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A Study of the Late Postclassic Aztec-Tarascan Frontier in Northern Guerrero, México: The Oztuma-Cutzamala Project, 1998



Research Year: 1998

Culture: Aztec and Tarascan

Chronology: Late Post Classic

Location: Michoacán and Northern Guerrero, México

Site: Oztuma and Cutzamala

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Background

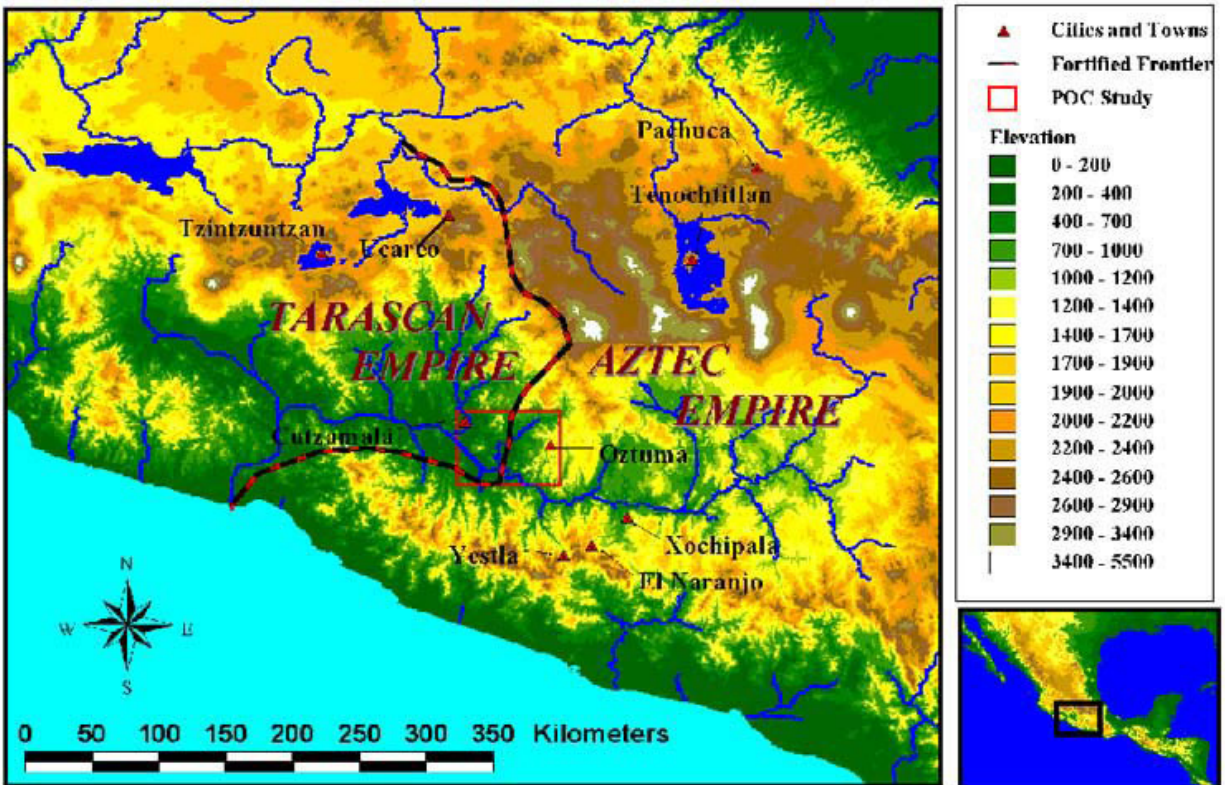
The Oztuma-Cutzamala Project (POC) consisted of a field survey of 125 archaeological sites situated in the 1500 sq. km area between the Late Postclassic Aztec fortress of

Oztuma, Guerrero, and the ethnohistorically known Tarascan garrison town of Cutzamala, Guerrero ([Map 1](#)). Colonial and Prehispanic documents indicate that, from about A.D. 1460 until A.D. 1521, the Aztec and Tarascan empires clashed along an extensive frontier defined by the modern states of Michoacán, México, and Guerrero (Durán, 1994; Stanislawski, 1947). In ca. 1479 the Aztecs, apparently in response to Tarascan advances towards the central highlands along the Balsas River, conquered the Chontal province (*alteptl*) of Oztuma and constructed a massive fortification manned by warriors and their families from the Aztec Imperial core (Relación Geográfica, 1985). Likewise, an account in the Relación Geográfica (1987) for Michoacán of 1580, reports that the town of Cutzamala held a garrison of 10,000 warriors whose objective was to carry the war to the Aztecs and capture their fortress at Oztuma. Thus the ethnohistoric documentation indicates that the frontier between Oztuma and Cutzamala was a highly militarized border in which intensive territorial warfare was an essential occupation for at least forty years.

Implicit in the definition of empires is the coercive relationship between the imperial core and the peripheral provinces. While war on a frontier may require a commitment of troops and resources from the imperial core, it would have had a greater impact on the indigenous Cuitlateca and Chontal populations of the region who had been integrated into the larger geopolitical conflict. The reported intensity and scale of the Aztec-Tarascan conflict in Northern Guerrero suggests that the execution of this war should have made a significant impact on the material life of the Late Postclassic people of the region. Following this hypothesis, the POC was designed to explore the impact of the imperial conflict on the local populations and examine the imperial organization of the frontier.

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The Aztec-Tarascan Frontier in 1519



Map 1: Geographical Context of the POC.

Research Objectives

Because of the exceptional documentation relating to the Aztec-Tarascan war in Northern Guerrero (Relación Geográfica, 1985; 1987; Durán, 1994; Tezozomoc, 1987; Codex Mendoza), it was possible to develop a series of specific research questions relating to the nature of imperialism and the form of the militarized frontier. However, in one particular case, the documents also presented conflicting accounts pertinent to understanding the nature of Aztec Imperialism. According to accounts written in the Aztec territorial core (Durán and Tezozomoc), the Chontal of Oztuma were annihilated by the Aztec conquerors, whereas the Relación Geográfica written in the Oztuma province states that the Chontal not only survived but maintained political and ethnic cohesion under Aztec hegemony. Based on this information and the reports of the limited archaeological projects that had previously been conducted in the Oztuma-Cutzamala region, the following research objectives were used to guide the POC.

Objective 1: Defensive Organization of the Frontier

The strategic importance of the frontier area meant that, aside from the economic benefits of trade and tribute, the Oztuma-Cutzamala corridor was integral to the maintenance of Aztec and Tarascan political boundaries. Therefore, the main objective of the POC was to identify major Aztec, Tarascan, Cuitlateca, and Chontal sites that would have been part of Late Postclassic frontier organization and to assess the role and function of these sites in the context of the imperial confrontation.

Objective 2: Regional Effects of Imperial Expansions

This objective focuses on the use of a diachronic study of the regional settlement pattern to assess the changes that occurred during the Late Postclassic Period. The Aztec-Tarascan war would have had a significant impact on the Chontal and Cuitlatecan populations, and it seems likely that repercussions of a war of the magnitude described in the sources would have caused the abandonment of vulnerable, but agriculturally desirable, border lowlands for the safety of hilltops or locations farther from the frontier. In particular, the POC focused on the region between the two imperial garrisons where the conflict may have prompted the formation of a no-man's-land (Armillas, 1948).

Objective 3: Correlating Ethnohistory and Archaeology

Ethnohistoric sources, by their nature, reflect certain biases and limitations based on the motives, abilities, and resources of the author. Archaeological data provides an alternative and independent source of information. The correlation of these two types of information facilitates the critical evaluation of ethnohistoric descriptions of events through the quantification, identification, and distribution of material remains. In addition to the search for archaeological correlates of the Aztec-Tarascan war, the POC specifically sought archaeological sites associated with the Postclassic and Early Colonial *alteptl* of Oztuma. The presence of such sites could provide independent corroboration for the account given in the *Relación Geográfica*.

Objective 4: Identifying Material Culture Spheres

At least two indigenous and two intrusive culture groups are known to have lived on the POC frontier at the time that the Spanish arrived. The sources indicate that the Cuitlateca population was clustered along the Balsas and Cutzamala Rivers and the Chontal in the eastern highlands. Each town is contiguous with other towns of the same ethno-linguistic identity, suggesting that there was a territorial dimension to their ethnicity. Likewise, the Mexica colonists at Oztuma tended to follow a gravitational model centered on the Aztec fortress. The distinct ethno-linguistic boundaries and the ethnic division of the frontier between the two imperial powers suggested that the

Cuitlateca and the Chontal would subscribe to different material traditions and that these traditions would be manifest in the archaeological record.

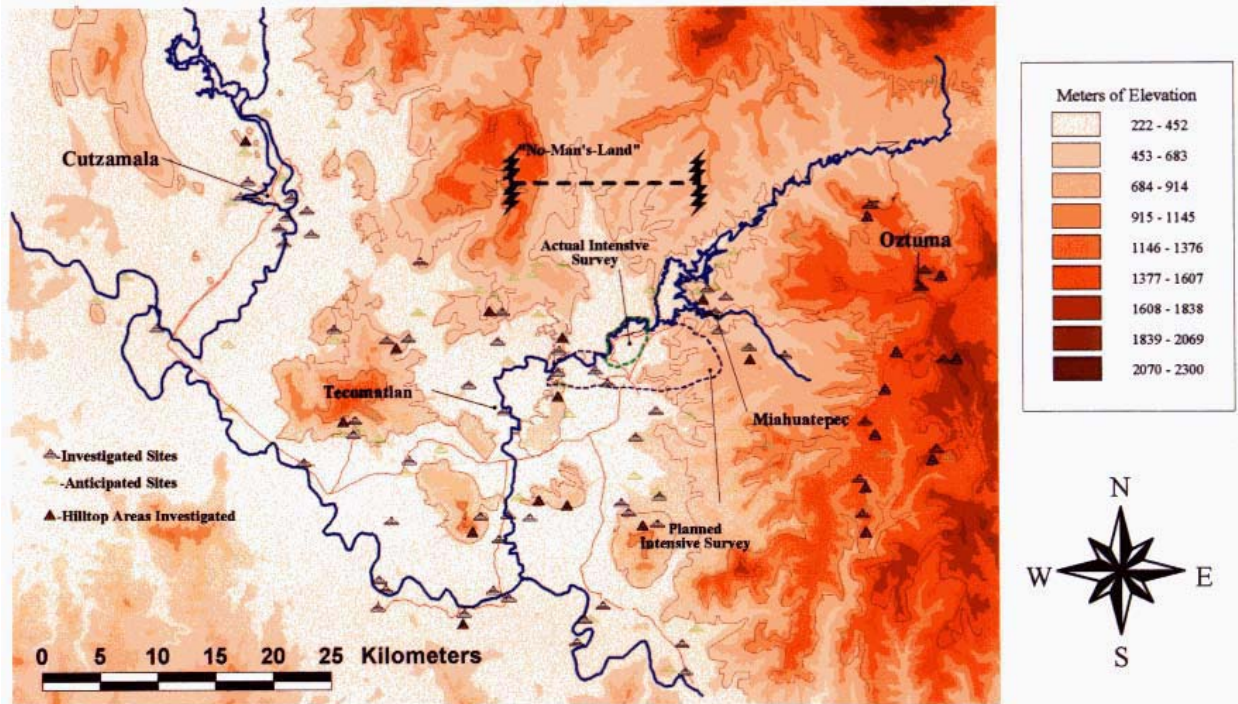
Methods

Gathering data for the POC required the identification of pertinent archaeological sites and the collection of artifact samples that could elucidate the temporal and cultural nature of the Prehispanic occupation. Two programs of surface survey were used to identify and record archaeological sites. The first method was a key site survey and the second method was an intensive survey. The key site survey used air photographs, local informants, and documents to identify major archaeological sites in the Oztuma-Cutzamala corridor ([Map 2](#)). Particular attention was paid to sites with specific reference in the colonial documents. The intensive survey focused on the lands south of the Río Palos Altos, directly between the two fortresses. Since there were no documented towns in this region, it was hypothesized that this area had been abandoned as a result of the war. Whereas the key site survey generally identified sites based on informants, the intensive survey relied on direct observations made by members of the project walking in a line at approximately 20 m intervals. The original design of the project called for an intensive survey of 60 sq. km, but the ruggedness of environment and the diversion of some resources to the key site survey reduced the actual area covered in the intensive survey to 11 sq. km.

Artifact sampling procedures were identical for sites discovered in both types of survey. Site boundaries and location were recorded with a GPS unit and standing architecture was mapped with a compass and tape. General collections of surface artifacts were made, although manos and metates were generally excluded from collection because they were of no analytical value for the objectives of this project and hauling the additional weight in the field would have been impractical. If there was a visible concentration of artifacts on the surface of a site, one or more intensive collections were made by gathering lithics and ceramic sherds with diameters greater than 1cm from a 5x5 m area. All collections were taken back to the base camp in Arcelia, Guerrero, where they were cleaned and analyzed.

Since little archaeological work had been done in this region prior to the POC, the nature of Cuitlateca and Chontal material culture was largely unknown. Thus, interpretation of the artifact samples and sites depended on the correlation of unknown artifacts with sites identified in Early Colonial documents and with the presence of artifacts known to be associated with the Aztec and Tarascan Empires. The large territorial scope of the POC and the direct intervention of the empires meant that there was sufficient spatial context and cultural variation to successfully identify salient characteristics of the frontier.

Map 5.1 The Proyecto Oztuma-Cutzamala Survey Zone



Map 2: The Oztuma-Cutzamala Survey Zone.

Data Interpretation

From the 125 archaeological sites investigated, a total of 12,926 ceramic sherds and 5,097 pieces of obsidian as well as miscellaneous other artifacts including bronze tweezers (Figure 1), green stone beads and pendants (Figure 2), ground stone *manos*, *metates*, *hachas* (Figure 3), stela fragments (Figure 4), and bark beaters were recovered (Map 2). By correlating the spatial distribution of these artifacts with the ethnohistoric record, certain conclusions were drawn regarding the form of the Aztec-Tarascan frontier and the effects of imperialism and militarism on the indigenous Chontal and Cuitlateca. In addition, oral traditions and a large collection of 16th century documents stored in the town of Ixtepec (Figure 5) contributed significantly to the reconstruction of Chontal-Aztec relations in the province of Oztuma.

The basic conclusions can be summarized as follows:

Aztec imperial defense was predicated on the integration into the empire of the Chontal provinces of Alahuiztlan, Oztuma, and Totoltepec. The indigenous Chontal population maintained a chain of strong points including several well fortified hilltop sites. An Aztec garrison constructed a large heavily fortified fortress site and ceremonial center on top

of a hill known as Cerro Oztuma. This citadel served as the defensive bulwark of the frontier, and the nobles living on this fortress served to represent imperial interest in the region.

The Tarascan side of the frontier consisted of the colonial provinces of Cutzamala, Punagarauato, and Ajuchitlan. The actual eastern edge of the empire ran from Totolapan on the Balsas River north then northwest along a well-defined ridgeline that served as a natural defensive barrier ([Figure 6](#)).

The ethnic and political divisions of the Late Postclassic frontier are seen most clearly in the distribution of Ucareo (from a Tarascan-controlled source) and Pachuca (from an Aztec-controlled source) obsidian and from the distribution of five distinctive types of decorated ceramics: Aztec Black-on-Orange ([Figure 7](#)), Aztec Guinda ([Figure 8](#)), Chontal Red-on-Buff ([Figure 9](#)), Yestla-Naranjo Black-on-White ([Figure 10](#)), and Fine Polished Incised ceramics ([Figure 11](#)).

In the Río Palos Altos Basin between the Tarascan controlled ridgeline and the Aztec fortified line was a no-man's-land that appears to have been abandoned as imperial intervention in the area caused increased militarization. I theorize that a 3 km long wall discovered in the no-man's-land appears to have been a Chontal construction aimed at defending important cotton and cacao producing lands ([Map 3](#)). One end of the wall had an artifact distribution suggesting that a Prehispanic battle had been fought there. This fortification may have been a Chontal attempt, whether independent or supported by one or the other of the empires, to secure the vulnerable but fertile lands of the river basin. In the end the Chontal inhabitants abandoned this region for the hilly eastern edge of their province, where they built a fortress and were incorporated into the Aztec defensive line. The discovery of this Chontal fortress at Ixtepec ([Map 4](#)) solves part of the question regarding the fate of the Chontal (Armillas, 1942-44).

Together, ethnohistoric documents and archaeological data indicate that the Chontal and Aztec relations were uneasy and that in the early Colonial Period the Chontal vied for control of the province with the orphaned Aztec garrison.

The correlation of archaeological and ethnohistoric data collected in this project allows for a reconstruction of the shifting political fortunes of the province of Oztuma. Because of the extremely dynamic situation between A.D. 1470 and 1600, the location of the headtown shifted three to four times to accommodate immediate military or economic needs.



Figure 1: Bronze Tweezer from Momoxtitlán.



Figure 2: Greenstone Pendant from Totoltepec.



Figure 3: Toolkit Cache from Chapultepec.



Figure 4: Stela Fragment from Paso Amatitlán.

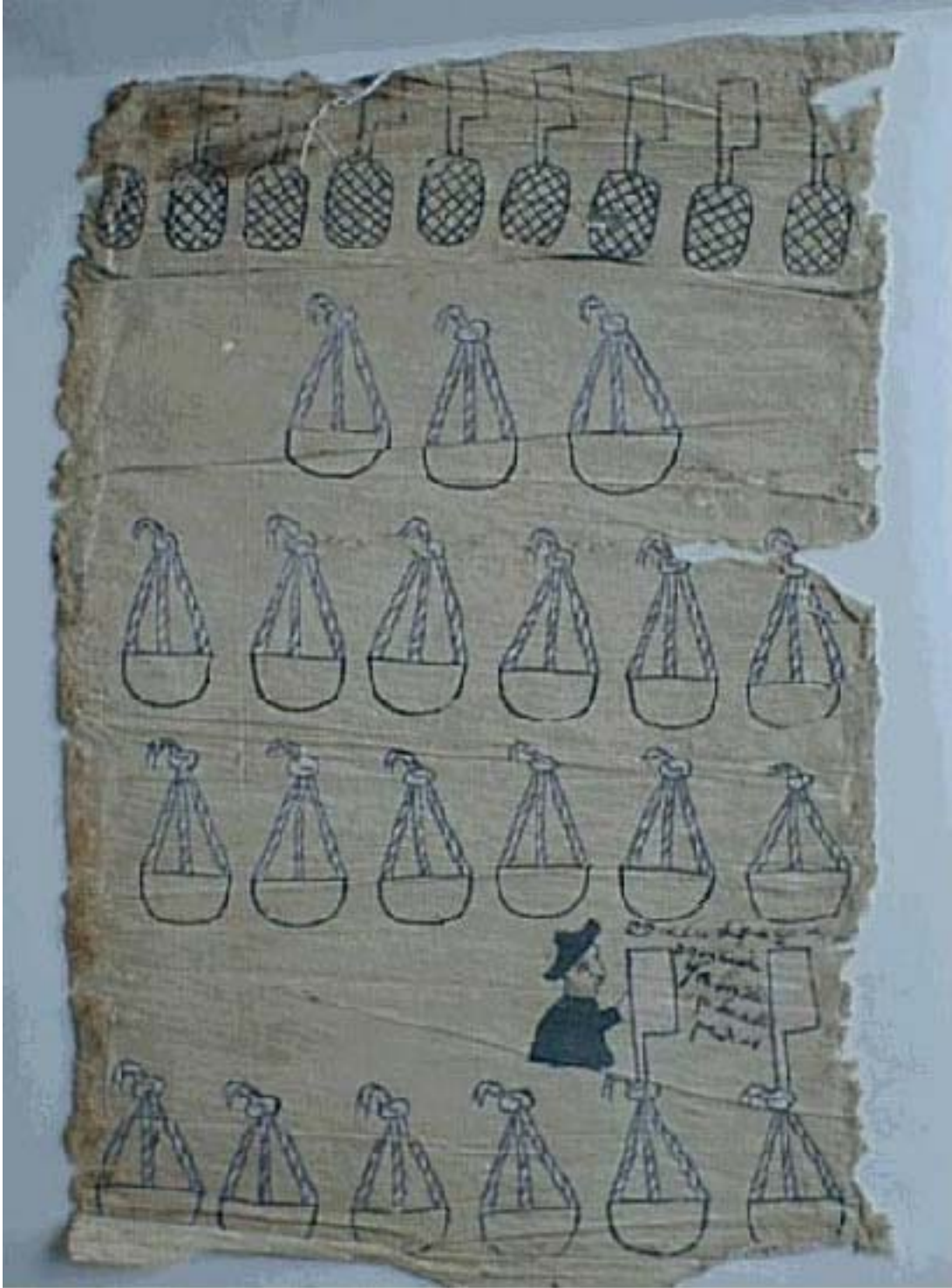


Figure 5: 16th Century Tribute List from Ixtepec.



Figure 6: A View from Site 125 on the Edge of the Tarascan Empire.



Figure 7: Aztec Ceramics from the POC.

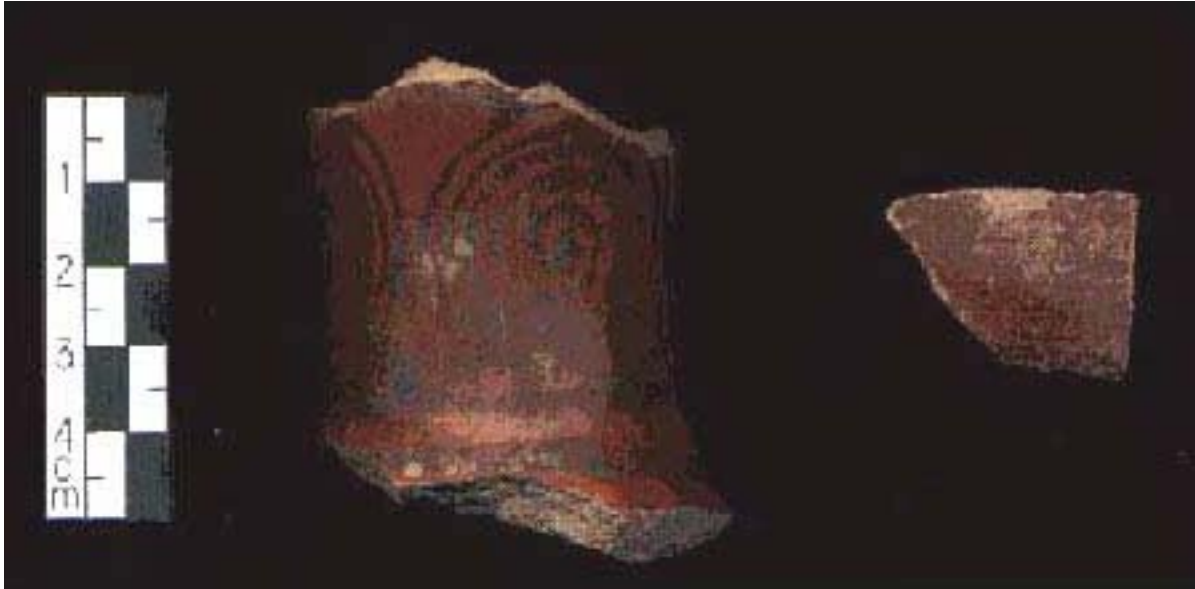


Figure 8: Aztec Guinda Ceramics.



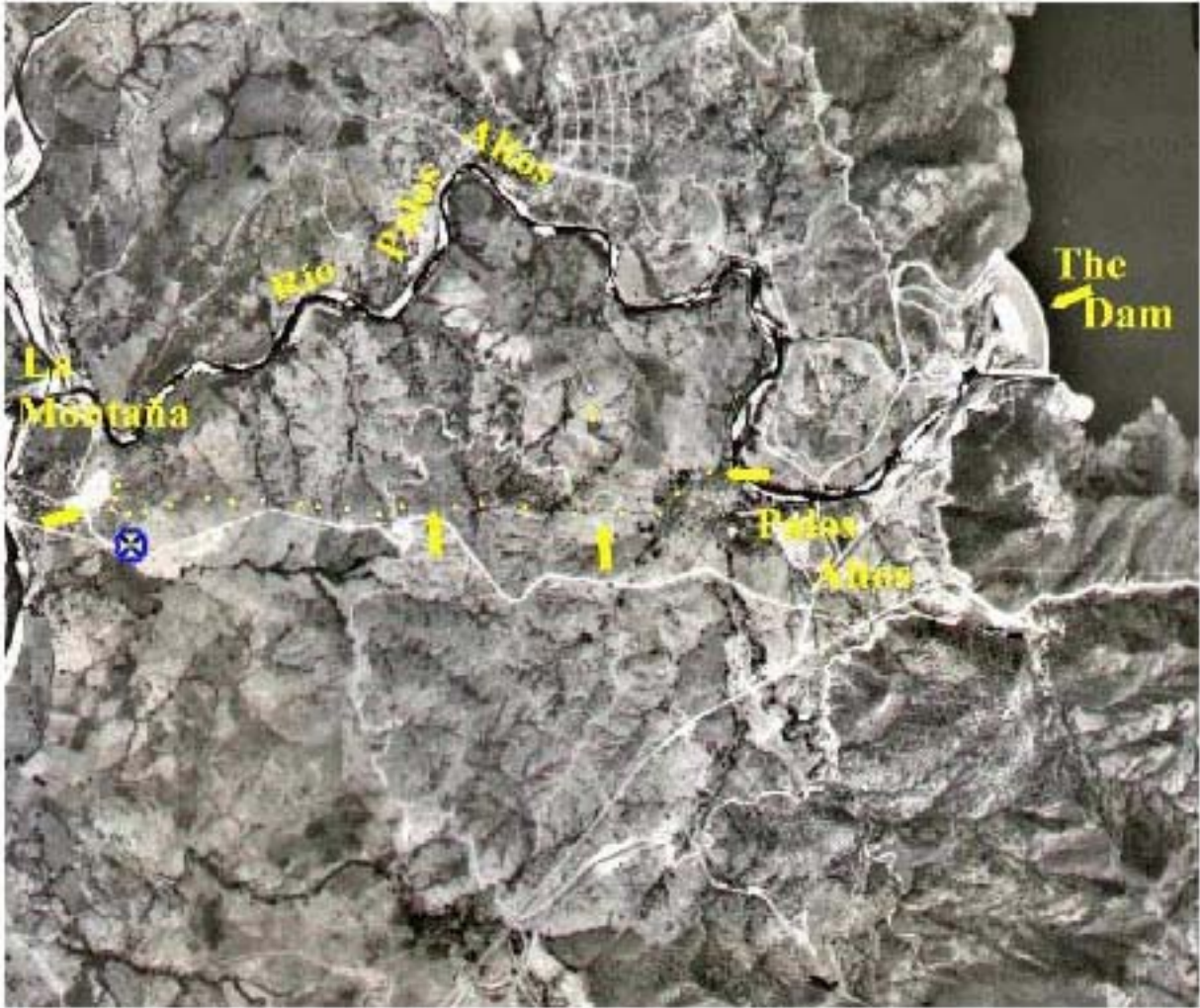
Figure 9: Chontal Red-on-Buff Ceramics.



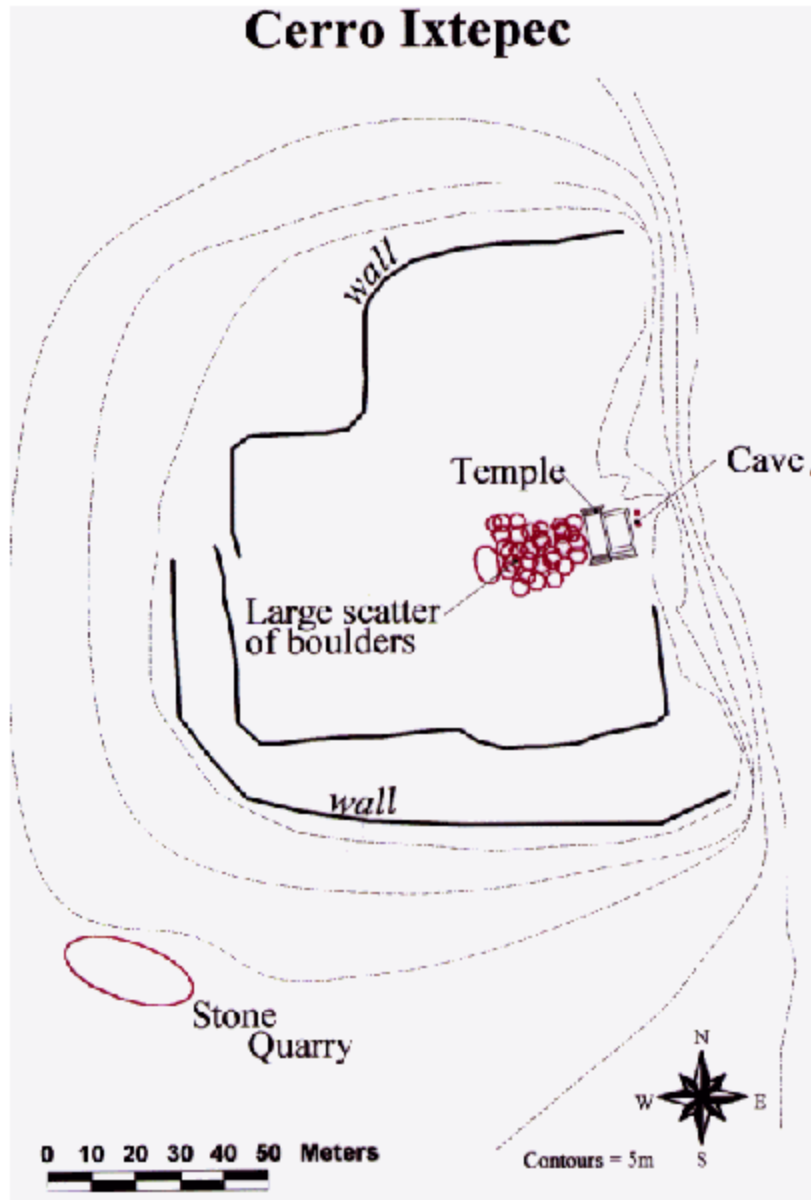
Figure 10: Yestla-Naranjo Black-on-White Ceramics.



Figure 11: Fine Polished Ceramics from the Tarascan Side of the Frontier.



Map 3: The Wall from the No-mans-land.



Map 4: Croquis of the Chontal Fortress at Ixtepec.

Conclusions And Direction For Future Research

Ethnohistoric accounts written on the frontier that indicate an intensive conflict between the Aztec and Tarascan Empires find strong support in the archaeological data. However, colonial accounts written in or near the center of the Aztec empire appear to exaggerate the Aztec conquest and extermination of the Chontal of Oztuma. Archaeological and documentary evidence indicate that the Chontal maintained cohesive political organization under Aztec hegemony. The POC demonstrated that

archaeological survey over a large area is effective in discerning imperial political boundaries that have been superimposed over indigenous polities.

Future work in this region should focus on further defining the Cuitlateca material culture and the influence of the Tarascan Empire in the Cuitlateca region. Data from the POC has allowed me to posit various theories about the nature of the conquest and incorporation of Oztuma into the Aztec Empire. The next step should be to conduct a focused survey to define the specific settlements associated with the province. Particular focus needs to be paid to the sites believed to have been abandoned in the Río Palos Altos Basin. I believe that a series of focused excavations in this region could be used to refine the chronology of these sites and elucidate the process of imperial militarization that occurred along the frontier.

In addition to the Late Postclassic sites that were the focus of the POC, a number of large ceremonial centers were identified along the Río Balsas. The surface data and architecture suggest that the cultures of the Balsas River were highly developed and centralized from the Late Classic through the Early to Middle Postclassic. Evidence of bronze, lime, and *metate* manufacturing were noted as well as other lithic industries. The scale of development of these sites suggests that this region partook in the pan-Mesoamerican Epiclassic phenomena that led to the rise of numerous regional states. One final benefit of the POC project was the creation of **El Museo de la Frontera** in the municipal library of Arcelia, Guerrero ([Figure 12](#)).



Figure 12: The Project Museum.

Acknowledgements

This work is dedicated to Adolfo Díaz Flores whose knowledge of the Tierra Caliente and commitment to protecting its history was unparalleled. I wish to acknowledge all members of the project team, with a special thanks to Aurelia Díaz Tellez, Anselmo Nava, Blanca Maldonado, and Raswan Sokol, and the members of the Amigos del Museo in Arcelia. I wish to thank FAMSI for its dedication to Mesoamerican research and for providing the funding that made the POC possible.

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