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Review of:

Novella, R., Martínez González, J. and Moguel Cos, M. A. 2002. *La Costa Norte de Michoacán en la época prehispánica*. BAR (International Series) 1071. Oxford: Archaeopress. xvii + 249 pages, illustrated throughout with figures, maps, plans and tables. Text in Spanish. ISBN 184171450. Paperback £35.00.

Over the past decade, Novella (leading author) has focused his research interests in west Mexico, including a publication on the *Classification and Interpretation of Marine Shell Artifacts from Western Mexico* (1995). Within Mesoamerican studies, the region defined as 'West Mexico' (*El Occidente*) is one of the least known archaeologically. Although the archaeology of the state of Michoacán is well known for its Preclassic Chupícuaro and Postclassic Tarascan cultures, other regions in west Mexico, including the coast, remain largely unexplored. This volume is the first monograph published on the archaeology of the coast of Michoacán, a region that continues to be threatened by looting, intensive agriculture, earthquakes and erosion. Scholars interested in the archaeology of Mesoamerica, and more specifically, west Mexico, will acknowledge that a work on this area is long overdue.

The present volume is the culmination of a project that commenced in 1994 and consisted of three field seasons (1994, 1997 and 1999). The objectives were to plot archaeological sites along the coast, and, more importantly, to propose a chronological sequence for the sites. The initial survey registered 129 sites (labelled CM1 to CM129) located between the Boca de Apiza (Coahuayana River) near the state of Colima and Maruata (River El Coire) in the south. Excavation of a selected number of sites was undertaken, extending some 16km into the hinterland. Using sound methodology, the authors conducted a field survey along the coast, selectively excavating 19 sites. They identified 36 groups of ceramics (with sub-groups and variants). All artefacts recovered from the sites made of stone, obsidian, bone, metal and shell were subsequently analysed, and seven radiocarbon dates were established. Thorough studies were also made of the molluscs, human remains, wood remains, evidence for salt production and settlement patterns. Clearly, the strength of the book is the accessibility of the data combined with a wealth of graphic material, including figures, maps, plans and tabulated data as well as an extensive bibliography. The percentages of ceramic types from some sites are cited in the text, but a graph or chart showing percentages of each ceramic group per site would be useful to many readers.

Following an introduction to the physical setting, the authors illustrate the diverse aspects of life on the coast during the 16th century based on an exhaustive reading of ethnohistoric and other sources, including the *Relación de la Provincia de Motines* (Davila Quinones 1580) and the *Relación de la Villa de Zacatula* (de Vargas 1581). Key elements regarding the daily life of the inhabitants of the coast – such as their

marine resources and products, political organisation, rituals and exchange contacts – are well documented. In noting these, the authors wish to trace a presumed continuity between diverse past and present practices. These include the use of construction techniques and materials that date to the prehispanic period, such as the *bajareque* (or *pajarete*) for the houses of the indigenous *nahua* populations. Some of these houses are constructed on top of prehispanic platforms. Another aspect is the contemporary use of *metates* which could “possibly be prehispanic objects” (p. 25). Information regarding both the decline of the use of *nahuatl* and the ability of the indigenous populations to preserve their cultural patrimony is pertinent; less justified is the inclusion of details about the political organisation of contemporary society and/or Catholic religious feasts (p. 26-27). The authors deem it necessary to provide definitions for terms, such as ‘archaeological site’ (p. 33) and ‘settlement pattern’ (p. 229), within this section. However, some specialised terminology (*bajareque*, technique of *roza*, *tumba y quema*, *zacate*) requires clarification for the less-informed reader.

The principal aim of the project (often repeated throughout the volume) is to provide a chronological sequence for the sites:

[T]hat sets the base for a relative chronology in the region. This chronological sequence is supported by the stratigraphy obtained through the excavations, the absolute dates from carbon-14 dating, and the comparison of our materials with the dates and sequences already established in other sites of Colima and other regions.

(p. 103)

From this chronological sequence, the processes of interaction with adjacent cultural areas – namely the Capacha, Ortices, Comala and Tuxcacuesco in the northwest, and the Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo-Petatlán in the southeast – can be understood. At this point, it must be stressed that the archaeology of west Mexico suffers from poorly-established chronological sequences. Certainly, the establishment of a chronological sequence requires a vigorous evaluation of previously used dates and a clear justification for the adoption of a new chronological scheme. Herein, the authors adopt the Preclassic-Classic-Postclassic scheme (excluding, for some unexplained reason, the Epiclassic), and cognisant of the lack of precise dates in the area (p. 27), they correlate their data from the coast with dates from other sources.

There are three broad chronological periods: Preclassic, Classic (which begins either at 160 BC (p. 81) or AD 100 (p. 86)) and Postclassic. For the chronological assignment of the sites, the authors use periods and dates interchangeably. For example, sites CM106 and CM113 are dated “until AD 800” and “until Late Classic” (p. 66-67), respectively, and for both sites no dates are provided for initial occupation. Site CM46 is tentatively assigned to the Postclassic due to the presence of copper artefacts (p. 48). Copper artefacts, however, appear much earlier in west Mexico (which, surprisingly, is confirmed by the authors on p. 208) at AD 600-800 – that is, the Classic according to their scheme and not the Postclassic. Furthermore, it is not clear to the reader why the authors feel a need to clarify that there is no evidence of a Teotihuacan presence in the study

area (p. 226). Teotihuacan, a major urban centre during the Classic period, established exchange contacts with diverse regions in Mesoamerica, but its presence in culture areas of the west Mexican coast is scarce.

Despite these minor inconsistencies, this volume significantly increases our knowledge of the poorly known area of *El Occidente*. The conclusions are somewhat brief and untheorised, but this is in accordance with the descriptive style of the volume. Some questions will remain with the reader and present interesting topics for future research, such as the location and use of the mines during prehispanic times, the ethnic identity of the inhabitants along the coast, their political organisation, and religious practices, *inter alia*. The availability and systematic analysis of all data from west Mexico would undoubtedly benefit scholars working in adjacent cultural areas, especially in the north-west and southeast of the study area.

Some errors and omissions were noted: typographical errors on p. 35 (Kelly 1890, 1989); Fougère-Kalfon, Brigitte (p. 243) instead of the correct Faugère-Kalfon; in the bibliography, the name of the author of the doctoral dissertation *The archaeological significance of ceramic figurines from Guerrero, Mexico*, Ellen Sparry Brush, is omitted (although her name does appear on p. 27 and 28) and the thesis appears under 'Charles Brush' instead; there is a lack of consistency regarding authors' names, *i.e.* they may be spelled or they may appear as initials; in the layout, for example under Hosler, D. (p. 244), the dates of publication are not aligned correctly.

These *errata*, few in number but unfortunate, by no means undermine the wealth of information provided by the authors. *La Costa Norte de Michoacán en la época prehispánica* is a starting point for future research in the area. The presentation of all excavated material – in an area where excavation results are seldom published – a sound methodology, and the analyses of data with diverse origins offer a mine of information for Mesoamerican scholars. For many sites under threat, this volume might well be their last record.

References

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- de Vargas, M. 1581. Relación de la Villa de Zacatula, in Acuña, R. (ed.) [1987]. *Relaciones Geográficas del siglo XVI: Michoacán*. Mexico: Universidad Autónoma de México, 437-472.
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