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# The Late Pleistocene paleoenvironment of the Basin of Mexico - evidence from the Tocuila mammoth site

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One of the most interesting and newest mammoth sites in Mexico is found in Tocuila, State of Mexico, east of Mexico City. Remains of at least five Plains mammoths (*Mammuthus columbi*), and other animals were found in deposits dated at approximately 11,200 yBP. The matrix in which the bones are embedded consists of a sandy silty sediment with pumice fragments associated with a catastrophic mud flow of volcanic origin.

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been more than 100 years since the presence of mammoth remains in the Basin of Mexico was first documented. In fact, for the past 30 years, the written reports have increased to dozens (Lorenzo & Mirambell 1986). However, most of the mammoth remains have just been the subject of salvage excavations, without further research on their importance. Here we report on a mammoth-bearing that has received much attention over the past seven years, both from the general public and academics from a range of institutions and disciplines.

The paleontological site of Tocuila is located about 40 km east of Mexico City, downtown at the small village of San Miguel Tocuila, Municipality of Texcoco, State of Mexico (Fig. 1). Construction of a water cistern for a cafeteria in July 1996 brought to light one of the most important Quaternary sites in Mexico (Morett *et al.* 1998a, 1998b). At the time, laborers found some large bone fragments when they struck a complete mammoth skull. Fortunately one of the co-owners of the property, Mr. Celso Ramírez one of decided to request advice from a nearby university museum. It was decided to undertake a detail-

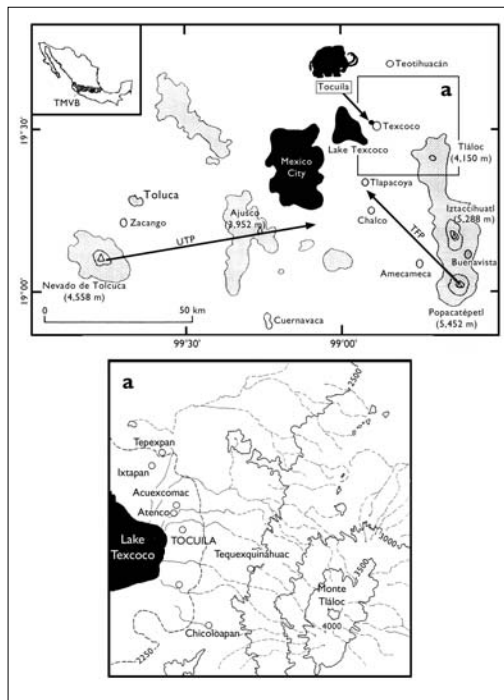


Figure 1 Map of the Basin of Mexico showing the location of the Tocuila Mammoth Site. Also showing the volcanoes from which the two main Late Pleistocene tephra marker units around the basin were formed; UTP: Upper Toluca pumice and TFP: Tutti Frutti Pumice. **a** Detailed map of the surroundings of Tocuila.

ed scientific excavation open for public viewing instead of just a salvage excavation. The site is situated at  $19^{\circ}31'11''$  N,  $98^{\circ}54'31''$  W, at an altitude of c. 2240 m (Fig. 1). The working area spread over 30 m<sup>2</sup>, in a 5 x 6 m pit, to a depth of 3.15 m; it was excavated during three months. The excavation and the stratigraphical levels were recorded, as were geometric position data for each bone specimen. Also, different specialists collected samples for other studies since it was decided to apply an interdisciplinary approach to this excavation. Conversations with town visitors showed that at least 15 other findings of mammoth remains have occurred in the vicinity of the site during the past 50 years.

## SITE DESCRIPTION

Most of the approximately 1,000 bones belong to the plains mammoth *Mammuthus columbi* (Proboscidea, Elephantidae). The remains include three skulls that are almost complete, other two incomplete skulls, and four mandibles, all of these from at least five individuals ranging in age between young and adults, and with both sexes represented (Fig. 2). Most mammoth bones were not articulated, except for a right hind leg that was complete, including the phalanges, and close to a large pelvis near the base of the deposit. The molars of some of the individuals are not symmetrical, this may be explained either by the differential embryological development of the molars as they grew (A. Lister, personal communication 1999), or by shrinkage of the species gene pool due to inbreeding in the regional populations. In addition to the mammoth bones there are few remains of horse (*Equus* sp.), bison (*Bison* sp.), camel (*Camelops hesternus*), rabbits (*Sylvilagus cunicularius*) within the lower sediment package, and in the top layers, fishes, turtles (*Kinosternon* sp.), and aquatic birds, including the flamingo *Phoenicopterus* cf. *ruber* (Corona-M. & Arroyo-Cabrales 1997; Morett *et al.* 1998a,b), and ducks (Corona-M., personal communication 1998). The faunal assemblage from the bottom layers is similar to other such findings in the Basin of Mexico as well as the Mexican Plateau, and that assemblage has been proposed as being characteristic of the Late Pleistocene grassland fauna in central Mexico (Ferrusquía-Villafranca 1978).

Initial study of the mammoth bones have shown that different taphonomic factors, such as trampling and slight weathering, affected the bones, but that not much transport occurred. Also, there are some bone fragments that show a pattern of modified bone similar to that produced by human flaking, suggesting a possible association of man with this faunal assemblage. Different samples from the fossiliferous sediments were assayed for radiocar-

Table 1  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates available for the paleontological site in Tocuila, State of México. Abbreviations for laboratories are: INAH - Dating Laboratory, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México; A(AA) - Laboratory of Isotope Geochemistry, The University of Arizona, U.S.A.; OxA - Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit, Oxford University, United Kingdom.

LAB NUMBER	SAMPLE NUMBER	DEPTH	MATERIAL	AGE (yBP)	DEVIATION ( $\pm$ )
INAH-1658	TOC-I-213	170-173	CHARCOAL	11,277	139
INAH-1659	TOC-I-222	170-205	CHARCOAL	11,274	116
INAH-1660	TOC-I-261/ TOC-I-333	205-230	SEEDS/ CHARCOAL	11,541	196
INAH-1661	TOC-I-277	230-270	SEEDS	11,296	230-270
INAH-1662	TOC-I-424/ TOC-I-436	270-300	SEEDS	10,553	188
A-9313 (AA23161)	TOC-I-241	204	SEDIMENT	10,220	75
A-9314 (AA23162)	TOC-I-555	305-306	SEDIMENT	12,615	95
OxA-7746	TOC-I-		BONE, <i>Mammuthus columbi</i> skull	11,100	80

bon dating, including standard and AMS  $^{14}\text{C}$  on sediment samples, as well as AMS  $^{14}\text{C}$  on mammoth bone. Dates are shown in Table 1. An average of  $11,188 \pm 76$  yBP for the standard  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates is in agreement with the AMS  $^{14}\text{C}$  date on bone ( $11,100 \pm 80$  yBP), and those from the AMS  $^{14}\text{C}$  for sediments are at the extremes.

#### LATE PLEISTOCENE PALEO-ENVIRONMENT AT TOCUILA

In order to understand the processes that formed the deposit and that preserved the mammoth remains, it was necessary to develop a multidisciplinary approach involving sedimentology, paleontology, volcanology, geophysical methods,  $^{14}\text{C}$  dating and molecular biology. The Basin of Mexico contained a number of shallow lakes during the Late Pleistocene. Tocuila lies on the eastern margin of Lake Texcoco, which during recent times has tended to be saline in nature. Bradbury (1971, 1989) has suggested that brackish conditions also existed in the lake during the late Pleistocene.

The Basin of Mexico is unusual in that it lies within an active volcanic area. Two large

stratovolcanoes, the Nevado de Toluca and the Popocatepetl, were active during the Late Pleistocene, as were other smaller volcanoes. Therefore it is not surprising that many of the sediments on the lake margin are volcanic in origin. These include not only primary ashfall deposits but also the products of mudflows, or lahars, which formed when heavy rain washed loose volcanic ash and other debris down from the higher ground around the lake. Analysis of the sediments surrounding the bones indicates that they contain large quantities of pumice and other volcanic materials. The pumices are rounded, indicating that they have been reworked. The deposit is therefore interpreted as a volcanic mudflow or lahar. Geochemical analysis of the pumice (Siebe *et al.* 1997b) indicates that the pumice comes from the Tutti-Frutti eruption of the Popocatepetl volcano, which occurred at about 14,000 BP (Siebe *et al.* 1997a). The gap of nearly three thousand years between the eruption of the pumice and ash and its incorporation into the lahar is puzzling. Siebe *et al.* (1997b) speculate that the ash and pumice may have become mobilised during a climatic warming that led to the melting of high-level snow and ice at the end of the last glacial period.



Figure 2 Photograph of the *Mammuthus columbi* remains at Tocuila.

However, recent studies (Gonzalez *et al.* 2001) indicate that the lahar deposit is associated with the upper Toluca Pumice (UTP) about 10,500 yBP.

The fact that the bones are largely disarticulated could suggest that the volcanic mudflow was not the cause of death of the mammoths, but that their skeletons became incorporated in the mudflow and were redeposit in their present position, further investigation is warranted. The good condition of the bones would seem to indicate that the time which elapsed between death and burial can not have been more than a few months. It also would suggest that the skeletons were not transported a great distance by the mudflow. Although there is a spread of radiocarbon dates (Table 1) through the sequence, we believe that the 1.7 meters of sediments containing the mammoth remains were deposited either in a single event or in several pulses over a very short period of time. Directly below the mammoth lahar, there is a dark sandy ash deposit that is approximately 30

cm thick (Fig. 3). Our initial interpretation of the stratigraphical sequence had this ash being deposited shortly before the emplacement of the lahar unit. However, careful examination of the sediments exposed in the NE corner of the excavation and in trenches dug in neighboring fields to the S and SW of the site indicated that the stratigraphy was more complicated. There is a complex sequence of volcanic ashes, lake silts and laharic deposits, which lie on top of this black ash horizon but are older than the deposits containing the mammoth remains (Fig. 3). This indicates that the mammoth lahar was deposited in a channel, which was cut through the sediments as far as the black ash layer. Initial indications are that this channel must have run approximately ESE-WNW, with the flow originating from the high ground to the East of Tocuila.

Whilst it might appear at first glance that with this high concentration of volcanic sediments the Basin of Mexico must have been a very hostile environment at the end of the

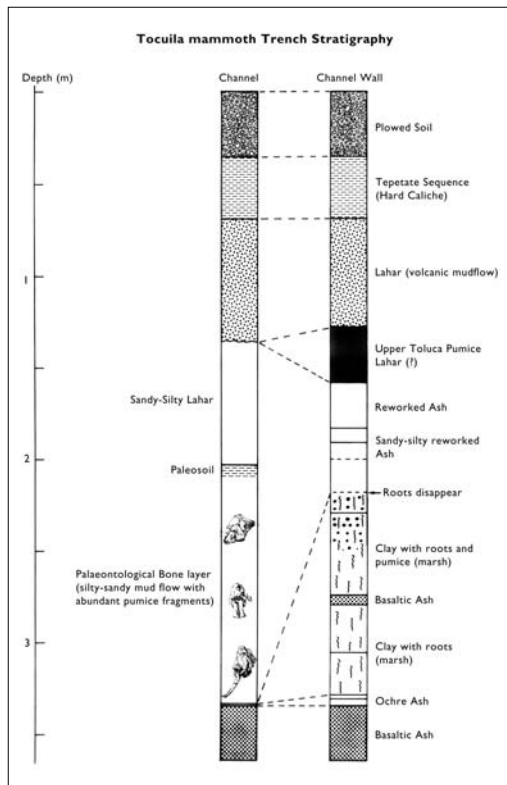


Figure 3 Diagram showing tentative stratigraphic correlations between the mammoth-bearing channel deposits and the unfossiliferous non-channel deposits.

Pleistocene, it is important to realize that these events were short-lived and that for the vast majority of the time the fauna could live undisturbed by volcanic activity. However, these relatively few catastrophic events have assured a high preservation potential for the Late Pleistocene fauna in the Basin of Mexico. The excavated area has been incorporated into a small museum, which holds on site the recovered bone remains, many of which are preserved *in situ*. Although the displays are not yet finished, the site can be visited. Future studies will search for the spatial limits of the fossiliferous deposit, which will help to build a framework for undertaking further excavations to solve some specific questions. These include the processes that formed the deposit, the possible presence of human activity associated with the bones, and

those related to osteological issues that could contribute to our understanding of the causes of the late Pleistocene extinction of megafauna in North America.

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