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SPECIAL SECTION: BEFORE TEOTIHUACAN—ALTICA, EXCHANGE, INTERACTIONS, AND THE ORIGINS OF COMPLEX SOCIETY IN THE NORTHEAST BASIN OF MEXICO

INTRODUCTION

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This issue's Special Section features a fascinating collection of papers on the Altica Project, begun in 2014 by Deborah L. Nichols and Wesley D. Stoner. First recorded in the Teotihuacan Valley Project directed by William T. Sanders in the 1960s, Altica represents an endangered species as one of the few early farming village sites in the Basin of Mexico that has survived predation by the monstrous urban sprawl of Mexico City. As one of the few remaining sites in the Basin dating to the Early and Middle Formative periods, from 1250 to 800 cal B.C., with relatively good preservation, Altica is unique and significant in many ways. It is the earliest site in a long sequence leading to urbanism in the Teotihuacan Valley. Though small in size (six ha) and located far from the major Early and Middle Formative centers, for about 450 years Altica may have been surprisingly well-connected in interregional exchange networks of ceramics, obsidian, exotic goods, and ritual knowledge. In these respects, the site serves as a proxy for many other similar contemporary settlements that, because of their destruction, will remain unknown forever.

Wesley D. Stoner and **Deborah L. Nichols**, who kindly coordinated this Special Section, provide "a frame of reference" for the papers to follow. They point out that, in addition to the site's importance as a survivor of modern urban expansion, Altica provides evidence on the transition from mobile foraging to sedentary food production, participation in early exchange networks, early status differentiation, ceramic ecology, obsidian procurement and exchange, plant-human interactions, diet and health, and chronological refinement for the Early and Middle Formative in the Basin of Mexico. They construct a broad context for discussion of the other articles.

In the next paper, **Andrés G. Mejía Ramón, Luis Barba, Agustín Ortiz**, and **Jorge Blancas** present the results of magnetic gradient prospection and aerial multispectral remote sensing to identify subsurface features at Altica. The combination of these two methods proved very successful in remotely sensing indicators of anthropogenic activity, most notably a number of pits dug in ancient times into tepetate bedrock. Four of these cavities held human burials, while others seem to have been used for domestic refuse disposal. The authors also discuss the success of the application of their methods to other small sites with little or no architectural signatures in eroded environments.

Dan M. Healan, in the third paper, presents his formal analysis of lithics collected by the project and discusses obsidian procurement, reduction technology, and utilization at Altica. He conducted *chaîne opératoire* analysis of approximately 29,000 obsidian specimens collectively weighing more than 207 kg. For anyone who might not know, this amount is a very large collection from a small site. The principal source of the Altica obsidian was, not unexpectedly, the Otumba volcanic complex, located only about 17 kilometers to the northeast of Altica, although other sources are also represented. Healan found that the most common artifact category in the collection was flakes, followed by percussion blades, and a small number of prismatic blades (the latter probably not made locally). In addition, cores of various shapes, unifacially and bifacially retouched tools, "macronodules," and a possible macrocore round out the collection. Production methods consisted mostly of expedient flaking technology employing standardized, hand-held direct percussion. The macronodules were found in two caches; Healan considers the possibility that they may be evidence of Altica's role as a transshipment center in an obsidian exchange network, but he finds the evidence lacking.

Nadia E. Johnson and **Kenneth G. Hirth,** in the following paper, pick up this idea in their discussion of Altica and the role of middlemen in Formative obsidian exchange. Through geochemical sourcing and technological data drawn from several Early and Middle Formative obsidian assemblages, they reconstruct trade routes and consumption to evaluate the role that intermediary sites such as Altica and Coapexco, to the south, may have played in obsidian production and exchange in the Basin of Mexico. Their sample from Altica is a surface collection distinct from the collection analyzed by Healan. Johnson and Hirth propose the existence of unstructured procurement networks that depended on individual agency (and the locations of their communities) rather than preexisting, well-established geographical loci as network nodes. They reason that sites located close to obsidian sources, e.g., Altica, must have played significant roles in procuring, processing, and initiating the movement of obsidian into an exchange network. They demonstrate that the inhabitants of Altica consumed "an abnormally large amount of obsidian compared to other contemporaneous agricultural communities" (Johnson and Hirth 2019:303), and they infer that Altica must have been involved in procuring and initiating trade

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of raw material into a Basin of Mexico exchange network, but was not necessarily a distribution site. The diversity of sources among the non-Otumba obsidian specimens in the Altica assemblage lends support to their inference. Their full reconstruction includes other contemporaneous sites and must be read carefully to be appreciated fully, but the best candidate in their scenario for a middleman site is Coapexco.

In the fifth paper, **Stoner** and **Nichols** present a new model of pottery trade and the formation of Early and Middle Formative style horizons from the perspective of central Mexico. Based on the results of neutron activation analysis of 1,154 pottery specimens from Early and Middle Formative contexts in the central Mexican highlands, they conclude that only a small amount of intraregional exchange occurred among central Mexican sites of this period, and potters in the southeastern Basin of Mexico made the majority of pottery intended for trade within the region. Imports from beyond the Basin of Mexico came predominantly from southwestern Puebla, with a smaller number of imports from the southern Gulf Coast, Morelos, and possibly Oaxaca. They show a trend through time of decreasing long-distance trade reflected in a decline in the number of imports from the Early Formative to the end of the Middle Formative. Stoner and Nichols attribute this trend to the solidification of regional styles and intraregional development in emerging polities focused on regional consolidation rather than external trade and interaction. These tendencies peaked, they conclude, with the great divergence of regional ceramic styles in the Late Formative.

Emily McClung de Tapia, Guillermo Acosta-Ochoa, Guillermo Diana Martínez-Yrizar, Carmen Cristina Adriano-Morán, Jorge Cruz-Palma, and **Berenice Chaparro-Rueda** follow with their reconstruction of Early to Middle Formative subsistence in the Teotihuacan Valley, based on macrobotanical, phytolith, and pollen analyses of pre-Hispanic plant remains from Altica. They make the important point that Altica provides the earliest evidence yet known for maize cultivation in the Teotihuacan Valley at around 1000 cal B.C. Very intriguing and unexpected is their identification of starch grains from yam, sweet potato, and possibly manioc, lowland root crops that would have been imported through interregional exchange.

In the seventh paper, **Rebecca Storey, Gina Buckley,** and **Douglas J. Kennett** offer a glimpse of the people of Altica through osteological and isotopic/radiocarbon analysis. As mentioned above, excavations discovered four individuals interred in deep pits dug into the tepetate bedrock. These included two older females, a middle-aged male, and a young male buried in a "deviant manner, suggesting possible foul play" (Storey et al. 2019:356). Rather than spoil the plot of a good murder mystery, we refer readers to the full text of Storey, Buckley, and Kennett for the lurid details. Although the sample is very small, the analyses show evidence of status differences at this early time, and all the individuals show significant indicators of health and nutrition problems during their lives.

In the concluding paper, **Nichols** and **Stoner** reprise the themes of the Special Section and reflect on the implications of their data and analyses for a better understanding of the origins of early village life, early social and economic differentiation, and the development of regional and interregional exchange networks in the development of complex society in Mesoamerica. It seems likely, as Nichols and Stoner suggest, that the collective organization that has been recognized at Teotihuacan had its roots in the Formative period. They conclude by reminding us of the value of reanalyzing older collections and returning to sites recorded long ago to conduct research with new methods and techniques.

We would add that the excellent research summarized in these eight papers on the humble, little, almost-forgotten site of Altica has now transformed the site into a formidable giant that will play a key role in the continuing development of Formative-period archaeology of ancient Mesoamerica. The Altica Project by Nichols and Stoner serves as a prime example of how we can continue to extract information from previously excavated sites that contributes to our understanding of major anthropological issues about the development of ancient complex civilizations.

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