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T'Hó: The Ancestral Mérida

Translation of the Spanish by Alex Lomónaco

Research Year: 1997

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Late Classic

Location: Yucatán, México

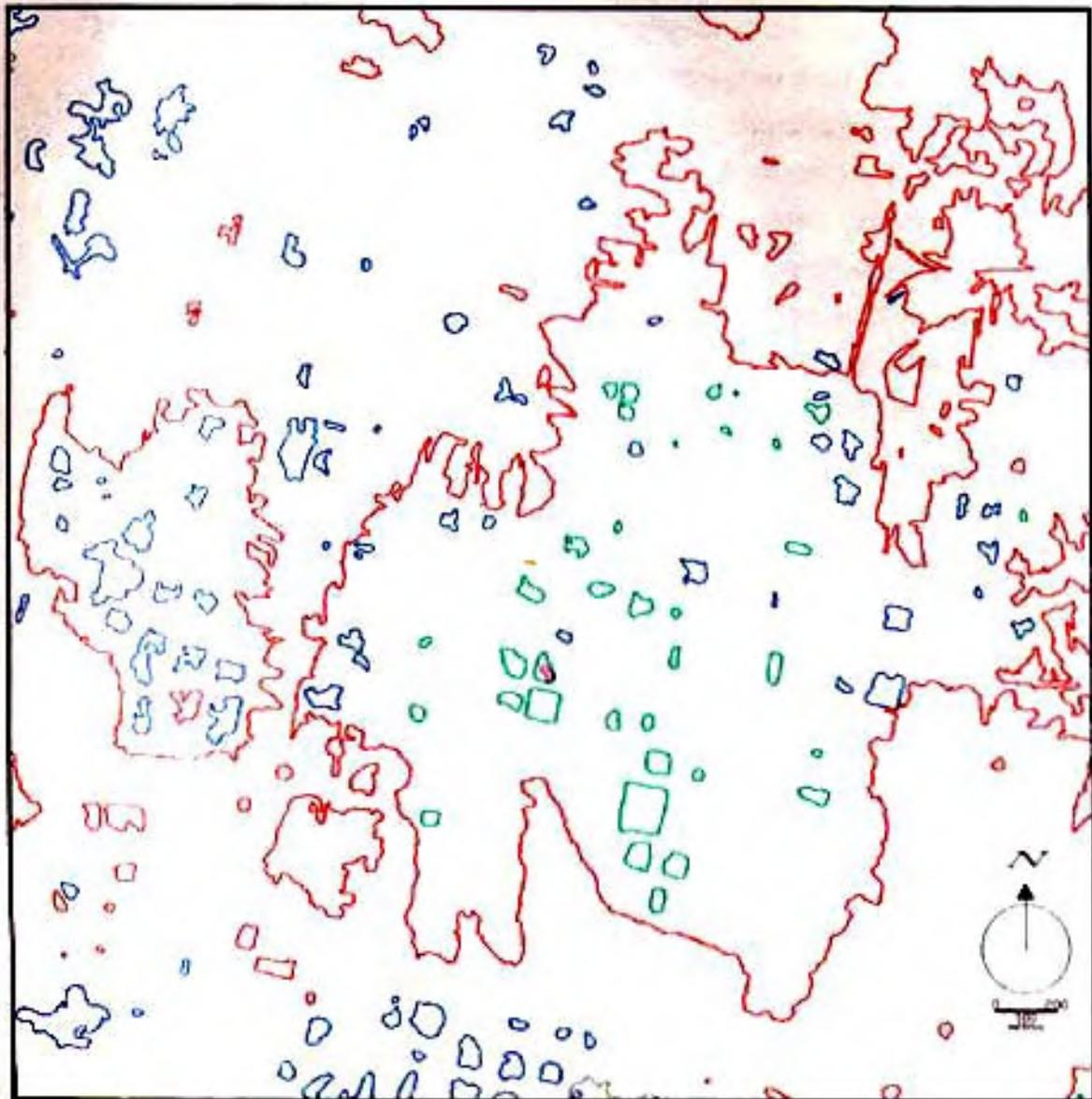
Site: T'Hó Mérida

The activities carried out during the first phase of the project *T'Hó: The Ancestral Mérida*, have yielded significant information about the relationship between the local geographical environment and the ancient occupation by the Maya. These findings are being enriched by a profound bibliographic revision wherefrom complementary data are being inferred in regard to T'Hó's historic developments. Simultaneously, we have done our best to maintain a presence in newspapers with a local and regional diffusion.

The digitalization of the city plan views showing particularly the height of ground elevations and the karstic depressions, are beginning to clearly reveal a close relationship between the nature of the soils and the model of settlement pattern that the ancient T'Hó, together with its closest neighbors Dzoyilá, ChenHó, Dzibilchaltún, Xoclán, and Kanasín, among others, are displaying. At this stage we have digitalized a strip that crosses Mérida's urban patch in an east-west direction, to further concentrate on digitalizing the Historic District of the city.

Based on that work, we were able to define that Mérida's Historic District –which was built on top of the ancient T'Hó– lies on an extended natural elevation of the ground –elevation 4–; on top of it, the highest contour elevations –elevations 5 and 6– were apparently chosen to create artificial levelings that would later support the ancient human settlement's buildings, a settlement which in Maya texts from early colonial times has been referred to as "Noh Cah Ti Hoo" –the Great Town of T'Hó–. In turn, in the surroundings and below elevation 4 or either on other small, similar elevations and a large number of important "depressions" may be observed, likely associated with water management or watering activities that are significant for the understanding of the agricultural economy which may have supported the resident populations at different historic moments (see [Plan 1](#)).

T'HO, LA MERIDA ANCESTRAL
Plano Topografico



— *DEPRESION* — *COTA 5*
— *COTA 4* — *COTA 6*

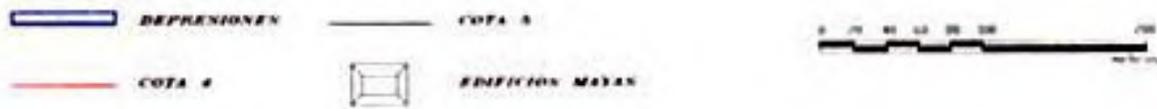
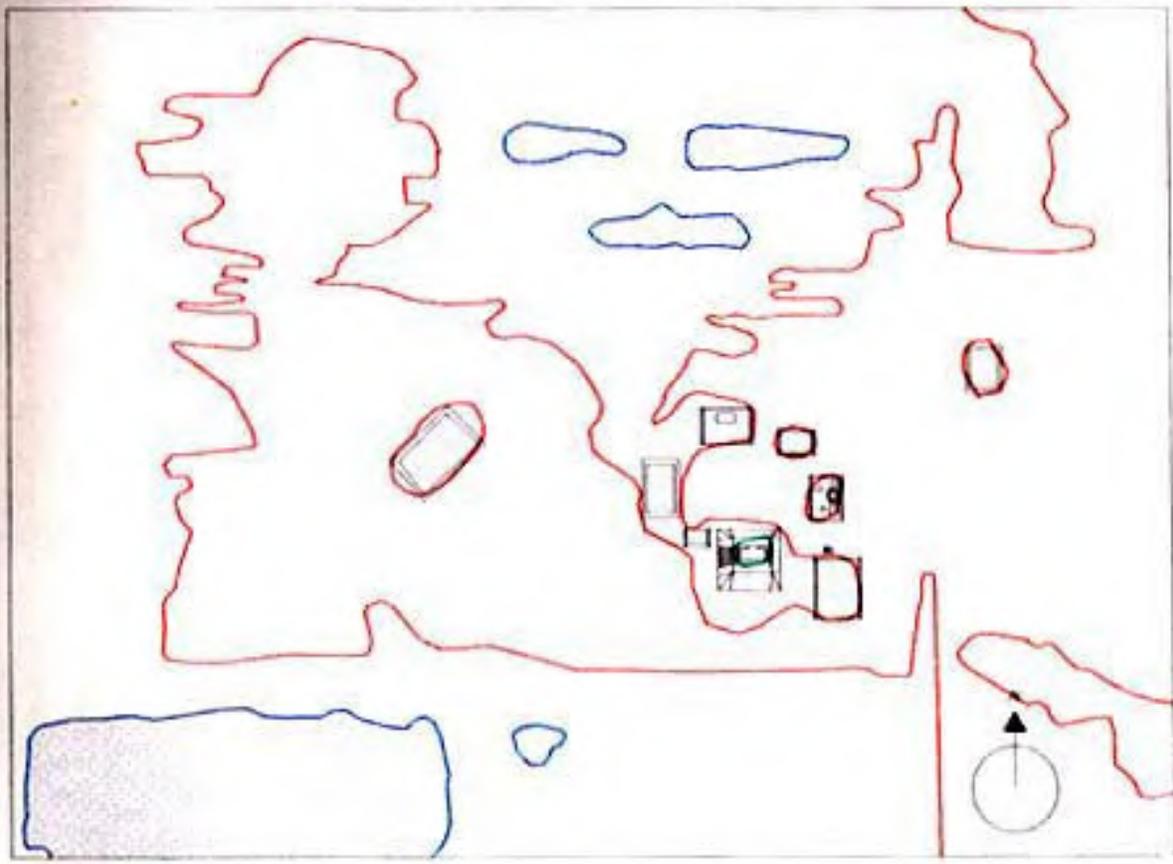
Plan 1. Topography of the Historic District, Mérida.

Comparable situations occur at sites close to T'Hó, located within Mérida's urban patch, a fact that is being corroborated with a similar methodology, based on a sample from the core of the smaller sites adjacent to T'Hó, where visible traits of the old Maya occupation have survived. The site of Dzoyilá, located in the southeastern portion of the city, as well as ChenHó, located in the Eastern Recreation Park, show in their topography evidence of an identical relationship between natural elevations –elevations 4, 5 and 6– and the occurrence of prehispanic mounds (see [Plan 2](#) and [Plan 3](#)). This represents an additional evidence of the "identification with ecology" that as has been noted by the anthropologist Alfredo Barrera Vásquez the ancient Maya maintained, one that in this case would allow us to design a new model for the study of regional settlement patterns in the northern Yucatán Península. According to this model, the examination of topography, hydrology, and other ecological variables, may be of help to understand the concept of urban planning of the Mayas from Yucatán, and to define the possible location of their ancient buildings.

Furthermore, a data base is being processed based on the sites that have been located in this region by Silvia Garza and Edward Kurjack in their *Atlas Arqueológico del Estado de Yucatán (Archaeological Atlas of the State of Yucatán)*, 1980, enriched with the results of architectural and ceramic analysis derived from the different programs of recovery and archaeological salvage undertaken by the Centro Yucatán, INAH. Thus, we shall obtain an accurate relation regarding the location and temporality of Maya settlements within the urban patch of Mérida, and we shall have the opportunity to observe the stages of regional development at which T'Hó may have played a significant role. Likewise, the newly achieved scope will provide some degree of control regarding the protection of the city's archaeological heritage, together with the possibility to establish a salvage program that will offer, in not too distant a time, a public image of the ancient Mayan history of modern Mérida.

CHEN HÓ

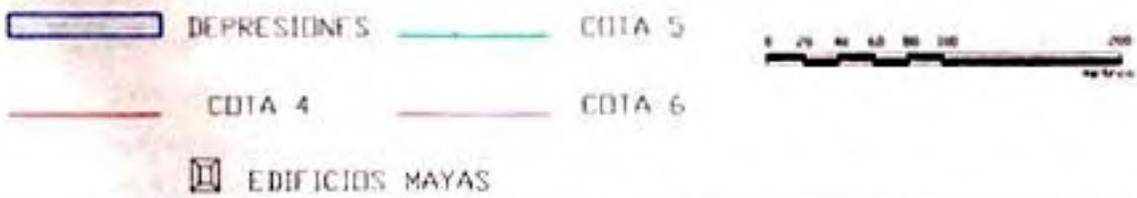
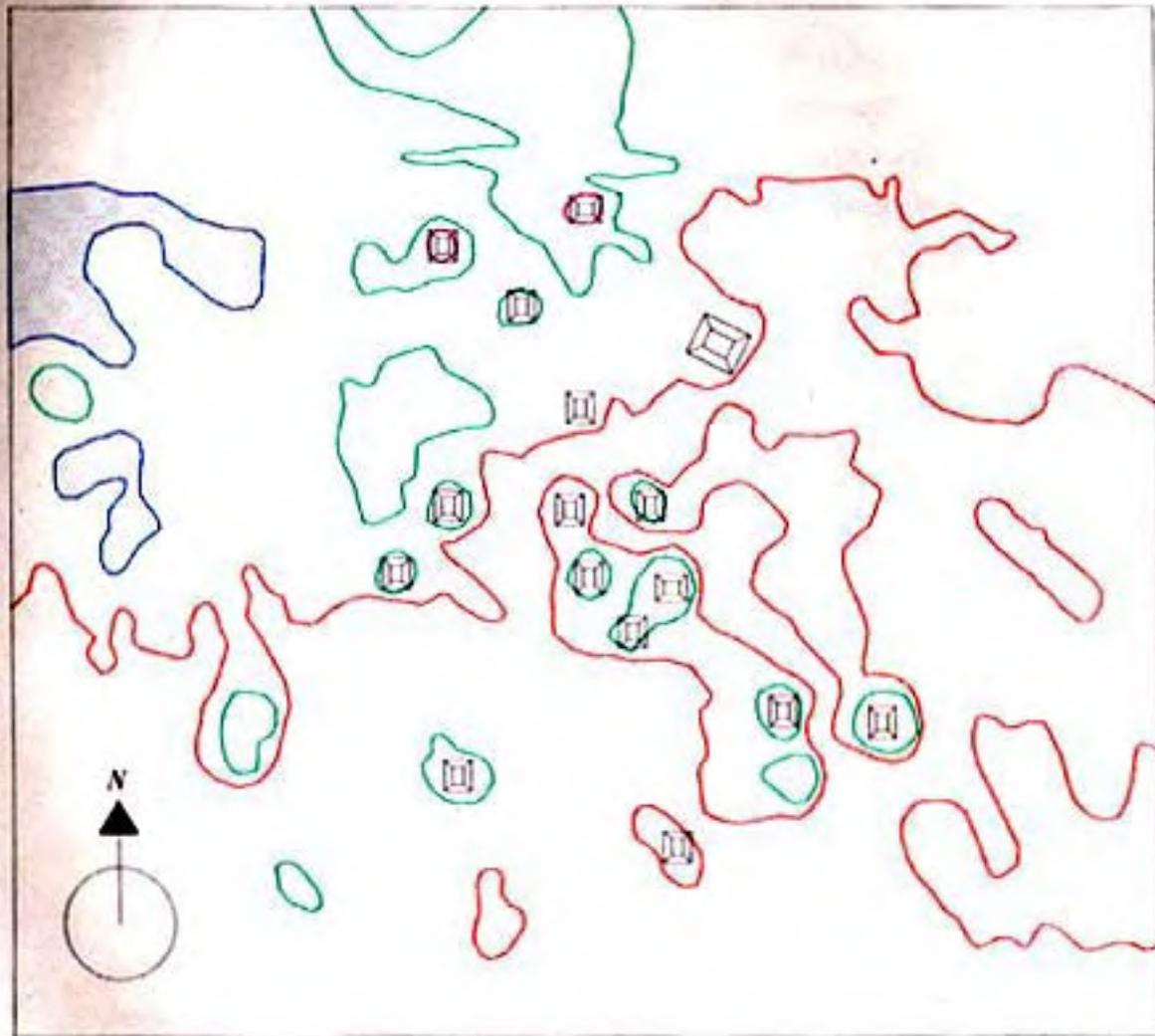
Plano Topografico Parque Recreativo de Oriente



Plan 2. ChenHó Archaeological Zone.

DZOYILA

Plano Topografico Sector Central



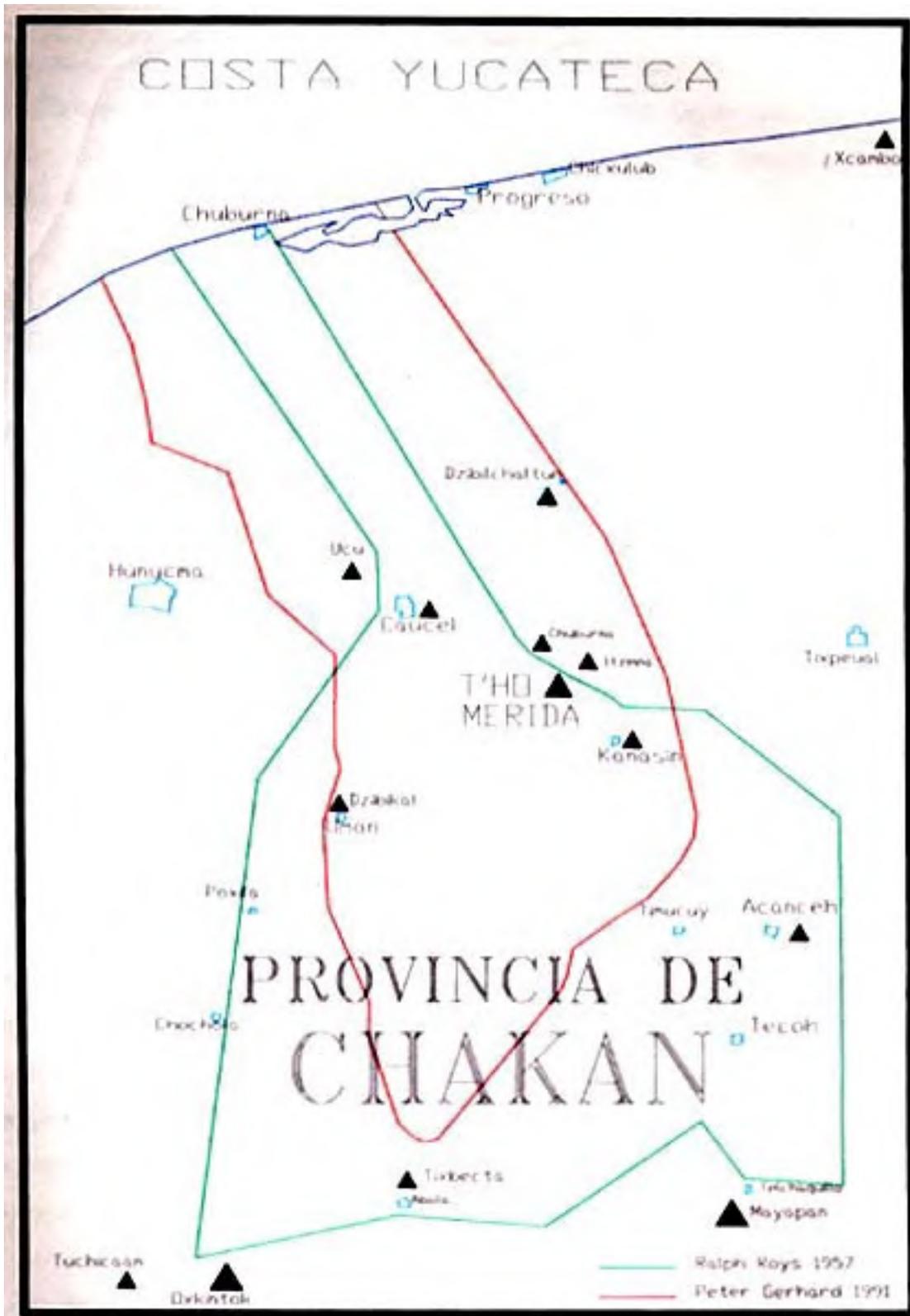
Plan 3. Dzoyilá Archaeological Zone.

In the particular case of the site of T'Hó, the Mayan historic and literary information refers to it as "Noh Cah Ti Hó" –The Great Town of T'Hó–, conveying the notion that the Mayan predecessor of Mérida was referred to in a way that undoubtedly outlined its preeminence over other settlements from the Peninsular Mayab. To some historians such as Sergio Quezada, T'Hó was "an independent bataboob", a decentralized polity subordinated to no capital. Such view considers that the definition of the Chakán Province was contemporary to the Spanish conquest, and that it was aimed to territorially cluster a number of "independent bataboobs" for a more efficient control and administration after the new order was established.

Our project has elaborated the regional context –the Chakán Province– where T'Hó is located, based on the demarcations proposed first by Ralph Roys in 1957, and later by Peter Gerhard in 1991, within which our sample of the sites recorded and classified in the data base will be completed for further studies with geographical information systems that will allow us to apply the model at a regional level (see [Plan 4](#)).

In our examination of reports on recoveries and salvage operations carried out in the city of Mérida, special attention has been given to the chronological and cultural aspects derived from the archaeological works. There is ceramic information available showing vessel types that correspond to moments of the Middle Preclassic, prior to the IIIrd century B.C. As to the construction activity, the earliest one has been recorded for the IVth century A.D. Through the application of the model we are now in the process of creating, we shall hopefully find some significant regularities between the chosen topography and the historic moment at each site.

As to T'Hó, the most precise references regarding its major buildings, for example the one described and drawn by Fray Diego de Landa, one that was built precisely where the modern Plaza Grande is presently located in Mérida, takes us to the Late Classic period, when the Puuc style was internationalized in the Yucatán Península back in the VIIIth century A.D.; we are indeed certain that the huge foundations now disappeared – we must remember the one that in the mid–XVIth century used to house the San Francisco Convent– may have been built at an earlier time, and are perhaps contemporary to other large towns such as Izamal or Acanceh. The size of the settlements and the quality and major importance of its architecture may provide a hint of the degree of political and territorial organization that existed in the former Province of Chakán during the XVIth century, of which Mérida was its main capital. The fact that T'Hó has played a major role in the historic development of the ancient Maya from northern Yucatán, poses no doubts.



Plan 4. The Chakán Province: Archaeological Panorama.

As we advanced in the methodological aspects of our proposal, we have attempted to be permanently present in the local media with the purpose of reinforcing the public awareness regarding the value of Mérida's archaeological and historical heritage and to encourage its preservation. In addition to learning more about the characteristics of the ancient T'Hó, one of the major goals of my research was to contribute to give this important Maya city the visible place it deserves, as a relevant part of Mérida's history. To this purpose, we have paid special attention to the municipal program aimed at recovering the colonial façades from Mérida's Historic District, implemented by the Town Council's Department of Urban Planning. This program includes the removal of the deteriorated flattened portions of the façades to replace them with a new layer of cement and paint. This circumstance has led to the discovery of ancient "ashlar stone linings" from the Maya in the walls of the Pedz Balam house, one of the earliest colonial structures built in one of the four corners of the Plaza Grande –60 x 61 Street–. The walls show the reutilization, since the earlier colonial times, of stones that were a part of T'Hó's palaces and temples, to build, with the same traditional construction techniques of the Maya, the walls of the newcomers' residences.

Through persuasion, we have convinced the municipal authorities to open and expose a number of test borings showing the nature of those walls, and to initiate the public display of fragments of a relevant historic period of Mérida, as opposed to covering them up again with a new flattening, as had been established in the original project and as had been proposed, after the opinion of experts, by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia itself.

Finally, we want to say that the second phase of this investigation will begin with a research in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville (Spain), where I shall hopefully find documents that will help to expand our knowledge and provide suggestive and accurate data for the characterization of T'Hó and its environments.

I have attempted to establish a communication with the researchers David Bolles and John F. Chuchiak IV, who have expressed, from their point of view as ethnohistorians, valuable comments and suggestions that will facilitate the efforts related to the consultation of historic documents in the archives.

I am also in touch with José Antonio González Iturbe, Master in Sciences, from the CICY (Centro de Investigaciones Científicas de Yucatán), with the archaeologist Rodrigo Liendo, from the University of Pittsburgh, and with the archaeologist Ernesto Vargas, del IIA-UNAM, whose advise is of great help for the successful development of my project.

In this preliminary report, I must say that for the digitalization of the maps and for the obtention of the planimetric results that illustrate the progress of my investigation, I have depended on the availability –at certain hours of the day when the equipment was not used by staff members– of a computer from Mérida's Town Hall which was in poor condition and caused a significant delay in the advancement of my work.

Finally, may I add that we are certain that the study of ancient Maya cities with the help of geographic information systems and ecological concepts, and the consideration of relationships among neighbor human settlements, rural areas, economy and agricultural technology, are fundamental for the knowledge and proper evaluation of the archaeological heritage, and for pursuing its integration with the present urban development.

For additional information, please refer to Josep Ligorred Perramon's publication:

T'Hó, La Mérida Ancestral

Ichcanzihó: "Los de Rancio Abolengo"

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