# Preliminary Archaeological Investigations at El Bellote, Tabasco, México

**Research Year:** 2007
**Culture:** Chontal Maya
**Chronology:** Classic
**Location:** Tabasco, México
**Site:** El Bellote, Islas de Los Cerros

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**Abstract**

Islas de Los Cerros is a uniquely large prehispanic coastal site complex in Tabasco, México, which was a resource zone and probable port for the Late Classic interior regional center of Comalcalco. Although the Proyecto Arqueológico Islas de Los Cerros (PAILC) - the first systematic project in coastal Tabasco - has previously investigated and documented residential and industrial features on five island sites, no investigation had taken place at El Bellote, the complex's elite and ceremonial-administrative center, due to landowner concerns. However, with a recent agreement between the Centro INAH Tabasco and the landowner, the PAILC was able to conduct the first systematic investigation of the site, which included mapping, surface collections, and profile drawings of sidewalls at looted and eroded mounds. The 2007 season of PAILC, supported by FAMSI (#07019), resulted in the documentation and analysis of the site structure, chronological affiliations, and feature construction at what can now be considered the largest site in coastal Tabasco. This research also permits the integration of data on the local elite and ceremonial-administrative center into the broader analyses on the complex's settlement history, social organization, and economic role in the Chontalpa region.

**Resumen**

Islas de Los Cerros es un extenso complejo de sitios costeros prehispánicos en Tabasco, México, el cual era una zona de recursos, y probablemente el puerto, del centro regional Comalcalco en el Clásico Tardío. El Proyecto Arqueológico Islas de Los Cerros (PAILC) - el primer proyecto sistemático en la costa de Tabasco - ha investigado y documentado rasgos residenciales e industriales en cinco sitios insulares. Sin embargo, El Bellote, el centro élite y ceremonial-administrativo no ha sido investigado, en consideración a las inquietudes expresadas por el terrateniente del sitio. Por otro lado, con un acuerdo reciente entre el Centro INAH Tabasco y dicho terrateniente ha permitido que el PAILC conduce el mapeo, recolecciones de la superficie y el dibujo de perfiles en cortes en montículos que hayan sido saqueado o erosionado. La temporada de 2007 del PAILC, financiado por FAMSI (#07019), ha resultado en la documentación e análisis de la estructura espacial, las afiliaciones cronológicas, y la construcción de rasgos en lo que ahora se puede considerar el sitio costero más grande de Tabasco. Esta investigación también permite la integración de datos del centro élite y ceremonial-administrativo con los análisis de la historia de las ocupaciones, la organización social, y el papel económico del complejo en la región Chontalpa.

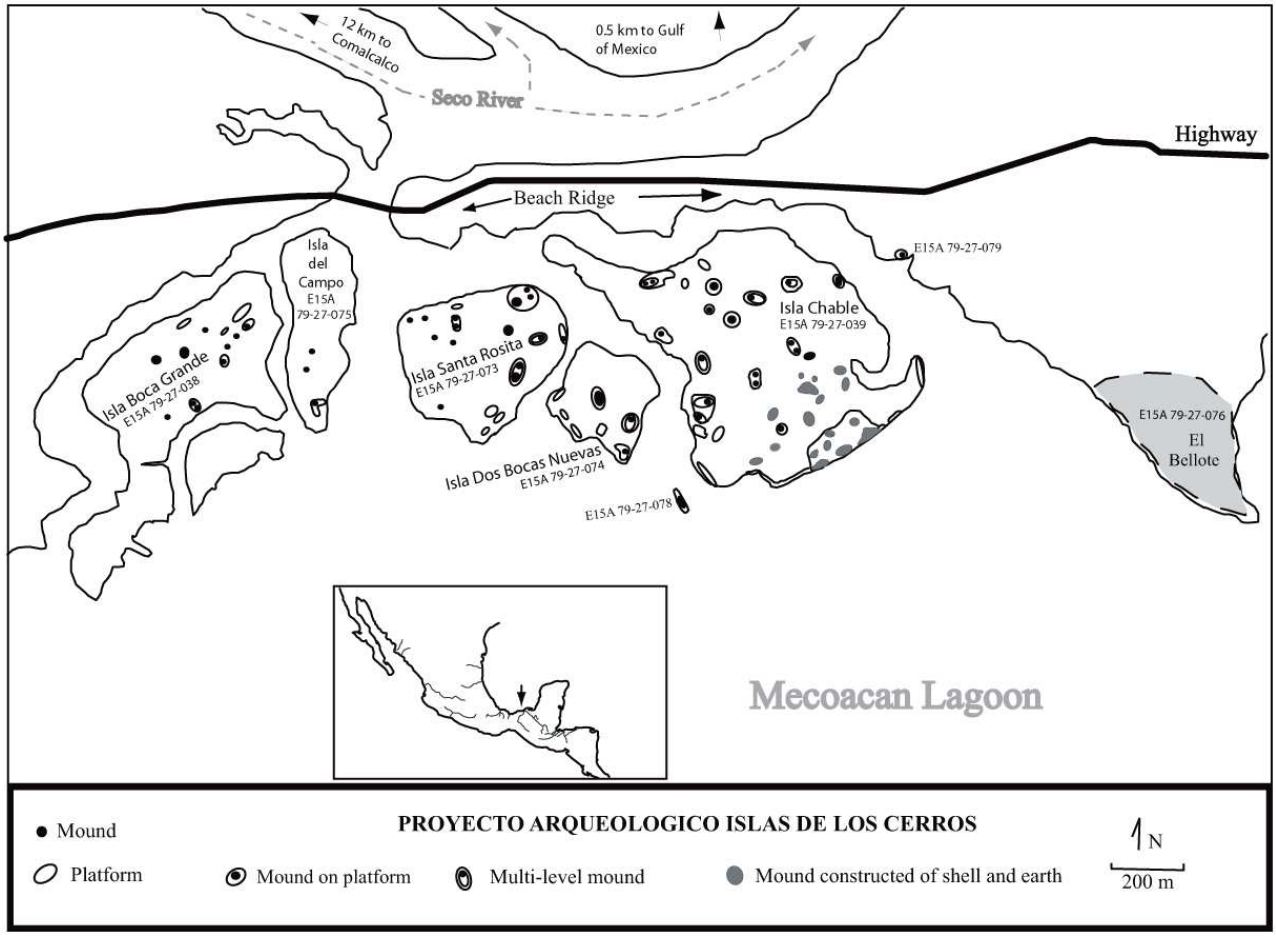


**Figure 1. Islas de Los Cerros.**

## Introduction

The Proyecto Arqueológico Islas de Los Cerros (PAILC) is the first archaeological project to systematically investigate a coastal zone in Tabasco, México, and the first to investigate the large coastal community of Islas de los Cerros (a prehispanic site complex on five mangrove islands and the ceremonial-administrative center of El Bellote at the mouth of the Laguna Mecoacan) (Figure 1). In 2001, the project surveyed the insular sites, documenting and collecting surface artifacts at 122 earthen and earthen-and-shell constructed platforms, mounds, mounds on platforms, and multi-level mounds (Ensor 2002a, 2002b, 2003). The survey enabled a preliminary understanding of the prehispanic settlement history and social organization on the five mangrove islands. It also confirmed Islas de Los Cerros' contemporaneity with, and economic importance to, the large inland regional center of Comalcalco. In 2004 (Ensor and Tun Ayora 2004), limited excavations in platforms and mounds confirmed the residential function of small mounds and platforms, provided preliminary information on their formation processes, provided samples of the local coastal residential architecture, and expanded the range of material culture from the site complex. Excavations in the linear platform and one crushed shell deposit indicated these were specialized industrial

activity features (for trade or fishing-related purposes and shell processing, respectively). In 2005 (Ensor 2006; Ensor et al. 2006), block excavations in a multi-level mound (funded by FAMSI #05024), although expected to help refine the ceramic chronological sequence, were more successful at reconstructing the formation processes of the multi-level mound. While the work on the five islands has been successful at addressing a number of research themes - rough chronological affiliations, social organization, economic activities, formation processes, ecology, trade in the region, and developing theoretical models on the regional political economy of this understudied region (Ensor et al. 2005) - all of this research was considered incomplete without the inclusion of the complex's ceremonial-administrative center of El Bellote. Prior research by PAILC at the site of El Bellote had not occurred due to landowner concerns. Recently, the Centro INAH Tabasco was able to obtain an agreement with the landowner allowing preliminary investigations at El Bellote.

Limited previous research from the late 19$^{th}$ to mid-20$^{th}$ centuries is available on El Bellote but those reports provide only sketchy information on the site. Charnay (1888:183-193), Blom and LaFarge (1926) and Berlin (1953a, 1954) briefly visited El Bellote and described Maya pyramid temples. Stirling (1957:231) briefly described a central pyramid group surrounded by additional mounds. Berlin and Stirling estimated that El Bellote dated to the Late Classic and Early Postclassic periods (using the ceramic chronology of their times). Robert West mapped the location of the larger mounds using aerial photos (West et al. 1969:96, personal communication 1993).

Epigraphic evidence at Comalcalco suggests El Bellote was a tributary of that inland city (Zender 1998:17-19). Zender (1998) describes probable references to El Bellote on two of three bone artifacts in burial Urn 7 of Temple IIIa at Comalcalco. It is suggested that Comalcalco and El Bellote initiated a war with Tortugero and lost (Comalcalco was annexed by Tortuguero for the larger kingdom of *Bakal* in AD 649). The epigraphy names *Chan-Chuwen*, or "Four Monkey/ Sky Artisan," a subordinate ruler from the site of *Peten-Ti'* ("island at the edge" - El Bellote, Islas de Los Cerros?) who, along with *Ox Balam*, ruler of Comalcalco, was captured by *Balam-Ahau*, ruler of Tortuguero, on 20 December, AD 649. *Chan-Chuwen*'s name is apparently repeated on a Tortuguero sarcophagus (Zender 1998).

In my own brief visits to a small portion of the site in 1993 and in 2000, I observed that some of the mounds had been severely damaged. According to local informants, this was done to provide "road fill" for the construction of the nearby Highway 187 in the 1970s. Other portions of the site had numerous intact mounds ranging from 1 to 4 m in height and platforms approximately 1 m in height over earth and shell deposits. Several looter's trenches in mounds revealed plaster, mound fill strata containing artifacts, and occasional brick-and-mortar. A large *horno* (thermal pit with heavily oxidized clay walls), measuring approximately 1 m in diameter, was observed in 2004 and 2005 eroding from the west shoreline of the site. No such *hornos* had been identified on the five islands. With the exception of a cleared area in the center of the site and an adjacent house area, most of the deposits at El Bellote are covered by coconut palm (the main crop at the ranch) and dense undergrowth.

Although unable to conduct activities at El Bellote until the 2007 season, it was apparent that the site should provide important information on elite residences and possibly industrial activities under elite administration. Of particular interest was whether or not long-distance trade items (e.g., obsidian, chert, ground stone, and nonlocal pottery) are located at El Bellote, possibly indicating port facilities, as these are sparse in the residential areas on the islands. Most importantly, research at El Bellote - the ceremonial-administrative center for Islas de Los Cerros - would complete the preliminary investigations on occupation history, social organization, and economic activities within this large coastal site complex.

**Field Methods**

The 2007 field season took place on 16-29 August 2007 and consisted of a crew of myself, Gabriel Tun Ayora (Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán), and a local laborer who also provided and operated the launch used to get to and from El Bellote. The specific objectives of the field work were to produce the first contour map of the site, systematically collect surface artifacts from individual features, and profile vertical walls in looters' trenches and other disturbances. The purpose of these objectives and the methods used for each are described here. The season was conducted under an INAH permit.

The contour map documented the spatial organization of the above-ground features and documented the morphologies of those features. These data are used to partially interpret the functions of the features (e.g., elite residential, temples, specialized economic activities, and other possibilities) and their spatial relationships within the site. Mapping data were collected using a CST/Berger 28x level and a 5.00 m stadia rod. The lagoon water level during the field work was used as an elevation reference. Temporary mapping data were established at several locations throughout the site using wooden stakes marked with flagging tape and pin flags. Other temporary mapping reference points were established between those data using spikes and were marked in the same manner. These had to be removed from the site at the end of the field work. A mapping log recording shot#, datum location, scope height, scope elevation, vertical and horizontal orientation, upper hair reading, middle hair reading, lower hair reading, distance, elevation, and subject was used in the field recording of mapping data. After plotting the data, the resulting contour map was field-checked for further improvements.

Surface collections of artifacts on the features were for the purpose of collecting preliminary information on feature function (based on the types of artifacts present) and on the chronological affiliation of those features (based on the existing ceramic chronology, which previously identified Late Formative and Late Classic period occupations on the islands at Islas de Los Cerros). These data complement the morphological data on the features with which to interpret feature function and provide the data on reconstructing the occupation history of El Bellote. As noted above, long-distance trade items would also indicate potential port facilities or at least greater access than island residents had to nonlocal goods. One 10-x-10 m collection unit was set up on each feature (when possible and where concentrations of artifacts were observed) using tapes and pin flags. Artifacts collected within the units were mostly

pottery, but also included other material categories. Few additional surface artifacts were collected outside the units, if deemed diagnostic or scarce (e.g., obsidian) and the locations of these collections were plotted on the map. The artifacts were placed in bags, by material category, with each bag having a distinct catalogue number and provenience information. Each bag was recorded on a master catalog.

The profiles of the walls of looters' trenches and other disturbances were carried out to document the stratigraphy, architectural elements, and construction sequence of those features. Profiles were only drawn where vertical, or near vertical, cuts were present. The cuts were scraped with trowels to observe the stratigraphy. Spikes, nails, string, and line levels were then used to set up profiling references. These were also mapped for elevation records and for additional locational and orientation data. The profiles were then hand drawn to scale using tapes for vertical and horizontal measurements. Artifacts were collected from the profiled walls, and catalogued, with their stratigraphic proveniences recorded.

### Artifact Processing and Recording

A house was rented in the fishing community adjacent to Islas de Los Cerros to serve as a dormitory and field laboratory. Each day after fieldwork, the collected artifacts were washed at the lab. After drying, the artifacts were labelled with their catalog numbers. Artifact recording also took place in the afternoons and evenings, and continued for full days after the fieldwork was completed. Upon completion of the 2007 season, all collected materials were transported to the Centro INAH Tabasco in Villahermosa, in an INAH truck with driver, where they are now curated.

The artifacts from the surface collection units and from the profiled walls were collected to provide additional data on feature function, construction, and chronology. The artifact recording used the same methods as in previous PAILC seasons. The ceramic analysis involved classifying sherds into the typology revised in the 2004 and 2005 seasons (Ensor et al. 2006). In addition to the 2007 El Bellote ceramic collections, the 2001 ceramic collection was re-analyzed in this season using the revised classification system for consistency. All other artifact categories (obsidian, chert, ground stone, samples of loose pieces of mortar, and loose brick fragments) had material, form, size, and additional attributes recorded in conformity with previous seasons. Table 1 presents the total numbers of artifacts by material category.

**Table 1. Artifact material categories in the PAILC collection from El Bellote**

| Material | n | Material | n |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ceramic | 2,755 | Obsidian | 11 |
| Fauna | 122 | Ground stone | 10 |
| Unmodified stone | 90 | Brick samples | 7 |
| Mortar and stucco samples | 44 | Chert | 5 |
| Clay chunks | 43 | **Total** | **3,087** |

As with the island sites at Islas de Los Cerros, the most abundant artifact category at El Bellote was pottery. Unfortunately, the pottery from Islas de Los Cerros, including the site of El Bellote, characteristically has severely eroded surfaces making traditional group-type-variety classifications difficult to follow. Additionally, many of the plastic decorative techniques described for nearby Comalcalco (Peniche 1973) are found in multiple paste categories at Islas de Los Cerros, making that classification system less useful. The Late Classic pottery types were previously revised in the 2004 and 2005 seasons. This involves a "type-variety" system whereby "type" includes paste attributes (color, coarseness, temper size and material) and "variety" includes surface treatment and/or decoration. This unconventional "type-variety" system evolved as a result of the observations that several surface treatment and decoration techniques are found associated with multiple paste categories at Islas de Los Cerros (e.g., Ensor and Tun Ayora 2004; Ensor et al. 2006). Several common Late Classic "varieties" from the insular sites were noticeably absent at El Bellote (e.g., Caobal/Trinidad, Fenix, and Soyataco). The Formative pottery classification is a descriptive system based on paste attributes and also surface treatment. Descriptive categories were also created for a low quantity of Early Classic pottery, which, at Islas de Los Cerros, has only been found at El Bellote. Table 2 presents summary descriptions of each category of pottery represented in the collections at El Bellote. All rim sherds had vessel form, rim form, lip form, diameter, and thickness recorded.

| Table 2. Summary descriptions of pottery present in the PAILC collection from El Bellote | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Type** | **Paste** | **Varieties*** |
| **LATE CLASSIC POTTERY** | | |
| Bellote (Figure 2) | Medium hardness, orange-brown color, no cores, fine calcite and mica (< 1mm inclusions) | Plain, Alisado, Delgado, Estriado |
| Centla (Figure 3) | Medium hardness, orange-brown color, some grey cores, abundant calcite and mica (<1 mm inclusions), occasional traces of red slip | Plain, Alisado, Delgado, Guaytalpa Estriada, Polished, and Pasta Roja |
| Cimatán (Figure 4) | Medium hardness, orange-brown color, grey cores are uncommon, abundant calcite and mica (<1- 3 mm inclusions), occasional traces of red slip | Plain, Alisado, Delgado, Estriado, Guaytalpa Estriada, and Pasta Roja |
| Mecoacán (Figure 5) | Medium hardness, yellowish-grey to orange-brown color, grey cores are uncommon, abundant white calcite (<1- 4 mm inclusions), occasional traces of red slip | Plain, Alisado, Delgado, and Pasta Roja |
| Comalcalco Fino (Figure 6) | Fine paste, chalky but medium hard, grey cores, very fine temper (< 0.2 mm inclusions) | Color variants: brown, yellow, grey, and pink |
| Jonuta (Figure 6) | Fine paste, hard, yellow-cream color, thick dark grey core, very fine temper (<0.2 mm inclusions) | Unobservable, Guaytalpa Estriada |
| Paraíso (Figure 7) | Fine paste, chalky but medium hard, orange color, some thin grey cores, very fine temper (< 0.1 mm inclusions) | Unobservable, Guaytalpa Estriada |
| Huimangillo (Figure 6) | Fine paste, hard, brown or pink, no temper | Unobservable |
| Unidentified | Hard, yellowish brown color, thick black core, fine calcite and mica (< 1 mm inclusions), occasional traces of red slip, some circumferential grooves | Unobservable, Estriado |
| Unidentified | Medium hardness, yellowish-grey to orange-brown color, grey cores are uncommon, abundant shell (<1- 4 mm inclusions) | Unobservable |
| **LATE CLASSIC IMPORTED POTTERY (TEMPORARY DESCRIPTIVE CATEGORIES)** | | |
| Red-on-Buff | Medium hardness, reddish-buff color, fine temper (< 1mm inclusions), red slip or paint in bands or lines. | - |
| Orange Polychrome | Medium hardness, orange color, some grey-brown cores, fine temper (< 1mm inclusions), red or black paint in bands or lines. One polychrome with red and black paint. | - |
| Red-on-Orange with Core | Medium hardness, orange color, thick grey cores, fine temper (< 1mm inclusions), red slip or paint in bands or lines. | Unobservable, Caobal/Trinidad |

| Table 2. Summary descriptions of pottery present in the PAILC collection from El Bellote | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Type** | **Paste** | **Varieties*** |
| **LATE FORMATIVE POTTERY** | | |
| Sierra Red | Soft and friable, brown color, fine calcite and iron (1 mm inclusions), thick red paint, thickened rims, and frequent deep circumferential grooves. | - |
| **LATE FORMATIVE POTTERY (TEMPORARY DESCRIPTIVE CATEGORIES)** | | |
| Pasta Areñosa | Medium hardness and friable, pale yellowish brown color, very abundant fine sand (< 1 mm inclusions) | Plain, Alisada |
| Pasta Burda | Soft and very friable, pale yellowish brown to reddish brown color, fine sand (< 1 mm inclusions) | Plain, Alisada, Estriada, Pulida |
| Pasta Blanca | Soft and very friable, white - pink color, fine sand (< 1 mm inclusions) | Plain, Alisada |
| **OLMEC HORIZON POTTERY (TEMPORARY DESCRIPTIVE CATEGORIES)** | | |
| White-Rimmed Black | Hard, white or reddish and black paste, some ash-tempered, grooves | - |
| White | White, ash-tempered, some with grooves | - |

****Summary descriptions of varieties in the PAILC classification system.***

Alisado - Smoothed surface.

Caobal/Trinidad - Parallel and cross-hatched incisions (common among different Late Classic paste types).

Delgado - Thin (3-5 mm) versions of common Late Classic paste types, usually with smoothed surface(s).

Estriado - Striated incisions.

Fenix - Exterior smoothed with parallel, horizontal finger impressions (common among different Late Classic paste types).

Guaytalpa Estriada - Undulating surface created by smoothed parallel horizontal grooves.

Pulida - Polished

Pasta Roja - Reddish past and more friable versions of common Late Classic past types.

Soyataco - Circumferential downward and inward grooves at the base of a vertical or straight neck (common among different Late Classic paste types).


**Figure 2. Bellote Ceramic Type.**


**Figure 3. Centla Ceramic Type.**


**Figure 4. Cimatán Ceramic Type.**


**Figure 5. Mecoacán Ceramic Type.**


**Figure 6. Regional fine paste pottery: Copilco (upper left), Comalcalco (lower left), Negro-Café Pulido (upper center), Jonuta (upper right), and Huimangillo (lower right).**


**Figure 7. Paraíso fine paste.**

As is the case at the island sites at Islas de Los Cerros, there were very few chipped stone and ground stone artifacts at El Bellote. However, far more were observed and collected from El Bellote than from similar surface contexts at the insular sites (Ensor 2002a). Obsidian and chert artifacts had macroscopic observations recorded on color, transparency, form, retouch, utilization, length, width, and additional comments. Ground stone artifacts had material, size, morphology, and other observations recorded.

Other infrequent artifact categories from the surface collections and profiles included loose pieces of mortar and plaster and brick fragments. For these artifacts, material descriptions, length, width, thickness, morphology, inclusions (temper), and other comments were recorded. Unmodified, or apparently unmodified, stone items were also collected, as these do not occur naturally at Islas de Los Cerros. The recordings for each unmodified stone included stone material, length, width, thickness, and additional comments.

As none of the enormous quantities of shell making up most of the deposits and feature strata were observed to have been modified, none were collected. However, field notes were made on taxon observed, which included primarily oyster (*Crassostrea virginicana*), but also quahog [almeja] (*Mercenaria campechiensis*) and whelk (*Busycon* sp.). Collected bone (all nonhuman and unmodified) were identified by taxon, but were infrequent.

**Site Description**

The site of El Bellote proved to be nearly twice as large as expected, covering approximately 16 hectares with 43 mounds and platforms distributed in five spatial groups, making the site the largest coastal site known in the Chontalpa region (Figure 8). The collected pottery indicated that, like most features on the adjacent island sites at Islas de Los Cerros, Formative period deposits were reused at El Bellote to build the Late Classic period mounds, leaving no identified undisturbed Formative period deposits or features. However, unlike the insular sites, a small amount of Early Classic pottery was found at El Bellote. Also unlike the insular sites, a limited amount of Olmec pottery was identified at El Bellote, making it the oldest site within Islas de Los Cerros. The profiles documented that the mounds at El Bellote were constructed in successive building episodes. Compared to the insular architecture at Islas de Los Cerros, however, the profiles also documented far more investment in mortar, stucco, and (in few mounds) brick and mortar architecture. One profile at El Bellote demonstrates far more frequent construction episodes than documented at any observed features at the adjacent insular sites. One larger mound had a wide trench cut into it that exposed a filled substructure's ceiling and corbel-vaulted arch. With the exception of a large hearth and plastered pit, no other production locations were identified. A formal commercial function for Islas de Los Cerros, if there was one, remains elusive: no apparent port facilities/locations were identified at El Bellote.

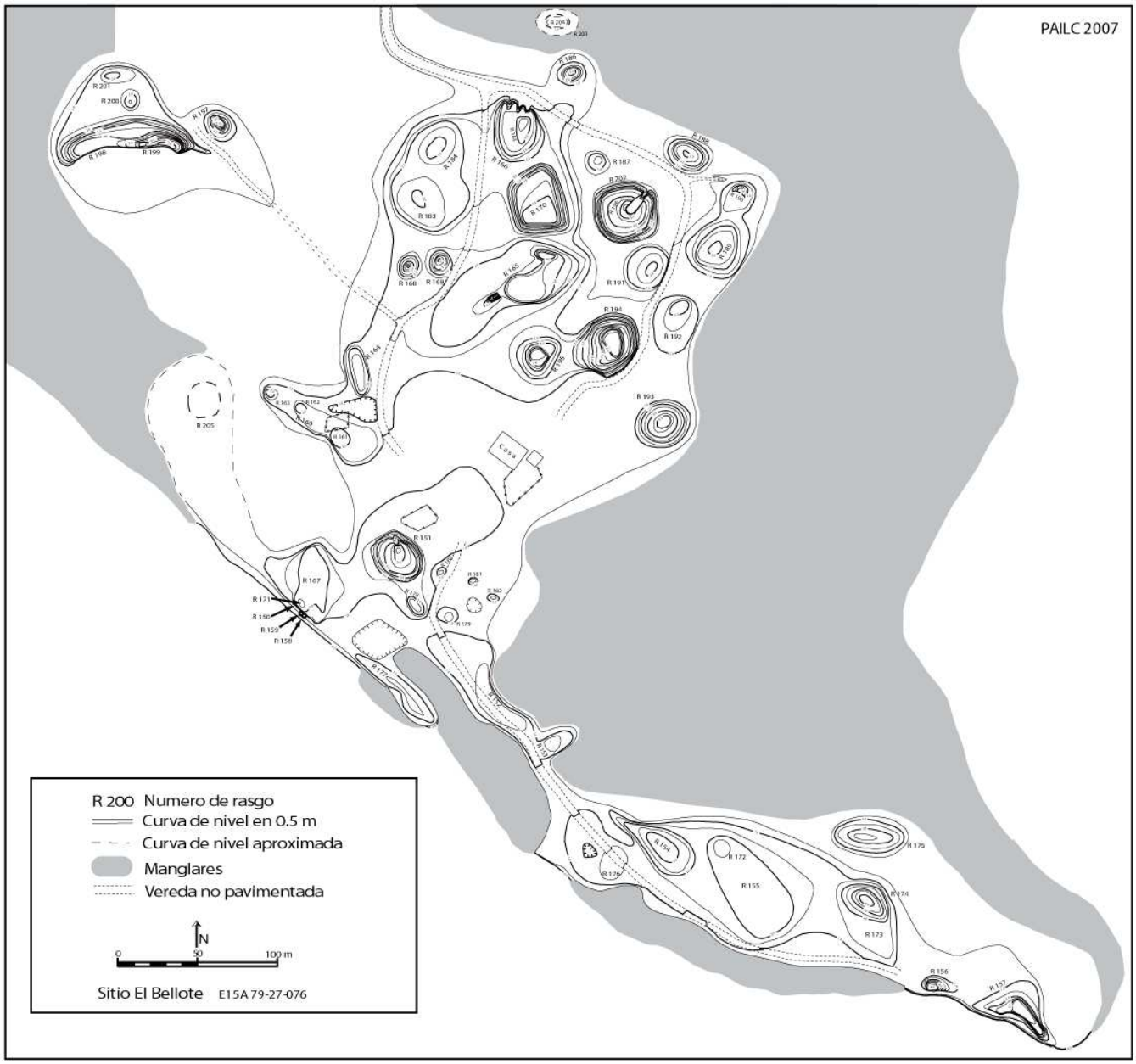


**Figure 8. Contour map of El Bellote.**

The spatial distribution of the 43 structures indicate five spatial groups comprising the latest prehispanic occupations (Late Classic period) at El Bellote: the Southern Group, Central Group, North-Central Group, Northeast Group, and Northwest Group (Figure 8). All but the Northwest Group are joined by basal deposits, or platforms. The site is surrounded by mangrove on the east, north, and northwest. The western shoreline of the peninsula has less mangrove protecting the site, where features are seen eroding from wave action.

The largest group is the Northeast Group, which is a concentration of three residential and ceremonial mound subgroups. Situated on a platform of 1.0-1.5 m elevation, Subgroup A consists of four residential mounds and three large mounds. Two of the residential mounds are built of stable earth and shell deposits and had more abundant mortar and stucco indicating substantial investment in domestic architecture. The two additional residential mounds were built only of earthen deposits and are much lower. Two of the large mounds have flat surfaces, steep slopes, and corners. Substantial structures were likely built on top of both; however, only one contains a mound on top of its flat surface. The third large mound is suspected to have been the 75 foot tall mound with a temple described by Stirling (1957) and earlier visitors. However, it was so badly disturbed decades ago that only its basal deposits remain. The subgroup appears to have been a patio group, albeit with the ceremonial mounds incorporated within the residential group. The surface collections indicated that the group is associated with imported polychrome pottery, more obsidian and chert than on the islands, vertebrate remains, and metate fragments.

Subgroup B consists of a second patio group with five residential mounds and one ceremonial mound. Unlike Subgroup A, Subgroup B was located on a very low 0.5 m platform of earthen deposits and all of the residential mounds were built only with earthen deposits and had little use of mortar in domestic structures. Imported materials, vertebrate remains, and ground stone were present at the residences. The larger ceremonial mound within Subgroup B, also incorporated within the patio group, had a decades old large trench excavated from its northeast corner to its center. The trench exposed a brick and mortar substructure with a corbel-vaulted arch (Figure 9 and Figure 10).

Subgroup C consists of one residential mound and one large ceremonial mound (Figure 11). Both are situated on a taller platform built of shell deposits, which appears to have been an extension of Subgroup A's large platform. The residential mound also had imported materials, vertebrate remains, and ground stone present. The 6.60 m high ceremonial mound had very steep slopes and a flat top and had abundant mortar and plaster fragments.

The Northwest Group has one large ceremonial multi-level mound and three residential mounds of different sizes on top of a platform of shell and earthen deposits. The large ceremonial mound is 86 m in length and 4.20 m in height. This mound has a flat top upon which a conical mound reaching 7.00 m in height was constructed (Figure 12). The superior mound appears to have had a ramp leading from its summit to the top of the larger, flat-topped inferior mound. Half of this multi-level ceremonial mound was removed for construction fill decades ago. The residences had imported materials, vertebrate remains, and ground stone present. Given the residential group's association with a ceremonial mound, it too is interpreted as reflecting an elite group within El Bellote.

**Figure 9. Feature 196 in the Northeast Group: substructure with brick and mortar vaulted arch exposed by decades old trench.**

**Figure 10. Brick and mortar eroding from top of Feature 196.**

**Figure 11. Feature 194 in the Northeast Group.**

**Figure 12. Features 198 and 199 in the Northwest Group.**

The North-Central Group at the site includes a linear mound on which three small mounds were located, and a subrectangular mound with a flat top and steep slopes. Based on the unusual morphologies of the mounds, and their arrangements, a nonresidential function is interpreted for this group. Furthermore, as these mounds do not seem large enough to have supported religious temples, a civic administration function is suggested here. Interestingly, this is the only group that does not have residential mounds associated with it.

The Central Group (Figure 13) consists of a large area of disturbed shell deposits and a total of six mounds and other feature remnants. The Group was probably a patio group surrounding a plaza that has seen severe disturbance by decades-old human activities and ongoing shoreline erosion. The most prominent mound in the Central Group has decades-old mechanical digging scars around its sides, but was largely spared from destruction. Along the western shoreline in this group was a low broad mound with a remnant of a smaller mound on top. Erosion has exposed a portion of a crumbling plaster floor on top of the smaller mound. The waves have cut a near vertical face in these mounds from which two submound features were exposed: a large circular plaster-lined pit and a large hearth with thick oxidized walls. The large hearth and plaster-lined pit were associated with earlier submound deposits. The mounds in the Central Group had imported materials, vertebrate remains, and ground stone present. One brick fragment was also present, but out of context, which may indicate a ceremonial structure.

The Southern Group at El Bellote includes five residential mounds, a large platform, and a small platform. All were constructed of shell and earthen deposits. The easternmost two mounds were severely disturbed by shoreline erosion. The residential mounds in this group also had imported materials, vertebrate remains, and ground stone. Additionally, the Southern Group of El Bellote is the only location within the site where fishing net sinkers were found at residential and nonresidential features. The large platform has a flat top with a possible low residential mound at its northwest end (Figure 14). We do not have evidence on the function of the large platform; however, it is obvious that it would have provided a large space for collective activities. The small platform, located on the west side of the group, was associated with nine fish net sinkers and a small concentration of obsidian blades and chert flakes. This unusual combination of artifacts at Islas de Los Cerros may indicate a specialized fishing-related feature, and the additional net sinkers at some of the residences may reflect an occupational specialization for the group.

**Figure 13. The Central Group, as seen from the lagoon (viewing east).**

**Figure 14. Feature 172 (in back) on platform Feature 155 (foreground) in the Southern Group.**

## The Regional Significance of El Bellote

El Bellote is clearly the elite-ceremonial-administrative center of Islas de Los Cerros. It is the only site within the coastal complex with ceremonial and administrative features, brick architecture, substantial investment in residential architecture, imported pottery and ground stone, more abundant imported obsidian and chert, and more abundant vertebrate remains. The only additional location at Islas de Los Cerros with similar attributes is the Grupo Sur of Isla Chable (Ensor and Tun 2004). With these first systematic investigations at El Bellote, we are now in a better position to model social organization at Islas de Los Cerros and the coastal complex's role in the broader Late Classic period Chontal state.

Within the broader Late Classic period Chontalpa political economy, Islas de Los Cerros is viewed as a resource extraction zone and possible port for the interior capital of Comalcalco (Ensor 2007). Our prior perspective on coastal trade, from the previous field seasons at the five islands, was that very few imported items were present at Islas de Los Cerros (Ensor 2007; Ensor et al. 2005). However, the 2007 season at El Bellote confirmed that there were local elites, and a middle class, within the complex and that these two social classes did, in fact, have access to imported commodities. Nevertheless, a formal commercial function for Islas de Los Cerros, if there was one, remains elusive: no apparent port facilities/locations were identified at El Bellote or at the insular sites. Therefore, our current knowledge on Islas de Los Cerros suggests that its primary role within the regional Chontal political economy involved the extraction, processing, and possibly transporting, of coastal resources to Comalcalco.

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