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The Sociopolitical Configuration in the City of Q'um'arkaj: The Palaces and *Nimja* or Long Houses of the *Chinamit Nija'ib'*

Translation of the Spanish by Eduardo Williams



Research Year: 2006

Culture: Maya-k'iche'

Chronology: Late Postclassic

Location: El Quiché, Western Highlands of Guatemala

Site: Q'um'arkaj (Uatlán)

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Abstract

Recent research in three sectors of Q'um'arkaj have yielded interesting new information about the types and dynamics of occupation of this Postclassic center, located in the western highlands of Guatemala. The excavations which were undertaken in May and June of 2006, revealed a high concentration of structures, built during several periods of construction and modification. They show that the city was clearly planned, and demonstrate architectural elements which show a certain level of urbanization. We have compared this information with data provided by indigenous documents of the sixteenth and later centuries, and with data found in colonial chronicles and letters written during the Conquest.

Resumen

Las recientes investigaciones en tres sectores de Q'um'arkaj han proporcionado informaciones sobre los tipos y las dinámicas de ocupación de este centro del Posclásico del Altiplano occidental de Guatemala. Las excavaciones realizadas en mayo y junio 2006 revelaron la fuerte concentración de estructuras con diferentes etapas de construcción y remodelación, una planificación constructiva que denota algunos componentes arquitectónicos propios de un asentamiento urbano. Las informaciones arqueológicas son contrastadas con los datos proporcionados por los textos indígenas de los siglos XVI y posteriores, en las narraciones de las Cartas de Relación y en crónicas de los españoles durante la conquista.

Introduction

The Q'um'arkaj Ethnoarchaeological project is currently one of the few scientific research programs formulated for the Western Highlands of Guatemala. Its goals are: to contribute to the reconstruction of history of the ancient K'iche' through the archaeological investigation combined with ethnohistorical sources; to progressively create a proposal that justifies the future protection and consolidation of some of the more important buildings in the settlement; and to encourage local spaces for the appreciation of the tangible cultural heritage.

The Q'um'arkaj archaeological site's last occupation dates from the Late Postclassic. Q'um'arkaj is built on a natural defensive promontory of less than 1km². The site's particular topography surrounded by gullies explains the nucleation of this settlement, where 83 structures have been reported. Besides the ball game other types of constructions can be seen: residential compounds, temple pyramids, long houses, round and square altars, rectangular and L-shaped dwelling structures, and other types of structures whose morphology and function are not known.

Even with the few archaeological data available, while visiting the site one can see its widespread occupation. In this sense the historical sources provide us with a slight panorama of the site's internal organization. In fact, these historical texts refer to the existence of four great chinamit or ruling families which shared the site's inner space: the *chinamit Kaweq*, the *Nijaib'*, the *Ajaw K'iche'*, and the *Sakiq* (cf. Pop Vuj 1993: 189; Título de Totonicapán 1983: 197). In this regard Dwight Wallace (1977: 20) and Robert M. Carmack (1979: 322) designated the South and Southwest sectors of the site as dwelling places of the "*chinamit*" *Kaweq* and *Ajaw K'iche'*, while the Southeast was occupied by the *Nijaib'* and the "*chinamit*" *Sakiq* occupied the small site of El Resguardo, located on the outskirts of Q'um'arkaj. This designation is the result of hypothetical interpretations based on the orientation of the buildings on the Main Plaza, as well as the location of the temples on the Main Plaza. The *Awilix* temple as patron deity of the *Nijaib' chinamit* is located on the east, therefore this sector is considered as

belonging to the *Nijaib'*. The conquered territories were ruled from Q'um'arkaj, and the government and regional administration were organized in this site as well. The regional power of the K'iche' elite seems to have extended throughout its wide network of families, all of them founded on relationships of ancestral lineage, and probably through strategic marriage alliances as well. Analyzed from this perspective, the family groups or *chinamit* would correspond in Q'um'arkaj with different architectural groups near or far from the site center, displaying through the use of space their political position. The present project aims at finding new information which will lead to the understanding of this sociopolitical configuration through the analysis of spatial distribution, of structural relationships, and of the architectonic morphology and cultural artifacts. Obviously, the attribution of a certain architectural complex to specific *chinamit* would not be possible solely through the study of archaeological remains, unless we find some kind of information that specifically links a building with one of the four major families of Q'um'arkaj. Until this happens the interpretations will continue to be hypothetical.

Excavations at Q'um'arkaj

This ancient settlement is known in the Indian texts as Chik'umarcaj, Chi-Gumarcaah-Chi-Izmachi, Q'umarmachi Chi Taq ta Sib Taq ta Simaj or Utatlán in *nahuatl*. This site has been the subject of archaeological research since 2003. In the 2006 season excavations were undertaken with the aim of increasing our knowledge about the occupation dynamics and the architectural morphology of three different areas. The studied sectors of the site were the eastern sector, called "quarter (barrio) of the *Nija'ib'* lineage," as well as two areas near the Main Plaza, and the west sector. Fieldwork in this season was conducted through limited trenches in the east and west sectors, and test pits near the Main Plaza, without involving the site's last occupation. Other test pits were arbitrarily located near the *Tojil* temple and in the eastern sector, with the aim of understanding the occupations prior to the Late Postclassic.

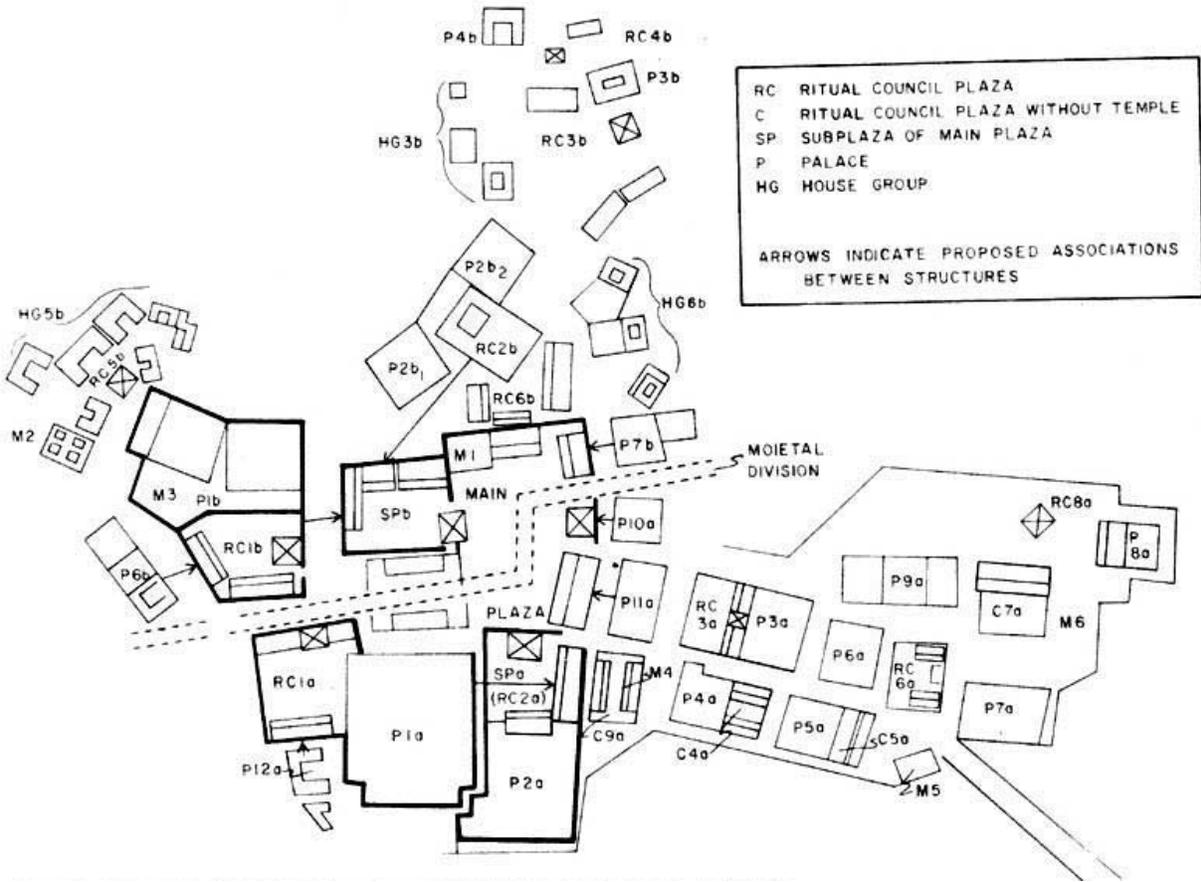


Figure 1. Site map made by D. Wallace showing Q'um'arkaj's main structures (1977: 30).

Excavations in the Palaces and the Long Houses or Nimja of the East Sector: The RC6a Platform and the C5a and C7a Nimja:



Figure 2. Funerary urn RC6a N1 with several offerings found north of the wall and canal of Platform RC6a.

The RC6a Platform was called "Ritual Council" by D. Wallace (1977). This building had a civic-religious function ([Figure 1](#)). On this platform one can see a small temple. Research in this platform allowed us to obtain data on its morphology, which consists of a huge construction of 18.50×18m, with walls that are up to 0.40cm thick, covered by adobe or with a triple layer of stucco and an orientation toward the west. This platform showed three systems of access on the north, south and west façades, as well as two canals for water parallel to the north and south walls. North of the north façade canal was found an *in situ*, broken funerary urn containing human bone fragments (left tibia

and fibula) and animal bone fragments. All this was associated with the urn and fine artifacts, including a "T" shaped piece of quartz similar to the *Ik'* logogram, a deer antler, obsidian blades and cores (Figure 2, above, and Figure 3). Three structures were recorded which were attached or parallel to this building; their architectural features seem to be similar to the former structure (Figure 4, below).

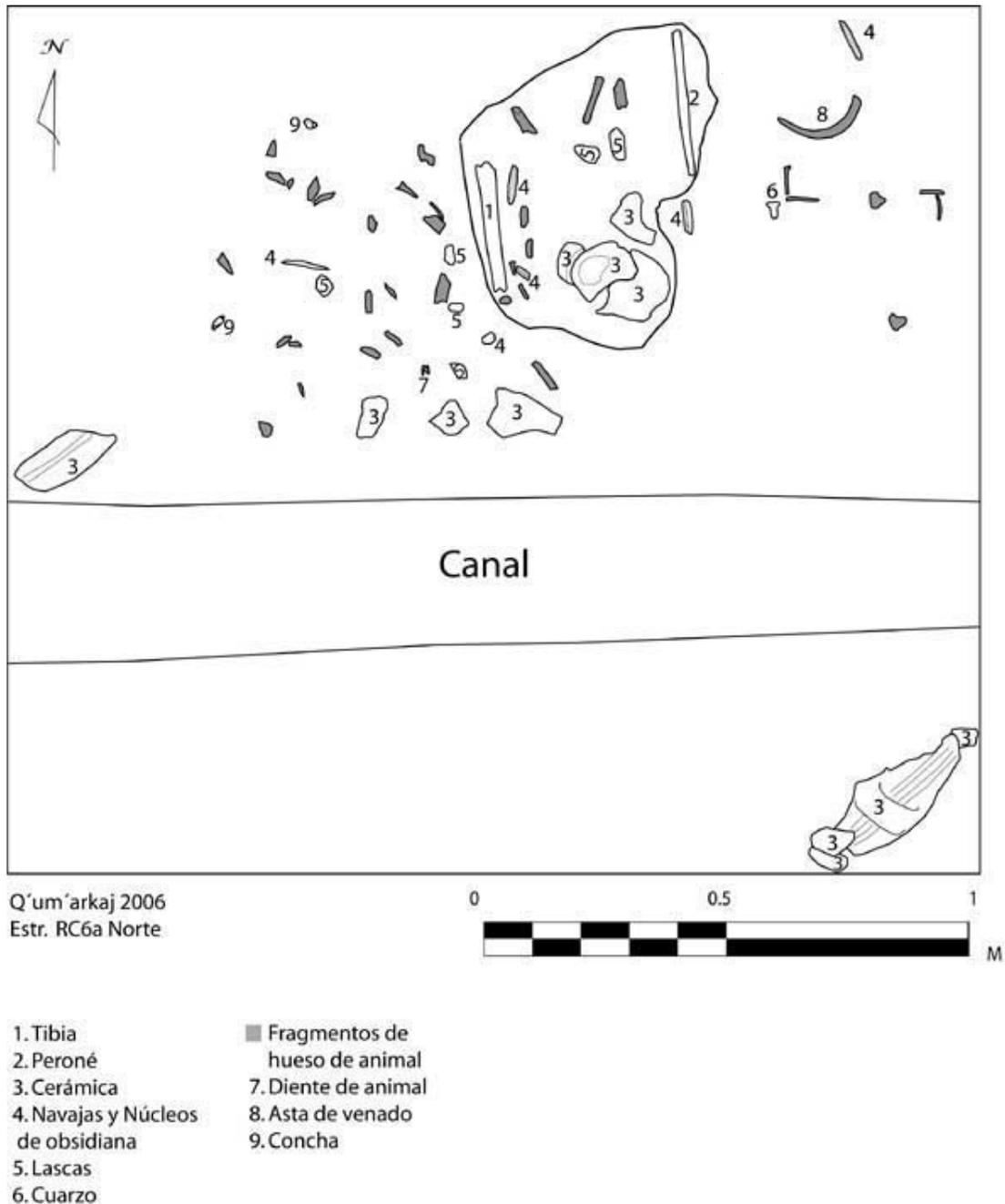


Figure 3. Detail of funerary urn RC6a N1.



Figure 4. Platform RC6a supporting the temple and superstructure elements. Attached to the west is Platform 1.

Through the depositional analysis of the remains in the RC6a platform we can see that the occupants of this part of the site modified the building on several occasions. In fact, the platform's extension on its southern façade seems to correspond with regulated events whose date is difficult to ascertain due to the dearth of cultural material that would allow to establish a chronology ([Figure 5](#), below). From its first wall (Wall 1) to Wall 3, which was its last modification, the platform was extended toward the south covering a space of 1.80m ([Figure 6](#), below). The movements in the northern façade are shown by profound modifications; the last building stage shows the building of emergency constructions; we can arrive to this conclusion because of the construction of a possible quadrangular defense system which blocked an access system, as well as the construction of a retaining wall which obstructed a water canal that was parallel to the wall. As a result of these seemingly unplanned constructions, two architectural elements were rendered useless: the North access system and the water canal. These modifications could be placed chronologically to shortly before the arrival of the Spaniards ([Figure 7](#), below).



Figure 5. View from the east of the walls of the south façade of Platform RC6a.



Figure 6. View from the west of walls 1 and 2 of the south façade of Platform RC6a.



Figure 7. Architectural "defensive" element attached to Platform RC6a and Platform 1, blocking northwest stairway.

In this same sector of the site the C5a and C7a structures were excavated, called "council houses" by Wallace (1977). In fact these are *Nimja* or long houses, located to the south and north of the RC6a Platform ([Figure 1](#)). Our work on these structures helped to increase our knowledge about this little-known type of building in Q'um'arkaj. Although Structure C5a is in a poor state to preservation, we were able to determine its orientation toward the west, toward the Main Plaza. The structure's poor level of preservation made it difficult to know its morphology, but we could investigate beyond the last occupation and recorded at least four earlier building stages. In the third stage we found a water canal made of stone slabs and worked river cobbles ([Figure 8](#), below). In the first building stage, which has a better level of preservation, we found the northern and eastern walls covered with stucco. It is possible that the last occupation of this structure was intentionally destroyed ([Figure 9](#)).



Figure 8. Trench showing stone slabs and river cobbles attached to the east wall of Structure C5a.

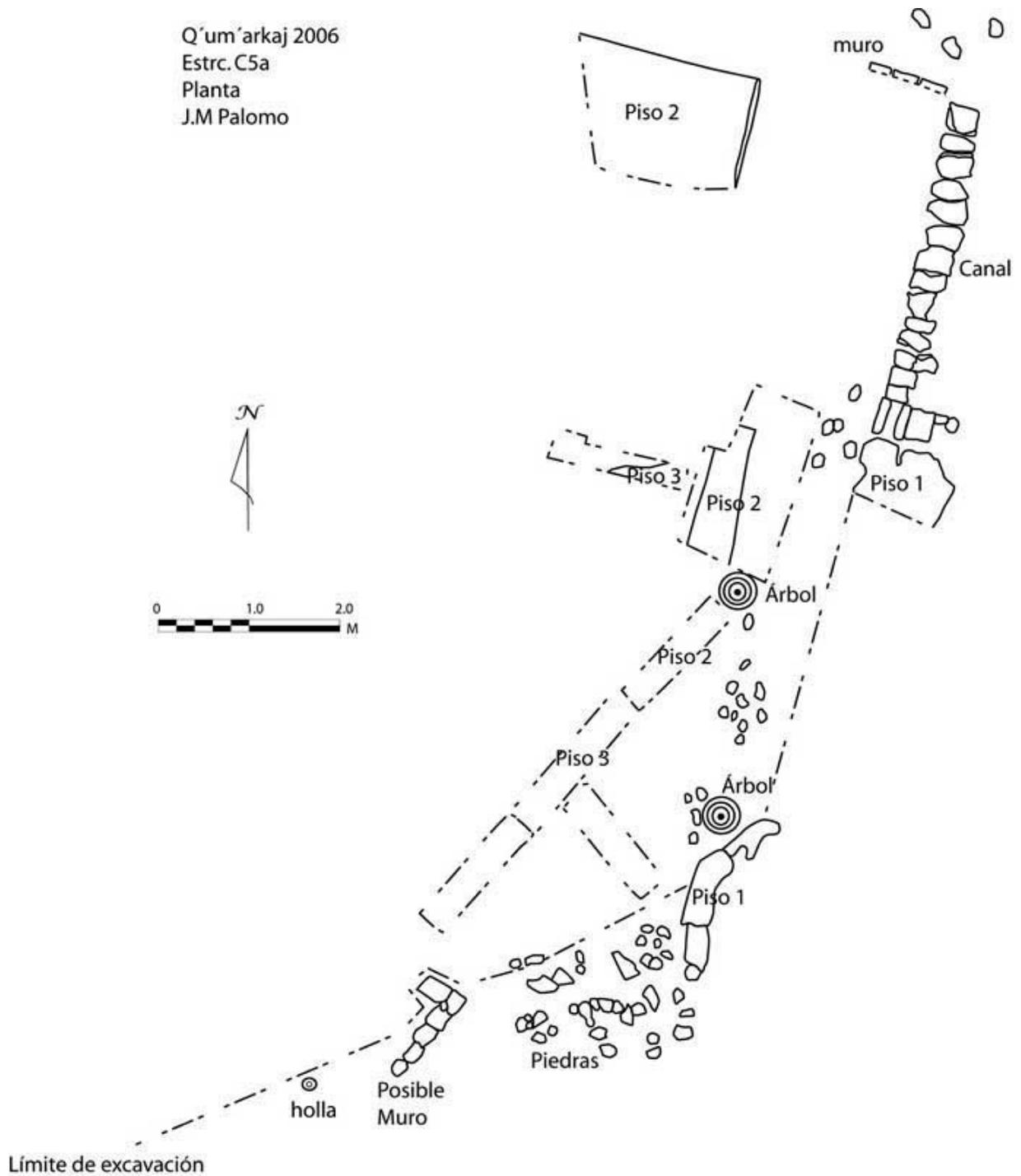


Figure 9. General layout of Structure C5a.

Unlike Structure C5a, Structure C7a is in a better condition of preservation, although apparently it was destroyed in part by the construction of a modern road on its northern side and by probable looting activity along its southern façade. Structure C7a measures

22.50×12.50m, is "C" shaped and has a long bench which ends in an "L" shape on its western wall ([Figure 10](#), below). We could see inside the structure a dividing wall, with a north-south orientation. In the center of the structure we found a stairway consisting of two steps that gave access to the upper part of the building ([Figure 11](#), below). Finally, on the top of the structure we saw a great deal of its stucco cover as well as five round, concave altars.



Figure 10. "L" shaped stuccoed bench on the western wall of Nimja C7a.



Figure 11. Long bench and central access system to Nimja C7a.

The southern façade seems to be the structure's main access. On this side we found an open space covered with stucco. In the southwestern end we found a heap of "selected" blocks of sediment, which could have been a base for inserting a wooden post. We did not excavate toward the east, but if this was the function for the heap of blocks we could have found more of them, which could have been used for supporting a roof made of perishable materials, such as straw, which protected the whole space, likely a small "plaza" (Figure 12).

Q'um'arkaj 2006
Estr. C7a
Planta

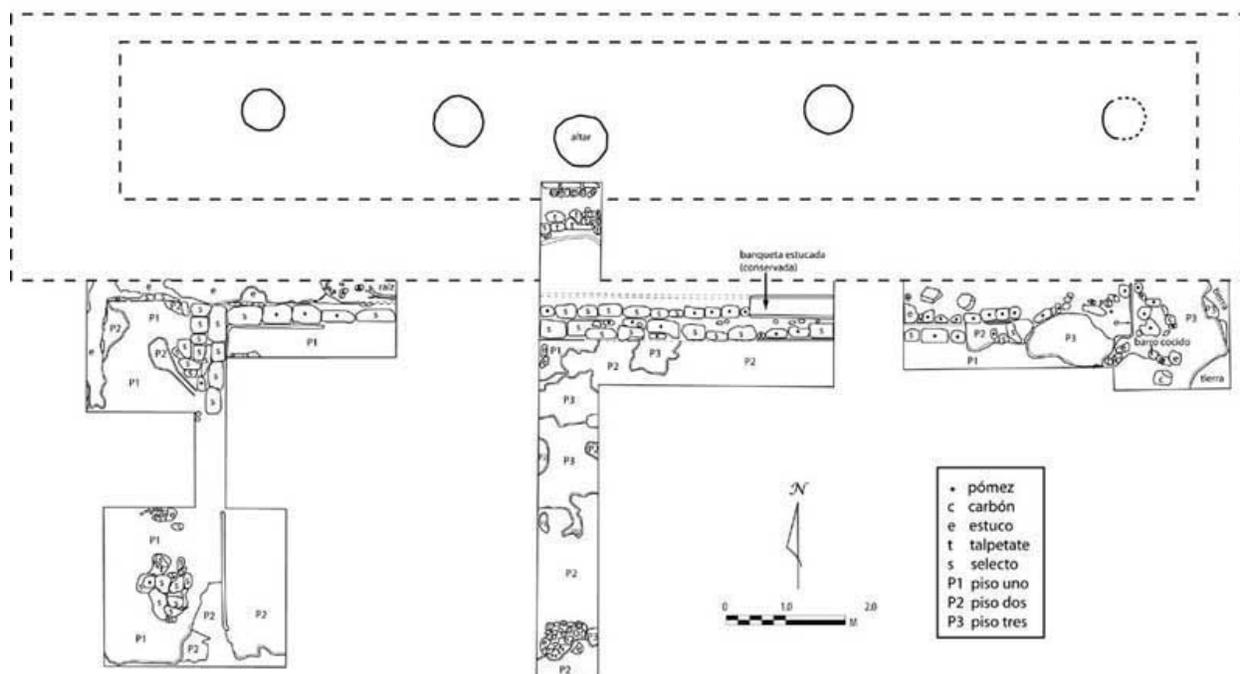


Figure 12. General plan of Nimja C7a.

Structure C7a seems to include the characteristics that would allow us to define a "long house" or Nimja, primarily its size (22.50×12.50m), the presence of stuccoed benches (an "L" shaped section), the existence of steps on the main façade and of round altars that could be comparable to the ritual hearths mentioned by A. Ichon, which seem to be specific to the "long houses" (Ichon 1988: 174). On the eastern end of the building we found an almost whole censer which could confirm the ritual function of this type of structure. The small stuccoed "plaza" recalls the descriptions made by Fray Francisco Jiménez (1975, Bk. 1: 80) and Hernán Cortez (1985: 253) (Figure 5).

Excavations in Structure P11a of the East Sector and the Nimja of the Main Plaza

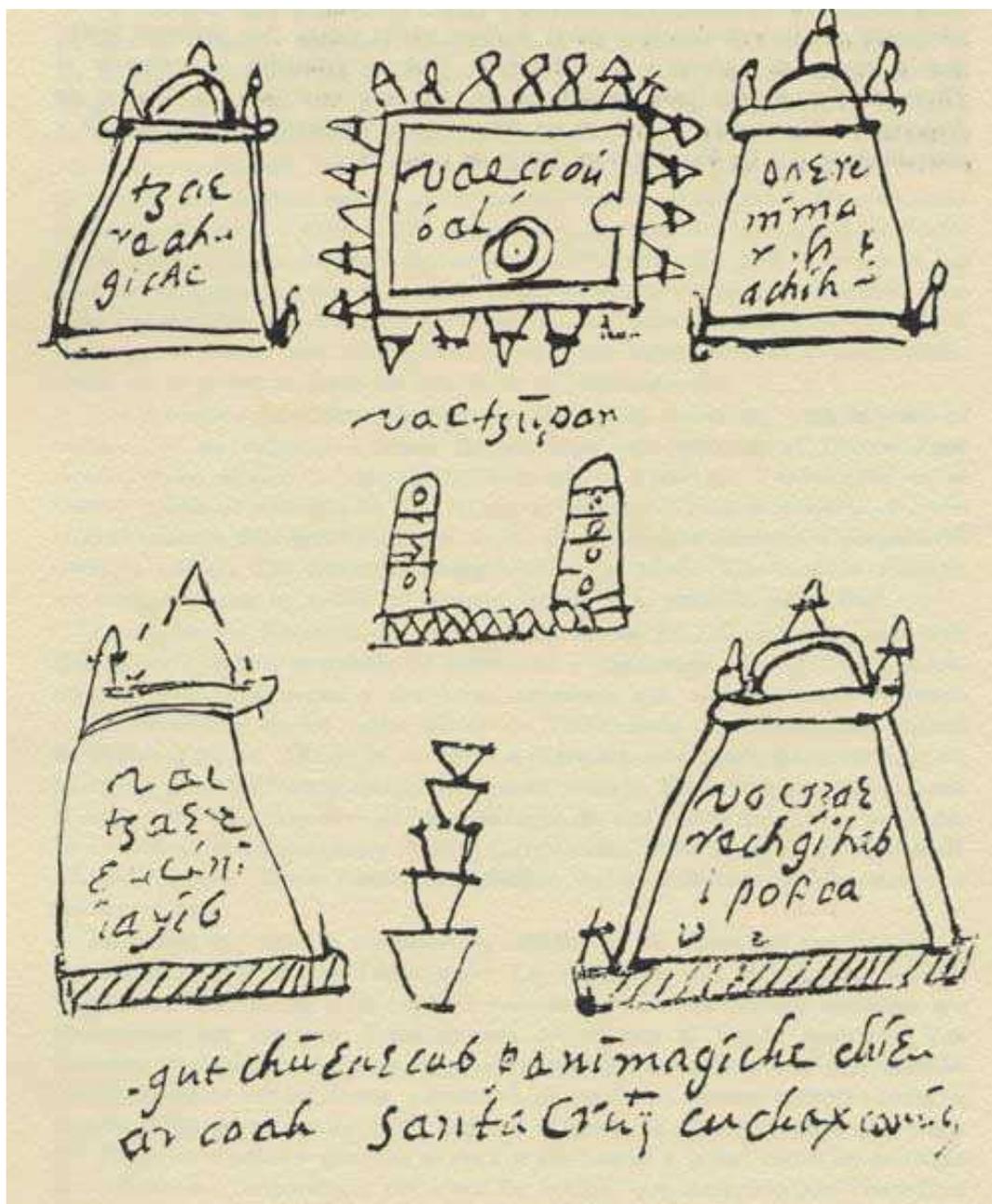


Figure 13. Perspective view of the Main Plaza at Q'um'arkaj, showing its most important political, administrative and ritual buildings (taken from the Título de Totonicapán; R. Carmack and J. Mondloch 1993: 38).

Structure P11a seems to have been a palace unit ([Figure 1](#)). It is located east of the largest *Nimja* or "long house" of the Main Plaza ([Figure 13](#), above). Three pits were excavated in this area, two were located between Structure P11a and the *Nimja*, and the third one was located at 2.50m from the southwestern corner of the *Tojil* Temple. Through the first two pits we could establish that Structure P11a extends over more than 12m of length, and that it has a central stairway, albeit partially destroyed ([Figure 14](#)). The *Nimja* was discovered on the structure's eastern wall, at a length of 4m. It shows a stucco *talud* or sloping wall on its base. The space between both structures is covered by a 2.20m wide stuccoed floor. On the central part and parallel to the buildings we found a water canal covered by stucco measuring 0.40cm wide and 0.30cm deep from its floor ([Figure 15](#)). Within this canal we found several fragments of burnt human bone, possibly belonging to several male adult individuals. Although they are considered to be in a secondary context, it is important to point out that in the area around the bones, on the floor and within the canal, we found a great deal of ash and we recorded burnt areas ([Figure 16](#)). Through these systematic excavations and by recording the stratification of the rubble we could detect three possible moments for the destruction of these structures: the first stage shows the destruction and fire caused by Pedro de Alvarado (cf. *Primera Carta de Relación* 1934: 12); the second stage seems to pertain to later destructions caused by the extraction and reutilization of worked stones, and lastly the third stage was brought about by the collapse of possible architectural elements of the superstructures, especially the *Nimja*. This idea is based on the strong concentration of stone slabs on the western profile.



Figure 14. Pit 1: stuccoed floor and wall, to the right is part of the central stairway of Structure P11a.



Figure 15. Pit 2: wall of Structure P11a with burned north and northeast areas, stuccoed floor and canal. In the stratification the strong stone slab debris presence is observed.



Figure 16. Pit 2: stuccoed canal where we found several fragments of human bone, belonging to several male adults in a burnt context with ash.

Excavations of the M2 and M7 Structures of the Western Sector



Figure 17. Western wall of the Substructure M2 in front of the Eastern wall of Substructure M7.

The structures labeled with the letter "M" are those whose morphology and function are not known ([Figure 1](#)). Through the excavation of Structure M2 we could determine its size (approximately 13×12.50m) and its orientation towards the west. This structure actually consists of a substructure and a superstructure. The substructure is made of worked stones which show the technique of facing ashlar, particularly on their base ([Figure 17](#), above). We found on the façade an access system made of small worked stones covered with stucco and partially removed. The superstructure was characterized simply by a small-sized stone course slightly out of alignment with the inside of the substructure. Some of these stones showed holes that might have been used to support beams and a roof made of perishable material. We found on the substructure a round clay hearth and a quadrangular architectural element with fine walls and base covered by a double layer of stucco (0.50×0.60m and 0.30cm deep). In spite of its meticulous excavation, we found no particular feature that would give information about its function, although we could speculate that it served to store some

kind of food or water for domestic or ritual use. One meter to the west of the M2 structure we found Structure M7, which consists of a 18×6m rectangular platform oriented toward the west ([Figure 18](#)). Between both structures we found a canal (Figure 19) with three holes on its *talpetate* base or floor ([Figure 19](#)). The excavation of these structures, especially the M2 Structure and the corridor, produced more than four thousand potsherds, among them semi complete censers, *comales*, jars, basins and 110 fragments of obsidian artifacts (cores, flakes, blades, etc.) ([Figure 20](#)). The analysis of the architectural elements and ceramics seems to support the idea of a domestic-ritual function for Structure M2 ([Figure 21](#)), which could have been used for celebrating family rituals ([Figure 22](#)).



Figure 18. Wall and rounded corner of substructure M7, on which can be seen the remains of the superstructure. Floor and canal made of talpetate.



Figure 19. Panoramic view of the canal in the talpetate floor.



Figure 20. Detail of canal and holes for supporting a beam of perishable material, in the talpetate floor.

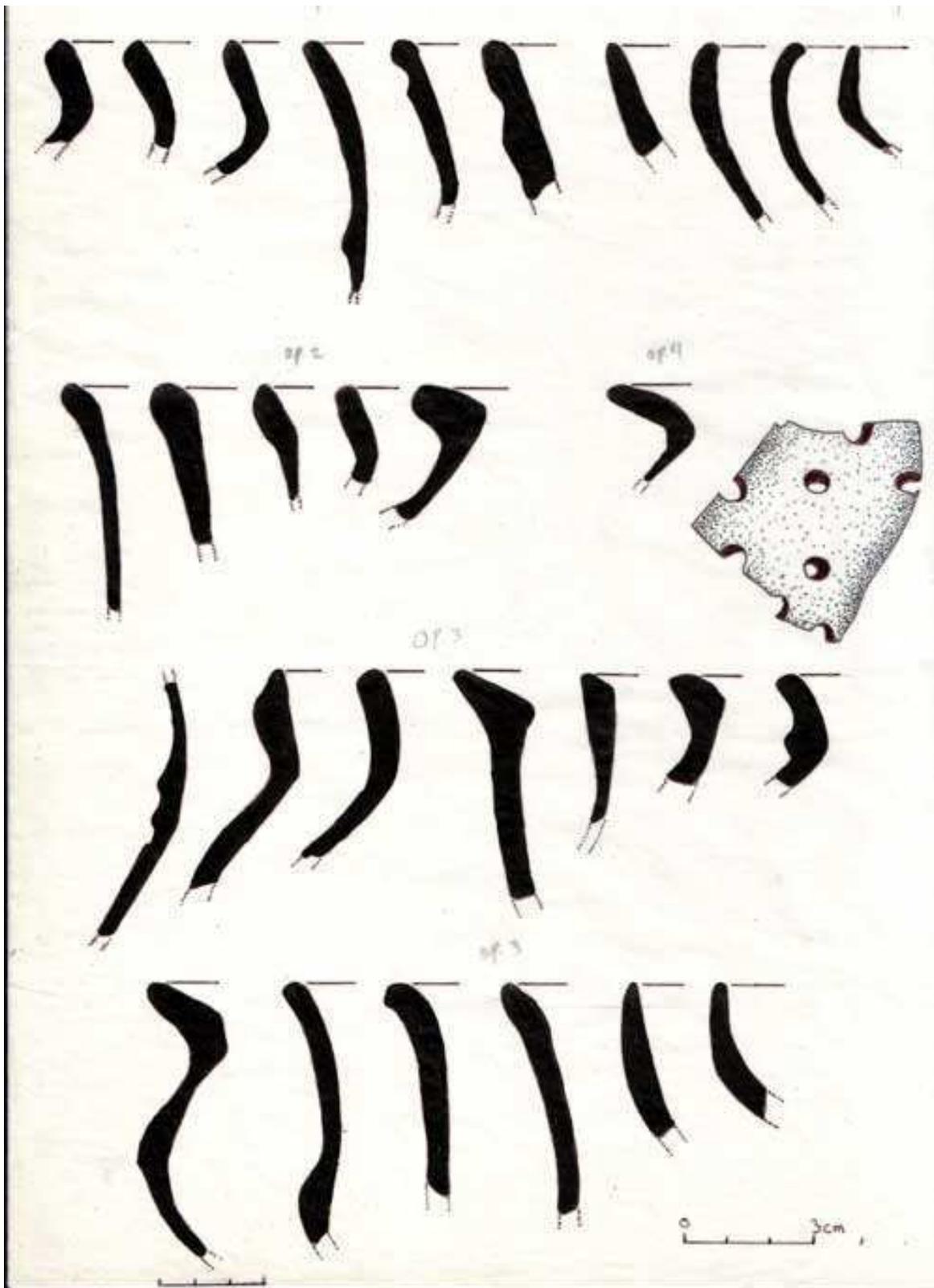


Figure 21. View of some forms of ceramic artifacts of the occupants of the M2 and M7 Structures.



Figure 22. Censer fragment from the alley between Structures M2 and M7.

Conclusions

The research season discussed here produced a great amount of data which are relevant for understanding the site's occupation, and show the good level of conservation of most of the structures. Other stages of the project are currently under way, for example radiocarbon dating, more thorough ceramic studies, and the culmination of a topographic survey.



Figure 23. View of the northern wall of Platform RC6a and the emergency retaining wall which cuts across the stuccoed canal.



Figure 24. Sample of fragments of polychrome stucco covering found in several operations. One fragment shows a geometric figure, probably a scroll, drawn with black lines which delineate red and dark-yellow surfaces.

By excavating in three different zones we could obtain a good sample of the different types of building found in the city. Through an archaeological approach combined with ethnohistorical data this project has had great achievements. The historical texts helped considerably to understand the behavior of the K'iche' society and its spatial arrangement in Q'um'arkaj, as described in Pedro de Alvarado's accounts: "*and like the city of [Q'um'arkaj] is very tight and the streets very narrow there was no way we couldn't suffer without drowning / or falling off the cliff in fleeing the fire. And as we climbed I saw myself inside the fortress so big that inside it we could not use horses because the streets were so narrow and covered with lime / I then decided to get out of it toward the level ground*"/. . . (P. de Alvarado 1934: 12). From an archaeological point of view Pedro de Alvarado's account is confirmed, since the archaeological data show a great preoccupation with the handling and use of space to advantage, which resulted in crowding of the structures in the three investigated sectors. Some buildings were attached while others are separated by a narrow thoroughfare of less than 2.50m, which had at the same time water canals (Figure 23). All structures have stuccoed floors, except for those in the western sector. In some areas we found *in situ* fragments of floors covered with polychrome stucco (Figure 24, above).



Figure 25. Wall and stairway partially uncovered in the western façade of Platform RC6a. These excavations were probably carried out in 1980.

The K'iche' of Q'um'arkaj developed complex building techniques which can be seen in the high quality of the joining, in the canals for water disposal, and in the coverings with several layers of stucco. The latter could lead us to a complex genealogy of leaders or show a certain effort to protect buildings from the effects of nature, and at the same time to take care of the center's splendor ([Figure 25](#), above). Although the architectonic monumentality of the structures shows variations between the three sectors, for the most part the same building materials were used, that is selected blocks, soapstone, *talpetate*, pumice stone, and to a lesser extent river cobbles. Thus, the local geologic resources were exploited ([Figure 26](#) and [Figure 27](#), below).



Figure 26. General view of the three walls and of the stairway of the southern façade of Platform RC6a, showing sample of building materials.

Within Structures M2 and M7, which are located in a far sector of the Main Plaza, activities were carried out which were linked with the daily life and probably festive-ritual activities as well. This idea is based on the great amount of ceramic and lithic material discovered here. Other remains that refer to the specific behavior of the inhabitants were the hurried construction of Platform RC6a. Could these movements mean a previous preparation for the arrival of the Spaniards to the settlement? It is well known that Q'um'arkaj's inhabitants had a close link with their conquered regions on the southern coast, and furthermore that there were links with cultures in the Central Valley of Mexico. Therefore, the construction of defense systems would be acceptable.



Figure 27. View from within Cave 1, built in the flank of the gully northwest of Q'um'arkaj. This cave was utilized in the ritual context of the present-day K'iche'.

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