CHINAMPA CULTIVATION IN THE BASIN OF MEXICO: Observations on the evolution of form and function

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INTRODUCTION

Chinampa agriculture is one of the best known, yet least studied forms of intensive agriculture in Latin America. Despite the voluminous literature concerning this productive means of cultivation (e.g. Rojas 1983, 1985; Jimenez-Osorino et al., 1990) archaeological investigations of chinampa agriculture are virtually nonexistent. A few researchers have examined chinampas directly (most notably Avila 1991; 1992; Parsons et al., 1982; 1985), but their emphasis was generally on settlement, rather than the fields themselves (e.g. Parsons et al., 1982; 1985; Javier 1996; Corona 1996). Other than Avila's precocious work, large scale studies of chinampas (as opposed to chinampa settlements) do not exist. The richness of the written record concerning chinampa agriculture has probably restrained field inquiry to some extent. However, as I intend to show, existing studies rarely exploit the fertile ground that lies between the written accounts and the archaeological realities. The history of chinampa agriculture is largely unknown, and awaits focussed and detailed study. Although we think we understand how these fields were constructed and maintained and what plants were grown on them, archaeological evidence of these attributes is minimal. The data summarized in this paper indicate that chinampa construction was considerably more variable than is traditionally recognized. Furthermore, the claims extending chinampa agriculture into the period before the Postclassic are currently unsupported by direct field evidence. In essence, my point is that we know precious little about the prehistory of chinampa agriculture.

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EXISTING FIELD STUDIES OF CHINAMPAS

The four studies of chinampas (two of which examine multiple features) present in the literature at the moment are 1) Avila 1991; Avila 1992; 2) Parsons et al., 1982; Parsons et al., 1985; 3) Frederick et al., n.d.; Nichols and Frederick 1993; Brumfiel and Frederick 1992; and 4) Frederick 1997. These studies are summarized briefly on Table 1. Figure 1 illustrates the locations of the studied fields. I am