

FAMSI © 2001: Francisco Estrada-Belli

(Boston U./ now Vanderbilt University)

**Archaeological Investigations at Holmul, Guatemala
Report of the First Field Season, May-June 2000**

With contributions by: Jason Gonzales (Southern Illinois U., Carbondale), Marc Wolf (T.I.M.S.), Laura Kosakowsky (Boston U./U. Arizona) and Justin Ebersole (Boston U.)



Research Year: 1999

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Proto-Classic

Location: Norhteastern Petén, Guatemala

Site: Holmul

Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Preparation for Field Work](#)

[Mapping the Site](#)

[Group I](#)

[Group II](#)

[Group III](#)

[Western Transect](#)

[Minor Centers](#)

[Summary and Future Directions](#)

[List of Figures](#)

[Sources Cited](#)

[Preliminary Report on the Ceramics from Holmul, Guatemala: Year 2000 Season](#)

by Laura J. Kosakowsky

Submitted 11/01/2000 by:
Francisco Estrada-Belli (Ph.D. 1998, Boston Univ.)
Vanderbilt University
Department of Anthropology
francisco.estrada-belli@vanderbilt.edu

Introduction

The goals of the Holmul Archaeological Project are to obtain an understanding on the nature of the Maya city of Holmul through information collected from field survey and excavations. It is believed that this archaeological site will provide key information to our understanding of the processes behind the development of political institutions among the Maya at the end of the Preclassic period, as evident from its architectural, artifactual and burial record. The site has frequently attracted Mayanists' attention because of its well-known Late Preclassic and Classic period burial and ceramic assemblages (Brady *et al.*, 1995; Bullard, 1960; Hammond, 1984; Pring, 1977; 1995; Merwin and Vaillant, 1932; Reents-Budet, 1995) although the site for the most part remains archaeologically poorly known. A number of structures were excavated by Raymond Merwin in 1911 (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932) in one of Harvard University's first scientific explorations in Petén, providing the first stratified chronology for the Maya Lowlands and an array of well furnished burials from Preclassic to Late/Terminal Classic periods (Merwin's Holmul I-V phases).

More specifically, Merwin's spectacular finds indicated the early development of elaborate elite tombs and funerary shrines at Holmul during the II and III centuries A.D. Also, the site's location at the crossroads of important geographical and political boundaries between the Tikal state and its eastern neighbors of Northeastern Petén, such as Naranjo, Yaxhá, Nakum, Xultún, El Pilar, Buenavista del Cayo and Xunantunich during the Classic period, presents important implications for our understanding of the political interactions among Maya cities in this part of the Lowlands as evident from their trajectories of growth, settlement and trade patterns. In particular, it is believed that observation of the architectural configuration of the site center, elite ceramic styles, iconography and burial patterns when correlated with the layouts and patterns of growth of the residential areas may help understand the growth of the city as a political player in the complex geo-political landscape of the Classic period Maya Lowlands. This material evidence might in turn help us correlate the history of the site with that of some of its historically better documented neighbors, namely Tikal and Naranjo even though at Holmul textual evidence may be lacking.

The project's methodology includes several phases of research directed at the systematic study of the archaeological site and its environs. Phase 1 is to be focused on (1) the mapping of the site center, and (2) initial survey of the residential areas by way

of survey transects. Additionally, (3) the use of GPS and geo-referenced aerial photos and remote sensing imagery is designed to guide surveyors to important landform features and possible archaeological sites outside of the site-center for mapping and exploration purposes. Site chronology and architectural development are to be investigated through (4) recording of looters' trenches profiles, and (5) excavations.

Phase 2 includes the gathering of further information as per points 1-5 listed in phase 1, in addition to (6) axial trenching on plaza structures, and (7) sub-floor excavations within the site center, (8) stabilizing of looted or otherwise damaged structures, (9) study of ceramic production patterns using stratigraphic evidence and chemical analysis of artifacts from site-center and residential areas, and (10) mapping of outlying minor centers within 5 km radius.

Phase 3 includes completion of objectives 1-10 from previous phases, and (11) test excavations at outlying minor centers, (12) consolidation of standing architecture exposed by looters trenches and archaeological excavations.

The first season of field work was scheduled to begin in May 2000 and to continue until the end of June 2000. The project team was composed of Dr. Francisco Estrada-Belli as PI (Vanderbilt University), Dr. Laura Kosakowsky (U. Arizona) as project ceramicist and co-PI, Marc Wolf (TIMS, Mass.) and Jason Gonzalez (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale) as surveyors, Justin Ebersole (Boston University), Jason Paling (Boston University), Ryan Mongaluzzo (SUNY, Albany), Anna Deeks and Harriet Lock (U. Nottingham), Lilian Rosales, Claudia Quintanilla, and Alexander Urizar (all U. San Carlos, Guatemala) as field archaeologists. The field crew also included 11 workers, a cook and a cook's assistant.

Operations were conducted with the collaboration of IDAEH inspectors Bertila Bailey and Francisco Moro to whom we are grateful for their assistance. Funding was provided by a grant (#6394-98) from the Committee for Research and Exploration of the National Geographic Society, The Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) (#98010) and by a grant from the Ahau Foundation (9904) to Professor Norman Hammond (co-PI) at Boston University. Boston University also provided administrative and logistic support for the Holmul Project, until its move to Vanderbilt University with the PI in September 2000.

Preparation for Field Work

After lengthy permit procedures and vehicle maintenance in Guatemala City, on May 18th, project members convened at the Hotel Palace in Melchor de Mencos, Petén, our base location outside of the Holmul field camp. Supplies were bought in Melchor and arrangements were made for all participants to be transported to the site. On May 23rd after an eventful and lengthy trip through deep mud and overgrown logging trails the project vehicles arrived at the location designated as field camp located 2 km SE of the Holmul site center ([Figure 1](#)).

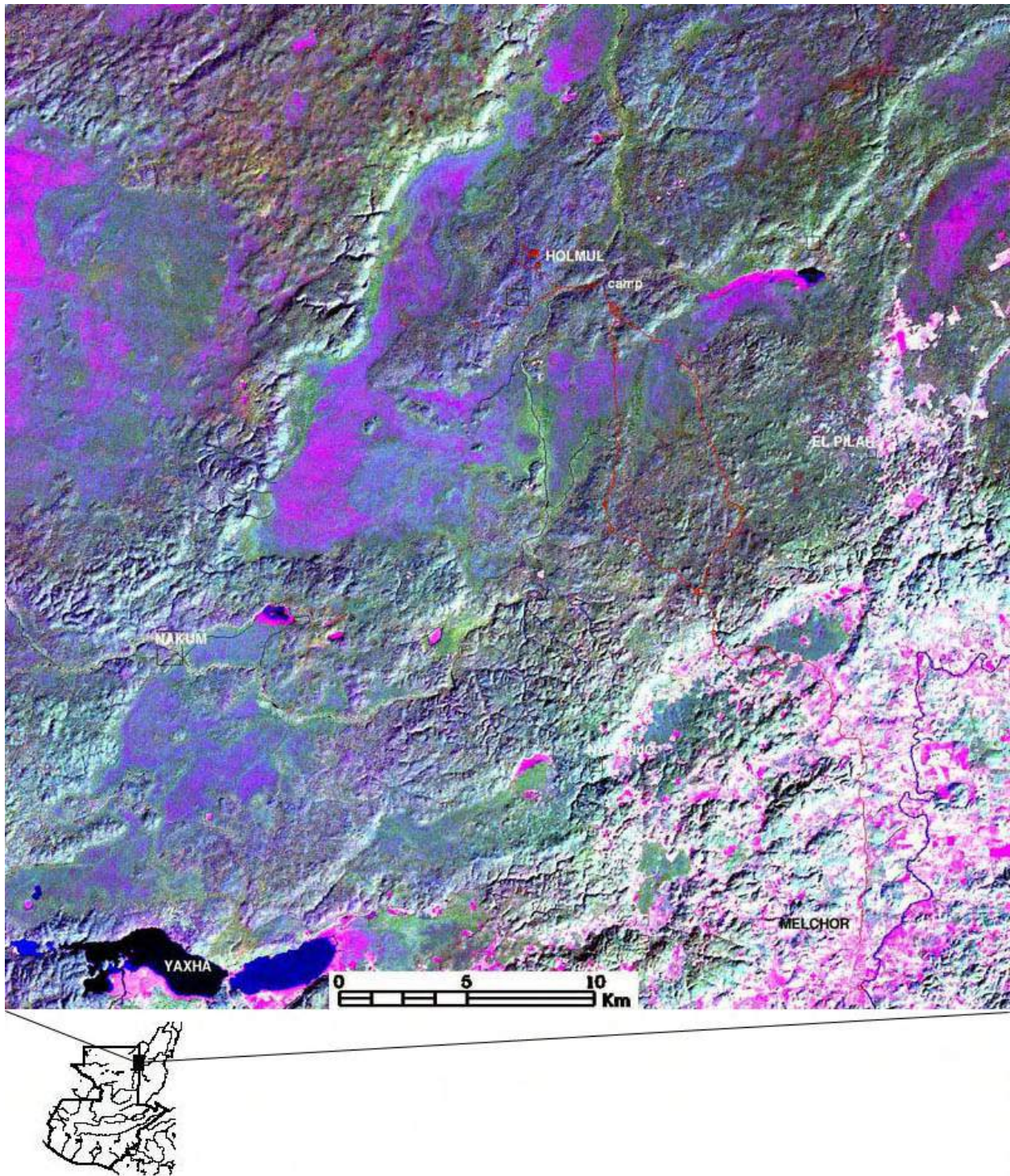


Figure 1. LANDSAT 5.™ (Dec. 1989, courtesy N. Hammond). False color image of the region of NE Petén surrounding Holmul.

The 45 km trip from Melchor de Mencos to the Holmul site was made on 4-wheel drive vehicles passing through several different ecotones. Upon departure from Melchor one rises on a first escarpment and enters an upland region, which is mostly occupied by a bajo. Here one finds an army outpost at the La Zarca location, approximately 13 km N of Melchor, as well as the last few houses before entering the bajo and the area unoccupied by residences. At about 21 km from Melchor one arrives at a second escarpment rising now sharply from 150 to 220 m above sea level and entering an area of uplands and rugged karst terrain. The escarpment is also the location of a water spring in the locality "El Manantial". At a short distance from the manantial one enters a second area of "bajillos", or small seasonal swamps, before taking a left turn into the logging trail leading to Holmul (locally referred to as "La Riverita"). The main trail instead continues for another 23 km to the Yaloch lagoon where a logging camp is located. Up to this fork the trail is maintained and used by logging concessions during the dry season and as a consequence when we arrived it was in very poor conditions due to deep ruts cut by the heavy trucks after the first rains. Beyond the fork, the Holmul trail heads N/NW on upland terrain before entering a large bajo known as bajo el Jobal which it crosses for an 8 km stretch. This portion of the trip is the most problematic since during the slightest rainfall the trail can become impassable. Also, this part of the trail had not been used for logging operations in seven years and became completely abandoned 4 years ago when IDAEH ceased to keep caretakers at the Holmul site. As a result, the road was largely overgrown and had to be cleared of vegetation to allow passage of the project vehicles. After crossing the bajo Jobal, the road rises again to an upland hilly area dominated by several streams. Among these is the head of the Holmul river to the north of the Holmul site. The camp itself is located in a clearing on the north-facing slope of an E-W ridge along which runs the seasonally dry bed of the Holmul river. In this spot the Holmul stream forms a small aguada which apparently communicates with the aquifer and holds drinkable albeit "muddy" water throughout the dry season.

A second clearing exists at 1 km from the site center, on the opposite side of the Holmul river bed, however this requires crossing the stream every time one is going to and from Melchor, and during heavy rains the camp might become isolated from the main trail. For this reason, and because of the existence of partially built structures in the first clearing, this location was chosen as field camp for the 2000 Holmul project. Upon arrival, areas were cleared for tents and camp facilities were immediately improved or built from scratch. Thatch roofs for workers dormitory, kitchen and latrines were repaired and structures were built for a field laboratory/dining area and lavatories. In all, the first week was dedicated to setting up camp and preparing for site survey and excavations.

Mapping the Site

The site center of Holmul is located on a L-shaped ridge running NW-SE slightly above the 180 m elevation. A GPS reading from the tallest structure in the Main Plaza, Building D of Group I, produced the following UTM coordinates: 258368 E, 1915384 N, or longitude 89°:16":23" W, latitude 17°:18":43" N in geographic coordinates. The site's

tallest buildings were also spotted on a 1989 Landsat 5 image and the location verified in the field at a 1.5 km distance from the Holmul stream and approximately 3 km west/north west of the camp clearing (see [Figure 1](#)). Interestingly, the previous known location of the Holmul site, available from the "Nakum" topographic sheet of the Guatemalan "Instituto Geografico Nacional", appears to be about 2 km SE of its actual location and therefore needs to be discarded, or corrected. The site location is an especially important issue in light of the existing "Parque Arqueologico" reserve which includes a 3x3 km area around the site but presently does not include the main plaza itself. Furthermore, the authorities have been informed of the correct location of the site so that logging concessions that are granted in the area may not erroneously include the immediate area of the archaeological site.

The ridge on which the site is located is situated on top of the watershed divide of a large limestone peninsula trending NE-SW, surrounded by extensive bajo areas to the west, south and east ([Figure 2](#)). To the west, is a massive escarpment ridge which runs from the Yaxhá area to the Río Hondo area of NW Belize dividing the watershed of the north-central Petén upland region from the rest of the Eastern Lowlands. From a cursory observation of the topography surrounding Holmul it would appear that ancient as well as modern communication to the south and west would be impeded by the wetlands, while to the north it would be favored by the karstic uplands. However, any hypothesis linking Holmul with polities to the north, such as Xultún and/or Xmakabatún, 26 km to the north, must be contrasted with existing references in Holmul ceramic and architectural styles and textual evidence to the southern Late Classic kingdom of Naranjo (Stuart, 1988), 20 km to the south. Furthermore, the Holmul river course might be considered a communication route between Maya cities, and it may have provided a viable path through bajos and karst between Holmul, Naranjo and Nakum.

As a first step of the site mapping, a baseline was set from a datum stake (6000,6000) located near the SW corner of Group I. From that point, 2 m wide brechas were cut in the four cardinal directions using an EDM Sokkia total station. The east, north and south brechas were extended to a maximum distance of up to 200 m while the western brechas was carried out to the 1 km marker from the datum to accommodate the mapping of the western transect (see [Western Transect](#)).

The site inventory nomenclature used in this report follows Merwin's designations of numbers for groups (acropolis) and of letters for individual structures, whenever those are available from the Merwin and Vaillant publication (1932). Structures not reported by Merwin are assigned new structure ID numbers, not letters. Stelae and altars are identified by ID numbers in separate orders (i.e. Stela 1, Altar 1).

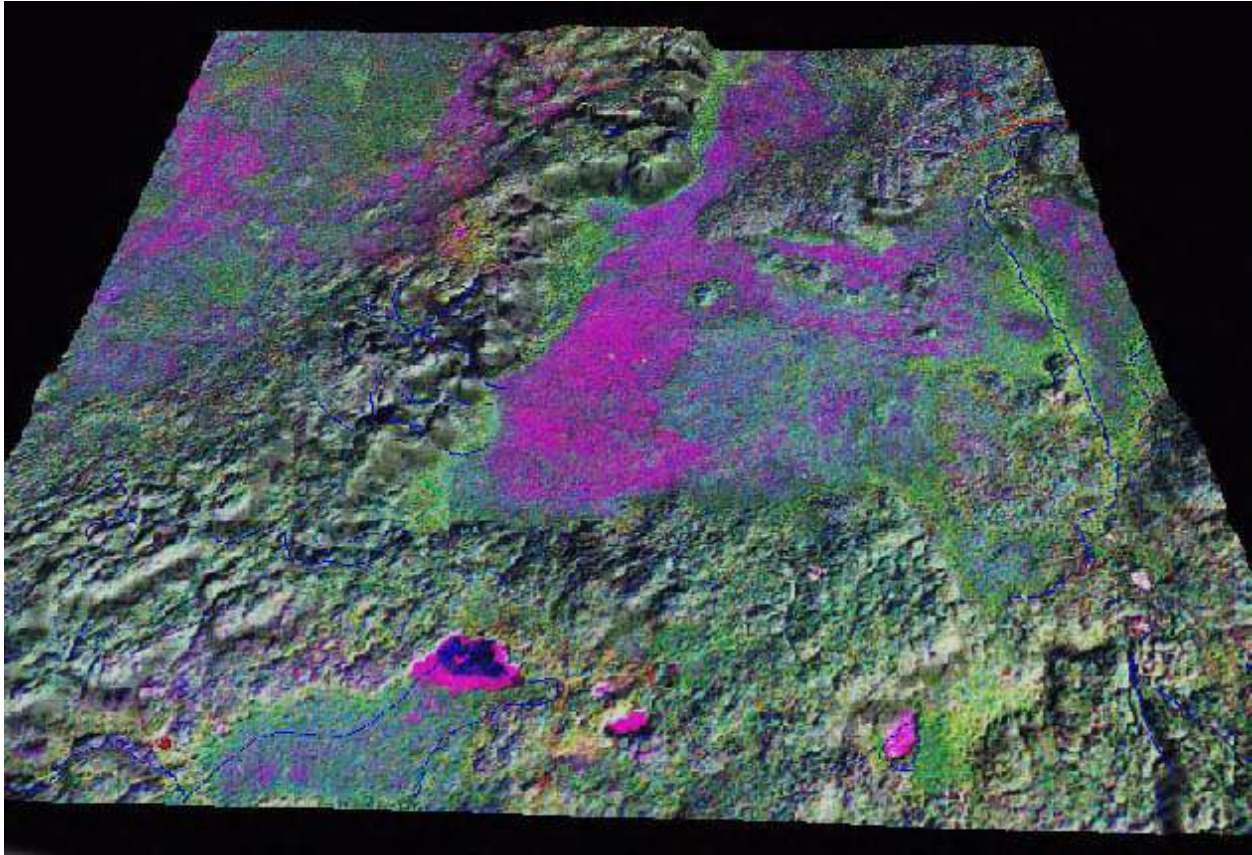


Figure 2. LANDSAT 5.™ Image draped on Digital Elevation Model showing Holmul and Nakum sites, surrounding landforms and land cover.

The central area mapped in 2000 comprised three main acropolis-groups separated by plazas and causeways occupying an overall area of 14 hectares on the broad main hill ([Figure 3](#)). The focal point of the ceremonial core is situated in the Main Plaza which measures 0.9 hectares in area, is rectangular in shape and is bound to the north by the Group I acropolis, to the south by the Group III elevated courts and to the east by the tall Ruin X pyramid.

Ruin X. This is a 12.5 m high steep-sided pyramid which supports two staggered vaulted buildings on its summit. The structure was described and excavated by Merwin (Merwin and Vaillant 1932: 50-53). Originally it comprised a vaulted room with a long, narrow E-W plan with a main doorway to the east and three doors to the west. In this room, three burials were placed prior to the doorway being sealed by a thick wall. In front of this eastern wall, a new "adosada" structure was built with three doorways opening to the east. In 2000, two large looters' tunnels were found to be cut at the base of the pyramid on the east and west sides.

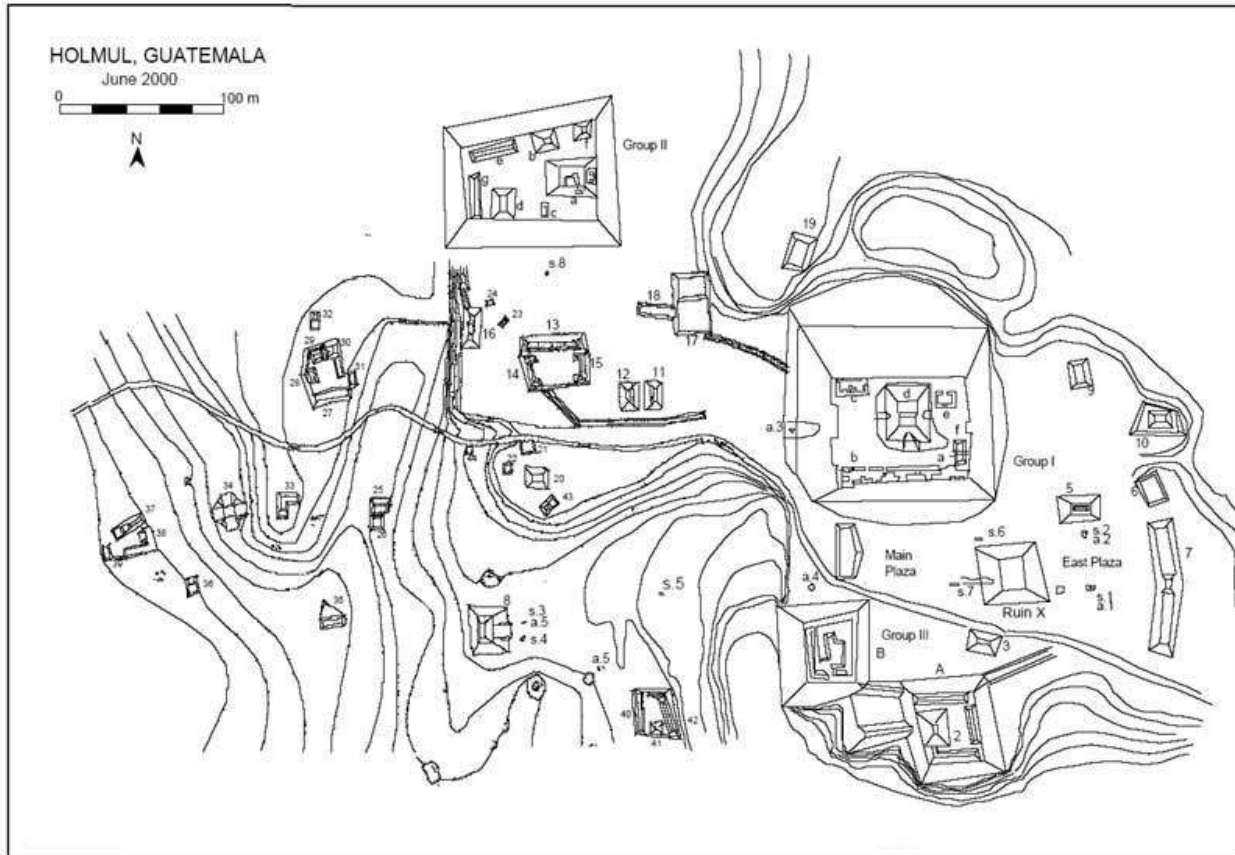


Figure 3. Preliminary map of Holmul. Survey by Marc Wolf, Jason Gonzalez and Francisco Estrada-Belli.

On the west side of Ruin X, and in axial position, a stela was found, Stela 7, lying on its back side (Figure 4, shown below). The stela measures approximately 0.8×3 meters with fairly flat sides. No carving was noticeable on the three visible sides. The stela's side facing the ground remains to be inspected for possible carving. It also remains to be determined whether the current location of the stela is *in situ*.



Figure 4. Stela 7 viewed from West, looking towards Ruin X. The looter trench in the background enters the center of Ruin X.



Figure 5. Stela 1 and fragmented Altar 1, viewed from West. An in situ fragment of Altar 1 is visible under the tree root.

Near the NW corner of Ruin X was another partial monument, Stela 6. This monument appears to be the lower half of a stela and is lying flat. No signs were observed of carving or of the stela's *in situ* location.

To the east of Ruin X is the East plaza. This almost squared plaza measures 0.8 hectares and is bound on the eastern side by a long range building (str. 7), on the northern side by a short pyramid (str. 5), and is open to the south. Structure 7 measures 79 m in length, 13 m in width at the base and is about 4 m high. The center of this structure is slightly raised but it does not appear to have supported a vaulted building. It is in axial alignment with the main doorway of Ruin X room 2 (east-facing).

Between Ruin X and str. 7, in axial alignment with these, and roughly at the center of the east plaza are Stela 1 and Altar 1. Stela 1 is standing apparently in situ with its base set into the plaza floor. It is currently wrapped by a strangler tree which also covers most of Altar 1 within its buttresses ([Figure 5](#)). The stela is roughly carved with a rounded tip and very uneven, plain sides. Merwin's measurements for Stela 1 are 3.7 m in height and 1.75 m wide. Altar 1 is located in front of the west face of Stela 1 and appears to be fragmentary. Merwin apparently found it intact and that it was 5' 4" in diameter and 1' thick. A test excavation by Claudia Quintanilla in front of Stela 1, centered upon the altar's main fragment, found that the latter had been repositioned in front of the stela on top of loose fill and humus. Moreover, Claudia found that looters had cut the altar fragment off from the rest of the altar which is still under the tree (in original location) and dug a pit into the two latest plaza floors underneath the altar to a depth of 0.8 m ([Figure 6](#), shown below).

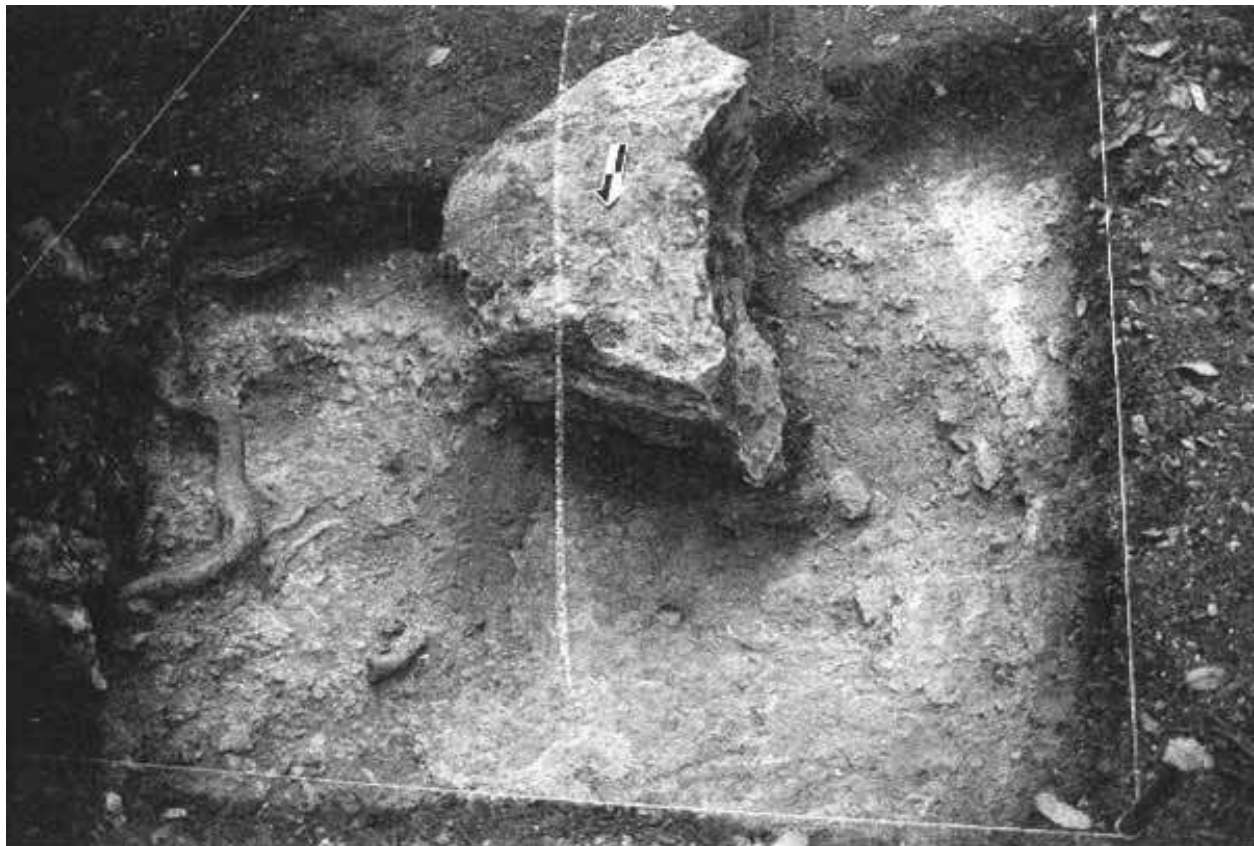


Figure 6. View of excavation 1 under Altar 1 exposing looters' pit and cut plaza floors.



Figure 7. View of Stela 2 and Altar 2 from Str. 5 looking to South.

In front of str. 5, on the north end of the east plaza are Stela 2 and Altar 2 ([Figure 7](#)). These monuments are both fragmentary, lying on their sides and partially covered by a tree's buttress. The stela's largest fragment measures about 2 m in length and has fallen away from the altar, on its back. Test pit 2 by Alexander Urizar in this location has found that a pit had been cut by looters underneath Altar 2, cutting away and removing half of the altar from its original location and cutting through at least 3 plaza floors underneath the altar. The main fragment of the altar and the nearby stela butt appeared to be inserted into the latest plaza floor.

Group I

Group I is a rectangular acropolis mound surmounted by a long and spectacularly high vaulted masonry building on its southern side designated Buildings A and B by Merwin (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:9). This structure actually appears to represent a single building. The foot of this building's outer wall stands 20 m above the plaza floor while its top is about 5 m high above the acropolis floor. This is a multi-roomed building with six broad doorways in the center and two smaller doorways on each corner. The interior is

divided into south-facing and north-facing non-communicating halves with narrow vaulted rooms. On the south, rooms are free from tumble from the partially collapsed vaults ([Figure 8](#)). These rooms are very narrow and unusually tall, and have suffered very little decay since Merwin's visit, as it can be seen from his excellent photos. Very narrow S-shaped passages connect each of the three main rooms. The terminal rooms at each side of the A and B building have a single narrow doorway on the front. On the north face of the building only one room is free from rubble. This is Merwin's room B6 and it exhibits an unusual four-springs vault still in fairly good condition ([Figure 9](#)). Access to the south facing room was likely not possible from the steep-sided south face of the mound but only through a narrow passage through the west end of Building B leading to the court behind it. The court on Group 1 measures 79×59 on its sides and rises 20 m above the surrounding plazas, as noted above. A steep sided pyramid, Building D rising to a 13 m height and with its stairway to the south, largely dominates it. On the summit of the pyramid is a masonry building which originally may have opened onto a narrow terrace to the north from its back room. However because of the looting on the summit and the large amount of rubble the location of this building's doorways and room partitions is yet to be determined.

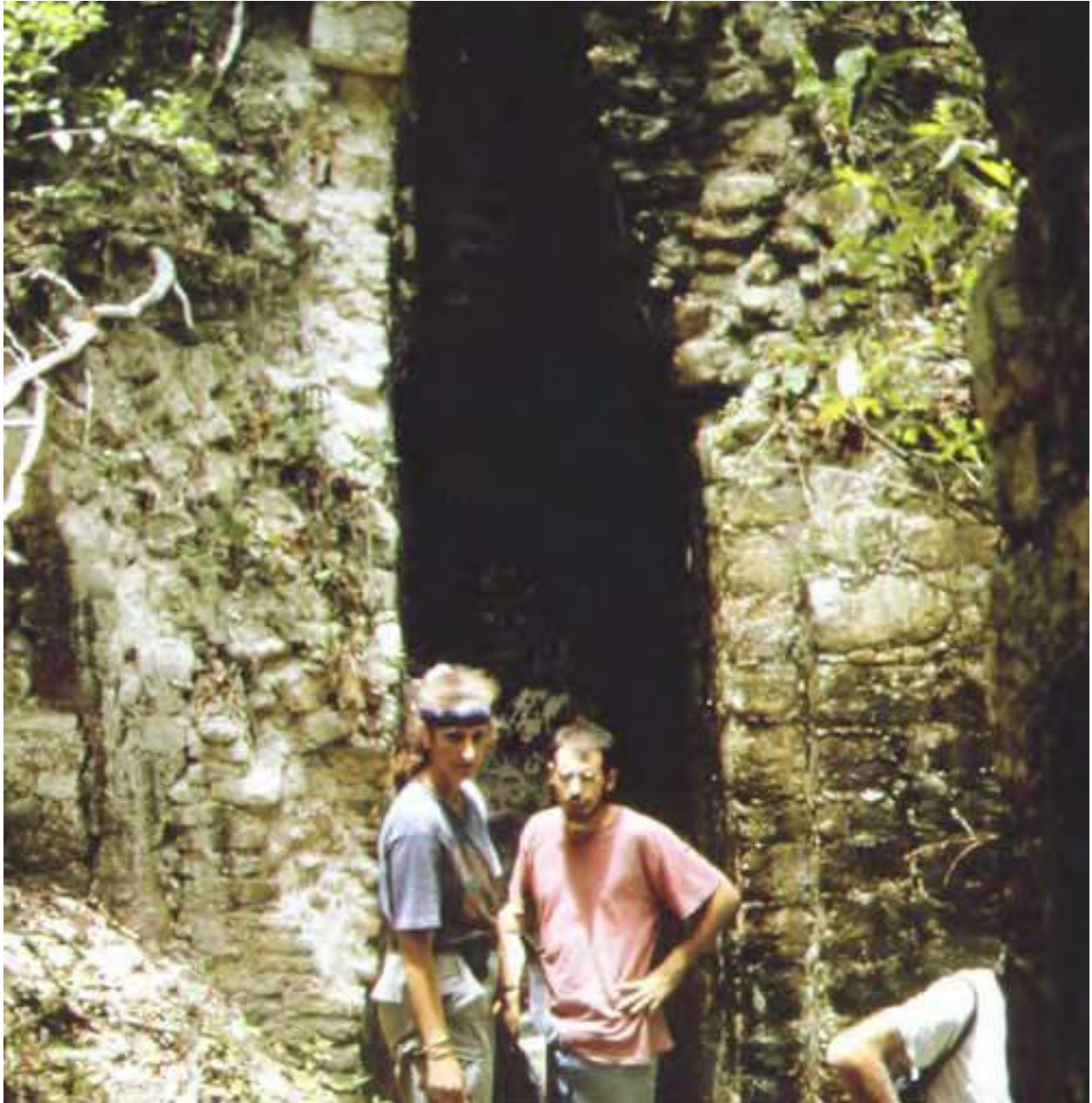


Figure 8. Building A, Group I vaulted rooms. Laura Kosakowsky and Ryan Mongaluzzo in the foreground (photo by J. Gonzalez).



Figure 9. View of vaulted room 6 on the north side of Building A, Group I. L. Kosakowsky and H. Lockard in foreground (photo by J. Gonzalez).

Abutting the western base of Building D is a one-story masonry structure, Building C, with rooms opening onto the north side, facing a narrow space in front of the steep side of the acropolis (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:11). In its interior is a north facing room with an axial bench ([Figure 10](#), shown below) with an armrest still in place. Narrow vaulted doorways lead to side rooms. Because of its configuration and seclusion (access from the narrow north side of the building) this structure may be one of the best candidates for investigating a throne room at Holmul.



Figure 10. Bench with arm rest inside Building C, Group I, viewed from east corner of the room (photo by J. Gonzalez).

On the western side of Building D is another one-story masonry building, Building E. Merwin does not provide a floor plan, but this appears to be a two-roomed building with benches and a doorway to the north. The rubble from the collapsed vaults obscures much of the interior.

On the SE corner of the acropolis is Building F (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:13). This appears to be a solid mound containing the famous burial exposed by Merwin which produced the "Holmul Dancer" vase (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:Plate 30 a and c). His trench through the middle of the mound is still open. Between Building E and F the edge of the mound floor has a small horizontal recess or indentation which could represent the location of a narrow stairway to the plaza below. On the opposite side of the mound however, on the western side, there is a much wider recess in the mound floor forming two broad terraces on each side and marking the summit of an inset stairway. At the base of the acropolis, and in axis with the stairway there is a large tunnel left open by looters. The rubble from this tunnel partially covers a large altar (Altar 3) which appears to be in situ and in one piece. It is about 0.7 m thick and 1.5 m in diameter approximately. An additional altar is located not very far from the SW corner of Group I, Altar 4. This monument is fragmentary, measuring about 1.5 m in diameter and 0.7 m in thickness, and appears to have been pushed onto the side of the logging trail, its present location, by a bulldozer perhaps during the construction of the logging trail.

A broad causeway bound by short berms/walls leads from the western face of Group I towards Group II, located about 170 m to the NW. As one follows this path to the NW, one finds immediately Structures 11 and 12. These twin buildings measure 17×10 m on each side and 4 m in height, are parallel to one another and oriented N-S. Their sloping sides bound a 5 m-wide alley with noticeable low benches betraying their function as a ballcourt. Immediately next to the ballcourt one enters a C-shaped courtyard on a low platform open to the south. Structure 13, the largest in this group occupies the north side and has at least 4 visible and collapsed vaults. The lateral buildings, 14 and 15, are C-shaped and also exhibit collapsed vaults on their summits. Between this courtyard and Group II, a few meters to the north, is a plain stela, Stela 8.

Group II

Group II is comprised of 7 buildings (Merwin's A through F) built on a 13 m high rectangular platform which measures 89×110 m on the sides. Building A is the most imposing mound of the group, occupying most of the SE corner of the platform (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:17).

Building A is a masonry superstructure with roof comb. It rises on a 6 m high mound. There is only one off-centered doorway on the south side, while the north side of the building is completely covered by sloping rubble from the top of the mound. The doorway is T-shaped in profile and is surmounted by the remains of a masonry mask over its lintel, now partially eroded but still discernible. The doorway leads into an interior corridor with a finely stuccoed vault (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:plate 3) which

turns east and leads into a wide rectangular room in the center of the building with a collapsed vault. This inner room is not accessible from any other way. At the base of the South slope of the Building A mound, two deep tunnels dug by looters have exposed at least two previous phases of the building. The outer East face of Building A is decorated by a giant masonry mask ([Figure 11](#), shown below) of which the southern half, or left cheek area, is now collapsed. Furthermore, a looter's tunnel is located in its center, right above the snout. The southern face of Building A is also decorated by a double or stacked mask, as noted by Merwin (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:15, plates 4, 5) which appears to be in stable conditions. The northern side of Building A faces a small elevated court onto which are buildings B and F. This court is now almost completely occupied by the rubble from the slopes of these buildings and probably from Merwin's excavations on some of them, but it appears to be composed of two terraces, the higher one being to the west, onto which is Building B.



Figure 11. Giant mask built with masonry block on east face of Building A, Group II (photo by J. Gonzalez).

Building B is a small "temple" structure which was excavated and beautifully illustrated in 1911 by Merwin's great photos (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:plates 6-9). Here he found four construction phases including 4 vaulted rooms and several interments. Six of the burials were placed in masonry vaults and accompanied by rich offerings (Merwin and

Vaillant, 1932:20-40). The sequence of the structure, from Holmul I to Holmul V, served as a basis for the site sequence which was adopted as the type sequence for the Maya Lowlands until the excavations at Uaxactún replaced it. The grave goods of burials in rooms 9, 8 and 7 (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:plates 18, 19) are especially important because they include early polychrome ceramics which have been the subject of discussions about the nature of the "Protoclassic" phenomenon in the Maya Lowlands (Pring, 1997; 1995; Hammond, 1984; Brady *et al.*, 1995; Laporte, 1995). Our inspection of 1992 and 2000 has revealed no new looting to this structure but recent vandalism had removed all vegetation from its roof exposing its beautifully decorated stucco frieze to the elements ([Figure 12](#), and [Figure 13](#), shown below). Close inspection of the frieze revealed fragments of red specular paint still in place. As a temporary measure, we built a thatch roof onto the rear of the structure to protect the stucco decoration until more permanent conservation can be applied.



Figure 12. View of NE corner of Building B, Group II with stucco decorated frieze.



Figure 13. Detail of the frieze and removed vegetation on Building B, Group II.

Building F, a small pyramidal structure on the NE corner of Group II was originally described by Merwin as having a vaulted room in the interior and only two phases of construction, the later of which sealed the room and turned it into a "solid" mound (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:44-45). However, a looters tunnel was apparently excavated very recently into the eastern phase of this structure. Close inspection of the interior revealed six consecutive construction stages of this building of which the two earlier ones exhibit a finely red-painted stucco facade with apron moldings. The interior of this tunnel was littered with large Sierra Red sherds suggesting the possible dating of the two earlier structures to the Late Preclassic.

The remaining structures of Group II, Buildings C, D, E and G have been partially excavated by Merwin who documented their floor plans and burials associated with the later phase of construction. All are described as domiciliary masonry structures with ample room space. Building C, a low rectangular structure, seems to fit this description best as well as perhaps Buildings E and G which are long multi-room range structures with a number of benches. Building D, on the other hand, is built on an elevated platform and has two rooms with doors opened to the east and west, respectively. The west room apparently had a bench and may resemble a "residence" while the eastern room had probably a different function and was found sealed by a rubble wall. In all, this configuration does not appear to be consistent with a residence.

Group III

Group III is a well-preserved "palace" complex that was poorly described by Merwin (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:48-50). It lies at the south end of the main plaza and it is composed of two elevated and secluded courts of similar squared shape and size identified as court A to the south and B to the west. The two courts rise about 6 m above the main plaza and are connected by a wall/walkway near the SE corner of B and NW corner of A. Court A, the southwestern most, measures 31×37 m at the top. It is bound on the north, south and east sides by long range buildings with visible collapsed vaults, while on the west side it is dominated by a 12 m high steep-sided pyramid, Structure 2. This pyramid was the most interesting feature of the court and was dedicated some attention in 2000. Among its features, was the unfortunate one of being completely bisected by three looters tunnels, east, north and south, penetrating at multiple levels. The East and West tunnels cut the building completely from top to bottom while the N and south penetrated it from the base.

A complete profile was drawn of the eastern trench, the most complex, by Anna Deeks and Justin Ebersole, revealing at least five construction phases and six plaza floors associated with it ([Figure 14](#)). In its inner part, a beautifully preserved stucco building was observed. It had a sloping talud and a vertical wall decorated with red painted stucco and an apron molding on the western face. The surviving portion of this building stands about 3 m above its associated plaza floor. The two subsequent stages of Structure 2 were clearly visible on the eastern profile as having a stairway. Both are lined with plaster and one, the later of the two, with possible stucco masks on each side. The latest construction phase of Str. 2 appears to have been a complete re-surfacing of the mound with several meters thick layers of rubble covering a possible masonry structure on the summit with a structureless flat surface. This last re-facing of the mound appears to pattern well with the last construction phases of several other "pyramid" buildings at the site (Building IIB and IIF, Building ID, and Str. 8).

A looters' tunnel on the north side of Str. 2 was also investigated. This tunnel penetrated the structure to a depth of 6 m into the mound. It first broke through a vertical wall made of medium-sized limestone blocks with plaster facing. It then penetrated a beautifully red-painted stepped wall with plaster lining and apron moldings decorated with multi-tone red bands, and some spirals motifs which were observed from fragments found in the tunnel's rubble pile. A third and earlier building face was observed 0.5 m further inside associated with a plaster floor ([Figure 15: #6](#)). The correlation between the structures observed in the east and northern profiles still remains to be determined. The architectural style and associated pottery found in the tunnel, suggest a Late Preclassic or Early classic date for the innermost small stucco-decorated structures found in the eastern and north profiles of Str. 2. The last re-facing of the structure almost certainly dates to the end of the Late Classic period or to the Terminal Classic.

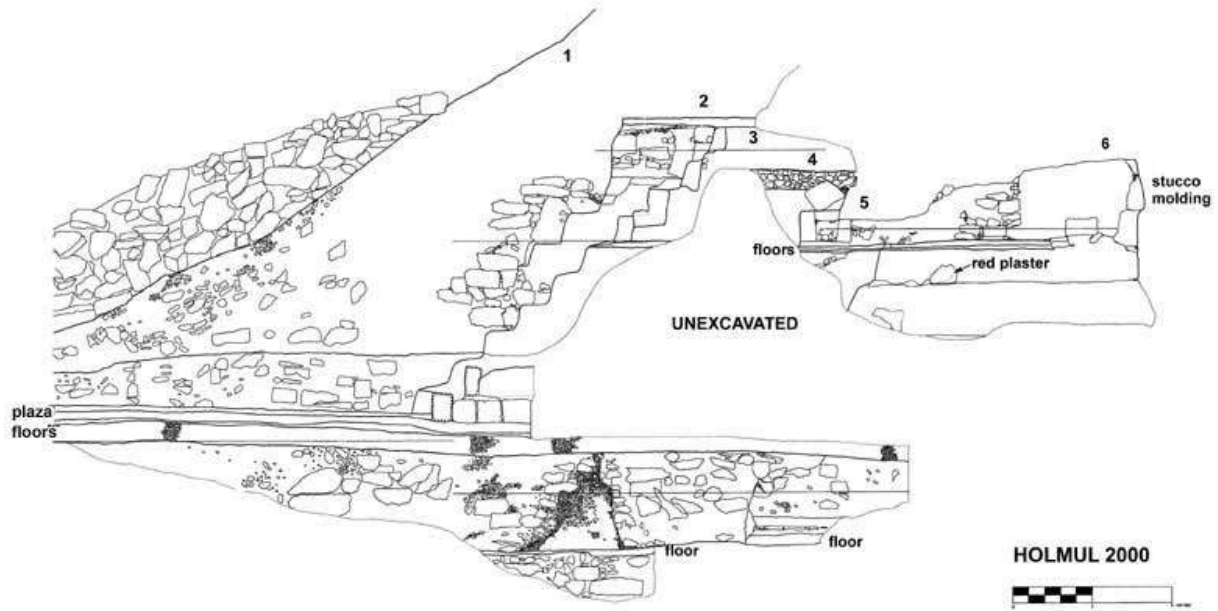


Figure 14. South Profile of looters' trench in east face of Str. 2, Court A, Group III.

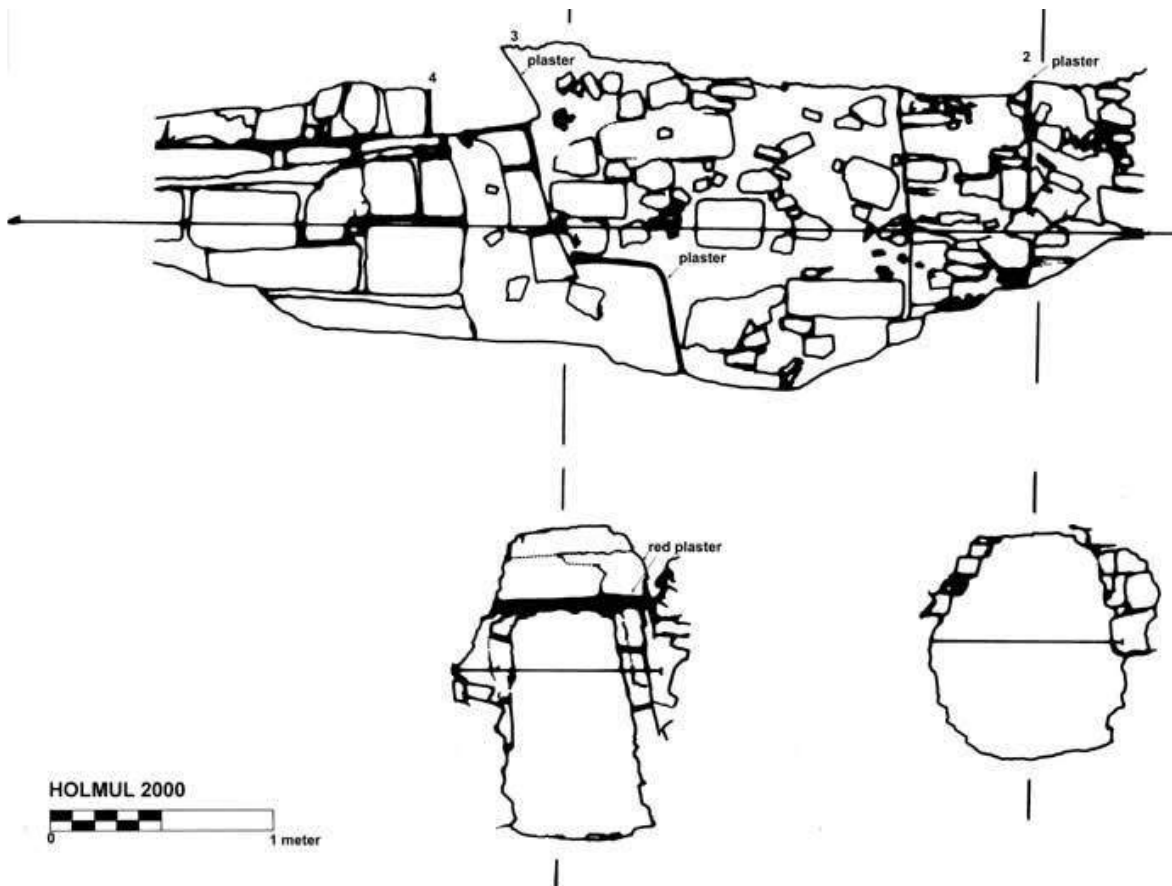


Figure 15. West Profile of looters' tunnel in north face of Str. 2, Court A, Group III.

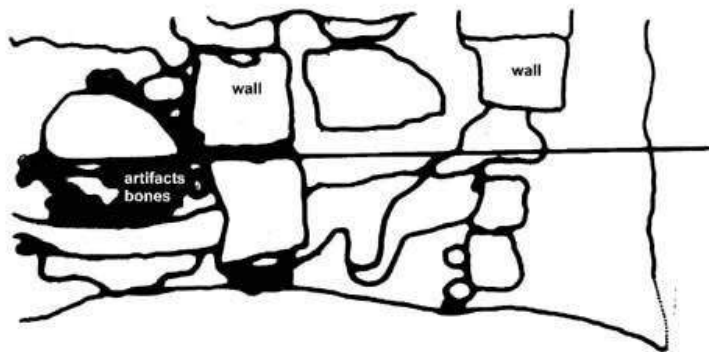
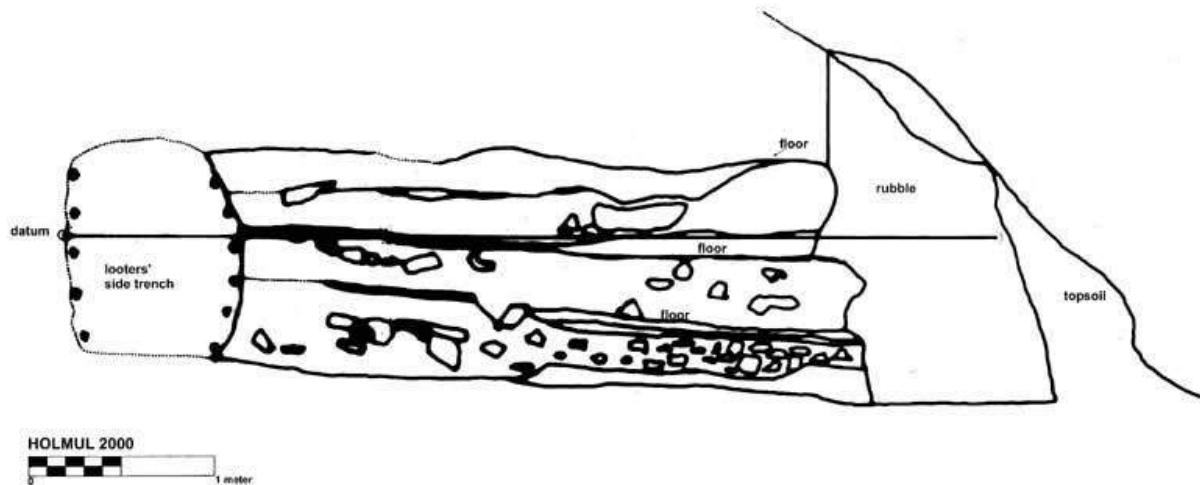


Figure 16. Profiles of (a) looters' tunnel and (b) inner chamber on southern slope of Court A.

A third tunnel was investigated on the southern slope of Court A of Group III. This tunnel was cut on the back or outer slope of a range-vaulted structure on the south edge of the platform, penetrating 5 meters into the structure. The profile drawn by Ryan Mongeluzzo and Harriet Lock shows three plaster floors which pre-date the construction of any building on this side of the court (Figure 16). In the inner chamber of the tunnel, a cave was carved by the looters into the rubble on each side. Here a number of bone and ceramic fragments, some of reconstructable, pieces were observed. The amount of disturbance, and lack of any remains of a formal vault or cist visible in profile prevents the identification of this feature as a looted burial or cache. The ceramics found in this "feature" are consistent with a Late Classic date.

Court B of Group III presents a different layout from Court A. It is fairly squared, measuring 39×43m and rising 6m from the main plaza. On the western side, a row of at

least seven vaulted rooms with masonry wall still preserved up to a 1.5-2 m height or up to the vault spring. These rooms apparently form an L-shaped building with the shorter side to the south. In front of this building is another row of vaulted rooms opened onto the eastern half of the court. This building actually appears to occupy also the remaining north, east and south edges of the court with a continuous sequence of vaulted rooms now largely collapsed and buried by rubble. In connection with the western row of rooms, in the center of Court B, a small cavity was noticed. Inspection of this opening in the court's floor revealed an E-W vaulted L-shaped 5-7 m long corridor which connected the western and eastern halves of Court B in an earlier stage of construction and was likely buried under the last court floor. It was re-opened by looters in recent times and is presently largely empty of rubble up to a 1.5 m height, exposing very well preserved masonry walls with finely dressed stones and a short vault.

Western Transect

The western transect survey, led by Jason Gonzalez, began from the site datum at 6000E, 6000N up to a distance of 450 m ([Figure 3](#)). First a 2 m wide baseline was cut (up to 1 km distance) placing stakes at 25 m intervals. Subsequently, two two-member mapping crews spaced at 25 m intervals advanced for 125 m perpendicular to the west base line, thus completing 125 m deep and 125 m wide sweeps on each side of the west base line (see also Puleston, 1983; Tourtellot, 1970; Tourtellot *et al.*, 1993; 1994). In future field seasons, the operation will be repeated to complete the 3 km projected length of each base line in the cardinal directions. In 2000, we were able to complete mapping of a swath along the west base line that was 250 meters wide and 450 meters long from the center point. Even within this relatively small area, we found a variety of structures and landform modifications. In brief summary, we mapped 43 structures, 4 stelae, 1 altar, 10 chultuns, 3 terraces, 2 long berms, 4 quarry pits, and 4 quarry marks with cut stone blocks on the bedrock surface.

As the survey proceeded east to west from the datum (near the west edge of the Main Plaza), we mapped a drainage area sloping to the south which had two terracing structures lying perpendicular to the drainage. Just to the west of this drainage was a stela (Stela 5) standing in apparent *in situ* position that appears to be in line with Structure 8 and Ruin X in the Main Plaza. Stela 5 stands about 1.70 m above the ground. It is roughly cut with an oval top end and round short sides. Its main sides face E-W and bear no signs of inscriptions ([Figure 17](#), shown below). To the south and east of Group II was a large 20 by 30 meter low platform structure, at which one of the berms bounding the causeway ended. On the right side of the western base line, are buildings lying on a 100 meter by 100 meter modified ledge/platform on which Group II was located. On this large platform was the ballcourt (strs. 11 and 12) and one long berm/walkway that terminates at a central C-shaped group (strs. 13-15) described above. On the western edge of this platform were two pyramid structures connected by a low wall, with room depressions on top of each structure. In front of these two pyramids were two small and low square platforms. Off the western edge of this platform was another drainage sloping southwest with one terrace/check dam.



Figure 17. Stela 5, in situ, seen from east.

South of this large platform is a scatter of structures, including several pyramidal structures, including Structure 8. In addition, evidence of landform modifications existed in terms of quarrying activities in pits, quarrying with cut marks and half finished construction blocks, as well as various chultuns.

Structure 8 is a 15 m high flat-topped and steep-sided pyramid. Two large looters trenches bisect it completely top to bottom and from side to side. Upon cursory inspection, at least one earlier phase of construction was observed including a vaulted superstructure covered by the flat top mound summit. On the eastern front of Structure 8 several limestone fragments were found in paired axial position. Among these, were at least one altar (# 4) and two stelae (# 3 and 4). Stela 3 appeared to be the butt end of a large stela about 1 m wide which was found to be still standing about 0.7 m above the ground ([Figure 18](#), shown below). A test excavation revealed it to have been reset on the humus layer without any formal layer of rubble or other preparations most likely in the post-abandonment period of the city. Stela 4 appeared to have been tipped and laying on its front over another stela/altar fragment. The "*in situ*" nature of Stela 4 and nearby fragments remains to be determined.



Figure 18. View of Stelae 4 (foreground), Stela 3 (background), and associated altar fragments.

A small "elite" courtyard group is located to the SE of Str. 8. This includes two long range buildings on the east and west sides and a small pyramid structure on the south side of the platform. Continuing to the west are several mound groups, including one on the northern side of the baseline that had several buildings with visible masonry walls. To the south of the baseline, the topography was very rocky and sloped gently to the southwest. Directly on the baseline at approximately N6000 E5650, is what appears to be a small radial pyramid, approximately 4-5 meters high, which will be the focus of further investigation in 2001. At the western end of the mapped area was a small group of mounds lying on the bottom of the slope directly before entering a flat area (possibly a bajo) that lies off the western edge of this map.

Minor Centers

A number of minor centers were reported during work at the Holmul site. Of these, only the site of "Caracol" was briefly inspected. The site is located about 5 km SSW of our base camp or about 3.5-4 km due south of the Holmul center. The site is composed of at least 3 tall pyramids clustered on a broad platform. Str. 2 appears to be the main structure measuring about 20 m in height and supporting a vaulted building on the summit. Serious damage to the superstructure and body of this pyramid has been inflicted by deep looters' trenches. At about fifty meters to the north is Str. 2 which is about the same height as Str. 3 although no masonry superstructure was noted due to the massive disturbance by looting. Str. 1 is located to the west of Str. 2 and appeared to measure about 15 m in height and have a stairway on the southern side. Four major trenches had bisected the structure on all sides.

Additionally, the site of Lechugal was reported by IDAEH inspector Moro to be located only 200 m from our base camp, but was not explored in 2000. Important architectural remains will likely be found at the site of Cival II located about 7 km to the north and at the site of Limonal in the same direction. To the west, on top of the escarpment and about 7 km from site center a number of minor centers might be located, including the site of Sufrikaya with one of the earliest reported cycle 8 inscriptions in the Maya Lowlands (Matthews, 1985). A great number of smaller "minor centers" are expected to be found within the 4-5 km radius of the Holmul center and will be investigated with the use of GPS and EDM equipment in the coming years providing important information on the economic, political and ritual structure of the settlement area of Holmul.

Summary and Future Directions

During the first season of systematic study of Holmul, many of the initial goals of the project have been accomplished as the auspicious beginning of a long-term multi-disciplinary investigation took place. The site was accurately located using GPS coordinates and spotted on Landsat images thereby setting up a datum for the study of the relationship of the city with the surrounding ancient settlement and landforms. A

preliminary map of the site core was produced at 1:500 scale with details of the main groups and plazas and the topography of the site center at 0.5 m intervals. The site layout was for the first time observable in all its defining characteristics and impressive complexity. Much of the major architecture at the site had been described only in the most cursory way in Merwin's posthumous report.

The core of the city is centered upon three major plazas separated by the imposing Ruin X pyramid and bound by an impressive acropolis, Group I, and palatial complex, Group III, to the north and south. In all, 5 stelae and 4 altars have been found within the central plazas area and a total of 8 stelae and 5 altars at the site, while only two stelae had been reported by Merwin. A broad causeway connects the main plaza to a second acropolis to the western Group II, also impressive in size and due to its giant "masks" adorning the eastern and western facades. Also intriguing is the early buildings buried under the Late/Terminal Classic mounds of Group II which may reveal more of the beautifully preserved architecture and Late Preclassic history of the site in future years. Group II is also associated with a plain stela and a large open-ended ballcourt next to a small but formally built elite domestic group. Str. 8, to the south of Group II represents a slightly peripheral but important focus of ritual activity outside of the main plaza and probably dating to the latest phase of the site. Three stela and two altars were found in its vicinity. A few hundred meters to the west, almost closing the main site area in this direction, is a small but extremely interesting radial structure which will be the subject of intensive study next year.

Group III was one of the most surprising areas of the site both for the complexity of this obviously "late" palatial complex and for the presence of extremely elaborate and well-preserved "Preclassic" temple structures inside Str. 2. This area, as well as Group II, in future years might yield invaluable information on the early history of the site as well as about the uses of space inside palatial compounds. Important areas to investigate will include sub-floor deposits as well as outer middens for the collection of elite waste in addition to primary burial or cache deposits.

In addition, new areas will be mapped to the north and east of the main plaza to include what appears to be most of the remaining ceremonial core. Due to the shape of the topography to the west and south it appears that most of the elite and public architecture should be found in the northern and eastern directions. To the south-southwest the ground appears to rise again after a broad depression at about 1 km distance and this area may reveal important settlement features in relation with the nearby stream and bajo areas.

Future efforts will focus on the relationship between the site center and important elite groups and minor centers located within the 4-5 km radius using GPS position and Landsat data for reference. The planned study of the settlement and associated landforms using field data and remote sensing imagery in a GIS spatial analysis will likely help elucidate the economic, political and ritual structure of Holmul as a medium-sized central Petén Maya city of the Classic period, as well as help understand its rise and demise as a focus of Maya settlement.

Finally, one major accomplishment of this first season has been to document the intensive and recent looting that has plagued this site in the last few years. When our crew arrived at the site, it found many open trenches with thatch roof still "green" as a sign that the looters had just left. More importantly, it is hoped that the project's placement of two caretakers at the site on behalf of IDAEH will help prevent further looting between archaeological work seasons and will open the door for the permanent protection of the site as well as its development as a sustainable cultural resource.

List of Figures

[Figure 1](#). LANDSAT 5.™ (Dec. 1989, courtesy N. Hammond). False color image of the region of NE Petén surrounding Holmul.

[Figure 2](#). LANDSAT 5.™ Image draped on Digital Elevation Model showing Holmul and Nakum sites, surrounding landforms and land cover.

[Figure 3](#). Preliminary map of Holmul. Survey by Marc Wolf, Jason Gonzalez and Francisco Estrada-Belli.

[Figure 4](#). Stela 7 viewed from West, looking towards Ruin X. The looter trench in the background enters the center of Ruin X.

[Figure 5](#). Stela 1 and fragmented Altar 1, viewed from West. An *in situ* fragment of Altar 1 is visible under the tree root.

[Figure 6](#). View of excavation 1 under Altar 1 exposing looters' pit and cut plaza floors.

[Figure 7](#). View of Stela 2 and Altar 2 from Str. 5 looking to South.

[Figure 8](#). Building A, Group I vaulted rooms. Laura Kosakowsky and Ryan Mongaluzzo in the foreground (photo by J. Gonzalez).

[Figure 9](#). View of vaulted room 6 on the north side of Building A, Group I. L. Kosakowsky and H. Lockard in foreground (photo by J. Gonzalez).

[Figure 10](#). Bench with arm rest inside Building C, Group I, viewed from east corner of the room (photo by J. Gonzalez).

[Figure 11](#). Giant mask built with masonry block on east face of Building A, Group II (photo by J. Gonzalez).

[Figure 12](#). View of NE corner of Building B, Group II with stucco decorated frieze.

[Figure 13](#). Detail of the frieze and removed vegetation on Building B, Group II.

[Figure 14](#). South Profile of looters' trench in east face of Str. 2, Court A, Group III.

[Figure 15](#). West Profile of looters' tunnel in north face of Str. 2, Court A, Group III.

[Figure 16](#). Profiles of (a) looters' tunnel and (b) inner chamber on southern slope of Court A.

[Figure 17](#). Stela 5, *in situ*, seen from east.

[Figure 18](#). View of Stelae 4 (foreground), Stela 3 (background), and associated altar fragments.

Sources Cited

Brady, J.E., J.W. Ball, D.C. Pring, R.A. Housley, y N. Hammond

1998 The Lowland Maya "Protoclassic": A Reconsideration of its Nature and Significance. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 9(1):17-38.

Brady, J.E., T.P. Culbert, H. Escobedo, D. Forsyth, R.D. Hansen, y P.M. Rice

1995 El Protoclásico en las Tierras Bajas Mayas: algunos apuntes sobre los resultados del taller de cerámica. In *VIII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala*, J.P. Laporte y H. Escobedo (eds.) pp.463-68. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala.

Bullard, W.R. Jr.

1960 Maya settlement patterns in northeastern Petén, Guatemala. *American Antiquity* 25:355-72.

Hammond, N.

1984 Holmul and Nohmul: a comparison and assessment of two lowland Maya Protoclassic sites. *Cerámica de Cultura Maya*. 13:1-17.

Laporte J.P.

1995 Preclásico a Clásico en Tikal: proceso de transformación en Mundo Perdido. En *The Emergence of Lowland Maya Civilization: The Transition from the Preclassic to the Early Classic*. N. Grube (ed.) pp. 18-32. Acta Mesoamericana no. 8. Berlin: Verlag Anton Saurwein.

Mathews, P.

- 1985 Early Classic monuments and inscriptions. In *A consideration of the Early Classic Period in the Maya Lowlands*. G.R. Willey and P. Mathews (eds.) pp.5-55. Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, Publication 10. Albany: State University of New York.

Merwin R.E. and G. Vaillant

- 1932 *The Ruins of Holmul*. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. III no. 2. Cambridge: Harvard University.

Pring, D.C.

- 1977 Influence or Intrusion? The Protoclassic in the Maya Lowlands. En *Social Process in Maya Prehistory*. N. Hammond (ed.) pp. 135-65. London: Academic Press.

- 1995 The Holmul I style in the Maya Lowlands. Unpublished Manuscript in possession of author.

Puleston, D.E.

The Settlement Survey of Tikal. Tikal Reports No. 13, W. A. Haviland (vol. ed.). Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania.

Reents-Budet, D.J.

- 1985 The Late Classic Maya Holmul Style Polychrome Pottery. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Texas at Austin.

Stuart, D.

- 1988 Blood Symbolism in Maya Iconography. In *Maya Iconography* E. Benson and G. Griffin (eds.) pp. 171-221. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tourtellot, G. III

- 1970 The Peripheries of Seibal: An Interim Report. In *Monographs and Papers in Maya Archaeology*, W.R. Bullard Jr. (ed.) pp. 405-419. Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, no. 61. Cambridge: Harvard University.

Tourtellot, G. III, A. Clarke and N. Hammond

- 1993 Mapping La Milpa: a Maya city in northwestern Belize. *Antiquity* 67:96-108.

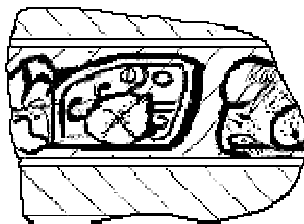
Tourtellot, G. III, J. Rose, S. Donaghey, y N. Hammond

- 1994 More light on La Milpa: Maya settlement archaeology in northwestern Belize. *Mexicon*16.

Preliminary Report on the Ceramics from Holmul, Guatemala: Year 2000 Season

Laura J. Kosakowsky

Visiting Scholar, Department of Anthropology, University of Arizona & Research Fellow,
Department of Archaeology, Boston University



Introduction

The Maya site of Holmul, in the northeastern Petén, Guatemala, was first visited and excavated by Raymond Merwin in a 1910-1911 Harvard University, Peabody Museum expedition. Subsequently, due to Merwin's ill health and premature death, this initial work was completed by George Vaillant, and the limited excavation and mapping data, and resulting ceramic sequence, were published only many years later (Vaillant, 1927; Merwin and Vaillant, 1932). Not surprisingly, given the spectacular nature of the burials and associated mortuary furniture uncovered in these early excavations, the site of Holmul and the "Holmul I style" (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932), or the "Q-Complex" (Lothrop, 1927) as it also became known, assumed the role as the defining type site for an entire period in Maya prehistory known in the literature as the "Protoclassic" (Pring, 1977), and its ceramic sequence became the standard for Maya sites until the publication of the Uaxactún report in the 1950's (Smith, 1955). While there has been much recent regional settlement and excavation data available from neighboring projects such as El Proyecto Triangulo (Samayoa, 1996); the El Pilar Project (Ford and Miller, 1997); the Belize River Valley work centered on Buenavista del Cayo (Ball and Taschek, 1991); and the Atlas Arqueológico de Guatemala [Sureste Petén] (LaPorte, 1997), Holmul itself never has been reexamined intensively and relatively little really is known of the ceramics, to say nothing of the settlement patterns, architectural configurations, sculpture, or chronological history of the site.

In the spring of 2000, a multi-year project was begun at Holmul to address questions concerning the development of this site through time, its role as a sub-regional center in wider spheres of political interaction, and to document its settlement history both within the ceremonial center and peripheral areas. Initial mapping of the site center produced a refined map of the main groups (I, II, and III) originally identified by Merwin (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932), and the results of the mapping, limited test pitting of the main plaza area, and cleaning and drawing of looters' trenches will be reported elsewhere. However the work from this season has produced some interesting preliminary information and new understanding of the ceramics from Holmul.

The History of Ceramic Research at Holmul

The excavations in 1910-1911 failed to identify clearly the earliest occupation of the site or an exact site chronology, although Vaillant's (1927) ceramic "analysis" ultimately defined five phases at the site, Holmul I- V, and key excavations in Building B, Group II, specifically Rooms 8 and 9, produced the defining ceramics for "Holmul I" and the "Protoclassic" period (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:37-40, 61-65). Typically, archaeologists have continued to identify the presence of a "Protoclassic" or "Holmul I" style pottery at other sites based on a broad series of ceramic traits that include: plates with four cylindrical supports; bowls, dishes, and vases with mammiform supports; spouted vessels or chocolate pots; z-angle rounded vessels; pot stands; and ring bases (Pring; 1995 ms. in possession of author). Sadly, this inadequate and poorly defined list and an entire phase of Maya cultural development were derived originally from a grand total of seventeen pots from Holmul.

It is surprising that the Protoclassic in the Maya Lowlands, since defined ceramically as the Floral Park Ceramic Sphere (Gifford, 1976), has been relatively neglected as a focus of study (Hammond, 1984). Indeed, the term "Protoclassic" has taken on numerous meanings throughout the years including: a) a chronological period of time in the first centuries A.D. (50 B.C. to A.D. 250), b) a cultural stage at the climax of the Late Preclassic that transitions into the Classic Period, or c) a cultural complex, mostly referring to style of decoration and shape of ceramics (Willey, 1977). Little archaeological investigation has been undertaken in an attempt to refine our understanding of this concept or time period, or to understand the importance of this transitional period between the Late Preclassic and Early Classic, although Protoclassic or Floral Park pottery has been identified at a number of sites in Guatemala, Belize, and México, and in varying quantities (Pring, 1977). Archaeologists still do not agree on the meaning of the "Protoclassic" or the "Holmul style" of pottery and until very recently, little careful thought has focused on refining our understanding of this important period in the development of lowland Maya civilization (Brady *et al.*, 1998). Currently, other definitive research on Holmul ceramics has turned to the Late Classic and analyzed pictorial styles in polychrome painting (Reents-Budet, 1985; 1991; Reents-Budet *et al.*, 1994) based on the extant collections from Holmul, and samples from many sites in Petén and Belize. However, the full range of ceramic types and varieties beyond the "Protoclassic", a complete ceramic chronology, and a full understanding of Holmul's place in wider ceramic spheres has remained unknown until the completion of this preliminary season.

The Ceramic Chronology of Holmul

The site of Holmul is located at the very edge of the northeastern Petén region of Guatemala as well as at the northwestern limit of Belize sites, spanning the watershed between the upper Hondo River basin of Belize and the interior reaches of the Petén. It

is thus situated at a ceramic crossroad, or potentially within more than one sphere of ceramic interaction, central to major centers in northern Belize and the Belize River Valley, as well as proximate to the larger polities of Naranjo, Tikal, Caracol and the more distant site of Calakmul. The ceramics recovered this season from the minor test pit excavations and looters' trenches provide some hints to these inter-site relationships as well as to Holmul's chronological history. In lieu of any radiometric dating from Holmul, the following standard ceramic complex time periods and ceramic sphere names have been adopted from Uaxactún (Smith, 1955):

Period	Ceramic Sphere	Approximate Date
Terminal Classic	Tepeu III	A.D. 850-?
Late Classic	Tepeu II	A.D. 700-850
Late Classic	Tepeu I	A.D. 550-700
Early Classic	Tzakol	A.D. 250-550
Late Preclassic	Chicanel	350 B.C.- A.D. 250
Middle Preclassic	Mamom	600-350 B.C.

The earliest ceramics found at Holmul were recovered from looters' trench 2 in the north face of the pyramidal structure in Group III. One sherd, possibly of Joventud Red: Mocho variety (Adams, 1971; Fig. 13 c, d) is an eroded mushroom stand form. It should be noted, however, that this form continues at Altar de Sacrificios into the Plancha and Ayn Complexes on Sierra Red and Caribal Red types, respectively (Adams, 1971), and given the eroded nature of the example from Holmul it is with no certainty that it can be placed as early as the Mamom horizon. Ceramics dating to late Mamom (600-350 B.C.) or early Chicanel (350 B.C.- A.D. 250) include examples of Ahchab Red and Buff: Variety Unspecified found in looters' trench 5 in the east face of Structure 8 and some sherds with surface treatments that are transitional between Joventud Red and Sierra Red.

Settlement at Holmul clearly was well established by the beginning of the Late Preclassic (350 B.C.). All six looters' trenches sampled from site center produced pottery from the Chicanel period (350 B.C. - A.D. 250), as did test pits 2 and 3 in the main plaza, and test pit 4 in front of Structure 8. Examples of Sierra Red: Sierra Variety and incised varieties (Laguna Verde, including the double-line break motif), and Polvero Black: Polvero Variety are abundant, occurring on outcurving, incurving, and flaring sided dishes and bowls as well as small orifice jars. There are many examples of labially and medially flanged or tabbed bowls with groove incising decoration, that typologically would appear to be late in the Late Preclassic based on comparisons with other sites in the region (Culbert, 1993). One example of Alta Mira Fluted from looters' trench 6 (Group II, Building F) is similar to examples from Tikal (Culbert, 1993) and

possesses a highly glossy hard Sierra Red slip. The range of ceramic types and varieties parallels those found in Late Preclassic ceramic complexes at other Petén and Pasión sites (Adams, 1971; 1998; Culbert, 1993; Sabloff, 1975; Smith, 1955) and the presence of Society Hall Red: Society Hall variety, a type found in northern Belize (Kosakowsky, 1987) and the Belize River Valley (Gifford, 1976) illustrates that during the Late Preclassic Holmul's ceramic affiliations were across a wide interaction sphere that included the sites of the Petén and Belize.

One might have expected that preliminary research at Holmul would produce large quantities of pottery from the "Protoclassic" period given the association of Holmul with the original identification and definition of the "Protoclassic". But as has been suggested elsewhere (Brady *et al.*, 1998) misinterpretations concerning the meaning of the "Protoclassic" as well as misidentifications of "Protoclassic" ceramic types have clouded our understanding of the distribution of ceramics from this time period. The paucity of Holmul I pottery found this season supports the assertion that "Protoclassic" deposits are limited in distribution and variable in context, even at sites with fairly sizable collections of "Protoclassic" ceramics (Case, 1982; Meskill, 1992). Furthermore, there is no evidence yet of a functionally complete ceramic complex for this time period, and the Holmul I ceramics found by Merwin and Vaillant (1932) would seem to represent a specialized burial sub-complex, coeval with Late Preclassic and Early Classic ceramic traditions, confirming prior research on "Protoclassic" pottery from other sites (Brady *et al.*, 1998). Red on cream decorated ceramics found in looters' trench 1 (Group III) are reminiscent of some examples from the original Merwin and Vaillant (1932) descriptions of Holmul I, and the same trench produced 5 sherds of Aguacate Orange. The former are well within the Petén Gloss Ware tradition of the Early Classic, while the latter are placed in Holmul Orange Ware and represent a non-glossy slip treatment that is derived directly from the Late Preclassic. Additionally, during this same time period, there is evidence of the continued production of monochrome red pottery that approaches the glossiness and hardness of Early Classic ceramics but within the slip color range for Sierra Red. Similar material has been identified on the varietal level at some sites (Kosakowsky, 1987) and on the typological level at others (Robertson, 1980). The persistence of Late Preclassic ceramic types well into the Early Classic has been suggested elsewhere in both Belize and the Yucatán (Kosakowsky and Pring, 1991; Lincoln, 1985; Robles Castellanos, 1990) and may explain the smaller sample of "Early Classic" ceramics found at Holmul this season.

Early Classic ceramics of the Tzakol sphere are not well represented in the collections from looters' trenches at Holmul, though this may be due to sampling, or the persistence of Late Preclassic traditions. There are examples of Early Classic eroded monochrome red-oranges, within the range of Aguila Orange, particularly at Río Azul (Adams, 1999) and Tikal (Culbert, 1993), and black (Balanza) body sherds from small orifice jars, found in looters' trenches 1, 2, 3 (all in Group III), and 5 (Structure 8). There were sherds of an eroded Balanza Black basally ridged tripod bowl in looters' trench 4 (Group III), Boletto Black on Orange sherds from looters' trench 6 (Group II, Structure F), and Dos Arroyos Orange Polychrome sherds, and a Yaloche Cream Polychrome from looters' trench 1 (Group III). In addition, Test Pit 4 in front of Structure 8 produced one eroded basal

flange bowl that in form dates to the Early Classic. The limited sample indicates a typical ceramic assemblage for any Petén site during the Early Classic (Culbert, 1993).

There is abundant evidence of Late Classic ceramics in virtually all surface collections and test pits from site center, and from surface collections in looters' trenches at an outlying L-shaped residential structure some 1.2 km to the southeast of site center. Looters' trenches 1 (Group III), 4 (Group III), and 5 (Structure 8) produced polychrome ceramics of the Saxche and Palmar Ceramic Groups, as well as Tinaja Red (and Subin Red), Achote Black, Cambio Unslipped, and Encanto Striated sherds, and red ridged plates similar to Mountain Pine Red at Barton Ramie in Tepeu 1, but on a local rather than an ash paste (Gifford, 1976). The polychrome pottery consists of standard Tepeu vessel forms including Saxche and Palmar types occurring on ridged plates in Tepeu 1, small barrels and round sided bowls in Tepeu 1 and 2, and a preference for cylinders in Tepeu 2. Many of the bowls and cylinders are decorated with pseudo-glyphs along the exterior of the rim, and other design elements include stylized step-scrolls, pyramidal, floral, and Ahau and mat designs, all of which are commonly depicted on Late Classic polychrome ceramics from many Petén and Belize sites (Adams, 1971; Culbert, 1993; Reents-Budet *et al.*, 1994; Gifford, 1976; Sabloff, 1975; Smith, 1955). In one case, from the outlying L-shaped structure, a highly eroded Palmar Orange Polychrome ridged plate with a ring base appears to have had, a now unreadable, primary standard sequence around the interior of the rim, and a serpent design on the interior of the base. Another Palmar Orange Polychrome barrel, from the same structure, exhibits design elements similar to pottery from Altun Ha (Reents-Budet *et al.*, 1994:Figure 5.42), although lacking the characteristic black or yellow/cream background.

In looters' trench 1 (6 sherds) and from the outlying L-shaped structure (2 sherds) came a minute quantity of Cabrito Cream Polychrome: Cabrito Variety (or Zacatel Cream Polychrome: Cabrito Variety), a ceramic type that often is referred to in the literature as "Holmul-style" pottery (Reents-Budet *et al.*, 1994) because it was discovered in Holmul burials (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932:Figure 9b). It is perhaps puzzling that even in this preliminary season so little "Holmul style" ceramics were recovered, but these findings support prior research that has hinted that the "Holmul style" is in fact a tradition of ceramic production across a broad region of eastern Guatemala and western Belize (Reents-Budet *et al.*, 1994). The many distinct styles of the category of "Holmul style" ceramics, and instrumental neutron activation analyses that demonstrate multiple centers of production (Reents-Budet *et al.*, 2000), when taken in light of the paucity of this type of pottery from the recent work at Holmul, might suggest that Holmul was not a major production locale for Cabrito Cream Polychrome, despite it having been named for the site.

The ubiquity of standard Petén style polychromes, of the Saxche and Palmar ceramic groups, as well as traditional monochrome red and black (Tinaja and Achote Groups respectively), and unslipped types of the Tepeu sphere suggest that Holmul's connections to the Petén sites to the west were of paramount importance during the Late Classic. The presence of some "Holmul-style" ceramics, produced in a broader region that encompasses sites of the Belize River Valley, would lead one to suspect that Holmul's position on the eastern edge of the Petén and within range of the many sites in

northern Belize and the Belize River Valley, allowed it to bridge more than one sphere of ceramic influence during the Late Classic.

Finally, from the outlying L-shaped structure, there are examples of poorly executed geometric polychromes reminiscent of Benque Viejo Polychrome (Gifford, 1976), though on a local paste rather than Vinaceous Tawny Ware. These are also similar to examples of the Zacatel Cream Polychromes of the Eznab Complex at Tikal (Culbert, 1993) that are clearly Tepeu 3 in date. Further evidence of occupation at Holmul, at least through the Terminal Classic, includes Subin Red bowls (in looters' trench 1 and the outlying L-shaped structure), two small body sherds that are possibly plumbate (looters' trench 1), and one small body sherd of a fine gray paste (from the outlying L-shaped structure) that is similar to Tres Naciones Gray, a Tepeu 3 type from the Pasión River area (Sabloff, 1975). As yet there is no evidence for Postclassic occupation at Holmul based on the work of the year 2000 season, although one example of a Tinaja Red tripod footed bowl is formally equivalent to late Terminal Classic/ Early Postclassic examples from the Spanish Lookout and early New Town complexes at Barton Ramie (Gifford, 1976).

Directions for Future Ceramic Research

Clearly there are still many unanswered questions concerning the ceramics of Holmul that a preliminary season can only begin to examine. On an intra-site level future work needs to address and identify the earliest occupation, the nature of the Protoclassic assemblage and how it is related to the Preclassic and Early Classic ceramic complexes, and how late in time Holmul was occupied. This beginning analysis has hinted alluringly to Holmul's political connections to other sites across a wider region, and the site's location within the Río Hondo watershed of northern Belize and on the eastern edge of the Petén core is mirrored in the pottery, which demonstrates affinities to both geographic regions. Further research on the Holmul ceramics has the potential to elucidate on the growth of social complexity at this minor regional center and to inform on what role Holmul may have played in inter-regional socio-politics, as well as rescuing these important data from the heavy looting that has impacted Holmul as it has other Maya sites in the Petén.

List of Ceramic Types and Varieties

Middle Preclassic Mamom Sphere

Joventud Red: Variety Unspecified (?)

Late Preclassic Chicanel Sphere

Achiotes Unslipped: Achiotes Variety

Sapote Striated: Sapote Variety

Ahchab Red and Buff: Variety Unspecified

Sierra Red: Sierra Variety
Laguna Verde Incised: Grooved Incised Variety
Alta Mira Fluted: Alta Mira Variety
Puletan Red and Unslipped: Puletan Variety
Society Hall Red: Society Hall Variety
Polvero Black: Polvero Variety

"Protoclassic" Floral Park Sphere

Unnamed Red-on-Cream (?)
Aguacate Orange: Aguacate Variety

Early Classic Tzakol Sphere

Quintal Unslipped: Variety Unspecified
Triunfo Striated: Triunfo Variety
Aguila Orange: Aguila Variety
Balanza Black: Balanza Variety
Lucha Incised: Lucha Variety
Dos Arroyos Orange Polychrome: Dos Arroyos Variety
Boleto Black on Orange: Variety Unspecified
Yaloche Cream Polychrome: Yaloche Variety

Late Classic Tepeu Ceramic Sphere

Cambio Unslipped: Cambio Variety
Encanto Striated: Encanto Variety
Mountain Pine Red: Variety Unspecified (?)
Tinaja Red: Tinaja Variety
Subin Red: Variety Unspecified
Cameron Incised: Variety Unspecified
Chaquiste Impressed: Variety Unspecified
Achote Black: Achote Variety
Saxche Orange Polychrome: Saxche Variety
Palmar Orange Polychrome: Palmar Variety
Zacatel Cream Polychrome: Zacatel Variety
Cabrito Cream Polychrome: Cabrito Variety
Tres Naciones Gray: Variety Unspecified (?)
Unnamed Plumbate (?)

Acknowledgements

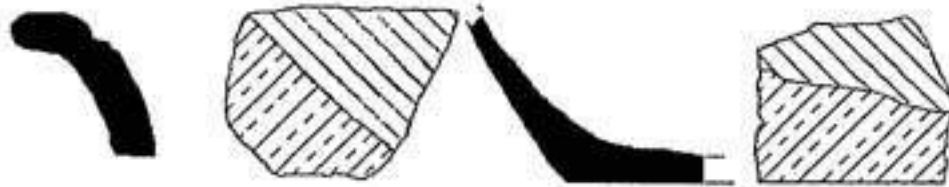
Funding for the Holmul 2000 season was provided by the National Geographic Society (Grant #6349-98), Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI), and the Ahau Foundation (Grant #9904). My special thanks to Peter Harrison and the Ahau Foundation for my travel expenses to Guatemala.

I would like to thank Francisco Estrada Belli, project director, and Lic.da. Nora Lopez of the Instituto de Antropología e Historia de Guatemala for providing the unique opportunity to work on the Holmul ceramics.

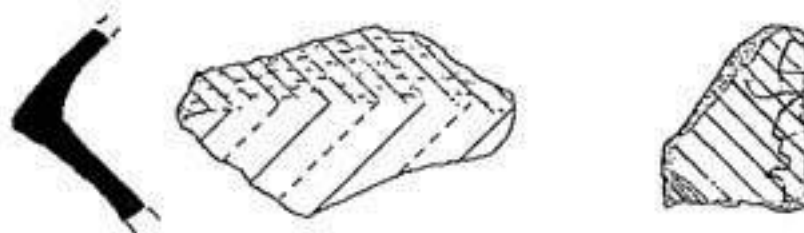
This work could not have been completed without the support, emotional, intellectual, and physical of Marc Wolf, Eelco Wolf, Jason Gonzalez and Ryan Mongelluzzo.

Special thanks to Jon Lohse and David Driver for helping to "pick up the pieces". Ceramic advice was graciously provided by Pat Culbert, Laura Levi, Lisa LeConte, Dorie Reents-Budet and Kerry Sagebiel, but any or all errors or omissions are my own.

Illustrations



(a) Ahchab Red and Buff: Variety Unspecified



(b) Joventud Red or Sierra Red
(mushroom stand form and graffiti)

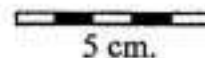
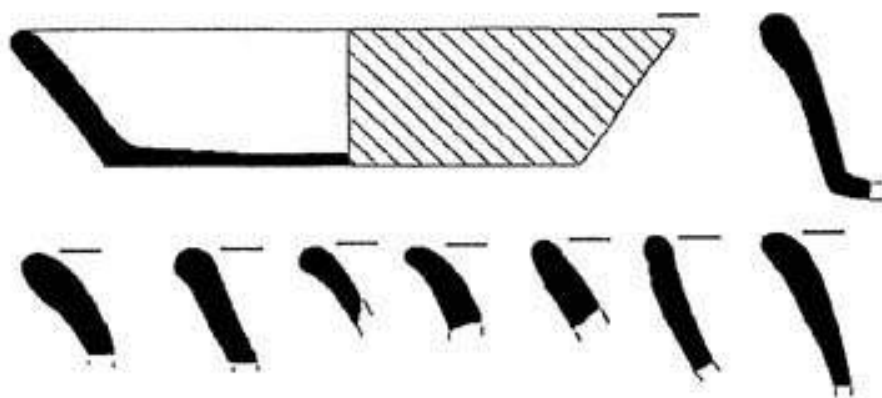


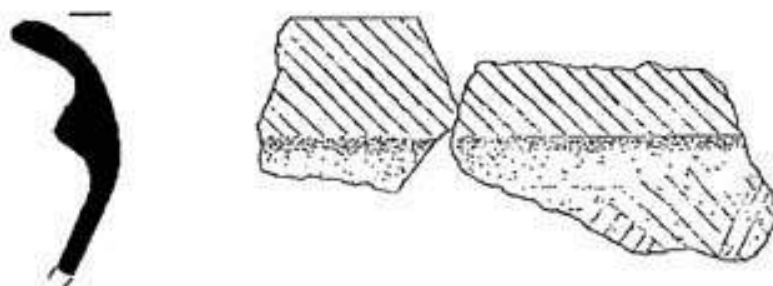
Figure 1. Late Middle to Late Preclassic: Mamom and Chicanel Sphere Ceramics



(a) Sierra Red: Sierra Variety



(b) Society Hall Red: Society Hall Variety



(c) Puletan Red and Unslipped: Puletan Variety



(d) Polvero Black: Polvero Variety

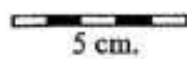
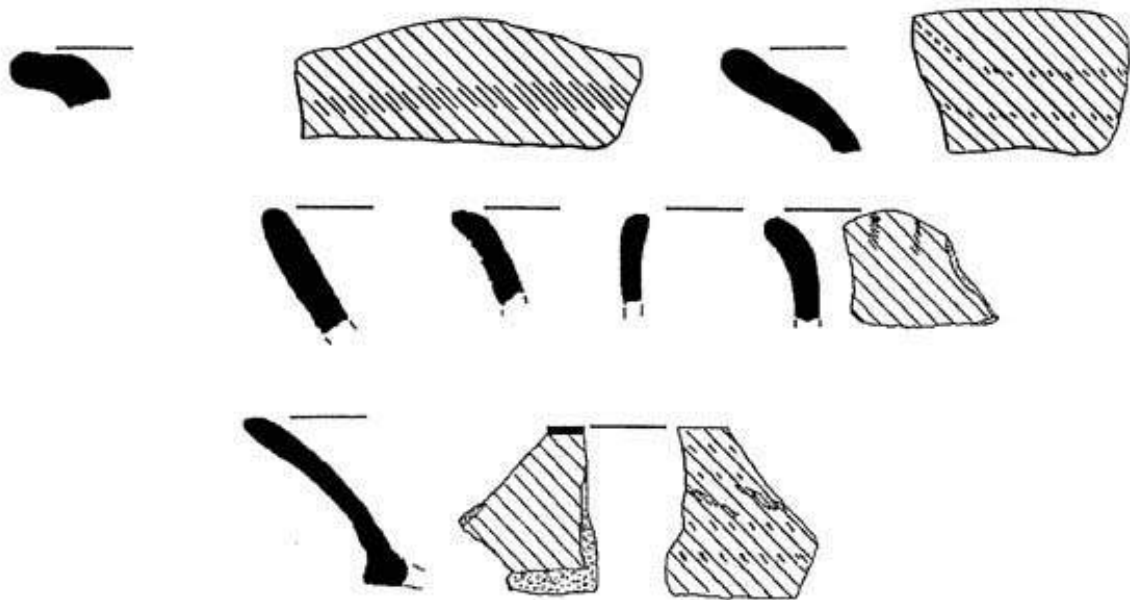
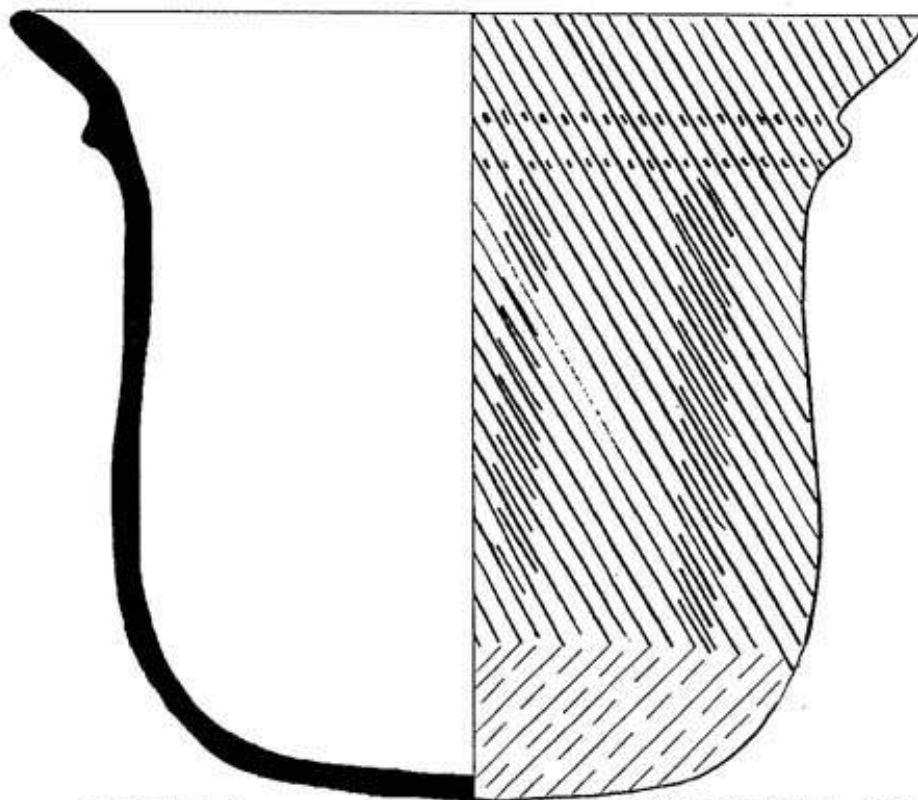


Figure 2. Late Preclassic: Chicanel Sphere Ceramics



(a) Laguna Verde Incised: Grooved Incised Variety



5 cm.

(b) Alta Mira Fluted: Alta Mira Variety

Figure 3. Late Preclassic: Chicanel Sphere Ceramics

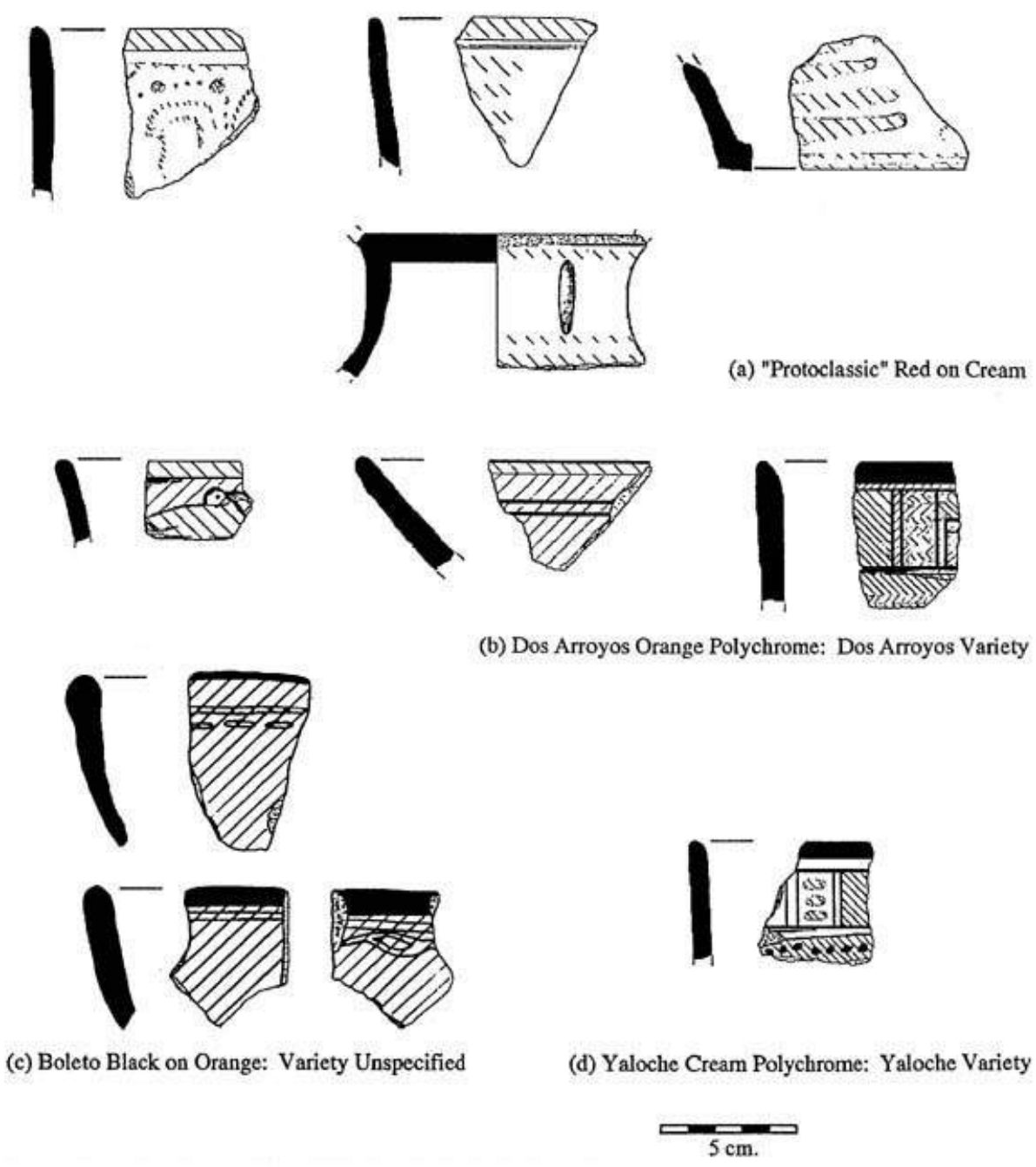
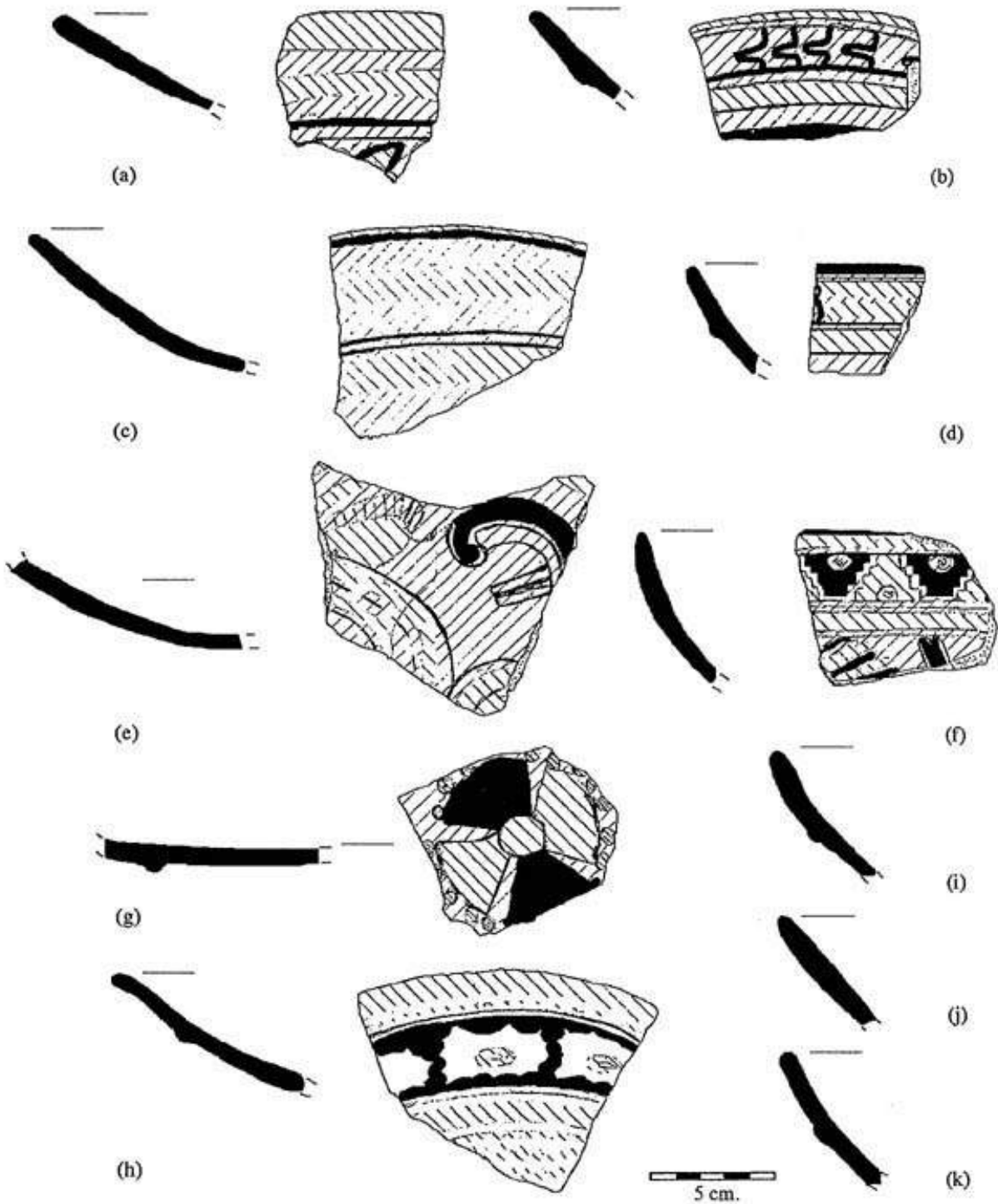
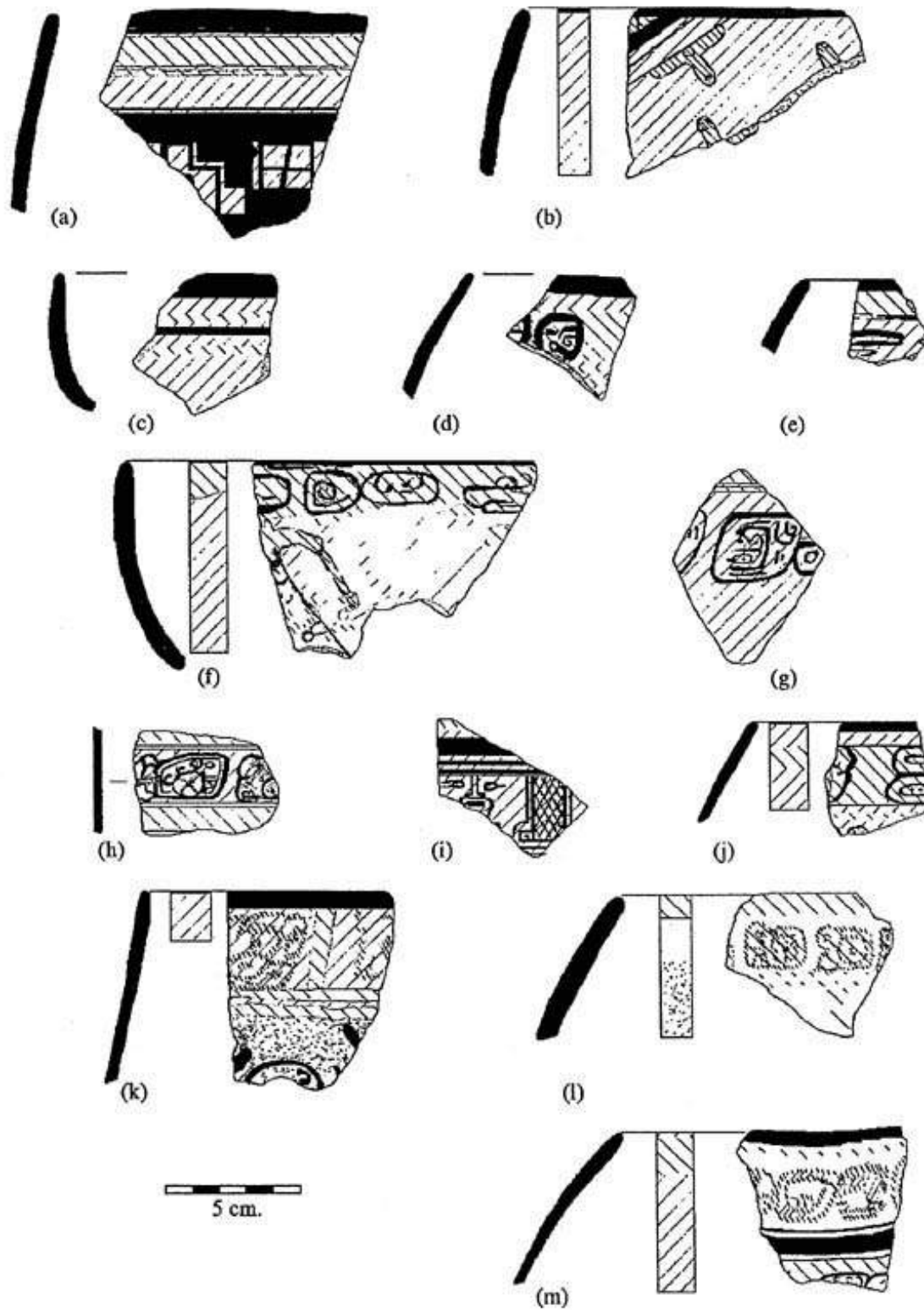


Figure 4. Early Classic: Floral Park and Tzakol Sphere Ceramics



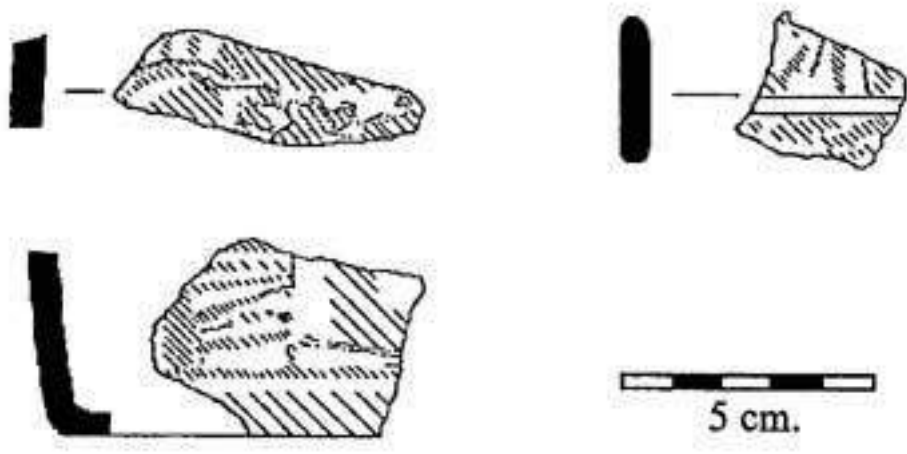
(a-g) Saxche Orange Polychrome: Saxche Variety (h) Juleki Cream Polychrome: Juleki Variety
 (i-k) "Mountain Pine Red"

Figure 5. Late Classic: Tepeu 1 Sphere Ceramics



(a-g) Saxche Orange Polychrome: Saxche Variety, (h-j) Palmar Orange Polychrome: Palmar Variety, (k-m) Zacatel Cream Polychrome: Zacatel Variety

Figure 6. Late Classic: Tepeu 1/2 Sphere Ceramics



Cabrito Cream Polychrome: Cabrito Variety

Figure 7. Late Classic: Tepeu Sphere Ceramics

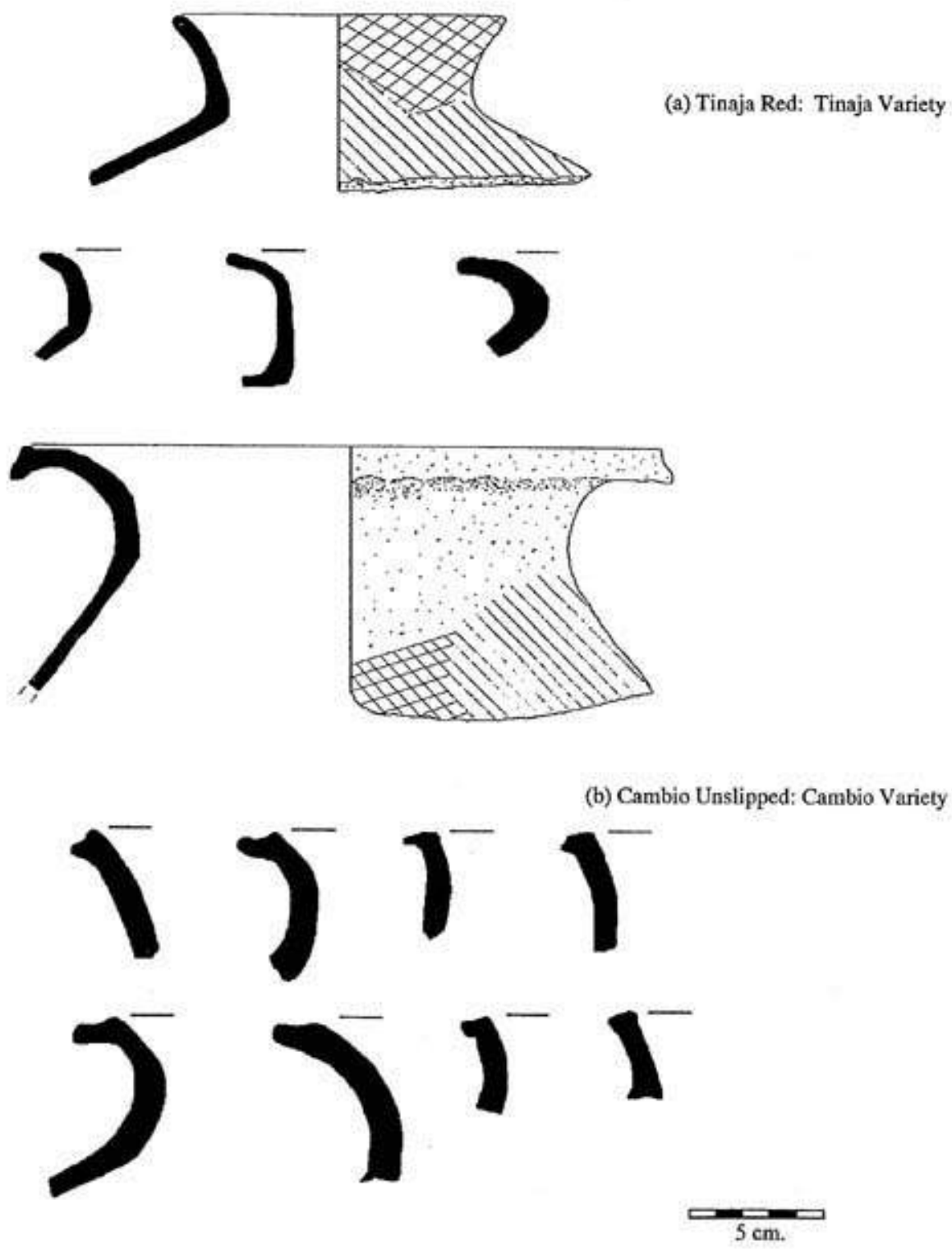


Figure 8. Late Classic: Tepeu 2/3 Sphere Ceramics

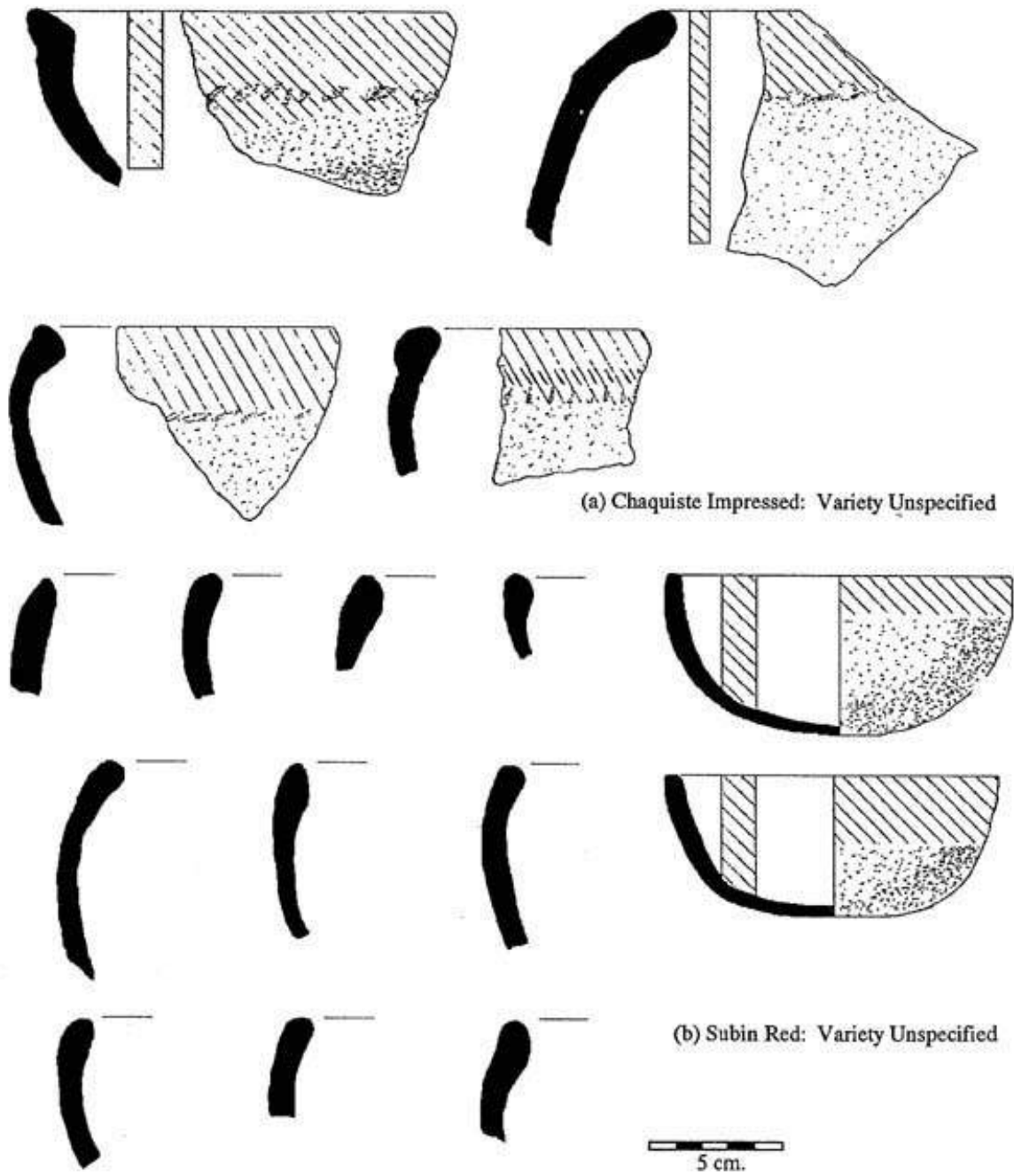


Figure 9. Late Classic: Tepeu 2/3 Sphere Ceramics

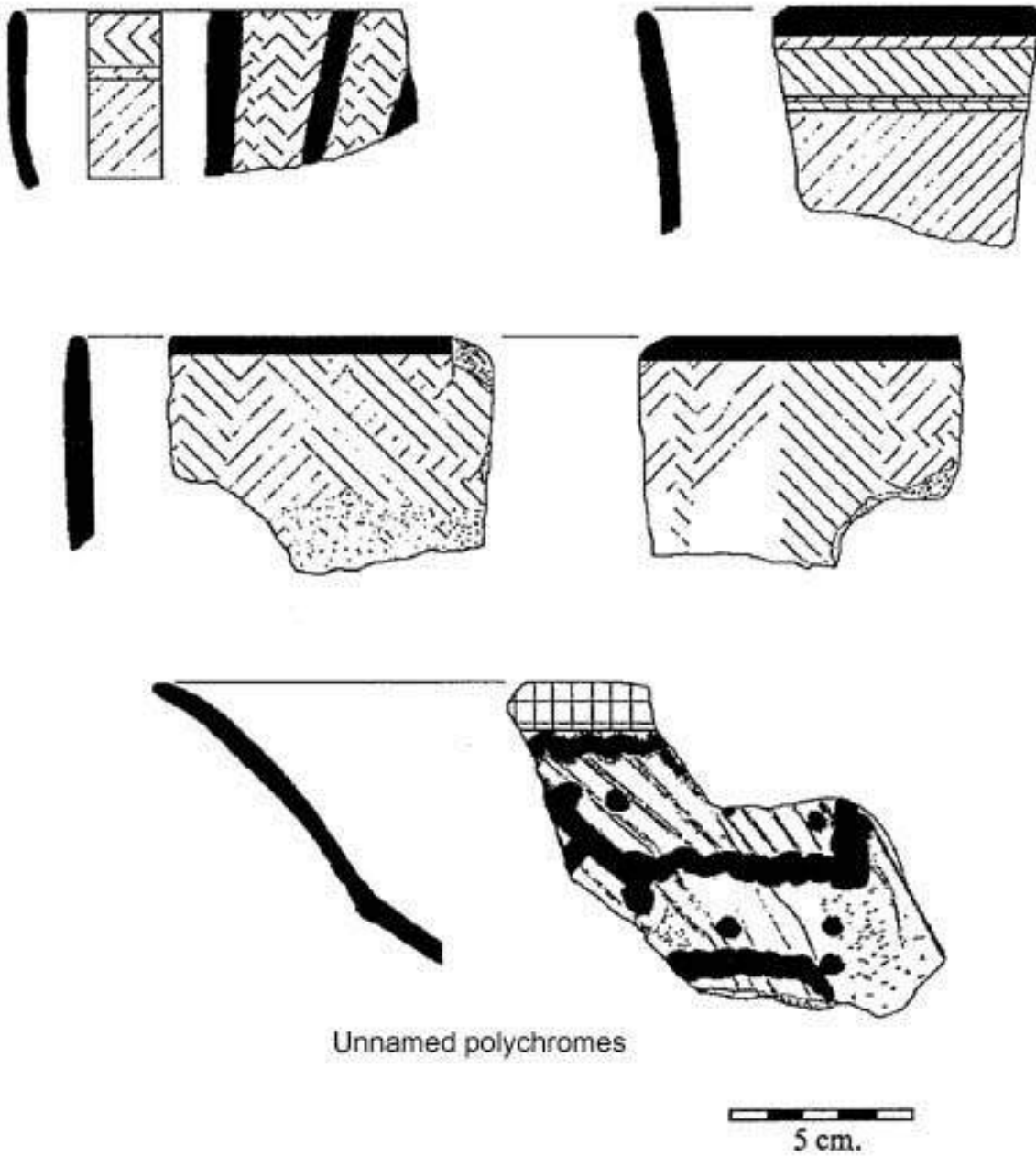
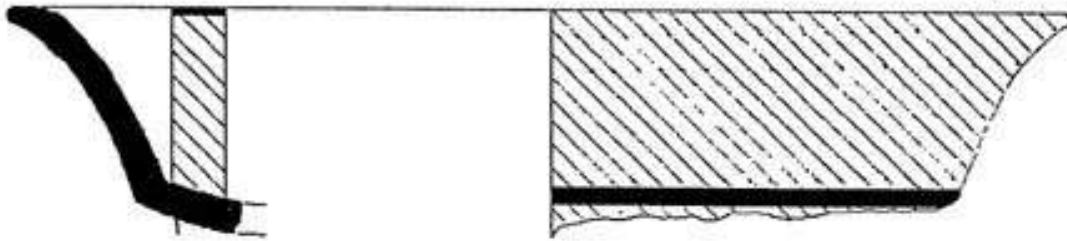


Figure 10. Late Classic: Tepeu 3 Sphere Ceramics



(a) Tinaja Group: Incised Red



(b) Tinaja Group: Black on Red

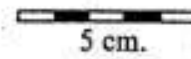


Figure 11. Late Classic: Tepeu 3 Sphere Ceramics

Sources Cited

Adams, R.E.W.

1999 *Río Azul. An Ancient Maya City*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

1971 *The Ceramics of Altar de Sacrificios*. Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology 63(1). Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Ball, J.W. and J.T. Taschek

1991 Late Classic Lowland Maya Political Organization and Central-Place Analysis. New Insights from the Upper Belize River Valley. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 2:149-165.

Brady, J.E., J.W. Ball, D.C. Pring, R.A. Housley, and N. Hammond

2002 The Lowland Maya "Protoclassic": A Reconsideration of its Nature and Significance. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 9(1998):17-38.

Case, R.P.

2002 Type: Variety Analysis and the Protoclassic Ceramics of El Pozito, Belize: A Critical Review. Unpublished Master's Thesis. Department of Anthropology, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA.

Culbert, T.P.

1993 *The Ceramics of Tikal: Vessels from the Burials, Caches, and Problematical Deposits*. Tikal Report No. 25, Part A. University Museum Monograph 81. University of Pennsylvania, The University Museum, Philadelphia.

Ford, A. and C. Miller

1997 Creación de La Reserva Arqueologica El Pilar en Guatemala y Belice: Un Nuevo Concepto de Rescate Para La Selva Maya. *El X Simposio de Arqueologia Guatemalteca. Museo Nacional de Arqueologia, Guatemala*. Julio, 1996. J.P. La Porte and H. Escobedo, (eds.), pp. 417-426. Guatemala City.

Gifford, J.C.

1976 *Prehistoric Pottery Analysis and the Ceramics of Barton Ramie in the Belize Valley*. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Vol. 18. Harvard University, Cambridge.

Hammond, N.

1984 Holmul and Nohmul: A Comparison and Reassessment of Two Maya Lowland Protoclassic Sites. *Ceramica de Cultura Maya*, Vol. 13:1-17.

Kosakowsky, L.J.

1987 *Preclassic Maya Pottery at Cuello, Belize*. Anthropological Papers of the University of Arizona 47. University of Arizona Press, Tuscon.

Kosakowsky, L.J. and D.C. Pring

1991 Ceramic Chronology & Typology. In *Cuello: An Early Maya Community in Belize*, ed. by N. Hammond, (ed.), pp. 60-69. Cambridge University Press, England.

LaPorte, J.P.

1995 Preclásico a Clásico en Tikal: Proceso de Transformación en Mundo Perdido. In *The Emergence of Lowland Maya Civilization*, ed. by N. Grube, pp. 17-33. Acta Mesoamerica No. 8. Verlag von Flemming, Berlin.

Lincoln, C.E.

1985 Ceramics and Ceramic Chronology. In *A Consideration of the Early Classic Period in the Maya Lowlands*, ed. by G.R. Willey and P. Matthews, pp. 55-94. Publication No. 10. Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, SUNY, Albany.

Lothrop, S.K.

1927 *Pottery Types and Their Sequence in El Salvador*. Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation. Indian Notes and Monographs. Vol. 1, No. 4. New York.

Meskill, F.K.

1992 *Ceramics and Context: A Protohistoric Perspective from the Sites of Kichpanha and Colha*. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Texas, San Antonio.

Merwin, R.E. and G.C. Vaillant

1932 *The Ruins of Holmul, Guatemala*. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Vol. 3, No. 2. Harvard University, Cambridge.

Pring, D.C.

1977 Influence or Intrusion? The Protohistoric in the Maya Lowlands. In *Social Process in Maya Prehistory*, N. Hammond (ed.). pp. 135-65. Academic Press, London.

1995 The Holmul I Style in the Maya Lowlands. Unpublished ms. in possession of author.

Reents-Budet, D.

1991 The "Holmul Dancer" Theme in Maya Art. In *VI Palenque Round Table*, V.M. Fields (ed.). pp. 217-222. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

1985 *The Holmul Style Classic Maya Pottery*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Department of Art, University of Texas, Austin.

Reents-Budet, D., J.W. Ball, R.L. Bishop, V.M. Fields and B. MacLeod

1994 *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period*. Duke University Press, Durham, N.C.

Reents-Budet, D., R.L. Bishop, J.T. Taschek, and J.W. Ball

2000 Out of the Palace Dumps. Ceramic production and use at Buenavista del Cayo. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 11(2000):99-121.

Robertson-Freidel, R.A.

1980 The Ceramics from Cerros: A Late Preclassic Site in Northern Belize. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Department of Anthropology. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Robles-Castellanos, J.F.

1990 La secuencia cerámica de la región de Coba, Quintana Roo. Colección Científica (Serie Arqueología), Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia México.

Sabloff, J.A.

1975 *Excavations at Seibal, Department of Petén, Guatemala: Ceramics*. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology Vol. 13(2). Harvard University, Cambridge.

Samayoa, O.Q.

1996 El programa de Rescate del Subproyecto Triángulo Yaxhá-Nakum-Naranjo. In *El IX Simposio de Arqueología Guatemalteca. Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Guatemala*. Julio, 1995. J.P. La Porte and H. Escobedo, (eds.), pp. 25-35. Guatemala City.

Smith, R.E.

1955 *Ceramic Sequence at Uaxactún, Guatemala*. Middle American Research Institute, Publication No. 20. Tulane University, New Orleans.

Vaillant, G.C.

1927 *The Chronological Significance of Maya Ceramics*. Ph.D. dissertation. Harvard University, Cambridge.

Willey, G.

1977 The Rise of Maya Civilization: a summary view. In *The Origins of Maya Civilization*, R.E.W. Adams (ed.). pp. 383-4423. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.