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Systematic Settlement Survey Surrounding Guirún, Oaxaca, México



Research Year: 1995

Culture: Mixtec

Chronology: Classic to Post Classic

Location: Oaxaca, México

Site: Guirún

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Introduction

In January 1995, the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) provided generous support to this investigator to conduct a regional survey in the area surrounding the Guirún site in Oaxaca, México ([Figure 1](#)). The survey of 110 km² was completed in summer 1995, and a preliminary report was filed with FAMSI in September of that year. Shortly thereafter, an extension was granted so that the

remaining project funds could be used for additional fieldwork at the Guirún site itself. In June and July 1996, the project prepared a detailed terrace-by-terrace map of the Guirún archaeological site. The site is situated in the terrain of San Lorenzo Albarradas and San Pablo Mitla (Tlacolula district) at the eastern edge of the Valley of Oaxaca ([Figure 2](#)). The project personnel included the Director Dr. Gary M. Feinman (University of Wisconsin-Madison) as well as Linda M. Nicholas (University of Wisconsin), Fausto Olivera Mendoza (Xaagá, Mitla), Everardo Olivera Díaz (Xaagá, Mitla), and Laura Waterbury (student volunteer, McGill University, Canada). The 1996 project represented the second year of a planned long-term effort to study the Classic-Postclassic period transition and specialized household production at the eastern edge of the Tlacolula arm of the Valley of Oaxaca.

The summer 1996 field research was designed to produce a more accurate and detailed map of Guirún than is possible during regional survey, and to define the extent of the site during each phase of occupation. Another goal was to examine the nature of prehispanic stone working at the site. Through intensive survey, we also endeavored to study the intrasite distribution of different stone working activities. Prior regional surveys of the Tlacolula arm (1980, directed by Stephen A. Kowalewski [Kowalewski et al. 1989]) and the Guirún area (1995, directed by Gary M. Feinman [Feinman and Nicholas 1996]), as well as Nelly Robles García's (1994) investigation of ancient quarrying activity at La Cuadrada, all had previously shown a significant association between the prehispanic inhabitants of Guirún and the exploitation and processing of stone materials. A final aim of the 1996 research was to evaluate the potential of the Guirún site for residential terrace excavations. Regional survey work (and subsequent visits to the site) indicated that a significant proportion of Guirún terraces were well preserved and might lend themselves to further subsurface investigation.

When the 1996 field project began, 70 terraces had been mapped at the Guirún site as part of the 1980 and 1995 regional surveys. However, the regional survey mapping efforts were limited both by extremely heavy vegetal cover in certain parts of the site and by recent farming in others. Construction of modern agricultural terraces confounded the mapping of ancient terraces in parts of the site. In 1980, preceding the availability of topographic maps, air photographs were employed in mapping. Yet, the photos for this area were unclear due to the dense mountain vegetation. Furthermore, the placement of Guirún at the junction of the 1980-1995 survey regions provided an additional complication. In 1995, we recognized that a more detailed map of Guirún was necessary. The 1996 intensive survey was needed to integrate, systematize, and refine the observations made in 1980 and 1995.

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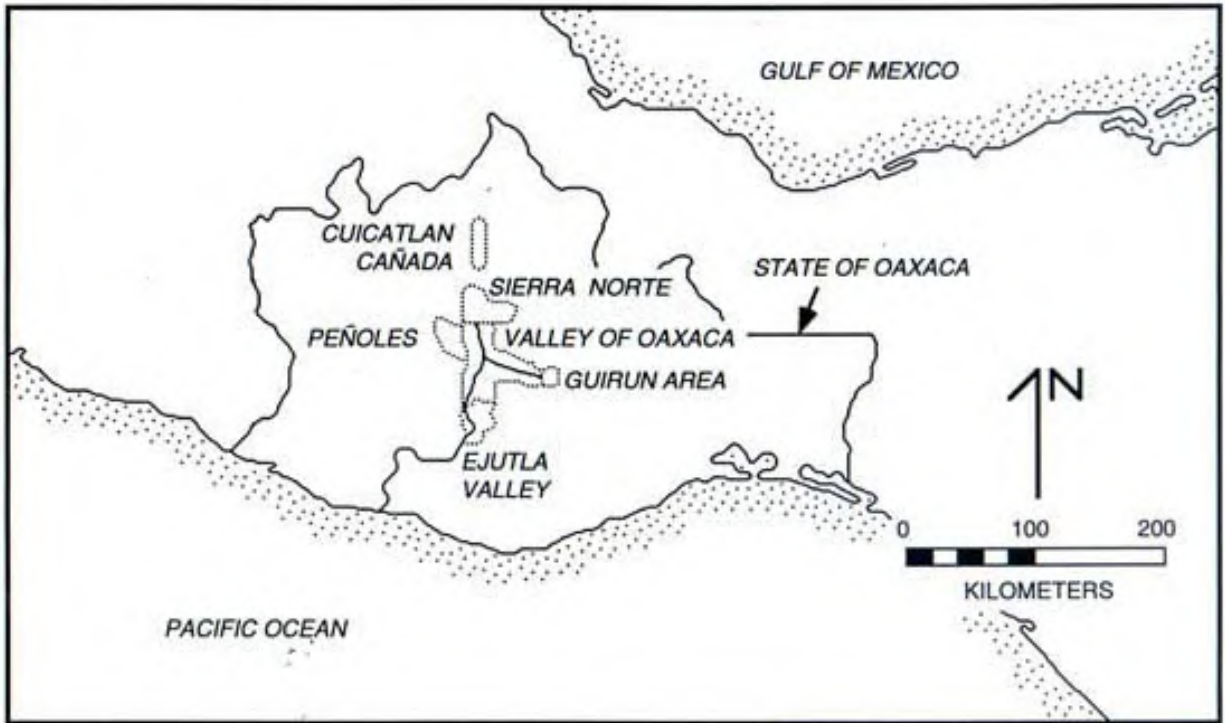


Figure 1. Location of the Valley of Oaxaca and the Guirún Area.

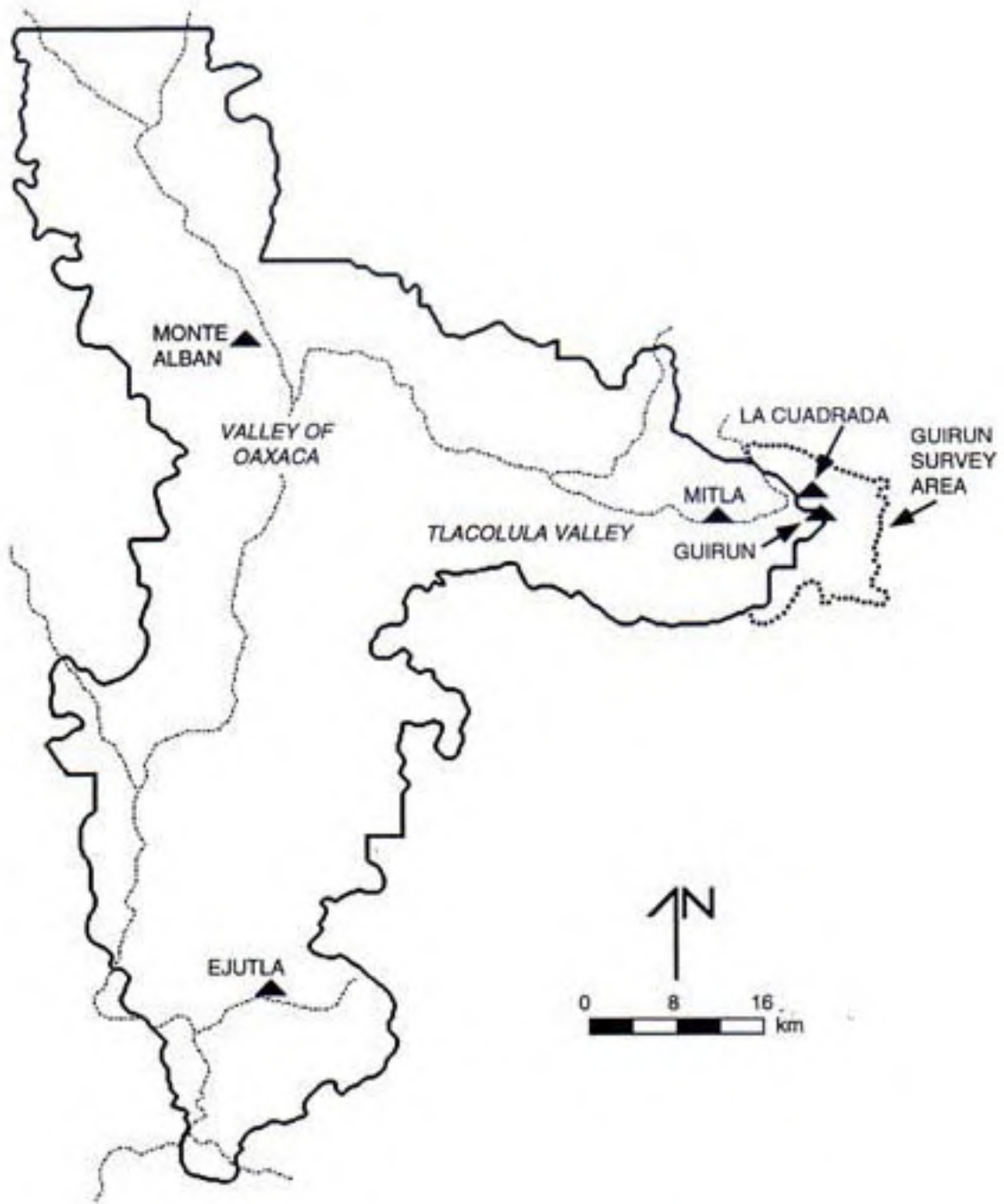


Figure 2. The Valley of Oaxaca and Guirún Area Survey Regions.

Methodology

The project field methodology consisted of systematically walking over the entire area of the Guirún site and mapping all architectural features observed on the surface. In the field, the principal unit of analysis was the residential terrace. In total, 330 terraces were mapped ([Figure 3](#)). Terraces were constructed on flattened hill slopes that were stabilized by the building of stone retaining walls. All intact terraces were measured. Whenever possible, we mapped house foundations and other features that were visible on these terraces. Many terraces have a single house foundation, although some of the larger ones have two or more.

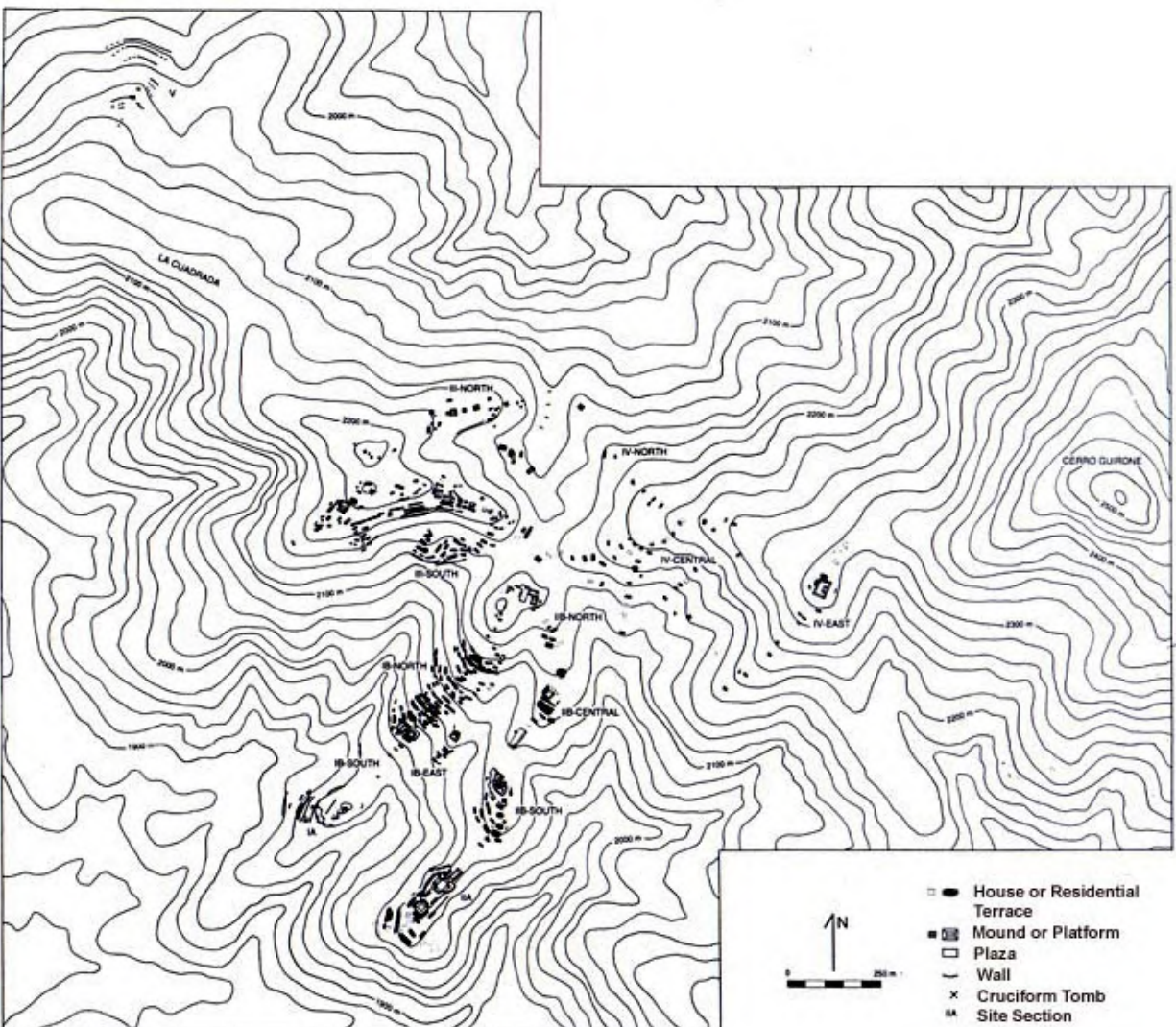


Figure 3. Distribution of Residential Terraces and Other Architectural Features at the Guirún Site.

The Guirún terraces were oriented on the site map using a Brunton compass. In the rough and heavily vegetated terrain where the site is situated, it was not feasible to employ a transit or alidade. On most days, a two-hour walk upslope and a difficult (often slippery) descent down were required to reach and depart the site. A 100 m tape was carried in the field, but frequently the dense, thorny vegetation made it more practical and accurate to pace the dimensions of terraces and other features.

In the field, we recorded the nature of the ceramics that were present on each terrace. These observations provided the basis for dating the site and estimating the extent of occupation during different phases. When ceramic densities were sufficient or other important artifacts were present, a collection was made; 179 surface artifact collections were made as part of this study. Some of these collections were complete surface pickups in which all artifacts within a 1 m square were recorded. Others were more selective, general collections of a specific terrace or other feature. Materials from all surface collections were washed, analyzed, and recorded in the project laboratory in Mitla, and the information from them was used to check observations that were made in the field. All materials from these collections are stored in a secure facility that is rented by the director in Xaagá, Mitla.

In addition to residential terraces, the mapping of Guirún recorded numerous platforms, house foundations, structures, plazas, walls, and patios. These features also were placed on the map, measured, and checked for surface artifacts. Many prehispanic architectural features were mapped either at the scale of 1 cm : 5 m or 1 cm : 10 m (depending on the nature of the terrain and of the archaeological remains). At the same time, a base map of the entire site also was prepared at the scale of 1 cm : 50 m. All information derived from field observations or collections concerning the dating of Guirún or the distributions of different classes of artifacts was recorded on this map. The 1 cm : 50 m map was derived from the new topographic maps now available for the Guirún area.

Results

The Guirún site is situated on the tops and slopes of a series of steep lomas that are located just below Cerro Guirone. This high mountain peak is a prominent feature that marks the eastern edge of the Valley of Oaxaca. The ancient settlement was extremely well defended, so that the few more gradual paths to Guirún were always blocked by defensive walls. In total, we mapped 64 walls as part of this summer's research; few of these walls had been recognized previously. In addition to the 330 terraces and numerous walls, we also recorded 55 structures and house foundations, 9 plazas or patios, and 51 platforms. The site was laid out so that a platform or structure was placed on virtually every natural loma top or flat saddle.

A new finding of the 1996 study was that Guirún apparently had small occupations in Monte Albán Late I (300-200 B.C.) and II (200 B.C. - A.D. 200). From the 1995 Guirún regional survey, we also know that a larger Monte Albán Late I and II site was located at

the base of the site near a natural spring (and the modern hamlet of El Zompantli). The El Zompantli site, along with many settlements of its time in this eastern end of Tlacolula, was abandoned during Monte Albán IIIA (A.D. 200-500). At that time, the more defensible Guirún settlement appears to have expanded greatly in size, spreading over the two longest and flattest ridges of the site. These ridges became the most densely settled sectors of the occupation in Monte Albán IIIA. Major public construction appears to have been initiated at the site for the first time in this phase. A large architectural complex was apparently begun, including a ballcourt.

The Guirún site grew further, expanding upslope, in Monte Albán IIIB-IV (A.D. 500-900). Some of the areas of the settlement with complex alignments of defensive walls were first settled at this time. The area of the site increased further in Monte Albán V (A.D. 900-1520). At this time the limits of the site included the La Cuadrada stone quarry ([Figure 3](#)). As in Monte Albán IIIB-IV, the Monte Albán V occupation focused on more defensible parts of the site, and new walls were erected in areas only associated with Monte Albán V pottery.

The lower portions of Guirún, around the ballcourt and the open cruciform tomb (excavated by Marshall Saville almost a century ago [Saville 1900, 1909]), appear to have been less densely settled in Monte Albán V. Based on the architectural alignment, we suspect that the open tomb and an associated curvilinear wall were added to an architectural complex that was principally constructed and more heavily used during a prior era. This may help explain why the artifacts associated with Saville's Guirún collections (curated at the American Museum of Natural History in New York) are mostly Monte Albán IIIB-IV in date rather than Monte Albán V, while the tomb is Monte Albán V in form and style.

One of the most striking features of Guirún is its association with the processing and use of stone artifacts. At least a dozen quarries and *bancos de piedra* are encompassed by the site or are situated immediately adjacent to it. These include the ignimbrite quarry (La Cuadrada) described by Robles (1994), as well as various sources of chert, greenstone, basalt, and other construction stone. Stone debris was often more abundant on the surface than ceramic artifacts. Numerous stone artifacts (for example, scrapers, chert blades, projectile points), retouched flakes, and even some in-process stone tools and ornaments were noted during the project. Most of these objects were made from the local cherts. In general, the chert assemblages on the terraces tended to be dominated by chert from the nearest source.

The high amounts of chert debris and the low proportion of finished tools relative to debris from these local cherts suggests that the inhabitants were working the chert and that at least some of the finished items were traded to other settlements. Even though stone sources were abundant at Guirún, nonlocal varieties of chert and onyx also were brought to the site. There is less evidence that these exotic materials were worked at the site. Given the dearth of flat farmland around the site and estimated populations that may have exceeded 1000 people during the Classic and Postclassic periods, we suspect that the occupants of Guirún would have partially supported themselves through the processing and exchange of a diversity of stone artifacts and materials.

More detailed discussion of intrasite patterns of stone working will have to await the excavation of a representative sample of terraces at the site.

Conclusions

Guirún appears to have been a much more populous and more important settlement than we suspected before the summer of 1996. This finding, along with the site's clear association with stone working, help account for the fabulous carved stone tomb, which was erected late in the site's occupational history and excavated by Saville (1900, 1909).

The site has considerable promise for terrace excavation. About 10-20% of the residential terraces still appear extremely well preserved with good stone retaining walls. Excavations at the site could provide new insights on the Classic-Postclassic transition in the Valley of Oaxaca, on frontier relations with neighboring regions to the east, exchange between this sector of the Valley of Oaxaca and other areas, and on the economy and technology of late prehispanic stone working in a range of materials.

If intact terraces are to be excavated at Guirún, the work should be conducted in the next five to ten years. With recent land reforms, farmers from San Lorenzo Albarradas are clearing the heavy vegetation that covers and protects ancient terraces, while opening new lands for milpa. Often, the top prehispanic deposits have been damaged, precipitating erosion. Of much greater concern are more concentrated agricultural efforts that are systematically removing the ancient stone walls associated with prehispanic structures and terraces on the saddle at the center of the site. There also has been a fair amount of pot-hunting in this part of the site over the last several years.

Our observations over the last few years indicate that the potential areas to excavate at Guirún are dwindling rapidly, although the site still has excellent investigatory prospects for continued study, excavation, and even perhaps tourism. Given the significance, the history, and the striking location of Guirún, it would be a great pity for the scientific and historical communities (as well as the surrounding villages) not to develop this research potential in the immediate future.

Acknowledgments

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