁷¹ Antonia Foias, discussion, April 12, 2019.

Aside from a three-bead necklace and undecorated loincloth with a belt, the body of this human figure is unremarkable. Although the digits on the hands and feet are marked by incised lines, they are much less carefully rendered than on the first WCMA effigy urn.

The only message this completely unembellished anthropomorphic form conveys is the humanity of the figure, confirming that this is most likely an ancestor or low-level elite which



Figure 10: Rear View WCMA

76.29.1

would have been worshipped by family to supernaturally intervene in their favor with the gods. In Figure 10, the rear of the urn shows clear lines which mark where limbs were attached to the main body of the urn, supporting the idea that this effigy, as many others who are solely anthropomorphic, depicts a generic construct of what an elite should look like, following a cast mold for some the pieces rather than a specific design made to make this urn to look like a real portrait of an ancestor. In fact, Lind uses this common occurrence of molding and non-specific features on anthropomorphic urns to argue that these are frequently “generic representations of the ancestors of the

Zapotec elite” rather than specific deceased “coqui and xonaxi” (kings and queens). Unless specific calendrical glyphs are used to identify the figure by name, it is likely that even depictions of ancestors impersonating or becoming a god through costume are generic as well.⁷²

This interpretation of the figures is supported by Lind’s documentation of the frequent practice of invoking elite ancestors to intervene with deities on behalf of the living.⁷³

⁷² Lind, *Ancient Zapotec Religion*, 53.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 342.



Figure 11: Seated Man Effigy MNA 6-8086
(from Sellen, “Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy
Urns”)

Comparison 1: MNA 6-8086

This object from the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City is another piece from the Peche phase, found inside Tomb 104 at Monte Alban (Fig. 11). Though this sketch cannot show it, the effigy is made of grey clay that is colored with traces of red paint. According to Sellen’s records, this urn was discovered at the foot of the skeleton, along with 3 other identical urns, all of which were

surrounding “a larger, more complex vessel.”⁷⁴ This urn is obviously anthropomorphic, as is the second piece from

WCMA, and shares many of the same features. Although the

long, flowing hair— which often identifies the high priest— above the figure’s brow is taller than the band around the WCMA figure’s head, it still has prominent facial features (with open eyes and open mouth, even depicting teeth). This figure is shown wearing a necklace with many beads and ear flares similar to those worn by the Cociyo effigies. Overall, the loincloth and simple, unadorned representation of the seated human body is shared between this object and WCMA 76.29.1.

The fact that this figure was part of a set of four urns surrounding a larger, more highly detailed effigy supports the idea that both this urn and likely the WCMA urn belong to the second-most common category of urns, which are known as “Companions” to Cociyo. These figures are often identical sets found in groups of three to seven surrounding a larger urn and it

⁷⁴ Sellen, “Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy Urns,” accessed April 17, 2019.

has been thought that these effigies represent either “devotees of a religious cult or an entourage accompanying an important personage on his journey through the afterlife.”⁷⁵ Additionally, there is evidence that royal burials included sacrificed attendants and retainers who were supposed to accompany their lord into the afterlife.⁷⁶ This offers an alternative interpretation to whether these effigy urns represent elite ancestors, or people meant to accompany a more important deceased figure. Moreover, Cociyo is often portrayed with a set of four less elaborate effigies meant to depict lightning’s companions: clouds, rain, wind, and hail. These generic sets could have also been highly anthropomorphic depictions of those vital forces that may have been set around a larger depiction of Lightning. Therefore, the central larger urn most likely represents the main individual buried in the tomb.⁷⁷

Comparison 2: MNA Mont. YW ofrenda 1-2

This piece is another object from the National Anthropology Museum of Mexico City, found in a mound surrounding Monte Alban (Fig. 12). It is also from the Peche phase. The style of this object is similar to the previous one, with a nearly identical hat/hair structure, wide eyes and mouth, large ear flares, and highly anthropomorphic appearance overall. However, there is also a glyph E, representing



Figure 12: Seated Man Urn MNA
Mont. YWofrenda 1-2 (Sellen,
“Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy Urns”)

⁷⁵ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 54.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

“earthquake” (which could relate to calendrical naming), displayed in the pectoral area, and connected to a knotted necklace.⁷⁸ The overall posture and belt/loin cloth of the lower torso are very similar to WCMA 76.29.1, which also suggests that perhaps the WCMA figure may have been created during the Peche period as well.

Comparison 3: MACP A-0285

Figure 13 depicts an object from the Museum of Archaeology Carlos Pellicer in Tabasco, Mexico. Its provenance is unknown, but it has also been dated to the Peche phase and shares many of the same features as WCMA 76.29.1. Though the figure’s long hair or hat is again much taller, it has ear flares, but no necklace. The same facial elements dominate: prominent wide eyes



and open mouth. In addition, a similar posture and simple unadorned attire, belt and loin cloth, characterize both this urn and the WCMA object.⁷⁹ It is becoming more evident through the sketches of these pieces (which are unavailable as photographs), that many of them could be considered nearly interchangeable, which once again supports the idea that they are general depictions of elite ancestors or an idealized image of the elite.

Figure 13: Seated Man Urn MACP A-0285

(from Sellen, “Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy Urns”)

⁷⁸ Sellen, “Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy Urns,” accessed April 17, 2019.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Comparison 4: MNA 6-6118

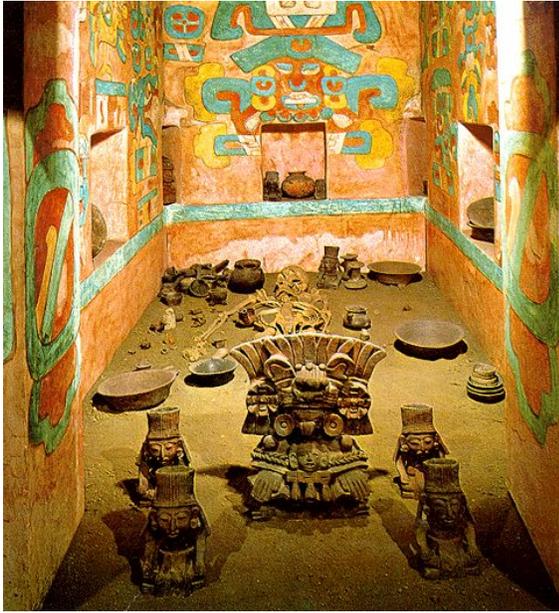
The object to the right is also from the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City and was also found in Tomb 104 at Monte Alban dating to the Peche phase (Fig. 14). Many of the prominent facial trends are shared with the WCMA urn, but there are a few noticeable differences between the two urns. This figure has a much larger hat/hair. As a result of this trend, could it be the case that the drawings are exaggerated, or perhaps many of the hats/headpieces were of variable sizes and the WCMA urn just happens to have a smaller banded cap? This MNA figure also sports a triangular cape which drapes over the entirety of the torso, covering all but the two anthropomorphic hands resting upon the knees of the



Figure 14: Seated Man Urn MNA 6-6118 (from Sellen, "Catalogue of Zapotec Effigy Urns")

figure, as well as a skirt that covers the legs. The most important difference between this figure and the previous ones is in the posture: there are no feet shown because the legs of this figure are not crossed, but rather tucked behind it in a kneeling position, presumably behind some sort of dress or skirt which makes the illustration appear entirely smooth. This theory is not just speculative based on the sketch, but also the fact that Sellen notes this urn to be a "representation of a woman"⁸⁰ based on Rickards' previous observation of distinct seating postures between the

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*



different sexes in Zapotec society.⁸¹ More importantly, this female urn was found in the same Tomb 104 at Monte Alban as the male urn MNA 6-8086 in Figure 11. As shown in Figure 15, which illustrates Tomb 104, both of these urns served as “companions” to the larger central urn depicting Cociyo.

Figure 15: Tomb 104 at Monte Alban (from “Monte Alban Tombs 104 and 105”)

Functionality, Use and Meaning

The duration of funerary urn creation among the Zapotecs closely mirrored the lifespan of their principal city, Monte Alban. They began making ceramic effigy vessels shortly after the founding of Monte Alban, around 500 BCE. After a massive increase in both quality and quantity during the Classic period, urns disappeared by the Late Classic, during the eighth or ninth centuries CE.⁸² Although their creation seems to coincide with the rise and fall of Monte Alban, there is no evidence that urn-making or any sort of craft markets were monopolized by the city. In fact, Whitecotton notes that “few workshops have been found in the Monte Alban urban complex” and that according to archaeological records, “it appears that craft production was dispersed throughout the Valley of Oaxaca region... instead of being centralized.”⁸³ Moreover, recent chemical testing has determined the general regions of provenance for a

⁸¹ Rickards, “Monograph on Ornaments on Zapotec Funerary Urns,” 151.

⁸² Feinman, “6: The Iconic Zapotec Urn and its Disappearance,” June 1, 2010.

⁸³ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 77.

number of Zapotec urns and found that according to the types of minerals used in each ceramic clay mix, there are a multitude of production centers outside of Monte Alban.⁸⁴

As Rickards states, “the urns are cylindrical vessels concealed behind elaborate figures built up from moulded and modelled pieces.”⁸⁵ Although most of the actual urn bodies are unstyled, there is a great amount of variety among the frontal effigy figures. His observations paint a clear picture of the individualistic nature of the Zapotec potter in relation to Maya influences, which are “obvious in the delicate modelling of human features and skillful use of feather-designs.”⁸⁶ The Zapotec potter, “accepting inspiration from outside... [but turning] it to his own,” gives slightly different traits to molded figures such that, despite using the same molds for certain pieces, “it is very rare to find several urns exactly alike.”⁸⁷ Other distinctions between urns beyond style or motif come from the color of the clays, which “differs according to the colour of the earth found in the different districts [within Zapotec territory].” Potters’ creativity was also displayed through the various methods of creating urns, where every decision, from the type of clay used, to the stain or mineral wash for painting the figure, or the tool for creating incisions (fingernail, maguey spine, obsidian blade, etc.), could result in dramatically different final products.⁸⁸ Additionally, Flannery and Marcus note that “conditions in the Valley of Oaxaca are excellent for the rapid drying of pottery,” which may provide insight as to how Zapotecs were able to develop this high level of skill with their ceramics.

⁸⁴ Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *Early Formative Pottery of the Valley of Oaxaca*, *Memoirs of the Museum of Anthropology*, no. 27, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 7-8.

⁸⁵ Rickards, “Monograph on Ornaments on Zapotec Funerary Urns,” 149.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸⁸ Flannery and Marcus, *Early Formative Pottery of the Valley of Oaxaca*, 12.

Most of the literature on Zapotec effigy urns focuses on their funerary function. Tombs, like the one pictured in Figure 15, were decorated with multiple urns that served purposes in the afterlife for both the living and the deceased. For the most elaborate effigies of Cociyo or other gods, there may be only one central, larger, more elaborate figure that was created to stand out from other urns that may have also been buried in the same tomb or cache. The most elaborate vessel often represented the deceased individual in the tomb “impersonating,” or mingling co-essences with a god. Sellen explains that indigenous understanding of “god impersonation” is incompatible with Western thought because the two categories of human and divine are “collapsed into one” such that “a human being can be considered equivalent to the material image of a deity” when in costume.⁸⁹ Upon entombment, this central urn enabled the ancestor’s soul to intercede with the gods on behalf of the living (provided that they appease the ancestor through ritual) and continue this ritual impersonation that the individual likely did for the community before death.⁹⁰ Based on this description, the WCMA urn which depicts Cociyo (Fig. 1) is likely one of these central figures. On the other hand, “companion” urns or other generic ancestor/elite representations were less individualized because they were often not created to depict one specific person or deity, but rather an idealized version of how an elite ancestor should appear. These “companion” vessels would surround the larger central vessel, often in groups of four, and protect the soul of the deceased through its journey in the afterlife.⁹¹ The unadorned WCMA urn simply depicting a seated human man (Fig. 9) is most likely one of these “companion” urns.

⁸⁹ Sellen, “Storm-God Impersonators from Ancient Oaxaca,” 8.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹¹ Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, 54.

Despite the differences between types of urns, Rickards' assertion that "nearly all of these vases were used for funerary purposes,"⁹² is only partially true, because additional research revealed that these urns may have had other uses before they were sealed away in a tomb. Sellen maintains that these urns were intimately connected to bloodletting rituals and that their primary purpose before entombment was to collect blood offerings given to the ancestors or gods in exchange for intervention with the divine in the sky realm. These sacrifices "allowed a variety of favorable conditions to be solicited from the gods via the ancestors, including rain, the fertility of the earth, the health of the people, military power, and even the Sun's vitality."⁹³ Blood was the most sacred offering because it was seen as the chief substance to "feed the most important staple and the gods' gift to ancient man, maize."⁹⁴ Sellen also notes that some of the urns have been found with obsidian blades or bird bones inside, suggesting that some form of blood sacrifice was conducted within/above these vessels. Moreover, the portability of these figures and the importance of copal burning for the green-corn harvest ritual, known to the Zapotecs of Mitla as "time to burn the copal," suggests a potential additional function of containing/transporting incense and burning offerings (including blood after it had dried).⁹⁵ Blood sacrifice was integral to the survival of current and future generations because it was believed that "blood feeds the corn, and corn, in turn, feeds the people."⁹⁶

Images and glyphs found on effigy urns related to corn and rain are not purely symbolic, but also shed insight into the types of rituals in which these vessels would be used before entombment. Many effigy depictions of Cociyo, like the figure from WCMA, include elements

⁹² Rickards, "Monograph on Ornaments on Zapotec Funerary Urns," 148.

⁹³ Sellen, "Sowing the Blood with the Maize," 86.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹⁵ Sellen, "Storm-God Impersonators in Ancient Oaxaca," 13.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

identified as corn in various stages of growth, clouds, rain droplets, and containers filled with water. Sellen suggests that many of these figures were integral for a ritual specific to the early “spikelet” stage in the life cycle of corn, which is considered a “significant and delicate moment” between planting and flowering.⁹⁷ In this ritual, a Cociyo impersonator would have “[danced] with cornstalks” and “[made] offerings to the god of rain... for abundant rainfall.”⁹⁸ Glyph C and other variations of maize glyphs found on effigies confirm the connection between Cociyo (the Storm God) and agricultural fertility rituals, which likely would have been conducted by an elite or priest who would embody the deity themselves for ritual purposes, and then may be immortalized in an effigy vessel, wearing the Cociyo mask and headdress, after death. Thus, such a figure could continue their role as a ritual specialist and communicator with the gods, but now in the sky realm in the afterlife.⁹⁹

It is not entirely known why the urns began to fade out of use in Zapotec society at the end of Classic Period. Feinman attributes the decline in urns less to another cultural or ethnic replacement, but rather to “shifts in Zapotec society and cultural practice toward the end of the Classic period.” As Monte Alban slowly declined, local elites emerged in “a dozen or more outlying valley centers,” which altered the mechanisms and dynamics of power more in favor of legitimacy through “lineal [descent] links” instead of “long-held rituals in which powerful individuals portrayed Cociyo or other supernaturals (as often depicted in the urns).” While this remains theoretical until further research can confirm the reasons for their decline, two

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹⁹ Sellen, “Sowing the Blood with the Maize,” 77-87.

archaeological expeditions discovered that these Classic period urns had been uncovered by later inhabitants, ritually broken, and then buried once more.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

After this extensive review of the two WCMA Zapotec effigy vessels, their iconography, meaning, and function, it is clear that these urns communicate far more than previously imagined. Zapotec religion and cosmovision were deeply entwined with the depictions of humans and deities, separately and together, in these objects. As a means of invoking ancestors' favor, continuing their role as spiritual leaders into the afterlife, or providing companions for venerated royal dead or the mighty Cociyo, Zapotec effigy vessels served a wide variety of ritual purposes both before and after entombment. Research revealed more precise dating for both WCMA vessels, suggesting that both pieces were made during the Peche period of Monte Alban IIIa (500-600 CE). Additionally, it is likely that the WCMA effigy depiction of Cociyo was one of the central figures in a tomb, representing the deceased individual as a god-impersonator, while the WCMA human urn was one of multiple companions. Although they were deposited in tombs, they collected offerings to the gods and ancestors in connection to rituals before their entombment, so their function extends well beyond funerary purposes. The exploration of these objects as physical manifestations of humanity and divinity sheds light on Zapotec concepts of the body, personhood, and images, which are subsequently used to understand *pée*, blood, maize, natural phenomena and the interconnectedness between all animated forms, whether they be mortal or supernatural.

¹⁰⁰ Feinman, "6: The Iconic Zapotec Urn and its Disappearance," June 1, 2010.

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