

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND HIERARCHY DURING THE PRECLASSIC IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS OF VERACRUZ

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The Maltrata valley, located in the Sierra Madre Oriental, west of the State of Veracruz, presents a wide variability of cultural features which evidence an occupation that extended from the Preclassic period to this day. Its geographical setting made of it the natural pass for different human groups from the Central Altiplano and from southeastern and southwestern Mexico, groups that have left their imprints in the local culture.

The exploration of 64 human burials during the project “Archaeology of the Maltrata Valley” (University of Veracruz – National Autonomous University of Mexico), confirmed that cultural diversity was also present in funerary practices since Preclassic times. In this sense, the project particularly outlined the burial found in Pit 22d at the site Barriales de Las Besanas, deposited in ventral decubitus flexed position, with two vessels on its feet, with forms very similar to those of the fine gray ceramics of Oaxaca, closing the entrance of a troncoconic formation that contained Preclassic figurines in the styles typical of the Central Altiplano and the Gulf Coast, in addition to Fine Gray ceramics from Oaxaca, Olmec ceramics, and others of local tradition (Lira 2002).

Jointly with this wide sample of exchange in early times, the finding provided information on social organization, as the buried individual was an infant, possibly a female, 5 to 7 years old and with clear indication of a high status that she could not have achieved by herself at such a young age, and that she in all likelihood had inherited; these features have led us to reconsider the hypothesis of Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery (2001), in the sense that it is possible to identify the shift from an egalitarian to a hierarchical society whenever infant individuals are found with traits of inherited social differentiation.

### THE MALTRATA VALLEY PROJECT

The Maltrata valley constitutes a strategic point due to its function as a place of transit and communication between the Gulf Coast and the Central Altiplano. Since 1999, systematic archaeological investigations are being conducted, which have shown an intense occupation of the valley and a cultural diversity that extended at least for 3000 years, expressed in human remains of the cultures of the Olmec, the Zapotec, the Teotihuacan and the Aztec peoples, and the people of the Puebla-

Taxcala region, among others, in addition to features of a local culture distributed across 14 prehispanic settlements (Lira 2004).

## LOCALIZATION OF THE SITE

The Maltrata valley lies 1700 m above sea level, in the highlands of the modern State of Veracruz, and adjacent to the borders of the State of Puebla (Figure 1). It facilitates the passage between the mountain barriers of the Sierra Madre Oriental, the Gulf Coast and the Central Altiplano. The valley is a wide space with enough natural resources for the development of different human groups.



Figure 1. Map of the Mexican Republic showing the study area and the sites mentioned in the text.

Among the sites identified, and with the name of Barriales de Las Besanas, an area of approximately 550.000 m<sup>2</sup> located 1738 m above sea level and in the UTM coordinates 14 680 752 E and 2 079 196 N (Figure 2) was documented.

It consists of extended and flat lands referred to by local people as both “Las Besanas” and the mires, because they are clay pits used in the manufacture of bricks, an economic activity of a great relevance for the modern population (Figure 3).

Elsewhere in these lands, rainstorm maize is grown, though during our reconnaissance no materials were found, but there where mud workers exploited mud, there was abundant archaeological material that included ceramics, grinding artifacts, obsidian and bone. The excavations of the mud workers went down to a depth of 3 m, and it was only through them that cultural remains could be detected, 1.50 m and 2 m under the surface.

Early in 2002, our attention was caught by the fact that at different points of the sections concentrations of charcoal, ash, limestone, basalt and ceramics were present, probably constituting hearths (Figure 4). For this reason, we saw the opportunity to recover charcoal samples to obtain dates. This was reported to the Regional Center of Veracruz, National Institute of Anthropology and History, together with the proposal of carrying out the salvage of a possible hearth observed on the section of a wall.

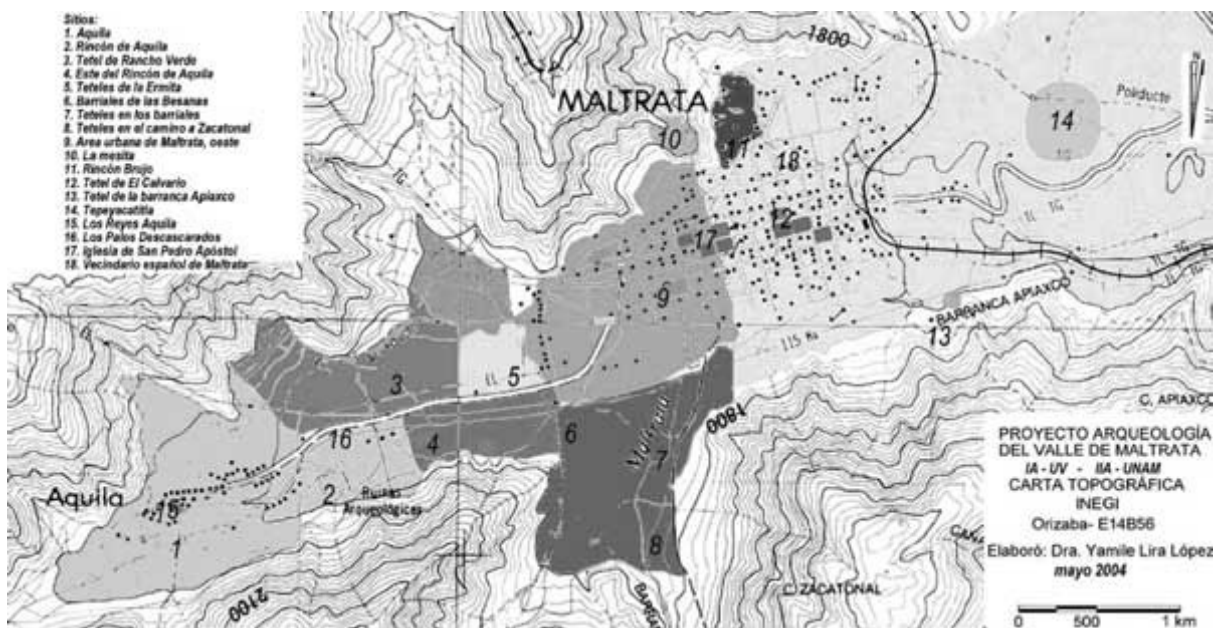


Figure 2. Topographic plan of the Maltrata valley, showing the settlements and the location of the site Barriales de las Besanas, with number 6.



**Figure 3. Mud banks in the settlement Barriales de Las Besanas.**



**Figure 4. Hearth traces in the sections of Barriales.**

## THE EXCAVATION

The salvage was initiated with a pit measuring 2 m in an east-west direction, and 1.50 m in a north-south direction, with a 15° deviation in the mire's section. Three hearths were located there: two small ones at the sides, and a larger one at the center, with traces of baked earth, and on top of it, the stones. Once the pit was outlined and the datum established, the following was determined:

- Hearth 1 was located 1.60 m to 1.65 m of the zero level; it was 0.50 m wide and was formed by slabs and charcoal present beneath them. It yielded no significant information.
- Hearth 3 was located 1.25 m to 1.95 m of the zero level; it was 0.60 m wide with basalt stones and charcoal at its base, and it was possible to distinguish baked earth walls surrounding the stones. This is the one that was excavated, while another one was found adjacent to it and designated as Hearth 2.
- As a consequence of the discoveries, several extensions were made marked 22, 22a, 22b, 22c, and 22d, with sides of 1.5 m and 2 m.
- The total area excavated had the following measures: the north and south sides, 4 m; the west side was 3 m long and the east side 6 m long. The material was found as of the first level and down to a depth of 4.60 m, where the trench material was located. The average culturally sterile layer began at a depth of 3 m.
- As the excavation proceeded, it revealed that part of the hearth visible in the mire's section was delimited by a mud circle of 1 m in diameter, starting at a depth of 1.23 m and continuing down to a depth of 2 m. An additional hearth was discovered in the wall of the pit, and therefore, it was expanded to the west and designated P22b. This was a complete hearth, located 1.60 m deep and continuing down to a depth of 2.70 m (Figure 5). In our view, a pit had been excavated, and during its use to cook or to make firewood, the mud that surrounded the cooking area gradually baked. In the rest of the excavated area there was a layer of compact or tamped earth 0.10 m thick at a depth of 1.40 m, and below, a layer of sherds and charcoal down to 1.60 m.



**Figure 5. Hearths.**

- South of these hearths the earth felt soft and the trowel penetrated easily as we excavated as of a depth of 1.40 m, suggesting the occurrence of other cultural remains below.
- All hearths had slabs of lime stones, amorphous basalts, some sherds, charcoal and ash.
- At a depth of 3 m, and observing the considerable reduction of materials and the sterile layer in the section of the parts excavated by the mud workers consisting in a very compact dark brown mud while at the same time the loose earth continued in the southeast part, it was decided to probe three corners of the pit to verify the sterility of the ground.
- In one of these probes, the southeast one, and at a depth of 3.32 m, we found part of the skull of an individual, and therefore, it was decided to expand the pit marked P22d to recover the complete burial and to have the integral context of this part of the settlement at Biarriales de Las Besanas.

## **THE BURIAL**

The bones are well preserved in this primary burial, a direct and individual one, deposited in flexed ventral decubitus position, and corresponding to an infant of possibly 5 to 7 years of age (Figure 6), with his face slightly bent downwards, onto the chest, with an orientation of 15° northwest, and in a north-south axis. The

cranium was seen at a depth of 3.32 m and ended at a depth of 3.56 m, and it pointed north. There was no cranial deformation.

The decidual incisors of the jawbone had already fallen and the permanent ones were sprouting; they were in disorder and overlapping one another, the left central incisor was coming out horizontally and tilted; besides, the lateral incisors had a cylindrical conformation and were coming out tilted towards the medial or sagital plane. The mandible showed that the alveolus of the canine was empty and that its edge was below the other ones, while neither the decidual canine nor the permanent tooth in formation was found; this phenomenon is typical of the beginning of an alveolar re-absorption due to the loss of the piece, or else, it could be attributed to some kind of pathological process.



**Figure 6. The burial with its offering.**

The humerus bones are in a vertical position and lateral to the ribs, articulated with the scapula, and they appear to be fragile; the right humerus is very close to the ribs, as they lie at a lower level with respect to the other humerus. At the left side and articulated with the humerus we observed the proximal portion of the cubitus and the radius, which would point to a transversal position, that is to say, across the body. Regarding the lower limbs, they all maintain their respective anatomic position and are articulated with the femurs; the lower limbs are flexed, and it is possible to distinguish that the femurs were on top of the tibia and the fibula, while the bones of the feet were lifted during the excavation. The individual had been given an offering consisting of a complete bowl and pot placed on the bones of its feet.

At the time of removing the left humerus to release the left ribs, we observed the bones of the right hand with the articulated phalanxes, as if the hand was placed with

its fingers extended and embracing the ribs under the humerus. The right cubitus and radius featured as well a transversal position across the body. As the proximal portion of the right cubitus was uncovered, we also found around this bone the articulated phalanxes of the left hand, showing, as of this position, that the left hand was placed as if it were grabbing the elbow. It was also found that from the third and to the seventh cervical vertebrae, there was some kind of compression in the vertebral body (Mendoza 2002).

Under the burial it was possible to observe something that could have been a troncoconic formation, or in other words, the burial initiated the formation that gradually expanded until it achieved 1.60 m in diameter, and 4.60 m in depth; under the burial there was brown and yellow clay with small fragments of charcoal and sherds with abundant ceramic material mainly after reaching a depth of 4 m, consisting of large vessel fragments among compacted clay and charcoal fragments.

There is a remarkable variety of modeled figurines and Fine Gray and Baño White ceramics. The ceramic fragments suggest that at least 11 vessels were deposited under the burial: one Fine Gray pot or vase with incisions, one Fine Gray bowl with incisions, one vessel with a black wash and a compact reddish paste, three bowls with a white wash and a double incised line on the rim, one vessel with a red on white decoration, three globular bowls of fired coarse paste, and one globular pot with a red wash and granular paste, among a considerable number of coarse sherds (Figures 7 and 8).



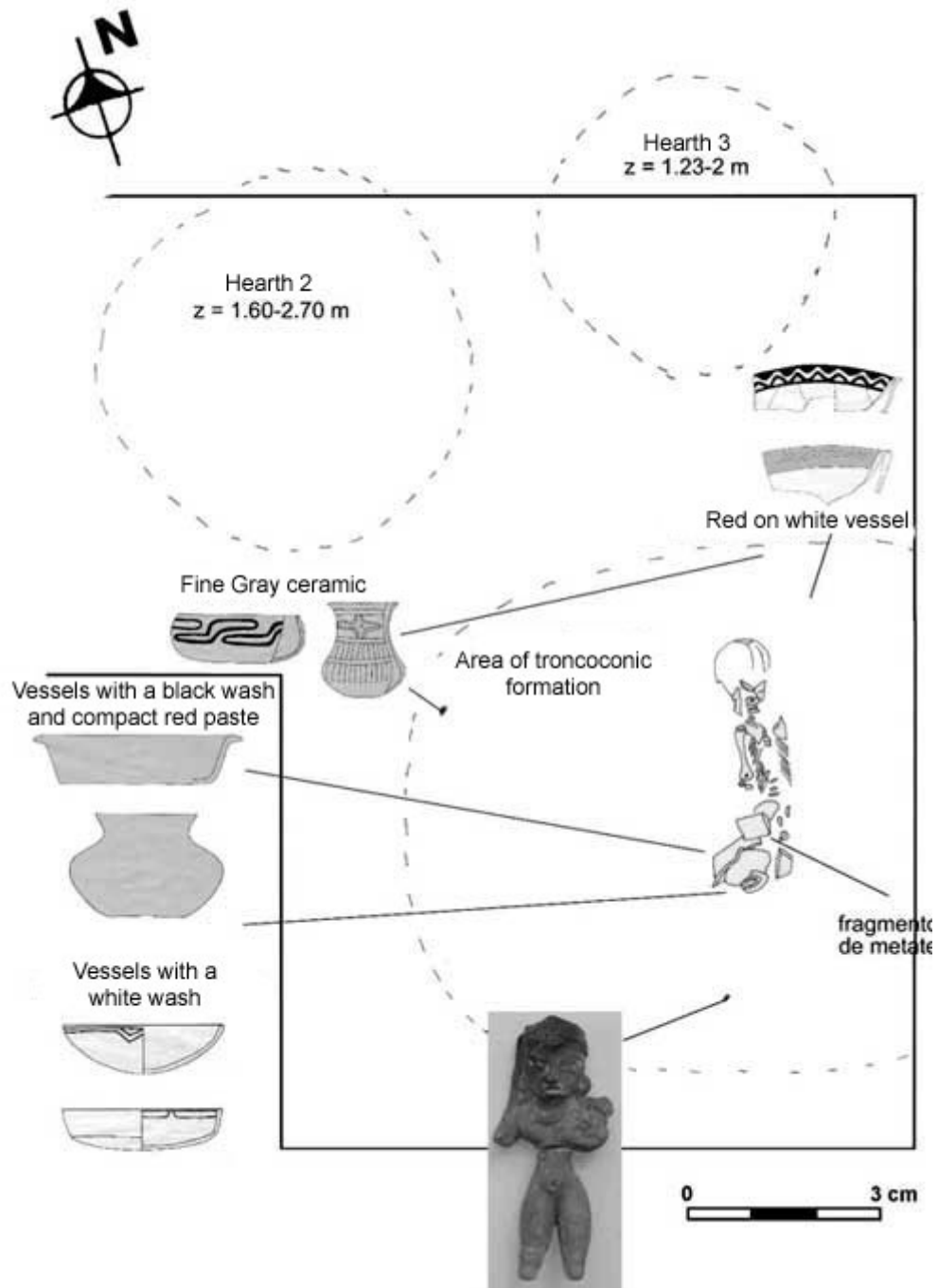


Figure 7. Ground plan drawing of pit 22a: hearths, burial, vessels associated with the burial, the troncoconic feature and figurine.

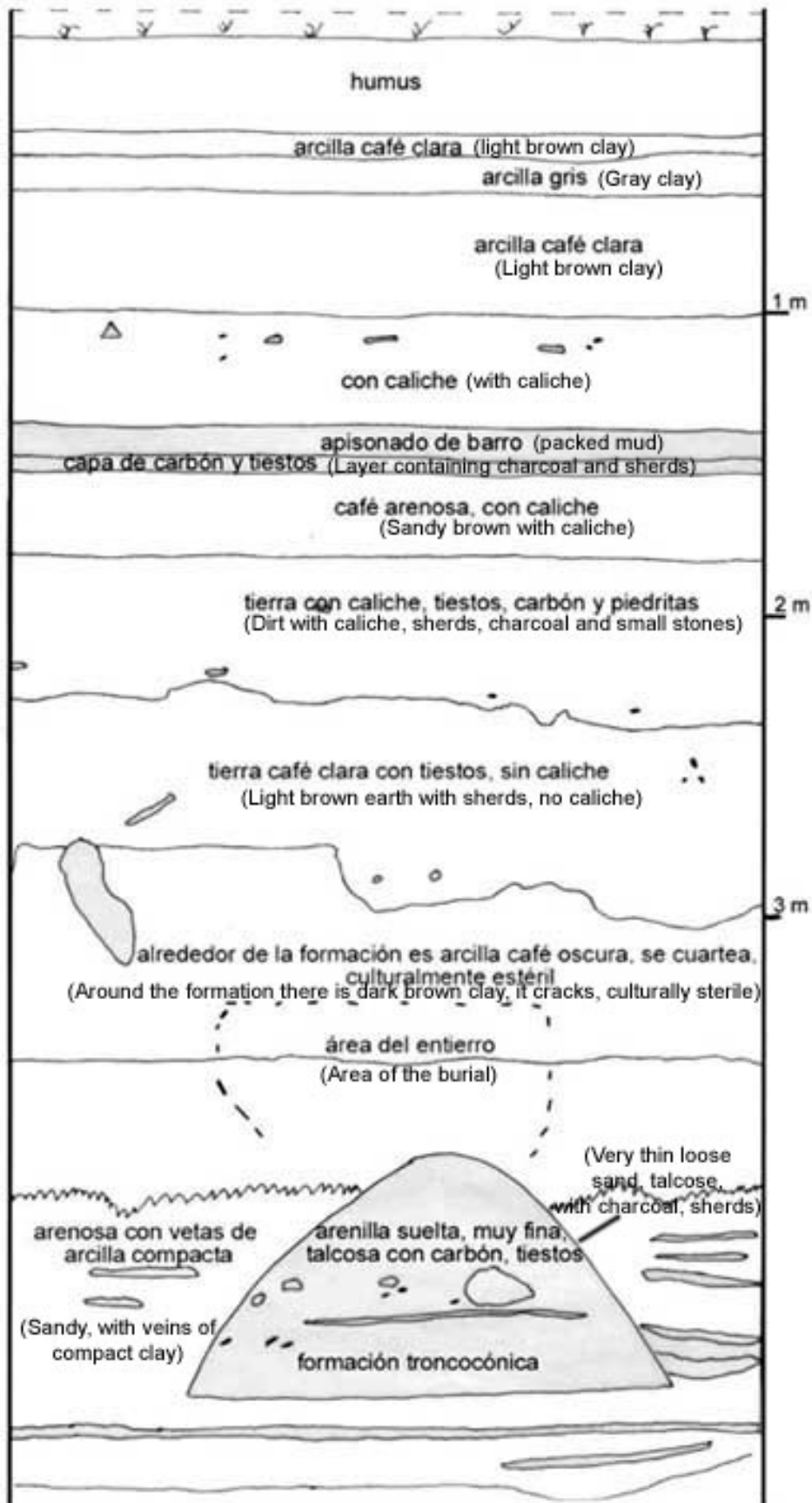


Figure 8. Drawing of section, east wall of pit 22d.

## THE CERAMIC MATERIALS

The qualitative and quantitative distribution of the more abundant ceramic types was observed in pit 22d, where the burial was found. In general, it was observed that there were several ceramic types grouped according to the type of mud: smoothed coarse ceramic in black mud (1a), brown (1b), red (1c) and orange; the ceramic with a wash or painting in the Baño Black ceramic types (2a), Baño Brown (2b), Baño Red (2c), Baño Orange (2d), Baño White or Cream with incisions on the rim (2e), coarse paste ceramics with red on white or cream decoration (3a). And the fine mud in the Fine Gray ceramic types (4a), and Baño Black (4b) or brown with a thin compact paste of reddish or black paste, with forms and decoration very similar to those of Fine Gray.

They are interesting because of their temporality, the relationships and the cultural influences that may be involved in the occurrence at Maltrata of the types 2e Baño White, 4a Fine Gray, and 4b Baño Black, and compact paste.

The two vessels deposited on the feet of the individual are particularly interesting, as well as one fragment of a grinding stone: one corresponds to a vessel of reddish compact paste, it has a polished black wash, divergent walls and undulated, everted, flat rim with incised decoration. Paste, form and decoration resemble greatly those of Fine Gray. The other one was a small globular bowl with the same paste and finishing than the previous one.

The fragments of "killed" vessels localized in the troncoconic formation correspond to several globular pots, although the sherds of a smoothed black and brown paste predominate. There are also several vessels of the ceramic type known as Baño White or Cream, of a coarse paste in the shape of bowls with curved convergent walls and a double incised line parallel to the rim; in addition, there are open vessels of the type Red on White or Cream, and Fine Gray; corresponding to this type there is a vessel in the form of a vase with incisions, with a design that features a cross with a small circle at the center, a motif that is repeated three times on the neck of the vessel, delimited by two lines in the upper and lower part, while it presents parallel vertical lines on its body. The motif is very similar to a shell ornament found in Llano Perdido, Cañada de Cuicatlan (Spencer 1982:173).

To temporally place the material and the distribution thereof, it has been taken into account that in the Tehuacan valley, during the early stage of the phase Santa María (900-400 BC; Middle Formative period), the similar ceramic types were: Canoas White, Coatepec White and Quachilco Gray, all of which initiated in this phase but were diagnostic of the later stage of the phase Santa María, 550-150 BC (MacNeish, Peterson and Flannery 1970:58).

Baño White corresponds to MacNeish's Canoas White, with incised decoration, and is the label of the Middle Formative period in both the Tehuacan basin and Central Oaxaca. It has a wide range of distribution, as this author has identified it in the

phase Conchas of the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, Chiapa de Corzo II in the Grijalva river basin in Chiapas, the phase Guadalupe in Oaxaca, the phase Aguilar in the Panuco region (Progreso White), Trapiche II in Central Veracruz, at sites of La Venta in Tabasco, and Tlatilco, El Arbolillo, and standard levels from Puerto Marquez in Guerrero (MacNeish et al. 1970:59). For the following phase, that is to say, the later part of the phase Santa María, Canoas is substituted by Coatepec White, which corresponds to Monte Alban's C5.

Fine Gray is MacNeish's Quachilco Gray, linked mainly to the Monte Alban I types G5, G7, G12-18, G24, G26, G32 and G33 (MacNeish et al.: 120, 133), and is an excellent time marker for the Late Formative period in the Tehuacan valley, showing a similarity and a connection with the gray ceramics of the Oaxaca valley (MacNeish et al.: 133), Chiapa de Corzo III-VI, Monte Albán I and II, Middle Tres Zapotes. Therefore, it is linked with the valley of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and with south central Veracruz.

To Marcus and Flannery, the gray pottery of the Oaxaca valley was a luxury pottery that was traded with San Lorenzo, with Aquiles Serdán in the Pacific Coast of Chiapas, and with Tlapacoya in the Basin of Mexico. Both Tehuacan and Oaxaca possessed a larger amount of imported goods, with an emphasis on Fine Gray *cajetes* or bowls. In short, around 600-450 BC, the pottery at Tehuacan and Oaxaca was very similar, and therefore, contacts between both valleys were, in all likelihood, intense (Marcus and Flannery 2001: 143, 165).

Baño Black, with a thin paste in reddish and black colors is the one known as Quachilco Brown (MacNeish et al. 1970:114), corresponding to the final stage of the Santa María phase (550-150 BC). Similar to the K6 type of Monte Alban I and II, which according to Caso, Bernal and Acosta, are intrusive in the valley of Oaxaca. Other significant cultural features found in the troncoconic formation include ten figurine fragments (torsos and extremities); one of them was found complete though it was broken in two, and is a female figurine carrying a child in her left arm, and three graceful torsos corresponding to figurines C10 (Reyna Robles 1971), similar to the figurines found in the Altiplano, two leg fragments of the "arched foot" type dated to the late stage of the phase Santa María, 50-150 BC, and one torso of the type known as seated trackwoman bodies, dated to the late stage of the phase Ajalpan, 1100-850 BC (MacNeish 1970: 140, 142).

On the other hand, the finding of a baby face figurine probably implies an Olmec presence; it is similar to those discovered by MacNeish at Tehuacan for the early stage of the phase Santa María (900-400 BC; Figure 9). Jointly with these materials, two awls made of deer bone were also recovered.



Figure 9. Figurines found under the burial with traits typical of the Central Altiplano.

## COMMENTS

The context and arrangement of the archaeological materials suggest that this was a habitational area located in the upper level; the layer of packed clay and sherds 1.40 m to 2.60 m deep corresponds to a packing of mud, charcoal and sherds. This was interrupted by the presence of hearths around which the proportion of sherds was poor, until no further evidence of hearths was detected, at a depth of 2.70 m; however, and as of a depth of 2.20 m, the number of sherds in the rest of the excavation increased considerably down to a depth of 3 m. Under the floor, the density of the earth, very loose and easily excavated, announced the presence of the burial on a troncoconic formation excavated to a depth of 4.60 m; the beginning of

this characteristic from the floor and to the troncoconic tomb shows that the inhabitants of the upper level were the ones responsible for this burial.

One of the goals of this work consisted in exposing cultural diversity. In this regard, it has been observed, considering the similarity of materials such as the Fine Gray pottery, that the regions of Oaxaca and Tehuacan maintained with the Maltrata valley, at the site of Barriales de Las Besanas, a close contact probably since 600-450 BC. And the situation was probably the same with La Venta in the state of Tabasco, with the Basin of Mexico and the valley of Morelos. As to the Gulf Coast, contacts included baby face figurines and the ceramic type Baño White with incised decoration, as well as figurines from the Altiplano, although this ceramic type had a wide range of expansion, having been found in regions of the Gulf Coast, the Altiplano and Oaxaca, among others. This corroborates the role played by the Maltrata valley as a place where cultural traits and ideas were maintained, while at the same time it facilitated both a way through and exchange.

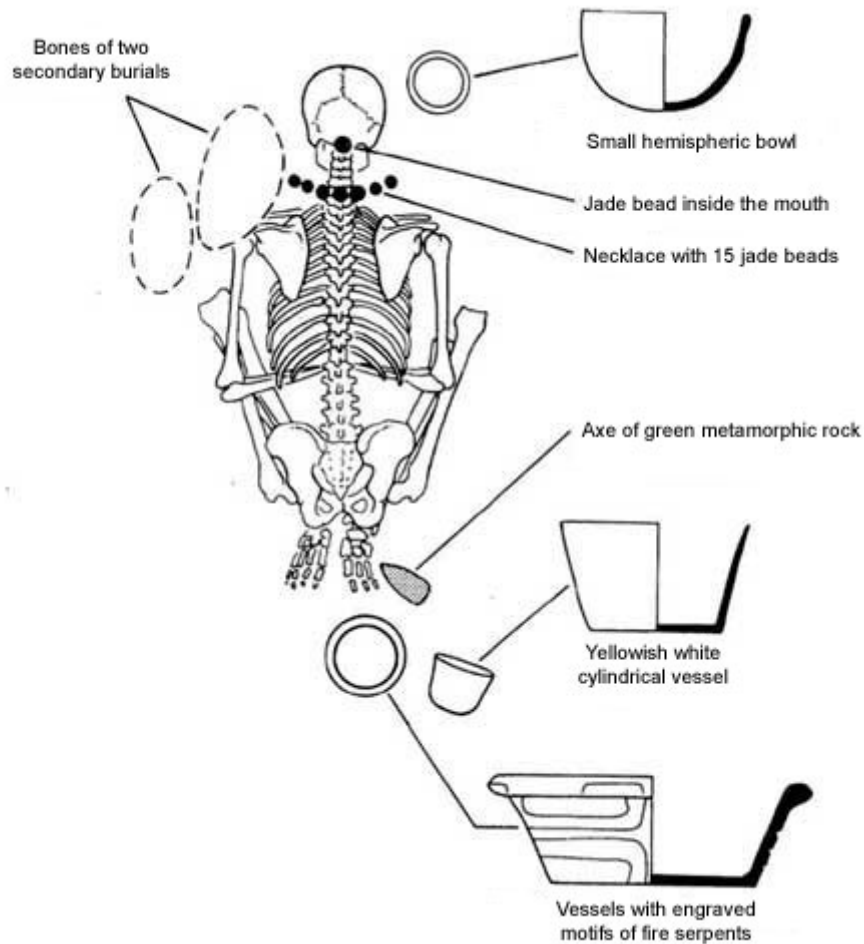
After comparing the materials with those from the nearby regions, we may say that the site dates –at the earliest- to the Middle Formative period.

The following goal involved the characterization a trait for the Preclassic hierarchical society in the Maltrata valley, namely, the inherited hierarchy. To that purpose, it was necessary to search for symbols of the inherited position and the special manners in which high ranking people were buried (Marcus and Flannery 2001:109). According to Marcus and Flannery (2001:109), it was during the San José phase in Oaxaca (1150-850 BC) when hereditary hierarchy emerged in the Oaxaca Valley.

The archaic states were highly centralized polities whose leaders came from a stratum of hereditary noblemen. Prior to the emergence of hierarchy, in egalitarian societies the differences in status were acquired, achieved, but not inherited. In regard to the Preclassic society at Barriales de Las Besanas we are positing the occurrence of a hierarchical society by comparing the San José phase, where there is indication that points to the fact that differences in social status could be inherited, as they are present in the burials of infants who were too young to achieve a high social status by themselves. In the case of burials corresponding to the San José phase and their associated materials, there is indication of status differentiation; however, it cannot be confirmed for the moment whether the differences in status were inherited or acquired.

For the case of Barriales, at Maltrata, we are not referring to elegant tombs and burials under the palace floors, but of a household where one individual was found in flexed ventral decubitus position, possibly a female of 5 to 7 years of age (Carlos Serrano, personal communication), on a troncoconic formation with abundant ceramic material, with a greater number of Fine Gray ceramics and different figurines. The possible “girl” –with two fine vessels in her offering- was placed on top of ceramics and figurines, suggesting that the figurines were her escorts. The occurrence of Fine Gray ceramic raises somehow the category of the individual, as it is considered a luxury and imported ceramic. Because of her young age, she could not have achieved a high social rank all by herself; therefore, this may have been inherited, as suggested by the position and manner in which she was buried,

although the abundance of materials for San Jose is larger (Figure 10). Thus, in the lower levels of the excavation the position of the individual strongly recalls the “stereotyped postures of authority” of the San Jose phase in the central valleys of Oaxaca (Marcus and Flannery 2001:114).



**Figure 10. Burial 11 at Tomaltepec; high ranking male individual from 30 to 40 years of age (taken from Marcus and Flannery 2001:114).**

In addition to these two hierarchy-marking traits, the arrangement of the body and the accumulation of imported goods, the occurrence of figurines should also be considered. The definition of a position of authority is closely related to a “posture of obedience”. Research conducted in the central Oaxaca valleys show that individuals in a “posture of obedience” are numerically higher in burials and are at a greater depth, with their heads at a lower level than those of the individuals shown in a posture of authority. In this way, the elite member was deposited on his knees and originally, perhaps, on top of his subordinates. An identical concept may be noticed in pit 22d at Las Besanas, where the girl was found on the entrance of a troncoconic formation that included up to ten figurines. Going back to the possibility that the figurines were used to represent “little ritual scenes” (Marcus and Flannery 2001:117), in the central valleys of Oaxaca it may be assumed that the figurines in

the troncoconic formation represent her subordinates. The burial of figurines and not of humans perhaps had to do with the young age of the girl, which may have prevented her from having subordinates of her own, though it is her age, precisely, what makes this finding so interesting.

Marcus and Flannery (2001: 123-125), even when they have shown the existence of hierarchy and social differentiation at the heart of the villages, have accepted that they were unable “to prove that the differences were inherited, as opposed to acquired. To prove hereditary inequality, differences in status must be found, revealed in minors or young children, individuals too young to have achieved prestige in life” (Marcus and Flannery 2001:124).

The burial of this girl points to the fact that probably the Marcus and Flannery conjecture was correct, because in fact, at an age between 5 and 7, the girl was granted the rank attributes expressed by her position and the material goods associated, and the infant could only have acquired them by being an elite member of the lineage that lived in the village.

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