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Jennifer P. Mathews

Trinity University, jmathews@trinity.edu

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Megalithic Architecture at the Site of Victoria, Quintana Roo

Jennifer P. Mathews

Since 1993, the Yalahau Regional Human Ecology Project of the University of California, Riverside and Trinity University, has been conducting archaeological fieldwork in Northern Quintana Roo. Although much of our work on architecture has focused at the site of Tumben-Naranjal, we are conducting a regional project in the Yalahau area and are attempting to gain a broad understanding of the region (see Fedick and Taube 1995; Fedick 1998; Fig. 1). During the 1997 field season, we mapped a previously unreported site that exhibited several monumental structures constructed in the Megalithic style, as well as a historic church structure. The following article is a brief report of these findings and their significance.

Mapping the Site of Victoria, Quintana Roo

The Maya ruins of Victoria are located in the municipality of Leona Vicario, Quintana Roo, off of Highway 180 and south of the modern community of Agua Azul. The site is previously unreported, but is described in the 1999 Technical Report for I.N.A.H. by the Yalahau Project (Mathews 1998a). Our project first became aware of a site near the town of Victoria in 1996, when local informants in the village of Naranjal, Quintana Roo, and the village priest informed us that there were ruins located near the modern town of Victoria. They reported that the site had Megalithic architecture similar to that at the site of Tumben-Naranjal (Taube 1995; Mathews 1998b). Karl Taube (1995) was the first to truly

characterize the Megalithic style, and has defined the hallmark characteristics of the architecture as the use of large, well-dressed stones with rounded edges (almost pillow shaped) often over a meter in length, and lay horizontally. These overlay an interior rubble core and roughly broken slabs are placed in the gaps between the larger stones. Remains of plaster on the facing stones indicate that they were thickly coated to form a smooth exterior surface and mortar was used to help hold the construction together (Taube 1995:49). This style has been documented at over twenty-five sites across the Yucatán Peninsula, and is especially common in the Yalahau region surrounding the site of Victoria (Mathews 1998b; Taube 1995). Interestingly, not only do the two sites share this Megalithic architectural style, but also Tumben-Naranjal is 22 km directly west of Victoria. Although a causeway between the two sites has yet to be found, evidence indicates there was one in existence. *Sacbeob* known for the site of Tumben-Naranjal (Reid 1995) have been found to radiate along the cardinal directions in the northern, western, and southern positions, and if they were to follow the radiating pattern known for sites such as Ek Balam (Bey, et al. 1997) and Cobá (Folan 1983; Navarrete et al. 1979), a road would be expected in the eastern position as well. It is this eastern *sacbe* that would lead to, or near, the ancient site of Victoria, and possibly on toward the coast (Mathews 1998b). Research is being conducted to trace sections of this possible long-distance *sacbe* between the coast, Tumben-Naranjal, and continuing westward (Fedick, et. al 1995, Mathews 1998c).

The six known structures (including a historic church) are located close to the town of Victoria and have never before been studied or reported by archaeologists. Members of the Yalahau Project recorded the site during two daylong visits. A preliminary site map of the site was created with a compass and tape (Fig. 2). The following is a brief description of each of the buildings mapped at Victoria.

The Church at Victoria

Located next to the ruins is a church measuring approximately 14 m by 36 m (Fig. 3). This church does not appear to have been associated with a hacienda, as there was only one hacienda (Hacienda Tejas) that the 1784 Episcopal inspection listed near what is now Victoria. However, three *ranchos*, or Maya villages are listed (Santa María, Xohku or Nohku, and Mojas) and it is likely that one of these became Victoria (see *Archivo Historico del Arzobispado de Yucatán* 1784; Robert Patch, personal communication 1998). Although it is unclear when the church was actually built, the fact that it was not included in Cogolludo's 1688 record of religious constructions (see Tozzer 1941) gives a strong indication that it was

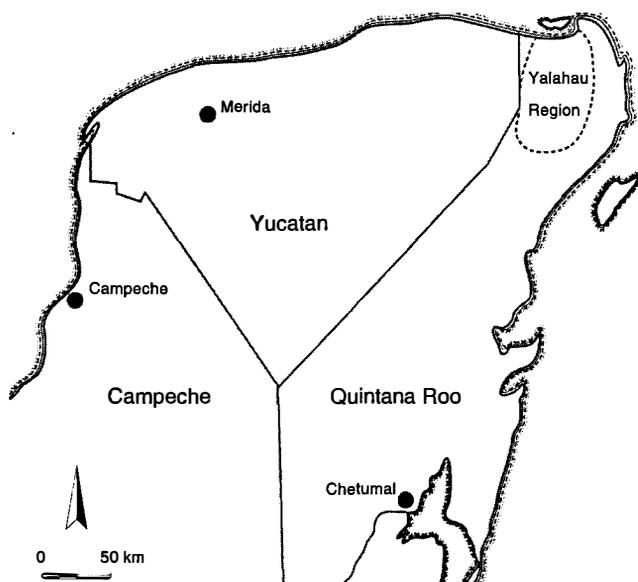


Fig. 1. The Yalahau region of northern Quintana Roo, Mexico.

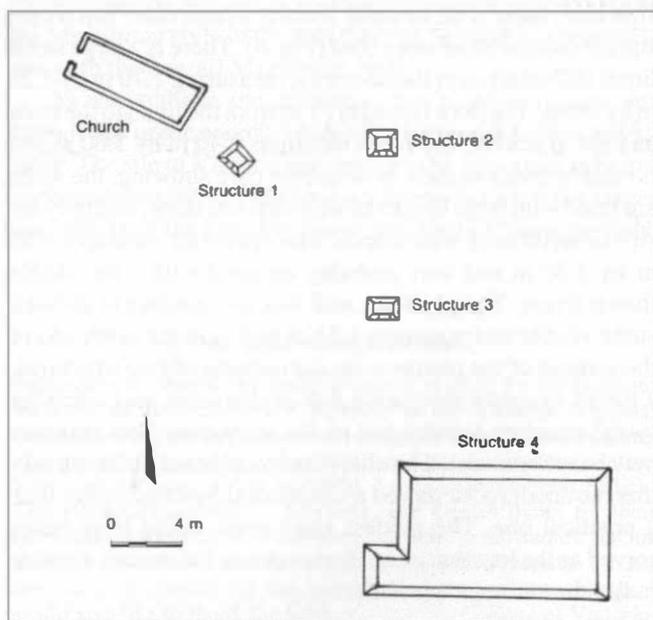


Fig. 2. The preliminary map of the Victoria ruins, Quintana Roo.

built in the 18th century or later. Interestingly, an 1846 census (Rodríguez Losa 1985) of the area mentions the pueblos of Nohku and Santa María (with populations of 784 and 551 respectively), which may correspond to a possible 1846 date included on a stone plaque located on the center of the church's front façade (Fig. 4). The date may also read 1646, and could indicate that the plaque is a curated piece that was placed in the 18th century church when it was constructed.

The frontal façade of the church faces west, and is the only full wall remaining, as the other three walls and roof, are almost entirely collapsed. The local village priest says that the roof caved in during the Caste War and that a perishable church was built inside of the original structure. The front façade contains one upper window approximately 2 × 2 m square and a smaller arched window located directly below. This smaller window is located directly above the plaque bearing a possible construction date. Below the stone plaque is an entranceway measuring a little more than a meter across with a wooden lintel that looks to be approximately .50 m wider on each side of the door. There are two round holes



Fig. 3. The Colonial church at the site of Victoria. (Photo: taken from video by Scott Fedick 1997).

roughly 10 cm across drilled into the lintel, which may have served to hold wooden doorjambs in place. On either side of the door are large windows measuring 2 m across. The church is constructed of larger dressed stones likely taken from the surrounding ruins, which are clearly in the Megalithic style. The Spanish apparently imitated the earlier Megalithic constructions of the ancient Maya, as the larger stonework of the church has small chinking stones and mortar in between, and the overall structure was covered with plaster.

Structure 1, Victoria

Directly east of the church, is a small, two-level pyramid platform structure built on a natural bedrock outcrop and constructed in the Megalithic style (Fig. 5). It is roughly square in shape with evidence of rounded corners on the eastern or back side. There is evidence of intact walls on all sides (the western and southern sides being best preserved), however, there is fairly heavy collapse along the base. There is a possible apron corbel on the south side of the structure, although collapse makes it difficult to discern. The total structure is approximately 4 m high and measures approximately 7 m by 7 m across the top. The summit is covered with dark soil and ceramic sherds. There are also remains of a small, rectangular structure roughly 3.5 m by 2 m, made up of two courses of nicely dressed stone averaging 45 cm by 30 cm. It is not clear if this was a later addition or from the original building construction. The west side of the structure is probably the front because the distance between the lower and upper platforms is 4 m across, versus the 1.5 m on the east side and 2 m on the north and south sides. There is no evidence of a stairway due to the severe state of collapse but it was probably located on this front side of the building.

Structure 2, Victoria

Continuing east from Structure 1 is Structure 2, a low, poorly preserved platform with a small structure on top. The platform is roughly square in shape, measuring approximately 16 m by 16 m, is about 2.5 m high, and although heavily collapsed, has clear evidence of Megalithic stonework. There are remains of a stairway on the south side of the structure about 2 meters across and appears to have had six risers. On top of the structure, there is an alignment of stones roughly 5 m by 5 m, and there is one wall running through the southern side of the square structure making a 2 m by 5 m room. The stones in this alignment are well cut, and average about 45 cm by 30 cm. There is also an altar located in the larger room that measures about 1.5 m by 1.5 m. There are ceramics scattered on the surface of the platform.

Structure 3, Victoria

This very well preserved structure is reminiscent of Structure 14 at Tumben-Naranjal; however, there is no evidence of an apron corbel. It is a two-tiered structure oriented to the west with a stairway on both levels. The bottom level measures approximately 14 m by 16 m and has five courses of stone. The upper level measures 8 m by 11 m and has six courses of stone intact. The lower stairway was built as a separate construction and not integrated into the lower level, while the second stairway is built into the second level, much like the aforementioned Structure 14. It is possible that this separate



Fig. 4. Closeup of the stone plaque in the church façade at Victoria. The possible date of 1646 or 1846 is located inside the outlined rectangle. (Photo: taken from video by Scott Fedick, 1997).

construction style on the lower level allowed for a small vault to run under the stairs. I would estimate that there were 10–12 stairs on the first level and 7–8 stairs on the second level. On the upper level, there is evidence of a small collapsed shrine or room measuring approximately 3 m by 3 m. If this also parallels Structure 14, it would have been added on during the Late Postclassic (see Lorenzen 1995 for a discussion of Late Postclassic additions).

Structure 4, Victoria

This is a very large L-shaped structure built onto a natural bedrock outcrop, with only one true wall left standing. This north wall, standing 2.10 m high, was clearly constructed in the Megalithic style. This wall has remains of very large blocks, chinking stones, and a small amount of mortar, although there is no evidence of a corbel apron. Because much of the structure is collapsed or built directly on to the bedrock, it is difficult to determine the actual perimeter of the building. Nonetheless, at the widest point of the "L," the structure measures over 65 m across. The building is capped with a heavy layer of soil and an abundance of ceramic sherds.

La Casa del Alux, Victoria

This small, roughly rectangular platform measuring 12 m by 14 m, is located about 750 m southwest of the main site center. It is very well preserved and clearly constructed in the Megalithic style. On the southern end of the south wall of the



Fig. 5. Structure 1, a two-level pyramid platform. (Photo: taken from video by Scott Fedick, 1997).

structure, there is an unusual feature, in that there is a small, square room with an open roof (Fig. 6). There is a large stone lintel still intact over the doorway, measuring 1.70 m by 1.20 m by .40 m. The door is roughly 1 m from the lintel to the floor and 1.4 m across. The room measures 2.40 m by 1.60 m and is clearly intact as there is no rubble core showing, the walls are lined with large blocks of well-dressed stone, and they are still covered over with stucco. The open roof measures 1.35 m by 1.30 m and was probably covered with a perishable thatch lining. The platform wall has five courses of dressed stone visible and measures 1.55 m high. On the north end of the summit of the platform are the remains of two structures: a round structure measuring 8 m in diameter, and a smaller round structure located just to the southeast. This structure may have represented an elite residence, however, it is likely that the small room served a ceremonial function rather than a practical one. The modest sized room could have better served as the location of an altar or shrine for ancient worship rather than storage or residence.

Possible Dating of the Ruins at Victoria

Although no ceramic chronology for the site has been obtained, the stylistic similarities and geographic proximity to the site of Tumben-Naranjal would indicate that it had a Late Preclassic to Early Classic occupation date. Dates from Tumben-Naranjal have been obtained through ceramic chronology (Boucher and Dzul 1998), architectural associations including a triadic grouping (Mathews 1995) and a corbeled vault (Mathews 1998b), and AMS radiocarbon dating of mortar and carbon inclusions found within mortar (Mathews, 1998a, 1998b). The combination and consistency of these chronological associations at Tumben-Naranjal strongly argue for a Late Preclassic and Early Classic occupation.

The site of Victoria is significant because, like Tumben-Naranjal, it represents a fairly well preserved Megalithic site in the eastern half of the peninsula. Although the Megalithic style appears to be well spread across the northern Yucatán Peninsula, it has not been well documented due to it being in a general state of poor preservation and covered with later architecture. At Victoria there appears to be only minor architectural modification most likely dating to the Late Postclassic period (Lorenzen 1995). This not only gives us a clear look at architecture from the Late Preclassic and Early

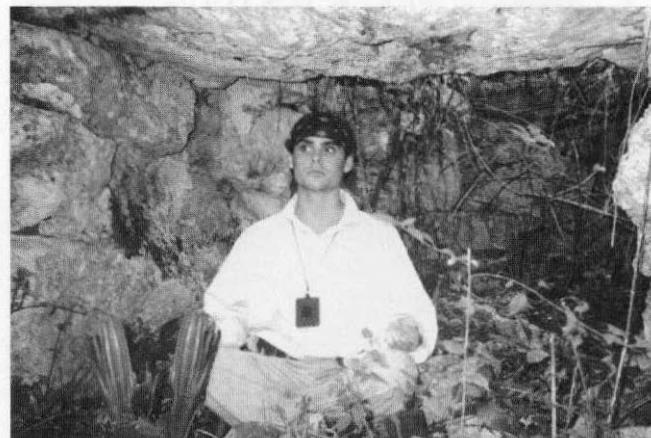


Fig. 6. The small square room in the Casa de Alux platform. (Photo: J. Mathews, 1995).

Classic periods, but also is another representative example of the Megalithic style in the east that can be used as a comparison with the overall Megalithic-style.

As we continue our studies in the Yalahau region, our knowledge of the ancient settlement in this area continues to grow. The site of Victoria may prove to be important in better understanding the interactions occurring between the larger site centers of the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods.

Acknowledgements

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Megalithische Architektur in der archäologischen Stätte Victoria in Quintana Roo, Mexiko. Das "Yalahau Regional Human Ecology Project" der University of California, Riverside und der Trinity University, San Antonio erforscht seit 1993 archäologische Stätten in der Region von Tumben-Naranjal im nördlichen Quintana Roo. Im Jahr 1997 wurde der zuvor nicht bekannte Fundort Victoria im Munizip von Leona Vicario dokumentiert und vermessen. Neben einer kolonialzeitlichen Kirche ließen sich verschiedene Strukturen nachweisen, deren Architektur im megalithischen Stil ausgeführt ist. Die megalithische Bauweise ist charakteristisch für die Zeit der späten Präklassik und frühen Klassik auf der Halbinsel Yukatan.

RESUMEN: Arquitectura megalítica en el sitio Victoria, Quintana Roo, México. El proyecto "Yalahau Regional Human Ecology Project" de la Universidad de California, Riverside y Trinity University, San Antonio se dedica a la investigación del patrón de asentamiento en la región de Tumben-Naranjal en el norte de Quintana Roo. En el año 1997 el sitio Victoria fue reportado e investigado por primera vez. Además de una iglesia colonial se encuentra varias estructuras con arquitectura megalítica. Este estilo es característico para la arquitectura del preclásico tardío y el clásico temprano en la península de Yucatán.

