

# Old Collections and New Insights: Recent Research in the Comitán Valley and the Chaculá Region

Caitlin Earley

University of Washington, Seattle  
ccearley@uw.edu

Ulrich Wölfel

Universität Bonn  
uwoelfel@uni-bonn.de

*The Comitán Valley and neighboring Chaculá region in Guatemala have been investigated by scholars from Eduard Seler to Carlos Navarrete. Scholars working in this region have assembled collections of drawings, photographs, and objects, including ceramics, lithics, and stone sculptures. Careful study of those materials supplements incomplete archaeological information. In this paper we present new research on Comitán-area collections assembled between 1890 and 1945. Centered on the investigative record left by Eduard Seler, Frans Blom, and Richard Ceough, as well as the collection of Gustavo Kanter, we consider newly uncovered photographs, stone and ceramic objects, as well as architectural and archaeological data. Combined, these reveal new information about the material record of the Comitán region, provide a different perspective on existing archaeological interpretations, and suggest cultural connections between diverse area sites.*

*Key words: Archaeology, collecting, sculpture, ceramics, caves*



The Comitán Valley and the adjacent Chaculá region are home to distinctive art and architectural styles (Figure 1). Archaeological sites in this region experienced a long and dynamic settlement history. The area was the subject of investigations by outsiders by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Several scholars, like Eduard Seler and Frans Blom, documented their travels through the region and elements of material culture they encountered, including ceramics, sculpture, and architecture. Other individuals, like Gustavo Kanter, a *finca* owner, assembled physical collections of works from this region. From collection photographs to expedition notes, early researchers in this area created a rich trove of documentation that has not yet been adequately explored.

New research on historical collections and records has led to important new insights on art from the Comitán region and its neighbor, Chaculá. Our research considers the records of early expeditions in conjunction with recent archaeological and art historical investigations. Combined, these sources illuminate elements of Classic and Postclassic period life in the region, highlight how the region has been situated within the field of Mesoamerican studies, and document changes at area archaeological sites from 1900 to the present, especially the removal, fragmentation, and destruction of monuments and archaeological material. In this paper, we present insights from three different eras of historical research in conjunction with recent analyses.

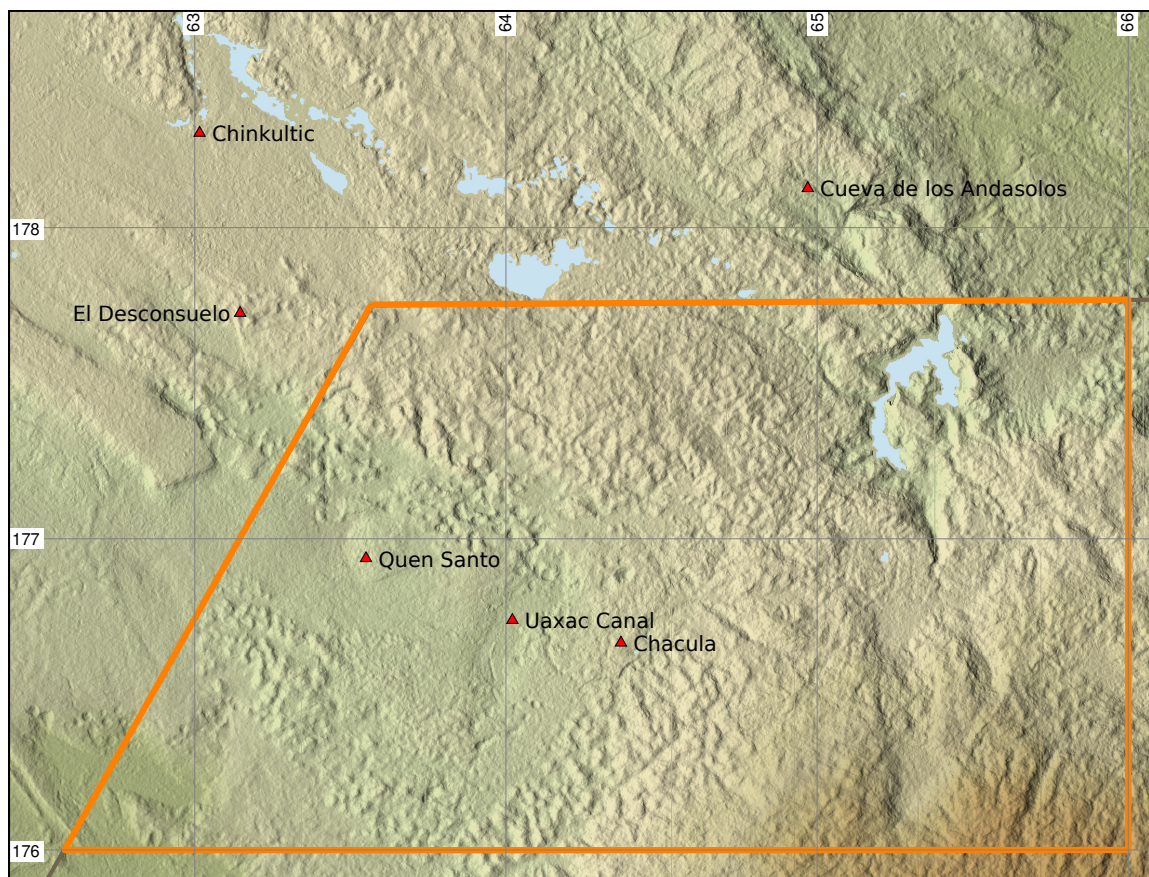
### Early investigations: Eduard Seler (1896)

In early 1896, German researchers Eduard and Caecilie Seler came to Comitán as part of their second journey through Mesoamerica, which lasted from October 1895 until May 1897. Their goal



was to conduct research and acquire collections for the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, today the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. While travelling through the Mexican state of Oaxaca, they managed to obtain important artifacts from private collectors, which included a large *lienzo* from Coixtlahuaca (known as the Lienzo Seler II; König 2017). The ensuing trip through Chiapas proved much less successful in this respect: Caecilie Seler-Sachs (1900:158) described it as a “chain of disappointments.” Furthermore, while in Mexico, Eduard Seler could not obtain a permit to carry out his own excavations, considered by him to be essential for obtaining “archaeologically useful material by which one could conduct a local delimitation and regional separation of cultures” (Eduard Seler, cited by Eisleb 1973:186-187).

This situation changed dramatically once the couple crossed the border to Guatemala in late March, where they encountered a fellow countryman, Gustavo Kanter. Kanter owned a large estate (*finca*) in the north-western corner of the department of Huehuetenango. It was easy for Seler to obtain permission from Kanter to conduct archaeological excavations, forgoing an official government permit. Taking advantage of the fact that the remoteness of the area helped in keeping government officials away, the Selers set out for two and a half months of intensive research that included the exploration and mapping of sites, as well as the long hoped-for excavation of ancient buildings. Although excavations brought to light interesting features, such as burials and offerings at Uaxac Canal and Pueblo Viejo Quen Santo, digging activities caused damage to the mounds. They do not conform to the standards of modern archaeology, and their published documentation was largely deficient (see Seler 1901:34-42, 54-55, 98-100, for examples). Furthermore, the relatively

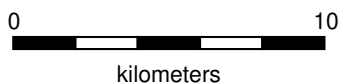


## Chaculá region and eastern Comitán valley

Drawing: U. Wölfel

Water bodies derived from Landsat 8, borders based on humdata.org (Conred Guatemala),  
Relief derived from ASTER GDEM V.2 (ASTER GDEM is a product of METI and NASA).

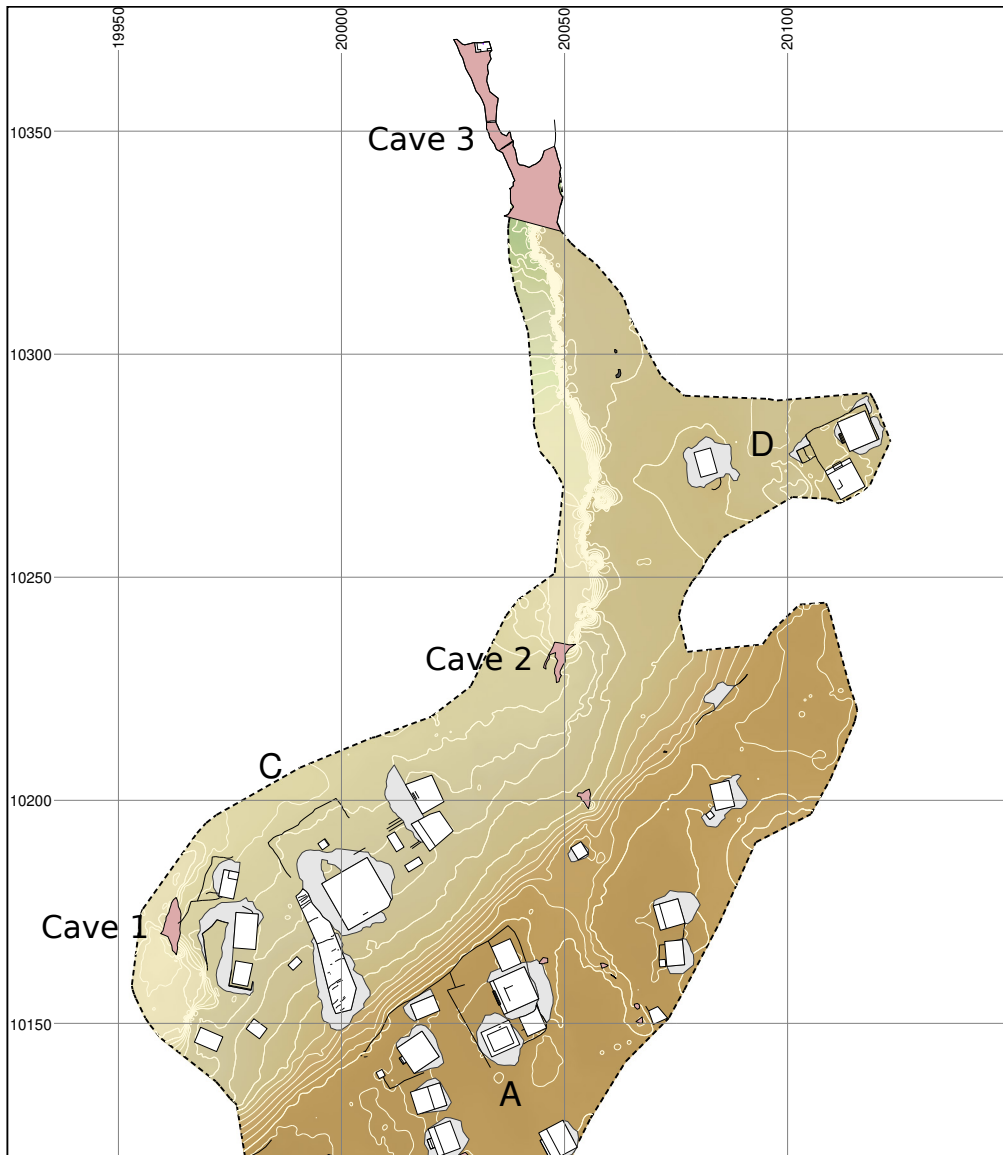
- ▲ archaeological sites
- Chaculá region
- international border



**Figure 1.** Map of the Chaculá region and the Eastern Comitán Valley (map by Ulrich Wölfel).

short occupational history of area sites (see also Navarrete 1979:49-51) hindered Seler's ability to establish a stratigraphic and thereby cultural sequence.

Recent research in the Chaculá region by the Proyecto Arqueológico de la Región de Chaculá (Wölfel et al. 2016; Wölfel 2022) has clarified some of Seler's original contributions and led to new discoveries at Chaculá and Quen Santo. Excavation and analysis confirmed the short occupation history of both sites, for instance, with settlement dating to the Late Classic to Early Postclassic (Wölfel 2022). Survey also revealed the extent of the Quen Santo archaeological site, stretching



## Pueblo Viejo Quen Santo

Groups A, C, D, Caves

Mapping: U. Wölfel and J. Pérez

Drawing: U. Wölfel

Contour interval: 2 meters

— caves  
- - - - limit of survey area

0 100  
meters



**Figure 2.** Map showing the location of Caves I, II, and III underneath Pueblo Viejo Quen Santo (map by Ulrich Wölfel).

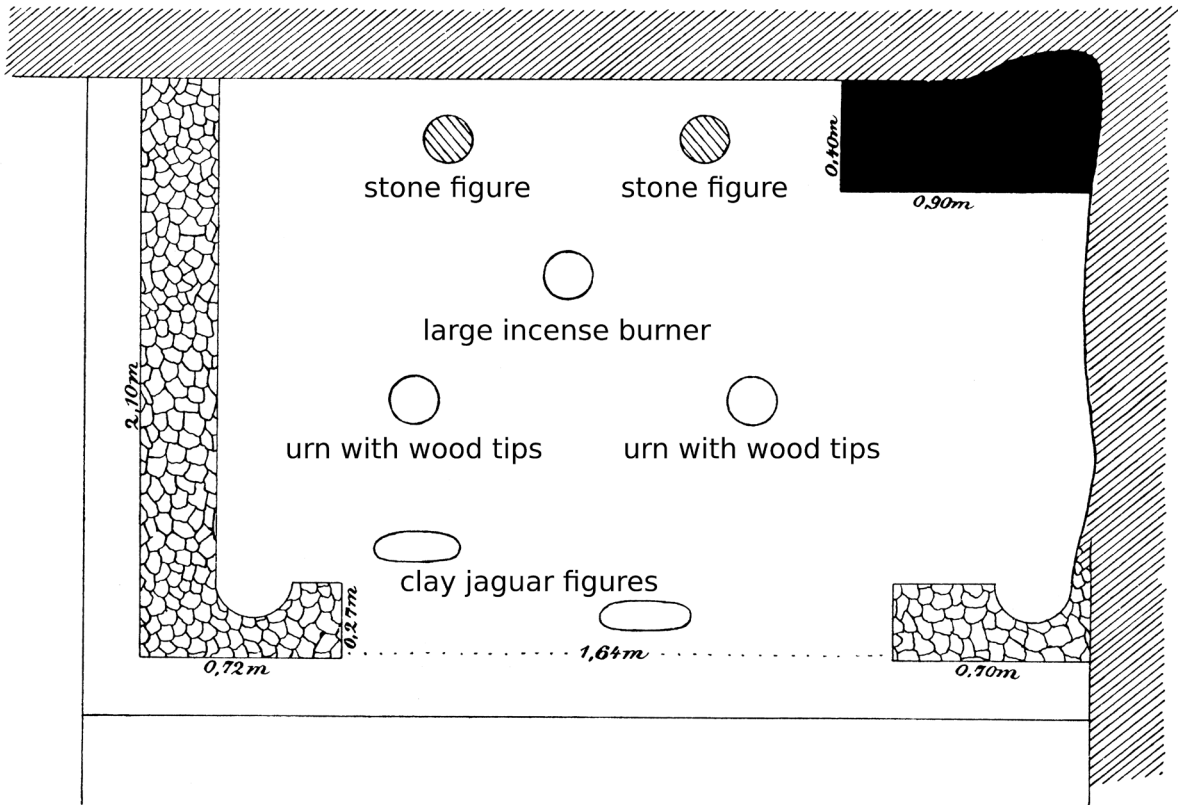


**Figure 3.** View of the Sanctuary inside Cave III at Quen Santo (Photo by Ulrich Wölfel).

across multiple plateaus in addition to the central group, which Seler dubbed Pueblo Viejo Quen Santo.

Twenty-first century research has also helped contextualize some of the information provided by Seler on the caves of Quen Santo, which attracted his particular attention. Located underneath the main architectural group, the complex consists of at least eight caves (see Brady et al. 2009; Wölfel 2022), of which three were investigated in detail by Seler (Figure 2). Although these had been subject to “planless plundering” (Seler 1901:146) a few years earlier, there were still quantities of pottery fragments and several stone sculptures in the caves. Seler correctly identified a small building found inside the main chamber of Cave III as the principal place of worship (Figure 3). Thanks to some pieces kept by Kanter in his house (see below) and the recollections of the *finca*'s *mayordomo*, who was present at the looting event, Seler created a reconstruction drawing of the ritual assemblage with stone sculptures and incense burners inside the building as found in the early 1890s (Figure 4).

Although later researchers dismissed the arrangement reconstructed by Seler as a “hodge-podge of material that does not resemble a functioning ritual assemblage” (Brady et al. 2009: 23), analysis of existing ceramics from the Cave III structure, combined with iconographic comparison, suggests



**Figure 4.** Diagram created by Seler of objects in Cave III, based on discussions with Antonio Romero and other community members (modified by Ulrich Wölfel after Seler 1901:Figure 240).

the diagram accurately reflects Late Classic and Postclassic ritual in the cave. A large *incensario* (height: 52.5 cm) shows the face of the Jaguar God of the Underworld, a theme shared by several other vessels from this cave (Figure 5). It features the typical serpent-like cord that twists into a “cruller” above the nose, spiralling “deity-eyes” (consisting of concentric circles), as well four small legs attached to the side of the face and spiked protrusions all over the face. The eyes and mouth have openings through which incense smoke could pass. An almost identical vessel has made its way to Munich’s Museum of Ethnology (Lehmann 1916). These vessels most likely represent the two objects described by informants at the front of the sanctuary in Cave III. Furthermore, pigments applied to walls and objects in the Cave III sanctuary exhibit a micro-stratigraphy (noted, but not further explored by Seler 1901:169-171): first, dark red hematite was generously applied, then calcification processes deposited an irregular layer of calcite on top, and finally one can observe brush strokes of blue paint, determined at the Rathgen-Forschungslabor Berlin to be Maya Blue. The intermediary calcite layer is evidence of prolonged use, with two periods coded by distinct pigment colours: (1) red for the early phase, likely dedicated to the Jaguar God of the Underworld—a major focus of Late Classic-era ceramics at Quen Santo; and (2) blue representing ritual use during a later



**Figure 5.** Ceramic vessel from Cave III at Quen Santo, now at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, Ca21635 (© Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photograph by Ulrich Wölfel).



phase, possibly associated with a rain and water deity.

Existing ceramics from Quen Santo revealed surprising aspects of ritual use at the caves. In some cases, calcite as well as Maya Blue extend over fracture surfaces, suggesting that ancient visitors employed fragmented pottery in site rituals. Most fragments were ritually discarded in Cave I, which features large accumulations of broken pottery. Yet pieces recovered by Selser in distinct caves can be joined. From this we can deduce that at some point objects were broken and some of the fragments moved. Significantly, since there are examples found at Caves I and II as well as I and III that join, but never from Caves II and III, we know that Cave I was the final destination for discarded ritually used ceramics.

### **The Kanter Museum at Chaculá (ca. 1900 - 1915)**

Likely inspired by the Selers' visit, Kanter began collecting objects from throughout the Chaculá region, and especially from Quen Santo, with no government oversight and without the permission



**Figure 6.** Stone sculptures in the collection of Gustavo Kanter  
(Courtesy of the Penn Museum, Image #194582)



**Figure 7.** Various works in the collection of Gustavo Kanter, including ceramic and lithic objects. Visible in the center back is a large ceramic vessel with a figure squatting on the rim, similar to vessels from Chinkultic (Courtesy of the Penn Museum, Image #194569).

of Indigenous communities. Kanter prepared a room in his *finca* house at Chaculá Viejo for the exhibition and safekeeping of his growing archaeological collection. The Kanter Museum impressed *finca* visitors, among them the Guatemalan historian and politician Adrián Recinos, who in 1913 praised its fine collection of Pre-Columbian artifacts (Recinos 1913:205). Contemporary writers considered the collection among the most important in Guatemala (Burkitt 1924:117), where the only national collection, a small museum at the Palacio de la Reforma, was destroyed by earthquakes in 1917 (see Chinchilla Mazariegos 2016). The Kanter collection included stone sculptures, ceramics, stucco fragments, obsidian knives and blades, greenstone objects, and even human remains.

For some ten to fifteen years, the museum prospered, as documented by a set of photographs taken during this time by Kanter's son-in-law, Gustavo Kaehler, and published in part by Robert Burkitt in 1924 (Figures 6 and 7). Numbers visible on the photographs hint at the former presence of a written inventory, whose eventual fortunate recovery may shed light on this issue. It is unknown whether Kanter kept provenience records for his collection.

Photographs of the Kanter collection not only give an overall impression of the quantity and variety of the collected materials, but they also paint a clearer picture of the artistic style associated with the Late Classic and Early Postclassic periods in the Chaculá region. Large stone sculptures featuring figures with crossed arms (Figure 6), some of them documented by Seler from Quen Santo, are particularly characteristic of the area. Fragments of stucco decorations suggest important buildings were richly adorned with sculpture. Large ceramic vessels with modelled anthropomorphic figures squatting on the rim (Figure 7) all have their parallels not only in Seler's collection from the same region, but also in archaeological assemblages from the neighbouring Comitán Plateau (see Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2023; Sánchez Gamboa and Earley 2023), suggesting a close connection between the two areas. Although provenance and archaeological context is unknown for the vast majority of these objects, they nevertheless help us understand the variety of artistic expressions from the larger region. Materials from the Kanter collection present connections to nearby artistic traditions even as they document an artistic style distinct to Quen Santo. The breadth of the collection, meanwhile, indicates a sophisticated artistic tradition flourished in the region, presumably supported by local dynasts at population centers like Quen Santo and Chaculá.

With the acquisition of his *finca* in the early 1890s, Kanter had inherited an almost decade-old conflict with the local Indigenous population over the right to the lands of their ancestors. Everything came to a head in 1913 when Kanter hired Mexican mercenaries to burn down two Chuj villages which he considered illegal occupants of his properties. A leader from El Aguacate, one of the affected villages, sought legal advice in the name of his and neighbouring villages, with the result that the Guatemalan president sent troops to occupy Kanter's *fincas*. Kanter was warned and fled to Mexico. The expulsion of Kanter meant a victory for the Indigenous population over a cruel and avaricious landowner. It also sealed the fate of the museum and the collection it housed. Destruction and looting of the museum by the Guatemalan army as well as neglect by later owners, when Kanter had finally sold his Guatemalan properties, led to the collection's disintegration and dispersal of the objects, some of which ended up in museums around the world, while the majority simply disappeared (Chavarochette 2011:62-67; Navarrete 1979:11-15; Wölfel 2022:37-43).

In the mid-1970s, Guatemalan archaeologist Carlos Navarrete could still document 49 sculptures at Chaculá, rescued from the debris of the museum (Navarrete 1979). This number has been

further reduced to nine sculpture fragments currently kept at the “new” *finca* house that was in construction at the time of the Selers’ visit and now serves as a lodge for a local ecotourism project. Despite the dissolution of the collection, surviving photographs have enabled us to better understand what types of objects comprised the collection and how they were displayed. Photographs of the works exhibited by Kanter have also revealed new connections between works from the Chaculá area and the Comitán Valley (Wölfel and Earley, n.d.).

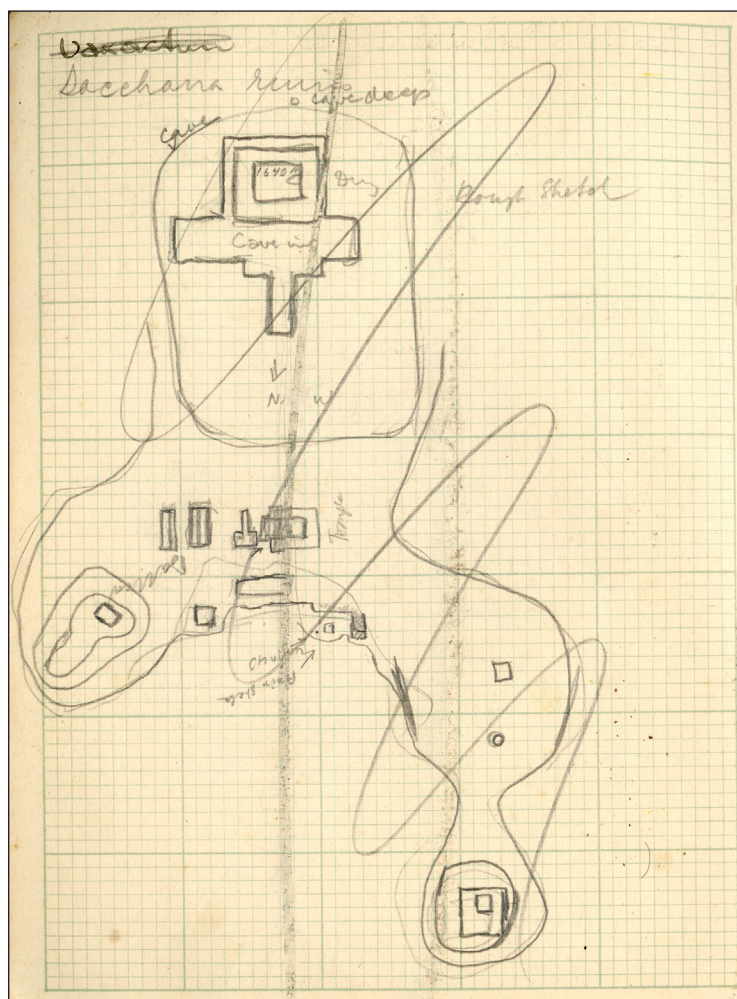
### **Early 20<sup>th</sup> century investigations: Blom and Ceough**

The next wave of scholars came in the 1920s, when Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge visited the Comitán region in July 1925 as part of the First Tulane Expedition (Blom and La Farge 1926-27). They stopped at Chinkultic on their way to the Guatemalan border, photographing several monuments and creating a rough map of the site. After a subsequent visit by Enrique Juan Palacios, Blom returned in 1928 with the John Geddings Gray Memorial expedition (Blom 1928). With him was one of Kanter’s sons, listed in the expedition records as a Chuj interpreter. In his second visit to the site, Blom made a fortuitous discovery: the cenote. While previous visitors had climbed the enormous Structure 23 that dominates Group C, closer examination of the monumental stairway (today known as upper Group A) led Blom to the hilltop acropolis, Stela 9, and the cenote itself. “Two hundred feet below the temple square shone a mirror of emerald-green, crystal-clear water – a sacred pool,” wrote Blom (1928:7). “The sight came upon us so suddenly, and its beauty was so perfect, that it haunted us for many days after.” Blom’s fascination with the cenote helped spur later investigations, including a project spearheaded by the Milwaukee Public Museum decades later (de Borhegyi 1968).

Blom’s records of the Comitán region help contextualize Selers’ writings and suggest opportunities for further research in the area. For example, as they moved across the Comitán plateau, Blom and his party documented the site of El Desconsuelo (Figure 8). Located above the Sacchaná Valley, it consists of several platforms and buildings, including a mound of “considerable size” (Blom 1928:21). Blom also recorded at least one plain stela and a ballcourt. Blom and DUBY (1957: 56-57) and later Wölfel (2022: 254) speculate that this site could have been the original location of the Sacchaná stelae, documented by Eduard Selers at the Finca Sacchaná and famous for their late inscriptions. Future research may help confirm this hypothesis.

Blom never published a full report of the Geddings Gray expedition, but he was certainly in contact with other scholars about his findings in the Comitán region. One of them was an amateur archaeologist who went by the name of Richard Ceough. Ceough began visiting the area by 1940, his interest spurred by “a somewhat romantic desire to explore the legend of the ‘Lost City of the Mayans’” (Ceough 1944:1). He worked with Javier Mandujano Solorzano, a schoolteacher in Comitán and guardian of local ruins for the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). Over the course of four field seasons, Ceough and Mandujano reconnoitered Chinkultic and surrounding lakes, documenting archaeological sites, routes of passage, and ritual cave use throughout the Comitán region. Although he was never trained in archaeology or anthropology, Ceough corresponded with many leading scholars of the day.

Reports submitted by Ceough to INAH serve as important records because they are the earliest



**Figure 8.** Sketch of El Desconsuelo / Sacchaná ruins by Frans Blom (courtesy of the Latin American Library, Tulane University).

documentation of many sculptures from Chinkultic—including some no longer extant today (duplicate copies of Ceough’s reports have been digitized at the National Museum of the American Indian). On August 1, 1945, for instance, Ceough and his team recovered Stela 11 at the site (Figure 9; Ceough 1945:19). He remarked on the “extremely good condition” of the stone, which depicts a standing individual facing to the viewer’s left. The figure wears the undereye ornament of the Jaguar God of the Underworld, and a jaguar ear sits just above his human one. Ceough also noted the figure’s “remarkably high headdress,” which consists of a tall stack of knotted cloth bands. Attached to the front are two examples of what Stuart (2012:129) calls the *xok* adornment, a motif that appears regularly on the headdresses of rulers. Sitting above the jeweled headband that forms the lower rim of the headdress is a human skull, depicted in profile, facing the same direction as the human figure. A vegetal tendril

curls from the headdress down around the face of the ruler, and finally out in front of him. Feathers emerge from the front and back of the headdress.

Recent research at Chinkultic has put this stone into some context: although the sculpture lacks existing legible hieroglyphs, it most likely depicts a ruler of Chinkultic dressed as a *ch’ajoom*. This title, related to rites of burning and sacrifice, appears throughout the Late Classic Southern Maya Lowlands (Scherer and Houston 2018:117). At Chinkultic, a recently discovered sculpture fragment and a series of ceramic vessels depict individuals wearing similar headdresses made of stacked knots (Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2022; Sánchez Gamboa et al., this volume). The headdress on Stela 11 is particularly similar to one worn by an attendant on Piedras Negras Stela 5 dated to 716 CE; and the headdress worn by a Naranjo king on Stela 11 (c. 788 CE) from that site. Like Chinkultic Stela



**Figure 9.** Chinkultic Stela 11, photographed by Richard Ceough in 1945 (National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 067\_001\_04\_076.tif).



**Figure 10.** Unnumbered monument documented by Richard Ceough. The subsidiary figure stands on the left. The right leg and a jutting diagonal element at knee level are visible of the figure on the right (National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 067\_001\_05\_034.tif).

11, the Naranjo stela includes stacked knotted bands, the *xok* adornment, human skulls, feathers, and a jaguar ear.

Ceough's photographs of stelae from Chinkultic document the continuing breakage and dispersal of the monuments. Monuments 9 and 10, for instance, are shown in Ceough's photographs with additional fragments not present at the site today (Earley 2023:100, 166). The last field report (Ceough and Corin 1947:Figures 48-50) included a fragmented sculpture whose whereabouts are currently unknown (Figure 10). It depicts two standing individuals, one wearing a short cape and feathered headdress and facing to the right. The body of the main figure is mostly lost, but the jutting diagonal elements near the feet are a common and locally distinctive feature of royal dress at Chinkultic (Earley 2023:102). While the majority of monuments from Chinkultic depict a standing

ruler, this sculpture is one of a small corpus of monuments depicting two facing individuals. These sculptures suggest the importance of courtly elites at the site. In doing so, they strengthen iconographic connections with the works of Yaxchilán, where secondary nobles are also heavily featured in stone sculpture (Earley 2023:106; Golden 2010; Sánchez Gamboa and Earley 2023).

In addition to his work at Chinkultic, Ceough visited ritual caves and other archaeological sites in the surrounding region between 1940 and 1946. Descriptions of his travels, and photographs of monuments at sites like El Amparo and Santa Elena Poco Uinic, stand as key records in the historical study of Comitán and Eastern Chiapas.

### **Cave Research in the Eastern Highlands and Chaculá Region**

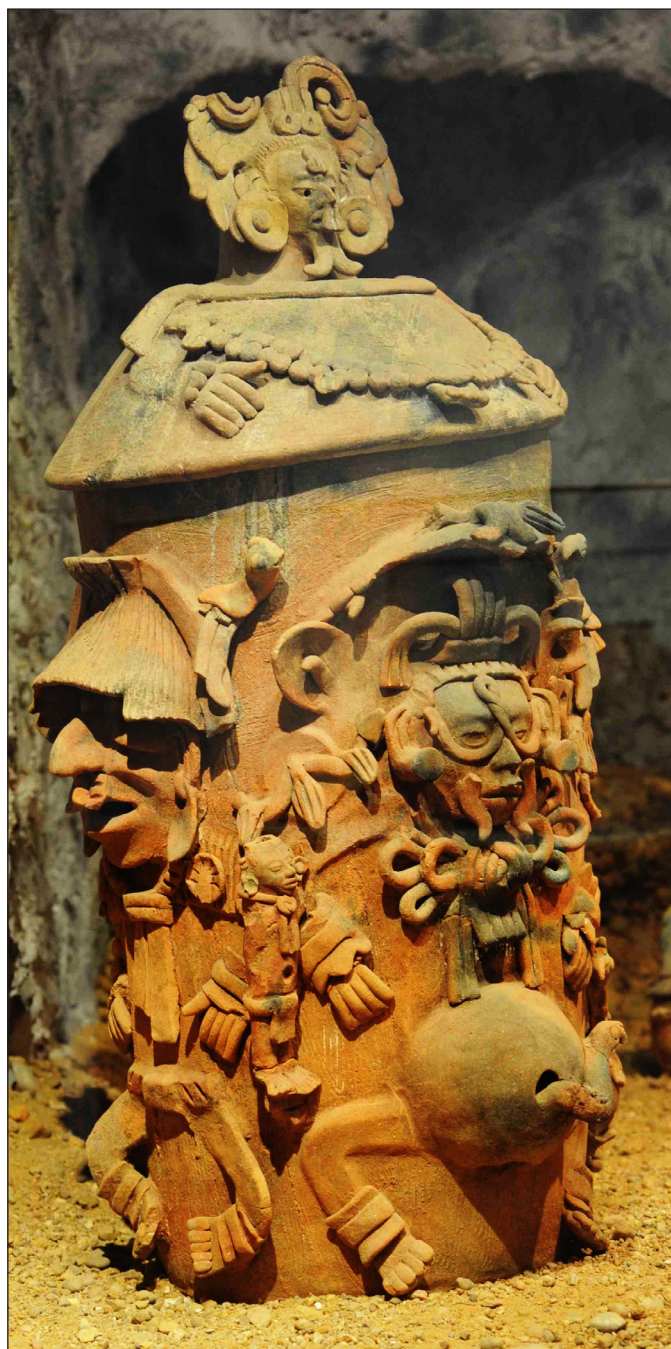
By the mid-twentieth century, largescale archaeological projects were underway at several sites in the Maya region. In the Comitán area, the New World Archaeological Foundation was beginning its survey work, while in the late 1960s, Stephan de Borhegyi and the Milwaukee Public Museum initiated investigative work in the cenote at Chinkultic, spurred on by Blom (Lowe 1956; de Borhegyi 1968; Gallegos 1976).

Some of the most important records from this era come from reconnaissance work completed by Carlos Navarrete, who also excavated large portions of Chinkultic (Navarrete 1975, 1984, 2020). In addition to his important work at Chinkultic, Navarrete recorded evidence of ritual cave use in the Comitán region that suggests cultural connections with Chaculá. In 1975, Navarrete and Eduardo Martínez (1977) documented a cave called the Cueva de los Andasolos. Inside the cave was an intact ritual assemblage, including one stone sculpture and a large ceramic *incensario*, among other offerings. Recent research on the Comitán and Chaculá areas (Earley 2023; Wölfel 2022) has highlighted the importance of this documentation because the cave connects the material culture of the Chaculá region to that of Chinkultic. One large sculpture discovered in the cave, potentially made of rock taken from within the cave itself (Navarrete and Martínez 1977:25-26), depicts a stylized individual with at least one arm crossed over the chest. As Navarrete and Martínez recognized, this is an example of a sculptural type dubbed “crossed-arm sculptures” by Navarrete (1979:31-33). Although crossed arm sculptures are found throughout the southern Maya region, they are particularly characteristic of Chaculá and Quen Santo (see Navarrete 1979:31-33; Wölfel 2022:248-252; Earley 2023:130). The discovery of a crossed-arm sculpture in the eastern Comitán area links the sculptural styles of the two regions, complementing recent analyses of ceramics, architecture, and bioarchaeological information.

Navarrete and Martínez also documented an enormous ceramic vessel from the Cueva de los Andasolos (Figure 11). As recent research has established, the applique decorations on this vessel place it within a “type” that seems to be distinctive to the eastern Comitán region, and particularly Chinkultic. Other examples of these vessels feature squatting individuals on the rim (see Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2022, 2023). The vessel from Cueva de los Andasolos matches that type because of its attention to figural imagery, the squatting posture of the two individuals on the sides of the vessel,







Ceramic vessel from the Cueva de los Andasolos, now at the Museo Arqueológico de Comitán, Chiapas (Photograph by Caitlin Earley)

and the accoutrements worn by the central figure: the undereye ornament and the pectoral worn by this figure match the regalia of the individual on Chinkultic Stela 11. Similar works were photographed in the Kanter collection (see Figure 5). Navarrete's work at the Cueva de los Andasolos, then, provides a crucial connection between the Comitán and Chaculá regions. Although today separated by a political border, ancient centers on either side were clearly in close contact and shared elements of material and ritual cultures.

Across the border in Guatemala, it was in the early 1970s that interest in the Chaculá region arose again – this time from a group of cavers from various Canadian universities. During their investigations they made a number of contributions to the archaeology of Chaculá and eastern Chiapas. For example, they descended into the large dry sinkhole known as the “Hoyo Cimarrón” and reported modelled human skulls in a cave at the bottom (Mort 1971), indicating ancient visitors used the sinkhole for funerary depositions. They also created a detailed map of Cave III at Quen Santo and documented a drip pool in a side passage. This remains the only known water source at this site and emphasizes the importance of Cave III (Tracey 1972). Finally, they documented an uncarved stone slab in Cave II at Quen Santo. The front of the slab shows a face painted in red pigment, its design visible thanks to decorrelation stretching

(Heitzmann 1976). The painted face seems to show the Jaguar God of the Underworld, judging from the large spiralling “god-eyes” that recall the *incensario* from Cave III described above, as well as the serpent-like cord that passes below the eyes, although the characteristic “cruller” element over the nose is no longer visible (Heitzmann and Wölfel 2023). This last discovery is important since it is one of the only known uncarved stone sculptures in the Maya area with painted iconography. Unfortunately, this unique monument has been broken in more recent years, as documented by a photograph published by Brady et al. (2009:Fig. 5).

## Conclusions

Recent archaeological and art historical research in the Comitán and adjacent Chaculá regions has highlighted the distinctive forms of sculpture, ceramics, and architecture used in this region. Crucial to this research are early records like those explored here, which allow for new viewpoints, even on old material. New research on the caves at Quen Santo corroborates observations made by Seler and suggests patterns of ritual use in the Late Classic and Early Postclassic periods. Photographs of the Kanter collection allow us to reconstruct one of Guatemala’s most important historical collections and one with significant ties to the eastern highlands of Chiapas. Reports from the Comitán region, meanwhile, document sculptures, sometimes in their original context, which may no longer exist today. Combined with new research initiatives, understanding the historical collections of the Comitán area—from photographs to expedition reports to objects—allows us a greater understanding of the region and its history.

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