



## Research Article

# Noble houses and palaces: reconsidering the existence of palaces in Late Postclassic (A.D. 1250/1300–1519) Tepeticpac, Tlaxcallan

M. Amparo Robles Salmerón<sup>a</sup>, Aurelio López Corral<sup>b</sup>  and M. Teresa Salomón Salazar<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Proyecto Arqueológico Tepeticpac. Avenida Benito Juárez no. 62, centro, Tlaxcala, Tlaxcala, 90000 and <sup>b</sup>Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia-Tlaxcala. Avenida Benito Juárez no. 62, centro, Tlaxcala, Tlaxcala, 90000

### Abstract

Archaeological research on palaces and architectural spaces related to power factions allow a better understanding of the social dynamics of political economies. Several types of palaces appear in Mesoamerica according to distinct forms of sociopolitical organization. For Tlaxcallan, a Late Postclassic (A.D. 1250/1300–1519) geopolitical state-level polity with a highly collective government, the existence of palaces has been questioned. We reconsider the existence of palaces in Tlaxcallan through the contextual analysis of an architectural complex (CA-2) of Tepeticpac, one of the sectors of the conurbated area. We evaluate the functionality of CA-2 as a palace by examining the processes of occupation and abandonment of the building in relation to its architectural and stratigraphic sequence and the type of associated artifacts. The comparison between archaeological and historical data indicate that Tlaxcallans probably had palaces, but they were less ostentatious compared to others found in societies with more centralized governments.

### Resumen

Los estudios sobre los espacios arquitectónicos de los grupos de poder, incluyendo los palacios, son fundamentales para entender las dinámicas sociales en las economías políticas. El Proyecto Arqueológico Tepeticpac excavó un conjunto arquitectónico (CA-2) que podría tratarse de un palacio tlaxcalteca del postclásico tardío (1250/1300 a 1519 d.C.), por lo que este estudio discute la evidencia que señala al CA-2 como una edificación de un grupo gobernante. Se presenta los resultados del análisis espacio-temporal del complejo incluyendo la secuencia constructiva, ocupación y abandono del edificio, así como de la producción, uso, y deshecho de bienes de uso cotidiano y de lujo; se reconstruyeron las actividades relacionadas con estas dinámicas, así como los cambios culturales generados durante el contacto entre tlaxcaltecas y españoles.

El palacio mesoamericano constituye la residencia de aquellos que administraban el poder, y un lugar multifuncional donde se realizaban actos públicos y privados de la élite. Caracterizamos a los palacios con base en tres dimensiones: escala (variaciones en el tamaño), diseño (diversos acabados y decoraciones), y uso-función (actividades del ámbito público y privado), considerando también que la morfología y características de cada palacio reflejan los rasgos culturales de las elites regentes, así como las estructuras político-económicas de sus sociedades.

Tepeticpac, localizado en el actual del Estado de Tlaxcala, fue uno de los asentamientos del *huey altépetl* de Tlaxcallan. Este altépetl se ha caracterizado por tener gobierno colectivo basado en la cooperación entre decenas de líderes *tecuitli* de ascendencia noble que controlaban bienes, territorios y mano de obra; otro rango de líderes fueron los *yaotequihua* o capitanes de guerra sobresalientes surgidos a través de méritos de guerra y la movilidad social. En este contexto histórico, se ha argumentado que en Tlaxcallan no hubo edificios con características palaciegas, y en cambio sí una sede de gobierno o de consejo en Tizatlán. En este trabajo, proponemos que los “palacios” tlaxcaltecas sí fueron comunes, aunque debieron ser relativamente pequeños y poco ostentosos en relación con otros ejemplos de Mesoamérica, como el caso del CA-2.

En total se identificaron seis etapas de ocupación en el CA-2. La etapa previa (1) consistió en un área doméstica con restos de un posible cuexcomate y materiales cerámicos para servir y preparar alimentos. Posteriormente, (2) se construyeron, una plataforma elevada (Unidades 1, 3A y 3B) utilizando lajas y piedras labradas, cuartos de adobe, una techumbre rematada con almenas de cerámica, y un patio (Unidad 4). Durante la ocupación de esta construcción (3) aumenta en el uso de sahumeros, vajillas de lujo y figuran las cerámicas importadas. El edificio fue clausurado (4) ritualmente, evento que se identificó con varios depósitos de derrumbe acumulado, asociado a la plataforma y al patio. Casi simultáneamente se erigió (5) una nueva estructura

**Corresponding author:** Aurelio López Corral; Email: [aul150inah@gmail.com](mailto:aul150inah@gmail.com)

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(Unidad 2) directamente sobre el derrumbe acumulado y cortando la fachada original, con una orientación distinta a los anteriores edificios y elaborada con materiales de menor calidad; observamos un empobrecimiento de los complejos cerámicos y un ligero repunte en la presencia de vasijas foráneas. Finalmente, el conjunto se abandona (6) formando una capa de tierra que por siglos sirvió para la actividad agrícola provocando.

La ocupación temprana del CA-2 corresponde a un recinto de élite considerando su ubicación privilegiada, la calidad los materiales asociados, y sus elementos constructivos como almenas; las vajillas importadas implican una conexión comercial con regiones de la Mixteca y el Valle de Tehuacán. Las vajillas de lujo del CA-2 poseen diseños tipo códice, poco frecuentes en otras partes de Tepeticpac. En el CA-2 se realizaron una variedad de actividades económicas asociadas a la élite, como el consumo de perros y guajolotes, rituales que incluyen sahumerios y figurillas de deidades, producción de hilo y cordeles, y manufactura de navajas de obsidiana. Entre 1519 y 1521 debió iniciar la segunda etapa constructiva influenciada por la cultura europea; aunque la construcción es más modesta, se observa una interacción comercial con grupos de la Cuenca de México que permitió a sus ocupantes mantener un estatus socioeconómico similar al de periodos anteriores. Finalmente, después de 1556–1557, el CA-2 y Tepeticpac parecen haberse abandonado debido a la reubicación de la población en la ciudad novohispana de Tlaxcala.

La evidencia indica que el CA-2 fue un conjunto multifuncional que formó parte de los aposentos de un *tecpán* (palacio) de una casa noble (*teccalli*). En Tlaxcallan el concepto de “palacio” como espacio físico del *teccalli* probablemente existió desde la época prehispánica contrastando en tamaño y ostentabilidad con aquellos construidos en formaciones políticas donde la autoridad estaba centralizada. El CA-2 se presenta como una ventana a la experiencia social de una casa noble de la elite gobernante de Tepeticpac durante el periodo transicional del Postclásico Tardío al periodo Novohispano temprano.

**Keywords:** Tlaxcallan; Tepeticpac; palace; noble house; architecture; *teccalli*; ceramics

The relationship between architecture and political power has been a dominant theme in the research of ancient societies. Studies on architectural spaces related to ruling factions, including palaces, are a fundamental issue to understand social dynamics of Mesoamerican political economies (e.g., Christie and Sarro 2006; Evans and Pillsbury 2004). In Tlaxcallan, a Late Postclassic-period (A.D. 1250/1300–1519) state-level polity of Central Mexico with a highly collective form of governance, the presence of palaces has been debated because the residences of leaders seem “comparatively small and difficult to distinguish from other large residences” (Fargher et al. 2011a:316).

Archaeological research at Tepeticpac, one of the sectors of the urban core area of Tlaxcallan, uncovered the remains of an architectural complex (CA-2) formed by several rooms and a patio, from which abundant and varied types of artifacts were recovered. The evidence led us to infer that the remnants were part of a Tlaxcallan palace or noble house, but because palaces are typically identified by their architectural configuration—with certain limitations due to the complexity of occupation sequences and specific circumstances of abandonment process (Inomata et al. 2001:288)—we considered evaluating if CA-2 was indeed a space linked to the ruling nobility of Tepeticpac. This information is crucial given that we have the possibility of comparing archaeological data with local written history, thereby allowing us to clarify the specific way in which the collective government manifested itself, and how Tlaxcallan leaders may have conceived governmental collectivity.

If CA-2 was part of a palace, then we should find evidence of cultural trends related to ruling individuals in the spatial arrangement of the building and its architectural construction sequence, the quality of building materials, and the characteristics of the artifacts recovered within its spaces. We focus on identifying the dynamics of occupation through an examination of its taphonomy, architectural sequence, and associated artifacts, focusing on distinguishing the

probable use function of the space and its processes of abandonment.

### Tepeticpac in its archaeological context

Tepeticpac was one of several suburb settlements that made up the Tlaxcallan urban core and a member of the larger state-level geopolitical entity, or *Huey Altepētl* (Figure 1). The site lies in the Central Plateau of Mexico, on the south-central region of the current state of Tlaxcala. It was erected over a system of hills flanked by steep ravines. There are six large plazas, at least 10 temples, and around 169 terraces built over an area of 98 ha. The distribution of architectural elements alternates with areas devoid of buildings and several restricted access points, delimiting at least five sectors (A, B, C, D, and E) (López Corral et al. 2019).

Tepeticpac was identified in the 1960s (Angulo 1965; Snow 1969; Tschohl and Nickel 1972), and in recent years, new projects resumed interest in the Postclassic cultures of Tlaxcallan (e.g., Fargher et al. 2010; López Corral et al. 2016). Since 2010, the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project (PAT) has carried out archaeological explorations with the aim of reconstructing the social, political, and economic structure of the settlement during its various periods of occupation, which expands from the Epiclassic (A.D. 650–900/950) to the Early Colonial periods (ca. A.D. 1519–1550). Research has also focused on analyzing the processes of change and abandonment of the settlement, including those generated after the Spanish conquest.

Architectural Complex 2 (CA-2) is located about 110 m southwest of the Tepeticpac Chapel in Sector C, over one of the most prominent sections of the site (Figure 2). Initial excavations of CA-2 and preliminary analysis of data associated the complex to the *teccalli*, or the “noble house” socioeconomic organization. Recent work

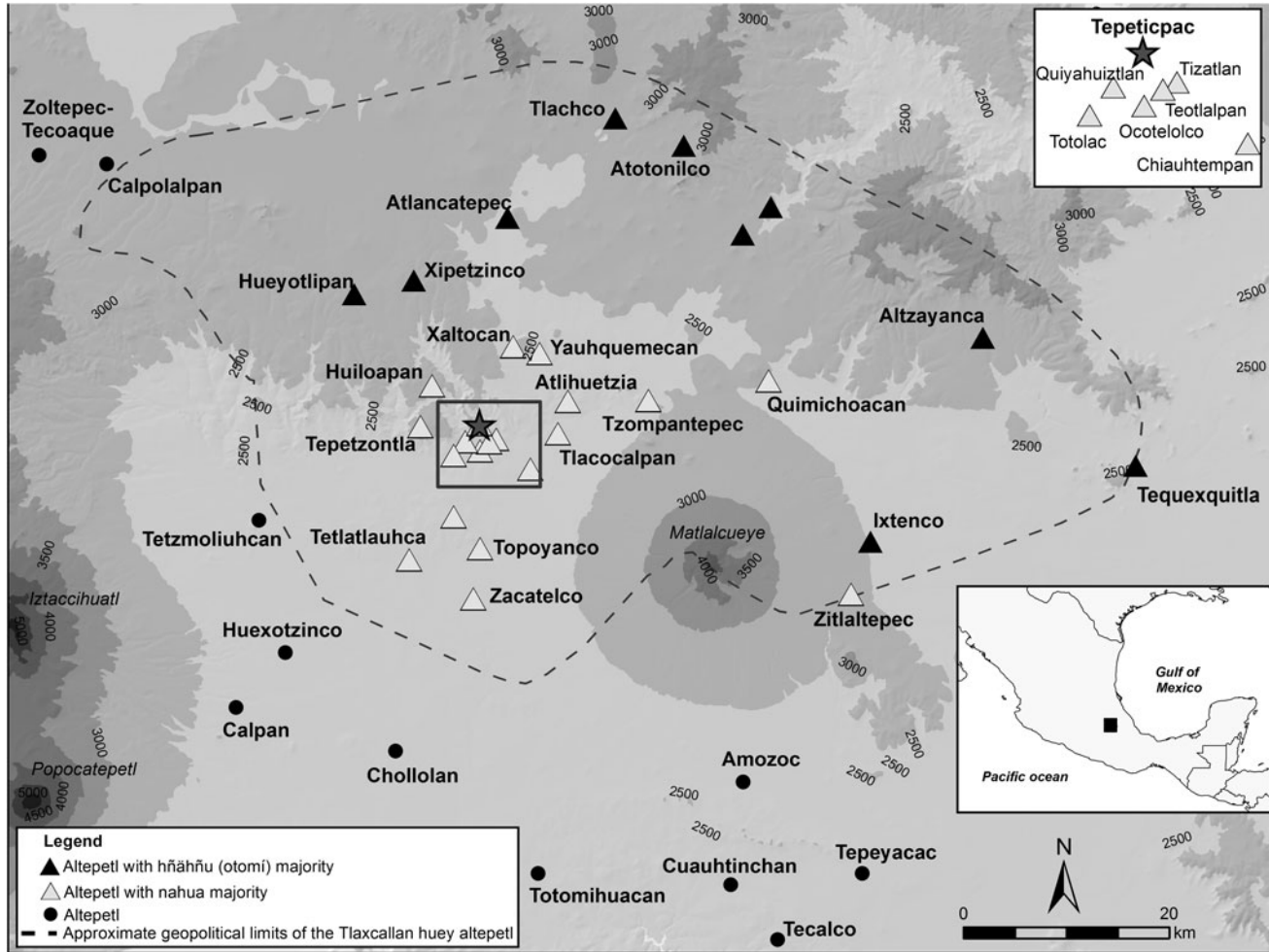
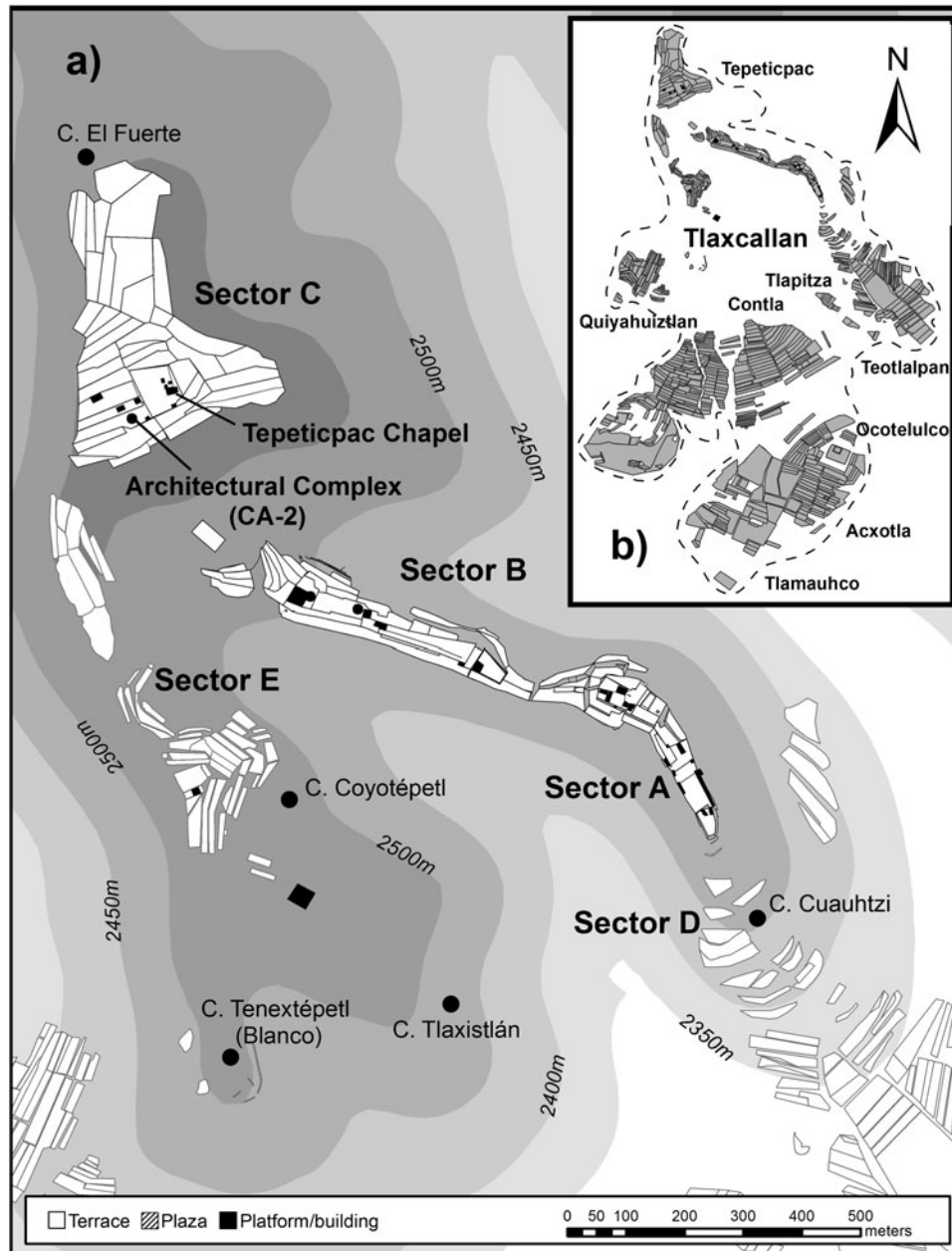


Figure 1. Map of the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley and the *huey altepetl* of Tlaxcallan. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.



**Figure 2.** Site map of Tepeticpac showing the (a) sectors and (b) location of Architectural Complex 2. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.

provides additional information on the social and cultural dynamics under which CA-2 was inhabited, abandoned, and reoccupied, thereby allowing a further evaluation of the complex relationship with local elite ruling groups.

### The Mesoamerican palace

The palace, in ancient times, was the place of residence for those who administered power, expressing an explicit fusion of public and private roles (Barber and Joyce 2006:211; Christie 2006:2; Fargher et al. 2020:6; Manzanilla 2001). A palace can be distinguished from an elite dwelling considering that it

is "...the residence of the highest-ranking member or institution of a polity and as the seat of governmental activities" (Christie 2006:3). Palaces can be identified using evidence of installations related to domestic and political activities because elite households seek to concentrate religious, political, and economic events around the palace (Elson 1999). Palaces are usually multifunctional and range from administrative to residential, displaying varied and diversified designs through time and space (Flannery 1998; Sheehy 1996; Yasur-Landau et al. 2015). Palaces are strategic locations for social practices of ruling elite. Therefore, their architectural complexity reflects the functions for which a palace was designed according to the prevailing political and economic order.

The scale, design, and use function are good parameters for identifying palaces. The scale of palaces is relative to other buildings and reflects the level of organization that elites exercise over the workforce (Charlton and Nichols 1992:244). The size of palaces can be considerably variable (Flannery 1998; Sheehy 1996), and it is said that for the Postclassic period, their surface can diverge between 479 and 11,000 m<sup>2</sup> (Fargher et al. 2020:Table 1).

The design of Mesoamerican palaces is also variable (see Evans and Pillsbury 2004), but commonly, they were built at prominent or restricted sectors using high-quality materials and decorative details (Christie 2006:2). The construction of these enclosures reflects an investment of resources that promotes hierarchical and symbolic differences between rulers and the governed.

The use and functionality of palaces refers to how governing groups use them for public and private activities. Palaces embrace administrative, residential, recreational, or political activities (Inomata et al. 2001:341), and they function as council rooms, courtrooms, rest houses (Evans 2004), state storage rooms (D'Altroy and Earle 1985), ritual spaces (Barber and Joyce 2006:215), houses of servants (Fargher et al. 2020:6), or as artist residencies (Flannery 1998:35). Unlike other elite spaces, palaces house ruling elites and serve to sponsor multiple public, economic, and ideological functions. Commonly, they are relatively larger buildings within a given settlement and were constructed with high-quality construction materials using sumptuous and exclusive decorative ornamental features with elaborate designs.

### Collective government in Tlaxcallan

Late Postclassic Tlaxcallan had a sociopolitical organization based on the sharing of power among various leaders (Gibson 1967; Martínez Baracs 2014). Leaders were of noble descent, and they controlled property, territory, and labor through an estate known as the *teccalli*—or the noble house (Muñoz Camargo 1998 [1580])—the prevailing socio-economic institution of several Puebla-Tlaxcala societies (Chance 2000; Hicks 2009; Martínez 2001). Another form of estate was the *yaotequihuacalli* (Anguiano and Chapa 1982), which was provided to the *yaotequihua*, or war captains (Zapata y Mendoza 1995 [1689]), that emerged from the common people (*macehualtin*) through outstanding war achievements (Durán 2006[1579]:vol. I, chap. XI, pp. 111–117).

Tlaxcalla's collective form of government has been labeled as a confederation, complex *altepetl*, senate, *señoría*, or republic (Fargher et al. 2011b; García Cook and Merino Carrión 1986; Lockhart 1992). A collective government polity is defined as “built on cooperation between individuals and groups making up a political community” (Blanton and Fargher 2008:12), a condition that applies well to Tlaxcallan given that the polity was headed by dozens of leaders (López Corral and Carballo 2021). Fargher and his colleagues (2010:316) argue that Tlaxcallan's collective sharing of power was expressed through a decentralized settlement pattern, an abundance of large plazas with relatively

small temples, and a lack of palaces. Following this perspective, the architectural complexes found at Tizatlán, another member of the confederation that lies east of the Tlaxcallan urban limits, are considered a capital where the Tlaxcallan leaders organized meetings for state-related issues (Fargher et al. 2010:12–13), unlike the historical version that identify these dwellings as the palace of the ruler Xicohtécatl the Elder (Díaz del Castillo 1998; Muñoz Camargo 1998 [1580]). However, considering the evidence of CA-2 and that Tlaxcallan probably had as many as 200 *tecutli* (noble rulers) and *yaotequihua* (war captains) leaders, each with its own *teccalli* or *yaotequihuacalli* estate, we hypothesized that palaces did exist throughout the geopolitical unit, although each varied in size, morphology, composition, quality of building materials, and associated artifacts.

### Taphonomy and architectural sequence of CA-2

CA-2 was explored with an extensive excavation of 216 m<sup>2</sup> (Figure 3), exposing a group of structures and spaces delimited by architectural elements designated as “units” (Figure 4). The complex consisted of a platform facing south, following the natural hill slope. It had a large patio in front and several associated rooms. The archaeological deposits were shallow, mainly due to partial damage caused by historical agricultural activities that left a scarce 40 cm of soil over the platform. Despite the destruction, we recovered substantial evidence on the overlap between architectural elements and a relatively complex occupational sequence. Through a stratification analysis scheme (Harris 1989), we identified three phases of occupation and two of abandonment (Figures 5 and 6).

To complement the architectural/stratigraphic evaluation of CA-2, we used the proportions and distribution of ceramic artifacts as markers to identify elite groups (Olson and Smith 2016; Smith 1987). Ceramic types were classified according to a modal system employing the attributes of paste, surface finish, decoration, designs, and shapes (Rattray 2001) and were grouped as (1) wares for preparing, serving, and storing food; (2) ritual and ceremonial wares; (3) prestige, luxury, or possible ritual function wares; and (4) salt production or trade wares.

Service wares include pots, comales, *cazuelas*, ladles, bowls, and plates in which food can be served, prepared, and stored (Figures 7a–7m); these types proliferate in all deposits, and their proportion (between 80 and 96 percent) remains constant throughout the occupation of the complex—a pattern consistent with domestic activities carried out in a multifunctional palace. In turn, textile printing ceramic types linked to the trade of salt occur in low quantities (0.5 to 1.4 percent).

Ceremonial wares include braziers, incense burners, and bowls and pots for rituals (Figures 8a–8i). Luxury goods, or bulk luxury goods, include polychrome vessels with fine decoration and complex “codex-style” glyphs (López Corral et al. 2019:340) (see Figures 7n–7p), which served ritual functions or were used as containers for food, offerings, or intoxicating drinks (Hernández 2010). Foreign imported types came from the Basin of Mexico (Cervantes et al.

**Table 1.** Comparison of 10 elite and one rural nonelite Late Postclassic residences from Tlaxcala, the Basin of Mexico, and Oaxaca.

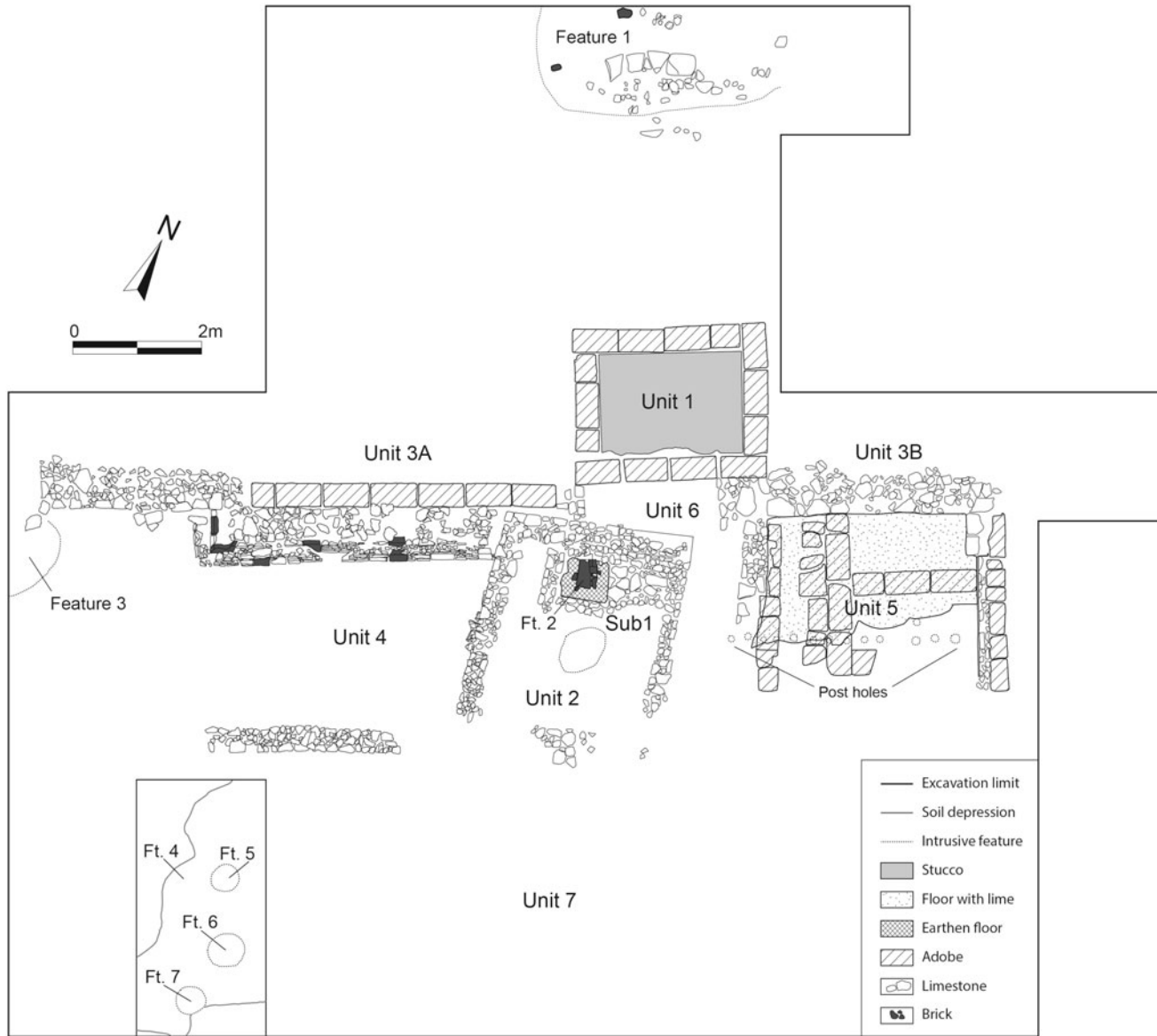
Residence	CA-2, Tepeticpac, Tlaxcala	CA-5, Tepeticpac, Tlaxcala	T.30, Tepeticpac, Tlaxcala	Ocotelulco, Tlaxcala	Tizatlan, Tlaxcala	Metepec, Tlaxcala	Cerrito Central, Xaltocan	Casas Reales, Chiconautla	Edificio 4, Tula	Cihuatecpan Structure 6, Teotihuacan Valley	Yucundaa Royal Residence (Unit 1-2), Teposcolula, Oaxaca
References	López et al. 2021; Ibarra et al. 2018	López and Santacruz 2014; López et al. 2021	Fargher et al. 2020	Contreras 1994; Zagoya 2007	Santacruz 2023; Zagoya 2007	López Corral et al. 2021	Farah 2017	Elson 1999; Nichols et al. 2009	Báez 2008, 2021	Evans 1988	Spores and Robles 2007; Spores 2013
Type	Elite	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	Nonelite			●		●					
Construction materials	Adobe	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	Brick	●	●	●	●	●		●			●
	Rock	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	Stucco floors or walls	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Architecture	Platform	●		●	●		●	●	●		
	Patio	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
	Sunken patio	●		●				●			
	Porticos				●	●	●	●	●		
	Altar				●	●	●	●	●		
	Hearts ( <i>tecuilli</i> )		●		●		●	●	●	●	●
	Almena	●							●		
	Ceramic molds	●									
	Rooms	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	Storage facilities or vessels	Unknown	●	●				●	●	●	

Craft production or consumption	Luxury vessels	●	●	●	●	●						●
	Serving vessels	●	●	●			●	●	●		●	●
	Obsidian blades and bifacials	●	●	●			●	●	●	●	●	Unknown
	Thread/textile production	●	●	Unknown					●		●	
Food preparation or consumption-related artifacts	Animal	●	●									
	Plant	●					●				●	●
Ritual activities	Figurines	●		Unknown	●	●		●	●		●	
	Braziers/Incense burners	●	●		●	●		●	●	●	●	
Imaginary in vessels, figurines, reliefs, or mural paintings	Deities	●			●	●			●	●	Possibly	Possibly
	Rulers or rulership	●	●		●					●		

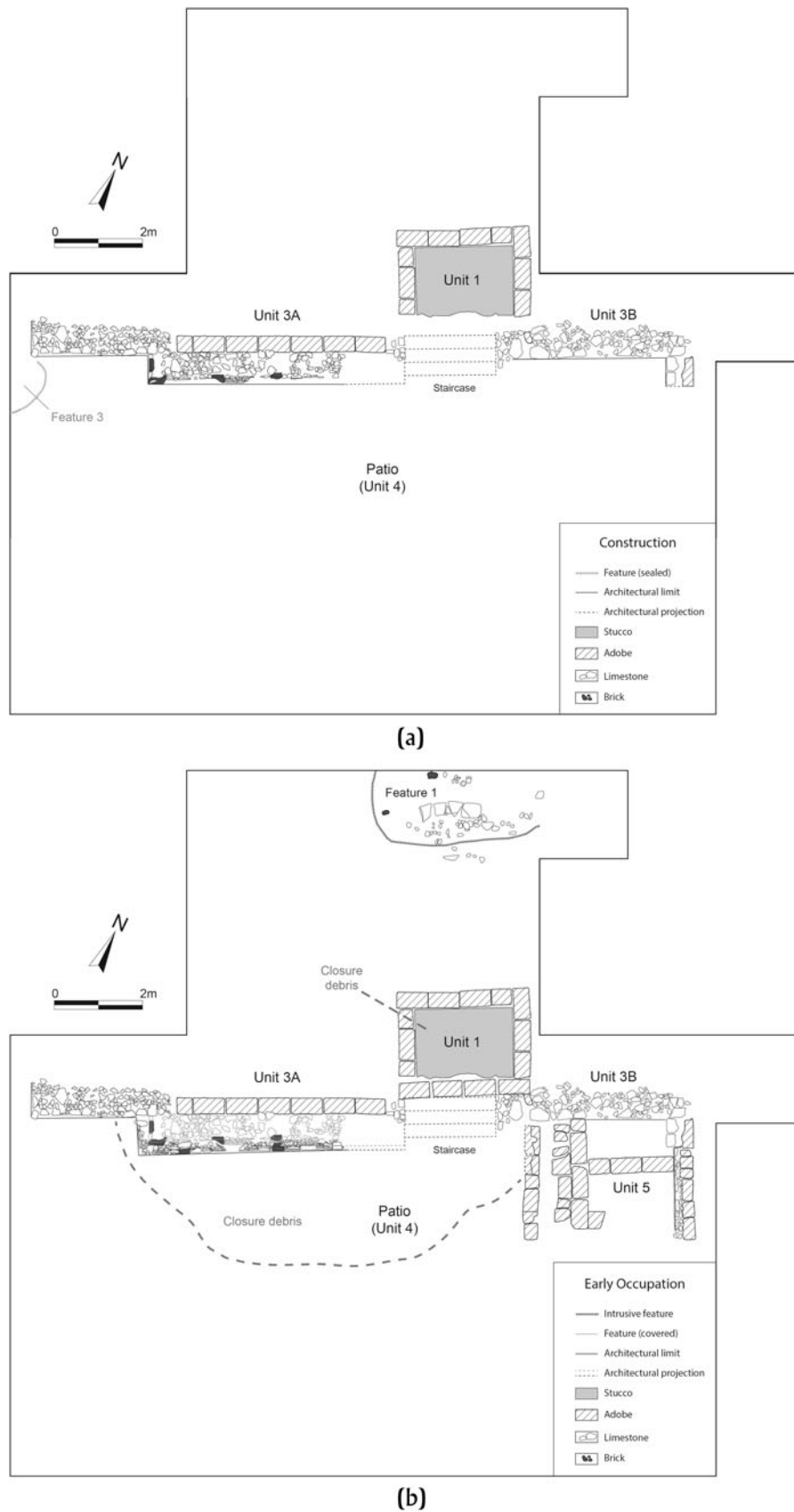


**Figure 3.** Excavation of Operation 2 (CA-2), view from the west (see chapel in the background). Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.

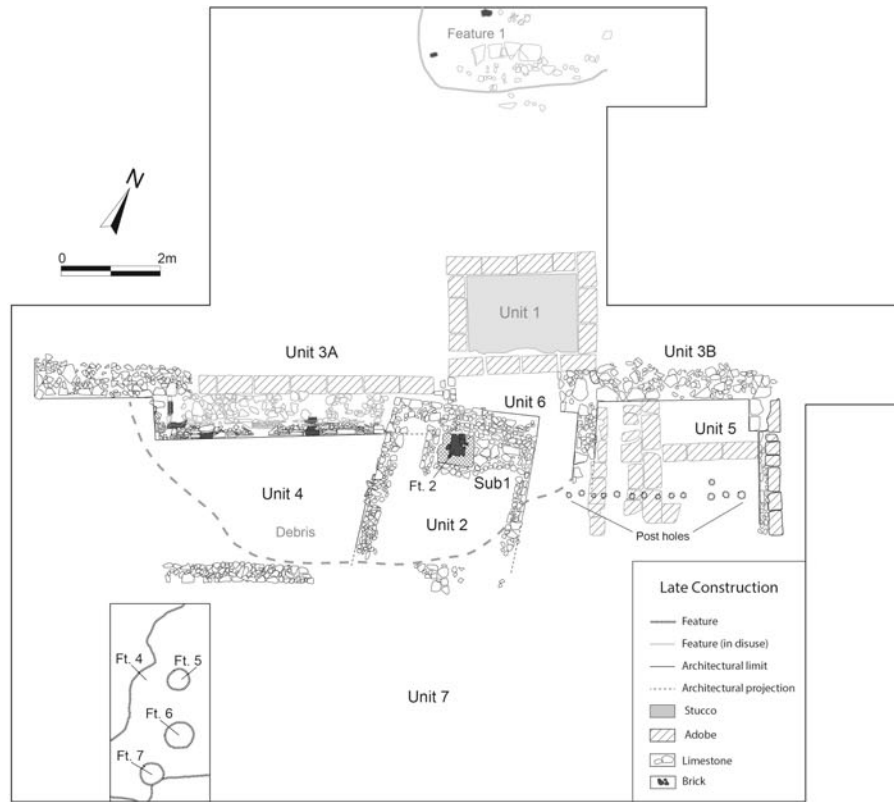




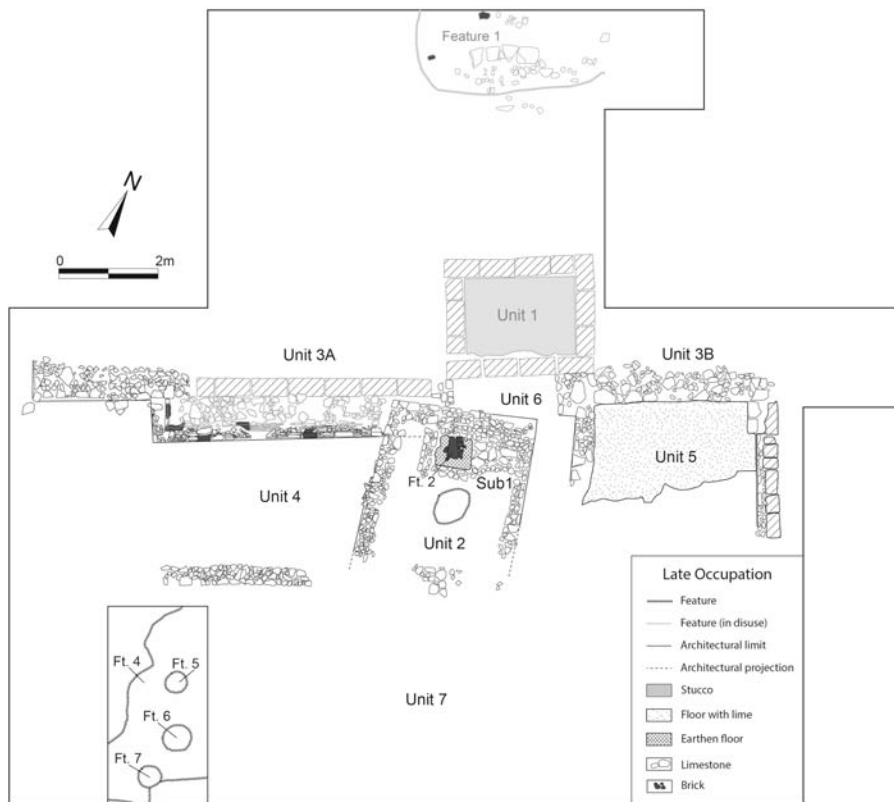
**Figure 4.** Plan view of Architectural Complex CA-2 showing labeled features. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.



**Figure 5.** Plan views of the (a) construction and (b) early occupation of CA-2. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.

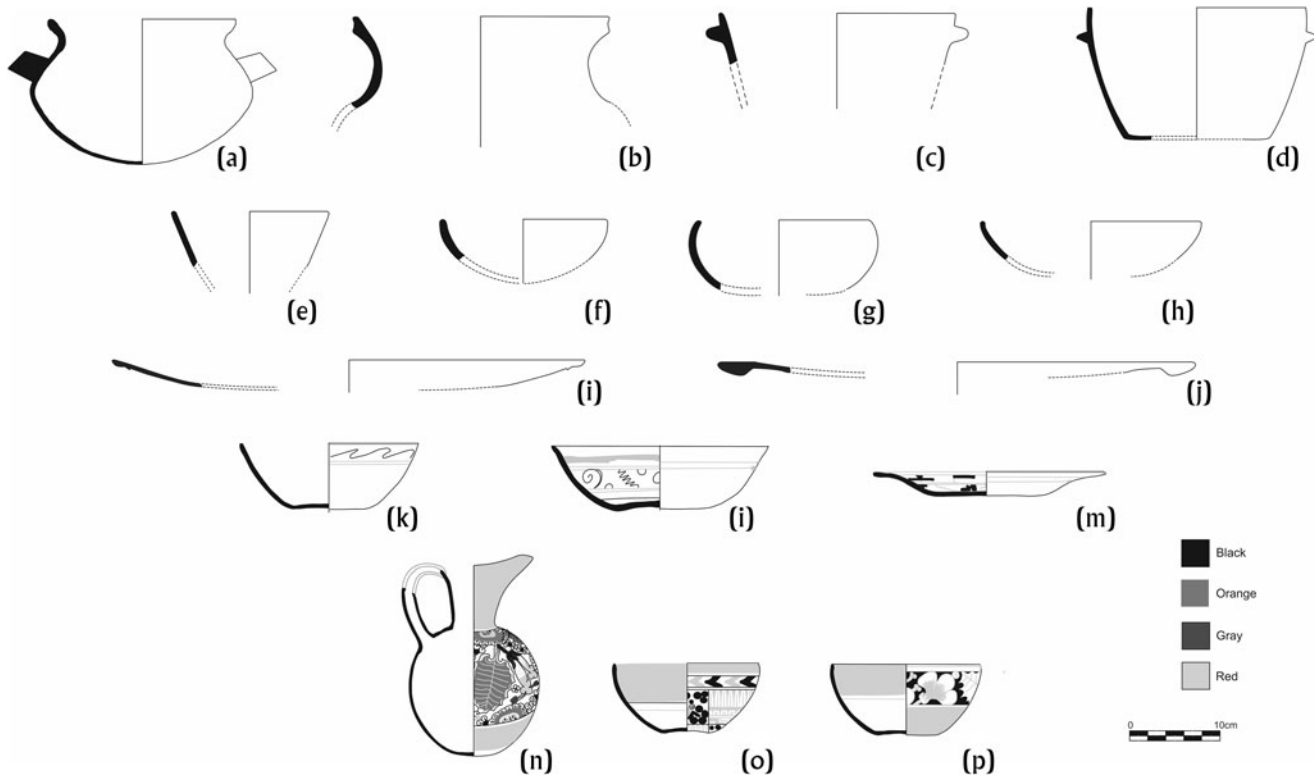


(a)

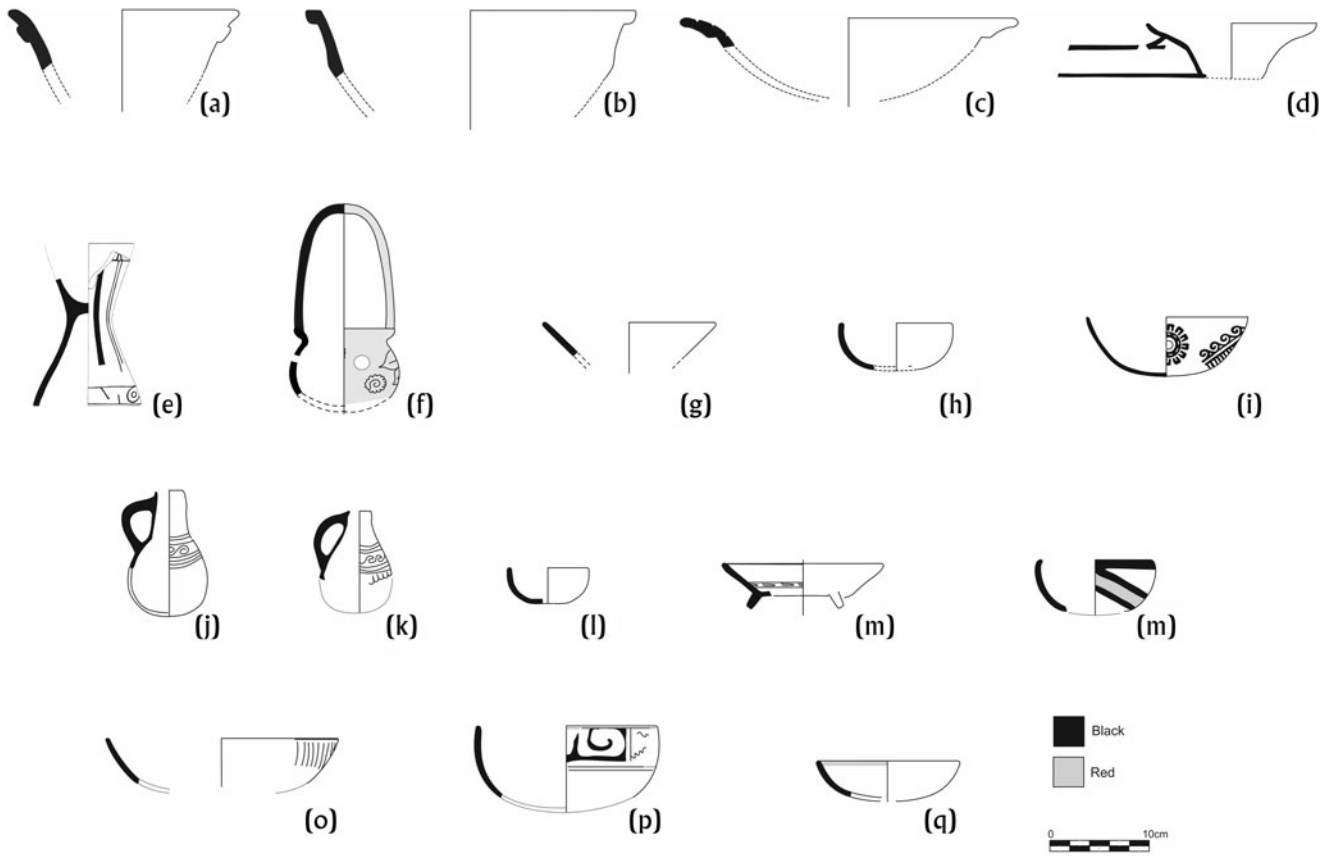


(b)

Figure 6. Plan views of the late (a) construction and (b) occupation of CA-2. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.



**Figure 7.** Examples of service wares: (a–c, g–h) Camiltic Reddish Brown; (d, f, i) Chilcoztic Orange or Metallic; (e) Ayocuxqui Coarse; (j) San Francisco Smoothed Red; (k–m) Machiyotl Geometric Design. Examples of luxury types: (n, o) Amoxtli Codex Glyph and (p) Iztlaca False Negative. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.



**Figure 8.** Examples of ceremonial wares: (a–b) Tlaxcitl Coarse; (c–d) Popocaxitl Incense Burner; (e) Tlaquilli Whitewashed Polychrome; (f–i) Chiltic Red Burnished. Examples of trade wares: (j–l) Tliltic Black Incised Burnished; (m) Aztec Black-on-Orange III; (n–o) Texcoco White and Black on Red; (p) Mixtec Black or Red on Cream and (o) Ehualtic Cream. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.

2007), Puebla and Oaxaca (R. Spores 1972:26–28), and north Tlaxcala (Heath-Stout 2019; Merino Carrión 1989) (Figures 8j–8o). Ritual ceramics, decorated types, and foreign pastes, because they are difficult to acquire, have a symbolic value that contributes to creating social distinctions (Olson and Smith 2016:143).

### Architectural Complex 2 (CA-2)

CA-2 consisted of a platform with a façade that was 16 m long and 8 m wide, and a patio 7 m wide in front. The complex had at least six substantial space modification events. The original construction plan included an elevated platform (Units 1, 3A, and 3B) and a patio (Unit 4) to which the southeast room (Unit 5) was attached at a late stage. After a closing event that partially destroyed the original building, a central room of the patio (Unit 2) was built, and another one (Unit 5) was remodeled. The platform was oriented 23° west of north, whereas the central room (Unit 2) of the patio and the eastern wall of the room next to it were oriented 9° to the south in relation to the original platform.

#### Previous stage

For this stage, we only have evidence of a circular cavity, probably the base of a granary (*cuexcomate*) (Feature 3) that was sealed by the construction of the CA-2 platform (see Figure 5a). Ceramics are scarce (less than 1 percent) and comprise domestic types, including potsherds, comales and bowls (96 percent), and a single fragment of an incense burner.

#### Construction of CA-2

The construction of CA-2 required leveling the surface floor at different heights; the northern portion that supported the main building, was about 50 cm higher than the southern one. A set of platforms with rooms and a large patio with an extensive earthen floor were built (see Figure 5a). The platform façade (Units 3A and 3B) was erected with a thick retaining wall (1 m wide) and had a set of protruding and receding planes, following the style of other architectural elements registered at the site; a *talud* (inward-sloping façade surface or panel) was made with a careful arrangement of slabs and worked stones interleaved with rectangular bricks. The original morphology of this central section was altered by the late construction of Unit 2 but most likely had an access that connected the patio with the upper part of the platform. The eastern end of the façade showed a break toward the south side, but it is unclear if this section continued further south as part of the original design. A later addition of Unit 5 consisted of two rows of calcareous and basalt rocks joined with clay (*tepetate*) and sand mortar; this construction system is like the western counterpart of the same façade (Unit 3A).

The room walls on the platform were made of adobe, and their basal rows were embedded in the bedrock (*tepetate*). We only have evidence of one of these walls on the southwestern edge and, in the center, the perimeter of another room (Unit 1) whose contours and thick stucco floor were well preserved (see Figure 5a). At least 18 elaborated fragmented *almenas*

(ceramic roof ornaments with varying decorative designs) that were decorated with stucco and black paint were recovered in the collapse over the patio (Figure 9), suggesting that at least the front part of the building was decorated with these ornaments. There are two types of *almenas* with decorative motifs similar to those seen in the Telleriano-Remensis and Florentine codexes. One had spirals with circular applications, probably representing cut seashells, that resemble the scepters called *xiyatlalli* carried by deities such as Mixcoatl and Quetzalcoatl. Another type of *almena* contained rectangular elements at the base, sometimes with a numeral inside, and curved elements on top (probably plant leaves or feathers), perhaps indicating a date.

Considering the central position and depth of Unit 1, this was an interior patio (*ithualli*) or vestibule around which other rooms would have been distributed. The south wall of Unit 1 is a late addition, indicating that there was an access that connected the lower south patio with this unit.

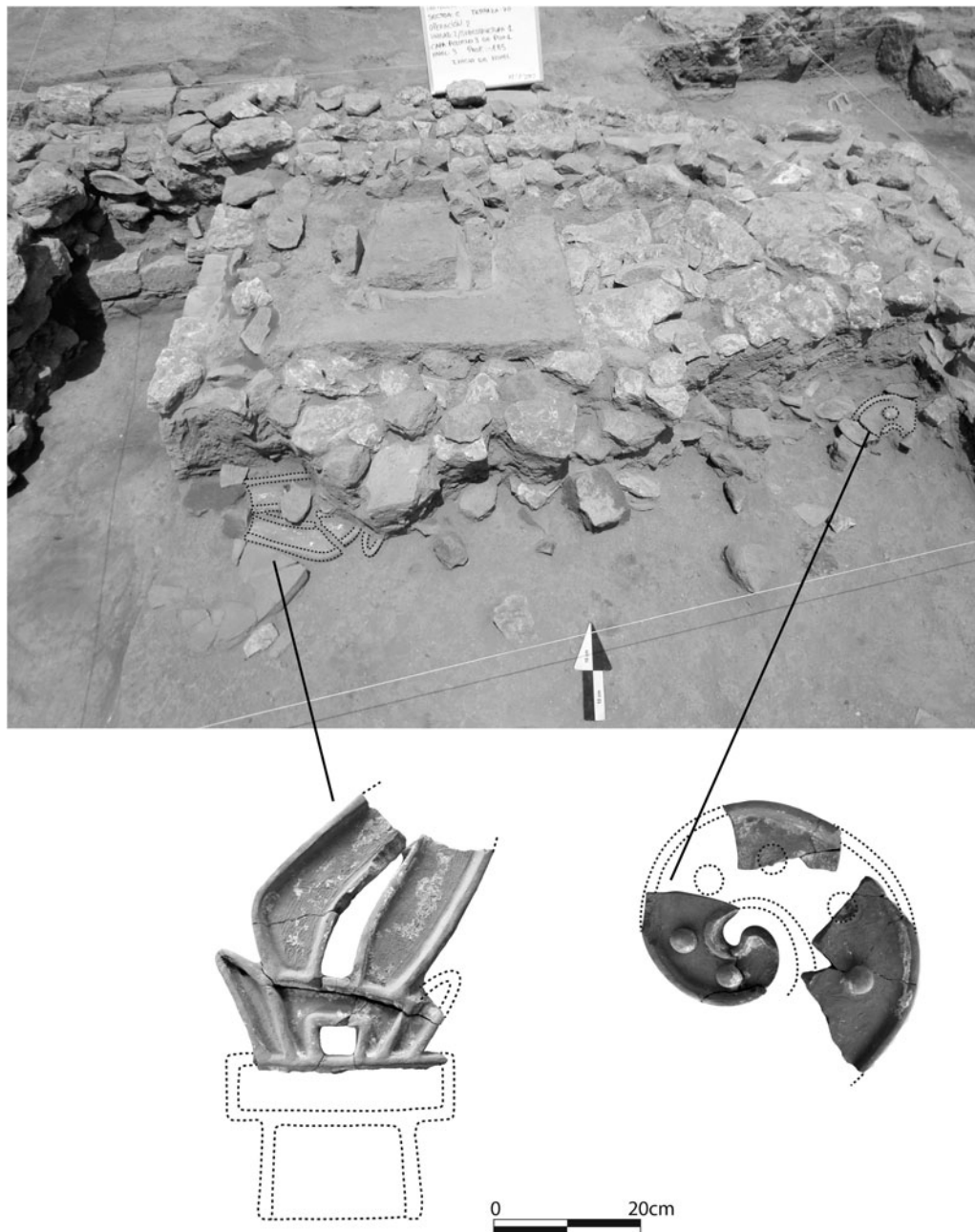
#### Early occupation

Several modifications were made to the platform during the early occupation. The west façade was modified by superimposing a layer of small limestone slabs (8 x 3 cm to 30 x 16 cm) placed longitudinally and alternating with thick rectangular bricks of different dimensions. On the other side of the façade, three perpendicular adobe walls were attached to another parallel wall (Unit 5). These do not align with the original design of the complex, indicating significant changes in the use and function of the patio (Figure 5a). The southern limit of Unit 1 was modified, breaking the original floor, and adding adobes, either to close the access or to place a step.

Several artifacts were recovered from an irregular pit excavated in the tepetate bedrock—probably a garbage dump (Feature 1)—located at the northern end of the excavated area. For this occupation, the volume of ceramics increases compared to the previous one (2.07 percent) (Figure 10), and 69 percent of the ceremonial wares consist of incense pan-shaped burners (Figure 11), which are considered ritual objects commonly found in Postclassic domestic contexts of the Basin of Mexico and Morelos (Carballo 2011:160; Huster et al. 2013:209; Smith 2002) and are depicted in codex scenes associated with priestly rituals. Recovered sherds of luxury pottery (1.3 percent) and foreign types (1.3 percent) include Aztec Black and White on Red from the Basin of Mexico, and ceramics similar to those reported for the Postclassic in the Tehuacán Valley (MacNeish et al. 1970:204) (Figure 12).

#### Closure

The early occupation of CA-2 has two collapse deposits: one located above the central patio, and the other one within Unit 1 (Figure 5b). The collapse in the central section of the patio included ceramics, lithics, animal bone, and other artifacts, along with construction rubble and several fragmented *almenas*. Below Unit 2-Sub1, we recovered a carbonized seed (Sample 36) that was dated between cal A.D. 1490–1603 ( $p=0.771$ ) and cal A.D. 1613–1637 ( $p=0.183$ )

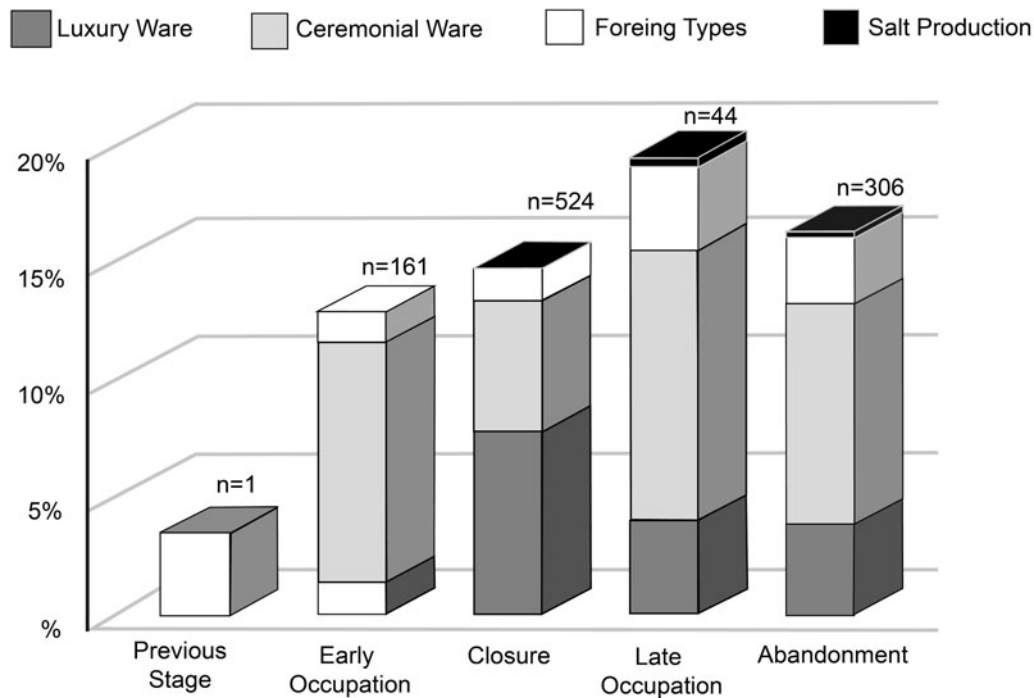


**Figure 9.** Excavation photograph of Unit 2-Sub I showing in situ location of two almena fragments. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.

(processed at the Keck Carbon Cycle Accelerator Mass Spectrometer Keck Carbon Cycle Accelerator Mass Spectrometer facility using a modified NEC 1.5SDH-1;  $^{14}\text{C}$  ages were  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ -corrected for mass-dependent fractionation with measured  $^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C}$  values). The collapse of Unit 1 also contained various materials. Fragments recovered in the collapse of both debris suggest a similar formation process of both deposits, in which the structures located on the platform and the patio access to Unit 1 were intentionally destroyed by some termination ritual.

The materials from these collapses show a considerable increase from the previous stage (see Figure 10). The most

abundant type were codex-style wares that probably formed part of the ceremonial paraphernalia restricted to a privileged group in Tepeticpac. Imported materials also rise in terms of proportion and diversity, given that we registered types from the Tehuacán region, an upsurge of types entering from the Basin of Mexico, and yet others from the Mixteca region, southern Puebla–northern Oaxaca region, and the Otomí region of northern Tlaxcala (Figure 12). We see a continuity in the action of censuring, given that there is a high percentage of incense burners (44 percent), but the ritual forms are extended to bowls suitable for offerings, as well as fragments of ritual pots and braziers (see



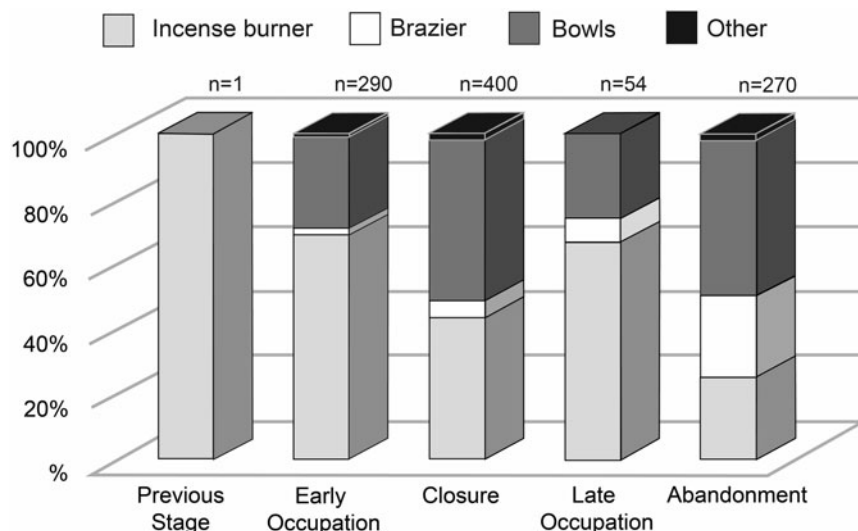
**Figure 10.** Percentual comparison of the principal wares by deposit. Service and salt production wares were excluded. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.

Figure 11). The evidence of ritual ceramics, luxury wares, almenas, and imported types is indicative of activities linked to elite groups, considering the characteristics of this type of goods and the kind of facilities that usually contain them (Carballo 2011:162; Elson 1999:164).

*Late construction and occupation*

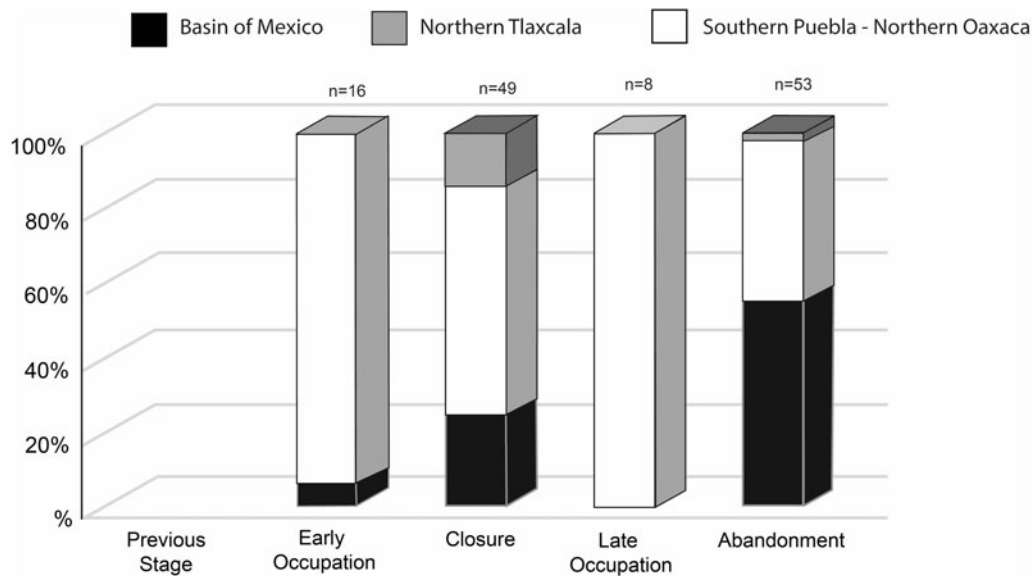
Upon the destruction of the early occupation of CA-2, Unit 2—of much lower construction quality—was built, and modifications were made to Unit 5. Unit 2 was a rectangular room

of 2.9 x 3.1 m, with a banquette on one of its sides (Unit 2-Sub1) (Figure 13). The northwest corner of Unit 2 was embedded into Unit 3A (see Figure 6a), orienting it 9° to the south with respect to the rest of the complex, coinciding with the layout of the nearby Chapel of Tepeticpac. The structure had an earthen fill topped with a stoned floor that supported a rectangular hearth (*tlecuilli*) (40 x 50 cm) made of bricks. The south section, possibly a patio, was delimited by an isolated wall located in the southwestern portion. The occupational surface was probably the earthen floor of the early patio (Unit 4).



**Figure 11.** Percentual relationship of the main ritual ware forms by deposit. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.





**Figure 12.** Percentual comparison of the principal trade wares by deposit. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.

Unit 5 was also remodeled to create a single roofed room with a front roof supported by posts. The previous adobe walls were destroyed, leaving just their start some 10 cm above the patio's earthen floor and filling in the intermediate spaces to accommodate a stuccoed floor. Its west wall was built offset 4° to the east compared to the alignment of the previous adobe bricks; this orientation seems intermediate between that of the early occupation and Unit 2. Likewise, with the construction of Unit 2 and Unit 5, a narrow corridor-like space was created (Unit 6).

Ceramics associated with the occupation surfaces of this stage (Units 5 and 6) comprise only 1.1 percent of the CA-2 sample, but this reflects the dynamics of cultural change that occurred during the Contact period. An impoverishment of ceramic complexes can be noticed because more than 80 percent of the pieces are bowls, of which 68.3 percent correspond to polychromes with geometric designs and burnished red types (see Figure 11); burnished red decoration wares were highly consumed among Iberian and indigenous elites of the Contact period (Charlton et al. 1990). Interestingly, the amount of ritual pottery grows proportionally and is followed by the occurrence of incense burners (66.6 percent of ritual pottery) and two brazier fragments. Foreign vessels (3 percent) also augment, signaling both the establishment of new interaction networks with the Basin of Mexico (54 percent) and a decline of ceramic trade interactions with southern Puebla–northern Oaxaca and northern Tlaxcala regions (see Figure 12).

#### Abandonment

The abandonment of Late CA-2 is marked by the fills underlying Layer A in Units 2, 5, and 6, which covered mixed pre-Hispanic and Early Colonial–period materials, including metal artifacts (Figure 13). The irregular cavities (Features 4, 5, 6, and 7) located in the southwestern section of the patio

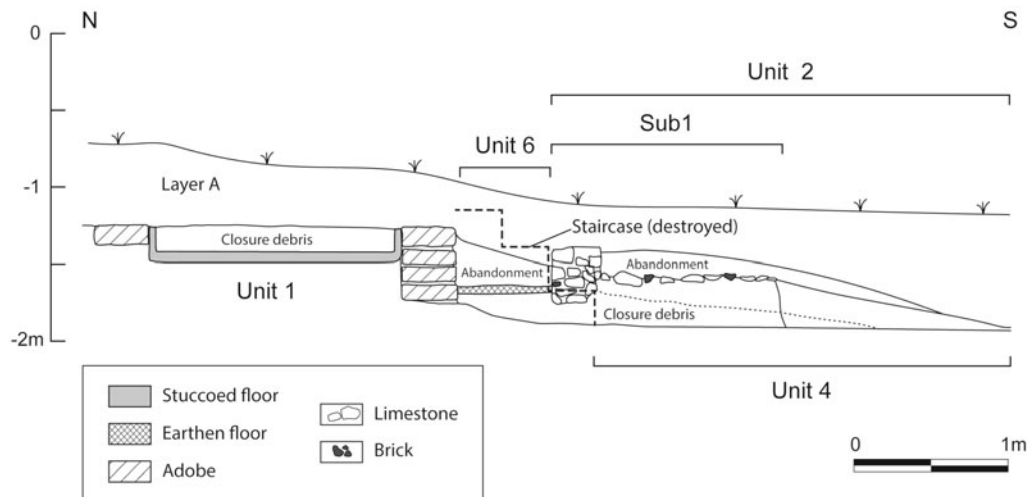
contained sherds that glued with others from Layer A, implying that they are part of the same late occupation or abandonment. At the bottom-center of Unit 2, there was an irregular hole (see Figure 6b).

Layer A was affected by agricultural activities after the abandonment of CA-2. This deposit contained fragmented codex-type polychrome vessels, many of which were recovered above the patio area (Unit 4) and therefore can be associated with the closure of the early occupation. Some of these luxury codex-type ceramics include allusions to the war, sacrifice, and nobility iconographic complex (López Corral et al. 2019:341–342, Figure 3b) (Figure 14). Additional materials show the entry of pastes that became popular in the New Spain regime—such as majolica, glazed ware, and porcelain—and new ceramic forms such as lantern-type braziers (see Figure 8c); around 50 percent of imported ceramics come from the Basin of Mexico and comprise rather late types, such as Aztec Black-on-Orange III and IV wares.

The evidence implies that the definitive abandonment of CA-2 was linked to the relocation of the population from the summit to the valley plain where the Colonial city of Tlaxcala was founded. This readjustment was most likely related to the significant mid-sixteenth-century population decline that originated from epidemics, which is reflected in the cadastral records of the *Padrones de Tlaxcala* (1556 to 1557) (Rojas 1987), but that was also due to taxation and religious conversion intentions promoted under the Spanish government; these changes may have allowed indigenous people some degree of participation within the new commercial and ritual order.

#### Interpretation of CA-2

The architecture of CA-2 basically includes its façade, the back of a possible interior patio or vestibule, the base of a



**Figure 13.** Stratigraphic scheme (north–south section) showing the deposits associated with the early closure and late abandonment stages of CA-2. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.

wall and the patio to the south, and several structures attached to the front of its façade; on the platform, the northern limit is demarcated by a possible midden. Other rooms from the early occupation were probably located on the north section but unfortunately did not preserve.

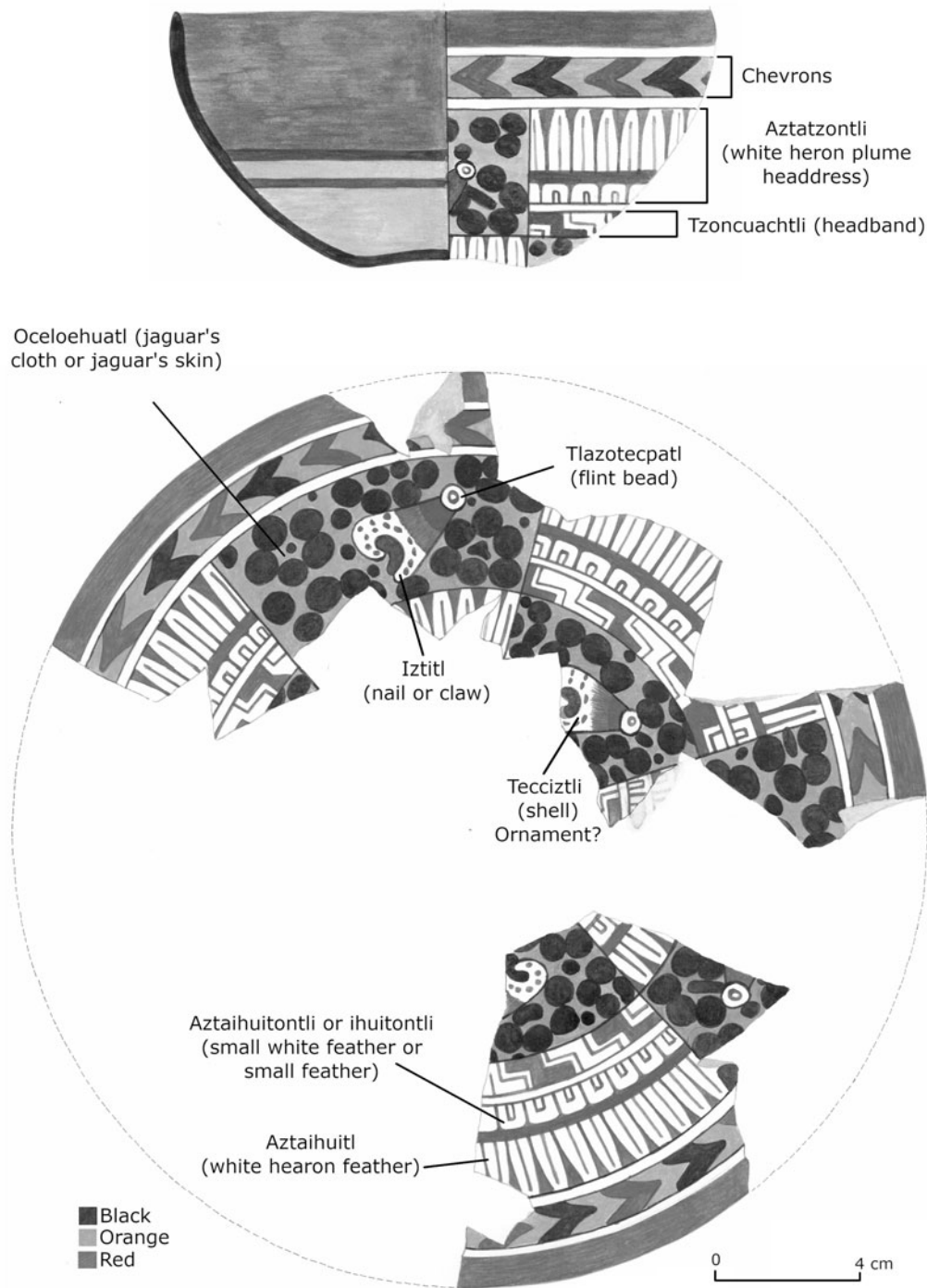
The early construction stage of CA-2 probably functioned as an elite enclosure, considering its privileged location within the settlement, the quality of construction materials, and the type of recovered artifacts, including codex-type ceramics with leadership insignia and allusions to warfare (see Figure 14). Also, almenas with symbolic rulership or religious elements, such as *xiyatlatli* scepters (see Figure 9), make the architecture stand out given that these adornments are usually used in public architecture related to governing groups, as seen in graphic representations of civic-ceremonial precincts in codexes from the Puebla-Tlaxcala-Oaxaca region. Likewise, the existence of imported pottery signals a substantial degree of commercial linking with other regions, including southern Puebla and northern Oaxaca. Luxury ware include codex-type ceramics with probable logographic writing that so far have only been observed in minuscule proportions compared to other parts of Tepeticpac, or in equally prominent civic-religious-administrative locations such as Ocotelulco and Tizatlán (Contreras 1992; Fuentes 1996).

The materials from the collapse of the early occupation reflect important domestic activities. We recorded a substantial proportion of wares for serving and preparing food, data that coincides with the analysis of around 2,300 zooarchaeological remains that registered a consumption of at least 51 animal taxa including wild (e.g., rabbits, deer, peccary, quails, royal eagles, ducks, turtles) and domesticated (dogs and turkeys) (López Corral and Santacruz Cano 2020:167–171). We also registered an increase of incense burners (70 percent of ritual ware) related to ritual activity (Huster et al. 2013:209), and figurines with representative elements of deities such as Tlaloc, Ehecatl–Quetzalcoatl, Yacatecuhtli, and an Ave María.

The closure deposits also provided evidence of craft production activities. Artifacts associated with thread production and textile weaving included needles, complete pins, and spindle whorls for processing short and fine fibers (such as cotton), and long raw ones (such as maguey fibers) (Ibarra et al. 2018) (Figure 15a). Additionally, the analysis of obsidian artifacts points to an industry primarily focused on prismatic blade production and, to a lesser extent, bifaces and small projectile points made from blades and flakes (Vicencio Castellanos 2015). The obsidian was imported from at least six sources (Paredón, Zaragoza-Oyameles, Otumba, Sierra de las Navajas, Pico de Orizaba, and Guadalupe Victoria), probably using commercial links with sites near the deposits (López Corral et al. 2021:Table 2) but also through the marketplace, considering that Tlaxcallan likely had an open type of market (Marino et al. 2020). However, given the political and military circumscription that Tlaxcallan suffered at the end of the Late Postclassic (Gentil et al. 2021; Millhauser et al. 2015), obsidian may have entered the region through political networks, itinerant craftsmen, the black market, or corruption strategies (López Corral et al. 2021).

The location, architecture, and the type and variety of materials recovered indicate that the early occupation of CA-2 was probably an elite residential space linked to the state. Its residents concentrated on a range of economic functions and ritual activities related to agricultural cycles and the gods who provided maintenance, as has been identified in other similar contexts (Carballo 2016). This arrangement is consistent with the model of the “house society” that characterized various groups in Mesoamerica, where domestic ritual was fundamental among corporate groups—including lineages—to promote cohesion and achieve detachment from those with less access to knowledge and connections to the supernatural (Carballo 2011:156; Gillespie 2000; Plunket 2002).

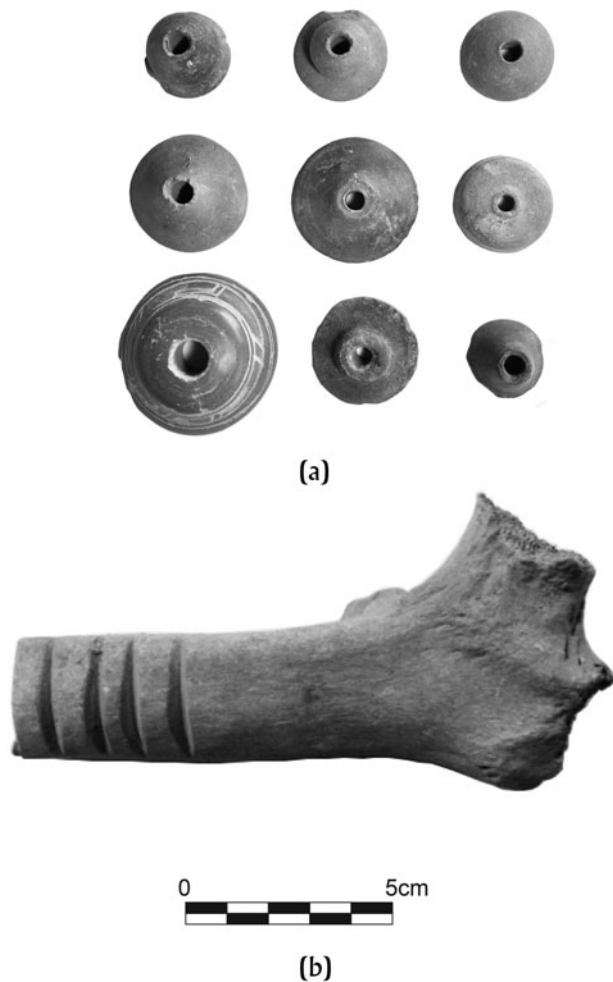
Although we cannot determine when CA-2 was initially built, radiocarbon dates and historical information suggest



**Figure 14.** Amoxtli Glyph Codex type vessel recovered at CA-2 exhibiting the iconography of the war, sacrifice, and nobility complex (also see López Corral et al. 2019:341–342, Figure 3b). Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.

that the end of the early occupation and the abandonment of the late stage correspond to the early sixteenth century. Likewise, Unit 2 corresponds to the latest phase of the complex and was erected around the same time the Tepeticpac Chapel was constructed between 1533 and 1552 (Santacruz Cano and López Corral 2011), indicating an ideological change in the architectural idea toward European standards.

The political, economic, and ideological rearrangements that took place after the arrival of the Spaniards must have had an impact on both the local settlement pattern and the function and use of domestic compounds, especially those associated with elite groups. The closure of CA-2 during the Contact and Early Colonial periods reflects the transition to a new form of social and government structure. After the deconstruction of the pre-Hispanic space, the



**Figure 15.** (a) Spindle whorls and the (b) *omechicahuaztli* instrument found during the excavation of CA-2. Courtesy of the Tepeticpac Archaeological Project archive.

rooms were rebuilt under a new ideological precept with a more modest scale and style, serving either as a space for food processing or as a room.

The residents of the late stage related to Unit 2 maintained commercial interaction with groups from Central Mexico, preserving a certain continuity in their socioeconomic status. The proportions of imported ceramics remained almost the same, providing certain stability in the acquisition and use of these artifacts. A fragment of *omechicahuaztli* (guiro instrument), considered of high cultural value, also corresponds to this occupation (Figure 15b); these artifacts are related to elite contexts and have been documented as part of funerary ceremonies dedicated to deceased warriors (Pereira 2005).

The use of Unit 2 must have been brief because after 1556–1557, Tepeticpac was probably abandoned, and its population relocated around the newly founded city of Tlaxcala. Archaeologically, this brevity is manifested by the scarce presence of diagnostic Early Colonial materials such as majolica, glazed ceramics, or metal objects, and only a

tiny sample of animal remains of Indo-European origin (0.09 percent of the entire collection) (López Corral and Santacruz Cano 2020:167–171).

### Oversized house or Tlaxcalteca palace?

Distinguishing between an elite house and a palace requires reviewing the criteria used for each case. It is likely that the design of architectural spaces, the type of construction materials, and the consumption of certain goods may be similar between an elite household and a palace. However, both cases can be differentiated by detecting markers related to ruling individuals in iconography and architectural decorative elements (e.g., almenas, mural paintings, ornaments, stele), and the multifunctionality of the architectural complex. The multifunctionality may include evidence of a varied form of production or consumption of goods, particularly those of greater economic value, such as textiles, foreign luxury goods, last-stage production of obsidian artifacts, and a diversity of local and nonlocal animals and plants consumed.

To understand the configuration of CA-2, it is necessary to consider all the available archeological evidence and contrast it with the local written history. This is because what was recorded during the Early Colonial period does not necessarily apply to the Postclassic. Taking into consideration all evidence, CA-2 was probably a multifunctional complex, perhaps a section of a *tecpan* (palace), which formed part of the living quarters of an elite group from a noble house (*teccalli*). The comparison of the evidence in CA-2 of Tepeticpac in relation to other elite and nonelite architectural complexes excavated within the Tlaxcallan geopolitical entity, as well as those of similar characteristics from other sites, show that the overall architectural quality and construction materials of the highest status enclosures reflect the multifunctionality that a palace economy exhibited (Table 1).

In some historical sources from Tlaxcala, the terms *teccalli* and *tecpa* (synonymous for *tecpan*) are used interchangeably. Although *tecpa* probably denotes the structure of the palace (*tecpancalli*), it often describes the social structure of its surroundings (Megged 2021:124). For example, in 1573, a document about a dispute over the inheritance and ownership of land in the town of Tlattepec narrates that Don Diego de Soto, governor of Tlaxcala, ordered an investigation regarding the *tecpa* domains of a person named Tecpatzin, grandfather of Doña Inés Teohuaxochitl, who claimed to have been the legitimate owner of those lands since 1473. The document affirms that the ruins of a building made of adobe with thick sunken walls and covered with plaster were identified as Tecpatzin's property. Another palace type of construction is exhibited in the "Genealogy of Zacatelco" regarding an individual named Coatzin teuctli, who was the ancestral founder of a *calli* (house) or minor noble house of the *teccalli* of Tepeyanco. In this scene, the leader is seated inside a *tecpancalli* made with adobe walls at the base and a roof topped with almenas (Megged 2021:150, Figure 6). In both cases, the construction of palace-type structures is similar to the archeological remains of CA-2, including the use of brick decorations, adobe, stuccoed floors, and almenas. Also, these historic

documents support that in the Tlaxcalteca concept of “palace,” there was a key ruling element designated to *tecuitli* leaders and correlated with the political-economic structure of the *teccalli*; it also shows that this idea was probably widespread among indigenous nobilities of central Mexico, as seen in the still standing sixteenth-century palace “*casa de la Cacica*” in Teposcolula (Terraciano 2001:158–165).

CA-2 yielded a variety of daily life-related artifacts and goods, particularly serving wares, animal bones, and items related to thread making and obsidian artifact production, but also codex-style luxury wares. Altogether, such product diversity suggests consumption activities at the domestic level but resembling more the tradition of tax labor payment (*tlacalaquilli*) by *macehualtin* (nonnoble) groups to elite rulers—a strategy well documented in regional annals (Carrasco 1973). In the Puebla-Tlaxcala region, this form of taxation included the provision of personal services, food preparation, working and guarding agricultural lands, and supplying raw materials, as was recorded in historical sources of the sixteenth-century (Martínez 1984; Reyes 1988; Zorita 1963). This points more to a type of palace economy in which multiple productive economic activities take place within an elite-related architectural complex and at a greater scale and quality than others in the same locality. This is also consistent with other documented cases of economies where a palace behaves like a large domestic complex or estate, being perceived as an “oversized house,” as has been observed in the Canaan region during the Middle Bronze Age and other settlements of the Near East (e.g., Manzanilla 2001:158–166; Yasur-Landau et al. 2015:13).

Recently, Fargher and colleagues (2020) reported the remains of another architectural complex at Tepeticpac, just a few meters north of CA-2, on terrace T.30 of Sector C. This complex presented considerable dimensions and was strategically located on a raised platform, presenting stuccoed walls and floors and decorative bricks like those found in CA-2. The building, in general, presents little ostentation and low architectural space complexity, so it did not seem to correspond to a Mesoamerican palace according to the formal parameters (Fargher et al. 2020:13). We agree that both buildings on T.30 and CA-2 are quite modest, resembling more of a residential structure in terms of scale and type of construction materials, yet both are set on one of the most prominent points within the Tlaxcallan urban core and basically share the same types of ceramics and other cultural materials that display the consumption of a diversity of products. Certainly, the size and ostentation of Tlaxcallan local palaces do contrast considerably with those from political entities with centralized authority, polarized access to power, and supreme rulers, with the Mexica and Acolhua of Texcoco being the most salient contemporary example (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1997; López Luján and Chávez 2010; see also Codex Quinatzin in Mohar [2004]). However, the type of associated materials, the construction, and the ornamentation design of the building (including the use of almenas), in conjunction with local historical documents, suggest that spaces such as CA-2—and perhaps also T.30—

had a political-economic use and functionality consistent with the *teccalli* socioeconomic system.

The relative architectural simplicity of complexes T.30 and CA-2 in comparison to those of other contemporary Nahuatl, Mixtec, or Zapotec populations (see Barber and Joyce 2006) might be explained by considering the collective form of governance in Tlaxcallan. Perhaps rulers sought to keep a modest image according to their ethic code and displayed authority based on humility and reticence, in the same way that they were required to do so during their public ceremonies and severe penitence rituals of *tecuitli* promotion (Torquemada 1969 [1615]:chap. XXIX). But having a collective government does not necessarily mean that everyone had an equal socioeconomic hierarchy. According to the analysis from CA-2, Tlaxcallan leaders must have highlighted hierarchical differences, including economic privileges such as the control of tribute and labor, or access to luxury goods. The key difference may lie in the genealogical ties that *tecuitli* made with respect to their inclusion in a *teccalli* noble house, or the possibility of obtaining benefits through social mobility, as the *yaotequihua* did. This argument gains strength if we consider how some individuals from the Early Colonial period fought to maintain their status as nobles and their bloodline connections to a *teccalli* ancestor to justify or strengthen their privileged social position in the face of the new Spanish political regime (Hicks 2009; Lockhart 1992; Martínez Baracs 2014).

## Conclusion

The analysis of the architectural sequence of CA-2, as well as the type of materials recovered within its spaces, indicates that it was probably a section of a Tlaxcallan palace and linked to the native *teccalli* institution. Tlaxcallan rulers must have had buildings of this type to perform their political, social, economic, and ritual (ideological) activities that connected them with the community under their charge.

This case study is an example of how the general configuration of a palace can be seen within a collective government system, thereby providing an understanding of the behavior of the Mesoamerican ruling elites beyond authoritarian or exclusive political systems. The identification of palaces has traditionally been based on architectural manifestations, such as the location of rooms on raised platforms and the presence of elements and materials that mark status and wealth. However, it is necessary to contrast the type and quality of material evidence in accordance with the sociopolitical and cultural precepts of its time, which is even more possible when there is historical documentation, as is the case of Tlaxcallan. More spaces such as CA-2 need to be explored, given that, prior to this study, only limited areas in the Ocotelulco and Tizatlán sections had been excavated. This is essential to analyze and contextualize the materiality of this type of building so that we can evaluate the presence of different forms of palaces and their characteristics in the archaeological record.

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**Data availability statement.** Data provided in this work are available at the Technical Archive of INAH, Mexico.

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