

THE OFFERING OF THE CENSER NAMED “LA NIÑA”

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The offering of an extraordinary censer accompanied by other artifacts discovered in Structure 7 at Tak'alik Ab'aj (Figure 1), was found in a crucial stratigraphic location for the interpretation of the final occupation of this structure. It has been chronologically placed by the end of the Late Classic period, and has produced information about the nature of the final history of this ancient city. The nature and arrangement of the vessels deposited during the ritual offering feature characteristics of other offerings found at the site, reflecting the formal concepts of a ritual tradition that has lived on throughout the ages and the innovations.

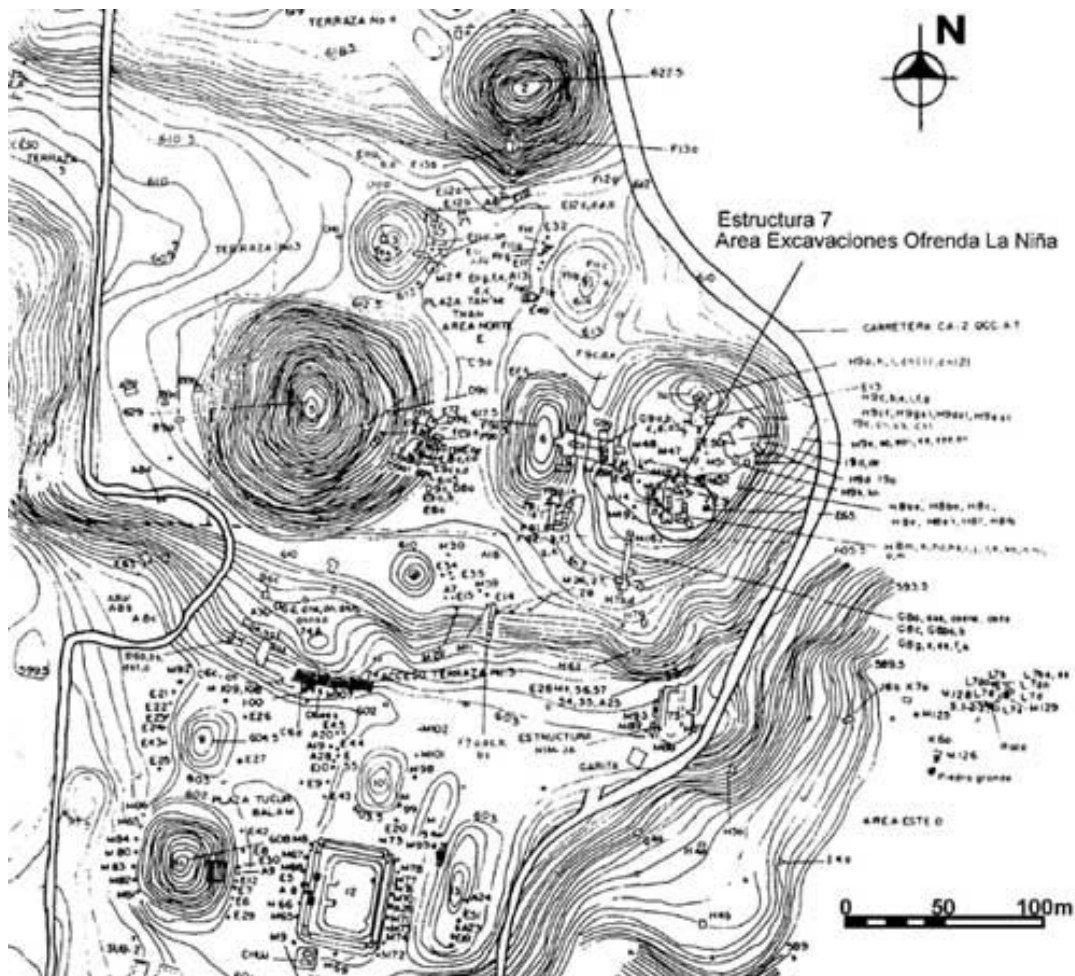


Figure 1. Map of the Main Group, Tak'alik Ab'aj.

In previous years, scholars had come to the conclusion that the first archaeological stratum usually encountered in these excavations was practically present throughout the site, and corresponded to the final stage of Tak'alik Ab'aj's history. The ceramic recovered in the stratum denominated Lot 5, a micaceous dark brown earth, poor in sand, and pasty, had yielded a dating to the Late Classic period mixed with the Postclassic period. This "response" was unsatisfactory and of no help to cast some light on the last chapter of Tak'alik Ab'aj's history.

DISCOVERY OF THE CENSER NAMED "LA NIÑA"

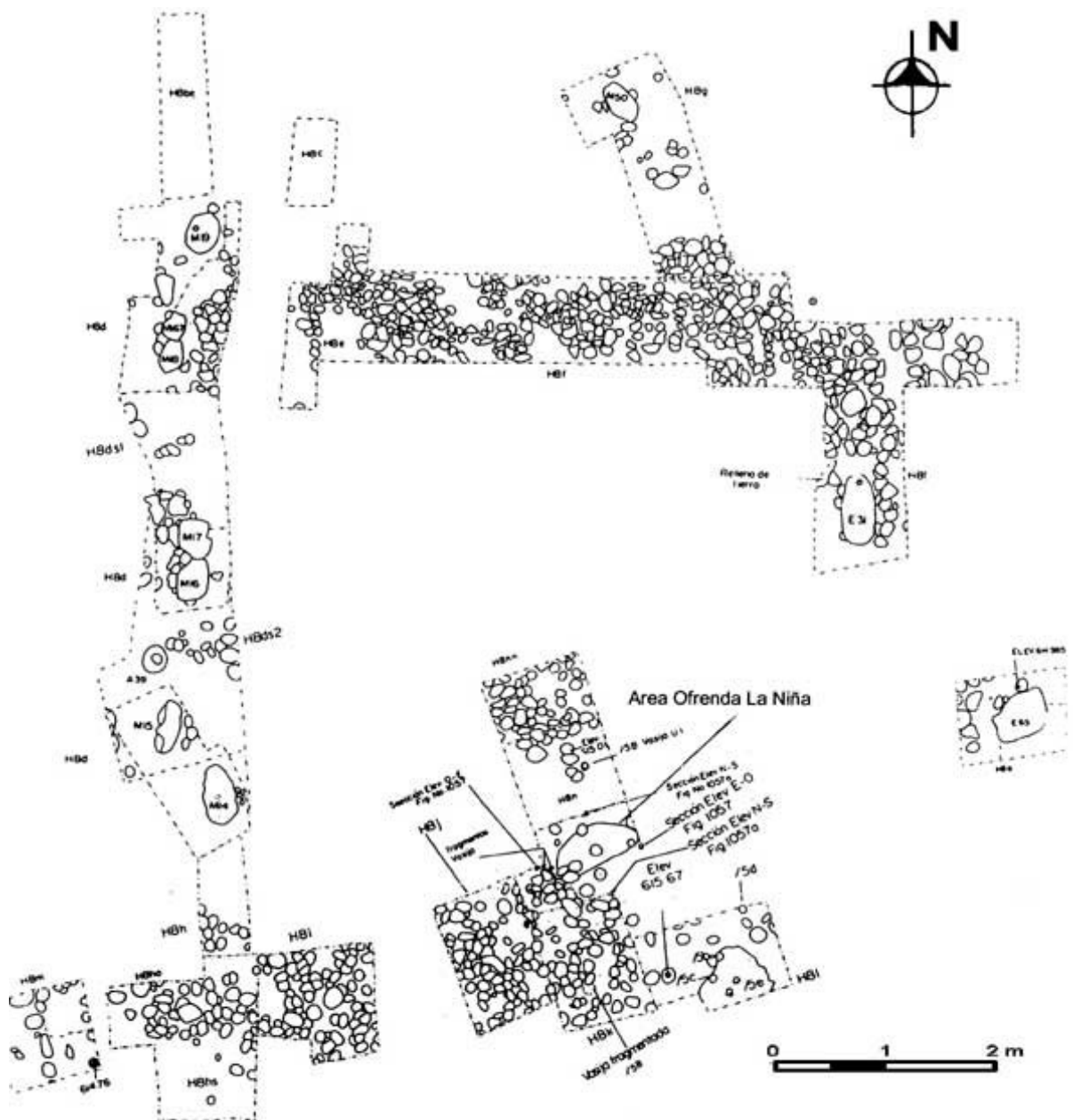


Figure 2. Ground plan of Structure 7.

In the year 2003, the excavation works conducted in the south sector of the surface of the grand platform of Structure 7 was intended to establish an accurate date for the final occupation of this sacred building, whose building history began in the Middle Preclassic period with a solid construction of mud, and was followed by successive versions that included cobblestone linings in the Late Preclassic, Early Classic and Late Classic periods (Figure 2). This final version revealed a cobblestone lining that covered the south half of the platform's surface, starting in the central monument alignment and extending towards east. In the area between the central and east monument alignments and during the excavation of the stone lining, this censer was found and given the name of "La Niña" by the excavators (Figure 3), not only for the girlish aspect of the figure applied on the cylinder of the censer but also because the excavations also uncovered miniature vessels and tripod cups, the latter of which had modelled human faces.



Figure 3. Drawing of the censer named La Niña.

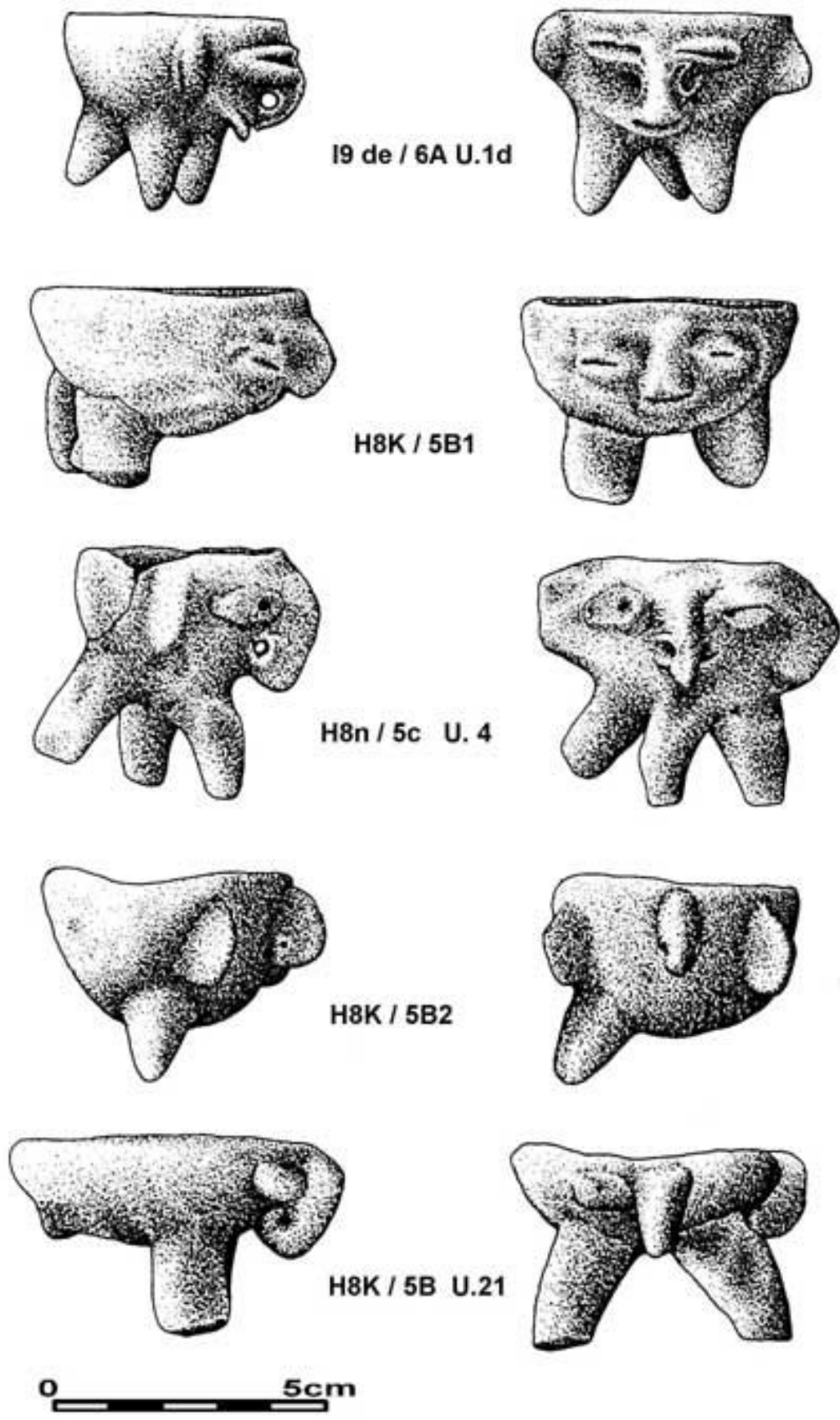


Figure 4. Drawing of miniature tripod cups with modelled human faces.

This cylindrical censer made with red paste and pumice –a paste typical of the local ceramic tradition of Ocosito- supported in its upper part a dish set on three supports; the blackened areas show that fire was once burnt under the dish. The total height is of 0.50 cm, and the diameter of the cylinder's base is of 0.30 m. The cylinder is decorated with appliquéés that depict a female figure. At the sides, two extended holes help to seize the censer. The peculiar miniature tripod cups found with the censer have an average diameter of 3.2 cm, and a height of 3.3 cm (Figure 4). At one side of the body of the wall, the pieces present the effigy of a modelled human face, with almond and protruding eyes with a horizontal line in the middle, and prominent nose and ears.

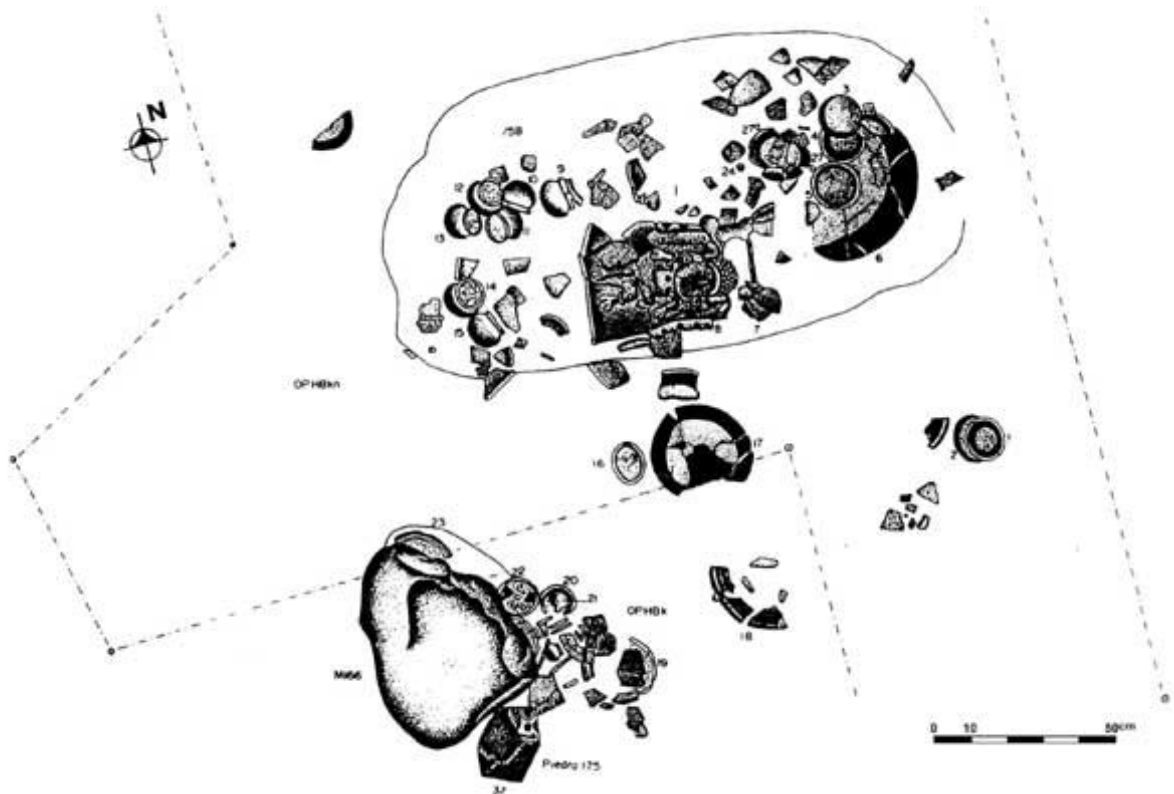


Figure 5. Ground plan of the offering named La Niña.

The censer known as La Niña is the major piece in an offering of 66 objects deposited in a sequential order (Figure 5). The group of artifacts in the offering includes the following:

- 17 dishes (25%)
- 16 bowls (23%)
- ten miniature vessels (14%)
- four miniature tripod cups with effigy of a human face (6%)
- four miniature tripod vessels (6%)
- four ceramic discs (6%)
- three miniature bowls (3%)
- two cylindrical vases (3%)
- one jadeite fragment

- one sculpture fragment
- one sculpted monument of a turtle
- one black bead
- the cylindrical censer named La Niña

The complete assemblage of miniatures amounts to 22 pieces which represent 33% of the offering. The dishes and bowls altogether represent 33 pieces, with 50%, while the remaining 11 pieces, including the censer of La Niña amount to 17%. The relation of 11, 22 and 33 are arithmetic proportions. Half of the pieces in the offering are represented by the dishes and bowls, half of these are represented by the miniatures, and half of the latter ones, in turn, are represented by the individual artifacts. In relation to the amounts of the pieces themselves, the repetition of number four is surprising.

THE OFFERING OF THE CENSER NAMED “LA NIÑA” AND ITS STRATIGRAPHIC RELATION

By the end of the Late Classic period, the ancient inhabitants of Tak'alik Ab'aj dug a space in the soil of 1.62 m in an east-west direction, and 0.86 m in a north-south direction, with a depth of 0.59 cm from the surface of the main platform in Structure 7 (Figure 6). In this cavity they deposited the pieces of the offering, and then the censer named “La Niña”. Apparently, the final phase of the ceremony in the ritual offering required a larger space, and then the deposit of the pieces was expanded around the cavity, directly on the level of the surface. The ceramic study completed by Marion Popenoe de Hatch, has revealed that the pieces in this offering as well as the ceramic material from the soil that contained it, correspond for the most part to the Ocosito Tradition of the Late Classic period, together with a small amount of material affiliated to the K'iche' ethnic group. Subsequently, on top of this offering, a stone lining was built on a levelling whose floor corresponds to the lower portion of Lot 5, which in turn corresponds to the final version of the construction history of this building. In this soil, the pattern of the Late Classic Ocosito material is predominant, while a smaller amount of K'iche' ceramics is present. On the pavement lies the upper portion of the stratum of Lot 5, which presents a considerable smaller amount of ceramics of the Ocosito Tradition, with a predominance of K'iche' materials from the Postclassic period.

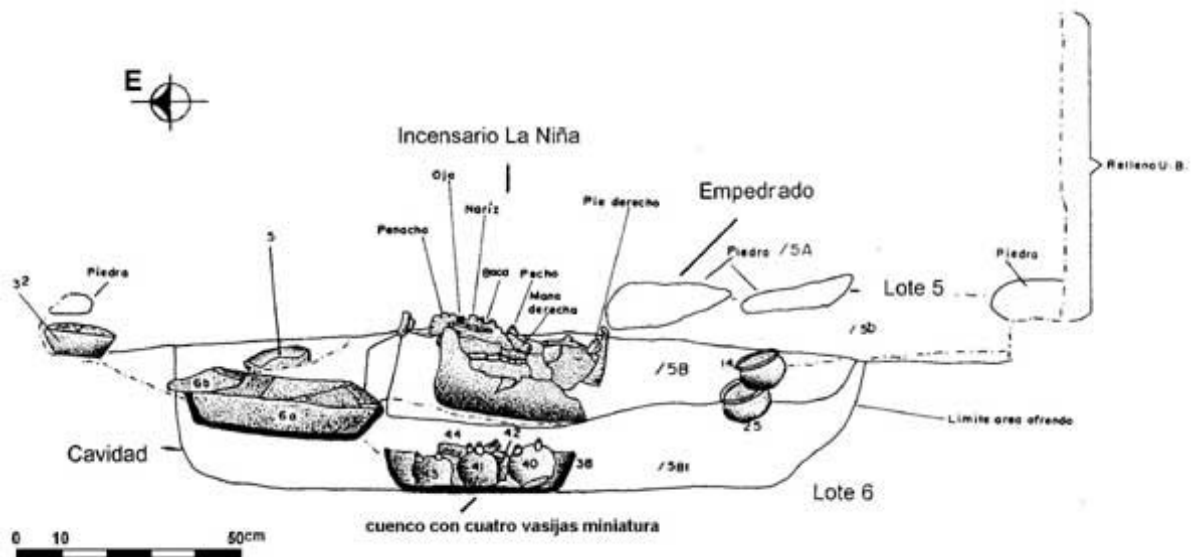


Figure 6. Profile of the east-west section of the offering of La Niña.

The almost intact condition of the offering of La Niña and its location between the surface of the grand Late Classic platform and its final remodelling with the construction of the cobblestone lining (Figure 7), suggests that this offering represents a sacralization ritual of the new construction. This new construction, jointly with the other ones built in the city, may be of a considerable importance if we consider that this was a time of revitalization, when the testimonies of the greatness of its extended history were, literally, being recovered. One immediate example to the offering of La Niña is the central and east monument alignments that were to maintain their meaning –or a remembrance of it- by being integrated to this version.

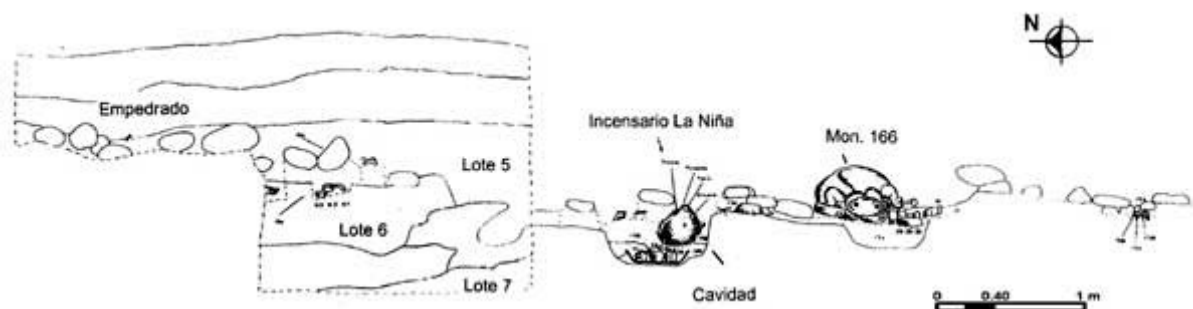


Figure 7. Profile of the east-west section of the La Niña offering.

THE “BINNACLE” IN THE OFFERING OF LA NIÑA

The documentation of the offering records the sequence of the pieces deposited in the course of the ceremonial ritual (Figure 8). First, at the bottom and center of the cavity, a large dish with four miniature tripod vessels was deposited in an upside down position; the location of these four pieces suggests a simulation of the four

cardinal directions with a north-south axis of 0° for the magnetic north, and 85° after an east-west direction. At the center of the space between the four vessels, and also in an upside down position, a miniature vessel was deposited, and on top of it, a small dish. Around and on top of the large dish, the soil matrix presented abundant charcoal, caused by the intense ceremonial activity. As the ritual went on, a large dish with another one in an inverted position, the lid, were deposited in the eastern section; in the central eastern part a ceramic disc was further deposited, as well as two miniature vessels at west. On top of them and in the west area, another deposit of seven miniature vessels was put in place, as well as three dishes, one black bead and three bowls, in the east area. Then, the censer, in a horizontal position with the head to the east and the feet to the north, was deposited.

The arrangement of the pieces around the space dug suggests that at that time the ceremonial activity was expanded, to cover an area of 3.50 m from north to south, and 2.25 m from east to west, where additional offerings were deposited in the southwest area, and in the north and south ends. Among these pieces, and in the southwest area, our attention was attracted towards a miniature bowl containing a miniature tripod cup with the effigy of a human face and two bowls containing a ceramic disc respectively, plus a miniature bowl and a fragment of stela with remains of early Maya iconography. Close to the south edge of the pit, a bowl was deposited with eight small cobblestones in the inside, together with another bowl with a small stone. Finally, and on the southwest group, a small monument was placed (No. 166), a cobblestone whose contour was sculpted to create the representation of a turtle (Figure 10).

On the south end, two miniature tripod cups with the effigy of a human face were deposited, together with one hexagonal ceramic disc inside a bowl covered by another one that served as a lid. In turn, the north end revealed a miniature tripod cup with the effigy of a human face, as well as a vase, one miniature bowl, and two fragments of cylindrical vases with pedestals, one with spikes, resembling those of a ceiba tree, and one fragment of jadeite. In addition, there was an alignment of four cobblestones with an orientation of 32° northeast.



Figure 8. Drawing and outline, offering of La Niña.

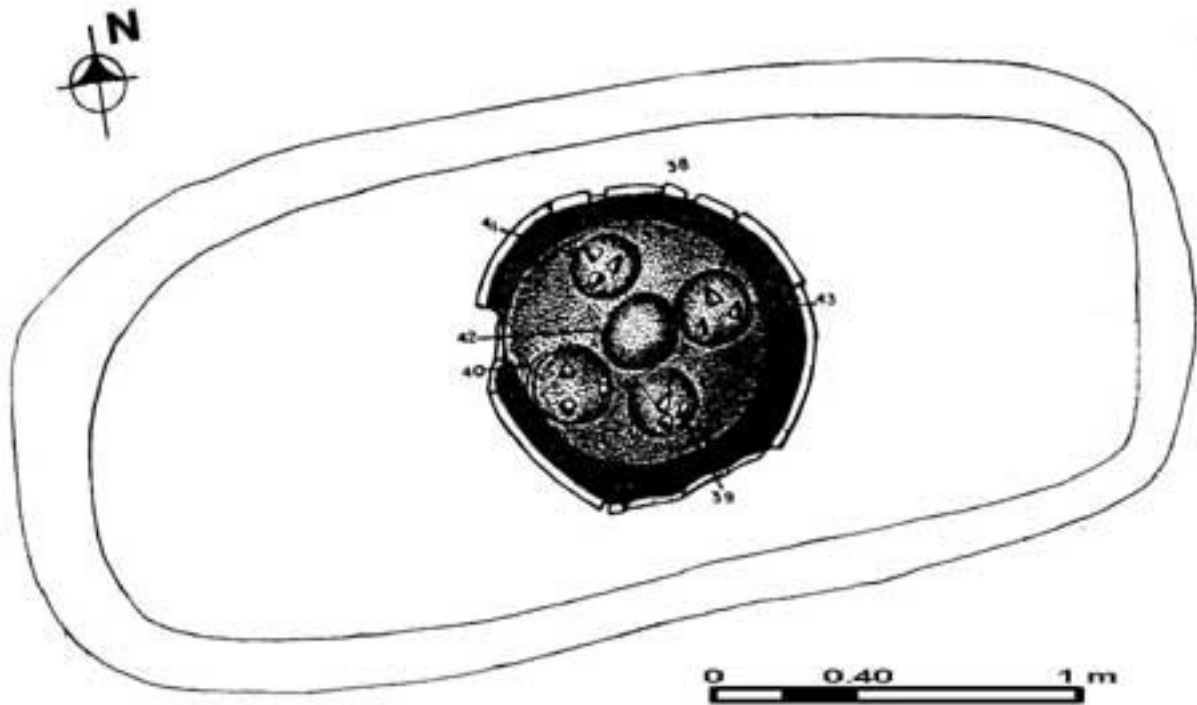


Figure 9. Plan of bowl with four miniature tripod vessels, offering of La Niña.

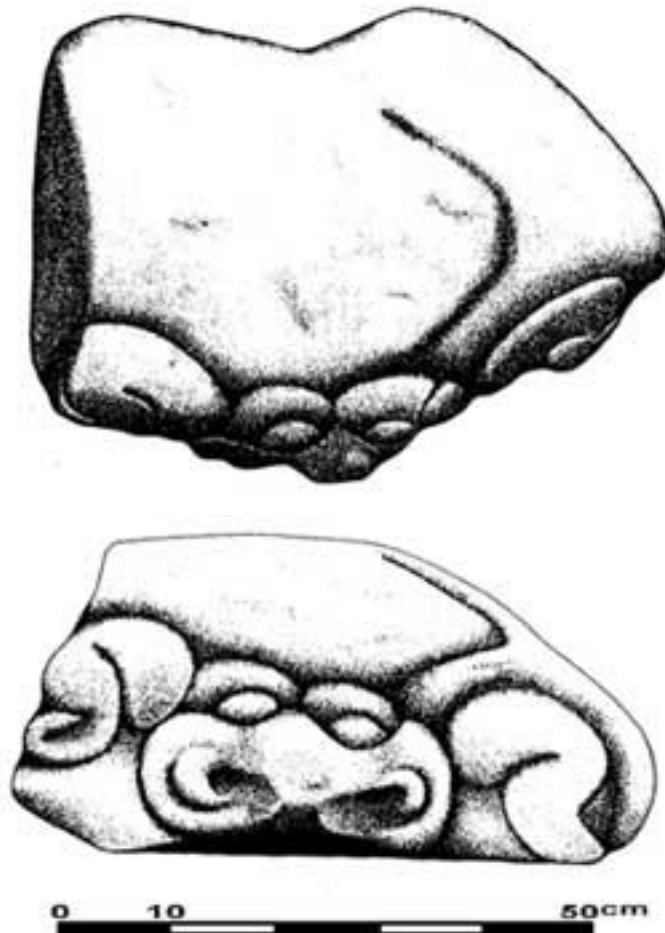


Figure 10. Drawing of Monument 165, the "Turtle".

A RITUAL TRADITION?

This offering presents several particularities that were not recorded in previously discovered offerings, such as the grand offering dedicated to Stela 13, with hundreds of pieces dating to the end of the Late Preclassic period (Schieber 2001). Moreover, it was possible to recognize characteristics here that are present in the offering of La Niña. The arrangement of pieces forming a unity in an offering, as is the case of the large bowl with the miniatures simulating the cardinal directions (Figure 9), has also been documented in an offering discovered in Structure 61A, Terrace 5, which includes a set of four obsidian blades in the form of a rhombus, also suggesting an allusion to the four cardinal directions (Wolley 2000). This characteristic is not present in any Preclassic offering that we know of.

The miniature vessel and particularly the miniature tripod cup with modelled human faces has been found in another contemporary offering on the surface of Structure 7B (Vela 2003), but never in earlier offerings.

The placement of very small cobblestones (Figure 8), of which there was a substantial amount in the offering of Stela 13 (Schieber 2002), and at times the presence of these small stones in Middle Preclassic contexts (interior of Structure 7A), seems to be a habit that continued to exist up to the Late Classic period, like in the case of the offering of La Niña.

Censers with spikes (Figure 7) like the one found deposited in front of Stela 13 (Schieber 2002), have continued in the Late Classic period, as suggested by the presence of one fragment of a cylindrical vase with a red paste pedestal, and very similar spikes. Finally, the ceramic discs with central perforation (Figure 9) that caught our attention in the offering of Stela 13 (Schieber 2002) are also present in this offering, made more than 700 years later.

During the Preclassic period, the ceramic and obsidian offerings evidenced a predominance of odd numbers, while even numbers, like number four, appeared in the Classic (see Crasborn, this volume). These particularities make us hypothesize on the possible existence of formal numbers in the ritual tradition of Tak'alik Ab'aj, one that lasted for centuries, parallel to the innovations that enhanced the range of characteristics of the offering, without necessarily replacing the existing ones. Such behaviour would seem to be quite close to the one observed from an overall point of view, where it is seen that ancient values were not discarded but instead, they were remembered and cherished, despite some overwhelming changes of thought, like for example the transition from the Olmec to the Maya ages (Popenoe de Hatch 2002; Schieber 2004).

THE CENSER KNOWN AS LA NIÑA: “DAUGHTER” OF A CRITICAL HISTORIC TIME

In the Early Classic period (250-600 AD), the regional events shadowed the dynamic trajectory of Tak'alik Ab'aj. The development of early Maya cultural expressions ceased at the end of the Late Preclassic period, in this and other contemporary cities of the southern Maya area, such as Kaminaljuyu, apparently as a consequence of the collapse of the grand long distance commercial route, which gave these centers wealth, power and intellectual stimulus.

The Late Classic times in Tak'alik Ab'aj were peculiar and interesting. The remains reflect the efforts of this society to overcome the collapse and make progress in its development, establishing new links for commercial exchange, remodelling the ancient buildings and turning once again to the successful achievements of earlier times. As an example, we could refer to the reutilization of sculpted monuments from the early Maya times integrated in the construction of a canal on the south façade of Structure 7 (see Marroquín, this volume). The plazas and buildings in this city also represented a museum created by the ancient inhabitants, who decided to rescue and recognize the achievements that had made their city grow, making of it one of the most important ones in Mesoamerica.

It was at this time when the ceremony was conducted with the deposit of the offering of the censer La Niña, anticipating new remodelling works in Structure 7 with the cobblestone lining, thus reflecting in architecture the rebirth of the city. Tak'alik Ab'aj had contacts with the peoples of the Solano Tradition in the Northwestern Altiplano, who kept Kaminaljuyu under their control (Popenoe de Hatch 2003). This important position and probably the first indication of the will of expansion on the side of this people in the search of the precious cacao, suggests that Tak'alik Ab'aj was negotiating or trying to come to some sort of an agreement. In the course of such negotiations, the stone lining was built. Nevertheless, and apparently for the first time in Tak'alik Ab'aj's history, negotiations failed and the city fell under the expanding vehemence of the K'iche' peoples (see Popenoe de Hatch, this volume). The ethnohistoric sources provide an account of these conquests and of the lamentation of the Mam for the loss of these lands, which had “always” been theirs (Popenoe de Hatch *et al.* 2001), and possibly because of this, when Pedro de Alvarado crossed the region, he remained ignorant of this legendary city (Díaz del Castillo 1986: 410-411).

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