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Recorrido Arqueológico El Mesón



Research Year: 2003

Culture: Olmec

Chronology: Pre-Classic

Location: Eastern Papaloapan River Basin, Veracruz, México

Site: El Mesón

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Abstract

The *Recorrido Arqueológico El Mesón* was initiated in 2003 to investigate settlement patterns and political economic organization in the Eastern Papaloapan River Basin during the Late and Terminal Formative periods (400 B.C.-A.D. 300). This 700-year span marked an important transition on the southern Gulf Coast between the earlier Olmec culture and the later Classic period cultures; however, our understanding of this period remains limited. This research focused on an area of approximately 23 sq. km around the archaeological site El Mesón. The settlement data indicate that during the Late Formative period (400 B.C.-A.D. 100) El Mesón emerged as a small region center, and based on similarities in the layout of formal architectural complexes, may have had political ties with the large center Tres Zapotes.

Resumen

En el año 2003 se inició el *Recorrido Arqueológico El Mesón* para investigar los patrones de asentamiento y la organización política económica de la cuenca oriental del río Papaloapan, durante las épocas del Formativo Tardío y Terminal (400 a.C. - 300 d.C.). Este lapso de 700 años representó una transición importante en la costa sureña del Golfo entre la cultura Olmeca y las culturas del Clásico; sin embargo, nuestro conocimiento de dicho lapso todavía es limitado. Esta investigación se ha enfocado sobre una zona de 23 kilómetros cuadrados alrededor del sitio arqueológico de El Mesón. Los datos del asentamiento indican que durante el período Formativo Tardío (400 a.C. - 100 d.C.) El Mesón surgió como un centro regional pequeño, y considerando las semejanzas entre la organización de sus conjuntos formales arquitectónicos, posiblemente haya tenido relaciones políticas con el gran centro de Tres Zapotes.

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Introduction

The Late and Terminal Formative periods (400 B.C.-A.D. 300) marked an important transition in the Gulf Lowlands between the Early and Middle Formative Olmec culture and the later Classic period cultures. One of the most important developments of this time was the emergence of a hieroglyphic writing system that was used in politically

themed Epi-Olmec monuments; however, the political environment in which the script emerged remains largely unknown. This research addresses questions of regional political and economic organization in the Eastern Papaloapan River Basin during the Late and Terminal Formative periods. Specifically this project examines whether settlements in the area around El Mesón were politically independent, or if they formed part of a large regional polity most likely controlled by the large center Tres Zapotes located approximately 15 km to the south. Additionally, this project provides settlement data for the El Mesón area for all Prehispanic periods.



Figure 1. Location of El Mesón (From INEGI 1:250,000 Carta Topográfica Coatzacoalcos 1997).

Background

The archaeological site El Mesón is located in the eastern Papaloapan River Basin just outside of the modern town Angel R. Cabada, Veracruz, México ([Figure 1](#)).

Although the site has been known in the archaeological literature since the 1940s, it has not been the focus of intensive archaeological investigations. As part of his survey of stone monuments in the 1930s, Mathew Stirling (1943) passed through El Mesón documenting two monumental basalt sculptures, a small circular basalt altar and a carved piece of columnar basalt. Stirling, however, did not describe the site. In the 1950s, the largest and most famous monument from El Mesón, the El Mesón Stela ([Figure 2](#)), was recovered by local farmers. This monument was subsequently drawn by Miguel Covarrubias (1957), Philip Drucker (1968), and John Scott (1977). Based on observations of the numerous earthen mounds in the area, Coe (1965:679) described the zone around El Mesón as potentially having the highest density of Prehispanic settlement in Mesoamerica. Finally John Scott (1977) briefly visited El Mesón as part of a study on post Olmec art in the Gulf lowlands. Scott provided the only map of the site to date, and made several surface collections of ceramics. Comparisons of these materials with ceramics from nearby Tres Zapotes suggested that the primary occupation of El Mesón dated to the Late and Terminal Formative periods (Scott 1977:87-88).

This project was initiated in 2003 to investigate settlement patterns, political organization, and economic organization in the area around El Mesón during the Late and Terminal Formative periods. Between May 1 and July 14, 2003, an area of approximately 23 square kilometers around El Mesón was surveyed. This research marks the first systematic investigations in this area of the Southern Gulf Lowlands.



Figure 2. El Mesón Stela.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork for the RAM survey consisted of a full coverage pedestrian survey of the project area. Because the density of settlement was expected to be relatively high, and given the lack of previous knowledge of the area, a "siteless survey" (see Dunnell and Dancey 1983) technique was employed that focused on the identification of architectural features on the landscape and artifact concentrations rather than discrete site boundaries. This survey strategy has also been employed in the Mixtequilla region of South-Central Veracruz (Stark 1991; 2003:395-397). Crew members surveyed the project area at a 20 m transect spacing to insure that household scale data would be gathered. Once an architectural feature or artifact concentration was identified, it was measured and sketch mapped, and its location was recorded using a Magellan Meridian Platinum global positioning system receiver. Where visibility permitted, collections were made of surface artifacts. Decorated ceramics and rim sherds were collected until a total of 100 sherds were collected or the boundary of the architectural feature or artifact concentration was crossed. All other artifacts were collected. Artifacts too large to carry, including large groundstone objects, were documented and left in the field. When multiple architectural features were identified in the same place, such as a mound on top of a platform, each individual feature was documented and collected separately.

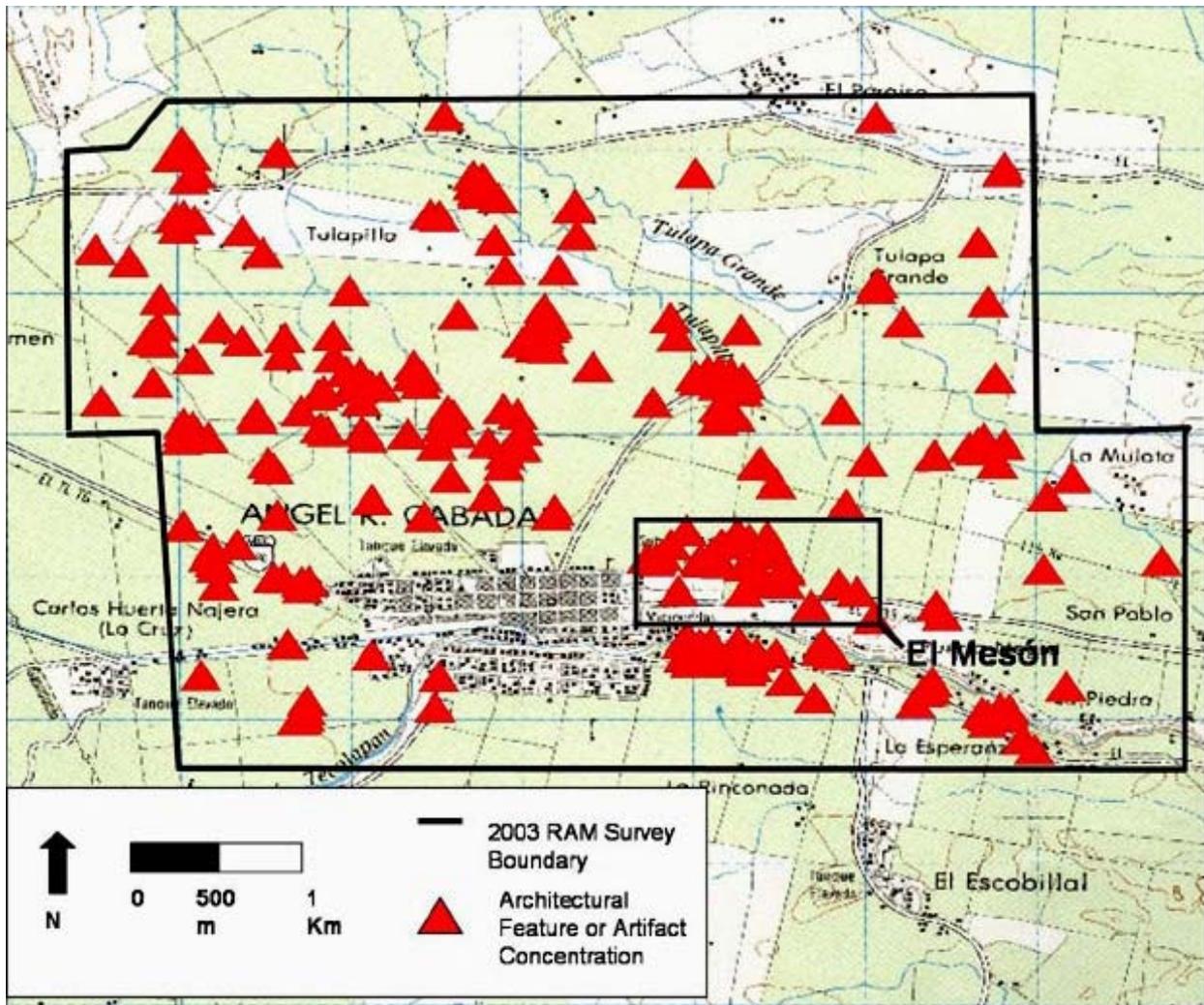


Figure 3. Architectural Features and Artifact Concentrations Identified During RAM Survey (From INEGI 1:50,000 Carta Topográfica, Lerdo de Tejada 1995).

Preliminary Results and Observations

Analyses of the survey data and recovered artifacts are ongoing; however, some preliminary results of the survey can be presented. A total of 383 individual architectural features or artifact concentrations were identified during the RAM survey (Recorrido Arqueológico El Mesón), a density of 12.3 architectural features or artifact concentrations per square kilometer ([Figure 3](#)).



Figure 4. Mound A at El Mesón (photo facing West).

The overall settlement pattern observed in the El Mesón area is characterized as a zone of contiguous settlements with architectural complexes formed from variable patterns of component architectural features including low residential mounds, larger conical and long mounds, large quadrilateral platforms, and artificial bajos ([Figure 4](#), shown above, and [Figure 5](#) and [Figure 6](#)). Some of these complexes feature plaza arrangements. Comparisons of the El Mesón area with other nearby centers in the Gulf Lowlands indicate that the density and arrangement of architectural features is more similar to the Mixtequilla region of south central Veracruz than Tres Zapotes (see Pool 2003a:92; Stark and Heller 1991). Like the Mixtequilla, residential dispersion at El Mesón blurs the boundaries between settlements making the identification of discrete "site" boundaries difficult. The result is that the archaeological record in the area around El Mesón exhibits an almost continuous distribution of architectural features and surface artifact scatters across the landscape.



Figure 5. Quadrilateral Platform La Paila (photo facing North).



Figure 6. Large Conical Mound near La Esperanza (photo facing South).

Although the overall settlement pattern for the El Mesón area is more like the Mixtequilla, the formal arrangement of architectural features in the main mound group at El Mesón strongly resembles the layout of the major mound groups at Tres Zapotes. This pattern, which features a plaza bounded by a long mound to the north, a conical mound to the west, and a small adoratorio in the centerline of the plaza, is also present at El Mesón ([Figure 7](#), shown below); however, the scale of construction is greatly reduced at El Mesón in comparison to Tres Zapotes (Pool 2000:150; Sullivan 2002). Pool (2000:150; 2003a:92) has argued that the mound groups that conform to this pattern at Tres Zapotes may have served as seats of authority for factional leaders who shared governance of the center. Given the proximity of El Mesón to Tres Zapotes, and the presence of Epi-Olmec monuments at the site, the replication of the Tres Zapotes mound group pattern may indicate that the El Mesón area was tied politically to the large center, possibly as a secondary center. The reduction in the size of the architectural features may be an indicator of El Mesón's subordinate position to Tres Zapotes during the Late and Terminal Formative periods. Alternatively, Pool (2003b) has suggested that this replication of this mound group outside of Tres Zapotes may be indicative of emulation of the prestigious center by independent local political leaders.

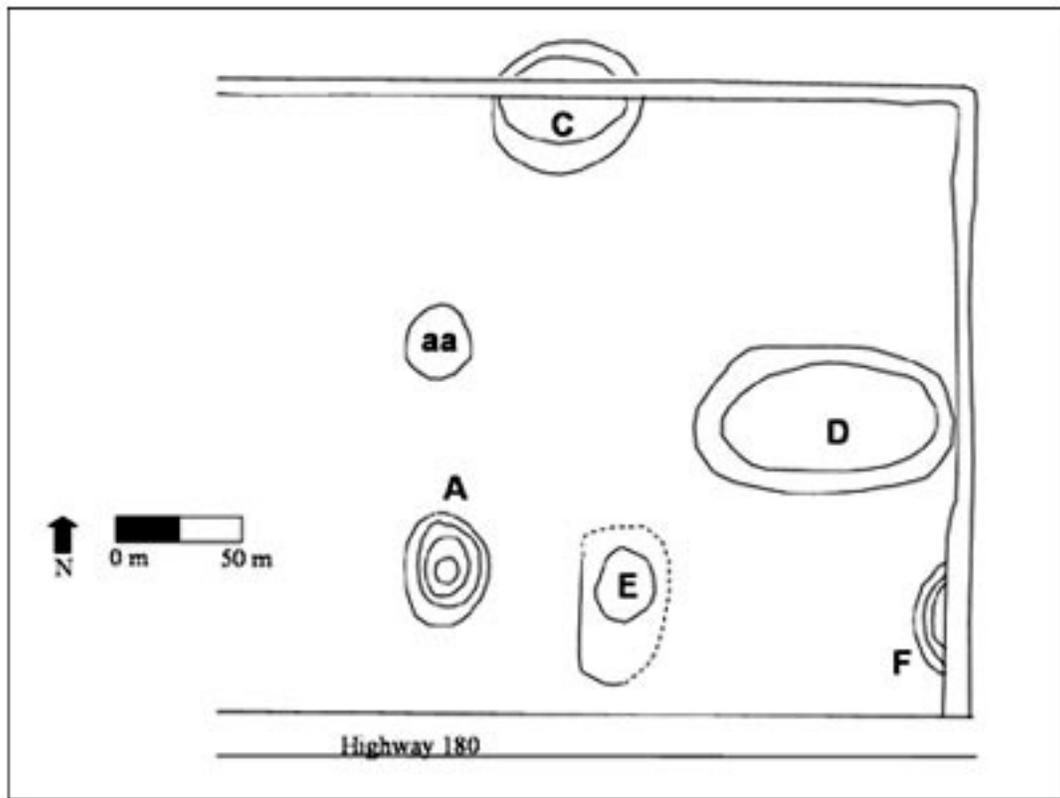


Figure 7. Plan of El Mesón.

Diagnostic ceramics recovered from surface collections document a settlement history for the El Mesón area that spans from at least the Middle Formative through the Postclassic periods. This chronology is based on comparisons of El Mesón ceramics with the ceramic sequence developed for Tres Zapotes by Ponciano Ortiz Ceballos (1975) and refined during the Recorrido Arqueológico Tres Zapotes (Pool personal communication).

Evidence for Early Formative settlement at El Mesón was scant. Two sherds of Calzadas Carved were recovered during the survey indicating a possible Early Formative component. The first clear evidence of settlement in the El Mesón area dates to the Middle Formative period (800-400 B.C.), based on diagnostic ceramics recovered from 21 locations within the survey area ([Figure 8](#)). It was during this period that El Mesón itself was first inhabited. As yet it is unclear if the mounds at El Mesón were associated with the Middle Formative occupation or if they date to later occupations. Additional Middle Formative settlements were located north of El Mesón along the Tulapilla Arroyo.

The Late Formative period (400 B.C.-A.D. 100) was a time of important growth for settlements in the El Mesón area. Diagnostic Late Formative ceramics were recovered from 206 locations within the survey area ([Figure 9](#)). El Mesón itself expanded during the Late Formative period growing to include settlements on the south bank of the Tecolapan River, and likely served as a small regional center. Settlements also expanded to the north and west of El Mesón. During the Late Formative period, at least two additional areas of civic ceremonial architecture were constructed, La Paila and Chico Loco. These two mound groups featured plaza arrangements with a large quadrilateral platform paired with a conical mound.

The Terminal Formative period (A.D. 100-300) was largely a continuation of the Late Formative growth. Diagnostic Terminal Formative ceramics were recovered from 226 locations ([Figure 10](#)). In general, the settlement pattern of the Late Terminal Formative is the same as for Late Formative period. Modest expansion of settlement was encountered in the area to the north and west of El Mesón.

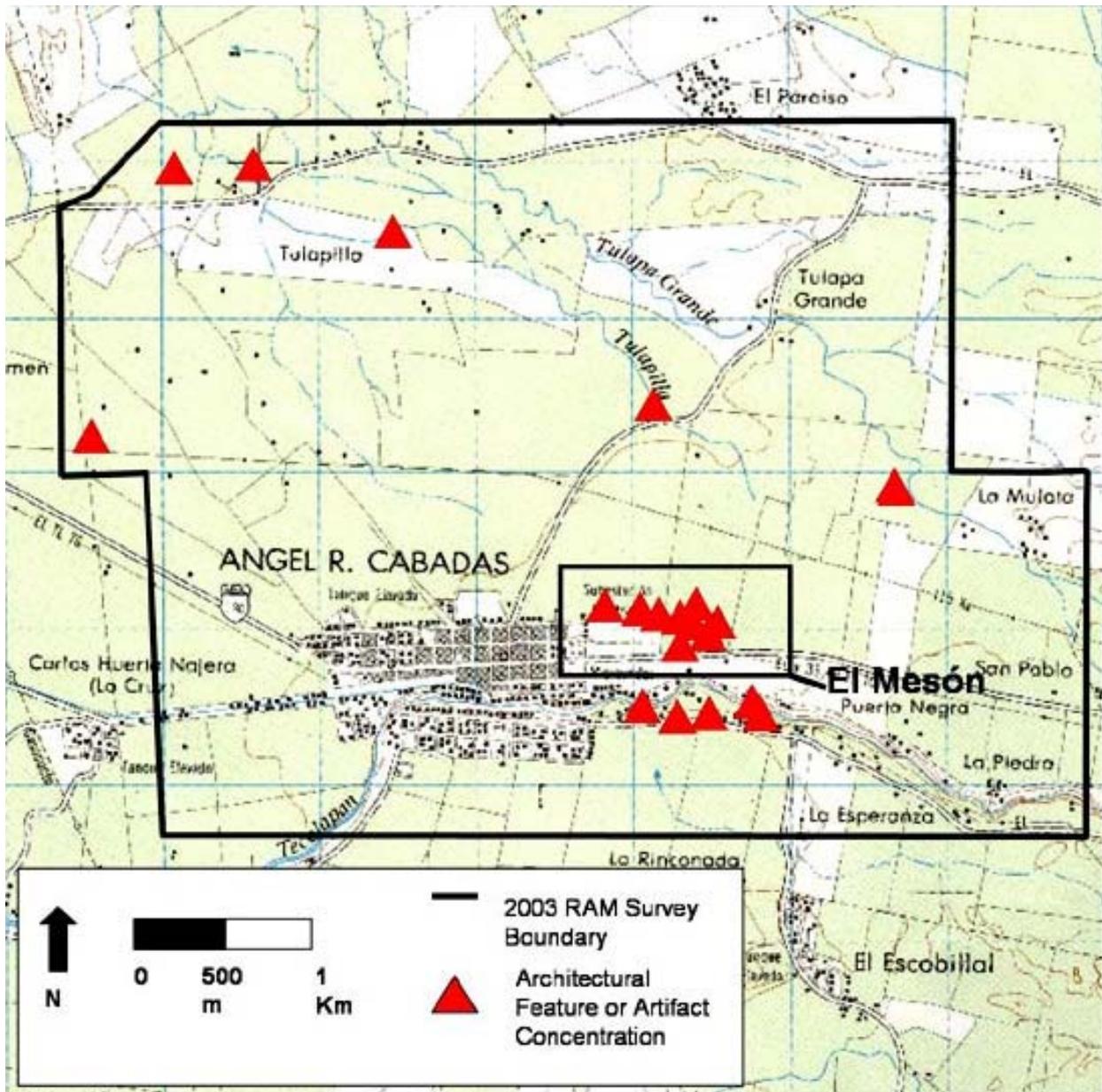


Figure 8. Distribution of Middle Formative Diagnostic Ceramics (From INEGI 1:50,000 Carta Topográfica, Lerdo de Tejada 1995).

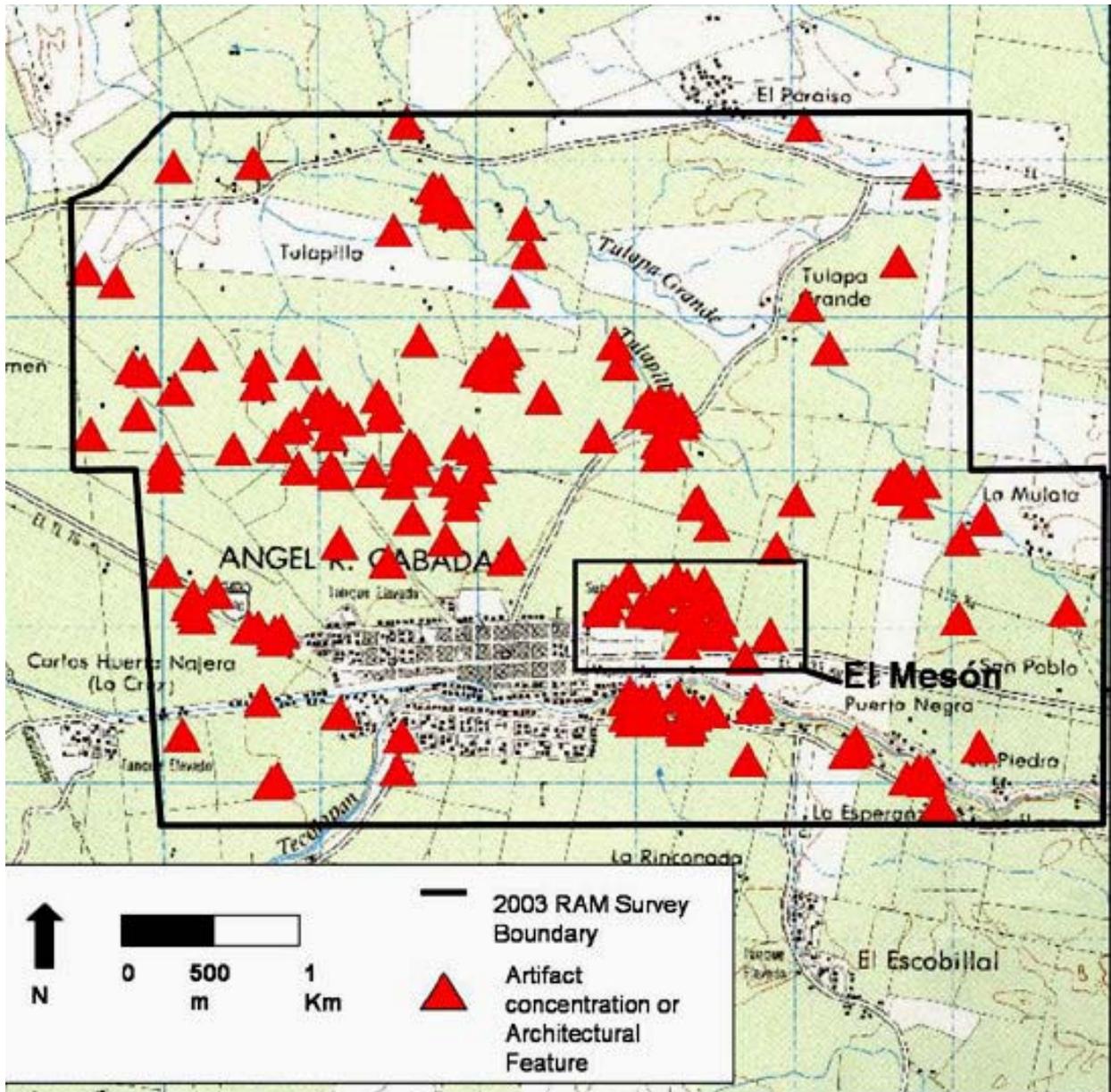


Figure 9. Distribution of Late Formative Diagnostic Ceramics (From INEGI 1:50,000 Carta Topográfica, Lerdo de Tejada 1995).

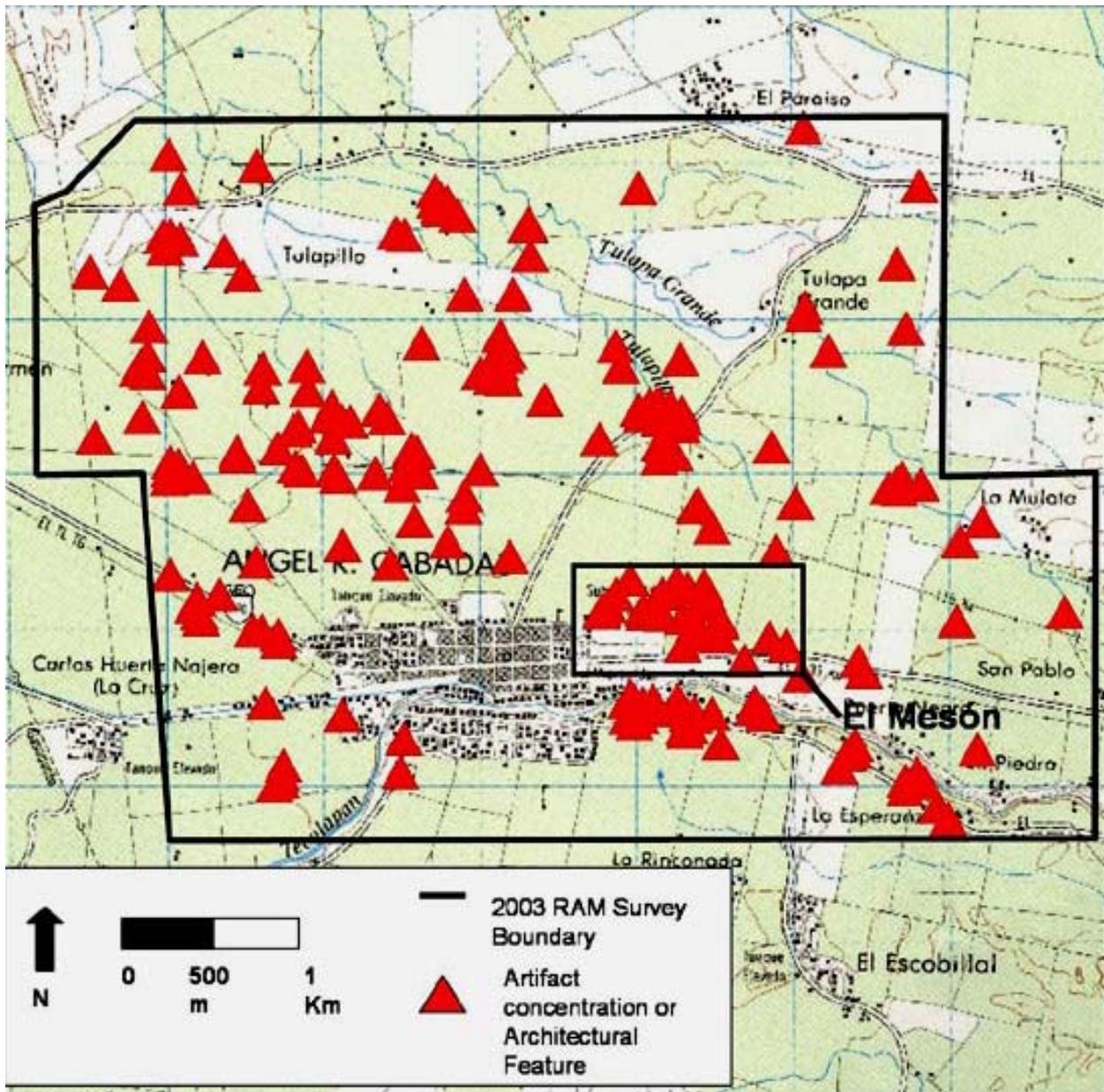


Figure 10. Distribution of Terminal Formative Diagnostic Ceramics (From INEGI 1:50,000 Carta Topográfica, Lerdo de Tejada 1995).

During the Early Classic period (A.D. 300-600) the growth trend begun during the Late and Terminal Formative periods continued. Diagnostic Early Classic ceramics were recovered from 258 locations within the survey area (Figure 11). Although the overall trend during the Early Classic period is growth, El Mesón itself experienced a decrease in settlement intensity. Settlements expanded to the south of El Mesón and to the northwest of the site in the areas around La Paila and Chico Loco.

By the Late Classic period (A.D. 600-1000) both El Mesón and the surrounding settlements were in decline. Late Classic diagnostic ceramics were recovered from 194 locations within the survey area (Figure 12). Although El Mesón itself continued to be occupied, much of the site had been abandoned. Settlements during the Late Classic period continued to concentrate around Chico Loco and La Paila; however the ceramic data suggests that these areas also experienced a decrease in the intensity of settlement. Likewise, at Tres Zapotes populations were declining and the site was largely abandoned during the Late Classic period (Pool 2003b; Pool and Ohnersorgen 2003:25).

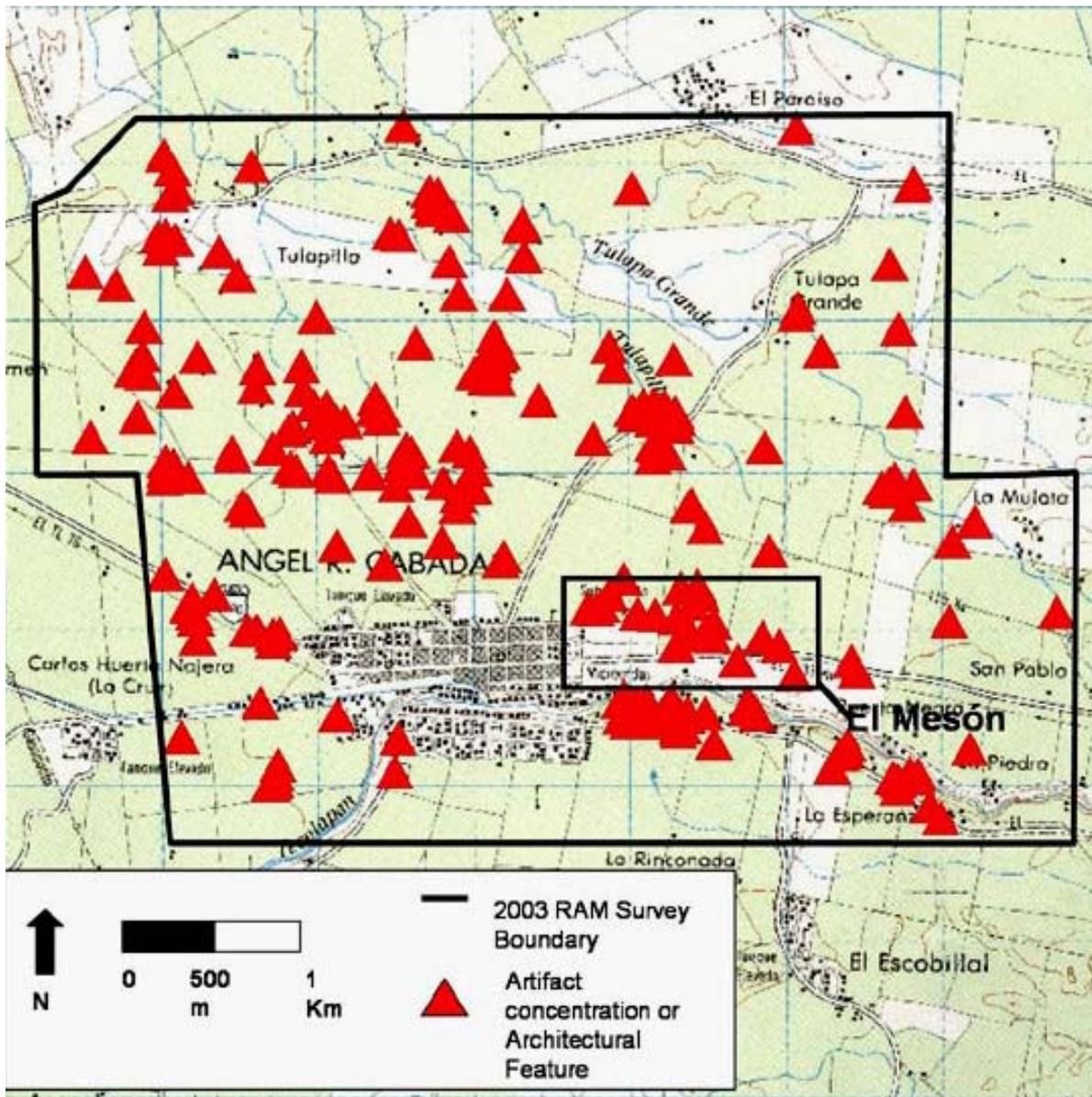


Figure 11. Distribution of Early Classic Diagnostic Ceramics (From INEGI 1:50,000 Carta Topográfica, Lerdo de Tejada 1995).

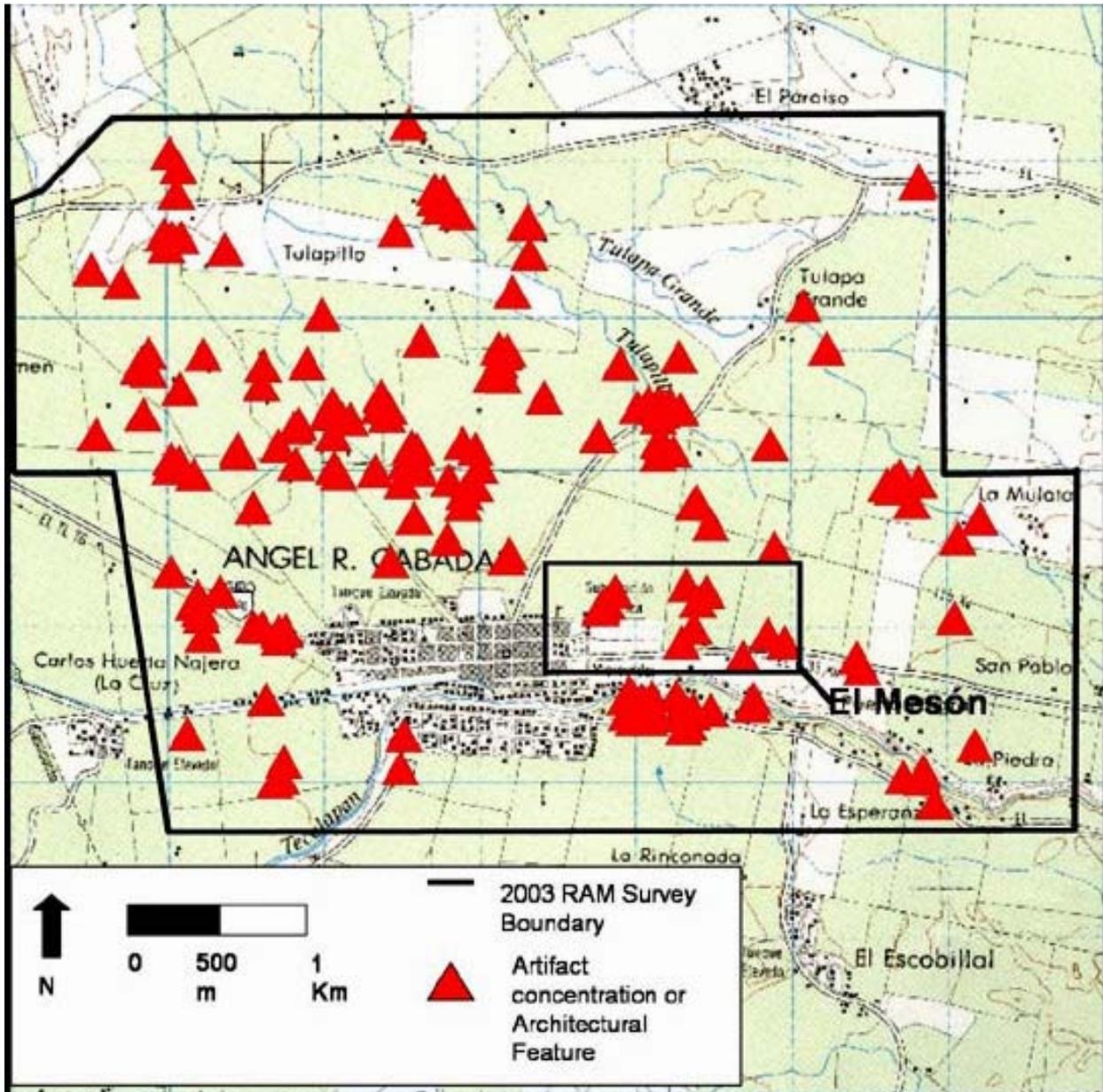


Figure 12. Distribution of Late Classic Diagnostic Ceramics (From INEGI 1:50,000 Carta Topográfica, Lerdo de Tejada 1995).

It is important to note here that the division of the Classic period in the Tuxtla area is based on a limited number of diagnostic types. This division may present problems in that if ceramic traditions cross phase boundaries, then later time periods may be underrepresented in the distributions. Regardless, the marked decline in the ceramic distributions between the Early and Late Classic periods still indicates that the intensity of occupation in the area was decreasing.

Like the evidence for Early Formative settlement, Postclassic diagnostic artifacts were scant in the project area. Five stamped base sherds, one sherd of Texcoco Molded, and three Tula type projectile points were recovered. Given this scarcity of Postclassic materials, no patterning of Postclassic settlement could be identified.

Summary and Significance

To date, the RAM survey has documented over 1,000 years of occupation in the eastern basin of the Papaloapan River. The survey data indicate that people had been living in the area perhaps as early as the Early Formative period. During the Late Formative period, populations in the area around El Mesón began to expand, and El Mesón itself appears to have emerged as a small regional center. This growth paralleled the development of the large center Tres Zapotes located to the south. Settlements continued to expand in the El Mesón area through the Early Classic period; however there is some indication that by the Early Classic period El Mesón's prominence as a center was being eclipsed by settlements located to the north. During the Late Classic period, the area was in decline, and given the paucity of Postclassic materials, possibly abandoned by A.D. 1000.

This research is significant because it has provided the first systematically collected regional scale settlement data from this area of the southern Gulf Lowlands. Previous research in the area has focused more on the stone monuments than on the archaeological sites themselves (Stirling 1943; Drucker 1968; Scott 1977). Understanding the political development of the El Mesón area is important because the major occupations date to the transitional period between the earlier Olmec cultures and the later Classic period cultures.

Some important questions about the El Mesón area remain to be answered. One of the most important will be characterizing the relationship between El Mesón and Tres Zapotes. Does the use of the Tres Zapotes long mound/conical mound pattern reflect El Mesón's role as a secondary center of the Tres Zapotes polity or does it represent the appropriation of the symbols of leadership by a politically independent leader. The results of ongoing analyses of the settlement data and collected artifacts will continue to address this question more fully.

Acknowledgements

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Gonzalez Prieto, and Maria de Carmen Chegala Galoso who washed artifacts, and all of the people of Angel R. Cabada who allowed us to walk through their fields to collect the data. Thank you to Dr. Chris Pool (University of Kentucky) for his guidance in planning this project and for allowing me to store the recovered artifacts in the laboratory facility at Tres Zapotes. A special thank you goes to Ponciano Ortiz Ceballos (INAH) for traveling with me to meet local officials in Angel R. Cabada and for his guidance in securing permits from INAH. I would also like to thank the 2003 crew of the *Proyecto Arqueológico Tres Zapotes* for their friendship and support while I was in the field. Finally I would like to thank Dr. Richard A. Diehl (University of Alabama) for suggesting that I carry out this project.

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