

RECENT NOTES ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL SALVAGE RESEARCH AT SITES NEAR COMMUNITIES TO THE SOUTHWEST OF THE YAXHA-NAKUM-NARANJO NATIONAL PARK

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With a preliminary character, the results of the recently archaeological documentation conducted at the sites of La Quemada Corozal, Ta Aj Corozal and Torre Corozal are presented here. These sites are located southeast of the Yaxha-Nakum-Naranjo National Park, 8 km north of the village of El Zapote. The preliminary analysis of the information gathered in the field has led to an increased knowledge on the chronological aspects of the time span when these sites were occupied, on construction features, and on the settlements' configuration. Also, a limited comparative analysis was accomplished with the plaza patterns that form the ceremonial centers, to understand the hierarchical character of the sites located in their surroundings.

The data collected originate in the documentation work of archaeological sites that the PROSIAPETEN program is conducting northeast of the department of Petén. These efforts include a topographic survey made with a Brunton compass and a 60 m long tape, the drawing of 56 looting trenches, the excavation of six test pits for stratigraphic control, and the industry classification of the archaeological materials recovered. The lots were dated according to the criteria of the Type-Variety system, the chronological correlation of the occupations recorded in relatively nearby sites, and through widely known architectural features.

The field and laboratory activities were developed during the months of March, April, and May, 2004, with the support of five excavation pairs, and 20 people assigned to the refill, the clearing of weeds and the logistic operations. Once these works were completed, the entire excavation of La Quemada Corozal and Torre Corozal was backfilled, abundant rubble was reintegrated, and the respective ceremonial centers were cleared of weeds. At the site of Ta Aj Corozal, work had to be abruptly interrupted because the present landowner declined to extend the corresponding authorization. Thus, as a result of the activities accomplished, visitors today may observe these ceremonial centers from different angles, enjoy the wood's canopy and admire the surrounding landscape.

THE SOUTH REGION OF THE PETEN ITZA-YAXHA LAKES

The biological corridor formed by the central basin of the Peten Itza-Yaxha lake system comprises the lagoons of Champoxte and Lancaja, as well as a large extension of cohune groves, alternating the upper forests still preserved in natural hills and elevations, with the lower lands that undergo seasonal floods (Figure 1).

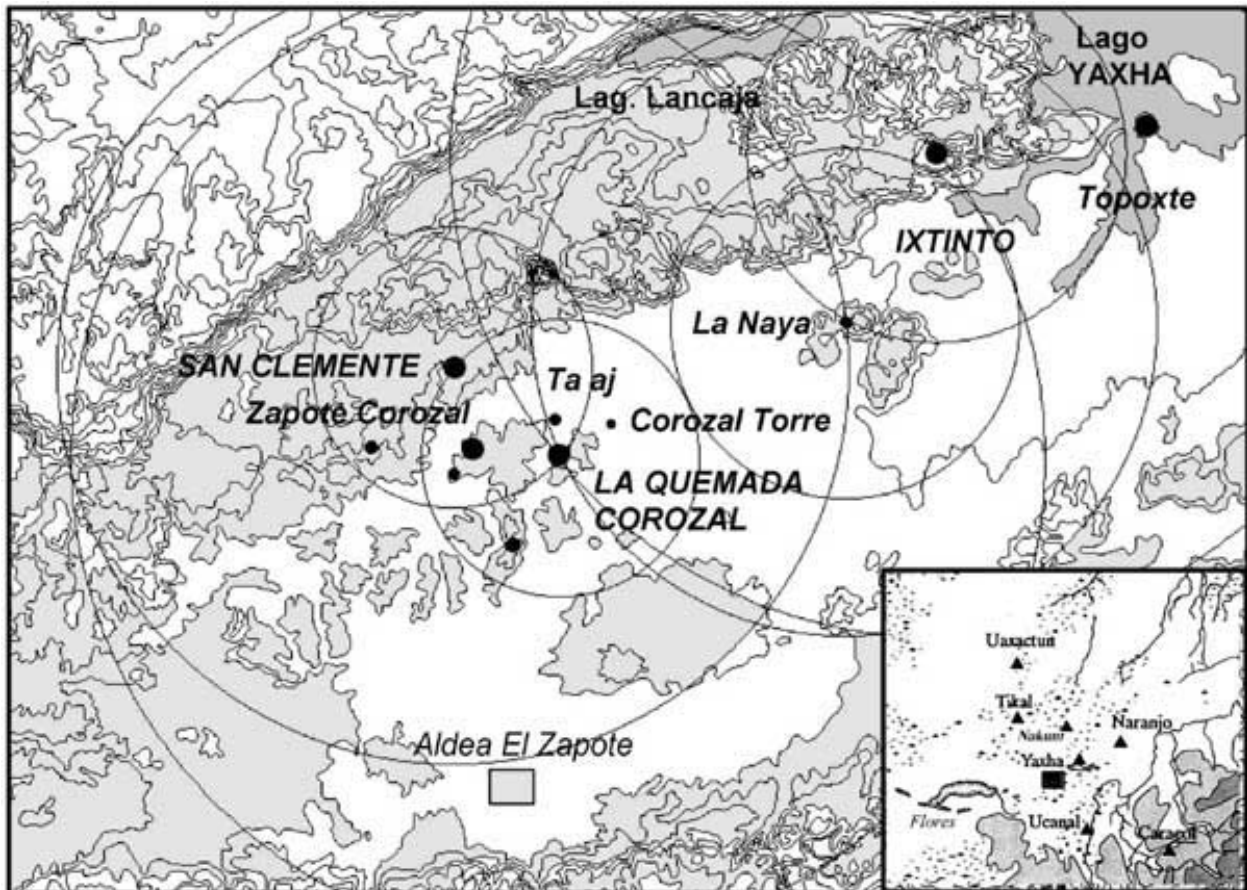


Figure 1. Geographical localization of the central sub-region of the lakes in Central Peten, showing the location of the sites at the periphery of La Quemada Corozal and probable area of influence.

Today, this area constitutes one portion of the muffling zone of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Within this sub-region, there are several prehispanic settlements: San Clemente (to the north), Zapote Corozal (to the west), Torre Corozal (to the east), Nima Witz (to the south), La Quemada Corozal and Ta Aj Corozal (in the middle area), and La Naya and Ixtinto (to the east). For now, the location of the sites of Cordoncillo and Huech remains to be established. None of these sites has a permanent surveillance, and therefore, only monitoring and maintenance visits to their major plazas are allowed (Figures 1 and 6; Quintana and Wurster 2001).

These sites include Acropolis type complexes which are attributed an administrative and ceremonial function. In some of them, Ballgame patios were discovered, as well as palace buildings with vaulted roofs, and carved stone and stucco modeled sculptures. Only the sites of La Quemada Corozal and Ixtinto include monumental Group E complexes. The use of this plaza patterns was emphasized because they facilitate tracing chronologically the importance of the sites, and because they tend to be indicators of the major political entities that occupied the different regions within the Maya area (Fialko 1988; Laporte 1996).

These sites occupy an intermediate position between the swamp of La Justa and the wet region of the savannah (Fialko 1997; Laporte 1996). Their respective settlements are located between the elevations of 240-280 m above sea level, raising themselves at average 10 m above the lowest level of the ground. The geographical distribution of these settlements suggests a strategic position along a possible route of exchange, where the closest destinies may have been Yaxha and Topoxte, and from then on, the routes that connected the west with Tayasal and Zacpeten, with Tikal to the north, and with the ancient trading routes that cut through the basin of the Mopan River to the south.

To understand the significance of the sites investigated, a summary of the recently collected data is now being presented and an interpretation for this sub-region is being proposed.

THE SITE OF LA QUEMADA COROZAL

The epicenter of the site La Quemada Corozal is integrated by several plazas and buildings of different dimensions. The East Plaza forms a monumental complex of the Group E type, whose East platform is over 95 m long, and the West Pyramid is 8 m high. The north sector is occupied by an Acropolis formed by two superimposed artificial platforms, while Patios A and B were no doubt areas designed for ritual and administrative activities (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Plan of the ceremonial center of the site of La Quemada Corozal.

The south sector of the site is occupied by the South Pyramid, several groups of middle size elongated platforms and small structures, with a residential and ritual function. In-between them, there is a Ballgame patio featuring a north-south orientation, as well as the South Pyramid, apparently aligned with a massive structure located north of the Group E type Complex.

The east sector is limited by three groups. The west sector includes an 8 m high pyramid; at the rear, there is a wide leveled terrace with low structures and a *chultun* in the central portion. There is a similar terrace at the north side, but in this case, no associated structures are present.

The multiple constructions located at each corner of the different patios correspond to the Terminal Classic period, and their size and position suggest a domestic function, although others may have had a ritual use. Similar constructions were recorded in-between this site and Torre Corozal, thus establishing a settlement continuity. The absence of construction remains in the plain grounds or areas with seasonal floods is notorious.

PRECLASSIC AND EARLY CLASSIC PERIODS

It was during the Preclassic period that the site of La Quemada Corozal adopted the character of a ceremonial center. During the Late Preclassic period, important levelings of the ground were undertaken, involving the entire removal of the arboreal vegetation and the moving of large amounts of stones and earth. Most probably, this transformation process of the natural landscape continued up to the Terminal Classic period (Figures 2 and 3).

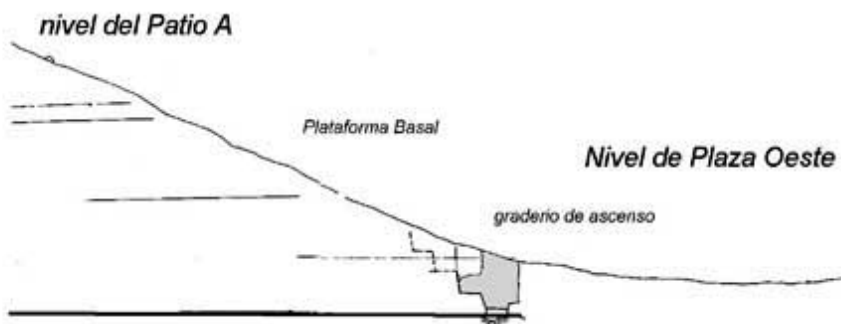
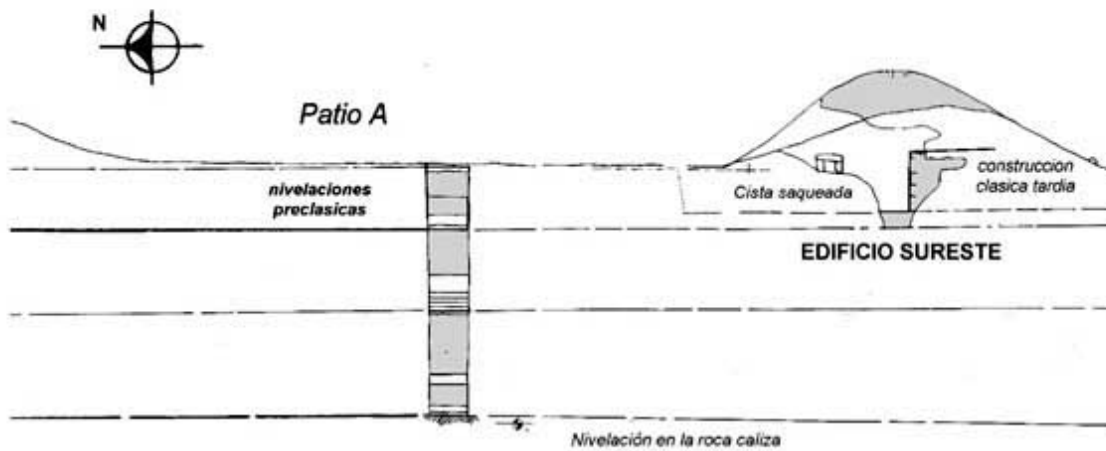


Figure 3. Profiles of the Acropolis of La Quemada Corozal.

The earlier versions of the buildings located within the East Plaza or Group E type complexes, the first buildings of the Acropolis, as well as the heavy retaining walls, the extensive leveling of the ground, and the laying of thick stucco floors underlying all of the buildings, correspond to the Late Preclassic period.

Within the Acropolis, Patio A raises 7.50 m above the limestone leveling, and its core records the superimposition of different and thick stucco floors, which in turn seem to correspond to three construction stages and their subsequent remodeling processes; also, remains of the ascending stairway were detected on the south side of the foundation.

In Patio A, the looters removed two rectangular stelas carved in limestone from their original location. Stela 1 shows a “cross” carved in bas-relief in the middle portion of a plain surface. The location suggests they were erected by the Late Classic period in front of the pyramid’s stairway that occupies the east side of the patio, together with the foundation of Patio B, and the others that integrate the complex.

Associated with the latest construction levelings of Patio A, three mutilated small buildings were found, featuring the slope and panel architectural mode together with iconographic designs in high and bas-relief, while the mouldings of the bodies were found at a different level.

The floor sequence indicates that the earliest construction stage corresponds to a probable “throne”, 0.40 m high. This presents, on its east and north sides, a feature which includes a “*kan*” cross, two scrolls in the shape of a fish tail, and two heads of the “*Chichan*” serpent, intertwined by two scrolls. At a later time, another building 0.90 m high was erected, incorporating to the sloping panel and to the framed horizontal panel the representation of an anthropomorphic deity and the design of a mat, or “*Pop*”, with a maximum height of 0.90 m. In a third stage –and in-between both buildings-, a probable bulk figure was built, of which only a U-shaped feature was preserved, together with some stucco remains of a small bench (Figures 3 and 4).

Deidad antropomorfa

Diseño de Petate "POP"



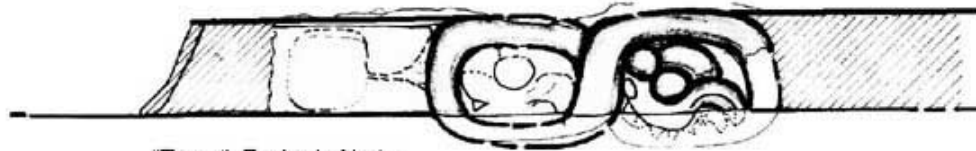
Lado oeste de edificio, Modo Talud-Tablero

Bano de acceso ?

Cruz Can - cola de Pez - Serpiente Chichan - Serpiente Chichan



"Trono", fachada este



"Trono", Fachada Norte

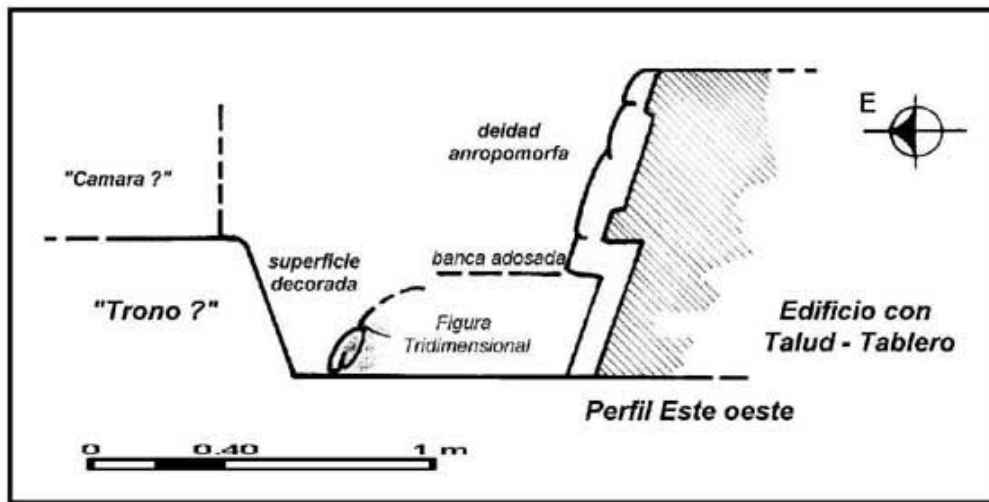


Figure 4. Iconographic and architectural details of the Early Classic period.

Both buildings were covered by the construction of a new platform 0.95 m high. This had an outset stairway on its north side, detached from a wall with a sloping panel and a flap. The resemblance observed in these two buildings, together with the constructions recorded at Group 6C-XVI, and the Central Acropolis of Tikal, as well as Group H of Uaxactun, make it possible to date their construction by the Early Classic period (Laporte and Valdés 1993).

The ceramic materials recovered from the construction refills include a considerable amount of diagnostic types of the Sierra and Savana groups. The slipped sherds from the Middle Preclassic period display a great variety of modal forms and decoration, with combined designs of U-shaped parallel incised lines (pre-fire; Forsyth 1989). The unslipped sherds feature striated surfaces and/or a fine polish.

The refills of the West, South, and North Pyramids, revealed lime blocks with stuccoed surfaces which were probably pulled off from other buildings, among them, those of the east sector of the Acropolis. Fragments of naked anthropomorphic figurines with punched decoration were also recovered. The sherds with modal features typical of the Early Classic period are extremely scarce, but the use of the the slope and panel architectural style is a diagnostic marker of an occupation during this period. Tentatively, the early occupation of the site may be dated to the Middle Preclassic period (around BC 600), with its peak around the dawn of the Early Classic period. The character of the current investigations prevents us from explaining whether this site was occupied throughout most of the Early Classic period and the beginning of the Late Classic period (AD 300-500), as well as the possible causes that led to the intentional mutilation of the earlier buildings.

LATE CLASSIC PERIOD

The Late Classic period is widely recorded throughout the site. The ceramic materials date to the Tepeu 2 horizon. The new construction program included the building of a palace with three vaulted chambers on the east façade of Patio B of the Acropolis, the earliest version of the Ballgame patio, a two-chamber palace and the North Structure in the southeast sector of the site, the South and West pyramids, as well as the multiple platforms recorded within the ceremonial center and adjacent areas. Most of the buildings led to the recovery of bone remains and polychrome sherds, possibly associated with looted funerary cists. These funerary features were present since the earliest versions of the East Pyramid of the Group E type Complex. All of them are small in dimensions, and were oriented from north to south (Figures 2 and 5).

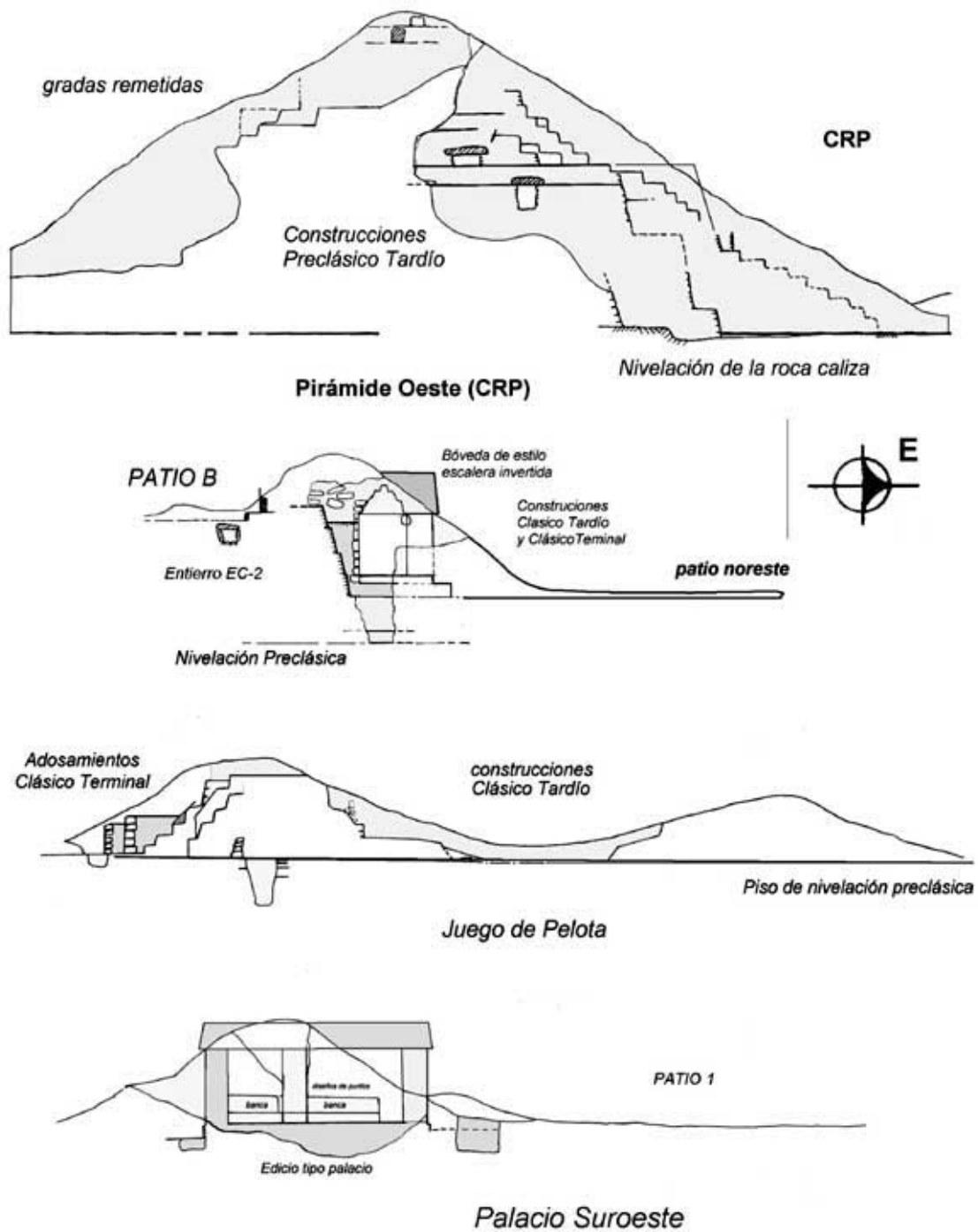


Figure 5. Profile of the Complexes of the Group E type, Ballgame patio and southeast patio.

The new constructions were characterized by the use of large limestone blocks, and the presence of packed refills made of broken or cut stone, and layers of white or gray soil. Very possibly this period witnessed the erection of Stelas 1 and 2, and a substantial change in the shape and dimension of the east sector of the Acropolis.

Although the mutilation of the buildings under Patio A is evident, particularly on the east sector, the recycling of wall stones for the new constructions suggests a remarkable availability of manpower. However, these transformations did not alter the original configuration of the East Plaza structures, perhaps as a consequence of their significance in the religious life of the community.

The remodeling of the Acropolis raised Patio B to a height of 9.50 m, and on top of it, four small platforms were built; the aspect of the North, East and West structures suggests the reproduction of a pattern of the Triadic type. On the east side of this platform, a tall, sloping wall was built, to integrate several short bodies. Apparently, one of its remodeling works corresponded to a platform of a medium height, further mutilated with the construction of three vaulted chambers oriented towards the east. The vault is of the “inverted stairway” type, and has remained *in situ* in the central room, thanks to the presence of a refill put in place in prehispanic times. The walls and the vault are mostly black, and apparently the stucco came off as a consequence of its exposure to high temperatures (Figures 2 and 5).

An additional palace, most probably vaulted, was built in the southeast sector of the site. It had two rooms with an eastwards orientation, and the inside showed two remodeling works and two small benches. There was also indication that this building had, at a certain point, a chamber on the north and south ends, but they are now mutilated. In front of this structure there is a building that seems to have undergone several remodeling works that apparently formed extended platforms; the first version was oriented towards the west, and the second towards the east.

The west building of the Ballgame shows two construction versions, and they both have an outset stairway at the rear, detaching from small sloping panels and remarkably inclined flaps. The game area features slightly inclined benches, as well as bouncing walls, also inclined (Figure 5).

Interestingly, the axis of the West Pyramid is not coincident with that of the East Platform. The normative axis of the plaza is coincident with the corridor formed by the West Pyramid and the border of the Ballgame Patio; the average deviation of this axis is 86°. We have found no evidence of the possible presence of sculpted monuments in this plaza.

At the center of the building located south, and in the axis of the Ballgame, a bowl of the Palmar Orange Polychrome type was recovered, as well as fragments of a tripod dish. They both exhibit a band with hieroglyphs and an exceptional calligraphy; human bone remains of an adult individual were also recovered in association with these materials.

Burial EC-02 was located under the plaza floor, in front of the East Building of Patio B of the Acropolis. The body was laid in an extended dorsal decubitus position, with the skull to the north, inside a cist built with slabs. Under the head there was a tripod dish of the Zacatal Cream Polychrome type, four bone ornaments in the skull region, and one spindle whorl in the abdominal region. The first display the form of “lip

plugs”, and were covered with red pigment; the spindle whorl was white and showed no decoration. The osteological analysis suggests this is the burial of an adult female, while the associated objects indicate that she had a high-rank status within society (Figure 7).

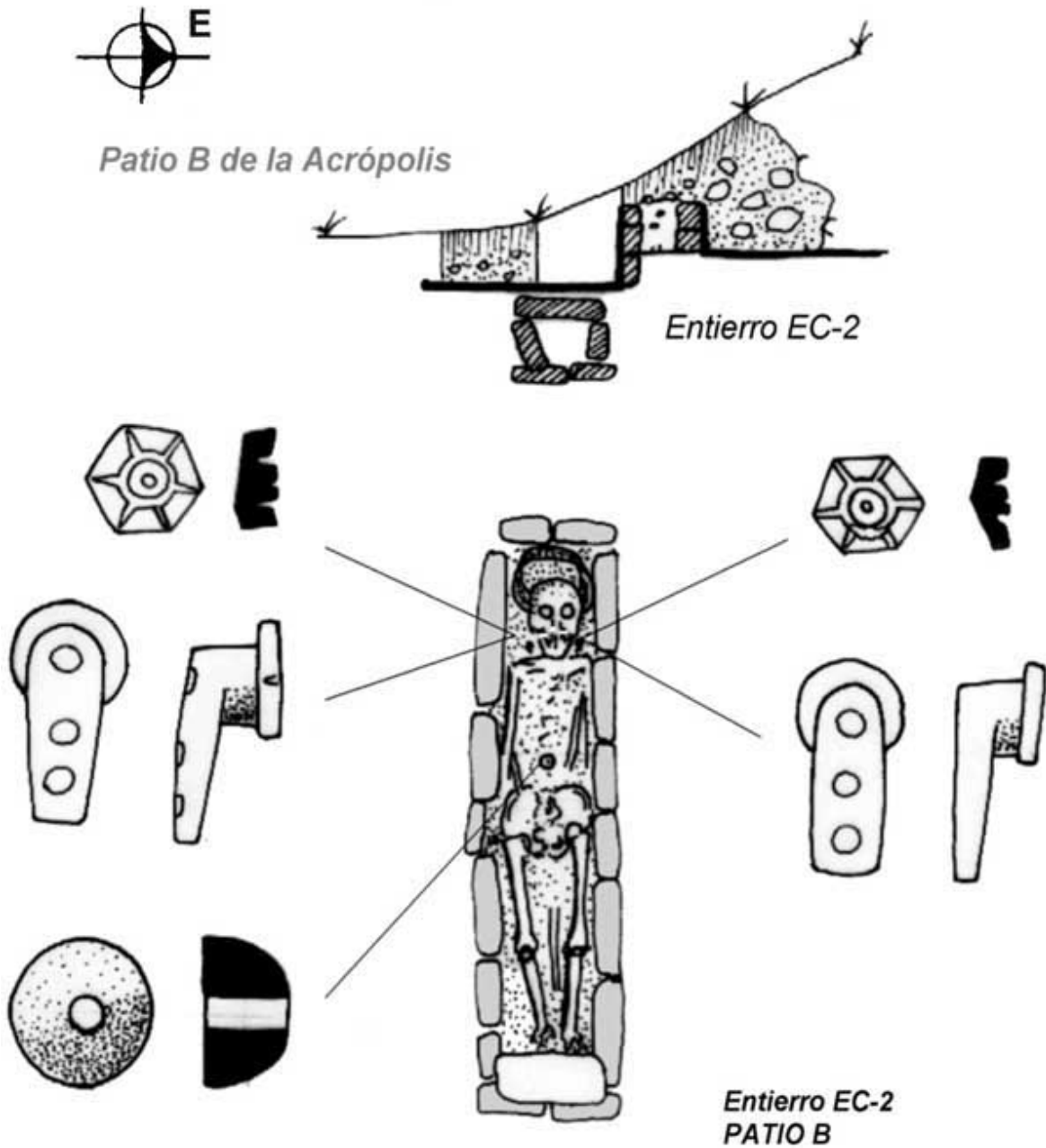


Figure 6. Burial EC-02, site of La Quemada Corozal.

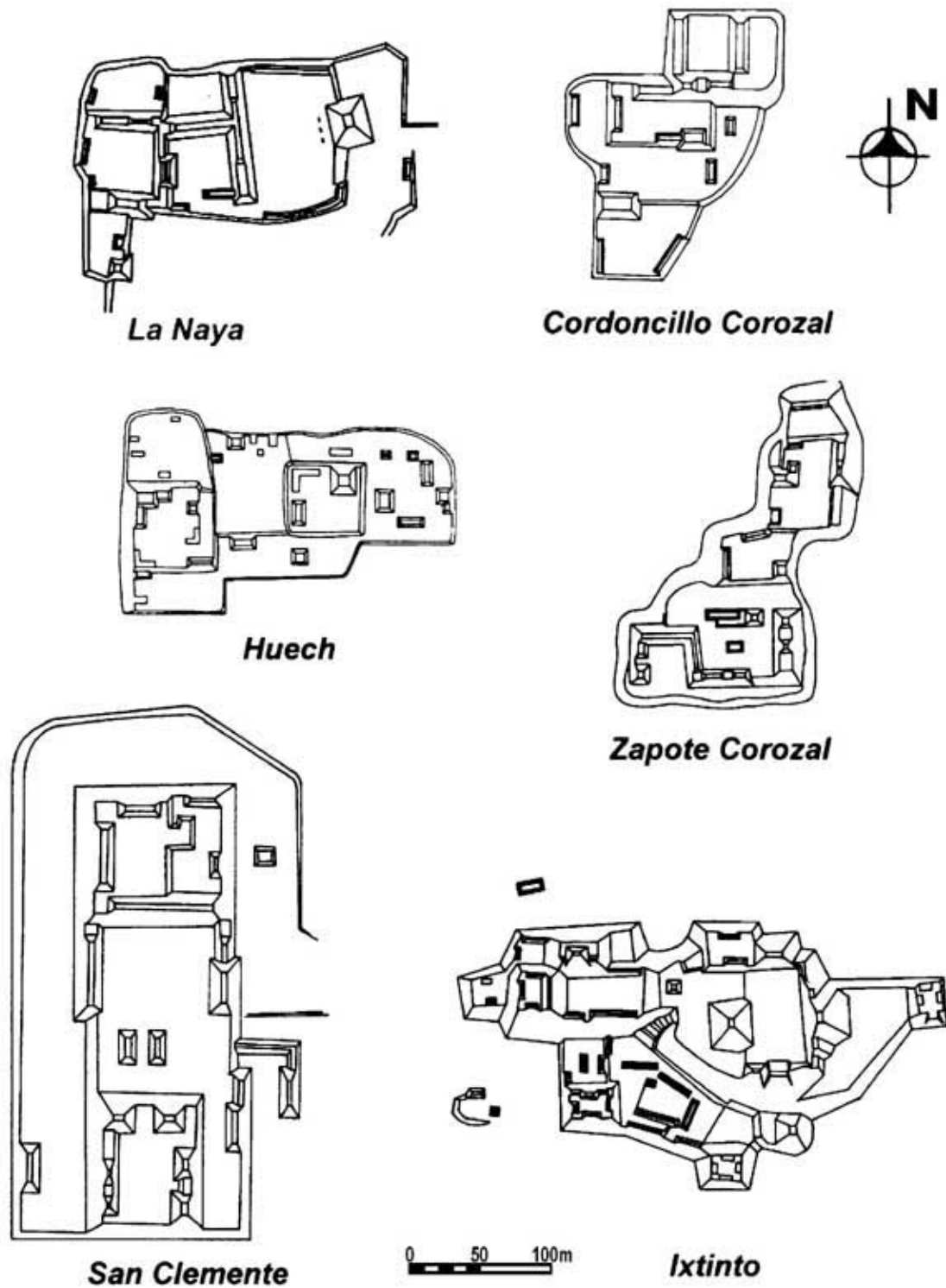


Figure 7. Ceremonial centers: La Quemada Corozal, San Clemente, Zapote Corozal, La Naya and Ixtinto.

Some construction features suggesting the presence of multiple burials were observed at the core of the building located at the southwest sector of Patio A of the Acropolis, and under the altar found in the southeast sector of the same patio.

TERMINAL CLASSIC PERIOD

The multiple simple structures that occupy the corners of the plazas in force during the preceding period were assigned to the Terminal Classic period (Tepeu 3). Distinctive features of this period were the wide elongated platforms, the small walls and the benches placed at their back, the refills of gray soil, the façades built with small, carved limestone blocks, the construction of small benches at the back of the buildings, as well as the overall lining of the buildings' façades built along the previous stage.

The presumption of a domestic character and an increased population is supported by the large amounts of ceramic recovered in the thin layers of earth that contained them. The funerary features associated with the final occupation of the site, as well as the deposit of offerings, would also correspond to this period.

Burial EC-01 represents an individual deposited in a flexed position on his left lateral, very close to the surface. The skull was placed northwards, and his sight oriented to the east; the offering included a valve of nacre shell, a thin object in the shape of a bone-made blade, and two pendants made with dental pieces, possibly peccary (*coche de monte*), and what looks like the claw of some big cat. It is worth mentioning that the skull shows traces of intentional deformation, and that the incisive teeth of the upper maxillary are incised (B5 Type; Imbelloni and Dembo 1938).

The placement of three caches corresponds to the Terminal Classic period. They are associated with the axis of the main buildings and altars:

- In front of the East Pyramid of Patio A of the Acropolis there was Cache EC-1; it corresponded to a brown flint knife placed in front of the first tier of the stairway.
- Caches EC-2 and EC-3 were placed in front of a square-shaped altar affixed to the southwest corner of the mentioned pyramid.
- Cache EC-2 included nine eccentrics of gray obsidian and a miniature pot; EC-3 corresponded to an incomplete vessel with no slip, buried in a round hole by the front wall of the altar.

The funerary feature designated as CT-1 corresponds as well to this period, in association with Building 2, located at the site of Torre Corozal (Matute 2003). This is the burial of an adult individual deposited in extended dorsal decubitus position, deposited in front of the south mask. The burial included the offering of a tripod plate placed under the skull and no remains of the cist were observed; therefore, it is believed to be of an intrusive character.

The funerary features described suggest that during this period, burials were placed outside the constructive core, and bodies were laid in the extended dorsal

decubitus position, with the skull towards the north, tripod dishes were placed under the skulls, as well as a few other objects. The accidental finding of these features does not allow for speculating about burials of individuals of a younger or older age than those recorded so far.

The ceramic materials of both periods include polychrome sherds, while the fragments of pots and ceramic types of the Tinaja group are abundant. Only the surface levels yielded ceramic fragments of Fine Orange paste. Actually, almost in all sectors of the site, fragments of ceramic censer were present in the form of aggregates or lateral flaps, or spiked decorations; while others show anthropomorphic figures in appliqué representing major deities of the Maya pantheon.

FREQUENCY OF MATERIALS AND THEIR DATING

The representativity of the occupations recorded at the site of La Quemada Corozal derives from the study of over 13.000 sherds: 8% of the lots were associated with the Middle Preclassic period; 40 % with the Late Preclassic period; 2 % with the Early Classic period; 28 % with the Late Classic period; 21 % with the Terminal Classic period; no Postclassic vestiges were recovered. The occupational sequence of this site was apparently parallel to the one recorded for Ixtinto, and it is probable that the occupational history may have been continued between BC 600 and AD 400, perhaps followed by a hiatus spanning between AD 400 and 800, and a re-emergence between AD 800 and 900 (Hermes, 1998).

The constructions at the site of Ta Aj Corozal undoubtedly correspond to the Late Classic and Terminal Classic periods, though there are several sherds that date to the Preclassic and the Early Classic periods. The site of Torre Corozal may have had an occupational and constructive history similar to that of La Quemada Corozal, being visited for the celebration of rituals during the Late Postclassic period, due possibly to the stucco characters depicted in Building 1, in the outer part of the vault.

HIERARCHIZATION PROPOSAL BY SITE RANK

Based on the cultural traits unfolded so far and given their significance for the study of this sub-region, we are now presenting a preliminary approach regarding the hierarchy of the sites established within the southern area of the Yaxha-Nahum-Naranjo National Park. The variables considered correspond to the amount of square meters occupied by each ceremonial center; the presence or absence of the so-called Group E type Complexes; the presence or absence of Ballgame patios, and the chronological depth of the settlements (Figure 7 and Chart 1).

The present analysis has excluded the sculptures, causeways, residential groups and *chultuns*, to avoid biases derived from the multiple plundering activities observed, and because of the need to widen the extensive reconnaissance works towards the surroundings of the sites referred to. However, one may say that this restriction does

not seem to affect our interpretations, inasmuch as the sites under study unfold characteristics similar to those of the polities defined in different geographic regions within the Maya lowlands (Chart 1).

The analysis of these variables suggests that in this sub-region, or within an area of 16 km², possibly three site ranks coexisted. Map 1 shows concentric circles with a 2 km radius from the ceremonial centers of La Quemada Corozal and San Clemente because they include a Ballgame patio, while Map 2 shows concentric circles from the sites that include a Group E type Complex, an extended occupational chronology and massive constructions (Figure 1).

In sum, sites of Rank 1 have ceremonial centers that cover around 60.000 m²; these architectural complexes are a part of compounds devoted to some specific function such as Ballgame patios, Group E Complexes, and include carved stone sculptures and/or others modeled in stucco. The sites of La Quemada Corozal, San Clemente and Ixtinto are representative of this rank.

Rank 2 has been assigned to ceremonial centers covering around 35.000 m². Such is the case of the sites of El Zapote Corozal, Ta Aj Corozal, Nima Witz and La Naya. Here, the chronology of occupation may parallel that of the Rank 1 sites, or be situated in one of its peak periods.

Rank 3 has been assigned to ceremonial centers covering average 15.000 m², and the site of Torre Corozal corresponds to this rank. The chronological considerations of the previous rank may be also applied to these sites, and their inclusion within the hierarchic system responds to the presence of ritual buildings of a massive character; in this case, we have considered the presence of sculptures exhibited at the frieze of the east façade.

CONCLUSION

The data obtained presuppose the economic interrelation between the inhabitants of the different sites recorded, while the presence of Group E Complexes, the Ballgame patios, the triadic groups and the shrines, stress the importance of ritual activities as a part of social life. The chronological depth of the Group E Complexes of La Quemada and Ixtinto is a sign of the importance of this sub-region, located in the middle portion of the lakes basin from Central Petén; this is reinforced by the considerable amount of Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic materials recovered.

The construction of Ballgame patios oriented from north to south and the emergence of San Clemente during the Late Classic period reconfirms the importance of the region, as well as that of the polities that exerted local power, control of local resources and the traffic of products. The hierarchization based on the dimensions of the ceremonial centers –and on their configuration– suggests the presence of construction regulations through which both the growth and the emergence of new ceremonial centers was made viable.

The construction process observed in La Quemada Corozal together with the characteristics of the neighbor sites, stress the importance of the ritual activities accomplished in the ceremonial centers, which continued up to the Terminal Classic period. The erection of stelas in the main plazas and the stucco sculptures integrated in buildings façades, together with the burial practices of the times, may well reflect the political re-orientations derived from alliances or conflicts experienced by the rulers of sites like Yaxha, Tayasal and Tikal. The use of the talud-tablero architectural mode and the iconographic motifs they unfold should be outlined, and these may be slight earlier or either contemporary to the arrival of "Teotihuacan" groups to the city of Yaxha and Tikal during the Early Classic period. It should also be outlined that the intentional destruction of a large portion of the Acropolis did not affect the buildings of the Group E Complex, and that the pyramids built –likely with the recycling of these materials– came to consolidate the ceremonial character of the site.

Although the data presented here are a result of the documentation of looting trenches, the preliminary analysis stresses the significance of the archaeological sites that day after day are at the mercy of looters, and of the areas assigned to agriculture and cattle breeding activities; like they were a part of prehispanic settlements, they also contain important data that should be taken care of by professional archaeologists.

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COMPARATIVE VARIABLES

RANK	Site	Area, m2	Group E Complexes	Acropolis	Ballgame
1	La Quemada Corozal	60.000	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Corozal Torre	30.000	No	Si	No
2	Ta Aj Corozal	25.500	No	No	No
2	Zapote Corozal	34.000	No	No	No
3	Cordoncillo Corozal	30.000	No	No	No
3	Huech	34.500	No	Yes	No
1	San Clemente	60.000	No	Yes	Yes
3	La Naya	35.000	No	Yes	No
1	Ixtinto	60.000	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	El Zapote	15.500	No	No	No
	Nimá Witz	30.000	No	Yes	NR
*	YAXHA		Yes	Yes	Yes
*	TIKAL		Yes	Yes	Yes

Chart 1. Comparative variables and chart reflecting the hierarchical rank of the sites studied.

- Figure 1 Geographical location of the central sub-region of the lakes at Central Petén, showing the position of the sites at the periphery of La Quemada Corozal, and probable influence area
- Figure 2 Plan of the ceremonial center of the site Quemada Corozal
- Figure 3 Acropolis profiles of La Quemada Corozal
- Figure 4 Iconographic and architectural details of the Early Classic period
- Figure 5 Profile of the Group E Complexes, Ballgame patio and southeast Patio
- Figure 6 Burial EC-02, site of La Quemada Corozal
- Figure 7 Ceremonial centers: La Quemada Corozal, San Clemente, Zapote Corozal, La Naya and Ixtinto