

## INVESTIGATIONS AT CHAKAH, PETÉN: A PERIPHERAL SITE OF EL PERÚ-WAKA'

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During the 1960's, groups of oil prospectors arrived in the area of the current Laguna del Tigre National Park, cutting a trail in the jungle. This trail crossed Chakah and was used by timber dealers and other predators who, on their way through, looted several buildings of the sites located in the area. However, and infringing oil prospecting regulations, these explorers failed to report the finding of those sites. It was only in 1970 when Robert Christie, from the University of Pennsylvania, reported the site of El Perú (Graham 1988, cited in Escobedo and Freidel 2004:2). Later, in 1996, Christophe Helmke, jointly with some local explorers, reported a small site in the vicinities of El Perú, which he named Mo' (Helmke n.d.: 9.15).

It was at the beginning of the 2003 field season conducted at El Perú-*Waka'* that an architectural group was found in the outskirts of the main site, which in time proved to be not just a simple separated group but instead, a small center with a around 12 architectural groups in total and several isolated structures. Currently, this center is considered to be a secondary polity ruled by *Waka'*. Besides, even though it was first believed that this was the site of Mo', the idea was refuted after comparing the preliminary maps of both sites, which –although sharing a similar settlement pattern– show that the extension, and at times the distribution of their component parts, was different. This new site was given the name of Chakah, and is located at an approximate distance of 1500 m north of the San Pedro River, in turn 500 north of a water hole, the main fresh water source in the sector, and a little over 5000 m at the southeast of *Waka'*, the governing center.

With the discovery of this site, research was initiated aimed at finding a more accurate definition of the settlement and its construction and chronological sequences; to this purpose, during the 2003 and 2004 field seasons, a reconnaissance of the area was conducted by Fabiola Quiroa and Griselda Pérez to ascertain the dimensions and density of the settlement. A test pit program was carried out by Quiroa, having covered so far nine of the 12 groups identified, and intensive work was accomplished in some of the structures of two of the main groups, one of which was intervened with the collaboration of Olivia Farr. The excavation of the burials found in the course of interventions was assisted by Jennifer Piehl, who in turn took care of the osteological analysis of the remains recovered. Griselda Pérez was in charge of clearing and recording the multiple looting trenches found at the site, six of which had been preliminary described by Juan Carlos Pérez. Also, Griselda Pérez conducted a preliminary dating of the pottery, some times with the help of Mary Jane Acuña, Ana Lucía Arroyave, and

Juan Carlos Meléndez, Evangelia Tsesmeli, Demian Marken and Edwin Román took care of making the survey of around 60 % of the site map. Román was responsible as well for most of the photographic record.

## **RECONNAISSANCE IN THE AREA: EXTENSION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SETTLEMENT**

With the identification of the first group and after having realized how significant the group was, it was decided that a reconnaissance was to be undertaken in the area in an attempt to define the extension, density, and settlement pattern of the site. That is why by the end of the second season, 61 mounds integrating 12 plaza groups had already been identified. A small permanent water hole was located, as well as one chultun, two dry brooks, and a possible ancient cenote.

With the three plazas already known from the previous season –the plazas of Groups A, B, and C- the reconnaissance was initiated using a road opened by an oil company in the 1960's, which crosses the site from east to west, approximately. Along this road, most of the groups located on the slopes were identified, and arbitrary incursions were made in the jungle, trying to spot the scarp limits and its slope. Even though several structures hardly visible to the naked eye may possibly have been overlooked, it could be said that most of the site was defined. The epicenter, integrated by Groups A and C, includes 15 structures distributed around two plazas with a restricted access; the plazas include two of the most massive buildings of the site and probably served a civic-religious function, in addition to accommodating the local elite. The remaining structures were grouped in plazas with three to four buildings that served a residential function. There are a few isolated mounds that do not form patio groups. The settlement spreads from the epicenter towards north, southwest and east, on top of the escarpment. Basically, no mounds were detected on the way down from the scarp.

The water sources are quite close to the site. At south, a little over 500 m away, there is a round-the-year water hole fit for human consume. At about 200 m northeast of the epicenter, an additional *aguada*, also with a permanent water supply was discovered, though it was much smaller than the previous one. At south, approximately 1500 m away from the site runs the San Pedro River, which besides being used for human consume and agriculture, is fit to be navigated when it crosses the area. Two dry brooks were detected going downstream between the ravines of the escarpment to a *bajo* area that was possibly a floodable and/or growing field sometime in the past. At east, down the scarp, humid soils turn into temporal water holes, mainly during severe winters.

## **TEST PITS PROGRAM**

The test pits program consisted of 20 excavation units, in addition to extensive excavations conducted in two structures. The main purpose of these pits was to obtain dates accurate enough to learn the chronological and construction sequence of the sites. In addition, more specific research questions were to be posed, for a more efficient organization of studies in future field seasons. Most of the pits were

placed in the patios and a few others in the structures, making it possible to gain knowledge, in a general manner, on the chronological sequence of the site and its occupation. In addition, test pits revealed architectural traits, construction sequences and construction techniques, among other things. They also allowed us to learn about the function of several spaces and related cultural traits, like for instance, burial habits and rituals. This led to the identification of three burials, one cache, one ceramic deposit and two garbage pits.

#### **BURIAL 4**



**Figure 1. Offering, Burial 4.**

In Structure A-2, Burial 4 was discovered (Figure 1); it consisted of a rectangular cist that included a slab roof and stone walls, cut inner face and a soil of brown loose dirt, oriented towards the southwest, following the longitudinal axis of the structure and placed on its standard axis. The individual, probably a male, was placed in the extended dorsal decubitus position, with his legs stretched out but crossed, his arms flexed and crossed on his torso, and his hands extended on his shoulder blades. His cranium was oriented towards the southwest. These bone remains were found in a very poor state of preservation as a consequence of roots and water leaking inside the cist. The individual was accompanied by an offering that consisted of two polychromatic vessels –a “killed” bowl and a jar-, both with evidence of having been wrapped up with leaves. They both were upside down, the first over the mandible of the individual, and the second on the right side of his skull. A bone ring was also found, behind the cranium. In addition to the offering, the interior of the cist yielded 25 sherds, ash, charcoal and soil samples, and two flint fragments. Both the offering and the materials mentioned above were tentatively dated to the Late Classic period.

## BURIAL 11

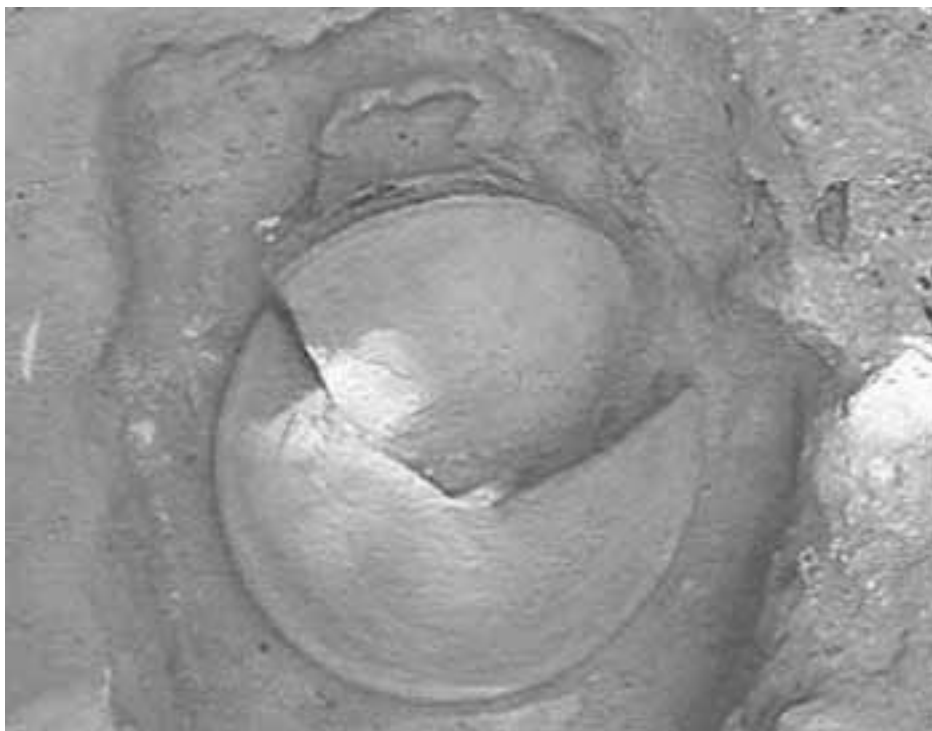


Figure 2. Burial 11.

Burial 11 (Figure 2) was a primary burial consisting of an adult, articulated individual, deposited in the extended dorsal decubitus position, with his arms slightly flexed and his hands over his pelvis, with a north-south orientation, his head to the south, slightly turned over towards east. The individual was deposited right on the limestone bedrock, in the patio of Group E in front of Structure E-8, following its standard axis. The burial lacked any construction or architectural trait to accommodate it, so that the skeleton had suffered a complete calcification due to direct exposure to the limestone stratum, which gave it a very hard consistency; in fact, the cranium almost graphically revealed the deformations that resulted from the weight it had to support for years. The individual was accompanied by a burial offering consisting of a complete dish of the Sierra Red type, placed upside down over his cranium. This vessel has led us to assume that Burial 11 dated to the Late Preclassic period.

## BURIAL 12

Burial 12 was found on the limestone bedrock, inside a garbage pit located within the patio of Group N, facing Structure N-45. The burial consisted of a male adult individual, irregularly deposited from east to west, with his head towards west and looking towards south. Due to the careless manner in which he was deposited, it is hard to ascertain his exact position, though he was placed in the flexed ventral decubitus position, with his arms flexed and his hands close to his mandibles, and his legs flexed under his thorax. The cranium was found in a slightly higher position than the other bone remains. The skeleton was very poorly preserved. No offering was found in association with this individual, except for materials typical of garbage pits, consisting of one fragment of miscellaneous lithics, one red flint flake, nine

fragments of shell, and 43 sherds dated to the Late Classic period; for all these reasons we have inferred that Burial 12 corresponded to this time span.

## CACHE 1



Figure 3. Censer found in Cache 1.

In addition to the three burials, a cache was found (Figure 3) in a form resembling a rectangular niche, with walls and a roof made of cut stone and a light yellowish brown earthen floor with limestone gravel. From the inside we were able to recover a good portion of a fragmented censer depicting an individual sitting on a lid. The full torso and one leg were recovered. Apparently, it was articulated. The anthropomorphic figure, likely a male, was wearing a bead necklace and an anklet, also made of beads. The lid on which he was sitting presented the carved image of a solar god, and his ear flares had holes, presumably to allow smoke to come out. Some appliqué remains were found, most of them with residues of Maya blue paint. A soil sample was taken. Also, one snail and 10 sherds were recovered, not all of them corresponding to the censer. All the collected material was tentatively dated to the Late Classic period.

## DEPOSIT 1



Figure 4. Ceramic fragments, Deposit 1.

Another trait identified consists of a ceramic deposit (Figure 4) found on top of Structure A-2, which revealed a back wall that integrated a room. This floor shows a well preserved stucco floor; in fact, a major portion of the original stucco is still there. The ceramic deposit rests on top of it, consisting mostly of a censer very similar to the one found in Cache 1, although the lid, in the shape of a bell, instead of depicting the image of a solar god, shows mat designs in appliqué; the few fragments of the individual seated on the lid were very similar to those of the other censer. The complete base of a cylinder was also found. The cylinder, as most of the censer, had been intentionally placed over the floor. There were several sherds dispersed over the floor, but the majority of them were appliqué and/or fragments of the two objects described previously, and many presented traces of blue Maya paint. Two additional

fragments of red flint were recovered, as well as two obsidian fragments and one soil sample. The material was dated to the Late Classic period.

## **MIDDENS**

Two middens were also identified, one of them at the back of Structure D-7, located in a section cut in the bedrock. The matrix of the midden consisted of a brown soil with mixed sand, clay, pumice and a large amount of organic material. The midden yielded 41 fragments of flint, three fragments of animal bones, 12 fragments of shell, one figurine fragment, four obsidian fragments, and 157 sherds dated to the Late Classic period. Another midden inside a section cut in the bedrock was found in front of Structure N-45, where one fragment of a ceramic spindle whorl was recovered, as well as 108 fragments of shell, 69 fragments of snail, 37 fragments of flint, 5 fragments of obsidian, and 283 sherds dated to the Late Classic period, including one fragment of a spiked censer. It was in this midden where the previously described Burial 12 was discovered.

## **LOOTING TRENCHES, CLEARING AND RECORDING**

As a complement of the archaeological excavations, it was necessary to clear and document de lootings, as in the mounds altogether found at Chakah during the reconnaissance stage, 12 lootings that included trenches and tunnels were detected. Structure C-3, one of the most affected ones, shows four lootings in total, three of which combine tunnels and trenches, making it possible to establish the presence of two construction stages: the first one was built with a very finely cut stone masonry and probably corresponded to the Early Classic time span, while the second, with a rather loose refill and a poor amount of mortar, may have been built during the Late Classic period. The ceramic material recovered during the intervention provided us with a rather varied sample that included unslipped vessels, some of them monochromatic, others polychromatic, as well as an almost complete but fragmented bowl, mixed with the rubble of the larger looting tunnel. The bowl, of the Saxche-Palmar Orange Polychrome type, presents a band with hieroglyphic inscriptions which according to Stanley Guenter (personal communication, 2004), makes reference to the site of El Zotz.

In Structure B-4 the looters carried out a totally destructive work, cutting at right angles a building that seems to respond to one single construction event occurred during the Late Classic period. The refill, like in the previous building, was made of stones of a regular size, with no mortar and scarce ceramic materials. At the base of the structure and immediately on top of the bedrock there was a floor 5 cm thick.

The remaining lootings are dispersed among some of the structures located, mostly, along the road cut by oil prospectors and distributed, one in Structure R-54, two, in R-55, and four additional ones in C-16, N-45, J-38, and L-40, respectively. All these structures seem to have been built during the Late Classic period, and do not show evidence of earlier buildings; besides, they share traits such as a floor at the base of the building which, as opposed to the patios and because of its localization, was well enough preserved as to be defined in the record.

## CONCLUSIONS

Further to the reconnaissance of the area, it was possible to observe that the settlement does not extend beyond the borders of the escarpment, in other words, there is a clear delimitation in the occupational area between *Waka'* and Chakah, as except for a few mounds that do not exceed a height of 0.50 m, there is no evidence of construction below the scarp. There are natural traits that outline the significance of the site in terms of water control, as on the way down from the scarp and towards the south there is a very large *aguada*, the main source of fresh water for that sector. There is another *aguada* at the northeast, considerably smaller than the previous one, though it still represents a permanent supply of water. Two dry brooks were also detected, and needless to say, the close vicinity of the San Pedro River, fully navigable all along this area, is also to be considered. The proximity of these water sources establishes a significant difference between the placement of Chakah and that of *Waka'*.

The test pits program allowed us to document that the site had its greater occupation during the Late Classic period. However, it also revealed a rather extended chronological sequence, as there is evidence of occupation and construction activities between the end of the Late Preclassic period and the beginning of the Terminal Classic period. These pits have also exposed interesting traits of the settlement, like for example the habit of cutting the natural stratum of limestone, both for burials and middens. However, there was scarce evidence of patio floors, as opposite to floors inside the buildings; this does not automatically mean they did not exist; probably they were not preserved, because remains of several of them were found, moreover, still showing remains of red stucco. Daub remains were also found, suggesting the use of perishable structures; in one case daub was seen in blocks placed on the bedrock. Perhaps these structures were dismantled, and daub was used as a refill for leveling the patio.

Even though the material recovered was not abundant, it helped to establish a chronological sequence, as markers of the different periods were identified in the majority of the excavated lots. Even the pottery recovered from the lootings, although originated in disturbed contexts, provided some guidelines to ascertain the temporal frame of the construction sequence, and in some cases, to identify the function of the structures. Likewise, it has allowed us to date, with a remarkable accuracy, the burials and/or middens found during the excavations.

As of the preliminary ceramic analysis, it may be inferred that the major occupation connected with the Plaza A Group took place late in the Early Classic period, although the occupation of the group extended from the Late Preclassic period, along the Classic, and up to the Terminal Classic period. The final phase of construction of both Structure A-1 and Structure A-2, corresponds to this latter period. In turn, and even if the material recovered in the construction refill in front of the substructure of Building A-1 belonged in fact to the Late Classic period, it should be noted that it was dismantled and therefore, there are grounds to presume that the substructure was earlier; the type of masonry is typical of the Early Classic period, that is, it consisted of small stone blocks almost perfectly cut and very neatly placed.



Structure A-1 does not seem to have been very tall, and considering its dimensions, the relatively coarse material and the amount of grinding stones collected in the refill, it is possible that the building served only a residential function.

The situation with Structure A-2 was the opposite, as the summit showed slab remains and the springing line of rather thick walls fit to support a vault. Besides, the structure was considerably taller than Structure A-1. This, together with the fact that most of the recovered material in this building corresponded to polychromatic ceramics and luxury materials, and the presence of censers, caches and a burial with a fine offering, suggests that the structure had, simultaneously, a civic-religious and a residential function. It may have been a palace type structure. Structure A-2, as well as A-1, also presented at least two construction stages, as under the one that appeared to be the final version, a substructure with a finer masonry and sloping panels at the rear was found, dating apparently to the Early Classic period.

On the other hand, Structure C-3 is taller than the two previous ones, in around 4 m. Although it has not been archaeologically excavated so far, it presents several large lootings, which –leaving aside the destruction they caused- yielded materials that helped us dating them with an occupation that extended throughout the entire Classic period, while at the same time they exposed part of its architecture and allowed us to make some inferences about function. In fact, the building appears to have had two construction stages, one during the Early Classic period, considering the substructure observed in one of the lootings, which shows the corner of the building with a very fine and solid masonry work. The superstructure, on the contrary, shows a coarse masonry work; however, the summit shows multiple rooms. This final construction phase seems to have had stairways that communicated both with the plaza of Group A and that of Group C. The pottery recovered in this building proved to be mostly of a sumptuous nature, with abundant polychromatic sherds, censer fragments, and even a polychromatic bowl with an inscription that made reference to a local lord of the site known as El Zotz, located in the area of Central Petén, all of which suggests that an elite group settled in this area and maintained inter-site contacts.

The remaining buildings and plazas explored were not so massive and appear to have had a purely residential function. This allows us to argue that the site was relatively independent, as it had a civic and religious center, and residential areas of its own. Naturally, under the ruling shadow of *Waka'*.

Apparently, the importance of Chakah was based on water control, considering its vicinity with two different water sources: one, the most important *aguada* in the sector, and then the San Pedro River, the main river source of the area. It should be noted that the road cut by the oil company in the sixties allows for reaching higher grounds through a relatively easy access, passable all year round, so it is possible that this route was used in antiquity (Freidel and Escobedo 2004:416). Thus, it could be speculated that Chakah probably had different functions as a consequence of its localization; as already said, water control, an issue that may be seen from different approaches, the most important one being the use of water sources for human consume and for agricultural activities. At the same time, it may have served as a watchtower to secure the southeast access of the governing center, and/or as an

outpost, outlining its significance as a trade enclave, both continental and with a water way.

In any case, we must stress that the data presented in this paper are of a preliminary character and that further field and laboratory studies are needed to more accurately define what its function was, and what type of relationship this site maintained with *Waka'*.

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- Figure 1      Offering, Burial 4
- Figure 2      Burial 11
- Figure 3      Censer found in Cache 1
- Figure 4      Ceramic fragments found in Deposit 1