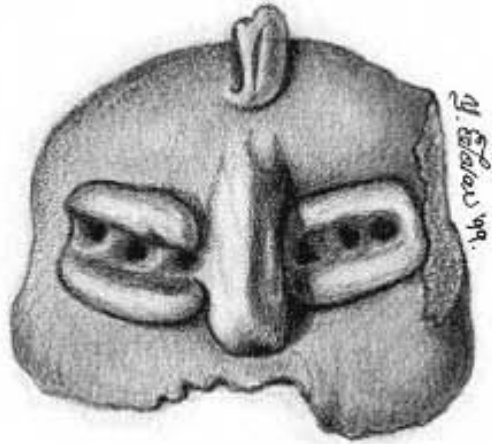


**FAMSI © 2002: Rosemary A. Joyce**

## **Early Formative Occupation of the Lower Ulúa River Valley, Honduras**



**Research Year:** 1996

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Early Pre-Classic

**Location:** Lower Ulúa River Valley, Honduras

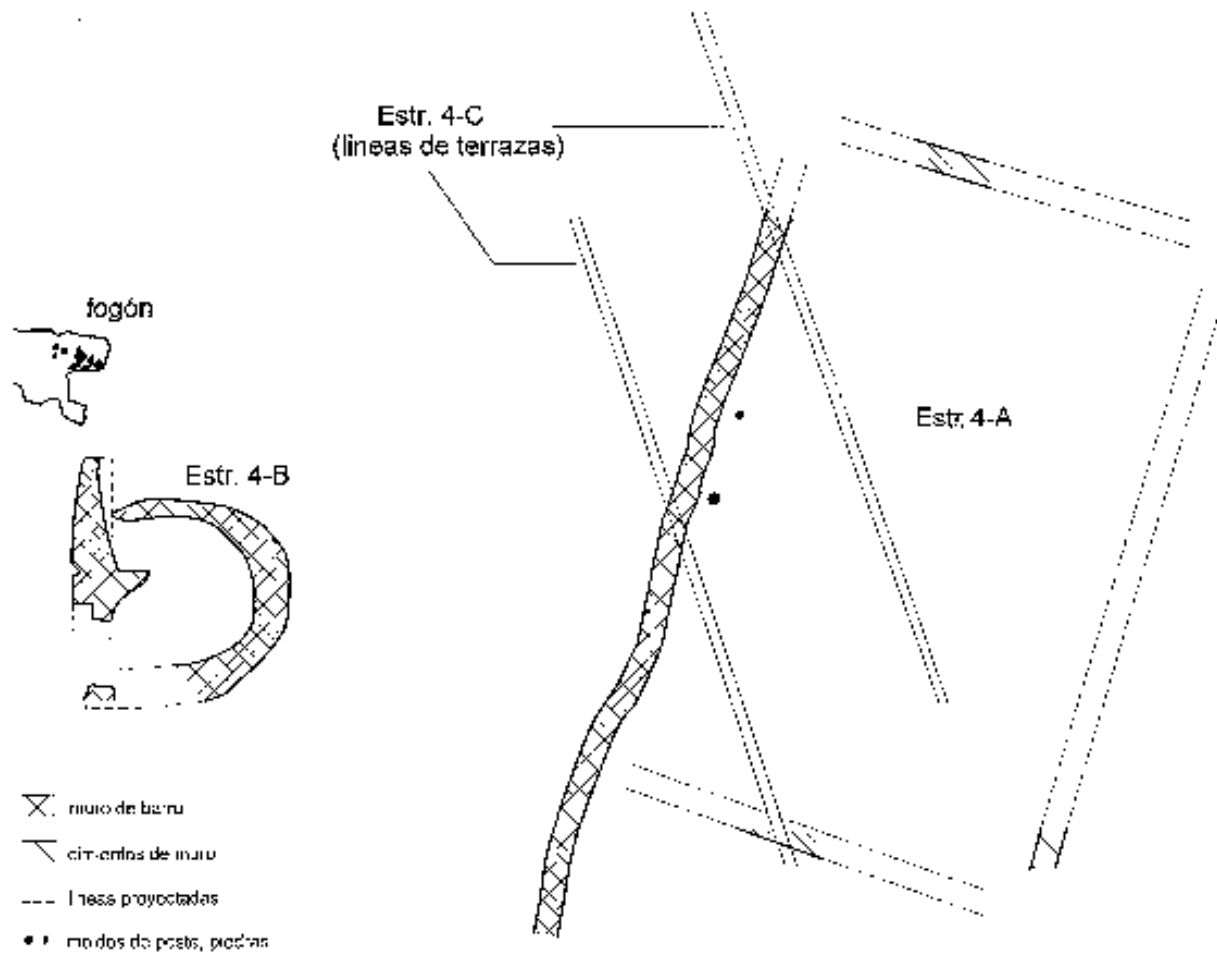
**Site:** Puerto Escondido

### **Abstract**

Excavations in northern Honduras have produced evidence of initial village life that is among the earliest cases documented in Mesoamerica. Settlement beginning prior to 1600 B.C., the production of sophisticated pottery by 1600 B.C., and integration in economic exchange networks extending into Guatemala and México by 1100-900 B.C. (calendar ages), are all consistent with patterns recorded in the Gulf Coast, Central Highlands, and Pacific Coast of México. Supported by a suite of 11 radiocarbon dates, these findings overturn traditional models that viewed Honduras as an underdeveloped periphery receiving delayed influences from Mexican centers.



Figure 1. Map of Eastern Mesoamerica.



**Figure 2. Major architectural features investigated at Puerto Escondido. Structure 4A was the specific building targeted with FAMSI funds.**

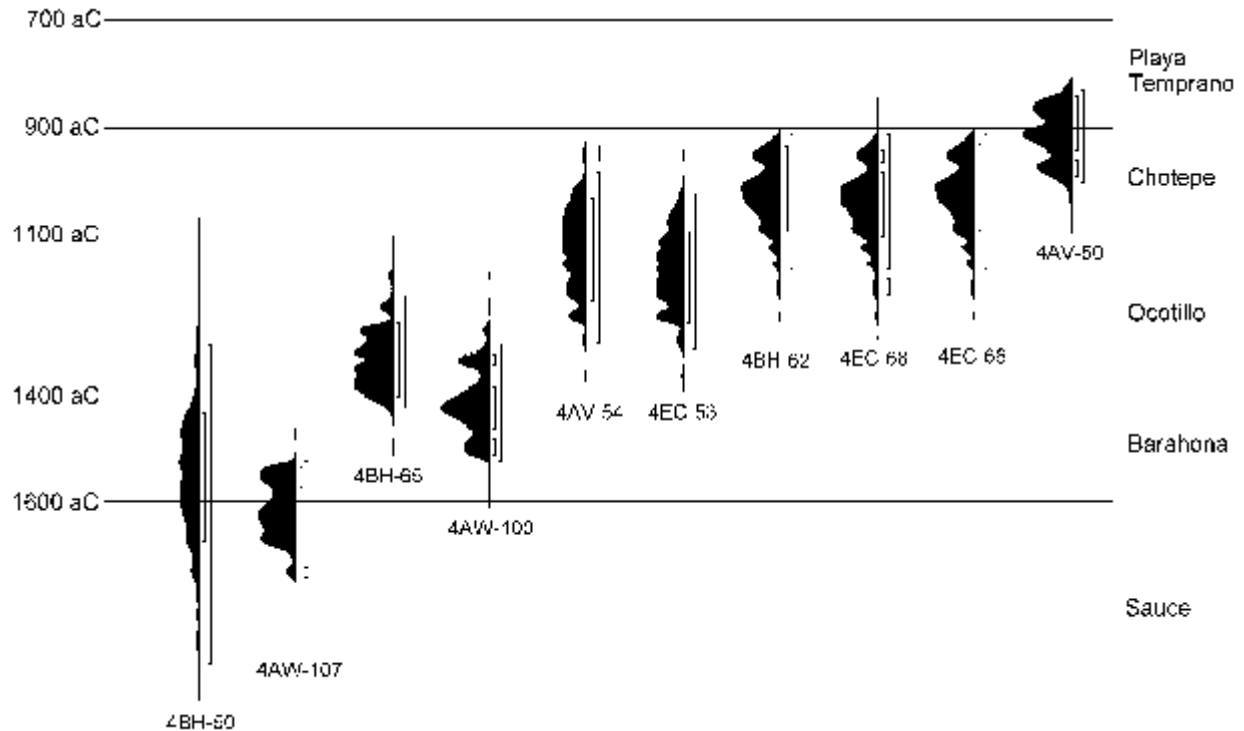


Figure 3. Calibrated carbon dates from the excavations at Puerto Escondido.

## Conclusions

Rather than an isolated, backward rural village on the edge of the Mesoamerican world, the Middle Formative society of which Playa de los Muertos was part had a continuous history going back as early as any sedentary society yet documented in Mesoamerica. Like other precocious Mesoamerican societies, the people of the Chotepe-phase Ulúa valley participated in long-distance networks of exchange through which obsidian from Guatemala moved as far west as the Gulf Coast Olmec centers. Honduras' Chotepe-phase societies participated directly in the social relations that spread preferences for flat-based open bowls in shades of black and white that often carried complex carved motifs related to ideological and religious concerns. The participation of villages in far eastern Mesoamerica in these networks demands reevaluation of core-periphery models of the development of Mesoamerican complex societies during the centuries from 1100 to 900 B.C.

The deep stratigraphic sequence at Puerto Escondido also requires a new evaluation of the emergence of sedentary societies dependent on agriculture from predecessors of the late Archaic period engaged in diversified collecting strategies (Voorhies, 1996a; 1996b). The stratigraphy, features, and dates for Barahona deposits at Puerto Escondido support arguments based on pollen samples from Lake Yojoa, located only 65 km away, for relatively early intensification of maize cultivation in northwest

Honduras (Rue, 1989). Prior to the identification of early occupation at Puerto Escondido, the proposed dates for maize pollen at Lake Yojoa were inconsistent with the lack of evidence for early settlement in the region.

At present, models of the Archaic to Formative period transition in Mesoamerica are based on a few sites in which conditions of preservation were unusually favorable. These sites may not be typical of what were probably highly varied routes toward greater sedentism and increased reliance on cultivation of a narrower range of plant foods. The role of fertile lowland riverine environments is especially difficult to investigate, due to the frequency with which sites have been reworked and buried by deposition (Pope, 1985; Voorhies and Kennett, 1995). It is highly unlikely that Puerto Escondido is unique, and much more likely that the agricultural potential of lowland river valleys in Mesoamerica would have made them some of the most favorable locations—along with swamps and lacustrine environments—for early transitions to increased reliance on agriculture and to sedentism (Hester *et al.*, 1996; Jacob, 1995; Jacob and Hallmark, 1996; Jones, 1994; Pohl, 1990; Pohl *et al.*, 1996). It seems certain that other equally early villages exist elsewhere in eastern Mesoamerica. The identification of early settlements in areas of active river deposition may be difficult, but it is crucial to arriving at more accurate understandings of the early history of human occupation in Central America.

## List of Figures

[Figure 1.](#) Map of Eastern Mesoamerica.

[Figure 2.](#) Major architectural features investigated at Puerto Escondido. Structure 4A was the specific building targeted with FAMSI funds.

[Figure 3.](#) Calibrated carbon dates from the excavations at Puerto Escondido.

**Please note:** A much more detailed report for this project can be found in an article entitled "Beginnings of Village Life in Eastern Mesoamerica" by Rosemary A. Joyce and John S. Henderson in *Latin American Antiquity*, Volume 12, Number 1, March 2001.

Submitted 01/09/2002 by:  
Rosemary A. Joyce  
[rajoyce@uclink4.berkeley.edu](mailto:rajoyce@uclink4.berkeley.edu)