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The Nature of Governance in Secondary Centers of the Classic Period, Mixteca Alta, México



Research Year: 2002

Culture: Mixtec

Chronology: Early Classic

Location: Mixteca Alta, México

Sites: Cerro Encantado, Cerro de la Cantera, El Peñasco, El Vergel, Cerro Miedoso

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Abstract

The project's objectives were to map and systematically collect three secondary centers in the Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca, México in order to get a better understanding of the political and social organization of Mixtec states of the Early Classic period. Five sites were mapped and collected during nine months. A total of 210.5 hectares were mapped and 910 25m² areas were collected. The sites range from 30.25 ha to 62.5 ha. The analysis of the collected data is ongoing, and only preliminary conclusions are made in this report. The comparative densities of costly goods and/or evidence of specialized production in and around public buildings will be used to assess the degree of centralized governance.

Resumen

Los objetivos del proyecto consistían en mapear y hacer recolecciones en forma sistemática en tres sitios secundarios de la Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca, México, para llegar a lograr un mejor entendimiento de la organización política y social de los estados mixtecos del Clásico Temprano. A lo largo de nueve meses, se mapearon y realizaron recolecciones en cinco sitios. Se mapearon en total 210.5 hectáreas y se hicieron recolecciones en un total de 910 áreas de 25 m². Los sitios varían entre 30.25 y 62.5 hectáreas. El análisis del material aún no ha sido completado y sólo presento aquí algunas conclusiones preliminares. Para establecer el nivel de centralización administrativa en estos centros secundarios, se usará la comparación de la densidad de los materiales exóticos o de lujo y los indicios de especialización cerca de los edificios cívico-ceremoniales o alrededor de éstos.

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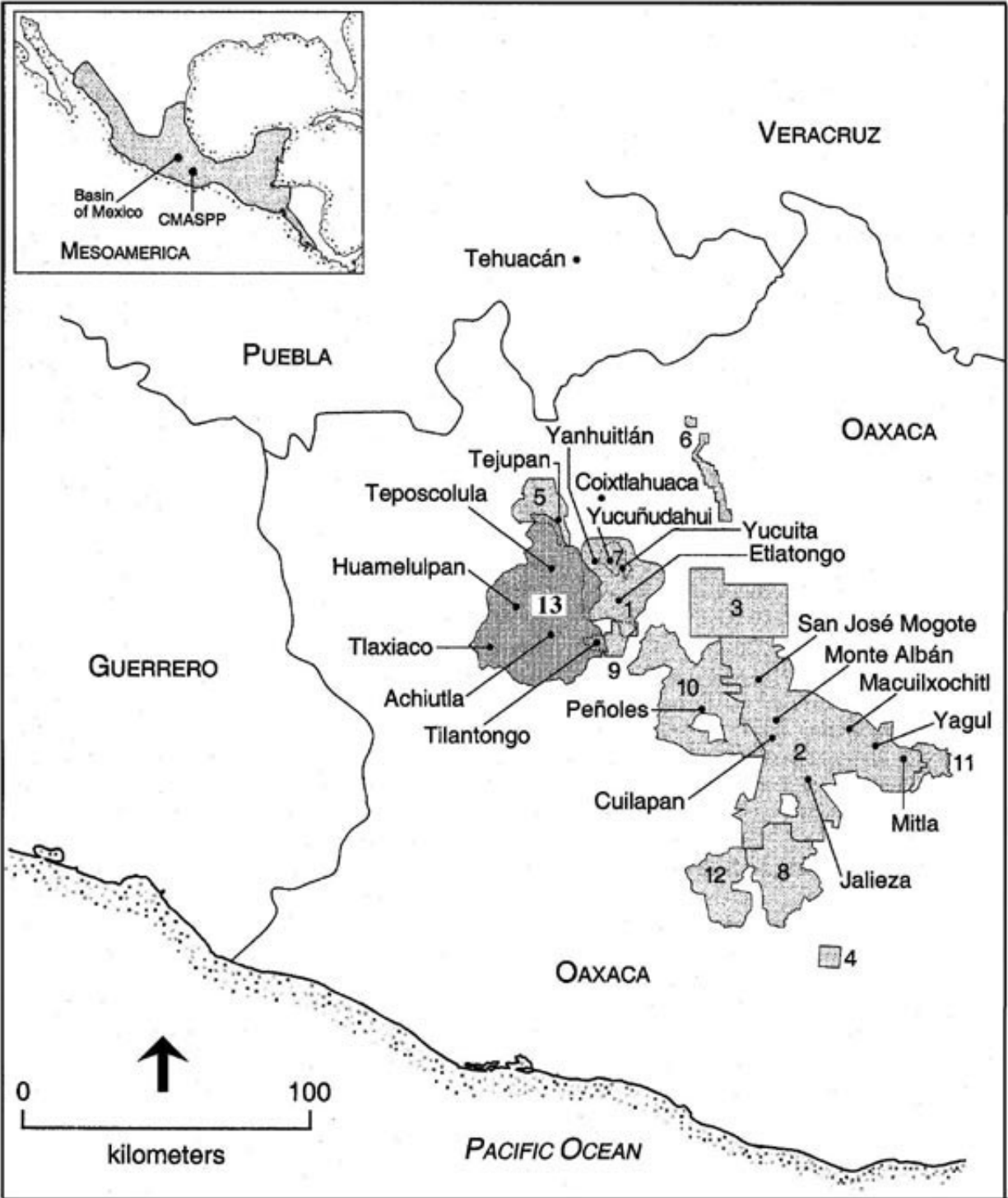


Figure 1. The Central Mixteca Alta Settlement Pattern Project (13) (from Balkansky *et al.* 2000).

Table 1. Prehispanic chronology for the Mixteca Alta and Valley of Oaxaca (from Balkansky *et al.* 2000)

Years	Mesoamerica	Valley of Oaxaca	Mixteca Alta
A.C. 1500	Historical		
1400	Late Postclassic	Monte Albán V	Natividad
1300			
1200			
1100	Early Postclassic	Monte Albán IV	
1000	Late Classic		Las Flores
900			(Transitional)
800		Monte Albán IIIB	
700			
600	Early Classic	Monte Albán IIIA	
500			
400	Late/Terminal Formative		
300		Monte Albán II	Late Ramos
200			
100		Monte Albán Late I	Early Ramos
—	Middle Formative		
100		Monte Albán Early I	Late Cruz
200			
300		Rosario	
400			
500	Early Formative	Guadalupe	
600			
700		San José	
800			
900		Tierras Largas	Early Cruz
1000			
1100	Early Formative		
1200			
1300		Espiridión	
1400			
1500 B.C.			

Objectives

The proposed project collected data on the spatial distribution of decorated ceramics, evidence for specialized production, and exotic goods in relation to public architecture to clarify the nature of secondary center governance in Mixteca Alta states of the Early Classic Period ([Table 1](#)). Five (instead of the three proposed sites) were mapped and 1% of the surface at each site collected. The sites were previously surveyed in 1999 during the Central Mixteca Alta Settlement Pattern Project (CMASPP) ([Figure 1](#)) (Balkansky *et al.* 2000).

Evidence for the control of craft production, valuable goods and ritual activities by plaza group residents will reveal the degree to which they controlled important economic and symbolic activities. A state that is less corporate and hence has less power sharing (Blanton *et al.* 1996; Blanton 1998) will show a correlation of production and consumption of costly goods with public buildings (Brumfiel and Earle 1987). Mixteca Alta states may have developed a comparatively centralized strategy vesting power in single households.

Background Literature

This dissertation project grew out of a preliminary analysis of architectural arrangements at secondary centers in the Mixteca Alta. The results of the analysis (Heredia 2001) showed a pattern in which single plaza groups are the main form of elite residential architecture. This pattern contrasts with the Valley of Oaxaca, where multiple plaza groups are more common, and may indicate that forms of state administration in these two areas differed. The Mixteca Alta pattern, with single plaza groups, points to a more centralized state where governance at secondary centers was restricted to single palaces, whereas in the Valley of Oaxaca power was shared across multiple palaces.

These preliminary analyses suggest two alternatives for Mixteca Alta secondary administration: (1) The smaller number of enclosed mound groups suggests less political centralization (broader span of control) at the secondary level by comparison with the Valley of Oaxaca; or (2) more power was centralized in single households in the Mixteca Alta, while in the Valley of Oaxaca power was shared across multiple households in a more corporate form of government (cf. Blanton *et al.* 1996).

Basing my hypotheses on previous analysis (Heredia 2001), I developed a research project through which I could get at governance in Mixtec secondary centers. The project involved mapping and intensively collecting five sites ([Figure 2](#)).

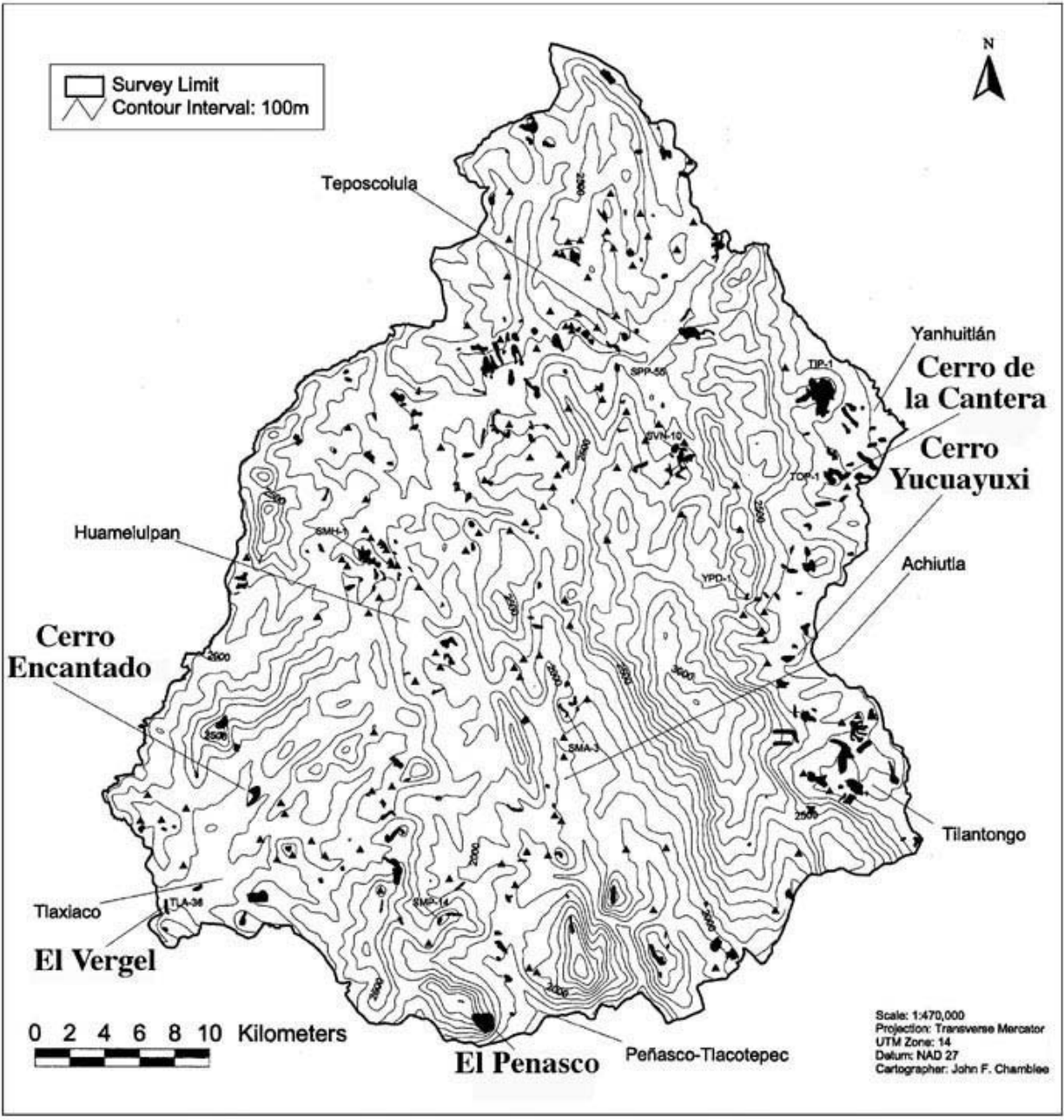


Figure 2. Area of study showing the sites studied and other important areas (from Balkansky et al. 2000).



Plate 1. Mapping at El Peñasco.

Methodology

Surveying and mapping began at the end of August 2001 and ended in June 2002. Ceramic and lithic cataloguing, photographing and tabulating began shortly after fieldwork and ended in January 2003.

Field Method

In order to obtain data to answer questions about the political and social organization at secondary centers, I intensively surveyed, mapped and collected five sites. First, each site was surveyed to delimit its boundaries based on architectural features. Once this was accomplished, a topographic map of each site was made using a Brunton compass, meter tape and stadia rod ([Plate 1](#)). Most of the time, a small crew of two worked in the field, one taking notes and holding the stadia rod, while the other shot points with the compass to obtain declination/slope and orientation. Since I had limited funding, the actual mapping on paper was done everyday after field work. After the mapping was complete, a grid of 50m by 50m squares was laid on each map and consequently each of the 50m by 50m squares divided into 100 5m² squares. Each 5m² was numbered from 00 to 100 and using a table of random numbers, one was selected for collection. An area of 25m² around each point was collected ([Plate 2](#)). All artifacts were systematically collected in each square. Once everything was collected, the

artifacts were separated by type (lithics, figurines, ceramics, etc.) ([Plate 3](#)). The ceramics were separated into non-diagnostic and diagnostic. The diagnostic sherds were collected and taken to the lab, while the non-diagnostics were weighed ([Plate 4](#)) (and/or counted when few) and left in the field. A total of 210.5 hectares were mapped and 910 25m² areas were collected. The sites range from 30.25 ha to 62.5 ha.



Plate 2. Collecting at El Peñasco.



Plate 3. Sorting pottery at Cerro de la Cantera.



Plate 4. Weighing pottery at Cerro de la Cantera.

Laboratory Method

The artifacts collected in the field were washed and consequently classified. Dating pottery was based on a comparison of the Valley of Oaxaca and Nochixtlán Valley (in the Mixteca Alta) ceramics. Caso, Bernal and Acosta's 1967 book on the ceramics of Monte Albán and Spore's 1972 archaeological settlement survey of the Nochixtlán Valley were my main references. Mixteca Alta ceramics were heavily influenced by those of the Valley of Oaxaca and the presence of imitations of these were used to date the sites. In addition to cataloguing the ceramics for periodization information, I created (Heredia n.d.) a ceramic classification based on vessel function (cf. Smith *et al.* n.d.; Lind 1987). The functional categories are serving, utilitarian (cooking, storage), ritual, fancy, and unknown (cf. Smith *et al.* n.d.). Functional analysis of pottery will allow me (during the analysis phase) to assess the degree to which feasting or other politically relevant ritual activities are restricted to elite residential areas. The distribution of decorated serving bowls or other unusual serving vessels will be of special interest in this analysis.

The lithics were classified by artifact type (flake, core, micro flake, preform, point, blade, ax, metate, mano, chunk, bead, etc.), raw material and color.

Cerro Encantado

The archaeological site known as Cerro Encantado is located on two hills, one of which is Cerro Encantado and Cerro de la Manzanita. The two are joined by a saddle with continuous archaeological debris. The site's total occupation area was estimated at 45 hectares, but due to internal conflict and urbanization in the area, I was able to map only 33 hectares.

The main civic-ceremonial architecture is found at the summit of Cerro Encantado ([Figure 3](#)). At the top, the main plaza (Pz 1) is enclosed by four structures; structure 1 to the north, is the main mound, and it measures 40m by 40m at its base and 4.5 meters high ([Plate 5](#)). The other mounds around Plaza 1 are rectangular and they measure approximately one meter in height. To south of the main civic-ceremonial area is another open area with a small mound on the south west corner; this area is known as Plaza 2 ([Figure 3](#), [Plate 6](#)). To the north of Structure 1 is a large flat, enclosed area restricted from all sides by a wall and Structure 1.

The site has 82 terrace walls (both agricultural and residential) plus a number of defensive walls ([Plate 7](#)). Cerro de la Manzanita has no remaining public architectural features, but I was informed that some walls have been found. Cerro de la Manzanita has been leveled to plant corn and to build houses, it was only partially mapped due the urbanization in the area ([Plate 8](#)).

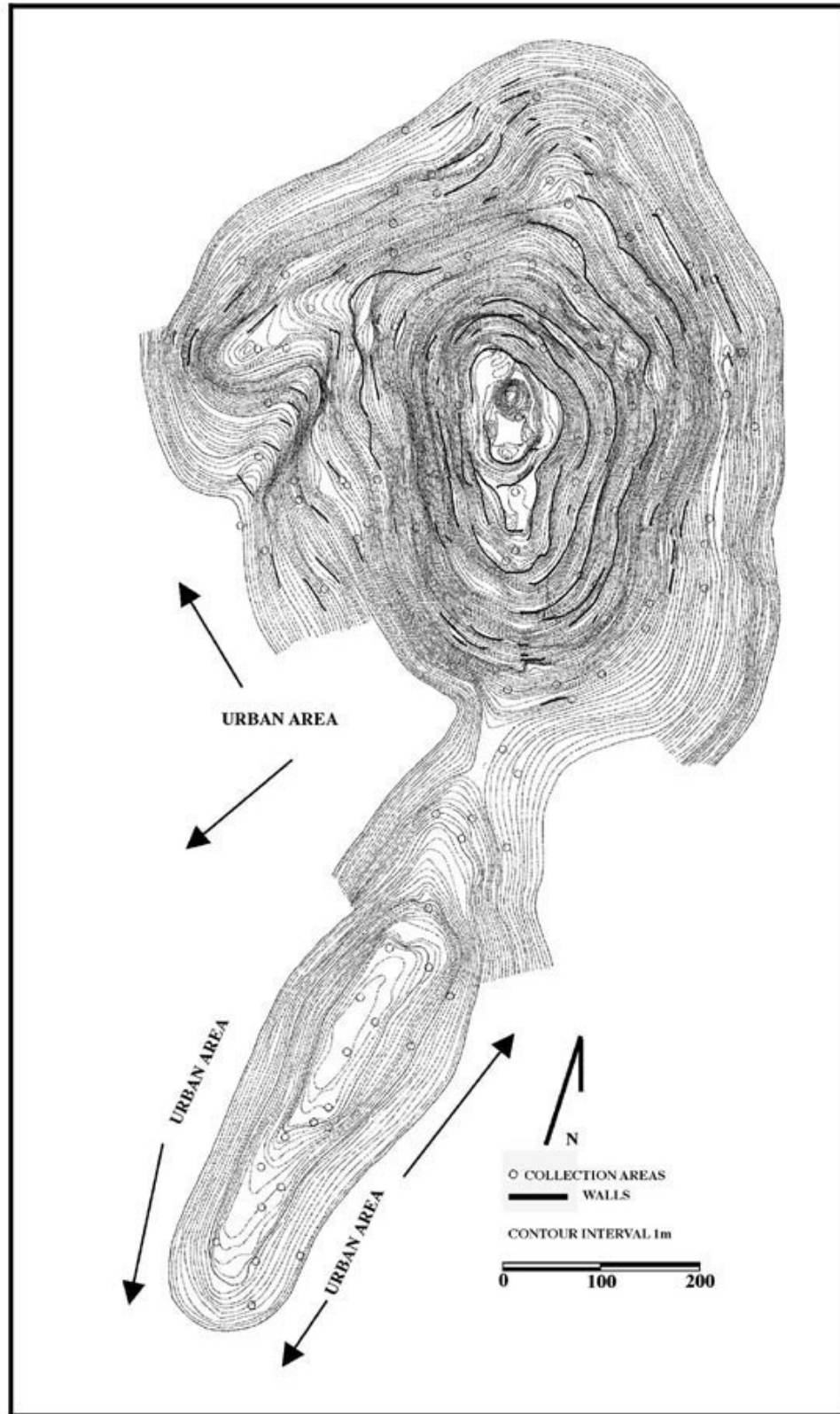


Figure 3. Cerro Encantado.



Plate 5. Structure 1 and main plaza at Cerro Encantado.



Plate 6. Plaza 2 at Cerro Encantado.



Plate 7. Defensive wall at Cerro Encantado.



Plate 8. View of Cerro de la Manzanita from Cerro Encantado.

Cerro de la Cantera

Cerro de la Cantera is located in the Nochixtlán Valley. It has six structures and 78 terraces (both agricultural and residential). Periodization for the whole site is predominantly Early Classic with some Terminal Formative on the main civic ceremonial area and Postclassic mainly to the east. The main architectural zone is composed of a plaza delimited to the east by the main structure (Structure 1) ([Plate 9](#)) that measures 23m by 26m at its base and 4m high, to the south by a small structure, less than one meter in height, (Structure 2) ([Figure 4, Plate 10](#)) and to the west by a wall. To the North of Str 1, is a large pile of rocks that I presume belonged to a third mound found to the north. The civic ceremonial area is surrounded by two extensive (defensive?) walls, one extends from southeast to northwest and measures 560m the other runs parallel and measures 700m ([Plate 11, Figure 4](#)).

To the northwest of the main civic ceremonial area stands another mound (Structure 4), and it is joined to the (defensive) wall that surrounds the summit of the site. The structure has been looted and much of the rock used for its construction is found spread on a flat area to the east and south. Finally, north northwest of Structure 4 a platform is found. The platform overlooks Lama-Bordo 1 ([Figure 4, Plate 12](#)). On this platform, another structure (Structure 5) is found ([Plate 13](#)).

Fifty five and a half hectares were mapped at Cerro de la Cantera. The site is in good preservation, although many of its walls have been removed or modified. Most of the site is still used today for planting beans.



Plate 9. Structure 1 and main Plaza at Cerro de la Cantera.

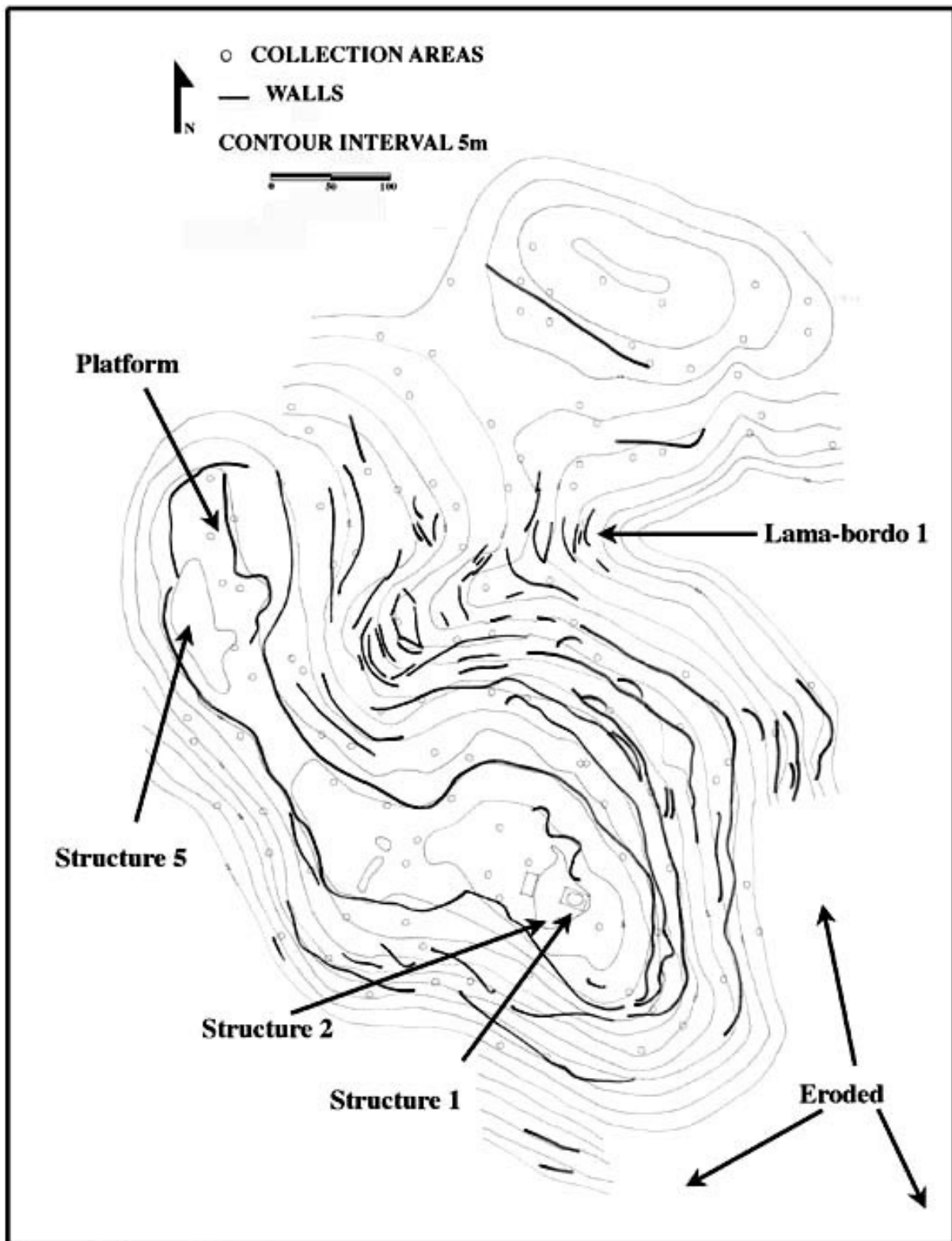


Figure 4. Cerro de la Cantera.



Plate 10. Structure 1 (right) and Structure 2 (left) at Cerro de la Cantera.



Plate 11. Defensive wall at Cerro de la Cantera.



Plate 12. Lama-bordo 1 at Cerro de la Cantera.



Plate 13. Platform and Structure 5 at Cerro de la Cantera.

El Peñasco

Cerro Peña Grande or El Peñasco (TLA-TLA-SMO-1) is located on the southern limits of the CMASPP (Balkansky *et al.* 2000). As its name suggests, the site is found on a large and very elevated mountain ([Plate 14](#)). The site was previously registered as Early Classic, but re-surveying the site I noticed that the site belongs largely to the Late Ramos (Late Preclassic) and Natividad (Postclassic) phases, with some Early Las Flores (Early Classic) occupation.

The civic-ceremonial architecture is found at the summit, and it is composed of an enclosed plaza (three structures and a platform around a plaza), a ballcourt ([Plate 15](#)), a sunken patio, two structures one to the east and the other to the west of the civic-ceremonial center which overlook the entire valley, a lone structure to the south of the civic-ceremonial center, and another to the southeast as well as 257 terraces. These two structures ([Plate 16](#) and [Plate 17](#)) overlooking the valley (on all four directions) are known as "miradores" (viewing points).

On a rock face, a large cliff of approximately 60m in height, I found several rock paintings and a couple of petroglyphs ([Plate 18](#), [Plate 19](#), [Plate 20](#) and [Plate 21](#)). These features have not been dated, but it is possible that this site has a long and continuous occupation from pre-ceramic times to the Postclassic.

The site continues to the east and south east on the arms of the mountain. This area is has the largest number of terraces, most of which are agricultural. Three hundred and forty two terraces were mapped on the piedmont of the site.

Most of the largest terraces at site are still used for agricultural purposes, but most of its Prehispanic architectural features remain in good state of preservation. Although it is estimated that the site extends for over 100 hectares, only 63 hectares were mapped due to the lack of financial resources. The map for El Peñasco is still under preparation, for this reason it is not included in this report.



Plate 14. El Peñasco.



Plate 15. Ballcourt at El Peñasco.



Plate 16. West "Mirador" at El Peñasco.



Plate 17. East "Mirador" at El Peñasco.



Plate 18. Rock painting at El Peñasco.



Plate 19. Rock painting and petroglyph at El Peñasco.



Plate 20. Rock painting at El Peñasco.



Plate 21. Rock painting (left) and petroglyph (right) at El Peñasco.

Cerro Yucuayuxi or Cerro Miedoso

Cerro Yucuayuxi is located in the Valley of Nochixtlán. The site's architectural arrangement follows the natural contours of the hill. Its architecture is arranged in a linear form ([Figure 5](#)) from east to west. At the easternmost point on the summit of Yucuayuxi, is a platform ([Plate 22](#)) where all of the civic ceremonial architecture rests. On the summit, there are two mounds, four platform mounds, two patios and a plaza. The largest mound measures 15m NS by 22m EW and 4m high, and it faces a large enclosed patio ([Plate 23](#)). In addition, on the north, two very damaged lama-bordos are found ([Figure 5](#)). The site extends for 34 hectares and its main occupation period is during the Early Classic, although there is some occupation during the Early Preclassic (Early Ramos phase).

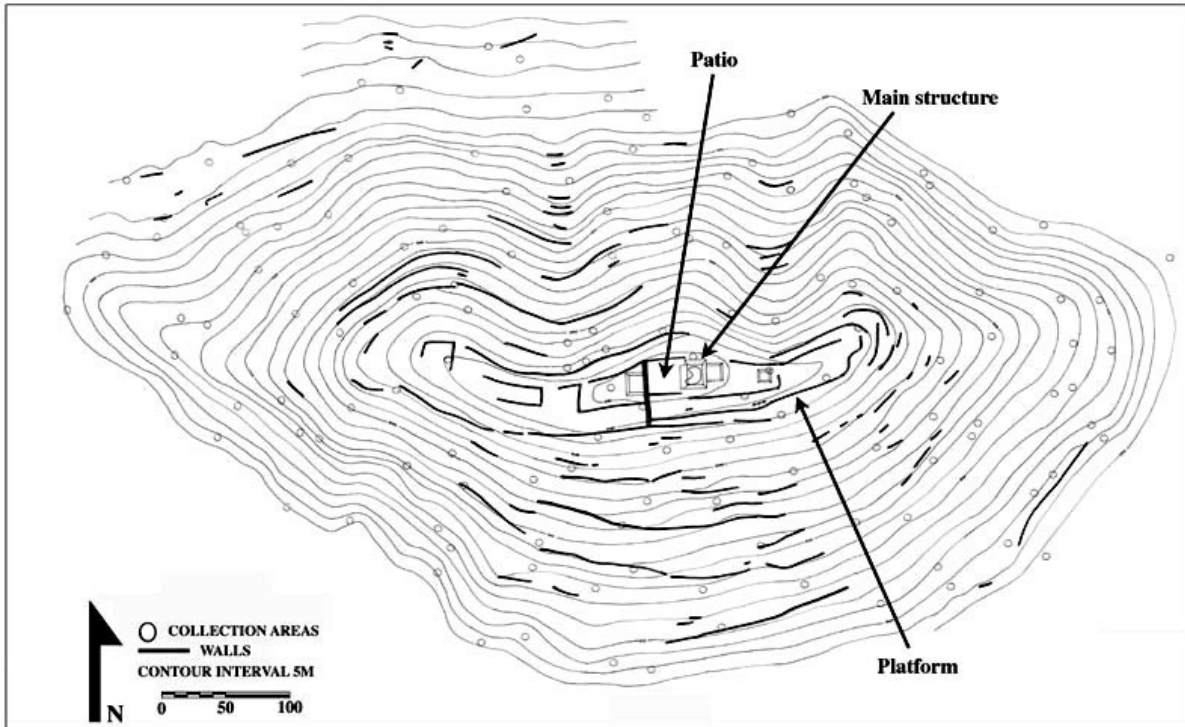


Figure 5. Cerro Yucuayuxi.



Plate 22. Platform at Cerro Yucuayuxi.



Plate 23. Main structure and patio at Cerro Yucuayuxi.

El Vergel

Cerro Encantado and El Vergel are found at about 8 km apart from each other. El Vergel extends for about 30.25 hectares, and its civic-ceremonial architecture is very complex. The site has two main architectural areas, one to the North and one to the South. The Northern architectural sector is composed of an enclosed four mound plaza group ([Figure 6](#)). The largest of the mounds measures about 25m by 25m at its base and about 5m high ([Figure 6](#)). To the south, the architecture is much more complex and it is composed of a series of platform mounds, a ballcourt ([Plate 24](#)), two sunken patios, and 129 terraces ([Figure 6](#)). There are also two lama-bordos, one in the north and one to the south ([Plate 25](#)) The southern side of the site was probably constructed during the Postclassic. The site dates to both the Classic and Postclassic periods.

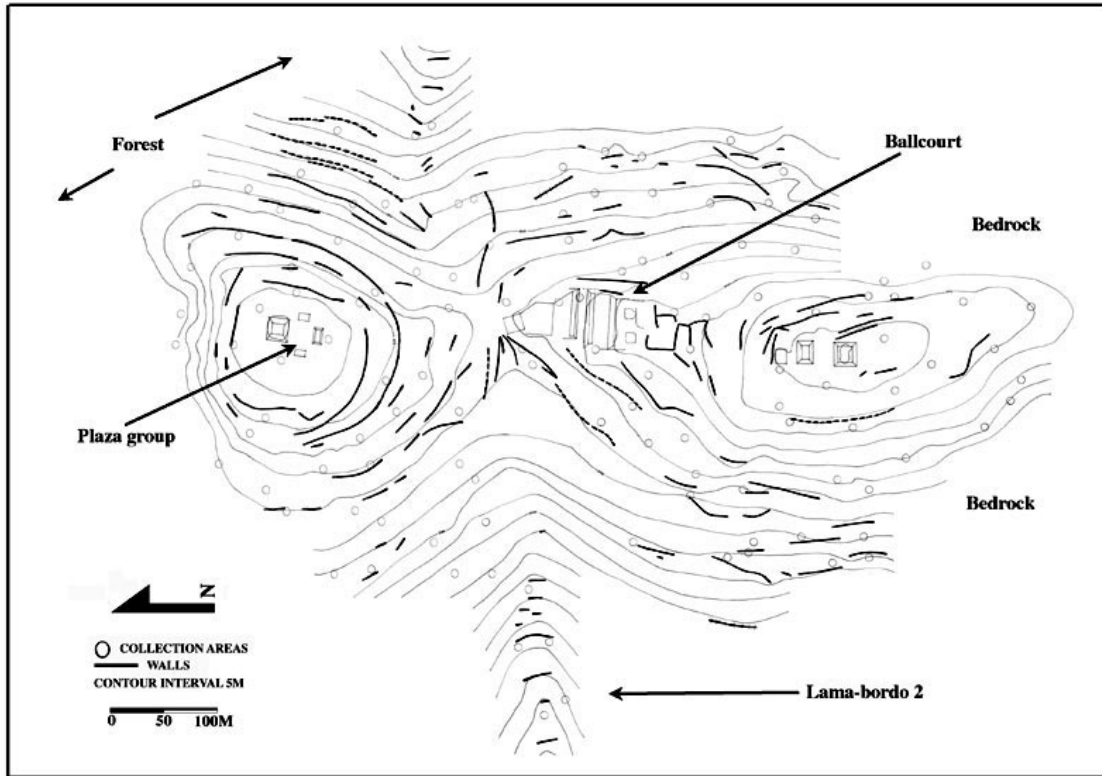


Figure 6. El Vergel.



Plate 24. Ballcourt at El Vergel.



Plate 25. Lama-bordo 2 at El Vergel.

Preliminary Conclusions

The objectives of this project were to map and intensively collect three secondary centers in the Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca in order to obtain information on the social and political organization of these centers. Five sites were mapped and collected during a period of nine months. The artifacts taken from each site were classified and tabulated for further analysis. Photographs of artifacts were taken, but none have been drawn to date. Currently, ceramic and lithic tabulations are being prepared for analysis, so only preliminary conclusions can be made. Cerro Encantado, El Peñasco and El Vergel differ from Cerro de la Cantera and Tidaa in their ceramics. The later two are located on the Nochixtlán Valley and the ceramics can be compared to those of the Valley of Oaxaca. Cerro Encantado, El Vergel and Peñasco are located on the west side of a large chain of mountains that forms a natural boundary ([Figure 2](#)). This boundary divides the Nochixtlán Valley (to the East) from a series of smaller valleys (to the West). Sites west of the divide seem to have weaker connections with the Nochixtlán Valley and Valley of Oaxaca as indicated by the pottery, and have more public architecture than those on the east, suggesting alternate forms of political organization. Most ceramics are imitations of Valley of Oaxaca pottery, which may suggest local production.

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