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Excavations at El Palenque, San Martín Tilcajete: A Late Formative Subregional Center in the Oaxaca Valley, México



Research Year: 1999

Culture: Zapotec

Chronology: Late Pre-Classic

Location: San Martín Tilcajete, Ocotlán district, Oaxaca Valley, México

Sites: El Palenque and Loma de Los Mogotes

Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[El Palenque](#)

[Loma de Los Mogotes](#)

[Sources Cited](#)

Introduction

San Martín Tilcajete, in the Ocotlán district of the Oaxaca Valley, has been the focus of archaeological investigations since August 1993, when Charles Spencer and Elsa Redmond returned to the Formative period sites that had been located and designated OC-SMT-11-A, SMT-11-B, and SMT-23 ([Figure 1](#)) in 1978 by survey crews of the

Oaxaca Settlement Pattern Project (Blanton *et al.*, 1982; Kowalewski *et al.*, 1989). During the 1993 and 1994 field seasons we carried out a program of intensive mapping and systematic surface collecting at these three sites. Based on an analysis of the surface collections we selected areas of the Rosario and Early Monte Albán I (700-300 B.C.) phase site SMT-11-A, known by townspeople as "El Mogote" to conduct a program of excavations during the 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1998 field seasons. Excavations at the Late Monte Albán I (300-100 B.C.) phase site SMT-11-B ([Figure 2](#)), known by townspeople as "El Palenque," began in 1997 and continued during the 1998 and 1999 field seasons. This report describes the excavations carried out during the 1999 field season at El Palenque and the Monte Albán II (100 B.C.-A.D. 200) phase site SMT-23, known as Loma de Los Mogotes, with the support of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI), and the permission of the Consejo de Arqueología of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) in México City, the Centro INAH Oaxaca, and the authorities in the town of San Martín Tilcajete.

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El Palenque

During the 1999 field season multiple excavation areas were opened at El Palenque, beginning with Area I, located at the northernwestern corner of the site's plaza. Area I has been the focus of horizontal excavations since 1997, when we first began exposing Structure 7. We continued excavating the remains of this imposing structure that was built on a masonry platform, some 80 cm in height, measuring 16 m by 16 m and oriented 17 degrees east of magnetic north. Structure 7 consists of eight rooms around a central patio. As of September 3, 1999 we have completely delineated and excavated this structure by meter square units according to the project's single grid system. All Brunton compass readings refer to magnetic north. The ground surface was stripped with crowbars (barretas), picks, and shovels, below which the excavations proceeded down to room floors and the patio surface with trowels, ice picks, screw drivers, brushes, and other finer tools. All deposits were systematically passed through 0.5 cm mesh screens. Ceramics were bagged in cloth bags, lithics in plastic bags and coin envelopes, burned adobes and burned daub in plastic bags, and the remaining small finds in coin envelopes. Dirt samples for flotation, pollen, and phytolith analysis were taken systematically from all culturally meaningful units. We have drawn a complete plan of every meter square of Structure 7 at 1:20 cm scale to show all the foundation stones and remnant adobe bricks of the walls of each of the eight rooms bordering its

inner patio. All features, including smashed reconstructable vessels resting on the floors of the rooms and the packed lime patio surface are indicated on the plan of the structure.

During the 1999 season we completed the excavation of Structure 7's Room 1, 5, 6, and 8. Room 5 borders the patio's north side and measures 4.4 m by 3.2 m; Room 5 was well preserved with various ceramic and stone artifacts resting on its hard-packed dirt floor. The remains of a two-tiered stone-slab staircase leading in and out of the patio were exposed on Room 5's southern side. Adobes still rested atop Room 5's walls, especially its eastern wall.

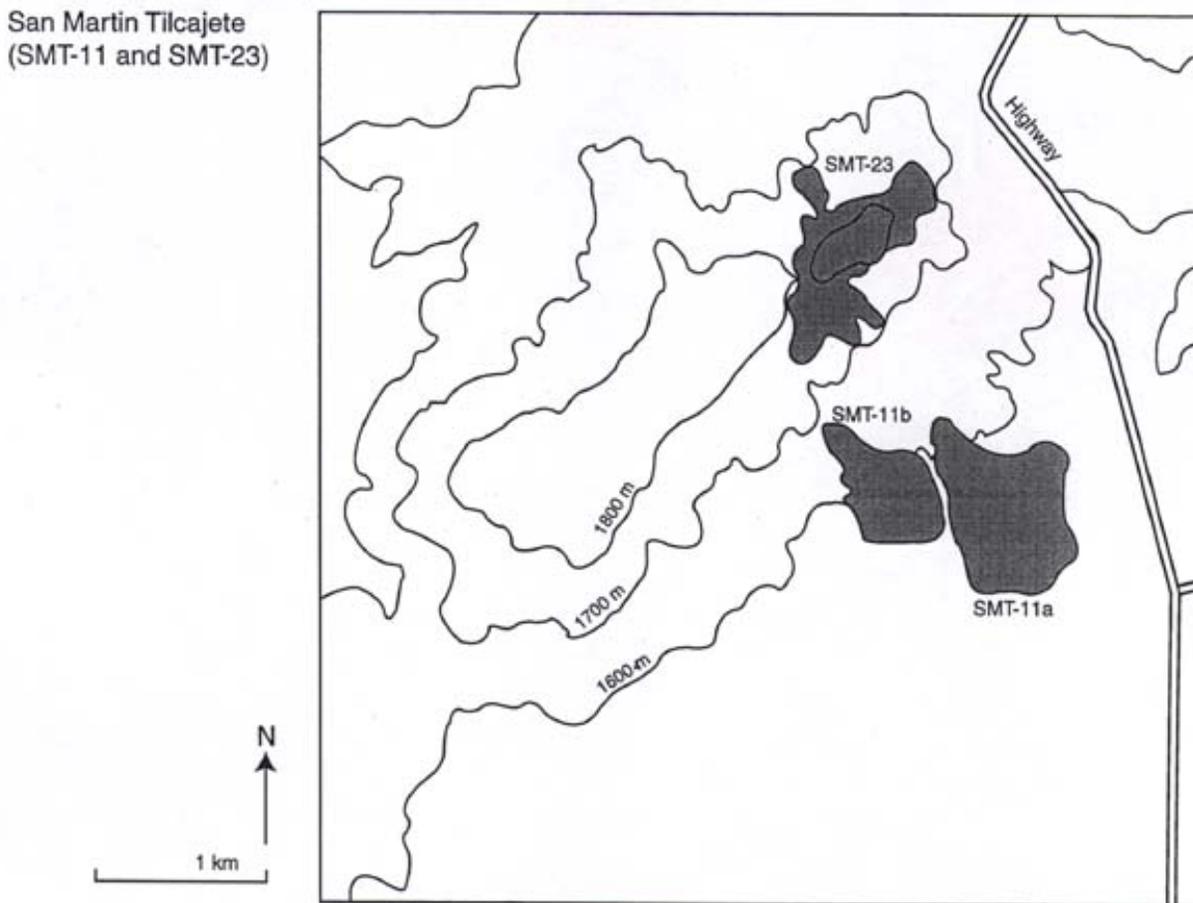


Figure 1.

Directly adjoining Room 5 to the west lay Room 6, at the northwest corner of Structure 7. Room 6 measures 5 m by 3.6 m and because of the heavier overburden here at the northwestern corner of Area I was in a good state of preservation. Several reconstructable vessel fragments rested on the room's hard-packed dirt floor and adobe bricks capped the wall foundations.

Room 8 is located at the southwestern corner of Structure 7 and measures 5 m by 3.6 m, in mirror symmetry to its counterpart, Room 6, at the structure's northwestern corner. On its hard-packed dirt floor rested various artifacts and burned domestic debris. Directly east of Room 8 lay Room 1, which measures 4.4 m by 3.2 m like its counterpart, Room 5, directly across the patio to the north. Various ceramic and lithic artifacts rested on its hard-packed dirt floor.

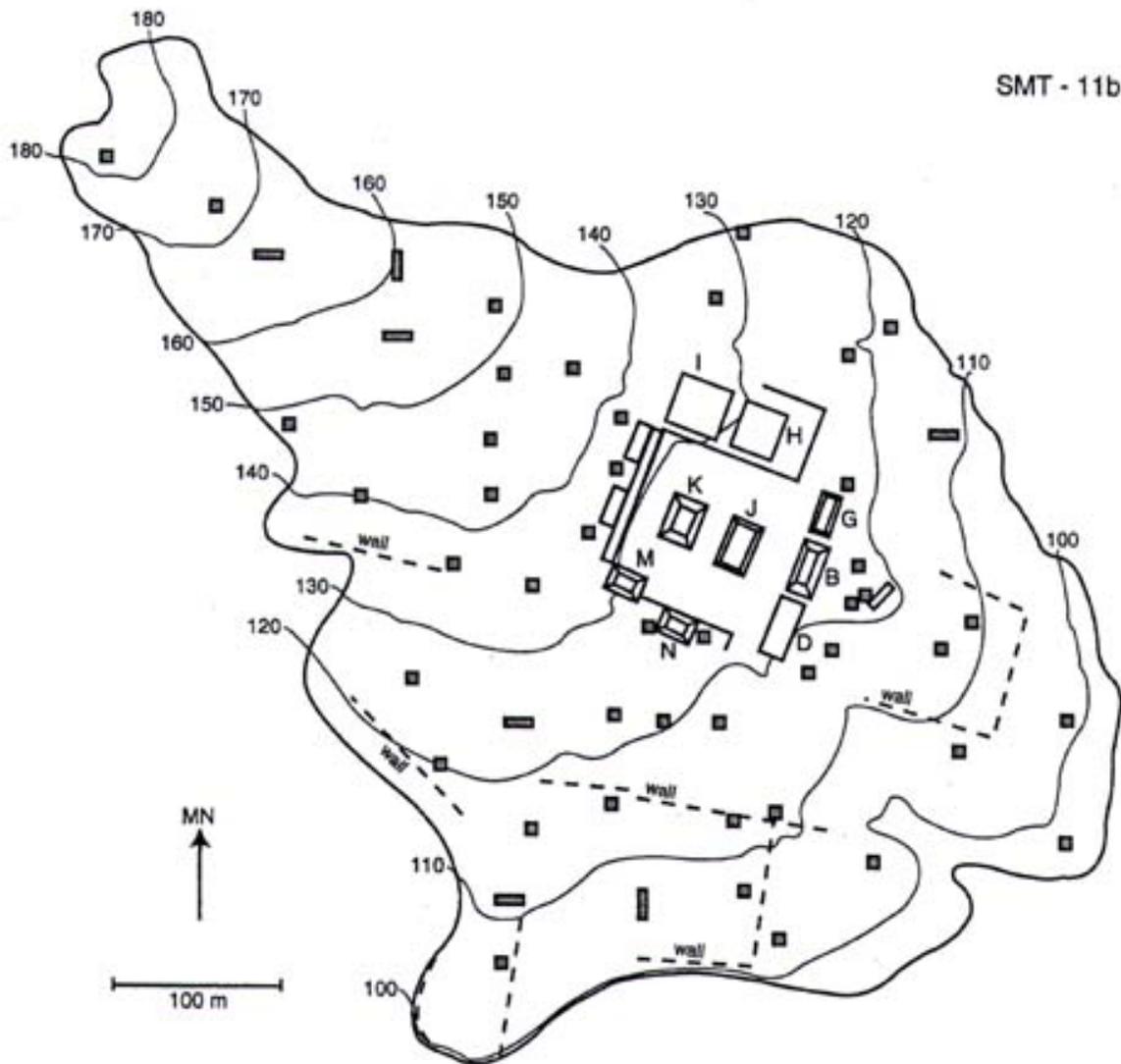


Figure 2.

During the 1999 season we also completed the excavation of Structure 7's patio. The patio measures 8 m by 8 m and features a stone pavement at its core, surrounded by a

hard-packed lime surface extending beyond. The mouth of a subterranean stone-slab drain was exposed at the patio's center, leading to the northeast, passing under Room 4 and beyond the northeast corner of Room 4, at Structure 7's northeast corner. Fragments of ceramic downspouts were recovered above the patio surface in front of Room 8 and Room 4 and had probably fallen from their original roofline positions at the time of Structure 7's destruction. The remains of two-tiered, lime-plastered stone-slab staircases were recovered leading from Rooms 2, 3, 5, and 6 in and out of the patio. The best-preserved staircase links Room 2, located at the extreme southeastern corner of the structure, with the inner patio. Just a meter north of this staircase a reconstructable outleaved wall bowl of the ceramic type designated G.12 by Caso, Bernal, and Acosta (1967) lay face down on the patio floor. This ceramic type, with its double-line incised rim and combed-bottom base is highly diagnostic of the Late Monte Albán I phase.

Also within Area I, we continued exposing some of the structures adjacent to Structure 7 on this prominent northwestern corner of El Palenque's main plaza. Structure 8, located directly south across a 1.9 m wide corridor from Structure 7 measures 12.2 m by 5 m. A stone-slab step in this narrow corridor serves as a conduit between them. Structure 8's surface was paved entirely with stone slabs; no evidence of a plastered or other surface was encountered. Structure 14, another masonry platform directly west across the narrow corridor from Structure 8 at the southwestern corner of Area I, was exposed as well. The same can be said of the partial excavation of Structure 15, at the extreme northeast corner of Area I. We expect to continue the excavation of both Structure 14 and Structure 15 during the upcoming 2000 field season and determine their size, and their chronological and functional association with Structure 7.

In addition to Area I, two other excavation areas were opened at the site of El Palenque during the 1999 field season. Two test trenches (Areas W-1, W-2) were excavated across the stone and earthen walls that delimit the site's gradual southern flank in order to evaluate their construction and their dating. The Area W-1 trench revealed a line of slumped retaining stones, along with Monte Albán I ceramics, lithics, and cane-impressed burned daub. The Area W-2 trench located to the north and upslope of Area W-1 revealed a better preserved stone retaining wall, but the associated ceramics dated to the historic period.

Loma de Los Mogotes

At the neighboring hilltop site called Loma de Los Mogotes (SMT-23), two excavation areas were opened during the 1999 field season under the supervision of Christina Elson. One block excavation was located on top of the mound on the northern side of the site's second, smaller plaza, which according to the program of intensive surface collections in 1994 dated to the Monte Albán II phase (100 B.C.-A.D. 200). Elson's crew exposed the complete stone wall foundations of Structure 1 on top of this mound. Structure 1 sits atop a 1.6 m tall masonry platform oriented 22 degrees east of magnetic north that still exhibited remains of its stuccoed exterior surface. Structure 1 measured

approximately 12 m by 12 m (its western end is severely eroded and rendered an actual measurement of 11 m) and consisted of six rooms arranged around a central patio. A large looters' pit penetrated a major portion of the structure's patio, but produced a large sample of Monte Albán II phase ceramics, especially ceramic types C.11, C.12, and A.9 (Caso, Bernal, and Acosta, 1967). Although the configuration of rooms was evident from the remnant stone foundations of Structure 1's walls, the damage caused by the looters' pit, erosion, and plowing prevented the recovery of intact floors. Test pits carried out in each of Structure 1's rooms revealed no evidence of any underlying earlier structure. The abundant domestic ceramics (*ollas*, *comales*), chipped stone, ground stone (*manos*, *metates*), and other artifactual and ecofactual debris associated with Structure 1 suggest that it was a residential structure, and probably a high-statused one at that. Elson's plan to excavate another residential structure at Los Mogotes during the upcoming 2000 field season should provide valuable comparative data.

Another block excavation was opened to the north in Los Mogotes's main plaza, which according to the 1994 program of intensive surface collections dated to the Monte Albán IIIb-IV periods (A.D. 200-700). Elson exposed a small platform measuring 5.8 m by 5 m located in the center of this northern plaza, which may have served as an *adoratorio*. The relatively light density of ceramics recovered here consisted largely of the ceramic type G.35 (Caso, Bernal, and Acosta, 1967).

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