



Figure 1. Structures 1 and 2 of Plan de Ayutla's North Acropolis (photo by Charles Golden).



Maya Archaeology Reports

# The Discovery of Plan de Ayutla, Mexico

Luis Alberto Martos López

Thirty years ago, archaeologist Peter Schmidt was informed by Lacandon Maya from Lacanha of a large, ruined city in the forest of the recently created agricultural cooperative of Plan de Ayutla, some 35 km northwest of Bonampak (Figure 2). Schmidt convinced the Lacandon to guide him to the site. After a long journey down winding, muddy trails he finally arrived at his destination. There he encountered two grand acropolises rising above natural hills that had been terraced and developed by the ancient Maya. Schmidt (1976) wrote a brief report in which he described the features of the site that most attracted his attention: its large extent and the quality and monumentality of its architecture. Schmidt suggested to the members of the Plan de Ayutla community that the site be named Toyol Na, which in Tzeltal means “House on the Heights,” and he persuaded community members to report the site officially to the National Institute of

Anthropology and History (INAH). That first report, although brief, remains a valuable document. The first official description of Plan de Ayutla, Schmidt’s report also included photographs documenting structural details that were generally in a better state of conservation than today.

Despite the enthusiasm for the site expressed in Schmidt’s report, the document remained in the archives for 28 years. Plan de Ayutla was forgotten and left to the depredations of looters. It was only in February of 1994 that archaeologist Alejandro Tovalín, director of the Proyecto Bonampak, led another official visit to Plan de Ayutla, preparing a report in which he laid out the urgent need for intervention in the buildings, as many were close to collapse (Ferrer Aguilar 2002; Tovalín Ahumada and Ortiz Villareal 2003). This report, much like Schmidt’s, went unheeded, to our collective regret.

In October 2001, the members of the community of Plan de



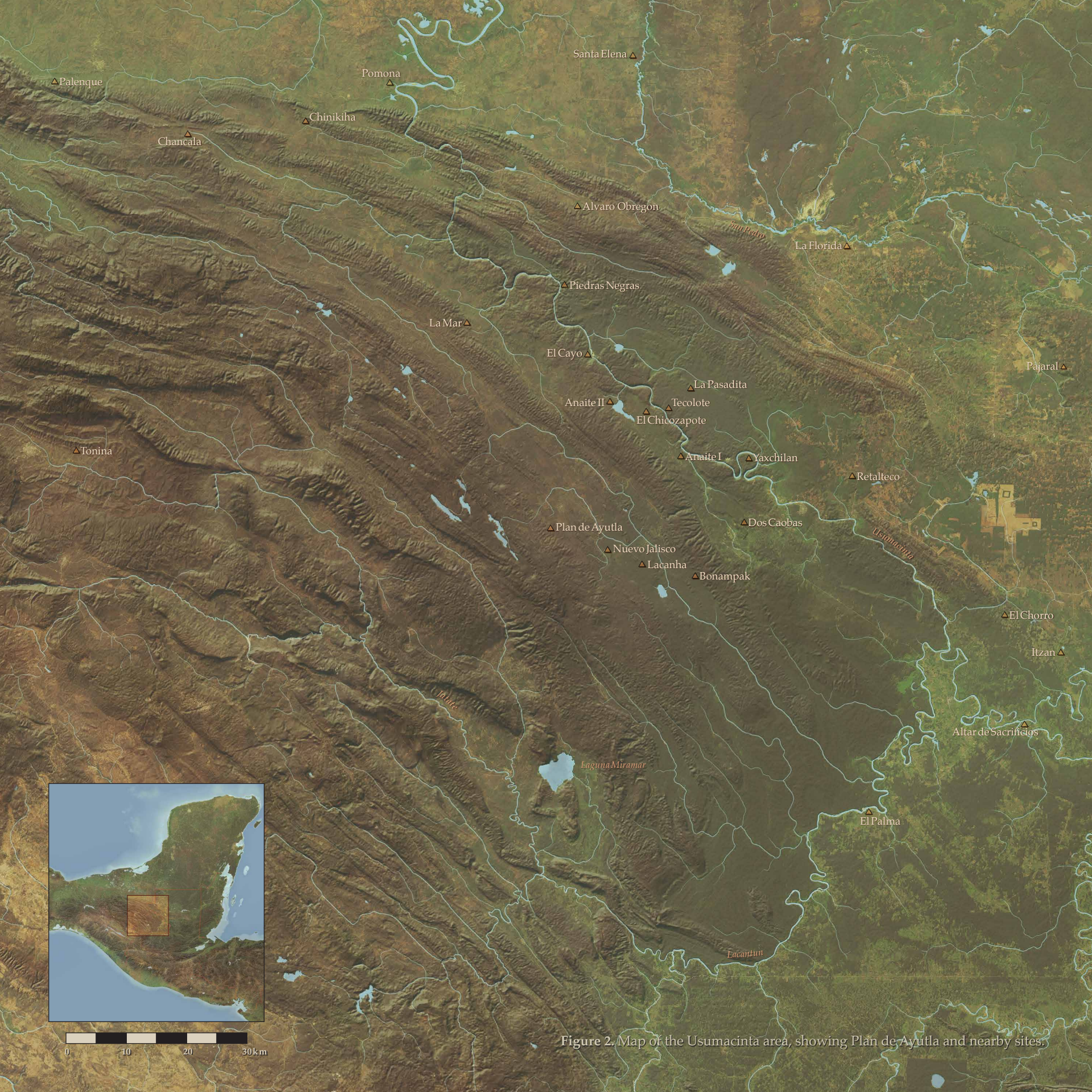


Figure 2. Map of the Usumacinta area, showing Plan de Ayutla and nearby sites.





**Figure 3.** Looking southeast across Plaza Muku'l at the East Acropolis, with Structure 51 at its base (photo by Jorge Pérez de Lara).

Ayutla asked the INAH Center in Chiapas to send an archaeologist to evaluate the work done at the site. Community members had chopped down foliage and cleared rubble from the North Acropolis with the goal of attracting tourists. Tovalín was sent again, this time accompanied by archaeologist Arnoldo González, director of the Proyecto Palenque. The two produced a new report on the basis of this visit, which provided a detailed description of the North and West Acropolises and suggested a program for emergency consolidation (Tovalín Ahumada and Ortiz Villareal 2003).

In October of 2002, I was invited by Laura Pescador, then director of the INAH center in Chiapas, to initiate a project in Plan de Ayutla, and I briefly visited the site in November of that same year. One year later, in November of 2003, the first field season of reconnaissance and consolidation began. Subsequent

field seasons initiated the work of topographic mapping and excavation, while continuing reconnaissance, survey, and consolidation of buildings (Martos López 2005). As a result of this work we now have a wider vision of what lay within this large and once populous settlement.

### **The Setting**

Plan de Ayutla is located 3.5 km from the modern Tzeltal community of the same name, in the municipality of Ocosingo in the heart of what once was the Selva Lacandona. The region is known as the Sierra de Jalapa and is located very close to the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve. Geographically and culturally speaking, the site lies in the heart of the Upper Usumacinta region, a zone of great environmental diversity that in the Classic





period (AD 250-900) provided a setting for the development of influential dynastic centers. It was also a region that experienced endemic warfare and alliances of political convenience, whereby dynasties sought to achieve political and economic hegemony over their neighbors (Demarest 1992; Martin and Grube 1995, 2000).

Plan de Ayutla is strategically located for control of the region. It is situated at the center of the zone influenced by primary political centers such as Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras, and very close to smaller sites such as Bonampak, Lacanha, La Mar, and Nuevo Jalisco. As a result, Plan de Ayutla must have played an active role in regional history and in struggles for political hegemony and control over commercial routes linking to the Ocosingo valley and the region around Palenque (Aliphat Fernández 1994, 1996; Anaya Hernández 1999, 2001; Anaya Hernández et al. 2003).

### The Site

Plan de Ayutla extends over approximately 25 hectares and is composed of 74 structures distributed across three natural hills that were transformed into three acropolises (North, East, and West) and three principal plazas (West, Central, and East) subdivided into seven smaller plazas (Ajk'ol, Yolil, Alan, Beja, Tut, Muku'l, and Tonna') (Figures 3–4). The plazas are flanked by numerous mounds, some very large but without exposed architecture. However, the acropolises contain well-preserved buildings. While these show a general affinity with regional architectural styles, they are also stamped with the strong personality unique to the site.

### The Plazas

Plaza Ajk'ol ("Upper Plaza" in Tzeltal, the language of the local community) is found between the North and West Acropolises and constitutes the extreme northwest of the ceremonial center. It consists of a sunken plaza completely enclosed by six structures and measures 135 m long by 80 m wide on its northern end and 47 m on its southern. Plaza Yolil ("Central Plaza") appears to be an extension of Plaza Ajk'ol. The separation between them is marked by a small rectangular building and two steps that run along a northeast-southwest axis. Plaza Yolil, delimited by the North and West Acropolises, is 75 m long by 50 m wide on the northern end and 90 m wide on the southern. Around the plaza are seven structures, five of them elevated above the plaza floor on the first terrace of the West Acropolis. The most notable is Structure 18, an extensive platform 48 m long that could have functioned as a processional way or city wall.

Recent excavations in Plaza Ajk'ol and Plaza Yolil revealed the presence of large sheets of clay. Apparently in some earlier

period the terrain was flooded or crossed by ravines, the symbolism of which could have influenced the placement of Plan de Ayutla: three mountains in the middle of water, evoking a mythical landscape from the moment of creation (Freidel et al. 1993:65-67, 139, 144-146; Taube 1998:433-444). Structure 39, a ballcourt, bounds Plaza Yolil on the southeast and Plaza Alan on the northwest (Figure 15). The ballcourt consists of six structures that define a closed court of enormous proportions, measuring 65 m in length, with a width of 14 m at the center and 20 m at the ends, oriented at an angle of 48 degrees. The entire complex, including the buildings and playing alley, covers an area 85 by 40 meters, making this the largest ballcourt in the Upper Usumacinta region.

Exploratory excavations revealed the presence of wide, sloping walls that, like the playing alley, display a covering of stone slabs, in a pattern markedly similar to the ballcourt at Tonina (Figure 16). In place of traditional ballcourt markers, the center of the playing alley exhibits an uncarved column altar, similar to the ones found in temples at Bonampak, Lacanha, and Plan de Ayutla itself (Figures 7, 18–19). This "marcador" is really a large column, 1.1 m long by 52 cm in diameter, anchored in a circular cist of stone slabs such that only 45 cm of its total length protruded above the level of the alley. At the bottom of the cist was an offering of a circular jade ear flare, a tubular jade bead, and a fossil shark tooth (probably *Carcharodon megalodon*) (Figure 17).

The playing alley of the ballcourt occupies the center of the site between the three acropolises and the plazas. It is possible that the column altar/ballcourt marker functioned as a center point and axis for the architectural layout of the site and was perhaps considered an *axis mundi* (Eliade 1959; Wheatley 1971). In fact the size and form of the ballcourt, as well as the presence of the column altar, underscores the importance that this precinct must have had for the lords of the ancient city.

Plaza Alan ("Lower Plaza") is located at the southeastern edge of the site. It comprises seven structures, with the ballcourt closing off its northwest side. Plaza Alan can be said to form an extension of Plaza Muku'l, as it opens in that direction. Plaza Alan measures 90 m in length by 80 m on the ballcourt side and 60 m on the other.

Located to the southeast of Plaza Alan, Plaza Tut ("Small Plaza") covers an area of 50 by 20 meters. Similar to an enclosed patio, it is defined by three low structures and may have served as a preparatory area for ascents to the East Acropolis. At the boundary of the plaza with the East Acropolis was found a burial associated with materials pertaining to the Terminal Classic period.

Plaza Beja ("Plaza of the Arroyo") takes its name from the



ravine that crosses it. It covers an area of 80 m by 40 m and is defined by four buildings that extend to the southwest from Plaza Tut, one of which appears to be a residential structure.

Plaza Muku'1 ("Great Plaza") is the largest at Plan de Ayutla, with prominent placement between the North Acropolis and the East Acropolis (Figure 3). It measures 90 m by 80 m and is defined by four structures, with the ballcourt closing off its southwestern side. The plaza has a northeastern extension of 130 m by 120 m that forms Plaza Tonna' ("Plaza of the Stone Houses"), where there are four residential complexes. The plaza

is bounded on the north by a natural hill, on the peak of which is a platform crowned by a structure called "El Mirador" ("The Lookout") because of its unrestricted view of the plazas below.

### North Acropolis

The North Acropolis rises above natural hills that were leveled and terraced. The complex measures 180 m in diameter and reaches a height of 45 m. The upper terrace covers a surface area of 4000 m<sup>2</sup>, on which is located a palace-type residential complex of at least 19 structures, with numerous bedrooms, enclosures,



Figure 5. Scenes of Plan de Ayutla's North Acropolis (photos by Jorge Pérez de Lara).





**Figure 6.** The North Acropolis palace complex consists of a myriad of interconnected chambers laid out on four distinct levels (photos by Jorge Pérez de Lara).



passages, staircases, and patios (Figures 5–6). The emphasis is on the north side, where a succession of four levels of terraced rooms is reminiscent of the Acropolis of Piedras Negras.

Structures 1, 2, and 3 are the most prominent buildings in the North Acropolis and form a triadic complex rising above its southern edge (Figure 1). These are large rectangular buildings with vaulted double galleries. While the front gallery is very narrow and possibly merely a corridor, the rear is divided into a central gallery and two side galleries (Figure 7). Considering the facades with three entrances, flying cornices, friezes on inclined planes, and decorations with stucco masks, the style is reminiscent of Palenque, a site with which Plan de Ayutla has a number of affinities. Recent work resulted in the recovery of

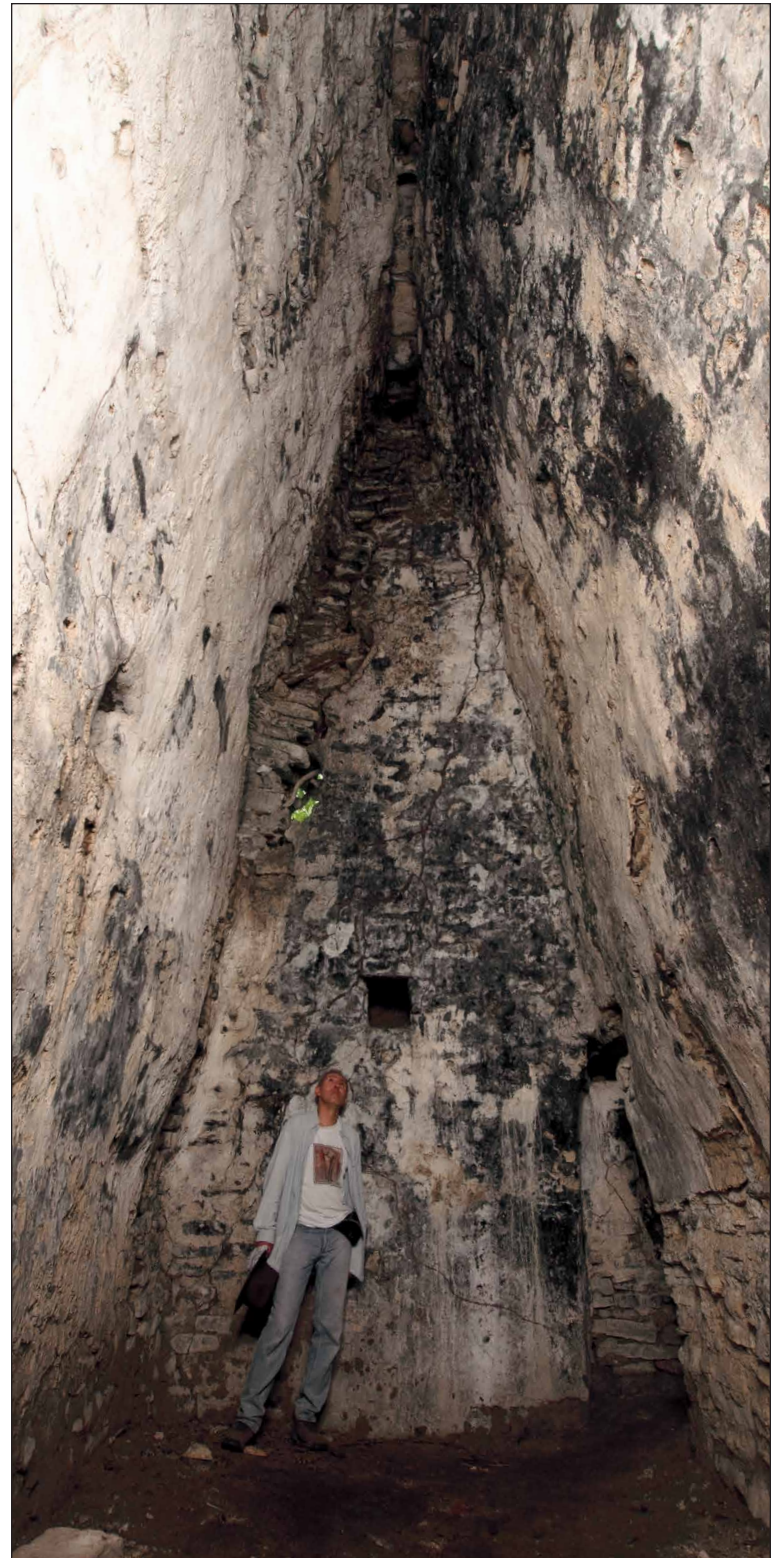
large quantities of stucco fragments that decorated the friezes, including the depiction of a jaguar god. Two additional rooms were found between Structures 2 and 3, both covered by rubble, a pattern that emphasizes what appears to be the increasing complexity of the acropolis through time.

Structure 13 is among the most notable buildings of the North Acropolis. Located at the eastern edge of the complex and of roughly quadrangular plan, it measures nine meters long by nine meters wide and is 11.5 meters in height. The interior spaces of the building are largely defined by two parallel galleries linked by a narrow door at the eastern end. Distinguishing these rooms from others at Plan de Ayutla, and indeed what makes them remarkable among all known examples of Maya architecture, are





**Figure 7.** Narrow front gallery of Structure 2 of the North Acropolis, with remains of a broken column altar in the middle distance (photo by Jorge Pérez de Lara).

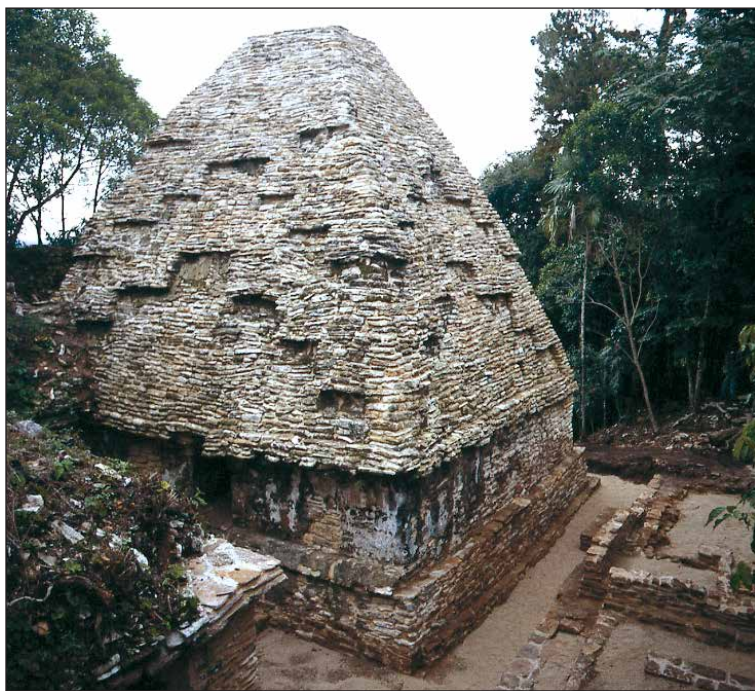


**Figure 8.** Eight-meter vault in Structure 13 of the North Acropolis (photo by Jorge Pérez de Lara).





**Figure 9.** Structure 13 of the North Acropolis (photo by Patricia Carrillo).



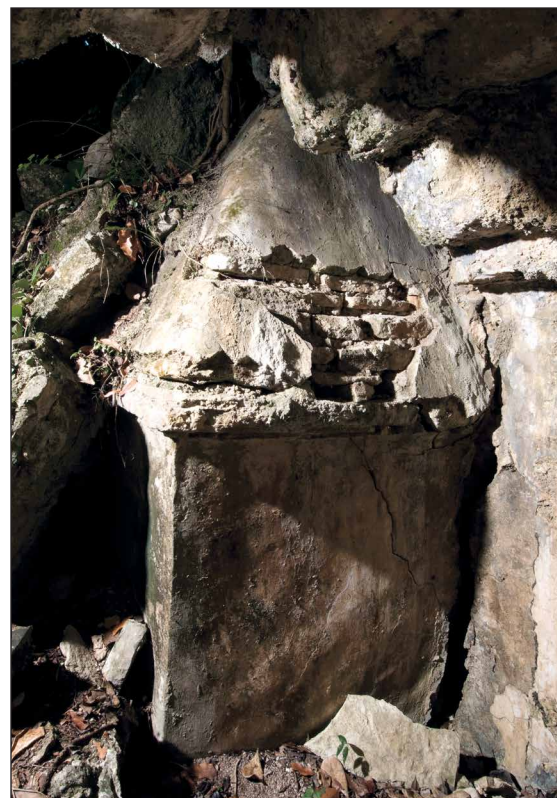
**Figure 10.** Structure 13 of the North Acropolis (photo by Patricia Carrillo).

the unusually high eight-meter vaults (Figure 8). Inside the front room, Peter Schmidt encountered a column altar that must have been located in the center of the space but was later moved by members of the community. Also noteworthy is that the walls were painted black, an unusual pigment for Classic Maya interiors.

The massive inclined frieze on the exterior facade of Structure 13 is decorated with stepped apron moldings that give the building its singular appearance (Figures 9–10). During fieldwork it was discovered that the building had two more vaulted rooms above the lower chambers. The first of these, towards the front of the structure, is 2.83 m long, .75 m wide, and 2.1 m high. The space behind this at the back is 3.5 m long, .9 m wide, and 2.7 m high. The only possible means of accessing these upper rooms would have been an interior staircase along the medial wall of the two great vaults in the lower rooms. The presence of these galleries imparts a new quality to the building, creating something close to a tower, although there is nothing to discount the possibility that the upper vaults were an architectural solution to the challenge of constructing a taller but less massive building to prevent collapse.

Fieldwork in 2009 revealed that the back room at the top of the structure has a complicated hole and channel system, perhaps





**Figure 11.** Structure 25 of the West Acropolis (above), with the internal sanctuary or earlier construction phase (right). Photos by Jorge Pérez de Lara.

allowing for astronomical observations. It is quite possible that the building functioned to observe the sun's zenith at the summer solstice, a very important date to mark the beginning of the agricultural calendar and the coming of the rainy season. On the solstice an observer located inside the back chamber below could see three illuminated rectangles at the top of the vault. The discovery inside this same lower rear chamber of three graffiti (a lord on a throne, a lord with a ceremonial bar, and an image of the building itself) seems to indicate the importance of the structure as the residence of the ruler. Additional data suggest that Structure 13 was built in the Early Classic.

In excavations carried out in the eastern patio of the North Acropolis a pavement was found in association with a great concentration of fine-paste ceramics, principally Altar Orange, Trapiche Incised, Tumba Black-on-Orange, Cedro Fluted, Poite Incised, and Tres Naciones Gray, as well as three Jonuta-style figurines. Excavations in the plazas have also yielded an abundant collection of these materials, indicating that the site was occupied during the Terminal Classic.

### East Acropolis

The East Acropolis is located in the southeastern sector of Plan de Ayutla and is built on a natural hill measuring approximately 130 m by 100 m and standing 32 m tall. Apparently the first

third of the slope lacks retaining walls, except on the southern edge where a staircase might have been built. At the foot of this probable staircase a burial was recently found in association with fine-paste ceramics and can thus be dated to the Terminal Classic period. The second third of the hill and upwards is marked by various levelings and multiple retaining walls; on the western slope these measure as much as 1.8 m in height. The upper platform covers an area of 1000 m<sup>2</sup> on which are four mounds distributed around a plaza. The most important of these buildings is Structure 58, a massive building that must have been vaulted. Associated with the upper platform was an altar marking the presence of a tomb, now looted.

### West Acropolis

The West Acropolis is the tallest at Plan de Ayutla, standing on a hill 65 m high. Unlike the other acropolises, it is not on a separate prominence but forms part of a ridge extending to the southwest. The natural hillside is covered by nine stepped terraces buttressed by retaining walls. The uppermost terrace has a surface area of about 3000 m<sup>2</sup>, and from this rise thirteen structures spread out around two main patios. The nine terraces and thirteen structures resonate with Maya numerology, and their number does not seem to be fortuitous. While the North Acropolis appears to have functioned as a residential complex for the ruling dynasty,





**Figure 12.** Structure 31 of the West Acropolis (photo by Jorge Pérez de Lara).

the West Acropolis could have had broader ceremonial, if elite-centered functions. The buildings are notable for their proximity, distributed in a packed formation around small patios.

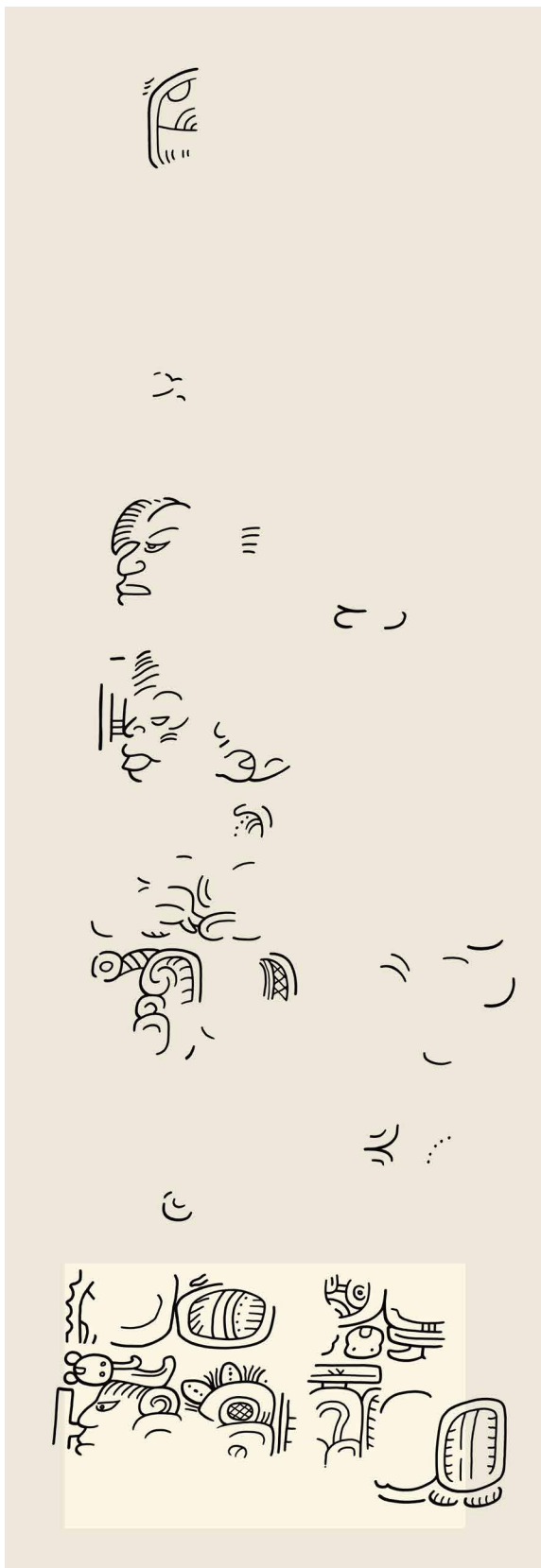
Of the buildings in this complex, Structure 25 merits special attention. A double-galleried building with three entrances built on a cruciform platform, it houses an enormous sanctuary reminiscent of the Cross Group temples at Palenque (Houston 1996; Schele 1977; Schele and Freidel 1990:238-239) (Figure 11). Apparently the building had two construction phases: in the first, the sanctuary appears to have been an independent structure; later this was rebuilt and converted into the sanctuary of a larger structure oriented towards the east.

On the eastern flank of the acropolis is Structure 26, a stepped platform of large proportions with a now-destroyed staircase on the northern side. Of the temple that crowned it only the foundation remains. Structure 27 is built on a rectangular plan with two long, vaulted galleries; its three entrances are similar in shape to those of Structure 25 at Yaxchilan.

Structure 32 is an atypical building with a stepped platform of five terraces with rounded corners. Evidently it featured a west-oriented staircase and a small temple, the remains of which can be observed in the collapse at the base of the building.

But the most notable construction in the West Acropolis is Structure 31 (Figure 12). While neither the largest nor the most





**Figure 13.** Remains of stucco decoration on the south side of Structure 31 of the East Acropolis, showing the head of a lord on the left and a wing on the right (photo by Jorge Pérez de Lara).



**Figure 14.** Inscription on the western facade of Structure 31 of the East Acropolis: (drawing at left) the remaining inscription (after drawings by Stephen Houston, Simon Martin, and Marc Zender); (photo above) glyphs corresponding to the passage of the drawing as indicated (photo by Jorge Pérez de Lara).



spectacular, it appears to be the most important given its location on the highest and most privileged point in the acropolis, the masks which decorate its platform, and the only inscriptions found on a building at Plan de Ayutla. A small rectangular structure, it has a single entrance and a single gallery noteworthy for its ogival vault. The underlying platform is stepped with three terraces, the first two of which are rectangular with rounded corners evidently corresponding to an earlier phase of construction; the third terrace has square corners. On this sits the foundation of the temple itself, the basal frieze of which once had polychrome stucco masks on all four sides. Those of the northern facade, on either side of the entrance, are quite damaged and only retain some elements in the form of foliage or wings. The molded stucco on the west has also nearly disappeared. The eastern facade, however, preserves the head of a highly stylized figure, marked perhaps by elements diagnostic of the Kaban calendric sign and others that appear to be wings, feathers, or leaves. The best preserved relief is on the south, the central motif of which is the head of a lord wearing a headdress with a celestial mask (Figure 13). The individual also wears earspools composed of a disk, volute, and pendant in the form of a bone. This figure is flanked by wings, perhaps identifying him as a “celestial lord.” On the edges of the frieze, extending from both sides of the individual, are two busts of lords wearing elaborate headdresses with side knots. From these individuals extend volutes that may be wind currents to underline the celestial setting of the composition.

The facade of Structure 31 is similar in appearance to the buildings of the Great Acropolis at Bonampak, with a basal molding and frieze decorated with pilasters of stone slabs arranged on different planes, producing a play of light and shadow (Angulo 1988). On the frieze and on both sides of the entranceway are sockets that could have held stucco sculptures, now vanished.

Fragmentary inscriptions are located on the lateral facades of the structure, incised into smoothed, leveled stucco and painted red and blue. Although little is preserved, it is possible that these formed dedicatory and calendrical texts that, like a panel, occupied the central section of the facades. On the eastern facade only four fragmentary glyphs remain, unidentifiable apart from the base of a calendrical cartouche. It is on the western facade where the greater part of the inscription endures (Figure 14).

The lower part of the inscription is a very unusual text, now studied by several epigraphers as yet without clear consensus about the transcription. However, Peter Mathews and Péter Biró are inclined to think that the inscription could be early, around AD 375 (Biró, personal communication 2004). This fits with the opinion of Simon Martin (personal communication 2004), who during a visit to the site suggested that the inscription

represented a very early form of calligraphy, perhaps from the Early Classic period.

In front of the platform of Structure 31 there is also a small adoratorio, a rare feature in the Upper Usumacinta region.

### Plan de Ayutla and the Upper Usumacinta

In recent years there has been a great deal of discussion about the identity of Plan de Ayutla. However, until more inscriptions are found at the site it will not be possible to resolve this problem. At present there are two positions with respect to its identity. Dmitri Beliaev and Alexandr Safronov (2004, and as cited in Biró 2004) have suggested the possibility that Plan de Ayutla is Ak'e, an important kingdom whose capital has not been found according to these authors. They contend that the identification of Ak'e with Bonampak has not been conclusively proven, and the comparatively small size of the latter site suggests that it may have been a late foundation. Beliaev and Safronov suggest that a dynasty arose at Ak'e and subsequently founded a new city at Bonampak, keeping the same emblem glyph, much as the lords of Dos Pilas maintained the same emblem as Tikal (Houston 1993). The area of influence for Ak'e could well coincide with the region of Plan de Ayutla. Study of the site could provide information on the political integration of the region in and around Bonampak and Lacanha.

The second position, originally put forward by Péter Biró (personal communication 2004, see also Biró 2004), suggests that Plan de Ayutla is Sak Tz'i', an important but as yet unidentified center involved in a series of wars against Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan, Bonampak, Lacanha, and Tonina. Plan de Ayutla is located in the center of the possible territory of this domain, as determined by Anaya Hernández, Guenter, and Zender (2003). Personally, I favor this possibility.

Piedras Negras Stela 26, dated to 628, records the submission of a captive from Sak Tz'i', and ultimately the two kingdoms were politically integrated: a ruler of Sak Tz'i', and not the king of Piedras Negras, is said to have installed a *sajal* at the latter site's satellite El Cayo in 763 (Martin and Grube 2000:143, 146, 151). Around 726, Sak Tz'i' exerted successful domination of the Bonampak and Lacanha region but, as narrated on Bonampak Lintel 2, was defeated by the combined forces of Yaxchilan and Bonampak in 787. Sak Tz'i' also fell to Tonina around this time (Martin and Grube 2000:188-189).

However, Sak Tz'i' was able to recover. During the Maya collapse, while the majority of the cities along the Upper Usumacinta fell one by one, Sak Tz'i' remained active for a time. Indeed, the latest date from the region refers to the site: a stela in a private collection dated to 864 portrays a *sajal* from a minor center engaged in a ritual commemoration of the one-year



anniversary of his father's death. The text mentions explicitly that this *sajal* was the vassal of the lord of Sak Tz'i' (Martin and Grube 2000:146; Miller and Martin 2004:191).

In the absence of incontrovertible evidence, there continue to be strong indications that Plan de Ayutla was the dynastic center of Sak Tz'i'. First and foremost are the size and complexity of the site. The North Acropolis includes a palace complex with numerous rooms and spaces for an important dynasty, along with a distinct emphasis on elaborate, symbolically charged architecture focusing on triads. Second, although there are no inscribed monuments at the site, there is extensive evidence of looting. There is not a single stone that looks like a lintel or a stela that has not been probed by looters checking for inscriptions on the underside. This leads to the conclusion that looters knew

of monuments at the site and were looking for other sculptures of value.

Finally, the large ballcourt of Plan de Ayutla, with its enormous dimensions and location at the center of the site, is a work that could only correspond to the requirements of an important dynasty. In fact, on the Nuevo Jalisco Panels, currently stored at Bonampak and said to be looted from Sak Tz'i', there is a reference to K'ab Chan Te', a ruler of Sak Tz'i', who styles himself "Two K'atun Lord, Ballplayer" (Biró 2004). This leads one to think that the ballgame was of central importance to the lords of this legendary site—this, too, is compatible with the immensity of the ballcourt at Plan de Ayutla. But the question is far from being answered. Only with more systematic investigations in Plan de Ayutla can we obtain the details needed to confirm the exact identity of the site.



Figure 15. The ballcourt during operations in 2008 (photo by Jorge Pérez de Lara).





**Figure 16.** Excavations in the ballcourt showing stone slabs covering the playing alley and benches.



**Figure 17.** The offering in the column altar cist.



**Figure 18.** The column altar at the center of the playing alley.



**Figure 19.** The column altar exposed.



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