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## CITY LIFE AT CLASSIC MAYA PALENQUE, MEXICO

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### ***Stahl Research Report #39***

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"City Life at Classic Maya Palenque, Mexico" is a Collaborative Research project with primary funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded to Professor Rosemary Joyce. Palenque, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Chiapas, Mexico, is well-known for its important role in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing. Previous and ongoing work there on the temples and residence of the ruling family have produced one of the best-understood case studies of the development of a Classic Maya state during the Late Classic Period (approximately 600-800 AD). Less is known about life outside of the precincts of the ruling family. Previous projects have mapped a dense sector of likely residential occupation bounded by the Motiepa river on the west side and the steep terrain to the east, and it is this neighborhood of Palenque that is the focus of this project.

While in other major Maya cities residential areas were usually constructed with a clear layout, typically a series of structures oriented around a central patio, the majority of Palenque's mapped structures appear at first to be more randomly distributed. However, there are *some* residential groups that do follow the traditional Plazuela design at Palenque, namely, Group IV – located in roughly the center of the neighborhood we have defined. Group IV was most likely a leading neighborhood residence, home of a high-ranking *sahal* (secondary noble), and the site of the neighborhood cemetery. The question remains as to why the structures composing other clusters surrounding Group IV take such a diversity of forms and orientations. Does this diversity indicate a history of growth, where Group IV is the oldest occupied part of the neighborhood? To answer these questions, we look to the neighboring residential groups and compare the kinds of activities, history of growth and levels of wealth and access that are evident there, compared to Group IV.

The project brings together an international group of scholars, including project co-director Dr. Rodrigo Liendo (Universidad Autónoma de México) and field directors Dr. Lisa Johnson (University of Nevada, Las Vegas) and Dr. Arianna Campiani (Sapienza Università di Roma) to explore three main research questions:

*How was city life in Palenque organized during the Late Classic height of its political power?*

*What was the structure of economic activities through which the city was provisioned?*

*Did residents outside of the precincts of the ruling family undertake the practices of ritual and luxury consumption documented for the ruling and noble families, as either producers or co-participants?*

These questions are being addressed by exploring the redundancy of activities across a sample of residences selected using stratified random sampling design. The basic sampling unit for our project is the compound, a group of buildings and associated exterior space that excavations in other Maya sites has shown typically is the residence of multi-generational extended families. Our spatial analyses show that approximately 109 mapped structures in this area form at least 23 possible clusters, each of which includes a diversity of architectural forms. For excavation and sampling purposes, we ranked clusters using a diversity index which accounts for different structural forms within a given cluster, which formed sampling strata. The project study area includes a number of smaller structures, some isolated, others in larger groupings which may reflect differences in function, wealth, or history of growth. In 2022, we conducted our first excavations in one larger compound, JO33.

The structures of JO33 originally faced the Motiepa river, with the entrance and front walls collapsed and eroded down the steep bank of the river. The compound measured approximately 20 m x 12 m. Following excavations, a large structure with multiple rooms, a collapsed stone roof and remnants of a stucco floor was defined to the north, designated JO33A. A second structure, a long linear platform situated to the south, with a narrow alleyway separating them, was designated JO33B. It was a simple rectangular platform, most likely built to support a perishable structure. Excavations suggest that the alley between these two structures was kept clear of debris, forming part of the access for circulation through the neighborhood.

One midden deposit was identified outside JO33B, with large amounts of ceramics, lithics, shell, faunal remains, figurine fragments and metate fragments. A second midden deposit was identified behind JO33A, with high quantities of ceramics, lithics, faunal remains, figurine fragments and manos and metates (grinding stones). Excavation within this structure identified an intact stucco floor, and soil chemistry samples were collected. These samples are being analyzed to identify the activities specific to each of these two structures.

In two excavation locations in Structure JO33B, deep circular pits, devoid of artifacts, extended below the level of the constructed floor. Excavators also encountered a box-like stone feature constructed in architectural fill, capped by a long linear flat stone. There were concentrations of burning outside the feature and on the top stone. This stone is very similar to the typical capstones used in Palenque burials and so it was suspected that this could have been a burial. The hollow box feature was full of soil but contained no human remains. However, residues from burning, fragmented human bone (a mandible and teeth and a tibia fragment), non-human animal bones, and a small shell bead were found outside of the feature. This was the only area where human bone was found. It is possible that this was a ritual feature built to conduct an event during the construction of the platform.

Inside structure JO33B, excavations encountered a series of superimposed deposits of dense flat-lying sherds, faunal remains and in some areas, concentrations of burning. At least one set of faunal remains were articulated bones, identified as a portion of a deer leg. These characteristics suggest the materials are residues from a specific event or events.

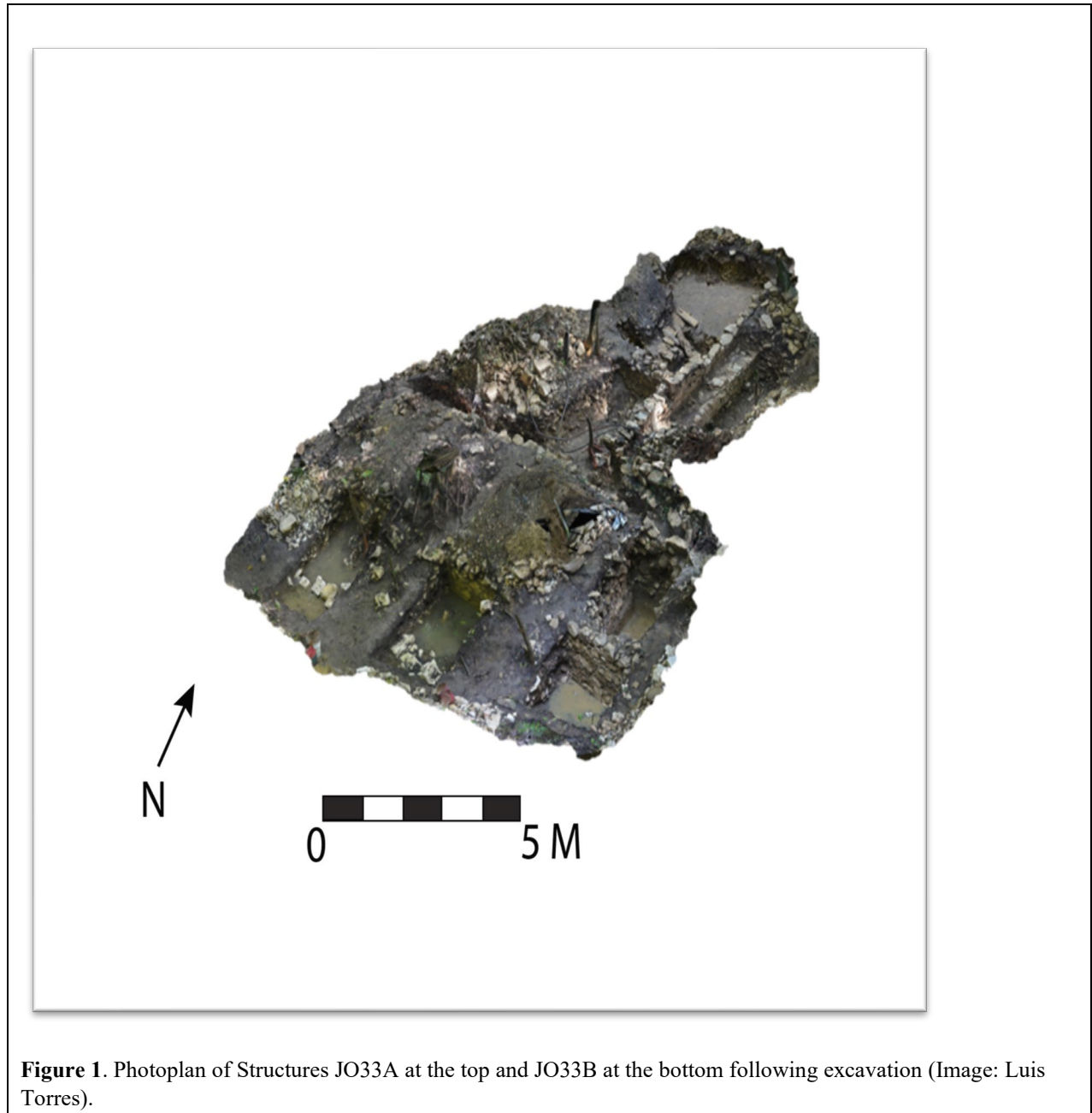
This compound appears to have been home to a somewhat wealthy household. Midden deposits from Structure JO33B produced a concentration of fragments of white stone items including an ear ornament, fragments of a stone box, and marble plaques with adhesive attached that once formed part of a mosaic attached to some perishable material.

In comparison to other residential groups in this neighborhood, particularly Group IV, the kinds of activities in JO33 are typical domestic activities. A preliminary review of the materials recovered from this group suggests there were widely shared Palenque practices using a suite of typical Palenque-style goods. Ceramics included storage vessels including large ollas, cooking and serving related vessels, such as bowls, plates, and cylindrical vessels. Obsidian imported into the site (under analysis for sources) was

worked using core-blade technology. Along with chert and limestone, it provided a full suite of household tools including bifaces, some showing heavy use. Five manos or mano fragments and 2 metate fragments were recovered from JO33A, along with two additional metate fragments from JO33B. The excavations also yielded 533 faunal remains representing turtle, fish, edible river snails, birds, crocodiles, dogs, and deer. Ongoing analysis of carbonized plant remains sampled across the excavations, along with a more thorough analysis of the faunal remains, will provide more precise information on diet of residents.

However, no burials were encountered, and other evidence of ritual was scarce. A concentration of materials layered in a heap nearly ½ meter in depth in JO33B may be remnants of an elaborate feasting event. Figurines were found in nearly every excavation area, in their largest quantities in the trash pits behind the structures. Special use ceramics recovered included a possible drum, a fragment of a handle from a ladle incensario and a nearly complete miniature vessel.

The 2022 excavations provide promising information for our research into the diversity of Palenque's households. They demonstrate differences in participation in ritual practice from both the ruling family, and the noble family living in Group IV, central to this neighborhood. At the same time, the residents of this compound had access to imported materials, both obsidian and white stones, including marble. At least some luxury items were consumed and discarded here. One set of deposits may represent the remains of feasting. As analysis of microresidues continues, we expect to understand what forms of crafting may have taken place in this group, establishing a baseline for continuing excavations in 2023 and beyond.



**Figure 1.** Photoplan of Structures JO33A at the top and JO33B at the bottom following excavation (Image: Luis Torres).