



Contributions to the Archaeology
Of Tikal, Naranjo-Sa'aal, Yaxha, and Nakum
Northeast Region of Peten, Guatemala

The Maya State of Naranjo-Sa'aal and Its Peripheral Organization: A Vision of Expansion and Control¹

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For eighteen years systematic archaeological studies have been carried out in the northeastern region of Peten, Guatemala, by the Department of Conservation and Rescue of Prehispanic Archaeological Sites (DECORSIAP) of the Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala (IDAEH). This work has been concentrated at the centers and peripheries of the major Maya cities of Tikal, Yaxha, Nakum, and Naranjo-Sa'aal, in the region of the Holmul river basin. With regard to Naranjo-Sa'aal in particular, thirteen years of regional research in an area of 360 km² has been dedicated to obtaining knowledge of the territorial characteristics of this ancient Maya kingdom, including the main city and its hinterland, where peripheral settlements indicate a hierarchy of four levels. This permits us to determine aspects of political geography, territorial control, interaction with other political entities, and the distribution of peripheral settlements with respect to their environmental contexts. In addition to surveys of the Upper, Middle, and Lower Holmul river basin, starting from the southern hinterland of Tikal and concluding at the northern hinterland of Naranjo, the regional settlement study was completed with three long-distance transects averaging 21 kilometers each between the main cities: Tikal-Nakum, Yaxha-Nakum, and Yaxha-Naranjo. Systematic mapping was completed at all identified urban centers and their residential groups, including a description of their natural settings. In addition, pit excavations were carried out in plazas, patios, and buildings; in many cases it was possible to obtain additional information from looters' trenches and tunnels, which facilitated the chronological assignment of each of the settlements (Fialko 1998a, 1998b, 2005, 2008).

Naranjo and Its Water Resources

Before proceeding to explain the intrinsic territorial characteristics of Naranjo-Sa'aal it is important to take a look at the main water resources of the northeast region of Peten, where three major river basins predominate: (1) The Uaxactun/Ixcanrió/Río Azul basin, which corresponds to the Río Hondo of Belize; (2) the Holmul Basin related to the Río Bravo of Belize, and (3) the Mopan Basin, which corresponds to the Belize River. The political geography of the northeastern Maya of Peten was closely related to these basins, which since the Formative period served as migration corridors, natural frontiers, and exchange routes (Figure 1). The political geography related to the Maya state of Naranjo-Sa'aal is contained within the context of the Lower Holmul river and the Mopan river watersheds, including a system of *bajos* known as La Pita (west), El Bambonal (east), El Jobal (north), and several streams and springs. The large Bajo La Justa (Culbert et al. 1997; Grazioso Sierra et al. 2001) probably functioned as a geographical limit between the ancient Maya kingdoms of Naranjo, Yaxha, and Nakum, which could have been a locus of dispute considering its valuable resources related to intensive agriculture.

With regard to the location and extent of the Holmul river sub-basins and the intermediate urban centers beyond the monumental epicenter of Naranjo, it is possible to estimate a local or intrinsic territorial area for this ancient Maya state of approximately 360 square kilometers, which would be equivalent to 62% of the local territory

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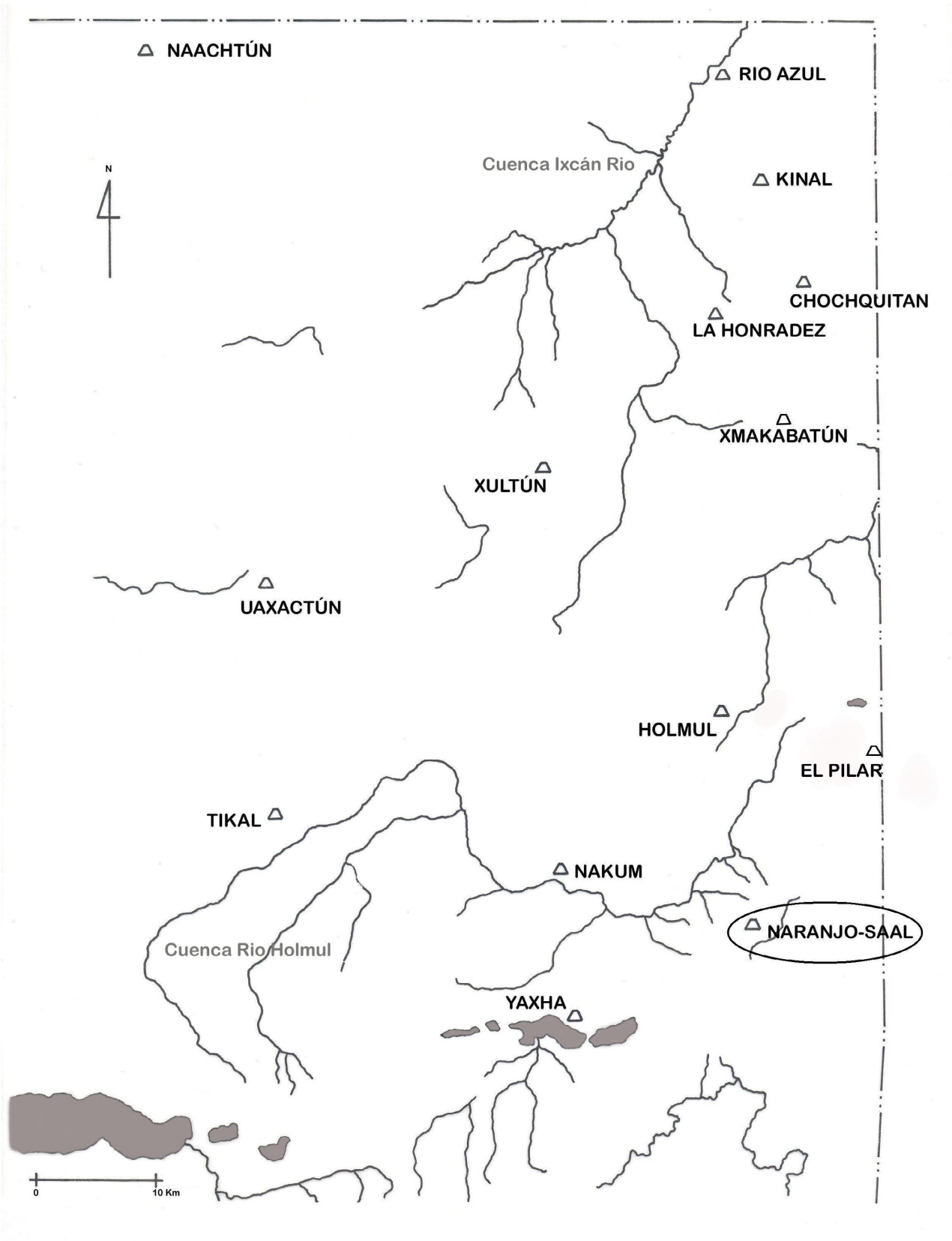


Figure 1. Northeast Peten river basins.

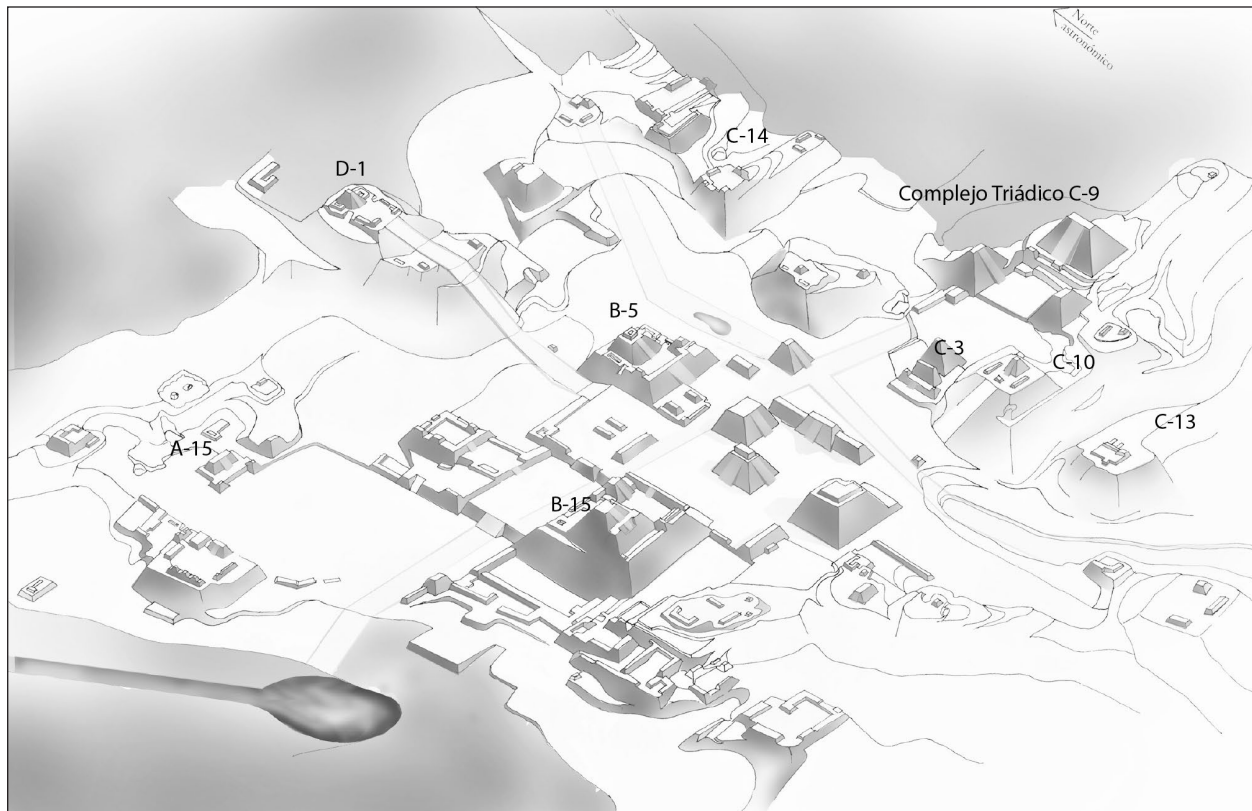


Figure 2. Naranjo Sa'aal as a major center.

of Tikal, which is estimated as approximately 575 square kilometers. On the other hand, Naranjo's hegemonic area of political influence was much larger, estimated as 1,961 square kilometers, where direct interaction is attested with important cities such as Holmul and Witzna to the north, Ucanal and probably Sacul to the south, Yaxha to the west, and Buenavista and Xunantunich, Belize, to the east (Figure 1).

Hierarchy of Settlements

The Holmul Basin landscape in the upper, middle, and lower sub-basins was occupied by a hierarchy of settlements on four levels, specified as *major centers*, *intermediate centers*, *smaller centers*, and *residential/rural centers*. The *smaller* and *residential/rural centers* are organized in a dispersed pattern located in a dependent relationship with regard to the intermediate centers (Fialko 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 2013). The characteristics of settlements related to each hierarchical level are specified below:

(a) The first level is equivalent to the major center of the state of Naranjo-Sa'aal, configured in the city's monumental epicenter (Figure 2). Operating as a capital it comprises an area of approximately 3.5 km², organized in major urban architectural components, such as eight triadic acropolis compounds, two ballgame courts,

two royal palace compounds, an astronomical compound or E-Group complex, four causeways, two reservoirs, and several large plazas integrating temples and palatial residences of the elite. A relevant feature of the major centers or capitals is the presence of carved stelae, generally associated with E-Group complexes and triadic acropolises. The epicenter of the city of Naranjo was the seat of a major elite corresponding to the dynastic lineage of the royal family, where major political, economic, and ritual activities were centralized in relationship to both inter-district and inter-state affairs.

(b) The second level of the political hierarchy is equivalent to the intermediate centers that were districts that functioned as axes of territorial control; these are usually distributed in radiuses of 5 to 6 km from the major center or capital, as well as in radiuses of 10 to 12 km in sectors that are associated with the border area. Naranjo-Sa'aal had intermediate centers, distributed along the four cardinal directions, each of which comprises an urban area that averages 150,000 square meters. Intermediate centers generally include some important architectural urban components that are usually associated with major centers, such as an E-Group compound, or a ballcourt, or one or more triadic acropolises (Figures 3 and 4). Intermediate centers always include palatial residences of the

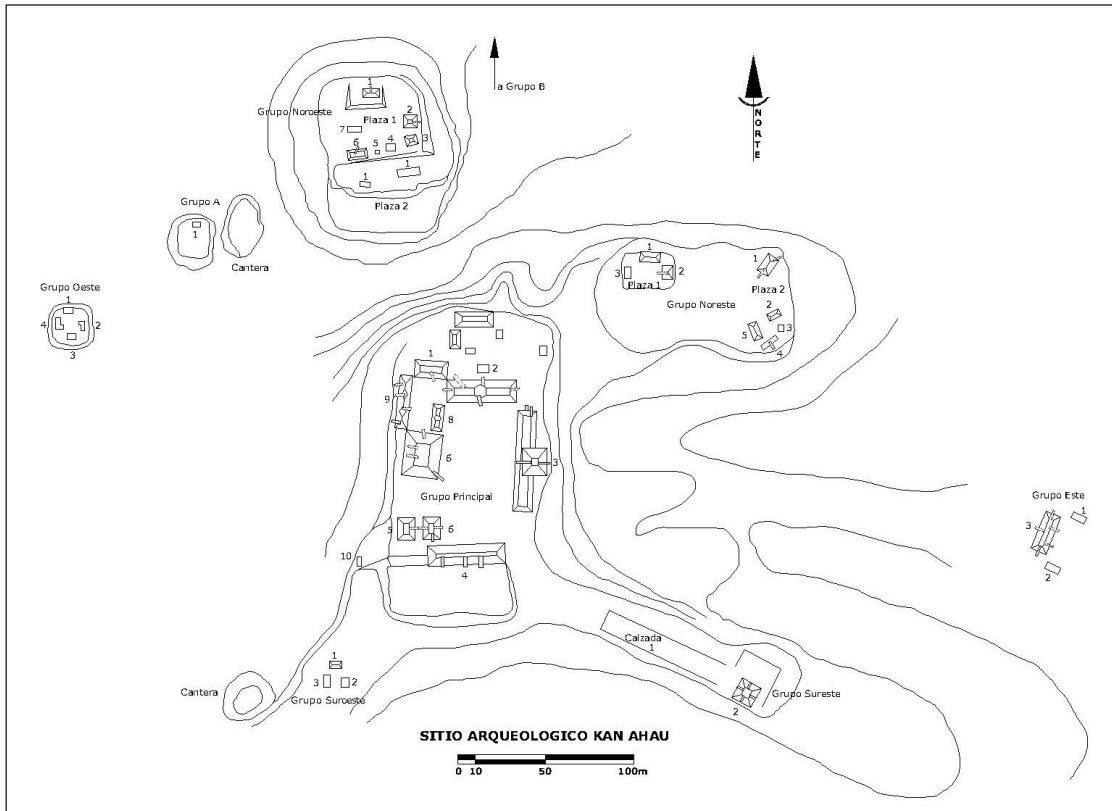


Figure 3. The site of Kanajau, as an intermediate center.



Figure 4. The site of La Tractorada, as an intermediate center.

elite and in some cases a causeway or a reservoir (Figures 5 and 6). Some of the intermediate centers contain carved stelae, such as Kanajau, El Aguacate, and Chunwitz (Figures 3 and 7), although generally plain monuments predominate. The fact that this type of intermediate center has architectural compounds with ritual, political, and economic functions indicates that some activities related to major and minor elite were carried out there albeit on a smaller scale than in the capital, focused on maintaining stronger sociopolitical links between the center and the hinterland.

It was determined that six of the intermediate centers of Naranjo-Sa'al have an E-Group (Kanajau, La Tractorada, El Gavilán, Balamchak, La Chiclería, Laín); six include ballcourts (Kanajau, La Tractorada, El Gavilán, Balamchak, El Aguacate, Nojwitz), and only three include a causeway as seen in Kanajau, Balamchak, and El Pital (Figures 3, 5, and 6). Four intermediate centers include rulers' palatial compounds (Chunwitz, El Aguacate, and Pital) (Figures 6 and 7). It may be significant that none of the intermediate centers had triadic acropolises, which is a strong contrast with the Naranjo-Sa'al capital epicenter which has eight, a fact which indicates that the ceremonies related to triadic acropolis compounds were centered in the capital of Naranjo-Sa'al. It is considered that in the Late Classic the intermediate centers were administered by a delegate of the king (*sajal*), equivalent to the *batab* function of the Yucatan and Peten region in the Postclassic period (Roys 1957).

(c) The third level of the hierarchy of Naranjo's settlements correspond to the smaller centers that include several plaza groups, with more than five palace-like structures and medium-size pyramidal temples; these smaller centers are in the process of transition to the category of intermediate centers (Figures 8 and 9).

(d) The fourth level of the political hierarchy corresponds to residential/rural centers, represented by groups of households which include an average of two to eight structures. The different patio arrangements that correspond to this category have been subdivided into ranges, as previously reported in relation to the groups located on the transects Tikal-Nakum, Yaxha-Nakum, and Yaxha-Naranjo (Fialko 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1998b). This category includes groups known as Plaza Plan 2 that integrate a small temple in the east sector of the patio (Becker 1971). For now, a sample of 1,000 residential groups have been documented at the periphery of Naranjo-Sa'al, of which one quarter correspond to a Plaza Plan 2 format (Figures 10 and 11).

Returning to the discussion of the intermediate

centers, these do not occur exclusively in the hinterland of Naranjo-Sa'al, as they have been identified at the peripheries of other major cities of northeastern Peten, such as Tikal (Puleston 1998; Fialko 2008, 2017), Yaxha (Fialko 1996, 1997, 1998, 2013), Nakum, Holmul (Estrada-Belli, personal communication 2013), La Honradez, and Río Azul, among others. This situation also seems to occur with major sites of the northern Peten, such as El Mirador, Nakbe, and Naachtun. It is considered that intermediate centers played a role as axes of territorial and spatial control of the state, especially those located in the confines. The urban elements of ritual and administrative nature are generally related to activities of minor elite families emulating major elites who act in major capital centers. Clear examples of intermediate centers functioning in a specialized way are Tzikintzakan on the southern border of Naranjo, acting as an intermediate defensive center, and Laín, located on the eastern border, related to ritual activities (Figure 7).

Similar to what has been reported in relation to the eleven intermediate centers at the periphery of the Maya state of Tikal (Fialko 2000, 2005, 2008, 2017; Fry 1969; Puleston 1983), and the nine centers that correspond to the periphery of Yaxha (Acevedo et al. 1996; Fialko 1998a, 2000, 2013; Morales 2005), it is considered that the twelve intermediate centers of Naranjo-Sa'al developed urban characteristics that seem to reflect aspects of political organization suggesting varying conditions of autonomy, semi-autonomy, and dependence towards the capital of the state.

Geo-Political Organization

The model of territorial space analysis and geopolitical organization used for Naranjo-Sa'al is the same as previously applied to Tikal and its northeastern periphery (Fialko 2000) and the periphery of Yaxha (Fialko 2013), which indicated a significant relationship between the establishment of the earliest settlements and the distribution of intermediate centers. Most of the Preclassic intermediate centers of the hinterland of Naranjo-Sa'al began their evolutionary process at the same time as the monumental epicenter of the city of Naranjo, namely Balamchak, Kanajau, and La Tractorada (Figures 6 and 8). It is considered that the early foundations identified in the intermediate centers corresponded to autonomous political entities, which were strategically established in specific sub-basins. The fact that each of these settlements has been associated with water resources, such as a bajo, stream, or waterhole is substantiated not only for basic subsistence



Figure 5. Causeways of the site of Balamchak.

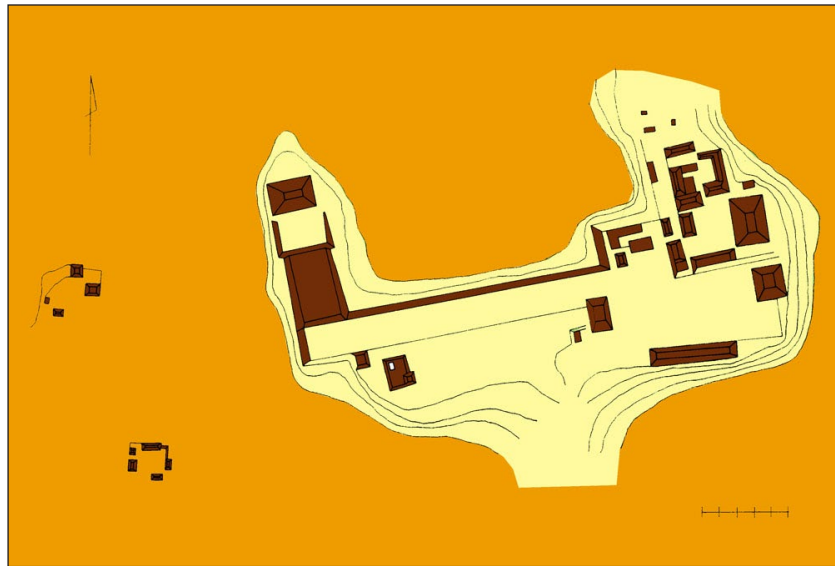


Figure 6. Causeway and palaces of the site of El Pital.



Figure 7. The site of El Aguacate as an intermediate center.

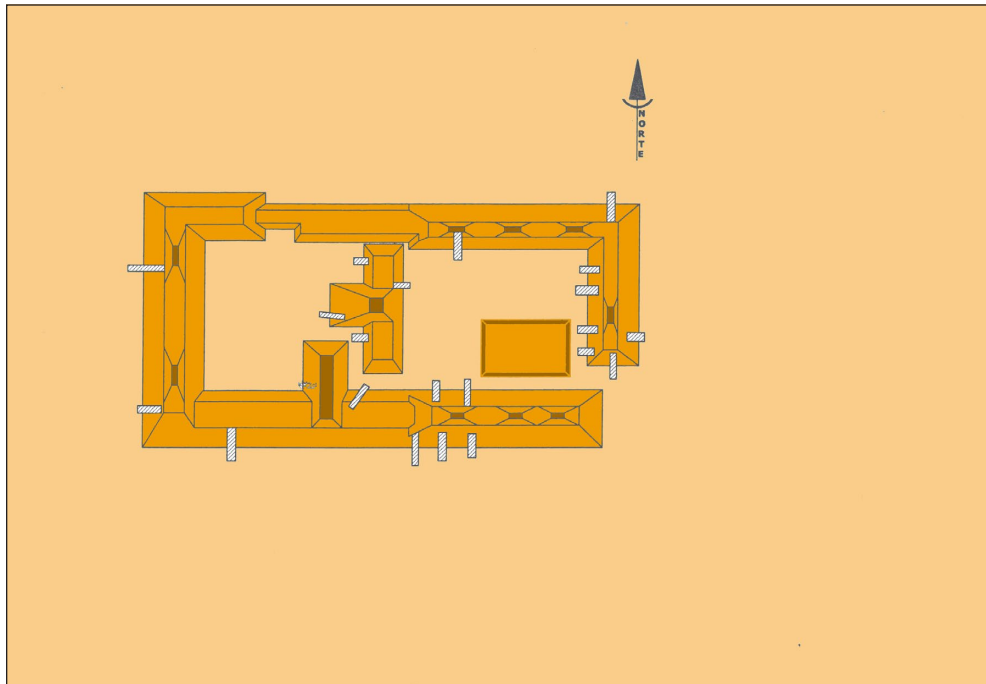


Figure 8. The site of El Bejucal as a minor center.

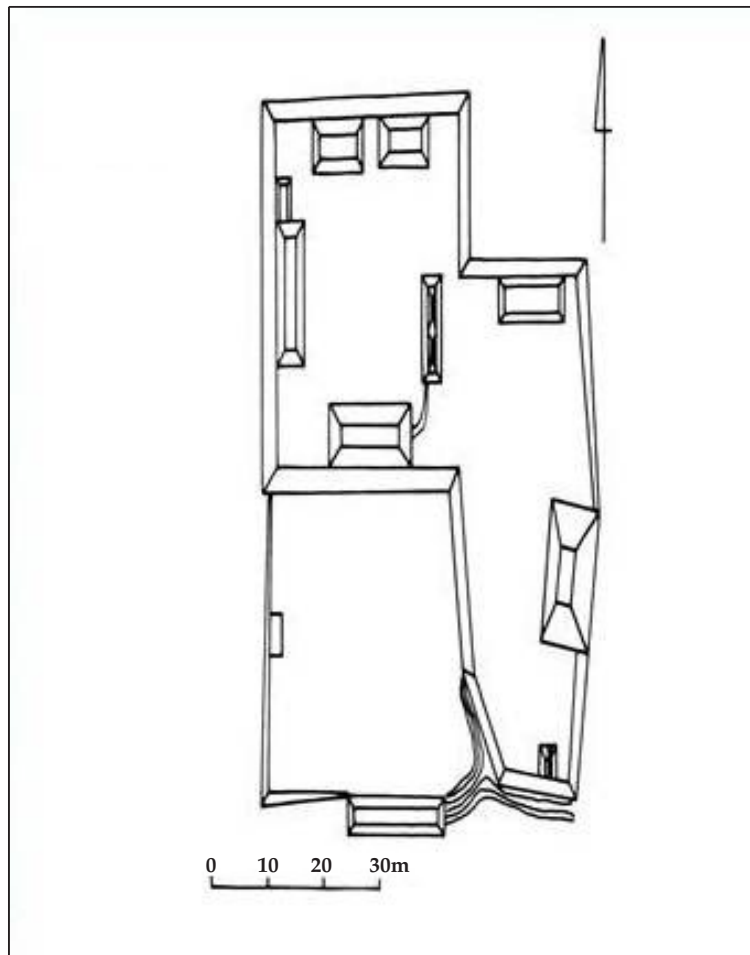


Figure 9. The site of Cascabillos as a minor center.

resources, but also for geographical reference of territorial delimitation and a possible toponymic identity.

In the case of the Middle Preclassic intermediate centers like Kanajau (to the north) and La Tractorada (to the southwest), they seem to have shared sociopolitical relations at an egalitarian level with central Naranjo-Sa'aal, considering that their formative deposits were found associated with their corresponding E-Group complexes. This situation indicates that since Formative times there would have been a qualitative differentiation in social organization, where an incipient elite became specialized in ritual and control of solar cycles, calendar management, and commemoration of ancestors (Figures 2, 6, and 8). Although no research has been carried out in other intermediate centers with E-Groups on the periphery of Naranjo, the evidence collected from the periphery of Tikal, as well as in Yaxha, indicates that these groups usually have Preclassic antecedents. The elites associated with Preclassic architectural monumentality of the intermediate centers clearly had availability of labor, a reason why they seem to have been relatively independent of central Naranjo.

It is considered that the segment of settlements related to the bajos, identified as *bajo communities* (Culbert et al. 1997; Gidwitz 2002; Kunen et al. 2000; Sever et al. 2000), were already developed at least to the west of Naranjo by the Middle Preclassic period. This situation parallels what is observed in the northern and eastern periphery of Tikal related to the great Bajo Santa Fe associated with the intermediate centers of El Corozal, Uolantun, and Chalpaté (Dunning et al. 2002; Fialko 1998b, 2000, 2016) and in the Yaxha periphery in relation to the intermediate centers of La Pochitoca and Poza Maya, associated with the Bajo La Justa (Fialko 1998a, 2013; Folan et al. 1998).

Since the Late Preclassic period, the wealth and dominion of the major elite of Naranjo is reflected in the architectural format of the city's East Triadic Acropolis (Fialko 2005; Martin et al. 2015, 2016; Tokovinine and Fialko 2007) and its E-Group complex, both reaching monumental proportions comparable to buildings of the same period documented in Tikal and Yaxha. Naranjo also shows Preclassic sculptural evidence associated with the eastern patio of the royal palace compound.

At the beginning of the Classic Period, the minor elites of the intermediate centers within the five km radius may have already been controlled by central Naranjo, while the centers within the 11 km radius may be allies close to Naranjo, although still relatively autonomous. It is possible that since

the Early Classic, Naranjo had some interest in the Bajo La Justa, located on the outskirts of Yaxha, and even the Bajo El Jobal, located 10 km north of Naranjo (Figure 1).

In the Late Classic, new intermediate centers appear on the periphery of Naranjo that do not have E-Groups, suggesting a consolidation of minor elites or political factions that when growing and strengthening could compete with one another to generate conflict. Examples of this are the intermediate centers of El Pital (west) and Chunwitz (east), which come to build royal palaces and facades with stucco masks, as well as Tzikintzakan, located within the southern periphery at 12 km from Naranjo (Figure 2). Something related to this situation might be mentioned in the text of Stela 22 of Naranjo, indicating military interventions of central Naranjo over some peripheral centers (Martin and Grube 2000).

It has been determined that during the Late Classic nine of the twelve intermediate centers of Naranjo-Sa'aal had ballcourts, providing an interesting insight into the type of relationship that might have prevailed among the minor elites of different centers and between these and the major elite of central Naranjo, which could reflect some type of socio-political integration at the inter-center level. Only the intermediate centers of Kanajau, El Gavilán, Balamchak, and La Tractorada had a ballcourt associated with an E-Group (Figures 2, 3, 6, and 7). Intermediate centers without ballcourts would indicate that the ritual and pragmatic activities related to the game had to be carried out in nearby intermediate centers that had courts, or directly in the capital of Naranjo.

Final Considerations

Regional polities that had influence or dominance in the political affairs of other Maya states have been considered to be hegemonic states (Lacadena and Ciudad 1998). Such categorization could be expanded with two variants: regional hegemonies, which would correspond to entities that dominated and influenced other states beyond their immediate borders, such as Tikal and Calakmul, and local hegemonies, which would be related to domains or circumscribed influences on immediate neighbor states, as represented by Naranjo, Copan, or Yaxchilan (Figure 1).

During the Late Classic, Naranjo-Sa'aal erected monuments with glyphic texts making reference to periodic warfare events against Yaxha, Tikal, Ucanal, and Caracol (Martin and Grube 2000). Stela 22 mentions the names of several political entities that apparently correspond to intermediate centers that might be related not only to Naranjo, but also

to the corresponding peripheries of Yaxha, Ucanal, Xunantunich, and Holmul, which peripheral centers should have been key in the defense of the state territory (Figure 1). The political expansion of Naranjo towards other neighboring states is clearly configured in the basins of the Holmul and Mopan rivers, with the purpose of controlling the routes that connect with the Caribbean Sea, and the bajos and associated fertile fields used for agricultural production (Figure 1).

In the political organization of Naranjo, the twelve intermediate centers identified up to now seem to have corresponded to integrated districts which were smaller political units coordinated from the main capital configured in the city of Naranjo. The *sajales*, apparently the leaders in charge of the intermediate centers, may have had among their duties the task of collaborating for the collection and transfer of the materials of the tribute directed towards central Naranjo (Figure 2). The tribute conditions could be balanced according to ballgame events, similar to what happened in the Postclassic period in Mesoamerica, where the loser had to grant resources (Zender 2004).

It is important to consider the situation of the minor elites of the intermediate centers in relation to war events that occurred between the Maya kingdoms during the Late and Terminal Classic periods; the response of those near to the border could have been ambiguous, a reason why these elites probably were granted special political treatment by the capital, to prevent their possible alliance with enemy neighbors. Also, it is possible that a ballgame circuit would have helped to create loyalty and balance.

The analysis of the distribution and urban components of intermediate centers identified in four of the largest Maya states of the northeast Peten—Tikal, Yaxha, Naranjo-Sa'aal, and Nakum—all associated with the Holmul River basin, could be considered as a first step to determine in future what system of political and territorial organization prevailed in each region of the Southern Maya Lowlands.

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