
SPECIAL SECTION: MORTUARY PRACTICES AND SHAFT TOMBS IN WESTERN MEXICO:
AN *HOMENAJE* TO PHIL WEIGAND

Introduction

Phil C. Weigand has devoted his career to the anthropology and archaeology of the most poorly known area of Mesoamerica, “an enormous area of elaborate cultural development [that] has been relegated to unimportance” (Weigand and Foster 1985:5). We refer, of course, to the *Occidente* or West Mexico, roughly defined by the states of Michoacán, Colima, Jalisco, and Nayarit, often including parts of Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Sinaloa, and sometimes Guerrero. Over the course of his career, Weigand has integrated data from archaeology, ethnohistory, and ethnography to gain a better understanding of western Mesoamerica. This Special Section is an *homenaje* to Phil that draws together contributions by some of his friends and colleagues who have felt his influence over the years.

Awareness of the archaeological treasures of West Mexico dawned on the world in the early twentieth century through massive looting of the area’s famed shaft tombs (Olay Barrientos 2001: 197). Carl Lumholtz (1973 [1902]) in the 1890s was one of the first to document the enormous scale of this looting (Bell 1971: 713–714; Olay Barrientos 2001:205; Weigand 1985:51). Since at least the late 1920s, the illicit antiquities trade has proffered ceramic funerary objects plundered from shaft tombs to museums and private collectors in Mexico City, the United States, and Europe. As a result, much of what is known or could be known about the prehistoric past of West Mexico was and remains decontextualized (Pickering and Cabrero 1998:73). Despite the heroic efforts of archaeological pioneers such as Alfonso Caso, Isabel Kelly, Donald Brand, Carl Sauer, Gordon Ekholm, Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla, Hugo Moedano, Muriel Porter, Román Piña Chan, Eduardo Noguera, and José Corona Núñez, among others (Bell 1971: 698–700; Chadwick 1971:659; Meighan 1971:755–756), West Mexico in the 1950s and 1960s remained shrouded in the mysterious aura of the shaft tombs and their exotic contents. Ironically, no attempts were made to reconcile the richness of the tombs with the supposed peripheral character of the area (Olay Barrientos 2001:197).

Such attempts would have to await the emergence in the 1970s of a coherent set of theoretical perspectives and goals in the area. In the foreword to *The Archaeology of West Mexico*, the book’s editor, Betty Bell (1974:x), wrote, “In West Mexico the data are still being gathered, so often barely snatched from under the noses of pot-hunters that we can ill afford to be choosy about what we take and what we leave for that more theoretically sophisticated

future. At this point we are hardly even beginning to see what the problems are, and I believe that we are still some distance away from being able to formulate sweeping hypotheses which have any contact with reality.” This state of affairs clearly troubled Weigand when he began his graduate studies in anthropology, specializing in West Mexican archaeology, and at the time that Bell wrote these words Weigand was already working to see the problems, define the issues, and formulate research strategies that would facilitate a better understanding of the ancient societies of western Mesoamerica.

Weigand’s regional settlement surveys in the Magdalena and Etzatlán basins and on the slopes of Tequila volcano, carried out in the 1970s with the assistance of his wife Acelia García de Weigand, led to “the most fundamental change in the archaeological picture of West Mexico” (Townsend 1998:22). This systematic research allowed Weigand to define the distinctive Teuchitlán cultural tradition of central Jalisco, characterized by a unique style of concentric circular public architecture, a four-tiered settlement hierarchy, and, of course, shaft tombs (Beekman 1996; Beekman et al. 1996; Ohnerson and Varien 1996; Weigand 1979, 1985, 1990, 1996; Weigand and Beekman 1998).

In a revision of a paper first presented in 1980, Weigand (1985: 47–48) perceived the need to set aside faulty assumptions about these societies (*pace* Schöndube 1974), to abandon the obsession with “funerary cults,” and to develop systematic archaeological research in the area, focusing on sociological, ecological, settlement, and landscape perspectives. Desiderata at that time, the early 1980s, apart from large-scale regional surveys and more controlled excavations, included more research on all time periods, paleoecological reconstructions, better and more detailed chronologies, and the ability to appreciate western Mesoamerica as an area where original and complex civilizations developed in their own right (Weigand and Foster 1985:5).

To appreciate Weigand’s impact on the archaeology of western Mesoamerica, one should first peruse volume 11 of the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Wauchope et al. 1971). That volume contains seven chapters on the archaeology and ethnohistory of West Mexico that went a long way toward systematizing the then current knowledge of the area (Paddock 1973:1135–1136; Schöndube 1974:1). The archaeology chapters are mostly culture-historical in nature, focusing primarily on space-time systematics and ceramic typology. In contrast, the seven articles published in

a previous Special Section of *Ancient Mesoamerica* (vol. 7, no. 1, 1996), “Recent Research in the Lake Basins of Highland Jalisco,” and the eight articles included here, while still paying due attention to spatial and chronological interpretation, reflect a keen awareness and at least a partial achievement of the goals adumbrated by Weigand decades ago.

The contributors to this Special Section focus on the shaft and chamber tombs that continue to characterize the archaeology of the region for many Mesoamericanists (Figure 1). But the articles also open up a discussion of wider issues that have been of interest to Phil Weigand over the years: West Mexico’s relationships with greater Mesoamerica, the contextualization of mortuary patterns within settlement systems, social organization and inequality, the role of exchange (especially of exotic goods), and the complex relationships between archaeologists and the public in western Mexico.

We begin with a piece by **Robert B. Pickering** and **Christopher S. Beekman**, who offer some personal thoughts on Phil’s contribution to West Mexican research. In the next article, **Beekman** builds upon Weigand’s contextualization of the shaft tomb mortuary program with the settlement system of the Teuchitlan

tradition by developing a ceramic chronology to date the tombs spanning three phases from the Late Formative through the Middle Classic period.

Several authors discuss the ties that bind the shaft tomb tradition to other areas of Mesoamerica, beginning by at least the Middle Formative. **J. Arturo Oliveros Morales** notes similarities between the materials found in the tombs of El Opeño and its contemporaries elsewhere in the highlands, but he also cautions against seeing a single origin for Mesoamerican complex society in the Olmecs. **Beekman** and **Javier Galván Villegas** examine the range of offerings to be found across an entire cemetery and find intriguing points of connection between Late Formative and Classic-period practices in the tombs at Tabachines, in central Mexico, and even in the Maya area.

Most of the articles discuss the settlement context of the shaft tombs under examination and identify a range of contexts in which they appear, including cemeteries, in association with public architecture, and as isolates. Other articles focus on the growing evidence for inequality and forms of social organization. **Lorenza López Mestas C.** and **Jorge Ramos de la Vega** approach inequality from the perspective of the very rich shaft tomb of Huitzilapa—

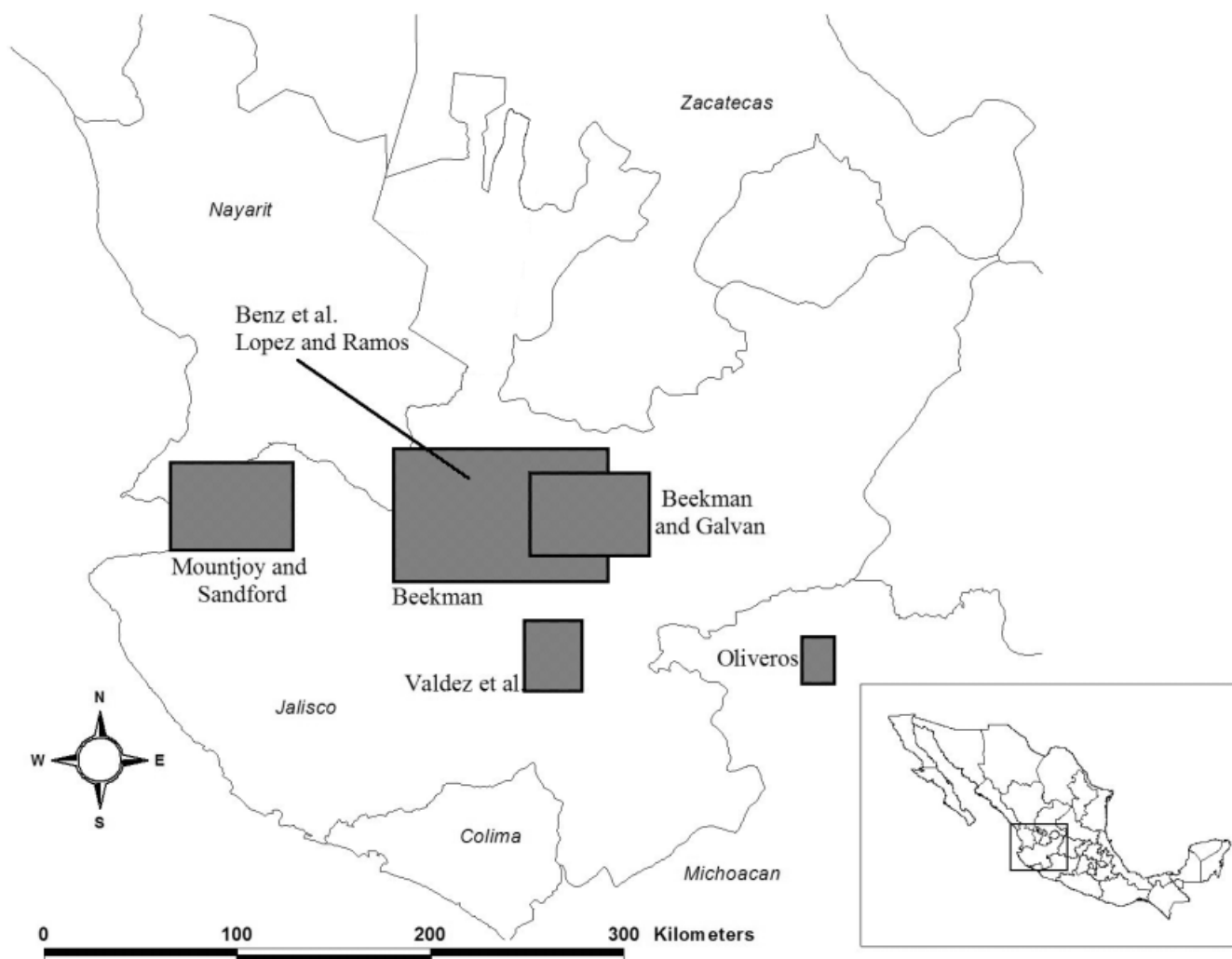


Figure 1. Approximate geographical zone addressed by the authors of each paper in the special section.

the first major unlooted shaft tomb to be excavated scientifically—and its wider settlement context, while **Bruce F. Benz, López Mestas C.,** and **Ramos de la Vega** present a wealth of detail on the organic remains found in the tomb and their meaning in terms of social status, class differentiation, and craft specialization. **Francisco Valdez, Jean Pierre Emphoux, Rosario Acosta, Susana Ramírez, Javier Rebeles,** and **Otto Schöndube** consider the coincident use of shaft tombs and pit burials within settlement areas. Many contributors link the use of shaft tombs to lineages or similar social groups. **Joseph B. Mountjoy** and **Mary Kay Sandford** provide another possibility that sees both kinship and community membership playing a role in the patterning of interment.

Looting and looters are a greater or lesser presence in all of the articles. Interaction between archaeologists and looters is a complex ethical issue, and different contributors have had different kinds of experiences. Several of the authors make reference to its importance, both in local lore (Mountjoy and Sandford) and in leading archaeologists to ancient cemeteries (several contributors). But probably all of the contributors would agree that looting is a sad fact of life, and not only in West Mexico.

These are some of the common themes that draw together the contributions to this Special Section. But this collection of arti-

cles also undermines the concept of a monolithic tradition of tomb burial in which multiple interments accompanied by exotic goods and hollow figures are buried in tombs 5, 10, or 20 meters below the surface. The contributors document a diverse array of burial practices, some of which are practiced within shaft and chamber tombs and some of which are used alongside them. Some authors suggest that shaft tombs are an elite phenomenon, and that other burial forms are those of local commoners, but as Valdez and colleagues note, this interpretation is not neatly substantiated.

We hope that this collection of articles on the shaft tomb tradition of West Mexico will demonstrate (to Phil and others!) that approaches to the shaft tomb mortuary tradition have become increasingly sophisticated and are better contextualized within their social and cultural milieu than ever before.

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