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**Suchil River Valley Archaeological Project, Zacatecas and Durango,  
2005 Season**

*Translation of the Spanish by Eduardo Williams*



**Research Year:** 2005

**Culture:** Chalchihuites

**Chronology:** Classic and Postclassic

**Location:** Suchil River Valley, northwestern Zacatecas and southern Durango, Mexico

**Sites:** Alta Vista, Cerro Moctezuma, Mesa la Gloria, Ejido Cárdenas, Nopalera Grande, El Vesuvio, La Soledad, Loma Flores, Punta Peñasco, La Lagunita

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## **Abstract**

The Suchil River Valley Project has the objective of studying the socioeconomic complexity process that different sedentary groups inhabiting the region experienced through time. This investigation tries to characterize the changes that occurred within these settled populations and that during the first millennium of our era formed what we now know now as the Chalchihuites culture. Mining activities together with the production of prestige goods are topics of relevance that we have decided to investigate in order to comprehend the political and ideological institutions of the communities. The regional archaeological surface survey sponsored by FAMSI has produced important data that is presented here as a basic preliminary typology regarding the sites that integrate this social system.

## **Resumen**

El Proyecto Arqueológico del Valle del Río Suchil tiene por objeto estudiar el proceso de complejidad socioeconómica que experimentaron los diversos grupos sedentarios que habitaron esta región. La investigación busca caracterizar los cambios ocurridos en estas comunidades que, durante el primer milenio de nuestra era, conformaron la cultura Chalchihuites. La extracción minera y en general la producción de bienes de prestigio son temas que particularmente nos hemos propuesto investigar con el fin de comprender a las instituciones del poder político e ideológico que integraron a las sociedades. El trabajo de prospección patrocinado por FAMSI aportó información que exponemos aquí como una primera tipología de los sitios que comprenden a este sistema social.

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## **Introduction**

The archaeological survey undertaken during the months of March and November of 2005 was made possible thanks to a grant given by the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI No. 05049). The study encompassed part of the San Antonio River Valley and a small portion of the Colorado River, both of which feed into the Suchil River. With these surveys we could locate and record 23 sites, as well as obtain surface archaeological material and information about the physical landscape which might be linked with the ideological aspect.

As synthesis we can point out that the region was previously studied by scholars such as Don Manuel Gamio (1910), Alden Mason (1937), and Dr. Charles Kelley who,

together with his team of collaborators, developed a series of works aimed at characterizing the Chalchihuites cultural sequence. Between 1952 and 1976 Kelley and his team made surveys in the eastern slopes of the Western Sierra Madre in Chihuahua, Durango, and Zacatecas, and excavations in the site of SchöederFerrería. Between 1961 and 1963, together with Loomis, they surveyed and excavated several sites in the Suchil River region. Lastly, Kelley excavated the archaeological site of Alta Vista during several seasons (1971, 1972, 1974, 1991 and 1993).

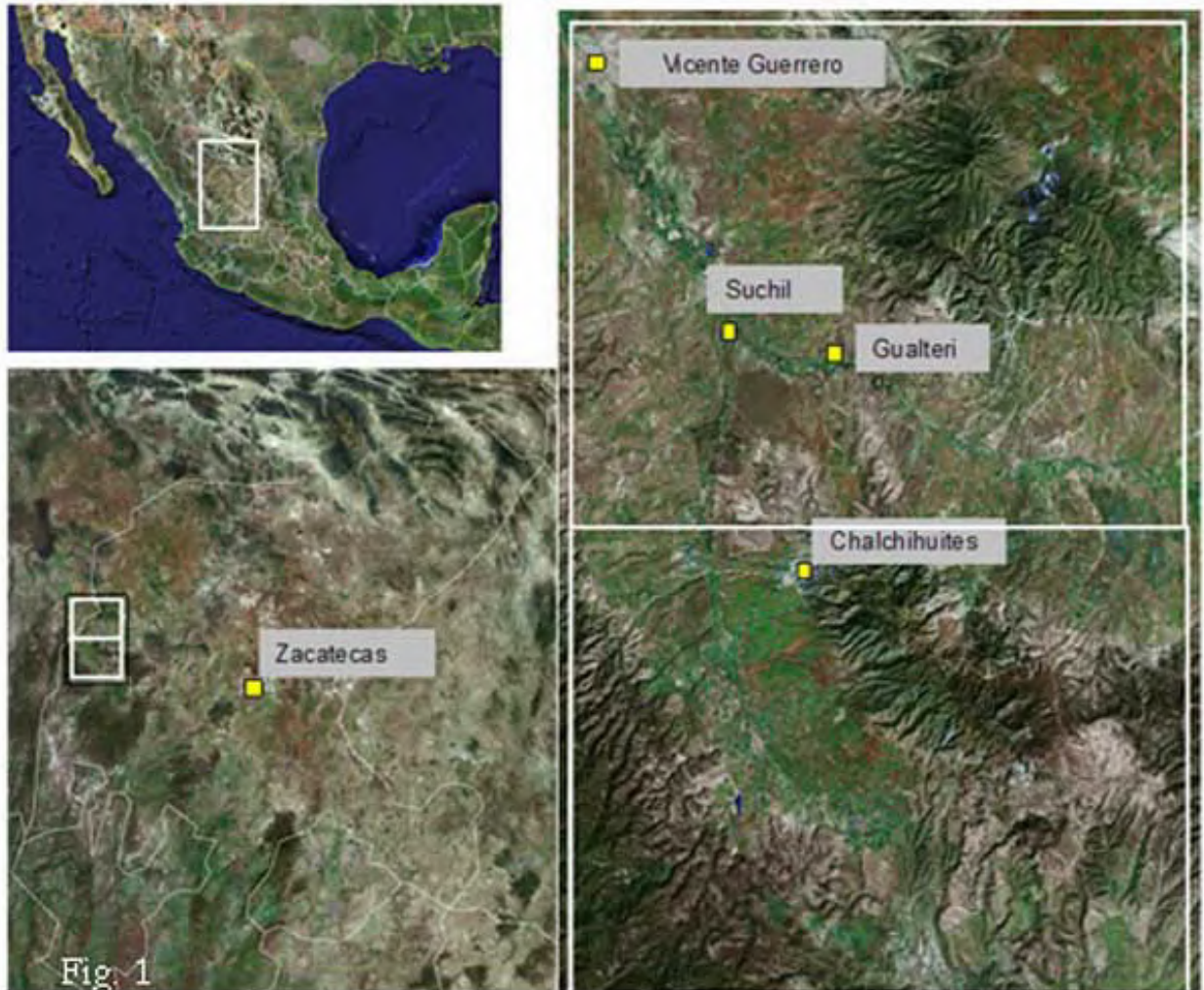


Figure 1. Location of the research area.

This research showed the existence of several sedentary groups generically known as "Chalchihuites culture", although their definition, scale, trajectory and interaction with other regions are still the subject of discussion among specialists. We can say that the territories currently within the states of Zacatecas and southern Durango were inhabited in Prehispanic times by sedentary groups that were able to attain an important level of

local development and established several relationships with other communities, both nomadic and sedentary.

Kelley suggested that the area was inhabited by several social groups who around A.D. 200 received some type of influence (soft diffusion) or passive transmission of cultural elements between Mesoamerican, subMesoamerican and Chichimec societies. Later, at the end of the Classic period, these groups were subjected to some sort of pressure by other groups coming from the central highlands, who had ceremonial knowledge (hard diffusion) and were trying to appropriate an important amount of minerals (an array of bluegreen stones and pigments). This argument is currently being used to support the idea of a commercial relationship between this region and Teotihuacán.



**Figure 2. Alta Vista archaeological zone.**

In our research we are also proposing to evaluate the idea of a possible intervention by Teotihuacán in the process of social development and complexity of the groups settled in the region during the Mesoamerican Classic period.

## Sampling Method

The objective of our survey is to obtain a representative sample of ancient settlements in the study region, for which we used a random stratified systematic method at 33%. First, we divided the INEGI F13B24 Vicente Guerrero chart in quadrants or sampling units of one square kilometer each. Later, we chose an area of 250 quadrants which included several topographic formations or natural zones present in the region (alluvium, low hills, and high parts of mesas and mountains), that is to say, a stratified sample. From this representative area we selected through a random process 33% of the total quadrants, which means 82 units to survey. Finally, we walked over 38 km<sup>2</sup> or quadrants with transects at an equidistance of 20 m from each other.

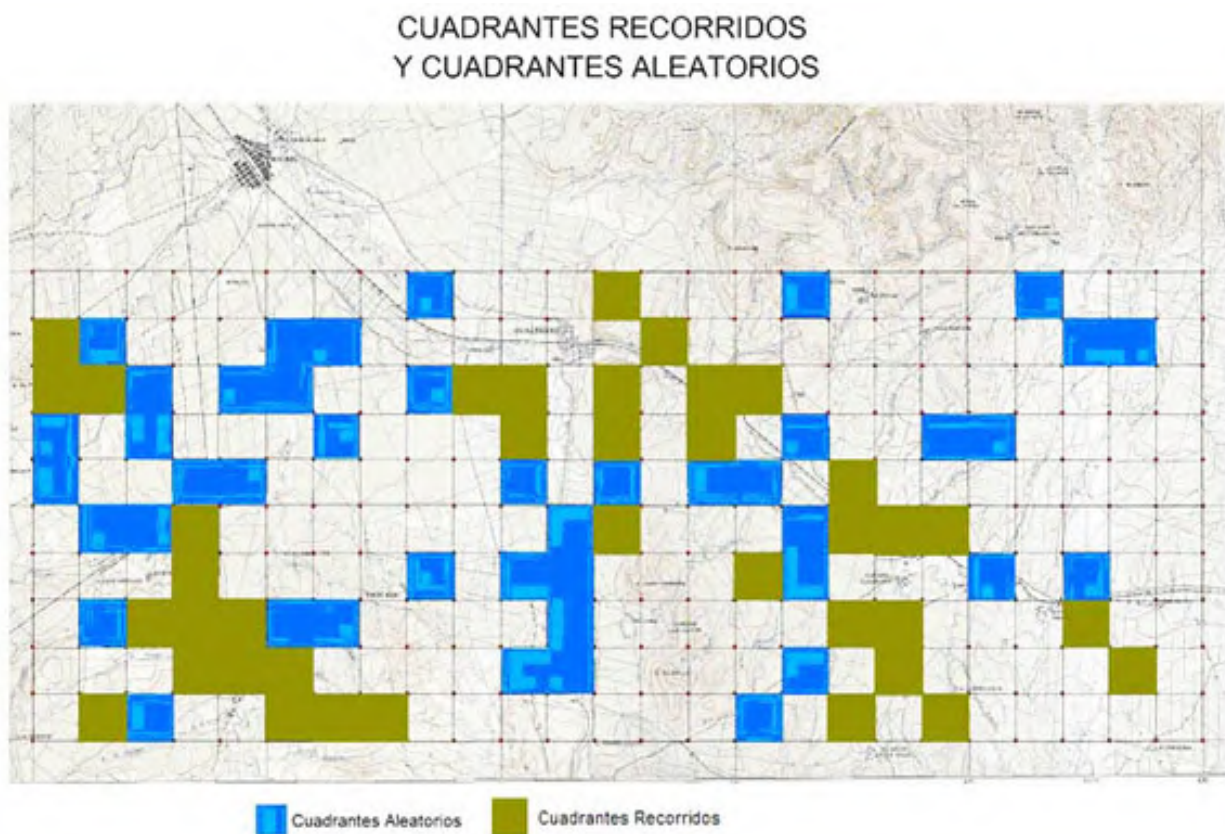


Figure 3. Random quadrants and surveys.

## Initial Results

We identified and recorded a total of 23 archaeological sites, which were classified according to the following categories:

- *Ruling center.* These are extensive sites showing a core area with monumental architecture. They are characterized by the possible diversity of public functions carried out within them. There may be traces of dwellings and terraces in the surrounding area. In general, these settlements are located in places with a visual vantage point over the surrounding area. Up to now we have identified the sites of Alta Vista and Cerro Moctezuma as ruling centers, considering them as seats of the chieftainships so far identified.
- *Civic and/or religious center.* These sites are characterized by having a public zone with monumental architecture. They are not extensive and show evidence of dwellings at the base of the topographic elevation where they lay, and have an extraordinary visual coverage of the region. They usually show one or more peripheral walls that surround or protect the central zone. The following sites belong to this category: Mesa La Gloria ([Figure 5](#)), Cerro Alto, Cerro Pedregoso, and Cerro Chapín.



Figure 4. Shell pendants from the site of Cerro Moctezuma.

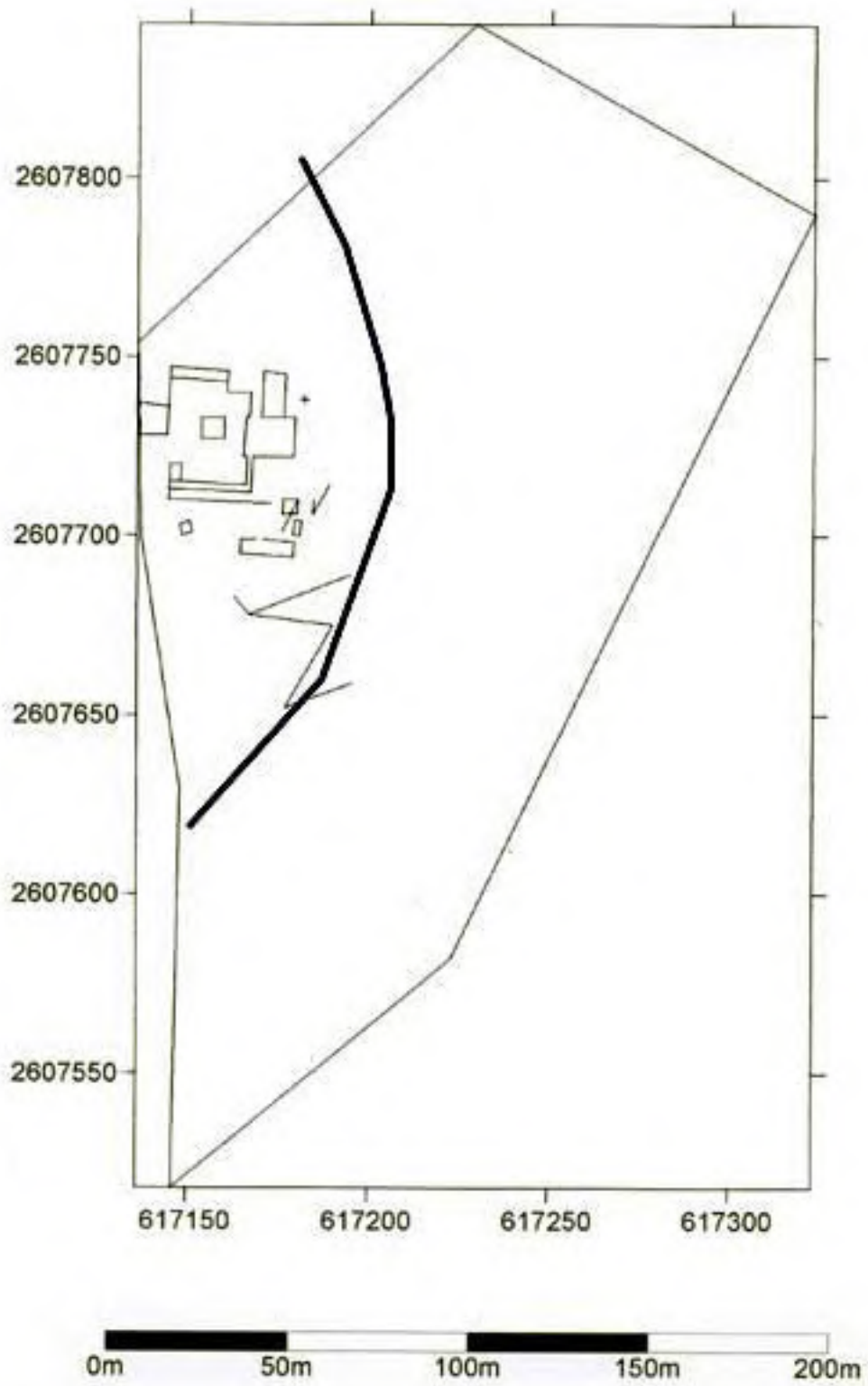


Figure 5. Planimetry of the Mesa la Gloria site.

- *Local center.* This is an extensive site showing a central area with public architecture surrounded by concentrations of people associated with the exploitation of natural resources (mainly agriculture and mining). The following are examples of this type of site: La Difunta, Pajones, La Nopalera Grande, and El Vesuvio, which were considered as possible acephalous communities.
- *Village.* These are extensive habitation sites, which from the surface are perceived as great concentrations of ceramic and lithic material, with no evidence of architecture. The following are examples of this type of site: La Tijera, La Soledad, Loma Flores, Punta Peñasco, La Pilitas, and El Bajío, which were probably occupied by sedentary groups of families.
- *Huntergatherer camp.* This type of site consists of concentrations of lithic and ceramic material with seasonal occupation. Occasionally there may be hearths and stone alignments which may belong to postconquest tribal groups. The following are examples of this type of site: El Pino, La Lagunita, and El Encino.
- *Mine groups.* As their name suggests, these are extensive sites with evidence of Prehispanic mining activities, which may or may not have evidence of dwellings. Although this type of site has been reported previously, up to now we have only recorded two of them: El Vergel, Gualterio mine group, and Ejido Cárdenas mine group ([Figure 6](#)).



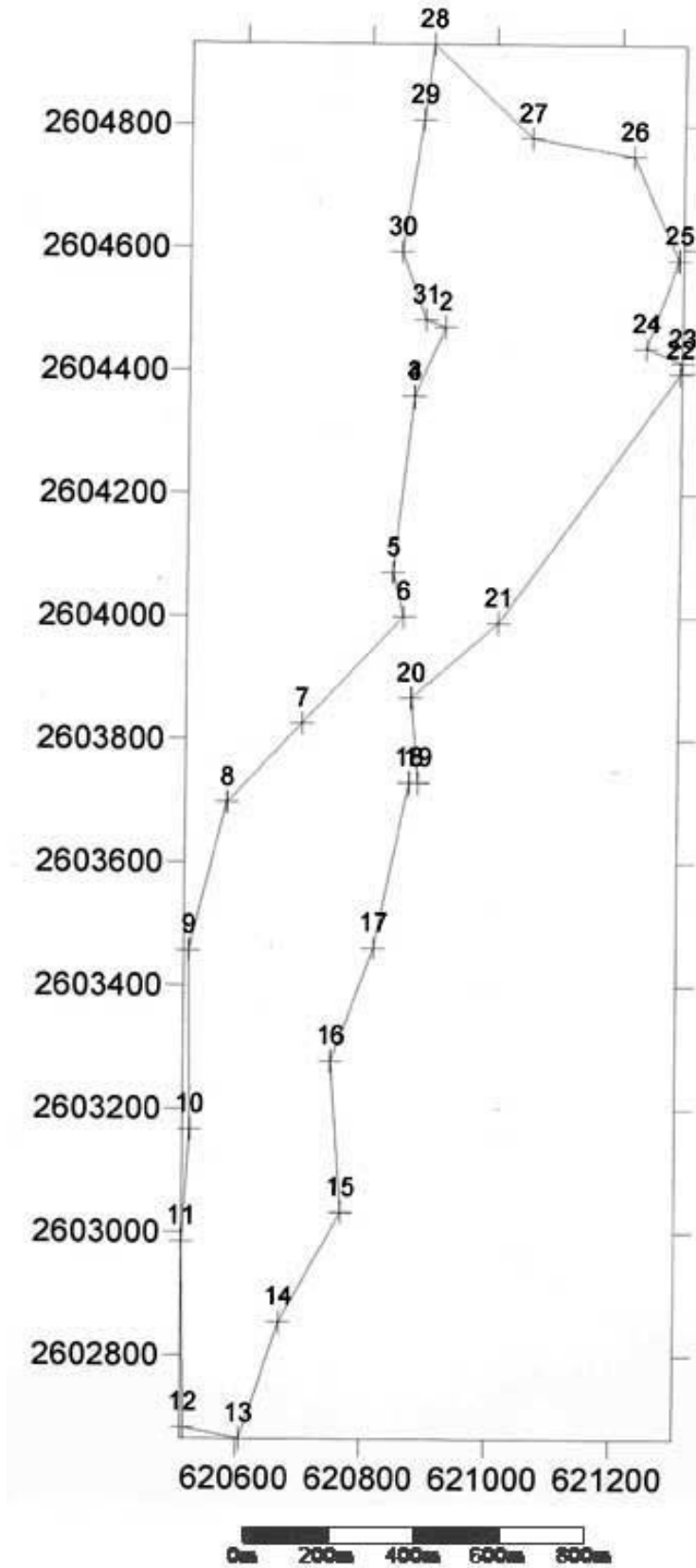


Figure 6. Polygonal of the Ejido Cárdenas mine group.



**Figure 7. Entrance to Prehispanic mine.**



**Figure 8. Prestige goods recovered from excavations in Alta Vista by Kelley, manufactured with bluegreen stones from the local mines.**

### **Preliminary Considerations**

The information obtained so far allows us to identify the possible presence of a site hierarchy: familylevel groups, including huntergatherer camps and hamlets; local groups, including villages and towns; and regional political entities or chiefdoms (Johnson and Earle 2003).

This site hierarchy could be explained as the existence of several social groups that were integrated by at least two heterarchical chiefdoms<sup>1</sup>, resulting from historical processes and being a consequence of the level of intensification of production, which

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<sup>1</sup> Elites are not organized in one sole central hierarchy. There are various hierarchies associated with different sources of power. They are ritually elaborate, but are not solidified institutionally into one sole political entity. Within heterarchies there is room for a whole range of chiefdoms reflecting multilineal evolutions of complexity, based on the political economies of prestige goods and the means for the legitimation of positions (Johnson and Earle 2003).

in its turn could have originated with population growth and technological development. The problems created by population growth were solved through the formation of political institutions, which created a wider politiceconomic integration and more powerful rulers who lived in sites such as Alta Vista and Cerro Moctezuma.

These initial considerations are put forth so as to guide future research, rather than as conclusions. We will carry on with a series of surveys and with the extensive excavation of at least one site of each type, to better understand the diachronic aspect of regional development.

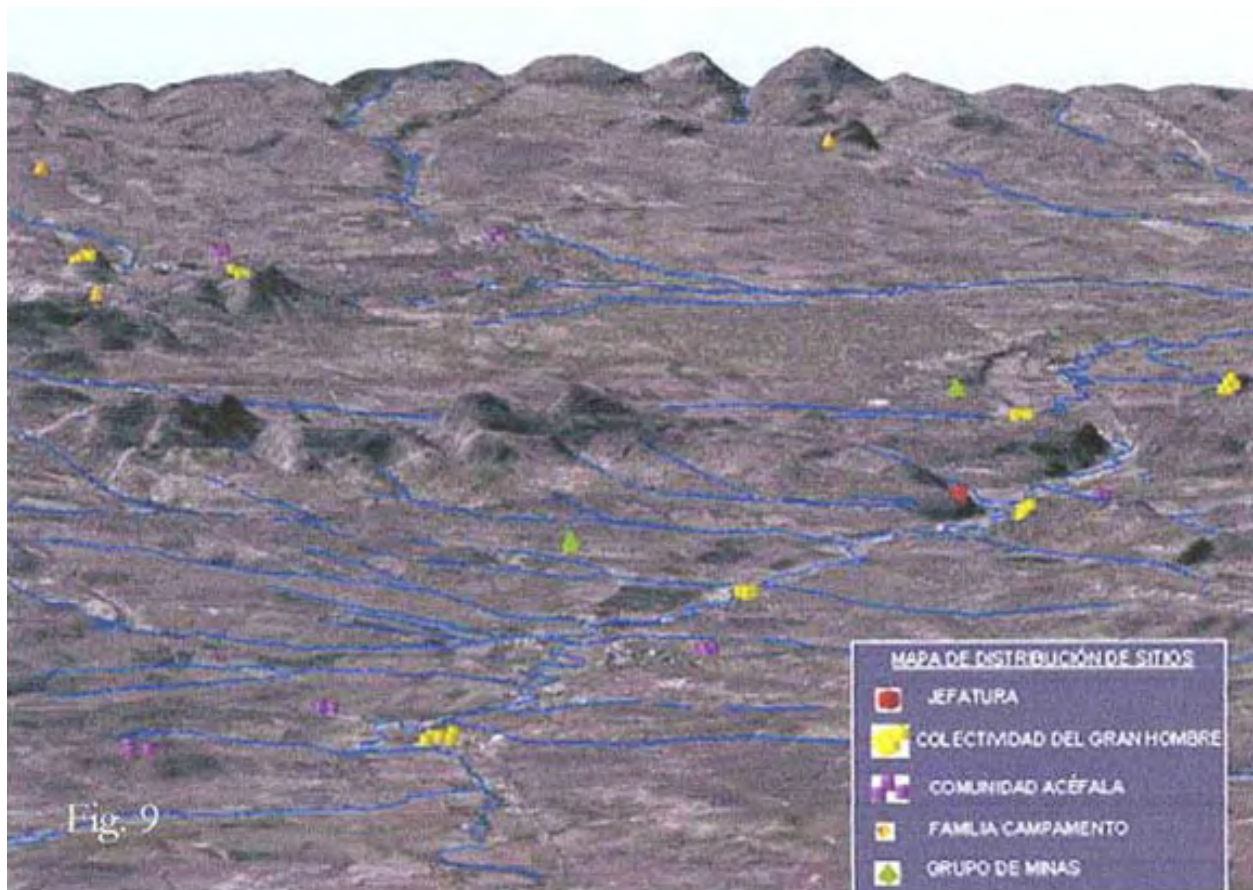


Figure 9. Map showing site distribution and hierarchy.

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