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## **La Pasadita Archaeological Project**



**Research Year:** 1998

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Late Classic

**Location:** Usumacinta Basin, Guatemala

**Site:** La Pasadita

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### **Introduction**

On March 15, 1998, a small team consisting of Charles Golden (Univ. of Pennsylvania), Tomás Barrientos (Vanderbilt Univ.), Zachary Hruby (Univ. Calif., Riverside), René Muñoz (Univ. of Arizona) and ten workers from Dolores, Petén, made the first archaeological reconnaissance in almost 30 years of the site of La Pasadita. La

Pasadita is a Classic Maya center located near the ancient frontier between the Yaxchilán and Piedras Negras polities. Today the site is shrouded in forest and accessible only by foot and horse. La Pasadita is known primarily for two carved lintels on display in museums and private collections outside Guatemala, as well as two polychrome mural fragments recovered in 1971 by Ian Graham. The epigraphic data available indicate that La Pasadita was governed during the latter half of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. by an individual named **Tilo:m**, who bore the title of **sajal** and who owed allegiance to the **k'uhul ajaw**, "holy lord", of Yaxchilán. It is clear that individuals bearing the **sajal** title were members of the non-royal nobility (Houston, 1993:128-129; Stuart, n.d.). Yet, we know little of the socio-political role played by **sajal**, and less still of how this role may be reflected in the artifacts, architecture, and settlement patterns of the sites they controlled. An understanding of secondary elites such as **sajal** is significant for understanding more than simply the internal organization of Maya polities. Understanding how such **sajal**-governed sites were organized to function within the body they served would greatly increase our understanding of how Classic Maya polities interacted with one another, especially along their frontiers. This project, then, sought to address three interrelated issues: (1) what was the socio-political role played by **sajal**, (2) how were sites ruled by **sajal** integrated into larger polities, and (3) how did Classic Maya polities interact along their frontiers. Operating under the auspices of the Piedras Negras Archaeological Project, directed by Lic. Héctor Escobedo and Dr. Stephen Houston, the La Pasadita Archaeological Sub-Project was initially envisioned as a three-year program of archaeological investigation dedicated to understanding the social role that was fulfilled by **sajal** within Late-Classic Maya polities.

The Late Classic (A.D. 600-800) was a period of political flux throughout the Maya Lowlands, during which subsidiary centers and secondary elites began to erect glyphic monuments for the first time (Fash, 1989; Fash and Stuart, 1991; Villeda, 1993). Yet, it is only in the western Maya Lowlands, especially the Usumacinta Basin, that this new socio-political stature was expressed epigraphically with the advent of a new noble title: **sajal** (Houston, 1993:129; Stuart, n.d.). Nowhere else in the Maya realm is the relationship between ruler and subject nobility so literally and explicitly spelled out for the archaeologist. This peculiarity of the Usumacinta region makes the study of Classic Maya socio-political organization in this area particularly fascinating. That this **ajaw/sajal** relationship might be defined materially, as well as epigraphically, was the impetus behind our expedition.

The question of the integration of **sajal** and **sajal**-governed centers into the larger socio-political structure that they served addresses several broader issues. Most striking, in the case of La Pasadita, is the definition of frontiers between Classic Maya polities. La Pasadita was subject to Yaxchilán, yet it is located across the Usumacinta River and 17 km to the north ([Figure 1](#)). Conversely, approximately 20 km to the north of La Pasadita, on the Mexican side of the modern border, is the site of El Cayo, Chiapas, a **sajal**-governed site allied to Piedras Negras. Somewhere in the space between these two secondary centers lay the ancient frontier between the Piedras Negras and Yaxchilán polities.

Epigraphic evidence suggests that this frontier was not a peaceful one. Piedras Negras Lintel 12 depicts a captive Yaxchilán **ajaw**, while Stela 8 shows a captive **sajal** from Yaxchilán. Furthermore, there is evidence that the last known ruler of Piedras Negras was captured as a result of conflict with Yaxchilán. The archaeological investigation of La Pasadita and its environs, therefore, offered the opportunity to understand the site as a physical construction, as well as a socio-political entity, involved in frontier maintenance.

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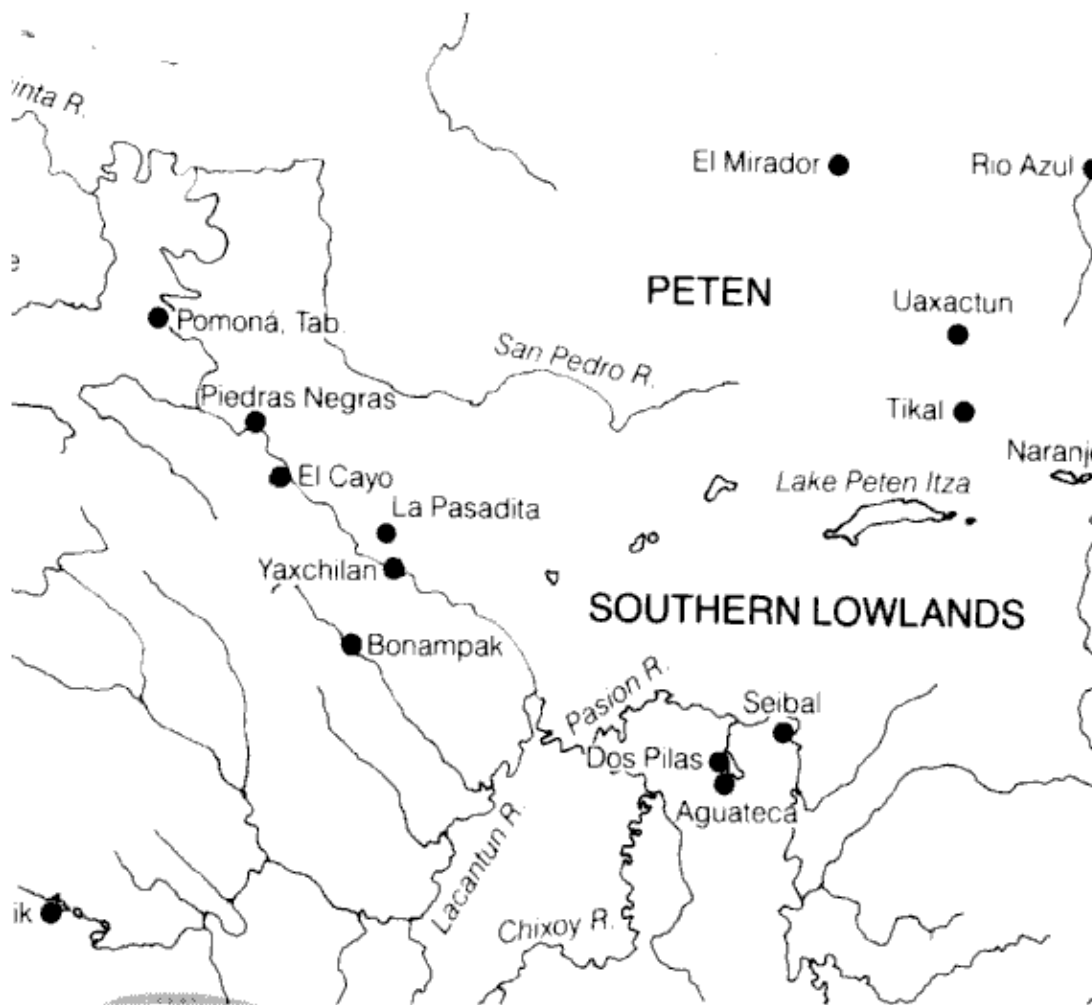


Figure 1: Map of the Usumacinta Basin (from Schele and Miller 1986:8).

## Political History

It is possible to achieve a preliminary understanding of the context within which the La Pasadita / Yaxchilán relationship functioned from a number of monuments known from Yaxchilán itself, La Pasadita, and several other, as yet unidentified, secondary centers. At the beginning of the second half of the eighth century A.D., Yaxchilán experienced an interregnum of ten years between the rule of Shield Jaguar I and Bird Jaguar IV, from 742 to 752 A.D. (Mathews, n.d.; Schele and Freidel, 1990:271). When Bird Jaguar finally emerged as the **k'uhul ajaw** of Yaxchilán, he began a dynamic program of monument production dedicated to the glorification of himself, his parents, his heir, and the chosen few of his subordinate nobility.

Bird Jaguar depicts himself with **sajal** both at home and abroad (Mathews, n.d.; Schele and Freidel, 1990:295). There are, in fact, at least fourteen known monuments from centers subsidiary to Yaxchilán, including La Pasadita, and two as-yet-unlocated sites known as Site R, and Laxtunich. These tend to depict Bird Jaguar IV, though in a few instances they do depict his successor, Shield Jaguar II, as well as his deceased father, Shield Jaguar I. Of the monuments associated with **Tilo:m**, La Pasadita 1 (dated A.D. 759) depicts Bird Jaguar receiving captives from **Tilo:m** and another individual ([Figure 2](#)). Lintel 2 depicts the celebration by Bird Jaguar and **Tilo:m** of the 9.16.15.0.0 (A.D. 766) period ending ([Figure 3](#)). Lintel 3 depicts **Tilo:m** and Shield Jaguar II (though it is unclear whether Shield Jaguar was **k'uhul ajaw** of Yaxchilán when this monument was commissioned), while a fourth lintel depicts **Tilo:m** without his overlord.

The quantity of monuments dedicated to Bird Jaguar after his accession may, in fact, be indicative of his struggle for the throne. Impediments to his accession may have come from within and without his future domain. Piedras Negras may even have been involved. Lintel 3 from Piedras Negras describes an event which occurred during the interregnum, and is witnessed by an individual identified as a **k'uhul ajaw** of Yaxchilán. This individual is, in fact, unknown at Yaxchilán, and may represent a pretender to the throne in competition with Bird Jaguar and supported by the rulers of Piedras Negras.

Once Bird Jaguar had emerged as the victor, it would have been necessary for him to do two things: (1) publicly validate his rule, and (2) cement his relationship with those supporters who had helped him to the throne, ensuring their continued support. The first of these goals was addressed by the creation of numerous stela and lintels at Yaxchilán, while the second helps to explain the abundance of monuments from secondary centers. The installation of a powerful ally such as **Tilo:m** at La Pasadita may have served many ends. It elevated the status of a loyal noble through the monumental depiction of lord and vassal, as well as established exactly who was the lord and who was the vassal. Secondly, it may have helped develop a defensible frontier between Yaxchilán and Piedras Negras. Finally, it may have insured control over agricultural lands needed to supply the burgeoning city of Yaxchilán and the court of Bird Jaguar.



Tilo:m Sajal

Bird Jaguar IV

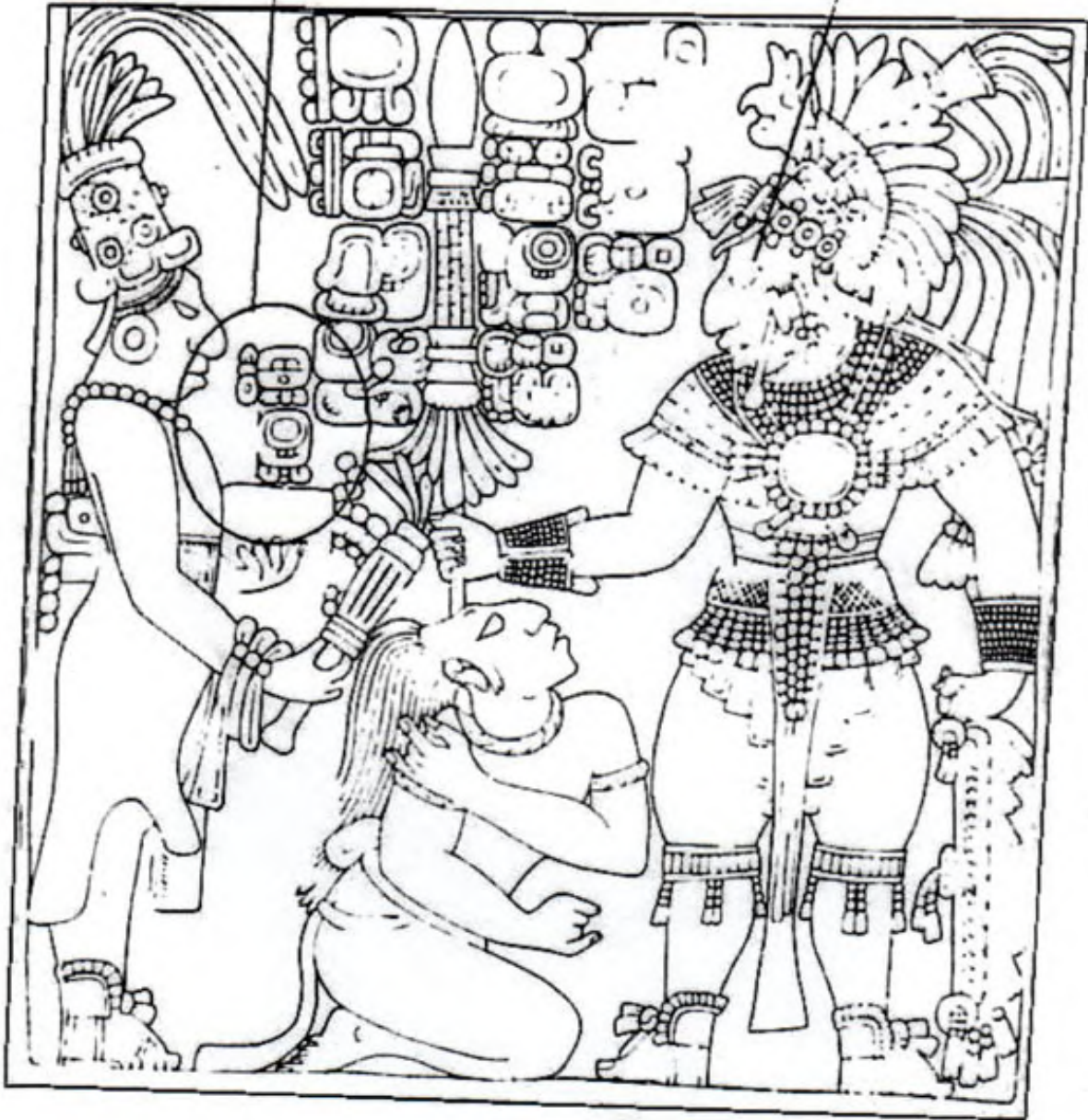


Figure 2: Lintel 1, La Pasadita (drawing by I. Graham, from Schele and Freidel 1990:302).

Tilo:m



Figure 3: Lintel 2, La Pasadita (drawing by I. Graham, from Schele and Freidel 1990:302).

## Results of Reconnaissance

Our party gained access to La Pasadita with the help of guides from Cooperativa Agricultura Centro Campesino on March 19<sup>th</sup>. We left the Usumacinta River approximately 2 km downstream from Yaxchilán, on the northern bend of the river that surrounds the site. According to our information, if loaded with cargo, this is the only point of access from the river to the valley within which La Pasadita lies. Traveling with pack-horses, the trip takes approximately five hours, though an individual on foot can make the same journey in under four. We established our camp on the banks of an arroyo that runs north-west from the Laguna La Pasadita.

To enter La Pasadita, once across the hills which line the approach from the Usumacinta, one enters a relatively wide valley area, along which runs a brecha cut by surveyors mapping the boundaries of the Selva Sierra Lacandón Biosphere. Though flat in comparison to much of Usumacinta drainage, significant hilltops still present minor obstacles to travel down the valley. Ancient habitation along the majority of the brecha is continuous and heavy between Yaxchilán and La Pasadita. Mounds of two to three meters in height are not uncommon. Unfortunately, we were not able to reconnoiter these structures due to time constraints on our work.

The majority of work which we accomplished at La Pasadita consisted of the identification and mapping of probable residential areas within approximately 2 km to the south of the Laguna La Pasadita. We conducted mapping using tape and compass, with structures given a fixed position using a GPS system ([Figure 4](#)). We have expanded upon the map of the site created by Graham, and are able to contrast the occupation of La Pasadita with areas to the south towards Yaxchilán, as well as around Piedras Negras to the north.

The landscape in and around La Pasadita itself is dramatic, with high cliffs rising from low hills and narrow valleys, all surrounding a small, deep lake. Settlement in the valleys around this lake (within 2 km) is sparse. Structures on the valley floor tend to take advantage of lower hill slopes or low rises, which were leveled out with small terraces. Small platforms, which almost certainly held perishable superstructures, were constructed atop these terraces, but only occasionally exceed 1.00 m in height. There are notable exceptions to this pattern, including a large, vaulted structure (now collapsed) associated with several caves. We observed no evidence for agricultural terracing in the immediate vicinity of La Pasadita.

By far the majority of settlement at La Pasadita is focused on hilltops. Every hilltop that presented suitable space for occupation contained at least one structure. Patio groups are organized around the constraints imposed by the natural landscape. The Main Group is the most dramatic example of this, overlooking a vertical drop of at least 50 m ([Figure 5](#)). In contrast to occupation on the valley floor, platforms on hilltops tend to be larger, commonly with mounds of up to 2.00 m in height.

# Campamento

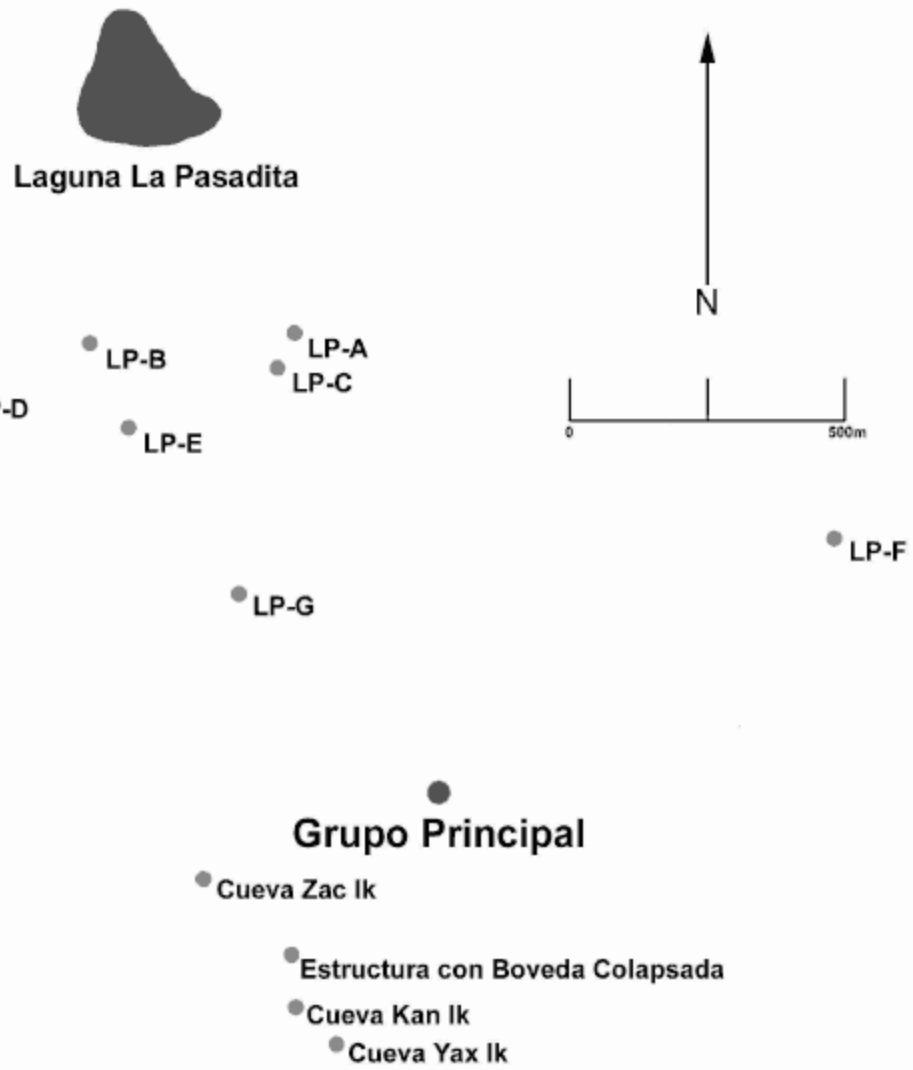


Figure 4: Relative location of archaeological settlement groups, La Pasadita, Petén.



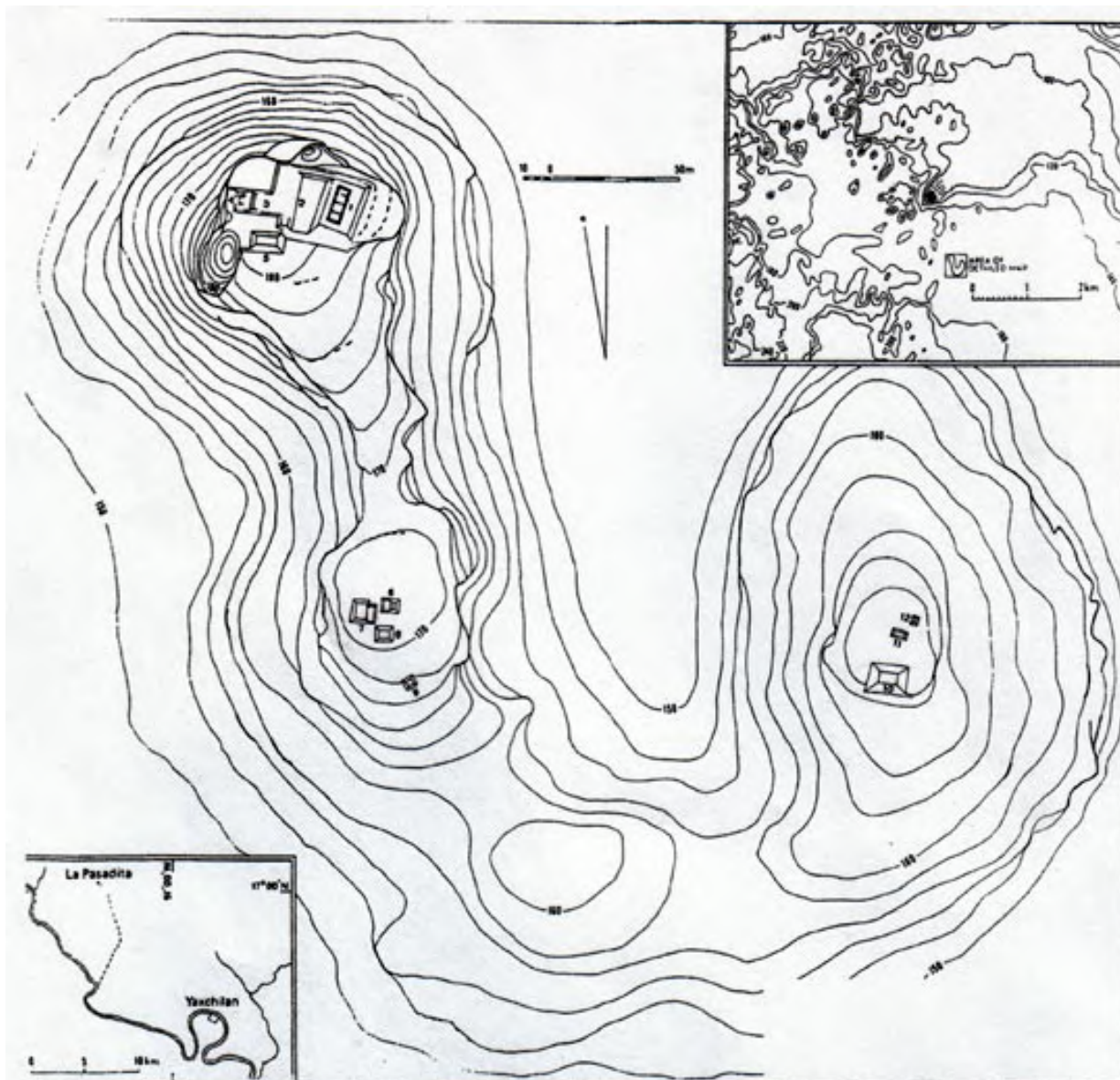


Figure 5: Main Group, La Pasadita, Petén (mapped by I. Graham).

Caves and other similar geological phenomenon also figure prominently in the organization of the settlement. As mentioned earlier, cliff faces rise out from most of the hills at La Pasadita, and a majority of these cliffs have caves with evidence of use in antiquity. Ceramic collections recovered from these caves provide the bulk of material available for analysis from La Pasadita. In addition to these caves, several hilltops are bisected by chasms, some of which are well over 30 m in depth.

These settlement patterns contrast markedly with settlement to the south of La Pasadita, as well as those observed in the periphery of Piedras Negras. Our entrance to La Pasadita was made via an overland route that took us on a path of approximately 10 km. Walking up the valley within which La Pasadita lies, settlement is almost continuous. Structures between 3 and 5 m in height are not uncommon on the valley floor. Though we were unable to inspect the hilltops in the area around our path, this occupation of low-lying areas clearly differentiates the region from La Pasadita proper. In the near periphery of Piedras Negras, settlement is largely restricted to the lower slopes of hillsides and valley floors as well, largely avoiding hilltops (David Webster, personal communication, 1998). To our knowledge, settlement data for Yaxchilán and its periphery have not been published, making comparisons with that site impossible.

Our primary source of information regarding the occupation of the La Pasadita area comes from ceramic collections made from three caves, designated Yax Ik, Zac Ik, and Tepescuintle. Ceramics from the Early through Late Classic were found in both Yax Ik and Tepescuintle. In Zac Ik, however, a number of Late Pre-Classic and Proto-Classic types were identified, including Sierra Red and Lechugal Incised. Occupation of the valley, then, can be postulated to extend back into at least the Late Pre-Classic, though unfortunately no structures can be securely assigned to this period.

Ceramics collected from caves did allow us to begin to address two of the primary issues which we had guided our work at La Pasadita: Is there ceramic, architectural, or settlement evidence for a frontier between La Pasadita and Piedras Negras, and if so, is La Pasadita more closely associated with Yaxchilán? Though caves do not provide a representative sample, we still feel that we can make some provisional statements regarding the ceramics of La Pasadita.

In our collection, many types common at both Piedras Negras and La Pasadita express very different modes at La Pasadita, from at least the Early Classic onwards. In fact, many vessel forms seem to approximate those which are common at Piedras Negras, while their surface decoration often varies. Monochrome basal flange dishes are common in Early Classic deposits at Piedras Negras, in Aguila Orange, Balanza Black, and Pucte Brown. In Cueva Yax Ik, however, we recovered a monochrome gray plate of a type unknown at Piedras Negras. Some varieties of Dos Arroyos polychrome also appear to differ at La Pasadita. Once again there is similar vessel form, but painting patterns more closely resembling modes known from the central Petén. Such differences appear to continue into the Late Classic as well. At present, however, our small sample and the limited publication of ceramic data from Yaxchilán (López Varela, 1989), do not allow us to postulate an artifactual connection between La Pasadita and Yaxchilán.



**Figure 6: Barrientos in Yax Ik Cave.**



**Figure 7a: Looters trenches, Main Group, La Pasadita.**





**Figure 7b: Looters trenches, Main Group, La Pasadita.**

Unfortunately, our greatest sources of information regarding the material history of La Pasadita, apart from artifacts recovered in caves, were the abundant looters' pits ([Figure 7](#)). These trenches provided us with our only stratigraphic data for La Pasadita. The site is heavily looted, and nearly every plaza group contains at least one looters' pit. So intense and destructive, in fact, is the looting at La Pasadita that the structure just to the west of the Mural Building in the Main Group (Structure 2 on Graham's map) contains at least six such pits. Three of these contain empty burial chambers, in the form of crypts that had been methodically cleaned out.

In an attempt to recover some data from the looters' trenches in the Main Group, these were cleaned out and their profiles were drawn. Evidence from these pits, though minimal, seems to indicate a burst of construction at La Pasadita during the Late Classic. Epigraphic evidence would seem to indicate that this took place coincident with the reign of Tilo:m, during the second half of the eighth century A.D. Only two phases of construction are in evidence within these pits. The few datable sherds can be attributed to the Late Classic, though we can be no more precise. No more than a single

phase of construction, in fact, was apparent in any looters' pit elsewhere at the site, though such pits outside of the main group were not thoroughly cleaned and recorded.

Another of the primary goals of work at La Pasadita was the documentation and the preservation of the murals that remain at the site. Those mural fragments recovered by Graham depict dancers carrying flapstaves, objects associated with summer solstice rituals at Yaxchilán and almost always connected in some way to Bird Jaguar IV (Stephen Houston, personal communication, 1998; Mathews, 1988). We were disappointed to find that the Structure 1, which contains these murals, had collapsed within the last five years.

Despite the complete destruction of the vaults of the structure, many of the walls, though damaged, are still articulated. On the northern wall of the central room in the building we were able to expose a portion of the mural (approximately 80 x 50 cm) depicting a being which appears closely related to the being represented in the headdress of Tilo:m on Lintel 2 ([Figure 8](#)). This fragment, painted with a basic palette of red, blue, yellow and green, would have been part of the uppermost register of the mural. Supernaturals are similarly depicted along the top of the Bonampak murals. That this fragment was in situ, with well-preserved polychrome paint, gives a promising sign that much of the mural, which clearly covered most of the building's interior, is still intact. The mural appears to have been painted in a basic palette of red, blue and yellow, combinations of which provided maroons and greens. We photographed and drew the headdress and other smaller mural fragments. It soon became evident, however, that due to the heavy damage to the structure, further excavation would prove destructive to any remaining portions of the mural.

Work on the building itself was halted, but we took several steps towards the future consolidation and restoration of the murals. We removed several small pieces of fallen painted stucco for subsequent analysis. The exposed mural fragments were covered with a non-perishable fabric (Tyvek), which was in turn covered with dirt. In order to help protect the architecture from further damage, a pole and thatch roof was constructed over one wall which appeared to be in particular danger of collapse ([Figure 9](#)). Finally, several fallen trees, as well as dead trees in danger of falling, were removed in order to prevent further damage to the structure.

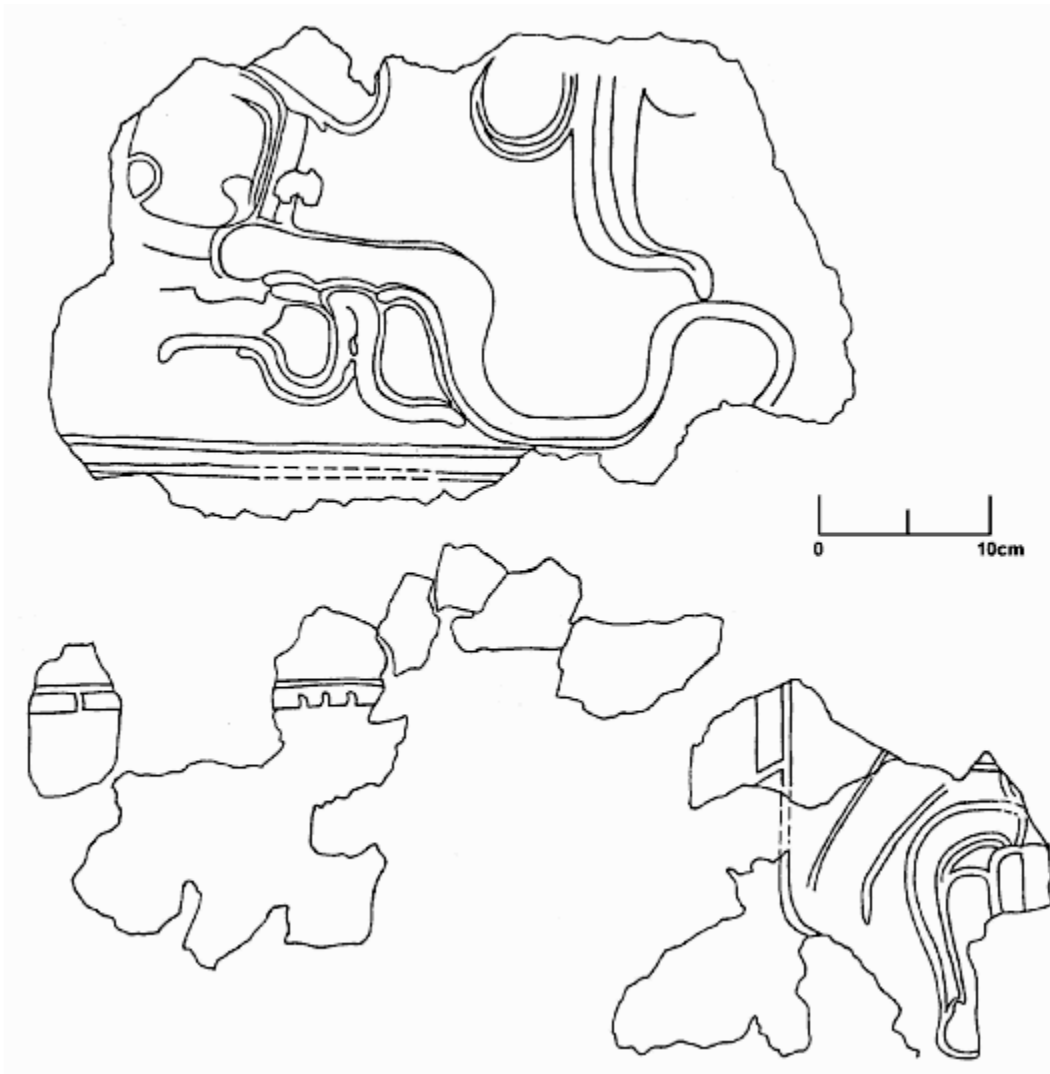


Figure 8: Mural fragment, northern wall of central room. Structure 1, La Pasadita (drawing by Z. Hruby).





**Figure 9: Protective shelter constructed over southern wall of central room, Structure 1, La Pasadita.**

## **Conclusions**

The 1998 field season of the La Pasadita Archaeological Sub-Project did move towards the development of a greater understanding of the frontier between Classic Maya polities, and of the relationship between primate and subsidiary centers in the Usumacinta basin. We can at present offer several observations based on the data recovered from La Pasadita. First, though occupation and use of the valley continued from Late Pre-Classic times through to the Late Classic, construction of La Pasadita's monumental architecture appears to have been limited to the Late Classic. It is likely that La Pasadita and Tilo:m owe this florescence to the patronship of Bird Jaguar. Secondly, though it is impossible to say at present whether La Pasadita is a defensive site, it is certainly defensible and could have functioned to guard the valley between Yaxchilán and Piedras Negras. Areas to the south of La Pasadita, and in the near periphery of Piedras Negras, exhibit a greater level of occupation oriented around lower hill slopes and valley floors. Occupation at La Pasadita clearly focuses on constructions atop hills bounded by cliff faces. Finally, though we cannot securely associate La Pasadita materially with Yaxchilán, we feel that it is demonstrably different from Piedras Negras.

Unfortunately, modern conflict has left its mark on La Pasadita. Due to the threat of land mines, it will be impossible to follow up on these initial conclusions for the foreseeable future. Plans are afoot, however, to address similar questions through research at secondary centers south of Piedras Negras during upcoming field seasons. In so doing,

we hope to more fully realize the picture of socio-political organization and boundaries in the Usumacinta basin.

## **Acknowledgements**

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