

EXPLORATIONS AT THE SITE OF NACIMIENTO, PETEXBATÚN, PETÉN

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In the 2004 season the archaeological excavations at the site of Nacimiento, in the Petexbatún region, continued. The site of Nacimiento, or more precisely, Nacimiento de Aguateca, to make a proper distinction with other sites and towns with the same name, is located approximately 2.5 km south of the site of Aguateca (Figure 1). The hieroglyphic inscriptions of Aguateca and other neighbor sites like Dos Pilas, narrate the history of the Petexbatún region during the Classic period. One crucial event was the entering of the Dos Pilas dynasty in the region in the VII century AD. The Dos Pilas dynasty substituted the dynasty of Tamarindito and Arroyo de Piedra as a regional power. In which way did this political change affect the population of the Petexbatún region? This is the question that guided archaeological investigations conducted at the minor site of Nacimiento, occupied before and after the arrival of the Dos Pilas dynasty. Extensive excavations conducted at residential groups in Nacimiento have made it possible to analyze the effect that this political shift exerted on local inhabitants.



Figure 1. Map of the Petexbatún region (by M. Eberl).

During 2003 a structure was excavated, nearby presumed agricultural terraces. This season work continued with the extensive excavation of two structures from two residential groups located at the core of Nacimiento.

THEORETICAL FRAME

The investigation at Nacimiento was carried out as part of the Aguateca Archaeological Project, whose second phase, under the direction of Daniela Triadan, was initiated on June of 2004. The major goal of the scientific research of the Aguateca Archaeological Project Second Phase was to examine the relationship between dynasties and domestic groups during the Classic period. Researches at the site of Nacimiento are a part of the field works which, in addition, include investigations at the crack of Aguateca and three transects from the site towards south (to the site of Nacimiento), towards north (to the site of Tamarindito), and towards west.

The hieroglyphic inscriptions of Aguateca (Eberl 2000) and Dos Pilas (Fahsen 2002) have made it possible to restore the history of the Petexbatún region during the Classic period. The dynasty of Tamarindito and Arroyo de Piedra reigned over the region of Petexbatún during the V and VI centuries AD. *B'alaj Chan K'awiil*, who probably came from Tikal, founded around 650 AD a new dynasty in the site of Dos Pilas. During the second half of the VII century, he bested, through warfare, matrimony and political alliances, the dynasty of Tamarindito and Arroyo de Piedra and the dynasty of Dos Pilas was established as the new regional power. Aguateca became the twin capital of the Dos Pilas kingdom.

The hieroglyphic texts outline the shift from a local dynasty to an intrusive dynasty as regional power around 650 to 700 AD. Through archaeology, we are investigating how political change affected the population of the Petexbatún region. The inscriptions, precisely, provide the dates of the events that motivated political change. They often indicate the precise day of a war or a ritual. Thus, this political change is envisioned not in terms of decades or centuries –time spans that are common in archaeology- but in terms of days or years. One of the major goals of our investigation is to achieve a comparable temporal control for archaeology.

Our attempt includes as well refining the Late Classic ceramic sequence. The Nacimiento ceramic complex covers the Late Classic period and dates from 600 to 830 AD. The excavations at Barranca Escondida, Aguateca (Eberl 2000, 2003a), the stylistic comparison (Foiás 1996: 423-424; Inomata 1995, 1997: 338-340) and the preliminary analysis of materials from Nacimiento have allowed us to distinguish the phases Tepeu 1 and Tepeu 2 in the ceramic complex of Nacimiento. The Tepeu 1 phase possibly dates to sometime between 600 and 700 AD, and the Tepeu 2 phase, to 700 to 830 AD. Demarest (2004:104), and Bishop, Rands and Sears (2004) additionally separated the phases “Full Tepeu II” (630-760 DC) and “Late Tepeu II” (760-830 AD); therefore the application of this refined ceramic sequence is favored, when working at the laboratory.

The correlation of the history recorded in the glyphic inscriptions with archaeology, allows for finding evidence of political change through architecture (specifically

through different architectural styles), pottery, and lithics. All these were the pursued objectives at the minor site of Nacimiento, one that offers the advantage of a short occupation during the Tepeu 1 and Tepeu 2 phases, or in other words, from the VI to VIII centuries AD.

PREVIOUS INVESTIGATIONS AT NACIMIENTO

Takeshi Inomata (1995: 101-102) noted, during the explorations he conducted across the area south of Aguateca, the presence of structures along the escarpment, as well as others that probably were part of the site of Nacimiento. A walk along the transect that establishes the border between the park and the cultural monument of Aguateca, and which crosses the site of Nacimiento, led to the discovery of the site itself (Eberl 2003a; Montenegro 2002). The rapid deforestation of this area in past years allowed us to assess the full extension of this site. Some 130 structures were grouped in 25 or 30 residential groups over an area of 1.5 km². The dispersed pattern of domestic settlements extended to the probable ceremonial structures. The site included a main plaza, a pyramid at the entrance of the largest cave of the site, and a Ballgame. These structures were located in different areas within the site core, and did not form a ceremonial center. The boundaries of the site were demarcated by a fall in the density and character of the settlements (Eberl 2004). The residential groups were located at the banks around the *rejoyas* and depressions. At the core of Nacimiento, each bank was occupied by at least one residential group. Outside the core, the lower density was expressed by the absence of settlements around the *rejoyas* and the presence of irregular residential groups and isolated structures.

In the year 2002 a research program was initiated that included mapping, probing, extensive excavations and additional investigations (Eberl 2002, 2003b, 2004). The mapping of the site was accomplished with a total station. The topographic map drawn includes information on natural resources like water, rock shelters and caves. Thus, the relationship between the settlements and the ground could be assessed. The test pits provided additional data on the settlements themselves and particularly on diachronic change. A test pit was excavated at each of the 25 to 30 residential groups of the site. The 24 test pits excavated provided information about the occupation of each residential group. The preliminary analysis of the artifacts recovered from the test pits suggests that most residential groups were occupied during the Late Classic period only. Previous investigations suggested that the ceramic sequence splits the Late Classic in a Tepeu 1 phase followed by a Tepeu 2 phase. The stratigraphy found in several test pits confirms this finer chronology. Tepeu 1 ceramics were detected at the bottom of the test pits, while others corresponding to Tepeu 2 were found closer to the surface. The minute analysis of the transition from Tepeu 1 to Tepeu 2 is still pending. It will be of interest to learn whether this transition occurred gradually or abruptly.

The research program included extensive excavations. In 2003, one structure of a group of five, located close to the presumed agricultural terraces (Eberl 2003b), was excavated. The structure was selected in the pursuit of understanding the function it served in relation to the terraces. The artifacts recovered in this structure suggest domestic use. The use of the terraces as a garden or a milpa is not that clear. A trench was excavated at the terraces, and soil samples of the profiles were taken.

The analysis of the distribution of the carbon 13 isotope (C13) made it possible to detect traces of maize crops (Johnson, Terry and Wright 2003). The C13 values of the samples taken from the presumed agricultural terraces vary between -26.11% and -24.62%, thus providing no evidence of maize agriculture. During the 2004 season, extensive excavations went on in two structures of two residential groups located at the core of Nacimiento. Additional investigations include the explorations of caves, rock shelters and *rejoyas* at Nacimiento by a group of experts, and the exploration of the agricultural potential of the region by a team from Brigham Young University (Johnson, Terry and Wright 2003).

EXTENSIVE EXCAVATIONS IN 2004

In the past, research suggested that the two regional powers –the dynasty of Tamarindito and Arroyo de Piedra on one side, and the dynasty of Dos Pilas and Aguateca on the other-, were associated with different architectural styles (Houston 1993:44; Inomata 1995: 465-482, 1997; Palka 1995; Valdés 1997; Van Tuerenhout 1996). The style of the local dynasty of Tamarindito and Arroyo de Piedra was characterized by structures with low benches and built with coarse stones or slabs. The structures associated with the intrusive dynasty of Dos Pilas and Aguateca feature various rooms with partition walls and tall benches. The construction involves cut stones.

The investigations conducted at Nacimiento are expected to allow the identification of more architectural markers, and to clarify the association between architectural styles and ceramics of the Tepeu 1 and Tepeu 2 phases. This is being accomplished through the extensive excavation of domestic groups. The investigations include partial excavations inside the structures to obtain information about the presence of earlier structures. For the extensive excavations of 2004, we selected two structures corresponding to two associated residential groups (Figure 2). The residential groups were located close to Datum 6 at the site core. The size of the structures and of the groups represented approximately the average, in regard to the residential groups at the site. Looting activities in these groups were almost inexistent –a problem that affected many other residential groups in Nacimiento. The largest residential group included three to four structures around a patio; the secondary group included three structures around a patio, southeast of the primary group. The pattern of two associated residential groups was interpreted as a functional and/or social interdependence with a domestic high ranking group in the primary group, and with servants or clients in the secondary group (Webster 1989:7, 11; 1992:140, 144). In other words, these two residential groups possibly represented two different social levels. This is helpful to detect the effects of the political shift for individuals of different social levels.

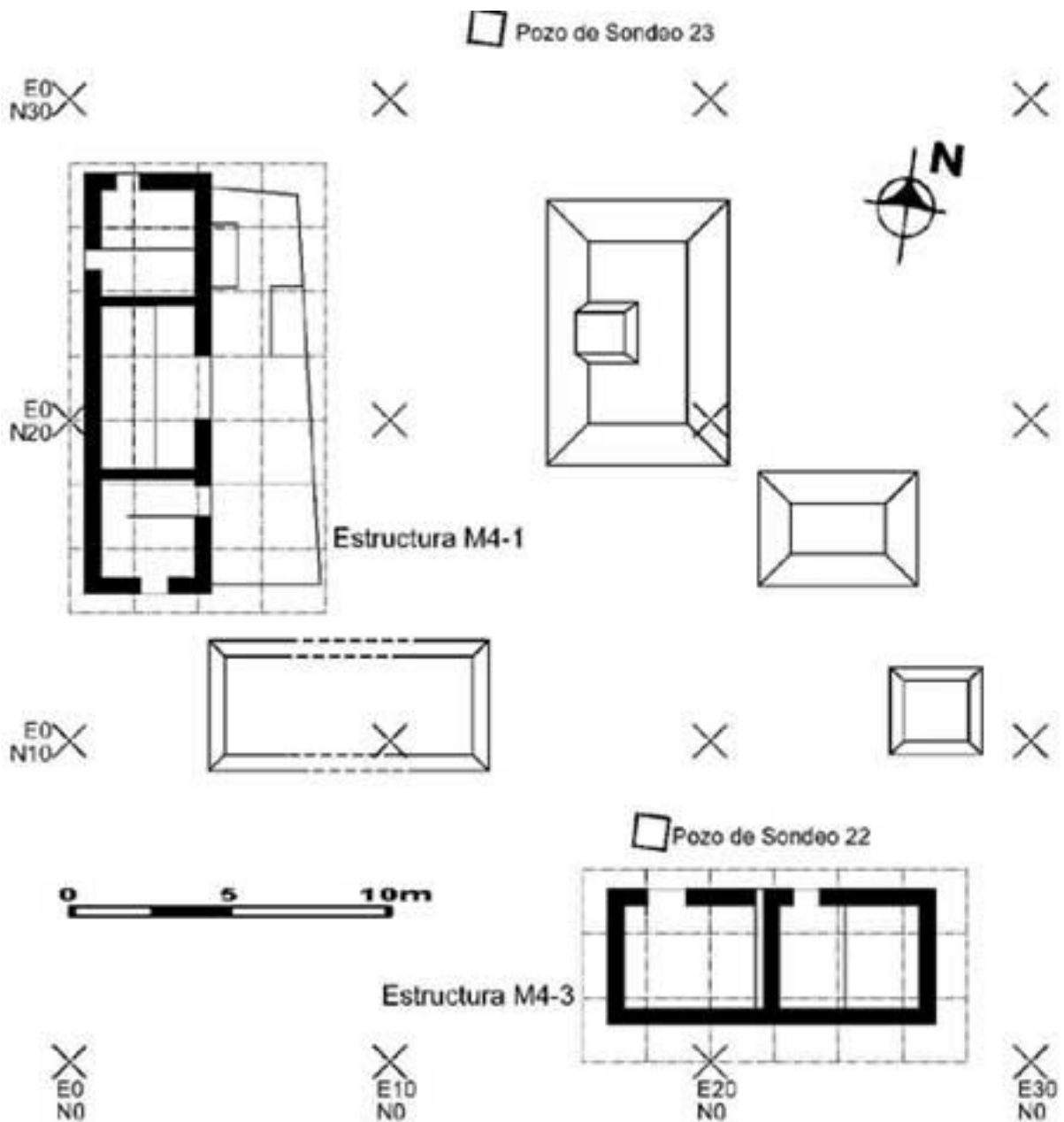


Figure 2. Map of residential groups partially excavated in 2004 (map by the authors).

The excavation of the two residential groups was initiated with the largest structure of each group. Structure M4-1 occupied the west side of the primary residential group, and Structure M4-3 occupied the south side of the secondary residential group. The excavation grid was oriented following the north-south axis of Structure M4-1, which is deviated $7^{\circ} 30'$ to the west of the magnetic north.

STRUCTURE M4-1

Structure M4-1 was the largest structure of both residential groups (Figure 3). The dimensions of the structure are 13.10 m x 3.90 m, and cover approximately 51.5 m². The reconnaissance of the structure prior to its excavation made it possible to detect traits that were consistent with the architectural style of Aguateca. The structure had

three rooms clearly separated by partition walls; the bench in the Main Room was tall and its sides were elevated. The extensive excavation of the structure allowed proving: 1) whether these architectural traits were consistent with the Tepeu 2 ceramic complex (attributed to the Aguatecan influence); and 2) whether the architectural traits showed any influence of the local architectural style.

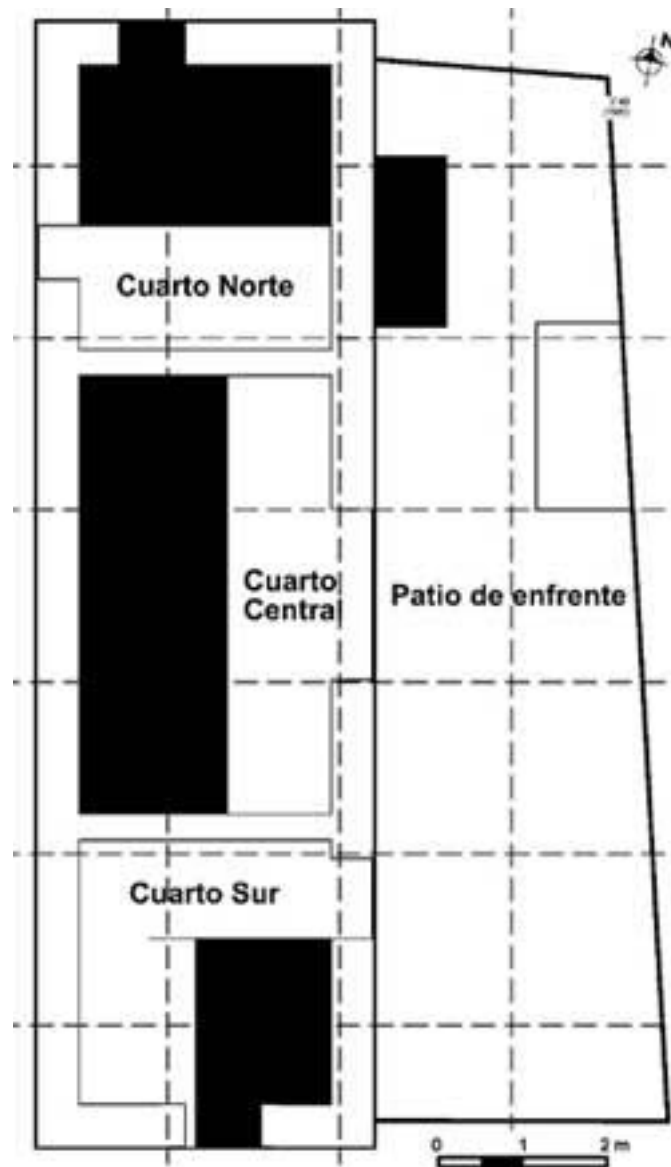


Figure 3. Schematic ground plan of Structure M4-1 (ground plan by the authors).

The extensive excavation of Structure M4-1 was conducted through 28 units of 2 x 2 m (numbered 1 to 28), covering 14 m from north to south, and 8 m from east to west, within an area of 112 m². The methodology used in the excavations conducted at Aguateca was applied here, with a distinction between levels and lots (Inomate 1995) and using sifts of one quarter of an inch. The documentation includes ground plan drawings and sections (usually at a 1:20 scale), and photographs. The excavations confirmed the presence of three rooms. In addition, there was a front patio formed by blocks of irregular stones that measured up to 0.72 m. The outlines of the frontal patio are irregular and do not conform to the rectangular design of the

structure itself. The front patio had a gravel refill. The original dwellers left garbage outside the limits of this patio. There was an external bench in front of the North Room. Near the bench there was a low platform. The south side of the front floor differs from that of the north side, and instead of a bench, we observed remains of steps that climbed to the front entrance of the South Room. The stones of these steps were looted for unknown reasons.

The North Room features an inner area of 9.7 m². The bench is located at the north side of the room, with a surface of 5.5 m² (or 56.2% of the inner space). The walls are relatively low. It is presumed that the upper parts of the room and the roof were made of perishable materials. The most remarkable feature of the North Room is the difference in the quality of architecture. The front wall and the partition wall of the Central Room were elaborated with slabs and clearly defined. The side wall and the rear wall were built with coarse stones informally arranged. This crude construction did not allow for accurately defining the entrance to this room. Most probably, there was an access at the rear side or –due to a shortage of stones in this part of the room- at the north side (implying an entrance or opening above the bench in the room). The inside of the room hardly contained any artifact. The stones of the inner wall and bench are partially burnt. In addition, charcoal was found between the floor and the wall stones. In our view, the North Room collapsed when the roof burnt.

The Central Room has a surface of 15 m², with an entrance on the east side and a bench on the west side. The bench occupies an area of 8.8 m² (or 58.6% of the inner surface). The low platform integrating the front patio defines the access to the Central Room. The frontal architecture of the structure is, alike the North Room, of a better quality than those at the sides. The entrance to the room is almost 2 m wider than the other entrances, and is very well defined by a step at the entrance. The absence of artifacts inside the Central Room corresponds to the same pattern of Aguateca. Several traits of the Central Room correspond to the design of the central rooms of structures found in Aguateca. Inomata (1995, 1997), observed that the central room of the residential structures in Aguateca served a public function and were used to entertain visitors or to celebrate parties. In our view, the Central Room of Structure M4-1 served a similar function.

The South Room, with a surface of 9.1 m², features an inner area similar to that of the North Room. The bench covers 5.7 m² (corresponding to 63% of the inner area). The building presents the poorest quality of the three rooms. The formal entrance to this room was probably located at the front of the structure. The absence of wall stones on the south side of the room opens the possibility that another entrance or opening existed on the south side of the room. A cluster of artifacts on the floor of the South Room caught our attention. The analysis of this material is pending, but several sherds were identified, possibly consisting of complete vessels. In addition, Inomata discovered several sherds with a composite of textiles and slip. Harriet Beaubien identified this novel material at the time of investigating the masks located in a room of the palace group in Aguateca (Beaubien, n.d.; Beaubien and Kaplan n.d.). The sherds of this identical material found at Nacimiento are small, but some of them show decorations or modifications. Comparable sherds are very rare in other Maya sites, and they possibly occur in special contexts. In our view, the deposit in the South Room represents a termination ritual. However, a detailed analysis is still pending and it is not possible to offer a concluding interpretation at this time.

Several units were excavated down to the bedrock inside the North Room and the South Room. However, no earlier structures were found. An offering discovered in the North Room contained a dish that stylistically corresponded to the Tepeu 1 complex. The structure was possibly built sometime during the early Late Classic period. The ceramics recovered on the floors of the structures correspond to the Tepeu 2 ceramic complex, and indicate that the main occupation of the structure dates to the final portion of the VII century AD.

STRUCTURE M4-3

Structure M4-3 occupies the south side of the secondary group (Figure 4). The structure measures 10.20 m per 4.20 m (43 m², approximately) and contains two rooms at east and west, with entrances that open up to the patio of that group. The structure was excavated in 18 units of 2 x 2 m (numbered 1 to 18), which covered 6 m from north to south, and 12 m from east to west, or 72 m². Structure M4-3 was built right on the bedrock. The foundations consisted of irregular, large blocks, and the walls consisted of large slabs vertically erected. Probably, the structure at some point had upper walls and a roof made of perishable materials.

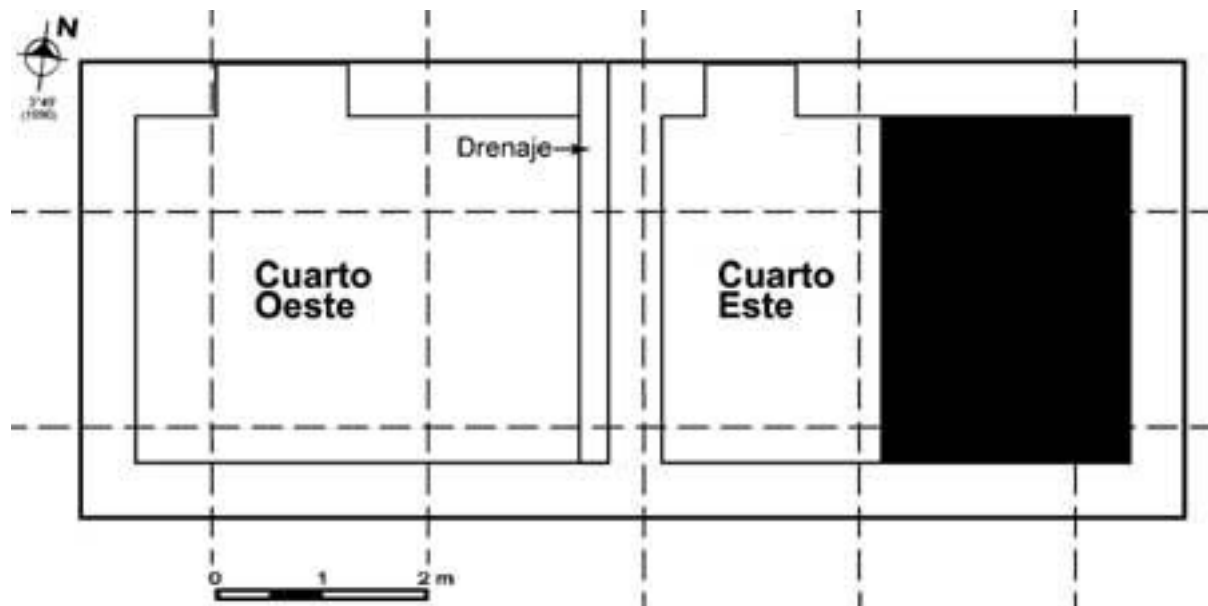


Figure 4. Schematic ground plan of Structure M4-3 (ground plan by the authors).

The West Room has an inner area of 13.2 m². No bench was found at the inside. The remarkable trait was a drainage built at the eastern side of the room with a sluiceway that led to the front of the structure. The floor of the West Room was thicker than the floor of the East Room, and featured a different texture and color. The only artifacts found in this room were placed inside the drainage. Another remarkable trait was the presence of a dense midden around the East Room. It is suggested that this room did not serve a residential function but that instead, it was used as a workshop. We plan to ascertain the function of this structure, once the artifacts collected at the midden are analyzed. In addition, soil samples were taken for chemical analysis (phosphates and other chemical elements), and for micro-

residues tests. The East Room has a surface of 14 m² and a bench on its east side. The bench covers an area of 7.4 m² (in other words, it occupies 53% of the total surface of the room). This room likely served a domestic function. The structure refill was excavated in both rooms, and no evidence of earlier structures was found. However, there was an offering under the floor of the East Room, which consisted of a pot and a dish (Figure 5). The dish and the pot are consistent with the Tepeu 2 ceramic complex. The date of construction of Structure M4-3 would tentatively correspond to the final portion of the VII century AD.

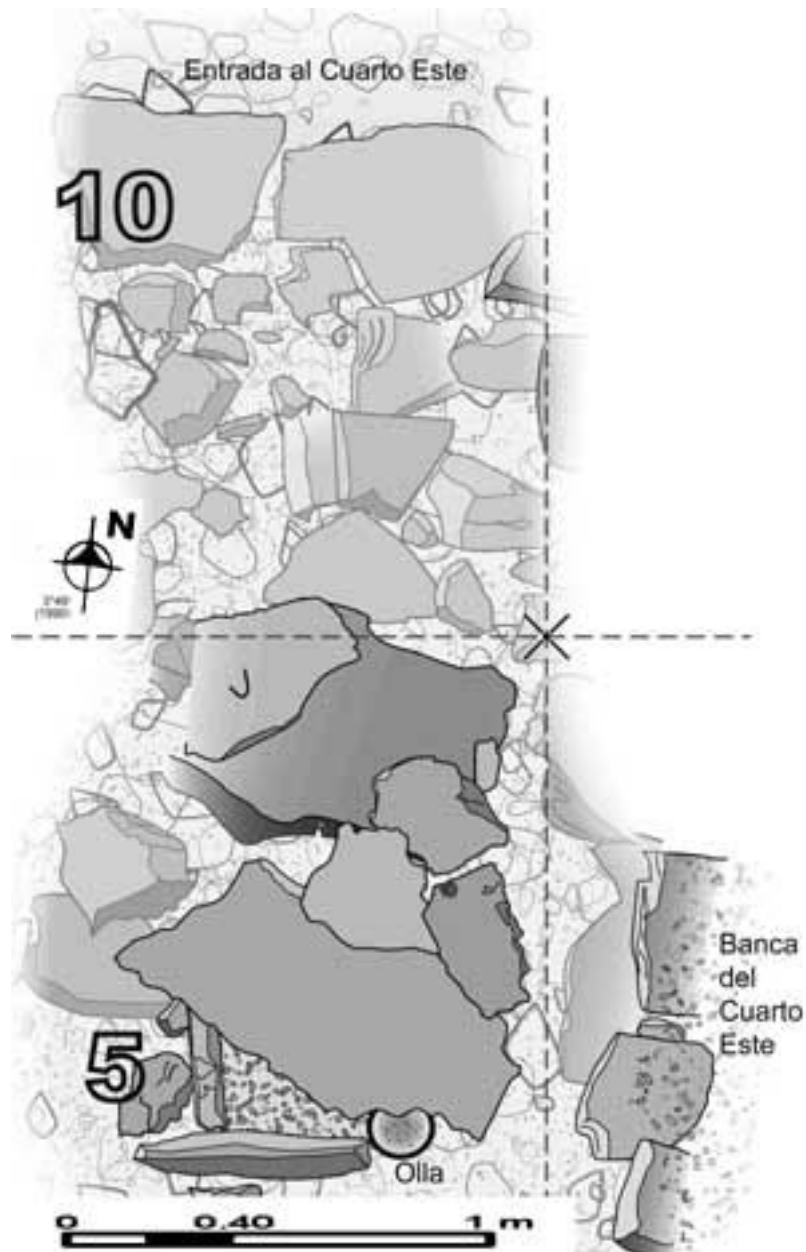


Figure 5. Ground plan of Offering 1 under the floor of the East Room of Structure M4-3 (ground plan by the authors).

DISCUSSION

The extensive excavation of these two structures facilitated a detailed study of the architecture. The comparison with elite residences from Aguateca, built in the VIII century AD, made it possible to detect temporal changes. In order to monitor differences in socio-economical status, the size and full volume of the structures was compared. For example, Structure M4-1 in Nacimiento is consistent, as far as the full size and inner surface of the rooms is concerned, with Structure M8-8 (the “House of the Axes”), Triadan *et al.* 1998).

The construction of Structures M4-1 and M4-3 with upper walls and a perishable roof is a feature present in residential structures of the Petexbatún region which remained unchanged throughout the Late Classic period (the only vaulted structures in Aguateca are found in the Palace Group). However, the construction technique varied: coarse stones and slabs are predominant in the Aguatecan style. Structures M4-1 and M-43 maintain the tradition of the Tamarindito style. Cut stones are almost absent, and the quality of architecture differs between these two structures. The corners and walls of the basal platform of Structure M4-3 are much less defined than the corresponding parts of Structure M4-1.

A trait that probably typifies the local style is featured by rooms where benches occupy less space than in comparable residential structures. Benches occupy, in Structures M4-1 and M4-3 of Nacimiento, 53% to 63% of the inner space. The benches in Structure M8-8 of Aguateca occupy around 72% of the rooms (Triadan *et al.* 1998). It is worth mentioning that the rooms in Structure M7-34, which probably served a residential function, include benches comparable to those of Nacimiento (the percentage ranges from 53% to 60%; Ponciano, Pinto y Monroy 1998).

The influence of the architectural style of Aguateca may be noticed through the presence of two or three rooms, “I”-shaped benches and partition walls. The patio in front of Structure M4-1 is a trait known in Aguateca. The North and South Rooms in Structure M4-1 had entrances or lateral accesses that were opened above the benches of the room –a trait not found in Aguateca. Several characteristics display a blend of both architectural styles. The benches of Structure M4-1 and M4-3 are, for instance, generally low (around 0.25 to 0.40 m), and consist of one to three stone alignments of slabs horizontally placed one on top of the other. The benches of the structures in Aguateca are taller, and at times they reach a height of 0.80 m. The bench of the Central Room of Structure M4-1 combines traits of both styles. The height in its central part varies from 0.40 to 0.45 m. The elevated lateral sides achieve a final height of 0.75 to 0.85 m (the surface of the bench was eroded and partially destroyed by tree roots).

CONCLUSION

Research was focused on the impact of political change occurred in the Petexbatún region during the second half of the VII century AD. It is suggested that this change archaeologically corresponds to the Tepeu 1 to Tepeu 2 transition. The preliminary analysis of the ceramic recovered in the both excavated structures during the 2004

season suggests a main occupation during the Tepeu 2 phase –in other words, during the end of the VII century AD- when Dos Pilas became the regional power. The architectural analysis of Structure M4-1 and M4-3 suggests a combination of these two architectural styles present in the region. The construction of Structure M4-1 and M4-3 maintains the conventions of local style in the Tepeu 2 phase. The most visible changes have to do with the design, which displays the Aguatecan style.

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Figure 1 Map of the Petexbatun region (map by M. Eberl)

Figure 2 Map of residential groups partially excavated in 2004 (map by the authors)

- Figure 3 Schematic ground plan of Structure M4-1 (ground plan by the authors)
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