VI. PRELIMINARY REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS IN THE ARCHEOLOGICAL ZONE OF RIOVERDE, SAN LUIS POTOSI, MEXICO

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Introduction

During the month of July, 1957, exploratory excavations were carried out by the writers at the site of El Jaral, in the municipio of Rioverde, San Luis Potosi. At the same time a site survey was conducted in the western Rio Verde basin and several local collections were studied. The present paper represents a preliminary report on these activities (1).

The central portion of the State of San Luis Potosi is composed of an extensive meseta bounded on the east by the Sierra Madre Oriental and by the Sierra Gorda on the west. These mountain chains are composed of sedimentary formations, primarily limestone, with occasional volcanic intrusions. It is part of the tierra templada, and has an altitude of about 1,000 meters above sea level. Rainfall is largely confined to the summer. The climate has been classified as BS, or dry steppe, according to the system of Koeppen (Vivo:83-84). The meseta is drained by the Rio Verde and its tributaries, which in turn form part of the Panuco system, one of the largest in Mexico.

The first Spaniard known to have passed through this area was Fray Bernardo Cossin, late in the 16th century. He noted the presence of mounds, already covered by vegetation, and found the region inhabited only by Pame Indians with a simple hunting-and-gathering culture (Velazquez, I:358).

The accompanying map (Figure 1), adapted from one drawn by Sr. Octaviano Cabrera Ipiña, gives some idea of the distribution and concentration of sites in the Rio Verde basin. Within several days the authors saw or visited more than thirty sites in the western end of the basin alone. These sites averaged some 15 major mounds each, for a total of at least 450 mounds in this small area. In some areas the sites are so thickly clustered that from one it is often possible to see several others. The similarity in sherds found on the surface of all the sites visited suggests their contemporaneous occupation.

The Site of El Jaral (RV-4)

The site of El Jaral (designated in the site survey as RV-4) was chosen for excavation and study because it appeared to offer good opportunities for securing a ceramic sequence. Essentially, El Jaral consists of 16 major mounds of varying sizes and heights, grouped into a hollow rectangle measuring approximately 140 meters north-south by 120 meters east-west (Figure 2). A large central mound divides the rectangle into two plazas. On the western side of the site two parallel mounds about 50 meters long suggest a ball court (Mounds 10 and 13, Figure 2). Other sites visited during the reconnaissance showed similar indications of ball courts.

Excavations in Mound 14

The central mound, designated Mound 14 was chosen for the major work of excavation (Plate 1,a-d). Treasure-hunters in previous years had dug a large hole in the center of the mound and according to local information, had reached the bottom where they encountered a burial. Although erosion had filled in more than half of this pit, the upper part of the mound interior which still remained exposed revealed very clearly several distinct periods of construction. Consequently it was decided to perforate the mound from its highest point with a one-meter-square pit, to sample the ceramics and to study the construction of the mound. At the same time, since at best only a secondary ceramic sequence could be derived from the mound fill, it was decided to dig other test pits and trenches at various points in the site to obtain a primary ceramic sequence. In addition, a pit was dug just north of Mound 14 to provide a check on the basic stratigraphy underlying that mound. All deposits were passed through quarter-inch mesh screens.

The original occupation zone under Mound 14 was a thin(6-8cm.) carbon-stained soil layer with cultural materials in it. Built immediately upon this layer was a structure 1.30 meters high of untrimmed limestone slabs; these were laid in courses and cemented with a fine, compact clay, which was also used to cap the structure (Stage I). As seen in the profile of the north wall of this pit (Figure 3, and Plate 1,b), only a small portion of this structure was uncovered, so that its form was not determinable.

Subsequently this stone structure was covered over and around by an earth fill (Stage II) and topped by a good cemented floor of fragmented tezontle, with a prepared base of adobe. This structure had a height of 1.50 meters above the original occupation level (i.e., 20 cm. higher than Stage I). At a later time the process was repeated, and the mound grew to a height of 2.15 meters (Stage III), with a prepared floor of very small limestone fragments. In Stage IV, the mound was again covered with more soil of the same constituency as that used previously; the maximum height is unknown, since the profile shows an upward slope toward the center, but it probably was not over 4 meters. Lying atop this level was a small deposit of distinctive soil; its significance was not determinable, however.

To form Stage V, the slope of the mound was leveled off with an ash-clay fill, and an almost pure ash fill was placed over this. This ash layer produced the bulk of the decorated ware and distinctive artifacts encountered in the excavations. In Stage VI the slope of the ash layer was levelled off as seen in the northwest corner of the pit profile, and the mound was covered with a thick prepared surface of small limestone fragments; in this stage the mound attained a height of approximately 4.50 meters.

The western slopes of Stages VII and VIII were cut by the pit but owing to the previous sacking of the mound, the full height is not determinable for these stages.

Stages IX and X are somewhat different in nature from those preceding and are more difficult to interpret. Stage IX is formed by a facade applied to the southern face of the mound. This facade is made of uncut limestone slabs cemented in courses with fine clay mortar, exactly as in the structure of Stage I. The original south face of the mound was evidently cut away to a smooth slope before the facade was applied, since the interior earthern layers of the mound terminate horizontally abruptly against the inside face of the facade (Plate 1,d).

Stage X was formed by a prepared surface (floor) of medium-sized limestone fragments in a clay matrix. As it was used to cover up and level off

the slope of Stage VIII, it is thicker at the western side (15 cm.) than at the eastern edge (1.5 cm.) of the pit. As can be seen in the profile of the north wall of the pit the floor terminates abruptly against a sloping layer of dark, humus-stained soil. This soil, at its juncture with the floor, intrudes down into Stage VIII; however, it also extends up above the level of the floor. It should be observed that the fill of Stage VIII levels off at the same height as the prepared floor.

It may be suggested that the dark layer above Stage VIII does not form an additional stage of mound construction, but represents the decayed remnants of a wooden temple structure which once stood on top of the mound. The intrusion into Stage VIII fill probably was made by a wall-post, long since decayed. This hypothesis would account for the abrupt termination of the floor in a vertical edge. The clay deposit overlying the floor at the west edge of the pit could have come from the melted adobe of a wattle-and-daub wall. There is evidence for the use of this type of construction in burned adobe fragments from elsewhere in the fill of Mound 14. The floor of Stage X projects south beyond the pit and overlies the edge of the stone facade of Stage IX.

In this final stage (Stage X), the mound reached a height of 6.60 meters above the original occupation level. The uppermost level of fill seen in the profiles agrees in composition with the sub-mound sterile sand-clay, and undoubtedly is a result of the digging activities of the treasure-hunters.

Other Stratigraphic Trenches

Test Pit 2 was dug to a depth of 1.40 meters just north of Mound 14, to provide a control on the stratigraphy underlying that mound. Below the plow zone, at a depth of 15-25 cm., a prepared surface of limestone chunks in a clay matrix appeared to indicate the original plaza floor. Below this was a 5 cm. layer of carbon-stained soil with sherd material which corresponded to the original occupation level underlying Stage I of Mound 14. Sterile clay-gravel and coarse sands continued below this layer, as they did beneath Mound 14.

Pit 3 was dug in the field west of the mound cluster, near a mound almost completely obliterated by plowing (beyond the mapped area of Figure 2). This pit was carried to a depth of 1.20 meters, of which the upper 85 cm. bore cultural material, notably pipe fragments. Some indications were noted that a thick floor such as was found in Pit 2 might have existed, but plowing had disturbed the area too badly to be sure.

Pit 4 was dug between Mounds 4 and 5 (Figure 2), but work was suspended when structural debris was encountered.

Pit 5 was dug between Mounds 10 and 13 (Figure 2), close to the latter, to test the hypothesis that they formed a ball court. A very thick and well-made plastered floor was found at a depth of 45 cm., the only such floor found in the site. This discovery strengthened the ball-court hypothesis, although time did not permit more definitive explorations.

Burials

The only human remains encountered in the excavations were those of a child which had been interred under the floor of Stage III in Mound 14; the floor had not been broken above the burial. The bones had been dispersed by rodent activity, and the only artifact associated with them was a light-grey ceramic earspool. It was reported that the persons who sacked the mound had encountered a burial at the bottom of their pit.

Ceramics

The present discussion is based entirely on a preliminary examination.

The only previously reported excavations in this region were conducted by Du Solier and Ekholm (Du Solier, et al., 1947) at Buena Vista, Huaxcama, S. L. P. On the basis of Du Solier's descriptions and a brief examination of a collection from that area, it is possible to state that the ceramics of the two zones are alike. The following ceramics described by Du Solier are present also at El Jaral: polished blackware, both plain and incised, often with red or white pigment in the incisions; red-on-white

ware; red-on-buff ware; two varieties of fine paste ware; and brushed, smoothed, and polished-slipped utility wares. Several other minor wares from Buena Vista are also present at El Jaral. The design inventory at El Jaral duplicates that illustrated from Buena Vista by Du Solier.

However, the ceramic complex at El Jaral contains some additional varieties not reported by Du Solier. These include two kinds of white-on-red ware; a black-on-white ware with only a straight broad line as decoration; a polished white ware; a polished orange-red slipped ware which has a graphitic sheen; a polished brown ware with a streaked slip; and two distinct varieties of negative decoration. One of these last is a trichrome, with a stamped black design on a polished white slip, to which has been added a red band over the black design around the lip.

Other Ceramic Artifacts

Other distinctive artifact classes include very finely made earspools, so delicate that the pressure of one's fingers will crush them. Ceramic smoking pipes were found; they are primarily of polished brown ware, well fired, and with a delicate conical bowl affixed near the end of a straight, pencil-thick stem; this kind of pipe is also present at Buena Vista. A few stems were of red-on-white ware. Figurine fragments, both human and animal, were found in various parts of the excavation, as well as fragments of effigy-decorated vessels.

Non-Ceramic Artifacts

These were quite infrequent. One carved shell finger-ring with a crudely indicated human face on the front was recovered. Banded grey obsidian and fluorite crystals were found. One exceedingly small mussel shell pendant, carefully cut and drilled, was found, along with part of a larger one. Basalt metate fragments from the surface of the site and broken pieces of orange-red painted plaster from Pit 1 in Mound 14 complete this category of materials.

Artifacts In Local Collections

The writers examined several private collections of materials from the Rio Verde basin. The data thus acquired contribute important information to the archeological knowledge of this area.

Figurines

The most common artifact class in the collections was that of figurines. Sr. Cabrera Ipiña has done a preliminary study of the most outstanding types; his data have been very helpful in the preparation of this report. Many of the figurine types, so far as is known, are unique to the region. A few Archaic period figurines are present but these seem to be intrusive from the eastern part of the Rio Verde basin.

Human forms predominate but there are a few animal heads and effigies from vessel rims. Techniques of manufacture include hand-modelling, use of molds, and applique; many figurines combine all three techniques. Applique is used for most features of ornament and dress on the figurines. No sexual characteristics are indicated on most of the figures.

The hand-made forms range from very well made to extremely crude. Many have a headdress resembling a chef's cap. Decoration includes earspools, necklaces, breechcloths, and occasionally belts crossed diagonally on the chest. A distinctive posture found among these figurines is with the hands placed over the mouth.

The mold-made faces closely resemble late Teotihuacan forms, often with three rows of rosettes forming the headdress. These generally have hand-made bodies and applique decoration.

One type, representing a woman, is completely mold-made. The head is disproportionately large, the hands are sometimes folded across the waist, and a figured skirt is indicated. Hand-made imitations or precursors are also found.

Ball-Player Figurines

One particular class of figurines evidently depicts ball players, for they are shown carrying a ball held against the waist, or at times with something resembling a bat. They may be dressed with knee-guards and decorated belts crossed diagonally on the chest. These ball players are made by all three styles of manufacture described above. Some have punctated features as well.

Other Ceramic Artifacts

The feathered serpent motif was seen in two figurines. Effigy whistles of the open-resonance-chamber type are found. Spindle whorls are nearly flat or small truncated hemispheres. A number of pipes and pipe fragments were seen which resembled those from El Jaral, having delicate conical bowls and straight stems. Small hemispherical clay bells with a slit at the bottom were noted. Several crude "wheels" which may have been used with toys were also present.

Stone Artifacts

In view of the ball-player figurines and the existence of long parallel mounds at several sites, further confirmation of the presence of the Mesoamerican game in this area was found in the report of a carved stone ball court ring from a site near El Jaral, which was said to have been sent to the Museo Nacional in Mexico, D. F.

A small yoke carved only on the ends, and another one completely and beautifully carved, were seen in local collections. A third carved yoke, almost identical to this latter privately-held one from the Rioverde area, is from the Rayon region and is on display in the Museo Regional Potosino in San Luis Potosi. The Rioverde yoke is from a site near El Jaral and was reportedly encountered lying around the head of a burial. With this same burial were found several very finely carved stone bowls of the same basalt material as the yoke. One of these is a bird-effigy; another has a fret and 13 circles carved on it; a third is yoke-shaped and has a ledge cut around the lip as if a top had once fitted there.

Other stone objects include polished stone celts, a female effigy

pestle, a plaster polisher, a bark-beater, and two finely made obsidian ear-spools each 9 cm. in diameter.

Comparisons With The Huasteca

Joaquin Meade (1948), as a result of a site survey of the Huasteca which included the Rio Verde basin, has classified this latter area as archeologically part of the Huasteca. Ekholm (1944) and Du Solier (Du Solier, et al., 1947), on the basis of excavations in the zone of Huaxcama and a reconnaissance near Guadalcalzar in the northern Rio Verde basin, have identified the materials there with those of the eastern Huasteca. Du Solier (ibid.:25) considers the occupation at Buena Vista "contemporaneous...with the Tula Toltec epoch in Hidalgo." Ekholm (p. 585) has stated that in Buena Vista, "the pottery is sufficiently like that in the Tampico-Panuco area during Periods IV and V to postulate their contemporaneity."

On the basis of the excavations at El Jaral, the closest ceramic ties of the western Rio Verde basin appear to lie with late Period IV in Ekholm's Panuco sequence (pp. 352-358). Similarities include polished and incised blackware (Zaquil Black in Panuco); a partially red-slipped, flat-bottomed, fine paste ware (Panuco Fine Paste); one type of negative decoration; brushed exteriors on a thick utility ware (Heavy Plain); and a distinctive vessel form of Zaquil Red (found in black-ware at El Jaral) in which the upper part of the vessel wall is slipped and polished, while the lower part, separated from the upper by a low ridge, is unslipped and slightly scored. A later Panuco variety of this form with only a narrow red-slipped beveled rim and a white-slipped body is present in a few sherds from El Jaral.

Figurine ties with Panuco also fall in Periods IV and V (Ekholm:435-459). A few figurines of Panuco B type, with punctate eyes, are found, and occasional examples of the "portrait" type. Much more frequent is the class with mold-made faces, which resembles certain Panuco varieties and, like them, has applique decoration on the heads and bodies. These Panuco figurines have broad, indented-base legs and a chalky-white slip, also present in some Rioverde examples.

Another group of artifacts found in the Rio Verde materials occurs at Panuco principally in Period V. These include bark-beaters, ground stone axes, shell finger-rings, clay smoking pipes, and spindle whorls. The Rio Verde pipes generally have more delicate bowls and lack support legs. Aside from pipes, all of the artifacts in this group are very scarce in the Rioverde area. Also, none of the ceramics diagnostic of Panuco V have been encountered in the Rio Verde materials. Thus it appears either that most of the non-pottery traits are earlier on the meseta than they are on the coast, or that Period IV ceramics survived in the Rio Verde basin while other later materials diffused from the eastern Huasteca.

In addition to the above traits, carved stone yokes are also present in the eastern Huasteca, according to Prof. Stresser-Paen (personal communication), although not reported by Ekholm. Also, Joaquin Meade (1948) has identified ball courts at a number of sites in that area. He has also reported a stone ball court ring from the northern Huasteca (personal communication). These features undoubtedly represent influence from the Tajin region.

It is clear, however, that the Rio Verde basin supported a distinctly different variety of the late Classic Huasteca culture from that represented at Panuco. These distinguishing features will be briefly summarized. Traits present on the meseta but absent from the coast include red-on-white, white-on-red, and broad-line black-on-white wares, and a distinctive fine paste ware; the use of red or white pigments rubbed into the designs on incised blackware; two varieties of negative decoration; figurines with covered mouths; and carved stone bowls. As noted, the pipes also differ, and the design elements used on the incised wares are almost entirely distinct. Also, Prof. Stresser-Paen has stated (personal communication) that carved stone ball court rings and carved stone bowls have not been reported in the eastern Huasteca.

Comparisons With Other Areas

Du Solier (Du Solier, et al., 1947) has favorably compared the ceramics of Buena Vista and El Tajin, but from a study of his report on Tajin ceramics (Du Solier, 1945) the resemblances seem rather vague. However, the carved stone artifacts found in the Rio Verde meseta were almost certainly imported from the Tajin region.

The use of red pigment rubbed into incised designs on polished black or brown ware is found in Teotihuacan, in the states of Zacatecas and Durango, and at Toluquilla and Ranas in the state of Queretaro. From this last site Noguera (1945, lamina 6) has illustrated a sherd showing similar decorative techniques to some known from El Jaral. It is very possible that a line of contact existed between the Rio Verde basin and the zone of Toluquilla-Ranas by which this technique was transmitted from Teotihuacan. This possibility is of considerable importance and needs to be investigated.

This distinctive use of red pigment is found also in the Caddoan area of East Texas, where it apparently was first used in the Alto Focus of the Gibson Aspect (Newell and Krieger, 1949). Conversely, the pipe fragments illustrated from the Davis Site (Ibid.:149) resemble rather closely some of those from the Rioverde area. Krieger (1951) has published a radio-carbon date for the first occupation of the Davis Site of 1553 plus/minus 175 years, or about 400 A.D. As it is certain that the focus continued for some time after that date, the two cultures may well have been partly contemporaneous. Since the use of red pigment does not occur at Panuco, and the pipe forms there are less similar to Caddoan forms, it may be suggested that the Rio Verde area is closer to the route(s) of north-south exchange between the Caddoan area and the Huasteca. Further work in this region is certainly merited as a means of discovering this important trade route.

A third Caddoan-Huastecan element is that of T-shaped platform stone pipes. Many examples have been found in the vicinity of San Bartolo, S.L.P., primarily in caves. Some of these are sufficiently like Caddoan forms to have been actually imported from Texas. Krieger (in DuSolier, et al.:29) has discussed them briefly, but their significance has not been adequately emphasized. They reflect, however, a very different and circumscribed current of Caddoan influence in this region.

Summary

The present paper has reported the results of exploratory excavations at the site of El Jaral and reconnaissance in the municipio of Rioverde, S.L.P. The most important data were derived from work in Mound 14 at El

Jaral. Despite the evidence for ten stages of construction in this mound, the perseverance of the same pottery types and stone-masonry techniques throughout point to a relatively short time span. This inference is corroborated by the shallow deposit of cultural materials at El Jaral. This observation as to the brevity of occupation may be extended to the whole western end of the Rio Verde basin on the basis of the similarity in ceramics at all the sites visited.

At the same time, such tremendous constructional activity on a single mound confirms an inference based on the concentration of sites in the area: namely, that the population must have been very dense and must have had a firm agricultural base. The existence of maize culture is shown by the charred fragments of several corncobs collected from the fill of Stage IV of Mound 14.

The ceramic ties between the Rio Verde basin and Ekholm's Panuco sequence have been shown to belong mainly in the late Period IV, with a number of very basic resemblances being found in the pottery of the two areas. Certain other classes of artifacts found by Ekholm in Period V at Panuco, also occur in the Rio Verde area but without any Period V pottery. In spite of this, there are enough distinctive features found in the culture of the Rio Verde basin to set it off as a clearly demarcated branch of the Huasteca culture of that time.

In a further study of the Rio Verde basin there exists the tantalizing possibility of discovering one of the trade routes between Mesoamerica and the Caddo of Texas, a possibility strengthened by the profusion of Caddoan-like pipes found and similarities with certain types of Caddoan pottery noted by Krieger (in Du Solier, et al.:29). In addition, there is an excellent opportunity in the area to study such scientific questions as settlement patterns, demography and land utilization. Du Solier (Du Solier, et al.:1947) has published the only report on excavations at a site within this area, and there remains a great need for further and more refined archeological studies.

Acknowledgements

The writers wish to express their deep gratitude to Sr. Octaviano Cabrera Ipiña, through whose interest and generosity the expedition which is reported in this paper was made possible. In addition to supplying most of the material needed for the excavations, he gave freely of his time and his extensive knowledge of the geography and history of the area to aid us in our work and in the preparation of this report. He is an esteemed friend and it is with pleasure that we take this opportunity to acknowledge our indebtedness for his kindnesses and aid.

We also wish to express our sincere appreciation to Profa. Antonieta Espejo who introduced us to the archeology of San Luis Potosi, and who, as a representative of the Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, served as adviser during the excavations.

We are grateful to Prof. Roman Piña Chan, who has examined some of the pottery and made valuable suggestions regarding external relationships.

We would like to thank Sr. Joaquin Meade and Prof. Guy Stresser-Paen, who have generously shared their wide knowledge of the eastern Huasteca in the course of conversations which have provided information helpful in the preparation of this report.

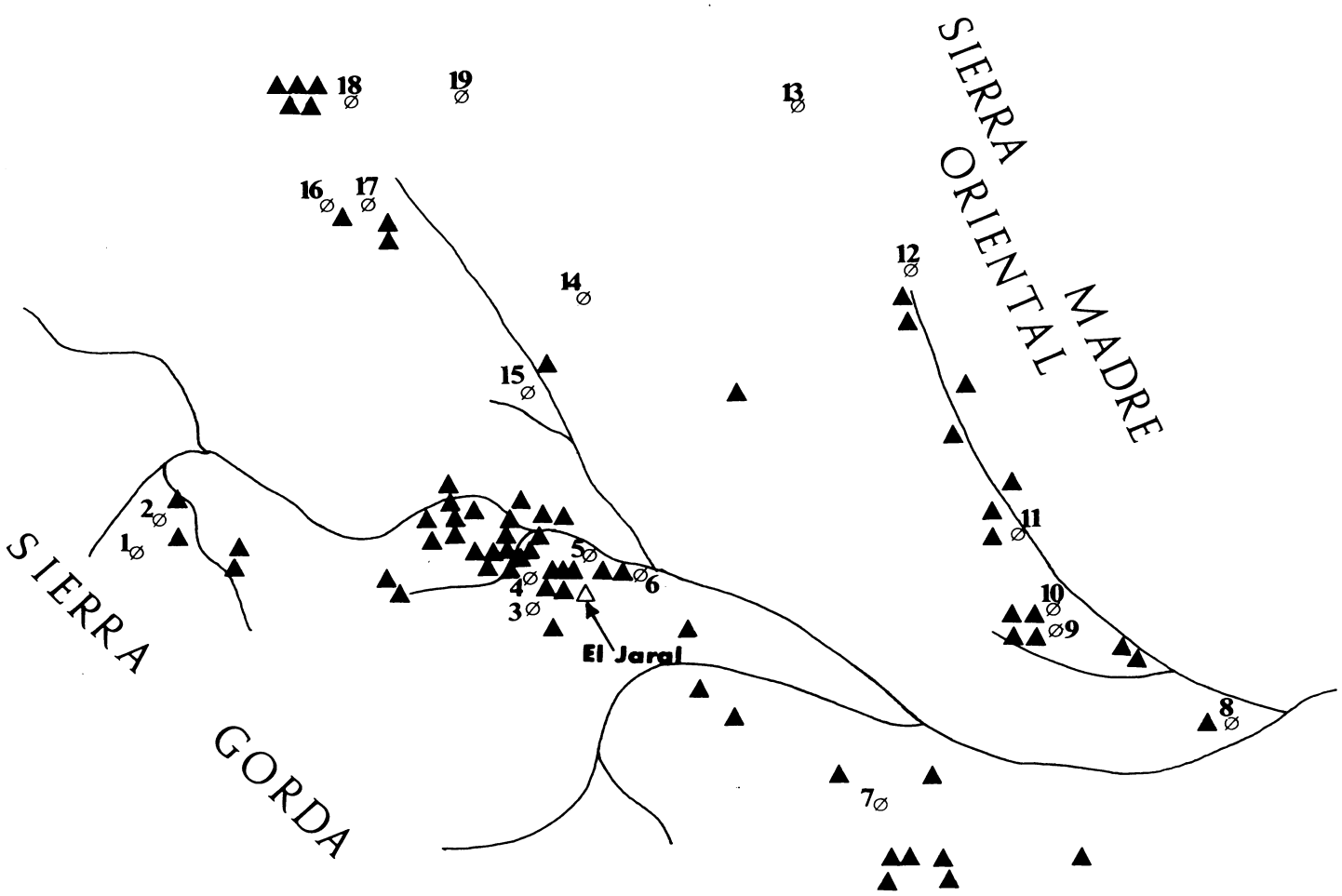
Notes

1. This paper was prepared in 1957, when the writers were students in the Escuela Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Mexico, as an archival report for the Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia. As there appears little likelihood that the writers will be able to carry out further work at the El Jaral site anytime in the near future, it seems advisable to now place this work on record. Nancy P. Troike prepared a preliminary report on the pottery types of El Jaral, "Preliminary report on excavations at El Jaral, Rioverde," presented at the X Mesa Redonda of the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropologia at San Luis Potosi in August of 1963; the proceedings of that conference, however, have never been published. The reconnaissance of the western Rio Verde basin in another paper by Nancy P. Troike, "Archeological reconnaissance in the drainage of the Rio Verde, San Luis Potosi, Mexico," Bulletin of the Texas Archeological Society, Vol. 32 (1961), pp.47-55.

Table 1.
(Supplement to Figure 2.)

Dimensions of the Unexcavated Mounds of El Jaral (in meters)

	North-South	East-West	Height Above Present Ground Level
Mound 1	21.50	12.40	1.53
Mound 2	34.30	18.60	4.59
Mound 3	17.00	20.00	2.51
Mound 4	19.00	18.40	1.53
Mound 5	19.80	21.00	1.53
Mound 6	15.40	15.00	1.53
Mound 7	22.00	28.00	3.06
Mound 7A	22.00	10.00	1.53
Mound 8	23.40	7.00	1.53
Mound 9	23.40	24.40	4.16
Mound 10	52.00	9.80	0.96
Mound 11	20.00	20.00	2.52
Mound 12	11.40	15.00	1.53
Mound 13	47.00	22.80	5.18
Mound 14	30.60	26.20	6.68
Mound 15	16.60	20.00	2.20
Mound 16	15.00	22.20	1.93



1. Altonilco
2. Sta. Catarina
3. La Loma
4. San Diego
5. Callejones
6. Rio Verde
7. Valle de San Ciro
8. Pinahuan
9. Ebano
10. Quemada
11. Villa de Gamotes
12. Alaquineso
13. Cd. del Maiz
14. San Bartolo
15. Valle de la Pastora
16. Buena Vista
17. Guascama
18. Guadalcalzar
19. Cerritos

Figure 1. The Rio Verde Basin. After Octaviano Cabrera Ipiña (1957). Archeological ruins are indicated by darkened triangles. The site of El Jaral is shown as a white triangle. Towns near ruins are numbered.

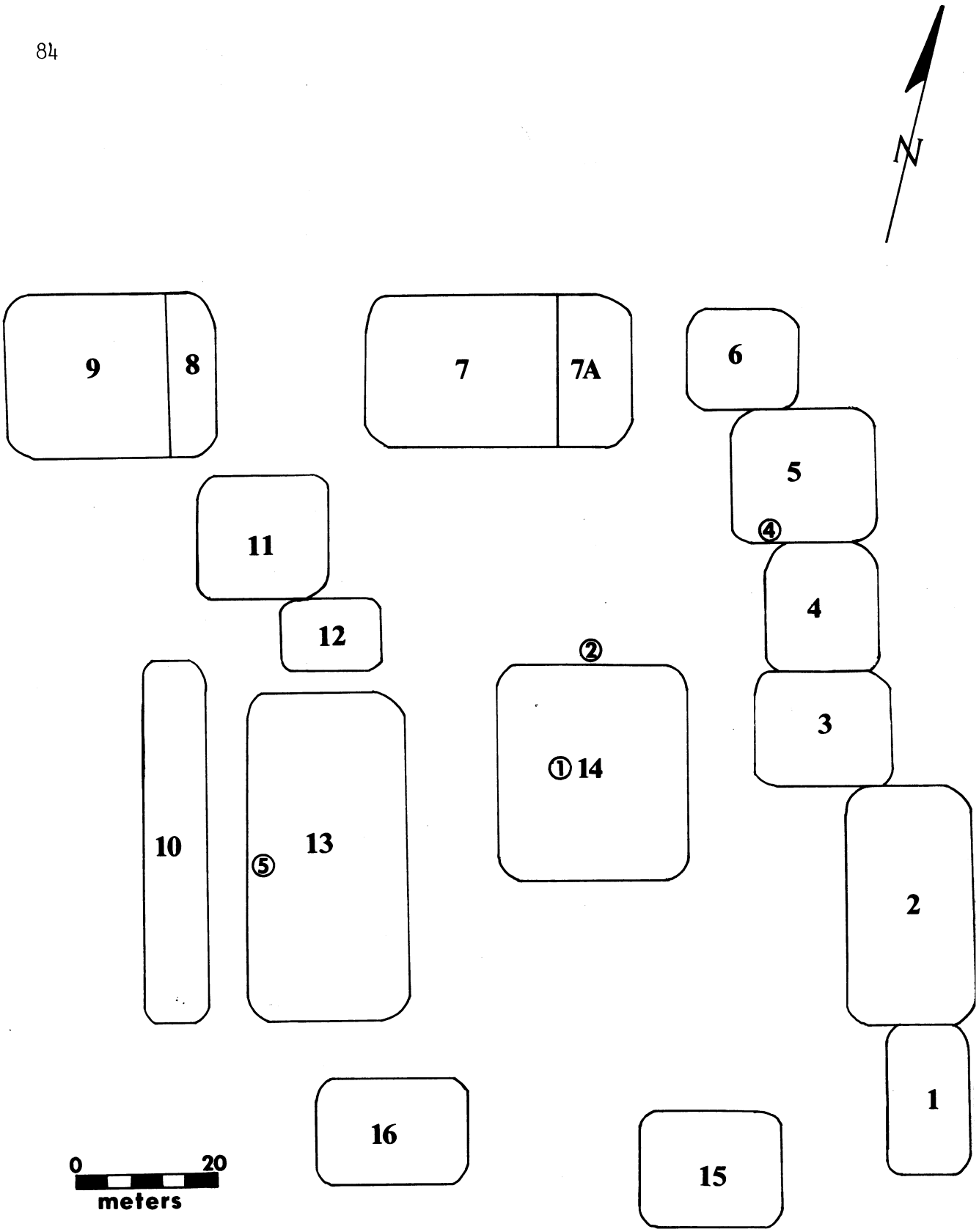


Figure 2. Plan of the Ruins of El Jaral, Rioverde, S.L.P., 1957. Mounds are numbered and are shown schematically. Encircled numbers indicate test pits. Test pit 3 is beyond the confines of the map.

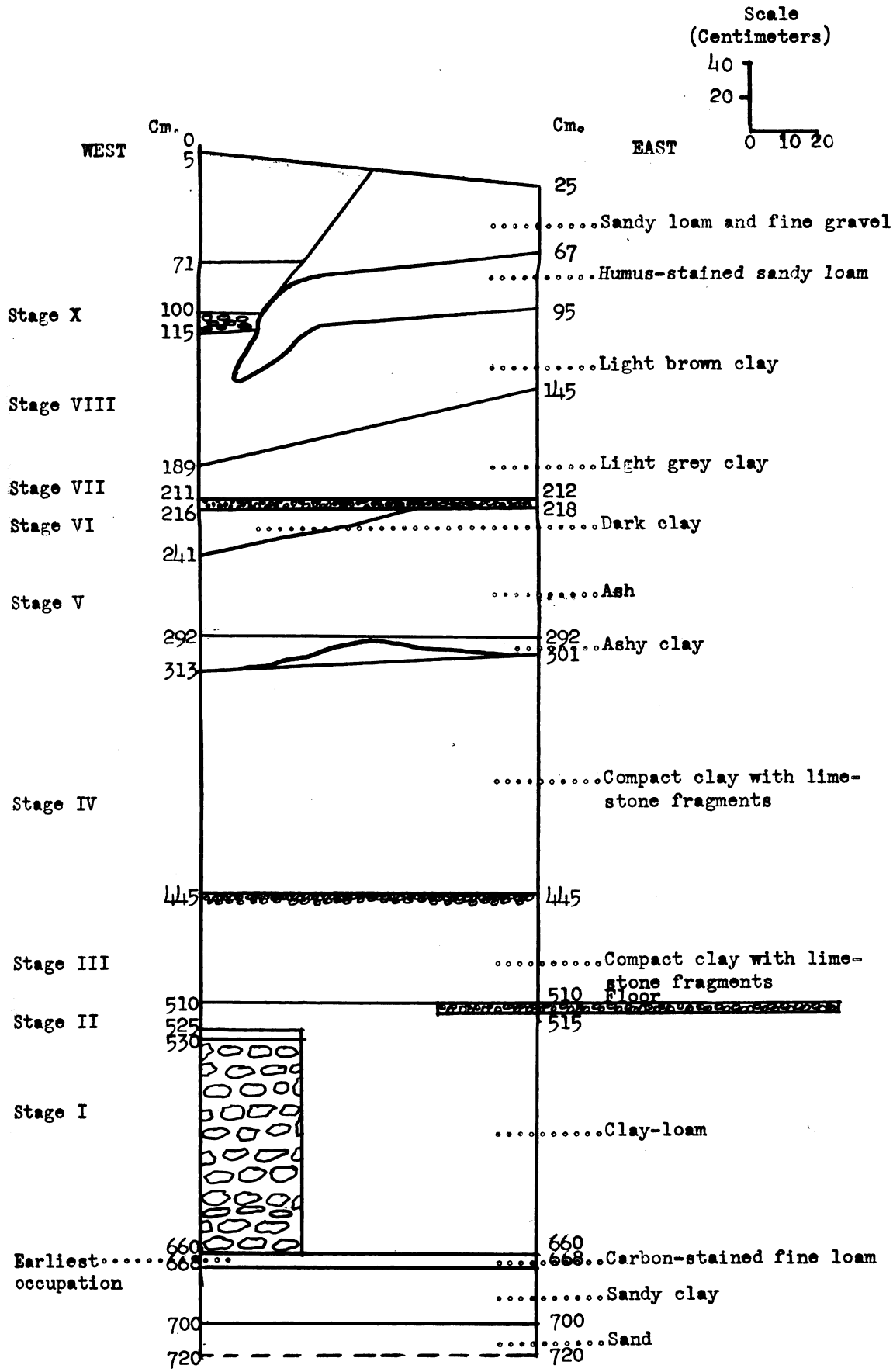


Figure 3. Profile of North Wall, Pit 1, Mound 14.

a

b

c

d

Plate 1. a, North side of Mound 14; b, Stage 1 in Pit 1, Mound 14; c, West wall of Pit 1, Mound 14; d, View west at Pit 1, Mound 14.

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