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Border Problems: Recent Archaeological Research along the Usumacinta River

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We began the Sierra del Lacandón Regional Archaeology Project (SLRAP) with our colleague René Muñoz in 2003, building on a very simple premise: little is known archaeologically about the borderlands between Maya kingdoms, and regional archaeological surveys in the zone between well-documented, adjacent, competing dynastic centers are needed to fill this in-

tellectual lacuna. Were Maya kingdoms tightly governed from center to periphery, or were they frayed at the edges? Did trade flow freely, following the landscape and unimpeded by taxation or the political machinations of Maya rulers? Were small communities governed by local elites, or were nobles imposed by the royal court on rural hamlets? These and related questions piqued our interest.

Nowhere in the Maya region seemed so promising for such a study as the zone between Piedras Negras, Guatemala, and Yaxchilan, Mexico (Figure 2). The two sites are widely known for their wealth of historical data, and both have been the subject of long-term archaeological investigations. Yet, little was known about the many smaller centers scattered along the Usumacinta River between Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan beyond what scholars could glean from the numerous looted monuments that clearly originated from the area. In this article we will discuss some of our findings concerning the ancient political landscape, with a particular focus on discoveries made in the 2006 field season, as well as the implications of the modern political landscape for future research and conservation of cultural resources in the region.

The results of our research have been both fruitful and frustrating. By design our research has been shaped by the border region between the ancient Maya kingdoms. Unfortunately our investigations have also been profoundly impacted by the location of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park in a remote part of Guatemala, along the modern day border with Mexico. Our re-



Figure 1. Late Classic building at Tecolote, a site relocated in 2003 by the Sierra del Lacandón Regional Archaeology Project (photo by Charles Golden).

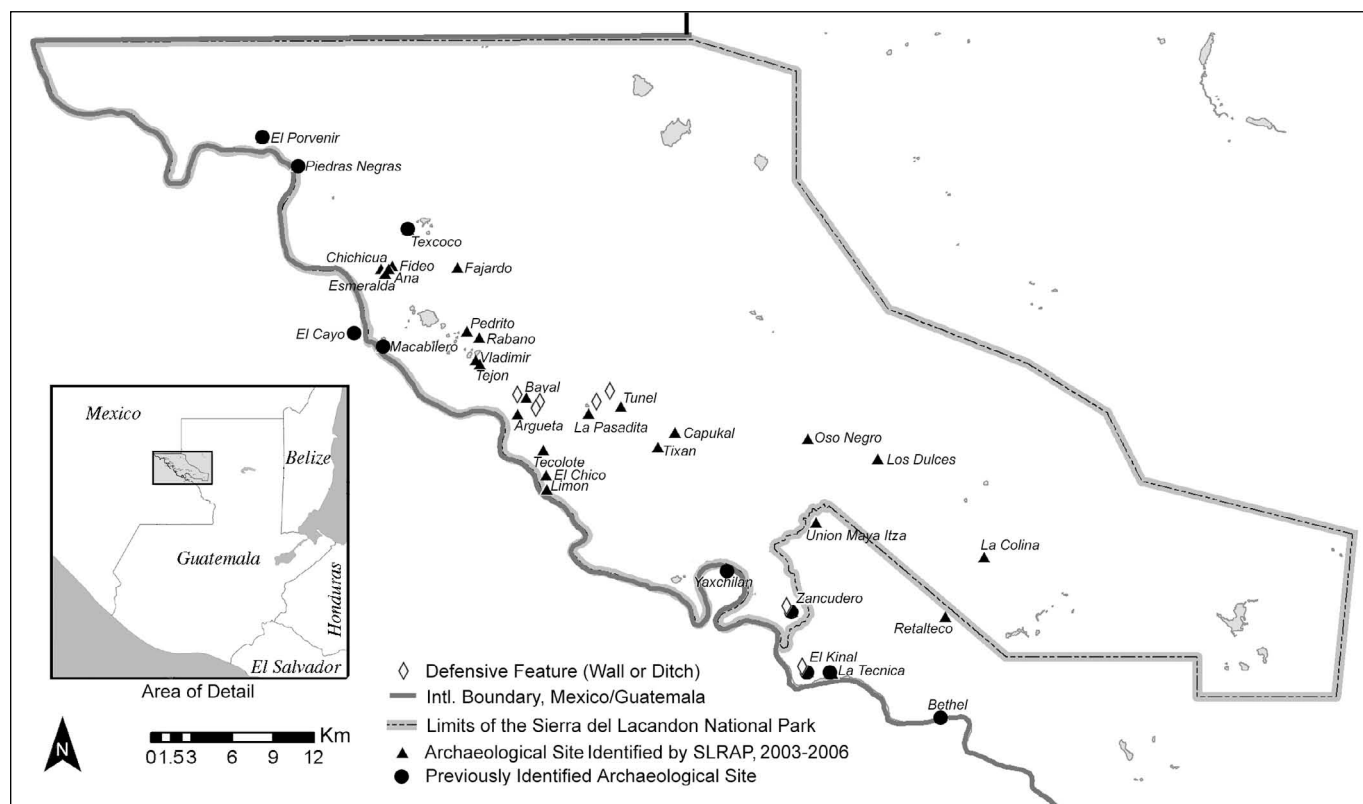


Figure 2. Map of the study region showing the limits of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park and sites investigated by the authors.

search to date has yielded new insights into the growth and development of the Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan kingdoms, with important implications for understanding ancient Maya politics more generally. Yet, like the ancient border we are investigating, the modern day Guatemala-Mexican border is an area at the limits of state authority, where local and national governments struggle to maintain order and law. As such, our efforts at archaeological research are significantly complicated. We find ourselves in a challenging race against looters and other illicit activities to document and protect the cultural and natural patrimony of the region before political instability and insecurity eliminates any possibility of such research.

Regional Setting

The Usumacinta River is a seemingly natural boundary marker, a fast-moving and powerful stream that has carved a massive canyon in the limestone bedrock between Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan. There is little doubt that this powerful river helped to define the political and economic landscape of Mesoamerica for thousands of years. Narrowly dividing Guatemala from Mexico—at low water you can throw a coin from the Petén into Chiapas—the Usumacinta River today is a porous border that, ideally, defines the political limits of the two nation-states. At the Boca del Cerro, the Usumacinta spills out of the canyon and onto the Tabasco flood-

plain, where it loses its power as a divider of nations and instead becomes one of several large rivers flowing into the Gulf of Mexico.

For the Prehispanic Maya, though, the Usumacinta River was never an east-west border. Instead the river pushed northwards crossing through the domains of many river kingdoms, and by the Late Classic period (c. AD 600-830) several royal dynasties exerted their power and authority on both sides of what would eventually become Guatemalan and Mexican territory. During the Early Classic period (c. AD 250-600), however, when dynastic power was first emerging at sites such as Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan, political control was probably limited to the areas immediately around the core settlements of newly formed royal centers. Between these centers was a largely vacant countryside forming political frontiers; sparsely populated and decentralized, these frontiers acted as buffers that moderated political and economic friction between the nascent dynasties (Golden, Scherer, and Muñoz 2005; Golden et al. 2006). By the Late Classic period, however, regional populations had expanded into the frontiers, a process linked to the expansion of royal control. By the seventh century AD, if not before, a few centers had politically incorporated most of the rural settlements and large swaths of the surrounding landscape into their domains, and the territories of the river kingdoms abutted one another (Anaya Hernández 2001, 2005a, 2005b; Anaya Hernández et al.

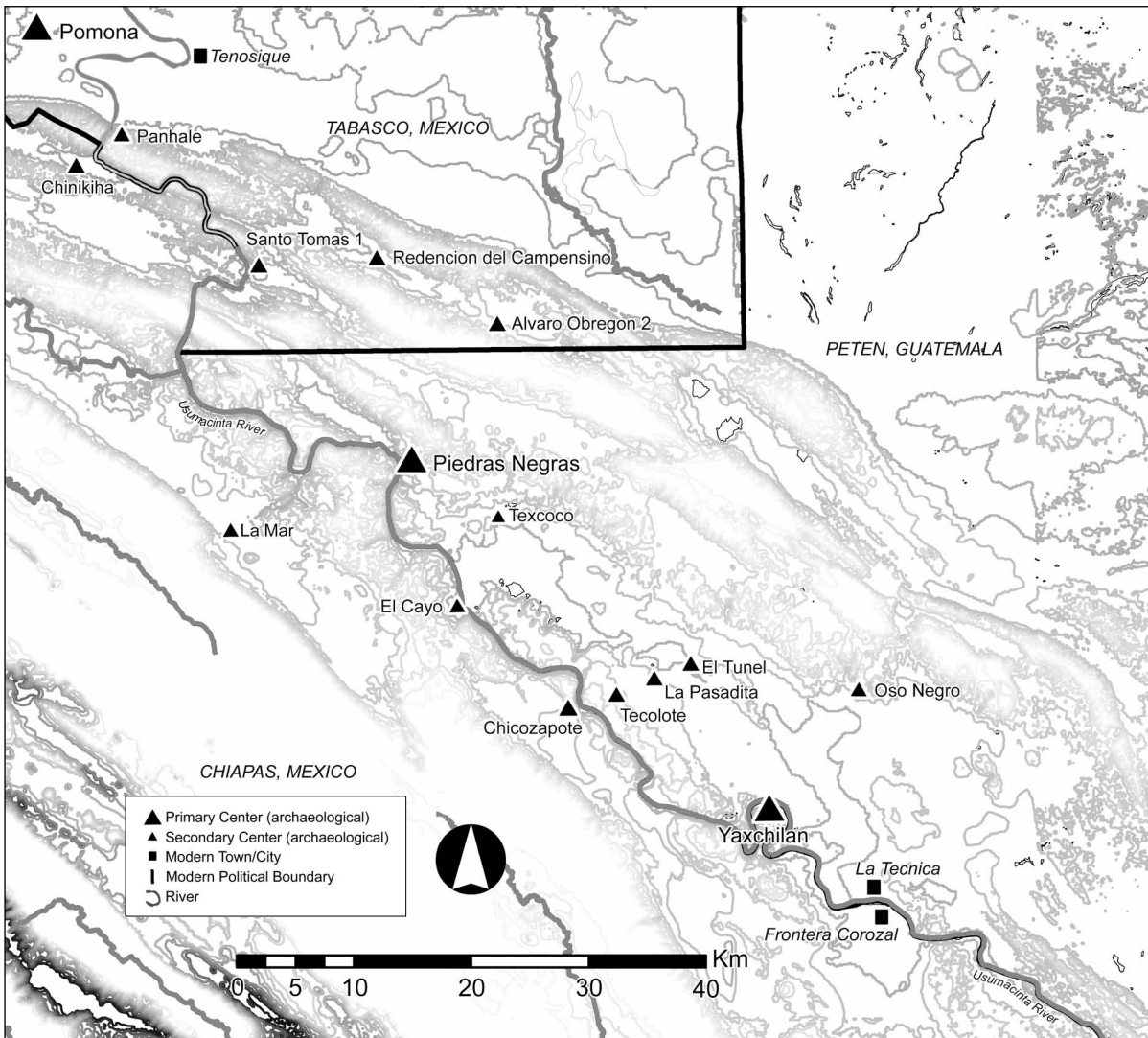


Figure 3. Map showing topography of the region, with primary and secondary political centers mentioned in text.

2003; Mathews 1991).

North-south political boundaries along the river during the Late Classic period were marked by dramatic shifts and breaks in the geography of the river channel and its adjacent valleys. Along tributaries such as the Pasión, Salinas, Lacanja, and Lacantun, many kingdoms vied for control. Yaxchilan apparently ruled much of the meandering middle section where the Usumacinta's larger tributaries had unified into the river's main stream, its domain reaching into the beginnings of the narrow gorge that marks the Usumacinta's next major change. Nobles subordinate to the rulers of Yaxchilan governed the northern boundary of the kingdom from centers such as Chicozapote and Tecolote (Figure 1) and guarded the narrow canyon in which the river flows past the Chicozapote rapids (also called the Anaite rapids; see Figures 2 and 3).

Other sites subordinate to Yaxchilan, such as La Pasadita, straddled the narrow inland valleys adjacent to the

river channel and extended the polity's northern border to the east and west from the river (Anaya Hernández 2001; Golden 2003; Golden, Scherer, and Muñoz 2005). Once north of the Chicozapote, however, the Yaxchilan kingdom gave way to the domain of Piedras Negras, where centers such as El Cayo provided control of that kingdom's southern reaches (Chinchilla and Houston 1993; Lee and Hayden 1988; Mathews 1998; Mathews and Aliphath 1992). By the Late Classic period the Piedras Negras kingdom probably dominated the remaining length of the Usumacinta canyon, but the political picture is complicated. The kingdom of Sak Tz'i was a significant presence in the region, negotiating alliances and enduring warfare with Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan (Anaya Hernández 2001; Martin and Grube 2000:146). The rulers of Chinikiha and Chancala were also active along this stretch of the river valley, though the extent of their polities is not clear (Anaya Hernández 2001, 2005a, 2005b; Stephen Houston, personal communication 2006;

Martin and Grube 2000:179).

At the Boca del Cerro gap, where the Usumacinta spills out onto the Tabasco floodplain, the river passed northwards through the domain of Pomona. Guarding the riverine and overland passes into the Tabasco floodplain were centers subordinate to Piedras Negras such as Santo Tomas 1, Redención del Campesino, and Alvaro Obregon 2. On the Pomona side of the political divide were political centers such as Panhale, poised on the Boca del Cerro to observe all movement into the kingdom (Anaya Hernández 2001, 2005a, 2005b).

Previous Research

From 2003 through 2005, the SLRAP concentrated its efforts on reconnaissance and mapping of the borderlands between Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan. In particular, mapping and test pitting were carried out in the swampy regions, uplands, and hills surrounding the Arroyo Macablero and areas to the south of the Laguneta Lacandon (see Figure 2; Golden, Roman, Muñoz, Scherer, and Romero 2005; Golden et al. 2004; Golden, Scherer, and Muñoz 2005; Golden et al. 2004; Golden et al. 2003; Scherer 2005; Vásquez et al. 2005, 2006). Fieldwork in 2003 and 2004, combined with the work of earlier investigators (e.g., Maler 1901; Maler 1903; Shook 1998) revealed a striking difference in site distributions between the two kingdoms. In the area presumed to be part of the Piedras Negras kingdom, overall settlement is abundant, though significant political centers are dispersed. Secondary political nodes—those centers governed by the immediate subordinates of the Yaxchilan or Piedras Negras kings and identified by monumental architecture or inscribed monuments—are scattered widely and interspersed with much smaller settlements.

Although epigraphic and iconographic data indicate that rulers of subordinate centers were often key military allies of their overlords, the distribution of secondary centers in the southern Piedras Negras kingdom does not suggest any attempt to provide tight military or political oversight of a border.¹ El Cayo is perched on the edge of the river and could thus have guarded that route north, but not much use is made elsewhere of the naturally defensible topography to guard overland passes on the Mexican or Guatemalan side of the river. On the Guatemalan side, settlement is abundant on the valley floors at sites such as Esmeralda, but sparse on hilltops. The large site of Texcoco, which may have been a secondary center in the Late Classic Piedras Negras kingdom, is perched on elevated terrain near a natural pass leading eastwards towards the territory of other polities, including the Hix Witz kingdom. Texcoco's location, though, leaves the major north-south route leading from Yaxchilan to Piedras Negras unguarded. Only the much smaller

¹ The patterns described for the southern Piedras Negras kingdom may not pertain along the kingdom's northern boundaries (see Hernandez 2005a, b).



Figure 4. Basal platform and superstructure of building at the site of Tixan (photo by Andrew Scherer).



Figure 5. Pyramid at the site of Texcoco (photo by Andrew Scherer).

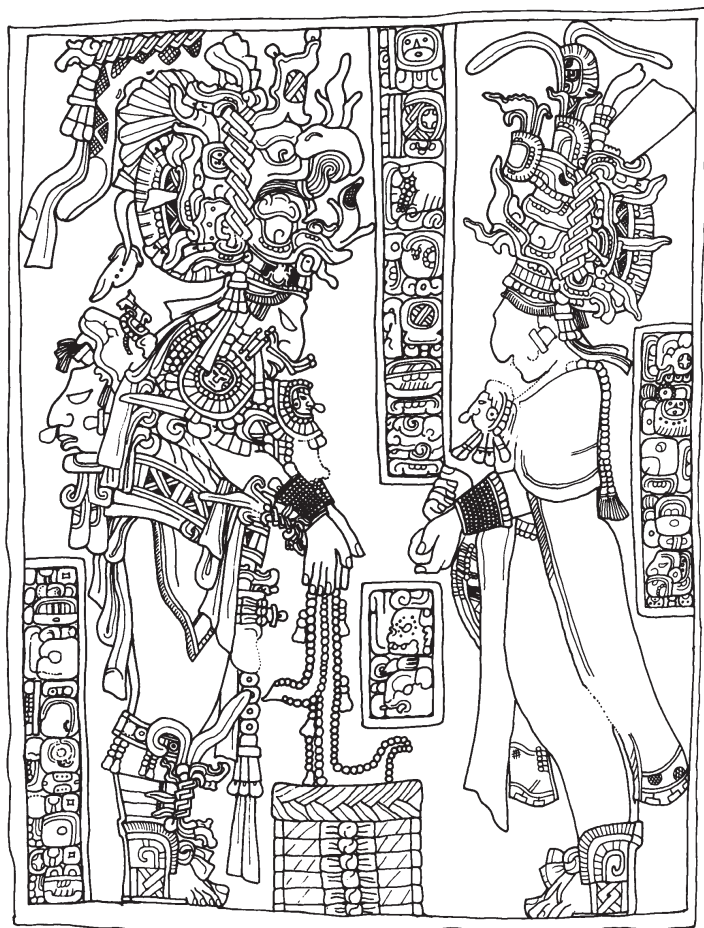


Figure 6. Tiloom, the local ruler (*sajal*) of La Pasadita (right) engaged in a ritual with Bird Jaguar IV, ruler of the Yaxchilan polity (left). Drawing by Linda Schele.



Figure 7. Wall between La Pasadita and El Tunel, with people at top and base of wall for scale (photo by Andrew Scherer).

center of Esmeralda offers any significant population center along that north-south route, and it is located on wide, open, and unprotected flatlands (Golden, Scherer, and Muñoz 2005).

In contrast, sites in the Yaxchilan kingdom with monumental architecture are heavily concentrated in the presumed border zone on both sides of the river, with much use made of the natural topography for the fortification of overland travel routes. The rulers of these sites, including Chicozapote, Tecolote, La Pasadita (and possibly the minimally documented site of El Tunel) provided the Yaxchilan dynasty with military and political control of the north-south routes overland and along the river that crossed the border with Piedras Negras. Along Yaxchilan's eastern border a similar pattern holds, with Oso Negro strategically situated near the path leading out to the archaeological sites of Pajalal and Zapote Bobal, centers of the Hix Witz polity (Breuil-Martínez et al. 2005; Breuil-Martínez et al. 2004; Fitzsimmons 2006; Gámez et al. 2006; Gámez 2006). Monuments from the region depict these subordinates to the dynasty of Yaxchilan engaged in rituals with their overlords, in some cases offering up war captives and other tribute in signs of fealty (Figure 6).

Our research has found further evidence for the formal development of a tightly controlled border in the form of a series of stone walls, which by analogy with excavated features in the Petexbatun region we believe to be the bases of palisades (see Demarest et al. 1997). These walls were placed strategically along Yaxchilan's northern boundary, crossing between hillsides in and around the sites of El Bayal, La Pasadita, and El Tunel (Figure 7). Some of these walls extend for over 100 m, while others cross narrow gaps of perhaps 30 m. We have not yet excavated the walls, and thus we cannot securely date them or confirm that they are the bases for palisades. However, the identification of these features as defensive structures is the most parsimonious explanation for their form and location, and their association with demonstrably Late Classic centers such as La Pasadita and El Tunel suggests that they are similarly Late Classic constructions.

By the close of fieldwork in the 2005 field season, our bi-national research team had conducted three field seasons of reconnaissance, mapping, and preliminary excavations in an area extending from Piedras Negras in the north to La Técnica in the south, and from the Usumacinta River east to the Sierra del Lacandón. At least twenty-three previously undocumented archaeological sites were identified, and five previously identified sites had been further documented. We had made some headway in locating sites and had improved the archaeological map of the middle Usumacinta Basin.

Our work also raised new questions. Were the



Figure 8. Eastern façade of Structure D3-1 at the site of Tecolote (photo by Arlen Heginbotham).

smaller sites that we had identified in our reconnaissance politically integrated into the Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan polities? Could patterns of material culture be used to determine political alliance of these smaller centers? What was the function of the smaller sites? Were they centers of agricultural production? Were they military outposts, as suggested by the presence of possible defensive features? In the 2006 field season our goal, then, was to begin to answer some of these questions through more intensive excavation at sites already identified.

The 2006 Field Season

Given the relative instability and insecurity of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park, safety dictated that we plan a season based along the edge of the park, where we were less likely to encounter drug traffickers and illegal settlers who have invaded the park and occasionally attacked park rangers. We planned to return to the community of Union Maya Itza, or UMI, a legal settlement located on the southern edge of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park. We had used it as our base of operations during the 2005 season, establishing what we believed to be a positive working relationship with the community. Working out of UMI would allow us to return to Oso Negro, a large secondary settlement located to the north of UMI that we identified during our 2005 field season. Moreover, if the situation was deemed safe enough we planned to extend our research north into the park itself. We were particularly interested in establishing a temporary camp near La Pasadita from which we could conduct research at La Pasadita, El Tunel, and Tecolote, as well as surrounding areas. We also planned to conduct further investigations in the town of La Técnica at the site of El Kinel, which we had visited briefly during the 2005 field season.

These were reasonable goals for a short field season of three weeks. However, following a series of inconclusive phone conversations with local officials in UMI over

a period of several months, Golden and our Guatemalan colleague Fabiola Quiroa traveled with personnel from the Defensores de la Naturaleza (the administrators of the Sierra del Lacandón park) to meet with the community's board of directors. There we were told in no uncertain terms that no further archaeological research was to be conducted in the community.

Faced with a serious obstacle, the SLRAP was fortunate to receive word from members of the board of directors in the neighboring town of La Técnica that archaeological research might be welcomed in their community. La Técnica is a small, legal community located on the banks of the Usumacinta River, just south of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park. After an impromptu meeting with board members from La Técnica, Scherer, Quiroa, and fellow archaeologist Juan Carlos Meléndez, with much assistance from our long-time guides from



Figure 9. Doorway of the Las Puertas palace at the site of Oso Negro (photo by Charles Golden).

the community of Santa Rita, negotiated a working arrangement that included permission to conduct research in La Técnica provided that individual land owners were consulted for their permission and were compensated for accompanying researchers during mapping and excavations.

This arrangement permitted the field season to go forward, and allowed for the SLRAP to follow through on most of the research questions that we had proposed, although research at Oso Negro would be impossible. Another positive outcome of this arrangement was the opportunity to conduct preliminary excavations at the archaeological sites of La Técnica, located in the center of the modern community, and El Kinel, which is located in the agricultural fields just outside of town.

Both sites are intriguing. Preliminary investigations at La Técnica in 2005 revealed that the central portion of the site includes an E-group, and surface collections produced a sample of primarily Preclassic ceramics. In contrast, surface ceramics collected at El Kinel are primarily Late Classic in date. More intriguing, during road construction in 2000 community members uncovered a carved monument. The monument bears the portrait of Shield Jaguar III, ruler of Yaxchilan, and has an inscribed date of AD 790 (Figure 13). The recovery of a carved monument at El Kinel, a site that has neither vaulted architecture nor imposing structures of any sort, is highly unusual, and the significance of the find is yet to be determined.

La Técnica

Our research personnel—seven archaeologists, one soils researcher, and eleven excavators and guides—arrived in La Técnica on June 2 and set up camp on the grounds of a house on the northern edge of town. On June 3 we began our investigations in the town center at the site of La Técnica. A site datum was established on the top of Structure A2-1, and the site was mapped with a total station to replace the existing tape-and-compass maps made by Paulino Morales and by members of the SLRAP (Morales 2001; Vásquez et al. 2005, 2006). What our original map from 2005 showed was a small but dense core of structures that includes an E-group, the only one identified to date along the Usumacinta River (Figure 10; see Aimers and Rice 2006). However, the more detailed map that emerged from the total station survey revealed that the E-group and a few surrounding structures rest atop a large platform that covers approximately two hectares. Other smaller structures outside the core are more widely dispersed. Construction in the town has destroyed some small structures, but overall the site of La Técnica is well preserved and local residents have sought to preserve the largest structures.

An interesting feature of the architecture at La Técnica is that the structures lack cut limestone block facings. One possibility is that community members removed facing blocks over thirty years of construction and ag-

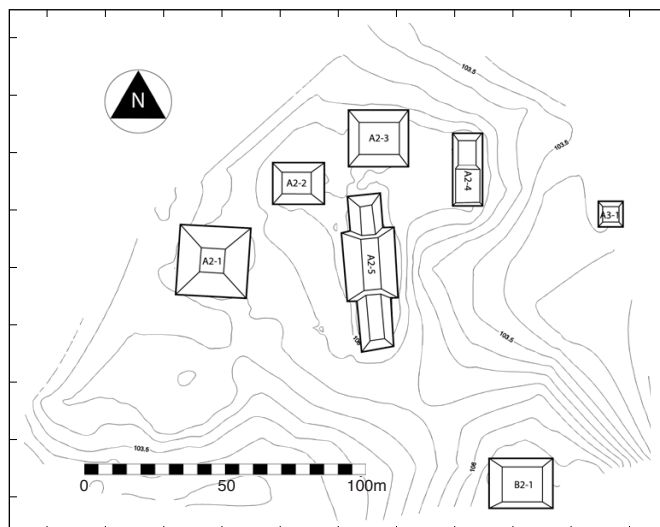


Figure 10. Map of La Técnica, Petén, Guatemala (by Charles Golden and Betsy Marzahn-Ramos).

ricultural activities. However, we did not notice any cut limestone blocks re-used in modern constructions, nor were we told of the removal of blocks from the mounds. A likely hypothesis is simply that cut limestone facades were not used in the construction of buildings at La Técnica. Mound fill consists of large cobbles from the river, and it is possible that such cobbles were also used for facing stones, similar to patterns seen in the southeastern Maya area (e.g., Schortman and Nakamura 1991).

Our excavations at La Técnica consisted of two test pits at the base of the pyramidal Structure A2-1. Excavations revealed deep deposits of river cobble fill, with the vast majority of the ceramic materials recovered dating to the Late Preclassic (c. 500 BC to AD 250). In our deepest excavations, however, the Late Preclassic ceramics give way to Middle Preclassic materials, pushing the earliest demonstrable occupation of La Técnica back to perhaps 500 BC. A few pieces of Protoclassic ceramics were recovered in the upper levels and suggest an abandonment of the site around AD 250. The few Late Classic ceramics recovered were limited to a handful of sherds in the humus layer and are minimal compared to the large quantities of Preclassic materials recovered from all levels of excavation. The majority of the construction at La Técnica dates to the Late Preclassic, with no evidence of Early Classic occupation. Some ephemeral Late Classic use of the site is suggested by the few Late Classic period sherds, though construction during this time seems unlikely.

La Técnica is thus a significant Preclassic center for the Usumacinta region. Late Preclassic structures at Piedras Negras, Macabiler, and Fideo are of comparable size or smaller, but no other E-groups have been identified in the region (Golden, Roman, Muñoz, Scherer, and Romero 2005; Houston, Ecobedo, Child, Golden, and Muñoz 2003:220-222). Why the site was abandoned

during or shortly after the Protoclassic period is unclear, although this fits a wider regional pattern that we will discuss below.

El Kinel

By June 7, we shifted our attention to the nearby site of El Kinel (Figure 11), having received permission from the landowner to conduct mapping and excavation in the mound group from which Monument 1, the sculpture bearing the image of Shield Jaguar III, was recovered (Houston et al. in press; Morales 2001; Morales and Ramos 2002). Paulino Morales (2001) designated a Northern Sector and a Southern Sector at El Kinel, with the two divided by a canal, known locally as “*el kinel*,” which gives the site its name.² Morales believed the canal to be a natural feature, a hypothesis also put forward by several local residents at La Técnica. Remote imaging of the canal, however, shows that it forms a clean arc across most of this bend in the river, essentially cutting off the southern sector from the north during periods of high water. The shape of the canal does not favor its interpretation as a natural waterway, and the presence of a raised berm along portions of its southern edge support the idea that it was excavated, at least in part, by people rather than carved by the river. Although at present the canal does not reach to the river at both of its edges, radar imagery appears to show that the canal did once reach the river and has subsequently been filled by sediment or was purposefully buried.

Mounds in the Northern Sector of La Técnica are more dispersed than those in the Southern Sector of the site. They appear to be mostly individual platforms that may have supported one or more perishable superstructures. The mounds in the Northern Sector are not particularly large, and the platform on which the monument was found is the largest structure north of the canal. Small structures line the edge of the canal, perhaps because the land to the north quickly gives way to seasonally inundated swamp. Yet the association of a series of three small structures (F7-1, F8-2, and G8-1) with at least one larger structure (F8-1) may indicate that there was an effort to develop an architectural complex of some sort.

Three test pits were excavated in El Kinel’s Northern Sector in and around Structure H10-1, the platform on which Monument 1 was discovered. Rich sheet middens in two test pits immediately adjacent to Structure H10-1 yielded abundant ceramics, lithics, and faunal remains. Given the context of these materials it is probable that they represent discard from the final occupation phase of the structure. Although utilitarian wares are most common, trade wares including Altar Fine Orange and Tres Naciones Fine Gray ceramics are abundant, and suggest a date of AD 830 or somewhat later for these midden materials. We provisionally suggest an abandonment of this portion of El Kinel no later than about AD 930 because trade wares post-dating the Terminal Classic fine

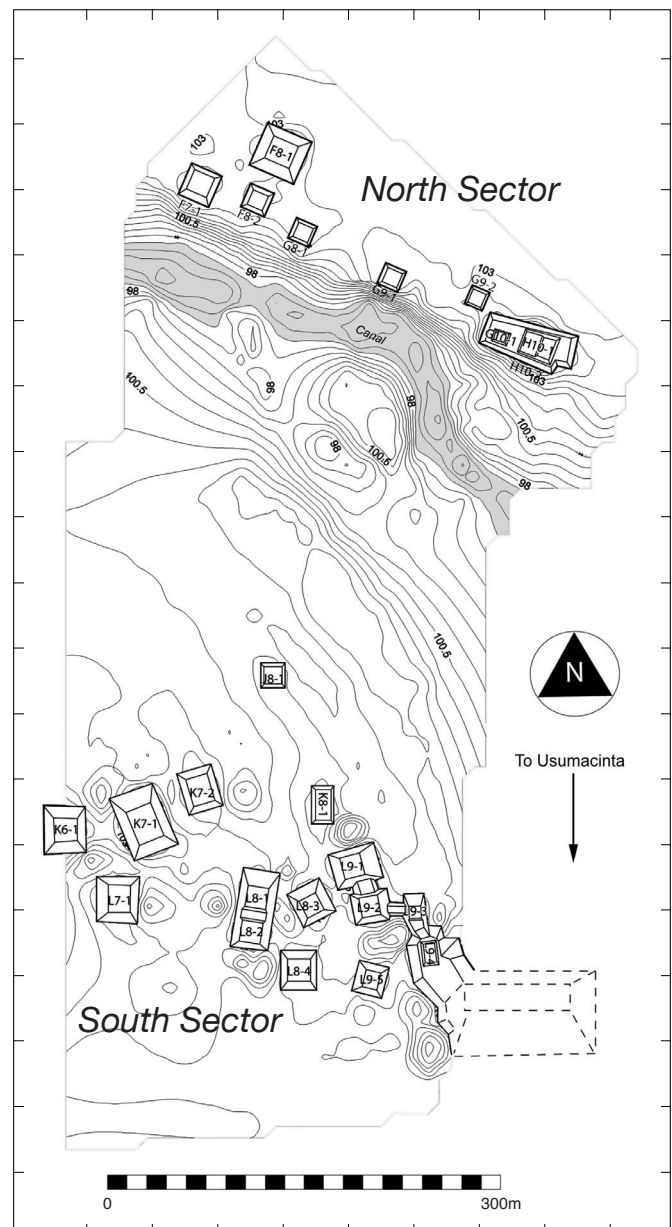


Figure 11. Map of El Kinel, Petén, Guatemala (by Charles Golden, Betsy Marzahn-Ramos, and Juan Carlos Meléndez).

wares are absent in our sample (Adams 1971:151; Sabloff 1975:17).

Although we have a final date for Classic period occupation in this area of El Kinel, we still do not have a precise understanding of the overall site chronology. Excavations were continued into what appeared to be culturally sterile soils, and in one test pit a few Late Preclassic sherds were recovered, but we could not associate them with a particular building phase. At the moment we believe that occupation in this platform and its asso-

² The origin of this term is unclear. It is not a word in common usage elsewhere in the Petén or Guatemala more generally.

ciated structures in the Northern Sector of El Kinel date exclusively to the Late and Terminal Classic, although they may have been built above a small-scale Preclassic occupation level. If the initial construction of Structure H10-1 is contemporary with the date of AD 790 inscribed on the monument found there, then a robust occupation continued for at least forty years before the area was abandoned.

In the Southern Sector of El Kinel, we obtained permission to map and excavate in two adjacent parcels of land where structures are abundant. At least fourteen structures were mapped in an area measuring approximately 300 x 400 m. These densely packed, large platforms are interspersed with deep depressions that must have served as borrow pits for materials used to build the structures. The borrow pits may then have served as aguadas to provide year-round water to the residents of El Kinel. Interestingly, several of the structures are connected by raised walkways. These walkways would have proven useful when the area intermittently flooded. According to modern residents of the area, the Southern Sector of El Kinel periodically floods when the Usumacinta spills its banks during the rainy season. They report that in the past this occurred regularly every two years or so, though it has been six years since the site last flooded.

The mounds in the Southern Sector of El Kinel are earthen platforms that once held perishable superstructures. Unlike the site of La Técnica, though, these platforms were at least partially faced and topped by limestone blocks, including limestone bases for the superstructures. However, many of the mounds have had their worked stone masonry removed in the course of farming in recent decades, a process we observed in more than one of the parcels farmed by the community.

Excavations were conducted in Structure L9-3, which had been previously penetrated by a looters' trench. A scattering of capstones, sherds, and human remains around the mound surface indicate the looters had encountered a burial, and the landowner indicated that he had backfilled the trench upon discovering the looting. We chose to re-open and clean the trench to access the architectural sequence of the structure and to attempt to recover any remaining data from the burial. A test pit was also placed adjacent to the trench to provide further context. A second test pit was placed in the walkway that connected L9-3 to Structure L9-4.

The test pits and the looters' trench yielded exclusively Late Classic materials. Although disturbance by farming might explain the loss of some Terminal Classic materials that may have been located on or near the surface, the fact that fine Terminal Classic wares were abundant in the Northern Sector, which has also been farmed, suggests that Terminal Classic wares never existed in any abundance in the Southern Sector. This absence of fine wares suggests that structures in the Southern Sector were abandoned before about AD 830, earlier than

those in the Northern Sector.

In our test pit in the walkway that connects Structure L9-3 and L9-4, we encountered a dense lens of ceramic debris that we originally believed was a midden—perhaps garbage tossed from the adjacent houses. However, further excavation revealed an adult burial (Burial 4; Figure 12) beneath the deposit of sherds, animal bone, spindle whorls, and figurine fragments. Although the upper layers of this deposit may indeed be merely household trash thrown from the neighboring buildings, the context of artifacts associated with the burial suggests that at least some of what we originally thought was garbage was actually a ritual deposit associated with the burial.

A large quantity of sherds representing partially complete vessels was found directly adjacent to the remains, and the apparently intentional placement of artifacts such as projectile points (at the level of the knees), a broken mano (over the pelvis), an chert axe (over the right arm), among others, strongly favors the idea that these objects were part of a single burial episode. All of these objects, however, were broken prior to deposition. Interestingly, Paulino Morales (Morales 2001:9) re-

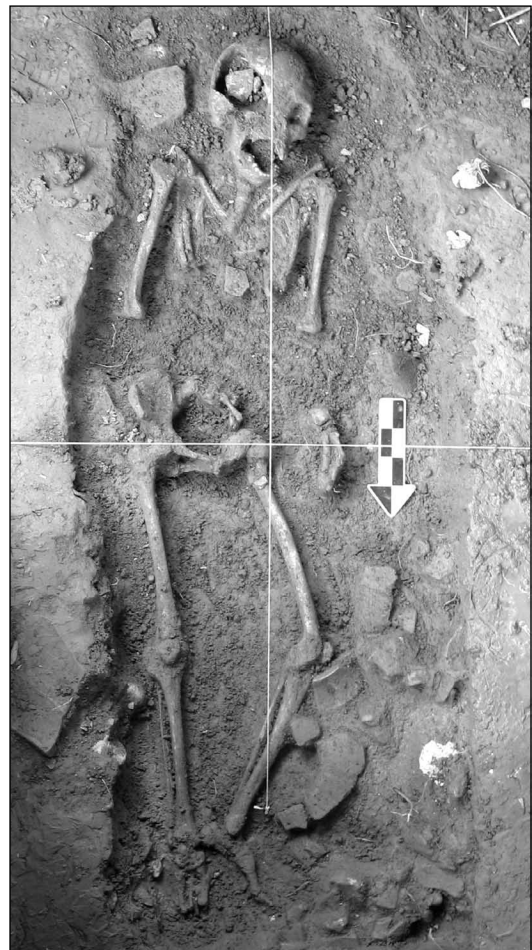


Figure 12. Burial 4, El Kinel (excavated and photographed by Ana Lucia Arroyave and Andrew Scherer).



Figure 13. Monument 1 from El Kinel, depicting Shield Jaguar III of Yaxchilan (drawing by Stephen Houston; see Houston et al. in press; Morales 2001; Morales and Ramos 2002)

ports a similar deposition of sherds associated with the burial that he excavated at El Kinel. The interment with the deceased of what otherwise might be interpreted as common midden materials may have constituted an important component of the mortuary ritual in this ancient community. Burial 4 had been disturbed in antiquity and

its lower arm bones (both radii and ulnae) removed, yet both upper arms (humerii) and the bones of the hands remained in an undisturbed, articulated position. It is unclear whether the lower arms were removed during an intentional re-entry of the burial, or merely removed during an accidental and incidental disturbance of the grave as a result of later activities in and around the structure where the burial was placed.

In clearing the backfill from the looter's trench in Structure L9-3 we located human remains that constituted what was left of the disturbed burial (Burial 6), much of which had been re-interred when the trench was backfilled by the landowner. Excavations adjacent to the looters' trench, however, unexpectedly revealed Structure L9-3 to be something akin to a "household shrine," typical of eastern structures in the Central Petén region (Becker 2004; Becker 1999; Becker 1971; Hageman 2004). However, without further excavation we cannot say whether other platforms contain similar numbers of burials and whether such a pattern of eastern shrines exists at El Kinel.

The burials of two children (Burials 2 and 3) and one adult (Burial 5) were densely placed within the structure. One of the children was interred in a capped crypt, with walls of roughly cut stone (Burial 2). The other two burials were also capped by flat cut stone blocks (*lajas*), though they lacked the walls of cut stones. Other burials were evident below those that we excavated, with the leg of one child (Burial 3) resting on the capstones of another unexcavated grave. Given the limitations on time and resources we decided to leave further excavations in this structure for future field seasons. The two children were not associated with any burial furniture, aside from polished river stones. The adult, though, was buried with three vessels near his head—including a black slipped dish inverted over his face. A similar black slipped tripod dish was found by Morales (2001:9) in his excavations in the Southern Sector of El Kinel.

Another interesting feature of the burials is the position of two of the individuals, one the adult buried between structures (Burial 4), and one a child from L9-3 (Burial 2). In both cases the left leg was placed in a slightly flexed position and the right leg was extended. The skeleton in Burial 4 had the right hand placed over the pelvis and the left hand was placed at its side, with the fingers flexed as if holding something. No artifact was found in the hand, though it may have once held a perishable object. The skeleton in Burial 2 had its left arm flexed over the chest, with its right hand placed over the pelvis. These individuals give the appearance of having been placed in their graves in a dance position, similar to that depicted on painted vessels and monuments. Although the significance of such positioning is not clear, this unique burial position reflects a mortuary custom specific to either the household in which these individuals belonged, or to the community of El Kinel in general.



Figure 14. Post molds in the berm of El Kinel
(photo by Fabiola Quiroa).

Excavations were also placed strategically in two locations outside of architecture. The first of these was an aguada, adjacent to L9-2, -3, -4, and -5. Soil cores by Chris Balzotti of Brigham Young University revealed a three-meter-deep deposit of clay sitting atop a sandy layer, indicating that flood-deposited clay covered the beach of the ancient river channel which had shifted southward to its current course. To determine the cultural associations of this stratigraphy—and possibly the date of this shift in the river—a test pit was placed precisely where the core had been taken. The results were significant—throughout the clay layers were Late Classic sherds, with sherds found only a few centimeters above the sandy soil of the ancient beach. Considering the large size of some of the sherds, and that the sherds were lying horizontally (as opposed to vertically) in the sediment, we do not believe the sherds reached this substantial depth through vertical migration in the soil matrix (Hofman 1986).

Rather, it is possible to imagine two likely scenarios that would account for this stratigraphy. One possibility is that the excavation of the aguadas by the original builders of El Kinel during the Late Classic period reached down to the level of the sandy layers. Periodic flooding of the site over the course of the Late Classic resulted in the gradual deposition of clay in the aguadas. Alternatively, occupation of the site began during

the Late Classic shortly after the river shifted its course. In such a scenario the excavation of the aguadas and the construction of the currently visible structures took place only after a significant period of sedimentation raised the land surface. In either case, materials predating the Late Classic period are conspicuously absent and suggest that the immediate area surrounding the aguada was not occupied before that time.

The second off-mound excavation at El Kinel was a test pit in a raised area adjacent to the canal itself that was potentially related to the original construction of the canal. Although no ceramics were recovered, just below the humus level a series of at least three circular depressions were found (Figure 14). These measured on average 12 cm in diameter, were at least 35 cm deep, and were separated by an average of 42 cm. One possibility is that they represent post molds from a wooden palisade. Such palisades formed from widely spaced wooden vertical posts, interlaced with horizontal pieces, have been proposed in the Petexbatun area (Demarest et al. 1997). Further excavation, however, is needed to follow up on this preliminary finding.

Despite our investigations, the political role of El Kinel within the Yaxchilan kingdom remains a mystery, and will require further research to clarify. Why such an unimposing site should be graced with a monument bearing the portrait of Shield Jaguar III is simply not clear. It is possible that Monument 1 was moved in antiquity from a more “monumental” site, however no such site has been identified near El Kinel.

If El Kinel was the original home of the monument, then clues may be sought in the text and imagery of the monument itself, together with the form of settlement and defensive features at El Kinel. Monument 1 memorializes a dance performed by Shield Jaguar while dressed as both a captive and a warrior. He is not identified by his full name, but rather as the “guardian of Torch Macaw,” a name he uses on at least one other monument (Houston et al. 2005; Houston et al. in press). Like many of the captives taken by the rulers of Yaxchilan, Torch Macaw is nowhere identified as the ruler of a competing kingdom. His significance to Shield Jaguar, therefore, must come from some other source.

One possible scenario is that Torch Macaw was significant to Shield Jaguar because he represented a threat from within the kingdom, rather than without. It is tempting to think that Monument 1 represents a memorial to Shield Jaguar’s victory over the residents of El Kinel’s Southern Sector. Certainly the construction of the moat-and-ditch suggests defensive measures taken by the inhabitants of the Southern Sector, and the apparent abandonment of the Southern Sector before the Northern Sector might be explained by a defeat in battle. At present, however, such a scenario is mere speculation, and whatever the reasons behind the monument, by the beginning of the tenth century AD both sectors of El Kinel had been abandoned.

Zancudero

Our plans to conduct investigations in the areas surrounding La Pasadita and Tecolote were put aside following the capture of CONAP and police officers by illegal invaders in the region immediately north of La Pasadita on June 13. With other large sections of the Sierra del Lacandón also inaccessible due to security concerns, and lacking permission to work in UMI, our access to the national park was extremely limited. However, a narrow strip of land in the southwestern tip of the park borders the agricultural terrain of La Técnica. This area was known to be safe, and relatively free from invading communities (although one such group of invaders was evicted in 2005).³

Reports from one of the landowners with whom we were working indicated the presence of exposed masonry in this southwestern corner of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park. One day of reconnaissance, followed by a day of mapping and test pitting revealed a fascinating site, which we have called Zancudero after the swarms of mosquitoes (*zancudos*) that inhabit the site. At the center of Zancudero is a large hill, approximately ninety meters tall. Atop the hill are several low platforms, with a commanding view of the plains to the south and the hills to the north. There are at least two small caves in the side of the hill, and several small structures are scattered around the base of the hill.

What makes this site interesting is not the settlement itself but rather a large wall that encircles the greater part of the hill. At least eight hundred meters long, and in places as much as four or five meters tall, this wall surrounds approximately three-quarters of the hill and its surrounding structures (Figures 15 and 16). The remainder of the circumference is completed by swampland and the Arroyo Yaxchilan, creating an easily defended



Figure 15. Exterior section of the wall at Zancudero, with photographer at the base of the rise (photo by Juan Carlos Meléndez).

outpost with accessible water and food close by.

A single test pit revealed that although there are some Late Classic sherds scattered in the humus, by far the majority of materials recovered dated to the Late Preclassic period. No excavations were placed in the walls themselves, so at present it is not possible to definitively say that they represent Preclassic fortifications. However, at least one other example of a probable Preclassic fortified site has been identified along the Usumacinta River at the site of Macabilero, which is located to the north in the vicinity of Piedras Negras (Golden, Scherer, and Muñoz 2005:13-14; Romero 2005; Shook 1998).

What, precisely, the formidable wall at Zancudero was defending during the Preclassic or Classic period is not clear. This is an otherwise unremarkable small site with a remarkably large wall. As a strategic location, though, the hill at the center of Zancudero offers an incomparable view of the surrounding countryside. During the Classic period such a hill would have provided the defenders of Yaxchilan with views upriver and out to the valley running towards the Hix Witz kingdom that were not possible from Yaxchilan itself. Further, it would have been possible for the lords of Yaxchilan to look out over subordinate communities within their kingdom. What role such a watchtower might have played in the more sparsely settled and politically fractured landscape of the Preclassic period is difficult to guess.

Synthesis

Although our findings from La Técnica, El Kinel, and Zancudero are preliminary, when integrated with research from three previous field seasons they add significant pieces to the puzzle of political developments in the middle Usumacinta River basin, from the Preclassic through the Terminal Classic periods. To date, Preclassic materials have been documented at Yaxchilan, Piedras Negras, El Cayo, Fideo, Macabilero, and now El Kinel, La Técnica, and Zancudero. None of these sites possessed large Preclassic occupations on the scale of central Petén centers, but the prevalence of Preclassic ceramics in virtually every cave we have explored hints that more Preclassic settlement remains to be identified. As far as we can determine from patterns on the Guatemalan side of the river, many small Preclassic centers were widely dispersed in the Sierra del Lacandón. Though La Técnica was clearly not El Mirador, and it would have been dwarfed by Preclassic Tikal, Uaxcactun, and any number of other Central Petén sites, the site was apparently one of the larger Preclassic centers along the Usumacinta, possibly larger than Piedras Negras at that time (Houston, Ecobedo, Child et al. 2003; Houston et al. 2000).

Zancudero, like La Técnica, appears to have seen its major occupation during the Preclassic period, and

³ The local term used for groups that make illegal claims to private property or public lands is "invasores," best translated as "invaders."

it is likely that the large defensive walls at the site also date to the Late Preclassic period. If this is the case, this significant fortification would constitute a very early example of a defensive structure in the Maya area, making it a contemporary of Becan (Webster 1974, 1976, 2000). Together with the imposing terraces and strategic location of Preclassic Macabilerio, Zancudero adds to the growing picture of the Usumacinta as a fractured, highly contested region even during the Late Preclassic period. If this is indeed the case, it has important implications for our understanding of the evolution of ancient Maya warfare and for the development of the Classic period polities that followed. More detailed interpretations, though, must wait until we can excavate the wall itself.

Data from the 2006 field season also furthers our understanding of a bimodal pattern in the settlement history of the region. As already noted, settlement was widely distributed throughout the region during the Late Preclassic, and possibly into the Protoclassic period. However, sometime during the Early Classic a major settlement shift occurred. The abandonment of La Técnica and Zancudero at the end of the Preclassic or during the Protoclassic reflects a wider pattern seen throughout our study area. Our sample of Early Classic ceramics has been primarily found scattered in caves. Almost nowhere have we found Early Classic ceramics associated with architecture, and in those few places where we have it is scarce.

At Piedras Negras, in contrast, Early Classic materials are abundant (Muñoz 2006), as they are at Yaxchilan (Lopez-Varela 1989). We have suggested elsewhere (Golden, Roman, Muñoz, Scherer, and Romero 2005; Golden, Scherer, and Muñoz 2005)—as have Houston and colleagues (Houston, Ecobedo, Child, Golden, and Muñoz 2003)—that the growth of the dynastic centers led to a depopulation of the countryside as people congregated around emerging royal dynasties at Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan. Through a combination of persuasion and coercion these newly formed dynastic centers siphoned off and concentrated regional populations around their growing cores. Our research continues to support this hypothesis as the simplest explanation for the chronological data collected thus far.

During the Late Classic period, ceramics are abundant at sites across the region. These findings suggest that regional settlement rebounded in the Late Classic period, spiking probably in the eighth or early ninth century AD before collapsing in the Terminal Classic period by AD 930 (Golden, Scherer, and Muñoz 2005). When people did return to the countryside during the Late Classic they did not reoccupy many of the old Preclassic centers. Instead, they chose to build new communities adjacent to the ruins. Some use of those ancient spaces is hinted at by thin scatterings of Late Classic materials over deep deposits of Preclassic materials, but whether this is evidence of reuse of the buildings as living spaces or implies the ritual re-use of abandoned structures is

not clear without further excavations.

Beyond developing a regional chronology, one of the guiding research problems for the SLRAP is the exploration of regional political geography in the middle Usumacinta basin. We are especially interested in identifying cultural patterns that reflect political affiliation within the Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan kingdoms during the Late Classic. Did subordinate nobles and the populations they governed identify their alliances through ritual acts, material culture, and other symbols detectable by archaeologists? Further, is it possible to identify the actual strategies of regional control utilized by the respective lords of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan?

Our work during the 2006 field season has helped substantiate several differences between sites in the Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan kingdoms that were hinted at by our previous research. First, burial patterns during the Late Classic in the two kingdoms are distinct. Overall, burials at Piedras Negras lack associated grave goods. Even elite burials are limited in their amount of funerary furniture, relative to other Maya sites. Among the elite at Piedras Negras, a burial tradition emerged

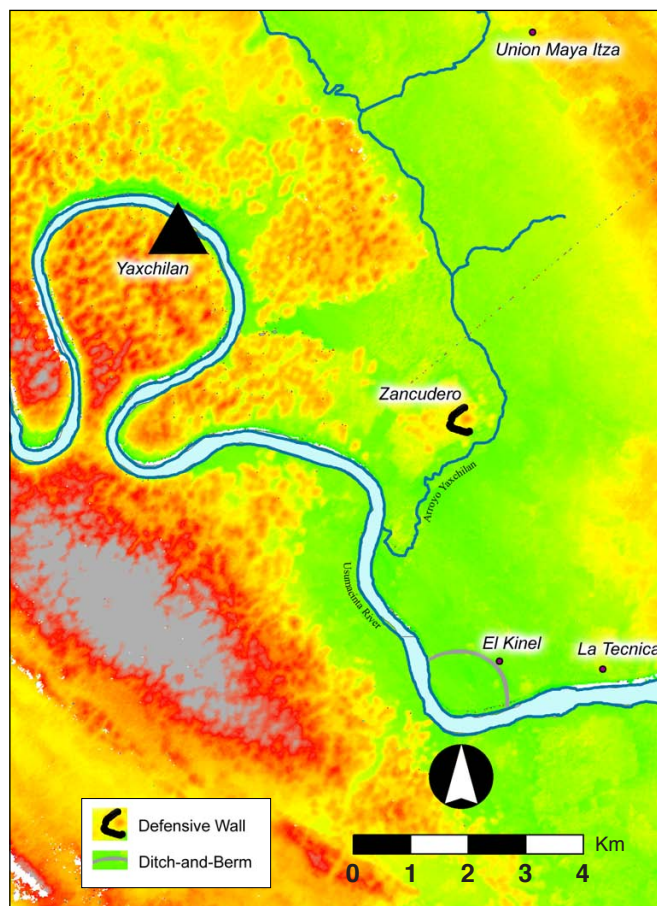


Figure 16. Modified Aisarsar radar image of the area including Yaxchilan, Zancudero, El Kinel, and La Técnica. Wall surrounding Zancudero and the ditch-and-berm feature of El Kinel are indicated in dark line (map by Charles Golden).

in the Late Classic period that included, among other things, the placement of burials outside of structures (as opposed to within pyramids) in order to permit burial re-entry.

Looted burial chambers at La Pasadita and Tecolote, as well as the burials excavated by our research team at Tecolote and El Kinel suggest very different patterns in the Yaxchilan kingdom. For instance, burial goods are more common. In particular, at El Kinel both Burial 1 (Morales 2001) and Burial 5 (excavated by members of the SLRAP) were found to have three pots interred with them, including a black plate perforated with a “kill-hole” inverted over the face in both cases. At Tecolote, Burial 3 also included an inverted tripod dish with a “kill hole,” although this was a polychrome vessel (Arroyave Prera 2004:52). This pattern is fairly typical of other Petén sites, but was never encountered in the 122 burials excavated at Piedras Negras (Houston, Escobedo, Scherer, Fitzsimmons, and Child 2003). Among the looted crypts from high status contexts (vaulted palace structures) at La Pasadita and Tecolote, all were placed inside, below the floors of structures. This pattern is like that observed for the royal tombs of Yaxchilan (García Moll 2004), but completely in contrast to Piedras Negras.

Patterns of ceramics are another example of divergent cultural traditions between the Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan kingdoms. We now have a significant ceramic sample from the Yaxchilan kingdom to compare with our well researched materials from Piedras Negras. Beginning at about AD 550, ceramic producers at Piedras Negras developed a distinct ceramic tradition emphasizing elaborate resist painting techniques. Although resist decorated ceramics are known from other Maya sites it is nowhere as common, or represented by such modal and typological diversity, as at Piedras Negras (see Muñoz 2006). The tradition of positive painting characterizing most Classic period Lowland Maya polychrome ceramics was a minority decorative technique for much of the Late Classic at Piedras Negras.

In contrast, the ceramics producers at Yaxchilan never developed a significant resist-decoration tradition (Lopez-Varela 1989, 1992, 1994, 1995), and most of the Late Classic polychrome ceramics from sites in the Yaxchilan polity are typologically identical to their analogs in the Central Petén in terms of decorative technique, motif, and palette (Arroyave and Meléndez 2005; Muñoz 2004). A very few sherds that may represent pieces of Piedras Negras style resist-painted polychromes are present in our collections from sites within the Yaxchilan kingdom such as El Kinel and Tecolote. These materials, however, constitute no more than a handful of sherds, and continued analysis is required to determine if they are typologically the same as those of Piedras Negras. Thus, the polychrome ceramic traditions of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan are distinguished from one another by fundamentally different ceramic technologies. Taking into account all types and wares, sites in the Yaxchilan

kingdom appear to have participated in the Tzakol and Tepeu ceramic spheres during the Late Classic, while Piedras Negras formed the center point of a distinct ceramic sphere.

Concluding Remarks

Little by little our research in and around the ancient border zone of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan is beginning to shed light on the growth and development of these two kingdoms, as well as the cultural patterns that formed part and parcel of the political divide separating the two polities. Of course much remains to be done, and we hope to continue working with the modern community of La Técnica and the Defensores de la Naturaleza in 2007. Our plan is to continue excavations at El Kinel and Zancudero, and return if possible to carry out investigations at La Pasadita and Tecolote.

Unfortunately the modern border problems in the region represent a significant impediment to future research. Events around the Petén suggest that Guatemala is at a historical crossroads at which the national parks with their cultural and natural resources must either be protected now or lost forever. In the Sierra del Lacandón illegal settlements have been on the rise since 2000. Today more than 3,000 people living in several illegal villages have destroyed large swaths of the forest, attacked and burned ranger stations, and creating a general atmosphere of lawlessness in this supposedly protected area (El Periódico 2006). In recent years, armed drug traffickers have also begun to use the forest as a base to receive shipments of cocaine and other drugs leaving Columbia en route for the United States. Of late, these illegal settlements have been incorporated into drug trafficking activities, with settlers providing maintenance to illicit landing strips and using assault rifles to protect shipments. These threats from drug traffickers come even as industrial interests in Guatemala seek to repeal the laws that established the national parks in the first place (Pérez 2006).

Confronted by drug traffickers and the potential for the legal elimination of national parks, many communities in the Petén dependent upon the sustainable use of protected areas for their livelihoods are asking for help from the government in maintaining these critical resources (Ramírez 2006). The Guatemalan government has responded in recent weeks with stepped up law enforcement efforts in the Petén, but it is not clear how long such efforts can be maintained or how effective they will be (Escobar López 2006).⁴ Unfortunately, scientific re-

⁴ New articles on this topic appear almost daily in the Guatemalan press and it is not possible to present a complete or up-to-date set of references in this publication. However, David Pentecost maintains the most complete set of links to such news pieces on his Daily Glyph weblog: www.gomaya.com/glyph/. Coverage by the press in the United States of these events has been almost nonexistent, though National Public Radio has posted an audio report at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6133609.

search in the Sierra del Lacandón cannot continue in the current climate of violence. We hope that the situation will improve over the coming year and allow us to continue our research northward again, into the heart of the Sierra del Lacandón and to sites such as Tecolote and La Pasadita. If not, the growing problems along the modern border may forever obscure the ancient border.

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