

**INVESTIGATIONS IN TEMPLES B-19 AND B-24
AT NARANJO, PETÉN:
THE EVOLUTION OF THE NORTH-SOUTH AXIS OF THE CENTRAL
PLAZA**

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Figure 1. Location of Naranjo in Petén.

The archaeological site of Naranjo has suffered constant looting (Figures 1, 2 and 6); consequently, since 2002 and as a part of the PROSIAPETEN-TRIANGLE Yaxha-Nakum-Naranjo, research work has been conducted, focused mainly on rescuing information, documenting and protecting the archaeological relics disturbed by illegal excavations, applying a methodology that allows not only to record the architectural features, but also to define the overall aspects of the composition and the processes of cultural evolution of the settlement (Fialko *et al.* 2002, 2003). The results obtained in

Structures B-19 and B-24, which define the limits of the site's Central Plaza to the north and south sides, respectively, are now being presented; both structures are crucial for gaining knowledge on the development and symbolism of the complex.

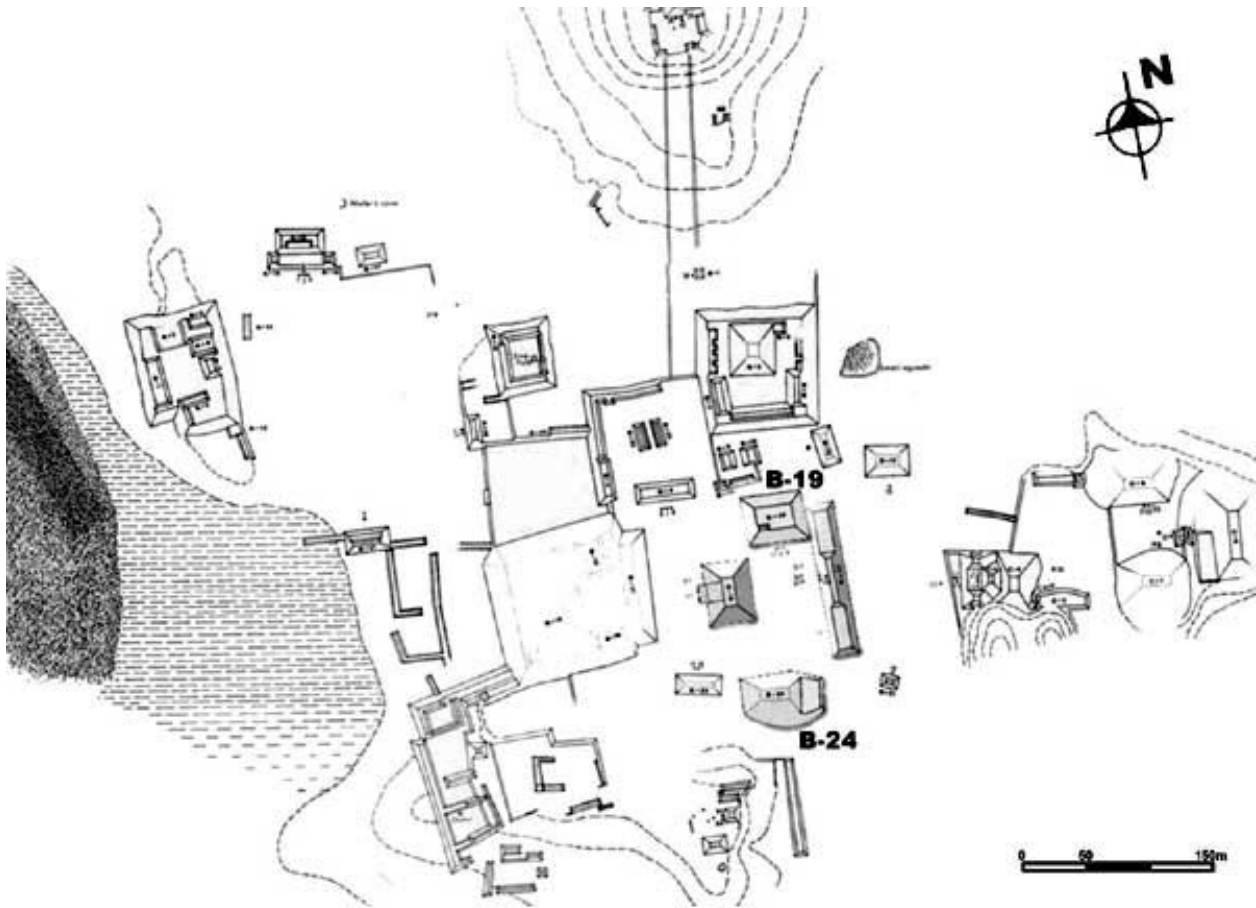


Figure 2. Archaeological site plan of Naranjo.

BACKGROUNDS: THE GROUP E TYPE COMPLEX

The Central Plaza of Naranjo consists mainly of four structures, B-18, B-19, B-20 and B-24. The east-west axis is defined by the radial pyramid B-18 (West Pyramid) and the long platform B-20 (East Platform). Together, these structures form a plaza pattern similar to that of Group E, in Uaxactun (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937), having thus received the name of Group E type Complexes. In Tikal, these have been also denominated Astronomical Commemoration Complexes (Laporte and Fialko 1995), technically called Plaza Pattern 10 (Becker 1999), and known by their functional relation with the observation of solstices and equinoxes.

Research conducted around this complex have led to establishing an architectural chronology that was initiated in the Preclassic period, with evidence of two construction stages associated with Chicanel ceramic materials (Figure 3).

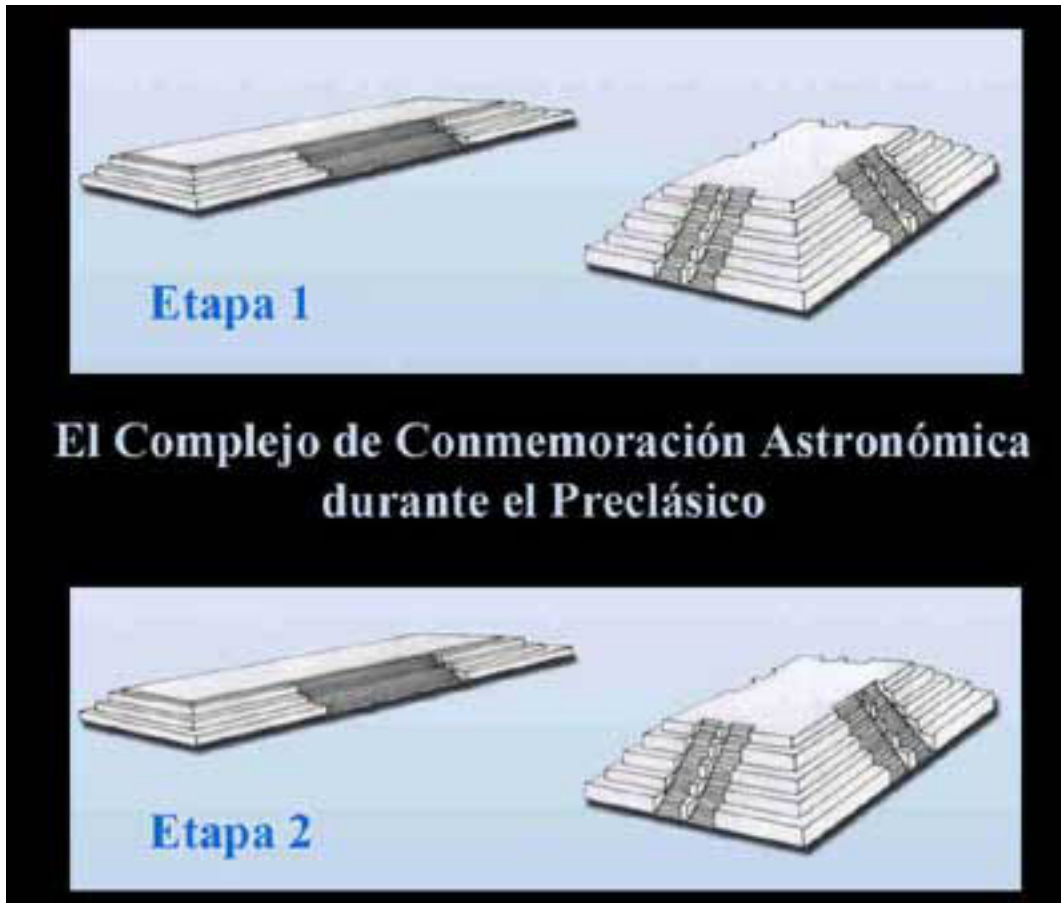


Figure 3. The Astronomical Commemoration Complex during the Preclassic period.

A third construction stage corresponding to the Early Classic period was identified, which modified the pyramid and apparently covered the entire surface of the long platform (Figure 4). Even though the concentration of Tzakol materials was relatively poor inside these structures, it was possible to define that in the West Pyramid, the first main structure of the previous stage was reused, and that in the East Platform, the dimensions of the main structures were considerably increased. In addition, a funerary chamber unfortunately looted and corresponding also to this period was found.



Figure 4. The Astronomical Commemoration Complex during the Classic period.

The initial phase of the Late Classic period –Tepeu 1 phase- represented the span with the greatest architectural growth in the complex, when both constructions achieved the maximum proportions. B-18 was transformed into a rectangular pyramid 63 m long, 45 m wide, and 15 m tall, on which the well known Hieroglyphic Stairway was later placed, together with an upper temple formed by several vaulted chambers. The construction of this temple has not been consistently dated so far, but it is known that its interior was modified during Tepeu 2, and it is possible that during this phase an additional construction was added as a “second level”. Furthermore, around the end of Tepeu 2 and/or the beginning of Tepeu 3, other modifications were accomplished which implied the disabling of the north and south accesses, and the mutilation of the stairways. At the same time, recent findings have proved the existence of ritual practices associated with Structure B-18, represented mainly by the re-dedication of the Early Classic period Stela 44 on the upper landing of the Hieroglyphic Stairway (Figure 5).



ESTELA 44

Figure 5. Stela 44.

In the East Platform, the late sequence of remodeling has not been defined for the moment, but it is known that throughout the Late Classic period it achieved its maximum dimensions: 1.50 m in length, 35 m in width, and 15 m in height. During Tepeu 1 and in front of its west façade, Stelas 15, 16, and 17 were erected; during Tepeu 2, Stela 18 was erected in the first place, and then the Stelas 33 and 34, probably an indication of three different stages of construction modifications, possibly concentrated in the upper portion of the platform, as they were not identified at its base.

As it is well known, the Group E type Complexes are the architectural representation of a crucial aspect of the Maya cosmology. Whether it was their functional or merely their symbolic arrangement, it has a clear ideological significance, not only because of its association with the solar transit and the time count, but also because of its functionality as a center of dynastic activity (Gómez 2004). However, in addition to the existence of an important east-west axis, the Central Plaza of Naranjo includes as well massive constructions of a ritual character on its north and south ends, forming a second symbolic axis.



Figure 6. Lootings in Structures B-19 and B-24.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NORTH-SOUTH AXIS IN THE CENTRAL PLAZA

PRECLASSIC PERIOD

In the northern section of the plaza, the earliest version of B-19 detected so far (Figure 7) corresponding to the Middle Preclassic period, is represented only by two alignments made of rectangular, finely cut limestone blocks, distributed in a stepped manner, each one of them approximately 30 cm high. It is believed that this construction may have served as a platform for leveling the natural limestone layer, to even the plaza's surface and form a stepped access to it.

The second phase of the North Structure (B-19-2) has allowed to record unconnected parts of mutilated architecture; the most representative section corresponds to two steps approximately 30 cm high, the upper one is located at a distance of 1.40 m from the lower one, and the latter is associated with a stucco floor whose sequence was lost within the refill of the later stages. Taking into account the location of this evidence, it may be concluded that this construction was 3 m tall, and that interestingly, its steps were oriented towards north.

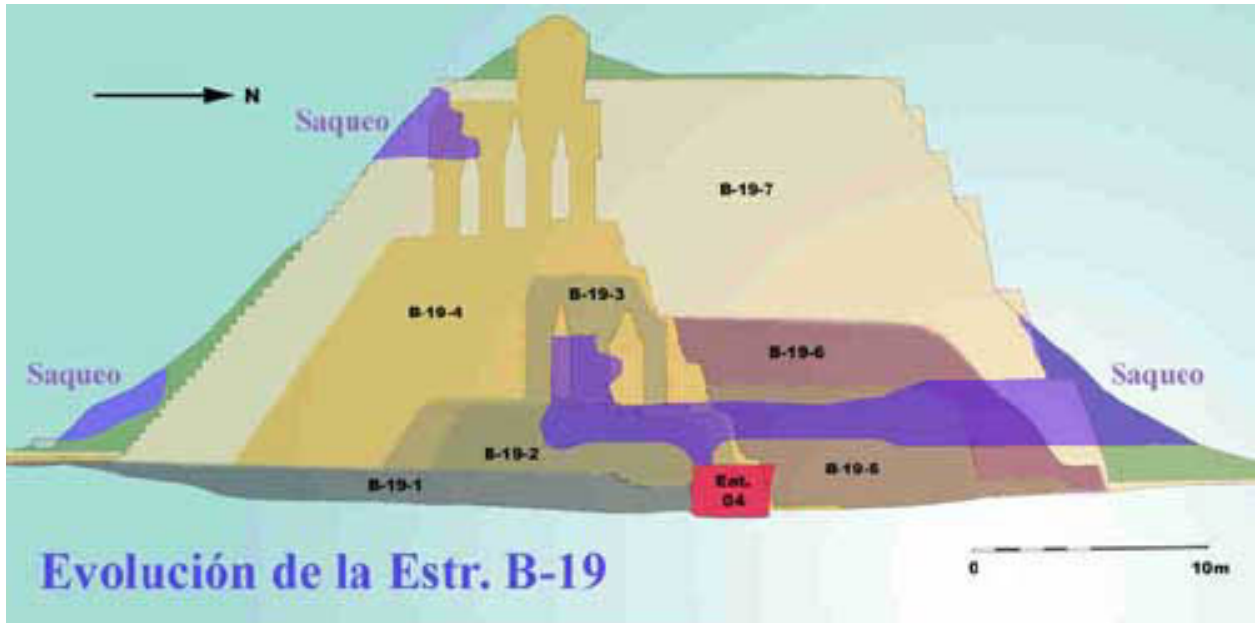


Figure 7. Evolution in the construction of Structure B-19.

During the final part of this period –the Late Preclassic period-, a third version of Building B-19 was built (B-19-3; Figure 8). This was observed through an apparently vaulted and mutilated precinct, consisting of several chambers distributed in two longitudinal rows. One of the branches of the looting tunnel penetrated into the southeast chamber, showing it is 5 m long, 0.80 m wide, and with a north access 0.90 m wide that is shifted west. Even though the full height of the precinct is unknown, it was confirmed that the springing of the vault was found at a height of 2.70 m, making it possible to assume an inner height of 4 m.

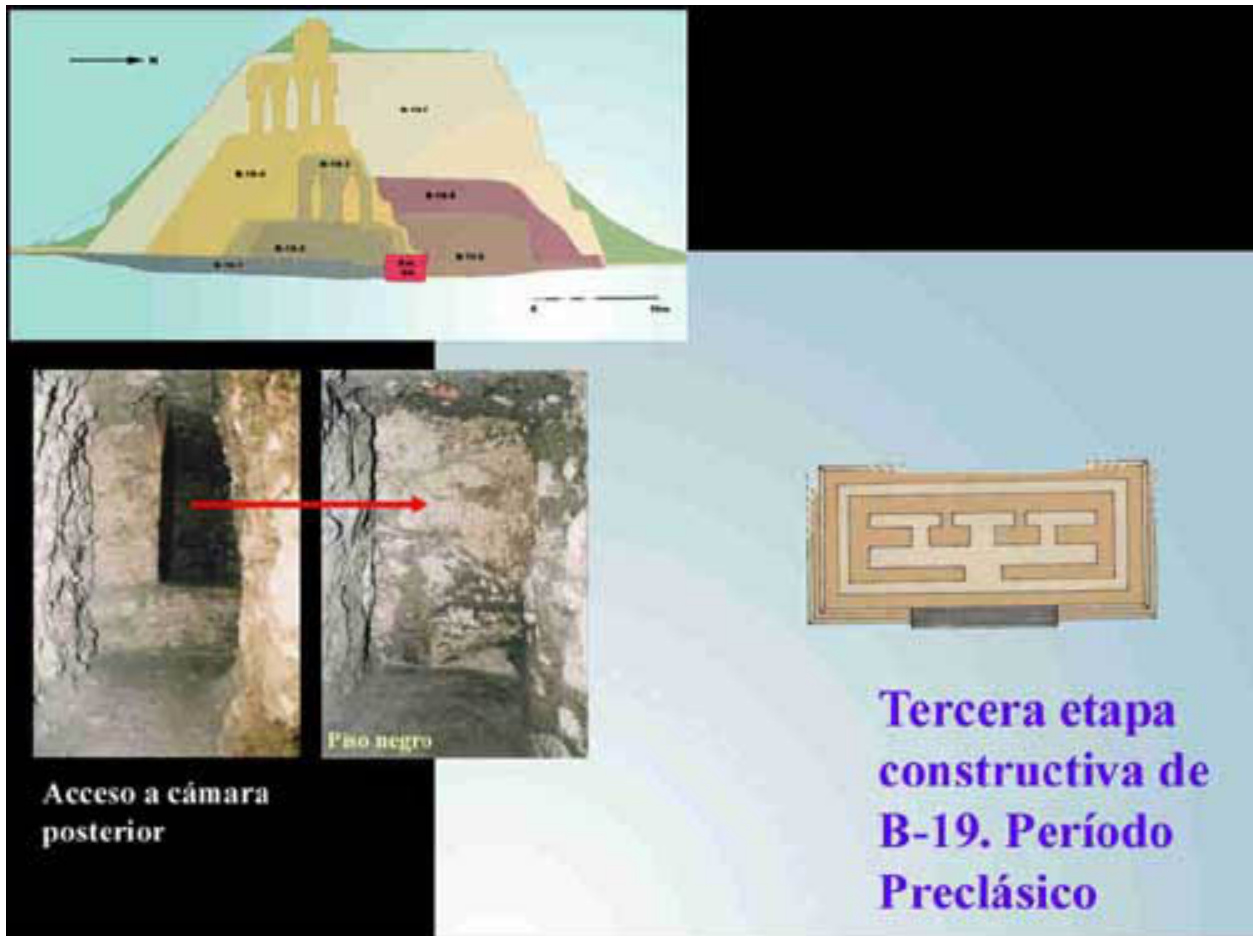


Figure 8. Evolution in the construction of Structure B-19.

An additional branch of the looting tunnel exposed the lower portion of the north façade of the precinct, revealing a central access 2.30 m wide. One record tunnel excavated parallel to the west jamb revealed the presence of two chambers, the rear measuring 0.85 m in width, and the front one 1.50 m, divided by a wall 1.45 m thick with a tilt of 0.40 m, given by a step placed in the access that communicated them both. In addition, it was confirmed that the precinct seated on a landing 0.40 m tall and 0.80 m wide, associated with another lower landing of unknown proportions. Although the construction still maintained most of the stucco lining in those areas that were not disturbed by the looting activities, it has not been possible to find evidence of color or relief *in situ*. However, the finding of several stucco fragments with bas-relief designs in the refill, suggests that the building had a decoration which was mutilated at the time of its closure. In general, this construction was oriented towards the north, and the readings conducted have always indicated 2 or 3 degrees of variation as of the magnetic north.

On the other side, in the south end of the Plaza, the only Preclassic period construction found consists of a small platform hardly 0.30 m high, located under the east part of

Structure B-24. As opposed to the previous one, this seems to correspond to a residential platform, with no associated floor and somewhat rustic characteristics.

EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD

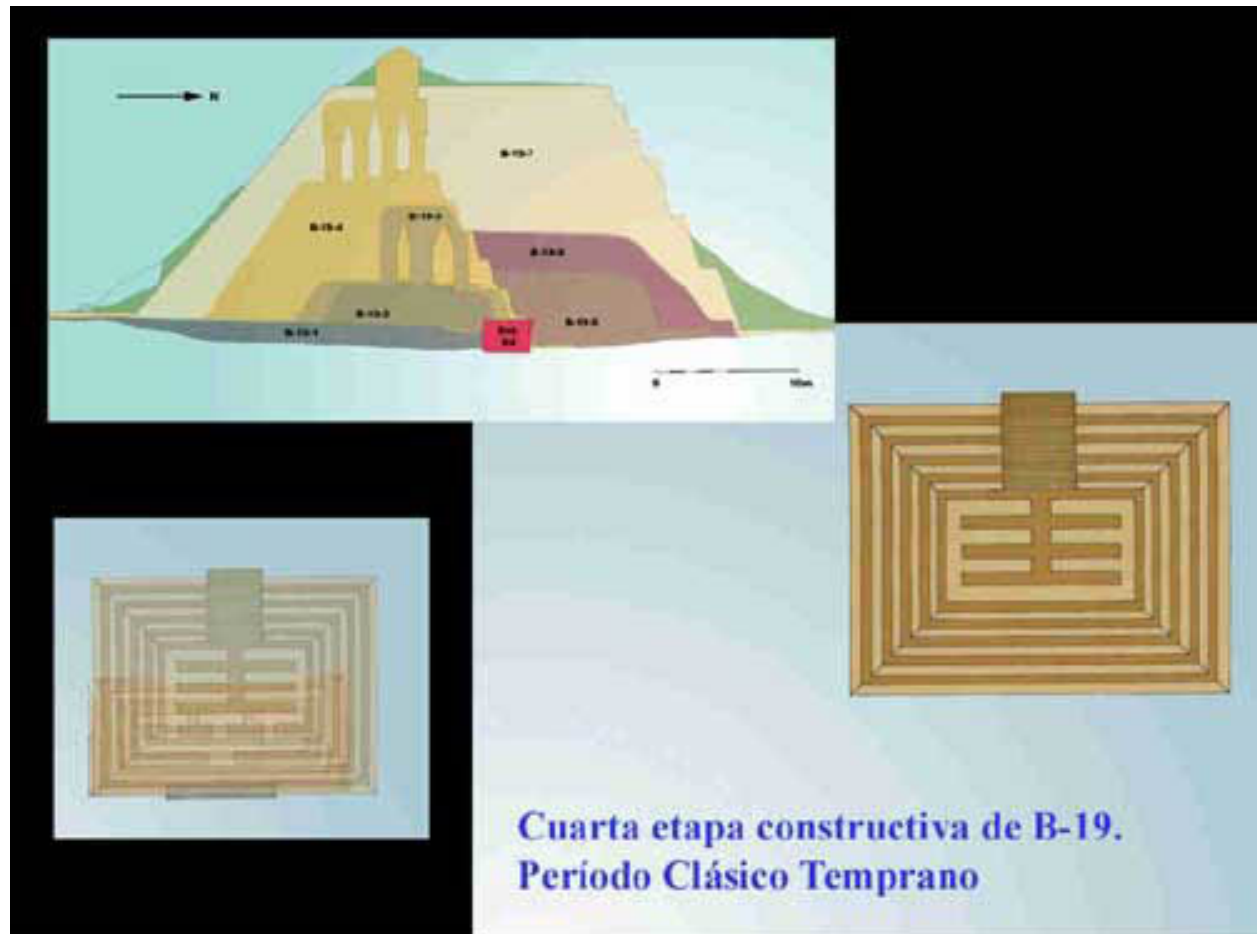


Figure 9. Evolution in the construction of Structure B-19.

During the Early Classic period, a new version of the north structure was erected (B-19-4; Figures 9 and 10), with a considerable increase of its proportions. A pyramidal basal platform 12 m high was built, which worked as the base of an upper precinct formed by three vaulted chambers. The foundation consisted of sloping bodies around 2 m high and with rounded corners, decorated with inset panels 0.60 m wide, placed approximately 0.30 m above the floor level, which still shows remains of orange stucco. The upper precinct consists of three adjacent chambers; the one to the north is approximately 4.30 m high, the one in the middle section is 4.50 m high, and the one to the south, placed at a lower level, is 4 m high. All three chambers are 0.90 m wide, with outer and inner walls 1 m wide: their full length is unknown, but because of their location with respect to the foundation and the finding of the south access to the precinct, it is considered that it was around 14 or 15 m long.



Figure 10. Structure B-19-4, Early Classic period stage.

On the inside, the stucco that dressed the walls shows clear evidence of having been exposed to fire, though no color remains were observed. On the outside, on the contrary, there was a good amount of the red stucco that dressed the building, and, even though it has not been investigated for the moment, one portion of a stucco frieze in middle relief was observed on the north façade; in addition, the finding of fragments of modeled stucco in association with the south façade suggests that it also had a similar decoration. A second level of construction, measuring 3 m in width and around 7 m in length, was directly associated with this version of the building. However, it has not been studied as yet, and therefore its morphological and functional characteristics remain unknown. Just like the previous version, it is assumed that the entire building was built with an orientation very close to the magnetic north, but it would seem that some change must have taken place in regard to the location of the main façade of the building, which is now facing south.

It has been confirmed that this building, jointly with the two preceding construction stages, was mutilated as a consequence of the introduction of an elite burial (Burial 4; Figures 11 and 12), which was unfortunately looted and which apparently corresponded to the transition from the Early Classic period to the Late Classic period.



Figure 11. Funerary chamber, Burial 4.



Figure 12. Paraphernalia of Burial 4.

THE TRANSITION FROM THE EARLY TO THE LATE CLASSIC PERIOD

Burial 4 was placed inside a vaulted funerary chamber 3.20 m long, 1.50 m wide, and with a maximum height of 2.20 m, seated on the natural layer of limestone, which had been leveled. The construction had an orientation of 355° and was built using rectangular limestone blocks with a size that varies between 0.30 and 0.60 m in length, joined together by means of a light brown mortar, placed in a façade stones fashion, and with a dressing of red paint.

On the floor of this chamber, a sediment layer of approximately 0.20 m and very evenly distributed was removed, revealing an important concentration of cinnabar. Furthermore, a prominence of mix projecting from the base of the north wall showed an imprint with the scheme of a woven mat. These details suggest that the body may have been placed on a stand made with crumbly materials, covered with some kind of textile and with a considerable amount of cinnabar. The bone remains recovered are scarce; however, most cranium fragments and teeth were found in the north sector of the chamber, while the phalanges were dispersed in its middle and south sectors, an indication that the body was placed with the head oriented to the north.

On the other hand, among the materials discovered, there were several round, shell beads (red and white), most of them with diameters of less than 5 mm, that stood out. In addition, several fragments of other shell ornaments, jade mosaics, animal bone remains –rodents and birds among others-, sea pearls, shark teeth, stingray spines, and stucco fragments of different colors, among other things, were recovered. These materials are a clear indication of the rank of the buried individual, and because of the location and associations, they would seem to correspond to the Tzakol/Tepeu 1 transition.

Returning to the evolution of architecture, the introduction of this burial mutilated part of the two previous versions of the construction; inside the looting tunnel there were several retaining walls built with reused blocks that previously were a part of them. However, it has not been possible to detect any formal construction corresponding to that span; only the springing of a sloping panel was found, built with coarsely cut rectangular blocks, which do not show any trace of a stucco dressing. Possibly, this may also be a mutilated construction.

LATE CLASSIC PERIOD

Just as the Group E type Complex, the first part of the Late Classic period represents the peak of the construction activity at the south side of the plaza, where no previous construction works were recorded, except for the small Preclassic period platform mentioned earlier. In spite of the limited knowledge existing about the architectural characteristics of the first version of Structure B-24, the presence of a building of large

proportions corresponding to this period (Figure 13) has been established. Of this structure, only one portion of the north façade was recorded, which included a first vertical body of 0.80 m in height, which ended in a landing of 0.60 m in width, while in regard to the second body, the base is all that is known, about (0.35 m exposed by the tunnel). Furthermore, it was possible to observe parts of the east façade, formed by a first vertical body of 2 m in height, which ended in a landing of 0.50 m in width, on top of which there was a second body of unknown proportions. The first body was ornamented with a cornice 0.10 m wide, placed at a height of 0.90 m.



Figure 13. Structure B-24, a substructure of the Late Classic period.

A second construction was detected to the east of the previous one. It consisted of a first body in the shape of a sloping panel and with an undefined height, joined by an outset stairway composed of steps (three of which are known) with treads of 0.80 m and risers of 0.40 m, with a full white stucco cover and building characteristics similar to those from the previous stage. The materials recovered are scarce, but suggest a chronology similar to the previous one (Tepeu 1); thus, this construction could be representing a remodeling work.



Figure 14. Structure B-19. Late Classic period stages.



Figure 15. Lithic cache associated with Structure B-19-6.

At the north side of the plaza, the sixth version of B-19 was built (Figure 14), and was detected through the presence of a foundation formed by a first body whose height was of 2 m, built by using a refill very similar to that of the previous stage but with a surface formed by a thick layer of white stucco (10 to 15 cm), which covers irregular lime stones and creates a curved shape. Associated with this construction, and in the axis of the north façade, a lithic cache was discovered (*EL-7*), containing 42 obsidian and flint eccentrics (Figure 15). This feature may be an indication of the symbolic significance of the north, notwithstanding the main façade of the building was oriented south since the preceding stage. It is important to outline that even though during this stage the volume of the foundation of B-19 was expanded towards the north and possibly towards the east, the upper precinct of the Early Classic period version was not disabled.

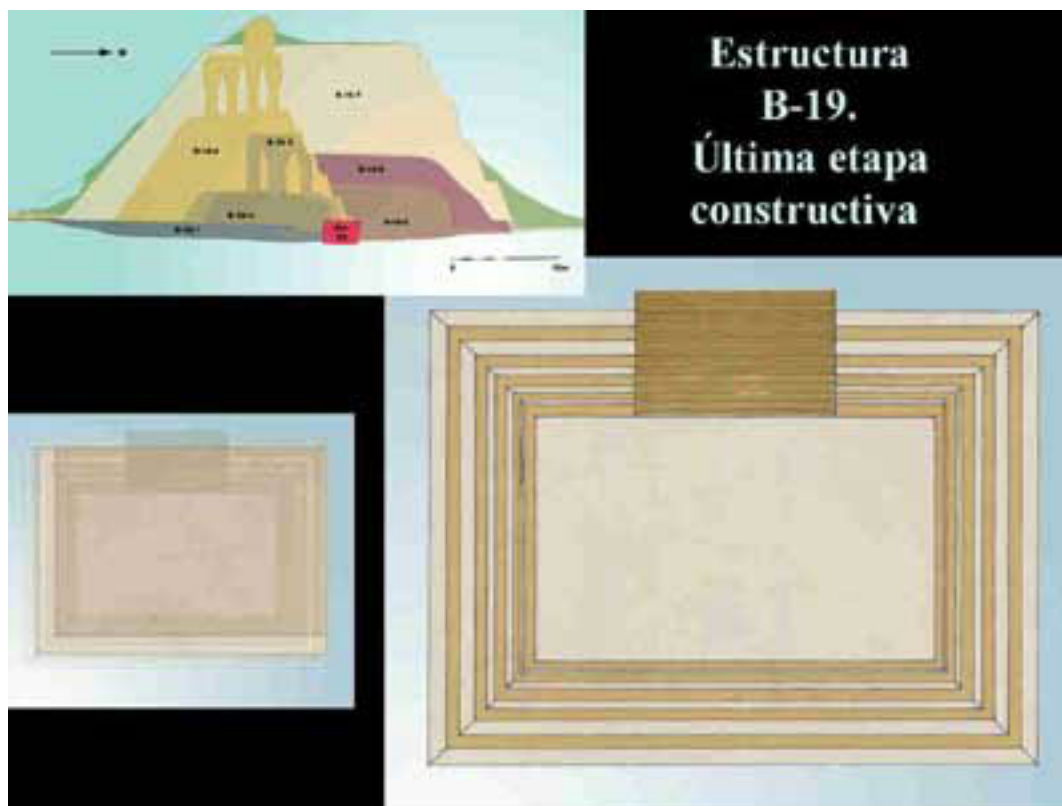


Figure 16. Structure B-19, final stage of construction.

It is during the second half of the Late Classic period –the Tepeu 2 phase- when both structures B-19 and B-24 achieved their maximum dimensions and became large truncated pyramids. To the north of the plaza, B-19 achieved a height of 17 m, a length of 55 m, and a width of 42 m at the base, possibly including six main sloping-shaped structures –the first with around 5 m in height, the next two with less than 4 m, the fourth and fifth with approximately 2 m, and the upper one with a little over 1 m, together with an upper platform of 380 m² (Figure 16). This stage covered entirely the previous ones, disabling the upper Early Classic period precinct which up to that period had remained exposed. However, one portion of the second level of the construction remained exposed, being the only single irregularity observed on the surface of the late mound.

Estelas ubicadas frente a la fachada de la Estructura B-19

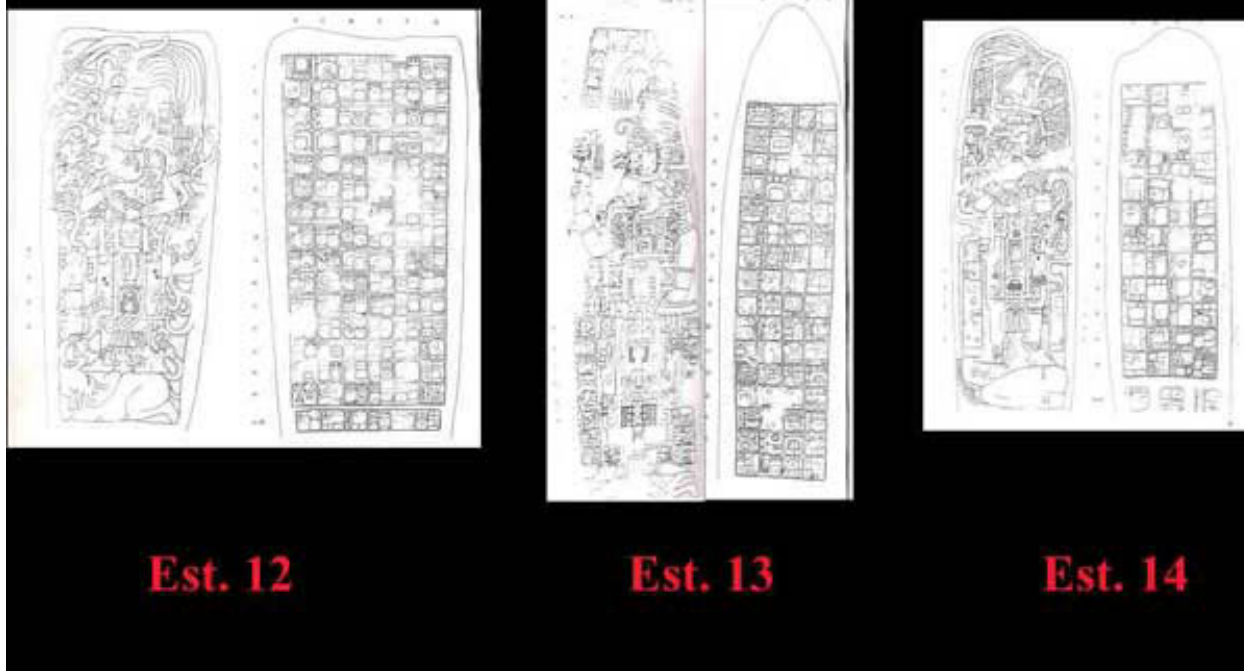


Figure 17. Stelas in front of the façade of Structure B-19.

At the same time, three stelae were erected during this span in front of the south façade of the structure (Figure 17). Stela 13, placed in the central position, commemorates the year 780 AD (9.17.10.0.0), and was apparently erected by the ruler *Smoking Batab*. Stela 14, corresponding to the year 784 AD (9.17.13.4.3) commemorates the access to the throne of the ruler known as *Itzamnaj K'awil*, son of the latter. Stela 12, erected also by *Itzamnaj*, narrates the victory of Naranjo over Yaxha in the year 799 AD (Martin and Grube 2000). Unfortunately, these monuments were destroyed by looters early in the 1960's. Some of the fragments were recovered in Belize and transported to the National Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Guatemala (Graham 1975); only drilled fragments left by the looters were found *in situ* (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Fragments of looted stelae.

On the other hand, to the south of the Central Plaza, Structure B-24 was entirely rebuilt, achieving a quadrangular base with sides of 65 m, and a height of approximately 25 m, formed possibly by five sloping-shaped structures, with a central stairway on the north façade and an upper precinct built at the level of the fourth body, flanked by decorative designs in high-relief (Figures 19 and 20). The upper precinct consisted of a small vaulted chamber 3 m long and 1.75 m wide, with a maximum height of 2.80 m, accessed through a vaulted corridor 2.40 m long and 1.80 m tall. Among the rubble that resulted from the looting actions, a small ocarina in the shape of a bird and painted blue was recovered, together with some bone remains of birds, all of which possibly came from a cache located under the chamber's floor.

It has been detected that the two upper bodies had a high-relief decoration. The south façade of the upper body, as well as its northwest corner, were almost entirely exposed; notwithstanding the major collapse observed, the presence of high-relief works was evident, in the form of large rectangular blocks (20/50 cm wide, 20/30 cm tall, and 50/80 cm long), placed on their sharp ends, and joined together by a light gray mortar. Unfortunately, the complete absence of a stucco lining and the limitation in the volume of the excavations did not allow for the identification of the designs. One remarkable

detail of this last construction stage is the absence of a good portion of the eastern area of the upper body, of such proportions that it made its definition impossible due to the collapse process (12 m in the north façade, and 20 m in the east façade); therefore, it is probable that the construction was never finished, because although most of it was constructed during Tepeu 2, the upper part of the building was undergoing modifications in Tepeu 3.



Figure 19. Upper precinct of Structure B-24.

Decoración en alto relieve, Esquina Noroeste B-24



Figure 20. Decoration in high relief, Structure B-24.

CONCLUSIONS

In short, we may conclude that the Central Plaza of Naranjo was basically formed by two symbolic axis, an east-west axis developed in the Preclassic period, and another north-south axis that achieved its maximum relevance at the beginning of the Classic period, both in vigor up to the final stage of occupation at the center of the city (Figure 21). This architectural arrangement responded to ideological factors related to the significance of the cardinal points for the ancient Maya culture, a discussion already approached by different scholars (Ashmore 1991).

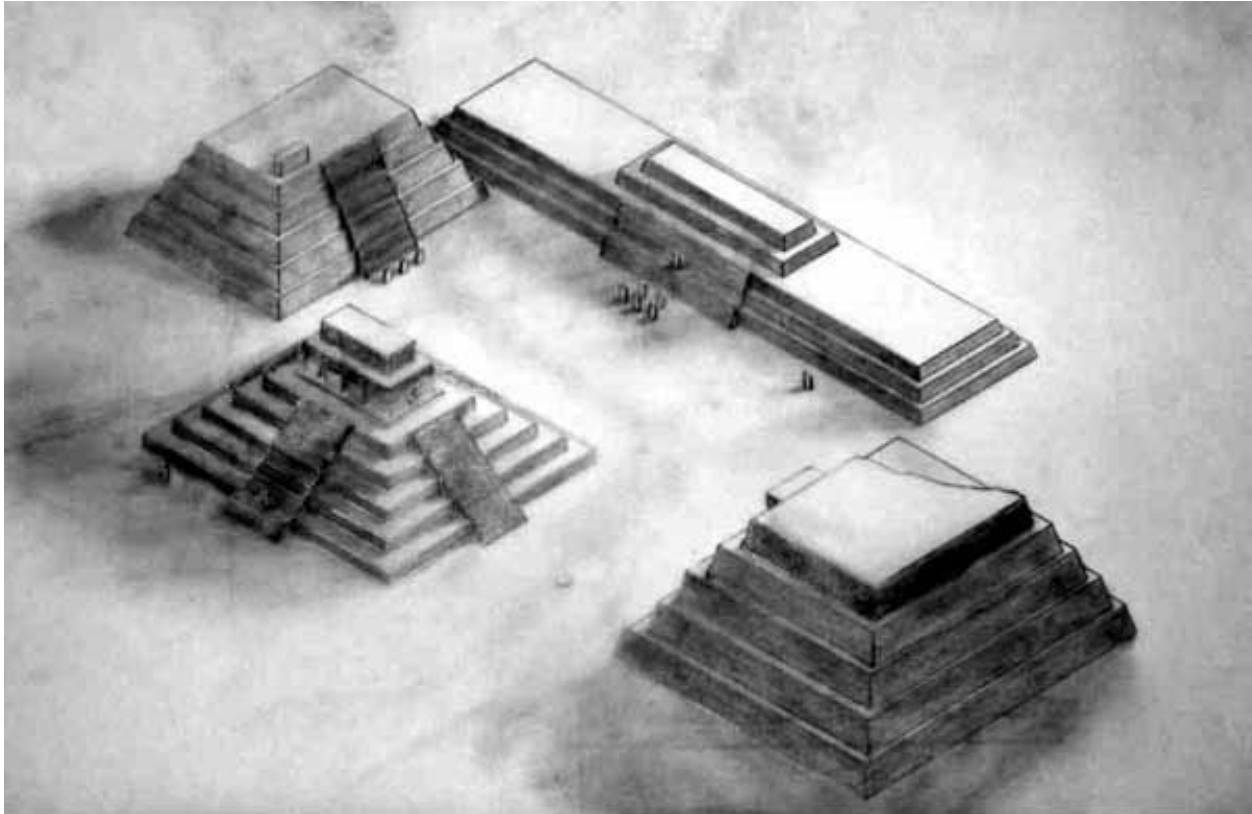


Figure 21. Hypothetical restitution of the Central Plaza of Naranjo, during its final stage of occupation.

Although there is still plenty to be done, with the results obtained from the information rescued from the lootings, the overall evolutionary processes and the architectural composition of the plaza have been defined, proposing as well interesting approaches for future investigations. The study of the iconographic features present in Structures B-19 and B-24 may provide valuable information about the cosmovision of the Maya and its relationship with the architectural design.

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