

**RESULTS OF THE 2002-2004 FIELD SEASONS,
AGUATECA EXCAVATION AND RESTORATION PROJECT,
PETÉN, SECOND PHASE, PRAS**

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The archaeological site of Aguateca, located in the region of Petexbatún, Sayaxche, Petén, has recently undergone several archaeological investigation and restoration projects in a number of structures located at its core. Systematic investigations were initiated in the late 1980's (Demarest *et al.* 1989; Demarest 1997; Valdés *et al.* 1993; Inomata 1995; Inomata and Stiver 1998; Inomata, Triadan and Ponciano 1998) and were carried on to this day (Inomata and Houston 2001; Ponciano *et al.* 2003; Ponciano *et al.* 2004), providing a more comprehensive insight of the processes that unfolded during the Late Classic period and the phenomenon known as Maya Collapse.

We are now presenting the last field results of the Aguateca Excavation and Restoration Project Second Phase, PRAS, corresponding to two years of research and restoration works (2002-2004).

NATURE OF THE PROJECT

The Aguateca Excavation and Restoration Project Second Phase, PRAS, was promoted as part of the Petén Sustainable Growth Program of the Ministry of Agriculture, Cattle Raising and Food. It is an integral program in nature, as it sets forth a number of impact projects that will benefit the rural communities of Petén. Within the SGP (*PDS*), CATIE was hired as the Central Executive Unit of the project. CATIE in turn, and through the International Public Contract 1-2000, summoned companies with an expertise in Restoration of Archaeological Structures, to undertake the execution of this Project. This represented a major shift in the traditional restoration scheme of archaeological sites, previously conducted by the Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala. This change, for the first time, involved civil society in the intervention of pre-Columbian buildings within the Maya area of Guatemala. However, this innovating scheme still preserves its traditional structures, as the State, through the Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala, supervises the execution of the physical public work and the correct fulfillment of the contract by the private company. The protection and restoration of the Guatemalan Cultural Heritage is a major challenge to the State, and therefore, the incorporation of more institutions is needed to fulfill such a major task.

The Aguateca Excavation and Restoration Project was integrated by a multidisciplinary team that involved archaeologists, a restorer architect, master curators and skilled masons, in order to complete the restoration of buildings with the greatest possible accuracy according to the recoverable archaeological evidence. An additional significant aspect in regard to the restoration of the buildings had to do with respecting the originality of the different structural features discovered in the course of archaeological investigations, to proceed with the physical restoration. The archaeological investigation was to be completed before initiating the restoration, as a part of the methodology applied in restoration.

Aguateca is located west of the Petexbatún lagoon, on top of the escarpment with the same name (Figure 1). It is located at the south end of the Aguateca brook, around 16 km in a straight line from Sayaxche. It integrates a sophisticated group of sites that include Dos Pilas, Tamarindito, Arroyo de Piedra, Punta de Chimino and Ceibal. Currently, Aguateca integrates a Reserve Park, but unfortunately, the neighboring populations are exerting a great pressure on its cultural and natural resources. Aguateca was a secondary ranked city within the Petexbatún region. According to epigraphic texts (Houston 1993), it once was the twin capital of Dos Pilas, the great regional center in the Late Classic period, having achieved a particular relevance when the site of Dos Pilas, 16 km to the northwest, was attacked in 761 AD and later abandoned; possibly, at that time, the royal family may have moved to Aguateca.



Figure 1. Aguateca, map of the region.

Current investigations have allowed us to expand our knowledge about Aguateca, and new information is now available in regard to the final and most likely dramatic moments of its occupation, considering that the population was engaged in organizing the defense of the city just before they were hit by their enemies. This is evident through the nearly 5.5 km. long stone walls built to protect the local dwellers, not only those at the site core but also those settled at the periphery. The wall

system, concentric in design, had its focal point on the Palace Group or residence of the king and not on the Main Plaza as was the case of Dos Pilas. This Palace Group and its structure M7-32, located west, were a part of the Aguateca Restoration Project and one of the relevant structures to be intervened.

OBJECTIVES AND GOALS OF THE PROJECT

The project included several goals that were to be achieved. The major objective was to learn about the cultural history of the buildings to be intervened. The corroboration or ratification of a pattern of sudden abandonment was crucial because former investigations (Inomata and Houston 2001) had proved that the elite groups in the city had quickly escaped, leaving abundant personal belongings behind, in their homes, in the same places where such objects were used for the last time. To define whether this pattern was present in other non-residential sectors of the site would be important to gain a more detailed knowledge of this phenomenon and its impact on local society. That is why the investigation of the buildings located at the main plaza represented an excellent opportunity in this pursuit.

Another goal of the Project was to investigate the ancient lifestyles of the Maya elite. Buildings located in the Causeway Area could provide new data and confirm the findings made in former research seasons (Inomata *et al.* 1997, Inomata, Triadan and Ponciano 1998, Ponciano *et al.* 1998).

This project was designed with the purpose of preparing the site for tourism and for habilitating an additional tourist attraction in the region, in addition to Ceibal, the great city at the banks of the Río Pasión, east of Sayaxche. To this purpose, a program was conceived that involved not only the restoration of archaeological structures, but also adequate infrastructure for tourism, through the construction of a visitors center, access stairways to the archaeological site, and a mirador on top of the scarp, among others features.

SECTORS SELECTED FOR INTERVENTION

These investigations were conducted in seven pre-selected buildings (Figures 2 and 3), four of them located at the Main Plaza (Structures L8-8, L8-11, L8-4 and L8-5), two in the Causeway Area (M8-37 and M7-34) and one at the Palace Group (M7-32).

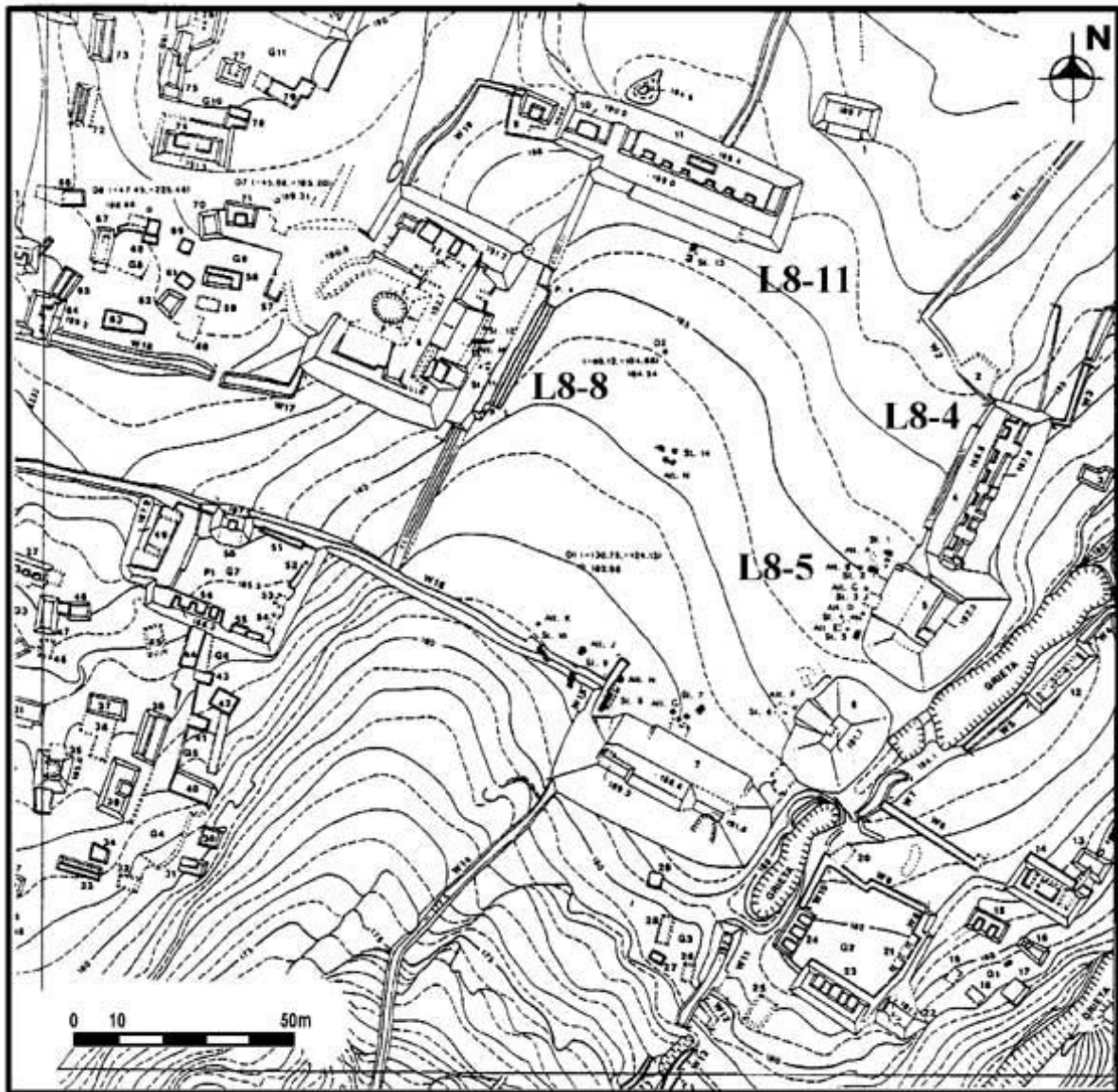


Figure 2. Map of Main Plaza.

To this purpose, the methodology of investigation applied was the one established for the site since the beginning of the Regional Archaeological Petexbatún Project (Inomata 1995). Later, the Aguateca Archaeological Project carried on with the investigations (1996-1999; Inomata *et al.* 1997; Inomata, Triadan and Ponciano 1998; Ponciano *et al.* 1998), as one of the focal points was to ascertain whether other site structures featured the pattern of sudden abandonment detected for the structures in the Causeway Area.

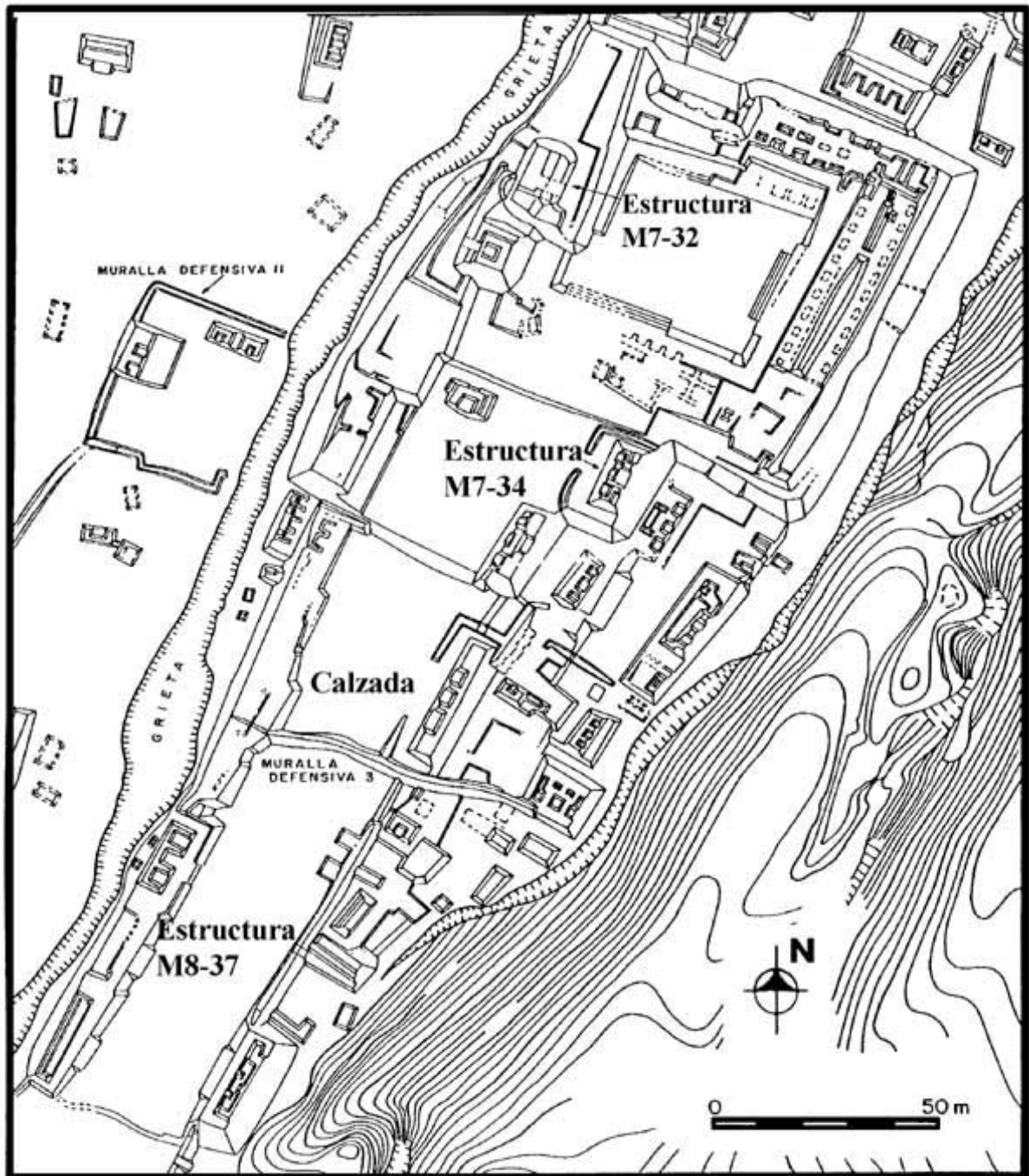


Figure 3. Map of the Causeway and Palace Group.

STRUCTURES AT THE MAIN PLAZA

Four pre-selected structures were intervened at the Main Plaza of this site. These structures occupied the east, north and west margins, representing the largest urban space intervened at the site. A wide plaza that exceeded 100 m at each side, and artificially leveled in its southern part dominated the public scene. The archaeological investigations conducted in each one of them have made it possible to learn about aspects related to its cultural history, and have set forth classifiers that helped to better understand its archaeological nature.

UNFINISHED TEMPLE (L8-8)

It is located in the western portion of the Main Plaza. The building was the one that featured the largest dimensions at the site. It was nearly 52 m long and 48 m wide, and its height was of 8 m (Figure 4). It was almost quadrangular in shape, and included a monolithic stairway at the front of its east side, and lateral panels. It had three stepped bodies, the first two with a facing of ashlar masonry, while the upper part featured an uneven surface due to the presence of a rustic stone leveling, aligned in square and rectangular shapes that created small recesses and revealed the construction system. There is a depression at the center, and a ramp at the rear that climbs from the ground above the first two bodies to the upper part, where the third body that was to be built would be placed. The overall characteristics have already been described, and this is one of the most enigmatic buildings of the city (Figure 5: Ponciano *et al.* 2003; Ponciano 2004).

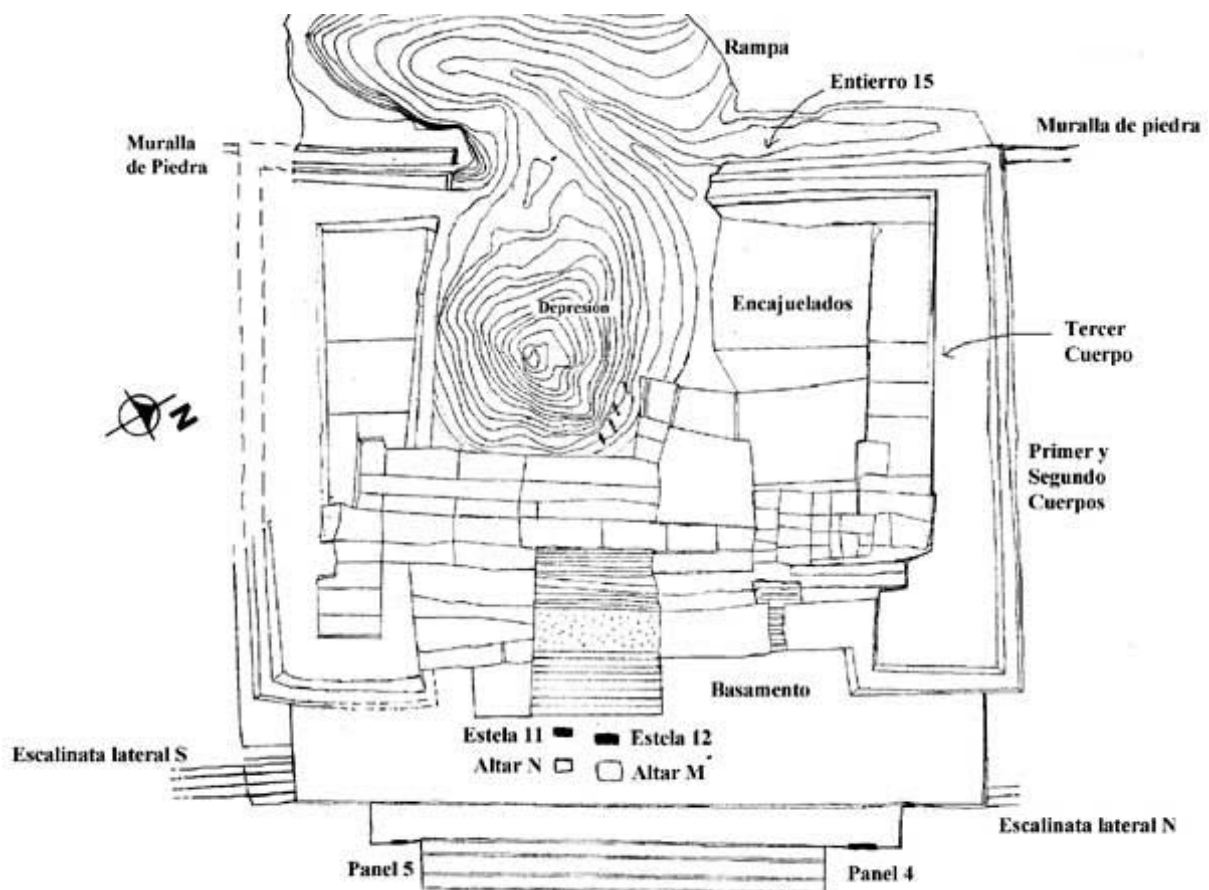


Figure 4. Ground plan of Structure L8-8

Archaeological investigations have corroborated that this building was in the middle of construction works when the city was attacked and residents escaped abruptly, leaving exposed the construction system of recesses, the retaining walls and finished portions of the building, particularly of the first and second bodies. The back side with the ramp suggests a storing area for construction materials, and the group of structures at L8-9 suggests that dwellers themselves possibly took care of the masonry works and the cutting of limestone blocks.

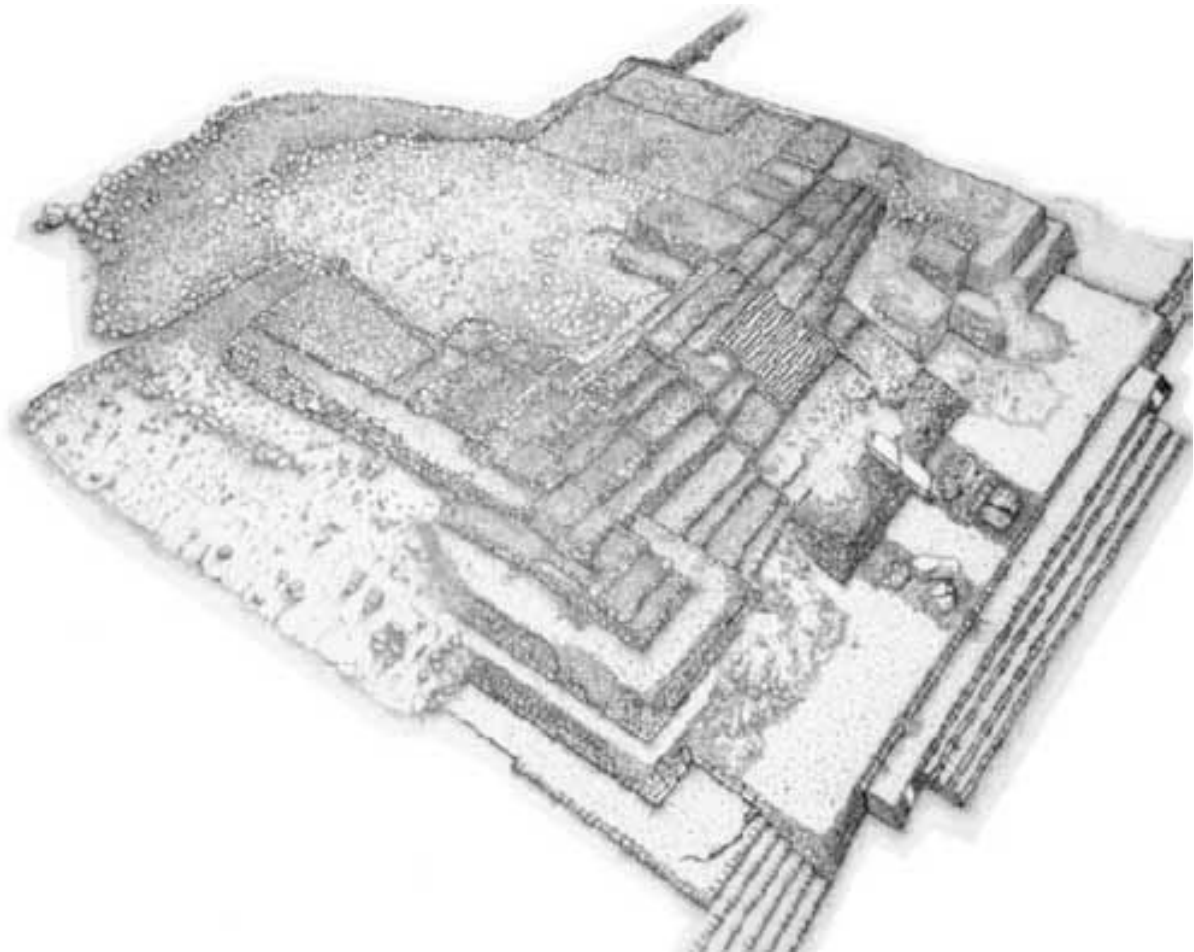


Figure 5. Aerial view of Structure L8-8.

The fact that the construction of this building remained unfinished has significant implications for our comprehension of the final moments just before the city was abandoned. The rear part of the structure shows abutting stone walls which were likely fenced for defensive purposes. However, it is also possible that the stone wall on the southwest side was originally part of the parapet of the West Causeway that limited the main plaza at that side, possibly reused, at a later stage, like a defensive wall. This suggests that the builders were preparing themselves to protect the city, while the construction of the building was still in process.

STRUCTURE L8-11: A SEAT OF POWER?

It is located in the northwest section of the Main Plaza. This building was 54 m long, 12 m wide and 3 m tall. It had an east-to-west axis, and its main façade looked south. It presents a basal platform with two bodies. In its upper part, on the front of the south side, there was a range room with seven pillars. It had a central stairway that led to the inside. Inside the room there was a central bench. The building had a cut stone architecture with a stucco finish. The roof was probably made of perishable materials. At the back, there was an affixed stone wall, possibly of a defensive nature, as well as a perimeter wall with an unusual position and orientation.

This was a range structure which likely served a public function, not only because of the size of the building but also because of where it was located, at the Main Plaza of the site. Even though several areas show a concentration of cultural material, particularly in and out of its west side, and at its rear part close to the defensive wall, in our view its function had to do with political activities, and may have possibly been the seat of the ruler. A central bench in a range enclosure seems to point to that possibility (Figure 6).

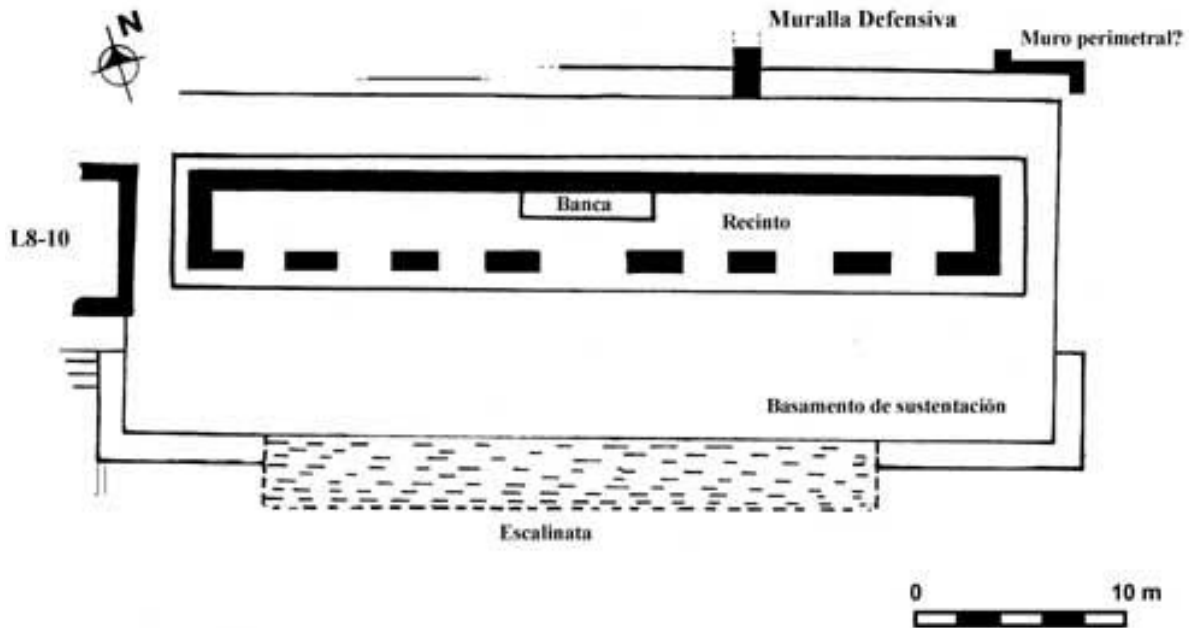


Figure 6. Ground plan of Structure L8-11.

STRUCTURE L8-4: RANGE HOUSE WITH BENCH AND NICHES, OR “CITY-COUNCIL”?

It lies on the northeast portion of the Main Plaza, abutted north of Structure L8-5. It is located adjacent to the crack that runs on a north-south axis. This was a range structure with a north-south axis, 52 m long, 10 m wide and 1.90 m tall, though at the rear, the height observed was of 4.10 m. The building was integrated by a basal platform with three bodies, a characteristic that is evident at its back side, where there is a more pronounced inclination of the bedrock towards east, as there is only one body on the frontal part overlooking the Plaza. There was a frontal stairway on the west side that climbed to a range enclosure formed by seven pillars. Inside the room there was a long bench that extended all along the back area. At the front of the empty space between pillars, facing the bench, there were niches formed with cut blocks. These niches were located on the same axis and positions than a similar number of funerary cists. The architecture of the buildings included blocks, or ashlar facings, of a good quality. The upper part of the building was possibly made of perishable materials (Figure 7).

Considering its position and shape, and the presence of a long bench at the back, this would seem to indicate we are in front of a building that served a public function.

Also, several burials were found in the refill (Burials 18 and 19). This may have been the seat of a city-council, where political and administrative issues of the ruling families were brought forward and discussed. This structure was highly significant, as it included the burials of several important individuals of the Aguatecan society. Buildings with a similar shape and relation to those of adjacent ritual structures have been previously observed at other sites such as La Joyanca (Arnauld 2002), which show some kind of similarity with Aguateca, for being cities of a middle rank and with a significant occupation during the Late Classic period (Ponciano 2004).

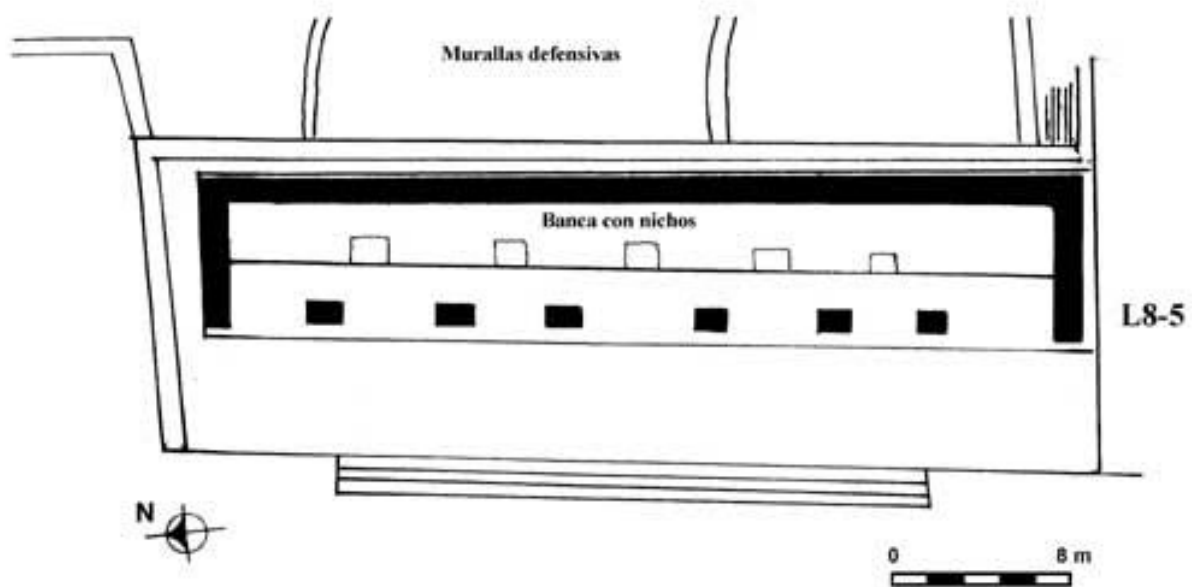


Figure 7. Ground plan of Structure L8-4.

STRUCTURE L8-5: DYNASTIC TEMPLE?

It is located on the eastern portion of the Main Plaza. This was an almost square building, with dimensions of 24 m at the sides and 7.50 m in height. It had a truncated pyramidal form with a room on its upper part. It features an outset stairway at front and an inset monument at its center. In front of the building and at the plaza level there are five sculpted stelae and seven altars aligned on a north-south axis. This is an enclosure with a full open front and a central bench. The architecture consisted of blocks of cut stone and stucco surfaces on walls and floors. The enclosure also featured a stucco cover. The walls were made of stone, and the roof of some perishable material. Material evidences of ritual activities were scarce, but their localization, form and association with the sculpted monuments confirm their ritual function. Considering the calendar dates on the stelae placed at the front of this building, it could be among the oldest ones of the Main Plaza, and it might be considered as the seat of the ritual power of the Dos Pilas/Aguateca dynasty that substituted the local Early Classic dynasty of Tamarindito.

The sculpted monument embedded in the ceremonial stairway (Monument 20) seems to be aligned following an east-west axis, with Stela 14 located right at the center of the Main Plaza, and with Stela 12 located on top of the foundation of Structure L8-8, at the west area of the Plaza. This suggests that there was a planned

scheme in the construction of the structure, and that it was left incomplete as a result of the attack against the city, early in the IX century (Ponciano 2004).

STRUCTURES IN THE CAUSEWAY AREA

Two structures were explored in the Causeway Area, M8-37 and M7-34. These buildings integrated the dense group of structures present at the epicenter of the site, which represent the elite sector of the city. The cut stone architecture, together with its location and artifact inventory, suggests that its dwellers enjoyed a privileged social rank. This causeway most likely was the scene of ritual and ceremonial events from and towards the Main Plaza, originating in the king's residence within the Palace Group, located around 150 m to the north.

STRUCTURE M8-37: HOUSE OF COLUMNS

It is located in the southwestern area of the Causeway, and it is the only building in this wide avenue that includes a basal platform. It is rectangular in shape, with a north-south axis, and its main façade looks to the east. It is 5.60 m wide and 16 m long. This structure shows a double row of three rooms each with a north-south alignment. It is obvious that the structure had three rooms originally, and that other additional three rooms were built later, in front of the earlier ones. The most peculiar trait observed are two columns in the room added at the front of the central room, forming a sort of "portico". Possibly, the columns, as well as the stone walls, reached up to the roof, made of perishable materials. Alike other structures by the Causeway, for instance M8-11 and M7-34 located on the east margin, M8-37 presented as well a perimetral wall all around. In the case of M8-37, this wall was located at north, south, and partially at east, leaving a central space to access the integrating enclosures.

This structure had benches in all rooms. In the rooms on the west side these were at the back, while in the rooms at front, or east, there were two benches placed at both sides of the accesses to the rooms. Clearly, this arrangement was unique in the area, but the associated artifacts point to a domestic residential function. The architecture features quality carved blocks with tenons. Specifically, the blocks forming the columns were carved in a peculiar way, like wedges superimposed one on top of the other, just as it happened with the square or rectangular ashlar with tenons used to face the room walls.

This structure was located within an area that has been identified for having had an elite residential function. The artifacts found in the surroundings of the structure and their nature, allow favoring this presumption. It is possible that it as well presented the same pattern of sudden abandonment observed in other structures excavated in the area (Inomata 1995), although research conducted at a later time does not discuss or confirm this possibility (Valdés *et al.* 2000:107).

STRUCTURE M7-34: COMUNAL HOUSE

It is located on the east margin of the causeway that communicates the Palace Group with the Main Plaza. The structure is rectangular in shape and built on a north-south axis with three rooms whose façade looks towards west, that is, to the causeway. This structure was located around 30 m south of the Sunken Plaza. Its architecture features well carved blocks with tenons and remains of stucco with red and turquoise paint. The walls were made with carved stone and reached the height of the roof. Interior walls allowed for the inclusion of inner partitions inside each room and inside the corridors that led from one room to the other. The roof was made of perishable materials. Similar to other structures on the causeway (M8-11 and M8-37), M7-34 presents a perimetral wall along its north and west sides. This perimetral wall was coarsely built with slab stones, creating an inner patio around the structure. In this structure, outside the perimetral wall, the foundation remains of two structures built with perishable materials were discovered.

The archaeological materials recovered suggest that the structure had a domestic function, as was the case with other structures explored in the surroundings, such as M8-4, M8-3, M8-2, M8-8 and M8-10. The materials include a wide variety of ceramic vessels, flint instruments, obsidian tools, grinding stones and *manos*, and censers that exceed the domestic nature of the structure. One way of explaining this situation is that possibly this structure served a communal function and that it simultaneously participated of ritual activities, being so close to the residency of the royal family (Ponciano *et al.* 1998; Inomata and Houston 2001).

This structure is a clear example of the so-called pattern of sudden abandonment, as in the inside and on the floors, there was a large amount of objects left behind by the residents when they abandoned the city. Possibly, these objects show the final places of use, and their localization would indicate the areas where they were used last. This was important because it made it possible for us to identify their distribution pattern and to more accurately ascertain the function of the structure and the activities carried out by its residents.

STRUCTURE M7-32

Structure M7-32 was located on the west section of the Palace Group, on a basal platform that elevated it from the level of the inner patio. It was a double bay structure with five rooms aligned along a north-south axis (Figure 8). This was the only structure of the site, together with M7-22 located north of the group that featured a vaulted stone roof. This structure was rectangular and extended in shape, and its façade looked east. It had a ceremonial stairway on the east end of the foundation, which in turn rested on another lower stairway found right above the patio level.

The basal foundation features three stepped bodies 3.10 m high. There was a small complementary foundation that elevated the superstructure from the surface of the basal foundation. The superstructure was aligned on a north-south axis. It presents parallel, aligned rooms, two at front, at the sides of the main hallway, and three at the back. At the back, several enclosures or rooms were built following also a north-south alignment, together with an elevated surface affixed to the southwest corner of

the superstructure, with its formal rising stairway. These rooms and elevated surface were delimited by a stone wall that ran as well along a north-south axis, parallel to the crack on the west side.

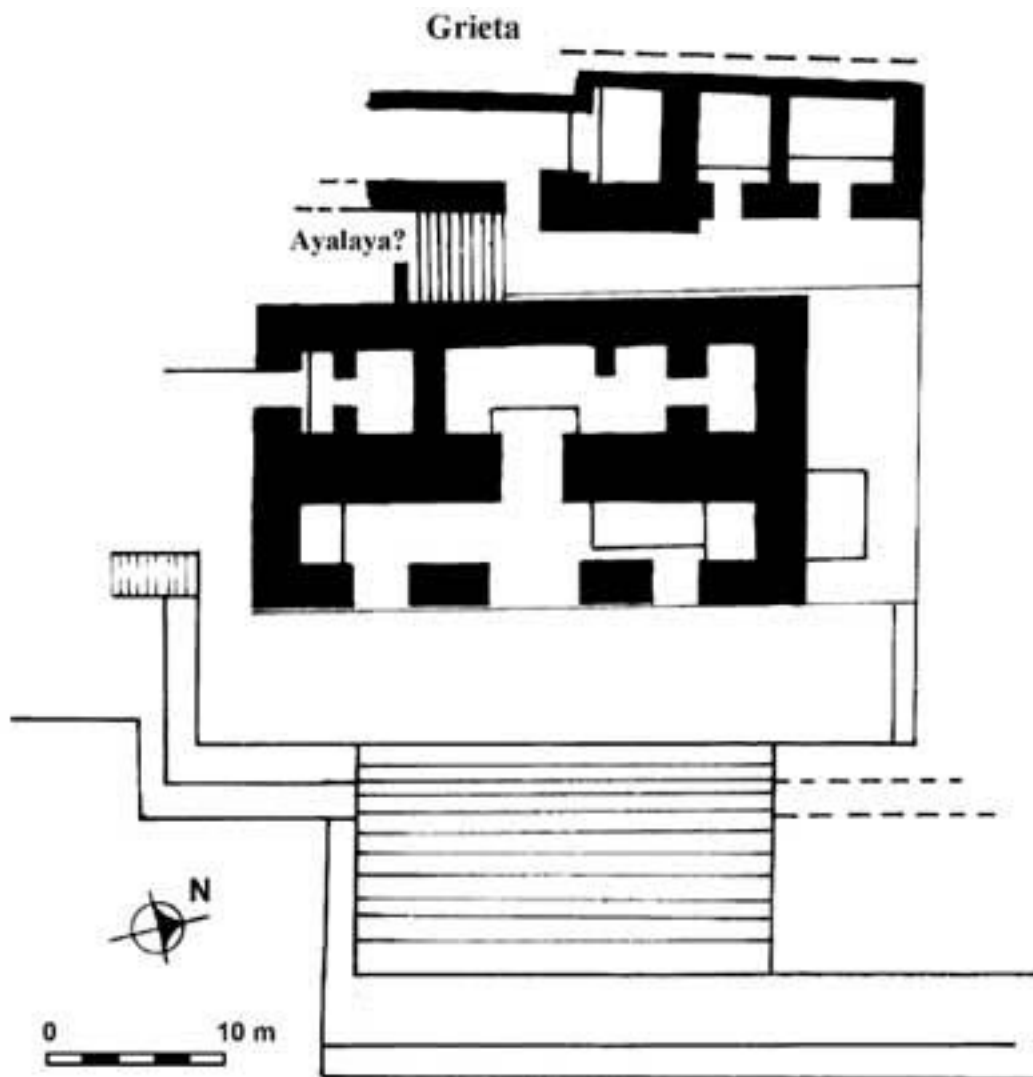


Figure 8. Ground plan of Structure M7-22.

The building consists of two longitudinal chambers separated into five inner enclosures. The front chamber consisted of one enclosure with two benches placed against the walls, and three doors that communicated with the outer terrace of the support platform, which descends, through a large stairway, to the main patio of the group. The second chamber consisted of three enclosures with benches placed against the walls and was connected to the front chamber through a central door. The chamber itself had an additional enclosure on the south corner of the building, which was accessed through a door placed on the south façade. The description we are now presenting corresponds to the investigation conducted mainly on the supporting foundation, the stairways, the enclosures at the rear, and the wall that surrounds them on the west side; the superstructure had already been previously investigated and restored.

Former investigations of this structure (Ponciano *et al.* 1998) had ascertained that the artifactual contents found inside and in areas adjacent to the rooms reflect that which has been denominated a “termination ritual” conducted by those who attacked the city, to destroy the king’s residence and his symbolic power. New investigations carried out both at the supporting foundation and its ceremonial stairway allowed us to fully assess the magnitude of this event. There was also indication that said ritual had been as well conducted outside the structure itself, involving areas up to the level of the patio at west, and the adjacent platform at south. Dense clusters of artifacts made of varied materials were found on the surface of the floors in a matrix of sandy grayish soil 10-14 cm thick, suggesting that this area may have also been burnt and destroyed.

An additional interesting aspect consisted in ascertaining that right on top of the refill of the ceremonial platform located at east, there were dense clusters of scattered and destroyed artifacts that included both ceramic and stone, as well as a small amount of carved stone blocks from the stairway. This seems to suggest that when the termination ritual took place, possibly the carved stone blocks of the stairway no longer were as in origin; for what it seems, they had been used to build the defensive wall system found in the northern and southern sections of the structure. This might be the first dismantling evidence of a structure in Aguateca for defense purposes, as it was always presumed that the defense of the city was more efficiently organized and planned than it was in Dos Pilas, where buildings were mutilated and defensive wall extended on top of the structures (Demarest 1997, Palka 1997).

CONCLUSIONS

The intervention in seven buildings of Aguateca has been completed, with a new model of action that now includes private companies in charge of restoring prehispanic archaeological buildings. Other entities, both public (such as the Sustainable Development Project of the Ministry of Agriculture, Cattle Breeding and Food), and private (such as CATIE), are now participating in the difficult task of protecting and assessing the rich cultural heritage of Aguateca, side by side with other entities that traditionally took care of this, such as the Direction General of Cultural and Natural Patrimony. This joint effort will no doubt result in the benefit of the Guatemalan cultural heritage.

For now, it may be said that this pilot model represents a new hope in regard to the execution of physical work in archaeological sites which –like Aguateca- are in urgent need of it. No doubt, the model offers considerable advantages and benefits regarding the manner of intervention, as it includes the joint participation of professionals in different academic disciplines, who integrating their knowledge and experience, will yield a final product of the best possible quality. Nonetheless, there are complex and delicate situations which must be reevaluated for future interventions at archaeological sites. Some significant aspects that must keep predominating include the need to conduct archaeological investigations prior to any sort of restoration. To be familiar with the cultural history of each structure and its participation within the group that includes it, is essential to achieve a better understanding of the role it played in society, as opposite to simply presenting a building by itself, and not as a witness of the events that led to its creation. An

additional aspect similarly important is the participation of entities such as the Direction General of Cultural and Natural Patrimony for supervising the execution of works, as this is the entity in charge of guarding for the conservation of archaeological relics in Guatemala.

The archaeological investigation and the restoration of the seven buildings located at the core of the site allow for a better understanding of the cultural history of Aguateca, particularly during the last occupational phase at the end of the Late Classic period. The pattern of sudden abandonment corroborated in the structures within the residential area located on the causeway may now be amplified to the ceremonial area represented by the Main Plaza. Structure L8-8 perhaps represents the most dramatic example of how the final occupational events at Aguateca took place and how the residents tried to defend their city and to go on with their activities, namely the construction of that public ceremonial structure, as a way to continue exerting power in the region. The epigraphic investigations conducted by Oswaldo Chinchilla have made it possible to date Altar M, located at the supporting platform of L8-8 towards 810 AD, pointing to one of the latest dates of the site, consistent with the final events of the occupation of the city.

An additional interesting aspect is that at the Palace Group, the panorama and the magnitude of the event known as termination ritual has been amplified, not only in the rooms of Structure M7-32 and its surroundings, but also up to the ceremonial stairway at east, and the platform at south, suggesting that the attack and destruction on the side of the assailants were of a wide spectrum. This event possibly marks the beginning of the abandonment of the city, as after the symbolic power of the dynasty represented by the royal family and their residence was lost, the remaining elite groups had no further motifs to keep on taking care of the area, in a way that construction works at the main plaza were probably interrupted and never again reinitiated.

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