

**A Classic Period Political Boundary in the
Sierra La Primavera Region, Jalisco, Mexico**

by

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Abstract- During the Mesoamerican Classic Period, the Sierra La Primavera in west-central Jalisco is hypothesized to have been a cultural and/or political boundary between the Teuchitlan Tradition of west Mexico and polity(s) closely allied with central Mexican groups, especially Teotihuacan. Ongoing research, drawing on settlement and artifact distributions, now allows us to make preliminary conclusions about the reality of the boundary, its nature, and the structural complexity of the polities on either side of it.

Introduction

The Teuchitlan Tradition of Late Formative and Classic Period western Mexico was centered in the highland lake basins of central Jalisco and is defined by elaborate, circular ceremonial architecture (Weigand 1985, 1992a, 1992b. See Weigand n.d.a. for an in-depth discussion of the architecture and its function). It appears to be the outgrowth of the better-known "shaft tomb cultures", which were distributed across much the same region (Weigand 1985). An arc of continuous settlement with several precincts of civic/ceremonial architecture, arranged around the Cienaga La Vega and the adjoining chinampa fields, composed the Teuchitlan valley core of the system during the Middle/Late Classic (Weigand 1992b, 1993). Peripheral circles found elsewhere in west Mexico will not be discussed in this paper.

Whether the Teuchitlan Tradition or its core was politically unified during its cultural apogee in the Teuchitlan I phase (A.D. 400-700) (Weigand 1985:73,75) is an open question at present and one which will be addressed in this paper. Weigand suggests that the Tradition had coalesced into one or more states on the basis of settlement hierarchy, intensive planned agricultural systems, and the strategic location of those circles outside the core near areas of rare resource procurement (1985, 1992b). Fernandez and Deraga (1992) find the claims for statehood to be unjustified and refer to the Teuchitlan polities as "senorios", or chiefdoms. Others have suggested the Tradition to have been dominated by Teotihuacan during the Classic period (Kelley and Abbott Kelley 1987:149; Publ 1990), yet all of these works refer almost exclusively to the earliest publications of the 1970's (Weigand 1974, 1975, 1977) and must be regarded as outdated.

Boundaries as a Focus of Study

Last year at these meetings, Stephen Houston and I (Beekman and Houston 1993) suggested that political boundaries can be a productive area to study political complexity. We compared the known ethnohistoric boundary between the Tarascan and Aztec empires of the Late Postclassic with those attested by epigraphy among the Classic period lowland Maya. Whereas the former was marked by a heavy investment in border fortifications and the placement of sites in strategic locations, the latter are rarely visible archaeologically and often do not even show a break in settlement distribution. Frequent hostilities have been documented in each of these examples, so something other than a simple concern for defense was affecting the form of these

boundaries. We suggested that political structure was the other factor involved and presented a number of cross-cultural examples of how more complex, and particularly more centralized and integrated polities have more defined boundaries. The Classic Maya are once again a case in point, in which the only defined boundaries are those of the most extensive centers, as seen in Tikal's earthworks or the boundary stelae of Copan.

Among the more clearly defined boundaries noted archaeologically are the empty buffer zones identified by Hirth in Morelos (1980), or between Cuicuilco and Teotihuacan noted during the Basin of Mexico survey (Sanders, Parsons and Santley 1978). More heavily fortified boundaries have been studied by Redmond (1983) in the Cuicatlan Canada, and by Gorenstein (1985) in the Acambaro region.

The Sierra La Primavera Region and the Background

The Sierra La Primavera region of west-central Jalisco has been postulated to have marked a political boundary of the Teuchitlan Tradition on the basis of sharp architectural differences to the west and east during the Middle/Late Classic period (Weigand 1992a). Yet these architectural differences are only part of a broader divergence in culture-historical trajectories.

To the west lies the Teuchitlan valley, the core of the Teuchitlan Tradition, where by far the largest number and most complex examples of the architecture are found (Weigand 1985). The Teuchitlan I phase marks the rapid evolution of the Tradition, in which the process of nucleation of population into the central portion of the Teuchitlan valley reached its greatest extent, and increasingly monumental architecture replaced the emphasis on the subterranean shaft tombs. The following Teuchitlan II phase, or Epiclassic, marks the period of the Tradition's decline and eventual disappearance in the face of changes in the material culture in the valley (Weigand 1990).

In the Atemajac valley to the east (where Guadalajara is now located), the Middle/Late Classic period is characterized by a shift away from the small centers of the Late Formative/Early Classic "shaft tomb culture" to a very different pattern. During the El Grillo phase, the *talud-tablero* architectural facade was used on rectangular monumental architecture at the sites of El Ixtepete (Corona Nunez 1960; Galvan 1975; Castro-Leal and Ochoa 1978), Coyula (Weigand

n.d.b.), and El Grillo (Javier Galvan, Personal Communication 1993). There are drastic changes in burial patterns and mortuary ceramics, many of which Javier Galvan connects with central Mexico (Galvan 1976, n.d.b.; Schondube and Galvan 1978; Aronson 1993), and others that Peter Jimenez links with the intervening Bajio and Los Altos regions (Jimenez Betts 1992). Meredith Aronson's recent analysis (1993) of the changes in the mortuary ceramics between the Early and Middle Classic has supported Galvan's interpretation of a complete break in the construction methods and mortuary use of these materials.

The two valleys are separated by the Sierra La Primavera, a range of hills up to 2270 meters above sea level and running north-south, currently covered in pine and oak forest. In relative elevation, however, the sierra does not exceed 700 meters relative to the valley floors. While it is possible to hike across the range in a single day, the most direct route is via the 5km long La Venta corridor, where the present Mexico Highway 15 runs from Guadalajara towards the coast.

Development and Collapse of the La Primavera Boundary

My research in the La Venta corridor in 1993 and 1994 has consisted of surface survey and ongoing test excavations (Beekman n.d.a.), and the following discussion integrates these data with what is already known for the two valleys to east and west.

Prior to the Classic period, the Teuchitlan valley was the shaft tomb core region, as defined by depth of the shaft and complexity of the chambers, whereas those known from the Atemajac valley were of a simpler form, and there is only minor occupation of the intervening La Venta corridor during this time. In the following Ahualulco/Tabachines Tardio phase, the circular architecture previously restricted to the Teuchitlan valley is now found in two locations to the east, one located by this project at the eastern end of the La Venta corridor, and another situated at the entrance to a more difficult pass through the Sierra La Primavera (Galvan n.d.a.). Settlement increases within the La Venta corridor, and includes the site of Estolanos, located on a mesa isolated from its neighbors by deep ravines and a wall-and-ditch system that blocks the only other access. Although occupation there continues into the first part of the following Teuchitlan I phase and clearly demonstrates the importance of warfare and the concern for defense during this

period, its isolation suggests that it played little strategic role in the formation or maintenance of the boundary.

The Middle/Late Classic marks the period of the most complex developments in the region, as represented in the parallel Teuchitlan I and El Grillo phases, which I have already discussed. The two circles already described for the Atemajac valley at El Resumidero and Bugambilias Abajo (Galvan n.d.a.) are abandoned in what appears to be a retraction back towards the corridor. This may be in response to the new, intrusive El Grillo phase, or it may be part of the ongoing nucleation of population into the Teuchitlan valley, although I lean towards the former.

In the La Venta corridor itself, the character of settlement has changed. The population increases substantially from the Early Classic, and while some of it is located on the open floor of the pass, the largest sites and those with distinctive preserved architecture are now in defensive locations. The southern edge of the pass is composed of several parallel mesas, including the site Estolanos already mentioned, but there is no position in this area that would allow observation of, or a rapid reaction to, movement in the pass. However, in the center of the corridor, the Mesa El Zacate, a flat-topped, defensible mesa, is now occupied and at some point during this phase or the next a wall is constructed across the spur allowing easiest access into the site. We have also found three other spurs cut by small ditches, although it is still uncertain if these are even ancient features and studies are ongoing.

Marking the northern edge of the pass is Cerro Tepopote, clearly a commanding position, and it is here that we have found the best evidence for a monitored or controlled boundary. 90-150 meters up on the western edge of the pass is the Southwestern Tepopote Complex, the second largest site we have located to date. It consists of nearly 100 mounds, terraces and walkways scattered across two separate ridges, and includes two circles of the Teuchitlan Tradition and a possible third badly damaged by looting. Access from below is steep and partially blocked by a stone escarpment, and a wall joining up with natural ravines defends the site against any attacks from the interior. This same wall shows signs that it may have been built in a piecemeal fashion, however, suggesting some lack of planning during its initial stages.

The site itself has a view not only of the western half of the La Venta corridor, but also deep into the Teuchitlan valley, including approximately one third of the Teuchitlan core settlement area. Also clearly visible from this site is a second corridor at the southeastern edge of

the Teuchitlan valley. There are several clusters of small semi-circles of stone directly above the site that I suggest may have been lookout positions and/or windbreaks for smoke signaling back towards the core.

At the eastern edge of this mountain, 150 meters above the pass, is Penol de Tepopote, the largest site located to date by our survey and one with an impressive view deep into both the Atemajac and Teuchitlan valleys. It consists of over 120 structures packed within 8 hectares, surrounded by a combination of sheer rock faces and stone walls. Ceramics indicate a substantial occupation of the site in the Middle/Late Classic, but with a considerable increase in the Epiclassic. This is also suggested by the architecture, in that a probable circle of the Teuchitlan Tradition and other apparently early structures have suffered an overlay of distinct Epiclassic architecture. For these reasons, the defensive walls cannot be definitely placed in the period of the boundary, but the naturally difficult access to the site argues for a defensive orientation from its foundation.

The La Venta corridor was in any case a closely observed trade or communication route during the Teuchitlan I/El Grillo phase. Furthermore, the western and northwestern passes into the Teuchitlan valley were also monitored during the same period by the fortified sites of Cerro Pipiole and Llano Grande, respectively. Each of these fortified sites was left isolated by the population nucleation into the core, and they are clearly small, special purpose sites that are unlikely to have been part of their own independent polities, although Cerro Pipiole definitely has an earlier component. I argue, on the basis of the presence of the fortifications, the circles of the Teuchitlan Tradition, and the strategic placement of the sites with views of the other passes and the Teuchitlan core, that these sites formed an integrated defensive system designed to monitor traffic entering (or leaving) the Teuchitlan valley. The La Venta corridor would thus be a parallel situation to that which Redmond has argued for the Cuicatlan Canada and Monte Alban in the Late Formative (Redmond 1983). Since, as mentioned, some proportion of the population is still located on the open floor of the pass, the fortified sites may have been occupied only in times of attack, although I find this to be very unlikely based upon their *strategic* positions and the fact that they are considerably larger than the populations below would need for a refuge. Another possibility is that despite the defensive character of the La Venta Corridor, actual conflict was

infrequent enough to allow settlement in indefensible positions. My impression is that this may be a rather common phenomenon along fortified boundaries elsewhere.

Cerro Pipiole, Llano Grande, and the Southwestern Tepopote Complex are all definitely abandoned with the beginning of the Teuchitlan II phase and by its end we see the complete cessation of activities at the rest of the Teuchitlan Tradition ceremonial circles (Weigand 1990). The new ceremonial architecture in the Teuchitlan valley is a U-shaped form with altar whose antecedents in the site of El Grillo suggest that the boundary with the Atemajac valley may have collapsed at this point, and a small example of this architecture is found in the corridor. The simultaneous appearance in both valleys and the corridor of "corral" shaped residential architecture and a new ceramic complex, both with strong similarities to materials to the north, argue for a very complex situation in the Epiclassic.

While Mesa El Zacate, in the center, and Penol de Tepopote, at the eastern edge of the corridor, are still occupied during the Epiclassic, they pick up the new ceramic complex and at least one of them adopted the new form of residential architecture. What this means in terms of a possible shift in political or cultural affiliation is very uncertain, especially during a period of such drastic change as Teuchitlan II. However, the distribution of these remaining sites indicates some kind of break, such that communication from the La Venta corridor to other passes giving access to the Teuchitlan valley was no longer of paramount concern. Mesa El Zacate and Penol de Tepopote may not have been part of a system any longer, if it indeed still existed.

Summary and Conclusions

The presently available data argue for not only a boundary in the La Venta corridor closely controlled by the Teuchitlan core, but for a wider defensive system for the entire Teuchitlan valley during the Middle/Late Classic period, of which the La Venta material is only one component. I submit that this defensive system strongly argues that the Teuchitlan valley was unified in some way during this period, almost certainly politically.

One possible difficulty with this is that all of the sites discussed, while far more complex than anything else in their local area, are very small in relation to the "habitation zones" in the core, and thus have low ranking positions in the overall Teuchitlan valley settlement hierarchy.

Whether this reflects their specialized nature or indicates a lack of important administrative functions is uncertain.

The nature of the interaction with the Atemajac valley is still to be determined. The La Venta corridor argues for a hostile boundary actively maintained from the west, but without matching fortifications for the eastern valley. This could argue for a politically fragmented landscape in the east, rather than an actual Teotihuacan presence. Ceramic decoration, but not its use, shows many similarities between the valleys, suggesting substantial interaction between different societies (Aronson 1993).

In conclusion, while the study of the La Venta corridor has provided important support for the centralization of the Teuchitlan Tradition, the "Teotihuacan presence" in the valley of Atemajac does not appear to have been a unified political one.

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