

## MYTHICAL ORIGINS, SYMBOLS AND RITUALS AT CHOCOLA AND THE SOUTHERN MAYA LOWLANDS

*Juan Antonio Valdés*

*Cristina Vidal*

**Keywords:** Maya Archaeology, Southern Coast, Chocola, Offerings, Iconography

The Chocola Archaeological Project initiated fieldwork one year ago, with a program of survey, mapping, and test pit excavations. Throughout the research process, our attention was strongly caught by the almost threatening proximity of the Sierra Madre mountain range on two of the sides that surround the archaeological site, while both to the north and east, human vestiges seem to be intermixed with nature. The landscape is striking because the observer feels that the northern mountains are within hand's reach, where the crystalline waters of countless creeks are born, generators of life and prosperity for human beings. Water descends along the surroundings of the site to fertilize the soil and to improve the regional agriculture that includes the growing of precious cacao, so famous since Prehispanic and colonial times.



**Figure 1** View of the Atitlan volcano that defines the sacred landscape, east of Chocola.

Chroniclers have said, just like the first bishop of Guatemala don Pedro Cortez y Larraz (1958), that the cacao from the Suchitepequez area was by far the best in Guatemala. At the east the situation is similar and one may breathe and feel a great calm, transmitted by the imposing presence of the Atitlan volcano (Figure 1) that raises majestically and proudly almost 3,500 m above sea level and sticks out

above the other mountains towards Chocola and the coastal area. No doubt this landscape did not go unnoticed by the ancient inhabitants, but rather, it marked and defined a close ideological relationship between man and nature, integrating mountains, caves, rivers and ravines as part of the sacred geography of Chocola and of their notion of the cosmos.

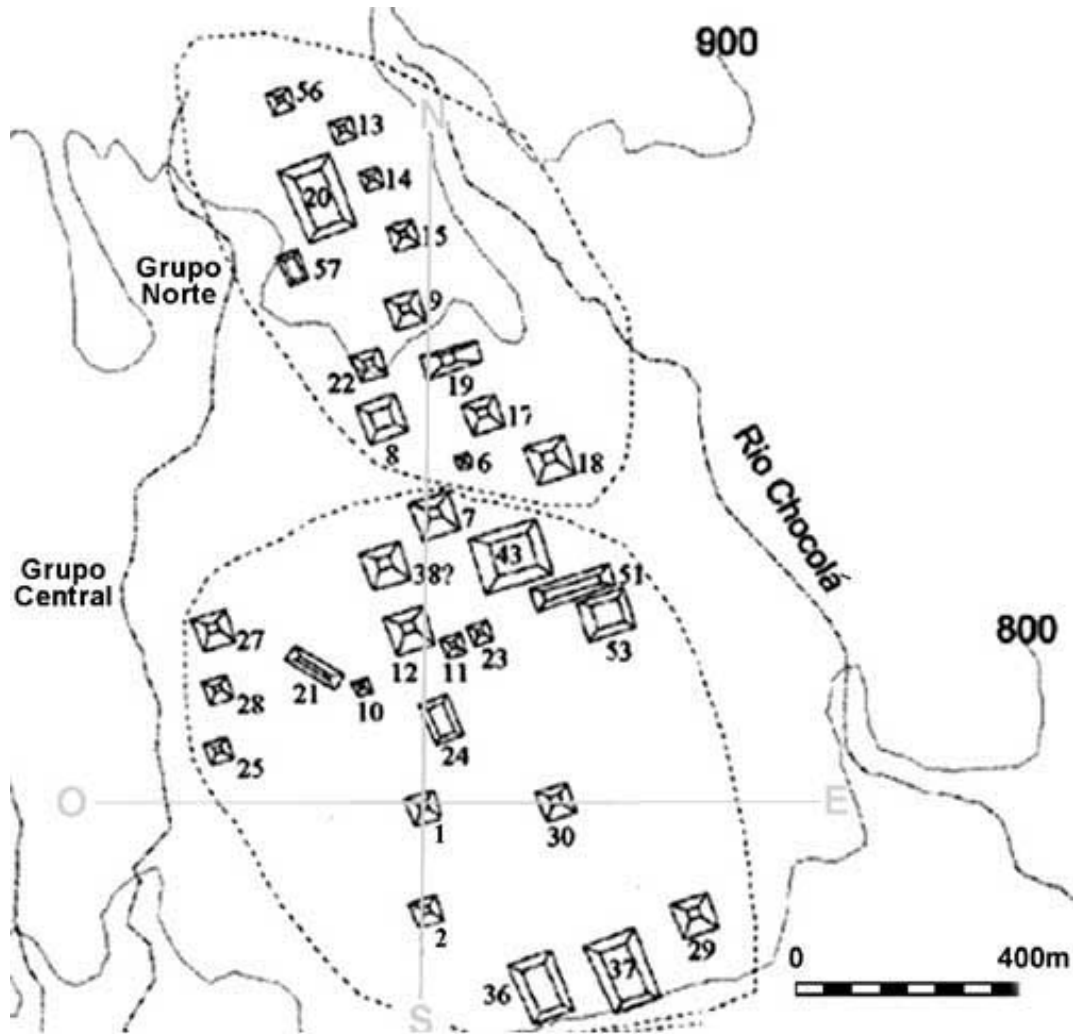


Figure 2. East-west and north-south axis of the Chocola structures.

Taking into account such a privileged geographic setting, observations of the solar course were conducted in the days close to the summer solstice, which allowed to know the linear relationship between Mound 1 and Mound 30, that form the east and west sides of a wide plaza located at the heart of the site (Figure 2). However, it was even more important to confirm the prolongation of the line that defines an east-west axis between both mounds and the peaks of the high mountains to the east, towards the Atitlan volcano, to confirm the earlier presumption regarding the existing links between the sacred geography and the planning and urbanization of the plaza, which may be traced back at least to the Late Preclassic period (Valdés *et al.* 2004).

It is of common knowledge that ancient astronomers devoted much of their lives attempting to understand the passage and count of time and to refine their calendar systems by using selected geographic points as a frame of reference. The

observation of time cycles has been in force since the Middle Preclassic period through architecture, with the construction of *“mound alignments, suggesting that prior to the development of the complex calendar, the beginning of the year was marked by sketching an axis on which sanctuaries were aligned, according to the extreme annual positions at sunrise and sunset during the solstices of June and December”* (Aveni 1993:57).

The constructions known as Group E have been widely documented in the lowlands in locations such as Tikal, Nakbe, and the site of Blackman Eddy for the Middle Preclassic period (Valdés 1995; Freidel 2003), but others with a similar antiquity have also been reported at Chiapa de Corzo, Lagartero, and La Libertad, in Chiapas. Shortly afterwards, in the Late Preclassic period, many sites erected similar complexes, including the Valley of Guatemala in the vicinities of Kaminaljuyú at the sites of Rincón, Las Charcas, Rosario Naranjo, Cruz de Cotiío and San Isidro II (Shook 1952; Murdy 1990; Valdés 1995).

The previous observation has led to presume that if the inhabitants of Chocola conducted solar observations, just like all other contemporary Mesoamerican peoples, they must have also placed some emphasis in exploring the canopy of heaven at sundown and at nightfall, when the coastal sky is covered with stars, the sky is clear, and the moon is outstanding. Although this has not yet been studied in Chocola, the possibility should be taken into account, considering that Marion Popenoe de Hatch (2002) has proposed that during the Late Preclassic period the inhabitants of Tak' alik Ab'aj aligned sculpted monuments with the star Eta Draconis from the Draco Constellation, associated with Structure 7.

The observation of the night sky has been an enigma and will always attract the attention of human beings, disregarding their culture or the historic moment they may be going through, because ever since the celestial bodies became associated with cosmic divinities, the need emerged to raise temples or sanctuaries to be used as shrines in which to reproduce the movements of the stars, a trend common to most cultures from antiquity, both in the Old and the New Worlds, although in the case of the Maya the cycles of the Moon and Venus were particularly well documented.

The interest for the visual observation northwards may make some sense at Chocola, where there is a north-south axis that passes adjacent to, or above Mounds 1, 2, 12, 7, 9 and 15 (Figure 2); consequently, it would be worthwhile to study in the future their orientation and meaning. At the same time, it is almost certain that the inhabitants of Chocola noticed the presence of the surrounding lagoons and volcanoes, as a symbolic representation of two of the four elements that form the universe, namely fire and water, two poles of one and the same axis where the igneous element –volcanoes- marked the dominant direction upwards, while the watery element –lagoons and rivers- would indicate the descending direction.

Likewise, the eastern caves and the hot water springs were reference points, since even nowadays, Maya peoples believe them to be sacred places with a magnetic flow. The region around Chocola features abundant caves that are used to worship, as well as hot water springs which define the area as a sacred space, most probably considered by its inhabitants to be highly fertile places full of energy and inhabited by supernatural beings. In fact, even today, the neighboring village of

Samayac is still famous due to the great number of individuals who devote themselves to ceremonial practices, known as witchcraft in popular speech.

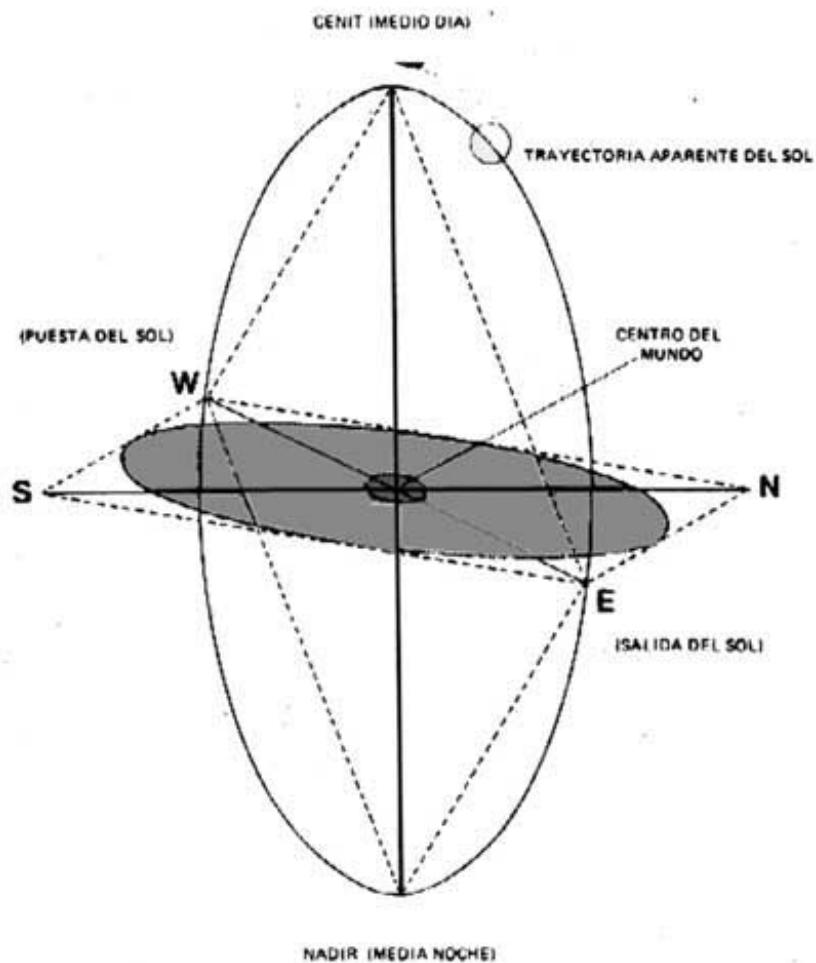
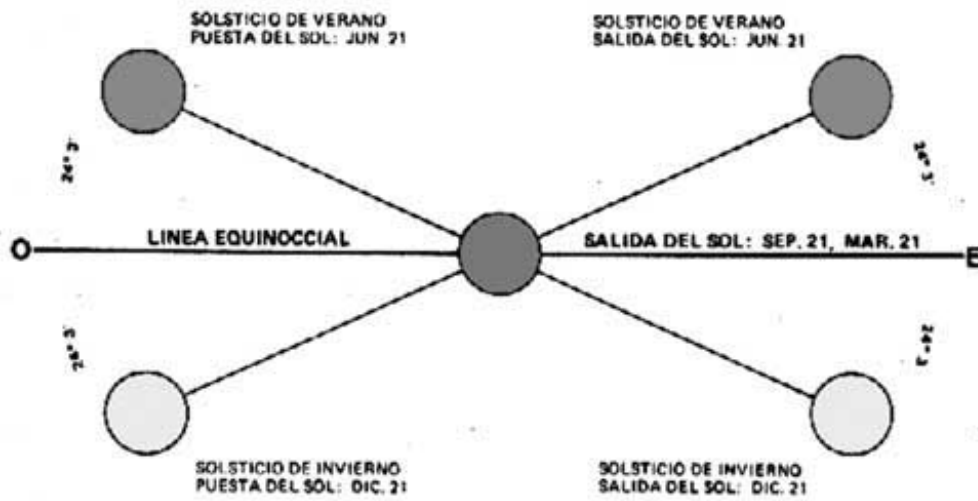


Figure 3. Vertical and horizontal plane with the four corners of heaven and the central axis of the universe (Florescano 1992).

The foregoing information leads to assume that the inhabitants of Chocoma did in fact consider the dual relationship between heaven and earth for city planning, and no doubt also the unity of time and space for their notion of the cosmos. According to indigenous chronicles, the origin of the world took place when the sun was created and the earth emerged from the celestial sea. Archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence shows that in the global view of Mesoamericans since the Preclassic period and up to Colonial times, the universe manifested itself in two planes (Figure 3): a horizontal plane (that of real life) and a vertical one (that of supernatural life). *“The horizontal plane has four sides that define the four cardinal directions, which is intercepted by the vertical plane known as tree of life or axis mundi”* (Logan 2000), originating the conceptualization of the fifth cardinal point, the center, representing the most important of them all. This defined the belief in the quadripartite division of time and the notion of the four corners of heaven, four deities that carry the world and four trees that are there to support the cosmos. This is shown in multiple examples, including the Madrid Codex with the four supporters of the sky and the central region surrounded by day glyphs, just like it is shown in the calendar wheel of the book of the *Chilam Balam of K'aua*.



**Figure 4. The World Tree among the Olmecs and the renovation of the four corners (Freidel 1999).**

But this quadripartite view of the Maya world goes back to more ancient times, since the Olmec artistic manifestations found at La Venta (Figure 4) show an emphasis on the representation of trees supporting the sky, as one of the most outstanding cosmological signs. In their view, *“the terrestrial plane is divided into quadrants and the cross defines the position of those trees that serve as a union between the surface of the earth, heaven, and the world of the dead; there are five*

*trees, four of which are at the edges of the world and one right in the middle, like a cosmic axis”* (López Austin 1995). Therefore, these trees were considered the paths of the gods, and when rulers were identified with the routes of divine will, they were transformed into the intermediaries between their people and heaven, achieving the right to interpret religious beliefs and practices.

That is why Olmec art depicts images of gods, and possibly of rulers as well, who occupy the position of the sacred tree right at the center, surrounded by the four elements that define the corners around it and considered to be sprouting seeds (Freidel 1999). The significance of the sacred tree or *World Tree* is evident in the central section of the crown they wear on their heads, as can be observed in figures carved in stone axes or in sculptures in the round. It is believed that the Maya inherited from the Olmec a number of religious notions that helped them to develop the sacred ideology, widely documented in the Lowlands. Within the region of the Southern Coast the information is poorer, since with the exception of Izapa and Tak'alik' Ab'aj, there is just a small number of iconographic and epigraphic elements that allow for a deeper analysis. Therefore, we think that more archaeological indicators are to be looked for to recognize resemblances and continuities in the use of shared symbolic elements among the different Mesoamerican cultures. This is one of the goals we are pursuing in the Chocola Project.

## **ONE EXAMPLE AT CHOCOLA**

Regarding what has been discussed so far about the quadripartite pattern (the cosmic relationship between the four cardinal points and the central axis that defines the fifth), we shall now present information related to the recent discovery of Feature 14 found in Chocola, no doubt a good example that other archaeologists may use as a standpoint to acknowledge the antiquity of this habit.

Works planned for the 2004 field season included the excavation of Mound 15, located at the north edge of the site, in an area linked with a heavy Preclassic occupation associated with the ruling class (Kaplan et al. 2004). The north section in Chocola includes foundation groups and pyramid buildings up to 20 m high, built on large natural platforms that gently cascade down following a north-south direction, providing a wonderful view of the region. The excavations conducted in 2003 at Mound 15 revealed several canals oriented towards different cardinal directions, which allowed for the first time to learn about the presence of a water management system there (Valdés et al. 2004; Paredes et al., n.d.). During the 2004 season, additional information was recovered about the canal system found in this place, and our knowledge was widened.

Research conducted in the upper part of Mound 15 revealed the presence of several platforms, and excavations were conducted in one of them, denominated Structure 1. This is a low platform built with stones during the Late Preclassic period, slightly exceeding 12 m by 5 m and oriented towards the east, where its banquette, consisting of two wide steps, allows access to the upper portion, where there was a construction made of perishable materials. Its function has not been ascertained so far, because its surface shows several alignments and clusters of stone that seem to

indicate partitions between built environments or specialized areas, and is presently under analysis.

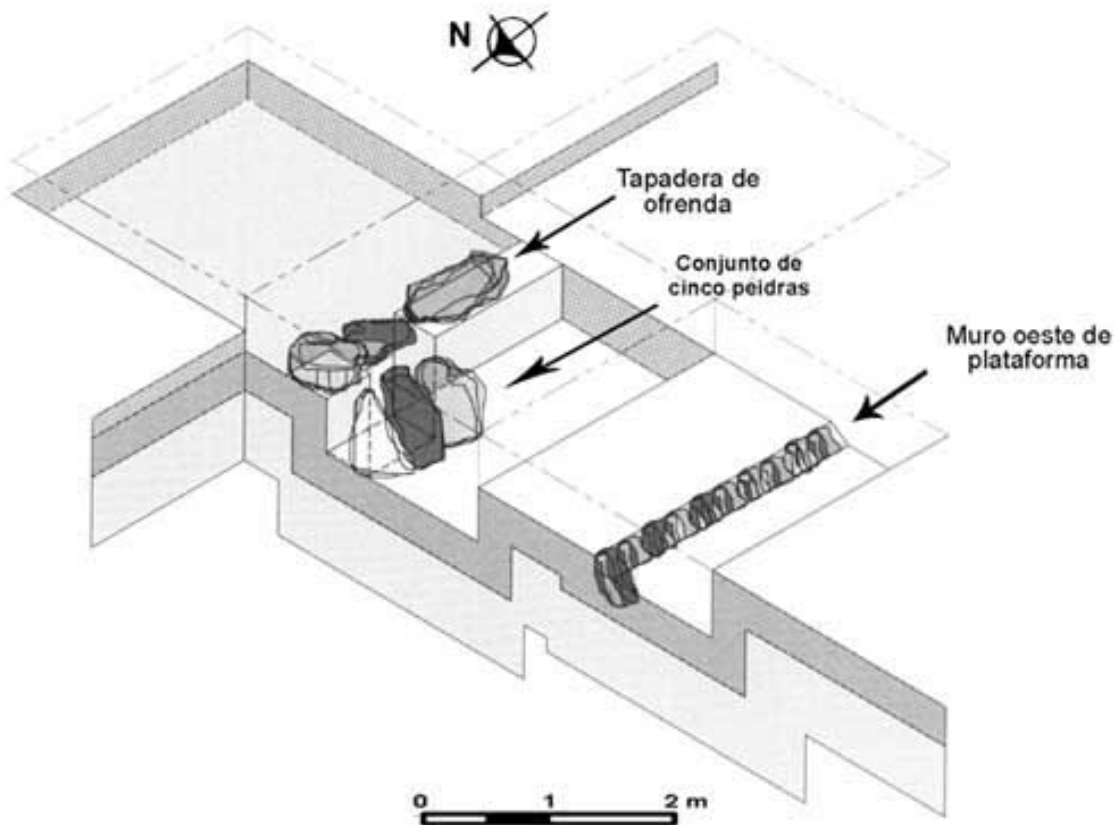


Figure 5. Photo of the offering (Trait 14) uncovered at the center of Structure 1.



Figure 6. Late Preclassic pot found with the offering.

The excavation of a pit at the center of the platform revealed Feature 14, an offering dedicated to the construction of that space (Figure 5). It looks like a seemingly plain offering, but full of symbolism. It consists of a large, brown pot (Figure 6), deposited on a poorly compacted soil level, with a thin layer of black earth around the vessel that could suggest burning, and probably indicating some ritual action at the time of being put in place. The vessel was buried with earth, and immediately on top, three flat stones following a north-south axis were deposited. When the piece was removed, we had an improved view of the large size of this pot, with clay fillets in the portion close to its rim, which allow to date it to the Late Preclassic period, although the corresponding ceramic type could not be identified since it is not commonly found in the ceramic inventory of the area. No objects were recovered during the cleaning of the vessel's interior, but the earth will undergo flotation later.



**Figure 7. View of eastern side, Trait 14, showing three of five vertical stones (drawing: M. Valladares).**

Immediately to the west of the pot was discovered a cluster of five flat stones set in a vertical position, and again, remains of another very thin black layer were seen above the soil level where the stones were found, possibly an additional ritual burning (Figure 7). It would seem that the placing of the offering involved the opening of the hole, followed by the placement of the vessel and the ritual burning next to it. The ceremony continued by putting in place the group of five stones and a new burning. The importance of this group of stones is due to the fact that all of them



have been deliberately placed, each one respecting the space of the others (Figures 8 and 9). Two slightly separated stones occupy the north position, while two others occupy the southern end, leaving the largest one in the central position. This particular placement was both premeditated and symbolical, and shows the quadripartite pattern associated with the five cardinal directions, in a similar way to what we have been discussing in this work.



**Figure 8. Photo of the group integrated by the five vertically placed stones.**



**Figure 9. Photo of the group formed by the five vertically placed stones.**

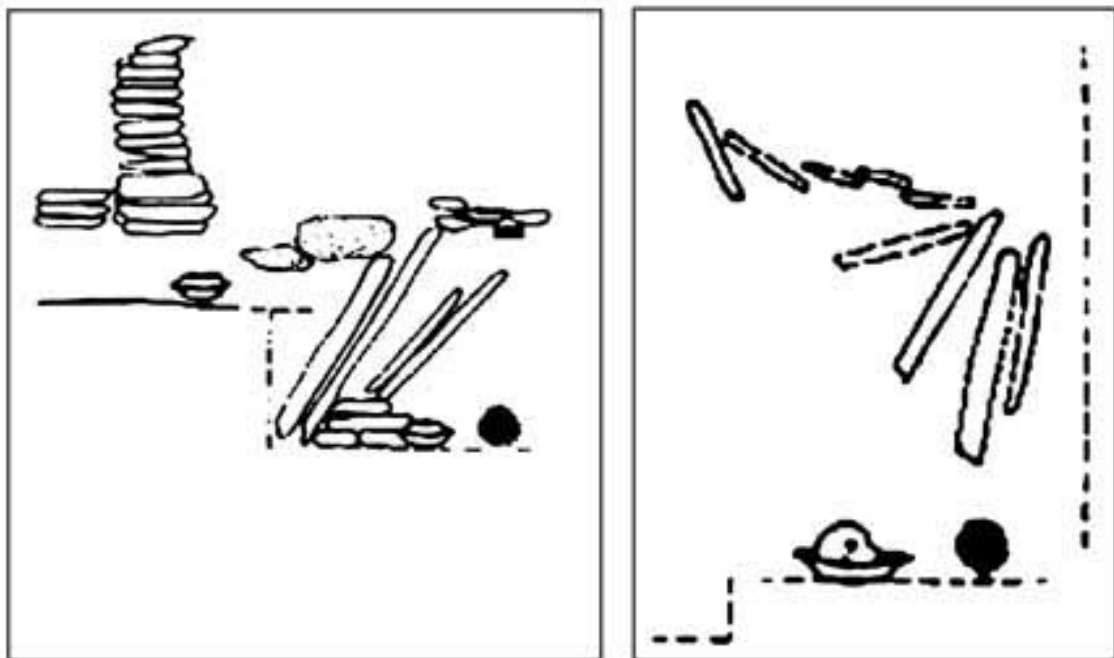
As stated already, the number five was very important in the notion that Mesoamerican man had of the cosmos, as it reflected the four cosmic directions in whose intersection lay the *axis mundi* or axis of the universe, around which the creative process was unfolded, something alike the *omphalos* or navel of the world. An axis that not only brings space together but also time, which in the sacred architecture of the Maya would be the one that runs vertically through their stylized temple-mountains. As is well known, the rituals and ceremonies that took place on top of the temples, conducted by rulers and priests around such central axis, would be intended to trigger once more, metaphorically, the entire creational process, thus securing the regeneration and continuity of life.

These stones, which merely seem to be rocky objects, had a huge magical symbolism, as this was not only a dedicatory offering to the construction, but one that reached far beyond, echoing an ancestral ritual that showed the power of kings over time and space. Likewise, the central stone represented the *axis mundi* and its associated symbolism, implying the power of the king over his people, the placement of the building in the environment, the position of the ruler in specific rituals or the location of the city within the Maya cosmos. In any case, the act of placing these five stones granted a special character to the building and framed it within a cosmic pattern.

This point of intersection would also be the point of union of the four elements composing the universe, that is, fire with water in the north-south direction, and earth and air in the east-west direction, because as stated elsewhere (Vidal 2000:47) “the important thing is that in this creative process two opposing forces able to

*concentrate their energy on one single point may come together, triggering, in turn, the origin of all things”.*

Similar arrangements using stone slabs in a vertical position were discovered during the excavation of two pits in the center of Structure 7 of La Lagunita, El Quiché (Ichon and Arnauld 1985). Both cases involved the graves of high ranking individuals from the Late Preclassic period, who may have been rulers (Figure 10). In Grave 1, five schist slabs were put in place to protect or to cover the body of an important character, while in Grave 2 the slabs are protecting the body of another person; Alain Ichon believed this was the grave of a shaman, due to the divination objects present in his funerary offerings, including rock crystals and quartz together with eleven vessels. Another similar example of the quadripartite pattern was the finding of an offering in Structure 6B at Cerros (Schele and Freidel 1990), where four little jade heads were placed around a bigger one that occupied the central point, and which in Freidel’s view echoed the power of the deceased sovereign and the objects of communication with the sacred world of the supernatural.



**Figure 10. Position of stones in graves 1 and 2 discovered at the site of La Lagunita, El Quiché (Ichon and Arnauld 1985).**

## **FINAL DISCUSSION ABOUT SYMBOLISM**

Undoubtedly, archaeological studies have supported the anthropological observation according to which human beings establish standards for social, political and religious coexistence, as they gradually turn into organized groups and increasingly complex societies. Ethnographic studies, in turn, have shown that the cosmological concepts that shaped the world view of the ancient Maya have not completely faded away. In this regard the work conducted at Zinacantán, Chiapas stands out (Vogt 1993), where the quadripartite arrangement of the town was

confirmed. This is a town that performs as a cross and maintains the relationship between man and sacred geography in the concepts of time and space.

There is evidence for ancient symbolic practices that were linked with cultural forms introduced after the Spanish Conquest, like the use of crosses to emulate the existence of the five cardinal points. After the Conquest, the Maya lands were devastated by the followers of the newly imposed religion, in such a way that local spirits and deities were forced to take refuge in the mountains, woods and at the heart of the hill, with the result that ancient Maya concepts were loaded with a new meaning, giving origin to a unique syncretism where myths and rituals blended (Lara 1993). That is why the conception of the five cardinal points had to be rendered in a new way and materialized in the Catholic cross, accompanied by elements of nature such as flowers, colored feathers, and copal, and permeated by an ancestral symbolism.

The discovery of the five stones within Structure 1 at Chocola (Feature 14) makes it clear that ritual practices were not necessarily to be conducted on top of steep pyramidal structures; they would take place as well in low buildings considered at first sight as of secondary importance to the eye of the archaeologist. Therefore, research should not be guided by the height of the buildings, but rather, the observation of the environment and the relationship with possible sacred points will allow to gain a better understanding of the beliefs and practices of the ancient Maya culture.

That is why it is not surprising that the offering of Chocola included the five slabs mentioned earlier, which *a priori* may go unnoticed but that are undoubtedly imbued with a strong symbolic meaning and represent one additional testimony of the significance that the inhabitants of Chocola granted to the manifestations of the sacred and to the forces of nature, since the earliest times. There was undoubtedly a close relationship *"between human rituals, the shapes of mountains and buildings. Each site shows a particular configuration based on the relationship between the forms derived from nature and those that were created by man... therefore, notwithstanding how modest they may be, towns are active cities and powerful ceremonial centers"* (Scully 1992:72).

In spite of the millennia elapsed since the local inhabitants of Chocola deposited the offerings in Feature 14 sometime in the Late Preclassic period, we may still observe in the Maya people the tight bonds they have with nature and the cardinal directions, and how all this blends together in the beliefs, mythical practices and cave-related rituals, water sources and mountains, making it possible for them to be in touch with their gods and benefactors to obtain food and the good omens that come from the north and the east.

## REFERENCES

Aveny, Anthony

- 1993 Imágenes precolombinas del tiempo. In *La Antigua América, el arte de los Parajes Sagrados* (R. Townsend, editor), pp. 49-59. The Art Institute of Chicago, Grupo Azabache, México.

Cortez y Larraz, Pedro

1958 *Descripción Geográfico Moral de la Diócesis de Goathemala*. Biblioteca "Goathemala", Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala, Vol. XX, volume I and II, Guatemala.

Florescano, Enrique

1992 *Tiempo, espacio y memoria histórica entre los Mayas*. Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas, México.

Freidel, David, Linda Schele and Joy Parker

1999 *El Cosmos Maya, tres mil años por la senda de los chamanes*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México.

Ichon, Alain, and Marie-Charlotte Arnaud

1985 *Le Protoclassique a La Lagunita, El Quiché, Guatemala*. Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique et Institute D'Ethnologie. Paris, France.

Kaplan, Jonathan, Juan Antonio Valdés and Oscar Gutiérrez

2004 *A New Chapter in Maya Archaeology. Results from the First Season at Chocola, a Major New Site in the Hearth of the Seminal Southern Maya Preclassic*. Paper presented at the 69<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting, Society for American Archaeology, Montreal.

Lara, Celso

1996 *El sincretismo religioso y la supervivencia de la cultura indígena*. In *Piezas Maestras Mayas*. Galería Guatemala III, Fundación G & T, pp. 232-236, Guatemala.

Logan Wagner, Eugenio

2000 *El espacio abierto como herramienta de conversión: el caso de Izamal*. In *Arquitectura e ideología de los antiguos mayas*. Memoria de la Segunda Mesa Redonda de Palenque (S. Trejo, editor), pp. 161-175. INAH, México.

López Austin, Alfredo

1995 *Los milenios de la religión mesoamericana*. *Arqueología Mexicana*, II (12): 4-15. Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, México.

Murdy, Carson

1990 *Tradiciones de arquitectura prehispánica en el valle de Guatemala*. In *Anales de la Academia de Geografía e Historia* 64: 349-397. Guatemala.

Paredes Umaña, Federico, Cristina Vidal, Jonathan Kaplan, Juan Antonio Valdés and Diana Belches

n.d. *Evidence of Water Management at Chocola, Guatemala*. Paper, 69<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting, Society for American Archaeology, Montreal.

Popenoe de Hatch, Marion

2002 *Evidencia de un observatorio astronómico en Abaj Takalik*. In *XV Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 2001* (J.P. Laporte, H. Escobedo and

B. Arroyo, editors), pp. 437-443. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala.

Schele, Linda, and David Freidel

1990 *A Forest of Kings. The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya*. William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York.

Scully, Vincent

1993 La humanidad y la tierra en América y Europa. In *La Antigua América, el arte de los Parajes Sagrados* (R. Townsend, editor), pp. 71-81. The Art Institute of Chicago, Grupo Azabache, México.

Shook, Edwin

1952 Lugares arqueológicos del Altiplano Meridional Central de Guatemala. *Antropología e Historia* 4 (2): 3-40. Guatemala.

Valdés, Juan Antonio

1994 Desarrollo cultural y señales de alarma entre los Mayas: El Preclásico Tardío y la transición hacia el Clásico Temprano. In *The Emergence of Lowland Maya Civilization. The Transition from the Preclassic to the Early Classic* (N. Grube, editor), Acta Mesoamericana 8, pp. 71-85, Germany.

Valdés, Juan Antonio, Jonathan Kaplan, Óscar Gutiérrez, Juan Pablo Herrera and Federico Paredes Umaña

2004 Chocola: Un centro intermedio entre la boca costa y el Altiplano de Guatemala durante el Preclásico Tardío. In *XVII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 2003* (J.P. Laporte, B. Arroyo, H. Escobedo and H. Mejía, editors), pp. 449-460. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala.

Vidal Lorenzo, Cristina

2000 El origen del mundo en el arte antiguo. *Ars Longa* 9-10: 37-50. Cuadernos de Arte, Universidad de Valencia, Spain.

Vogt, Evon

1993 La persistencia de la tradición Maya en Zinacantan. In *La Antigua América, el arte de los Parajes Sagrados* (R. Townsend, editor), pp. 61-69). The Art Institute of Chicago, Grupo Azabache, México.

Figure 1 View of the Atitlan volcano defining the sacred landscape, east of Chocola

Figure 2 East-west and north-south axis in the Chocola buildings

Figure 3 Vertical and horizontal plane with the four corners of the sky and the central axis of the universe (Florescano 1992)

- Figure 4 The Tree of the World for the Olmec and the renovation of the four corners (Freidel 1999)
- Figure 5 Photo of the offering (Feature 14) uncovered at the center of Structure 1
- Figure 6 Late Preclassic pot found in the offering
- Figure 7 View of the eastern side of Feature 14, showing three of the five vertical stones (drawing: M. Valladares)
- Figure 8 Photo of the group formed by the five vertically placed stones
- Figure 9 Photo of the group formed by the five vertically placed stones
- Figure 10 Position of the stones in graves 1 and 2 uncovered at the site of La Lagunita, El Quiché (Ichon and Arnauld 1985).