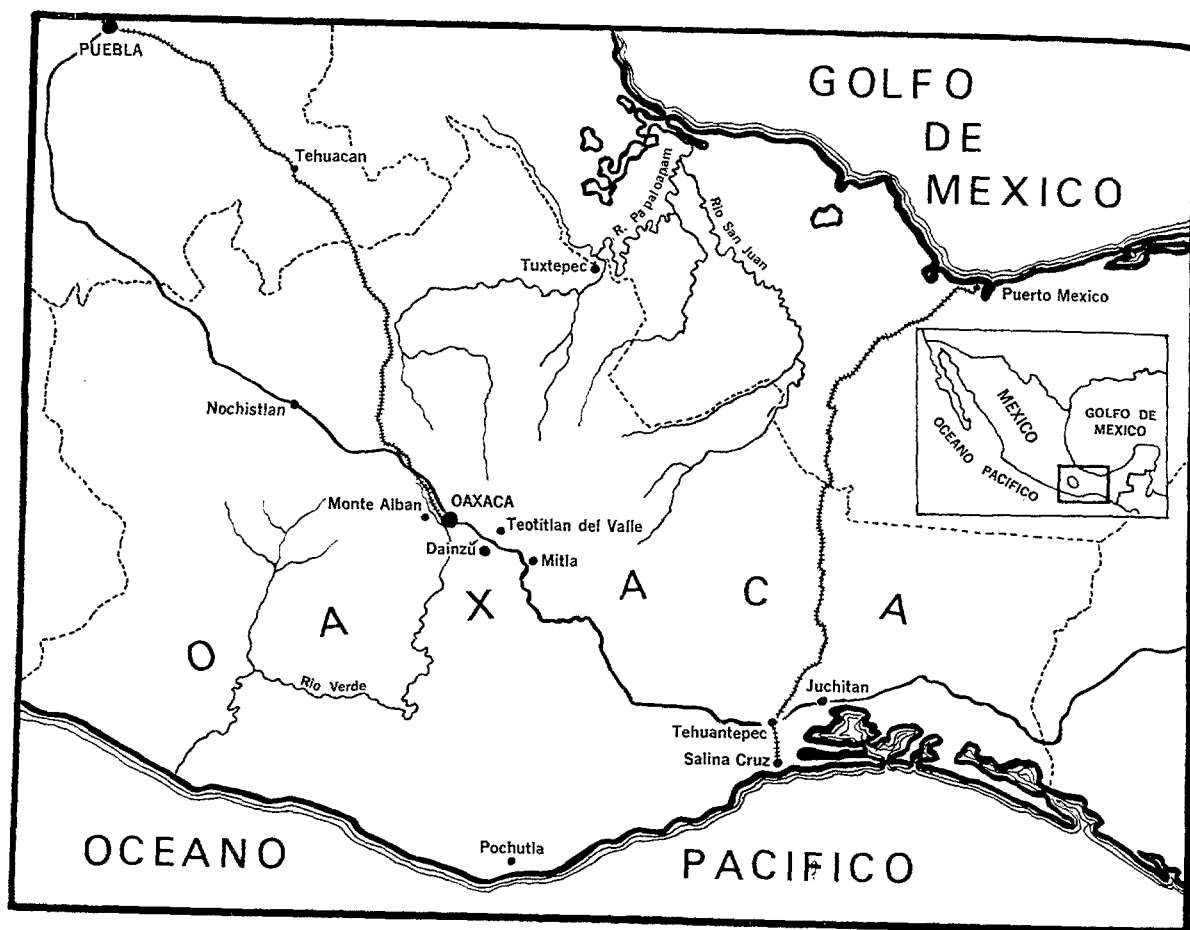




The Ball Players of Dainzú

By IGNACIO BERNAL

About halfway between the city of Oaxaca and the ruins of Mitla lies the village of Macuilxóchitl, in the Valley of Tlaxiaco. Amid the fields surrounding this hamlet, which are tilled by the local inhabitants, rise the mounds and courts of a huge archaeological area, of which the southern part may once have been an independent site. It is in this southern section, which I named Dainzú in the Zapotec language, that we made the first excavation of the area, partially uncovering a mound in December 1966 and January 1967.

THE MOUND AT DAINZÚ faces westward and has a north-south extension of more than one hundred fifty feet, and measures about twenty-five feet in height. Although the excavation has revealed only the lower part, it is already apparent that the mound consisted of three stepped tiers with vertical walls, forming narrow terraces between the sections. The monument, of course, became smaller on each successive level. This type of architecture using nearly vertical walls—and therefore no slope or panel—always dates from a period preceding the arrival of Teotihuacan influence. Thus from the shape alone, we can be rather



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sure that the structure corresponds at the latest to Period II of Monte Alban (300-100 B.C.?).

The western front of the mound on the first level is formed of two sections extending on either side of a central platform. The northern section is larger but less interesting than the southern one, where we focused our attention. This section meets the platform at right angles to form an L-shaped enclosure, with one wall facing west and the other south. The whole lower level—the only one dug so far—was built of rough unworked stones which served as backing for large carved slabs, sometimes quite thick, that covered the entire surface in much the same system as that used in the Temple of the Danzantes at Monte Alban.

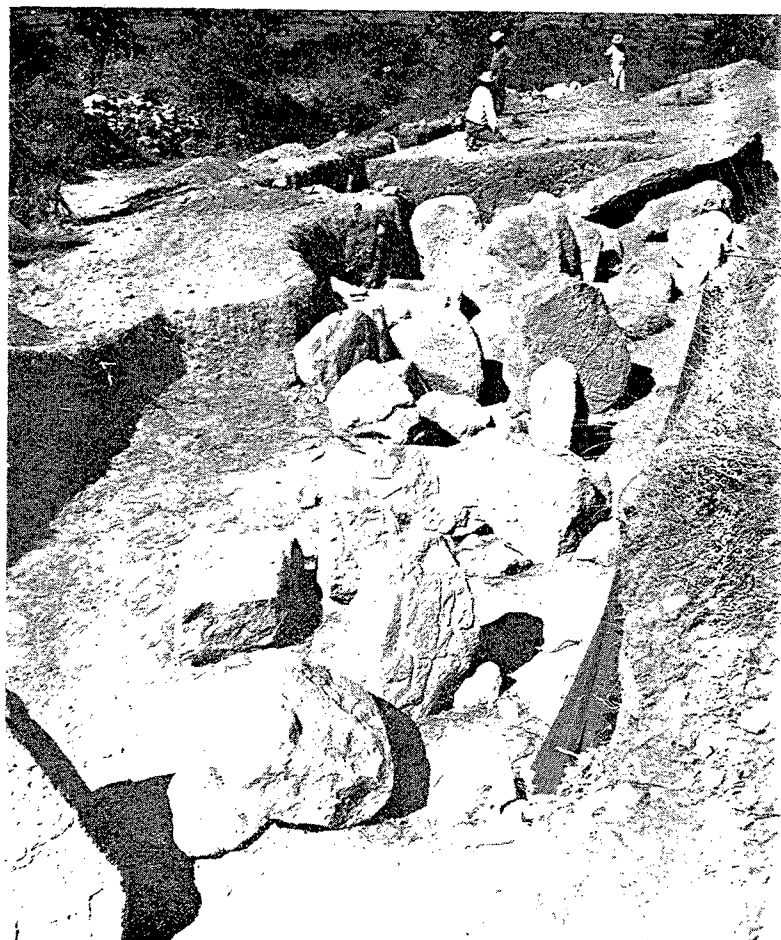
The slabs that formerly adorned the two upper levels of the mound in the same fashion are now missing, and were probably reused as building material for other structures. Two carved stones which may originally have been part of this mound have been discovered on a small platform about two hundred yards away. This means that if we are to recover as many as possible of these ancient stones, we will probably have to excavate the whole area.

THE SLABS ARE REALLY the most important of our finds in the area, since each one has engraved on it a whole figure, either human or half animal and half man. The first level of the building was covered by at least two rows of slabs, irregular in shape and size, with some much larger than others. Fifty have been found so far of which more than half (twenty-seven to be exact) were *in situ*. The others had fallen in such a way that we hope to restore them almost exactly to their original positions. Unfortunately they are carved in a local stone that tends to flake quite easily and even to break. While some of the slabs still show the original design in almost perfect condition, many others are so eroded that the carving has either disappeared entirely or is only partially clear. Slow and meticulous work is being carried on to salvage as much as possible, but many details are irreparably lost.

The slabs can be classified by the subject depicted into three main groups. Of the first type only one example has been recovered: it shows a human figure without a mask but wearing a large headdress which may correspond to the bird of broad beak that Dr. Caso, Director of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, Mexico, and I identified among the urns of Oaxaca in our publication of 1952. This god is known since Period I of Monte Alban. In its uplifted hands the figure holds an object that I have not been able to identify; in front of its knees is a human head with



Slabs of irregular shape from the first level of the monument at Dainzú.



Although twenty-seven slabs from the monument at Dainzú were *in situ*, the remainder had fallen. They may, however, have fallen in such a way that their original positions can be reconstructed.



One of the two slabs from Dainzú belonging to the second group is decorated with a humanized jaguar. Height, 1.34 meters.

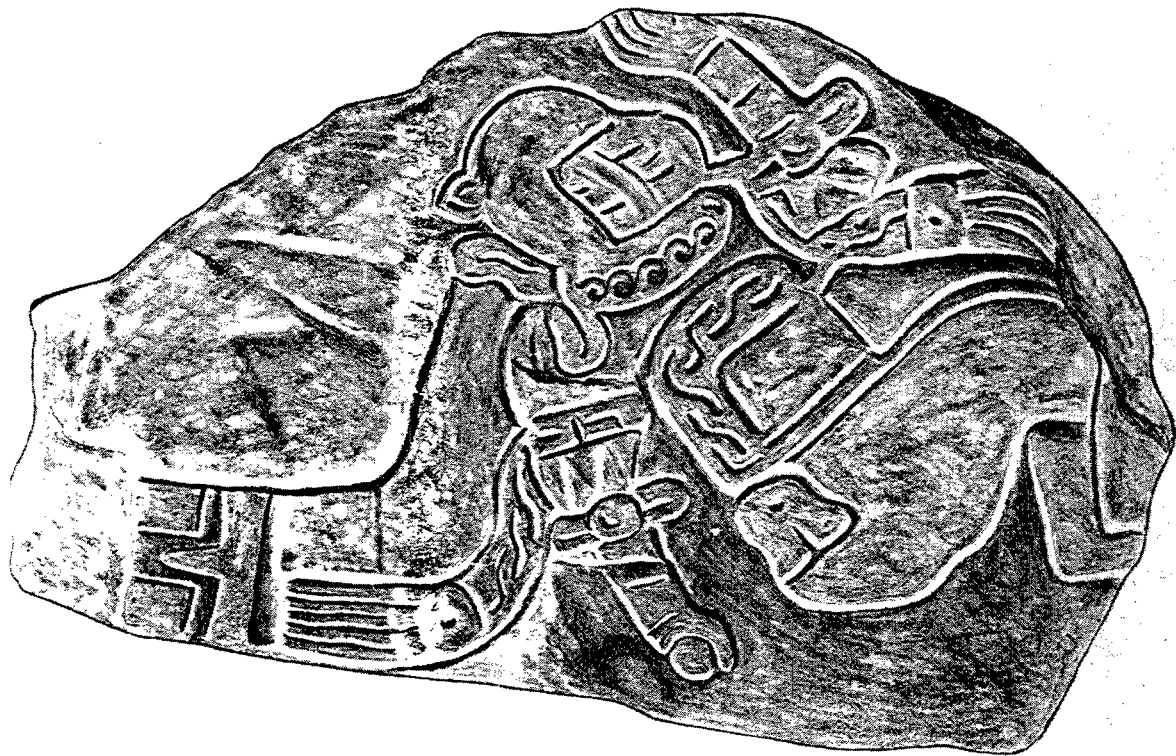


A slab carved with decoration of the first type—an unmasked human figure wearing a headdress, perhaps that of the bird with broad beak. Height, 1.14 meters.

a bow under the chin, perhaps the head of a loser in the ball game. To the right of the figure is a design resembling the hill glyph as it commonly appears in Oaxaca, although in a different position. This may be a toponymic glyph.

The second group consists of two stones displaying humanized jaguars. In one of the carvings the head is clearly that of a jaguar with a large headdress of broad bands, quite similar to the one on the other stone. However, in the latter case the face is probably human but wears a jaguar mask, and perhaps even a beard. Both jaguar figures are clad in loincloths and what appear to be embroidered jackets, and hold something in their extended hands. In one case the offering is a jaguar head, but in the other the object is not clear.

The third group, by far the most numerous, portrays in every instance a human being in a contorted position; some of the postures are impossible to assume, and each one is different. All the stones of this group have many elements in common. Each shows a figure wearing a mask, or rather what looks like a shield for the face such as that used by the catcher in baseball or by fencers. Sometimes a sort of animal snout, perhaps of a jaguar, projects from this shield.



Human figures in contorted positions are typical of the third group of slabs from Dainzú. The faces are covered with protective masks. Heights, above and below, 0.76 and 1.14 meters.



In the other slab of the second group, the face is probably human, but is covered by a jaguar mask. Height, 1.30 meters.



Figures from the third group of slabs from Dainzú. One figure (*Right*) wears short pants terminating at the knees. Height of slab, 0.68 meters. The knees of the other figure (*Left*) have a protective covering. Height of slab, 0.54 meters. The slabs of this group must portray ball players.



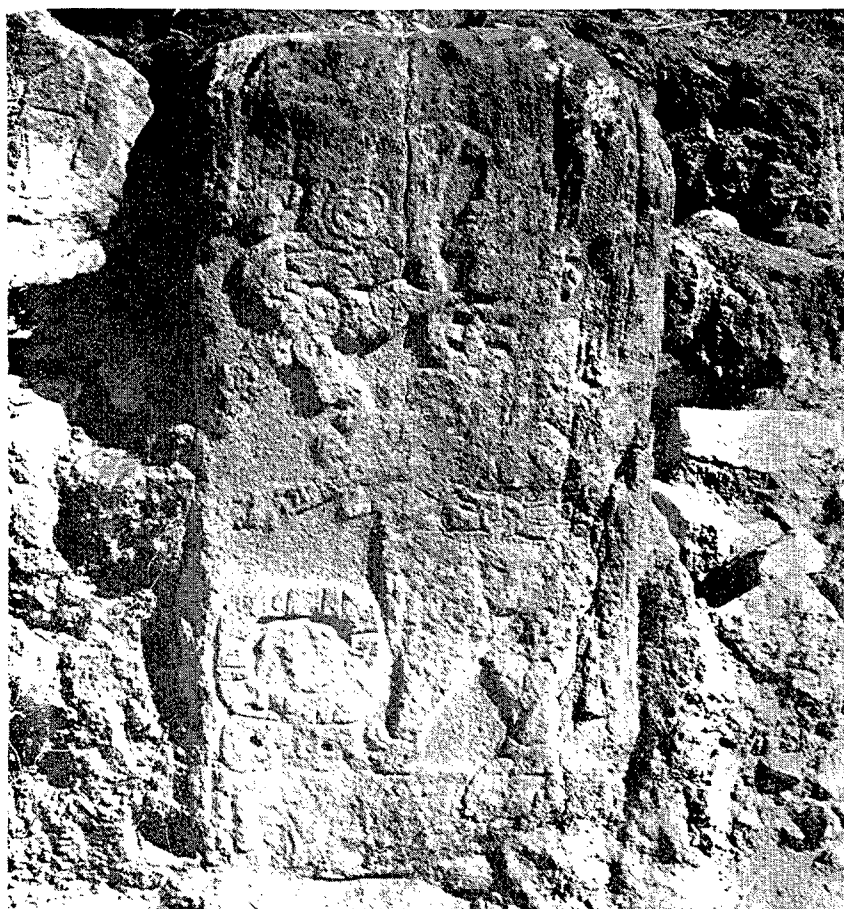
There is nearly always a kind of gorget or collar that might have been made of leather. Each figure holds a rather small ball in his right hand. Both arms are protected by what look like gloves, which are tied at the elbow. In some cases the knees also have a protective covering. The clothing is quite complex and varies from one slab to another, but we frequently see what appear to be short pants, which are fastened at the waist and reach only to the knees. Since this is an entirely non-Mesoamerican type of garment and we know of only one other example—in the fresco of the offering to the gods at Teotihuacan (*Gamio* 1 [1922] plate 33)—quite possibly these represent large loin-cloths.

The remarkably dynamic quality of the figures, perhaps illustrating postures common in the ball game, makes these carvings even more extraordinary. I think there is little doubt that ball players are depicted, since as already mentioned, each holds a ball in his right hand, wears a face guard and protection for the arms and knees, besides displaying vigorous motion. It is certain, however, that this is not the same kind of ball game that we see from the Classic period onwards, but a more ancient form that may have been played without a special court. In three instances a

hieroglyph is located next to the figure. Stone 1 also displays a numeral two. On others only the hieroglyph appears.

STRATIGRAPHIC PITS WERE DUG to supplement the chronological evidence of the stones and to help place the monument in time. The main pit—just behind Stone 24—obviously corresponds to the period in which the monument was erected and the slabs set in place. Sherds found here indicate that the four lower levels are coeval to Monte Alban I in its later phase, known as I-C. The top levels of the pit contained a few sherds of Period II; although few in number and less than two percent of the total, they must nonetheless be taken into account. For the moment it seems likely that the whole monument and the slabs portraying ball players should be placed provisionally at the very end of Period I, sometime around 300 B.C.

Resemblances between the Dainzú ball players and the Monte Alban *danzantes* are obvious, although many differences can also be seen. Especially similar is the seated *danzante* of Monte Alban who wears a jaguar mask and certain ornaments reminiscent of the figures at Dainzú. Another stone from the eastern wall of the main staircase in the northern platform at



Stone 1 from Dainzú bears a hieroglyph next to the figure as well as the numeral 2. Height, 3.81 meters.

Monte Alban is even more similar; it is carved with a figure wearing a protective mask almost identical to those at Dainzú. Yet another relationship can be established much further away, on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala. A splendid stela found recently in the region of El Baul pictures a captive who holds in his hand, a ball identical to those of the Dainzú ball players. Unfortunately the Guatemala stela has not been precisely dated, but it too belongs to this ancient horizon.

The last but perhaps major problem is to determine which culture produced the Dainzú ball players. Judging by the period in which the stones were carved and by their artistic style, it is evident that they must date from the last great moments of the Olmec world. I consider them to be a variant of this type of culture. Not that their creators are Olmec in the strictest sense—they do not conform to the Metropolitan Olmecs of the Veracruz-Tabasco coastal area—but they do have obvious affinities with these people.

A long scholarly discussion on whether or not the Monte Alban danzantes are Olmec seems to have demonstrated clearly that although quite different, they nevertheless form part of the Olmec world and are Olmec in spirit, if not in detail. I believe the same is true of their contemporaries, the Dainzú ball players. But these come even closer to the Olmecs;

they apparently represent a link between the Monte Alban danzantes and Olmec art, not in its Metropolitan version but in the one usually found among Olmecoid peoples. The latter are contemporaneous groups who had their own high culture (in certain aspects—stone architecture, writing and the calendar—even superior to the Metropolitan Olmecs), but also adopted ideas and traits from the Olmecs. We cite the jaguar cult as an example of such a feature. This probably originated in the Metropolitan Olmec area and formed one of its main bases of influence, being widely diffused and accepted by all the Olmecoid groups. These high cultures, together with the classic Olmecs, constitute the great general area of the first civilization to rise in Mesoamerica. This is the major significance of the Dainzú finds. They supply yet another chapter in the fundamental and basic history of the period during which ancient Mexico for the first time rose to the rank of civilization.

The author is Director General of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico. He has excavated at more than a dozen sites in Mexico, and is the author of many books, papers and reviews. He began teaching at the National University of Mexico in 1946, and has been a visiting professor in American and European universities. He is now President Elect of the Society for American Archaeology.