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**Investigating the Expansion and Consolidation of the Tarascan State:
Fieldwork at Erongarícuaro, Michoacán, México**



Research Year: 2005

Culture: Tarascan

Chronology: Late Post Classic and Late Pre-Classic/Early Classic

Location: Michoacán, México

Site: Erongarícuaro

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Abstract

During the summer of 2005, detailed mapping and excavations were carried out at the site of Erongarícuaro, Michoacán in order to investigate the processes involved in the development of the Tarascan State in the Late Post Classic period (A.D. 1350-1520). The specific focus of the project was the excavation of elite contexts that could be compared with elite contexts from the neighboring site of Urichu. Ethnohistoric documents state that Urichu was subordinate to Erongarícuaro in the hierarchically organized tribute system. Comparative study of the elite contexts from both sites will help to clarify the functions of local elites in the state bureaucracy, and how different levels of the bureaucracy might have differed archaeologically from one another. Preliminary analysis demonstrates that Erongarícuaro was home to lapidary specialists who were most likely attached to the nobility at that site. Such is not the case at Urichu, and this difference suggests that functional hierarchies were merged into one state bureaucratic system in which higher units oversaw a greater variety of state operations and had more responsibilities than lower units. Ultimately this study will contribute to our knowledge of how the Tarascan State was organized, how control was maintained, and how it differed from other Late Post Classic Mesoamerican states and empires, in particular the Aztec empire. Mortuary contexts dating to the Late Pre-Classic to Early Classic were also excavated, and they should help to clarify both the regional chronology and local social interaction during that time period.

Resumen

Durante el verano de 2005, en el sitio de Erongarícuaro, Michoacán, se llevó a cabo un mapeo detallado así como excavaciones, a fin de investigar los procesos que involucró el desarrollo del estado tarasco en el período Posclásico Tardío (1350-1520 d.C.). El punto central específico del proyecto fue la excavación de contextos de elite que pudieran ser comparados con los contextos de elite del sitio vecino de Urichu. Los documentos etnohistóricos señalan que Urichu estaba subordinada a Erongarícuaro en el sistema de tributos jerárquicamente organizado. El estudio comparativo de los contextos de elite de ambos sitios habrá de ayudar a aclarar las funciones de las elites locales en la burocracia estatal, y de qué manera los diferentes niveles de la burocracia pueden haber diferido arqueológicamente unos de otros. El análisis preliminar demuestra que Erongarícuaro era el hogar de los especialistas en lapidaria que muy probablemente estaban ligados a la nobleza de ese sitio. No es éste el caso de Urichu, y esta diferencia sugiere que las jerarquías funcionales estaban fusionadas en un sistema burocrático estatal donde las unidades más grandes supervisaban una variedad más amplia de operaciones del estado y tenían más responsabilidades que las unidades inferiores. Finalmente este estudio habrá de contribuir a nuestro conocimiento de cómo estaba organizado el estado tarasco, cómo se mantenía el control, y cómo difería de otros estados e imperios del Posclásico Tardío, en particular del imperio azteca. Los contextos mortuorios que datan del Preclásico Tardío al Clásico Temprano también fueron excavados, y deberían ayudarnos a dejar en claro tanto la cronología regional como la interacción social local durante dicho período de tiempo.

Submitted 02/16/2006 by:
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Figure 1. Limits of the Tarascan State in West-Central México. The Tarascan capital, Tzintzuntzan, is shown, as is Lake Pátzcuaro, in central Michoacán. Also shown is the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán. From Pollard 1993:5.

Introduction

The Tarascan State developed in the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin, Michoacán, in the Late Post Classic period. It grew to become the dominant polity in Western México, and was never conquered by the Aztec empire (see [Figure 1](#)). The capital of the state was Tzintzuntzan, located in the northern part of the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin (see [Figure 2](#), below).



Figure 2. The Lake Pátzcuaro Basin, with Erongaricuaró and other prominent sites mentioned in the text.

That basin constituted the demographic and political core of the state, and presumably its political consolidation provided the means and impetus for political expansion beyond the basin through military conquest and alliances (Pollard 1993, 2003). Much of what is known about the Tarascan State is derived from ethnohistoric sources. Archaeologically, little work has been done, particularly outside of the capital Tzintzuntzan. Large scale excavations carried out by Dr. Helen Pollard in the 1990s at the site of Urichu, located in the southwest corner of the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin, helped remedy this situation. Those excavations demonstrated that during the Late Post Classic period, elites at the site adopted distinct Tarascan markers of elite/noble status such as Tarascan polychrome ceramic vessels and decorative copper/bronze objects (Pollard and Cahue 1999).

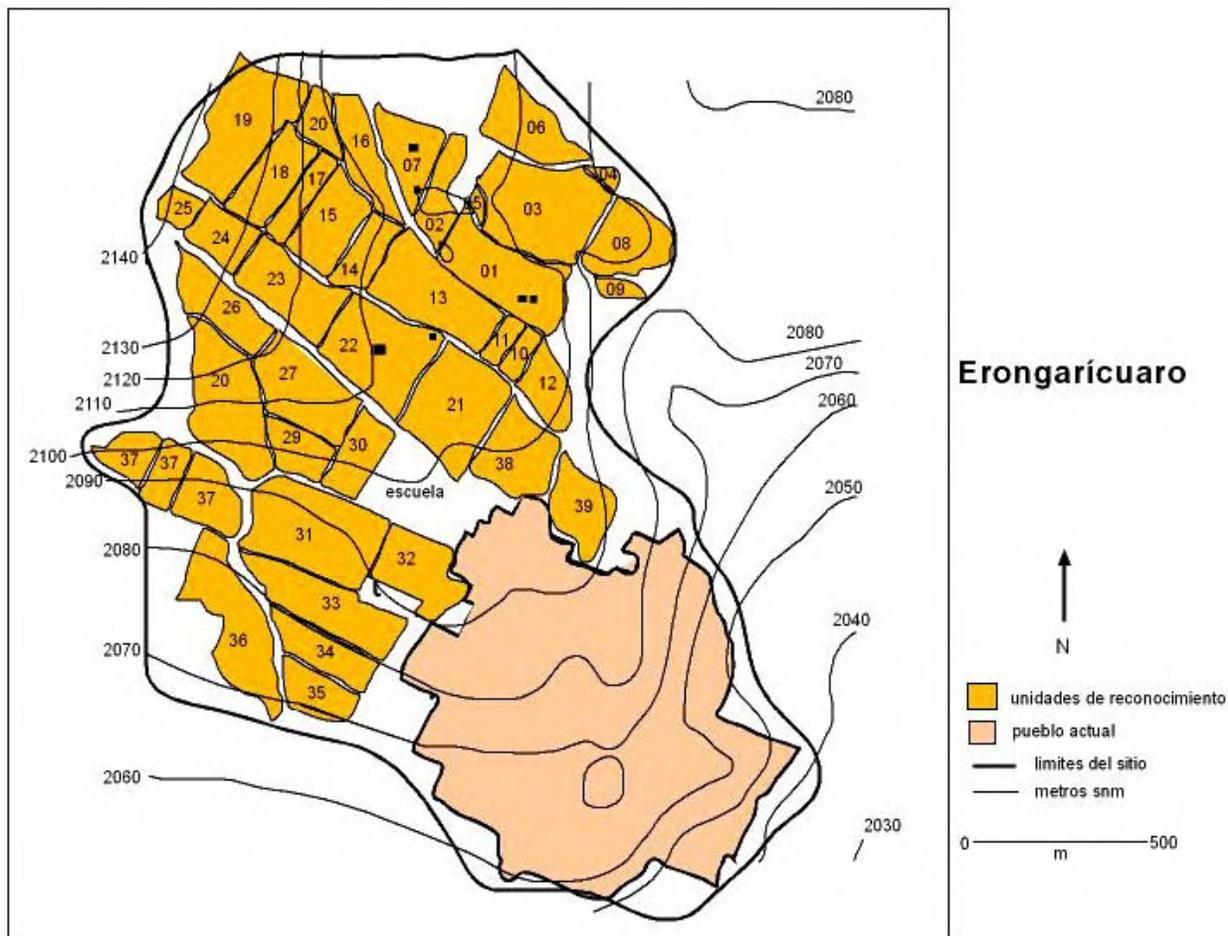


Figure 3. Map of the site of Erongarícuaro. Survey units (fields) are in yellow with their survey number. The modern town is included in the extent of the archaeological site. Courtesy of Dr. Helen Pollard.

In 2001 Dr. Pollard led a project that conducted a total surface survey and limited excavations at the site of Erongarícuaro (see [Figure 3](#)) (Pollard n.d.). Erongarícuaro was, according to the *Caravajal Visita* of 1524 (Warren 1985), superior to Urichu in the administration and collection of tribute. Erongarícuaro sent the tribute it oversaw directly to the capital of Tzintzuntzan. Analysis of the survey material showed that the distribution of Tarascan polychrome sherds was restricted to the northern part of the site. Fields with the greatest densities of obsidian artifacts, predominantly prismatic blades, prismatic blade cores, scrapers, and debitage, were also largely located in the northern part of the site as well. Lastly, a few pieces of obsidian suggested that a lapidary industry existed at the site, in which obsidian was used to make decorative items; most likely lip plugs (*bezotes*).

Excavations at the site revealed shallow cultural deposits limited to the Late Post Classic period in fields 1 and 7, in the northern part of the site. Excavations in field 22, located near the center of the site, revealed a domestic structure dating to the Late Pre-

Classic to Classic Period (roughly A.D. 100 to 600, in the Loma Alta phase). Under the house, two burials were found, dating to the same time period.

Due to the importance of Erongarícuaro according to the ethnohistoric evidence, the lengthy occupation at the site, and the possibility that an obsidian lapidary industry existed at the site, it was decided that additional excavations at the site could help elucidate processes of incorporation and control at the site and in the larger state bureaucracy, through a comparison with elite contexts at Urichu.

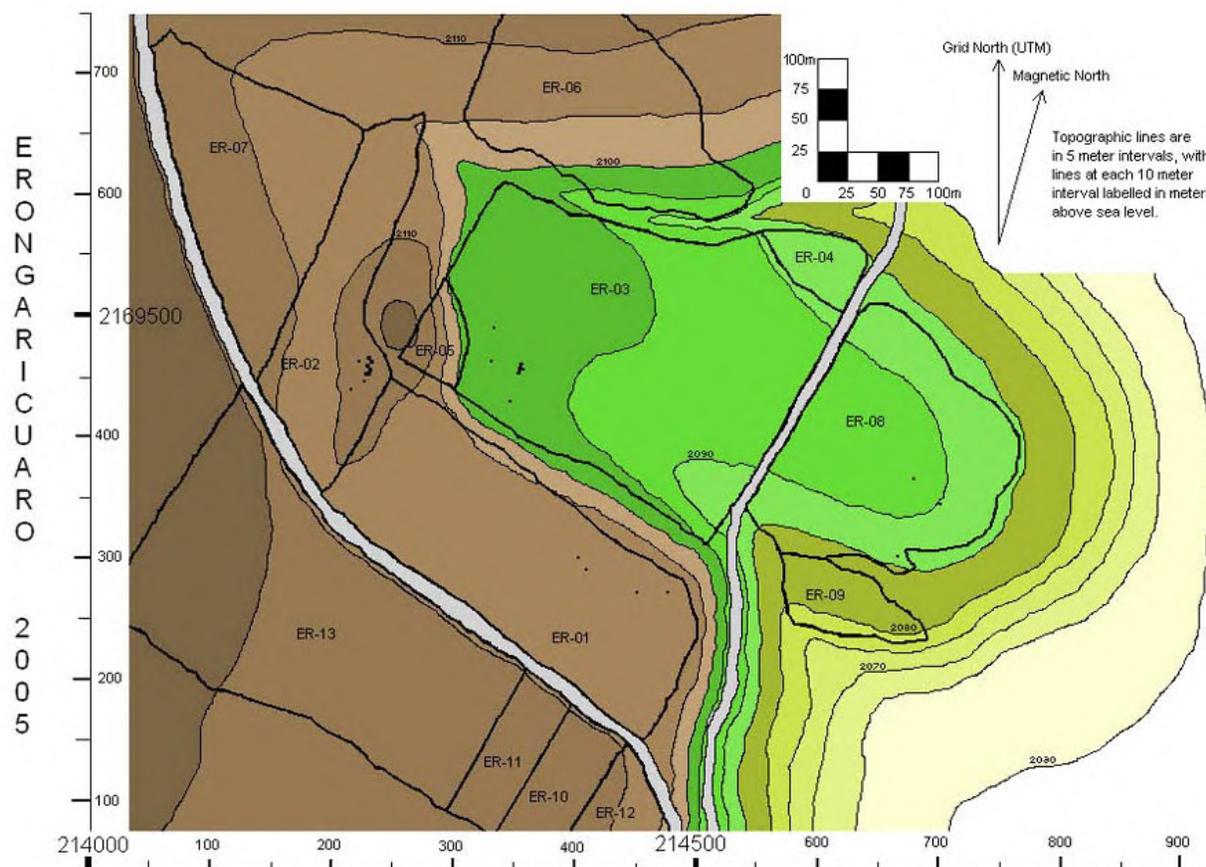


Figure 4. Topographic map of the northern part of the site of Erongarícuaro, with UTM coordinates below and to the left of the map (UTM quadrant 14). Field borders are marked by thicker lines, and the field numbers are labeled. The location of the pits in fields 2, 3, 1, and 8 are also shown by the black dots.

The 2005 Field Season

During the summer of 2005, a project including the detailed mapping of the northern part of the site (where the elite contexts were identified based on the 2001 surface survey) and larger scale excavations were carried out at the site of Erongarícuaro. The map produced shows the presence of a hill, composed mostly of field 5 and a private

house lot (see [Figure 4](#)). This hill is at least ten meters tall measured from the base where it meets field 3 (see [Figure 5](#)). Based upon artifacts found on this hill and the artifacts recovered from the excavations in field 2, it is likely that this hill is the remains of a pyramid structure¹, used in ritual/religious activities.



Figure 5. The hill that associated material culture indicates was likely a pyramid used in religious rituals during the Late Post Classic period, with the author standing just in front and slightly left of center for scale. The hill is viewed from the east, roughly in the middle of field 3. Photo by Karin Rebnegger.

Excavations were carried out in fields 2, 1, 8, and 3. The excavations in field 2, totaling nine 2 m by 2 m pits south-southwest of the hill, produced a high density of artifacts, mostly if not exclusively dating to the Late Post Classic period. A hearth was found, and radiocarbon samples are in the process of being dated ([Figure 7](#), shown below). Aside from the hearth, no features were found, as the area has been repeatedly plowed. Cultural materials were recovered up to a depth of one meter. Significantly, a number of bezote fragments were found (see [Figure 7](#)). The fragments are broken but unfinished, suggesting that the production of obsidian *bezotes* did indeed take place at the site. The bezotes are all made from green obsidian, most likely from obsidian sources in

¹ The pyramid was most likely the result of modifying a natural rise and topping it with a pyramidal structure.

Guanajuato within the boundaries of the Tarascan State. In addition to the *bezote* fragments, numerous pieces of green obsidian debitage and pieces of red/black obsidian debitage (one of which was smoothed but not polished) were recovered (see [Figure 7](#)). The debitage and obsidians of various colors is further evidence for a lapidary industry at the site (see lithic workshop type 2 in Pollard 1993).

The excavations also yielded a copper bell (see [Figure 7](#)). Based on the excavations from Urichu, copper (or bronze) artifacts were restricted to elites, and the bell found in field 2 strengthens the case that this area was home to Erongaricuaró's elites insofar as they were part of the state bureaucracy. High densities of ceramic pipes, used in religious rituals by priests and other members of the nobility, were also present in the field 2 excavations. This also supports the suggestion that the adjacent hill was a pyramid structure and was the focus of religious rituals and the surrounding area was home to the local nobility. Spindle whorls (small cotton-spinning whorls associated with female elites [Pollard and Cahue 1999]) and a high density of obsidian scrapers were also found in the field 2 excavations.

Because field 2 was thoroughly plowed, excavations were moved to fields 1 and 8, in an effort to locate undisturbed elite contexts. A total of seven 2 m by 2 m pits were excavated in these two fields, but at shallow depths (about 30 centimeters) the excavations hit bedrock and few artifacts were recovered.

Excavations were then moved to field 3, directly adjacent to and in front (on the east side) of the pyramid. A total of seven 2 m by 2 m pits were excavated in this field. In the two pits closest to the pyramid, artifacts were recovered in lesser densities than in the field 2 excavations. In particular, obsidian artifacts were found far less frequently compared to field 2. In a pit farther from the hill, parts of three burials were found. Three pits adjacent to this one were then excavated in order to fully excavate these burials. Ultimately, in these four pits, the remains of as many as seven individuals were found, but due to time constraints only four of these individuals could be fully excavated.



Figure 6a. Photo of the skull of burial 1 with the accompanying ceramic vessel (see Figure 7h for a picture of the vessel). Photo by Karin Rebnegger.



Figure 6b. Photo of the remainder of burial 1 (the skull has been removed to insure it would not be disturbed by looters), an extended burial lying on its right side. The body was covered by large flat stones, visible in 6a below the skull. The humeri in the bottom left corner of this photo are associated with burial 4. Photo by Karin Rebnegger.

While all four excavated burials were in a poor state of preservation, three were preserved well enough to identify the anatomical position of the remains. One was flexed, and the other two were extended (see [Figure 6a](#) and [Figure 6b](#), above). The fourth was likely extended. Grave goods associated with the flexed burial (burial 3) were encountered at a depth of only 42 centimeters below the surface. The burials contained a fair amount of burial goods, including whole bi- and polychrome ceramic vessels and a groundstone axe (see [Figure 7](#), below). Green obsidian blades (likely from Pachuca, in the state of Hidalgo) and a few figurine fragments were also recovered near the burials, and likely accompanied the individuals (see [Figure 7](#)). The ceramics associated with the burials indicate that the burials date to the Late Pre-Classic and/or Early Classic periods (in the Loma Alta phase). Radiocarbon samples were taken from the burials and are in the process of being dated.

Artifacts recovered during the 2005 field season



Figure 7a. Hearth from the excavations in field 2. Located within the feature is an obsidian scraper. Photo by Karin Rebnegger.



Figure 7b. Sherds from a mostly complete bowl that was located above burial 3 in the field 3 excavations. Photo by David Haskell.



Figure 7c. A copper/bronze bell recovered in the field 2 excavations.



Figure 7d. A nearly intact bowl from burial 3. Photo by David Haskell.



Figure 7e. A Late Post Classic pipe found in field 5, which is located on the slope of the hill/pyramid. Photo by David Haskell.



Figure 7f. A *molcajete* (chili grinder) from burial 4. The grinding surface was created through the use of a punctate technique. Photo by David Haskell.



Figure 7g. Bezote fragments from the field 2 excavations. Photo by Karin Rebnegger and Chris Valvano.



Figure 7h. Olla from burial 1, next to the skull (see Figure 6a). Photo by David Haskell.



Figure 7i. Obsidian biface from the excavation unit in field 3 closest to the hill/pyramid. Photo by Karin Rebnegger and Chris Valvano.

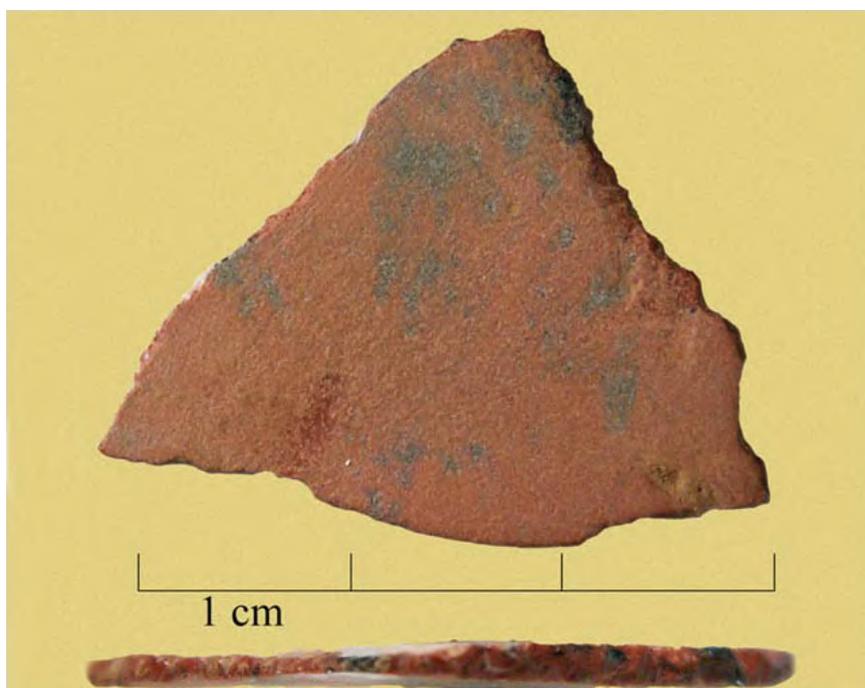


Figure 7j. Piece of red and black obsidian from the field 2 excavations. The piece has been worked in order to create a smooth, flat surface, but is not polished. Photo by Karin Rebnegger and Chris Valvano.

One of the pits in this part of field 3 contained large areas of orange clay. This clay appears to have been stamped or flattened, akin to a house floor. This is the only indication of a structure associated with these burials. This pit also contained bones at a depth of 135 cm, but due to time constraints this pit was closed off and the bones could not be excavated. In order to discover the extent of the cultural deposits in field 3, a seventh pit was excavated to the south of the pits containing the burials. Significant cultural deposits were recovered up to a depth of 70 cm in this pit, but all excavations at the site were stopped in accordance with agreements made with the landowner.

Preliminary Results and Interpretations

Erongarícuaro's Place Within the Tarascan State: The Field 2 Excavations

The artifacts recovered from the field 2 excavations should help to clarify how the Tarascan administrative hierarchy was organized, and how the Tarascan system might have differed from the Aztec system. Numerous scholars have commented on the difference between the more centralized Tarascan State and the more loosely organized Aztec empire, with the former commonly glossed as a territorial state/empire, and the latter commonly labeled a hegemonic empire (after Hassig 1985). These terms potentially gloss over much variation both within the administrative system of each empire and between the two. In short, these terms are imprecise, and many potential arrangements could exist under so-called territorial or hegemonic modes of organization and control.

While specific arrangements of control and bureaucratic organization in the Aztec empire are not completely understood, they are better known than in the Tarascan state. An important factor of the organization of the Aztec empire is the divorcing of tribute flows from strong subject polities, and more generally the separation of different spheres of economic and political control (Berdan et al. 1996; Smith 1986, 1987, 2003a, 2003b). By analyzing how different functions were either combined or separated at multiple bureaucratic levels in the Tarascan State, we can compare how the bureaucratic fields in these two Late Post Classic empires were organized in a more detailed and rigorous manner.

Ethnohistoric evidence shows that Erongarícuaro was superior to Urichu in the state system of tribute administration. This does not necessarily indicate that Erongarícuaro was superior to Urichu in other spheres of economic and political control, however, as the tribute system could have been imposed from above and have had little or nothing to do with those other functions, as in the Aztec case. The extent to which elites at Erongarícuaro possessed other functions in the state administrative system that elites at Urichu did not, such as control over the production and distribution of prestige goods or status markers, would indicate that functions were efficiently organized in a generalized and hierarchical way.

For example, the *Relación de Michoacán* (1956) indicates that markers of noble status came directly from the Tarascan king, and upon the death of an official, these items were returned to the king, so he could in turn bestow them upon the next holder of that office. Such a system seems to suggest a bureaucratic system characterized by tight and direct control between the king and all lower offices. In effect, the bureaucratic hierarchy would have been flattened by the fact that the king directly oversaw these offices. The organization of the tribute system tells a different story, however. The presence of multiple levels of authority suggests a system in which each level directly oversaw only those units one level below it, and reported to a unit only one level above it. The present study is concerned with a bureaucratic hierarchy consisting of at least four levels, starting at the top with Tzintzuntzan, then Erongarícuaro, Urichu, and ending with the small hamlets and villages that sent tribute to Urichu (in addition to small sites that were subordinate to Erongarícuaro).

For this reason, the evidence for a lapidary industry at Erongarícuaro and its absence at Urichu suggests that a higher-level bureaucratic unit within the tributary system was accorded additional functions in the oversight of the production and distribution of markers of noble status. The artifacts recovered in field 2 suggest that this production was taking place directly adjacent to the only pyramid structure at the site. The associated artifacts, most significantly the numerous pipe fragments and the copper bell, strengthen the association between the production of the *bezotes* and elite contexts. The analysis of the ceramics has not yet been conducted, but a higher frequency of highly decorated sherds would also support this interpretation. The evidence at this stage of analysis suggests that the production of the *bezotes* (and possibly other items of jewelry) was either attached to the elites (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; see also Costin 2001) at Erongarícuaro or performed by lower ranking members of the Erongarícuaro noble class itself (and therefore could be called embedded production [Ames 1995]). This evidence supports a more hierarchically organized model of bureaucratic control in the Tarascan State, one in which multiple functions were aligned with one another and overseen by single bureaucratic units. It also contradicts a system of more direct control, especially strict control over markers of status, that is indicated in the *Relación de Michoacán*.

If indeed the Tarascan State can be characterized as a more hierarchically organized bureaucratic system in which higher levels possessed control over a wide range of activities, this raises other questions. Perhaps the most salient of these is the question of how control over lower levels was maintained. If levels below the capital had a wide range of functions, inefficiency or even outright insubordination might have disastrous consequences to the uppermost, state level nobles. Therefore we might hypothesize that the Tarascan State had effective means of assuring that lower levels remained loyal, and subordinate, to the larger state. The nature of the material culture used by lower level, local elites to mark their status should help to answer questions relating to mechanisms of control in the Tarascan State.

At Erongarícuaro, as at Urichu, no artifacts were recovered dating to the Late Post Classic that could be attributed to sources outside of Michoacán, or roughly the territory

controlled by the Tarascan State. This is in contrast to most if not all earlier periods (see below for a description of Erongarícuaro in the Loma Alta phases and Pollard and Cahue 1999 for a description of elite material culture at Urichu both before and after the rise of the Tarascan State) in this area of the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin. Instead, elites at Erongarícuaro bought into a new prestige goods system that relied upon distinct polychrome ceramic vessels and copper/bronze items largely used for bodily decoration. The degree to which the polychrome ceramics at Erongarícuaro were imported or locally produced will help to clarify how this process of incorporation occurred. Strict control might have been maintained by controlling production of such goods at Tzintzuntzan or other sites where the relatives of the royal dynasty are said to have lived (Ihuatzio and Pátzcuaro, according to the *Relación de Michoacán*), and the access of lower level, local elites might have easily been restricted by the capital (see also Pollard 1987 for a discussion of state control over copper production). Alternatively, if such distinct polychrome vessels were locally produced in Erongarícuaro, it would indicate that the incorporation of subordinate elites occurred through other, more cultural and symbolic, means such as acculturation or symbolic emulation rather than strict economic control of production and distribution by the uppermost levels of the Tarascan State. In either scenario, it appears that the access to extra-regional (i.e. outside of the boundaries of the Tarascan State) prestige goods was severely restricted by the state, and this likely played a key role in the adoption of "Tarascan" markers of status by lower level elites.

Erongarícuaro in the Late Pre-Classic and Early Classic Periods

While the goal of the 2005 field season was to investigate archaeological contexts of the resident elite during the Late Post Classic period, a happy accident was the excavation of mortuary contexts dating roughly to the Late Pre-Classic and Early Classic periods (radiocarbon samples are in the process of being analyzed). The field 3 excavations were carried out in an effort to locate additional Late Post Classic deposits. Field 3 is adjacent to the hill/pyramid and reconnaissance of the surface artifacts suggested the presence of Late Post Classic elite occupation. Pits were laid out close to the pyramid, but the most significant finds in this field were the Late Pre-Classic–Early Classic period burials.

The raw counts of artifacts recovered in the pits not containing the burials suggest that this area was not very densely occupied, as overall artifact numbers are much lower than in the field 2 excavations. In terms of the lithic assemblages, basalt flakes frequently rival or surpass obsidian flakes in terms of raw counts per level. Therefore obsidian does not appear to have been intensively utilized, with the people of Erongarícuaro opting instead to use basalt, which was plentiful in the immediate environs.

The association of thin yellow-green obsidian blades with the burials is therefore interesting. Wherever thin yellow-green blades have been found at Erongarícuaro, they have been associated with Late Pre-Classic to Early Classic period ceramics, and it

appears that the blades themselves are fairly reliable markers of this time period at the site, as they are not associated with any other time period. The excavations in field 22, carried out in 2001 under the direction of Dr. Pollard, recovered high quantities of similar blades. Information from local informants indicates that an area of the site being used intensively to mine clays by local brick makers, labeled field 38 on the survey map, possesses significant Late Pre-Classic to Early Classic period cultural deposits. Reconnaissance in this area in 2005 confirmed this, as sherds indicative of this period along with thin yellow-green obsidian blades were found.

These obsidian blades, given their color, are likely from the Pachuca obsidian source in Hidalgo, and their presence indicates some long-distance trade contacts with central México. These trade contacts might have been somewhat intense, given the rather high quantities of Pachuca obsidian in the 2001 excavations in field 22 compared to other sites in the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin during other periods, and their wide distribution at the site of Erongarícuaro (Pollard n.d.). It remains unclear whether their use was more utilitarian (in effect replacing any local obsidian industry that would have produced blades for household use) or their possible association with mortuary contexts indicates a more socially oriented use as markers of prestige.

The highly decorated ceramics recovered from the mortuary contexts in field 3 (as well as field 22) indicate the presence of skilled artisans at the site during this period. The two bowl forms associated with burial 3 (see [Figure 7](#)) are similar in form to a bowl recovered in the 2001 excavations in field 22. The polychrome bowl from the 2005 field season achieves three colors through the use of a red slip, negative/resist firing, and white paint. The bowl from 2001 uses black and red paint on a white slip, however. This is just one example of a wide range of techniques used by ceramic artisans during this period, as vessel forms and decorative elements show a wide range of stylistic and technical variation.

When combined, the evidence of Late Pre-Classic–Early Classic period occupation in fields 3, 22, and 38 indicates that Erongarícuaro was a fairly large site during this period, at least when compared with its basin contemporaries (for which there is admittedly scant evidence). The question remains, however, whether or not the occupation of the site during this time period was dispersed or more consolidated. If we presume that the occupation was unevenly distributed and restrict the area of occupation to only those three fields (3, 22, and 38), then the site of Erongarícuaro might have been as small as 20.8 hectares. On the other hand, if we presume that the occupation of the site was contiguous and fields 3, 22, and 38 represent the boundaries of the site during this time, we would then include fields 1, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 21 in the calculation of the size of the site. All these fields combined indicate a Late Pre-Classic–Early Classic occupation size of roughly 41.3 hectares. These two figures represent the probable minimum and maximum spatial extent of occupation at Erongarícuaro during this time period given our present knowledge of the site.

The time period we are dealing with is admittedly large, probably too large to conduct a meaningful analysis between the 2005 and 2001 excavations at this point.

Contemporaneity of the field 3 and field 22 excavations is a problem at this point, not to mention the artifacts observed in field 38. Hopefully the radiocarbon dating of the field 3 excavations will help to remedy this problem, and concomitantly to help refine the chronology for this time period in the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin. Given the amount of excavated materials pertaining to this time period, especially considering the limited scope of excavations at the site, Erongarícuaro has enormous potential to yield insights into the nature of social interaction, as well as lacustrine adaptation, in the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin during the Late Pre-Classic and Early Classic periods.

Conclusion

Thanks to the 2005 fieldwork, made possible by FAMSI, we should have a better picture of how the Tarascan state constituted itself at the various levels of its bureaucratic organization, that is, how these various levels were differentiated through the functions they possessed and executed. A corollary to this question is how the multiple levels, once differentiated, were also integrated, either through direct oversight and the strict control of markers of high status or by more voluntary means of participation in the state achieved through ideological and symbolic means. This research will help to refine and complement our models of political control in the Tarascan State that have largely been derived from the ethnohistoric sources. Furthermore, the Late Pre-Classic – Early Classic period occupation of Erongarícuaro should not be overlooked, due to its comparatively extensive nature. The site, given the analysis of artifacts recovered in 2005 and 2001, has the potential to answer questions concerning important topics such as the participation (or the lack thereof) of the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin in the Mesoamerican "world system" during the Early Classic period, and more importantly how social interaction at a local scale influenced the degree of that participation at the same time that local social interaction was shaped by the larger-scale processes implied by that "world system."

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Dr. Helen Pollard of Michigan State University for her support over the years and in particular for her help in setting up the 2005 field season and providing advice once it was underway. I also wish to thank Dr. Susan Gillespie of the University of Florida for her help in the grant application process and for her advice on the 2005 field season. Thanks to Karin Rebnegger of Michigan State University for help in running the 2005 field season and for the impetus to carry out the research at Erongarícuaro through her own dissertation research into the political aspects of lithic production and control in the Tarascan State. Thanks to Erica Begun, Brandon Nolin, Joe Hefner, and Jessica Boulware for accompanying me to Erongarícuaro and contributing to the field season with their own areas of expertise. The workmen from Erongarícuaro, in particular Pablo Guzman deserve many thanks and much respect for their work and skill in excavating as well as communicating with other members of the

town. Thanks also to the Consejo Nacional de Arqueología and INAH for the granting of permits, without which the 2005 field season would not have been possible. Furthermore, the staff of the INAH Centro Regional de Michoacán deserves acknowledgment for their help in expediting the process. Thanks also to Aida Castilleja of Erongarícuaro for her help in communicating both with INAH and with the townspeople of Erongarícuaro. Lastly, thanks to Martín Rivera of Erongarícuaro for sharing his knowledge of the local archaeology, in the process helping show us what we were looking for.

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[Figure 7g](#). Bezoite fragments from the field 2 excavations. Photo by Karin Rebnegger and Chris Valvano.

[Figure 7h](#). *Olla* from burial 1, next to the skull (see [Figure 6a](#)). Photo by David Haskell.

[Figure 7i](#). Obsidian biface from the excavation unit in field 3 closest to the hill/pyramid. Photo by Karin Rebnegger and Chris Valvano.

[Figure 7j](#). Piece of red and black obsidian from the field 2 excavations. The piece has been worked in order to create a smooth, flat surface, but is not polished. Photo by Karin Rebnegger and Chris Valvano.

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