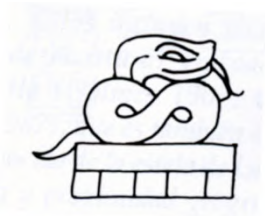
The La Mojarra Chronicle: an Illustrated Account of an Archaeological Investigation in Veracruz, Mexico



By Richard A. Diehl

Dedicated to the memories of Matthew W. and Marion Stirling and the National Geographic Society and the belief that archaeological information should be shared with the public, not kept as the preserve of a privileged few.

Chapter One. Introduction

In 1983 archaeologists from the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, recovered a large stone shaft from the river bed at La Mojarra in southern Veracruz Mexico. Known today as La Mojarra Stela 1, the monument's face features a striking human figure and a very long hieroglyphic text in an unknown script. Dates expressed in ancient Mesoamerica's Long Count calendric system included in the text place its carving in the 2nd century of our era, what archaeologists call the Terminal Formative period. However, the language of the text and its decipherment remain contentious issues even today.

In 1995 I led a joint University of Alabama-University of Veracruz archaeological project at La Mojarra with the financial support of the National Geographic Society and both universities. Our goals were to learn about the site and above all to discover additional monuments with texts in what is now called the Isthmian or Epi-Olmec Script. This web page relates the history and results of that project, its successes and high points as well as its failures and disappointments. I hope to give the reader insights into what we did as well as why and how we did it. In addition, I want share the daily experiences of our project as an example of what happens on an "average" archaeological field project in Mexico or anywhere else. Our project was unique, as all archaeological projects are, and yet most follow certain very similar trajectories. Accompany me then as I reconstruct a five month episode in my fifty year career as an archaeologist. Although it occurred fifteen years ago, the *Proyecto La Mojarra* remains as fresh in my mind as this morning's breakfast, and as pleasant to think and write about as it was to experience it first hand. I only wish we could do it all over again!

Figure 1.1. The tiny modern hamlet on top of the ancient settlement that yielded Stela 1 is named after a local river fish whose scientific name is Cichlasoma uruthalmus. The Spanish term mojarra is applied for a wide array of fish in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico regions and is sometimes translated into English as Tilapia. These farm-raised examples from near Veracruz City are typical of what Veracruzanos identify as mojarra.

Figure 1.2. The archaeological site of La Mojarra consists of a few low earth mounds separated by open plazas. We did not test any of the mounds but did excavate into a plaza that was first laid down sometime in the Early Classic period (AD 300-600). Today the site surface serves as a cattle pasture and supports a few homes, a school, and auxiliary structures. The inhabitants, like all their neighbors in the region, are *Jarochos*, Spanish-speaking descendants of Indians and Europeans, including an Italian soldier named Laureani, who settled in the region after the War of the French Intervention (1861-67). Today his descendants credit him and his eight “wives”

with fathering more than 50 children; we had the pleasure of transporting one of his granddaughters downriver to Alvarado to her 85th birthday party.

Figure 1.3. La Mojarra lies near the southeastern edge of Mesoamerica's Classic Veracruz culture region to the west of the Papaloapan River that skirts the volcanic Tuxtla Mountains. Map taken from Wikipedia.

Figure 1.4. La Mojarra occupies the east bank of the Rio Acula; a distributary of the Alvarado Lagoon. It lacks true headwaters or an up-river source; its water backs up from the lagoon. The lagoon in turn receives its freshwater from the Rio Papaloapan, one of Mexico's largest rivers.

The village lies in the middle of one eastern Mexico's largest and richest wetland zones, a maze of streams, river, lakes, and swamps teeming with plant and animal life. Alas, in the mid-1990s much of the vegetation was being cut off for un-improved cattle pastures, a rather short-sighted land use pattern that yields a few years of marginal profits and decades of environmental degradation

Figure 1.5. The Acula River surrounds La Mojarra on three sides. The sharp eastward bend in the river appears strangely unnatural, at least to my non-geologist eye. One observer has suggested it is the result of eastward erosion "wrapping around" the built-up cultural obstruction created by ancient construction of the archaeological site but that has not been scientifically tested or demonstrated. The Valencia Ranch was our project headquarters and the scene of almost all our investigations. Image taken from Google Earth June 2010.

Chapter Two. The Modern History of La Mojarra's Stela 1

In the early Twentieth century, Stela 1 stood upright on dry ground near the bank of the Acula river. At some unknown date the eastwardly eroding river bank undercut the sculpture, causing it to fall into the water. Thus it was never really "lost" or forgotten, as some have alleged. In 1986 archaeologists and engineers raised it by inserting posts around it as pilings. After one unsuccessful attempt during which it fell back into the water, they loaded it on a barge, shipped it upriver to the town of Acula and thence by truck to Xalapa. It was originally scheduled to be placed on display in the newly-renovated MAX but did not arrive in time to be installed prior to the official opening. Thus it was relegated to the museum basement, where it laid almost forgotten for several years until a young student realized that it contained lightly inscribed glyphs in addition to the obvious human figure.

Figure 2.1. Posts that mark the spot in the water where the Stela 1 was found remained visible in 1995. They were placed there by the engineers who lifted the stone up before removing it to Xalapa.

Figure 2.2. In 1995 we probed the river bed at the Stela 1 find spot looking for additional monuments. We even dove to the shallow bottom and felt around in the murk. No luck! If any stones were there, they hid from us.

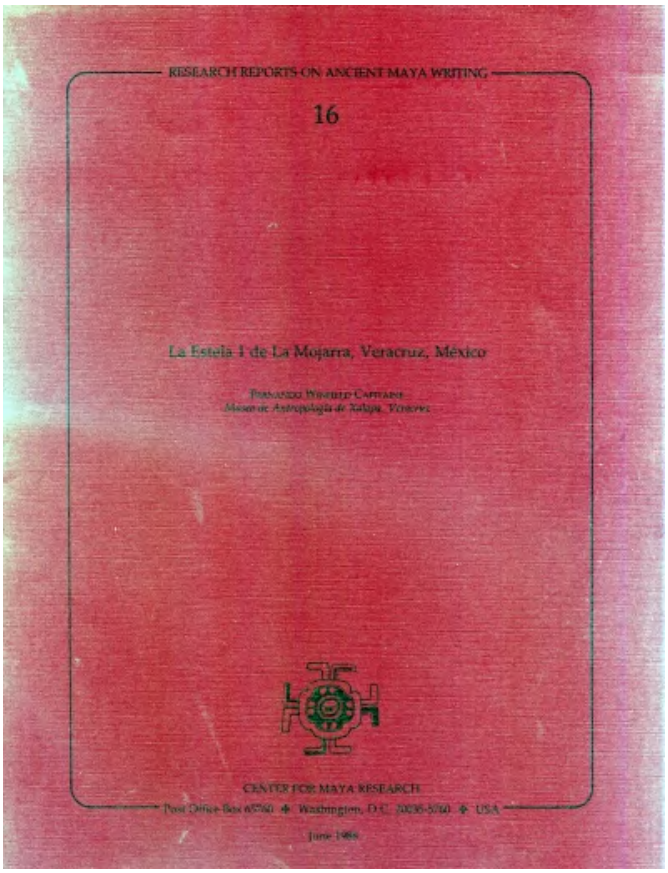


Figure 2.3. “La Estela 1 de La Mojarra, Mexico” by Fernando Winfield Capitaine, (*Research Reports # 16 on Ancient Maya Writing, The Center for Maya Research,* Washington, DC June 1988) is a bilingual Spanish-English monograph that includes George Stuart’s drawings of the human figure and text. It remains the definitive description of Stela 1 and the standard source used by epigraphers attempting to decipher the inscription.

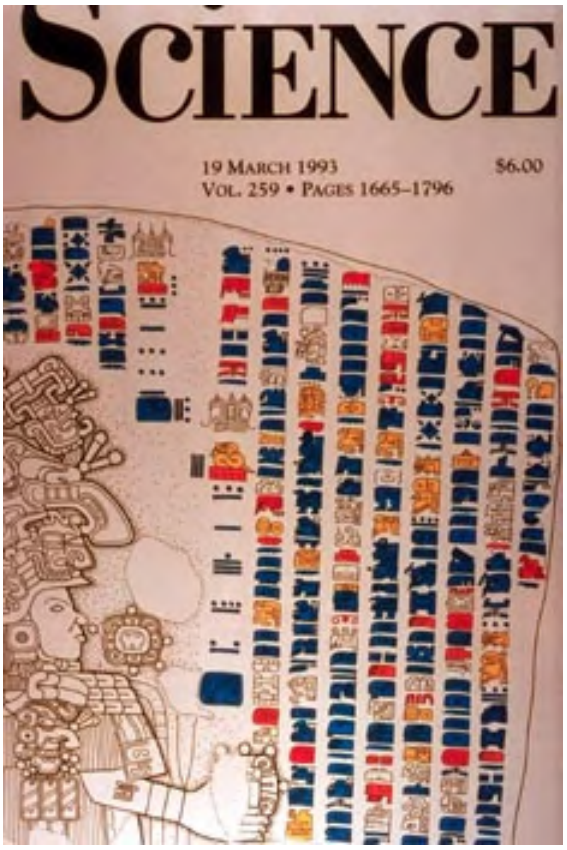


Figure 2.4. The 19 March, 1993 issue of *Science* magazine contains John Justeson and Terrance Kaufmann's proposed decipherment of the text and the Isthmian script. The multi-colored glyphs were added to the magazine cover for visual impact; there is no evidence of paint on the original monument. Today their proposed decipherment is accepted by some authorities and rejected by others.

Figure 2.5. Today La Mojarra Stela 1 is exhibited in the Museo de Antropolgía de Xalapa (MAX) in the Veracruz state capital. Although first brought to MAX in 1986, it was not placed on exhibit until ten years later when Museum Director Dra. Sara Ladrón de Guevara, shown here pointing to one of the 500+ glyphs in the text, gave it a place on honor in one of the museum's sun-lit sculpture galleries.

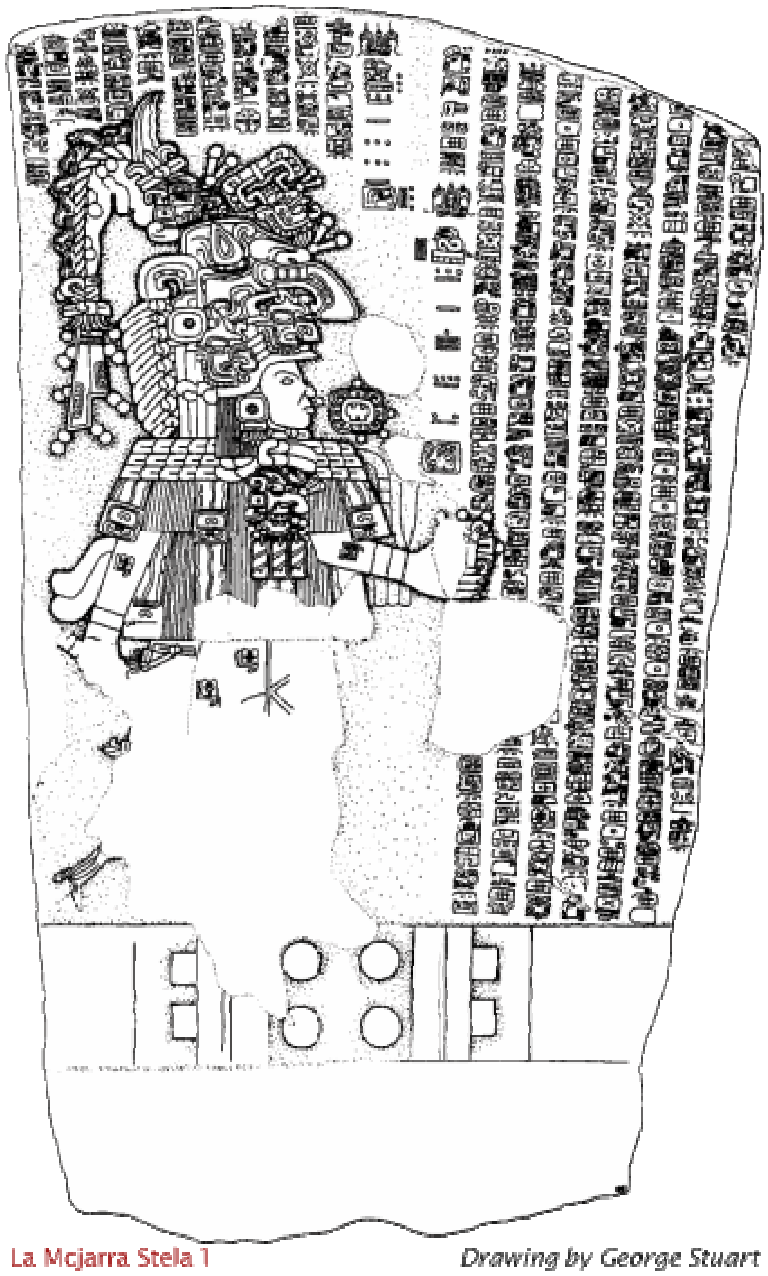


Figure 2.6. La Mojarra Stela 1 text and human protagonist. The human figure, assumed to be a local ruler, is carved in bold and deep relief, while the lightly incised glyphs are barely visible. This seemingly unusual pattern is actually true of most Isthmian Script texts. The lower portions of standing figure and a section of the text scaled off at some point in the past.

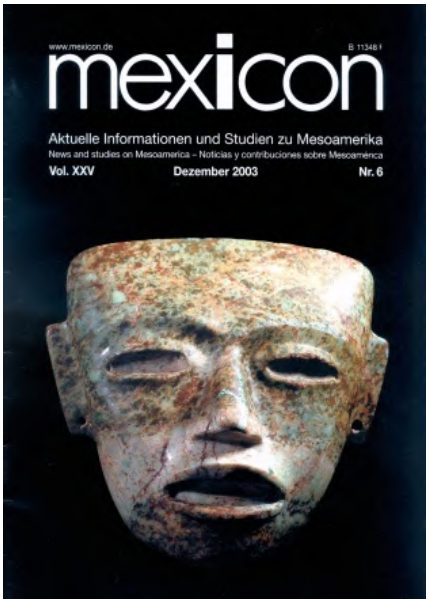


Figure 2.5. The December 2003 issue of *Mexicon* contains an essay by Stephen Houston and Michael D. Coe that contains the most systematic rebuttal of the Justeson-Kaufmann decipherment published to date. Their examination of the Isthmian Script text on the obverse of the Teotihuacan style mask seen on the cover led Houston and Coe to conclude that "… the decipherment proposed by Justeson and Kaufmann is, in our view, unlikely to be valid."(p. 159). The debate continues.

Chapter Three. Other Stone Monuments in the Region

Southern Veracruz is renown among archaeologists for its abundance of ancient carved stone monuments. While those of the Formative period Olmecs come to mind immediately, large samples of Late Formative and Classic period examples are known from Tres Zapotes and Cerro de las Mesas, both located quite near La Mojarra. Although La Mojarra Stela 1 shares formal and stylistic characteristics, as well as the use of calendric glyphic notations with sculptures from these two sites, these commonalities have never been examined in detail.

In addition to these well-known sculptures, five other stone monuments found near La Mojarra are worth mentioning at this point. The Alvarado, Cerro de la Piedra and El Meson sculptures were known years before the discovery of Stela 1, a fourth is located in the plaza of the town of Acula a few kilometers upriver from La Mojarra, and the last lies on the surface of the site itself. None of them has been carefully recorded using modern techniques and I must warn the reader that the images below may contain inaccuracies. Nevertheless, it is clear that all share some relationship to La Mojarra Stela 1 as well as certain examples at Tres Zapotes and Cerro de las Mesas.

Figure 3.1. The “Alvarado Stela” has been known since first reported by Leopold Batres (1905) but while from the Papaloapan river region, its precise original location is unclear. Like La Mojarra Stela 1, it depicts a regally dressed standing figure and once had a column of glyphs, now seen only as vague cartouches.

Figure 3.2. Stela 1 from Cerro de la Piedra is a poorly known and obscurely published stone slab that portrays a standing figure wearing a headdress with elements reminiscent of Teotihuacan imagery and holding an object often considered a piece of equipment used in the ball game.

Figure 3.3. El Meson's Stela 1 has been photographed and drawn on several occasions but a definitive image remains to be published. The main theme of a splendidly attired ruler sanding on an elaborately detailed foundation echoes that of the stelae from both Alvarado and La Mojarra. Neither glyphs nor calendric inscriptions have been detected on the badly eroded surface of the stone.

Figure3.4. This stone fragment in the plaza of Acula appears to be the upper section of a rather well-shaped stela. The top is defined by a raised frame bordered by thin raised borders. The carved designs on the frame and in the enclosed main field seem to emphasize aquatic subjects; the most prominent feature appears to be the vertical tail of a fish or aquatic mammal, and a fish can be seen on the far right of the frame. The image to the right in the main field is too eroded to identify, as is true of the remaining depictions. Interestingly, several depictions “over-ride” or intrude into the frame. We could not verify the original provenance of the sculpture. Archaeologist Carey B. Oakley, now retired from the University of Alabama, provides scale.

Figure 3.5. This battered, amorphous stone known as “La India” lies in the pasture near La Mojarra’s main plaza. Nothing is known of its history or previous condition. The fact that it occurs in a stone-less alluvial area indicates it was brought from elsewhere, almost certainly the nearby Tuxtla mountains, at some point in the past.

Chapter Four. The Town of Alvarado: Our Base Camp

Figure 4.1. The town of Alvarado, our Project home from January until May, 1995, occupies the southern side of a stabilized sand dune at the mouth of the Laguna de Alvarado. Both the town and the lagoon are named in honor of the Spanish Conquistador Pedro de Alvarado. The full name of the community is La Ilustre, Heróica y Generosa Ciudad y Puerto de Alvarado. Historically the community has been a fishing village oriented to the sea as well as a regional commercial center serving the inland residents. The population of the *municipio* (roughly equivalent to a US county) was *ca.* 48,000 in 2005, approximately half of whom resided in the town.

Figure 4.2. A bridge constructed across the outlet to the ocean in 1964 replaced the large ferries that formerly connected the north and south edges of the narrows. During my first trip southeast along the Golf Coast in that year, my ADO bus had to wait in line for three hours to make the ferry crossing. Fishing and shrimping have been Alvarado's lifeblood for centuries. Unfortunately yields have declined in recent decades, in great part as a result of over-exploitation.

Figure 4.3. This vintage photograph from the late 1950s or early 60s shows the ferry or *panga* that crossed the Alvarado narrows prior to 1964. Four such ferries were vital links along the Gulf coast between Tampico and Campeche prior to major bridge construction and later limited access highways built further inland to avoid wide river crossings. I do not miss the "Good Old Days"!

Figure 4.4. The passage to the ocean in the foreground connects the Lagoon seen in the distance with the Gulf of Mexico. A well-kept *malecon* or promenade overlooks the water.

Figure 4.5. The downtown landscape is dominated by the Cathedral dedicated to Nuestra Señora del Rosario, the local government building (*Palacio Municipal*), and a school, all facing on to a well-maintained plaza.

Figure 4.6. Morning mist was a common occurrence as we loaded up our University of Veracruz boat for the daily trip upriver to La Mojarra.

Figure 4.7. Alvarado's plaza is the center of public life and a source of pleasure and pride for all citizens or *Alvaradeños.* Mornings see it filled with adults hurrying about their business and children going to school. Although the afternoon heat brings life to a crawl, it resumes a busier but still languid pace in early evening as young families fill the benches and walks, teenagers flirt while trying to look cool, and adults relax in the fresh breezes and socialize after a hard day's work.

Figure 4.8 . Alvarado's commercial center is dominated by imposing two-story buildings that often date back to the early and mid 20th century. In 1995 modern mega-retailers had still not become a presence in the town and businesses were all owned and run by local families.

Figure 4.9. A walk around the downtown residential zone is like looking through a kaleidoscope of single story masonry building facades. These simple walls conceal front rooms and corridors leading to interior courtyards and the more private parts of the home. Many families who do not go to the plaza in the evening continue to follow the tradition of moving chairs, especially rocking chairs, out on the sidewalk to enjoy the fresh breeze and socialize with neighbors and passers-by.

Figure 4.10. Many homes use wooden shutters in place of glass windows to provide privacy and keep out the heat and blowing sand.

Figure 4.11. The ubiquitous red and white taxis are commonly hired for trips of more than a few blocks in the ever-present heat, while teenagers and even few of their elders have adopted motor scooters as a modern alternative to the bicycle. The entrance to the municipal *Mercado* is on the left.

Figure 4.12. Refreshment stands are Alvarado's equivalent of the sidewalk cafes found in other parts of the world. They provide welcome spots to cool off and enjoy a cold beer or fresh juice and a tangy shrimp cocktail while catching up with friends and watching the world go by. We did our best to ensure their continued survival by patronizing them whenever possible.

Figure 4.13. One of numerous receiving stations for catches of fresh water fish. Most fish seem to be destined for local consumption and Alvaradeños are fanatics about consuming only fish that are as fresh as possible. "Look that fish in the eye!" takes on a whole new meaning here!

Figure 4.14. Alvarado's marine gas station for small boats provides fuel as well as a place to exchange information about the weather, locations where fish may or may not be found, and who is doing what with whom up and down the rivers and sloughs. Here is where I learned that our boat did not have brakes when I hit the dock with a loud and highly visible thud one day.

Figure 4.15. The big boys of Alvarado's sea-going fishing fleet tie up to the *malecon*. In 1995 recent declines in catches and relatively high costs of fuel forced many of them to remain in port more time than they would have wished. Their production is marketed on regional and national markets. The boats and their crews give Alvarado a maritime feel not found in most places where Mesoamerican archaeologists live and work.

Chapter Five. The Laguna de Alvarado region

Figure 5.1. The region in blue crosshatching on the map encompasses the Laguna de Alvarado and its annually inundated backwater zone. Highway XXX runs parallel to the Papaloapan river, the primary source of water in the region, while Highway XCXX extends east-west. Slightly raised levees and river borders not visible at this scale serve the ancient and modern foci of human habitation. The hydrology of the entire region was massively transformed by construction of the Miguel Aleman Dam after World War II. The dam was designed to prevent or moderate the massive floods that ravaged the region in earlier years. Unfortunately baseline studies of pre-dam ecology, hydrology, and land use were never carried out so we do not know what the hydrological regime and other basic aspects of the regional ecology were prior to the 1950s.

Figure 5.2. Mangrove plant communities line the banks of the Acula river and other waterways that enter the Laguna de Alvarado wherever the natural vegetation has not been removed for cattle pasture. The saline water and fine silty alluvium provide a rich habitat that has provided humans with fish, crabs, small mammals, and many other aquatic resources for millennia.

Figure 5.3. The Acula terminates in an internally drained lake or aquatic cul-de-sac. Quiet stretches of the river water are seasonally covered with Mexican water lilies (*Nymphaea apla*). Here Bernardo, our boatman or *motorista* guides our boat through an increasingly thick mat of these plants. Their presence indicates the total absence of salinity in the water here at the upper reaches of the Acula. Of no economic use today, they were considered sacred by the Maya and other lowland Mesoamerican in pre-Columbian times.

Figure 5.4. Cattle were introduced into the region by Spaniards in the 16th century and ranching is a major component of life and economy today. Milk is sold to local middlemen who ply the river daily by boat but meat is the primary commercial product.

Figure 5.5. Why do cattle cross a river? Because they are driven to do it by their water-borne cowboys. I never knew that cows can swim until this episode. They did not seem to enjoy the experience.

Figure 5.6. Before calves are old enough to swim, they get to ride in the boat.

Figure 5.7. Barnyard animals contribute quite a bit to the petty cash needs of local families as well as providing protein-rich food. Most were introduced from the Old World by the Spaniards but domesticated turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*) were indigenous to Mesoamerica and the southwestern United States. This strutting gang of thugs acted as though it ran the Valencia Ranch until Doña Dominga convinced it otherwise.

Figure 5.8. Fish are a mainstay of the local diet. Here a local boy passes a Sunday afternoon using a throw net to bring home dinner and perhaps earn a few pesos as well. The abundance of locally available high protein foods is reflected in the apparent absence of malnutrition in the local population while the minor presence of highly processed foods in 1995 was evident in the low incidence of obesity. On the whole, local *Jarochos* are a well fed and healthy group of people.

Figure 5.9. This *Jarocho* Huck Finn caught more fish in an hour off the Alvarado dock than I have caught in my entire life.

Figure 5.10. Rural homes in the region are always located adjacent to the waterways for easy access to the aquatic highways and almost every family has at least one boat. Paved roads are non-existent and although trucks and other vehicles with high ground clearance can enter the region during the dry season, terrestrial access is always difficult at best.

Figure 5.11. Manatees were once common in the region but by 1995 were on the verge of extinction. The Mexican government recently declared the region a protected zone for the docile *Trichechus manatus* but the future of the population is in doubt. La Mojarra is home to a long tradition of hunting “sea cows” and inviting the entire neighborhood to feast on the flesh. The attitude of the locals towards conservation was starkly highlighted when Sergio Vásquez queried our workmen what they would do if they sighted the two remaining manatees known to survive in the Acula river. They responded that they would kill one but leave the other to

prevent extinction of the population. They were not clear on how a single animal, even a female, can reproduce.

Figure 5.12. Cattle are ubiquitous in the region and we had to fence in our excavations with barbed wire to prevent the Valencia animals from falling into the pits. Most were relatively docile but this new mother, who we dubbed “Mother of All Excavations”, was very protective of her new-born calf.

Figure 5.13. All the local fauna is harmless if one avoids it! Fer-de-lances (*Bothrops asper*), sometimes called “the ultimate pit viper”, are endemic to the region. The most feared and deadly animal in the environment, they are always killed on sight. These three were found in a sugar cane field, one of their favored habitats owing to the large rodent populations they harbor. Like most people around the world, locals do not like to touch even a dead snake with

their hands. Many years ago I asked a workman who had just beheaded a fer-de-lance with his machete if he would skin it for me. His response was something like “Skin it yourself!”

Figure 5.14. This house at the edge of the La Mojarra archaeological site is modern example of a building type that has existed in the region for millennia: a single room structure with a packed earth floor, walls of vertical poles and a palm thatch roof resting on vertical posts. Still common in the region, such houses can be more comfortable than they might appear, especially in the year-round heat. The stand against the wall is used for washing dishes from inside the house via access from the window behind it. Erosion from discarded waste water exposed an ancient human burial that we excavated early in our field work. The reddish cylindrical propane gas tanks provide fuel for the stove, a modern replacement for the traditional wood-burning hearth.

Figure 5.15. Most houses along the river are constructed of cement block covered with painted stucco and roofed with sheets of various factory-made materials. Windows with wooden shutters, wood doors, and mosquito screening admit light and fresh air. Such buildings cost considerably more than those of the traditional style but mark its owners as modern and prosperous.

Figure 5.16. Primary schools are found along the river banks in every community of more than a few families. Today most children complete at least six years of education and many continue their studies in secondary schools and beyond in facilities located in towns like Alvarado, Acula, and Tlacotalpan.

Figure 5.17. Although most people along the river are nominally Catholic, the church does not have a strong presence and numerous Protestant evangelical sects have made substantial inroads into the region. Local congregations often begin with a pole and thatch meeting place that they gradually transformed into a more substantial masonry temple.

Chapter Six. Preparations for the Project

Every archaeologist can attest to the fact that it takes more time to plan and prepare for a field project than to carry it out. Our project was no different. I first began thinking about it shortly after Winfield Capitaine's monograph swept me up in the excitement and controversy over the puzzling text on Stela 1. I concluded that the only way scholars could ever decipher the text and its script was to have additional texts for comparative purposes and that although I am not an epigrapher, I could help the process by locating more stone monuments at La Mojarra. But how could I discover stone monuments without either knowing where they were or being extraordinary lucky?

Figure 6.1. The emerging science of subsoil prospection offered a way out of this dilemma. Twenty years previously my friend and mentor Michael D. Coe, along with engineer/scientist Sheldon Briener had used a magnetometer to locate Olmec monuments at San Lorenzo, including the magnificent Colossal Head shown above. It occurred to me that such an approach might work at La Mojarra, where the alluvial soil meant that any positive signal would (or ***should***) be a magnetic rock introduced from outside. Preliminary discussions with Luis Barba of UNAM's Archaeological Prospection Laboratorywere encouraging; he agreed with my basic hunch and his team had the necessary equipment to do such a survey.

Figure 6.2. The next step was to actually visit La Mojarra in a reconnaissance to provide the background information I needed in order to plan the project and prepare a proposal for funding. That opportunity came in December 1992 at the end of a project at Teotihuacan led by my archaeologist wife Sue Scott, in the white hat, above. Sue and I, together with her field crew drove from Mexico City to Oaxaca and then on to Acula, where we rented a boat for a Sunday afternoon trip to the site.

Figure 6.3. Don Domingo Valencia Laureani, the local landowner, led us around his ranch, a property that includes the major portion of the ancient settlement. I quickly realized that adequate excavation of even one of the small mounds on the site was far beyond what we could reasonably do in a single field season but that we could map the site, conduct a subsoil prospection with a magnetometer, and excavate several test pits. I presented my ideas to Don Domingo, who could have stopped the project in its tracks with a simple refusal to work on his property. Fortunately, he responded enthusiastically, assuring me that we would be welcome to survey and excavate on his ranch. Now I needed to find the funds to do it!

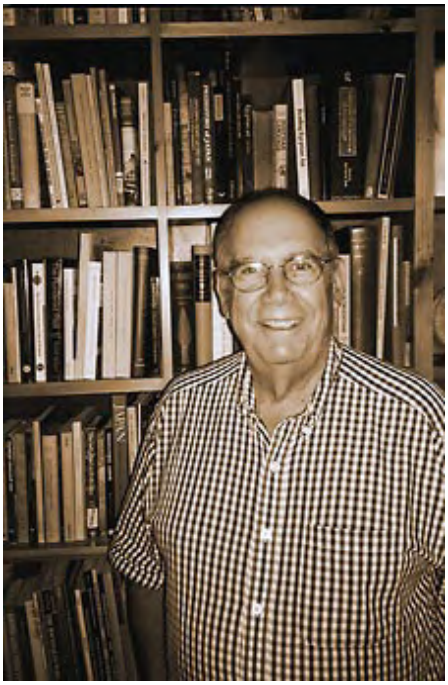


Figure 6.4. When I returned home I contacted National Geographic Society (NGS) archaeologist George Stuart. George had brought Stela 1 to the attention of the scholarly world by through his detailed drawings of the text and figure, his English translation Winfield Capitaine's monograph, and publication of the bilingual edition. He encouraged me to apply to the Society's Committee for Research for a research grant to cover the project expenses.

Figure 6.5. The National Geographic Society, headquartered in Washington, D.C., has sponsored important research projects in many fields every year. I followed George's advice and the Society provided a generous award that allowed me to move ahead.

Figure 6.6. Every research project I have done in Mexico has included Mexican students and archaeologists and I looked forward to working with personnel from the University of Veracruz (UV) as well as UNAM's Archaeological Prospection Laboratory. Professor Sergio Vásquez Zárate, a young UV archaeologist shown here with an obsidian blade in his hand, agreed to both participate and recruit UV students for the project. We planned to carry out the fieldwork between January and May, 1994, the dry or non-rainy season in the region.

The One-year Delay

Figure 6.7. Even the best laid plans go awry! I decided to postpone the project one year when the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection in Washington, D. C. asked me to serve as Acting Director of Pre-Columbian Studies in academic 1993/94 while Elizabeth Boone, the permanent Director, took a well-deserved Sabbatical Leave. Of course I accepted, and the University of Alabama allowed me to postpone my Sabbatical Leave, timed to coincide with the project, a year as well. Thus January 1994 found me in the snows in Washington, D. C., rather than the heat of Veracruz. It all worked out very well.

Figure 6.8. Dumbarton Oaks is a research center under the aegis of Harvard University. It houses what is arguably the finest Pre-Columbian research library in the world and a small but outstanding collection of objects from Mexico, Central America, and the Andes. Some of the objects are displayed in a special building designed by renowned architect Phillip Johnson. It also is home to world class programs in Byzantine Studies, Studies in Landscape and Gardens, superb gardens and many other amenities that create an academic environment unlike any I have ever experienced anywhere else.

Chapter Seven. The Trip to Mexico

I have driven back and forth to Mexico from Pennsylvania, Missouri, and Alabama almost more times than I can remember. Well, I can remember at least 17 trips just off the top of my head. In any case, I was a veteran road-tripper by the time this one began. On the whole, it was a cakewalk, as my father used to say. The University of Alabama Chevrolet Suburban was in good shape and even had functioning air conditioning. UA anthropology graduate student Cletus "Clete" Rooney was a companion and relief driver, a real pleasure since many a trip had me as the solo driver for 12-14 hours day after day. And I was not towing anything, not a 28' house trailer, or even an 18' boat. What more could I have asked for?

Figure 7.1. In my mind the project really began in the parking lot of the Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Wal-Mart Super Center in January, 1995 when Clete and I swept through the aisles stocking up on goods and supplies that we would pack into the Suburban we were to drive to Alvarado, our ultimate destination. We might have avoided this step in the process had I known that Veracruz City boasted a Sam's Club that offered almost everything we could want, and some things, such as televisions sets, dried hominy grits in bulk quantities, and beach paraphernalia, that we did not.

Figure 7.2. The Alabama Museum of Natural History's Division of Archaeology (DOA) provided the project with a SUV that we quickly nicknamed La Traga-Gasolina (the Gas-Hog). In any case, it served us well, and while the transmission failed in April and the gas filter got so clogged on the way north in May that it would not go over 10 miles per hour, the all-important air conditioning worked flawlessly. Here it is parked at a lovely lighthouse on the coast of the Tuxtla mountains, as far south as we got on this trip.

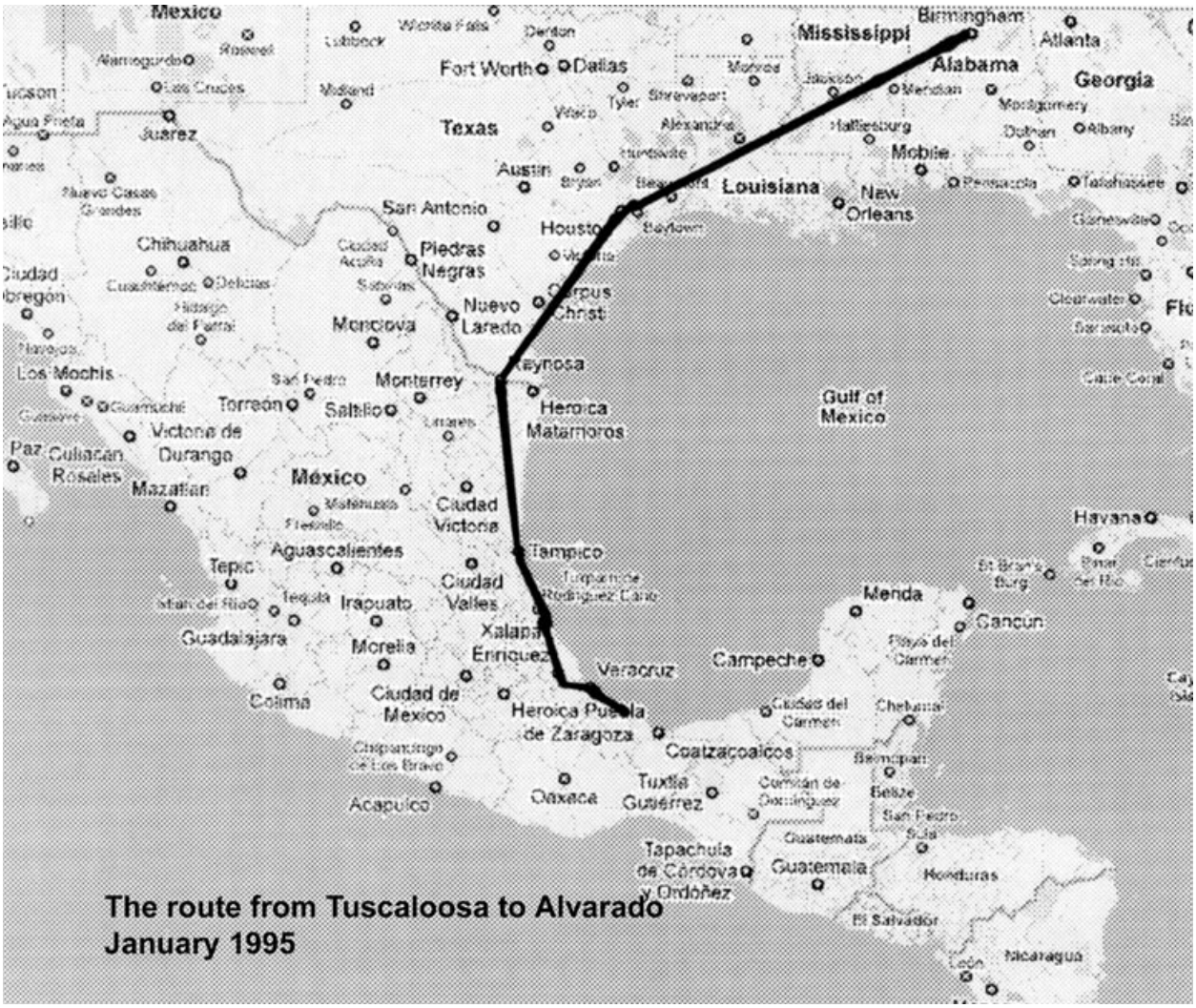


Figure 7.3. Our itinerary took us along the Gulf coast. As much as I prefer to poke along back roads, we were in a hurry and stuck to Interstate highways in the US and main roads in Mexico. It made for boring driving but *ni modo* as we say in Spanish. At least we did not suffer breakdowns or encounter any serious difficulties. As we headed towards Louisiana on Interstate 20/59, word came over the radio of the disastrous earthquake in Kobe, Japan. Ironically, as I write this account fifteen years later, I am following news of the even more devastating 9.0 Richter-scale quake and the tsunami and potential nuclear power plant meltdown off Japan's northeast coast. Two trips to Japan since 1995, together with the close ties my wife and I have established with Japanese in-laws and other friends bring this latest disaster much closer to home than its Kobe predecessor.

Figure 7.4. Whenever I drive this route I make certain to enjoy a meal at Mulate's, a wonderful Cajun restaurant with live music and a dance floor in Breau Bridge, LA. A real fine food, high cholesterol experience! After feasting at Mulate's, I can put up with mediocre Interstate food until I get south of the border.

Figure 7.5. No, this is not McAllen, Texas, as we saw it but I wish we had. What would it have been like to cross the border in those days? I always prefer to cross at small ports-of-entry because they are much easier to negotiate than places like Nuevo Laredo or Matamoros. People on both sides just seem friendlier. It also helps to have "University of Alabama" painted on the sides of your vehicle, you just may hear someone yell "ROLL, TIDE" on either side of the river.

Figure 7.6. Reynosa can be a bustling and confusing place to negotiate unless you know the town but even the most hopelessly lost Gringo can find his way out to the south-bound highway in a few minutes. The tower is a telecommunication installation, not an oil derrick. After securing our immigration papers and a vehicle permit, we headed on to Tampico for our first night in Mexico.

Figure 7.7. I love this bridge! Why? Because I remember all the times I had to wait for hours in 95 degree heat for the ferry it replaced. Furthermore, the ferry dropped you off in downtown Tampico, one of the most chaotic cities I have ever experienced. Today, the bridge allows you to avoid the mayhem. Although the technical border of ancient Mesoamerica lies to the north at Soto La Marina, I consider Tampico as the modern gateway to the ancient realm. From here on one senses the ancient civilizations of the Huasteca in both the physical features of the people and the feel of the land.

Figure 7.8. This is Clete's introduction to Mesoamerican archaeology so naturally we had to stop at El Tajin. When I first visited the site in 1963 much more of the ancient city was covered in high jungle and very few buildings had been excavated or restored. Despite considerable work since then, it remains one of Mesoamerica's most poorly understood urban centers and civilizations. Oh, to be a young archaeologist who could devote a decade or two to revealing its secrets!

Figure 7.9. I wanted to stop at many archaeological sites, beaches, and villages but we had to catch up with Sergio in Xalapa, the capital of Veracruz and home to the University. This cosmopolitan city enjoys a perfect climate and rich cultural life, yet has managed to avoid a large influx of foreign tourist and interlopers.

Figure 7.10 We finally arrived in Alvarado! After a few days in a hotel, we located a nice rental house with rooms and spaces for all our needs. Despite its location on the main street into town, it was amazingly quiet except for Wednesday evenings when the neighboring evangelical church congregation sang hymns over its super public address system until well past my bedtime. Their enthusiasm far exceeded their talents. Even today the strains of “Roca de Eternidad” (Rock of Ages) still intrude into my sleep from time to time.

Figure 7.11. The house even had a swimming pool in the back. We were told that it would only take a few minutes to fill it up and presto! we could relax after a hard day in the field. Ha! We managed to use it three times before it died and became a breeding ground for all sort of interesting insects.

Figure 7.12. We furnished the house sparsely but comfortably with things bought at Sam's Club in Veracruz City. The wicker-seat and back rocker was crafted by a local carpenter and even today I use it **as a reading chair in my UA campus office. I suppose it was too much to expect air conditioning but** electric fans kept us cool until mid-April when the clouds went away and the temperatures soared.

Figure 7.13. After securing and furnishing the house, we had several tasks to complete before we could begin the actual fieldwork: purchasing tools, lining up workers, and picking up the fiberglass boat the University of Veracruz provided for us free of charge. This was our source of transportation up and down the river each day. The trip took approximately 30 minutes up-river in the morning and somewhat less as we came back down with the current. We were extremely fortunate to be able to hire Bernardo Prieto as our boatman or *motorista.* I have ridden on Gulf lowland waters with many boatmen but none were as competent as he was.

Figure 7.14. Why couldn't we drive in to the site? Such a trip is possible from the town of Acula towards the end of the dry season when several streams have diminished in depth but takes about two hours from Alvarado. As I discovered one day in April, even then the dirt track is treacherous, with thin dry crusts covering deep mud holes. One April day I drove to the site, just to see if I could do it. I could, and celebrated by audaciously running the Traga-Gasolina up the largest mound on the site. I felt like the King the Acula.

Figure 7.15. As they say, "Pride goes before the fall!" On the way home I drove over a stretch of track that appeared quite firm, only to sink all four wheels of a four-wheel drive vehicle into the hidden mud. It took over an hour to get a tractor to pull me out. By the time I got home I was so mad I almost had what my wife calls a North Texas Wall-eyed Hissy Fit. After that the Suburban stayed on pavement until it got back to Tuscaloosa.

Chapter Eight. The Project Personnel

Figure 8.1 The core project scientific personnel included (left to right) Clete Rooney, Maria Eugenia Maldonado Vite, María Antonia Aguilar Pérez, Adelina Suzan Morales, Alfredo Vargas, Natividad Ferman, and Richard A. Diehl. The two bookends were from the University of Alabama, the accumulated wisdom separating them were students from the Universidad Veracruzana. Missing is their professor, Sergio Vásquez Zárate, the photographer. We are seated on the edge of our non-functional swimming pool. It is gratifying to know that every student has since acquired an advance degree and is a contributor to the field of archaeology, and that most are now parents of potential future students of the past.

Figure 8.2 The Archaeological Prospection Laboratory from the Institute of Anthropological Investigations, National Autonomous University of Mexico. Team Leader Dr. Luis Barba

Pingarrón (right), Karl Frank “Paco” Link Macon (center), and Agustín Ortíz Butrón (left) check readings from their instruments on their solar-powered laptop computer, quite a technical innovation back then. The project contracted with the Team to identify possible buried stone monuments. Alas, three weeks of work by even magicians cannot find what is not there.

Figure 8.3 All the archaeological expertise in the world cannot get off the ground without permission of the owners of the land that holds the ruins. Don Domingo Valencia Laureani, great-grandson of the locally renowned Italian soldier who settled the region in the mid-19th century, and Don Berman Prieto, graciously welcomed us on their property and provided all the help and support they could. Here they are relaxing during the end-of-season party.

Figure 8.4 Landowners, workers, and archaeologists all gather for a group photograph at the end of the end-of-season party. We all ended the project having learned a great deal about archaeology and each other, much to our mutual benefit.

Chapter Nine. Our Daily Routine

No two days are ever the same on an archaeological expedition but after a week or two a basic routine begins to define most days. I never documented ours with a complete set of photographs but it went something like this:

1. Wake up, eat breakfast, pack a lunch, and pile into the Traga-Gasolina.
2. Drive down to boat dock with the driver muttering obscenities in English at the vehicles in his way while Alfredo attempted to translate them into Spanish for the benefit of the female students.
3. Buy ice for our coolers at the local ice house, load up the boat, and head up river.

Figure 9.1. At times we gave rides to people who needed to go somewhere. This primary school teacher on the way to her riverside school is offering visiting archaeologist Roberto Lunagómez some good advice on how to mend his evil ways.

Figure 9.2. At times *El Jefe* had a last cup of coffee as we crossed the Laguna de Alvarado. He was not as grumpy as he appears here.

Figure 9.3. Often we passed fishermen using a net to catch a meal or fish to sell.

9.4. Mostly we sat quietly buried in our on thoughts of what had to do when we arrived, as Alfredo and Clete appear to be doing here.

Figure 9.5. Upon arriving at La Mojarra by about 8:00 AM, each of us would begin our tasks for the day. Some of us devoted our efforts to excavation. Here María Antonia and Clete clean out an existing hole in preparation for laying out a formal test square. It may surprise some people to learn that over 50% of all archaeologists working in the Americas are women but that is the case. Perhaps some day we will see a movie titled “Indiana Jane”.

Figure 9.6. Later in the season, the hole in Figure 9.5. became our carefully excavated Operation 04 test pit as Clete put his previous experience digging earthen sites in the southeastern United States to good use at La Mojarra. Here he explains the stratigraphy to a visitor while María Eugenia takes notes.

Figure 9.7. Sergio and Alfredo took charge of preparing the topographic map. Here they are being "supervised" by one of the landowners. A true cowboy, he would sit on his horse for hours watching them. He even ate his lunch in the saddle. I began to wonder if he were one of the centaurs Aztec observers described as a single animal combining the features of a man and a horse.

Figure 9.8. Sergio and Alfredo did both mapping and excavation; here Sergio shows his student a fine point about soil distinctions in the ill-defined color and texture transitions so common at La Mojarra.

By 2:30 PM we were exhausted and the heat was reaching its maximum. That meant it was time to pack up and go back home.

Breaks from the routine

Figure 9.9. We purchased all the things we could in Alvarado, both for the sake of convenience and to support our local businesses. Nevertheless on occasion we had to make the 50 km. trip to Veracruz to buy supplies, touch base with archaeologists at INAH's Regional Center, and attend to other business. No trip to the big city was complete without a stop at Sanborn's Restaurant for a gigantic breakfast of the type seen above.

Figure 9.10. At times we had so much to do in Veracruz City that we were forced to stay for two meals, or at least a “lechero” (coffee with milk) at the famed Café La Parroquia. Archaeology can be very demanding work at times.

Chapter Ten. Burial Excavation

Figure 10.1. No sooner had we begun our field work than residents of the house in Figure 5.4. showed us human remains they had encountered while excavating a drainage channel. They asked if we were interested in investigating them: of course we were, and immediately assigned the task to several students under Sergio's supervision.

Figure 10.2. The work was hot and soil quite hard. We soon discovered that the shade of an umbrella reduced the heat, kept the soil more friable, and allowed the excavator to see things washed out in the bright sunlight.

Figure 10.3. As the excavation progressed we could tell the skeleton belonged to an adult but we initially misidentified her as a possible male. Late studies by María Antonia and María Eugenia showed the deceased lady may have lived into the fifth decade of her life. She suffered several dental maladies; her teeth showed severe caries down into the roots as well as considerable tartar deposits, and she lost several molars long before her death. The absence of any grave offerings prevented us from assigning her to a specific archaeological period. Alas, her interment was the only one we encountered, thus the biological characteristics of La Mojarra's population over time remain a mystery.

Chapter Eleven. Mapping Ancient La Mojarra

Figure 11.1. Creation of a topographic map of the archaeological site was one of our primary project goals. We needed the map in order to answer basic questions about ancient La Mojarra's size, complexity, and importance. Sergio and Alfredo took charge of the job, using a transit, stadia rod, alidade, steel tapes, Brunton compass, and the other traditional tools of the topographer. Fortunately for them, most of the site was covered by cattle pasture rather than forest or brush. Like the rest of us, they soon arrived at an understanding with the resident cattle: they left us alone and we did not eat their grass. Unfortunately they often shared their ticks with us.

Figure 11.2. Archaeological topographers use instruments to create maps but depend on their feet and lots of careful observation to understand what information to put on the maps and what it means. Only by constantly walking the surface of a site can they detect the subtle changes that allow them to comprehend the modern surface of ancient community.

Figure 11.3 Our *topógrafos* spent as much time consulting with each other, a necessary part of the process, as they did using their instruments. The slowly shrinking puddle and others like it provided breeding grounds for an astounding number of mosquitoes. Mounds B-1 and B-2, the small hillocks behind them are hardly the towering pyramids of Teotihuacan or Tikal but played a crucial part in the La Mojarra story nonetheless. Unfortunately we were not able to excavate them, so their secrets remain for future archaeologists.

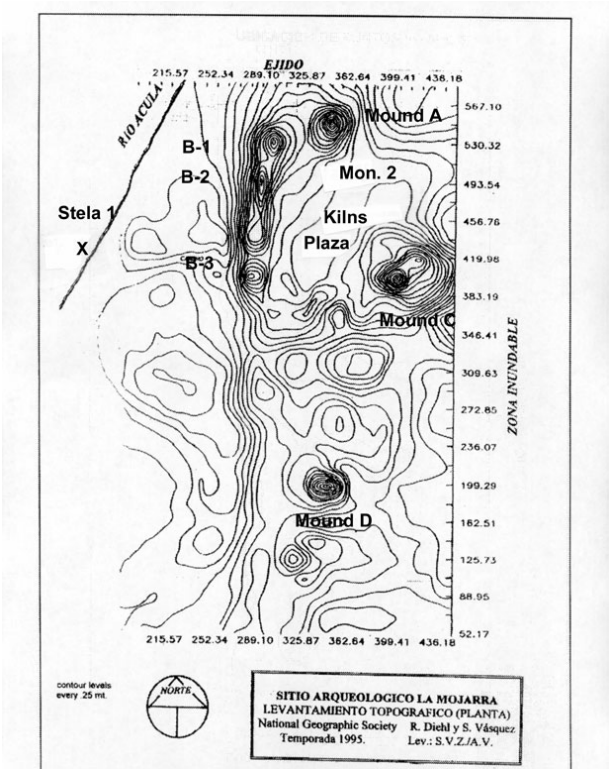


Figure 11.4 The topographic map they created shows the “skeleton” of the site formed by north-south-oriented mounds surrounding a flat internal plaza. The map depicts perhaps 95% of the site. We did not map a mound to the north in the ejido and a few small mounds across

the river owing to a lack of time and permission from the land owners. We estimate the entire ancient community measured *ca.* 500 meters North-South by 250 East-West and covered roughly 14.3 hectares (35 acres). Although La Mojarra was tiny compared to ancient Mesoamerican urban centers, it was typical of its time and place.

Chapter Twelve. The Excavations

All of our excavations were relatively small affairs designed to shed light on the history of occupation of the site or to expose sub-surface anomalies detected by the UNAM team. Operations 01, 02, and 04 were test pits designed to provide us with basic information about the history of deposition at the site and its cultural sequence.

Operations 01 and 02

Figure 12.1.

Figure 12.2. Operations 01 and 02 began by cleaning down the wall of an existing pit that had been dug several years before when a subterranean water cistern was put in place. They provided an excellent opportunity to teach the crew how we wanted our excavations to be done as well as expose the basic stratigraphy of the site.

Operation 04

Figure 12.3. After finishing Operations 01 and 02, Clete initiated Operation 04 immediately adjacent to Operation 02. Numerous artifacts and cultural remains had appeared in Operation 02 and we thought a completely controlled test pit on that spot might yield data that could help us create a ceramic chronology for La Mojarra. Clete took the pit all the way down to the water table where, lacking pumps, we were forced to abandon further excavation despite the fact that we had not yet reached a “culturally sterile” pre-occupation layer.

Operation 05.

Figure 12.4. Operation 5 was a test pit that I excavated in the plaza to test the stratigraphy in that area and get a sense of the depth and nature of the cultural deposits. I abandoned it upon striking a horizontal layer of redeposited architectural stucco that obviously had been placed there after it was removed from the surface of a nearby building. My reason for not going any deeper at that point was that the season was still in its earlier stages and I did not want to get into something larger than I could handle until after the UNAM had an opportunity to study the area. The stucco fragments were a preview of what we would find at the end of the season when we began to excavate the anomalies they identified.

Operation 06

Figure 12.5. Operation 06 was another test pit measuring 2 x 1.5 meters designed to test the area west of the mounds and overlooking the river near the Stela 1 find spot. Sergio and Alfredo took charge of this hot, bug-ridden effort. For some reason that now escapes me, we even believed we might find a monument here. Such is the folly of sun-stricken archaeologists! Alas, no monuments appeared but they did find a fragmented, semi-complete pottery vessel.

Operation 13

Figure 12.6. The Operation 13 test pit was located on the property of Don Bernardo Prieto at the south edge of the main portion of the archaeological site a few meters north of the river after it makes it hard turn to the east. We chose this spot because we saw pot sherds and other cultural remains eroding out of the river bank. Although the top meter of soil lacked any remains, perhaps because it is recent alluvium, beneath that we found what appears to have been a midden deposit or ancient trash dump containing sherds, figurines, obsidian fragments, mollusk shells, animal bones, and other Classic period debris. Operation 06 was carried out late in the field season when the hot, cloudless days drove us to raise tarpaulins over our excavations for shade and even shelter the boat under mangrove whenever possible.

Figure 12.7. As time ran short and the cultural deposits got deeper, we reduced the size of Operation 13 in an attempt to reach culturally-sterile subsoil. The yellowish deposit on top lacked any pottery or other human refuse.

Figure 12.8. Clete can testify to the fact that things get pretty tight at the bottom of a 1.0 meter wide pit.

Chapter Thirteen. Subsoil Prospection

By March most of the site map was completed, the burial was excavated, and we had finished several test pits. Thus we knew enough about the site to allow Dr. Luis Barba Pingarrón and his assistants Agustín Ortíz Butrón, and Paco Link Macón to begin their search for sub-surface anomalies that might represent buried stone monuments. Luis and his colleagues made up UNAM's Laboratorio de Prospección Arqueológica, a branch of the university's Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas. They arrived in Alvarado in a large field truck, a self-contained research lab where they could not only store equipment and sleep but actually process data the same day they captured it. They parked the truck in Alvarado and rode up and down the river in our boat, thus avoiding several hours of daily driving and the trouble and humiliation of getting stuck in the mud.

Using Sergio and Alfredo's topographic map as a base, they examined the sectors of the site we felt were most likely to contain buried monuments. Their instruments included a cesium magnetometer, an electric resistivity device, a metal detector, and the archaeologist's tool of last resort-an old fashioned hand auger. We hoped the magnetometer and resistivity recorder would detect stones (i.e. carved monuments) in La Mojarra's non-magnetic and stone-less alluvial soil. The metal detector was very useful for identifying magnetic anomalies caused by

lost barbed wire, tin cans and other modern debris, while the auger provided a quick but accurate peek at what really created the anomalies.

Figure 13.1. Agustin (left), Paco (center) and Luis (right) examine data on their Apple laptop computer, powered by a solar panel lying on the ground by Agustin's leg. Although my current students consider this equipment suitable for a museum exhibit on the history of archaeology, at the time it surpassed anything I had seen or experienced. They were truly on the cutting edge; they even brought folding chairs to sit on, a fact that my La Mojarra colleagues were quick to remind me.

Figure 13.2. Technology always draws a crowd and our students were very quick to sense something new that they needed to learn about (in the shade, of course!).

Figure 13.3. Sergio and Alfredo helped UNAM's tech-wizards lay out a grid so that they could anchor their observations in real space.

Figure13.4. So much of archaeology and subsoil prospection consist of ordinary, repetitive, and some would even say boring, tasks like laying out lines, taking measurements, and recording observations. Indiana Jones probably never did it this way but neither did he produce any useful data!

Figure 13.5 After laying out grid lines, Luis, seen here in white, and his co-workers systematically walked each zone with the gradiometer while it recorded the magnetic properties of the underlying soil. The readings it recorded were later down-loaded into the computer.

Figure 13.6 Here is the core of the system: the gradiometer Geoscan FM 36, computer, and a power source. Luis' red striped socks are optional, especially in a cattle pasture, but tucking your pants in your socks drastically reduces the number of ticks that find succulent leg and thigh flesh.

Figure 13.7. Paco makes it look simple but the camera failed to capture the heat, sweat, boredom, and mosquitoes. The string lines had to be taken down each evening to avoid their being trampled or eaten by the cattle.

Figure 13.8 The Bradphys IV resistivity meter was specially designed for archaeological work by scientists at Great Britain's University of Bradford, a highly respected center for studies of archaeological prospection.

Figure 13.9. On one occasion as Agustín twirled the knobs of the Bradphys V, I overheard one of our workers ask his mate if he thought the pasture was large enough to accommodate the alien spaceship being guided in. At least that is what I thought he said.

Figure13.10 Many archaeologists curse metal detectors as the hand-maiden of looters but they can play an important role in archaeological research. In this case, Paco detected many nails, fragments of barbed wire and staples whose signature was sufficiently distinctive that we did not have to worry about excavating them.

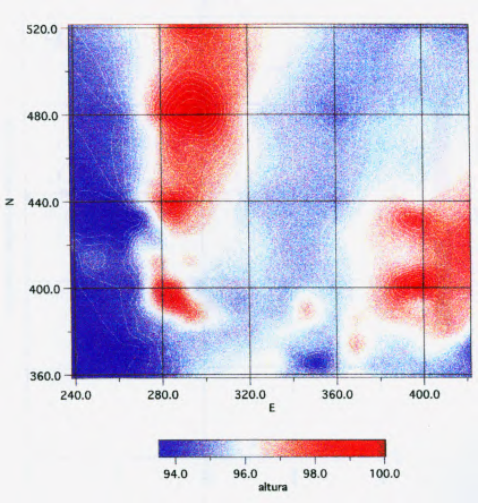


Figure 13.11 The UNAM team produced this colorized topographic map of the north sector of the site based upon the previous observations and reading done by Sergio and Alfredo. The red areas on the left (west) depict the site's main mounds and the low platform that supports them; another raised area can be seen to the east.

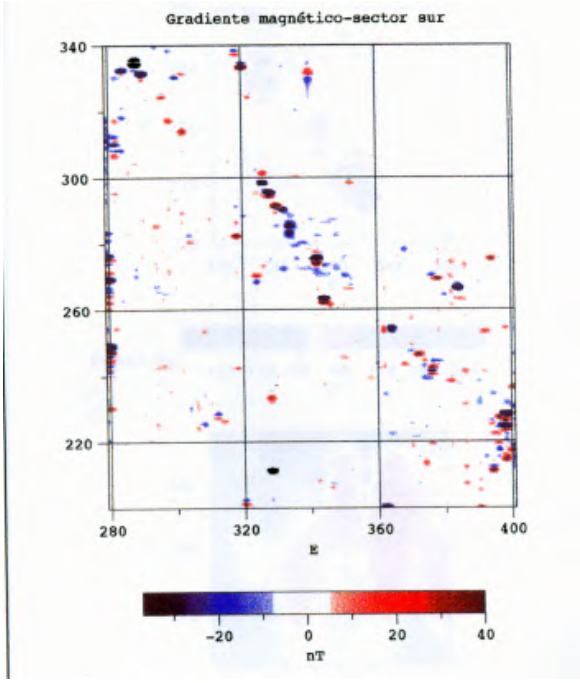


Figure 13.12 The archaeologists "magic x-ray vision" can detect buried cultural remains but cannot tell us what they are. This NW-SE trending line of anomalies is not a line of stone monuments but rather a buried line of barbed wire!

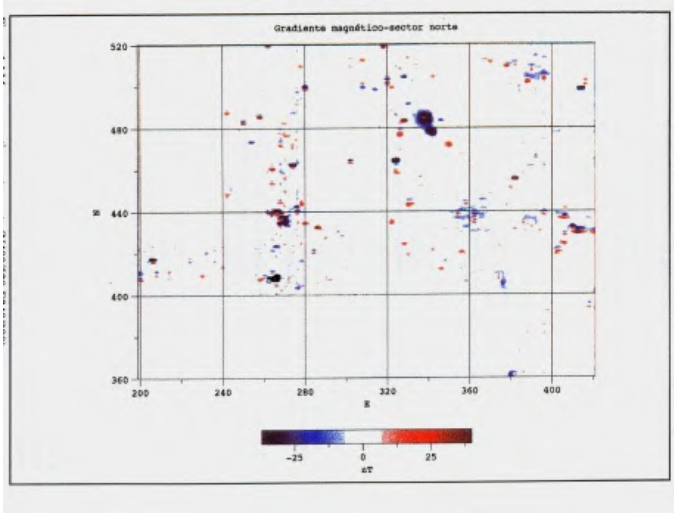


Figure 13.13 When we first saw this plot of magnetic anomalies, we were convinced that at least some of them indicated the locations of stone monuments. As discussed in the following pages, our excavations proved us wrong.

Chapter Fourteen. The Kiln Excavations (Operations 07, 08, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20 and 21)

Our UNAM colleagues finished their survey just before our planned week-long break for *Semana Santa* (Easter Week). Although we were quite anxious to begin excavating the reasonably strong anomalies they had identified in the plaza (surely they signaled stone monuments with inscribed texts!), we held off beginning the work until after returning from well-earned vacations. Alfredo was in charge of the undertaking. He opened Operation 07, the first of 10 2 X 2 meter squares, to see what was buried beneath the plaza. You may imagine our surprise and slight disappointment when we uncovered the lower section of a ceramic kiln used to fire ancient ceramics instead of the hoped-for stone sculpture.

In ancient Mesoamerica people often fired their clay pots in simple fires placed directly on the soil. However people in southern Veracruz often constructed true kilns, sophisticated earth-walled structures that allowed much better control over the firing process. At La Mojarra someone had constructed at least three closely spaced kilns in the plaza. Their bases are all that remains today but they are easily identified by their bright red, heavily fired interior walls and the fragments of the upper walls and potsherds from overly-fired vessels that cracked and had to be discarded. For unknown motives that we cannot understand, at the end of their lives all three kilns we exposed apparently were dismantled and then filled with carefully-placed pieces of white architectural stucco. This stucco and the fired clay kiln walls gave them high magnetic

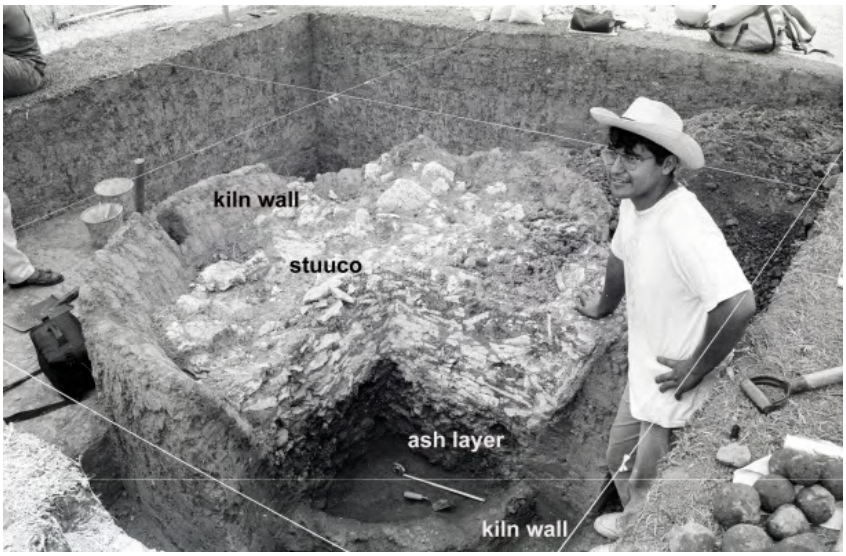
signals that we had mistaken for stones. Luis and his crew had cautioned us about counting our horses before they were in the corral, a warning we soon came to appreciate. Despite our obvious disappointment, we can take solace in the fact that our discovery of kilns adds very important information to our understanding of Classic period life and culture in the region.

Figure 14.1. The bottom of first of the three kilns as it began to appear from the plaza overburden. The upper walls had been destroyed in antiquity and their fragments were scattered around the general area. Their proximity to the modern ground surface suggests that cattle walking over them have contributed to their compaction in recent decades.

Figure 14.2. “Sure doesn’t look like a stela to me. But, what is it?” It took us several weeks of excavation, examination of artifacts and other finds, head-scratching and discussion before we realized what we actually had.

Figure 14.3. Alfredo assiduously recorded every detail with camera, note-pad and drawings. He was responsible for preparing the final report on the kiln excavations as his excellent 1998 Licenciatura in Anthropology thesis at the University of Veracruz. By this time in the season (April) the dry season and the harsh sun that accompanies it dominated the weather, drying out exposed soils and making them most difficult to "read" in the way that archaeologists wish to do.

Figure 14.4. Awnings and tarpaulins created shade but also raised the temperature underneath them at times. The incurved shape of the kiln bottom can be seen in Figure 14.6, but we feared it would collapse if we undercut it. This is the only kiln we excavated to below ground level. We exposed the tops of the other two but left them intact for future archaeologist who may have better techniques, equipment, and questions than we did.



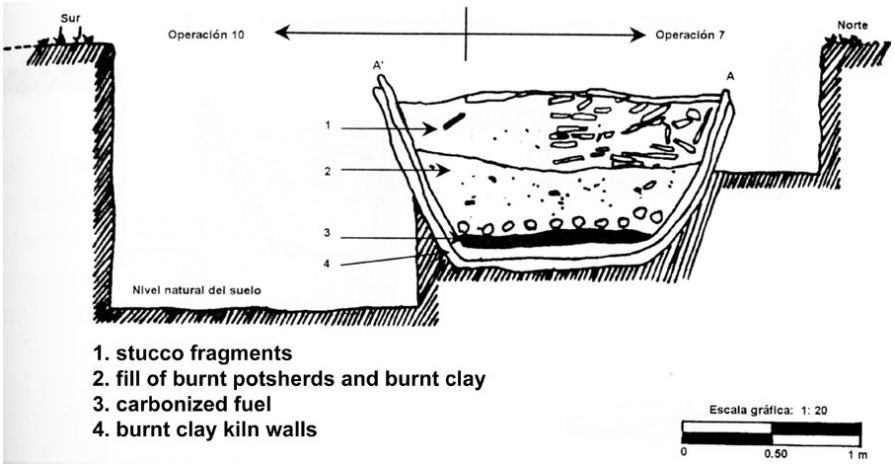


Figure 14.5. and 14.6. In order to understand the kiln's construction and its strange fill, we carefully removed one-quarter of it in as though it was a piece of pie. The kiln wall was quite sturdy and burnt bright red owing to repeated fires when in use. A thick ash layer filled the very bottom of the kiln, covered in turn by a mixture of pot sherds and soil. Finally, stucco fragments that had been very carefully broken to size were placed in horizontal layers to a point near the remaining rim. We assume they originally faced the walls of a nearby mound but that supposition would have to be tested by actually excavating the mounds, something we were not prepared to do. Why was this done? Was it some sort of "Termination Ritual" that signified the abandonment of a mound or even the entire community? Why was so much care taken in all this? What are three kilns doing in the plaza, a presumed civic and/or ritual space in the first place? If La Mojarra did have additional carved stone monuments, where are they? When archaeologist Matthew W. Stirling came to the region 60 years ago, he found Tres Zapotes' Stela C with its famous early Long Count date by stubbing his toe on it? Why can't Dick Diehl find one even with all the whiz-bang gizmos at the disposal of modern archaeology?

Chapter Fifteen. The End of Project Party

The End-of-the- Season Party is one of archaeology's most sacred traditions. Ever fearful of breaking a solemn taboo, we hosted just such a celebration on a May Sunday afternoon. Good food, cold beer, relaxed conversation, and music provided by workers whose talents we had been ignorant of until then: what more could we have asked for?

Figure 15.1. How relaxed everybody becomes after the pressure of winding down a long field season is finally over!

Figure 15.2. By May the afternoon sun was fierce indeed and the ladies of the house had the good sense to claim the shade under the house overhang long before it occurred to some of the rest of us.

Figure 15.3. Don Domingo after proposing a *brindis* (toast) in which he let us know that *los arqueologos* would always be welcome to return to his ranch.

Figure 15.4. Don Berman wondered whether watching us work on his land for months qualified him as a practicing archaeologist. I cautioned him against making any hasty career changes.

Figure 15.5. These guys had an amazing repertoire. We were royally entertained for a good portion of the afternoon.

Figure 15.6. Our last trip down the Acula, and the end to Phase One of an archaeological odyssey.

Chapter Sixteen. Laboratory analyses

Many people believe that excavation and fieldwork are the totality of what archaeologists do but that is far from the case. Ask any archaeologist and she will tell you that each week spent in the field recovers so many objects and data that it takes a month to analyze them. But analyze we must; if we fail to study our materials and publish our results nobody learns anything and the fieldwork was simply looting under the guise of science. Thus when our field season and end-of-dig party hangovers ended we moved all the excavated artifacts, notes, drawings, and other project materials to the University of Veracruz's Archaeological Laboratory in Xalapa. We had already washed and catalogued the artifacts while in Alvarado, thus Sergio and his students could begin to study the pottery fragments (sherds), figurines, obsidian tools, human bones, and other remains during their limited spare time during the 1996-97 academic year. I returned to Xalapa for six weeks in the following summer to finish up loose ends and work on the project technical report that we submitted to INAH and the NGS. The images below give the reader an idea of the kinds of artifacts we found. Nothing really distinguishes them from similar objects used by ancient Mesoamericans everywhere or the kinds of materials archaeologists deal with all over the world. They are simply the surviving scraps of a small group of villagers living for many generations on the bank of a minor river in a rich lowland swampy environment. Our brief five months of research in the ruins of that village has helped us understand and appreciate their lives much better than we did before but we still do not know if they actually carved Stela 1 themselves or brought it from somewhere else, or if they could even understand the lightly-incised text overshadowed by the figure of a proud, even haughty potentate.

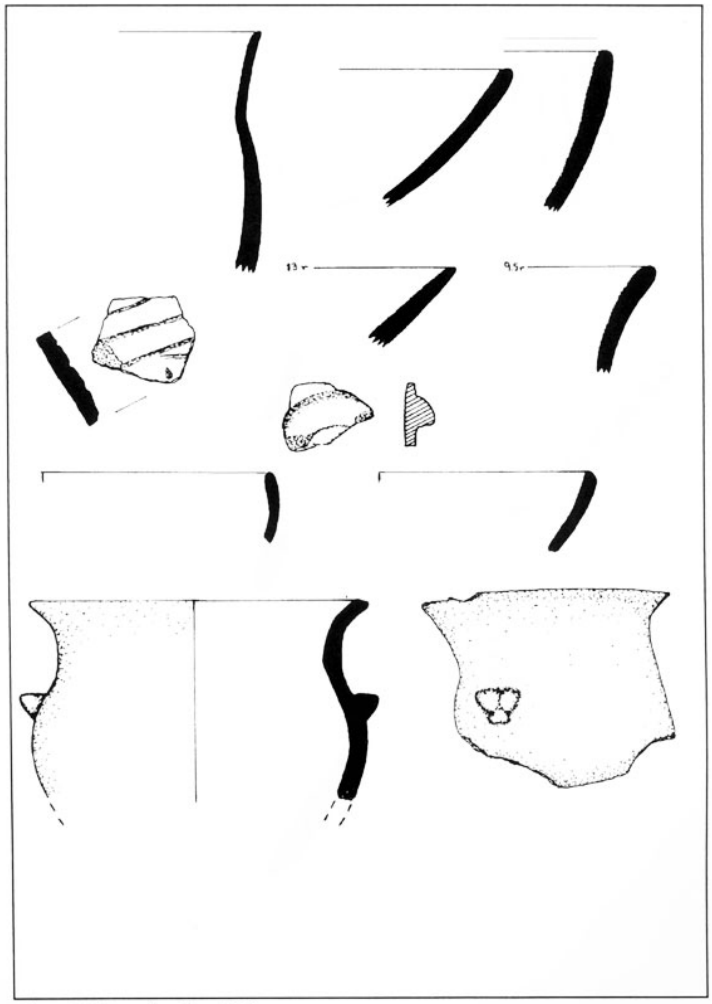


Figura 7.1 Ceramica Naranja Fino

Figure 16.1. Fine Orange pottery. The blacked-in drawings show profiles of sherds found in the excavations while the lighter lines indicate the approximate diameter of the original vessels. The vessel forms illustrated here include jars with out-flaring necks, bowls with out-leaning upper walls, and a jar with small handles or grips on the shoulder (bottom). Fine Orange is a very common pottery class during the Classic period in this region; its surfaces may be orange or greyish and is quite hard on non-eroded specimens. Such utilitarian vessels were common in ordinary households of the period.

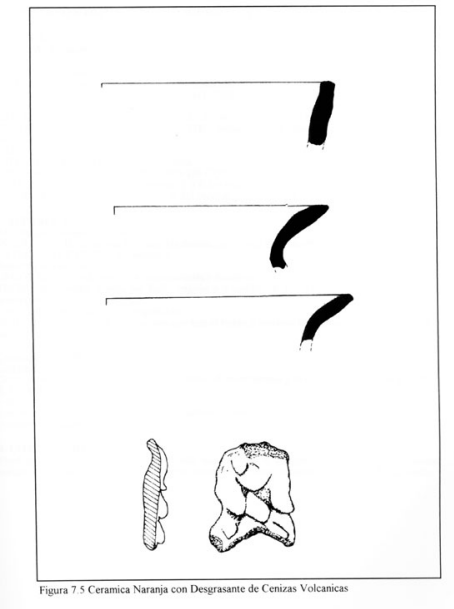


Figure 16.2. Orange pottery. The three rims shown above belonged to two large jars and what may have been a large basin. The paste used to form the vessels was mixed with a volcanic sand temper that helped prevent cracking during manufacture. The thin and sloppily-modeled, headless human figurine at the bottom is one of the very few we recovered.

Figure 16.3. Black Domestic Ware type. These large fragments all came from a single vessel that we suspect was used as a serving bowl for some sort of stew or soupy food. The apparent light color of the sherds in this and the next two images is a result of photographic errors and does not reflect the actual colors.

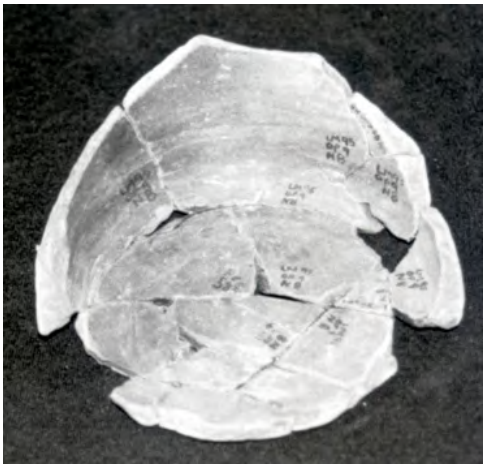


Figure 16.4. This flat base of a vase with almost straight walls has two large red stripes painted on the lower interior. The purpose of the original vessel in unknown but may have been more ceremonial/ritual than strictly domestic.

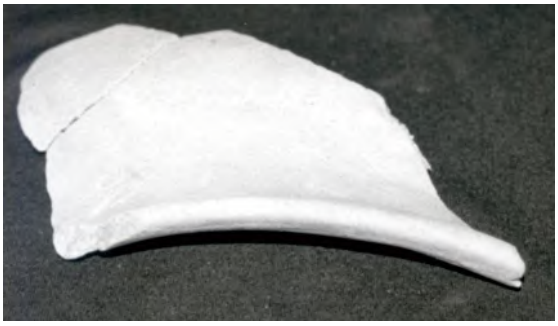


Figure 16. 5. This large sherd belonged to the rim of a jar like that seen at the bottom of Figure 16.1.

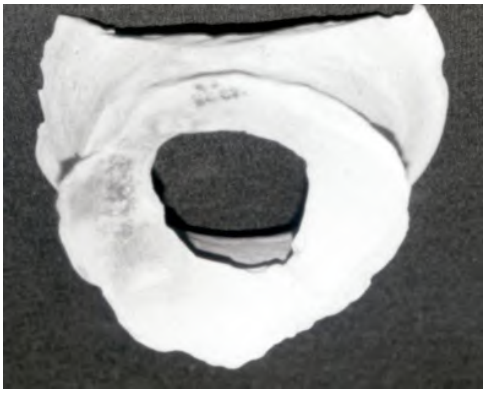


Figure 16.6. This odd fragment appears to be the lower body segment of a jar that rested on a ring base, of which only the shoulder (bottom) remains. The fabric of the vessel is a rough orange paste similar to that illustrated in Figure 16.2.

Figure 16.7. This hollow standing human effigy lacks only its head to be considered among the numerous masterpieces of the ceramicist art known from southern Veracruz. Local residents of La Mojarra found the fragments and donated them to then-Director of the Museo de Antropología in Xalapa. Maestro Fernando Winfield Capitaine. Today it is on display in the museum.

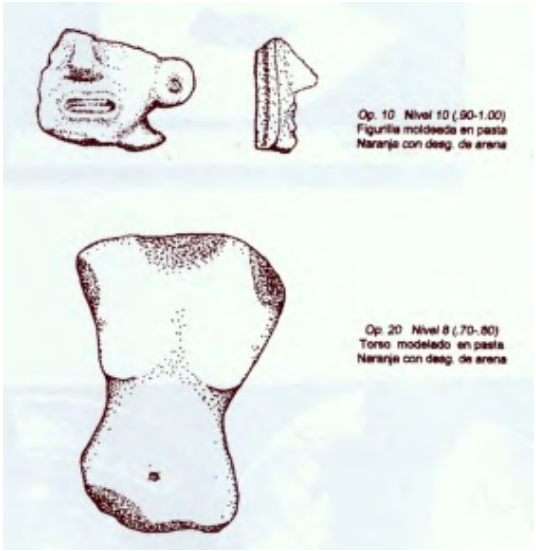


Figure 16.8. Although the figurine head (seen in profile and frontal view) both were manufactured from a rough orange paste tempered with volcanic sand, they were two different objects.

Epilogue

After summer of 1996 the students each went his and her own way into new careers, marriages, and jobs while Sergio and I were drawn into both old and new pursuits that had nothing to do with the project. As they say, “Life comes at you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.” Thus I find myself finishing up this long-overdue *Chronicle* in 2011, 15 years after the fact. During that time the issues surrounding La Mojarra Stela 1 and its enigmatic text remain unresolved. No new inscribed monuments have appeared, although a Teotihuacan-style stone mask with an Isthmian Script text has surfaced in a private collection. That inscription has led some authorities to question the decipherment of the writing system proposed by John Justeson and Terrance Kaufmann (see Chapter 2). Archaeologists have not returned to La Mojarra to carry out additional field research, although the pace of investigations has quickened in the surrounding region. One very encouraging trend is the growth of a large and well-trained cadre of young archaeologists from many places, but especially Veracruz, who are dedicated to the study of the region. Perhaps someday soon one of them will accomplish what we failed to do: locate additional stone monuments containing texts in this baffling writing system. If so, I owe him or her bottle of top-drawer Cognac as a reward.