OBITUARY

Thomas H. Charlton (1938–2010)

Thomas H. Charlton, Mesoamerican archaeologist and professor of anthropology at the University of Iowa, died suddenly on June 2, 2010, in Iowa City. He is best known for his work on the Aztecs and post-Conquest period archaeology. Tom was born on August 17, 1938, to Thomas Harry Charlton and Winnie (Taylor) Charlton in Scarborough, Ontario, Canada. His lifelong interest in history, the past, and its material manifestations began when he was an undergraduate at Victoria College of the University of Toronto during the late 1950s. He had his first experience in field archaeology when he participated in University of Toronto surveys and excavations in his native Ontario. Tom took a class on archaeological method and theory with William Mayor-Oakes, who showed students some of the materials from a recently excavated saltmound on the shore of Lake Texcoco. Mayor-Oakes commented that the glazed wares “must be Aztec XXVI,” anticipating Tom’s own later work on saltwares and post-Conquest ceramics (1969a, 1972).

After receiving his B.A. in 1960, Tom went on to graduate school at Tulane University. His first field experience in Mesoamerica came in 1961, when he worked with William Bullard in Belize (then British Honduras). In 1963, he joined William Sanders’s Teotihuacan Valley Project in the Valley of Mexico. His 1966 doctoral dissertation, “Archaeological Settlement Patterns: An Interpretation,” incorporated field data from the Teotihuacan Valley, an area where much of his subsequent research would be focused. Jeffrey Parsons recalls that when he and Tom surveyed together in the Teotihuacan Valley during 1963 and 1964, Tom would often ponder about how it might be possible to reconstruct community structure from the archaeological remains underfoot.

After completing his dissertation, a faculty position at Grinnell College brought Tom to Iowa in 1966. A year later he joined the anthropology department at the University of Iowa, where he remained an active member for the rest of his life.

Tom’s research always stressed the integration of historical, ethnographic, and archaeological data. His early interests in ethnographic analogy are reflected in his studies of contemporary rural settlement and agriculture in the Teotihuacan Valley (1970). Tom’s dissertation research had made him aware of the lack of studies of post-Conquest settlement patterns (1969b). Because Spanish sources provide only limited details of rural settlements, Tom turned to archaeological methods, but this required that he develop knowledge of post-Conquest ceramics to identify and date sites. In doing so, he became one of the first anthropological archaeologists working in Mesoamerica to be concerned with the ceramic assemblages and settlement patterns of the historic Colonial period (1968). His demonstration that a number of late prehispanic pottery types persisted for several generations beyond initial European contact has proven fundamental in the ongoing study of the demographic and sociocultural impacts of Spanish imperial organization in Central Mexico (1968, 1969b, 1972, 1986). His 1972 monograph still stands as one of the most comprehensive studies of indigenous Colonial-period occupation in rural central Mexico.
In 1966, Tom initiated post-Conquest archaeology in the Teotihuacan Valley with a project of surveys and collections of Colonial and Republican sites in the Otumba area, and in 1969 he directed excavations north and south of Otumba. He saw historic archaeology as not just a source of new data but also fertile ground for testing archaeological theories (1972:1–2). His familiarity with historic sources also prompted an early interest in locating obsidian mines (Charlton and Spence 1983). Tom recognized that regional studies of trade and nonagricultural production were needed to complement the focus on agriculture and demography of the cultural ecological and evolutionary models used by archaeologists in the 1960s. In 1975, he undertook a novel survey of three trade routes leading out of the Otumba area and the northeastern Basin of Mexico, recording both prehispanic and post-Conquest sites (1978), in contrast to the usual practice of archaeologists in Mexico to focus exclusively on prehispanic remains.

In 1969, Tom met Cynthia Otis, when she was drawing profiles of pottery in the Iowa State Archaeologist’s office. She subsequently took a class with him, then worked in his lab at the Casa Milagro in San Juan Teotihuacan in the summer of 1971. Tom invited Cynthia to participate in the 1975 Trade Route survey, and the following year they married. They had hoped to hold the ceremony on February 29 because it was a leap year, but that date fell on a Sunday and the Justice of the Peace resisted, and so they married on Saturday the 28. From that time on, Tom’s field and laboratory research was carried out in partnership with Cynthia.

After the mid-1980s, Tom’s early interests in rural communities extended to the urban center of Aztec Otumba. There, in collaboration with Deborah Nichols and Cynthia Otis Charlton, he codirected innovative investigations that have proven fundamental to the understanding of Late Postclassic urbanism in the Basin of Mexico (Charlton 2000; Nichols and Charlton 1997). Earlier, in the mid-1950s, Paul Tolstoy had made survey collections within the Aztec town site of Otumba. Then, in 1963, William Mather, a Penn State graduate student, surveyed and mapped the Otumba site as part of the Teotihuacan Valley Project, and it was he who first recognized substantial evidence of Aztec household workshops—a pattern we now recognize as having been widespread in prehispanic Mesoamerica, as craft specialization developed from a household context. Aztec household workshops often employed techniques of mass production to manufacture large amounts of goods that were exchanged through hierarchical market and tribute systems. Some industries ceased after the Spanish conquest, such as the manufacture of obsidian lip plugs and ear spools, but Tom’s work showed how other industries continued and adjusted to new consumers and new techniques.

In the early 1990s, Tom and Cynthia began collaborations with Mexican archaeologist Patricia Fournier García on prehispanic and Colonial materials from the Templo Mayor in Mexico City and Tlatelolco. Their years of collaboration yielded not only a number of studies of post-Conquest archaeology (e.g., Charlton et al. 2005a) but also a close personal friendship.

When in the field, Tom enjoyed visiting other projects, especially looking at their ceramic collections to build on his knowledge of Colonial and prehispanic pottery. Tom’s fieldwork was aided by his many practical skills, including as
a licensed electrician and in automotive repair. These skills were also useful as Tom pursued his interest in restoring old MGs. He also had a deep affection for cats, especially strays and orphans in need of a home, and over the years a number of these animals immigrated from Mexico to Iowa with Tom and Cynthia. A favorite activity of Tom’s was mountain climbing and, sometimes accompanied by his son, Thomas H. Charlton VI, he made several long hikes to the tops of Cerro Tlaloc and Popocatepetl on the eastern border of the Basin of Mexico.

Over the course of his career, Tom witnessed the increasing pace of destruction of archaeological sites in the Basin of Mexico. This prompted him and Cynthia to return to fieldwork on rural sites with a series of surveys and excavations of Teotihuacan-period villages north of the great city. They collaborated with Raúl García Chávez and Verónica Ortega on salvage excavations at the village site of San Bartolomé in the Teotihuacan Valley (Charlton et al. 2005b), where remains of Teotihuacan-style apartment compounds still survived.

At the time of his death, Tom was directing his annual University of Iowa field school in historic archaeology at Plum Grove, Iowa, where he had been working since 1974 while continuing analyses of materials from Mexico. After Tom’s unexpected death, Cynthia took over closing down of the 2010 field season at Plum Grove and preparing the artifact collections for transfer from the University of Iowa to the office of the Iowa State Archaeologist. Tom’s papers, including the field notes and records from his projects in Mexico, will at a later date be deposited at Tulane University, where future generations will benefit from Tom Charlton’s important research on Aztec and post-Conquest archaeology.

NOTE
Acknowledgments. We thank Cynthia Otis Charlton for comments and information about Tom’s life and work, as well as Patricia Fournier-García and Glenn Storey of the University of Iowa.

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