

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE YALAHAU REGION: PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE 2003-2004 FIELD SEASON

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The region of Yalahau is located in the northeastern portion of the Yucatan Peninsula, in the state of Quintana Roo, Mexico (Figure 1). This region is characterized by abundant rainfalls that add up approximately to 2000 mm per year, or almost twice as much the rainfalls of the remaining north of the peninsula (Isphording 1975:244). These important rainfall levels have contributed to the formation of a number of depressions that extend along a system of geological faults known as the Holbox fracture zone (Tulaczyk et al. 1993). The combination of these factors resulted in the formation of wetlands or savannas that characterize this peculiar area of the peninsula. The savannas extend approximately 50 km from the north coast towards south, and have an east-to-west range of approximately 40 km (Fedick 1998: 109-110). Since 1993, research accomplished by members of the Yalahau Regional Human Ecology Project has produced new information on several archaeological sites, caves, causeways and other cultural traits of the region (Amador and Fedick 2002; Amador and Glover 2001, 2002; Fedick and Mathews 2001; Fedick and Taube 1995; Glover and Amador 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Mathews 1999; Rissolo 1998).

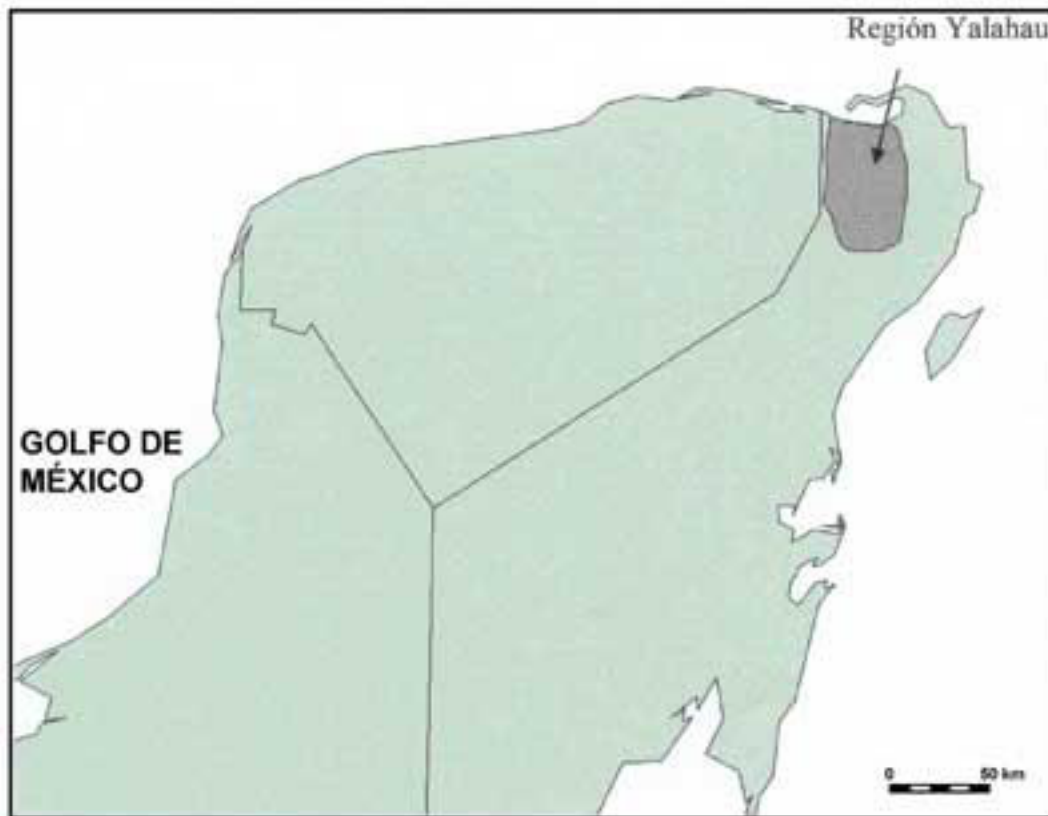


Figure 1. Localization of the Yalahau region in the northeastern Yucatan peninsula.

RECENT INVESTIGATIONS

Since 1999, Jeffrey Clover and Fabio Esteban Amador have been working on two cultural aspects of the region: settlement patterns and site chronology within the region, with the purpose of gaining understanding on the dynamics of the ancient societies that inhabited this region for more than two thousand years. The study area in the Yalahau region was delimited on the basis of a cushioning area of approximately 20 km off the savannas, probably the distance travelled in one day by its ancient inhabitants (Kepecs et al. 1994; Kepecs 1999:51). Altogether, the study area comprises approximately 5000 km². To this day, 48 unknown sites have been documented, while other ones previously documented by Sanders (1955, 1960) and other members of the Yalahau Project were revisited, yielding a total of 67 sites which will be incorporated into the study (Figure 2).

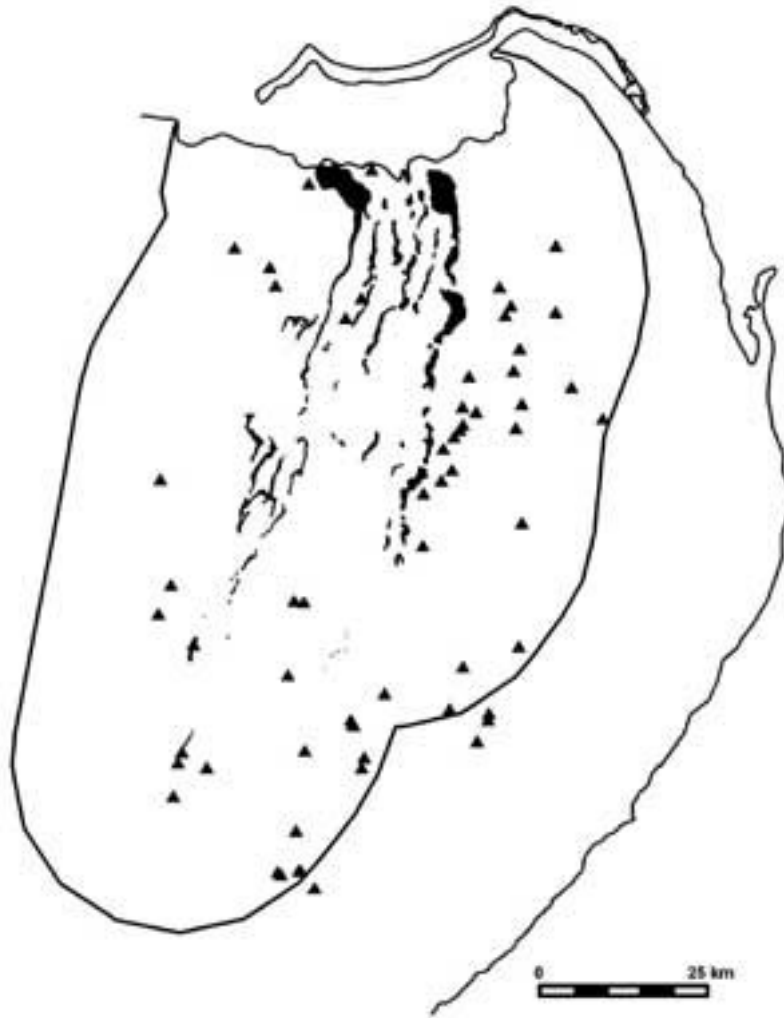


Figure 2. Sites integrating the regional project studies.

THE STUDY OF THE SETTLEMENT PATTERN

The purpose of the investigations carried out in regard to the settlement pattern is to evaluate four conceptual frameworks connected with the spatial distribution of the administrative centers in the Yalahau region, to gain knowledge on socio-political complexity. The patterns to be evaluated are: the Decentralized Autonomous Pattern (Figure 3a), the Centralized Pattern (Figure 3b), the Peripheral Pattern (Figure 3c), and the East-West Corridor Pattern (Figure 3d; Adams and Jones 1981; Ball and Taschek 1991; Chase and Chase 1996:805; Demarest 1992; Fox 1987; Fox and Cook 1996; Marcus 1993; Martin and Grube 1995, and Ringle 1999). These patterns are not mutually exclusive, and it is possible that a combination of them was in force at the same time. Maya political organization should be considered a *continuum* where the centralized and decentralized systems existed at contemporary times and at different places, within a region the size of Yalahau (Freidel 1983; Leach 1954 and Marcus 1993).

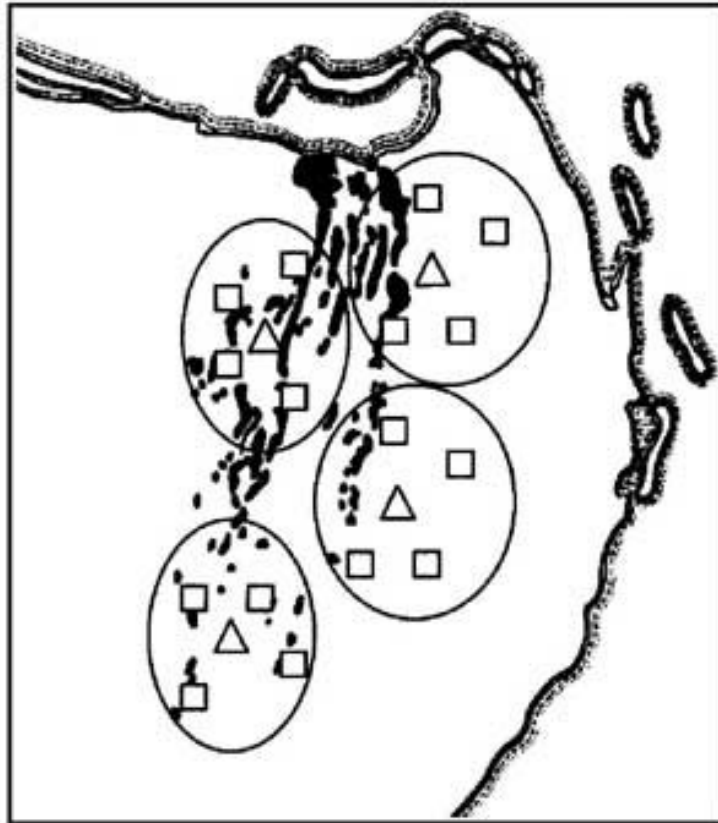


Figure 3a. Four patterns of political organization: Decentralized Autonomous.

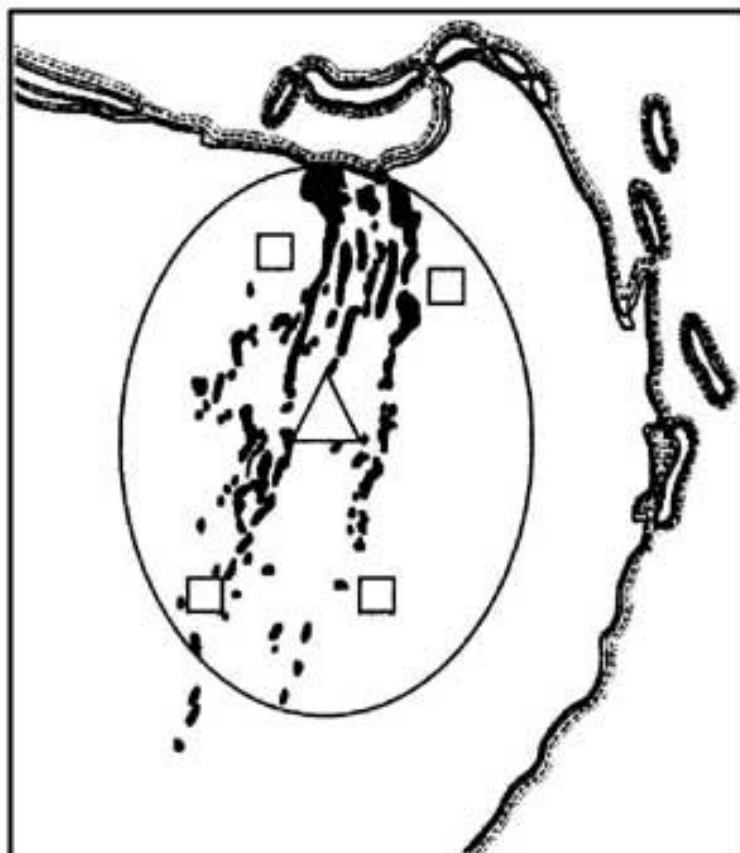


Figure 3b. Four patterns of political organization: Centralized.

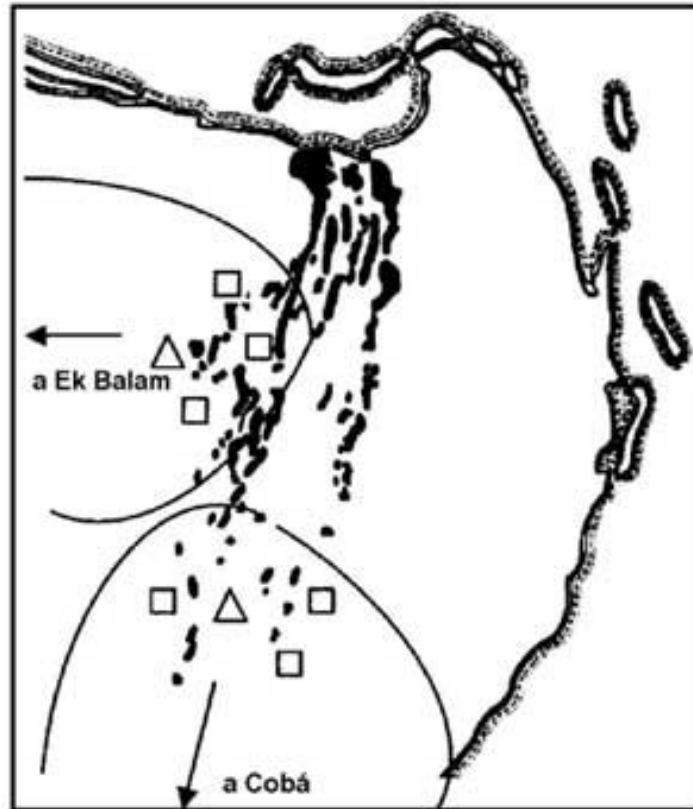


Figure 3c. Four patterns of political organization: Peripheral.

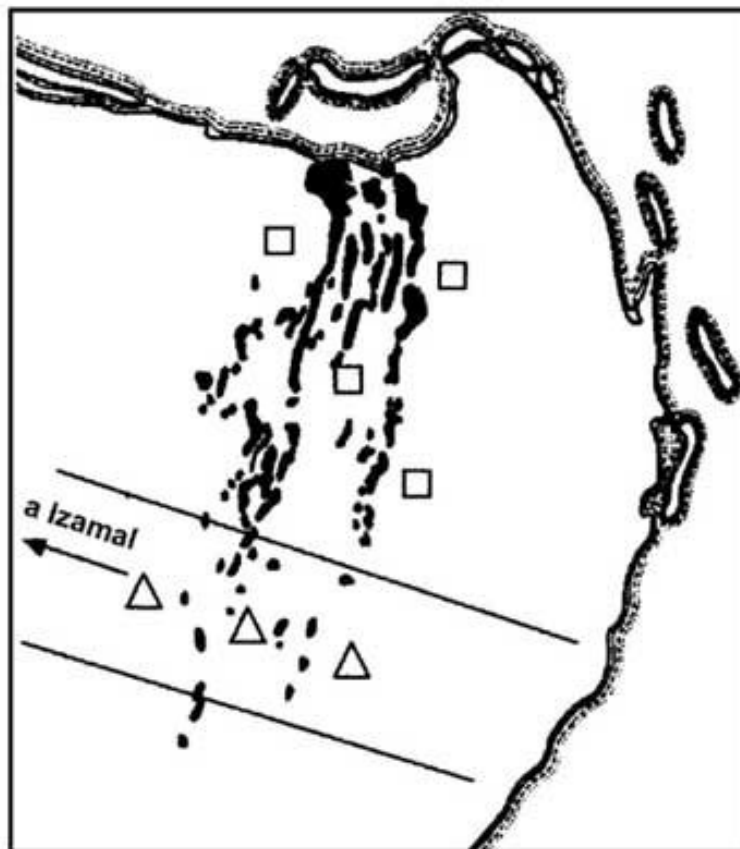


Figure 3d. Four patterns of political organization: East/West Corridor.

The study of the settlement pattern was focused on the architectural survey of sites within the region. The sites have been identified through surface reconnaissance, interviews with local informants, and tours in areas that were cleared of vegetation. Sites from different areas within the region have been documented with a total station, GPS, and the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), for the digitalization, organization and analysis of the field data. Other sites, instead, were documented with GPS, compass and metric tape to outline preliminary plans of their architecture.

CERAMIC STUDIES

The first step in the ceramic studies consisted in carrying out a surface collection whenever this was possible in previously unknown sites: 34 sites and four cenotes have provided surface ceramic information (Figure 4). Eight of these sites were selected for excavation based on their location or geographic shift within the region and according to the magnitude of the monumental architecture present at each site. The purpose was to obtain site samples, not only in different areas with respect to the savannas, but also in sites with different architectural characteristics (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Location of sites with surface collection.

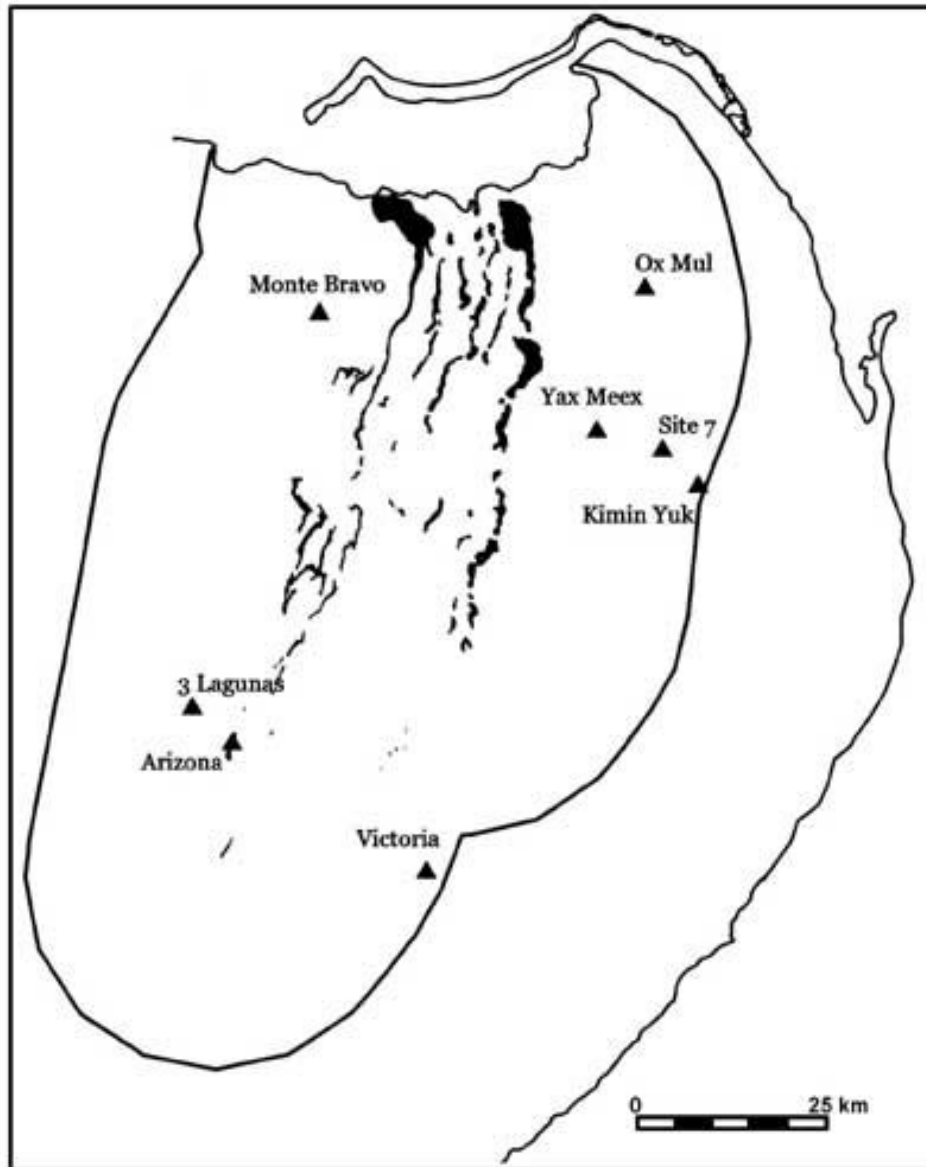


Figure 5. Location of the excavated sites.

Once this stage was completed, an excavation program was initiated outside the monumental architecture of the eight sites. Unfortunately, we were unable to excavate inside the structures due to the lack of permits, time restraints and funding, and therefore, the work was limited to provide a relative chronology of the sites. However, there is certainty in that which concerns the ceramic groups, and we are widely confident about the method of analysis, which will result in a strong analytic foundation for future works in the area. The main goal of the ceramic study consists in creating a regional chronology, for the first time. Once the chronology is established, it will be possible to evaluate patterns of cultural change, extension and duration of the spheres of interaction and exchange, as well as proposed migration patterns, among other investigations. This project represents the first step in the incorporation, participation and development of the ancient societies that inhabited the region of Yalahau within the cultural traditions of the Northern Maya Lowlands.

MIDDLE PRECLASSIC PERIOD

The Middle Preclassic ceramic materials originated in excavations and surface collections have been documented for the sites that follow: Ox Mul, Nohoch Pich, Yax Meex, Site 19, Site 7, Kimin Yuk, Site 15, Victoria, Arizona, Tres Lagunas, Site 17, Actun Pech, Actun Pak Chen, Actun Toh and Chiquila. The occurrence of the ceramic groups Juventud, Chunhinta, Dzudzuquil, Achiote and Kin in these sites, provides evidence of an early population that shared the pottery of the Nabanche complex, established for Komchen, in western Yucatan (Andrews 1988, 1989; Ball 1978:122).

However, the dates of these ceramic groups established for Komchen for the Middle Preclassic period, do not necessarily apply to the eastern region of the peninsula. These early materials point to the presence and continuity of a ceramic tradition or transition phase from the Middle to the Late Preclassic periods (Figure 6). We were unable to study the architecture of these earlier occupations because they are buried under later constructions not yet accessed by us. This is an aspect that future studies will have to take into consideration.

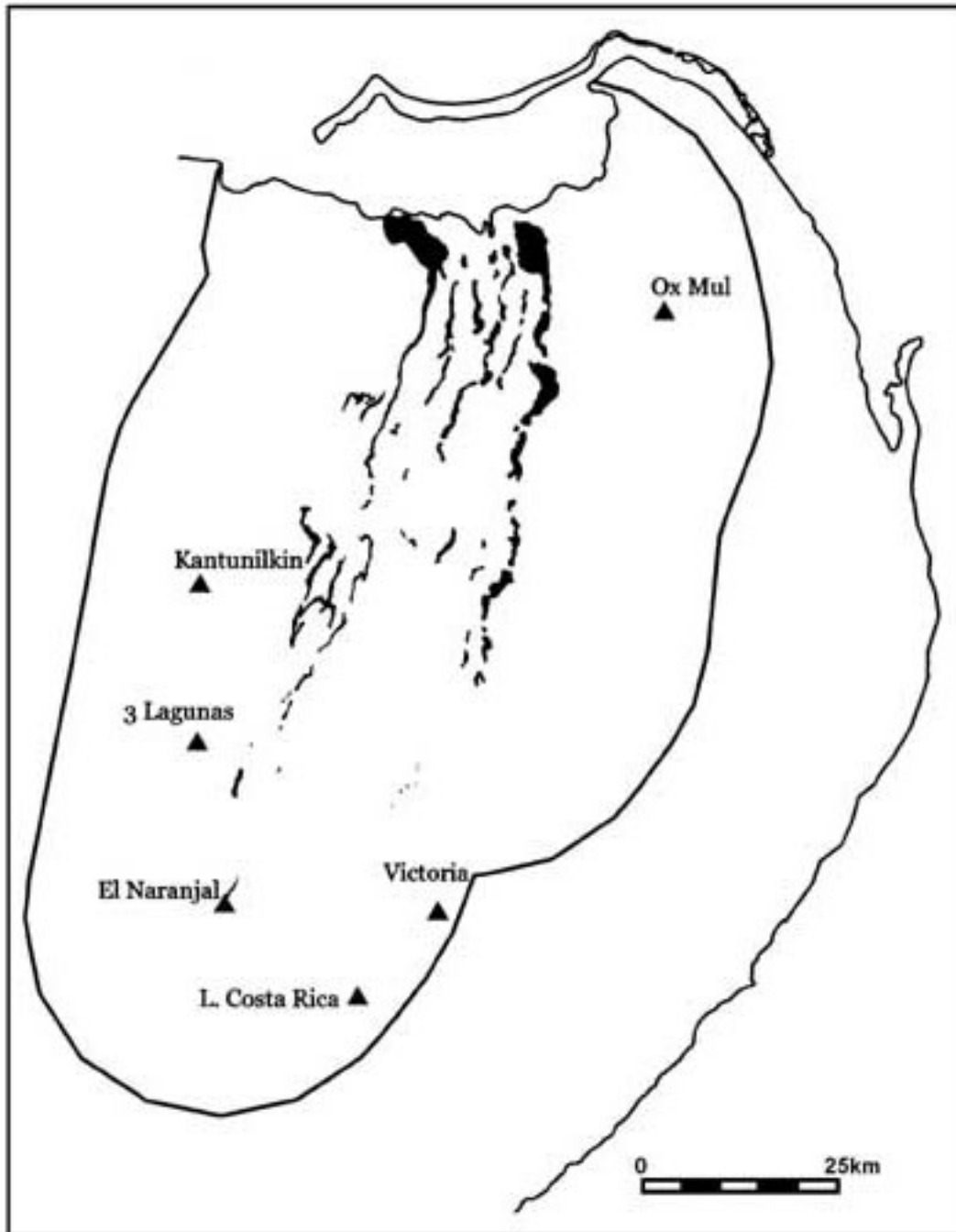


Figure 6. Location of sites featuring the megalithic architectural style.

LATE PRECLASSIC PERIOD

The Late Preclassic period has been and still is a concept difficult to deal with in northern Quintana Roo, as there are only two strong ceramic markers: the Sierra group, and the Tanchah group. The Sierra group, for example, was found in 33 sites and four cenotes explored in the region. However, the Engobe Light variety differs from the Sierra variety used in the Southern Lowlands, Peten and Belize, as a Late Preclassic marker (Figure 4). In fact, the Sierra group exhibits a number of variations

regarding its shapes, as it incorporates lip and basal flanges in the bowls, more characteristic of the Early Classic period. Moreover, materials of the Sierra group occur in the excavation pits, jointly with diagnostic materials of the Early Classic period, such as the bichromes Carolina and Huachinango, and the Saban, Xanaba and Cetelac groups, among others.

The problem for establishing a period of occupation for the Late Preclassic lies in the absence of absolute dates or excavation levels with a clear separation between the materials generalized for the Late Preclassic (Sierra and Tancah) and the diagnostic materials of the Early Classic period (Carolina, Huachinango, Saban, etc). Then the question raises: is this a sampling problem, considering that the excavations were conducted only outside the structures?, is it a part of a yet not well defined peninsular problem?, or, are the Sierra and bichrome groups from the Yalahau region the result of a contemporary regional development originated in some earlier tradition? It is possible that just like the Middle Preclassic materials, the Sierra and Tancah ceramic groups of the Yalahau region could be expressing a transition from one period to the other, or in other words, a temporal and dynamic process between two periods solidly established and accepted. In terms of the architecture, no definition exists for the time being of an exclusive architectural style for this period, as the structures are buried under later constructions.

EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD

In spite of the problems involved in establishing a Preclassic occupation in the region as a consequence of the mix of Late Preclassic and Early Classic materials, it is possible to say, with certainty, that sites show that the greater occupation took place during the Early Classic period (Figure 4). For now, we shall refer to the eight sites that have yielded rich ceramic information and where architectural surveys were conducted. Jointly with the ceramic data, it is possible to date an architectural style defined as megalithic for this period, just like it has been established in other sites like Ake and Izamal. The megalithic style consists of constructions with large boulders and rounded corners, together with features such as cornices and rounded platform corners (Mathews 1998; Taube 1995). This architectural style was first documented by Karl Taube at the site of El Naranjal located in the south portion of the Yalahau region.

To this day, six sites with a megalithic style have been documented in the Yalahau region. They are the sites of: Ox Mul, Tres Lagunas, Victoria, El Naranjal, Laguna Costa Rica and Kantunilkin (Figure 6). The best examples of megalithic style are Tres Lagunas, El Naranjal and Victoria. El Naranjal is possibly the largest site in the region, and has been previously studied by other members of the Yalahau Project and the INAH. For the time being, we shall focus on the sites studied by this project. The site of Kantunilkin has been little by little dismantled by the nearby population, a fact that narrows the possibilities of ascertaining its magnitude and significance in the region, while Laguna Costa Rica and Ox Mul are examples featuring a smaller architectural volume, and lack the sophistication in construction techniques exhibited by the major sites.

The site of Tres Lagunas, located 20 km north of the site El Naranjal, is dominated by a large platform with approximate measures of 150 m north-south and 100 m east-west. This platform was built on a low hillock adjacent to the lagoon. Its south side is approximately 3 m tall, while the north side rises 15 m above the surface of the lagoon. There are four superstructures on top of the platform, together with an architectural feature which consists of a depression of an unknown function. On the east, west and north sides of the main platform and at a short distance, there are three longitudinal walls, 1 m high. While the north wall is 30 m long, the walls at east and west are 100 m long. They all have formal entrances that provide an access to the main platform.

One of the best intact examples of megalithic architecture is located at the north and west end of the platform, and consists of outer walls. While the main platform shows no example of a cornice, it indeed has rounded corners. Twenty km east of El Naranjal is the site of Victoria. This site is dominated by a large Acropolis with two plazas, three pyramids and other structures laid out on basal platforms. The tallest pyramid is 16 m high and constitutes the tallest structure in the region. The architectural groups at the site center are located in an area of approximately 200 x 200 m. The best intact example of the megalithic architectural style is found at a superstructure located southeast of the Acropolis, and shows an intact wall 2 m high and 20 m long. This site also features evidence of a cornice.

The site of Laguna Costa Rica is located at the southeast corner of the study area, 16 km south of El Naranjal and 12 km of Victoria. Megalithic architecture is represented by two platforms, Structure 1, with measures of 55 x 55 m, and Structure 2, with measures of 90 x 40 m. Structure 1 has a cornice, while Structure 2 has rounded corners in one of its superstructures. Other structures in the process of being documented do not feature a megalithic style.

The site of Ox Mul is located at the northeast end of the study area. The megalithic architecture is represented only by one large basal platform with approximate measures of 85 m x 40 m. The megalithic wall occurs on the north side of Structure 2, and is 2 m tall and 50 m long. No rounded corners were documented, but instead, one cornice example was identified. Laguna Costa Rica and Ox Mul are examples of megalithic architecture; however, evidence shows a smaller construction scale, as well as a less elaborated construction quality than that observed at El Naranjal, Victoria, and Tres Lagunas. Also in terms of architectural volume, Ox Mul and Laguna Costa Rica represent the smaller examples of megalithic architecture.

The ceramic groups recovered in these megalithic sites are the following: Carolina, Cetelac, Tancah, Sierra, Huachinango and Saban, among others. Nevertheless, these ceramic groups are neither exclusive nor solely found at megalithic sites. In fact, these ceramic groups have also been found in all sites excavated, pointing to contemporaneity of megalithic and non-megalithic sites. The non-megalithic sites feature different styles and architectural distribution. One of the questions under investigation has to do with the commercial and political relationships existing among these sites and the megalithic ones, considering that they are contemporary, all of them.

LATE/TERMINAL CLASSIC PERIOD

The ceramic materials of the Late/Terminal Classic period are minimal in the excavation samples of the sites in this region. This may result from the combination of several factors. First, the depopulation of the region caused by changed levels in the water-bearing stratum, causing that the savannas could no longer be exploited by local people for their subsistence. Second, the depopulation caused by the growth of large cities in the vicinities: Coba to the south, as well as other sites to the west, like Ek Balam. However, just a short amount of materials were documented in the sites of Tres Lagunas, Yax Meex, Monte Bravo, Ox Mul, Kimin Yuk and Site 7. The Vista Alegre ceramic group, a marker of this period in the Yalahau region, has been generally found sharing strata with Postclassic materials, a fact that lessens its value as a diagnostic material of the Late/Terminal Classic in this research.

POSTCLASSIC PERIOD

Ceramic materials corresponding to the Postclassic period have been recovered in all sites excavated, with the exception of Victoria. The ceramic groups identified include: Navula/Panaba, Mama/Panabchen, Payil and Vista Alegre, among others. Architecture is identified with the construction of altars and oratories on pre-existing structures. These modifications tended to be accomplished in the monumental architecture of the different sites. The distribution of materials and modifications in the Postclassic are still in the process of investigation, and it is not possible to advance a preliminary conclusion. The sites with a strong concentration of Postclassic ceramic materials are located in areas close to the coast or either in the east end of the study area located near the coast, particularly at the sites of Vista Alegre, Conil, Monte Bravo, and Kimin Yuk.

CONCLUSIONS

The studies of ceramics and settlement patterns conducted during the past four years in the Yalahau region, in the northeastern portion of the Yucatan peninsula, have significantly increased our knowledge about the ancient societies that inhabited a poorly known region, characterized mainly by its savannas.

Current investigations have shown a very complex chronology and settlement patterns throughout time and space. Information originates mainly in the documentation of a total of 67 sites recorded and visited, with surface collections carried out in 34 sites and four cenotes, excavations conducted at eight sites, and detailed architectural surveys accomplished with a total station in 15 sites.

One of our preliminary impressions suggests that during the Early Classic period there was not just one single pattern of centralized political organization to be applied. The sites with megalithic architecture found at the south of the study area show a possible political organization that is much more complex than that of other contemporary sites in the region. Comparatively, the sites on the east and west side

of the region are characterized by an individual architectural style, which may suggest a decentralized political organization. Likewise, the ceramic and architectural evidence from other periods still proves greatly important for our studies.

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Figure 2 Sites integrating the regional project studies.

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- Figure 3b Four patterns of political organization: Centralized.
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- Figure 5 Localization of excavated sites.
- Figure 6 Localization of sites featuring the megalithic architectural style.