

FROM THE PRECLASSIC TO THE CLASSIC IN LA PALANGANA, KAMINALJUYU

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The construction sequence of the group of buildings located in the south portion of the Kaminaljuyu Park known as La Palangana, needed to be comprehensively examined under the perspective of the present knowledge about archaeology, in the Guatemala Valley in particular, and in the broader context of Altiplano and the South Coast of Guatemala. With this view, the exploration units anticipated by the Kaminaljuyu Park Project for the period 2003-2004 were to be excavated down to the culturally sterile levels in the areas surrounding the different visible mounds and constructions, to recover the largest possible amount of archaeological evidence adequate to provide new elements that may help to clarify the confusing historic scenario of this major monumental group. The new hypothesis emerged from this exploratory phase must contribute to define the strategic plans to be contemplated by future archaeological research programs in the core sector of Kaminaljuyu.

DESCRIPTION OF THE AREA

The group of buildings known as La Palagana is located southeast of the Acropolis and is the second important building assemblage located in the present Kaminaljuyu Park (Figure 1). It consists of two rectangular plazas, a Lower Plaza at west of the group, and an Upper Plaza towards east and 4 m above.

The Lower Plaza is surrounded on its four sides by rectangular buildings. In the middle, on the west side, is Mound C-II-2, higher than the two rectangular constructions abutting north and south. Two smaller mounds close the north and south sides of the plaza. Mound C-II-14 separates the Lower and Upper plazas, and represents the tallest construction of the entire assemblage. It also has two abutting constructions, one to the north and one to the south. Mound C-II-13 is located at east of the Upper plaza.

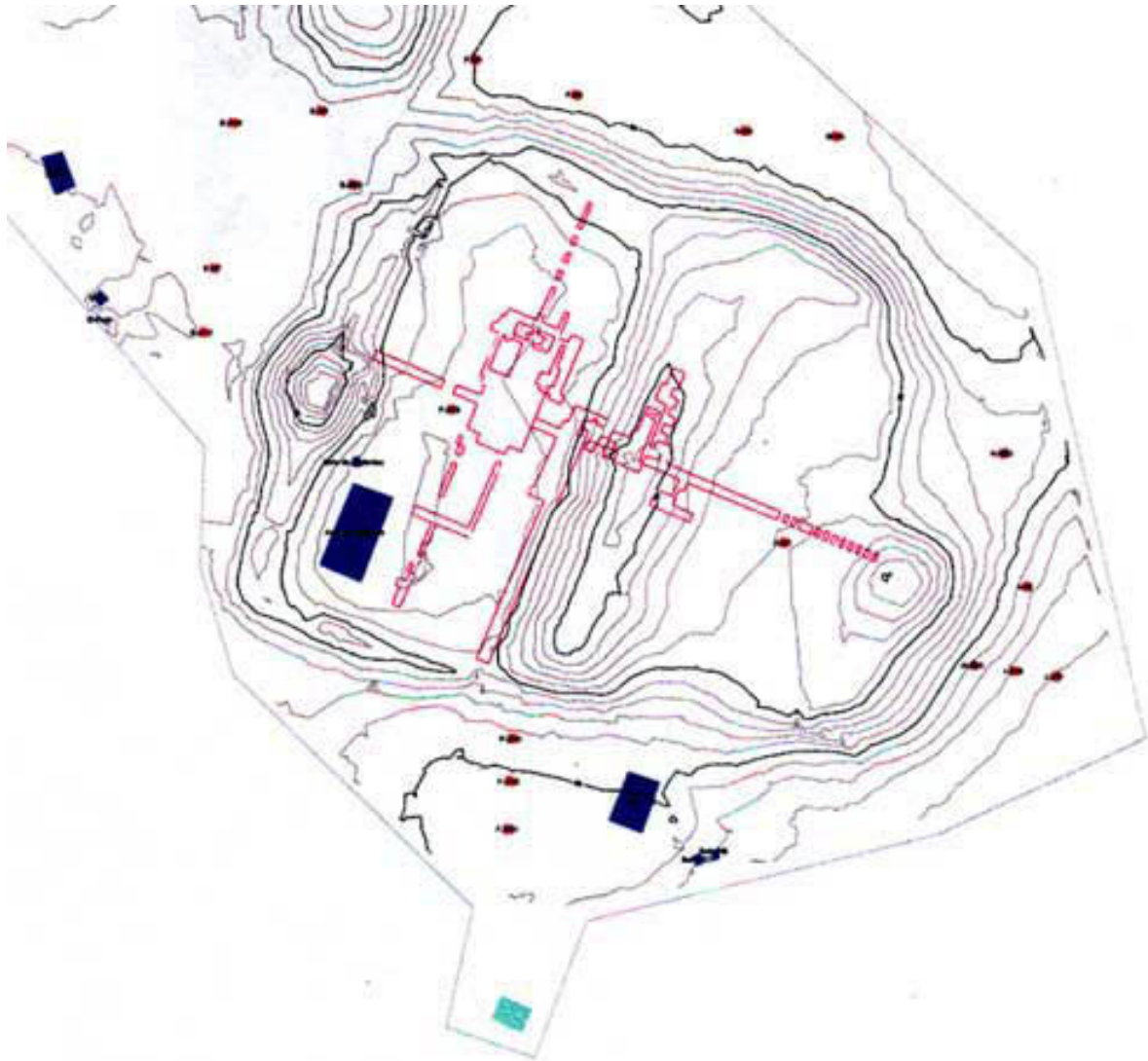


Figure 1. Ground plan of the assemblage. La Palangana, Kaminaljuyu.

INVESTIGATIONS AT LA PALANGANA

Until 1969, practically no studies had been carried out in this group. Only a looting trench was present at the center of C-II-12. In 1926, Samuel Lothrop excavated the centre of the Lower Plaza and reported some of the sculptures he found there (Lothrop 1926). Supposedly, the Lower Plaza had been a huge Ballgame, after Ledyard Smith (1964) identified several “sunken” type Ballcourts in Kaminaljuyu during his typological investigation on Ballgames from the Guatemalan Altiplano.

During three field seasons in 1969 and 1970, Sean Cárdenas and later Charles Cheek excavated La Palangana as part of the Pennsylvania State University Kaminaljuyu Project (Sanders and Michels 1977). The information available at the time of initiating this project basically derives from those investigations. Cheek and his colleagues excavated the center of the Lower Plaza with the purpose of finding evidence of the presence of Teotihuacan styles in Kaminaljuyu. Their excavations

led to the identification of several structures, some of them with the typical Teotihuacan talud-tablero architecture, thus weakening the previous hypothesis of a sunken “palangana-type” Ballgame. Nevertheless, the name of “La Palangana” has survived to our days.

Besides, in the 1970 season, they conducted excavations and opened exploratory trenches both in the Lower Plaza and Structure C-II-14, and in the Upper Plaza, which unfortunately were not taken to the sterile level; thus, it was not possible to outline a comprehensive chronology of the different construction stages at La Palangana. Precisely, one of the goals of the Kaminaljuyu Park Project was focused on obtaining a more accurate chronology that would allow us to date the main buildings of the present Kaminaljuyu Park.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS OBTAINED IN THE 2003-2004 SEASON

Fourteen exploration units of 2 x 2 m were excavated at the periphery of La Palangana, plus one in the Lower Plaza and one in the Upper Plaza, the preliminary results of which are presented below. The information used comes from the reports prepared by the archaeologists of the Kaminaljuyu Park Project.

WEST OF LA PALANGANA

Three units were excavated at the west side of Mound C-II-12, units E-5/20, E-4/7, and E-4/12, in the present surface of the plaza located at the park’s entrance. A sandy floor with pumice was detected at a depth of 1.30 m, on top of which there was cultural material dating to the Late Classic period. Under that floor, the ceramic corresponds to the Early Classic and Late Preclassic periods. The excavation units placed in front of C-II-2 identified the same sandy floor with pumice, but almost 40 cm higher. Therefore, in front of Building C-II-12, to the west, a wide terrace may have possibly existed during the Late Classic period.

Interestingly, this part of the presumed plaza located west of Mound C-II-12, has not shown an intense construction activity of floors, and the culturally sterile soil is relatively close to the modern soil (not more than 1.60 m deep).

NORTH OF LA PALANGANA

This sector is approximately 3 m below the plaza we have just mentioned. Apparently, the area was leveled in modern times, as during the 1970’s it was used as a soccer field (Cheek 1977:70). Three units were excavated at the edge of the structures that formed the north border of La Palangana, F-5/4, G-5/8, and G-5/5. Apparently, this sector had no buildings during the Preclassic period, as neither floors nor construction refills were detected. The sterile soil is relatively close to the modern soil (80 cm to 1.80 m deep).

The majority of the Preclassic cultural material was found in the depressions of the ground, likely accumulated there by the erosion of the nearby buildings; on the contrary, these depressions might have been used as dumpsters. Such is the case of the southwest corner of G-5/8, where a depression discovered may well have been a canal carved in the sterile talpetate, subsequently refilled with garbage.

The Early Classic cultural remains are relatively scarce. There is no evidence of the sector being used during the Late Classic period, because the context was disturbed by the ground leveling carried out in recent times. The ceramic remains recovered in the more superficial layers are mixed with modern rubble.

THE UPPER PLAZA

There is a dramatic change in the context excavated in unit H-3/1, almost at the core of the Upper Plaza (Figure 2). This plaza has a relatively flat surface with a small mound on its east border. The east and north sides of the plaza drop to the ground level that surrounds La Palangana by the north, except for the northeast corner where there is a rectangular area almost 3 m below the Upper Plaza. Both the south side and the northeast corner may have served like entrances to the Upper Plaza. In general, the area of the Upper Plaza was the one investigated the least by Cheek and his colleagues in 1970. Just one trench was excavated in this area. It features a west-to-east orientation, and the units excavated inside were taken to different depths, though none of them reached sterile soil (Cheek 1977).

Unit H-3/1 was placed 3 m south of that trench. It reached a depth of 10.80 m, and was the deepest excavation accomplished by the current project. During the Late Classic period, different ceremonial activities seem to have taken place at the plaza. Abundant ceramic clusters were found on a floor found at a depth of 1.20 m. Although ceramics have not yet been analyzed in full, most of the materials seem to correspond to broken censers, some of which had a slight layer of white paint, and to ceramics with simple shapes and poorly fired, often containing remains of burnt materials. Specifically, this unit allowed us to observe the great movement of earth carried out during the Early Classic period. Over the more clearly defined floor dated to the Late Preclassic period and Tamping 3, there are 6.80 m of refills and floors built in the Early Classic period.

With the preliminary information of the ceramic analysis, the construction sequence of the Upper Plaza may be summarized as follows: during the 600 years of the Late Preclassic period, 2.60 m were built with three floors and the corresponding refills above the level of the sterile soil. However, in the 350 years of the Early Classic period, almost 7 m of floors and refills were built, with at least five identified floors and a stone drainage. In the 300 years of the Late Classic, evidence of only two floors and refills were found, which increased the plaza level in 1 m. The Postclassic occupation was only evidenced by the ceramic remains found within the 0.20 m surface level.

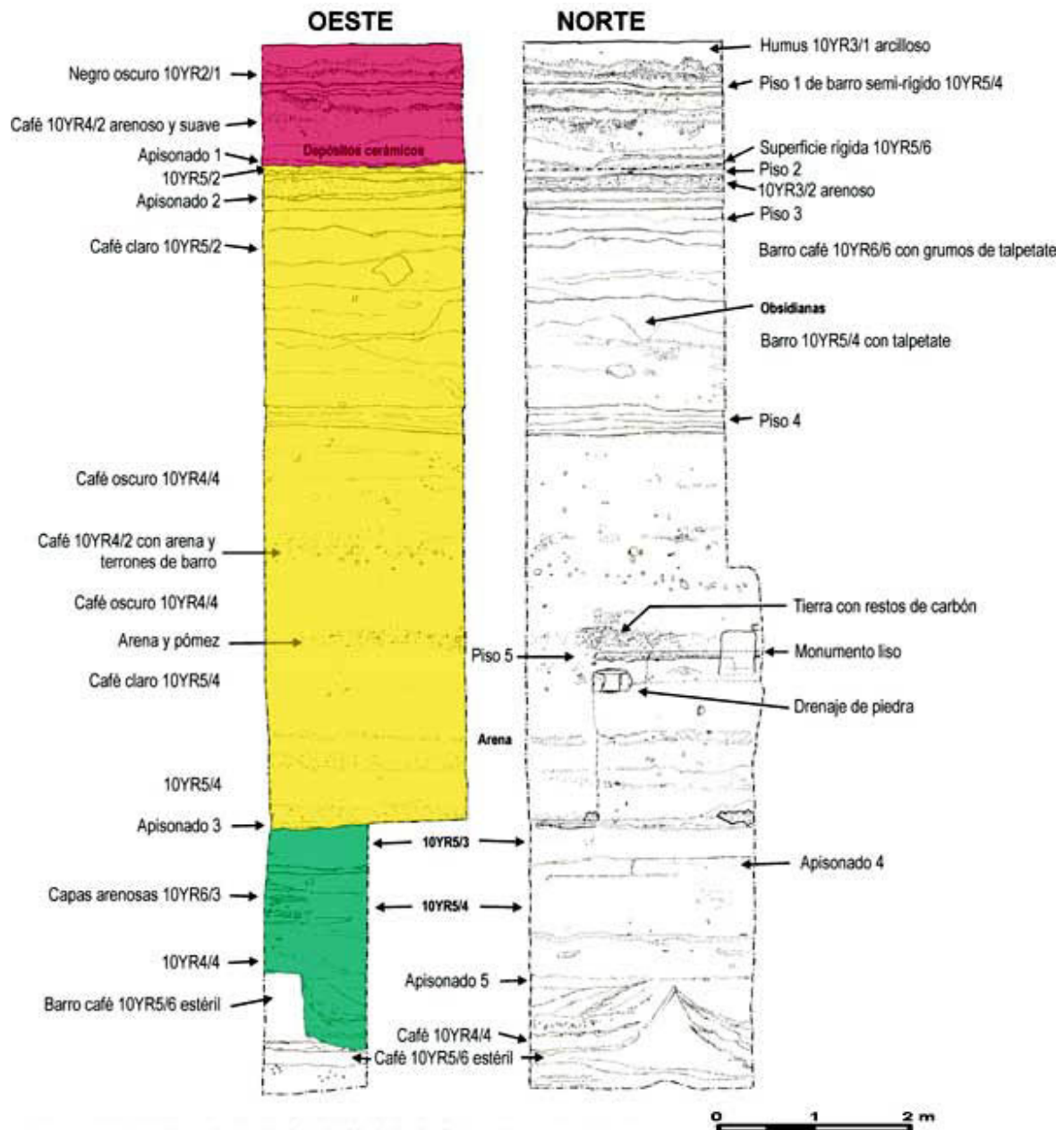


Figure 2. Profiles Of Unit H3 1, West Upper Plaza.

An interesting offering was found 6.35 m deep, dating to the Early Classic period. It consisted of two partially assembled vessels that contained some perishable material, possibly an offering of food and probably with some liquid, as shown by the stains observed inside the sherds. Another possibility is that it contained incense. The vessels are two bowls corresponding to the Late Preclassic Zambo ware. Possibly, this offering was placed by the ancient workers of the site that participated in the Early Classic remodeling.

At a depth of 6.47 m from the surface a stone drainage was found (Figure 3). It presented a 3° slope towards the south, and its outer width was of 0.50 m. Perhaps it was used to drain the rain waters that accumulated in the plaza when the surface was at the level of Floor 5. The associated ceramic materials correspond to the Early

Classic period. This excavation unit yielded evidence of an occupation that was initiated in the Late Preclassic Arenal phase and continued until the Postclassic Chinautla phase. This confirms that the group of buildings and plazas known as La Palangana was the area with the highest range of human settlement throughout the site presently known as Kaminaljuyu Park.



Figure 3. Stone drainage. Unit H3 1, Upper Plaza.

EAST OF LA PALANGANA

Unit H-4/20 was placed at the center of the presumed access to the Upper Plaza on the east side, 4.5 m below the plaza level, on a small and relatively flat ledge. Although no evidence was found of steps to access the Upper Plaza, this excavation revealed an extended occupation in the area, with eight floors and refills, and a stratigraphy proportional to that observed at the Upper Plaza level, suggesting that the sector corresponding to the east slope underwent constant modifications, carried out within the same time frame than those of the Upper Plaza and with an apparent intensive construction activity during the Early Classic period. The fragment of a monument was found in the refill of the penultimate Early Classic construction stage.

With the purpose of defining the east side of Structure C-II-13, test units I-3/6 and H-3/20 (Figure 4) were excavated. The information obtained in I-3/6 evidences that this slope was being worked since the Late Preclassic period, as four construction remains were identified that included ceramic material of the Arenal phase. During the Early Classic, at least four floors were built; in addition, five steps made of mud and sand that covered two different stone drainage systems were identified (Figure

5), possibly built to evacuate the rain water from the ledge where unit H-4/20 was placed, or either to drain the water that accumulated in the Upper Plaza.

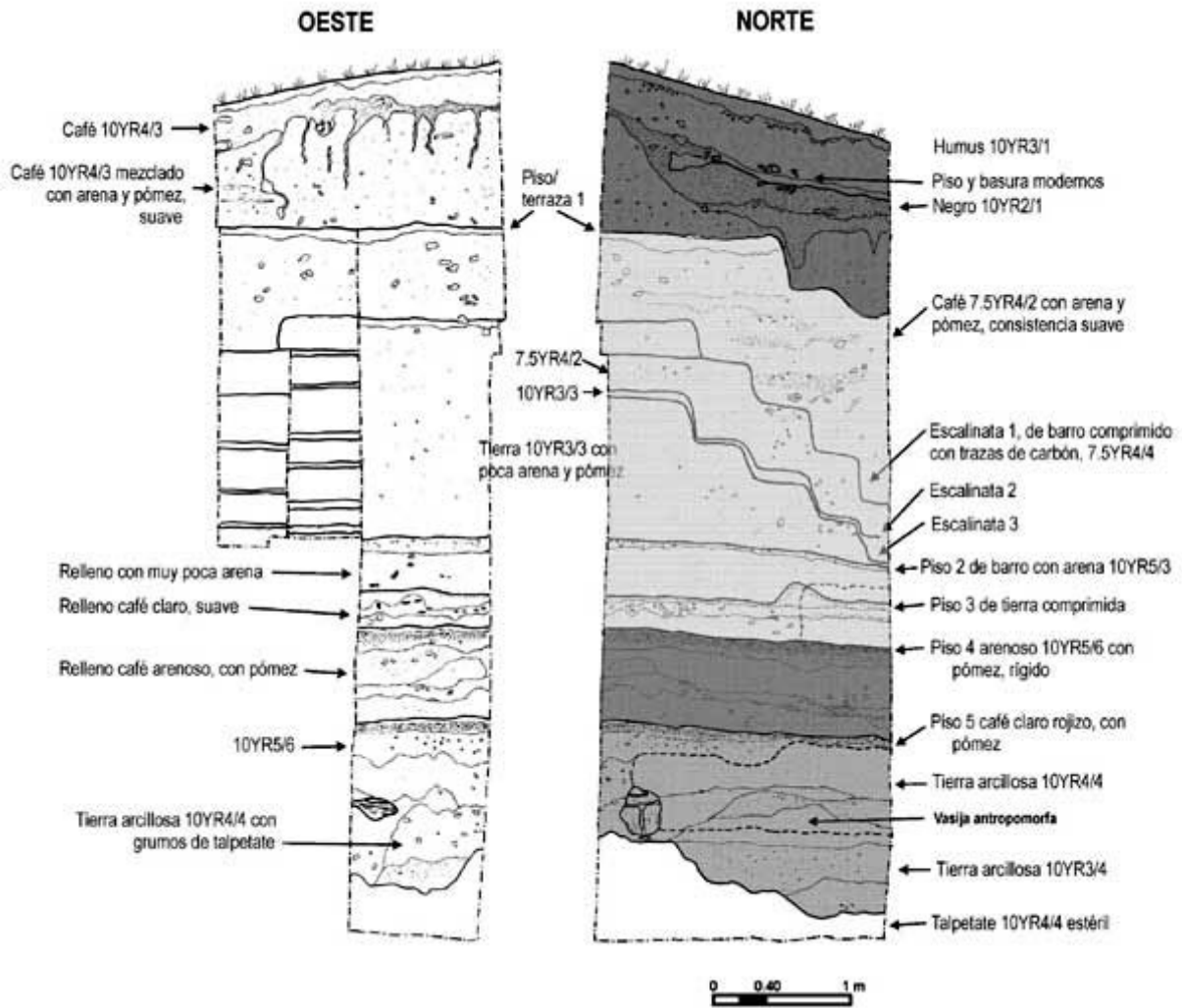


Figure 4. Profiles of Unit H3/20 on the east side of La Palangana.



Figure 5. Stone drainages. Unit 13 6, east side of La Palangana.

Test unit H-3/20 revealed the presence of mud steps with two modifications, which possibly provided an east access to Structure C-II-13 during the Early Classic period. The ceramic found on a floor at a depth of 4 m, identifies the moment of transition between the Late Preclassic and the Early Classic periods. At a depth of 5.40 m we found a probable anthropomorphic Middle Preclassic vessel, with a human effigy and the probable body of an insect (Figure 6), although expert entomologists think this is the representation of the ribs and vertebrae of a human being. No evidence of Late Classic constructions were found, and possibly the ceramic remains of that period come from the erosion of the upper portions of C-II-13.

Test units I-3/16 and I-3/17 were excavated at the level of the surface that surrounds La Palangana from the east side. It confirms that the occupation of this sector of La Palangana was initiated in the Middle Preclassic period.



Figure 6. Anthropomorphic vessel. Unit H3 20.

SOUTH OF LA PALANGANA

Test units F-2/10, F-2/15 and F-2/20 placed at the foot of the construction that closed La Palangana from its south side, revealed that in the Late Classic, the construction that closed the Lower Plaza to its present level was already completed, although it is probable that there were Early Classic constructions, as shown at least by two floors corresponding to that time span that cover the level occupied during the Late Preclassic period.

THE LOWER PLAZA

Test unit F-4/23 (Figure 7) was also placed 3 m south of the excavations conducted by Charles Cheek, and revealed that in this zone of the Lower Plaza at La Palangana, the Early Classic construction levels were not so vast as those of the Upper Plaza, suggesting that the construction effort of the Early Classic period was mainly oriented to the east of La Palangana. It is probable that the “walls” or the

continuous mound limiting the south and north of the Lower Plaza at La Palangana were the beginning of a remodeling intended to raise the level of this area to reach that of the Upper Plaza, though they were never completed. The main findings in F-4/23 suggest it was a Preclassic residential zone, as ceramic concentrations include domestic garbage deposited in an area that also worked as a funerary deposit.

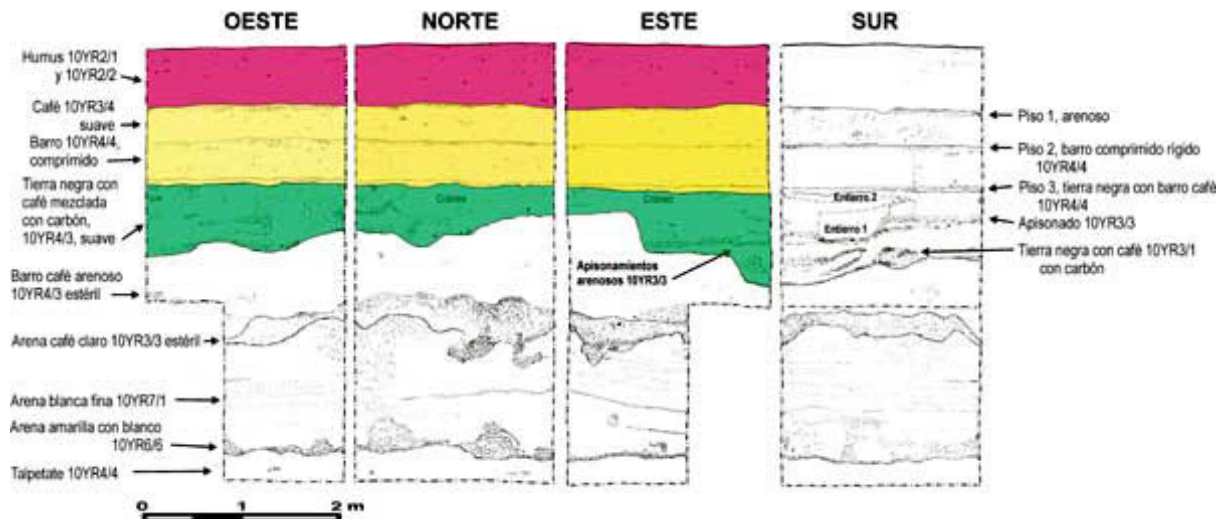


Figure 7. Profiles of Unit F4 23, Lower Plaza.

Two burials were found, one of them located practically in contact with Floor 3, at a depth of 1.42 m. The bones were placed on the floor of the refill of Floor 3, with slightly deep-set thorax and pelvis. The body was oriented at 90° from east to west, with its cranium towards the west. It consisted of an adult skeleton placed in an extended dorsal decubitus position, with the chest pretty much fragmented and not much articulated. It had shoulder blades and arms (the left arm was broken and displaced from its normal position), both forearms were quite disarticulated, and there was at least one hand. The pelvis was found in a primary position and only with the right femur down to the knee. The skull was heavily fragmented and only 17 teeth were recovered. Very probably, the burial was disturbed when Floor 3 was consolidated. Fifteen centimeters north of the pelvis, teeth of a carnivorous animal were observed, perhaps suggesting that disturbance was also a consequence of small animals' activities.

The other burial, found 1.82 m deep on a mud tamping, consists of a thorax placed in the decubitus ventral position, oriented 22° towards southwest, with shoulder blades, arms and left forearm, and no pelvis or skull; only the mandible was found. To the right, there were fragments of a bowl placed on a layer of red pigment about 15 mm thick. It is possible that this burial was similarly disturbed by later modifications, causing the disappearance of the waist, the legs and the cranium. It was also presumed that perhaps, only the thorax was deposited on the floor as a result of a human sacrifice (the position of the vertebrae seems to suggest that the body was "opened" in its front part). The dates of the ceramic found in the vicinities of both burials date them to the Late Preclassic period.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The 16 units excavated at La Palangana have succeeded in enhancing our knowledge about the past of this important group of constructions from the Kaminaljuyu Park. Contrary to that which was believed in the 1970's, there was an important Preclassic occupation at La Palangana, which was initiated in the Providence phase of the Middle Preclassic period, primarily on the east side.

The Lower Plaza was leveled with several floor and refills, and was basically delimited at north and south, with the dimensions that were maintained throughout the Classic and up to the abandonment of the site. The excavations conducted by Charles Cheek have already revealed that by the end of the Late Preclassic period, Mounds C-II-12 and C-II-14 may have worked as residential platforms for the elite. The Upper Plaza, which during the Preclassic was located at a lower level than that of the present Lower Plaza, seems to have had a greater intensity in its construction activity –three to four times more refills- than its western equivalent. Transition to the Early Classic period meant a remarkable increase in the construction activities of the Upper Plaza. However, there are no evident traits of a shift in the construction technology towards the Teotihuacan methods, as apparently was the case in the Acropolis and in the elite buildings at the center of the Lower Plaza.

To graphically summarize the conclusions related to construction works accomplished at La Palangana, three different sections may be sketched after the excavations accomplished, suggesting work hypothesis on the possible construction levels completed since the Preclassic period. Thus, the first section (Figure 8) may be sketched following a north-south direction from the Early Classic talud-tablero platform outside the Park, across the street, on the south side, passing F-2/20, F-4/23, crossing the Lower Plaza, and reaching F-5/4. The chart presents a projection of that which may have been the occupation levels of the Lower Plaza during the Preclassic, Early Classic and Late Classic periods.

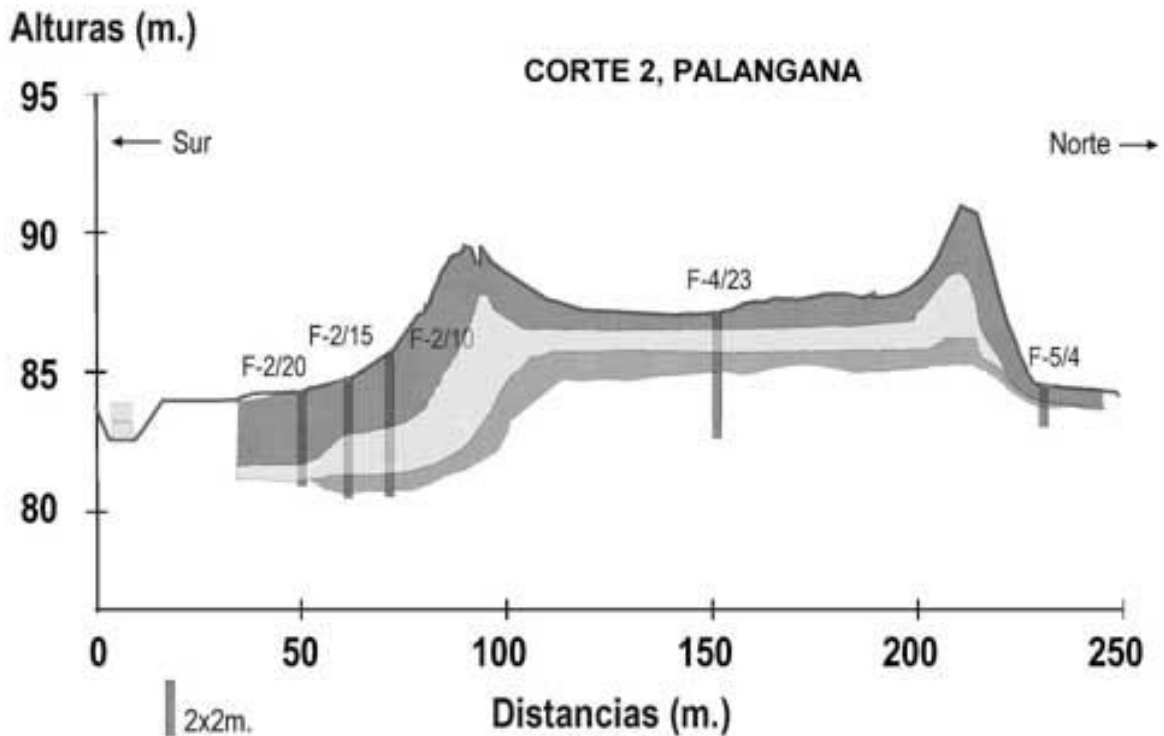


Figure 8. Hypothetical North-South section of the Lower Plaza.

The second section (Figure 9), always on a north-south direction, may be sketched as of the same platform with the talud-tablero located outside the park, but crossing the Upper Plaza, passing H3/1 and reaching G-5/5. Figure 9 shows that which may have been the construction stages of the Upper Plaza, following a north-south direction. Finally, there is a third section (Figure 10) sketched on an east-west direction, cutting both plazas. In the projection of that which may have been the construction levels of both plazas, it is evident that the largest volume of construction corresponding to the Early Classic period was verified in the Upper Plaza.

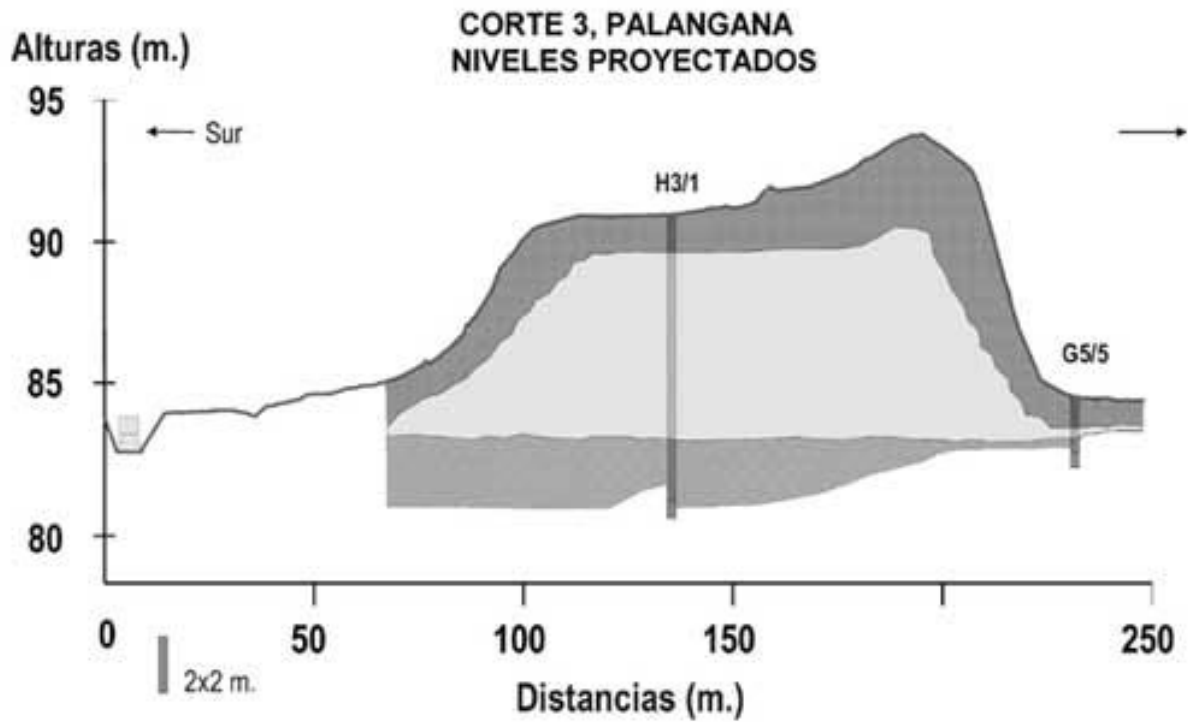


Figure 9. Hypothetical North-South section of the Upper Plaza.

We hope that these preliminary results may be the basis for planning the operative hypothesis of future research projects at La Palangana, allowing for formulating in an irrefutable manner the true occupational history presented here as assumed in the three previous charts.

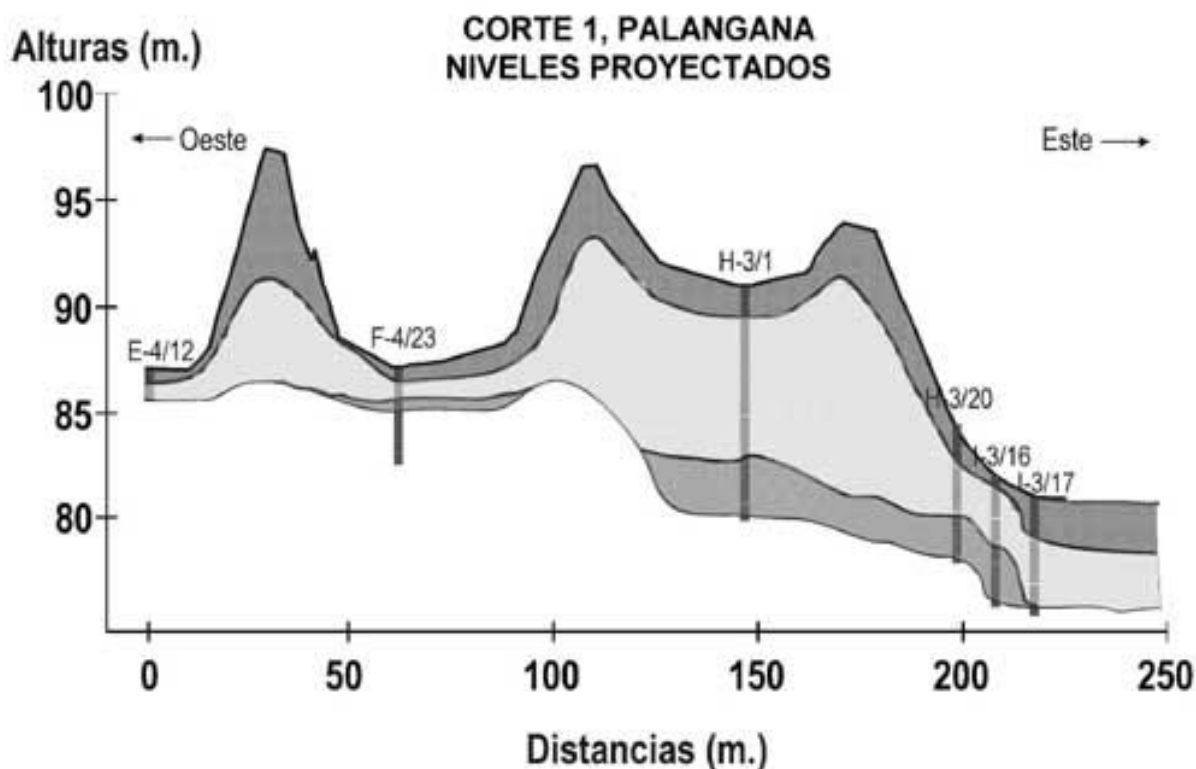


Figure 10. Hypothetical East-West section.

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- Figure 1 Ground plan of the assemblage, La Palangana, Kaminaljuyu
- Figure 2 Profiles of Unit H3 1, West Upper Plaza
- Figure 3 Stone-drainage. Unit H3 1, Upper Plaza
- Figure 4 Profiles of Unit H3 20, east side, La Palangana
- Figure 5 Stone drainages. Unit 13 6, east side, La Palangana
- Figure 6 Anthropomorphic vessel. Unit H3 20
- Figure 7 Profiles of Unit F4 23, Lower Plaza
- Figure 8 Hypothetical North-South section, Lower Plaza
- Figure 9 Hypothetical North-South section, Upper Plaza
- Figure 10 Hypothetical East-West section