

Poza Maya (Petén, Guatemala) in the light of old and new investigations

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Introduction

Poza Maya is an important pre-Columbian centre of Maya civilization located in north-eastern Guatemala. The site is situated in the heart of the Triangle Yaxha-Nakum-Naranjo National Park that covers 371.6 km² and encompasses three major cities (Naranjo, Yaxha and Nakum) and several medium or intermediate centres such as Poza Maya, La Pochitoca, and Naranjito (Figure 1). There are also many smaller sites (that in the settlement hierarchy model proposed by Vilma Fialko [2013] can be classified as minor centres), as well as plenty of small residential complexes dispersed in rural areas stretching between the above-mentioned sites (Fialko 2013).

Recent investigations in Poza Maya were carried out within the frame of the Nakum Archaeological Project (NAP) run by the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland and realized thanks to permission from the Guatemalan Institute of Anthropology and History (IDAEH). So far, these investigations have included mapping, excavations, and archaeological surveys within and outside of the city epicentre, as well as geophysical research. Here, we present a brief description of the most important results of the NAP investigations carried out at Poza Maya. We also outline previous research conducted by Guatemalan authorities in this pre-Columbian centre.

Previous research at the site

The first reconnaissance of Poza Maya was carried out in the 1970s by the Guatemalan Institute of Anthropology and History (IDAEH) under the direction of Miguel Orrego, who created the first preliminary plan of the site. Orrego gave numbers to all structures documented at the site (from 1 to 50). Later, Poza Maya was the subject of investigations carried out under the framework of the Triangle Project of the IDAEH. During these investigations in 1992, Claudia Molina surveyed

the site and prepared a new plan of the site wherein she distinguished three major (A-C) and three minor architectural groups (D-F). She also proposed an alternate nomenclature for the documented structures which included their location within their respective architectural groups, e.g. Str. A-1, Str. C-2 – in Group C, etc. The results of this work were presented in 1994 in her Licenciatura thesis, defended at the Faculty of Architecture, Rafael Landívar University. Molina's thesis included a very detailed description of all documented buildings and looters' trenches (35 illicit excavations were documented) that devastated many structures at Poza Maya (Molina 1994; Quintana 2013, 214). Triangle Project research also included archaeological and consolidation works conducted at the site in the 1990s. Limited archaeological investigations were carried out in 1992 when the site was surveyed; several test-pits were excavated and ceramics were collected from the surface. This work continued in 1995 with excavations, documentation, and consolidation of several structures heavily destroyed by looters' trenches (among them was a monumental pyramid of Structure 1 and a ballcourt [Structures 13 and 14]), as well as excavations of test-pits in all major plazas of Poza Maya. Archaeological work during 1995 was supervised by Juan Luis Velásquez and Zoila Calderón (Velásquez, Calderón and Hermes 1995). Rescue work and excavations were subsequently continued at the site in 1998 by Bernard Hermes and Vinicio García, who investigated Structures 1 and 21 (Hermes and Contreras 2002). In 1999, Poza Maya and its surroundings were also investigated by Vilma Fialko under the Regional Archaeology Programme of the Triangle Project. During this research, several new residential complexes were documented on the periphery of the site (Groups G-J); thirteen test-pits were also excavated at Poza Maya and looters' trenches and tunnels were documented (Fialko 1999a). Moreover, between 1995 and 1996, several new residential groups were discovered around Poza Maya during investigations by the Bajo Communities Project, which conducted investigations in the wetlands of Bajo La Justa and its vicinities (Kunen et al. 2000).

IDAEH excavations showed that the site of Poza Maya was inhabited from the Late Preclassic till the Terminal Classic. However, it experienced a large growth during the Early Classic – material from this epoch is prevalent in almost all excavations (Fialko 1999a; Hermes and Contreras 2002). Early Classic growth was mostly seen in the middle and final part of this period (Tzakol 2 and 3 phases), and scholars were able to distinguish at least four major architectural stages dating to this period of growth. Previous research has also demonstrated that the Late Classic period saw the rebuilding of most Early Classic structures while the



Figure 1. Map of the Triangle Park with location of various archaeological sites, including Poza Maya (map by Piotr Kołodziejczyk).



Figure 2. Aerial photograph of the aguada located close to Poza Maya (photo by Jarosław Żrałka).

Terminal Classic was characterized by drastic depopulation and a halt in architectural activity (Hermes and Contreras 2002; Fialko 1999a).

NAP investigations

Recent investigations of the Nakum Archaeological Project (NAP), though not large in scientific scope, nevertheless consisted of several important research phases. First of all, an exact topographic map of the site has been prepared with the use of two Total Stations. This new map shows that previous plans were very schematic and far from being topographically precise; they did not reflect the exact shape, volume, and orientation of many Poza Maya structures. The data are currently being processed, and the first topographic map with contour lines will be submitted to IDAEH soon. The mapping process showed that Poza Maya does not have a coherent N-S orientation, as was presented in previous plans by Orrego and Molina. We now know that the northern sector of Poza Maya has a more or less N-S orientation, but the southern and central parts of the site show a several degrees deviation to the west from the north. However, it has not been established so far whether this difference is the result of an attempt to adjust the layout of the city to different landforms, or if these parts were built in distinct periods and therefore represent changes in the concept of city planning.

The overall location and shape of Poza Maya creates the impression that the site has the character of a defensive location. It is situated on a karstic elevation or hill surrounded by the seasonal wetlands of Bajo La Justa. This location made access to the city very difficult, especially from the north, east, and west. Currently the difference between the level of plazas and the surrounding Bajo La Justa exceeds 15 m in the northern and eastern limits of the site. This is of course the result of several hundred years of rebuilding the city, which increased its volume (especially vertically), creating a highly inaccessible place. Though nowadays Poza Maya is best reached from the south, we should remember that in pre-Columbian times, especially during the rainy season, it was not so easy to get to the site from the south, since that is also where the wetlands of Bajo La Justa lie. Some 350 m to the southwest of the southern part of Poza Maya there is a square *aguada* measuring ca. 235 x 205 m (Figure 2) that was constructed during the Early Classic (Fialko 1999a, 1999b). The *aguada* must have formed an important source of water during pre-Columbian times, and it is still filled with water to this day. Investigations of the *aguada* and its surroundings, conducted in 1999 by Vilma Fialko and her team revealed the existence of two canals that are connected with this reservoir. The first canal provided water to the *aguada* (scholars were able to document 270 m of this

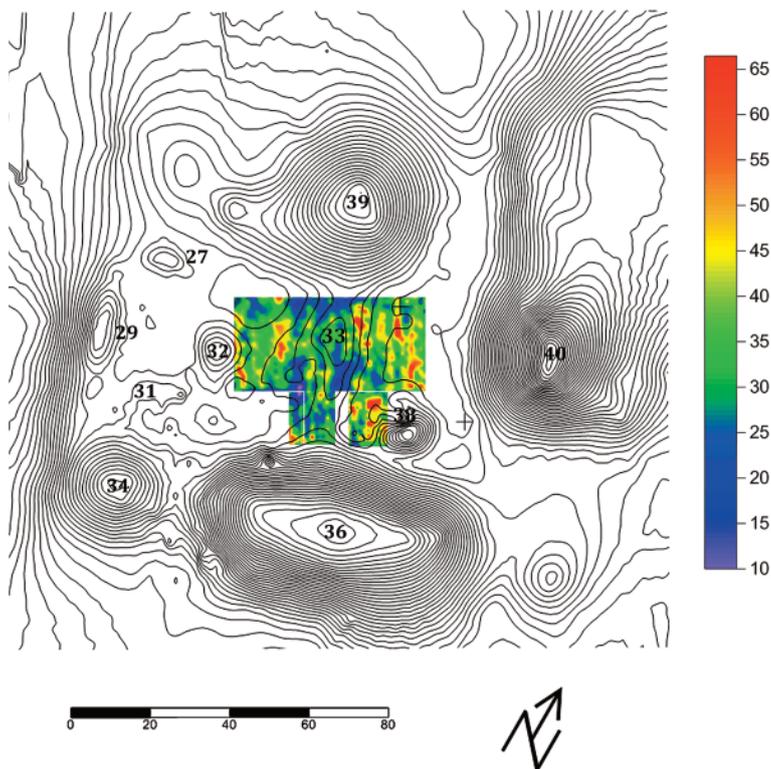


Figure 3. Map of the southern part of Poza Maya featuring the results of geophysical research with the use of resistivity-meter (map by Piotr Szczepanik, NAP).

canal), while the second one carried water outside the reservoir into the surrounding Bajo La Justa, possibly for agricultural purposes (Fialko 1999b, 15-17).

Investigations at Poza Maya have also included using geophysical techniques (resistivity-meter) in the northern part of the site (on the plaza stretching in front of Structure 1), and in the southern sector (the area between Structures 36 and 39 and to the north of the latter construction) (Figure 3). They showed a series of anomalies, some of which have been tested archaeologically.

Between 2015 and 2016, limited archaeological excavations were carried out in the southern part of the site (in Structures 33 and 39), as well as in a small patio group encompassing Structures 27-32 and located in the southwestern corner of the site (Figure 3). This patio group consists of a small plaza, that is delimited from all sides by low mounds, that are vestiges of structures. The patio in question forms a typical Maya habitational complex with most structures, having a residential function and an elongated rectangular plan. Nevertheless, Structure 32, which is located on the eastern side of the plaza, is higher, and its shape suggests that it was rather square at its base. Similar constructions were documented on the eastern side of many Maya complexes across the lowlands, and they are part of what archaeologists have named as the eastern-shrine complex or the Plaza Plan 2 group (where eastern structures usually

have a square plan and are higher than neighbouring structures). Such eastern shrines usually contain burials and offerings and must have been associated with the cult of ancestors living in their respective habitational groups (see Becker 2003, 2014; Chase and Chase 1994). However, the latter construction was heavily looted in modern times; an illicit 10 m long trench converting into a 1.75 m high tunnel has been documented here (see Fialko 1999a). It exposed various architectural features representing different stages in the rebuilding of the latter construction. Though the looters' trenches were sealed by the authorities of Triangle Park, we decided to conduct only superficial excavations on the major western façade of this structure, in order not to affect its stability. Our research in the southwestern patio was focused on superficial, extensive excavations supplemented by several test-pits, all of which were aimed at establishing the shape and dating of all the structures that form this complex (Figure 5). Excavations indicate that the complex was constructed and occupied during the Late and Terminal Classic, as may be surmised from all the recovered archaeological material.

A pyramidal construction (Structure 39) and an elongated platform that joins it from the south (Structure 33), were also subjected to excavations. Investigations of Structure 33 were planned to check for anomalies that were documented while using geophysical techniques (Figure 3). At least some anomalies can be ascribed to retaining walls detected in the construction fill and with walls of the façades of Structure 33. In general, excavations of Structure 33 showed that it was a low platform, approximately 20 m long and 12 m wide, and might have been used for ritual purposes such as dances and other similar activities (Figure 4). It divided a plaza or patio group that was enclosed (and formed by) Structures 40 (from the east), 36 (from the south) and 39 (from the north). All archaeological data indicate that the platform was constructed during the Early Classic period and it was at least 1.20 m high, with its stairway located on its western façade (Velasquez et al. 2015). Since the platform in question joined Structure 39 from the south, it might have been associated with the latter construction, which was a pyramid platform. Excavations revealed that Structure 33 covers an earlier construction (33 Sub-1) which was also a low platform that was constructed during the Late Preclassic period. The latter construction can be associated with the lowest strata (construction fill) discovered in a test-pit, excavated to the east of Structure 33 (Figure 4).

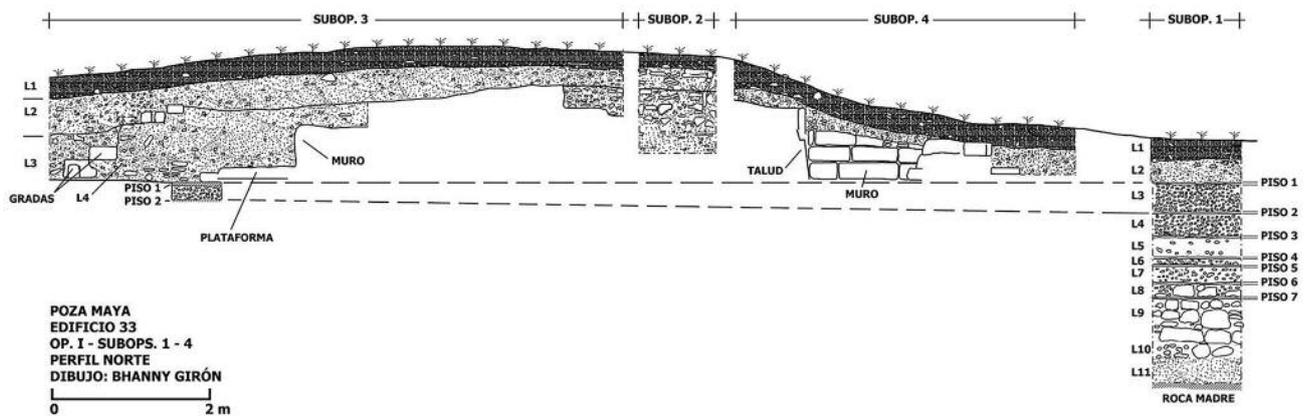


Figure 4. Cross-section featuring several excavation units opened in Structure 33 and to the east of this construction (a test-pit marked as Subop. 1). Drawing by Bhanny Girón.

A pyramidal structure (no. 39) was only partly investigated by the NAP: a trench was excavated on its northern façade (but we failed to discover any major architectural features here); another excavation on its top showed that in its last architectural stage Structure 39 was a several-terraced platform surmounted by two superstructures which encircled a small patio that opened to the south and west. These constructions can most probably be dated to the Early Classic period. The major façade of Structure 39 may have been located on its northern side, but future excavations may change this opinion.

Conclusions and future perspectives

Recent excavations at Poza Maya confirm previous findings, according to which the site was first settled during the Late Preclassic (Chicanel phase), and it reached its cultural and architectural peak during the Early Classic. However, Poza Maya was also the subject of important architectural changes during the Late Classic (Fialko 1999a), which saw the rebuilding of a large pyramid of Structure 1, a ballcourt, and other structures (Velasquez et al. 1995). The site was also partly inhabited during the Terminal Classic period as recent investigations in the southwestern patio of Poza Maya indicate. We plan more intensive excavations in the future that will hopefully shed more light on the problem of



Figure 5. Poza Maya, a) excavations of Structure 31 in progress (note walls of the building); b) Structure 27 during excavations (note exterior walls of the building exposed during excavations). Photographs by Robert Słaboński.

its development across time, and especially its political role in the region. The role of Poza Maya in local geopolitics constitutes an as yet unresolved problem. The site is located only 4.5 km north of Yaxha (Maler Group) and 6.3 km south of Nakum (in a straight line). The lack of carved monuments and other texts at Poza Maya obscures our knowledge about the political relations this site had with other neighbouring centres. However, this absence may indicate that Poza Maya was part of other mighty polities such as Yaxha. Ironically, the period of the greatest architectural and cultural development of Poza Maya – the middle and late part of the Early Classic (Hermes and Contreras 2002) – is poorly represented at Yaxha, despite many years of excavations at the latter site (Hermes 2000). However, Yaxha has a group of Early Classic monuments featuring local lords that show the political importance of this site during the period in question. However, stylistically they can be ascribed to the first part of the Early Classic (Grube 2000, 255). The supremacy of Tikal over both Poza Maya and Yaxha during the Early Classic should also be considered. Although Poza Maya was first settled during the Late Preclassic period, evidence of architectural remains from the Late Preclassic is meagre, and it is only during the Early Classic when we observe great growth of this centre. This cultural peak may have been the result of direct influence from Yaxha; its elites might have established an important administrative centre at Poza Maya during the Early Classic, and it might have been ruled by a lesser segment of a Yaxha dynasty (Fialko 2013, 277) or other inferior nobles. Although this view may change in the future, Poza Maya represents one of the most important Early Classic Maya settlements in the region, that might have played a significant role in the history of this part of the Maya Lowlands.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Recent research at Poza Maya was financed by funds from the National Centre for Science (NCN, grant number DEC-2013/11/N/HS3/04861), and realized thanks to permission granted from the Guatemalan Institute of Anthropology and History (IDAEH), and Ministry of Culture and Sports of Guatemala. We are indebted to Samuel David for editing this text in English.

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Sacred Landscape and Oral Traditions in the Ixil region, Guatemala

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Within an Ixil Maya worldview, natural and transformed elements of the landscape play a vital role in the perception of the environment as part of sacred geography. In many aspects, ritual life concentrated around those spaces provides evidence for the continuity of ancestral traditions. At the same time, these sacred geographies are subject to ongoing dynamic processes and transformations. Not only are natural and transformed landscapes in the Ixil region considered places of prayer and sacrifice, but they are also many times considered as living beings. The *K'uykumam*, or the ancestors' live inside the caves, pre-Columbian building remains are explicitly manifested in the mountains. These elements of sacred geography are organized in spiritual spaces through the Ixil Maya calendar and many times associated to the particular days of the ritual cycle. All kinds of ritual specialists, such as Daykeepers (*Aj'qij*, *B'aal*, *Vatz*, *Tiixh* in Nebaj, or *Mama'* in Chajul), as well as midwives (*K'uyintxa'*), ancestral authorities, and *cofradía* members (religious brotherhoods within the Catholic Church), look after these places and are the important keepers and transmitters of local oral histories and traditions. These stories are also consid-

ered very important in the ongoing attempts to reaffirm local autonomy, revitalize local culture, and promote social justice for community members based on human, indigenous, and territorial rights.

This report presents part of the data that has been collected within my doctoral research project, that aims to document the dynamics in the relationships between people and sacred places and the perception of sacred landscape among the indigenous people of the Ixil region in Guatemala. Moreover, it explores the different ongoing changes and challenges that I will mention further on. Initially the research included collecting and recovering information about the natural and transformed elements of sacred landscape in the region, that are considered as sacred places, based primarily on local oral traditions and histories, as well as participant observation of rituals and religious celebrations. In addition, GIS technology was used to document some of the locations of specific sacred places where people continue to pray and practice ritual, as well as spaces that now only exist in the community's memory. I have also considered some of the archival resources and existing archaeological data, as contemporary sacred places are often located in the former settlements. As the research progressed, I included another analytical focus that examines women's roles and approaches to religiosity both within *costumbre* and Maya spirituality. The research findings have been immensely informative in terms of the contemporary perspectives, not only on the sacred landscapes, but also environment and its conceptualizations within Ixil Maya communities. Of course, it would be difficult to expand on all of these points of interest in this report, so I will concentrate only on selected aspects of my research materials.¹ Partial results of the project had been already submitted to local Ixil Maya authorities and community leaders in order to help strengthen their efforts in promoting environmental social justice in the Ixil Region and the recovery of information about cultural patrimonial heritage. Sharing the research results, including community members in the ethnographic fieldwork, as well as in the production, presentation, and dissemination of the results is part of the method that I put effort in implementing and developing throughout my academic work.

The Ixil Region is located in the El Quiché department in the western highlands of Guatemala where almost 90% of the population are Indigenous Peoples (INE 2018). It consists of three municipalities: Santa María Nebaj, San Gaspar Chajul, and San Juan Cotzal, where the majority of inhabitants are Maya Ixil. There

¹ This report has been initially submitted in 2017. Some necessary amendments have been added to its final version. There have been also other publications where I have broadened different topics that had been mentioned here and that I add in the bibliography.