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The Chontalpa Historical Archaeology Project, Oaxaca



Research Year: 2005

Culture: Chontal

Chronology: Late Post Classic and Early Colonial

Location: Chontalpa Highlands, Oaxaca, México

Site: Santa Maria Zapotitlan

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Abstract

The Chontalpa Historical Archaeology Project (C.H.A.P.) is studying indigenous interaction spheres in the Chontal highlands of Oaxaca, México. For the last four years

this interdisciplinary project was drawing from the rich archaeological, historical, and ethnographic records of the region, while attempting to bridge these disciplinary gaps through collaborative efforts and an integrative methodology based on the paradigm of 'historical archaeology'. By focusing primarily on the Late Postclassic and Early Colonial periods, data collection and analysis are focusing on potential correlations between these three data sets, while looking at both Chontal idiosyncrasy as well as external connections. The Chontal host communities are actively participating in the project's activities and data dissemination.

Resumen

El Proyecto de Arqueología Histórica de La Chontalpa (PAHC), *Chontalpa Historical Archaeology Project* (C.H.A.P.), está estudiando las esferas indígenas de interacción en las tierras altas de la Chontalpa en Oaxaca, México. Durante los últimos cuatro años este proyecto interdisciplinario estuvo obteniendo datos de los ricos registros arqueológicos, históricos y etnográficos de la región, a la vez intentando tender un puente entre estas disciplinas a través de un esfuerzo de colaboración y de una metodología integradora basada en el paradigma de la "arqueología histórica". La obtención y el análisis de información se enfocaron principalmente en los periodos Postclásico tardío y Colonial temprano, centrándose en las correlaciones potenciales entre estos tres conjuntos de datos, a la vez que se observaron tanto las idiosincrasias chontales como las conexiones externas. Las comunidades chontales anfitrionas están participando de manera activa en las actividades del proyecto y en la disseminación de la información.

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Danny Zborover

Department of Archaeology

University of Calgary, Canada

dazborov@hotmail.com

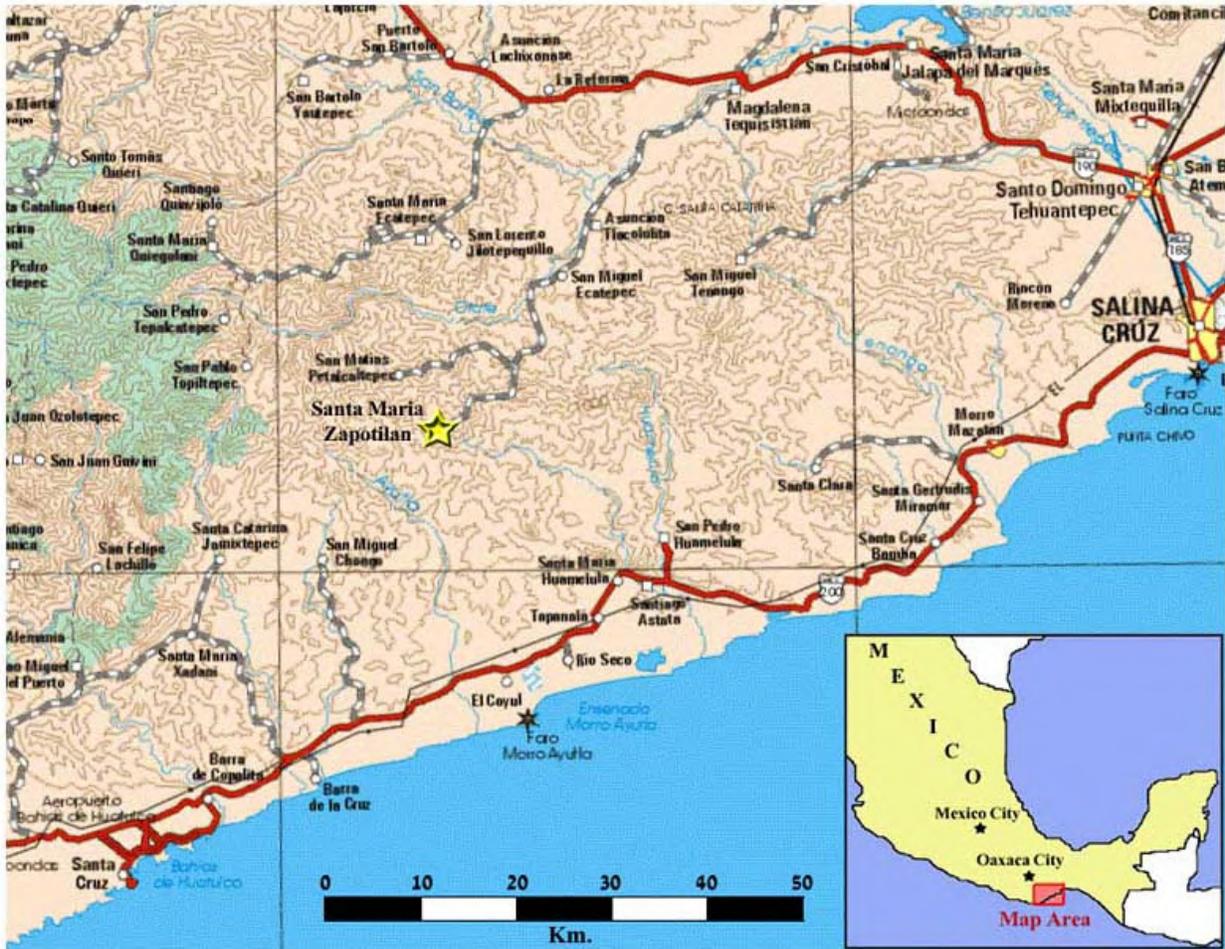


Figure 1. A map of the Chontal Highlands, with the location of Santa Maria Zapotitlan.

Introduction

The Chontal are one of 14 ethnic groups in the modern state of Oaxaca, comprising of two major dialectic groups (coastal and highland). In the highlands, about 3,600 inhabitants live in 25 villages, most of which are nucleated communities restricted to small valleys and mountain slopes. While the coastal group had been largely acculturated, the highland Chontal are considered one of the most geographically isolated groups in México, a fact that has allowed the survival of several important historical documents *in situ*, as well as many ancestral oral traditions and indigenous practices (Carrasco 1960; Oseguera 2003; Turner 1973; Zborover 2002, n.d.a.). This seemingly conservative setting, however, is rapidly changing.

As demonstrated by previous studies of the historical documentation pertaining to this area,¹ the highland Chontal interacted from at least the Late Postclassic period with better-known indigenous groups such as the Aztecs, Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Pochutecs, and probably Huaves. At the same time, we still have little solid data regarding the Chontal's own origins, subsequent migrations, and final settlement before the Spanish conquest. The ambiguity is further enhanced by the fact that their dialect is a linguistic isolate, unrelated to any known Mesoamerican language.² And while archaeological work on the more accessible coast had started over three decades ago (Brockington *et al.* 1974; Kroefges 2001, 2004, n.d.), the highland Chontalpa remained largely unexplored, although archaeological sites have been visited and reported for some time.³ Following the linguists' contentions that the highland dialect is prototypical to the coastal (Turner and Turner 1971; Waterhouse 1962) and hypothetical migration routes from the north (Brockington *et al.* 1974; Kroefges 2004), it is likely that the key to the Chontal identity and presence in Oaxaca would lie in the highlands region.

Methodological Framework

Considering the richness of evidence types available for this region, a primary research goal for the ongoing project is to develop a methodology for the integration of the archaeological, historical, and ethnographic data sets, as both inter-dependent and complementary to each other. Pioneered by Ronald Spores and others during the 1960s, in recent years there has been a growing number of such historically-oriented archaeological approaches, among the most methodical being those by Byland and Pohl (1994; and Pohl 2004), Smith (1992, 1993), and the various projects coming from the Faculty of Archaeology at the University of Leiden (e.g. Jansen 1998). Going beyond Colonial European sources, these studies further looked at indigenous documents produced both before and after the Spanish conquest, and considered pictorials along alphabetic manuscripts as equally valid sources for historical information. Building on these examples and further drawing from the paradigm of 'historical archaeology' (as especially practiced by the European school, e.g. Andr n 1998), the author has been experimenting on a methodological framework which attempts to gain insights otherwise not accessible when working within a single discipline. This integrative approach does not assume that any one data set is inherently more reliable than the others, but rather considers the relative strengths and weaknesses of each, and thus attempts to compare similar type of information in a

¹ Most notably the *Lienzo de Tecciztlan y Tequatepec*, a 16th century pictorial historic-propaganda created in order to form supra-ethnic political alliances and control over the Chontalpa economic resources (for details see Kroefges 1998 and Zborover 2002, 2003a, 2005, n.d.b.).

² As noted previously by several authors, the term 'Chontal' is derived from Nahuatl—meaning 'foreigner'—though the Oaxacan Chontal is unrelated linguistically to any other known Chontal groups. For a more complete discussion on the Chontal language, see O'Connor (n.d.), Turner and Turner (1971), and Waterhouse (1962).

³ Mart nez Gr cida had already reported in 1910 on several highland sites, although with not much detail. In March 2000, INAH archaeologist Roberto Z rate Mor n visited a cave site close to the village of San Juan Alotepec; this site has not been published yet and awaits further exploration.

complementary fashion. For that matter, we are not simply concerned here with confirmatory evidence (i.e. where data from one set coincides with the others), but also how and why data sets may contradict each other. In the latter case, instead of discarding any contradictory data off hand as simply 'wrong', we further attempt to adjust our methods to account for and understand such discrepancies. Although the diverse resources make the Chontalpa of Oaxaca particularly suitable for experimenting and improving on such a methodology, this region is not unique in this regard, and it is our hope that this systematic approach will eventually be applicable to other regions of Mesoamerica.

Broadly, we were able to follow four integrative levels between the archaeological, documental, and oral data sets: 1) Finding and explaining site location; 2) Defining sociopolitical and economic relations between sites; 3) Defining interaction between polities; and 4) Identifying material manifestation of the historical narrative(s). Following the nature of the available historical documentation so far, the temporal focus for the data collection and following reconstruction were the Late Postclassic–Early Colonial periods, with an additional attempt to identify the Chontal's first arrival to the highlands. At the same time, since the available documentation provides us with not just the European colonialist perspective, but also with the indigenous point(s) of view and internal affairs (before and after the Spanish conquest), within the C.H.A.P. context the historical inferences were not limited to European-Indigenous interactions (as is common in North American and current Mexican 'historical archaeology'). For that matter, we were mostly focusing on four indigenous 'interaction spheres': *Cacique-Cabecera*, *Cabecera-Sujeto*, *Cacicazgo-Cacicazgo*, and Indigenous-European, as identified previously by Zborover (2002, n.d.a.). Thus, we were able to weigh both etic and emic perspectives, and get closer to a fuller reconstruction of this eventful transition period in Mesoamerican history. Naturally, indigenous (ethno)historical sources were dealt like any other historical records, by applying the historical method of 'source criticism', both internal and external (Howell and Prevenier 2001; Zborover 2003b, n.d.a.). This further ensures that we do not accept any historical statements in the sources at face value, but rather apply agency to understand the primary context of the source creation.

Archaeological Survey

Rather than being an attempt to 'fill in the blank' on the Mexican archaeological map, the archaeological aspect of the project was designed after the documental analysis had shown the area to be historically prolific and highly conducive for further research. Following the project's paradigm of 'historical archaeology', a purposive approach to the survey was favored over a full-coverage one, by focusing on those sites documented in the historical sources. Although this seemingly subsidiary role for archaeology, for the moment this has also been the primary analytical unit for the C.H.A.P., following the interests and training of the author. It is hoped that future collaboration with historians, ethnologists, and other specialists will further enhance the interdisciplinary balance of this project.



Figure 2. Constantino Martínez cutting transects and holding the tape measure during the survey and mapping of Cerro Zapote; note the typically low stone wall in the foreground and the thick vegetation growth at the site.

The survey's primary purpose was to collect as much information as possible in the form of intra- and inter-site variability, so to identify the suitable candidates for a more detailed exploration. Most helpful at this stage were the data pertaining to chronological questions, but other potential data included site function, status, ethnic and political affiliation, etc. In one form or another, all of these categories could be related to the information gleaned through the documental and oral sources, either as corroborative,

complementary, or contradictory data sets. The survey was conducted in two consecutive field seasons (June–August 2005 and February–May 2006), thus allowing work in both the rainy and dry seasons respectively. Considering the environmental parameters of this region this proved to be both necessary and ideal, since site mapping was only possible in the dry season due to the typically thick foliage and underbrush, while surface collections were most efficient when conducted in cleared areas for agriculture (*milpas*) during the rainy season. On occasions, we had to cut random transects to better identify the sites' boundaries and features ([Figure 2](#), shown above).



Figure 3. The village of Santa Maria Zapotitlan viewed from the east. The hill to the left is Cerro Quebrantahueso, while the one to the right is Cerro Maguey. Archaeological sites were found on both the hills and within the village.

In previous years, we were able to work in several Chontal villages in the region and collect extensive archaeological and historical information for the Chontal highlands. Following the analysis of this data, for the last two field seasons, we chose to focus the project on the Chontal village of Santa Maria Zapotitlan ([Figure 1](#) and [Figure 3](#), shown above), which is referenced in several of the most important pictorial and alphabetic documents for the region: the *Lienzo de Tecciztlan y Tequatepec* (LTT), the *Zapotitlan Manuscript* (ZM), the *Lienzo de Jilotepequillo* (LJ), the *Jilotepequillo Manuscript* (JM), and the *Chontecomatlan titulos primordiales* (CT). While in three of these documents (ZM, JM, CT) Zapotitlan is mentioned as an origin place for the Chontal people, it is

further referenced in others (LTT, ZM, LJ, and perhaps JM) as a key place involving the Aztec intervention in the region. Furthermore, Zapotitlan is showing in the LTT as one of the four Chontal subject towns which paid tribute to a powerful *cabecera* (head town) during the 16th century ([Figure 4](#), shown below).



Figure 4. Zapotitlan (or Cerro Zapote) in the Colonial pictorial documents. In the *Lienzo de Jilotepequillo* (left), emperor Motecuhzoma is standing beside Zapotitlan. In the *Lienzo de Tecciztlan y Tequatepec* (right), Zapotitlan is further divided into five wards, with its Chontal ruler seated above.

Altogether, ten adjacent archaeological sites were surveyed in an area of about 4 km²: Cerro Venado, Loma Pastle, Cerro Quebrantahueso, Portillo Tortuga, Cerro Culebra, Cerro Zapote, Cerro Chile, Cerro Estivo, Cerro Pastle, and the actual village of Zapotitlan⁴ ([Figure 5](#), shown below). The detection process was based on local informants who directed us to where "tepalcates" (pot sherds) were occasionally found, and an opportunistic survey of ridgelines, hilltops, and other potential locations for human activity. An individual site was defined when its artifact distribution was spatially separated from other sites by 100 m or more of cleared terrain (as much as can be ascertained considering the natural parameters), and sites' boundaries were recorded with a GPS Garmin eTrex Vista and locations marked on the INEGI 1:50,000 maps.

⁴ Sites were also given 'project designations', such as Zap-1, Zap-2, Zap-3, etc. However, considering the prime importance of locally-known toponyms to a historically-oriented research (as explained below), these will be referred to with their proper names.

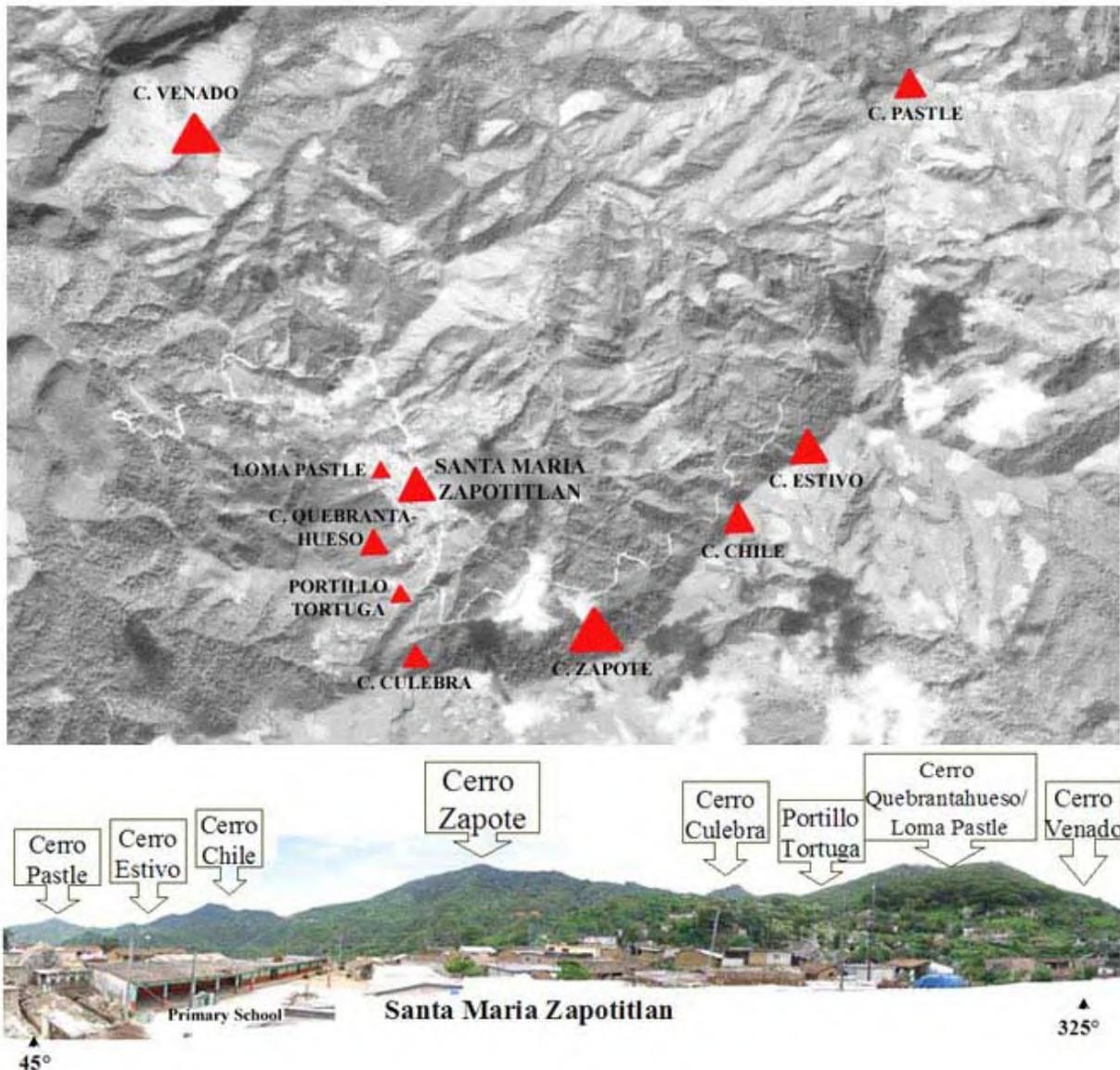


Figure 5. Archaeological sites in and around Santa Maria Zapotitlan. In the aerial view (above), the size of the triangles stands for the relative dimensions of the sites. In the panoramic view taken from the village (below), note the location of the primary school to the left-hand side, where we conducted the village excavations.

For the most part, these relatively small sites are located on an integrated series of hilltops surrounding the modern day village, all artificially modified into large domestic platforms that are supported by retention walls and terraces.⁵ In at least one site, Cerro Venado, the terrace walls were massively built and might have served as fortifications (Figure 6, shown below).

⁵ This form of landscape modification was also observed in the modern-day village, where we were able to study the terraces' construction technique (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Newer and older domestic terraces in the village of Zapotitlan (left) and the archaeological site Cerro Venado (right). Construction techniques and materials are essentially the same.

In Cerro Zapote, probably the largest site surveyed so far, massive stone alignments might have served either for defense or to restrict public access between the eastern and western sectors of the site. With that, architectural remains are modest when compared to the coastal sites, and are mostly limited to low house mounds ([Figure 7](#), shown below) with an occasional larger mound that might have served civic, ceremonial, or palatial functions. Construction techniques include rectangular house foundations of roughly-shaped stones (which probably supported adobe brick walls), while wattle-and-daub and multi-tiered stone walls seem to be less common.



Figure 7. A residence or temple mound on the 'acropolis' of Cerro Zapote, with associated artifacts found on the surface and used in recent rituals. In the upper inset—two ancient ceramic pots (note the zoomorphic shoe pot to the left); in the lower inset—a stone statuette.

Artifacts were collected from the surface in a non-probabilistic fashion, mostly from around visible structures and features where these could be identified. At the same time, sites were divided into collection sectors following the boundaries of the domestic platforms. Collections from the top of the platforms were supplemented with those from their respective slopes, where artifacts were more visible. The decision against employing inter-site sampling strategies at this stage resulted from the relative small size of the sites, the difficulty to obtain a large sample of artifacts from most parts of the sites, and the need to collect as much as possible from each site for the purpose of creating a typology for the region.

As artifacts were commonly observed on the streets and house lots of the modern-day village, we made additional surface collections within the settlement boundaries. In addition to an intensive surface collection from the immediate area of the now-ruined

Colonial church,⁶ artifacts were collected from selected localities where locals had discovered or reported ancient artifacts, mostly while digging for house foundations. In addition, a highly eroded petroglyph depicting spirals, lines, and dots was recorded on the western periphery of the village.



Figure 8. Cerro Estivo. To the left, a simplified plan of the site's core; to the right, Timoteo Martínez and "Pinta" are standing beside test pit 5; in the foreground is test pit 6 with two exposed features and a plaster floor.

⁶ In addition to high quantities of sherds, several obsidian fragments were collected from a narrow strip immediately above the eroded adobe wall of the church. It is therefore assumed that the fill for the thick wall was taken from an earlier archaeological context.

Excavations

Selection of sites for excavation was based on the results of the survey, as on the sites' relevance for the historically-oriented research. In Cerro Estivo ([Figure 8](#), shown above), the ceramic types from the surface collection showed greater variability and the highest percentage of decorated sherds from all surveyed sites, and included several types of fine paste and burnished gray ware. This is also the only site in the survey area that features a ballcourt (except perhaps for Cerro Zapote), and based on the associated artifacts, could be securely dated to the Classic period.⁷ The four 1 m² test pits revealed carefully laid structures and features, including a highly fragmented plaster floor ([Figure 8](#)). The close proximity of these to the site's surface, together with the shallow depth of the sterile stratum, establishes that the site was apparently abandoned after a relatively short occupation episode.

It is interesting to note here that the toponym "Cerro Estivo" apparently refers to the heaped nature of the archaeological site's walls, and therefore was probably not the early name for this place. At the same time, this site is in fact an offshoot of a larger hill named 'Cerro Chile', in itself an archaeological site. This unique combination of characteristics might correlate with Marcus and Flannery's (1996) suggestion that the 'Hill of the Chile Plants' appearing on Monte Alban's 'Structure J' conquest slab, should indeed be found in the Chontal highlands.⁸ Undoubtedly, much work is still needed in order to prove or disprove this intriguing hypothesis, though for now we can similarly apply here the methodology of historical archaeology for the Formative period, as we would for later periods.

⁷ The clearest diagnostic is a Gulf-style anthropomorphic hacha similar to the ones documented for the Classic period, which was found by a local farmer close to the ballcourt. See also Kroefges (2001, 2004) for similar *hachas* found in the Huamelula area.

⁸ Their original proposal was based on several factors, including the typical radius for Monte Albán's territorial control, the highlands' relative isolation and (assumed) lower level of social complexity, and hints from the *Relaciones Geográficas* that the Zapotec were particularly interested in the mountainous areas between Nejapa and the coast (Joyce Marcus, personal communication, October 2005).



Figure 9a. Joined test pits 1 and 2 of the primary school excavation. For respective stratigraphic profile, see Figure 9b.

surrounding sites; 3) Based on the notion of settlement continuity and ethnic affiliation as demonstrated by the historical documents, to try and isolate any Chontal ceramic index types; and 4) To demonstrate the rationale behind an archaeological excavation to the community at large, and to incorporate the school kids in this educational activity (as specified below).

The two adjacent 1 m² test pits excavated in the school yard demonstrated a complex stratigraphic sequence ([Figure 9a](#) and [Figure 9b](#)). All the removed dirt was screened with 3 mm and 5 mm meshes, and soil samples from selected levels were preserved for floatation and further analysis. Carbon for dating was normally collected from lower levels which were less disturbed, and from secured contexts such as features. The ceramic material collected from over ten strata and two features spans from the modern to the Postclassic and Classic periods (and perhaps earlier), although the more detailed analysis is still pending. The uppermost levels I to IV were accumulated during the different modifications of the school during the 20th century, and their chronological position could be inferred from discussions with elder informants. Associated with level VI was a posthole pit, where the now-decayed wooden post was lined with compact gray clay. Below this, the thickest level VII was composed of a dark loose matrix, highly rich with organic material and artifacts. Both human and animal bone fragments were also found in this level, but no complete burial was identified. A two-tiered wall composed of large stones was traversing the units from NE to SW in levels VII and VIII, though its function remained unclear due to the small size of the excavation. Within the fill associated with the wall, we found several misplaced slab-shaped stones, which might have served as floor tiles. If so, then these could be the remains of a large structure which was heavily disturbed. These two related levels are thought to have formed during the Late Postclassic, although it is likely that the fill accumulation lasted well into the Colonial period.

Though it is quite possible that the earliest represented deposits from these sites might be entirely unrelated to the Chontal people, future comparison of these sequences to the material collected from other sites in the highlands and the coast (e.g. Kroefges 2004 for the Huamelula basin), together with the dating of carbon samples from the excavations, will hopefully settle the questions of where did the first Chontal speakers originally come from, when did they settle the area, and with whom did they interact.

Artifact Analysis and Ethnoarchaeology

Altogether, over 6,000 sherds and other artifacts were collected from the surface and excavations.¹⁰ The detailed ceramic analysis is still in progress, though the preliminary study of the sites' material points to a mainly Postclassic period occupation and earlier,

¹⁰ Only two complete vessels were found during the survey, both on a low mound on the highest platform of Cerro Zapote (an area which was dubbed "the acropolis", see [Figure 7](#)). Both appear to be Pre-Columbian in shape and decoration (one is a zoomorphic shoe pot), but their immediate context indicates that these were 'recycled' in modern times for local rituals, as is also attested by our Chontal informants.

with the exception of the contemporary village site as mentioned above. This is based on comparisons to better-known areas and sequences, such as the ones from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Wallrath 1966; Zarate 2003; Zeitlin and Zeitlin 1990), Huamelula (Kroefges 2001, 2004), Huatulco (Fernández and Gómez 1988; Martínez Magaña 1999), and other coastal surveys and excavations (Brockington *et al.* 1974; Joyce *et al.* 1998; Zarate 1995). However, identifying any chronological diagnostics for the region remains highly problematic for the moment, since this was probably a peripheral zone in the past as it is today, and many Postclassic types might have still been in use late into the Colonial period (see Kroefges 2004 for a similar problem on the coast).

The majority of vessel types represented are domestic-utilitarian (jars, bowls, plates, comales, etc.), most made with coarse to medium pastes, with only few examples showing plastic or surface decorations. Some fine pastes and thin-walled wares probably represent the presence of local elite mentioned by the historical sources, with even fewer examples of vessel types for ritualistic purposes. Supports include the globular, elongated, and slab types, although in much lesser percentages than found on the coast (Peter Kroefges, personal communication, April 2006), while effigy supports are entirely absent in the Zapotitlan assemblages. Similarly, we did not find Mixteca-Puebla or any other polychromes, and these are similarly rare in Huamelula (Kroefges 2004). If this is not a result of taphonomic processes, then it might indicate that the local elite were not actively participating in the interregional exchange of exotic goods by the hegemonic polities of Tehuantepec and Tututepec. Figurines are similarly rare among the finds, though quite common in private collections, which in turn might explain their absence from the sites' surface. Interestingly, although the close proximity of the sites and the overall domestic appearance of the ceramics, there are also clear dissimilarities between the sites' assemblages. It is not clear at the moment whether these inter-sites variations reflect chronological, functional, or social factors, or otherwise a result of our biased collection strategy, and further analysis and survey will aim to clarify this issue.

Among the other finds, quartz debitage was the most common lithic type found on the surface of all sites, and was probably mined from a nearby lowland site known locally as "Llano de Cristal". Since no quartz tools were found so far, it is assumed that this had served primarily as temper in ceramic production. Black, gray, and green obsidian pieces were also found in moderate quantities, mostly representing finished prismatic blades or other tools (their provenience still awaits trace element analysis). The quantity and variety of obsidian fragments suggests that the region, albeit its remoteness, was still connected to the obsidian trade routes of the Postclassic. The most common ground stone artifacts recorded on the surface of sites were *manos* and *metates*, all produced from local lithic types, with one unique footed *metate* found in test pit 5 on Cerro Estivo. Polished stone axes and adzes were also found in several sites, while more refined ones were found on Cerro Estivo in close proximity to the ballcourt, and might have served for ceremonial purposes. The only complete carved stone object found during the survey was an elongated statuette, which was recovered from the surface of the Cerro Zapote "acropolis" (Figure 7). Similar to the complete ceramic vessels from the same *locus*, this too seems to have served in more recent rituals

dedicated to the rain, although its style and the highly weathered surface both point to an ancient manufacture.



Figure 10. Gabriela González is learning about local ceramic production from Eudoxia Galván Martínez. Note the plastic water tanks at the back, which are now replacing the ceramic pots at most households.

In addition to the analysis of the survey material, the project members also documented artifacts held in private collections in the village, consisting mostly of figurines found by locals while working their fields on the surrounding hills. Where available, information was recorded as to the provenience of the finds and other relevant information. Finally, following the assumption that local ceramic production and usage kept to traditional canons, we conducted an ethnoarchaeological study with the last active potter of the village, Eudoxia Galván Martínez. For a few days, Gabriela González had joined Mrs. Galván and actively participated in the various stages of the ceramic production, including selecting the source materials, manufacturing techniques, and firing ([Figure 10](#), shown above). In various households, we further recorded specific data regarding ceramic folk-typologies, vessel life-cycle of use and discard, and form to function

correlations, especially where specific vessel forms could be tied to specific activities, which in turn might be helpful in explaining their archaeological distribution, wear patterns, association with other types, and so forth.



Figure 11. Joel Cruz ('comisariado de bienes comunales') with the 'Zapotitlan Map' before its restoration. In the inset—a detail of the map showing roads, rivers, mountains, forests, boundary markers, and nearby villages. Zapotitlan is represented by the circle on the lower right corner.

Historical Documents

Since historical sources play such a pivotal role in the C.H.A.P. objectives and methods, an active attempt was made to locate relevant documents in the villages themselves, in addition for looking at the provincial and national archives. Of particular interest to the project were the genre of "territorial narratives" (Zborover n.d.a.), which are defined as indigenous documents (both pictorial and alphabetic) that combine a narrative of past

events, where the territorial aspect was either their underlying principle, or otherwise played a major role. In Zapotitlan, we were able to study a territorial map that was painted and glossed in 1935 ([Figure 11](#), shown above). Although its relatively late execution date, the map layout and pictorial elements appear to be based on indigenous conventions, and is structurally analogous to the early Colonial cartographic-histories. It is therefore quite possible that this map is a copy or the transformation of an earlier document that had not survived. In addition to the glossed village boundaries, the document contains a depiction of landscape features, pathways that are no longer in use, nearby villages, and other glosses containing historical information. Unfortunately, when we were presented with this valuable document by the village authorities, it was already in an advanced state of deterioration. In order to preserve this testimony both for the people of Zapotitlan and for future study, we were able to communicate between the village authorities and the Document Restoration Workshop of the Biblioteca Burgoa in Oaxaca City. The document was treated and restored with no charge, and was subsequently returned to the community for safekeeping.

Another potential source for historical information on Zapotitlan and the region would surely be the village archive, which is currently kept in several cardboard boxes in the village agencia. This archive contains many manuscripts that deal with the past of the community, starting apparently from the 18th century, if not earlier. Again, the preservation conditions of this resource are far from ideal, as the pages are currently found scattered in total disorder, and many are affected by humidity and insects. We have discussed the importance of protecting this archive with the village authorities, and more immediate steps will be taken on our future visit to Zapotitlan in November, 2006.

Oral Knowledge

Oral knowledge systems are rich and complex among the highland Chontal. Although oral information is (re)created in the present rather than in the past (even if it is *about* the past), the remoteness of the region contributed to the preservation of this ancestral communication system, in such a way that the plethora of traditions in itself can be used today to correlate with the historical and archaeological data sets. For this purpose, we attempted to systematically collect and categorize oral knowledge (following Vansina's 1985 guidelines) from as many informants as possible in several Chontal villages. In Zapotitlan, 25 formal sessions were recorded from both men and women in their homes, and additional sessions were made informally while meeting people on the street or while working in their fields. All formal sessions were audio taped, the information put down on a special form designed for this purpose, and the informants photographed. All our informants were explained the purpose of the project, and interviews conducted only with their full consent.

Although it is commonly the men who volunteered to participate in the sessions, we soon realized that oral knowledge was quite common and indeed multifaceted among the women. Since most oral traditions were collected by both Gabriela González and Veronica Pacheco, this fact alone has much facilitated communication with this sector,

which has often been neglected in the ethnographic literature. While many stories repeated themselves among the different informants, variants were common and these will hopefully allow us in the future to draw comparisons between the genders.

Oral knowledge systems collected in Zapotitlan can be divided into four working categories:¹¹

Place names (toponyms)

Settlement histories

Regional histories

Mythical (hi)stories

The first category pertains to toponyms collected from informants both in the field and in the village itself. Toponyms are crucial for any cohesive reconstruction based on historical documentation, which often refer to named settlements, boundary markers, event-oriented *loci*, etc. (Byland and Pohl 1994; Pohl 2004). During the toponymic and archaeological surveys, we would find a panoramic lookout from which the informant would name the visible features in every known language (mostly in Spanish and Chontal). These were written down and audio taped, and the landscape was photographed and occasionally videotaped. Where possible, we tried to repeat naming the same set of features with different informants, so to check for inconsistencies.



Figure 12. Toponymic landscape survey with Timoteo Martínez from the archaeological site of Cerro Pastle, looking in this panoramic stitch towards the south and east. The names in black (four in total) are the ones showing on the INEGI map (E15C81), while the ones in white (29 in total) are the additional toponyms known to Mr. Martínez.

¹¹ Naturally, these four are not the only categories that can be potentially identified, but only those which are most relevant to the project's research design. It should also be noted that none of these categories is entirely independent, and several can often be found within a single narrative. Finally, it is important to remember that such non-literary and literary genres are often interrelated, and often (re)create each other (most notably in the first category of toponyms).

The prime importance of these collected toponyms lies in the fact that most are not included on any topographic maps, either the Mexican INEGI 1:50,000 or others. In some surveys, the ratio of the toponyms on the INEGI maps (which in the first place were recorded from local informants), to the ones we recorded from the informant was 1:8 respectively ([Figure 12](#), shown above). According to our informants, most toponymic knowledge was passed down orally from parents and siblings, and in some cases, from village officials when the informant served in office. Accordingly, our informants were mostly familiar with those places within the village territory, and had only scant knowledge of those belonging to other communities. Still, the mere fact that we can correlate between these toponyms to the ones found in the earliest documents, attests that these had indeed preserved for at least 400 years (if not more), and can be used today for the purpose of historical reconstruction.

Toponyms for the landscape around Zapotitlan appear in either Chontal or in Spanish, in contrast to the Chontal villages' names that are mostly in Nahuatl. This linguistic pattern is also confirmed by the earliest historical documents we have for the area. Since this same historical documentation further points to an Aztec presence in the region, it is likely that the renaming of settlements is a product of that intervention, and not of the Nahuatl speaking auxiliaries to the Spanish conquerors (especially when considering the late and sporadic European intrusion to this region). Consequently, this contrasting pattern might indicate that the Aztec intervention has been superficial enough to leave the landscape naming around the settlements relatively intact, or that Nahuatl names for natural features were not as readily adopted by the Chontal speakers as those for cultural ones.

The second category of oral knowledge refers to settlement histories, and could be manifested either as traditions passed down the generations, or as personal recollection of the informant. In Zapotitlan, the most common tradition of this category refers to the origins of the village itself; in most versions, the village was once located on the slopes of Cerro Maguey, a prominent mountain 3.5 km away, in a locale known today as the archaeological site of "Pueblo Viejo" ([Figure 3](#)). This spot has later been abandoned, and the people were divided—half left to found Santa Maria Zapotitlan, and the others founded the village of San Jose Chiltepec. The date for this event is not provided, although all informants have heard it from an elder, and none had lived it. Considering the settlement continuity as revealed through the village excavations, this tradition might reflect an event that took place over 500 years ago. Zapotitlan (or Cerro Zapote) and Cerro Maguey are also mentioned in the documents as individual settlements from at least the 16th century, while in the pictorial narrative of the LTT Zapotitlan seems to have 'stolen' the lead from Cerro Maguey in the regional politics¹² (Zborover 2002). The "Pueblo Viejo" and the village of Chiltepec will be included in the November 2006 survey, which hopefully will shed more light on this complex interaction.

¹² Interestingly, in the village of San Matias Petacaltepec, Cerro Maguey is also remembered by the name of "Cerro Huatulco", perhaps due to their relationship in the 16th century as showing by the *Lienzo de Tecciztlan y Tequatepec* (Zborover 2002, n.d.b.).

The third category refers to events that shaped the village in a regional perspective. One of the most intriguing ones refers to a 'nahuales' war between Zapotitlan and San Mateo del Mar, a Huave village over 125 kilometers away in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Today, these two villages have no contact, and for the moment there is no known mention to San Mateo del Mar in Zapotitlan's historical record.¹³ Still, the tradition is detailed enough in regards to event-oriented loci to have been based on actual historical events, perhaps as an echo of ethnic conflicts predating the Spanish conquest. One of the surveyed archaeological sites which dominates over the village, Cerro Quebrantahueso, is specifically mentioned in one version as the seat of the Huave nahual ([Figure 3](#)). This site was probably the hilltop extension of the Zapotitlan village site, as the latter is located on the slope of that hill. Interestingly, the available ceramic data from the survey area does show some affinities with Isthmus material, although Huave archaeology is still at its infancy and comparisons are difficult at best.

The last category mostly refers to traditions about Fane Kantsini, the Chontal culture-hero. Although there is no direct evidence that this figure in fact existed historically, these stories are quite similar to the ones recorded by Martínez Grácida (1910) almost a century ago, or to other historical references of this figure from at least the 17th century, for example as showing in the *Lienzo de Jilotepequillo* and the *Zapotitlan Manuscript* (both of which refer to Postclassic events). In addition, place names are quite common in these traditions, and might be significant when trying to determine the historicity of these traditions, especially when further associated with archaeological sites (but see further discussion below).

Topics and Problems in Chontalpa Historical Archaeology

The rugged topography of the Chontal highlands, together with the Chontals' pre-state social structure as shown by the documents, can probably account for the reduced proportions of the archaeological sites and associated architecture around Zapotitlan. Although far from spectacular, this proved to be most favorable for a historically-oriented research, as smaller sites also represented more manageable units for analysis and comparisons. Of these surveyed sites, the centrally located Cerro Zapote appears to be the largest, and perhaps the most important Pre-Columbian site in the area ([Figure 5](#) and [Figure 7](#)). When compared to the historical records, this observed settlement pattern of a large site (Cerro Zapote) surrounded by smaller satellites is perhaps analogous to the one showing by the topoglyph (pictorial toponym) of Zapotitlan in the *Lienzo de Tecciztlan de Tequatepec* ([Figure 4](#)), where the five house-like icons, interpreted as 'barrios' or wards, formed together a larger tributary unit during the 16th century (Zborover 2002). Unfortunately, the LTT is mute in regards to the proper names of these wards, and so it is impossible to further compare them to the locally known toponyms or sites around the village. With this, the discrepancy in the number of spatial units between the archaeological and historical data sets (ten sites

¹³ It is quite possible that the "Guapi" mentioned in the *Zapotitlan Manuscript* as fighting against the Chontal are in fact the Huaves. However, no particular Huave village is actually named.

vis-à-vis five icons) is apparent, and perhaps can be explained in several ways; it is quite possible that not all the surveyed sites were contemporary, or that not all paid a tribute; another possibility is that our 'etic' definition of what constitutes a spatial entity ('a site') is entirely different from the 'emic' conception of a tributary unit in the 16th century. Further analysis of the collected artifacts should address the first possibility, while more detailed historical data could help address the other two.

At the same time, the excavation and surface finds clearly demonstrated that the contemporary village is located on an extensive Pre-Columbian settlement, and is not merely the Colonial period congregation of the surrounding Postclassic sites. For this matter, other test units are being planned to be excavated on Cerro Zapote to determine its temporal depth. A comparison of these two sites will hopefully ascertain why the current village location was chosen as the main Colonial settlement over Cerro Zapote (or any other site). Another important problem to resolve is the exact location referred to in the historical documents; were 'Cerro Zapote' and 'Zapotitlan' one and the same in the early Colonial references or two separate entities as they are today? How were these related, and why have they diverged? Solving such questions is highly crucial for any successful integration of historical and archaeological data, and the implied resolution of details could probably only be achieved by applying such an integrative approach.

It is further interesting to note that from those ten surveyed sites and six test pits, so far we have not identified a single Aztec style artifact (although some may show on further analysis). If this observation is valid, it also strongly contrasts with the documental evidence, where the Aztec presence in the regions is highlighted by at least four indigenous pictorial and alphabetic sources pertaining to the region (ZM, LJ, LTT, and the *titulos primordiales* of S.M. Ecatepec), of which three originated from the highlands.¹⁴ Since there were no previously-known historical references to such an involvement in this area, this in itself could further revise our current picture of the Triple-Alliance imperial extent and military influence in Oaxaca. If so, perhaps we can explain the absence of Aztec material culture with the fact that their presence was either ephemeral (as hinted by the toponymic data), exerted through the local elite, or that the Aztec representatives were using the local material culture.¹⁵

At the same time, one of the most challenging conclusions coming from a more detailed comparison of these documents, is that in the early Colonial period, this region was divided by antagonistic heroic traditions—one loyal to the *representation* of the Chontal culture-hero Fane Kantsini, while the other to the *representation* of the Aztec emperor Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin (Zborover n.d.). It remains to be seen whether these figures

¹⁴ The most spectacular to date is the *Lienzo de Jilotepequillo*, which was documented by the C.H.A.P. 2002 field season in the Chontal village of San Lorenzo Jilotepequillo ([Figure 4](#)). A detailed analysis of this document is currently prepared for publication by the author.

¹⁵ Such discrepancies between the historical and archaeological data pertaining to the Aztecs are known from other places in Mesoamerica, as for example with the case of the conquest of Oaxaca (Huaxyacac). See Hodges (1998) for further examples and discussion.

were in fact historically conflicting in the area in the Late Postclassic, or if it was only their virtual representations that were adopted by opposed faction leaders during the Early Colonial period. Remarkably, there also seems to be a shift in the image of Fane Kantsini as described in Zapotitlan's oral traditions vis-à-vis previously recorded versions from nearby villages such as Jilotepequillo and S.M. Ecatepec; while in the latter two this Chontal culture-hero is described as the liberator of his people, in Zapotitlan he is "remembered" as a cruel king and sorcerer who used to kidnap and eat people, and was finally vanquished by a priest. At the same time, another tradition in Zapotitlan relates of an unnamed king, who arrived in order to build a version of "México City" (Tenochtitlán?) on top of Cerro Zapote. The construction halted suddenly, and the king was gone leaving only the unfinished walls that can be seen today at the archaeological site. This interesting divergence might have to do with the Early Colonial factions; since Zapotitlan was apparently affiliated with the Motecuhzoma faction—which was antagonistic to Fane Kantsini—this might have survived to our days in the form of a critical tradition against that latter figure. As a future goal of the project, it would be interesting to compare Zapotitlan's archaeological material to that of Jilotepequillo and other villages from the Fane Kantsini faction, and see if this factional political milieu has also been translated into material terms, regardless if any Aztec material will show up in future explorations or not.

It is also expected that the Postclassic–early Colonial ceramic material will help to solve historical problems raised by the documents; in the *Lienzo de Tecciztlan y Tequatepec*, for example, Zapotitlan appears as a tributary subject to a coastal *cabecera* which controlled a vast area in the Chontal highlands. However, the identity and location of this '*cabecera X*' is highly problematic and still debatable¹⁶ (for a full discussion compare Kroefges 1998 and Zborover 2002). However, if we can assume that the sociopolitical relations of these *cabecera-sujeto* have also translated into material terms (which the LTT clearly demonstrates in the form of tribute), and if the historical identification of Zapotitlan is accepted, then parallels in the archaeological records could lead us to the correct location of the elusive *cabecera*. Undoubtedly, any future understanding of historical processes in the Chontal highlands should take into account what we have learned from the archaeological, historical, and oral data sets, especially when it comes to questions of conquest, alliance building, and sociopolitical transitions from the Early Classic to the Early Colonial periods.

Public Historical Archaeology

Integrated within the C.H.A.P. research design was the development of strategies for disseminating the project progress and results to the Chontal public, by keeping in mind that our academic or personal objectives might be irrelevant and entirely different from those of the host community. Due to various factors this goal proved to be more

¹⁶ The most likely candidates are Huatulco, Huamelula, and "Huala Capixca". While the first two are well-known settlements on the Pacific coast, the latter is only known from the *Zapotitlan Manuscript* as the *cabecera* founded by the Aztec emissary "cinco garzas" in the Chontal Highlands (Perez Garcia 1956).

complicated than expected, mostly because of the current religious factionalism and the discontinuous political mechanisms within the village. Altogether we realized that written field reports, such as those often submitted to official research institutes, were most ineffective since the information often stayed within the *agencia municipal*, and was not communicated to the village people or the newly entering authorities. At the same time, speeches in the periodical village assemblies were beneficial for the purpose of getting public awareness and support, but also limited due to the low number of attendants and lack of sufficient time.

In 2005, we designed a large poster that included a summary of the project results explained in non-technical terms, and further illustrated with photographs. With the agreement of the village authorities, this poster was placed on an exterior wall in the *agencia* where it was visible and accessible to all the community members (Figure 13, shown below). This proved to be a most successful dissemination strategy, as both adults and children arrived daily to study the information and photos, and to comment on the historical content.¹⁷ In addition, full-scale copies of the poster were given to the village primary and secondary schools as instructional aid for the teachers. Upon demand, we also printed letter-size versions of the poster which could be then photocopied and kept by those interested.



Figure 13. Community members reading the C.H.A.P. poster at the village 'agencia municipal'. In the inset—a presentation on Chontal history and archaeology in the primary school.

¹⁷ This frequent activity of public commentaries proved to be fascinating in itself, and revealed significant data regarding the Chontals' own conceptions of the past, as well as its potential uses for the present.

The community at large was actively involved in all stages of the primary school excavation. The students helped daily to screen the dirt and wash the sherds (with close supervision of the author), thus giving them a hands-on experience with their own past ([Figure 14](#), shown below). The teachers brought daily groups of students to observe the excavation progress and ask questions regarding the village history in particular and archaeology in general. The central location of the excavation, along with the artifact analysis which took place in the *agencia*, further allowed any other interested community member to approach and do the same. On a couple of occasions, the authorities invited officials from other Chontal communities to observe the excavation and discuss the historical significance of their village. At the end of the school excavation, the entire community was invited for a public talk which explained the results, allowed a final look at the open test pits' strata before being filled in, and exhibited the most significant finds ([Figure 13](#)).



Figure 14. The primary school kids around test pit 1. In the inset—helping the author to screen for artifacts.

Today, a poignant point in the Chontal highlands is the rapid disappearance of oral traditions and practices, as the younger generation is no longer interested in learning the 'old ways' and native language, and are moving out of the village to find work either in the big cities or the U.S.A. As a consequence, oral knowledge systems that had been

passed on for generations are now 'dying' with those last Chontal elders. Additionally, a new major highway project is currently being planned to cross through this remote region, and serve as a 'short-cut' to the tourist resorts of Huatulco. If this will materialize, the Chontal as an ethnic group would surely experience a rapid acculturation process, both linguistically and culturally.

In cooperation with the village authorities, the community members, and the Oaxaca INAH Regional Center, it was decided to establish a community museum in the village that will exhibit the project finds and results, and will serve as a regional educational center for the preservation of the highlands Chontal history and culture. Most of the village people with private collections agreed informally to donate their artifacts to the museum, once it would be built. We are currently seeking funds to start with the construction of this edifice. Since we reject any paternalistic approaches to scholarly research, we will concentrate on building a collaborative infrastructure that will benefit both academics and indigenous, and will bear fruits beyond this project's goals and timeline. By doing so, the C.H.A.P. members do not seek to 'halt' acculturation, but only to record and preserve what is still possible of the Chontalpa fascinating past, and share it with those interested today.

Acknowledgements

The Chontalpa Historical Archaeology Project (C.H.A.P.) was initiated in the summer of 2002 as part of the author's ongoing dissertation project at the Department of Archaeology at the University of Calgary. I am grateful to the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., (FAMSI) for providing the core funding for two consecutive field seasons of the project (June–August, 2005 and February–May, 2006), which preliminary results are presented in this report. I would also like to thank the Department of Archaeology and the University of Calgary for providing me with additional funds. The 2005 and 2006 field seasons were authorized by the INAH Consejo de Arqueología, and were further supported by the INAH Oaxaca Regional Center. Lastly, this project would not have been possible without the approval and support of the village authorities and community members of Santa Maria Zapotitlan, as well as those others interested in the Chontal past and present.

For the last four years, the C.H.A.P. has been exploring the indigenous interaction spheres in one of the most obscure cultural regions in México—the Chontalpa highlands of Oaxaca ([Figure 1](#)). This interdisciplinary project is drawing from the rich archaeological, historical, and ethnographic records of the region, and attempts to bridge these disciplinary gaps through collaborative efforts and integrative methodologies. To better accomplish this goal, the C.H.A.P. brought together collaborators from different nationalities, disciplines, and trainings: Gabriela González (Ethnology, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México), and my wife Veronica Pacheco (Ethnomusicology, University of Alberta, Canada), were responsible for collecting oral knowledge from Chontal informants; the historical documentation was conducted by the different participants, with the collaboration of the Biblioteca Burgoa,

Oaxaca; and the archaeological work was mainly carried by the author (Archaeology, University of Calgary, Canada), with the periodical assistance of archaeologists Roni Biller (Israel), and Dr. Peter Kroefges (Germany). Collaborators from the village of Santa Maria Zapotitlan included Mr. Joel Cruz Martínez, Mr. Timoteo Martínez García, Mr. Constantino Martínez, and Mr. Nicolas Martínez Martínez, among others, who actively participated in most aspects of the project. The local schools' teachers assisted in further disseminating the project's purpose and results to the young students and their parents.

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[Figure 3](#). The village of Santa Maria Zapotitlan viewed from the east. The hill to the left is Cerro Quebrantahueso, while the one to the right is Cerro Maguey. Archaeological sites were found on both the hills and within the village.

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[Figure 13](#). Community members reading the C.H.A.P. poster at the village *'agencia municipal'*. In the inset—a presentation on Chontal history and archaeology in the primary school.

[Figure 14](#). The primary school kids around test pit 1. In the inset—helping the author to screen for artifacts.

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