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Contesting the Sacred Landscape in Colonial Mesoamerica



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Abstract

Exploratory research trips conducted in February and July 2007 enabled the investigator to observe ritual practices and material remains associated with Catholic pilgrimage shrines and with caves, springs and other landscape features traditionally invested with religious meaning by Mesoamericans. The intent of this initial research in Oaxaca and the state of Mexico was to locate specific sites where further archaeological and ethnohistorical studies might illuminate the colonial period interchange between Native groups and church authorities concerning the sacred landscape. The continued importance of landscape shrines in Catholic pilgrimages and their gendered complementarities with the church's miraculous image were important findings of this research. Future investigations will now focus on two Zapotec-region locales in Oaxaca examined during the FAMSI-funded project which are historically interconnected late colonial pilgrimage sites.

Resumen

Estas investigaciones exploratorias, llevadas a cabo en los meses de febrero y julio de 2007, han permitido la observación de costumbres religiosas y restos materiales ligados a santuarios católicos de perigrinación y a cuevas, manantiales y otros elementos del paisaje natural, en donde la gente mesoamericana siempre a envuelto mucho significado religioso. El propósito de los estudios de campo en Oaxaca y el estado de México fue encontrar sitios específicos donde nuevas investigaciones arqueológicas y etnohistóricas podrían aclarar el intercambio entre grupos indígenas y las autoridades eclesiásticas acerca del paisaje sagrado durante la época colonial. La constante importancia de los puestos sagrados en el paisaje para las peregrinaciones católicas y su complementaridad de género con la imagen milagrosa de cada iglesia fueron hallazgos importantes de este proyecto. Nuevas investigaciones planeadas se enfocarán en dos sitios en regiones zapotecas de Oaxaca examinadas durante el proyecto patrocinado por FAMSI, sitios de perigrinación que estaban interconectados durante la época colonial tardía.

This project focuses on sacred Mesoamerican landscape features, colonial and postcolonial apparitions of the Virgin Mary or the Crucified Christ, and the interchange between Native groups and ecclesiastical authorities over the power and identity of supernatural forces embodied in the landscape. The exploratory investigation funded by FAMSI in 2007 had two primary purposes: 1) understanding the legacy of this religious dialogue in contemporary pilgrimage practices, and 2) locating sites with rich potential for further archaeological and ethnohistorical research. To this end, a variety of locales were investigated with variable cultural identities. Most of the research was conducted in Oaxaca, Mexico, where the Chatino apparition known as the Virgin of Juquila now attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from all over Mexico. Other Oaxaca sites visited in the communities of Mitla, San Pablo Guilá, Santo Domingo

Chihuitán, and Santiago Laollaga are historically associated with Zapotec-speaking groups. In Central Mexico, the pilgrimage shrines of the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico DF and that of Chalma in Mexico state were visited, both of which have colonial-era apparitions associated with Nahua communities, but which currently attract a wide range of indigenous and mestizo devotees.

Introduction

Perhaps no image evokes the centrality of the sacred landscape to Mesoamerican peoples better than the Central Mexican place glyph for a town. Rendered in Nahuatl as *altepetl* or “water mountain,” this stylized image couples a flowing stream of life-giving water with a sacred mountain, where the seeds of regeneration are stored. Together they convey the dependency of a political community on cosmic forces imbued in the natural landscape (López Austin 1994). Graphically, late Prehispanic Mixtec scribes depicted the polity’s name through variations in the form of the mountain and the stream. It was not a new association between the landscape, the community, and the supernatural world. From the Formative period on, images of the sacred mountain and of caves that served as portals to the supernatural world imprinted religious significance on the landscape itself through petroglyphs and paintings or metaphorically linked the cosmos with the built environment, where platform mounds stood in for mountains and temple interiors replicated sacred caves (Grove 1997; Schele and Friedel 1990; Manzanilla 1994; Brady and Ashmore 1999).

Archaeologists conclude that important Prehispanic cities like Teotihuacan accommodated large numbers of pilgrims participating in major festivals at their sacred temples, but it may be that mountain and cave shrines outside urban areas gained increased ritual importance during the Late Postclassic, both for local communities and for foreign pilgrims (Barba de Piña Chan 1998). As has been documented for the Aztecs, many important religious festivals required priests and political leaders to make ritual processions leading from the temple to a special mountain promontory or to a waterside locale, where sacrificial offerings, songs, and incantations were performed to enlist the support of divine forces on behalf of the community (Broda 1991). Landscape features did not necessarily serve the members of one polity to the exclusion of others. The Spanish observers Sahagún and Motolinia reported that some “pagan” landscape shrines drew Natives from great distances, counting between them eighteen pilgrimage sites in Oaxaca, Puebla-Tlaxcala, Yucatan, and the Valley of Mexico (cited in Valero 1998:64).

It was a religiosity abhorrent to the Catholic missionaries, whose responsibility to convert the Natives into sincere Christians provided the moral justification for the Spanish conquest. Seeing the agency of the Devil everywhere, from practices of blood sacrifice that seemed to mock Catholic rites of communion to the proliferation of false gods, they proceeded to destroy temples, marginalize Native priests, and ban all cult activities. Images of Precolumbian deities might have been stored underneath the newly built church altar for a time in some communities, but eventually the sharp eyes of

the friar or parish priest, often with the complicity of Native informants, located and successfully expelled such pagan practices from public venues. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that forms of traditional religious expression persisted longer at landscape features than they did within the community proper.

During anti-idolatry campaigns of the seventeenth century, sacred caves were frequently exposed, their surfaces replete with evidence of recent animal sacrifice accompanied by incense and candles. Some outraged clerics conducted grand public spectacles in which recovered idols were burned in an effort, ultimately incomplete, to bend Mesoamerican hearts and minds to Catholic orthodoxy (see Tavárez 2000, Romero Frizzi 1994 for specific instances). The measure of their failure can be seen widely in Mesoamerica today, where indigenous communities from the Maya highlands to northern Veracruz continue to make pilgrimages to sacred caves and mountain shrines (Adams and Prufer 2005; Sandstrom 2005), leaving offerings dedicated to the powerful spiritual presences that reside there. That these presences may intermingle Christian names or imagery with ancient Mesoamerican concepts does not lessen the profoundly indigenous basis of such practices.

Containing and diverting the power of the sacred landscape were related colonial projects. Apparitions of the Virgin Mary or miracle-working crosses found in caves or springs were widely reported in New Spain, often in narrative contexts that served to denigrate Native belief and illustrate the superiority of Christianity. Among such efforts, the story of the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the humble (now canonized) Indian Juan Diego is the most widely known, despite the elusiveness of its historical details. Recent scholarly analyses (Poole 1996, Brading 2001) conclude that Tepeyac hill had indeed become a site of Native pilgrimage as early as the 1560s, prior to its promotion as a sanctified locale by Creole residents of nearby Mexico City in the early seventeenth century. Other early colonial apparition sites include Ocuilan, near Malinalco in the state of Mexico, where in 1539 an image of the crucifix miraculously replaced a cave idol smashed by Augustinian missionaries, eventually becoming the powerful force that today draws hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to the sanctuary at Chalma (Rodríguez-Shadow and Shadow 2000). In Oaxaca the image of the Virgin of Juquila is claimed by the Chatino community to have appeared miraculously in a cave in nearby Amialtepec, although official accounts insist it was a gift of an early Dominican missionary. Whatever its origin, the Virgin of Juquila's miracle-working powers continue to attract pilgrims from all over central and southern Mexico (Noría Sanchez 1998). In these three cases as in numerous others, the fame of the locally important apparition was broadly disseminated through Catholic hagiographies published in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Research questions and 2007 exploratory field studies

With the proselytizing purpose of these late colonial publications so transparent, it is easy to read the Catholic apparition accounts as straightforward attempts to appropriate the sacred landscape. Miraculous images were removed from their natural landscape

setting (often with great difficulty, itself taken as evidence for the veracity of the miracle) and established within the church sanctuary, where the behavior of the assembled believers could be controlled directly by ecclesiastical authorities. Given the persistent importance of landscape shrines among indigenous communities, however, it is also clear that the Church's efforts to contain religious devotion within sanctuary walls were often unsuccessful. It is this religious and social tension between indigenous communities and colonial authorities which sparked my interest in using archaeological and documentary records to illuminate how the sacred landscape became contested space in the post conquest era.

My initial hypothesis for this project was that that both Christian apparition sites and "pagan" shrines arose from similar ritual practices in caves and other landscape settings, but that the articulation of religious messages took on different forms in the two contexts as part of the historical dialogue between Native community members and representatives of the Church and the broader colonial society. It has been my conviction that indigenous actors played an active role in this dialogue, as the dynamic, but ultimately unsuccessful example of apparition claims made by Maya men and women in early eighteenth-century Chiapas makes clear (Gosner 1992). Finding similarly rich documentary sources that revealed both sides of the colonial period religious exchange would be a serendipitous but probably unlikely result of my own archival research. Still I hoped to locate written materials from the everyday affairs of civil and religious administration that would suggest the appearance and spread of specific Catholic shrines linked to the sacred landscape. Archaeological research would provide further evidence for the colonial period use of nearby caves and rock shelters, assuming that ceramics and other datable materials could be recovered along with organic residue from ritual offerings and other activities. To find a starting point for the research, my plan was to use my long experience with the prehistory and ethnohistory of the Tehuantepec region as a frame for this study, investigating a sample of Catholic and "pagan" cave shrines in the Isthmus, then expanding to the better known apparition sanctuaries that attract Isthmus Zapotecs among other distant pilgrims, primarily those of Juquila in Oaxaca and Chalma in state of Mexico.

Funding from FAMSI was used to support two exploratory research trips to Mexico that I undertook in February and July 2007, accompanied on each trip by a graduate research assistant. What I knew beforehand about the apparition and pilgrimage traditions was limited to published primary and secondary sources. I had never visited a cave or church pilgrimage shrine in Mexico nor personally witnessed any of the community festivities or spiritual healing ceremonies that draw people to them. The goal of the initial study was to familiarize myself directly with these phenomena, paying special attention to spatial features of these locales and the material correlates of pilgrimage behavior that might have archaeological implications. More specifically I hoped to locate a site or sites where both archaeological and archival data relevant to my central concerns with post conquest religious change could be found. Having located these resources, I would then apply to grant agencies for major funding to launch the intensive phase of this investigation.

February 2007 site visits

Accompanied by a graduate assistant, Heather Law, I visited three key Catholic pilgrimage shrines on this trip, those of the Virgen de Juquila in Oaxaca, the Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico City, and Santo Cristo de Chalma in the state of Mexico. Visits to these shrines did not coincide with any major fiesta, but ample opportunities were afforded to observe pilgrims and the rituals they practiced as well as to record the patterning of architectural and artifactual remains associated with these practices. Each of the shrines is associated with a long-established saintly apparition and miracle-working tradition, as noted above. Previous anthropological and historical investigations of the three shrines vary considerably in quality and coverage, but they have been consulted as well in the course of my literature review.

Because the Virgin of Guadalupe apparition is so well known and the image's significance to Mexican national identity well studied, I will note here just a few aspects of the shrine's layout and its historical foundation as a basis for comparison with other locales. The circular floor plan of the modern (mid-1970s) basilica ([Fig. 1](#)) was designed to accommodate vast numbers of congregants and allow the image of the Virgin to be seen from any of the seven doorways entering the building (historical details below are taken from the basilica's official website, www.virgendeguadalupe.org.mx). It has replaced the early 18th century basilica at the southern base of Tepeyac hill, which was reopened in 2000 after extensive repairs ([Fig. 2](#)). To the right of and slightly behind the somewhat later Capuchin convent adjoining the old basilica is the oldest standing structure of the complex, the south-facing Parroquia de Indios, which was constructed in the mid-seventeenth century by the vicar who popularized the apparition tale, Luis Laso de Vega ([Fig. 3](#)). Seventeenth-century traditions held that this was the spot where Juan Diego lived out the remainder of his days, and accordingly a *cofradía* or religious confraternity of Indian men was founded here in 1679. Remnants of two of three earlier buildings associated with the Guadalupe cult are said to be found within the parish church.



Figure 1. Modern Basilica of Guadalupe



Figure 2. Old basilica with Capuchin convent to the right



Figure 3. Statue of Juan Diego before Fr. Zumárraga with Parroquia de Indios behind

Behind these buildings on the summit of Tepeyac hill, where tradition claims that Juan Diego collected roses at the bidding of the Virgin, is the Capilla del Cerrito dedicated to the archangel San Miguel; the 1749 edifice replaced a smaller first chapel, said to have been built by a local baker and his wife in 1666 ([Fig. 4](#)). A spring emanating from the southeastern base of Tepeyac that marked the spot where the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego became famous for its healing waters, but, according to official history, its well was a dangerous source of infectious disease. The unique circular baroque structure known as the Templo del Pocito, built to contain the waters (and those seeking therapeutic miracles) was finished in 1791 ([Fig. 5](#)).



Figure 4. Capilla del Cerrito



Figure 5. Templo del Pocito

Organized pilgrim groups arrive daily at the basilica plaza according to a predetermined schedule that may extend into the evening hours. The groups range from community parishes to business, union, and industrial associations and, more popularly, bicycle clubs from near and far. Penitents traditionally cross the plaza on their knees, with supporters singing and cheering their progress. Groups are met by a priest at the basilica door, and the association's banner is deposited to the right of the altar before a special mass is said to the pilgrims ([Fig. 6](#), [Fig. 7](#)). Individuals may enter the chamber behind the altar and observe the painting more closely via a moving sidewalk that zigzags below the image to give them time to pray and contemplate. Once completing the visit to the sacred site, visitors depart via the Calzada de Guadalupe through a bustling market where religious icons and memorabilia, food and drink are sold ([Fig. 8](#)).



Figure 6. Costumed *concheros*



Figure 7. Pilgrims approaching the Basilica of Guadalupe



Figure 8. Religious artifacts for sale outside the basilica

The basic features of sacred image, sanctuary and open plaza, market, and landscape shrine are present at the other two pilgrimage shrines visited on this trip, although in less compact form than at the Basilica of Guadalupe. At Chalma, located about 100 km southwest of Mexico City, the principal features of the sacred site visible today begin with the Augustinian sanctuary. The church and its atrium were constructed over a *barranca* in this rugged landscape in 1683 ([Fig. 9](#)), replacing the small, difficult-to-access chapels that flanked the hillside caves earlier in the century; the sanctuary complex was subsequently enlarged and remodeled. A convent behind the sanctuary for novitiates and two two-story guest houses, one for visiting monks and one for pilgrims ([Fig. 10](#)), were completed in the eighteenth century. On the eastern side of the *barranca* above the guest houses are several caves, including the Cueva de la Aparición where the figure of the crucified Christ is said to have appeared miraculously in 1539. The cave entrance has been altered to form three arches carved in the volcanic rock, with an image of Saint Michael over the central arch. Forged iron doors protect the rocky entrance, but there is little modification of the cave interior, according to ethnographers María Rodríguez-Shadow and Robert Shadow (2000: 65-79). Behind the convent and sacristy is a wide wall where ex-voto paintings and other testimonials from Chalma's grateful petitioners are hung ([Fig. 11](#)). The surrounding hillsides are dotted with over 70 large crosses ([Fig. 12](#)) built and maintained by pilgrim groups, which are brought down from the hills to the church atrium in time to be repaired and redecorated for the major festival of Pentecostal Sunday (one of 8 major Chalma

festivals scattered over the calendar year), during which traditional *conchero* dance groups perform (Rodríguez-Shadow and Shadow 2000:138-158).



Figure 9. Augustinian church at Chalma



Figure 10. Guest lodgings at Chalma



Figure 11. Wall of ex-votos behind the church



Figure 12. Pilgrim crosses on hillside

Even without a major festival, the narrow street leading to the sanctuary is choked with permanent and temporary market stalls, at which one sees both the typical array of manufactured religious items, local sweets, fruit, wooden toys and other crafts from near and far, along with therapeutic limestone “earth” ([Fig. 13](#), [Fig. 14](#)). The Shadows (2000: 60f.) report that the number of vendors swells to over 500 during the festivals, 90% of whom are women.



Figure 13. Religious artifacts for sale in market area



Figure 14. Therapeutic Chalma earth.

The shops cater primarily to pilgrims after their visit to the shrine, but there is another site at the beginning of the Chalma pilgrimage experience that has special significance for the focus of this project. A natural spring that emerges from the base of an enormous *ahuehuete* or cypress tree (*Taxodium mucronatum*) is an important first stop along the route, about 5 km. northeast of the sanctuary ([Fig. 15](#)). By tradition first-time pilgrims buy a garland of white and red flowers from merchants at the site after bathing in the spring's waters and wear the garland dancing en route to Chalma, where it is deposited at the sanctuary. The clear waters of the spring are partly contained in a large pool that invites bathers, but a more religious association with these waters is observed as well. Women stand near the pipes that channel the spring to the pool and splash their bodies with water that is thought to have special healing and fertility powers ([Fig. 16](#)). Small fabric bundles containing a baby's umbilical cord or locks of its hair are tied to the boughs of the tree, both to assure the long, healthy life of the child and to give thanks to the spring's spirit for the life that was granted ([Fig. 17](#)).



Figure 15. Sacred *ahuehuete* tree.



Figure 16. Women collecting water at the spring.



Figure 17. Cloth bundles tied to the tree branches.

At the third major pilgrimage shrine visited on this trip, that of the Virgin of Juquila in Oaxaca, the complex ritual relationship between the formal church in the town of Santa Catarina Juquila and the landscape shrine at some distance away is as striking as that of Chalma, though the symbolic content and ritual practices are different. Beginning with the sanctuary itself ([Fig. 18](#)), the small church in the district capital has profited since the early 1700s, when, after intensive lobbying efforts by the local curate, it became home to the miracle-working statue of the Virgen de la Concepción that appeared in the nearby Chatino community of Amialtepec. Even in the late 18th century, the major festival for the Virgin celebrated in early December brought as many as 25,000 people to Juquila annually, and today it attracts over 100,000 visitors to this mountainous part of the state (Noria Sánchez 1998). Outside of the festival proper, pilgrims arrive daily by busloads, often walking the 30 km. distance from the juncture with the major highway, Mex. 131. Much activity is focused on the rear exterior of the church, where visitors ascend stairs to view the tiny image of the Virgin more closely, and where they leave offerings of white and red gladiolas or have small containers of holy water filled by an efficient staff ([Fig. 19](#), [Fig. 20](#)). As with all major shrines, a bustling market with religious images presses against the atrium wall of the church ([Fig. 21](#)).



Figure 18. Juquila church with image of the Virgin above the main entrance.



Figure 19. Rear of the Juquila church.



Figure 20. Offering of flowers at Juquila. Pilgrims receive blessed water in rear of photo.



Figure 21. Religious icons for sale at market stall outside the sanctuary.

“El Pedimento” is the landscape shrine for Juquila, located on a mountain peak about 5 km east of town toward the highway intersection and normally the first stop for pilgrims. A small modern chapel ([Fig. 22](#)) is the major building at the site, to which visitors bring offerings of calla lilies, sometimes mixed with red carnations, which vendors hawk along the roadside. About 100 people were present at the shrine during our visit, most of who had come by bus and walked from the road below. Banners flanking the chapel

entrance announce the annual return of pilgrim groups, from taxi driver associations to families and bicycle clubs ([Fig. 23](#)). The rear wall of the chapel (in a narrow hallway behind the altar) is covered with testimonials, including pictures and odd artifacts from hats to shoes, left by thankful petitioners. The major activity at the Pedimento however takes place outside the chapel on the slope facing the town. There visitors scurry to dig chalky soil from the mountainside, which they moisten with water from a spigot nearby to form earthen images of the objects or beings for whom they seek the Virgin's intercession. The crowded hillside of busily engaged people of all ages modeling clay forms gives the impression of a very strange adult kindergarten group. Most figures are quite crudely shaped, although some show more artistic talent or the application of molds, plastic adornments or other material aids ([Figs. 24](#), [25](#), [26](#), & [27](#)).



Figure 22. Pedimento chapel.



Figure 23. Pilgrim's banner or advertising?



Figure 24. Making a clay model from earth at the Pedimento.



Figure 25. A domestic scene.



Figure 26. Modern aspirations.



Figure 27. An offering table.

Behind the cleared area where the modeled offerings are created and deposited, the wooded slope is filled with crosses hanging from the trees, mostly homemade objects of turned wood or wood slats with hand-painted testimonials ([Figs. 28, 29, 30, & 31](#)). Visitors who have received the Virgin's intervention leave a cross in gratitude for her favors. The huge numbers of artifacts requires the officials who maintain the shrine to take them down from the trees regularly, sweeping them into large trash piles. Those who want to avoid that fate hang their crosses from higher limbs. Even so, we saw no cross with a date earlier than 1997, and most were dated from just the previous two years. Understanding that neither the wood crosses nor the clay figures would leave long-lasting archaeological evidence, I inspected the trash accumulation on the slope from nearby refreshment stands ([Fig. 32, Fig. 33](#)).



Figure 28. Crosses on the hillside.



Figure 29. A pilgrim returns from the U.S. to give thanks.



Figure 30. A cleanup pile.



Figure 31. Height helps preserve the offering.



Figure 32. Refreshment and icon stands on the north slope of the hillside.



Figure 33. Trash pile.

This custom of modeling figures out of clay or stone is one more broadly observed in Oaxaca, as we were to discover at one of two sites of local significance we visited in the Oaxaca Valley. In the village of San Felipe Tejalapam, a recent apparition of the Virgin Mary associated with a farmer's well became mired in local politics as it attracted popular attention in the 1990s (Barabas 2006). Although disclaimed by ecclesiastical authorities, the apparition of a so-called "daughter" of the Virgin of Juquila was supported by the Oaxaca government, which dispensed funds for the construction of a chapel, now almost complete, located near the base of a steep hill above the well. The small statue that provides tangible evidence of the apparition to believers was pronounced by the Church as nothing but a modern, commercially made religious icon and was confiscated by the town's curate. Nonetheless, pilgrims continue to visit the apparition site, where some claim signs of the Virgin still appear, and the site complex is cared for by a local committee of men and women (Barabas 2006). On the day of our visit, the chapel building was locked, but bushes nearby were festooned with plastic flowers and animal figures. At the well itself, offerings of flowers and votive candles were more organized, and included images and tableaux of domestic scenes created from earth, stone, and plastic figures ([Figs. 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, & 41](#)).



Figure 34. Chapel dedicated to the apparition of the Virgin at San Felipe Tejalapam.



Figure 35. Bush with offerings.



Figure 36. Close-up of plastic cow.



Figure 37. Well where the Virgin appeared.



Figure 38. Lit candles from recent offering.



Figure 39. Plastic dog from offering tableau.



Figure 40. Offering scene with money.



Figure 41. Discarded past offerings.

The second Oaxaca Valley site we visited is a cave near the town of Mitla known as Cueva del Diablo ([Fig. 42](#)), which has figured in several archaeological projects, beginning with test excavations conducted in the 1930s by Elsie Clews Parsons, who reported finding miniature Late Postclassic ceramic vessels. Although Parsons' informants claimed that the site was not currently used, they remembered it having ceremonial importance in the recent past. The ethnohistorian Angeles Romero (personal communication 2007) thinks that the cave is the one identified in a 1565

report as the scene of ongoing pagan idolatry, so the ceramics Parsons excavated might be post conquest in date.



Figure 42. Cueva del Diablo entrance.

The cave was surveyed in 1965 by members of the Oaxaca Valley Human Ecology project under the direction of Kent Flannery. A small stream runs through the interior of the cave, so damp conditions precluded the preservation of organic remains that were the object of this project. The survey team made note of surface artifacts, which extended down the talus slope from the cave mouth for 50 m. and which included incense burners, green schist plaques, chipped stone, and figurine and pottery fragments dating from the Late Formative through the Late Postclassic (Finsten, Flannery, and Macnider 1989:42). The site was tested more recently by INAH archaeologists as part of a salvage program (Barabas et al 2005) associated with the construction of a new highway to the Isthmus. Again Postclassic incense burners were noted on the surface of the cave interior, and Classic period pottery was found in the test operations (Robert Markens, personal communication 2007).

Barabas and her colleagues (2005) report on the complex spiritual ideas and ritual practices that surround the Cueva del Diablo and the nearby boulder known as La Mujer Dormida, which are linked in contemporary therapeutic and propitiatory rites by Mitla residents. On the occasion of our visit, the cave floor held numerous distinct displays of ritual offerings, some of which must have occurred just days before to judge from the freshness of flowers, along with flattened cardboard boxes and bedding items that insulated the petitioner from the damp surface ([Fig. 43](#)). Typical offerings consist of candles or wax blocks in one of three colors, flowers (mostly bunches of chamomile or *manzanilla*), loose cacao beans, fruit (especially oranges and sometimes coconuts), cigarettes, bottles of alcohol, and bundles of copal wrapped in banana leaves, known as “tamalitos de copal” ([Figs. 44](#), [45](#), [46](#), [47](#), [48](#), [49](#), [50](#), [51](#), [52](#), & [53](#)). Small pottery vessels are frequently part of the display, usually small bowls, but occasional a tripod-footed vessel similar in shape to the Postclassic miniatures found by archaeologists. Where commercial votive candles were noted, they all had images of Christ on them, rather than the Virgin. Burning of some primary offerings inside the cave and the burning of what appeared to be trash piles swept out to the cave mouth were noted. Unfortunately, the nearby road construction has destroyed what evidence of discarded past offerings might be found on the talus slope.



Figure 43. Interior of the cave.



Figure 44. Burnt offering with cacao.



Figre 45. Tamalito de copal.



Figure 46. Flower offering.



Figure 47. Offering with marigolds and chamomile.



Figure 48. Offering with cacao, tobacco, leaves.



Figure 49. Offering with small tripod-supported vessel.



Figure 50. Offering bowl with fruit, cacao, and quartz.



Figure 51. Offering with black candles.



Figure 52. Detailed arrangement of offerings.



Figure 53. Offerings at rear of cave.

Reflections from the February site visits

The intent of this exploratory field trip was to determine what kinds of material patterns are associated with shrine and cave rituals that may have colonial period archaeological correlates and to learn more about the ways in which ritual practices are structured. Several potentially significant patterns were observed. First, there are shrine specific or, in some cases, regionally specific ritual practices that vary among the pilgrimage centers we visited, such as the donning of flower garlands by first-time visitors to

Chalma. The modeling of an image representing the desired outcome of one's petition to the saint is widely observed in Oaxaca, even among highly urbanized visitors to shrines like Juquila. The practice has been reported for shrines out of the state that attract indigenous and mestizo devotees from rural Oaxaca, such as that of the Santo Cristo de Otatitlán in Veracruz (Velasco Toro 1997:183). The lack of such figures at Mitla's Cueva del Diablo may reflect differences in cave rituals or in the identity of the Mitla ritual practitioners, who are more likely to be spiritual specialists. By contrast, the material remains left behind at the Mitla site had more promising archaeological potential, with imperishable containers for alcohol or food, and seeds and pollen from offering flowers and fruits the most notable examples.

Although mass communication, easy transportation, and popular Mexican tradition have clearly contributed to the intensity and flavor of pilgrimages, the degree to which Mesoamerican ideas and beliefs influence overtly Catholic rituals associated with these major shrines was impressive. A clear example of this is the sacred *ahuehuete* tree visited by Chalma pilgrims, with its branches adorned with bundles containing hair or the umbilical cords of newborns and its spring waters considered to have fertility-enhancing powers.

An observation of even wider importance for this study is the way in which Native ideas about symbolic gender complementarities appear to underline the spatial distribution of ritual practice, from the most urbanized sacred spaces at the Basilica of Guadalupe to natural or constructed shrines of local significance. Apparitions of the Virgin Mary and the shrines centered around them have universal female associations, of course, but their linkage to wells or caves with flowing water may be a more distinctly Mesoamerican symbolic connection with the female goddess of water. Conversely, images of the crucified Christ are associated with mountain peaks, rocky promontories, or large boulders. Sandstrom's (2005) study of Nahua ritual pilgrimage in Veracruz makes explicit the connection of such places with Tonatiuh, the sun god, whom local people identify with Christ.

Just as Veracruz Nahua shamans seeking relief from an intense drought pay ritual visits to both a mountain cave where the water goddess resides and the pinnacle where boulders mark the sun god's realm, so have I found that the most Catholic of contemporary shrines carry both water/sun and female/male ritual spaces. Pilgrims to Juquila stop at the Capilla del Pedimento on a nearby mountain peak to bring flower offerings and construct earth models of their requests before they continue on to town to visit the Virgin's image in the church and receive holy water to take home. The male associations with the Pedimento locale are affirmed by the custom of leaving crosses in remembrance of past blessings. The opposite gender roles are observed at ritual

spaces associated with the crucified Christ of Chalma, where the feminine waters of the *ahuehuete* tree springs are visited by petitioners prior to their entering the masculine space of the sanctuary itself, with crosses maintained by pilgrim groups dotting the surrounding hillsides. Even the Virgin of Guadalupe has these gender-complementary spaces, now overshadowed by the intense ceremonialism centered on the basilica structure itself. The original apparition is said to have occurred at a spring where the 18th century Templo del Pocito was erected, and the adjoining Tepeyac hill is a promontory associated with Juan Diego's collecting flowers for the Virgin.

July 2007 site visits

My February observations alerted me to the importance of looking beyond a specific ritual cave or church sanctuary to the broader landscape context of which the sacred site is a part and to seek patterns of gender complementarity linking nodes on a ritual pathway. At the same time, it became clear to me that conducting archaeological research near large pilgrimage centers would be impractical, and I resolved to focus further research on smaller sacred sites in Oaxaca, where I was already familiar with the indigenous groups and the nature of the archaeological record. I was also inspired by Alicia Barabas' recent discussion of Oaxaca pilgrimage circuits revolving around either the Virgen de la Concepción, of which the Juquila sanctuary image is the most widely venerated, or the Señor de las Tres Caídas, with its many "brother" Christs (Barabas 2006: 85-90). In the latter group is an image celebrated in the Isthmus community of Chihuitán, where I had previously conducted historical archaeology fieldwork but knew little about its pilgrimage history.

Barabas (2006:86) points out how believers may aspire to visit all the sibling sanctuaries on a circuit, with the Black Christ of Otatilán, Veracruz, regarded as the devotional center for that cult. Some may journey as far away as the shrine to the Black Christ at Esquipulas, Guatemala. With the recent example of a "daughter" image of the Virgin of Juquila taking hold in the Oaxaca Valley, it seemed to me that studying linkages between devotional centers on the Señor de las Tres Caídas circuit would be an important means of understanding the historical establishment of apparition sites and their appeal beyond the local community. After learning that a miraculous apparition in San Pablo Guilá in the Chichicapa Valley of Oaxaca was referred to as "Señor Cristo de Chihuitán," I resolved to limit the fieldwork component of my July trip to visiting these two locales. The majority of time during the three-week trip was devoted to archival research, with a second graduate assistant, Michelle Rosado, and I investigating documentary leads in Oaxaca and in Mexico City.

Our visit to San Pablo Guilá was timed well, for the church was in the process of being cleaned and decorated for the feast of Mary Magdalene the following day. Some 10-12 members of the church committee were at work, placing balloon garlands around the images of the saints and testing fireworks outside ([Fig. 54](#)). The church itself is a marvel of colonial construction and historic preservation, with an interior richly painted in original deep colors of dark blue, turquoise, and yellow. Designs include some simple

floral motifs, but the majority is geometric, including Mitla-like stepped fret motifs. Later research on this trip at the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City revealed that the San Pablo Guilá church was not constructed until 1724, when funds were approved to hire an architect to design a new church to replace an earlier colonial building destroyed by an earthquake (AGN Indios, v. 48, exp. 224, fs. 265v-266v). The central image of the elaborate gold-bedecked *retablo* is that of the crucified Christ. One of the more knowledgeable men on the decoration crew identified this image as Señor Cristo de Chihuitán, but knew nothing about any connections with the Isthmus community of that name. He told us that his community, which has a resident population of almost 4000, is filled with pilgrims from all over on the fourth Friday of Lent, when the major fiesta associated with this image is celebrated.



Figure 54. San Pablo Guilá church.

We understood that there were many springs emerging from the hillside on which the village is located, and the presence of several large *ahuehuete* trees just south of the church atrium and facing municipal building was a key marker ([Fig. 55](#)). The pool formed by a spring near one of the trees had been cemented in. As we looked around for what we anticipated would be some evidence linking the spring to the Virgin, we were amazed to find an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe painted on one of the tree roots extending into the pool's waters ([Fig. 56](#), [Fig. 57](#)). The hypothesis of gender complementarity at sacred shrines had been supported again.



Figure 55. San Pablo Guilá's *ahuehuate* trees.



Figure 56. Walled pool for spring waters.



Figure 57. Painted image of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

At the Isthmus town of Santo Domingo Chihuitán, far less activity surrounds the church in this community of 1200 people ([Figs. 58, 59, & 60](#)). A few individuals on the nearby square with whom we spoke suggested that the early colonial church no longer draws large numbers of people to the fourth Friday of Lent festival. It is a point reaffirmed by one local author (Rueda Ruíz 2006), who blames the brief stays of modern visitors on motorized transportation, making it easy for people to come for just the day, rather than staying long stretches. With the keeper of the church keys away on a trip, we could not gain access to the building interior, which on a visit many years before had seemed to me to be sparsely ornamented, with a simple altar, few sacred images, and plain, white-washed walls. This time our attention was focused on the exterior surroundings of the church, and in particular an area facing the atrium entrance where brick flooring, glass and potsherds were visible on the ground. A newly constructed bank of rooms directly behind this area houses pilgrims during their stay, making the older foundations a promising site for further investigation ([Figs. 61, 62, & 63](#)).



Figure 58. Santo Domingo Chihuitán church.



Figure 59. Front of church.



Figure 60. Atrium gate of church.



Figure 61. New guest quarters.



Figure 62. Brick foundation.



Figure 63. Potsherds, brick fragments, and other surface remains.

Given the male associations of the Chihuitán sacred image and its fiesta, I investigated a potentially complementary landscape feature, a locally renowned *ojo de agua* in the pueblo of Laollaga, approximately 5 km west. Waters from this spring feed a stream that flows directly north of Chihuitán. Arriving on a Sunday afternoon, just prior to the week in which Laollaga's major fiesta would be celebrated, we found the spring and its clear pools of water filled with families of bathers. Three rustic restaurants serving grilled meat and empañadas under thatched roofs line the banks (Figs. 64, 65, & 66). Although the festive and popular scene seemed unlikely to produce much in the way of archaeologically useful findings, we were pleasantly surprised. At the point where the waters emerge from their underground source, there is a small chapel with a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe visible inside, once again supporting the female deity associations with flowing water and a likely gendered complementarity with the masculine image of the crucified Christ at Chihuitán (Figs. 67, 68, & 69). Potsherds visible on the ground in the vicinity of the shrine and a small, possibly artificial mound nearby promise further archaeological potential (Fig. 70, Fig. 71). Based on my previous excavations at the colonial-period site of Rancho Santa Cruz near Chihuitán, the pottery appears to be Late Postclassic and colonial-period in date.



Figure 64. Laollaga's *ojo de agua*.



Figure 65. Streamside restaurants.



Figure 66. Restaurant kitchen.



Figure 67. The springs.



Figure 68. Shrine to the Virgin at the springhead.



Figure 69. View from the shrine.



Figure 70. Sherd scatter near shrine.



Figure 71. Sherds eroding from mound.

Given the strong archaeological potential of the Chihuitán landscape/sanctuary complex, it would have been terrific to find corroborating historical documents related to the pilgrimage. The archival component of this research trip was, unfortunately, less successful. In Oaxaca we searched three archives, the Archivo General del Poder Ejecutivo, the Archivo General del Poder Jurídico, and the Archivo Histórico del Arquidiócesis. Only the latter archive held colonial period materials pertaining to the Isthmus, and these were not relevant to the current investigation. The two major state archives largely house 19th and 20th century materials from the Isthmus, and few references to Chihuitán that would shed light on the fiesta and its pilgrimage were located. Most germane was a letter from 1872 in which the community of Chihuitán agreed to donate 175 pesos from the income generated by the *feria* toward the construction of the new municipal building in Tehuantepec. A week spent in Mexico City searching likely branches of the Archivo Nacional de la Nación that could provide documentary reference to religious activities on the Isthmus was similarly unsuccessful, other than the chance discovery of a document referring to the eighteenth-century construction of the San Pablo Guilá church mentioned earlier. Despite the poor result of my archival search thus far, I am confident that still untapped resources in tax records or local parish archives will provide some additional documentary support.

Prospects for future research

Based on the results of my FAMSI-funded exploratory research in 2007, I am ready to formulate a research proposal for a more intensive investigation of post conquest sacred landscapes in Oaxaca. This project will combine archaeological, ethnographic, and ethnohistorical methods, as I seek to understand more fully the historic context in

which Native communities 1) reconciled their traditional concepts of sacred powers resident in the natural environment with the divine forces represented by Catholic doctrine and 2) instrumentally made use of the Church's language of apparitions and miracles to reassert their ties with one another through acts of pilgrimage. This investigation will focus on the Oaxaca communities of Santo Domingo Chihuitán and San Pablo Guilá, whose regional proximity and shared crucified Christ tradition suggest important religious and likely economic exchanges in the past.

My goals in this project are to first document specific linkages between late prehispanic and colonial period ritual practices related to the Isthmian sacred landscape, particularly those centered around Chihuitán. This evidence would be gathered primarily through the archaeological tools of intensive surface survey and small-scale excavation. Dating of materials would be done through stratigraphic context, radiocarbon assays (where possible), and through thermoluminescence analysis of select ceramics. Ethnographic studies of the present pilgrimage practices at Chihuitán and San Pablo Guilá would provide necessary confirmation of the use of landscape features in present-day ritual pathways followed by the pilgrims, especially the role of gender complementarity. Finally, it is hoped that a search for documentary sources will yield more historical information by which the early eighteenth-century church at Guilá and its venerated image of Christ can be directly linked to a pre-existing cult at Chihuitán. In the absence of such records, a planned archaeological survey at Guilá should provide material remains that would help establish these connections.

Funding from FAMSI has been critical to the development of this project design, and I am grateful for the opportunity to turn what had been a long-simmering pot of questions and musings about colonial-period religious interaction into a realistic and delimited set of research goals.

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