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Sierra del Lacandón Regional Archaeology Project First Field Season 2003



Research Year: 2003 Culture: Maya Chronology: Classic Location: Petén, Guatemala Site: Sierra del Lacandón National Park

Table of Contents

Abstract Resumen Introduction Reconnaissance of Esmeralda Reconnaissance of Fajardo Reconnaissance of Texcoco Reconnaissance of Tecolote Conclusions Acknowledgements Research Team of the 2003 Field Season List of Figures Sources Cited

Abstract

This report describes the results of the first field season of the Sierra del Lacandón Regional Archaeology Project (SLRAP), which carried out the first systematic archaeological reconnaissance of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park of Guatemala from May 10 to June 1, 2003. The primary research goal of the SLRAP is to achieve a better understanding of political integration in Classic period Maya society, particularly as this pertains to the relationship between primary rulers and the subordinate nobility who governed the frontier settlements between competing kingdoms. In addition, the SLRAP was charged by park authorities with creating a cultural inventory of the park in low-lying areas adjacent to the Usumacinta River that are threatened by inundation resulting from the construction of hydroelectric dams at the Boca del Cerro in Tabasco, México. The SLRAP achieved great success in its first field season, and established the basis for future research in the park. Members of the project identified two previously unknown sites and investigated two sites that had been informally reported, but not adequately documented.

Resumen

Este informe contiene los resultados de la primera temporada del Proyecto Regional Arqueológico Sierra del Lacandón (PRASL) (Sierra del Lacandón Regional Archaeology Project (SLRAP) en inglés), durante la cual se realizó el primer reconocimiento arqueológico del Parque Nacional Sierra del Lacandón de Guatemala, entre el 10 de mayo y el 1 de junio, 2003. La meta principal de la investigación del PRASL es lograr una mejor comprensión de la integración política en la sociedad maya del período Clásico, sobre todo en lo que tiene que ver con las relaciones entre los gobernantes principales y la nobleza subordinada que gobernó los asentamientos de frontera entre los reinos en competencia. Además, las autoridades del parque encargaron al PRASL la creación de un inventario cultural del mismo, de las áreas más bajas próximas al río Usumacinta que se ven amenzadas por inundaciones, como resultado de la construcción de represas hidroeléctricas en la Boca del Cerro, Tabasco, México. El PRASL fue sumamente exitoso en su primera temporada de campo, y estableció las bases para futuras investigaciones en el parque. Los miembros del proyecto identificaron dos sitios de los que no se tenía noticias, e investigaron dos sitios de los cuales existían reportes informales. aunque estaban documentados no adecuadamente.

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Introduction

This report describes the results of the first field season of the Sierra del Lacandón Regional Archaeology Project (SLRAP). Supported by a grant from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., (FAMSI), a team of Guatemalan and American archaeologists, soils scientists, and park guards working with the assistance of workers from Dolores, Petén carried out the first systematic archaeological reconnaissance of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park of Guatemala from May 10 to June 1, 2003. The SLRAP was conducted as a subproject of the Piedras Negras Regional Archaeological Project, an integral part of the Fundacíon Defensores de la Naturaleza's work towards the protection of cultural patrimony in the Sierra del Lacandón National Park of Guatemala Park of Guatemala (Figure 1).¹

The primary research goal of the SLRAP is to achieve a better understanding of political integration in Classic period Maya society, particularly as this pertains to the relationship between primary rulers and the subordinate nobility who governed the frontier settlements between competing kingdoms. In addition, the SLRAP was charged by park authorities with creating a cultural inventory of the park in low-lying areas adjacent to the Usumacinta River that are threatened by inundation resulting from the construction of hydroelectric dams at the Boca del Cerro in Tabasco, México (Figure 2).² In this brief first field season, the SLRAP achieved great success in establishing the basis for future research in the park. Members of the project identified two previously unknown sites and investigated two sites that had been informally reported, but not adequately documented (Figure 3).

¹ The Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza is an NGO that co-administers the Sierra del Lacandón Park with the governmental Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas of Guatemala (CONAP). In addition to the SLRAP, The Piedras Negras Regional Archaeology Project includes consolidation, conservation, and touristic development of the site of Piedras Negras under the direction of Lic. Luis Romero.

² A recent report of the Comisión Federal de Electricidad of México (2003a) indicates that the dam will be 46 m high, and constructed about 90 m above sea level. An unknown number of archaeological sites in the Usumacinta drainage will be flooded when the development project is completed. By the admission of the CFE at least eleven sites in México will be entirely inundated (Comisión Federal de Electricidad 2003b), and this is a conservative estimate that does not include sites in Chiapas or the Petén. Working in conjunction with the Defensores de la Naturaleza, members of the SLRAP, and others are working to assess the potential threat to the cultural and natural patrimony of Guatemala along the Usumacinta River.



Figure 1. Map showing the location of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park within the Republic of Guatemala.



Figure 2. Model showing the impact of flooding resulting from a 46 m dam at the Boca del Cerro, Tabasco, México (by Todd Berendes, University of Alabama-Huntsville).



Figure 3. Map showing the locations of sites identified during the 2003 field season.

Reconnaissance of Esmeralda

The site of Esmeralda is an area of dense settlement arrayed along the northern edge of a bajo extending north from the Laguneta Lacandón. Although former members of the Comunidades Populares en Resistencia en el Petén (CPR-P or Popular Communities in Resistance in the Petén) who lived in the area during the Guatemalan civil war were aware of the site, Esmeralda has not been previously reported to IDAEH or to the co-administration of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park. A grouping of approximately twenty-one structures (designated PRASL 63³) is evidently the Late to Terminal Classic

³ The project's name in Spanish is El Proyecto Regional Arqueologico Sierra del Lacandón, or PRASL. The Spanish acronym is used to name plazas and plaza groups located on reconnaissance, which are numbered in the sequence of their discovery–thus PRASL 1, PRASL 2, etc.

period political node of Esmeralda (Figure 4). Although the architecture is imposing for rural settlement, the masonry is not finely done and consists largely of a veneer of rough-cut blocks over dry-laid rubble core. If we accept as a working hypothesis that during the Late Classic period the Piedras Negras kingdom was governed by the rulers of a three tier site hierarchy (i.e., Piedras Negras as a primate center, and El Cayo, La Mar and Texcoco, among others, as secondary centers), Esmeralda appears to be a tertiary political node.



Figure 4. Map of PRASL 63, Esmeralda, Petén, Guatemala (map by A. René Muñoz, E. Ramirez, and M. Zamora).



Figure 5. Map of the site of Esmeralda, Petén, Guatemala. Black dots indicate mounds or groups of mounds. Triangles indicate larger groups that probably represent political centers at the site.



Figure 6. Map of PRASL 80, Esmeralda, Petén, Guatemala.

Almost all other architectural groupings identified in the reconnaissance of Esmeralda consisted of one to four mounds arranged in patios. The exception to this pattern is PRASL 80, located approximately 800 m to the northeast of PRASL 63. PRASL 80 consists of nine structures arranged into a loose grouping of structures (Figure 5 and Figure 6). Among these structures are two pyramidal buildings approximately 4.00 m high, and a large (2.00–3.00 m high) range structure. The pattern of settlement suggests that Esmeralda may have been composed of two communities, with clusters around PRASL 63 as well as the smaller PRASL 80 (Figure 5). We can say from materials recovered in looter's pits in PRASL 63 that a significant amount of architectural growth took place in that group during the Terminal Classic period (Figure 7 and Figure 8). We lack a comparative sample from PRASL 80, and therefore cannot

say, at present, whether there are two contemporaneous communities. Ceramics obtained from looters pits in PRASL 63, and another group designated PRASL 84, indicate that occupation was virtually continuous at Esmeralda from the Late Preclassic through Terminal Classic periods (Figure 7, Figure 8, and Figure 9).



Figure 7. North profile of looter's pit, PRASL 63 (by M. Zamora).



Figure 8. East profile of looter's pit, PRASL 63 (by M. Zamora).



Figure 9. West profile of looter's pit, PRASL 84 (by A.R. Muñoz).

Reconnaissance of Fajardo

The site of Fajardo has not been previously reported to archaeologists, but mounds were reported to the Defensores de la Naturaleza following a recent macaw survey in the Sierra del Lacandón (Marie-Claire Paíz and Rosa María Chan, personal communication 2003). Project members conducted a brief reconnaissance of the area along the eastern side of the central bajo, just west of the sierra (Figure 10). Settlement is similar to Esmeralda in terms of density and the orientation of settlement to seasonally inundated wetlands and seasonally filled arroyos. Plaza groups are located

at intervals of approximately 50 to 80 m. In approximately five hours of reconnaissance we were able to identify and take points on twenty-seven plaza groups. Fajardo, like Esmeralda is probably a tertiary political node, but no identifiable center for this site was located in the very limited explorations conducted during the 2003 field season.



Figure 10. Map of the Fajardo site, Petén, Guatemala. Black dots indicate mounds or groups of mounds.

Reconnaissance of Texcoco

The site of Texcoco has been tentatively identified for a century, but detailed reports by professional archaeologists do not exist (e.g., Aliphat 1994). Park guard Chico León and Archaeologist Edwin Roman rediscovered the location of the site, and project members spent two days mapping the site center with tape and compass to produce a site plan (Figure 11 and Figure 12). Given the preliminary nature of our reconnaissance, this plan

is not complete, but does give a good idea of the size and nature of the site. The site center as mapped is approximately 500 m from southwest to northeast, running along a ridge top.



Figure 11. Detail map of the area of investigation, showing the location of Texcoco.

Access to this ridge is through a series of narrow valleys running to the southeast. The site center is dominated by the monumental architecture at the southwest end of the ridge (Figure 12). A palace complex, "La Gallina," is the focus of this area. The palace sits on a platform with three terraces, each between one and two meters high. The masonry of the structure is poorly done in comparison to that at Piedras Negras or other sites in the region, and consists of roughly worked boulders and cobbles.



Figure 12. Map of Texcoco, Petén, Guatemala. Grid squares are hectares (by C. Golden, E. Roman, A. René Muñoz, A. Scherer, and M. Zamora).

Seven buildings on top of a large platform form Patio 1, the plaza to the northeast of La Gallina. Of these, a pyramidal structure jutting up from an eastern extension of the patio is the largest, rising approximately 7.00 to 8.00 m on its western face and 10.00 m on its eastern face. It was impossible to define the corners of this structure, resulting in the

odd form of this building in <u>Figure 12</u>.⁴ Two uncarved column altars were found in front of a colonnaded structure northeast of La Gallina, and two more altars were located just north of Patio 1.

To the northeast of Patio 1 is Patio 2. This is a smaller patio, also atop a large, low platform, composed of at least four structures, with several ancillary structures to the west, north and northeast. On the northwestern side of Patio 2 is a monumental sweatbath, similar to the eight known sweatbaths at Piedras Negras.⁵ The sweatbath sits across Patio 2 from another large masonry platform, with two terraces and a staircase facing onto the plaza. Patio 2 is completed by range structures on the north and south sides of the plaza, both of which apparently held largely perishable superstructures. The southeastern corner of the southern structure provided the datum for linking the mapping data from different areas of Texcoco.⁶

To the southeast of Patio 2 is Patio 3, a plaza that appears residential in nature, composed of five structures atop a large platform/terrace extending out from the hillside. Continuing northeast from Patio 2, there are a number of structures that were quickly mapped in the available time, and there are certainly more buildings than appear in Figure 12. At the northeastern end of the escarpment is a large platform with two terraces. A staircase on the northeastern side of the platform is the principal access, and a masonry wall supports give the outline of an otherwise perishable superstructure. Researchers encountered several smaller mounds in the hills surrounding Texcoco's site center, as well as in the valley to the southeast.

Reconnaissance of Tecolote

The site of Tecolote probably first came to the attention of professional archaeologists in the 1930s. Edwin Shook (1998) noted in his journals that while on a trip to Piedras Negras his guides told him of standing, vaulted structures near the Chico Zapote rapids, but he was unable to visit the site due to lack of time. More secure evidence of the site came in the 1980s, when tourists presented George Stuart of the National Geographic Society with photographs of a well-preserved, vaulted structure that they had encountered on a trip down the Usumacinta River.

⁴ One possibility is that the building was never completed, and never received the masonry veneer required to better define its form. Such incomplete buildings are also known at Piedras Negras (Child, Fitzsimmons, and Golden 2002). Another possibility is that the building was completed, but the masonry was so poorly worked that collapse has rendered the form of the structure unintelligible without excavation.
⁵ The function of the building is clearly indicated by a massive stone lintel, thrown to the front of the structure by

⁵ The function of the building is clearly indicated by a massive stone lintel, thrown to the front of the structure by looters digging in the collapsed vault of the steam chamber.

⁶ Some of the structures ancillary to Patio 2 appear in <u>Figure 12</u>, but more buildings were present and were not mapped for lack of time.



Figure 13. Detail map of the area of investigation, showing the possible extent of area controlled by Tecolote.

Park guards Américo Ixcayao and Eduardo Martínez led researchers René Muñoz and Andrew Scherer to Tecolote, located near the site of La Pasadita (Figure 13). This small team spent three days conducting reconnaissance and preliminary mapping of the site center of Tecolote, which includes the vaulted structure (Structure 1) that had appeared in the tourists' photograph. A preliminary map of Group A, which contains the standing building, was made with a measuring tape and compass (Figure 14, shown below, and Figure 15). An elevation of the building was also completed (Figure 16). Due to time limitations, only sketch maps and notes were made for the remaining groups at Tecolote.



Figure 14a. Photograph of the vaulted Structure 1, Group A, Tecolote. Door of building, with Américo Ixcayau and Eduardo Martínez of CONAP.



Figure 14bc. Photographs of the vaulted Structure 1, Group A, Tecolote. (b) Staircase of platform in front of Structure 1. (c) Front of building showing details of masonry.



Figure 15. Map of Group A, Tecolote, Petén, Guatemala (by A.R. Muñoz and A. Scherer).



Figure 16. Elevation of vaulted Structure 1, Group A, Tecolote (by A.R. Muñoz and A. Scherer).

The lintels over the doorways of Structure 1 are not carved, and therefore have not been looted, which accounts for the survival of the building. Overall, Structure 1 is very well preserved. However, roots from a tree on the northeast corner of the structure have penetrated the corner of one room, and the back wall of Structure 1 is slightly bowed threatening the structure with collapse.

Above the molding of Structure 1, on its front face, are two inset areas that likely housed panels or sculptures, with the sockets serving as means of mounting the piece. The inset areas are reminiscent of those found on Temple 33 at Yaxchilán, which are mounted with seated human figures. The face of Structure 1 is fronted by a small staircase, of three to four risers, which runs along the length of the building.

The interiors of the three rooms are extensively looted, with the interior floors and benches largely destroyed. However, in each of the rooms, remnants of plaster are found on the interior walls and vaults, and the remains of polychrome murals are still evident.⁷ The interior of this building was almost certainly covered in elaborate polychrome paintings similar to those at La Pasadita (the color palate is reminiscent of murals at La Pasadita). The majority of the paint is blue and red (specular hematite), but most individual images are no longer visible to the naked eye. However, the southwestern wall of Room 1 exhibits a small area of visible imagery near the southwest corner. A black outline of the right wing and leg of a bird is clearly visible. Below the bird

⁷ The preserved wall plaster also makes it possible to determine the location of masonry benches, largely destroyed by looters, by identifying the joints between the wall plaster and the plaster facing on the benches.

are two objects, possibly fish (Figure 17, shown below). Portions of the mural are preserved in each of the rooms, with indistinct figures still visible to the naked eye. The conservation and recovery of data from these murals is a priority in future field seasons.



Figure 17. Photograph showing a section of polychrome mural in Structure 1, Group A, Tecolote. A bird with claws grasping towards a fish is visible (photo by A. Scherer). A looted crypt is located in the rubble fill below the floor of Room 3. The crypt is centered in the room and runs parallel to the long axis of Structure 1. The southwest wall of the crypt appears to abut the southwest wall of Room 3. The crypt measures .60 m wide, approximately 1.50 m long, and .50 m high, and was capped by 3 large, finely cut capstones, one of which was removed by looters to enter the crypt. The crypt walls consist of superbly worked stone, four courses high and covered in plaster. Preliminary exploration revealed no evidence of human remains or burial furniture, suggesting that the looters removed everything within the crypt.

Adjacent to Structure 1 are Structures 2 and 3, both of which are collapsed vaulted buildings. The presence of a megalithic stone slab in the collapse of Structure 3 suggests that the building was a sweatbath, since similar architectural features are associated with sweatbaths at Piedras Negras and other Usumacinta sites—including Texcoco. A small staircase leads from the front of Structure 3 down to Patio 1. All of the other buildings in Group A, except Structures 7, 8, and 9 appear to have been vaulted, though with the exception of Structure 1 these vaults have collapsed.

Located to the east of Group A is Group B. For lack of time, only very preliminary notes were taken and it was not possible to compile a map of the group. The Group has an appearance reminiscent of the acropolis at Piedras Negras, with multiple platforms approximately 5.00 m high, built into the side of a hill slope, rising in a series of patio groups demarcated by vaulted, range structures. Five other large patios or clusters of architecture where located in the vicinity of Groups A and B, and most of these contained collapsed vaulted structures. A ceramic sample obtained from a cave near Group A revealed materials spanning a range from Late Preclassic through Terminal Classic periods.

Conclusions

The sites of Esmeralda and Fajardo are clusters of settlement situated to take advantage of the seasonally inundated *bajos* of the valley, and settlement at both sites clusters between approximately 100 and 140 m above sea level. Our hypothesis is that the *bajos* provided farmland for crops that supported not only local occupation, but the larger centers of the kingdom as well. Tests for the chemical signatures of maize agriculture conducted during the 2003 season by Kristofer Johnson of Brigham Young University may provide the evidence to support this hypothesis.

Occupation at Esmeralda evidently continued from at least Late Preclassic through Terminal Classic periods. There is no reason to suspect that occupation in and around Fajardo does not reflect this same pattern. Some groups, such as PRASL 63, almost certainly functioned as local political nodes at these rural sites, and within the political scheme of the Piedras Negras kingdom such nodes may have occupied a third tier in the political hierarchy of the polity. Our ability to interpret the site of Texcoco is hampered by the lack of a ceramic sample. The poorly dressed masonry of the buildings suggests a late occupation, but we cannot say whether site occupation was contemporary with Piedras Negras or not. We can, however, say securely that Texcoco was a center of regional importance. The size of the architecture, the extent of the site, the presence of uncarved monuments, a vaulted sweatbath, and other features indicate the significance of the site. Furthermore, that the site is arrayed along a ridge top, accessible through narrow valleys, and situated on the flanks of the sierra suggests that Texcoco was built with defense in mind, although there is no reason to assume that this was the only reason for its placement on the landscape.

If Texcoco was contemporary with dynastic Piedras Negras, it is almost certainly a secondary political center within the political hierarchy of the kingdom. If, however, Texcoco post-dates the dynastic power of Piedras Negras, the construction of this site on a ridge top may indicate a breakdown in regional stability, and political authority in the area may have been splintered. If this is the case, Texcoco may have been a primary center in a fractured political landscape.

At Tecolote, however, we can be somewhat more secure in our dating of the monumental architecture and the site's role in the political hierarchy of the region. On the basis of architectural form it is apparent that Structure 1 is a Late Classic building, with no earlier component apparent in looter's trenches. There is no evidence for major modification of the substructure or superstructure, and the building was probably completed in a single construction phase.

Tecolote is situated remarkably close to the site of La Pasadita, which we know to be part of the Yaxchilán kingdom. Various authors (e.g., Anaya 2001; Golden 2003; Golden *et al.* 1998) have suggested that La Pasadita was strategically located as a frontier outpost, used to control overland travel through the valley in which the site lies. Tecolote, too, was probably strategically placed to control both the local resources and maintain the frontier with the kingdom of Piedras Negras to the north.⁸

With the continuing collaboration of the co-administration of the park and IDAEH, the Sierra del Lacandón Regional Archaeological Project hopes to continue its research from 2004 through at least 2009. Central to the goals of this project, as stated above, is the creation of a cultural inventory of sites in the Sierra del Lacandón that are endangered by the construction of a dam at the Boca del Cerro. If, as currently available information indicates, water floods the landscape behind the dam at the 136 m contour line, Piedras Negras will suffer serious damage and most, if not all, of Fajardo and Esmeralda will be flooded (see Figure 2, Endnote 2). The dam is scheduled for completion in 2009, and there is an obvious need for continuing research in the area to

⁸ Further evidence to support this hypothesis of a link between Yaxchilán and Tecolote comes from the architecture of Structure 1. The excellent masonry work, particularly the style of molding around the face of the building, is reminiscent of styles employed at Yaxchilán, in buildings such as Structure 33. Furthermore, the layout of Structure 1 at Tecolote, with two doors facing onto the plaza and third facing to the side, is identical to the structure at La Pasadita that contained murals and sculpted lintels (Figure 19).

further document sites adjoining low-lying areas, and to rescue that information which can be rescued before rising floodwaters prevent any further investigations.



Figure 18. Map of the soils series in the Sierra del Lacandón National Park, showing the locations of soils samples taken by Kristofer Johnson (by K. Johnson).

24



Figure 19. Map of vaulted structure with murals at La Pasadita, a structure remarkably similar in plan to Structure 1, Group A, Tecolote (by C. Golden after a map by I. Graham).

Acknowledgements

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List of Figures

Figure 1. Map showing the location of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park within the Republic of Guatemala.

<u>Figure 2</u>. Model showing the impact of flooding resulting from a 46 m dam at the Boca del Cerro, Tabasco, México (by Todd Berendes, University of Alabama-Huntsville).

Figure 3. Map showing the locations of sites identified during the 2003 field season.

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<u>Figure 5</u>. Map of the site of Esmeralda, Petén, Guatemala. Black dots indicate mounds or groups of mounds. Triangles indicate larger groups that probably represent political centers at the site.

Figure 6. Map of PRASL 80, Esmeralda, Petén, Guatemala.

Figure 7. North profile of looter's pit, PRASL 63 (by M. Zamora).

Figure 8. East profile of looter's pit, PRASL 63 (by M. Zamora).

Figure 9. West profile of looter's pit, PRASL 84 (by A.R. Muñoz).

Figure 10. Map of the Fajardo site, Petén, Guatemala. Black dots indicate mounds or groups of mounds.

Figure 11. Detail map of the area of investigation, showing the location of Texcoco.

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