

In the Land of the Chichimecs?

Arqueología y Etnohistoria: La Región del Lerma. EDUARDO WILLIAMS and PHIL C. WEIGAND, editors. El Colegio de Michoacán and Centro de Investigaciones en Matemáticas, Morelia, 1999. 335 pp., figures, bibliographies, place-name index. (Paper).

Reviewed by Christopher S. Beekman (Glenn Black Labs)

This volume celebrates the twentieth anniversary of the Colegio de Michoacán's ("Colmich") semi annual series of conferences, workshops, and roundtables devoted to the anthropology and history of western Mexico. The book marks an eastward shift into north central Mexico, into lands normally marked on Mesoamerican maps by the unedifying label of "Here be Chichimecs", the nomadic peoples known from the Conquest period. The region was left out of Kirchoff's classic map defining Mesoamerica, and although complex sedentary settlements have been identified and even excavated in this area for over 60 years, most were attributed to a "climatic optimum" proposed by Pedro Armillas for the Early Postclassic period. This volume includes not only recent scholarship on the area, but also helps synthesize older research that will force Mesoamericanists to reconsider the role of this region in wider social dynamics.

The introduction by Phil Weigand and Eduardo Williams provides historical background and geographic parameters. The Lerma river basin extends west from the valley of Toluca through to Lake Chapala, encompassing parts of northernmost Michoacán, the "Bajío" region of Guanajuato, western Querétaro, and the Los Altos region of eastern Jalisco. As such, it provides a natural corridor between east and west, and marks the transition from the high altitude Mesoamerican highlands to the lower and drier steppes to the far north. Weigand and Williams blame the region's marginal reputation on the overuse of mortuary ceramics to define "cultures" (Chupícuaro mortuary pottery being the prime example), a lack of sustained field projects, and the tendency to project contact period societies and environmental conditions into the distant past. The editors ask us, for the Classic period at least, to instead consider the area as another hearth of independent complex developments in Mesoamerica.

Beatriz Braniff C. gives an extremely brief summary of environment in the Bajío. She suggests that the landscape of small lake basins and swamps may have been more extensive in the past. She discusses evidence for the "Armillas hypothesis" and draws upon some paleoenvironmental data in this discussion, but none more recent than 1984. There has been a great deal of research on this topic since then (O'Hara, Metcalfe, and others) that would seem to shift the timing of the desiccation to the Epiclassic, and require the introduction of sociopolitical factors into Armillas' model.

The ethnohistorian David Charles Wright Carr summarizes the Precolumbian sequence for eastern Guanajuato and Querétaro, a difficult task considering the fragmented nature of the published record. His synthesis is useful for those unfamiliar with the area, and clarifies a basic east vs. west distinction in ceramics and architectural patterns that splits the northern Lerma basin in half. After a population peak in the Classic (or perhaps Epiclassic - the distinction is quite vague up here), the population declined gradually through the Postclassic. If this is a response to environmental changes, it did not prohibit the existence of complex sedentary centers with links to Tula and the Tarascan empire. Wright's attempt to follow the sequence into the historic period, and make analytical contact with known ethnic groups, is a good first run at the problem.

Efraín Cárdenas García's article perhaps best lives up to the book's introduction. Cárdenas draws upon the work (mostly unpublished or unsynthesized) of a generation of INAH archaeologists to define a diverse tradition of public architecture in Guanajuato centered around sunken patios and pertaining to the A.D. 300 - 700 period. Some sites have earlier Chupícuaro ceramics in the lowest levels. The chronology of this tradition remains hazy as the radiocarbon dates are few and far between, and the associated ceramics are sketchily described, but the placement in the Classic to Epiclassic will meet with little disagreement. This article actually focuses primarily on the much less frequent examples of circular architecture found in the Bajío, relating most of them directly to the Teuchitlan tradition of Jalisco. I should note that these circular complexes should not be confused with the simple round buildings found very frequently in Querétaro and San Luis Potosí and related to those known from northern Veracruz.

The two articles by Dan M. Healan and Christine E. Hernández, and by Jorge Ramos de la Vega and Lorenza López Mestas, are brief, illustrated discussions of otherwise unpublished ceramic sequences. These are welcome contributions for all their brevity. The first covers materials from the Lake Cuitzeo basin in northeastern Michoacán, while the second focuses on the Los Altos region of eastern Jalisco. Both help bridge the gaps separating the Bajío from the highland lake basins. Lacunae still exist, particularly in the Los Altos materials, where the Postclassic is still unrepresented. Ramos and López seem unwilling to assign formal names to their phases or their ceramic types, which are simply discussed by their type of decoration. All phases and types are preliminary, however, and it would help if the authors used their knowledge to create the framework necessary for additional advancement.

Two site specific studies are very illustrative of work in the region. Cárdenas' second contribution to the volume reexamines an unpublished 1970s archaeological project in eastern Michoacán. The excavations at Santa María, in Morelia, have been controversial because of the destruction of the site by development, and because of the wealth of materials recovered. The collections have languished for some years, but Cárdenas has sorted through old reports and photographs to help recontextualize the materials collected. Exotic imports identified at the site include shell from both Pacific and Caribbean coasts, turquoise (presumably from the American Southwest), jade (presumably from the Motagua valley), and cinnabar (perhaps from the mines in northern Querétaro). The jumble of ceramics (not recorded originally by strata) similarly include materials with distant ties. One platform had an example of a talud tablero facade, interpreted to indicate Teotihuacan involvement in the local sequence. Another article by Weigand and Acelia García de Weigand focuses on Peñol de Chiquihuitillo, one of the numerous hilltop settlements of the Los Altos region. The Weigands give their trademark detailed architectural description based on their extensive experience with construction methods and the creative use of looters' trenches. They use local private and public collections to develop a temporal profile of this site for the Late Formative to Epiclassic periods. Although on some level I can applaud these attempts to rescue data from the field and the filing cabinet, I have to ask, exactly how robust are the recovered data?

Williams provides one of the four topical papers by discussing his ongoing ethnoarchaeological research on salt procurement, production, and exchange in the Lake Cuitzeo basin. Numerous photographs, drawings, and maps depict the production process, and he provides a detailed and balanced treatment of the topic. He assesses the degree to which the ethnoarchaeological data can be used to understand the archaeological record, and makes some very useful and concrete suggestions for archaeologists. Those seeking comparative data will find

this article particularly useful, especially since he discusses the archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence for extensive salt production in western Mexico as a whole.

Three other papers are focused on forager/ agriculturalist interaction along the northern Mesoamerican frontier. Ana María Crespo and Carlos Viramontes deal with this in an abstract way by proposing that this interaction can be evaluated by the separation of those traits that the authors argue to be most characteristic of one or the other of these two broadly defined groups. For example, the presence of tools for processing foods other than maize (e.g. for preparing nopal, mezquite, or animals) should be considered indicative of interaction, as these were foods normally exploited solely by hunters and gatherers according to the authors. Also, whereas hunters and gatherers cremated their dead, agriculturalists buried theirs in sacred centers, whereas agriculturalists under the influence of Teotihuacan buried their dead under house floors. The authors also argue that rock art shows the interaction between foragers and agriculturalists; while the former were responsible for the depictions of animals, the latter made the geometric symbols often found on the same outcrops. This article might benefit from a fuller discussion of specific sites, a less rigid distinction between the two subsistence orientations, and greater reference to the existing literature on the topic of forager to farmer interaction. The two papers by Alberto Carrillo Cázares and Cayetano Reyes García do a better job on this topic through their papers on specific 16th century relationships. Carrillo presents a brief background to the missionary policy of resettlement and peaceful conquest of the Chichimecs. The rest of his article then focuses on the 1574 document Guerra de los Chichimecas, the most complete discussion of a resettlement, its strategies, procedures, and results. The use of Purépecha Indians to form a sedentary nucleus for the new settlement as a prelude to settling the more nomadic Uamares was particularly interesting. Reyes discusses how sedentary peoples such as Purépecha and Otomí were given greater freedom as they moved into the Bajío, since it was they who, in a sense, conquered the area through their actions as merchants, new settlers, and even conquerors.

One point that becomes clear is the importance of the Lerma basin in the Classic period. There were several INAH “Bajío” publications from the 1990s that postulated a heavy role for Teotihuacan in the area. This volume encompasses that viewpoint, but develops another. Several contributors cite research concerns parallel to those further to the west, the presence of Teuchitlan tradition architecture throughout Guanajuato and extending into Querétaro, and ceramic crossties. The possible links to Teotihuacan are relegated to the far eastern part of the study area (Lake Cuitzeo basin and the southeastern part of Guanajuato and Querétaro), and are still not that secure. Too many of the ceramic crossties are described as “Teotihuacanoid”, not a term that builds confidence, and similar ceramics in Jalisco are now seen as Epiclassic in date. Similarly, the simple talud tablero facade is still forced to bear far too much interpretive weight. This element has a 1500 year temporal span (not counting the version I once saw on a colonial Spanish fort in the Philippines), and the persistent attempts to link it to a specific polity seem anachronistic.

The volume showcases a region pivotal for understanding northern Mesoamerican dynamics, and also points out many of the characteristics and weaknesses of research in the area. Some articles use terms considered archaic to archaeologists elsewhere (“civilization” and “barbarism”), and fieldwork is methodologically unsophisticated. Long term and sustained field projects are rare, and much effort is expended on salvage studies for data that can only be exploited to a very limited extent. There is a very strong connection between archaeology and history, greater than that between archaeology and anthropology, that continues to shape

research. There has been an unwillingness to incorporate art history and iconographic studies, despite the presence of detailed ceramic figurines and monumental architecture with probable symbolic import. Finally, western Mexicanists have tended to be isolationist in their scholarship. Despite the general consensus that the region must be treated as Mesoamerican, only a few authors make reference to current Mesoamerican research to help guide and interpret their work. Researchers end up talking largely amongst themselves, and many of the articles do not include the detailed maps necessary for outsiders to comprehend the sites and subregions discussed in the text.

Conference volumes are often uneven, and hence the position espoused in the introduction is not necessarily carried through by the articles included here. But those who work in western Mexico and probably central Mexico should get this book for the chronological and distributional data discussed. Those looking for comparative material on salt production, farmer to forager interaction, or the historiography of archaeological research will find useful examples to draw upon. Research in the area has begun to gather momentum thanks to the growing number of researchers and perspectives, and this volume succeeds in defining the Lerma basin for the next cadre of fieldworkers.