

Proyecto Regional Arqueológico  
La Corona  
(PRALC)

*Studying an Extraordinary  
Classic Maya Center*

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# LA CORONA Original name: Sak Nikte' Toponymic glyph



**Project director**  
**Dr. Marcello Canuto**  
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**Panel 1, La Corona,**  
 left detail fragment (K'wich 7 Yook,  
 Governor, 677 CE)

- 1. **This comparatively small site** is located 27 kilometers north of Waka and west of the higher karstic plateau of El Mirador, at the edge of the swampy wetlands of the Laguna del Tigre National Park.
- 2. **Heavily looted in the 1960's**, many of its finely carved sculptures ended up in private collections and art museums throughout the world. The provenance of the sculptures was lost and, for a long time, they defined a lost Maya city simply known as "Site Q".
- 3. **With the discovery of a well preserved hieroglyphic panel** in 2005, Sak Nikte' was finally proven to be the long lost "Site Q".
- 4. **La Corona was one of the Kan kingdom's most faithful and important allies.** As a consequence, the high quality inscriptions from La Corona have provided invaluable information about the Kan Kingdom, including the fact that local kings of Sak Nikte' married three princesses from the powerful capital of Calakmul.



Excavation of Structure 13R-10.

- 5. **This proves the importance** of marriage alliances during the Classic period and points to the strategic importance of La Corona during the expansion of the Kan Kingdom in the seventh century CE.
- 6. **Recent investigations directed by Dr. Canuto and Dr. Tomás Barrientos** (Universidad del Valle de Guatemala) have begun to help scholars understand how the Kan Kingdom went about dominating

Photo © Corinne Isidore



Jade and Spondylus shell offerings, Burial 3, Structure 13Q-3, Main Plaza, La Corona



Chival "Laguna Curvada" located at the north side of La Corona. This ancient city is characterized by being surrounded by numerous bodies of water like the one, which could have played an important role, such as a defensive barrier

PROYECTO REGIONAL ARQUEOLÓGICO  
LA CORONA  
(PRALC)

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[The Proyecto Regional Arqueológico La Corona](#) (PRALC) works at the Classic Maya site of La Corona located in the northwestern part of the Petén jungle of Guatemala (Figure 1); this region is almost entirely unexplored archaeologically—that is, little is known about the history and nature of its pre-Columbian settlement. In fact, the site of La Corona was only discovered fifteen years ago under the virgin canopy nestled among several rain-fed lakes. Although undiscovered, the existence of this particular site has been known to the scientific community for nearly half a century. It has been known as the [elusive and enigmatic “Site Q”](#), which was made famous by [its many looted monuments](#) of extraordinary quality (Figure 2).

### “Site Q”

Oil prospection in the 1960’s opened many previously inaccessible areas of Guatemala’s tropical northern Peten region (Figure 3). An unfortunate consequence of this exploration was the discovery and subsequent looting of many scientifically unknown Maya centers—such as La Corona. In fact, it was roughly at this time when the then-unregulated antiquities market received an influx of La Corona’s hieroglyphic monuments, all of which were sold at auctions throughout the world.

Because these monuments had been looted, their origin was not known to the scientific community. However, similarities among the looted monuments hinted to some scholars as early as the mid-1970s of the existence of an unknown but important site in this area. [Peter Mathews](#)—then a Yale graduate student—surmised that the strong epigraphic, iconographic, and stylistic similarities among over two dozen looted monuments located throughout the world reflected their common origin. He named the single, then-unknown city as [“Site Q”](#) and triggered a forty-year search for its location. While the majority of the “Site Q” pieces

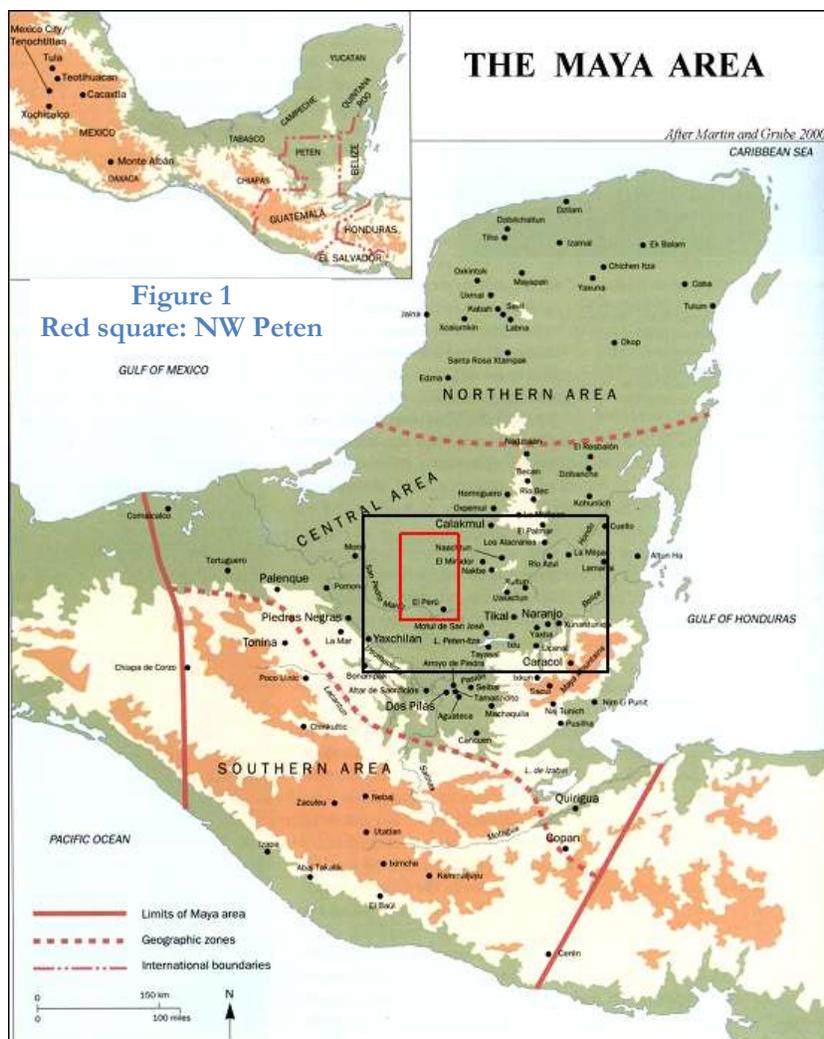




Figure 2 Chicago Art Institute panel

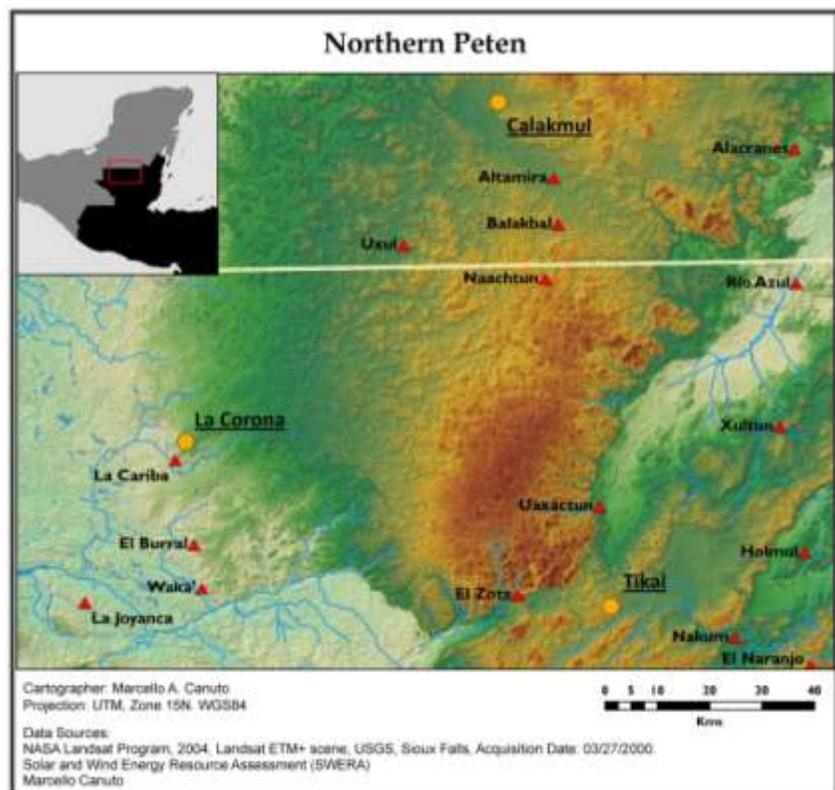
were identified decades ago, we are still [discovering pieces in private collections](#) that originated at this same site. It is likely we will be identifying pieces from this site in other private collections for years to come.

Epigraphic analysis of these looted monuments discovered that Site Q's ancient name was *saknikte'* – the “place of the white frangipani”. This toponym, however, was never used as part of the ruling family's title. That is, at other important Classic Maya sites, rulers were bestowed with the highest political title of the lowland Maya: “holy lord” (*k'uhul ajaw*) of their kingdom. The “Site Q” rulers, however, were only referred to as nobles (*ajaw*), never as holy lords. Since the presence of this title, known as an “emblem glyph”, represents king's political independence, its absence at “Site Q” suggested that its kings were beholden to a much greater regional power.

Epigraphers also recognized that the “Site Q” texts contained many references to another

important site known as [Calakmul](#) (located in Campeche, Mexico). During the Classic period (AD 200-900), Calakmul was, along with [Tikal](#), one of the largest Maya centers. In fact, they were rival cities during the Classic period (Figure 3). Though direct confrontations between the two capitals were limited, they each allied themselves with the ruling families of other Maya centers to conduct “proxy wars” for much of the AD 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this political landscape dominated by Tikal and Calakmul, “Site Q” was a staunch Calakmul ally. In fact, many “Site Q” texts mention Calakmul rulers presiding over its own rituals. Moreover, this relationship was long-standing as it involved long-term stays by “Site Q” kings at the Calakmul court.

Figure 3 northern Peten



## Discovery of La Corona

Beginning two decades ago, scientific teams undertook expeditions to the unexplored area of the northwest Peten. In the mid-1990s, the combined effort of remote sensing specialists and forest conservationists led to [the discovery of and first expeditions](#) to a “new” Classic Maya site located in this area. In 1997, [Ian Graham](#) and [David Stuart](#), both with the Peabody Museum at Harvard University at that time, [organized an expedition](#) to this “new” site. They christened the site “La Corona” for a crown-like complex of five temples. David Stuart, however, immediately noted that on some of La Corona’s eroded monuments

there were references to some of the same people mentioned in the “Site Q” texts.

In 2001, Dr. Chris Hayward of the University of Manchester in England conducted a petrographic study of a stone sample taken from the site of La Corona. Using stable isotope and petrographic analyses, Hayward’s study showed that the stone from La Corona was identical to one of the “Site Q” monuments now located in the [Hudson Museum](#) at the University of Maine. Both the epigraphic and petrographic studies led [David Stuart to suggest](#) that La Corona was likely “Site Q.”

His identification was confirmed in 2005 when a multi-disciplinary expedition to

THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2005

# Maya Monument May Connect Little-Known Ruins With Mystery Site

By JOHN NOBLE WILFORD

Forty years ago, the ancient ruins in Europe and the United States were flooded with looted artifacts from the Peten rain forest of Guatemala. Their artistic style and inscriptions suggested to scholars that the monumental stones came from an abandoned seventh-century Maya city at some unidentified remote place, which became known as Site Q.

Now, archaeologists think the mystery has been solved in the little-known ruins of a place called La Corona. Last week they reported finding a well-preserved stone monument in two sections carved with more than 140 hieroglyphs that bear dates and tell stories of two kings mentioned prominently in the Site Q texts.

The discovery was made in April by Marcello A. Canuto, a Yale archaeologist who has been exploring La Corona. The site is inside the Laguna del Tigre National Park in northwestern Guatemala, less than 20 miles from the temple ruins of Yaxha, called El Pora today by local people.

An analysis of the inscriptions was conducted by Stanley Guenter, a graduate student and specialist in Mayan writing at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. He noted the similarities between the style, chronology and texts of the La Corona monument and those of the looted material.

“This discovery concludes one of the longest and wildest hunts for a Maya city in the history of the discipline,” Dr. Canuto said in an announcement of a recent lecture at Yale in which he described the findings.

Dr. David Freidel, a Maya archaeologist at S.M.U. who is a leader of the nearby Yaxha excavations, supported the interpretation in an interview. “This is substantial evidence that this is Site Q,” he said, adding with admiration, “Marcello was touched by the gods.”

The discovery was not entirely surprising. In 1997, Ian Graham, an expert in Mayan hieroglyphs at Harvard, and a colleague, David Stuart, visited La Corona and came upon stones that made them suspect this was the long-sought Site Q.

Dr. Graham said in an interview that Dr. Stuart had read one of the inscriptions, which mentioned the name of a king who also figured in Site Q texts, and “was pretty much certain” that La Corona was the source of the looted material. An analysis of the stones suggested that they came from the same quarry as the Site Q artifacts.

Dr. Graham, who was not involved in the new research, called it an exciting discov-

ery and “gratifying confirmation” of their earlier findings, though he conceded that at the time he had some reservations because of the site’s modest size. Its crumbing ruins cover about two-thirds of a mile square.

Dr. Stuart, now an archaeology professor at the University of Texas, noted that at an international conference in 2001 he presented evidence that he said already established the Site Q-La Corona connection.

Dr. Canuto cautioned that further re-

search might prove that Site Q — shorthand for the Spanish “que,” meaning “what?” — was not a single place. Perhaps the looted material will be traced to several sources with related histories and traditions.

Archaeologists deplore the practice of plundering ancient ruins, particularly widespread in poorly policed jungles, because they cannot tell exactly where looted artifacts came from, the all-important context.

Even so, Dr. Canuto said the newfound Itz’at’uuc monument was the same type of fine-grained stone used in the looted artwork. This, he said, “gives a long way to allowing us to demonstrate that nearly, if not most, Site Q monuments were looted from La Corona.”

Archaeologists said that more intensive excavations there were likely to uncover other information to establish this as Site Q. A prize would be to find evidence that the two kings mentioned in the inscriptions, Chak Hach’u K’aan and his son, K’inich Yook, actually lived and ruled in this city in the last half of the seventh century.

Archaeologists reported finding a well-preserved limestone monument last week among the ruins of La Corona, in northwestern Guatemala, which they believe may be linked to stones looted decades ago from an unidentified site.

## A story of ancient kings helps piece together the puzzle of a missing city.

Mr. Guenter said the panel’s hieroglyphs gave a date, the equivalent of Oct. 15, 677, for the dedication of a shrine temple to which the monument was fixed. The temple was dedicated to a god named K’inich W’ak U’ K’inich Yook, one of the most important kings of his dynasty, was responsible for the temple. A journey he made to the powerful kingdom of Calakmul, in present-day Mexico, is described in the text, with an illustration showing the visiting king performing a ceremony at Calakmul.

The text also refers to a similar temple dedication carried out by his father, the previous king, in 656. Scholars said these dates filled gaps in their knowledge of Maya politics in the jungle region.

Dr. Canuto, Mr. Guenter and other researchers from Southern Methodist spent a week exploring La Corona supported in part by the National Geographic Society, the El Pora-Yaxha Archaeological Project and the Wildlife Conservation Society. They made their discovery on the last full day.

While the others were mapping the ruins, Dr. Canuto said, “I looked into a trench where looters had obviously dug through to the interior” of a temple. They had stripped the open trench bare, its former contents presumably becoming some of the goods of illicit trade.

But stepping into the temple interior, the archaeologist came upon the two stones of the monument, which measured about 46 by 14 inches. He saw immediately that lines and marks were etched into the gray limestone. He called for Mr. Guenter to take a look.

The two archaeologists cleaned the surface, exposing a single, long hieroglyphic text on one stone and a brief text accompanying the etched illustration on the other. It was not long before they felt sure of the connection with Site Q.

“The panel exactly mirrors the style, size, subject matter and historical chronology of the Site Q texts,” Dr. Canuto said.

On their last morning, the team excavated and removed the inscribed stones and sent them to a laboratory in Guatemala City for subtyping and more study. Another expedition is planned for a return to La Corona and a closer examination of other ruins from a time its kings left words in stone to mark their passage through the classic period of the Maya civilization.




Figure 4 NY Times article on recently discovered La Corona panels

La Corona resulted in the [discovery by Dr. Marcello A. Canuto](#) of a perfectly preserved stone panel identical in style, size, and even content to the “Site Q” monuments. This panel confirmed that “Site Q” and La Corona were one and the same.

This discovery led to the development of PRALC and its long-term research effort at the site. Since 2008, research at La Corona has been conducted by the La Corona Regional Archaeological Project (PRALC), co-directed by [Marcello A. Canuto](#) and [Tomás Barrientos Q.](#)

PRALC has now worked at La Corona and its environs for five years, during which time, it has constructed a permanent research camp located near the site. This

camp has been built closely following general protocols for long-term environmental and cultural sustainability. PRALC has also engaged local and regional stakeholders in a long-term plan for the preservation of the cultural and natural heritage of the region.

### La Corona and its Current Context

La Corona is located in the [Maya Biosphere Reserve](#) (MBR). Spanning 2.11 million hectares, the MBR is Central America’s largest protected area, and the epicenter of the ancient lowland Maya civilization that flourished between BC 600 and AD 900 (see Figure 5). Today, the reserve contributes the largest part of a tri-national system of protected areas in

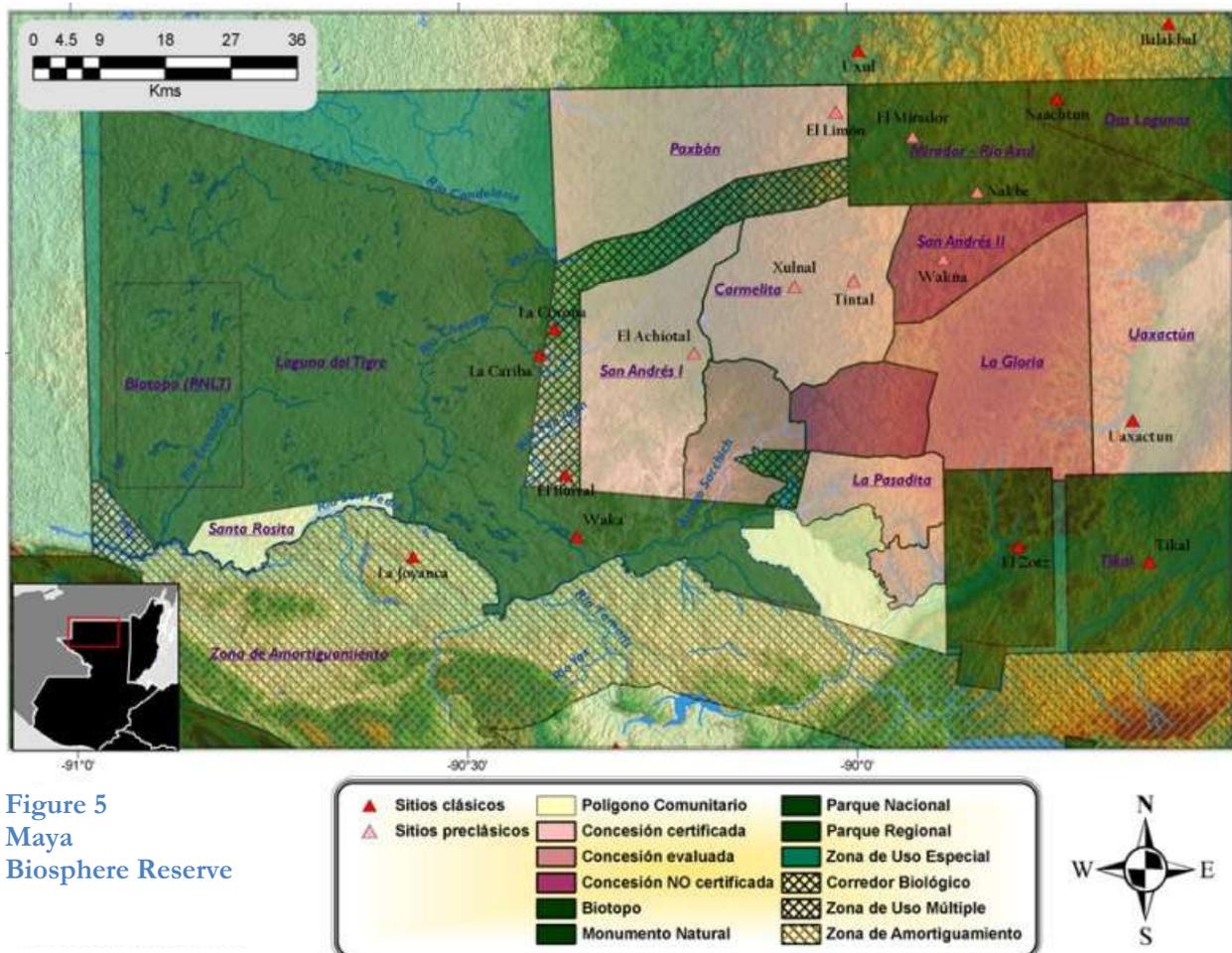


Figure 5  
Maya  
Biosphere Reserve

Guatemala, Belize, and Mexico—the largest tract of intact habitat north of the Amazon Basin. This region contains many important archeological sites—[El Mirador](#), Tikal, and Calakmul. Currently, it is being deforested alarmingly quickly by illegal settlers that use fire set during the dry season (March-May) to destroy the forest and render it useful only for cattle ranching (Figure 6).

La Corona is located in the western portion of the MBR in the Laguna del Tigre National Park (PNLDT), one of the core zones of the MBR. It is the largest national park in Guatemala and the largest protected wetlands in Central America. The vast area is periodically flooded, which creates unique characteristics such as vast savannahs and transition forests. In 1990, the [RAMSAR Convention recognized PNLDT](#) as a Wetland of International Importance due to its great concentration of wetlands within the 289,000 hectare national park.

Overall, the MBR is not well-known archaeologically, despite the fact that the majority of the ancient lowland Maya civilization was located within it. Due to the nature of the rugged karstic terrain, tropical vegetation, seasonal climate, and a long history of colonial neglect, the MBR today



**Figure 6** Illegal burning within MBR

still contains large unexplored or lightly surveyed areas wherein many sites have not been investigated scientifically.

PRALC's long-term presence in this region has resulted in the construction of a permanent research camp (Figure 7) that is staffed year-round and with satellite internet connectivity. PRALC, and its collaborators, such as [WCS](#) and [CONAP](#), have succeeded since 2005 to limit fire, looting, and poaching damage to this delicate tropical environment. Only through continued research will PRALC be able to contribute to this endangered region's protection.

**Figure 7** PRALC camp

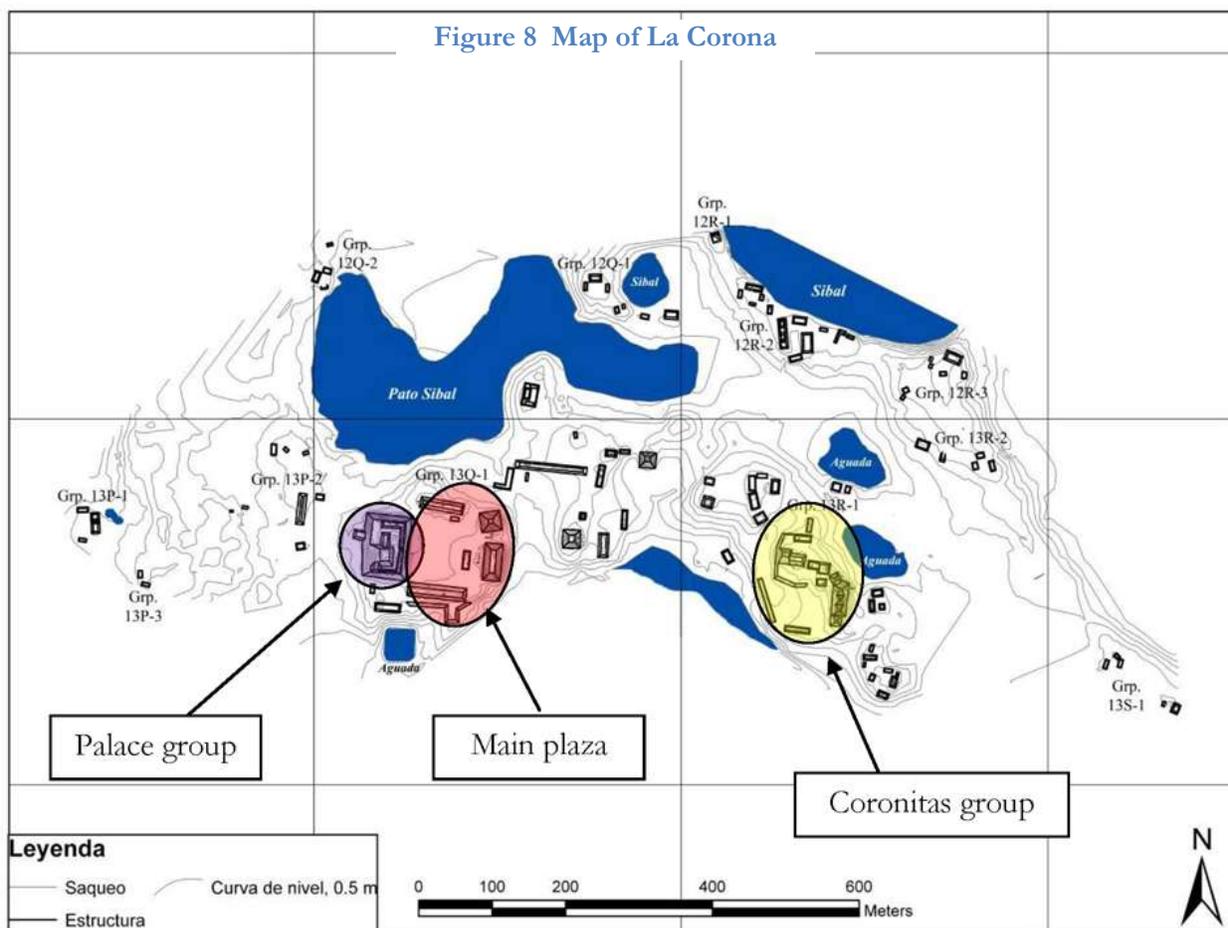


### PRALC's research at La Corona

After five seasons of field research, PRALC has begun to elucidate the development and role of this enigmatic site. Research in these five years has involved extensive survey of the entire research region as well as more focused mapping and excavations at the site itself.

This research has revealed that the site is perched along all the high ground available among at least four separate lagoons—called *sibales* (Figure 8). At first blush, La Corona appeared to be a rather small and sparsely populated site. Now it is clear that all the well-drained terrain in this largely damp and marshy region is densely

settled. La Corona consisted of a widely dispersed, but not small, population of subsistence farmers. The core of the site is composed of two major monumental architectural groups: the Main Plaza (Figure 9) to the west and the “Coronitas” group to the east. Monumental structures and high-ranking residential groups were dispersed among them. A small lagoon to the south of the Principal group was in fact an artificially constructed lake—*aguada*. It is likely that this *aguada* was constructed to provide potable water for the elite residents of the Palace and Main Plaza; it represents, furthermore, a surprisingly intense effort of engineering.





**Figure 9 Main Plaza**

La Corona was occupied (AD 300-800) during the Classic period. Despite its large number of carved monuments (over 75 pieces), it is modest in size, composed of two main building complexes and sparse settlement. The inconsistency between its many and exquisite hieroglyphically-inscribed and sculpted monuments and this modest size renders La Corona relatively peculiar in the ancient Maya world.

Moreover, the colossal looting efforts (Figure 10) at the site have resulted in the removal of many monuments from their original context. The looted pieces from La Corona are now displayed as isolated objects in museums or squirreled away in private collections throughout the world, irretrievably fragmenting the historical narrative of the site recorded on them.

La Corona's monuments are like a broken and incomplete puzzle; and, only sustained archaeological intervention and salvage aimed at identifying the original location of these monuments can hope to

reintegrate and holistically interpret the record of this site and its role in lowland Maya prehistory. Furthermore, the refined style of these pieces indicates that a relatively high-status cadre of artists was involved with La Corona's public monuments—ones more often associated with large primary centers such as Calakmul.

Importantly, the texts from La Corona discuss places and personages far beyond the limited confines of the site itself. While it does record a detailed history of the La Corona ruling dynasty, it also provides a myriad of information on



**Figure 10 Looter's trench, La Corona**

important cities of its day that cannot be found elsewhere. It recorded, in other words, important historical information about the developments of the great cities of the Classic Maya civilization.

Why did it enjoy such a privileged perch in the Classic Maya world? What made La Corona so special? The answer to these questions comes in part from an important looted monument—Panel 5 (Figure 11)—that records the history of La Corona’s political alliances. Its central image displays two noble women standing in their respective litters facing each other. The text records the separate arrivals to La Corona (in AD 520, 679, and 721) of three noble women from Calakmul. The women are named and identified as wives of La Corona kings. Furthermore, [Simon Martin](#) discovered that [each of these women was a daughter of the Calakmul king](#) of that time; in other words, they were all princesses.

The panel’s focus on women is remarkable for Classic Maya society; however, the recording of a two-century long familial connection between the dynasties of Calakmul and La Corona is almost entirely unique. While political alliances forged by marriage ties were common among the Classic Maya, this example appears to reflect more than political alliance, rather it celebrates sustained kin relations. The La Corona dynasty was, therefore, more than just allied, but likely,

*avored* by the Calakmul rulers whose grandchildren were heirs to the La Corona throne.

We now know that La Corona was such a close ally to Calakmul’s rulers, that on several occasions a Calakmul princess was sent to La Corona to marry the La Corona king. This position gave it access to the greatest of artists, scribes, and kings on a regular basis. In addition to this sustained privilege, La Corona also had the good fortune of being located near a source of dense marble-like limestone that proved ideal for stone carving. This combination led to the development of a rich, detailed, and well-preserved carving tradition at the site which we are only now beginning to appreciate.

But why did Calakmul choose to favor La Corona? PRALC research has shown that La Corona’s special relationship with Calakmul has much to do with the desire and need of the Calakmul kings to maintain open and viable a trading route throughout the Maya lowlands. La Corona straddles the

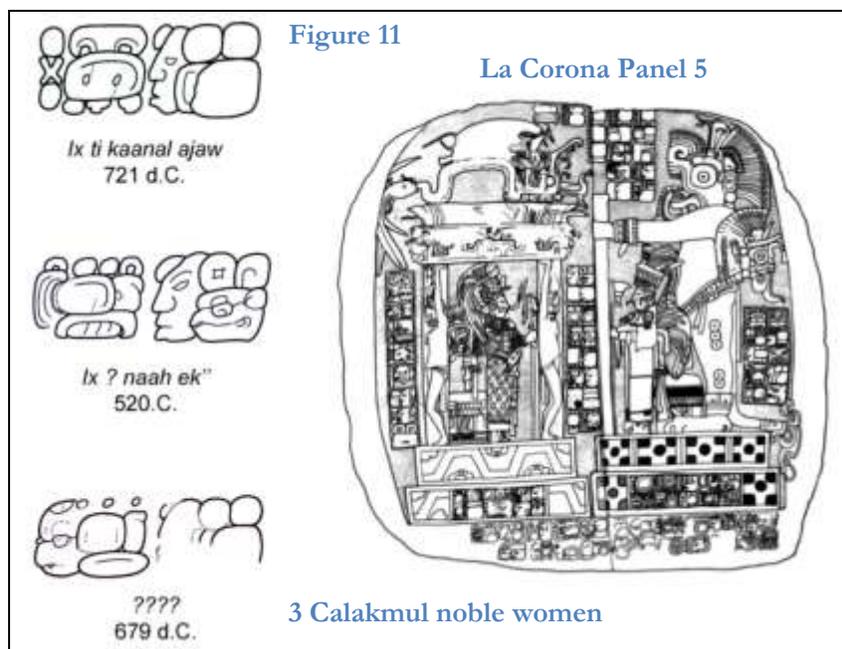
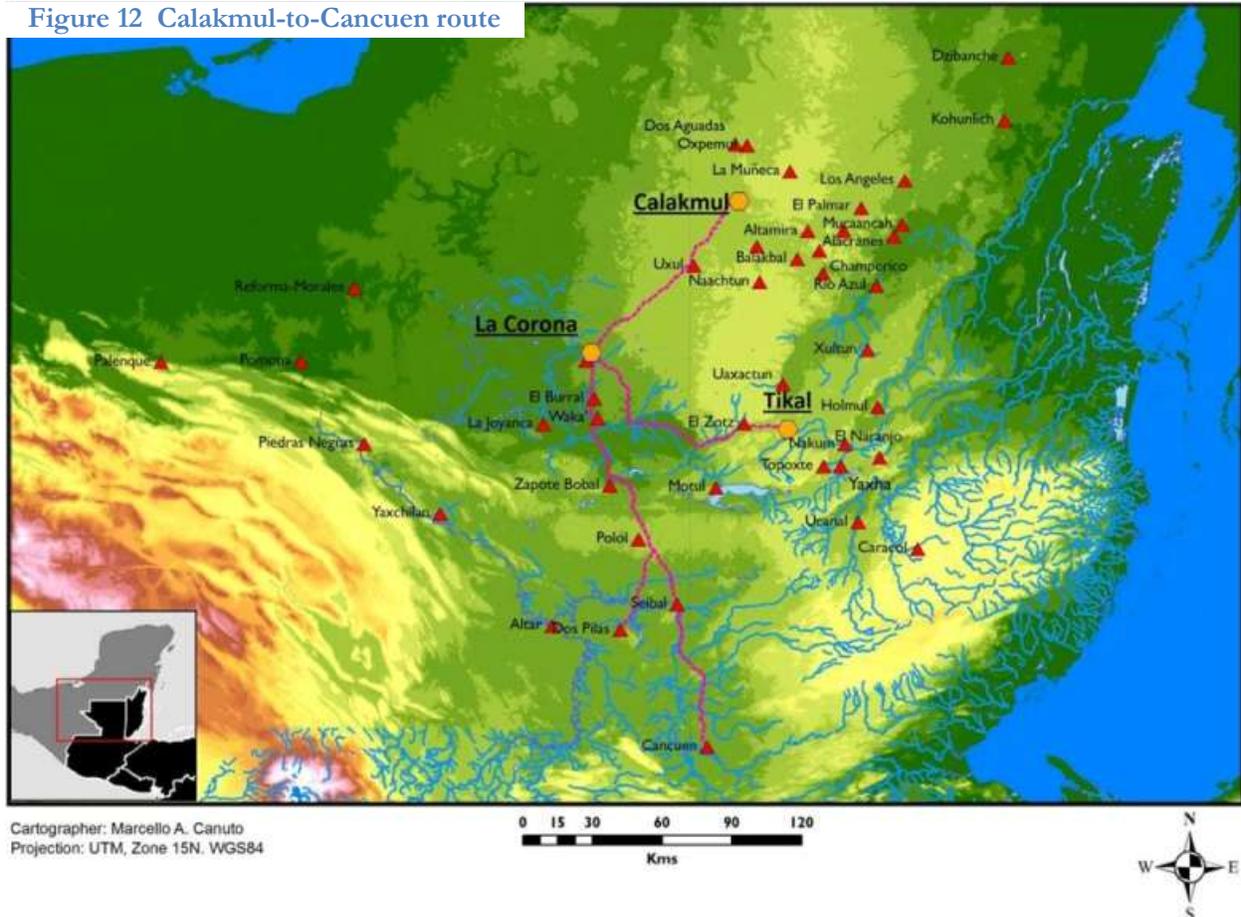


Figure 12 Calakmul-to-Cancuen route



most viable north-south communication route between Calakmul and the Guatemalan highlands (Figure 12). Along with other Classic period capitals like El Peru (anciently known as Waka'), Dos Pilas, and Cancuen, La Corona maintained a critical north-south "royal route" through the Maya lowlands that connected Calakmul with its southern allies. As a consequence, La Corona and its rulers figured prominently in the imperial designs of Calakmul's kings over a period of two centuries during the Classic period.

So, La Corona proves exceptional for 1) its abundance of water, 2) its location at a critical leg of a north-south trade route, and 3) its dense marble-like limestone. For all those things, Calakmul kings sent their

daughters, scribes, warriors off to La Corona and converted this small site into a royal enclave that faithfully recorded and preserved important episodes of Classic Maya history.

With further study, PRALC will surely find more hieroglyphic texts that will provide important data about Classic Maya political history. Moreover, the continuing research on ancient diet, health, and everyday domestic life will help illustrate how life at small centers differed from those of the larger capitals. These studies will help elucidate the complexity of lowland Maya society.