

Politics, territory and historical change in Postclassic Matlatzinco (Toluca Valley, central Mexico)

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Abstract

Historical interpretation of political dynamics in pre-conquest central Mexico from indigenous records is fraught with difficulties. Beyond the basic challenges involved in interpreting fragmentary evidence is the fact that the majority of evidence comes from the dominant imperial polity (Tenochtitlan) and paints a biased and overly generalized view of political and social dynamics in provincial areas. We present a reconstruction of the political geography of the Toluca Valley of central Mexico in Aztec times that avoids these biases by focusing not on the events described in native histories, but on the individual towns and their spatial locations. We find that a theoretical perspective that defines political entities by networks and relations among people more adequately captures the historical situation than traditional models that define polities based on territory and boundaries.

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Keywords: Political process; Politics; Ancient States; Borders; Toluca Valley; Mexico

Reconstructing the pre-European political situation in central Mexico presents a challenge for research in historical geography. Beyond obvious practical problems of fragmentary written evidence are three inter-related conceptual challenges. The first is to overcome the intentional bias of written historical records that results from their production and purposeful manipulation by the dominant, ruling elite class. The second is to give a 'voice' to places and regions ignored or suppressed by bias so that broader political, social, and economic process can be examined from a more balanced perspective. The third challenge is to conceptualize and represent places and regions that do not fit the standard western conception of 'territory' as a well-defined geographic or political space.

We address these conceptual challenges through an analysis of political process and change in the pre-conquest Toluca Valley of central Mexico between ca. A.D. 1300 and 1550. Through detailed mapping of town locations within the Toluca Valley (derived from a variety of sources), we can see through the biases in the historical record to show that political control of the Toluca Valley was never consolidated into an integrated politico-territorial unit. Rather,

control of geographical space was continually contested between the native Matlatzinca people of the Toluca Valley and a series of outside imperial polities, including the Tepanecs, the Aztec Triple Alliance, and the Spanish Empire.

These conflicts served to fulfill and reinforce spatially overlapping, multi-scale social, economic or military agendas of multiple political entities both within and outside of the Toluca Valley. The very notion of well-defined territorial boundaries is not applicable to the pre-conquest Toluca Valley or surrounding regions, and this is reflected in our conceptual understanding of polities and cartographic representations of historic political situations. Thus, the work presented here contributes to on going discussions at the intersection of Anthropology and Geography on re-examining the effects and conceptual utility of 'borders' and the relation between borders, territory and the fluid nature of how people utilized geographic space and conceptualized political space.¹

In the following section, we describe the cultural and linguistic history our study area to demonstrate both its historical complexity and how that complexity is exacerbated by broader regional political processes.

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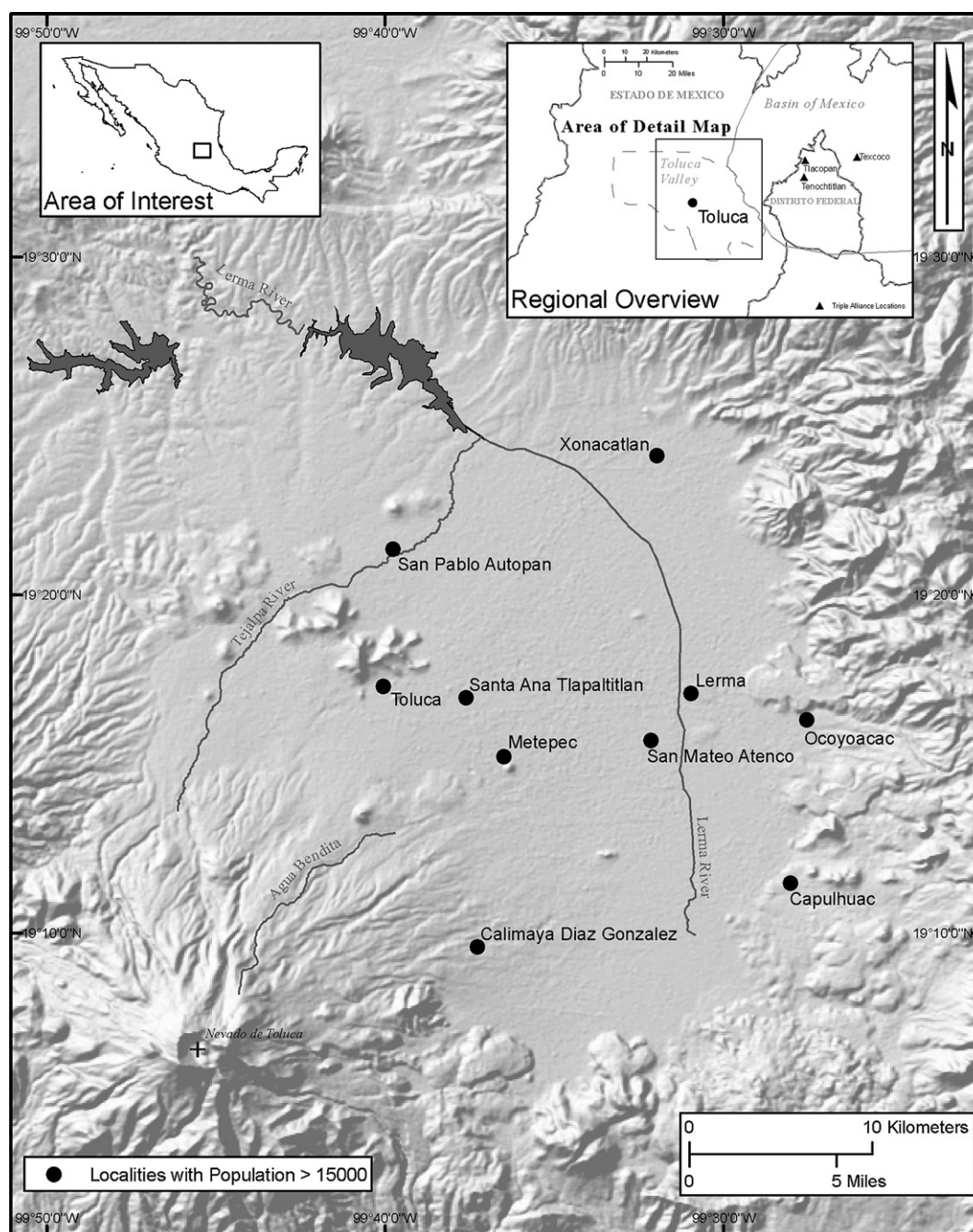


Fig. 1. Location of the Toluca Valley in Mexico.

The Toluca Valley, Matlatzinco, and the Matlatzincas

Situated in the south-eastern portion of the constituent state of Mexico, the Toluca Valley is a broad highland valley located immediately west of the Basin of Mexico (Fig. 1).

The valley is situated on an elevated plateau and because of this, generally experiences cooler temperatures than surrounding areas. The annual rainfall ranges from 800 to 1200 mm.² Fertile soils and

the waters of the Lerma River have made the Toluca Valley a productive agricultural area.

Before the arrival of the Spanish in 1519, the Toluca Valley was known as Matlatzinco, a Nahuatl term that means either 'Place of nets' or else 'On the small place of nets.'³ This usage is found in both types of documents used in the present study: native historical accounts from the Basin of Mexico and early colonial Spanish administrative documents from the Toluca Valley (see discussion of

² <http://www.worldweather.org/179/c01300f.htm#climate> (last viewed 13 July 2009).

³ The term 'matlatl' means 'net' in Nahuatl. F. Karttunen, *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl*, Norman, 1983, and 'tzinco' is a locative that has been translated 'on the small place of'. F.F. Berdan, Appendix E: the place-name, personal name, and title glyphs of the codex mendoza: translations and comments, in: F.F. Berdan, P.R. Anawalt (Eds.), *The Codex Mendoza*, Vol. 1, Berkeley, 1992, 163–239.

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