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**Interpreting three Zapotec Cocijo effigy vessels from Monte Albán in relation to Zapotec worldview: an analysis of ceramic Cocijo effigy vessels from Tomb 104 at Monte Albán, Mexico, in relation to the directions of the world**

Verstraaten, N.

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September 2016 - February 2017

# INTERPRETING THREE ZAPOTEC COCIJO EFFIGY VESSELS FROM MONTE ALBÁN IN RELATION TO ZAPOTEC WORLDVIEW

## AN ANALYSIS OF CERAMIC COCIJO EFFIGY VESSELS FROM TOMB 104 AT MONTE ALBÁN, MEXICO, IN RELATION TO DIRECTIONS OF THE WORLD

*Nienke Verstraaten*

*Leiden University*

### *Abstract*

*The Zapotec Cocijo effigy vessels excavated from Monte Albán, Mexico are great in number and yet very little is known about the purpose and meaning of these objects. A lack of available data on the provenance of the Cocijo effigy vessels causes difficulty for any sort of research that is conducted on them. Regardless, in this paper an attempt is made to formulate a different methodology through which these effigy vessels may be interpreted. Data on three effigy vessels originating from the same tomb on Monte Albán will be analysed in light of the Zapotec worldview during the Classic period (±200CE – 800CE) and the meanings that were ascribed to the primary directions within this worldview. The three vessels which are examined in this study are aligned with each other within the tomb and all are oriented with their face to the east, the realm of life, and their backs to the west, the realm of death. Therefore it is suggested that there exists a connection between the position and orientation of the in situ Cocijo effigy vessels and the worldview of the Zapotec people.*

### *Keywords*

*Iconography, Worldview, Directionality, Ancestor Veneration, Animism*

*E-mail: [n.verstraaten@umail.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:n.verstraaten@umail.leidenuniv.nl)*

*Academia: <https://leidenuniv.academia.edu/NienkeVerstraaten>*

*ResearchGate: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nienke\\_Verstraaten](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nienke_Verstraaten)*

### **I**ntrouction

The research presented in this paper deals with arguably one of the most complex parts of humanity; our (religious) beliefs (Morris 1987, 21). Archaeologists are invariably limited to the material remains left behind by the peoples of the past, which puts researchers at a disadvantage when studying the religious structures, rituals and beliefs of past peoples (Insoll 2004, 1). However, a middle ground exists between the physical world of archaeological remains and the mental world of beliefs and religion that can be studied through worldview theory.

A worldview can be considered a “map” of how the world and the larger universe are constructed according to specific people an individual group of people (see for example: Arnold 1999; Hopkins and Josserand 2001; López García 2001; Radzin 1983; Roe 1982; Wilbert 2004). Researching past peoples using worldviews is possible, via extensive analysis of ritual and religious contexts such as tombs, burials, and associated material culture. This paper aims to interpret a set of three ceramic objects known as Cocijo effigy vessels in relation to the Zapotec worldview. The vessels – recovered from

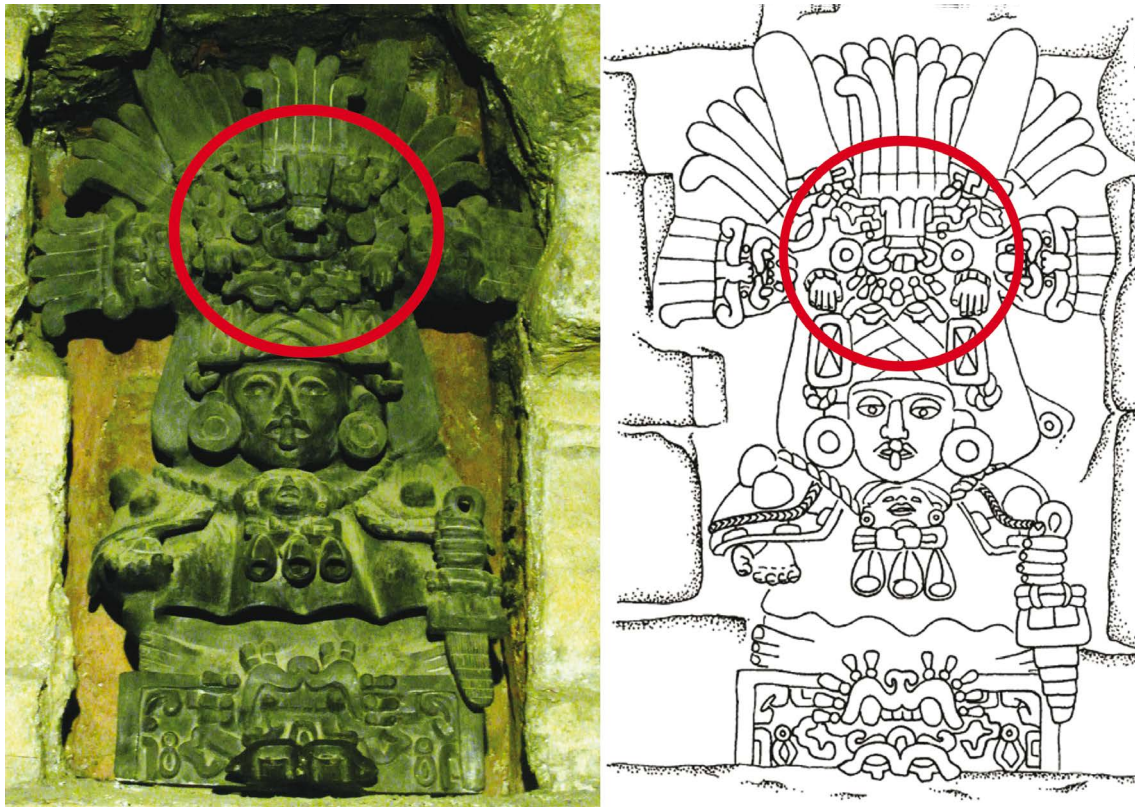


Figure 1. Side by side photo and drawing of the effigy vessel situated above the lintel of the entrance of tomb 104. It portrays a human figure sitting on a pedestal, wearing a headdress with Cocijo's mask in it. Encircled are the depictions of Cocijo's mask (editing done by author). Drawing: Farmsi.org (registration key: MAAt/104). Photo: Taken by author, courtesy to the Museo Nacional de Antropología.

Tomb 104 - were crafted by the Zapotec people who inhabited the site known as Monte Albán between 450 BCE and 750 CE, in the Oaxaca province in Mexico (see fig. 1).

Cocijo is the Zapotec deity of storms, lightning, rain and fertility and many different representations of this character are known from Monte Albán. Much is known about the iconography and meanings of Cocijo, yet the purpose of the three effigy vessels discussed in this paper remains widely unknown. Few assumptions have been made about the purpose of the Cocijo effigy vessels, even though theories concerning the purpose of effigy vessels in general do exist (e.g.: Caso and Bernal 1952; Marcus 1983; Sellen 2007). The aim of this research is to develop new means of understanding the three vessels from tomb 104 in regards to their purpose, by analysing their iconography, position and orientation in relation to current knowledge on the Zapotec worldview.

### Methodology

This research is based on an extensive literary study of the Cocijo deity, the Cocijo effigy vessels, the tomb context from which these vessels were recovered and the worldview of the ancient Zapotec people whom inhabited Monte Albán. Tomb 104 was selected due to the fact that is one of the few funerary contexts in Monte Albán with secure provenance and positional data on the vessels. It is also one of the few contexts for which detailed archaeological maps and drawings exists, which clearly indicate the vessels' *in situ* locations. The iconography on two of the three vessels portrayed full body representations and one partial representation of the Cocijo mask in a headdress of another figure. This allows the investigation of possible connections between vessel types and representational styles, in relation to their orientations and locations in the tomb.

### Theoretical orientation

One important aspect of ancient Zapotec religious practice, was the veneration of ancestral spirits and deities through the manufacturing and ritual use of

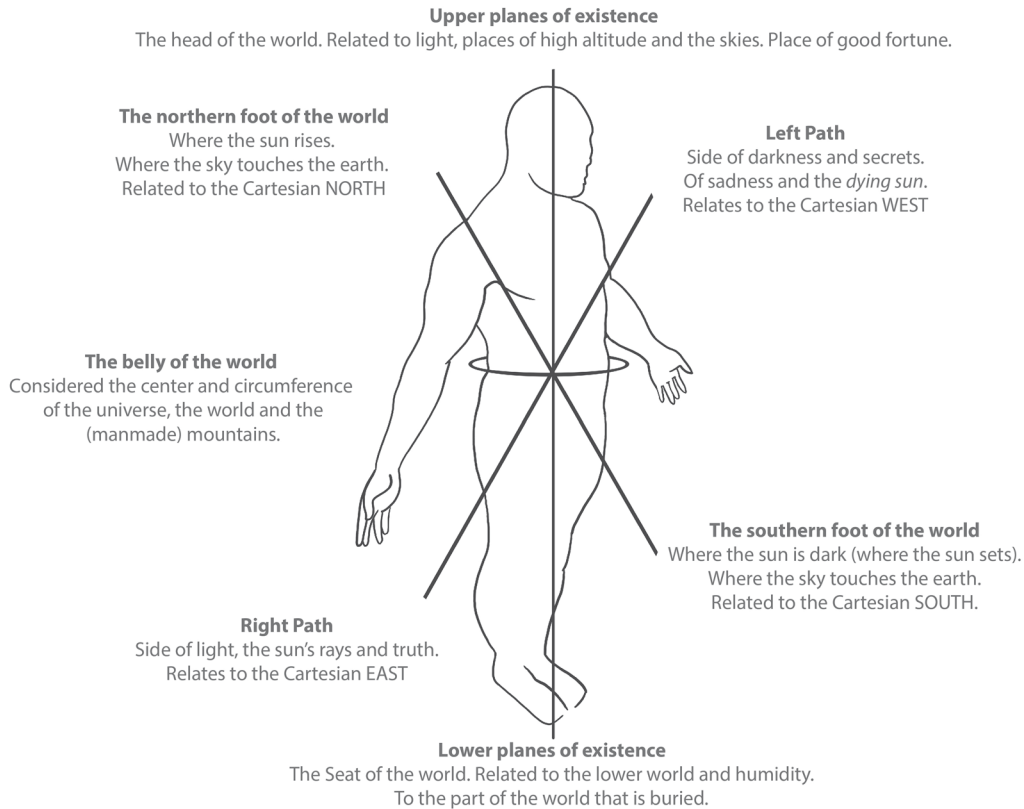


Figure 2. An illustration based on the seven recognised directions in combination with the vertical axis mundi in relation to the human physiology.

effigy vessels (Sellen 2007). For ancient Zapotec people everything in the world surrounding them was considered to be alive, animated by spirits and the forces of nature (Scarre 2011, 11; Marcus 1983). This is important when interpreting the effigy vessels because, for the people who made them, these items were believed to have been imbued with the essence of life and significant spiritual power. Representing a deity or sacred ancestral spirit in the shape of an effigy was enough to invoke the presence of these spiritual beings and to ensure a lasting connection with them (Fitzsimmons 2011, 53; Marcus 1983). A prominent theory posits that most effigy vessels do not directly depict deities and sacred beings, but more often are representations of people or sacred ancestors personifying these deities or sacred beings, by wearing masks and putting on distinctive clothing (Marcus 1983, 144; Sellen 2007, 99 en 126). The mask of Cocijo is a key element in this analysis and therefore warrants some attention (for a detailed description of the Cocijo mask, see e.g.: Caso and Bernal 1952, 17-18; Marcus 1983 and Sellen 2007, 155-159). In a Mesoamerican context the mask and its transformative powers are a widely used ritual tool (Markman and Markman 1990 XIII), which

makes it possible to temporarily adopt the identity of another person or being, without having to fully surrender your own (Markman and Markman 1990, XIV). Thus, effigies showing figures that brandish the Cocijo mask are imbued with the essence and identity of Cocijo itself, allowing the deity to be present in spaces where no (living) humans reside, such as tombs and burials.

It is a common aspect of pan-Mesoamerican belief that the world is a set of interconnected planes of existence, often referred to as a *tiered cosmology* (López Austin, 1993). In Mesoamerican worldviews this model is often shaped after the human body (Arnold 1999, 54; López García 2001, 290-291). In a tiered cosmology, the different planes of existence are connected through what is commonly referred to as the *axis mundi*; the central point of the world (Radzin 1983; Roe 1982, 136; Wilbert 2004). Where the Western world model recognises only four primary directions (north, west, south and east) the Mesoamerican worldviews commonly recognise six primary directions including west, east, north, south, up, down (see fig. 2). Sometimes, the models recognise a seventh direction: the centre of the world

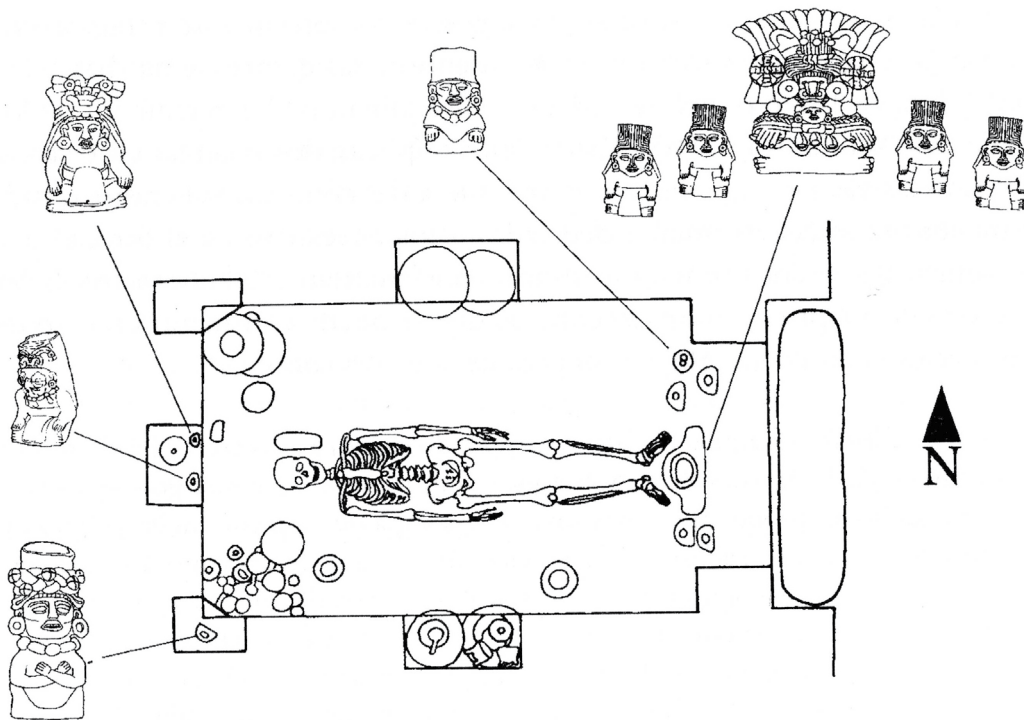


Figure 3. A schematic drawing which shows the layout of Tomb 104 and where all the different effigy vessels are located. The two Cocijo effigy vessels are located in between the feet of the skeletal remains and in the niche at the back, behind the interment's head. The drawing does not show the effigy which is located on the lintel above the entrance. It does show the doorway and cover stone. This drawing is an exact copy of Caso's original field drawing (Caso 2003, 138), with the addition of the lines and effigy vessel drawings. Source: Sellen 2007, 139.

(López García, 2001; Morris 1987, 133). This results in a set of orientations that can be represented in a three-dimensional model (see fig. 2).

An important part of ancient Zapotec worldview were the meanings they ascribed to the seven directions they recognised, based mainly on the movements of the celestial bodies and stars. The north and east were considered the directions of light, truth and where life prevailed. These directions were also associated with the rising and the shining sun (López García, 2001). Conversely the south and west were connected to darkness, secrecy and death. These directions were also associated with the setting and the dark (invisible) sun (López García, 2001). Urcid (2014) notes that burial structures which were built below houses were often located on the west side of the building, “suggesting a symbolic link between death and the setting sun” (Urcid 2014, 209). Similarly the north is related to the rising sun and the south is related to the setting sun. This is probably because during the summer solstice, the sun reaches the most northern point of its annual cycle, while during the winter solstice the sun reaches the southernmost point of its annual cycle (Hopkins and Josserand 2001, 3).

### Materials

This study focuses on Tomb 104 at Monte Albán. It was undisturbed prior to excavation, which means that all the artefacts and human remains were recovered in their original positions (Caso 2003, 107-125). This allows for a secure analysis of the orientation of the interment and the three Cocijo effigies, as well as their relative positions to one another. The single human interment is oriented west→east, with the head towards the far wall of the tomb and the feet towards the entrance (see fig. 3). The tomb contained three different Cocijo effigy vessels, two of which were located inside the tomb while the third was situated on the lintel above the entrance outside. The vessels all faced east, their backs directed towards the western wall of the tomb. This caused two of the vessels to face away from the interment and one vessel to face towards the interment. All three vessels show different representations of Cocijo. The first effigy vessel to be discussed is the one situated on the lintel above the entrance of the tomb. This effigy vessel is adorned with a very elaborate headdress in which the mask of Cocijo has been integrated (see fig. 1) and from which two small hands of the deity protrude, creating the impression that Cocijo

is actually inhabiting the headdress. The vessel was facing *away* from the tomb, towards the east.

The second effigy vessel to be discussed was situated inside the tomb, at the feet of the internment. This particular effigy portrays a figure sitting cross-legged with its hands resting on its knees. However, the character is wearing the mask of Cocijo over its face instead of in the headdress. The effigy vessel is accompanied by four smaller vessels representing the four *acompañantes*, which are often associated with the Cocijo deity (see fig. 3). This vessel too, faces to the east, away from the internment.

The last vessel to be discussed was positioned in one of tomb's western wall niches. This particular vessel is stylistically quite different from the other two. Unlike the other two vessels, it is not a representation of a human looking figure. Instead it is a cylindrical vessel, which is adorned with a seated Cocijo figure. Stylistically speaking this effigy vessel is relatively simple in its decoration, especially when compared to the two larger figurine vessels described above. It is the only vessel out of the three that is facing *towards* the internment, due to the fact that it was positioned behind the skeletal remains in the far west tomb wall.

### Discussion

As mentioned prior, Cocijo effigy vessels are believed to represent ancestral spirits who impersonate the deity through the wearing of a mask (Marcus 1983; Sellen 2007). This allows them to temporarily attain the deity's identity and powers. The different positioning of the masks, over the face or in the headdress could be related to the different ways in which Cocijo's presence is invoked. Relating this back to the vessels in tomb 104, several inferences can be made. If we consider that wearing a mask over the face is the 'true' form of impersonation, then the two vessels inside the tomb context are both true impersonations of Cocijo. By wearing the deity's mask over their faces, they effectively *solidify* him in the physical realm, on earth. On the other hand, the figure on the vessel in the niche outside is wearing the mask of Cocijo in its headdress instead of over its face. In this case the mask may signify the presence of Cocijo in spirit more than in the flesh as would be suggested with a true impersonation. This particular effigy is more suggestive of the deity watching over the individual rather than of an ancestor impersonating the Cocijo deity. Marcus (1983) takes notice of this difference as well and states that it "(...) *might represent contemporary royalty honouring both their ancestors and the supernatural by wearing*

*their likeness in the headdress*" (Marcus 1983, 148). Tomb contexts at Monte Albán were often revisited by the descendants of the deceased for ritual purposes (Middleton et al. 1988). Perhaps the vessel's position at the entrance of the tomb was to inform visitors of two things: 1) that Cocijo is represented by the ancestor who is interred in the tomb, and 2) that Cocijo's presence, or spirit, watches over the tomb, the ancestral remains interred within it and the living who visit. Thus, the vessels are not only a portrayal of the ancestral impersonation of Cocijo but also serve to tie the spiritual power of Cocijo to the context in which they are situated.

Considering the fact that all three vessels are oriented west → east, a hypothesis related to the Zapotec worldview can be formulated. The western direction is related to the realm of the *dying sun*, a place of darkness, sadness and secrecy. The eastern direction, on the other hand, is related to light, truth and the sun's rays. In other words it relates to the realm of the *living sun*. Therefore, when combining the meaning of the world directions with the orientation data of the effigy vessels, an interesting picture emerges. All three of the Cocijo effigies, which are in and of themselves an embodiment of fertility and ancestral veneration, have their backs literally turned in the 'direction of death' while they face towards the 'direction of life'. Furthermore Tomb 104 itself is oriented east → west, meaning that when one enters the tomb you face west, towards the realm of darkness and death. Conversely, when leaving the tomb one would face east, towards the realm of light and of life. The analysis of the Cocijo effigy vessels in relation to the worldview model can be taken another step further when one considers the *axis mundi*. In order for an orientation scheme to be applied to the tomb and effigy vessel, a centre point is needed from which the orientations can be determined. This point can be considered the *axis mundi* of the orientation scheme and the Cocijo effigy vessels may be fulfilling such a role in the context of this tomb. What becomes clear now is that the Cocijo effigy vessels is most likely an embodiment of the Zapotec worldview model. In the positioning and orientation of the vessels, implicit meaning related to the world directions are evidenced.

### Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper was to investigate the purpose of the three classical Zapotec Cocijo effigy vessels in relation to the Zapotec worldview, their iconography, as well as position and orientation within Tomb 104. The effigies are hypothesised to represent the ancient Zapotec worldview in the



shape of a microcosm, as their positioning inside the tomb seems to illustrate. All three vessels are oriented west → east, away from the realm of death and towards the realm of life. They therefore seem to serve as a means to exemplify the natural order of the Zapotec world view in their orientation and positioning. Furthermore, the vessels display different representational styles of the Cocijo deity, indicating a difference in their purpose. They may have served to either manifest the deity in a physical form or to represent Cocijo spiritually. If an effigy vessels portrays a human figure wearing the mask of Cocijo over their face, it is a means of manifesting the deity *physically*. If Cocijo is represented as a mask in the headdress of an effigy it may be indicative of the deity being present *in spirit*.

The analysis of the ancient Zapotec worldview in relation to the Cocijo effigy vessels is a new approach and warrants extensive further studying. Regardless, the initial results seem promising for the research field at large. If more vessels are recovered from future excavations it will certainly be worthwhile to include their orientation data in the study and analyses of these effigies, for it is a source of information that has yet to be further explored.

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