

FAMSI © 2002: Gerardo Gutiérrez

Archaeology and Ethnohistory in the La Montaña of Guerrero: Patterns in the Political and Territorial Expansion of a Tlapaneco- Mixteco Polity in Post-Classic Mesoamerica



Research Year: 2000

Culture: Tlapaneco-Mixtec

Chronology: Post Classic

Location: Guerrero, México

Site: Tlapa-Tlachinollan

Table of Contents

[Abstract](#)

[Resumen](#)

[Goals and Problems](#)

[Results](#)

[Concluding Remarks](#)

[List of Figures](#)

[Sources Cited](#)

Abstract

According to Codex Azoyú 1, in the year 1421 A.D., the polity of Tlapa experienced a process of territorial growth at the expense of 20 neighboring political units. Thus, the objective of this research was to identify and explain the spatial patterns of territorial expansion related to the formation of this complex Tlapaneco-Mixteco polity. Through

an analysis of the incremental evolution of its expansion, I learned about the strategies used by Tlapa to meet the economic demands of the incorporation of new territories. Over a five-month period this project conducted archaeological explorations in eastern Guerrero, México, and it adds to the archaeological knowledge of the nearly unknown Mixteca-Nahua-Tlapaneca region of Mesoamerica.

For additional information view the publication below:

[Catálogo de sitios arqueológicos de las regiones Mixteca-Tlapaneca-Nahua y Costa Chica de Guerrero \(in Spanish\)](#)

Resumen

Este proyecto estudia los patrones de expansión político-territorial del señorío Posclásico de Tlapa-Tlachinollan, en la región mixteca-tlapaneca-náhuatl del Estado de Guerrero, México. De acuerdo con las fuentes etnohistóricas, esta unidad política se conformó, entre los siglos XIV y XV de nuestra era, a través de la subyugación militar y política de otros 20 señoríos regionales de la Sierra Madre del Sur. Este proyecto analiza las etapas de conquista del Señorío de Tlapa-Tlachinollan, utilizando información tanto etnohistórica como arqueológica, y propone una serie de patrones de expansión territorial que revelan las estrategias político-económicas empleadas por los gobernantes de Tlapa en su proceso de conquista.

Para la información adicional ver la publicación:

[Catálogo de sitios arqueológicos de las regiones Mixteca-Tlapaneca-Nahua y Costa Chica de Guerrero](#)

Submitted 06/14/2002 by:
Gerardo Gutiérrez
gxq153@hotmail.com

Goals and Problems

The purpose of this dissertation is to study issues associated with the territorial expansion of the *altepetl* of Tlapa-Tlachinollan, a middle size autochthonous Mesoamerica polity located in eastern Guerrero, México ([Figure 1](#)). Territorial expansion is defined as the annexation of formerly independent political units into one's sovereignty by any means possible.

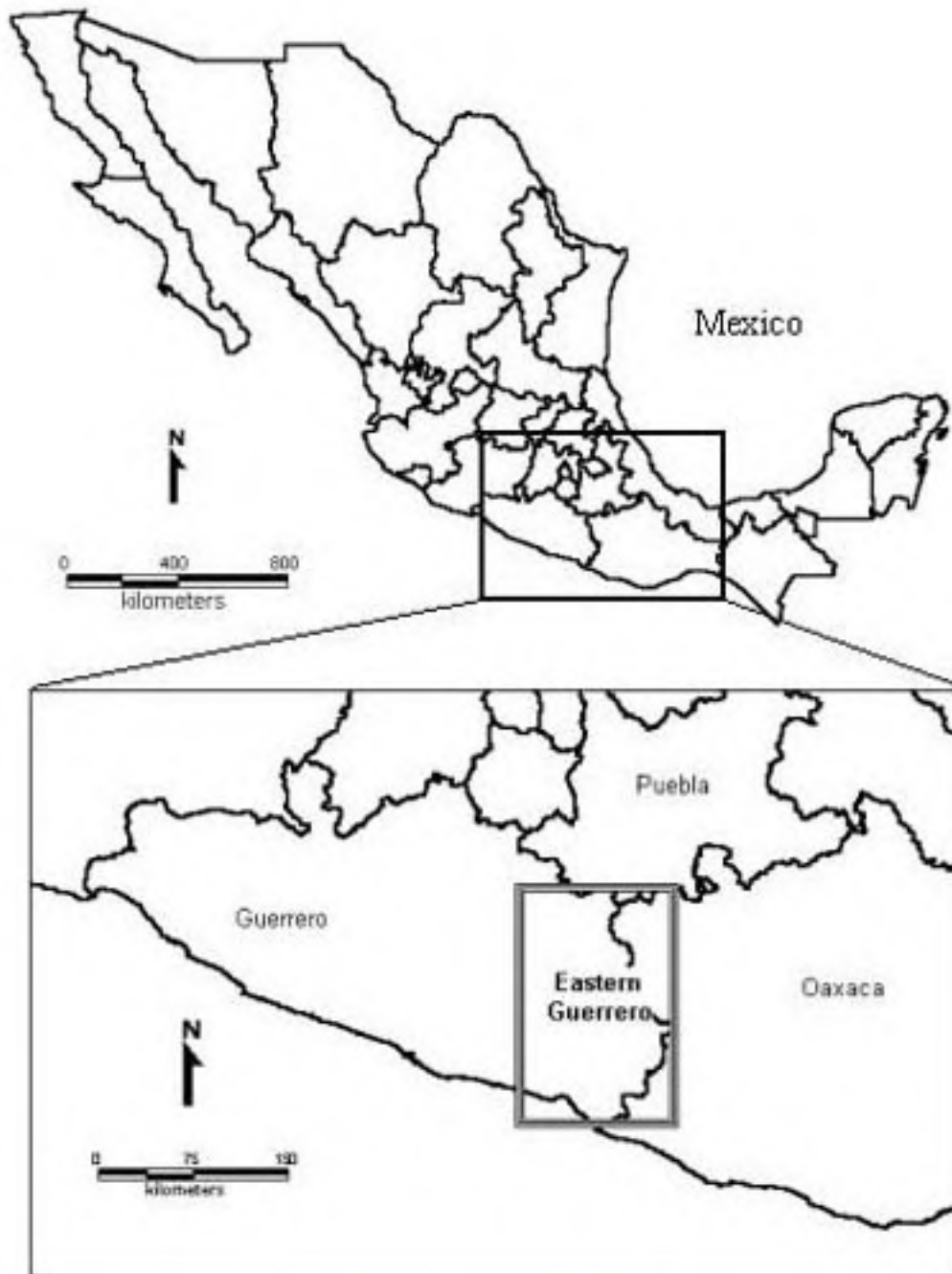


Figure 1. Location of eastern Guerrero.

In this research the *altepetl* was considered the basic unit of political expansion (García Martínez, 1987; Lockhart, 1992; Carrasco, 1999). The *altepetl* was the native state of Central and Southern México. It was organized into a modular-like political structure in which a group of kin-related rulers (*teuctlatoani*) exercised the legitimate right to use

force against the inhabitants of a given territory. Internal and external competition between ruling lineages for the control of land, people, and preciosities promoted the annexation of weaker modules.

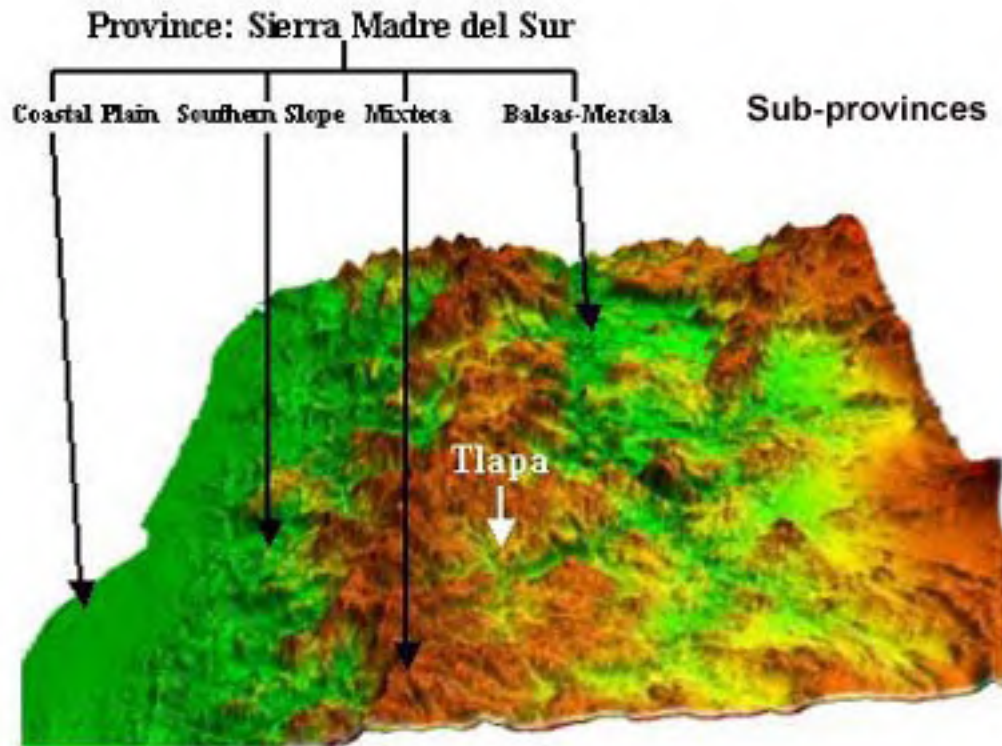


Figure 2. Tlapa-Tlacinollan Province.

Tlapa-Tlacinollan was a middle size multi-ethnic polity located in the Mixteca-Tlapaneca-Náhuatl region ([Figure 2](#)). Information on its indigenous political history was available from a large corpus of local pictorial documents found in the region (Villela, 1996). Two pictorial codices of this corpus: the Codex Azoyú 1 and Codex Azoyú 2 narrate the political history of the altepetl of Tlapa-Tlacinollan from A.D. 1300 to A.D. 1565 ([Figure 3](#) and [Figure 4](#), shown below). The important political events mentioned in these two documents describe the conquest of some twenty places located over eastern Guerrero ([Figure 5](#), shown below). Both documents depict the place names of the defeated rival polities and the approximate time in which they were conquered or annexed to the political sphere of Tlapa-Tlacinollan.



Figure 3. Folio 1 obverse of Codex Azoyú 1 (Vega Sosa 1991).

If these place names can be associated with Postclassic archaeological sites in the geography of eastern Guerrero, then the sequence, direction and extend of territorial expansion would be known. *This would provide opportunity to study the geopolitical strategies used by Tlapa-Tlachinollan's leaders in their expansion and to reconstruct the dynamics of political interaction in eastern Guerrero.*

Constanza Vega Sosa (1989) has studied this problem and has identified most of the place names in the codices correlating them with modern and colonial Pueblos of eastern Guerrero. She also wrote the first comprehensive interpretation of Codex Azoyú 1 (Vega Sosa, 1991). Since then other authors have reinterpreted and/or corrected some of her identifications (Rubí, 1998; Vélez, 1998; Carrasco, 1999; Jiménez, 2000). Nevertheless, features such as the exact position, structure, size, and architectural dimensions and design of the archaeological sites were unknown.



Figure 4. Folio 17 obverse of Codex Azoyú 2 (MNA-INAH).

The codices Azoyú 1 and 2 were painted in Tlapa around A.D. 1565 and were used in the Spanish courts by the powerful Alvarado-Cortés lineage to claim political and territorial rights under the colonial system. This biases the narration in favor of the deeds of this ruling lineage, leaving some doubt about the historical reliability of the recorded events. As a result it is difficult to use these documents at face value. It is even harder to prove that the events portrayed in the codices really happened or that they happened in the same way or at the same time as they are depicted in the narration.

This problem needed to be solved to use the codices as a hypothetical framework for Tlapa-Tlachinollan's political expansion. Critical analysis was carried out to evaluate the accuracy of these accounts. In order to address the issues in this research it was necessary to undertake archival research in the *Archivo General de la Nación* (AGN) in México City. I examined a variety sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century documents that discuss territorial controversies and land litigations made by the local *señoríos* during the creation of Spanish-like Indian municipalities. I was trying to find documents that: (1.) deny or contradict the information contained in the codices of Azoyú, or (2.) support the accounts of the codices.



Figure 5. Petlacala and Axoxuca-Atlixnac's conquests in A.D. 1447 (Codex Azoyú 2, folio 3, obverse).

Results

Some 80 documents in the *Ramos de Indios*, *General de Partes* and *Tierras* were consulted for the *pueblos* in the jurisdictions of Tlapa and Chilapa. The results of this research were:

- (1.) No document was found that contradicts or denies the narration contained in the codices of Azoyú 1 and 2.
- (2.) Several documents confirm the ascendancy of the Alvarado-Cortés lineage in the region supposedly conquered by the prehispanic lords of Tlapa-Tlacinollan.
- (3.) Document AGN, Ramo Indios, vol. 34, exp. 140 confirms that seven regional Caciques of the main Pueblos of the region recognized Tlacinollan as the main Cabecera of the region and their Caciques as the most important ([Figure 6](#)).

I concluded from this that the information contained in the codices of Azoyú can be used with reliability, but always with caution.

Archaeology provided an independent way to test both the accuracy of ethnohistorical sources and my individual interpretation of the documents through an examination of the material remains from where the events supposedly took place. The basic assumptions and scenarios hypothesized from the ethnohistorical sources that needed to be tested archaeologically were:

- (1.) Field confirmation that the place names in the documents had been interpreted correctly.
- (2.) The existence of a settlement system dominated by Tlapa-Tlachinollan.
- (3.) The existence of a military frontier between Tlapa-Tlachinollan's territory with the northern Náhuatl villages.
- (4.) Test the sequence and direction of the expansion according to the framework proposed by the codices.

A geographic model was created to interpret the strategies used by the lords of Tlapa-Tlachinollan according to the sequence of expansion and the shape of the territorial extend after each conquest period ([Figure 7a](#) and [Figure 7b](#)). The territorial expansion was analyzed as a spatial phenomenon subject to costs of movement and friction. This provided insights into the costs of expansion in specific directions.

A key site survey was designed to study the archaeology of eastern Guerrero. I decided to use this methodology because I wanted to find the sites that represented the rivals and/or allies involved in Tlachinollan's expansion, that is, the sites that were strategically and economically important for Tlapa-Tlachinollan. Key site survey was used because of the logistic problems created by the insecurity of the region, the difficult topographic conditions, and the enormous size of the area I needed to cover, more than 4,000 sq. km. ([Figure 8](#), shown below and [Figure 9](#))



...exelentísimo señor Gaspar Julio, Marcos Miguel, Thomás Pedro, Pedro Santiago, Agustín de Vargas, Don Thomás Luis, Diego Hernández, Don Gaspar Juan, Luis Santiago, Diego Juan, naturales de las caveseras y pueblo de Tlapa como proceda y aya lugar (compa)recemos ante la grandeza de vuestra exelencia y decimos que la jurisdicción del dicho pueblo de Tlapa se compone de ocho caveceras y una de ellas recae en los gobernadores naturales por ser los más principales de dicha jurisdicción como con efecto la poseio y tuvo el padre de Diego, Francisco de Peralta casique, al que ha sido gobernador en dicho pueblo de Tlapa y hallase uno de los más principales de dicha jurisdicción y siendo como ha sido costumbre en que dicha cavesera de Tlachinollan recaiga en los que an sido...

Figure 6. Document AGN, Indios, vol. 34, exp. 140, December 1689.

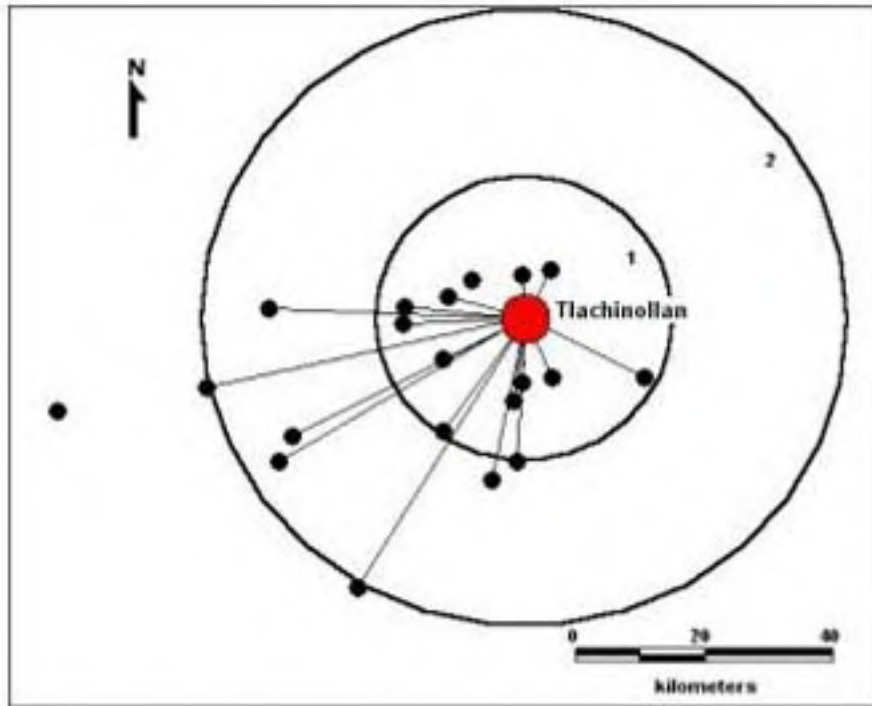


Figure 7a. Ideal shape of Tlachinollan if located on an isotropic plain with no political or economic competition.

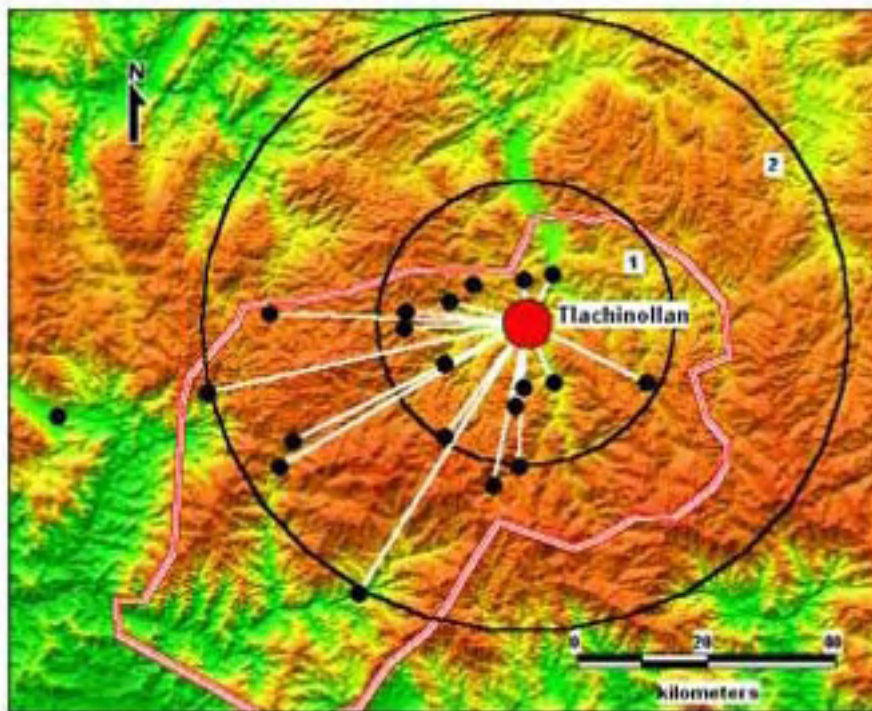


Figure 7b. Comparison between the ideal shape of the polity and the shape of Tlachinollan's territory after A.D. 1510.



Figure 8. The key site survey was undertaken with the help of local guides and authorities (Cochoapa Grande, Metlatonoc, Guerrero).

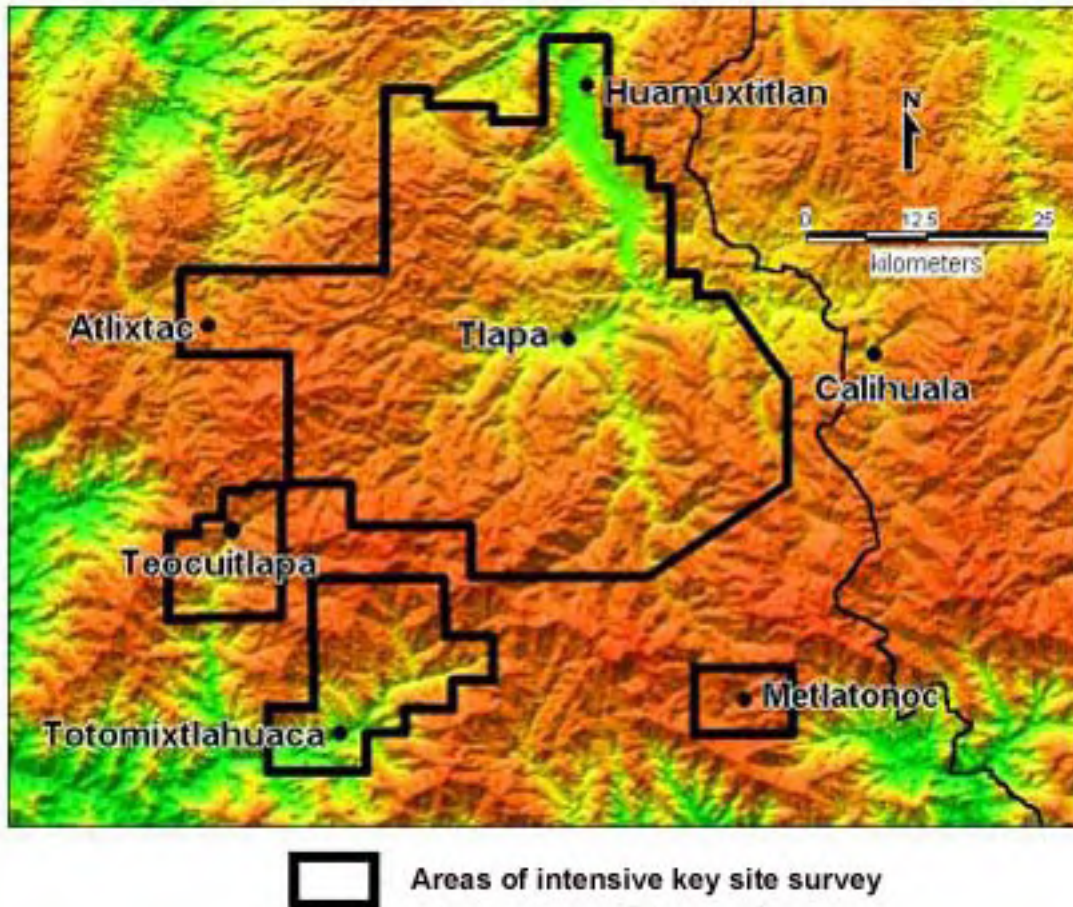


Figure 9. Areas of archaeological survey in the Mixteca-Tlapaneca-Náhuatl region of Guerrero.

A field season partially financed by FAMSI was carried out in the area during 2000 in which 190 archaeological sites were found. From these 123 were reported to have Postclassic ceramics or other features associated to this period. Once the exact position, size, and architectural features of conquered places was identified ([Figure 10](#)), I was able to examine the political expansion of Tlapa-Tlacinollan.

The results of the archeological research were:

(1.) The interpretation of the codices' place names was very accurate. In more than 80% of the time I found a Postclassic site of importance where I had predicted it would be, based on the place names recorded in the codices.

(2.) The aridity of northeastern Guerrero resulted in archaeological sites being concentrated close to the Tlapaneco River, the only permanent source of water throughout the year ([Figure 11](#)). Codex Humboldt fragment 1 shows an agricultural system along the Tlapaneco River which was controlled and monopolized by high status nobles during the early 16th century. Effectively a complex irrigation system called Trompezón was observed along the main

valleys of the Tlapaneco River. This system required the construction of complex perimeter walls that protect the fields from the torrential inundations of the Tlapaneco River. Centralized management and organization was required to build them, especially to protect the plots larger than 100 hectares.

Three main clusters of archaeological sites in the region were closely associated with complex systems of Trompezón fields which suggests that they were valuable prizes in the political competition. These three clusters of sites are: Tlachinollan's regal-ritual cores (Contlaco-Cerro Quemado); Ixcateopan-Alpuyeca; and Huamuxitlan-Coyoahualco (Figure 12). Native leaders probably used the agricultural surplus obtained from this fertile system to promote political allegiance and finance the costs of their political expansion.

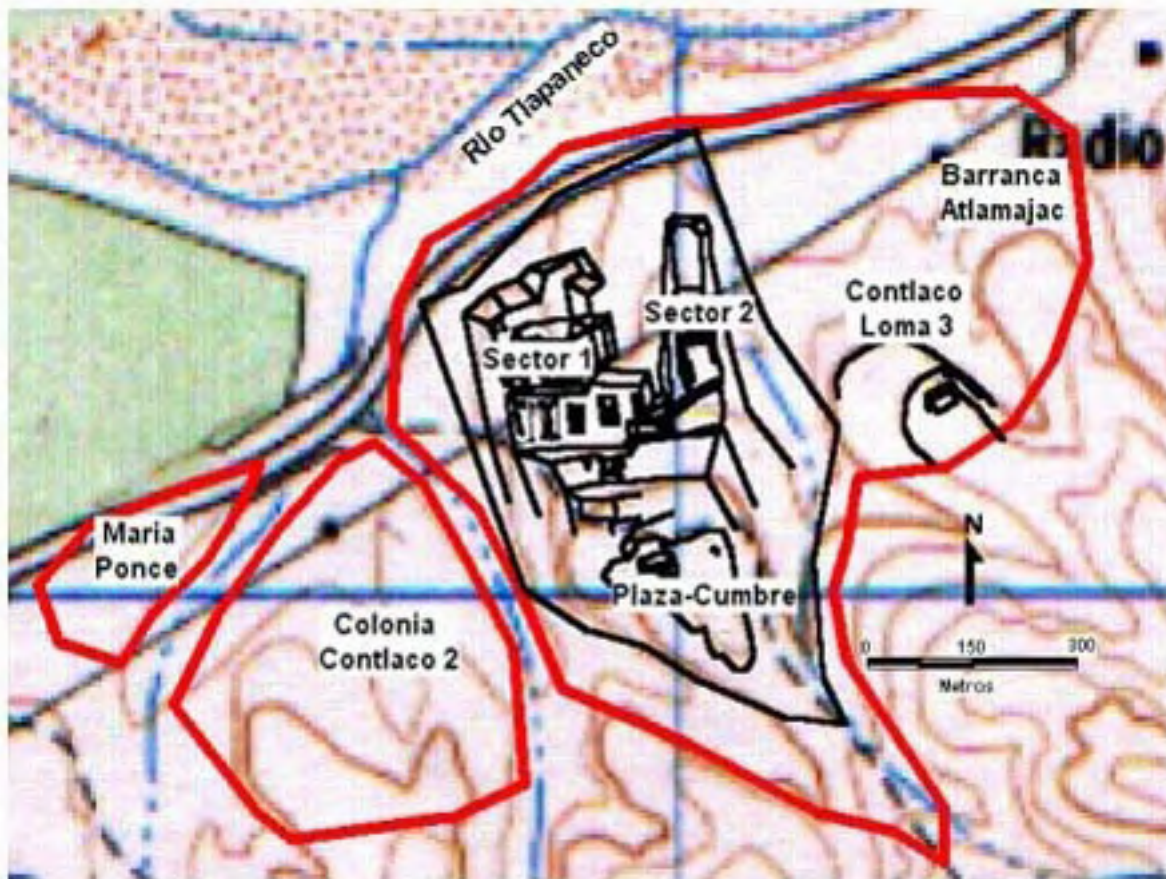


Figure 10. Different sectors of the site of Contlalco (Tlachinollan).

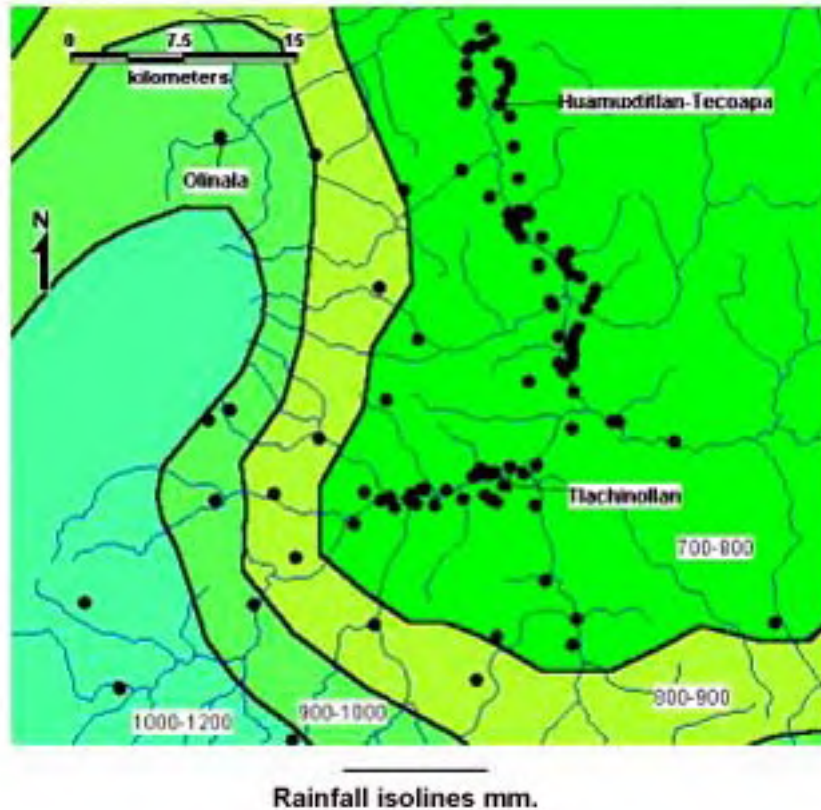


Figure 11. Distribution of Postclassic sites in the northern sector of the Montaña region. Note the concentration of sites along the rivers, especially in the area with the lowest rainfall during the rainy season (700-800 mm).

(3.) The results of the log-normal distribution applied to eastern Guerrero settlement system proved that Tlapa-Tlachinollan was in fact the dominant center of a primate settlement system during the Postclassic period. Although, this test was not conclusive and did not prove that Tlapa-Tlachinollan actually expanded, *it showed that the archaeological settlement pattern of eastern Guerrero does not contradict the ethnohistoric scenarios of Tlapa-Tlachinollan's expansion.* Tlapa-Tlachinollan one way or another did become the primary settlement over a vast region ([Figure 13](#)).

(4.) A system of fortified villages was identified along both margins of the Zizintla River confirming the existence of political tensions and possible conflict between Tlapa-Tlachinollan (predominately Mixtec-Tlapanec) and the Náhuatl villages in the Quiahuateopan province. This received further support from the observation that the archaeological sites around Chiepetlan and Olinalá have insignificant percentages of the ceramic type T1BGB. This ceramic type has been found predominantly in the area under Tlapa-Tlachinollan political control.

(5.) The direction of growth proposed by the ethnohistorical documents suggested territorial expansion in a marked southwest direction. This suggests

that Tlapa-Tlachinollan lords focused their efforts on the control of the trade route leading to the Pacific coast. Cacao, cotton, fish, and salt were the prizes they were after. Control of this route also gave them control over villages in different ecological zones providing access to resources of the temperate and high Montaña as well as gemstones and gold in the high Montaña and the Costa Chica.

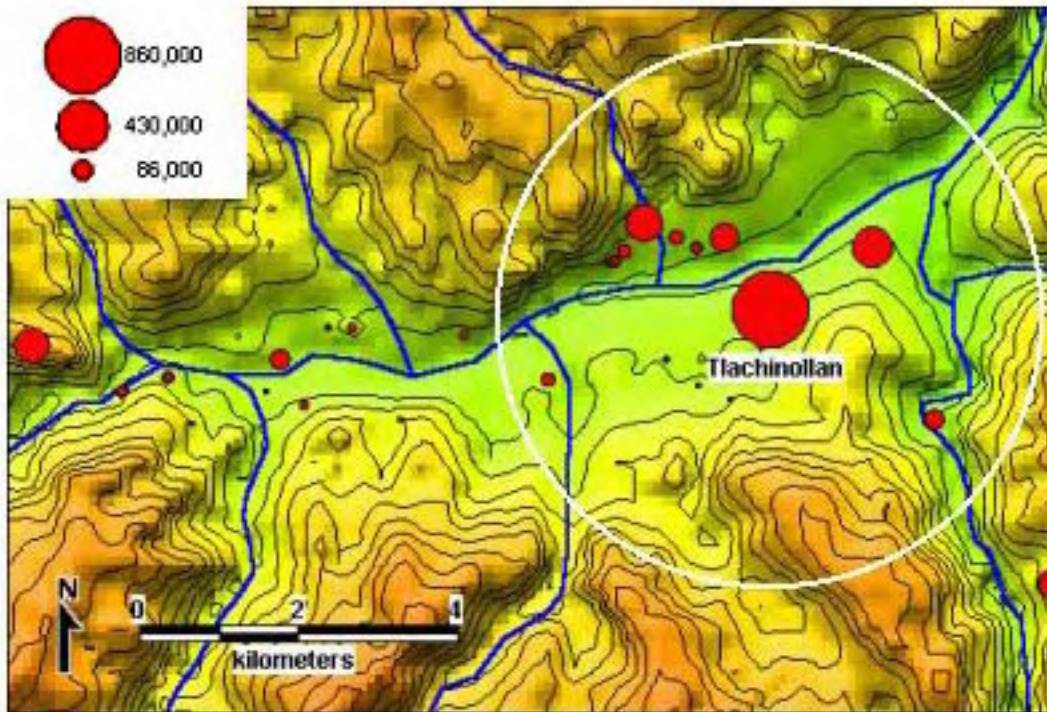


Figure 12. Concentration of sites weighted by area size. Note the concentration of the largest sites in the eastern portion of the valley of Tlapa around Tlachinollan (Contlalco).

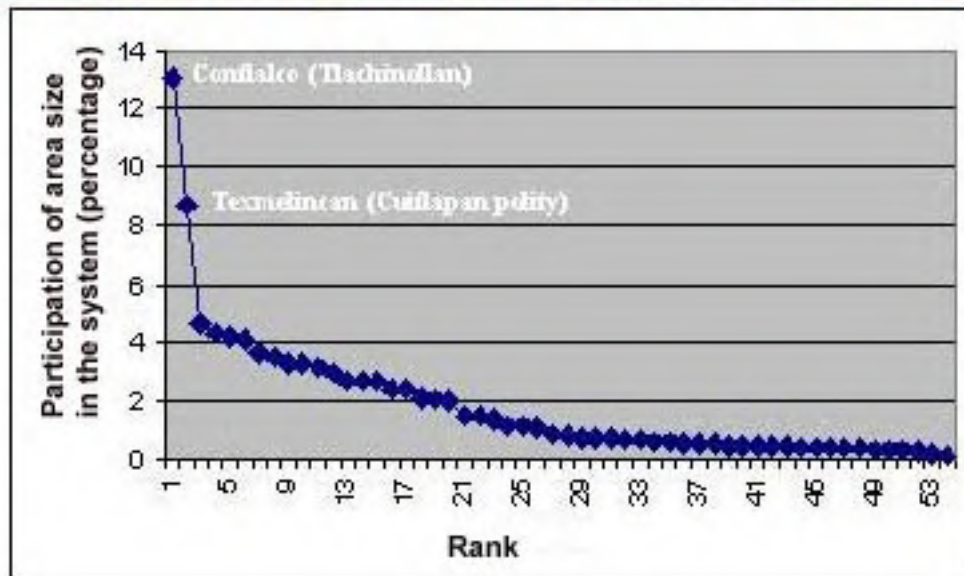
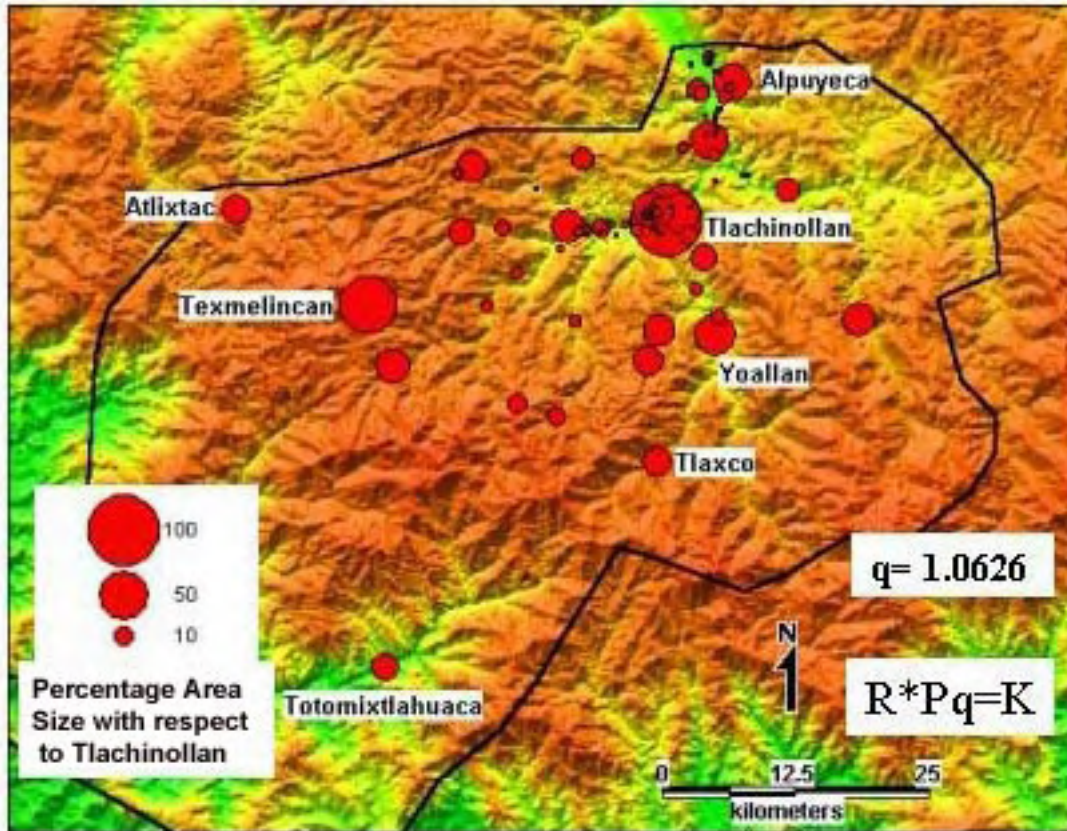


Figure 13. Results of the q value for the regression line of the settlement system contained in the territory controlled by Tlachinollan in A.D. 1510.

It is really difficult to reconstruct a sequence of political expansion using archaeological materials. This notwithstanding I proposed that the most powerful political units in

eastern Guerrero were conquered during the latter stages of Tlachinollan's expansion. This idea was corroborated. Previous to A.D. 1461, Tlachinollan only conquered small polities and it avoided the territories of the strong *altepeme* of Cuitlapan, Yoallan and Alcozauca. These larger polities were conquered after A.D. 1461 and only after Tlachinollan became a client state of Tenochtitlán.

Concluding Remarks

It is important to understand that the territorial expansion of Tlapa-Tlachinollan consisted of the modular annexation of other regional competing *altepeme* into and under its sphere of command. With the exception of some highly productive irrigation lands, the leaders of Tlapa-Tlachinollan were more interested in controlling the labor and specific resources of the region than the whole territory.

Internal conflict and disagreement over political succession seem to have sparked the initial impetus of Tlachinollan's expansion. This supports an important assertion of this dissertation that territorial growth is the spatial manifestation of intra-polity competition.

List of Figures

[Figure 1](#). Location of eastern Guerrero.

[Figure 2](#). Tlapa-Tlachinollan Province.

[Figure 3](#). Folio 1 obverse of Codex Azoyú 1 (Vega Sosa 1991).

[Figure 4](#). Folio 17 obverse of Codex Azoyú 2 (MNA-INAH).

[Figure 5](#). Petlacala and Axoxuca-Atlixac's conquests in A.D. 1447 (Codex Azoyú 2, folio 3, obverse).

[Figure 6](#). Document AGN, Indios, vol. 34, exp. 140, December 1689.

[Figure 7a](#). Ideal shape of Tlachinollan if located on an isotropic plain with no political or economic competition.

[Figure 7b](#). Comparison between the ideal shape of the polity and the shape of Tlachinollan's territory after A.D. 1510.

[Figure 8](#). The key site survey was undertaken with the help of local guides and authorities (Cochoapa Grande, Metlatonoc, Guerrero).

[Figure 9](#). Areas of archaeological survey in the Mixteca-Tlapaneca-Náhuatl region of Guerrero.

[Figure 10](#). Different sectors of the site of Contlalco (Tlachinollan).

[Figure 11](#). Distribution of Postclassic sites in the northern sector of the Montaña region. Note the concentration of sites along the rivers, especially in the area with the lowest rainfall during the rainy season (700-800 mm).

[Figure 12](#). Concentration of sites weighted by area size. Note the concentration of the largest sites in the eastern portion of the valley of Tlapa around Tlachinollan (Contlalco).

[Figure 13](#). Results of the q value for the regression line of the settlement system contained in the territory controlled by Tlachinollan in A.D. 1510.

Sources Cited

Carrasco, Pedro

1999 *The Tenochca Empire of Ancient México: The Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlán, Tezcoco, and Tlacoapan*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

García, Martínez Bernardo

1987 *Los Pueblos de la Sierra: El poder y el espacio entre los indios del norte de Puebla hasta 1700*. México: Centro de Estudios Históricos, El Colegio de México.

Jiménez, García Elizabeth

2000 "La Arqueología de Tlapa." *Tlapa: Origen y Memoria Histórica*, ed. Mario O. Martínez Rescalvo. Chilpancingo, Guerrero, México: Universidad Autónoma.

Lockhart, James

1992 *Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central México, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Rubí, Alarcón Rafael

1998 "Era de los Habsburgo: 1521-1700," *Historia General de Guerrero, El Dominio Español*. CONACULTA-INAH, Gobierno del Estado de Guerrero, JGH Editores, Asociación de Historiadores de Guerrero, A.C., vol. 2, pp. 11-232. México.

Vega Sosa, Constanza

1989 "Los Glifos Toponímicos en el Códice Azoyú 1." *Primer Coloquio de Documentos Pictográficos de Tradición Náhuatl*. México: IIA-UNAM.

1991 *Códice Azoyú: El reino de Tlachinollan*. México: FCE.

Veléz, Calvo Raúl

1998 "Etnohistoria (?-1521)." *Historia General de Guerrero, Época Prehispánica*. México: CONACULTA-INAH, Gobierno del Estado de Guerrero, JGH Editores, Asociación de Historiadores de Guerrero, A.C, vol 1, pp. 141-478.

Villela, F. Samuel

1996 "El Códice Panel de Chiepetlán y las migraciones nahuas a la Montaña de Guerrero." *Estudios de cultura náhuatl*. 26:133-146. México: IIH-UNAM.