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Ancient Xoconochco: Occupational History



Research Year: 2000

Culture: Aztec

Chronology: Post Classic

Location: Xoconochco, México

Sites: Las Gradas and Old Soconusco

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Introduction and Background

Fieldwork carried out at and in the vicinity of Xoconochco, capital of the ancient Province of Xoconochco (or Soconusco, the hispanicized rendering of the name) ([Figure 1](#)) during the summer of 2000¹ and supported by FAMSI, has provided us with valuable new information regarding the history and occupation of this important regional capital. This research was the second phase of a multi-year project, the Proyecto Soconusco Posclásico (hereafter PSP), initiated in 1997 (Gasco 1998a, 1998b).² The summer 2000 fieldwork was very specifically focused on the occupational history of the community of Xoconochco, which was named as the regional capital when the region fell to Aztec rule in the late 1400s and served briefly as the provincial capital early in the Colonial period (Gasco 1999, n.d.; Gasco and Voorhies 1989; Voorhies and Gasco n.d.).

The long-term goals of the PSP are to examine the social and economic transformations that took place in the Soconusco region during the Postclassic period. There is a general consensus among Mesoamerican scholars that the Postclassic period was a time of political, economic, and social transformation (e.g., Andrews 1993; Berdan *et al.* 1996; Blanton *et al.* 1993; Byland and Pohl 1994; Chase and Rice 1985; Hodge and Smith 1994; Sabloff and Andrews 1986; Smith and Berdan n.d.). As Mesoamerica was experiencing political fragmentation following the collapse of the large centralized polities of the Classic period, the evidence suggests that the intensity of economic and social relations between and among diverse regions of Mesoamerica was actually increasing. With expanding commerce and the growing importance of long-distance trade, the products of several regions of Mesoamerica were increasingly in demand.

Among the goods that circulated widely within the Postclassic Mesoamerican commercial system were cacao, turquoise, metal, polychrome ceramics, and obsidian. Although the importance of these and other products in both the economic and ideological spheres is widely recognized, little is known about many of the regions where these goods originated. This is particularly true of the cacao-producing regions, like Soconusco, and the regions in western and northern México and the American Southwest where metals and turquoise were mined. Clearly, we cannot fully understand the complexities of Postclassic Mesoamerica until these poorly studied yet vitally important regions are investigated.

The Soconusco region was undoubtedly a key player in the Postclassic Mesoamerican economic system because it was a primary producer of cacao—a product that not only circulated widely in long-distance trade, but also served as a medium of exchange and

¹ I would like to thank the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia for granting the permits to carry out the research. I also wish to thank the ejidatarios of Acacoyagua who kindly allowed us to work on their parcelas. Thanks also to the project field and lab assistants, Susan Maguire, grad student at SUNY-Buffalo, Katie Ainsworth, grad student at SUNY-Buffalo, Karla Cardona, grad student at Tulane University, Lucia Gudiel, undergraduate at California State University, Dominguez Hills, and Cristina Sedillos, recent graduate from California State University, Long Beach. Finally, I wish to thank Mariano Perez, Manuel Perez, Ernesto Ordonez, and Leonardo Gonzalez for their hard work during the fieldwork.

² The 1997 fieldwork was supported by the H. John Heinz III Charitable Trust.

played an important role in feasting and in ritual activity (Gasco 1996). Two of the long-term goals of the PSP are to explore how the organization of cacao production and exchange may have changed during the course of the Postclassic period and how participation in an expanding commercial system may have transformed social and economic relations between and within Postclassic Soconusco communities.



Figure 1. Location of Soconusco region in southern México.

To achieve the larger goals of the PSP, basic information about the location and composition of Postclassic Soconusco sites must first be in hand. One of the archaeological manifestations of changes taking place across Mesoamerica during the Postclassic period is that there was a significant decline in mound building and the construction of monumental public architecture. This shift in architectural strategies means that Postclassic communities often go undetected if archaeologists rely on the presence of mounds to identify sites. In our surveys in the Soconusco region (see Voorhies and Gasco n.d.) we have found that single-component Postclassic sites without mounds are virtually impossible to locate using standard survey techniques. Thick vegetation and soil build-up typically mean that there are no surface features or artifacts. Only when an area has been recently plowed have we successfully located this kind of site. Similarly, Postclassic occupations that are part of multi-component sites

are difficult to interpret. A number of sites in the Soconusco region seem to have had a major occupation during earlier time periods, either the Late Formative or Classic periods, when most or all of the mounds/platforms were constructed. But many of these sites also exhibit ephemeral evidence (often only a few sherds) for occupation during the Postclassic period, as well. Without substantial subsurface testing, however, it is impossible to determine the extent or the nature of the Postclassic occupation at these multi-component sites. To avoid the problems associated with multi-component sites, the PSP has so far focused only on single-component Postclassic sites. The sites investigated as part of this project are located at both inland locations as well as estuary locations (see [Figure 2](#) for location of sites excavated during the 1997 field season). The sites located within the estuary system or wetlands are on islands along the inner-coastal canal system which was utilized as a transportation route for long-distance trade (discussed more fully below).

The problems associated with locating and interpreting Postclassic sites in the Soconusco have been particularly vexing as we attempted to locate the town of Xoconochco. In several documents that record the incorporation of the Soconusco region into the Aztec Empire (e.g., the Codex Mendoza, the Matricula de Tributos, and a third document that records tribute paid to the Aztecs), the town of Xoconochco is portrayed as the capital of the tributary province of Xoconochco (Gasco and Voorhies 1989). The Codex Mendoza notes further that two high-ranking Aztec officials were stationed in the town of Xoconochco (Berdan and Anawalt 1997), and other reports claim that an Aztec garrison was located there (Carrasco 1999). Obviously, any investigation of the Late Postclassic Soconusco region should include research at this important community.

The identification of the Postclassic town of Xoconochco has been difficult because of the changes in architecture and the difficulty of locating sites with small mounds or no mounds discussed above, because the colonial town of Soconusco was abandoned in the early 1800s so there is no modern town associated with the colonial town, and because of contradictory information in the literature (Voorhies and Gasco n.d.). It is clear from a wide range of colonial documents that the town was located somewhere north of the modern town of Acacoyagua. We have been able to narrow the possible location to two sites, Soconusco Viejo and Las Gradas, both local names for the sites ([Figure 3](#)).

The Postclassic site of Soconusco is first mentioned in the archaeological literature by Drucker (1948), who notes that a site claimed by local residents to be Soconusco is small and unimpressive. Unfortunately, the site does not appear on his published map, nor is it mentioned in his field notes (1947). Navarrete (1978) identifies the remains of Xoconochco as a few km. northwest of Acacoyagua, but he does not describe the site in any detail, and he could be referring to either Las Gradas or Soconusco Viejo. Finally, a local historian (Culebro 1975) also reports that Soconusco is located to the northwest of Acacoyagua in the foothills of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas. The site he describes is large, with several pyramids and plain stelae, and with a series of steps built into the hillside leading to a shrine. Drucker, Navarrete, and Culebro all claim to be describing

the same site, but it now seems likely that Drucker was describing Soconusco Viejo and Culebro was describing Las Gradas. We are not certain which site Navarrete visited.

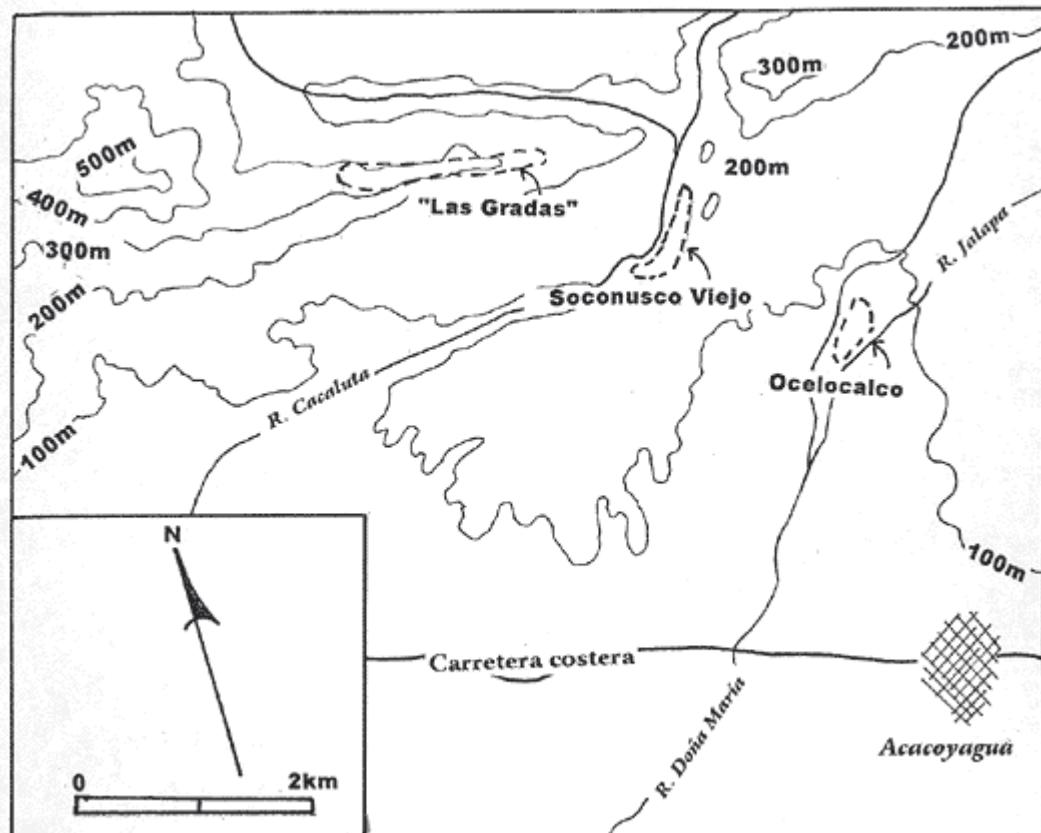


Figure 3. Location of Las Gradas and Soconusco Viejo.

Given the importance of the town of Xoconochco in the reconstruction of Postclassic Soconusco cultural history, and with the preliminary but contradictory evidence about the two sites of Las Gradas and Soconusco Viejo, the very specific goals for the Summer 2000 field season were to investigate the two sites as well as the area located between the two sites to determine whether these were, in fact, two separate sites, or whether there was continuous occupation between the two areas, which would mean that these two sites were instead two components of a single "metropolitan Xoconochco" area. We also hoped to be able to determine the relationships between the two sites (or the two components of the site).

Prior to the 2000 field season we had established that the sites of Las Gradas and Soconusco were both occupied during the Late Postclassic period, and the site of Soconusco Viejo also has a colonial occupation. In 1989 and again in 1997 I had conducted limited fieldwork at the site of Soconusco Viejo that had included mapping and excavating test pits in both the colonial and postclassic components of the site

(Gasco 1990, 1998a, 1998b). The site of Las Gradas had only been located and visited briefly by me in July 1998. The materials observed on the surface indicated unequivocally that the site dated to the Late Postclassic period, but the site had not yet been thoroughly surveyed, and site boundaries were unknown.

Survey conducted during the 2000 field season has led me to identify the entire area, which covers approximately seven square kilometers, as "Greater Xoconochco"³ ([Figure 4](#)). This is not meant to imply that the area constitutes a single large site, however. Instead certain portions of the entire area were foci of activity during the Late Postclassic period, but because these different areas are in such close proximity, it seems appropriate to consider them together as part of a single integrated area rather than to think of them exclusively as separate and distinct sites. It is clear that two areas within the Greater Xoconochco area, Soconusco Viejo ([Figure 5](#)) and Las Gradas ([Figure 6](#)), were the main foci of Late Postclassic occupation. Yet these two "sites" are separated by less than 400m. A third area, which we are calling Soconusco Bajo ([Figure 7](#)), is even more difficult to characterize. A very light scatter of Late Postclassic sherds was found across most of the area surveyed and foundation stones of three structures that may date to the Late Postclassic period were identified, yet the bulk of sherds from test pits and several mounds pre-date the Postclassic period.

In this Report I describe the fieldwork conducted in each of these three areas, I describe the ongoing analysis of the artifacts, and I provide tentative interpretations and discuss plans for future research.

Submitted 12/01/2002 by:

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³ It is worth mentioning that none of the areas investigated during the 2000 season is accessible by car, and even access on foot was difficult in many cases due to the steep terrain and dense vegetation. I want to thank my crew for not only persevering but also maintaining their sense of humor under difficult conditions.

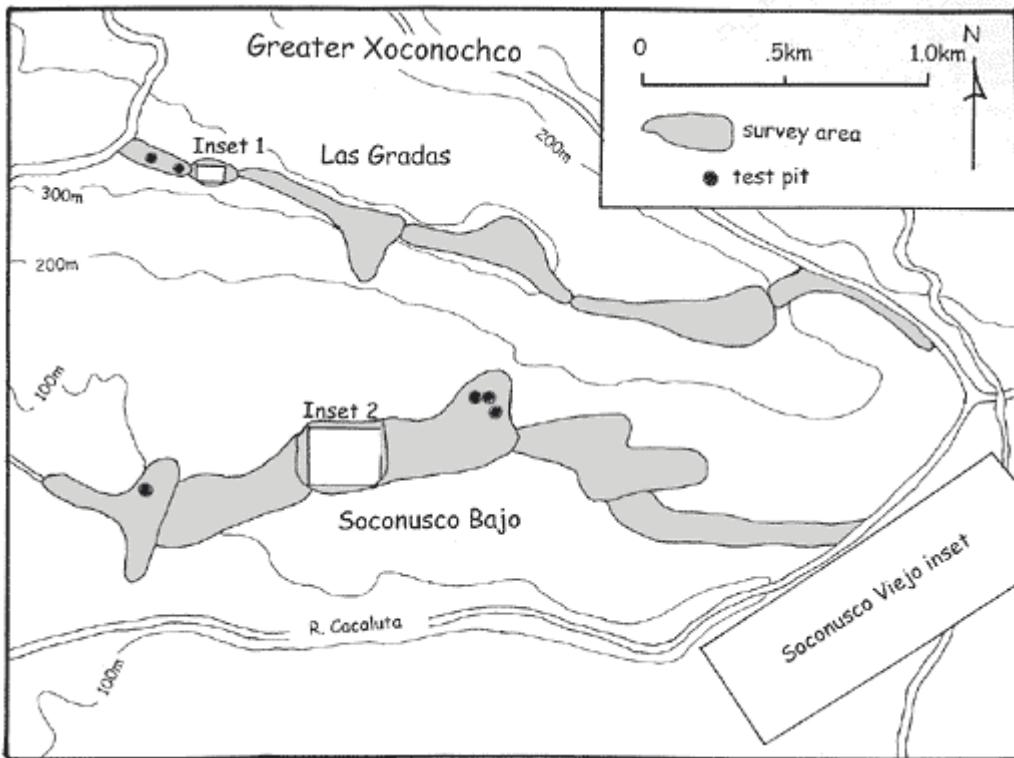


Figure 4. Greater Xoconochco area, showing area surveyed and location of test pits located outside of areas mapped as inserts.

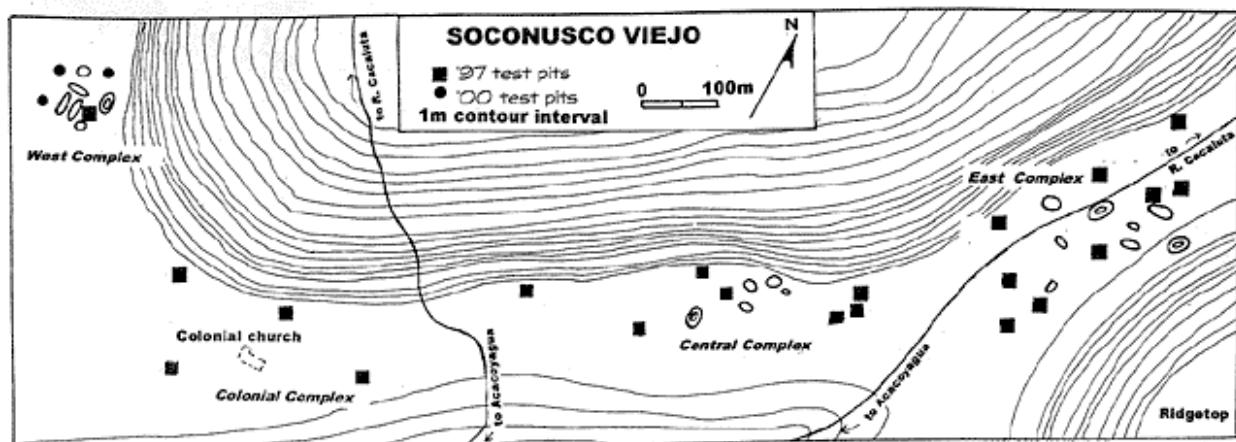


Figure 5. Inset of Soconusco Viejo, showing location of test pits excavated in 1997 and 2000.

Description of Fieldwork

Fieldwork consisted of pedestrian survey of the ridge top upon which the site of Las Gradas is located and of the area below the ridge top that lies between Las Gradas and Soconusco Viejo (see [Figure 3](#) and [Figure 4](#)). Because the rainy season began early in May that year—earlier than normal—dense vegetation prevented our being able to survey

the ridge top completely. Although I had not initially planned to do further fieldwork at the site of Soconusco Viejo during the 2000 field season, we were able to spend a few days at the site to resolve specific problems there. The fieldwork was conducted between June 4 and June 26.⁴

Soconusco Viejo

The site of Soconusco Viejo is situated along the northwest side of a northeast/southwest trending ridge above the Cacaluta River (see [Figure 4](#) and [Figure 5](#)). The Colonial component of the site had been investigated first in 1989 (Gasco 1990) and both Colonial and Postclassic components of the site were investigated in 1997 (Gasco 1998a, 1998b). The Central and Eastern Complexes consisted of several small low mounds ([Photo 1](#), shown below), and all of the materials recovered from test pits excavated in '97 in these two areas were exclusively Late Postclassic in age. Materials from test pits in the Colonial Complex dated primarily to the Colonial period, which indicates that the congregación programs imposed by the Spanish colonial regime involved moving populations from their Postclassic town sites to new town sites adjacent to the earlier towns. This is a pattern we have noted at other Postclassic and Colonial sites in the Soconusco region.



Photo 1. View of mound in East Complex of Soconusco Viejo.

⁴ In my original proposal submitted to FAMSI I had planned to have one student field assistant. I had the good fortune of having three additional students agree to participate in the project for room and board. As a result we were able to accomplish the planned fieldwork as well as the unplanned work at Soconusco Viejo within the time frame planned for fieldwork.

During the '97 field season we were unable to date the West Complex, where a ballcourt and a few small mounds were located. None of the sherds recovered in the single test pit excavated in '97 were diagnostic. To attempt to resolve this problem, we excavated three additional test pits in the West Complex during the 2000 field season. It is now clear that the construction and major occupation of this Western Complex predates the Postclassic period; most sherds date to the Classic period. The presence of a few Late Postclassic sherds, however, may indicate that the area was also used during the Late Postclassic period.

Las Gradas

Very little was known about the site of Las Gradas prior to the 2000 field season; we had visited only the western-most part of this area briefly in 1998. Las Gradas is situated along an east-west trending ridge and has a commanding view of the entire coastal plain to the south ([Photo 2](#), below) and the upper Cacaluta River Valley to the north, historically an important transportation route into the Sierra Madre and perhaps continuing farther north into the Grijalva Valley of Central Chiapas (see map in Navarrete 1978). Las Gradas clearly occupies a very strategic location. Our survey of the ridgeline during the 2000 season was somewhat limited by the fact that the early onset of the rainy season that year meant that vegetation was higher and thicker than it usually is during the month of June. Nevertheless, we were able to survey almost the entire ridgeline (the eastern-most end of the ridge was impenetrable, see [Figure 4](#)). Based on surface remains, the densest occupation occurred in and around the area mapped as Inset 1 ([Figure 4](#) and [Figure 6](#)), but Late Postclassic sherds were found in small numbers in all portions of the ridgeline that were surveyed.



Photo 2. View of Las Gradas and coastal plain in distance.

Within the area mapped as Inset 1 ([Figure 6](#)) we found the greatest evidence for construction activity. In this area are two cobble-faced mounds that sit atop an artificial and cobble-faced platform. In this area the ridgeline itself has been modified and artificial terraces have been built on the slopes. To the east of the area mapped as Inset 1 there are at least two additional cobble-faced mounds. A total of six test pits were excavated in the western portion of the Las Gradas area. Analysis of recovered sherds confirmed that occupation of this area was limited to the Late Postclassic period (discussed more fully below).

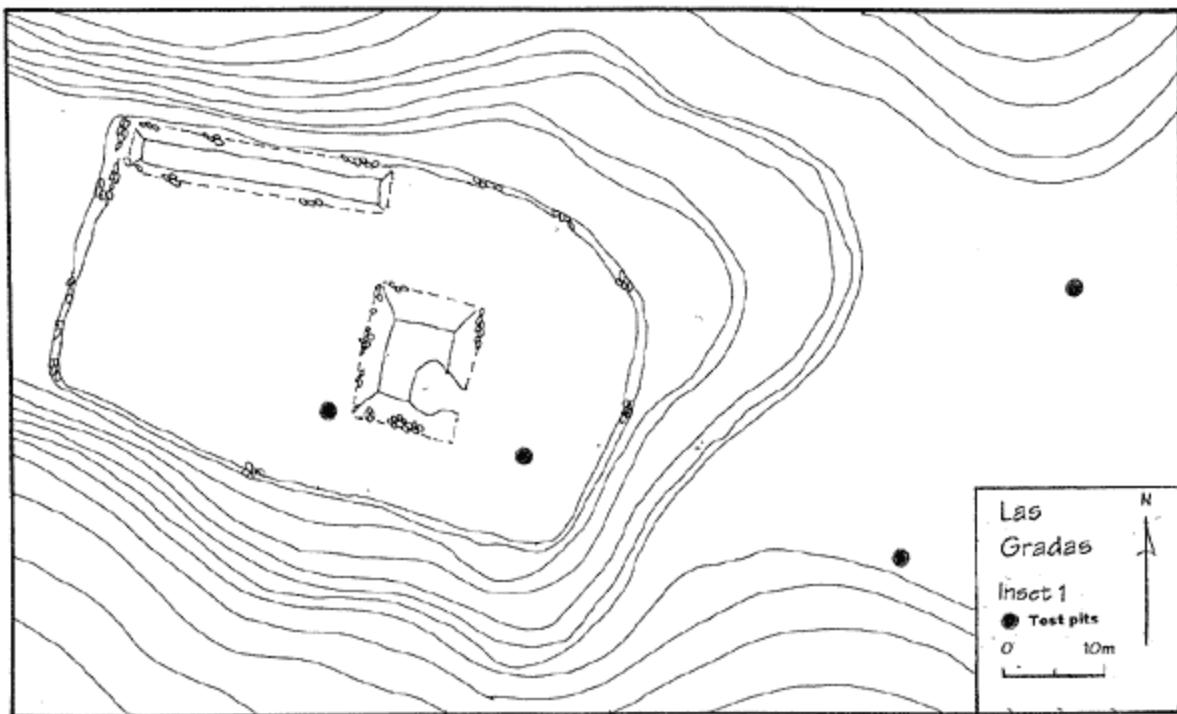


Figure 6. Inset of Las Gradas, showing location of test pits excavated in 2000.

Soconusco Bajo

The investigation of the Soconusco Bajo area consisted of survey across an area that was accessible by foot; much of this area is under cultivation and our survey was limited mainly to cleared agricultural fields. Although some Late Postclassic material was found across most of the surveyed area, we focused primarily on the area located within Inset 2 ([Figure 7](#)). Within this area there are five mounds as well as the foundations of three ground-level structures delineated by river cobbles. The mounds and the major occupation of this area date to the Middle or Late Preclassic periods, yet there are hints that the area also was used during the Late Postclassic period. A small number of Late Postclassic sherds were recovered in the area, both during the surface survey and during excavations. Most intriguing, however, are the three ground-level structures that measure from 40-60m in length and 4-5m in width ([Photo 3](#), shown below). During previous investigations in the region, this kind of structure has been associated with Late Postclassic or Colonial settlements—although we have never encountered any structures as large as these. Although test pits were excavated near these structures, and one trench was excavated across one of the structures ([Figure 7](#)), we are unable to ascertain the function of these structures, and we cannot say definitively that they date to the Late Postclassic period. Material recovered in the other test pits excavated in the Soconusco Bajo area (one to the west of the area mapped in Inset 2 and three to the east) is also ambiguous. Most of the sherds from the three test pits to the east date to

the Late Classic period, yet some materials from the surface survey near these pits are clearly from the Late Postclassic period. Overall, the evidence for activity in this area during the Late Postclassic period is very ephemeral; there is just enough material to suggest that the area was being used for something, but not enough evidence to indicate what that something was.



Photo 3. View of foundations of ground-level structure, Soconusco Bajo.

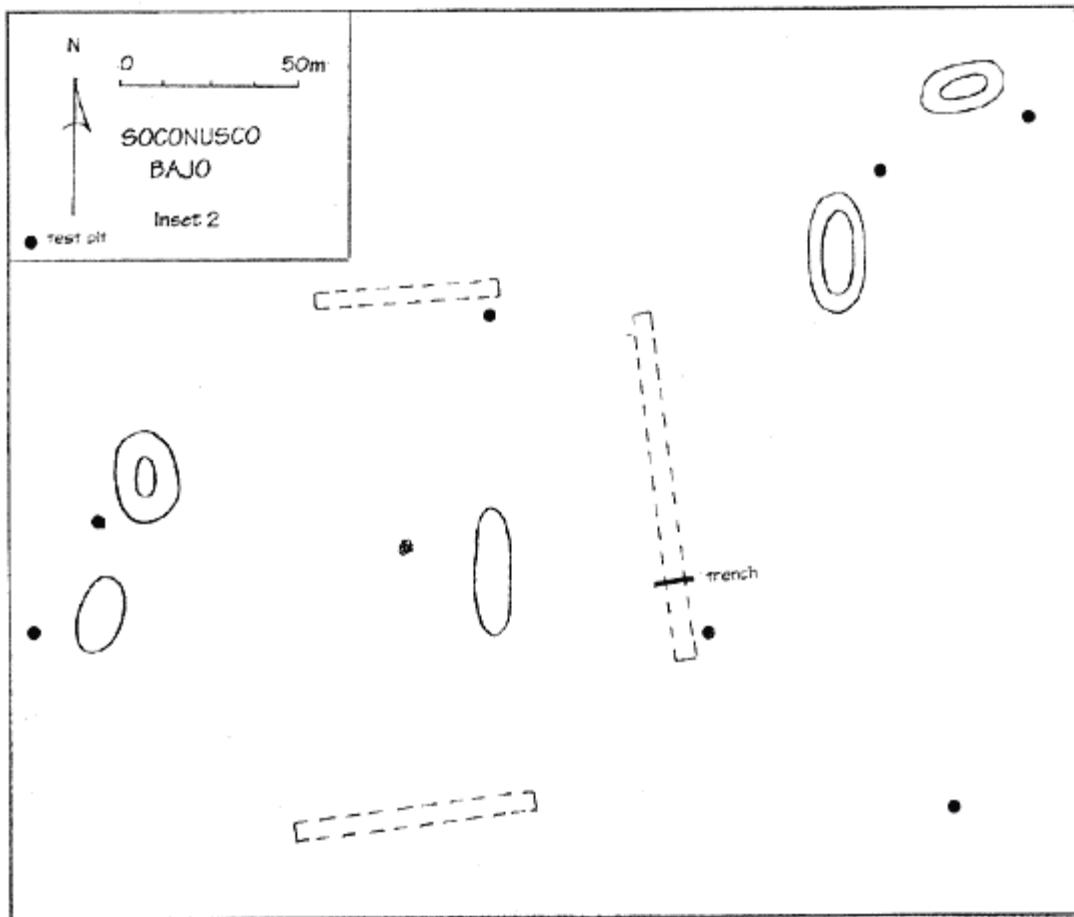


Figure 7. Soconusco Bajo area showing mounds, ground-level structures (outlined with dashed lines), test pits, and trench.

Artifact Analysis

All of the materials recovered during excavations were washed, labeled, and analyzed during labwork conducted at the New World Archaeological Foundation in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.⁵ Compared to the wide range of materials recovered during the '97 excavations, materials recovered during the 2000 season were limited to obsidian and ceramic artifacts. The following discussion includes an analysis of the materials recovered during the 2000 field season as well as certain materials from the 1997 field season which are included here for comparative purposes.

⁵ I wish to thank John Clark and Ron Lowe of the NWAF for providing us with space to carry out our lab work. Our ceramic analysis was greatly improved as we could use the comparative collections and the library. Also, thanks to John Clark for sharing his expertise on obsidian with Susan Maguire, the project lithic analyst.

Obsidian

The obsidian recovered during the 2000 field season as well as the obsidian recovered during the 1997 field season were analyzed during the course of lab work in 2000. In 1997 John Clark had analyzed a small sample (approximately 20%) of the obsidian artifacts found that year, and in 2000, with the assistance of graduate student Susan Maguire (SUNY-Buffalo) the entire collection from both the 1997 and 2000 field seasons was analyzed (Maguire 2001).

A total of 466 obsidian artifacts were analyzed from surface and excavated contexts at the sites of Soconusco Viejo (including the Postclassic and Classic components of the site), Las Gradas, Soconusco Bajo, Las Brujas, Las Piedritas, and Ocelocalco (see [Figure 2](#) for location of these last three sites). Maguire's analysis provides information regarding sources (based on visual sourcing) ([Table 1](#)), artifact form ([Table 2](#)), and various aspects of production technology ([Table 3](#)). In addition, basic measurements (length, width, thickness, weight) were recorded for each artifact, usewear was recorded, and presence or absence of retouching, burning, and surface abrasion was recorded.

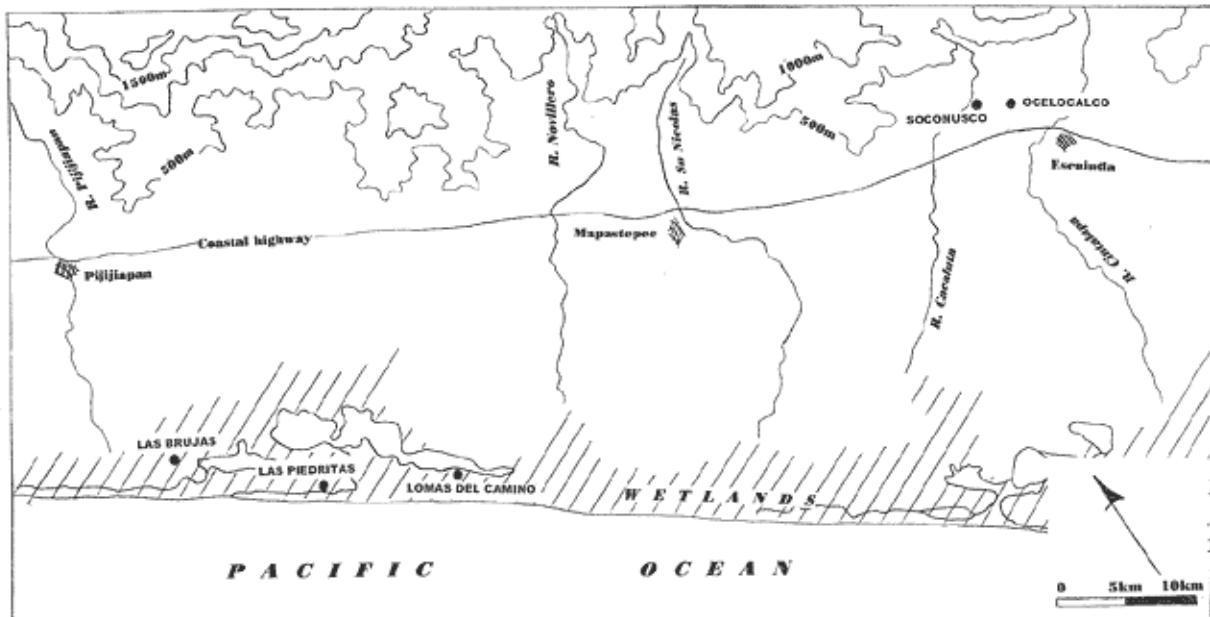


Figure 2. Proyecto Soconusco Posclásico study area showing sites excavated in 1997.

Table 1
Obsidian Sources by Site

	Pico de Orizaba	Pachuca	Tajumulco	Guatemalan ¹	Mexican ²	Unk.	TOTAL
Las Brujas	36	40		62	2		140
Las Gradas	7	3	2	3			15
Las Piedritas	103	58		63		1	225
Ocelocalco		1					1
Soconusco Bajo	8	2	7	21			38
Soconusco Viejo (Postclassic)	3	17	5	20			45
Soconusco Viejo (Classic)				2			2
TOTAL	160	121	14	173	2	1	466

¹ Includes San Martín Jilotepeque, El Chayal, Ixtepeque sources.

² Unidentified Mexican sources

Table 2
Obsidian Artifact Forms by Site

	Blade	Core	Point	Flake	Shatter	Unk.	TOTAL
Las Brujas	122	3	2	4	8	1	140
Las Gradas	9	1	3	2			15
Las Piedritas	193	12	4	8	6	2	225
Ocelocalco	1						1
Soconusco Bajo	14	11	1	8	4		38
Soconusco Viejo (Postclassic)	36		1	5	3		45
Soconusco Viejo (Classic)	1			1			2
TOTAL	376	27	11	28	21	3	466

Table 3
Obsidian Production Technology and Artifact Form by Site

	Bipolar				Direct Percussion				Indirect Percussion				Unk.	TOTAL	
	Unk	Core	Flake	Shatter	Blade	Core	Flake	Shatter	Point	Blade	Core	Point	Shatter		
Las Brujas	1	2		5	4		4	3		118	1	2			140
Las Gradas		1					2			9		3			15
Las Piedritas		7	1	2	2	1	7	2		191	4	4	2	2	225
Ocelocalco										1					1
Soconusco Bajo		11	2	3	1		6	1	1	13					38
Soconusco Viejo (Postclassic)			1	3	2		4			34		1			45
Soconusco Viejo (Classic)							1			1					2
TOTAL	1	21	4	13	9	1	24	6	1	367	5	10	2	2	466

The sample size of the total assemblage is small, particularly for the sites of Las Gradas ($N=15$), Soconusco Bajo ($N=38$), Soconusco Viejo ($N=47$), and Ocelocalco ($N=1$). As a result, all interpretations must be considered highly tentative. Nevertheless, certain patterns suggested in the data warrant further study.

In a previous study Clark *et al.* (1989) noted that in Soconusco there was a shift in the Late Postclassic period from an earlier predominance of Guatemalan obsidians to Mexican obsidians. This trend is clearly reflected in the data from the 1997 and 2000 PSP field seasons ([Table 1](#)). The assemblages from predominantly Formative or Classic period deposits (Soconusco Bajo and the West Complex of Soconusco Viejo) exhibited high proportions (55% and 100% respectively) of Guatemalan obsidians whereas all of the other assemblages had high proportions of Mexican obsidians (Pachuca or Pico de Orizaba). Percentages of these Mexican obsidians ranged from a high of 73% at Las Piedritas to a low of 45% in the Postclassic deposits at Soconusco Viejo (a figure that is only marginally higher than the percentage of Guatemalan obsidians—44%—at this site).

Although the general trend toward greater utilization of Mexican obsidians in the Late Postclassic period is reflected in the PSP data, the data also suggest that access to and utilization of the Mexican obsidians was not uniform across all communities. At the wetland sites of Las Brujas and Las Piedritas, not only were there high percentages of Mexican obsidians but there were simply many more obsidian artifacts recovered, both

in terms of absolute quantities as well as volume (between three and five times more obsidian was recovered at the wetland sites per cubic meter). This presumably reflects the fact that the wetland sites were located along a major transportation route where goods—like obsidian—were in greater supply.

A second observation that is even more tentative, given the small quantities, is that the relative proportions of Pachuca versus Pico de Orizaba obsidians also vary among sites (see [Table 1](#)). The site of Las Brujas has roughly equal quantities of Pico de Orizaba and Pachuca obsidians, but Pico de Orizaba obsidian predominates at the site of Las Piedritas, where it makes up 46% of the assemblage compared to 26% from Pachuca. At Las Gradas, there is more obsidian from Pico de Orizaba than Pachuca (but not the extremely small sample at this site). And at Soconusco Viejo there are much higher proportions of Pachuca (but again, the sample size is very small). This kind of variation might be attributable to chronological factors. Braswell (n.d.) has argued that Pico de Orizaba obsidian was more common in some regions during the Middle Postclassic (ca. A.D. 1200-1359), and that Pachuca obsidian became more widely used in the Late Postclassic period. The possibility that relative frequencies of obsidian from different sources can serve as a chronological marker is very intriguing, and ongoing research of both the obsidian and the ceramics from the PSP sites will be testing this possibility.⁶

Ceramics

All of the sherds recovered during fieldwork in 2000 were washed and labeled and were assigned to known ceramic types already established for the region. Because sherds from excavations at Soconusco Bajo and in the Western Complex at Soconusco Viejo did not date to the Postclassic period, no additional analysis was carried out on these sherds. Sherds from excavations at Las Gradas, however, clearly date to the Late Postclassic period, and all of the diagnostic sherds ($N=484$) were subjected to additional analysis with individual attributes recorded for each sherd. The same system was used that had been used on the materials recovered in 1997 from the other Postclassic sites, making it possible to easily compare the materials from the five sites excavated in 1997 and Las Gradas.

There are two major aspects of the ceramic analysis that I will discuss here. First, because a main concern was to attempt to identify the relationship between Soconusco Viejo and Las Gradas, a detailed comparison was carried out for the ceramic assemblages from these two sites. Tulane graduate student, Karla Cardona, conducted

⁶ A small sample of obsidian recovered during the 1997 field season was subjected to obsidian hydration analysis at the UCLA obsidian hydration lab under the direction of Glenn Russell and with support from an RSCAAAP grant from California State University, Dominguez Hills. I had proposed in my original budget for the 2000 field season to expand this analysis, and submit another 80-100 samples to the UCLA lab. Unfortunately, the \$2,000 that was cut from my grant was exactly the amount budgeted for the obsidian hydration analysis, and in the meantime, the UCLA lab has closed. I did secure permission from INAH to export the obsidian for hydration analysis, and I will be pursuing other sources of funding to have the analysis done at another facility.

this comparison and it appears in her master's thesis (2001). Second, the ceramics recovered at Las Gradas in 2000 can be compared to the ceramics from the other five Postclassic sites investigated in 1997 to place the observed patterns into a larger regional context.

Perhaps the most notable difference between the ceramic assemblages from Soconusco Viejo and Las Gradas is that all of the sherds recovered at Las Gradas belong to only two ceramic types, Acapetahua Coarse and Acapetahua Fine. In contrast, at Soconusco Viejo nine different ceramic types were present, even though the number of sherds is less than half the number found at Las Gradas.

Acapetahua Coarse and Acapetahua Fine are the two most common ceramic types found at Late Postclassic sites in the region; we suspect that they were produced locally, although we have not yet carried out sourcing studies (see Voorhies and Gasco n.d.). For the most part, vessel forms within these two types are identical and consist largely of food and water storage and preparation vessels (comales, ollas, tinajas, and wide-mouthed jars). The only distinction between the two types is that Acapetahua Fine exhibits a finer paste with smaller sand inclusions, vessel walls are thinner, and more care was taken to smooth or even burnish the surface of the vessels.

The limited number of ceramic types present at Las Gradas is quite curious, and may be nothing more than a product of the small sample size. But it may also reflect the fact that a more limited range of activities took place at this site than was the case at other sites, including Soconusco Viejo.

A second distinction between the ceramics at Las Gradas and Soconusco Viejo is that certain vessel forms (e.g., comales and ollas or bowls) at Las Gradas exhibited greater rim diameters than did the same basic vessel form at Soconusco Viejo (Cardona 2001:81-83). Again, given our small sample size, we cannot make too much of this, but this, too, may prove to be evidence for different activities carried out at the two sites.

At this stage of the ceramic analysis, the evidence suggests that the two sites were contemporary. The differences between the two assemblages seem to me to be more likely to indicate functional differences rather than temporal differences. The Acapetahua Coarse and Acapetahua Fine ceramics at both sites are virtually identical in overall paste characteristics and vessel forms. Even though some of the Las Gradas vessels tend to be larger than the same vessel form at Soconusco Viejo, there is also considerable overlap in the sizes of these vessels.

The Soconusco Viejo and Las Gradas ceramic assemblages can also be compared to the assemblages recovered at the other four Late Postclassic sites investigated in 1997 (Table 4). These data indicate that all of the inland sites (Ocelocalco, Soconusco Viejo, and Las Gradas) have less ceramic diversity than do the wetland sites. The tremendous differences in the size of the various assemblages may account for some of this, but note that the wetland site of Lomas del Camino has a very small number of sherds—fewer than either Soconusco Viejo or Las Gradas—yet it has nine of the ceramic types

present whereas Soconusco Viejo has only six types, and, as noted above, Las Gradas has only two.

Table 4
Diagnostic Sherds by Site

	Las Brujas	Las Piedritas	Lomas del Camino	Ocelocalco	Soconusco Viejo	Las Gradas	TOTAL
Acapetahua Coarse	916	699	33	65	139	196	2048
Acapetahua Fine	87	161	7	13	32	288	588
Chiapanec Polychromes	66	106	14	8	14		208
Chiapanec Polychrome variant	46	31	3		6		86
Fine Gray	23	156			1		180
Fine Gray variant	14	34			1		49
Las Morenas Yellow-brown	21	90					111
La Palma Orange	52	134	54	1			241
La Palma Orange variant	4	14	3				21
La Palma Plain	14	244	13		3		274
Monochrome	9	21	1	2			33
Misc Polychrome	60	146	4	2			212
Orange on White	32	95			2		129
Soconusco Plain					20		20
TOTAL	1284	1785	128	89	218	484	3988

There are several possible explanations for these differences. They may reflect the fact that the sites were occupied at slightly different times. A more likely explanation, however, is that residents of the wetland sites had greater access to a wider range of ceramics because these communities were located along the canals where there was extensive water-bourne trade. Several of the types that are either entirely absent or present in very small quantities at the inland sites were imported to the Soconusco region (e.g., the Fine Gray wares are almost certainly from Oaxaca, and at least some of the polychromes and bichromes may be imports from the Chiapan or Guatemalan highlands, from Oaxaca, or elsewhere). A very tentative reading of the available ceramic data is that many of these imported ceramics were not available to consumers at the inland sites.

The analysis of the ceramics from both the 1997 and 2000 field seasons is ongoing. A major goal of the continuing analysis is to identify key chronological markers or shorter ceramic phases that will allow us to more precisely date the sites and individual deposits at the sites. I remain hopeful that statistical seriation techniques together with obsidian hydration analysis (see [note 6](#)) will ultimately lead to tighter dating of our materials.

Tentative Interpretations and Directions for Future Research

There are, of course, a number of questions that will only be fully answered with much more extensive excavations, but this phase of fieldwork has yielded important information that advances the overall objectives of the project. We know now that Las Gradas and Soconusco Viejo are two distinct and separate (but much closer spatially than previously thought) areas of occupation. In a sense these are separate sites—there is clearly an unoccupied area, or at least a little utilized area, that separates them. A third area, Soconusco Bajo, is much more difficult to interpret, but some activity—perhaps nonresidential—may have been carried out here during the Late Postclassic period as well. At the same time that we can conclude safely that this was not simply a single large site, I suggest that we should look at the entire area as an integrated zone of Late Postclassic activity, and I am calling the area Greater Xoconochco.

The precise relationship between Las Gradas and Soconusco Viejo cannot yet be determined. There remains the possibility that even though both date to the Late Postclassic period that they were not contemporary—the Late Postclassic period, after all, lasts for 300 years. We are still working on refining the ceramic chronology, but we have not yet been able to isolate any ceramic groups or attributes that are chronologically sensitive enough to identify short-term phases during the Late Postclassic period. Given our current understanding of the ceramics, it is impossible to distinguish the ceramic assemblages for the two sites except for the fact that there is so little ceramic diversity at Las Gradas. The variability in the obsidian sources at the two sites might be interpreted as evidence that they were occupied at different times within the Late Postclassic period (or during the Middle and Late Postclassic periods). If the predominance of Pico de Orizaba obsidian denotes an earlier occupation then we could reason that Las Gradas was occupied earlier than Soconusco Viejo, where Pachuca obsidian predominates.

A second possibility is that Las Gradas and Soconusco Viejo were contemporary, but that they served different functions or that individuals from different social groups occupied each area. The strategic location of Las Gradas may be significant. Perhaps this was the site of a fortress or even the reported Aztec garrison that, according to some sources, was located at the town of Xoconochco (Carrasco 1999). Other than its strategic location, there is little to indicate that this was the site of a garrison. It is worth noting, however, that given the very small number of obsidian artifacts found at the site, there is a much larger than expected number of projectile points (20%) in the assemblage. At all other sites, points make up less than 3% of assemblages.

Unfortunately, none of the artifacts from Las Gradas are unambiguously Aztec, and the fact that there is more obsidian from Pico de Orizaba than from Pachuca is puzzling if this were an Aztec garrison (the projectile points are all made of Pico de Orizaba obsidian). But we have to ask ourselves what a remote Aztec garrison might look like. If there were a garrison in Soconusco, it would have been the most distant garrison from Tenochtitlán, and soldiers are unlikely to have brought much with them. A garrison may have been totally supplied by the local residents. The unusual features of the ceramic assemblage—the fact that vessels like comales and ollas tend to be larger and the absence of much diversity in ceramic types—might be interpreted as evidence of food preparation for large groups rather than individual households.

There are other ways to interpret the relationships between these two sites. Las Gradas may have served as a defensible place of refuge for the people of Soconusco Viejo during periods of violence. Or, as local historian Culebro (1975) suggested decades ago, it might have been a shrine site. Finally, if the absence of a wide range of ceramic types, particularly the absence of polychromes, is simply a product of small sample size, Las Gradas might have served as a residential area for elites who lived apart from their subjects (who lived at Soconusco Viejo).

As I begin planning for future work in the Greater Xoconochco area as well as at other Postclassic sites in the Soconusco region, there are several issues that I will be exploring. First, the settlement pattern in the Greater Xoconochco area and Late Postclassic settlement patterns across the entire Soconusco region (and perhaps in other regions within Mesoamerica as well) illustrate some of the limitations with "site centered" archaeology (especially sites that are identified solely by the presence of mounds). The increased use of ground-level structures in the Postclassic period and the ephemeral nature of some Postclassic occupations make it difficult to both identify and place nice neat boundary lines around the "sites." Strategies for excavation must include broad horizontal excavations that expose large areas and must investigate relationships among neighboring "sites."

Chronological concerns remain central to my ongoing analysis and will remain a focus of study in future fieldwork. In the case of Las Gradas and Soconusco Viejo, it is obvious that we need to be able to say with certainty whether or not they were contemporary. Similarly, the chronological position of the wetland sites remains unclear. The archaeological data from the sites of Las Piedritas and Las Brujas as well as from other sites previously investigated by Voorhies (see Voorhies 1989 and Voorhies and Gasco n.d.) indicate that the wetland sites were flourishing well into the Late Postclassic period. The sheer quantities as well as the diversity of imported materials suggest that these sites were vibrant centers of trade. Yet curiously, the Aztec documents that record their conquest of the Soconusco region and later Spanish colonial documents do not mention a single wetland town. The complete absence of any colonial artifacts at the wetland sites also suggests that they were abandoned prior to the Spanish conquest. To address questions related to the regional economy and change during the course of the Postclassic period we will ultimately need to establish more firmly the occupational history of these sites as well as the inland sites.

In conclusion, I am grateful to FAMSI for supporting the 2000 fieldwork at Xoconochco. This support enabled me to conduct a critical phase in my ongoing research on Postclassic Soconusco. A number of important questions were answered while other new questions emerged. Information from the 2000 field season can now be added to existing data that are helping us to better understand how the important changes in Postclassic Mesoamerica affected life in ancient Soconusco.

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