

Los Cerritos: an early fishing–farming community on the Pacific Coast of Mexico

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Recent excavations at Los Cerritos, an earthen mound site on the Pacific Coast of Mexico, provide evidence for a sedentary fishing–farming community dating to the Early Formative period (3500–2800 cal BP). The site is one of nine known earthen mounds dated to this period within or near the present-day coastal wetlands surrounding the Acapetahua Estuary (FIGURE 1). Similar sites are found in wetland contexts elsewhere in Mexico, particularly the Mazatán region (Clark 1994), and along the coast of Guatemala (Coe & Flannery 1967). In the Mazatán region, sites in these wetland contexts are smaller than contemporary settlements in the interior and ceramic assemblages are dominated by globular gourd-shaped vessels known locally as *tecomates*. Based on this, some archaeologists have hypothesized that they were seasonally occupied encampments used for collecting and processing estuarine resources (Lesure 1993).

Our work on the Early Formative period occurs in the context of a long-term research programme focused on a series of Archaic Period shellmounds in the wetlands of the Acapetahua region (7500–3500, Voorhies *et al.* in press). This research suggests that they were special-purpose locations used to collect and process estuarine resources, an interpretation based on the absence of domestic features, low tool diversity, faunal assemblages dominated by shellfish and a distinctive stratigraphy characterized by alternating beds of burned and unburned shell. The excavations at Los Cerritos provide our first glimpse of the subsequent Early Formative period in the region. The site is a small earthen mound (0.25 ha) rising approximately 2.5 m above the natural ground surface. It is surrounded by mangrove forest on all sides (FIGURE 2), but is visible in aerial photos as a small lobe extending into the northern side of the Los Cerritos Lagoon. Intact sub-surface midden deposits were identified with auger probes, and excavation units (2x2 m) were placed in two promising areas of the site (FIGURE 3; A & B). Domestic features (floors, hearths and pits) were discovered in both areas, but the deposits were

particularly well preserved in area B, where a series of living surfaces was associated with high concentrations of domestic refuse (FIGURE 4). Similar to other Early Formative sites on the Pacific Coast, *tecomates* with red-slipped rims were common, but highly decorated bowls were also present in lower frequencies. Obsidian flakes and cores, representing a relatively simple bipolar flake tool industry, were also present. Pottery from the site has been provisionally identified to the Cherla phase of the Early Formative, and a series of radiocarbon dates indicate occupation at the site from 3400 to 3100 cal BP.

Faunal and floral remains from the site suggest a broad-based economy combining maize (John Jones pers. comm.) with animal resources from the wetland environment. Shellfish from the adjacent shallow water lagoon were present but not abundant as in the nearby Archaic shellmounds. However, other resources from the upper estuary (e.g. fish) dominate the faunal assemblage. Preliminary oxygen isotopic seasonality data indicate that shellfish were collected throughout the year. Combined with evidence for substantial domestic features and diverse economic pursuits, the current evidence suggests that Los Cerritos was a relatively stable, sedentary fishing–farming community. This represents a fundamental departure from the logistical use of estuarine resources evident during the Archaic period. The broad-spectrum economic pursuits evident at Los Cerritos, however, can easily be interpreted as an outgrowth of subsistence strategies practiced in the area for thousands of years.

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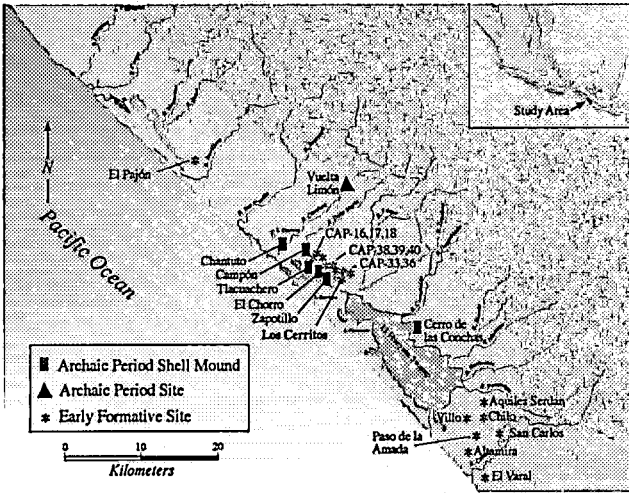


FIGURE 1. Map of south Pacific coast of Chiapas, Mexico showing the location of Los Cerritos and nearby Archaic and Formative period sites.

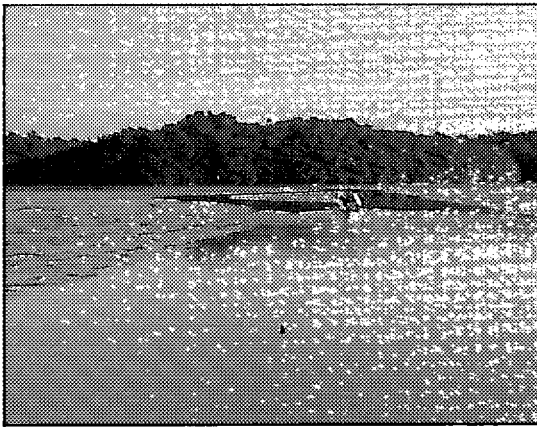


FIGURE 2. Photograph of the Los Cerritos lagoon at low tide with a canal leading to the Los Cerritos site surrounded by mangrove trees.

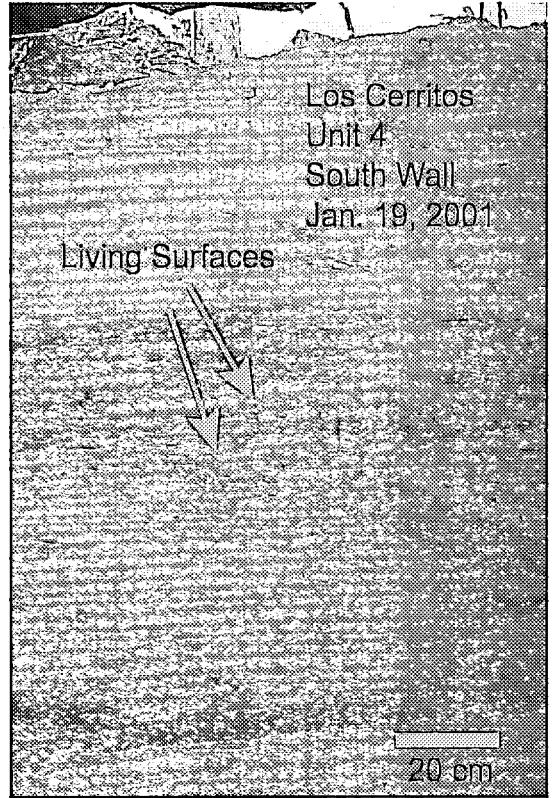


FIGURE 4. Photograph of stratigraphic section in Area B (Unit 4, South Wall).

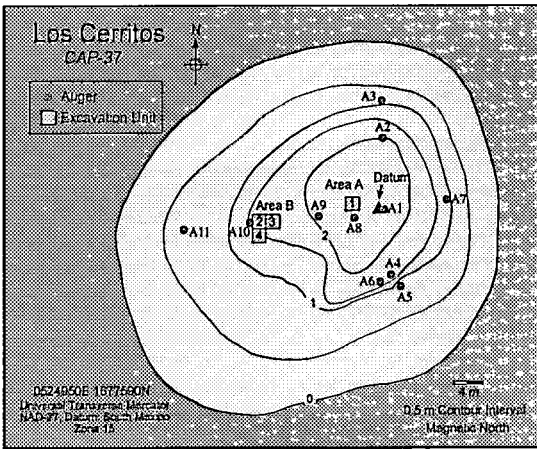


FIGURE 3 (left). Topographic map of Los Cerritos showing auger and excavation locations.

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