The Quick and the Dead: Decision-making in the Abandonment of Tetimpa

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ABSTRACT

Although abandonment studies focus on both the natural and cultural aspects of site formation processes, less attention has been paid to the significance of cultural meanings in decision-making during episodes of rapid abandonment. In this article we concentrate on these cultural meanings in an attempt to understand the archaeological assemblages left behind at the central Mexican highland site of Tetimpa as it was buried under volcanic ash at the end of the first century AD We also discuss the implications of these meanings for Mesoamerican household archaeology at the village level.

Key words: Tetimpa, México, houses, ritual, cosmology.

RESUMEN

Aunque los estudios sobre abandono se enfocan tanto en los aspectos naturales como culturales de los procesos de formación de los sitios arqueológicos, se ha prestado menos atención a la relevancia de los significados culturales en la toma de decisiones durante episodios de abandono rápido. En el presente artículo nos centramos en estos significados culturales con el fin de llegar a un mejor entendimiento de los conjuntos de artefactos que quedaron en el sitio de Tetimpa en el altiplano central mexicano cuando el asentamiento fue cubierto por ceniza volcánica a finales del primer siglo de nuestra era. Asimismo, discutimos las implicaciones que estos significados tienen para la arqueología doméstica de las aldeas mesoamericanas.

Palabras clave: Tetimpa, México, casas, ritual, cosmología.

INTRODUCTION

Tetimpa was a dispersed village located on the northeastern flank of the Popocatépetl volcano in central Mexico (Inomata and Sheets in this issue: Figure 1), about 15 kilometers west of the Great Pyramid of Cholula. It was initially settled between 800 and 700 BC as part of an important agricultural expansion of smallholders (Netting 1993) into the forested piedmont of the Sierra Nevada, however the entire area was abandoned towards the end of the first century AD due to a major plinian eruption that deposited close to 3.2 km^3 of pyroclastic material over the countryside (Panfil 1996: 16; Plunket and Uruñuela 2000). At the time of this volcanic event, the village consisted of perhaps 400 to 600 households spread over some 2 km^2 (Plunket and Uruñuela 1998). We have divided the Formative occupation into early (700-200 BC) and late (50 BC-100 AD) phases that appear to be separated by a brief hiatus.

The most striking thing about Tetimpa is that once we have «liberated» a residential unit from the overlying volcanic ash, we are looking at a house and its surrounding landscape that no one has visited for almost two millennia (Figure 1). It is more like a ghost-town than a typical highland archaeological site; we don't excavate the remains as much as we sweep and dust. It's like traveling back in time to look at an ancient Mesoamerican village without the villagers.

Due to the abruptness of the event that sealed Tetimpa's fate, it is tempting to assume that the archaeological record reflects quotidian activities that were «frozen in time,» a typical day in the life of those ancient Mesoamerican villagers. However, this is a deceptively simple scenario (Cameron 1996; Inomata and Sheets, this volume; Sanders 1993: 278). Further analysis and reflection suggest that the circumstances were far from typical and that we are viewing a very extraordinary period in the village's history, a time of high drama and intense anxiety

Figure 1. Domestic unit of the Late Tetimpa phase (Operation 13).

caused perhaps by an increase in Popocatépetl's volcanic activity. In addition, we need to constantly remind ourselves, as Santley and Hirth suggest (1993: 4; Hirth 1993), that the Tetimpa of the first century AD grew out of a previous history, established over many centuries by the families that originally colonized the volcano's slopes, and that the domestic units we uncover are the result of the structural modifications implemented through time to allow householders to adjust to the social, economic, political, and ecological transformations of the latter part of the Formative.

In this paper we will focus on the implications of our work at Tetimpa for the study of Mesoamerican households and how our data contribute to our understanding of gradually abandoned houses. Since these are overlapping domains, we will attempt to intertwine them in our discussion rather than address them sequentially.

CONTEXT AND POSITION: EVIDENCE FOR EXTENDED ABSENCES

To begin with, we have learned to take a close look at whether things are face up or face down. This seems obvious once one grasps its significance, but it was not absolutely apparent until we did some detailed analyses of the abandonment process (Plunket and Uruñuela n.d.a). We realized that if the *cazuelas* and *ollas* were face up, they were usually filled with food, but if they were face down, they were clean, either left to dry or «stored», even if they were resting on the patio floor (Figure 2). This also applies to *metates* since they are stored by leaning the grinding surface against the *talud* of the kitchen platform, the *mano* placed on the *tablero* above. An analogous situation can be observed in the modern rural houses of Mexico, where, while not in use, inverted *cazuelas* adorn the rooftops to keep them clean and out of the way.

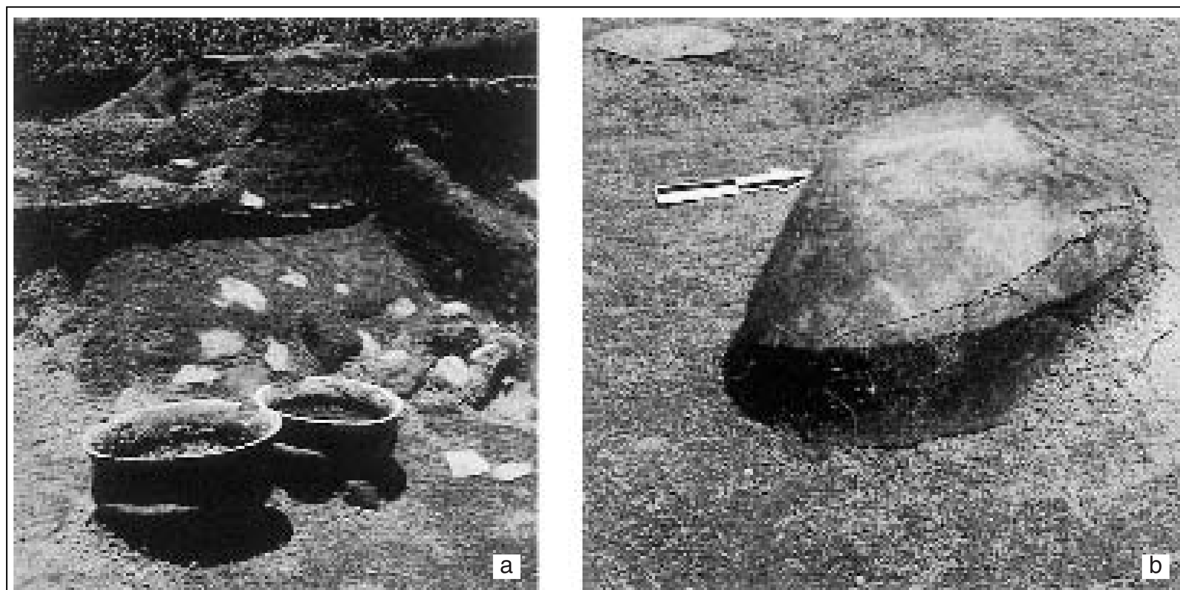

Figure 2. Examples of positional differences between cazuelas at two Late Tetimpa houses: (a) *cazuelas* face-up with food inside at Operation 11; b) *cazuela* stored face-down in the patio of Operation 13.

But our recognition that the position of the artifacts themselves was highly significant led us to understand that the abandonment of the houses of Tetimpa was not so much an abrupt evacuation as a tendency towards extended absenteeism as people stayed away from their village, returning repetitively to undertake minimal maintenance and tend their *milpas* and gardens. Therefore, we have suggested that when the volcanic event began, some householders were present while others were away (Plunket and Uruñuela n.d.a).

We found that, as Tomka (1996) has observed, the things people leave behind as they abandon their homes, document not only the circumstances that led to the exodus, but also a great deal about their ideas of returning. Some of the houses in the village were new and their daub plaster finishes show few signs of wear, but other houses were in desperate need of repair: the daub was highly eroded, patio floors had become uneven and the central staircases were falling apart. Most repairs were make-shift, like using a broken *metate* to shore up a collapsed staircase (Figure 3), and buildings that were under construction were being used in spite of the fact that they were not yet finished. One might interpret these as signs of abandonment, but in light of Tetimpa's peculiar fate, we prefer to see them as evidence that much of the population was not in full-time residence and did not have enough time during their occasional visits to undertake major maintenance projects, preferring perhaps to postpone this time-consuming work for the future when they assumed they would return home for good once the volcano settled down.

ARTIFACTS OF THE LIVING AND OF THE DEAD

There are very few small bowls and goblets in the Tetimpa houses, perhaps because they are highly portable, but as we analyzed the fill and midden deposits that had accumulated during the centuries prior to the geological catastrophe, we discovered that small vessels are relatively rare in discard areas. We believe this is mainly because these items constitute the bulk of the burial furniture in the graves underneath the platform floors. They do not appear to have been produced specifically for mortuary rites since they show signs of use wear, but even though they probably represent the service dishes from which living household members ate and drank, these small vessels were also deemed essential accouterments for deceased kin.

Figure 3. Make-shift repair of the kitchen staircase at Operation 11 using a broken *metate.*

The paucity of those objects in the Late Tetimpa (50 BC-AD 100) ceramic assemblages consequently might be attributable not only to their portability but also to their symbolic importance for individuals who would have to make the transition to the otherworld sometime in the future. Although it is tempting to interpret the assemblages of the Late Tetimpa houses as direct reflections of pragmatic, economically logical decisions made by each household at the time of the disaster, we believe that variables like portability can only partially explain the archaeological record. Obsidian or chert cores and tools occur in very low frequencies at the Late Tetimpa houses, and although they are relatively abundant in discard contexts, they are not numerically important components of the funerary assemblages; these items were part of the world of the living, useful and easy to carry, and it was the living who took them along as they left their homes. Grinding stones also belong to the world of the living, but they are heavy and difficult to transport -and besides, with little or no grain to grind, they become less important for survival; they are, however, useful items for the occasional visits and would be essential for food preparation once the families returned home.

This distinction between the living and the dead is significant in view of the abandonment of the Late Tetimpa houses, and we think it can be usefully applied to interpret other parts of the archaeological assemblages. For example, there are almost no figurines in the Late Tetimpa houses, and although figurines and figurine fragments are fairly common in discard areas, they never occur in burials. Whether they were used for curing, divining, or as toys, the Tetimpa figurines belong to the world of the living, and they were taken from the houses in the weeks and months before the eruption. The central courtyard altars with their carved stone images (Figure 4), however, belong to the world of the

dead, and therefore, they were left behind with the ancestors buried under the floors of the Tetimpeños homes. This is also true of the censers. These are found in the main room of the house that probably served as a family shrine or in front of the courtyard altar that constituted the liminal space for ritual practice (Blanton 1994: 79-80; Plunket and Uruñuela n.d.b); they also occur in select burials of men who presided over the ancestral rites (Uruñuela and Plunket n.d.). These were items that linked the living with the dead, ritual paraphernalia used to venerate the ancestors that would become obsolete as the shrines for the fathers and grandfathers disappeared under the thick layer of ash.

The stone slabs, or *lajas*, that often appear as «stelae» associated with food and food production areas (Uruñuela and Plunket 1998) were also consistently left behind (Figure 5). Our interpretation of these upright *lajas* has varied throughout our six years of research, but we now suspect that they are another type of shrine, perhaps related to the women of the household and their lineages. One of these *lajas* had been used to create a central courtyard altar that lacked carved stones, thus indicating an association between these slabs and the world of the dead, and providing an explanation for their strong representation in the archaeological record of Tetimpa.

It is not only that censers, carved shrine stones, and upright *lajas* belong to the world of the dead, but they also belong to the house, to the vertically extended lineage that the house manifested, as opposed to that segment of the lineage that was alive at the time of the eruption. Just as the small vessels may have been taken because they were practical, portable and important components of future burial rites, and thus

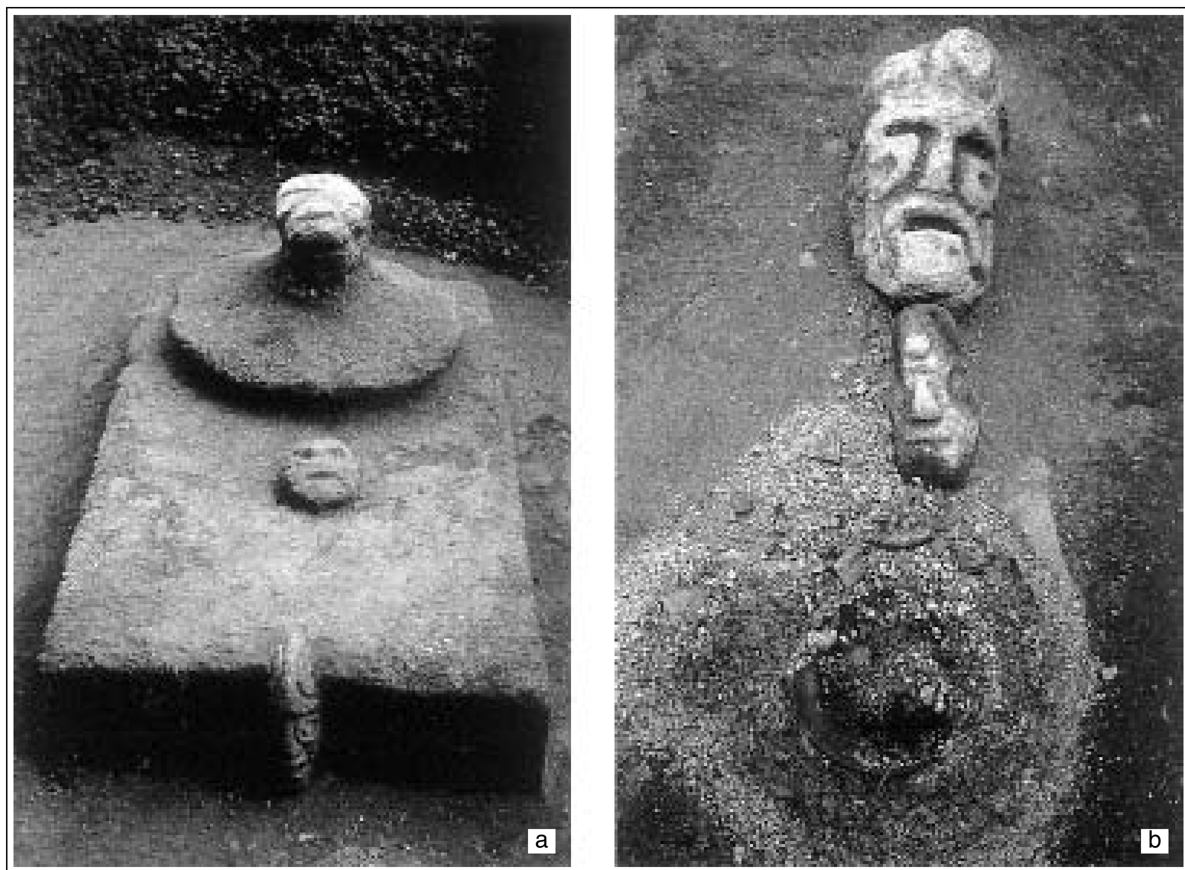

Figure 4. Central courtyard shrines found in situ: (a) Operation 12 and (b) Operation 13.

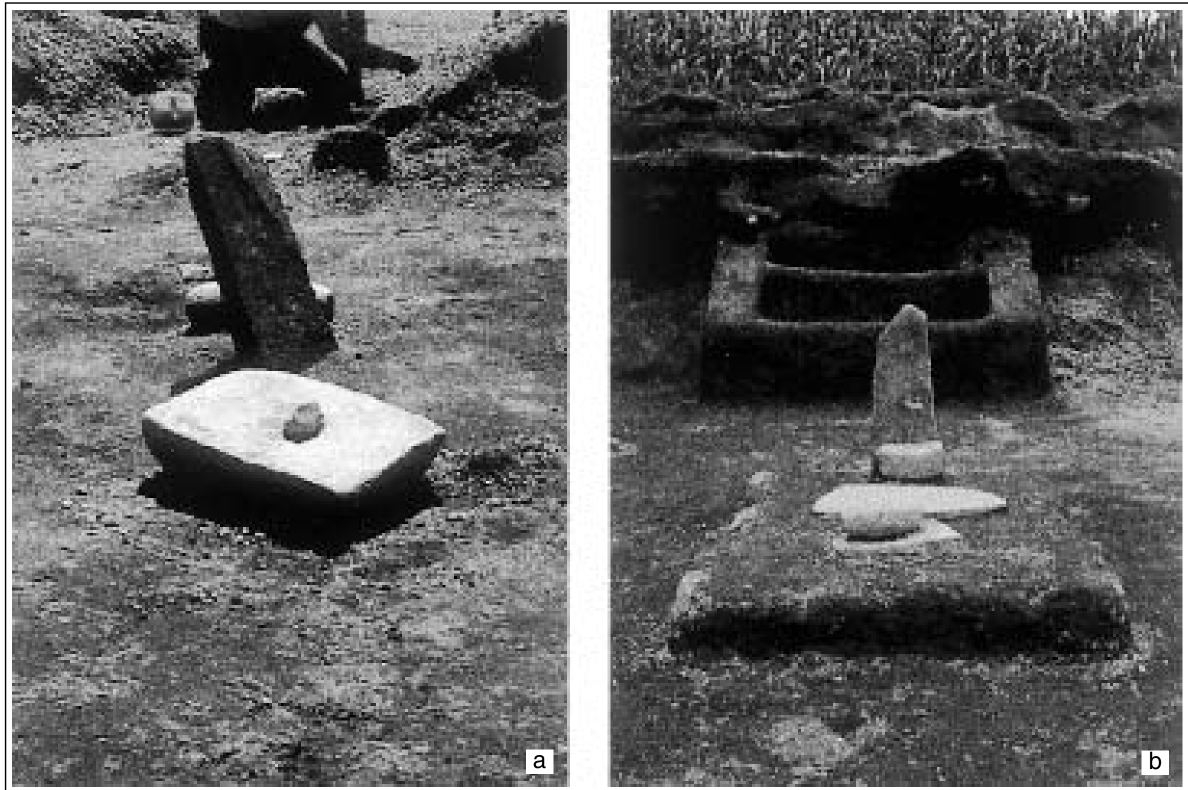

Figure 5. Upright stone slabs (*lajas*) at Operation 11: (a) associated with a food production area and (b) forming part of a central courtyard shrine.

linked to specific living individuals, the shrine stones, the censers, and the *lajas* belong to the corporate group that remained with the house, the ancestors who in a sense **were** the house.

HOUSEHOLDERS AND HOUSES

This distinction between individuals and group, between householders and house, provides yet another way to understand the archaeological assemblages of the Late Tetimpa dwellings. For example, bark beaters and obsidian perforators are found in some burials but they never occur in the houses. The bark beaters, generally associated with certain male burials, probably served to make paper that was burned in the censers for the ancestors; but it is likely that paper was used also for a great many other things that would have been relevant to various aspects of the world of the living, like decorations, wrappings, costumes, headdresses, and offerings at extra-household temples and shrines, so bark beaters were taken from the houses. Obsidian perforators were essential for self-sacrificial rites that certainly must have formed part of the ritual practice at the central courtyard altars; but they also would have been important items for personal ritual practice that did not focus on ancestor veneration or that took place beyond the household level at communal or regional shrines, and so perforators were never left behind.

Tetimpa itself had buildings that were non-residential. During the summer of 1999, we excavated a large room dating to the Early Tetimpa phase (*circa* 300 BC) that had none of the familiar features of domestic space we have documented so far at twenty-three different houses or detached kitchens. This was a large building with 36 m^2 of interior space, adobe rather than wattle-and-daub walls and a distinctive built-in

censer situated to the right of the entrance; two post holes penetrated the finely polished clay floor about 1 meter from the back wall, suggesting the presence of a special structure-within-a-structure, perhaps a shrine. There were no ancestors buried beneath the floors of this building, and it's size, large enough to hold 20 to 30 individuals seated along its walls, suggests that this was a meeting hall, the locus of supra-household ritual and decision-making. Due to its location within a cluster of residential buildings, we think this may have been a lineage hall where collective decisions were made and sanctified by the ritual actions of household heads.

Beyond the boundaries of the village, there were other locales for ritual practice that may have been important to the Tetimpeños, most significantly the temples and shrines of Cholula that would have required about four hours to reach on foot. We do not know how Tetimpa was integrated into the regional ritual system, but if the headmen of the village managed to procure exotic obsidians, cherts and ceramics, they certainly must have participated at some level in the larger organizational system of western Puebla and Tlaxcala.

The data from Tetimpa have greatly enriched our understanding of Mesoamerican households, particularly for the central highlands where thin soils and high population density have not provided the most nurturing environment for the conservation of ancient village lifeways. The preservation of domestic contexts at Tetimpa allows us to confirm and develop many archaeological interpretations that are based on analogies derived from the ethnographic literature or rooted in the ethnohistorical accounts from the early Colonial period. For example, Tetimpa confirms the existence of that typological entity labeled «dispersed village» (Sanders *et al.* 1979: 52-60) for the Formative, and shows that this doesn't mean evenly or randomly dispersed, but rather a non-random distribution that was probably produced by the organizational features of lineage structures. The importance of the lineage as a generator of architectural patterns, ritual activity and collective decision-making is emerging as the central theme of our studies of this Late and Terminal Formative village (Uruñuela and Plunket n.d.; Plunket and Uruñuela n.d.b), and we suggest that the type of organization we have documented at Tetimpa was not an exception, but the rule for a large part of Mesoamerica during this time period (e.g., Marcus and Flannery 1994; McAnany 1995; Widmer and Storey 1993).

THE *TALUD-TABLERO*: CANONICAL COMMUNICATION IN DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE

The architecture of Tetimpa contradicts the standard cliché that a *talud-tablero* platform is diagnostic only of a temple (Millon 1981: 228-229). Ethnographic studies provide ample evidence that in lineage-based societies, houses can also serve as temples since they are the locus of the ritual activity that venerates the ancestors (Ahern 1973; Blanton 1994: 79-114; Middleton 1987). Rather than expect a clear, unambiguous distinction between temples and houses at the village level, we might rather suggest that domestic ritual requires the incorporation of sacred symbolism within the residential space and that there is no inherent ambiguity involved in the fusion of house and temple.

All of Tetimpa's house platforms are divided into two sections, a lower *talud* that often «houses» the remains of departed family members, and an upper *tablero* that merges with the house floor to form the occupation surface for the living. A great deal of energy was invested in building these *talud-tablero* platforms not only for the central shrine rooms but also for sleeping quarters and kitchens; since ancestors could be buried under the floors of any of these rooms, it makes sense that all platforms should be architecturally designed to accommodate both the living and the dead. We propose that this particular architectural façade was much more than a decorative device in that it allowed basic cosmological principals to be expressed within the house and provided a necessary temporal continuity for families composed of both active and deceased members.

Whether the *talud-tablero* developed in the Formative villages of the central highlands and was used later as a prototype for temples at highland centers like Cholula, Tlalancaleca and Teotihuacan, or whether villagers adopted an existing temple format in order to enhance the symbolism of their houses, is an historical question we cannot answer, but perhaps it is time to rethink the *talud-tablero* profile in terms of lineage and cosmology (Plunket and Uruñuela, in press) rather than simply to use it as a classificatory device or evidence of «Teotihuacan influence» (e.g., Gendrop 1984).

A very limited number of Tetimpa house platforms have decorated façades. These are not necessarily the largest or the most elegant houses, and to us this suggests that architectural decoration should not be viewed automatically as a socio-economic status marker. The clearest case we have documented so far

was, in most ways, an ordinary house: the same *cazuelas* and *ollas*, the same grinding stones and *cuexcomates* (grain storage silos), the same hearths, and the same small platforms. Apart from the modeled and painted daub relief on the inverted U-shaped *tablero* (Plunket and Uruñuela 1998: 303, Figure 14), the only appreciable difference between this house and its neighbors was a turtle shell drum with a deer antler tucked inside that had been left in the corner storage room. It would seem that, at least in some cases, decorated façades in village architecture are more indicative of role differences than status differences, that is the symbolism has more to do with identifying the locus of community ritual than the variations in household wealth. This perspective is supported to some extent by work at Cerén that suggests that architectu-

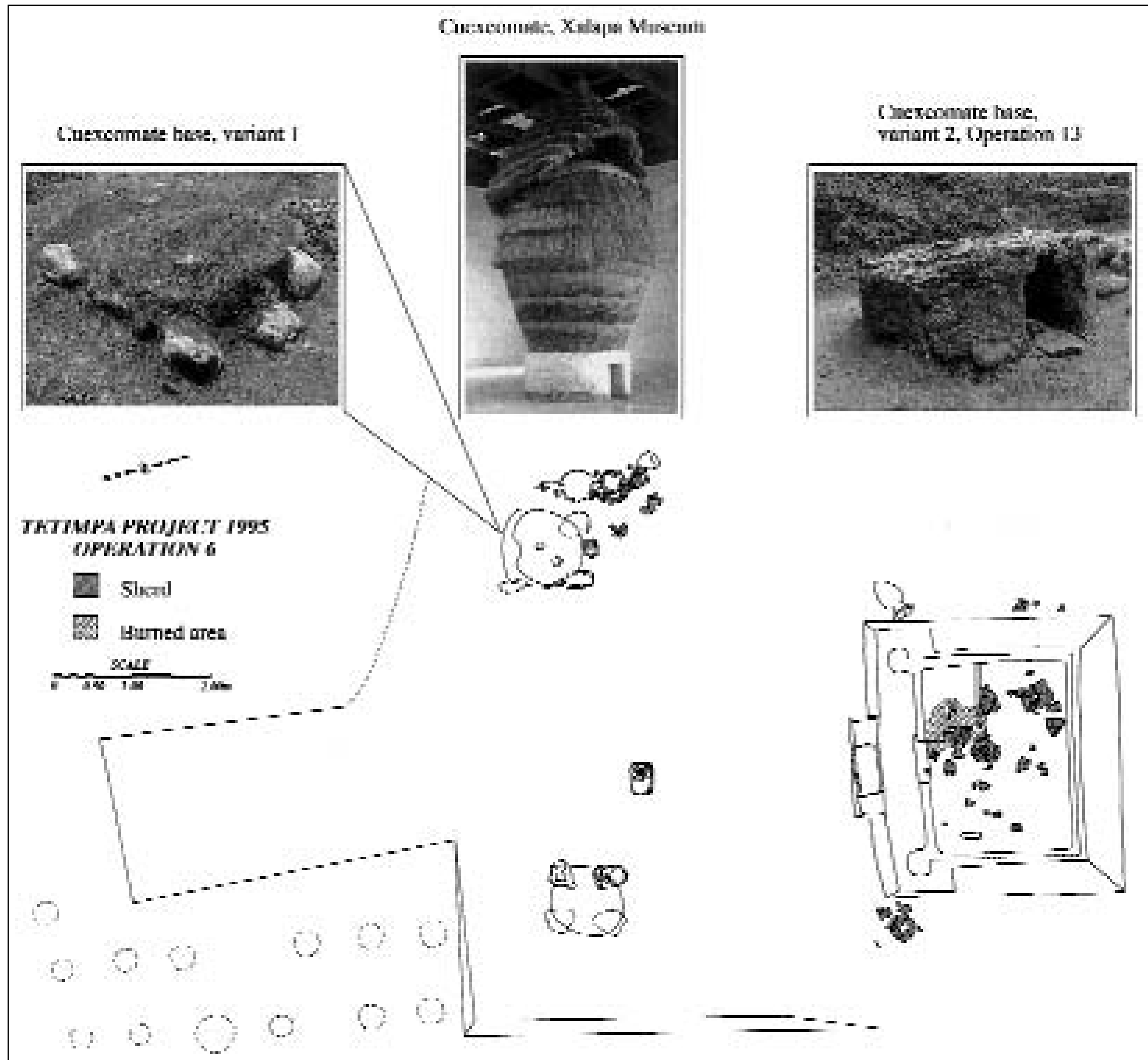

Figure 6. Two variants of *cuexcomate* bases from Tetimpa compared with a modern version of these wicker-and-daub silos in the Xalapa Museum.

re was employed as a way to distinguish the house of a community ritual practitioner from the dwellings of other villagers (Brown and Sheets, this issue; Brown *et al*. n.d.).

But wealth was also symbolized in the houses of Tetimpa. House size, shrine complexity, the amount and quality of the goods, and the number and visibility of the storage facilities were all used to designate wealth and prosperity. One of the most significant transitions we have been able to document between the Early and Late Tetimpa phases in the first century BC is the replacement of the ubiquitous bell-shaped pit by the above-ground wicker-and-daub *cuexcomate* that can still be found today in some villages on the slopes of the volcano. *Cuexcomates* were not placed within the patio like the underground storage pits (Figure 6), but rather they were displayed prominently at the entrance to the house compound or used to delimit the patio when only two, instead of three, platforms were present. Perhaps the reason for transferring storage facilities to the surface had to do with the fact that the centuries-long occupations of many of the residential units had resulted in the «filling-up» of underground space, but the exhibition of large food storage silos at the entrance to the residence created an appropriate message for outsiders arriving at a Late Tetimpa house: a central lineage shrine framed by the symbols of household prosperity.

CONCLUSIONS

Abandonment studies often focus on the concrete aspects of site formation processes, placing perhaps as much if not more emphasis on the **way** material things become incorporated into the archaeological record rather than on the **why** they do. We have tried to point out that the structures of household and village organization and ritual practice can provide important insights into the questions of the «why» of the archaeological record by contrasting the world of the living with the world of the dead, the interests and rights of the individual with those of the group, and the obligations of individuals and groups at different organizational levels of society: the household, the community and the world beyond.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Mesoamerican Research Foundation and the Sistema Ignacio Zaragoza of the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología for their generous support of our research at Tetimpa. The Consejo de Arqueología of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia granted the official permit for this project and has provided assistance and advice throughout our research that are much appreciated.

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