



Contributions to the Archaeology  
Of Tikal, Naranjo-Sa'aal, Yaxha, and Nakum  
Northeast Region of Peten, Guatemala

# Maya Prehispanic Occupation in Yaxha, Northeast Peten, Guatemala: A Synthesis

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## Introduction

In 1990 the Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala (IDAEH), as part of the Ministry of Culture, began a project of archaeological research and conservation in the northeastern region of Peten, at the Maya sites of Yaxha and Topoxte (Figures 1 and 2). Initially the excavations in Yaxha were carried out in locations related to Temple 216 (Hermes et al. 1997), the Lake Causeway, and Vía 5 (Hermes et al. 1999). Important information was collected from a general test-pitting program at the epicenter of Yaxha, including excavations in several chultuns. Later, from 2001 to 2006, conservation works at Yaxha were completed under sub-contract in the the North Acropolis, the Maler Group, and the South Acropolis and its related ballcourt (Figure 3).

Research work carried out in the central part of Topoxte Island made it possible to establish the existence of ten construction stages. Six of them (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8) are characterized by greater construction activity, and the other four are considered minor modifications of previous stages of buildings (Figure 4).

## The Middle Preclassic Period

The Yaxha-Sacnab basin was populated around 700 BC by small groups that settled in a dispersed fashion on high terrain, whose ceramic affiliation is closely related to the first settlers of Tikal (D. Rice 1976a, 1976b; P. Rice 1979a:14-18). The analysis of the first ceramic samples from Yaxha permitted the subdivision of the earlier period into two ceramic complexes called Ah Pam and Yancotil, equivalent to the contemporary complexes Eb and Tzec of Tikal (D. Rice 1976a:434-435). The earliest evidence of occupation recovered in the work carried out by the IDAEH project in Yaxha corresponds to the Yancotil Complex.

In Yaxha evidence has been recovered of

early activity mainly in the southern and western area of the epicenter of the site, which makes it possible to ascertain that the first settlement was focused within the aforementioned area. Samples of Mamom pottery were recovered in the northern area of the West Group.

The North Acropolis is located at a higher elevation of the natural terrain; it is important to mention that a few sherds of Mamom pottery were found in relation to the northern temple of the Acropolis, indicating a locus of occupation related to the first Yaxha inhabitants; however, most of the samples belonged to the following Yancotil phase. During Yancotil times, the natural landscape in central Yaxha consisted of inclined relief and irregular outcrops of bedrock originating near the shore of Lake Yaxha. It is probable that the area later related to the Lake Causeway was a path adapted according to the topographic conditions of the land that connected the lake with the main settlement.

The works carried out indicate that it is at the end of the Middle Preclassic (beginning of the Yancotil Complex) that the North Acropolis area began to be used for ceremonial purposes, and it can be assumed with some certainty that the beginning of ceremonialism with architectural associations was also centered in the E-Group (Astronomical Complex). In relation to the East Acropolis, under Temple 216, the first known activities consisted in the conditioning of the bedrock (cutting and carving its surface as a natural floor) before the placement of a multiple burial accompanied by an offering consisting of an inverted vase corresponding to the Juventud Red type.

In Topoxte Island there is scant evidence associated with the lower floor of the Main Plaza,

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<sup>1</sup> The original version of this article was published as Hermes 2001.

directly placed on bedrock. The only documented construction is a low platform possibly of ellipsoidal shape (Building 5C-1 Sub) (Figure 5).

### The Late Preclassic Period

The evidence recovered in Yaxha indicates abundant activity in the central, southern, and western parts of the epicenter (Figure 3). By this time the North Acropolis was undoubtedly the most important ritual center, making Yaxha the site that achieved the greatest development in the lake basin. The triadic temples of the North Acropolis were already built; the northern pyramid had stucco masks, and buildings 137 and 144 had important remodelings and additions throughout this period. In the southwest area of the North Acropolis, under the plaza floor was found a buried building (134 Sub), which was decorated with a large frieze portraying two personages who could be related to a version of the Hero Twins. The plinth of the Acropolis also underwent six stages of Preclassic stairways, one of them related to a large decorative stucco panel showing a complex iconographic scene related to a theme of sacrifice and the underworld.

Yancotil-phase sherds were collected from patio 4 of the South Acropolis near bedrock and under Palace 365. In relation to the ballcourt, a Preclassic chultun was identified near the southwest corner of the eastern platform. Important evidence of a drainage canal was also seen under the ballcourt patio. In Plaza B, samples of Preclassic sherds were recovered under Building 90, related to a possible substructure built over a layer of clay.

There is evidence of intensity of construction activity accompanied by a marked population growth, clearly reflected in the abundant amount of artifact remains and in the wide area of spatial distribution in which they were found. It is apparent that the main access to the epicenter of the city was related to the central and western sectors, in order to facilitate the continuous mobilization of people between the lakeshore and the upper area of the settlement. One of the results of this situation was the widening and modification of the natural terrain in the area that became the initial version of the Lake Causeway (south) and the Maler Causeway (north).

In relation to the East Acropolis and specifically Temple 216, the first version known as Sub 1 was constructed, the evidence for which is restricted to the western facade in which a plinth of three stepped terraces was documented in association with three staircases interspersed with sloped walls (Figure 5).

Important Yancotil evidence comes from the

Maler Group at the northern sector of the city (Figure 3). An offering (10 and 10A) included four medium size pyramid models made of clay and coated with red specular stucco; two Sierra Red vessels were also recovered. The finding relates to the west facade of Building No. 4, under the stair at the level of the first plaza floor. The first stage of the Maler Causeway was also built during the Late Preclassic; this early version did not have lateral walls or parapets.

During the Late Preclassic, on the islands of Lake Yaxha the cultural situation can be considered as atypical in the sense of the lack of evidence, since it was not possible to situate any cultural manifestation unequivocally for this period.

In Topoxte Island there is only one possible activity related to the terrace south of Building A, where a large concentration of ceramic, lithic, and snail material was located. Given the presumed utilitarian function of the materials, the evidence was registered as Trash 1. The presence of a vessel and about 10 sherds related to a Protoclassic episode may also date this finding to a later period. However, it is important to consider that this sample of problematical sherds, besides being minimal, presents a questionable stratigraphic position.

With the exception of results obtained in research carried out in Lake Peten Itza (P. Rice 1996:288-292), all the reports of archaeological investigations in the Central Peten indicate that notable demographic and construction growth occurred during the Late Preclassic period.

This situation may indicate that at least in certain areas of the lakes region, there was population settled before the Middle Preclassic Mamom cultural unification, and in places which grew at this time such development became interrupted, apparently accompanied by some kind of depopulation. The main reason could be found in the immense increase in size attained by certain sites located north of the lakes, which achieved hegemony over their nearby competing centers, gaining control over large territories for their benefit.

### The Protoclassic

In Yaxha, significant evidence has not been recovered for this time period. The limited information available tells us that between 100 BC and AD 200, construction activity in the North Acropolis continues as in the past. It may be that at this moment or in the interval of time that marks the beginning of the next cultural period is when buildings modifying the initial triadic pattern of the North Acropolis were constructed.

In relation to Topoxte there are two Protoclassic construction stages. During the first (second in the sequence of the island), the central area of the main plaza was leveled by a floor at the level of Building 5C-1 Sub (Figure 5). To the north, two low platforms were constructed as well as five chultuns characterized by a clover shape (4C-2, 4C-3, 5C-3, 5C-4). Both platforms are associated with chultuns, and their similarity to platforms A, B, and C of Uaxactun is clear, especially when the construction process of the A-V building complex started (Smith 1950).

During the next stage (third in the sequence of Topoxte), there was a large amount of construction activity (Figure 7). The level of the main plaza was raised approximately four meters. Building C Sub 1 was built, only known by a small amount of scattered evidence found inside the south side of Building C-1 of the Postclassic period. Also, it is possible to recognize the first stage of the stairway between Buildings C and D, which in this version had nine steps attached to the perimeter wall of the eastern area, where the main buildings were probably concentrated. This is the first example in which Topoxte Island was used to carry out activities of a public nature.

It is important to mention that Chultuns 6B-1 and 7B-1 were already in use; they are located to the southwest of the main plaza. The preference to use chultuns with more than one enclosure is clear, where the clover shape related to three enclosures was favored. Chultun 7B-1 is not considered a standard chultun in the strict sense of the word, because it comprised of a network of underground enclosures (Figure 8). This network consists of at least twelve semi-spherical enclosures carved in the bedrock; they are interconnected by passages and arched openings that connect with common areas of several enclosures, where there is usually only one access to the surface. Their function does not seem to have been to store waste or usable materials. They present some specialized features, such as the hole in the floor of Chultun 5C-4, and the stones in enclosure 10 related to Chultun 7B-1, where the evidence of high temperature in the walls suggests a function related to a steam room (*temazcal*).

In relation to Chultun 7B-1, one of the characteristics observed in the offerings layed during its ritual termination is that many vessels were cut in half, while complete pieces and almost all jar necks were placed in inverted position. Apparently this network of enclosures carved on bedrock may have served a cave function within Topoxte Island. It was observed that ceramics related to previous cultural periods continue to be in use, with its repertoire of types, shapes, and

decorations; however, new features are represented in two ceramic classes characterized by the use of orange base slip and bichrome and polychrome decoration.

According to the subdivision into two periods that Brady et al. (1998) have proposed for the Protoclassic, it can be said that the local Agua Verde ceramic complex presents all of the traits that identify the late part of the cultural period (Protoclassic 2).

### The Early Classic

In central Yaxha archaeological excavations show little activity during the Early Classic period, a situation that clearly contrasts with the evidence of carved monuments and construction activities known in the eastern side of the city. The first stelae of Yaxha were erected toward the beginning of the Classic era (Mathews 1985:13). Unfortunately, almost no hieroglyphic text survives, making decipherment difficult, so that the chronology of the stelae is based exclusively on stylistic considerations. Importantly, Stelae 1 and 2 mention the toponymic glyph of Yaxha (Stuart 1985). Stela 1 shows the head variant of the title *ajaw*, indicating that Yaxha was already in the Early Classic period the seat of a ruler, and that the kingdom had established itself as an important center of the region (Grube 2000).

Important evidence of the Early Classic growth in the eastern zone of the site was recovered in the East Acropolis in relation to Temple 216 Sub 2, which was built at the beginning of this period, while Temple 216 Sub 3 belongs to the middle part. One of the characteristics of Temple 216 Sub 2 is that it shows the form of a truncated conical pyramid; its upper platform has a stylized quadrangular shape based on apron walls decorated with matching cornices. Access to the upper terrace was possible through a recessed stairway (Figure 9).

The version related to Temple 216 Sub 3 shows certain parts of the previous building; its shape remains stylized and quadrangular, while large stone blocks were added in the corners to make its recession less pronounced. A new stairway was constructed leading to the upper platform (Figure 10).

At the southeast area of the Maler Group near Building 6, a chultun with Early Classic sherds was identified. Also, at Group C near Building 152 were recovered Tzakol polychrome sherds representing dishes with basal flanges, and one slab-foot sherd.

During the Early Classic period, it could be considered that the settlements related to the islands were already part of the political entity of Yaxha. For instance, in Topoxte Island there are two

construction stages during this period; both are restricted to activities in Building A. The first one (fourth in the sequence of Topoxte) is associated with the construction of Building A Sub 1 that sealed Chultuns 6B-1 and 7B-1 (Figure 11). This building is composed of an oval or semicircular plinth with a stairway and a rectangular room (Figure 12). During the next stage (fifth in the sequence of the site), Building A Sub 1 was remodeled (Building A Sub 1a). The level of the floor of the upper terrace was extended to the north in the area on the stairway by covering it with a kind of podium in the shape of a rectangular block (Figure 13).

“Presumably, Yaxha, located in the middle between Caracol and Tikal, at some time during the Early Classic, also fell under the hegemony of Tikal, although we must note that there is still a lack of consistent evidence for this hypothesis. A phenomenon that is possibly connected with changes in the structure of power in Yaxha during some time of the Classic is the interruption in the erection of stelae. Although for lack of dates it is impossible to determine the exact point when Yaxha stopped erecting sculptured monuments, it can be observed that all the stelae of the site stylistically come from the beginning of the Early Classic and after the Late Classic” (Grube 2000, translated from the Spanish).

The apparent depopulation that Yaxha suffers at this time probably has some connection with the sudden construction boom that is observed for the final part of the Early Classic at the Poza Maya site located 5 km north.

### The Late Classic

Both on the mainland and on the islands it has not been possible to detect evidence of activity that can be unequivocally placed in Tepeu 1 times. No site stelae show characteristics of the first half of the Late Classic. The shortage of dates and hieroglyphic texts with dynastic information makes the explanation of the hiatus impossible.

In Tepeu 2, Yaxha's Temple 216-1 was constructed, consisting of a pyramid of nine stepped platforms that support a temple with two chambers and a roof comb on the upper part. For the most part the vestiges that can be observed at present on the surface belong to this period (Figure 14).

The political, economic, and demographic changes that took place during the Late Classic must have contributed to consolidate Yaxha itself as an important center of exchange within the area southeast of Tikal.

The Lake Causeway was widened and modified according to the modality of the time,

and at the intersection with Vía 5 a control point was constructed, probably with the intention of observing and controlling all of the merchandise and people who entered and left the site from the south.

In Topoxte there are two construction stages during this period. As occurred during the previous Early Classic, both are restricted to activities in Building A (Figure 15). The first one (sixth in the sequence of the site) is associated with the construction of Building A-1, of which only the east and west facades are known. It seems to correspond to a small temple conformed by three stepped platforms that hold a room in its upper part; this construction can be dated to Tepeu 1–2 times (Figure 12).

Important evidence for the second stage (seventh in the sequence of the site) is observed on Building A-1a (Figure 13). It shows a remodeling that widens the first platform of the building, of which there is no greater knowledge; however, it was possible to determine that during the Postclassic period, part of the northern and southern facades were dismantled, including part of its fill, to reuse the stone in new constructions.

As evidence of elite activity there are four carved stelae (two on Topoxte Island, and two on Cante Island) and the important Burial 49 of Topoxte, which was placed inside Building A, refitting an enclosure of Chultun 6B-1, which had at least 200 years of being closed (Figure 15).

The burial corresponds to a young adult male accompanied by an offering of four ceramic vessels, 260 greenstone artifacts, 190 pieces of freshwater and marine shell, seven pieces of bone material, 19 artifacts of lithic material, and a mosaic made of conch shell and greenstone (Figures 16 and 17). There is a slate disc and three bone artifacts that present hieroglyphic inscriptions. In one of the bones there is reference to the fact that the buried person is the son of a Tikal woman. Two of the ceramic vessels and a string of 40 freshwater snails can be considered musical instruments. They should have a direct relationship with the type of activity the individual used to do.

The rest of the evidence of the Late Classic period does not have an elitist character and is reduced to two chultuns and four burials. On the islands of Cante and Paxte there are only fillings and a few burials.

### The Terminal Classic

The convulsive situation experienced by the Central Lowlands for the Terminal Classic period is not reflected in Yaxha, but rather, a constructive effort is characterized by major renovations of the

monumental buildings of the previous period, accompanied by the relocation of many of the existing sculpted monuments.

An example of this is the case of Stela 7, carried in front of the stairway located south of the general platform of the North Acropolis, its relocation possibly associated with activities related to the adjacent ballcourt (Buildings 131 and 133) located in the north sector of Plaza E. Other relocated monuments are Stelae 8, 9, and 10 in the Maler Group in front of Building 4; Stela 41 in the Eastern Acropolis; and Stela 13 in the Twin Pyramid Complex (Plaza A).

The best examples of Terminal Classic activity come from the Maler Group, especially from Temple 1 and Buildings 3, 4, and 5. Additional Terminal Classic references appear at the Twin Pyramid Complex, the Eastern Acropolis, and the South Acropolis ballcourt (Figure 3). Excavations conducted at Palace 365 evidenced at least three Terminal Classic stages.

At the Lake Causeway there were modifications in the southern end; the construction located at the intersection of the causeway and Vía 5 disappeared. The elimination of this control point must have been motivated by the desire of the group that held the political power to attract some of population that had been dispersed after the collapse of different Late Classic centers relatively close to Yaxha. Probably the main goal was to use people as a workforce and eliminate any type of obstacle that would discourage activity within the site.

Excavations carried out in the Eastern Acropolis have led to an understanding of the great remodeling works in Temples 216-1 and 216-1a (Figure 18), specifically in the lower part of the stairway and in the lower area of the west side of the plinth.

In the islands that continue to function as part of the Yaxha polity, the distribution of materials from the Terminal Classic period is rather curious, since in Topoxte the only evidence was provided by two pits excavated at the northeast of the main plaza. In addition to the evidence mentioned, in the rest of the excavation works there were only a few isolated sherds. Meanwhile, the occupation on the other islands is clear, with the presence of relatively abundant material remains.

## The Postclassic

For this period, cultural activity in Yaxha is scarce and of an indefinite nature. The east sector of the city has some evidence of post-occupational activity in Building 216 and in three chultuns. At the rear chamber of Temple 216 an offering was

documented consisting of smashed sherds and copal candles.

At the southern end of the Lake Causeway there may have been one or two huts located in the vicinity of the lake pier platform in order to take advantage of the facilities that could be obtained from a leveled area of such extent.

The scarcity and distribution of Postclassic vestiges in Yaxha's mainland acquires greater relevance if it is considered that the works carried out by the IDAEH research project have completed a general sampling program where one hundred test pits covered most of the mapped area. Important Postclassic settlement was focused primarily on the islands of Topoxte, Cante, Paxte, and Jacalte (Bullard 1970; P. Rice 1979b; Hermes and Noriega 1998) (Figure 19).

It is evident that Topoxte Island is not a member of the New Town Sphere that characterizes the initial part of the Postclassic period, although this sphere has members to the east and west of the Yaxha region, where coincidentally there is evidence of population continuity between the Terminal Classic and the Postclassic. The absence of the New Town population in an intermediate zone between member sites of this ceramic sphere (Sharer and Chase 1976) allows us to suppose that there are no human groups settled permanently in the vicinity of the Yaxha lake during most of the time period of this sphere.

The only cultural manifestation with ceramics whose affiliation could be New Town is Offering No. 1 of Yaxha, which was placed on the upper part of Temple 216 when it was already collapsing. Practically all the offering materials originate from outside the Central Lowlands; the pottery could correspond to two varieties of the Daylight Orange type. Despite the inclusion of turquoise and gold, we are inclined to date this finding prior to the first settlement of the Isla phase (Hermes et al. 1993; Hermes and Noriega 1998).

It is possible to consider that the first use of the Yaxha region by Postclassic people was between AD 1150 and 1200. Although no clear evidence of the settlement of this population has been located, its existence is known by the presence of material corresponding to Clemencia Crema pottery class (considered as originating from the Yaxha region), in Early Postclassic contexts in Macanche (P. Rice 1987). According to this association, perhaps on its arrival to Yaxha this group of people may have placed the previously mentioned Offering No. 1 on top of Temple 216.

The beginning of the Isla cultural phase is around AD 1200 and is marked by the sudden construction boom of the eighth constructive

stage of Topoxte and its associated population growth. The three lake Yaxha islands show dense occupation. Topoxte's immense constructive effort includes monumental architecture; with the exception of some groups with larger buildings, some smaller constructions look organized to fit the limited space and irregular topography of the island in the best possible way (Figure 20).

There are two major construction stages (eighth and ninth in the sequence of the site), and another, apparently unfinished, of minor intensity (tenth in the sequence) in the monumental area of the island. It has not been possible to differentiate these through ceramics, although the later stage is characterized by a considerable increase in the presence of effigy censers.

During the eighth stage the buildings and monuments of Topoxte have typical stylistic features of the Postclassic period, such as almost vertical walls, presence of staircases with balustrades which are topped by a block, flat ceilings, palace-type constructions with three entrances, presence of columns and colonnades, and small-size stelae and plain altars. Additionally, in the main plaza of Topoxte a sculpture in the shape of a snake's head very similar to one reported in Mayapan was located (Proskouriakoff 1962:Fig. 7a).

Construction works that mark the ninth stage can be dated to between AD 1350 and 1375. The steady remodeling characteristics could be interpreted as a sign of political-ideological stability and continuity of the leading lineage. It is possible that these works are due to the accession of a new ruler (Figure 20). Apart from a marked disinterest in symmetry, the buildings do not show significant stylistic changes. Practically all the examples of masonry enclosures have three doors; there are also cruciform altar-platforms. Probably some of this altar type may have existed in a previous stage, although no example of them remains.

At this time, it is possible to see through the material evidence of Topoxte some features and similarities with different sites located to the west (Central Peten), east (Belize), and northeast (Belize and Quintana Roo), which confirm and indicate the continuity of ties to Yucatan that are observed in the previous stage. Among these features can be mentioned stone sculptures and ceramic vessels, some of them representing a turtle with a human head emerging from its jaw, which usually functioned as the container of an offering. Also documented was the presence of incense burners decorated with spikes or with the representation of an anthropomorphic effigy associated with copper clamps, and human skulls placed as an offering.

There are three radiocarbon dates for Topoxte's

last occupation, which average the year AD 1450, so the abandonment of the site should have been at most a few years after this date.

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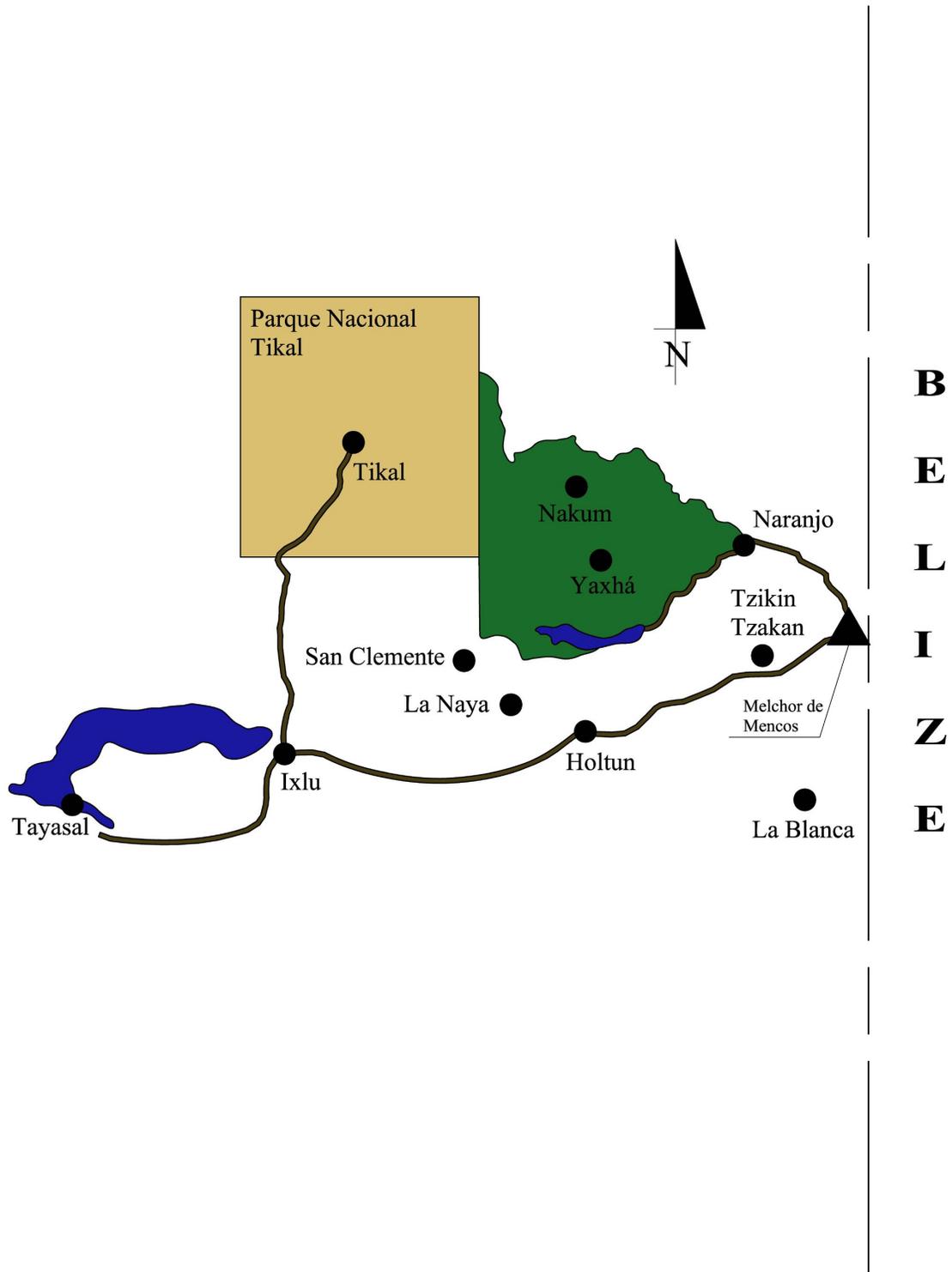


Figure 1. Map showing location of Yaxhá.

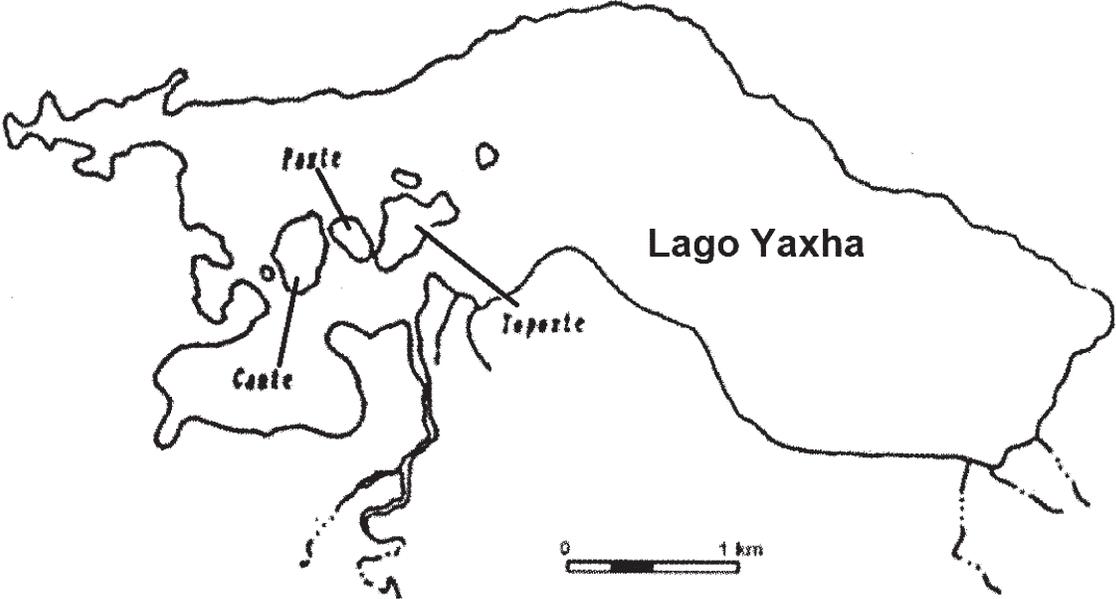


Figure 2. Lake Yaxha and its islands.

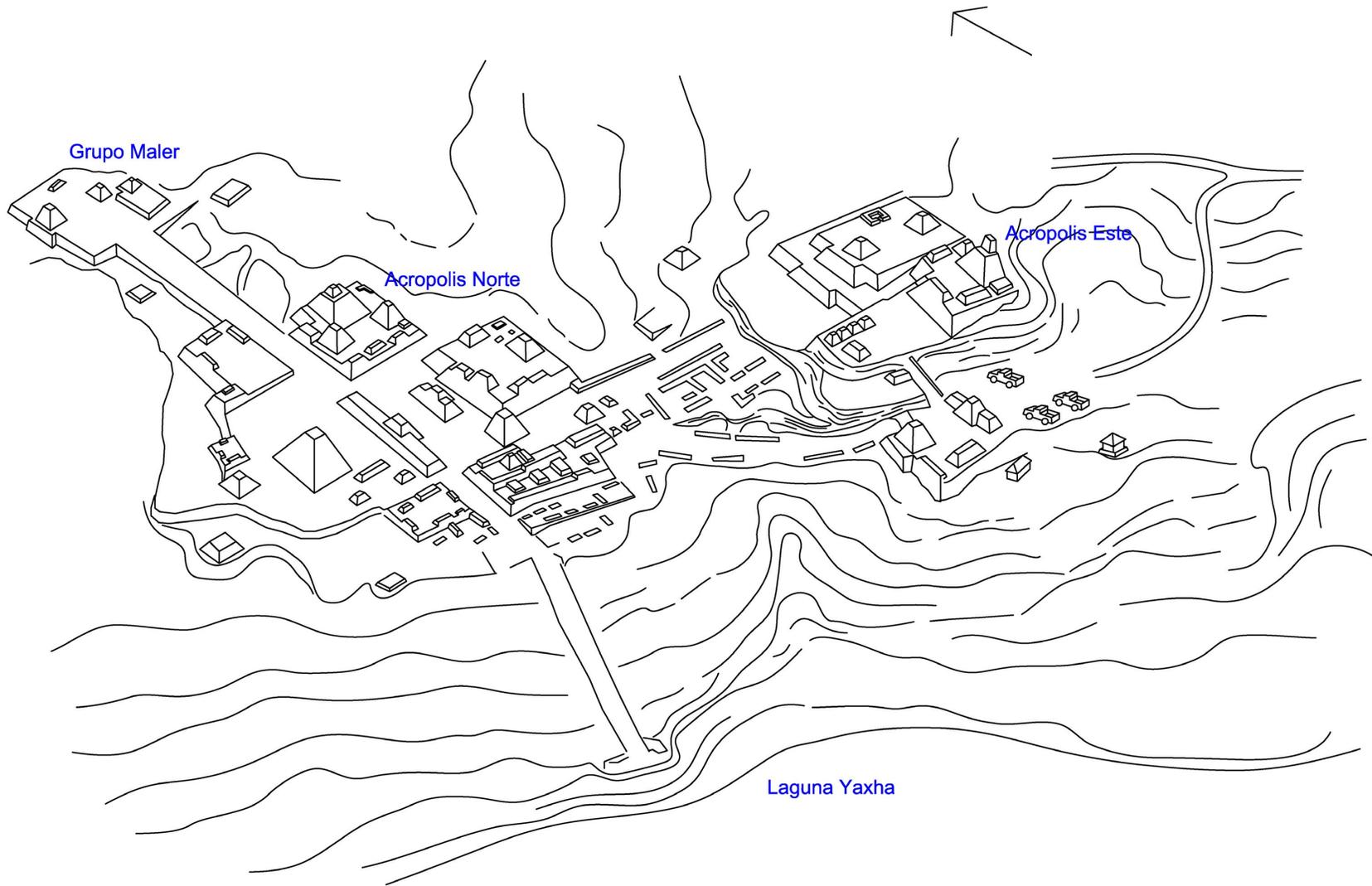


Figure 3. Map of Yaxha.

PERIODOS		HORIZONTES CULTURALES	COMPLEJOS CERÁMICOS	ESTADIOS CONSTRUCTIVOS
POSCLASICO	TARDIO		ISLA	10
				9
	TEMPRANO		8	
CLASICO	TERMINAL	TEPEU	TOLOBOJO	7
	TARDIO		IXBACH	6
	TEMPRANO		UCUTZ	
PRECLASICO	PROTOCLASICO Y/O TERMINAL	CHICANEL	TSUTSUY	5
			AGUA VERDE	4
	TARDIO	MAMOM	KUXTIN TARDIO	3
			KUXTIN TEMPRANO	2
			YANCOTIL	?
	MEDIO		AH PAM TARDIO	1
			AH PAM TEMPRANO	

Figure 4. Chronology of Yaxha and Topoxte.

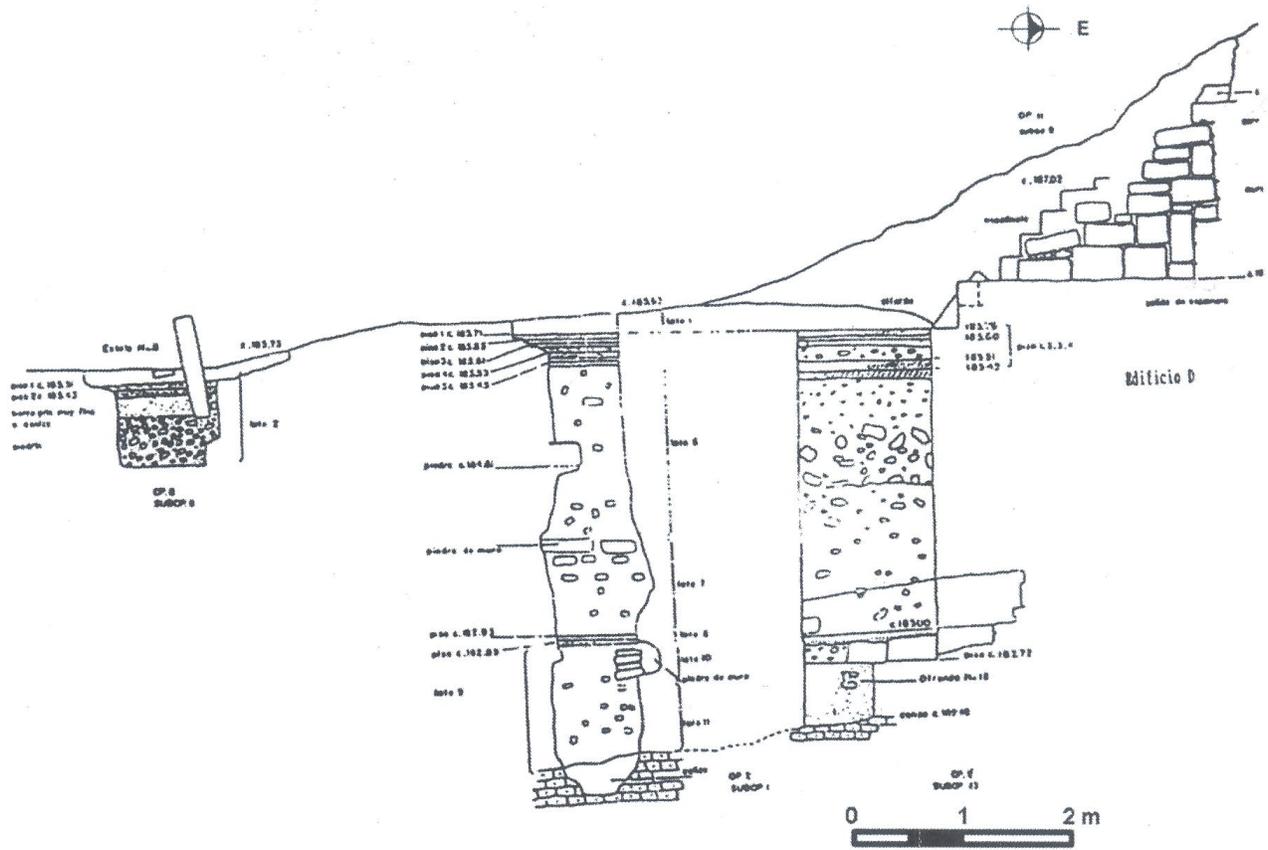
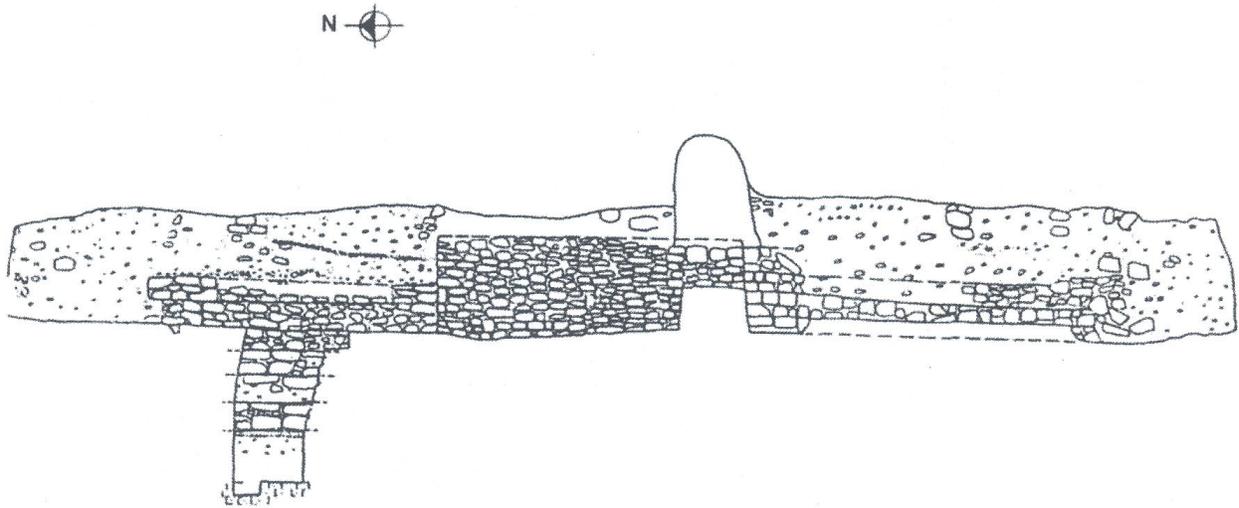


Figure 5. Section of the Main Plaza of Topoxte.



**Figure 6.** West facade of Building 216 Sub 1, Yaxha.

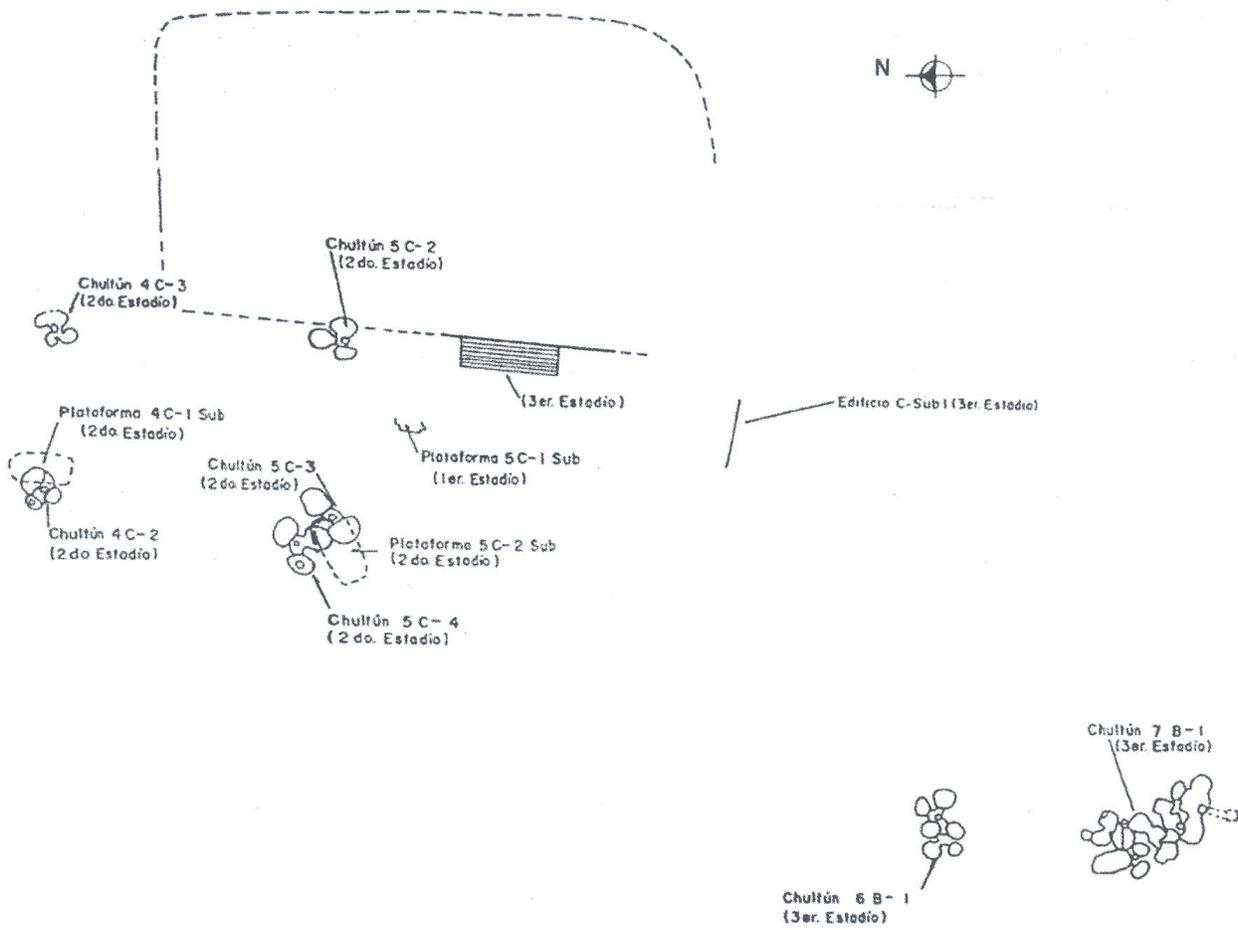


Figure 7. Central area of Topoxte before the Classic period.

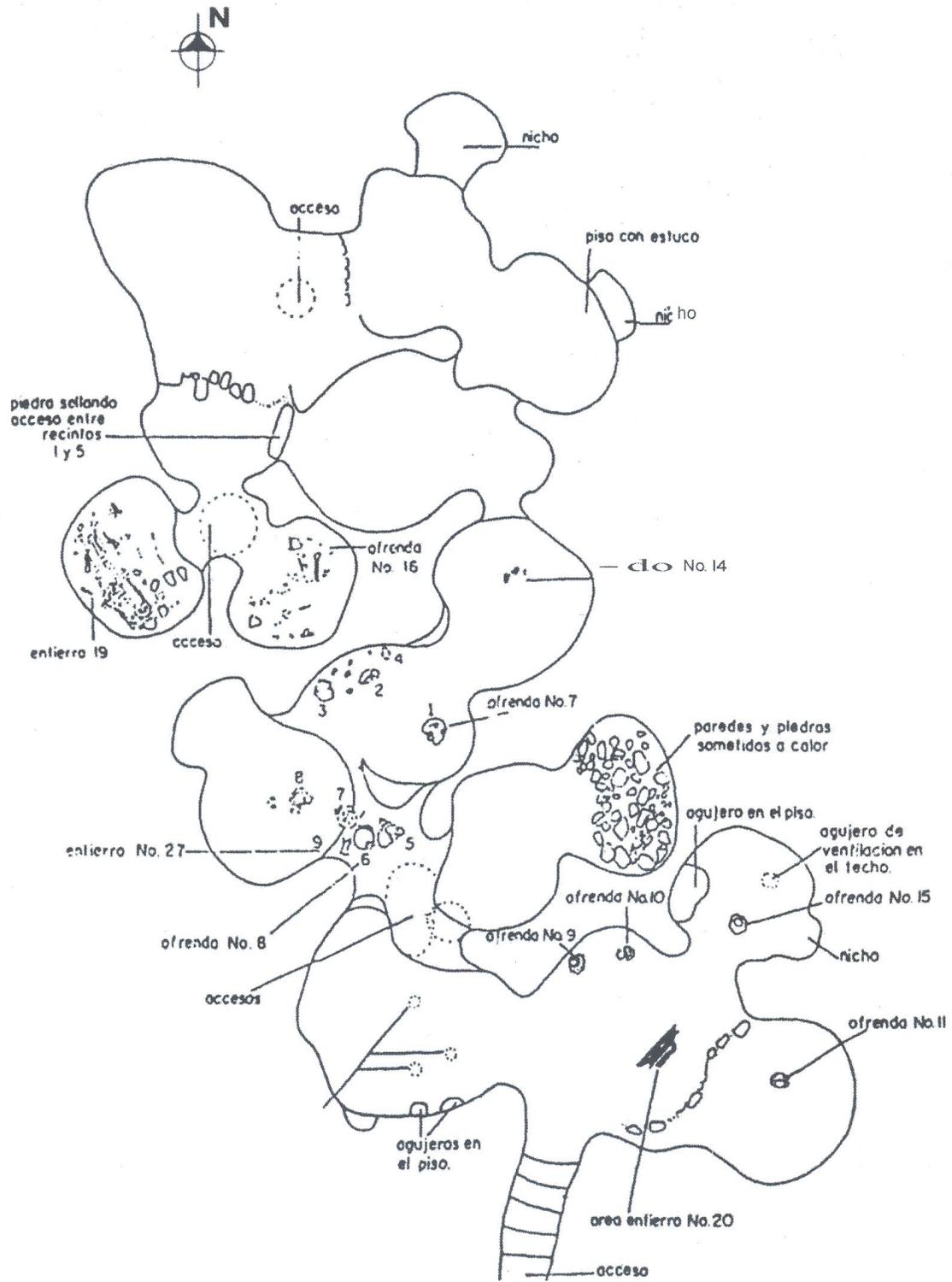


Figure 8. Chultun 7B. Offerings and finds.

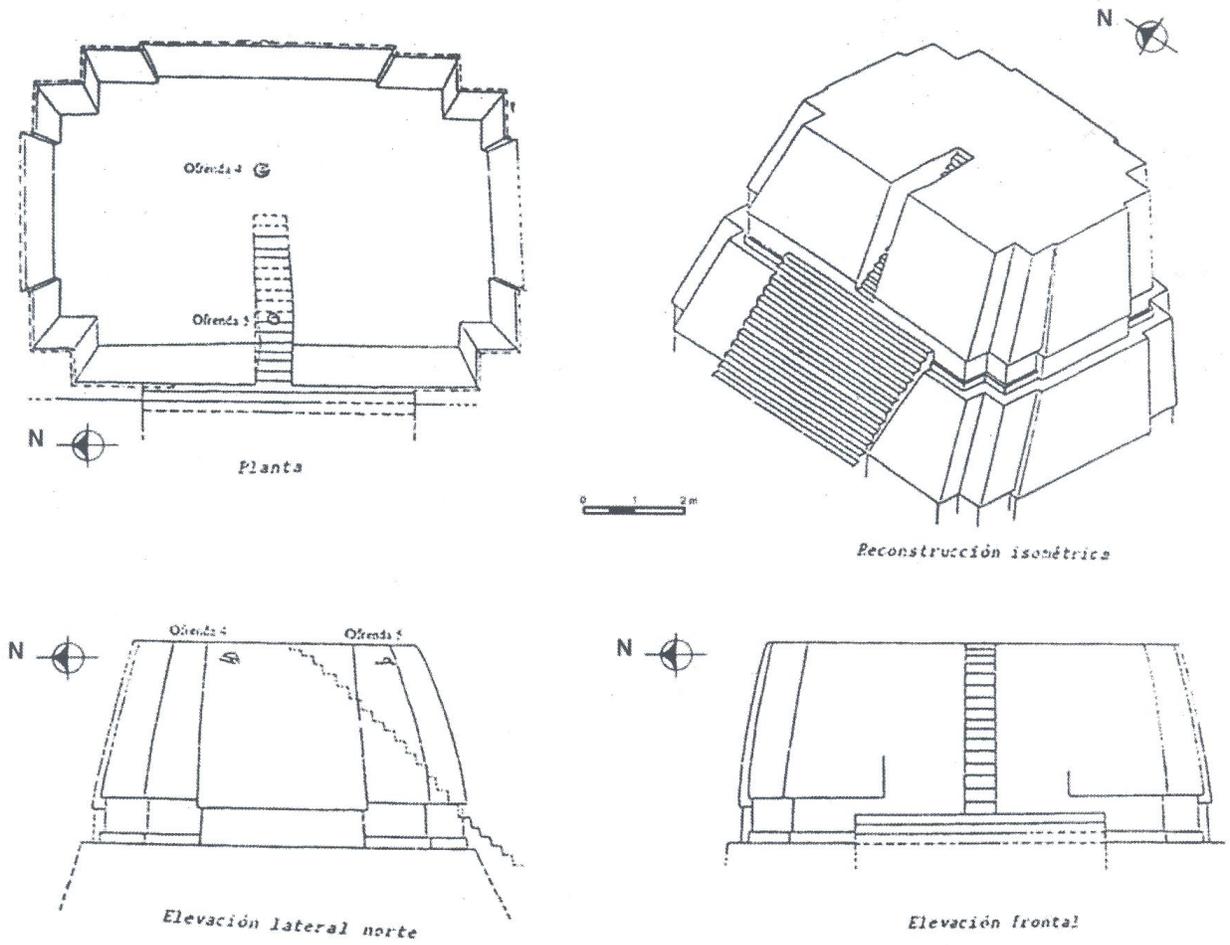


Figure 9. Plan, elevation, and reconstruction of Building 216 Sub 2, Yaxha.

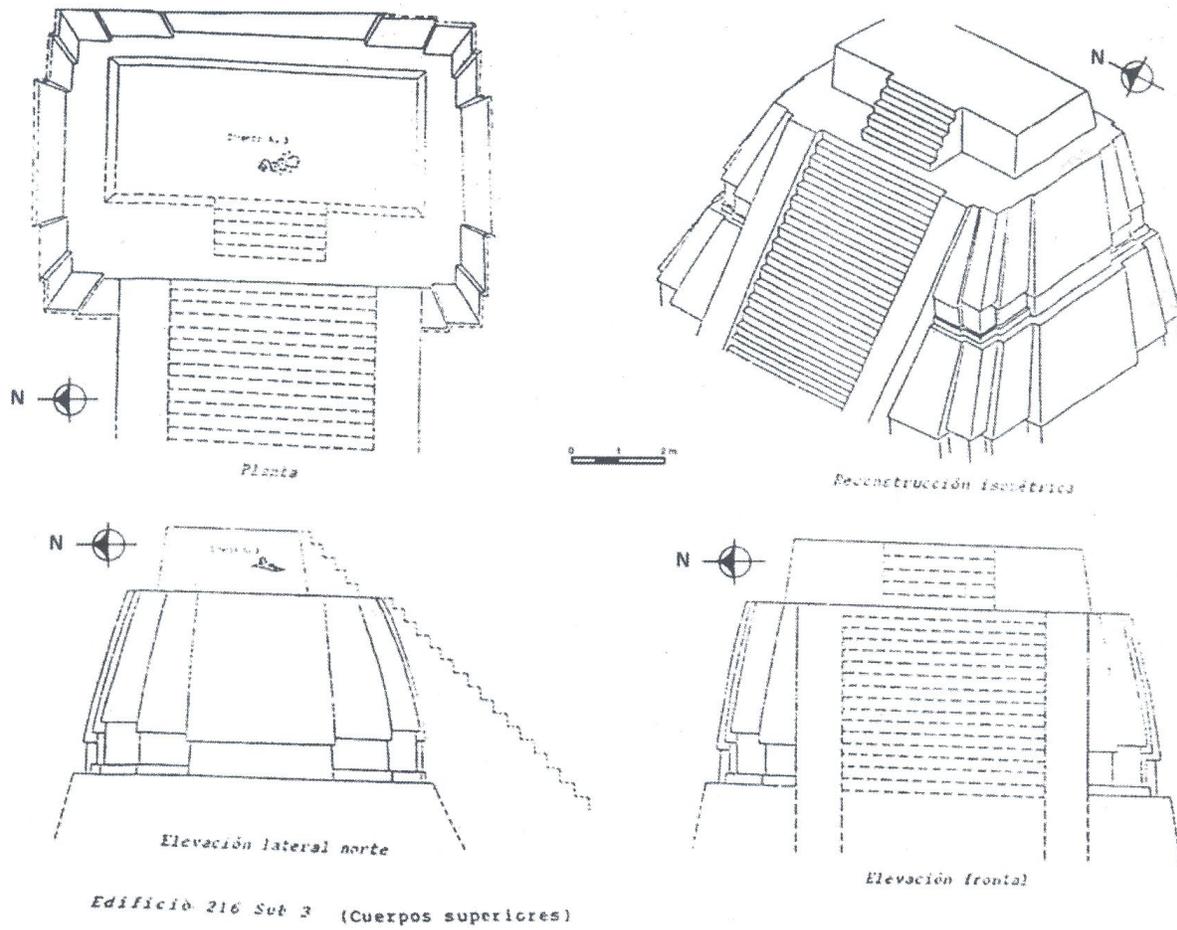
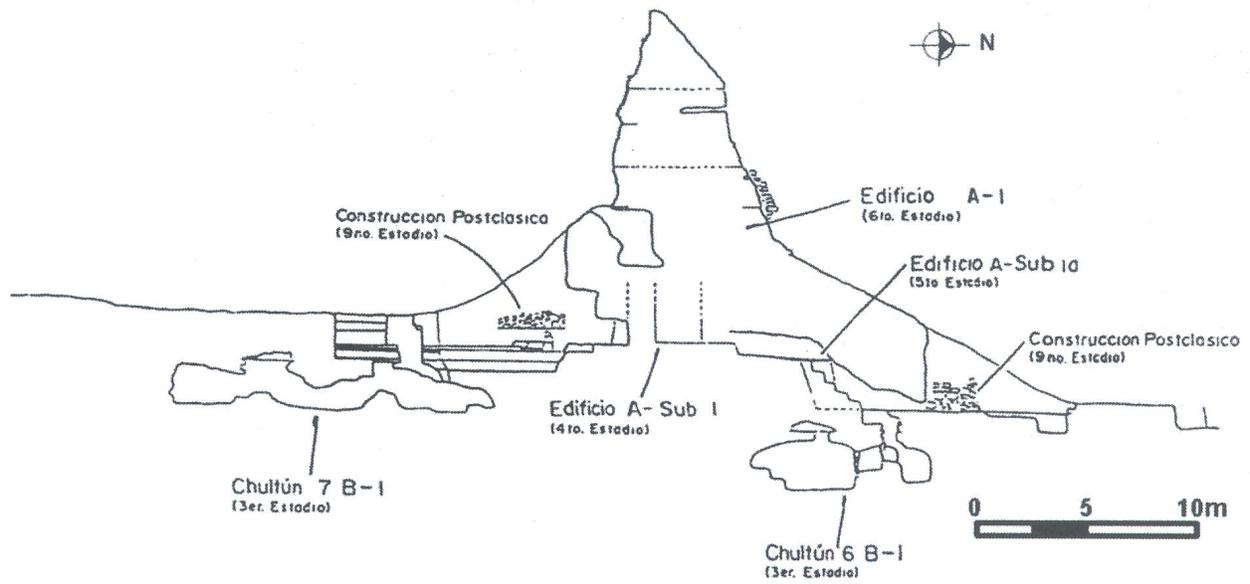


Figure 10. Plan, lateral elevation and reconstruction of Building 216 Sub 3, Yaxha.



Corte N-S del Edificio A de Topoxte; mostrando evidencia de distintos estadios constructivos. Junio 1958.

Figure 11. North-south section of Building A, Topoxte.

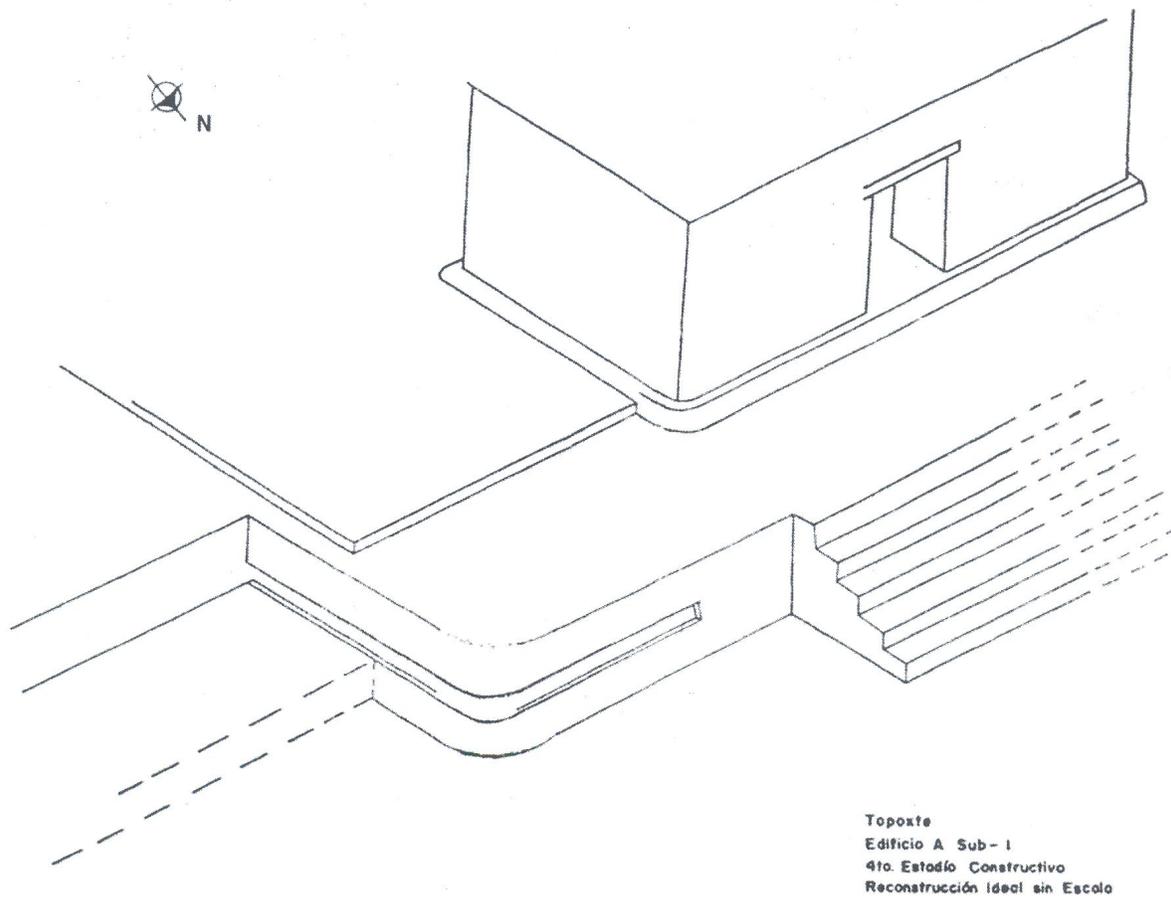


Figure 12. Ideal reconstruction of Building A Sub 1, Topoxte.

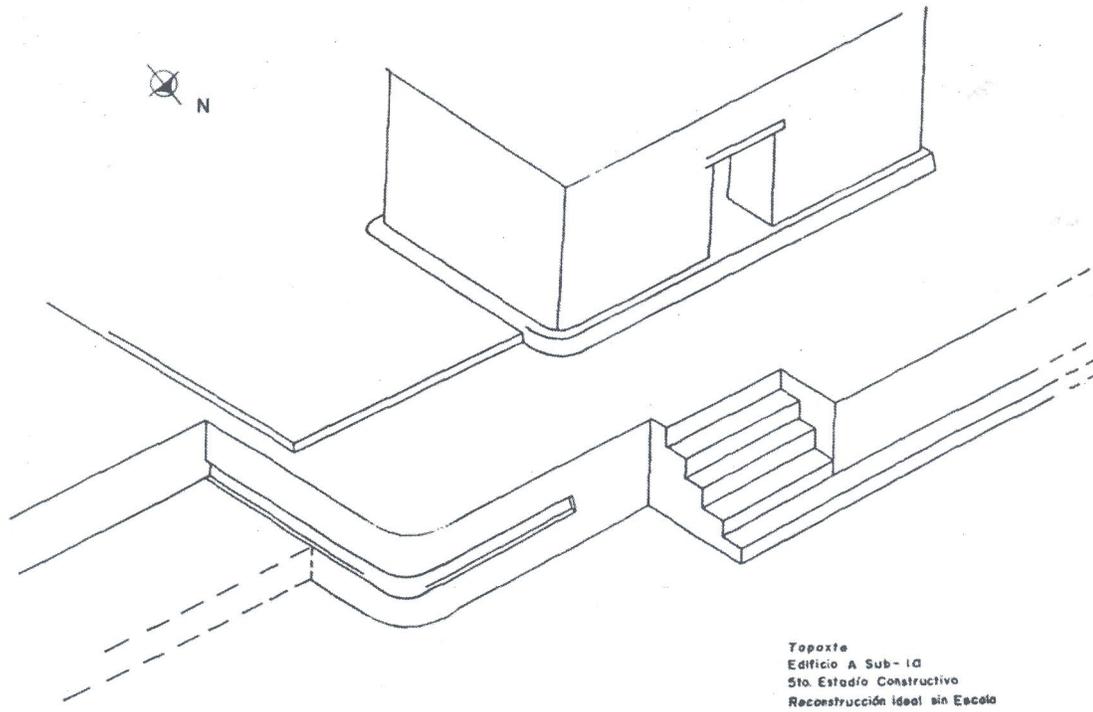
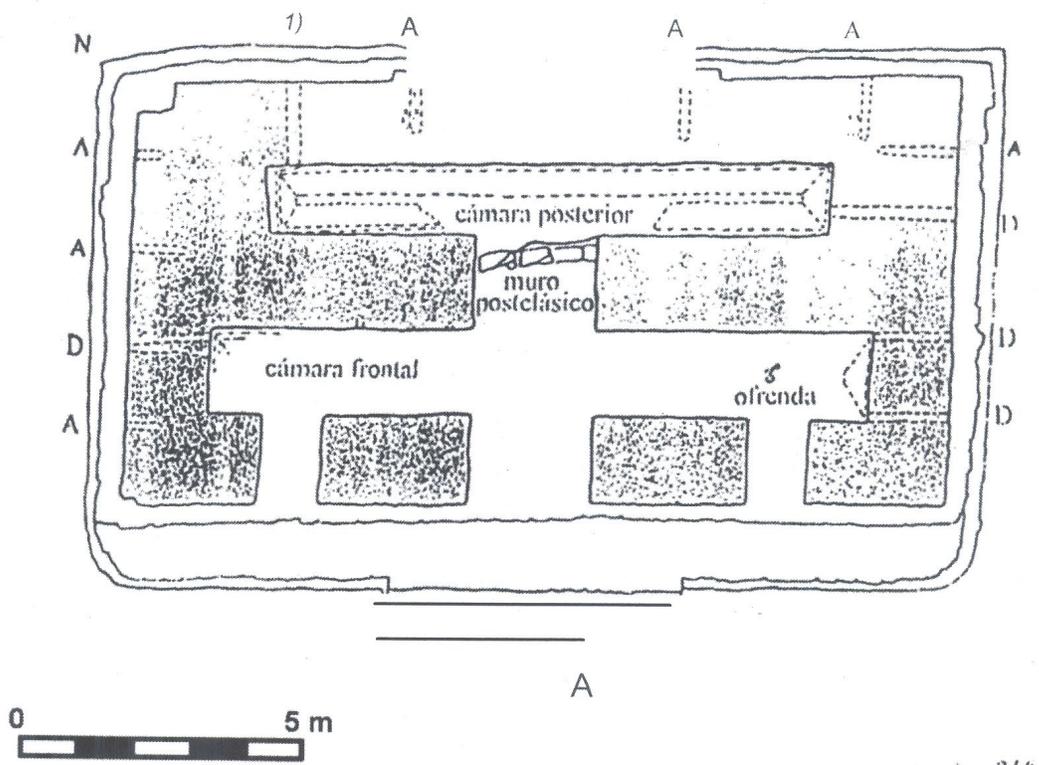


Figure 13. Ideal reconstruction of Building A Sub 1a, Topoxte.



Edificio 216

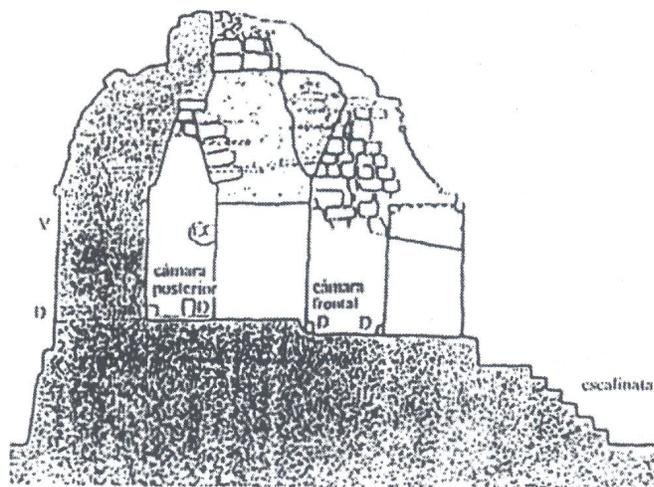


Figure 14. Plan and north-south section of Building 216, Yaxha.

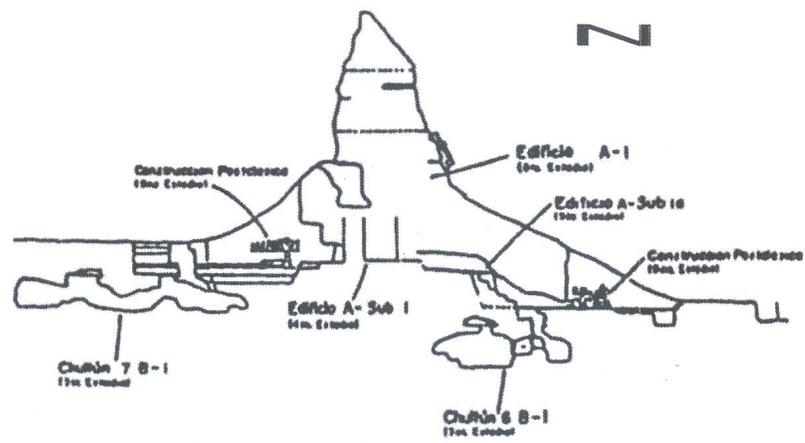
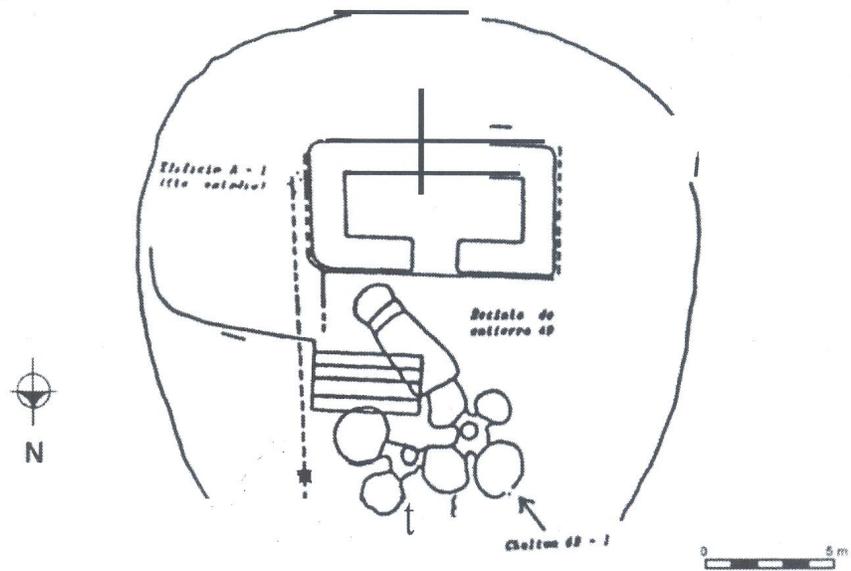


Figure 15. Plan and north-south section of Building A, Topoxte.

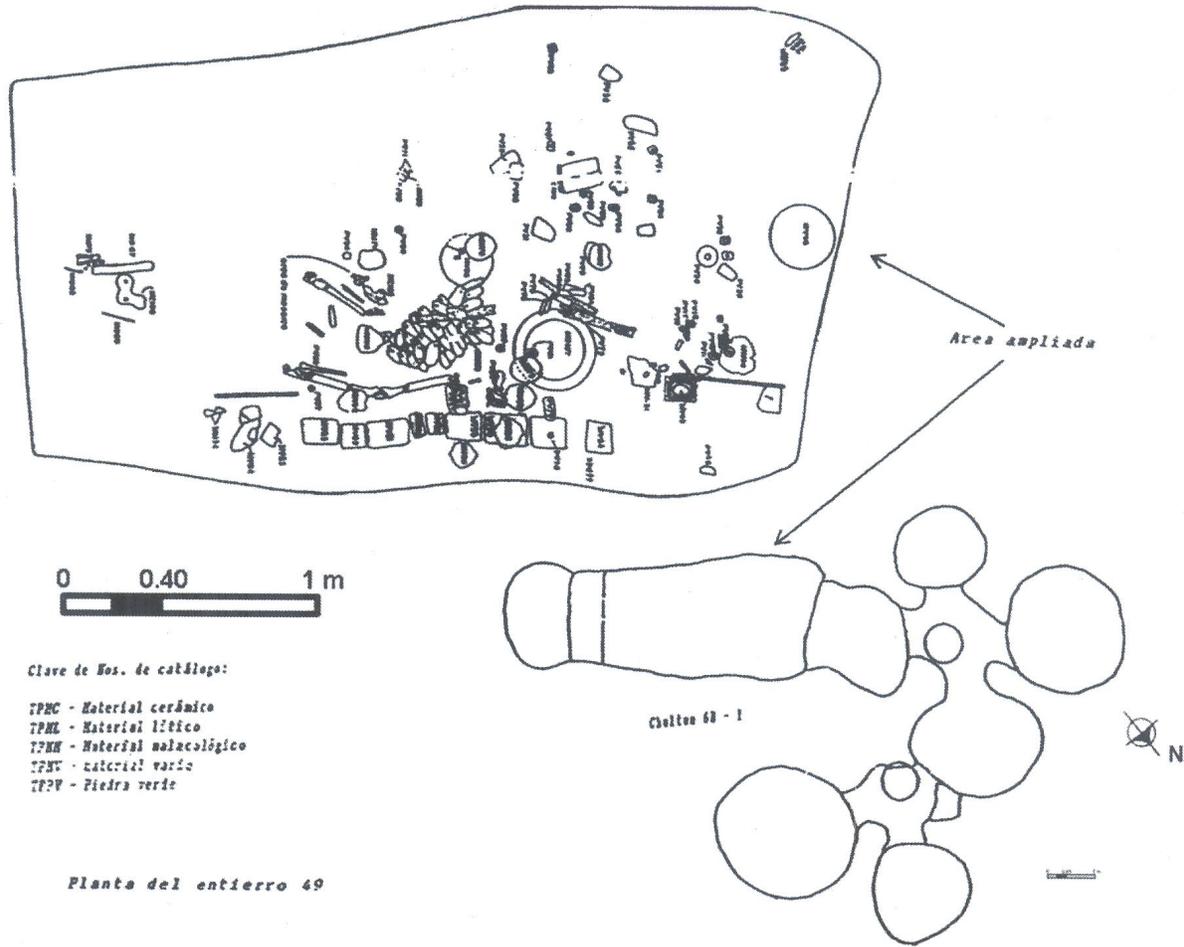


Figure 16. Plan of Burial 49 and Chultun 6B-1, Topoxte.

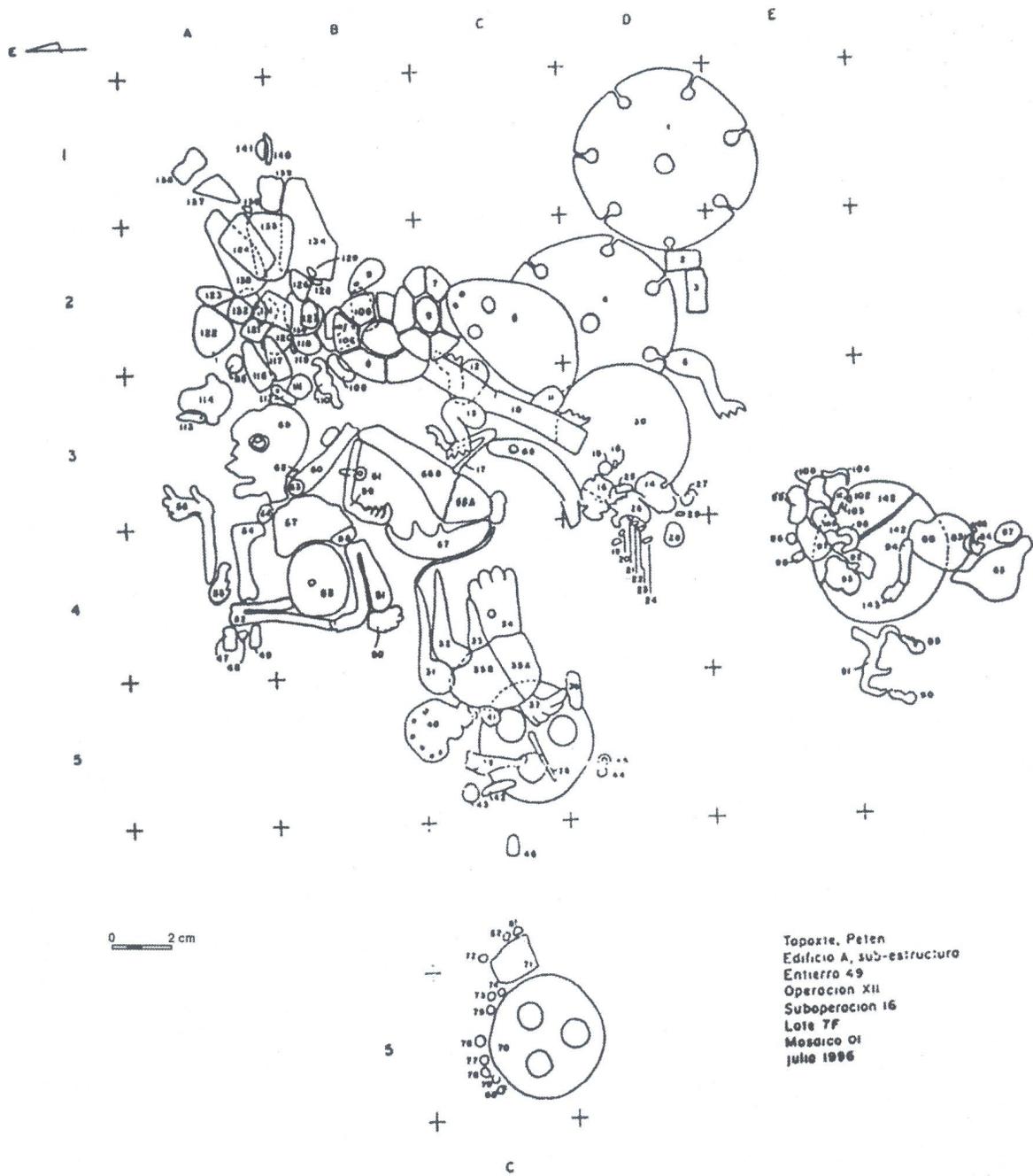
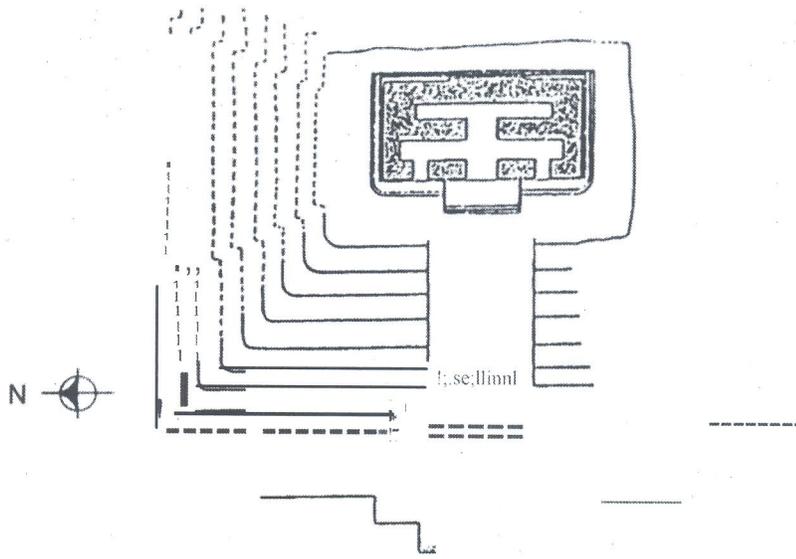
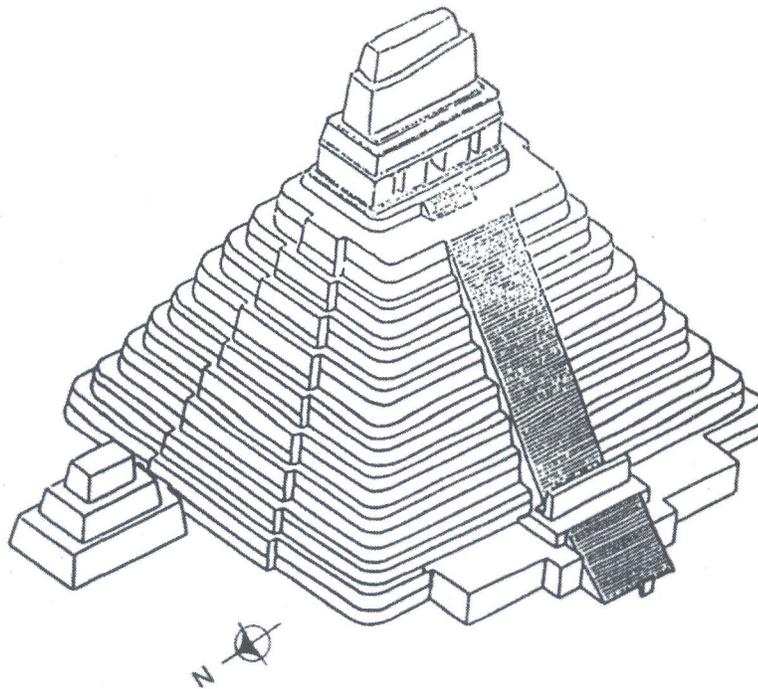


Figure 17. Mosaic associated with Burial 49, Topoxte.



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**Figure 18.** Plan and ideal reconstruction of Building 216-1.

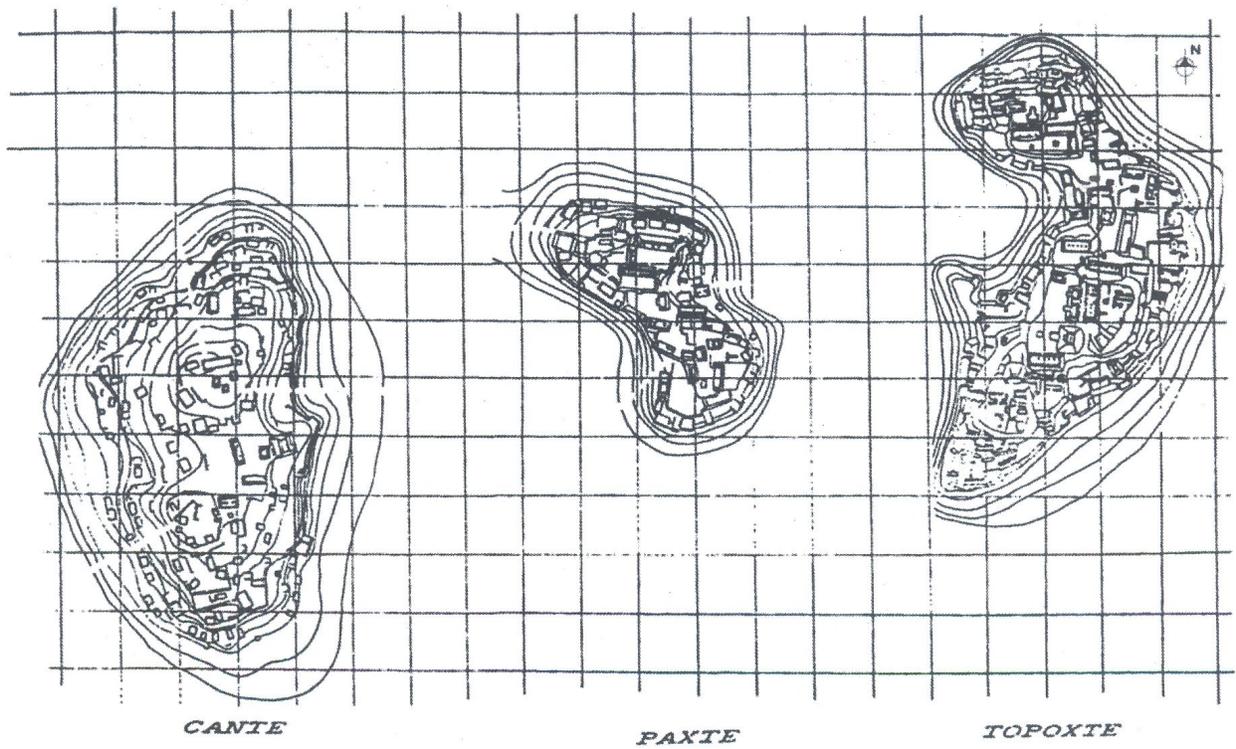


Figure 19. Map of Topoxte, Cante, and Paxte islands.

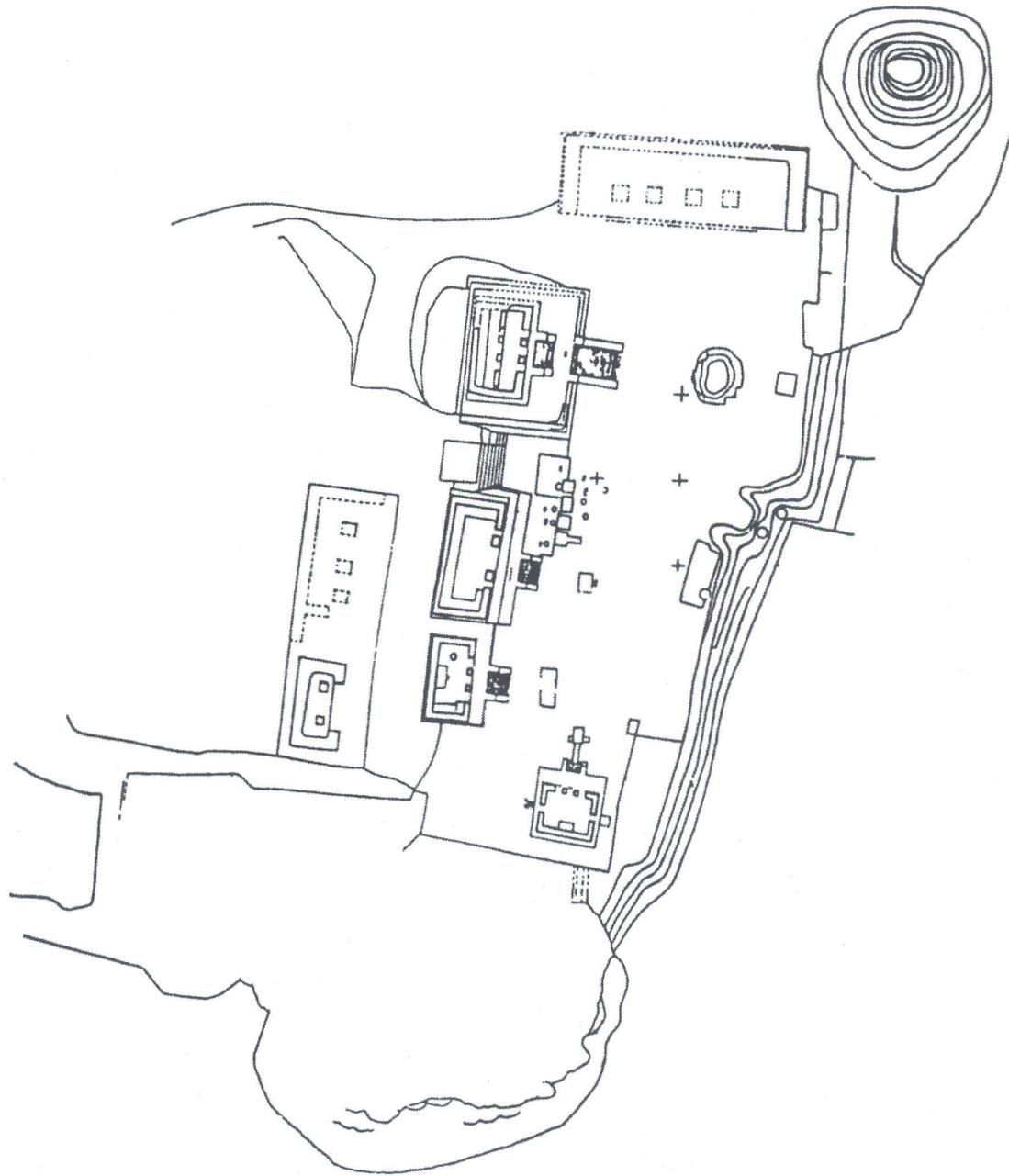


Figure 20. Map of the central area of Topoxte during the Postclassic period.