Soconusco Formative Project

Research Year: 2002
Culture: Olmec
Chronology: Pre-Classic
Location: Soconusco, Chiapas, México
Site: Cuauhtémoc

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Introduction

The Cuauhtémoc site is located within a previously undocumented zone of the Soconusco between the Early Formative Mazatán polities (Clark and Blake 1994), the Middle Formative center of La Blanca (Love 1993) and the Late Formative center of Izapa (Lowe *et al*. 1982) (see Figure 1). Taking advantage of the refined Soconuscan chronology (Table 1), the fieldwork described below provides data to track developments at Cuauhtémoc over the first 900 years of settled life in Mesoamerica. This time period is divided into seven ceramic phases, and so, allows for changes in all classes of material culture to be tracked on almost a century-by-century basis. These data are being used to document the emergence and development of sociopolitical complexity in the area. In addition to local processes, the goal of this research is to determine the nature of changing relations between elites on the Gulf Coast of México and the Soconusco. The work also aims to be significant cross-culturally as Mesoamerica is one of only a handful of areas in the world where sociopolitical complexity emerged independently and the Soconusco contains some of the earliest societies where this occurred (Clark and Blake 1994; Rosenswig 2000).

Table 1. Soconusco and San Lorenzo Chronologies in radiocarbon years (bce)

Soconusco Phases	Years	Soconusco Epochs	Gulf Coast Epochs	San Lorenzo Phases
Barra	1550-1400		pre-Olmec	
Locona	1400-1250	Mazatan polities		Ojochi
Ocos	1250-1100			Bajio
Cherla	1100-1000			Chicharras
Cuadros	1000-900		San Lorenzo	San Lorenzo
Jocotal	900-850			
Conchas	850-650	La Blanca	La Venta	Nacaste
The Cuauhtémoc site is abandoned				
Escalon	650-500			Palengana
Frontera	500-300			
Guillen	300-50	Peak of Izapa	Epi-Olmec	

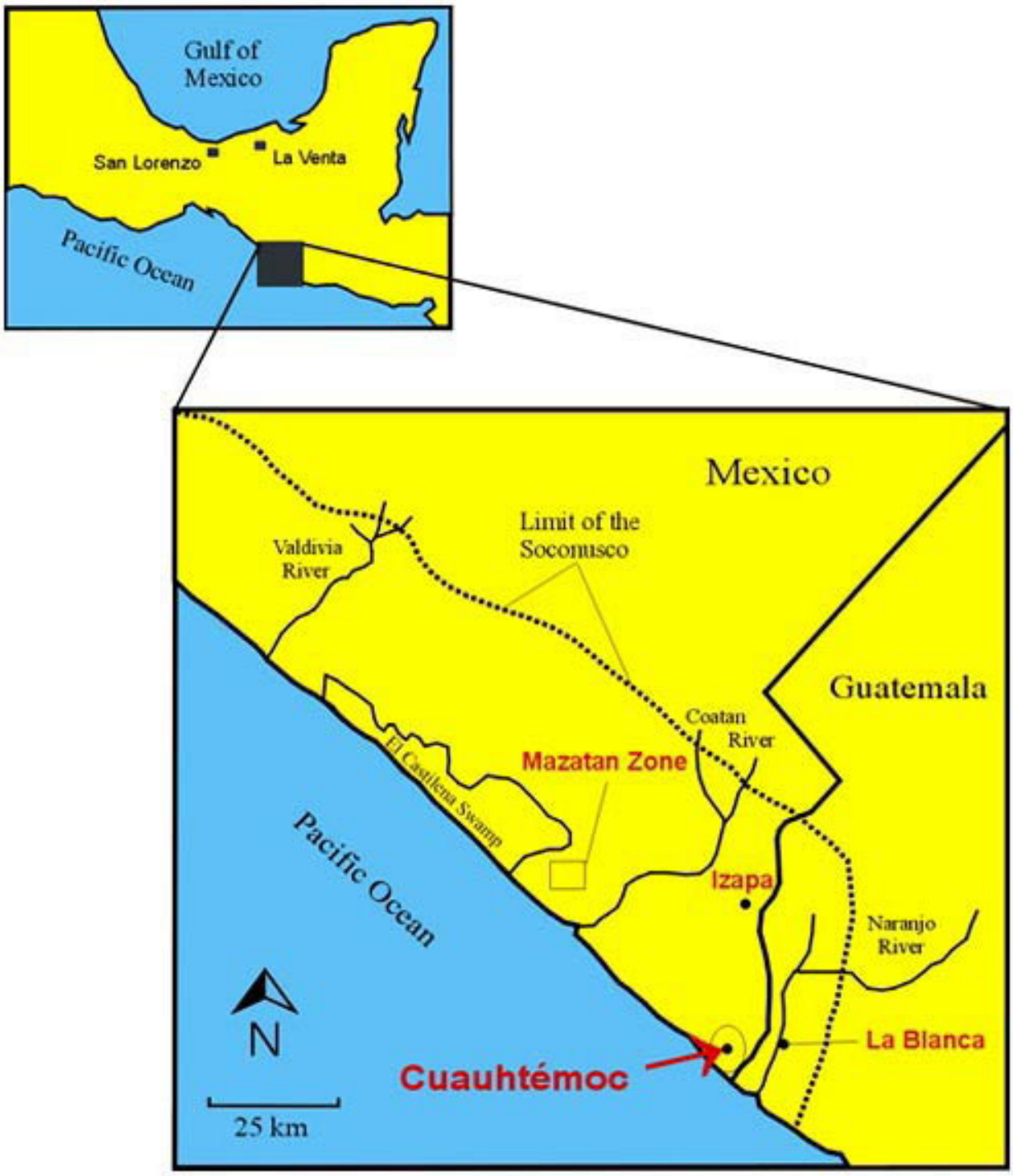

Figure 1. Location of the Soconusco in Mesoamerica and the Cuauhtémoc zone in relation to Formative period centers.

The site of Cuauhtémoc provides a unique opportunity to explore cultural developments as work from the 2001 season (Rosenswig 2001), and FAMSI-sponsored excavations in 2002, document that this site was continuously occupied from the first settled villages

through the rise of the distant Olmec capitals in the Gulf Coast. The long tradition of work on the Formative periods of the Soconusco (e.g., Blake *et al*. 1995; Clark and Blake 1994; Ceja 1985; Coe 1961; Coe and Flannery 1967) provides a well-known ceramic sequence. However, no previously documented site was occupied continuously from Barra through Conchas times. La Victoria was occupied during the Locona/Ocos and the Conchas phases (Coe 1961). Salinas la Blanca was occupied during the Cuadros and Jocotal phases (Coe and Flannery 1967). The Middle Formative center of La Blanca was occupied during Conchas times (Love 1989, 1993, 1999). The Early Formative center of Paso de la Amada was occupied during the Barra through Cherla phases and abandoned during the initial San Lorenzo period (Ceja 1985; Clark and Blake 1989, 1994). Cuauhtémoc is the only site in the Soconusco documented to date that was continuously occupied during the Early and Middle Formative from the Barra through Conchas phases (Table 1).

The early Middle Formative Conchas phase represents the most extensive occupation of Cuauhtémoc. During this time the site reached its maximum extents and architectural mounds were constructed. This apogee corresponds to the emergence of the regional center of La Blanca built around a 25 m high central mound. Cuauhtémoc appears to have been a secondary center to this regional capital and was abandoned after nearly a millennium of occupation when La Blanca was abandoned after the Conchas period. Along with the concomitant abandonment of these two centers, ongoing survey conducted by the Soconusco Formative project (and funded by the National Science Foundation) demonstrates that the entire region was virtually abandoned at the end of the Conchas phase. While this is an interesting cultural process it also means that earlier materials are not buried under later period over-burden.

The site of Cuauhtémoc covers 4.8 hectares and contains one preserved 3 m high mound, one recently disturbed 5 m high mound and another recently disturbed linear mound that purportedly measured 100 × 25 m and was 2 m high (Figure 2). The latter two mounds have recently been flattened by heavy machinery. Furthermore, because the site is currently part of a banana plantation it has been cut by 3 m deep trenches that are several kilometers long and spaced 100 m apart. These trenches expose cultural deposits down to sterile clay layers and allow for this early Mesoamerican village to be documented in cross section. Additionally, every 30 m there is a 1 m deep drainage canal running perpendicular to the main trenches. Although the damage to the site is unfortunate, it provides a remarkably extensive sub-surface view of the cultural deposits. During the 2001 season, we systematically surface collected the site and mapped a 220 m section of the profile produced by one of the main trenches (Rosenswig 2001). The trench profile revealed a 100 m long section of early Early Formative habitation flanked by two 30 m long sheet middens containing late San Lorenzo and early La Venta period remains.

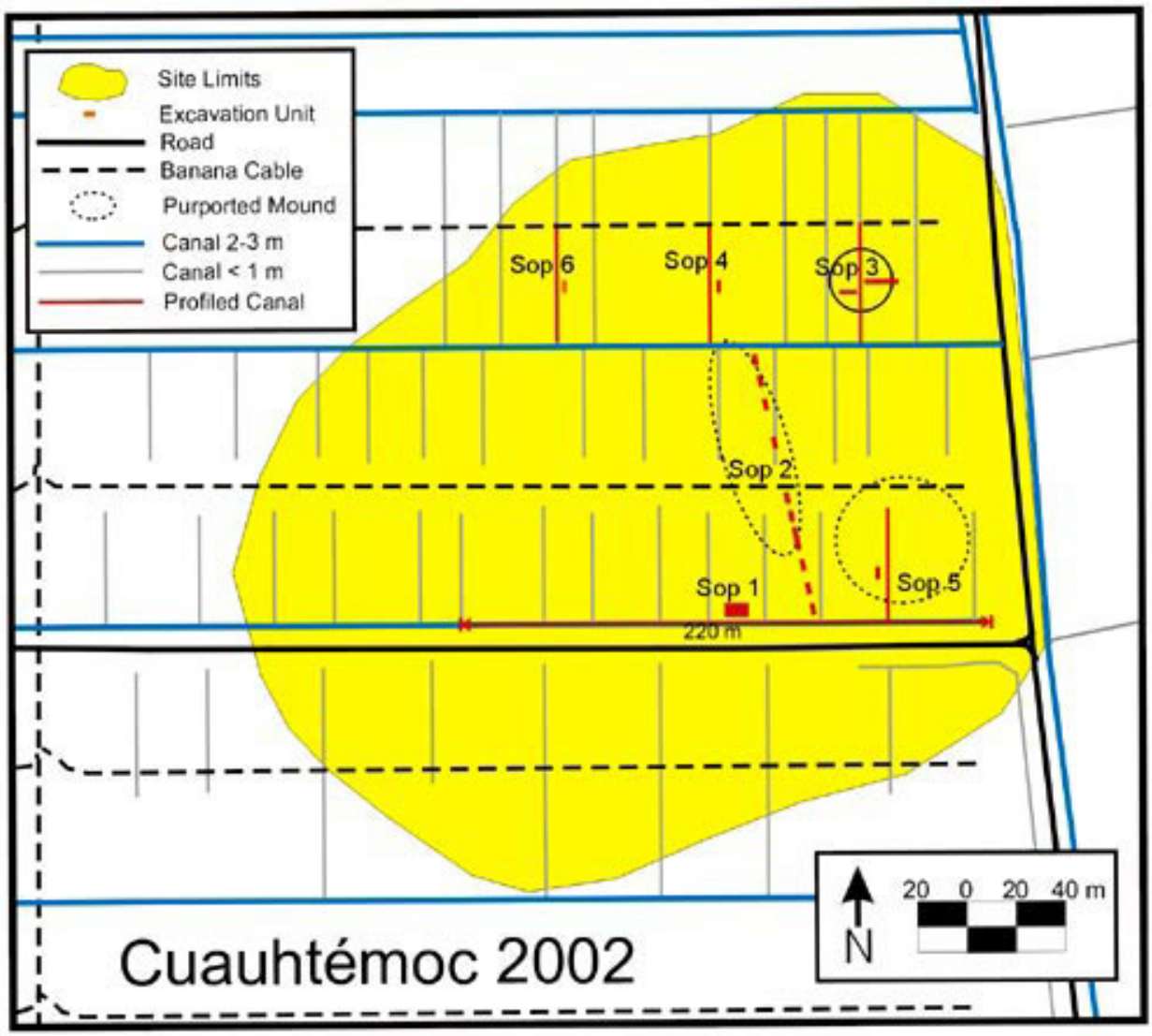

Figure 2. The Cuauhtémoc site with site limits, excavation units and profiled canals indicated.

Soconusco Formative Project 2002

During the months of April and May 2002, FAMSI-sponsored excavations were initiated by the Soconusco Formative Project at Cuauhtémoc. In the course of an eight-week season we excavated a total of 29 units that constituted 57.5 m^2 and profiled four 50 m long sections of irrigation canals that cut through the site (Figure 2). This work has confirmed the site's continuous occupation during the Barra through Conchas phases and has documented stratified and chronologically superimposed deposits. With these data, local developmental trajectories are emerging. Questions of evolving village life are being explored beginning in pre-Olmec times and pan-regional changes, brought

about by the rise and fall of both San Lorenzo and La Venta, are being tracked in the Soconusco.

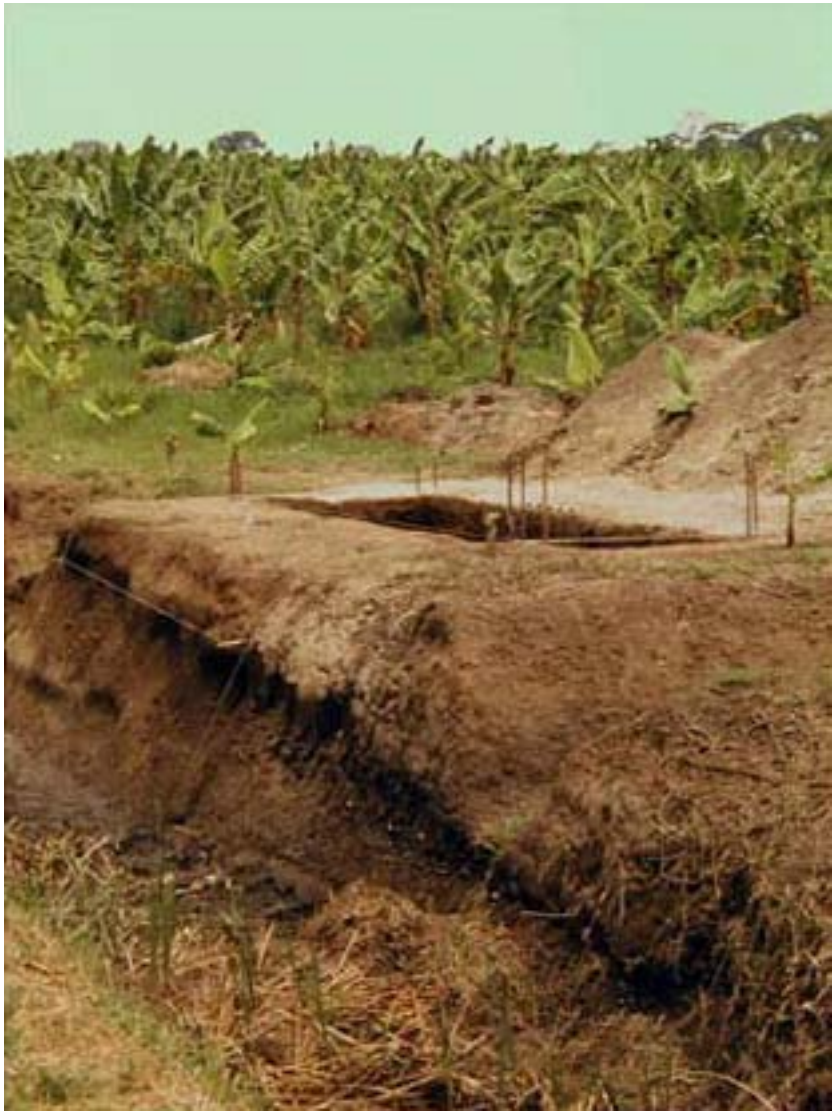

Figure 3. Location of Suboperation 1 in relation to 220 m profiled section of irrigation canal, looking northwest.

Suboperation 1 was excavated as 5 units next to the 220 m profile (Figure 3) that showed this area to be a Jocotal and Conchas midden that is 30 m long off of the side of a raised occupation zone that has recently been shaved down to pre-Olmec period levels. These units formed a 2 × 6 m block that allowed us to excavate two 1 × 2 m columns from two sides with tight stratigraphic control (Figure 4). Conchas and Jocotal dark, dense midden deposits (with traces of Cuadros materials) were documented overlying Locona through Cherla occupations contained within a sand horizon. The

existence of this sand level was documented across much of the site and was likely the reason this location was initially favored for settlement as it raised the community above the seasonal floods in this alluvial environment. A burial was recovered from these sand levels. From Locona period levels, two effigy vessels were recovered; a bowl in the shape of a fish (Figure 5) and a tecomate with a composite human-duck image (Figure 6). Human-duck imagery is best known from the Tuxtla statuette (Bernal 1969: Plate 47) but is also found at Altar 7 at La Venta (Ochoa and Jaime 2000: 27). However, this tecomate is the oldest duck/human representation by 500 years and the only one from a pre-Olmec context that I am aware of.

Figure 4. Close up of Suboperation 1 as two controlled units are carefully removed by stratigraphic levels, looking northwest.

Figure 5. Locona phase effigy fish bowl.

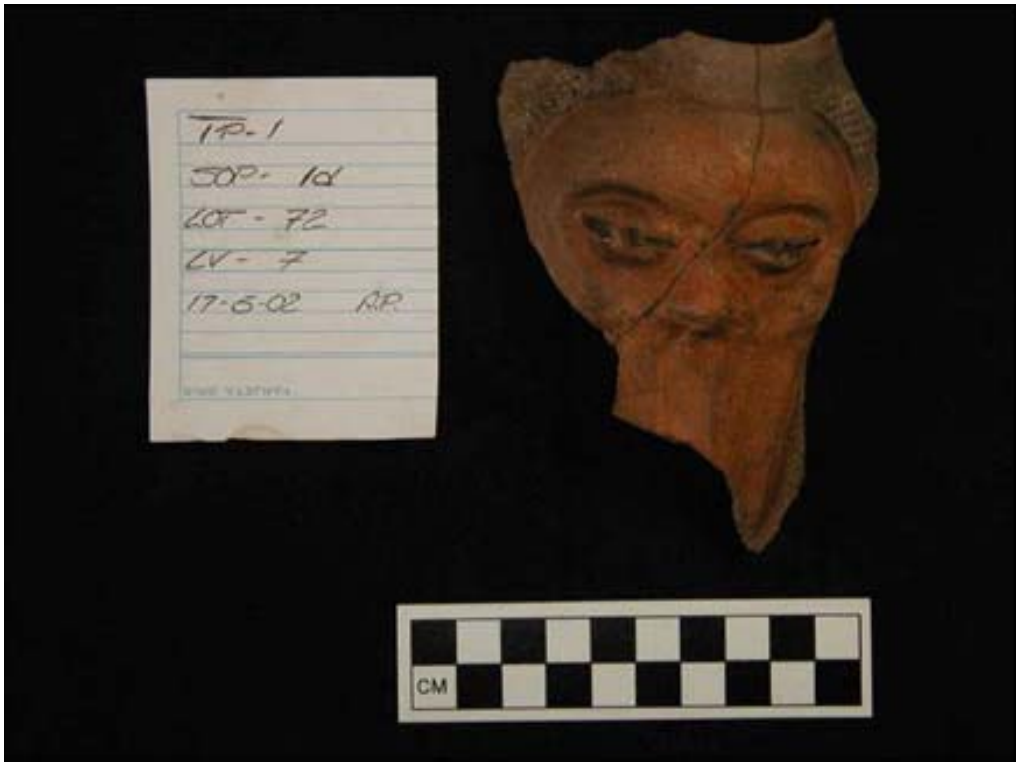

Figure 6. Locona phase effigy tecomate in the form of a half human, half duck face.

Figure 7. View of 4 of the 17 units excavated as Suboperation 2, looking south.

Suboperation 2 was excavated as 17 units aligned linearly over 100 m (Figure 7) in order to bisect what is left of the base of Mound 2, a 2 m high structure that was reported to measure approximately 100 × 25 m before being flattened when the land was prepared for bananas to be planted. This series of units is roughly perpendicular to the 220 m profile mentioned above and helps to document the dimensions of the original raised sand horizon. These units collectively document horizontal stratigraphy with Barra through Cherla sand levels in the central units flanked to the north and south by Cuadros, Jocotal and Conchas midden associated with the edge of the mound that once stood here. The early Early Formative (i.e., Barra, Locona and Ocos) component from under the mound is now exposed with these earliest phases on the surface of the current ground level. In these levels we documented a hearth feature. Suboperation 2

documents areas of pure Locona midden that are 70 cm thick in places. From the northern most unit we recovered part of a Middle Formative quadripartite vessel (Figure 8) in the levels above an Ocos phase bell-shaped pit. This vessel form is more typical of Highland México during the Middle Formative. From the southern part of the Suboperation we recovered a Middle Formative seated figurine made of greenstone (Figure 9) and a nearly complete solid ceramic figurine measuring 19 cm in height (Figure 10) and a polished, triangular mirror (Figure 11). Three burials were recovered on the edge of the midden and two others were encountered but we did not have time to excavate them.

Figure 8. Part of a quadripartite ceramic vessel recovered from a Conchas phase level of Suboperation 2I.

Figure 9. Greenstone seated figure recovered from a Conchas phase level of Suboperation 2k.

Figure 10. Solid ceramic figurine recovered from Conchas phase levels of Suboperation 2 and 2b (drawn by Joe McGreevey.)

Figure 11. Iron-ore triangular mirror recovered from a Conchas phase level of Suboperation 2.

Suboperation 3 was excavated at Mound 1, the only remaining architecture at the site. We profiled a 50 m section of the irrigation canal that runs north south (bisecting the mound) and excavated a 2 m and a 4 m unit perpendicular to the canal. These units document that the mound was built during the Conchas phase and, in addition to other artifacts, we recovered a small jade adze from the construction fill (Figure 12). This mound was built over a series of occupations levels from earlier phases and we documented a Cherla phase pit full of shell, fauna and burnt clay below the center of the mound that was dug into an Ocos brown sand level (Figure 13).

Suboperation 5 was excavated to document the construction history of Mound 3. This mound was purportedly 5 m high before being ploughed to plant bananas. We cleaned a 50 m section of irrigation canal of all vegetation (Figure 14), shovel scraped and then profile one wall. Next, we excavated a 1 × 2 m unit west of the canal to collect a controlled sample of artifacts directly associated with this stratigraphic information. We have documented that this mound was built exclusively during the Conchas phase when Cuauhtémoc reached its largest extents. This mound was constructed beyond the eastern edge of the original sand horizon and thus represented a labor investment not only for the mound but for extending the raised village surface as well. The fill material is almost exclusively from the Conchas phase down over 2.5 m (i.e., 40 cm below the current water table) with no earlier occupation levels documented.

Suboperation 4 and 6 were excavated in the northwest sector of Cuauhtémoc to take advantage of the subsurface view that the irrigation canals provide and to begin documenting the site's history and extents. As with Suboperation 5, we cleaned and profiled a 50 m section of irrigation canal and excavated a 1 × 2 m unit at each of these two suboperations. The south end of the canal profiled as Suboperation 4 began close to the northernmost unit of Suboperation 2 and together they provide a view of 150 m of subsurface stratigraphy perpendicular to the 220 m profile drawn in 2001 (see Figure 2). This Suboperation documents the northern edge of the early Early Formative sand level 13 m from its southern edge and the excavated materials from a 1 × 2 m unit east of the canal profile are pure Jocotal and Conchas phase deposits. Suboperation 6 is parallel to, approximately 60 m west of, Suboperation 4 and is beyond the limit of the early Early Formative sand. The excavated materials are Cuadros, Jocotal and Conchas in age with some earlier materials mixed in. These suboperations represent the first steps in documenting the site's geologic and cultural development.

Figure 12. A jade adze recovered from the Conchas phase construction fill of Mound 1 in Suboperation 3a.

Figure 13. A Cherla phase pit feature full of shell and faunal remains documented under Mound 1 as Suboperation 3c.

Figure 14. Beginning to clean the 50 m profile documented as Suboperation 5, looking north.

Figure 15. Ceramic figurines from the Cuauhtémoc site that date to the Cuadros (left) through Conchas (right) phases.

Analysis in Progress

In the field laboratory, all artifacts were washed, counted and weighed and all ceramic rim shards were labeled. In addition, all excavation lots were analyzed to determine temporal placement of their shards. As of the writing of this report (August, 2002) all fauna remains have been identified and quantified by Rosenswig and Travis Doering has performed initial visual sourcing and quantification of all obsidian. Faunal remains indicate that deer and dog were the most commonly eaten mammalian species and there were also some armadillo and gopher remains. Catfish and gar were the most popular fish species consumed and reptile remains include crocodile, turtle, iguana, frog and snake. Significant quantities of crab and bird remains were also recovered. Obsidian documented at Cuauhtémoc indicate that almost all of this material came from Tajamulco, El Chayal and San Martin Jiloltepec. The remainder of the analysis will be carried out during the 2002/2003 academic year by the author at the New World Archaeological Foundation in San Cristobal de las Casas. This analysis is supported by a Fulbright-Hayes grant for dissertation research.

Conclusion

FAMSI-sponsored excavations at Cuauhtémoc are providing a unique view of Early and Middle Formative cultural developments in the Soconusco as the site was continuously occupied from the first settled villages through the rise (and fall) of the distant Olmec capitals in the Gulf Coast. Cuauhtémoc is an ideal location to explore Early and Middle Formative period occupation as there is no occupation at the site after the Middle Formative and thus no overlying deposits. The settlement shift after the Middle Formative, culminating in the abandonment of Cuauhtémoc and its supporting settlements, is not well understood and is an important objective of ongoing settlement survey. Such work will place excavations results within a regional political context. The figurine heads in Figure 15, above, are examples of typical late Early Formative (i.e., San Lorenzo) and early Middle Formative (La Venta) periods. These changing figurine styles, along with many other objects presented in this report, demonstrate that the inhabitants of Cuauhtémoc were actively participating in a changing Formative world. The Soconusco has the best evidence of direct interaction with the Gulf Coast Olmec of any region in Mesoamerica (Clark and Blake 1989; Clark 1990, 1997; Clark and Pye 2000; Navarrete 1974, 1978). Therefore, the excavation and ongoing analysis of materials recovered during the 2002 season at Cuauhtémoc provide a temporally fine-grained view of the evolution of settled life, long distance interaction and the evolution of sociopolitical complexity from the perspective of a single community over nearly a millennium.

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