



# Royal Tomb Discovered in the Diablo Group at El Zotz, Guatemala

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The ancient kingdom of El Zotz derived its geopolitical importance from a position athwart the trade and communication routes between the mighty center of Tikal and the western Maya lowlands (Houston 2008) (Figure 1). In the very shadow of its more sizeable neighbor, El Zotz would have struggled to maintain its independence much less evince an antagonistic attitude, yet the latter seems to have been the case: the smaller site seems to have served as a forward bastion of powers aligned with Tikal's archenemy Calakmul (ibid.). That a royal court was relocated to El Zotz

in the sixth century AD during a time of weakness at Tikal was indicated by the data available to archaeology and epigraphy before the discovery at the site of a substantial Early Classic presence and a remarkably opulent royal tomb dating to the fourth century AD (Brown University 2010).

El Zotz was known and heavily exploited by looters before the first archaeological reconnaissance in 1977. In that year Marco Antonio Bailey mapped the ruins and may have named the site; it was Bailey who registered it with the Guatemalan government (Laporte 2006). The following year George Andrews explored a large architectural group one kilometer west of the settlement center, giving the name El Diablo to the complex where

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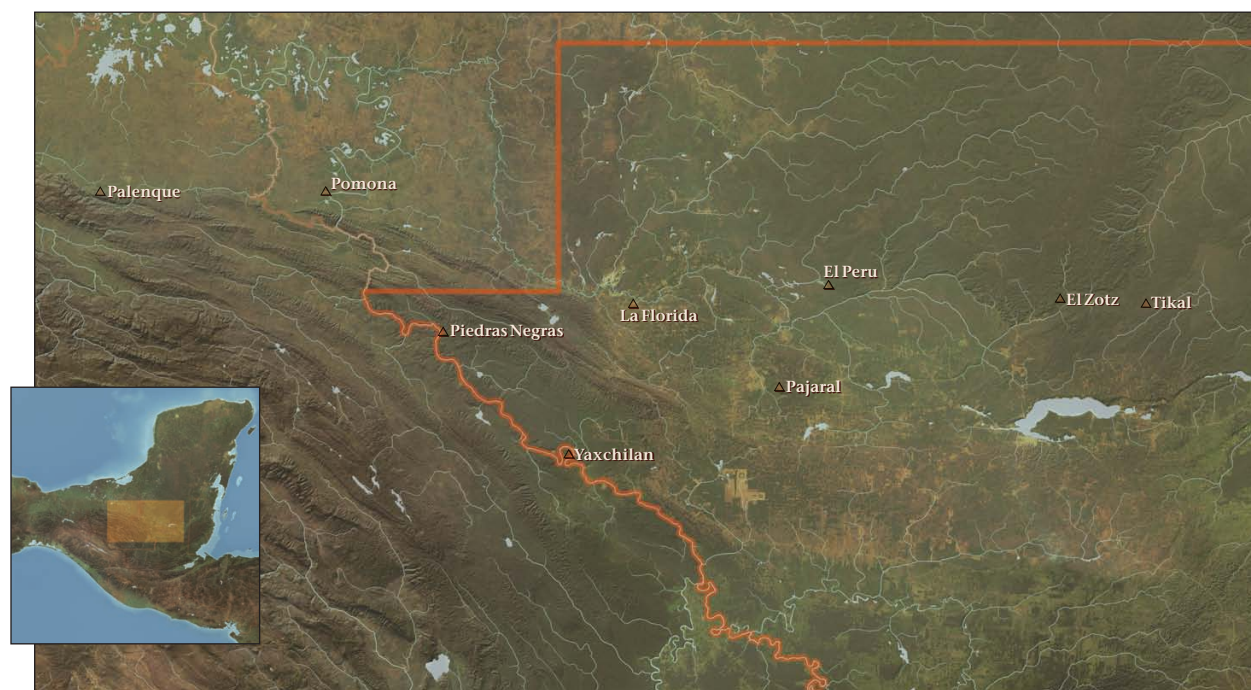
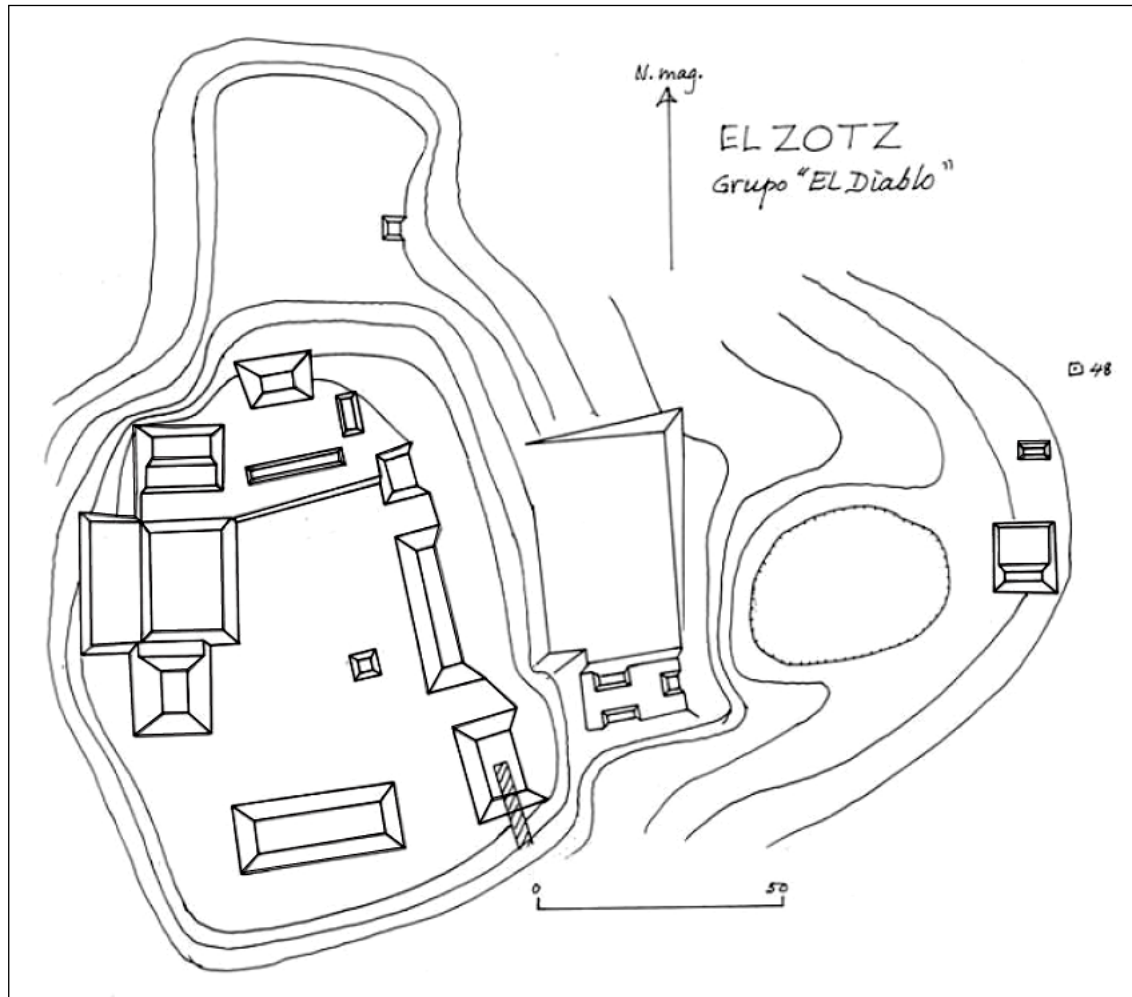


Figure 1. Copyright 2010 Precolumbia Mesoweb Maps.



**Figure 2.** Ian Graham's map of the El Diablo Group (after Nelson 2007:Fig. 4). The hatched element just above the zero on the scale is a looters' trench in Structure F8-1.

the tomb has now been found (Andrews 1986). Andrews noted that looters' trenches had exposed buildings decorated with polychromed stucco. In the late seventies Ian Graham also investigated El Zotz and prepared a detailed plan of the site with illicit excavations carefully recorded (Houston et al. 2006) (Figure 2).

A comprehensive mapping effort came in 2006 and 2007 under a forerunner of the current Proyecto Arqueológico El Zotz (El Zotz Archaeological Project) (see Houston et al. 2006; Houston et al. 2008). And in 2008 the project began test pitting and excavations. Prior to that date the only digging was done by looters, who moved some 900 cubic meters of soil while honeycombing the site with tunnels and pits (Houston 2008).

The small ancient settlement known as the Devil's Lookout or "El Diablo" sits on a substantial elevation, from which the principal pyramids

of Tikal can be sighted on the horizon (Nelson 2008). The largest structure in the Diablo Group, designated F8-1, is a pyramid ten meters tall with a 23 x 26 meter base (ibid.) (Figure 2).

Reconnaissance by the archaeological project had detected an unexpected Early Classic presence in the Diablo Group, and in the 2008 season a tomb dating to that era was investigated and systematically cleaned of the few remains left behind by the looters: sherds and fragments of bone, conch, and jade (Gillot 2008). The scant vestiges left behind by the looting make it all the more remarkable that an untouched royal tomb was yet to be found.

Work in the Diablo Group in 2009 continued the previous year's effort to determine the construction sequence by means of test pitting and investigation of the looters' trenches and tunnels (Román and Carter 2009). A tunnel at the entrance to Structure



Figure 3. Mask 2 in the process of liberation. Photo: Arturo Godoy.

F8-1 (the main pyramid of the Diablo Group) was extended to liberate the front facade, whereupon a series of stucco masks began to be encountered (Figure 3). Mask 1 was a representation of the local version of the Jaguar God of the Underworld, with its spiral eye, shark tooth, and curling band over the nose (ibid.) (Figure 4b). Extending the tunnel further, a second mask was found (Figures 3, 4a). Meanwhile the continuation of a tunnel at the foot of the structure's back facade had revealed a third mask (Figure 5). It was becoming clear that the entire building was covered in polychrome stucco like the famous Rosalila Structure beneath Temple 16 at Copan.

During the 2010 field season a pit excavated into the floor of a small building in front of Structure F8-1 began to unearth red-painted ceramic vessels containing human fingers and teeth (Stephen Houston, personal communication 2010). The details regarding these caches and the tomb which they consecrated are forthcoming in the technical report of the El Zotz Archaeological Project 2010 field season, which will be posted on the Project's website at [www.mesoweb.com/zotz](http://www.mesoweb.com/zotz). A small portfolio of photographs follows in the present report (Figures 6-10).

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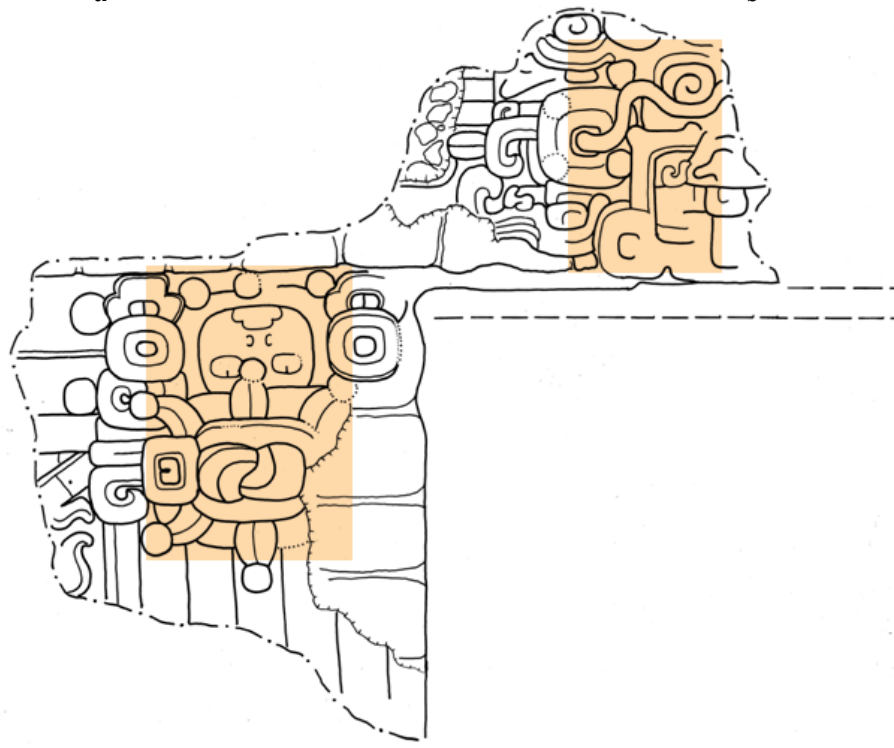
## Royal Tomb



a



b



c

**Figure 4.** (a) Mask 2 (photo: Arturo Godoy); (b) Mask 1 (photo: Arturo Godoy); (c) masks as uncovered, with Mask 2 on the left and Mask 1 on the right (drawing by Zachary X. Hruby from Román and Carter 2009:Fig. 3.6).



Figure 5. Mask 3 (photo: Arturo Godoy).

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**Figure 6.** Partial contents of the tomb (photo: Arturo Godoy).



**Figure 7.** A supernatural effigy figure and "ingots" of specular hematite (photo: Arturo Godoy).



**Figure 8.** For the maize god as “contortionist” see Taube (2003:461, Fig. 26.2, 2005:25, Figs. 2, 3), Martin (2006), and Taube et al. (in press) (photo: Arturo Godoy).



**Figure 9.** Not only are the warp and weft preserved in this textile but it may be possible to recover color with exacting curation. Vessels in the tomb contain abundant remains of what may be pulque, again subject to scientific analysis. And the stucco that once coated wooden objects has preserved clear traces of painting and even glyphs. The El Zotz archaeological project will be publishing laboratory reports bearing on Maya mortuary practice for years to come. (Photo: Arturo Godoy.)



**Figure 10.** For the curving lines that represent the peccary's powerful scent, see Houston 2010 (photo: Arturo Godoy).