The Lords of Lambityeco

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The Lords of Lambityeco: Political Evolution in the Valley of Oaxaca during the Xoo Phase.

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The site of Lambityeco in the Tlacolula arm of the Valley of Oaxaca is well-known to archaeologists and tourists alike for its impressive high-status residences as well as its altar complex with plaster friezes depicting several generations of ruling couples whose remains were discovered interred in a family mausoleum below the altar. Lambityeco was the focus of archaeological excavations and surface survey directed by John Paddock of the Institute of Oaxaca Studies from 1961 to 1976, followed by years of laboratory analyses. This impressive volume by two of the lead researchers on the project, Michael Lind and Javier Urcid, synthesizes major excavations focused on the Mound 195 Complex at Lambityeco. The authors present the excavation results in great detail and clarity, which allows them to trace changes in the Mound 195 Complex through the Late Classic and into the Early Postclassic and consider the implications for the Prehispanic history of the Zapotec people of the Valley of Oaxaca.

As an important demographic and political center during the Late Classic Xoo phase (ca. 650–850 CE), Lambityeco has figured prominently in debates about the Classic period collapse and the Early Postclassic Liobaa phase. Although Lambityeco was one of the largest sites in the Valley of Oaxaca and featured impressive monumental architecture, the community was dwarfed by the powerful mountaintop city and polity seat of Monte Albán, located twenty-five kilometers to the northwest. Lambityeco is
therefore crucial for understanding the political organization of the Xoo phase Monte Albán polity. Evidence for intensive salt-rendering activities as well as ceramic production and textile manufacture, among other economic activities, also makes Lambityeco an important site for developing models of economic relations in the Valley of Oaxaca.

Even more fundamental to questions of sociopolitical change during the Classic period collapse has been debate over the ceramic chronology for the Late Classic and Early Postclassic in the Valley of Oaxaca, and Lambityeco has been a focus of some of the most heated disagreements. For many years Lambityeco was considered the key site for understanding what happened in the Valley of Oaxaca during the Early Postclassic period immediately following the collapse of Monte Albán. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, researchers, including Marcus Winter and Michael Lind, began to raise questions concerning the ceramic markers that were viewed as differentiating the Late Classic and Early Postclassic. Since arguments concerning the Early Postclassic ceramic phase relied heavily on results from Lambityeco, the site figured prominently in the debate. Winter raised the most serious concerns in a 1989 article that pointed out that few radiocarbon samples from the Valley of Oaxaca dated to the Early Postclassic. At Lambityeco, six of the seven radiocarbon dates from the site fell within the Late Classic period, and the only Early Postclassic date was clearly anomalous. Recent systematic research by Robert Markens has begun to differentiate the Late Classic Xoo phase from an Early Postclassic Liobaa phase.

Needless to say, the evidence from Lambityeco figures into many of the key research problems and debates in Oaxacan archaeology, and this is one reason why The Lords of Lambityeco: Political Evolution in the Valley of Oaxaca during the Xoo Phase is such a welcome volume. The authors rely on the revised ceramic sequence to set the basic chronological framework for their study, which shows that most of the major occupations at the site, including the Mound 195 Complex, date to the Late Classic period rather than the Early Postclassic, as previously thought. The authors address Zapotec cultural evolution from a perspective that draws on World Systems theory along with recent considerations of agency and history, while challenging several long-held theoretical assumptions in Oaxacan archaeology. They insightfully question traditional approaches to cultural evolution that view change as episodic with long periods of relative stability punctuated by dramatic evolutionary transformations. Lind and Urcid point out that the episodic approach is in part a function of the reliance by archaeologists on ceramic phases that in Mesoamerica typically divide time into periods of several centuries’ duration. Chronological frameworks built largely on
the basis of ceramic phases may predispose archaeologists to see change in an episodic fashion; yet as Lind and Urcid demonstrate, archaeologists can build more nuanced chronologies through careful attention to stratigraphy. By skillfully examining stratigraphic relationships at Lambityeco—what Lind and Urcid term the sequential integration approach—they are able to trace the history of the construction, use, alteration, and reuse of the buildings and tombs of the Mound 195 Complex during the course of a single ceramic phase. Their approach joins a growing literature on the biography of objects and places that examines the ways in which the history of places are implicated in broader changes in political relations, identity, and practice.

Another aspect of the authors’ critical stance toward cultural evolution is to question the utility of archaeological indicators of a state form of political organization. For example, Lind and Urcid question traditional indicators of the state, such as four-tiered settlement hierarchies and palaces, which continue to be important in archaeological discourse in Oaxaca. The authors also join a growing number of researchers who recognize a diversity of forms of political organization within states. Instead of seeing the Late Classic period as a “golden age” when the Monte Albán polity reached its apogee as the political capital of a unified and tightly integrated state that dominated the central valleys of Oaxaca and beyond, the authors take the organization of the Monte Albán polity as an empirical question to be investigated. They consider a variety of general categories of state organization, including territorial states and city-states, using ethnohistoric and ethnographic analogies to specify how these kinds of polities may have been realized by ancient Zapotecs.

What makes this volume so effective is the authors’ attention to detail in their discussion of the stratigraphic relations within the Mound 195 excavations and how the evidence relates to the broader findings from Lambityeco. This approach allows Lind and Urcid to trace the history of political and economic relations between Lambityeco and Monte Albán during the Xoo phase. The combination of archaeological, osteological, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence from Mound 195 provides an unprecedented picture of the community’s ruling family. The authors trace the continuous elaboration of the ruler’s residence as the wealth and influence of Lambityeco’s royal family increased through the eighth century. Incredibly, friezes preserved on an altar complex and tomb depict four successive generations of royal couples who ruled the community from ca. 700 to 800 CE along with an important apical or founding ancestor. The friezes represent the genealogy of the fifth couple who ruled from ca. 775 to 800 CE, Lord 1 Lachi and Lady 10 Naa, whose portrait heads decorate the
façade of a tomb beneath the residence. These data show that Lambityeco was the political seat of a small polity in the Tlacolula arm of the valley. Although the lords of Lambityeco may have paid tribute to Monte Albán, they were gaining power throughout the eighth century.

The ascendance of the lords of Lambityeco came to an abrupt end at ca. 800 CE as Lord 1 Lachi’s remains were removed from the tomb and shortly thereafter Lady 10 Naa was unceremoniously interred, indicating that the royal family was deposed and expelled from the residential compound. The authors make a compelling argument that the rebuilding of the Mound 195 Complex that followed was the result of the imposition of new rulers by Monte Albán. Their findings have major implications for models of changing relations between Monte Albán’s rulers and the royal lines of other political centers in the Valley of Oaxaca. Oaxacan archaeologists are increasingly recognizing that the end of the Classic period was marked by factionalism and competition among ruling families. As Lind and Urcid note, the nature of inter-elite relations appears to have been highly variable at this time. At Lambityeco, the removal of the royal family and its replacement with a noble family from Monte Albán indicate that the status of the community changed from a semiautonomous political center to a dominated province. These findings show that just prior to the collapse of political authority at Monte Albán, the polity’s rulers forcibly gained control over at least one competing royal family and its polity. This control was short-lived, however, as the rebuilding of the civic residential compound at Mound 195 was never completed, and within a few decades, ruling families and institutions collapsed at Lambityeco and throughout the valley. Although the evidence from Lambityeco directly addresses the collapse of only one political center in the Valley of Oaxaca, the implications of these data are complex and far-reaching. The authors consider a variety of factors that may have led to the political collapse, such as relations with commoners and climate change, but acknowledge that we are far from reaching a satisfactory understanding of this profound transformation in the political history of Oaxaca and Mesoamerica more generally. The Lambityeco excavations add to a growing body of evidence from sites like Monte Albán, Jalieza, and El Palmillo on the fate of Zapotec nobles and ruling institutions at the end of the Classic period.

*The Lords of Lambityeco* is an important contribution to Oaxacan archaeology. The authors provide a careful and detailed study of one of the most important and controversial sites in the region. They use the evidence to examine the history of one of the Valley of Oaxaca’s most powerful Late Classic royal families and consider the implications of the fate of this family and the broader community for understandings of the Classic period col-
lapse. Like any insightful work, the volume raises as many questions as it answers; readers will be considering the implications of this study for many years to come.

Arthur A. Joyce