

## EXCAVATIONS AT THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF TRES ISLAS, RÍO PASIÓN, PETÉN

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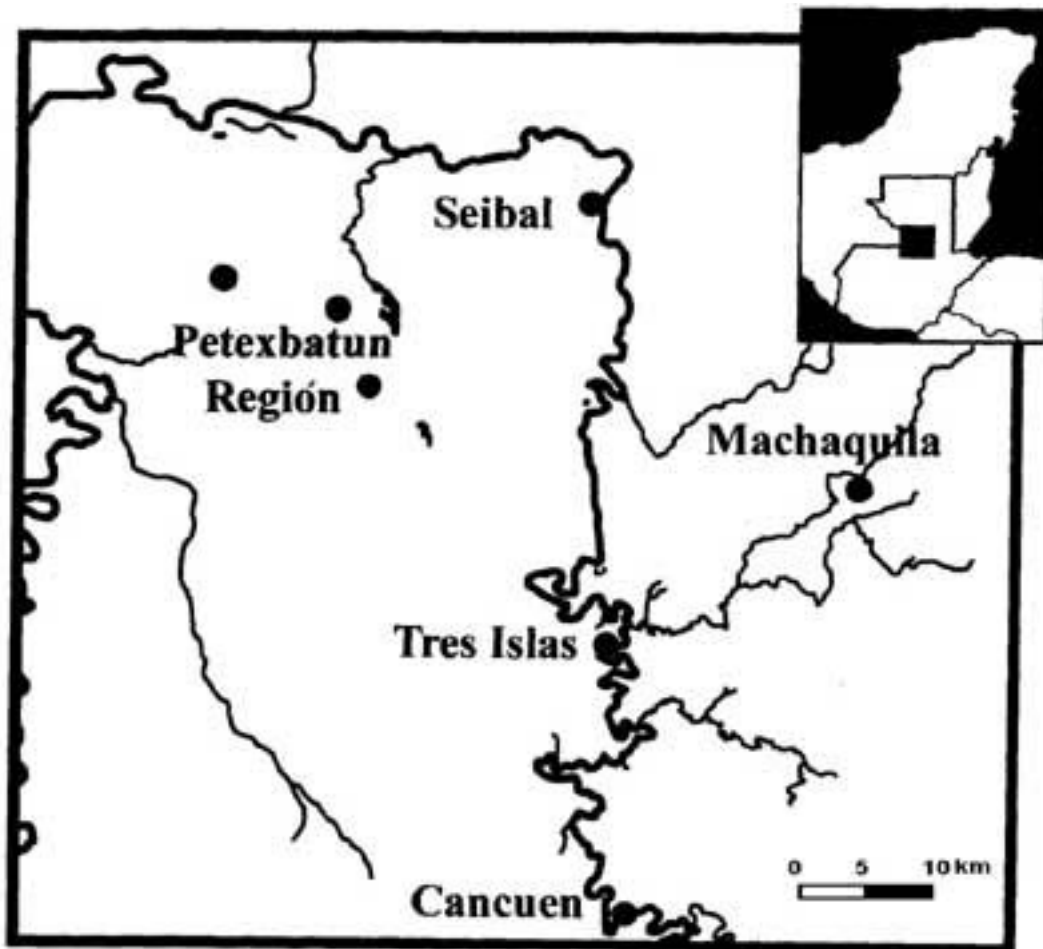
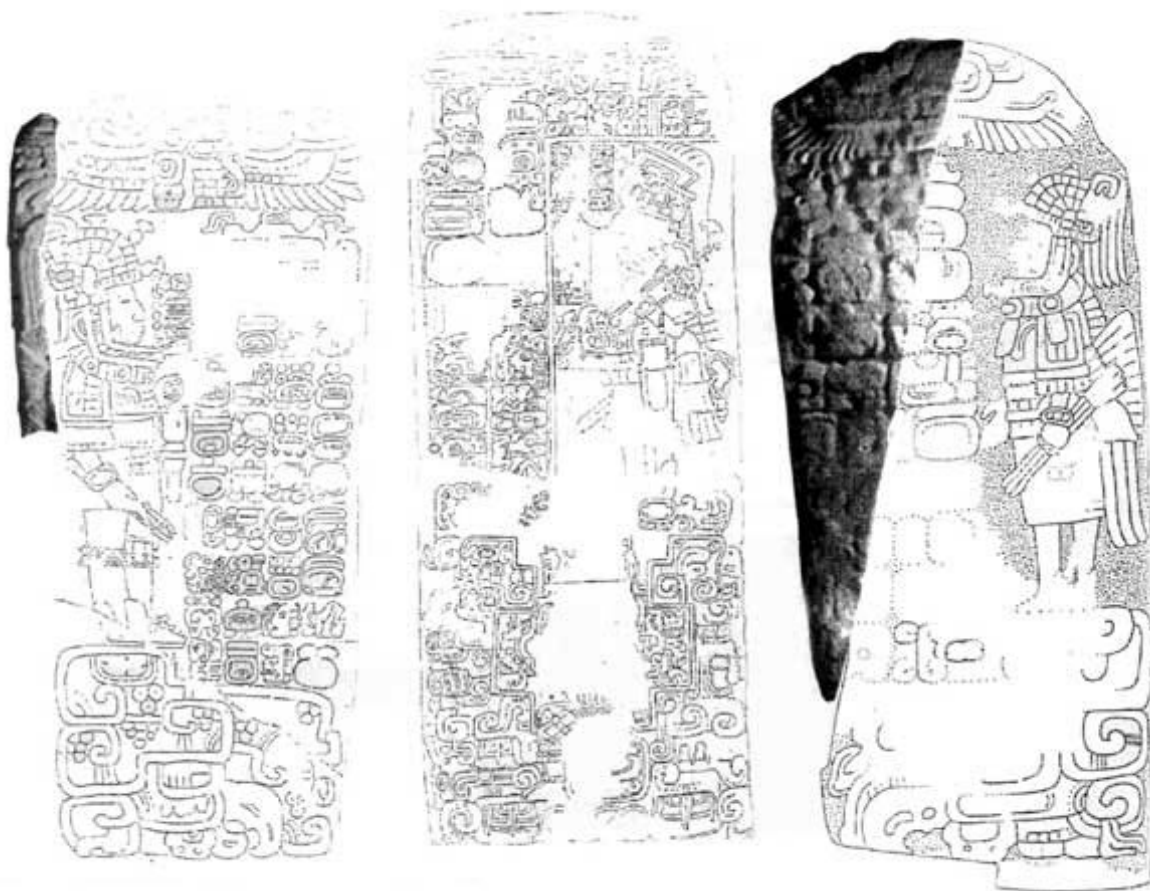


Figure 1. Map of the Upper Pasión.

This investigation corresponds to the reconnaissance and excavations conducted at the archaeological site of Tres Islas during the 2003 and 2004 seasons as part of the regional explorations of the Cancuen project. The archaeological site of Tres Islas is located on the left margin of the Río Pasión, approximately 20 km north of Cancuen and 20 km west of Machaquila (Figure 1). The first explorations in the area were those of Teobert Maler in 1905 and Sylvanus Morley in 1938, although the site was not reported until 1965, when Ian Graham announced the presence of three fallen Stelae with no associated mounds (Figure 2: Graham 1965). *“The site is famous*

due mostly to these Early Classic stelae with the earliest dates in the Río Pasión region (Mathews 1985), and with iconographic representations of individuals dressed like Teotihuacan warriors" (Stone 1989). The three stelae were dedicated in AD 475 although the texts are retrospective and narrate events occurred in AD 400 and 416 (Tomasic and Fahsen 2004).

In addition to the early dates and the Teotihuacan style present in the stelae, it is worth mentioning that the relevance of the studies being carried out at the site and the region, are derived from the fact that the stelae display the Emblem Glyph, associated with the kingdom of Cancuen and Machaquila during the Late Classic period. Based on this epigraphic evidence, it was hypothesized that Tres Islas was the Early Classic capital of the Cancuen kingdom, and that later, in the Late Classic period the capital was transferred to the site of Cancuen, so that research at the site defines the relationship of Tres Islas with Cancuen throughout the Classic period.



**Figure 2. Drawing of the stelae, Tres Islas.**

Thus, research in the past two years at Tres Islas have made it possible to observe the nature of the site, as well as the occupation there, while the regional reconnaissance has unveiled a new site which seems to be the largest of this region. The map (Figure 3) shows the site of Tres Islas, with an architecture that consists of a group with three stelae with an altar, and 200 m towards south, a group of four small structures 1.50 m high. Both groups are located a few meters away from the edge of a scarp with a wide view of the Río Pasión.

During the 2003 season, research was focused on the elaboration of a site map and on excavations that would allow for establishing the original position of the three stelae. In 2004, excavations continued at the Stelae and Altar Group, with the purpose of interpreting their function. On the other hand, intensive excavations were conducted at the Mound Group, located 200 m southwest of the Stelae Group to define their relationship, and finally, a regional reconnaissance was carried out with the purpose of understanding the relationship of Tres Islas with other sites of the region, besides Cancuen.

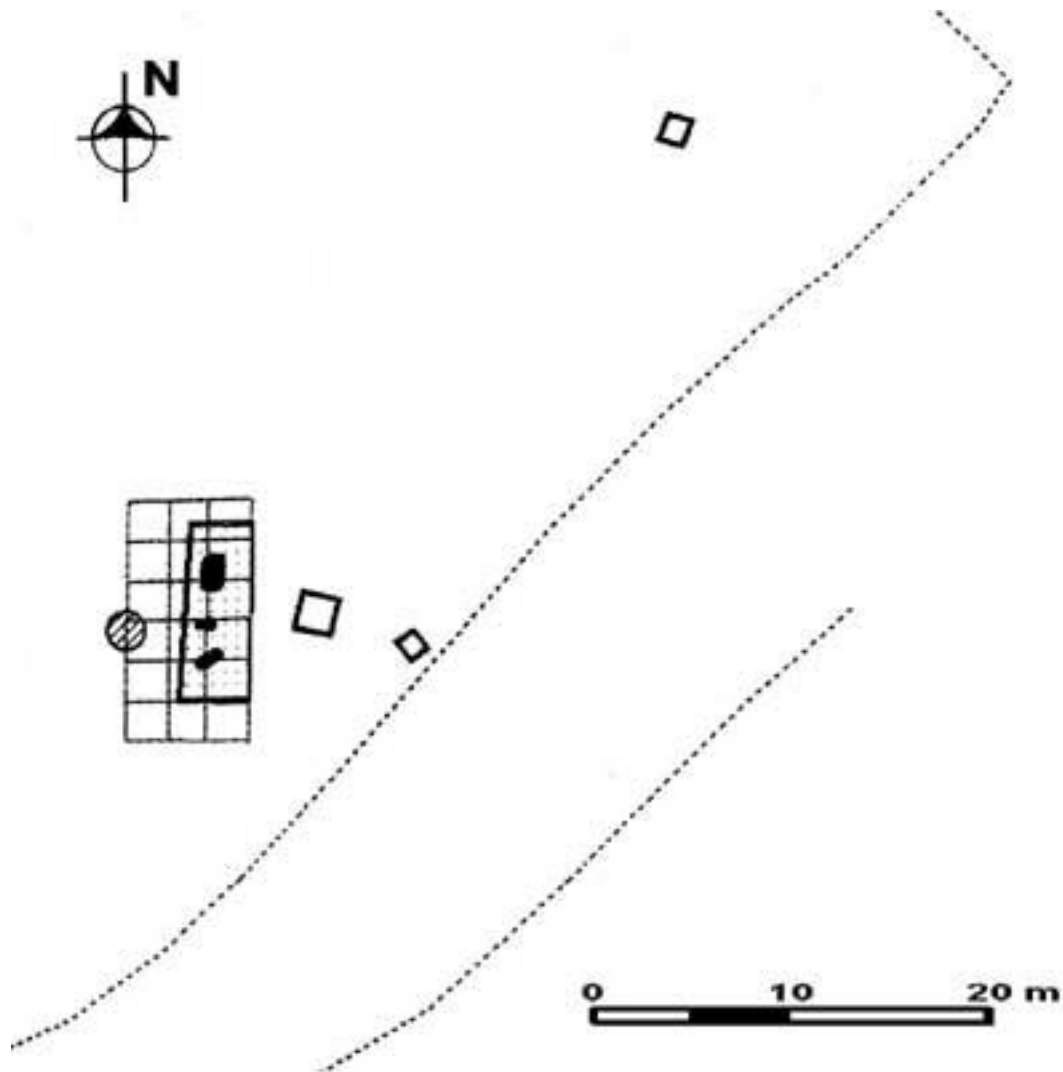


Figure 3. Tres Islas site map.

### EXCAVATIONS AT THE STELAS GROUP

As a result of the excavations conducted in 2003, a fragment of Stela 3 was discovered at a depth of only 10 cm below the surface, with its front section looking up. Figure 4 shows the fragment mentioned together with Graham's drawing. At the same time, the fragments of Stela 1 (Figure 5) were discovered. The fragments were transported to Santa Elena, Petén.

Altogether, the excavations conducted by Ian Graham and the ones carried out in recent seasons, have brought to light a number of Early Classic offerings associated with the three stelae. According to Graham's field notes, the first of these offerings was discovered in 1970, and consisted of two vessels (one turned over on top of the other, rim against rim), containing in the inside obsidian flakes and cores. The offering was later handed over to the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, in Guatemala.

Graham found a piece of uncarved jade, the size of a grapefruit, close to Stela 2, believed to be part of an associated offering. During the 2003 season, the rest of this offering was found under Stela 2, precisely around the pit excavated by Graham in 1965. This offering, excavated by Claudia Quintanilla, of the San Carlos de Guatemala University, consisted of two vessels (one turned over on top of the other, rim against rim). In front of the east side of the vessels, over 300 flint flakes were found, in addition to nine polyhedral exhausted cores of obsidian. The content of the vessels was as follows: a carved green stone snail; a *jute* carved in a light green stone; a carved green stone turtle; a human hand in a light green stone; a head of the Maize God carved in a light green stone; a possible carved stone polisher of a pale green color. Together with this, the following marine remains were recovered: two shells of an unidentified species; one *Cowry* shell; a marine coral skeleton; a West Indian Worm shell.

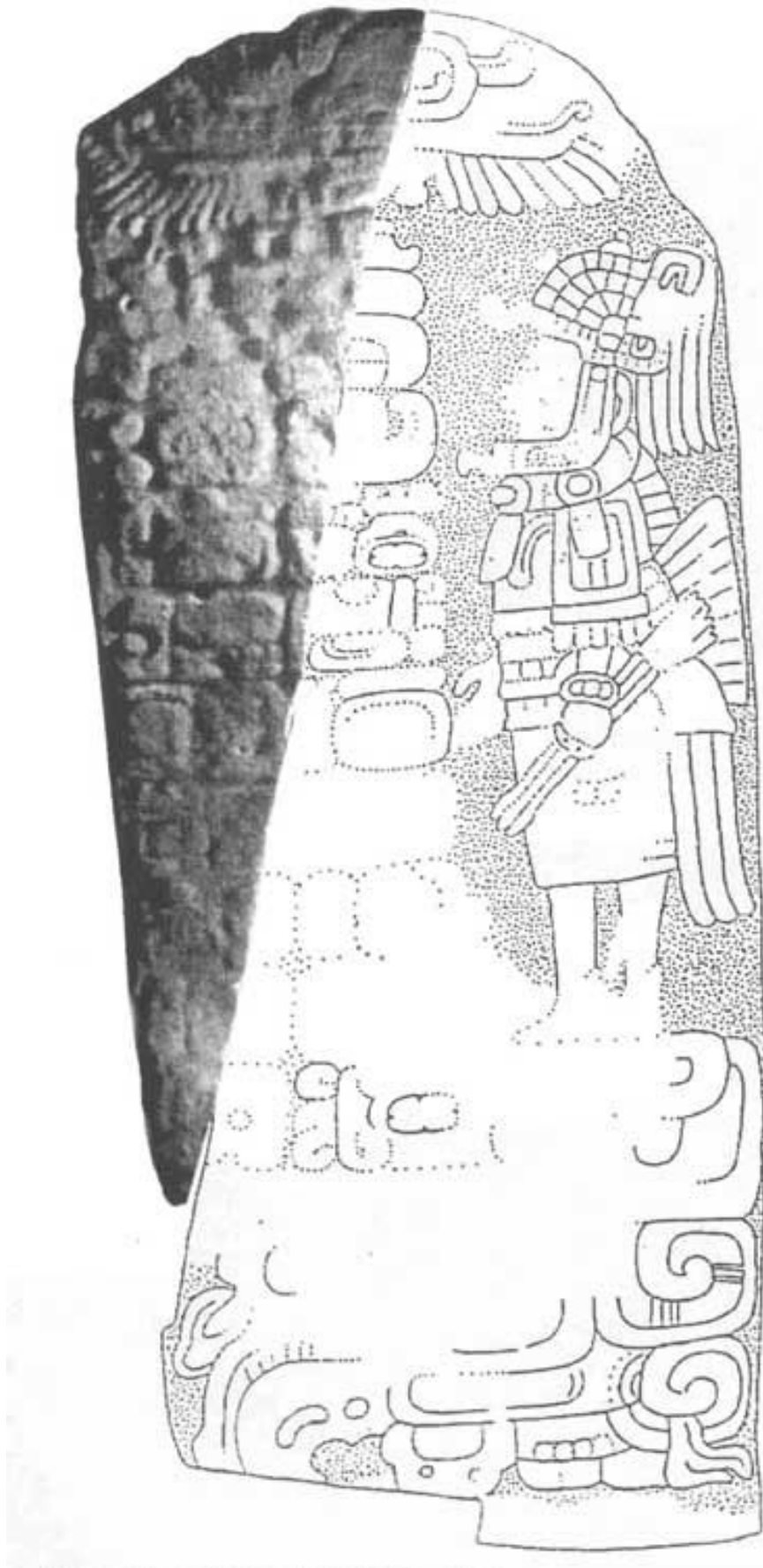


Figure 4. New fragment of Stela 3.

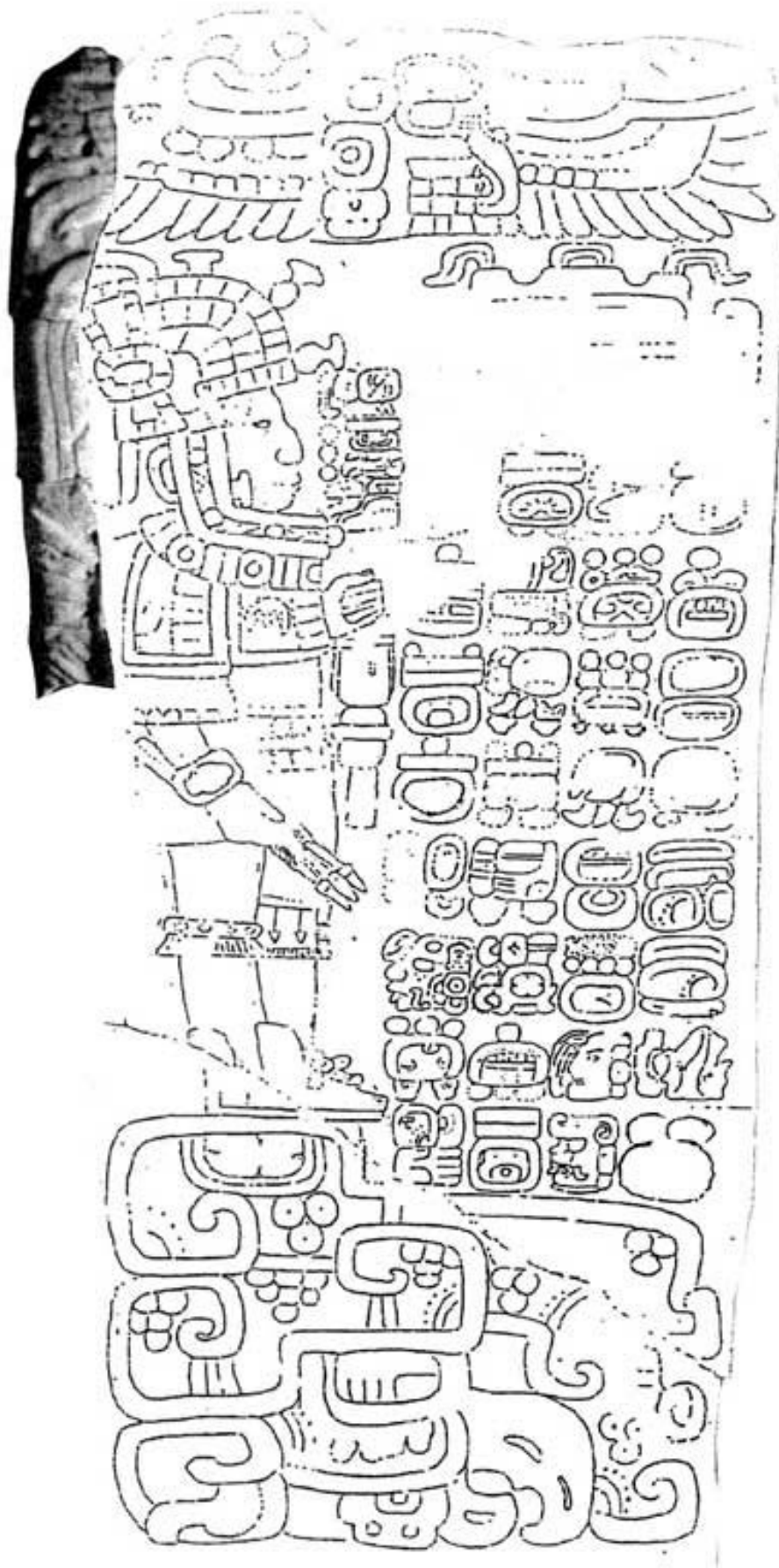


Figure 5. New fragment of Stela 1.

All marine remains come from the Atlantic Ocean, except for the unidentified samples. In 2004, a third and last offering dedicated to Stela 3 was discovered, consisting of 58 flint flakes and cores, 18 exhausted cores, and 13 obsidian fragments. At this time we do not know for sure whether these were originally inside the vessels placed rim against rim, as only very small and eroded sherds were found adjacent to the flakes and cores. However, it was possible to confirm the original localization of Stela 3, as the offering was placed around the spike that was found *in situ*.

Considering that all the stelae were erected in AD 475, the possibility exists that the obsidian flakes of the offering in Stela 1 correspond to the cores of the offering in Stela 2, and that the flint flakes of the offering in Stela 2 correspond to the flint cores of the offering in Stela 3. In the future, experiments will be conducted to reassemble the cores with the flints mentioned above, and should this be accomplished, we would then be in a position to confirm that the three offerings were placed in the soil as part of a dedication ritual, associated with the erection of the three stelae in AD 475.

Although the analysis carried out on them to this day are in a very preliminary phase, it can be said, for instance, that these dedication offerings are very similar to those from other sites in the Lowlands. *“Uncarved shells are very common in the dedication offerings of Tikal, particularly during the Early Classic period”* (Moholy-Nagy 2003:94). *“An additional resemblance may be observed in the nine and eighteen obsidian cores of the dedication offerings. Offerings with nine or eighteen pieces of obsidian or flint have been discovered in Copan, Tikal, Uaxactun, Piedras Negras and many other sites in the Lowlands”* (Fash 1991; Coe 1959; Smith 1950). *“The nine obsidian cores may refer to the nine lords of the underworld, or lords of death. This hypothesis is supported by the presence of shell and shell figurines in the offering under Stela 2, because often times, shells are associated with the aquatic underworld and with death, in Maya art”* (Thompson 1950:49).

## THE CEREMONIAL CENTER AS A SOLAR OBSERVATORY

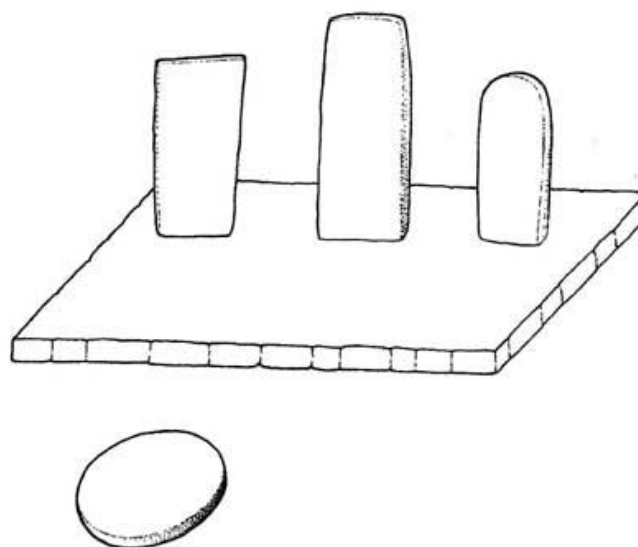


Figure 6. Reconstruction, drawing of Stelae and Altar.

As to the dedication offerings and the fragments of Stelae 1 and 3, excavations have helped to accurately establish the original localization of the three stelae. Several units show evidence of platform walls west of the altar around the monuments. There is a reconstruction of the site with all three stelae and the altar in their original place (Figure 6). Stelae 1, 2, and 3, were placed on a line with a north-south orientation and facing the altar, located right at west of the central steal. According to the investigations conducted in 2003 and 2004, it is presumed that the stelae and altar were erected as part of a dedication ritual and that they worked as “a solar observatory similar to Uaxactun Group E” (Aveni and Hartung 1989; Ricketson and Ricketson 1937; Ruppert 1945). At Uaxactun, Structures 1, 2, and 3, marked the solstices and the equinoxes, as seen in Structure E-VII (Figure 7). Structure 2 is located right at east of Structure 7, and the edges of Structures 1 and 3 mark the solstices at approximately 24° north of the east and south of the east, respectively.

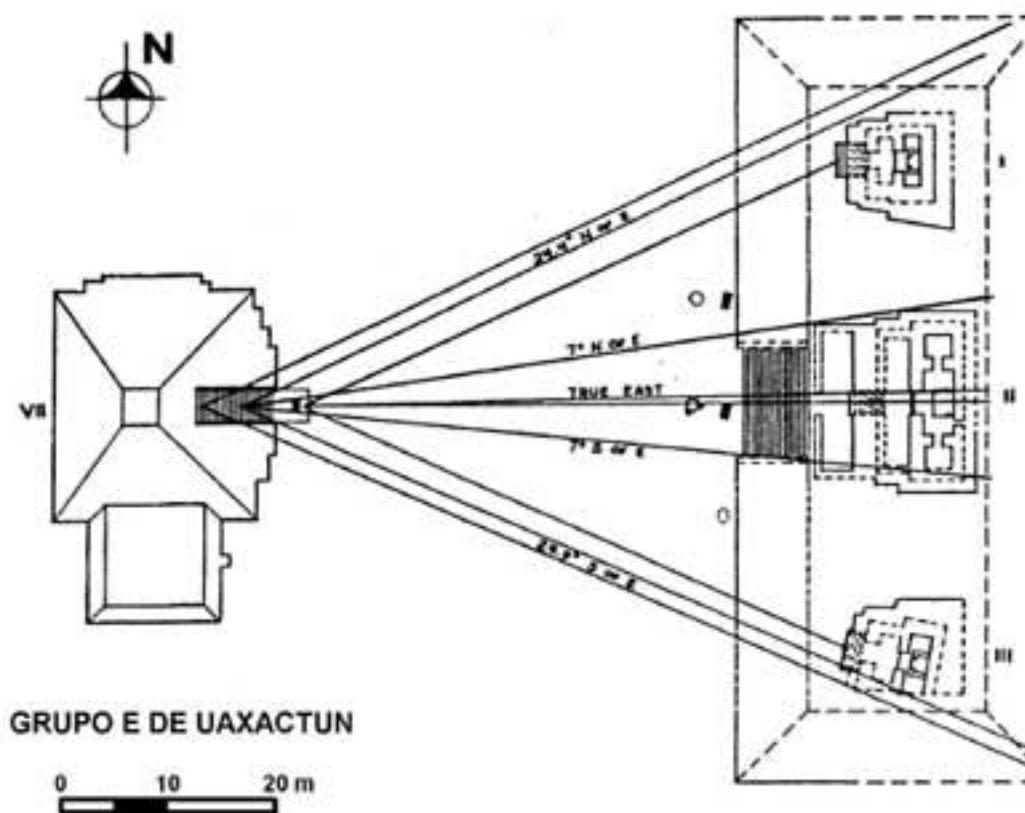


Figure 7. Group E, Uaxactun.

## UAXACTUN GROUP E

When similar angles and lines are applied to the group of stelae at Tres Islas, they usually are consistent with those of Uaxactun. Also, given that the group of stelae and altar is located at the edge of a scarp, with over 2 km of lowlands, mostly opening to the eastern landscape, it might have been a good place to watch the dawn.



In March, 2004, and in an attempt to confirm these hypothesis, one transect was opened east of the Group of the Stelae, to take a picture of the dawn on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, the spring equinox. Unfortunately, the weather prevented this from happening until the dawn of March 26, five days after the equinox. Although the picture shows that the sun was placed slightly at north of the east-west axis, it was possible to observe that in fact the stelae and altar may have functioned as a solar observatory. In this computer-generated picture, each stela was placed in its original location for a better visualization of its orientation, in relation with the sunrise (Figure 8). Hopefully, future investigations and excavations, as well as the weather conditions, will make it possible to confirm this hypothesis about the group being a solar observatory.



**Figure 8. Photo reconstruction of the Stelae and Altar.**

Parallel to the excavations of Claudia Quintanilla at the Group of the Stelae, Edy Barrios supervised the excavation of the Group of the Mounds, 200 m south of the Tres Islas stelae. The excavations have shown that the occupation of this group extended from the Early Classic to the Postclassic period. In the upper levels, Barrios found a number of rustic walls in the patio of this architectural group, together with sherds that date to the Postclassic period. In the lower levels, three burials were found:

- The first was an individual buried in the extended dorsal decubitus position, below a layer of Late Classic sherds

- The second individual was buried with two Late Classic vessels, one of them featuring a hieroglyphic text
- The third individual was buried inside a stone cyst, with five vessels dating to the Early Classic period; one of them, a black vessel with basal flange and annular base identified as corresponding to the Lucha Incised type, was found turned over, covering the cranium

As a result of the excavations in Tres Islas during 2004, we know that this architectural group was at least partially contemporary to the Early Classic dates of the stelae, although its occupation extended for a much longer time span than the dates indicated in the stelae.

### RECONNAISSANCE IN THE TRES ISLAS REGION

Several sites were identified, mapped and tested during the field season, though most of them were small in size. The site called El Raudal is apparently the largest one reported to this day in the region, based on the number of structures and their dimensions. It is located 5 km at east of Tres Islas, on the Santa Amelia River (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Map of the Tres Islas region.

The structures in El Raudal are located at the top of small hills, and its major architecture was delimited to two different groups. The first consists of large structures with plazas oriented towards north and south, surrounded by residential groups with small patios (Figure 10). The main structure (Structure 1) had a central stairway on its north and south sides, while its higher part featured a number of

rooms with walls made of fine stone blocks. It should be noted that the width of these walls and the finding of several vault rocks suggest the presence of vaulted arches.

Approximately 300 m to the south, there is an Acropolis formed by a number of buildings with platforms on top of a hill. This preliminary map shows that it is integrated by several rectangular platforms that head to a structure located on the upper part. As of the platform, it has a height of 35 m. One of the reasons for locating the site on the Santa Amelia River –one of the tributaries of the Río Pasión- may have been the rapids along the river, after which the site was named. The site occupied a strategic position within the region, as during the dry season the rapids prevented the navigation upstream. If we consider that the course of the river has remained unchanged since the days when the site was occupied, that situation may have led the inhabitants to the construction of a port, with an appropriate exploitation. On the other hand, no sculpted monuments with hieroglyphic inscriptions were discovered at the site, and test pits have yielded ceramic samples that would suggest a Late Preclassic, Early Classic and Late Classic occupation; therefore, El Raudal could be partially contemporary to Tres Islas.

Based on the evidence collected this season, El Raudal seems to be a primary site within the Tres Islas region, as because of the dimensions of the structures found, the site may have in fact been the Early Classic capital of Cancuen instead of Tres Islas, like it was previously presumed; Tres Islas, possibly, may have been a satellite site between El Raudal and Cancuen.

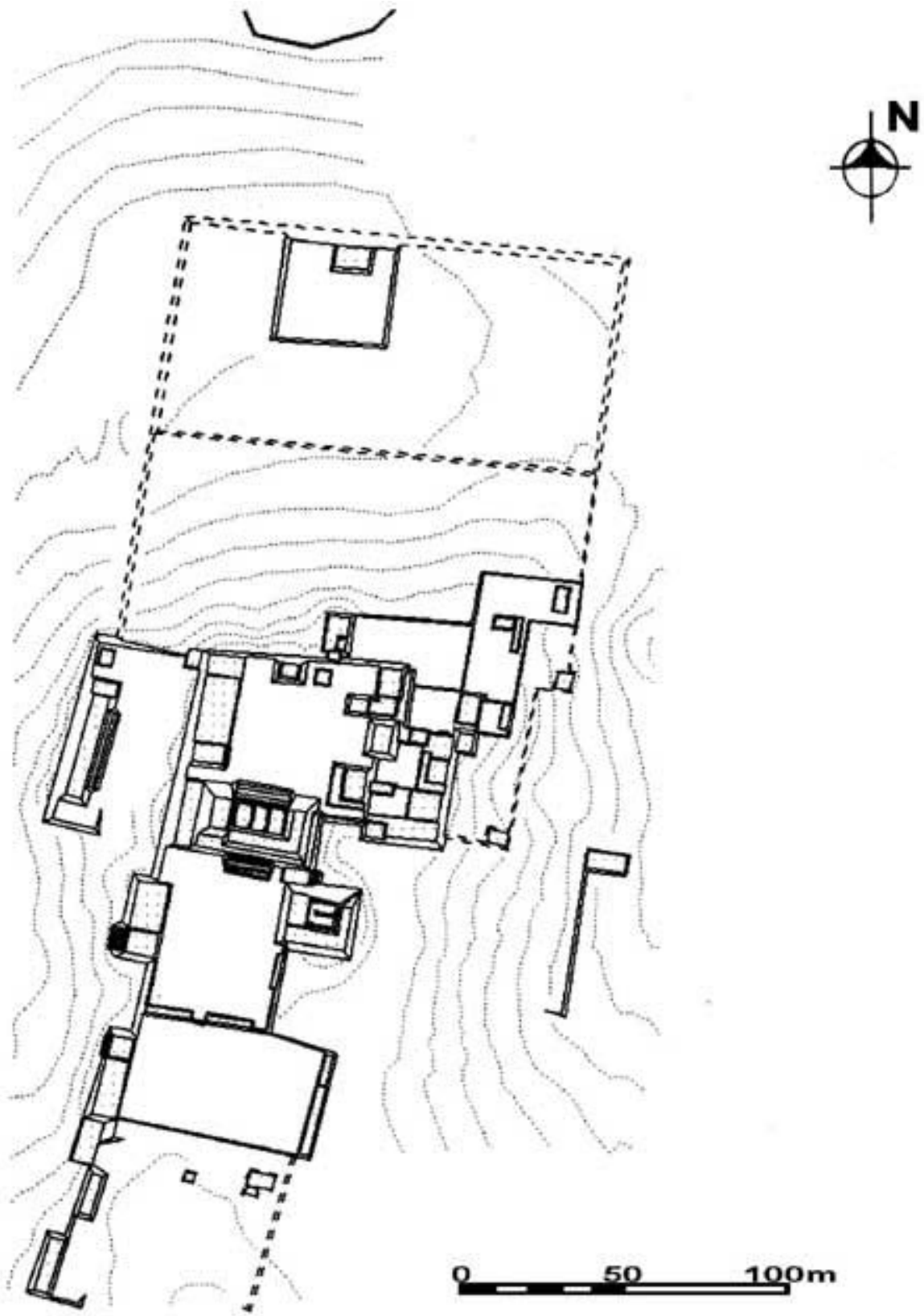


Figure 10. Map of Group 1, El Raudal.

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