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Late Classic–Epi-Classic Ceramic Chronology at Islas de Los Cerros, Tabasco, México



Research Year: 2005

Culture: Chontal Maya

Chronology: Late Classic–Epi-Classic

Location: Northern Chontalpa Region, Tabasco, México

Site: Islas de Los Cerros

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Abstract

The FAMSI-funded 2005 season at Islas de Los Cerros, Tabasco, México, used block excavations in a multi-level residential mound to locate and sample stratified features. The excavations were expected to provide a large sample of feature-associated pottery for developing a preliminary ceramic sequence for the Chontalpa region of Tabasco. Although the excavations did not yield structures or other features with abundant pottery, they did contribute new information on mound formation processes and Formative pottery from Formative deposits reused in the Late Classic period. This report describes the preliminary results of the excavations.

Resumen

La temporada de campo 2005 financiada por FAMSI en las Islas de los Cerros, Tabasco, Mexico, utilizó excavaciones de bloque en un montículo residencial de múltiples niveles, con el fin de localizar y obtener muestra de elementos estratificados. Se esperaba que las excavaciones proporcionaran una amplia muestra de cerámica de elementos asociados para desarrollar una secuencia cerámica preliminar para la región Chontalpa de Tabasco. Aunque las excavaciones no produjeron estructuras u otros elementos con cerámica abundante, sí proporcionaron nueva información en los procesos de formación de montículos y de alfarería Formativa, de los depósitos Formativos reutilizados en el período Clásico Tardío. Este informe describe los resultados preliminares de las excavaciones.

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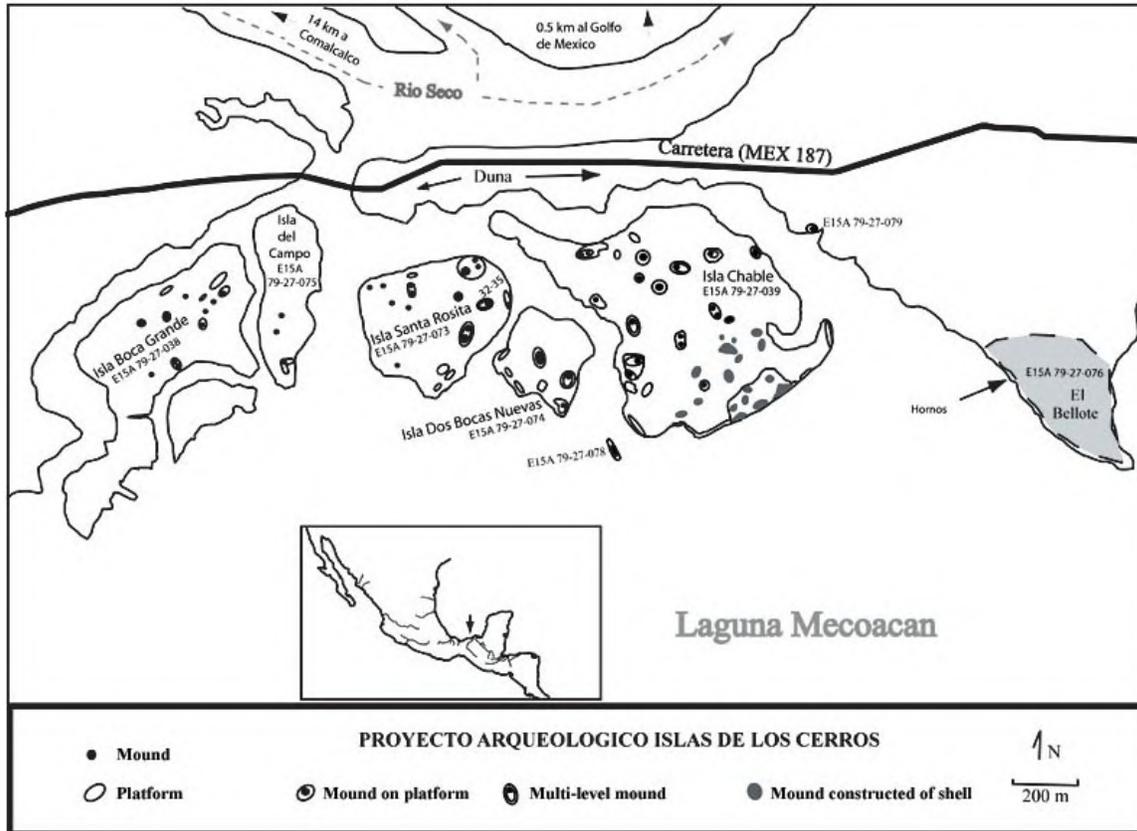


Figure 1. Islas de Los Cerros.

Introduction

FAMSI funding (FAMSI #05024) was used to complete a 6 May–5 June, 2005 excavation season at Islas de Los Cerros devoted to developing a preliminary ceramic chronology for the Late Classic–Epi-Classic periods in the northern Chontalpa region (Municipio de Paraíso, Tabasco, México). Archaeologically, this portion of the Chontalpa region is best known for the Late Classic–Epi-Classic regional center of Comalcalco and for ethnohistorical studies on the Post Classic and sixteenth century Chontal Maya. However, despite a number of recent projects in the region (Armijo 1999a; Ensor 2002; Ensor and Tun 2004; Gallegos 1994) and ongoing INAH rescates, archaeological interpretation has not progressed significantly due to few, and problematic, stratigraphic excavations with which to develop a general ceramic chronology for the Late Classic–Epi-Classic periods. Peniche (1973) provided an initial ceramic chronology for the region based on one stratigraphic excavation at Comalcalco. However, those categories spanned most or all of the Late Classic–Epi-Classic periods and the pottery used in that study were subsequently reclassified (Boucher 1981) due to considerable overlap in attributes. Additionally, architectural and epigraphic evidence at Comalcalco suggest inconsistencies with that ceramic chronology (Andrews 1989; Armijo 1999b; Zender 1998). Ongoing ceramic analyses at Comalcalco are now providing a revised classification, yet what is lacking are good stratigraphic associations with which to view a sequence. Although there is an increasing amount of potential data

on settlement patterns, subsistence, and regional analysis, the lack of an accepted ceramic chronology inhibits temporal placement of sites, features, and artifact assemblages into a chronological sequence to enable archaeologists in the region to better describe Late Classic period culture history and social developments.

The Proyecto Arqueológico Islas de Los Cerros (PAILC) provides an example of this problem in the region. Islas de Los Cerros (ILC) is a Late Classic period site complex of five adjacent mangrove island sites and the peninsular ceremonial/administrative center of El Bellote ([Figure 1](#)), located approximately 12 km downriver from Comalcalco. ILC is a probable port and coastal resource extraction zone for Comalcalco (Andrews 2004; Ensor 2003). Although having surface collected pottery from residential mounds within the project area, I was unable to perform a settlement history analysis to view the growth of the community without being able to place pottery groups and varieties within sequential periods or phases (Ensor 2001, 2002, 2003). Excavations in potential specialized resource processing features yielded information on the activities associated with those deposits (Ensor and Tun 2004). However, those activities and domestic occupations could not be placed within a chronological framework. Although a detailed pottery classification, based on the new Comalcalco categories, resulted in 39 group and types, what is now lacking is the chronological distribution of those categories.

In 2004, small test units (1-x-1 m and 1-x-2 m units) in three residential mounds at ILC (Ensor and Tun 2004) indicated that two of the mounds had stratified architectural features (clay or lime floors with adobe and/or lime-plastered walls), with floor-associated artifacts beneath wall fall, and extramural features (pits), also with associated artifacts. Two floors and two pits showed evidence of burning. Although no features were identified in the third mound, abundant architectural debris was present indicating the unit was too small and missed those features. The mound fill between features was of mixed deposits that cannot be used for observing a ceramic sequence. In fact, a low quantity of Formative period pottery was often found alongside fine paste pottery in the same strata suggesting reuse of Formative deposits to construct the Late Classic mounds. In fact, no pure Formative deposits have yet been identified at ILC—the Formative pottery has, to this point, always been identified in association with Late Classic pottery. Although the test units indicate a high density of stratified features, the small size of the units was capable only of sampling small portions of those features resulting in too small a sample of feature-associated artifacts with which to develop a ceramic sequence. Nevertheless, it became clear from the test excavations that a broad spatial approach to excavation would result in larger collections from more fully exposed and more numerous stratified features that can be used to develop a ceramic chronology. Because some features exhibited burning, and several pits had burned fill, a broad spatial approach to locating more stratified features and more fully sampling them was also expected to yield carbon samples. Therefore, a feature-oriented approach to stratigraphic sampling for developing a ceramic chronology was proposed for the 2005 season. The broad spatial approach to identifying features and collecting their associated contents was expected to be manageable and have very positive

results due to a large number of expected stratified features, in addition to providing spatial data on domestic areas.

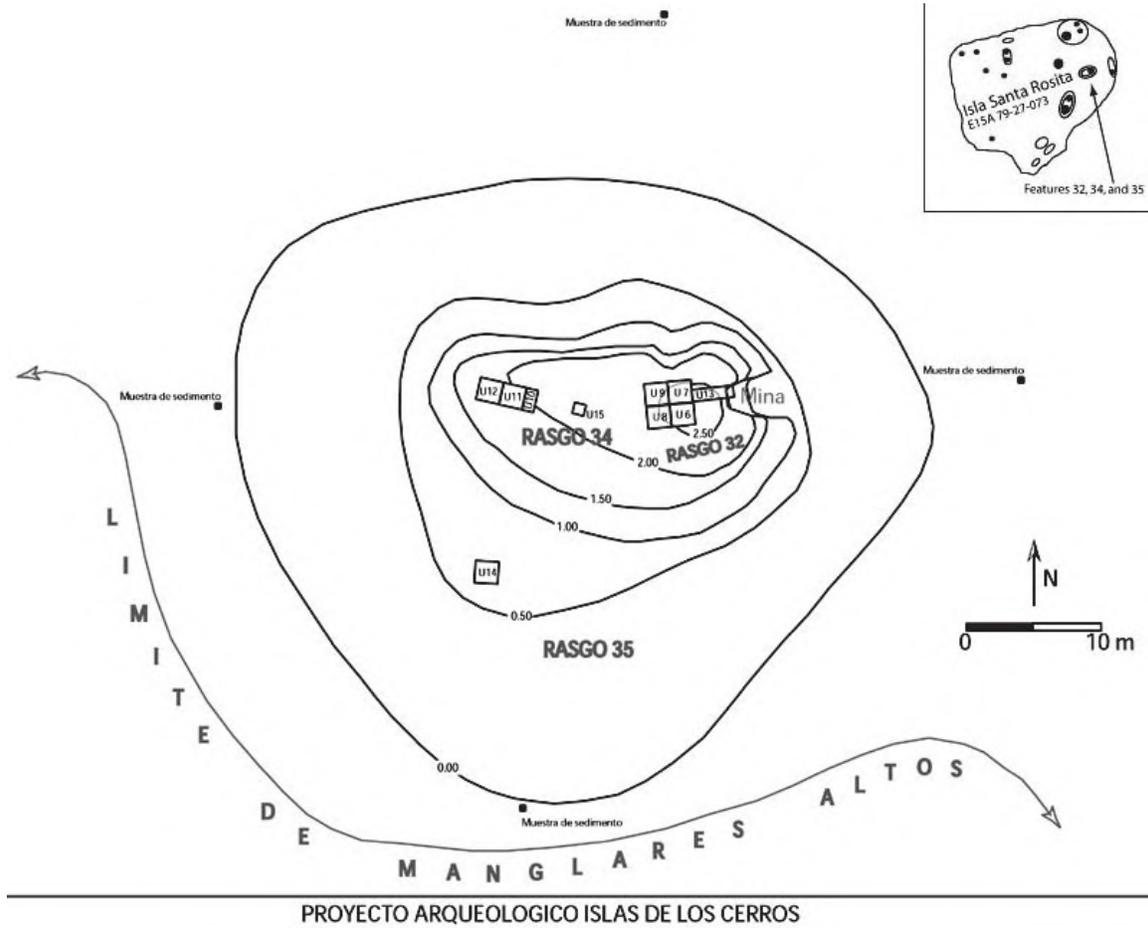


Figure 2. Features 32 (superior mound), 34 (inferior mound), and 35 (platform).

Methods

A multi-level mound over a platform on Isla Santa Rosita was selected for the excavations (Figure 2). Feature 32 is a 0.5 m high mound, 20 m in diameter, situated on top of the east end of mound Feature 34 (measuring approximately 1.5 m in height and 35-x-20 m in size). The inferior mound, in turn, overlies a low platform (Feature 35). A wide variety of pottery collected from these features during the 2001 survey and the multiple levels of mound construction suggested stratified occupations. An additional reason for selecting this location was its vulnerability to damage: a recent mine (for sediment—a limited resource on the mangrove islands) cut into the east end of Feature 34.

Excavation Block A included four adjacent 2-x-2 m excavation units (forming a 4-x-4 m square) and a 1-x-3.8 m extension unit connecting the block to the mine cut. Block A was located on top of the smaller superior mound (Feature 32). A second excavation

block (Block B) was placed on the top of the larger inferior mound (Feature 34) to the west of Feature 32. Block B included two adjacent 2-x-2 m units and a 1-x-2 m unit forming a 2-x-5 m rectangle. Another 2-x-2 m unit was placed at the lower edge of Feature 34 where it overlies the platform (Feature 35) to sample the strata, potential features, and artifacts in that location. Given the presence of tree crops on the top of Feature 34, the two blocks could not be joined to form a larger block. However, a 1-x-1 m unit was placed between the two blocks to verify continuity in Feature 34's strata between Block B and Block A (under Feature 32).

All excavated sediments were screened through 1/4" mesh (the 2004 excavations used 1/8" mesh, but all faunal remains and chipped stone recovered from the residential mounds were found to be larger than 1/4"). Each level was completed throughout the block before proceeding to excavate the next level. Arbitrary 10 cm levels were used in the excavations. However, the crew switched to cultural levels when sediment changes occurred in less than 10 cm. All features identified were photographed, had plan view drawings, and had profiles and/or cross-sections drawn. An Eastern Michigan University Theodolite was used for mapping and establishing excavation datum elevations above mean lagoon level. Upon completion, all excavations were backfilled. All INAH regulations for conducting archaeological excavations and conservation of materials and architecture (INAH 1994) were followed throughout the course of the project.

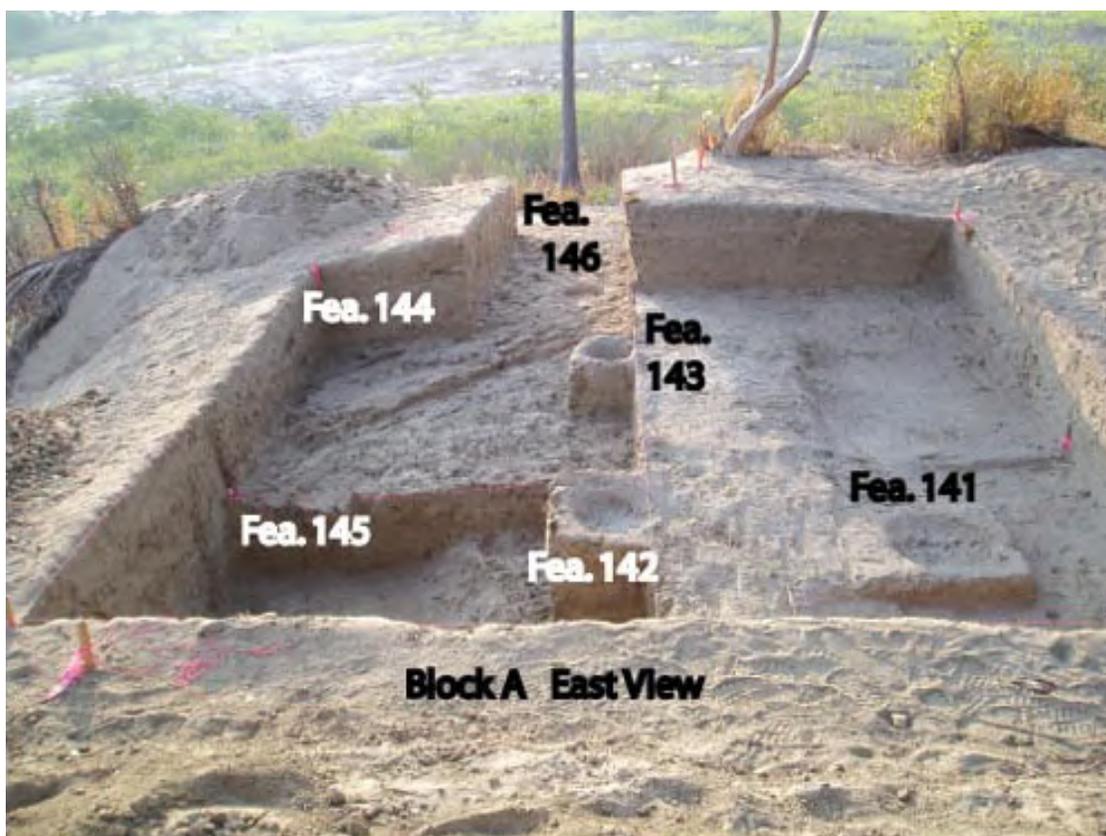


Figure 3. Features 141–143, 145–146 (small pits) and Feature 144 in Block A.

Results

Despite the success in identifying stratified structures and other features with burned fill and/or cultural material in their fills in the residential mounds excavated with small units in the 2004 season, and despite the relative large quantity of artifacts collected on the surface of Features 32 and 34 in the 2001 season, the two block excavations and additional units in this season at Features 32, 34, and 35 did not reveal a single structure. Although seven small pits (Features 140–143, 145–147) and an unidentified possible feature (Feature 144) were documented and excavated, none showed signs of burning nor did they contain many artifacts in their fill ([Figure 3](#) and [Figure 4](#)). Moreover, each feature's fill was that of its overlying stratum with mixed Formative and Late Classic pottery, rather than primary deposits formed during the features' use. Although the ceramic analyst was able to identify several Formative period groups (below) and revised the classification of the Late Classic pottery, both Formative and Late Classic pottery were mixed together in each strata confirming that Formative deposits were reused to construct the Late Classic residential mounds. Although the 2005 excavations produced valuable data on the formation of the multi-level mound and platform, and provided the opportunity to further revise the ceramic categories, they produced little data applicable toward refining the ceramic sequence. Therefore, the remainder of this report focuses on the new information obtained on mound formation and from the ceramic analysis.



Figure 4. Feature 147 in Excavation Unit 14.

Mound Formation

As illustrated in the excavation profiles ([Figure 5](#) and [Figure 6](#)), Stratum 1, a humus layer, was present in each excavation location. Stratum II was present in Block A and represents the fill of the smaller superior mound (Feature 32). Stratum III was continuous between Block B and Block A. The 1-x-1 m unit located between the two blocks also identified the top of Stratum III. This stratum provides evidence for a single large mound (Feature 34) over which the superior mound (Feature 32) was later added. The differences in this stratum between the two excavation blocks involved thickness. Stratum III was a much thicker deposit on the east side of Feature 34 than on the west side.

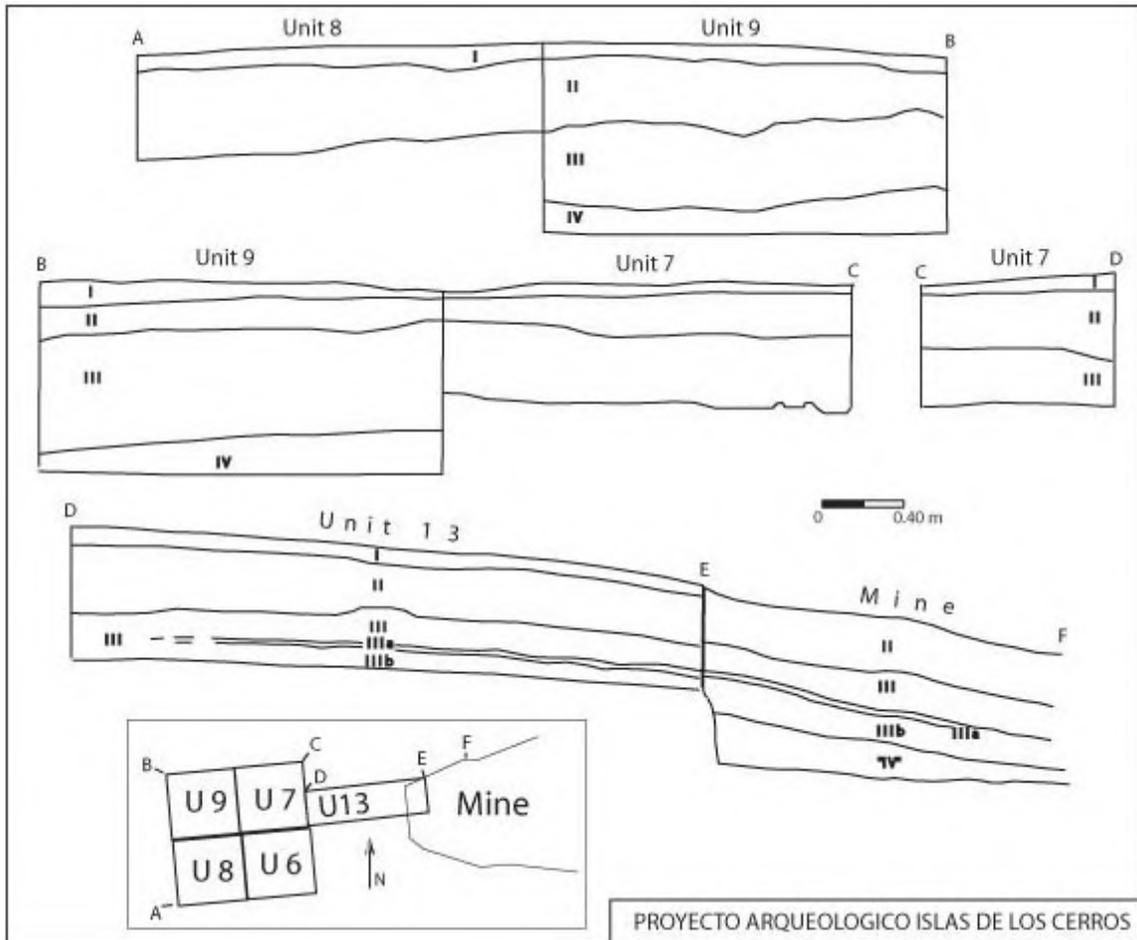


Figure 5. Block A profiles.

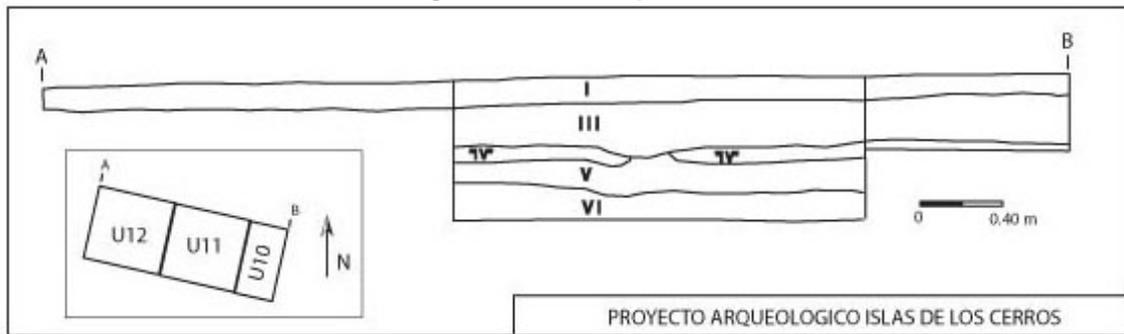


Figure 6. Profile of Block B.

There were indications that what became the larger mound Feature 34, was previously more than one mound. Stratum IV in Block A was another thick layer of mound fill. However, the top of Stratum IV sloped downward toward the southwest, suggesting it once was the surface of a smaller mound located under the east side of what became mound Feature 34. In Block B, to the west, several thinner strata (IV', V, and VI), none of which were floors or surfaces, were identified beneath Stratum III. Nothing similar was identified in Block A, which suggests a different mound was constructed in the

Block B location. Only with the addition of Stratum III overlying these deposits in both locations was there a continuous sediment creating one larger mound: Feature 34. In summary, the excavations revealed a sequence whereby possibly two mounds (one on the east and one on the west) were present and later joined by Stratum III to form a larger mound (Feature 34). Feature 32, the smaller superior mound, was later added over the east end of Feature 34.

The 2-x-2 m unit located at the base of Feature 34 overlying the platform (Feature 35) revealed several relatively thin strata and one small pit (Feature 147). None of these strata could be linked to those in the two excavation blocks.

Ceramic Analysis

The 2005 collections and previous season's collections were reanalyzed by Socorro Jiménez, a pottery specialist who has been reanalyzing the Comalcalco and recently excavated sites' collections from the region. Based on her observations, ILC apparently has a greater frequency of Formative period pottery than many of the recently excavated sites in the region. The ILC collections are therefore providing an opportunity to better understand Formative ceramic variability in the area. New descriptive groups were established and some of the new groups established during prior seasons at ILC (e.g., Bellote and Mecoacan) were retained. Sierra Red (Late Formative, Chicanel phase) was the only Formative group present that is well documented from other sites in the region.

[Table 1](#), shown below, lists the Formative and Late Classic groups in the 2005 collection. The White Paste and Polished groups share fine-medium fragile and friable pastes with very small shell temper or small quartz and mica temper. The polished are more numerous and share similarities (e.g., geometric designs on large bowls) with some Nacaste (900-700 B.C.) and Palangana (600-400 B.C.) phase pottery at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán in Veracruz (Coe and Diehl 1980), and with the site of Tierra Blanca in Tabasco (Ochoa and Casasola 1978). The most common forms represented for these groups are flat-based bowls with direct or everted rims. Engraved geometric designs are also common on exteriors. The Sandy Pastes are similar to the White Paste and Polished, yet with abundant sand particles. Coarse-paste rims are more commonly short-rimmed ollas and thin-walled tecomates. "Bellote" was first defined in the 2001 season and is characterized by orange-brown fine-medium paste, less friable than other Formative pastes, and very small quartz and mica temper. Bellote rims almost always display bowl or olla forms.

Table 1. Formative and Late Classic Ceramic Groups from the 2005 Season	
Formative Descriptive Groups	Late Classic Groups
Polished	Centla
Sandy Paste	Cimatán
White Paste	Fine Pastes
Coarse	Comalcalco
Mecoacan	Paraíso
Bellote	Copilco
Sierra Red	Huimanguillo
	Jalpa

No new Late Classic groups were identified for the region. Centla and Cimatán coarse wares are abundant at ILC. It was noted that, in general, ILC Centla and Cimatán pastes are redder in color than elsewhere in the region. Fine paste pottery is less common, representing less than two percent of the collection.

Summary

Although not successful in refining the ceramic sequence at ILC, the 2005 excavations, supported by FAMSI, contributed toward a greater understanding of mound formation processes and ceramic variability at this coastal site complex. The pottery analysis identified more Formative ceramic groups than were previously recognized, despite the fact that all Formative pottery found thus far at ILC are from deposits reused in the Late Classic. These results will guide future excavation strategies in continuing efforts to better identify the ceramic sequence and to address additional research questions, particularly those related to residential mound formation and activity areas.

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