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**Buenavista-Nuevo San José, Petén, Guatemala**  
**Another village from the Middle Preclassic (800-400 BC)**

*Translation of the Spanish by Eduardo Williams*



**Research Year:** 2005

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Middle Preclassic to Postclassic

**Location:** Petén, Guatemala

**Site:** Buenavista-Nuevo San José

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## **Abstract**

The small site of Buenavista-Nuevo San José is located on the northern shore of Lake Petén Itzá, Petén, Guatemala, and 3.5 km southwest of the larger Motul de San José site. Buenavista-Nuevo San José consists of 14 mounds and various chultuns from the Late Classic. And 3 sub-structures of the Middle Preclassic under the Structure 4 of the site, marking a long occupation from Middle Preclassic (800 B.C.) until the Early Postclassic (1200 A.D.). The site was preliminarily investigated in 2001 by members of the Motul de San José Archaeological Project (MSJ) and formally excavated in 2005 under the auspices of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) grant number 05039, with the objectives of providing more data about the ancient Maya of the Motul region during the Middle Preclassic (800-400 B.C.) or before. Buenavista-Nuevo San José offered the opportunity to uncover three sub-structures from the Middle Preclassic (Mamom) with important chronological data using AMS dating and stylistic analysis of the architecture, ceramics and others artifacts. One of the most exciting results of this study was to discover ceramics of the Early Middle Preclassic, in the deepest level the Structure 4 de Buenavista-Nuevo San José, similar to northern Peten and western Belize, suggesting interaction of two early populations.

## **Resumen**

El pequeño sitio Buenavista-Nuevo San José esta ubicado en la orilla norte del Lago Petén Itzá, en el departamento de El Peten, Guatemala y a 3.5 km al suroeste del sitio mayor Motul de San José. Buenavista-Nuevo San José consta de 14 montículos y varios chultunes del período Clásico Tardío y 3 sub-estructuras del Preclásico Medio debajo de la Estructura 4 de la ultima ocupación del sitio, habiendo tenido Buenavista-Nuevo San José una larga ocupación desde el Preclásico Medio (800 a.C.) hasta el Post-Clásico Temprano (1200 d.C.). El sitio fue preliminarmente investigado en el 2001 por miembros del Proyecto Eco-arqueológico Motul de San Jose (MSJ, en adelante) y formalmente excavado en el 2005 bajo los auspicious de la Fundacion para el Avance de Estudios Mesoamericanos (Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. [FAMSI] mediante la beca #05039), con los objetivos de adquirir mas datos sobre los antiguos Mayas de la región de Motul de San Jose desde el Preclásico Medio (800-400 a.C.) o antes. Buenavista-Nuevo San José ofreció la oportunidad de descubrir tres sub-estructuras del Preclásico Medio (Mamom) con importantes datos

cronológicos usando fechamientos AMS y análisis estilístico de la arquitectura, cerámica y otros artefactos. Uno de los mas importantes resultados de este estudio fue el descubrimiento de cerámica del Preclásico Medio Temprano en los niveles mas profundos de la Estructura 4 de Buenavista-Nuevo San José, parecidas a las del norte de Peten y oeste de Belice, sugiriendo dos tempranas poblaciones en interacción.

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## **Introduction**

The archaeological site of Buenavista-Nuevo San José in the department of Petén, Guatemala, was surveyed in 2000 and preliminary test pits were excavated in 2001 (Moriarty 2000: 90; Castellanos and Guffey 2001) as part of the sub-project of regional reconnaissance of the Eco-archaeological Project of Motul de San José, supported by Williams College and directed since 1999 by Antonia Foias.

In 2001 the excavations of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, Petén, identified a long occupation from the Middle Preclassic (800 B.C.) or a little before, to the Postclassic (A.D. 1200) (Foias 2003: 21). Both ceramic and architectural finds from the Middle Preclassic were the motivation for a new investigation during 2005, sponsored by the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) through grant 05039.

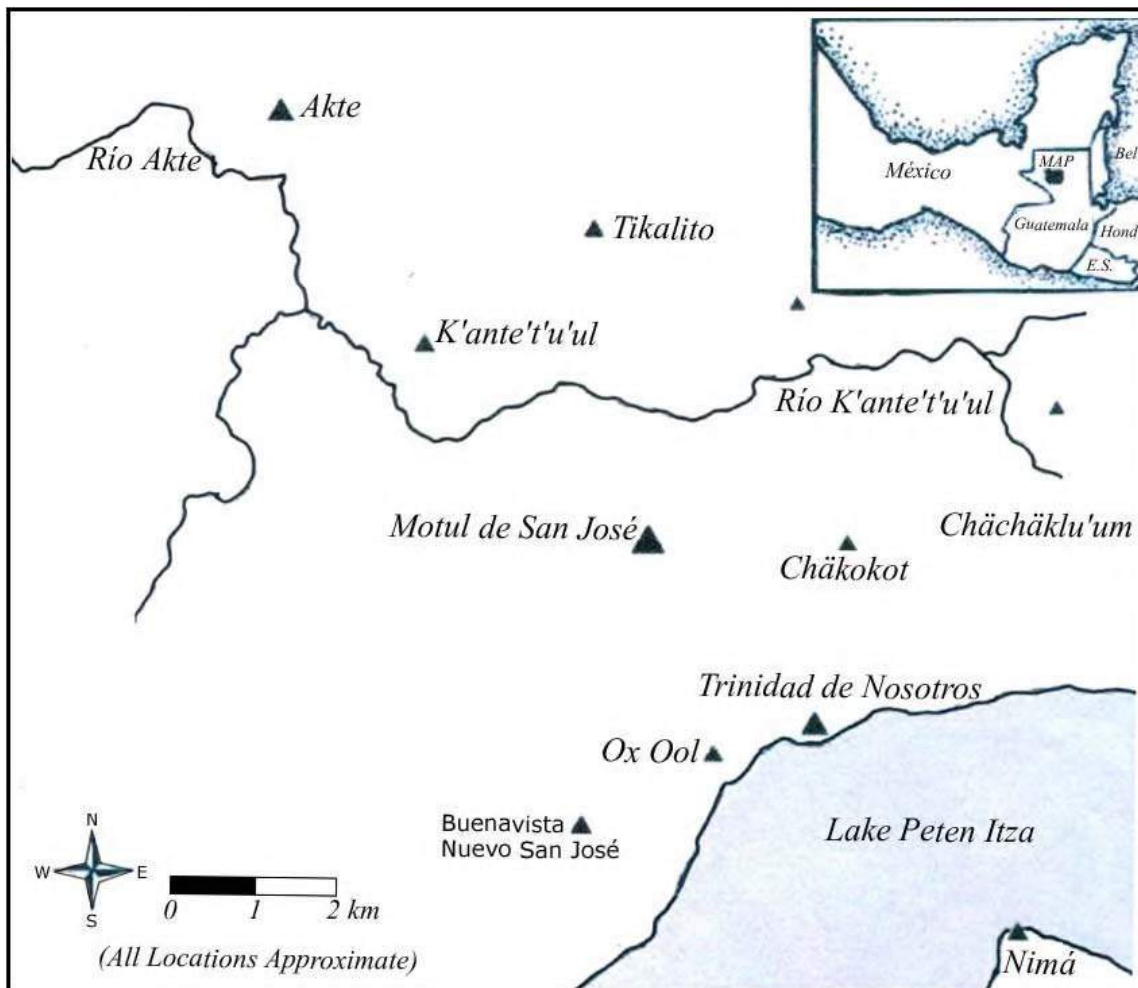
## **Location**

The epicenter of the small site of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, Petén, Guatemala, is located half a kilometer from the northwest shore of Lake Petén Itzá ([Figure 1](#)), on the following UTM coordinates: N 1881550; E 1991250. This site was part of a bigger settlement, partially or totally destroyed by modern construction in the village of Nuevo San José and by intensive agricultural and cattle exploitation. This small settlement was located in a tropical rain forest environment (Lundell 1937) with *mollisol* soils of high organic content, useful for agriculture (Jensen *et al.* n.d.).

During the Late Classic the epicenter of Buenavista-Nuevo San José was formed by 14 structures divided between Groups A and B, apart from four *chultuns* on the top of a hill, from which can be seen the twin pyramids of Motul and a considerable part of Lake

Petén Itzá and its margins. Structure 1, the East pyramid, is isolated from the rest of the mounds, since it was built on one side of the hill where the other structures of the site were erected (Moriarty 2000: 90; Castellanos 2007) ([Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#)).

Under the settlement from the Late Classic are found the remains of the Middle Preclassic within Mound 4 and under Mounds 2, 7, 8 and 11.



**Figure 1. Map indicating the location of the archaeological site of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, Petén, Guatemala (modified after Moriarty 2004: 32, fig. 5).**

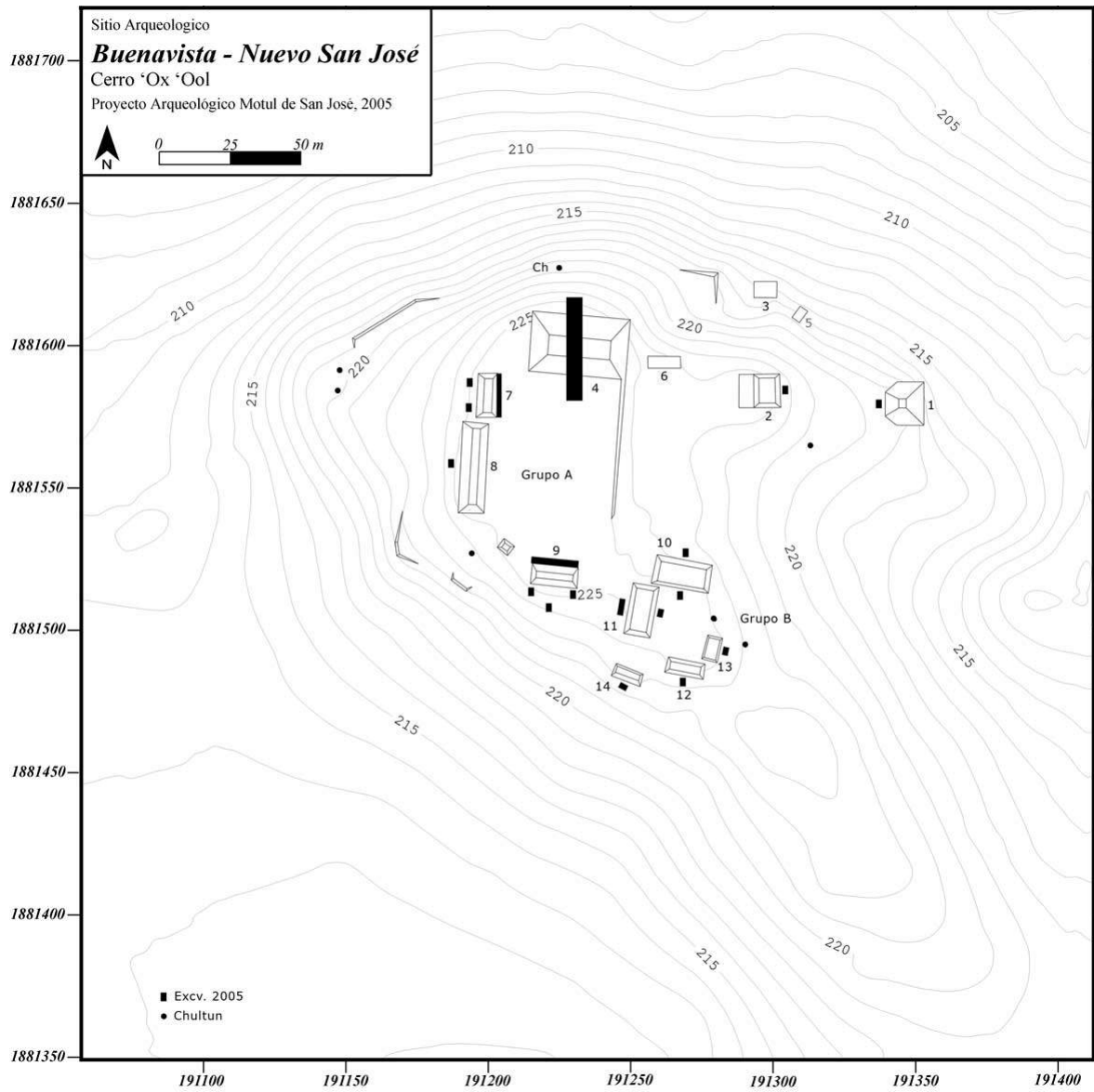
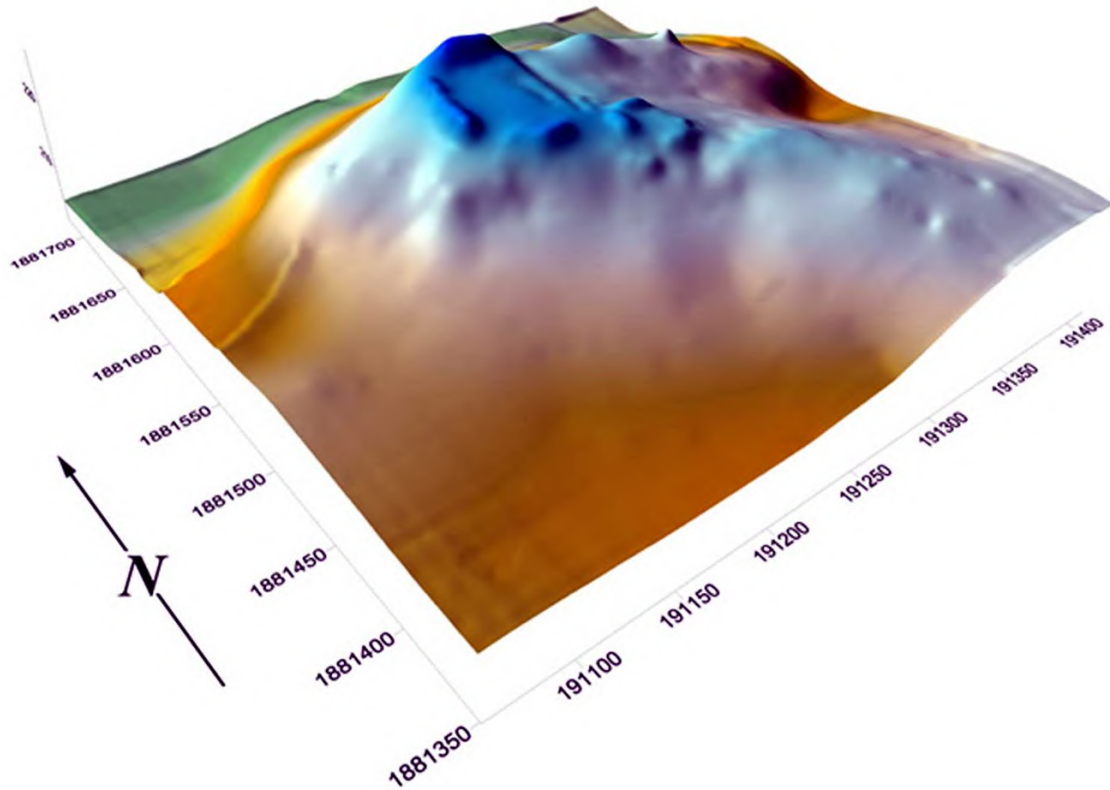


Figure 2. Map of the archaeological site of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, Petén, Guatemala (after Moriarty *et al.* 2005).



**Figure 3. Tri-dimensional map of the archaeological site of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, Petén, Guatemala (Moriarty 2005).**

## **Objectives**

Archaeological investigations were directed toward the creation of a more complete map of the epicenter of the site of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, as well as to pit-testing three Middle-Preclassic substructures within the site's Structure 4, of relatively easy access under the Late Classic surface, and to pit-testing other possible structures from the Middle Preclassic under mounds 2, 7, 8 and 11, in order to obtain a bigger sample of pottery and other cultural remains from the same time.

The Middle-Preclassic (800-400 B.C.) occupation in Buenavista-Nuevo San José will be the main objective of this report, although it also includes a summary of the results of pit-testing in some structures from the Late Classic.

## **Background**

Although there is evidence of human activity based on pollen analysis, consisting of forest clearing and exploitation of lake and river ecosystems in the lake region of Petén from 2000 B.C. (Deevey *et al.* 1983; Pohl *et al.* 1996; Brenner *et al.* 2003), no cultural artifacts have been reported of preceramic occupations near Lake Petén Itzá, like the

ones from Belize of 3000 B.C. (Pohl *et al.* 1996; Iceland 1997). This may be due to the sampling methods, since most of the time the remains from preceramic occupations are deeply buried.

However, occupations from the early Middle Preclassic (1000-800 B.C.) have been found in the lake region of Petén, through pottery recovered in stratigraphic pits and/or secondary contexts in elevated sites like Nixtunchich, Ixlu and San Francisco, near Lake Petén Itzá, and Yaxha Hill and Ixtinto near Lake Yaxha (Rice 1976b: 434-437; Rice 1996: 256-257, 267, 286; Clark and Cheetham 2002: 298, fig. 5). These may have been the first populations in the lake region, even before the occupation of the great sites of Tikal and Nakbe (Rice 1996: 256-257).

There is evidence for other occupations from the Middle Preclassic (800-400 B.C.) dispersed throughout the lake region of central Petén, particularly linked with floor fill (Cowgill 1963: 17; Chase 1979: 92, 1983: 28-29), but without associated architecture, unlike Buenavista-Nuevo San José in the Petén.

## Methodology

- a. Axial north-south trench, 20 m long by 1 or 2 m wide (E-W) and roughly 4 m high practiced on Mound 4 (North Str.) of Buenavista-Nuevo San José ([Photo 1](#)) in order to collect a more representative sample of pottery and other artifacts, and to identify architectonic features from the Early and Middle Preclassic.
- b. Test pits applied to other structures that make up the epicenter in order to locate trash middens to better understand the site's chronology ([Figure 2](#)).
- c. Making a more detailed map of the epicenter of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, using the software programs Golden Surfer and Adobe Photoshop 7.0 ([Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#)).
- d. Analysis of the site's pottery in order to establish a partial or stylistic chronology according to the type-variety system (Smith *et al.* 1960; Sabloff and Smith 1969) with its later modifications (Forsyth 1989, 1993; Foias 1996; Cheetham n.d., in press), as well as the comparison with pottery from other sites to establish its cultural affiliation.
- e. Analysis of four samples of carbon residues through Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) in the lab of the University of Arizona, Tucson, in order to establish the absolute chronology.



a) Diagnostic potsherds from the Middle Preclassic, several types.



b) Pital Group.



c) Tierra Mojada Group.



d) Chuhuinta Group.



e) Savana Group.



f) Achiotes Group.

Photo 1. Diagnostic potsherds from the Middle Preclassic (Mamom Horizon).





a) Uck Group.



b) Cocoyol Group.



c) Ainil Group.



d) Calam Group.



e) Impressed sherds from the Sin Engobe (no slip) Group.



f) Unidentified ware with volcanic ash temper.

Photo 2. Diagnostic potsherds from the early Middle Preclassic (Pre-Mamom Horizon).

## Excavations

### Middle Preclassic occupation

Through several archaeological materials, mainly pottery recovered during several excavations carried out during the 2001 and 2005 field seasons in the epicenter of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, we assume that the irregular rock hill over which the site's epicenter is located was filled and tamped ([Photo 1](#), [Figure 4](#)) around 780-760 B.C. (calibrated carbon dates) (see [Table 1](#)).

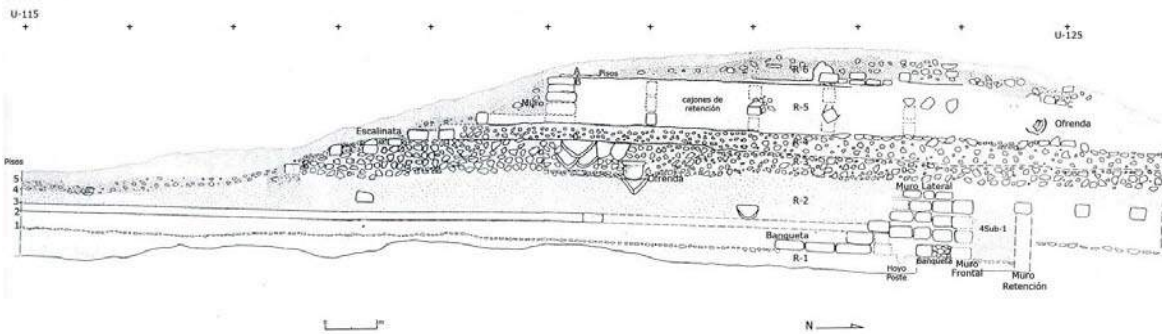


Figure 4. West profile of north-south trench, Structure 4.

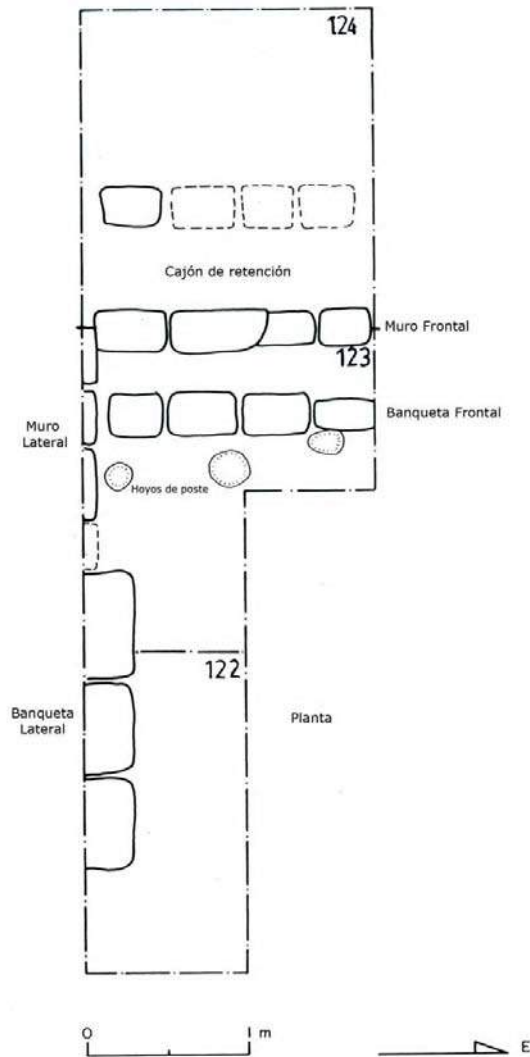
Diagnostic ceramics within this fill were dated stylistically to the Middle Preclassic (800-400 B.C.) in the Mamom horizon, represented more on the modal than the typological level by the following groups: Juventud, Chunchinta, Pital, Tierra Mojada, Mars Naranja, and Achiotés Sin Engobe (Smith 1955; Smith and Gifford 1966; Culbert 1979, 1993; Laporte and Fialko 1993b; Cheetham n.d., in press; Forsyth 1989, 1993, 1996; Rice 1979a, 1996; Hermes 2000; Ball and Tascheck 2003) ([Photo 1](#)).

But these ceramics were mixed with a slight percentage of diagnostic sherds of the last part of the Early Preclassic (900-800 B.C.) --Pre-Mamom horizon-- identified in other sites of Belize and Petén, in the groups Uck Rojo, Cocoyol Crema, Ainil, and Calam Ante, of matte slips with incised post-slip designs of a pan-Mesoamerican tradition (Cheetham, personal communication 2006; Culbert 1979, 1993; Laporte and Fialko 1993b; Cheetham *et al.* 2003: 615-634, n.d., in press) ([Photo 2](#)). Therefore, I suspect there was a transitional epoch at the end of the Early and Middle Preclassic for the leveling work in the whole epicenter of the site. Besides, we found a slight amount of lithic artifacts, modeled solid figurine fragments (no whole pieces) and fauna remains (described in detail by Thornton below).

In this same time span (780-760 B.C.) the construction of Sub-structure 4Sub-1 began, above the leveling fill mentioned above, in the north (higher) part of the hill occupied by this site ([Figure 2](#) and [Photo 3](#)).



**Photo 3. North-south trench, Str. 4, Buenavista-Nuevo San José, Petén, Guatemala.**



**Figure 5. Plan of Sub-structure 4Sub-1, under Structure 4.**

The excavated section of substructure 4Sub-1 revealed a segment of its façade, built with roughly cut limestone blocks, with stucco on its top, measuring approximately 1.20 m high with a 20 cm-high frontal banquette and traces of three postholes in front, although these could also have belonged to an earlier construction ([Photo 3](#), [Figure 4](#) and [Figure 5](#)). We could see the vertex with an east wall and what could be another banquette from north to south, or part of another structure ([Photo 5](#)). The fill technique of this substructure consisted of retention boxes located at approximately every two meters ([Photo 6](#)).



Photo 4. Segment of Sub-structure 4Sub-1, wall, frontal banquette and three post holes.



Photo 5. Possible north-south banquette, 4Sub-1.



Photo 6. Excavation inside 4Sub-1. Front wall and retention box.

According to Hansen (personal communication 2006) the style of 4Sub-1 dates to the Middle Preclassic, as well as the ceramic material of the following groups found within

the fill of this substructure: Juventud, Chunchinta, Pital, Tierra Mojada, Savana, and Achiotes. Stylistic data were confirmed by a radiocarbon date of 4267 +/- 35 cal. 760-415 B.C. taken from a carbon sample (see [Table 1](#), below) found under and inside the substructure. From inside this fill were extracted fragments of modeled solid figurines (no whole pieces) ([Photo 7](#)), and fragments of lithic artifacts, among them a fragment of bark remover which because of its style could be a little earlier ([Photo 8](#)).



**Photo 7. Figurines from the Middle Preclassic.**



**Photo 8. Bark remover found within the leveling fill, possibly early Middle Preclassic.**



**Photo 9. Bark remover found within 4Sub-2 fill, possibly Middle Preclassic.**

The exact dimensions of this substructure are not known because of the small scope of the excavation, but its shape could have been rectangular, judging by the architectural features and the shape of the mound of the last occupation. It is difficult to understand its function, but I will allow myself to present a suggestion further along this report.

The plaza in front of 4Sub-1 had two renovations during the Middle Preclassic, apparently on all its area of approximately 72 m<sup>2</sup>, with two thick and hard floors covered with stucco, each one of approximately 20 cm ([Photo 10](#) and [Figure 4](#)). Substructure 4Sub-1 and its plaza floor covered by stucco were later covered by other two substructures, 4Sub-2 and 4Sub-3.

Substructure 4Sub-2 covered not only the earlier structure (4Sub-1), but it extended 10 m to the front over the plaza, reaching a height of approximately 1.20 m over the earlier substructure, through two different fills (R-2 and R-3), which were also supported by retention boxes. The first fill (R-2) was composed of highly compacted yellowish sand mixed with clay, almost muddy, from which was retrieved a carbon sample that produced the radiocarbon date of 2500 +/- 35 cal. 780-420 B.C. The second fill (R-3) consisted of medium-sized and big stones, and was sealed by the stucco floor D<sup>1</sup> ([Photo 11](#) and [Figure 4](#)). Inside this fill was found a whole eroded deep bowl without slip approximately 50 cm high with a similar diameter. It pertains to the Middle Preclassic, maybe to the Achiotres Group, and was placed on the north-south axis ([Photo 12](#) and [Photo 13](#)), probably as a dedicatory offering for the building. Inside this fill we also found a great amount of fauna remains, figurines, pottery, and some flint instruments such as unifacial and bifacial tools, chisels, used flakes and a bark remover ([Photo 9](#) and [Photo 16](#)).

Substructure 4Sub-2 was also subjected to a renovation with another fill (R-4) of the Middle Preclassic, sealed by the stucco floor C. In the back of the building were two partial, fragmented vessels of the Desprecio Inciso and Pital Crema types, which may have been deposited as offerings for the building's completion ([Figure 4](#), [Photo 14](#) and [Photo 15](#)). We could not see the façade of this substructure in the excavation's profile, since it may have been dismantled in antiquity; it was also impossible to define its extension in the back side.

At the end of the Middle Preclassic 4Sub-2 may have been covered by a new building, 4Sub-3, of roughly 1 m in height, with a façade of five courses of stone, both faced and amorphous, whose fill was sealed by floor B ([Figure 4](#)). This feature could only be seen during the 2001 excavations. The pottery found within the fill included diagnostic types from the Middle Preclassic, apart from obsidian fragments, figurines and fauna belonging to the species described by Thornton (2006) in the section presented below. However, we should add that the upper part of the fill had a small amount of sherds of

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<sup>1</sup> The substructure floors were named from top to bottom with letters, while the plaza floors, in the inverse order of the excavation, were named with numbers.

the Sierra, Polvero, and Flor groups from the Late Preclassic Chicanel horizon (400 B.C.- A.D. 250) (Smith 1955; Smith *et al.* 1960; Culbert 1979; Rice 1979, 1996; Forsyth 1989, 1993, 1996) ([Photo 17](#)).

The exact dimensions and possible functions of the substructures 4Sub-2 and 3 are not known, although their shape apparently was rectangular. It should be pointed out that both were modified until the Late Classic with the incorporation of a stairway on the whole front of the mound, and some walls on its top, over two stucco floors.



**Photo 10. Detail of thick stucco floors.**



**Photo 11. Detail of R-3 and R-4 fills of 4Sub-2.**



**Photo 12. Offering in 4Sub-2 substructure.**



**Photo 13. Reconstructed whole vessel.**





**Photo 14. Termination offering for 4Sub-2.  
Partial fragmented vessels.**



**Photo 15. Partial Desprecio Inciso vessel.**

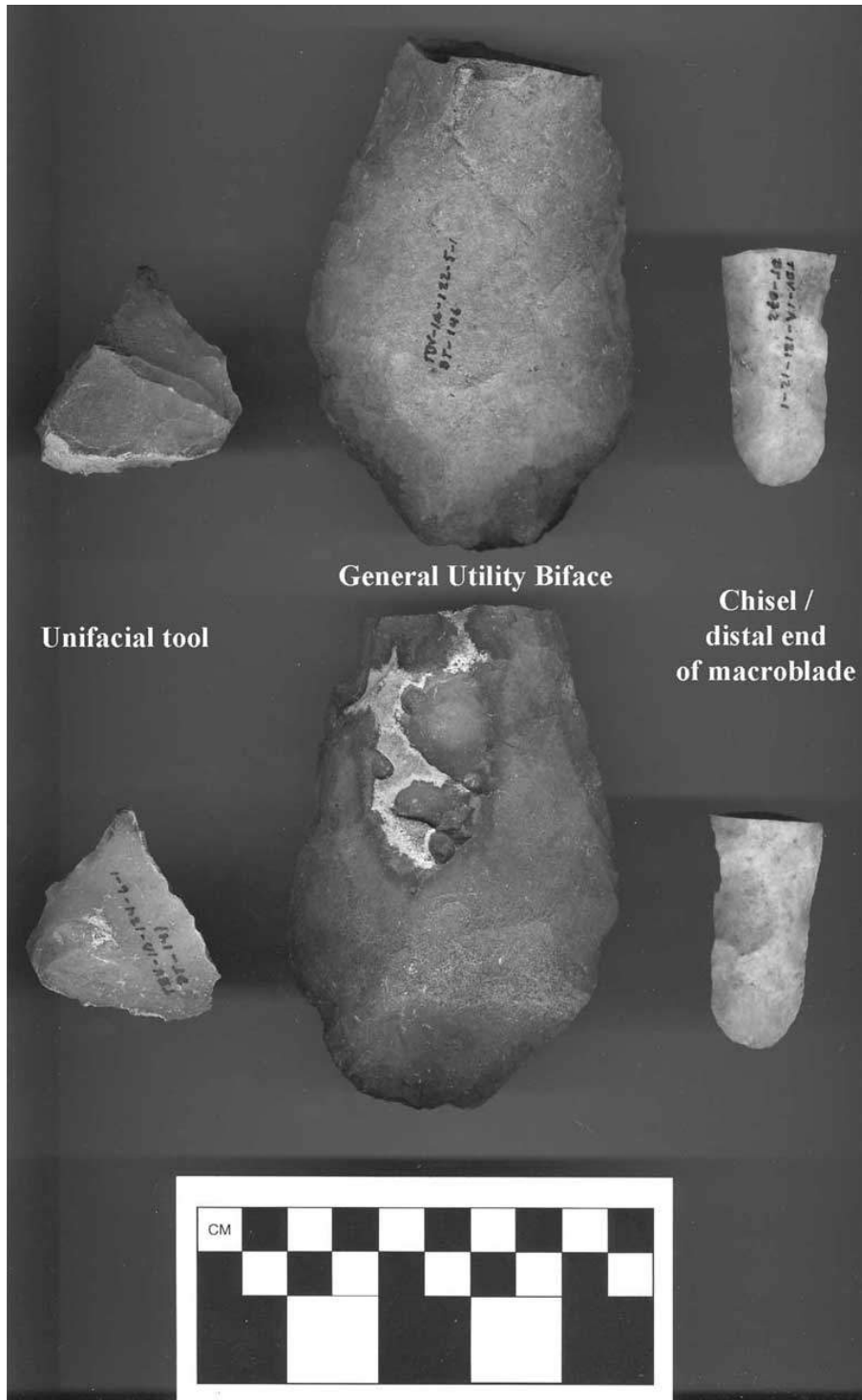


Photo 16. Flint tools (unifacial, bifacial and chisels).



Photo 17. Diagnostic sherds from the Late Preclassic (Sierra Rojo, Polvero Negro, and Flor Crema).

Stylistic dating of pottery and other materials from the deeper and earlier levels was supported by dating produced by four carbon samples subjected to the Mass Spectrometer Accelerator (MSA) of the University of Arizona, whose 2 sigma calibrated ranges fall between 790 and 409 B.C. ([Table 1](#)). The latest MSA sample is being processed in order to verify the dating of the substructure 4Sub-3, and the results will be

included in the monograph of the Motul de San José Eco-archaeological Project of Williams University, together with the final results of the analysis of the ceramic complexes and of other industries from the Middle and Early Preclassic. However, some preliminary results will be presented in this report.

**Table 1. Radiocarbon Dates for Buenavista-Nuevo San José, Petén.**

Lab Number	Provenience	Material	Radiocarbon date	2 Sigma <sup>2</sup> Calibrated Date
AA72323	Under and inside 4Sub-1	Carbon	2467 ± 35	760 - 415 B.C.
AA72324	Fill over stucco floors	Carbon	2500 ± 35	790 - 420 B.C.
AA72325	Leveling fill	Carbon	2493 ± 34	780 - 420 B.C.
AA 75154	Inside fill of 4Sub-3	Carbon	2449 ± 34	754 - 409 B.C.

<sup>2</sup> Calibrated using Stuiver and Reimer 1993; and Reimer *et al.* 2004.

On the other hand, besides substructures 4Sub-1, 2 and 3 in the north end of the epicenter, there must have existed other constructions during the Middle Preclassic, probably in the shape of low platforms, because of some stone alignments and ceramic material from this period found in pits located behind structures 2, 7, and 8 of Group A and structure 11 of Group B ([Figure 2](#), [Photo 18](#), [Photo 19](#) and [Photo 20](#)), where two very interesting artifacts were recovered: one half of a possible hollow cylinder seal ([Photo 21](#)), and a fragment of the flat base of a dish with black slip and post-firing incisions in its interior, of the Desprecio Inciso type ([Photo 22](#)) whose design may be in four parts (quadripartite), as shown in the reconstructive drawing ([Figure 6](#)).



**Photo 18. Middle Preclassic**



platform, behind Structure 2.



Photo 20. Possible Middle Preclassic platform behind Structure 11.

Photo 19. Middle Preclassic platform and fill behind Structure 8.



Photo 21. Fragment of a ceramic cylinder seal from the Middle Preclassic.



Photo 22. Fragment of Desprecio Inciso plate, with a possible quadripartite design.

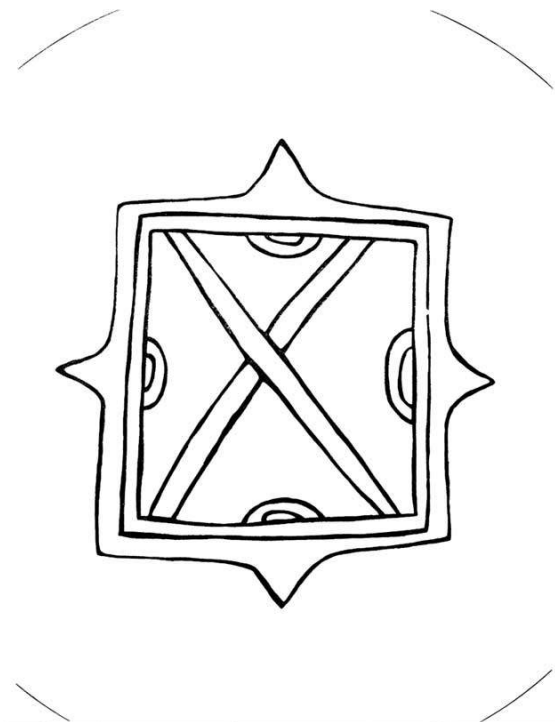


Figure 6. Hypothetical reconstruction of the quadripartite design.

## Late Classic occupation

The excavations and finds of the Late Classic occupation will not be described here for lack of space, and because they are not the central subject of this report. We only include a summary of these results, which will be described in detail in the seventh report of the Motul de San José Eco-archaeological Project, as well as in the project's monograph, which will be published at the end of the year.

As well as Structure 4 (north) which covered the constructions of the Middle Preclassic (4Sub 1, 2 and 3) described above, during the Late Classic other 13 structures were built, which make up the epicenter of Buenavista-Nuevo San José ([Figure 2](#)), divided in groups A and B.

Group A and the small pyramid on the east may have been the civic-administrative component, while the cluster of five low platforms of the B Group may have been the habitation component of the site ([Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#)).

Structures 1, 4, 7, and 9 of Group A were explored with test-pits, while structures 3, 5, and 6 were not explored.

Structure 1 --East Pyramid-- is 2.5 m high, and was the funerary structure of the Late Classic with a looted funerary chamber inside.

Structure 4 (North Str.) of the Late Classic sealed the Middle Preclassic constructions described above, with a fill and two stucco floors on its top, which supported some asymmetrical walls. Another modification was the incorporation of a stairway on the whole front of the mound, under which there was a great amount of eroded polychromes from the Late Classic, which may be the remains of some kind of pre-construction ritual ([Figure 7](#) and [Photo 23](#)). However, the asymmetrical walls on the building's top may have been from the Postclassic, since they are associated with pottery from that period (Rice 1987), although they are mixed with Late Classic pottery (Foias 1999), and their construction technique using blocks in a vertical position is different from the *soga* (rope) technique from the Late Classic ([Photo 24](#)).

Structures 7, 8, and 9 were low rectangular platforms, 15 m long by 3.50 m wide and 60 cm tall ([Photo 25](#) and [Photo 26](#)), built with *soga y pretil* (rope-and-railing) technique ([Photo 27](#)), with perishable roofs and pottery associated with the Late Classic. Structures 7 and 8 may have been built over constructions from the Middle Preclassic.

In Group B ([Figure 2](#)) the form and function of structures 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 is far from being understood, since pits were excavated only in front and behind the structures to know their chronology. However, because of the utilitarian pottery from the Late Classic (Foias 1999), grinding stone fragments and *manos* found here, as well as hammerstones and bifacial tools, I will speculate the structures had a domestic function.

There are seven chultuns that have not been explored, one just behind Structure 4 which may be associated with the underworld. Although their specific function is not known, chultuns are usually considered as places for storing water, crops, tools, textiles, trash or were used as latrines, drainage wells, ceremonial chambers, and recently as fermentation chambers for drinks and/or foods (Puleston 1971; Smith and Cameron 1977: 110; Dahlin and Litzinger 1986: 721-734).

Half a kilometer to the north of the epicenter there also was a depression which may be the place where the site's building material was obtained. Later it served as *aguada* (water reservoir) during the rainy season.

During the Late Classic Buenavista-Nuevo San José may have been a satellite center ascribed to Motul de San José, the great ruling center at the time.

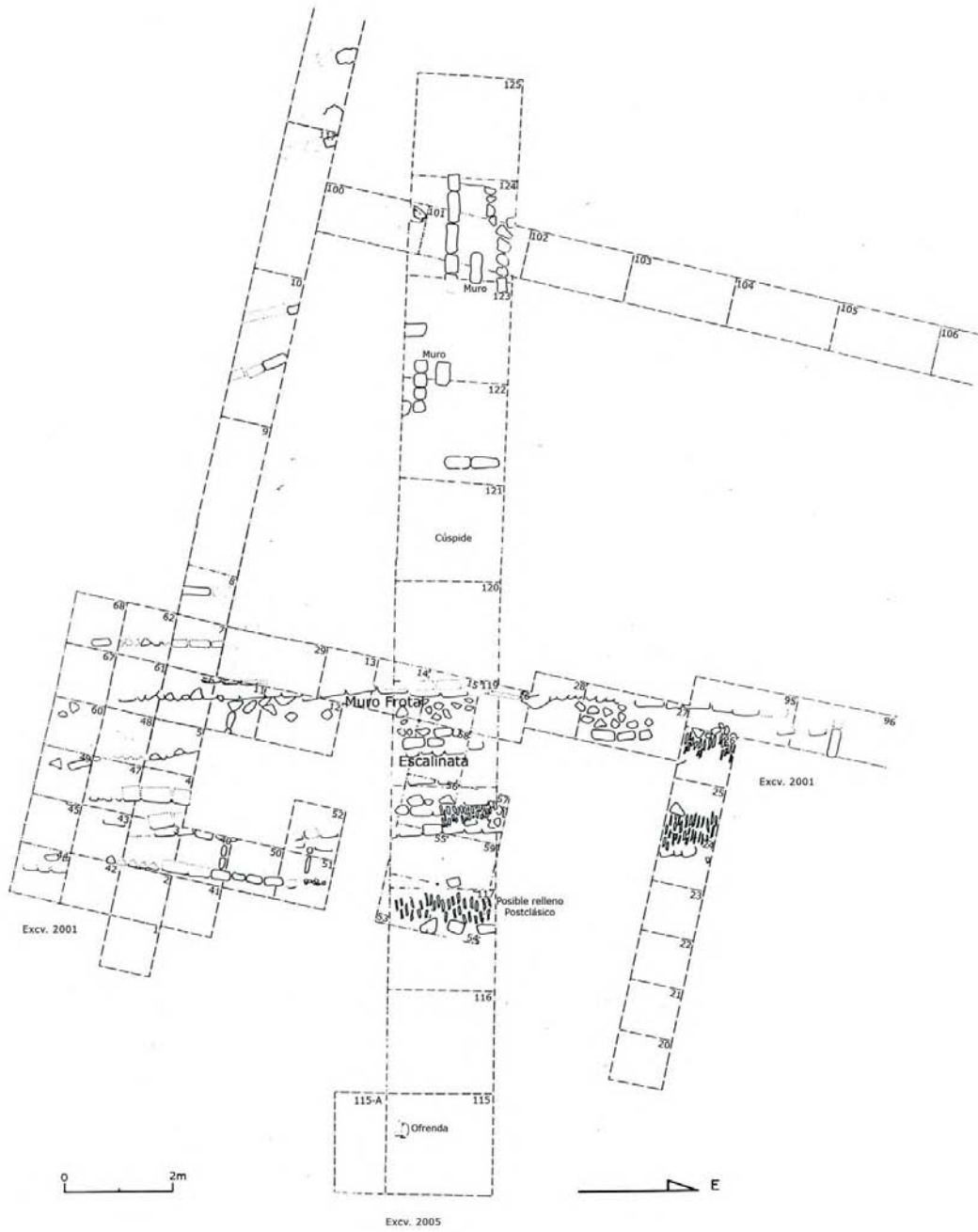


Figure 7. Plan of the last occupation of Structure 4.





**Photo 23. Stairway of Structure 4, Late Classic.**



**Photo 24. Walls atop Structure 4.**



**Photo 25. Front of Structure 7, Group A.**



**Photo 26. Front wall and east corner of Structure 9.**



Photo 27. *Pretil* technique, still used to build walls on stone platforms.

## Results

### Location

As was stated in the introduction, Buenavista-Nuevo San José is located half a kilometer from the northwestern shore of Lake Petén Itzá, atop a high hill from which one can see some five kilometers around, covered with *mollisol* soils that have been used for agriculture since early times (Emery, personal communication 2005 [soil analysis is currently underway]), apart from hills abundant in flint nodules for making flakes and tools.

In other words, the surrounding terrain's agricultural potential, as well as the site's closeness to food and flint sources, may have been the critical factors for the settling and continued occupation of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, apart from the indisputable preference of the settlers for fishing and other high-protein lake and river resources such as *jutes* (small edible freshwater snails) and turtles. Large and medium-sized mammals such as white-tailed deer, peccary and foxes were also hunted in the nearby savannas, and lastly there is evidence for the presence of domesticated dogs (Thornton 2006).

It should be pointed out that occupations from the early Middle Preclassic and Middle Preclassic located on high ground dominating a wide area with similar resources to those of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, Petén, have also been reported for mounds 456

and 340 from the survey of the lakes Yaxha and Sacnab (Rice 1976). Almost all early settlements reported for the Petén have been found atop elevations near productive fields with good drainage (Laporte and Fialko 1995: 44) and in the Belize River basin (Awe 1992; Cheetham 1998).

This pattern of sites on elevated ground near rivers, lakes or other bodies of water (Puleston and Puleston 1971: 330-337) might suggest that these lands could have been under the control of a small group of people, perhaps a family or a lineage who achieved power through time and probably managed to establish a rank society, as suggested by Coe (1974: 10-11) for another region.

## **Architecture**

The architectural finds described above for Buenavista-Nuevo San José, such as the leveling of all the terrain occupied by the site's epicenter and the formal masonry construction of substructure 4Sub-1, associated with a plaza of around 72 m<sup>2</sup> completely covered with stucco during the Middle Preclassic, required not just more labor, but also technological complexity to obtain the limestone blocks used for construction and for lime production. All this suggests the existence of quarries, kilns, skilled artisans, carriers, and leaders, apart from showing an increase in social differentiation between the site's inhabitants, and the need for more visible markers such as buildings with worked stone.

Furthermore, the superposition of substructures 4Sub-2 and 3 on top of the earlier one, their north orientation, their possibly rectangular shape, the construction quality with stucco floors, the offerings, incised ceramics, and figurine fragments all seem to suggest a more civic function for these substructures during the Middle Preclassic, or maybe just the residence of a social group with rank or prestige, because they were not modified until the Late Classic, suggesting occupational stability and a tendency to avoid their remodeling.

In addition, because of their northern orientation these substructures may have been associated with public ritual cycles of veneration and propitiatory sacrifices, like the ones performed in other Maya sites of the Middle Preclassic. Directionality was critical for Maya rituals linked with village construction; this may have given a role of "place founders" (Ashmore 1988: 96) or a "genealogy of place" (de Certeau 1984) to the founders of Buenavista-Nuevo San José.

Although rectangular platforms have also been reported for Blackman Eddy (Garber *et al.* 2004: 378), Nohoch Ek (Coe and Coe 1956), Pacbitun (Hohmann and Powis 2000), Nakbe (Hansen 1992) and Holmul (Bauer *et al.* 2005) during the Middle Preclassic, they have been attributed a more domestic function, while the round and elliptical structures reported from several sites in Belize, the Petén, and the Yucatán Peninsula seem to have had a more civic function (Powis *et al.* 2001: 83; Aimers *et al.* 2000: 71-86, table 1).

## Pottery

Diagnostic pottery from the early Middle Preclassic (1000-800 B.C.) in Buenavista-Nuevo San José was represented by only 2% of sherds with red, black, streaked orange, cream or white slip, with an opaque to slightly shiny but not waxy look. Sherds were unevenly fired since they show stains, streaks and fading color. Some sherds had no slip and some were very particular with volcanic ash temper.

Just a few shapes are represented from the early Middle Preclassic period: dishes with flat base, straight divergent walls and widely flaring rim; flat-based bowls with short flaring walls and rims thickened on the exterior, flat-based vases with semi-cylindrical walls and direct rim; globular jugs with short curved divergent neck and direct rim; *tecomates* with inward curving walls and thick direct rim, as well as a mushroom with fingernail impressions in the upper part, with no slip, provisionally attributed to the following slipped groups: Uck, Cocoyol, Ainil, Calam, and Canhel.

The decoration seen on some sherds was made with incised designs after applying the slip or with fine excised lines, almost imperceptible in some instances, with motifs similar to the ones suggested by Cheetham (2003: 614, fig. 6) for the Belize River basin and central Petén for this same period. These types are also shared with more distant regions, such as the Gulf coast, the Pacific coast, the Mexican Highlands and Guatemalan Highlands, all the way to the western regions of Honduras and El Salvador, indicating an early interaction and a shared ideational system on a pan-Mesoamerican level (Cheetham 1998).

Diagnostic ceramics from the Middle Preclassic are represented in Buenavista-Nuevo San José by sherds of the following slipped groups: Juventud, Chunchinta, Pital, Tierra Mojada, Savana, and the unslipped Achiotes group, with the well-known diagnostic shapes from elsewhere in the Petén and Belize, such as dishes and bowls with flat base and high straight divergent walls and slightly flaring or direct rim; composite-silhouette shapes of "cuspidor" style and others with tubular spouts, globular jugs with short curved flaring neck and rim thickened on the exterior, with waxy, luminous monochromatic and bichromatic slips with negative (resist) decoration, pre-slip incisions and slots, beveling, grooving and some modeling.

On the other hand, the presence of the Mars Naranja ware indicates a certain kind of interaction with western Belize and the Petén, where this pottery is more common and is diagnostic of this period (Willey *et al.* 1965: 294, note 9).

Of particular interest was the presence in the ceramic inventory of a whole vessel, probably of the Achiotes Sin Engobe type, and three partial, fragmented vessels of the Desprecio Inciso and Pital Crema types on a north-south axis in substructure 4Sub-2, as part of the building's dedicatory ritual, which according to Garber must include whole vessels and valuable items, while the building's termination ritual must include incomplete pieces (Garber 1993: 800-807). This was part of an ancestral tradition in the

Maya Lowlands (Coe 1959: 77; Becker 1993: 47; Joyce 1992: 497-505, 2001: 13371-13375), which may have represented an early knowledge of the meaning of physical and social space for ritual trajectories (Joyce 1992: 497-505; Hendon 2000: 42-53).

Besides, the presence of a fragment of the flat base of a Desprecio Inciso dish in a Middle Preclassic trash midden behind Structure 7 of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, which may represent the four corners or directions of the world ([Figure 6](#), [Photo 22](#)), indicates that this small and early settlement shared Maya and in general Mesoamerican cosmology about the division of the world in four quarters, which was widely known in the iconography of later periods (Ashmore 1991; Bricker 1983; Coggins 1980; Gossen 1974).

An additional find was the presence of a ceramic cylindrical seal fragment, suggesting it was used for body, fabric or paper decoration, a Maya tradition also present in other sites of the same period. Some fragments of cylindrical seals from the Middle Preclassic have also been found in Uaxactún (Kidder 1947: 69, fig. 59c), Blackman Eddy (Garber *et al.* 2004: 32, fig. 3.3a) and K'axob (MacAnany and López Varela 1999: 157, fig. 7 and 159, fig. 9).

A complete discussion of ceramic complexes from the Middle Preclassic will be made with the extension it deserves in the forthcoming monograph of the Motul de San José project.

## Lithics

The lithic analysis of the Motul de San José project is being performed by James Lawton of Tulane University as part of his doctoral dissertation. The preliminary results of the lithic analysis from the early occupations of Buenavista-Nuevo San José include a great deal of different tools and an important amount of flaking debris.

Among the more widespread flint tools, within the sample of whole and fragmented pieces characteristic of the Middle Preclassic in Buenavista-Nuevo San José, there are: scrapers (15), with a high incidence and probably imported to the site in finished form; celt-shaped utilitarian bifaces (7) of triangular shape (3); small chisels (6); hammerstones (6); projectile point (1) and abundant flakes (Lawton 2007) ([Photo 9](#)).

The manufacture waste radii at Buenavista-Nuevo San José during the Middle Preclassic ([Table 1](#)) only reflect production for domestic use, although because of the presence of hammerstones one can assume that a certain amount of reduction took place at the site (Lawton 2007).

However, Lawton (2006) excavated a possible flint workshop from the Late Classic, named La Estrella, in the village of Nuevo San José (half a kilometer from Buenavista's epicenter). He recovered 4.2 million flakes by cubic meter of knapping refuse, so we still

have uncertainty as to whether Buenavista-Nuevo San José had control over the nearby flint sources and workshops from the Middle Preclassic.

The fragments of calcite bark removers found within the fill of Middle Preclassic substructures in Buenavista show ancestral knowledge to work the *amatle* tree bark to make paper. There are similar examples of bark removers from the same time period in Blackman Eddy and Kaxob (Garber *et al.* 2004: 32, fig. 3.3a; MacAnany and López Varela 1999: 157: fig. 7 and 159, fig. 9).

Obsidian found in the Middle Preclassic fill consisted mostly of 13 extremely worn prismatic blade fragments, whose provenience is from El Chayal and San Martín Jilotepeque, according to a macroscopic analysis. (Moriarty, personal communication 2006), although the XRF (X-ray florescence) analysis to be conducted by Moriarty at Tulane University in the coming months will improve our understanding of the possible sources, as well s the exchange networks, and the access routes with the Guatemalan Highlands during the Middle Preclassic.

**Table 2. Size of sieved flint flakes. Lithic analysis of Buenavista-Nuevo San José (Lawton 2007).**

Screen Type	Size	Nominal Designation	Actual Square-Mesh Opening Size		Actual Diagonal Opening Size	
			Inches	mm.	Inches	mm.
Standard Sieve Cloth	Grade 1	1 inch	1.00*	25.4 mm	1.41*	35.9 mm
	Grade 2	½ inch	0.500*	12.7mm	0.707*	18.0mm
	Grade 3	No. 3½	0.223*	5.66mm	0.315*	8.01mm
	Grade 4	No. 7**	0.100*	2.54mm	0.141*	3.59mm
	Grade 5	No. 16	0.0465*	1.18mm	0.0657*	1.67mm

## Fauna

The analysis of archaeological fauna was conducted by Erin Thornton (2006) from the University of Florida. The most widely represented species from within the fill of substructures 4Sub-1, 2 and 3 from the Middle Preclassic were the following: *Bolimulus* spp, *Cervidae*, *Dermatemy mawwi*, *Drymaeus tropicalis* Emidydae, *Eugladina ghesbrechii* and spp, *Gastropoda marina*, *Elicina* spp, *Kinosternidae*, *Llampsilis* spp, mamalia large and medium, *Neocyclotus dysoni*, *Odicoileus virginianus*, *Oliva* spp and *sanaya*, *Orthalicus* spp, *Pachychilus Indiorum*, *Pomacea flagellata*, *Testudines*, *Strombus* spp and *pugillis*, *Tetrapoda*. They are summarized in the generic taxonomy in [Table 3](#).

Snails of the types *Helicina*, *Bulimuls*, and *Neocyclotus dysoni* are often found in milpa patches, in open areas or in possibly palm roofs (Hammond and Miksicek 1981), which may suggest greater deforestation of the forest, not just for agricultural purposes, but also for utilization of firewood as fuel for cooking, ceramic manufacture, and lime production. However, one should bear in mind that these snail species can also appear in undisturbed forests.

On the other hand, the remains of shell fragments of *Strombus pugilis*, *Oliva sayana* and *O. spp.*, and *Pomacea flagelatta*, as well as bivalves such as *Unionidae* spp, suggest not only interaction with the Atlantic coast of Belize, but also the Maya cosmological link with water, life and fertility (Andrews 1969; Kurbjuhn; Novella 1995; Safer and Gill 1982; MacAnany *et al.* 1999: 136); they also constitute prestige items sought for exchange, for making gifts or for possessing, since no other valuable goods were found.

**Table 3. Middle Preclassic fauna found at Buenavista-Nuevo San José (Thorton 2006).**

<b>Taxonomic Category</b>	<b>NISP</b>	<b>% NISP</b>	<b>MNI</b>	<b>% MNI</b>
Mammals	95	33.9	3	4.4
Turtles	68	24.3	3	4.4
Marine gastropods	9	3.2	8	11.8
Freshwater gastropods	88	31.4	52	76.5
Freshwater bivalves	20	7.1	3	4.4
<b>TOTAL =</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>100</b>

## Discussion

We can really only make a modest proposition based on the small scale of the excavation and the few archaeological materials obtained from Buenavista-Nuevo San José. Our main concern was to define the site's chronology, because of the paucity of absolute chronometric data for early occupations in the northwestern region of Lake Petén Itzá.

The AMS analysis applied to three carbon samples obtained from the deeper levels of Structure 4 at Buenavista-Nuevo San José gave a time frame with C-14 dates between 760 and 420 B.C.

However, the stylistic analysis of pottery showed the presence of a slight percentage of early Middle Preclassic ceramics (Cheetham, personal communication 2006), very different from the Mamom tradition in terms of shape and surface finish (Forsyth, personal communication 2006). This may suggest a transitional stage between an autochthonous population (Andrews 1990: 1-20; Cheetham *et al.* 2003: 619) and the

arrival of a new population from the Highlands, as previously suggested by several authors for the central Petén region (Hammond 1977: 116-133; Sharer and Sedat 1987; Andrews 1990: 7, 10, 15-16; Ball and Taschek 2003: 179-217). However, this assumption must be taken with caution, since there are still many comparative studies to be made between the lake region's earliest ceramics before we can determine the possibly origins of both populations.

In spite of being far from identifying the economic and cultural processes that produced the foundation and continuous occupation of Buenavista-Nuevo San José, I speculate that between 762-418 B.C. or a little earlier, its settling might have been linked with the terrain's agricultural orientation, with its proximity to water, food, and flint sources, as well as to the general logistical condition offered by the area. But clearly we are not dealing with an incipient sedentary village, since it had at least one main construction of worked stones and a great amount of fill in its main plaza, which emphasize the need to indicate rank through a more formal construction, perhaps of an administrative or elite nature.

Besides, Buenavista-Nuevo San José had a sophisticated ceramic technology, ancestral ritual knowledge and practices, a paper-making tradition and long-distance trade goods, such as obsidian from the Guatemalan highlands, shells and pottery from Belize showing a certain social differentiation for its occupants, who might have belonged to a main lineage with the right to found a village and take possession of the land. Another option is that Buenavista-Nuevo San José might have been an outpost previous to the foundation of a ruling center on the shores of Lake Petén Itzá.

The Late Preclassic (400 B.C.-A.D. 250) is poorly represented in all the excavations in Buenavista-Nuevo San José, with just a handful of sherds of the Chicanel sphere from the Sierra, Polvero and Flor groups, without associated architecture. This suggests a scarce population for this period. However, this may be due to a bias in the sample or possibly to the fact that a large part of the population emigrated to nearby centers with better logistical conditions and an abundant evidence of construction during the Late Preclassic. A good candidate for the role of ruling center during this time is the archaeological site of La Trinidad, at only three kilometers to the east of Buenavista, with massive civic architecture and a river port in the mouth of the Kantetul River, which connected these populations with the major centers of central Petén during the Late Preclassic.

The Early Classic (A.D. 250-550) is almost imperceptible in Buenavista-Nuevo San José, consisting of a dozen sherds of the Aguila, Balanza and Actuncan/Dos Arroyos polychrome groups, without visible architectural features, although I can't confirm a depopulation or just an important drop in the population.

Apparently, Buenavista-Nuevo San José was not repopulated until the Late Classic (A.D. 600-800), when the 14 structures of the last epoch were built. Group A was the civic-administrative component, while the cluster of five low platforms in Group B might have been the site's dwelling component during the Late Classic. For this time



Buenavista-Nuevo San José could have been a satellite center, ascribed to the great ruling center of Motul de San José.

Clearly, more excavation has to be undertaken in Buenavista-Nuevo San José in order to better know the Preclassic and Late Classic occupations, and to solve the many doubts and assumptions left by just one studied building and one dozen test pits. They are not enough to give us a picture of how the communities functioned during these times.

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