

Introduction to the Volume

On the 16th day of June 1984, our field crew stepped out of our rented living quarters in Ejutla de Crespo to begin a systematic, regional survey of the Ejutla Valley. We walked toward the eastern edge of the town, a community of around 8,000–10,000 people at that time. The fields at the edge of Ejutla seemed like a reasonable place to start on the first day of a multi-month archaeological survey, as a key aim on day one was training the crew on our survey methods, and the proximity to town meant that no one had to be concerned about the location, nor was much time needed for travel.

Walking in town, we immediately began to find prehispanic potsherds and broken obsidian blades on the surface of the unpaved streets. In addition, pottery that clearly was not modern often was visible in exposed adobe bricks used in the construction of contemporary house walls. As we approached the fields at the edge of town, we observed an unusual artifact on the ground, a small piece of marine shell. Unlike the rest of our team, we had considerable prior experience as crew members on archaeological surveys in the Valley of Oaxaca to the north of the Ejutla Valley (Blanton et al. 1982; Kowalewski et al. 1989). These regional archaeological surveys were an outgrowth of Kent Flannery's multiscalar project, *The Prehistory and Human Ecology of the Valley of Oaxaca* (Flannery 1976a). To us, shell was a rare surface find. Ejutla is, after all, ensconced in Mexico's Southern Highlands, more than 100 km from the Pacific Coast (Figure 1.1).

We reached the fields at the eastern edge of town, unaware of what awaited us. The first plowed fields we entered were littered with broken pottery and obsidian blades, but it was the dense scatters of surface shell debris that focused our attention. In one small collection area (~0.1 ha) we picked up more than 300 pieces of shell (Figure 1.2). This was unprecedented, as we almost never found shell, especially in quantity, during our many months participating in the regional surveys of the larger Valley of Oaxaca in 1977 and 1980 (Blanton et al. 1982; Kowalewski et al. 1989).

Most of the shell we found in these fields was cut debris, ranging from fragments of large gastropods to small pieces of nacreous mother of pearl, and, even to our untrained eyes, clearly was not food waste. Some chunks appeared to be broken, unfinished ornaments or blanks. Only a few pieces were finished or polished, mostly small thin disks. There also were a few small, complete shells. Mixed with the shell were unusual quantities of broken, heavily used obsidian blades (Figure 1.3). We surmised that these tools may have been used to cut the shell. We also observed ceramic wasters and stone debris that was indicative of

lapidary activities. The utilitarian ceramics, grinding stone fragments, and concentrations of building stones in these same fields appeared to be domestic refuse, which raised the possibility that the shell-related and other craft activities that we suspected were enacted in this setting may have been situated in a residential context. That prospect was a bit curious at the time since most prehispanic and other premodern production activities, especially for exchange, were presumed to have taken place in nondomestic workshops (e.g., van der Leeuw 1976, 1977).

Over the next several years we remained intrigued by our findings on the east side of Ejutla and returned in 1990 to address the many questions that were raised by the observations and discoveries that we had made there six years earlier. What was the socioeconomic context of the shell working, when were these activities enacted, what kinds of ornaments were crafted, and for whom? What about the less obvious indicators of ceramic production and stone crafting? In the remainder of this volume, we report on the excavations that we led in the area of dense surface shell. We document what we recovered during five seasons of field and laboratory work, what we learned from those investigations concerning shell ornament production and other prehispanic craft activities, and the broader implications of this research for prehispanic Mesoamerican economies and interregional interrelations more generally.

1.1. What Brought Us to Ejutla

That first day in the fields on the east side of Ejutla de Crespo was the beginning of a regional-scale project that we directed over two summers in 1984 and 1985 (Feinman and Nicholas 1990, 2013). The impetus to survey the Ejutla Valley began soon after the regional survey of the Valley of Oaxaca was completed in 1980 (see Figure 1.1). The two of us were part of the field crew that surveyed the southern part of the valley during the 1980 field season. The southern boundary of the Valley of Oaxaca survey area was determined as much by local permissions and time as by the low hills that separated the Valley of Oaxaca from the smaller alluvial basin to the south. Settlement did not drop off as we neared the boundary with the modern political district of Ejutla, and we often thought about what might lie farther south. At that time, less was known about prehispanic Ejutla than about the larger Valley of Oaxaca to the north.

Although the Valley of Oaxaca has long been recognized as a core region of prehispanic Mesoamerica (Palerm and Wolf 1957), regional vantages are not entirely adequate

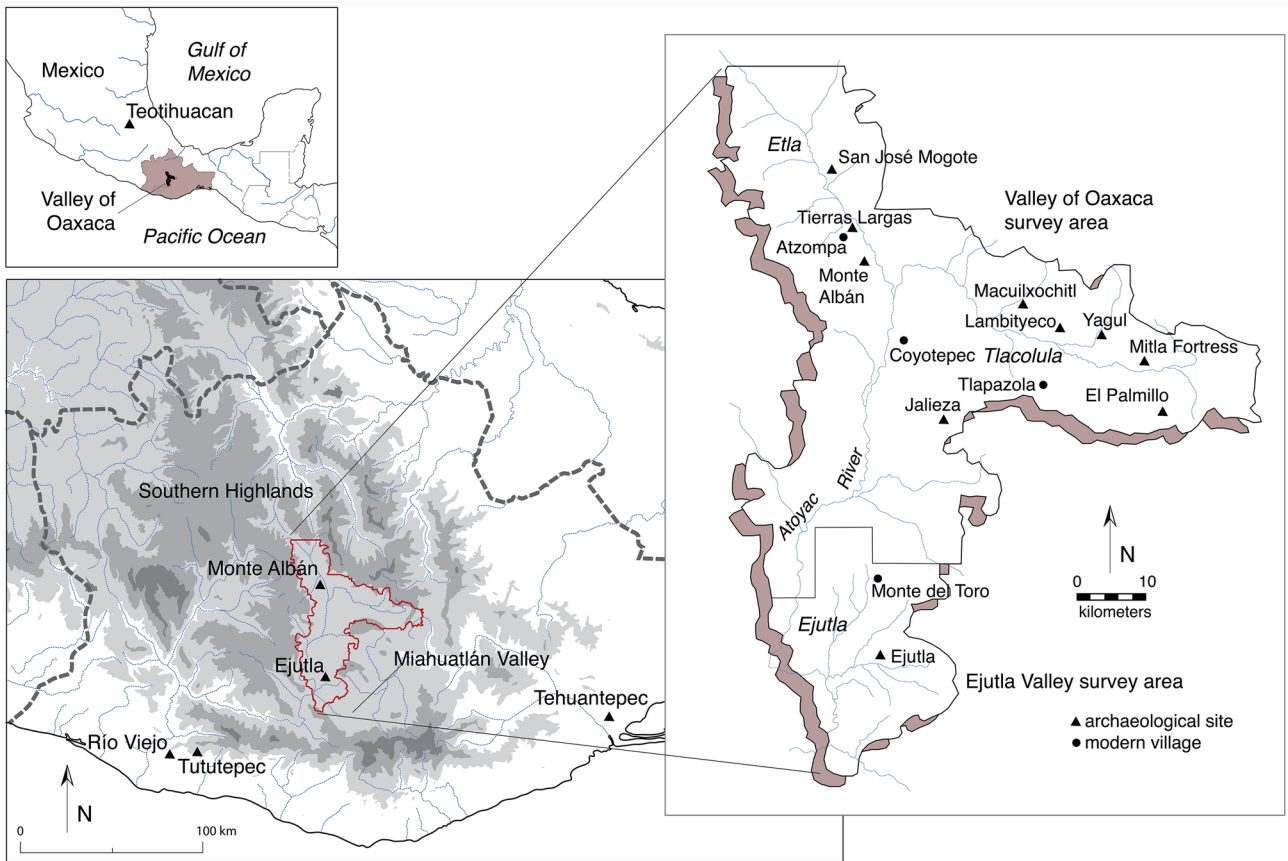


Figure 1.1. Map of Mexico's Southern Highlands and the Valleys of Oaxaca and Ejutla, showing places mentioned in the text.



Figure 1.2. Shell from one small collection area (CAE) on the east side of Ejutla de Crespo.

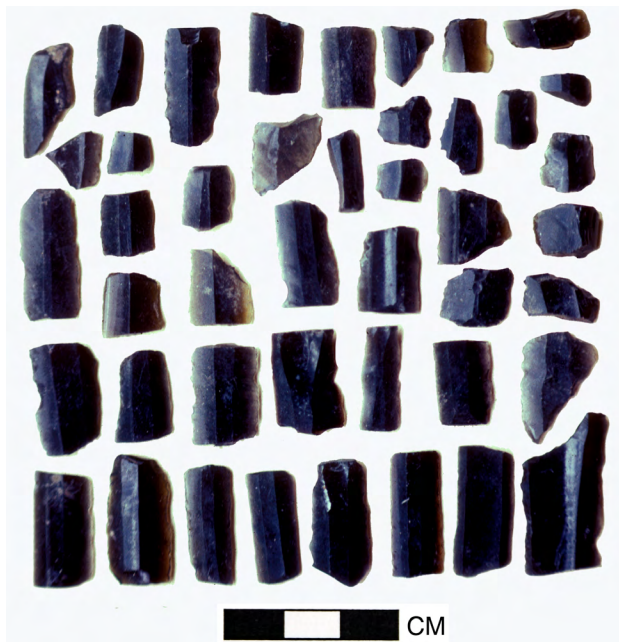


Figure 1.3. Obsidian from the same collection area (CAE) on the east side of Ejutla de Crespo.

to assess the limits of prehispanic polities or certainly the exchange links that extend beyond those boundaries (Kowalewski 2004). Political borders are not always coterminous with geographic regions (*sensu* Haggett 1966, 242–47) or with economic and cultural networks (e.g., Blanton and Feinman 1984; M. L. Smith 2012). One of our goals in expanding the systematic archaeological survey into Ejutla was to provide a broader macroregional perspective on the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, of which these two neighboring valleys were a part. What was the relationship between the Valley of Oaxaca and its smaller, southern neighbor? Did that relationship shift over time, and in what ways?

The results of the regional investigation of Ejutla (Feinman and Nicholas 1992, 2013) raised a series of additional questions that prompted our investigatory transition from survey to excavation. One of the joys of archaeological survey is finding the unexpected. The area of dense worked shell debris mixed with prehispanic ceramics and stone tools was one such unexpected discovery. But to address the questions that this evidence of prehispanic shell working in the landlocked Ejutla Valley brought to mind would require more fine-grained temporal and contextual information than survey could yield. Given the rarity of prehispanic shell working in highland Oaxaca, gaining a deeper understanding of this craft activity at Ejutla and why prehispanic Ejutleños crafted shell ornaments would be integral for examining interregional relations in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca.

1.2. Research Themes and Questions

Our discovery of shell-working debris in fields on the east side of Ejutla de Crespo, most likely in a residential

context, dovetailed with larger issues about interhousehold and intercommunity economic relations in prehispanic Mesoamerica that were starting to come to the fore. The earliest excavations in Oaxaca were carried out at the prehispanic urban capital, Monte Albán, with a focus on dating and monumental architecture (e.g., Caso et al. 1967). When Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus (2005, 2015) began their excavations in 1966 at the earlier, Formative village at San José Mogote, in the valley's Etlá arm, north of Monte Albán, they placed great importance on looking at meaningful units to get at the social context of different activities. That research goal did not align well with the then-standard practice of excavating test pits and trenches. Instead, they (Flannery 1976a) made the residence the unit of analysis and excavated broad horizontal expanses to get at houses and their associated exterior spaces. Their illustration of the importance of domestic units for understanding a wider set of issues beyond building chronologies led to a broadening of themes that archaeologists in Oaxaca began to address. As results of the San José Mogote excavations were being published (e.g., Flannery 1976a), the focus of work in Oaxaca expanded from Monte Albán to the central valley and areas beyond. As we began excavations in Ejutla, we took inspiration from Flannery and Marcus's residential excavations at San José Mogote as a template to expand the corpus of excavated houses to other periods and to answer questions about the nature of interregional interaction, economic specialization, and the prehispanic economy.

When we began excavations in Ejutla in 1990, Flannery and his students and colleagues had amassed a significant sample of excavated houses for the Formative period even beyond San José Mogote (Drennan 1976; Whalen 1981; Winter 1972), but there had been few excavations in Classic period domestic contexts beyond several residential terraces at Monte Albán (Winter 1974). A larger sample of domestic units for the Classic period Valley of Oaxaca was necessary to understand how similar or different the later domestic units were from those in the Formative period. We were also interested in the diversity and interrelationships between households during the Classic period. Our goal was to begin to build a sample of excavated Classic period houses, and the surface hints of shell ornament production in a residential context in Ejutla provided a potential venue for implementing that aim.

One of our first questions was the timing of the shell working at Ejutla. Was it even prehispanic, as we suspected, given the ancient pottery and stone tools we found in association with the shell? The best-represented shell taxa on the surface were Pacific Coast varieties that generally were used for ornamentation rather than for food in prehispanic Mesoamerica, so we did not think the shell was modern. Although most of the broken pottery in the area of dense surface shell could pertain to the Classic period, ceramics from multiple periods (Monte Albán Late I–Monte Albán V, 300 BCE–1520 CE) were mixed with the shell debris and other artifacts, so excavation would