II. ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN THE NORTHERN MAYA NEW DATA ON THE MAYA PRECLASSIC

David W. Sedat and Robert J. Sharer

The origin of settled life in the southern Maya lowlands, a region that saw the later spectacular culmination of Classic Maya civilization, has been a problem of longstanding as well as contemporary interest. The earliest extant cultural remains in the southern lowlands are the Xe-Real ceramic complexes (Altar de Sacrificios and Seibal) confined to riverine settings of the southern portion of the area. As Willey, Culbert, and Adams have already noted, these early complexes are "diverse, apparently highly regional, and of uncertain time depth" (1967:293); although Xe-Real ceramics, on the basis of modal similarities, show possible ties to the Chiapas Grijalva Valley (Dili-Escalera phases), the Guatemalan Pacific Coast (Conchas phase), and the Gulf Coast Olmec region of Veracruz (La Venta and Tres Zapotes complexes) (Willey 1970:355). R. E. W. Adams feels that the most likely source for Xe-Real peoples is the adjacent lowlands of Tabasco and Veracruz (1969:21, 1971:154). On the other hand, Sharer and Gifford in a recent article (1970) postulate the southeastern Maya highlands, in view of the evidence from the site of Chalchuapa, El Salvador, to be one of the likely sources for certain segments of the earliest lowland populations.

The hypothesis advanced by Sharer and Gifford is based upon two factors, the first being the finding of ceramics at Chalchuapa (Colos ceramic complex ca. 900-650 B.C.) that are typologically closely related to Xe pottery at such Lowland Maya sites as Altar de Sacrificios and Seibal as well as with early Jenny Creek pottery from Barton Ramie. The second factor is the discovery of typological antecedents to these related ceramics in the stratigraphically preceding Tok ceramic complex (ca. 1200-900 B.C.) at Chalchuapa. This evidence indicates that the southeastern Maya highlands were not only the locus of an early sedentary population but also one of the probable sources for the migration of agricultural peoples to the Maya lowlands (Sharer 1969:64-68, Sharer and Gifford 1970:452-3).

The ceramic links between the southeastern highlands and the early settlements in the southern and eastern lowlands appear to relate pottery producing populations residing in these two regions, for the pottery involved, especially the Jocote group, is of a domestic nature and hence not explainable as a result of some other process such as trade (Gifford 1968:2, Sharer and Gifford 1970:450). If the southern highlands were indeed the origin region of some of the first lowland colonists, then the intervening areas should provide concrete evidence for early migrations. Sharer and Gifford have already suggested that the most direct migration routes to the lowlands from the southern highlands are through the Copan, Polochic and Mojo valleys, as well as parts of British Honduras (1970:453).

Although most of the area between the southern Maya lowlands and the Maya highlands is unknown archaeologically, there has been a great deal of speculation concerning the prehistory of this intermediate area and its role during the Preclassic eras. For example, the northern highland region of Guatemala (comprising in part the present-day departments of Alta Verapaz and El Quiche) is between the southern highlands (which contain such important sites as Kaminaljuyu and Chalchuapa) and the southern lowlands, and has a scant record of archaeological research. The northern highlands also harbor the sources of the Salinas-Chixoy and Pasion rivers, both important rivers in the Maya lowlands. These north-south trending river systems might have been used by early peoples as natural corridors into the lowlands from the highlands. However, R. E. W. Adams, after conducting an archaeological survey in the Cotzal Valley (northern El Quiche) and at Chajcar (Alta Verapaz), has concluded there was "an essential vacancy of much of the Maya highlands until relatively late in the Preclassic period" (1969:20). Adams also reports that his examination of three large private collections of intact pottery vessels from these regions revealed a lack of Preclassic pottery; thus, "if the adjacent highlands are largely vacant at the time of the earliest complexes now known in the lowlands, then we cannot derive cultural ideas, nor people, nor agriculture from these same vacant areas" (1969:20). Adams apparently wishes to infer from his examination that there was little or no contact between the Preclassic highland cultures and the first agriculturalists in the lowlands. Accordingly, Adams would not see the Late Preclassic floresence in the highlands

(for example, at Kaminaljuyu) to have greatly influenced the Lowland Maya's evolution towards civilization (1968:10, 1969:21). The declaration of the northern highlands to be a vacant or feebly developed region during the Preclassic has apparently received general acceptance by various writers in recent articles (Willey 1970:322, Puleston and Puleston 1971:332).

More recent excavations in the Alta Verapaz have provided preliminary evidence suggesting Adams' conclusions regarding the prehistory of the northern highlands may be somewhat premature. During the month of July, 1971 exploratory excavations were conducted at the site of Sakajut, Alta Verapaz (Figure 1). The site of Sakajut is located approximately 2 km. south of the town of San Juan Chamelco and an equal distance north of the previously reported archaeological site of Chichen (Smith, 1955:60-62). The site is in a region of karst topography and partially cleared pine forests; milpa is presently being planted over the site itself. Sakajut is a previously unreported site discovered by Sedat during an informal reconnaissance of the region in 1964. The site proper, consisting of five earthen mounds arranged around a central plaza (Group A) is situated on a terrace of the Sakajut River, a small tributary of the upper Coban or Cahabon River. Across this small river and to the south is another group of eight earthen mounds (Group B), including an open-ended ball court (Figure 2).

The 1971 excavations at Sakajut consisted of a single test pit located at the base of one mound (Structure 2) and a more thorough excavation of the base and summit of another mound (Structure 3; Figure 2). The test pit at the base of Structure 2, located on the apparent western axial line of the structure, revealed first a shallow humic layer followed by 1 m. of sterile yellow clay constructional material. At the base of the construction and resting on sterile clay was a single vessel (Cache #3) apparently deposited during the construction. Cache #3 is a Black-Brown ware vessel belonging to the Pinos Ceramic Group (Jorgia Incised: Variety Unspecified) common to both the sites of Kaminaljuyu and Chalchuapa. On the basis of shape comparisons to Chalchuapa ceramics, this vessel may date as early as the late Middle Preclassic (Kal Ceramic Complex, ca. 650-400 B.C.).

However, an assessment by Edwin M. Shook (Personal Communication, 1971), based upon the incised motif as it occurs at Kaminaljuyu, would place the vessel in the Late Preclassic (Miraflores phase). Based upon this limited evidence, the construction of Structure 2 may be placed in either the late Middle Preclassic or the Late Preclassic.

The excavations on Structure 3 were more extensive than those conducted on Structure 2. Briefly, a series of test pits were dug along the east-west and north-south axial lines. These excavations revealed at least three superimposed earthen rubble and clay constructions (Figure 3). The uppermost, presumably latest construction (Structure 3-1st), consists of sterile layers of banded red and yellow clays. There was no attempt to reveal the three-dimensional form of any structure; however, in section, a series of eroded simple terraces could be discerned for Structure 3-1st (Figure 3). Directly beneath this was Structure 3-2nd, an earthen construction with two simple terraces. Traces of an even earlier construction (Structure 3-3rd) were found near the center of the mound. Beneath all this construction was a black humic layer, approximately 20-30 cm. thick, which overlaid a sterile clay deposit. Partially intruded into this basal black level (and presumably contemporaneous with the construction of Structure 3-2nd) was a partial vessel and intact obsidian blade (Cache #1). This vessel is a flat-bottomed, flaring-walled bowl with a slightly incurving rim. A thick-line, blotchy resist technique was used to decorate both the interior and exterior of the vessel. The exact chronological placement of this vessel remains to be clarified, but it is certainly Preclassic and possibly related to the earliest Usulutan traditions of the Middle Preclassic in the southern Highlands (Puxtla Ceramic Group at Chalchuapa and Las Charcas Phase at Kaminaljuyu).

During the course of these rather brief and preliminary excavations, a total of 1066 sherds were recovered from the various test pits. Although the bulk of this material remains in Guatemala, the material from the earliest stratigraphic feature, the basal black layer, has been thoroughly studied. Sherds from this deposit are relatively sparse, but contain several important early types with close modal affinities with other ceramic complexes

of the Terminal Early Preclassic and Middle Preclassic eras. The exclusive vessel forms found in this basal stratum are tecomates and flat-bottomed bowls. Decorative modes include red-painted rims, exterior red slip, white-rimmed black ware, interior finger punching, impressed applique fillets, post-slip incising, fugitive black paint and red/orange paint, zoned punctations, and one example of possible rocker-stamping on a tecomate rim.

The entire sequence of cultural activity at Sakajut is not known at this time. A preliminary assessment of time depth for the site is provided by the excavations on Structure 3, however, only a very small portion of that mound was tested. The earliest evidence of occupation is the black earth stratum (Feature 3) underlying the three known structures of the mound. On the basis of the ceramic content, this stratum is dated from the terminal part of the Early Preclassic to the early Middle Preclassic. Feature 3 is interpreted as a preconstructional top soil, perhaps cultivated by early agriculturalists. This interpretation is supported by many charred carbon fragments of twigs and branches found within Feature 3 which could indicate slash-and-burn agriculture. Structure 3-3rd, the earliest revealed, was neither extensively uncovered nor sampled, but its position directly beneath Structure 3-2nd indicates its antecedence. Structure 3-2nd, on the other hand, is an earthen, terraced construction possibly dated as early as the Middle Preclassic based on the temporal assessment of a cache (Cache #1) already discussed. After an interval of undetermined length, Structure 3-2nd was covered over by Structure 3-1st. As revealed in profile, this clay construction approximates the architecture of Structure 3-2nd. The dating of Structure 3-1st is problematic due to the sterile nature of the clay fill and surfaces. However, on the basis of close constructional similarities to Structure 2 (dated as Middle Preclassic to Late Preclassic by Cache #3), Structure 3-1st may be regarded as contemporaneous with Structure 2. In other words, Structure 3-1st seems to date from late Middle to Late Preclassic. The abandonment or cessation of maintenance of Structure 3-1st (and possibly the site in toto) is inferred by the presence of a series of intrusive pits into the summit of the structure. One of these pits was filled with domestic debris and contained Classic period sherds. By the Classic period (ca. A.D. 300-900) the focus of local cultural activity

seems to have shifted to Chichen or Group B to the south. In sum, river terraces at Sakajut seem to have been occupied at an early date by agricultural peoples. Subsequently, this area became the focus of ceremonial activity during the Middle Preclassic based upon the various superimposed structures and associated cached vessels at Sakajut (Group A). Ceremonial activity apparently ceased during the Late Preclassic and presumably was relocated elsewhere, probably Group B. Sporadic activity at Group A, seemingly domestic, is indicated during the Classic period.

Bearing in mind the preliminary nature of this report, the 1971 excavations at Sakajut provide an important source of new data on the early occupation in the northern highlands. For the first time archaeological research has produced definite evidence of substantial Preclassic populations in the northern Maya highlands. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that these apparently initial sedentary populations date from a much earlier time than previously suspected.

Sakajut is not a unique or unusual site for the Alta Verapaz region, nor the only settlement of its time period in the region. A brief reconnaissance by Sedat and Sharer in the San Pedro Carcha area (about 10 kilometers north of Sakajut) revealed another site dating from the terminal Early Preclassic to Middle Preclassic based upon a surface collection of sherds. Furthermore, at the site of El Porton, near San Jeronimo, Baja Verapaz (Smith, 1955) surface collections made in 1970 and 1971 revealed material dating from the terminal Early Preclassic or Middle Preclassic. In this sample there were tecomate rims with interior finger punching, white-rimmed tecomates, and Jocote related types. Another important discovery was made at El Porton where a Preclassic monument with intriguing motifs reminiscent of Olmec and Izapan iconography was revealed (Sharer and Sedat 1971).

This supplemental information, when combined with the data from Sakajut, indicates that the northern highlands were not only substantially populated from an early date and that these populations may have been involved in the early cultural contact between the southern Maya highlands and the lowlands, but that they also participated in the cultural developments of the rest of Mesoamerica, particularly the Late Preclassic florescence of the southern highlands.

In regards to the significance and nature of the early occupation in the northern highlands, one may speculate that the first inhabitants of this region were pioneers moving into an essentially vacant area in search for agricultural lands. This movement of people beginning as early as the terminal part of the Early Preclassic might reflect population pressures already eminating from the southern highlands and Pacific Coast where village life and agriculture are demonstrably earlier (Coe and Flannery 1967, Green and Lowe 1967). Populations migrating to the northern highlands from these southern regions would have encountered a varied virgin environment, including tropical highland rain forest and stands of pine. Steep terrain would separate the inhabitable areas. Nevertheless, these migrating populations can reasonably be inferred to have also pushed further north until they finally reached the lowlands of the Peten. There, they might have found other newly established peoples, possibly from the lowlands of Tabasco and Veracruz.

Another speculation concerning the role of the northern highlands during the Preclassic is afforded by the location of Sakajut, both within its immediate geographical area as well as by its proximity to important highland natural resources. Located on an elevated river terrace, Sakajut commands the narrowing portion of the Chamelco valley. Through this portion of the valley runs an important system of native foot-paths leading south to Tactic and beyond. Branches of this trail system lead to the east via Tucuru to the Polochic valley; another trail system leads to the north into the Peten. The antiquity of many of these pathways may well go back to Preclassic times, but verification of this must await further archaeological reconnaissance along this trail system. Local informants indicate that these and other trails are still used by inhabitants and itinerate peddlers. Guatemala City is reported by these informants to be about four days unladen foot-travel from Chamelco (Sakajut) by these trails. The Peten is a week or less away from Sakajut. Thus, the position of Sakajut along a presently used trail system may be indicative of its ancient role as a trade center or control outpost.

Sakajut is not only favorably connected to a modern trail system, but is also in relatively close proximity to three important highland natural

resources: jade, quetzal feathers, and obsidian (Figure 1). Jade occurs in situ near Manzanal in the Middle Motagua River valley and possibly may also be found in other parts of the Sierra de las Minas (Alta Verapaz) and the Sierra de Chuacas (Northern El Quiche and Baja Verapaz) (Thompson 1970:139). These actual and potential sources for jade are only two to three days journey from Sakajut. Another resource originating in the Alta Verapaz region are quetzal feathers, prized by the Maya and Olmec for adornment. Finally, one of the most logical routes for the movement of El Chayal obsidian reportedly found at the Olmec Gulf coast site of San Lorenzo, Veracruz (Cobean et. al., 1971) could have been through the Alta Verapaz and down the Usumacinta drainage system.

In summary, Sakajut, even after only preliminary excations, has provided important evidence that the northern highlands were not vacant nor feebly developed during the crucial Middle and Late Preclassic periods. While it is not yet entirely clear just what the precise relationship of these initial populations was to other pouplation centers in Mesoamerica, the very presence of early agriculturalists in the northern highlands might be indicative of the migrations previously suggested (Sharer and Gifford 1970) to have played a part in the introduction of certain ceramic types in the lowlands. These same northern highland populations might also prove to have acted as intermediaries in early trading patterns or ritual exchange systems. Thus, the northern Maya highlands emerges as a crucial area of cultural contact and transition between the precocious southern area and the initial settlement and ultimate florescence of the lowlands. While this obvious importance of the northern highlands was noted as early as 30 years ago by A. V. Kidder (1940:121), only future research now being planned for this region can provide the data concerning the nature of Preclassic settlements in this area as well as the relationships to the Maya lowlands and the southern Maya highlands. The solution of the problem regarding the origins of lowland Maya populations and the rise of Maya civilization can only be further clarified by the results of these anticipated studies.

Figure 1. Map of Mesoamerica showing archaeological and mineral sites mentioned in the text.

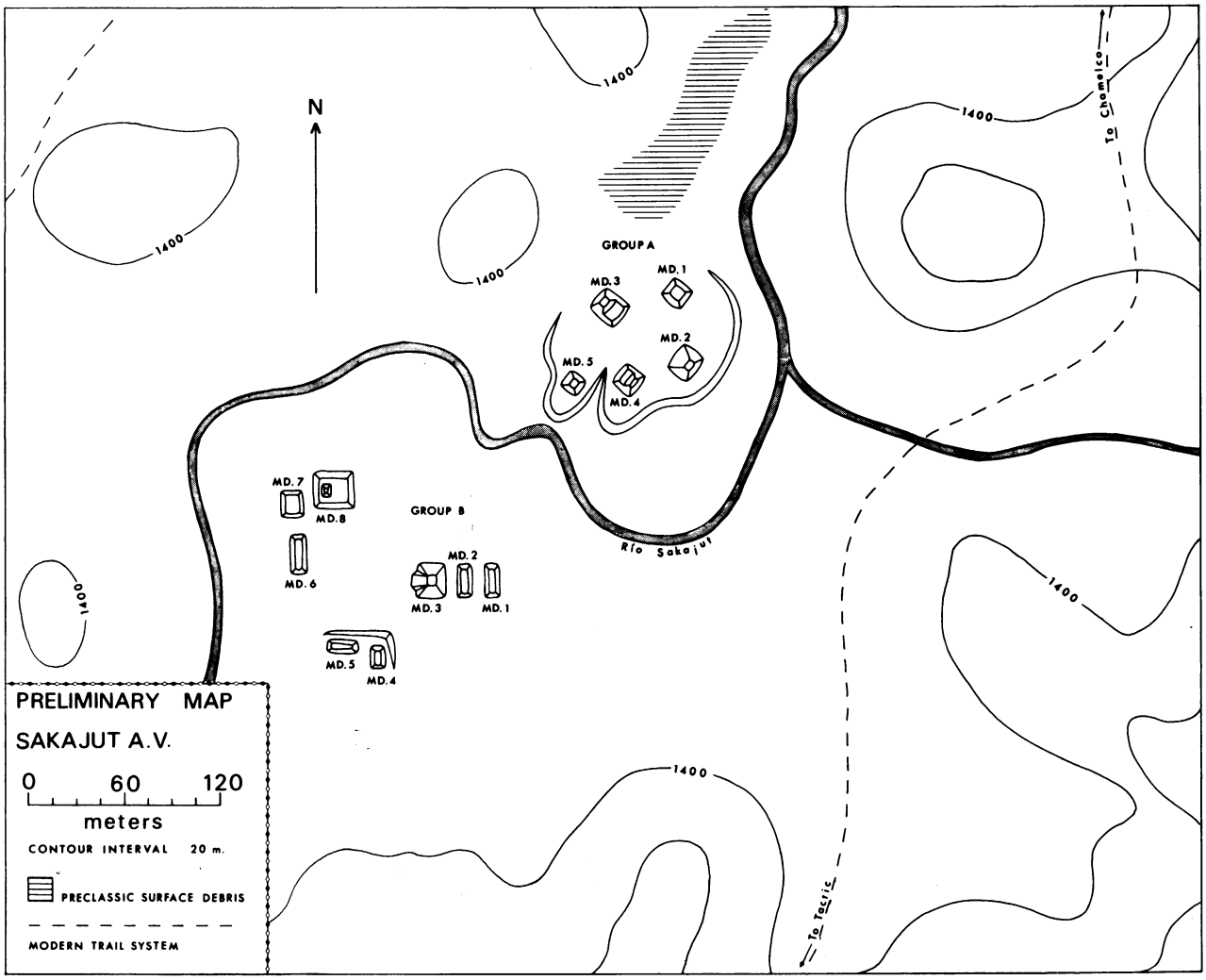

Figure 2. Preliminary map of Sakajut, Alta Verapaz, Guatemala.

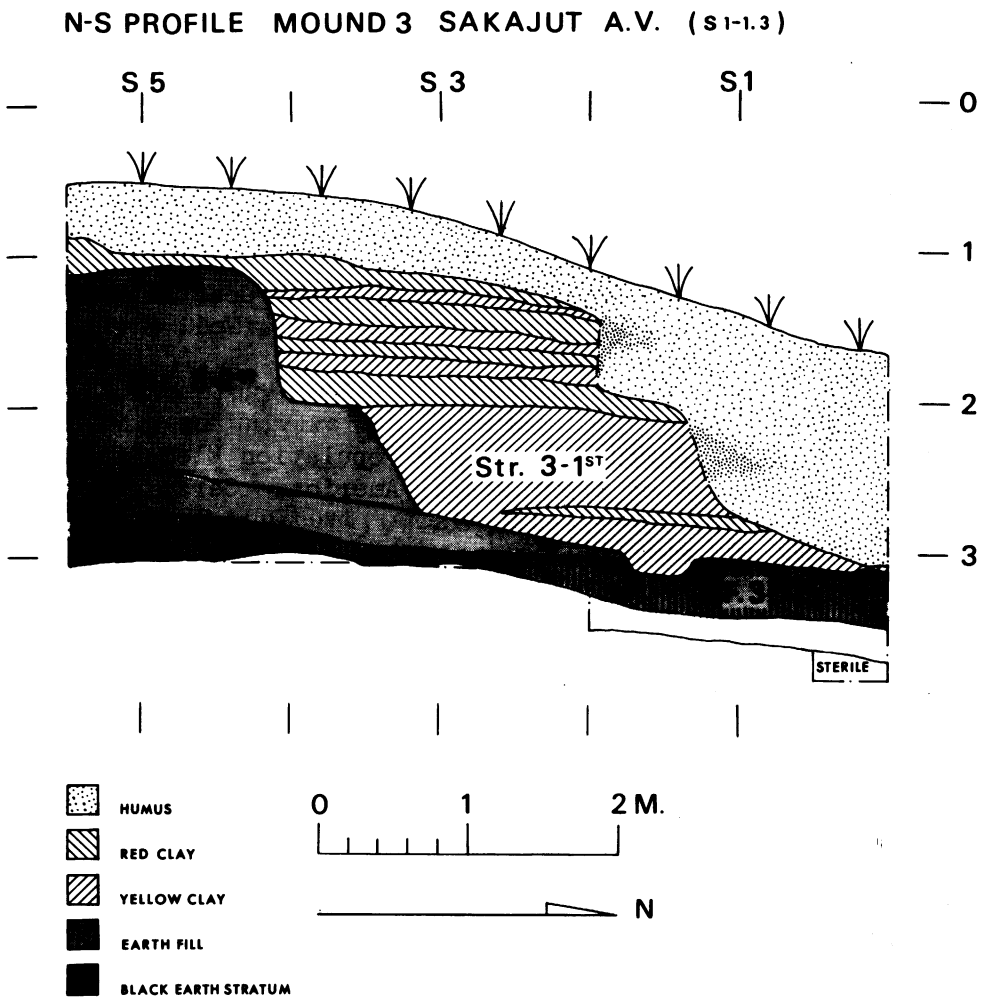

Figure 3. North-South profile, Mound 3, Sakajut, A.V.

Bibliography

Adams, R. E. W.
1968 Maya Highland Prehistory: New Data and Implications. Department of Anthropology, University of Minnesota. Xeroxed.

1969 Maya Archaeology 1958-1968, A Review. Latin American Research Review, 4:3-45.

1971 The Ceramics of Altar de Sacrificios. Papers of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Vol. 63.

Cobean, Robert H., and Others
1971 Obsidian Trade at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan, Mexico. Science, Vol. 174.

Coe, M. D., and K. V. Flannery
1967 Early Cultures and Human Ecology in South Coastal Guatemala. Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology, Vol. 3.

Gifford, James C.
1970 The Earliest and Other Intrusive Population Elements at Barton Ramie May Have Come from Central America. Ceramica de Cultura Maya et al, No. 6, Philadelphia.

Kidder, A. V.
1940 Archaeological Problems of the Highland Maya. In The Maya and Their Neighbors, edited by C. L. Hay et. al., pp. 117-125. Appleton-Century, New York.

Green, Dee F., and Gareth W. Lowe
1967 Altamira and Padre Piedra, Early Preclassic Sites in Chiapas, Mexico. Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation, No. 14.

Puleston, Dennis E., and Olga S. Puleston
1971 An Ecological Approach to the Origin of Maya Civilization. Archaeology 24:330-337.

Sharer, Robert J.
1969 A Preliminary Report of the 1969 Archaeological Research Program at Chalchuapa, El Salvador. Katunob 7:55-69, Greeley.

Sharer, Robert J. and James C. Gifford
1970 Preclassic Ceramics from Chalchuapa, El Salvador and Their Relationships With the Maya Lowlands. American Antiquity 35:441-462.

Sharer, Robert J. and David W. Sedat
1971 An Early Sculptured Monument from El Porton, Baja Verapaz, Guatemala. Department of Anthropology, Claremont Graduate School. Xeroxed.

Smith, A. L.
1955 Archaeological Reconnaissance in Central Guatemala. Carnegie Institution of Washington Pub. 608.

Thompson, J. Eric S.
1970 Maya History and Religion. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Willey, Gordon R.
1970 Type Descriptions of the Ceramics of the Real Xe Complex, Seibal, Peten, Guatemala. In Monographs and Papers in Maya Archaeology, edited by William R. Bullard, Jr., pp. 313-355. Harvard University, Cambridge.

Willey, G. R., T. P. Culbert, and R. E. W. Adams
1967 Maya Lowland Ceramics: A Report from the 1965 Guatemala City Conference. American Antiquity 32:289-315.