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**THE VALLEY DE NACO:  
ETHNOHISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY  
IN NORTHWESTERN HONDURAS**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

At the time of the conquest, northwestern Honduras, a part of the culturally complex eastern Maya frontier zone, participated in extensive exchange networks. Historical and archaeological evidence indicates that Naco, one of the principal late prehispanic centers in the region, maintained strong ties with the rest of the Maya world and with non-Maya Central America. A similar pattern of external connections characterized earlier centers in the Valle de Naco.

Archaeological, historical, ethnographic, and linguistic evidence indicates that northwestern Honduras was part of the eastern frontier of Mesoamerica. The Valle de Naco, in the middle part of the Río Chamelecón valley (Fig. 1), was situated within a zone of cultural transition between Maya groups to the west and non-Maya groups to the east. The Valle de Naco has a strategic geographical location, facilitating external connections. The upper Chamelecón provides a natural route to the Copán region and the Guatemalan highlands beyond. Trail systems, many still in use today, lead from the Chamelecón valley, across the Omoa mountains, to the Motagua drainage and the southern Maya lowlands. To the east, the Chamelecón flows into the Sula plain, which offers easy access to the coast and to central Honduras. Reconstructing the external relationships of the Valle de Naco can provide important insights into the larger problem of cultural relationships along the eastern Maya frontier. Exchange is an obvious facet of these relationships, for conquest period historical documents show that northwestern Honduras was heavily involved in long-distance commerce. Intersecting exchange networks gave the region an intermediary economic status, linking it with Maya towns to the north and west and with non-Maya centers to the south and east.

Recent investigations in the Valle de Naco (Henderson 1976; Henderson *et al.* in press) have produced a great deal of new archaeological data to complement historical evidence. Archaeological documentation of the Valle de Naco's external connections confirms and amplifies historical indications that the region was closely linked to the Maya world and upper Central

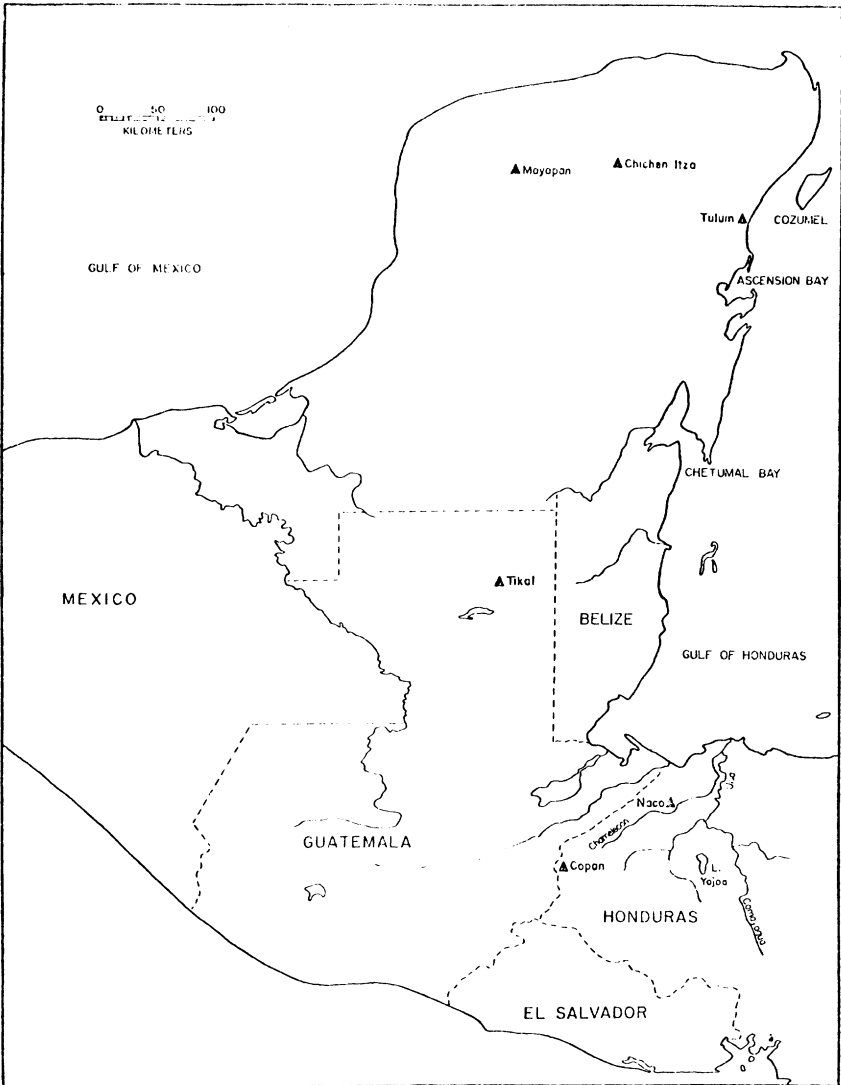


Fig. 1 The Maya area.

America in late prehispanic times. Archaeological evidence also shows that this pattern of cultural relationships has considerable time depth, stretching back at least to the Late Classic period (600-900 A.D.).

### **Exchange Networks and Northwestern Honduras at Conquest**

At the time of the conquest, active maritime trade networks stretched from the trade center of Xicalango, on the Laguna de Términos, around the coast of Yucatán to the base of the Gulf of Honduras and beyond (Fig. 1). Before setting out on his famous march across the Yucatán peninsula to Honduras in 1524-1525, Cortés sought advice about routes from the merchants of Xicalango and Acalan (in the Río Candelaria drainage). Cortés says that they responded with eyewitness accounts of all the major settlements along the coast, as far as the residence of Pedrarias Dávila (Panama). He learned, for example, that an entire ward of Nito – a trade center on the Gulf of Honduras near the mouth of the Río Dulce – was occupied by merchants from Acalan in the charge of a brother of Acalan's ruler. Cortés' account of the march also contains many indications that flourishing native exchange networks involved overland as well as sea routes. The merchants of Xicalango painted him a map showing

the whole route from Xicalango to Naco and Nito, where the Spaniards were, and even as far as Nicaragua, which is on the South Sea, and the place where Pedrarias, Governor of Tierra Firme, resided. This [map] was a remarkable thing because it showed all the rivers and mountains that had to be crossed, and all the large towns and inns where they stopped when they attended the fairs.

At several points along the march, Cortés acquired information about Spaniards in the Gulf of Honduras area and about the best routes to follow to reach them; he encountered merchants' way stations as well as the traders themselves; and several local lords told him of their commercial relations with the Gulf of Honduras. There is little doubt that, for much of the march, Cortés was following active trade routes across the base of the Yucatán peninsula (Pagden 1971:339-386; Simpson 1964:345-369).

Conquest period historical sources confirm the special commercial importance and far-flung economic connections of northwestern Honduras. Columbus, during his fourth voyage, met a large trading canoe in the Gulf of Honduras near the Bay Islands. The vessel was eight feet wide and as long as a galley, with a canopy amidships, and carried 25 men as well as women and children. The canoe, either bound to or returning from Honduras, carried a large and varied cargo of trade goods: cacao; a variety of cotton garments with multi-colored designs; wooden swords edged with stone blades; stone axes; copper bells, axes, and knives; and crucibles for melting copper (Las

Casas 1875:109-110; MacNutt 1912:317). Yucatecan merchants maintained commercial establishments in Honduras, and had agents stationed there to manage their commercial affairs (Scholes and Roys 1948:34; Stone 1941:15). The lords of Chichén Itzá maintained a port outpost at Ascensión Bay where they embarked for Honduras to obtain cacao, feathers, and other goods (Ciudad Real 1872:2:407-408). The son of the Cocom ruler of Mayapán survived the fall of the city because he was away on a trading expedition in Honduras (Tozzer 1941:39). Chetumal even set a fleet of war canoes to Honduras to defend its commercial interests against the Spaniards (Tozzer 1941:8; Chamberlain 1966:53-57).

Honduras, known as the “land of gold, feathers, and cacao,” apparently also exported obsidian, precious stones, shells, and a variety of perishable goods. Cotton cloth, salt, honey, and slaves were among the goods which moved from Yucatán to Honduras (Roys 1972; Scholes and Roys 1948; Thompson 1970c).

### Naco

Naco, the large late prehispanic town in the Valle de Naco, was one of the principal conquest period centers in northwestern Honduras. Naco's history during the period of the initial Spanish conquest of Honduras is quite complex – it served as a base of operations for a number of Spanish parties, but it never grew into a major European settlement.

Cristóbal de Olid, Cortés' rebellious captain, was probably the first European to establish himself at Naco. Olid brought his captured rivals, Francisco de las Casas and Gil González Dávila, to Naco, where they overpowered him. Mortally wounded, Olid escaped and hid himself. His enemies quickly discovered him, brought him back to Naco, and beheaded him in the plaza. At this point, relations with the local population deteriorated – the Indians were apparently unwilling to provide food and supplies indefinitely – and most of the Spaniards left. Some returned to Mexico with Las Casas and Gil González; others went on to establish settlements elsewhere in Honduras (Cavallero [1525]).

At first, native communication networks radiating from Naco remained in operation despite the presence of the Spaniards. Cortes first learned of Olid's death from Indians captured during his exploration of the Nito area, across the mountains to the north (Pagden 1971:391-392). But native trade networks were seriously disrupted by Spanish operations (Pagden 1971:383), and Naco soon ceased to be an important center. When a contingent of Cortés' force arrived at Naco, they found the town deserted (Díaz 1916:56-57).

Naco had been a large and prosperous community, and its valley, environmentally transitional between the steamy plain of the lower Ulúa and Chamelecón rivers and the cooler hilly country around Copán, is pleasant and fertile. The Valle de Naco is one of the few spots where the narrow middle Chamelecón valley widens, forming a flood plain with a substantial stretch of level farmland. Bernal Díaz (1916:56-59), arriving at Naco with the force sent by Cortés, was enchanted:

At the hour of Mass we went to Naco. At that time it was a good pueblo, but we found it had been deserted that very day, and we took up our quarters in some very large courts where they had beheaded Cristóbal de Olid. The *pueblo* was well provisioned with maize and beans and Chili peppers, and we also found a little salt which was the thing we needed most, and there we settled ourselves with our baggage as though we were going to stay there forever. In this pueblo is the best water we have found in New Spain, and a tree which in the noon-day heat, be the sun ever so fierce, appears to refresh the heart with its shade, and there falls from it a sort of very fine dew which comforts the head. At that time this *pueblo* was thickly peopled and in a good situation, and there was the fruit of the Zapotes, both of the red and small kind, and it was in the neighborhood of other *pueblos*.

Montejo ([1539]:228) reported that Naco had a population of 10,000 persons. This agrees quite well with Cortés' statement that there were more than 2,000 houses at Naco, not including its dependent hamlets (Pagden 1971:407).

Naco's linguistic affiliations are obscure. Most linguistic maps place Naco near the transition from Maya to non-Maya (Jicaque-Lenca-Care) speech (e.g., Thompson 1970b:86). The eastern limits of Maya speech are difficult to specify. As Thompson (1977:3) put it: "Long-established linguistic boundaries are not like stone wall or clipped hedge. Rather, we should think in terms of tidal waters where man is hard put to say where fresh begins and brackish ends." The search for a boundary which can be plotted precisely on a map should give way to a recognition that a frontier is a zone of transition in which contrasting cultural patterns and the groups which carry them interpenetrate. The change from one pattern to another is complex, occupying considerable space.

Enclaves – groups of one linguistic or cultural affiliation living among people of a different identity – are useful in conceptualizing and describing the interaction of contrasting groups and patterns. The enclave concept is familiar to Andeanists. It is at the heart of Murra's (1968:1972) formulation of the "archipelago" pattern which is typical of Andean societies. Andean archipelagos, in Murra's analysis, function in resource procurement: small groups reside away from their home communities to exploit locally available resources or to secure access to different environmental conditions necessary

to raise desired crops. In the case of large political entities, such as the Lupaqa kingdom, enclaves might be as far as 250 km from the core area, yet they were considered integral parts of Lupaqa territory and residents retained their cultural identity and rights and obligations in their core communities.

Enclaves were common features of Mesoamerican territorial organization at several levels. The most familiar Maya example is the *barrio* of Acalan merchants in Nito. Other enclaves in the Maya area were associated with merchants and long-distance exchange; they are commonly interpreted in terms of the port of trade concept. As in the Andes, enclaves should be viewed in a broader functional context – in the first place as more generalized resource procurement mechanisms. The Itzá of Tayasal, for example, maintained an enclave among the Chol in the Nito area to secure access to prime land for cacao cultivation (Pagden 1971:376). Many other motives are likely: to gain access to other sorts of natural resources (necessities like salt or exotic raw materials like jade); to gain easy access to distant local markets; to acquire intelligence information for political use – these hardly exhaust the possibilities.

The most striking examples of enclaves are those located at great distances from the core area. When they operate on a regional or local scale, the contrast between “colonists” and “host” group is often much less obvious – except in frontier areas. Here, the contrast between enclave and surrounding group may be extreme, though the distance to the core area is not great. Frontiers may in fact be characterized as zones of maximum density of enclaves.

At the time of the conquest, Naco was near the eastern edge of a continuous zone of Cholan (Chontal, Chol, Chortí) Maya speakers stretching from the Gulf of Mexico across the base of the Yucatán peninsula well into Honduras. Maya speech (probably Chol) was dominant along the northwest coast of Honduras as far east as the region of the mouths of the Ríos Chamelecón and Ulúa (Thompson 1970b; Feldman 1975). The coastal area beyond the Ulúa – at least as far west as Trujillo – was occupied by Jicaque speakers (Thompson 1970b; Campbell 1976b:164). The Sula plain must have been a frontier zone between Chol and Jicaque groups. West of the Sula plain, one would expect occasional Jicaque enclaves – probably *barrios* within Chol-speaking communities. Approaching the frontier zone, Jicaque enclaves would become more frequent, and would include whole settlements of Jicaques. The heart of the frontier zone in the Sula plain would be an intricate mosaic of Chol and Jicaque enclaves – both settlements and *barrios*. Moving east, Chol settlement enclaves would become less common, gradually giving way to a pattern of Chol *barrio* enclaves in Jicaque settlements.

The actual situation was still more complex. Away from the coast, Chol gave way to Chortí, so that there would also be Chol-Chortí and

Chortí-Jicaque interpenetrations. Two documents of 1533 (Stone 1941:14-15) maintain that a single language was spoken along the entire coast from the Río Copilco in Tabasco to the Río Ulúa in Honduras, and that the peoples of this area considered themselves to be the same. In the same year, Alonso de Avila reported that the interpreter he used in Yucatán was equally effective in northern Honduras (Scholes and Roys 1948:3). This cannot mean that the entire area was uniform linguistically, but it does indicate that one language was widely understood along that entire stretch of coast. Chontal, of the Cholan group, is the most likely candidate, since Chontal-speaking Putun merchants of the Acalan region were prominent in the maritime exchange networks encircling the coast of Yucatán (Scholes and Roys 1948; Thompson 1970a). The quarter of Nito occupied by Acalan merchants would have constituted an enclave of Chontal speakers in a Chol area. There may well have been Chontal enclaves on the island of Cozumel, another important trade center (Sabloff and Rathje 1975). The commercial establishments and agents maintained in the Ulúa region by the merchants of Xicalango and other parts of Yucatán suggest the likelihood of Chontal enclaves there among Chol, Jicaque, and perhaps Chortí speakers (Thompson 1970b).

The possibility that Naco housed “foreign” merchants is intriguing, but very difficult to evaluate, since there is no direct evidence for Naco’s linguistic affiliation. The most obvious possibility would be a Chontal enclave (Thompson 1970b:91) among Chortí or Chol speakers, as at Nito. There are a few hints of Nahua speech in the Naco area, which would imply an enclave of Pipiles with ties to the Pacific coast. There is no doubt that there were pockets of Pipil (Nahua) speakers in other parts of Honduras. Cortés explicitly reported that the language of some of the towns near Trujillo was almost identical to that of central Mexico (Pagden 1971:417). Ciudad Real (1872:1:347) mentioned people of “Mexican or Pipil” speech in the Comayagua area. The evidence for Naco is much less clear. The strongest indication is the statement by one of Olid’s men (Cavallero [1525]:242-246) that Naco was a town of Indians who came from the southern sea (i.e., Pipiles from the Pacific coast). When he heard that the people of the Naco area had fled the Spaniards, Cortés had the lords who accompanied him from Mexico reassure them of the Spaniards’ good faith, and Cortés’ captain shortly reported that people were returning to their homes in Naco and nearby villages (Pagden 1971:406-407). The communication may have been direct, for there is no mention of interpreters, but at best this is no more than slightly suggestive. Supposedly Nahua place names in the Naco area (Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938:21) mean little, since they could have originated with the Mexican auxiliaries (Campbell 1976a:13). Campbell (1976b:177) suggests that Nahua speakers at Naco would provide a mechanism to account for Pipil loan words in Honduran Lenca. Since there were Pipil enclaves in the



Comayagua area (Ciudad Real 1872:1:347) — closer to the area where Honduran Lenca was spoken — this is not a strong argument.

If Naco housed an enclave of Pipiles, they may well have been merchants, as were the occupants of the Acalan quarter of Nito. Certainly there was trade between the Pacific coast and the Gulf of Honduras. Cortés captured an Indian from the Pacific coast, probably a merchant, in the Lake Izabal area (Pagden 1971:404). The wealth of the Naco area, particularly its gold (Ciudad Real 1872:1:349; Cavallero [1525]:257-263), would have been very attractive to foreign traders. Naco has sometimes been interpreted as a port of trade, housing an enclave of Nahua-speaking *pochteca* (“long-distance merchants”) from central Mexico (Chapman 1959:62-63; Thompson 1970b:91; Roys 1972:117-118). The presence of Aztec *pochteca* is wildly unlikely. Nahua speech — for which the evidence is not conclusive — would indicate a connection with Pipil groups of the Pacific coast, not with Aztec central Mexico (Campbell 1976a:14).

The port of trade identification is equally tenuous. The port of trade concept has been widely used in interpretations of Mesoamerican culture history, particularly with reference to trade centers in Yucatán and the Gulf of Honduras — Xicalango, Acalan, Cozumel, Chetumal, and Nito as well as Naco (e.g., Chapman 1959; Parsons and Price 1971; Sabloff *et al.* 1974; Sabloff and Rathje 1975). The port of trade notion is part of the conceptual framework developed by Polanyi and his associates to avoid some of the biases of western capitalist and market-oriented economic thought in the analysis of “aboriginal” economies (Dalton 1975). It may be useful to characterize trade centers in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East as ports of trade (Polanyi *et al.* 1957), but it is not necessarily appropriate to extend the analogy to all Mesoamerican trade centers. Very little archaeological work has been done at any putative port of trade in Mesoamerica. Identification of a commercial center as a port of trade carries the implication that a powerful external political entity played a major role in its organization — guaranteeing its neutrality and free port status. This is a facet of exchange which would be extremely hard to demonstrate in the most favorable circumstances. The concept must be used with caution, especially in areas far beyond the immediate orbit of the Aztec state.

The presence of enclaves, Nahua speech, and long-distance merchants are all separate issues. They have too often been linked through uncritical use of the port of trade concept. This highlights an important drawback of the concept: it diverts attention from the actual internal cultural make-up and organization of individual centers. Enclaves need not imply long-distance trade, and commercial centers with enclaves of foreign merchants cannot be assumed to fit the port of trade pattern. The port of trade concept, as it is commonly used with reference to the Maya region, is at

once too vague (with regard to internal organization) and too narrow (assuming the role of a major political power). Facile reliance on the port of trade concept in the interpretation of Maya exchange obscures much detail and variation and may lead to serious distortion. In the case of Naco, a judicious blend of historical and archaeological evidence may well permit the recognition of foreign enclaves, perhaps associated with long distance trade. Naco's supposed port of trade status is a separate issue which is not likely to find confirmation in the data.

Naco was certainly an important center, but it is difficult to discern the details of the native economic and political organization of the area from historical evidence alone. Cortés did not explicitly say that Naco was the capital of a province, but he sometimes implied that it was, particularly in his discussion of Naco and the other principal towns of the area – Quimistlán, Zula, and Cholome (Pagden 1971:407). Ciudad Real (1872:1:349) said that the entire area (including San Pedro Sula) had been part of the “*gran provincia de Naco*” before the conquest. The Spaniards' use of Naco as a base of operations for their early attempts to pacify the native populations of northwestern Honduras was probably based on its status as a powerful political center.

Naco did not retain political importance under the Spanish occupation. With the establishment of San Pedro as the principal Spanish settlement in the area in 1536 (Chamberlain 1966:57), Naco quickly slipped into obscurity. By 1586 the entire area was impoverished and depopulated; in that year there were no more than ten Indians living at Naco (Ciudad Real 1872:349).

Naco did not, however, disappear entirely. There is no question of the location of ancient Naco: the modern Honduran villages of Naco Nuevo and Las Flores de Naco overlie part of an extensive archaeological site. Local oral traditions still reflect the events of the early Spanish occupation of Naco. The tale of “El Rey,” who fled wounded to El Salto (the waterfall of the Río Naco, just above the site), only to be brought back and killed at Naco, surely refers to the untimely end of Cristóbal de Olid (Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938:20, 38).

Ancient Naco (Henderson 1976; Henderson *et al.* in press; Wonderley 1978) is one of the few archaeologically known conquest period centers in Honduras. It is the only Late Postclassic period (1200-1520 A.D.) settlement identified in the Valle de Naco so far, though Cortés' statements indicate that there were once others. Naco is a very large site, occupying some 90 ha. Heavy recent disturbance has blurred the outlines of the settlement, but Late Postclassic Naco was evidently centered on the north bank of the Río Naco. Small residential mounds are densest near the main group, a cluster of large elite residences and public structures including a ball court (Fig. 3). Away

from the main group, they have a much more dispersed distribution. The Late Postclassic residential zone extended across the river, but many of the structures in this sector of the site represent earlier periods.

Naco's ceramics show no obvious similarities with central Mexico. A single blade of Pachuca green obsidian is the only evidence for such a link, and this is hardly compelling evidence of a close relationship. The few identifiable imported sherds suggest economic connections with Yucatán and southern Honduras. Preliminary ceramic analyses indicate that Naco's locally made pottery falls into two classes which are distinct technologically and stylistically. Santa Barbara ware, which includes almost all utilitarian vessels, along with censers and polychrome tripod dishes, occurs everywhere in Late Postclassic Naco except in the main group. Its closest external relationships are with late ceramic complexes in the eastern highlands of Guatemala, an area which was the source of at least some of Naco's obsidian. More general resemblances point to Yucatán. Different vessel shapes, with related but distinct polychrome decoration, and different censer types, comprise Cortés ware, which occurs almost exclusively in the main group. Cortés ware resembles the pottery of Utatlán, the Quiché capital, and other centers in the central and western highlands of Guatemala. Some Cortés polychromes also

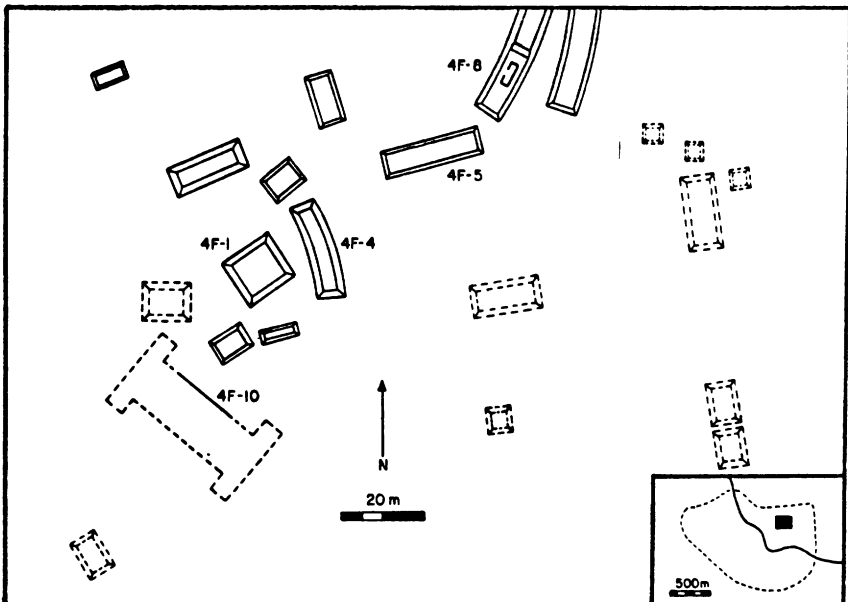


Fig. 3 Naco, main group. Inset shows the location of the enlarged area within the site.

point to connections with Late Postclassic ceramics from areas to the south and east, notably Cihuatán and the Managua region of Nicaragua, which may represent Pipil groups. This raises the possibility that the people associated with Naco's main group were culturally as well as socially distinct from the surrounding populace. Naco may well have had a Mexican-influenced elite like the Quiché, if not more direct Pipil connections.

Archaeology provides basic confirmation of the historical evidence for Naco's cultural and economic relationships. Archaeological indications of Naco's internal organization and of its close relationships with the Maya highlands provide information not reflected in the historical sources. As a working hypothesis, Naco is best regarded as a basically Maya, though possibly multi-ethnic, community with definite ties to non-Maya Central America.

### Antecedents

Archaeological survey has located 89 other sites in the Valle de Naco (Henderson *et al.* in press; Urban 1978). They range from isolated low mounds to major centers with hundreds of structures. They extend the valley's occupation back at least to the Late Preclassic period (300 B.C.-A.D. 250).

La Sierra (Henderson *et al.* in press), a major Late Classic (600-900 A.D.) center, is the largest site in the valley (Fig. 2). The settlement, situated on the west bank of a sluggish tributary of the Río Chamelecón southeast of Naco, occupies more than 100 ha., with more than 400 structures. The central sector contains large, elaborate public buildings with dressed stone architecture, including a ball court. Smaller residential structures cluster north and south of this zone, with a more dispersed distribution in the outlying sectors of the settlement.

Both architecture and ceramics point to close connections with Copán and the Classic Maya world. La Sierra's pottery includes a few imports from Copán, but the basic similarity between the ceramic assemblages of the two centers indicates a shared tradition of production. Ties with the central Maya lowlands exist, but are less marked. An apparent La Sierra export pot was recently located near Quiriguá. At the same time, La Sierra participated in the Ulúa polychrome tradition of the Sula-Ulúa-Yojoa region. Some vessels in this style were imported, but most were manufactured locally. As in later times, the Valle de Naco was fundamentally part of the Maya world in the Late Classic period, though it maintained close connections with non-Maya peoples to the east and south. La Sierra appears to be the Late Classic counterpart of Naco.

The Valle de Naco boasted a center with sizable public architecture even before La Sierra arose. Santo Domingo (Fig. 2), tentatively assigned to

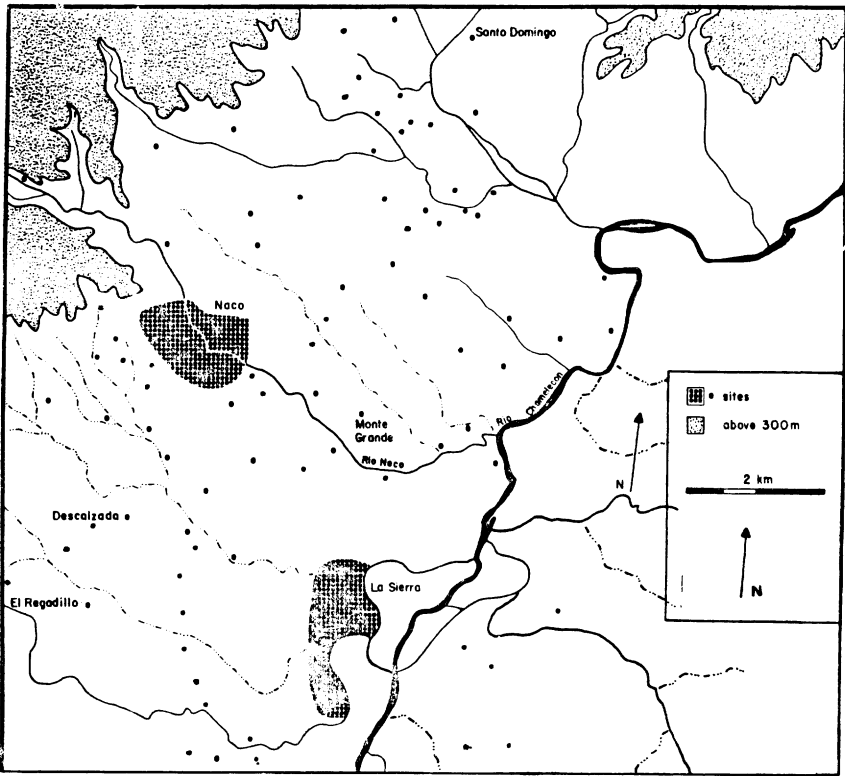


Fig. 2 Archaeological sites in the Valle de Naco.

the Late Preclassic period (300 B.C.-A.D. 250), has 39 structures, including platforms up to 6 m tall. The pattern of external relationships was fundamentally the same as in later periods, though connections are more difficult to pinpoint. Santo Domingo's ceramics show close ties with Late Preclassic pottery from Copán and general similarities with contemporary material throughout the Maya area. They are also related to Late Preclassic complexes from the Yojoa and Comayagua regions of central Honduras.

### Prospects

Together, historical and archaeological evidence indicate the outlines of Naco's conquest period external connections and provide clues to its internal organization. This helps guide more intensive investigations of Late Post-classic Naco and of earlier centers in the valley. Continuing research will focus

on the nature of the settlements within the valley and the connections among them as well as on their changing patterns of external relationships. Investigation of Naco's historical roots in the Valle de Naco contributes to a fuller understanding of the history of the eastern Maya frontier and its intricate patterns of cultural relationships.

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