

EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS OF THE MONUMENTAL EPICENTER OF NARANJO, PETEN

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The most recent results achieved through reconnaissance works conducted at the periphery of Naranjo have allowed estimating that the city extended in an area of approximately 8 km², mostly towards the southeast and north directions. The monumental epicenter occupied approximately 1.5 km, comprising at least 112 major buildings that played ceremonial, administrative and residential functions both for the royalty and the minor elites. The dramatic looting suffered by the great majority of the buildings has been documented since 2001, in a proportion equivalent to 27% of the total damage; today, lootings amount to 253 trenches and tunnels, including what has been recently observed during the reconnaissance conducted at the peripheral groups of the city, equivalent to additional 110 tunnels and trenches (Fialko *et al.* 2004). The peripheral groups were associated with hillocks and plots arranged in terraces; they included palaces and minor temples, apparently related to secondary or minor elites, as well as residential groups for common people, where quadrangular architectural groups were present.

Due to the impossibility to fulfill in a short period of time the systematic description of all the damages suffered, it has been opted to select those buildings with the greater damage located at the monumental center and in urgent need of stabilization. These buildings provided vital information about the cultural evolution process of the city, manifested by the architectural and sculptural relics and by the remains of ceramic and lithic objects found in the debris of the funerary chambers. The information in support of this document is based on the interventions conducted in 35 major buildings, and in the excavation of 75 stratigraphic test pits. Archaeology shows that the rulers of Naranjo, notwithstanding they lived almost permanently ready for war, at no time interrupted the construction process of their capital city.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The archaeological investigations conducted at Naranjo have concentrated on a theoretical approach aimed at attempting to understand some aspects of the development process verified in the capital city of a complex Maya polity, one with a huge regional impact, considering the 44 stelas documented so far (three of them

recently) as well as several altars. Naranjo was strategically located in the area of a cultural border. To evaluate its evolutionary process, several levels of consideration have been taken into account, to identify the geographical context and the source of natural resources that led the first residents of Naranjo to settle there. The organization of the cultural information recovered in regard to the first settlement, with 14 superimposed centuries of continued occupation, was based on several levels of consideration supported by the following aspects of cultural evidence:

- Adjustment to the environment and its degree of modification
- Architectural form and volume
- Density of production and distribution of cultural objects within the urban space
- Level of craftsmanship skills observed in the treatment of ceramic, lithic and malacological objects
- The relationship of such handcrafted materials with ritual architectural contexts, such as Acropolis groups with temples which might have an affiliation with the manifestation of a cult or a system of beliefs specific of the urban elite from Naranjo
- The relationship of technically specialized objects with royal Acropolis palaces, which tell about the instauration of a powerful dynasty that steered the local political wheel and which was later widened to achieve a regional presence through alliances and warfare actions, with the economic projection of strengthening and expanding their ideological view.

Naranjo is located in an area which may be considered as the divide of two large river basins: those of the Holmul and the Mopan rivers. These two natural routes connected the Maya worlds of Peten and Belize, and ultimately the coast of the Caribbean Sea. Naranjo is protected to the east by a moderately scarp mountain range, fragmented at its base into a system of apparently natural drains. These formations worked as a natural defense system for the city; on the other hand, the mountain range and the natural drains work as a canyon that catches the north wind in a favorable manner, creating a healthy climate that ranges from mild to cold throughout the year.

The monumental epicenter of the city of Naranjo was associated with an area of karstic elevations where several hills with a moderate height stood out, adjacent to the low lying ground of La Pita. This low lying ground presents a year-round water source, to which the Maya –probably during the Classic period- incorporated a draining system; one of those canals has been identified. In the north sector of the low lying ground of La Pita there is a scarp sector with associated and probably artificial terraces; however, further research is needed to gain knowledge about the agricultural use given to the low lying ground and its environment. Other major water resources at Naranjo included two water springs, also with constant water flow. For some time, Naranjo was known precisely under the name of El Manantial (The Spring), a denomination still present in several ancient geographical maps.

THE CHICANEL HORIZON

Based on stratigraphic test pits, it was possible to ascertain that the natural topographic environment of Naranjo was characterized by the presence of seven moderate high hills, located below the West Acropolis, the Central Acropolis and the Triadic Acropolis D-1, B-5, C-3, C-10, and C-9. Some of these hills have shown evidence of chultuns and apparently superficial caves, which have not been systematically excavated yet. There is indication that they were used as areas for conducting cult-related ceremonies to the earth and the underworld. The significance given to the natural rock within the urban environment of Naranjo is clear, as several architectural complexes, instead of covering them with masonry and stucco floors for artificially elevating the acropolis base, were left uncovered and incorporated into the urban landscape (Figure 1).

The earlier inhabitants of Naranjo date back to the Late Mamom period, and traces of them have been found at the hill on top of which Acropolis D-1 was built, in the form of middens adjacent to the causeway. Trash of that period has been also found at Acropolis B-5 and below the Ballgame patios, as follows: under the refill of the second main structure of the north basal platform of Acropolis B-5, the remains of a low platform with masonry and stucco floors were identified, resting on a limestone terrace (Figure 2). Later, during the Late Chicanel period, the sector was covered when high up in the hill the first version of the pyramid temple was built. Finally, both the Mamom and Chicanel construction features were razed during Tepeu 1, with the major expansion of the entire foundation.

Very early ritual Chicanel evidence was observed, perhaps as a part of a transitional complex beginning in the Late Mamom period, in the deep refills of Pyramid C-9 and in association with the cave located at the heart of the pyramidal structure. Between the deepest floor and the bedrock there are examples of *Pomacea flagellate* shells and possible sherds of the group Juventud Red, Canhel Unslipped, combined with fragments of censers and chips of obsidian and flint.

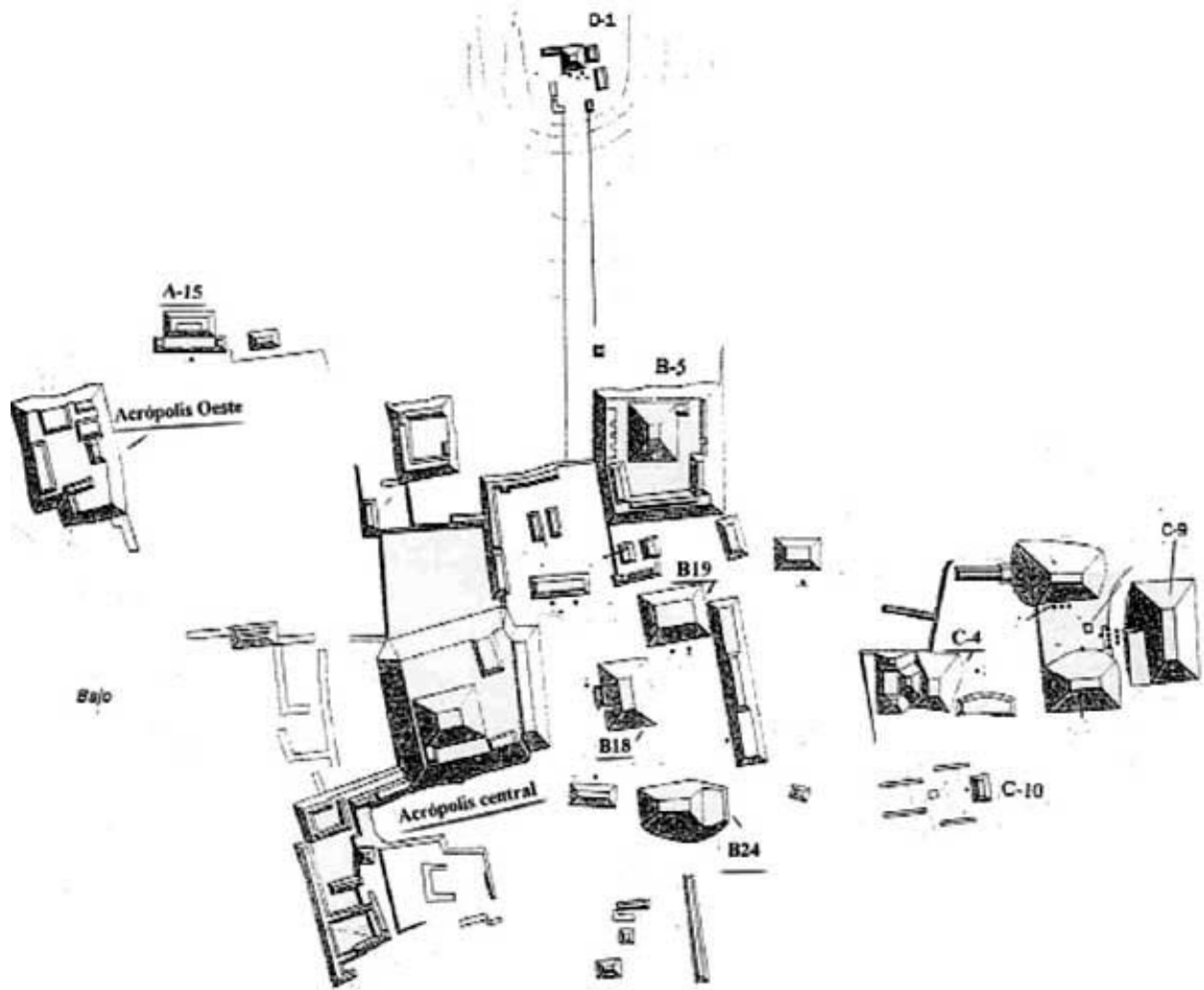


Figure 1. Plan view of the monumental sector of the city of Naranjo.

The inhabitants of Naranjo in Preclassic times were characterized for having developed two urbanization periods, which may be considered as an Early Chicanel and Late Chicanel facets, and which are manifested in the sub-structures of buildings that are part of five Acropolis, and in the Group E type Complex. The Chicanel settlement was expressed in an urban east-west axis as of the monumental center, reminiscent of an ancient causeway or processional route which may have departed from the main watering place towards the east end, passing by important localities like the first version of the royal palace, the cave of the Triadic Acropolis B-5, and the Group E type Complex, to end at the C-9 Pyramid, which was considered like the *Witz* of Naranjo. Preclassic platforms were found under the Ballgame patios that once were on, or adjacent to, the causeway.

The selected area for building the architectural complex with the Group E format was precisely there where the watering place used to be, and that ceremonial space

transformed itself into the navel or core of the epicenter. In the stratigraphic tests conducted at the plaza level, it was observed that the Maya had gradually applied masonry refills on the residual clay of the watering place, in addition to a succession of seven stucco floors, until an adequately horizontal upper level was attained. The carefully paved area supported the earlier versions of the longitudinal platform B-20, facing its corresponding radial base pyramid.

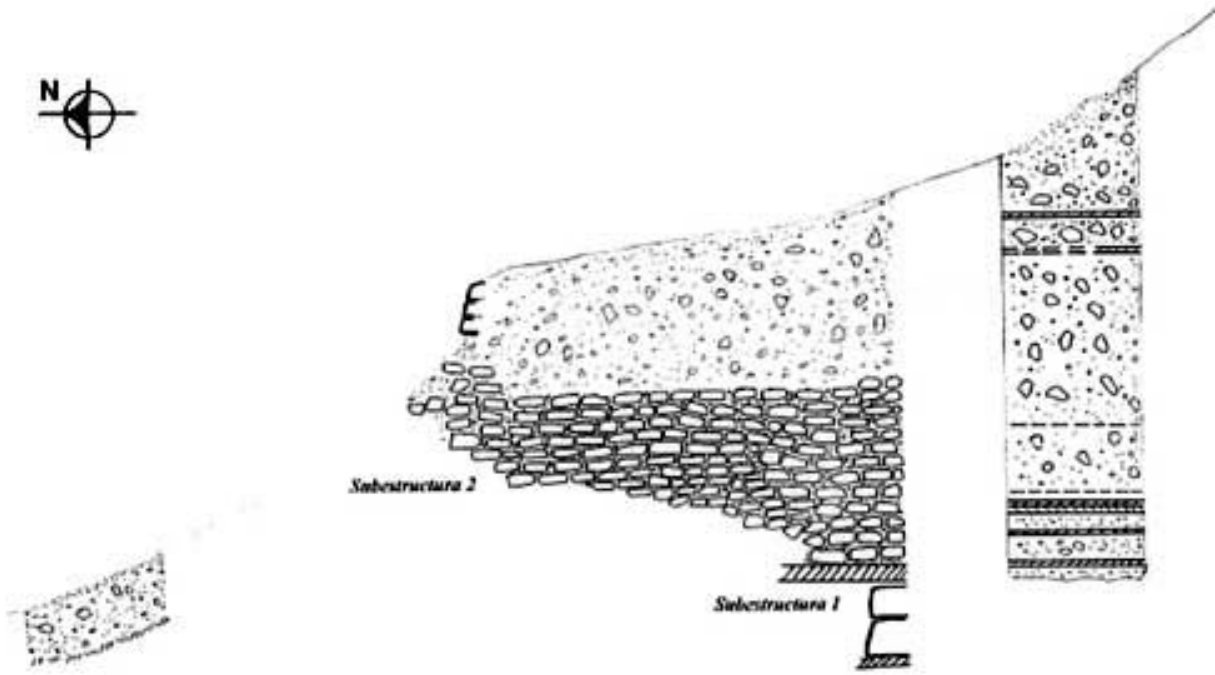


Figure 2. Foundation B-5: Mamom and Chicanel sub-structures.

Pyramid B-18, also known as the Temple of the Hieroglyphic Stairway, had stairways on its four sides (Figure 3). In the looting trenches, remains of the two Preclassic versions were identified at the level of the first flight of the west and east stairways (Gómez 2003). The radial form may possibly have been present since the Chicanel version, considering their construction resemblance with pyramids found in similar contexts at Tikal (5C-54), Uaxactun (E-VII-sub) and the example of Preclassic radial pyramidal models found in a cache at Yaxha.

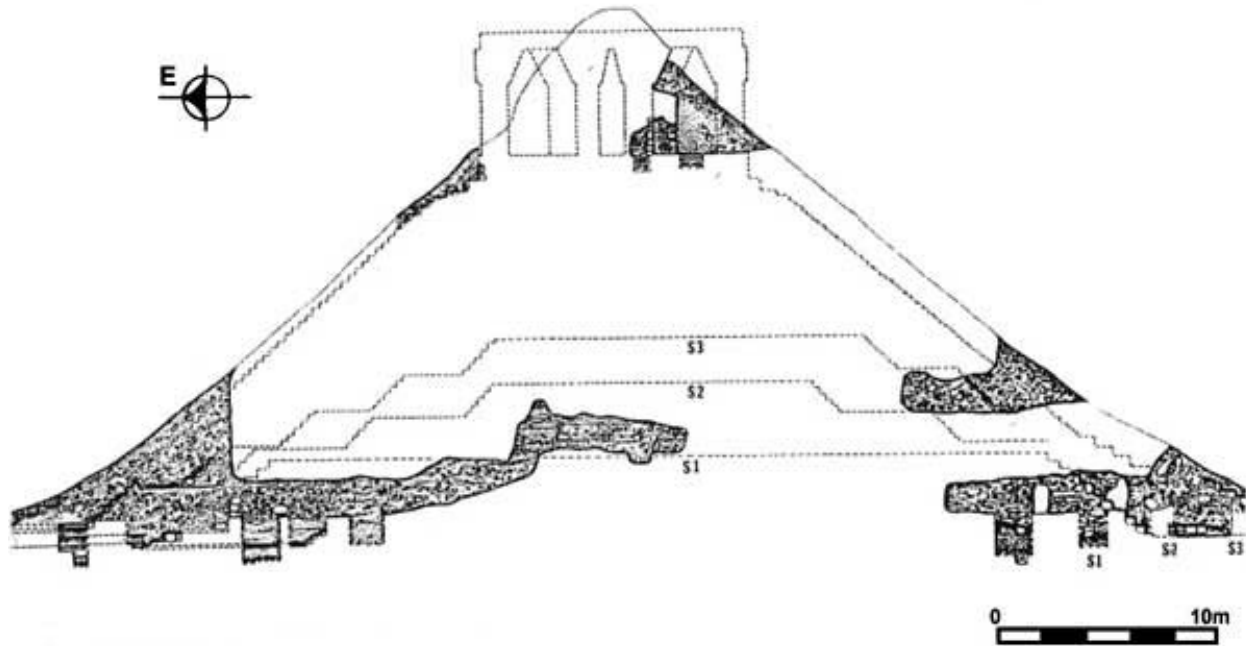


Figure 3. Pyramid B-18: cultural periods.

During the Early Chicanel period, the first pyramidal foundations were also built at the top of at least five of the hills, associated with caves and rock perforations, which seem to suggest the formal establishment of a cult appointed to a system of beliefs connected to the cult of the ancestors and the realm of the underworld.

Decorative features of the Naranjo Preclassic architecture are clearly present in the Late Chicanel sub-structure of Temple B-4 (Figures 4 and 5), expressed in panels leaned on façade walls, in the presence of a much curved beam and in inset corners with deep moldings covered by a thick stucco of a yellowish hue. The Preclassic walls were built with large cut limestone blocks, placed face-wise and joined together with a thick masonry which includes a black clay amalgam.

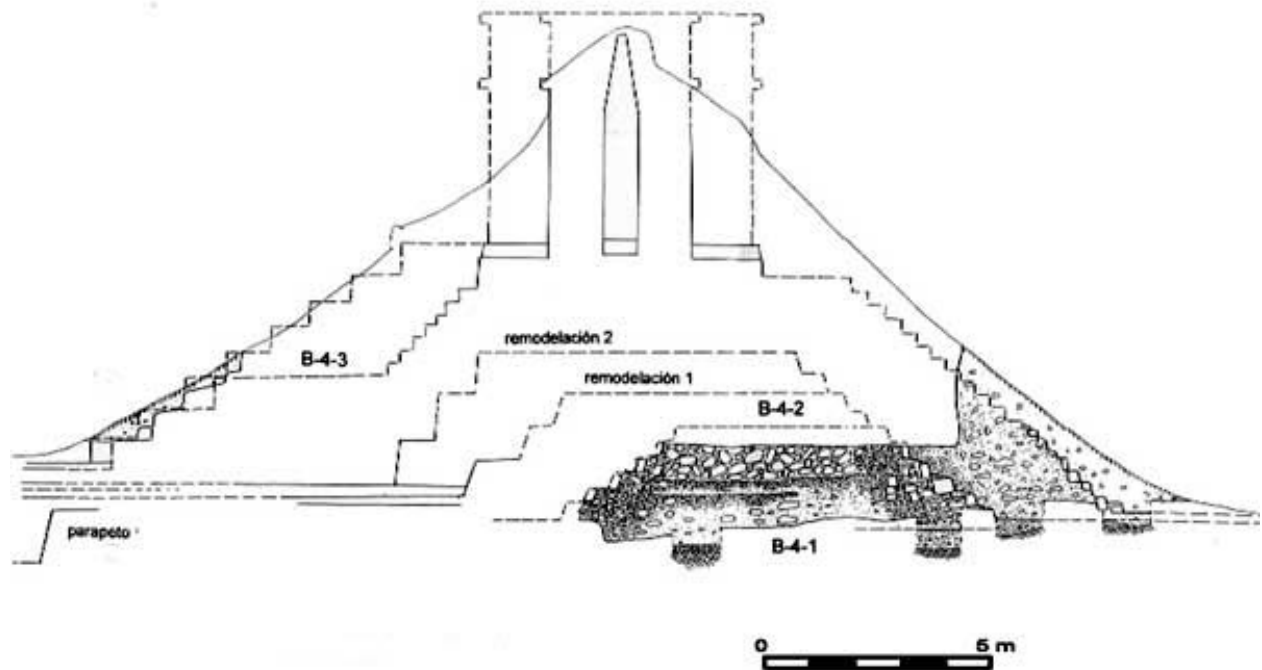


Figure 4. Temple B-4: cultural periods.

Construction features corresponding to the Late Preclassic period, in relation with the Central Acropolis, were located at the East Patio in a perfectly plastered stairway (Figure 6); the stairway needs to be examined to define its specific function, probably associated with a palace. To support such an assumption, there is a large fragment of mural painting, recovered inside the North Palace of said East Patio. The Central Acropolis was the palace complex used by royalty during the Late Classic period. The sole Preclassic palace investigated so far at Naranjo lies under Building B-19 (see Gámez, this volume).

THE TZAKOL HORIZON

There is evidence that a good portion of the Early Classic period constructions of Naranjo located at the monumental epicenter were demolished previous to initiating an intense construction program manifested in the Tepeu 1 phase of the Late Classic period. In reconnaissance works conducted at the residential periphery of the south side, features identified as corresponding to the Tzakol occupation were recovered. At the monumental epicenter a number of ceramic concentrations were found in Buildings B-13 and B-5, as well as with dispersed sherds found in the refills of Buildings B-18, B-19, B-20 and in the East Patio of the Central Acropolis. For now, there are no constructive expressions of the Early Classic period in the west sector of the city.

The best examples of the Early Classic period architecture are located in Pyramid C-9 and shrine B-8, which was once part of Acropolis B-5; here, the remains of a stairway painted in red and orange and with its corresponding beam, were documented. This building is associated with three tripod cylinders that looters abandoned in multiple fragments. The dramatic distortion caused by the looting tunnel does not allow for confirming whether the vessels corresponded to a burial or a cache (Fialko 2004: Figure 7).

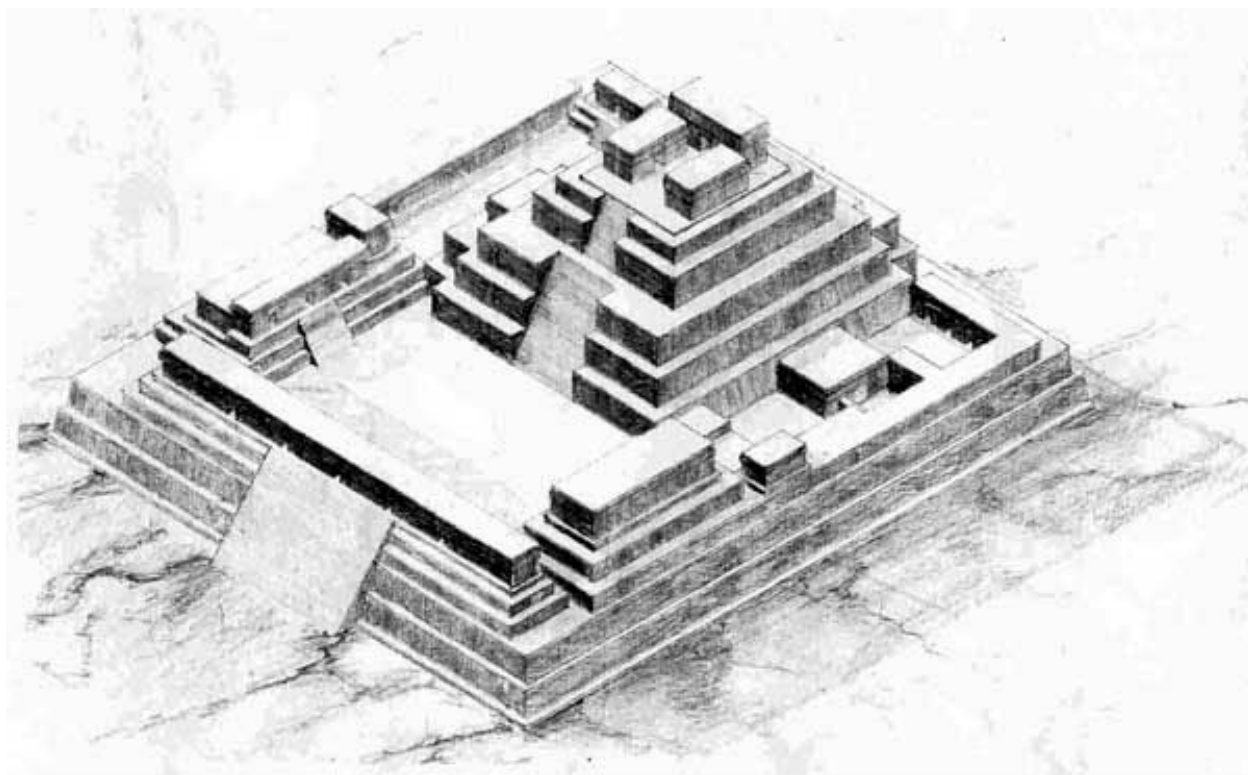


Figure 7. Pyramid C-9; Chicanel sub-structure.

Inside the great East Platform of the Group E type Complex, there is a funerary chamber of the Early Classic period, documented as part of the rubble left behind by the looters, with the walls and vault entirely covered with cinnabar. The seal was located on the west façade, precisely where looters chose to penetrate; inside, there were thousands of samples of flint and obsidian, which were a part of that seal. The sifting process allowed for recovering some plates made of a green stone that were part of a mosaic, as well as some beads made of a green stone and a shell that belonged to a collar. It was also possible to recover some very tiny bone fragments and dental pieces.

The few Tzakol sherds found inside are consistent with the stratigraphic location of the chamber, introduced in a sector of the stairway corresponding to the Late Preclassic building. Due to the vaulted style of the chamber, it probably corresponded to the end of the Tzakol 3 phase.

Acropolis C-3 shows signs of the Early Classic period, expressed in one fragment of Stela 42 found by looters in 1997; apparently, it was leaning on a wall in the context of a ritual cache covered by the refills of a Tepeu 2 building (Fialko 1997). Recently, word spread in regard to an additional stela stolen from Naranjo, finely carved on three of its sides (Stela 45), which probably by now has already been sold in the U.S. It is considered to come from the same ritual cache where Stela 42 was located, because they are very similar to one another.

THE TEPEU HORIZON

At the beginning of the VII century AD, conflict arose between Naranjo and Caracol, and for better or worse, this probably was expressed in city-planning and architectural features. During the Tepeu 1 phase, Naranjo undertook important construction initiatives with several palaces located at the Central Acropolis, particularly the East Patio; there, the Central Palace already existed as an axis around which the different patios of the royal residential complex irradiated. During the initial part of the Late Classic period, the East Patio for the Ballgame was also built, and particularly a new version of the radial pyramid B-18, previous to the placement of the widely known hieroglyphic steps. Likewise, an expanded version of Palace B-19, probably with two levels, was erected, north of the Group E type Complex.

The large expansion of Acropolis B-5 seems to correspond to the beginning of Tepeu 1. At this time, the limestone surface that supported the terrace of the foundation was covered. The base of the pyramid was widened, giving way to a larger upper platform. Despite the political upheavals that caused frequent warfare events, Naranjo continued its building activities in the VIII century, as shown in the final version of Acropolis B-5, where the upper platform of the pyramid already included a palace complex with a quadrangular form (Fialko 2004).

Only late in the VII century the first palaces of the west zone were built, while remodeling works were conducted in Acropolis D-1. During the second half of the VIII century, Naranjo built pyramidal structures over 13 m high in a single effort, by using refills with little masonry. By the end of the Late Classic period, construction activities

were undertaken throughout Naranjo, in the area of the monumental epicenter, and in the peripheral and suburban residential areas.

The trend towards verticality became prominent in the pyramidal foundations, being B-5, B-16, B-18, and in a way Palace B-19 and Temple B-24, special cases. The city-planning reorganization involved the formalization of the North and South Patios of the Royal Palace, built in the Central Acropolis, as well as the construction of a second patio for the Ballgame and the formalization of the A-19 palace quadrangle (see Aquino, this volume). In turn, the Acropolis located to the east and the great *Witz* pyramid (C-9) acquired an impressive volume.

The Terminal Classic period in Naranjo was expressed in the trend to occupy the west area of the city, and to develop quadrangle complexes in the southwest area. During the first part of the IX century, remodeling works were still been undertaken at the major quadrangles of Acropolis B-5 and at A-19, although reusing materials from a number of sectors that probably collapsed or deteriorated. Before the abandonment, the rulers of Naranjo promoted a program for the re-dedication of Early Classic monuments corresponding to the ruler *Aj Wosaj*. Examples of those activities are appreciated in the shifting of Stela 38 and Altar 1 to the top section of Acropolis D-1. It has been confirmed that no Early Classic constructions existed in that sector, though there was significant Terminal Classic activity. Also, Stela 44, once again corresponding to the ruler *Aj Wosaj* and dating to 596 AD was re-dedicated, at the sector of the hieroglyphic stairway of Building B-18, perhaps in a futile effort from the ruling elite in the process of loosing its position to gain back some space, by turning to the revitalization of one of the most revered Maya rulers of all times.

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Figure 1 Plan view of the monumental sector of the city of Naranjo

Figure 2 Foundation B-5: Mamom and Chicanel sub-structures

Figure 3 Pyramid B-18: cultural periods

Figure 4 Temple B-4: cultural periods

Figure 5 Temple B-4: Chicanel sub-structure

Figure 6 Central Acropolis; Chicanel sub-structure

Figure 7 Pyramid C-9: Chicanel sub-structure