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## **Cancuén Regional Archaeological Project: Highland-Lowland Influence and Exchange along a Geographical Boundary**



**Research Year:** 2000

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Late Classic, Tepeu 2

**Location:** Upper Pasión region, Department of Petén, Guatemala

**Site:** Raxruja Viejo, El Achiote, El Guaraní, La Caoba

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## Abstract

The Upper Pasión region of Guatemala that bridges the physical boundary of the southern Maya lowlands and the highlands has seen little archaeological attention. The strategic position of this region at the head of the Pasión-Usumacinta River route and along the highland-lowland interface is crucial to understanding important issues in Mesoamerican archaeology, including highland-lowland interaction and long distance trade. This FAMSI-funded research project began the systematic exploration of the region by identifying, mapping, and testing a number of sites. Descriptions of the fieldwork, interpretations, and considerations for future research in the region are presented here.

## Resumen

La región del Alto Pasión de Guatemala sirve como frontera entre las tierras bajas mayas del sur y el altiplano, y ha recibido poca atención por parte de la arqueología. La posición estratégica de esta región, en el inicio de la ruta del río Pasión-Usumacinta, pasando por la interfase de las tierras altas y las tierras bajas, es crucial para la comprensión de importantes cuestiones de la arqueología mesoamericana, entre ellas la interacción entre las tierras altas y las tierras bajas y el intercambio a larga distancia. El proyecto de investigación financiado por FAMSI comenzó con la exploración sistemática de la región, con la identificación, mapeo y excavación de un cierto número de sitios. Aquí presento las descripciones del trabajo de campo, las interpretaciones y las cuestiones a tener en cuenta para futuras investigaciones a realizarse en la región.

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## Introduction

The Upper Pasión region in the southern portion of the Department of Petén, Guatemala and the adjacent Alta Verapaz ([Figure 1](#)) is poorly known archaeologically. Its remote, difficult to reach location made access a challenge and Guatemala's long civil war and the illicit drug trade made the region hazardous. The end of the war in 1996 and the widening and paving of the road from Cobán have made the area more accessible, although the drug trade is still a problem. This improved access facilitates research but at the same time endangers sites in the region. Looters can now simply drive into some of the sites and dismantle ancient structures in search of valuable artifacts and convenient fill material for construction projects. Thus, while the primary

goals of this FAMSI-funded project are scientific in nature, we are also preserving and recording the cultural patrimony of the Upper Pasión region in the face of this new threat.



Figure 1. Map of southwest Petén, showing FAMSÍ-funded research zone.

The region was first explored by archaeologists early in the 20th century when Teobert Maler traveled to Cancuén by river from the distant confluence of the Pasión and Usumacinta rivers as part of his quest to explore the length of those river systems from their mouths to the Gulf of México (Maler 1908). Sylvanus Morley returned to Cancuén for two days in 1915 while recording Maya inscriptions (Morley 1938). Patricia Carot spent two months in the adjacent Alta Verapaz in 1975 exploring caves and producing sketch maps of nearby sites (Carot 1989). Research in the region resumed briefly in 1967 when a small group of scholars from the Harvard Seibal project spent four days at Cancuén (Tourtellot, *et al.* 1978). The first large-scale research project in the Upper Pasión commenced in 1999 under Arthur Demarest of Vanderbilt University (Demarest and Barrientos 1999).

The current research sought to further explore the region, identifying, mapping, and testing additional archaeological sites. This project benefited from the work of the Vanderbilt Cancuén project, including my own regional reconnaissance in 1999 while part of that project (O'Mansky 1999). Some of the sites identified by my regional reconnaissance were test excavated by myself and my local crew and also by members of the Vanderbilt Cancuén Regional Archaeological Project during its 2002 field season.

The completion of the FAMSI-funded research in 2002 consisted of the complete mapping of four sites (Figure 2)—Raxruja Viejo, El Achiote, El Guaraní, and La Caoba—using a Nikon DTM-520 total station. These sites were then tested using sometimes contiguous 2 x 2 meter excavations, in most cases placed behind structures in the hope of striking middens for dating purposes. Analysis of the ceramics recovered was conducted by Cancuén Project ceramicists Cassandra Bill, Michael Callaghan, and Jeanette Castellanos.

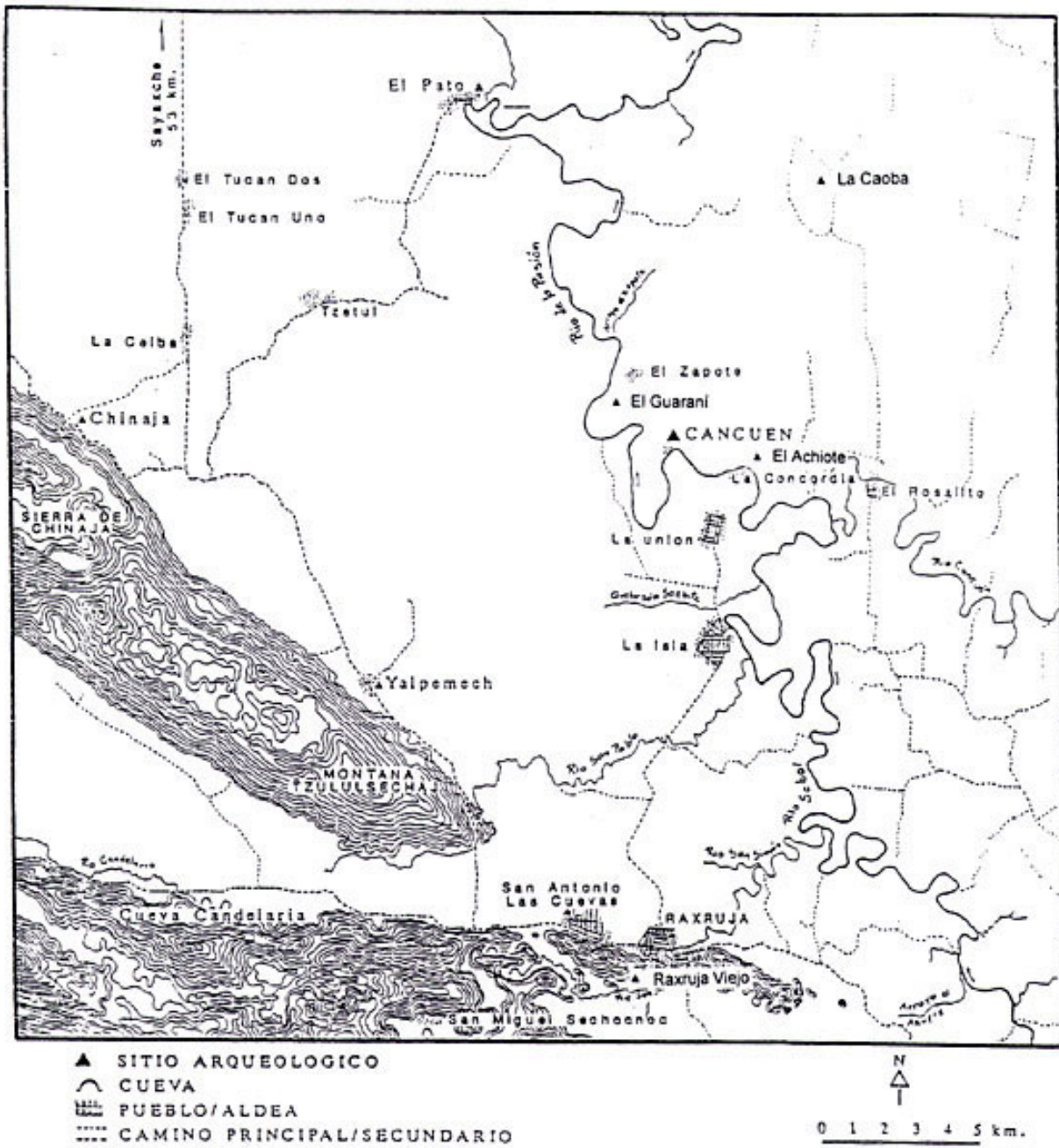


Figure 2. Map of Upper Pasión region.

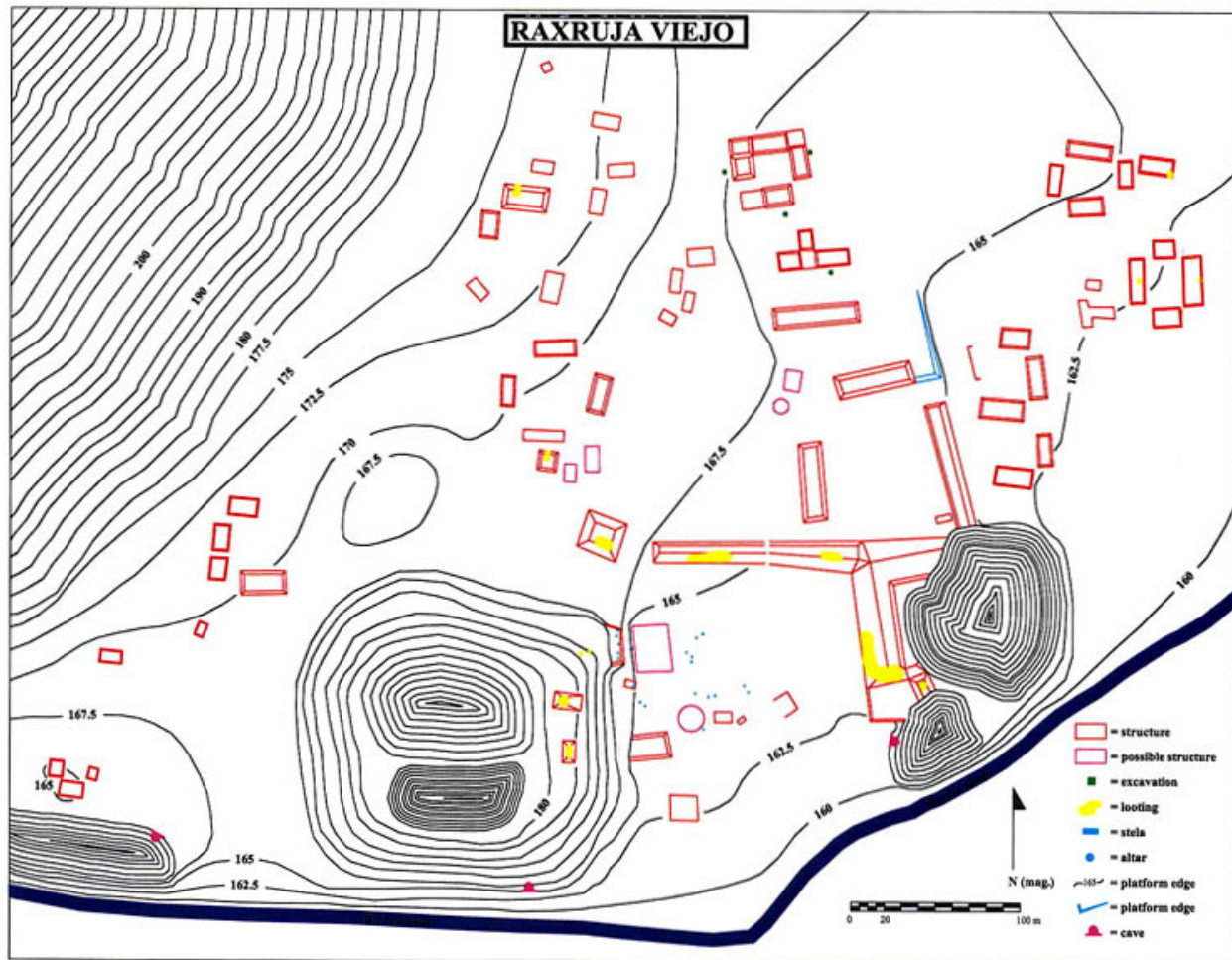


Figure 3. Map of Raxruja Viejo.

## Raxruja Viejo

The center of the site of Raxruja Viejo (Figure 3) is located approximately two kilometers south of the modern town of Raxruja at 15°51'31"N, 90°03'00"W. It is nestled among the foothills of the Alta Verapaz (Figure 4, shown below) and is bounded by the Río San Simón to the south. Patricia Carot briefly examined the site in 1975 while studying caves in the area (Carot 1989). She produced a sketch map of the site center but did not conduct any excavations.

Raxruja Viejo is in a poor state of preservation overall due to looting and the mining of architectural fill for use in roadbeds and other construction projects. Much of this destruction occurred in the 1960s and 1970s when the Raxruja-Rubel Santo road was built. The current landowner reports that entire buildings in the epicenter were bulldozed. The foundations of several of these are at least partially visible today. Subsequent damage to the site was done by plows and mining of large structures for stone continued in the summer of 2002 (Figure 5, shown below) until the Institute of Anthropology and History intervened.



**Figure 4. Sacred hills at Raxruja Viejo.**



**Figure 5. Looting of a palace structure for stone at Raxruja Viejo in 2002.**

The central plaza of Raxruja Viejo measures approximately 175 x 135 meters and includes 14 structures (two of which were bulldozed) and 21 monuments—19 stelae and 2 altars, all plain and loosely clustered toward the northwest corner of the plaza. Most of the monuments are broken and many are not *in situ* due to the bulldozers. The limits of the plaza are defined by the Río San Simón to the south and cave-riddled karst towers on the east and west sides. A 60 meter long range structure, probably the palace, measures up to eight meters tall, closes off the north side of the plaza, and continues along the east side of the plaza, abutting one of the karst towers ([Figure 6](#), shown below). Looting indicates that this massive structure was built in a single phase. A pass between the two eastern towers is blocked by a low, looted mound that reportedly once contained a tomb. A four-meter tall platform near the northwest corner of the plaza is built into the western karst tower. Five stelae line the front of the platform. Two structures are located high up the face of the slope. Both of these are looted through their central axes and, like the looted mound across the plaza, both reportedly contained tombs. On the south side of the same karst tower, a large cave mouth is situated just above the river ([Figure 7](#), shown below). All of the karst hills around the site are riddled with caves.



**Figure 6. Palace structure built against a sacred hill on east side of main plaza, Raxruja Viejo.**



Visible settlement beyond the central plaza is limited. Approximately 60 structures were identified and mapped. However, numerous additional structures fell victim to the bulldozers and plows and there are likely hidden structures at the site. Remnants of ancient structures are also evident several kilometers from the site center under modern Raxruja. Raxruja Viejo appears to have been a fairly extensive settlement.



**Figure 7. Cave mouth above Río San Simón in a sacred hill on west side of main plaza, Raxruja Viejo.**

### *Excavations and Artifact Analysis*

Limited excavations in plaza groups outside of the central plaza yielded small amounts of badly eroded pottery. While analysis is preliminary due to the small artifact assemblage, the Raxruja Viejo utilitarian wares appear to be different from the Cancuén

ceramic system with different pastes and forms. There are some similarities, though, in fine wares (Bill, *et al.* 2002). All of the Raxruja Viejo pottery recovered in 2002 dates to the Late Classic period.

The date of the ceramics, in conjunction with the evidence for a single massive construction phase and the abundant plain monuments, suggests that Raxruja Viejo was settled late, perhaps in an attempt to control the lucrative Pasión River system trade route as Cancuén lost power and was abandoned around A.D. 800.

## **El Achiote**

The site of El Achiote ([Figure 8](#)) is a small village of approximately 40 structures located on the high east bank of the Pasión River 2.8 kilometers south of Cancuén. Settlement focused on three ridges or hills roughly equidistant from the highest hill at the site. No evidence of construction was found atop this hill but it likely served a ritual function as a lone stela is located on the west side of the hill. The stela seems to have been plain but the front (downhill) face is eroded and partially sloughed off. Most of the mounds at the site are very low. The densest concentration of settlement and the largest mounds are those located farthest from the river on high ground 150 meters northeast of the highest hill. Small clusters of mounds are located farther inland on other hills but an uncooperative landowner prevented additional study.

Nearly 50% of all mounds identified at El Achiote were tested. Deposits were quite shallow and, thus, the ceramic material is heavily eroded. The El Achiote ceramics are part of the Cancuén sphere and date to early facet Tepeu 2 (Bill, *et al.* 2002). Not surprisingly considering its proximity, El Achiote was a small village that was occupied while Cancuén was at its height.

## **El Guaraní**

The site of El Guaraní ([Figure 9](#)) is a small village located approximately 3.2 kilometers north of Cancuén near the modern village of El Zapote on the east bank of the Pasión River. It consists of eleven structures, one of which is a 400 m<sup>2</sup>, 2-meter tall platform occupying the highest ground in the immediate vicinity. The remainder of the site consists of small, low mounds that likely served as houses and assorted outbuildings. Based on the distribution of mounds in a few groups east of the large platform with two scattered to the west, it is likely El Guaraní was home to only two or three families.

Excavations at El Guaraní tested eight of the eleven identified mounds. As at El Achiote, deposits are shallow and ceramics recovered are thus heavily weathered. Those that retain diagnostic features date to Tepeu 2 and are part of the Cancuén ceramic sphere (Bill, *et al.* 2002).

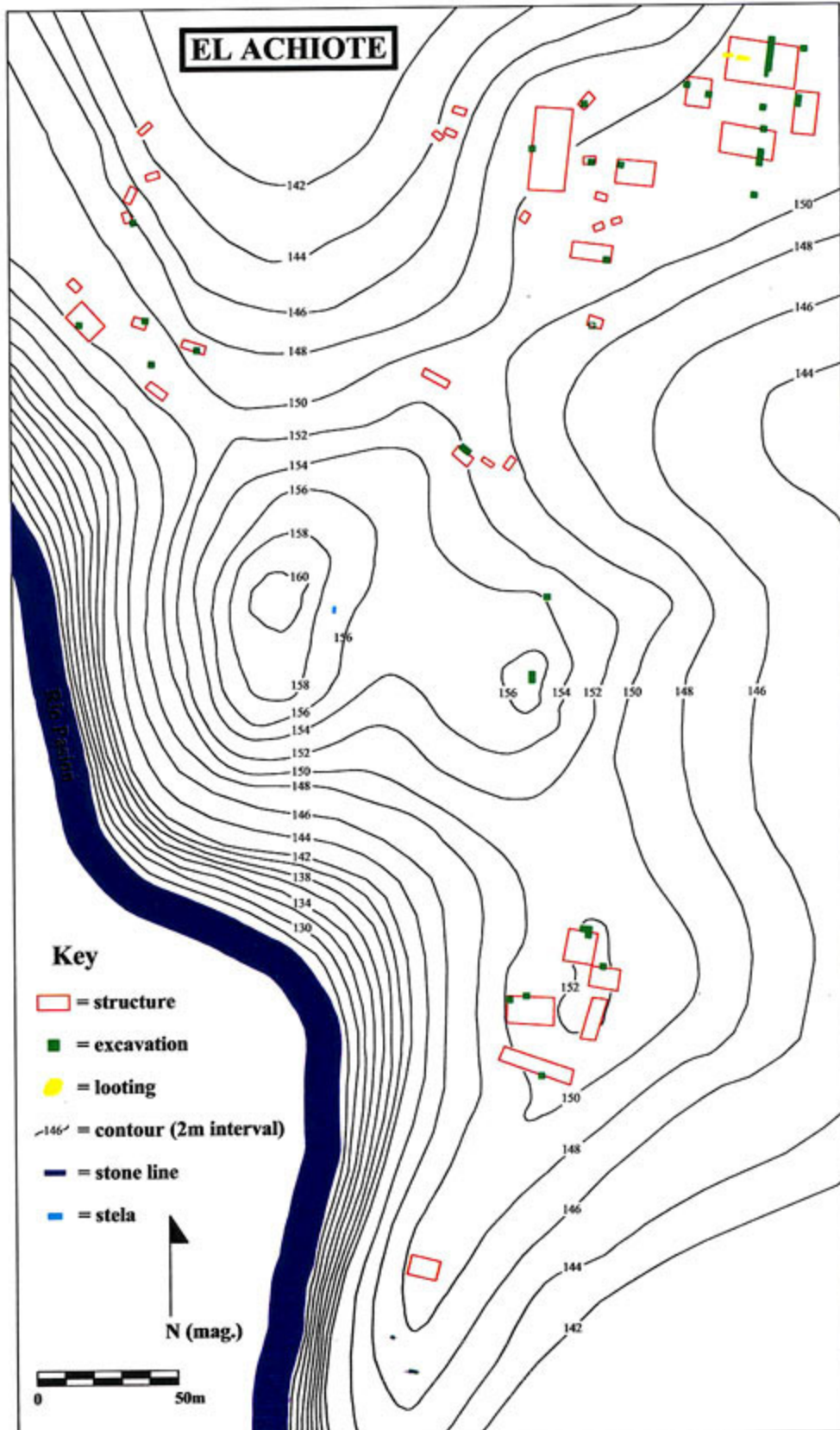


Figure 8. El Achiote site map.

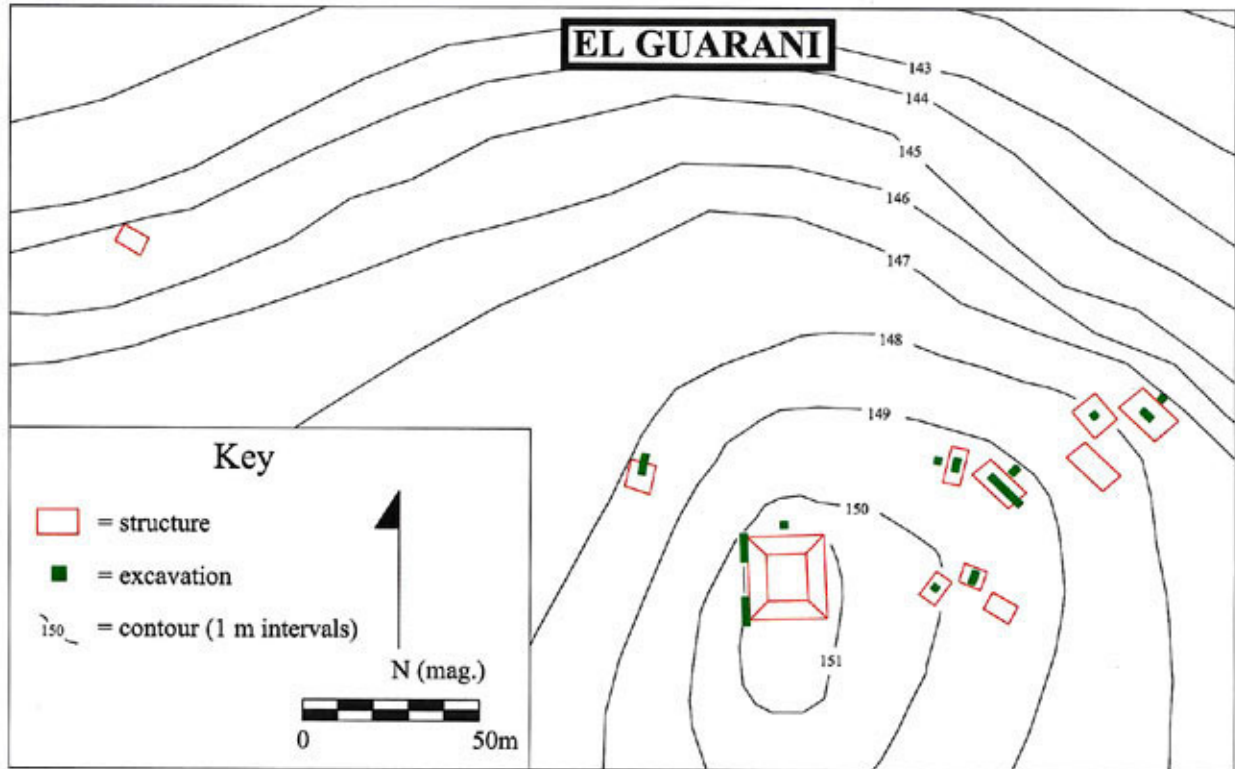


Figure 9. El Guarani site map.

## La Caoba

The site of La Caoba ([Figure 10](#)) is located under the modern town of the same name approximately 11.5 kilometers northeast of Cancuén. It is a small village comprised of more than 30 structures with the main plaza group situated at 16°05'80"N, 89°58'96"W. Settlement is concentrated on high ground in a region surrounded by cave-riddled karst towers that were used for rituals as early as the Preclassic period (Woodfill, *et al.* 2001). Despite two small aguadas, there is no nearby permanent source of abundant potable water. The main group is a fairly massive plaza group, dominated by four structures around a central plaza. The largest of these cover more than 400 m<sup>2</sup> and are more than two meters tall. This group is set atop a hill on the east edge of the site. The hill was modified in a large-scale (relative to the size of the ancient village) leveling project. Fortunately, the modern inhabitants of La Caoba have not built over this group. However, school buildings were built just south of the main group and the village cemetery is just to the north. Additionally, the south structure was heavily mined for stone in the 1990s to build a church ([Figure 11](#), shown below). Small clusters of structures are located atop other hills in the area to the east and southeast of the main group.

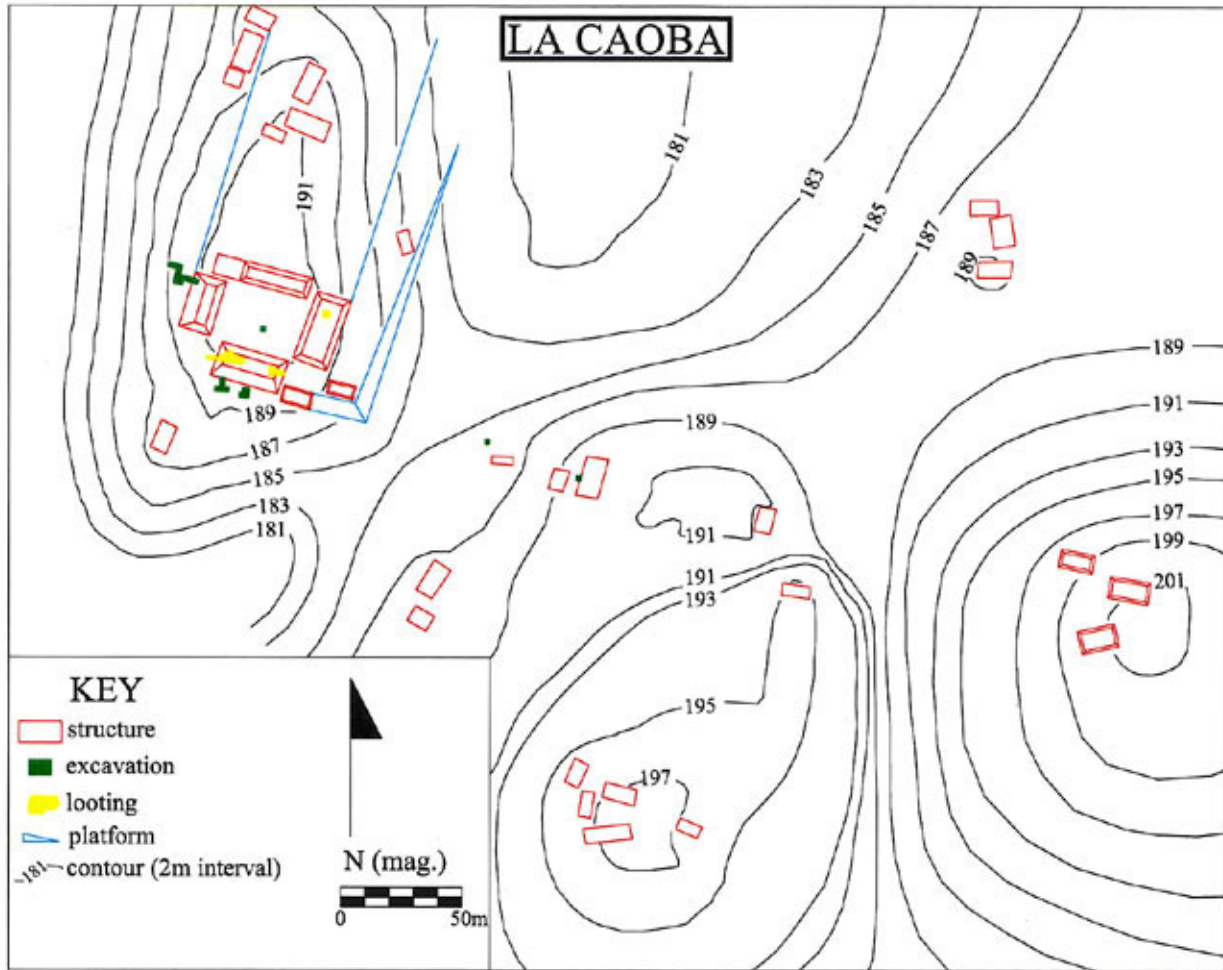


Figure 10. La Caoba site map.

Ceramics recovered in limited excavations at La Caoba primarily date to the latter part of Tepeu 2 with a few Early Classic and Late Preclassic sherds in deeper levels and are of the Cancuén ceramic sphere (Bill, *et al.* 2002). While La Caoba may have been settled to control access to nearby caves (Woodfill, *et al.* 2001), the date of the ceramics and the marginal environment may indicate that much of the site was occupied when the Pasión River route was erupting in endemic warfare (Demarest 1997, *in press*). Populations may have moved further inland to less hospitable areas to escape the turmoil, as documented elsewhere in the Petexbatún region (O'Mansky, *et al.* *in press*).



**Figure 11. The recently completed church in modern La Caoba, built in part from fill material taken from remains of ancient Maya structures.**

### **Preliminary Interpretation: Sacred Geography and Settlement Patterns in the Upper Pasión Region**

The Upper Pasión region is unusual for its lack of large temples at even the largest sites, such as Cancuén and Raxruja Viejo. Evon Vogt (1964) proposed that temple pyramids were constructed versions of the sacred environment with the pyramids serving as mountains and the temples atop them as caves. David Stuart (cited in Schele and Freidel 1990) subsequently recognized that the word for such temple pyramids and mountains was the same, *witz*. In the earliest stages of the Vanderbilt Cancuén project it was hypothesized that the lack of temples at that site, despite one of the largest palaces in the Maya world, may be due to the presence of nearby cave-riddled karst towers, including the massive Candelaria cave system (Barrientos, *et al.* 2000). These natural features precluded the need to construct artificial representations. Preliminary exploration of some of these caves (Woodfill 2002) and discussions with local informants indicates that virtually all known caves in the region contain ancient Maya artifacts, suggesting that these locations were *loci* for rituals.

The above hypothesis is most strongly supported at the site of Raxruja Viejo. As noted above, structures on the east and west sides of the central plaza are built into karst towers. One large cave entrance has been noted in the eastern tower and the current landowner reports many others are located higher up the face of the hill. It is likely that for elaborate rituals at the site the local populace would gather in the plaza, facing the nearly two-dozen monuments to the east while awaiting the k'ul ahau's emergence from a cave mouth dozens of meters above the plaza floor. For other sites in the region, processions may have been led from site centers to other caves for similar performances.

## **Future Research**

The long-term prospects for successful research in this archaeologically little-known region are extremely promising. Thanks to this FAMSI-funded research, in addition to the sustainable development work in the region by the Cancuén Archaeological Project under the direction of Arthur A. Demarest (García, *et al.* 2001), local villagers are now eager to have archaeologists come work with them. In 2003, the regional Vanderbilt project will investigate the sites near the modern villages and towns of San Pablo, Santa Isabel, La Isla, El Pato, and Fray Bartolome de las Casas while continuing to identify additional sites for further investigation in the years to come. Such ongoing fieldwork will continue the research begun by the Cancuén Regional Archaeological Project—the first regional study in the Upper Pasión region, a region that until now has seen surprisingly little attention despite its crucial position as the physical boundary behind the highlands and lowlands. Future work will shed further light on important issues in Maya and Mesoamerican archaeology, including highland-lowland interaction, long distance trade, and the use and incorporation of sacred geography.

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