Urbanization and Empire at the Aztec City of Calixtlahuaca
(Toluca Valley, Mexico)

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Project Description
This project will conduct excavations and mapping at the Aztec-period urban center of Calixtlahuaca in the Toluca Valley. This is one of the very few Aztec cities with both excavated public architecture (temples and palaces) and open residential areas available for fieldwork. A sample of houses and terraces will be excavated, and the entire urban settlement will be analyzed with spatial and built-environment methods. Calixtlahuaca holds unique promise to illuminate two of the major research issues in Aztec archaeology: urbanization and Aztec imperialism.

Calixtlahuaca was the political capital of the Toluca Valley prior to Aztec conquest of the area in the 1470s. Archaeologist José García Payón excavated numerous public buildings and burials at Calixtlahuaca in the 1930s. The proposed project builds upon this earlier work in two ways. First, project members will analyze the remains from the 1930s excavations, most of which remain unpublished. Second, this project will pursue a different kind of archaeology, focused on houses and domestic activities, which will complement the earlier focus on temples and palaces.

The initial field season will be devoted to systematic collection of surface artifacts and the development of a GIS (geographical information system) to pursue a variety of spatial analyses. A second, longer, field season will focus on excavations of residential features and agricultural terraces. These will allow the reconstruction of domestic activities and conditions, within the context of the site’s hillslope setting. Two specialized methods will aid the archaeological fieldwork: geoarchaeological investigations of terracing; and geophysical prospecting (ground-penetrating radar) to help locate and study buried structures. The standing monumental architecture will be remapped electronically, permitting the 3-dimensional virtual reconstruction of the city and its natural and built-environment settings. A third season will be devoted to the analysis of excavated artifacts.

Intellectual Merit
This project will extend the PI’s program of archaeological research into the effects of Aztec imperial expansion on provincial peoples to a new region. As a frontier zone between the Aztec and Tarascan empires, the Toluca Valley holds great promise for unraveling the nature of Aztec imperial dynamics. The project will also apply a new approach to ancient urbanism that involves
four dimensions of urban process: urban form, urban life, urban functions, and urban meaning. By integrating the results of García Payón’s excavations of monumental architecture with the proposed excavations of houses, this project will produce an unusually rich and comprehensive view of the nature of ancient urbanism in the Toluca Valley and contribute to the improved study of ancient urbanism worldwide.

**Broader Impacts**

This project will construct a Postclassic ceramic chronology that can be applied to other sites in future research in the Toluca Valley. This is the start of a long-term commitment to scientific research in the Toluca Valley by the PI, his students, and U.S. and Mexican colleagues. Collaboration with local scholars and institutions, including the establishment of an archaeological laboratory facility at the Colegio Mexiquense, will help improve the scientific infrastructure of the Toluca area. Publicity and a variety of specific actions of the project will improve public access to the site of Calixtlahuaca (an official archaeological zone now open to the public, but rarely visited). Publication in print and internet venues will contribute to the public appreciation of the site, and publication in standard scholarly formats (including a scientific internet site) will disseminate results to the wider community of scholars.