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Archaeological Survey in the Coastal Chontalpa de Oaxaca, México



Research Year: 2001

Culture: Chontales

Chronology: Classic to Late Post Classic

Location: Oaxaca, México

Site: Chontalpa

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Abstract

Contrary to traditional stereotypes of the prehispanic culture of the Chontales de Oaxaca, architectural sites and artifacts at the Pacific coast indicate that there were more complex societies, well integrated into southeastern Mesoamerican networks of sociocultural, economic and political interaction. This report presents the results of surface survey and test excavation at the Río Huamelula, District of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, and discusses the sociocultural context of the archaeological record from the Classic to the Late Postclassic periods.

Resumen

Contrastando los estereotipos tradicionales acerca de la cultura prehispánica de los chontales de Oaxaca, los vestigios arquitectónicos y artefactos hallados en la costa del Pacífico revelan sociedades más complejas y bien integradas en las redes de interacción sociocultural, económica y política del sureste de Mesoamérica. En este informe se presentan los datos obtenidos en los recorridos de superficie y las excavaciones de sondeo en el valle del río Huamelula, Distrito de Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, y se discute el contexto sociocultural de los vestigios arqueológicos desde el período Clásico hasta el Posclásico Tardío.

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Introduction

In the southeastern part of the modern Mexican state of Oaxaca, a linguistically isolated indigenous group occupies the high mountain ranges of the Sierra Madre del Sur and the coastal piedmont and plain toward the Pacific Ocean ([Figure 1](#)). Since the first Spanish report described these people, they have been known as "Chontales" (Nahuatl: "strangers") of Oaxaca (see Relación de Chichicapa 1984; Relación de Nexapa 1984; Burgoa 1989). Traditional ethnographic and historiographic descriptions on the prehispanic and early colonial Chontals have usually relied on the small number of Spanish accounts that promoted the stereotype of uncivilized barbarians living in caves or flimsy shelters without any centralized political organization (Basauri 1940; Taracena 1941; Turner and Turner 1971).

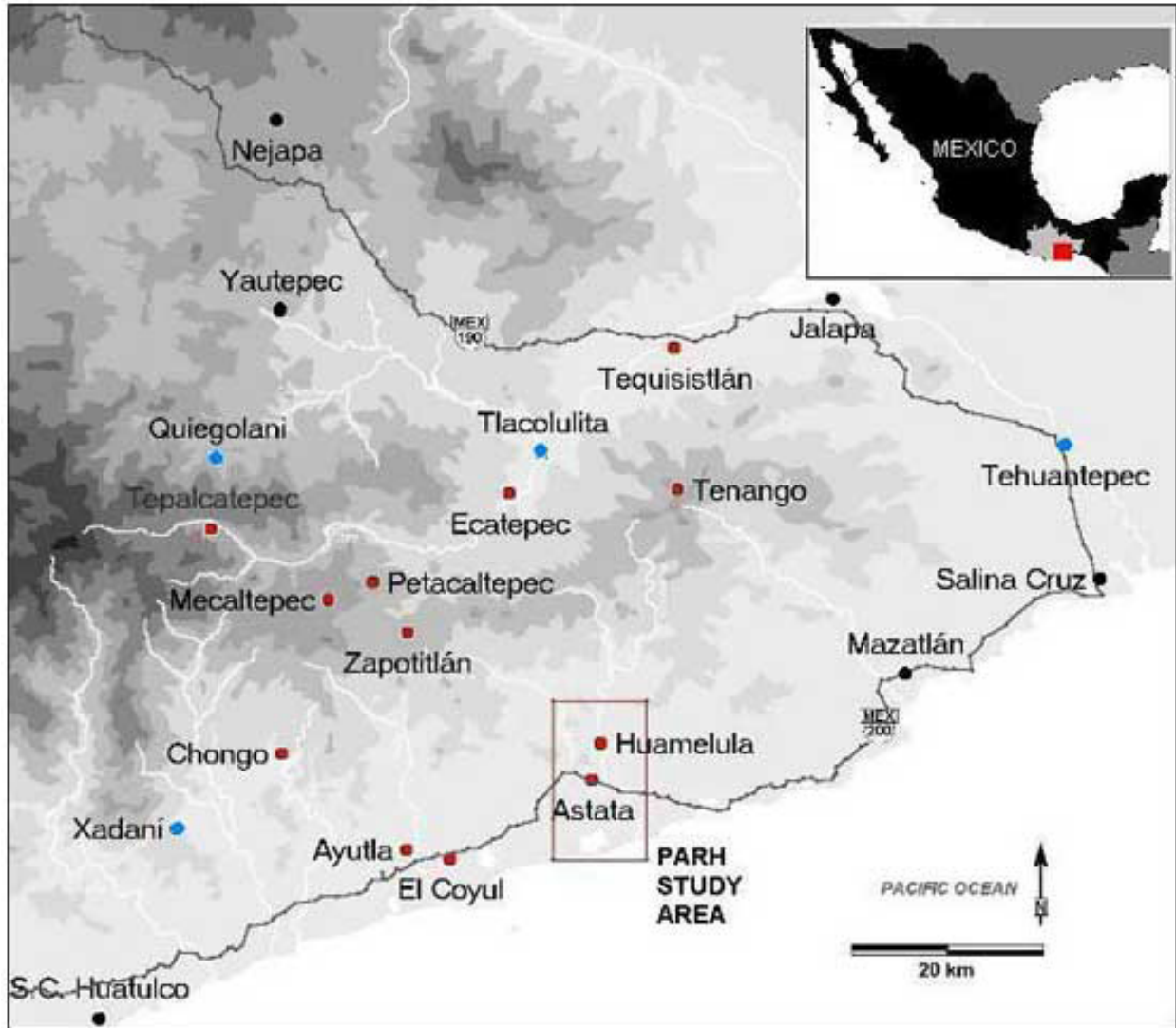


Figure 1. The Chontalpa de Oaxaca and the PARH study area.

More recently, however, studies on colonial documents, and a cursory archaeological reconnaissance along the eastern Oaxacan coast revealed that this stereotype needed to be differentiated. Pictorial and textural sources from the coastal Chontalpa suggest that the colonial villages of Aztatlan (modern Santiago Astata) and Huamimillollan (modern San Pedro Huamelula) were actually the successors of important prehispanic communities (see Gerhard 1972; Bartolomé and Barabas 1992; Camacho 1993; Kroefges 1998).

This report presents some results of an archaeological fieldwork project (PARH¹) designed to study the settlement history at the Río Huamelula valley in the coastal Chontalpa ([Figure 2](#)). One question was if there is any evidence for a settlement that can be identified as the prehispanic center and the subsequent colonial cabecera of Huamelula, the largest settlement in the 16th century on the eastern Oaxacan coast. Further, the project also aimed at locating Aztatlan, another colonial Chontal cabecera further south at the shore, abandoned in the late 17th century after a series of pirate attacks (Gerhard 1972:126). A study of the artifacts and settlement pattern at these sites and other sites at the Río Huamelula should contribute necessary information to understand ancient political organization and culture history in the coastal Chontalpa and to evaluate the traditional Chontal historiography.²

From March to July 2001, locally hired workers and I conducted a surface survey along the Río Huamelula valley and test excavations at the archaeological site. The analysis of artifacts and their distribution was started in August 2001 but has not yet been fully completed.

PARH Survey

In order to identify ancient settlement remains in the Río Huamelula River, a team of five locals and I walked over a continuous block of c. 14 km² in and around the village of San Pedro Huamelula ([Figure 3](#)). Our survey field walking achieved a full coverage except for the private lots in the village center of Huamelula. Our goal was to record and map all detectable archaeological surface features in the survey area. After that, we made cursory visits to the sites surveyed by Brockington around 1970 (Brockington et al. 1974; Brockington and Long 1974), Hualampamo (RH09) and Hualakgoce (RH08). There, we recorded the position of surface features and took reference sample collections of artifacts. Furthermore, we visited previously unrecorded sites indicated by local informants. Local Informants also gave us additional information on the distribution of archaeological sites outside the surveyed area.

¹ The Proyecto Arqueológico del Río Huamelula, Distrito de Tehuantepec (PARH) was approved by the Consejo de Arqueología in 2000 (Oficio Número C.A. 401-36/1339). I would like to thank FAMSI for providing the basic funds of this project. I thank the Consejo de Arqueología of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México City, and the Centro INAH Oaxaca for their support, as well as the municipal authorities of San Pedro Huamelula and Santiago Astata. Finally, many thanks to the numerous collaborators in Huamelula, Astata, and Oaxaca.

² This issue will be more fully treated in the on-going doctoral thesis, prepared at the Department of Anthropology, University at Albany–SUNY.

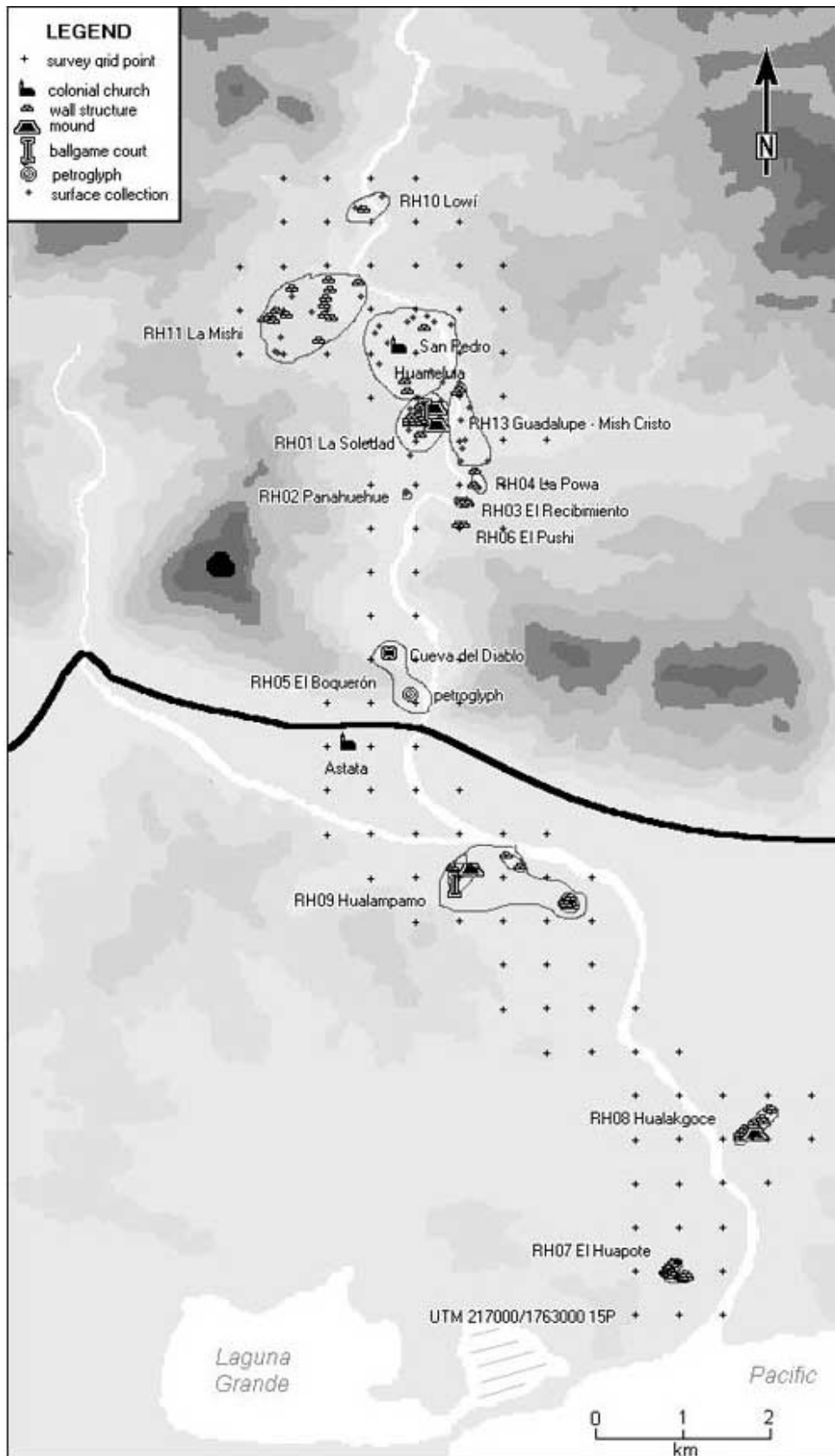


Figure 2. The PARH study area, showing the survey grid, detected sites and features.

We recorded 91 archaeological surface features in the entire study area. Terrace retention walls were most common on the slopes of lower foothills. Less frequent were the foundation walls of probably domestic buildings on the terraces or flat areas. Monumental mounds were massive concentrations of stones and dirt with a minimum height of three meters. Mounds of one to two meters height were recorded as low mounds. The identification of architectural surface remains was restricted to the foothills around the Río Huamelula valley. In the lower alluvial valley bottom and the coastal plain, any existing features may have either been disintegrated by flooding or covered by alluvial deposits.

Archaeological sites and site sections were defined according to the clustering of architectural features, using an arbitrary distance of 250 m to 300 m between isolated or clustered architectural remains. We recorded three village-size settlement sites, two of which can be identified as early colonial Huamelula and Astata (see [Table 1](#)). While San Pedro Huamelula remained in its river valley location and grew from the Classic period until the Spanish conquest, the coastal population apparently shifted their main center various times to different locations. It seems as if Hualampamo, Hualakgoce, and Guapote were the consecutive predecessor settlements of modern Santiago Astata. In addition to these village-size settlements, we identified several associated barrios (wards) and hamlets and around Huamelula.



Figure 3. The modern village of San Pedro Huamelula seen from site sector RH13, looking west.

Table 1. Site Attributes and Surface Ceramic Frequencies

| Site# | Site Name | Site Type | Periods Identified | Recorded Architecture | | | Area Surveyed (hectares) | Vessels per 100 m ² | Minimum Number of Vessels (cases) |
|-------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | | | | Mound | Residential Unit | Ballgame Court | | | |
| RH01 | Huamelula - La Soledad | secondary regional center | Classic - Late Postclassic | 3 | 8 | 1 | 16.5 | 6.0 | 595 |
| RH02 | Panahuehué | isolated residence | Colonial | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0.5 | 0.1 | 7 |
| RH03 | El Recibimiento | segregated ward of RH01 | Late Postclassic - Colonial | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1.4 | 0.6 | 56 |
| RH04 | La Powa | segregated ward of RH01 | Classic - Late Postclassic | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2.2 | 0.5 | 46 |
| RH05 | El Boquerón | ritual cave and petroglyph | probably prehispanic | 0 | 0 | 0 | NA | | NA |
| RH06 | Cerro del Pushi | isolated hamlet | Late Postclassic - Colonial | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0.5 | 0.1 | 10 |
| RH07 | Guapote | nucleated village of Aztatlan | Classic (?) - Early Colonial | 0 | 26 | 0 | 4.7 | 1.3 | 128 |
| RH08 | Hualakgoce | segregated elite district | Classic - Late Postclassic | 2 | 10 | 0 | 6.5 | 1.4 | 135 |
| RH09 | Hualampamo | secondary regional center | Classic - Postclassic | 1 | 10 | 1 | 70(10)* | 0.9 | 87 |
| RH10 | Lowí | Two isolated residences | Late Postclassic - Colonial | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3.3 | 0.2 | 21 |
| RH11 | La Mishi | nucleated ward of RH01 | Postclassic - Colonial | 0 | 14 | 0 | 57 | 1.3 | 132 |
| RH12 | Huamelula - Centro | overbuilt area of RH01 | Classic - Late Postclassic | 0 | 1 | 0 | 75.8 | 1.9 | 188 |
| RH13 | Huamelula - Mish Cristo | dispersed ward of RH01 | Classic - Late Postclassic | 0 | 2 | 0 | 21.8 | 1.7 | 167 |

* Most of Hualampamo's reported extension was not verified in the field. Only 10 ha were surveyed.

Artifacts were continuously scattered in varying density in and between sites. Due to time and technical constraints, we had to take non-probabilistic sample collections. We concentrated our collections around architectural features in order to associate them with the pottery's chronology. Within a judgmentally chosen collection area, the team picked up every sherd or other artifact visible on the surface. The artifact inventory was mainly composed of pottery and obsidian fragments plus a few specimens of other stone tools, figurines or minerals.³

Ceramics were collected as indicators of the relative chronological relationships between the sites and site sectors. Their chronological assessment was to be achieved by:

1. identifying diagnostic index types in reference to Brockington and Long's (1974) previous ceramic classification and pottery studies from outside areas, and
2. correlating diagnostic pottery attributes to those of the pottery that had been stratigraphically distinguished in the test excavations at RH01 Huamelula-La Soledad.

Diagnostic Pottery

Ceramic vessel fragments constitute the main artifact category. We collected 5,598 sherds during survey and excavation. They represent a minimum of 2,133 vessels, based on the distinction of attribute combinations such as paste, surface treatment and decoration, as well as vessel form. The ceramics are generally badly fragmented and eroded so that it was impossible to establish the entire appearance of any vessel.

Most vessels appear to have been produced with a local clay that obtains a brown to orange color when oxidized, or a gray color under reductive firing conditions. Coarse brown-orange paste was mostly used for ollas, comales, and large bowls, while fine brown-orange and gray wares were predominantly used for bowls. A prominent ceramic paste is a very fine, white, kaolin-like paste, which occurred in small amounts at the sites of RH01, RH12 around Huamelula, and at RH07, RH08, and RH09 further south. This ware is reportedly very frequent at the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec during the Formative and up to the Early Postclassic periods (Zeitlin and Zeitlin 1990, Zeitlin 1993), and may have been imported into the PARH study area from those Isthmian production centers.

³ Reference collections of the retrieved pottery, as well as all other clay and lithic artifacts are now stored at the storage facilities of the Centro INAH Oaxaca at the Ex-Convento Cuilapan, Oaxaca, and at the "Museo Chontal," Centro Coordinador Indigenista (Instituto Nacional Indigenista), San Pedro Huamelula, Oaxaca.

Many of the slips and paintings on the vessels may have disappeared in the soil. Our inventory of pottery decoration is very low and we therefore lack stylistic indicators for a chronological distinction of most sherds. Diagnostic incised decorations are very rare ([Figure 4](#)). Nevertheless, some vessel types and attributes are diagnostic and show similarities with pottery styles from outside areas; these indices thus enable us to assess a rough chronological position of the associated sites and features. The most frequent diagnostic feature is the presence of support feet from presumable tripod vessels. I did not identify any ceramic mode that would indicate Formative period occupations in the PARH area. Diagnostic artifacts reflect Classic, Postclassic, and colonial period occupations.

The so-called Talun-carved pottery constitutes one of the most diagnostic ceramic styles of the coastal Chontalpa de Oaxaca. Brockington defined this type on the basis of complex figurative and glyphic scenes and elements produced by molding, modeling and carving. Talun-carved ceramics seem to be firmly dated to the Late Classic period at the Oaxacan coast (Brockington 1966), and they resemble similarly decorated vessels from the Classic period Gulf Coast and the western Maya lowlands (see Winning and Gutiérrez Solana 1996). At RH01 Huamelula - Barrio La Soledad, we found one small fragment and recorded another fragment in the collection of the Museo Chontal (Centro Coordinador Indigenista) in Huamelula ([Figure 4a](#), and [Figure 5](#)). Brockington and Long (1974), as well as Urcid (1993), suggested that the distribution of this vessel type may have coincided with the immigration of Chontals from Tabasco into southeastern Oaxaca.

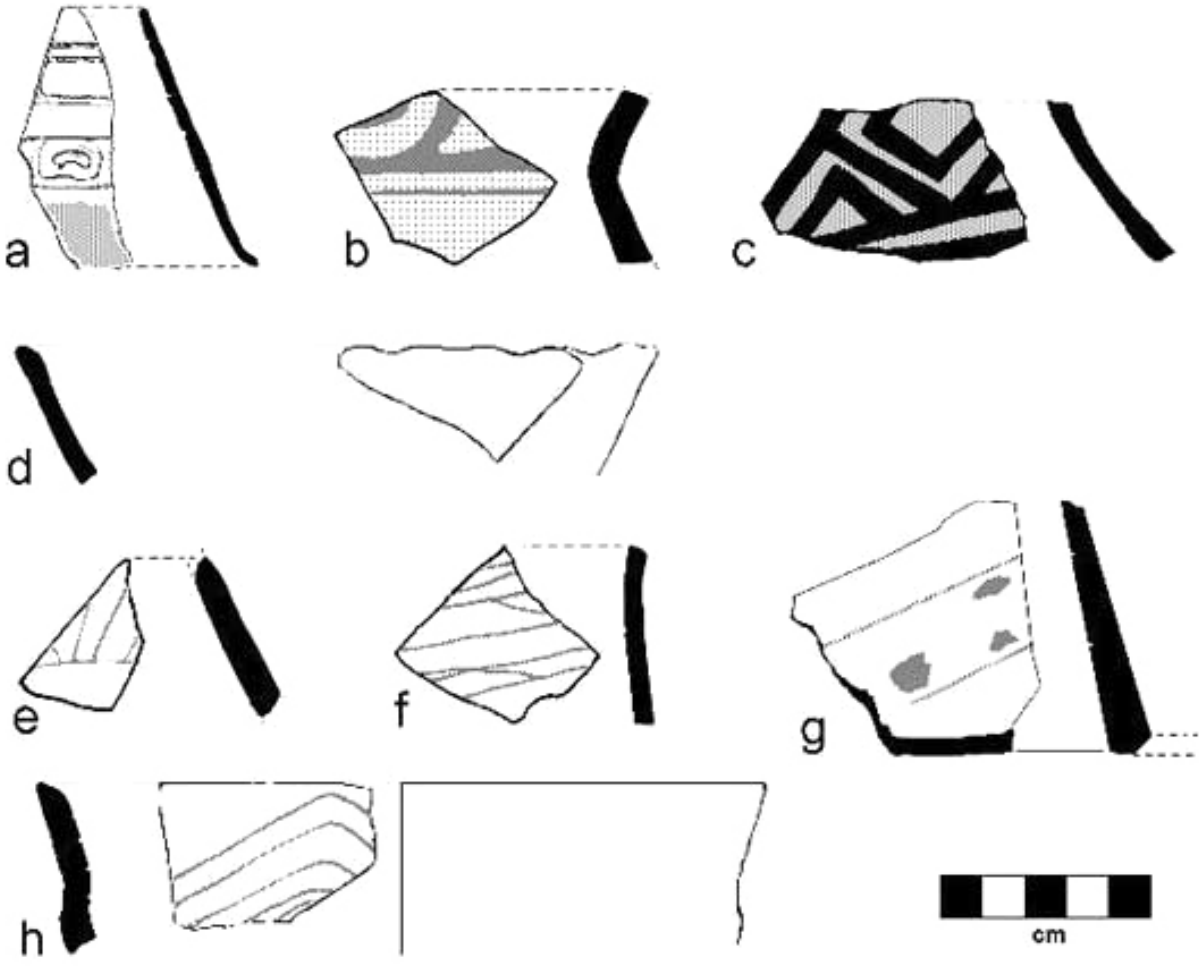


Figure 4. Decorated vessels from PARH sites and test pits.



Figure 5. Relief-decorated vessel fragment found at mound M1 now in the Museo Chontal, Huamelula. Defined as Talun-carved by Brockington and Long's type-variety classification.

However, Chontal-Maya from Tabasco and the Oaxacan Chontal are two unrelated languages, and the origin and course of the Oaxacan Chontal migration is still enigmatic (see Turner and Turner 1971, Winter 1986). Since the overall number of Talun-carved vessels is small and its distribution widely scattered over multiethnic southern Oaxaca, I would hesitate to link this vessel style exclusively to Chontal migrants. However, Chontal migration may have accompanied or followed a generally close interaction between southern Oaxaca and the cultures of the Gulf Coast and the western Maya lowlands during the Late Classic as the distribution of shared stylistic and iconographic traits illustrate. As shown below, various traits of portable stone sculpture and obsidian additionally indicate an exchange of economic and ideological goods that linked the Gulf coast with the Pacific coast of southern México and Guatemala during the Late Classic period.⁴

⁴ PARH collected 282 obsidian fragments during survey and excavation. A sample of 33 black and light gray fragments was submitted to the Missouri University Research Reactor for an abbreviated neutron activation analysis to determine their volcanic sources. This analysis, kindly supported by a subsidiary grant from the National Science Foundation, will allow a comparison between the obsidian imports at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (see Zeitlin 1982) and sites at the western Oaxacan coast (see Joyce et al. 1995).

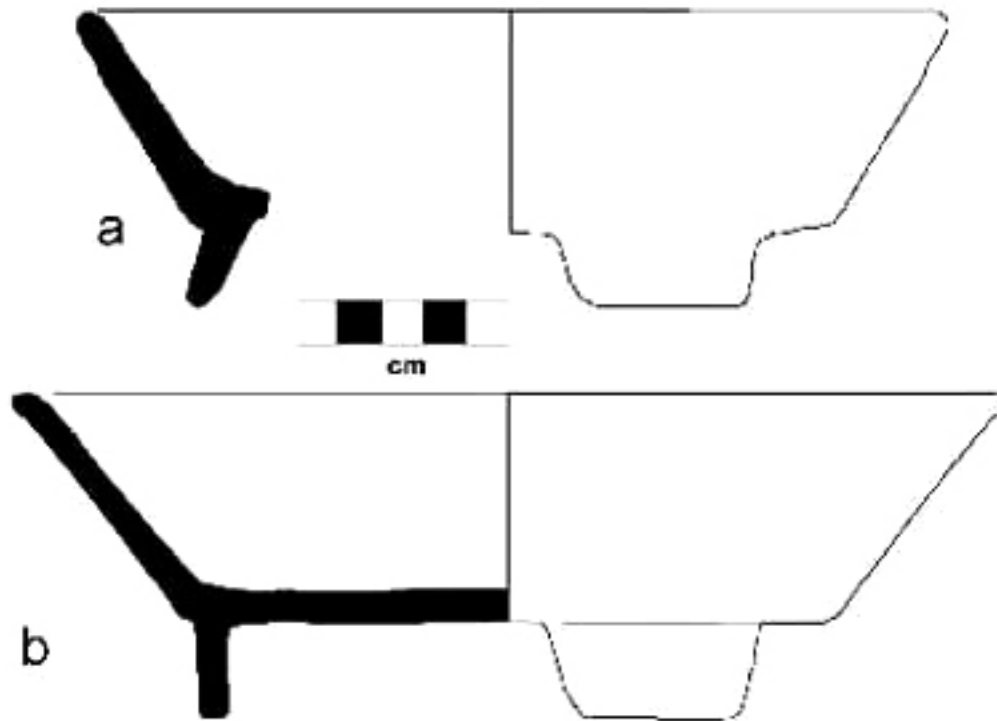


Figure 6. Slab supported tripod vessels from PARH survey.

Slab supports are usually found on conical bowls ([Figure 6](#)); similar vessels are known for the Early and Late Classic periods in the Northern Yucatán area (see Vallo 2000), the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec (see Wallrath 1967) and on the central part of the Oaxacan coast at Sipolite and Bocana Copalita (Brockington 1966; Joyce, personal communication, University at Boulder, Colorado, 2002). Brockington and Long (1974) also considered a possibly Early Postclassic date (A.D. 900- 1200) for those slab supports he had found on the Oaxacan coast.

Short conical and short effigy supports seem to be of the Early and Late Classic period (A.D. 300 - 900), although Brockington and Long (1974) also suggest an Early Postclassic date for some ([Figure 7](#)). Long conical and long effigy supports are commonly associated with the Late Postclassic period. They are present at the sites of RH01, RH02, RH03, and RH04 around Huamelula, as well as at RH07, RH08, and RH09 further south at the coastal plain ([Figure 8](#)). The diagnostic, Mixtec-related red-on-cream bichrome vessels or codex-style polychrome vessel paintings are very rare in the PARH area; although Brockington and Long (1974) reported such vessels from Hualakgoce, the PARH survey did not detect a single fragment of either type. However, the Museo Chontal at Huamelula hosts one polychrome support fragment painted in the Mixteca-Puebla codex-style.



Figure 7. A school kid found these mold-made short effigy supports near the ballgame court at RH01 Huamelula - Barrio La Soledad.



Figure 8. Long effigy supports from Late Postclassic vessels, featuring two serpent heads and an eagle head. Museo Chontal, Huamelula.

Glazed and wheel-made vessels are diagnostic for post-Conquest pottery but they occur only in low frequencies at the PARH sites. It seems that much of the colonial pottery may have been based on the Late Postclassic ceramic tradition, especially the vessels of the coarse ware. A broad variety of clay figurines ([Figure 9](#)) were recently

found by school children at RH01 Huamelula-La Soledad, together with figurines found during PARH, they still need to be examined for stylistic similarities with other regions.



Figure 9. A variety of mold-made and hand-modeled figurine fragments from the civic-ceremonial compound of RH01 Huamelula - Barrio La Soledad. Museo Chontal, Huamelula.

Previous surface finds close to the ballgame court produced two so-called hachas and a Gulf coast style tenoned stone head ([Figure 10](#)). A fragment of a stone yoke was also reported from Huamelula. These stone sculptures are considered to be a characteristic set of ritual ballgame paraphernalia at the Gulf coast and the Guatemaltecan Pacific coast (see Wilkerson 1991; Parsons 1991). At the Río Huamelula, this complex is found at the sites of Huamelula, Hualampamo and Hualakgoce, in addition to two hachas from San Vicente Mazatán some 40 km further east. During the Late Classic period, these coastal communities engaged in this pan-regional cult that connected the Gulf coast over the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the Guatemaltecan Pacific coast that Parsons (1978) had described as the "peripheral coastal lowlands" (see also Zeitlin 1993). The

settlements of Hualampamo and Hualakgoce—from which Brockington also reported the presence of the *hacha*-yoke complex—as well as Huamelula all appear to have flourished as secondary regional centers during this period.



Figure 10. Stone sculptures found near the ballcourt at RH01. Tenoned stone heads (hachas) and miniature hachas.

The Prehispanic Settlement of Huamelula

The most salient feature of the ancient settlement at Huamelula is a civic-ceremonial compound that includes two monumental mounds, a ballgame court ([Figure 11](#) and [Figure 12](#)) and the remains of two other monumental buildings that were recently

destroyed.⁵ The pottery surface distribution around Huamelula indicates that RH03 El Recibimiento and RH04 La Powa were contemporaneous wards or hamlets set off from the civic-ceremonial center, while a larger portion of the residential zone is buried underneath the modern village.



Figure 11. Mound M2 at the civic-ceremonial compound seen from the ballcourt BC1.

We mapped the remaining civic-compound and excavated eight stratigraphic test pits within the compound and in the adjacent residential zones ([Figure 13](#)). The test pits Op1 and Op5 were dug next to mound M2 and revealed the earliest traces of elaborate architecture in the Río Huamelula valley. In test pit Op1, a lime plaster floor sealed a shallow deposit of burnished pottery sherds and marine shells at a depth of about 1.6 m ([Figure 14](#)). An associated piece of charcoal was dated with AMS radiocarbon dating and produced a calibrated date between A.D. 210 and 410.⁶ It would place the earliest possible origin for the construction of the plaster floor to the Early Classic period (A.D. 300-600). Conical tripod vessels with solid slab supports found on the surface near elaborate architecture at RH01, RH03, and RH08 are also known from the Classic period (A.D. 300-900) of the central Oaxacan coast (Brockington 1966), the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Wallrath 1967) and the northern Maya lowlands (Vallo 2000). At the coast this pottery style continued possibly even into the Early Postclassic period (A.D. 900-1200; see Brockington 1966; Brockington and Long 1974).

⁵ Several years ago, a monumental mound close to the ballgame court was bulldozed to give way for a baseball ground. Thanks to the efforts of Sara de León Chávez, former director of the Centro Coordinador INI at Huamelula, school kids collected a remarkable set of artifacts from the affected site. This material constitutes the main collection of the Museo Chontal at San Pedro Huamelula, including the hacha-style stone sculptures and large vessel fragments.

⁶ The AMS radiocarbon dating and calibration of two charcoal samples (B160, B197) was conducted by Beta Analytic Inc., Miami.



Figure 12. The ballcourt BC1 seen from the top of mound M2.

In the Postclassic period, the site sectors of Huamelula either continued to be occupied or were reoccupied. In addition, large residential zones had developed to the north and east of Barrio La Soledad. If the extensive residential zones of RH11 La Mishi and RH13 Mish Cristo are not merely a product of internally shifting residences, they would indicate that the population grew in size and developed additional wards. Furthermore, we detected isolated residences or hamlets at RH02, RH06, RH09, and RH10 that revealed Postclassic as well as colonial pottery.

While all available data suggest that Huamelula grew in size during the Late Postclassic, it seems that the Classic period civic-ceremonial compound at Barrio La Soledad had lost its original function by the Late Postclassic period. At the northern end of the ballgame court, a stone alignment outlines a small building of unknown date on top of the already eroded court floor. If this feature is not of a colonial or early modern date, it could reflect a Postclassic rearrangement of older materials and space.

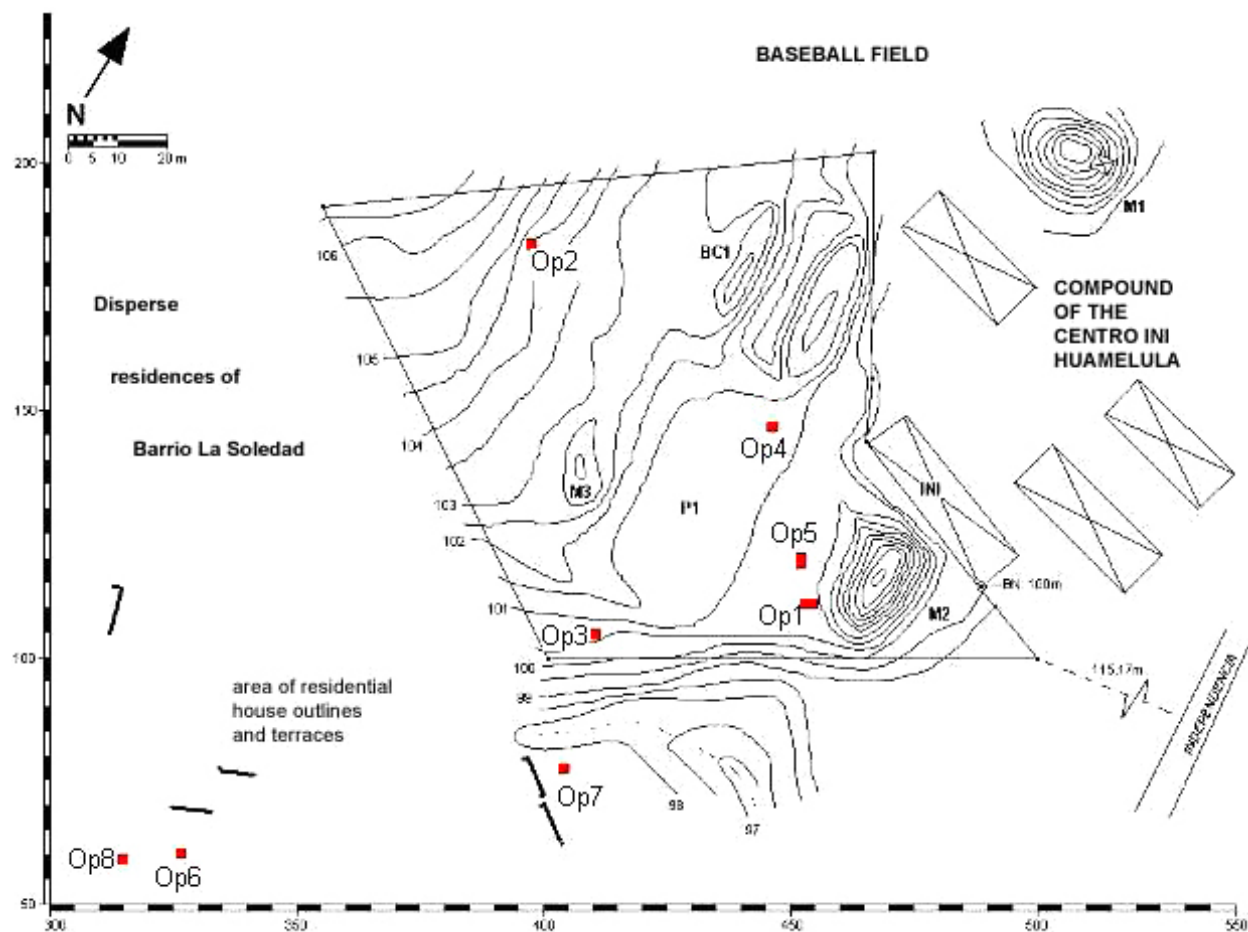


Figure 13. Topographic plan of the civic-ceremonial compound of RH01 Huamelula - Barrio La Soledad.



Figure 14. Plaster floor in test pit Op1, at a depth of about 1.6 m below surface.

The residential structures adjacent to the west of the civic-ceremonial compound revealed pottery only diagnostic for the Late Postclassic or Early Colonial period. There, test pit Op6 uncovered a refuse dump associated with residential house outlines (see [Figure 13](#)). AMS analysis of a charcoal sample from that deposit produced a calibrated date of between A.D. 1420 and 1500. The two radiocarbon dates mark two phases of occupation in and around the modern village of San Pedro Huamelula. The earlier one probably coincides with the development of the civic-ceremonial compound during the Classic period and its function as a center of the ritual ballgame cult in the Late Classic.

The Postclassic civic-ceremonial center may have moved to where nowadays the center of modern San Pedro Huamelula extends; as some locals said, archaeological remains were found underneath the parochial church of San Pedro. The colonial churches of San Pedro and San Sebastian (see Garrido Cardona 1995) appear to mark the early colonial cabecera, as outlined by our site RH12 Huamelula Centro.

The Early Postclassic pottery is not well distinguished from earlier and later ceramics; the ceramic classification by Brockington and Long (1974) could imply that pottery assemblages from the Late Classic and Early Postclassic were in fact quite similar. Consequently, it could be argued that Huamelula continued to be settled during the Early Postclassic period, but that the associated pottery is not discernible. On the other hand, the lack of any well-defined ceramic distinction may indicate that the Late Classic and the Late Postclassic occupation were separated by an episode of abandonment or

demographic decline at Huamelula. In such a scenario, the Classic period civic-ceremonial compound of RH01 would appear to have been reused for domestic purposes and perhaps burials by a different, Late Postclassic society.

RH07 El Guapote–Ancient Aztatlan?

This is the southernmost settlement site within the PARH area, only a few hundred meters from the Pacific shore. It has not been registered before, and therefore Brockington (1974) speculated whether either Hualampamo or Hualakgoce could represent the abandoned colonial village of Aztatlan. Now it seems that the small nucleated site of Hualakgoce was possibly an isolated elite residence, segregated from the larger, densely terraced population center of Late Postclassic and colonial El Guapote (RH07).

We only surveyed the northern slope of the El Guapote hill, a site fraction of 4.6 hectares, but recorded 26 individual architectural features, mostly components of a system of adjacent domestic terraces. Where the slopes are steep, terrace retention walls are up to two meters high. The concentration of residential features at El Guapote is denser than at any other site within the PARH study area. Its high population density was probably supported by the abundant good farming land along the adjacent Río Huamelula, and the Laguna Grande—an important zone for fishing and salt extraction immediately to the west. It is most likely to be identified as the historical Aztatlan—the village was abandoned around A.D. 1680 after repeated pirate attacks (see Gerhard 1972). When compared to the setting of Aztatlan in a colonial map from 1579 ([Figure 15](#)), El Guapote appears to be the best candidate for this historical Chontal village because of its location between the Laguna Grande and the mouth of Río Huamelula (compare location of RH07 in [Figure 16](#)).

The pottery assemblage recovered at El Guapote is very different from all other sites further north, since a frequently red slipped coarse ware dominates. Red slipped tripod vessels with conical supports indicate a Late Postclassic occupation and resemble a ware that Brockington (1982) observed along the entire Oaxacan coast. While this Postclassic ceramic ware dominates at El Guapote and may have continued into the early colonial period, a few gray incised sherds possibly come from a small, Classic period occupation.

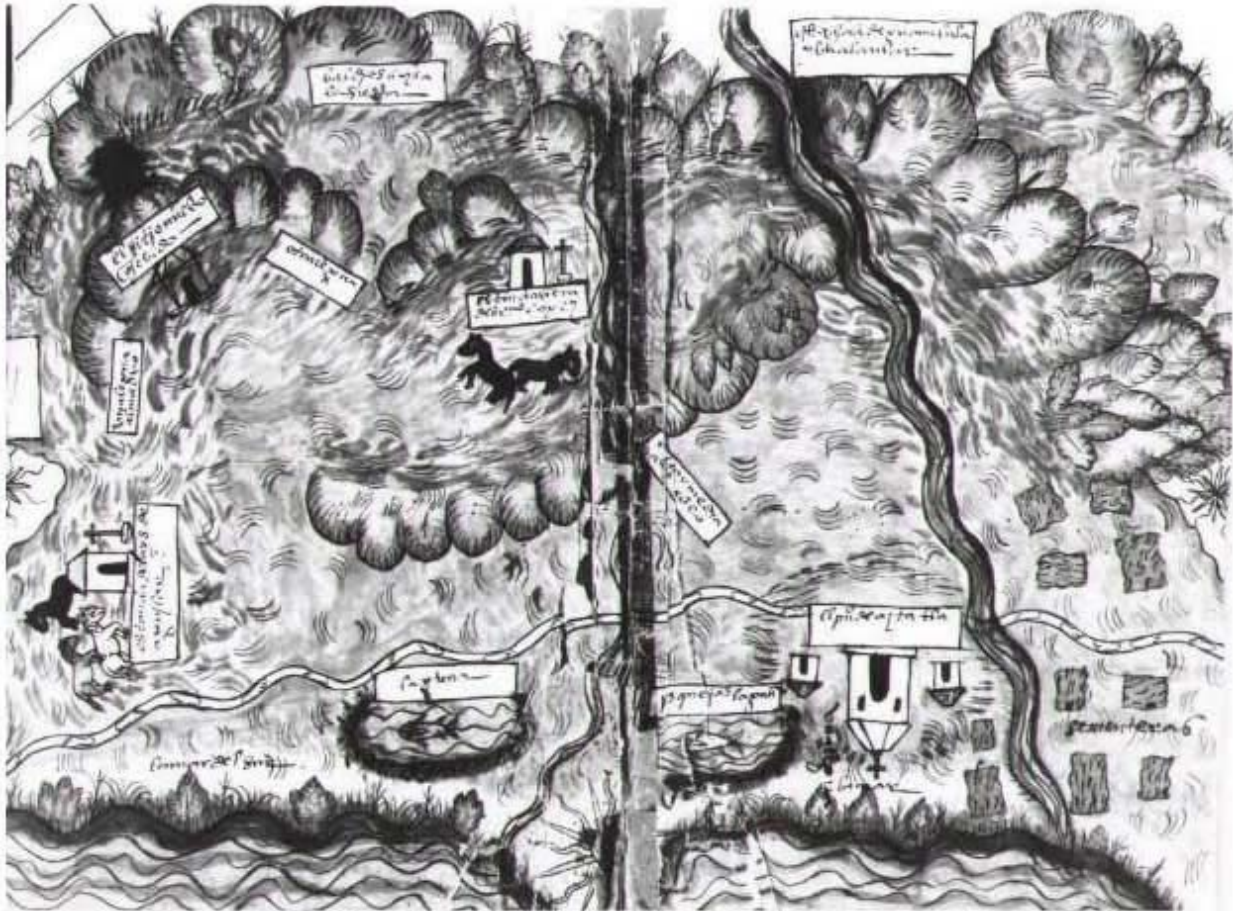


Figure 15. Painted map from 1579, showing the original location of Aztatlan (modern Santiago Astata) between the Laguna Grande and the Río Huamelula. Archivo General de la Nación (México) Ramo de Tierras, vol. 2679, (exp. 14, fs. 15).



Figure 16. View from a hill top terrace of RH07 El Guapote toward the mouth of the Río Huamelula.

Classic Period Political Landscape

As Zeitlin has argued, the eastern Oaxacan coast was probably an extension of the peripheral coastal lowland interaction sphere (Zeitlin 1993:122 ff.). Accordingly, the presence of ballgame courts and paraphernalia would reflect a situation of neighboring peer polities that competed with each other, using the ballgame and associated rituals to channel rivalries between neighbor communities. Such a scenario would suit the Classic period settlement pattern at the Río Huamelula, where the neighboring sites of Huamelula, Hualampamo, Hualakgoce yielded related artifacts and architecture and appear to overlap chronologically. Adjacent sites at Los Cocos and Mazatán, as well as Bocana Copalita, outside the PARH survey area also yielded ballgame courts or related stone sculpture (Brockington and Long 1974; personal observation 1999).

There is no evidence that any of these small polities had the capacity to exercise political control over the entire coastal region. Further, there is no indication of a direct control from outside polities, such as highland Monte Albán (see Joyce 1993:74; Marcus and Flannery 1996:206-207). It still needs to be examined what role the Isthmian regional center of Saltillo (see Zeitlin and Zeitlin 1990) played at the eastern Oaxacan coast. Pottery and obsidian imports, as well as some aspects of the ritual ballgame may

have been introduced into the PARH area via Saltillo. The Classic Period large polity of Río Viejo at the western coast (see Joyce 1993), apparently did not leave any distinguishable marks on the material culture at Río Huamelula sites.

The Postclassic Political Situation at the Río Huamelula

Colonial documents narrate that three supra-regional powers engaged in expansionistic enterprises in southeastern Oaxaca shortly before the conquest: the Mixtec kingdom of Tututepec, the Zapotec kingdom of Tehuantepec, and the Aztec Triple Alliance. The ethnohistorical record of Huamelula and Astata, on the other hand, repeatedly refers to their dynastic and political ties with the Isthmian Zapotec capital of Tehuantepec (Archivo General de Indias, Escribanía 160 bis, Códice Ramírez 1979:86-89; see also Kroefges 1998⁷). This does not exclude the possibility that Tututepec had been militarily successful in the PARH study area at a certain moment.

The archaeological record cannot be easily interpreted in terms of their rivaling influence on the communities along the Río Huamelula. While the kaolin pottery types of the Classic and Postclassic periods suggest a continuing stylistic and economic orientation toward the Isthmus to the east, any sudden changes in the political landscape—through military conquest by Tututepec, for example—are not reflected in the archaeological record retrieved by PARH.

Previously, Brockington (1982) suggested that the spatial distribution of codex-style polychrome pottery along the Oaxacan coast coincided with the degree of sociopolitical influence of Tututepec over subdued communities. The scarcity of this diagnostic pottery in the PARH area may indicate that the Postclassic communities along the Río Huamelula did not participate in the Tututepec imperial organization as closely as did the neighbor communities at the bays of Huatulco. There, some 80 km further west, polychrome codex-style vessels are abundant at sites at Santa Cruz Huatulco and Bocana Copalita (see Fernández Dávila and Gómez Serafín 1988, 1990; Martínez Magaña 1999; personal observation). The documentary evidence has shown that the Huatulco area was under strong control by Tututepec's imperial officers (see Relación de Guatulco 1984).

⁷ The Codex Ramírez (1979:86-89) tells about a vengeance expedition of Axayacatl against Tehuantepecs coastal allies, during which the Aztec ruler's army moved westward until reaching Huatulco ("*Guatusco*"). The AGI document from 1571 is a testimony by the Aztlatan cacique, a son-in-law of the widow of Zapotec ruler of Tehuantepec, Cocijopij (Juan Cortéz). According to an earlier study by Kroefges (1998) on the indigenous colonial historical-cartographic pictorial found in Astata, the so-called Lienzo de Tecciztlán y Tequatepec, a genealogical line of local rulers from Huamelula is joined by Zapotec warlords to establish a cacicazgo that included Chontal communities of the Chontalpa Alta and Costa.

Conclusion: Settlement Continuity and Chontal Identity

According to the surface finds and excavations, the Late Postclassic settlements of Huamelula and Astata (El Guapote) continued into the colonial period, when written sources describe them as Chontal communities. The documentation of dynastic indigenous local rule (*cacicazgos*) is complemented by a rich material culture at these sites. Both lines of evidence reflect a sociocultural and economic organization very similar to neighboring Mixtec and Zapotec *cacicazgos* (see Spores 1983; Lind 1999; Marcus and Flannery 1983; Whitecotton 1977). This similarity probably resulted from the close interaction of coastal communities with outside areas.

It is not yet clear if the people who created and used the Classic period civic-ceremonial centers at the Río Huamelula and associated artwork were Chontal speakers or not. So far, there is no evidence to reject this assumption. Monumental architecture, pottery, and stone sculpture seem to have been introduced into the Río Huamelula valley by the initial settlers. The traditional assumption that the Chontals immigrated around A.D. 700 (see Long 1974; Zárate 1995; Winter 1986) would fit this sequence. However, we need a more precise chronology that could confirm a continuous occupation at Huamelula from the Late Classic to the Late Postclassic period. If the two occupational phases were indeed separated by a phase of abandonment during the Early Postclassic, we may consider that Chontal immigrants reoccupied these sites that had been built by a society of a different ethno-linguistic affiliation.

The traditional stereotype of the Chontals of Oaxaca, in either case, cannot be accepted for the Late Postclassic period at the coast. The stereotype has to be understood in the specific historical context of the more isolated highland portion of the Chontalpa. There, conflicts with Zapotec communities, isolating topography and various frustrated attempts to bring the inhabitants under Spanish rule may have caused both unstable living conditions on the one hand, and pejorative stereotypes on the other. At the more accessible coast, however, Chontal communities were well connected to the pan-regional communication networks. In this context, the communities of the Río Huamelula not only participated in economic, political and ideological exchange throughout the prehispanic periods, but were also rapidly brought under Spanish rule.

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