



**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

be necessary to confirm whether or not the shell working mostly pertained to the Classic period.

Another question was the socioeconomic context of the shell working at Ejutla. Flannery and his colleagues found evidence of shell working in some Early Formative residential contexts, typically small concentrations of flint chips, chert tools and drills, and fragments of cut and discarded shell in the corner of a house (Flannery and Winter 1976, 39). But not all houses engaged in the same activities, and shell working and other specialized crafts tended to be centered in one community ward or another (Flannery and Marcus 2005, 66; Marcus 1989). Was the area of shell debris at Ejutla also a ward of households whose occupants crafted shell into ornaments? Was shell working (and potentially other craft activities) at Ejutla carried out in residential contexts, as indicated by the surface debris?

A third set of questions revolved around the nature of production, distribution, and the prehispanic economy. What was the nature of the technology that was used to craft shell ornaments at Ejutla? What tools were used to cut the shell and shape the ornaments? What ornaments were made, a small set of similar items, like the small disks we found on the surface during the regional survey, or a broad diversity? Was there a division of labor or different tasks carried out by separate households? What about procurement? The first worked shells that we identified in the surface debris were Pacific Coast varieties. Ejutla is considerably closer to the Pacific Coast than the Gulf Coast, so that was not unexpected. But would more investigation and analysis reveal a broader shell assemblage that also included Gulf Coast species? In Early Formative residential contexts at San José Mogote, far to the north, one of the most common categories of shell came from rivers of the Gulf Coast (Flannery and Marcus 2005, 79).

What was the scale and intensity of shell working at Ejutla? Did the crafters of shell ornaments work their trade on a part-time or full-time basis? For whom were the shell ornaments crafted? Were they intended only for local use or for broader distribution to other communities near and far? In the surface collections, there were few finished shell ornaments amid the much greater quantities of broken, unfinished ornaments and cut shell debris. But would we find more finished items in intact contexts such as house floors, burials, and offerings? Or would the shell species, debris, and unfinished ornaments at Ejutla provide clues that the site was a possible or likely source for some of the finished ornaments found at other contemporaneous sites in the valley, including Monte Albán, the regional capital? The intensity and context of shell ornament production at Ejutla, and whether or not households engaged in more than one craft activity, as seemed possible based on surface debris, has implications for how we think about the prehispanic economy.

What about macroscale relations across the region? On the regional surveys we had noted much more evidence

of utilitarian craft production (ceramics and lithics) in the Valley of Oaxaca than in Ejutla (Feinman and Nicholas 1992, 2013; Kowalewski et al. 1989). We did find many good clay deposits in the Ejutla Valley, so we suspected that ceramic manufacture there might have been of smaller scale (intended for local use) or shorter duration than in the Valley of Oaxaca, making it less visible on the surface. The shell was different. Shell working was much rarer in the region overall, but heavily concentrated in Ejutla. In the much larger Valley of Oaxaca, evidence of shell working has been found only at San José Mogote during the Early Formative (Flannery and Marcus 2005; Flannery and Winter 1976, 39–41; Marcus 1989) and for later epochs in surface collections on a few residential terraces at Monte Albán (Blanton 1978). In the Miahuatlán Valley, immediately south of Ejutla and closer to the Pacific Coast, evidence of prehispanic shell working has been reported (but not described in detail) in one small habitation area that is part of a large site near the district capital (Brockington 1973, 15; Markman 1981, 32). But the densest surface evidence of shell working was at the Ejutla site. We suspected that excavations in the fields of dense surface shell at Ejutla could provide a wealth of information, not only on details of shell ornament production but also to help us answer broader questions about macroscale relations and the nature of the prehispanic economy.

### 1.3. Organization of the Book

We organize this volume into a series of chapters that present background information on Ejutla, the basic findings of the excavations, our principal research themes, and the material record. In chapter 2, we discuss a range of topics relevant to our excavations in the area of dense surface shell, from a fuller picture of the Ejutla Valley drawn from the regional survey, a description of the Ejutla site beyond the shell area, a brief introduction to shell in prehispanic Mesoamerica in which to situate the surface findings at the Ejutla site, and the importance of excavating houses in Mesoamerica. We briefly introduce three other sites in the Valley of Oaxaca—El Palmillo, the Mitla Fortress, Lambityeco—where we subsequently excavated houses and on which we draw when relevant to findings from Ejutla. Chapter 3 lays out our three-stage investigatory plan of surface collection, test pits, and large-scale horizontal exposures to recover information on the timing, context, scale, and nature of shell ornament production and other craft activities at Ejutla. In chapter 4 we describe the architecture and other physical evidence we uncovered, including the prehispanic structure, the subterranean tomb, the firing pits near the structure, and the temporally diagnostic ceramics associated with the different features and levels of the excavations. Subsequent <sup>14</sup>C assays place the shell working in the Middle–Late Classic (550–800 CE) (Table 1.1). In chapter 5 we focus on the features and artifact assemblages that reveal the domestic context of the excavated structure, including the subfloor tomb and its contents, the kitchen area and interior workspace, and the range of utilitarian artifacts and subsistence remains that are typical of residential