

IN SEARCH OF THE POPULATION OF THE EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD AT LA SUFRICAYA, PETEN

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Keywords: Maya archaeology, Guatemala, Petén, Holmul Basin, La Sufricaya, Holmul, Early Classic, contacts with Teotihuacan, mural paintings, painted hieroglyphs

La Sufricaya, a minor site located 1.2 km away from the central plaza of Holmul, has provided crucial information about the occupation of the Early Classic period (AD 300-550) and the socio-political development of the Holmul area. Several carved stelae from La Sufricaya have provided unique information on the dynastic history of Holmul, suggesting that La Sufricaya was the seat of an emerging dynasty during the Early Classic period. The epigraphic and iconographic evidence from the stelae and mural paintings found in the main structure of the site, suggest as well that at La Sufricaya, the elite was part of a political and cultural interaction with groups from Central Mexico.

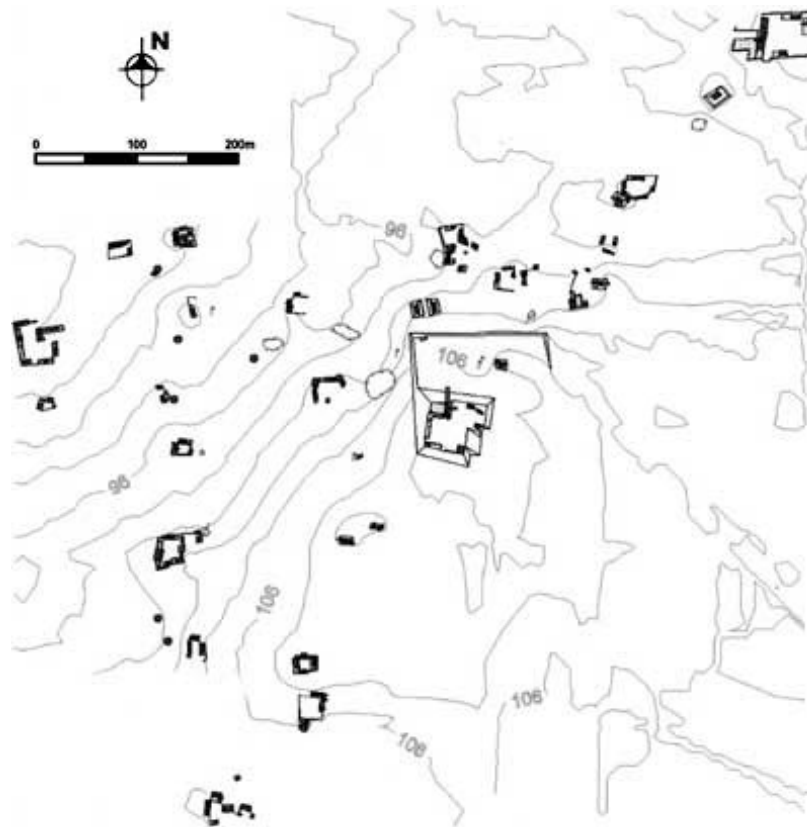


Figure 1. Map of La Sufricaya.

Research at the site will help to solve one of the most complex problems of Maya archaeology, namely, the nature of the relationships between the Mayas and Teotihuacan in Central Mexico, something that could completely change the traditional patterns applied in the inter-regional interaction of the Early Classic period. The data from La Sufricaya may also have implications for the comprehension of the regional political processes during the Early Classic period, at a much larger scale, including the growth of the regional polity of Tikal and the arrival of the elite from the Mexican Altiplano in the Central Lowlands during a critical phase of the political development of the Mayas.

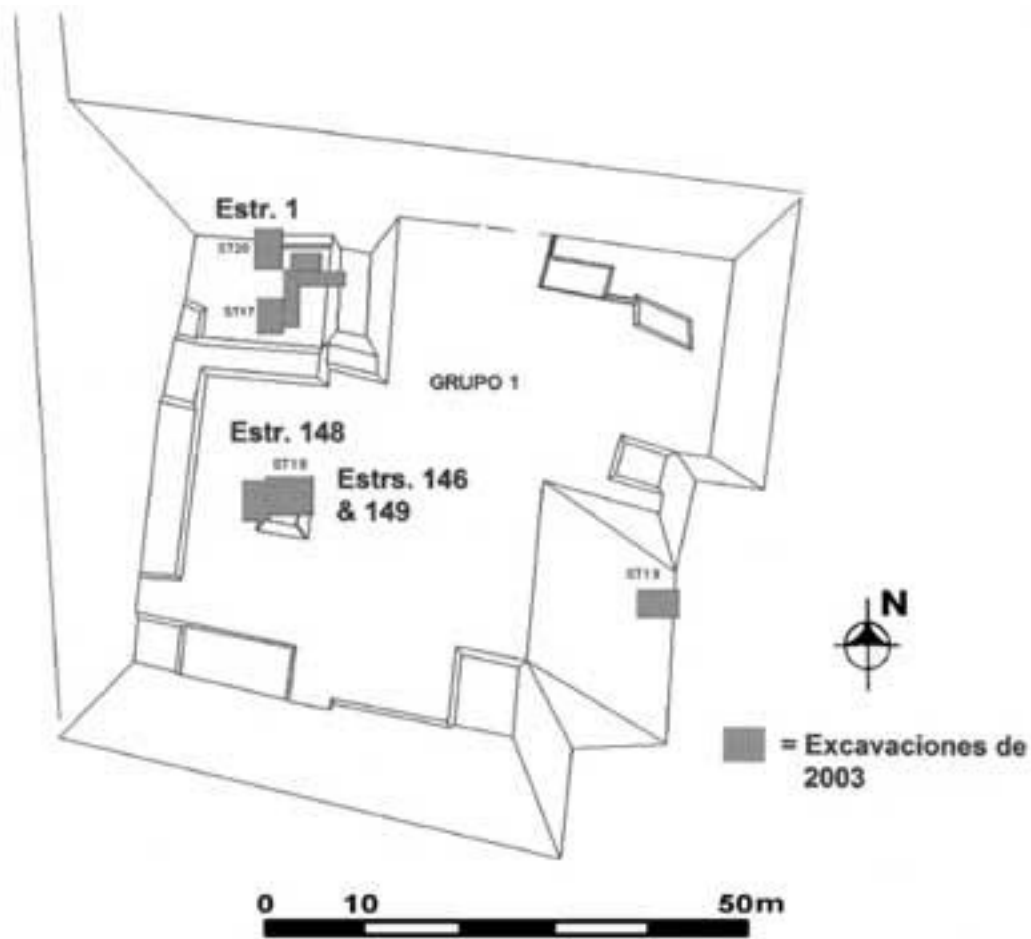


Figure 2. Map of Group 1.

Ian Graham first visited La Sufricaya in the 1980's. During his stay, he mapped the main group and found Stela 2. The ceremonial center of the site consisted of an elevated plaza with a small pyramid and a large platform 11 m high (Figure 1). A large number of residential groups surrounded the ceremonial center. Several structures were built on top of the platform forming a small Acropolis (Figure 2). Since the field season of 2001, intensive investigations have been conducted at Structure 1, following the discovery of

mural paintings in the inside. Four excavation seasons at La Sufricaya have provided a wealth of information regarding the occupation of the site.

La Sufricaya had an intensive ritual activity during the Early Classic period, when the ceremonial center was drastically remodeled. The subsequent occupational phase, of an exclusive residential character, took place during the Late Classic and Terminal Classic periods (AC 550-900; Estrada-Belli 2001b). Eight fragments of carved monuments were recovered at La Sufricaya. Nikolai Grube conducted an analysis of the carved monuments found at La Sufricaya, which have provided details on the dynastic history of the Holmul region (Grube 2003).

Stela 1 depicts the ruler with a headdress in his right hand and a serpent vision in his left. Stylistically, this portrait is similar to the early examples from Tikal and other sites within its political sphere, suggesting a *Baktun* 8 dating (prior to AC 435) for the monument.

The inscription on Stela 5 shows a Long Count date corresponding to the 6 of August of AD 422; it refers to the “seat” of a local lord named *Aj-Wosal*, and represents the earliest reference to a dynastic line in the Holmul region (Grube 2003:703).

Stela 6 features an earlier date, but only one portion of the inscription is readable; the interpretations of the date fall between AD 377 and 387. This inscription also includes glyphs resembling the name of the lord *Siyaj K'ahk* (known as Smoking Frog), a ruler or military captain affiliated to Teotihuacan, also known in inscriptions from Tikal, Uaxactun and other sites within Peten (Grube 2003).

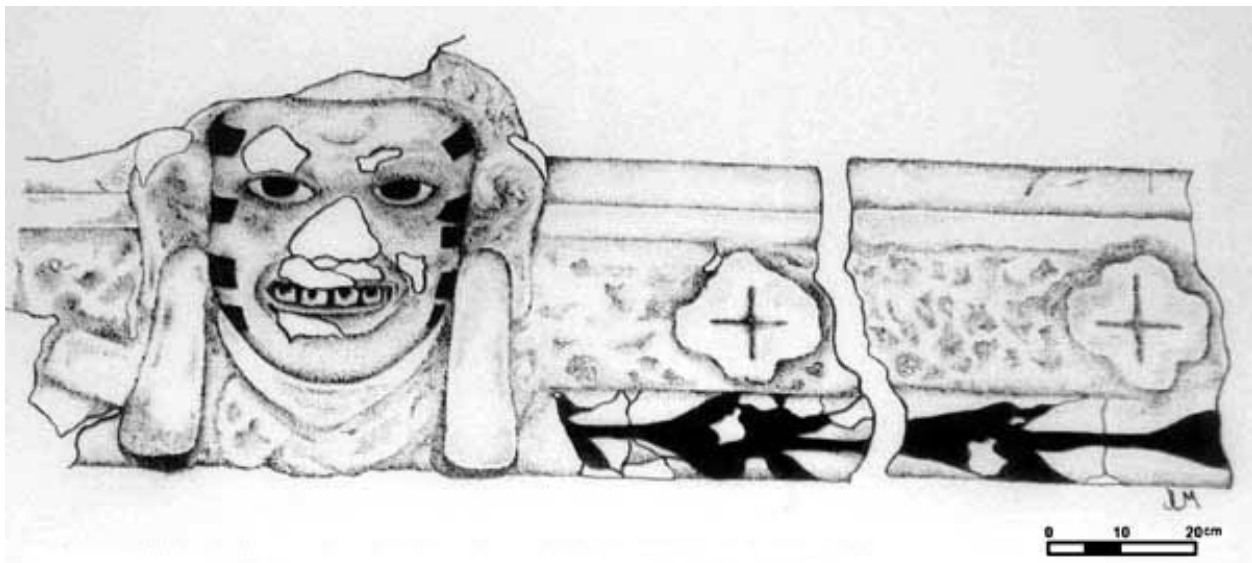


Figure 3. Drawing of the cornice of Structure 1 (drawing by Jessica Mundt).

The discovery of the mural paintings from La Sufricaya has provided details concerning the dynastic ceremonies possibly conducted at Structure 1 during the Early Classic

period. The composition of Mural 1 consists of several standing or seated figures, shown in rows and inside frames formed by red lines. The seated figures are wearing the costume typical of the Central Altiplano in Mexico and also carry the weapons typically used by the warriors of that region (Estrada Belli 2001).

The second mural painting was found during the field season of 2002 (Tomasic and Estrada-Belli 2003). The scene represents a seated figure tied up to the gallows, and is reminiscent of the sacrificial scenes from Tikal and of the Late Classic ceramic (Taube 1988). A similar type of sacrifice also implied cutting the neck of the victim, in association with inauguration ceremonies (D. Freidel, personal communication 2002). Thus, this mural may be depicting the rituals conducted as a part of royal inaugurations at La Sufricaya.

The investigations conducted during the 2003 field season inside Structure 1 revealed the outer western wall of the room that housed Mural 1. This outer wall was decorated with a frieze and a four-leaf type stucco mask painted in a bright red (Figure 3). The cornice was also ornamented with an arrow motif similar to the chevron motifs used in Teotihuacan, equivalent to the *Pop* motif of the Maya area, which denotes royalty. According to Stuart and Taube (personal communication 2003), the use of this adornment may indicate that there was a throne in this room during the Early Classic period. Both the iconography and the stylistic components of the mask suggest that this elite captive may have been a part of the dynastic rituals and of the sacrifice depicted in the murals (Estrada-Belli and Foley 2004).

The monuments, art and architecture at La Sufricaya suggest that a complex system of ritual and dynastic activities unfolded at the site during the brief period comprised between AD 300 and 450. An intriguing aspect of this site has to do with the possible reference to a foreign presence during these events. The military captain mentioned in Stela 6, *Siyaj K'ahk'* is a frequently cited character in the political history of the Peten sites, where he may have played a significant role in the changes and dynastic lines of this region (Coggins 1976; Schele and Freidel 1990; Stuart 2000). The implications of the inscriptions in Stela 6 are that *Siyaj K'ahk'* may have as well participated in the dynastic history of Holmul and La Sufricaya. The presence of Teotihuacan warrior-figures in Mural 1 suggests a visit to La Sufricaya and Holmul paid by a Teotihuacan-affiliated group. Alternatively, the rulers of La Sufricaya and therefore of Holmul, may have used the symbols and iconography of Teotihuacan to show their allegiance to Tikal and to increase their own power (Demarest and Foias 1993).

A summary of the investigation conducted at La Sufricaya during the field season of 2004 is now being presented, which has contributed to the comprehension of the Holmul region socio-political history, while it simultaneously provided new data about the connection between the Maya and the Teotihuacan peoples.

DESIGN AND RESEARCH GOALS IN 2004

After the mural paintings, the carved stelas, and the Teotihuacan-style artifacts were discovered at La Sufricaya, the design of our research has been based on an approach aimed at understanding both the archaeological and the historical contexts of the epigraphic and iconographic evidence of the site. This included the documentation referred to the preservation of murals, combined with the archaeological investigation. This approach was maintained during the 2004 season with the help of Gene Ware of the Brigham Young University, who conducted the multi-spectral analysis of the murals. The curator Alberto Semeraro, in turn, cleaned and stabilized Murals 6 and 6-North. Heather Hurst, from Yale University, completed the first stage of the creation of reproductions of Murals 1 to 7. The excavations of Anna Browne Ribeiro and this author in Platform 1 and Structure 1 provided information about the sequences of occupation and construction in the area.

CONSERVATION

When Murals 6 and 6-North were discovered in 2003, they presented a lime layer that covered the details of the scenes. Alberto Semeraro removed the lime and repaired those portions of the murals where stucco risked falling from its wall matrix. His work revealed a new scene which seemed to represent a historical meeting between a group of Mayas and another group from Central Mexico. Mural 6 depicts a procession of Maya figures which seem to be carrying presents or offerings (Figure 4). The characters are shown facing several seated figures with costumes from Central Mexico placed inside a number of red squares, resembling the codex from the later times and being almost identical to the figures of Mural 1.

Mural 6-North is perhaps the most peculiar mural at La Sufricaya. The main record depicts two lords holding a meeting. One of them is seated on a temple with the red frames that evoke horizontal panels or *tableros* and with his body painted black, while the other character stands on one of the temple's stairways. The seated figure, represented in a different artistic style, holds a torch in his hand, extended towards the figure at his right, depicted in the typical artistic Maya style. An interesting detail in this mural has to do with the track of footprints that connect the figure at the right with the lower record. In the murals from Teotihuacan and in the later Mixtec codex, tracks of footprints are used to indicate movement or trips made to far away places. The track of footprints runs across an additional track which leads to a procession of Maya figures. A lower record represents a figure seated under a structure with a thatched roof.



Figure 4. Character in a procession on Mural 6.

EXCAVATIONS

Three excavation units opened under the direction of Anna Browne Ribeiro allowed us to examine several low mounds located on the plaza on Platform 1, to the south of Structure 1.

The excavations in 2004 were initiated to define the extension of Structure 146, a residential construction of the Late Classic period investigated during the field season of 2003 by Niña Nievens. During the excavation, a platform contemporary to Structure 146 was discovered and designated as Structure 148, with measures of 3.80 m x 2.40 m. An additional structure with several rooms, Structure 149, was also found during this field season. This structure preceded the Late Classic period structures, and was probably

contemporary to Structure 1, as it was built directly on top of the last floor of the plaza of Platform 1.

Structure 149 was partially destroyed and its construction materials reused during the construction of Structures 146 and 148 during the Late Classic period. Three burials were found in association with Structure 146. The cuts for the burials were placed along the western edge of the structure, cutting the preceding floor of the plaza. The remains of the burials were poorly preserved and consisted of fragments of long bones and several teeth.

Burial 19 was placed in a cist of aligned stones and was sealed with slabs. As an offering, it included a shell pendant and a polychromed bowl, thus dating the burial to the Late Classic period.

Burial 18 was placed adjacent to Burial 19; this introduction partially cut the latter one. The bone remains consisted of a small pile of fragments of long bones, suggesting that the remains were wrapped-up in a bundle or re-deposited in ancient times. The burial also included the offering of a flint spear and a dish.

In turn, Burial 21 was placed in a stone-delineated cist and sealed with slabs, to the north of Burials 18 and 19. The bone remains consisted of very tiny fragments of bone and several teeth, discovered in the north and south sectors of the cist, suggesting that the burial was disturbed and removed in ancient times. No offerings were found in association with Burial 21.

While we were unable to specify the precise function of Structure 149, dating to the Early Classic period, it was evidently associated with the ritual complex of Structure 1, and therefore, was not a residential structure. The presence of several burials in association with Structure 148 confirms the hypothesis that the function of La Sufricaya's ceremonial center shifted from an elite ritual center to an elite secondary residential center, sometime between the Early Classic and the Late Classic periods. Interestingly, no burials were discovered in Structures 1 and 149, implying that the structures were not of the residential type.

The excavations conducted by this author during the field season of 2004 pretended to clarify the construction sequence of Structure 1, as well as understanding the structure's function, while providing an archaeological context for the murals.

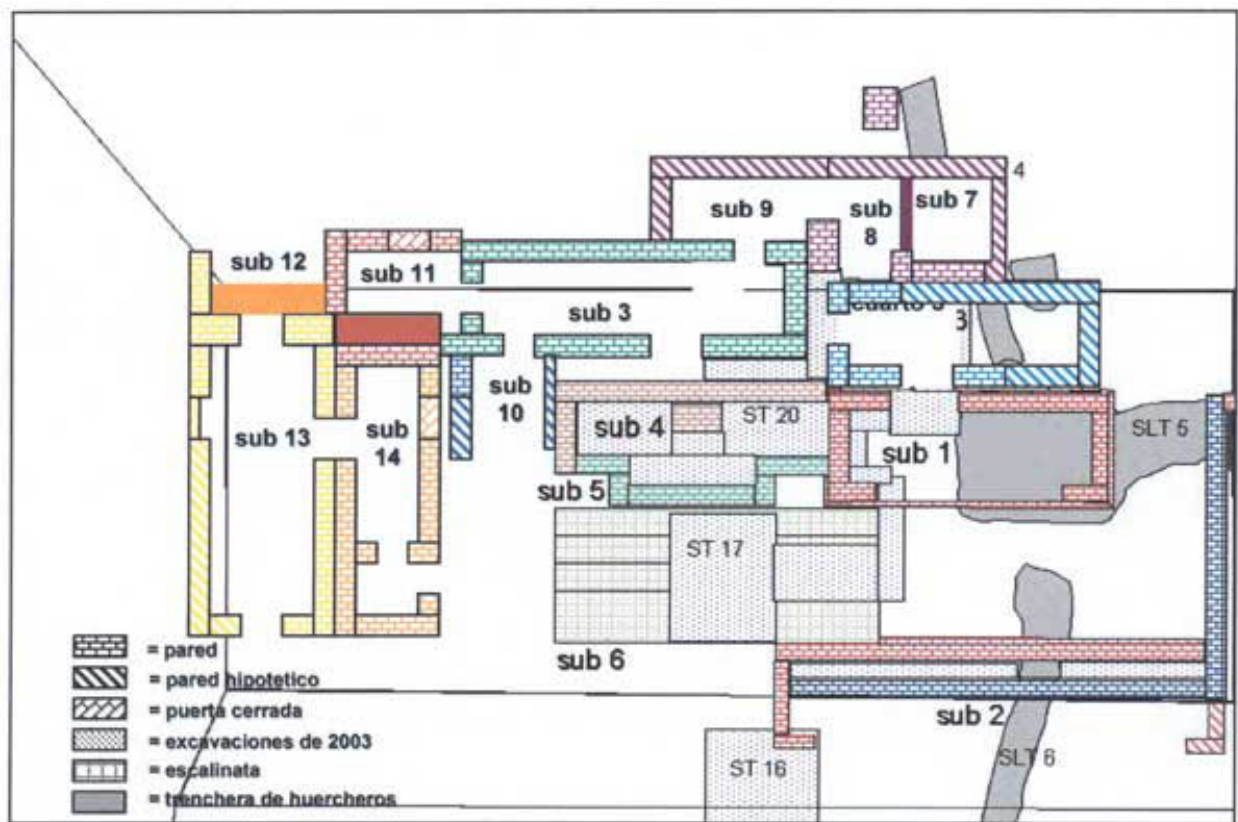


Figure 5. Construction phases of Structure 1.

These excavations have revealed that Structure 1 underwent several remodeling phases that included a number of individual structures built during the Early Classic period (Figure 5). Access to these structures was probably verified through a central patio located south and a stairway in the north façade of Platform 1 of the plaza. The social and political reasons for these renovation activities in Structure 1 are not fully clear, and probably have to do with the change of function of the structure and the site during the Early Classic and Late Classic periods.



Figure 6. Structure, 13-sub.

An additional interesting finding is that of Structure 1, 13-sub -a large vaulted room- where a painted inscription was discovered (Figure 6). According to Alexandre Tokovinine (personal communication 2004), the portion of the exposed text includes the date *16 Mak 11 Eb* (Figure 7). The date present in the text of La Sufricaya is similar to the date recorded in Tikal's Stela 31, which describes the arrival of *Siyah K'ah'* to the site. While the date on Stela 31 is in fact *15 Mak 11 EB*, the date from La Sufricaya differs in one month, though it probably refers to the same date.

The title "*Chak-tok-wayaab*" is also included in the text (Figure 8). This title refers to a stingray spine excavated in an Early Classic period context in the central area of Holmul; it stands for "foreteller", and it refers to a specific group of people who were probably the founders of La Sufricaya.

The access to the room with the mural painting was closed when the wall for Mural 5 was erected. During the phase that followed, it was filled with rubble and sealed with a floor. Several ceramic artifacts were recovered from the refill of the rooms. The ceramic artifacts combine Maya ceramic types and slips with the forms and decorative designs typical of Teotihuacan. Several fragments of the phase known as Tzakol 2 include a tripod plate of the Lucha Incised type, with the design of a Teotihuacan-style heart

perforated with knives and with dripping drops of blood (Figure 9). In a nearby midden, there was a sherd of the Balanza Black type covered with stucco and ornamented with a painted tassel.



Figure 7. Hieroglyphs in Structure 1, 10-sub.



Figure 8. Glyph showing the *Chak-tok-wayaab* title.



Figure 9. Glyph of 16 Mak 11 Eb.

CONCLUSIONS

Work accomplished during the field season of 2004 provided a substantial amount of information concerning the role and history of La Sufricaya, with archaeological, epigraphic and iconographic data. This approach has contributed to our comprehension of all the major research issues regarding La Sufricaya, including its occupational and construction history, the role it played within the political dynamics of Holmul, and the foreign presence at the site. The excavations conducted in Structure 1 have provided data about the structure's layout, which is in fact a compound that comprises several interconnected structures.

The field work in 2004 provided additional and crucial epigraphic information, with the small compilation of texts from the Holmul region as well as the discovery of the glyphic text painted on a wall inside Structure 1. The excavation and the study of the text will

reveal additional information regarding the identity and the role played by the inhabitants of La Sufricaya. Moreover, the text from La Sufricaya is one of the few examples of hieroglyphic writing of the Early Classic period in the Maya Lowlands.

Murals 6 and 6-North may provide information about the role played by foreigners at La Sufricaya and the greater Holmul region. The contents of these murals seem to be the record of some historical meeting, but they could also refer to a mythical event. The additional examination and interpretation of the murals will clarify these issues, and will provide as well a foundation to understand the nature of the manifest foreign presence at La Sufricaya, together with its possible implications in the political dynamics of both La Sufricaya and Holmul.

Finally, the excavations conducted within the plaza, on Platform 1, confirm the functional transition of La Sufricaya from the beginning to the end of the Classic period. The Late Classic period residence on Platform 1, which used to be an open plaza during the Early Classic period, suggests that the function of Platform 1 shifted from a ritual complex during the Early Classic period, to a residential area.

The field season of 2004 has produced a substantial amount of interesting evidence, but it has as well posed new and abundant questions regarding the function of the site and the identity of the people that occupied La Sufricaya. All these questions will eventually be answered with the additional research to be conducted during the field season of 2005. Specifically, several excavations within Structure 1 will clarify a number of spaces regarding their construction sequence and function. The investigations within the residential area that surrounds La Sufricaya and Holmul will provide information on the ethnic identity and the sociopolitical role of its people, as well as archaeological evidence of the events recorded in the murals of Structure 1. As an additional interesting aspect of the manifest foreign interaction that took place at La Sufricaya, it shall be explored whether this foreign presence was verified at all levels of society and what kind of secondary impacts such presence may have had for both the elite and the common people. The excavations within the residential groups may indicate whether or not the people of the different social statuses used or adopted the symbols and the iconography typical of Teotihuacan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This field season was granted financial support from the National Geographic Society, the Ahau Foundation, FAMSI, and the Vanderbilt University. We wish to thank ARB Corporation, Interco Tire, PIAA Corporation and WARN Industries, as well as Francisco Moro, Bertila Bailey, and Marcos and Inma Gross.

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Figure 1 Map of La Sufricaya

Figure 2 Map of Group 1

Figure 3 Drawing of the cornice of Structure 1 (drawing by Jessica Mundt)

Figure 4 Character in a procession on Mural 6

Figure 5 Construction phases of Structure 1

Figure 6 Structure, 13-sub

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