

The Tarascan (Purépecha) Empire

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Abstract and Keywords

At the time of European contact, western Mexico was dominated by the Tarascos, who spoke a language called Purépecha. Never defeated by the bordering Aztec Empire, the Purépecha Empire instituted a bureaucratic system that was designed to extract tribute from subjects and to control political, economic, and social life throughout their territory. Archaeological research shows that existing societies in west Mexico were quickly co-opted by Purépecha tribute-based and ideological systems. This chapter reviews the traditional model of Purépecha development by incorporating archaeological research from both the Pátzcuaro Basin imperial core region and elsewhere in the empire. Recent work indicates that there was a spectrum of state–local relations that were more complicated than the ethnohistoric record suggests. In particular, new data from the Pátzcuaro Basin of Michoacán show how the Purépecha developed over a long trajectory in western Mexico, engaging in a series of negotiations with large urban centers.

Keywords: West Mexico, Purépecha, Tarascan, Empire, ethnohistory, Pátzcuaro Basin, Tarascos, Michoacán

AT the time of European contact, western Mexico was dominated by a population known as the Tarascos with a distinctive language (Purépecha), customs, and centralized sociopolitical system that is best characterized as an empire. During the two centuries prior to European Conquest, the Purépecha Empire at times controlled more than 75,000 km² of the modern state of Michoacán as well as parts of Guerrero, Jalisco, Colima, and Guanajuato (Figure 38.1). The supreme ruler (*cazonci*) operated from the imperial capital of Tzintzuntzan in the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin, Michoacán. Never defeated by the bordering Aztec Empire, the Purépecha instituted a bureaucratic system that was designed to extract tribute from subjects and control political, economic, and social life throughout their territory.

Current archaeological research in the region centers on identifying social and environmental processes that allowed Purépecha elite to consolidate political and economic power during the Late Postclassic period (A.D. 1350–1522) to become the dominant force in western Mexico. Ethnohistoric investigation suggests that existing sociopolitical hetero-

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geneity in western Mexico was co-opted by Purépecha tribute-based and ideological systems (Gorenstein and Pollard 1983; Pollard 2008; Warren 1985), but this remains to be tested archaeologically (Figure 38.2). According to the official Purépecha history documented in the *Relación de Michoacán* (RM) (2000 [1541]), by A.D. 1350 leader Tariácuri and his descendants had successfully subjugated and consolidated small polities in the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin. This was followed by territorial conquest in western Mexico through ideological manipulation, intermarriage, and control of resources.

In this chapter we review archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence for Purépecha Empire development both from the LPB core region and elsewhere in the empire. These data suggest that there was a spectrum of state–local relations that were more complex than that shown by ethnohistory alone. We conclude with a discussion of recent models of Purépecha complexity, including data from archaeological work within the LPB. Emerging research shows how the Purépecha regime developed over a long trajectory in (p. 544) western Mexico, engaging in a series of negotiations that can be documented over multiple centuries of social, political, and economic change.

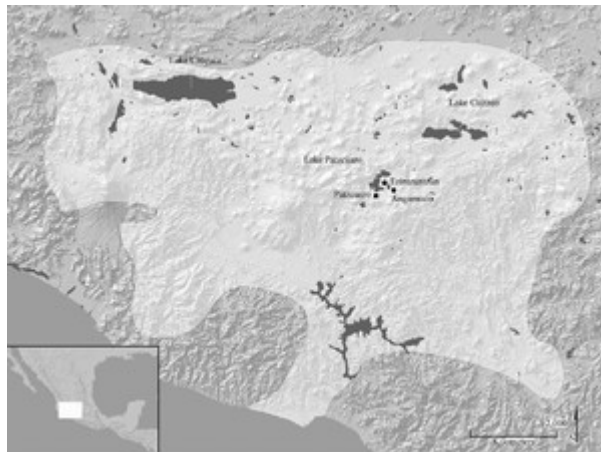


Figure 38.1 Map of the Tarascan Empire showing major archaeological sites within the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin, Michoacán, Mexico.

Drawing by author.

Purépecha Governance in Ethnohistory

Between the fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Purépecha are thought to have established the most consolidated and centralized empire in Postclassic Mesoamerica (A.D. 1000–1522) (Beekman 2010; Pollard 2012; Smith and Berdan 2003). This was due in part to the highly centralized bureaucratic system instituted by the Purépecha elite that is described in the partially preserved RM. As told to Franciscan priest Fray Jeronimo de Acalá by Purépecha noblemen around A.D. 1539, this official history of the Purépecha describes how the seminomadic *uacúsecha* (“eagle”) lineage migrated from the Zacapu Basin to the Pátzcuaro Basin in the early 1300s (see also Beaumont 1932:ch. 7). After de-

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feating several chiefdoms in the region, leader Tariácuri ruled from the city of Pátzcuaro and installed his newphews Híripan and Tángaxoan as lords of (p. 545) the cities of Ihuatzio and Tzintzuntzan. Their descendants expanded the Purépecha Empire throughout western Mexico, instituting a tributary system and an administrative bureaucracy centered in the Pátzcuaro Basin. This system functioned by appointing a tribute collector (*ocámbecha*) for every 25 households who then submitted payments to the central authority in Tzintzuntzan (Beltrán 1994). Tribute largely varied by settlement. For example, at the high-ranking site of Acámbaro located on the northeastern border of the empire, inhabitants paid corn, food stuffs, and blankets to Tzintzuntzan while Pátzcuaro Basin residents may have paid tribute in labor (Aguilar González 2005; Beaumont 1932:64–69). The RM also lists numerous officials who were in charge of each aspect of craft production and resource procurement, ranging from hunting, woodwork, and pottery production to *pulque* and honey processing (RM 2000:558–572). In other words, this coordination of tax collection, leadership, and political economic activity throughout the empire was controlled by a highly centralized system. (p. 546)

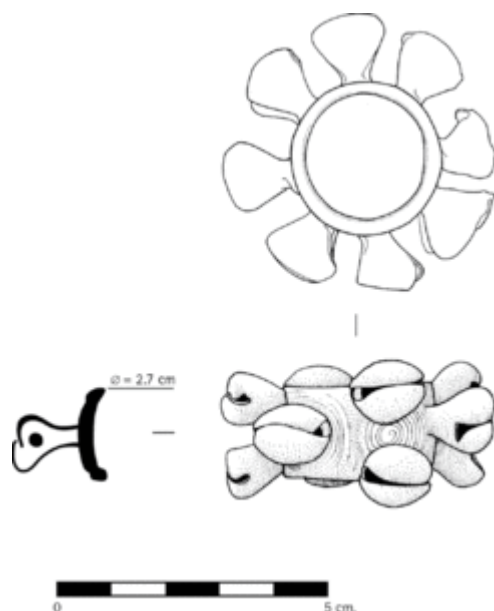


Figure 38.2 Rattle for a Purépecha thunderstick composed of multiple bells around a central ring. From the cemetery at the site of Angamuco, Michoacán, Mexico, Late Postclassic.

Drawing by Daniel Salazar Lama for the LORE-LPB project.



Figure 38.3 Purépecha stirrup spouted vessel possibly for cacao. From the cemetery at the site of Angamuco, Michoacán, Mexico, Late Postclassic.

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Aspects of Purépecha social and religious life are illustrated in the RM, including architecture, social organization, customs, and material culture. For example, distinctive “Purépecha-style” ceramic artifacts such as Polychrome spouted vessels, miniatures, elaborate pipes, and animal effigy vessels called *patojas* appear in the RM and have been documented archaeologically in the Pátzcuaro Basin and elsewhere in Late Postclassic contexts in western Mexico (Figure 38.3) (e.g. Arnould et al. 1993; Castro Leal 1986; Hernández 2000; Macias Goytia 1989, 1990; Pollard 1993; Porter 1948; Ramírez and Cárdenas 2006).

Metallurgy, which also appears in the RM, was strongly associated with elite culture and played a significant role in the structure of political economic power. For example, copper ingots and items such as tweezers and bells were given as gifts to foreign visitors and by regional elites to the king, and as tribute to state storehouses in the Pátzcuaro Basin (Pollard 1993:119).

The Purépecha were associated with distinctive architecture, such as the *yácata*, which was a semicircular rubble-filled pyramid faced with dressed stone slabs that sometimes had petroglyphs and a perishable structure on top (Figure 38.4). These pyramids were devoted to the main deity Curicuaeri and were related to religious practices (p. 547) such as human sacrifice in major settlements. The recovery of several elite individuals exhibiting dental modification and grave goods associated with the Tzintzuntzan *yacatas* indicate that they were also used in mortuary contexts (Moedano 1941; Rubín de la Barbolla 1939, 1941).

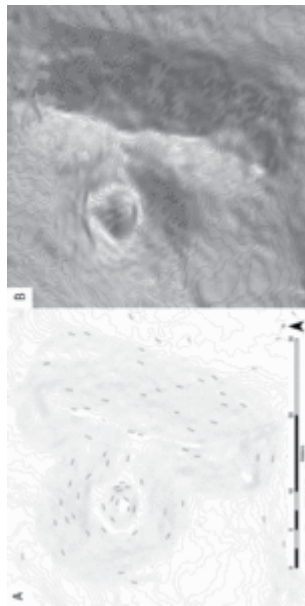


Figure 38.4 Traditional *yácata*-style pyramid composed of a rectilinear and circular element, from the site of Angamuco, Michoacán, Mexico. (A) Shows a plan view of this feature as a 5 cm contour map; (B) shows a perspective view of this same feature using the same contour map overlain on a hillshade. All features derived from a 0.25 cm digital elevation model created from high resolution LiDAR data.

Prepared by author

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Purépecha fought a number of wars against the Aztecs and their allies, but they never lost against the larger empire (Durán 1967:282; Garcia Payón 1941:80). Purépecha rulers were aware of Spanish presence due to an intricate network of spies in Aztec territories and later due to several Aztec emissaries sent to Tzintzuntzan requesting aid. The Purépecha refused to help their enemies against the Europeans. Around this time, political in-fighting in the Purépecha capital weakened the king, which led him to secretly escape the city to regain control of his territory (Pollard 1993; Warren 1985). When Spanish general Cristóbal de Olid arrived at Tzintzuntzan in A.D. 1522, *cazonci* Tangáxuan II submitted to the Spanish without resistance and ruled with partial independence until his execution in A.D. 1530 (Beaumont 1932:ch. 5). (p. 548)

Archaeological Perspectives in the Imperial Core and Beyond

Archaeological research has examined this ethnohistoric model by looking at how the Purépecha regime controlled elite identity, economy, and border zones to the north. In the Pátzcuaro Basin, scholars have argued that political changes were facilitated by environmental fluctuations and associated population growth (Fisher et al. 2003; Gorenstein and

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Pollard 1983; Pollard 2008). The development and consolidation of the Purépecha Empire was visible in the construction of *yácatas*, elite artifacts, and increasing populations around Lake Pátzcuaro. At the site of Urichu, Pollard and Cahue (1999) argued that Lupe phase (A.D. 600–900) tombs were associated with imported and luxury grave goods while later Postclassic use of the tombs shows localized exploitation of upper-class items. This has been interpreted as a Purépecha elite emphasis on homegrown symbols of power as they established a centralized imperial base in the Pátzcuaro Basin (Pollard 2008; Pollard and Cahue 1999). Long-term landscape modification in the Pátzcuaro area included agricultural intensification during the Late Postclassic, which is understood as state-sponsored production in part due to population growth (Fisher 2005). During the Classic and Early Postclassic periods, landscape degradation and subsequent recuperative strategies such as terracing are thought to be a result of increasing populations and social complexity in the region (Fisher et al. 2003).

Resource Extraction and Production

Research into resource exploitation and production shows that while the Purépecha Empire may have exacted tribute from its subjects, craft production was not under direct state control. For example, the primary supplier of copper was the central Balsas Basin in the southern portion of Purépecha territory, but there is evidence that smelting—one of several key production steps—occurred in other areas such as the Zirahuén Basin (south of Pátzcuaro) (Hosler and MacFarlane 1996; Maldonado and Rehren 2009). After copper ingots were produced, they were sent to yet another location for final processing. This means that intermittent specialists, who carried out copper production steps such as smelting in addition to other activities such as farming, were probably key players in the broader political economic system (Maldonado 2009). Moreover, imperial involvement in production varied and economic integration was probably very local.

Lithic and ceramic production studies reflect a similar pattern. Obsidian, which is not local to the imperial core, was primarily exploited during the Late Postclassic from the Ucareo-Zinapecuaro source in Michoacán (Rebnegger 2013). This source was used throughout central and western Mexico during the preceding time periods but was largely limited to the Purépecha territories during imperial consolidation (Pollard and Vogel 1994). This may have been because the Purépecha wanted direct control over the (p. 549) Ucareo-Zinapecuaro source area, which was in a strategic region near the Aztec Empire (Healan 2009; Hernández and Healan 2008). Importantly, however, the empire did not control all aspects of production since obsidian items continued to be processed by part-time specialists and in households throughout western Mexico (Darras 2008, 2009). Pottery manufacture at sites in the Pátzcuaro Basin may also have been local though with clear stylistic changes during the Late Postclassic. Comparison of ceramics between the Classic and Postclassic periods at the site of Urichu and Postclassic ceramics from Tzintzuntzan suggest that Purépecha pottery emerged from a long tradition of local forms and motifs rather than from top-down, state-controlled production (Hirshman et al. 2010; Hirshman and Ferguson 2012).

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The Zacapu Basin

Work in the Zacapu Basin—ancestral home of the *uacúsecha* lineage—has sought to establish a model of long-term occupation before and during early Purépecha Empire formation (Arnauld et al. 1993; Darras 1998; Michelet 1992). Excavations at the site of Loma Alta have documented a Preclassic and Classic period (100 B.C.–A.D. 550) ancient island cemetery and ceremonial center with square and circular platforms and sunken plazas (Carot 2001, 2013). Loma Alta artwork included rounded-base figurines, polychrome ceramic vessels, and over 40 motifs that influenced art throughout Michoacán during the Classic period (Filini 2004; Macías Goytia 1990; Manzanilla López 1988; Pollard 2003). These motifs also appear in Postclassic contexts suggesting that the Purépecha used earlier designs as symbols of past local societies, possibly in an effort to perpetuate sociopolitical legitimacy in the region (Carot 2013). During the Later Classic and Epiclassic periods, Zacapu Basin art was influenced by Teotihuacan and Tula workmanship, including depictions of warfare and pyrite discs (the *tezcacuitlapilli*) (Pereira 1999; cf. Kelly 1947: 125–127; Piña Chan and Oí 1982:Figure 25). Around this time, existing communities and new migrants began to build cities on raised lava flows (*malpaís*), eventually creating an urban zone that extended more than 4 km². Movement to these inhospitable settlements may have been due to population growth and for defense, though there is no evidence for warfare (Michelet 2000). Artifacts from these urban sites show pre-Purépecha vessel forms and styles that may have been precursors to Late Postclassic Purépecha artifacts elsewhere (Forest 2014; Jadot 2016). By the mid-fifteenth century, the *malpaís* sites were abandoned for environmental and political economic reasons (Michelet 2010; Migeon 2003).

The Imperial Borderlands

Settlements along the Purépecha border regions reveal a mixed picture of imperial consolidation and porosity. Along the regime's northeastern border, between the states of Michoacán, Hidalgo, Querétaro, and México, there is evidence for different ethnic communities (e.g. Otomí, Matlatzinca, Nahuatl, and Purépecha speakers) throughout the Postclassic who may have served as a “buffer” between the warring Aztecs and Purépecha (Hernández 2000; Hernández and Healan 2008). Borderland fortress communities retained distinct practices despite allegiance to their respective kings in Tzintzuntzan or Tenochtitlan (Gorenstein 1985; Lefebvre 2012; Silverstein 2001). In northern Michoacán in the Cuitzeo Basin, Purépecha objects and local ceramics have been recovered in association with temples and tombs, indicating contemporaneous Purépecha and non-Purépecha populations (Macías Goytia 1989, 1990). In the Sayula Basin, Jalisco, Purépecha elite ceramics and other artifacts were found exclusively in local elite burials, suggesting that Purépecha symbols were exported and used to constitute authority in heterogeneous border regions (Acosta Nieva 1996; Ramírez and Cárdenas 2006).

Recent Perspectives on Purépecha Development

Archaeological work over the past few decades has sought to problematize the limited ethnohistorical accounts of Purépecha development and governance (Arnauld et al. 1993; Carot 2013; Darras 1998; Gorenstein 1985; Fisher 2005; Fisher et al. 2003; Hernández and Healan 2008; Michelet 1992, 2000, 2010; Pereira 1999; Pollard 1993, 2008). One perspective that has become increasingly clear is that the Purépecha Empire did not emerge in a vacuum during the Late Postclassic but was rather the product of long-term changes throughout western Mexico. Postclassic artifact styles and motifs have their roots in earlier Preclassic- to Classic-period Chupicuaro and Loma Alta traditions, and artifact changes do not reflect significant ruptures over time (e.g. Carot 2013; Michelet 2013; Pollard 2003, 2008, 2012). A long-term model of Purépecha complexity and change provides an important foundation for understanding localized practices in both the Pátzcuaro area and elsewhere in the Late Postclassic imperial territories. Less clear, however, is the mechanisms for empire formation and the changes in internal social, political, and economic structure that must have occurred in preimperial contexts. How did Purépecha leadership subjugate existing local communities? How were particular domestic and social practices affected during subject incorporation, and when did this occur?

In the imperial core region, recent work at the ancient city of Angamuco is providing information about such local changes during the Postclassic period. Located on a *malpaís* land form approximately 9 km southeast of Tzintzuntzan, Angamuco was occupied from at least the Early to Late Postclassic periods (A.D. 900–1522), with a primary occupation before and during imperial changes in the Postclassic. Full-coverage pedestrian survey and Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) data have aided in the documentation of over 7,000 architectural features in recent years (Fisher and Leisz 2013). The LiDAR (p. 551) analysis shows that the city was at least 12 km² and comprised of over 20,000 stone architectural features such as *yácatas*, roads, terraces, and domestic structures (Chase et al. 2012; Fisher et al. 2011; Fisher and Leisz 2013). The discovery of this previously unknown city demonstrates that complex urban centers existed in the core region before the Purépecha established their empire. This is particularly significant because if a large population of people was living in the Pátzcuaro area before imperial consolidation, this means that the path to imperial development must have occurred earlier than previously thought.

Based on research at Angamuco since 2009, a working model of site occupation has been established (Fisher and Leisz 2013). During the Early Postclassic (A.D. 900–1200), inhabitants lived in sunken plaza complexes and consumed artifacts that are similar to those documented in the Bajío region and elsewhere in Michoacán during the Classic to Epiclassic periods (Cárdenas 1999; Piña Chan and Oí 1982; Pomédio et al. 2013). This was followed by major growth and expansion during the Middle Postclassic (A.D. 1200–1350) when building platforms and walls were clustered in distinct areas with rectilinear or semicircular pyramid complexes and ceramic artifacts are similar to those documented at the *malpaís* sites in the Zacapu Basin (Arnauld et al. 1993; Michelet 2000; Pereira and

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Forest 2011; Pereira et al. 2012). The final phase of occupation is represented by a contraction of the settlement area during the Late Postclassic (A.D. 1350–1522) with a focus around Purépecha imperial-style architecture such as large *yácatas* and plazas. A high degree of social differentiation and an emphasis on public ritual activities suggests that Angamuco at this time was organized like other Late Postclassic sites in the Pátzcuaro Basin, such as Ihuatzio (Acosta 1939).

As these data show, the origins of the Purépecha Empire were significantly more complex than the narrative described in ethnohistoric texts. If the Purépecha did emerge from a long trajectory of social, economic, and material practices in the Pátzcuaro Basin, then they had to negotiate with existing cities with complex bureaucratic systems and large populations. Ongoing archaeological research at sites like Angamuco will investigate these negotiations in an effort to document the alternative pathways to political control in western Mexico.

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