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**Postclassic Urbanism at Calixtlahuaca: Reconstructing the Unpublished Excavations of José García Payón**



**Research Year:** 2002

**Culture:** Tarascan

**Chronology:** Post Classic

**Location:** Toluca, México

**Site:** Calixtlahuaca

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## **Abstract**

The Postclassic city of Calixtlahuaca was a power political capital in the Toluca Valley in the western portion of the State of México ([Figure 1](#)). Between 1930 and 1938, archaeologist José García Payón conducted excavations at the Calixtlahuaca archaeological site. He excavated and restored a number of large monumental structures and excavated a series of burials with rich associated offerings. Although García Payón published some of his results, he never conducted a thorough analysis of the materials nor published detailed data on the excavations or offerings. In this project I conducted an analysis of more than 1,000 ceramic vessels and hundreds of other objects from the Calixtlahuaca offerings. I searched—in vain—for García Payón's unpublished notes and catalogs. I also analyzed Postclassic ceramic vessels from other sites in the Toluca Valley, including Teotenango and Calimaya.

## **Resumen**

La ciudad posclásica de Calixtlahuaca fue la capital de un gran reino en el Valle de Toluca (Estado de México). ([Figura 1](#)). Entre los años de 1930 y 1938, el arqueólogo José García Payón llevó a cabo excavaciones en la zona arqueológica de Calixtlahuaca. Excavó y restauró algunos monumentos arquitectónicos impresionantes, y excavó varios entierros con ricas ofrendas asociadas a éstos. García Payón publicó algunos resultados de sus investigaciones, pero nunca lo hizo de manera completa y detallada. En este proyecto hice un análisis de más de 1.000 vasijas cerámicas y cientos de otros objetos de las ofrendas de Calixtlahuaca. Busqué -infructuosamente- las notas y catálogos de García Payón. También investigué vasijas cerámicas posclásicas de otros sitios en el Valle de Toluca, incluyendo Teotenango y Calimaya.

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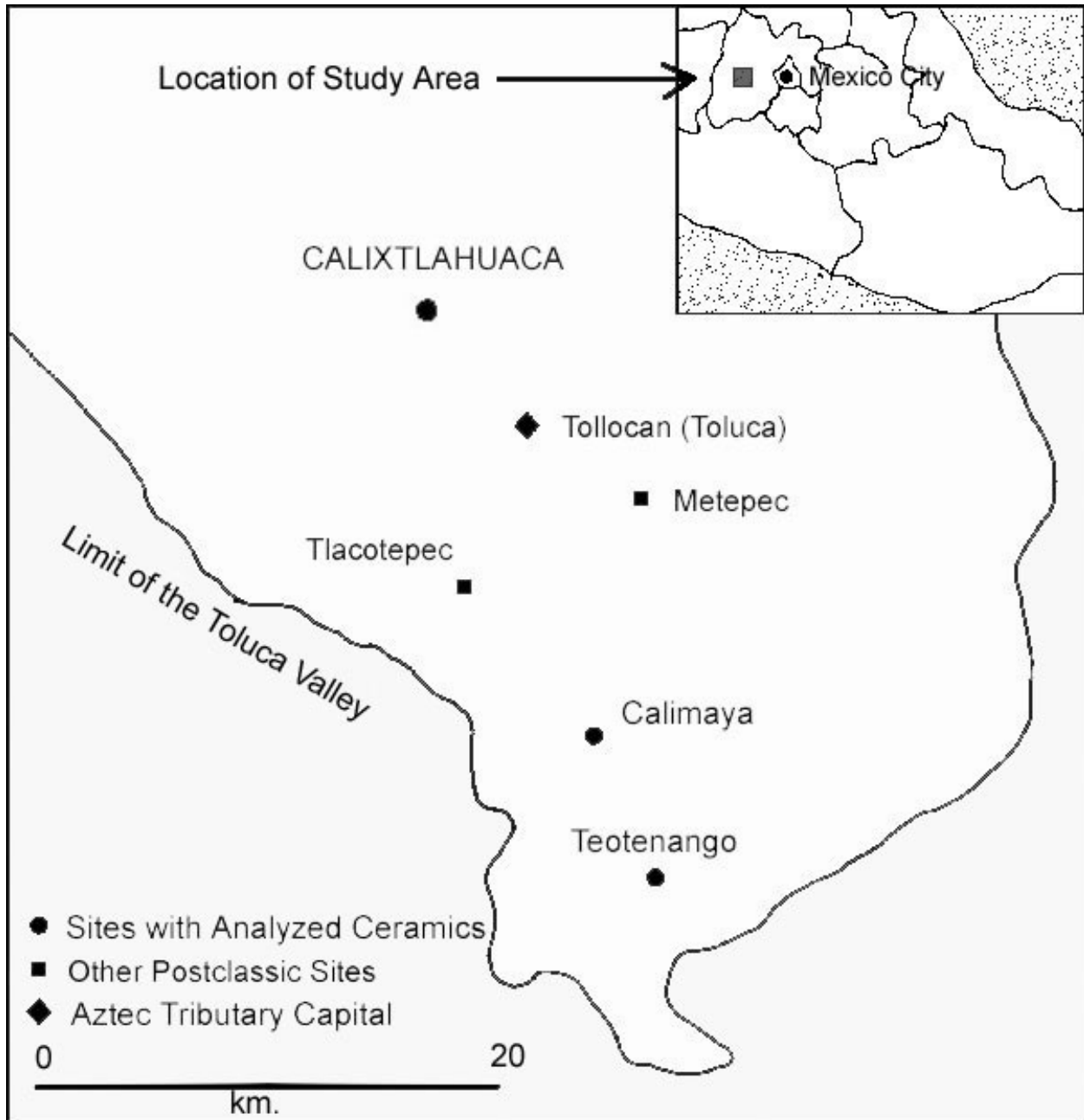


Figure 1. Location of Calixtlahuaca and other Postclassic sites in the Toluca Valley.

## Introduction

Calixtlahuaca was the capital of a powerful Postclassic polity in the Toluca Valley (in the modern state of México). Known today for the quality and quantity of its monumental architecture, Calixtlahuaca was once one of the leading cities in Postclassic central México. Because of its regional significance and its historical role in the conflict between

the Aztec and Tarascan empires, research at Calixtlahuaca has great potential for illuminating a variety of issues concerning the Postclassic cultures of central México, particularly in the realms of urbanization, imperialism, social identity, and historical processes. Much of Calixtlahuaca's monumental architecture was excavated and restored by José García Payón in the 1930s. Unfortunately, García Payón never completed the analysis of his excavations and he failed to publish his results beyond a few short technical articles and general works. The goal of this project was to analyze the artifacts and notes from his excavations to illuminate aspects of the chronology, significance, and urbanization of Calixtlahuaca.

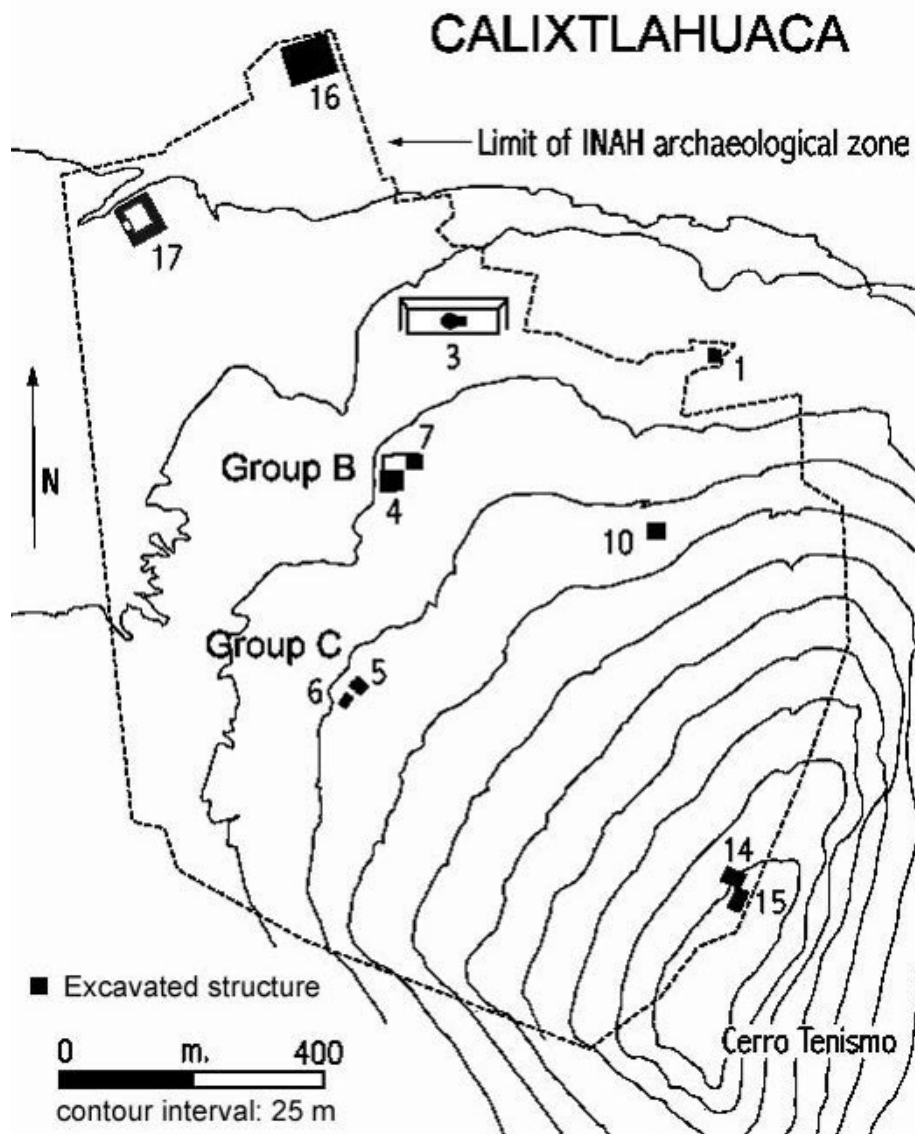


Figure 2. Map of Calixtlahuaca. (digitized by Timothy S. Hare from a topographic map provided by Jorge Villanueva Villalpando of the Centro INAH, Estado de México).

## García Payón's Excavations

José García Payón excavated at Calixtlahuaca between 1930 and 1938. As was common at that time, he concentrated his efforts on the monumental architecture of the site ([Figure 2](#)). Structure 3, a large four-stage circular pyramid dedicated to the wind god Ehecatl, is the best-known building ([Figure 3](#) and [Figure 4](#)). García Payón also excavated other religious structures at the site, including Structure 4 (a large rectangular temple) and an odd cross-shaped building decorated with tenoned stone skulls; these are part of Group B ([Figure 5](#)). García Payón excavated a large architectural complex, Structure 17 ([Figure 6](#) and [Figure 7](#)), that he wrongly identified as a "calmecac" (school). This complex, however, conforms precisely to the standard Aztec palace plan (Evans 1991; Smith 2003:139-145), and more likely was the city's royal palace. He also excavated several smaller structures in Group C at Calixtlahuaca (known locally as "el Panteón;" see [Figure 8](#)), where he encountered rich burials and offerings with ceramic vessels, bronze objects, jewelry of greenstone, obsidian, and rock crystal, and other items. Similar burials with offerings were excavated in the plaza in front of Structure 3 ([Figure 4](#)). The only surviving illustration of the burials is an engraving shown here in [Figure 9](#), taken from García Payón's (1941b) brief article.

One offering, from either Structure 5 or Structure 6 in Group C (García Payón's published descriptions are contradictory on this point) supposedly included a Roman figurine (García Payón 1961; Hristov and Genovés 1999). As I describe in my website: (<http://www.albany.edu/~mesmith/tval/RomanFigurine.html>), this object cannot be considered a valid or well-documented archaeological find; see also Schaaf and Wagner (2001).

José García Payón failed to adequately publish the results of his fieldwork at Calixtlahuaca. The most important of his publications are brief articles on ceramics and burials (García Payón 1941a, b). He published the first volume of a planned multi-volume report (García Payón 1936), but this book consists of ethnohistory and general information about the Toluca Valley, with next to nothing on the excavations. Just before his death in 1976, the State of México issued a reprint of the 1936 report (García Payón 1974). The historian Mario Colín Sánchez, Director of Cultural Patrimony for the State of México, located some of García Payón's notes and text (Colín 1974), and turned them over to Leonardo Manrique and Wanda Tommasi de Magrelli to edit for publication, evidently not telling them exactly where he had found the material. They organized the material into three planned volumes to be published in the book series, "Biblioteca Enciclopédica del Estado de México," of which Colín was the general editor. The first volume consisted of brief textual descriptions of excavations and architecture (García Payón 1979). The second, some maps and photographs of architecture, appeared two years later, shortly after the death of Tommasi (García Payón 1981). Manrique submitted the manuscript for the third volume—a series of over 100 hand-colored illustrations of artifacts—to Colín in early 1982 (García Payón n.d.). Shortly thereafter, Colín died and the publication series came to an abrupt halt. Manrique tells me that he

has no idea what happened to the illustrations, and no one else seems to have searched for these until now.



Figure 3. Structure 3 at Calixtlahuaca.

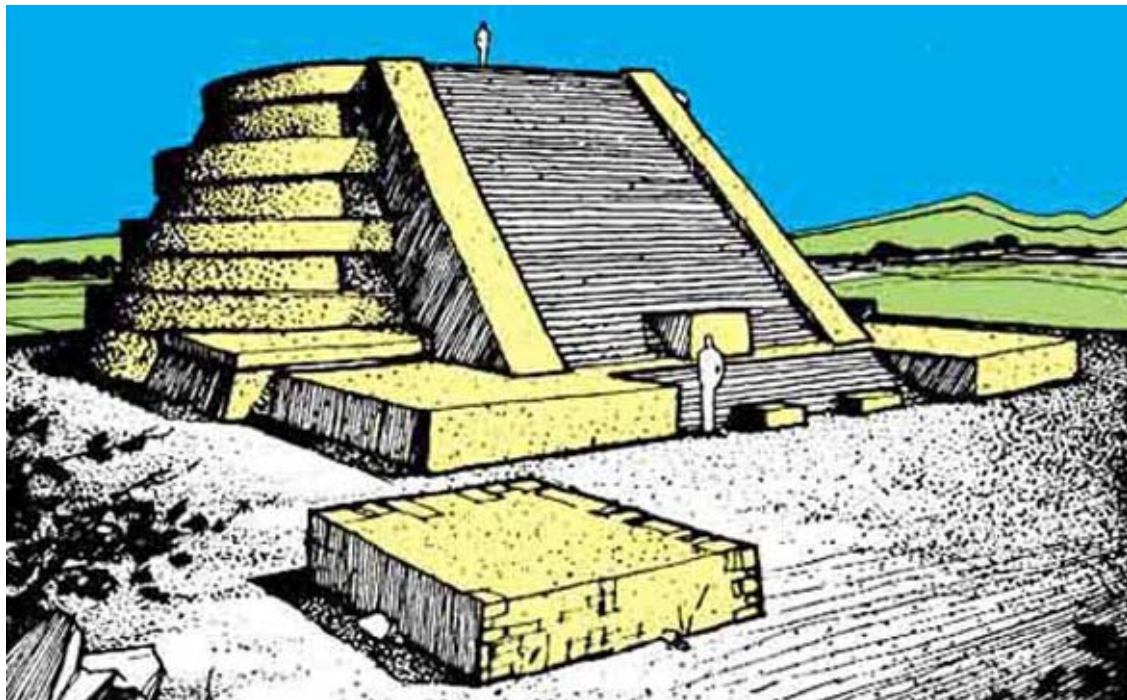


Figure 4. Structure 3 at Calixtlahuaca, after Gendrop (1970).

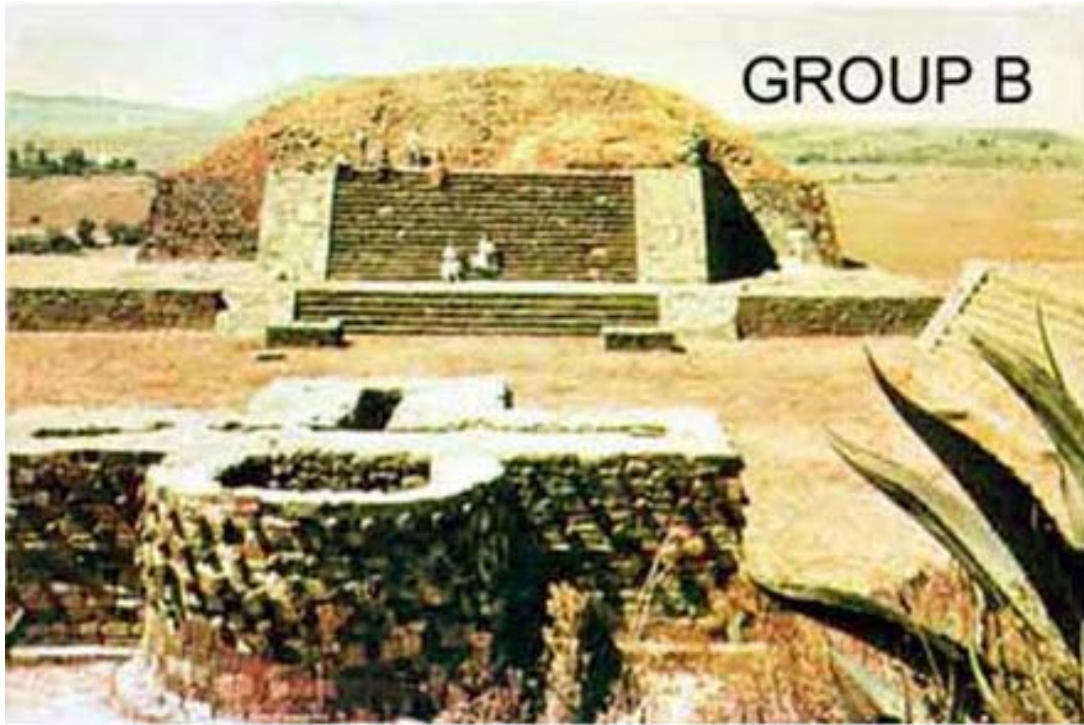


Figure 5. Group B (structures 4 and cruciform).

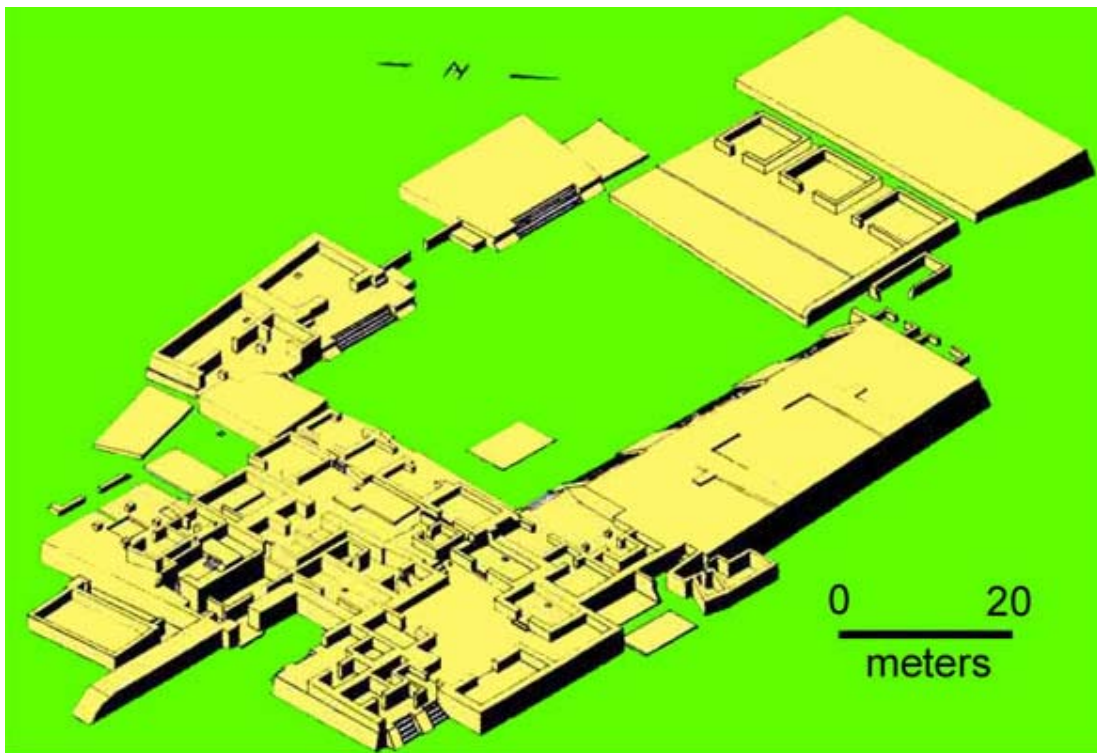


Figure 6. Structure 17 drawing.



Figure 7. Structure 17 photo.



Figure 8. Group C.





A.



B.

Figure 9. Burial engraving.

### Grant-Funded Activities

The research described here was carried out between June 26 and August 10, 2002, in the towns of Toluca, Tenango, and Calixtlahuaca in the Toluca Valley of central México. I was assisted by graduate students Jennifer Wharton (University at Albany, SUNY) and Melissa McCarron (Yale University), and by Toluca high-school student Myrna Antonio Aguirre.

**Objective 1. To locate unpublished notes, catalogs and other documents from García Payón's fieldwork at Calixtlahuaca.**

My research was directed at finding four types of document or information:

1. **The original notes, or related materials, that Mario Colín found and gave to Manrique.** I searched extensively in the Archivo Histórico del Estado de México with the assistance of the director of the archive and several historians with experience working in the archive, and I consulted with historians familiar with other historical archives in Toluca, with no luck.
2. **The lost volume of illustrations.** I sought advice from several historians who had known Mario Colín and were familiar with his materials and archives. I looked for the material at the press in México City where the book series was printed and in the Mario Colín archive in the Biblioteca Nacional in México City, to no avail.

3. **Material documenting the history of the Calixtlahuaca artifact collection.** I was more successful in this area; I was able to trace the history of the collections from the 1930s to the present. This information is presented in Smith *et al.* (n.d.).
4. **Notes with the García Payón Archive in Veracruz.** Discussion with Arqigo. Omar Ruiz Gordillo, who knows this collection well, indicates that the material from García Payón's work in the state of México duplicates material in the Archivo Técnico of INAH in México City (which I had already examined in 2001).

**Objective 2. To identify and study collections of artifacts from Calixtlahuaca.**

A major collection of artifacts from García Payón's excavations is preserved at the Museo de Antropología in Toluca, under the control of the Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura. This collection consists of over 1,200 ceramic vessels plus nearly 1,000 other objects, from large stone sculptures to jade beads. The bulk of these objects were from offerings, most of which were associated with burials. The collection is well cataloged and well maintained by the Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura, whose staff made their databases, expertise, and assistance available in numerous ways. Unfortunately, there are no records on the proveniences of the objects within Calixtlahuaca. With the help of my student assistants, we accomplished the following tasks: (1) Classified and recorded attributes on all ceramic vessels; (2) Taken one or more digital photographs of each vessel; (3) Classified and studied briefly all remaining objects except for stone sculpture. We have not had time to completely study the collection of stone sculptures, which numbers 271 objects. Previously published Calixtlahuaca sculptures are good examples of the Aztec sculptural style (Umberger 1996). Most of this major collection of Postclassic sculptures remains unpublished and unstudied, however. An article describing the Calixtlahuaca artifact collection (Smith, *et al.* n.d.) will appear in the journal *Expresión Antropológica*.

**Objective 3. To reconstruct the excavations of García Payón as fully as possible.**

My study of the Calixtlahuaca artifact collection has illuminated a number of aspects of García Payón's fieldwork beyond what is contained in the publications on the site, but it will be difficult to adequately reconstruct his excavations unless some of the missing documentation turns up in the future. One preliminary hypothesis is that García Payón's proposed chronology of the site is incorrect. Instead of a continuous occupation spanning the Classic period through the Spanish conquest, the materials in the collections point to two episodes of offerings, probably suggesting two episodes of occupation at the site: Classic period and Late Postclassic period.

#### **Objective 4. To study Postclassic ceramics from other sites in the Toluca Valley.**

We completed study of most of the Calixtlahuaca collections within four weeks. We next processed a collection of 100 Postclassic ceramic vessels from the site of Calimaya (south of Toluca). I also classified collections of several hundred Postclassic vessels each from the sites of San Miguel Ixtapan (Rodríguez G. and García S. 1996) and Huamango (Piña Chán 1981) using the notes and photographs of the Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura.

We then worked on the collection of nearly 1,000 Postclassic ceramic vessels from the Epiclassic monumental center of Teotenango at the southern end of the Valley. The vessels are from intrusive Postclassic burials. Excavated by Román Piña Chán (1975), the Postclassic vessels have been described and discussed (Tommasi de Magrelli 1978; Vargas Pacheco 1975), but have never been the subject of a complete and systematic analysis. They are well cataloged and stored in the site museum run by the Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura. We also found that numerous ceramic vessels, stone sculptures, and other materials from Calixtlahuaca are currently curated at this museum. In total, we classified nearly 3,000 Postclassic ceramic vessels from Calixtlahuaca, Teotenango, and other sites in the Toluca Valley.

#### **Objective 5. To generate hypotheses and make plans for future fieldwork at Calixtlahuaca.**

This research has already generated many ideas and hypotheses for future exploration. Database work and quantitative analyses are currently in progress, and some of the results will be presented in a paper later in 2003 (Smith and Wharton 2003). As these analyses proceed, I will develop the data and results into more formal hypotheses and guidelines for my planned excavations at Calixtlahuaca in 2004 or 2005.

#### **The Ceramics of Calixtlahuaca**

García Payón (1941a) published the first study of Postclassic ceramics from the Toluca Valley, based on the Calixtlahuaca whole vessels. For a variety of reasons (outlined in Smith 2001, 2002b, n.d.), the ceramic chronology proposed by García Payón (with four Postclassic periods) is problematic and unsupported by empirical data. Subsequent studies of Postclassic ceramics from the Toluca Valley have done little to produce an acceptable classification or chronology. Tommasi de Magrelli (1978) illustrated vessels from Teotenango, but presented no analyses. Vargas Pacheco (1975) proposed a speculative ceramic chronology for Teotenango, again unsupported by empirical data. More recently Sodi Mirando and Herrera Torres (1991) published a catalog of Toluca Valley vessels in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in México City.

I began the task of establishing a new classification and chronology of Postclassic ceramics from Calixtlahuaca and other sites in the Toluca Valley in 2000 with a study of several hundred vessels in the Bauer and Blake collections in the Smithsonian Institution and the American Museum of Natural History (Smith 2001). I have posted digital images of these vessels on my web page: (<http://www.Albany.edu/~mesmith/tval/bauer/images/bauerindex.html>).

The FAMSI-supported research conducted in summer 2002 helped advance understanding of the formal and regional variation in Postclassic ceramics from the Toluca Valley and nearby regions. We established new classifications of ceramic decoration and vessel form. I have written the first version of what will be an evolving document that describes my classification in more detail (Smith 2002b). A progress report on current analyses will be presented in a conference paper in spring 2003 (Smith and Wharton 2003). I would like to post a selection of the digital images of the Calixtlahuaca and Teotenango vessels on the Internet, but I currently lack formal permission from Mexican authorities and research assistants to help with the task.

Because of the importance of decorated ceramics in studies of chronology, regional variation, social identity, and exchange, classificatory efforts so far have concentrated on these vessels. I have defined a series of "decorative groups" based upon colors and techniques; groups are in turn composed of "types" that consist of regularly occurring associations (i.e., numerous examples) of attributes of design field and motifs. Not all vessels fit into a defined decorative type. The groups defined so far are the following: A: plain (2 types); B: polished redware (8 types); C: white-based polychrome exterior with polished red and/or white polychrome interior (2 types); D: white-based painted (4 types); E: buff-based painted (7 types); F: negative decoration (1 type); G: negative with red-on-buff (4 types); H: negative with red-on-white (1 type); J: orange-based painted (4 types); K: red-and-orange-on-cream (3 types). Some of the variation between groups is shown in [Figure 10](#). The most common vessel forms in the Calixtlahuaca collection are shown in [Figure 11](#).

We identified numerous imported Postclassic vessels in the Calixtlahuaca collection ([Figure 12](#)). Ceramic figurines, from both the Postclassic and Classic periods, are also present in the collection. The collection of figurines in the Aztec style includes examples with some of the distinctive Aztec figurine pastes ([Figure 13](#), C-E, shown below) as well as examples with coarse paste, most likely from the Toluca Valley ([Figure 13, A-B](#)); a similar situation—Aztec-style figurines in both local and Basin of México pastes—exists in the Aztec-period figurines from Morelos (Smith 2002a).



**Figure 10. Some of the variation in the Postclassic decorated ceramics. Row 1: Group C; Row 2: Groups B and E; Row 3: Groups E, B, and G. (5) Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, CONACULTA-INAH-MEX.**



**Figure 11. Variation in vessel forms in the Calixtlahuaca collection. (7) Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, CONACULTA-INAH-MEX.**



**Figure 12. Some imported vessels in the Calixtlahuaca collection. Row 1: Tlahuica polychrome from Morelos; Row 2: Aztec III/IV from the Basin of México and "Chontal" polychrome from Guerrero; Row 3: Negative polychrome from San Miguel Ixtapan, Aztec III from the Basin of México, and "Laca" polychrome from Puebla or Tlaxcala. (6) Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, CONACULTA-INAH-MEX.**



**Figure 13. Aztec-style figurines from Calixtlahuaca. A and B: coarse paste of unknown origin, probably local; C: fine gray paste from the western Basin of México; D, E: fine orange paste from the Basin of México. (11) Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, CONACULTA-INAH-MEX.**

One unexpected finding was an abundance of ceramic vessels (nearly 100) dating to the Classic period. Most of these are types common at Teotihuacán ([Figure 14](#), left), and about 15 vessels are likely Classic-period imports from the Valley of Oaxaca ([Figure 14](#), right). Current research is directed at classifying these Classic vessels with respect to published studies of the ceramics of Teotihuacán and Monte Albán.

Non-ceramic material from Calixtlahuaca is described briefly in Smith *et al.* (n.d.).





**Figure 14. Classic period vessels from Calixtlahuaca. Left: 2 vessels in Teotihuacán style; right: 2 vessels imported from Oaxaca (Monte Albán II or IIIa). (8) Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, CONACULTA-INAH-MEX.**

## Summary

The research supported by FAMSI in 2002 has significance at several levels. *First*, this research is helping bring to light the results and significance of José García Payón's initial excavations at Calixtlahuaca. Calixtlahuaca is the key site for understanding the Postclassic cultures of the Toluca Valley (García Castro 1999; Sugiura Yamamoto 1998; Zuñiga Bárcenas 2001), and García Payón's work has significance beyond the site itself. *Second*, the proposed research helps lay the groundwork for my planned fieldwork at Calixtlahuaca starting in 2004 or 2005. *Third*, this research contributes to the clarification of a number of problems concerning the chronology, classification, and regional distribution of Postclassic ceramics of the Toluca Valley.

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