

EXCAVATIONS AT THE SITE OF LA MUERTA, MIRADOR BASIN, PETEN

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During the field season 2003 of the El Mirador Basin Archaeological Project, salvage works were conducted at the site of La Muerta, because several archaeological features risked imminent collapse and looting. Among them, interventions were programmed for Building A1, a ceremonial temple, and for Building A2, a pyramid shaped structure with sloping walls on its east and west façades, in addition to the outset stairways on the north and south façades. Other excavations were also conducted in two recently discovered monuments. These research works are part of an effort intended to facilitate the access to a place found along the road used by those who visit El Mirador, from Carmelita. In this case it is worth outlining that the site is strategically located in this route but has been heavily looted and has received no particular attention, other than the periodical monitoring by those in charge of watching over the resources of El Mirador.

LOCATION, DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUNDS

La Muerta is an archaeological site considered to be at the periphery of El Mirador, located 3.5 km south of the Tiger Complex (Figure 1). La Muerta functioned as a camp where gum was gathered, and is so far the only single available reference about the origin of its name. The archaeological site was preliminary explored and documented by Hansen over two decades ago (Hansen 1990, in press; 1995). His research consisted of a preliminary mapping, description and drawing of a number of superficial features and partial walls uncovered by looters. In his survey, he made emphasis on the severe looting observed in the buildings, particularly those of the South Group, identified as A1 and A2, outlining simultaneously their architectural complexity.

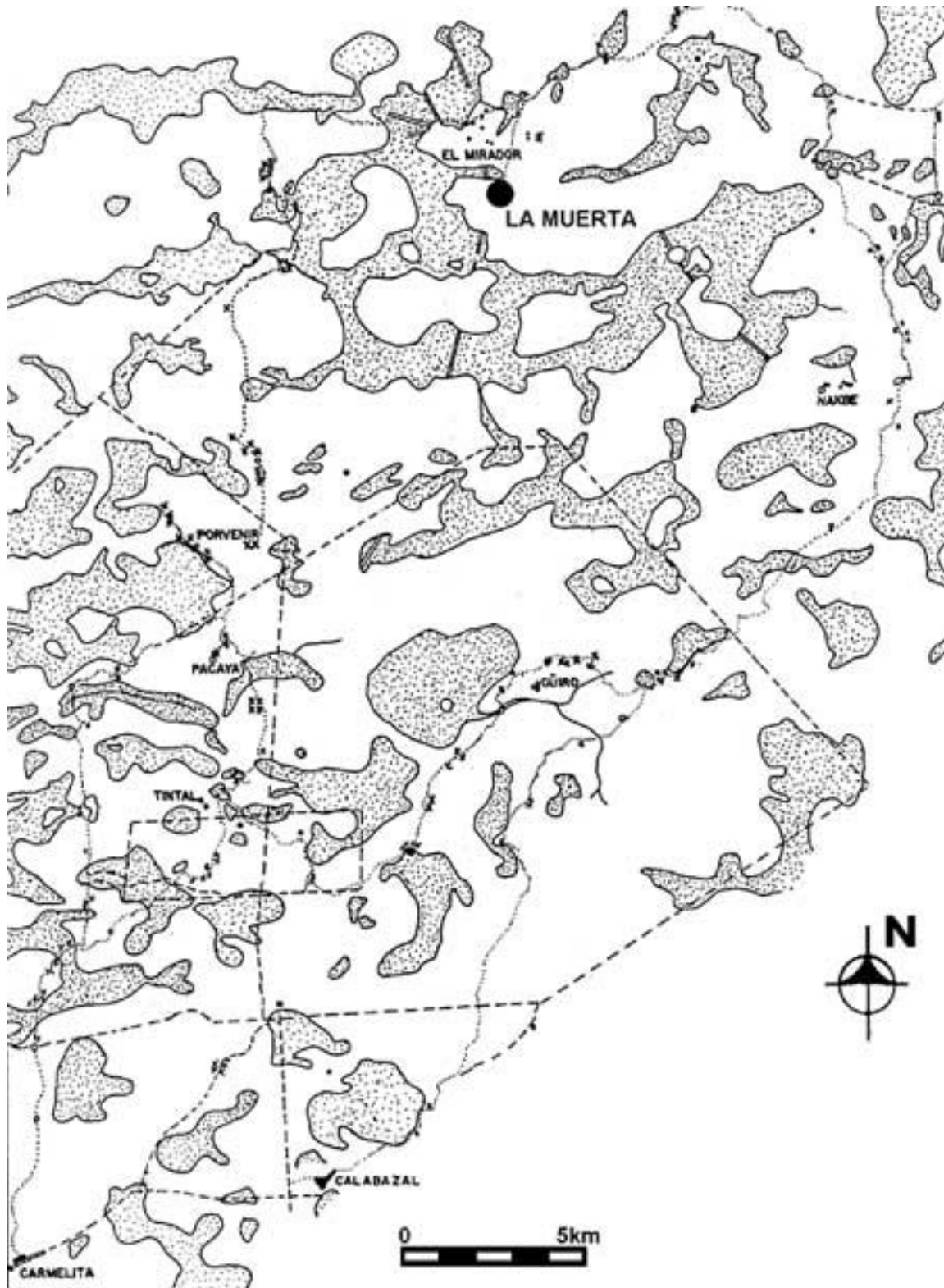


Figure 1. Map showing the sites of El Mirador and La Muerta (after Howell NWA 1989).

La Muerta was identified as a center with a Late Classic occupation. It's located between El Mirador and El Tintal, close to the causeway that connects both sites. The reason for its location there seems to have been the use of the watering place. When referring to more specific features in the description of this settlement, it was said that the mapping revealed two major architectural areas with 11 residential groups. The South Complex is located close to the watering place, and the North Complex is located approximately 400 m in that direction (Hansen 1995:6). During the present season an additional group of structures associated with two monuments was documented (Figure 2).

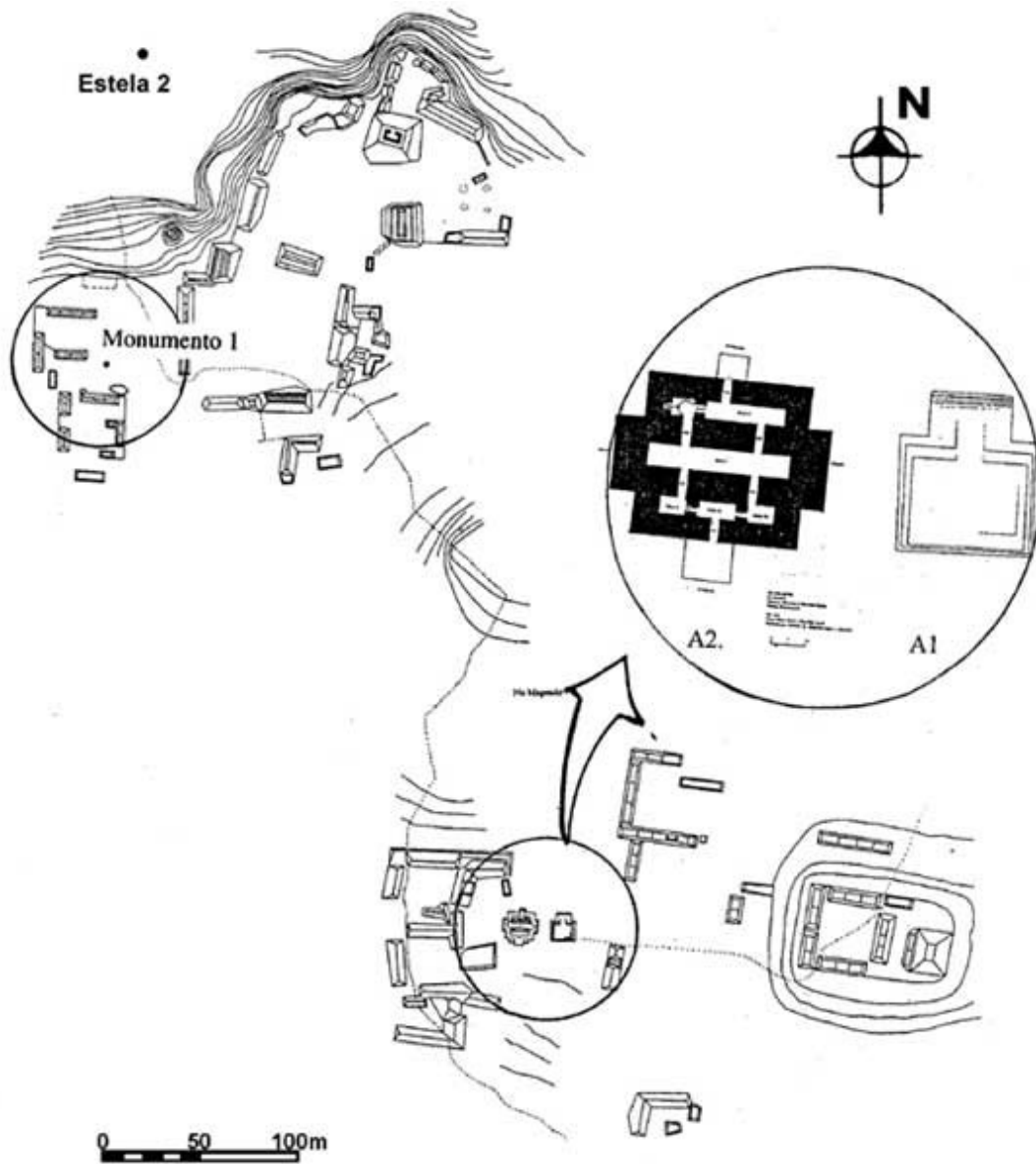


Figure 2. Plan of La Muerta with detail of Buildings A1, A2, and Monument 1.

INVESTIGATIONS CONDUCTED IN BUILDING A1

Building A1 is of a ceremonial temple style with an outset stairway on the north façade, and one superstructure. It is 11.50 m long, 8.60 m wide and 9.40 m tall. These characteristics suggest a ceremonial function and the building may have had an ornamental comb cresting, common in Central Petén during the Late Classic period, resembling that of the Temple of the Masks in Tikal. The damage and destruction of Building A1 were severe, because looters emptied its core down to the lower levels. A looting trench that began at the basal portion of the building led to the exposure of materials and a constructive system (floors and cells with solid walls refilled with gravel). This trench was perforated down to the floor level of the chamber, which in turn was dug into a deep pit that perforated the floors and refills of the building down to the base. The excavation of the central pit caused two large cracks in the south wall of the building. The south corner showed a collapse of over 1 m inwards, weakening it further. Several surrounding operations were initiated for the archaeological investigation, with the purpose of revealing its architectural characteristics, as well as facilitating the evaluation of the team in charge of the restoration works (Figure 3).

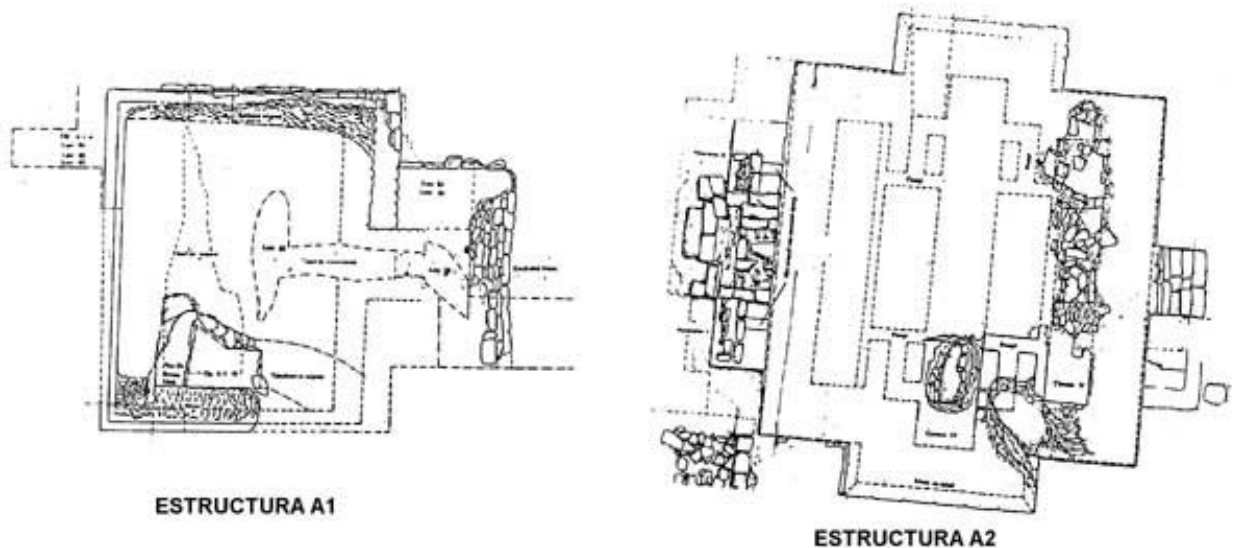


Figure 3. General plan view of Buildings A1, A2, and architectural details

OPERATIONS A1-A, A1-B AND A1-C

These operations were designed to reveal the wall of the first foundation in the south façade of the building. The wall featured several courses of lime rock, cut in a sloping way, and covering the stone liner. The ceramic materials collected suggest they date to the Late Classic period. The collected sample of fragments of modeled stucco painted in red, black and blue was very significant. These fragments constituted the ornamental features of panels and friezes (Figure 4a).

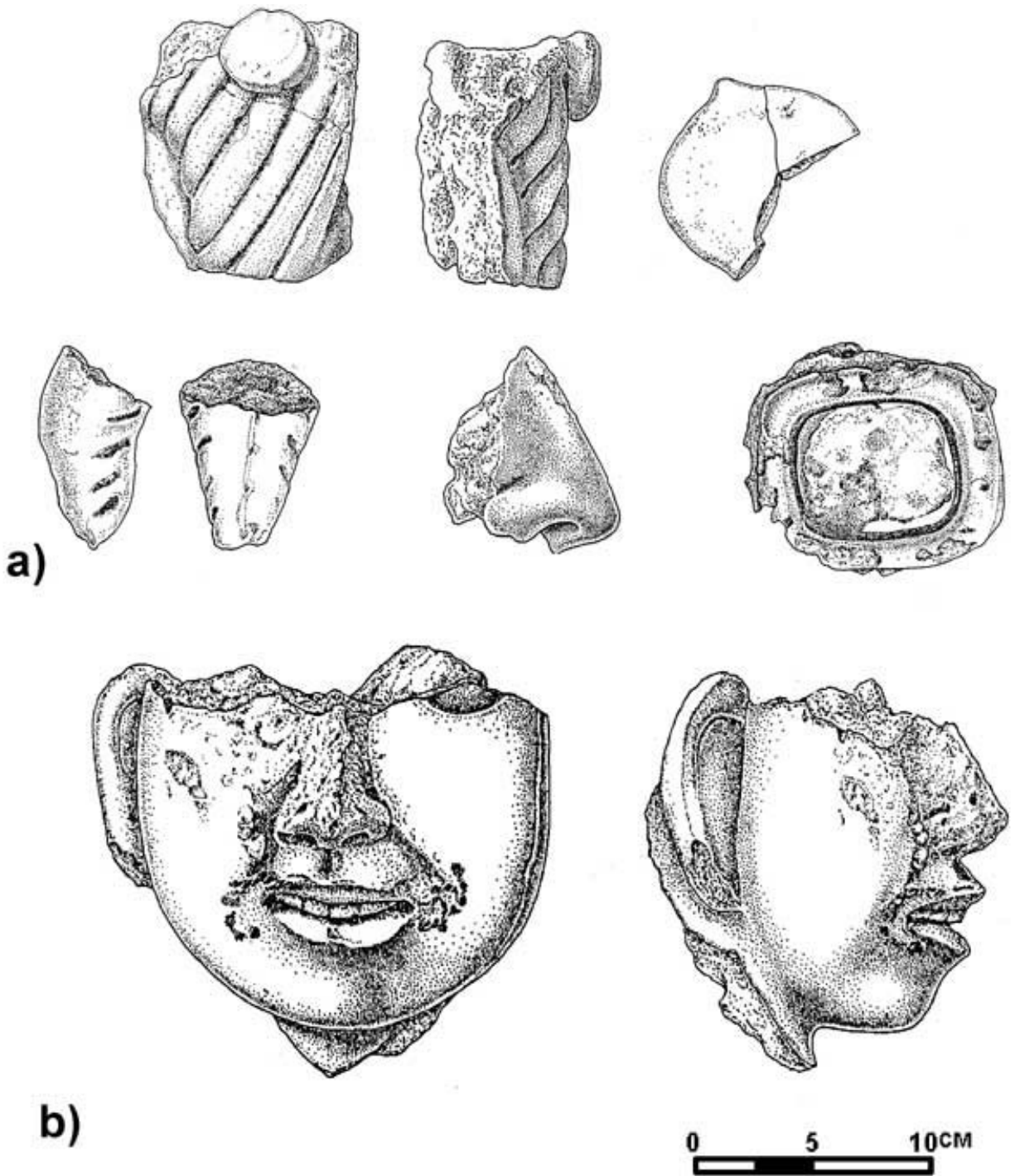


Figure 4. a) Fragments of modeled stucco from Building A1;
b) Model stucco face from Building A1.

OPERATIONS A1-E, A1-F AND A1-G

These operations took place in the north and west façades, exposing the outset stairway of the north façade and the first foundation of the west façade. One of the significant findings consisted of a fragmented face exquisitely modeled in stucco (Figure 4b). Finally, operation A1H was designed, with the purpose of rescuing the space in the upper section, and operation A1F, which consisted of a tunnel in the north façade aimed at defining architectural and funerary features (López 2004).

INVESTIGATIONS IN BUILDING A2

This building is located west of A1, and presented major damages caused by natural, environmental deterioration, particularly following the heavy looting that exposed the interior of two of the chambers or vaulted spaces. The archaeological investigation made it possible to excavate the interior of the building in full and to expose the four façades, defining its architectural and sculptural features like the associated archaeological materials (Balcárcel et al. 2004: 320-410). The building includes six vaulted chambers of different dimensions, with exquisitely finished stucco floors. The chambers correspond to the first stage of construction. In some cases, the walls exhibited a partial stucco dressing with traces of red paint.

In the second stage of construction, two sloping walls were defined on the east and west façades, with outset stairways on the north and south façades and with remnants of ancient masks flanking the stairways. Both the first and second levels were designed with several chambers connected with one another through small passageways. The chambers featured different dimensions, and as to the materials and the construction system, they differed in their deterioration depending on each case. To this day, the architectural style differs from the usual one in the area, making its architecture unusual and significant, not only because of its style but as well because of its temporality.

WEST FAÇADE

Three operations were designed for this façade (A1A, E and D) and initiated with the removal of the rubble from the looting trench. The first architectural and sculptural features came to light in the process, together with a fragment of modeled stucco with evidence of red paint and a lintel block from the collapse of the upper chambers. The three operations exposed the façade in full, and facilitated the complete removal of rubble from the central chamber. This chamber is connected with other spaces through passageways, in the following manner: passageways 1 and 3 are found north, connecting with chambers II and VIII, and passageways 2 and 4 are found south, connecting with chambers VI and VII (Figure 5). The archaeological material was abundant, with predominance of fragments of modeled stucco. Both these passageways and chambers include one level of stucco floors. Materials recovered

included fragments of obsidian cores, one of them with incised decoration, bifacial flint fragments and ceramics.

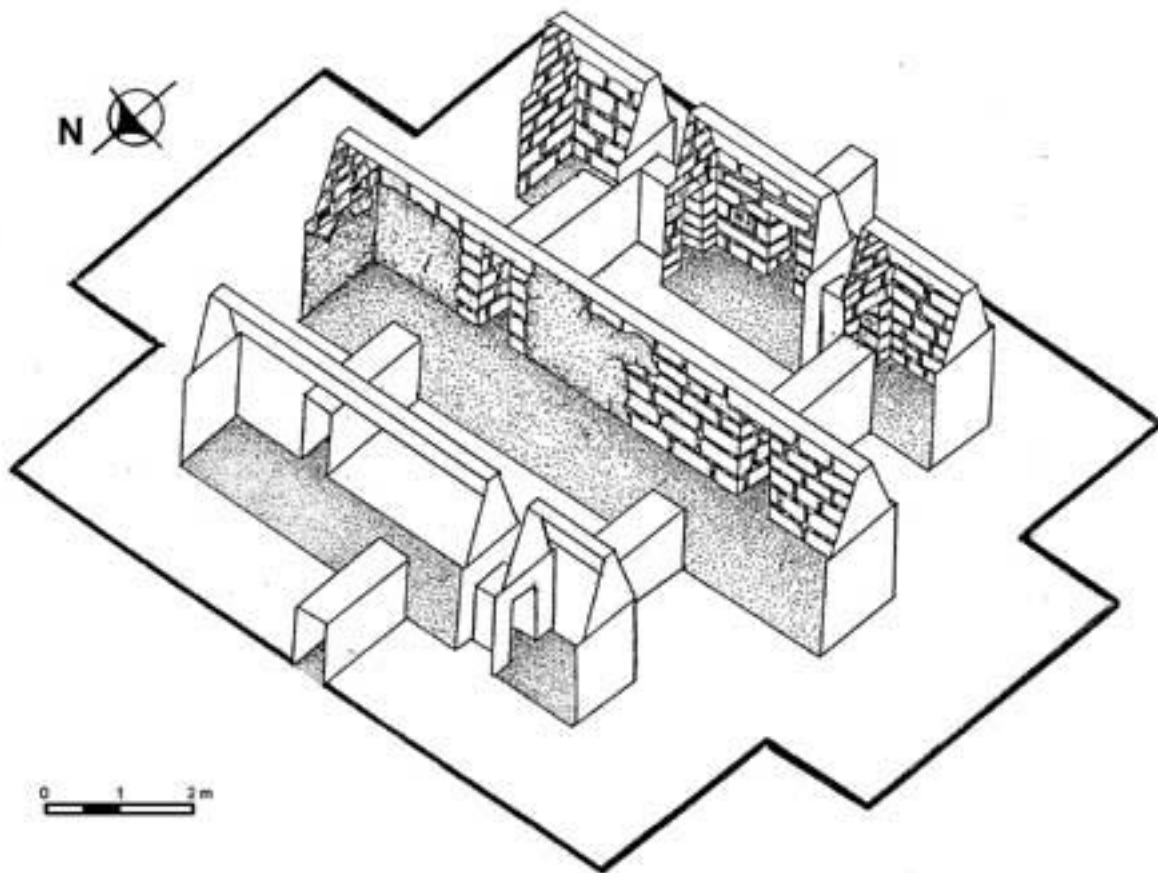


Figure 5. General isometric view of Building A2 with architectural details.

OPERATION A2-D

This operation was placed north of the looting trench, and led to the discovery of a sloping wall with remarkably varied construction materials regarding its dimensions and shape. This wall corresponds to the second stage of construction. Among the archaeological materials, large amounts of modeled stucco fragments predominated.

OPERATION A2-E

It was located southwest of the building, exposing a vertical wall with evidence of red paint in the lower course. Two stucco floors were defined, as well as several fragments of modeled stucco.

OPERATION A2-H

This operation comprised the entire south façade and exposed two outer passageways, one at each end of the façade. Each passageway was formed by two descending steps that shifted towards the center of the façade; in addition, a vertical wall was fully uncovered, an outset stairway, two platforms, and on top of them, the remnants of two small masks that flanked the stairway. Unfortunately, the masks showed a very poor preservation (Figure 6). With further explorations, several component parts were recovered, which were found at the foot of them, in the architectural rubble collapsed from a higher level. Some of the fragments recovered were put back in place, and several designs could be defined. Most of the fragments had evidence of red and blue paint, with a predominance of red.

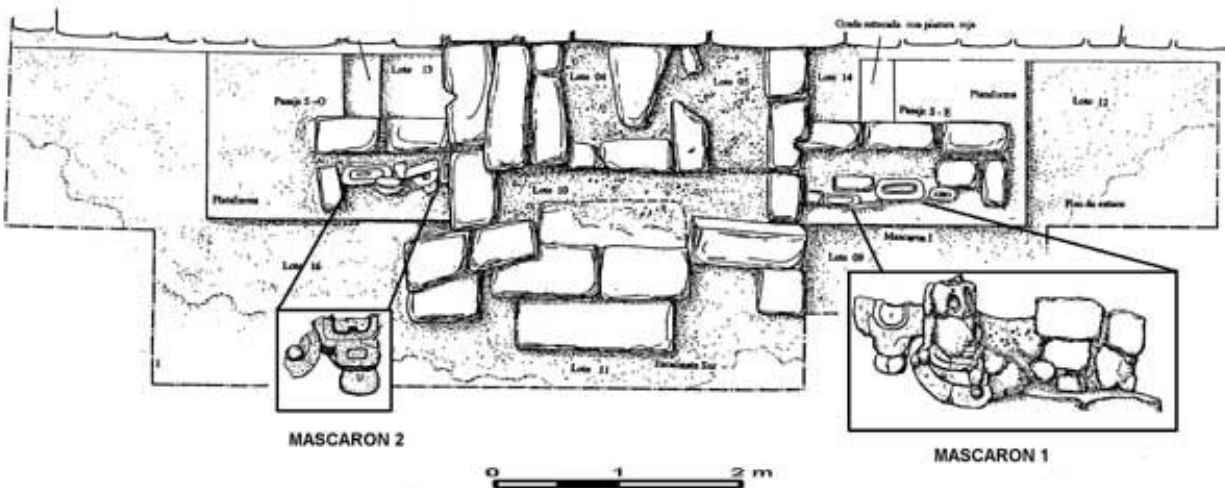


Figure 6. South plan view with architectural and sculptural details of Building A2.

(Note: there are some unreadable terms in this figure).

OPERATION A2-L

The examination of the preceding architectural and sculptural components led to the uncovering of another passageway, hidden by the stairway and the masks, corresponding to the second stage of construction. This passageway connects the south façade with another chamber, which in turn communicates with two others (operations A2-N and A2-M) through other passageways. Research made it possible to explore the three chambers in full. The archaeological materials recovered in the chambers are the following: one arrow point of green obsidian, one pyrite fragment, one stingray spine, one fragment of perforated shell, one fragment of a human skull, one dish fragment with a perforation at the base and abundant ceramic from the Early and Late Classic periods. A significant architectural piece of information was the presence of rope hangers in two of the walls, carved in the lime rock.

NORTH FAÇADE

Operations A2-C, A2-F, A2-G and A2-J were designed. In the north façade, the finding of ceramic deposits on the stucco floor and one outset stairway was the most significant. The ceramic was diagnostic of the Early and Late Classic periods.

EAST FAÇADE

This refers to operation A2-B. The amount of rubble was abundant, because of its relation with the looting trench. The most relevant data consisted of a sloping wall and sherds of the Codex style with hieroglyphic designs indicating the primary standard sequence and one glyph of a brown, veined color with a fine incise with the glyph na (ja), a glyph also common in the primary standard sequence (Figure 7).



Figure 7. a-i) Sherds of the Codex type from Building A2; j) Special sherd from Building A2.

FIRST STAGE OF CONSOLIDATION OF BUILDINGS A1 AND A2

As a consequence of abandonment, the buildings were exposed to alterations and deterioration caused by different agents, such as sedimentary accumulation, the fact of being outdoors, root invasions, etc. An additional factor that affected and provoked the quick decay of the buildings was vandalism and looting, because several tunnels and looting pits were opened in both buildings, causing the destruction of walls, vaults, floors, and the subsequent formation of cracks, etc. (Figure 8; Monterroso 2004: 411-440). Building A1 consists of three basal supports formed by collapsed walls. The building had a number of different problems, such as deep cracks in the walls, collapse,

and perforations in tunnels and looting pits. We proceeded with their intervention by first removing the organic matter, the degraded mix and the loose stones of the refill.

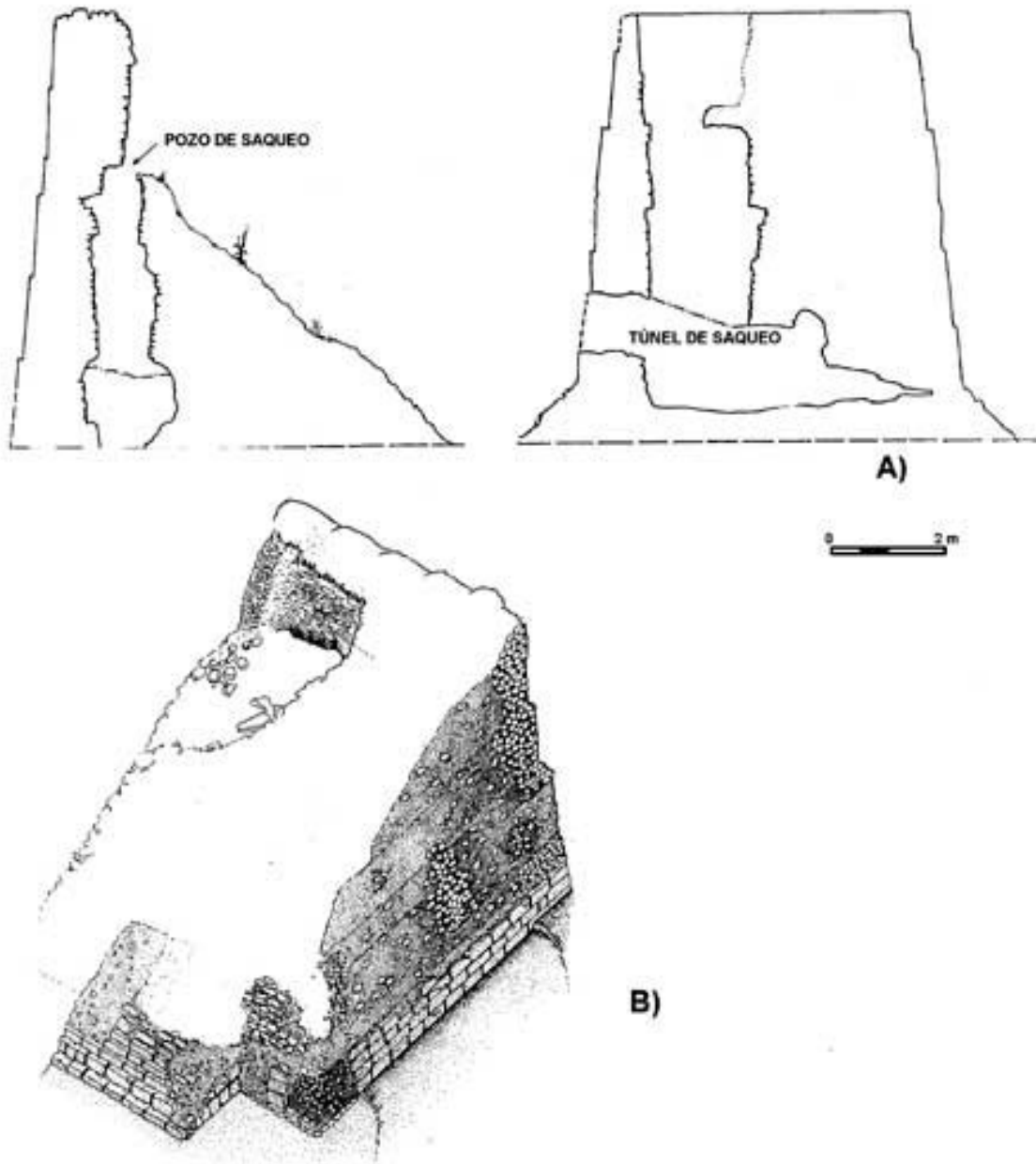


Figure 8. a) East and south elevation of Building A1; b) Isometric view.

For stabilizing the looted areas the technique of refilling with stones that ranged between 0.20 m and 0.65 m long and mortar was applied. An appropriate volume with a strong mortar was left in place to prevent water from leaking in and to obtain a stable load for the wall. In addition, lootings were refilled and sealed. In the treatment of cracks, records were made so that they would function like binders once they were

cleaned. The refill of the records was accomplished with stones of the slab type. As to the walls, the original stones were put back in their original places, and those that were degraded were replaced by other reused ones. A similar procedure was followed with the stairways.

The consolidation works in Building A2 consisted in the recovery of volumes, the consolidation of facings, the bracing of chambers, walls, etc. Even for the intervention of walls, vaults and ridges, part of the second level was emptied in sections. In addition, stucco consolidations were made, as was the case with the masks.

MONUMENT 1, LA MUERTA

During this season, we were told about a carved stela that risked to be looted. Together with representatives of the IDAEH, we verified the finding of a sculpture at the North Complex of the site, which was denominated Monument 1 (Figure 9; Suyuc 2004: 441-504). The excavation of Monument 1 was initiated with an exploration identified as Operation 100. The state of preservation of the sculpture was fragile. The monument was much deteriorated, and it was seriously eroded, removed, fragmented and broken. Over 300 fragments were collected, big and small, with evidence of having belonged to the monument's surface, and approximately 600 fragments associated with the carved area; most of them were not found in context, and because of time restraints, 95 fragments could not be put back in their original context.

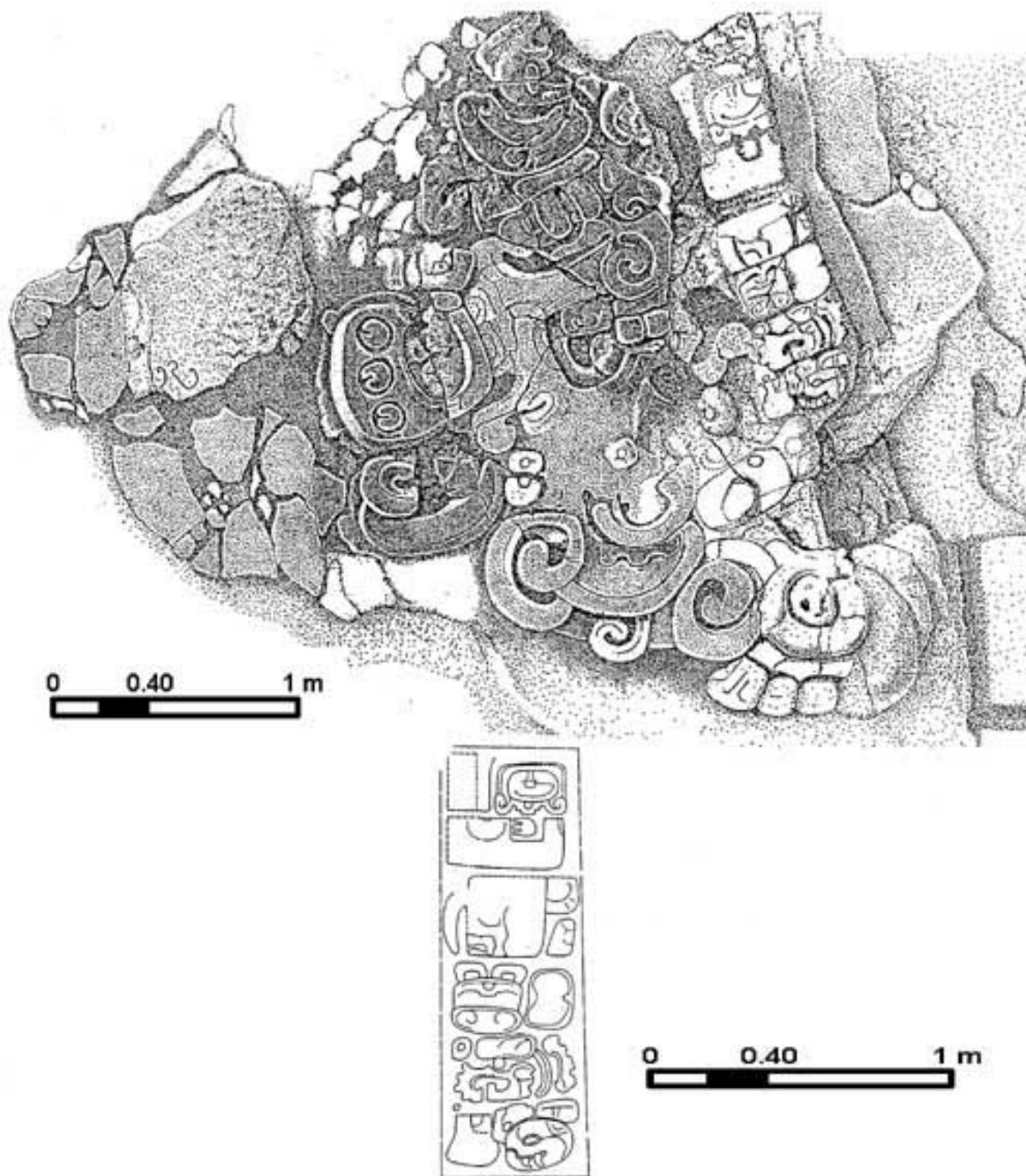


Figure 9. Monument 1, with detail of the hieroglyphic panel.

One of the primary motifs of this sculpture corresponds to the head in profile of an individual covered with a mask. This figure was placed on top of another large head of a monster with maxillary teeth. The different iconographic motifs present in the scene seem to suggest the impersonation of a deity in the act of conveying a message through the scrolls that emerge from its mouth, which extend towards a column that includes at least six hieroglyphics. The main features this character unfolds, besides his headdress,

are the following: the eye is represented by means of a large circumference divided in three in its inside, to form a trilobe motif; similar examples of trilobe motifs in the eyes occur in monuments such as the Stela 10 in Kaminaljuyu, the masks of Structure E-VII-sub, and the Stela 5 in Uaxactun, as well as Monument 24 in Quirigua, all of them connected with masks or deities. As to the nose, it is divided into two segments, yielding a triangular shape.

The earflare has a circular shape. Of this earflare, only indications of its lower portion are left, and below, there is a feature similar to an additional earflare in the shape of a shell (Stanley Guenter, personal communication 2004). Along the edge it features three smaller circumferences designed in a U-shape. The same symbols have been identified in a jade plate from a funerary context in El Tintal (Hansen 1992:145). From the inside of the mouth of the mask, one single detail of the individual that is wearing it can be seen, and it is a reproduction with an identical design representing another mouth. A number of scrolls emerge from inside the mouth of the mask, possibly representing speech scrolls that are gradually coming out. In the outer part they continue, until they reach a hieroglyphic panel. The scrolls keep extending to form the head of a stylized monster in profile, which shows the eye, the maxillary and its teeth.

The hieroglyphic panel is located at the right of the sculpture and consists of six hieroglyphs at least, four of them placed in their original position, while two others were found in a removed stone. The relocation of the fragment was accomplished preceding the portion that remains adhered to the rock, although its precise location could not be attested; due to the characteristics of the glyphic sequence, it was most probably in the indicated place.

- The upper glyph shows severe erosion problems and includes one cartouche corresponding to a Tzolkin date. Hansen believes this to be the chicchan glyph, with the eroded numerals at the left of the glyph.
- Glyph 2 is still harder to identify; it is located under glyph 1, one fragment of its upper portion was preserved, and the visible details include a circular figure and a few fuzzy lines.
- The next glyph, identified in the sequence with the number 3, is broken in the carved section, and only its lower portion was found. However, it is one of those denominated head variants.
- The hieroglyph identified with the number 4 has undergone erosion and the incisions are hardly visible.
- Hieroglyph number 5 represents an apparently zoomorphic head variant, and seems to represent a bird with a large faceted beak.
- Hieroglyph 6 represents a zoomorphic head variant in the shape of a serpent. The upper portion of glyph 6 seems to represent the signs of k'ul ahau, or divine

lord, or ruler, suggesting it could be an emblem glyph; similar examples of this glyph have been reported earlier, identified like kingdom serpent head (Martin 1996:43; Robicsek and Hales 1981:233; Guenter 2003:308). It also denotes a particular significance because of the hypothesis that posits the Mirador Basin to be the political entity owner of the emblem glyph of the serpent head. The glyph in Monument 1 becomes the most ancient variant, suggesting the possibility that it may have been the emblem glyph of El Mirador.

Monument 1 at La Muerta has evidence of prehispanic destruction. One of the data from the excavation was the finding of two fragments of the sculpture in the refill, 2 m away from the monument, which may seem to indicate that they were violently pulled out. The monument is eroded and covered with microflora, and because of the advanced deterioration evidenced on the stones, it was initiated with a process of preliminary consolidation.

The sculpture limited with the traces of a quarry towards the north. The blocks were semi-cut, and it was observed that the armhole formed a gradual drop, created intentionally in the same direction. These details seem to indicate that the remains of the quarry corresponded to a wider design of the sculpture or at least to one part of the blocks that remained exposed. This would explain why the blocks were not finally removed. The most important features that may be observed are the marks left by the working tools in the walls of the quarry, and the finding of one fragment of a flint tool (piocha) that confirms the intensive studies in the Nakbe quarries conducted by Woods and Titmus.

STELA 2 OF LA MUERTA

It refers to another monument located some 100 m north of the trail that leads to the camp of El Mirador (Figure 10). It was denominated Stela 2, and there were no spatially associated mounds; rather, it seems to be an isolated monument. The dimensions of this lime rock monument are 0.93 m, per 0.75 m per 2.90 m. Among the most significant features are some strange eroded areas in the middle section of the stela that seem to be a part of the design, and which divide it in two rectangles. Also, three of the sides show carved circular cavities, with an average diameter of 6 cm and a depth of 3 cm. Perhaps the stela had stucco on it with painted designs, though no evidence was found regarding this possibility.

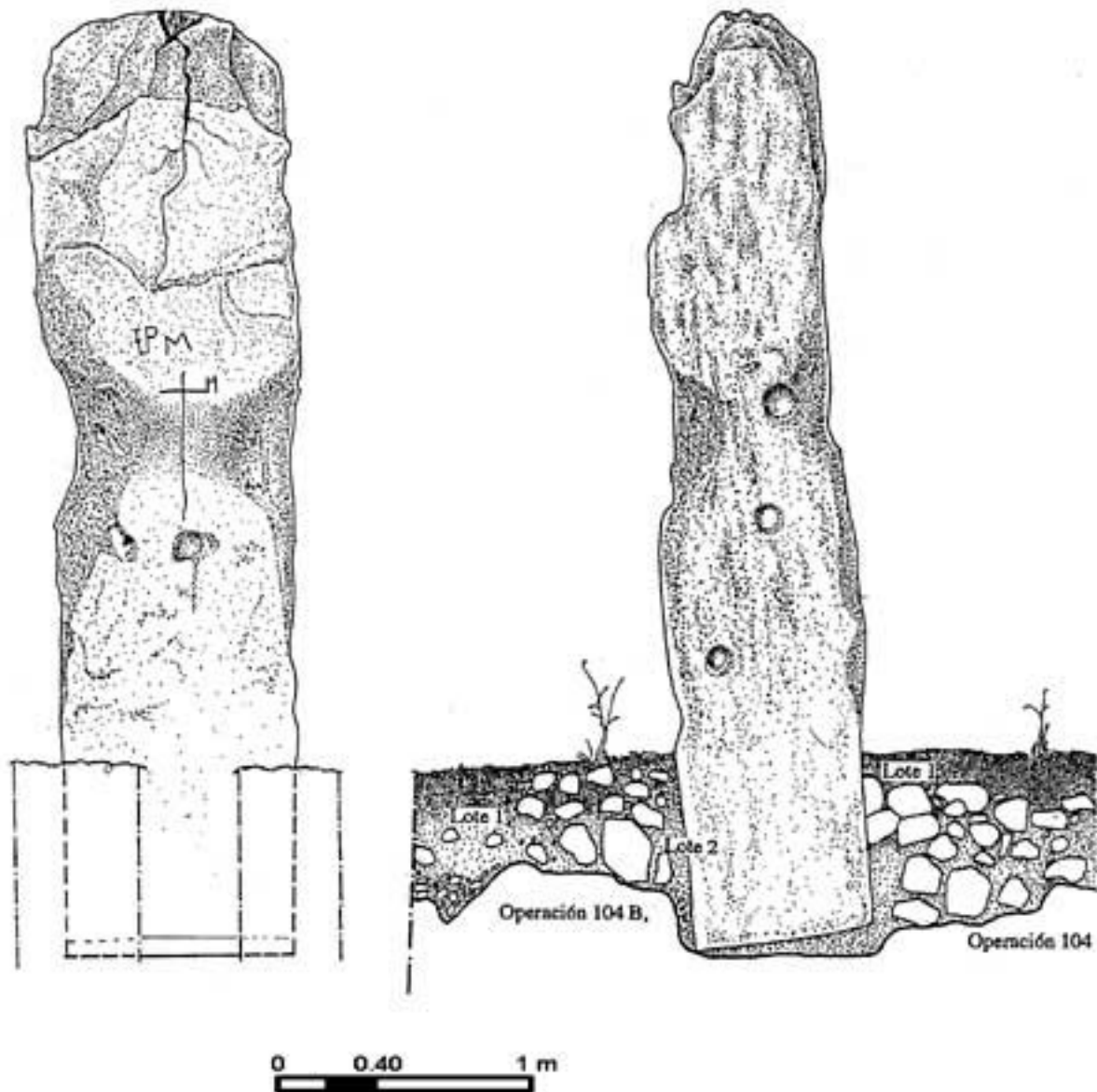


Figure 10. Stela 2, north and west views, showing the location of operations 104 and 104-B.

Excavations were conducted in the south and north portions (Operation 104), which were previously braced. The ceramic material was limited and it was eroded. A rim that seemed to correspond to a dish of the Sierra Red type was recovered.

One of the major unknown issues about the meaning of Stela 2 is that nowhere, 50 m around, surface archaeological features are visible. The following are some options that could be considered:

- That it was used in ceremonial events in a large open plaza, together with Monument 1.

- That it was used as a boundary stone or a territorial bordering landmark.
- That it was used as an astronomical marker.

Stela 2, as well as Monument 1, is located in contexts that say very little about their meaning.

FINAL COMMENTS

It is a known fact that the Mayan art of imagery did not appear spontaneously; rather, artistic techniques and traditions gave shape to scenes and motifs that decorated a quite extended space of friezes, walls, basal platforms, stairways and other features, with a sophisticated symbolic, iconographic connotation. In that respect we may mention the site of La Muralla, which still shows evidence of some stuccoed scenes in one of its major buildings (Hansen et al. 1995:543-560). The artistic techniques and cultural traditions passed from one generation to the other, and sculpture associated with architecture constitutes the most representative artistic form for the earlier periods.

One of the most significant features is the upside down U shape as part of the masks-earflare complex. This feature is very common since ancient times in its usual or upside down form. A number of examples may be observed in stelae and monuments of different sites distributed within the Maya area. In regard to the number of chambers, their arrangement, as well as the associated archaeological materials, the function of Building A2 may have been of the funerary type. It has several chambers and vaulted spaces that probably were intended for collective use since the initial stages. The Early Classic period within the Mirador Basin is poorly known, and the scarce evidence found is represented by Preclassic residencies associated with chultunes, as was the case of Operation 730 conducted at Nakbe (Balcárcel 1999: 332-352; Balcárcel and Stauber 2004: 551-570). The archaeological investigation at La Muerta is of the utmost importance to understand the historic, political and social sequence of the area. One of the few references at hand is centered in the Palma Group at Nakbe.

The occupation of Group L at La Muerta, even though it seemed to be modest, is crucial to gain knowledge on issues related with the political life that unfolded several centuries back, during the Early Classic period in the Mirador Basin; although at that time the great center of El Mirador underwent a dramatic demographic collapse that marked an abandonment around the end of the preceding period (Hansen 1990), it seems that the people of La Muerta still recalled the status it had a few years back, as shown by Monument 1.

Political or religious events, or both, must have taken place in the so-called North Complex of La Muerta, to explain the placement in this location of at least two monuments with features related to a high social status, as represented by access to sculpture, writing, ruling nobility, and all things that both monuments involve. However, all conjectures derived from the monuments' analysis must be subjected to further

investigation. The data recovered are abundant; therefore, this research is still in the process of analysis. The results will widen our knowledge about the cultural dynamics at the Mirador Basin and the Early Classic period, poorly known in that area.

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Figure 1 Map showing the sites of El Mirador and La Muerta (alter Howell NWAf 1989)

Figure 2 Plan of La Muerta with detail of Buildings A1, A2 and Monument 1

Figure 3 General plan view of Buildings A1, A2, and architectural details

Figure 4 a) Fragments of modeled stucco from Building A1; b) Model stucco face from Building A1

Figure 5 General isometric view of Building A2 with architectural details

Figure 6 South plan view with architectural and sculptural details of Building A2

Figure 7 a-i) Sherds of the codex type from Building A2; j) special sherd from Building 2

- Figure 8 a) East and south elevation of Building A1; b) Isometric view
- Figure 9 Monument 1, with detail of the hieroglyphic panel
- Figure 10 Stela 2, north and west views, showing the location of operations 104 and 104-B