

**THE CANCUEN REGIONAL PROJECT, PETÉN:  
THE ROUTE BETWEEN THE NORTHERN  
ALTIPLANO AND CANCUEN**

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Since 1999, the archaeological discoveries at Cancuen have shown that during the Late Classic period the site took advantage of its geographical location to lead the navigation along the Río Pasión, and to control the access to this important route for the products of the mountain region, with jade and obsidian, among others (Barrientos *et al.* 2001; Kovacevich *et al.* 2001; Demarest and Fahsen 2003). The image that unfolds in regard to the organization of exchange and production in Cancuen is a new incentive for the investigation and study of economics, both from Central Petén and its peripheral areas, with special emphasis on those peripheral zones considered to be of a secondary interest, such as northern Alta Verapaz and southwestern Petén.

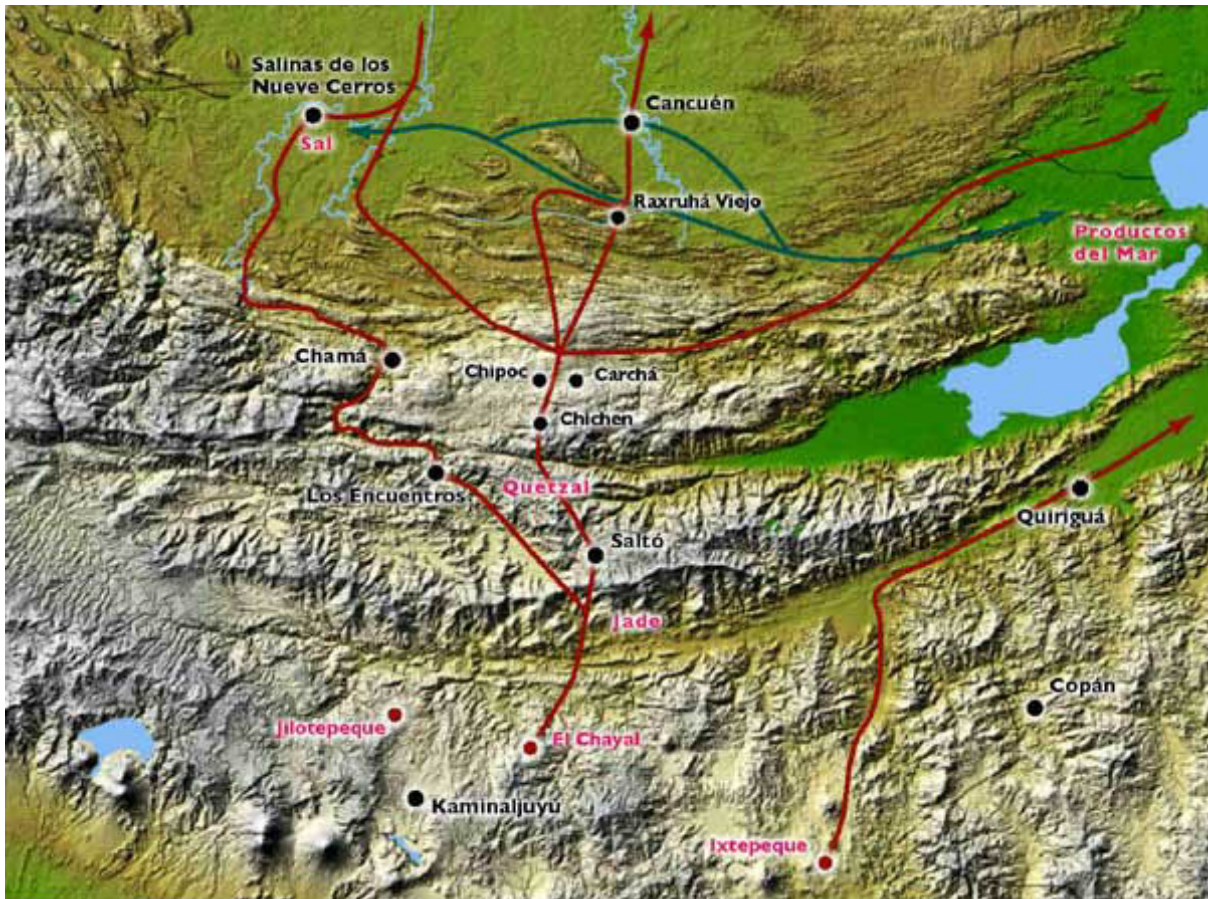


Figure 1. Exchange routes between the Altiplano and the Lowlands.

## Sea products

It is precisely in these zones where the products of the Highlands may have been transported on their way to Cancuén from their source of origin, and likewise, from Cancuén to elsewhere in Petén. This issue is being approached by other regional sub-projects recently undertaken as part of the Cancuén Archaeological Project. Those sub-projects were initiated with the purpose of examining ancient settlements in these poorly studied zones, and to test inter-regional exchange theories along this major trading corridor.

The scale of commercial imports and production of the Highlands in Cancuén for their distribution in the Lowlands (Kovacevich *et al.* 2001; Kovacevich 2003a, b) contributes to the study of the distribution of obsidian and other products (Kidder 1940; Hammond 1972; Sharer and Sedat 1987; Arnauld 1990). Trade routes during the Late Classic period moved products from the Highlands, carried by porters, along transportation routes and up to the water routes in the Lowlands (Figure 1). The Río Pasión, in western Petén, was one of the most important routes, fit to directly supply areas like the Petexbatún region, Ceibal, Altar de Sacrificios, Yaxchilan, Piedras Negras and Palenque, as well as other sites in Central Petén via terrestrial routes (Hammond 1972; Demarest and Barrientos 2004).

## EXPLORATIONS AT RAXRUHA

The Cancuen Project has undertaken a reconnaissance project in the karstic zone between Cobán and Cancuen. This year research was initiated with a pilot study in the north edge of this zone, where the final transition from Sierra de Chama in northern Alta Verapaz to the southern Lowlands of Petén unfolded. The San Simón river valley, close to the modern town of Raxruha, extends approximately 17 km right south of Cancuen, and it was hypothesized that this zone, at the height of the Lowlands but more physiographically similar to a mountainous zone, could produce evidence of trade routes communicating with Cancuen. The San Simón River emerges from a cave towards the Raxruha valley, and flows east for around 15 km to the Sebol River (Figure 2). Both sections are navigable during the rainy season, but the rapids, the river currents and the absence of shortcuts, make it probable that the Raxruha-Cancuen route was traveled northwards, on foot, to Cancuen.

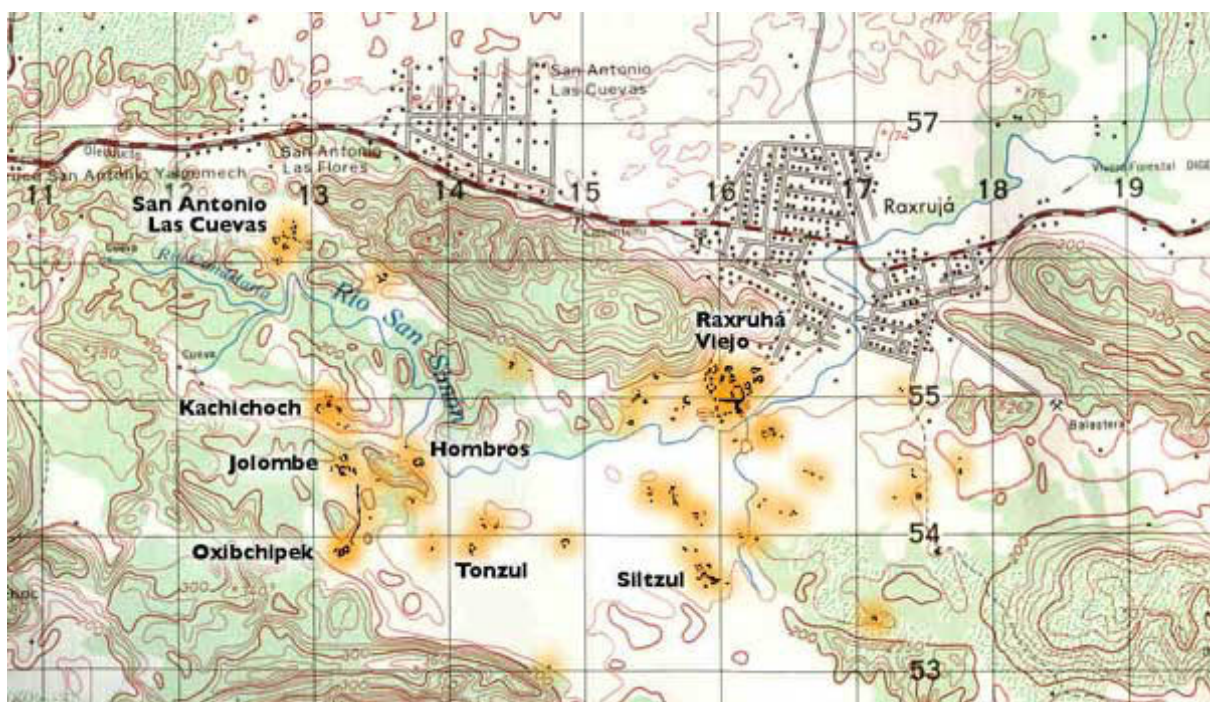


Figure 2. The San Simón river valley, showing the sites located in 2004.

In addition to the reconnaissance of sites and caves between Chisec and Raxruha carried out by Patricia Carot in 1976 (Carot 1989), limited archaeological works had been formally conducted prior to 2002, when a team of the Cancuen Project drew maps and made test excavations at the site of Raxruha Viejo (Morán and Pereira 2003; O'Mansky 2003). This work was followed by other investigations conducted by members of the same project in the cave system of Candelaria, at west, and in one of the caves at the south of the Raxruha village (Woodfill *et al.* 2003; Woodfill *et al.* 2004; Segura and Monterroso 2004). The San Simón river valley, however, has never before been the focus of an investigation.

The intensive exploration in the Raxruha area in 2004 was focused on the river along a 5 km span, right east of its source and in an area skirted by karstic hills at north, east, and south. The valley opens to Chisec via Sechochoc through the southwest, to Cancuen through the north, to Sebol via Pecajchoc, and to Sierra Chinaja, then

ahead to Laguna Lachua, and Salinas de los Nueve Cerros at west. Altogether, the survey covered 15 km<sup>2</sup>, and 41 sites of ancient settlements were located.

### SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

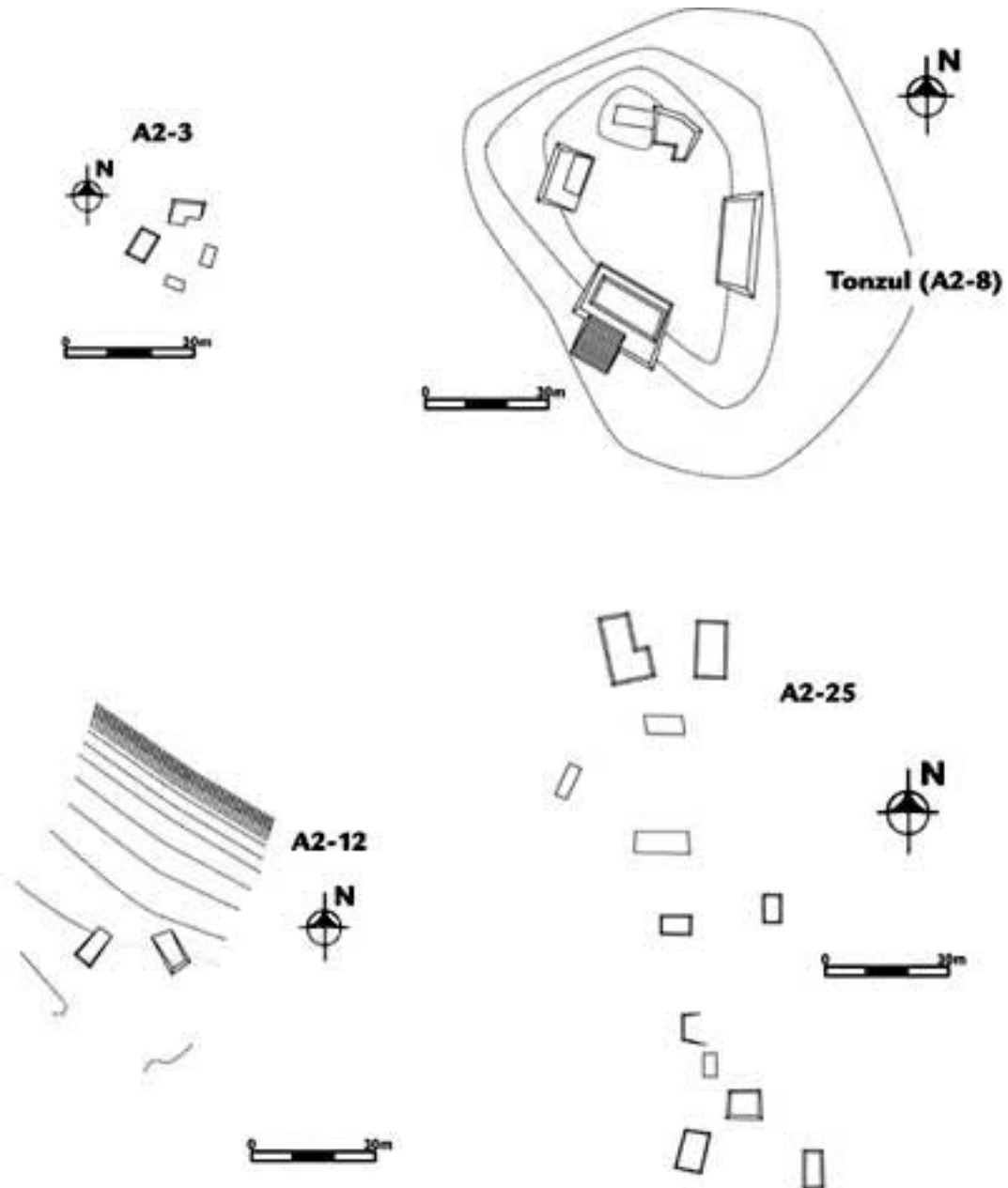


Figure 3. Examples of Type 3 sites (maps by Arik Ohnstad).

The 41 sites located during the survey may be divided into three settlement ranks:

- 83% (n=34) are Type 3 sites; that is, small residential groups or isolated structures (Figure 3). In general, these small residential groups are organized in groups of orthogonal patios with two, three, four, and at times five

structures, while a small number of these sites (<1%, n=3), represent two or three adjacent patios.

- Other five sites (12%) represent the largest amount those of Type 2, whose architecture served special functions as pyramids, rank and/or *sacbeob* structures (Figure 4). Each one of these sites includes one or more residential patio groups, usually with platforms with large floor areas, unlike those of Type 3. San Antonio Las Cuevas, a site with 30 structures reported by Carot (1989:67), was not visited at this time.

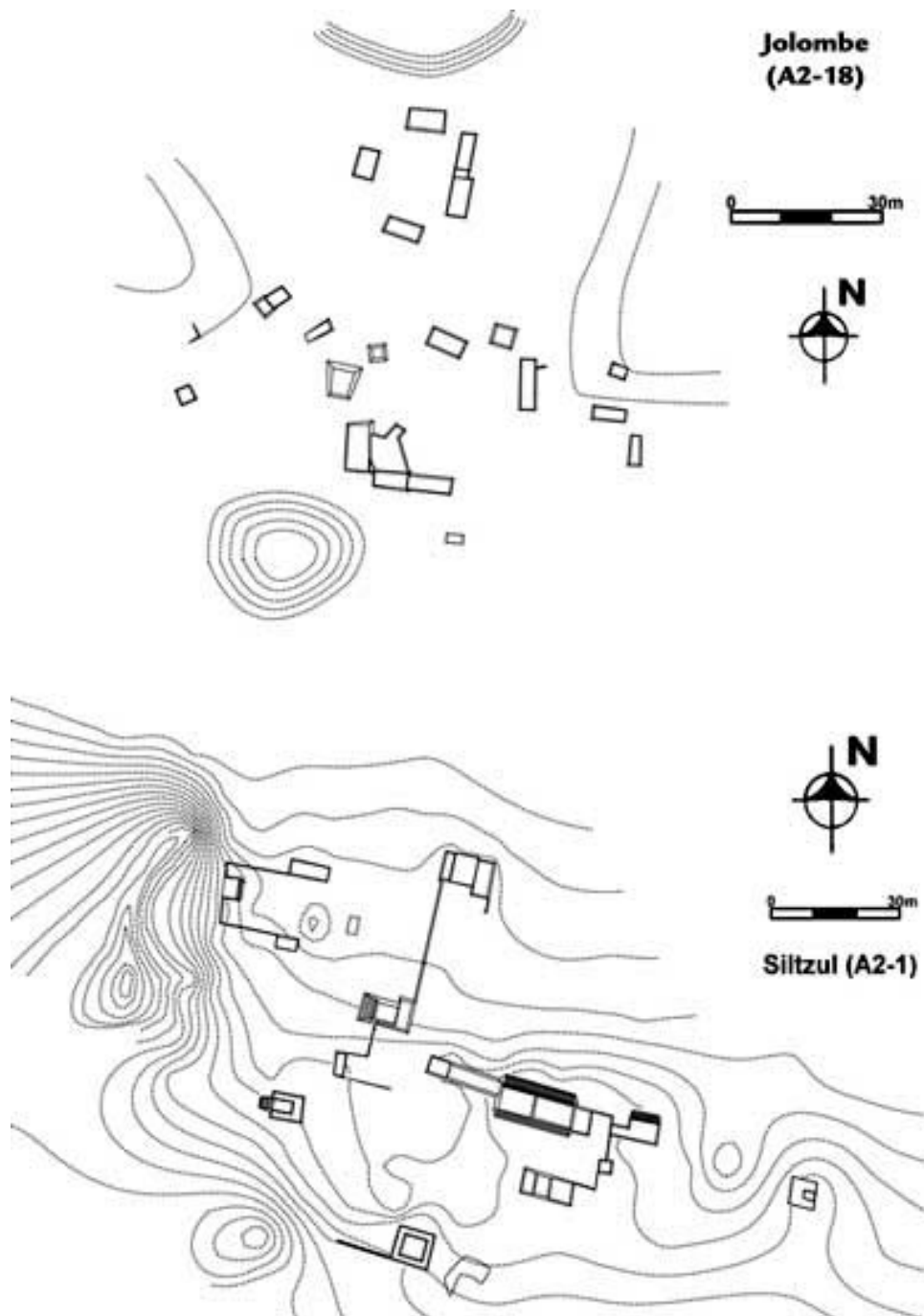


Figure 4. Examples of Type 2 sites (maps by Arik Ohnstad and Mark Wolf).

Finally, one single site, Raxruha Viejo, represents a regional center of the Type 1 (Carot 1989: Morán and Pereira 2003: O'Mansky 2003).

Raxruha Viejo features 11 patio groups (Figure 5), as well as a number of other structures with a special function, such as platforms with stelae and altars, and small pyramids. The site is dominated by a large, "L"-shaped stone structure built on a karstic hill at the bank of the river. These platforms built on top of the hills have greater resemblances with traits from the Highlands than with any pattern typical of the Lowlands (Figure 6; but see Laporte *et al.*, this volume, for examples of the Machaquila region which share this pattern).

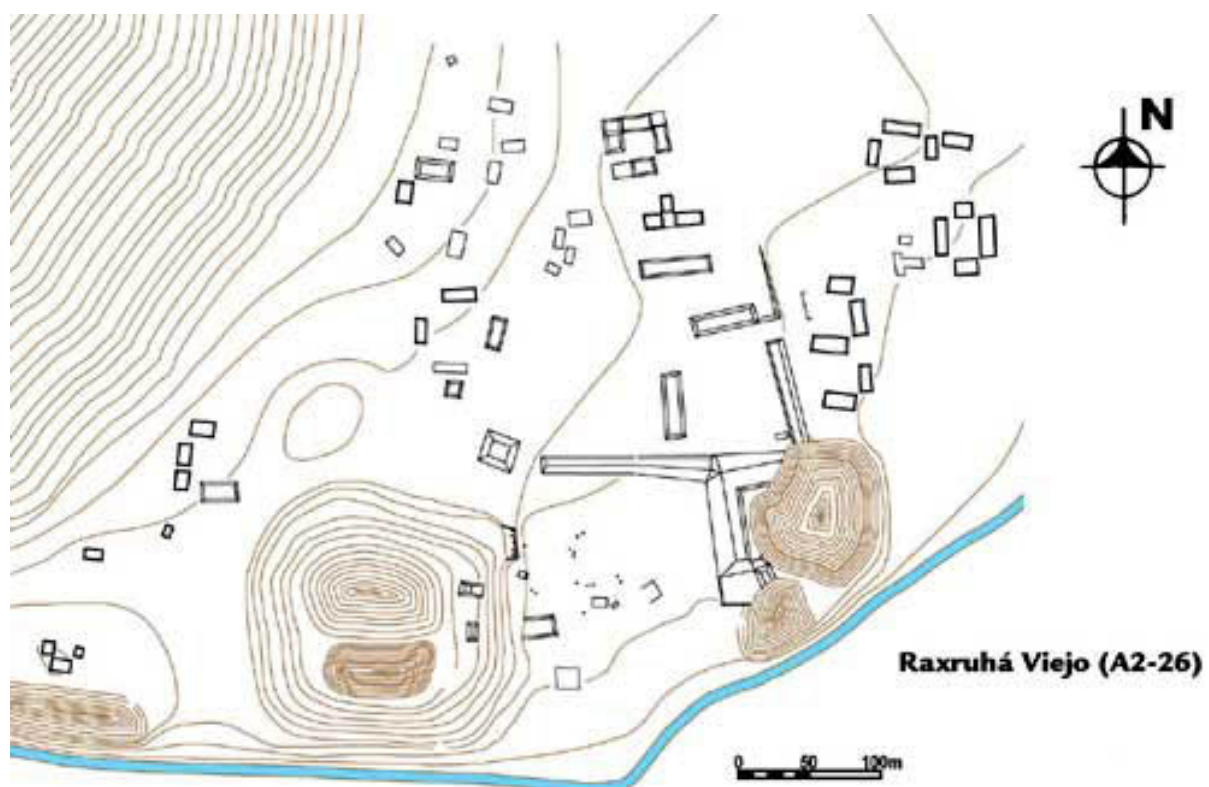
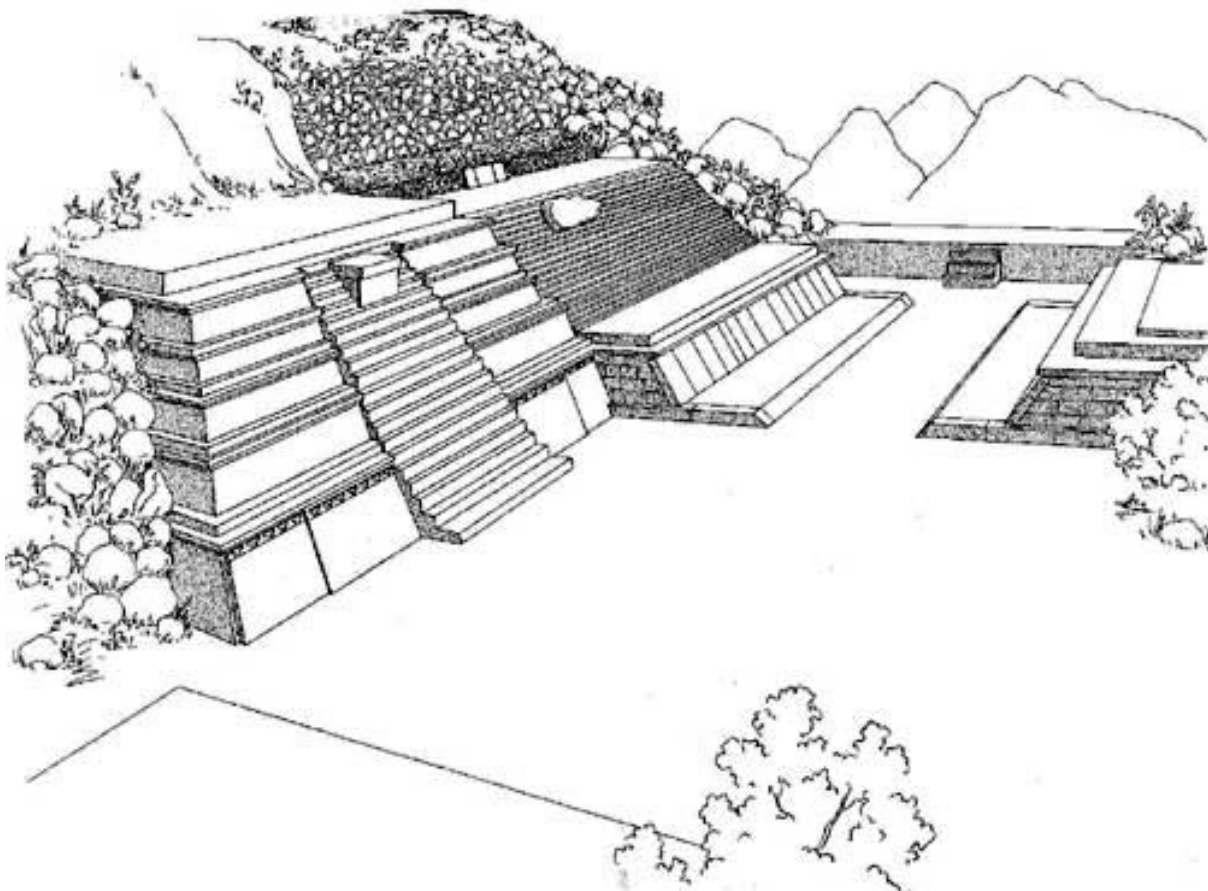


Figure 5. Raxruha Viejo, a Type 1 site (map by Matt E. O'Mansky).

Although this pattern occurs in several other sites at the valley, the effect in Raxruha Viejo is much more impressive than at other sites. Its 8 m of height and the 160 m of the extended structure may have created an amazing scenario for rituals, with the background of a *witz* or sacred hill. The north arm of this structure makes the residential portion of the site to be entirely separated of the great main plaza, with approximate measures of 150 x 170 m, and opened to the river on its south side. Thus, the plaza seems to be related to the river, and may have had the purpose of causing a visual impact on the travelers who reached the place along the route of the river corridor, and of monitoring their activities within the site. For example, when one enters the residential sector, one has to cross the northwest corner of the plaza, which presently shows remains of 19 plain stelae and two altars, located on top of, and around, a low stone platform. Then, one must as well pass by the largest pyramid at the site.

Because of its dimensions –with over twice as many structures as any site of the Type 2-, and because of the scale of its structures and the occurrence of symbols of political power like the stelae and altars present there, it is clear that Raxruha Viejo was the head of this settlement system. However, the distribution of the population within the valley seems to have been polarized: three among the five sites of the Type 2 (Kachichoch, Jolombe and Oxibchipek), were located on a north line at the western border of the valley settlement (Figure 2). Several identical artifacts found in Raxruha Viejo as well as in these sites suggest that the four of them were contemporary. Probably, some element of competition may have existed between the sites at west and Raxruha Viejo, but the possibility exists that they maintained a relationship of cooperation with the capital. Very preliminary obsidian studies suggest that these sites had less access to this important tool.



**Figure 6. Architectural style of the Mayan Altiplano: Chjolom, showing the amplification of the natural hills through stone platforms (after A.L. Smith 1955: Figs. 35).**

## **EXCAVATIONS AT THE RAXRUHA REGION**

Test excavations were conducted in nine of the sites explored, with an emphasis on recovering garbage pits. One ceramic sample recovered in garbage pits excavated at the site of Raxruha Viejo in 2002 (Bill *et al.* 2003), suggests that the majority of the surface remains from the San Simón river valley date probably to the Late Classic period. The deepest deposits in the test excavations conducted in three sites may represent earlier deposits, but so far, they have not been analyzed in full. Although in

the valley caves –and throughout the region- the great majority of the materials corresponded to the Early Classic and Preclassic periods, any settlement in the area prior to the Late Classic period was probably small in size. It should also be noted that it is still uncertain whether the Raxruha materials date to the Tepeu 1, 2, and 3 spheres, or whether they encompass several or all these sub-periods. Further exploration and analysis will help to more accurately define the chronology.

## **OBSIDIAN**

The amounts of obsidian found in the valley seem sufficiently significant, and as expected, they arrived in the shape of prepared cores, just as in Cancuen (Kovacevich 2001) and most of the sites in the Lowlands. A preliminary comparison of the average density of obsidian found in the garbage pits in each one of the sites excavated in the Raxruha area, shows that Raxruha Viejo probably used more obsidian than other sites in the area.

Possibly, Raxruha Viejo controlled the exchange of this product in the same way that it controlled the symbols of power represented by altars and stelae. An informal study suggests that obsidian blades in places outside Raxruha were more reused than those from the center. Then, it is possible that Raxruha Viejo represented a place where the cost of obsidian increased, because it was first used by the elite or other groups, prior to being redistributed elsewhere, a hypothesis which will need to be confirmed in the future.

## **POTTERY**

The ceramic assemblage of the Raxruha region is characterized by a remarkable variety in the form of vessels and paste technology, which probably promoted a lively regional and inter-regional trade of pottery. However, it is very clear that the San Simón valley was not a part of the same ceramic system existing in Cancuen and satellite sites, notwithstanding that the areas are less than 20 km away one from the other. Just one among the utilitarian types used in Cancuen appears frequently (the large jar of the Cambio Unslipped type), while in the San Simón river valley not one single sherd was found of the most common utilitarian ware of Cancuen, the Zapote Impressed bowl (Bill *et al.* 2003).

Besides, the valley of San Simón and Cancuen share several similar fine wares. However, relatively few tripod dishes and fewer Saxche-Palmar sherds, the first elite gifts ware in the Late Classic Lowlands, were found in the region of Raxruha. Instead, the Saxche-Palmar tripod dishes represent 36% of the fine wares of Cancuen during the Tepeu 2 sphere (Bill *et al.* 2003: Table 21.1).

The fine wares that the region of Raxruha and Cancuen seem to have in common are black and cream with volcanic elements, and maintain a general resemblance in shape and decorative motifs with the Late Classic Highlands, such as Cream-on-Mikado, Chipoc Brown and Black Brown of the middle valley of the Chixoy River (Bill *et al.* 2003; Smith 1952; Ichon and Grignon 1983; Arnauld 1986). These are very common wares in Cancuen, amounting to 9 and 19% of the fine ware assemblage,



depending on the time frame (Bill *et al.* 2003: Table 21.1), while similar types are distributed in small numbers only in other Lowland sites such as Altar de Sacrificios, Uaxactun and Piedras Negras (the frequency in the San Simón assemblage is still to be ascertained, though most Raxruha types seem to use volcanic paste).

The fact that similar vessels are found in large numbers in Alta Verapaz has led ceramicists to posit this region as its zone of origin (Smith 1955:8; Adams 1971:44); this hypothesis has been confirmed through the study of the chemical composition of pastes in one case of a cream ware found at Cancuen (Sears and Seijas 2002). Interestingly, one sample of figurines recovered at Raxruha Viejo shows the same chemical source than some Cancuen figurines (see Sears *et al.*, this volume).

Adams (1974:44) suggests that the scope and variation shown in the types of the cream incised ware indicate that the examples recovered in the Lowlands came from a wider region and not from one single site. Evidence originated in this study supports such a hypothesis, given the variety between the ware examples in regard to shape, decorative motifs and technology (Smith 1952: Arnauld 1986; Ichon *et al.* 1996).

The presence in Raxruha of significant amounts of pottery from Alta Verapaz, compared with that of their neighbors only 20 km away, and the use of architectural patterns from the Highlands such as the construction of platforms on top of hills, leads us to suggest that the San Simón zone is more socially, culturally and/or ethnically related to Alta Verapaz than to the Lowlands. This finding, which must still be confirmed through future explorations, allows us to suggest that the hills in northern Alta Verapaz during the Late Classic period were not just a frontier of a geographic character.

The presumed absence of the Saxche-Palmar types and other fine wares common in Cancuen, just like the Chablekal Fine Gray type is in Raxruha, makes it clear that the exchange of elite gifts between Cancuen and the inhabitants of the San Simón valley did not follow the most usual patterns of the Lowlands, and that Raxruha did not participate in the same local and regional markets than Cancuen (Callaghan and Bill 2004).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND PLANS FOR FUTURE INVESTIGATIONS**

The area around the modern village of Raxruha was the seat of a prosperous Late Classic rural society. Obsidian, pottery and other goods were negotiated locally and elsewhere in the Highlands, and probably in a lesser degree, in communities from the southern Maya Lowlands.

The political and economic relationships that this area shared with the passing site of Cancuen, located less than 20 km away at north, are still uncertain. Reconnaissance and excavations in 2004 have produced, among others, the following hypothesis for future investigations:

- There is a clear socio-cultural border between the Highlands and the Lowlands, in addition to the physiographic border between these two zones.

- The wide distribution of the cream incised ware of Alta Verapaz implied by the amount and the apparent absence of settlements in the San Simón valley prior to the Late Classic period, suggest a late migration wave arrived from the higher region.
- The distribution of at least several ceramics and other patterns of the material culture of Alta Verapaz (architecture, for example), suggests as well that a favorable social atmosphere existed in the Northern Altiplano for the movement of goods along the route between the Highlands and the entrances to the Lowlands.
- This atmosphere may be the consequence, due to the very similar cultural and ethnical identities, of the occurrence of gift networks among the elites, a regional and inter-regional level of marketing infrastructure, and perhaps a special merchant class.
- Preliminary data on architecture and obsidian distribution at Raxruha, would suggest that exchange remained under elite control, or at least, that they were the ones in charge of controlling it.

Future investigations in the northern Highlands will be carried out using a model of intensive explorations and test excavations in the east-west valley that crosses the route between the regions of Cobán-Carcha (Sharer and Sedat 1987), and Cancuen. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) will also be used to identify probable less expensive travel routes within this zone, which will be of help to define roads for exploration and to pose specific questions and investigations.

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