

## Pottery and Ethnic Identity in the Oaxaca Barrio, Teotihuacan

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Ethnicity has, in recent years, become a significant topic in archaeology (e.g. Emberling 1997; Jones 1997). Although a universally accepted definition of ethnicity may be impossible to pin down, many archaeologists and anthropologists in general would accept that ethnicity is, at least in part, strategically negotiated as a social construction of difference (Jenkins 1997; c.f. Stone 2003). Since this process occurs at the perceived boundary of an ethnic group (Barth 1969; Cohen 1985), the archaeologist is faced with the task of identifying the aspects of the material world, if any, that symbolized a particular group's boundaries.

In the case of ethnic enclaves, the marking of boundaries with material things may be particularly evident (Emberling 1997:316). Occupants of an ethnic enclave, outnumbered and surrounded by residents of the host society, face the dual challenges of presenting their identity to the rest of the city and maintaining it internally (Spence 1996). Various social, ritual, and technological practices may be called upon to meet these challenges.

Mike Spence's work at Tlailotlacan, an ethnic enclave in the Mesoamerican city of Teotihuacan, demonstrates the importance of the site for understanding the relationship between material culture and the construction of ethnicity in enclave situations (e.g. Spence 1992, 1996, 2002, 2005; White et al. 2004). Several lines of evidence, including objects that differ stylistically from typical Teotihuacan forms, suggest that a distinct Zapotec ethnic group occupied the site for centuries. Spence (2002, 2005) and others (Millon 1973:42; Rattray 1993) propose that Zapotec-style pottery, which was recovered during excavations at the site, was an important

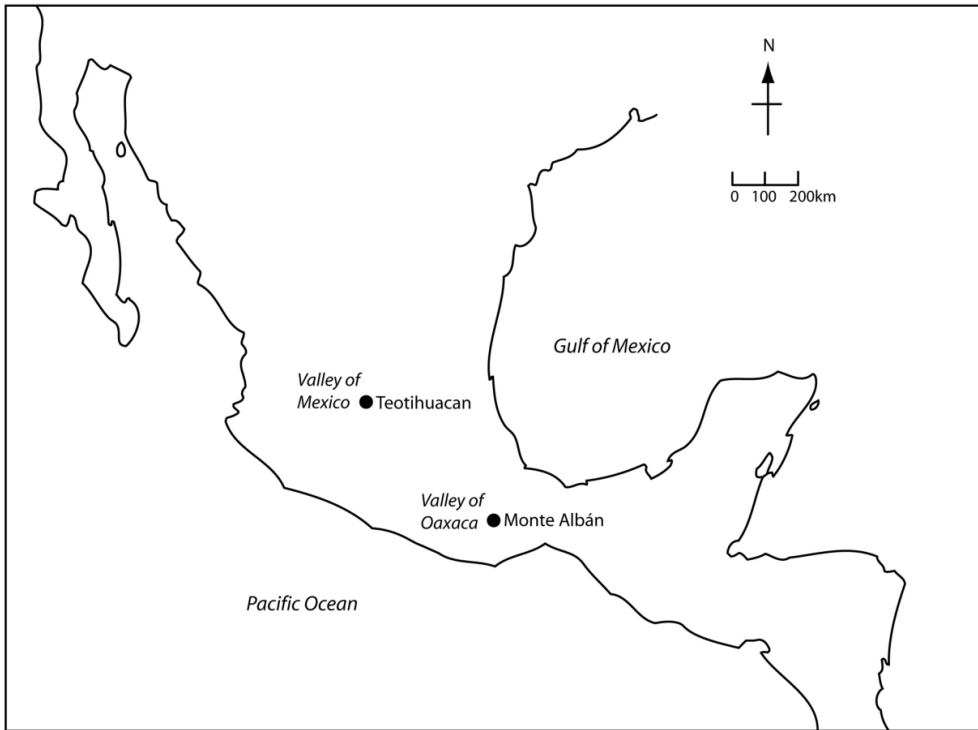
marker of the residents' ethnic identity, perhaps for the duration of the site's occupation. However, the stratigraphy at Tlailotlacan is not straightforward and others have suggested that Zapotec-style pottery production at the site was short-lived, and was quickly replaced by typical Teotihuacan forms (Paddock 1983; Winter 1998).

To more fully understand how ethnic boundaries were marked at Tlailotlacan, it is important that this debate be addressed. This paper provides evidence for a long duration of Zapotec-style pottery manufacture. It is based on my MA thesis (Gibbs 2001), which was written under the supervision of Mike Spence. It should be evident that his work was a major influence.

### Tlailotlacan

Situated in the semi-arid highlands of central Mexico, Teotihuacan was the largest urban centre of its time in the New World (Figure 1). The settlement began to grow rapidly in the first or second century BC, and by around AD 200 it had a population of about 125,000 people and covered an area of some 20 square kilometres (Cowgill 1997; Millon 1973). As a major metropolis, Teotihuacan had widespread ties throughout Mesoamerica, and some areas of the city were settled by people originally from outside the Valley of Mexico (Rattray 1987; Spence 1996; White et al. 1998, 2004).

Tlailotlacan, also known as the Oaxaca barrio, is the most convincing of these ethnic enclaves. It seems to have been settled by Zapotecs from the Valley of Oaxaca sometime around AD 200, during Teotihuacan's Late Miccaotli or Early



**Figure 1.** Map of Mesoamerica showing location of areas and sites mentioned in the text.

Tlamimilolpa phase (Figure 2). While the physical extent of the barrio remains somewhat unclear, Spence (1992) suggests a population of 600 to 700 individuals occupying ten or eleven apartment compounds near the western limit of Teotihuacan (Figure 3). Material culture in a Zapotec style persisted in the barrio, in some form or another, perhaps until the ultimate decline of Teotihuacan sometime around AD 650.

For example, mortuary traditions within the barrio include extended burials in well-made, Zapotec-style tombs and there are ritual deposits that may be based on Zapotec traditions (Spence 2002). A Zapotec glyph was carved into a tomb doorjamb (Millon 1973). While the architecture is, in general, consistent with typical Teotihuacan style, Croissier (2004, 2007) excavated a structure in the barrio that has a layout consistent with a Zapotec-style, multi-room temple. Evidence from oxygen and strontium isotope ratios indicates the presence of people born and raised outside the Oaxaca barrio, some perhaps from the Zapotec homeland in the Valley of Oaxaca

(Price et al. 2000; White et al. 1998, 2004).

Zapotec-style pottery is also found in the barrio. It makes up a rather small part of the total ceramics from Tlailotlacan (approximately 2 or 3 %) while the rest of the ceramics are typical Teotihuacan forms. Interestingly, the Zapotec-style pottery assemblage includes only a small subset of the overall repertoire of Zapotec ceramics that are found in the Valley of Oaxaca itself (Caso et al. 1965). As there is evidence that the cities of Teotihuacan and Monte Albán, the Zapotec capital, maintained significant levels of interaction (Marcus and Flannery 1996), it is perhaps unsurprising that Zapotec-style ceramics would be found in Teotihuacan and, in fact, imported Zapotec wares are found throughout the city (Rattray 1993). But the Oaxaca barrio represents the unique occurrence in Teotihuacan of a concentration of locally-made imitations of Zapotec pottery.

Pottery forms include what may be domestic ritual ceramics, such as handled censers, decorated censers, and urns (Spence 2002). Zapotec

Age	Time Units/Phases
700	
600	Metepec
500	Late Xolalpan Early Xolalpan
400	
300	Late Tlamimilopa
200	Early Tlamimilopa Miccaotli
100	Tzacualli
<u>AD</u> BC	
100	Patlachique

**Figure 2.** Chronology of the Teotihuacan phases discussed in the text (after Cowgill 1996).

figurines may also have had a ritual function. Pottery items with a more utilitarian function include large, relatively coarse conical bowls and smaller, finer bowls, usually with a pair of grooves around the rim (Figure 4). The former are similar to types referred to as G21 or G35 in the Valley of Oaxaca, while the finer bowls are similar to G12 bowls (Caso et al. 1965; cf. Winter 1998). Comales (griddles) and zoomorphic bowls make up the rest of the Zapotec-style utilitarian ceramics from the barrio.

While there is good evidence that certain aspects of the Zapotec material culture repertoire persisted for centuries after the barrio was settled (e.g., the tombs), the case for the pottery is less clear. All of the locally-made Zapotec-style pottery from the barrio seems to belong to the

relatively brief Late Monte Albán II-IIIa transition period. None of the pottery is comparable to later period material from Monte Albán. Because there was continued contact between Monte Albán and Teotihuacan we might expect that, if pottery had continued to be made in the Oaxaca barrio, it would have kept up with changing trends in the Zapotec homeland. Since there is no evidence of change, this has suggested to some that the duration of manufacture of Zapotec-style ceramics in the Oaxaca barrio must have been quite short, lasting only a generation or two (Paddock 1983; Winter 1998).

Mike Spence (1992, 2005), however, has offered a different explanation. He suggests that after the initial settlement of the barrio the role that pottery played would have changed. If the residents of the Oaxaca barrio were trying to maintain an ethnic identity distinct from the rest of Teotihuacan, any Zapotec element of their material culture could have been given a new role as a symbolic marker of that distinct identity. This would have the effect of freezing the pottery forms, making them resistant to the changes that took place in the Valley of Oaxaca. So the duration of Zapotec-style pottery manufacture may have lasted for centuries, with the potters adhering to a small set of outdated Monte Albán types.

Unfortunately, the mixed deposits of the Oaxaca barrio, with ceramics from multiple time periods in a single context, do not allow a straightforward assessment of the site's stratigraphy. It is not possible to simply look to the dateable Teotihuacan pottery in any one context to designate a date for that context (Rattray 1993). Virtually all contexts or "bags" containing Zapotec-style pottery contain Teotihuacan ceramics that can be attributed to two or more Teotihuacan phases.

### Analysis

My effort to address this problem is based on the ceramic material recovered from Mike Spence's (1992) excavation of Tlailotlacan's structure TL6 (Gibbs 2001, 2004). Since almost all the bags of

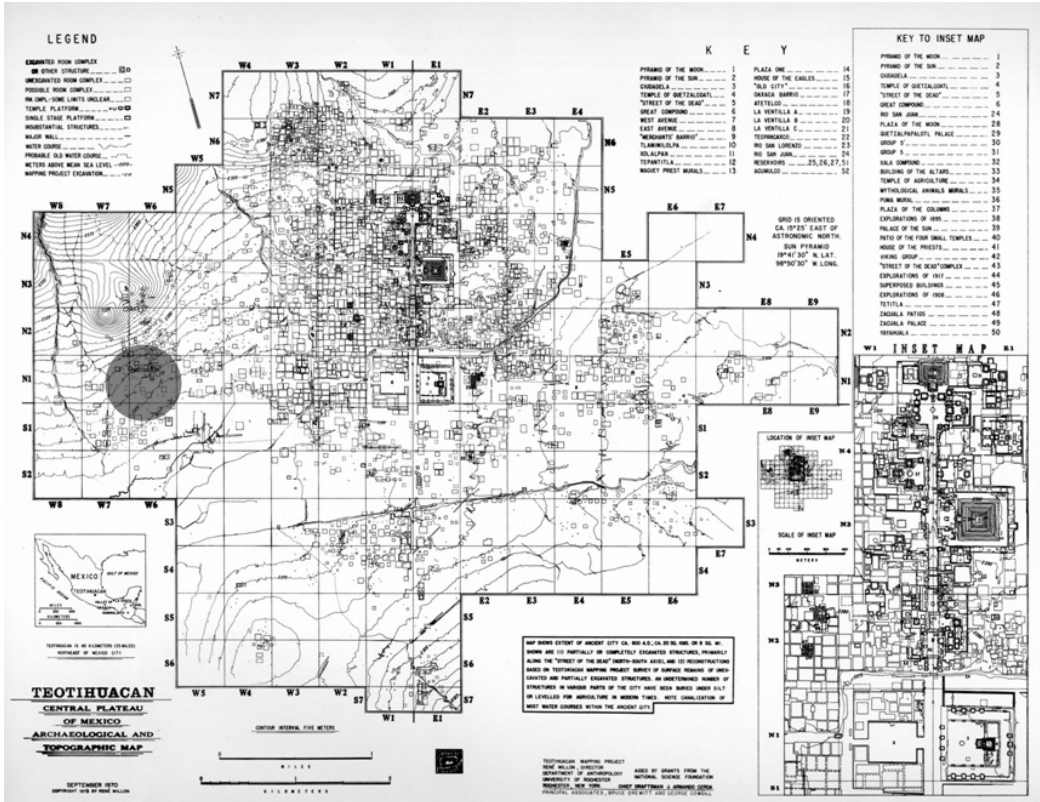


Figure 3. Map of Teotihuacan. Location of Tlalilotlacan is marked by a large circle (after Millon 1973).

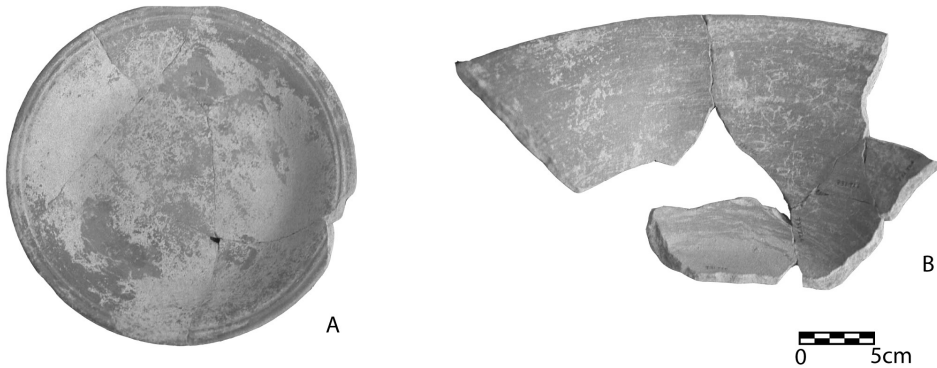


Figure 4. Ceramic bowls from Structure TL6 at Tlalilotlacan. A is similar to type G12 from the Valley of Oaxaca and B is similar to type G35 variant 1 (Caso et al. 1965; Winter 1998).

pottery contain Teotihuacan ceramics from multiple phases, it is impossible to reliably attribute any particular Zapotec sherd or pot to a specific Teotihuacan phase. However, I suggest that evidence for the retention of chronological

integrity can be identified when the bags are examined collectively.

I do this by dividing all the Teotihuacan pottery into two groups; those that come from bags or contexts containing no Zapotec pottery,

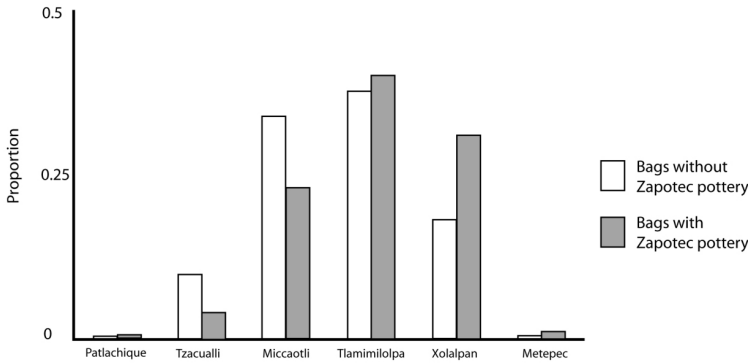
and those that come from bags containing at least one piece of Zapotec pottery. After eliminating any bags with small sample size (less than 20 sherds), for both groups I determine the proportion of Teotihuacan pottery attributable on stylistic grounds to the six main phases of the Teotihuacan chronology: three before the Zapotec migration to the barrio (the Patlachique, Tzacualli, and much of the Miccaotli phase) and three after the migration to Teotihuacan (the Tlamimilolpa, Xolalpan, and Metepec phases) (Figure 5). Although the earliest and latest phases are too poorly represented to say anything concrete, the middle phases show an interesting pattern. The bags without Zapotec pottery have higher average proportions of Tzacualli and Miccaotli pottery and lower proportions of Tlamimilolpa and Xolalpan pottery, relative to bags with Zapotec pottery. This fits well with our a priori knowledge of the Zapotec migration to Teotihuacan, and suggests the retention of chronological integrity. If the barrio were settled late in the Miccaotli phase or early in the Tlamimilolpa, we would expect a higher proportion of Zapotec pottery in bags also containing Tlamimilolpa pottery, and this pattern is, indeed, observed. But also note that this trend continues into the Xolalpan phase; the increase is not restricted to the phase corresponding to the initial settling of the barrio. This finding suggests that Zapotec pottery was manufactured at least into the Xolalpan phase.

The pottery can also be considered in relation to the architectural evidence. Mike Spence identifies eight architectural stages in TL6 that correspond to the building phases subsequent to the initial Zapotec migration to the barrio (Spence, personal communication, 2004). These phases are in chronological order with the earliest (Stage A) dating to the Late Miccaotli or Early Tlamimilolpa phases and the latest (Stage H) dating to the Metepec phase, the final occupational phase of the barrio. The other stages, though in chronological order, cannot yet be attributed to a particular phase. Nevertheless, these ordered stages corroborate the conclusions that were based on the comparison of bags with and without Zapotec pottery.

Table 1 shows the proportions of Teotihuacan pottery recovered from contexts relating to each of the eight stages. Again, although each architectural stage has pottery dating to multiple phases we do see an interesting trend. The highest proportions of early pottery, from the Tzacualli and Miccaotli phases, are found in contexts relating to the earliest architectural phases, and the highest proportions of late Teotihuacan pottery are found in contexts relating to the latest architectural phases. The Patlachique phase is omitted because there were so few sherds dating to this period. Note that Table 2 is not necessarily saying that Stage A is Tzacualli and Stage B is Miccaotli, etc. What it does show is that some chronological ordering is retained in the bags of pottery.

Furthermore, if we plot the proportion of Zapotec pottery within contexts relating to the architectural stages, we see that it does not decrease over time (Figure 6). Although there are fluctuations, the proportion of Zapotec pottery is actually highest in Stage H, the latest architectural stage. This finding also suggests that Zapotec pottery was made beyond the Early Tlamimilolpa phase, perhaps even into the Metepec.

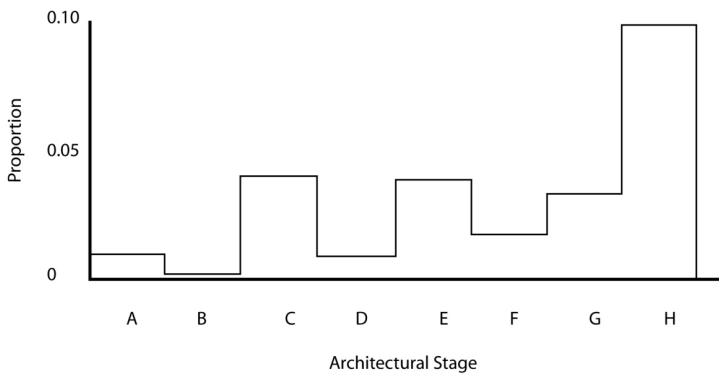
If Zapotec-style pottery was made into the Xolalpan or Metepec phases, it would be interesting to see if there were any identifiable typological or functional changes, or changes in the proportions of particular types. As an example, I consider here pottery with purported ritual functions versus pottery with domestic or utilitarian functions (see Gibbs 2001 for further examples). If we compare the cumulative proportion of phaseable Teotihuacan pottery in bags with ritual Zapotec sherds (from urns and censers) to bags with utilitarian sherds (G35s, G12s, and comales) we see there is, in fact, little difference (Figure 7). Similarly, and not surprisingly, there is little difference in the relative proportion of ritual versus domestic pottery in any of the eight architectural stages identified by Spence. The relative proportions of ritual and domestic Zapotec pottery do not seem to change over time.



**Figure 5.** Proportion of Teotihuacan pottery in bags with and without zapotec pottery. Note the increased proportion of bags containing Zapotec pottery during the Tlamimilolpa and later phases. The founding of Tlailotlacan occurred during the Late Miccaotli or Early Tlamimilolpa.

Architectural Stage	Phase				
	Tzacualli	Miccaotli	Tlamimilolpa	Xolalpan	Metepec
A	0.22	0.39	0.30	0.09	0.00
B	0.18	0.46	0.30	0.05	0.00
C	0.07	0.37	0.43	0.12	0.00
D	0.11	0.35	0.44	0.11	0.00
E	0.08	0.29	0.43	0.20	0.00
F	0.05	0.22	0.43	0.29	0.00
G	0.03	0.23	0.35	0.36	0.02
H	0.03	0.21	0.38	0.36	0.02

**Table 1.** Proportions of Teotihuacan pottery by architectural stage.



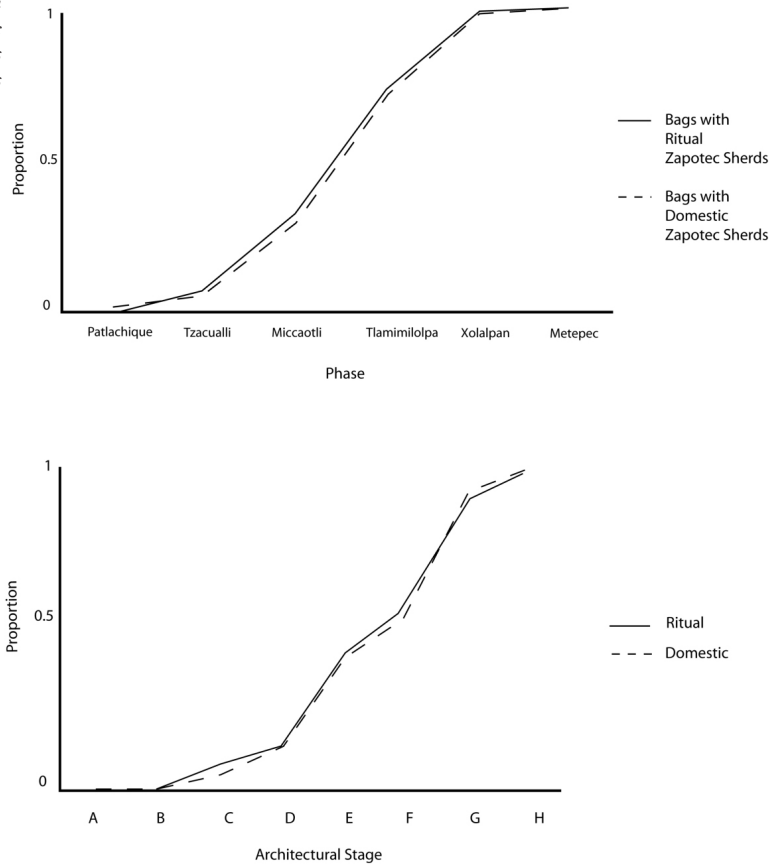
**Figure 6.** Proportion of Zapotec pottery by architectural stage. Stage A corresponds to the founding of Tlailotlacan while stage H corresponds to the latest occupation.

**Discussion**

The analysis outlined above suggests that the manufacture of Zapotec-style pottery in Tlailotlacan had a long duration. A discussion of the reasons for a Zapotec presence in Teotihuacan is beyond the scope of this paper, although it is worth noting that a range of ideas have been

proposed, including that the barrio residents were masons (Rattray 1987) or that they were part of a trade diaspora (Croissier 2007; Spence 2005). Whatever the reason, it is apparent that the residents of the barrio did feel the need to maintain some aspect of their distinctiveness for centuries after the initial founding of the barrio. The continued manufacture of an ethnically

Figure 7. Cumulative proportions of Teotihuacan sherds in bags with ritual and domestic Zapotec sherds. Upper graph is by Teotihuacan phase, lower is by architectural stage.



distinct type of pottery suggests that it may have had some symbolic value related to the continued expression of a Zapotec identity. As Spence (1992) suggests, this could have the effect of freezing the pottery forms. However, as ritual pottery does not make up a greater proportion of the Zapotec-style pottery in the barrio during the later phases, this expression was not confined strictly to formal, ritual activities. It was also an element of the daily household practices of the residents. Spence (2005) argues, therefore, that pottery would have had an important role in the enculturation process. The use of pottery in a variety of daily activities such as food preparation and consumption, washing, and domestic rituals would contribute to “the new generation incorporating the habitus of their predecessors” (Spence 2005:185).

That the residents of Tlailotlacan maintained a distinct material culture for centuries is significant in light of the strong political and ideological control exercised by the state, as evidenced by the overall cohesive layout and orientation of the city, the standard residential compounds and architectural style, and the conventional art forms (Sugiyama 2004). It suggests that this material culture was symbolically important and that it played a role in the negotiation of a distinct identity. This process occurred not only at the scales of the compound and the barrio (Manzanilla 2004), but also within individual households through the daily activities of the residents of Tlailotlacan.

## Conclusion

Although the stratigraphy at Tlailotlacan is characterized by mixed deposits, my analysis shows that some chronological integrity is retained. Zapotec-style pottery is found most frequently in association with Teotihuacan-style pottery that can be dated on stylistic grounds to the phases after the initial settling of the barrio. It is also found most frequently in association with architectural features that correspond to the later occupation of the site. These patterns continue through the Xolalpan and, perhaps, even into the Metepec suggesting a long duration of Zapotec-style pottery manufacture in the barrio. Mike Spence (1996) suggests that a range of distinct traits should be evident in an ethnic enclave, including traits that relate to both public and private practices. Zapotec-style pottery can be added with more certainty to the list of ethnic markers that occurred in Tlailotlacan over the course of much of its existence.

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