

CHAPTER 16

Achievements of the 2003 Season of the Chocolá Archaeological Project

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The second season of the PACH has proved successful from every point of view. The potential of the site located in this area, so poorly investigated and paradoxically so crucial in regards to the early developments of the southern Mayan area, has become evident in different and sound ways. A major task of the heads of the project is bringing recognition to the site's value both by the Mesoamerican archaeological community and by the rest of the world, in the widest sense of the word. To develop such a mission, multiple efforts will be required which will involve the work of scholars, volunteers and institutions, whom we thank and encourage to join us in the challenge of showing the significance of this site as a cultural patrimony of the nation and the world. The general issues that shall now be unfolded are closely related to the PACH objectives, namely, scientific investigation in conjunction with community development.

The 2004 results

Based on surface collection, test pits and remote sensing surveys using gradiometry, specific areas were excavated within the area of Chocolá, and materials were removed, marked, and stored. The analysis of the stored material, which includes ceramic, green stone, obsidian and utilitarian artifacts in general, has been focused on conventional issues such as dating and extrapolation of the information regarding the ancestral works and economic organization.

The data obtained from the first and second seasons suggests a spatial expansion, and now, with confirmed absolute dates, knowledge of the timeframe and duration of the ancestral remains provide information about the social, political and economic organization, as shown by the excavations in the ancient structures. In addition to the GPS survey that has expanded the known area of the ancestral remains of Chocolá to 5.5 x 2.0 km, the grid excavations and the mapping with a Total Station, were carried out for; three important excavations of ancient structures: 1) an apparent elite compound 2) a large platform with apparent beams and stepped accesses 3) a very extended canal system.

The size of the elite residence was of 12 x 6 m, it was positioned in an orientation towards the cardinal points and located in Mound 15, at the northern edge of the city, an area with a large number of low platforms whose existence was revealed through the excavations conducted in 2003 and 2004. They were built with river cobbles extracted from the Chocolá River, located 100 m to the east, in a very pronounced drop. These excavations also lead to the discovery of underground constructions, specifically conduits of different sizes to carry water through a complicated canal system placed in and out of the structure and associated to a possible well. This showed that the Chocolá inhabitants not only channeled the water to prevent an erosive action on their structures, but also redirected the fluid for domestic uses. One complete vessel recovered from inside a pit and a second one in the center of the elite compound, were probably used to extract water. The radiocarbon tests conducted by the project this season reveal social complexity as far back as the Late Pre-Classic period (B.C. 400), and, since these examples were collected from strata located above the systems of underground water conduits, we expect very early achievements to be documented in future fieldwork.

The dimensions of the platform, located 3.5 km south of the elite compound, are of 45 x 40 m, and it is also oriented towards the four directions. The building, with eight stone courses in its north wall, apparently with beams and a stepped access on its east wall, suggesting a main access, with another possible access on the west, like the platforms of Tak'alik Abaj', Chocolá's remarkable neighbor, where sculptures seem to have been placed at intervals in the periphery of the platform; a fragment of a concave vessel, or what in some contexts has been defined as a monument (there are altars with several cupped depressions in the haubeas of the Chocolá sculptures) was located outside the limits of the platform in the east. The pits excavated near the center of the platform reveal traces of burnt mud that may represent activity related to the preparation of meals (Chocolate?).

Recent excavations in Mound 15 have revealed a ditch system, cleverly built with selected stones, with slabs used as lids, and taxcal, the latter is a material that abounds in Chocolá and Tak'alik' Ab'aj; it extends 34 m to the south of the elite compound, and includes ramifications to nearby areas, as was revealed during the 2003 season. During the 2004 season, an improvised archaeological salvage showed the occurrence of these traits 1.5 km to the south of Mound 15, showing the large expansion of this system. Several construction techniques show the sophistication of this system, which depends on the conditions of the local physiography as well as on the needs shown by its design. At least four different types of documented constructions reflect the intention to provide curvature, bifurcations, sluices, an open flow, and water administration inside the residences, as well as the control of the descending water flow through uneven constructions.

In 2004, a total of 29,678 ceramic fragments, plus 16 complete vessels, and 3,527 obsidian pieces were collected, washed and marked; 50 figurine fragments and a large amount of artifacts such as grinding stones, manos, pestles and other stone instruments were collected. Making the distinction between sculptures for ritual use and utilitarian, carved stone artifacts

(therefore, not including a large amount of stones whose function is the abrasion for the preparation of foods or other matters), the project has yielded a count of around 25 sculptures including several found in situ through controlled archaeological excavations; should we add to this count the carved stones with cupped depressions, the number would be much larger. One monument, Stela 1, was the only one piece known as originating in Chicolá; the researcher Robert Burkitt, over 70 years ago, mentioned other nine in his unpublished letters. From the survey, the gathering of information through local interviewees and the careful reading of notes written by earlier researchers, we have succeeded in distinguishing the sculptures originated in Chicolá, still found at the property, the disappeared ones, and those that were brought to the property from nearby archaeological sites. The statistical analysis provides evidence of how the local sculpture shows both regional and local styles in the historical sequence of the art in the southern Maya area. The catalog includes plain stelas, carved stelas, circular altars, quadrangular altars with and without cupped depressions, portable sculptures representing zoomorphic figures, mass carvings with the motif of the captive, figures in benches and vertical pedestals, possibly miniature pot-bellied figures and other forms.

Student training and advanced work of future investigators of the Maya Area

The long-term study of the Chicolá ceramic has been initiated under the Project's leadership; Dr. Judith Mitchell, Dr. Peter Mathews' student at the La Trobe University, Australia, will be working on the ceramics of Chicolá for her second doctoral degree. Two doctorate students from the University of New Mexico will initiate work in the 2005 season under the guidance of the Project's directors. It is expected that several students from the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, who have concluded their field practices at the site in 2003 and 2004, will return to continue with their training in the 2005 season. The past two seasons have included a good number of students doing their practices, with the participation of students from France and Spain.

The importance of communitary development for the Research Project

The archaeological site of Chicolá is at great risk, because the economic situation of the region exerts a constant pressure which results in damages to the ancient buildings. The Project attempts to develop the conditions so that the modern inhabitants of Chicolá may have in the days to come and under the form of an archaeological-eco-tourism, a source of income as an alternative to the failed strategy of small agricultural parcels that presently prevails as a model. Besides, we have contemplated the training and hiring of many local inhabitants for such purposes.

It is our belief that the Chicolá archaeological program and its amazing buried past cannot be successfully accomplished without the cooperation of the

modern residents, the municipal authorities, the authorities of the Suchitepéquez Department, and all Guatemalans, in general. Based on the petition and the data provided by PACH, the Government of Guatemala has agreed to declare three quarters of the site as Cultural Patrimony of the Nation. However, prior to proceeding with land expropriations from the present owners –a right of the State-, PACH is trying to find alternatives through contacts with local authorities to arrange a land exchange or a land sale for the formation of an archaeological park. The other initiative under consideration is the creation of an archaeological museum where to preserve the pieces recovered by the Project with their respective informative guides. Two expert curators from the New Mexico Museum shall be invited by the PACH director to meet with government authorities during the coming season. Through a grants fund, the Project is organizing the possibility that two or three students each year may obtain free college education or carry out studies at the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala at Mazatenango. In addition, efforts have been made to maintain the garbage collection system, with a truck that passes once a week. The problem of garbage is a reality, and a feasibility study will be conducted soon to define possible solutions, by generating data for the search of such solutions.

Conclusions

The Mesoamerican culture is one of the six great cultures of the ancient world; inevitably, the Mayan civilization is the most extraordinary among those that emerged in this geographical and cultural space. Even though a large number of studies have been conducted focusing on the Maya culture, ironically, there are still sites in the southern Maya area that have hardly been investigated. Since this recent work has been carried out, the ancient site of Chokolá, which may be justly called a lost city, has begun to reveal itself as having a large size, an extended duration and an early beginning. It is anticipated that new discoveries will lead to the documentation of more early Maya architecture, bringing about the task of preservation of the site as part of a precious world patrimony.

In addition to the investigative potential of the site, we feel that through the construction of an archaeological park, a museum and other developments, jobs could be created for the modern local residents, impoverished by the difficult economic situation they are enduring. The 2004 season has yielded significant advances towards such objectives, and hopefully, the 2005 season will prove equally fruitful.