

## Housework in Postclassic El Salvador

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### *Introduction*

When I wrote the first version of this chapter many years ago, household archaeology was essentially in its infancy and feminist archaeology was but a faint hope in the hearts of some of us. Happily both fields have expanded substantially in the ensuing decades. The chapter must be understood in its historical context, as having been written when the first of the fields was just beginning to flourish and the second did not really exist in any formal or public way.

Following the end of the civil conflict that shut it down, the Cihuatán project has reopened under the auspices of the Fundación Nacional de Arqueología de El Salvador. The foundation is a private organization concerned with the preservation and protection of the Salvadoran archaeological heritage, as part of the plan to incorporate El Salvador into the Ruta Maya international tourism development. Cihuatán now has its own web page ([www.cihuatan.org](http://www.cihuatan.org), with the URL linked on most major search engines), a technology that did not exist when the fieldwork described below took place. I expect that Hal Ball would have found this new electronic world, and the new interests in archaeology, amazing and fascinating.

A current trend in American archaeology is the examination of remains of households, either simple house floors or entire complexes of related structures, looking to the

patterning of materials within them to determine activities associated with the household. These patterns are then used to recreate domestic activities and their relationships with various social groups within that society or, less legitimately, to interpret

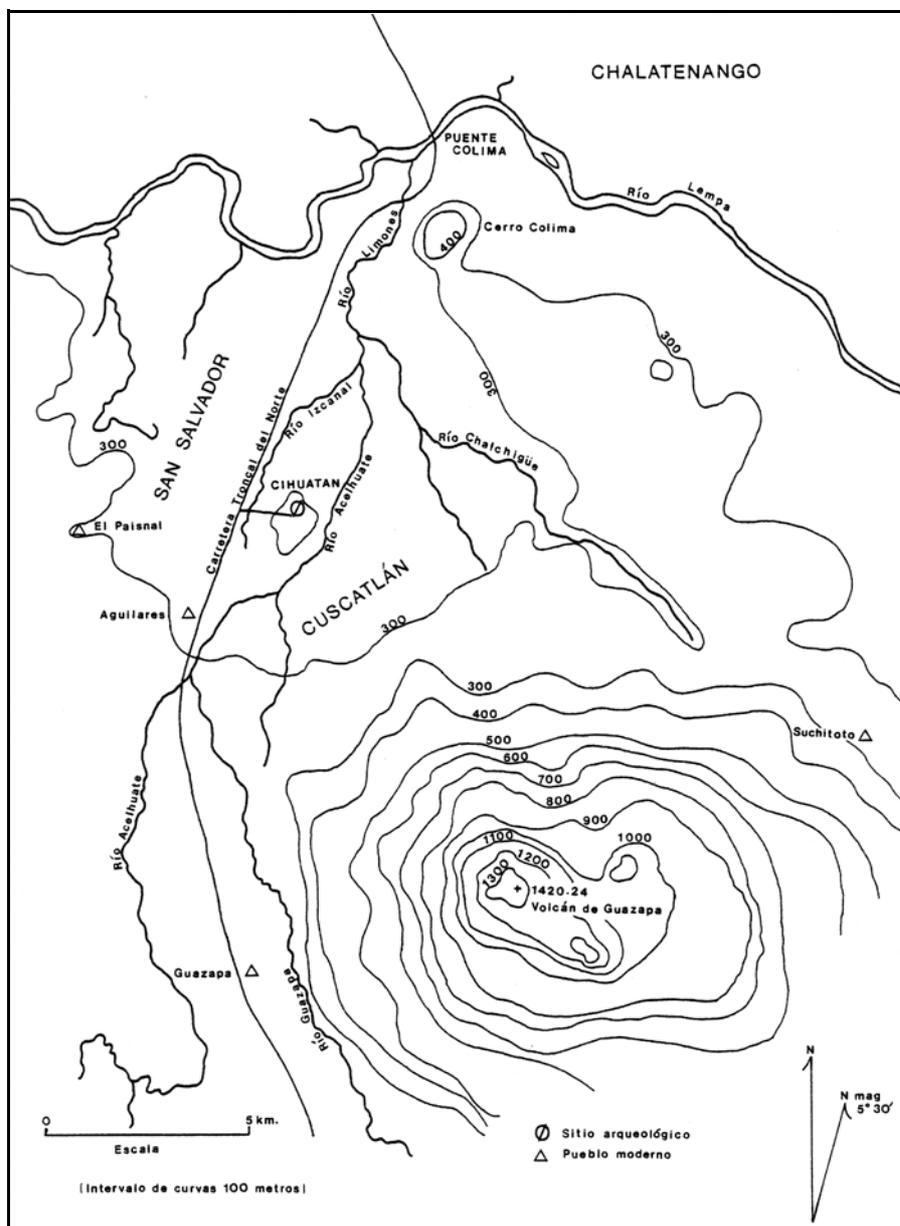


**Figure 10.1** Lower Mesoamerica. Drawing: E. Morales. Drawings and photographs are by the author except as indicated.

sexual divisions of labor. Whatever criticisms can be made of the latter undertaking, it is evident that studies of households as households, rather than as collections of artifacts to be analyzed separately according to material (e.g., ceramics, lithics, etc.), can contribute greatly to our understanding of the daily functioning of past societies. The following is a presentation of such patterns as noted within excavated structures in a single Early Postclassic site on the southwestern frontier of Mesoamerica.

In producing this report I have not attempted for a number of reasons to engender the activities recoverable in the archaeological record. First, I have found that most engendering of activity areas and tasks is done on the basis of what I have referred to as the

“direct ethnocentric approach” (Bruhns 1991:420); this is certainly the case in Mesoamerica. Many tools, even those such as metates that are assumed to be associated with food preparation and hence with women, have multiple uses that are not sex-linked. The close association among tasks such as food preparation, cloth-making, obsidian working, and ritual effort does not permit separation of the activities except on the basis of ethnographic comparisons with much later, and ethnically different, cultures. I cannot be certain that women ground corn, cooked, and wove while men worked obsidian, drank beer, and farmed, and I am therefore ignoring the question until we have additional relevant evidence, such as grave goods associations, on the point.



**Figure 10.2** Map of the lower Acelhuate-Chalchigüe Valley, showing the location of Cihuatán. Drawing: A. Woods.

### The Site

The site of Cihuatán is located in the republic of El Salvador, 37.5 km north of San Salvador, the national capital, along the Carretera Troncal del Norte, some 4 km past the modern market town of Aguilares and 15 km before the ancient ford (and modern bridge) of the Lempa River at the Cerro Colima (Figure 10.1). Named for the form of the Volcán de Guazapa as seen from the site (which approximates the silhouette of a woman sleeping on her back, identified as the Cihuateo or local earth goddess), Cihuatán is an immense, sprawling site whose two major ceremonial centers are located on a low ridge in the middle of the valley of the Acelhuate River (Figure 10.2).

The residential portion of the site continues for some three to four km north and south from the centers, with an unknown extension to the east and west where remains on the valley floor have been largely obliterated by deep plowing for sugar

cane. We located six subsidiary centers in the late 1970s, all but one with the aid of Hal Ball and his Piper Apache, El Quetzal.

Despite its size, Cihuatán was not occupied for very long, perhaps for as little as a century and certainly not for more than two. All non-ceremonial structures excavated were built upon the shallow, sterile soils of the ridge and only two showed any signs of remodeling or rebuilding. Investigations in the Western Ceremonial Center undertaken by William Fowler show that there were but two areas of rebuilding in the center of the town: a small sector adjacent to the main pyramid, which may have been elite housing or administrative buildings, and the West Ball Court. The remodeling of the latter had not been completed at the time Cihuatán was burned by persons unknown and abandoned, probably ca A.D. 1000–1200 (Bruhns 1980; Fowler 1981).

After this traumatic event Cihuatán remained essentially untouched until the 1950s, although there may have been some sporadic small-scale occupation within the town zone in the ensuing centuries (Kelley 1985). The area was under deep forest when Pedro de Alvarado, the local conquistador, passed through in 1524 and was still in forest when Simeon Habel, the German-American traveller whose accounts form one of our earlier modern sources for the region, arrived in the area in 1878. Habel (1879) reports only that the local inhabitants told him that had he delved into the forest instead of keeping to the road he would have found the remains of many walls among the trees. The fact that the site had a local name, the same that it bears today, presumably indicates that the natives knew something about it. Cihuatán is too early for metal and its pottery is not particularly handsome, two facts that have kept it safe from all but the most opportunistic or casual looting.

### ***Excavation History***

Modern studies of Cihuatán began with the Salvadoran archaeologist Antonio Sol, who conducted excavations in the Western Ceremonial Center in 1925 (Sol 1929). In that same year Samuel Lothrop visited the site and briefly described it (Lothrop 1926). John Longyear published a more detailed description and a composite map of the Western Ceremonial Center (Longyear 1944), and in 1954 the Salvadoran government began investigations at Cihuatán under the direction of Stanley Boggs (Boggs 1972). With various interruptions these investigations continued until an escalation of civil hostilities in 1979 forced suspension of the several archaeological projects centered on Cihuatán.

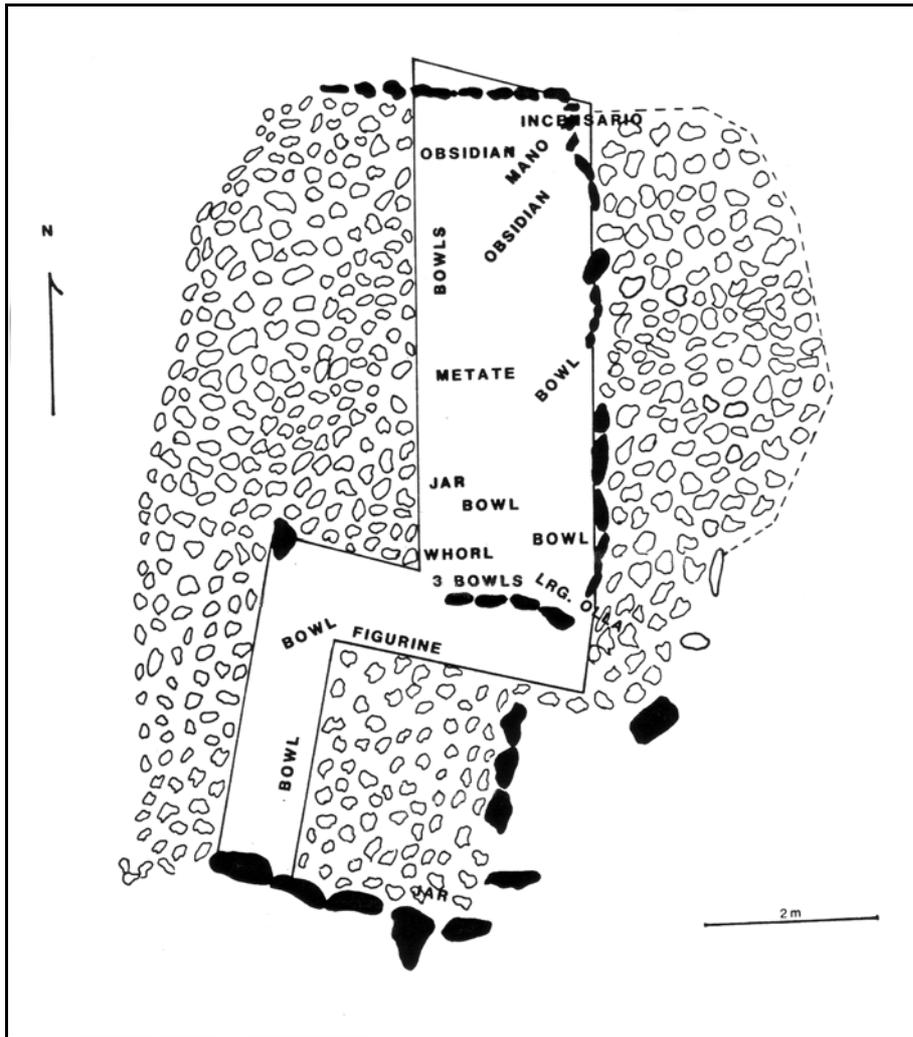
The material discussed below comes from the activities of one of these efforts, the Cihuatán Settlement Archaeology Project, directed by the author. Because the form of Cihuatán is so different from those of earlier (and later) settlements on the southeast frontier of Mesoamerica, and also owing to the site's definitely Early Postclassic date, a program of mapping and excavation in the non-ceremonial part of the city was begun in 1975 (Cecil 1982). The excavations showed that Cihuatán had been abandoned very rapidly and that subsequently there was little or no reoccupation until the middle of this century.

It has been known since the 1920s that the ceremonial buildings had been destroyed by fire. The smashing of the huge portal *incensarios* (censers) on the western steps of these structures indicates that something more than a serious conflagration took place, as does a similar pattern of destruction at Santa María, the single subsidiary site investigated in the Lempa Valley proper (Fowler and Solís Angulo 1977). Investigations in the domestic structures showed that the fire had consumed, at the very least, all the central district of Cihuatán; the lack of reoccupation of the site is indicative of major social or political changes associated with that burning. Whatever the reasons for the destruction of Cihuatán, it has provided an excellent opportunity for the investigation of domestic activity areas, because artifacts were left on the floors of buildings and patios, to lie undisturbed until discovered by archaeologists some 600 years later.

The civil conflict that brought the original Cihuatán project to a close has caused this study to remain preliminary. We could not complete analysis of ceramics and other artifacts because it was impossible to return to the site. When we were able to return in 1993 and 1996 to 1998 we found that the collections had been totally destroyed by Salvadoran soldiers who occupied the site for some months and tossed all of the artifacts stored in the site house outside. As a result this paper is based on field notes and inventories, photographs and drawings, and the preliminary artifact analysis that I carried out between 1977 and 1979. The lack of distinction among olla types, for example, stems from postponement of reconstruction drawings to the later season that we expected to be forthcoming. Now that continuation of work at Cihuatán, largely aimed at conservation and restoration, is under way, we hope to be able to extend our household excavation and analysis.

### ***The Excavated Structures***

During 1977 and 1978 more than ten structures were



**Figure 10.3** Structure SS-118. **Note to plans:** No differentiation is made between olla and jar variants. All vessels marked "bowl" are flat-bottomed, flaring bowls slipped red or tan; a small percentage have high tripod legs and/or pinched appliqué bands around the border. See Bruhns (1980) for detailed discussion of Cihuatán ceramics and Fowler et al. (1987) for discussion of the prismatic blade industry. Bedded foundation stones are in solid black, cobble subflooring is in outline, and pieces of fired ceramic floor are stippled. Areas of foundation in NW-1 probed but not excavated are in dotted outline.

cleared; of these, two on the south side of the Western Ceremonial Center (SS-118 and SS-50), one on the West Terrace (P-16), and a household cluster (NW-1 to NW-3) on the northwest side of the Western Ceremonial Center were in a good enough state of preservation that it was possible to observe distinctive clustering of artifacts on their floors. All structures of course contained abundant remains of household (and other) refuse; for the purposes of this study this was discounted, and only clustered materials representing substantial portions of ceramic vessels and artifacts or large clusters of stone chipping debris were utilized for interpretation.

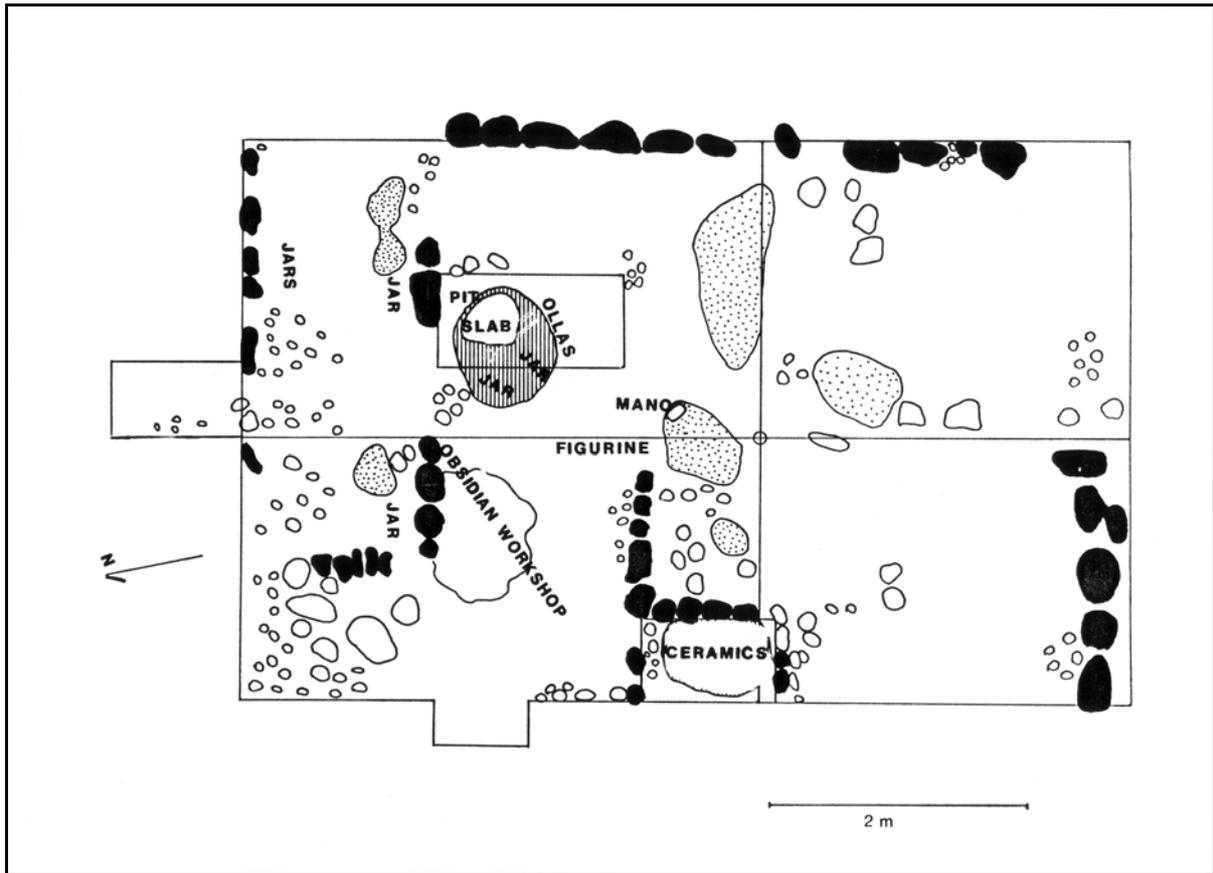
#### Western Ceremonial Center Structures

#### Structure SS-118.

This was the first structure to be uncovered. Because it had been repeatedly plowed and there was one looters' pit in the east side it was in a relatively poor state of preservation, and accordingly was not excavated in its entirety.

A considerable amount of the cobble subflooring was still in place, as was enough of the bedded boulder foundation to show that there were at least two rooms to the structure (Figure 10.3). The major activity indicated by the archaeological remains was obsidian working; most of the northern end of the structure contained debitage, bladelets, core fragments, and other tools. These, though disturbed, were very abundant and indicated that the work had taken place within the structure. The exterior was not excavated, save for a small trench and test pit to the south.

Ceramic and other remains were more disturbed than was the obsidian. A metate was found near the center of the north room with a mano fragment northwest of it, more or less in the corner and in the heaviest area of obsidian debris. A number of redware flaring *cajetes* (bowls) clustered along the walls, with a jar and a bowl in the south accompanied by several other *cajetes*, a white bowl, a very large *olla* (globular jar) and a spindle whorl. Several pieces of plumbate, including one with a red and white exterior and plumbate interior, were found scattered in this area as well. The south room contained several more flaring bowls, a figurine fragment, and a cluster of large sherds, apparently from a storage/water jar, in the corner.



**Figure 10.4** Structure SS-50.

*Structure SS-50.* This structure formed part of a small plazuela group to the south of the Western Ceremonial Center (see Cecil 1982 for structure locations, and Bruhns 1982 for discussion of another structure in the group). Unfortunately discussion of Structure SS-50 is limited by the inaccessibility of notes on artifact analysis.

Located on a platform in the height range of 30 to 50cm that marked all Cihuatán house platforms, the two-roomed building had been little disturbed. In it were preserved considerable areas of fired clay flooring, on top of which the low cobble walls, apparently plastered with fine clay, had fallen. Dense clusters of artifacts were located on the center west limit of the structure on a side of the building that was probably open, and an area of dense obsidian-working debris was located along what may have been a covered porch. A storage pit covered with a flat stone was surrounded by a dense cluster of ceramics, mainly the remains of large jars and ollas, and a mano still lay on a piece of undisturbed floor in the center of the house (Figure 10.4). A figurine was found near the mano.

*The West Terrace*

*Structure P-16.* Located on the edge of what may well have been the marketplace of Cihuatán, P-16 is a very large structure (10.6 x 5.3m) in an irregular line of low and high platforms bordering the terrace (Figure 10.5). Although the structure had been disturbed by trash burning and by a small tree growing in its southern end, excavation of the entire building as well as units on its east and west sides revealed considerable evidence of associated activities.

The southeast quarter of the structure contained abundant remains of an obsidian workshop marked by extremely heavy chipping debris that extended outside the building onto the West Terrace. This workshop was considerably larger than others encountered at Cihuatán, and it contained a high proportion of tools such as adzes, scrapers, and spokeshaves that were not formed from the common polyhedral ("bullet") core, as well as cores, bladelets, and other objects.

A large white incised jar was found along the south interior wall. Along the east wall, beginning in unit 2, were more remains of vessels, with several flaring bowls of the common red ware coming from upper unit 2, two small ollas, several more jars and bowls,

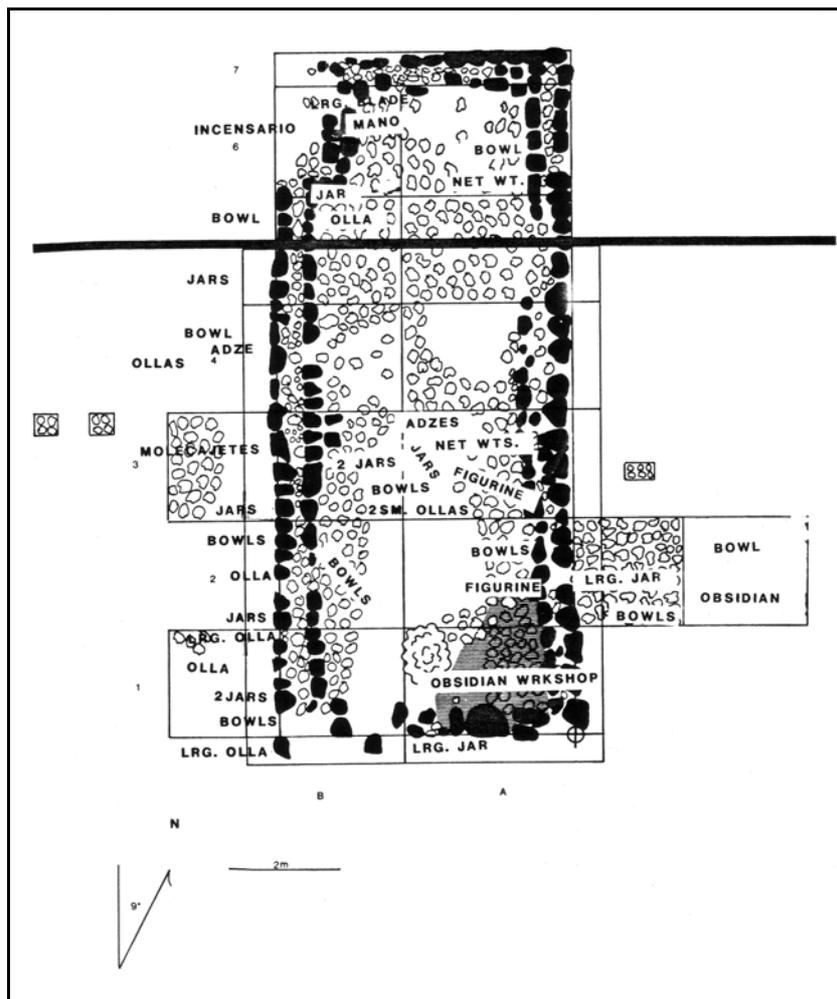


Figure 10.5 Structure P-16.

and a figurine fragment from unit 3A. Also from this unit were several adzes and net weights. In the northernmost unit were another net weight and a large coarse olla, with a mano fragment on the floor just to the west, associated with a large obsidian blade. These were found next to a large jar and an olla with evidence of burning on its base. Numbers of red sherds, mainly from flaring bowls, and a few bits of Tohil Plumbate were found in 4B; in 3 and 2B there were at least two jars and four flaring bowls.

Trenching and opening of units outside P-16 proved interesting. To the east, along a terrace top that showed evidence of cobble paving, was the extension of the obsidian workshop, accompanied by a large jar and several bowls. These were clustered at the south, whereas the northern part of the trench revealed only scattered debris. Along the west side of the structure, however, where there would have been protection from summer rainstorms, was an immense amount of material that indicated an important use of the area. From south to north the objects consisted of a large tan cooking vessel, at least three flaring bowls, another tan

olla, then jars, ollas, and bowls.

Outside unit 4 were three *molcajetes* (vessels used for grinding of chiles and other sauce ingredients, as well as for serving) and an adze, then more jars and cajetes and a fancy red and white Marihua Red on Buff-related bowl. Finally, on the exterior of unit 6, at the north end, probably an entrance to the structure, were the remains of an hourglass spiked incensario with modeled decoration, accompanied by pieces of other modeled ceramics, the remains of a deity image or other ritual vessel.

*The NW1–NW3 Group.* In 1978, exploration west of the West Terrace revealed the remains of numbers of slumped terraces overlooking the Rio Izcanal and the western Acelhuate Valley. Some platform structures were visible, and one of these, NW-3, was selected for excavation. The structures were assigned provisional numbers until they could be integrated into the site map when the sector was

surveyed, an event that had not taken place at the time this chapter was written.

In the process of excavation we cleared the NW-1 terrace below NW-3 and discovered that there were significant remains of architecture not visible on the surface. Accordingly, the entire terrace, more than 32 m long, was excavated in combination with tests in the area between its structures and those above. It would appear that this area forms a single household cluster, or perhaps a neighborhood (Figure 10.6). The area had never been plowed, and artifacts remained undisturbed on the floors where they had been left (Figure 10.7). Their presence clearly demonstrates the rapidity of the destruction (and, one hopes, evacuation) of Cihuatán.

The only structure with a platform excavated in the group was NW-3. In this instance the platform levelled the floor out from the slope. Approximately 6 x 7.50 m, the house had a single interior wall that bisected its upper quarter (Figure 10.8). The wattle and daub walls, their clay coating fired to a crumbly ceramic, had fallen inward and covered the southern

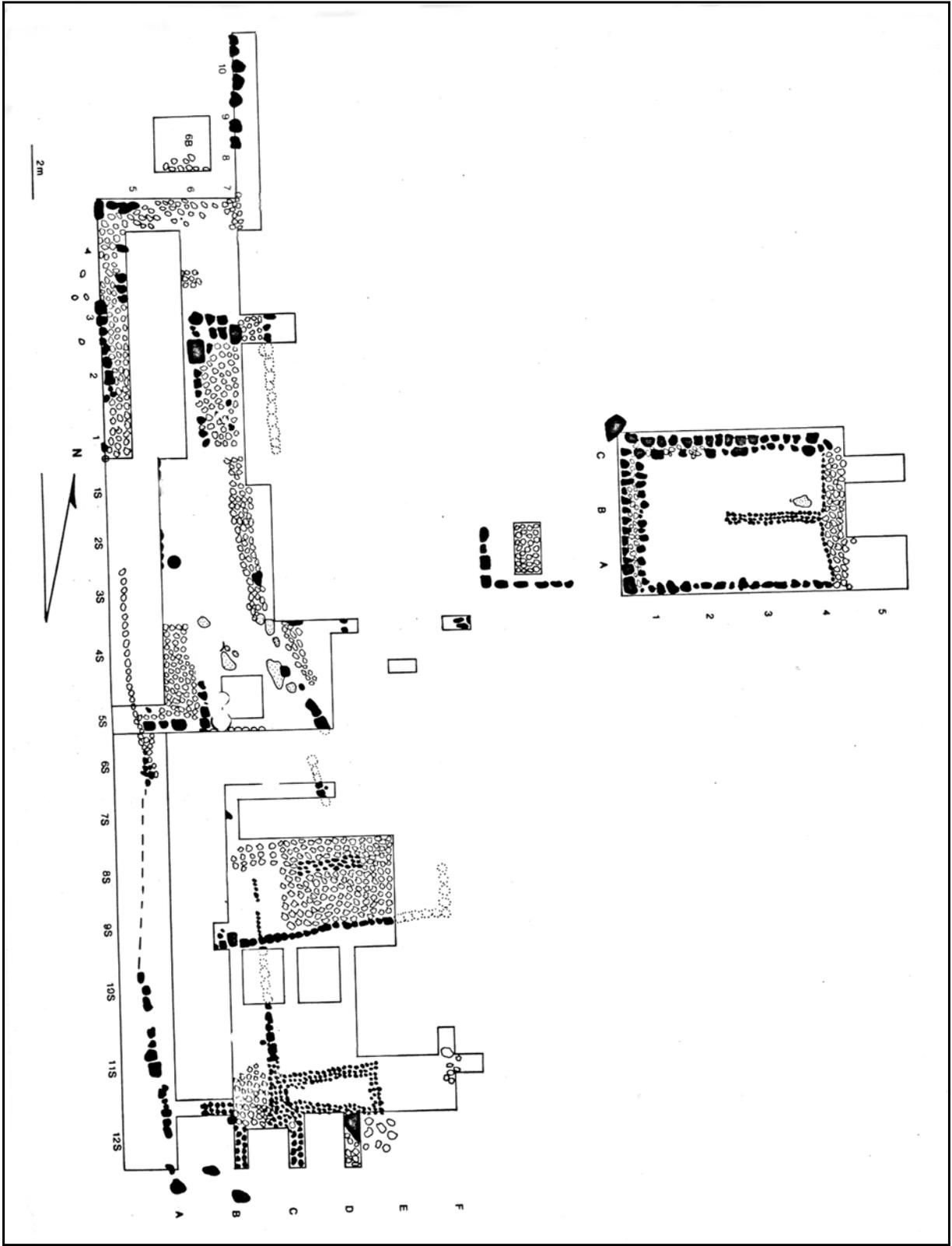


Figure 10.6 NW-1/NW-3 group.



**Figure 10.7** NW-1, showing flaring bowl and small olla smashed on the floor of the burnt building group.

half of the building. Within the building were abundant remains of vessels smashed by the collapsing walls; the majority were flaring-walled bowls, ollas, and jars. The ollas were clustered along the north wall and in a group at the house center that was associated with a small cluster of obsidian blades. Similar clusters of obsidian tools, one of 12 blades and one of four large blades struck from non-polyhedral cores (Figure 10.9), were found at the center south wall and in the northeast corner, respectively.

Two large open vessels similar to ones used historically for the brewing of maize beer had been left in the northwest corner on the same wall. A mano and a core remained along the center wall, and a large slab of soft volcanic tuff (*talpuja*, an important construction material in the ceremonial center) lay on the floor near them. Non-domestic items were limited to a fair number of spiked incensario fragments and a wheel from a wheeled figurine.

Test excavations in the 11 m-wide area between NW-3 and the NW-1 group showed that much of the area had been paved and that there was an intermediate terrace, perhaps with further structures on it. The NW-1 terrace was found to support four structures with paved unwallled areas between them (Figures 10.10–12). Most artifacts were found outside the structures; given El Salvador's climate, these areas almost certainly were roofed, although only one

posthole was found in excavation. The identification of the exterior surfaces as shaded working areas is strengthened by the presence of the remains of a sewing/spinning kit (a whorl and two obsidian blades for cutting the thread, apparently originally in a basket or gourd) on the floor at 3SB. One does not carry on sedentary activities such as spinning and sewing in the full sun.

Most of the vessels found in NW-1 were domestic: red and tan flaring bowls, tan to orange ollas, and jars of various sorts. A number of these bore heavy carbon deposits and one, an olla in 11SC, contained the remains of a burnt meal (possibly the sweetened maize dish *atole*) on the interior. Many of the vessels were lined up along the edge of a low foundation that separated Structures 1 and 2 from Structures 3 and 4. In the foundation area, in three separate clusters as if it had fallen and bounced, was a rare Nicoya-related polychrome tripod bowl (Figure 10.13). The same area also yielded four more spindle whorls and a ceramic ear plug.

Grinding stones were limited to a plain metate in 2SB and an unusual carved bird-head metate of Honduran type in 10SB (Figure 10.14). Non-domestic activities are represented by several incensarios and the remains of a clay box near the Nicoya-like bowl, and perhaps also by two similar but not identical unslipped clay earspools (Bruhns 1980:Figure 36d).

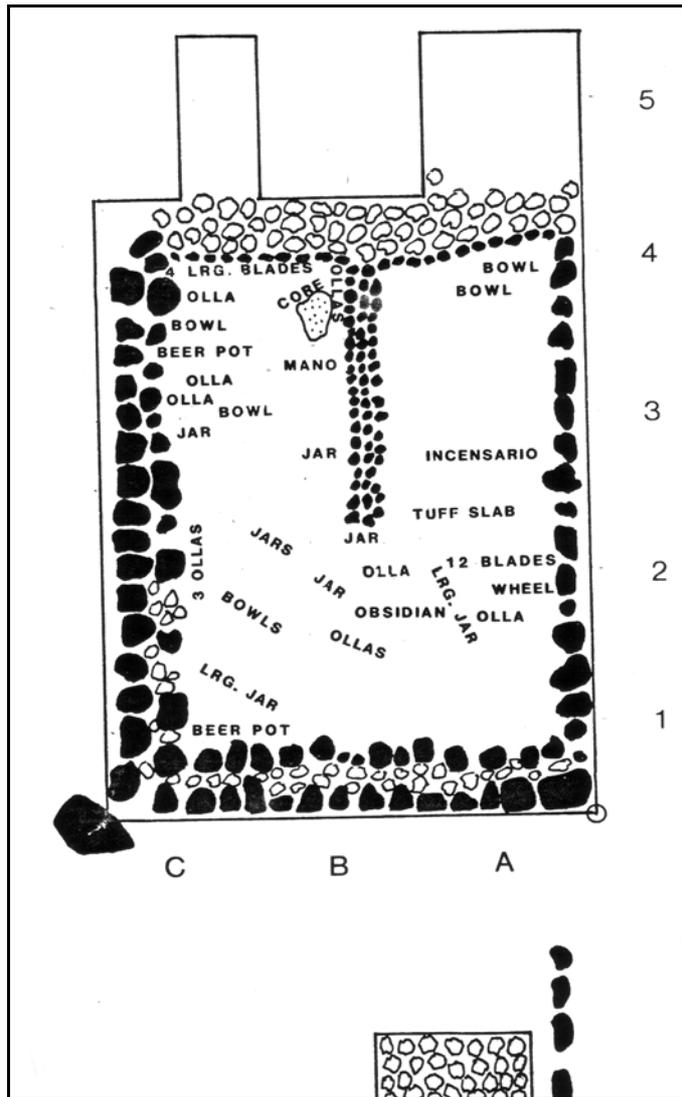


Figure 10.8 Structure NW-3.

Obsidian bladelets and other small tools were frequent and fairly evenly distributed around the group of structures, but there were few indications of any stone-working within the excavated areas.

### Interpretation

The excavations have yielded a wealth of information concerning non-ceremonial architecture, settlement planning, and domestic activities.

### House Construction and Form

Cihuatán domestic architecture appears to have been quite diverse. The norm seems to have been construction on a low platform in groups more or less regularly arranged around a small patio or plaza.

Along the slopes of the ridge, however, the platform was replaced by a terrace, and household groups exhibit a more linear arrangement. Because buildings in such arrangements sometimes lack platforms it is a bit difficult to assess the number of construction units without excavation. As a result, it is very likely that estimates of the number of houses, and hence of the Cihuatán population, are seriously low.

Houses were built of adobe and wattle and daub, or cobbles in mud mortar, with clay floors. Collapse debris from walls shows that wall heights were only about one meter. Structures probably had huge overhanging roofs to protect the interior from the gusty downpours of the rainy season, as do modern houses built in the traditional manner. We did not locate any hearths in the ancient Cihuatán houses, perhaps because, as was true until the civil conflict, they were made of clay rather than stone and therefore would leave no particular traces in a burnt house. We also excavated considerable areas outside the main structures only on NW1-3, so may have missed any special kitchen structures of the sort that are the rule historically and ethnographically in this region. On NW-1 we did find what seems to be the foundation for a storehouse of some sort (Structure 4), most likely a corn crib.

Most of the artifacts encountered can be identified as related to domestic activities such as food preparation and consumption. The flaring bowls may have been used both for preparation and for serving, to judge from the range of care with which they were decorated, from coarse wiping to double slipping and polishing. Many ollas show signs of use in the fire, and we even have one burnt meal in an olla that was left outside away from the house until it could be cleaned.

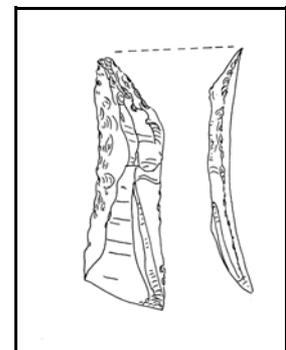


Figure 10.9 Characteristic obsidian blade of non-prismatic type.

Preliminary analysis of the ceramics shows that the Cihuatecos made a considerable range of different ollas and jars, which were presumably for somewhat different purposes. One of these purposes, water hauling and/or storage, can be discovered by a comparison with modern vessels. The modern five-gallon

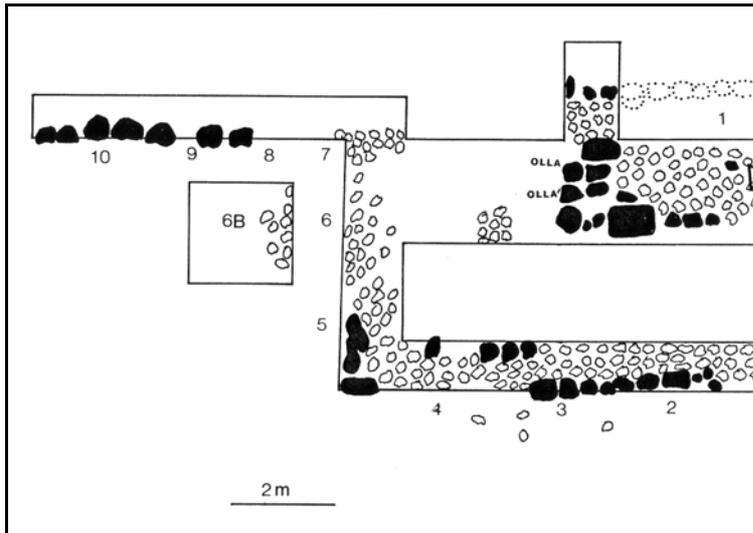


Figure 10.10 NW-1, details of structures and their contents.

(20-liter) water jar has changed not at all in size, form, disposition of handles, or even color since ancient times. Twenty liters is the maximum amount that an average woman can carry for any distance, and most of the houses at Cihuatán are located at a considerable distance from year round water sources.

Most structures had grinding tools associated with them; these as well as botanical evidence from the 1979 season (Harlan et al. 1979) indicate that corn was being consumed. Presumably some of the larger ollas were used for soaking the corn in lime to produce *nixtamal* (hominy). Tortillas do not seem, however, to have been important in the ancient Cihuatecan diet, judging by the fact that fewer than a dozen sherds of *comales* (clay griddles) were found in all excavations. Because the griddles are extremely fragile, they are, if anything, very likely to be over-represented in the middens of tortilla-eating peoples. It has been noted that tortillas did not form an important part of the Maya diet until the early Colonial period, when they were introduced by Mexican mercenaries who accompanied the Spanish. Cihuatán's very early Postclassic date suggests that the importance of tortillas did not increase until later in the period.

Presumably corn was consumed as drinks such as atole, as tamales (both filled and unfilled), as *bolillos de maíz* (maize dumplings) in stews, and even just as hominy. Metates are, of course, used to grind other things such as herbs, seeds for the drink *horchata* (morro [*Crescentia alata*] are commonly used today), colorings such as *achiote* (anato), and possibly even clay for pottery making. The fact that metates regularly occur in association with flaring bowls and ollas reinforces the interpretation that food preparation was going on in and around the ancient Cihuatán houses.

Storage of foodstuffs, either temporary or long-term, was almost certainly practiced in the structures. Structure

SS-50 contained the remains of numerous large jars in its north room (Figure 10.4). The jars, placed out

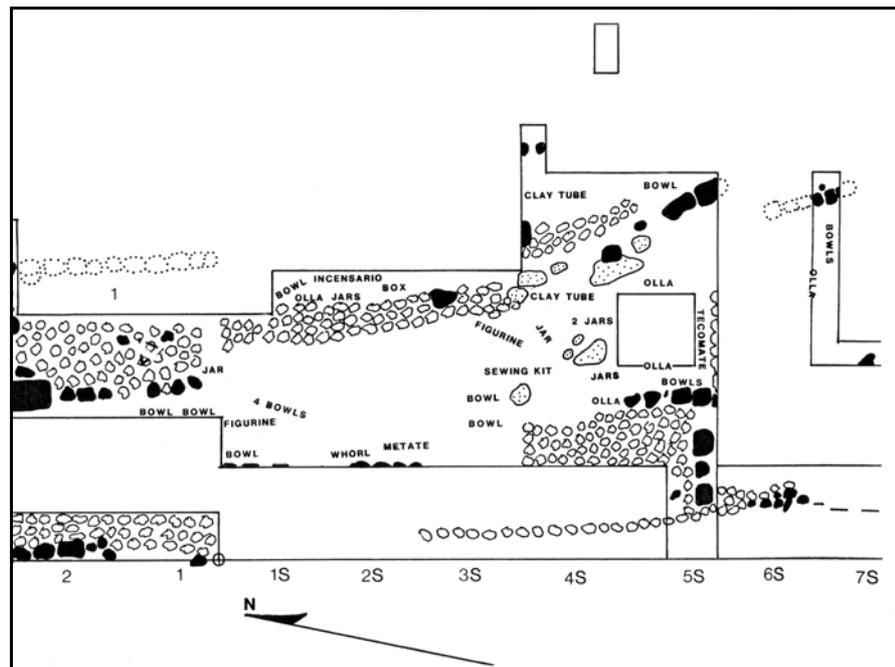
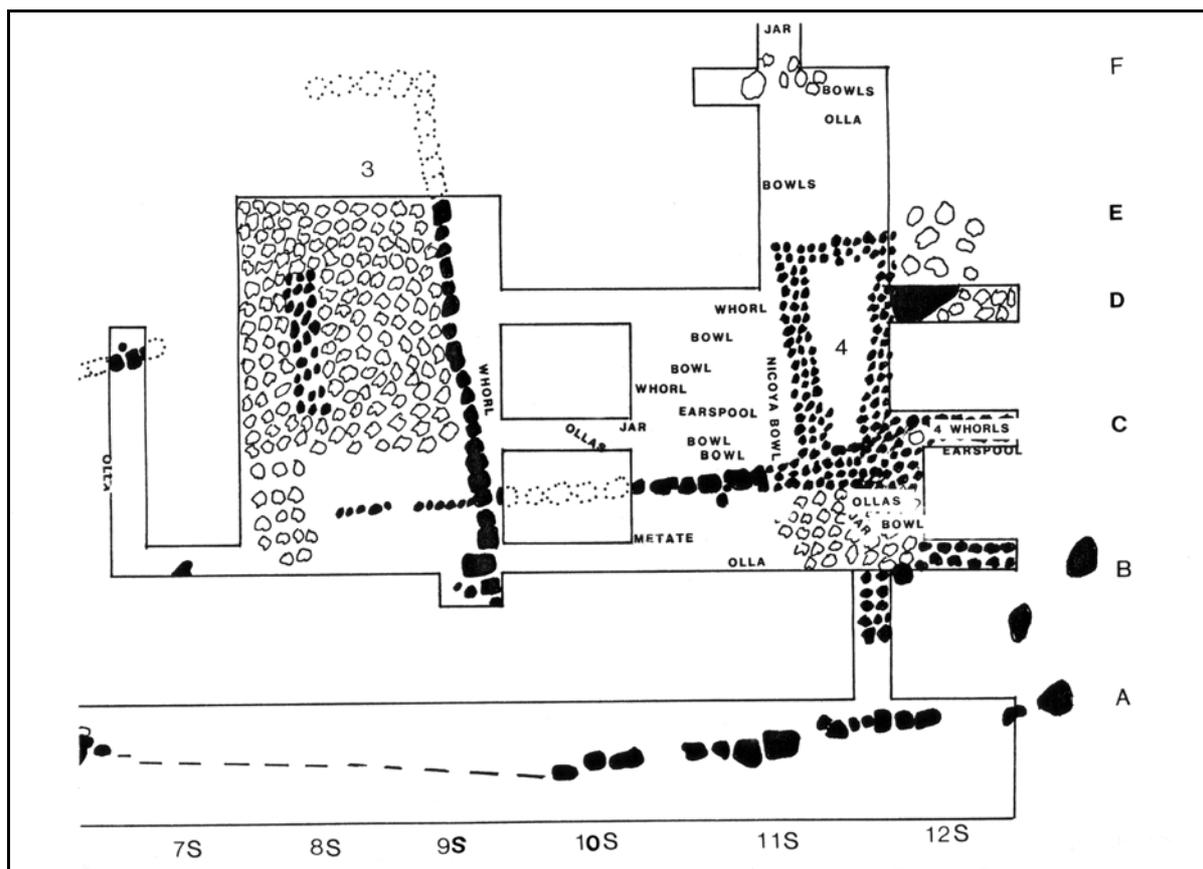


Figure 10.11 NW-1, details of structures and their contents.

of the main traffic corridor that presumably ran from the open west side to the center where grinding tools, storage pits, and a cluster of ollas and flaring bowls were found, appear to define a storage area.

The pattern of use of manioc (*Manihot esculenta* Krantz) in the Cihuatecan diet in recent times has involved the harvesting of quantities sufficient for several days, and piling of unpeeled tubers at the back of the house or kitchen until they are needed. A similar pattern of activity might be expected to have



**Figure 10.12** NW-1, details of structures and their contents.

existed in ancient times, but analysis of soil from atop the floor surface at the rear (east) side of the house provided no evidence to support such an expectation.

Textile manufacture or repair seems to have been another important household activity, to judge from the presence of spindle whorls in all structures and the sewing kit in NW-1. Cotton remains have been found in archaeological contexts, but agave fibers may have been spun as well. The quantities of whorls found do not suggest spinning above the domestic scale. In the NW-1 complex, which yielded the largest number of whorls, most were found outside the buildings, which indicates that spinning was done, as would be reasonable, where there was not only the shelter presumably provided by a roof or ramada but also sufficient light for the task.

Three structures (SS-118, SS-50, and P-16) yielded evidence of obsidian working from house interiors. SS-118 and SS-50 produced mainly blades and bladelets from polyhedral cores, as well as debitage. It is surprising that obsidian working would have been done indoors although, as with spinning, if the houses had an open side or an open porch on one side there would have been both shelter and the light required for the work. Obsidian working is, however, fairly

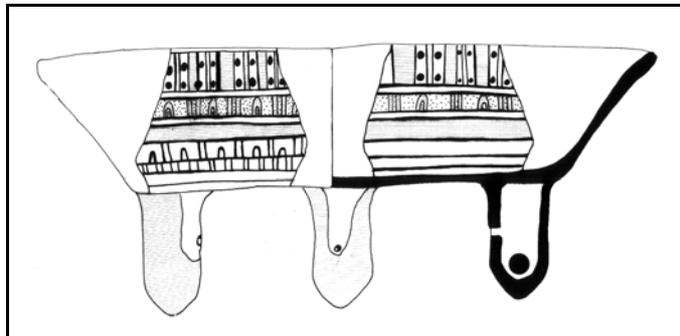
dangerous not only to the workers but also to the people around them, and therefore not an expectable element of house-interior activity.

Obsidian debris on the floor of a house would have been a serious hazard to the skin of every resident and visitor. Even the wearing of sandals would not have removed the danger; obsidian flakes are extremely sharp and, as experiment has verified, will cut easily through leather or basketry, and even through running shoes. Moreover, since people presumably sat on the ground, other parts of their bodies would have been exposed to razor-sharp chips. It is possible that such debris was regularly swept up; lenses of debitage have been found in midden. Nonetheless, the location of obsidian workshops in areas that would have had to be traversed by everyone using the structure is curious.

Religious activities in domestic context are attested by the occurrence of incensarios in both spiked hourglass and ladle forms, and figurines, and perhaps also by remains of wheeled figurines and musical instruments found in a number of structures, although not in close association with a floor. The incensarios are small, perhaps 20 to 40 cm high. The only figurine clearly associated with a housefloor, an unidentifiable creature with a netted face, is from the

northwest part of SS-50. It may be significant that the object lay close to this food preparation area. Other figurines represent standing and seated humans, as well as Tlaloc and several unidentified supernaturals. Wheeled figurines are mainly representations of dogs and other animals (Boggs 1972).

Activities that may have been somewhat more than



**Figure 10.13** *Nicoya polychrome related bowl (red, yellow, and black on white slip), from W-1.*

purely domestic can be identified only for Structure P-16. This building fronts on what was probably the main market (Bruhns 1980:38–39). The west side, or rear, of the structure, which was partly paved, had a great many bowls and ollas, as well as three molcajetes arranged along it. The east, or market, side also had a cluster of bowls and a large jar on a paved area that might have served as a porch. The size and number of the vessels, the number of molcajetes, and the location of the artifacts seem to indicate food preparation and distribution on a fairly large scale. Net weights associated with the house may identify fish as one of the foodstuffs; fish are, or were, common in the two rivers that flank the site center.

The south end of the structure contained a very large obsidian workshop in which one of the major tool types produced, and perhaps used, was a slightly trapezoidal "hachita" or adze, a tool that was probably used in woodworking. The quantity of both tools and debris in the workshop suggests something more than

production for the family unit. The building's location, its moderately large size, and its contents probably indicate that its occupants were engaged in several commercial activities, which are quite likely to have included restaurant service, tool making, and perhaps woodworking. The general character of other refuse in and around the structure shows that it also served as a residence.

### ***Ethnographic Parallels***

From the distribution of artifacts observed in the archaeological structures it appears that household activities have not changed greatly from the Early Postclassic to the present. Ethnographic observations made in 1978 on four related families living in the vicinity of Cihuatán, plus more sporadic observation of other households in the area and on the coast at Caluco and Jaltepeque show a disposition of materials quite similar to that of ancient times.

None of the families had electricity or running water; although there was a well at Cihuatán it was dry more often than not, or the hand pump was broken so that water had to be fetched from the rivers. All families had traditional houses and kitchens. A list of observed domestic activities and their spatial distribution around the household plot appears in Table 10.1.

It is worth noting that in the house proper the only



**Figure 10.14** *Bird head metate of Atlantic Honduran type in situ, NW-1.*

activity that would leave material traces would be storage of non-perishable goods, including raw materials for tools and other uses as well as the implements necessary for working such materials. Today tools of high value and those that are used infrequently are kept in the house, together with personal ornaments, clothing, bedclothes, and other items. Such objects are stored safely out of the elements and the reach of small children, hung from the rafters and from wall pegs, placed in boxes or bags, or simply leaned up against the walls.

Some houses also contain a small shrine that houses a plaster or plastic statuette or a paper picture and a glass or vase for flowers. In houses with electricity a light is kept on the shrine; the inhabitants of non-electrified houses do not risk fire, although a votive candle in a glass may be lit when someone is actively involved in devotions.

Most activity takes place on the porch or in associated ramadas and in the adjacent yard or patio. Here in the shade women sew and prepare food, men make or repair tools, and everyone eats, visits, chats, and carries on other leisure or semi-leisure activities. The distribution of artifacts about the ancient structures indicates much the same sort of daily round. Grinding stones and related objects are located in parts of structures that appear to have been open or lit by an open side, or are in patios. Vessels that were used directly in food preparation are clustered around the grinding stone, which today is close to the fire because *masa* (wet ground corn) for tortillas is scooped off the metate and immediately formed into cakes and cooked. Today other vessels are placed on tables or shelves, usually along the walls of the kitchen or porch, and foodstuffs are stored in sacks, baskets, cans, or just on the dirt floor along the walls of the kitchen or living structure. Similar habits in the past are indicated by the locations of vessels in the excavated houses.

The continuity in domestic practice from the Early Postclassic to the present is considerable. For example, the most common vessel forms in ancient Cihuatán are a flat-bottomed, flaring bowl that is occasionally tripod, a series of round bodied ollas that contain one to five liters of liquid, and the 20 liter jar with a long neck and three handles. Today the flaring bowls are made of brightly colored plastic, but they are still used in quantity as the all-purpose preparation, temporary storage, and even serving vessels of the household. My own household boasted 11 such bowls, whereas the people across the yard, who lived in a more traditional manner, had many more. Modern use of closed vessels parallels the open bowls; many of the modern ollas would, as sherds, be indistinguishable in form and decoration from the Early Postclassic

cooking vessels.

Modern practice gives us some indication of the varied uses for the ancient ollas. Large ollas are used for making nixtamal, which in this area is not cooked but rather made by soaking dried corn for about 24 hours in a lime solution. Nixtamal is made every day or so, depending on the size of the family, because it will sour if kept for long. Large ollas are also used for cooking tamales, but are not used for beans because beans must be prepared daily to avoid spoilage. In former times the large ollas or an even larger form closely akin to what we have called a "beer pot" was used for brewing corn beer, now illegal. The smaller ollas, with capacities of one to two liters, are used for cooking beans, other vegetables, atole, and the like. The large jars have changed not at all in size and form, but they are now commonly made of aluminum and, more recently, of plastic. These materials are preferred because they are considerably lighter than clay and are not breakable. Also plastic ones come in many delicious colors not available in clay.

Although European-style metal and plastic single serving dishes have made some inroads into the household inventory, as have metal tableware and cooking vessels, calabash bowls (mainly from the fruit of the *morro* tree [*Crescentia cujete*]) are the common ordinary eating dish. They are used both as cups and as bowls for the traditional soups and stews of the area; other traditional edibles are finger foods, which are eaten from a leaf. In the ancient houses we can observe a notable lack of vessels of single-serving size, and it seems very likely that gourds and calabashes were being utilized for this purpose then as now. Gourds are also used today as canteens, though they are being replaced with plastic imitations. The only small vessels at ancient Cihuatán are fancy imported ones such as plumbate jars, Mixteca-Puebla and "Nicoya" polychrome cups, and similar luxury goods. Most structures contained a few such pieces in their refuse dumps; the quantities suggest that the imported vessels were "best dishes" used only for special purposes, much as many modern households have a few china cups or glasses for company.

Other activities observable today would not leave many, if any, archaeological traces. The damp, hot climate of El Salvador and the acid soils preclude substantial organic preservation, so that many household goods would be unrepresented in the archaeological record. We can also assume that there has been considerable change in labor investment among activities. The shift from stone to metal means that tool manufacture no longer consumes significant household time and energy. Food preparation may or may not take longer today than in the past. The

introduction of tortillas, presumably in the later Postclassic, would have instituted longer preparation times, shortened today by the fact that most families own or have access to a hand mill for first grinding of the corn, which is only "finished" on the metate. In other areas of food preparation, modern practices and the time required for them may not differ significantly from those of ancient times.

Clothing manufacture, repair, and maintenance are probably all more time-consuming now because modern clothes are more complex than ancient ones. People wear more garments at a time than they would have aboriginally, and many sleep in modern beds with sheets and blankets. All of these factors result in a significant increase in washing and, owing to the number of garments and the more delicate nature of the popular synthetic fabrics, more mending. Detergents are now used, but the basics of scrubbing, hand smoothing, and drying have not changed appreciably in centuries, and the water sources remain the same.

Since the excavations at Cihuatán reported here, El Salvador has suffered through a horrendous 12-year civil war. During the strife much of the countryside was virtually abandoned as country people sought the relative safety of towns and cities. The families at Cihuatán were no exception, and they now live in one of the booming suburbs that have already destroyed the outlying ceremonial center of Las Palmas and are encroaching upon Cihuatán itself. Life in these new suburbs is very different: houses are of concrete with metal or composition roofs, and are built with multiple rooms that have walls of standard western height. All have electricity, running water, and either modern toilets or a latrine. Propane burners are replacing the wood or charcoal-burning stoves, although the burners are placed on the same table that once held the traditional stove.

"Modern" foods, such as sliced bread, sodas, milk, and even yogurt, have made inroads on the traditional diet, and the general availability of television leaves the newly suburban with no doubts regarding what is modern and desirable and what is old fashioned and hence less desirable. Traditional life continues in the more isolated areas, but for the first time in many centuries major changes in daily life are taking place around Cihuatán. Twenty-eight years ago it was possible to use direct ethnographic analogy to interpret the prehistoric remains; today, for better or for worse, housekeeping in El Salvador has changed forever.

**Table 10.1: Contemporary Household Activities  
and Their Spatial Distribution**

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**Inside House**

Birth  
 Death  
 Wake for the dead<sup>1</sup>  
 Sleeping  
 Storage of clothing, sleeping materials, valuables, materials not in daily use  
 Shelter from storms<sup>2</sup>

Religious activity (altar use, prayers)

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**Porch, Open House Front, Attached Ramada**

Preparation of food  
 Preparation of foodstuffs, etc., for storage  
 Eating  
 Sewing, garment repair and construction  
 Repair of tools, etc.  
 Other sedentary tasks

Visiting/play/courting/resting

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**Kitchen<sup>3</sup>**

Final preparation of food  
 Preparation and soaking of hominy  
 Grinding of corn and other foodstuffs (also takes place at open front of house, but not usually on porch)  
 Cooking

Storage of food, kitchen equipment, dish, sacks, washing materials

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**Outside/Yard**

Water storage (jars leaned against house/kitchen walls)  
 Washing of self, children, clothes, foodstuffs (also at river, spring, well)  
 Storage of farm equipment (leaned against walls)  
 Play/visiting with passersby/courtship  
 Religious activity (shrine/house cross)  
 Storage of firewood in dry season  
 Feeding of animals

Defecation, disposal of garbage (on perimeters of cleared area)

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**Special Structures<sup>4</sup>**

Well  
 Bath enclosure  
 Wash stand (framework to hold wooden scrubbing tray and perhaps tubs)  
 Latrine (uncommon)  
 Animal pens<sup>5</sup>  
 Yard shrine  
 Duck pond  
 Corn crib

Extra *ramadas* or roofed porches to side and back of main structures, for tool and equipment storage

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*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> The institution of the wake is, of course, Roman Catholic. The corpse is laid out in the house and many of the visitors stay indoors around the deceased, talking and drinking, while others, mainly adult males and older boys, stand in the yard drinking and setting off rockets at intervals.

<sup>2</sup> This is important during the rainy season in this specific area, because the torrential downpours are accompanied by high winds and funnel clouds. Traditional houses, with their huge gabled roofs, provide excellent protection from the weather. During *temporales* (long rain storms), when the wind is not high, life continues to be lived mainly on the porches.

<sup>3</sup> Today kitchens tend to be in a nearby but separate structure. More "modern" houses may have the kitchen as part of an open porch at the front of the house. At Jaltepeque I observed kitchens and washstands in their own separate ramadas, quite a distance from the house proper.

<sup>4</sup> These structures are highly variable from household to household and their number and nature depend on the possessions of the family (e.g., do they have an oxcart that needs protection [plows are left out in the rain], do they have their own well, etc.)

<sup>5</sup> Turkeys are kept in the kitchen at night and when it is raining, because they are delicate and stupid. Chickens and ducks fend for themselves, although a walkway into an appropriate tree may be built for the chickens. Most people do not pen cattle, sheep, goats, or pigs.

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