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NAACHTUN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT: PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE FIRST FIELD SEASON 2004

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The ancient Maya city of Naachtun is still one of the remotest sites in the Yucatan Peninsula, and one of the main but lesser known Maya centers. The site is located at the geographical center of the Yucatan Peninsula, one kilometer south of the Guatemalan border with Mexico, and approximately 20 kilometers northwest of El Mirador (Figure 1). It was first visited during the first half of the XX century (Lundell 1932, 1933; Morley 1922, 1937-1938; Ruppert and Denison 1943). The current Naachtun Project was initiated in 2002, following a reconnaissance trip to the site made by Kathryn Reese-Taylor, Ernesto Arredondo and Marc Zender. The team remained for four days at the site, and based on the information gathered during the trip, the preliminary objectives of the project were set forth. The first field season took place during the months of February, March and April, 2004, under the direction of Kathryn Reese-Taylor (University of Calgary), Peter Mathews (La Trobe University), and Marcelo Zamora (Universidad del Valle). The goals of the project were:

- To establish a chronology for the site.
- To examine the walled complex
- To examine Group A and the palace complex located in Group B
- To initiate the site mapping
- To initiate the study of texts and images unfolded in the stelas and altars of the site.
- To initiate a damage assessment caused to architecture by looting.

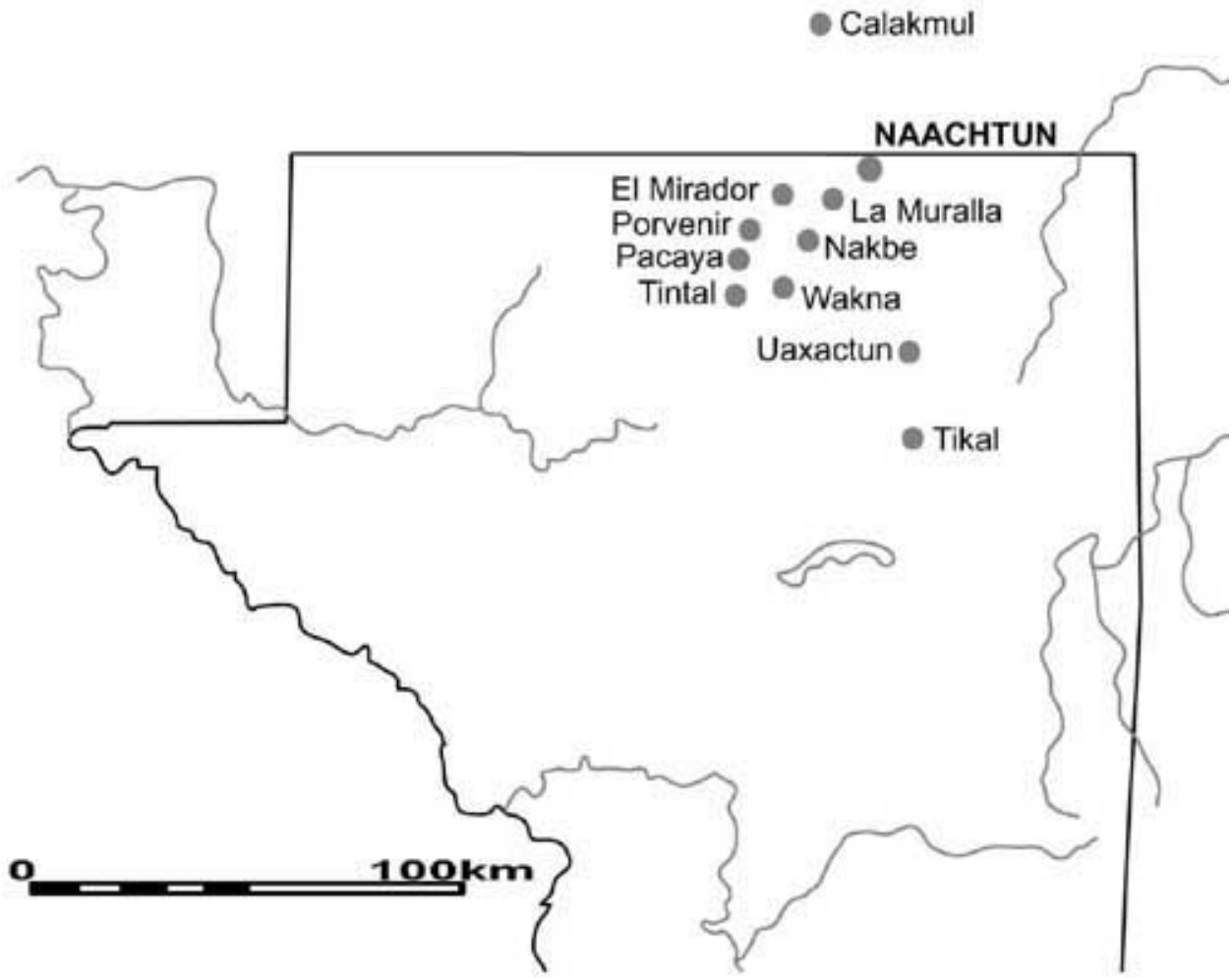

Figure 1. Map showing archaeological sites (drawing by Kathryn Reese-Taylor, after Hansen 1998).

THE MEASUREMENT AND MAPPING

The measurement and mapping of the civic center was in charge of Shawn Morton (University of Calgary) and Marcelo Zamora (Figure 2). First, a line was drawn at the known civic center with an east-west orientation, using a station or base. Every 25 m, additional stations were set along the line, with triangulations on each one to grant their accuracy. Then, lines from north to south were traced as of each one of the stations. Again, the stations or bases were set along the north-south lines every 25 m, and they were triangulated to grant their accuracy.

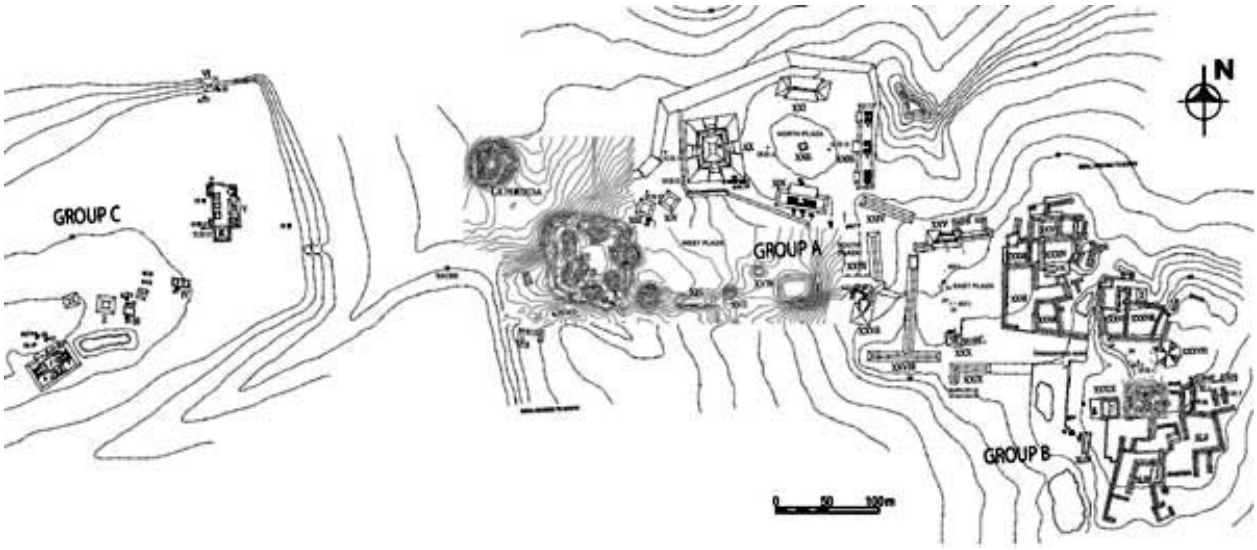

Figure 2. The site of Naachtun (map by Shawn Morton, Marcelo Zamora and Elizabeth Reese Baloutine, after Ruppert and Denison 1943).

Every structure was mapped by setting a total station at the bases established along the north-south and east-west lines. The points were marked in each structure with an approximate separation of 2 m, so that a systematic radius covered the entire structure. This resulted in a very precise covering of each one of the buildings. These same points were also set in plazas, using the same 2 m radius system. In the course of this measurement, a large and so far unknown structure was discovered between Group A and Group C, north of the *sacbe* that connects both groups. The discovery of this 15 m high structure, provisionally identified like La Perdida, suggests the presence of more public architecture that possibly went unnoticed to previous investigators.

TEST PITS

Martín Rangel (Universidad de San Carlos) conducted a test pit program, which was the starting point for the subsequent identification of the construction. He excavated a total of 11 pits with sides of 2 m:

- At Group A, two pits were excavated at the center of the North Plaza; two in the platform, west of Structure 20; one in the platform west of the walled complex; and one between Structures 13 and 14.
- At Group B, one pit was placed at the plaza, west of Structure 38; one at the patio inside Structure 40; and one in the residential complex, east of the radial pyramid.
- At Group C, one unit was placed at the plaza, west of Structure 5, and an additional unit was placed in the platform of Structure 1.

The test pits at the plazas were not deep, and exposed only one or two stucco floors placed directly on top of the bedrock. None of the trenches opened by looters, which

were subjected to examination, revealed deep stratified deposits. Therefore, the site seems to have had a horizontal stratigraphy with only one or two construction events in each building, except for the walled complex, which will be discussed next. Meanwhile, it is possible that Naachtun developed from east to west throughout time.

OPERATION 2

The excavations at the palace complex of Group B were conducted by Jeffrey Seibert (University of Calgary; Figure 3). The initial excavations in Structure 40A focused on the stairway of the structure. Sub-operation A consisted of a 1 x 4 m trench placed on the main axis of the structure and the stairway. The excavations revealed four steps in this unit. The ceramic found in these contexts dated to the Late Classic period.

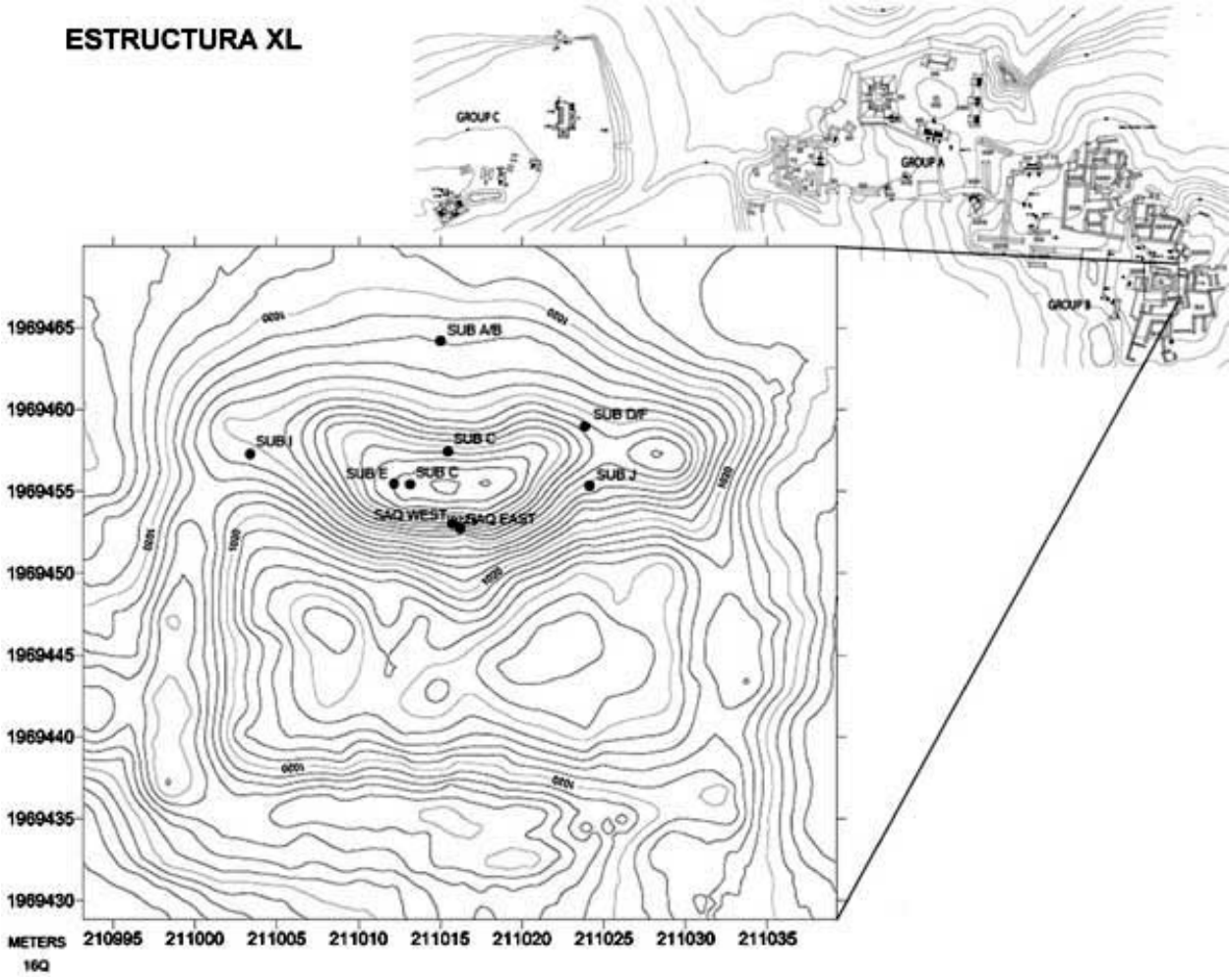

Figure 3. Operation 2 (map by Shawn Morton and Marcelo Zamora).

STRUCTURE XL

Sub-operation B consisted of a 1 x 5 m trench; it revealed a stairway at the end of its north side, a large platform at the center of the unit and a set of two steps at the end, forming the south side of the stairway and headed towards the upper part of the platform corresponding to the superstructure on which it was built. The steps in this unit were identical to the steps found in sub-operation A, as far as construction was concerned. An additional sub-operation showed that at the front of the structure's wall there were ashlar stones with no tenons, resembling the architectural style of Central Yucatan, in a blend of the Rio Bec and the Chenes styles. A large amount of modeled stucco was also found in this room, which was probably a part of a façade corresponding to the upper end of the building; besides, it also featured characteristics of the Late Classic architecture from Central Yucatan (Potter 1978; Gendrop 1998).

The excavations at Structure 40 revealed one single construction event dating to the Late Classic period (Figure 4). Additionally, the structures in the area were built according to the style of Central Yucatan, showing increased influences from the north on Naachtun.

Figure 4. The wall of Structure 40.

OPERATION 3

Roberta Parry (University of Calgary) was in charge of excavating the reservoir, a large, rectangular feature located in the southwest corner of the West Plaza (Figure 5). In total, 5 units were excavated. These excavations revealed that the reservoir had a complex stratigraphic sequence (Figure 6). Its base consisted of decomposed bedrock, suggesting that the area may have not drained properly during the rainy season. The

reservoir was built sometime during the Late Classic period, and was contemporary to the West Plaza, as it was connected with the surface of the plaza through a stepped wall. A number of floors of compact sand were placed on the decomposed bedrock. The absence of sedimentary layers in-between the sand floors suggests that it was dredged from the bottom of the reservoir to prepare a foundation for new floors.

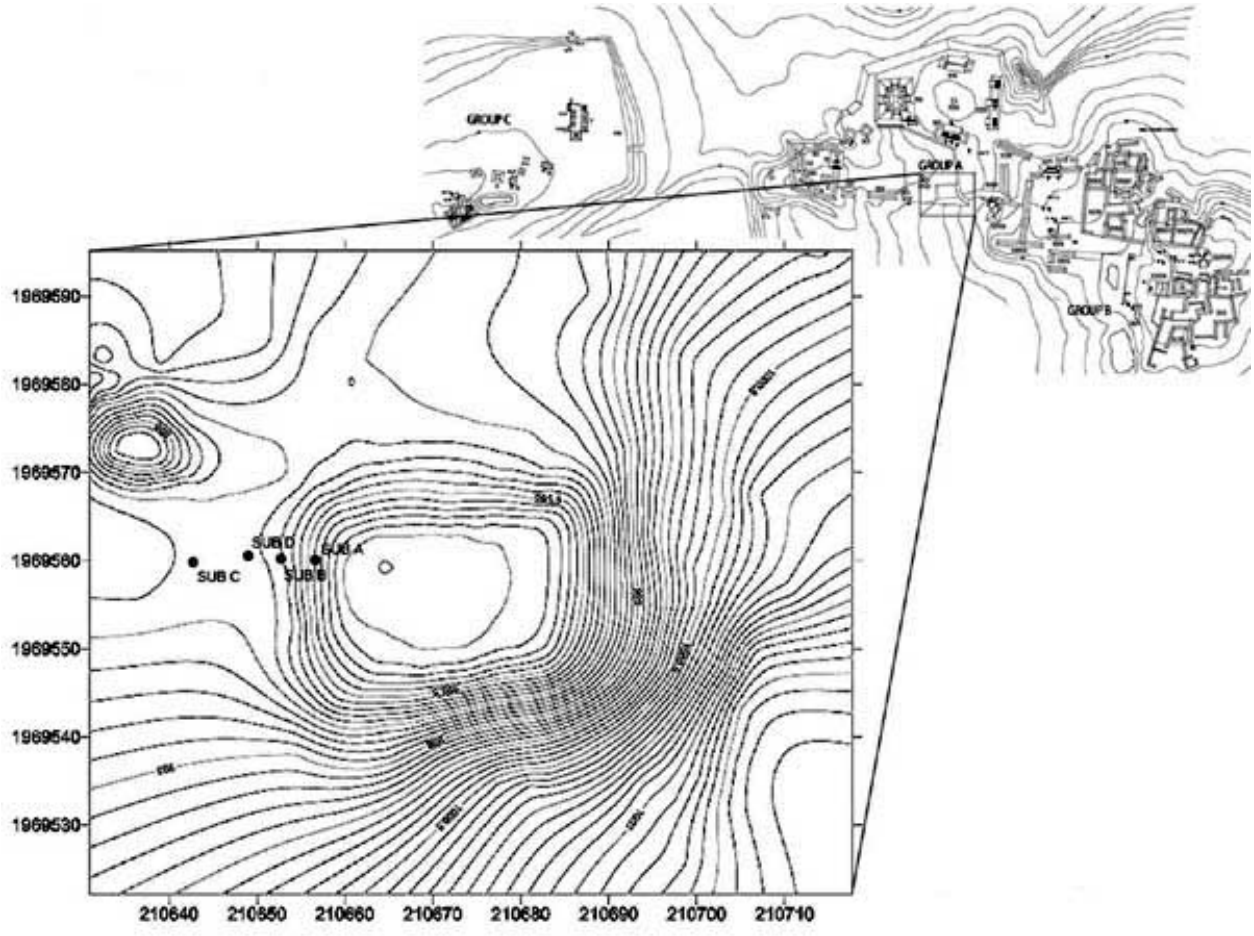

Figure 5. Operation 3 (map by Shawn Morton and Marcelo Zamora).

Figure 6. The reservoir.

During the Late Classic period, two modifications significantly altered the storage capacity of the reservoir:

- A retaining wall was built on top of the last sand floor. A terrace consisting of a layer of stones covered with a layer of sand was built behind the wall. This terrace may have been porous, allowing water to slowly leak to the center of the reservoir. By minimizing the area of the water surface at the receptacle's basin, evaporation may have been prevented, thus allowing for the storage of a larger volume of liquid during the dry season.

- During the VIII and IX centuries AD, a clayish gray layer was laid on the sand layer of the terrace. This layer slopes from the west end of the reservoir to the top of the retaining wall, forming a ramp. This last modification had no significant impact on the size of the reservoir, and allowed for an easier access to its basin.

OPERATION 4

Ernesto Arredondo explored the walled complex. The main objective of the excavations was to define the construction sequence of the wall, as well as identifying the function of the buildings found within the perimeter (Figure 7). Apparently, the plaza was built on a mound that was a part of the natural landscape. This possibly provided a natural protection, and may have been the main reason why the decision was made to fence the area with a wall.

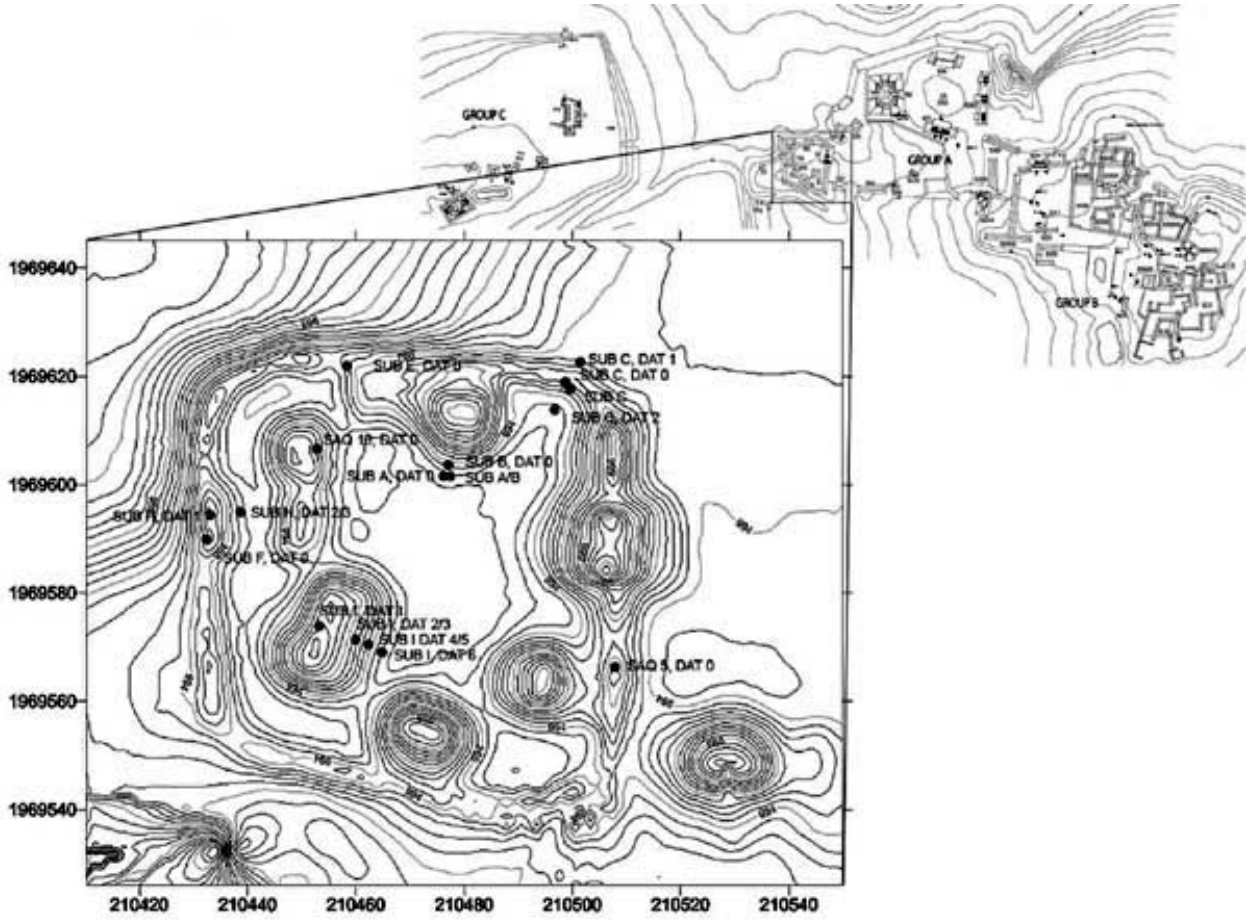

Figure 7. Operation 4 (map by Shawn Morton and Marcelo Zamora).

The wall surrounding the complex was built on a packed stucco floor, under which there was an earlier floor with a westwards slope. Possibly, this was the ramp that connected

the *sacbe* with the West Plaza of Group A. The artifacts recovered mixed with the refill of the wall include ceramic, shell, as well as black and green obsidian. The ceramic suggests that the wall was erected during the Early Classic period.

Structure 7 A is located in the most protected area of the complex. The excavations revealed two chambers. The west wall of the chamber in the rear section was formed by the outer wall of the complex. Therefore, this building was added after the area was enclosed. The chamber at the back also includes a bench 3.60 m long, with two arms for support and a length of 1.20 m. In addition, there was a niche, covered at some later time. The bench was centered along the back part of the wall in the chamber, and was found aligned with the main entrance of the complex. Due to its localization along the wall, Structure 7A was the one with the most difficult access from the main entrance.

Structure 8 consisted of a long room with a front entrance and a door at the back, providing access to the rear part of the room. The building underwent at least three construction stages.

EPIGRAPHY

Peter Mathews and Alex Parmington (La Trobe University) conducted the recording of the hieroglyphic texts and the images displayed in the stelas. The readable dates in the monuments of Naachtun, between AD 504 and 761 span along nearly the entire Classic period (Figure 8). According to these monuments and other archaeological data, it was inferred that Naachtun was a large site, occupied from the Preclassic to the Terminal Classic periods. However, only fragmentary information is available concerning the inscriptions at the site.

Monument	Location	Date of Dedication	Carved Surfaces FIDPS	Number of Glyphs	
Stela 1	south of Struct. XXV	9.9.10. 0. 0	FIDP	52	no altar
Stela 2	south of Struct. XXV	9.10.10. 0. 0	FIDP	113 or 117	no altar
Stela 3	east of Struct. XXX	9. 5. 0. 0. 0. ?	FID	13	no altar
Stela 4	north of Struct. XXX	??	FIDP	31 or 29	no altar
Stela 5	north of Struct. XXVII	9. 6.10. 0. 0 ?	FID	10	no altar
Stela 6	south of Struct. XIX	??	FID?	36	no altar
Stela 7	south of	??	FID	??	no altar

	Struct. XIX				
Stela 8	south of Struct. XIX	9.16. 0. 0. 0	FID	53?	no altar
Stela 9	south of Struct. XIX	9.15. 0. 0. 0 ?	FID	42	no altar
Stela 10	south of Struct. XIX	9.16.10. 0. 0. ?	?ID	27	no altar, or altar 6
Stela 11	south of Struct. XVII	??	FID	??	no altar
Stela 12	on top of Struct. XX	9. ?. 0. ?	?ID	??	no altar
Stela 13	plaza S of Struct. XXV	??	?ID	2+	assoc altar 2
Stela 14	plaza S of Struct. XXV	??	FID	??	assoc. altar 2
Stela 15	Struct. No. XXXIX	9.14. ?13. ?	??D	25	no altar, according to SGM
Stela 16	south of Struct. XXXVI	??	??D	??	assoc. altar 4
Stela 17	north of Struct. XXXIX	??	FID	12	no altar
Stela 18	west of Struct. XXXVIII	??	FID?	13	no altar
Stela 19	west of Struct. XXXVIII	??	FID	??	no altar
Stela 20	east of Struc. V	??	??D	??	no altar
Stela 21	NW corner of Struct. V	9. 7. 7. 7.12	FID	41	no altar
Stela 22	north of Struct. III	??	??D	??	assoc. altar 8
Stela 23	south of Struct. III	9. 3.10. 0. 0	FID	22	no altar
Stela 24	north of Struct. I	??	F	--?	assoc. altar 9

Figure 8. List of carved monuments at Naachtum and their dates.

Stelas 18 and 19 are at each side of the base of the west stairway of Structure 38, a radial pyramid in the palace complex of Group B at Naachtum. Stela 18 is presently on the left side of the stairway, and is one of the monuments that went misunderstood in the numeral sequence of Ruppert and Denison's system (1943). In the front part, there is a woman standing on a captive. When compared with other stelas from Naachtun, this one is fairly well preserved, despite the fact that the carved glyphs on both sides are heavily deteriorated and do not allow for an accurate decipherment. Stela 19 stands at

the other side of the stairway, and this is what Ruppert and Denison (1934: 134) have pointed out about it: “There are traces of sculpture and glyphs, but nothing that could be identified”. The stela was considered to be in such a bad shape that not even one picture was taken of it. When research was initiated around Stela 18 during the 2004 season, we realized that it was a very fragmented monument. Once it was turned over and the fragments were cleaned, we found more than simply “traces of sculpture”, though indeed they were not clearly visible. Nevertheless, the fragments recovered made it possible to establish that –just like Stela 18-, Stela 19 also depicted a person standing on a captive, and the laterals exhibited carved glyphs.

In fact, Stelas 18 and 19 represent paired stelas. Stela 19 depicts a ruler standing on a captive, while Stela 18 shows a queen. The dates of the stelas are uncertain, but probably both date around AD 700 to 750, for stylistic and historic reasons.

EXAMINATION OF LOOTINGS AND CONSOLIDATION

Baudilio Salazar (CUDEP) evaluated the condition of the public architecture, and based on his results, he designed a plan for its consolidation. Much of his initial study consisted in clearing and documenting the looting trenches in Structures 20 and 23. A total of seven of the most significant trenches found at Naachtun were recorded. The trenches in Structure 20 revealed that this building had a previous construction event. Structure 23 included as well two construction events or stages.

The construction refill of both Structures 20 and 23 consisted in large limestone blocks joined together with a mortar of lime and small stones. Just like in most of the construction uncovered so far, no artifacts were found. This refill was remarkably clean.

CHRONOLOGY AND PRELIMINARY HISTORY

Debra Walter (International University of Florida) and Silvia Alvarado (Universidad de San Carlos) have established a preliminary chronology of the site using primarily the ceramic recovered from the excavations, as well as those obtained in the looting trenches. Whenever possible, the date limits for the chronological periods corresponding to Naachtun were based on radiocarbon dates associated with the ceramic sequences of other sites, as well as on historic events recorded in glyphic texts representing the shifts along the cultural history of the Maya. For the chronology of Naachtun, also the dates of the long count were used.

- Naachtun 1 (BC 58 – AD 41). This phase was poorly represented at the site. It was defined based on several sherds obtained from the deepest levels of the reservoir.
- Naachtun 2 (AD 41 – AD 159; Figure 9). This is the first well defined phase in the settlement. The ceramic originates in Structures 1 and 5, and in the reservoir. The ceramic types include Sierra Red, San Felipe Brown, San Antonio Golden-Brown, Polvero Black and Matamoro Bichromatic. The modes show Z-angles.

- The civic center was located in Group C, and the first public architecture was built. In this phase, Naachtun appears to have been one of the many wealthy communities within the basin that existed at the shadow of El Mirador.

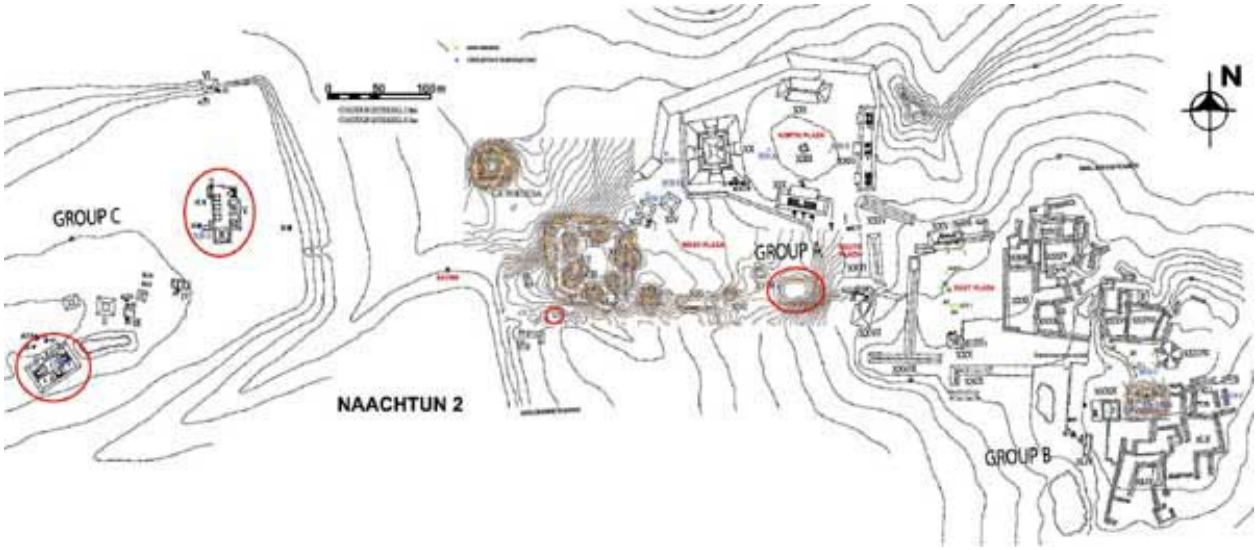

Figure 9. Structures built during Naachtun 2 (map by Stewart Morton, Marcelo Zamora and Kathryn Reese-Taylor).

- Naachtun 3 (AD 159 – 292; Fig. 10): it marks the beginning of the Early Classic period at the site. This date is approximately consistent with the fall of El Mirador. The early facet corresponds to the Protoclassic complex elsewhere in the Low Lands, with the ceramic types Zapote Striated, Sierra Red, San Felipe Brown, San Antonio Golden-Brown, Matamoro Bichromatic, Águila Orange, and Balanza Black. The modes include Z-angles and long-necked vessels. The paste is of a poor quality. Most of these types are continued during the late facet, with the aggregate of Dos Arroyos Orange Polychrome, Actuncan Orange Polychrome and Triunfo Striated. The basal flanges first appear at this time.

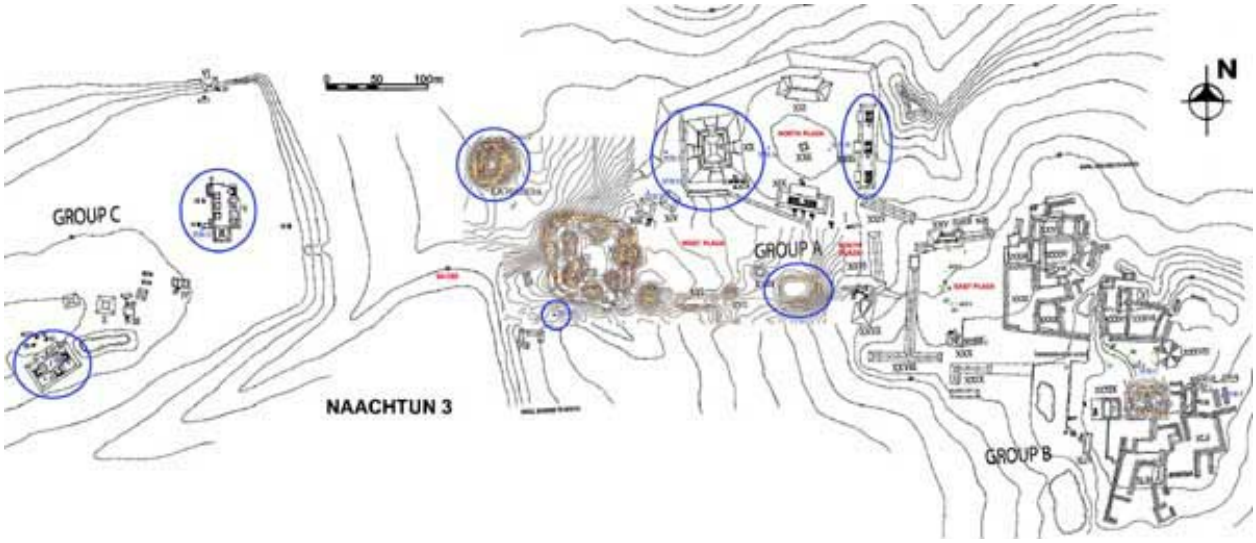

Figure 10. Structures built during Naachtun 3 (map by Shawn Morton, Marcelo Zamora and Kathryn Reese-Taylor).

- Construction continue at Group C, and it is believed that La Perdida and Structure 20-2 date to this period. The city experienced an exponential growth during this period. Most of the buildings located in the North Plaza of Group A were built or remodeled. The looted tomb of Structure 23B also dates to this time span. The North Plaza was the center of all civic activities and is remarkably similar to the design and architecture of Mundo Perdido in Tikal (Laporte 1995: Laporte and Vega 1987: Martin and Grube 2000).

- Naachtun 4 (AD 292 – 564; Figure 11): there is also evidence of an early and a late facet. The diagnostic types of the early facet include Quintal Unslipped, Triunfo Striated, Águila Orange, San Blas Red-on-Black, Dos Arroyos Orange Polychrome, Caldero Buff Polychrome, Pucte Brown, Balanza Black and Lucha Incised. The Z-angles are no longer present, and the basal flanges become common. The late facet includes the aggregate of Urita Incised and Paradero Fluted, as well as a red and a burnished type with no assigned name so far. Also, tripod supports are present in this period.

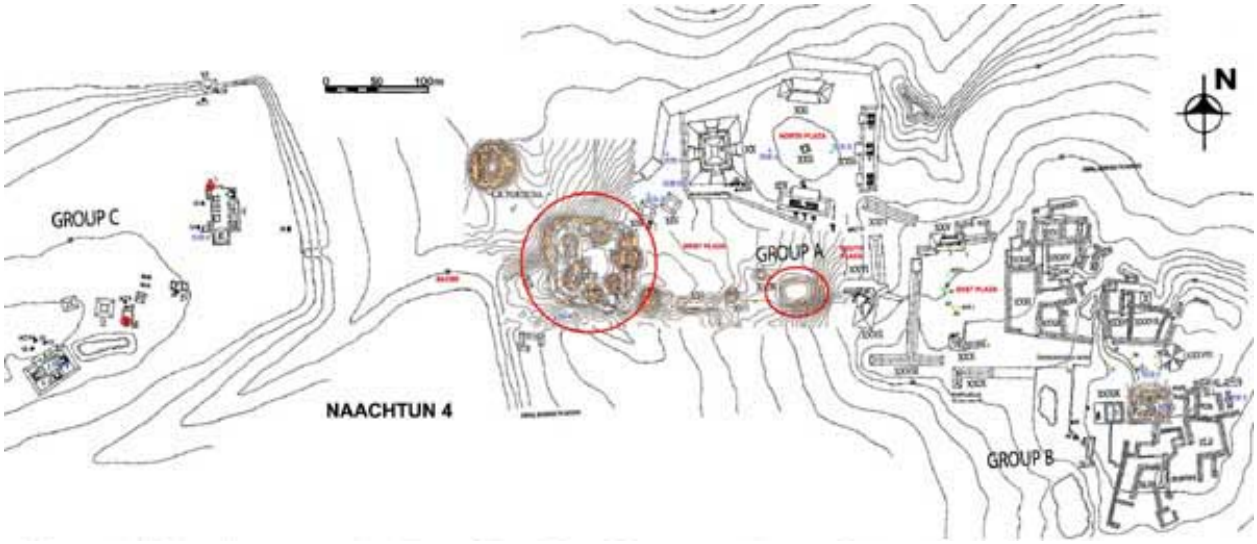

Figure 11. Structures built during Naachtun 4 (map by Shawn Morton, Marcelo Zamora and Kathryn Reese-Taylor).

- The city continued to grow. The excavations suggest that most of the West Plaza was built by then, the reservoir included, while one area of the site was fortified. During this period, Structures 7A, 8, 10, 11 and 12 were also either built or remodeled. Also, Stela 23, located south of Structure 3 in Group C, was certainly originated in this period.

- Finally, all the green obsidian was recovered within the West Plaza, particularly within the walled complex and the reservoir. Given the presence of this obsidian, Naachtun may have had close links with Teotihuacan, or with one of its allies in the Low Lands. The construction activity in the North Plaza may have been interrupted, and there is no evidence of the construction, by then, of large temples and palaces. Possibly, Naachtun, as well as Río Azul, were under the control of Tikal. This scenario is consistent with the hypothesis that Naachtun was the ancient capital of the kingdom of Masul, attacked by Tikal in AD 486, as recorded in Stela 10 of that site (Güenter 2002; Martin and Grube 2000: 37-39).

- Naachtun 5 (AD 564 – 652; Figure 12): this is a short period that spans from AD 564 to 652. Its beginning is marked by the period 9.6.10.0.0 (AD 564), celebrated by some Naachtun ruler and recorded in Stela 5. Many new types were introduced: Cambio Unslipped, Encanto Striated, Veracal Orange, Saxche Orange Polychrome, Azcorra Ivory Polychrome, Corona Red, Tinaja Rojo and Infierno Black. The construction activity gained input in Naachtun, while Group A still remained the center of domestic and ritual activities. Most of the East and South Plazas of Group A were built throughout this period, while the reservoir underwent remodeling. The erection of stelas is increased in this span with Stelas 1, 2 and 5. It is possible that at that time the site had become independent from Tikal; however, its connection with Calakmul is still uncertain.

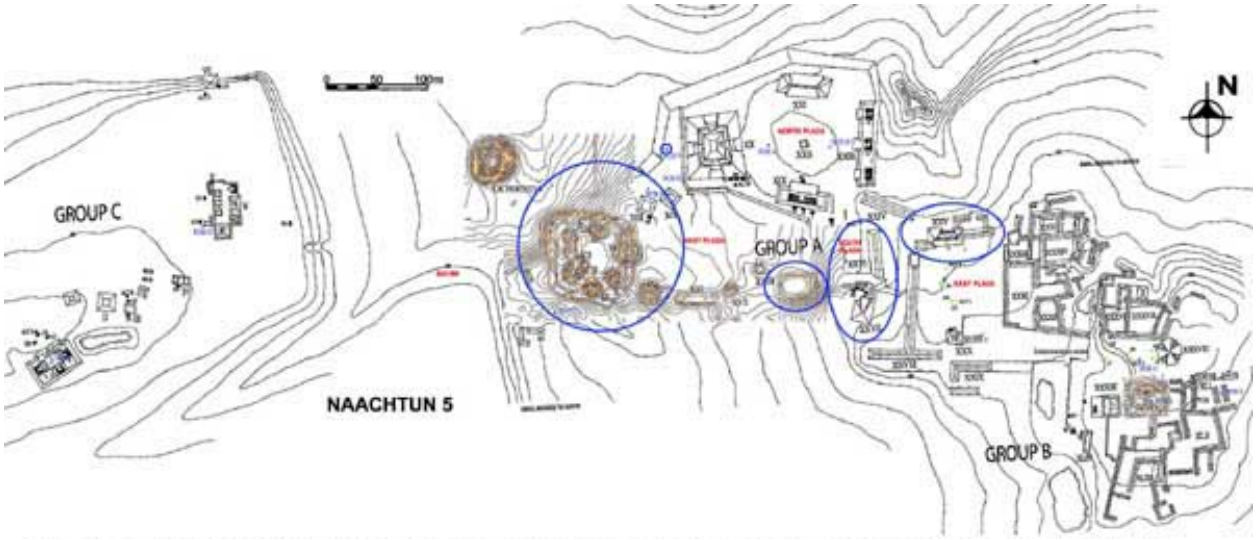

Figure 12. Structures built during Naachtun 5 (map by Shawn Morton, Marcelo Zamora and Kathryn Reese-Taylor).

- Naachtun 6 (AD 652 – 889; Figure 13): this phase includes two facets corresponding to the Late and Terminal Classic periods. The Late Classic period is initiated with the capture of an *ajaw* from *Ox Te Tun* (the city of Calakmul) by a Naachtun queen, as shown in carved Stela 18 (Figure 9; Morley 1937-38). Much of the earlier ceramic continue, though new diagnostic types such as Palmar Orange Polychrome, Zacatal Cream Polychrome and a variety of other major polychromes, appear. Likewise, it would seem that there was an expansion in the surface treatment of the Tinaja Red and Infierno Black types, including imprint, incised and stamped designs. The percentage of dishes and vases grew larger, particularly in regard to the imported polychrome types.

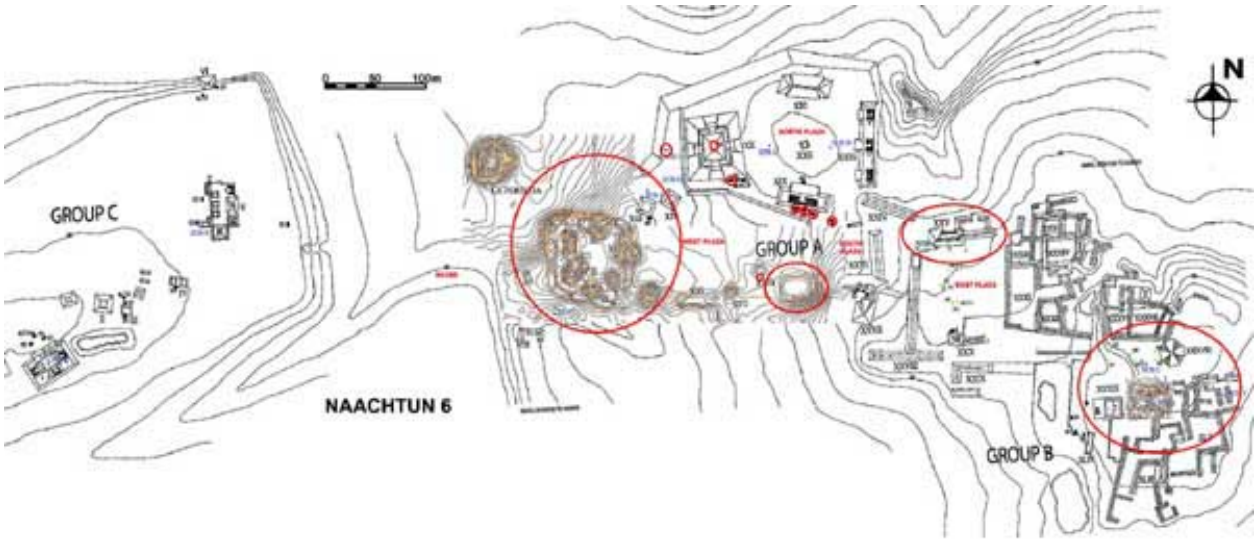

Figure 13. Structures built during Naachtun 6 (map by Shawn Morton, Marcelo Zamora and Kathryn Reese-Taylor).

- During this span, the civic and ritual center was moved to Group B. Structures 38, 39 and 40 were built in the style of Central Yucatan, and reflect a new architectural influence from the north. Several stelas were erected throughout this period, suggesting that even though there were no construction activities in Group A, it indeed maintained its ritual and political significance. The consistent placement of stelas, as well as the permanent practice of erecting stelas whenever a period came to an end, suggests that Naachtun did not suffer the political instability associated with the Terminal Classic period until after 9.18.0.0.0 (AD 790).

- Between AD 790 and 889 –in other words, during the Terminal Classic-, new ceramic types emerged: Achote Black, Muna Slate, Ticul Thin Slate and Provincia Flat-Relief. So far, what has been found has been a dozen sherds in the lots that correspond to the humus of Structures 38, 40, and the reservoir. No building was constructed and no dated stela was erected within this span, though Mathews suggested that Stela 24 could belong to this period, based on the style of the carvings. If a substantial population existed during the Terminal Classic at Naachtun, it still remains to be found.

- Naachtun seems to have maintained its importance in the ritual memory of the Postclassic Maya, as suggested by the abundant Postclassic sherds found on top of Structure 20.

In short, Naachtun is one of the major cities within the El Mirador Basin. It had a much extended sequence, and significantly, it grew remarkably during the centuries that followed the collapse of El Mirador. The excavations conducted in the 2004 season were indeed successful, and provided the foundations for future investigation of this strategic site.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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