

# MAYA MIGRANTS TO TOLLAN CHOLOLLAN

Geoffrey McCafferty and Tanya Chiykowski  
Department of Archaeology, University of Calgary

Paper presented at the Canadian Archaeological Association  
Peterborough, ON – 2008

## **Abstract:**

Recent reinterpretations of archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence indicate lowland to highland interaction during the Epiclassic period, with influences seen at such sites as Cacaxtla, Xochicalco, and Cholula. During the summer of 2007 the authors had the opportunity to work with recently excavated materials from a large rescue project at Cholula that included ceramic trade wares which further support these interpretations. This paper will present ceramic and lithic evidence to suggest exchange patterns from the Classic to Postclassic transition. Discussion will integrate Epiclassic Cholula into the dynamic changes that were taking place during this crucial period of Mesoamerican history.

This paper presents recent discoveries from a large rescue project in the streets of modern Cholula, particularly as they relate to questions of lowland/highland interaction during the Classic to Postclassic transition. Ethnohistoric sources indicate that after the fall of Teotihuacan Cholula was occupied by the Olmeca-Xicallanca, a Chontal Maya group from the southern Gulf Coast. While this historical sequence was accepted by archaeologists during the mid-twentieth century, subsequent interpretations by members of the Proyecto Cholula rejected this scenario and instead claimed that Cholula was abandoned after the Classic period and not re-occupied until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Since the early 1990s, McCafferty has argued for an active Early Postclassic component at Cholula, integrating a critical consideration of the ethnohistoric record. Thus the authors were excited to have the opportunity to analyze a series of contexts that support the continued occupation of Cholula through the Classic to Postclassic transition.

Details about the Olmeca-Xicallanca have long been debated, with Wigberto Jimenez Moreno's seminal 1942 article still the most developed discussion. As the name suggests, the historic Olmec probably came from the lowlands of the southern Gulf Coast, with their important port-of-trade at Xicalango on the Laguna de Terminos. This was a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual area in the Postclassic period, where Chontal Maya, Mixe-Zoquean, and Nahuatl groups (at least) formed a cultural mosaic.

Cholula, located in the Puebla/Tlaxcala valley of Mexico's central highlands, was clearly identified with the Olmeca-Xicallanca in Colonial period 'mythstories.' For example, Ixtlilxochitl recorded the sequence of world ages, or suns, in which the Olmeca arrived during the Ehecatonatiuh ("sun of the wind god"). They vanquished, literally "consumed," by the

“giants”, or *quinametiname*, who had lived there previously. These ‘giants’ were the pyramid builders of Classic period Teotihuacan and Cholula. The Olmeca of the Wind Age built a pyramid dedicated to their high priest/god Quetzalcoatl; this structure was probably the final stage of the Great Pyramid, Tlachihualtepetl.



Figure 1: Great Pyramid of Cholula, the Tlachihualtepetl, from the south

More information is available in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, which records and depicts the arrival of Tolteca and Chichimeca migrants to Cholula, where they met with the Olmeca-Xicallanca priest-king Amapane at his palace on the side of the Great Pyramid. After living under Olmec domination for a period of time the Tolteca and Chichimeca revolted to establish their own town around a new ceremonial center in what is now San Pedro Cholula, northwest of the Great Pyramid. This new center was described by Cortes as ‘grandier than the cities of Spain, with more than 400 towers atop temples.’



Figure 2: Arrival of Tolteca-Chichimeca lords at Great Pyramid (HTC 1976: )

Despite these detailed accounts, problems with the ceramic sequence and consequent chronology led archaeologists of the 1970s and 80s to reject the ‘mythstories’ in favor of a culture history that closely paralleled that of the Basin of Mexico, proposing the abandonment of Cholula at the end of the Classic and reoccupation roughly in line with the rise of the Aztecs. This was the accepted sequence when McCafferty began working at the site in the mid-1980s.

In the late 1970s the archaeological world was rattled with the discovery of Maya style murals at the site of Cacaxtla, just north of Cholula. These murals present brilliant polychrome images of warring groups, some with characteristic Maya features and costume elements. These were quickly identified as Olmeca-Xicallanca, and related to another 16<sup>th</sup> century description by Diego Muñoz Camargo of a fortified Olmec town with deep defensive ditches like those found at Cacaxtla. Together with renewed interest in the carved facades of Xochicalco, where very Maya-like lords are depicted seated within the undulating coils of a feathered serpent, the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century featured a greater concern with lowland/highland interaction. With epigraphic decipherments that suggest Teotihuacan influences on Tikal and Copan, among other Maya centers, and with renewed interest in relations between Tula and Chichen Itza, Mesoamerica is being reconceptualized as more cosmopolitan, with a greater degree of international integration.



Figure 3: Cacaxtla Battle Mural

### **CHOLULA**

Within this cultural context, Cholula can be reinterpreted for its role in the Classic to Postclassic transition. Analysis of domestic remains from the UA-1 household allowed a seriation of Postclassic midden deposits to suggest a cultural sequence from about 900 CE to Contact. Subsequent excavations have filled in the remaining gap between the Late Classic and Early Postclassic, so a ceramic sequence with roughly 100 - 200 year increments is now plausible, though rigorous absolute dating is still needed to confirm or refine that sequence. Polychrome pottery was probably first developed by at least 900 CE, while incipient Mixteca-Puebla style iconography was introduced even earlier. The earliest polychrome pottery resembles Maya polychromes with Gulf Coast stylistic elements, and is therefore probably an Olmeca-Xicallanca innovation.

The Classic to Postclassic transition can be interpreted based on a series of rescue excavations conducted by Sergio Suarez Cruz of the INAH Regional Center in Puebla. For example, R-106, known as the Transito site, revealed a Late Classic period house along with isolated features from the Middle Postclassic and Early Colonial periods. The ceramics and figurines from the Classic domestic context were consistent with other Classic period materials known from the site, and bore many similarities with those from Teotihuacan, suggesting that at a household level there were strong cultural parallels between the two centers. A midden deposit with a very high incidence of green obsidian debitage suggests a cottage industry, and since green obsidian is generally considered to have been monopolized by Teotihuacan it is possible that this was the residence of someone with particularly close relations with the Basin of Mexico capital.



Figure 4: Transito site house floor with interior wall and doorway

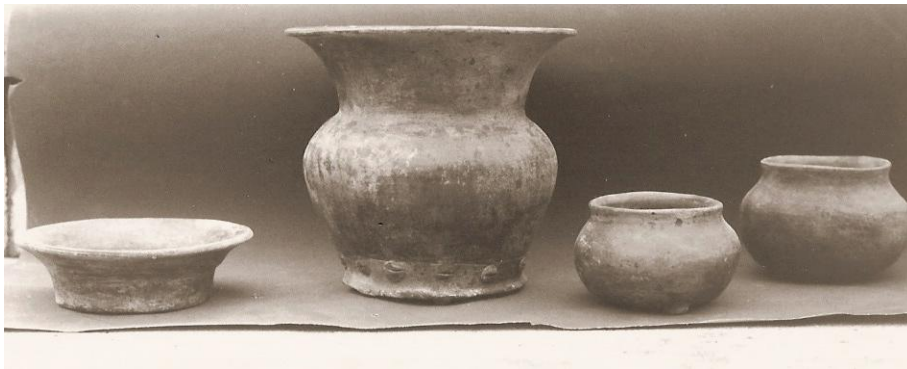


Figure 5: Tepontla Burnished Grey from Transito site

The Epiclassic period is represented by salvage work directed by Suarez Cruz at the Patio of the Carved Skulls, located on the northeast corner of the Great Pyramid. This locale was originally explored by Eduardo Noguera in the 1930s, when he discovered a miniature pyramid altar containing the skeletal remains of an adult male and female, representing the ‘richest’ grave ever found at Cholula. Associated with the skeletons were a number of ceramic vessels, including miniature ollas with shallow grooved decoration on the shoulder (Adriana Anaranjado) and subhemispherical bowls with black painted designs on the interior base (Cocoyotla Black on Natural). Suarez Cruz’s salvage excavation identified six construction stages at the patio, with a gradual transition from primarily Classic period ceramics (similar to those from the Transito site) to a predominance of Postclassic diagnostics such as Cocoyotla bowls, Momoxpan comales, and San Andres Red ollas and cazuelas. No polychrome pottery was found, suggesting that the patio was abandoned prior to about 900 CE. Trade wares from the patio related to Gulf Coast types.

Surface finds of early polychromes from an adjacent area on the platform, however, suggest that the area continued as an elite residential zone, although this needs to be verified with further excavation.



Figure 6: Miniature pyramid-altar from Patio of the Carved Skulls



Figure 7: Cocoyotla Black on Natural

A deep trash-filled well from San Pedro Cholula provides a solid dated context for some of the earliest polychrome pottery. Two dates from between 900-1000 CE were associated with examples of Ocotlan Red Rim, including the Sencillo subtype as well as more elaborate polychrome subtypes such as Cristina and Elegante.



Figure 8: Ocotlan Red Rim Polychromes

The best documented context for the Early Postclassic was the UA-1 Structure 1 house and associated midden deposit. This was excavated by Daniel Wolfman in the late 1960s, but was largely unreported until McCafferty's dissertation in the early 1990s. A variety of polychrome types were found in abundance, especially subtypes of Ocotlan Red Rim, Cuaxiloa Matte, and Torre Polychrome. Cocoyotla Black on Natural was also prominent, as were monochrome bowls of Xicalli Plain. A second house, Structure 2, was partially sampled and provided an indication of Middle Postclassic diagnostics. Intrusive features, including two trash-filled wells, provided samples of Late Postclassic and Early Colonial material culture.

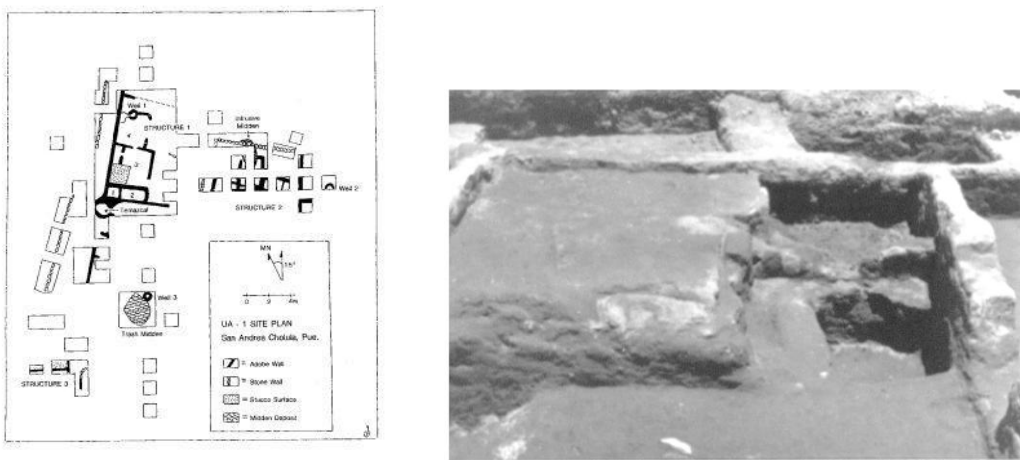


Figure 9: UA-1 excavation and photo of Room 3 with altar (photo by D. Wolfman)



Figure 10: Cuaxiloa Matte Polychrome and Torre Polychrome

Based on these previous studies it is now established that Cholula was not abandoned following the Classic period, but rather underwent significant cultural changes. The Great Pyramid was expanded to its maximum extent during the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic, including the Patio of the Altars which featured monumental sculpture with Gulf Coast iconographic elements and elaborate polychrome murals with themes related to Late Classic Maya vases and general characteristics similar to the Cacaxtla murals.



Figure 11: Stela/Altar 1 from Patio of the Altars, and Bebedores image

A Late Classic burial from a residential platform features distinctive cranial and dental modifications that led Suarez Cruz (1985) to identify the individual as a “Maya merchant.” While ethnic identification is a tenuous proposition using archaeological remains, these data do correspond well with the ethnohistorical accounts of Gulf Coast Olmeca-Xicallanca occupying Cholula beginning about 800 CE.





Figure 12: “Maya” skull with inlaid teeth from Late Classic burial

### **THE 2007 SALVAGE PROJECT**

Beginning in late 2006 and extending through 2007 Sergio Suarez Cruz directed an extensive salvage project in the streets of Cholula to mitigate the impact of a potable water project. Due to the archaeological significance of the modern city, which is built on top of the prehispanic city, construction projects require archaeological monitoring, though this rule is seldom observed as strictly as it was for this salvage project. Suarez Cruz was able to employ several archaeology students from the National Institute for excavation and analysis, and during the summer of 2007 archaeologists from the University of Calgary were able to join in the analysis of materials. Angela Fedorchuk prepared preliminary identification of eighteen human skeletons, Tanya Chiykowski classified lithic materials, and Geoffrey McCafferty supervised some of the ceramic analysis.

Trenches were dug by backhoe in streets in over twenty city blocks. Archaeologists monitored the trench excavations and were able to investigate cultural features as they were encountered. Surprisingly, virtually all of the archaeological features in this area of the city dated to the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic periods, thus providing excellent evidence to evaluate cultural practices associated with the Olmeca-Xicallanca occupation of Cholula.

One notable feature was an intact house floor that included remains of a hearth. Material culture included Cocoyotla Black on Natural ceramics, supporting the Epiclassic/Early Postclassic date. Carbonized remains of maize associated with the hearth are being dated at the National Institute radiocarbon lab, and dates are expected to fall in the 800-900 CE range. Beneath the living surface were two burials, placed in the flexed, seated position and facing north. This is the typical burial position and orientation of Postclassic Cholula, and indicates that the practice was introduced somewhat earlier than anticipated.



Figure 13: Epiclassic house and associated burials, note hearth in lower right (photo by S. Suarez Cruz)

A second important feature was a 6 m deep well, filled with refuse and when full expanded to the side as a shallower trash pit. This was one of the features analyzed by Chiykowski, who studied 220 lithic fragments. 96% of the lithics were obsidian, with the remainder of a whitish chert. Basing her classification on visual distinctions in color, black was the most common, followed by cloudy and clear grays, and green. Dividing the well column into 1 m increments, an interesting pattern appeared. The bottom three levels exhibited virtually identical frequencies of obsidian by color, with roughly equal amounts of black, cloudy gray, and clear gray and a lesser amount of green obsidian. In the upper three levels, however, black obsidian made up between 50-70%, with very little clear gray and about 10% cloudy gray. The frequency of green obsidian remains about 10% in the different layers.

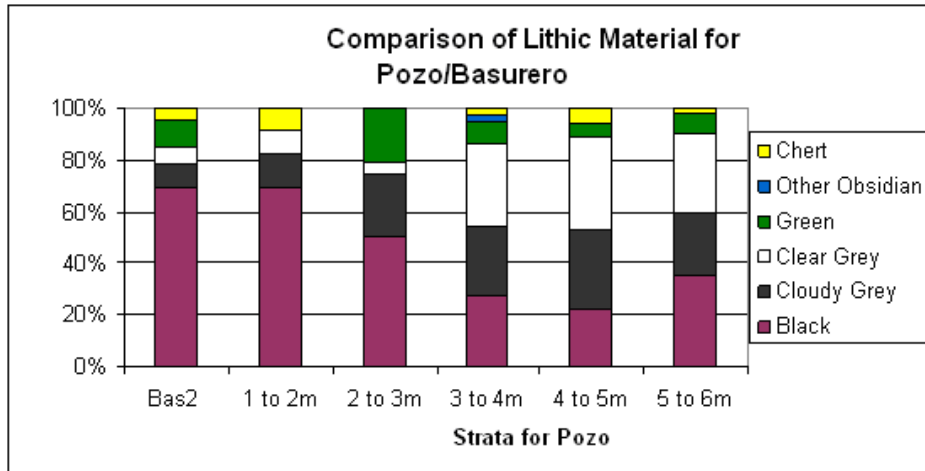


Figure 14: Table of lithic frequencies from midden/well

Ceramics from the well demonstrate a similar pattern. In the lowermost levels the pottery frequencies were similar to those from the Patio of the Carved Skulls, with Cocoyotla Black on Natural as the major decorated type, suggesting an Epiclassic date. In the upper levels and in the associated midden, however, fragments of Ocotlan Red Rim were included, although only in the Sencillo subtype, suggesting that these materials probably pre-date the San Pedro well associated with the 900-1000 CE dates. Samples of carbonized wood are in the process of being dated at the INAH lab. The ceramics confirm that the lower and upper levels of the well were filled at different times, though possibly within a generation or two.



Figure 15: Local ceramics from well; Cocoyotla, Comac Red on Buff, Ocotlan Sencillo

In addition to these local types, the well and midden included numerous examples of import wares from the Gulf Coast, including a fine whiteware vase from the Huastec region of the northern Gulf and imitation fine orange from the southern Gulf. Two pieces of Tohil Plumbate represent some of the first examples of this famous import ware found in Cholula. A

reconstructible *xantil* brazier closely resembles biconical braziers with anthropomorphic appliques found at UA-1 and at Cacaxtla. These exotic ceramics support the presence of strong Gulf Coast interaction, consistent with the theory that Cholula was occupied by Maya-related Olmeca-Xicallanca.



Figure 16: Import pottery from well: Tohil Plumbate, Huastec whiteware, Imitation Fine Orange



Figure 17: Ceramic xantiles; Cholula museum and two from UA-1

A third feature also dated to this transition period and ties in with other architectural forms from Cholula's ceremonial center. Trenching on Avenue 5 South, three blocks south of the modern town plaza and about a kilometer west of the Great Pyramid discovered a miniature pyramid altar decorated on its low facades with sculpted skulls and crossed bones. Other miniature pyramid

altars are known from the Patio of the Altars and also the famous Patio of the Carved Skulls, so named because the small altar was also decorated with sculpted skulls. Both of these altars date to the Epiclassic period and are associated with the Olmeca-Xicallanca occupation. Associated ceramics include shallow bowls of Cocoyotla Black on Natural, Imitation Fine Orange, and a small polychrome jar decorated in a Gulf Coast style. The new altar was associated with similar pottery, though that analysis is not yet complete.



Figure 18: Miniature pyramid-altar with carved skulls (photos by S. Suarez Cruz)



Figure 19: Altar of the Carved Skulls and Altar Olmeca

Chiykowski did complete the analysis of 236 lithic artifacts from the altar and vicinity. She measured this collection based on blade weight in addition to raw count. Black obsidian again made up the largest amount of obsidian by weight, accounting for about 50%. Cloudy and clear gray obsidians were represented at approximately 15% each. Interestingly, the average weight per flake (by color) indicated that green obsidian flakes were generally smaller, suggesting a more refined knapping technology perhaps as an indication of greater perceived value. All of the expended cores were of black obsidian, indicating a distinct distribution network whereby green

obsidian may have been traded as prepared blades; this corresponds to the pattern found at the UA-1 household complex where no green cores were found.

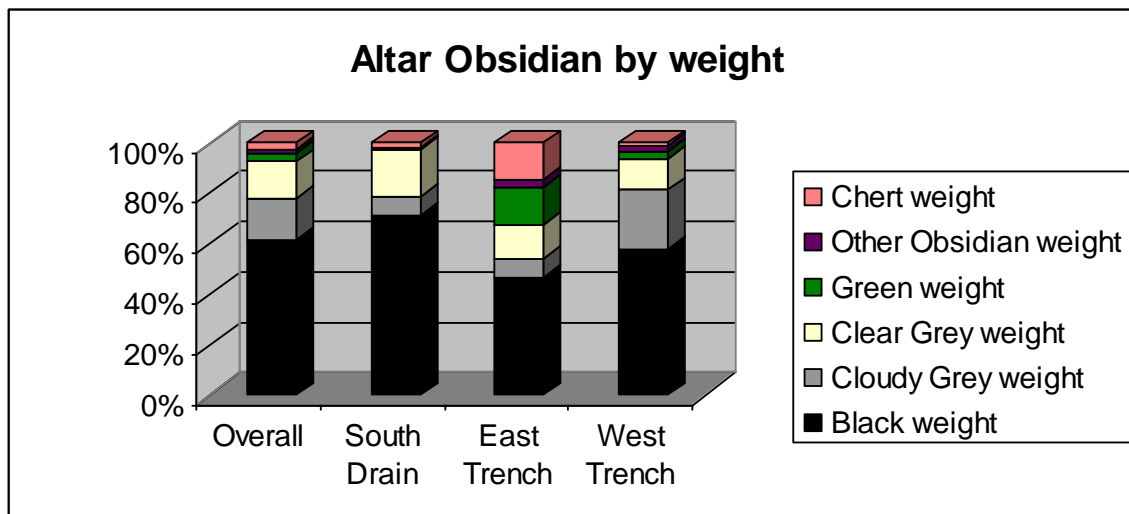


Figure 19: Obsidian from miniature pyramid-altar

Green obsidian is well established to have been mined at the Cerro de las Navajas site near Pachuca, Hidalgo, where its control was monopolized by such imperial states as Teotihuacan, Tula, and Tenochtitlan. It is notable that during the Late Classic period the Transito site featured more than 90% green obsidian, indicating close economic ties between Cholula and Teotihuacan which controlled the green obsidian trade at the time. By the subsequent Epiclassic period, however, Cholula's access to green obsidian was considerably restricted, averaging about 10% from all collections sampled.

Most significant during the Epiclassic, and apparently increasing into the Early Postclassic, was the use of black obsidian. While compositional analysis has not been done to confirm the provenience of black obsidian, there is a major source of black obsidian at the nearby Guadalupe Victoria site at the base of the Orizaba volcano in the eastern Puebla valley. During the Epiclassic/Early Postclassic this site was most likely controlled by Cantona, a site that grew to monumental scale based, presumably, on its obsidian industry. With Cholula's Gulf Coast orientation at this time it is quite likely that it was *at least* a trading partner with Cantona, though this relationship needs to be more fully explored.

## CONCLUSION

Salvage excavations in downtown Cholula recovered a wide range of archaeological features, including several that provide valuable information for inferring cultural practices during the Epiclassic to Early Postclassic transition. Since this has been a hotly debated time period for the city's history, these data provide confirmation that the city was indeed occupied continuously during the Classic to Postclassic transition, while also supporting the Gulf Coast influences suggestive of the Olmeca-Xicallanca occupation.

The detailed research by Chiykowski on the obsidian remains represents one of the first studies of this important artifact class ever conducted at Cholula. She builds on an MA thesis by Ruth Edelstein from McMaster University that focused on materials collected during the previous excavations by Suarez Cruz and McCafferty at the Transito site and the Patio of the Carved Skulls. As a more substantial data base for lithics from controlled contexts is developed, Cholula's role in dynamic exchange networks is becoming clearer. The relative lack of green obsidian in contrast to the abundance of black obsidian supports a focus away from the Basin of Mexico during the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic, when green obsidian was probably controlled by Tula, in favor of a more eastern focus that probably included Cantona but extended all the way to the Gulf Coast.

Ethnohistoric sources indicate that the Olmeca-Xicallanca were important actors in Postclassic Mesoamerica, yet the 'New Archaeology' aversion to historical texts and the 'Mexico-centrism' that has dominated central Mexican archaeology have tended to mask their contributions. As peripheral regions such as Puebla and the Gulf Coast receive renewed attention, the Olmeca-Xicallanca are being revived. Recent studies by Lopez Austin and Lopez Lujan on the pan-Mesoamerican Zuyuan phenomenon, and Ringle et al's interest in the cult of Quetzalcoatl, both indicate a dynamic internationalism during the Classic to Postclassic transition, with Cholula and the Gulf Coast as significant players in the construction of a Postclassic world system