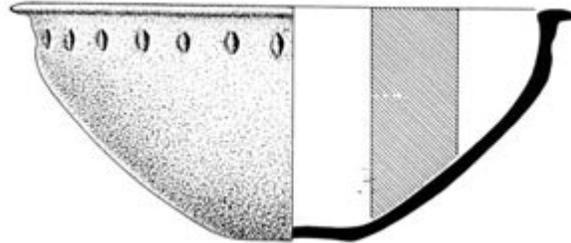


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Cancuén Archaeological Project



Research Year: 1997

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Classic

Location: Petén, Guatemala

Site: Cancuén

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Introduction

The 1999 field season exceeded our expectations in scope and discoveries. Survey and mapping at the largest center in this little explored and poorly understood region, Cancuén, Guatemala, revealed residential groups, a ballcourt, and new areas of the palace that previous explorers had failed to recognize. Its palace is certainly one of the largest in the Maya world, with architectural features including over forty well-preserved, corbel-vaulted rooms each three to four meters in height. Excavations in newly identified residential groups revealed evidence of craft specialization, long distance trade, and economic diversity and complexity.

We had hypothesized that Cancuén's location was critical in interaction between the volcanic highlands of Guatemala and the lowland Petén rainforest to the north. The site is located precisely at the start of the Pasión/Usamacinta River system, the single largest trade and transport system of the western Petén (Figure 1). Epigraphic evidence demonstrates that the site was allied with lowland kingdoms such as Tikal, Dos Pilas, Calakmul and Machaquilá and yet appears to have remained politically independent.



Figure 1. Map of the Pasión River Valley.

The excavations of the FAMSI sponsored 1999 season at Cancuén support and document these interpretations. Ceramic data implies strong connections with both the highlands and the lowlands and lithic finds indicate the importance of craft specialization and long distance lithic exchange. The material recovered is essential for interpreting the origin and importance of Cancuén, as well as addressing larger questions of the role

of highland-lowland trade in the rise, maintenance and fall of the Classic Maya civilization.

These investigations consisted of: mapping and survey of the previously unstudied residential areas of the site; salvage, recording, and consolidation efforts within the royal palace to counter damage caused by looting; and excavation of test units to sample residential areas throughout the site. All of this has been done to gather preliminary information for generating a more complete site map ([Figure 2](#)) as well as larger-scale grant proposals for future seasons.

Submitted 04/01/2000 by:

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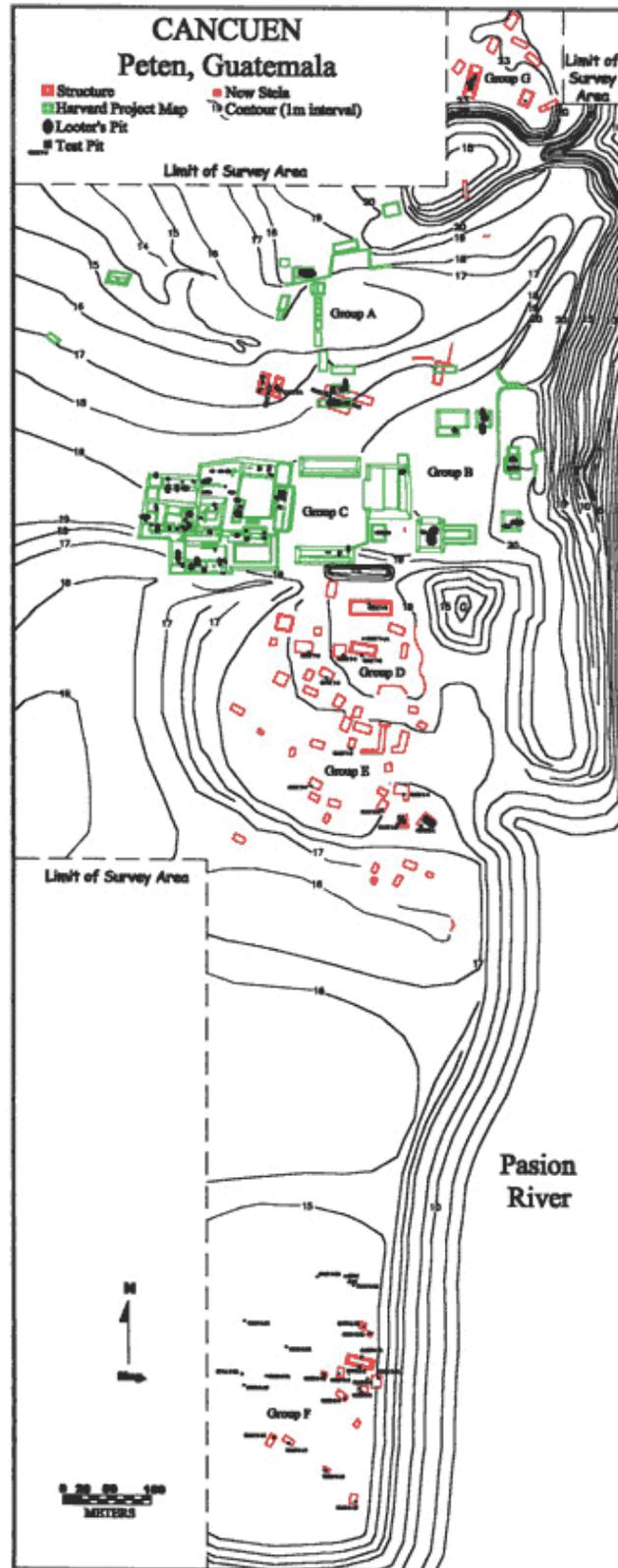


Figure 2. Map of Cancuén showing extent of Harvard and Vanderbilt project investigations.

Mapping and Reconnaissance

Much of the 1999 survey was spent mapping mounds and mound groups south of Cancuén's epicenter. Survey in this zone revealed dense populations continuing from the palace precinct approximately 800 meters south to the bend in the Pasión River. Three groups were identified (Groups D, E, and F) and plotted and mapped ([Figure 3](#) and [Figure 4](#)) though the distinction between Groups D and E is merely based on distance. Settlement in this area was continuous over an area of approximately 350 x 200 meters with a total of forty-four structures mapped from these two groups. In general, the larger mounds are those closest to the palace group immediately to the north and as one proceeds south the mounds decrease in size.

Group F, located at the bend in the river to the south, represents the southern edge of occupation identified during the 1999 survey. A mound 22 x 10 meters and 2 meters high and its accompanying plaza group dominate this area. Surrounding these structures are numerous low-lying "mounds". Test pits in 20 of these yielded 13 mounds with artifacts. Given the low height of these platforms and the apparent open area between Groups D/E and F it is likely that there are other "hidden", non-platform structures in this area.

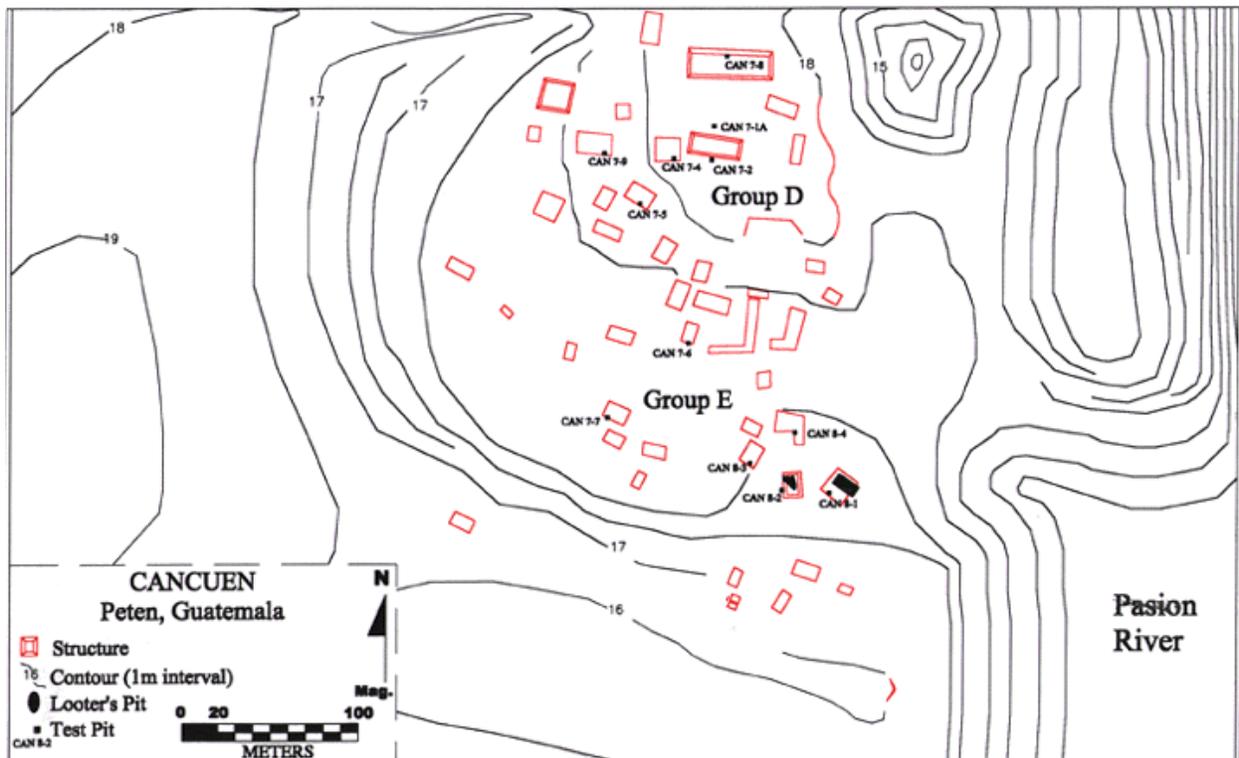


Figure 3. Groups D and E at Cancuén.

The terrain to the north of the palace, where Group A is located, descends gradually before sharply rising up a natural hill that was modified in antiquity with large facing stones from the riverside below. A number of additional mounds (Group G) were discovered atop this hill ([Figure 5](#)). North of the hillcrest, the terrain descends again into an area that appears to have been modified into a series of terraces. Several mounds follow at least two terraces on this face. Group G is dominated by a 6 meter high mound that had contained a large tomb, now heavily looted. The area farther to the north rises into another hill. A short reconnaissance in the area yielded additional settlement that will be further examined in subsequent field seasons.

Mapping operations in the core itself consisted of recording a new ballcourt (structures 12 and 13) and the re-mapping of several existing structures (9, 10, and 11) which had been previously plotted by the Harvard Seibal Project in 1967 ([Figure 6](#)). Of these previously mapped buildings, the parallel orientation of structures 9 and 10 may indicate yet another ballcourt.

In addition to the continued survey of areas immediately surrounding Cancuén itself, local informants' reports of sites within the greater region will also be investigated in future seasons in order to fill in gaps in the ancient landscape for this largely unknown territory.

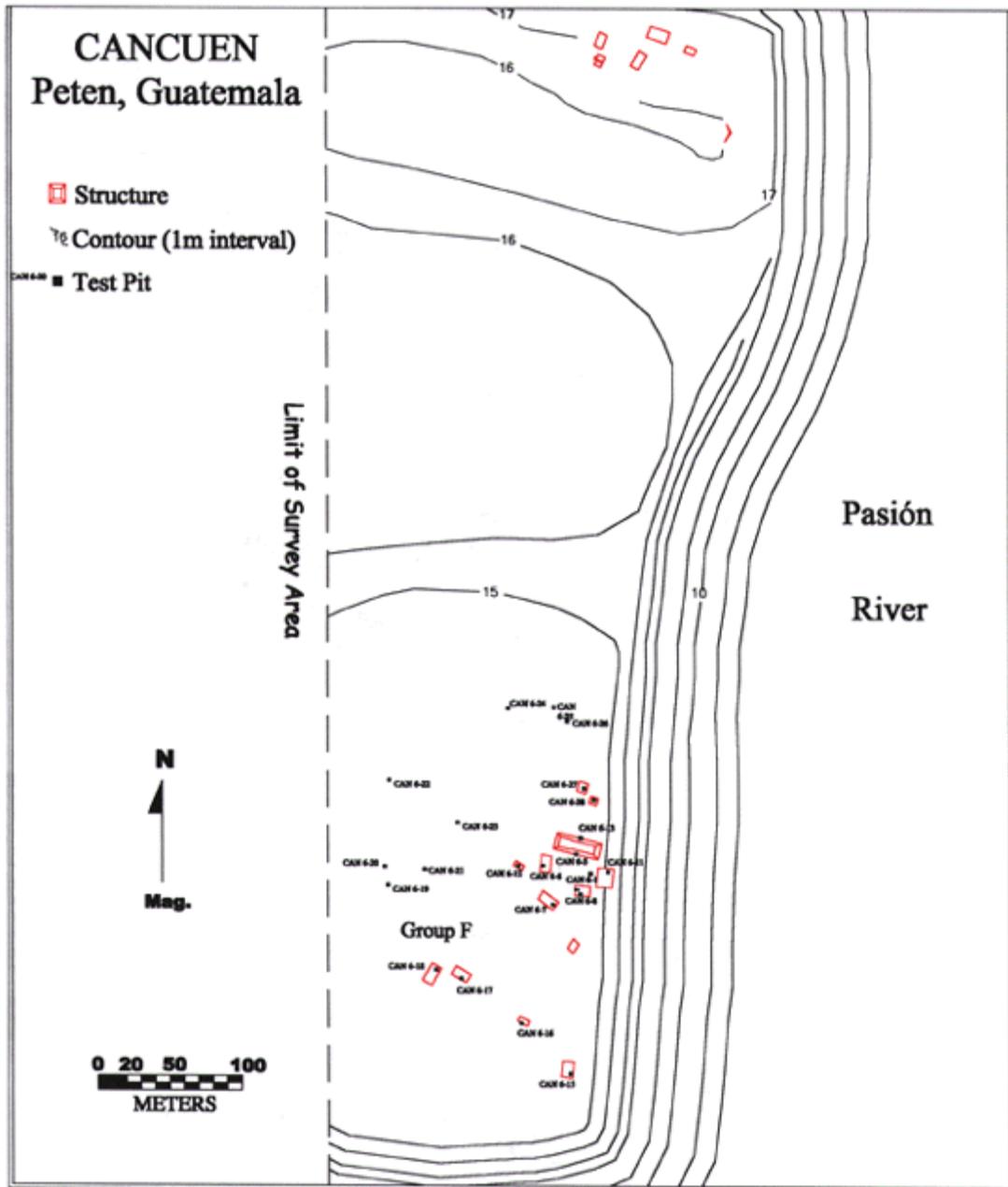


Figure 4. Group F at Cancuén.

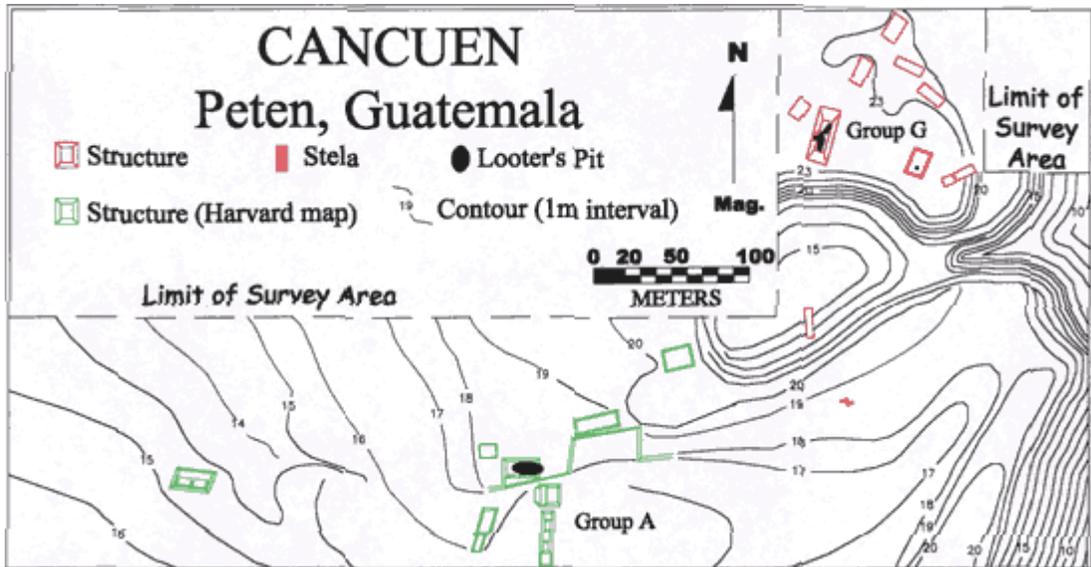


Figure 5. Groups A and G at Cancuén.

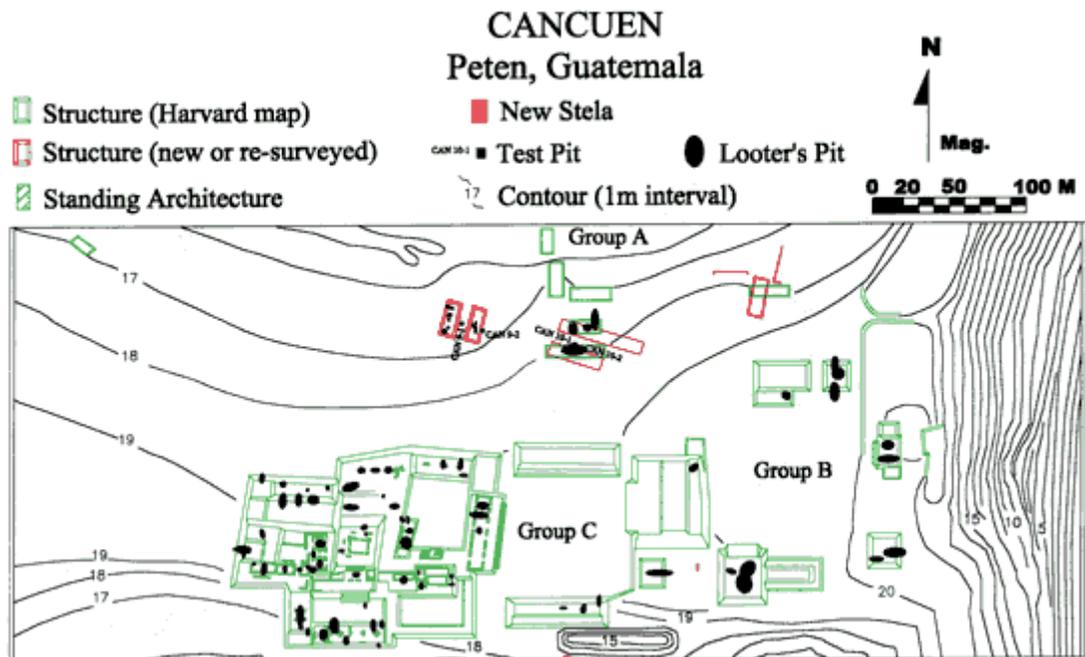


Figure 6. Groups A, B, and C at Cancuén. (note the extent of looting in the palace area.)

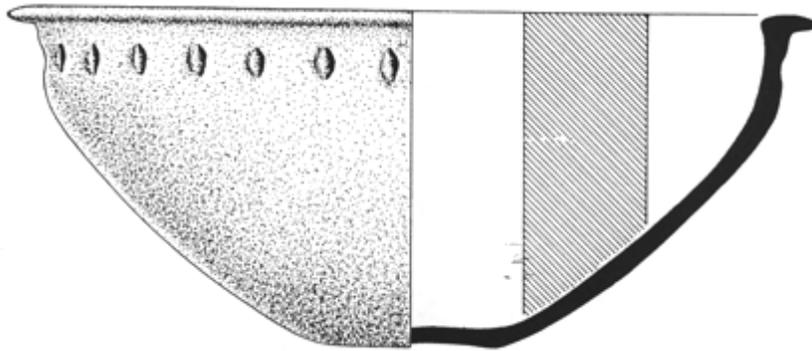


Figure 7. Bowl with incurved-rim and finger punctation characteristic of the Cancuén ceramic assemblage.

Consolidation and Recording of Looted Structures

While the numerous looter's trenches at Cancuén were damaging, fortunately looters mistakenly excavated trenches into the palace, and not into contexts where elaborate goods would be located. All trenches were documented ([Figure 6](#)) and consolidated. The trenches exposed beautiful limestone masonry architecture and numerous corbel-vaults. Unstable architectural features were stabilized with wooden supports. These supports will allow the preservation of cut stone masonry walls 3 to 4 meters in height for future conservation and reconstruction.

Artifacts recovered from these trenches included ceramics, lithic material, figurine fragments, and jade beads. These remains indicate very great wealth for the royal family of Cancuén, not surprising given their control of the Upper Pasión River. Consolidation of these trenches has allowed us to refine our strategy for excavations of the palace in future seasons.

Excavations

The primary goals of this season's excavations focused on trying to generate a preliminary ceramic chronology, determining the rough extent and density of population south of the palace complex, and establishing approximately when the palace itself was constructed and/or occupied. In order to address these goals, test units were placed in areas with visible structure mounds and the palace itself. Twelve operations (totaling 66 excavation units) were conducted during our investigations. These investigations included: the collection and recording of surface finds from around the site and the adjacent riverbank, the placement of excavation units in the elite residential and plaza complexes of the palace as well as in the non-elite residential compounds of the

outlying areas, and finally, the examination of looter's trenches and the collection of materials taken from exposed areas which will be used for later analysis.

Recovered Artifacts

Ceramics: The ceramics of Cancuén represent an assemblage distinct from that of other Maya Lowland sites. There are some types and modes identical to those of Seibal and the Petexbatún, yet Cancuén ceramics exhibit many distinctive types and traits with tremendous variation in both composition and style.

Stylistic differences within the collection sample also serve to distinguish Cancuén from other lowland centers. All sherds recovered have fallen squarely into a Late or Terminal Classic classification (Tepeu 2 or Tepeu 3), yet there appears to be a relative lack of striated utilitarian wares which make-up large portions of these collections at other Late Classic sites. Numerous examples of Fine Orange and Fine Gray Wares have been uncovered at Cancuén indicating a strong Terminal Classic component. The most frequently encountered sherds at Cancuén are those of somewhat large bowls with incurved-rims and a band of finger punctation a few centimeters below the rim ([Figure 7](#)). First described by Tourtellot et al. (1976), these bowls seem to constitute a distinct marker of the Cancuén assemblage. In addition, some features of the Cancuén ceramics also indicate ties to the highlands that are visible only eight kilometers to the south.

Lithics: The site of Cancuén has an optimal location for the procurement and processing of stone tools, which is reflected in the large quantities of lithic material recovered this field season. Visual identification of the obsidian artifacts indicates that the majority of them were quarried from the obsidian at El Chayal, Guatemala, certainly the most convenient source for the residents of Cancuén. As noted by Hammond (1972) the Pasión River valley would have been one of the most likely routes of trade from the highlands to lowland Maya centers. Cancuén's location on the Río de la Pasión precisely at the point where it becomes navigable is perfectly situated to oversee any movement of goods between highland sources and lowland points of consumption.

The obsidian artifacts recovered this season were primarily in the form of prismatic blades, with some examples of bifacial projectile points. Much of the obsidian debitage retained parts of the cortex, material that would have been removed had these artifacts been processed somewhere else, again suggesting that large quantities of obsidian were transported in bulk to Cancuén for processing and export.

Group F (Operation 6) provides evidence for chert tool production on a large scale. Excavations revealed not only recovered 5 exhausted cores of chert, but large amounts of chert debitage and numerous tapered limestone hammers used in the production of bifacial tools. This evidence suggests that the residents of this area may have been producing chipped stone artifacts for intrasite and/or possibly intersite exchange. These hypotheses will be tested in future field seasons.

Conclusions and Foundation for Future Research

Excavations of the 1999 field season at Cancuén produced valuable new evidence that will help launch a decade of more intensive research at the site. Survey and mapping identified and cataloged all looter's trenches and disturbances, as well as identifying residential groups, a ballcourt, and other mounds for future excavation. Looter's trenches were cleaned and stabilized to prevent future destruction, and permanent guards at the site have dramatically reduced the risk of future episodes of looting and the loss of valuable information.

The abundance of ceramic evidence recovered will provide us with a strong chronology for the construction and inhabitation of the palace as well as residential areas. The ceramic data can also be utilized to demonstrate highland/lowland interaction and exchange. Lithic data suggests craft specialization, possibly lineage based, with the purpose of inter and intra-regional exchange.

As anticipated, FAMSI funding of this preliminary field season has been extremely successful in generating data for additional grant proposals. Based on data gathered during this season funding has been secured from the National Geographic Society, Vanderbilt University Development Grants Program, as well as an additional FAMSI award for continued survey of the terra incognita surrounding Cancuén. In addition, discussions with international development agencies are exploring the possibilities that this project and its strong community relations with the local villages may present for future regional development. Incorporating this data with that of future field seasons will allow us to address questions of Cancuén's political and economic role in the Classic Maya world. This information is not only invaluable for the political history of Cancuén, but can be used to address larger issues of the importance of inter-regional exchange in the rise and fall of Classic Maya society, while also making a significant, positive impact on the indigenous population which inhabits the region today.

All project members are deeply grateful for the FAMSI support which has served in this case to meet the FAMSI goal and those of the project: to seed initial investigation that has provided the basis for funding future large-scale research in this previously unexplored region.

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