REPORT OF THE 2005 FIELDWORK OF THE

STANFORD-UNIVERSIDAD DEL VALLE SEMETABAJ PROJECT

Dr. JOHN W. RICK

LIC. LUISA ESCOBAR GALO

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Preface

This is a preliminary report on excavations and related activities carried out at the Guatemalan site of San Andrés Semetabaj by a cooperative team of archaeologists from Stanford University and Guatemala's Universidad del Valle from 17-29 April, 2005. The work is a response to the suggestions and support of Erick Mack, whose family owns the land on which a significant proportion of the sites lies. It follows initial fieldwork that was carried out at the site in December 2003 and April 2004, and is designed to initiate a new phase of research capable of determining the nature and value of the archaeological deposits at the site. Although we anticipated a full month of excavations at the site, local conditions made it prudent to curtail this initial excavation season at an earlier time than planned. Thus the work is inconclusive in many respects, but this reflects our hope and intention of completing and extending this work, perhaps during a similar season in 2006. The Peter Hawley Mack Foundation, founded by the Mack family, provided funds for the execution of this work, and Erick Mack made many of the arrangements which allowed for efficient and effective fieldwork. Without the support and interest of Erick and the Mack family, it would not have been possible to carry out this project; whatever advances in knowledge about the site we have achieved in this short time were made possible by this generous help.

1. The Site of San Andrés Semetabaj

1.1 Location

The site of San Andrés Semetabaj is in the Departamento de Sololá, adjacent to the town of the same name. Geographically the site is located on a descending ground surface below mountains to the north; a surface gentle enough to allow extensive mound construction, although the overall terrain is dissected by minor drainages (Fig. 1). Background on the setting and early investigation history of the site can be found in the report of a predecessor investigation that assessed the site, primarily its chronology, through a series of small excavations scattered across the site (Shook, Hatch, and Donaldson, n.d. "Ruins of Semetabaj, Dept. Solola, Guatemala", henceforth referred to as Shook et al.). To the northwest lies the sharp descent into the deeply incised drainage of the Rio Panajachel, and to the southwest, at a distance of several hundred meters beyond the apparent site limit is the steep face descending to Lake Atitlán, about 400 m below. The analysis of the ceramics recovered from these 1970's excavations, along with earlier surface collections revealed a primarily Middle Preclassic and Early Classic period occupation of the site, or at least deposition of ceramics in and around those periods. A preliminary map was made of the site, giving approximate positions of mounds and other features. We have adopted the mound numbering of Shook et al., running from 1 through 15. We were only able to visit Mounds 2 and 3 on brief occasions, as they lie inside the modern walls of a religious girl's school into which outsiders are rarely permitted.

Our first two very short seasons of fieldwork were aimed at mapping and minor conservation work at the site. The preliminary map of Shook et al. was never intended to be an accurate portrayal of the site's contours and characteristics, and there is a serious problem of site delimitation of site boundaries. The eastern periphery is effectively the modern town of San Andrés Semetabaj, but the site may well continue under the town's buildings. To the north,

the sherd and obsidian scatter continues well beyond the northernmost Mound 15, and we suspect that addition modest mound structures may be present that are obscured by high-standing corn. We regard the N-S dimensions of the site to be presently unknown, with a likely minimum extension of 0.7 km; the E-W site width, assuming that the major occupation is confined to the high ground of the mound ridge, is probably around 0.3 km. The minimum area of the site is thus in the range of 20 ha, and the monumental core of mounds enclosing about 10 ha of space.

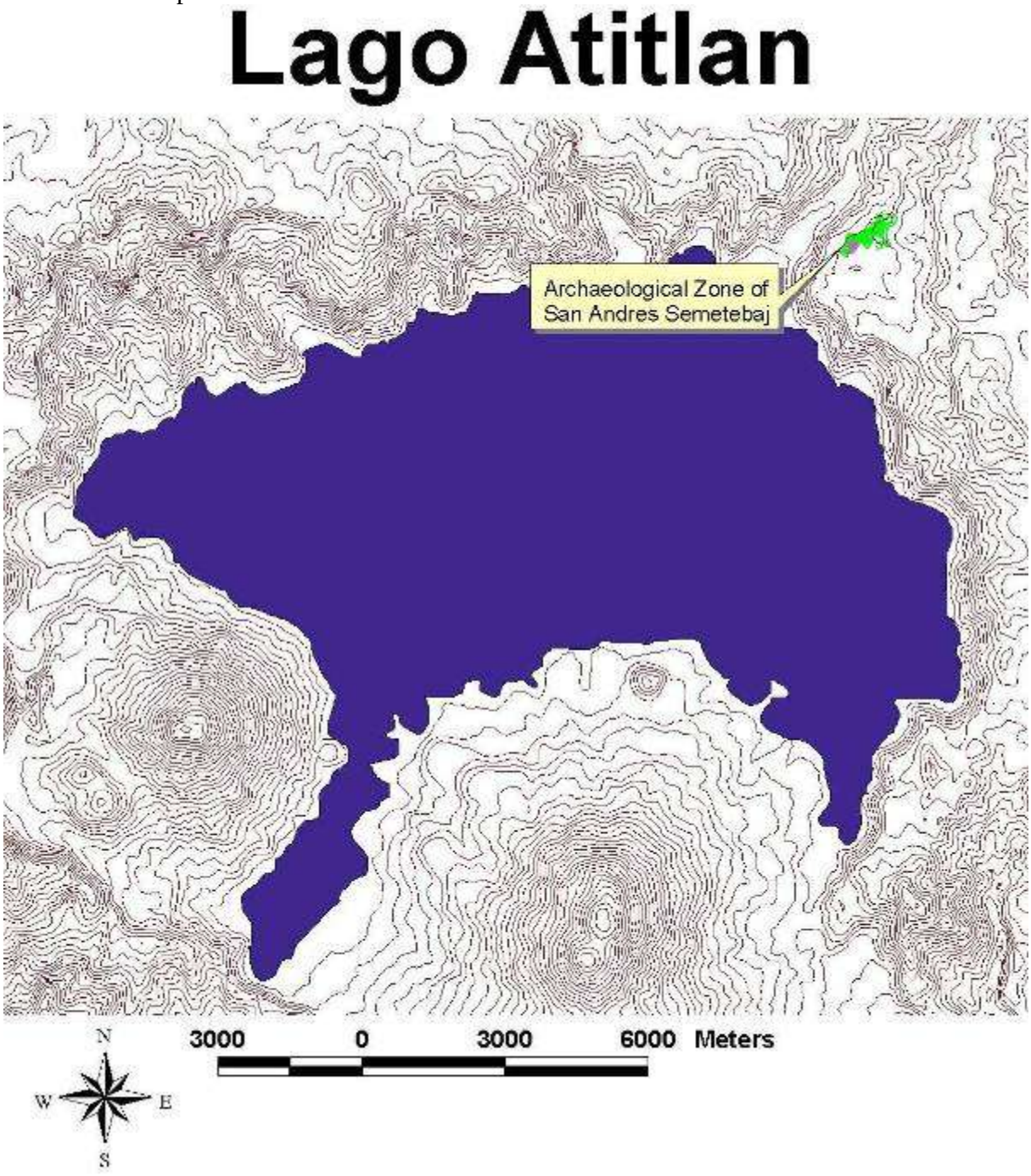

Figure 1. Location of San Andres Semetabaj in relation to Lake Atitlán.

The mapping of the site, the primary activity we carried out prior to the excavations reported here, was done with the use of a high precision electronic theodolite ('total station') and GPS instruments, and supplemental mapping was carried out by personnel of the Global Heritage Foundation subsequent to our 2005 fieldwork (Fig. 2). From these efforts we have both a reliable topographic map with cultural features, and also various forms of three-dimensional models valuable for analysis and visualization of the site. Subsurface detection was carried out with magnetometry in the first short season, but without producing results that could guide further fieldwork. We were able to define two new mound-like topographic features (Mounds 16 and 17) that have extensive cultural materials, although their elevation may be primarily of natural, and not cultural origin.

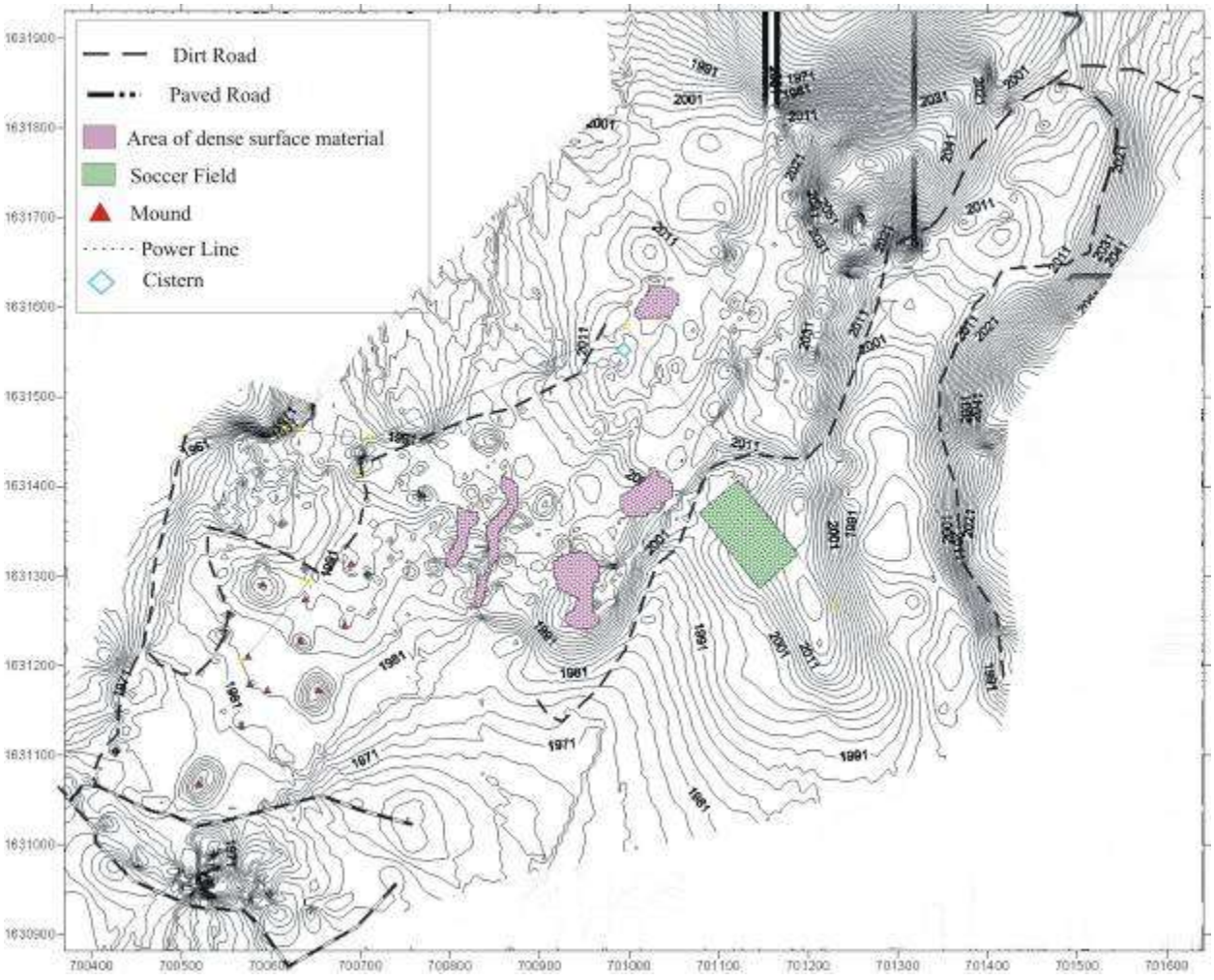

Figure 2. Overall area of San Andres Semetabaj, as documented through project theodolite and GPS survey, showing major features and topography.

In the second short season in 2004 we also cleaned, documented, and partially backfilled a looter's trench in Mound 11, which provided information on the layering, and possible construction methods and uses that the mounds have. Some familiarity with the artifact inventory was given by this cleaning activity, and the ceramics found in the effort confirmed the site's occupation as primarily concentrating in the Middle Preclassic, and the Early Classic Periods, with a notable lack of Late Preclassic and Postclassic materials. It is clear

that the primarily earthen mound construction has allowed substantial erosion and alteration of the mounds, but the broad distribution of artifacts in areas around the mounds inevitably led us to wonder if there was preservation of occupation surfaces or structures between the mounds. The current season was primarily devoted to further determination of the condition of the mounds, and particularly to revealing the condition of the surrounding deposits.

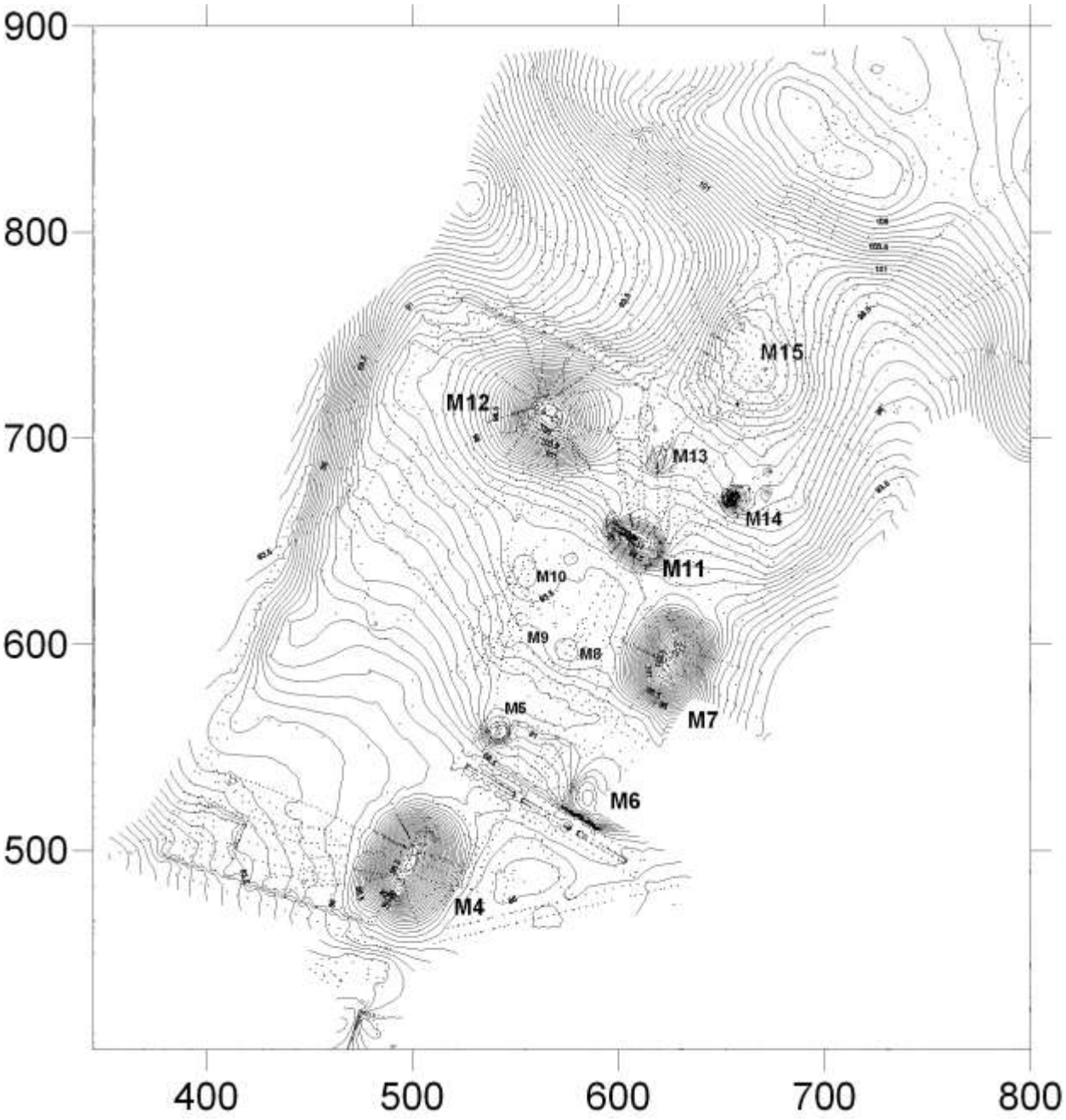

Figure 3. Map of the monumental core of San Andres Semetabaj, showing major mound locations, topographic contours, and individual theodolite measured points.

1.2 Site Condition

The substantial mounds (Fig. 3) of the site are forested on their crowns, with scrubby vegetation on their descending slopes, a good part of which was cleared in our mapping efforts. The evergreen trees on the crowns have decades of growth, and stumps scattered between these trees suggest occasional harvest of the timber. The relatively flat areas around the mounds are presently cornfields, with occasional bean or pea fields, especially within the town periphery on the site's east edge. In contrast to the high standing cornstalks of the growing season, by April the fields are completely cleared of cornstalks. In general the site surface is undisturbed other than by the relatively deep field furrowing practiced by local farmers. Nine notable exceptions to this intact condition are, in order of magnitude:

1. The walled town cemetery, covering nearly 1 ha of area in the site's SW corner. Our observations suggest that there has been significant leveling of this space; we wonder whether grave-digging or other activity has revealed artifacts or structures.
2. A deeply-cut road along the WNW site edge penetrates through the soil layers to underlying rock along its ESE limit.
3. A compound of small housing units in the extreme SW corner of the site covers and possibly impacts the site, with the notable presence and modification of the tomb reported by Shook et al.
4. Some alteration of the site's surface contours caused by the asphalt roads in the site's southernmost area.
5. Substantial reduction of Mounds 5 and 6, caused by extension of agricultural fields in the case of the east side of Mound 5, and intrusion of modern houses in the case of the east side of Mound 6. It appears that Mound 14 has been substantially reduced around all sides from the period of the Shook et al. report, again apparently to extend the area of the surrounding fields. In a similar way, Mound 11 may have been truncated on it's eastern end.
6. Topographic alteration occasioned by the flattening of the modern procession way leading to the cemetery from the ESE.
7. According to local accounts, looting and subsequent archaeological excavation of Mound 13 has severely altered the configuration of this relatively small structure, perhaps the smallest of the known mounds.
8. A relatively recent looter's trench on the NW side of Mound 11 has penetrated deeply into the mound's structure; our 2004 work curtailed the slumping of the trench walls and greatly reduced the depth of the trench.
9. A modest looting pit is present on the SW side of Mound 15, which a number of teenagers from the town claim to have excavated, recovering a metate and a possible jade statuette.

2. Research Team and Timing of the Project

The 2005 field crew consisted of the following personnel:

Directors:

Lic. Luisa Escobar Galo, Universidad del Valle
Dr. John W. Rick, Stanford University

Field Director for Guatemalan students:

Lic. Carlos Alvarado, Universidad del Valle

Laboratory Director:

Karla Cardona

Graduate Student field assistants:

Daniel Contreras, Ph.D. candidate, Stanford University
Christian Mesia, Ph.D. candidate, Stanford University
Nichole M. Slovak, Ph.D. candidate, Stanford University

Guatemalan Undergraduate Students:

Iyaxel Cojti Ren, Universidad del Valle
Rodrigo Guzman, Universidad del Valle
Diego Vasquez, Universidad del Valle

14 field workers from San Andrés

Figure 4. Excavation crew at San Andres Semetabaj, 2005

This fieldwork was carried out from the 17th to the 29th of April 2005, but with periods preceding and succeeding the fieldwork for setup and shut down. Prior to the fieldwork Co-Director Lic. Escobar had been filing papers and undertaking other activities to obtain permission, make local field arrangements, arrange for vehicles, and recruit Guatemalan professionals and students. Stanford graduate student Daniel Contreras traveled to Guatemala ahead of the remaining U.S. contingent on 15 April, and together with Co-Director Escobar obtained supplies and transported students and materials from Guatemala City on the 16th, subsequently setting up living arrangements, hiring local workers, and preparing site for fieldwork on the 17th through the 19th of April. The U.S. research team reached Guatemala City on the 18th, and after retrieving a rental vehicle and cell phone and making a number of arrangements proceeded to San Andrés on the 19th. Some research equipment was transported from Stanford University, primarily an electronic theodolite (total station) and its support gear, various minor equipment, and large quantities of high quality zip-lock bags. Considerable additional research material was obtained in Guatemala, some equipment such as screens and stakes were made in San Andrés, and the Universidad del Valle generously loaned us excavation tools. The field team was housed in private residences in the nearby Lomas de Atitlan development.

3. Fieldwork Methodology

a. Mapping

The 2005 work consisted almost entirely of excavation, with little significant mapping work done beyond that necessary to re-establish datum stakes, and to lay out unit corners. It will be recalled from prior reports that the primary datum for the site was established with an initial wooden datum stake of arbitrary designation 500N, 500E, and 100H (all dimensions in meters) on the northerly end of Mound 4, triangulating its position to stable landmarks in the event it needs re-establishment. North was obtained by Brunton compass, corrected to absolute north with current magnetic declination for this area. Subsequent datums were shot from this initial stake, usually to mound top locations. We believe that our north map orientation is within 0.5 degrees of absolute north. In the 2005 field season the datum stake on Mound 4, as well as those on Mounds 11 and 12 were reset with reinforcing rod stakes set in cement, marked with datum numbers.

All excavation units were laid out by using 'setting out' functions of our total station theodolite, with the instrument established on primary or secondary datums in all cases. The positioning of the units can thus be assumed to be accurate, with no more than a cm of error in dimension or location. This also allowed units to be laid out in the site grid, aligned to the common directionality of that grid. At the time of laying out the corner stakes of the units a separate stake was placed, marked with an altitude relative to the absolute site datum. The first units laid out, 22-26, were of a 1x2 meter size, while all later units (excepting only U26a, a 1x1 meter size) were laid out as 2x2 meter units, and one of the four possible 1x2 meter units (East, West, North or South sides) within the 2x2 space was excavated. Two units were expanded: Unit 26 was expanded with the single square meter Unit 26a; and Unit 28 was expanded with a 2x2 meter unit, Unit 37.

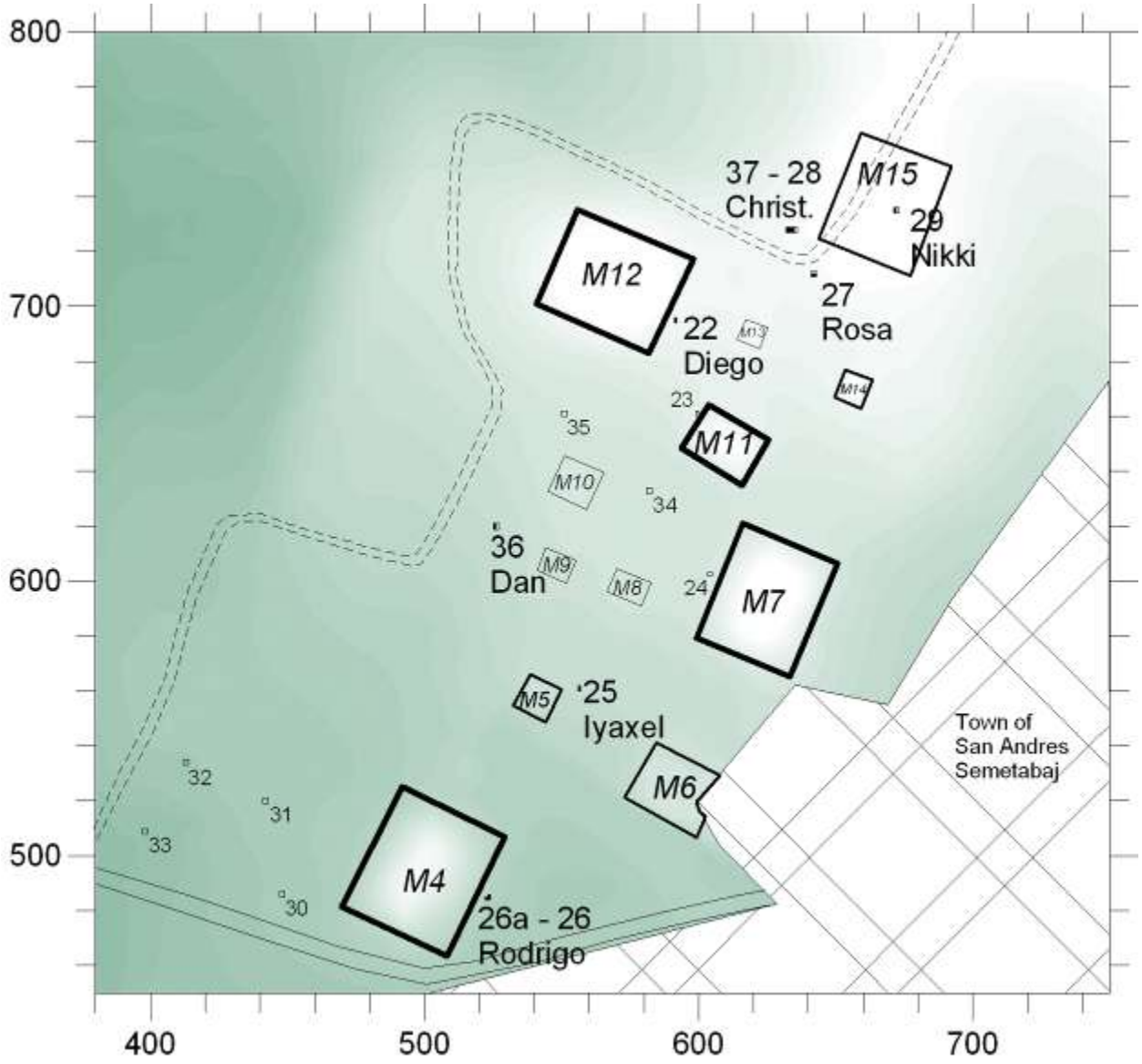

Figure 5. Location of excavation units and their excavators within central San Andres Semetabaj.

b. Unit Placement

The following are the placements of the units laid out, and excavated in 2005 (Fig. 5). Most units were not finished due to the unexpected termination of work. The North and East ranges of the units are given below, all were placed at even meter locations within the site grid.

	North	East	Location	Excavated?	Side Exc
Unit 22	N694-696	E591-592	East of Mound 12	Yes, unfinished	
Unit 23	N661-662	E598-600	West of Mound 11	No	
Unit 24	N602-603	E603-605	West of Mound 12	No	
Unit 25	N560-562	E556-557	NE of Mound 5	Yes, unfinished	

Unit 26	N484-486 E523-524	East of Mound 4	Yes, finished	
Unit 26a	N484-485 E522-523	Adjacent to U26	Yes, finished	
Unit 27	N711-713 E641-643	South of Mound 15	Yes, unfinished	S
Unit 28	N727-729 E634-636	West of Mound 15	Yes, unfinished	E
Unit 29	N734-736 E671-673	In middle of M15	Yes, unfinished	W
Unit 30	N485-487 E447-449	West of Mound 4	No	
Unit 31	N519-521 E441-443	West of Mound 4	No	
Unit 32	N533-535 E412-414	West of Mound 4	No	
Unit 33	N508-510 E397-399	West of Mound 4	No	
Unit 34	N632-634 E581-583	East of Mound 10	No	
Unit 35	N660-662 E550-552	North of Mound 10	No	
Unit 36	N619-621 E525-527	West of Mound 9	Yes, unfinished	W
Unit 37	N727-729 E632-634	Adjacent to U28	Yes, unfinished	

b. Excavation Methods

Our excavations were done observing and differentiating levels based on stratigraphic changes in the sediments encountered. Designations for units and layers on forms and bag labels took the form of SASunit number-Estrato-Nivel; for example, SAS22-E2-N1 would be the designation of the first level excavated within stratum 2 in Unit 22. Strata were the coarse stratigraphically-defined layers removed, and since in many cases the sediments were relatively uniform over many decimeters of depth, we opted to subdivide strata in levels. These were at times arbitrary levels within strata (although if we removed, say, 10 cm levels within a stratum, it was excavated with a surface inclination of the last stratigraphic definition – excavating in truly leveled levels would have had the effect of mixing the steeply sloping natural layers found in many units, especially those on mound edges. In other cases levels were sub-strata, following natural definitions less clear and pronounced than those which defined the strata themselves.

All dirt removed from excavations was screened through approximate ¼ inch mesh hardware cloth. All cultural materials, including bone, ceramics, stone, and charcoal was recovered and bagged for return to the laboratory. Additionally, soil flotation samples for the recovery of carbonized plant remains were taken, and when sufficient charcoal was recovered, carbon samples were taken within aluminum foil pouches. A variety of field records were kept, including individual level sheets for every stratigraphic level excavated within each unit; field notebooks kept by each unit leader/advanced students, and profiles of all units were drawn when the unit was complete, or upon our departure in the case of incomplete units. Level depths below local datum were noted at the end of each stratigraphic unit and counts of buckets of earth removed were kept to allow volume estimates for the layer. Digital photographs and video was taken, with storyboards identifying the unit and feature in the image. After the premature close of the season, the excavation units were backfilled to surface level with the screened dirt originally removed from the excavation.

Excavation was usually carried out from around 8 am to 5 pm in the afternoon, although we shifted to a somewhat earlier schedule in the later days of the excavation. Each unit under excavation had a team of three persons, generally consisting of an experienced archaeologist/student combined with two local workers. There were generally six to seven units open simultaneously, and our local work force rotated around 12-14 persons, none of whom had any formal experience in archaeology at the start of the excavation, but all of whom had

familiarity with the materials we were recovering, and usually were accustomed to working in agricultural production and hence the local soil and its contents. In general they proved to be very quick learners, dedicated workers, and perceptive of our goals and standards. In a number of cases we were able to incorporate them into higher level tasks, so they could learn survey methods or other more mentally demanding work. The work was supervised by Dr. Rick and Lic. Alvarado, and Lic. Escobar when she was on site.

4. Results

The results of the fieldwork reported here are preliminary, due to the incomplete excavations which in most cases did not reach lowest levels of the site's stratigraphy. Similarly, the analysis of recovered materials in the field was interrupted, and we do not yet have detailed reports for them. This account will attempt to recount the observations made at the time of excavation about the general situation within individual excavation units. Note that the number designations for excavation units listed here are not consecutive in cases because many units were laid out but not excavated. The units represent two excavation strategies:

1. The excavation of areas between the major mounds or on the minor platform-like mounds where we suspect there might be preservation, underneath the modern corn fields, of occupation or residence areas typical of formative or Classic period villages. This would be of key importance for the long-term value of investigation in San Andres Semetabaj, because we cannot expect particularly good preservation of major mound-top structures due to erosion and cultural disturbance. We had requested permission for three separate areas to sample under this strategy, which was granted after some negotiation.
2. Excavation at the foot of major structures to identify, if possible, the skirting edge of the mound construction itself; this strategy was initiated primarily by Lic. Escobar and Lic. Alvarez. Permission for centrally-located excavations in mounds is difficult to obtain, as the penetration of the major structures can create long-term conservation problems and potentially damage monumental structures. Advantages to excavating on the edge of mounds are numerous: preservation of the base of mound structures is generally better than the mound tops, since downward eroding materials quickly cover and preserve the base; it is possible to find the contact(s) between the mound structure(s) and the surrounding plaza or platform surfaces; and it is not unusual to find tombs located near the basal center-line of mound faces.

Unit 22 (mound base excavation)

This unit was actually placed on the lower slope of Mound 12, and proved to have a complex sequence of deposits related to the upslope structures, although we did not seem to have reached the actual mound surface in our excavations. The unit was supervised by Diego Vasquez, student at the Universidad del Valle. In the steeply sloping layers excavated we found an exceptional amount of special, probably ritually related materials. These included exceptionally large ceramic sherds, modeled and decorated vessel fragments including elaborate censer forms, abundant greenstone beads (some of which may be jade), large possibly complete obsidian blades, large amounts of charcoal, and big fragments of burnt clay, seemingly from a clay-surfaced wood structure that had burnt. The high angle of repose for this material, and the steeply sloping layers all suggest that this material was in the process of sliding from further up the mound when it was incorporated into the deposit. A seemingly justified interpretation of this material would be as the remains of a substantial, possibly mound-top structure which had burnt

Figure 6. Location of Unit 22; in center background is Unit 28; Unit 27 is in right background. Diego Vasquez is on right.

Figure 7. Incensario fragment illustrating the type of remains found in Unit 22

its remains and much of its contents having been pushed or eroded down the east face of Mound 12. The structure might well have had a temple or other religious function. There seems to be an abundance of this material, given the productivity of this small unit.

Unit 25 (mound associated excavation)

This unit was placed to investigate a terrace-like step down into a plaza-like area lying between Mounds 5 and 6; possibly twin mounds with a ritual area between them – their configuration is seen by the Guatemalan colleagues as likely to be aligned and concerned with astronomical phenomena. The unit was supervised by Iyaxel Cojti Ren, a Quiche student from the Universidad del Valle. The unit placed on the upper side of the terrace, immediately on the edge of a roughly 1 meter dropoff at the edge of what was reported to be the Mack property. This unit was taken the deepest of all, to about 2 m total depth, and it passed through what may be fairly typical field area stratigraphy. The uppermost layers produced a higher density of material, mostly heavily fragmented ceramics, with some obsidian present. Density of cultural materials drops significantly 20-40 cm below surface, and then returns to greater density near a meter of depth, then dropping again, and seemingly picking up as 2 meter depth is approached; but at this point the excavation was closed with the end of the season. The unit produced one feature, at a depth of about 1.2 meters below surface: an area of highly compacted adobe-like soil, which included the whitish, probably ash flecking that was noted in what seemed to be adobe bricks found in the Mound 11 trench profile cleaned in 2004. This may thus be a portion of an adobe structure, but only a very small part of it was encountered, suggesting that some constructions may be present at this depth, but illustrating the difficulty of identification.

Figure 8. Location of Unit 25; Iyaxel Cojti Ren and Lic. Carlos Alvarado on right.

Figure 9. Possible puddled adobe feature in unit 25.

Unit 26 and 26a (mound base excavation)

This unit was placed at the approximate center of the east face of Mound 4, and was expanded by the 1 square meter of unit 26a when the area of the original unit was reduced by a modern intrusive pit filled with loose soil and modern trash – probably the upper part of a latrine pit. This excavation was directed by Rodrigo Guzman of the Universidad del Valle. The upper layers of the excavation passed through a series of compact soil layers lying in conformance with the slope of the mound, most easily interpreted as clay-laden slope wash eroding from the upper mound surface. Below this the sediments were somewhat looser in intermediate layers, then hardening again as the unit terminated when the excavation reached a clear, hard layer of much lighter, nearly cement-like clayey soil. Our assessment was that we had reached a likely remnant surface of the mound's original construction. There were hints that we had found a turn outward of that surface, perhaps in the form of a salient or projecting portion of the mound such as might be found at the edge of a staircase-like feature. Neither the preservation, nor the very limited extent of our excavation allowed, however, a strong definition of this possible feature.

Unit 27 (Between-mound excavation)

This unit was placed just south of the southwest corner of the very low, platform-like Mound 15 in an open cornfield, directed by Rosa Mendoza Rick of Stanford University. This unit passed

Figure 9. Location of Unit 26 at the edge of Mound 4; Rodrigo Guzman on left.

Figure 10. Unit 26 (foreground) and Unit 26a (left background) showing latrine with fill (right) and endurated mound surface (left).

through the apparently normal surface concentration of highly fragmented cultural materials, including some modern trash, and dropping in material density until a little below a meter of depth. The excavation was terminated in the range of 1.5 m below surface, at which point material densities were notably increasing, patches of white-specked dense adobe soil were appearing, and concentrations of large ceramic sherds were appearing in a spotty formation around the unit. The unit in general was quite undistinguished in contents up to this point, but at the time of closure gave suggestions of horizontal differentiation and non-random material distributions suggestive of floor or structure contexts.

Units 28 and 37 (Between-mound excavations)

Unit 28 was placed to the west of Mound 15 in a somewhat sloping cornfield area that showed some indications that bedrock might be fairly shallow – both the surface contour, a lighter soil color, and the presence of light colored talpetate or other soft whitish stone on the surface were suggestive. The excavation was directed by Christian Mesia, doctoral candidate at Stanford University. The upper levels of soil in this unit were exceedingly clayey and difficult to dig and screen. The unit produced almost immediate evidence of blocks of this stone in the form of blocks at a depth of 20-40 cm below surface. These may be remnants of very late, possibly historic construction. This evidence fades below 40 cm of depth, and the unit's cultural frequencies fell off, much like other units. But at around 80 cm depth the previously hard but featureless soil began to show clear evidence of fine horizontal layering – most notably in the form of very dark, carbon-laden thin layers which could be followed over much of the unit's surface. These seemed to rest on similarly fairly thin highly compacted, clayey and whitish flat-surfaced layers. Within the dark layers and resting flat upon the compact surface were large ceramic fragments and substantial segments of large obsidian prismatic blades. These features clearly identified in Unit 28 are best explained as well-used occupation surfaces that are intact, indicating a lack of stratigraphic mixing or intrusion at this particular location. The presence of significant quantities of crushed charcoal in the floor surface deposit suggests the presence of burning, and the types of materials are more suggestive of domestic activities than, for instance, the apparently more ritually-generated mound-edge assemblage seen in Unit 22. Because this type of surface could be related to household activities and could even conceivably be a floor in or around a domestic structure, we expanded this excavation towards the west with Unit 37, a 2x2 meter expansion. This extended area did not reach the depth of the floor-like surface prior to the shutdown of excavations.

Unit 29 (Low platform excavation)

Because of subtle shifting of the areas we were granted permission to excavate from that we requested, it became important to sample the open space represented by the extremely low bulk of Mound 15. To this end we put in a fairly centrally-placed excavation unit; the startup of this unit was complicated by our late discovery that this area was not within the bounds of the Mack landholding; this excavation was directed by Nichole Slovak, doctoral candidate at Stanford University. We spent a few days tracking down the landowner, the Campos family of Panajachel, a representative of which was very cooperative in granting us permission to carry out the excavation. This unit, like U28, started with extremely compact and hard soil units, but progressed rather rapidly into a much softer deposit of what our workers called 'volcanic sand'; while far from a pure sandy material, it was much easier to excavate and rapidly became nearly

Figure 11. Unit 28 (foreground) and Unit 37 (background) showing floor feature in center, originally overlain by thin carbon layer.

Figure 12. Detail of floor in Unit 28, with ceramics and obsidian lying flat on surface.

completely devoid of cultural material, especially in the range of 60-120 cm of depth. At around 1.5 depth a somewhat more compact surface was found, which broke through to a very soft, silty-sandy deposit beneath. While some cultural material began to appear again, the unit produced very little cultural material all the way to the end of our excavation time. The very soft underlying sediment may well be the fill on a very sizeable pit fill; we did not have time to fully explore this. It is possible that it represents layered fine-sediment fills constituting the body of Mound 15; if so it suggests this is a relatively late construction, since Early Classic sherds continue to be the contents of the fill well down into the structure's low bulk. The stratigraphic sequence, once below the site's typical mixed surface deposits, is quite different from that found in other areas, which is likely to represent the construction and different usage of this area that contrasts notably with even the nearby units 27 and 28.

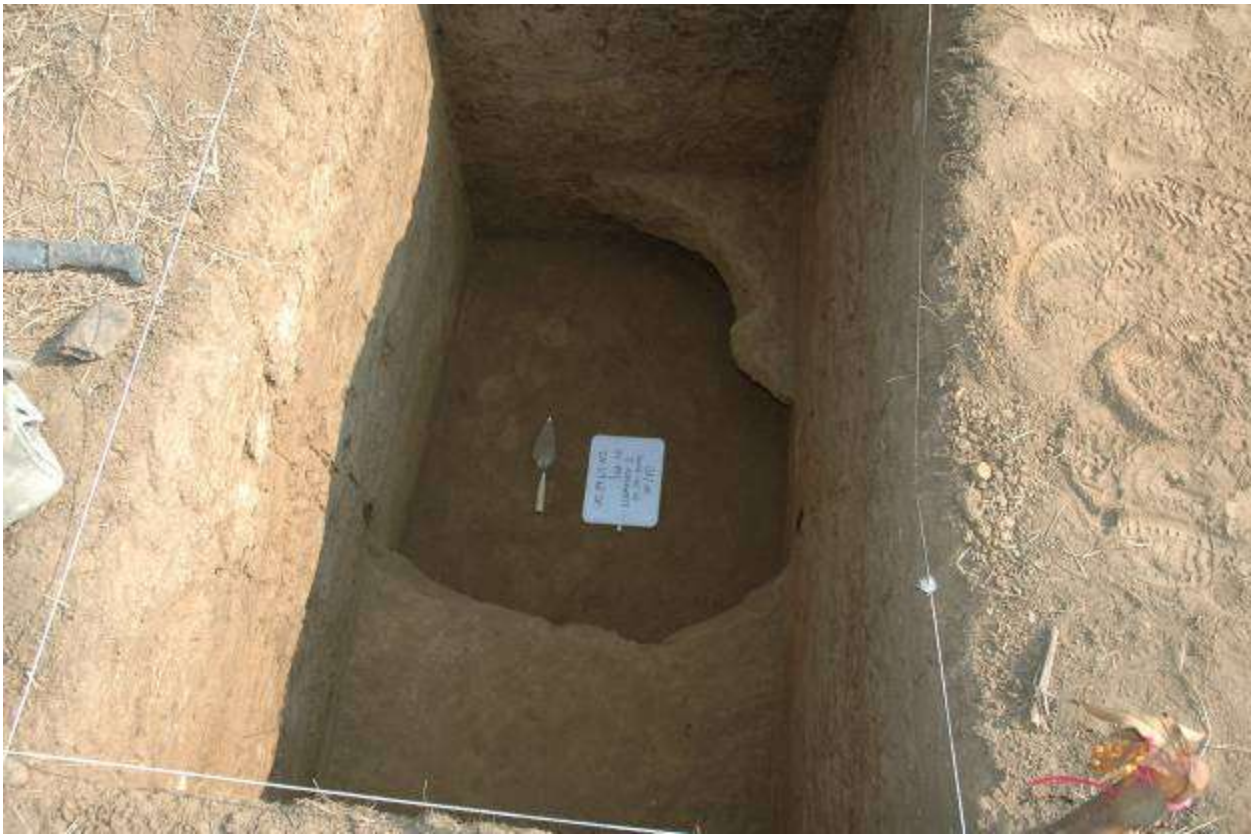

Figure 13. Unit 29, showing depth at which exceeding soft soil, possible pit fill, was found (center).

Unit 36 (Between-mound excavation)

This unit, located to the west of the hardly perceptible rise of Mound 9, was placed in a flat cornfield area and directed by Daniel Contreras, doctoral candidate at Stanford University. This was the last unit opened, and it was only excavated to a relatively shallow depth before work terminated. The stratigraphy was undistinguished in these initial layers, and the density of cultural material was low throughout the approximately 60 cm depth that was reached. The ceramics recovered in these upper layers were exceptionally fragmented, perhaps reflecting extensive historical cultivation in this area. Too little work was done on this unit to justify any major observations on the unit.

5. Preliminary Conclusions from the Excavations

While it is premature to reach major conclusions, some guidance can be taken from these initial and incomplete results. The evaluation of ceramics, carried out by Dra. Hatch of Universidad del Valle (see Appendix 1) gives quite conclusive evidence that we are dealing with Early Classic occupation in the upper layers of the site that we sampled. In a broad sense, it could be argued that the majority of strata in these units, once below the surface, can be broadly compared with some justification given their similar placement in the ceramic chronology.

Aside from the temporal implications of the ceramics, it is possible to assess the degree of variability of materials and contexts found in the rather varied excavation locations. Although most of the materials analysis has not been carried out yet, field observations of artifacts combined with the very distinctive character of the contexts revealed in the excavations gives some confidence that the site has fairly highly differentiated deposits.

Units 22 and 26 are in quite similar positions at mound bases, yet their contents are quite distinct. Unit 22 can be interpreted as suggesting the presence of mound-topping structures, probably of ritual character in the case of Mound 12. The last major prehistoric event documented in Unit 22 may well be the burning and destruction of such a mound structure, perhaps while it still contained a fair amount of ritual material. Although speculation, it could be that such an event is related to the predominant abandonment of the site during or at the end of the Early Classic; excavations have not revealed any substantial quantity of evidence for prehistoric occupation of this site thereafter. Unit 26, perhaps due to differing local sedimentation processes, encountered the apparent structure of Mound 4 at a relatively shallow depth, and gave little evidence of the rich ritual artifacts found in Unit 22. There is no evidence of ritual materials 'draining' off Mound 4, which could be due to the greater height of the mound, to a different function of the mound, to a lack of similar destructive processes, or many other local factors.

Most encouraging is the presence of as many as three significantly different contexts that may prove to be domestic in nature: units 25, 27 and 28/37. Although only Units 28/37 even begin to give significant definition of actual residential activity-related or habitation-type deposits, there are major hints in the other two units of horizontally and vertically differentiated deposits that may well reflect fairly intact living surfaces. The best guess at this point is that some of the difference in sediment character between these three units may be due to different proximities to, or presences of different structure types. In particular, we believe there is a significant possibility of identifying relatively unobvious construction materials in the form of adobe brick or perhaps puddle earth. A fine read of the stratigraphy and its contents may allow fine differentiation of floor deposits and earth-based construction that is known to be present in formative sites throughout Mesoamerica.

The broader implications to draw from these data are that while the mound structures may have suffered substantial erosion and possibly even intentional destruction in ancient times, it looks like there may be reasonably good preservation of construction features and floors in the site, starting at a depth of perhaps 60-100 cm in many parts of the site. How widespread such preservation might be is highly unknown, but there is no reason at this time to discount the possibility that San Andres Semetabaj may have preserved within it sufficient intact evidence to define much of the structure and character of one of the most substantial Early Classic sites of

the Atitlán area. While we do not have equivalent evidence from the Preclassic period from these excavations, Hatch's analysis of our ceramic collections hint at a fairly widespread 'background' of Preclassic material in the later levels, which hints at lower strata that might have a similar preservation of an earlier community structure. Indeed, her prior excavations at San Andres Semetabaj confirm this earlier occupation. There is not enough evidence to specify the nature of the earlier occupation, but should the Early Classic deposits be conformably sealing the underlying, intact Preclassic layers, there would be hope of recovering more than one stage of ancient community. Although there may have been a hiatus in occupation between Middle Preclassic and Early Classic times (perhaps providing some degree of actual vertical separation of occupation deposits – a potentially great advantage) that would keep San Andres from providing a record of continuous evolution between early and later occupations, the comparisons between evidence from such communities could be very important for understanding the early complex societies of the Atitlán area.

5. Further Research

Given the interrupted nature of this first season of excavation, and the apparent initial success in finding domestic deposits, it is clear that the first priority is the completion of the partial excavation units from 2005, and probably the excavation of the units laid out, but never opened in that season. The two primary goals would be to:

1. Extend and confirm, if possible, the evidence for residential structures and surrounding areas capable of defining the layout, differentiation, and function of the Early Classic community of San Andres Semetabaj.
2. Reach the apparently present Preclassic deposits of Semetabaj and verify if they have an equivalent potential to reveal the structure of an earlier version of this community. Such a sample will probably hint at the continuities or differences between these two sequential organizations, and thus the history of emerging political, social, and economic societies of the altiplano area.

It is probably worthwhile, although perhaps with a lower priority, to due further excavations at mound edges and complete those begun in 2005. A number of goals would be fulfilled from successful completion of these excavations. First is that the inventory of attractive and displayable material from the site may increase, especially working in areas such as that of Unit 22. Getting a representative sample of ritually related, probably elite-origin materials would be a quite legitimate goal of our project, given its interest in community organization. Second, a major problem that must eventually be faced is the relationship between the monumental constructions at Semetabaj and the apparently multi-phase occupation deposits. In simplest terms – who built the major structures of the site; were they of Preclassic or Classic origin, or quite likely, both. Were they altered, expanded, or neglected over time? The answer could be quite important in understanding the strategy the leadership of Semetabaj had over time in their rule of the area. Finding an articulation between mound structure and surrounding deposits will undoubtedly prove to be of great importance in determining construction and use dates for the structures.

Over the long range, San Andrés Semetabaj needs attention to some major issues and possibilities, as mentioned in previous reports:

1. The relationship between the site and town needs to be explored through interaction and education between townspeople and archaeologists. As of yet, the town has only vague notions of the significance of the site, or what opportunities it presents to them beyond being a source of saleable looted materials. Continued involvement of townspeople in archaeological work is one way of providing information, but it should be possible to establish other means by working through the office of the town alcalde and possibly the school system. The site offers significant educational, and perhaps economic opportunity for the town, and the population should be given the chance to learn about the site, and make educated decisions about their involvement in its future. In the last monthrs of 2005 we contracted for a Guatemalan anthropologist, Luis Ernesto Velásquez Alvarado, to work in the community; his findings will give us considerable insight into relations with the town.

2. In particular, it would be ideal to construct a town museum that could curate collections from the site, exhibit site materials and information (as well as local history) relevant to both outsiders and townspeople, and serve as a cultural center for the town and surrounding communities. Such community museums have proved successful in Mexico for both promoting tourism and town cultural values. The proximity of site and town in this case make a strong argument for developing a museum or other facilities that promote an effective relationship between the two.

3. The site, due to its size, visibility, apparent good state of preservation, setting, early time period, and strategic location is a prime candidate for touristic development in the future. Properly investigated and cleaned, the site would be one of the few accessible sites for visitors to the Guatemala highlands, and is proximity to the tourist flow through Panajachel could allow a significant number of visitors per year. If properly planned and managed, the flow of visitors through the town could provide a significant economic benefit, while at the same time allowing for investigation and conservation of these significant monuments.

4. A substantial program of investigations should be undertaken to confirm the age of the site, the architectural design and function of different site sectors, and the role of this monumental center within the cultural development of the region. Based on this information, the site needs to be delimited, a policy developed for land use within site boundaries, and a long-term prioritization of investigation goals and conservation efforts.

Appendix 1: Proyecto San Andrés Semetabaj: Ceramic Report 2005

Marion Popenoe de Hatch

All excavations of the 2005 field season produced material dating to the Early Classic period. No operation penetrated the Preclassic occupation. Unit 26A, near Mound 4, reached down as far as nine stratigraphic levels, but Early Classic material was still present at this depth. A very light scatter of Late Classic sherds were found in the surface levels of Units 22 and 26, but insufficient to indicate that there was any substantial occupation at the site during this period.

The most abundant ceramics in the Early Classic material were those with orange slips, polished black, and black-brown slips. There was also a mixture of Middle Preclassic sherds in the lots. The Middle Preclassic ceramics are closely related to those of Kaminaljuyu during the same period. The Early Classic ceramics are part of the Solano Ceramic Tradition which spread throughout the Central Highlands of Guatemala at the end of the Late Preclassic period. The ceramic markers of the Solano Tradition are Esperanza Flesh, Prisma and Llanto wares. The local domestic utilitarian wares at Semetabaj during the Early Classic consist of an unpolished brown ware and a pink paste ware. The high percentage of fine and imported wares relative to local domestic wares suggests that the area excavated in 2005 was occupied by the elite sector of the population.

Summary of cultural shifts at Semetabaj

In the Middle Preclassic period Semetabaj was involved in the elaborate trade network that linked it with Kaminaljuyu, the South Coastal zone which today is the Department of Escuintla, and the northwestern Guatemala highlands. The ceramics also indicate that it was connected, via the site of Chocola south of Lake Atitlan, with the east-west commercial route which linked the sites along the coastal piedmont of Guatemala, connecting Mexico with El Salvador.

Beginning with the Late Preclassic period Semetabaj was abandoned. The ceramics at Chocola suggest that at least part of the Semetabaj population may have moved down to this site on the southern slopes of Lake Atitlan and continued in occupation there. However, this idea needs to be tested further. At Chocolá it is clear that its trade orientation shifted away from the highlands and focused solely on the coastal trade network.

During the Early Classic Semetabaj was reoccupied by an expansionist group associated with what is known as the Solano Ceramic Tradition. New, very strong relationships were established with Chocola on the coast which resumed its function as the connecting trade link between the Guatemalan highlands and the coastal network.

The almost total lack of Late Classic ceramics at Semetabaj suggest that the site was not occupied during this period. This information needs to be confirmed, as it may be that there was simply a reduced population at a part of the site, or perhaps just outside of it, where the ceramics have not yet been analyzed.

There is no evidence of occupation at Semetabaj during Postclassic times.