



## Project Gallery

# A Teotihuacan complex at the Classic Maya city of Tikal, Guatemala

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Lidar reveals the presence of a precinct at the Classic Maya city of Tikal that probably reproduces the Ciudadela and Temple of the Feathered Serpent at the imperial capital of Teotihuacan.

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## Introduction

Classic Maya cities of the first millennium AD are increasingly understood as places shaped by locals and non-locals. That presence can be seen in ‘hard’ terms—the result of invasion, in-migration, human trafficking and resident elites or traders of foreign origin (Vaillant 1935; Wright 2012; Houston 2020; Martin 2020)—or as ‘softer’ interactions that emphasise an interplay of eclectic art styles and “cosmopolitan discourses” (Halperin & Martin 2020: 830). Finding unambiguous proof of ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ contact remains a challenge, but there can be no doubt that non-local enclaves existed in Mesoamerica. A case in point is Teotihuacan, Mexico. During the second quarter of the first millennium AD, the city had pockets of people, artefacts and building styles from Oaxaca, the Gulf Lowlands, West Mexico and probably the Maya region (Clayton 2005; Spence *et al.* 2005; Croissier 2007; Álvarez-Sandoval *et al.* 2015; Sugiyama *et al.* 2016). Their position within the city was oriented roughly to their direction of origin. Whether such foreigners were summoned, or came of their own volition is uncertain, but Teotihuacan appeared to be the dominant party in these interactions.

## Tikal, lidar and the ‘Ciudadela’

The Maya metropolis of Tikal in Guatemala has long yielded evidence of reciprocal contact with Teotihuacan (Laporte 1989). It has also revealed glyphic accounts of martial intrusions in detail that is unavailable at Teotihuacan itself (Stuart 2000). Most texts at Tikal refer to the main personage of this contact as Sihyaj K’ahk’ (“Born from Fire”)—an epithet that is Maya in origin but non-Maya in phrasing, recalling the fiery darts of Teotihuacan warfare. Taking

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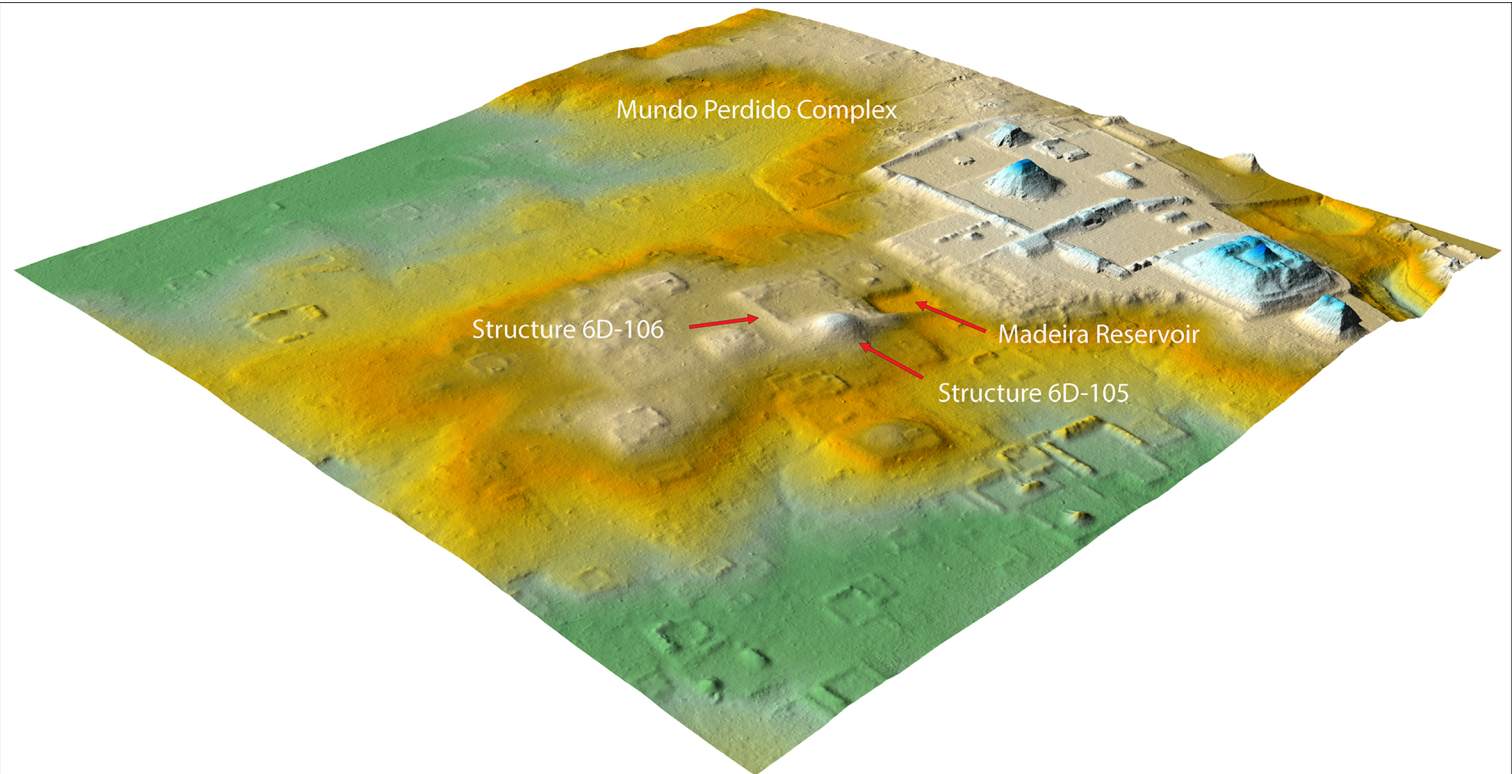


Figure 1. Lidar view of the Teotihuacan Complex at Tikal (figure by T. Garrison/PACUNAM).



*Figure 2. Filtered lidar highlighting the structures and quarrying at Tikal (figure by T. Garrison/PACUNAM).*

place in AD 378, that intrusion from Teotihuacan was local to Tikal, yet regional in impact, occurring within a landscape of newly founded dynasties served by ancestral cults and protected or surveilled by extensive fortifications that reflect the contemporaneous insecurities and oppressions (Estrada-Belli *et al.* 2009; Houston *et al.* 2015, 2019). Within Tikal, the major focus of this Teotihuacan presence was in a distinct sector located just south of the





Figure 3. Overlay (at 30 per cent size) of the Teotihuacan Ciudadela on the Tikal precinct, showing the same orientation, flanking platforms, eastern pyramid, western enclosure and north–south corridor at the western entrance to the precinct (figure by T. Garrison/PACUNAM).

Mundo Perdido Complex (Figure 1). Buildings in this area combined Maya and Teotihuacan-style elements, including the talud-tablero ('slope-panel') moulding linked to the Mexican city (Iglesias 1987; Laporte & Fialko 1995).





*Figure 4. Alignments in the 'Ciudadela' precinct at Tikal, with correspondences to the orientation of Teotihuacan ( $15^{\circ} 28' 00''$ ); note the spatial skewing from structures in the Mundo Perdido Complex to the north (figure by T. Garrison/PACUNAM).*

A lidar capture in 2016 (Canuto *et al.* 2018) detected another feature. Located in an area between two elite residences with Teotihuacan features (Groups 6C-XVI and 6D-V) was what appeared to be a natural hillock (Figure 2). Earlier mappers had marked



Figure 5. Teotihuacan-style incense burner fragments from the front platform of Structure 6D-105 at Tikal (photographs by E. Román/PACUNAM).

this feature with natural contours, while, in field notes, also observing blocks of masonry on its surface (Carr & Hazard 1961). It soon became clear that this precinct mirrored—at a smaller scale—the form of the ‘Ciudadela’ (the citadel) at Teotihuacan, along with, on its eastern side, a building in the same position as the celebrated Temple of the Feathered Serpent (Sugiyama 2017a). The Ciudadela at Tikal was approximately 30 per cent smaller than its exemplar at Teotihuacan, yet it had the same north–south wings on the eastern pyramid, an enclosed square plaza in front and a reservoir (called the ‘Madeira’) in place of the canal to the north of the complex at Teotihuacan (Figure 3). Although much less distinct, the northern edge may have been affected by later robbing of stone to build additions to the Mundo Perdido Complex. The broader sector appears to be oriented  $15.5 \pm 1^\circ$  to the east, resembling the grid that guided the urban plan at Teotihuacan (Figure 4).

Prompted by these lidar data, excavations began in 2019 (Román Ramírez & Méndez Lee 2020). In the pyramid of the Ciudadela—a structure approximately 12m high (possibly the third tallest at Tikal during this period)—excavators documented the highly unusual use of clays and adobes as building materials, with six construction phases, most dating to the Early Classic period (*c.* AD 300–550). The main structure (6D-105) yielded a deposit of Teotihuacan-style incense burners, in an evident parallel to the ‘Adosada’ platform that covered the western façade of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent at Teotihuacan (Figure 5). The back of this building was aligned to the north and associated with an intensely burned deposit of two human sacrifices and green obsidian points resembling lithics at Teotihuacan (Chinchilla *et al.* 2015). A further burial with green obsidian points was located in the southern structure of the Ciudadela (6D-106). Pending further study, and excavations in 2021, this deposit may correspond to the warrior burials found under the Temple of the Feathered Serpent at Teotihuacan (Sugiyama 2017b).

## Conclusion

Maya cities are not synchronous wholes (*cf.* Smith *et al.* 2021). Planned by sector—often by individual rulers—they tend to articulate poorly with other parts of their urban form, usually by means of causeways of post hoc design. The ‘Ciudadela’ at Tikal appears to be a plan-within-a-plan: a deliberate evocation of a focal feature of Teotihuacan. As with the foreign enclave at Teotihuacan, it lies in a western part of the city, and is thus oriented towards its locus of inspiration. As an embedded ‘quotation’ of a distant place, the precinct at Tikal recalls Los Horcones in Chiapas, which in part resembles the plaza and buildings that define the area of Teotihuacan’s Temple of the Moon (García-Des Lauriers 2012). With the historical evidence from glyphic writing, the Tikal ‘Ciudadela’ suggests a considerable investment that, in one phase, galvanised into the replication of an imperial locality tied to conquest and foreign rites.

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