

## **ANNUAL REPORT: INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH METHODS IN ETHNOHISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY (MEXICO) 2013 FIELD SCHOOL**

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Students participate in ceramic making class

### **GENERAL**

This program took place between June 23 and July 20, 2013. Its primary goal was to examine what composes both pre-Columbian and Early Colonial historical sources in Mexico, learn how to interpret those sources, and how to apply those sources to the analysis of evolving cultural patterns on the actual landscapes where they were conceived. In so doing we emphasized predictive models for site identification and recovery that can be tested archaeologically. The art historical and ethnohistorical sources used include screenfold books or codices, maps and lienzos. Four primary areas were the subject of our investigation: (1) the Valley of Mexico; (2) the Plain of Puebla; (3) the Valley of Oaxaca; and (4) the Nochixtlan Valley region of the Mixteca Alta.

### **THE VALLEY OF MEXICO**

Week 1 was spent with an introduction to the Aztecs of the Empire of the Triple Alliance, the dominant civilization of the Mexican highlands at the time of the European incursion. The National Museum served as a primary foundation for examining 3,000 thousand years of cultural evolution in the Basin of Mexico followed by visits with on-site lectures at the ruins of the Great Temple (Templo Mayor) of Tenochtitlan, the recently discovered remains of the palace of Motecuhzoma, together with Tlatelolco, including the Colegio de Tlatelolco where our primary source for Aztec history, the Florentine Codex, was originally conceived by Friar Bernadino de Sahagún and his Nahuatl associates. Our challenge was how to rethink the hard transition archaeologists ordinarily make between the “Pre-Columbian” and “Colonial” periods in Mexico.

The source of Aztec Imperial power was then traced back to an ancestral site in religious stories recounted by the Aztecs to Tula, the Early Postclassic Toltec capital. Here we focused on contrasting and comparing what was written by Sahagún and his associates with what actually appears in the narrative of the art at the site. In keeping with this year's theme on the transitional period of the early 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, we examined Ixmiquilpan, a Colonial church near Tula that is renowned for its early Colonial murals painted in a fusion of styles that depict a mythic factional conflict combining elements of the Iliad with an Aztec creation story.

### **CHOLULA-CACAXTLA**

Dominating the Plain of Puebla, Cholula is the longest, continuously occupied major urban center in the Americas. The great acropolis and pyramid, even larger than Teotihuacan's Pyramid of the Sun, is a mass of Preclassic and Classic masonry and adobe brick that defies conventional stratigraphic excavation, while a Late Postclassic city is buried beneath ever expanding urban growth. Despite these obstacles, we examined how investigators have developed a number of ingenious excavation methods to analyze the site, including the identification of a Terminal Classic-Early Postclassic origin for a lavishly painted and glazed elite ware called Cholula polychrome.

Lectures from ethnohistorians and ethnographers demonstrated to students that the foundation of theocratic power at Cholula during the Late Postclassic was a religious ceremony dedicated to Quetzalcoatl whereby a prince declared a Tecuhtli or lineage head, and was thereby granted, by Quetzalcoatl's divine authority, the rulership of a royal estate or Tecalli. The appeal of the cult of Quetzalcoatl and the Tecuhtli ceremony was so powerful that it transcended all local religious customs and bound ethnically diverse peoples together into homogenous social and political units. This facilitated elite alliance and economic exchange throughout the Central Highlands prior to the rise of the Aztec Empire centered at Tenochtitlan.

This year's seminars in examining the codices focused on urban geography. The design of the Colonial central plaza in Cholula still present today is thought to be based on a plan for the Postclassic ceremonial precinct. Using Codex Borgia with its eighteen pages depicting a continuous system of plazas and temples with associated rituals was used to consider cult distribution within an urban environment otherwise composed of multiple independent Tecalli.

Cacaxtla was constructed as a remote citadel for an extended ruling family. The entire site covers approximately 56,250 m<sup>2</sup> of which only the palace has been excavated. Its residential core consists of a labyrinth of rooms, porticos, and passageways constructed around two main plazas oriented on a north-south axis. The architecture incorporated much of Classic period Teotihuacan's talud-tablero style together with a ground plan similar to Maya palaces like that at Palenque suggesting that Maya influence in the region was profound, probably during a period of a hiatus in power in the region by Cholula due to a volcanic eruption of Popocateptl.

### **THE VALLEY OF OAXACA**

Our investigation began with a day of orientation at the Zapotec capital site of Monte Alban. Monte Alban stands on a 400 meter high mountain that was intentionally level over time for the construction of a ceremonial and civic center that ultimately covered some 40 km<sup>2</sup>. With construction extending back to middle Preclassic, the site remains a critical source for understanding not only a sequence of architectural, artistic, and epigraphic innovation for the Oaxaca region but of subtle changes in the production of ceramics that allow archaeologists to date the principal occupation phases throughout three thousand years as well.

A significant new component of our investigation is Atzompa, currently being excavated by Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History but now open to the public as well. Our analysis focused on questions of whether Atzompa was a rival of Monte Alban or a subsidiary center by focusing on similarities and differences between the architectural complexes. A significant recent discovery at Atzompa was an ancient kiln. It was surprising how much it resembled kilns still employed by the community of Coyotepec further south on the valley floor to produce a burnished black ware that is directly connected to prehistoric precedents in production as well.

Instruction in reading hieroglyphic writing on stone monuments as well as codices, maps and lienzos was held in class rooms at the Fundación Harp Helú, a new institute to promote Oaxaca indigenous studies located in the restored Convento de San Pablo that dates to the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE. Subsequent lectures continued at Postclassoc sites in the Valley of Oaxaca including Mitla and Zaachila.

### **THE MIXTECA ALTA**

The final part of the project focused directly on the Mixtec codices, the longest continuous Pre-Columbian indigenous histories in the western hemisphere. The pictographic symbols represent people, places, and things used to illustrate mythical stories of creation, heroic sagas, and royal genealogies spanning over a thousand years. It also provides significant information about systems of corridor alliances that bound royal families into systems of mutual obligation between the Plain of Puebla and the Coast of Oaxaca.

Our on-site classes over the previous three weeks served as a basic introduction to Mesoamerican pictographic communication systems. Even students lacking experience in epigraphy or art history could grasp the significance of symbolism communicated through standardized systems of color and form to communicate meaning. During the last week of the project, each student was required to actually present their own oral readings and interpretations of scenes in the codices. The accounts were then analyzed with regard to their relevance to actual landscapes and significant communities known to have been the locations of the events portrayed were visited to contrast and compare compound signs with the composition of actual landscape features.