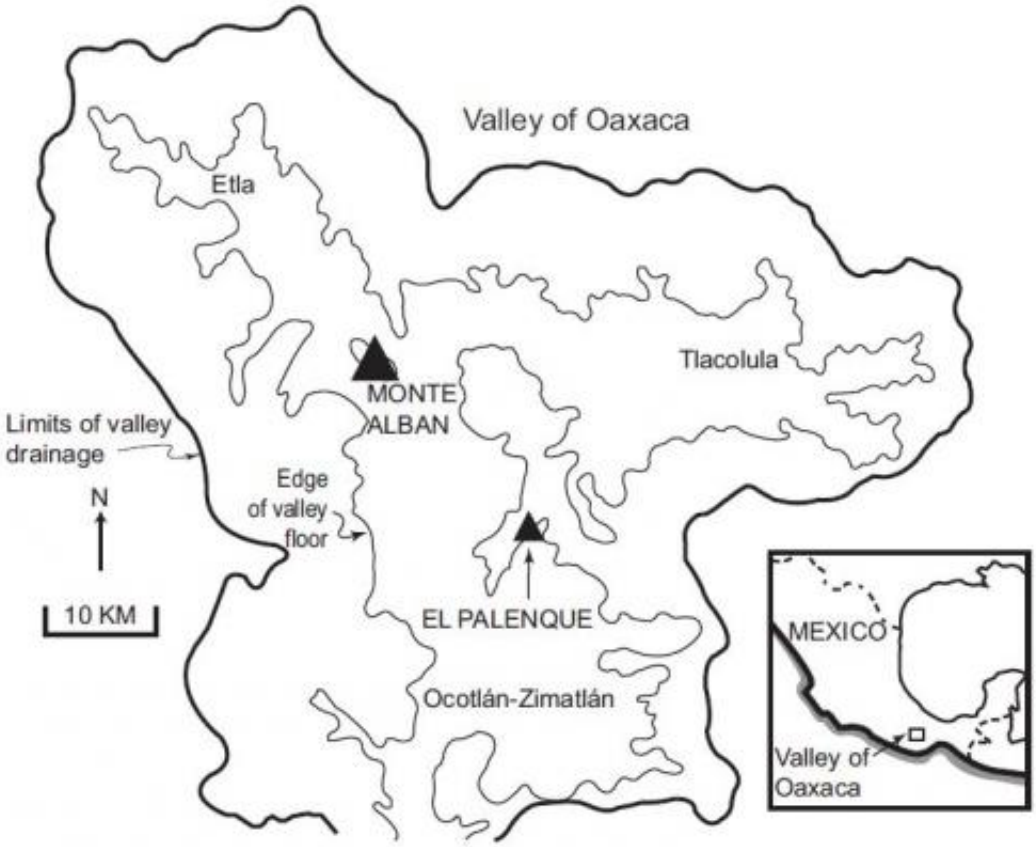
Archeologists unearth oldest Zapotec temple in Mexican valley

April 23 2013, by Bob Yirka



Mexico's Oaxaca Valley, withMonte Albán and El Palenque indicated. Credit: (c)2013 *PNAS*, Published online before print April 22, 2013, doi: 10.1073/pnas.1305294110

(Phys.org) —Archeologist's Elsa Redmond and Charles Spencer of the

American Museum of Natural History report on new developments at the ongoing excavation site in the Valley of Oaxaca in Mexico. In a paper they've had published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the two describe a temple complex found at the site that appears to be similar to those described by Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century. The people that lived in the valley at the time were part of a group known as the Zapotec Civilization.

Redmond and Spencer have been working at the excavation site since the 1993—over time the area has been found to have once been the center of a mini-state—various buildings have been unearthed, including a palace at its north end. In this latest effort, the researchers have found what appears to be a hierarchical group of temple buildings situated at the east end, which they say suggests a full time priesthood.

The temple complex consists of several buildings located behind a wall that include a main temple building and two smaller buildings that appeared to serve as living quarters for high-ranking priests. The structure of the main temple building indicates a hierarchy—in addition to the main room, there was a large kitchen and small rooms at the back which appear to have been sleeping quarters for lower ranking priests. The smaller temple buildings also had fire-pits that appeared to be used both for heating the rooms and to sacrifice animals and perhaps at times, people—a human tooth and part of a limb bone were found among the ashes. Also, mysteriously, they found what appeared to be a hastily buried body in one of the fire-pits.

The early history of the people that lived in Mexico has been difficult to piece together because they didn't leave behind any written documentation. Because of that, historians have been forced to rely on accounts given by Spanish explorers. The excavation at the Valley of Oaxaca, the researchers report, has thus far found such accounts to be in line with what has been found. This is somewhat surprising, however,

since carbon dating has placed the time of the people that lived there at 300 to 100BC—some 1,500 years before the first European explorers arrived.

The excavation of the temple complex has not yet been completed—the researchers note they've found a staircase in the temple complex that leads to some unknown private chamber and are currently in the process of digging down into it to find out what its purpose might have been.

More information: Early (300–100 B.C.) temple precinct in the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico, *PNAS*, Published online before print April 22, 2013, doi: 10.1073/pnas.1305294110

Abstract
Archaeological investigations during the past two decades in Mexico's Valley of Oaxaca have documented the appearance of key public buildings, such as the royal palace and multiroom temple, associated with the rise of an archaic state at ca. 300–100 B.C. A fuller picture is now emerging from the site of El Palenque, where recent excavations have defined a temple precinct on the east side of the site's plaza. This precinct exhibits characteristics similar to those of the temple precincts of later Mesoamerican states described by Colonial period sources. The excavation data document a walled enclosure containing three multiroom temples, two special residences identified as priests' residences, and an array of ritual features and activity areas. The temple precinct's components are interpreted as comprising a hierarchy of temples staffed by a specialized priesthood. A series of radiocarbon dates indicate that the precinct's differentiated components were all in use during the 300–100 B.C. period of archaic state emergence. The El Palenque temple precinct is the earliest temple precinct excavated thus far in the Valley of Oaxaca.

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