

The San Bartolo Regional Archaeological Project: Results of the First Field Season 2002¹

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Before I begin my talk, I'd like to thank all of the institutions that have helped us in our first field season. The discovery of murals at San Bartolo has turned this ancient city into a monument of national importance for Guatemala (Figure 1). The site's preservation (and its looting as well) are both due in large part to a remote and isolated location in the dense and humid tropical rain forest. As a result, prior to the present project no intensive archaeological investigations have been conducted in the zone, to the detriment of our understanding of the geopolitical role played by its many sites.

Previous investigations

Before March, 2001, the ruins of San Bartolo were practically unknown to archaeologists, despite the fact that a large number of its structures had suffered a decade or more of looting. The site lies in an extensive region of uninhabited jungle in the northeastern Peten district of Guatemala, some eight kilometers north of Xultun, a very large but little known Classic Maya site (Figure 1). In March of 2001, the murals of San Bartolo were discovered in the course of investigations by the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions Project. San Bartolo now ranks as one of the most important sites in Guatemala and the Maya area. The discovery of the paintings was fortuitous, in that the author had traveled to the Peten in order to visit other ruins where previously undocumented carved stone monuments had been reported. These ruins were said to be in the vicinity of Dos Lagunas and Naachtun, sites that lie to the north near the Mexican border.

In the wake of the paintings' discovery, in May and June of 2001, a more extensive reconnaissance of the ruins was undertaken and, more importantly, an evaluation of the murals and their state of preservation. Access to the site was also improved, and a team of watchmen was put under contract to remain in the vicinity year-round.

Description of the site

The archaeological site of San Bartolo covers about one square kilometer of tropical forest and appears to be surrounded on all sides by *bajos* (seasonally

inundated swamps). The site consists of two principle architectural groups (Figure 2). The largest is associated with the Pirámide de las Ventanas (the Pyramid of the Windows—so called for the masonry windows of its final construction phase). The group includes an important palace structure as well as a ballcourt. The pyramid looks southwards, possibly towards the large site of Xultun. During our survey a number of mounds were found, totaling 103 to date. Unfortunately the majority of these structures have been looted. Our project has so far recorded 211 illicit excavations.

Other features mapped included a causeway oriented north and south, connecting the Ventanas group with an area of *bajos*, and a quarry to the south of the site. The section of causeway mapped so far is 200 meters long. Among the public works projects carried out by the Maya and recorded so far are artificial *aguadas* (reservoirs), features that provided the city with water for its survival. The entire Ventanas group sits on a great platform that is clearly visible from the east of the complex.

Ventanas pyramid

The looters' excavations in the main pyramid of the Ventanas complex show at least three different levels previous to the final construction. The highest tunnel goes straight through the pyramid, revealing four construction stages with very well preserved stairways. The last construction stage also has stucco-covered stairways in a good state of preservation. At the base of the pyramid in the rear is another looters' tunnel revealing eight construction phases, the earliest dating to the Mamom ceramic phase of the Middle Preclassic (700–300 BC), with a flint construction fill.

Records were made of each of the discovered

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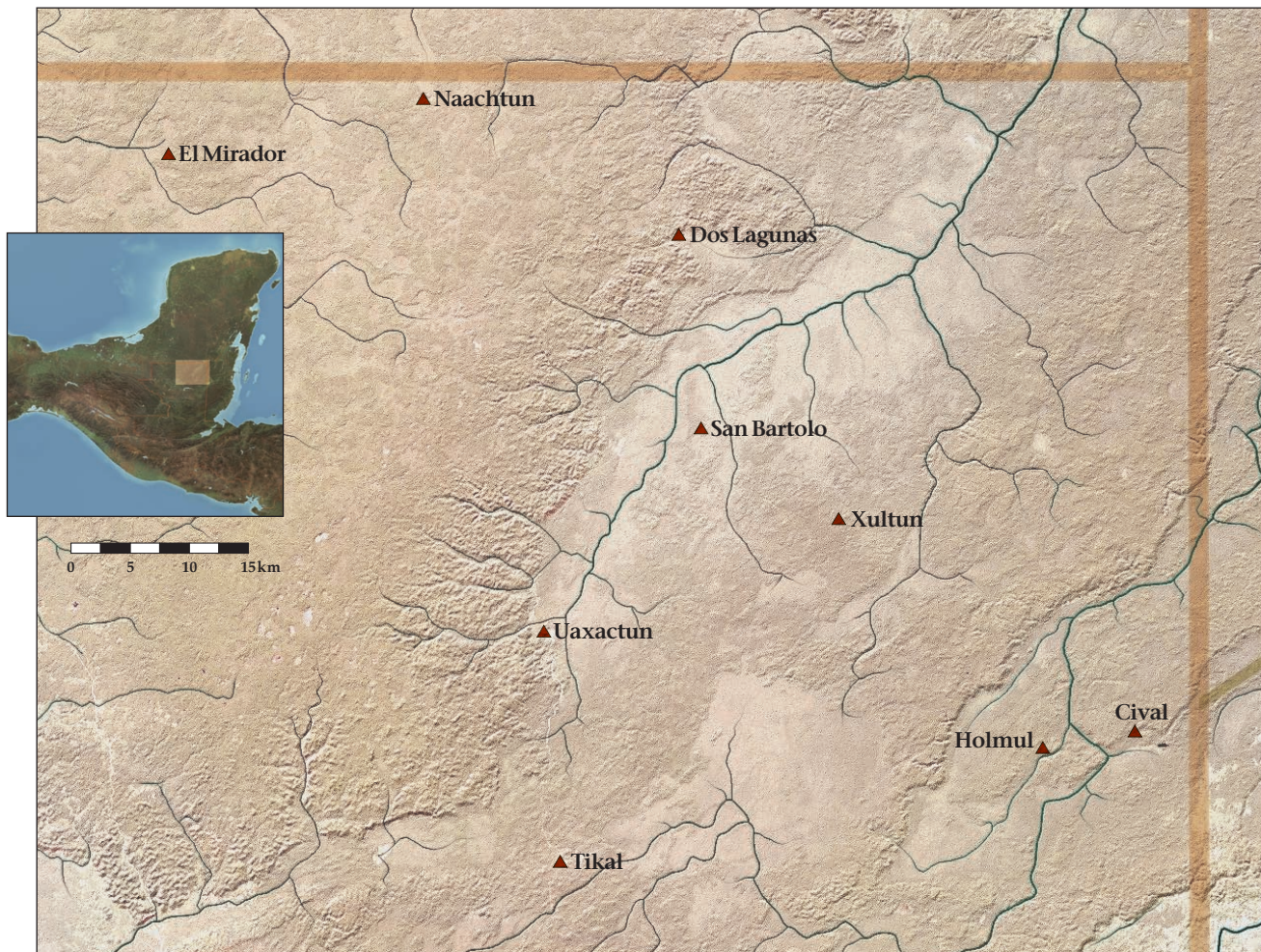


Figure 1. Sites mentioned in the text (map courtesy of Precolumbia Mesoweb Press).

construction stages in order to obtain a chronological sequence for the building. A test pit was also sunk in front of the pyramid, encountering a substructure that represents an earlier version of the platform supporting the architectural complex. Materials recovered during this excavation also date to the Mamom phase.

Ballcourt

A relatively small ballcourt is located on the east side of the Main Plaza. A test pit in the playing alley encountered various construction stages dating to the Mamom and Chicanel phases, the latter diagnostic of the Late Preclassic (300 BC – AD 300).

Monuments

Reconnaissance and mapping have also revealed the presence of carved monuments. Four fragmented stelae in a poor state of preservation were encountered in the center of the Main Plaza. Stela 3 is the best preserved,

with some carving that appears to be glyphic. The ceramics associated with these monuments are highly eroded but could date to the Late Classic (AD 600–900). This indicates that the ancient inhabitants returned to this city, which had apparently been abandoned towards the end of the Preclassic. It is important to note that with the exception of Structure 63 all of the material recovered in excavations at the site dates to the Preclassic.

Other monuments found were four sculptures of the type known as “*barrigones*,” fat anthropomorphic figures carved in the round. These were found in a very poor state of preservation, making it difficult to specify the sculptural motifs.

Structure 63

A looters’ trench revealed the presence of another carved monument, which was designated Monument 1. This was found in Structure 63, located to the south of the palace on the Main Plaza. This monument was associated with a ceramic deposit containing a great

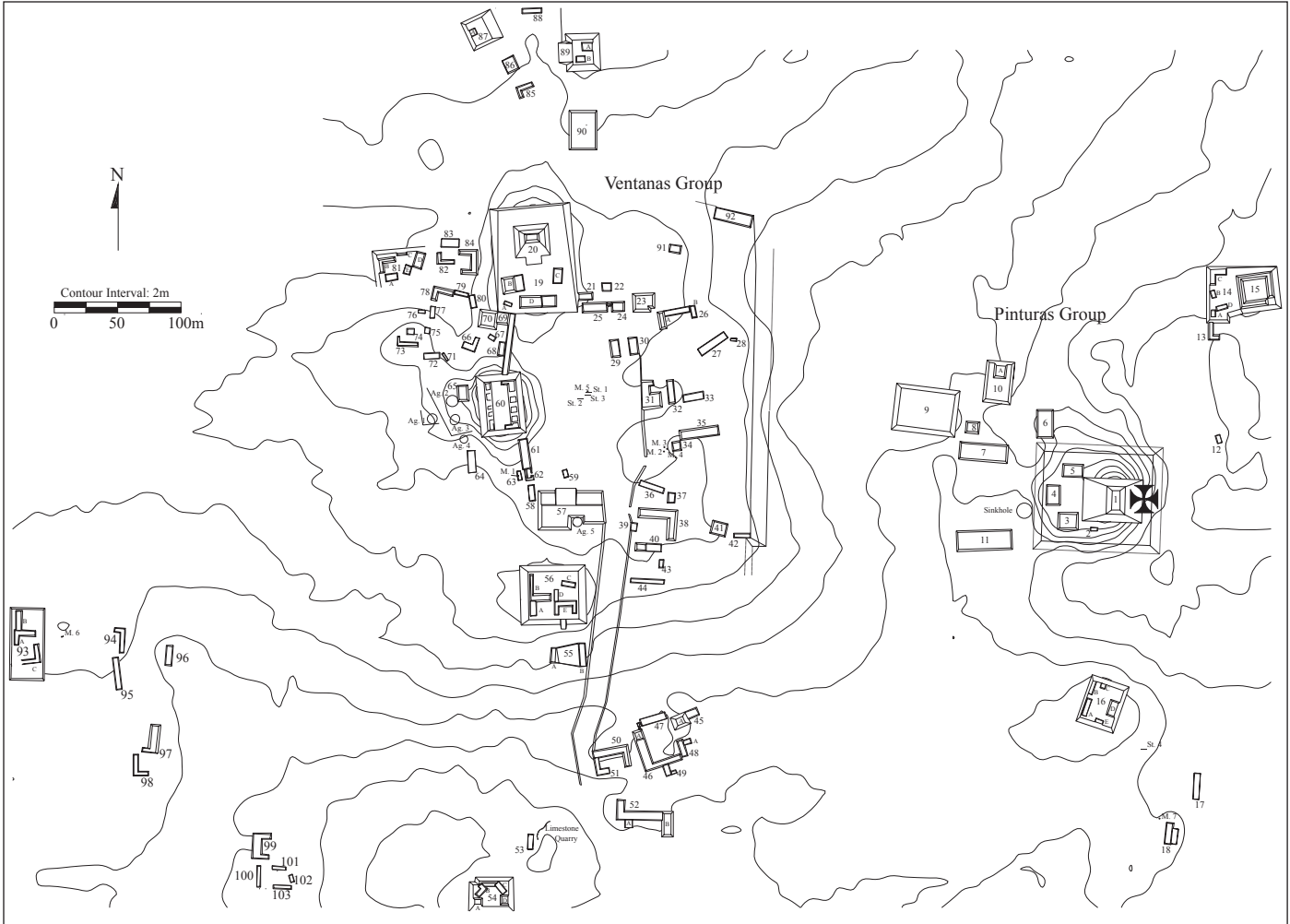


Figure 2. Map of the San Bartolo archaeological site showing the location of the Ventanas Group and the Pinturas Group, the building complex in which the murals were found.

variety of vessels dating to the Late Classic.

Pinturas pyramid

The *Pirámide de las Pinturas* (Pyramid of the Paintings) is located about 500 meters east of the Ventanas complex, faces west towards it. This larger structure, about 26 m in height, is perforated by four looters’ excavations, two in the front wall and two in the rear. The ones in the east-facing rear wall penetrate deeper into the structure. In fact, the principal looters’ excavation consists of a tunnel that starts at the base of the pyramid and continues westward, revealing in the process a minimum of six previous construction phases. This main tunnel branches occasionally into secondary excavations at right angles toward the north and south. After excavating the fill, the looters encountered the intact rear wall of the terrace of the pyramid’s final phase and went straight through it.

After seven meters of excavation of densely

compacted fill, the looters arrived at the terrace of another structure (Pinturas Sub-1), striking the building at its northeast corner and proceeding to remove the western wall of the structure up to a height of almost 1.6 m from the tunnel floor (approximately 1.2 m from the interior floor of Sub-1, the profile of which is visible).

It is important to note that all of these constructions, from the oldest up to the ultimate construction phase, were founded directly on bedrock. As was also the case with Ventanas, each one of the construction phases was documented and materials were obtained dating to the Chicanel phase, with an admixture of Mamon phase sherds in the earliest substructures.

The murals of San Bartolo were found to be in a good state of preservation despite their antiquity. However, the surface was cracked and in danger of spalling, such that intervention was necessary in order to ensure their conservation. To that end, a team of conservators was enlisted to undertake multi-spectral photography and

cleaning of the surface of the painting, as well as physical and chemical analyses of the pigments and stucco. In addition, a regimen was instituted for monitoring the microclimate of the pyramid to observe the patterns of change in humidity and heat in the chamber and fill. To stabilize the paintings, a solution was injected to unify the fragments with the weakest adhesion and prevent their spalling. Temporary bracing of the mural was effected in order to forestall its collapse. And in order to prevent the loss or destruction of any detached fragment, an extremely fine fabric with a sponge core was installed as a retaining cover.

The preservation and conservation of San Bartolo is not centered solely on the paintings, however. Work was also undertaken on the substructures of the Ventanas and Pinturas pyramids, including:

1. Filling of the upper chamber of the Ventanas pyramid in order to prevent the filtration of water into the interior;
2. Covering the stuccoed stairways with fine soil and bags of sand to prevent their deterioration;
3. Protection of the floor and talud of Sub-1 of the Pinturas pyramid with fine soil and bags of sand to avert damage to the painted stucco and to prevent any fragment from detaching.

One of the objectives of this season was to determine the dimensions of the Sub-1 murals building in order to plan the conservation of the structure and better estimate the size of its murals. To this end, and to avoid uncovering any preserved mural prematurely, a tunnel was excavated along the front exterior. The intention was to verify the continuation of the eastern wall from north to south. It was determined that the building is 11 m in length, with a talud painted in red over a stucco floor painted pink. The surviving entrance to the structure on this side is defined by a step covered in stucco and painted red. (Jamb scars were located for two other entrances.) Before the conclusion of the field season we managed to locate the southeast corner of the building. One noteworthy find in this section was a graffito, albeit one of indeterminate design.

It was possible to define the remains of one door jamb and a burned area in the interior of the building where an incensario was probably positioned. Additionally the south wall of the structure was encountered. Regrettably the wall between the looters' tunnel and the southeast corner of the Sub-1 was destroyed by the Maya in antiquity in order to construct a new building that constituted the ultimate construction phase. However, fragments of mural from this wall were recovered and found to be painted with volutes and bands of red, as well as the lower extremities of a figure kneeling in



Figure 3. Glyph recovered from Sub-1 fill.

profile and painted in red, yellow, and black. Fragments of the face and left wing of a stylized bird were also recovered, with another fragment of its feet depicted in black, yellow, and red.

The most interesting fragment so far recovered is a glyph from what must have been a longer inscription painted in an early style (Figure 3).

Conclusions

San Bartolo is a small city when compared to other early sites; in its entirety it would fit within the Danta complex at El Mirador. But like the larger centers from its time and region, the site apparently has all the trappings of a civilization. This calls for a reconsideration of the chronological stages of social, political, and cultural evolution as previously understood for the Maya Lowlands. San Bartolo figures as an example of the many cities which flourished in its era, displaying all the characteristics of a vital settlement interacting with a range of other polities at greater and smaller scale. It is for this reason that we intend to continue the investigations at San Bartolo over the longer term, in order to test our hypotheses and shed light on the many imponderables. I would like to thank the team of archaeologists who are working on this project, as well as the workmen, guards, and technical personnel, the Instituto de Antropología e Historia de Guatemala, and each and every one of the individuals who bring to bear their experience and support in the accomplishment of this work.