

RECENT DISCOVERIES AT PERÚ-WAKA', PETÉN: SACRED LANDSCAPES IN THE SOUTHEASTERN ZONE OF THE EPICENTER

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The temple complex of El Perú-Waka' is located at the southeast of the site center. The original map was drawn by Ian Graham thirty years ago. This space inside the site was named El Mirador, and consists of three different assemblages that include two pyramids built on natural elevations and one group located on top of a natural, hilly slope, which seems to have been leveled in ancient times. This surface supports three small structures that include one temple and two adjacent platforms.

The goals of this long term research are to establish the nature and relationship between the monuments of this religious triadic complex. The different hypothesis will be focused on the following general issues: the relationship of this religious enclosure with the rest of the city, the differences at the heart of the enclosure itself, and, particularly, the possible comparisons with other religious complexes of different Maya cities. Therefore, Structures N14-12 and O14-07, and Stela 3, on the elevated plaza, have been the focus of operation 8 at El Perú-Waka' during the past two field seasons (Figure 1).

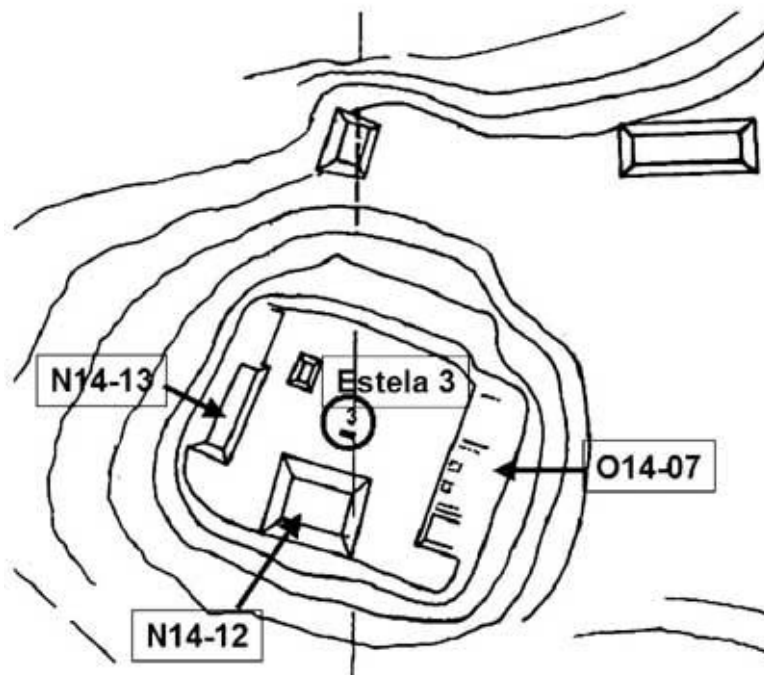


Figure 1. The plaza on the summit.

STELA 3

Like Ian Graham has documented, Stela 3 does not seem to be cut, although it is possible that its surface is now completely eroded. The stela is 1.30 m wide and 0.26 m thick. Its upper portion has been fractured, and its current height is of 2.10 m, with a spike of 1.05 m below the surface. Possibly, the excavations adjacent to the stela will reveal some of the upper fragments; however, further investigations need to be conducted in the 2005 season.

Looting activities have been detected in the north face of the stela, reaching almost the depth of the base. Due to the extent of this looting, we were unable to establish whether there was a deposit in this place. A test pit incorporating the east half of the looting was placed in front of the stela. At least, six different floors were documented in front of the monument. These events of multiple floor construction directly associated with the north face of the stela, were identified as well in other units. The evidence suggests that construction was an uninterrupted activity in the plaza summit. Possibly, this mitigated the effects of erosion at a height like this, or either it was simply related to the subsequent architectural modifications evident in this place.

Special findings in the area include green stone and shell beads. A dense cluster of sherds was found on top of the last floor directly associated with Stela 3. Subsequent excavations showed no further evidence of this concentration of fragmented vessels, suggesting that the extension of the deposit was limited to an area closer to the stela. A well delimited space with a concentration of smashed vessels may point to a ritual cache. Therefore, it does not seem to be a termination deposit, as generally defined for the extension of the areas involved (Freidel, personal communication 2004).

A small platform was identified on the south face of Stela 3, where an excavation was initiated to compensate the loss of information on the north face of the monument. Perhaps this platform served as an altar during the Late Classic and Terminal Classic periods. Evidence in support of this interpretation includes the finding of an important amount of censer and candlestick fragments, sherd concentrations, smashed *in situ* vessels close to and on the altar, as well as burnt sherds. A small fragment of a flint eccentric was discovered on the right side of the altar. This altar, the associated artifacts, and the dense cluster of sherds found on the north side of the stela, further support the argument that this place once was a sacred space.

In unit 11, a little farther north from unit 1 in front of the stela, a cache was discovered. This cache included two vessels placed lip against lip, plus a third vessel in an upside down position. These vessels were located approximately 0.30 m at the north of a rounded, grinding stone (Garber 1989), and at the east of what appeared to be a cut on the floor. The vessels and the grinding stone were found between the axis of Stela 3 and Structure N14-12, where some very small fragments of mother of pearl were also collected.

The thickness of the walls, the slip, the form of the rims and the monochrome red and orange colors of the vessels all point to a Terminal Preclassic dating (Acuña, personal communication 2004). The cache was found on top of a refill layer used to level the bedrock on the floor. This leveling created an adequate foundation for the previous activities conducted on top of the plaza.

STRUCTURE N14-12

Three looting trenches were documented in the smaller structure designated N14-12 (Figure 2). This building is only 2.15 m high (Tsesmeli, personal communication 2003), with approximate dimensions of 11 m per 12 m. According to the elevation of the central datum on Plaza 2, and to the one recorded at a point established by the reconnaissance team slightly north of Stela 3, the plaza on the summit is approximately 45 m higher than the datum of Plaza 2. The height of the natural elevation creates the illusion that Structure N-14-12 has the same grandeur than the two other pyramids. This is a tricky architectural technique, also used in Pyramid O14-02, located on a much scarped slope.

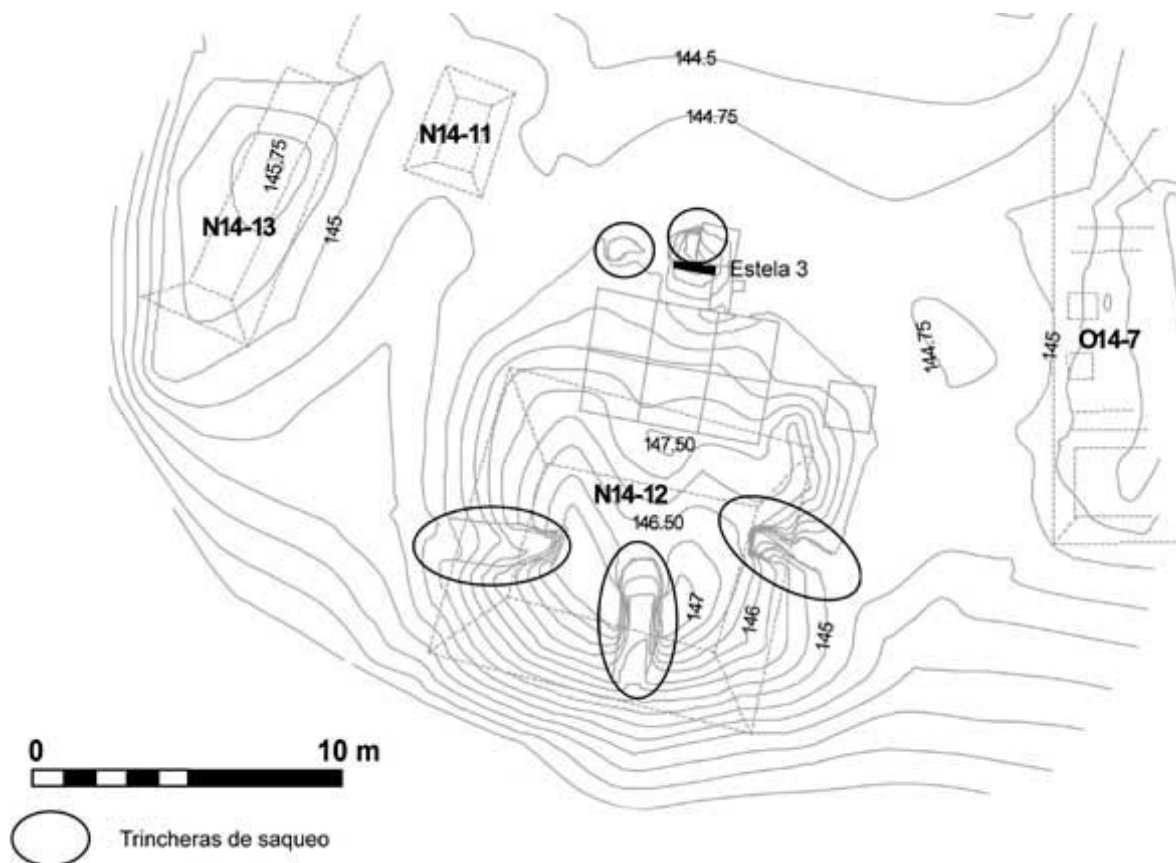


Figure 2. Looting trenches inside Structure N14-12, and at the north of Stela 3.

Structure N14-12 dates to the Late Classic and possibly even to the Terminal Classic period during its final phase of construction. The excavations revealed two coarsely elaborated platforms north of the central access, flanked at both sides by masonry columns. A hatchet was found right in front of the eastern column. The columns are

delineating an access route to a rather unrefined stairway in the axis of the structure, which presents six steps and a small platform on the top. Large slabs were used to build the stairway. Many were laid following the east-west axis, and simultaneously aligned with the stela. Probably, the slabs were a part of an earlier vault and were later reused for remodeling the structure.

The stairway was built close to the surface level, and no stucco remains were found, only ballast, suggesting the presence of a stucco surface sometime in the past. This would also confirm the presence of erosion acting on the plain. The angle of the stairway created an artificial ditch that allowed water to run, destroying the stucco floors and preventing the formation of a humus layer.

The excavations at the northwestern façade of Structure N14-12 revealed another entrance between the western column and the wall of the northwestern corner. Evidence suggests that this peripheral entrance led to a room with a collapsed vault adjacent to the stairway; assuming symmetry, there was a possibility that another vaulted room could be found in the eastern half of the façade. When the collapse was cleared, two slab layers were observed above the last floor. The slabs were not found one on top of the other or in sporadic positions. Because of the arrangement shown by slabs at the corner, it was concluded that the trait had been intentionally arranged. The finding of a half shell placed under the slabs that formed the perimeter of this trait supports the hypothesis of an intentional placement.

The looting trench at south, also placed on the axis of Structure N14-12, was investigated this season. A floor 0.10 m thick was the major finding in this unit, discovered as a result of clearing the matrix of the organic material present on top of the trench. This floor may have represented a surface prepared for the construction of a big wall designed to support a heavy weight. Interestingly, the floor is taller than any other one excavated on the south façade of Structure N14-12; this may suggest the possibility of the past presence of an elevated room at the back of the building. At the same time, this would reinforce the notion by which the stairway was part of a remodeling event of the structure, one that included an earlier stairway and/or an elevated room that were later covered.

The sherds of a small vessel collected in this unit are consistent with some others originated in the central face of the stairway. This may be explained in several ways; possibly the vessel was placed on top of the small platform and then it broke. Some fragments may have fallen inside the south trench and others may have fallen to the north, on top of the stairway, due to natural processes. It is also possible that the vessel was smashed and its fragments intentionally dispersed by the Maya or by the looters who visited the site in the 1960's. This latter option is feasible because the accumulation of humus along the axis is insignificant. Probably, considering a context of this nature, the modern intervention accomplished 40 years ago would not seem so recent.

Two units were set inside Structure N14-12 to provide information about the constructive sequence of the building. One was placed along the axis, and the other on a possible vaulted room. Like in the rest of the operation, the units did not yield an abundance of diagnostic materials to help us date the structure. Unit 29 allowed us to identify two additional floors along the axis, as well as another rather eroded floor

that was a part of the base of the stairway. The first floor had a thickness of 0.10 m to 0.12 m, and on top of it there were 37 fragments of human bones, not yet identified. Like this material was well preserved, it is feasible that it was placed and later covered by the matrix and the subsequent refill. It might be interpreted that the bone represented an offering aligned with the axis, placed prior to an architectural modification or construction event. That thick floor is similar to the floor recorded in association with the south trench, although it is 2 m deeper. Future excavations will allow us to find out if it in fact corresponds to the same construction phase posited previously in the hypothesis of the elevated room in the rear part of the structure mentioned before.

On the contrary, the unit inside the vaulted room included three floors at the surface lots which were not visible in the profile of unit 29. These floors show the previous configuration of Structure N14-12, and suggest that the middle wall represented an architectural modification. This may be argued because it is not necessary to prepare a surface with three separated floors prior to building a wall. The penultimate floor was gray and had marks of burnt patches. Several charcoal samples were collected in the area. The fifth, sixth and seventh floor correspond to the two floors mentioned previously in unit 29. Above these floors, in unit 30, there was a stone alignment on the same vertical axis, just like inside the western wall of the structure, only that this time it was found at a depth of 1.10 m. This implies a construction similar to the earlier versions of Structure N14-12; however, for the time being, the earlier architectural configurations remain ambiguous.

In most of those units the bedrock had been leveled, a very different case than those of the units at north of the stela, which feature an uneven bedrock. The leveling and the presence of sherds and flint flakes in the final levels of the units inside Structure N14-12, suggest that the bedrock was intentionally leveled and prepared, and that the refill was placed on top of it prior to the construction. The sherds recovered from the refill seem to be earlier than the ceramic material of the upper levels, but additional analysis must be conducted before attributing them a specific time frame.

Additional excavations allowed us to define the southwest corner of Structure N14-12. The intrusion of a tree root and the steep slope in this face of the structure, affected negatively the preservation of this corner. Cut stones were found on the southwestern slope of the plain.

STRUCTURE O14-07

Structure O14-07 flanks Structure N14-12 in its eastern side (Figure 1). According to Graham's map, two columns seem to be present on the western face of the structure at each side of the central entrance. It is probable that two accesses existed at the opposite side of the columns. The excavations conducted in Structure O14-07 this season have been in general surface excavations, having revealed only the last construction phase of the western façade. Two levels of cornice stones were found, disturbed by tree roots. This finishing technique was observed in other structures from El Perú-*Waka'*, including those of operations WK05 (Residential Group), and WK06 (Palace Group). Freidel (personal communication 2004) believes that a true cornice stone is a trait that marks the flourishing of architecture at the northern Maya

lowlands, but that it is unusual in the area of lowland Petén. The ceramic material excavated in this structure has not yet been analyzed, and therefore, no specific temporality has been defined so far. The columns were not identified during this field season, but we were able to document the presence of several levels of stones placed at the foot of the opening, in the central entrance. Ceramic material dating probably to the beginning of the Late Classic period was collected under the lowest level of these stones, while the final lots of unit 20 may be dated to the Early Classic period.

Several construction phases were exposed outside Building O14-07. Nine floors were documented outside the structure, confirming once more that the remodeling of floors was present across the plaza. Unfortunately, and due to time restraints, this unit was not excavated down to the bedrock, so that together with the scarcity of artifacts, it was not possible to ascertain the specific function this building may have had.

ARTIFACTS

Griselda Pérez Robles executed the preliminary analysis of the ceramic materials collected in 2003. Many of the excavations conducted on the plaza summit were horizontal, and most dates corresponded to the Late Classic period. The five vertical units yielded Early Classic materials, or lots with a mix of early and late materials. Thus, evidence suggests that the occupation of the plain took place between the Terminal Preclassic and the Late and Terminal Classic periods. The vessels of the cache corresponding to the Terminal Preclassic or Early Classic periods, together with the diagnostic pottery of the Late Classic and some Terminal Classic evidence, favor this view.

The sherds and other artifacts collected in operation WK08A are not indicative of a residential function. The ceramic material was primarily composed of censer fragments, striated sherds and vessels with appliqué spikes, a few bowls, vessels and dish fragments; much of this ceramic material showed evidence of burning. Many of the units have yielded a small amount of sherds, and the overall trend points to small fragments. The total number of sherds collected after two excavating season amounts to 6232 pieces.

Lithic artifacts, obsidian and shell are also present, but like pottery, materials are scarce. These materials will need a more thorough analysis; however, it is worth mentioning that several cases that corresponded to the typology of artifacts were detected. Most lithic materials consisted of flake remains or débitage. The obsidian artifacts, except for one, are fragments of prismatic blades, and most of them were collected from the lots over the exposed floor around the platform, in front of the building, and there were also other, fewer cases, in the refill.

There are several interesting and inexplicable patterns regarding the shell deposit. The more abundant type of shell is that of *jutes* (*Pachychilus* sp.), collected in almost all units directly associated with the architecture of Structures N14-12 and O14-07. Just one of the excavations adjacent to the stela contains *jutes*. None of the specimens seems to have been used as a food resource, in spite of their size. Two

different hypotheses could explain this phenomenon. One, they were offerings, and two, they were mixed with the matrix and transported to the plaza on the summit for the construction refill; this would suggest that the nearby *bajo* was used like a land resource. A different pattern was noticed in regard to the *Pomacea* shells: these were found only at the deeper levels of the vertical excavations, specifically in units 11, 29 and 33. That was also the case of the fragmented mother of pearl, found only in units 11, 20, 29 and 30. The above patterns need a more detailed study.

CONCLUSIONS

The natural elevation itself appears to be a large pyramid, with a plaza and a temple built on top (N14-12). The position of the religious enclosure on top of natural promontories and an elevated ground reinforces the systems of cosmological beliefs. Several attributes of the El Mirador group suggest the same:

- The first attribute is the elevation, which contributes to a visual prominence in the landscape. The data obtained through reconnaissance show that the plaza on the summit supports the three smaller structures, almost 45 m exceeding the height of the primary plaza located northwest.
- Second, the access routes to the religious triadic complex were dramatically restricted, suggesting a limited access to these areas.
- Finally, the proximity to water of this religious enclosure, in the form of an adjacent *bajo*, suggests a representation of the mythical mountain of water for the Late Classic Maya (Scarborough 1998).

The triadic arrangement of Structures N14-12, N14-13 and O14-07 on top of the plain opens northwards and slightly to the east, in the general direction of the *bajo*. The *bajo* itself needs an in-depth investigation in regard to how it was integrated to the localization of the site. The northeast orientation of the structures at the plaza on the summit is not in harmony with the direction of Structures O14-07 and O14-02, which look northwest, right to the site center. These pyramids show a greater similarity with one another than they do with the triadic group.

To continue with the search of information, it would be necessary to achieve the goals mentioned at the beginning of this investigation. Work in the 2005 field season, will be focused on the study of Stela 3, and subsequently, on additional investigations of the north slope of the plain to go deeper in the hypothesis of a stairway at the front and along the natural promontory. However, the excavations will concentrate, mostly, on Structure O14-04, which is the second largest of the El Mirador group.

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Figure 1 The plaza on the summit

Figure 2 Looting trenches inside Structure N14-12 and at the north of Stela 3