Chocolá Archaeological Project, Guatemala

Translation of the Spanish by Alex Lomónaco

Research Year: 2004
Culture: Maya
Chronology: Preclassic and Classic Periods
Location: San Pablo Jocopilas, Department of Suchitepéquez, Guatemala
Site: Chocolá

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Abstract

Based on older as well as still accumulating evidence, scholars assume that innovative developments occurred in the southern Mesoamerican area during the Preclassic period (1500 B.C. – A.D. 200) that strongly influenced the later great Mesoamerican civilizations. Ironically, scholars lack a clear sense of even the broader events and processes that shaped southern Guatemala's history and gave it its peculiar and, long assumed, seminal character. The investigations in Kaminaljuyú and Abaj Takalik in the last decades, showed the strong relationship between these two regions, and considered the presence of other sites between both zones, like Chocolá, participating in the same political entity and sharing ideological, technological and economic advances. The strategic position of Chocolá, could bring answers to these questions and many others, including those surrounding the study of theoretical problems as evolutionary sociopolitical processes that led to the subsequent creation of urban societies.

Resumen

Tomando en consideración los datos arqueológicos, se sabe que en el área Sur de Guatemala y México se produjeron innovadores desarrollos durante el período Preclásico (1500 a.C.–200 d.C.), que influyeron notablemente en el futuro de las culturas vecinas. Sin embargo, algunas veces se carece de un sentido claro de los sucesos y procesos determinantes que configuraron la historia de la región sur de Guatemala y que le dieron desde hace tiempo su ya asumido carácter seminal. Las investigaciones efectuadas en las últimas décadas en Kaminaljuyú y Abaj Takalik han demostrado la estrecha relación existente entre ambas zonas, por lo que se considera que otros sitios localizados en medio de ellos, como Chocolá, también debieron participar de la misma entidad política y gozar de los avances ideológicos, tecnológicos y económicos notados en estos dos grandes centros. La posición de Chocolá puede dar una respuesta a ello y a muchas otras inquietudes, incluyendo el estudio de problemas teóricos, como procesos de evolución sociopolítica que condujeron a la posterior creación de sociedades urbanas.

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Introduction

The archaeological site of Chocolá is located in the southwestern Bocacosta of Guatemala, at the foot of the Sierra Madre mountain chain, in the township of San Pablo Jocopilas, Department of Suchitepéquez (Figure 1 and Figure 2). This is a very fertile strip of land irrigated by numerous streams which descend from the top of the mountains. The central portion of the settlement is located

850 meters above sea level, and its weather is mild, thanks to the arrival of cool winds from the Pacific Ocean in the late afternoon and evening.

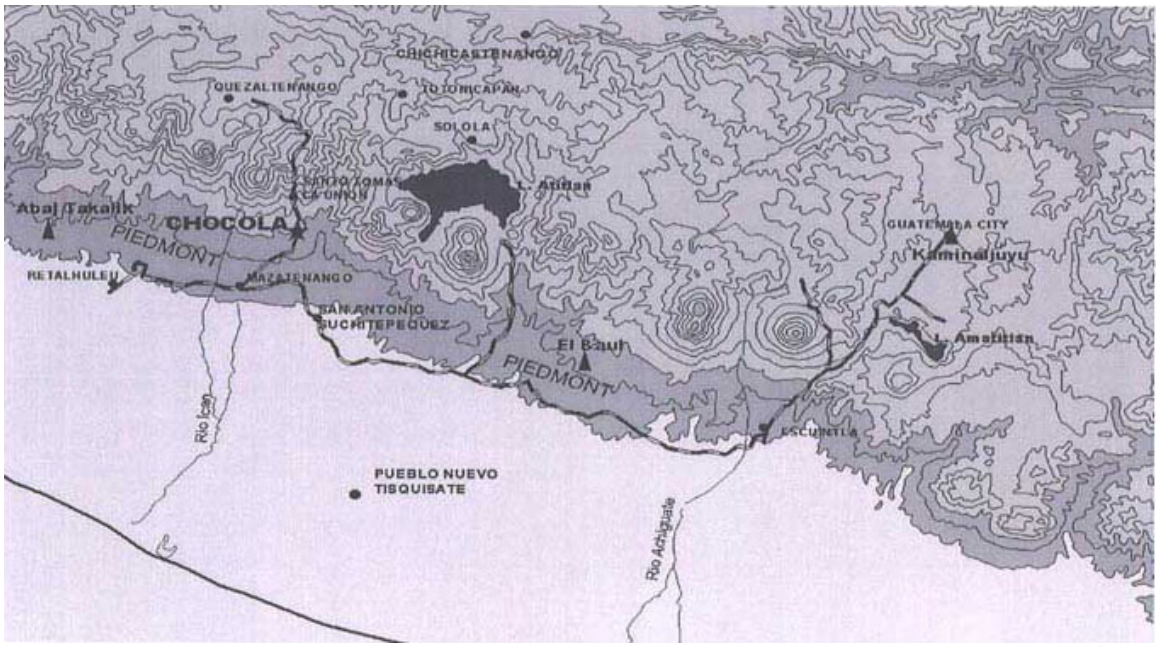

Figure 1. Map of the southern coast of Guatemala showing the location of Chocolá.

Chocolá has been investigated by Robert Burkitt, who excavated Mound B and outlined a schematic map during the second decade of the XXth century, with the remarkable discovery of Monument 1, a wonderfully sculpted sample (Burkitt, 1930). A few years later, Edwin Shook, Franz Termer, John Graham and others visited the site but conducted no investigations.

Figure 2. Location of Chocolá and archaeological sites in the Bocacosta, Department of Suchitepéquez.

As decades went by and new projects developed, both at the Guatemalan Pacific coast and the Highlands, it became apparent that Chocolá needed to be formally studied due to its location in the intermediary area between both cultural regions. This made it an excellent subject to restate hypotheses concerning relationships of political dependence, ideological participation, diachronic changes in the form of growth and decrease of the community, social and technological evolution, use of intensive agriculture, urban planning, etc. My interest towards these issues was shared by Dr.

Jonathan Kaplan of the University of New Mexico, and therefore, we jointly requested authorization to conduct the Chocolá Archaeological Project from the authorities of the Director General of Cultural and Natural Heritage of Guatemala, (*Dirección General de Patrimonio Cultural y Natural de Guatemala*), a permit that was granted through the Agreement No. 19-2003. The first field season was carried out during three months (June–August) in 2003, with such amazing results that the second field season was prepared for 2004 with a duration of four months (May–August). In both cases the team was formed by professors and students from different universities, such as the universities of San Carlos of Guatemala, New Mexico, La Trobe in Australia, Valencia in Spain, and La Sorbonne in France, together with volunteers interested in Maya archaeology who arrived from different countries to support the project.

Figure 3. Mountainous country to the East of the site.

The evidence recovered during the field and laboratory work indicates that Chocolá had an extended occupation from the Middle Preclassic period to the Postclassic period, although its peak seems to have taken place during the Late Preclassic period (400 B.C. – 200 A.D.). It occupied a strategic location to exert control on one of the mountain routes that connected the Pacific Coast with the Guatemalan Highlands (Figure 3 and Figure 4), which seems to have allowed its political and ideological integration at a regional level, as well as its development as a complex society, becoming one of the cities that integrated the Miraflores political sphere dominated by the famous site of Kaminaljuyú. The research conducted in 2003 and 2004 was focused on the preparation of a new site map, initiating excavations in different structures, detecting activity areas, preparing a sculptural corpus, and collaborating with the inhabitants of Chocolá for a more comprehensive knowledge of

their roots in the rescue of their cultural identity (Valdés and Kaplan, 2003; Kaplan, Valdés and Paredes, 2005).

Figure 4. Mountain range to the East of Chocolá.

Figure 5. Mound 1.

Survey and Mapping

During the first field season (2003), an area of 5 km^2 was mapped, and 65 mounds were detected. In 2004, the survey area was enlarged to 10 km^2, while the number of mounds increased to 80 with heights that ranged from 0.50 to 25 m, either forming closed plazas or isolated structures (Figure 5).

Figure 6. Data verification process.

The methodology applied during the survey and mapping process was developed in three stages: during the first one, the area was explored with maps 1:50,000 of the Republic of Guatemala, and a GPS Trimble Geoexplorer. The second stage included the implementation of transects, with groups of 10 people walking along a horizontal line towards the front, with a 5 m separation between them, while in the last stage the data was verified (Figure 6) and other additional details written down concerning the cultural aspects visible on the ground (Valdés *et al.*, 2004; Herrera, Valdés and Kaplan, n.d.).

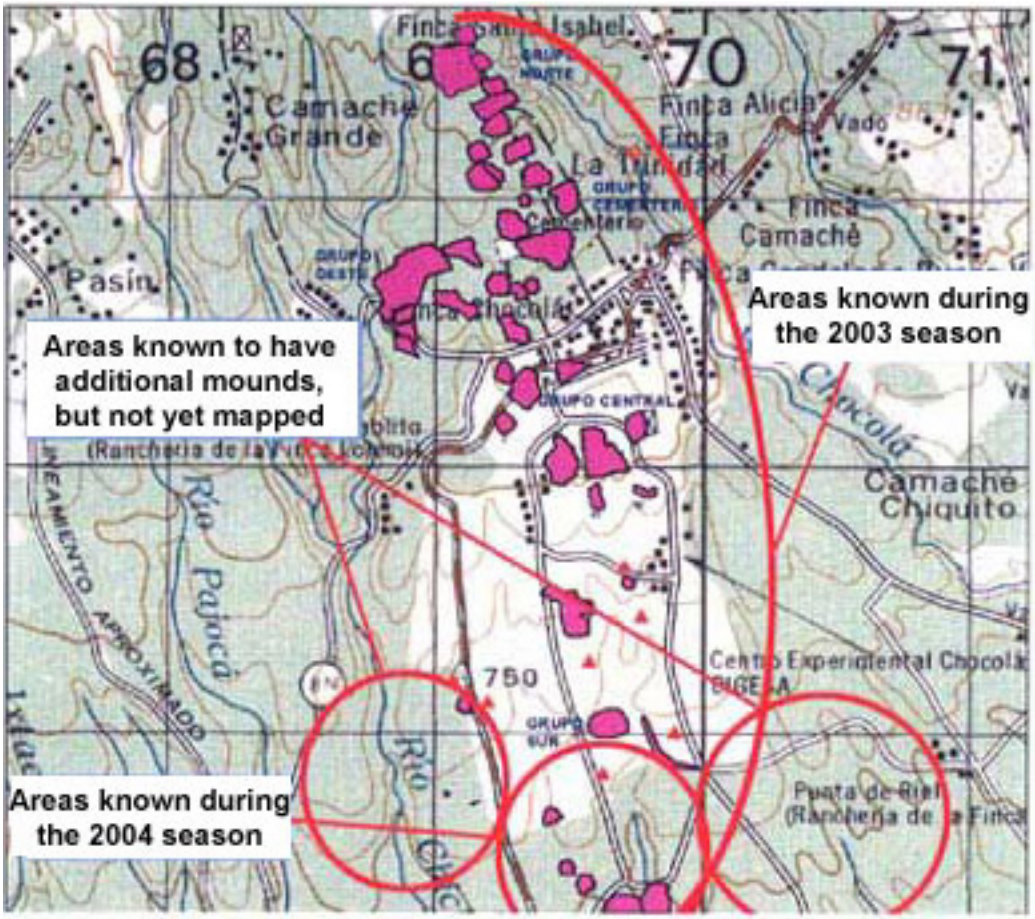

Figure 7. Map of Chocolá on plan 1:50,000.

With the data obtained from both field seasons (Figure 7 and Figure 8), we suggest that the northern sector of Chocolá was the most significant area, the seat of local power and the place where the greatest manpower was required to construct plazas and buildings of a large size. The southern area, in turn, was scarce in major structures though the number of households for common people was higher, as also were the refuse dumps and activity areas related to obsidian and lithic workshops. The existence of wide empty spaces between the architectural groups may also suggest that those areas were used for agriculture, with the growth of cacao included, as still was the case in the region in the XVI century (Kaplan and Valdés, 2004).

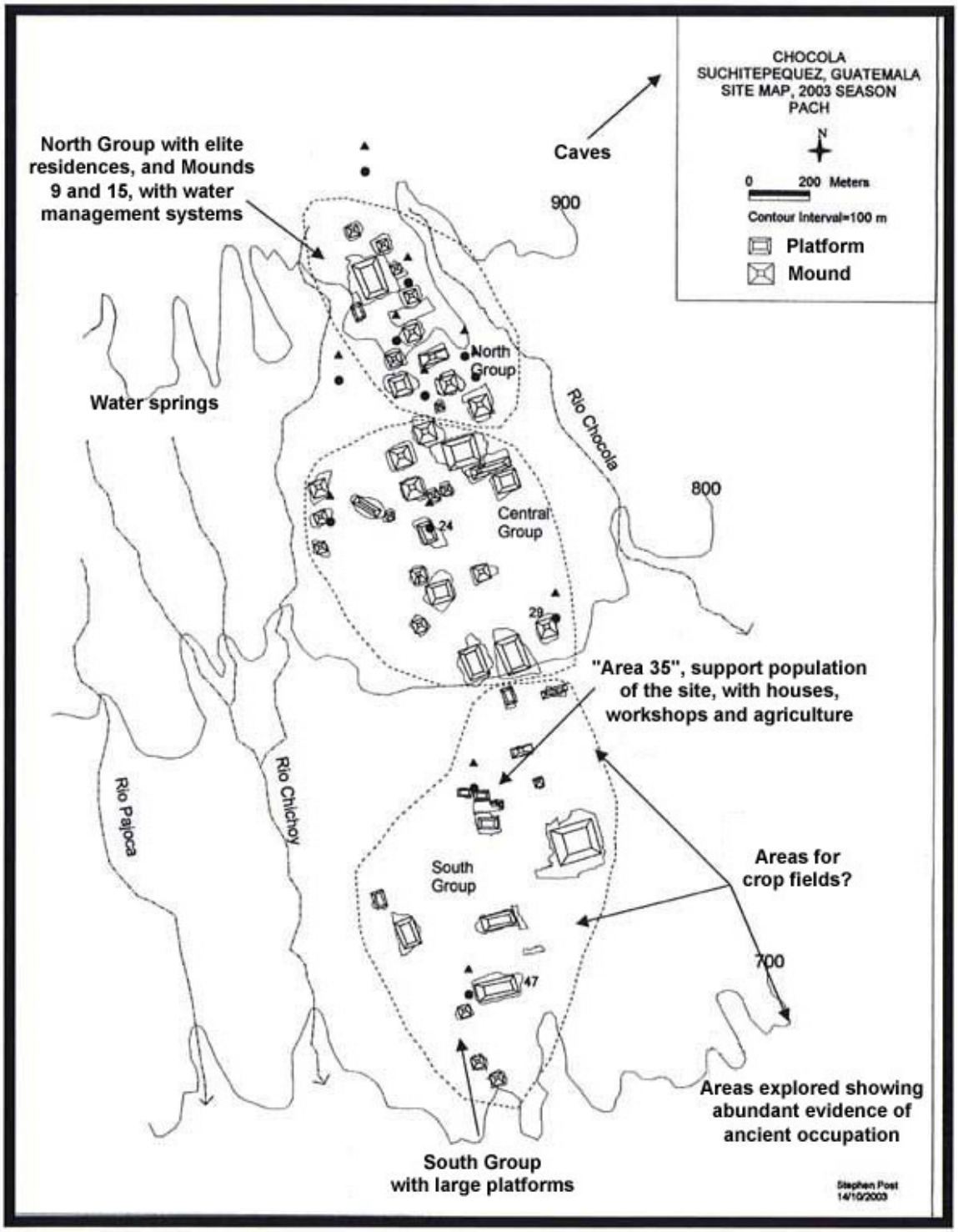

Figure 8. Major architectural groups at Chocolá as established by the mapping completed during the 2003 and 2004 season.

The Excavation Process

During the 2004 season, Structures 5 and 15 located at the southern and northern ends of the site were excavated. However, prior to initiating the process, a different survey technique based on the use of a gradiometer was utilized, which helped to detect anomalies in the subsoil, such as garbage pits, underground constructions, activity areas, etc.

Figure 9. Excavation process.

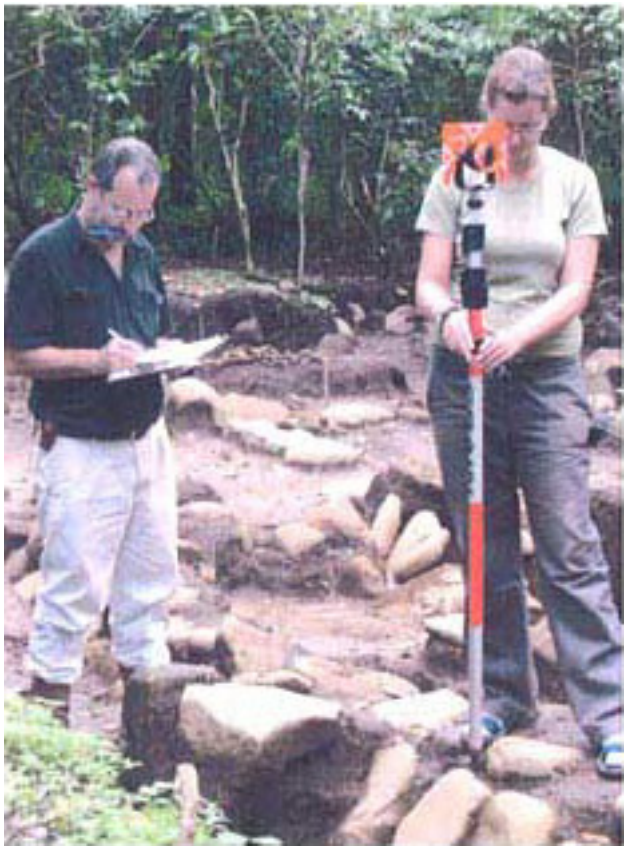

Figure 10. Data capture.

Excavation of Structure 5

This was an extended platform, 44 m long, 20 m wide, and 5 m in height (Figure 9, Figure 10, Figure 11 and Figure 12). The platform's walls were constructed with cobbles and, apparently, the platform had two main sections. Remains of up to eight courses are still visible on the North side of the first section, forming a sloping wall, while some remains of an access stairway may be observed on the East side, in front of the plaza. The presence of rounded corners on the northeast and southeast ends, and angular, inset corners should be pointed out as a distinctive trait. Both cases represent a typical tradition of the Late Preclassic Mayan architecture, but not of the sites from the Bocacosta, except for the recent discoveries in Abaj Takalik (Schieberg and Orrego, 2002). The ceramic and architectural evidence allows us to date the construction of Structure 5 in the Late Preclassic period.

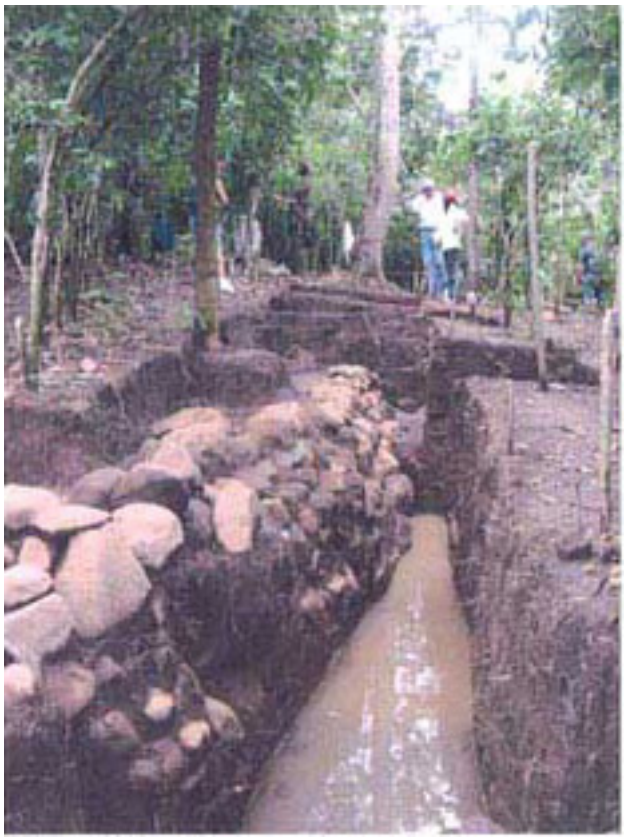

Figure 11. North wall of building.

Figure 12. Angular inset corners.

Excavation of Structure 15

It is located in an area with a dense Late Preclassic occupation at the northern border of the site, formed by groups of buildings constructed on wide natural terraces that gently slope down towards the south, providing a wonderful panoramic view of the entire region.

Figure 13. Northeast view of the structure.

The excavations revealed the presence of several platforms, therefore we proceeded to excavate the one denominated 15-1 (Figure 13 and Figure 14). It turned out to be a construction of only 0.40 m in height, with cobblestone lining and dirt floors, that measured 12 m long by 6 m wide and was oriented towards the east, where it had two wide access steps. Above the floor of the platform we uncovered the remains of stone walls, which possibly served to divide rooms, yet neither the remains of walls nor postholes were located on the platform's surface. This has prevented, so far, the identification of its precise function, though the finding of a ritual offering on the central axis should be pointed out. A cache composed of a large pitcher and five flat stones in vertical position, associated with the ancient tradition of the quadripartite pattern and the *axis mundi* at the center, as a joining axis between time and space. Clearly, the rituals and ceremonies conducted by rulers and priests around such central axis would be aimed at metaphorically unleashing, once again, the process of creation, securing the regeneration and continuity of life.

Figure 14. Steps in Eastern façade.

Figure 15. Canal with flagstone cover.

Knowledge of Hydraulic Management

The excavations adjacent to Structure 15-1 uncovered a system of canals that run in different directions following a straight or curvilinear orientation adapted to the terrain, with ramifications, and the particularly notable finding of a water distribution outlet (Figure 15, Figure 16 and Figure 17). Several construction techniques for canals were detected, such as: 1) construction with stones on the four sides, 2) construction with stones on three sides and an earthen floor, 3) construction with stones on two sides, an earthen floor and no cover, 4) construction with stones on three sides and no cover.

Figure 16. View of canal from North Group.

Based on the discovery of at least another five sections of canals at different parts of the site, the existence of a very extensive and sophisticated system of management and manipulation of water throughout the city was recognized, confirming the significance of this resource and the existence of an administrative structure that took care of its correct functioning. Similar canals with the same temporality, the Late Preclassic period, have been reported at Abaj Takalik and Kaminaljuyú, where the best possible advantage of the unevenness of the ground was used so that waters would run as desired.

Figure 17. Canal and branching adjacent to Structure 15.

Figure 18. Vessels recovered during the salvage.

Archaeological Salvage

During water source excavation works carried out by the local municipality, the workers discovered several vessels and consequently a salvage excavation was initiated (Kaplan, Valdés and Paredes, 2005). It was a cluster of 11 complete vessels with other fragmentary ones (Figure 18 and Figure 19), located in the middle of a mound split in half by a dirt road, 300 m Southeast of Structure 5, to the South of Chocolá. The vessels were complete although fragmented, and because of their form and decoration they have been assigned a dating corresponding to the Protoclassic period due to the occurrence of mammiform supports, orange slips, resist decoration, and the presence of an incised dark brown vase. They all form a semicircle, and they seem to represent the funeral offering of a burial of which no bone remains were found, possibly destroyed by the climatic conditions of rain and humidity that prevail in the area, as well as by its closeness to the surface.

Figure 19. Excavation of offering adjacent to Structure 5.

Preparation of the Sculpted Monuments Catalog

This study was planned with the purpose of recovering the largest possible amount of information on the plain and sculpted monuments from Chocolá and neighboring regions, as the monuments are no longer in their place of origin. This issue is particularly interesting, considering that information on regional sculpture is scarce, with the exception of Monument 1 from Chocolá, sculpted in a manner similar to Altar 10 from Kaminaljuyú (Valdés and Kaplan, 2003). Another spectacular example is the "Suchitepéquez Altar", although it is of unknown origin and the only information available indicates that it was found in the vicinities of San Antonio Suchitepéquez, located a few kilometers away from Chocolá.

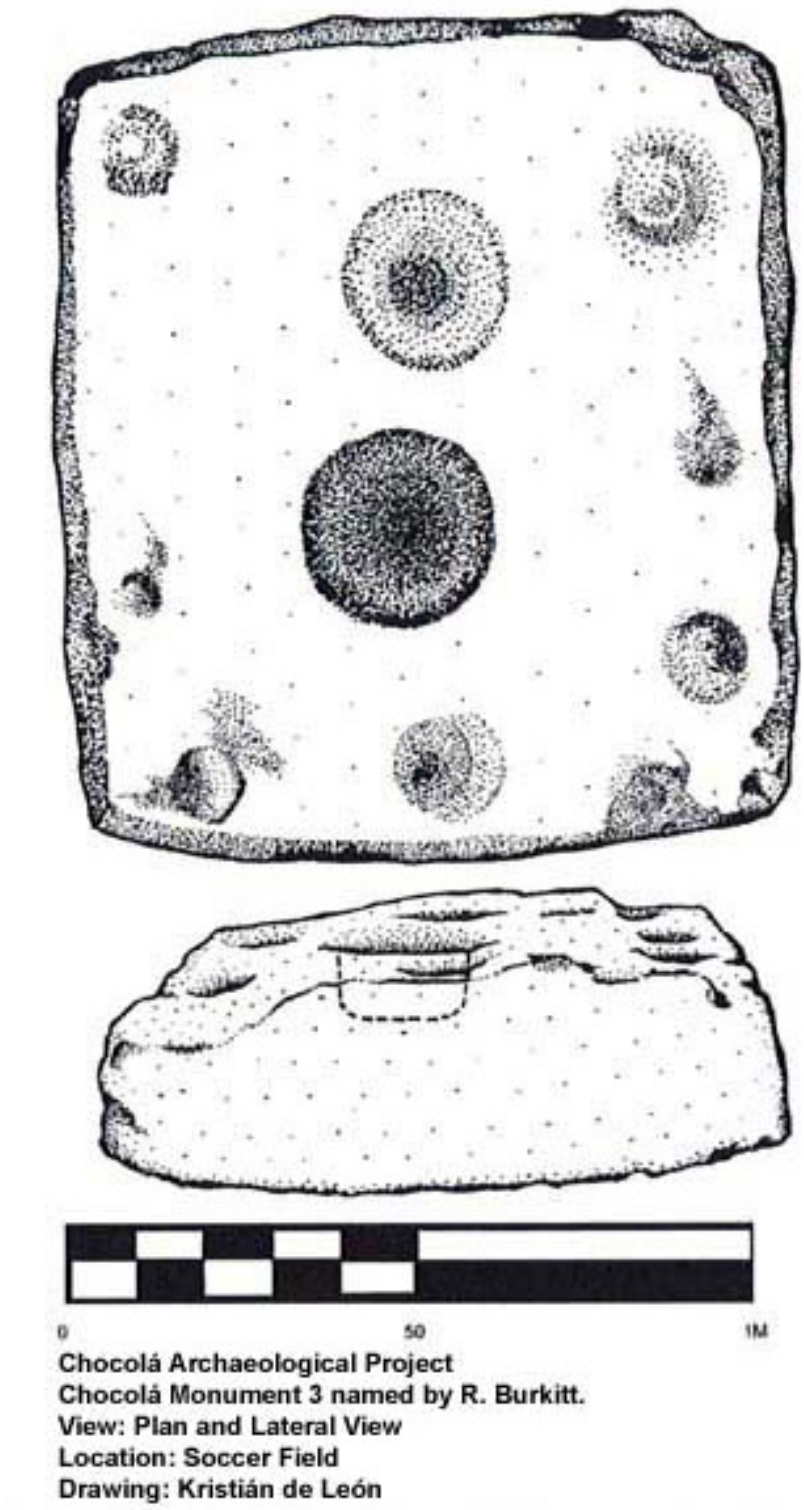

Figure 20. Sculpted Altar from Chocolá with circular perforations.

Presently, there are a number of monuments in the soccer field of the village, yet they do not resemble the altars mentioned earlier as some of them are plain and the others show circular holes on their surfaces (Figure 20 and Figure 21). Therefore, we suggest the following possibilities: 1) several sculptural styles existed at the site, 2) the monuments reflect a different temporal occupation,

and 3) some of the monuments were not of a local origin. This third suggested possibility arose after the review of historic documents which stated that during the presence of German farmers in the region (1896-1943) some sculpted monuments were moved, from the site of Palo Gordo and from other farms administered by them to Chocolá, for their exhibition at a park. However, after the Germans abandoned Chocolá, the property was put under the administration of the Guatemalan government and, as time went by, the monuments gradually disappeared leaving no or scarce traces of their existence, with the exception of the old pictures and drawings made by Robert Burkitt (1930).

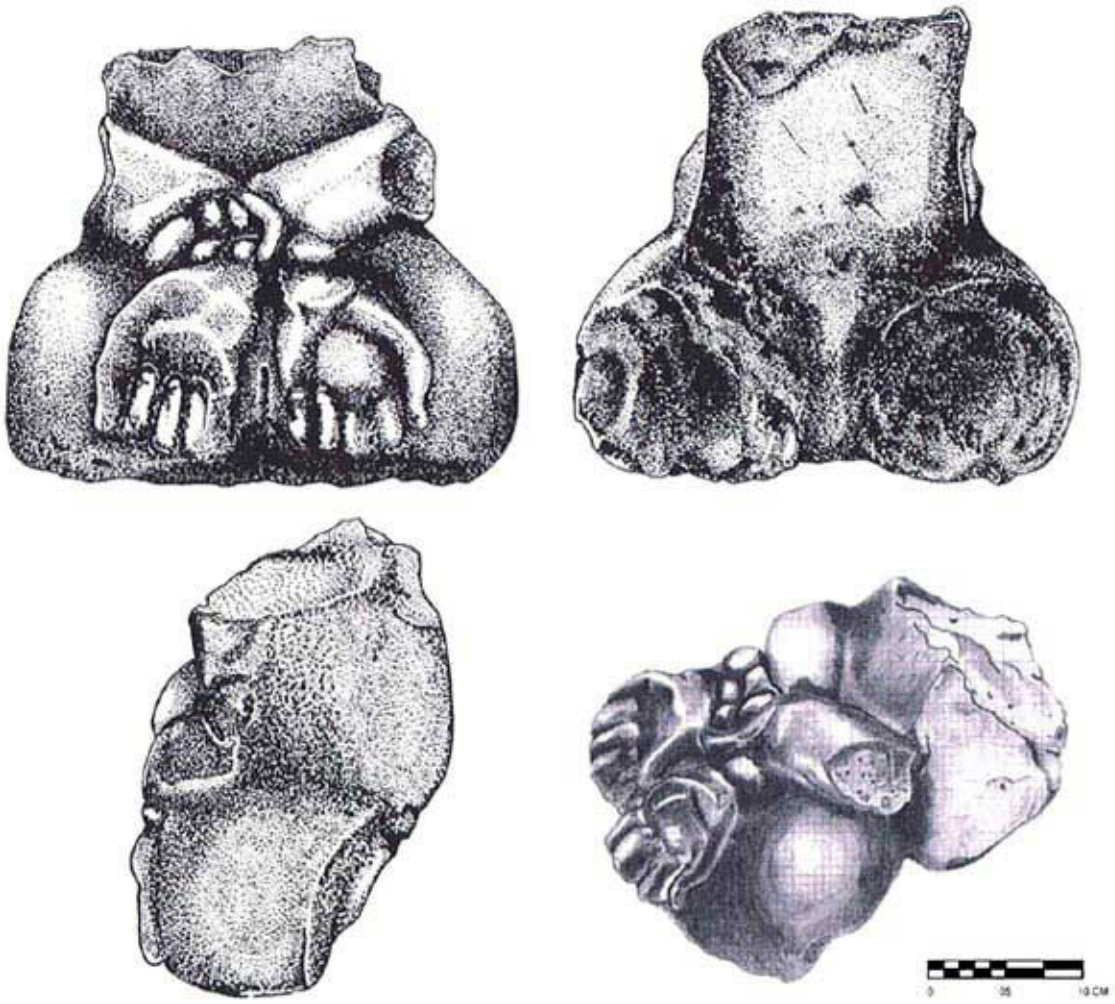

Figure 21. Monument at Chocolá representing a prisoner.

As previously discussed, the catalog was initiated using index cards to keep records that allowed for comparisons with other sculptural corpuses from the Southern coast, as a quick consultation document. Presently, there are 22 sculptures in the project's catalog, which keeps growing with the inclusion of other sculpted monuments from adjacent regions, that will serve to establish comparisons (Figure 22). Such associations allow us to deal with ideological and religious references to search deeper into the representations of complex cultures evidenced in the other regions.

Figure 22. Example of sculpted monument discovered in the Bocacosta region.

Figure 23. Vessels from a private collection.

Ceramic Analysis

The surface collection systematically recovered during the transect surveys was the basis for the first formal assessment regarding the extended period of occupation at the site. This has been confirmed by excavations, when sealed lots of ceramic fragments from the Middle Preclassic period to the Late Classic period were found, while on the surface there were sherds from the Postclassic period, fully identified (Figure 23 and Figure 24).

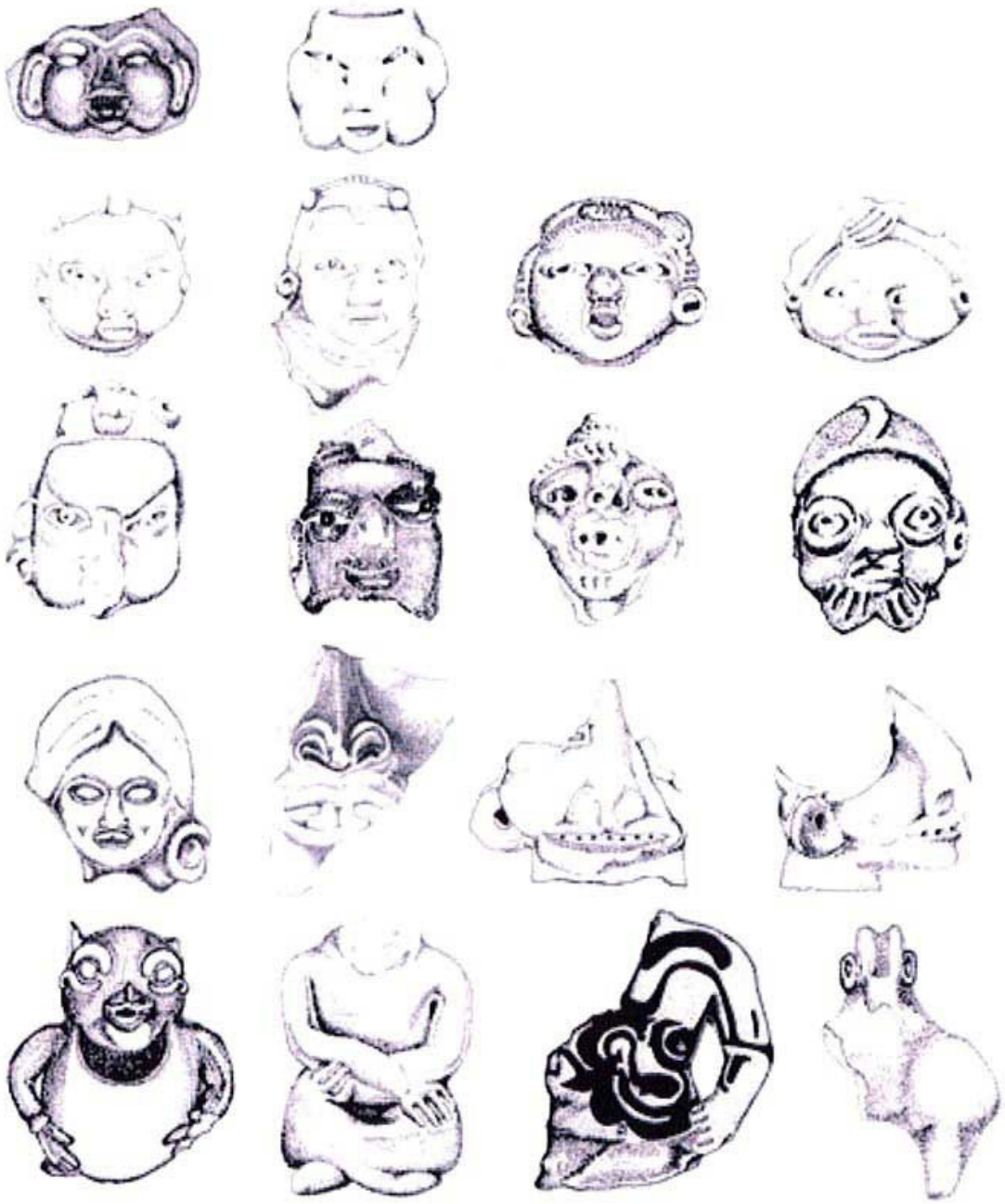

Figure 24. Sampler of figurines from the Preclassic and Classic periods found by the Chocolá Project.

The sample has been compared at the Ceramoteca of the Institute of Anthropology with typologies from other sites of the Highlands and the South coast, finding plates of orange glossy ware and bowls with black slip from the Middle Preclassic period. For the following period there are dark brown ware vessels, as well as plates with mammiform supports and bowls with orange slip and conical supports as Protoclassic markers. One tripod vase with cylindrical supports was among the few materials recovered from the Early Classic period, while Firpo type ollas, Tiquisate ceramics, and the late

plumbates mark the occupation of the Late Classic and early Postclassic periods. Dr. Marion Hatch has collaborated in corroborating opinions and dates.

A suitable database for cross referencing is being developed and we anticipate that, thanks to the good state of preservation of the Chocolá ceramics, it may be possible to prepare a reliable typology for the Bocacosta region, since, lamentably, one is nonexistent at this time due to the poor conditions of preservation of the Abaj Takalik pottery.

Obsidian Analysis

The first study comprised 3,000 objects recovered during this season, indicating a different use and function. As expected, most of them originated in the Chayal source (56%), dominated by Kaminaljuyú, but interestingly, there also exists quite a high percentage of obsidian from the San Martín Jilotepeque source, in Chimaltenango (41%).

The analysis is also revealing that prismatic blades were the most common artifact, as is also the case with other sites of the southern coast. Because of its morphological characteristics, the prismatic blade easily adapts to the work of cutting, both at a domestic and a specialized level. The absence of exhausted cores may indicate that the blades could have been manufactured prior to their arrival at the site, as it has also been noted at Escuintla for the Middle and Late Preclassic periods (Carpio, 1997). However, a moderate production at the site of Chocolá should not be put aside as the possibility exists that some exhausted prismatic cores were reduced later on through the bipolar technique.

This situation will be looked at again when we excavate the areas considered as ''workshops'', at the southeast of the site, places that include large platforms with small residences on top, and where can be observed in plain view thousands of small lithic artifacts lying on the surface of the modern ground. For the moment, the percentages noted regarding the presence of the two major sources of exploitation should be seriously considered, as in the first place they confirm Chocolá's commercial relationships with sites from the Highlands, and specifically, with Kaminaljuyú. Second, it will be important to learn how one source was replaced by the other one, and whether this had something to do with the political changes that took place at the dawn of the Early Classic period in the Highlands region.

Industrial Archaeology Research

The modern village of Chocolá is partially located on top of the ancient ruins of the pre-Hispanic settlement with the same name. During the end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth, it was transformed into a profitable coffee plantation run by a German company that generated the power for the functioning of the machinery through a system of hydraulic energy. The Germans were expelled during World War II, and no more equipment was bought from that source, instead, the machinery was bought from England and the United States, demonstrating that the political power and the world order had changed (Cambranes, 1996).

Figure 25. View of the coffee processing plant.

We decided to include a specific study on this subject in view of Chocolá's significance during the beginning of the industrial age in Guatemala, made evident by the machines that are still being used at the workshop and at the farm's coffee processing plant, which tells us of a dynamic epoch in regard to the economic, social, cultural and political issues (Figure 25, Figure 26 and Figure 27). These pieces of machinery have endured up to the present and are still working, being physical evidence of the historical evolution of both the country and the community of Chocolá. This gives rise to the research question: how can a machinery-archaeology connection be established? We considered that a possible answer would lie in gaining knowledge about the machines, to later take them as archaeological artifacts located in time and space, and within a historic context.

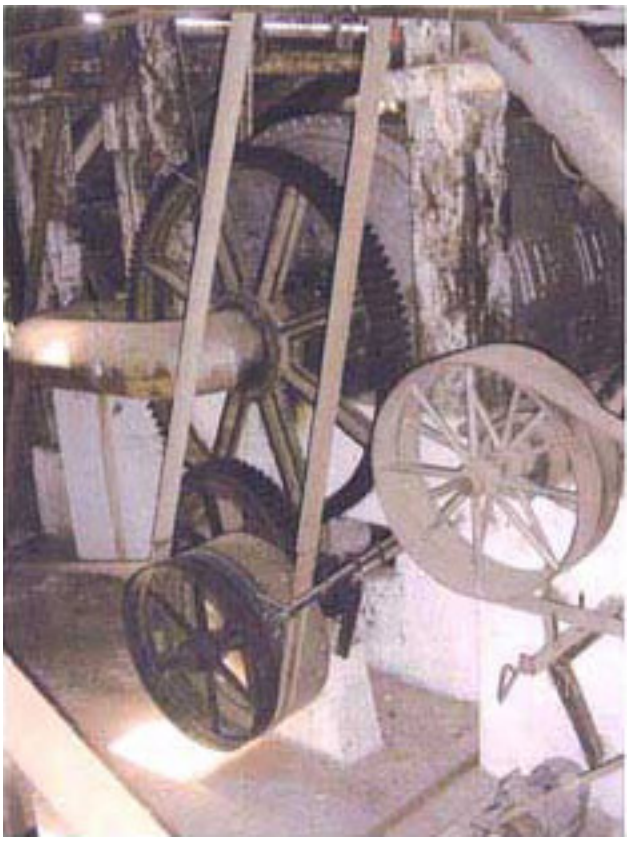

Figure 26. Mechanism of coffee-dryer machine.

The program for industrial archaeology of the Chocolá Archaeological Project seeks to create a complete record of the coffee machinery powered by hydraulic energy. In Latin America, industrial archaeology as an archaeological practice is new, therefore, we attempted to apply the archaeological methodology of classification, recording and dating of the industrial remains, in this case, of machines used for the production of coffee. Machines as study objects are a part of the archaeological investigation, and may be classified, photographed, measured and drawn, while their component materials may be identified.

Figure 27. Patent Record in favor of José Guardiola.

Final Comments

The 2004 season produced crucial evidence regarding the archaeological potential of Chocolá. This includes the data collection of Preclassic architecture not previously reported earlier, and evidence of the extensive water management systems, of the existence of sculptural styles both at a local and regional level, and of the commercial relationships maintained with other sites at the coast and the highlands.

The map was widened to 10 km^2, thus allowing for the detection of abundant cultural traits, activity areas and growing fields adjacent to streams, as evidence of the agro-botanical potential this area must have had to support its pre-Hispanic population. The results of excavations in the two buildings intervened are promising, and have allowed for the identification of construction systems, temporality and indications of ritual activity. Over 35,000 objects were recovered in 2004, including 16 complete vessels, which helped define the typology of the ceramic material. The long distance connections and the participation within a regional political sphere come to life and produce answers as excavations grow wider and further results are obtained from the analysis of materials at the laboratory. In addition, the preparation of the catalog of monuments is as well providing information on Chocolá's participation within political spheres (relationships maintained with Abaj Takalik, Kaminaljuyú and other smaller sites from the coastal area), providing a glimpse of the coexistence of an "official", finely sculpted art, with another "popular" type, simpler and at times "semi-grotesque" in the eyes of the western art, though the people who created it probably felt otherwise.

In short, the investigation of the 2004 season has made very significant contributions and has enhanced our knowledge about this great site which remains nearly intact. From every point of view, it is a seminal site of higher culture for the region of the Bocacosta in Guatemala.

Acknowledgements

The 2004 field season was made possible thanks to the help of several cultural organizations, but I want to particularly mention the grant #03033 provided by the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI), as without their help our proposed goals would not have been achieved.

I wish to acknowledge the constant support of the authorities and inspectors of the many offices within the Director General of Cultural and Natural Heritage of Guatemala, as well as the interest shown by the political authorities of San Pablo Jocopilas and Chocolá, the students, the members of the community and the workers who participated in the investigation, as they at all times encouraged us with positive comments on the project's activities.

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