A City by the Sea

Early urban planning on Mexico's Pacific coast

by Jennifer Pinkowski

Courtesy New World Archaeological Foundation

Cantón Corralito is just one of many archaeological sites in the Mexican state of Chiapas, best known for its spectacular Maya ruins: the towering pyramids of Palenque and the bloody murals at Bonampak. (Black-masked Subcomandante Marcos, leader of the 1994 indigenous uprising that put the plight of Mexico's Indians on the international stage, brought Chiapas fame as well.) But these are hundreds of miles north of Cantón Corralito, which lies in an archaeologically rich area little visited by tourists.

The Soconusco is a resource-rich region dominated by an estuary system of rivers and swamps that runs along the Pacific coast for about 350 miles to southern Guatemala, separating farmland and beach. In prehistory, it was the main travel route through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which connects the mainland of Mexico to the Yucatan Peninsula and Central America. While agriculture first arose in Oaxaca, the state bordering Chiapas to the northwest, and the Olmec (1250–500 B.C.) created Mesoamerica's first civilization just north, on the Gulf of Mexico, it is in the Soconusco that archaeologists have documented the earliest permanent villages, ranked societies, and sophisticated pottery in Mesoamerica, all of which arose during a period known as the Early Formative (1800–900 B.C.).

The Soconusco's archaeological record has long been overshadowed by the dramatic monuments created by later Mesoamerican cultures, such as the colossal heads of the Olmec or the pyramids of the Teotihuacanos or Maya. The sticky tropical climate quickly destroys organic material, and the constantly shifting rivers often bury sites under deep alluvial deposits. Malaria and dengue fever thrive here as much as chocolate, bananas, sesame, and cotton.

But its resources have drawn people for at least 9,000 years, and archaeologists have followed them. Since the early twentieth century, some have studied the region's Archaic period (7000–1800 B.C.), when nomadic populations lived in small mobile bands and relied on the swamps for fish, clams, and shrimp, while the majority have worked on the many Formative-period sites that grew along the coast from at least 1600 B.C. Much of this work has been supported by the Brigham Young University–based New World Archaeological Foundation (NWAF), now headed by John Clark, considered one of

"Downtown" Ojo de Agua, a possible ceremonial center with pyramids and a rectangular central plaza in Chiapas, Mexico. Some 14 large mounds rise from the landscape, and hundreds of house platforms lie underground.

the foremost authorities on this period. Recently, Clark and John Hodgson, an NWAF archaeologist and Ph.D candidate at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, revisited a Formative site called Ojo de Agua, a settlement possibly founded by people relocating from Cantón Corralito, which was flooded out about 1000 B.C. Ojo de Agua was first investigated by the NWAF decades ago but has remained largely unexcavated until now.

While the research is still in beginning stages, what Hodgson found in the 2005 field season is promising. Ojo de Agua may be a planned ceremonial center in Mesoamerica with pyramids, the earliest one found so far.

Around 1800 B.C., life in much of Mesoamerica was still being lived as it had for thousands of years. Small nomadic tribes hunted and gathered, sometimes seasonally returning to known resources, though agriculture would become a way of life. Permanent settlements would take longer to develop. In the Soconusco, settled village life gathered speed first, though agriculture quickly followed. (The Soconusco's reliable natural resources may have delayed the need to cultivate crops.) The earliest evidence archaeologists have is pottery that dates to 1800 B.C., widely considered the earliest sophisticated ware in Mesoamerica. Earlier pottery, such as that found in the southwest state of Guerrero dating to 2400 B.C., is often crudely constructed. By contrast, the early pottery from the Soconusco is well made, with thin walls, trichrome slips, and elaborate geometric designs. These *tecomates,* as they're called, were often created in huge sizes suitable for large amounts of corn beer or food, clearly indicating they had a purpose beyond the utilitarian—feting guests or impressing neighbors, for instance—which is an archaeological benchmark of social complexity.

From about 1600 B.C. through the next 1,000 years, large regional settlements, home to sometimes thousands of people, would arise all along the Soconusco, including Paso de la Amada in the north, Mazatán, Cantón Corralito, Ojo de Agua, and La

Ojo de Agua lies on what is now a working ranch with sesame and papaya fields. A trench cut into the side of the mound in the background revealed that it had once been a 20-foot-tall clay-capped pyramid. At right, John Hodgson and John Clark stand with a stone monument, rare for the period.

Courtesy New World Archaeological Foundation (2)

Blanca and La Victoria in Guatemala. From the number of large sites, at least a dozen, with surrounding hamlets, and the density of buildings and pottery discovered, the Soconusco was one of the most heavily populated regions in Mesoamerica.

The best-known, and earliest, Soconusco site from this period is Paso de la Amada, which NWAF archaeologist Michael Blake first excavated in the 1980s. First settled around 1600 B.C., it was a town of about 2,000 people Clark dubbed the Mokaya ("maize people" in Mixe-Zoquean, the language of the region's modern inhabitants), who lived in central villages surrounded by outlying settlements. Archaeologists found houses of disparate sizes, burials rich with grave goods, the earliest palace, and the first ball court. ("Mesoamerica's Oldest Ballcourt," News, July/August 1998.) In this chiefdom, some inhabitants clearly had more power and wealth than others—a shift from the egalitarian hunter-gatherer life.

Over the next 500 years or so, similar transitions would take place in other parts of Mesoamerica. For instance, Tlapacoya, a Valley of Mexico settlement now mostly destroyed by ever-expanding Mexico City, was a powerful regional chiefdom around 1100 B.C.; and the first ranked society in the Valley of Oaxaca has been found at San José Mogote dating to around 1000 B.C. In the Maya regions, there is little archaeological evidence of village occupation before 950 B.C.

The most dramatic changes were taking place on the Gulf Coast. There, at the huge urban center San Lorenzo (1150–1000 B.C.), the Olmec created the first stone monuments, massive heads depicting kings.

Like the Aztec thousands of years later, who demanded annual tributes in jaguar skins, cacao, and bird feathers from Soconusco chiefdoms, the Olmec were keenly interested in the region's bountiful resources. Numerous archaeology sites in the Soconusco have Olmec artifacts, underscoring their populations' longstanding connection. Some archaeologists who have excavated major Olmec sites argue that the Olmec may have picked up the Soconusco's early social complexity, taking the chiefdom form of "government" like that at Paso de la Amada and bringing it to new levels of complexity. Michael Coe, a preeminent archaeologist at Yale who excavated San Lorenzo as well as several Formative sites in the Soconusco, says, "If we knew more about the earliest cultures on the Gulf Coast—the people who preceded the Olmec—I'm sure you'd find out that all of the influences were coming out of the Soconusco." With most of the Gulf Coast buried under deep alluvial deposits, archaeologists have long been unable to find the Olmecs' ancestors.

But the notion that these innovations in social complexity found in the Soconusco were then transmitted to other cultures by the Olmec, who traveled and traded widely, is far more uncertain. Archaeologists don't agree about the impact the Olmec had on other cultures. The Valley of Oaxaca, for instance, where archaeologists Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery have traced a 7,000-year-long occupation and various levels of social complexity, holds potential evidence for social developments arising independently in several locations at once. And at sites with long occupations, like Tlapacoya, evidence of such developments may be buried.

Ojo de Agua has the potential to contribute to this body of scholarship. Like the majority of archaeological sites in the Soconusco, the settlement, located on what is now a working cattle ranch, is a collection of earthen mounds. These are largely the remnants of platforms made of earth, clay, stone, and organic materials that supported houses and other buildings. In the late 1960s, NWAF archaeologists found nonresidential structures at Ojo de Agua, as well as an impressive Olmec statue now on display in the regional museum in Tapachula, the closest major city. "But no one realized how old the mounds were until John and I started collecting pottery in and around them that dated to 1050 B.C.," Hodgson says. In the past couple of years, irrigation canals dug on large portions of the site revealed hundreds of house floors buried beneath several feet of soil. These surrounded 14 large mounds. Were these larger mounds the remnants of public buildings in central Ojo de Agua?

The mounds had all been built on the same alignment, 20 degrees east of due north. Hodgson took 14 carbon samples, which revealed consistent dates: around 1050–900 B.C. Of different shapes and sizes, the mounds had been quickly erected in the same period from a mixture of earth and specially mined clay, then capped with another layer of clay. Because of this

sealing layer, the preservation of their interior is unusually good; in one mound, Hodgson found impressions of palm fronds and chunks of wood from the thatched-roof house that had once stood on it.

A stone-lined, 100- by 225-foot elevated platform, most likely the town plaza, ran along the central axis of the site. Pottery sherds and another carbon sample dated it to the same period. Hodgson also found a large four- by five-foot stone monument, its relief carvings eroded by time. A couple of years ago, ranch hands found in the same area a five-foot-long stone sculpture of a fish, its bulbous eye still clearly visible. Such monuments are extremely rare for the period.

Hodgson and Clark are particularly intrigued by two mounds near the platform. Unlike those that gained height over time through accretion, mounds 5 and 7 had been built as 20-foot-tall flat-topped mounds from the outset. Mound 5 sits at one end of the plaza, and number 7 is directly behind it. The arrangement, size, and construction suggest that these are pyramids.

Hodgson and Clark think Ojo de Agua may have been a ceremonial center with a formal layout and pyramids built around a central plaza. It shows the nascent defining characteristics of a Mesoamerican city, including a planned alignment, a central plaza, ceremonial buildings, stone monuments, and most intriguingly, the pyramids. If so, it would be the earliest city with such an arrangement found in Mesoamerica so far. Pyramids don't appear in ceremonial centers until the creation of the second major Olmec capital, La Venta (900–500 B.C.).

Additionally, "most cities developed haphazardly, but this looks like it was conceived before it was built," Hodgson says. Towns contemporary with Ojo de Agua were aggregates of small houses and very few public buildings built over time as populations expanded. Its consistent dating and lack of later modifications suggests Ojo de Agua's layout was decided before its designers broke ground. It had been at least 250 acres in size with both domestic and nonresidential buildings on an important local river. From its size, the region's dense population at the time, and comparisons to other Soconusco settlements, Clark believes between 3,000 and 6,000 people may have lived there.

They caution that these interpretations are preliminary and will certainly develop as excavations continue. Clark says, "It's possible Ojo de Agua is a freak of archaeological preservation, and that San Lorenzo is the earliest planned city."

This spring, Hodgson plans to return to Ojo de Agua to continue excavations. Last year, he was careful to take carbon samples from just off center of each mound to preserve their contents for excavation. While the architecture of the site remains his focus, it's possible that in these mounds he may discover what has long been missing in the Soconusco: the people themselves. Relative to the population density in the region, few burials have ever been found, though five were discovered at Cantón Corralito in 2004. They are most likely obscured by deep alluvial deposits.

Meanwhile, many mounds await documentation and perhaps one day, excavation. A survey by Hodgson turned up 430 mounds last year alone. Less than 1 percent have been excavated. There is a pressing need for salvage operations and surface surveys, because the mounds are attracting looters seeking artifacts to sell to collectors in nearby Tapachula or in the capital. Other mounds have been "mined" for clay for use in road construction and brick making. Several have been completely destroyed. ■

Jennifer Pinkowski is associate editor of Archaeology.