

**An Intrasite Examination of a Shaft Tomb Site  
in Central Jalisco, Mexico**

by

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**Abstract-** An extensive and detailed surface collection of the Estolanos site, of the La Primavera region, Jalisco, Mexico, is here examined for intrasite variation. The site dates to the Late Formative through the Middle Classic (approx. A.D.1-600). It is an isolated and discrete mesa, only recently brought under modern cultivation, and includes zones devoted to shaft tombs, apparent residential structures, and defensive features. The distributions of ceramics and lithics are examined in relation to these areas.

## **Introduction**

West Mexican archaeology has long focused on the shaft and chamber tombs used by elites from the Early Formative through the Middle Classic (ca. 1500 B.C.-550 A.D.) (cf. Oliveros 1970, Weigand 1985), in particular the elaborate ceramic figures deposited within as burial offerings (cf. Kan, et al. 1970, von Winning 1974, Galván 1991, Aronson 1993). Unfortunately, these studies have often been done with little regard for basic residential settlement research. Bizarre statements regarding prehispanic cultures of the region are frequently still made in general texts on Mesoamerica, describing the region as one of "tomb cultures". Even though recent research has repeatedly confirmed the association of shaft tombs with surface structures, both residential or public architecture (e.g. Ixtépete [Deraga 1988], Huitzilapa [Ramos and López 1996], Bugambillas [Galván 1991], El Arenal [Corona Nuñez 1960, Long 1966], other sites in Colima and Jalisco [Olay de Barrientos 1993, Cabrero 1993], and even the earliest shaft tombs at El Opeño and San Felipe [Oliveros 1970:Figure 6, Weigand 1996:Figure 8]), these contexts have been underemphasized. Although some effort is expended in describing the elaborate ceramics and artifacts recovered from the tombs, any settlement debris found is described only as of poor quality and indistinct.

This paper is an initial effort to describe the internal structure of a residential site from the Tabachines phase in central Jalisco, Mexico. Tabachines is thought to extend from around 200 B.C. to A.D. 550, and suggested subphases are addressed here.

## **The Site of Estolanos**

The site discussed here is located half an hour west of Guadalajara, and lies on the northwestern edge of the La Primavera caldera. This edge of the caldera was uplifted, and erosion from the interior has left a series of dissected mesas running just west of north.

The mesa Estolanos is separated from its longer neighboring mesas by steep walled gorges of about 35 and 55 meters in depth. The only level entrance into the site is at the southern end of the mesa, and is less than five meters wide. Happily the site had only been plowed and cultivated with maize and beans for three years, churning up a large quantity of artifacts but not yet producing major alterations to their spatial location.

There are only a few structural remains on the site, and all of them are low platforms with stone retaining walls and primarily earthen fill. There appear to have been four areas with structures, in the northern, central, and southern sectors of the site, and at the site entrance. A single structure is located to the north, among a field of looted shaft tombs. The primary group of structures is in the center of the site, with at least three low platforms and another possible one. An informant reported that there had been structures in the southern section of the site, and we encountered numerous piles of loose river cobbles such as those used in the other constructions.

Finally, there is a wall and ditch blocking the one entrance to the site. The 60 centimeter high construction has stone retaining walls and earthen fill, and with a short step of 20 centimeters in height on the interior face. The trench excavated in front of the wall is about 1.3 meters deep and 4 meters wide, accentuating the height advantage of anyone within the wall in repelling attempts to enter the site.

The site has suffered extensive looting, and we mapped 98 looters' pits distributed across the mesa. These are focused on the northern end of the site, where we were able to investigate the remains of numerous looted shaft tombs, and around the central group of structures.

Due to the vast amount of ceramic material on the surface of this site, I decided to make a more extensive collection than we had made at other sites during our survey. A grid system of 10 meter squares was adopted, in order to allow an even distribution of collections across the site, and greater spatial resolution than with our usual collections. At each point on the grid, a one meter radius circle was drawn to define the collection area. We made a total of 438 collections across the five hectares that the site covered, and we took another 22 non-systematic samples from the pits around the looted shaft tombs. The systematic collection resulted in a ceramic sample of over 4000 sherds, and 1800 obsidian artifacts. Except where specifically mentioned, the following discussion only makes use of the systematic sample of materials.

## **Analysis**

A simple examination of the distribution of ceramics can give us a first look at the site. Although up to 100 grams of ceramics are found in almost all of the collection squares, higher densities are found in the central and southern parts of the site. The southern sector is where we

find the remains of destroyed structures, and I consider this a probable major residential focus for the site, particularly since densities are so much lower around the remaining structures in the central and northern sectors.

Ceramics were initially broken down into categories of open vs. closed body sherds, distinguished by curvature and degree of treatment of the interior vs. exterior surfaces. Closed vessels are presumably jars, tightly incurved vessels, etc. oriented towards storage, or perhaps cooking. Open sherds are presumed to be primarily from serving vessels. As you can see, closed vessels are far more common over the site. Open vessel predominance is patchily distributed across the entire site, but is interestingly absent in the area of high sherd density posited to have been a major residential area.

One major focus of this surface study was to compare the distributions of Tabachines and Estolanos wares (Beekman 1996a, Beekman and Weigand in press). The two ceramic wares share a number of features, including forms, designs, and decorative methods. But Tabachines ceramics are thinner, more carefully decorated, have different rim forms, and petrographic analysis found finer pastes and more careful vessel production (Beekman 1996b). There is some question as to whether these differences are chronological or functional. Are Tabachines vessels earlier, or are they a finer mortuary or ritual ware? A series of tombs in the Guadalajara region, excavated by Javier Galván (1991) in the early 1970s, divided fairly cleanly into two groups - those with Tabachines vessels as offerings, and those with Estolanos vessels. The Tabachines tombs had earlier obsidian hydration dates than the Estolanos tombs, suggesting a temporal distinction into Early and Late Tabachines phases. Yet Meredith Aronson's technical analysis (1993) focused on probable differences in function.

If the differences are functional, we should expect to find Tabachines sherds around the tombs, and perhaps around the surviving platform thought to have ritual functions, but it is unlikely that a significant percentage of the total would occur elsewhere. If the differences are chronological, then the contexts of the two wares should not differ, although their extent might.

Another topic to be investigated was whether the bichrome versions of Tabachines and Estolanos had distributions that differed from the other types of each ware. Bichrome, or in this case Red on Cream, was both a greater investment of labor in the decorative process, and had

potentially greater symbolic content. We might predict that the Red on Cream types in each ware would have a more restricted distribution focusing more closely on elite or ritual contexts.

Tabachines wares are uncommon on the site as a whole, but are found in the central and northern parts of the site. Other chronological indicators thought to be limited to an Early Tabachines subphase, such as obsidian jewelry, are also limited to this general area. X's represent non-systematic collections that the project made while investigating the looted tombs in this part of the site, and simply indicate that these vessels were indeed being deposited in the tombs in addition to their other functions. Oconahua Red on Cream is the bichrome representative of Tabachines wares, and shares a nearly identical distribution, hence the greater decoration does not appear to have invested these vessels with any additional roles.

Estolanos wares are much more common in the site, which could be due to either chronological or functional differences. However, they were found in some frequency around the more substantial architecture of the site as well, and in the area of the tombs. There is also a widespread distribution of Estolanos wares around the southern part of the site where structural remains were reportedly found before plowing began. Teuchitlan Red on Cream, the bichrome type within the Estolanos wares, shares a very similar distribution. Additional non-systematic collections of this bichrome type were collected around the shaft tombs as well.

In sum the two wares, and specifically the two bichrome types, appear in largely the same contexts (i.e. tombs, elite or public, residential), but in different quantities. I conclude that the differences noted between the two are largely chronological, agreeing with the obsidian hydration evidence from the Guadalajara tombs. The lack of Tabachines ceramics and the prevalence of Estolanos types in the southern part of the site is more likely due to a later occupation in that area.

Lithics (obsidian) are found across the entire site, but production debris provides some indication of internal zoning. Although debitage and shatter are found everywhere, there are lesser amounts around the remaining platforms and the looted tombs. There are greater quantities in the southern part of the site, where the destroyed structures used to be. This pattern becomes clearer when we add Cores and Finished Tools to the analysis. They indicate four loci of obsidian tool production. The first three are found in areas of low ceramic density: the very far north, and two

clusters along the western edges of the site. The fourth locus is the southern sector, again where the destroyed structures used to be. Most of the tools found in these loci are obsidian macroblades that have a semi-circular notch flaked into one side, leaving a groove of rather uncertain function.

In sum, the site of Estolanos appears to have been occupied over an extended period, with a small occupation in the northern and central sectors during the Early Tabachines phase alongside shaft tombs. Some specific areas with signs of stone tool production are scattered around the site. By the late Tabachines phase, however, settlement had extended to the southern part of the site, and a particularly dense area of residential activity appears to have formed here, with more extensive evidence of in situ stone tool production. Shaft tombs continued to be excavated in the northern part of the site, however. Tombs and residential settlement are clearly both functioning in proximity to one another, although in this example we appear to have a cemetery area on the outskirts of a village, rather than individual tombs associated with specific houses. Future research into the shaft tombs and their significance in these societies must move beyond the tombs themselves and address their intrasite context.

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