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RESUMEN: En 1996, una cerámica extraordinaria fue descubierta en Bedrock, un sitio Maya en el noroeste de Belize. La cerámica se puede fechar tentativamente durante el periodo de transición entre el Clásico Temprano (es decir, Tzakol 3, ca. 450–600 d.C.) y el Clásico Tardío (es decir, Tepeu 1, ca. 600–700 d.C.). La decoración de la cerámica se divide en cuatro paneles. Los dos principales grupos de escenas retratan seres sobrenaturales entregando ofrendas, mientras que los dos paneles más pequeños contienen seis imágenes de cabezas. El objetivo del presente artículo es presentar un análisis descriptivo del Vaso Bedrock y agregar una pieza importante más al corpus de la iconografía maya.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Im Jahr 1996 wurde in der archäologischen Stätte Bedrock im Nordwesten von Belize ein außergewöhnliches Gefäß gefunden. Das Keramikgefäß datiert ungefähr in die Übergangszeit von früher Klassik (Tzakol 3, ca. 450–600 n. Chr.) zur frühen späten Klassik (Tepeu 1, ca. 600–700 n. Chr.). Das Gefäß ist mit vier großen Panels dekoriert. Die beiden großen Panels zeigen übernatürliche Wesen, die Opfergaben darbringen. Die beiden kleinen Panels enthalten jeweils sechs Köpfe. Das Ziel des vorliegenden Artikels ist es, das ungewöhnliche Gefäß vorzustellen und damit eine wichtige Ergänzung zum Korpus der Maya-Ikonographie zu machen.

Excavating the Acropolis at Río Viejo, Oaxaca, Mexico

Arthur A. Joyce and Sarah B. Barber

In this paper we discuss archaeological research conducted during the summer of 2009 in the ancient urban center of Río Viejo in the lower Río Verde Valley on the Pacific coast of Oaxaca, Mexico (Fig. 1). Our 2009 fieldwork involved excavations on the acropolis at Río Viejo, which was the civic-ceremonial center of the site during the Terminal Formative period and again in the Late Classic (Joyce 2006, 2008, 2010). The 2009 research was designed to investigate the construction, use, and abandonment of the acropolis. As the seat of regional political authority, excavations on Río Viejo's acropolis are crucial for understanding the early development, organization, and collapse of centralized polities in the region.

Previous research in the lower Río Verde Valley shows that a complex regional polity first developed during the Terminal Formative period (150 B.C.–A.D. 250; Joyce 2010). The polity seat was located at the urban center of Río Viejo, which grew to 225 ha during this period. Excavations at Río Viejo and other Terminal Formative sites suggest that centralized political authority was built by mobilizing support through the sponsoring of communal rituals and works projects (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2008). By far the largest of these communal projects was the construction and use of the huge central acropolis at Río Viejo that we have designated Mound 1 (Fig. 2). The acropolis was a massive architectural complex covering an area of 350 x 200 m. It supported two large substructures, designated Structures 1 and 2, respectively, which rose to at least 17 m above the floodplain as well as a large

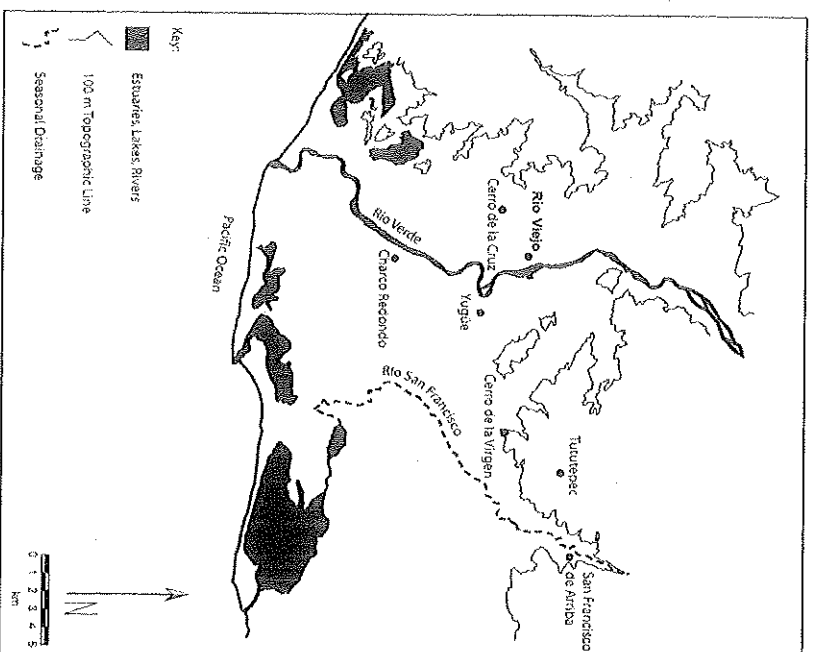


Fig. 1. Map of the lower Río Verde Valley showing the site of Río Viejo

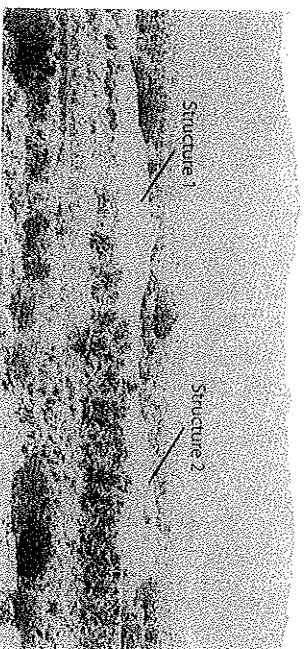


Fig. 2. View of the Rio Viejo acropolis from a distance of 2 kilometers

plaza, a sunken patio, and several smaller buildings (Fig. 3). Excavations in Structure 2 in 2000 raised the possibility that the acropolis was almost entirely constructed during the late Terminal Formative Chacahua phase (A.D. 100–250). The 2000 excavations also showed that during the Chacahua phase Structure 2 consisted of a large stepped platform that supported a poorly preserved public building (Levine and Joyce 2009). The evidence suggested that Terminal Formative political authority was tenuous and contested since shortly after its construction, Structure 2 was burned and then abandoned for the entire Early Classic period (A.D. 250–500; Joyce 2008).

Regional data show that by ca. A.D. 250, Rio Viejo collapsed as the polity seat and the next 250 years were characterized by political fragmentation. The acropolis was reoccupied during the Late Classic (A.D. 500–800) and once again became the civic-ceremonial center of a regional polity. Late Classic political authority differed from the Terminal Formative, however. A decline in large-scale building projects and rituals along with an emphasis on the celebration of rulers in monumental art suggests that Late Classic political authority was more exclusionary and less communal than in the Terminal Formative (Joyce 2008; Joyce *et al.* 2001). The Rio Viejo polity collapsed once again at ca. A.D. 800. The dismantling of Late Classic buildings on the acropolis as well as the destruction of rulers' portraits on carved stones suggest the denigration of ruling ideas and institutions during the Early Postclassic period (A.D. 800–1100).

The 2009 research consisted of two transects of excavations, one running east-west and the other north-south across the southern half of the Mound 1 acropolis. In total, nine operations were carried out consisting of block excavations up to 4 x 4 m as well as smaller test excavations (1 x 1 m, 2 x 1 m, 3 x 1 m). Most operations were located over anomalies detected by a ground penetrating radar (GPR) survey carried out in 2008 (Barber 2009).

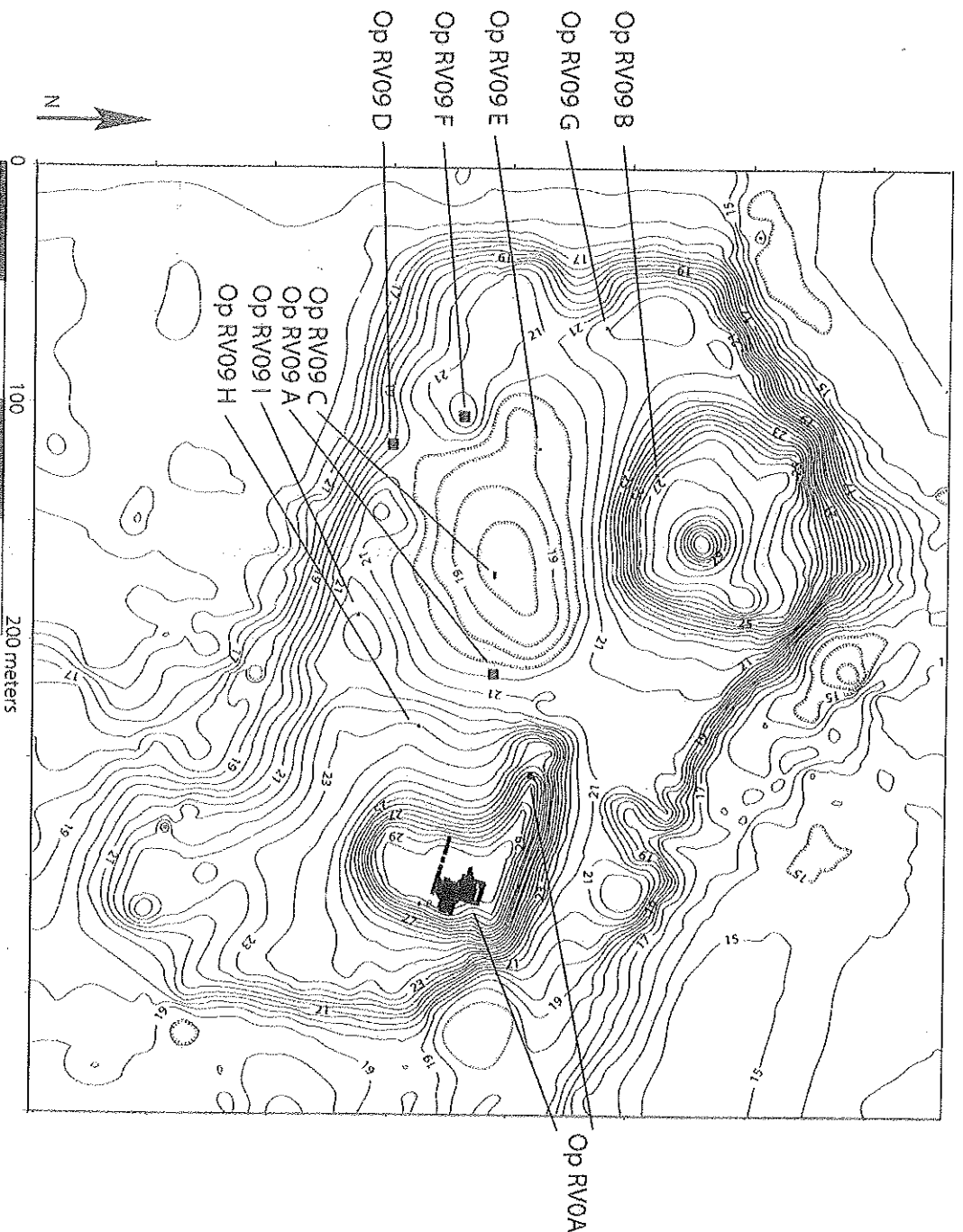


Fig. 3. Plan of the Rio Viejo acropolis showing locations of excavations in 2000 and 2009

Excavations in the Acropolis

The 2009 research strengthens many of the inferences drawn from the 2000 excavations on Mound 1, Structure 2, but also resulted in revisions of several of our earlier hypotheses. The excavations confirm that the majority of the acropolis was built during the late Terminal Formative Chacahua phase. Test excavations on the southern end of Structure 1 (Op. RV09 B) and at the base of Structure 1 on the far western end of Mound 1 (Op. RV09 G), however, indicate that this part of the acropolis was begun during the early Terminal Formative Miniyuca phase (150 B.C.–A.D. 100) or early in the late Terminal Formative Chacahua phase. Evidence from most of the remaining operations (Ops. RV09 A, D, F, H, and I) is consistent with the hypothesis that the majority of the acropolis was completed during the Chacahua phase. Like the 2000 excavations on Structure 2, most of the 2009 operations showed that all but the last 0.5 to 2 m of the acropolis were completed during the Chacahua phase. Terminal Formative period structure fill excavated in 2009 was consistent with patterns noted in 2000.

Rather than basket loads of unconsolidated sediment typical of later fill deposits, the Terminal Formative fill ranged from unconsolidated basket loads to various forms of what we have termed “structured fill.”

Structured fill on Mound 1 at Río Viejo included at least four types of organized deposits (Levine and Joyce 2009:83–85). Type 1 consisted of puddled adobe made from adobe material that was carefully poured into alternating layers; Type 1 fill occasionally included adobe blocks as well. Type 2 was a less ordered structured fill consisting of variably sized adobes and sometimes fired bricks placed at irregular intervals and surrounded by unconsolidated sediment. The proportion of unconsolidated fill to adobes varied considerably. Type 3 consisted of more formal arrangements of adobes, and occasionally fired bricks, sometimes stabilized by a calcareous mortar. Type 4 may have involved the use of wooden frames to stabilize the fill. In some areas small cells probably either of puddled adobe or rammed earth, were filled with loose sediment.

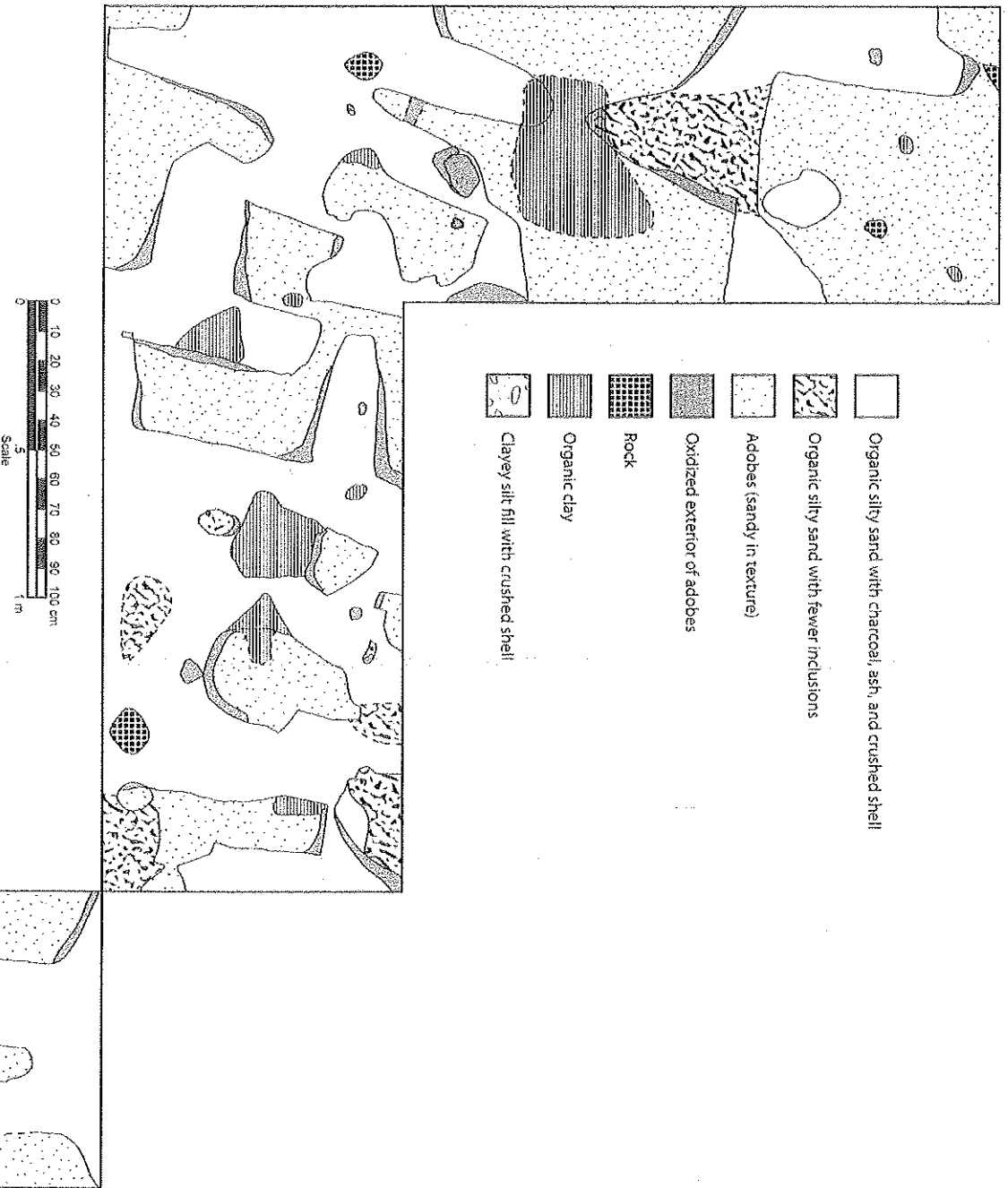


Fig. 4. Plan of the Chacahua phase adobe wall in Op. RV09 A

The variability present in fill material, forms of adobes and fired bricks, and techniques in arranging these blocks suggests that the construction of the acropolis may have resulted from the efforts of five or more distinct work groups or may reflect differences in construction techniques over time. The degree of variability in construction fill does not appear to be the result of architectural necessity. Instead, we may be seeing the result of a rotation of work groups, perhaps from different areas of Río Viejo and from other communities in the valley, who carried out their jobs in slightly different ways.

In addition to construction fill, Chacachua phase architecture included several occupational surfaces or earthen floors as well as an adobe slab pavement on the surface of a platform exposed in Op. RV09 F. Op. RV09 A, excavated in the area between the sunken patio and Structure 2, exposed 6.0 m² of a feature consisting of a single course of adobe blocks surrounded by burned organic material at about 2 m below ground surface (Fig. 4). We suspect that it was a foundation wall of a Chacachua phase superstructure, although further work is needed to determine the nature of this building. The burned material surrounding the blocks is also intriguing. We have not been able to infer precisely what this deposit was (burned wooden beams or a frame of some sort are a possibility). It was overlain by a stratum of ash and sand up to 20 cm thick, suggesting that the burning represented the final use of these features. The oxidized material could be part of the burning event dating to ca. A.D. 250 that may have destroyed the public building on Structure 2 (Joyce 2006:86–88, 2008:229). Although Structure 2 was abandoned at this time, data from Op. A show that several thin resurfacing levels and floors that likely date to the Chacachua phase were deposited over the adobe feature. These data suggest that the abandonment of the acropolis may have occurred over the course of a few decades rather than immediately following the major destruction event. In Op. RV09 D, we also discovered evidence of burning dating to the end of the Terminal Formative with abandonment immediately following the destruction and no reoccupation until the Late Classic. These data suggest that a small number of people may have continued to utilize the acropolis for a short time after the Chacachua phase destruction. In Op. RV09 D, two burials (Río Viejo B54-163 and B57-166) were discovered in the uppermost fill deposits dating to the Chacachua phase. Both burials probably date to the very end of the Chacachua phase and may also be associated with the

destruction event. We recovered few artifacts left on Chacachua phase surfaces and no evidence of cached objects suggesting that people planned to return (Izomata 2003; Severson 1982). The evidence indicates that abandonment probably occurred over a period of several years and the structure then remained unoccupied and in ruins until the Late Classic period.

Pis dug into Chacachua phase deposits in many of the operations (RV09 Ops. D, E, F, and H) also indicate that the acropolis was mined for sediment probably for construction fill during the Early Classic period or early in the Late Classic. A hearth intruded into Chacachua phase structural fill in Op. RV09 F indicates some sort of cooking activities occurred during the period when the acropolis was mined for sediment. Whether the sediment was just expediently removed for building materials or was seen as having some sort of special significance through its association with an earlier ceremonial building is impossible to know at present. It is also possible that the mining of sediment was associated with the destruction of the acropolis at ca. A.D. 250 and could have been an act of desecration or decommissioning of the structure. The evidence from the 2009 excavations supports the earlier hypothesis that the acropolis was abandoned for the entire Early Classic period.

Evidence from all of the 2009 operations shows that the acropolis was reoccupied during the Late Classic Yuta Tiyoo phase. In most operations a layer of fill that ranged from 0.5 to 2.0 m was used to resurface the acropolis. Unlike the structured fill of the Terminal Formative, Late Classic fill consisted of basket loads of unconsolidated sediment at times with adobe pieces, probably redeposited from Formative contexts. In places, holes dug during the Early Classic or early in the Late Classic were filled. The scale of Late Classic construction found in most of the operations was far less than for the Terminal Formative, which is consistent with the results of the 2000 project.

An exception to the general pattern of construction on the acropolis comes from excavations in the sunken patio. Ops. RV09 C and E show that the portion of the acropolis in which the sunken patio was located was built during the Late Classic Yuta Tiyoo phase. Op. RV09 C was placed in the center of the sunken patio and penetrated to a depth of 5.2 m below the current ground surface. The Op. C excavations exposed 4.8 m of Late Classic construction fill that was likely deposited over a relatively short period to create the sunken patio. In fact, the

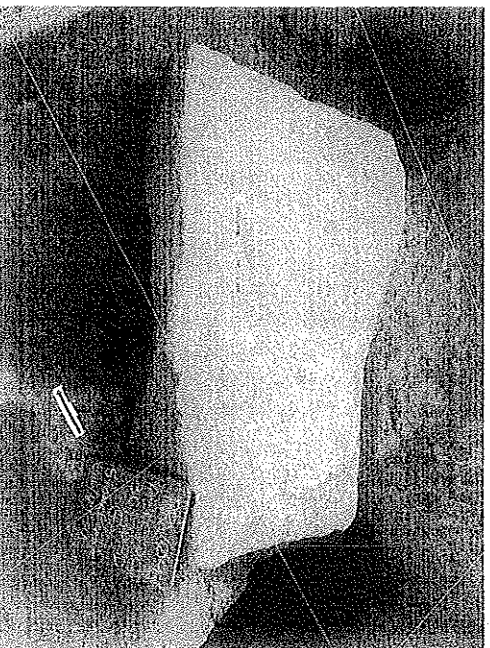


Fig. 5. Yuta Tiyoo phase stela from Op. RV09 A

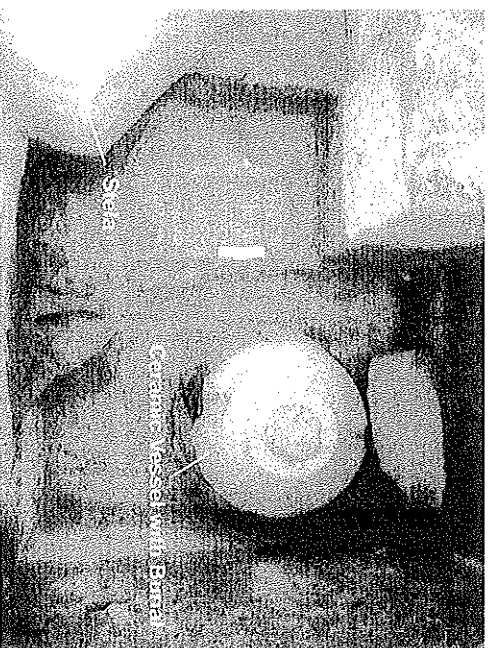


Fig. 6. Yuta Tiyoo phase offering from Op. RV09 A

Op. C excavations found that the construction fill of Mound 1 extended to 2 m below the modern surface of the floodplain, which means that the acropolis was originally at least that much higher than we had previously estimated (alleviation of the floodplain has raised the ground surface since the acropolis was first built). Since we did not reach deposits predating the acropolis, we still do not know the original height of the building.

The results of the Op. C and Op. E excavations suggest that during the late Terminal Formative the area eventually covered by the acropolis may have instead consisted of several buildings perhaps surrounding a large public plaza where communal ceremonies were carried out. During the Late Classic, the plaza was then covered by at least 4 to 5 m of fill and the sunken patio was built. In Mesoamerica sunken and enclosed patios were usually restricted ceremonial settings that were seen as ritual interfaces with the divine world of deities and ancestors (Freidel *et al.* 1993:350–355). The creation of the sunken patio also linked together the earlier buildings to form one massive architectural complex, the Río Viejo acropolis. Although smaller in scale than construction projects at many Terminal Formative sites in the region (Barber 2005:114–118), the sunken patio is by far the largest architectural project that has been identified for the Late Classic. We suspect that this building project was designed to transform a publically accessible plaza into a restricted ceremonial space. Similar transformations of previously public areas into ceremonial spaces restricted to the nobility are indicated by evidence from the Valley of Oaxaca (Joyce 2010:217–220). Many of these restricted ceremonial spaces consisted of sunken or enclosed patios like the one from Río Viejo's acropolis. These data are also consistent with regional evidence suggesting that Late Classic political authority was more exclusionary than the communal forms of authority hypothesized for the Terminal Formative polity (Joyce 2008, 2010).

Excavations exposed a number of features dating to the Late Classic period. In Op. RV09 A, a plain stela was exposed lying on Late Classic resurfacing deposits; the stela measured 1.32 m x 0.90 m x 0.44 m (Fig. 5). A second possible stela was exposed in Op. A south of the first. Plain stelae are common along the western coast of Oaxaca (Jorin 1974:26–33). Although the meaning and use of plain stelae are not entirely clear, they are usually found in public ceremonial settings similar to contexts in which carved portraits of rulers and deities have been discovered (Urcid 1993:148).

Immediately east of the Op. RV09 A monolith, the excavations exposed a probable offering associated with the stela, although time did not permit excavation of the entire feature. The offering was interred in the fill layer immediately below the level of the monolith. It included a large cylindrical ceramic vessel placed upside down atop two thin granite slabs (Fig. 6). A probable adult female (full osteological analysis pending) was discovered interred within the vessel along with a greenstone bead, the tusk of a peccary, and an obsidian flake (Río Viejo Burial B55-164). The individual was tightly flexed, yet still largely articulated within the vessel. Two granite slabs were discovered 5 cm to the north of the vessel, although time did not allow the complete exposure of the slabs or investigation of what lay beneath them. Two whole ceramic vessels were also discovered about 50 cm west of the vessel containing the burial. South of the vessel burial, excavations exposed three

other burials that also may have been part of the offering. Burial B56-165 was an extended interment of an adult female lying prone with her head to the south. She was buried with several ceramic vessels as offerings. Burial B58-167 was an extended, prone interment beneath B56-165. Burial B59-168 in the southern end of Op. RV09 A was noted, but time did not permit its excavation. All of the burials, whole ceramic vessels, and granite slabs appear to have been part of offerings associated with the stela.

Approximately 120 m west of Op. RV09 A, excavations in Op. RV09 E focused on what appeared to have been a step or bench at the western end of the sunken patio. Although the majority of deposits within Op. E consisted of Yuta Tiyoo phase construction fill, we also recovered a 0.45 m thick midden deposit. The midden included elaborate Late Classic ceramics, bodily adornments, and musical instruments (whistles) as well as a large quantity of obsidian blades. We suspect that the midden was associated with practices carried out in the sunken patio, perhaps ritual feasting.

In Op. RV09 F, excavations exposed several short sections of what was probably the stone foundation of a Late Classic building. These wall remnants were similar to several discovered on Structure 2 during the 2000 field season (Levine and Joyce 2009:93). As with Structure 2, the Op. F walls were probably foundations of Late Classic structures that were later mined for building materials. The dismantling of the Late Classic buildings probably occurred during the Early Postclassic. The excavations on Structure 2 showed that Late Classic structures were taken apart for building materials to construct low platforms during the Early Postclassic; the platforms supported modest houses. Although Early Postclassic pottery was recovered in the uppermost strata in most excavations during the 2009 field season, we found no evidence of residences from this period as had been found on Structure 2 (Joyce *et al.* 2001). The GPR survey revealed that the plaza and patio areas of Mound 1 had been plowed in the historic period, potentially destroying Postclassic features in the 2009 excavation areas. These areas may have been farmed in the Postclassic as well.

Conclusions

The 2009 excavations provide additional data on the history of construction, use, and abandonment of the acropolis at Río Viejo. The research shows that the acropolis was a material embodiment of many of the most significant political transformations in the region. The results support the hypothesis based on the 2000 project that most of the acropolis was built during the Terminal Formative and would have required a major mobilization of labor (Levine and Joyce 2009). These data are consistent with the idea that the mobilization of consent via communal building projects and public ceremonies were important in the negotiation of political authority at the end of the Formative period (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2006, 2008, 2010).

The evidence indicates that the abandonment and possible destruction of the acropolis at ca. A.D. 250 extended over much of the building. The abandonment of the acropolis was undoubtedly a significant aspect of the collapse of the Río Viejo polity and the resulting political fragmentation of the Early Classic (Joyce 2008:228–230, 2010:195–196). The only possible evidence for the use of the acropolis during the Early

Classic involved the mining of fill and the use of the hearth excavated in Op. RV09 F. There is no evidence for construction phases or buildings dating to the Early Classic.

The acropolis was reoccupied during the Late Classic when Río Viejo was once again the political seat of a powerful regional polity. An important finding of the 2009 field season resulted from the excavations in the sunken patio, which showed that it was largely or entirely built during the Late Classic. Construction of the sunken patio united earlier buildings to create the acropolis that is now visible on the surface of the site and created a restricted ceremonial space. The creation of restricted ceremonial spaces was indicative of the more exclusionary forms of authority that are suggested by evidence from the Late Classic (Joyce 2010:241–247; Joyce *et al.* 2001).

The 2009 excavations found little evidence of an Early Postclassic occupation on the acropolis with only small quantities of ceramics from this period recovered in the upper strata in the operations. This evidence suggests that only parts of the acropolis were occupied by Early Postclassic commoners following the Classic-period collapse as was shown in the 2000 excavations in Structure 2.

Acknowledgments

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RESUMEN: Este artículo discute las excavaciones realizadas en el 2009 con el propósito de investigar la construcción, el uso, y el abandono de la acrópolis en el centro urbano antiguo de Río Viejo, Oaxaca, México. La acrópolis fue construida durante el período Preclásico Terminal y se convirtió en el centro ceremonial cívico de la unidad política de Río Viejo. La construcción de la acrópolis requirió una gran movilización de mano de obra constante con las formas comunales de autoridad sido intencionalmente destruida como parte de la caída de la unidad política en 250 d.C. La acrópolis fue poblada nuevamente durante el Clásico Tardío cuando Río Viejo una vez más se convirtió en un centro político. Después de la caída de Río Viejo en 800 d.C., los edificios en la acrópolis fueron desmontados y reutilizados para construir residencias durante el Posclásico temprano.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Der vorliegende Beitrag diskutiert die Ergebnisse der archäologischen Feldkampagne 2009, die das Ziel hatte, die Konstruktion, den Gebrauch und das Verlassen der Akropolis des vorspanischen urbanen Zentrums von Río Viejo, Oaxaca, México zu erforschen. Die Akropolis wurde während der Periode des Endformativums gebaut und wurde zum administrativen und religiösen Zentrum der Polity von Río Viejo. Die Konstruktion der Akropolis machte die Rekrutierung einer großen Menge von Arbeitskräften notwendig, was auf die Existenz kommunaler Formen von Autorität hinweist, die für diese Zeit allgemein angenommen werden. Die Akropolis wurde um etwa 250 n. Chr. verlassen und im Rahmen des Kollapses des gesamten politischen Gebietes zerstört. Schließlich wurde die Akropolis in der Späten Klassik wieder genutzt, als Río Viejo zum zweiten Mal zu einem regionalen Machtzentrum wurde. Nach dem Zusammenbruch der staatlichen Strukturen in der Späten Klassik wurden die Gebäude auf der