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## **Documentation of Floor Assemblages from Aguateca, Guatemala**



**Research Year:** 2002

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Classic

**Location:** Petén, Guatemala

**Site:** Aguateca

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## **Abstract**

The excavation of the Classic Maya site of Aguateca, Guatemala, revealed extraordinarily rich floor assemblages of complete and reconstructible artifacts, resulting from rapid abandonment. The present project focused on the documentation of this unique data set through restoration, drawings, and photographs. The project members have completed the restoration of objects. They have also drawn and photographed a significant part of reconstructed artifacts.

## **Resumen**

La excavación del sitio clásico maya de Aguateca en Guatemala ha revelado conjuntos extraordinariamente ricos de artefactos completos y reconstruibles, que fueron resultado de un abandono repentino. El proyecto se enfocó en la documentación de esta importante colección a través de su restauración, dibujos y fotografías. Los miembros del proyecto han terminado la restauración de las piezas arqueológicas. Además, se ha dibujado y fotografiado una parte significativa de los objetos reconstruidos.

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Takeshi Inomata

University of Arizona

[inomata@u.arizona.edu](mailto:inomata@u.arizona.edu)

## **Introduction**

Our understanding of ancient material culture is strongly conditioned by the pattern of abandonment at the sites that we study (see Sheets 1992). In the Maya lowlands where most settlements were abandoned gradually, archaeologists usually find structures nearly devoid of objects, and fragments found in middens and construction fills constitute a large portion of excavated materials. Under this condition, our ability to examine the daily practices of ancient people is severely limited. Although complete and reconstructible objects from burials and caves provide important information, they represent contexts quite different from daily lives. In this regard, rich floor assemblages of complete and reconstructible objects excavated at the rapidly abandoned center of Aguateca, Guatemala, represent an extraordinary data set. In particular, they lead to an understanding of Classic Maya domestic groups with resolution and clarity that have not been possible before. The goal of the present project is to document this remarkable set of objects as thoroughly as possible. Drawings and photographs of reconstructible

objects from well controlled contexts will be bases for a contextualized understanding of Aguateca households and will also serve as sources of valuable information for Maya archaeologists who work at other sites.

### **The Study of Domestic Groups and the Documentation of Archaeological Remains**

The last few decades witnessed significant developments in household archaeology. In most traditional societies, residential structures are not only spaces for private lives but also for economic production geared toward extra-household exchange and for political interactions with extra-household individuals (Inomata 2001a, 2001b; Webster 1989; Wilk and Ashmore 1988). Large structures of society may also play out through daily practices that take place in domestic spaces (Bourdieu 1977). Thus, a study of domestic groups contributes significantly to the understanding of larger social institutions. In addition, the development of gender studies led to the notion that households and other domestic groups are not internally homogeneous entities, but they comprise conflict, negotiation, and asymmetrical power relations among individual members (Tringham 1991). For a study of these groups, then, standardized classification of artifacts are not enough. It requires a deep contextualized understanding gained through close attentions and sensitivity to details that might reflect activities and intentions of individual agents.

A necessary step in a contextualized study is the careful documentation of archaeological materials through drawing and photograph that capture subtle information. The importance and effectiveness of meticulous documentation have been shown by photographs of polychrome vessels by Justin Kerr (1989-1997), photographs and drawings of inscribed monuments by Ian Graham (1975-97), and the state-of-art imaging of the Bonampak murals by Mary Miller. The significance of documentation through graphic media is not limited to iconographic and epigraphic studies, as seen in the long lasting impacts of well illustrated excavation reports, such as the Tikal and Altun Ha reports (Pendergast 1979-82; Shook *et al.* 1958). In the study of domestic groups that requires attention to details and subtleties, the graphic documentation of individual artifacts is an effective and necessary strategy.

### **Aguateca Archaeological Project**

From 1990 to 1993, Inomata directed systematic archaeological investigations at Aguateca as a part of the Petexbatún Regional Archaeological Project (Demarest 1997; Inomata 1995, 1997). The excavation of elite residential structures in the central part of the site revealed numerous reconstructible objects left on the floors and clear traces of burning (Inomata and Stiver 1998). These data, along with the construction of extensive defensive walls prior to the abandonment of the center, suggested that Aguateca was attacked by enemies at the end of the Classic period and that the central part of the site

was burned (Demarest *et al.* 1997; Graham 1967; Houston 1993; Inomata 1997). The residents of the burned area probably abandoned their houses rapidly, leaving most of their belongings behind.

Building on these results, Inomata started the Aguateca Archaeological Project with Daniela Triadan and Erick Ponciano in 1996 with the specific objective of examining Classic Maya elite households through the extensive excavation of rapidly abandoned buildings. The success of its initial seasons supported by a FAMSI grant led to full-scale operations in the following seasons funded by the NSF and other agencies. During the four field seasons, the project members extensively excavated six structures in the rapidly abandoned elite residential area in the center of the site (Strs. M7-34, M8-2, M8-3, M8-4, M8-8, and M8-13). We also excavated two vaulted structures in the royal residential compound (Strs. M7-22 and M7-32). Excavators found these royal buildings nearly devoid of reconstructible objects, except for a sealed room of Str. M7-22 that contained numerous royal possessions. Excavations, however, revealed dense deposits of ceramic sherds and other broken objects inside and around these structures. Inomata has suggested that the royal family evacuated the center prior to the final attack and that the victorious enemies conducted termination rituals destroying these symbolically important buildings and depositing numerous broken objects (Inomata 2001c).

The quantity of complete and reconstructible objects found in the rapidly abandoned buildings is truly impressive. In particular, each of the multi-chambered elite residences (Strs. M7-34, M8-4, M8-8, and M8-13) housed 60 to 100 ceramic vessels, more than 1,000 stone tools, 20 to 60 shell ornaments, about ten spindle whorls, and up to 300 pyrite mosaic mirror pieces, as well as various types of figurines, musical instruments, and scribal tools (Inomata *et al.* 1998, 2002; Inomata and Triadan 2000; Triadan 2000). Such an inventory of objects in each structure emerged gradually through intensive lab work. Most objects were smashed and their fragments were mixed together when the stone walls of the structures collapsed. Thus, it was impossible to know the number of objects and their shapes without sorting thousands of fragments and refitting them. A significant part of the lab seasons supported by a NSF grant from 1999 to the present was devoted to this extremely time-consuming and labor-intensive work. In addition, the project members have classified all excavated artifacts, and basic data on their attributes, including their types and dimensions, have been recorded in computer databases.

## **Documentation Project**

This extraordinary collection of complete and reconstructible objects deserves even more thorough documentation beyond standardized classification. Thus, in the present project, the researchers drew and photographed a large portion of artifacts, significantly expanding the graphic data set of Aguateca materials. More specifically, this study consisted of the following components:

### ***Restoration of objects***

The project members have completed the refitting and reconstruction of excavated objects. Daniela Triadan (University of Arizona) and Estela Pinto (Universidad de San Carlos) supervised Guatemalan students, Marco Antonio Monroy, Pablo Rodas, Elisa Jiménez, and Diego Guerra, who were responsible for the reconstruction of ceramic vessels. The total of 480 vessels was recorded as whole or reconstructed vessels. Harriet Beaubien (Smithsonian Center for Materials Research and Education) and her conservation interns have treated particularly important and delicate objects.

Kazuo Aoyama refitted lithic artifacts, and Triadan examined figurines. Inomata refitted other formal objects, including grinding stones, bone tools, and greenstone objects. Although it was nearly impossible to reconstruct large, plain vessels, other smaller objects were more fully refitted.

### ***Drawing***

Alfredo Román (Universidad de San Carlos) has drawn a significant number of complete and reconstructed objects. Aoyama has drawn lithic artifacts. Román has completed drawings of all unique figurines, and bone, shell, greenstone objects. He has drawn a significant number of ceramic vessels, including all of the relatively well reconstructed vessels.

### ***Photograph***

Inomata, Triadan, and Diego Guerra were in charge of photography. Inomata and Triadan have photographed all reconstructible figurines, bone objects, shell objects, grinding stones, and greenstone objects. Inomata and Guerra have also photographed all of the complete and reconstructible ceramic vessels.



**Figure 1. Restoration of a vessel: refitting of fragments.**



Figure 2. Gluing pieces of the bottom part of vessel.



Figure 3. Restoration: placing a rim piece.



Figure 4. Restored vessels.





Figure 5. Treatment by conservators: cleaning and restoration of a polychrome vase.



**Figure 6. Restoration of a ceramic flute.**



Figure 7. Restoration of a ceramic bowl.



Figure 8. Restoration of a large storage vessel by conservators.



Figure 9. Restored large storage vessel.

## Conclusions

The Aguateca Archaeological Project started with initial support from the FAMSI, which led to larger operations in the following seasons. The FAMSI grant supported the final stage of the project for the thorough documentation of unique floor assemblages of complete and reconstructible objects. Drawings and photographs produced through the FAMSI-supported study are an important step toward a deeply contextualized understanding of Maya households. The significance of the unique Aguateca assemblages is not limited to the specific goal of the project focused on the study of households. Their images distributed through internet and the Aguateca site report will be a significant source of information for archaeologists who examine ceramics and other artifacts, art, and technologies.

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