

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SALVAGE INVESTIGATION IN VERAPAZ, SAN VICENTE, EL SALVADOR

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This review is the result of an archaeological salvage investigation work conducted during the months of May and June 2001, by the Archaeology Unit of the National Council for Culture and Art, CONCULTURA, supported by the mayoralty of the Verapaz Township, in the archaeological site of Verapaz, department of San Vicente, El Salvador.

The two earthquakes occurred in Salvadoran territory during 2001, and to a larger degree the second telluric event occurred one month after the first one, with a magnitude of 6.6 degrees on the Richter Scale spread its destruction force during 20 seconds in the departments of Cuscatlán, San Vicente and La Paz. Upon the arrival of the first winter rains, many ravines, riverbanks and gorges gave in to the forces of nature, resulting in the overflowing of lands in these places. Such was the case in the slopes of the Verapaz River, exposing the material remains of a Middle Preclassic (900 to 400 BC) prehispanic settlement.

This article summarizes the results of the salvage archaeological investigation conducted in Verapaz, its location and geographic context, the backgrounds of Preclassic burial-related investigations in El Salvador, the survey works, the excavation, stratigraphy, the analysis of the Verapaz ceramics and the conclusions.

### GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Verapaz is located in the township with the same name, situated 610 m above sea level, in the paracentral area of the territory of El Salvador, between the geographic coordinates 13° 38' 4" N and 66° 52' 21" W (Figure 1; Diccionario Geográfico de El Salvador 1971), 9.3 km west of the city of San Vicente, northwest of the Chinchontepec or San Vicente volcano in the Jiboa valley, shared with other four townships. This valley is today one of the main centers of agricultural production in El Salvador, thanks to the fertility of the lands and the abundant water-bearing strata it possesses. No doubt, the ancient inhabitants of these territories were well aware of the benefits of the place. However, the number of archaeological sites documented in this area of the Jiboa valley and north slopes of the San Vicente volcano is limited, although they show a chronology of prehispanic occupation that extends from the Preclassic to the Postclassic periods.

The archaeological site of Verapaz is located approximately 800 m northwest of the city of Verapaz, on the south bank of the homonymous river and in front of the public washing place (Figure 2).

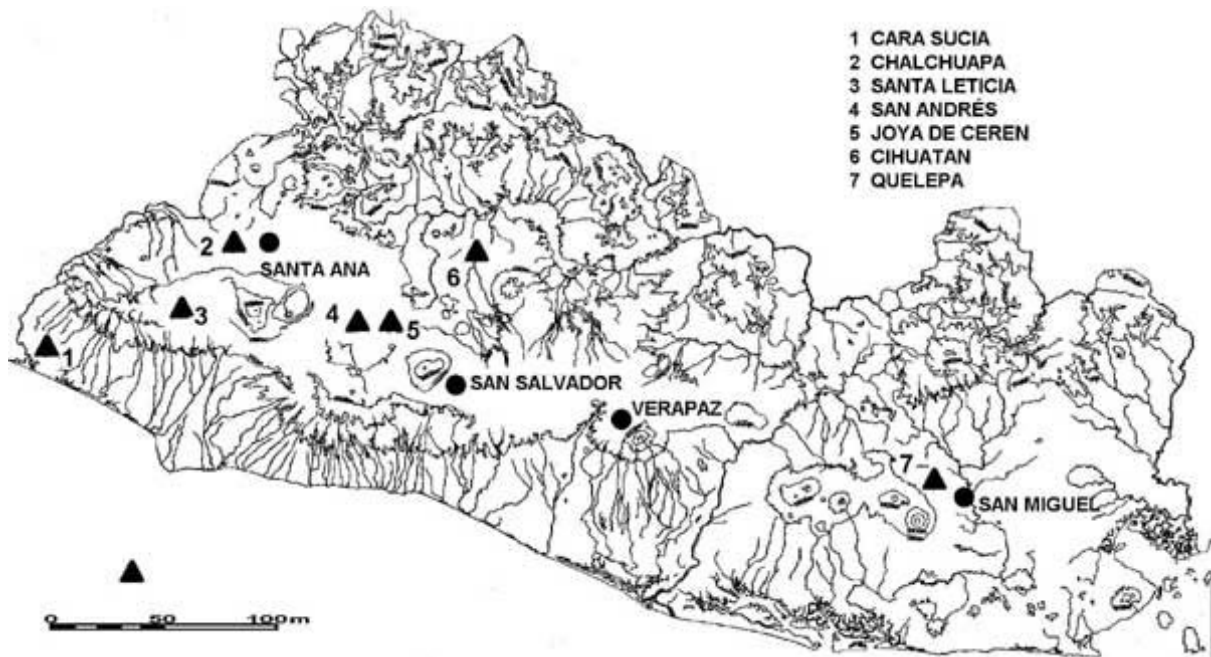


Figure 1. Map of the Republic of El Salvador showing the location of the archaeological site of Verapaz, San Vicente.

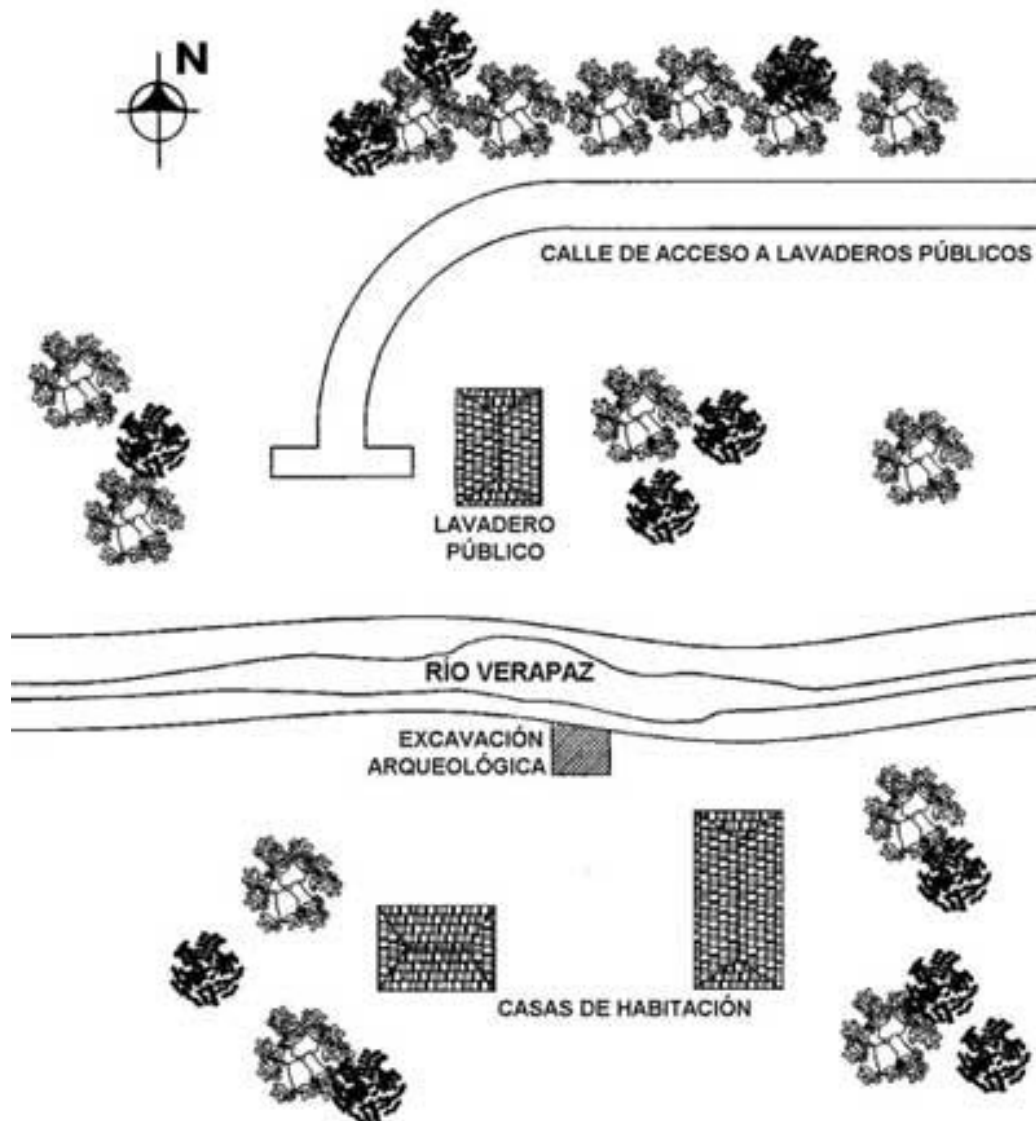


Figure 2. Location scheme of the archaeological investigation at the site of Verapaz, San Vicente, El Salvador.

## BACKGROUNDS OF PRECLASSIC BURIAL-RELATED INVESTIGATIONS IN EL SALVADOR

During the archaeological investigations conducted in the site of Quelepa, San Miguel, between 1967 and 1969, Wyllys Andrews (1986:249) stated that *“the sole significant amount of bones was originated in a refuse deposit under the platform or terrace of the Uapala phase (500 BC to 200 AC), near the base of pit 4”*. During the investigations of the Chalchuapa Archaeological Project, University of Pennsylvania, carried out between 1968 and 1970 and directed by Robert Sharer, several burials were documented, among which two were mentioned as corresponding to the Preclassic period: *“... in the excavation of Structure E3-1, of the archaeological site of El Trapiche, the bone remains of a young individual of around 9 to 11 years of age were documented, associated with an obsidian knife; it is presumed that this burial*

*dates to the Early Middle Preclassic period*". Similarly, the excavations at La Laguna Seca documented "... several bone fragments of an individual whose age, sex, and orientation could not be established; however, it was possible to document a ceramic offering of 13 objects and 12 obsidian knives". This burial was associated with Late Preclassic ceramic (Sharer 1978: 189-191). The salvage excavations carried out between 1977 and 1978 at Structure E3-7 in the site of El Trapiche, Chalchuapa, by William R. Fowler, led to conclude that *"the excavations revealed that the structure (E3-7) had been a funerary mound of multiple events during the Late Preclassic period. The remains of 33 skeletons of individuals were found in the construction refill. These remains were interpreted as evidence of human sacrifice. This and other evidences suggest that the burials in E3-7 may have corresponded to prisoners of war from some population alien to Chalchuapa"* Fowler 1984: 603).

In 1987 an archaeological salvage was carried out at Antiguo Cuscatlán, La Libertad, by Gregorio Bello Suazo: "... the finding of bone remains, found at the time of excavating trenches to lay pluvial pipelines. The remains were placed at a depth of 3.20 m and around them there were traces of skulls, humerus, and other bones embedded in both the trench walls, and across". The remains lie under the volcanic ash deposited by the eruption of the crater of the Ilopango volcano, in 260 AD, so that they belong to the Late Preclassic period (Bello Suazo 1991: 115-121). During the archaeological salvage that took place at the archaeological site of Carcagua, Santa Ana, in 1999, carried out by Fabricio Valdivieso, a Middle Preclassic burial was discovered. *"The so-called Burial 1 shows bones in a poor state of preservation, almost pulverized, the body is incomplete, this is a direct burial, a primary one in an apparent dorsal decubitus position, and is associated with a mat, as an offering"* (Valdivieso 1999:10).

Other accidental findings of prehispanic Preclassic burials documented in Salvadoran territory took place in the following archaeological sites: Las Bolinas, Chalchuapa, with a Late Preclassic burial (Boggs 1966); El Molino, Santa Ana, with 6 to 8 Middle Preclassic burials (Maroli 1985a); Cangrejera, San Juan Opico, La Libertad, with a Middle Preclassic burial containing over 40 individuals (Boggs 1975); San Mateo, San Salvador, with one Late Preclassic burial (Valle 1976); La Cima, San Salvador, a burial associated with Late Preclassic ceramics (Amaroli 1985b); ENA, Ciudad Arce, La Libertad, bone and dental remains with Late Preclassic ceramics (Mata 1975). In addition, burials in underground deposits were documented in Casablanca, Chalchuapa, associated with Late Preclassic ceramics (Shibata, personal communication), in Carcagua, Santa Ana, associated with Middle Preclassic ceramics (Erquicia 2000a, b), and lately, bone remains associated with Late Preclassic ceramics were found in Casablanca, Chalchuapa (Ito 2002:6).

## **SURVEY WORKS**

Survey works were initiated in October, 2000 and were continued in May, 2001, in the same location where several materials had been previously recorded; however, and due to the seismic events and the first rainfalls, the bank walls of the Verapaz River collapsed, bringing down with them cultural materials and exposing in the resulting section bone remains and ceramic objects. The superficial inspection

consisted in a walk across the bordering grounds of the place of this finding, where southeast of the site it was possible to document and collect archaeological ceramic and lithic material in low densities, on the land surface. Unfortunately, the material collected evidenced an important degree of erosion as a consequence of agricultural activities, making it impossible to diagnose typology or to establish a dating. Also, the banks of the Verapaz River were walked to the south, having identified in stratigraphic sections the tephra layer known as Tierra Blanca Joven TBJ, thrown out by the Ilopango volcano in century III AD (Hart and Steen-Mcintyre 1983:14). It should be said that no structures and no other archaeological traits were identified.

## **EXCAVATIONS AND STRATIGRAPHY**

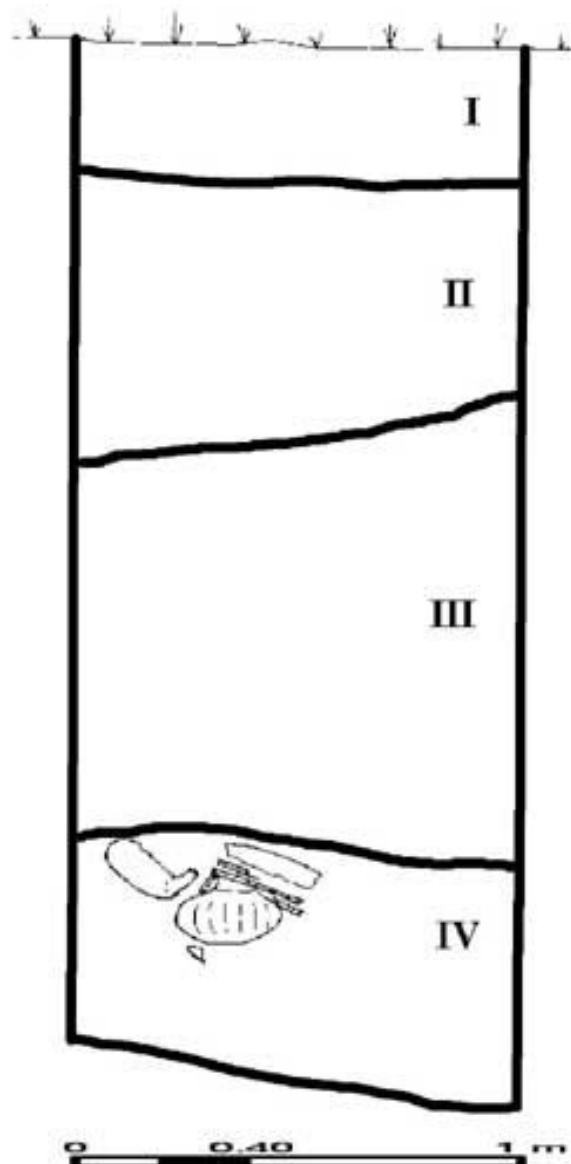
The phase of salvage archaeological excavation began by the end of May, 2001, and ended by mid June that year; for this phase it was planned to dig a test unit with dimensions of 1 x 1 m, oriented north, excavating (already known) stratigraphic levels until the level of the archaeological trait was reached. This was denominated Operation 1, and was located on top of the archaeological trait denominated Burial 1; this operation was aimed at rescuing and documenting as much data as possible.

Like it was said earlier, Burial 1 was placed in the section of the south wall of the Verapaz River bank at an approximate height of 12 m from the surface. This section made it possible to observe the different stratigraphic layers, including the prehispanic occupation layer where the burial was found, composed of ceramic materials that included two pots (a spouted one and a phytomorphic one), a bowl, and bone remains (Figure 3).

- The thickness of the first layer ranged between 0.30 and 0.34 m, and consisted of topsoil containing organic materials such as roots and litter. This layer yielded no cultural material.
- The thickness of layer II ranged between 0.50 and 0.65 m, and consisted of the layer of tephra with pumice inclusions known as TBJ, from the eruption of the Ilopango volcano whose crater –today turned into a lake- is located 15 km west of Verapaz.
- The thickness of layer III ranged between 0.85 and 1.05 m, and consisted of a sand layer with stone and pebble inclusions; this layer yielded three ceramic fragments that were contemporary to the material of Burial 1, and it would seem that this layer corresponded to an old water flow that has cut the layer of prehispanic occupation.
- Layer IV, with a thickness varying from 0.45 to 0.50 cm, exposed the prehispanic occupation where Burial 1 was found. The earth was of a dark brown color, with dispersed pebbles and semi-packed.

Upon reaching the burial level, seven ceramic pieces of the offering were documented, found under the bone remains, apparently the humerus bone and the radius bone of an individual. Upon verifying that the archaeological trait was much

larger and that it extended towards west, it was decided to expand the operation to a dimension of 1.10 x 2.40 m. When the operation was expanded, additional ceramic and lithic (obsidian) offerings were found. The remains of a skull was discovered, probably from another individual, as it was placed 0.90 m away from the rest of the bones; these did not coincide in any anatomic position with the other bone remains, though the level where they were found was the same. Regrettably, it was not possible to record how these individuals had been buried, because part of the archaeological trait had been lost initially with the overflowing of part of the grounds where the study object was placed. In addition to the bone remains referred to, and in the scrambled earth, one small tooth was found, which after analysis proved to correspond to an infant of approximately 8 to 10 years of age. The state of preservation of the bone remains was very poor, and therefore, it was not possible to be specific or to obtain any adequate interpretation out of it.



**Figure 3. View of section of Burial 1 at the archaeological site of Verapaz. Layer I: humus; Layer II: tephra with inclusions of TBJ (Tierra Blanca Joven) pumice; Layer III: sand, with stones and pebbles; Layer IV: stratum of prehispanic occupation showing bone remains and ceramics, in a dark brown earth.**

The offering in Burial 1 included a total of 22 ceramic objects, in the form of jars, *tecomates*, bowls, dishes, ornamental objects and miscellanea. As to lithics, there were seven obsidian objects including flakes, blades, and spear points. In addition, an ornamental object was found consisting of a greenstone anthropomorphic pendant (Figure 4).

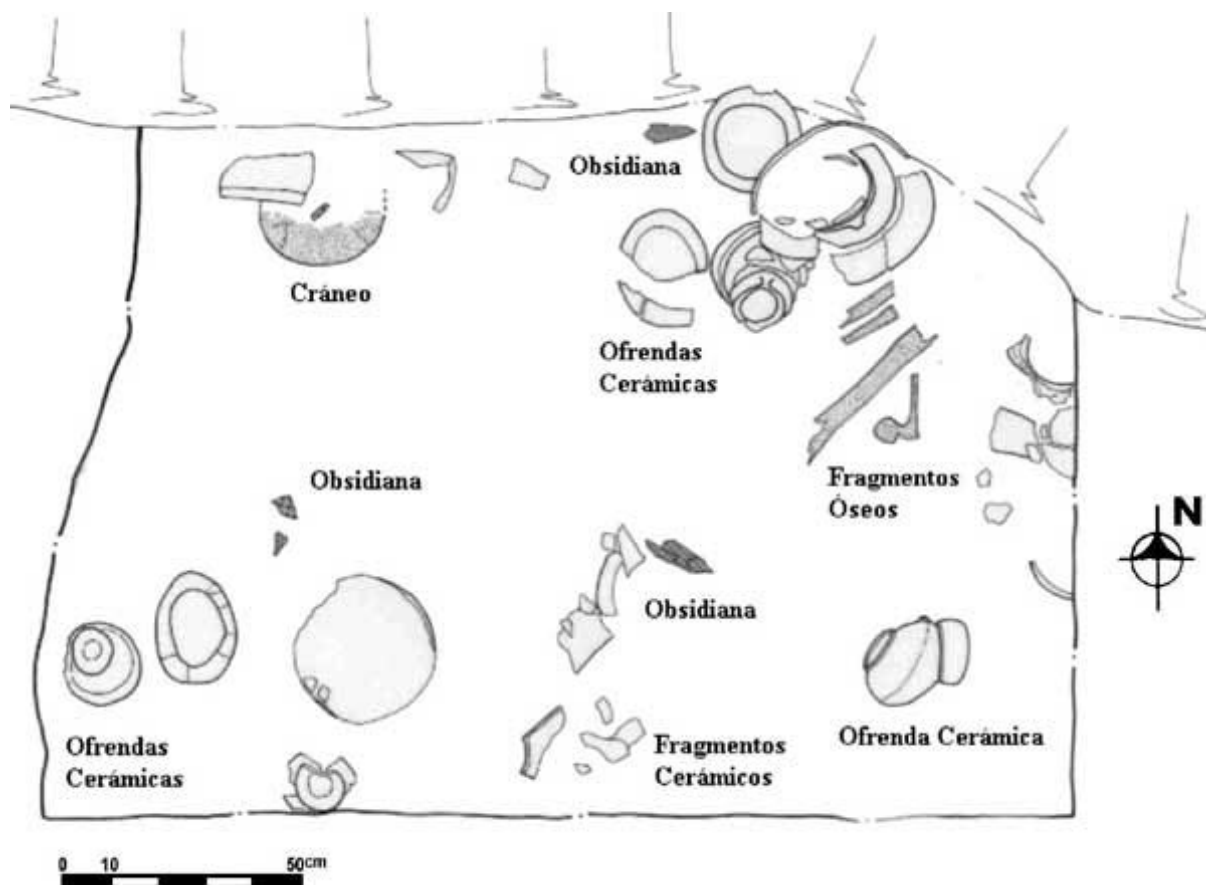
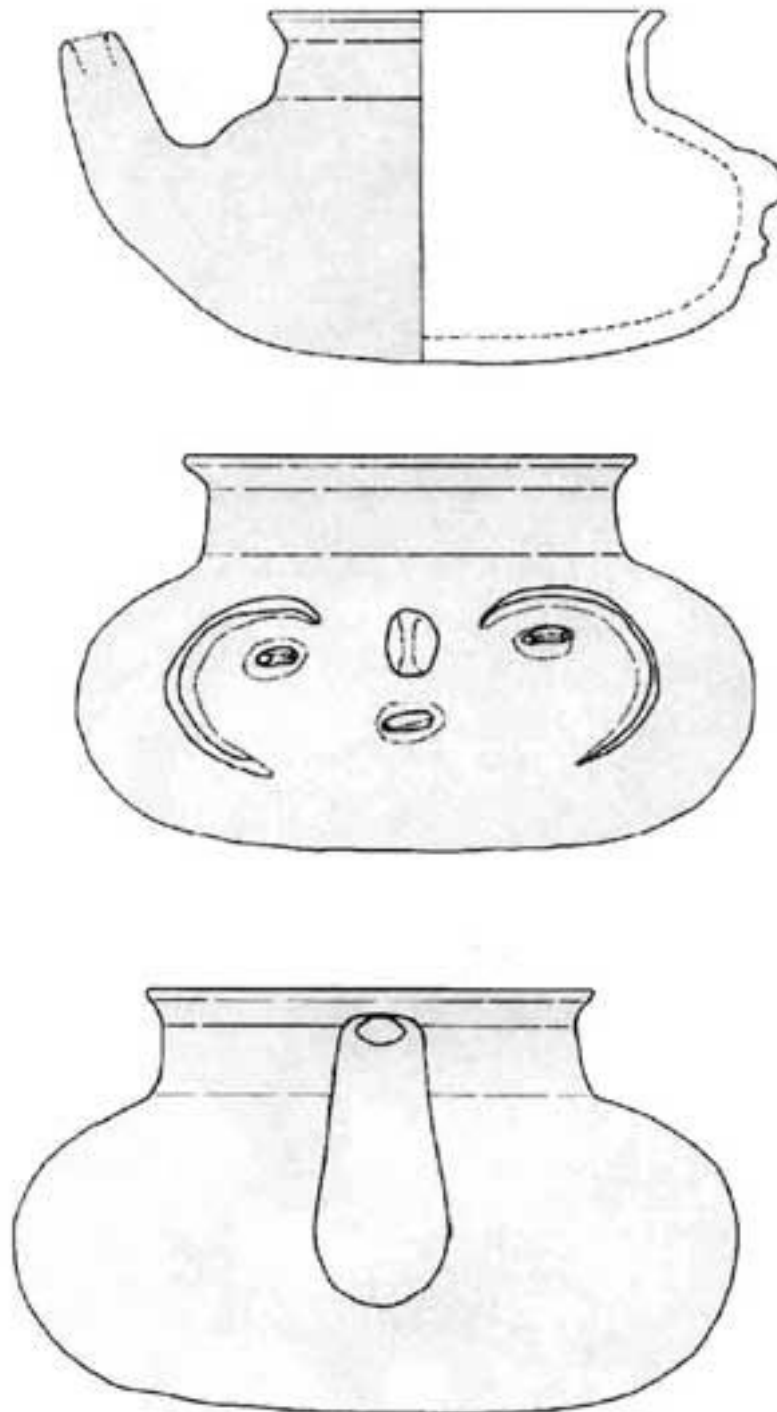


Figure 4. Ground plan of Burial 1 at the archaeological site of Verapaz, showing bone remains, ceramics and obsidian offered.

## THE VERAPAZ CERAMICS

In addition to the 22 ceramic objects of the offering found *in situ* in the Verapaz burial, many ceramic fragments were collected during the salvage operation. For the ceramic analysis, diagnostic fragments which could turn useful to identify its form and classify its type were selected. They were classified according to their surface treatment, decoration, size and shape (Figures 5, 6 and 7). A total of 72 rims were analyzed, 38 of which (or 53%) are orange on cream, with Usulután resist decoration; they correspond to the forms of pitchers, bowls and *tecomates*; 15 rims (or 21%) are orange on cream with Usulután resist decoration and with red paint on the rim, in the form of bowls and pitchers; other nine rims (or 13%) present a cream

slip, and correspond to the forms of pitchers and bowls; six additional rims (or 8%) are red on cream, with the form of bowls, and one other rim (or 1%) shows no slip and has the form of a bowl.



**Figure 5. Different views of the anthropomorphic spouted pitcher with Usulután decoration corresponding to the offering found at Burial 1 in the archaeological site of Verapaz.**



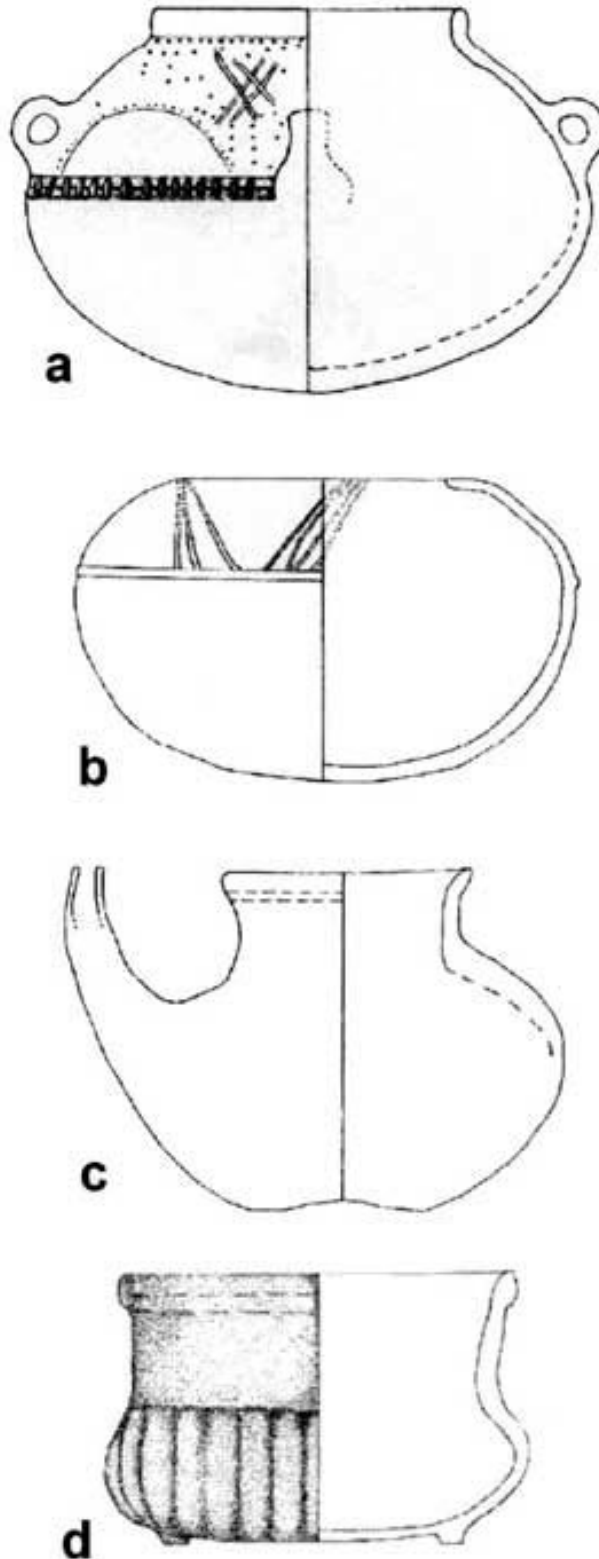


Figure 6. Ceramic piece of the offering found in Burial 1 at the archaeological site of Verapaz.

- a) *Tecomate* with four small handles, bichromatic, with punched decoration and incisions (21 cm x 14 cm and d = 10 cm);
- b) Bichrome *tecomate* with a decorated slip (26 cm x 14 cm and d = 10 cm);
- c) Usulután style spouted pitcher (height = 15 cm, and d = 11 cm);
- d) Tetrapode phytomorphic bowl (17 cm x 11 cm and d = 16 cm).

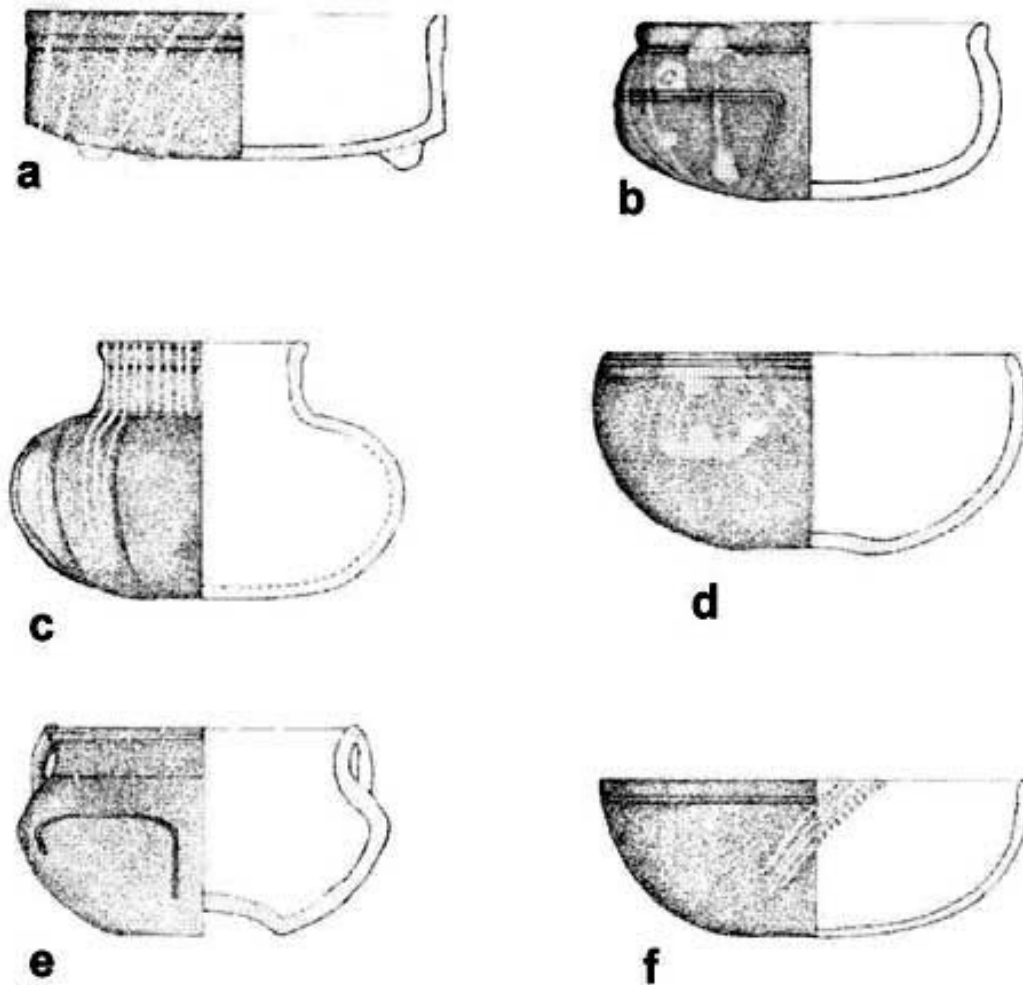


Figure 7. Ceramics included in the Burial 1 offering, archaeological site of Verapaz.

- a) Usulután style tetrapode bowl (height = 61 cm and d = 17 cm);
- b) Usulután style bowl with a convex base and curved-convergent walls (16 cm x 7.5 cm and d = 14 cm);
- c) Usulután style phytomorphic pitcher (ayote) (22 cm x 15 cm and d = 11 cm);
- d) Usulután style bowl with a concave base and curved-convergent walls (height = 10 cm, and d = 21 cm);
- e) Usulután style bowl with two small handles, concave base and curved-convergent walls (21 cm x 12 cm and d = 18 cm);
- f) Usulután style bowl with concave base and curved-convergent walls (height = 9 cm, and d = 24 cm).

## CONCLUSIONS

During the fieldwork conducted at the archaeological site of Verapaz, it was not possible to identify any type of prehispanic architecture; however, a prehispanic burial was identified and documented, as well as a low density concentration of cultural materials on the surface of the grounds adjacent to the archaeological trait.

The most important archaeological trait and the one that served as study object in the archaeological site of Verapaz, was the one denominated Burial 1. With the data obtained with the documentation and archaeological excavation, it was possible to interpret that this was a collective burial, probably of the primary type, constituted by two or more adult and infant individuals simultaneously buried, which included a ceramic offering of over 22 objects of varied forms and functions. At the same time, several lithic objects were recorded, varying from obsidian points to one greenstone anthropomorphic pendant.

It is important to emphasize that this archaeological trait is the burial that yielded the largest number of offering objects among all the Preclassic burials documented in El Salvador.

Based on the amount and quality of the objects recorded as offerings associated with the Verapaz Burial 1, it may be interpreted that the most important individual in this burial was a relevant personality, possibly buried simultaneously with several other individuals as a sacrifice from those who would accompany him in his journey to the underworld.

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- Figure 2 Location scheme of the archaeological investigation at the site of Verapaz, San Vicente, El Salvador
- Figure 3 View of section of Burial 1 at the archaeological site of Verapaz. Layer I: humus; Layer II: tephra with inclusions of TBJ (Tierra Blanca Joven) pumice; Layer III: sand, with stones and pebbles; Layer IV: stratum of prehispanic occupation showing bone remains and ceramics, in a dark brown earth.
- Figure 4 Ground plan of Burial 1 at the archaeological site of Verapaz, showing bone remains, ceramics and obsidian offered.
- Figure 5 Different views of the anthropomorphic spouted pitcher with Usulután decoration corresponding to the offering found at Burial 1 in the archaeological site of Verapaz.
- Figure 6 Ceramic piece of the offering found in Burial 1 at the archaeological site of Verapaz. a) *Tecomate* with four small handles, bichromatic, with punched decoration and incisions (21 cm x 14 cm and d = 10 cm); b) Bichrome *tecomate* with a decorated slip (26 cm x 14 cm and d = 10 cm); c) Usulután style spouted pitcher (height = 15 cm, and d = 11 cm); d) Tetrapode phytomorphic bowl (17 cm x 11 cm and d = 16 cm).
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