

Tinker Grant Summer 2004 Terminal Report  
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Aztec Pottery from Tula, Hidalgo, Mexico

The site of Tula is located just north of Mexico City, outside the Basin of Mexico, in the state of Hidalgo. Surrounded by a large archaeological zone, Tula is comprised of several archaeological occupation areas, the main ones being Tula Chico, the first major occupation of the area during the Terminal Classic Corral Phase, and Tula Grande, the second, of which was occupied at the height of the Toltec civilization, the Tollan Phase, AD 900-1150. The latter occupation area is of concern here. Graced with two very large pyramids, two ballcourts, a great plaza, a myriad of elite, residential and political buildings and mounds, not to mention an impressive collection of monumental sculpture and murals, Tula is most popularly and academically recognized in Mesoamerican archaeology, along with the public, as the site of the capital of the Early Postclassic Toltecs.

In approximately AD 1150, Tula Grande was burnt down by invaders, presumed to be Chichimeca from the north, marking the decline of the Toltec capital and was largely abandoned, although unlikely that the region was entirely emptied of its large populace. A period of inoccupation at Tula follows the burning event, approximately 150-200 years in length, and much less is understood of the succeeding Late Postclassic Fuego, Palacio and Tesoro Phases of the site. The most comprehensive archaeological evidence of post-Toltec occupation at Tula Grande comes from the 1992-93 excavation of Building K, a long, several meters high mound, located at the south end of the main plaza.

INAH archaeologist, Dr. Robert Cobean, in his project “Maintenance, Conservation, and Study of the Archaeological Zone of Tula, Hidalgo”, excavated Building K. The building is a major construction of a Tollan phase political building, named the Hall of Columns. Yet unlike any other mound at Tula Grande, the Building K mound has evidence of reoccupation after its destruction at the end of the Tollan Phase. It contains several superstructures, appearing to be habitational in nature, that are superimposed on the Hall of Columns and in fact, site reports conclude that some of the building material of the Hall was reused by these later inhabitants.

It is the purpose of my project to investigate Aztec occupation of Tula, using the pottery from Building K as an example - the first archaeological project at Tula to be solely dedicated to researching Aztec Tula. The Summer of 2003 involved 2 weeks of sorting Aztec pottery out of the Building K assemblage which also contains Coyotlatelco, Toltec and Colonial pottery, and then another month of going through the 3000 Aztec sherds I have and giving general classifications to each and every one. I worked in the old house of Jorge Acosta, a Mexican archaeologist who in the 1940s-60s reconstructed the major buildings at Tula. I was able to compile a general classification for the assemblage and to take numerous photos of groups of sherds to be brought back for later analysis. I also gathered enormous amounts of sherd attribute data that will be used in statistical testing that will help in comparing Tula’s typology with other site typologies.

This past summer involved the first month once again in the Acosta lab, more intensely classifying pottery. Much of that month was dedicated to making design drawings, over 300 unique designs in all. This design collection will be key in comparing Tula’s designs with designs and other pottery characteristics from 6 other sites

that I have selected in the Basin of Mexico, all located in the Northern and Central portions of the Basin of Mexico, an area that is less well-studied in the world of Aztec pottery analysis. The Aztec pottery from Teotihuacan, Tzumpango, Atzacapotzalco, Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlatelolco will be integral in figuring out if the pottery from Tula is similar or unique or both. The second month of my research involved meeting with various archaeologists in setting up the possibility to work on the collections from these 6 sites.

My preliminary analyses suggest that Tula has many original characteristics that may indicate that Tula has its own production center, but it does have many similar characteristics to particularly Atzacapotzalco and Tlatelolco, suggesting that Tula may have had a close economic relationship with these two areas, which of course, also suggests a close political relationship.

We know that the Aztec Triple Alliance was far-reaching in its grasp for political and economic domination of the surrounding lands of the Valley of Mexico. This is well documented for large portions of central Mexico. But documentation gets sketchy for lands adjacent to the North and there are mixed reports as to how developed the northern regions were and how intense was economic and political interaction. The next steps of my project will delve deeper into these issues, and the results, I hope will give us a perspective on the Aztec empire that has so far gone unnoticed.