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Working Together

Archaeology in the Middle of Political Conflict in Yautepec, Mexico

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Many professional discussions of archaeology and the public describe ideal settings in modern industrialized nations. These sound naive and out of touch to those of us who have faced the complexities of fieldwork in the Third World. The traditional accounts of archaeologists "working together" with local peoples describe settings where there is basically a single community and a single local public to deal with. Those of us who work in other countries, however, must deal with multiple publics that often present conflicting demands to the foreign archaeologist. In 1993 my field crew and I found ourselves in the middle of a violent political struggle in Yautepec, Mexico, that exerted a strong influence on both our research design and our community interactions. The concept of "working together" took on complexities that illustrate some of the problems of doing fieldwork in other countries today. One of the lessons from the 1993 season is that there is no single "public" for archaeology. We are responsible to numerous publics, and positive interactions with one public may be viewed as harmful by another.

Yautepec, a town of 40,000 in the central Mexican state of Morelos, has a reputation for deeply divided political allegiances. It has a long history of conflict, often violent, extending at least back to the Mexican revolution of 1910 (the revolutionary general and hero Emiliano Zapata was from a town not far from Yautepec). Archaeological fieldwork in Yautepec began in 1989 with excavations of a large palace--the only extant Aztec royal palace building--by Hortensia de Vega Nova of the Morelos Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) state office. When my wife, Cynthia Heath-Smith, and I visited that year, de Vega and other archaeologists (including the director of the Morelos INAH office) urged us to come excavate Aztec houses at Yautepec. We agreed that the open fields adjacent to the palace were a promising place to dig; this was the downtown area of a major Aztec city, and the ground surface was covered by dense artifact scatters. The Sociedad Cultural Yautepec, a local organization of citizens interested in the history and culture of the town, was helping to support the INAH excavations and invited me to speak at one of its meetings and also encouraged us to dig in Yautepec.

We obtained funding (from the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities) and permits (from the central INAH office in Mexico City) and began fieldwork in summer 1992. De Vega was still excavating at the palace, but the Sociedad Cultural Yautepec had split into factions. One faction withdrew and formed the new Patronato Pro-Restauración de la Zona Arqueológica

de Yauhtepec, Morelos. This became the primary organization helping the INAH excavations; members did modest fund-raising and helped with various logistical matters. Our 1992 season was devoted to an intensive survey to define the extent of Aztec Yauhtepec under the modern town, and we spent a lot of time knocking on doors and requesting permission to root around in peoples' yards. The Patronato provided considerable help during the first season, including funding one of the local workers we hired, securing a letter of permission from the municipal president, running public service ads on the local radio station asking people to cooperate with our project, and making lemonade for the crew.

There were no overt political problems that season, although we did notice graffiti on public walls indicating conflict over the water situation. The major political cleavage in Yauhtepec today is between the dominant party, the Partido de la Revolución Institucionalizada (PRI), and the leftist opposition party of Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). The federal government had proposed a decentralization of the water supply whereby control would pass from the federal government to local authorities. The party in power, the PRI, was in favor of this change, whereas the PRD party was opposed, and there has been at least one death over this issue. During the summer 1992 season, we made plans to begin excavations the following January in the open fields across from the palace (Figure 1). This area had been designated an INAH Archaeological Zone; it had been surveyed, with property markers set up.



Figure 1: Vacant lot adjacent to the Yauhtepec royal palace. In 1992 we made plans to excavate Aztec houses here.

In fall 1992, however, the open fields of the archaeological zone-- but not the area of the pyramid itself-- were taken over by a planned squatters invasion (Figure 2). The squatters, whose shacks literally appeared over night, were affiliated with the PRD. They claimed to be poor landless people who were simply looking for a place to live. They immediately petitioned the state and municipality to provide utilities such as electricity and water for their tarpaper shacks. Other residents of Yauhtepec told us, however, that most of the squatters owned land elsewhere, and this was simply an organized grab for more land. The PRI-controlled municipal government and INAH immediately began legal actions to evict the squatters. The Yauhtepec government did not want this new PRD block in town, and INAH wanted to reclaim its registered archaeological zone. For a variety of reasons (many still unknown to me), these efforts were unsuccessful, and the squatters remained in place.



Figure 2: Shantytown of squatters established in fall 1992 in the fields shown in Figure 1. This photo is taken from the Yautepec palace.

The situation was at a standoff when we arrived in January 1993 to excavate. We looked for alternative places to dig, and received permission to work in the large walled yard of a secondary school several hundred meters from the pyramid and archaeological zone. It seemed likely that the squatters would be evicted soon, and we would be able to dig where we had originally intended. After a month, it became obvious that no progress was being made, and we abandoned plans to excavate in the affected area.

We avoided the squatters' settlement as much as possible, fearing possible violence against the U.S. archaeologists and students. The squatters invasion and the attempts to evict them became news in the national media. Newspaper and television reporters were regular visitors to Yautepec to follow the story of the dispute, and I was interviewed numerous times. I avoided making statements about evicting the squatters; this was not our responsibility, and I did not want to provide the opportunity for misleading stories about "gringo archaeologists trying to throw people out of their homes." At one point, the squatters became very active and belligerent, picketing the statehouse in Cuernavaca and staging marches and protests in Yautepec. Several protesters jumped over the wall of a lot adjacent to the squatters' settlement where we were excavating an Aztec house and threatened our workers. One worker, a PRI member, complained to the local PRI office, and word soon reached the governor, who sent a contingent of state troopers in bright blue uniforms with shotguns to guard the excavation crew. There were no further threats and the troopers soon grew bored, so we put them to work at the screens. When we completed the excavation adjacent to the squatters' settlement, we declined further protection, and there were no more incidents of this type.

During the 1993 excavations, my university would not let me employ local workers directly unless they became New York State employees, drawing biweekly checks in Albany and paying U.S. and N.Y. income tax. We had to subcontract out for the labor, and the Patronato in Yautepec agreed to be the subcontractor. The subcontract forged an even closer relationship between the project and the Patronato. It turned out that all of the officials of the Patronato were also active PRI members, who endeavored to use our relationship for the benefit of the party. For example, the PRI wanted to use our hiring to reward party activity, and prospective workers were told that they couldn't be hired on the project unless they joined the PRI. We resisted this, however, and ended up hiring whom we wanted (even a few PRD sympathizers). We were invited to various party functions, and the PRI used our relationship for their own propaganda: "The PRI supports work on the history of Yautepec while the PRD destroys Yautepec ruins." We were thus aligned politically whether we liked it or not. We also benefited from this PRI connection;

we used a telephone and fax machine in the PRI office, party workers helped with some of our negotiations with landowners, and one student rented a room above the office.

Landowners in Mexico are often wary of letting archaeologists dig for fear that their property will be seized if anything interesting turns up. There were rumors around town that we were going to tear down the secondary school because we had found buried pyramids there; in fact, we had uncovered domestic structures and burials (Figure 3) and the school was in no danger. This general fear, coupled with the very public struggle over eviction of the squatters, made many landowners hesitant to let us excavate. We did manage to get permission to dig in about 13 modern properties (including two schools and two 16th-century church yards), and these served as sampling frames in our search for buried houses.



Figure 3: Excavation of an Aztec structure in the yard of a secondary school in Yautepec. Note our audience of students on the balcony.

It proved a very successful excavation season, despite having been prevented from digging where we had originally planned. We uncovered the first set of Aztec urban houses ever excavated and recovered sufficient data to reconstruct the activities and social conditions of their inhabitants.

We returned to Yautepec for more fieldwork in 1994 and 1996. These seasons were devoted to a regional survey of the Yautepec Valley. Although our lab and housing were based in town, most of our time was spent in the countryside, where we did not encounter any problems of a political nature. As the 1997 field season begins, the squatters are still in place, and by now they have seriously damaged the archaeological remains with their house construction, latrines, trash pits, and looting.

Just who constitutes our host community in Yautepec? To which of the many publics are we responsible and in what ways? Table 1 lists 16 distinct publics in Mexico that are relevant to the project, but this is a great simplification of a complex situation. Many of the categories in Table 1 are composite groups, often with conflicting interests and roles. For example, the municipal government included two relevant factions: the PRI-controlled municipal president's office supported the project, while the PRD-controlled public works department tried to stop the fieldwork.

Category	Public
Archaeological Publics:	1. Consejo de Arqueología, INAH, Mexico D.F. 2. Centro INAH en Morelos, Cuernavaca 3. Local archaeologists and historians
Governmental Institutions:	4. Municipal government, Yauhtepec 5. State government, Morelos
Community Organizations:	6. Sociedad Cultural Yauhtepec 7. Patronato Pro-Restauración de la Zona Arqueológica de Yauhtepec, Morelos 8. PRI, Partido de la Revolución Institucionalizada 9. PRD, Partido de la Revolución Democrática 10. Primary and Secondary Schools 11. Yauhtepec Catholic church
Local Residents:	12. Excavation workers and families 13. Landowners 14. Squatters 15. Other Yauhtepec residents 16. The Mexican public

Table 1: Relevant Publics at Yauhtepec, Morelos

In the context of Yauhtepec politics, it is tempting to view the PRI as the "good guys," helping us and promoting archaeology and preservation of the archaeological record, and the PRD as the "bad guys," who block fieldwork and contribute to looting and site destruction. Many personal friends are active PRI partisans. It is not a difficult decision to continue to work with the PRI in the future, although this ensures the continuing alienation of the PRD faction in town. But maybe the members of the PRD have a greater need for public education and attention from archaeologists. Perhaps our efforts would make the greatest impact if directed at the opposition party. On the national level, the PRI-controlled government has long supported archaeology, including research, education, and conservation. But what if the PRD were to win a presidential election? Would this have a negative impact on archaeology and the archaeological record? Any efforts directed at PRD partisans in Yauhtepec, however, would surely alienate the people and organizations of the PRI.

My solution to this dilemma is to continue to work with the PRI for logistical reasons and to concentrate public education efforts with the schoolchildren of Yauhtepec. The students and teachers at the public schools constitute one of the major publics for our work in Yauhtepec. We conducted several excavations in the secondary school near the pyramid and one excavation in a primary school in another neighborhood. These became major foci of public education. All of the students got to see the excavations, and we lectured to more than 1,000 students throughout the course of the season; I also gave some lectures at the secondary school in subsequent seasons. We began excavation of an elite residence in the schoolyard but were not able to complete the work before the end of the field season. Later, an INAH team completed the work and consolidated the architecture to serve as an open exhibit for the secondary school.

We also cooperated with a program run by the Sociedad Cultural Yauhtepec designed to teach fifth- and sixth-graders about archaeology and the archaeological heritage of their town (this project was funded by a grant from the PRI-controlled federal government). A group of these students toured the excavations

each week, and we talked to them about Yauatepec's history. These students and our project were subjects of a television documentary made by the state public television station.

We will be working in Yauatepec for several more years, mostly conducting laboratory analysis. I have given public lectures and written articles for local newspapers, and project members are planning to produce one or more exhibits along the lines suggested by Elizabeth M. Brumfiel [*SAA Bulletin* 12(4):4-7, 15]. Many project activities, both research and community interaction, will continue to involve project members in unintended factional affiliations. We don't have much choice in this, given the nature of local conditions in Yauatepec. Our landlords, for example, are involved in the Patronato, the PRI, and the local schools. The bulk of our work in public education will continue to focus on the students in Yauatepec's primary and secondary schools. These children are the future adult citizens of Yauatepec, and at least they have not yet joined a political party.

Acknowledgments

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Note: Information about our excavations can be found on the web at <http://www.public.asu.edu/~mesmith9/yaucity.html>.

Michael E. Smith is now at Arizona State University.