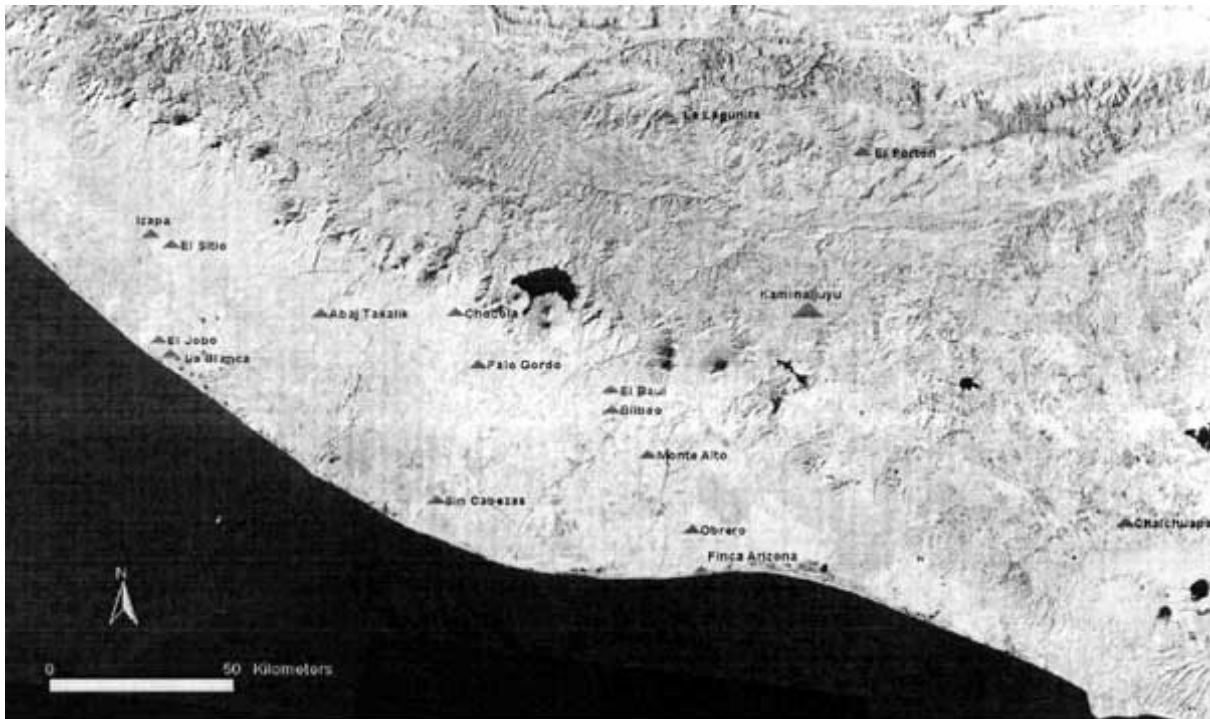


## METHODS, THEORIES AND ADVANCEMENTS OF THE CHOCOLA ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT AT THE BOCA COSTA REGION IN GUATEMALA

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**Figure 1. Map of the Southern Maya Area.**

Chocola is located north of the boca costa region, in Guatemala, at the heart of the southern Maya area (Figure 1). As a consequence of the disperse but striking evidence there, scholars have long believed that this was a seminal or engendering area for the developments that were to come towards a higher Mesoamerican civilization; ironically, Chocola has not been much researched or known. The boca costa region integrates one of the richest systems of agricultural production in Central America, and according to testimonies provided by ethnohistoric sources this is particularly true in the case of cacao (Coe 1961; Coe and Coe 1996; Gasco 1990, 1996, 2003, n.d.; Juarros 1936). Chocola is located close to and almost in a place that is equidistant from Tak'alik Ab'aj at west and from El Baul at east, two sites featuring some of the earliest monuments and dates of the Long Count. Similarly, it is equidistant from Kaminaljuyu, the largest Maya city of the east southern area, and Izapa, a large non-Maya city at west. An additional important site located 30 km southeast of Chocola is Palo Gordo.

Further to much of the earliest Maya writing and of the first examples of urban planning in Mesoamerica, this region was witness to the development of the earliest manifestations of the stela-altar complex and of the ruler-stela cult which represent the first unequivocal developments towards complex social stratification and political organization in the Maya world. Together with the evidence of a strong social stratification, this area contains the earliest examples of the very core of Maya ideology, such as the cult to the Principal Bird deity and the mythology of the Popol Vuh. Moreover, there is abundant evidence to consider dynamic encounters and interaction between Mixe-Zoque speakers and Maya or Proto-Maya speakers; no doubt, these relationships involve ideological and economical exchange.



Figure 2. The Project's Fence.

In an attempt to compensate the abandonment suffered by this area on the side of scholars, but simultaneously to answer different theoretical questions, the Chocola Archaeological Project (PACH) initiated field works with a three-month season in 2003 (Figure 2). This paper presents the preliminary results of that investigation as well as of the advancements made so far in the 2004 season. In general, and in a very sound manner, the project has determined that the site is intact for the most part and that it comprises a much larger area than previously thought. This provides scholars with a unique opportunity to improve their understanding of the southern Maya area.

## **PREVIOUS STUDIES AT CHOCOLA**

During a mission of objects acquisition funded by the University of Pennsylvania in 1928, Robert Burkitt excavated three dirt mounds in Chocola (Burkitt 1930) only resulting in confusion on his side; prior to Burkitt, Sapper visited Chocola and then, Termer, Shook and Graham put together small informal efforts. All these researchers noticed the probable significance of the site based on its large dimensions and the amount of dirt mounds they observed –at least 100 according to Shook (personal communication 1992)-, further to abundant surface artifacts and the presence of several stone monuments.

Operating under a five-year covenant with the Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala, PACH initiated field research in 2003, conducting reconnaissance, mapping, survey and test units between the months of June and August (Kaplan and Valdés 2003); a second season of four months was completed from May to September 2004.

## **THEORETICAL BASIS FOR THE PROJECT**

Four theoretical models guided our investigation at Chocola and lay the foundations for specific questions:

- Why and how early urban planning emerged in the boca costa region of Guatemala?
- In what way the “ethnic” interaction in the boca costa region between Mixe-Zoque speakers and Proto-Maya speakers may have had an influence on events and processes that led to “precocious” social and cultural complexity?
- Which system of center-periphery existed in the Preclassic southern Maya area as part of a large and early economical and political area?
- May the fact of taking advantage of abundant water and intense growth of crops, mainly cacao –of a great value across ancient Mesoamerica and requiring large amounts of water (Gall 1983)-, possibly expressed through the monopoly of the product and its exchange, have represented a driving force for the important developments occurred in the southern area?

The comprehensive study of an ancient city reaches beyond the specific research subjects of PACH. Efforts are being made to preserve and facilitate the study of Chocola’s history, including post-conquest and post-colonial times. Chocola was a large hacienda created by José Guardiola, an agricultural engineer from Guatemala (Wagner 1991, 2001); the farm was sold by Guardiola to German companies in 1891. As such, the post-colonial history of Guatemala is represented at Chocola in very distinctive manners (Calderón Tobar 2000). Gutiérrez Mendoza is completing a project report on the aspects of the post-conquest history of Chocola, and with the cooperation of local and state political leaders, future efforts could include not only the creation of a museum to house the prehispanic remains, but also the workshop

and the coffee processing plant of the plantation that flourished and grew to a large size throughout the period it was owned by the German company.

PACH is also encouraging interaction with peasants and other residents of the modern town, trying to create an active interrelationship, different to that of the “informant” stereotype. In this way, we attempt to learn more about the practices, the eco-archaeological and interactive uses of the town and region in the form of sustainable growth like ecotourism, but also to encourage the participation through all possible means of the local residents in the project, something that gives plenty of meaning to the Chocola archaeology. One constant concern of the project is: whose history is this?

## **SUMMARY OF RESULTS TO THIS DAY**

From the very preliminary reconnaissance in the region adjacent to the modern finca Chocola, the project has recovered or has confirmed earlier evidence of many ancient communities, such as San Francisco Zapotitlán, La Ceiba, Camache, San Pablo Jocopilas, San Antonio Suchitepéquez, Santo Tomás la Unión, San José el Ídolo, Hacienda el Paraíso El Copado, close to Santo Domingo Suchitepequez and others, suggesting a dense occupation since the Preclassic period and to our days.

The growth of many modern towns and villages caused a negative impact on some of these sites, and it is clear that many of them needed to be investigated soon, in view of the threats they were facing. However, even without the motivation of salvage, the region immediately adjacent to Chocola deserves exponentially, more field investigation than the one we have undertaken, in the pursue of obtaining vital information on the boca costa region of Guatemala and on the special role it played in the subsequent development of the Classic Maya civilization.

Strategically, with respect to agriculture, commerce, and the possible monopoly – because it was at a greater altitude than its nearby neighbor, Tak'alik Ab'aj- but also putting in correlation the common cosmological dictates for a Maya settlement, Chocola is located at the west and south of the high mountains. Many caves, still used for local rituals, are dotting the landscape around rivers and hills.

The reconnaissance conducted during the first season of PACH was of 3.5 x 1.5 km within and around the town and finca of Chocola, defining places with presence of artifacts in the entire area. Studies conducted this year have expanded the occupation area to at least 5.5 x 2 km. Last year, a series of 25 pits were placed from north to south within this area; the pits yielded artifacts that possibly date to the Ocós period and reach the Postclassic, suggesting a much extended occupation, or either, a series of different occupations.

The inspected area –which represents a minimal portion of the ancient remains of Chocola and the possible satellite communities-, rises around 400 m on the large natural terraces that extend 5.5 km from south to north. It comprises an isosceles triangle with a widened area at north, delimited by the Chocola and Chichoy rivers that flow east and west, respectively, on their way south to the coast.

Until the extensive excavations are completed and reveal some more representative and finer information of the area, the full extension of the occupations at any given moment will remain unknown. Through the preliminary inspection of ceramics and other artifacts, we probably have an elite structure at north, in Mound 15, preliminary dated to the Late Preclassic or perhaps to the Middle Preclassic period.

Last year, speculation was focused on a division of the ancient city into three sectors:

- At north, with large, low and grouped platforms, river cobble structures, and water directing systems, possibly an elite residential area.
- At the center, the larger mounds, most of them apparently featuring a pyramidal form, suggest an area of administration and public ceremonies.
- At south, a less formal area with architecture of houses for common people, workshops, and intensive agriculture.

This year, reconnaissance and studies were expanded south, although still within the boundaries of the modern cooperative finca Chocola, documenting many new dirt mounds and platforms that expand the area to at least 5.5 x 2 km.

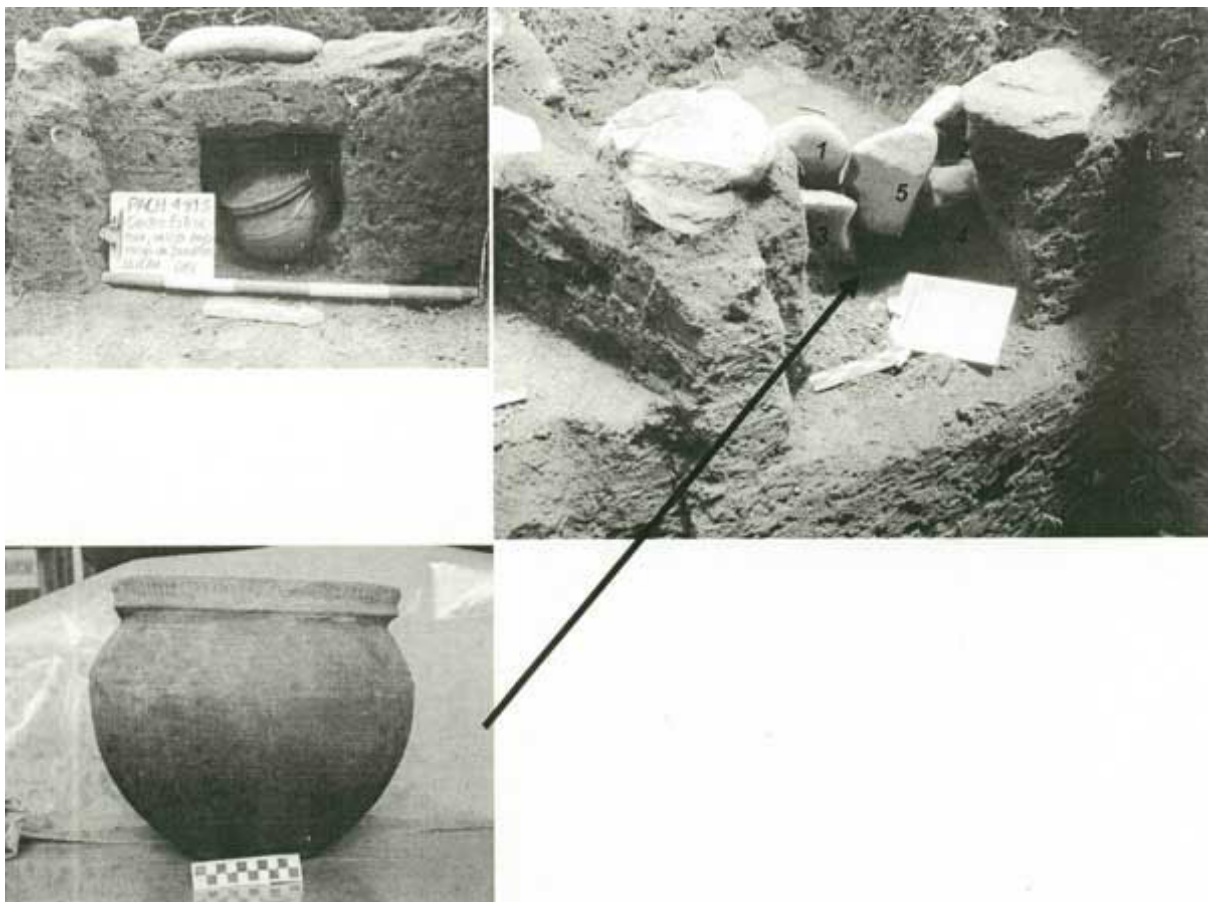


Figure 3. Canals, Mound 15.

The ancient settlement is oriented from north to south, with a north-south axis that is longer than the east-west axis. Taking advantage of local geology, which consists of abundant volcanic cobbles, architecture seems to have been built with stones rounded by the action of rivers, with artificially carved boulders, and even with slabs or carved stones used as covers for the water canals that run under the surface (Figure 3). Alike Tak'alik Ab'aj, volcanic soils enriched with clay acquire great hardness when they are tamped on, something that is clearly corroborated by walking along the modern roads of the site and around the town.

Structure 1 was revealed by the gradiometric survey conducted by David Monsees. Structure 1 covers a surface that averages 12 m in length and 5.50 m in width, and its function would seem to be related to a privileged social group of the Late Preclassic period. On its west side there are two stone alignments; the first and more superficial one was laid on the floor horizontally, on top of the second alignment consisting of more solid blocks, flat, rectangular or oblong, almost vertically placed. Interestingly, 30-45 cm below and separated by earth, there is a third row of stones approximately the same size than those of the first road: this stone alignment may represent some earlier structure. The north-south stone alignments on the east side of the structure suggest some kind of construction outside the house, possibly access steps.

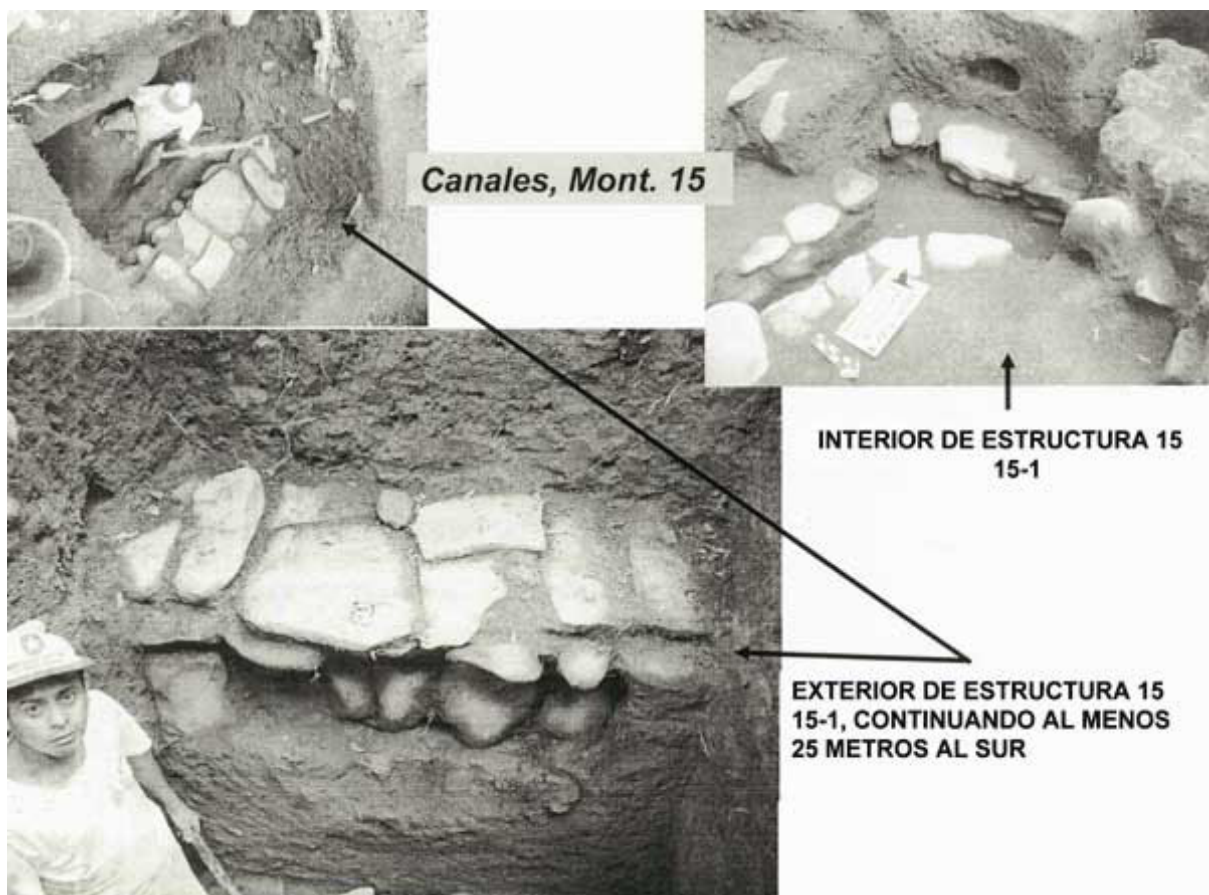


Figure 4. Pot, Structure 15-1.

A large pot was recovered, complete and partly surrounded at west by five stones representing the four cardinal directions, with the fifth one, or vertical direction (Figure 4). An absolute date may be obtained by means of more than five carbon samples recovered near this vessel. Also, charcoal samples were recovered close to this vessel. Furthermore, charcoal samples were recovered from safe contexts close to another structure, 3.5 km south of Mound 15, possibly providing a good comparison of opposed sectors in the ancient city.

Considering the superabundance of water in Chocoma, it came as no surprise to find, during research, evidence of a sophisticated system of water management. Very probably related to Structure 1 and below it, there is a well built water management system. Its function consisted in transporting water and it runs under Structure 1, extending at least 25 m on a southeast direction and moving away from the slope. The finely elaborated figurines were found inside or near the ditch, as well as a polished tripod vase with negative decoration that may have entered the canal at a later date (Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 5. Tripod, canal, Mound 15.

The water management system was integrated by at least four different types of constructions:

- One with well cut stones on both sides; slab-type roof stones, and *taxca* floor as a sealer of the inner surface.

- River cobbles on its four sides.
- River cobbles on two sides only, and at the bottom.
- The lower water transportation made through skillfully designed slopes to break the strength of the fluid and prevent the erosive effect of water.



Figure 6. Tripod, canal, Mound 15, Vessel found at the redistribution point of the drainage.

As previously suggested, in ancient times these ditches run under the original floor and possibly on the ancient surface, near Structure 1. The water control in residential contexts seems to take care of two necessities:

- The evacuation and drainage of water surplus for the protection of architecture.
- The delivery of drinkable water inside the structures.

The project hypotheses are circumscribed to three areas: elite, administration, and common people or sustaining population. In this respect, there is one mound that attracts the attention for its design and construction system, discovered 3.5 km south of Mound 15, in an area where evidence of perishable houses is still being sought (Figure 7); however, the building may be explained through an administrative



function in an important agricultural area. The structure seems to be a platform that supports cobble structures, while the horizontal rows that form a retaining wall add up to almost eight stones one on top of the other. The preliminary evidence allows for speculating on a wide access with architectural ornamentation which may have framed the presumed stairway.



Figure 7. Wall of a large platform, Mound 5, structure 5-1 PACH.

## CERAMICS

The ceramics of Chocla represent an essential element of the ancient community; it is its cultural material and will provide the backbone of the refined chronology throughout the extended life of the city, as well as substantial information on its economical and social organization. The surface collection, the test pits and the intensive excavations are beginning to refill this history. We were able to define

ceramic of the Middle and Late Preclassic periods, with types similar to the phase Las Charcas del Altiplano, or the phase Gualatón, corresponding to the South Coast.

## **UTILITARIAN AND ELITE ART AT CHOCOLA**

One PACH subproject intended to document and collect information on sculpted monuments and other carved artifacts, attempts to present a first sculptural *corpus* of Chocola, including several ones known only through references, and whose whereabouts are presently unknown. To this date, the project has formally recorded 22 monuments in index cards, which include carved stelae (including the famous Monument 1 discovered by Burkitt), rectangular altars with concave depressions, round altars with no other carving except their cylindrical form, bulk sculptures and effigies. For the time being, this catalog does not include many carved stones with concave depressions known as “*tacitas*”, inasmuch as their function is so far unknown. In addition to the monuments, there is a notorious large amount of work on volcanic stones in the form of “donuts”, small bowls, grinding or crushing containers, and others of an unknown form. They may be included in the Chocola catalog as specialized objects. The figurines include several fragments of the Providencia style, as well as many others whose style is not so clear and probably respond to an entirely local style (Figure 8).

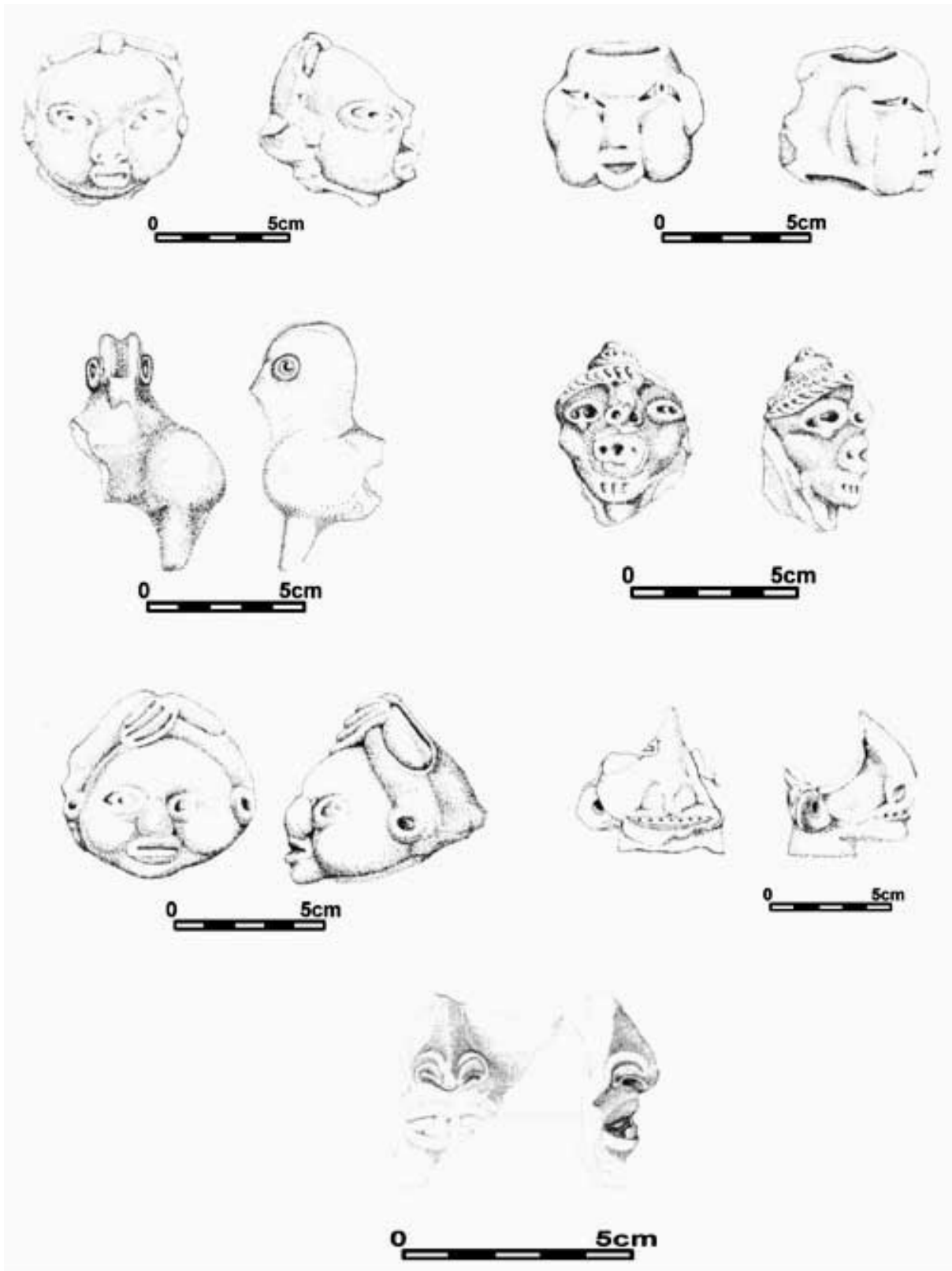


Figure 8. Figurines, PACH 2004.

## CONCLUSION

Investigations at Chocoma have provided and will continue to provide new information on this poorly researched region. It is important to compare the results and the theoretical collaboration with other scholars interested in what is believed to constitute a very important site for the investigation of this region.

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Figure 1 Map of the Southern Maya Area.

Figure 2 The Project's Fence.

Figure 3 Canals, Mound 15.

Figure 4 Pot, Structure 15-1.

Figure 5 Tripod, Canal, Mound 15.

Figure 6 Tripod, Canal, Mound 15.

Figure 7 Wall of a large platform, Mound 5.

Figure 8 Figurines, PACH 2004.