

**REVISITING MALER'S USUMACINTA:**  
Recent Archaeological Investigations  
in Chiapas, Mexico







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**REVISITING MALER'S USUMACINTA:**  
**Recent Archaeological Investigations**  
**in Chiapas, Mexico**

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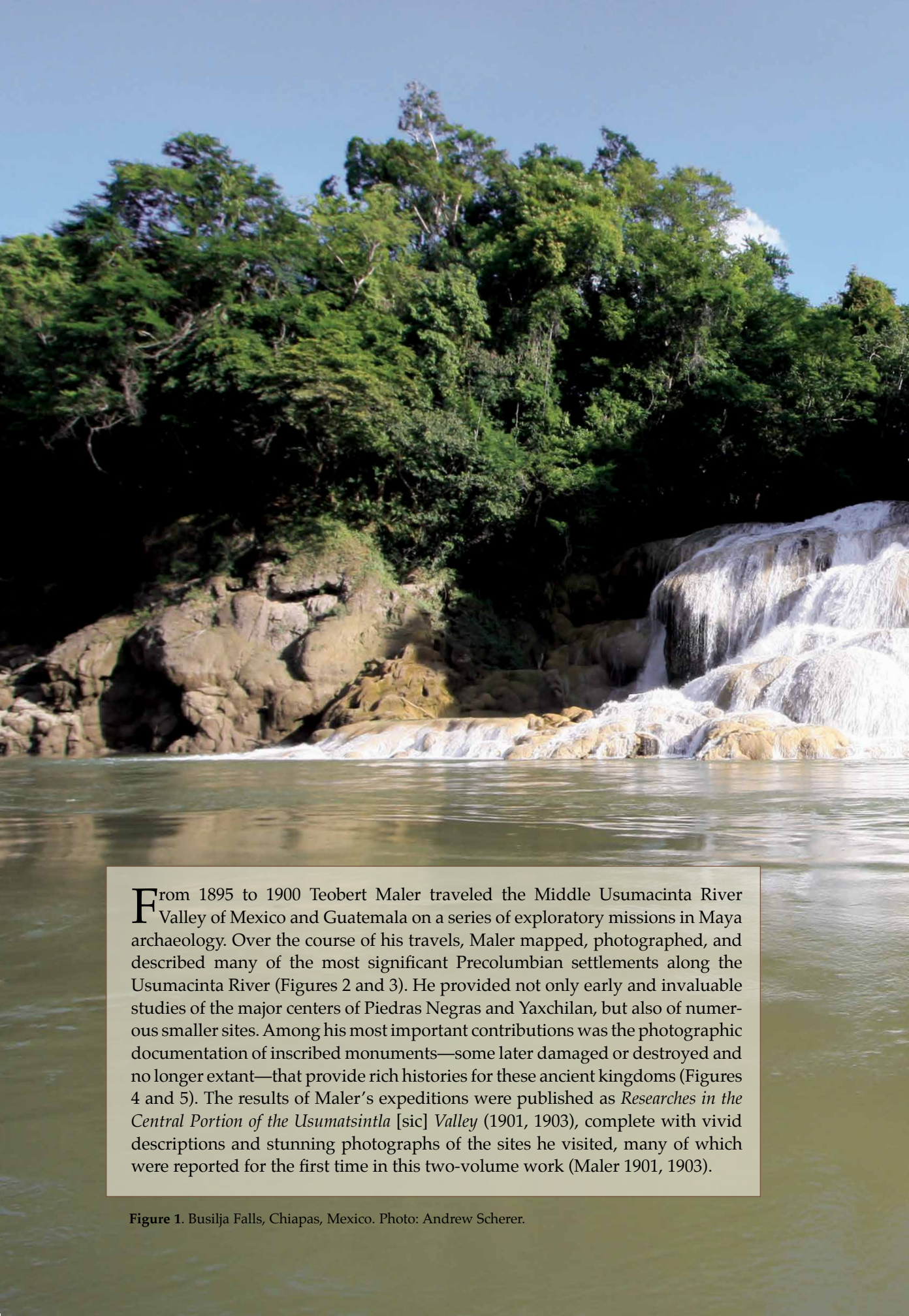
*Front Cover: Iguanas—Upper San José Canyon of the Usumacinta River. Photo: Andrew Scherer.*



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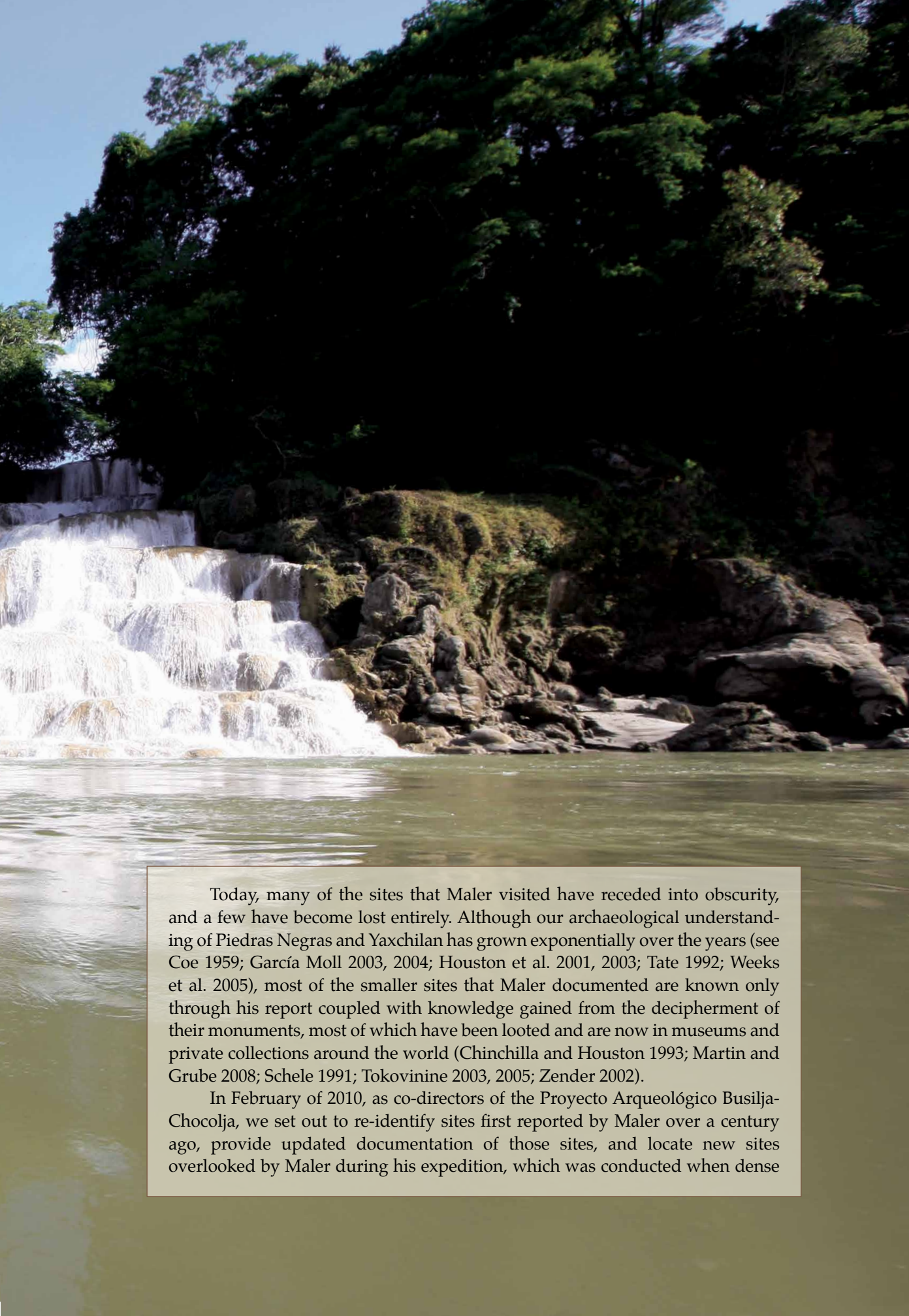




From 1895 to 1900 Teobert Maler traveled the Middle Usumacinta River Valley of Mexico and Guatemala on a series of exploratory missions in Maya archaeology. Over the course of his travels, Maler mapped, photographed, and described many of the most significant Precolumbian settlements along the Usumacinta River (Figures 2 and 3). He provided not only early and invaluable studies of the major centers of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan, but also of numerous smaller sites. Among his most important contributions was the photographic documentation of inscribed monuments—some later damaged or destroyed and no longer extant—that provide rich histories for these ancient kingdoms (Figures 4 and 5). The results of Maler’s expeditions were published as *Researches in the Central Portion of the Usumatsintla* [sic] *Valley* (1901, 1903), complete with vivid descriptions and stunning photographs of the sites he visited, many of which were reported for the first time in this two-volume work (Maler 1901, 1903).

Figure 1. Busilja Falls, Chiapas, Mexico. Photo: Andrew Scherer.

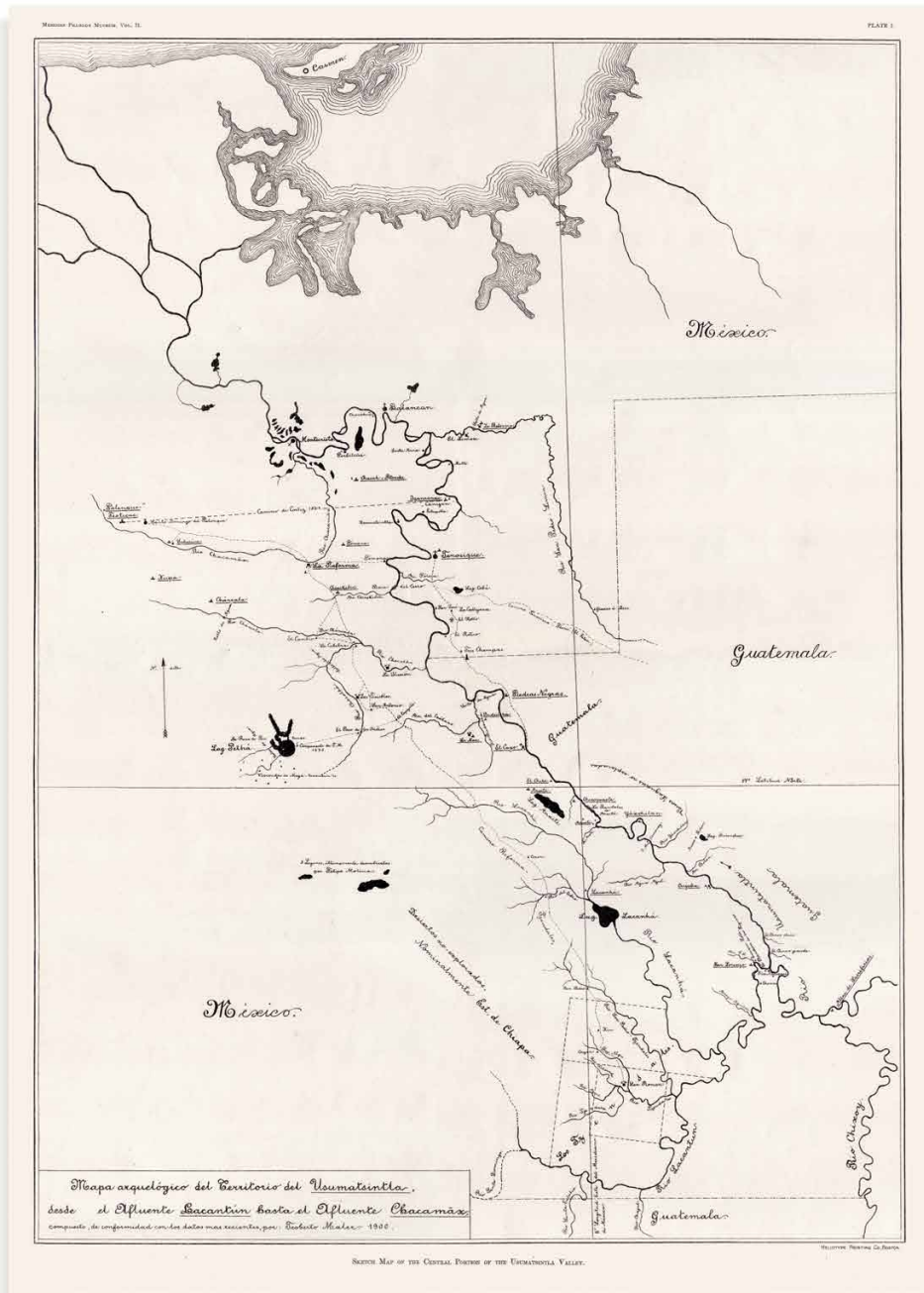




Today, many of the sites that Maler visited have receded into obscurity, and a few have become lost entirely. Although our archaeological understanding of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan has grown exponentially over the years (see Coe 1959; García Moll 2003, 2004; Houston et al. 2001, 2003; Tate 1992; Weeks et al. 2005), most of the smaller sites that Maler documented are known only through his report coupled with knowledge gained from the decipherment of their monuments, most of which have been looted and are now in museums and private collections around the world (Chinchilla and Houston 1993; Martin and Grube 2008; Schele 1991; Tokovinine 2003, 2005; Zender 2002).

In February of 2010, as co-directors of the Proyecto Arqueológico Busilja-Chocolja, we set out to re-identify sites first reported by Maler over a century ago, provide updated documentation of those sites, and locate new sites overlooked by Maler during his expedition, which was conducted when dense





**Figure 2.** Maler's map (Plate 1 of Maler 1901; see [www.mesoweb.com/maler/Maler\\_Usumatsintla.pdf](http://www.mesoweb.com/maler/Maler_Usumatsintla.pdf)).

forest still covered the landscape (Figures 6 and 7). This research was supported by funding from the National Geographic Society/Waite Grant program and with permission from Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). We established a base of operations near the archaeological site of La Mar from which we ventured on foot, by car, and by boat. Our work involved preliminary documentation of sites and included the photography and





Figure 3. Modern map of same geography as Figure 2.

illustration of visible architecture when possible. Our permit from INAH did not encompass the entire area visited by Maler (Figure 2). Rather, our research zone was restricted to the area of Chiapas south of the Chocolja River and north of the site of El Cayo, west from the Usumacinta River and east from the foothills of the Sierra Guiral (Figure 7). What follows is a summary of our reconnaissance arranged to match the narrative of Maler's reports, ordered from north to south





Figure 4. "CHÁNCALA: PYRAMID AND TEMPLE" (Maler 1901:Plate 3).

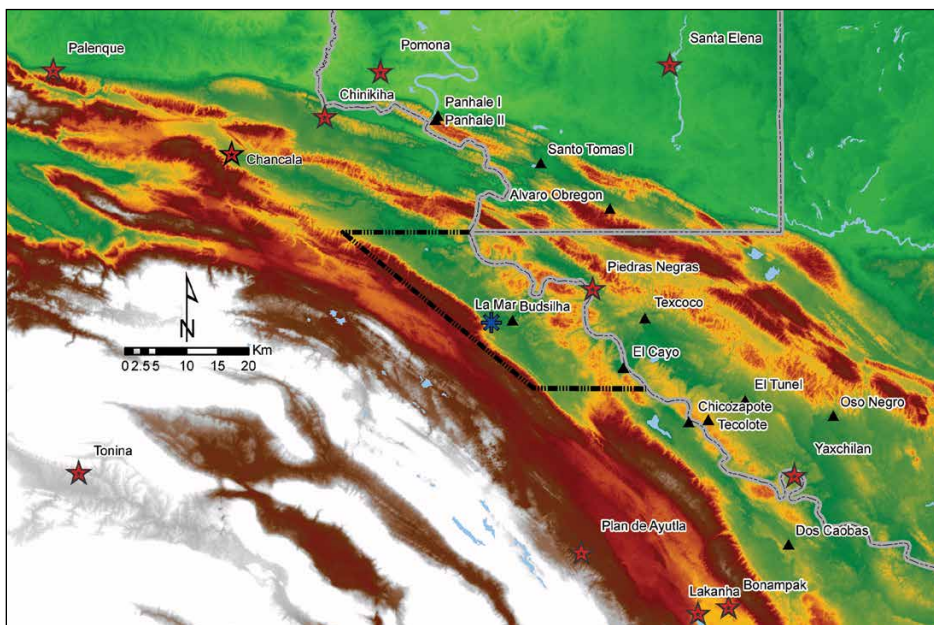
rather than chronologically. We exclude both Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan from our review since neither were part of our 2010 investigations, and both are well reported elsewhere. We also omit mention of the region that Maler visited south of Yaxchilan in April of 1900. This is a particularly opportune time to revisit Maler's Usumacinta in light of recent regional work at Chinikiha (Liendo Stuardo 2006, 2007b), in the Redención del Campesino Valley north of Piedras Negras (Anaya Hernández 2005, 2006; Anaya Hernández et al. 2002), Plan de Ayutla (Martos López 2005, 2009), and continuing work at Bonampak (Tovalín Ahumada and Ortiz Villarreal 2006), among others. We returned again in 2011 to better document some of those sites first visited by Maler and to further explore





Figure 5. Piedras Negras Stela 26 (Maler 1901:Plate 25).





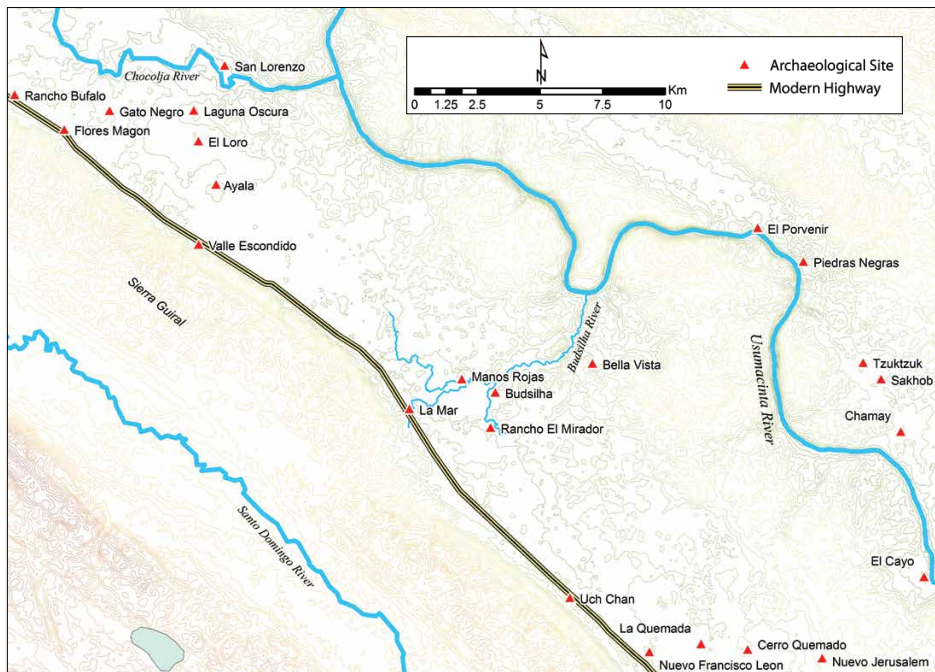
**Figure 6.** Topographic map of the zone demonstrating dynastic centers (stars), secondary centers (black triangles), La Mar (asterisk), and Budsilha. The 2010 research zone is defined by the dashed line. Map by Charles Golden.

some of the new sites discovered during our own reconnaissance, and we hope to expand on this research in coming field seasons.

### The Middle Usumacinta River Valley

With the able assistance of local informants and workers at the logging camps who served as guides and porters, Maler managed to crisscross southern Tabasco, eastern Chiapas, and northwestern Guatemala with his large-format camera and fragile glass plates documenting magnificent and imperiled archaeological remains. Maler's foray into the region began in 1895 with preliminary trips to Yaxchilan in July and Piedras Negras in August. He returned to the region in 1897 and visited El Cayo, Budsilha, La Mar, El Chile, Anaite II, and El Chicozapote from the end of May through the end of June. From there he traveled to Yaxchilan where he spent July and August documenting the site. On his return trip he briefly revisited Piedras Negras. After a small break he returned to the Usumacinta in January of 1898 to document a series of sites between Tenosique and Palenque that included La Reforma, Chirikihá, Chancala, and Xupa. In August of 1898 he traveled to what was then called Lake Petha and is now known by the name Lake Mensabak (Palka 2005a; Wonham 1985). Maler returned to Piedras Negras from September through November of 1899 to conduct the first thorough study of the site under the auspices of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University. In an extended stay from December of 1899 through the end of March 1900 he further documented Yaxchilan. From there he





**Figure 7.** The Middle Usumacinta River Valley with sites documented during the 2010 reconnaissance season. Map by Charles Golden.

continued up the Usumacinta to the Lacantun River and there documented the site of San Lorenzo before concluding his travels in mid-April of 1900.

The Middle Usumacinta region is nestled amongst the foothills of the Chiapas highlands, and the topography can range from relatively broad valleys to narrow canyons and jagged cliff faces (Figures 8 and 9; Aliphath Fernández 1994). Quite unlike the Yucatan peninsula and the Central Peten there is no shortage of perennial surface water; the Usumacinta River cuts through the region flowing northwest to the Gulf of Mexico, fed by numerous tributaries and surrounded by a series of large lakes and smaller lagunas (Figures 10 and 11). Today, travel along much of Maler's route is easy, moving along well-paved highways and through rolling pastureland where the greatest delay comes from the abundant speed bumps, military checkpoints, and the occasional improvised roadblock set up as part of community protests. When Maler explored the region, however, it was largely forested and only sparsely occupied by logging encampments and scattered Lacandon Maya communities. Travel for Maler was slow and arduous overland, whether via the paths of the wood cutters or bushwhacking through the forest. Travel by canoe was little better on the fast-flowing Usumacinta River. Although it is often assumed that the majority of travel, and particularly the movement of bulk goods through this region in pre-modern times was by canoe on the Usumacinta, we find this doubtful. The Usumacinta is an especially challenging river to navigate, even in a modern motor boat, due





**Figure 8.** View west from atop Structure 1 of Laguna Oscura across the valley to the Sierra Guiral, the foothills of the Chiapas highlands. Photo: Andrew Scherer.



**Figure 9.** The Usumacinta River at the Boca del Cerro. The start of the rapids is barely visible in the middle of the image. Photo: Andrew Scherer.





**Figure 10.** The Chocolja River near the modern community of San Lorenzo, Chiapas. Photo: Andrew Scherer.



**Figure 11.** Laguna Oscura, Chiapas. Photo: Andrew Scherer.



to its fast and powerful current, as well as the many dangerous rapids along its course (Figures 12 and 13). As wonderfully detailed in Ron Canter's (2007) report on the river, the Usumacinta is notably difficult in the stretch north of Yaxchilan where much of its flow is through steep canyons marked by rapids and whirlpools. The most powerful rapids begin just below Piedras Negras and its outlier El Porvenir and continue until the Boca del Cerro, where the river pours out onto the Tabasco floodplain at the city of Tenosique, Tabasco. Between Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras are the formidable Chicozapote Rapids—known as the Raudales de Anaité in Maler's day. Maler (1903:111-112) provides a wonderful account of the challenges posed by these rapids, which are certainly not the most perilous on the river:

The dangerous *Raudales de Anaité* had recently claimed several human lives. Besides this, several cargoes had been sunk, the oarsmen, however, having been able to save their lives. Instead of blasting away the most dangerous rocks, the authorities at Tenosique preferred to forbid the shooting of the rapids on pain of a heavy fine. As the forest trails are in an unheard of condition, the pack animals cannot survive them. It is almost an impossibility to convey a *carga* by land. In spite of all dangers, therefore, most of the wood-cutting firms prefer the water-way.

I had succeeded in bringing my rather old and fragile *cayuco* as far as the *Raudal grande*, where we all disembarked, leaving the baggage in the boat, which my men, who had climbed up on the rocks, now slowly and carefully towed along by means of long ropes. It was a very difficult piece of work, because the *cayuco*, gliding along at the foot of the sheer rock, remained invisible to those handling the ropes, which had every now and again to be slung over projecting angles of the rock or bushes, which threatened to impede progress. We finally reached the last headland, down which we clambered and made the *cayuco* fast. I then had it unloaded and everything placed on the lowest rocks, for at this point the water dashed over half-concealed boulders with such force that we could not think of towing the boat through with its load. The sight of the stupendous walls of rock, which we had just passed, the din of the water, forced between rocks and rushing along at the most frightful speed, caused my men utterly to lose their heads, though they had always considered themselves excellent *vogas*. They were terribly frightened and only the utmost exertion on my part had brought the trembling fellows thus far. Our attempt at towing the *cayuco* over the rapids was unsuccessful. It filled with water, the ropes broke, and, dashing to pieces against the rocks, it vanished in the whirling flood.

Maler's claims of personal stoicism aside, his report of the Chicozapote Rapids reveals not only the dangers posed by such hazards but also the lack of easy portage necessary to circumnavigate them. This is true of most of the dangerous rapids of the Usumacinta, which are located within steep canyons that require a lengthy and arduous portage to bypass overland (Canter 2007:14-16). As part of our reconnaissance efforts, we traveled from Tenosique to Yaxchilan by motorboat. Before making the trip we were told by locals standing on the boat ramp at Tenosique that a boat had recently overturned in one of the rapids south of the Boca del Cerro and a number of people had drowned. Even with a seasoned guide our boat was swamped as we traveled downriver in the rapids just above the Boca del Cerro, where the Usumacinta exits the sierra and flows





**Figure 12.** Navigating the rapids of the Usumacinta River by motorboat, northwest of Piedras Negras. Photo: Andrew Scherer.



**Figure 13.** The Chicozapote Rapids (Raudales de Anaite) near the sites of El Chicozapote (Chiapas) and Tecolote (Petén). Photo: Andrew Scherer.

out onto to the Tabasco floodplain (Figure 9). Indeed, death by drowning is a regular occurrence on the dangerous Usumacinta. In 1999, for instance, while Golden was working as part of the BYU/Universidad del Valle Piedras Negras Archaeological Project, a boatload of undocumented migrants overturned on the river and dozens of people drowned in a tragedy that is still much discussed as a cautionary tale among professional boatmen in the region.

Balancing the possible benefits of river travel against the risks of losing life and cargo on the dangerous Usumacinta, the Maya must have favored overland routes for travel through the region between Yaxchilan and the Boca del Cerro. Although much of the topography of the Sierra del Lacandon is rugged and travel by foot can be slowgoing, there are a number of key routes that cut through the area along relatively flat valleys (Anaya Hernández 2001:56-58). One such valley parallels the Usumacinta River through Guatemala, running roughly between Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras (Aliphath Fernández 1994:179-181). The route of travel was so critical that in the Late Classic period Yaxchilan established a series of secondary centers and wall systems to control movement along the valley (Golden et al. 2008; Scherer and Golden 2009). Although no official roads have been built on the Guatemalan side of the river, abandoned logging roads scar the forest and mark out the well-defined overland routes (Figure 14; see also Canter 2007), while in Mexico paved highways and finely made unpaved roads now crisscross the region.

In Maler's time, the logging companies established an overland route that linked Tenosique (located on the banks of the Usumacinta north of Piedras Negras) to Palenque, skirting the foothills of the sierra. Maler used that route to travel from Tenosique to La Reforma and eventually to Palenque. That road still exists today, though it has been supplemented by a modern highway that follows a slightly different route. Geographic information system analysis shows that the Tenosique-Palenque road follows a least-cost route of travel through the region. Flavio Silva de la Mora (2008) recently identified a series of ancient *sabes* along this same route. When Maler visited the region, the logging companies were in the process of building a second road that led from La Reforma to the Lacantun River south of Yaxchilan, more or less paralleling the Usumacinta on the Mexican side of the river. This road exists today as Highway 307 and runs through the valley that connects Yaxchilan and Palenque.

These two broad valleys, one on the Mexican side of the Usumacinta and the other on the Guatemalan side, were almost certainly the major routes of overland travel used by the Maya in antiquity, especially for moving north to south (or vice versa) on the landscape (Anaya Hernández 2001:56-58). East-west travel in the Middle Usumacinta region would likely have been along the various river tributaries including the Chocolja, Chancala, Busilja, Arroyo Macabilero, and Arroyo Yaxchilan, with numerous smaller streams probably navigable during the rainy season. Although these tributaries all contain waterfalls that would have required some portaging, their currents are far slower and less powerful than that of the Usumacinta. Further, much of the terrain immediately adjacent





**Figure 14.** Modern trail along a former logging road in the Peten. This path connects Piedras Negras to El Cayo and was used by Maler during his explorations of the region. Photo: Andrew Scherer.

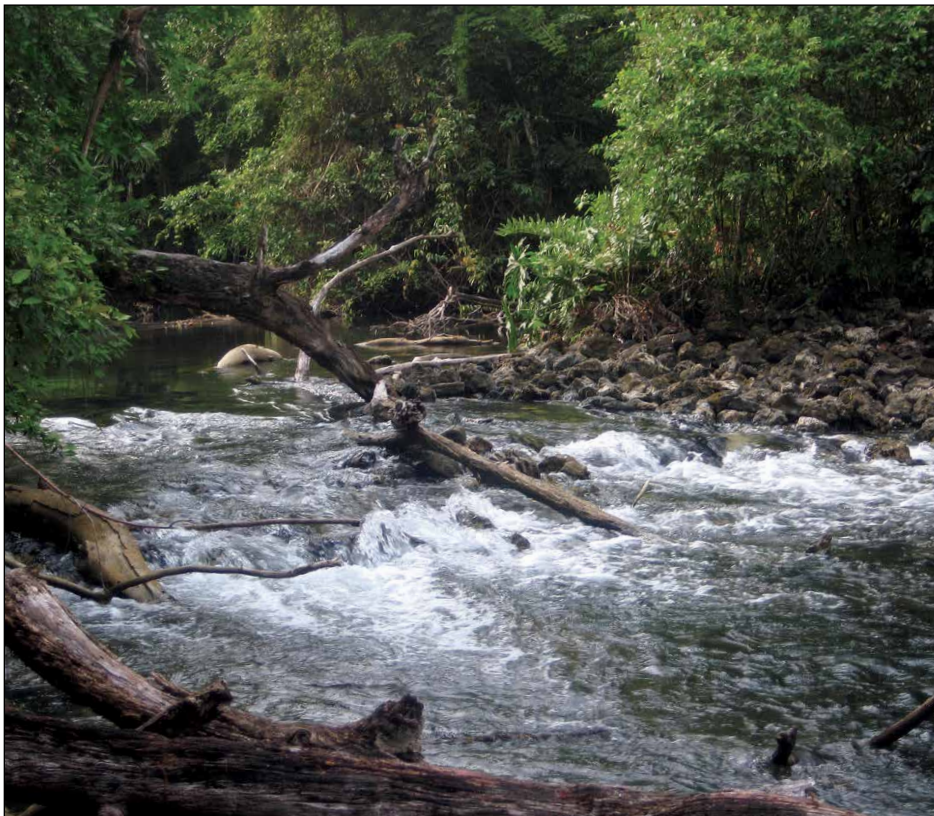


to these tributaries is relatively flat and easy to walk (Figures 10 and 15).

Today much of the forest of Tabasco and Chiapas has been cleared for cattle ranching and farming, and numerous *municipalidades* and *ejidos* dot the region. Northwestern Guatemala, what is today the Sierra del Lacandon National Park, is still largely uninhabited and forested, though it is threatened by recent illegal invasions. In some respects our work in 2010 mirrored that of Maler; we relied heavily on local informants to locate the archaeological sites reported here. But in other ways our work was quite different, aided by roadways and, for better or worse, over a century of deforestation.

### From Tenosique to Chancala

In January of 1898 Maler set out from Tenosique with the assistance of four local guides. His objective was the logging settlement of La Reforma, a three day's journey west of Tenosique, from which he would explore archaeological sites in the vicinity. At La Reforma, Maler briefly visited an archaeological site that he called "Las Ruinas de La Reforma." Maler reported that the ruins were "numerous and often quite imposing" (Maler 1901:10). This site, which we did not visit during our reconnaissance trip, should not be confused with the well-known



**Figure 15.** Arroyo Macabilero, Peten. The photograph was taken only a few hundred meters from Figure 14 and shows a partially destroyed check dam that may date to the Classic period.  
Photo: Andrew Scherer.





**Figure 16.** “CHÁNCALA: WATERFALL, RIO CHÁNCALA” (Maler 1901:Plate 4).

site of Moral-Reforma located to the north of Tenosique (Juárez Cossío 2002; Martin 2003).

From La Reforma, Maler briefly explored the important site of Chinikiha, which is presently being investigated by an archaeological team headed by Rodrigo Liendo Stuardo (2006, 2007b). Chinikiha is located at the mouth of a narrow valley that runs between the Usumacinta River and the edge of the sierra that continues on to Palenque. This valley reaches the Usumacinta south of the Boca del Cerro canyon. Maler briefly documented the monumental core of Chinikiha, which includes some still-standing vaulted structures. These monumental structures are situated around a large ceremonial plaza centered on a ballcourt whose I-shape is relatively unique for Classic-period lowland Maya sites. Based on current readings of the site’s inscriptions, Chinikiha was an important political center within the region—albeit one that was overshadowed by its more powerful neighbors—and was apparently politically independent for most if not all of its history (Liendo Stuardo 2007b:6). The work of Liendo’s research team is bringing to light the full scale of this major political center, which was occupied from at least the Late Preclassic to Terminal Classic periods.

After visiting Chinikiha, Maler ventured along the Chancala River in order to document a site reported upstream near one of the Chancala’s waterfalls. Maler called the ruins Chancala, after the name of the river, which eventually flows into the Chocolja River some 20 km west of the Usumacinta (Figures 10 and 16). Today the site is generally referred to as La Cascada-Chancala in order to distinguish it from the archaeological site located at the modern town of

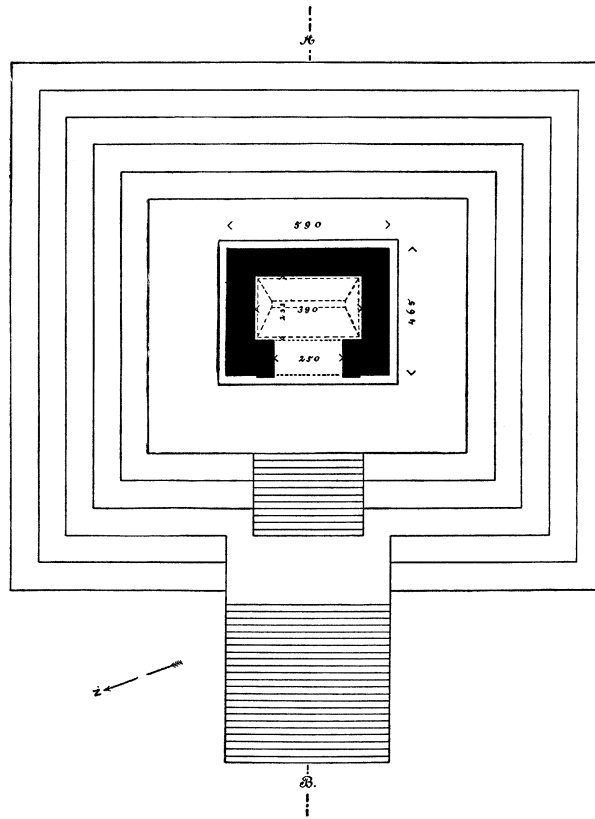


Figure 17. "CHÁNCALA: PLAN OF TEMPLE AND SUBSTRUCTURE" (Maler 1901:Figure 2).

Chancala (Liendo Stuardo 2005, 2007a). At La Cascada-Chancala, Maler reports "a considerable number of substructures" as well as "a temple, in a fairly good state of preservation, which crowned a small pyramid of six terraces. ... The front of the temple faced the west" (1901:14). Maler provides a plan of the pyramid whose summit was a single-room, vaulted superstructure that was already collapsed in Maler's day (Figure 17). Single-door, single-room, vaulted superstructures are relatively rare in the western Maya lowlands and occur in only a few other sites, including El Chile, Bonampak, and Piedras Negras (Pyramids R-3 and R-10 of the South Group Court). Maler also notes the presence of red paint and some hieroglyphic writing painted on the front facade of the building, as well as traces of stucco on the frieze that he believed were remnants of seated figures. Today the site is located on private property and has been visited and briefly documented by Liendo as part of his work in the region around Palenque (Liendo Stuardo 2002, 2005, 2007a). Liendo reports the existence of at least 21 structures at La Cascada-Chancala, including a ballcourt (Liendo Stuardo 2005:38). Historically the site is not well-understood but may have maintained some degree of political autonomy, and its lords appear to have used their own emblem glyph (Stuart and Stuart 2008:235). Nevertheless, Chancala was overshadowed by larger centers in the region including Chinikiha and especially Palenque. Liendo also notes two other minor centers in the Chancala River val-



ley: Reforma de Ocampo and San Juan Chancalaíto; the latter was connected to Chancala by a causeway (Liendo Stuardo 2005:38). During our work in the area we attempted to visit La Cascada-Chancala but were unable to locate the landowner to obtain permission to enter his land.

### **Laguna Oscura and Surrounding Settlement**

With the assistance of local informants, not to mention the extensive deforestation of recent decades, we were able to document a number of sites in the region around the Chocolja River that were overlooked by Maler. The most significant of those sites is Laguna Oscura. The site core is situated 1.6 km south of the Chocolja River, a little more than 0.5 km north of the laguna from which it gets its name (Figure 11). The laguna is surrounded by swamp on its southern and eastern sides but is relatively easy to access from the north and south. The core of the site consists of a plaza bounded by a large hill to the west and smaller hills on the eastern and western margins (Figure 18). We were able to make a sketch plan of approximately 3 hectares of the site center (Figure 19).

The large hill at Laguna Oscura was modified into a large pyramidal structure (Structure 1) with substantial superstructural architecture on its summit. In order to create Structure 1, the Maya modified a natural hill into a monumental pyramid perhaps 30 m tall with a base measuring approximately 80 m x 65 m (Figure 20). The slopes of the hill are terraced and fronted with masonry. Much of the stonework is now out of place, but some of the original terrace walls are still intact (Figure 21). The superstructure on the summit of Structure 1 is perforated by a large looters' trench, 3–4 m wide and 7–8 m long. It appears that the looters may have been clearing out a room of a collapsed vaulted building. The doorway of Structure 1's superstructure appears to be oriented to face approximately 120° E of N. This roughly suggests an orientation facing Piedras Negras, though the epicenter of Piedras Negras is closer to 105° E of N from Laguna Oscura and is obscured by the hills that border the Usumacinta.

The base of Structure 1 was modified into a large platform upon which at least one other smaller structure was constructed (Structure 2; Figure 22). Along the western base of Structure 1 we encountered a large monolith broken into two pieces (Figure 23). Although the stone is roughly stela-shaped, we found no evidence of carving on its surface. The northern limit of the plaza consists of a small hill with at least one structure on top (Structure 3), with another structure to the southeast (Structure 4). Similarly, the eastern limit of the plaza also consists of a low hill with at least one structure on top (Structure 5). A low mound is located on the southern end of the plaza (Structure 6), and a long range structure measuring at least 50 m in length is located just south of the plaza (Structure 7). When we encountered the central plaza of Laguna Oscura it had recently been burned in preparation for planting, presumably by the inhabitants of the community of San Lorenzo, which is located just north of the site.

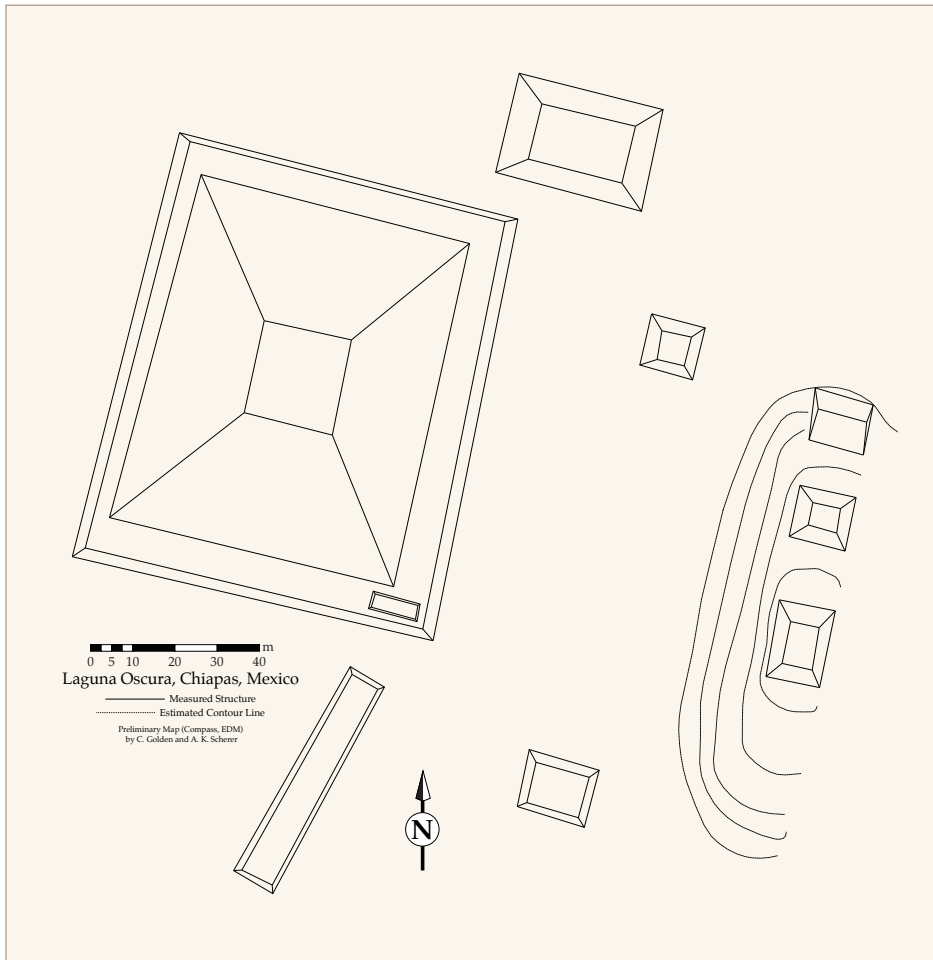
The summit of Structure 1 affords a commanding view of the surrounding terrain, and its location provides an ideal vantage for monitoring the midway



**Figure 18.** Panoramic view of the site core of Laguna Oscura, with close-up details. Structure 1 is the modified hill on the left side of the panorama. Image by Andrew Scherer.







**Figure 19.** Sketch map of the site core of Laguna Oscura, Chiapas, by Charles Golden and Andrew Scherer.

point between the Usumacinta and the Sierra Guiral to the west along the transportation corridor of the Chocolja River (Figure 8). Laguna Oscura is situated roughly equidistant from Chinikiha (27 km) and Piedras Negras (25 km), and we have little doubt that Laguna Oscura was a center of some political importance. However, additional research is required to determine whether it constituted a secondary center near the edge of a more powerful kingdom (perhaps Piedras Negras) during the Late Classic or was itself the center of a small independent political unit. Furthermore, we do not know when Laguna Oscura was occupied.

Although we did not have the opportunity to complete comprehensive reconnaissance in the immediate vicinity of Laguna Oscura, we did identify a number of small structures as we walked toward the site from the south. Much of the terrain immediately adjacent to the laguna is low-lying swamp. However, south of the laguna the land is raised, dry, and today is used for cattle pasture. It is in this zone that we identified a number of mound groups. Further to the





Figure 20. Structure 1, Laguna Oscura. Photo: Andrew Scherer.



Figure 21. Close-up of intact terrace wall of Structure 1, Laguna Oscura. Photo: Andrew Scherer.





Figure 22. Structure 2, Laguna Oscura. Photo: Charles Golden.



Figure 23. Monolith from Structure 1, Laguna Oscura. Photo: Andrew Scherer.





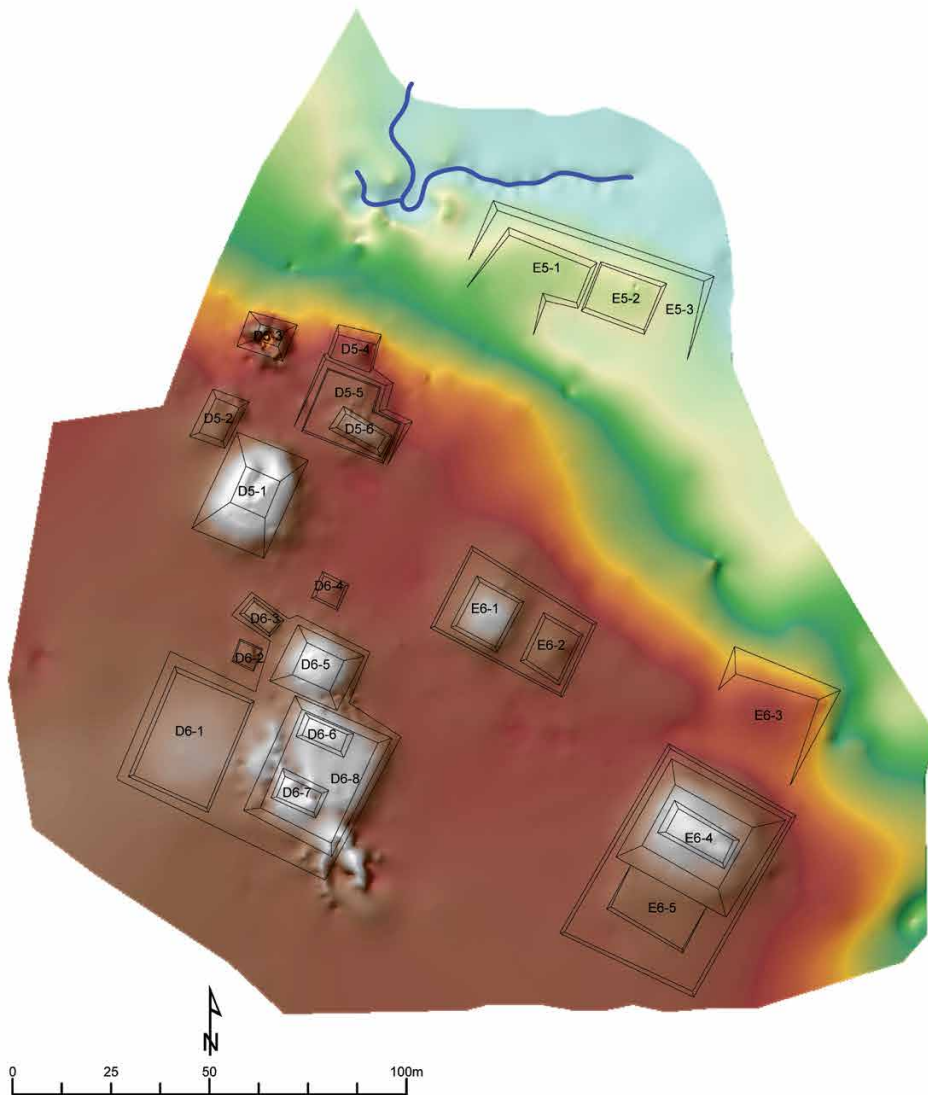
**Figure 24.** Rancho Búfalo, Chiapas. Note the two structures, one in the right middle distance, the other in the center background. Photo: Andrew Scherer.

south, west of the highway near the Vallescondido Restaurant, we were directed to a series of house groups along the flanks of the foothills of the Sierra Guiral. Settlement is also located north of Laguna Oscura near the modern community of San Lorenzo, along the banks of the Chicolja River.

### **Rancho Búfalo**

Along Highway 307, about 7 km directly west of Laguna Oscura is the site of Rancho Búfalo, named after the cattle ranch within which it is located (Figure 24). We briefly visited the site in 2010 and returned in 2011 for preliminary mapping and test excavation. The site core consists of at least 12 structures, some of which are as much as 3–4 m tall (Figure 25). The site is located along the edge of one of the many arroyos that crisscross the region. Preliminary analysis of the ceramics by Dr. Socorro Jiménez and her student Alan Mendez of the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán indicates that the bulk of settlement dates to the Late Preclassic period with some continuation into the Early Classic.

Unfortunately, a number of the structures have been looted in recent years. The most egregious destruction is the obliteration of the southern corner of Platform D6-8 with a backhoe, apparently to remove loose dirt and rocks for modern construction. More intriguing, about a decade ago modern



**Figure 25.** Rancho Búfalo, Chiapas. Map by Jeffrey Dobreiner and Charles Golden.

residents removing rocks for construction stumbled upon a tomb (Burial 1) within Structure D5-3, which is a bit of a surprise considering the modest size of Rancho Búfalo and the structure in question. Structure D5-3 is currently a three-meter-tall mound (Figure 26), though it may once have been significantly taller, and the tomb chamber occupies the core of the structure (Figure 27). The interior tomb measures 2.9 m in length, 1.4 m in width, and 1.5 m at its maximum height. When the erstwhile diggers opened the tomb, they removed several large capstones that were still in place, exposing the tomb chamber. The grave was partially filled with rubble that obscured the tomb floor, and no artifacts or human remains were visible. Ceramics within the fill of Structure D5-3 indicate that the tomb dates to the Late Preclassic period. When we cleared the





Figure 26. Structure D5-3 and the looted tomb; see Figure 27. Photo: Charles Golden.



Figure 27. Rancho Búfalo Burial 1, a looted tomb shown here after roof collapse was cleared from the chamber. Photo: Charles Golden.



**Figure 28.** Artifacts recovered from Rancho Búfalo Burial 1: Late Classic cylinder vessel (left) and shell earflares and bone needle (right). Photos: Charles Golden and Andrew Scherer.



**Figure 29.** Greenstone adzes from the looted burial at Rancho Búfalo. Photo: Charles Golden.

tomb, however, we uncovered a Late Classic cylinder vessel on the tomb floor, along with a pair of shell earflares, a bone needle, and fragments of a single adult human skeleton (Figure 28). The architectural context therefore points to an initial interment dating to the Late Preclassic. But this tomb was evidently re-entered sometime during the Late Classic at which time the cylinder vessel and possibly the earflares (judging by their style) were deposited, perhaps in exchange for the original grave furnishings which (if ever present) were removed. The bone needle may have been used to pin a burial shroud or bundled offering, though given the disturbance of the burial chamber it is not possible to securely associate this object with the original burial. A Late Preclassic date for the grave would make this the earliest tomb so far identified from the western



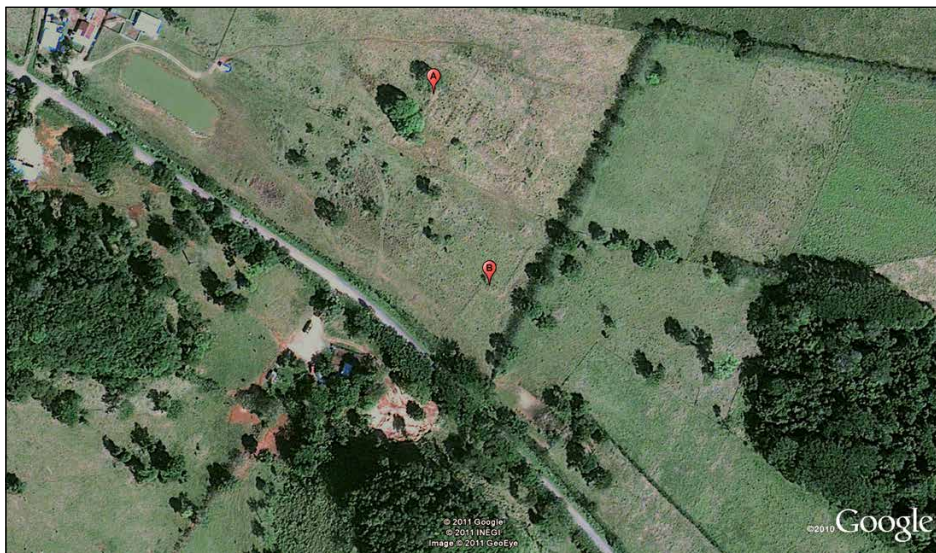
Maya lowlands, though we have no doubt that similar chambers are located deep within the architecture of Piedras Negras, Palenque, and other sites where the Preclassic ceremonial cores are buried underneath monumental Classic-period architecture.

In addition to the tomb, the locals found another burial at Rancho Búfalo, just along the southeastern edge of Structure XXX, in which was found a small bowl containing obsidian blades, a jade bead, and seven greenstone adzes. While the bowl, bead, and obsidian were not saved, the current residents of the site turned over the greenstone adzes to the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Figure 29). The deposition of these greenstone adzes at Rancho Búfalo is reminiscent of the more elaborate Preclassic celt caches recovered at Ceibal (Smith 1982:245), Cival (Estrada-Belli 2006), La Venta (Drucker et al. 1959), and other Preclassic sites. Similarly, the placement of the mortuary structure at the northern end of the site epicenter recalls the layout of numerous Preclassic sites across Chiapas and Tabasco (Clark and Hansen 2001). Even from this meager data it is evident that Rancho Búfalo was participating in broader Preclassic ritual traditions. We can only presume that the life of the site was cut short with the founding of Classic-period royal dynasties at Palenque and Piedras Negras.

### **Flores Magón**

The site of Flores Magón is located along the southeastern edge of the modern community of Flores Magón, about 2.5 km southeast of Rancho Búfalo. As with Rancho Búfalo, we visited the site briefly in 2010 and then conducted preliminary mapping and excavation exercises in 2011 (Figure 30). As with so many sites in the valley, Flores Magón is located on the flanks of the hills of the Sierra Guiral, and the architecture is oriented towards the northeast, facing across the valley and towards the Usumacinta River. During this time we were able to map much of the extant site (Figure 31). However, local residents report the site was much more extensive in the past, with many of the largest buildings destroyed during the construction of the highway and the construction of the modern town. The mapped portion of the site consists of a dense complex of structures leading towards what we assume was the largest portion of the epicenter to the southwest, now destroyed. We identified three long, low walls, two of which radiate from a small building (located in the southwest corner of the mapped portion of the site). These features may have been part of a more elaborate system of walls, now destroyed, that served to delimit distinct social spaces within the site or may even have had a defensive purpose. However, without further investigation the function of these walls is unclear.

All of the visible masonry consists of large unworked or heavily eroded stone blocks. There is one giant, uncarved, stone slab atop one of the structures, which was perhaps a lintel. Another similar monolith was recently removed from the site by the inhabitants of the modern community of Flores Magón, who placed the stone along the highway near the eastern edge of town. The buildings are generally oriented 30° E of N or 120° E of N, patterns typical of Classic-period sites in the region. Preliminary ceramic analysis by Jiménez and

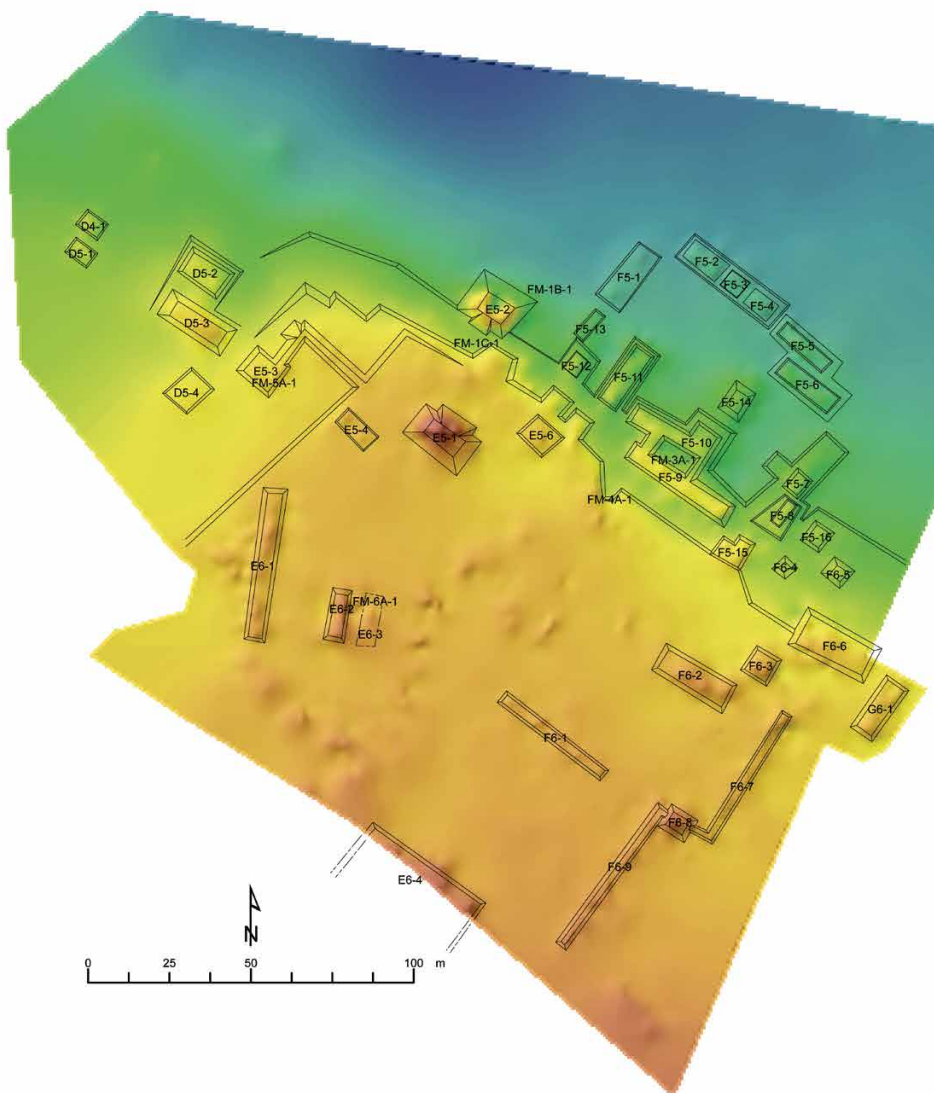


**Figure 30.** Aerial image of Flores Magón. For reference, “A” points to Structure E5-2, “B” to Structure F6-8. From Google Earth (© 2011 Google, INEGI, GeoEye).

Mendez indicates that occupation so far identified was confined to the Late Classic period. While we were conducting work at the site, a resident of Flores Magón presented us with materials he had found on his property, including a fine-paste drinking vessel and fragments of stucco glyphs (among them an *ajaw* sign), confirming Flores Magón’s Late Classic date. The stucco fragments are clearly from an architectural facade and suggest that monumental architecture was once located in the now-destroyed portion of the site. Also among the goods shown to us were two large jade fragments from which large plaques had been removed in antiquity. As a locus of either jade exchange or production coupled with evidence for monumental architecture, there is little doubt that the site was of some importance. Indeed, the arrangement of buildings along the northeastern edge of the site, with its unusual groupings of long low buildings situated around spacious patios, is reminiscent of other such architectural complexes that have been identified as markets or exchange centers (Carrasco et al. 2009:Figure 2; La Porte and Chocón 2008; La Porte and Escobedo 2009). It would not surprise us if future research at Flores Magón was able to establish the social and economic role of the site as a market center in the frontier between major regional kingdoms.

Near the end of the field season local informants led us to an unusual vaulted structure on one of the hilltops south of the mapped portion of the site, in what was once the epicenter of Flores Magón (Figure 32). The hill itself is heavily modified, with terraces that once bore superstructures covering the lower slopes of the mountainside. Many of these buildings were obliterated for road fill during the construction of the highway, and a cattle pen sits on the flat spaces at the bottom of the hill where, we are told, other large structures once stood. The full form of the structure at the summit of the hill is difficult to dis-





**Figure 31.** Flores Magón, Chiapas.  
Map by Charles Golden, Jeffrey Dobreiner, and Andrew Scherer.

cern due to collapse, vegetation, and looting. However, along one side a vaulted room space was built into the lower portions of the structure. The vault covers a single chamber. Masonry walls continue for about 1–2 m below the spring line but eventually give way to a natural crevice such that the lower portions of the wall are bedrock. It appears that the crevice was a natural structure that the Maya then incorporated into their architecture. Today the floor is covered by rubble and the chamber is open on both its northern and southern ends. The opening to the south is the result of looting, which penetrated the vault. The original opening appears to be a small aperture (~1 m high) on the northern end of the room spanned by a large limestone slab lintel (Figure 32, bottom photo; note that the original aperture is the lower opening, while the upper opening is



**Figure 32.** Vaulted chamber atop hill south of the mapped portion of Flores Magón: views toward northern end of chamber (top) and southern end (bottom). Photos: Andrew Scherer.



from further looting). The function of the room is unknown, and though it may have served as either a storage or burial chamber local informants are not aware of any artifacts recovered from the room. Unfortunately we did not have the equipment necessary to descend into the chamber, though we do hope to return in future seasons to more fully explore the structure.

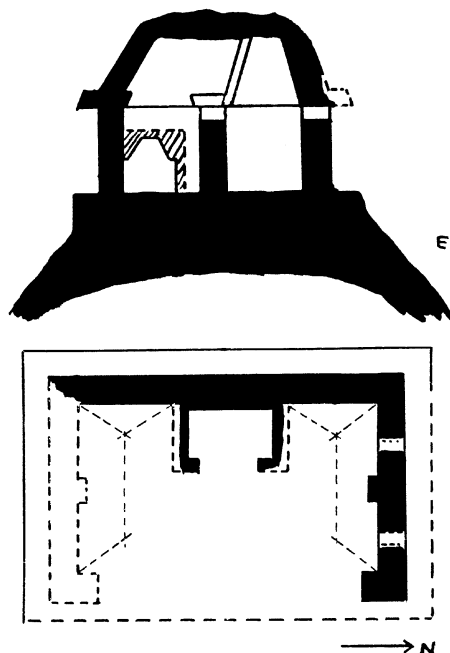
### Xupa and Lake Petha (Mensabak / Itsanok'uh)

After Maler completed his 1898 explorations in the area around the Chancala River and following a brief detour back to the logging settlement at La Reforma, he set out for Palenque. On his way he stopped at Rancho Sulusum, located a short distance east of Palenque on the Chacamax River and owned by German Koller.

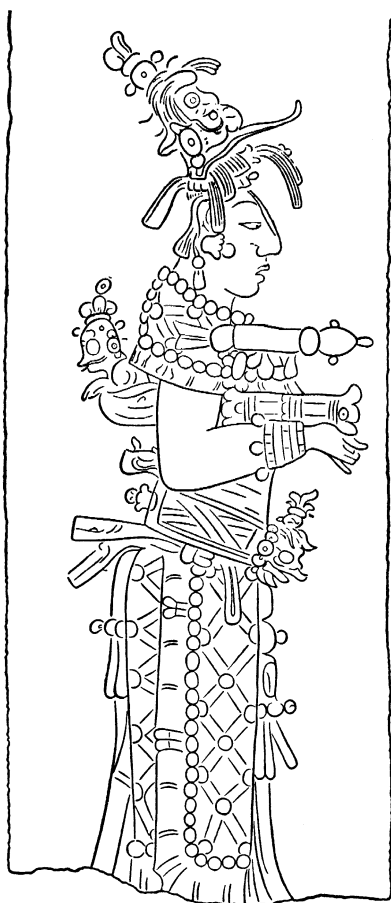
Koller is an important but little-known figure in the history of early archaeological exploration at Palenque and the surrounding region. Maler first met him in 1877 when he visited Palenque. In 1895 Koller apparently served as guide for William Henry Holmes and Edward Thompson at Palenque during their joint visit to the site. Thompson is better known as the former owner of Chichen Itza who famously dredged its Great Cenote and is not to be confused with the eminent Mayanist J. Eric Thompson. While Holmes (1897) spent his time documenting Palenque's architecture, Koller led Thompson through a series of looted tombs and crypts (Thompson 1895). Local informants like Koller were essential in the early days of Maya archaeology, as they still are today, underscoring the fact that explorers and archaeologists rarely "discover" new sites but instead are usually directed to them by local informants.

Koller led Maler to the site of Xupa, where Maler spent some time exploring the site; in his report he notes:

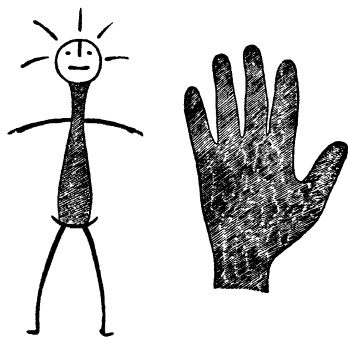
Nearly all of the buildings appear to have had great substructures built of good hewn stone. The superstructures are almost without exception in ruins, but in all directions there are massive substructures many of which are of considerable size. ... The principal temple, once a noble edifice crowning a large pyramidal substructure, alone still exhibits parts of rooms and remains of walls. (Maler 1901:19)



**Figure 33.** Profile and plan of the superstructure of the primary temple at Xupa, Chiapas, from Blom and La Farge (1926-1927:1:Figure 168). The layout—particularly the inner shrine—is characteristic of the Cross Group at Palenque, the buildings of which were dedicated in AD 692.



**Figure 34.** Incised figure on a tablet from Xupa (Maler 1901:Figure 4). The unknown woman wears a beaded skirt of the Maize God, typical of artistic depictions of the Palenque royal family dating to the reigns of Pakal through K'an Joy Chitam II (seventh and early eighth centuries).



**Figure 35.** Anthropomorphic figure and red hand renderings on cliff wall at Lake Petha (Mensabak and Itsanok'uh), Chiapas (Maler 1901:Figure 10).

Maler noted that the primary temple had a three-doorway facade and was in general similar in architectural style to structures from Palenque, which in turn led him to conclude “beyond all doubt that Xupá was very intimately connected with Palenque” (Figure 33; Maler 1901:19). The sanctuary of the temple was adorned with a series of incised slabs that were for the most part looted and destroyed before Maler’s visit. He did manage to find one on the slopes of the pyramid, which he illustrated (Figure 34). Xupa was visited a few decades later by Frans Blom, who further documented the site (primarily the main temple) and reported that he was informed that the monument that appears in Maler’s monograph “was removed by a man who took it to his plantation on the Chacamas [sic] River” (Blom and La Farge 1926-1927:1:201).

Although Xupa was outside of our permit zone and was not visited on our research trips, the site was recently documented by Rodrigo Liendo Stuardo as part of his regional reconnaissance efforts. Liendo notes that Xupa’s main plaza consists of fourteen buildings and that the site’s ceramic assemblage indicates a late date of occupation (c. AD 750-850; Liendo Stuardo 2005:38). Inscriptions have borne out Maler’s hypothesis that Xupa was linked to Palenque (Miller and Martin 2004:105; Stuart and Stuart 2008:164). It appears to have been a secondary political center within the Palenque polity, presumably established to control its southern border and smaller settlements in that area, which include at least 20 architectural groups within close proximity to Xupa itself (Liendo Stuardo 2005:38). An important observation demonstrated by Liendo’s work is an apparent “no-man’s land” of vacant settlement between Xupa and the site of Chancala, which suggests the presence of a sociopolitical buffer zone



between the two ancient communities (Liendo Stuardo 2005:37).

After a return trip to Tenosique, Maler set out in August of 1898 for Lake Petha in the foothills of the Chiapas highlands where he documented a series of rock paintings on the lake's cliff faces. During Maler's visit the area around the lake was inhabited by the Lacandon, who treated the images painted on the cliffs as sacred. Among the images that Maler recorded were a black-lined painting of a serpentine/crocodilian monster (Maler 1901:Figure 9), a black-lined painting of a human figure, and red hand prints (Figure 35). These and other images have been further documented by other scholars (Bruce 1968; Palka 2005a; Wonham 1985). Today, we now know that Lake Petha is in fact a series of lakes, the largest of which are Lake Mensabak and Lake Itsanok'uh—names derived from Lacandon supernatural beings (Palka 2005a). The paintings that Maler documented are believed to date to either the Postclassic or Historic periods, and at least some if not all of the images were rendered by the Lacandon or their immediate predecessors (Palka 2005a).

### **From Tenosique to El Cayo**

In May of 1897 Maler made an expedition from Tenosique to the logging encampment at El Cayo. Rather than risking the dangers of the Usumacinta in the stretch between Tenosique and El Cayo, Maler took the overland route along a road built by the logging companies through what is now southern Tabasco and the Sierra del Lacandon National Park of Guatemala. This was not Maler's first trip along this route, as he had previously made the journey in 1895 as far as Piedras Negras, where he conducted preliminary explorations of the site.

Had Maler ventured to the southeast of Tenosique he would have encountered the Redención del Campesino Valley, which, based on survey by Armando Anaya, is dotted with Maya settlement (Anaya Hernández 2005, 2006). The recovery of a wooden box from the site of Álvaro Obregón bearing the name of a Teotihuacan lord appearing in the text of Piedras Negras Panel 12 implies some sort of relationship between the local lords of Álvaro Obregón and the kingdom of Piedras Negras (Anaya Hernández et al. 2002). This hypothesis is given further credence by the Piedras Negras-style ceramics noted for sites in the valley (Anaya Hernández 2005). No doubt the valley was a critical route of travel between Piedras Negras and regions to the north.

In 1897 Maler passed through El Porvenir and Piedras Negras and continued on the route to its terminus at the logging encampment at El Cayo. Since Maler's time the jungle has largely reclaimed the road used by the loggers, although a footpath follows the same route today and its edges remain distinct amidst the underbrush (Figure 14). The University of Pennsylvania expedition improved and utilized this road to access Piedras Negras in the 1930s, and more recently guerillas and refugees during the armed conflict, archaeologists, park guards, and land invaders have all made good use of this path. There is little doubt that the modern path follows along an ancient route of travel. Between Piedras Negras and El Cayo, the path passes through some ancient rural settlement before arriving at the site of Esmeralda, which, though not monumental,

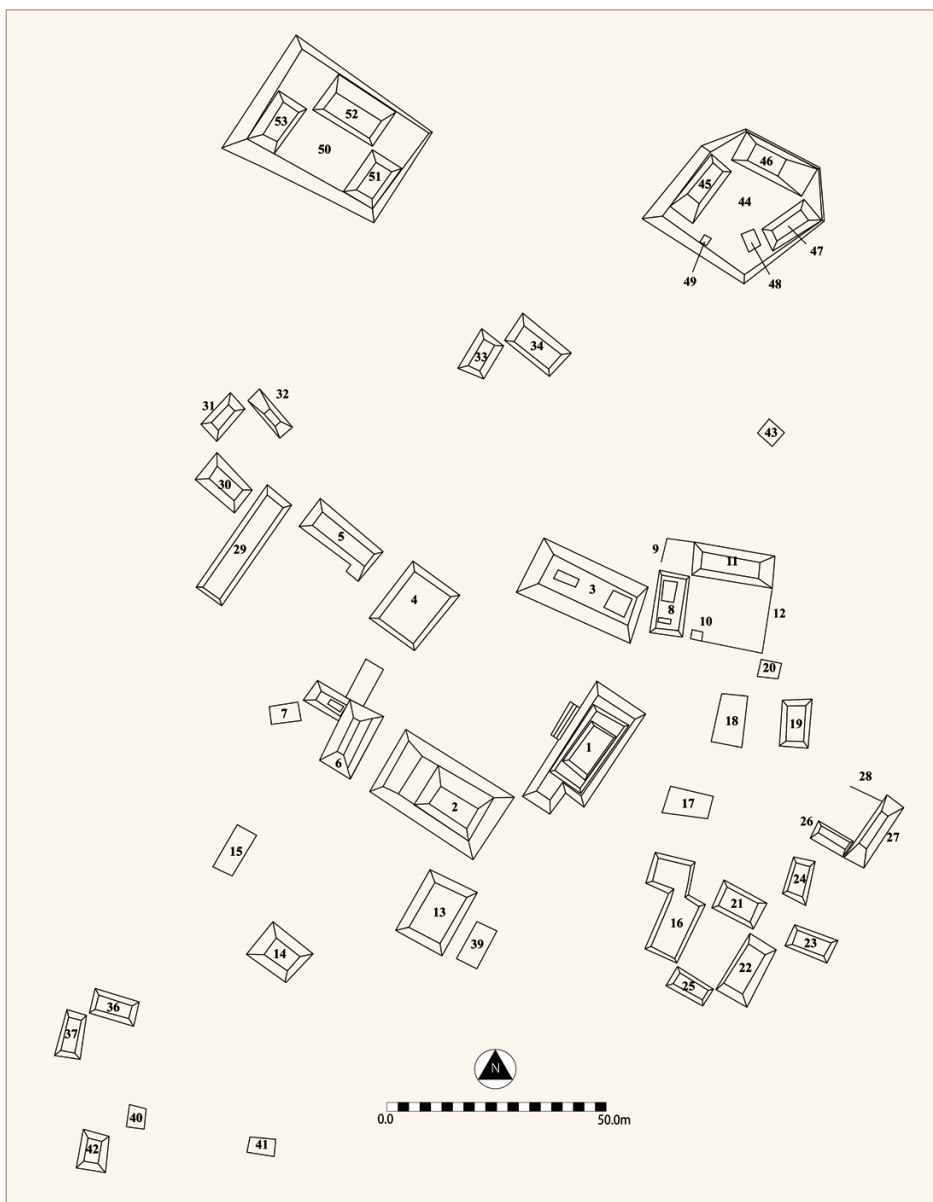
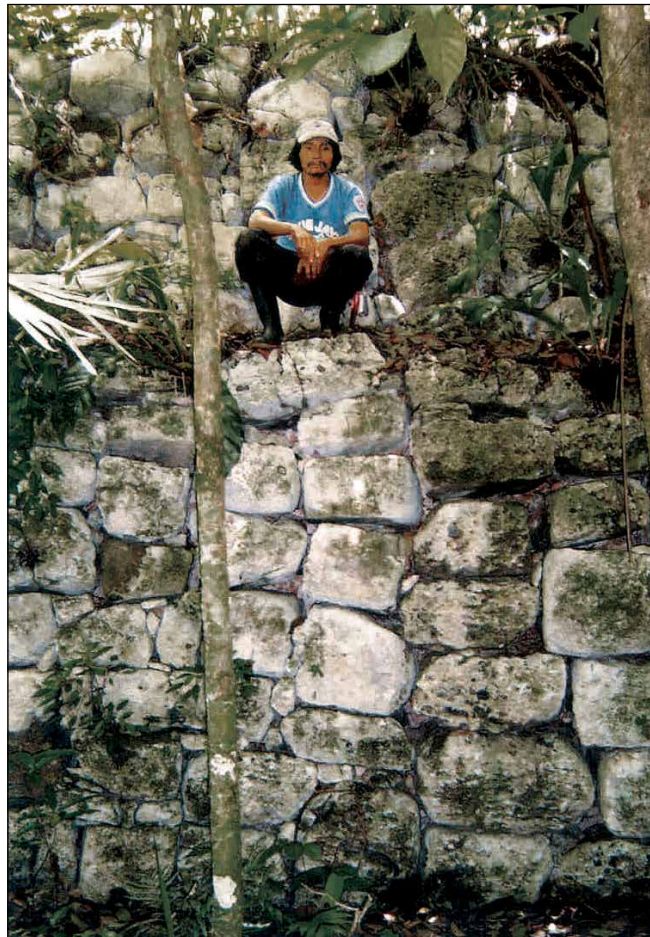
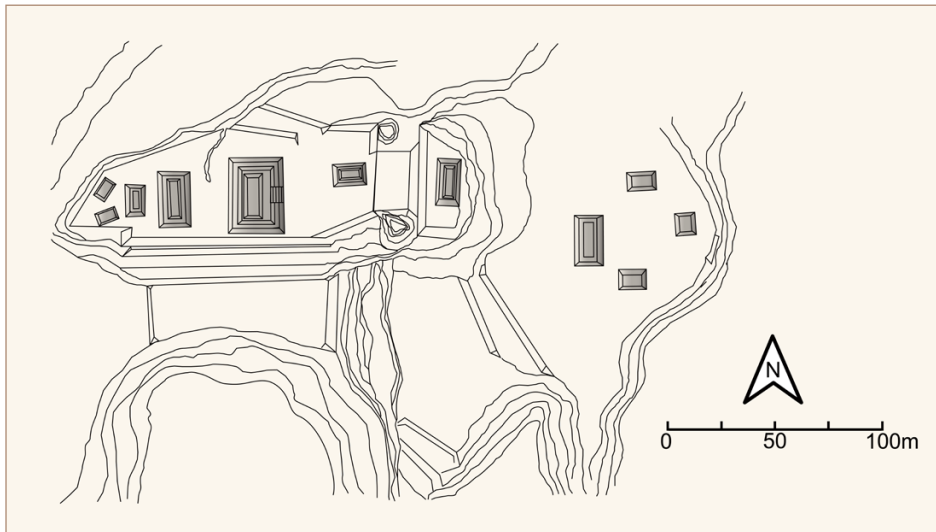


Figure 36. The site of Esmeralda, Peten. Plan by Greg Borgstede.

does have a small ceremonial center, including a ballcourt (Figure 36; Golden et al. 2005). From Esmeralda the path continues on along the Arroyo Macabilero (Figure 15) until it reaches the shores of the Usumacinta. On a nearby ridge is the Preclassic site of Macabilero, and situated on the opposite bank of the Usumacinta is the Classic-period site of El Cayo. Macabilero, notable for its location atop a steep hilltop, is associated with monumental terracing (Figure 37), likely a reflection of the endemic warfare that plagued the region during the Preclassic period (Golden et al. 2008:266). Apparently Maler did not notice any of the settlement during his journey from Piedras Negras to El Cayo, or perhaps





**Figure 37.** Macabilero, Peten: sketch map of the site (above); terrace wall (below). Plan by Luis Romero; photo by Charles Golden.



Figure 38. El Cayo Stela 1 (Maler 1903:Plate 34).

portedly still held by the community. No archaeological expedition has returned to the site since.

Despite the paucity of archaeological data for El Cayo, epigraphic analysis of monuments from the site and elsewhere underscores its importance for the Late Classic political history of the region (Chinchilla and Houston 1993; Mathews 1998; Zender 2002). El Cayo was governed by at least three generations of *sajals*, most if not all of whom were loyal to the kings of Piedras Negras (Houston 2003; Houston and Inomata 2009:175). As such, El Cayo represents an important southern outpost of the domain of the lords of Piedras Negras during the Late Classic period. Indeed, the monuments from El Cayo are rendered in

he felt these relatively small mounds did not bear mentioning.

When Maler visited El Cayo, a logging encampment had been built right atop the ruins. Maler explored the core of the site, which is dominated by a two-tier temple, the upper level of which is capped by a series of five small superstructures. Maler also documented three stelae and what he identified as a lintel (actually a panel similar to those found at Piedras Negras; Figures 38 and 39). During the early 1990s the site was investigated by a research team led by Peter Mathews and Mario Aliphath (Mathews 1998; Mathews and Aliphath Fernández 1993, 1997). Their research produced a map of the site, including the Grupo Norte—the principle architectural complex (Figure 40). Their work demonstrated that El Cayo was occupied from at least the Late Preclassic to the Late Classic, and during the 1993 field season they uncovered an important monument, Altar 4 (Mathews 1998). Mathews and Aliphath's research was cut short when local residents, opposing their plan to safeguard Altar 4 by removing it from the site, violently ejected the archaeological team. Even today, the region around El Cayo is considered dangerous by local informants, and Altar 4 is reported





Figure 39. El Cayo "Lintel" 1 (Maler 1903:Plate 35)



Figure 40. Crew members of the Mathews and Aliphath project moving El Cayo Stela 1 (see Figure 38). Photo courtesy of Peter Mathews.

the style of Piedras Negras monuments and some, including the superb Altar 4, bear signatures of artists from Piedras Negras itself (Chinchilla and Houston 1993:61; Mathews and Aliphath Fernández 1997:109).

### **Budsilha**

At El Cayo, Maler heard reports of a site with a “half-demolished” building, which he called Budsilha after the nearby river of the same name (today known as the Busilja). Maler traveled overland from the logging encampment at El Cayo to a smaller encampment known as La Mar. Along the way he encountered a recently abandoned Lacandon Maya encampment. His expedition reached La Mar the following day. From the camp at La Mar he set out for Budsilha, which he estimated as located 6 km below the encampment along the Busilja River. At Budsilha, Maler only describes the single, primary structure. According to him:

The only building, still half preserved, — probably this was once a community-house and not a temple, — consists of two apartments: a front chamber 14 m. 90 cm. in length by 270 cm. wide, and a corresponding rear chamber. The two entrances of the front chamber had a very wide span (230 cm.), as did also the two entrances leading from this to the rear chamber (186 cm.). Formerly, these were, therefore, spanned by wooden beams, which, as is invariably the case, had been torn out by the destroyers of the ruins, and this had caused the façade to fall. (Maler 1903:91)

Maler spent some time exploring the site in what was ultimately a futile attempt to find monuments.

Today the site of Budsilha (spelling variants include Busilha, Busiljá and Busil Ha')—which is not to be confused by the modern traveler with the *ejido* of Busilja that lies along the highway—is well known to local residents of the town of Nueva Esperanza, within which it is located. We were fortunate to be permitted by the landowner to spend a number of days in 2010 and 2011 at the site, documenting its primary structure and conducting preliminary reconnaissance and test excavation. The landowner tells us that when he first arrived in Nueva Esperanza the main structure (D6-1) was largely intact, but that a windstorm later caused a large tree to fall into the building bringing down some of the roof. As of 2010 the building seemed to us to remain much as Maler described it, partially collapsed with only some walls and portions of the vault still intact (Figures 41 and 42). However, sometime between our visit in February of 2010 and our return in June of 2011 portions of the eastern facade and the center internal wall fell over (Figures 43 and 44). Figures 41 and 43 show more or less the same view, with the facade visible in 2010 now fallen. Similarly, Figures 42 and 44 are taken from roughly the same angle (though slightly different locations) and show the center vault intact in 2010 and collapsed in 2011. Sadly, the deterioration of the building has been hastened in recent years as local inhabitants have removed stone from beneath the walls to use in modern construction.

Maler's reconstruction of the main building quoted above is correct in many respects, though flawed in a few key areas. As Maler indicated, Structure



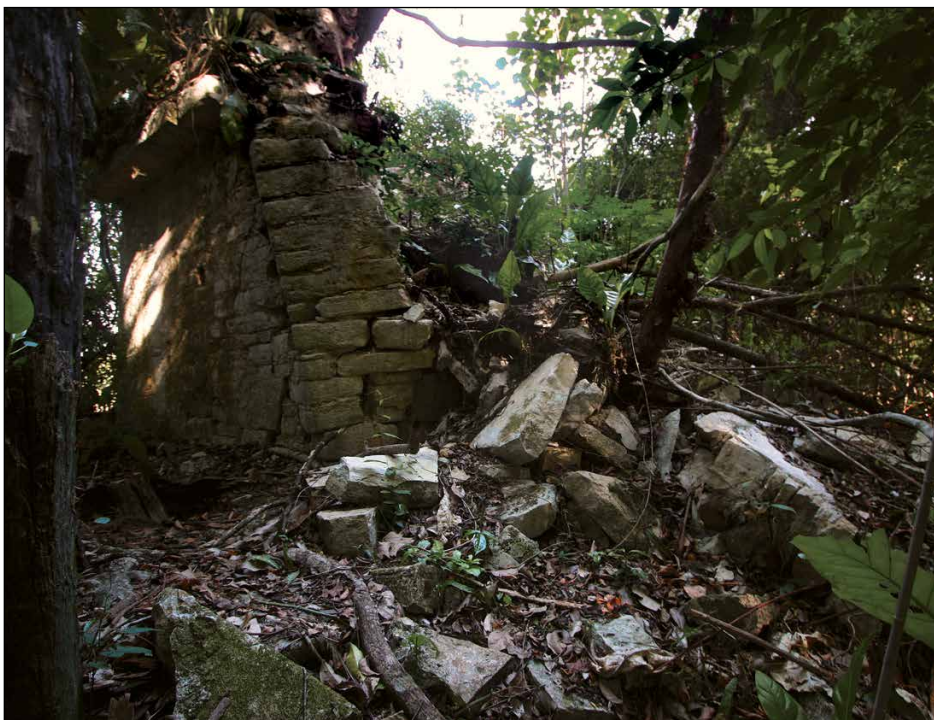


**Figure 41.** Budsilha Structure 1, view of eastern facade, 2010. Photo: Charles Golden.



**Figure 42.** Budsilha Structure 1, view of eastern gallery from the northeast corner of the structure, 2010. Photo: Andrew Scherer.





**Figure 43.** Budsilha Structure 1, view of eastern facade, 2011. Photo: Andrew Scherer.



**Figure 44.** Budsilha Structure 1, collapsed center wall, 2011. A portion of intact vault in Figure 42 is lying in the foreground of this photograph. Photo: Andrew Scherer.

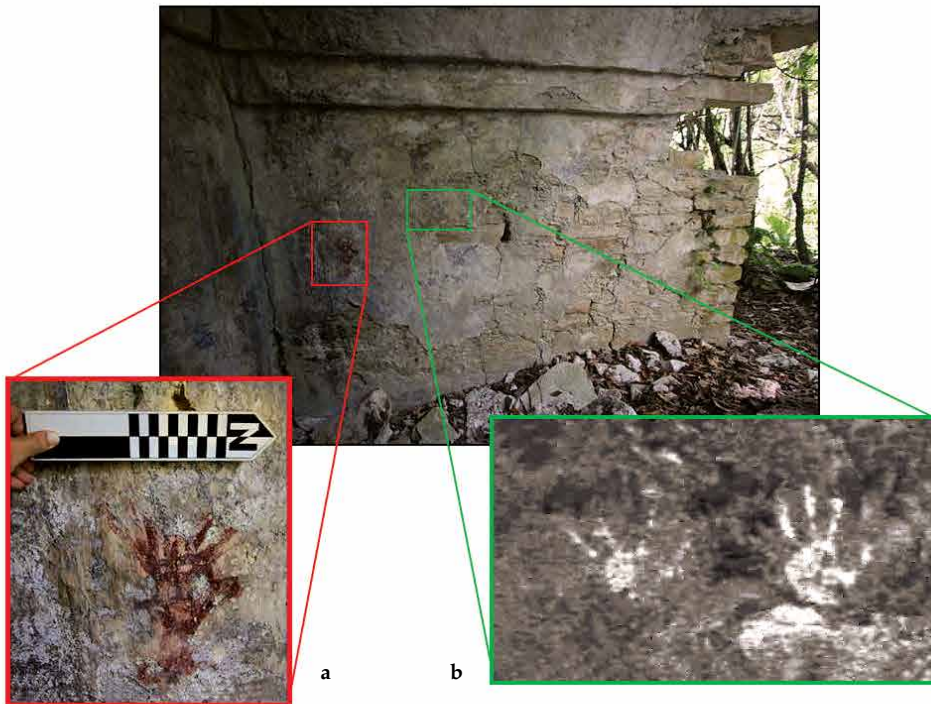




**Figure 45.** Budsilha Structure 1, looking west through the doorway in the median wall between the eastern and western galleries, 2010. Photo: Andrew Scherer.

D6-1 is indeed a two-chambered building with a long axis that runs NE–SW. The eastern half of the southern facade wall and the southern half of the eastern facade wall are intact, as is the southern two-thirds of the central wall that divides the interior space into two chambers. Otherwise, much of the other walls has collapsed, though the foundations are still visible. Only the southernmost part of the vault is still intact. As Maler mentioned, the doorways are indeed quite wide (Figure 45). There is no evidence of the building’s lintels. Although it is possible that they were made of stone and were already looted in Maler’s day, it is equally likely that he is correct in suggesting that they were made of wood. Whatever the case, it is unlikely that the lintels were inscribed, as carved lintels are not known from sites in this vicinity and are instead virtually a trademark of Yaxchilan and its subordinate centers.

We suspect, however, that Maler was wrong when he opined that the structure only had doorways on its eastern facade. Rather, we suspect that the western facade also contained two doorways, as suggested by the stairway that leads up to the back side of the structure. Further, based on the foundation remnants there is clear evidence of a doorway in the northern wall of the structure. The abundance of doorways no doubt contributed to the structure’s collapse. Unfortunately significant amounts of stone have been carted away from the structure for use in modern buildings. Moreover, there is a massive looters’ pit in the northwestern corner that has partially undercut the median wall of the building.



**Figure 46.** Eastern face of the median wall of Budsilha Structure 1, 2010: overlain red hand prints rendered into the image of an anthropomorphic head with headdress and ears flares (a) and traces of hand print visible in modified image (b). Photo and images by Andrew Scherer.



While documenting the structure in 2010 we identified what appeared to be a red handprint on the eastern face of the inner median wall, near the southwest corner of the eastern room (Figure 46). Upon closer inspection, the image seems to be at least two handprints, one on top of the other. This is reminiscent of the handprints that Maler documented at Lake Petha (Mensabak/Itsanok'uh), as noted earlier (Figure 35), and such prints were presumably made by the Lacandon Maya or their immediate predecessors. As such, they likely postdate the construction of this Classic-period structure by centuries. The prints almost certainly had sacred connotations; such prints were perceived by later Lacandon as hand prints of the deities themselves (Palka 2005a:5). We sent photographs of the Budsilha image to Joel Palka who pointed out that although the red print at Budsilha was likely made by dabbing a paint-covered hand on the wall of Structure 1, the print was then modified in order to render a human head wearing a headdress and ear flares (Joel Palka, personal communication 2010; Figure 46a). It seems that as the pigment was originally applied some of the paint from within the palm was removed to create the effect of a face. Rebecca Deeb (personal communication 2010) further pointed out that by converting the colors of the image to Photoshop's Lab Color mode and then filtering to the blue/green channel, two additional handprints are visible (Figure 46b). Thus, at least three handprint-based images adorn the structure, and probably more. The portion of the wall containing the print in Figure 46a was still standing and undamaged as of 2011. However, because we did not wish to disturb any of the rubble from the recent collapse, we were unable to confirm that the portion of the wall with the prints in Figure 46b is still intact.

Maler does not mention the prints when he visited Budsilha, and it is possible that they were made sometime after his 1897 visit. More likely, however, he did not notice them. He did, however, find Lacandon vessels in one corner of the structure (Maler 1903:91). Quite likely Budsilha was a pilgrimage destination for the Lacandon, as were Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan, and other Classic-period sites in the region (Palka 2005b:263).

Structure 1 was built atop a C-shaped platform that it shares with three other structures. None of the other structures shows any evidence of having been vaulted. This platform was constructed on a larger platform that was built atop a natural raised area that includes a total of 17 densely packed structures. This dense arrangement of structures is unusual and suggests a specialized function not only for this architectural complex but for Budsilha in general, an issue that we will return to below.

To date we have managed to map approximately six hectares of the site core (Figure 47). The most notable structure is a large pyramidal platform, Structure 17, built atop a large hill about 240 m north of Structure 1. The exact form of Structure 17 was difficult to determine, though it must have originally been at least ten meters high (not including the height of the hill itself) judging by the amount of rubble. More significant was a major architectural complex directly to the southeast of this structure, atop an adjacent tall hill. Due to time constraints this complex was not mapped and does not appear on our map of the

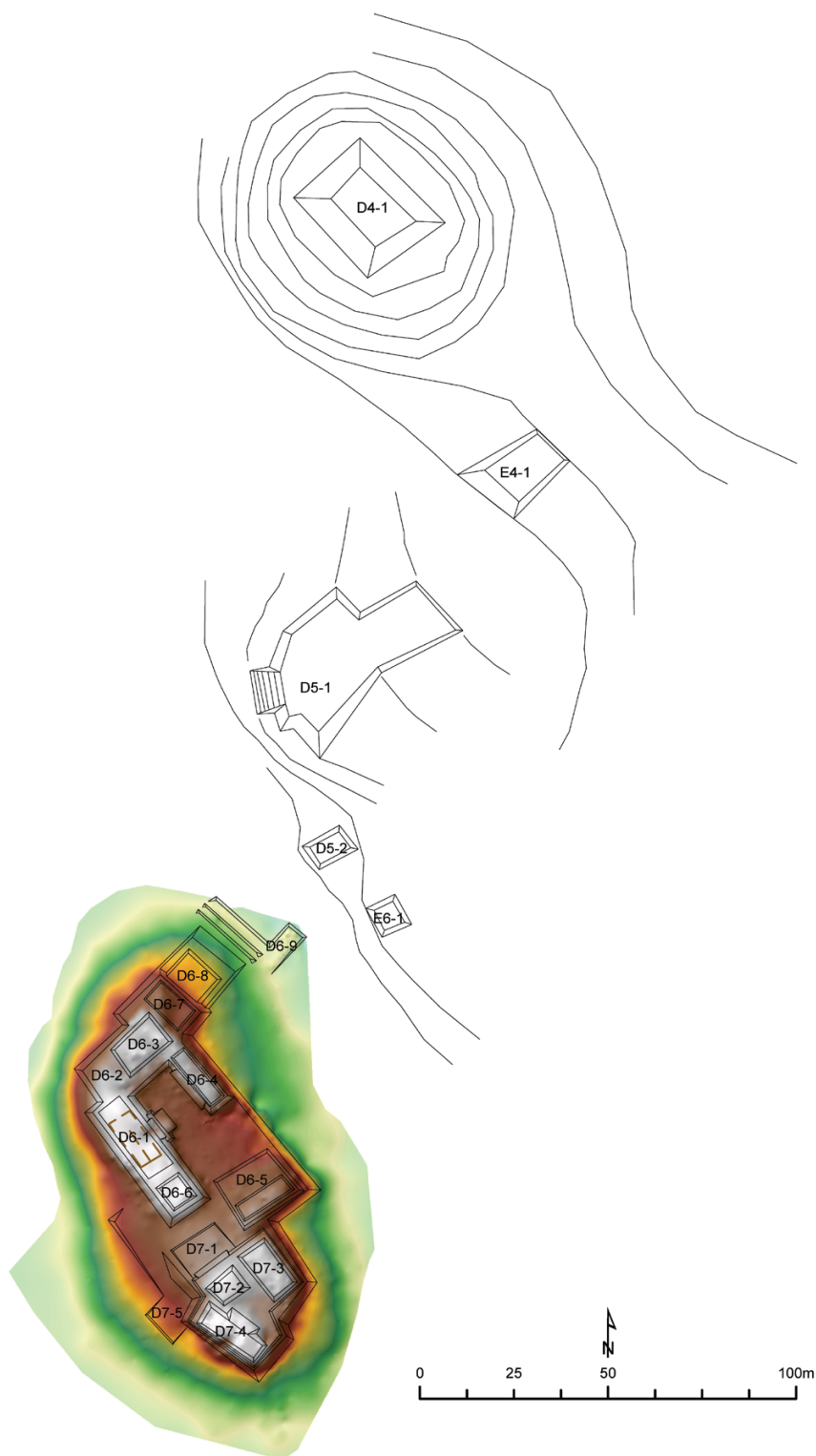


Figure 47. Budsilha, Chiapas. Map by Charles Golden, Andrew Scherer, and Jeffrey Dobreiner.





**Figure 48.** Looters' pit in unmapped architectural group at Budsilha. The assistant is standing in the pit that was excavated out of the rubble fill; the original floor level is somewhere around the height of his head. Photo: Andrew Scherer.





**Figure 49.** Panoramic view of Budsilha looking southwest over the site center. The clump of trees in the left-center of the image is the primary group with Structure 1. Structure 17 is located atop the hill in the right-center of the image. The treeline behind Structure 17 is along the tributary of the Busilja River. The modern community of Nueva Esperanza and the Sierra del Lacandon are in the background. Photo: Andrew Scherer.

site. There are at least two large (5–10 m high) platforms built atop the hill, with one platform located higher up the hill than the other. Amidst the rubble is a large quantity of flat, worked stone suggesting that there may have been vaulted structures as part of this complex. There is also an abundance of Classic-period sherds within the rubble. Unfortunately there are also a series of large looters' pits within this architectural complex (Figure 48). Maler likely referenced this building in his report when he wrote that "several mounds of ruins, the highest of which was once the principal temple, were found; also some large stones, which were not carved" (Maler 1903:92). Unfortunately we did not notice the large stones that Maler mentions, which have likely been carted away since his visit. One possibility is that the stones that Maler describes were lintels for vaulted buildings.

Many of the other hilltops in the vicinity of Budsilha are topped by single mounds, or small clusters of mounds. GPS coordinates were taken on those hill-top groups immediately adjacent to the center, though further reconnaissance is needed to fully map the distribution of settlement at Budsilha. Aside from the principal group, all of the settlement identified to date is located on the hilltops. In addition, we also encountered what appear to be artificial terraces on some of the hillslopes.

The site of Budsilha is situated in a low-lying area adjacent to the Busilja River. The principal architectural complex is located about 450 m south of the Busilja and, as mentioned earlier, is situated on a substantially raised platform. Today a smaller tributary stream passes within about 200 m of the northwestern margin of the primary architectural group, and the site is subject to seasonal inundations at which time the principal group becomes an island. Although Budsilha was apparently dry when Maler visited the site in May of 1897 dur-





ing what would have been the start of the rainy season, we suspect that it was seasonally inundated during the Classic period when the forest cover around Budsilha was likely more substantial than it is today in this heavily ranched area. Especially prone to flooding is the northern edge of the main group, where there is much standing water even today despite the deforestation. Assuming there was even more surface water during the Classic period, Structure 12 seems to have served as a landing point for canoes travelling up the Busilja River. From this landing area, the terrain gradually slopes up to the masonry platform upon which the principal complex was built. Five extremely low, square masonry platforms (unmarked on the map) were built on that slope. Although much further evidence is needed, we suspect that the site of Budsilha may have functioned as either a market or a trade node.

The site itself seems to have been sparsely settled. All of the identified structures, aside from the primary group, were built atop hills. The low-lying terrain is otherwise void of architecture. This pattern of dispersed hilltop settlement is highly reminiscent of the site of Tecolote, which, as we have suggested previously, served a special function as a military outpost in the Yaxchilan kingdom (Scherer and Golden 2009). Although we do not believe Budsilha was a defensive site *per se*, we do believe the settlement pattern reflects that: (1) its primary function was not that of a residential community where the distribution of settlement would be denser and oriented to the surrounding agricultural terrain, and (2) the occupants of Budsilha were concerned with maintaining vigilance of the surrounding terrain. In fact, the site itself is built in a relatively defensible position, surrounded by the Busilja River and its tributary stream to the north and west, and by hills and cliffs to the south and east.

If we are correct that Budsilha served a specialized function, perhaps as a market or exchange node, then we must ask who administered the site? Although it is possible that it was politically independent, the lack of any monuments (even in Maler's day) would suggest it was not the political seat for an *ajaw* or even a *sajal*. Rather, we favor one of two alternative hypotheses which



**Figure 50.** Busilja Falls. Photo: Andrew Scherer.

are not mutually exclusive. One possibility is that Budsilha was governed from the site of La Mar to the west (see below). If this hypothesis is correct, then perhaps Budsilha served as a special-function extension of La Mar situated to access the Busilja River and ultimately the Usumacinta. Alternatively, Budsilha may have been directly administered by Piedras Negras. By the Late Classic period, the rulers of Piedras Negras had a vested interest in building regional political alliances and positioning subordinate lords to control terrain beyond the polity capital (Chinchilla and Houston 1993; Golden et al. 2008). Though the terrain immediately adjacent to the Usumacinta in the vicinity of Piedras Negras is extremely rugged and difficult to travel by foot, the region around Budsilha and La Mar consists of an expansive flat valley (Figure 49). In terms of distance, the shortest route from the Usumacinta to that valley is along the Busilja River, which enters the Usumacinta at the spectacular Busilja Falls, located on a bend in the Usumacinta known as the Cola del Diablo (Figure 50). The direct distance from the site of Budsilha, which is positioned on the eastern side of the valley, to the Usumacinta is only 5.25 km, slightly longer if one follows the Busilja River itself.

### **Cueva de las Manos Rojas**

During our reconnaissance at Budsilha, local informants directed us to a cave located 1.5 km northwest of the site center. The cave is located in the side of a hill and has a relatively small entrance, about 2 m tall and 1.5 m wide (Figure 51). Inside, we estimate the cave height to be about 5 m at its highest point near the entrance. The ceiling of the cave gradually drops away from the entrance to a final height of about 0.5 m. The interior space measures approximately 5 m across and perhaps 5 m deep. Unfortunately, at the time we visited the cave we did not have measuring equipment with us, so all measurements must be treated as rough estimates.

The most distinctive feature of the cave is a series of red handprints and





Figure 51. Entrance to Cueva de las Manos Rojas, Chiapas. Photo: Andrew Scherer.

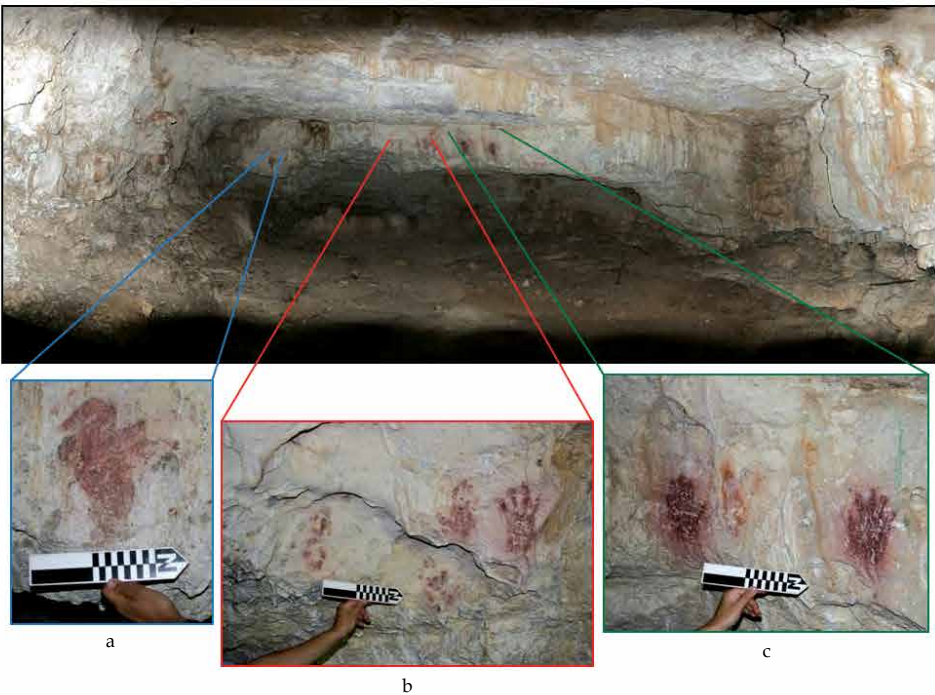


Figure 52. Cueva de las Manos Rojas: (a) indecipherable image, possibly a human head; (b) cluster of handprints; (c) pair of handprints. Photos: Andrew Scherer and Charles Golden.





**Figure 53.** Pigment near the entrance to Cueva de las Manos Rojas: red pigment on left side of entrance. Photo: Andrew Scherer.



**Figure 54.** Pigment near the entrance to Cueva de las Manos Rojas: orange pigment on right side of entrance. Photo: Andrew Scherer.



other red images located on an interior wall (Figure 52) that constitutes part of the Late Postclassic or Historic corpus of rock art found at Budsilha, Lake Mensabak, and elsewhere in the region. Locally the cave is known simply as "Cave of the Red Hands." The images are all located on a vertical stone face of the gradually dropping ceiling, roughly halfway between the cave entrance and the back wall. The image located to the far left is indecipherable though possibly a human head, similar to the one seen at Budsilha (Figure 52a). Near the center of the wall is a cluster of four images (Figure 52b). Moving clockwise from the far left, the first image is a partially faded left handprint. Next is a pair of handprints with the right hand on the left side and the left hand on the right. Below this pair of handprints is another left handprint. Based on the size of the prints in this cluster, the images were made by multiple individuals. To the right is another pair of red handprints, this time with the left hand on the left and the right on the right (Figure 52c). Judging by the size of the prints, this pair of images seems to have been made by the same individual, and these prints are smaller than those in the previous cluster. Also visible are streaks of green and orange color, probably also pigment. The orange pigment immediately to the right of the left handprint is probably another handprint. There is an aura of lighter red pigment around the two dark handprints, which we suspect is the result of moisture within the cave dissolving the red handprints. There is a light area of reddish pigment to the right of this cluster, though it is unclear what was originally rendered here. Continuing to the right, there is a final red image that may be another handprint or perhaps a human head rendered with handprints similar to the head identified at Budsilha. Here also are traces of what appear to be green pigment. The only other areas of pigmentation noted in the cave were a concentration of red pigment on the left side of the cave entrance (as one enters) and a concentration of orange pigment on the right side of the cave entrance (Figures 53 and 54).

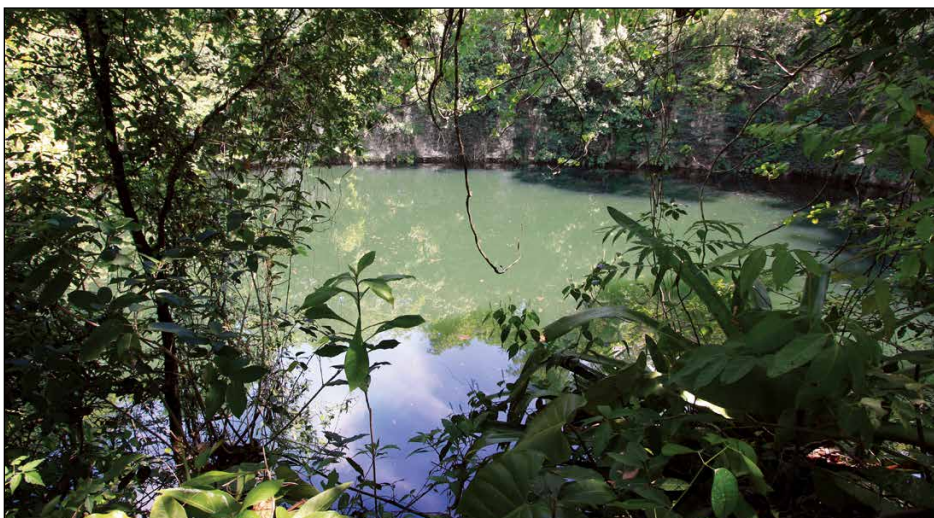


Figure 55. Cenote at Cueva de las Manos Rojas. Photo: Andrew Scherer.

On the surface of the cave floor we also noted large concentrations of fresh-water snail shells, chert flakes, and either animal or human bone fragments. The cave floor is notably clear of loose rubble, though it is uncertain if it was cleared recently or in the past. Intriguingly from a geological perspective the cave is located in the base of a hill, the summit of which is perforated by a large, water-filled cenote (Figure 55). There are some isolated mound groups adjacent to the cenote and cave, though we were unable to conduct a full reconnaissance of the area. The cave, with its rock art and association with the cenote, was almost certainly considered a sacred place on the landscape by the Lacandon Maya and presumably earlier occupants of the area.

### La Mar

During Maler's visit to Budsilha he was pleasantly surprised when informants revealed that there was another archaeological site in the *milpa* (agricultural field) near the logging encampment of La Mar, which he was using as his base to explore the ruins of Budsilha. According to Maler the encampment of La Mar was situated on a creek of the same name, which flows into the "Léché Brook, which in turn flows into the Budsilhá" (Maler 1903:90). Maler was led to the ruins by Señor Gordillo of the logging encampment and describes the trip as follows:

Following the brook upstream (right shore) we presently reached the milperia, where in this month [May] the shooting grain was still in the first stages of its growth. Since the whole ground for almost one kilometre in diameter had been most carefully burned out, the least remnant of the ruined city, which we explored in all directions, was exposed to view. ... The architectural centre of this city was formed by two temples now in ruins. These temples crowned pyramids standing opposite one another: the western faced east, and the front of the eastern was turned towards the west. The plaza between the two temple pyramids was, in addition, bordered on the north and south sides by smaller buildings, while on the other two sides some banks of earth or elevated causeways adjoined the temple. (Maler 1903:93-94)

Maler named these ruins after the logging encampment, La Mar. During his brief visit, Maler documented two stelae at the site, and two more have since been attributed to La Mar (Figure 56). The decipherment of these four monuments as well as sculpture from elsewhere in the region underscores the geopolitical importance of La Mar (Martin and Grube 2000:151-153; Schele and Grube 1994). The toponym first identified by Stuart and Houston (1994) as 'Rabbit Stone' and its variants has since been linked to the site of La Mar (Schele and Grube 1994; Zender 2002). The earliest reference to La Mar is on Panel 4 of Piedras Negras with a possible date of AD 638 (Simon Martin, personal communication 2010). This is followed by a series of references to a noble who "belonged" to Kan Bahlam of Palenque and was a captive at Tonina in AD 693 (Simon Martin, personal communication 2010). This suggests that in the late eighth century the governor of La Mar was a subordinate of the king of Palenque and unsurprisingly a target of attack by Palenque's archrival Tonina.





Figure 56. La Mar Stela 2 (Maler 1903:Plate 36, left).



**Figure 57.** Piedras Negras Stela 12. Mo' Chaak is the standing figure with his back against the left edge. Photo: Charles Golden.



By the latter half of the eighth century the La Mar *ajaw*, Mo' Chaak, was one of Piedras Negras Ruler 7's most important allies, as demonstrated on monuments at both Piedras Negras and La Mar (Figures 57 and 58; Schele and Grube 1994). Throne 1 of Piedras Negras describes him as literally supporting Ruler 7, and Stephen Houston (2004:276) suggests that he was not only Ruler 7's "favorite" but also the possible commissioner of the throne itself. Mo' Chaak also appears as a youth on Piedras Negras Panel 3. The implication is that by the reign of Ruler 7 much of the region, including La Mar, Budsilha, and many of the other sites detailed here, were subsidiary to Piedras Negras. The strength of that relationship is reaffirmed by what Stephen Houston (personal communication 2010) sees as a possible familial connection between the lords of Piedras Negras and La Mar in the eighth century. From the epigraphy alone, it is clear that La Mar is crucial to the geopolitics of the region.

Since Maler's time there has been no archaeological investigation of La Mar, and the site is often incorrectly located on published maps. Local informants took us to a site they believed to be La Mar, and using Maler's description we were able to confirm the identification and properly and precisely georeference the location. Today La Mar is divided between private ranches and largely bisected by Highway 307, with the twin pyramids that Maler reports located along the western edge of the highway (Figure 59). As Maler describes, a tributary of the Busilja winds its way past the ruins and through the site center. Unfortunately the property owner who controls access to the parts of the site discussed by Maler refused to grant us permission to document the site core (Figure 60). On an earlier occasion, however, we were allowed to briefly visit the epicenter and take photographs, confirming that we had indeed relocated Maler's La Mar. Fortunately a significant portion of La Mar is also situated to the east of the

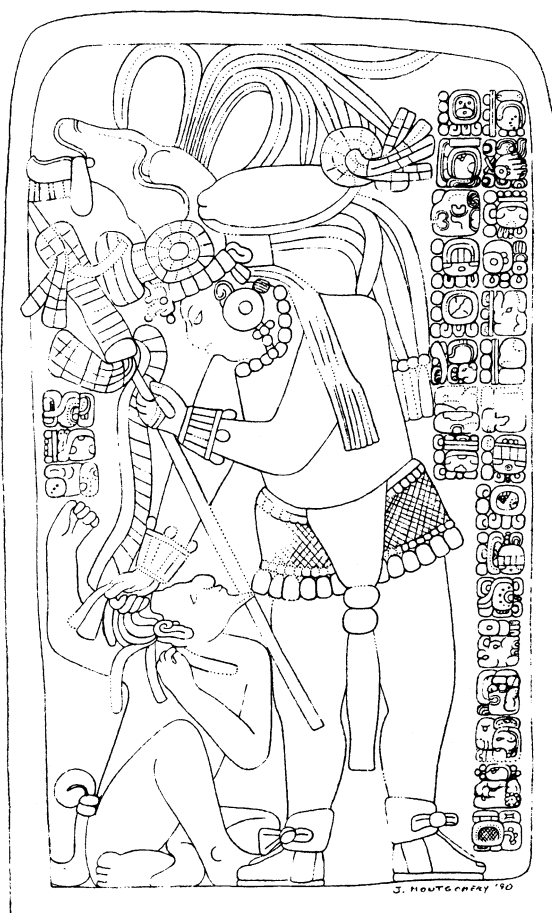


Figure 58. La Mar Stela 3, featuring Mo' Chaak, *ajaw* of La Mar. Drawing by John Montgomery.



**Figure 59.** One of the twin pyramids at La Mar. The individual in the foreground is standing at its base while the second individual is on the summit. Photo: Andrew Scherer.

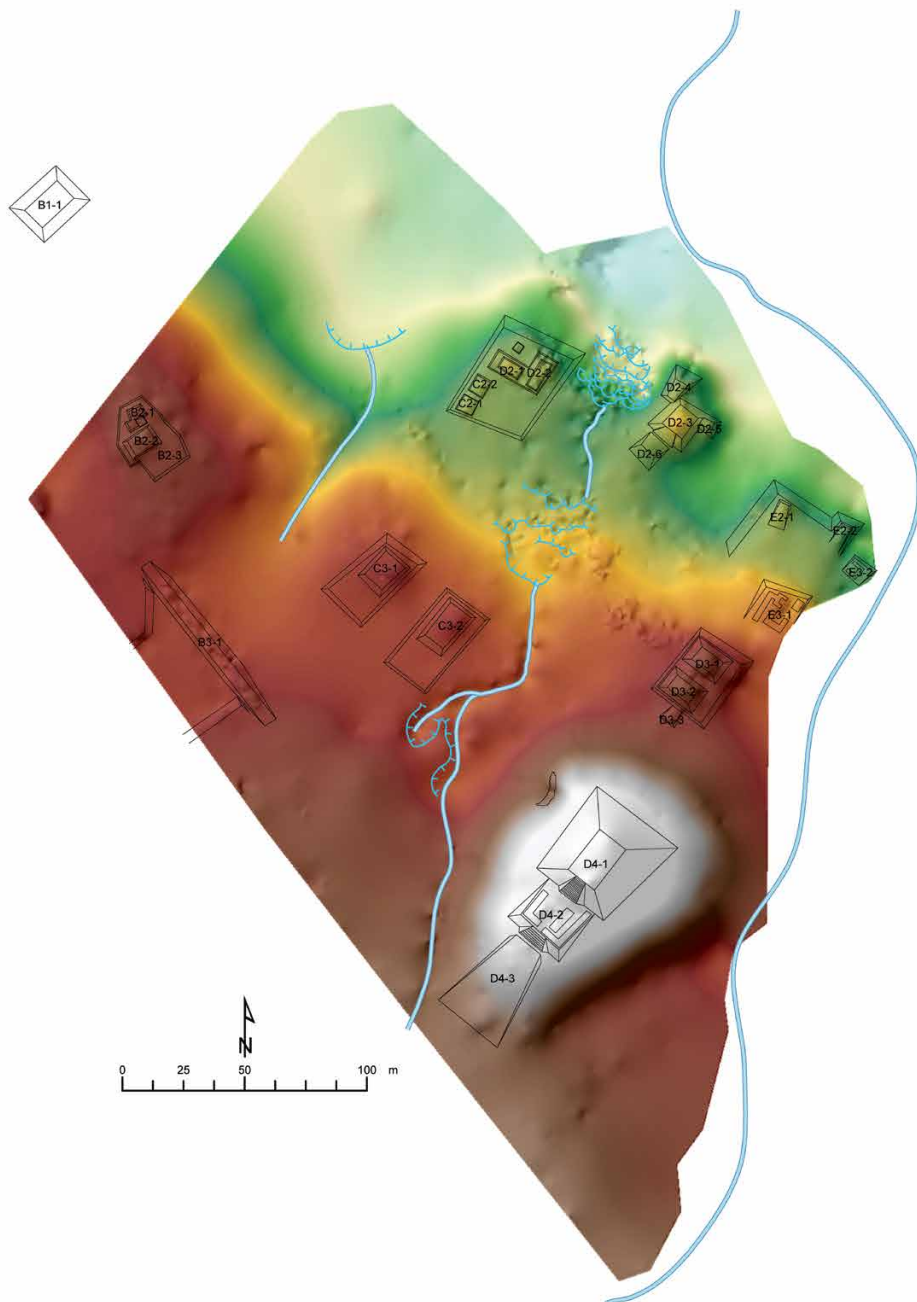


**Figure 60.** Aerial image of La Mar, showing the relationship of the archaeological site to the modern highway. The large structures that Maler documented are within the red polygon and remain to be mapped. From Google Earth (© 2011 Google, INEGI, GeoEye).

highway, and the two landowners who own this portion of La Mar were quite accommodating and expressed interest not only in our work, but also in preserving the portions of the site that are located on their land.

As Maler reports, the ceremonial core of La Mar consists of a plaza bounded by twin pyramids on the east and west and a long and low mound to the north. The central plaza is still under canopy. Each pyramid is estimated to be 5–7 m tall. North of the central plaza are a series of other large mounds, visible from





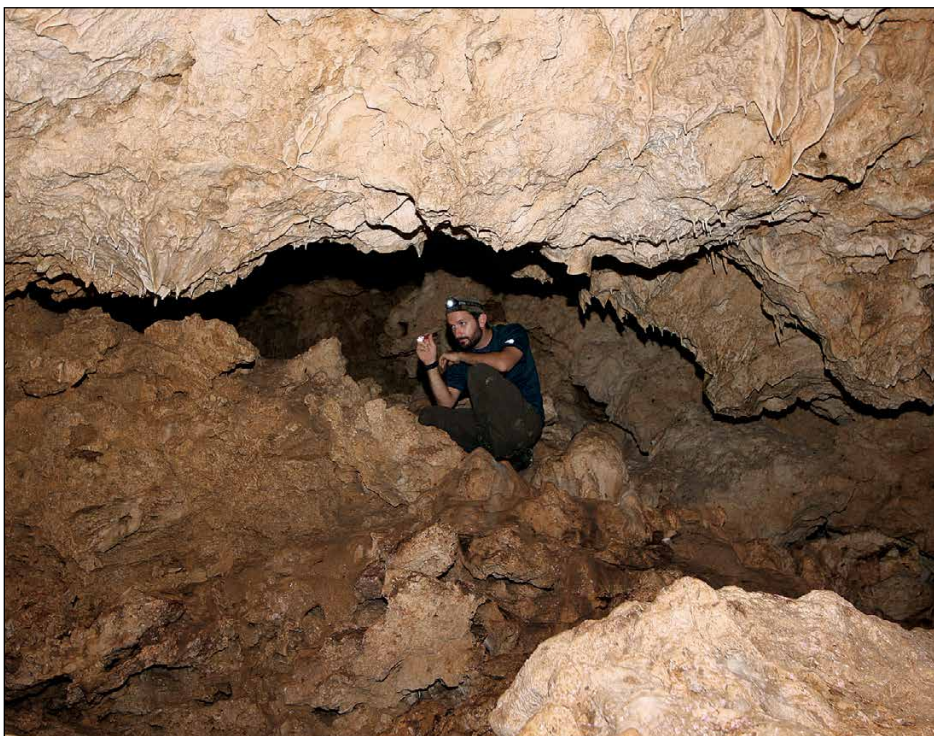
**Figure 61.** La Mar, Chiapas. Map by Charles Golden, Andrew Scherer, and Jeffrey Dobreiner.

the highway. The ranch house is constructed atop one of the mounds. Beyond the site core there is an additional 30 to 40 hectares of settlement on the western side of the highway that we were unable to map.

On the eastern side of the highway we mapped 10 hectares of La Mar by total station and conducted a near-complete survey of 80 hectares by GPS (Figure 61). The area we mapped is located approximately 600 m north of the twin pyramids first identified by Maler. Although many of the structures in the



**Figure 62.** Southern view of the hill containing Structures D4-1 and D4-2 at La Mar. Structure D4-1 is the leveled platform just below and to the left of the treeline near the top. Structure D4-2 is covered by the trees. Photo: Andrew Scherer.



**Figure 63.** Cave on the north face of the hill on top of which Structures D4-1 and D4-2 are located. Photo: Charles Golden.



mapped area of La Mar are relatively modest in size (1–2 m high), Structure D4-1 is monumental, consisting of a large pyramidal platform constructed atop a natural hill (Figure 62). Although we do not have precise measurements, we estimate that the height of the Structure 18 masonry platform capping the hilltop is roughly 5 meters. Unfortunately Structure D4-1 has been heavily looted, with two massive pits punched into the summit of the pyramid. Our suspicion, however, is that at least one if not multiple superstructures were originally located atop the pyramid. The landowner indicates that the looting occurred before he acquired the land in the 1980s, and indeed the looting does not appear recent. Structure D4-1 is fronted by a platform located about a third of the way down from the summit. Structure D4-2 supported two small superstructures. Some masonry rubble is present from the base of the hillslope up to Structure D4-2, though it is not clear if the stonework was actually part of a stairway and the map has been left ambiguous in that regard. The modification of hilltops into monumental architectural complexes is an obvious parallel to the monumental buildings at Laguna Oscura and Budsilha. A large cave is located at the northern base of the hill (Figure 63). We explored the upper regions of the cave, which is full of rubble and seems to continue to a significant depth. We did not locate any surface ceramics or other cultural material within the cave.

The eastern and northeastern limits of the mapped portion of the site are bounded by the stream mentioned in Maler's report. The stream flows year-round and cascades down a series of waterfalls with dramatic effect, similar to the site core of Palenque—albeit on a much more modest scale (Figure 64).



**Figure 64.** Waterfalls east of Structures E2-2 and E3-2 at La Mar. Photo: Andrew Scherer.



**Figure 65.** La Mar ballcourt. The archaeologist is standing within the court; Structure D3-2 is on the left, and Structure D3-1 is on the right. Photo: Andrew Scherer.

Relative to the stream, the mapped portion of the site is located in an upland region that gradually slopes downhill to the north. Structures 5 through 12 are all located on natural rises and are oriented to face out towards the stream, which flows south to north. There is a dry stream bed that runs between Structures 16 and 18. It appears that water seasonally flows down this stream bed (or did so in the past) and cascades down exposed bedrock between Structures 11 and 12, and perhaps also between Structures 7 and 10.

A ballcourt (Structures D3-1 and D3-2) is situated atop a low platform (Figure 65). The court is notably small and we suspect that there may be at least one more ballcourt in the unmapped portion of the site. The position of the ballcourt near the stream is reminiscent of both Palenque and Yaxchilan, where the ballcourts are located adjacent to the Otulum and Usumacinta Rivers, respectively, with possible underworld connotations. The La Mar ballcourt is oriented on the same axis as one of Yaxchilan's ballcourts,  $120^{\circ}$  E of N. Further, the presence of a ballcourt hints at some sociopolitical autonomy for La Mar. Ballcourts are found at all of the major centers of the region: Yaxchilan, Piedras Negras, Palenque, Chinikiha, and Plan de Ayutla. In contrast, despite years of reconnaissance in the Yaxchilan kingdom, we have yet to identify a ballcourt at any of its secondary centers. The presence of a ballcourt at Esmeralda, presumably a Piedras Negras subordinate center, may indicate that among subsidiaries of Piedras Negras ballplaying was not limited to the polity capital, as it was within the dominion of Yaxchilan. This may be part of the broader phenomenon of more overt political subordination within the Yaxchilan kingdom relative to Piedras Negras, as we have hypothesized previously (Golden et al. 2008).

The presence of the monumental Structure D4-1 and the ballcourt suggests



that at least a portion of La Mar's civic-ceremonial center is included in the mapped area of the site, with the majority of the epicenter, including the twin pyramids, remaining unmapped. If this is correct, the La Mar site core is nearly 1 km long, north to south, and is probably broken into a series of smaller precincts. As such, the layout at La Mar is reminiscent of the larger Piedras Negras, where the core is slightly larger than 1 km north-south and the monumental architecture was constructed in distinct precincts (Acropolis, East Group, South Group). Nonetheless, the architecture of La Mar is by no means as large or monumental as that of Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan, or even Plan de Ayutla.

One unusual feature that we encountered over the course of mapping was a long, low line of stone (about 1 m high and 2 m wide) that runs northwest to southeast in the mapped portion of the site (Structure B3-1). At present it is difficult to speculate as to its function. The stones may have been the foundation for a wooden palisade that served a defensive function or perhaps to delimit a portion of the site (see Scherer and Golden 2009). Alternatively, the stones may have been part of a *sache* system similar to those reported near Palenque (see Silva de la Mora 2008). However, modification of the terrain to the southwest of B3-1 into a relatively rectilinear space, and the obvious drainage of water down a channel running northeast from B3-1, suggests a likely role in water management and the control of runoff during the rainy-season floods.

Beyond the unmapped portion of the site we were able to obtain GPS points on twenty other architectural groups. These consisted of either isolated mounds or mound groups of two or three structures, the majority of which likely served residential functions. The settlement is situated around upland areas adjacent to the stream that flows into the Busilja River to the north, facilitating access to these waterways but avoiding seasonal floods. In fact soils are quite deep in some portions of La Mar. One of the landowners had excavated a large pit (no architecture appears to have been disturbed) in order to collect water for his ranching operation, and the visible soil profile was about 3 m deep with no evidence that he had hit bedrock. The location of settlement on the valley floor at La Mar is in obvious contrast to the more defensive posturing of hilltop settlement at nearby Budsilha, again hinting at the alternative functions of these sites.

Aside from the extensive looting in Structure D40-1, there has been very little looting in the portions of the site that we have been able to document. What is notable, however, is the lack of ceramic material on the surface, which is quite in contrast to what we observed at Budsilha. It is possible that farming and ranching at La Mar since Maler's time has significantly disturbed surface deposits. Alternatively, it may suggest a shallow occupational history for the site.

During our reconnaissance in the region around La Mar we encountered another large center approximately 10 km to the southwest, which we have named Uch Chan. We were first drawn to the site by a massive looters' cut into a large mound on the west side of the highway. There are a series of large mounds on both sides of the highway, many of which have been penetrated by looters. There is a large hill in a forested area adjacent to the highway, the entire flank of which is terraced into a series of large platforms and patio groups. Although

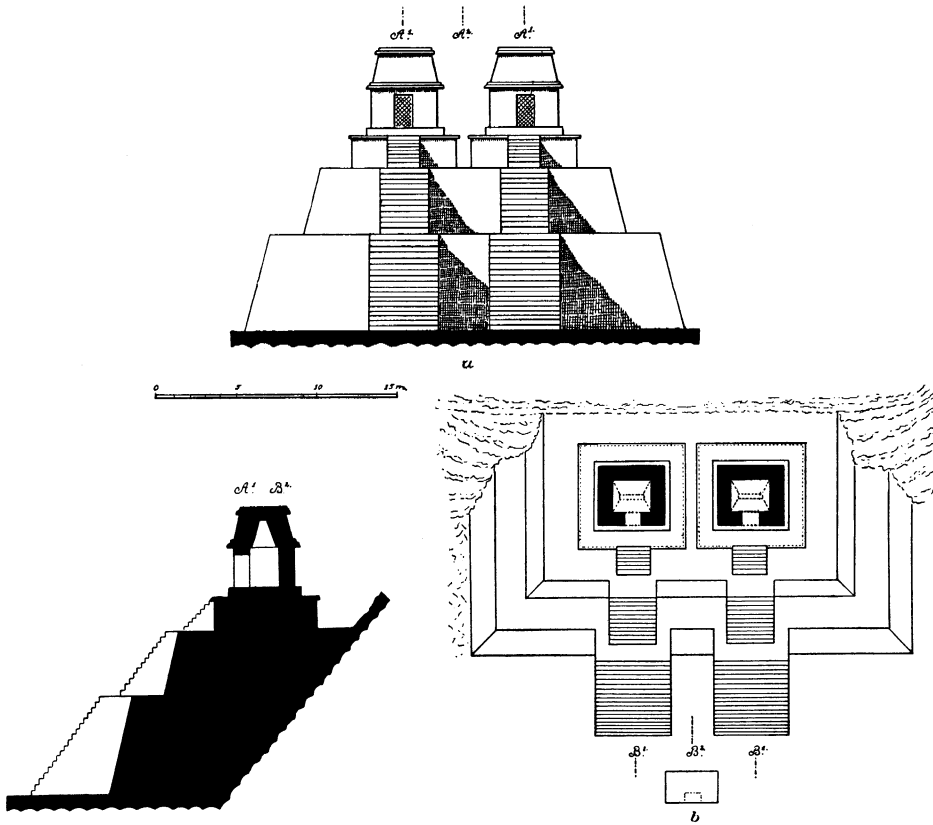


Figure 66. Facade, profile, and plan of the principal pyramid at El Chile, Chiapas (Maler 1903:Figure 35).



Figure 67. Environments around the Laguna Lacandon, Peten: mud flats that are inundated during the rainy season. Photo: Andrew Scherer.





**Figure 68.** Environments around the Laguna Lacandon, Peten: serrated grasses around the lake perimeter. Photo: Andrew Scherer.



we only had the opportunity to explore Uch Chan preliminarily, the amount of architecture would suggest that at least some of the structures may have been vaulted. In terms of monumentality, Uch Chan is easily comparable to La Mar and Laguna Oscura and, like those sites, should be considered a secondary political center. The site may be the source of some of the looted monuments of yet-to-be identified sites from the kingdom of Piedras Negras.

### **El Chile, Anaite II, and El Chicozapote**

After completing his study of La Mar, Maler returned to El Cayo. From there he traveled by canoe up the Usumacinta to the logging encampment of El Chile on the Mexican bank of the river. During Maler's day—and likely during Classic times as well—El Chile was used as a portage point for travelers heading upstream (south) and needing to avoid the dangerous Chicozapote rapids. About half a kilometer from the encampment Maler encountered ruins that he named El Chile after the nearby logging camp. The principle structure at El Chile is a twin-stairway pyramidal structure leading up to twin superstructures (Figure 66). The superstructures were partly destroyed when Maler visited the site, though he reports that the building lintels were still present and unworked. According to Maler, the structure faces to the north, as did the main building at El Cayo, raising the question of whether they were oriented to face in the general direction of Piedras Negras. However, no monuments have been reported for El Chile, and its ancient political allegiances are unknown.

From El Chile Maler traveled inland along the Anaite stream, and after about 3 km he encountered a small archaeological site that he named Anaite I. Further inland is a large lake known as the Laguna Santa Clara. According to Maler, to the south and west of the lake is a much larger archaeological site that he named Anaite II. From that description we must assume the "Anaité" that appears north of the lake on Maler's map (Figure 2) is a reference to Anaite I and the "Anaité" that is south of the lake on the map refers to Anaite II, but future work is needed to reconfirm these locations. The Laguna Santa Clara, much like the Laguna Lacandon to the north in Guatemala, is situated in a broad expansive plain that is seasonally inundated when the lake overflows during the rainy season. As attractive as these lakes appear in aerial photography, they are in fact quite formidable barriers for travel due to the marshes that surround them, which are full of standing water, deep mud, swarms of mosquitoes, and serrated grasses that easily cut human skin (Figures 67 and 68). At Anaite II, Maler reported:

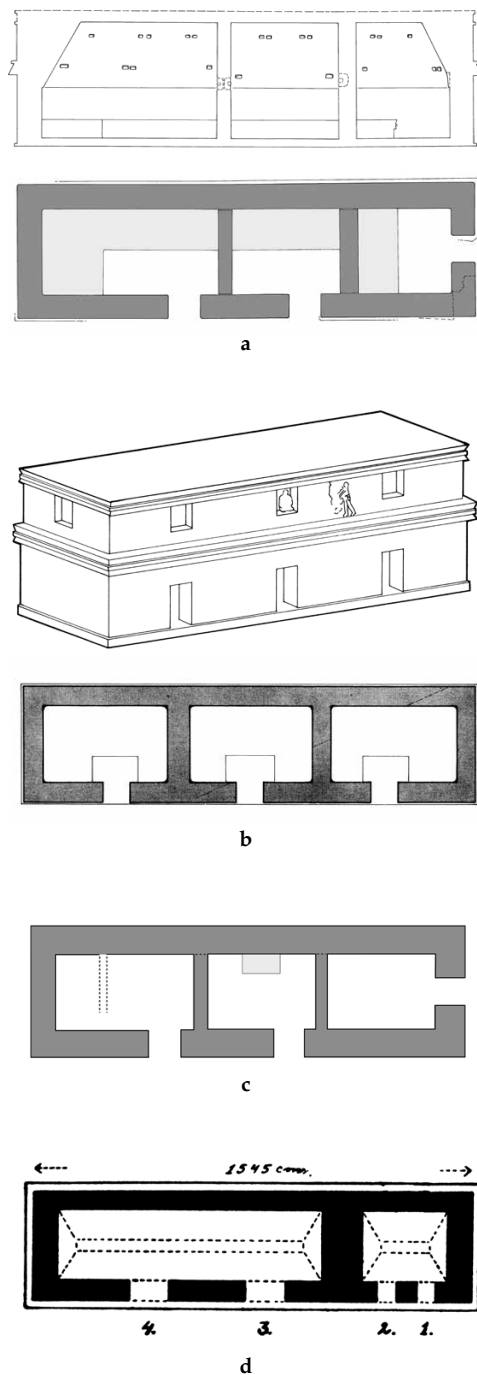
In this ruin, never before visited, we found many buildings now fallen down, but their massive substructures with their walls of stone slabs are for the most part well preserved. . . . The architectural centre of Anaité II consists of a great terrace about four metres high and rectangular in shape, the retaining walls of which are well preserved. On top of this terrace are the ruins of several small buildings, among them the massive substructures of two small ruined temples. (Maler 1903:99).

Maler did not find any carved monuments.



After he finished his exploration of Anaite II, Maler returned to El Chile whence he ventured to the site of El Chicozapote in what was then mid-June of 1897. El Chicozapote was reported to be located near an abandoned logging encampment “midway between El Chile and Anaité, being about three leagues (about twelve and a half kilometres) from these two points” (Maler 1903:100). Upon arriving at the abandoned logging encampment Maler developed a malarial fever which “broke out with great violence”; the ever-indomitable Maler writes that after “[a]bstaining from food for three days and taking heavy doses of quinine in coffee, I succeeded in breaking it up completely. In such desperate conditions — surrounded by people who are constantly dissatisfied and grumbling — it is necessary to lose no time in curing one’s self, otherwise the case lasts for months and the system is much reduced” (Maler 1903:100).

Still weak from fever Maler set out to explore El Chicozapote, which is apparently situated near the banks of an arroyo that was known at the time as the Arroyo del Chicozapote. He describes El Chicozapote as “a large ruined city, where many remnants of buildings covered the *extremely hilly tract of land*” (Maler 1903:100, *emphasis added*). Maler’s description of the rugged terrain at El Chicozapote is reminiscent of Tecolote, located just across the Usumacinta in Guatemala (Scherer and Golden 2009). Maler’s description of the principle structure of El Chicozapote recalls Structure



**Figure 69.** (a) Structure D3-1 from Tecolote (drawing by Martín Rangel); (b) Structure 1 from Bonampak (drawing by Gerardo A. Ramírez Hernández from Arellano Hernández 1998:Figure 4); (c) La Pasadita Structure 1 (drawing by Charles Golden from notes by Ian Graham); (d) principal structure from El Chicozapote (Maler 1903:Figure 36).

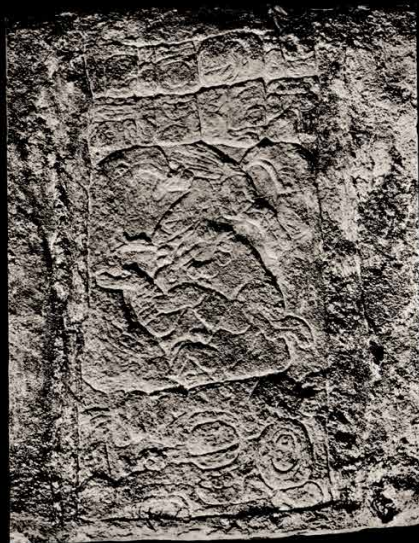
D3-1 at Tecolote, Structure 1 at La Pasadita, and Structure 1 at Bonampak (Figure 69). According to Maler (1903:101), “On a terrace about two metres high, with a flight of steps leading to the lower esplanade, a building rises facing the north-west, probably a temple, consisting of two chambers in a line.” Although it is not published in his report for the Peabody Museum (Maler 1903), an Austrian publication of Maler’s photographs and illustrations includes a photograph of the ruined building (Herrmann 1992). In all cases, the building was constructed first as a single larger galley, with interior walls then erected to divide the space inside. The major difference between the main structures of these three sites is the number of doorways and the division of the Bonampak structure into three rooms, whereas the buildings at El Chicozapote, Tecolote, and La Pasadita are divided into only two rooms, one significantly larger than the other (Figure 69). Finally, as with La Pasadita and Bonampak but unlike Tecolote, the doorway lintels of the El Chicozapote structure were carved—three of the four were still in situ during Maler’s visit and the fourth had fallen and was shattered (Figure 70). Maler reports that two of the lintels still retained their vibrant color. The lintels have since been removed from the site and are in private collections and museums. Based on epigraphic analyses of these lintels we know that El Chicozapote was administered by lords subordinate to the king of Yaxchilan (Martin and Grube 2000:124) and that the site, along with Tecolote and La Pasadita, formed part of a defensive perimeter along the northern border of the Yaxchilan kingdom (Golden et al. 2008). After completing his exploration of El Chicozapote, Maler returned to Anaite and from there set out for Yaxchilan by canoe on the Usumacinta.

### **From 1901 to 2011**

Maler’s work in the Middle Usumacinta River Valley was effectively the first regional survey of the area, conducted decades before regional reconnaissance emerged as standard practice in Maya archaeology. Since Maya monuments were still largely undeciphered at the turn of the century, Maler could offer little in terms of historical and cultural interpretation of the sites that he documented. In the 100 years that have passed since his expeditions, we are now much better positioned to contextualize the sites that he reported over a century ago. Although a full review of the political history of the region is beyond the scope of this paper, we do want to make a few key observations resulting from our research in 2010 and 2011, building upon our earlier work in the area (Golden and Scherer 2006; Golden et al. 2008; Scherer and Golden 2009, in press).

As a result of recent advances in epigraphic studies, we know that the Classic-period history of the Middle Usumacinta River Valley was a tumultuous one, as the region’s most powerful centers—Palenque, Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan, Tonina, and Sak T’zi’—vied with one another for regional dominance (Anaya Hernández 2001; Anaya Hernández et al. 2003; Biró 2005; Martin and Grube 2000; Mathews 1988; Safronov 2005; Schele 1991; Schele and Grube 1994; Stuart 1998; Stuart and Stuart 2008; Tokovinine 2005). In turn, the smaller sites of the region—many of those reported here—were swept into these geopolitical





**Figure 70.** El Chicozapote Lintels 1 (top, left), 2 (top, right), 3 (bottom, left), and 4 (bottom, right). Plates 37 and 38 of Maler 1903.

struggles: battles took place at these smaller communities, captives were taken, daughters were married to lords of the polity capitals, and accession and funerary events were overseen by the kings of the polity capitals. What follows is a brief overview of the Late Classic geopolitical history of the region, based on the most recent readings of its hieroglyphic texts, and integrated with the archaeological data reported here.

Around the turn of the eighth century, during the reign of K'inich Kan Bahlam II (ruled AD 684-702), Palenque's dominance stretched as far south as La Mar and Anaite, where lords from both of these sites were allied to the Palenque king (Martin and Grube 2000:170). This suggests that a significant part of the region reviewed in this report was at one time under the sway of Palenque. Sometime around the turn of the century, Tonina under the leadership of K'inich Baaknal Chaak seems to have wreaked havoc in this area, taking captives from a number of centers including La Mar and Anaite, and even obtaining the loyalty of Bonampak to the south (Martin and Grube 2000:182). For the lords of Palenque, these events marked an apparent contraction of regional dominance. By the latter half of the eighth century, Palenque's overlordship was clear only as far south as Xupa, where both the material culture and epigraphy indicate strong ties to Palenque (Stuart and Stuart 2008:164). Throughout the eighth century Palenque fought with both Tonina and Piedras Negras, presumably to protect the Palenque kings' interests to the south and east (Martin and Grube 2000:170-173; Stuart and Stuart 2008:152, 165, 188). Chinikiha, one of the largest centers between Palenque and Piedras Negras, seems to have managed to maintain some degree of autonomy during this tumultuous century (Liendo Stuardo 2007b:6).

Despite Tonina's successful forays into the Middle Usumacinta River Valley in the early eighth century, the majority of the region was under the sway of either the lords of Piedras Negras or Yaxchilan throughout much of the eighth century (Chinchilla and Houston 1994; Mathews 1988; Schele 1991; Tokovinine 2005). By the middle of the century, Yaxchilan's dominance stretched as far north as El Chiczapote, which, along with Tecolote and La Pasadita in Guatemala, formed a ring of sites protecting Yaxchilan's northern border (Scherer and Golden 2009). Looted monuments from the region suggest that at least a few other Yaxchilan-allied secondary centers remain to be identified. For the kings of Piedras Negras, the lords of El Cayo and La Mar—the latter once subject to Palenque—were valuable allies throughout the eighth century. From this we can posit with reasonable certainty that in addition to El Cayo and La Mar, the sites of Budsilha, Uch Chan, Laguna Oscura, and many of the smaller sites reported in this study were tied in some manner to the Piedras Negras polity. Both Uch Chan and Laguna Oscura are reasonable candidates for the source of looted monuments depicting subordinate Piedras Negras lords.

Why were the kings of Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan, Palenque, and Tonina so preoccupied with exercising dominance in the Middle Usumacinta River Valley? Although there certainly was prestige to be gained through combat and the taking of captives, we believe the available evidence points to material



concerns underlying the Late Classic conflict in the area. Perhaps the single most important factor was control over routes of travel. Many of the smaller centers reviewed here are situated along the major valley that runs southeast–northwest between Yaxchilan and Palenque. La Mar, in particular, is located at a critical juncture on the landscape. Recent least-cost analysis by Golden has shown that La Mar sits at a crossroads of sorts for all the major Maya polities of the region. The easiest route between Yaxchilan and Palenque is through La Mar, and the site is located at the point at which travelers venturing from both Tonina and Piedras Negras (by way of Budsilha) would enter the valley. The valley itself was likely an important corridor for the exchange of goods, including jade and obsidian from the highlands, and marine shells, stingray spines, and salt from coastal areas to the north. If we use the presence of these exotics as a measure of the degree of control over routes of travel, it seems that Piedras Negras was reasonably successful in obtaining goods from the north—as measured by the presence of marine goods in elite burials (Coe 1959). However, the inhabitants of Piedras Negras seemed to have had poor access to exotics from the Guatemalan highlands, as demonstrated by the paucity of jade in the tombs (Coe 1959; Escobedo 2004) and the small size of the obsidian blades and cores (Hruby 2005).

The kings of Piedras Negras likely had additional reasons to control the valley to the west of the Usumacinta in the area around La Mar. The site of Piedras Negras is located amidst especially hilly, rugged terrain which would have been ideal for defense, yet problematic for agriculture. The apparent lack of terracing at Piedras Negras (Nelson 2005) suggests that the occupants of the city were not pushed to farm the hilltops or hillslopes where the soil is notably thin. Despite the limitations of the terrain, the inhabitants of Piedras Negras enjoyed one of the most maize-rich diets in the Maya lowlands (Scherer et al. 2007). The solution was most likely the importation of maize from nearby regions, perhaps as tribute. Much of the area around La Mar and Budsilha is notable for its deep soils, a product of the relative lack of topography and perhaps seasonal flooding from the Busilja River and other waterways. Although the agricultural potential of this area needs to be assessed through paleoenvironmental analysis, we suspect this area was a “breadbasket” of sorts for the Piedras Negras polity. Indeed, our own reconnaissance efforts indicate that settlement in the valley west of the Usumacinta, in the area around La Mar, appears to have been far denser than on the Guatemalan side of the river where the terrain is more rugged.

There is also compelling evidence to suggest that the toponyms used by Piedras Negras may refer to the area between La Mar, Budsilha, and Piedras Negras itself. One of the toponyms for Piedras Negras is *yokib*, for which a possible translation is “entrance” (Stuart and Houston 1994:31). *Yokib* may be a reference to the formidable Iguanas–Upper San José Canyon through which the Usumacinta cuts to the west of Piedras Negras, and indeed some local residents have begun to refer to the canyon as such. Although the canyon is certainly impressive as one passes through it on the river, the San José is perhaps best appreciated when viewed from the area around La Mar, where it appears as the most dramatic feature on the horizon (Figures 71 and 72). Marc Zender has suggested



Figure 71. Iguanas–Upper San José Canyon viewed from on the river. Photo: Andrew Scherer.





**Figure 72.** Iguanas—Upper San José Canyon viewed from a few kilometers northwest of La Mar. Photo: Charles Golden.

that *k'ina'* ("sun water") is a toponym referenced in lordly titles at Piedras Negras (Zender 2002:171). If there is any remarkable feature on the landscape that could be called "sun water" it is likely the Busilja Falls, located about 10 km upstream from Piedras Negras and about 5 km from the site of Budsilha (Figure 73).

## Conclusion

Much work remains to be done in order to understand this important corner of the Maya world. We now know that many of the sites visited by Maler were secondary political centers attached to the polity capitals of Piedras Negras, Palenque, and Yaxchilan. Since Maler's time we have developed a much better grasp of the archaeology and Classic-period history of the region. However, much of that perspective is biased towards the polity capitals themselves. If we are to truly understand the Middle Usumacinta River Valley we must take our cue from Maler and look beyond the major sites of the region and explore its smaller ancient communities.

Our work in 2010–2011 represents an important first step, providing updated information on sites first visited by Maler and identifying new sites that Maler missed during his own travels through the region. Yet many questions remain. For instance, we still do not fully understand how secondary centers were integrated with the polity capitals. This is especially true for the Piedras Negras kingdom. During the final years of the Classic period, the kings of Piedras Negras honored their allies at La Mar and El Cayo both on monuments at Piedras Negras and with monuments carved for the secondary centers. Yet we lack even the most basic archaeological information from the sites themselves (Chinchilla and Houston 1993; Schele and Grube 1994). Just as the region is wanting in terms of archaeological investigation, it is also in dire need of protection. Nearly every site we visited demonstrates evidence of looting, much of it quite recent. As population levels in the region continue to rise and more forest is cleared, it is only inevitable that the speed of looting and destruction will accel-



**Figure 73.** The upper falls of the Busilja where the river enters the Usumacinta about 10 km downstream from Piedras Negras. Photo: Andrew Scherer

ate. Continued documentation of archaeological sites in the Middle Usumacinta River Valley is sorely needed, not only to understand the ancient history of the region but also to protect one of Mexico's most valuable cultural resources.

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