

**The Chronological Context of the  
Central Jalisco Shaft Tombs**

by

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for the session

Research in Recently Discovered  
Shaft Tombs from West Mexico

61st Annual Meeting of the  
Society for American Archaeology  
April 11th, 1996

Abstract: The chronological placement of the so-called Shaft Tomb Tradition of western Mexico has been only partially defined, and a detailed re-evaluation of the ceramic and chronometric data has not been completed since the mid 1960s. I approach the problem through the non-figural ceramics collected in the Sierra La Primavera region, and a re-examination of tomb lots from the site of Tabachines, both near Guadalajara and the core of the societies utilizing the shaft tombs. A minimum of three phases can be identified among these materials, and preliminary correlations with other regions and dates are presented.

## **Introduction**

The 1990s is an exciting period to work in western Mexico, with the increasing database and emphasis upon theoretical issues. Yet we are still very dependent upon the often crude, three phase sequences developed since the 1930s by Kelly (1945, 1949), Lister (1949), and others, which have often been left enshrined as complete without further attempts at refinement by later researchers. Such gross breakdowns of ceramic evolution are not an indication that there was no change, but rather expose the preliminary nature of most chronological research that has been done in west Mexico. Unfortunately, the enormous periods of apparent stasis created by these sequences have often been taken as indicators of a lack of social change as well. This is particularly true in relation to the so-called "Shaft Tomb Complex".

In this paper, I would like to discuss some recent research into the chronology of this phenomenon, specifically its manifestation in north-central Jalisco, though this burial complex is, of course, distributed across a much wider area. A considerable amount of effort has already been expended on integrating shaft tombs into Weigand's Teuchitlán Tradition architectural sequence (e.g. Weigand 1985), and a certain number of C14 dates do exist, largely thanks to Jorge and Lorenza (Ramos de la Vega and López Mestas C. 1996). However, I will be focusing on changes in the ceramic sequence. I will also be concentrating on the shaft tombs from the Late Formative and Classic period, and not the El Opeño style tombs known from this area beginning in the Early to Middle Formative (Weigand 1985), for which there are virtually no ceramic data.

## **Central Jalisco**

Research into the chronology of the shaft tombs in central Jalisco, the location of the largest number and most elaborate examples, has been primarily within the Tequila and Atemajac valley systems (e.g. Weigand 1979, 1985; Schöndube and Galván 1978; Galván 1991). The phases defined by Phil Weigand in the valleys ringing the Volcán de Tequila are distinguished by architectural changes. In this sequence, El Opeño style tombs develop into the straight shaft and chamber tombs by at least the Late Formative El Arenal phase. The following Aqualulco phase already marks the decline of the labor investment in the tombs and their accompanying offerings.

This mortuary pattern continues to decline in complexity until sometime during the Middle to Late Classic Teuchitlán I phase, when these tombs are replaced by the very different box tombs.

Although not the defining feature of these architectural phases, certain ceramic types have been defined as flags by Weigand for use in areas with less distinctive architecture (Beekman 1996; Weigand 1992). Ahualulco Red on Cream begins with the El Arenal phase and continues through at least the Ahualulco phase (200 B.C.-A.D.400/500). Oconahua Red on White is a fine, thin ceramic with occasionally fine-lined designs, and spans the latter part of El Arenal and into the Ahualulco phase (A.D.1-300+). Oconahua Red on White is essentially the same as Ameca Grey, a type described by both Isabel Kelly (1948) and Stanley Long (1966) during their own studies in this region. Later, probably developing out of Oconahua, comes Teuchitlán Red on Cream, which is thicker, with a more matte finish, different paste characteristics distinguished by petrographic analysis, and with slight iconographic details that to my eye suggest the designs that occur with much greater prominence beginning in the Epiclassic. The Teuchitlán type begins sometime during the Ahualulco phase and ends during Teuchitlán I or II, depending on where you are and whether you talk to Phil or I. Each of these types is of course only one among many that share the same paste, firing pattern, and surface finish. There are a variety of plain, reduce-fired, red-slipped, or other types in each of these wares.

It is clear that the materials from the Tequila region during the El Arenal/ Ahualulco/ Teuchitlán I architectural phases are generally contemporaneous with those of the Tabachines phase in the adjacent Atemajac valley. Galván (1991) defined the Tabachines phase after INAH's excavations of two dozen shaft tombs in the site of the same name, and he divided it into Early and Late subphases. Distributed between these subphases were different Red on Cream types corresponding reasonably well to the Tequila valley types. Colorines Lineas Multiples and Rojo/Crema Ollas correspond very well to Ahualulco Red/Cream. Tabachines Rojo/Crema is a clear parallel to Oconahua Red/White. The Atemajac valley type Arroyo Seco Rojo Amplio appears to correspond roughly to Teuchitlán Red on Cream, although with much simpler red decoration more akin to a slip. Certain olla and deep bowl forms also appear distinct, but are actually better represented among Teuchitlán Red/Cream's plain counterparts in the same ware.

I felt that the Tabachines shaft tomb lots could be re-examined and even seriated to provide more information. To provide a framework, I took those tombs for which Galván had obtained obsidian dates, and ordered them by the results. After arranging the listing of ceramic types and lithic artifacts to correspond to this sequence, I then proceeded to insert the tomb lots for which there were no chronological data. The result was a very clear three part division, which I call Early, Middle, and Late Tabachines (Table 1). Tabachines Rojo/Crema was limited to the first two phases, Arroyo Seco Rojo Amplio to the last two, and Colorines R/C types were found throughout the sequence, but with each decorative type pertaining to different phases. Middle Tabachines might be interpreted as transitional, but some specific types were limited to that subphase, and many objects associated with the heyday of the shaft tombs drop out after Early Tabachines, such as the hollow figurines and obsidian jewelry.

With this new three phase breakdown of Tabachines, the distribution of the Atemajac valley parallels to Weigand's Red on Creams corresponds more closely to his placement of these critical types. Ahualulco Red on Cream, found in the El Arenal, Ahualulco and Teuchitlán I phases, corresponds to two types within the Colorines group that extend across all three Tabachines subphases (Beekman 1996: 518-537; Galván 1991: 48-66). Oconahua Red on White, from the late El Arenal through Ahualulco phases, is essentially identical to Tabachines Rojo/Crema, found in Early and Middle Tabachines (Beekman 1996: 455-481; Galván 1991: 68-70). Finally, Teuchitlán Red/Cream, which occurs in the Ahualulco and Teuchitlán I phases, corresponds somewhat more roughly to Arroyo Seco Rojo Amplio, from the Middle and Late Tabachines subphases (Beekman 1996: 497-509; Galván 1991: 73-75).

There are culture-historical parallels between the two valley sequences that may also aid in integrating the two chronologies. There is a decline in the effort put into building the shaft tombs during the Middle and Late Tabachines subphases (Galván 1991: 256,299), a trend also noted in the Tequila valleys during the Ahualulco and Teuchitlán I phases (Weigand 1979,1985).

These points all argue for Early Tabachines to correspond to the latter half of the El Arenal architectural phase. The Middle Tabachines phase appears less well defined, but I would equate it with the Ahualulco phase. The Late Tabachines subphase would therefore correspond to

the Teuchitlán I phase up until the coming of very different ceramics around A.D. 550 as part of the El Grillo complex.

### **Absolute Chronology**

Putting absolute dates to the correlated sequences is more of a challenge. Galván reports a series of obsidian hydration dates for the Tabachines phase, and one from the following El Grillo phase in the Atemajac valley (1991: 256; Schöndube and Galván 1978: 163-164). They define the three part breakdown quite well, but the dates were calculated in the 1970s, prior to any of the refinements considered critical today, such as thermal sensors, etc. Considering the complexities and controversies involved in hydration dating today (e.g. Webster and Freter 1990; Braswell 1992; Webster, et al. 1993), the dates as reported cannot be taken at face value. Hence, I remain skeptical of the absolute dates that have been assigned to the phases, though I found the hydration readings useful for the relative ordering of the tombs.

Recent chronological data has come from the salvage excavations at Huitzilapa, in the Magdalena valley, for the early part of the sequence. Jorge Ramos and Lorenza López have already discussed this tomb (1996), and I would only like to add a comment regarding the associated ceramics. Although the ceramic assemblage from the tomb has not been described in detail as yet, specific elements that are chronologically useful, and which you may have noticed in their slides, include El Arenal style hollow figurines, Tabachines Black, Oconahua Red on White, and a much greater number of the more finely made Ahualulco Red on Creams. In terms of the modified ceramic chronology, these materials would place the tomb fairly clearly in the Early Tabachines phase. Their excellent collection of calibrated C14 dates, clustering in the 1st century A.D., establishes a minimum starting date for Early Tabachines, which I would currently begin around 1 A.D.

The Middle Tabachines phase, much like the Ahualulco phase, is a bridge between the more clearly defined Late Formative and Middle Classic societies in the region, and is frequently difficult to isolate on its own (Weigand 1974; 1985:70-72). The transition from the Early to Middle Tabachines ceramic phases, occurring about the same time as the El Arenal to Ahualulco architectural transition, is particularly difficult to date. The start of the phase should be located

after the Huitzilapa radiocarbon dates (approx. A.D. 100), yet prior to the Ahualulco phase structure at the same site, with its two calibrated C14 dates in the 3rd century. I currently estimate the transition at 200 A.D. Long's (1966) study of the San Sebastián shaft tomb in the 1960s provides further clues.

The San Sebastián tomb was believed to have been re-used, and had chronological markers from all three of Long's now discarded phases. The uncalibrated radiocarbon dates appeared to pertain to early and later periods and, on the basis of an exhaustive seriation of stylistic attributes (Long 1966: 21-36), Long felt that the tomb was composed of earlier and later interments with the Oconahua Red/White vessels as part of the later group (Long 1966: 93).

Whether one accepts that particular argument or not, after recalibration using the CALIB 3.0 program (and corrections for upwelling in the case of the shell samples) (Stuiver and Becker 1993; Stuiver and Braziunas 1993), there is no clear separation in the dates. Intercepts and one sigma standard deviations range primarily from A.D. 250-400 and, I argue, mark the later occurrence of Oconahua Red on White. This is slightly later than Weigand's estimate for the same type, and would place the Middle to Late Tabachines interface at around A.D. 400/450. I have spilt a great deal of ink in other papers arguing for the end of the Late Tabachines phase at around A.D. 550 (Beekman in press), making this subphase relatively short.

## **Conclusions**

I have presented the primary evidence, at present, for a three part breakdown of the Tabachines "shaft tomb" phase, and for the absolute dates of its components, by focusing on certain well-defined decorative wares. I have proposed an Early Tabachines phase from A.D. 1-200, a Middle Tabachines from A.D. 200-400/450, and Late Tabachines from A.D. 400/450-550. While this chronology seems to work for the Atemajac valley, and it would appear to serve in the Teuchitlán core area as well, there will undoubtedly be differences requiring a great deal of research to work out. Much better descriptions of the rest of the ceramic assemblages for these periods is critical.

Unfortunately, these ceramic phases must stand on their own for now. Most of the published ceramic sequences that exist for western Mexico are more concerned with later periods,

while early materials are often ill-defined. As a result, the tripartite division of the Red on Creams in central Jalisco, and their chronological ordering, is difficult to corroborate through comparative research, as all three types would typically be encompassed within a single "shaft tomb phase" in older publications. Most of the very general descriptions of red on creams elsewhere in west Mexico are simply too vague to correlate with these types. Despite the frequent overemphasis in western Mexico upon ceramic types for the delineation of synchronic ceramic "provinces", and even for sociological interpretation, ceramic descriptions have nonetheless been quite brief and insufficient for any detailed research. As a good chronological sequence is the backbone of any culture-historical reconstruction, and complex theoretical issues are impossible to address without it, we need to devote much more time and effort to our annoying tepalcates.

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Table 1- Seriation of offerings in the Tabachines shaft tombs. Distribution of offerings by tomb reconstructed from Galván 1991.

Table 2- Radiocarbon dates from the San Sebastián shaft tomb, recalibrated and modified for upwelling (Stuiver and Pearson 1993; Stuiver and Braziunas 1993).

Figure 1- Chronological chart for central Jalisco. Architectural abbreviations: R= Round, G= *Guachimontón* (# signifies typical number of satellite structures on the circle), U= U-shaped structure/ Enclosed patio, C= Corral, P= Large Platform, T= *Tecpán*. Architecture based on Weigand (1992).