

The Shaft Tombs of the Atemajac Valley

And Their Relation to Settlement

by

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The recent resurgence of interest in the shaft tombs of western Mexico is due in part to salvage excavations carried out over two decades ago in the Atemajac valley, central Jalisco, by the National Institute for Anthropology and History (INAH). This fieldwork, which was focused on the excavation of the Tabachines cemetery and a few isolated shaft tombs elsewhere in the valley, is by far the largest sample of archaeologically excavated shaft tombs from anywhere in West Mexico (cf. Galván 1976; Schöndube and Galván 1978 for preliminary reports). The publication of the final monograph on the excavations (Galván 1991) was followed by independent analyses of the data recovered (Aronson 1993, 1996; Beekman 1996a: 858-863, this volume). However, the importance of this sample of shaft tombs has generally not been recognized among professional archaeologists or the interested public. This article will report on some of the major findings of this research, and will discuss the relationship of these materials to contemporary settlement in the Atemajac valley, and to the Tabachines phase to which they belong.

The Excavations at Tabachines

In the mid 1970s construction of a new housing development began at Tabachines, half a kilometer northwest of the archaeological site of El Grillo (cf. Galván and Beekman n.d.a.). El Grillo is located just inside the northern stretch of the Periférico, or beltway ring, that circles Guadalajara, and is the most extensive archaeological site in the Atemajac valley. When construction there began to expose the first of 19 shaft tombs, an INAH project run by L. Javier Galván V. took the opportunity to recover as much information as possible from the tombs as they each came to light. An additional two tombs (Tombs 11 and 12) were located by the INAH project through a series of trenches, and were the first shaft tombs excavated from start to finish by archaeologists (Galván 1991: 159-169). Another four shaft tombs or possible shaft tombs were also identified and recorded by INAH over the next several years at Ciudad Granja, Valle de Guadalupe, Ixtépete, and Bugambilias, all within the Atemajac valley (Galván 1991: 194-204, 313-320). These were salvage projects, and excavations and recording had to be carried out quickly in order to avoid further disturbance of the exposed remains by looters. Nonetheless, the amount of information recovered and the thoroughness with which the remains were analyzed and

published surpassed that of any prior shaft tomb research. Even the earlier work of Stanley Long (1966) was focused on only a few looted tombs, and did not make full use of the materials recovered. For example, Long never attempted a typological analysis of the excellent collection of ceramics obtained through his efforts, even though this is a basic element of early archaeological research in any region.

Many of the 25 shaft tombs excavated by INAH were damaged to varying degrees during their exposure by construction crews, but it was possible to map the remainder and develop good reconstructions of most of the tombs. Twenty-one were of the stereotypical boot shape, with a vertical shaft from 1.3 to 3.25 meters in depth (Galván 1991: Chart 1), terminating in a side chamber in which one or more bodies were placed. A single tomb had two side chambers (Tomb 7). At least eight of the tombs had a small step at the base of the shaft before entering the chamber itself, and one tomb (Tomb 10 - Galván 1991: Figure 92) displayed the remains of a plug placed over the mouth of the chamber to seal it. Atypical examples included a bottle shaped tomb (Tomb 2), a tomb so shallow that no shaft was clearly apparent (Tomb VG), and two more burials whose tomb architecture was so thoroughly destroyed as to be undeterminable (Tomb BG and IX), although these two were deep enough to be shaft tombs.

It is uncertain what significance the diversity of shaft tomb forms may hold (Figure 1). Long (1967: Table 1) identified a wide variety of tomb shapes, but the lack of artifactual data has left it unclear as to whether these are chronological differences. The boot-shaped tombs are found over an extremely wide area (Ibid), while the bottle-shaped tombs are known from Nayarit and elsewhere in central Jalisco (Corona Nuñez 1954; Weigand 1985: 61). The form of Tomb VG closely resembles the “One step open pit” illustrated from Usmajac, in the Sayula lake basin to the southwest (Valdez, et al. 1996: Figure 4d). What any of these variations might mean is unclear, and their distributions over space do not appear to form regional clusters. For this reason, Weigand has instead focused on quantitative, not qualitative, differences between tombs, such as the depth of the shaft (Weigand 1985: 64-66).

Skeletal preservation in the Atemajac valley tombs was generally poor, probably due to intrusion by water, but a total of at least 43 individuals could be identified or inferred in the field from the 43 shaft tombs. Most remains were extremely fragile, but their position and orientation

could generally be recorded (see Galván 1991: Figure 70 for a photograph showing the poor preservation). Sex could not be determined due to the lack of preservation, although socially defined gender was suggested by the grave goods in several cases. All of these examples were inferred to be females, based on the presence of metates for grinding foodstuffs and/or the presence of small solid female figurines (e.g. Tomb CG in Galván 1991: 194-202). By the same logic, one of the individuals in Tomb 8 (Galván 1991: Figures 83, 85) and another in Tomb 17 (Ibid: Figures 115,116) might be defined as male on the basis of accompanying weaponry. Some of the chambers were extremely small and had no surviving skeletal remains, suggesting that these were used for children (Galván 1991: 112). Some, but not all, of these young burials had relatively few associated offerings.

Although most tombs held evidence of a single occupant, several had two, three, four, or even five individuals. Bodies were typically laid out on their backs or sides in an extended position, and in six cases lay on a bed of unworked obsidian pebbles up to two centimeters thick (Galván 1991: 111). It is worth noting that obsidian and chert debitage was frequently dumped over the top of Classic period elite burial chambers in the Maya region (e.g. Taschek and Ball 1992:492; Chase and Chase 1996: 71), an interesting link between shaft tomb mortuary symbolism and other regions of Mesoamerica. Small stones and obsidian flakes were also found in the mouths or otherwise around the heads of several individuals (e.g. Tomb CG in Galván 1991: 198). Discussing mortuary patterns of the 16th century Aztecs of central Mexico, Sahagun notes the following:

“And when the rulers and the noblemen died, they put green stones in their mouths. And if they were only commoners, [they used] only greenish stones or obsidian. It was said that they became their hearts.” (Sahagún 1978: Book 3, Appendix, Chapter 1, 45)

A correlation between the kind of objects placed in the mouth at Tabachines and the apparent status of the individual appears to hold (Galván 1991: 247-248), but status is relative, as we shall see. It is perhaps just as important to once again draw attention to the parallel to the rest of Mesoamerica.

Obsidian hydration dates were obtained from samples taken from 13 of the tombs. The dates would appear to place the tombs from approximately 750 B.C.- A.D. 450, (Galván 1991:

Chart 1), an extended period which has been defined as the Tabachines phase. Some differences in ceramic types correlate with these dates, and have led to a division into an early and late subphase (Galván 1991: 255-256; divided further in Beekman, this volume). The extremely long span of time represented by these obsidian hydration dates is probably not to be taken at face value, however, and Beekman has suggested that these dates probably represent the period A.D. 1-550 (this volume).

Offerings within the tombs consisted of ceramic vessels, flaked obsidian tools, ground stone tools, and a variety of other prestige objects, including several examples of the well known hollow figures. The pottery vessels are perhaps the most valuable to shaft tomb studies, however, since they have been only poorly studied previously. Despite the literally thousands of hollow figures that have found their way to museums or collectors, and hence illustrated in art volumes, relatively few ceramic vessels are found on the art market (cf. Kan et al. 1970 for an example of this pattern). Anyone who has examined a looted cemetery site knows the reason. At the site of Estolanos (PP.33), in the western part of the Atemajac valley, intact ceramics looted from the tombs were found smashed indiscriminately on the spot, while almost no signs of hollow figures were to be seen (Beekman 1996a: 278-287). Ceramic vessels are evidently not worth the effort financially for looters to carry them away, thanks to their fragility and lower black market value relative to the aesthetically pleasing hollow figures. Informants reported to Beekman that those few vessels that were taken away were given to friends or used as toys or ashtrays, while the figures tended to be more highly valued (Ibid).

Galván classified the whole ceramic vessels into three distinct ceramic groups, or more correctly wares, called Colorines, Tabachines, and Arroyo Seco (Galván 1991: 47-83). These are currently being called Colorines, Tabachines, and Estolanos along the western margins of the Atemajac valley (see Beekman, this volume; also Beekman 1996a) due to some differences that appear to carry over into the Tequila valleys to the west, and further modifications may be forthcoming from the Huitzilapa project (Ramos and López, this volume). All three of these wares include red-on-cream bichromes amongst their possible color combinations, muddying the typological distinction somewhat. But Aronson's technological analysis (Aronson 1993:125-200, 283-299; 1996) found that consistent differences in production methods, and to a lesser degree

pastes, separate them quite neatly. Her usewear analysis also noted that Colorines vessels were virtually utilitarian, while Tabachines and Arroyo Seco vessels were much less heavily used, although still not produced specifically as a mortuary ware (Aronson 1993: 200-214). Tabachines vessels seem to have been particularly favored, and examples exist of Oconahua Red on White vessels (the finest of the Tabachines wares) that have been found in tombs even after they have been repaired or improperly fired (e.g. Galván 1991: 69, Figure 23; Aronson 1993: 180, Figure 5.47; Beekman 1996a: 474, Figure 5.10b). This kind of conservation behavior is to be found elsewhere in Mesoamerica whenever high value prestige wares are involved (e.g. Kerr 1989: 115, File no. 1835). Despite these indications, Aronson concludes (1993: 295) that none of these pottery groups were likely to have been made by full-time specialists, largely due to the lack of apparent standardization.

Vessel iconography is predominantly geometric, although some more organic motifs have been noted. Designs include bands, cross-hatching, drips, propeller-shapes, horseshoes, clusters of dots, s-shapes, and, more rarely, rectilinear spirals referred to in Mexico as *xicalcolihquis*. Perhaps the most interesting decorative motif, at least in terms of interregional implications, is the pattern of parallel undulating lines that Galván rightly describes as akin to the much later Mazapan red on buff ceramics of Early Postclassic central Mexico, usually associated with Tula (1991:51-63). Far more complex iconography on ceramics that otherwise match Galván's type descriptions has been identified in the Tequila valleys to the west (Beekman and Weigand in press), suggesting that the Atemajac valley societies placed less emphasis on symbolic signaling, or simply that the Tabachines cemetery didn't encompass that variation. Even at Tabachines, however, the geometric designs on the shaft tomb vessels are frequently organized into broader patterns of clearer ideological significance. In particular, we can point to the common pattern of the division of ceramic bowls into four quadrants, representing the four cardinal directions of Mesoamerican cosmology.

The Tabachines tombs are also important because they provide a context for the shaft tomb figures that have so thoroughly obsessed earlier archaeologists and art historians. The excavations recovered figures of warriors, acrobats, players of the Mesoamerican ballgame, and females carrying a probable *acocote*, a tubelike gourd used to extract pulque (Galván 1991:

Figures 40-42, Appendix, Figure 18). Galván interprets the figures as symbolic of living servants of the deceased, being interred to continue their service into the next life (Galván 1991:103). Many of the figures might equally well be interpreted as self-representations of the deceased elites themselves, however. Among other items found in the tombs are weaponry in the form of obsidian points and stone spearthrower hooks, as well as stone yokes associated with the ballgame (Ibid: Figures 39, 46), indicating that the deceased were no strangers to these kinds of activities.

Other artifacts within the Atemajac valley shaft tombs range from utilitarian goods to exotic prestige objects. Manos and metates for grinding foodstuffs are found in several of the tombs, as well as obsidian blades and several distinct forms of scrapers (Galván 1991:83-94, Figures 37-39). Personal decoration occurs in the form of obsidian and shell jewelry (cf. also Long 1966: 228-230; Beekman 1996a: 790-799, Figures 6.16,6.17 for more examples of the former) and clay earspools, as well as cylinder seals possibly used for body decoration (Galván 1991: Figures 32, 45-48). There are also several anthropomorphic obsidian figures (Beekman 1996a: Figure 6.16; Galván 1991: Figures 37,38,47), clearly parallel to more finely made examples from the burials at the Temple of the Feathered Serpent at Teotihuacan, the latter examples dating to the Terminal Formative period (Cabrera Castro et al. 1991: Figure 10).

Galván takes a Neo-Marxist approach to interpretation in his monograph on the excavations, focusing on the delineation of different classes. He emphasizes in particular that the deceased in the richest burials clearly had access to prestige goods and quantities of ceramic vessels that the poorer burials did not. He also points to the pattern of burial, in which 11 of the tombs included multiple interments (up to five in a single tomb). The question of whether these tombs were used once, or whether they were reused numerous times, is critical to their interpretation. Sequential inhumation, or repeated use of the same tomb for later burials, would imply social continuity and some kind of corporate basis to the shaft tombs. Simultaneous inhumation, or the burial of multiple individuals as a single event, could signify that some of the dead could have been victims of human sacrifice. Based on several points, none entirely convincing on their own, it was concluded that each of the tombs had been sealed after single burial events (e.g. Schöndube and Galván 1978:154-156), although Galván has since noted that Tomb 8 might be an exception (1991: 149). A re-examination of the tomb maps suggests that

some of the bodies within Tombs 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 11 are crammed over to one side, or stacked atop one another. This strongly suggests repeated tomb use, a behavioral pattern that is turning out to be quite common among certain Mesoamerican elites (e.g. Chase and Chase 1996). In fact, the disagreements over simultaneous vs. sequential inhumations, and their accompanying social implications, virtually duplicates the much older debate over the Zapotec tombs of Oaxaca (Caso 1933; Lind and Urcid 1983). Following the interpretation that the Tabachines tombs were primarily single burial events, however, Galván argues that each tomb had a single primary individual for whom the tomb was built, while the other inhumations were sacrificed retainers accompanying the primary individual into the next world (Galván 1991: 234-240).

In sum, the analysis of mortuary practices and interred goods reveals a strong distinction between two categories Galván describes as the “Dispossessors” and the “Dispossessed”, or the “Haves” and the “Have Nots” (Figure 2). He notes that the disparity between the two is clear, but also far greater than many have come to associate with the society that built the shaft tombs (1991:259-284, 291-298). This is particularly significant in light of the fact that all of the Atemajac valley shaft tombs fit comfortably within the third and lowest rank of Weigand’s hierarchy of shaft tombs (Weigand 1985: 64-66). We must also remember that shaft tombs themselves are an elite form of burial. In the Tequila valleys to the west, the one area where we have some idea of quantities, over 90% of the burials are simple pit tombs. In other words, the known Atemajac valley shaft tombs represent only a slice of the regional burial hierarchy, yet still encompass a wide range of social status.

This distinction, however, seems to decline with time. The later Tabachines tombs show a decrease in the quantities and degree of elaboration of grave goods. Entire categories of artifacts (among them the hollow figurines and obsidian jewelry) drop out of the record, and single burials are now the dominant pattern. With the disappearance of the major evidence for social ranking among the later shaft tombs, Galván argues for a transformation of the social system towards a relatively more egalitarian pattern (1991: 256-257).

There are other ways of interpreting this shift, however. It could, alternatively, be a reflection of the increasing peripheralization of the Atemajac valley *vis a vis* the developing core of the Teuchitlan Tradition to the west (see Weigand, this volume). Or, it could actually reflect an

overall *increase* in social stratification within the system of which the Tabachines area was a part. The gulf between the uppermost elites and the rest of society could actually be increasing, and the truly high status individuals in the society might no longer be found in a small local cemetery like that at Tabachines. Seen from the perspective of a single cemetery serving local elites, their increasing marginalization and decline in access to status goods would appear as a growing egalitarianism.

The Place of the Shaft Tombs Within the Atemajac Valley Settlement System

The Atemajac valley is located in the highlands of central Jalisco and is the site of the modern metropolis of Guadalajara, the second largest city in Mexico (Figure 3). The valley is delimited to the north, south, and west by mountains, with major passes like the La Venta Corridor to the west, and the San Isidro de Mazatepec Corridor to the southwest. To the north and east is the deep canyon of the Rio Santiago. The valley floor ranges between 1500 and 1600 meters above sea level, and the region is considered semi-arid, particularly when one takes into account that most rainfall is concentrated in the period from May to October. Despite the contemporary population densities, the valley was not the primary regional center of population in prehispanic times, due largely to the distribution of natural resources. Water sources in the valley are limited to small streams and springs, many seasonal, and sources for crop irrigation are not impressive. Only minor sources for obsidian, used for most stone tools in the area, are to be found in the Sierra La Primavera to the west (e.g. Beekman 1996a: 100-106). The Tequila valleys west of the Sierra were the focus of large population concentrations and *in situ* development of complex societies during the prehispanic period. This is not surprising in light of the presence of numerous high quality obsidian sources, as well as the presence of two lakes, with the accompanying increased diversity in wildlife (Weigand 1996). Although the Atemajac valley may not have been a major center of prehispanic population, numerous village sites have been identified through archaeological survey.

The Atemajac valley today, with its large population concentration, has been a hostile environment for archaeology, due to urban growth and the more deliberate ravages of looting. The settlement survey, carried out primarily through aerial photos and reports from the

inhabitants of the valley, has been partial and focused towards larger and more directly threatened centers. The data have not yet been organized into a coherent settlement hierarchy that we can present at this time, but we can provide a general description of Tabachines phase settlement (see also Galván and Beekman n.d.b.). Added to these data are the results of an intensive survey carried out on the western margins of the Atemajac valley, in the La Venta Corridor that leads into the Tequila valleys and the core of the Teuchitlan Tradition (Beekman 1996a).

When viewed on a large scale, settlement in the Atemajac valley was generally associated with water sources. Accessible year round sources are limited, however, so settlement continues to be located in the same four regions, regardless of the specific archaeological phase. The settlements in the center of the valley around El Grillo revolve around the small but permanent Arroyo Atemajac and the seasonal Arroyo Seco. Northern sites relied upon proximity to the Arroyo Ocote and other seasonal streams. Sites around Ixtépete, in the southwestern region, are generally associated with seasonal streams and the numerous springs found in this part of the valley. The eastern settlements around Coyula are to be found along the upper slopes of the Canyon of the Rio Santiago. Access to the Rio Santiago would have been difficult, but the cluster of terraced sites along these upper slopes suggests that it wasn't prohibitively so, and in either case there are natural springs in this region as well.

During the Tabachines phase, however, there was an additional focus to Atemajac valley settlement that sacrificed easy access to water supplies for proximity to communication routes. Survey in the La Venta Corridor to the west noted increased settlement and architectural investment in this region during the Tabachines phase, specifically the later subphase, signaling the greater emphasis on the passage of goods or information between valleys. This is the period of the peak of the Teuchitlan Tradition, and Beekman has argued elsewhere that the polity based in the Tequila valleys established several strategic sites on the passes into its political core (Beekman 1996a). The Atemajac valley would have been severely marginalized by these changes, and this appears to correspond chronologically to the later Tabachines phase, and the decline in the volume of offerings in the tombs.

The cemetery of Tabachines is, as already stated, a bare 500 meters from the main collection of architecture at the prehistoric settlement of El Grillo. The most obvious architecture

at the site, however, dates rather clearly from the following El Grillo phase (Galván and Beekman n.d.a.), and it is unclear just how large the settlement might have been in Tabachines times. No single settlement within the valley appears extensive enough to have had a population of more than a few hundred people. Weigand (1996: 202) has estimated that each major shaft tomb cemetery identified within the Tequila valleys tends to be associated with typically 18 habitation compounds at 15 persons per compound. While somewhat less settlement might have been in the area of Tabachines, this should nonetheless give an impression of the expected population in the immediate area, all evidence of which is probably beneath the streets of northern Guadalajara.

Some of the other scattered shaft tombs identified in the Atemajac valley are more clearly connected to single component Tabachines phase settlements. A cemetery was located at the site of Estolanos, in the La Venta Corridor (Beekman 1996a: 278-287). The information recovered here was far more sketchy than at Tabachines, since the cemetery had been looted some time before it was located by archaeologists, and the open tombs had mostly collapsed. However, the cemetery area was located at the northernmost end of a long narrow mesa which showed evidence of a small village of five hectares and perhaps 125 people. At Resumidero (PP. 2) in the west and Bugambilias Abajo in the southwest, shaft tombs occurred in the same settlement with Teuchitlan Tradition public architecture (Beekman 1996a: 159-164; Galván and Beekman n.d.c.), although not directly below the outer satellite structures as at Huitzilapa (Ramos and López, this volume). Another looted tomb at Ixtépete was near a more modest surface structure (Fernández and Deraga 1986).

Shaft tombs therefore occur in various locations relative to settlement. They can occur grouped into cemeteries associated with small villages; Estolanos and perhaps Tabachines fall into this category. Some can occur associated with individual structures, as at Ixtépete. Presumably the tombs from Ciudad Vieja and Valle de Guadalupe were once associated with small dispersed structures, but all evidence of the latter has disappeared. The tombs found at Bugambilias and Resumidero are interesting for different reasons, since their presence near public architecture of the Teuchitlan Tradition may indicate that the deceased had a political role. Hence, settlement contexts for the Atemajac valley tombs appear to be quite comparable with those from the adjacent Tequila valleys (Weigand, this volume).

The end of the Tabachines phase is still a matter of some debate. The succeeding El Grillo phase is marked by a change in burial pattern to single interment box tombs with dramatically different pottery and design complexes, as well as the replacement of the Teuchitlan Tradition circular architecture by rectangular platforms or U-shaped public buildings, some with *talud-tablero* facades (cf. Galván n.d.; Aronson 1993; Beekman 1996b). Although we disagree as to the timing of this transition (Galván argues A.D. 300, while Beekman pushes for A.D. 550) and its source (Galván says Teotihuacan, and Beekman equally vociferously argues for the Bajío of Guanajuato), we do agree that it was a rapid and dramatic change involving the influx of new populations.

Conclusions

The salvage excavations described here were a tremendous opportunity to collect data on a large number of shaft tombs. Up to that point, shaft tombs were typically recorded long after looters had already located and pillaged them, and confidence in the data recovered was correspondingly weak. The majority of the tombs recovered in the Atemajac valley were initially located due to construction, which did damage some of the cultural material, but this hardly nullifies the significance of the material. This is one of the methodological lessons of the Tabachines excavations, along with lessons regarding salvage archaeology in general; projects initiated for salvage purposes can and should be analyzed and published to the limits allowed by the recovered data. The Atemajac valley project also made use of the experience gained through the salvage work, and found two additional tombs using more standard archaeological methods.

It is in the arena of cultural history, however, that the Atemajac valley shaft tomb excavations make their greatest contribution. Although some radiocarbon dates were obtained previously for shaft tombs in Nayarit and Jalisco, data of this sort are not very useful unless tied to defined complexes of material culture. In this, the Atemajac valley project was pivotal for modern shaft tomb research. The definition of the Tabachines phase through typological analysis of ceramics, lithics, and other materials is baseline archaeological work that can be built upon and modified by future research. The Tabachines study also provided extensive information on a

population of tombs, so that a proper understanding of the range of variation could be had, and the position of any particular tomb can be better contextualized within the society.

In the area of broader theory, the Atemajac valley study interpreted the shaft tombs as the Jalisco variant of the wider Mesoamerican pattern of Late Formative/ Classic period ranked societies. Galván's original conclusions were more strongly worded than this, interpreting the Tabachines tombs as reflective of a society following a Tributary or Asiatic Mode of Production (Galván 1991: 297-303). Considering the data that have come to light over the past 25 years regarding West Mexican society (Weigand 1985), we can regard the Atemajac valley project as one of the earliest steps towards the recognition that complex societies were developing in western Mexico very much in step with the rest of Mesoamerica.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1 - Depiction of the range of shaft tomb forms found within the Atemajac valley. Modified from Galván 1991: 224, Figure 1.

Figure 2 - Two examples of burial chambers from Tabachines. To the left is Tomb 6, an example of a high status tomb; to the right is Tomb 9, an example of a low status tomb. Modified from Galván 1991: Figures 72 and 89.

Figure 3 - Map of Tabachines phase settlement within the Atemajac valley, with special reference to sites mentioned in the text.