

THE CONQUEST OF TAK'ALIK AB'AJ

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According to the stratigraphic evidence and the analysis of ceramics recovered in recent excavations, it would seem that Tak'alik Ab'aj was conquered by K'iche' groups at the beginning of the Early Postclassic period (ca. 1000 AD). This date goes a long way back from the period comprised between 1400 and 1450 AD that many ethno-historians claimed for the K'iche' expansion towards the South Coast of Guatemala. The data will be summarized below.

Following many years of excavation works at Tak'alik Ab'aj (Figure 1), the chronological sequence has been finally well understood. In short, the original population apparently arrived during the Early Preclassic period, and around the Middle Preclassic, the inhabitants were already involved in a trade network that connected the Olmec groups of the Mexican Gulf Coast and Chiapas. The trade network was concentrated in a lineal route that ran along the boca costa region in Guatemala and that connected Mexico with El Salvador. By the beginning of the Late Preclassic period, trade nexuses were switched to the Maya groups, with a strong orientation towards Kaminaljuyu in the Guatemalan Altiplano. The commercial route was essentially the same, except for the fact that Kaminaljuyu and its trade connections with the Motagua basin were integrated into the network. This connection ceased to exist by the end of the Preclassic period.

At the beginning of the Early Classic period, Tak'alik Ab'aj established new relationships with the Northwestern Guatemalan Altiplano, more specifically with the Solano group that was in a process of expansion from the centers located in the northwest, and which eventually took control over Kaminaljuyu. At that time, the trade route no longer continued in line along the boca costa, but instead, it became vertical, connecting the South Coast not only with the Northwestern Altiplano but indirectly, with the Central Altiplano now under the control of the Solano group. Another change occurred during the Late Classic, when Tak'alik Ab'aj apparently became independent just like many other sites of the South Coast of Guatemala, such as Chocoma, in the department of Suchitepequez, and Cotzumalguapa, Montana and Texas in the department of Escuintla (Bove 1989:80). Now, Tak'alik Ab'aj was experiencing an era of revitalization, and was initiating a period of intense reconstruction works to relocate many of the ancient monuments in critical places, as dictated by the new remodelling of the structures.

It is important to remember that the population of Tak'alik Ab'aj stayed there uninterruptedly and *in situ*, despite the several changes occurred with their commercial partners. In the Late Classic, the scene turned into a mosaic of independent centers in the South Coast and the Altiplano, all of them interacting, or either, as we shall see in this case, competing with one another for territory and resources. Therefore, the pottery at Tak'alik Ab'aj shows a continued evolution since its earliest occupation, throughout its entire trajectory, and up to the end of the Late Classic period, reflected in a ceramic tradition denominated Ocosito. Its frontiers probably extended to the west up to Coatepeque or beyond, to the south down to the Ocosito River, and to the east, to the Samala River (Herrera 1995:76). The sole major change in the sequence took place right at the end of the Late Classic, with the arrival of pottery originated in the K'iche' area and that subsequently began to blend with the Ocosito Tradition. Shortly after, during the Early Postclassic period, the K'iche' pottery was quickly infiltrated in the site, and the Ocosito Tradition disappeared or was absorbed by the new complex. No hiatus or pause exists between the Late Classic and Early Postclassic developments. Following the initial contact, the local simply was replaced with the new, and this covered almost the entire site.

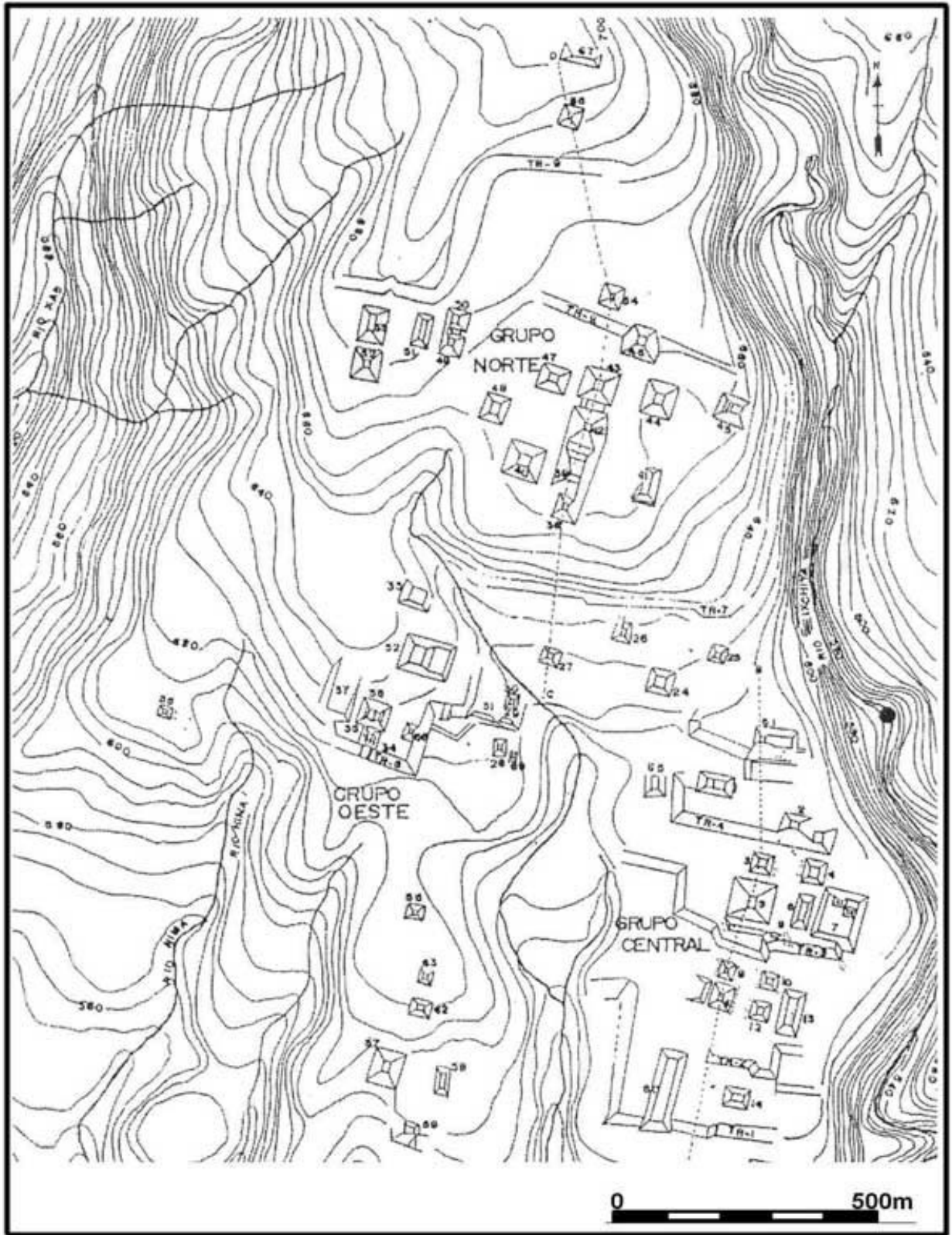


Figure 1. Map of the archaeological site of Tak'alik Ab'aj.

The charts in Figures 2, 3 and 4 show how abrupt this change was. These charts illustrate the frequencies shown in different excavation units; level 5 is the layer immediately under the accumulation of modern sediments, and level 6 is right under level 5. In pit F11ga (Figure 2) excavated in Structure 4, we observed that the Postclassic is hardly present in level 6, while it is very abundant in level 5. In pit D9g (Figure 3) excavated in Structure 5, there were no Postclassic sherds in level 6, but level 5 showed that it had already entered strongly in the site. A similar pattern is observed in pit F7bS (Figure 4), located in the access to Terrace 3, where the Postclassic material appeared for the first time in the lower portion of level 5 to increase remarkably in the upper portion, where it was more abundant than the ceramics of the local complex.

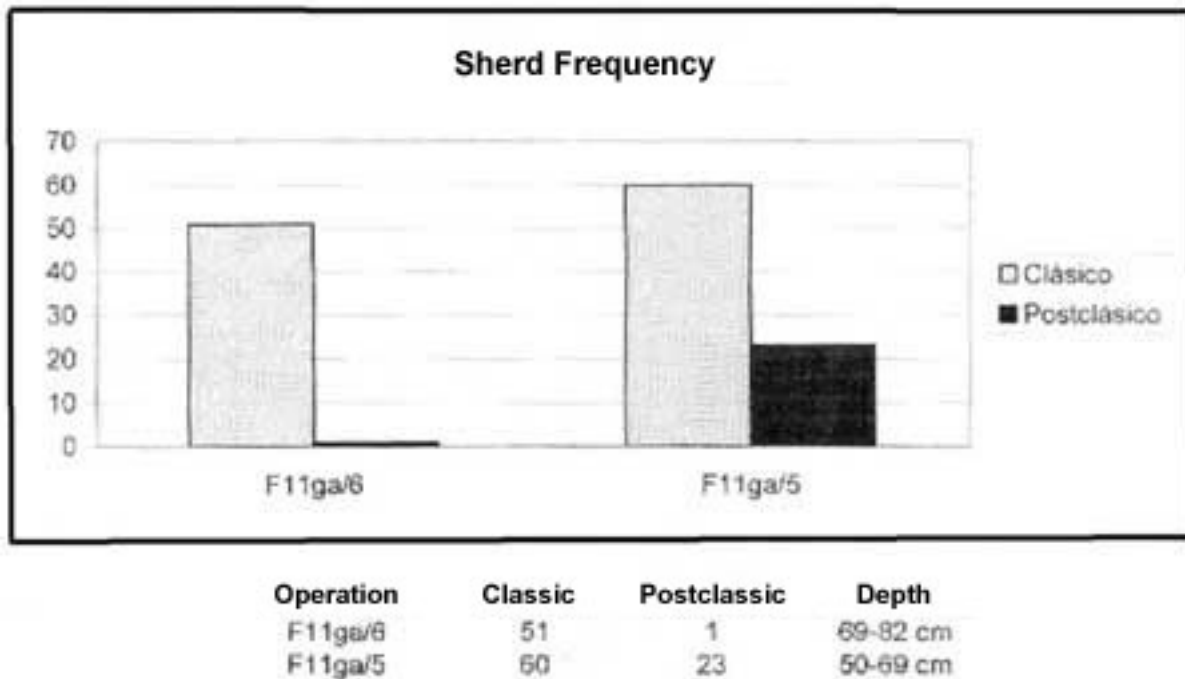
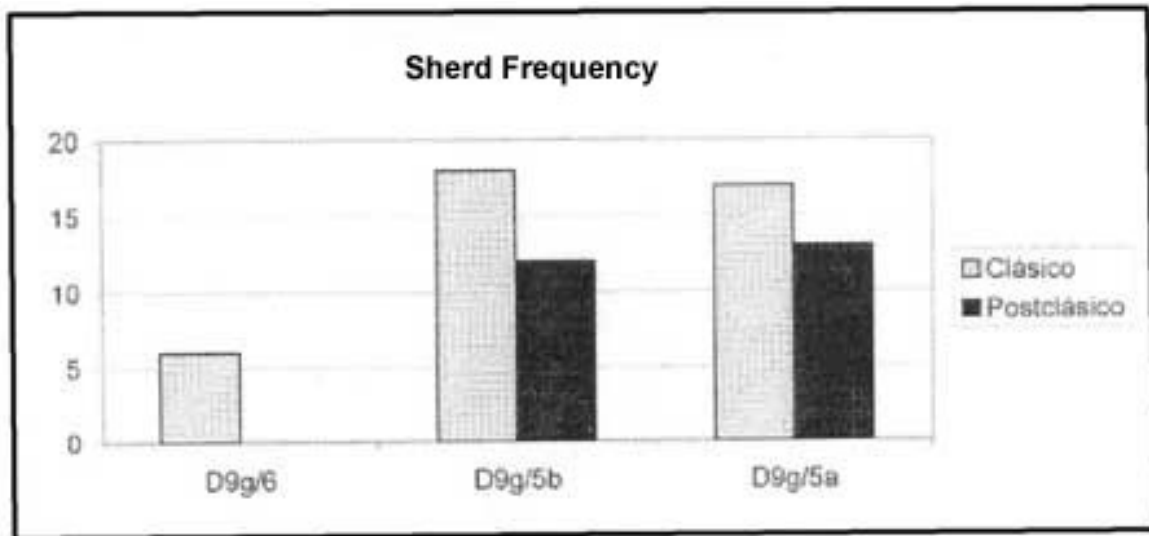


Figure 2. Comparison of Classic and Postclassic sherd frequencies in levels 5 and 6 of excavation F11ga.



Operation	Classic	Postclassic	Depth
D9g/6	6	0	126 cm
D9g/5b	18	12	70-120 cm
D9g/5a	17	13	40-70 cm

Figure 3. Comparison of Classic and Postclassic sherd frequencies in levels 5 and 6 of excavation D9g.

Operation	Classic	Postclassic	Depth
F7bS/6	128	0	137
F7bS/5b	78	12	106-137
F7bS/5a	40	52	55-106

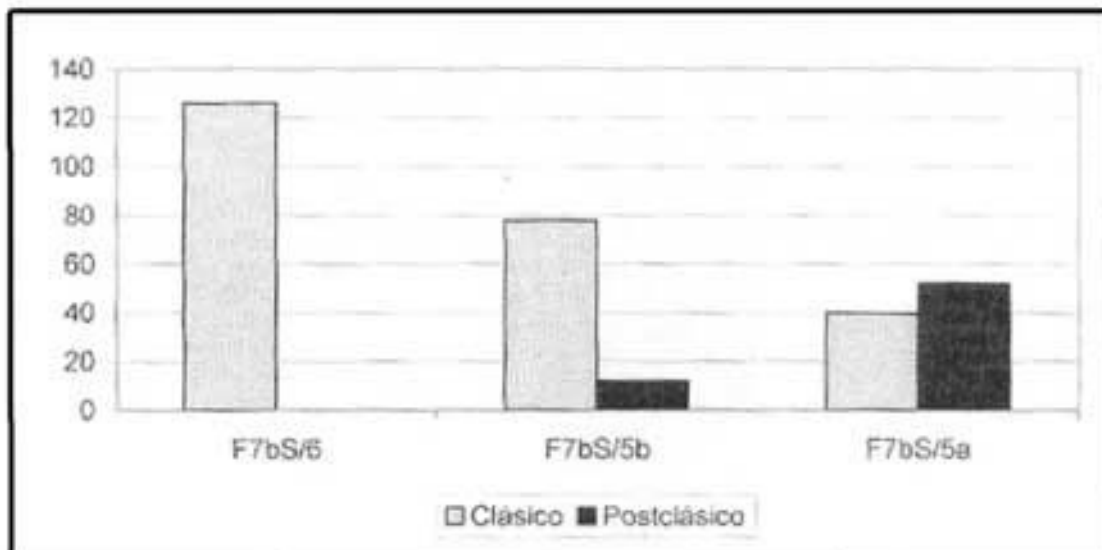


Figure 4. Comparison of Classic and Postclassic sherd frequencies in levels 5 and 6 of excavation F7bS.

Many persons agree with the recent ethno-historic interpretations which favor the notion that the K'iche' groups arrived during the Late Postclassic period, around 1225 AD, and believe that they could be identified with Mexicanized Toltec or Maya groups coming from the area of modern Mexico. However, the K'iche' material in fact arrived to Tak'alik Ab'aj in association with the Tohil Plumbate pottery and other diagnostics of the Early Postclassic period, dating to around 1000 AD. The complex arrived in Tak'alik Ab'aj was manufactured as of the typical fine vessels of the Altiplano with abundant pieces showing thin walls of a brown color, with no slip, or with a polished slip that ranged from orange to bronze. These are in strong contrast with the red paste vessels so typical of Tak'alik Ab'aj throughout time.

According to the evidence now at hand, in Tak'alik Ab'aj the question rises again about who the first K'iche' were, and when was it that they arrived to settle down in Guatemala. Now, I must repeat the argument I have presented earlier. The results of the excavations carried out at Uatlan and conducted by the State University of New York at Albany (Brown 1982:45), suggest that one population began to occupy the K'iche' area during the Preclassic period, and that it continued to reside there throughout the Classic and Postclassic periods, with no radical changes, development-wise. No intruder Mexican complex was observed in the chronological sequence. However, it was notorious that the population that had occupied several sites in the Uatlan area began to nucleate at the site of the same name and surrounding areas, around the beginning of the Early Postclassic period. This nucleation was followed by a period of massive expansion. The information gathered at Tak'alik Ab'aj must reflect the initial period of the K'iche' intrusion into the South Coast.

The ceramic evidence shows that the predominant period of intrusion in the Guatemalan Altiplano took place at end of the Late Preclassic and beginning of the Early Classic periods. Moreover, this intrusion is precisely the cause of the identification of the Early Classic as a complex different than that corresponding to the Late Preclassic. This is the intrusion that has been denominated Solano Tradition, initially appeared in Guatemala in the Northwestern Altiplano. The pottery of this period is known best in the Middle Preclassic site of Rio Blanco; these ceramics are also present in the samples of La Lagunita. For what it seems, the Rio Blanco/La Lagunita complex underwent a gradual development in the Northwestern Altiplano and eventually, at the beginning of the Early Classic period, it initiated its dispersion throughout the Central Altiplano.

In this region, the population established a large base at Solano, located southwest of the Guatemala valley, and it was probably from there that people began to move until they took control over Kaminaljuyu (Popenoe de Hatch 1997). This intruder ceramic tradition in Kaminaljuyu occurred initially at the beginning of the Early Classic and continued to evolve along the Late Classic period. By the end of the Late Classic Kaminaljuyu was abandoned, but in the Central and Northwestern Altiplano the ceramic tradition continued to evolve up to Postclassic times. For this reason, we believe that the Solano tradition was related to K'iche' speakers, as these people were well

established in the area at the time of the Spanish conquest. There is no ceramic evidence to support the idea of an intruder complex or of a sudden introduction of new styles and forms during the Postclassic. However, the ceramic complex of the Central Altiplano began to differentiate itself from that of the Northwestern Altiplano during the Late Classic, suggesting that this K'iche' group began to split among the different geographic areas, in a way that by the Postclassic it existed as what we now know as the linguistic K'iche', Kaqchikel and Tz'utujil groups.

A few years ago, it was argued that Tak'alik Ab'aj established a connection with the Solano group in the Northwestern Altiplano at the beginning of the Early Classic period (Popenoe de Hatch 2003). The evidence is based on the elite burial discovered in Structure 7, which was interpreted like the burial of the last ruler associated with the period of the Maya-style sculptures and the early hieroglyphic writing. Nonetheless, the connection with the Northwestern Altiplano was not new, as it is also clear that Tak'alik Ab'aj maintained commercial relationships with the Northwestern Highlands, both in an active and inactive way, throughout its entire history. We may assume that the inhabitants of Tak'alik Ab'aj spoke a Maya language associated with groups of the Altiplano, although for the moment the information is insufficient to identify exactly what was the language they spoke. However, there are signs in the indigenous chronicles that point to the fact that possibly, the inhabitants of Tak'alik Ab'aj may have been the Yoc Canchebes, a branch of the Mam population (Recinos 1957:75). Be this true or not, it is clear that the contact with the Altiplano turned particularly important following Kaminaljuyu's collapse and its domination by a population that used the Solano Tradition ceramics.

It is reasonable to think that Tak'alik Ab'aj ran the risk of being hit by the associated population with the aggressive expansion of the Naranjo Tradition along the Coast, and that later a hostile confrontation took place with the sites of Escuintla. Both for political and economical reasons, it was clearly preferable and beneficial for Tak'alik Ab'aj to establish an alliance with the Solano groups of the Altiplano, thus making it possible to benefit from the commercial network that was being established by the Solano population, and to get help in case of an attack by the coastal aggressors.

The connection with Solano was maintained along the Early Classic period, but then again it was followed by a change in the relationships, with the beginning of the Late Classic period. At that time, the coastal sites in Escuintla freed themselves of the control of the Naranjo groups, an event that promoted an era of local economic prosperity. In general, the Late Classic period in the South Coast of Guatemala was an era of large, independent and vigorous centers which participated in an active exchange. The new emancipated coastal centers promoted an increased local commerce. Tak'alik Ab'aj joined the network, and simultaneously experienced a process of revitalization. Once again, the site started to function like one of the largest local capitals, directing new energies towards exchange with other coastal sites, with the result that then, it was no longer necessary to maintain a strong nexus with the Altiplano. Nonetheless, prosperity at Tak'alik Ab'aj was not destined to survive beyond the Late Classic, because it came to an end by the end of the period with the intrusion of K'iche' elements in the site.

The problems with the chronology of the K'iche' expansion, reside in the interpretation of post-hispanic chronicles. More specifically, they are based on dates calculated using the list of kings recorded by the K'iche' (Carmack 1981:122). This dynastic sequence is undoubtedly based largely on communal memory, and perhaps, in a lesser degree, in ancient codices recorded in the form of drawings. Histories recorded by heart, transmitted from one generation to the other, tend to turn into a telescopic form, or are abridged to include only the most important events or those most valuable from the political point of view. This does not mean that the dates calculated for the list of kings are wrong, but it outlines that it is difficult to confirm the sequence of events, as well as who did what and when. On the other hand, archaeological evidence can, and in fact provides, the basic guidelines. The challenge consists in coordinating that which was recorded shortly after the Conquest with information provided by archaeology. Archaeological evidence confirms that the K'iche' people expanded (Figure 5), and that they took control over the coastal zone between the Ocos and Samala rivers, which is exactly what they declared in the Nihai I chronicle (Recinos 1957:78). The problem is when, and the Tak'alik Ab'aj information suggests that the expansion had been initiated at the beginning of the Early Postclassic period and not at the beginning of the Late Postclassic, that is to say, around 1000 AD, contemporary to the dispersion of the Tohil Plumbate pottery. The chronicle states that the conquest took place in 1300 AD, but archaeological evidence shows that this happened around three centuries prior to that date, that is, around 1000 AD.

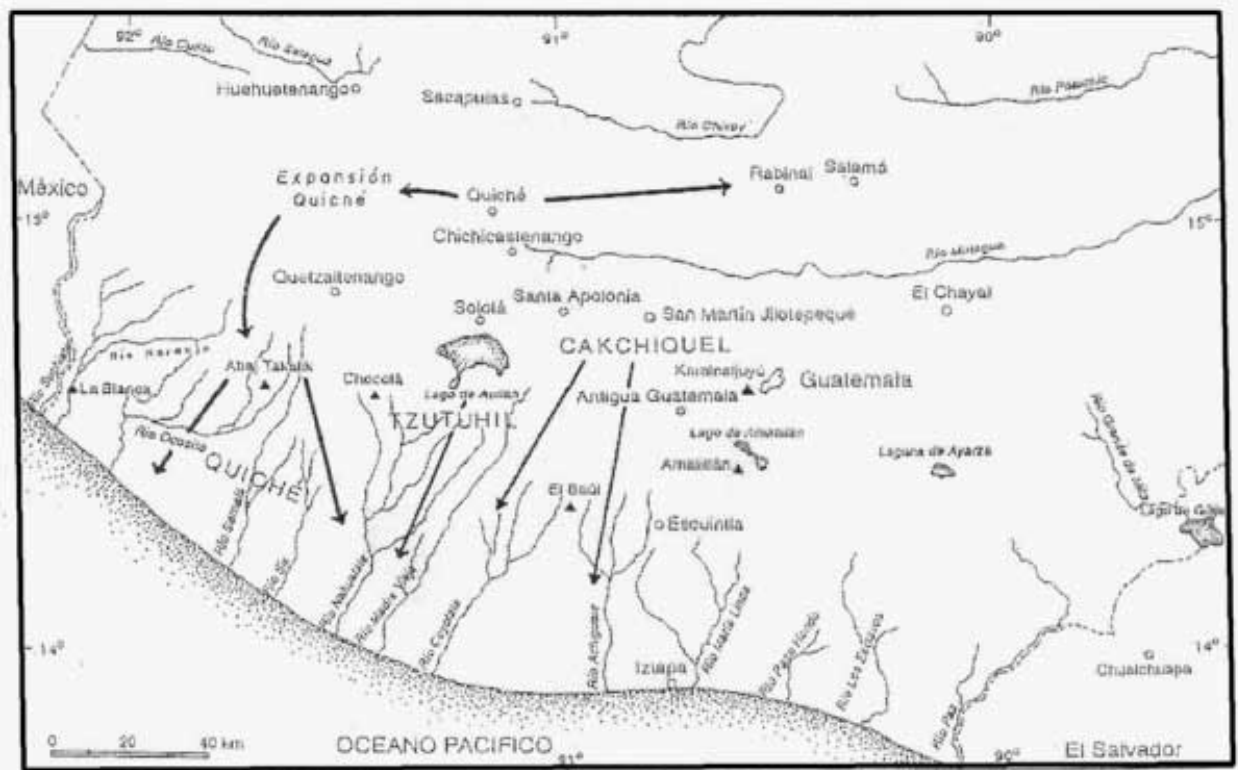
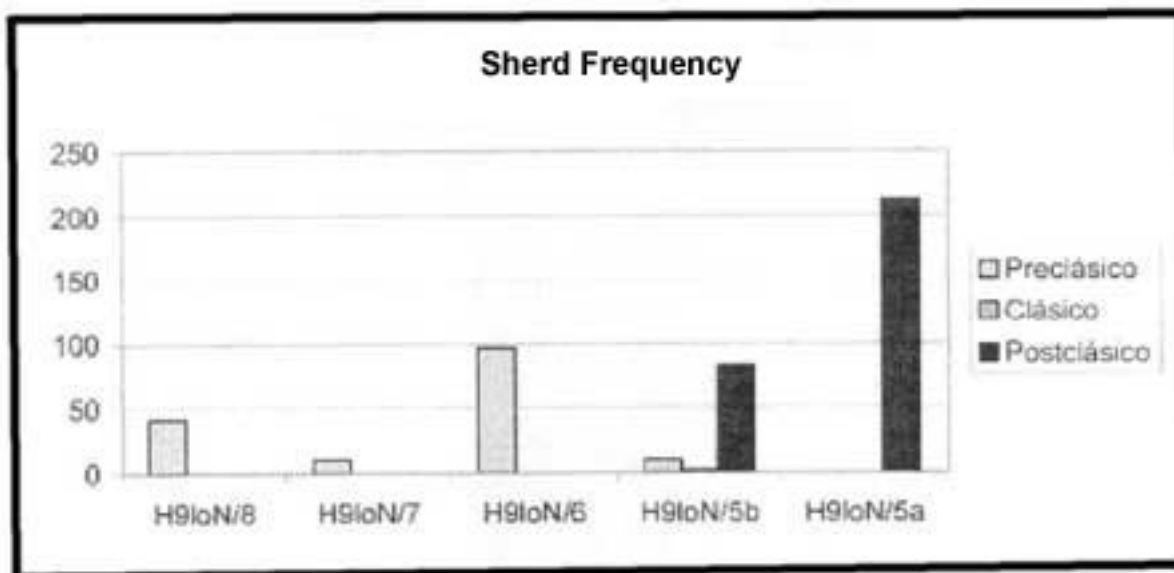


Figure 5. The K'iche' expansion during the Postclassic period.

The ceramic information of Tak'alik Ab'aj suggests that some kind of relationship was initiated with the K'iche' area right at the end of the Late Classic period, as occasionally, K'iche' sherds are found mixed with the Late Classic Ocosito complex. It has been extremely hard to ascertain whether the Postclassic K'iche' material was merely mixed with the Late Classic material scattered on the surface, or whether the relationship began prior to the Postclassic period. In general, the Late Classic Ocosito material is associated with the San Juan Plumbate pottery, while the K'iche' material arrives with Tohil Plumbate. However, the recent discovery of the La Niña incense burner (see Christa Lavarreda, this volume), has shown that the K'iche' material precedes the Postclassic, though only slightly.

La Niña was offered or buried intrusively in level 6, by an excavation that was later sealed with a cobble stones floor. The material inside the cavity and under the stones, included several K'iche' sherds of the Postclassic in association with La Niña, also found on the floor around this offering. Figure 6, shows the frequency pattern of the sherds. Levels 7 and 8 only yielded ceramics of the Middle Preclassic period, when the platform was built. Level 5b, right under the stones, presented sherds of the Preclassic period, a few of the Late Classic, and a large number of Postclassic ones. Above the stone packing, all of the material corresponds to the Postclassic period.



Operation	Preclassic	Classic	Postclassic	Depth	
H9loN/8	42	0	0	148-170 cm	
H9loN/7	11	0	0	141-148 cm	
H9loN/6	96	0	0	103-141 cm	
H9loN/5b	10	2	83	79-103 cm	Under the stones
H9loN/5a	0	0	213	60-79 cm	Above the stones

Figure 6. Frequency comparison of Classic and Postclassic sherds in excavation H9loN adjacent to the La Niña incense burner.

The stratigraphic relationship of La Niña leads to the inevitable conclusion that the burial of La Niña must have taken place right at the time of establishing the new relationship with the K'iche' area, an association repeatedly occurred throughout the history of Tak'alik Ab'aj. Both regions had a tradition of close commercial links, and –probably– also political ones. The events that unfolded after this new approximation was once more initiated, remains a subject to be examined, but it is clear that the K'iche' complex soon dominated the entire site and that the Ocosito complex disappeared. By the Late Postclassic period, apparently Tak'alik Ab'aj was no longer inhabited, although very occasionally it is possible to find Fortaleza White on Red sherds, thus suggesting that the K'iche' people remained in the area.

One presumes that Tak'alik Ab'aj may have served like an entrance way that made it possible for the K'iche' to conquer the rest of the South Coast, between the Ocos and Samala rivers, expanding themselves to the ocean, exactly like their chronicles claim. However, the abandonment of Tak'alik Ab'aj by the local population suggests that they may have been contrary to the plan of conquest, as for what it seems, they were not a part of it. This decision must have been crucial for the population, as they were forced to leave behind a home that had maintained its integrity for approximately 2000 years.

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Figure 1 Map of the archaeological site of Tak'alik Ab'aj.

Figure 2 Comparison of Classic and Postclassic sherd frequency in levels 5 and 6 of excavation F11ga.

Figure 3 Comparison of Classic and Postclassic sherd frequency in levels 5 and 6 of excavation D9g.

Figure 4 Comparison of Classic and Postclassic sherd frequency in levels 5 and 6 of excavation F7bS.

Figure 5 The K'iche' expansion during the Postclassic.

Figure 6 Comparison of Classic and Postclassic sherd frequency in excavation H9loN, adjacent to the La Niña incense burner.