

Recent Research at San Isidro, El Salvador, in the Context of Southeastern Mesoamerican Archaeology

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Abstract

Despite receiving a fair amount of scholarly attention the archaeology of the extreme southeast of Mesoamerica still remains a relatively poorly developed focus of study (Love and Kaplan 2011). In this article I identify some important factors that hamper our understanding of the ancient past of this region, including, but not limited to, the lack of data about the effects of population density and of volcanism, and exceptionally uneven distribution of data from different periods. The second half of the Preclassic period (ca. 1000 BC - AD 250) seems to be the most neglected by researchers, even as it is likely the most crucial time for the southeastern boundary of Mesoamerica from the perspective of reconstructing processes of cultural dynamics and emergence of identities. I offer what I believe is a reasonable albeit partial solution to the problem by presenting recent research results, as well as outlining the future directions of my ongoing investigations at the large Preclassic site of San Isidro, located in the Sonsonate department of El Salvador. I argue that even at the early stages of these investigation, San Isidro shows great potential for providing data to better understand El Salvador's ancient past as an important player in the Mesoamerican past.

Keywords: Southeast Mesoamerica; El Salvador; Volcanism; Drone Survey

Resumen

Investigaciones recientes en San Isidro, El Salvador, en el contexto de la arqueología del sureste mesoamericano

La arqueología del extremo sureste de Mesoamérica, a pesar de recibir una buena cantidad de atención académica, sigue siendo un campo relativamente poco desarrollado. En este artículo identifico los principales factores que dificultan nuestra comprensión del pasado antiguo de esta región, incluida, entre otros, la densidad de población, el volcanismo, y una distribución excepcionalmente desigual de datos de diferentes períodos. La segunda mitad del período Preclásico (ca. 1000 a. C. - 250 d. C.) parece ser el período menos estudiado y probablemente el más clave para la frontera sureste de Mesoamérica desde la perspectiva de la reconstrucción de procesos de dinámicas culturales y el surgimiento de identidades. Ofrezco una solución probable, aunque sólo parcial, al problema al presentar avances recientes y direcciones futuras de mi investigación en curso en un gran sitio del Preclásico de San Isidro en el departamento de Sonsonate en El Salvador. Sostengo que incluso en la etapa inicial de la investigación, San Isidro muestra un gran potencial para proporcionar los datos faltantes sobre el pasado de El Salvador y el rol que jugaba en el pasado mesoamericano.

Introduction

Since its appearance in the first half of the twentieth century, the idea of Mesoamerica as a relatively coherent cultural area (Kirchhoff 1943) where particular cultures shared multiple common traits (such as vigesimal numerical systems, permutations of two independent calendars, ritualized ball game, or agriculture based on maize, squash, and beans, among others), has become universally accepted in the scholarly community (see Coe and Houston, 2015: 14-16; Sharer and Traxler 2006: 28-29). Over time it underwent several revisions and adaptations to fit the ever-growing corpus of available data (see Feinman 2019). The spatial extent of Mesoamerica, however, remains problematic, particularly with regard to its south-eastern extremity (e.g., Creamer 1987; Hoopes and Fonseca 2003).

While the concept of a clear-cut cultural boundary no longer seems to be considered to be a reflection of ancient reality, no consensus has been achieved about how to model, describe, and understand the transition zone between Mesoamerica and Lower Central America. This lack of clarity is caused, at least in part, by spotty availability of archaeological data. The Honduran part of the Mesoamerican southeast has been relatively well known thanks to extensive, multi-annual survey and archaeological projects at or near Copan, Naco, Ulua, and in the Comayagua valleys, and recently in the Mosquitia region, as well (Fash 1983; Manahan and Canuto 2009; Schortman and Urban 2011, 2014; Schortman et al. 2001; Schortman and Urban 1995; Schortman et al. 1986; Dixon 1989; Dixon et al. 1994; Fisher et al. 2016). Those studies were largely built upon an array of earlier work, such as the pioneering research by Glass (1966).

Scholars' views are not unanimous on how far the southern portion of the Mesoamerican Southeast reached in different time periods. In El Salvador, which is the likeliest candidate for the transition / buffer zone for most of the ancient times, the current state of archaeological knowledge leaves much to be desired, which may be somewhat surprising given that after pioneering surveys by Longyear (1944; 1966) and Haberland (1960) which paralleled those conducted by Glass in Honduras, a number of site-oriented or regional studies have been carried out across the area (Fig. 1).

In the western portion of the country, investigations at El Carmen, Santa Leticia, Cara Sucia, and Chalchuapa stand out. Additionally, the Chalchuapa ceramic chronology became a point of reference for most of the later investigations in El Salvador (Demarest et al. 1989; Demarest 1986; Amaroli 1987a; Sharer 1978; Shibata et al. 2014; Sharer and Gifford 1970). Other ceramic studies in the western El Salvador include those by Beaudry (1983) and Sampeck (2007).

The central-western valley of Zapotitán was archaeologically surveyed and investigated by the Protohistoric Project led by Payson Sheets in the 1970s (Sheets 1975), and the two best-known sites within it, San Andrés and Joya de Cerén, have been

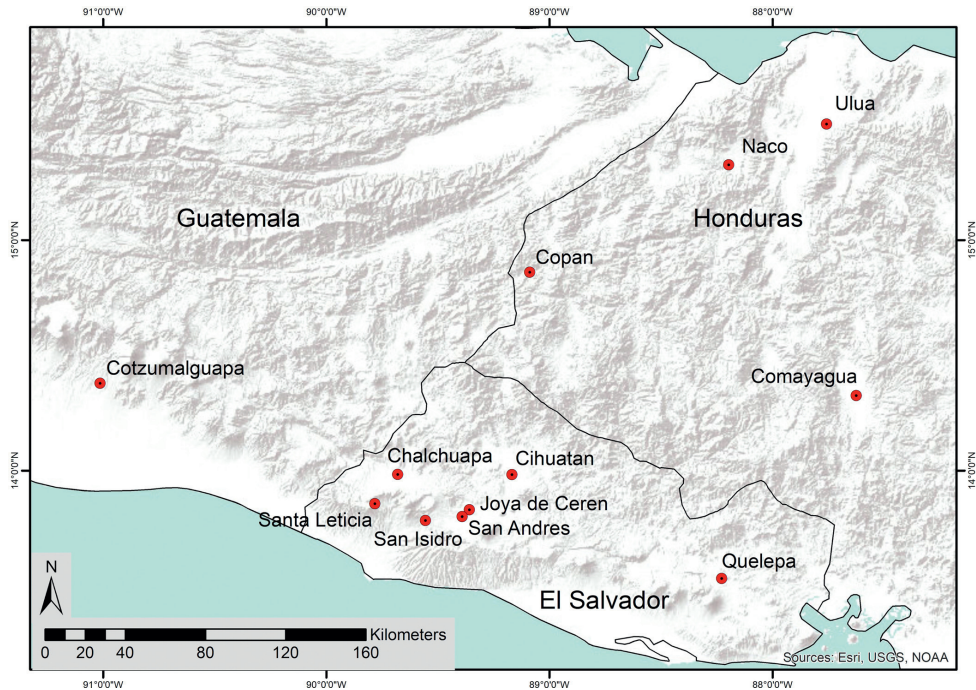


Fig. 1. Map of the southeastern edge of Mesoamerica showing location of some of the places mentioned in the text (Author).

continuously studied until today (Black 1983; Boggs 1943; Díaz et al. 2013; Ichikawa 2017; Sheets 2002; Sheets et al. 2015). In the Paraíso basin to the north, just before building a dam on the Lempa River that turned a densely occupied zone into the Cerón Grande reservoir, salvage survey was conducted by Fowler and Earnest (1985), and two of the primary sites that survived the flooding due to their elevated location, Cihuatán and Las Marías, have been on archaeologists' radar ever since (Bruhns 1980; Kelly 1988; Bruhns and Amaroli 2009; Amaroli 2012; Amaroli and Bruhns 2002). Recently, Fowler (2019) has presented an update on the Pipil migrations in the north-western territories of the country. Additionally, western El Salvador has been often included in the so-called Southern Maya Region (SMR), which, somewhat contrary to its name, has been envisioned as an area of multiple ethnic and linguistic identities (see Love and Kaplan 2011; Kaplan and Paredes-Umaña 2018).

Territories east of the lower Lempa River lag behind. Only a handful of sites have been investigated. Two of them, namely Los Llanitos and Quelepa, were partially studied decades ago (Longyear 1944; Andrews 1976). Slightly more recent are excavations at Asanyamba and Loma China, although the latter has never been published in any accessible form (Beaudry 1982; Garnica and Ramírez Menjívar 2009: 8). The El Chiquirín site constitutes an accidental finding that was salvaged prior to its destruction (Escamilla and Shibata 2005). Recently that long-neglected

region finally became a focus of three investigations, each of different scope (Valdivieso 2006; Amador 2009; Gómez 2010).

A few long-term projects have either just begun, were of somewhat smaller scale, or await formal publication; these include Ataco, Tamanique, and San Isidro (Paredes-Umaña 2013; Miriam Méndez, personal communication, April 2019; Szymański *et al.* 2018). Apart from those methodical studies, a number of salvage, opportunistic, or informal investigations have been carried out at several sites across El Salvador, including, in the Güija Lake area, Tacuscalco, Tehuacán, El Tanque, Nueva Esperanza, and multiple locations within greater San Salvador. For an insightful, although not academically referenced review of those activities, and of Salvadoran archaeology in general, see a recent book by Paul Amaroli (2015).

Obstacles for Archaeology in El Salvador

As already mentioned, at first glance there should be enough data available from a relatively small country (just over 20 000 km²) to understand and reconstruct its archaeological past. Why, then, is it still so poorly known? Why is it that such fundamental issues as the cultural affiliation of so many ancient Salvadoran sites continue to be hotly debated? The answer, I think, is threefold.

First of all, archaeologists interested in Salvadoran archaeology are at a disadvantage because they need to operate in the most densely populated country in Central America (for official 2016 census data processed by Index Mundi, see <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/el-salvador/population-density>). Modern urban and rural development extends far and wide, rendering significant portions of land, likely containing buried cultural traits, inaccessible. Most undeveloped areas are under cultivation of staples and cash crops, or are pastures. Current owners of sugarcane or coffee plantations are reluctant to let archaeologists pass through and register the potential archaeological features, let alone excavate them, in fear of having their businesses disrupted. In effect, what often looks like a thorough investigation of an ancient site is in reality a limited excavation of only some of the most prominent structures in an area. That was precisely the case of Quelepa, and partially even Chalchuapa (Sharer 1978; Andrews 1976), and in recent times the site of Las Marías (Amaroli 2000). This is not by any means a critique directed at the investigators, who had to maneuver between the needs of a project and the wishes of the hosts. On the contrary, this limitation makes all the more impressive the abilities of those scholars, who theorized and posited models of ancient societies that remain in use even today, despite having such incomplete sets of data. Extensive projects at large sites similar to those conducted in the Guatemalan or Mexican rainforest, or even in neighboring Honduras, seem impossible in most of the Salvadoran territories.

The second factor that hampers our understanding of the ancient history of El Salvador is volcanism. On the one hand, volcanic activity can help archae-

ologists determine stratigraphic chronologies. Such is the case of the famous TBJ (*tierra blanca joven*) stratum found in most archaeological sites and profile cuts in the western and northern portion of the country. Once it was securely tied to the mega-eruption of the Ilopango volcano sometime in the Classic Period (ca. AD 250-900), that distinctive, easily detectible white-yellowish layer of soft ash served to distinguish the “before” and “after” (Amaroli 2015: 148). At the times of the Chalchuapa and Quelepa projects the Ilopango eruption was generally thought to have happened ca. AD 260, thus coinciding well with the established dating of the Preclassic-Classic transition in the Maya area. The TBJ layer was used to distinguish the Preclassic societies of the Caynac (Chalchuapa) and Uapala (Quelepa) phases immediately below it, from the Classic Payu and Shila phases immediately above (Sharer 1978: 53-57, 107-111, 119; Andrews 1976: 179, 182-183). On the other hand, with the shifting dating of the Ilopango event from ca. AD 260 to ca. AD 429, to AD 536, and finally to AD 539/540, this tight fit between the natural catastrophe and the cultural crisis no longer seems plausible. The Preclassic/Classic transition models are calling for a deep revision (Dull et al. 2001; 2010; Amaroli 2015: 148-166; Ichikawa 2016, Dull et. al. 2019).

But volcanism, apart from being able to mislead chronologies, may also impact and skew archaeological surveys. Stanley Boggs first noted that massive ash falls can drastically alter the landscape. Judging from several-meter deep TBJ strata near the Ilopango Lake, and the estimation by Dull and his colleagues that the amount of tephra expelled at the time of the TBJ eruption exceeded 40 cubic kilometers, it is entirely possible that some deep valleys might have been completely or partially filled, some rivers dammed and redirected, and some smaller springs buried and blocked permanently (Amaroli 2015: 15; Dull et al. 2019). After some time, the more loose and soft pockets of ash would be washed away, eventually bringing landscapes back to their pre-eruption condition, but where the tephra became compacted and hard, changes would persist. In addition to these perturbing events, several other eruptions and lava flows have altered the landscape in significant ways, likely burying an unknown amount of archaeological remains below tons of ash or impenetrable layers of pumice and hard magmatic rocks. The best-known example of the former is the Loma Caldera eruption that buried the Joya de Cerén sometime in the first half of the seventh century AD (Sheets 2013: 29). Historical accounts describing the San Marcelino (AD 1722), El Playón (1658), and Boquerón (1917) eruptions, confirm the volcanic impact on the cultural landscapes (Carr and Pontiers 1981; Black 1983: 63, 72).

For all of these reasons any archaeological survey in El Salvador is handicapped both during the planning and executing phases. The planning usually requires selecting a territory that, by general knowledge and analogy, has potential to yield information about archaeological settlement patterns, based on interpolation of past conditions that may have been optimal for ancient inhabitants (water ac-

cessibility, resources, cultivable lands, defensive position or location at a juncture of trade routes, etc.). Such an interpolation in El Salvador seems to bear a higher-than-average risk of being inaccurate simply because the landscape alterations that ensued since then may have been so decisive. In other words, what archaeologists see today when looking around in El Salvador may be significantly different from what was seen by the prehispanic peoples living on those lands.

The execution phase of a survey, after discounting areas covered by modern urban and rural development, and those that cannot be accessed due to lack of permission, is thus often limited to either the steep, rocky volcanic slopes, or the pumice and basalt fields that leave no hope for finding any pottery or architectural remains.

The final problem that is an obstacle in understanding the ancient cultural dynamics of El Salvador, and in part resulting from the previous two, is the extremely unbalanced availability of data from different time periods. Naturally, one can argue that such is the nature of archaeology in general, and this problem is certainly not limited to El Salvador; however, southeastern Mesoamerica appears to be suffering from it more than other regions. It seems that our understanding of the Salvadoran past severely diminishes from the Postclassic (ca. AD 900 – 1520) backward.

Copious Early Colonial sources, as well linguistic data, help to fill in the cultural mosaic on the eve of the Conquest (Larde 1926; Miles 1957; Campbell 1997; 2016; Constenla Umaña 1991; Escalante 2000; Rogers 2016). A number of sites have yielded data from the Early Postclassic (ca. AD 900 – 1250), among them Cihuatán and Las Marías, El Cajete, Antiguo Cuscatlan, Loma China, and portions of the Izalcos region (Bruhns 1980; Amaroli 1983; Amaroli 1986; Amador 2009; Sampeck 2007).

The significant discontinuities observed for the Classic / Postclassic transition, which apparently happened sometime in the tenth century AD, constitute a major complication for archaeologists. We are not certain to what extent the arrival of the Pipil disrupted the Late Classic distribution of cultural identities in El Salvador. One can speculate that there was not much left to disrupt, and the newcomers merged and mixed while shaping the new reality after the Classic collapse. Short of that conclusion, the nature of the cross-cultural exchange during the Late Classic remains murky, at best. There is no unambiguous evidence that would place eastern El Salvador exclusively within either the Mesoamerican, or Isthmo-Colombian interaction spheres (Andrews 1976; Bruhns 1996; Ashmore 2014). The Tamasha-phase site of Cara Sucia is often interpreted as the easternmost outpost of the Cotzumalguapa cultural enclave, with Quelepa displaying some Southern-Guatemalan and / or Veracruzian traits as well (Amaroli 1987a; Moraga et al. 2010). However, one may ask, what is the nature of the Cotzumalguapan cultural entity, how might it relate to Classic Veracruz, and what implications may it bear for the southeast (Ashmore 2014; Chinchilla 2012; Daneels 2001)? Can it be interpreted as an evidence

of cultural intrusion from the Gulf Coast of Mexico, adding yet another element to the cultural mosaic of the region? How would that intrusion impact the modern perception of southeastern Mesoamerica as a peripheral area? Otherwise, Late Classic data have been recovered from primary contexts at numerous sites, such as Chalchuapa, Cara Sucia, San Andres, Quelepa, Santa Leticia, and others, offering at least some cultural framework to build upon in theorizing on cultural identities of ancient societies of El Salvador (Sharer 1978; Moraga et al. 2010; Ichikawa 2017; Andrews 1976; Demarest 1986).

The next great challenge is posed by the eruption of Ilopango around AD 540. Robert Dull and his colleagues (Dull *et al.* 2019) picture a natural catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions, traces of which can be detected on both poles. For the territory of El Salvador it must have had devastating consequences, rendering much of the area uninhabitable for several decades. Whether the post-Ilopango cultures are direct descendants of the pre-Ilopango peoples remains to be verified. Andrews attributed the Late Preclassic / Early Classic Uapala phase at Quelepa to the Lenca whom he sees as producers of the Preclassic Usulután pottery (Andrews 1976: 181), although Ashmore recently (2014) has shown how shifts in built environment attest to a profound change of cultural templates between the Uapala and Shila phases.

Sharer (1978, 30-42) presented a case for the existence of a Middle Preclassic village in Chalchuapa (El Trapiche and Casa Blanca), but he admitted that the Tok and Colos sherds in monumental context come exclusively from the cores of structures, and are mixed with later, Late Preclassic ceramics (Sharer 1978, 71-74). Demarest did not detect cultural remains earlier than those dating to the Late Preclassic at Santa Leticia (Demarest 1986: 39-44). San Andres yields very limited evidence for Preclassic complex society (Ichikawa 2017: 47). One exception to this pattern may be El Carmen, an exclusively Early Preclassic agricultural village investigated by archaeologists (Demarest et al. 1989); that said, one anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this paper pointed out that he has first-hand knowledge about rather numerous examples of Late Classic traits around the site that were somehow excluded from the final report and the subsequent monograph. Another early site is Antiguo Cuscatlan, where Paul Amaroli found Middle Preclassic burials during his emergency intervention at a construction site (Amaroli 1987b). However, no secure evidence for Middle Preclassic monumental architecture has been recovered from El Salvador sites so far, and the cultural significance of public structures from the ensuing Late Preclassic is understood only slightly better.

At the same time, one cannot ignore the evidence, albeit mostly not from primary archaeological contexts, that during the Middle and Late Preclassic times El Salvador was apparently the arena of an intense intra-, and intercultural dynamics. A growing number of “Olmecoid” sculpted forms from the western portion of the country show at least passive participation (i.e. reception, if not contribution) in the pan-Mesoamerican network of cultural exchange. The famous “Piedra de las Victo-

rias,” a multi-ton monolith carved on all four sides with representations of walking or sitting personages, constitutes the ultimate proof that the exchange was not limited to simple trade of exotic goods (Sharer 1978: 157-158). Such non-portable items must have been either commissioned by local elites as manifestations of their status, or imposed by external powers as a display of their influence. In either case, they point to western El Salvador as a member of a “Mesoamerican interaction sphere” (see Freidel 2019). An interesting concept is proposed by Federico Paredes (2014) regarding the Jaguar-head artefacts found in various places within western El Salvador. He argues that, while maintaining its local coherence, the Jaguar-Head Nuclear Zone was connected to the exchange network influenced by Izapa. This idea fits with a larger cultural concept, most often referred to as the Southern Maya Region (SMR). This is a theoretical construct encompassing the Highlands, the piedmont, and the Pacific coast from the southeastern Chiapas all the way to western El Salvador. Despite its rather unfortunate name it is thought to comprise multiple ethnic and linguistic groups, of which “the Maya” would be the predominant one. Preclassic western El Salvador, in the proposed model, was part of the SMR, which in turn may have played a crucial role in the development of Classic Maya civilization (see Love and Kaplan 2011; Kaplan and Paredes-Umaña 2018).

In the opposite end of the country, at Quelepa, Andrews reported modest findings of the Middle-to-Late Preclassic Uapala phase (Andrews 1976: 179). However, the three so-called “altars” discovered in secondary contexts in different parts of the site are distinctively Izapan in style. Their obvious non-portability, again, makes the case for Quelepa elites participating in either the Izapan / SMR, or broader Mesoamerican interaction spheres, however they may be defined (Ashmore 2014; Sampeck 2014; Love 2011).

Beyond those very general connections, the scarcity of primary data from the Middle and Late Preclassic (ca. 900 BC - AD 250) and Early Classic (ca. AD 250-600) hampers attempts at reconstruction of cultural dynamics in El Salvador before the Ilopango eruption. This problem is all the more acute when one considers the fact that it was precisely during those fifteen centuries before the Late Classic that Mesoamerica became a distinctive cultural unit. The nature of those processes is arguably even more crucial along the Mesoamerican “boundaries” than at its geographic core. If we want to truly grasp the meaning of “Mesoamerican-ness”, we need to study it at its edges. Naturally, one has to always be conscious of the artificial, modern genesis of this cultural division that is a mere approximation of ancient reality, based as it is on limited information. The purpose to flesh out the identities and cultural dynamics, though, requires employment of some general intellectual constructs that give shape to otherwise ethereal elements of human cultural behavior.

There certainly are more reasons behind the inability of Salvadoran archaeology to grow out of its puberty, including distortion or manipulation of the past by Colonial and later political actors, and also because of a decade of civil war that rav-

aged the country in the 1980s and 1990s, and which rendered archaeological work almost impossible. From a purely academic vantage, I consider the three factors mentioned above to be the most severe of all. Nevertheless, while we have no choice but to accept the reality of the first two factors, we do have the capability to make the third work to our advantage. The paucity of Preclassic data with controlled, secure provenience makes for an opportunity to select sites and design excavations in a way that will help to fill that void.

The fact is, important questions lacking answers are many. What was going on along the southeast of Mesoamerica when the cultural entities were emerging and individuating? How sharp, or how smooth, were the cultural divisions? Did they exist at all? Were the societies living along the cultural transition zones aware of their “peripheral” or “transient” position? How did they describe themselves in relation to their neighbors to the northwest and southeast? Did they form a transition-zone cultural sphere? How do they relate to societies that inhabited the post-Ilopango landscape?

San Isidro, Sonsonate: a key to the Preclassic?

From the relatively few Salvadoran sites that may yield undisturbed Preclassic information, only a handful have been properly investigated. Among these latter, the large-scale projects at Chalchuapa and Quelepa were conducted before the wide accessibility of the Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) that makes radiocarbon dating narrower and more reliable (Andrews 1976; Sharer 1978; Gove 2000). Because archaeological excavations are necessarily destructive in nature, the original sealed contexts of the excavated structures were lost. Nevertheless, at least at Chalchuapa, new efforts are still being made to understand that site’s past (Ito et al. 2003; Ichikawa et al. 2009; Ito and Shibata 2013).

San Isidro stands out among the still-unexcavated sites that exhibited some Preclassic material during survey. It is located in the northwestern portion of the department of Sonsonate, just below the southeastern slopes of the “Three Volcanoes Complex” (Santa Ana, Cerro Verde, and Izalco), and just south of the rim of the lake-filled caldera of Coatepeque. The site was first reported after two brief visits by Salvadoran archaeologists in October 1980 and November 1981, who noted the existence of three large and two smaller mounds located on a sugarcane field some 800-900 m apart from each other (Boggs 1981). It is significant that both of those visits took place late in the rainy season, when the cane had grown to its greatest heights, effectively obscuring the view to survey. Nevertheless, the ubiquity of Preclassic sherds was noted on the survey logs. Fowler, Amaroli and Arroyo visited the site in 1988 when surveying the Izalco area, but their activities remain unpublished. In 1996, Oscar Picardo Joao from the Universidad Francisco Gavidia attempted to draw a sketch map of the site and describe the pottery. His efforts were published

on the online journal, *Theorethikos* (Picardo 1998); however, the illustrations are lost (Picardo, personal correspondence 2017). A ceramic study of the Izalcos area, conducted by Kathryn Sampeck, encompassed San Isidro, generally confirming its Preclassic dating, but also reporting a localized, limited Late Classic occupation (Sampeck 2007).

I visited the site first in 2017, noticing from the paved road branching off from the Armenia-Sonsonate highway towards Cerro Verde and Coatepeque, three out of the originally reported four mounds. I inquired at the local San Isidro agricultural cooperative, which manages these lands, and obtained permission to survey the terrain. However, the southernmost mound, the second largest in the vicinity, is located on fields owned by another cooperative, which has its administrative seat in the town of El Sunza. There, I was unsuccessful in obtaining the necessary permissions. Eventually, however, the landowners let me and my team pass through and take photographs, but without employing other methods of surveying (e.g., with a total station), or collecting pottery. Initially I did not perceive this as a problem, as much of the archaeological site seemed to be located on the San Isidro lands.

The survey was initiated in 2018 by the team consisting of scholars from the Salvadoran Ministry of Culture, the Francisco Gavidia University, and one independent researcher, as well as myself as a project director. We selected the month of April, when the risk of rains is minimal, and the fields are mostly clear of vegetation. In order to make an effective use of the modest funds at our disposal, we employed a methodology of mixed ground-and-aerial mapping of the most prominent features. Using a DJI Mavic Pro drone, and a series of total-station-mapped Ground Control Points (GPCs), the team executed several series of flights around the visible mounds, of which we counted at least 20, taking a total of 2,049 photos. We also collected separate sherd samples from each of the flight locations. The only exceptions to this sampling were two areas on the El Sunza lands, where we could not employ the GPCs, nor gather ceramics; only drone flights were performed there. All of the photographs were processed using the Agisoft PhotoScan Pro software, and converted into Digital Elevation Models (DEMs). When studying the models, it became apparent that some regular features are too subtle to be perceived from the ground, appearing only on DEMs and orthophotomosaics. The result of the 2018 season was a preliminary map showing discrete concentrations of mounds dispersed over an area of ca. 2 square km, and some initial pottery dating based on the surface collection. Most of the sherds were non-diagnostic (primarily due to an advanced erosion), but those that were (ca. 11 %), exhibited exclusively Preclassic features, with particular emphasis on Tok and Colos (early Middle Preclassic) and Caynac (Late Preclassic), with rather modest Kal (late Middle and early Late Preclassic) presence throughout the site (Szymański *et al.* 2018). Furthermore, during my unsuccessful visit to El Sunza, I was shown a private collection of figurines and vessels. The owner without hesitation separated those coming from the area of San Isidro from those