

THE INHABITATION OF RÍO VIEJO'S ACROPOLIS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the life history of the acropolis at Río Viejo, Oaxaca, Mexico, from the perspective of what John Barrett (1999) calls the "archaeology of inhabitation." Río Viejo's acropolis went through a complex history of construction, use, modification, abandonment, and reuse beginning in the Terminal Formative and continuing until at least the Postclassic. I argue that changes in the use and meaning of the acropolis embodied in important ways political changes of the Río Viejo polity. In particular, during the Terminal Formative and again in the Late Classic the acropolis went through periods of construction and use that expressed sacred authority and political power. During the Early Classic and Early Postclassic Periods, however, the acropolis evinced a very different dialectic between spatial structure and agency, reflecting the collapse of political institutions and rulership and the emergence of alternative or foreign ideologies.

This chapter examines the life history of the acropolis at Río Viejo on the Pacific Coast of Oaxaca, Mexico. The acropolis was a monumental architectural complex that was first constructed during the late Terminal Formative Period (A.D. 100–250) as the ceremonial precinct of the Río Viejo state. I trace the subsequent use, modification, abandonment and reuse of the acropolis until the decline of the Río Viejo polity during the Early Postclassic Period (A.D. 800–1100). I argue that, like other monumental spaces in Mesoamerica, the acropolis went through a complex history that embodied in important ways political transformations of the Río Viejo polity including incorporation, domination, resistance, negotiation, and perhaps conquest. In particular, during the Terminal

Formative and again in the Late Classic the acropolis went through periods of construction and use that expressed sacred authority and political power. During the Early Classic and Early Postclassic Periods, however, the acropolis evinced a very different dialectic between spatial structure and agency, reflecting the collapse of political institutions and rulership and the emergence of alternative or foreign ideologies. In each period, however, the symbolism of the acropolis was informed in important ways by the broader context of its earlier uses and the meanings embodied therein. Before examining the archaeology of Río Viejo, I will briefly discuss the theoretical perspective through which I examine the inhabitation of the acropolis.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Following recent developments in landscape archaeology (Alcock 2002; Ashmore 2002; Ashmore and Knapp 1999; Bradley 1998; Koontz et al. 2001), I argue that the way in which people organize space, including how they conceptualize and alter landscapes, are important aspects of structure that both shape and are shaped by social action. In complex societies, constructed landscapes, especially monumental spaces, are important in reinforcing power within the established social order (Ashmore 1991; Couture 2002; Joyce 2000; Koontz et al. 2001; Love 1999; Van Dyke 2003; Wheatley 1971). Monumental spaces embody politico-religious beliefs that legitimate authority. The physical arrangement and symbolism of buildings, plazas, courtyards, roads and other architectural

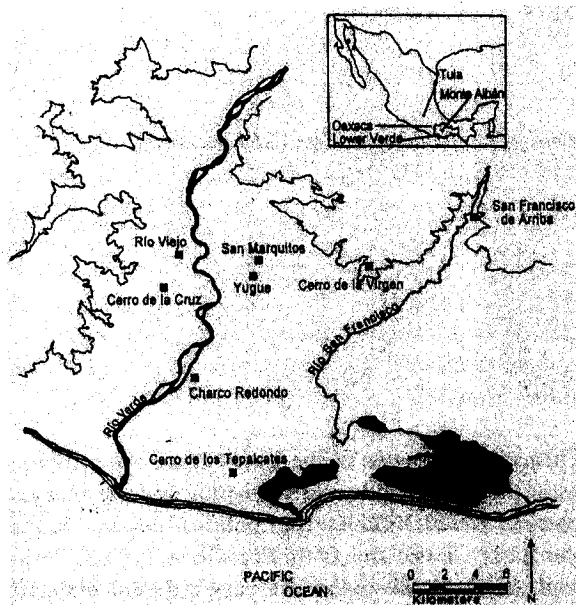


Figure 1. The lower Río Verde Valley, Oaxaca.

features channel the movement and experiences of actors.

In Mesoamerica, archaeological research has shown that the architectural arrangement of ceremonial precincts at cities like Monte Albán, Teotihuacan, Copán, and Tikal materialized a shared view of the cosmos, although one that was shaped by local political history (Ashmore 1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; Joyce 2000, 2004; Sugiyama 1993). Mesoamerican ceremonial precincts, like those in many ancient cities, served as *axes mundi* where cosmic planes like earth, sky, and underworld intersected. Pyramids, in particular, were viewed as sacred mountains (Schele and Freidel 1990:71–72). These centres were also often viewed as places of cosmic creation (Schele and Guernsey Kappelman 2001; Sugiyama 1993:120–121).

A common pattern among Mesoamerican ceremonial centres was to construct a symbolic vision of the cosmos in the layout and symbolism of buildings, plazas, courtyards, and art. While patterns varied through time and among peoples of different regions (Ashmore 2003; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; Grove 1999; Joyce 2004), this sacred geography usually involved rotating the cosmos onto the surface of the site's ceremonial centre such that north represented the celestial realm and south the earth or underworld (Ashmore 1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002;

Joyce 2000, 2004; Sugiyama 1993). In addition, at least in the Maya lowlands and especially during the Late Preclassic (300 B.C.–A.D. 300), the east-west axis of ceremonial centres represented the rising and setting points of the sun. For example, at Tikal in the Peten lowlands of Guatemala, the Great Plaza is bounded to the south by Structure 5D-120 with its nine doorways symbolizing the underworld and to the north by the North Acropolis with its royal tombs and stelae depicting rulers, while the east-west axis is defined by Temples I and II (Ashmore 1991:200–203, 2003; Coggins 1980). Furthermore, at Tikal this architectural template seems to be repeated at varying spatial scales from Twin Pyramid Complexes up to the layout of the entire site core. At Monte Albán in the Oaxaca Valley the Main Plaza complex includes representations of the celestial realm on the North Platform and images of sacrifice, warfare, and the underworld to the south (Joyce 2000; Masson and Orr 1998). While significant architectural changes occurred in the Main Plaza at Monte Albán, this basic pattern of cosmic symbolism persisted from the time of the site's founding at 500 B.C. until about A.D. 500 when new patterns emerged (Joyce 2004).

This sacred geography cosmically sanctified authority by positioning nobles as powerful intermediaries between commoners and the divine forces that created and maintained the cosmos. The iconography of carved stones and painted murals and pottery often depict nobles performing important rituals in ceremonial precincts. Nobility was often associated with the northern end of ceremonial precincts through the placement of their residences, their tombs, or their depictions in monumental art, which symbolically associated them with the celestial realm (Ashmore 1991:200–203; Joyce 2000, 2004).

The power of monumental spaces, however, does not derive just from the ideas that they embody, but is produced and experienced through the practices that take place within these places (Ashmore and Knapp 1999; Bradley 1998). Rituals in temples and public plazas involving sacrifice, shamanism, ancestor veneration, processions, divination, and dance communicated aspects of the dominant ideologies of Mesoamerican states. Many of the ceremonies performed by nobles reenacted the cosmic creation and were means of petitioning supernaturals for fertility and prosperity on behalf of their people (Ashmore 2003; Freidel et al. 1993; Joyce 2000). In Prehispanic Mesoamerican written

texts, including creation myths and dynastic histories, nobles were seen as fundamentally different from common people, with distinct origins and with special powers to contact the supernatural realm (Freidel et al. 1993; Schele and Freidel 1990). Religious beliefs and practices were, therefore, in part ideological, creating a social contract where nobles performed the most important rituals that petitioned supernaturals for fertility and prosperity, while commoners provided allegiance and tribute in return (Joyce 2000, 2004). By participating in emotionally charged ritual performances, often invoking the cosmic creation, people came to identify with and incorporate in their dispositions messages about their place in the social and cosmic order, including social constructions of class, gender, faction, and polity.

The ongoing use and alteration of monumental space transformed the meanings they embodied, although in ways that reflected the past, creating a life history of place (Ashmore 2002:1177–1179; Barrett 1999; Bradley 1998; Couture 2002:16–29; Knapp and Ashmore 1999). Recently, John Barrett (1999) has described the creation of these life histories of place as involving the inhabitation of landscapes. Transformations of inhabited landscapes, including constructed monuments, involve the reworking of established meanings and the politics of their control. For example, by manipulating space through the erection of physical or symbolic barriers, elites restrict interaction between members of different groups to times and places of their choosing so as to control both the content and presentation of social discourse (Hegmon et al. 2000; Hillier and Hanson 1984). In Mesoamerica, the creation of civic-ceremonial precincts and the sacred calendar were ways in which nobles controlled access to monumental spaces and ritual performances (Love 1999). For example, during the Classic Period, Monte Albán's Main Plaza was transformed from a largely public ceremonial space to an increasingly private elite residential area with a trend towards ritual performances involving a more restricted audience of nobles (Joyce 2004). The increasing exclusion of commoners from the Main Plaza may have alienated them from the rulers and ruling institutions of the Monte Albán state since commoners would have had a social memory of the Main Plaza as a more public and inclusive place as well as a symbol of communal identity.

Monumental spaces, however, were also sites of social negotiation and resistance to authority such

as when Native American forced labourers incorporated Prehispanic carved stones or architectural elements into Early Colonial buildings constructed under Spanish rule. The creation, use, and alteration of monumental space, therefore, embodied changes in power and domination in the complex politics of ancient Mesoamerica. Even after their primary period of construction and use, monuments continued to hold meanings that were informed by their earlier histories (also see Bender 1998; Bradley 1998; Sinopoli 2003) as exemplified by the Aztecs' performance of rituals at Teotihuacan, which they viewed as the place of the gods where time began (Hamann 2002).

INHABITING RÍO VIEJO'S ACROPOLIS

The inhabitation of Río Viejo's acropolis has been examined as part of a long-term interdisciplinary project in the lower Río Verde Valley, Oaxaca (Barber and Joyce 2004; Joyce 1991a, 1991b, 1999, 2003; Joyce et al. 1998, 2001; Workinger 2002). This research has included horizontal and/or block excavations at the sites of Río Viejo, Cerro de la Cruz, San Francisco de Arriba, Cerro de la Virgen and Yugüe as well as test excavations at 13 other sites (Figure 1). The entire region has been the focus of a non-systematic surface reconnaissance, while full-coverage surveys have systematically studied an area of 152 km². The research has focused on understanding the origins, development, and collapse of the Río Viejo polity.

The acropolis at Río Viejo, designated Mound 1, was a huge architectural complex consisting of a platform measuring approximately 350 m by 200 m along its base and rising at least 5 m above the floodplain (Figure 2). The platform supports two large-substructures, reaching heights of 15 m above the floodplain. The large substructure on the northwestern end of the acropolis we designated Mound 1-Structure 1 and the one on the eastern end of the platform was Mound 1-Structure 2. The acropolis also supported five smaller structures, a plaza, and a sunken patio. With an estimated volume of 395,000 m³, the Mound 1 acropolis is one of the largest structures in Prehispanic Oaxaca (Levine et al. 2004).

Excavations in Mound 1-Structure 2 during the 2000 field season yielded architectural data from the eastern end of the acropolis (Joyce 2003; Joyce et al.

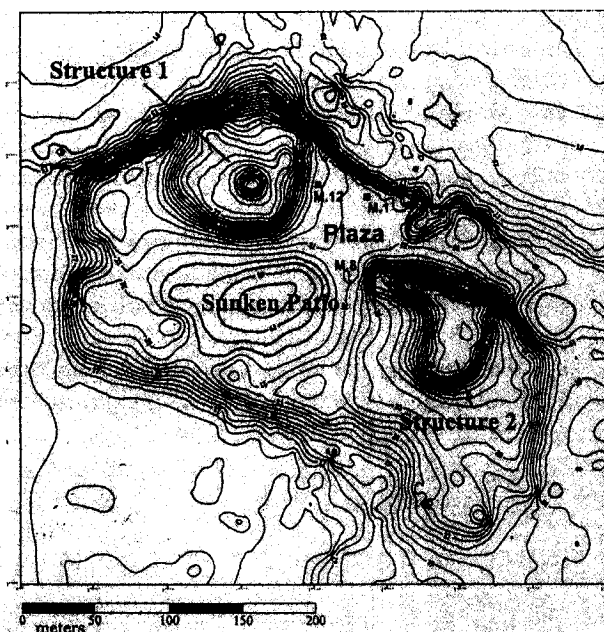


Figure 2. The acropolis at Río Viejo (■ = location of carved stone monuments).

2001; Levine et al. 2004). Mound 1-Structure 2 is an L-shaped monumental substructure that rises approximately 8 m above the surface of the acropolis plaza and 15 m above the surrounding floodplain. Excavations exposed an area of 242 m² on Structure 2 and penetrated in places to a depth of 3.2 m below the current surface of the mound. The data indicate that all but the upper 1.1 m of the structure were built during the late Terminal Formative and probably during the latter part of that phase. A small number of redeposited early Terminal Formative sherds in the structure's fill, however, suggest the possibility that there might be an earlier building phase beneath our excavations. While the acropolis was apparently abandoned at the beginning of the Early Classic (A.D. 250–500), construction and occupation resumed during the Late Classic (A.D. 500–800) and continued during the Early Postclassic (A.D. 800–1100).

THE TERMINAL FORMATIVE ACROPOLIS: EMBODYING INCORPORATION

Excavations in the acropolis show that it was probably constructed largely during the late Terminal Formative Chacahua phase from A.D. 100 to 250. Excavation and

survey data show that the Terminal Formative in the lower Río Verde Valley was a time of increasing social complexity with Río Viejo emerging as an urban centre and probably the capital of a state polity (Joyce 1999:137–138, 2003). By the late Terminal Formative Río Viejo covered 200 ha and was the first-order centre in a five-tiered settlement hierarchy. People from Río Viejo and several other communities in the lower Verde region began constructing monumental buildings during the early Terminal Formative Miniyua phase (150 B.C.–A.D. 100), while Late Formative Minizundo Phase (400–150 B.C.) monumental architecture has been excavated by Workinger (2002) at San Francisco de Arriba. The acropolis at Río Viejo was the largest building constructed in the region during the Formative and was the civic-ceremonial centre of the city.

The evidence indicates that during the late Terminal Formative, Structure 2 consisted of a large stepped platform reaching approximately 14 m above the floodplain that supported a public building. An unusual feature of the structure was that it was constructed of adobe blocks with almost no stone, despite the fact that granite was locally available and was used during the Formative Period for the construction of building foundations. Excavation stratigraphy and results of a preliminary micromorphological study provide data on construction methods (Levine et al. 2004). Excavations indicate that the platform consisted of at least two levels that were retained by walls made from fired earthen blocks and chunks. Platform fill consisted of unfired adobe blocks probably made by pouring a mud-slurry into a mold. After drying, the bricks were set into a silty, perhaps slightly calcareous mortar of coarser composition. On the summit of the platform, excavations revealed remnants of a poorly preserved adobe building. Only a few short sections of the base of the wall were preserved. The recovery of pieces of faced stucco that apparently covered portions of the building as well as one piece of painted adobe indicates that it was an architecturally elaborate building. The pieces of architectural stucco constitute the only examples of this material found thus far in the lower Verde region. The low density of artifacts and lack of domestic debris indicates that the structure was a public building.

The poor preservation of the Terminal Formative building limits inferences about architectural form

and associated activities. In addition, our excavations on Mound 1 are limited to Structure 2 so we do not know the overall configuration of the acropolis at this time and are unable at present to develop a model of the ceremonial centre's sacred geography. Based on the available architectural data along with the regional archaeological record and comparative data from other Mesoamerican centres, it is possible, however, to suggest something of the sociopolitical significance of Structure 2. As in many parts of Mesoamerica, the Terminal Formative in the lower Verde region was a time of political centralization and the emergence of urbanism. In the lower Verde, Río Viejo increased from 20 ha in the Late Formative to 200 ha by the end of the Terminal Formative, while the regional settlement hierarchy increased from three to five levels (Joyce 2003).

At this time throughout much of Mesoamerica people were building monumental public buildings and plazas like those on the acropolis at Río Viejo that became symbols of emerging state polities (Joyce 2000; Laporte and Fialko 1995; Sharer 1994; Sugiyama 1993). Some of the more impressive examples include the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacan, the Main Plaza at Monte Albán, the El Tigre and Danta complexes at El Mirador, and the North Acropolis and Mundo Perdido Complex at Tikal. Archaeological, iconographic, and epigraphic research shows that the ceremonial precincts of these Terminal Formative cities were constructed according to the principles of sacred geography discussed above and therefore operated as *axes mundi*, creating a point of communication and mediation between the human world and the supernatural otherworld (Ashmore 1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; Joyce 2000; Sugiyama 1993). The dramatic public ceremonies organized and led by nobles in ceremonial precincts would have created powerful psychological forces that bound commoners to the rulers, the symbols, and the new social order centred at these emerging political centres. Public plazas built at major political centres of the Terminal Formative were far larger than those of previous periods and imply a scale of performance that would have engaged larger populations and people from broader territories.¹ These public ritual performances produced larger-scale corporate identities internalized in people's dispositions and externalized in social practices like contributing tribute, allegiance, and labour to the state. Monumental buildings like Río Viejo's

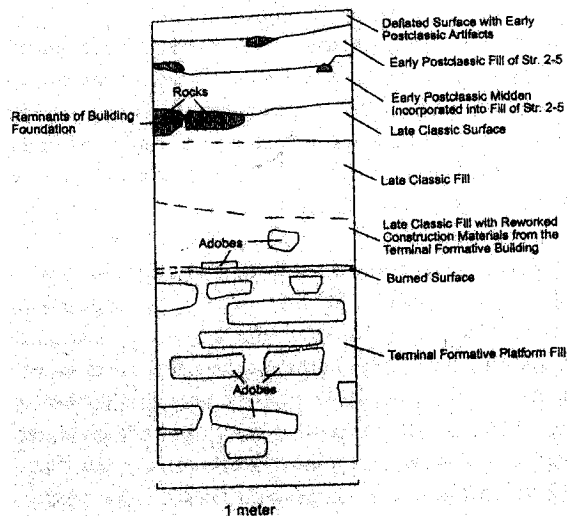


Figure 3. Representative excavation profile (Unit 6C75) showing the building stages of the acropolis at Río Viejo.

acropolis were also visible for great distances so that their power as sacred mountains and political centres would have been present in the everyday lived experiences of people throughout the region. Even the initial construction of monumental buildings would have engaged people in emerging corporate structures since it appears likely that labour was contributed voluntarily. Evidence suggests that warfare may have increased in scale at this time, which could also have acted to unite people behind rulers and ruling institutions (Clark et al. 1998; Freidel 1986:101–106; Joyce and Winter 1996; Webster 1977). While people were increasingly incorporated into larger-scale political formations, which in most cases can probably be described as states, there undoubtedly were different degrees of compliance and involvement with unifying rulers, institutions, and practices (Joyce et al. 2001). In some cases, commoners and nobles outside the centre may have actively resisted emerging political structures (Joyce 2000:85; Joyce 2004).

Given the poor condition of the Terminal Formative architecture at Río Viejo, I am primarily drawing on analogies with other monumental spaces in Mesoamerica to argue for the importance of the acropolis in the creation of larger-scale corporate identities. One available source of data for the sociopolitical significance of the acropolis, however, is its technique of construction.

Rather than simply using basket loads of earthen fill or rubble to raise the Structure 2 platform, the builders made thousands of fired earthen bricks and unfired adobes and secured them with a mud mortar (Figure 3). Other excavated Terminal Formative monumental buildings in the region were constructed of either basket loads of earthen fill (Gillespie 1987; Joyce 1991a:367–371; Workinger 2002:163–234) or rarely, rubble (Workinger 2002:171). The time and labour invested in the building of the acropolis represents active and uncoerced commoner involvement in the creation of the civic-ceremonial centre. The participation of commoners in the construction of the civic-ceremonial centre as well as the rituals carried out there, would have contributed to the creation of a new corporate identity centred on the symbols, institutions, and rulers at Río Viejo. Monumental buildings have also been excavated at second-order and third-order sites in the lower Verde region such as Charco Redondo, San Francisco de Arriba, and Yugüe (Barber and Joyce 2004; Gillespie 1987; Workinger 2002).

Political power during the Terminal Formative in the lower Verde may have reflected a corporate pattern as described by Blanton and his colleagues (1996). In polities with corporate forms of political organization, the exclusionary power of nobles is restricted by an ideology that limits self-aggrandizing impulses of leaders. In the lower Verde, the communal labour invested in the construction of monumental architecture and the relative lack of evidence of inequality expressed in mortuary ritual as well as the absence of monumental art are consistent with corporate forms of political organization, which have been described as “group oriented” and “faceless” (Blanton 1998). The Terminal Formative acropolis at Río Viejo, therefore, may have been as much a symbol of community and its relationship to the supernatural realm as of the power of individual rulers or royal families.

A more corporate/communal form of political organization is supported by Stacy Barber’s recent excavation of a portion of a late Terminal Formative cemetery at the third-order site of Yugüe (Barber and Joyce 2004). Barber’s excavations recovered the remains of at least 33 individuals, both male and female and of varying status levels and ages buried within a public platform. In contrast, excavation of a high-status residence at the site of Cerro de la Virgen recovered no burials. The dense placement of burials in the Yugüe cemetery as well as the frequent disturbance and movement of the

bones of earlier interments by later ones can be interpreted as an assertion of the collective and a denial of the individual and perhaps of differences among individuals (see Shanks and Tilley 1982; however, see below). Similar collective mortuary practices were found with a Late Formative (400–150 B.C.) cemetery at the site of Cerro de la Cruz (Joyce 1991a, 1994).

THE EARLY CLASSIC ACROPOLIS: EMBODYING COLLAPSE/CONQUEST

The architectural complex on the acropolis as well as the politico-religious institutions that it housed had a short-lived prominence, probably lasting less than 100 years. At about A.D. 250 the elaborate adobe building on Structure 2 was abandoned. Burned adobes and floor areas suggest that the structure may have been destroyed by fire. The summit of the Structure 2 platform, however, lay exposed to the elements for perhaps as long as 250 years, resulting in erosion and disintegration of most of the building. Two AMS dates have been obtained from the remains of the adobe structure. A date of 1573 ± 40 B.P. or A.D. 377 (AA40036) was obtained from charcoal associated with adobe building materials. A second date of 1696 ± 43 B.P. or A.D. 254 (AA40037) was recovered from charcoal lying directly on a section of burned floor and sealed by overlying adobes. I consider the second sample to be more reliable in dating the abandonment and possible destruction of the building because of the latter’s more secure context and because a date of A.D. 254 is more consistent with the ceramic evidence from the underlying platform.

The abandonment of the acropolis was part of a regional disruption in sociopolitical organization (Joyce 2003). Río Viejo experienced a major decrease in size going from 200 ha in the late Terminal Formative to 75 ha in the Early Classic, while the settlement hierarchy declined from five to four levels. The full-coverage survey data indicate that during the Early Classic Coyuche Phase (A.D. 250–500), the lower Verde region contained multiple first-order centres with perhaps as many as eight sites of roughly equivalent size. The systematic survey data show that the percentage of the occupational area in the piedmont increased from 38 per cent in the late Terminal Formative to 63 per cent in the Early Classic, suggesting a shift to defensible locations. Several other large Terminal Formative floodplain sites with mounded architecture,

including Yugüe, declined significantly in size or were abandoned.

The data suggest that some form of conflict led to Early Classic political fragmentation in the lower Verde. It is not clear whether this conflict involved local political factions or if an outside power conquered the region. Excavation data suggest that the Early Classic disruption in settlement patterns and sociopolitical organization may have had something to do with the powerful central Mexican polity of Teotihuacan located about 400 km northwest of the lower Verde (Barber and Joyce 2002; Joyce 2003). Two high-status Early Classic burials excavated at Río Viejo have elaborate offerings including green obsidian from the Pachuca source, controlled by Teotihuacan, and imported or local imitations of thin-orange vessels, suggesting interaction with Central Mexico and probably Teotihuacan. Obsidian studies, including neutron activation analyses (Joyce et al. 1995), have shown that 80 per cent of the 356 pieces of obsidian excavated from Early Classic contexts in the region was from Pachuca. This is the highest proportion known for a region outside of the central Mexican highlands (Joyce et al. 1995; Workinger 2002). While the data for Teotihuacan contacts are intriguing, at present plausible models of Early Classic interaction range from conquest to increased reciprocal exchange (Joyce 2003; Workinger 2002).

I would like to suggest, however, that not only the abandonment of the acropolis, but the fact that it was left to disintegrate for at least 250 years, should be seen as having political significance. The 250 years during which the acropolis was left in ruin should be viewed from the perspective of the inhabitation of the site, such that its political importance during the Terminal Formative informed the significance of the ruins during the Early Classic (see Ashmore 2002:1178; Barrett 1999; Bradley 1987). This important political and religious building, which had taken considerable communal labour to construct, and which presumably was an important symbol of the Terminal Formative state, was left to slowly disintegrate. Like its architecturally impressive, intact predecessor, the ruined building would have been visible to the remaining occupants of the site as well as to people in surrounding communities. It is interesting to speculate why Structure 2 was not rebuilt or reoccupied since flat elevated surfaces are ideal locations on which to live in the hot, lowland climate of the Oaxaca Coast. If the

Terminal Formative state collapsed due to factional competition it could have symbolized a failed political system. Another possibility is that foreign conquerors could have seen the acropolis as a symbol of a defeated enemy, and its reoccupation, a potential expression of resistance.

THE LATE CLASSIC ACROPOLIS: EMBODYING DOMINATION

During the Late Classic Yuta Tiyoo Phase (A.D. 500–800) Río Viejo returned to prominence as the regional centre in the lower Verde (Joyce et al. 2001:349–354). Río Viejo grew to 250 ha, and the regional settlement hierarchy increased from four to seven levels. The survey data show that in the Late Classic people left defensible piedmont sites and returned to the floodplain. In the full-coverage survey zone, the percentage of settlement in the floodplain increased from its Early Classic level of 22 to 56 per cent by the Late Classic. Río Viejo was the first-order capital of a state polity given its large size, monumental architecture, and numerous carved stone monuments. The rulers of Río Viejo may have dominated areas to the east and west along the Pacific Coast and had exchange relations with regions as distant as the central Mexican highlands and the Gulf Coast (Joyce 1993:75–76; Joyce et al. 1995:11–12).

In the Late Classic, the huge acropolis at Mound 1 once again became the civic-ceremonial centre of Río Viejo. Evidence that Mound 1 was a locus of important public ceremonies, and probably the ruler's palace, includes the presence of three Late Classic carved stone monuments depicting rulers (Urcid and Joyce 2001), a plaza spatially situated for public gatherings, and a sunken patio probably for elite-restricted activities. A test excavation 50 m south of Mound 1 recovered thick deposits of Late Classic sherds from fancy serving vessels, suggesting elite domestic activities or perhaps feasting (Joyce 1991a:480). Excavations during the 2000 field season in Structure 2, demonstrate that this part of the acropolis was reoccupied during the Late Classic, although the architecture from this period was very poorly preserved, due to reuse of foundation stones during the Early Postclassic (A.D. 800–1100). Excavation and surface collections suggest that the entire acropolis was occupied during the Late Classic.

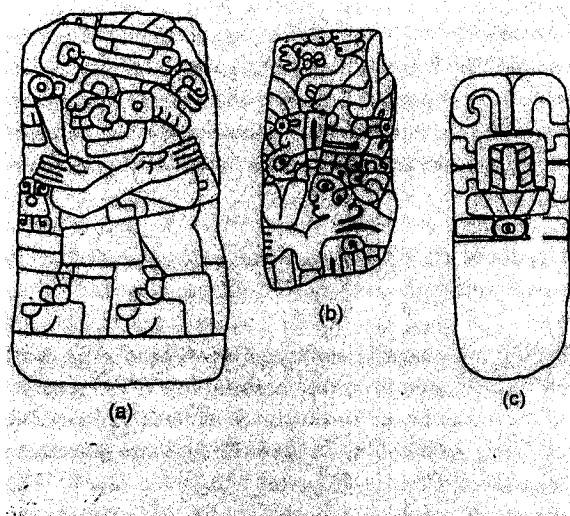


Figure 4. Carved stone monuments from Río Viejo: (a) Monument 8; (b) Monument 11; (c) Monument 14.

Evidence from Río Viejo indicates that the Late Classic polity was no longer characterized by the corporate political organization and communal building projects that occurred during the Terminal Formative. Excavations at Río Viejo indicate that rather than large-scale building projects, construction of public buildings during the Late Classic involved only minor renovations of earlier structures that would not have required large labour forces. For example, Structure 2 on the acropolis was rebuilt by laying down a 0.6 m thick deposit of fill over the ruins of the Terminal Formative building and then constructing another building on this surface, this time with a stone foundation and perishable walls (see Figure 3).

Iconography from Late Classic carved stone monuments in the lower Río Verde Valley suggests a more exclusionary form of political power legitimated through the aggrandizement of individual rulers, their ancestors, and their place in the line of dynastic succession. A total of 13 carved stone monuments have been dated stylistically to the Late Classic at Río Viejo (Urcid and Joyce 2001). They are carved in low relief and are made of the local granite. Many of the carved stones depict nobles, probably rulers of Río Viejo, dressed in elaborate costumes and sometimes accompanied by a glyph that represents their name in the 260-day ritual calendar (Figure 4). For example, Río Viejo

Monument 8, located on the acropolis, depicts a noble wearing an elaborate headdress and the profile head of a jaguar. The personage also wears a jaguar buccal mask with prominent fangs and earspools. To the left of the figure is the individual's hieroglyphic name, "10 Eye." Río Viejo Monument 11 depicts a noble holding a zoomorphic staff. The person is wearing a composite pendant and an elaborate headdress that has a jaguar head protruding from its back. Above the figure are the glyph "2 Jaguar" and the "blood" glyph, probably a reference to the autosacrificial letting of blood. Human sacrifice may be referred to on Monument 15 where a noble is shown with several glyphs including those for heart and blood. In addition to actual depictions of rulers, two carved stones (Monuments 1 and 14) each include only a single glyph, which we hypothesize to be the calendrical name of a ruler.

The aggrandizement of nobles as well as their physical and symbolic separation from commoners is indicated by data from the hilltop ceremonial site of Cerro de los Tepalcates that overlooks the ocean and estuaries about 2.5 km north of the coast. At Cerro de los Tepalcates, hieroglyphic inscriptions are carved into boulders. The inscriptions appear to be calendrical names of nobles. The names often occur in pairs, suggesting that they may represent marital pairs. The site also included a probable looted tomb. Since no tombs have been discovered elsewhere in the region, these data suggest that lower Verde nobles may not have been interred in their communities, but rather in sacred non-residential sites.

The reoccupation of the acropolis during the Late Classic, the rebuilding of temples, and the erection of carved stone monuments would have symbolized and embodied the resurgence of lower Verde nobles following the polity's fragmentation and perhaps subjugation during the Early Classic. The acropolis once again became the centrepiece of the Río Viejo state. The Late Classic acropolis was a monument expressing the sacred authority and political power of the nobility. It was easily visible to commoners living at Río Viejo and nearby communities, symbolically reinforcing the dominant position of the nobility, especially in their role as intermediaries between people and the sacred (Joyce et al. 2001). Public rituals on the acropolis, including sacrifice and ancestor veneration, would have even more forcefully enacted the dominant ideology. Presumably, nobles positioned on the monumental buildings of the acropolis would have led

public ceremonies with commoners in attendance on the plaza below amongst the carved stone monuments of their rulers. In contrast to the Terminal Formative, however, commoners seem to have been less involved in state projects such as the construction of public buildings. While lower Verde nobles expressed their power in monumental art and architecture, the focus on individual rulers in monumental art and the decrease in state building projects suggest a less communal, more exclusionary ideology. Commoners may have been less actively engaged in the kinds of dramatic ritual performances and shared experiences that created a sense of belonging and identity with state symbols, rulers, and institutions (Joyce and Weller n.d.; Kertzer 1988). At present, we have no evidence for Late Classic expressions of resistance by commoners. Developments during the Early Postclassic suggest, however, that there may have been a hidden transcript of resistance (see Scott 1990) that only became public once the state, and its coercive powers, had collapsed (Joyce et al. 2001).

THE EARLY POSTCLASSIC ACROPOLIS: EMBODYING RESISTANCE

The data from the lower Río Verde demonstrate that a major change in settlement patterns and sociopolitical organization occurred during the Early Postclassic Yugué Phase (A.D. 800–1100). Río Viejo continued as a first-order centre, although settlement at the site declined from 250 to 140 ha. At the same time, another first-order centre emerged at San Marquitos, which grew from 7 ha in the Late Classic to 191 ha in the Early Postclassic. The regional settlement hierarchy declined from seven to four levels. There was a settlement shift to higher elevations with piedmont sites increasing from 34 per cent of the occupational area recorded in the survey during the Late Classic to 62 per cent by the Early Postclassic. Excavation and survey projects have found no evidence for the construction of monumental architecture at Río Viejo and other sites during the Early Postclassic. The lack of monumental building activities is mirrored by a reduction in monumental art with only three carved stone monuments recorded at Río Viejo that are tentatively dated stylistically to the Early Postclassic (Urcid and Joyce 2001). The regional data, therefore, suggest a fragmentation of political centres, more decentralized political control, a decrease in social stratification, changes in

ideology, and perhaps a shift to a more corporate pattern of political organization (Joyce et al. 2001).

Explanations for the collapse of Río Viejo's ruling institutions are difficult to demonstrate given the available data (Joyce et al. 2001). Population decline resulting from environmental factors like landscape degradation or drought are not indicated at present. Some form of conflict seems to be a more likely factor in the collapse. The dramatic settlement shift into the piedmont would be consistent with the movement of people to defensive locations. In addition, Early Postclassic settlement is concentrated in a very small area of the piedmont with 58 per cent of the total occupational area in the full-coverage survey located within a radius of 3 km from the first-order centre of San Marquitos. This settlement nucleation could have been for defensive purposes. Excavations and surface survey at Early Postclassic sites have recovered large numbers of chert projectile points. For example, ten projectile point fragments were recovered from the Early Postclassic residences on the acropolis, while only two have been recovered from all earlier excavated contexts in the region. These data could indicate greater conflict in the region. It is unclear whether conflict was intraregional, involving factions of the fragmented Río Viejo polity, or if it involved incursions by people from outside the region.

Excavations at Río Viejo show that by the Early Postclassic, the acropolis was no longer the civic-ceremonial centre of the site, but instead was a locus of commoner residences. Large-scale horizontal excavations exposed two areas of Río Viejo with the remains of Early Postclassic houses (Joyce and King 2001). One area with Early Postclassic residences was on Structure 2 of the acropolis where excavations exposed the remains of five residences surrounding a central patio (Joyce et al. 2001). The residences consisted of low (ca. 5 m) platforms, which provided a base on which wattle-and-daub structures were built (Figure 5). Carbon samples associated with the Early Postclassic residences yielded dates of 899 ± 44 B.P., or A.D. 1051 (AA40034), and 997 ± 47 B.P., or A.D. 953 (AA37669). Excavations recovered burials, utilitarian artifacts, and middens that demonstrate the domestic function of these buildings. While inhabitants had access to a variety of local and imported goods, the relatively modest architecture and burial offerings indicate commoner status.

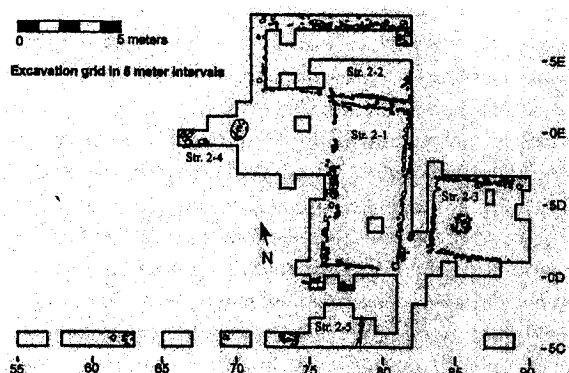


Figure 5. Early Postclassic low-status residences on Río Viejo's acropolis.

The presence of commoner residences on the acropolis at Río Viejo show that Early Postclassic people did not treat the earlier sacred spaces, objects, and buildings with the same reverence they had been afforded in the Late Classic and before (Joyce et al. 2001). A dramatic example of this disjunction between Late Classic and Early Postclassic political organization and ideology is marked by the discovery of a fragment of a Late Classic carved stone monument re-utilized in an Early Postclassic structure wall exposed in excavations 180 m southeast of Structure 2. The carved stone, recovered in an Early Postclassic residence excavated by Stacie King (Joyce and King 2001:5), depicted an elite individual with an elaborate feathered headdress. Prior to its placement in the wall of a commoner residence, this monument had first been re-utilized as a *metate*. At least four other Classic Period carved stones were also re-set in walls during terminal, presumably Early Postclassic, occupations (Urcid and Joyce 2001). It is unlikely that only a few generations after the collapse that these carved stones were simply reused opportunistically for the construction of walls and a *metate* and that Early Postclassic people exhibited ignorance of or indifference to the earlier meanings of sacred objects and spaces. Both areas where Early Postclassic residences were excavated exhibited stratigraphic continuity between Late Classic and Early Postclassic deposits and there are no indications of a hiatus in the occupation of these areas (Joyce and King 2001). Evidence from Mesoamerica and throughout the world shows that earlier meanings of monumental art and architecture continue to inform their reuse and reinterpretation for hundreds and sometimes thousands of

years after their creation and initial use (Barrett 1999; Bender 1998; Bradley 1998; Hamann 2002; Masson and Orr 1998; Schele and Freidel 1990:195–196).

The Early Postclassic occupation of the acropolis by commoners, the dismantling of public buildings, and the reuse of carved stone monuments for utilitarian purposes suggests the active denigration of earlier sacred spaces, objects, and buildings rather than simply the transformation of those institutions by rulers (Joyce et al. 2001; Joyce and Weller n.d.). The Early Postclassic acropolis, therefore, evinces a very different dialectic between spatial structure and agency, though one informed by earlier meanings. During the Early Postclassic, the collapse of ruling institutions would have been manifest on a continuous basis as commoners, some living on the acropolis and dismantling its buildings, looked out onto the deteriorating remains of the once sacred space that had been the centrepiece of the Late Classic state.

The way in which state symbols were treated in the Early Postclassic suggests that commoners increasingly penetrated and perhaps actively resisted the dominant ideology in the years prior to the political collapse. Although the collapse in the lower Verde probably did not involve a commoner rebellion, allegiance to the nobility may have been weak during the Late Classic such that non-elites would not have supported their leaders in the face of external military incursions or internal factional competition. By the Early Postclassic, people were free of the coercive power of Late Classic nobles and were able to publicly oppose and subvert the meanings of traditional symbols of state power via actions such as the reuse of carved stones, the dismantling of public buildings, and the occupation of previously sacred spaces. The destruction, denigration, and reuse of these material symbols of the Late Classic state were based on a collective memory of the experiences of having lived under elite domination. This Early Postclassic transformation suggests that a hidden transcript of Late Classic resistance had become public (Joyce et al. 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

The life history of Río Viejo's acropolis embodied transformations in political power and ideologies from the Terminal Formative through the Postclassic. The

initial construction of the acropolis occurred during a period of political centralization and increasing social inequality with the development of the Río Viejo state. Political power at this time appears to have exhibited a more corporate pattern such that the acropolis was probably a symbol of communal identity and the community's relationship to the supernatural realm as well as a symbol of emerging rulers and ruling institutions. The acropolis as well as the ritual and political practices that occurred therein embodied new systems of social relations, but also contributed to the production of those social systems. These new social relations included the incorporation of people into a larger-scale, politically centralized state polity at Río Viejo.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that Terminal Formative social change would not have been driven simply by emerging elites or the new corporate structures of the Río Viejo state. In addition to cooperative social practices such as the construction of monumental buildings and ritual performances, social change at this time was undoubtedly also an outcome of struggle, negotiation, and perhaps conflict that should be considered in the life history of Río Viejo's acropolis. One possible point of tension may have been between the emerging institutions of rulership and traditional structural principles that were more egalitarian and community based. This tension is suggested by Late/Terminal Formative mortuary data from the cemeteries at Cerro de la Cruz and Yugüe (Barber and Joyce 2004; Joyce 1991a, 1994). The majority of skeletons recovered in the cemeteries were interred in dense concentrations where individual bodies were often rearranged and piled together as a result of successive burial events, thereby losing their individuality and becoming incorporated into the social group at death. Some burials, however, especially high-status ones, were left as intact skeletons, suggesting a more individualized form of authority linked perhaps to emerging state institutions as symbolized, for example, by Río Viejo's acropolis. While the overall pattern of rulership at this time may appear to be corporate, it was not necessarily the result of a structural unity, but was instead in part an outcome of negotiation among those people that identified with traditional communal authority and those that were aligned with newer more individualized and unequal forms of power. The potential conflict between traditional and state forms of authority also highlights the different meanings that the acropolis no doubt had for people depending on

their position relative to these divergent ideas and institutions.

The tension between traditional and state forms of authority could have been a factor contributing to the abandonment and possible destruction of Río Viejo's acropolis within only 150 years of its construction. While this scenario is speculative given the available data, social tension over divergent ideologies and forms of authority could have led to the rejection of state rulers and ruling institutions. The construction of the acropolis may have been an attempt by Río Viejo's rulers to consolidate state power, which instead became the spark that triggered the rejection of the state and the resulting political fragmentation of the Early Classic Period. Of course, other factors such as interaction with Teotihuacan could also have played a part in social change at this time (Joyce 2003; cf. Workinger 2002:394–402).

Throughout the Early Classic Period Structure 2 on the acropolis at Río Viejo was left to disintegrate. The Early Classic was a time of political fragmentation and possibly conflict. The impression is that the region was characterized by multiple, perhaps competing polities (Joyce 2003; Workinger 2002). Río Viejo had decreased in size and political importance, and no community in the region approached the scale that had been reached by Río Viejo during the Terminal Formative. The ruins of the acropolis would have persisted, however, as a reminder of the people, institutions and ideas that sponsored its construction during the Terminal Formative.

Ironically, Early Classic burials at Río Viejo occur most often as individual interments, and there is no evidence of the dense cemeteries of the Formative. Two high-status burials have been recovered with offerings of up to 29 ceramic vessels as well as greenstone, shell, and obsidian artifacts (Joyce 1991a:779, 784). The data suggest that Early Classic social organization involved a decrease in the scale of political control, but with more individualized forms of authority perhaps closer to the network pattern of Blanton and his colleagues (1996). Nobles may have been more successful in consolidating power, developing new forms of rulership within smaller more traditional community-level scales of control.

By the Late Classic Period, Río Viejo again grew into an urban centre and capital of a state polity that dominated the lower Río Verde region. While additional research is needed to examine the sacred geography of

Río Viejo, the Late Classic acropolis was undoubtedly a monument expressing the sacred authority and political power of the nobility. The rebuilding of the acropolis during the Late Classic can be viewed as more than a simple reflection of the administrative institutions of a state, it represented the regional reemergence of Río Viejo's nobles and ruling institutions from the ruins of earlier monuments and the political orders that they symbolized. Political power in the Late Classic exhibited a more exclusionary form than previously, which was legitimated through the aggrandizement of individual rulers, their ancestors, and their place in the line of dynastic succession.

The current data from the Late Classic do not directly suggest the earlier structural contradictions and resulting tensions between more communal and more individualistic forms of authority, although there seems to have been less public participation in state projects relative to the Terminal Formative. The fragmentation of political centres and the return to more decentralized political control during the Early Postclassic (A.D. 800–1100) indicates that these tensions may have continued to be present. Regardless of the conditions that triggered the political collapse, the Early Postclassic evidence from Río Viejo's acropolis indicate that shortly after the collapse people were no longer treating the earlier sacred spaces, objects, and buildings with the same reverence they had been accorded previously. I argue that the dismantling of public buildings and the reuse of carved stones during the Early Postclassic represent more than just a political collapse, these were expressions of a previously hidden transcript of resistance by the inhabitants of Río Viejo made possible by the removal of the coercive forces of the state.

In conclusion, the history of monuments like the acropolis at Río Viejo must be understood as more than static reflections of successive forms of sociopolitical organization (also see Ashmore 2002; Barrett 1999; Bradley 1987, 1998). The acropolis was an inhabited place that went through a complex history of transformations that embodied broader political and ideological relations involving incorporation, domination, resistance, negotiation, and perhaps conquest. The life history of the construction, use, modification, abandonment, and reuse of the acropolis must be understood as transformations achieved by practices that reworked previous meanings embodied in spatial organization, architecture, and iconography. By examin-

ing the inhabitation of monuments such as Río Viejo's acropolis, it is possible to go beyond functional explanations to examine a life history of place that considers the ways in which monumental spaces both shape and were shaped by social action.

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NOTES

- 1 An exception to this generalization is the Middle Formative (800-400 B.C.) Olmec centre of La Venta, which appears to have had large performance spaces probably reaching the scale of some of those of the Late/Terminal Formative (400 B.C.-A.D. 250).

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SPACE AND SPATIAL ANALYSIS IN ARCHAEOLOGY



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