

## ANNUAL REPORT: ETHNOHISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN MEXICO 2014 FIELD SCHOOL

**Director(s):** Dr. John Pohl, UCLA  
**Co-Director(s):** Dr. Danny Zborover, UC San Diego



*IFR students with Dr. John Pohl at Monte Albán, Valley of Oaxaca*

The 'Ethnohistorical Archaeology in Mexico' field program took place between June 15 and July 12, 2014, during which students examined both pre-Columbian and colonial historical sources, learned how to interpret those sources, and how to apply those sources to the analysis of culture on the actual landscapes where they were conceived. For this purpose we visited major and smaller archaeological sites and museums, explored communities of Zapotecs, Mixtecs, and Chontal ethnic groups, and conducted specialized classes in urban and rural settings. In so doing we emphasized the development of predictive models for site identification and recovery that can then be field-checked and tested archaeologically, although in compliance with the Mexican Federal regulations our program did not conduct any archaeological surveys or excavations. Instead, one of the primary goals of our program is to introduce students to truly interdisciplinary approaches by immersing them in a cultural environment through which they explore combined art historical, ethnohistorical, archaeological, and ethnographic approaches. As in previous years, we made it our priority to familiarize students with the institutional practicalities of conducting archaeological and historical research in Mexico, and to introduce them to our network of local collaborators. In so doing students are exposed to a world where the present is infused with the past in such intense, extraordinary, and unexpected ways, which in turn induces them to question the nature of cultural change in traditional societies, and opens

up ways of perceiving how the equal redistribution of epistemic power to “non-Western” peoples can be conceived.

This year we focused our attention on the state of Oaxaca in southern Mexico, where three primary areas were explored: the Valley of Oaxaca, the Nochixtlan Valley region of the Mixteca Alta, and the Oaxaca Coast of Huatulco. While numerous archaeological, historical, and ethnographic studies were conducted in each of these sub-regions (and especially the first two), there has been little comparable research that attempted to understand the interconnections on a broader state-level scale. Accordingly, in each one of these sub-regions the students carried out a series of guided and independent exercises that focused on the critical evaluation of different ethnographic contexts, which allowed them to gradually progress from specific to more general inferences. These assignments further helped students to better define their own research questions and interests, and we expect that many of these will eventually turn into more detailed research projects on the undergraduate and graduate levels.

In particular, we continued to expand our inquiries on the emergence of secondary, segmentary states and their relationships as peer polities. The existence and combination of historical sources like codices, maps, and *lienzos* is unprecedented in almost any other historical-archaeological situation in the world, and together these represent the longest continuous indigenous histories ever recorded in the western hemisphere. The codices are the primary sources for unlocking the secrets of how social, political, and economic relationships are encapsulated in elite metaphor and allegory, thus supplying us with an absolutely unique insight into the Pre-Columbian mind. The transition from the Classic to the Postclassic can be clearly mapped as a process of decentralization that reflects a reorientation to the commercial emphasis of the Postclassic world. The use of codices and other historical sources has led to the identification of highly complex relationships that integrate the new Postclassic society over large areas, which combined the autonomy of the Preclassic chiefdom with the political integration among the elite of the Classic central ceremonial complexes.

As such, this season spotlight on Oaxaca was rooted in the idiosyncratic geographical, material, documentary, and cultural parameters that set the region apart from adjacent ones, yet without overlooking neighboring states and the larger Mesoamerican and Pan-American picture. Consequently, we have added the central Pacific Coast to our itinerary, with a specific emphasis on the town of Huatulco. This important site and associated port are described in Colonial period reports to Phillip II as having been under the control of Tututepec, the powerful Mixtec kingdom located fifty miles to the west and that claimed to have been originally founded by the culture-hero Lord Eight Deer according to various Pre-Columbian painted narratives. We are currently exploring Pacific coastal cultural and economic exchange between Southern Mexico, the American Southwest, and West Mexico between A.D. 900-1600. The American Southwest in particular experienced a period of settlement shift to the south where emerging elite erected platform mounds, structures that mirror the scores of palaces identified archaeologically throughout southern Mexico, and particularly Oaxaca. A comparison between the excavated examples of Pueblo Grande, Arizona and Yagul, Oaxaca with their networks of small courts and rooms are especially striking and it is notable that such innovations were accompanied by the production of lavishly painted ceramics - Salado Polychrome - and typical Mesoamerican jewelry forms like ear spools, nose ornaments, and pectorals possibly suggesting a direct engagement with Mesoamerican feasting systems including reciprocal exchanges in kinship titles that underlay the formulation of long distance monopolies.

The program directors have already begun to disseminate some of these preliminary conclusions in professional conferences and have further incorporated the new insights into their currently taught university courses. Considering the geographical scope of this program, together with its strong emphasis on methodological approaches and training in reading codices, the students who participated in the 2014 season gained an invaluable experience that not only broadened their horizons on the enormous potential of Mesoamerican archaeology and history to their own research, but perhaps more importantly, into breaking the disciplinary boundaries that often hinder our ability to explore the past in a more holistic fashion. Following our success rates from previous years' seasons, we are therefore confident that these students will go on to develop their own exciting interdisciplinary projects in Oaxaca, Mesoamerica, and beyond.