



Eleia Montiel

# *The Mixe-Zoque Legacy in the Soconusco*

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Ball game court at Izapa 1 archaeological site. Photo: Elsie Montiel



Vase with the figure of a *coati* holding its muzzle. *Plomiza* ceramics. Early Post-classical period.

Although traditionally the Pacific Coast of Chiapas is considered part of the Mayan area, strictly speaking, archaeological and linguistic evidence show that the region was actually inhabited in ancient times by members of the Mixe-Zoque linguistic group. Mayan does not belong to this group, but the language of the culture we now call Olmec may well be part of it.

According to colonial chroniclers, Mixe-Zoque speakers inhabited part of southwest Chiapas, from Tapanatepec, near the border with Oaxaca, to Tapachula, on the border with Guatemala, where Tapachultec was spoken. However, shortly before the Spanish conquest, speakers of varieties of Mayan (Mam, Quiché and Tuzantec) and Nahuatl had begun to settle in some parts of this fertile, strategic area.

The word “Soconusco,” the name given to this part of Mexico’s Southeast, is derived from the Nahuatl *xoconochco*, meaning “place of the sour prickly pears” (*xoconostle*), the name of a now extinct people and a province that paid tribute to the Mexica empire in the sixteenth century.

Today, Soconusco is the name given to one of the state of Chiapas’s eight administrative areas or counties. It covers 16 municipalities located between the Pacific coastal plain and the southern arm of the Chiapas Sierra Madre mountains, from Mapastepec to the Guatemalan border. Due to its climate and fertile land, the region has been continuously inhab-

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ited for at least 5,000 years. Its strategic location has made it an important cultural corridor between Mexico and Central America.

The earliest signs of human habitation date back 5,000 or 6,000 years when groups specialized in exploiting coastal resources settled in the Chantuto region, giving rise to a peculiar kind of archaeological site called *concheros*, or “shell places”, because of the large deposits of clam shells that they took out of the estuaries and mangroves. Years later, other groups whose economy was based on agriculture founded the first villages and began a ceramic tradition called *barra*, which not only has the merit of being the oldest in Mesoamerica’s Southeast, but also of having created beautiful vessels of technological excellence. Some researchers even think that their spreading out from this region helps us understand the origin of the Mixe-Zoques, the ethnic group that founded the Olmec culture on Mexico’s Gulf Coast.

About 1200 B.C., the population of Soconusco received a big cultural impact from the Olmec metropolitan area. The presence of traits of this first great civilization is clear in several objects studied and recovered in the region. One example of this is the pottery and some of the stone sculptures from Izapa on exhibit at the Soconusco Archaeological Museum in Tapachula.



Late Pre-classical figurine from Izapa.

Izapa A archaeological site. Photo: Rubén Vázquez





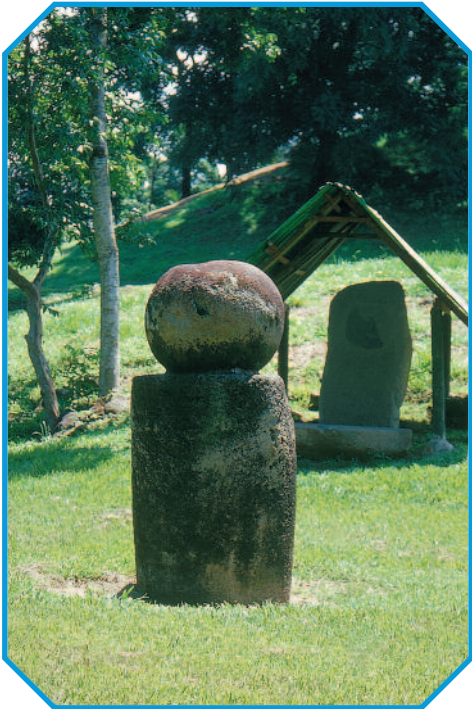
*Plomiza* ceramic receptacle with the image of the god Tlaloc. Early Post-classical.



Three-legged plate with eagle-shaped legs. Late Post-classical.



Bottle with images and hieroglyphics characteristic of the Mayan area.



Complex B Izapa. Sculptures at the main plaza. Photo: Elsie Montiel

This important pre-Hispanic city had a long history of occupancy and flowered between 300 B.C. and A.D. 200; its inhabitants created a specific style of sculpture that rendered many aspects of their world view in stone. Their rich iconography includes images like the silk cotton tree-crocodile, the tree and axis of the cosmos that communicates the underworld with the heavens; toothed gullets that symbolize heaven; gods with prominent noses out of whose mouths emanates fertilizing water; two-headed beings that represent the cosmos; the rites of decapitation to invoke rain; descending gods; and many others.

We know little about the Classical period in this region, but evidence shows that in its first stages from A.D. 300 to A.D. 600, Teotihuacan groups used it as a cultural corridor to Central America. During the Late Classical period (A.D. 600-800) and Terminal Classical (from A.D. 800 to A.D. 1000), in addition to influences from Mayan lands, it acted to disseminate the complex called “Yokes, hatchets and palms” which may have been related to the presence of the Pipils, Nahuatl speakers who lived in Guatemala and El Salvador.

During the Early Post-Classical (A.D. 1000-1250), the region was the birthplace of the production of pottery with a characteristic metallic sheen, called *plomiza*, highly prized throughout Mesoamerica. Vessels of this kind have been found in important sites like Chichén Itzá in the Mayan region, Tula in Central Mexico and several parts of Oaxaca, the Gulf Coast and even in the West.

During the first half of the Post-Classical period, the Mesoamerican peoples also began to make metal artifacts; this activity would

greatly increase in the second half of the period. Using different techniques like smelting and hammering, the smiths created luxury items and tools out of copper, gold, silver and alloys like *tumbaga* (copper and gold) and bronze (copper and tin).

No deposits of these metals or workshops have been found in the Soconusco, which means that the metals found in the region were taken there from other parts of Mexico and Central America. The production and exchange of cacao, used both as food and as currency, gave the local elites access to these artifacts through complex trade routes. Rattles, needles, tweezers and hatchets are the metal objects most frequently found in the region and can be seen in the display cases at the Tapachula museum.

The expansion of the Mayan states that blossomed in the Guatemalan highlands, especially those inhabited by Mam and Quiché speakers during the Late Post-Classical period (A.D. 1250-1550), was the reason many Mayan groups came to this area where a Mixe-Zoque language, Tapachultec, had been spoken of old. Until the end of this period, the Mexica empire, attracted by cacao production and by the desire to forge greater contact with the Mayan groups of the Guatemalan highlands, left a deep imprint in the Soconusco. Different sources, such as the Registry of Tributes and the Mendocino Codex, offer us information about the peoples that inhabited the Soconusco province when it was a tribute-paying region, its hieroglyphics and the products it delivered to Mexico-Tenochtitlan.

One product of this relationship is a stone sculpture and the excellent Aztec-tradition vessels displayed in the

Soconusco Museum. We should also mention that even during the first half of the twentieth century, Nahuatl speakers, speakers of the language of the Mexica, still remained in some towns in Soconusco.

A new order was imposed with the Spanish conquest and colonial occupation. The region became part of the captaincy of Guatemala, as did a large part of what is today the state of Chiapas. With independence began the long process of annexing the area to the Mexican state, which culminated in 1882 when a treaty between Mexico and Guatemala established the border between the two countries.

During the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, large, mainly German-owned, haciendas were established in the region. In that same period, large groups of Asian immigrants crossed the Pacific and arrived on the Chiapas coast. Today, the region is a port of entry for many Central American emigrants who for different reasons have settled there. All these actors define the make-up of today's inhabitants of Soconusco. **NM**



Efigie receptacle with the image of a warrior whose head is the top. *Plomiza* ceramics. Early Post-classical.



Stelae 11 found in complex B, Izapa. Photo: Elsie Montiel

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### THE SOCONUSCO ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Describing the historical complexity and cultural dynamic of this long-inhabited region of Chiapas was the main objective of establishing the Soconusco Archaeological Museum. Because of the nature of its collection, the museum especially emphasizes pre-Hispanic times; the sculptures from Izapa and the *plomiza* pottery are among its most important collections. However, its rooms also include other actors, from both colonial and modern times, who have participated in the cultural plurality that today characterizes the region's inhabitants.

SOCONUSCO ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM  
 8 AVENIDA NORTE # 24, BETWEEN 1 AND 3 PONIENTE  
 TAPACHULA, CHIAPAS  
 PHONE: (962) 626 4173  
 OPEN: TUESDAY TO SUNDAY, FROM 10:00 A.M. TO 5:00 P.M.



Three-legged Teotihuacan-style vessel with battlement-shaped legs. Early Classical.