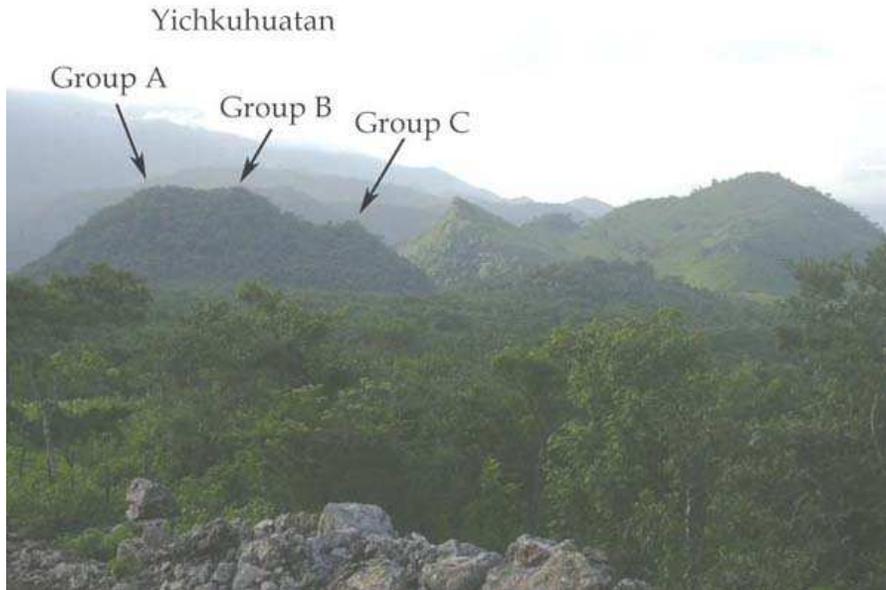


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The Terminal Classic to Postclassic Transition in the Western Highlands, Guatemala



Research Year: 2006

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Terminal Classic to Postclassic

Location: Western Highlands, Guatemala

Sites: Yichkuhuan and Pohpotx

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Abstract

Excavations in the western highlands of Guatemala examined two sites that were dated to the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods in order to investigate the “collapse” period in the Maya highlands. The Postclassic period site—Yichkuhuan—was found to have both a Terminal Classic and Postclassic occupation. Because the site is located on a hilltop and displayed many traits associated with a “typical” Postclassic site, the uncovering of an earlier occupation was unexpected. The Terminal Classic period site—Pohpotx—was characterized by poor construction technique, a general dearth of artifactual evidence, and a relatively short occupational sequence despite its relatively considerable extent. Analysis of these two sites suggests that the “collapse,” or transition, period in the highlands was a complex period, and cannot be described as a sequential movement of people from one location to another as originally hypothesized.

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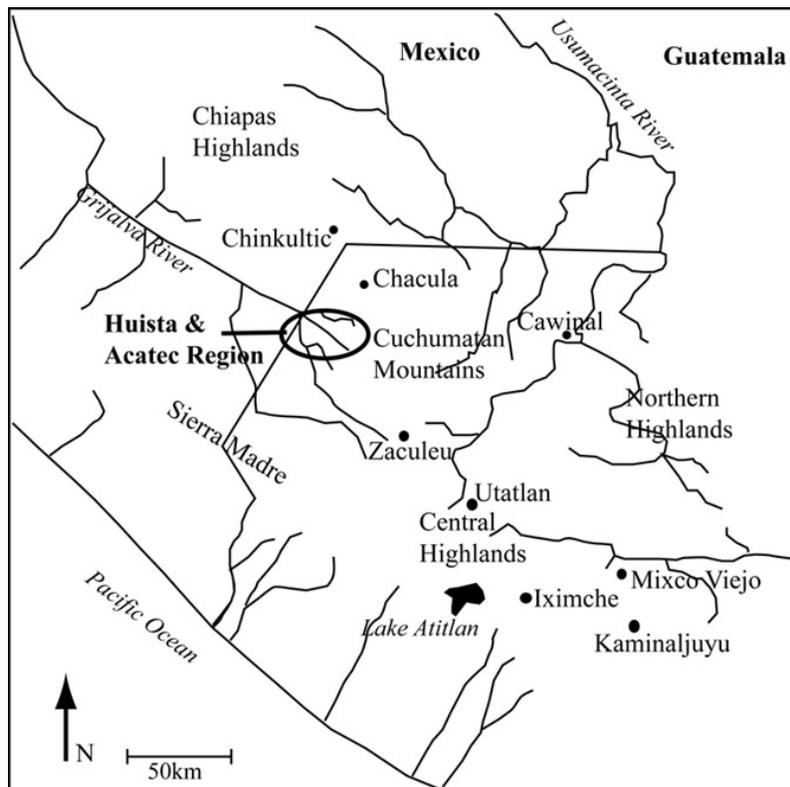


Figure 1. Map of western Guatemalan highlands.

Introduction

The archaeological research reported here expands upon research carried out in 2001-2002 in the western Maya highlands of Guatemala and funded by a grant from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., (FAMSI) (see Borgstede 2004). That research produced a settlement survey of the Huista-Acatec region of Guatemala, a basic chronology, and descriptions of over 100 sites in the region. The current research focuses on the Huista region specifically, and two explored during the settlement survey: Yichkuhuatan and Pohpotx.

The Huista region encompasses five modern *municipios* in the department of Huehuetenango, Guatemala: Jacaltenango, Santa Ana Huista, San Antonio Huista, Concepcion, and Nenton. Jacaltenango is considered the *niman conob'*, or “head town” of the Huista region. The inhabitants of this area are also known as Jacaltec Maya, and the language spoken is called Pop'ti or Jacaltec. The Jacaltec Maya are known as both a conservative Maya community (a “closed corporate community”) as well as participants in the *movimiento maya*, a national-level indigenous movement. The Huista region encompasses three ecological zones: *tierra fría* (3000-2000 masl), *tierra templada* (2000-1250 masl), and *tierra caliente* (below 1250 masl). These zones are spread across the western slopes of the Cuchumatán mountains of Guatemala and the upper tributaries of the Grijalva River, bordering Chiapas, Mexico ([Figure 1](#)). Each zone is characterized by a distinct rainfall pattern, average temperature, and growing season. Archaeologically, *tierras fría* and *templada* have a similar settlement pattern which is distinct from that found in *tierra caliente*. The current research examined two sites in *tierra caliente*. The latter area is karstic, with abundant caves, underground streams, and deeply-cut river beds.

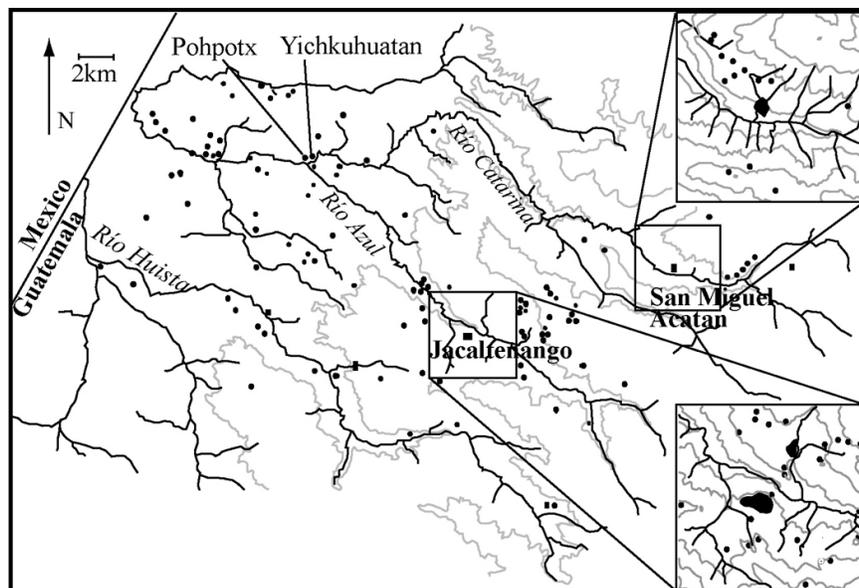


Figure 2. Settlement in the Huista-Acatec region.

The rivers cutting through the *tierra caliente* of the Huista region flow from the heights of the Cuchumatán mountains to the east, and which drain into the Grijalva to the west. Three rivers—Río Azul, the Río Huista, and the Río Catarina—have cut deep but narrow valleys into the limestone hills of the *tierra caliente*, forming the Upper Tributaries of the Grijalva. These rivers merge at the Guatemalan-Mexican border, near the archaeological site of Lagartero. Many Pre-Columbian settlements of all sizes are found along these rivers and their seasonal tributaries ([Figure 2](#)). Sites are often located where two rivers merge, and the two sites examined here are located near the junction of the Río Azul and Río Catarina.

Research Background

The current research focused on the Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic period transition in the *tierra caliente* area of the Huista region of the western Maya highlands. Within Maya archaeology, there has been a long-standing interest in the end of the Classic period, whether framed as the Collapse (Culbert 1973; Sabloff and Andrews V 1986) or, more recently, the Terminal Classic (Demarest, Rice, and Rice 2004a; Tourtellot, Sabloff, Carmean 1992). This era in Maya history is more accurately termed a transition or transformation in the Maya highlands because the subsequent Early Postclassic period is relatively well-represented in the archaeological record compared to the southern Maya lowlands, particularly within the Huista-Acatécat region.

During the Collapse era, there is a clear transformation of society, particularly in social organization, from one period to the next in the southern lowlands and Maya highlands. In the lowlands, research strategies have focused on illuminating both the proximal and long-term causes of this transformation, culminating with the current reliance on a complex set of multivariate explanations (see Demarest, Rice, and Rice 2004b). In the highlands, the current state of knowledge lags far behind that of the lowlands in terms of empirical archaeological data and models and theories. Complicating the development of a comprehensive view of Maya organizational change is the nature of the data used to construct models, particularly the incorporation of multiple lines of evidence—hieroglyphic, oral historical, archaeological—into models and their disparate use to understand different periods of the Maya past.

Archaeological research in the Guatemalan highlands has tended to focus on the early and late ends of the pre-Columbian sequence, such as the Middle and Late Preclassic period for the former (e.g. Poponoe de Hatch 1997) and Late Postclassic Maya kingdoms for the latter (e.g. Carmack 1981; Nance et al. 2003; Weeks 1983). In contrast, the Classic period, which displays the heaviest occupation in many parts of the highlands (Arnauld 1986; Borgstede 2004; Ichon 1996), is relatively unexamined and the transition between Classic and Postclassic even less so, with a few exceptions (e.g. Ichon 1992). There is a notable disjunction, however, between earlier and later interpretations of Maya

society in terms of: social organizational models, settlement patterns, archaeological evidence, and historical evidence (ethnohistorical, hieroglyphic, and oral historical). This disjuncture appears to develop primarily during the Collapse era, or the transition from the Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic periods. That is, the Preclassic and Classic periods are understood exclusively in archaeological terms, while the Postclassic period is generally studied in terms of ethnohistory, or at least archaeological data is framed in terms of written documents.

The Terminal Classic period in the highlands and upper Grijalva depression of Chiapas, Mexico has been examined archaeologically and through hieroglyphic inscriptions. It is characterized by settlement centers operating within the sphere of influence of lowland Maya polities, either in terms of direct control, indirect interaction/emulation, or trade (e.g. Borgstede et al. 2004). Hieroglyphic evidence from near Chinkultic and in the Chacula zone to the north of the Huista-Acatec region provide inscriptions dating to the 10th Baktun and suggesting ties with Yaxchilán in the Usumacinta basin. Archaeological and ceramic evidence, from both Chinkultic (Ball 1980; Borhegyi 1968) and the Chacula zone (Weeks 2003), also supports ties to the Maya lowlands, particularly the Usumacinta Basin, and show Terminal Classic lowland ceramic types such as Fine Orange. In general, the period is characterized by: a relationship with the southern Maya lowlands, a settlement pattern that is similar to that of the southern lowlands (closed plaza groups, temple pyramids, open ballcourts, stelae), ceramics similar to the Maya lowlands, and hieroglyphic writing. This evidence suggests that polities in the western highlands, while developing independently, were tied to the events—political, social, ecological—occurring in the lowlands as well. Importantly, social organization appears to revolve primarily around political relationships; polities similar in operation and constitution as their counterparts in the lowlands (Montmollin 1995).

The Early Postclassic period is relatively better known in the highlands than in the southern lowlands. While this period is difficult to define in the southern lowlands, the widespread use of Tohil plumbate and other ceramic diagnostics makes the period more visible in the Guatemalan highlands (Borhegyi 1965). Compared to the early Classic period, however, the Early Postclassic period generally represents a significant shift in settlement patterns, trade, and population levels. Based on previous research (Borgstede 2004), two archaeological phases—the Chinax and the Q'anil—coincide with the Terminal Classic and the Postclassic periods, respectively. These are described briefly.

First, the Chinax Phase represents the end of the Late Classic Period or a Terminal Classic Period (AD 750–1000) that is common in northwest Guatemala and Chiapas. In the Huista region, this phase is a continuation of the previous Ah Phase (Early-Late Classic, AD 100–750). A few sites were founded for the first time during the Chinax phase, but the majority of sites occupied in the previous phase continue to be occupied. While some sites continue to be occupied into

the subsequent Q'anil Phase, there is a significant break between the Chinax and the Postclassic phase. The Chinax phase sees the heaviest occupation in the region, with the greatest number, and largest, sites being occupied.

The ceramics of the Chinax Phase show continuity with the preceding Ah Phase. These include a general tendency towards reds and oranges, particularly in bowl forms, as well as coarse wares in red and brown, usually in jar forms. Impressed fillets, common throughout the Maya highlands, continue to dominate, in bowl and jar forms. Some types expected of the Terminal Classic Period, such as Fine Gray, are not found, while some Terminal Classic Period markers, such as Fine Orange, are found. There are differences between the Chinax and Ah Phases, including the gradual disappearance of the dish and cylinder forms. Paste types remain consistent, with medium pastes for the fine types and coarse pastes for the larger utilitarian wares, usually all light in color. This phase shows very little continuity with the succeeding Q'anil Phase, except for a few general utilitarian varieties. Two very large sites appear to date exclusively to the Chinax phase—Pohpotx and the site of K'uha. By the end of the Chinax Phase, the site of Pohpotx (H-85) was the largest in the entire Huista region ([Figure 3](#)). These sites continued the tradition begun in the preceding Ah Phase, with primarily Classic Period characteristics in architecture and settlement patterning, specifically quadrangular plaza layouts and architecture of uncut limestone, although there are indications of shifts at a few sites (including cut stone architecture and variable plaza layouts). Ballcourts are ubiquitous, at first order sites as well as at smaller second-order centers. Within the residential areas of larger centers such as Pohpotx, a distinctive patio layout of the Chinax Phase is a large structure facing a falling, low terrace wall with two smaller structures closing the patio. This residential element is found at most of the Chinax Phase sites, and is most pronounced at the site of Pohpotx. Settlement remained nucleated, organized around existing sites with a few large sites being founded and growing rapidly. Some small occupation sites were found, unassociated with a large center in any clear way. By the end of the phase, most settlements in the Huista region appeared to have been abandoned, representing a clear break between this phase and the following Q'anil Phase.

The Q'anil Phase is the last phase in the Pre-Columbian sequence and represents the Postclassic Period (AD 1000–1500). It can be divided into an early facet and late facet, representing the Early and Late Postclassic periods, respectively. The Postclassic Period is well known in the Guatemalan highlands, and the Q'anil Phase represents a “typical” suite of traits for this period. Ceramics show a marked difference from earlier types and varieties. The early facet Q'anil phase includes Tojil Plumbate, common throughout the Guatemalan highlands, and a thin brown type found in jars with strap handles. Additionally, coarse types are also found, as well as thin, hard-fired oranges and reds, which are found in both the early and late facets. For the settlement pattern, early facet Q'anil sites tend to be nucleated with residential zones located in or near monumental cores. Instead of three to four structure plaza groups that were well-defined, as in the

previous phases, structures are grouped less formally or are organized more in a linear manner. Construction typically is of small or large uncut stone as fill with cut stone facings. Monumental construction was generally smaller than in previous phases, although it utilizes natural topography to create the appearance of greater height, and certain sites have an acropolis. Residential structures were made of small, uncut stone, probably supporting perishable superstructures. Terraces are found near many of these sites as well, probably for defense or protection against erosion.

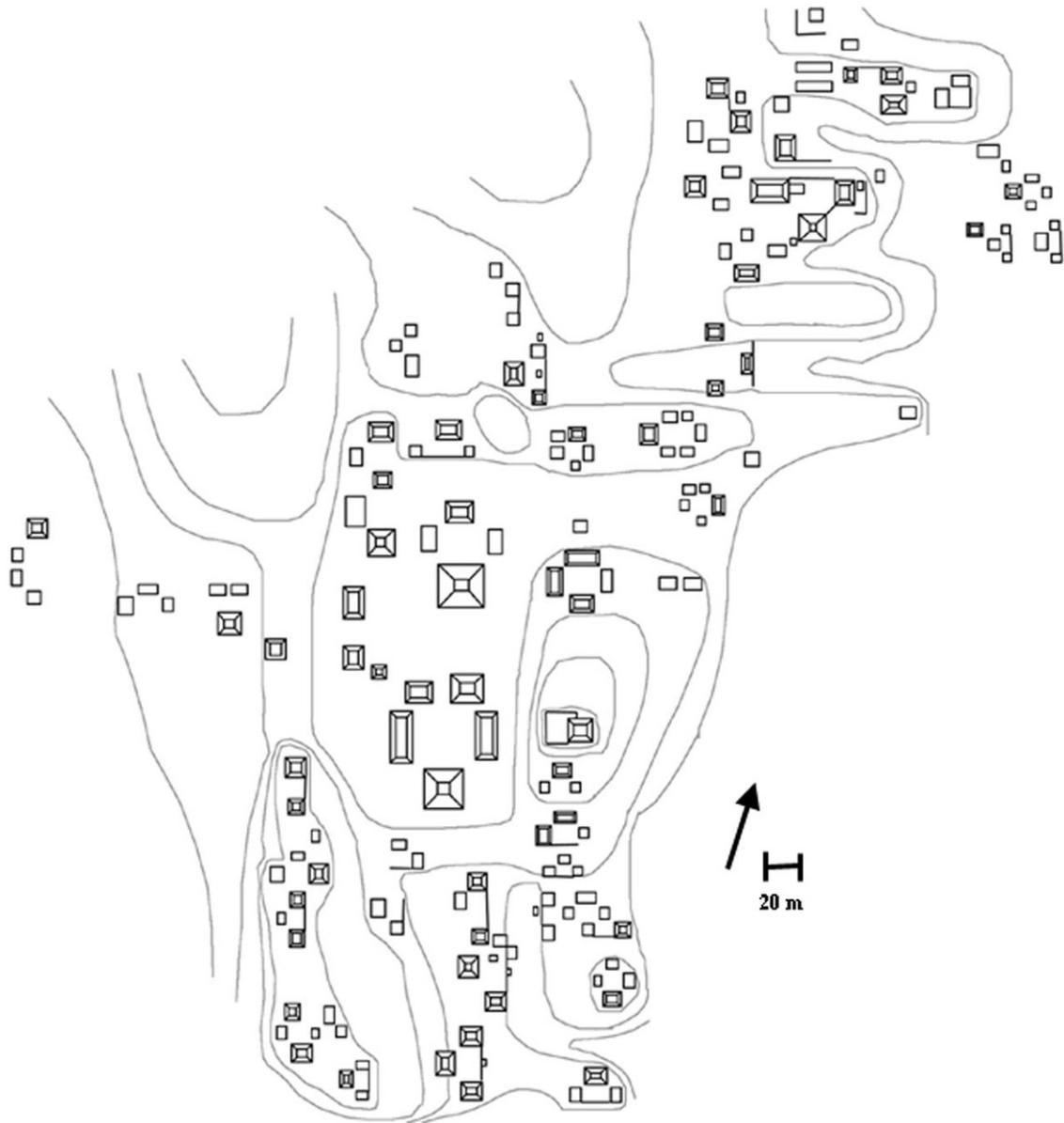


Figure 3. Map of Pohpotx.

Based on the characteristics of the Terminal and Early Postclassic phases in the Huista region, archaeological research was aimed at understanding the transition between these two phases by examining two sites discovered during settlement survey: Pohpotx and Yichkuhuan. Pohpotx is a large site, of which about 180 structures remain visible, about 200m from the confluence of the Río Azul and Río Catarina. The main group of the site, with a seven-meter high pyramid, is located on a plain surrounded by low hills on three sides, overlooking the rivers, and settlement extends throughout the plain and up the hills. A ballcourt is located to the north of the main group. The site contains both elite, ceremonial structures and common households.

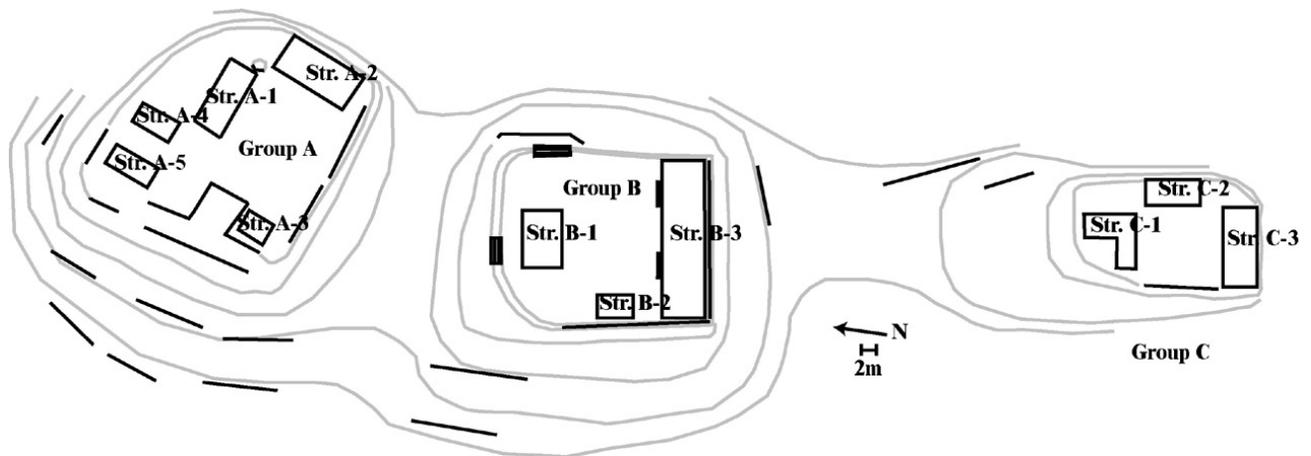


Figure 4. Map of Yichkuhuan.

Yichkuhuan ([Figure 4](#)) is located on top of a hill overlooking the confluence of the same rivers, less than 2 kilometers from the main plaza of Pohpotx. It is a relatively smaller site located on top of a hill nearby Pohpotx, with a “defensive” layout: hilltop, high platforms, imposing terrace walls, and cliffs on one side. The site has three principal groups, located on separate elevated areas, with terraces descending three sides of the hill ([Figure 5](#)). The ceremonial architecture of Group B is typical of the Postclassic period—relatively smaller and better constructed (cut stone laid in courses), often low pyramids and platforms. The site contains a number of high (1-3m) terrace walls that create level terrain on the hill-slope. There are also a number of caves associated with the site, where local informants have discovered human remains and ceramics.

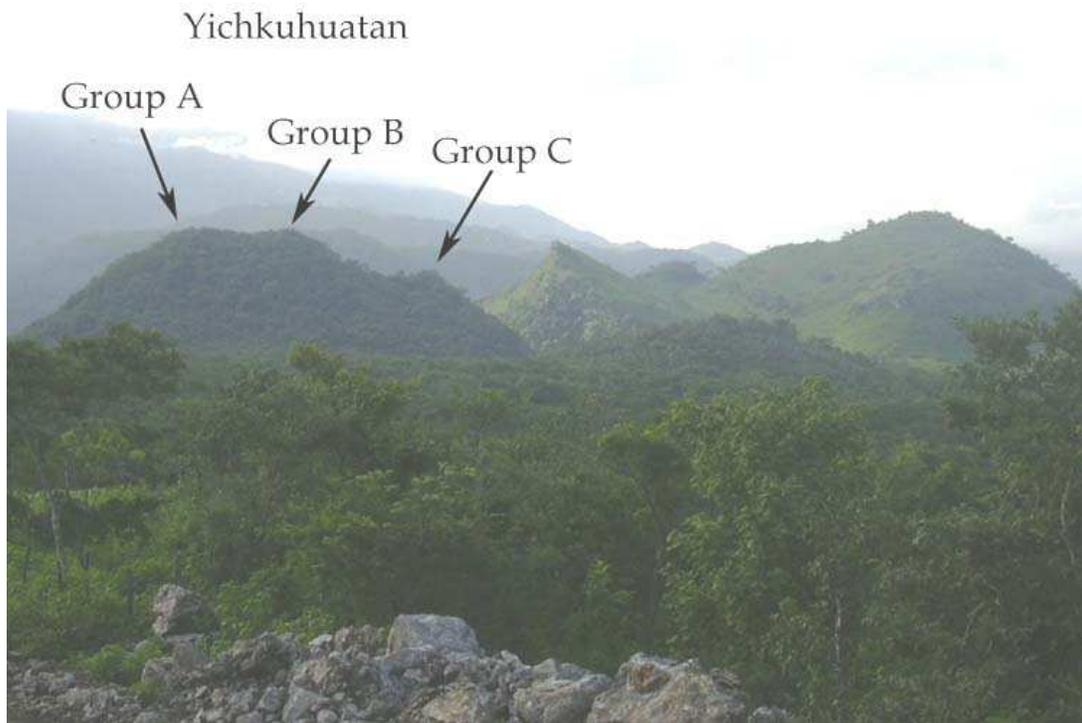


Figure 5. Image of Yichkuhuatan showing main groups.

The two sites were chosen for further investigation because initial investigation during the settlement survey suggested that Pohpotx was a Terminal Classic site and Yichkuhuatan was a Postclassic period site, including an early Postclassic component. The two sites, then, bracketed the transition period. The location of the two sites near to one another raised the possibility of serial occupations. The working hypothesis, therefore, was that the population of Pohpotx moved during the transition period to found the more defensive site of Yichkuhuatan, with each site dominating the river confluence during its respective period.

Methods and Operations

During excavations at the two sites, researchers were based in Nueva Catarina, an *aldea* of Jacaltenango. Because the two sites are located so close to each other, Nueva Catarina afforded the easiest access to both sites. Building upon prior settlement research, the first step was to update maps of both sites: a tertiary group was mapped at Yichkuhuatan (Group C) and corrections were made to the map of Pohpotx. Excavations were then conducted, first at Yichkuhuatan and then at Pohpotx. Materials were returned first to Nueva Catarina and then to Jacaltenango for cleaning and analysis.



Figure 6. Yichkuhuan, Postclassic construction.



Figure 7. Excavating.

Excavation operations ([Figure 7](#) and [Figure 8](#)) and locations were chosen at each site in order to: a) test the working hypothesis; b) address the research goals at hand generally; and, c) gain as much knowledge of the sites and their chronology as possible. Operations focused on both elite (ceremonial plazas and structures) and non-elite contexts (small house groups and terraces). Attempts were made to understand construction sequences and structural relationships through operations and sub-operations, while gaining the most data possible during the field season.



Figure 8. Excavating.

Yichkuhuatan

At Yichkuhuatan, excavations were carried out in both of the primary plaza groups, Group A and Group B, as well as on the terraces descending the hill slope. All operations began as 1m by 1m pits, and were expanded in a manner consistent with the research goals. Cultural levels were used (structure floors,

plaster, etc.), as well as arbitrary 10cm levels. For coding purposes, all lots were labeled with the site number (67 for Yichkuhuatan), operation number, sub-operation number, and lot number. Operation 1 investigated Group A, Operation 2 investigated Group B, and operation 3 the terraces. For the first operation, in Group A, excavations were conducted in and around the parallel structures at the north of the group, in the plaza area, along the terraced approaches to the group, and at the base of the platform. Between the two parallel structures (structures 1 and 2), the sub-operations revealed topsoil of uneven depth laying over a reddish, clay that rested on top of limestone bedrock. In places the soil was up to a meter deep, but the limestone usually was between 5-15 cm in depth. In the limestone at one end of the alley between the structures was an oval, drilled hole, measuring 26cm x 20cm at the top and narrowing to 8 by 4.5cm after 15cm of depth. Artifacts recovered included Terminal Classic period ceramics, some with evidence of burning and obsidian. Ceramics from most of Group A date to the Terminal Classic period, mainly utilitarian, and much of it appears to have been burned. The investigations suggested that: a) the “platform” was a natural limestone hill that was leveled out in antiquity to form the base of the platform; b) the construction of the structures in the plaza group were placed on top of this platform at a later date; c) the main plaza area was “cleaned” of artifacts; d) the entire group was occupied during the Terminal Classic period, with no Classic period occupation; and e) the group also had a Postclassic period occupation. Additionally, three small, ovoid reservoirs were found (about 50cm across at the widest opening and 1.25m in depth for each), utilizing natural outcrops of limestone for most of the walls of the reservoir and finished with a constructed wall to hold water.

Sub-operations were carried out along a terrace that ran up to the entrance to the group (a short flight of three steps down from the platform floor), and also at the base of the natural limestone rise that formed the platform. For the former, there was a thin level of top soil, and then limestone and soil fill, similar to the terraces descending the hill, down to bedrock. Very few artifacts emerged from this area, again suggesting that it was kept relatively clean. At the base of the platform, excavations went through soil for almost one meter, and suggested erosion and fall from the top of the platform. The found artifacts probably fell (or were swept) off the platform above.

The operation in Group B investigated two structures (numbers 2 and 3) as well as the plaza floor. Construction was markedly different than Group A: smaller, cut limestone was used as facing, and placed in courses for the walls of the structures (and the platform itself) ([Figure 6](#)). Fill for the structures often contained river cobble as well as limestone. The entire group was built upon a high platform: the fill for the platform contained small stones in the upper levels, increasing in size with depth (and becoming only limestone). Excavations into the platform to 2 and a half meters of depth did not reach bedrock, suggesting a fairly extensive construction effort to bring it to roughly the same height as Group A, without the benefit of a natural hill rise as in Group A. Most of the plaza area,

platform, stairs, and the structures showed signs of having been plastered, with abundant plaster still remaining on the surface of the group. Some daub was found as well, suggesting perishable superstructures. A sub-operation into Structure 3 revealed that it was built at the same time as the platform itself, probably in a single construction episode. Artifacts recovered were primarily ceramics, all dating to the Q'anil phase, or Postclassic period.

Finally, investigations along the terraces occupying the slopes of the site uncovered a complex and unexpectedly dense living area. The terrace walls themselves were constructed of large limestone blocks, roughly fitted together without mortar, to form a sustaining wall that supported a level living "floor." This area, which varied in size for different terraces, backed up to either the natural limestone rise of the hill or another terrace wall. In general the terrace walls measure more than a meter and a half in height, often two to three meters ([Figure 7](#)). Terraces are found throughout the site: on the west and north sides, as well as between Groups B and C. The other sides of the site have cliff walls falling down to Rio Catarina. Sub-operations in various terraces suggested that these are living areas. They had concentrations of utilitarian ceramics, abundant snail shells, animal bone, packed clay impressions from wattle and daub structures, and obsidian. On one terrace a line of stones was found that suggested the base of house. The Ceramics emerging from these sub-operations dated to the Chinax and Q'anil phases.



Figure 9. Yichkuhuan, Terrace wall.

Pohpotx

Investigations at Pohpotx were organized into four operations: the main group, a large secondary group, the ballcourt area, and a residential group. Within the main group, a looter's trench was discovered ([Figure 10](#)) and cleaned in the base of the largest pyramid. (A number of looter's pits were found in the tops of the larger structures, as well). This sub-operation, along with others, indicated the relatively "crude" construction technique of most of the larger structures: they appeared as if large, uncut limestone blocks were piled into a form resembling a pyramid, with little effort given to the facing, finishing, or utility of the structure. No plaster was found on any structure, and most were difficult to climb (no stairs were found on any structure). Within the main pyramid, fill consisted of slightly smaller stones and earth, reinforcing the impression of generally haphazard construction techniques. Sub-operations in the plaza area indicated a very shallow occupation—bedrock was reached after 20-50cm in most cases. No evidence for paving or plastering of the plaza area was found. The very few ceramics that emerged from any of the sub-operations indicated solely a Terminal Classic occupation, and were generally non-fine types.



Figure 10. Pohpotx, Terminal Classic construction.

A second operation was conducted in the plaza group to the north of the main group, which consists of six structures of medium size for the site. All of the sub-operations were placed in or near the structures and plaza. Findings were similar to the main group: crude construction with very little ceramic or lithic material. The plaza area itself had a level of fill/paving, consisting of medium-sized gravel limestone. This fill was probably used to level the plaza area, which had bedrock not that far below the surface (about 20cm).

A fourth operation was carried out in the west structure of the ballcourt. While much of the stone from the ballcourt structures had been removed to form a retaining wall for modern agriculture, the west structure was less modified than surrounding ancient structures. It measured a little more than half a meter in height and is 2.5 meters in width along its entire 22m length. While it is constructed of slightly smaller uncut limestone than the structures of the main group, construction technique is identical: limestone and earth fill with no facing, plastering, or paving. Ceramics were the same as from the other excavations. All of the excavations were very shallow—in the ballcourt, limestone bedrock lay 15-20cm below the surface. Excavations in the playing alley corroborated this. An additional sub-operation to the east of the east structure, along the slope of the tongue on which the ballcourt is located, uncovered a richer deposit of ceramics, likely due to erosion. All of the ceramics dated were either datable to the Chinax phase, or were utilitarian types common throughout the Classic period.

A final sub-operation was conducted in a small household group of three structures near the sloping banks leading to the river. Excavations suggested that the extant structures were basal platforms for perishable superstructures; no evidence was found of stone house walls of basal walls. Construction was of limestone (very few river cobbles), with earth fill. Very few ceramics were recovered, even of utilitarian types.

Discussion and Conclusion

The operations outlined above provide a starting point for interpreting the transition period within the sites of Yichkuhuan and Pohpotx. Some important points, which were largely unexpected, were discovered for these sites:

1. Pohpotx was constructed in a much more crude and unsophisticated manner than expected, with little evidence of “elite” ceramics during the Chinax period.
2. Pohpotx had a relatively short occupation, as demonstrated by its lack of depth and presence of only one ceramic period.
3. Yichkuhuan had a longer occupation than expected, with evidence of a Chinax phase presence at the site as well as a Q’anil phase presence,

and clear construction and architectural differences between the different periods.

4. Terrace areas at Yichkuhuatan appear to have been living areas for habitants of the site.
5. The hilltop site of Yichkuhuatan had means for collecting / storing water other than the river at the base of the hill.

Building upon these specific points, the transition period itself can be addressed, beginning with three important concerns raised during the course of research. First, the chronology of the sites does not appear to be strictly sequential. That is, both sites were occupied during the Terminal Classic Chinax phase. The working hypothesis was that the site of Yichkuhuatan was initially settled after the site of Pohpotx was abandoned as occupants of the latter migrated to the former. This suggestion was based on previous investigations that showed a strong Postclassic occupation (Q'anil phase) at Yichkuhuatan and a strong Terminal Classic (Chinax phase) occupation at Pohpotx. Given the different nature of these two sites in terms of settlement patterning (hilltop vs. plain; closed plaza plans vs. terrace & open plans) and architecture (Yichkuhuatan Group B cut stone / courses vs. Pohpotx main group rough limestone piles), combined with ceramic data, it was a logical assumption that the two sites dated to different periods, exclusively. Excavations at Yichkuhuatan, however, showed that it had more time-depth than the initial settlement survey investigations showed. Excavations at Pohpotx, on the other hand, failed to reveal evidence of any occupation other than the Chinax phase, marking it a single-phase, "shallow" site.

The conclusion regarding the relative chronologies of the sites must remain tentative at this point, however. The simultaneous occupation of the two sites is based primarily upon ceramic evidence—the definition of the Chinax phase ceramics—because radiocarbon dates are not currently available. In concluding that the two sites were occupied simultaneously, the assumption has been made that the residents of both sites used Chinax ceramics at the same time. An obvious problem is the possibility of the continued use of Chinax ceramics at Yichkuhuatan after Pohpotx had been abandoned, as might be the case in the movement of population from one site to the other. This would, in turn, raise the problem of the distinct differences—ceramic, architectural, patterning—within the site of Yichkuhuatan (Group A vs. Group B). Regardless of the interpretation of these data, however, it is important to note that Yichkuhuatan was discovered to be a two-phase site, contrary to expectations. And the presence of Chinax ceramics at Yichkuhuatan reinforces some type of connection between the two sites, either in terms of co-occupation or sequence.

Regarding chronology, it should also be noted that initial investigations through settlement pattern failed to adequately capture the time-depth of the site of

Yichkuhuan. That is, the Q'anil phase ceramics—in terms of numbers of sherds collected and in terms of spatial distribution throughout the site—masked the presence of the Chinax occupation, which was largely limited to isolated areas within the site (Group A; specific terraces). While this type of error is well documented in settlement survey methodology, it is worth restating that earlier occupation(s) of a site can often be masked by later occupation. This fact is particularly relevant in the Maya highlands where there is a heavy, visible Postclassic period occupation; the Classic period evidence may often be buried beneath the later constructions.

The second important issue that was addressed by the research was architectural style and its variance over time. During the Chinax phase at Pohpotx, constructions were largely of uncut, limestone blocks often placed almost haphazardly into pyramidal shapes for monumental architecture, and, for non-monumental architecture, similar construction was completed on a smaller scale, creating platforms (for perishable superstructures), steps, and plaza spaces. The general impression of the site is of crude and/or hurriedly built structures, following Maya “norms” in site planning but with little attention to (or awareness of) construction techniques and structure finishing. The Chinax phase at Yichkuhuan is more difficult to characterize: natural topography was utilized to maximize height and create plaza space, and structures were made out of limestone blocks. They do appear more serviceable than their counterparts at Pohpotx, but it is difficult to ascertain if this is due to a better construction technique or simply smaller structures and the use of the natural topography of the site.

During the Q'anil phase at Yichkuhuan, construction shifted to the use of smaller, cut stone as construction material, including limestone and river cobble. Additionally, buildings, plaza areas, and platforms (including staircases) were covered in plaster. Group B, in particular, is distinctive and recognizable in its differences when compared with Group A. Two possible interpretations (among many) are that: a) the Q'anil phase occupants of the site developed a different architectural style, copying construction techniques from elsewhere in the Huista region during this period (a “continuity-emulation” model); or b) a new group of occupants moved into the site (and/or the region), bringing a distinctive architectural style (an “invasion” model). Data are equivocal at this point, but it should be noted that Group B, the Q'anil phase plaza group, was constructed in such a manner that its platform reached the same height and size as the earlier Group A, without the aid of elevated topography (a man-made platform instead of the leveling of a natural rise as with Group A). The meaning of this practice remains elusive, suggesting either an attempt to equal earlier attempts (continuity-emulation), to co-opt the ritual importance of the hilltop (invasion), or something else. Architectural differences, however, clearly demarcate the Chinax and Q'anil phases, while some characteristics are common to both (such as terracing).

The third important issue that was raised during the research concerns settlement patterning. In the Maya highlands, hilltop sites such as Yichkuhuatan have often been considered “defensive” sites and have typically been dated to the Postclassic period. Yichkuhuatan shows that the equation of “defensive” with Postclassic is simplistic (see Borgstede and Mathieu 2007). As with the site of Zaculeu, a site can be “defensive” and date to other time periods, including multiple phases. Yichkuhuatan is similar to Zaculeu in that it appeared to be a single-phase, Postclassic period site until it was excavated, at which point a distinctive, earlier period occupation was discovered (Dimick 1955). While this reinforces the point made above concerning the masking of earlier phases by later constructions, it also raises important issues concerning continuity of occupation. In terms of settlement patterns, this situation makes it difficult to characterize a period; in the Huista region, for example, it cannot now be said that the Chinax phase pattern consists of valley-floor sites and the Q’anil phase pattern of hilltop sites. It also makes comparison, and the search for broader, causal factors, more problematic, or, minimally, more spatially restricted.

Two site-specific settlement characteristics were underscored during the research, however. The first is the ubiquity of a “Pohpotx layout”: three structures organized around a rectilinear plaza, with a terrace on the fourth side (often with a small “oratorio” halfway along the terrace). This layout appears throughout the site of Pohpotx, on numerous scales: small structures located at a great distance from the monumental architecture; larger structures located close to the core of the site; on the valley floor; and on the hills surrounding the valley floor. The layout apparently was an important characteristic of the planning of the site, and comprised an emic organizational “unit.” The relationship among these groups is not formalized in any way that is apparent. They appear to be located throughout the site, with no obvious planning for their placement. Second, the Pohpotx layout is not found at Yichkuhuatan. The main Chinax phase group at the latter site is located on top of a platform, but is not organized in the same way as the many groups at the site of Pohpotx. The meaning of this lack of congruence remains unclear, and would appear to argue against the movement of people (and their ideas concerning site organization) from one site to the other.

The research at the sites of Pohpotx and Yichkuhuatan have highlighted a number of key components of the Terminal Classic to Postclassic transition, including chronology, continuity, and settlement patterning and architecture. The archaeological evidence both reinforced prior interpretations—Pohpotx appears to date exclusively to the Chinax phase, or Terminal Classic—while refuting others—Yichkuhuatan dates to both the Q’anil and Chinax phases instead of only the Postclassic. While this complicated the efforts to interpret the transition in a straightforward manner, such as movement from one site to another, it underscored the complexity of the transition period. This complexity, in miniature through the examination of just two sites, mirrors the complexity of the transition, on various scales, throughout the Maya world. The research raised important questions for future research, including: 1) the secure dating of the Chinax phase

throughout the entire Huista region; 2) the characterization of the Q'anil phase constructions (e.g. a "continuity-emulation" model, an "invasion" model, or something else); and 3) the relative weight of various factors on settlement choice and site layout: ideology, defense, ecology, etc. The working hypothesis was that the site of Yichkuhuatan was initially settled and occupied by people abandoning the site of Pohpotx during the transition. While this may still hold, research suggests that this did not happen in a simple or straightforward manner (as the hypothesis was conceived), and that the historical trajectory of the site Yichkuhuatan was longer and more complex than originally believed.

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