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Monumental Earthen Architecture at La Joya, Veracruz, México



Research Year: 2007

Culture: Classic Veracruz

Chronology: Late Preclassic to Classic

Location: Municipio de Medellín de Bravo, Veracruz, México

Site: La Joya de San Martín Garabato

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Abstract

La Joya, a major site in Central Veracruz, similar and contemporary to Cerro de las Mesas, is currently object of an approved excavation project targeting its monumental earthen architecture, severely damaged by brickmakers. Two monumental platforms, apparently palatial residences, revealed a sequence of spanning the first millennium CE, suggesting the existence of early state-level organization with possibly dual or alternate government, shedding new light on Protoclassic (epi-Olmec) and Classic society. Extensive excavations and stratigraphic trenching during 2007, funded by FAMSI, focused mainly on the East Platform, and resulted in a finer chronology of part of the platforms' sequences and a preliminary interpretation of political and symbolical functions of the excavated buildings.

Resumen

La Joya, sitio mayor del Centro de Veracruz, similar y contemporáneo con Cerro de las Mesas, es objeto de excavaciones autorizadas en sus edificios monumentales, severamente dañados por ladrilleros. Dos plataformas, aparentemente residencias palaciegas, presentaron una secuencia abarcando el primer milenio, sugiriendo la existencia de una organización estatal temprana con posible gobierno dual o alterno, lo que arroja nueva luz sobre la sociedad Protoclásica (epi-Olmeca) y Clásica. Excavaciones extensivas y calas estratigráficas durante 2007, financiadas por FAMSI, se enfocaron principalmente en la Plataforma Este, y resultaron en el fechamiento más preciso de varias etapas constructivas y una interpretación preliminar de las funciones políticas y simbólicas de las plataformas.

Introduction

Earthen architecture in Mesoamerica has been neglected as a source of information concerning elite architecture and political organization. While Olmec heartland earthen architecture has recently become a focus of research (R. González Lauck in La Venta, A. Cyphers in San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán and Laguna de los Cerros, R. Lunagómez in Medias Aguas, most of them FAMSI grantees), Central Veracruz mounds have only been approached by test pits (Drucker 1943, Stark ed. 2001, Daneels 2002, Pascual 2006), extensive but still unpublished excavations (M. Torres Guzmán at Zapotal) or hurried rescue projects (A. Medellín Zenil 1960, I. León Pérez 1985, 1989, 1991, 1994, Andrade 2003, and unavailable rescue reports). Although most cite the use of adobe and the presence of staircases and dedicatory caches in Classic period mounds, they rarely define complete buildings or approach the earthen architecture in terms of its socio-political function. Potential functions have been proposed based on surface data from settlement pattern studies (Stark 1999, Daneels 2002), including the interpretation of monumental platforms as palaces based on formal similarity with Late Classic Maya acropolis (Stark 1999), but factual support was still lacking.



Figure 1. Map of study area (after FAMSI Gulf Coast Area map).

A recently initiated excavation project in Central Veracruz is revealing highly refined monumental palatial architecture built of stamped earth and adobes that raises the possibility that a state level organization started in the Protoclassic period (100 BCE-CE 100), which is much earlier than originally thought, and may have functioned on a form of dual or alternate government. The site of La Joya is located on the Gulf Coast, in the central part of the State of Veracruz, at the confluence of the Jamapa and Cotaxtla rivers (Municipio de Medellín de Bravo) (Figure 1). It was a major site during the first millennium CE, capital of a small state, contemporary and possibly initially subordinate to Cerro de las Mesas. The site is being steadily destroyed by brickmakers, making imperative a sustained effort in excavations. An UNAM grant made possible the first two field seasons (2004-2006), and FAMSI granted support during February-August 2007.

Framework and hypothesis

A long-term study, initiated by the author in 1981, covered 1,200 km² of the lower Cotaxtla basin in Central Veracruz, locating 132 sites with monumental earthen architecture, most from the Classic period (Daneels 1997, 2002). Two basic architectural layouts were defined: the *Monumental Plaza*, a large open plaza surrounded by three large rectangular mounds of similar size and shape (either pyramids or platforms), and the *Standard Plan*, a clearly differentiated layout consisting of a smaller plaza delimited to the north by a large pyramid, to the south by a ball court, and laterally by low rectangular platforms. In combination with independent evidence from settlement hierarchy, ceramic and radiocarbon chronology, population density, and relative presence of indicators of differentiation and specialization, I proposed that the *Monumental Plaza* reflected an early, relatively simple level of socio-political organization dating to the Protoclassic period (100 BCE-CE 100), whereas the *Standard Plan* evidenced a society already formed at the state level, arising in the Classic period (CE 100-1000) (Daneels 2002, 2005a).

To test this hypothesis, I selected the site of La Joya, immediately south of Veracruz city ([Figure 2](#)) (by its full name La Joya de San Martín Garabato, not to be confused with La Joya near Catemaco in the Tuxtlas Mountains, excavated by Philip Arnold). Occupied since the Preclassic period, it reaches the rank of a capital zone during the first millennium, and has both a *Monumental Plaza*, delimited by three monumental platforms (each larger than 1 hectare and between 8 and 13 m high), and a *Standard Plan* with a 20 to 25 m high pyramid; in these respects it is similar and contemporary to the well-known site of Cerro de las Mesas, about 40 km to the south. Since the early XX century brickmakers have slowly destroyed La Joya (Escalona 1937), leaving only about 10% of the mounds above actual surface. Because of the severe degree of deterioration, the Archaeology Council of the National Institute of Anthropology and History authorized in 2004 my project “Temporalidad y Función de la Arquitectura de Tierra”, a program of extensive excavations without the requirement of restoration. This project thereby offers a unique opportunity to investigate the monumental earthen architecture of Central Veracruz, allowing the remnant of the buildings to be excavated in their entirety.

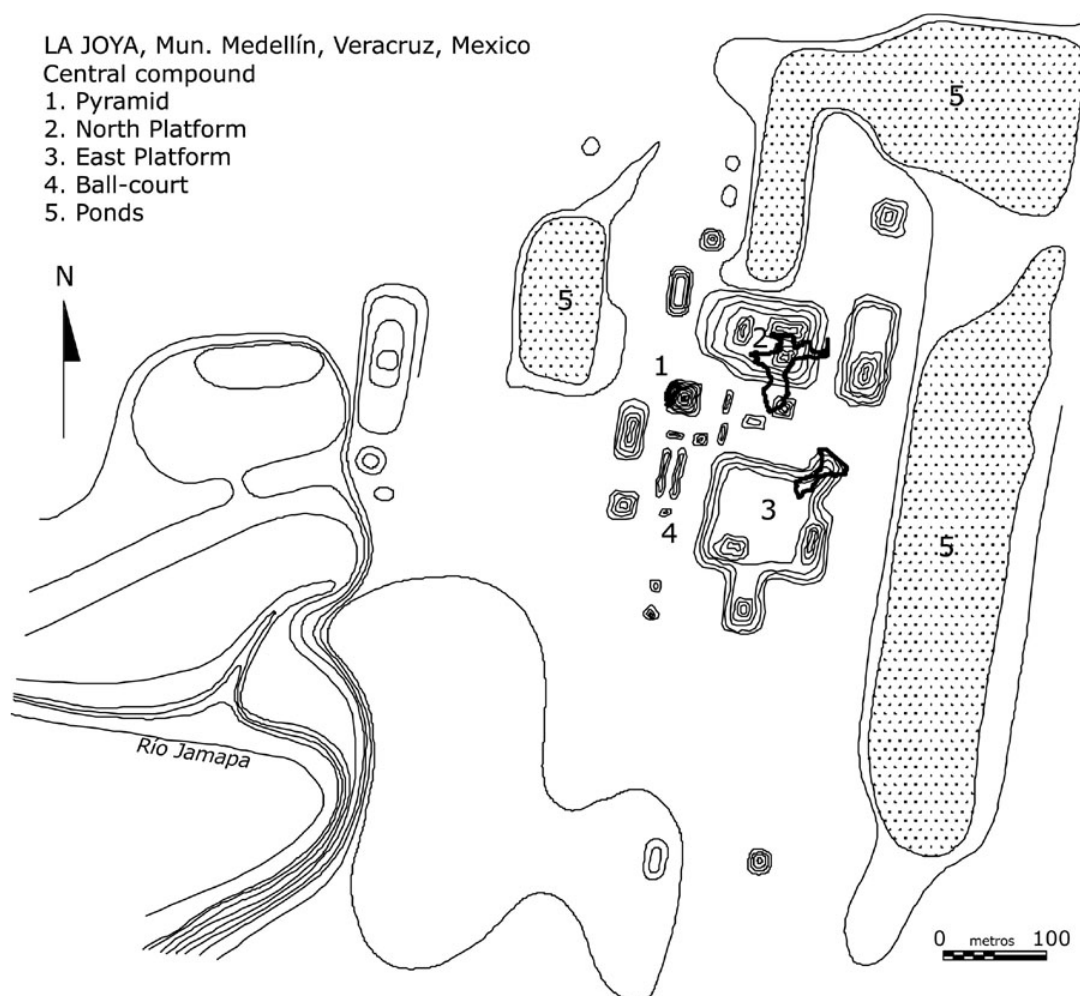


Figure 2. Composite map of site, combining contours of mounds as mapped in 1937 before destruction (Escalona Ramos 1937), inserted in topographic map made by the author in 1988, showing added smaller mounds, as well as the three artificial ponds that surround the central compound and their relationship to the Jamapa river. In thick black contour lines, extant areas of the principal mounds in 2004.

Antecedents

La Joya has now been excavated since mid-November 2004, during a total of nine months in two field seasons funded by DGAPA-PAPIIT/UNAM IN305503, then during 6 and a half months with FAMSI. The finds have exceeded all expectations. The **Pyramid**, in a 112 m² trenching, revealed its substructure, reconstructed to be nine-tiered, with an *alfarda*-flanked staircase on each side. In the **North Platform** it was possible to expose a total of approximately a 100 m² of the first building stage (4th century cal BCE-2nd century cal CE) and 272 m² of the second building stage (2nd to mid-4th century calCE), which consists of a large basal platform with five, functionally different buildings, so far interpreted as an entrance hall with rooms for public administration, a private reception hall, an enclosed elite residence, a temple on a stepped platform and a small servant's quarter. Of the third building stage only a low 6 x 6 m mound has been identified, possibly an altar. The buildings have consecratory offerings in the corners, which include ceramic vessels and (sacrificial?) burials of whole or dismembered individuals. The combination of public, administrative, residential and ritual activities has been the major argument to interpret the platform as a palace. In the **East Platform** we focused on 400 m² of the third building stage, defining four remodellings of a single building: starting as a multi-room unit, twice burnt down (calCE 220-400 and calCE 400-570), it is converted into a flat-topped rectangular platform (twice rebuilt). The East Platform is associated with dedicatory and termination offerings, including sacrificial human burials, a yoke and ceramic vessels and a particular figurine type, called "Dios Narigudo", throughout its six building stages.

So far, excavations have confirmed the chronological precedence of the *Monumental Plaza* layout, with the final plaza level of the ball-court south of the pyramid slightly later, and thus the *Standard Plan* as well (although there is no way of knowing whether a ball-court was present at the first plaza level, as the area was destroyed by brickmakers well before the start of the project). On the other hand, as the platforms seem to correspond to the multifunctional nature of palatial residences, their beginning in the Late Preclassic/Protoclassic (at least of the North Platform) suggests the presence of an elite governmental structure from periods older than anticipated.

Objectives

The purpose of the present project was to achieve a fine-grained chronology of the successive construction stages, expose complete buildings to define layouts and sample floors, dismantle them to identify fill techniques and possible offerings, and then expose substructures. We continued work in the areas adjoining the past excavations and soon to be destroyed by the brickmakers, particularly in the East Platform, because its northeast corner area features the complete sequence of a whole building group, associated with lavish offerings of ceramic and burials, which will help determine its use through time (Late Preclassic to Middle Classic). As the brickworkers proceed laterally and not horizontally (as we're doing), what is now still a whole building with staircases will soon be truncated. It was therefore urgent to continue work till the sterile layer, retrieving the most complete possible data of third, second and first building stages, a 4 m high profile, meanwhile providing backdirt for the brickmakers to work with. Since the change of Art. 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which made former ejidatarios full owners, we're working on the sufferance of the actual owner, up to now agreeable. Thus, work focused on the 400 m² sector of the East Platform, and included trenching and profiling of both Platforms to correlate stratigraphy.

Methods

The methods consist of extensive excavations to define building limits, form, and construction techniques, and trenching to define the building sequence. We're using 2 x 2 m squares of the general site grid established in 2004, and control depth of strata and finds from a common 00 datum (top of the East Platform). Using small picks and trowels, the walls, floors (interior and exterior) and fills of buildings are exposed and sampled for architectural technique (composition, resistance, pigments) and chemical (organic and mineral) and botanical residues (pollen, phytoliths, macrofossils, imprints in burnt clay); burnt floors or walls are sampled for paleomagnetism; finds like burials, caches, hearths and middens are screened or extensively sampled for charcoal and chemical and botanical residues; complete ceramic vessels are sealed for microexcavation in the laboratory. All samples are taken and stored according to the characteristic requirements of each substance, pending distribution in the corresponding laboratories. Drawings of architectural details are made 1:50, finds are detailed on a scale of 1:20 or 1:10 (burials or caches), and photographs are made with a high resolution digital camera in raw format for day to day work, with conventional black/white and slide film for wholly exposed stages.

Evaluation procedures

Stratigraphy, material analysis and radiocarbon dates will allow a fine-grained chronology of the East Platform and comparison to the North Platform, so as to reconstruct precisely the timing of the building sequence of both platforms. As both seem to be palatial residences, and delimit the same *Monumental Plaza* at the center of a political capital during 1000 years, it is relevant to know whether the building stages are simultaneous or alternated, and regularly or irregularly spaced. If a dual government existed (splitting political and religious power, as in the Postclassic Maya batab/ahkin system or the Aztec tlaotoani/cihuacoatl), one would expect simultaneous building stages, with finds reflecting different functions (political vs. ritual preponderance). If two ruling lineages took turns governing, one would expect alternated building stages, with finds reflecting equivalent political power (buildings of similar function, residues of similar activities, symbols of different lineages). Regular intervals would reflect an established pattern of power rotation, while irregular intervals would suggest rival relationships with intermittent ascendancy.

Field data

The FAMSI grant was applied to further following operations from February 12 to September 1, 2007: on the East Platform we were able to complete the definition of the sequence of the third building stage, and excavate part of the consecration offering of the northeast corner of first building stage. In the main plaza and the south plaza, trenching allowed defining the stratigraphic relationship between the East and North Platform and the Pyramid ([Figure 3](#)). These data will be discussed in detail and interpreted according to their sociopolitical implications.

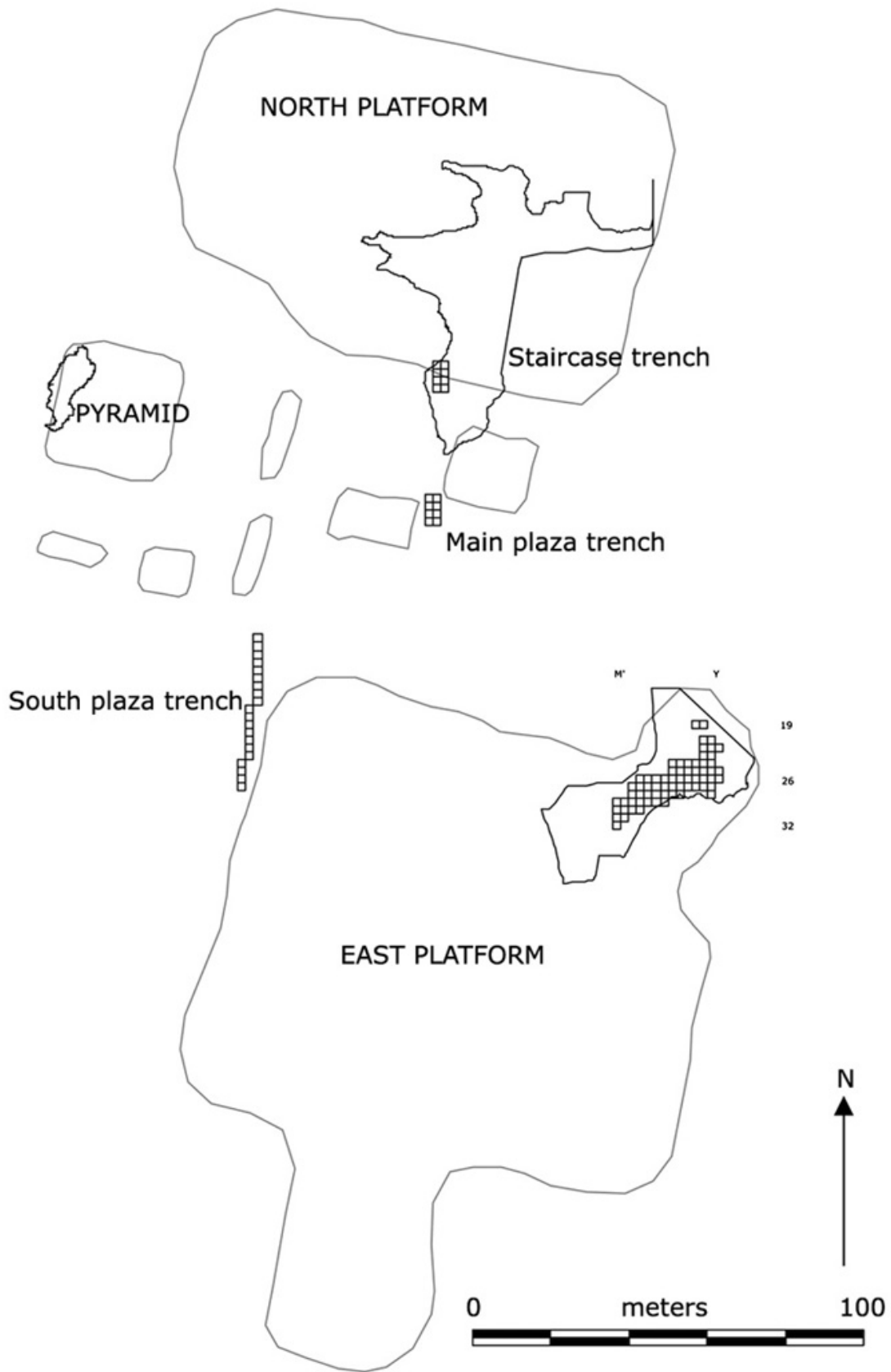


Figure 3. Map of operations done with FAMSI funding, according to 2 x 2 m grid, against contour of original mounds in gray and contour of extant areas in black.

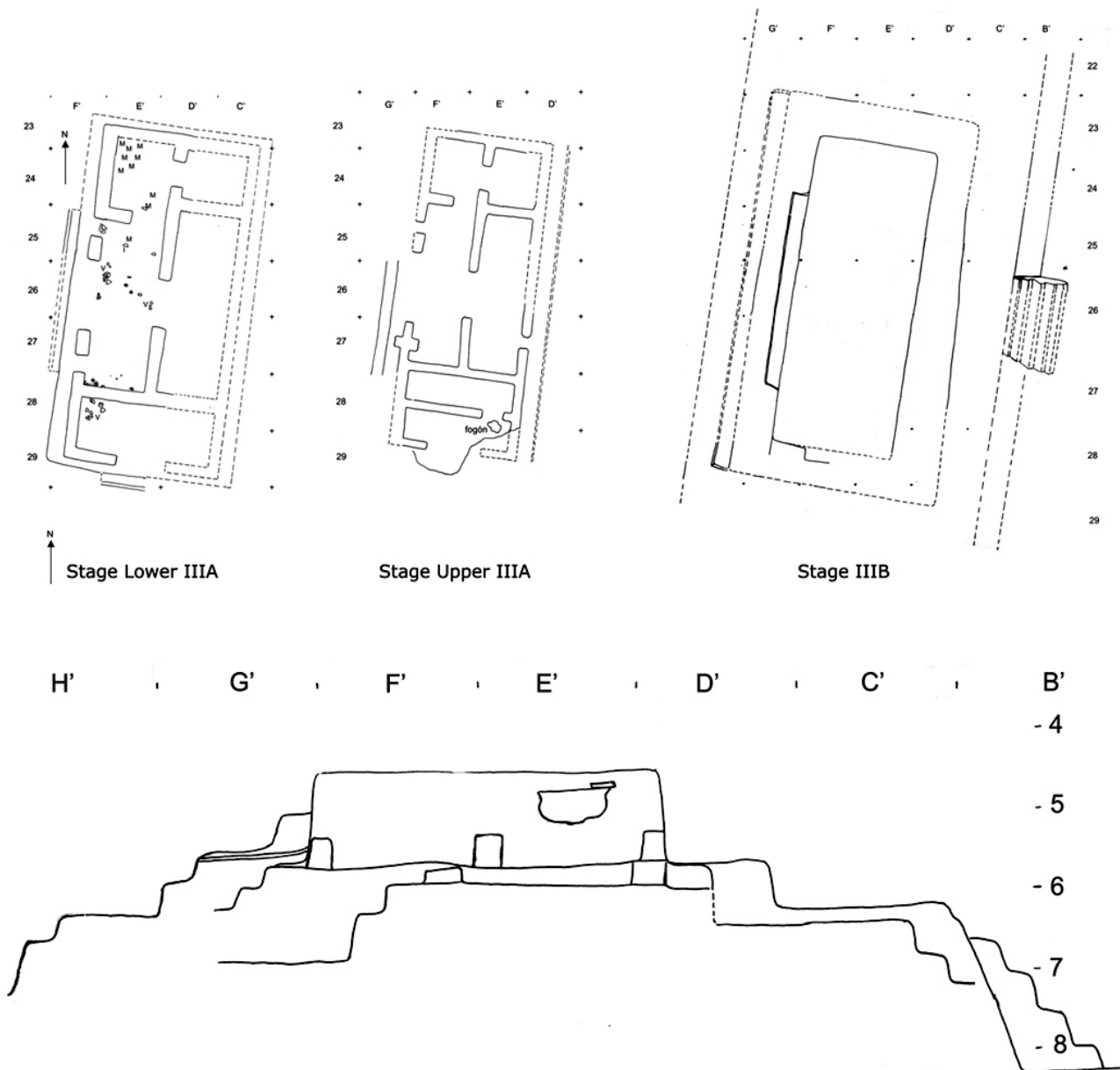


Figure 4. East Platform: first, second, and third moments of the third building stage, in ground plan and in profile, according to 2 x 2 m grid. Levels in meters below highest point of East Platform. In Lower IIIA stage plan, the dashed lines indicate the areas reconstructed on the principle of symmetry, as the eastern part had been intentionally dismantled in antiquity.

East Platform: Sequence of the third building stage

Of the four remodellings, part of the upper three buildings had been excavated in preceding field seasons. During this season, it was possible to define their contour, and located the consecratory offerings placed in the main axis, and uncover the earliest buildings ([Figure 4](#)). This first stage (Lower IIIA) consists of a large residential unit on a low two-tiered stepped platform, its western façade forming the southeast corner of the raised main plaza level. The upper tier, accessible through a two-step staircase (with an incense burner – *brasero* - at its

base), leads to the residence surrounded by a narrow walkway. Though partially dismantled, applying the principle of symmetry, the complete residence can be reconstructed as being 12 x 5.5 m, with 40 cm wide adobe walls at least 1.68 m high (according to collapsed pillar facings and remaining wall base), a flat roof (derived from the burned wattle and daub fragments) with a perimetral wall separated by a central wall. The longitudinal partition of space is rather reminiscent of the rectangular double room buildings of the Maya area than of the more squarish layout of single rooms around a central patio common in the central highlands (for example Teotihuacán, Xochicalco). The entrance hall is flanked by rectangular pillars and gives access to the main room as well as to the two small adjoining rooms to the north, the first of which resulted to be the granary, as hundreds of carbonized maize cobs were found, mainly in the northwest corner (Figure 5) To the south, a lateral room has an independent entrance to the south with a staircase. This building was burned down covering a wide variety of artifacts lying on the floor like Teotihuacán style candeleros (one is rectangular and double chambered, the other four-lobed and single-chambered), polished greystone earspools, small jade beads and concentrations of small clay balls interpreted as blowgun projectiles, as well as several ceramic bowls (as these were found after the FAMSI funding ended, no further detail will be given here). This residence was intentionally burned igniting two heap of fibrous wood in the entrance hall, then the walls were dismantled almost to their base, and about three quarters of the posterior rooms cut off to erect the second building stage (2 sigma cal CE 380-580 +/- 50, Beta 218848 AMS). A series of bowls containing “Dios Narigudo” figurines (Figure 6) were placed in the layer of *firme*, the fine-grained layer of fill that underlies the floor of the new house.

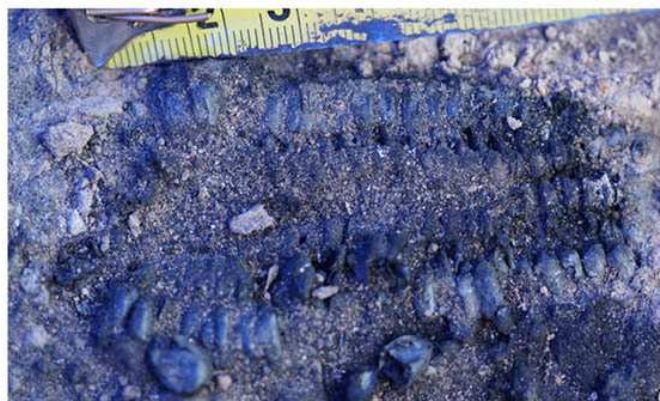


Figure 5. East Platform: examples of carbonized maize cobs from NW room.



Figure 6. East Platform: one of the bowls with “Dios Narigudo” figurine, placed above the rubble of the destroyed first building, as dedicatory offering to the second construction stage.

The second building (Stage Upper IIIA – see [Figure 4](#)) apparently shares the same lower tier platform as the former, but its upper tier is accordingly raised and accessible through a three-step staircase. It has a layout very similar to the former, though slightly narrower (11.4 x 4.5 m), and placed more to the west, the main differences being that one of the freestanding pillars at the entrance is encased in the wall, and thus should be designated as a pilaster, and that the southern room is now doubled. The walls are now made of 30 cm wide adobes, and the general quality of workmanship is lower than the previous building. On the threshold between both rooms a sunken fire-pit was found, suggesting possible cooking activities. In sharp contrast with the first building stage, this residence was completely cleaned before its burning and destruction (2 sigma cal CE 400-570 +/-40, Beta 203804 AMS). This building had in its central axis at the foot of the upper tier staircase ceramic bowls both as dedication offering (during construction and remodellings) and as termination offering (placed in the fill, at the top of the stairs), several of them with “Dios Narigudo” figurines.

From the same chronological phase, virtually identical residence layouts, though smaller in size, have been found in rescue excavations in same the region, slightly up-river (at La Campana, 8 x 4 m - Jiménez y Bracamontes 2000 - and Las Puertas, 8 x 5 m Guerrero 2003). These were also associated to “Dios Narigudo” figurine offerings. This shows that the layout is part of a recurring pattern of elite residences associated to monumental platforms and “Dios Narigudo” figurines, but not necessarily with sites with ball-courts, as none are reported at these latter sites.

The third moment (stage IIIB – see [Figure 4](#)) represents a complete change in the function of the structure: it becomes a three tiered stepped platform, almost 4 m high, with a flat surface on top, without any evidence of building of either adobe or posts. It shares the same plaza floor as the former moments, with a seven-step staircase to the main entrance to the west, and to the east a narrow five-step staircase to the lower tier. The upper tier follows exactly the rectangular contour of the second residence. It was lavishly consecrated with a huge ceramic vessel (1 m in diameter, seen in profile in [Figure 4](#) bottom), a stone bead, a possible pyrite disk and a complete plain limestone yoke (*yugo*), traditionally considered to be part of ballgame paraphernalia (found in a previous season), all immediately below floor level; a ceramic bowl with “Dios Narigudo” figurines was found at the base of the upper staircase. This building remains a three tiered platform after a rise in the general platform level, but emerging only as a 2.5 m high building with a five-step main west staircase.

The following remodellings continue the pattern of flat-topped stepped platform, with a main staircase to the west, and secondary staircases to the east and apparently to north and south also, though its height above the general floor level of the East Platform becomes each time less (2.4 m, then 2 m, then 1 m), seemingly reflecting the waning importance of the building in the overall configuration of the East Platform. Each of these remodellings sported dedicatory caches of bowls with “Dios Narigudo” figurines in front of the main west staircase (and sometimes also to the east). The final stage was covered and leveled by a fill from the fourth building stage, after the placing of a huge termination offering: to the west two human burials and a dog, as well as three bowls with “Dios Narigudo” figurines, and to the east eleven primary burials (9 cross-legged, 2 lateral), 14 dismembered (skulls, legs and arms) and 7 secondary (bundles of long bones and skull fragments), amongst them stacked platters and above everything an almost continuous layer of small sketchy “Dios Narigudo” figurines (more than 800 of them) and small hemispherical cups, all made from the same crumbly orange paste (drinking cups?), apparently produced in series for the ceremonial event accompanying the interments. The ceramic types associated to this offering belong mainly to the latter part of the Middle Classic (CE 500-700), but Late Classic bowls were found in the arms of the seated individuals, suggesting they may have hugged the latest fashion. In the 10 cases where positive identification was possible, all were young adult males (25-35 years). Although human sacrifice could not be evidenced (the individuals are not tied, and the dismembered parts could have been obtained post-mortem), the probability that so many persons of the same gender and age group would have died conveniently at the time of the large termination offering is virtually nil.

After this event the whole area is completely leveled off: no buildings are erected, though a west to east drainage line is placed below the floor to drain the main body of the platform towards the east ([Figure 7](#)). This line cuts a former north to south tubing that caught and drained the water from the second tier of stage IIIB. Interestingly, from this fourth stage on, the northeast outcrop of the East Platform will remain unchanged, while the main body of the East Platform will continue to grow through two more major building stage, increasing its height another 3.5 m (over a hectare in surface, an estimated 20,000 cubic meter in volume), till the very end of the Classic period (approximately CE 1000).



Figure 7. East Platform: drainage of ceramic tubes from the fourth building stage.

East Platform: Consecration offering of the first building stage

The northeast corner of the first building stage was exposed, showing a fill consisting of removed paleosoil, suggesting that the surface immediately surrounding the structure was scraped in order to obtain material for construction. The talus has a very low angle, of the order of 20°, due to the lack of internal contention of the fill. It is covered by a sandy loam ramp that on top of the 1 m high platform levels out as a floor. This cap layer contained two burials further to the south and southwest and generally contains large amount of broken pottery and figurines.



Figure 8. East Platform: arrangement of “Dioses Narigudos” in the capping stratum of the first building stage (Top: level 95, bottom: level 101).

The northeast corner excavations showed that the sherds were part of whole vessels shattered in a seeming pattern of ritual dumping, interspersed with arrangements of “Dios Narigudo” figurines in situ (Figure 8). Hundreds of sherds belong to a single huge jar, hematite red on the shoulder and bitumen paint on the bottom half, others correspond to parts of monumental hollow figures. All of these are firmly into the local Central Veracruz tradition of the period. Yet, another series of fragments belong to large pieces of incense-

burner with overhanging lips, decorated with mold-made appliqué in the form of cotton flowers, reptile eye, feathers, and large knots, which are definitely reminiscent of Teotihuacán incense burners ([Figure 9](#)).



Figure 9. East Platform: fragments of Teotihuacán style censors found in the capping stratum of the first building stage (from top to bottom, from left to right: thumb-impressed, with cotton flower moldmade appliqué, knot, next three feathers, last: reptile eye glyph).

Below this corner, three refuse pits were found, dug into the sterile clay below paleosoil. Two of these are tronco-conical in shape. The material appears to be Late Preclassic, which agrees with the dates of the ovens and other refuse pits found more to the south in earlier field seasons.

Chronology and function of the East Platform

These finds are important firstly in view of the chronology they suggest for the East Platform. The closest parallels for the Teotihuacán-style incense burners found in the first building stage are from the Xolalpan period (when molds start to be used - Rattray 1979: 225, 272, Rattray 2001). Three radiocarbon dates were obtained for the first building stage; one associated to Burial 5 in the same floor gave CE 230-410 +/- 40 (2 sigma calibration; Beta 203801), which would agree quite well with an Early Xolapan date, though the two other dates would suggest a slightly earlier placement: CE 130-400 +/- 50 and 40 BCE-CE 130 +/- 40 (2 sigma calibration; Beta 218442 and 218441). Also, the middens found in the sterile clay underlying the fill are Late Preclassic (four dates from kitchen ovens sunk in the sterile

clay stratum range from 400 to 160 BCE – Beta 203795, 203796, 203798, 203799). The candeleros on the floor of the first residence of the third stage, especially the rectangular one, would also date to (Early) Xolalpan according to the Teotihuacán sequence (Rattray 1979: 272, Rattray 2001), which would agree with the radiocarbon date of destruction to the late fourth to sixth century. But, this would mean that the first, second and early third building stage of the East Platform are compressed into the roughly 200 years of the Xolalpan period, between CE 350 and 550 (Rattray 1998), while we know the termination offering before the final leveling of the fourth stage can be placed at the very start of the Late Classic through ceramic cross-dating (CE 700). The fourth to fifth stages would then stretch the span between CE 700-1000.

The extensive excavation of the third building stage in the East Platform illustrates how certain units undergo important changes in function, from residence to stepped temple (?) platform. Nevertheless, the “Dios Narigudo” offerings remain a constant through the change, and through the whole building sequence from first to last stage. This stand in contrast to the North Platform, where at least for the first to second building stage there seems to be a strong continuity in the form, function and placement of the structures on the platform, and figurine offerings are lacking.

Stratigraphic trenching

Two trenches were dug to the south of the North Platform, where surface level was better preserved. The first trench allowed defining that the main staircase of both first and second building stage rise from the paleosoil in a very close succession ([Figure10](#)). This is also the case in the East Platform as well as for the first building stage of the Pyramid’s substructure, which thus shared a common prepared plaza level right above paleosoil. The second trench, further south, shows that the North Platform’s penultimate building stage rose from an intermediate raised plaza floor 75 cm higher, and the last building stage is abutted by the newly elevated plaza floor that coincides with the third building stage of the East Platform. The profiling of the brickmaker’s cut through the plaza to the south of the Pyramid, running parallel to the foot of the East Platform, show that the three plaza floor levels continue with a slight incline towards the south.

Thus, the stratigraphy as well as the radiocarbon and ceramic dates indicate that the North Platform was the oldest, existing alone in its first and second building stages (Late Preclassic and Early Classic period). Then, late in the Early Classic or at the start of Middle Classic, the first stage of both Pyramid and East Platform are built and joined to the North Platform by a plaza floor.



Figure 10. Trench to the south of the North Platform: main staircase of first and second building stage, rising from paleosoil (top: upper flight, bottom: lower flight).

Table 1. Radiocarbon dates from North and East Platforms

LA JOYA, Mun. de Medellín, Veracruz, Mexico

Laboratory no.	Analysis	BP	+/-	BP-1950	2 sigma calibration	context	sample	phase of context
Beta 128432	AMS	2200	40	-250	380-160 BCE	Plat. N X'47 Level 95-96, cranium in paleosol below first building stage	charred material	Late Preclassic
Beta 128447	radiometric	1940	70	10	80 BCE - CE 230	Plat. E A'/B' 25/26 Level 48-58 termination offering, end of 3rd building stage	charred material	Transition to Late Classic
Beta 128448	AMS	1590	50	360	CE 380-580	Plat. E D'24 y D'28, Level 60, charcoal on floor stage Early IIIA	charred material	Middle Classic
Beta 203795	radiometric	2220	60	-270	400-170 BCE	Plat. E B'31, Level 109, bottom of open oven	charred material	Late Preclassic
Beta 203796	radiometric	2180	40	-230	380-160 BCE	Plat. E B'31, Level 109, combustion area of open oven	charred material	Late Preclassic
Beta 203798	radiometric	2310	50	-360	420-360 BCE, 290-230 BCE	Plat. E D'31, Level 113, lower charcoal layer of beehive oven	charred material	Late Preclassic
Beta 203799	radiometric	2270	70	-320	410-160 BCE	Plat. E D'31, Level 109, upper charcoal layer of beehive oven	charred material	Late Preclassic
Beta 203801	AMS	1690	40	260	CE 230-410	Plat. E X29, Level 95, upper floor first building stage, assoc. Burial no. 5	sediment	Middle Classic
Beta 203802	radiometric	2130	40	-180	350-300 BCE	Pyramid, charcoal layer on bottom beehive oven	charred material	Late Preclassic
Beta 203804	AMS	1570	40	380	CE 400-570	Plat. E E'28, Level 58, charcoal on upper floor stage Late IIIA	charred material	Middle Classic
Beta 218438	AMS	2170	40	-220	370-100 BCE	Plat. N X'47 Level 83-84, Burial 3 and troncoconical pit in corner first stage	charred material	Early to Middle Classic
Beta 218439	radiometric	1930	60	20	50 BCE - 230 CE	Plat. N floor in Z'/A" 48/49 Level 95 y 97, abandonment first stage	charred material	Early to Middle Classic
Beta 218440	radiometric	1880	60	70	CE 10-250	Plat. N floor in S/U 44/45 level 62-71, abandonment first stage	charred material	Early to Middle Classic
Beta 218441	AMS	1950	40	0	40 BCE - CE130	Plat. E X25 N. 87, rubble on floor, abandonment first stage	charred material	Early to Middle Classic
Beta 218442	AMS	1760	50	190	CE 130-400	Plat. E X24 Level 91-92, burial 32 in altar first building stage	charred material	Middle Classic
Beta 218443	AMS	1730	40	220	CE 230-410	Plat. N G'37 Level 66 and E'40 Level 70, between floor 2 and 3 of audience ha	charred material	Early to Middle Classic
Beta 218444	AMS	2170	40	-220	370-100 BCE	Pyramid G'19 Level 107, midden below first floor substructure	charred material	Late Preclassic
Beta 218449	AMS	1750	40	200	CE 220-400	Plat. E J'/K' 31/32 Level 73-74, abandonment stage IIIA	charred material	Middle Classic
Beta 218450	AMS	1790	40	160	CE 130-350	Plat. N Z'/A' 50/51 Level 52, ashes on floor, abandonment second stage	charred material	Middle Classic

(samples dated with funding UNAM DGAPA-PAPIIT IN305503 2004-2006)

Preliminary interpretations

As often happens, simple questions beget complicated answers. Based on the preliminary results, and pending complete analysis of the materials recovered (ceramic vessels and figurines, lithics, botanical and faunal remains, chemical residues, building techniques etc.), what can be said about the sociopolitical implications of the earthen architecture is the following. Massive platforms support a series of buildings with administrative, residential and ritual functions, which allows their interpretation as palatial units. The earliest is the North Platform, with the first building stage Late Preclassic (though at that stage not technically a platform but a monumentally enclosed space, the functional diversity the buildings inside is already established, and therefore its palatial use inferred) and the second Protoclassic, with its use carrying on into the Early Classic.

A *Monumental Plaza* was in place at least by the late Early Classic (CE 200/300), enclosed by the North and East Platform and the basal platform of the Pyramid, all standing on a plaza floor leveled at the original surface. So, from that time period on, two palatial residences share the same main plaza till the very end of the Classic period (CE 1000): five major building stages in the case of the East Platform, and (at least) four in the North Platform. By the Middle Classic (equivalent to Xolalpan in Teotihuacán and the Early Classic in the Maya area), the three buildings share an elevated plaza level, on which the *Standard Plan* layout is added to the south of the Pyramid, a small square plaza with the ball-court to the south and platforms to the east and west. By inference, the state religion associated to the ball game would by then be in place at La Joya, and the find of the yoke in the third building stage of the East Platform is consistent in this context.¹

¹ Though the beheading ritual associated to the ball-game is attested in nearby Cerro de las Mesas as early as the Protoclassic – Daneels 2005a).

So far, the data support our original hypothesis that the *Monumental Plaza* precedes the *Standard Plan*, and allow placing both layouts in a quite precise moment in time, at least for La Joya: Early Classic for the first (CE 200/300) and Middle Classic for the second (CE 300/400). Unexpectedly, the Monumental Platform as a palatial residence by itself, i.e. apparently unrelated to a plaza layout, appears to be older, at least Protoclassic (100 BCE – CE 100) or even earlier, which suggests that its early political organization is not as simple or egalitarian as originally inferred. On the other hand, it should come as no surprise, as the general region produced the up to now earliest prototype of ruler stela at La Mojarra, with a lavishly clad figure in profile, accompanied by a glyphic text initiated with long count dates of the mid second century CE (La Mojarra Stela 1 – Winfield 1988).

The questions arising from the presence of two palatial residences along the major plaza of a capital during approximately 700 years can now also be addressed in view of the evidence gathered so far. The North and East Platforms are structurally similar, elevated platforms accessible from the plaza level through ample staircases, with a variety of buildings including residences, stepped platforms interpreted as temples, smaller constructions interpreted as altars and service quarters (administrative buildings being so far only attested in the North Platform, but that may be due to the more extensive nature of the excavations in that structure). Both have dedicatory caches in the construction stages, but their nature and placement differ significantly. In the North Platform, human burials with ceramic vessels appear mainly in the corners of the buildings. In the East Platform, the most common form of cache, from the earliest to the latest building stage, consists of bowls with a special type of figurine (“Dios Narigudo”), under floors in front of staircases or entrances to buildings, placed in or close to the central axis, and only occasionally of human burials (also in axis). We consider this type of figurine to be associated to a folk cult (Medellín 1960, Daneels in press), parallel to the state cult associated to the ball-game. Such figurines, placed in the same kind of dedicatory caches, are found as well in habitational units of common folk throughout the Jamapa-Cotaxtla basin, as in pyramids and monumental platforms. We already indicated their presence in residential units of major platforms virtually identical to the East Platform’s early third stage residences, in architectural compounds apparently lacking ball-courts.

Therefore, returning to the alternatives cited in the evaluation procedures, the platforms have had simultaneous use at least at some times: around CE 200/300 the second stage of the North Platform is still in use at the time of the first to the early third stages of the East Platform. But this additionally suggests that the architectural growth is not regular (there is no one-to-one correspondence between the building stages of both platforms). This rules out a major concerted urban renewal planning, although the several stages of plaza floor rises (implying the carrying of huge amounts of fills) demonstrate the maintenance of shared architectural spaces. Together with the existence of a separate symbolical discourse in both platforms, with a clear relationship to ritual in the case of the East Platform, the evidence so far tends to support the hypothesis of a dual government based on a separation between political and religious functions, rather than the cyclical ascendancy of rival lineages of equivalent political function and power.

Thus, the data obtained from La Joya shed a new light on political organization in Central Veracruz during the Classic period. Not only do they allow making a case for the interpretation of the monumental platforms as palatial residences, but place their inception at an unexpected early date, at least the Protoclassic. Furthermore, the presence during 700 years of two palaces one across the other along the main plaza of a capital site can thus far

best be interpreted as a case of dual government, splitting secular administration from religion, thus foreshadowing the Postclassic instances known from historical evidence. This interpretation is based on the structural similarity and parallel chronology of the monumental platforms on one side and their divergent symbolic associations on the other. These insights reveal a complexity that goes beyond anything that had been proposed so far for Classic period Central Veracruz.

The objectives targeted in the project were thus reached so as to address the main hypothesis emitted. Yet the complexity of the findings has made the excavation process slow, so that the second and first buildings stages of the East Platform are still to be excavated. Profile records of existing cuts indicate an intricate sequence of remodellings of complete buildings for each stage, which will inform on the kind of structures that emerged in the first place to limit the south-east corner of the main plaza, at its paleosoil level. This will require additional funding to excavate.

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Extended versions of this report, including data obtained also before and after FAMSI funding, will appear in edited books at CIESAS/UNAM (on dual government) and at INAH/Penn State (on urbanism).

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