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RECONSIDERING THE REALITY OF SOUTHEASTERN MESOAMERICA: CONTINUITY,
DIVERSITY, AND INTER-VALLEY INTERACTION IN WESTERN HONDURAS

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Abstract

The late fifth century AD was a time of rapid transformation in non-Maya southeastern Mesoamerica. From this time forward, the landscape of western Honduras would become filled with increasingly complex polities and rising populations. So too is there evidence for a distinctive change in material culture, such as the development of widely shared regional polychrome ceramic traditions and the stabilization of obsidian exchange networks. Arguably, more than any other period in prehistory, it is during the Late Classic that a unique cultural identity emerges from this part of southeastern Mesoamerica.

In this paper we seek to answer the question, can we characterize the diverse peoples and communities of Late Classic western Honduras as belonging to a culture area of shared affiliation and concordant identities, or is “southeastern Mesoamerica” nothing more than a geographic designation, which encompasses a diversity of strategies just different enough to defy uniform classification? To address this question we place the findings of our own research in the broader context of the long-term research projects conducted by our colleagues since the 1980s. In particular, we emphasize the inter-valley interactions among these polities to illuminate the shared and divergent paths taken by these communities during this period.

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INTRODUCTION

Our central conceit in this paper is that the time is ripe for reconsideration of the consensus view of southeastern Mesoamerica. The term Southeast Mesoamerica is of course well suited to describing the geographic region of interest to everyone in this session, describing as it does the contiguous national borders of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (Figure 1). Moreover, this term serves as convenient shorthand for the pre-Columbian societies and polities that arose and interacted across a well-established cultural frontier.

This shorthand, however, often glosses over the nuanced (and occasionally glaring) differences of the people and communities of this region, especially those located east of the Maya world, in northwestern Honduras, leaving ambiguous both variation and continuities.

Here, we call attention to these differences during a time of rapid transformation, the Late Classic period. Explosive growth is characteristic of this period, as western Honduras is filled with increasingly complex polities and rising populations. A shift in material culture also accompanies this transition, in which monumental constructions become more common, distinctive polychrome traditions emerge, and obsidian exchange networks are stabilized. All of this signals changes in the organization of the local and regional economy.

Historically, explanations for this transformation look to the role of the Copan polity. Early interpretations saw Copan as an instigator for change among the less developed peoples to the east (Boone and Wiley 1984; Urban and Schortman 1986). Such outdated

models often portrayed non-Maya peoples beyond the frontier as passive recipients of the ideological sophistication and statecraft of the more sophisticated and complex Maya.

Of course, the numerous large-scale research efforts spanning the 1970s through 1990s have demonstrated older core-periphery models to be ill-suited to explaining the rise of complexity in the Southeast (Robinson 1987; Schortman and Urban 1994, 1996). In advancing theoretical models of interregional interaction, these efforts revealed that some polities in the region were indeed intimately connected with the Copan polity (Ashmore 1987; Schortman and Urban 1987) while others engaged with distant Maya centers along the coast of Belize (Joyce 1986). More importantly, it is now clear that many polities in western Honduras were only marginally related to the Maya and others, seemingly not at all (Hirth 1988).

With the issue of interregional interaction settled, questions of intraregional concern captured the attention of scholars in western Honduras. With few exceptions (Aoyama 1994, 2001; Canuto and Bell 2008; Inomata and Aoyama 1996; Schortman and Nakamura 1991), these efforts have focused on polities constrained by valleys, which coincidentally define the limits of research permits issued by IHAH. Although their particular research agendas and theoretical perspectives may vary, results point again to the profound variation and continuity of these Late Classic cultures.

To address the issue of diversity and continuity so fundamental to our question of the reality of Southeast Mesoamerica, we propose a theoretical shift to address inter-valley interaction in which interactions *among* the polities within southeastern

Mesoamerica takes center stage. Such an approach holds great potential to shed new light on the region. Recently, Menzies and Haller (2012) have amply demonstrated the utility of adopting a similar “macroregional” perspective (following Flannery 1976:5; Redmond et al. 1999:110) to compare contemporary developments across the Late Ceramic political landscape of central Panama. We are not the first to call attention to the utility of such an approach (Beaudry-Corbett and Henderson 1993; Hirth et al. 1993:230), but we do think that comparable and robust datasets suitable for this endeavor have only now been made available (see Table 1).

RECENT RESEARCH AT JESUS DE OTORO

Our most recent investigations contribute yet another piece to the emerging picture of the diverse strategies enacted by the prehistoric inhabitants of western Honduras. Since 2007, our research in the Jesus de Otoro valley has provided some tentative but suggestive results (McFarlane and Suri 2012; Stocket and McFarlane 2007, 2008), which we will briefly summarize today.

The Jesus de Otoro valley is located roughly 30 kilometers south of Lake Yojoa. This small highland valley is topographically defined by the Otoro river, which drains to the north and becomes the lower Ulúa river. Beyond the southern limits of the valley lie the headwaters of the Otoro river and the La Esperanza obsidian source. As such, our research area is situated in close proximity to several valleys that have undergone long-term or intensive archaeological investigations -- including the area surrounding Lake

Yojoa and the Comayagua Valley -- and is connected via the Rio Ulua to others, including the Santa Barbara region, the Ulua valley, and the Sula Plain.

Surveys undertaken by IHAH and local informants (Neill 2004) have revealed a relatively dense settlement pattern of at least 19 pre-Columbian and Colonial period sites (Figure 1). Based on the intensity of modern agricultural activity, we presume that many of the smaller sites have been lost or eluded detection. Nevertheless, a fascinating pattern was noted. That is, pre-Columbian sites with monumental architecture exhibited strikingly similar site-planning principles. Of the largest visited, all five of the top tier sites shared a large plaza bordered on the east by a monumental platform and superstructure (Figure 2). Although, generally open plazas with monumental architecture are noted in the Late Classic Comayagua Valley (Dixon 1989a) and elsewhere (Joyce and Hendon 2000; Robinson 1986; Stockett 2007, 2010; Urban 1986), this particular east-focused pattern seems unique to the Jesus de Otoro valley.

One of the best examples of this pattern is the site of Sinsimbla, which has been the focus of our investigations. Through four field seasons we have collected data through a survey of the site and test excavations throughout the monumental center as well from surrounding households. Diagnostic ceramics collected through these efforts place the occupation of Sinsimbla from the end of the Early Classic through the Late Classic. Radiocarbon assays, which range between AD 570 and 780, lend further support for a predominantly Late Classic designation. We argue that the founding and occupation of Sinsimbla is an exemplar of the Late Classic period transformations noted throughout the region.

Pottery types recovered from Sinsimbla date predominantly to the Late Classic period, but trace amounts of Early Classic types, such as Usulutans, were noted. Inhabitants of Sinsimbla were producing or acquiring recognizable Ulúa Polychrome types and varieties. The assemblage conforms most frequently with the Ulúa Polychrome Red Group (e.g. Joyce 1993a, 1993b). Other decorative types including Monte Grandes and Canciques were noted, placing the inhabitants of Sinsimbla within a wider exchange network spanning from the Maya frontier to the Comayagua valley and north to the Sula plain. Perhaps not surprisingly the regions surrounding Lake Yojoa (the middle and lower Ulúa river and Comayagua valley) exhibit the greatest similarity of decorative forms.

While there are slight variations in the frequency of Late Classic types, there is no significant difference in access to non-local resources. Fragments of polychrome vessels were present in all sampled structures, regardless of structure size or location. Chipped stone artifacts reduced from non-local materials were also found across the site. Although the most common obsidian source was the La Esperanza quarry, trace amounts of obsidian from more distant locales was distributed at Sinsimbla. Control over access to or distribution of these non-local resources was not limited to a specific segment of the Sinsimbla community.

Investigations at Sinsimbla, therefore, provide new insights into the ancient inhabitants of the valley. This small-scale community first settled the western bank of the Otoro river during the Early Classic period. Soon after, the population underwent significant socio-political and presumably demographic transformations. The built

environment grew dramatically to include the monumental eastern pyramid and other constructions along the main plaza. Based on the ceramic assemblage, it appears that soon after Sinsimbla was founded external trade ties shifted away from the Usulután producing regions to the south and toward the Ulúa and Lake Yojoa region to the north. There is however an absence of familiar Late Classic Maya types, such as Copadors, in the Sinsimbla assemblage suggesting that interactions with the great centers to the west or their intermediaries were not emphasized. By the onset of the Terminal Classic period, some of the structures at the site were falling into disuse and the site was abandoned soon after.

Among the many questions that remain currently unanswered for Sinsimbla is determining the nature of its relationship to other sites across the valley. The settlement hierarchy of the valley presents an unusual pattern consisting of many relatively larger sites and few small-scale habitation or special function locales. Of course, the modern agricultural activities have undoubtedly taken their toll on these now invisible smaller sites. Nevertheless, we argue that the sociopolitical organization of the valley simply does not conform to a typical hierarchical arrangement. With available evidence there appears to be no single primate center from which activities are coordinated across a valley-wide polity. Rather, a heterarchical pattern seems likely, wherein multiple sites functioned as centers in their own right (Crumley 1979:144; Marquart and Crumley 1987). At the very least, paramount elites were not able to influence subordinates to settle nearby, signaling a political economy with limited disparity among ranked segments (de Montmollin 1989).

This settlement pattern places Jesus de Otoro in line with contemporary patterns identified in the Comayagua valley but divergent from most other valleys in the region. Settlement pattern research undertaken in valleys to the north and west generally recounts a landscape populated with many small sites supporting a few monumental centers. This is the case for the lower Motagua valley and La Entrada region (Schortman and Nakamura 1991). Elsewhere, the pattern consists of a single primate center, as seen in the Naco and Cacaupala valleys (Urban 1986; Urban et al. 1999), the lower Ulúa and Sula plain (Pope 1987), the Santa Barbara (Schortman and Urban 1987) and El Cajon regions (Hasemann 1987; Hirth et al. 1989).

Interestingly, the primate center pattern often, though not exclusively, occurs at choke points or crossroads of the interregional interaction networks in southeastern Mesoamerica (Hirth 1978). Gualjoquito in the Santa Barbara region (Schortman and Urban 1987) and Salitrón Viejo along the lower Sulaco river (Hasemann 1987) serve as examples of this type. Given that Jesus de Otoro is the last open valley enroute to the La Esperanza source and highlands, one may wonder why the inhabitants of this valley did not conform to the “gateway center” model.

DISCUSSION

Even with such a brief overview the limited archaeological evidence from Sinsimbla and the Jesus de Otoro valley raise questions about the diversity and continuity of cultural patterns throughout the region. Returning to our central point, we wonder if the data sets from these neighboring valleys truly reflect a shared cultural

affiliation and concordant identities. If the differences we have noted in the distribution of polychrome wares, site layout, and settlement patterns reflect real variation in the organization of Late Classic practices then perhaps we need to develop a new model to understand this region. We believe that the best approach to explaining these patterns is through the perspective of inter-valley interactions.

In a sense, we view an inter-valley approach as the natural next step in the progression of archaeological study of the Southeast. The axes of analysis researchers have formerly utilized to understand intra- or inter-regional dynamics may now be applied at this middle scale to parse interactions within the region itself. For instance, ceramics have long been identified as material expressions of group identity and evidence for the spread of economic exchange networks and shared ideas. Drawing on existing intraregional ceramic analyses and chemical source analysis, scholars of the Southeast can begin to fine-tune our understanding of the movement and distribution of pottery, as well as the spread of influential ideas about how pottery should be made, decorated, and used from zone to zone within the Southeast. This might shed light on the types of networks (both exchange and ideology based) uniting or dividing the region and how they changed over time.

The Honduran Polychrome Tradition (e.g. Henderson and Beaudry-Corbett 1993) is a prime example of how the application of an inter-valley interaction perspective may test the reality of Southeast Mesoamerica. When the Honduran polychromes were described (often disparagingly) in contrast to their Late Classic contemporaries in the Maya area, it is easy to consider them as a homogenous group. However, when an inter-

valley perspective is adopted a number of aesthetically complex and symbolically rich varieties emerge (Joyce 1993a,). Bold Geometric types, reflecting a Central American influence, are more common in the lower Ulúa and Sulaco valleys but are rarely noted elsewhere (Hirth 1988). Chamelecon Polychromes exhibit subtle variation in their distribution within the Naco valley, but are divergent from Ulúa polychromes of the central corridor (Schortman et al. 2001). Interestingly, the Ulúa polychrome traditions exhibit increasing variation among these valleys from the fifth through the ninth centuries (Joyce 1993a). Finally, if the uneven distribution of Copadors and other Copanec exports are plotted (Henderson and Beaudry-Corbett 1991; Henderson et al. 1979; Hirth 1988:315) it becomes clear that the exchange networks and group identities defy easy classification as a singular Southeast Mesoamerica.

Similarly, inter-valley analysis of the built environment may shed light on shared or divergent practices related to political strategizing and architectural vernacular. From the smallest scale of individual site plans, density, and architectural design to larger-scale site size hierarchies, settlement data can illuminate unity and/or variation within southeastern Mesoamerica. Our data from Jesús de Otoro, for example, suggest an interesting divergence from other documented site planning principles and settlement distributions in the region. The largest sites in the Jesús de Otoro valley all share a similar plan: variations on a rectilinear plaza dominated by an east-situated monumental platform. Interestingly, this pattern compares favorably only to the contemporaneous site of Cementario de Yarumela in the Comayagua valley (Dixon 1989a:96). Likewise, the heterarchical settlement pattern in Jesús de Otoro is in opposition to more commonly

observed patterns in the Southeast. However, it is important to note that these comparisons are -- at present -- anecdotal and unsystematic. If placed in the context of an inter-valley analysis drawn from all well-documented Southeast polities, startling insights into differing strategies for the accumulation and expression of power, identity, and authority may be revealed. The time for us to begin drawing such comparisons, we believe, is now.

CONCLUSION

With the culmination and publication of many of the large-scale projects of the 70s, 80s, and 90s, coupled with earlier work and new, smaller projects present us with a new opportunity to collaborate and compare across datasets in way that didn't used to be possible. We believe scholars of Southeast Mesoamerica should take advantage of the growing body of data from valley-specific and polity-specific projects to undertake a larger effort--one aimed at elucidating the nature of Southeast Mesoamerica as a region and answering the question posed by this session: was this region truly a reality in pre-Columbian times?

We see the ultimate goal of this project to be the formulation of specific research questions designed to draw upon data from as many known regions of the Southeast as possible. For example, one might ask: what are the strategies for political development as inferred from the unified or divergent values in the site-planning principles? Or, what do the patterns of integrated or distributed networks of exchange suggest about interaction and affiliation? And finally, what are the socio-political and

economic arrangements created by the inhabitants of this region? And, more to the point, what can these alternatives to the hegemonic and hierarchical political arrangements of their neighbors to the west inform us about human organization in the past?

It is these broader goals to which we believe inter-valley studies are best suited. By presenting our findings from Sinsimbla and posing questions about their relation to the rest of the region, we hope to stimulate interest in the larger project of inter-valley analysis and raise awareness about the potential represented by the data sets of southeastern Mesoamerica.

Table 1. Primary Sources for the Archaeology of Western Honduras

Region/Valley/Polity	Citations
La Entrada	Aoyama 1994; Inomata and Aoyama 1996; Nakamura 1987
Lower Ulúa River and Sula Plain	Henderson 1988; Joyce 1986, 1991, 1993; Joyce and Henderson 2001; Pope 1987; Robinson 1986; Sheptak 1987
Middle Chamelecon: Naco and Cacaupala Valleys	Connell 2002; Douglass 2002; Henderson 1977; McFarlane 2005; Schortman and Urban 1994, 2011; Schortman et al. 2001; Stockett 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2010; Urban 1986, 1993; Urban and Schortman 1988, 2004; Urban et al. 2002; Urban et al. 1999; Wells 2003
Middle Ulúa: Santa Barbara Valley and Lake Yojoa	Ashmore 1987; Baudez and Becquelin 1973; Beaudry-Corbett 1993; Schortman and Urban 1987, 1995; Schortman et al. 1986
El Cajon Regions: Sulaco and Lower Humuya Valleys	Hasemann 1987; Hirth et al. 1993; Hirth et al. 1989
Comayagua Valley	Agurcia 1980; Dixon 1989a, 1989b; Dixon et al 1994; Lara Pinto 1985, 1991
Olanco and Mosquitia	Brady et al. 2000; Dixon et al. 1989
Jesus de Otoro Valley	Inestroza 2007; McFarlane and Suri 2012; Neill 2004; Stockett and McFarlane 2007, 2008.

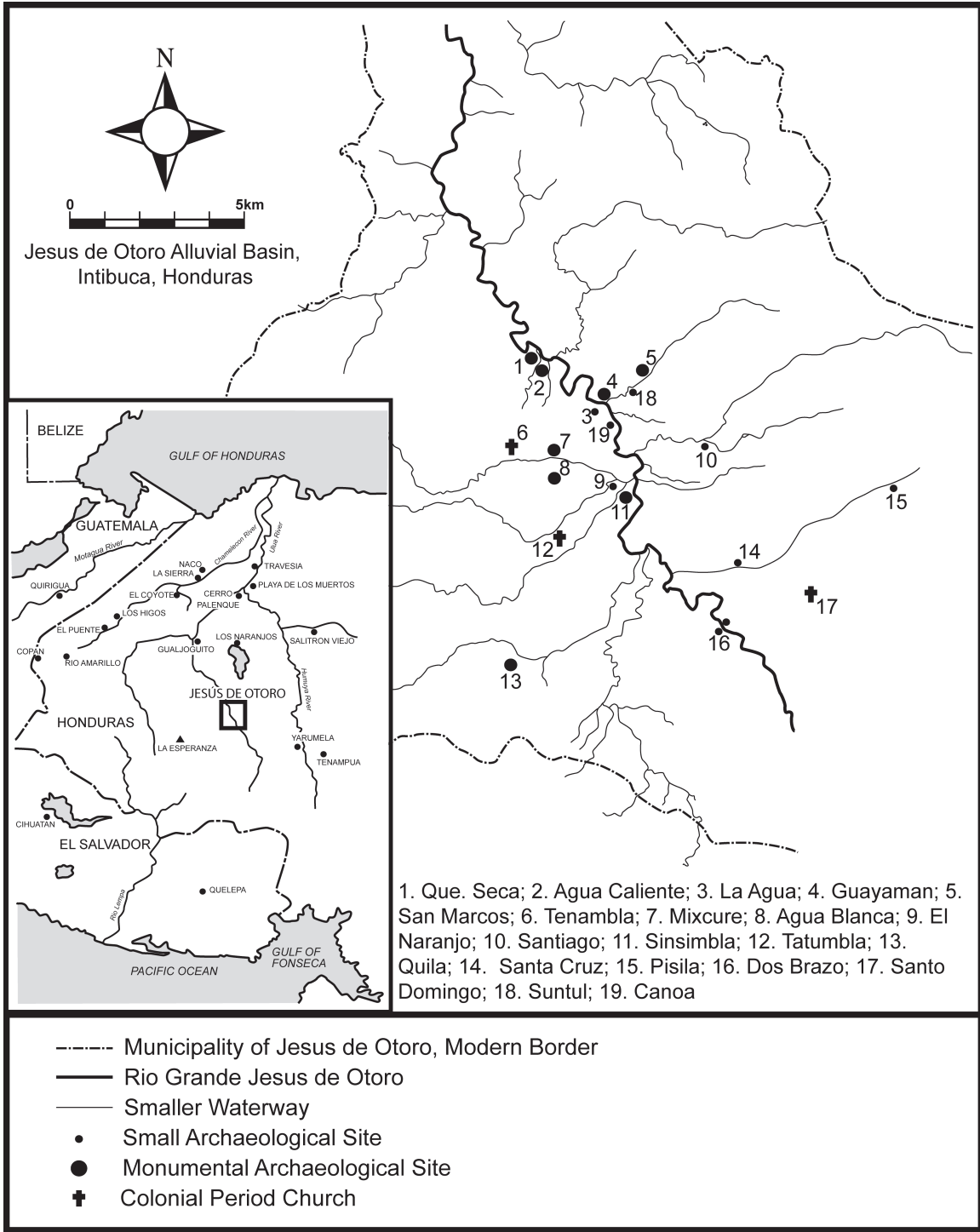


Figure 1. Major Centers in Southeast Mesoamerica and Archaeological Sites in the Jesus de Otoro Valley.

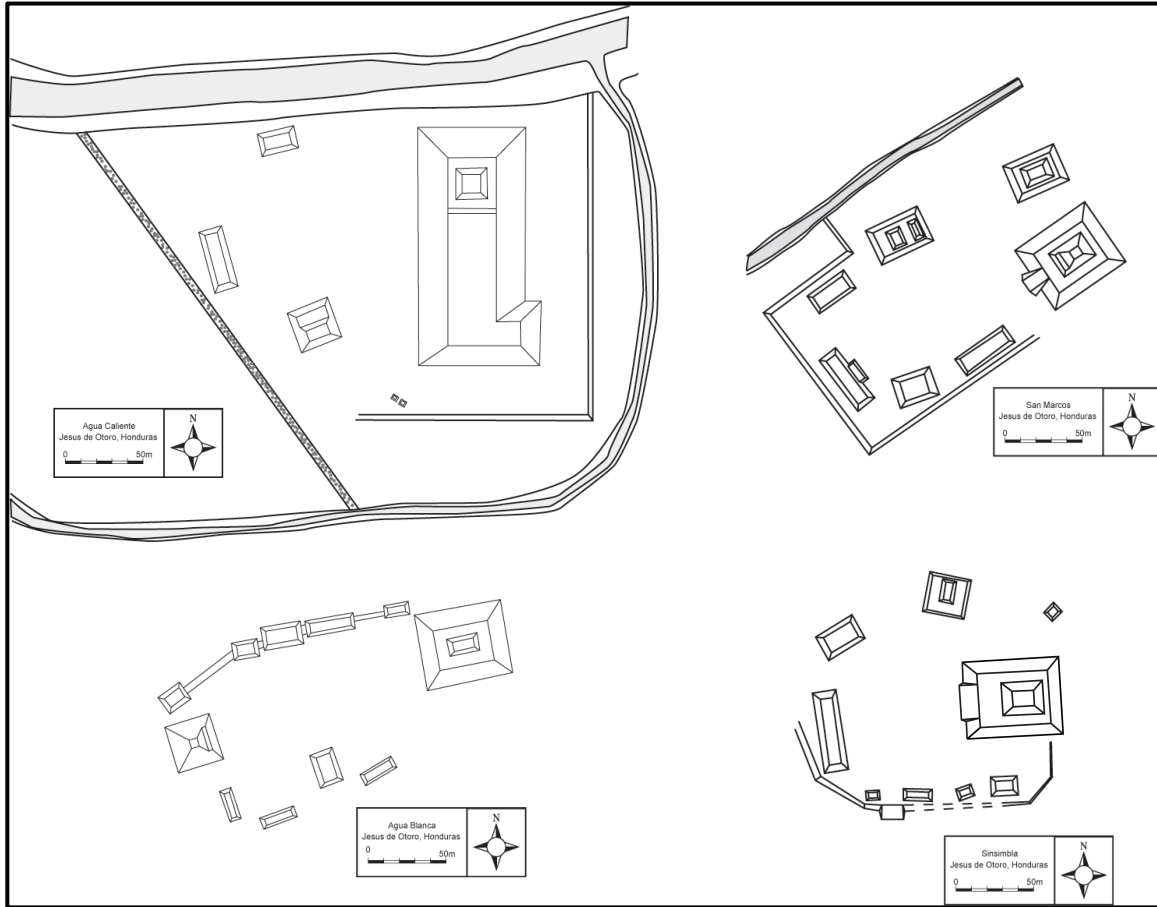


Figure 2. Common site plan for Pre-Columbian sites in the Jesus de Otoro valley.

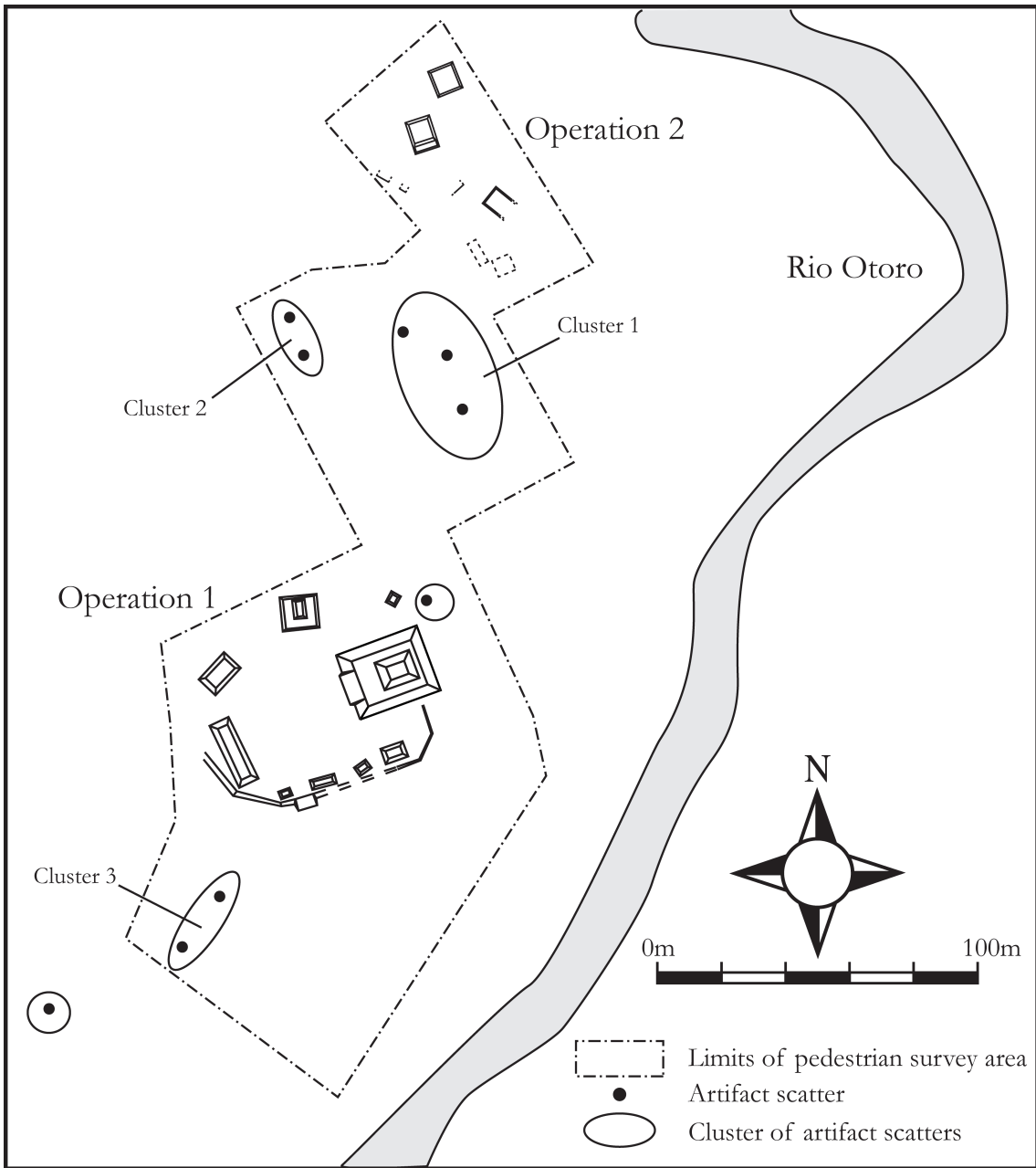


Figure 3. Limits of pedestrian survey and location of artifact scatters and surface-visible architecture at Sinsimbla.

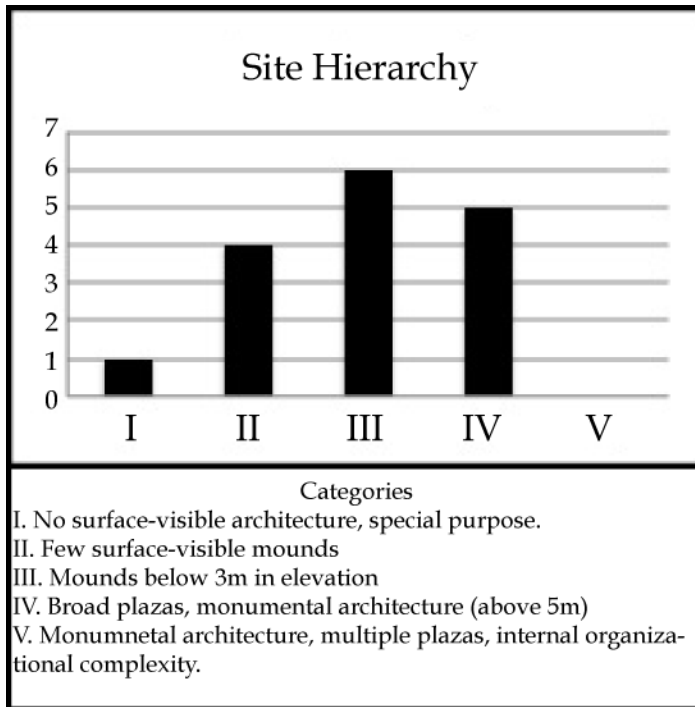


Figure 4. Site Hierarchy, Jesus de Otoro valley.

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