

Mixtec Empire

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Archaeological and ethnohistoric research in Oaxaca, Mexico, shows that a powerful coastal empire dominated by Mixtec-speaking peoples developed during the Late Postclassic period (1100–1522 CE) with its political seat at the city of Tututepec. The founding of Tututepec is recorded in the Mixtec codices, pre-Hispanic and early colonial screenfold books made from bark paper or deer skin. Early colonial Spanish and indigenous documents as well as archaeological research provide evidence for the later history of the Tututepec Empire.

Prior to the rise of the Tututepec Empire, the lower Río Verde Valley had been inhabited for over 2000 years (Joyce 2010). During the Late Classic period (500–800 CE) the city of Río Viejo was the capital of one of the largest and most powerful polities in Oaxaca. The Early Postclassic (800–1100 CE), immediately preceding the rise of Tututepec, was a time of political instability and conflict, however. At this time, Tututepec was nearly uninhabited, which shows that the Late Postclassic city did not develop out of an earlier community, but was founded instead as a new political center. Archaeological and ethnohistoric sources indicate that the founding of Tututepec was the result of the arrival of highland Mixtecs into the lower Verde region at about 1100 CE (Joyce et al. 2004). Settlement data are consistent with massive immigration as the total occupational area in the zone covered by archaeological survey increases from 507 hectares in the Early Postclassic to 2321 hectares by the Late Postclassic – a 458 percent increase.

The codices suggest that the movement of Mixtecs into the lower Verde was related to the activities of Lord 8 Deer “Jaguar Claw,” who was born in 1063 CE in the highland town of Tilantongo (Joyce et al. 2004). When he was 18, Lord 8 Deer left Tilantongo and set out for the Pacific coast with the specific goal of founding a kingdom. The codices show that Lord 8 Deer and his followers traveled to the coast bearing sacred objects, which were used upon their arrival in rituals of foundation at Tututepec. The codices then depict Lord 8 Deer conquering dozens of towns and receiving tribute from subject communities.

The codices suggest that Lord 8 Deer was able to found a kingdom at Tututepec because of a combination of advantageous historical, political, economic, and ecological circumstances. The archaeological record shows that at the beginning of the 12th century the region was vulnerable to outside conquest following the collapse of Río Viejo and the ensuing political fragmentation. Lord 8 Deer may have pursued a strategy designed to take advantage of the ecological complementarity of a highlands-to-coastal trade corridor. The lower Verde was characterized by a diversity of lowland resources that were valued in highland areas, such as cacao, salt, and cotton. Access to coastal resources may have been a factor in Lord 8 Deer’s establishment of an alliance with a powerful highland polity affiliated with the Tolteca-Chichimeca that contributed to his success in founding Tututepec.

Archaeology provides evidence for the continued success of Tututepec throughout the remainder of the pre-Hispanic era (Joyce et al. 2004). A regional archaeological survey shows that Late Postclassic Tututepec covered 2185 hectares making it larger in area than the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán.

Tututepec had a complex internal organization with multiple zones of public architecture, high-status residences, possible barrios, specialized craft production, and ritual activities. The civic-ceremonial core of the site is the large pre-Hispanic platform on which the colonial period church is now located. Among the carved stone monuments discovered at Tututepec, Monument 6 is the most significant because it represents the Central Mexican goddess Itz'papatl, the "Obsidian Butterfly," providing archaeological support for Lord 8 Deer's alliance with the Tolteca-Chichimeca as shown in the codices.

Early colonial documents describe Tututepec as the center of an expansionistic empire that dominated much of southern Oaxaca extending over 25 000 sq. km (Spores 1993). Tribute paid to the capital ranged from gold, copper, feathers, textiles, and cacao from lowland communities to cochineal and cotton *mantas* from highland towns. While Tututepec had exchange relations with Aztec Tenochtitlán, political relations between the two empires were tense.

Excavations at Tututepec by Levine (2011) exposed the remains of three non-elite residences built on separate terraces in the northern part of the site. Each residence consisted of several structures surrounding a central patio. Artifact assemblages from the residences included social valuables like elaborately painted Mixteca-Puebla style polychrome pottery along with copper artifacts. Spindle whorls were common, indicating the production of cotton textiles. Over a thousand obsidian artifacts were recovered with nearly half from Central Mexican sources, indicating exchange with pochteca merchants who likely sought coastal products in return (Levine, Joyce, and Glascock 2011).

Frequencies of polychrome ceramics, obsidian, and copper artifacts far exceed what has been found in excavated non-royal residences in the Oaxacan Highlands, indicating that Tututepec's commoners had greater access to these social valuables and so probably benefited from the overall political and economic power of Tututepec.

SEE ALSO: Aztec Empire; Zapotec Empire

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FURTHER READING

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