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## **Regional Survey in the Central Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca, México**

**Research Year:** 1998

**Culture:** Zapotec

**Chronology:** Pre-Classic to Post Classic

**Location:** Oaxaca, México

**Sites:** Tlaxiaco, Teposcolula and Nochixtlán

Regional survey in the Central Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca, México was conducted between January 1 and June 15, 1999. The project was headed by Stephen A. Kowalewski as Project Director and Andrew K. Balkansky as Field Director and principal investigator. The survey area included 31 municipios of three districts of the state of Oaxaca: Tlaxiaco, Teposcolula and Nochixtlán, which covered a large territory between four previously surveyed regions of the Mixteca Alta (the Nochixtlán Valley, the Tilantongo-Jaltepec sector, the Huamelulpan Valley and the Teposcolula Valley).

The general objectives of the project were:

1. To test general hypotheses that interrelate size, boundedness, and complexity of social systems;
2. To test hypotheses about the role of exogenous and local factors in local and regional change;
3. To document the timing and degree of possible human involvement in ecological changes in Mixteca Alta (e.g. major modifications of the land);
4. To study the main trends of the socio-political development of the region and to determine whether Mixtec polities were always small units or whether they were at one time much larger states;
5. To better understand three major transitions of the cultural evolution of Central Oaxaca, namely the origins of the Formative "walled towns" (ca. 1 A.D.), their centralization into Classic-era regional states (ca. 500 A.D.), and the development, sometime in the Postclassic (beginning ca. 1000 A.D.), of the "cacicazgo" as the predominate political-economical form across Oaxaca;

6. To provide an informed basis for future research at the intra-site scale using representative sampling, controlled collecting, and excavation.

By May 15, 1999, the project covered 1100 sq. km with 615 sites.

Phase	Districts			Total
	Tlaxiaco	Teposcolula	Nochixtlán	
<b>Cruz (1500-300 B.C.)</b>	47 sites	40 sites	29 sites	116 sites
<b>Ramos (300 B.C.-200 A.D.)</b>	41 sites	27 sites	10 sites	78 sites
<b>Las Flores (200-1000 A.D.)</b>	92 sites	67 sites	49 sites	208 sites
<b>Natividad (1000-1530 A.D.)</b>	199 sites	179 sites	88 sites	466 sites
<b>All phases</b>	279 sites	216 sites	120 sites	615 sites

The main focus of the survey was the all but unknown central part of the Mixteca Alta, which is the center of Tlaxiaco district. Here several medium-size and small valleys were surveyed. The largest of them was the Achiutla Valley; center of an important Postclassic kingdom and the Tlaxiaco Valley. They are circled by a series of small valleys and foothill zones and are limited from the east by a high mountain system. The fact that this area is not well documented is plainly illustrated by the discovery of a large Postclassic site, known as "Pueblo Viejo de Magdalena Peñasco" (TLA-SMP-SIP-5). This site is not known from ethnohistorical sources, but contains complex architecture, including a ballcourt and the remains of many residential terraces.

In the Teposcolula district the area that connected the Valley of Teposcolula with Tlaxiaco and Huamelulpan was studied. The eastern section of the Teposcolula district, which extends to the Nochixtlán Valley has received similarly little attention. Here the survey revealed a probable archaic component, including one rock painting, and dense sedentary occupation beginning from the Early/Middle Formative (Middle Cruz, 1200-700 B.C.). The settlement pattern demonstrates continuity from these early villages to a large complex Ramos urban center at Cerro Jazmin (SPP-TOP-TIP-1), which grew to one sq. km in size. The Natividad component at Cerro Jazmin was about four sq. km. It coincided with the ethnohistoric data concerning the importance of a Mixtec cacicazgo centered at Tiltepec. Modern Tiltepec is situated at the foot of Cerro Jazmin, making this giant site a good candidate for the Postclassic cabecera.

In the Nochixtlán district the only part surveyed was the western portion which neighbors the mountain system dividing the Achiutla and Nochixtlán valleys. A new map

of the archaeological zone of Monte Negro (NO-TIL-TIL-1), originally explored by A. Caso and J. Acosta in 1937-1940, demonstrated that the site was much larger and complex than was previously thought. In addition, a probable Late Cruz predecessor (NO-SJD-SJD-7) of the local political center at Monte Negro was found. Due to their size, complexity and paramount position in the site hierarchy, Monte Negro and Cerro Jazmin seem to be hegemonies in the western portion of the Nochixtlán Valley in the Late Formative times.

The survey of Tilantongo (NO-TIL-TIL-24), the capital of the most powerful Mixtec kingdom in 11-16th centuries, showed that despite architectural insignificance, it truly was the large and important settlement discussed by the Mixtec codices. The site, inhabited from the Middle Formative times, was possibly Monte Negro's political successor beginning from the Early Classic. The peak of its occupation dates to Postclassic, when all neighboring low hillslopes (about three sq. km) were densely populated.

Preliminary analysis had already revealed some problematic points for the Project:

1. *Cruz-Ramos transition* – The number of sites during the transition from the Middle Formative (Late Cruz) to the Late Formative (Early Ramos) decreases in the current survey area. Previous surveys did not reveal this pattern. At the same time, the general area occupied by all sites grew from 650 ha to approximately 700 ha and the number of the large sites (more than 30 ha) grew from three to seven. We see this pattern as a result of the formation of the early Mixtec urban centers – a process observed elsewhere in Oaxaca – the Central Valleys, the Huamelulpan Valley, and the Eastern Nochixtlán Valley. Two of the Early Ramos sites – Monte Negro and Cerro Jazmin – were already urban centers covering more than one sq. km, while the Late Cruz sites did not exceed 60-70 ha. It is also important to note that the major reduction was noted in the western part of Nochixtlán Valley (33 to 14 sites), where these two large political centers emerged during Middle-Late Formative transition. Most of the Cruz sites in their general vicinity were not occupied during the entire Ramos phase. We did not have many examples of Cruz structures, but nevertheless Early Ramos architecture is much more complex and functionally differentiated than its predecessors.
2. *Late Ramos "hiatus"* – There is an apparent absence of settlements dating to the Late Ramos (200 B.C.-200 A.D.) in the major part of the area surveyed (only 15 sites, 170 ha comparing to 62 sites and 700 ha of Early Ramos). It is a striking fact because in Yucuita and Huamelulpan this period was a time of the major centralization and florescence of the regional states and general growth of the population. At the same time only two sites in the surveyed area had continuous occupation from Early Ramos to Early Flores while 20 had a gap between these phases.

There could be several explanations for this:

1. Migration of the population from the periphery to the regional cores;
2. Effects of the military expansion of the regional states and movement of the population;
3. Problems with ceramic typology.

Mass abandonment of the sites and their posterior repopulation do not seem very likely, as the key positions of the regional centers in this phenomenon is evident. More than half (eight) of the sites that had Late Ramos components were distributed around the Huamelulpan Valley in the neighboring areas. In addition, five sites were situated in the Huendio-Tlacotepec Valley, about 10-15 km southeast of Huamelulpan limits. No apparent Late Ramos horizon was observed at Monte Negro or Cerro Jazmin. Monte Negro seems to be abandoned with only slight evidence of Postclassic occupation. However, Cerro Jazmin was one of the largest sites in all Nochixtlán region and evidently a capital of the significant polity in the Early Classic. It is possible to suppose that the cessation of the socio-political activity in these areas during Late Ramos was connected with the creation of the large regional states which in turn caused changes in regional systems.

*Submitted 05/01/1999 by:*

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