

DOWN TO THE STERILE GROUND: “X-RAYS” OF THE KAMINALJUYU PARK

Matilde Ivic de Monterroso

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In the 1980's and 1990's, several salvage excavations were conducted at the southwest of Kaminaljuyu, the most important being those carried out during Project Miraflores I, Kaminaljuyu/San Jorge (Popenoe de Hatch 1997), and Miraflores II (Valdés 1997, 1998). These projects provided information on intensive agricultural systems, residential and ritual patterns, ceramic sequences, and evidence of the possible replacement of the Preclassic population by a new group in the Guatemala Valley, who arrived and took control of Kaminaljuyú during the Early Classic period.

Nevertheless, one question that remained unanswered had to do with the relationship between Kaminaljuyu and Teotihuacan, reflected in the discoveries of Mounds A and B, and in the architecture of the Acropolis at Kaminaljuyu Park. For this reason, the park was the perfect place where to investigate this issue. This paper is providing new data that allows for evaluating the question of relationships between Kaminaljuyu and Teotihuacan.

PROJECT DESIGN

The investigation agreement anticipated the excavation of test units at the site periphery, and of a few others in the platforms supporting the mounds. No pits were planned inside the Acropolis or specifically on the mounds. The following facts were considered at the time of designing the project's strategy:

- The availability of the site plan drawn by the Tobacco and Salt Museum Archaeological Project (Ohi 1991). However, the use we made of this plan was limited, as it was elaborated with aerial photos, thus limiting the placement of the pits.

For this reason we saw the need to create a new topographic plan using the total station (laser theodolite), a work accomplished by Zachary Nelson and Carlos Chiriboga. This was the first major accomplishment produced by our project.

- The availability of architecture uncovered through the extensive excavations conducted at the Acropolis by Gustavo Espinoza in the 1950's and early in the 1960's, and the absence of both the archaeological records of Espinoza and

the ceramic excavated there that would allow for producing a dating. These excavations did not reach sterile soil.

This previous knowledge was used by Stephen Houston and his colleagues, who sketched a complete ground plan of the Acropolis, created three-dimensional models of the structures and examined in detail both the architectural sequence and the construction techniques.

- The excavations conducted by Charles Cheek of Pennsylvania State University (Sanders and Michels 1977; Cheek 1977), focused on the area known as *La Palangana*. Cheek excavated the Classic and Preclassic levels, but he neither reached sterile soil.

In this new occasion, attempts were made to reach the sterile level in the only two pits authorized, placed in the Upper and Lower Plazas of La Palangana and in other pits in the surrounding area. Works were conducted by Carlos Alvarado, Karen Pereira, Pablo Rodas and Alejandro Seijas (see Carlos Alvarado, this volume).

- The need to take the maximum advantage of the test units authorized to obtain the complete chronological sequence of the site and collect information on its cultural development in the Early Classic and Late Classic periods. In this pursuit, the pits were placed the closest possible to the possible structures, to date at least the lower part of their construction.
- An additional major point consisted in investigating the different terraces present at the site reflected in the contour lines, with the purpose of obtaining the full chronology.

Upon the excavation of 74 pits and preliminary ceramic analysis, we may conclude that the Kaminaljuyu Park is not the best place to obtain this sequence, given the huge amount of modification and soil movement it suffered in prehispanic times. Very few pits have yielded information about the change of phases and periods. It is clear, however, that both ceramics and obsidian do not reflect the same relationship with Teotihuacan than architecture does. No Thin Orange ceramics were found, but only around five small fragments of Teotihuacan-style cylinders; almost all Early Classic censers correspond to local styles, and of the approximately 25.000 obsidian fragments, less than ten were originated in Pachuca, Mexico.

On the other hand, during the elaboration of the strategy, Marion Popenoe de Hatch noted that both the group at west (the Acropolis) and the group at east (La Palangana) had a similar orientation, as opposed to the conglomerate of mounds at the site core. For this reason, one of the main goals was to define its chronology and make some initial approach in regard to function.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATIONS

In order to achieve an overall view of the results obtained, we must move through the site plan on an east-to-west direction. In short, important deposits of the Middle and Late Preclassic, and Early and Late Classic periods were found. As no authorization was extended to specifically excavate the continuous mound that surrounds the Lower Plaza, it was not possible to obtain a comprehensive answer on the function of this architectural group, neither to establish whether the mound already existed in the Early Classic period in the form of a continuous platform, raised later in the Late Classic period. The test units that Charles Cheek excavated in this mound at north and south did not reach sterile soil, although the excavated zone corresponded to the Late Classic period (Cheek 1977).

Nevertheless, it seems that during the Early and Late Classic periods the area served an administrative and ceremonial function, reflected by the amount of censer remains found, the absence of domestic pottery and the architectural remains present, which for the Early Classic period include buildings with *talud-tablero* features. It is important to note that at the site of Solano, also with *talud-tablero* architecture, there are continuous platforms surrounding the plaza with buildings on top of them (Brown, in Sanders and Michels 1977:225).

EXCAVATIONS IN THE SURROUNDINGS OF MOUND C-II-8

This mound is located west of La Palangana, in the plaza that presently includes the entrance to the site. Eleven test units were authorized around it. To the north and northeast of the mound there were Preclassic dumpsters deposited in holes and canals carved in the *talpetate* (the sterile level of Kaminaljuyu), covered by thick Late Classic deposits. This situation repeated itself in several zones of the site. In test pit F6/11, disjointed human bones were discovered inside a Late Classic deposit. To the south, test unit E5/9 was excavated, and it was the closest one to this structure. Right at the bottom and against the sterile level of the *talpetate*, there was a dense deposit of Late Preclassic ceramic. On top of this deposit, of approximately 1.50 m and to the surface, ceramics yielded a dating for the Late Classic period. Towards the southwest, test unit 5/12 and its extension E5/11 presented a similar pattern, with the characteristic that in the upper levels there was a mix of Late Preclassic and Late Classic materials. In this pit and in a secondary context, two fragments of a Preclassic monument (Figure 1) were discovered. The cultural deposits of the entrance plaza were very close to the surface. Nonetheless, it is clear that Mound C-II-8 corresponds to the Late Classic period. Its upper section, as a consequence of erosion, features materials and construction techniques typical of this period.

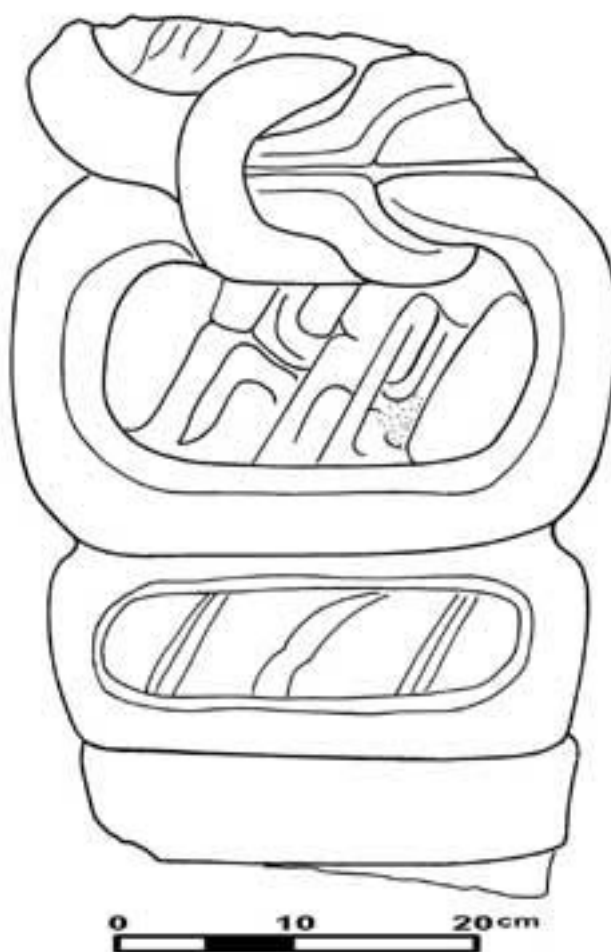


Figure 1. Fragments of a Preclassic monument.

EXCAVATIONS AROUND MOUND C-II-6

This mound is located at the southwest of mound C-II-8 and east of the Acropolis, at the plaza with the present entrance to the site. Four test units were authorized around it. The pits placed closer to the mounds were pits C6/14 and D6/6. In the first (Figure 2), on the west façade of the mound and in the deepest cultural deposit, remains of the Late Preclassic Santa Clara phase were found, mixed with some Early Classic material. In the final section of this deposit there was a complete vessel of the Late Preclassic Zambo ware (Figure 3). Here, as well as in other test units, there were complete or semi-complete vessels placed at the end of the cultural deposits. This pit, of 1 m to the surface, included Late Classic refills. Unit D6/6 (Figure 4), towards the northwest of the test unit, similarly uncovered a deep Late Preclassic deposit mixed with Early Classic remains, sealed at a depth of 2.80 m by Late Classic refills and mixed with materials from previous periods. Then, the mound as seen today corresponds to the Late Classic period, though it may have had construction stages dating to the Early Classic period, a fact eventually confirmed by another finding in pit C6/5, a few meters away and east of the Acropolis.

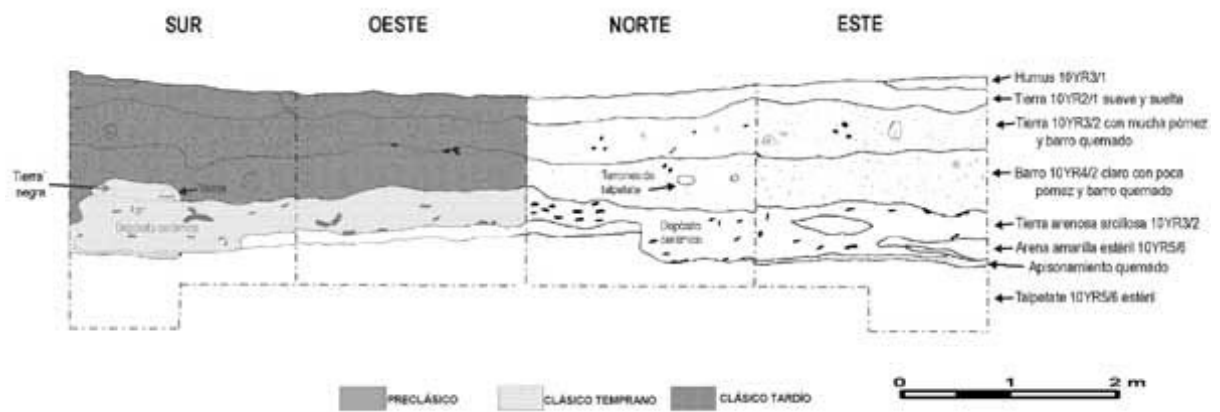


Figure 2. Profile, KJP C6/14.



Figure 3. Late Preclassic Zambo ware vessel.

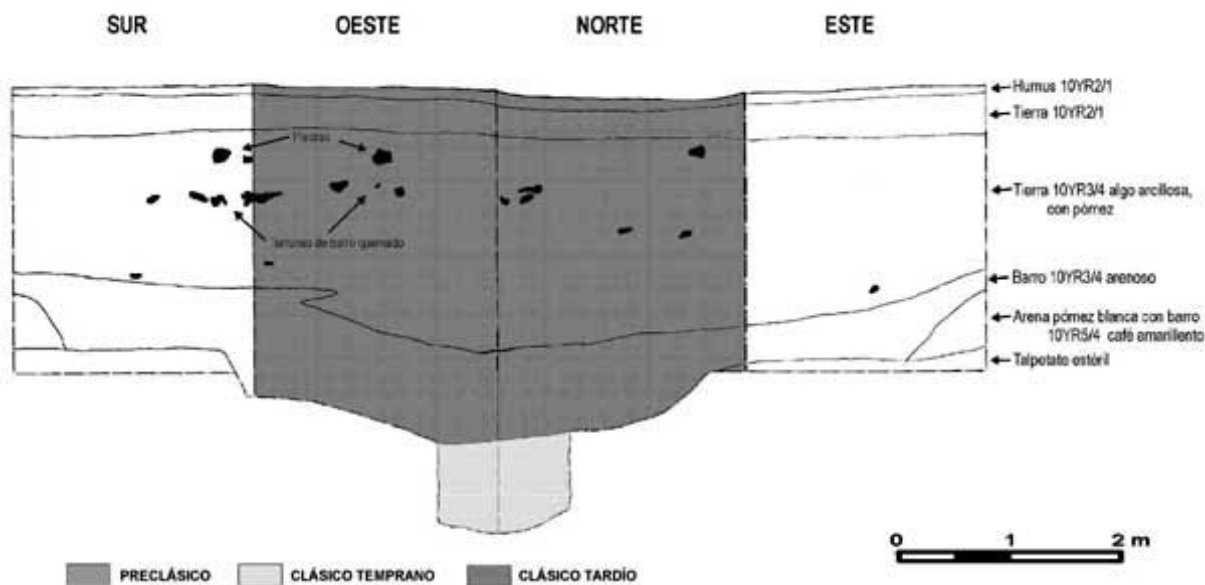


Figure 4. Profile, KJP D6/6.

EXCAVATIONS AROUND MOUND C-II-15

This is a particularly interesting case. At first sight, it does not look like a mound, though authorization was granted to excavate a test unit, D7/9, on top of it, as part of the sampling. As a result, we learned that above the sterile level there are three meters of construction of an ancient mound corresponding to the Middle Preclassic Providence phase, followed by 0.40 m of refill of the Late Preclassic Verbena phase, and on top of it, 2 m of refill with mixed materials of the Preclassic, Early Classic and Late Classic periods. Perhaps this is the sole Preclassic mound that the Classic residents did not fully destroy. The discovery of deposits corresponding to the Providence phase was confirmed through pit C7/4, located a few meters away on the east slope of the Acropolis.

EXCAVATIONS IN THE SURROUNDINGS OF THE ACROPOLIS

East of the Acropolis, at the bottom of pit C7/4 (from 3.40 m to 3.60 m), and adjacent to the east slope of the Acropolis, a dense deposit was discovered containing pottery of the Middle Preclassic Providence phase, followed by other levels of the Late Preclassic Verbena and Arenal phases which included a complete Corinto Daub vessel (Figure 5), that showed the existing relationship with the zone of the Motagua at that time. The remaining materials were mixed; they dated to the Early and Late Classic periods, and formed the base of two plaza floors.

In pit C6/5 and almost reaching the surface, the remains of a building with *talud-tablero* features, demolished in its upper part, were exposed. The building had an orientation of 35° at east of the north, and presented the same architectural characteristics of the Acropolis buildings in the use of slabs to support the horizontal panel, the type of construction materials and dimensions (the sloping wall measured

1.08 m). In the deepest levels, there was Late Preclassic and Early Classic ceramics of the Santa Clara phase. The building was covered by a Late Classic refill.

In the upper part of the Acropolis, the only authorized pit (B8/13) exposed the remains of a stone-made sloping panel and two mud panels. The excavation reached a depth of 3.40 m, and revealed mixed materials of the Early Classic and Late Classic periods. West of the Acropolis, the information obtained was very scarce. Apparently, part of the cultural deposits was razed by heavy machinery during the construction of the neighborhood known as Kaminaljuyu II. Two test units were placed adjacent to the west wall of the Acropolis, hoping to find garbage pits, but only thick levels of eroded materials were observed all the way from the top down. Here, reference should be made to the discoveries made in pits B10/15 and A8/3. The first contained the remains of a structure covered with Late Classic refill. Its inside was excavated, but only just a few very small sherds were found, so no reliable dating could be derived. However, it provided evidence of the presence of structures between the west zone of the park and the Mongoy Mound across the street.



Figure 5. Vessel of the Corinto Daub ware, Late Preclassic period.

On the other hand, in the superficial levels of pit A8/3, a possible modern black magic rite was observed, which involved a dog's leg, seven cents, and charcoal. A similar finding took place in this sector of the site, showing the phenomenon of rites that are alien to the Maya ceremonies being carried out at archaeological sites.

EXCAVATIONS AROUND MOUND C-II-3

It is located in the northernmost area of the site, close to the Acropolis. It is among the tallest ones, and its state of preservation is deplorable. Nine test units were authorized around this mound, which have revealed an interesting pattern. The entire northeastern periphery shows Late Preclassic deposits, including the remains of a stairway dated to that period and discovered in pit E9/2 (Figure 6). This structure was covered by Late Preclassic (Santa Clara phase) and Early Classic refills. In the south periphery, towards the west of the mound, all refills found in pits dated to the Late Preclassic period.

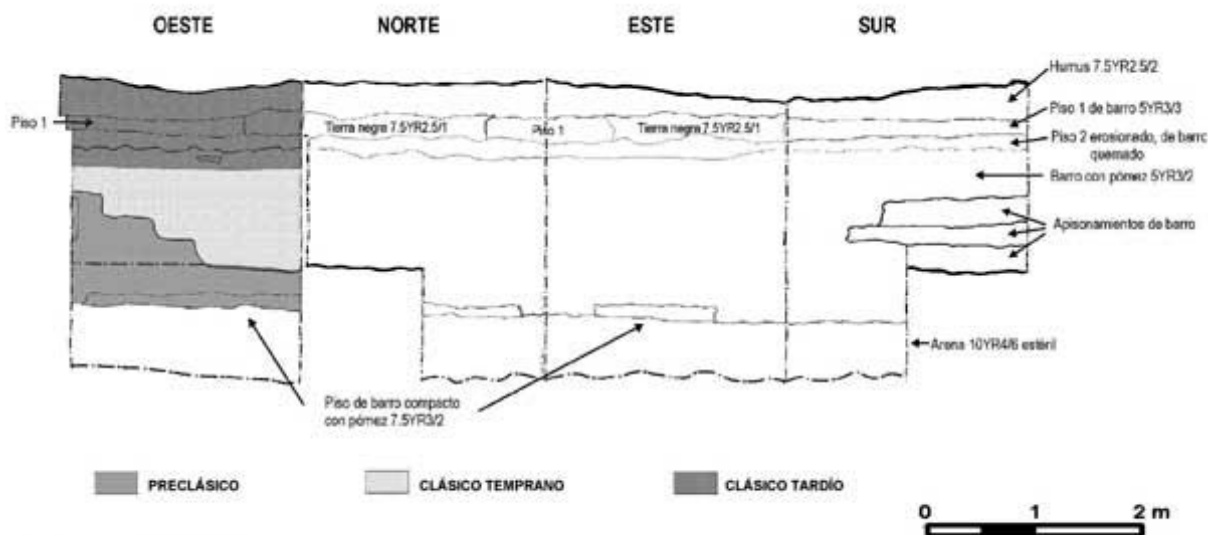


Figure 6. Profile of KJP E9/2.

Finally, the north sector of the site revealed domestic deposits dating to the end of the Early Classic, and the beginning of the Late Classic periods.

PRESENT SITUATION OF THE KAMINALJUYU PARK

The archaeological “X-rays” of the park are useful for gaining knowledge on its ancient history, but as well for becoming aware of the fact that the park is in a critical situation. This place is an archaeological area that works as a municipal park, but that lacks the minimum adequate services.

During the excavations, recent dumpsters were found, as well as dog burials, witchcraft rites, etc. The mounds are rapidly deteriorating, and the same happens

with the structures that cover the roofs of the Acropolis and La Palangana. The tunnel at the Acropolis entrance shows three collapsed zones. East of La Palangana, in the pit right at east of Mound C-II-13, strong water currents are formed from its top, threatening to detach part of its structure. The slopes of the Acropolis are still used as “chutes” during the summertime. In addition, the site has been used for several reforestation campaigns, with the derived problem of roots, that are about to reach Early Classic levels.

After the signature of the Peace Agreements in 1995 and 1996, the site is now open to devotees of Maya spirituality, but the place lacks a garbage disposal service to process the remains that are often burnt within the site, outside the altars.

With this new information, the plans and the three-dimensional reconstructions, it is our hope that the government of Guatemala may become interested in the Kaminaljuyu Park, which should be one of their major portals of interest, as well as a very important place for national education.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents the preliminary results of the Kaminaljuyu Park Archaeological Project. With the advance of ceramic and obsidian analysis, probably additional data will become available. For now, almost 90% of the materials recovered in excavations have been dated. The Early Classic ceramics and obsidian excavated at the Kaminaljuyu Park hardly present any evidence of a relationship with Teotihuacan, as opposed to that which was observed in architecture and in the tomb contents of Mounds A and B.

Regarding the function of the architectural group known as La Palangana, it may have had an administrative and religious function, due to the amount of censer sherds discovered, almost all executed in local styles, and the absence of domestic ceramics. Additional excavations down to the sterile soil of the continuous mound that surrounds the Lower Plaza at La Palangana are needed, to define whether it existed since the Early Classic period, or if on the contrary, it was built and erected during the Late Classic period. This will be of help to obtain additional information on the function of La Palangana.

Excavations show that the mounds found at the site core do not constitute an architectural group, and although their current shape corresponds to the Late Classic period, their construction stages may have been initiated in different periods. Mound C-II-5 presented construction evidence of the Middle Preclassic, Late Preclassic and Late Classic periods. Mound C-II-6 may have been initiated in the Early Classic period, with a continued growth during the Late Classic. Close to it, in the sector located east of the Acropolis, we observed the remains of a building featuring the Early Classic *talud-tablero* form. The building materials of Mount C-II-8 date to the Late Classic period, but at the back, there was a Late Preclassic deposit. Just like Charles Cheek pointed out (1977), the level of the sterile *talpetate* was very close to the surface, on the west side of the site, due to the pass of a natural dome along this sector. For this reason, it is possible that in addition to taking advantage of a

strategic spot in the routes that communicated both with the Altiplano and the South Coast, they had built the Acropolis of Kaminaljuyu here to take advantage of a natural source of *talpetate*, a much important construction material in the architecture typical of the Altiplano.

The west sector of the Acropolis probably contained architectural remains destroyed during the building of the modern colony, as pointed out by the evidence of a small structure. North of the site, residential garbage pits from the late Early Classic and the early Late Classic periods were discovered. Finally, and also north of Mound C-II-3, there was construction evidence of the Late Preclassic and Late Classic periods.

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Figure 1 Fragments of a Preclassic monument

Figure 2 Profile of KJP C6/14

Figure 3 Late Preclassic Zambo ware vessel

Figure 4 Profile of KJP D6/6

Figure 5 Late Preclassic Daub Corinto ware vessel

Figure 6 Profile of KJP E9/2