
Tak'alik Ab'aj (Guatemala) No 1663

1 Basic information

Official name as proposed by the State Party

National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj

Location

Municipality of El Asintal
Department of Retalhuleu
Guatemala

Brief description

Tak'alik Ab'aj is an archaeological site located at the piedmont of the Pacific Coast of Guatemala. Its 1,700-year history spans the years from 800 BCE to 900 CE, a period that saw the transition from the Olmec civilisation to the emergence of Early Mayan culture. Tak'alik Ab'aj functioned as a primary player and catalyst in this transition, in part because of the vital role it played in the long-distance trade route that connected the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in today's Mexico to present-day El Salvador. Ideas and customs were shared extensively along this route, as indicated by the diversity of sculptural styles that are found at Tak'alik Ab'aj as at no other site in Mesoamerica, as well as by artefacts analogous to sites located hundreds of kilometres distant. Sacred spaces and sacred buildings were laid out here according to cosmological principles, and innovative water management systems, ceramics, lapidary art and lithic tools are found within this site, a central portion of which comprises the nominated property. Today, Indigenous groups of different affiliations still consider the site a sacred place and visit it to perform rituals.

Category of property

In terms of categories of cultural property set out in Article I of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

Included in the Tentative List

27 April 2012 as "Tak'alik Ab'aj National Park"

Background

This is a new nomination.

Consultations and technical evaluation mission

Desk reviews have been provided by ICOMOS International Scientific Committees, members and independent experts.

An ICOMOS technical evaluation mission visited the nominated property from 8 to 15 August 2021.

Additional information received by ICOMOS

A letter was sent to the State Party on 27 September 2021 requesting further information about the area of the nominated property and the proposed buffer zone, the Tak'alik Ab'aj "El Caracol del Tiempo" site museum, the participation of local communities and the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous communities.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 11 November 2021.

An Interim Report was provided to the State Party on 20 December 2021 summarising the issues identified by the ICOMOS World Heritage Panel.

Further information was requested in the Interim Report including: integrity, research activities, the site museum, and risk management.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 28 February 2022.

All additional information received has been incorporated into the relevant sections of this evaluation report.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report

9 March 2022

2 Description of the nominated property

Note: The nomination dossier and additional information contain detailed descriptions of this property, its history and its state of conservation. Due to limitations on the length of evaluation reports, this report provides only a short summary of the most relevant aspects.

Description and history

National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj is located in a subtropical humid forest 600 metres above sea level in the piedmont area of the Sierra Madre volcanic chain that runs along the Pacific Coast of Guatemala.

For the construction of the city, which existed from 800 BCE to 900 CE, the slopes descending from the volcanic piedmont to the coastal plains were modified into a series of ten successive terraces covering about 6.5 square kilometres (650 hectares). There are four principal architectural groups, each named according to its location within the archaeological site: Central, North, West and South. The Central Group includes Terraces 1, 2 and 3. The nominated property, which encompasses sixty percent of the Central Group, contains 22 structures, 252 sculptures, 22 canals and 154 elements of lapidary art.

Its location put Tak'alik Ab'aj in a position to function as a critical link within the predominant long-distance commercial network of this region. This allowed the site to evolve into one of the main Mesoamerican economic and cultural centres. Among the most important material remains found at the nominated property today are monuments sculpted in stone, sacred spaces and sacred buildings constructed of clay and faced with cobbles,

water management systems, ceramics, lapidary art and lithic tools. The city's layout follows cosmological precepts.

Tak'alik Ab'aj is noted for the diversity of styles of sculptures from different cultures that congregated there, a diversity not believed to exist elsewhere in Mesoamerica. The sculptures were produced by artisans in six different styles, which might represent different cultural traditions, some developing in parallel during the same cultural epoch: Olmec, Maya, Potbelly, Zoomorph, Coastal and Local, as well as a number of undefined styles. Furthermore, artefacts analogous to distant cities and sites in present-day Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Costa Rica have been recovered. In this historical process, Tak'alik Ab'aj functioned as a primary player and catalyst in the transition from the Olmec world system to that of the Maya.

The integration of sculpture into the design of sacred places created the scenarios for public displays of power. The public architecture programme of Tak'alik Ab'aj included a clay ball court from the Middle Preclassic period, one of the earliest known in Mesoamerica. Ceremonial spaces functioned as places where public acts were performed by rulers. The techniques and materials used for construction and the buildings' forms changed through time, but the objective of combining sacred spaces with sculpture was maintained.

It appears that Olmec monuments from the Middle Preclassic period were extracted from their original placements and reinstated on new structures in the Late Preclassic period. The west facade of Structure 12 in the Central Group represents an example of this technique to create what may be an "open-air museum".

Creative water management was also a feature of Tak'alik Ab'aj from the beginning of its long history. Systems for draining rainwater from the plazas were engineered, and in the residential areas a system was devised to supply drinking water by means of aqueducts.

The ceramic tradition at Tak'alik Ab'aj, called the Ocosito Tradition, was present throughout the history of this ancient city, which indicates that the same peoples continued living there for centuries. Obsidian artefacts are found profusely in archaeological excavations, indicating that they were used often and were important in both every day and ceremonial life.

The design and placement of the largest monumental building on the site – Structure 5, on Terrace 3, measuring 113 by 120 metres at its base and 16 metres high – is based on a "cosmogram," a geometric figure depicting the universe wherein the arrangement of the buildings follows a main east-west alignment, the intersection of which with a north-south axis is the "Ombligo-Mux" ("navel," "mux" in the indigenous Mam language) as a central point or *axis mundi* for the city.

The study of these objects and public works makes it possible to follow the changes in styles and technology utilised, reflecting some of the wealth of ideas that existed

in the minds of the ancient artisans and architects during the 1,700-year history of the nominated property, from 800 BCE to 900 CE.

The nominated property has an area of 14.88 ha, and an originally proposed buffer zone ("Preliminary Protection Strip") of 0.50 ha. The total area of 15.38 ha represents only a small portion of the entire 650-ha archaeological site, which has been declared National Cultural Heritage. Most of the site is in private ownership and for many decades has been used for single-crop agriculture (coffee, rubber and sugar cane).

Important events in the history of Mesoamerica are reflected in the nominated property, where the dominance of the ancient Olmec civilisation during the Middle Preclassic period (800 to 350 BCE) was followed after a period of transition by the emergence of the Early Mayan culture during the Late Preclassic period (100 BCE to 150 CE). A commercial long-distance trade route played an important role in its economic and cultural development. Contact among different peoples and cultures facilitated the flow of ideas, which were assimilated here and creatively re-invented. It appears that this situation was appropriate for the emergence of a chiefdom at this place.

During the Middle Preclassic period, Tak'alik Ab'aj shared the cultural traits of the dominant Olmec civilisation and became a contributing city in its long-distance trade route. Tak'alik Ab'aj entered a transitional period from 350 BCE to 100 BCE, during which time the political power of this first Mesoamerican civilisation faded. The archaeological record of the city's architecture, sculpture, ritual activity and water management indicates the change in concept, design and aesthetic idioms happened in a gradual and uninterrupted manner.

Early Mayan culture emerged here at the beginning of Late Preclassic period (100 BCE to 50 CE) and reached its mature expression with the second generation (50 to 150 CE), marked by the development of the Mayan Long Count astronomical calendar. The beginnings of Maya writing are evident on the sculpted monuments at Tak'alik Ab'aj in the form of brief glyphic texts and Long Count dates.

During the Early Classic period (150 to 500 CE), western highland people fighting for control of this commercial domain caused the end of the long-distance trade route. This also ended the Preclassic period's early Mayan cultural manifestations, including the end of almost a millennium of sculpture tradition that had been expressed in the locally re-created Olmec and Mayan artistic idioms.

Studies indicate that this period came to an abrupt end at the beginning of Late Classic period (500 to 900 CE), and Tak'alik Ab'aj resumed its contacts and interactions along the Pacific corridor. Around 900 CE the western highland people had split into different language groups and occupied different highland regions. The ancient people of Tak'alik Ab'aj were confronted by the challenge of the K'iche' people's expansion, but, on this occasion, they

apparently capitulated and the city's lengthy history ended with its abandonment.

In modern times, the archaeological site began to be noticed and explored in 1888, with formal investigations starting in 1976. The nominated property, including the 0.50-hectare "Preliminary Protection Strip", were donated in two phases by the Finca Santa Margarita owners to create a National Archaeological Park. The first donation of 7.69 hectares was initiated in 1987 and completed in 1998, after the construction of a paved road from the Municipality of El Asintal, the condition for the donation, was completed. The second donation of 7.69 hectares began in 2007 and was completed in 2013, even though the condition for this second donation – the construction of a site museum – remains unfinished. The donated land includes Terraces 1, 2 and 3, where the Central Group of Tak'alik Ab'aj is located.

Indigenous groups of different ethnic affiliations consider the site to be a sacred place and visit it to perform rituals. In order to protect the original monuments, an "alternative altars" programme and corresponding regulations were implemented in 1995, in concordance with the idea of a living heritage site. In 2002, the whole extent of the 650-hectare archaeological site (most of which is still in private ownership) was declared National Cultural Heritage.

State of conservation

The State Party highlights that the long- and mid-term planning for park development has always aimed at striking a balance between educational, aesthetic, practical and conservation considerations when deciding how to treat the architectural ensembles. As a result, some structures are completely or partially exposed, with their stone coverings restored and the remaining earthen surfaces covered with grass. Others are kept under their accumulated soil and vegetation cover. To date, eleven buildings, three canals and two causeways in the nominated property have been partially exposed, restored and covered with grass, or completely restored. Of the monuments inside the nominated property, seventy-three are covered with a roof *in situ* or are stored, and the rest are exposed.

All cultural and natural components (artefacts as well as constructions and buildings) have been inventoried and are subjected to a preventative conservation programme.

The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj administration has been working since its establishment to gradually re-create the original biodiversity by collecting native species from the small patches of the forest that have survived in the deep ravines of the rivers and propagating the plants in nurseries for re-introduction in the nominated property, turning it into an ecological island within the surrounding coffee, rubber and sugar cane plantations.

In summary, ICOMOS considers that the measures taken by the State Party have resulted in a good state of

conservation of the archaeological objects, sculptures and buildings.

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation overall is very good.

Factors affecting the nominated property

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the main factors affecting the nominated property are environmental and development pressures. These include heavy rains linked to the subtropical climate as well as to the effects of climate change; and a lack of water drainage at the site. The Santa María volcano's Santiaguito lava domes could affect the nominated property with ash and gas transported by wind.

Development pressures potentially include fragmentation of the five privately-owned farms surrounding the nominated property and changes to their land use, and an increase in tourism together with the construction of tourism-related infrastructure. Damage caused by vandalism, looting or illegal access is considered minimal.

The project's archive and laboratories are housed in wooden buildings and there are concerns about the potential damage that fire could cause. In more general terms, and not seen as an immediate threat, development pressure from the surrounding population and the local community of El Asintal is mentioned.

ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation is very good and that factors affecting the nominated property are generally well identified and at present under control. A solution should be sought to protect the archive and laboratories against the threat of fire.

3 Proposed justification for inscription

Proposed justification

The nominated property is considered by the State Party to be of Outstanding Universal Value as a cultural property for the following reasons:

- Tak'alik Ab'aj distinguishes itself from other pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cities by its extraordinary quantity and diversity of Preclassic period stone sculpture styles and sophisticated jadeite artefacts for early powerful rulers. These were realised during a gradual and continuous transition from Olmec towards Maya cultural expressions.
- The ancient architects slightly modified the terraced landscape in order to create a sophisticated urban layout based on cosmological precepts and astronomical orientations. This architectural layout *par excellence*, integrated with a conspicuous sculptural programme, created ritual scenarios for the

public performance of the Preclassic period incipient chiefdom.

- The ancient astronomers there performed important observations of the nocturnal sky and the sun, leaving an amazing record in the alignments of sculptures.
- The Central Group of Tak'alik Ab'aj displays multiple sculptural styles developed over a span of almost a millennium. Olmec style monuments were re-used and re-assembled to form part of an "open air museum" in the Late Preclassic period, indicating the intention to evoke the past and create a historic discourse, particularly in times of crisis.
- In the imaginary of the Indigenous people, Tak'alik Ab'aj has been recognised and identified as a sacred place with areas that are designated today as locations for ritual performance.

Based on the nomination dossier, the key attributes of the nominated property are the archaeological remains, such as the urban layout, buildings, features, sculptures and artefacts, as well as the modern use and reinterpretation of this setting by Indigenous communities.

Comparative analysis

The comparative analysis has been developed around parameters that reflect key aspects of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value of the nominated property, such as cities involved in long-distance trade; millenary cities; cities with similarities in urban layout; cities with scenarios for public display; cities with Olmec and Mayan cultural expressions; and archaeological sites in a good state of conservation and with integrity. The State Party has examined archaeological properties from the same region inscribed on the World Heritage List, sites included in the Tentative Lists of States Parties, and other properties.

No geo-cultural area has been defined, but it can be surmised to be Mesoamerica: the geographical scope of the comparative analysis covers an area from La Venta in Tabasco, Mexico, to Chalchuapa in El Salvador. Several of the properties mentioned are inscribed on the World Heritage List, among them the Ancient Maya City and Protected Tropical Forests of Calakmul, Campeche (Mexico, 2002, 2014, criteria (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (ix) and (x)), the Historic Centre of Oaxaca and Archaeological Site of Monte Albán (Mexico, 1987, criteria (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv)), and the Maya Site of Copan (Honduras, 1980, criteria (iv) and (vi)).

Other sites mentioned for comparison include Chalchuapa (El Salvador, Tentative List); Tres Zapotes, La Venta, Chiapa de Corzo, Seibal and Izapa in Mexico; Santa Leticia in El Salvador; and Kaminaljuyu in Guatemala. Some of these comparators have been quickly dismissed by the State Party for being set in vastly different landscapes and/or having different building programmes. In other cases, it is recognised that comparable aspects exist, but the conclusion reached is that expressions found in the nominated property are "*superlative and unique*".

ICOMOS notes that no reference is made to the two ICOMOS-IAU Thematic Studies on Heritage Sites of Astronomy and Archaeoastronomy in the context of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (2010, 2017), nor the modern use of the nominated property for ritual activity by Indigenous communities. These reflect directly on two of the justifications in support of the proposed criteria, but are not considered in a comparative context.

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis should have addressed these aspects and been better structured and strengthened by including more detailed information. However, ICOMOS also considers that the comparative analysis in its current form convincingly demonstrates that the nominated property stands apart from comparable sites in its geo-cultural region in terms of its combination of cultural context, early date, inclusion in long-distance trade networks, longevity and very good state of conservation.

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of this property for the World Heritage List.

Criteria under which inscription is proposed

The property is nominated on the basis of cultural criteria (i), (ii), (iii), (iv) and (vi).

Criterion (i): *represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that Tak'alik Ab'aj distinguishes itself from other pre-Columbian cities in Mesoamerica for its extraordinary quantity and diversity of Preclassic stone sculpture styles and sophisticated jadeite artefacts for early powerful rulers. There was a continuum reflecting the transition from Olmec towards Maya cultural expressions, providing a unique opportunity to observe the "*gradual change of thought behind the artisans' chisel*". Tak'alik Ab'aj is said by the State Party to be like a laboratory where these changes of thought can be studied, and as such is exceptional in Mesoamerican history.

ICOMOS considers that the long history of the nominated property and the accumulation of a large number of sculptures of different styles is an expression of a very interesting and possibly unique evolutionary development, but has not been demonstrated to be a masterpiece of human creative genius *per se*. Uniqueness is not, on its own, sufficient to justify inscription. The nominated property must be considered in a broad cultural-historical context, and its possible creative excellence assessed in relation to that context.

Criterion (ii): *exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the long-distance trade route running along the Pacific littoral and Tehuantepec Isthmus led to the sharing

of cultural traits with places as far away as the Olmec lowlands in present-day Mexico on one end and today's El Salvador on the other, starting in the Middle Preclassic period and lasting for several centuries. This interchange is manifested in the monumental ceremonial architecture used as ritual scenarios for the public performance of the Preclassic period incipient chiefdoms, the sculptural programme, the urban design based on ancestral cosmological precepts, and water management, which all attest to a high level of urban planning. Furthermore, the quantity and diversity of Preclassic period stone sculptures reflect the shifting influences that resulted from the transition of Olmec towards Maya cultural expressions. In combination with the evidence of advances in early writing, mathematics and calendrical systems found there, the nominated property is considered by the State Party to be the best representative in this extraordinary cultural region.

ICOMOS considers that Tak'alik Ab'aj played a critical role in an important ancient long-distance trade route. Through the interchange of ideas and materials, it received and disseminated many of the most advanced ideas on town planning, styles of monumental arts and technological advances, all expressed in the layout, architecture and sculptural programme of the nominated property.

Criterion (iii): *bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the archaeological evidence situates the nominated property among the first ancient sites located on the long-distance trade route along the Pacific littoral and Isthmus of Tehuantepec to display the symbolic expressions of astronomical observations (sculpture alignments, offering placements, the orientation of the urban plan with an *axis mundi* centre point), together with evidence of the Long Count calendar system and the development of hieroglyphic writing represented by and sculpted into stone monuments.

Furthermore, the re-use, re-assemblage and re-combination of sculptures of different styles and previous epochs for public display in architectonic scenarios is particularly conspicuous at Tak'alik Ab'aj and appears to be a central element in its 1,700-year-long occupation.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property is an exceptional example of the early development and use of a large number of important cultural traditions, some of which are now considered to be representative of Mesoamerica, including astronomical observations and their expression in urban planning and design, calendrical systems and hieroglyphic writing. Furthermore, the re-use and re-combination of sculptures of different styles and previous epochs including, for example, sculptures of Olmec and Maya cultures, is an outstanding example of the creation of public displays or architectonic scenarios.

Criterion (iv): *be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the act of re-using and re-assembling sculptures of different styles and previous epochs for public display in architectonic scenarios, whereby monuments from the Middle Preclassic period Olmec culture were extracted from their original placements to form part of a historic "open air museum" in the Late Preclassic period, indicate the intention to evoke the past and create a historic discourse, particularly in times of crisis.

ICOMOS recognises the potential for Outstanding Universal Value in the phenomenon described by the State Party. However, it is better justified as a cultural tradition under criterion (iii).

Criterion (vi): *be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria);*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj is an important sacred ancestral place for present-day Indigenous peoples, where they perform ceremonial rites and perpetuate their ancestral spirituality. The predominant cultural/linguistic groups are K'iche', Mam, Kaqchikel and Tz'utujil.

ICOMOS recognises the importance the nominated property holds for different Indigenous communities. However, ICOMOS considers that the continuity and direct association between the archaeological features of the nominated property and the current practices by Indigenous peoples have not yet been sufficiently documented. In addition, the persistence and resilience of beliefs can be observed at many sites in the geo-cultural region and around the world. In the framework of this nomination, it has not yet been well demonstrated through the comparative analysis that the nominated property can be considered outstanding under this criterion.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property meets criteria (ii) and (iii), but that criteria (i), (iv) and (vi) have not been demonstrated.

Integrity and authenticity

Integrity

The integrity of the nominated property is based on the archaeological evidence being whole and intact regarding the transition from Olmec to Maya cultural expressions, the urban layout based on cosmological precepts and astronomical orientations, and the structures and sacred spaces for ritual performances.

The archaeological deposits are intact, and are not subject to major pressures. After its abandonment around 900 CE, the nominated property was reclaimed by dense vegetation. In more recent times, coffee, rubber and sugar cane plantations were created, which, according to the State Party, do not reach the archaeological levels in the ground. The location on privately-owned land with restricted access added to the protection of the larger archaeological site. Excavations have discovered largely undisturbed contexts, and the documentation and inventorying of the finds have created a very complete archaeological record.

The boundaries have been drawn to encompass elements located in the Central Group of the larger archaeological site that contribute to the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. In its Interim Report, ICOMOS noted that the nominated property represents less than three percent of the entire 650-ha archaeological site. Very little information has been provided about what is – or what is expected to be – located in the vast archaeological areas outside the nominated property. It is known, however, that the urban elements of Tak'alik Ab'aj are not restricted to the nominated property, but continue beyond its boundaries. Even though the nominated property is said by the State Party to represent in an adequate manner the whole of the larger site, it is difficult to confirm this statement on the basis of the information provided. The lack of contextualisation of the Central Group, and the fact that the rationale for the delimitation of the nominated property is not explained in the nomination dossier beyond that it comprises the area donated by the land owners, raises questions about integrity. An example of the seemingly arbitrary definition of the nominated property's boundaries is that the drinking water supply system at El Escondite, which is described in detail in the nomination dossier, is located outside the nominated property.

The condition of integrity of the nominated property, therefore, cannot refer to the completeness of the site as one human settlement with all its functional elements; rather, it refers to the integrity of the elements that support the proposed Outstanding Universal Value within the nominated area.

The State Party is planning to continue construction of the partially built "El Caracol del Tiempo" site museum inside the nominated property, which was initially seen as a potential threat to its integrity. However, additional information provided by the State Party in November 2021 presented evidence of an archaeological survey that had been conducted in 2005, two years before construction of the museum was initiated. Further information sent by the State Party in February 2022 indicated that the building site was strategically selected in an area with little archaeological evidence, based on survey excavations. The museum building is one storey high and will be screened from the rest of the site by trees. The State Party also explained that fifty percent of the building has already been constructed. Structural studies carried out in 2020 determined that about twenty percent of the existing

building is unsound and will have to be demolished for safety reasons. The new construction will start in May 2022 and is scheduled to be completed in 2023. The State Party also clarified that the current visitor and research infrastructure at the site will not be removed.

ICOMOS notes that, according to researchers, the distribution of sculpture in the city itself was not haphazard. Most monuments were placed in the Central Group on Terraces 2 and 3. The clustered distribution of monuments in the Central Group draws attention to this sector as the ceremonial heart of Tak'alik Ab'aj, and also to the likelihood that the display of stone monuments there related to this critical function.

While it is known that elements that support the potential Outstanding Universal Value exist outside the limits of the nominated property (such as the drinking water supply system at El Escondite), ICOMOS considers that the known and well-preserved elements within the boundaries of the nominated property, the area called "the ceremonial heart of Tak'alik Ab'aj" by the investigators, are sufficient to support the potential Outstanding Universal Value and meet the condition of integrity. Furthermore, ICOMOS recognises that the entire 650-hectare archaeological site is protected as National Cultural Heritage, and recommends that the State Party pay specific attention to maintaining the integrity of this entire area.

ICOMOS considers that the integrity of the nominated property has been demonstrated.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the nominated property is based on its ability to truthfully and credibly express its cultural values through its attributes. It can be said to be authentic in its location and setting, forms and designs, and materials and substances, as demonstrated by the archaeological evidence, as well as in its intangible heritage, including spirit and, to a degree, its continued uses.

The archaeological remains that convey the proposed Outstanding Universal Value (buildings, sculptures and objects) display a high degree of authenticity due to the fact they had not been disturbed prior to excavation. The State Party highlights the carefully conducted excavations, the painstaking documentation of the archaeological evidence, and the respectful stabilisation and conservation of the remains, using materials directly from the area. The restored drainage canals still prevent the accumulation of surface water at the archaeological site. Another important aspect in the discussion of the nominated property's authenticity is its continued use as a pilgrimage site for Indigenous spiritual guides (Ajq'ijab').

At the nominated property an ecological restoration is being conducted, but changes can be detected in the wider setting due to the modern agricultural use of the area (coffee, rubber and sugar cane plantations). Also, some of the ancient sculptures have been removed to a shelter (since the planned museum is not operational),

where they are displayed to the public. Copies are exhibited in their place.

ICOMOS considers that the conditions of authenticity have been met.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the conditions of integrity and authenticity have been met.

Boundaries

The 14.88-hectare nominated property contains sixty percent of the Central Group of the 650-hectare archaeological site of Tak'alik Ab'aj. The nominated property is demarcated on the ground by a metal fence or vegetation barrier. The extent of the nominated property, plus its 0.50-hectare buffer zone, corresponds with the 15.38-hectare area donated to the state of Guatemala.

Currently, about one hundred people work at the Tak'alik Ab'aj National Park and they are considered by the State Party to be the nominated property's population. No-one actually lives in the nominated property.

Very little information is given by the State Party concerning the archaeological remains located outside the nominated property. More information on this subject was requested by ICOMOS in order to improve its understanding of the relationship of the nominated part of the Central Group with the rest of the 650-hectare archaeological site, and the rationale for the nominated property's delimitation. The State Party responded in February 2022 that the nominated area was defined based on three factors: (a) the strategic selection of the concentration of the greatest intensity and diversity of archaeological remains; (b) the existence of intensive research; and (c) the delimitation and legal certainty of the nominated property.

As a buffer zone, the State Party proposed a three-metre-wide band around the nominated property that it calls a "Preliminary Protection Strip." In additional information provided in November 2021, the State Party instead proposed a 43.8-hectare "initial protection zone" surrounding the nominated property. It contains an agroforestry zone of the Finca Santa Margarita, with rubber, coffee, cacao, sugar cane and three species of timber trees being the main crops. The State Party also proposed ten "protection islands" to be located throughout the 650-hectare archaeological site. No information on the exact extent of the "protection islands" or their selection was given.

The newly proposed "initial protection zone" has been defined using the northern limit of the Finca Santa Margarita, which surrounds the nominated area, as well as the natural environment with the geographical location between two rivers and the presence of streams and water sources as references. According to the State Party, the relevant owners have agreed to the proposal since national legislation protects the areas around water courses and thus limits the possible uses of the area. However, the State Party indicates that it might reduce the proposed area in the future, depending on the outcome of

negotiations with the new administration of the Finca Santa Margarita.

No additional information has been provided about the extent or delimitation of the "protection islands." It was indicated, however, that a distinction has to be made between "potential protection islands" (6) and "current protection islands" (3), the total number of proposed "islands" thus being reduced from ten to nine. Both the "protection islands" and the "initial protection zone" are still under discussion within the State Party and have no legal basis yet. The State Party mentions that the discussions will probably take at least two more years.

It should be noted that ICOMOS does not consider creating "Protection Islands" to be an appropriate way of adding more elements to the nominated property. If there is a desire to reinforce the protection of these elements without including them in the arguments supporting the proposed Outstanding Universal Value, they could be included in an appropriate buffer zone.

In its "Work Plan for Delimiting the Buffer Zone", the State Party indicates that the ultimate goal is to declare the remainder of the entire 650-hectare archaeological site outside the nominated property as a buffer zone.

In view of the potential for fragmentation of ownership of the land around the nominated property, it is especially important to define a functioning buffer zone that will provide an additional layer of protection for the nominated property and help avoid possible future land uses that are incompatible with the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. ICOMOS therefore considers that a buffer zone with complementary legal restrictions placed on its use and development should be put in place before a possible inscription of the nominated property on the World Heritage List, as outlined in paragraphs 103-107 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

Depending on the details concerning its establishment, the concept proposed as "initial protection zone" could function as buffer zone for the nominated property. However, ICOMOS recommends to pursue the goal of declaring the entire site outside the nominated area as buffer zone.

Evaluation of the proposed justification for inscription

In summary, ICOMOS considers that, despite weaknesses, the comparative analysis justifies consideration of this property for the World Heritage List. Criteria (ii) and (iii) are justified, but criteria (i), (iv) and (vi) have not been demonstrated. On the basis of the identified criteria, the conditions of authenticity and integrity for the nominated property have been met. The lack of a functional buffer zone is an issue that need to be addressed by the State Party.

4 Conservation measures and monitoring

Documentation

The archaeological site of Tak'alik Ab'aj has been known for over a hundred years, and has been intensely studied in the framework of the ongoing "National Project Abaj Takalik" (the site was originally called Abaj Takalik instead of Tak'alik Ab'aj), initiated in 1987 with a multidisciplinary team that now has about one hundred participants and is fully funded by the Ministry of Culture and Sports. The project maintains an on-site archive that contains the reports, maps, inventories and other documentation of the archaeological interventions. Furthermore, an effort has been made to gather in the archive all documentation generated previous to the beginning of the project. The flora and fauna existing at the archaeological site are inventoried by the Ecology Unit and the edible and medicinal plants are presented in an Archaeobotanical Garden.

This information provides the management team with excellent baseline data for all aspects of management, including monitoring and conservation as well as disaster prevention and recuperation.

In its Interim Report, ICOMOS requested additional information on future research activities, and the existence of a research plan or strategy. The State Party responded in February 2022 that a research plan exists. It highlights the importance of the connection between research and conservation, and names several research objectives linked to the justification for inscription of the nominated property. It remains unclear to what degree the research themes involve excavation in the nominated property or in the larger archaeological site.

Conservation measures

The nominated property's generally good state of conservation is due, at least in part, to the fact that investigation and conservation activities are planned and executed together by a multidisciplinary management team. Furthermore, the project has on-site laboratories and storage facilities. A preventative conservation programme and constant monitoring of the nominated property seem to have avoided serious problems.

The basic principle of the consolidation works is to restore the stability of a building or architectonic feature without changing its original design or condition. Reconstruction is applied only if necessary, and every restoration measure has to be reversible (the same principles are applied in the laboratory with the archaeological artefacts and materials). The materials employed are as close as possible to the original. The State Party indicates that five-percent cement is used to enhance the durability of the clay against weathering, but that the material has a texture and consistency very similar to the one used by the ancient builders. Before being applied to the archaeological remains, the materials are tested experimentally. Some of the monuments considered to be very fragile due to the clay building material (the ancient ball court, for example) have been excavated, documented and reinterred.

Some of the monuments included in the nominated property are covered with a roof *in situ*, or have been stored. In 2002, a selective replication programme for the sculptures was initiated. The original objects are presented in a more protected place or stored, while the replicas can be viewed on-site and used, for example, in modern ritual activities.

In the additional information submitted in February 2022, the State Party presented a Strategic Plan for the Conservation of the Outstanding Universal Value of the National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj. The plan details the general concepts of conservation at the archaeological site and mentions some of the measures taken for the conservation of monuments, structures, stelae, altars and canals. These include adding protective roofs, undertaking maintenance and establishing monitoring frequencies.

ICOMOS notes that no information has been provided on the status of the strategic conservation plan (such as its date of approval), and considers that it will be necessary to develop a more detailed and specific conservation plan that can be used as a guide for future work on the monuments. Furthermore, ICOMOS suggests that the possibility of improving the materials used in the protective outdoor roofs (recycled material or imitation palm leaves) should be explored by the State Party.

Monitoring

The State Party presents a list of more than twenty indicators and the periodicity of their inspection. The constant monitoring is described by the State Party as an essential part of the maintenance and continuous conservation programme, which provides the information (reports) for actions to be scheduled. The results of these proceedings are reflected in annual institutional reports. Also, on an annual basis, the National Archaeological Park staff asks for permission to review the known archaeological remains located on the privately-owned lands surrounding the nominated property.

The site's documentation centre is mentioned as the depository for collected information, but it is unclear how the data is collected and stored (such as in databases).

ICOMOS considers that the good state of conservation of the nominated property indicates a seamless functioning of the feedback processes between monitoring and maintenance/conservation. The abundant experience of the on-site site staff is also an important asset. However, several of the described indicators are, in fact, maintenance or administrative activities. While the periodicity and the findings reported during these activities can serve as indicators, it would be helpful to know what quantitative indicators are used to monitor in a comparable way the state of conservation of the buildings and carved stone monuments, for example, or the amount of annual earth movements in the reburied structures.

ICOMOS recommends creating more explicit links between the indicators, the attributes that support the proposed Outstanding Universal Value, and the known and potential threats to the nominated property.

ICOMOS considers that it would be advisable to further develop the conservation plan and the monitoring system to include quantitative data that helps define the state of conservation of all the attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value, as well as the factors affecting the nominated property, and to adapt the monitoring system for easy integration of its outcomes into the Periodic Reporting questionnaire.

5 Protection and management

Legal protection

In 1989, the National Council for Protected Areas declared Tak'alik Ab'aj an Area of Special Protection (Law Decree 4-89). In 2002, the entire 650-hectare archaeological site was declared National Cultural Heritage under the category of National Archaeological Park by the Ministry of Culture and Sports, due to its important archaeological, historical, artistic and cultural values (Ministerial Decree 528-2002).

ICOMOS notes that the use of the same name, "National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj", for both the entire archaeological site and for the nominated property has the potential to cause confusion and recommends revising the name.

Cultural heritage protected under the 2002 Decree may not be altered unless duly authorised by the General Directorate of Cultural and Natural Heritage. Furthermore, authorisation by the municipality is also necessary. The Decree also implies an obligation by the owner to protect and conserve the nominated property, and that any act that impairs the values of the property or affects their appreciation is prohibited.

The Political Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala, which establishes that archaeological monuments and relics are state property (Article 121), also supports conservation of the archaeological site and its surroundings. Due to the geographical location of the nominated property between two nearby rivers (Ixchiyá and Nimá), there is also a layer of environmental legal protection that focuses on forests and vegetation on the banks of rivers and lakes and near water sources (Political Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala, Article 126, and the Law for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment of Guatemala, Decree No. 68-86). Watersheds are also protected (Forestry Law and its regulations, Decree No. 101-96), and it is strictly prohibited to cut trees up to twenty-five metres from the banks of rivers, streams, lakes, lagoons and water sources (Decree No. 90-97, Health Code).

Two of the five privately-owned farms surrounding the nominated property, Finca Santa Margarita and Finca

Buenos Aires, are declared Private Natural Reserves. The Private Natural Reserves have their own conservation plans for their natural and cultural heritage, which contribute to the conservation and protection of the nominated property as well as the formation of natural corridors surrounding it. The remaining privately-owned properties are engaged in the process of being declared Private Natural Reserves.

An "alternative altars" programme and corresponding regulations were implemented in 1995 in order to provide Indigenous groups with adequate places for ceremonial rituals, as well as guidelines for cooperation concerning the site's conservation principles.

Further information was requested in December 2021 regarding the legal status of the "initial protection zone" and "protection islands" proposed by the State Party in November 2021. As mentioned above, the State Party responded that both concepts are still under discussion and as yet have no legal basis.

While it is indicated that the nominated property as well as the entire archaeological site are protected at the highest possible level, ICOMOS considers that further details are needed about the zoning that regulates present and future land uses in the archaeological site surrounding the nominated property. In additional information provided in November 2021, the State Party indicates that, while the relevant laws exist, the regulations that would allow their application are not in place.

Management system

Since its beginning in 1987, the National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj has been funded and managed by the Ministry of Culture and Sports through the Vice-Ministry and Head Office of Cultural and Natural Heritage/Institute of Anthropology and History. The local management structure of the National Archaeological Park is organised in two sections: the Technical Scientific Coordination, and the Technical Administrative Coordination. Together, these two sections have five technicians, two professionals and ninety local members on the operative staff.

Since 2011, the National Archaeological Park has developed and implemented five-year management plans to ensure long-term investigation, conservation, protection, outreach, operation and integrated management. The plans are framed in policies and in the context of broader plans such as the National Development Plan: K'atun, Nuestra Guatemala 2032, the Master Plan for Sustainable Tourism in Guatemala 2015-2025, and the Municipal Development and Territorial Management Plan 2019-2032.

The Municipal Development and Territorial Management Plan 2019-2032 stipulates that archaeological sites in the municipality are in the "protection and special use of the land" category, which allows investigation, conservation, and restoration of historical assets. It contemplates the conditional use of parks and ecological trails, low

environmental-impact tourism, recreational, cultural and sports activities according to the local cultural characteristics, small-scale commerce, and handicrafts. In this category of protected use, residential, industrial, educational and health facilities as well as liquid and solid waste treatment facilities are prohibited.

The current management plan (Management Plan for 2021-2025) details the management philosophy, strategic objectives and actions to be taken to maintain and improve management efficiency and achieve the established goals. These goals, along with actions, were developed by representatives of different management, operative, and technical units of the National Archaeological Park, with the guidance of an external consultant to foresee current and future needs.

The current management plan also includes a description of the regional context and the characteristics of the proposed area of the National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj, its zoning, carrying capacity, social inclusion and emerging projects, as well as information on the funding mechanisms. A meeting with key participants of the El Asintal municipality was held to validate the plan. ICOMOS considers the plan to be largely adequate, and highlights the very extensive experience of the managing staff. However, while the plan mentions the nominated property's proposed Outstanding Universal Value, the connection between it and the management goals is not very clear.

No direct references are made in the management plan to the use of Heritage Impact Assessment processes. ICOMOS notes that Heritage Impact Assessments are a pre-requisite for any development projects and activities that are planned for implementation within or around the nominated property, as is required under paragraph 118bis of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

In its Interim Report, ICOMOS requested additional information on a risk management plan, which the State Party had announced for early 2022. In the additional information submitted in February 2022 the State Party included the Integrated Risk Management Plan for the National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj. The plan specifies objectives and a methodology, and details a long list of actions. The list is divided in three priority levels and addresses seventeen different threats. While the plan covers a wide range of risks, ICOMOS considers that the document needs to be more practical in order to be a useful tool. The State Party did not indicate whether the plan was in preparation, or approved.

The State Party proposes the creation of a non-governmental organisation as a cultural association or foundation to strengthen the involvement of the population in support of the National Archaeological Park.

Today, the National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj is an operative programme of the Guatemalan Government, and as such is granted an annual budget not less than the

last assigned budget investment. In addition, the future investment planned for completion of the site museum is about US\$1.925 million. The State Party indicates it is considering creating an independent accounting competency to minimise exposure to budget fragility and limited capacity for implementation.

ICOMOS considers that the management system and plan are generally adequate. The requirement for Heritage Impact Assessments should be made more explicit, and more information is needed on the risk management plan and the proposed non-governmental organisation to strengthen the involvement of the population.

Visitor management

The nomination dossier discusses visitor management in some detail, including visitor facilities and infrastructure and policies and programmes related to the presentation and promotion of the nominated property.

Visits to the nominated property are highly controlled. Visitors are not allowed to tour it without being accompanied by officially recognised guides, and they are prohibited from climbing elevated structures or entering areas where restoration or excavation work is ongoing. ICOMOS notes the need to improve the security measures around open excavations.

In charge of visitor-related activities at the nominated property are the Infrastructure Unit (six collaborators) and the Guardians, Guides and Entrance Fee Collection Unit (eighteen collaborators). The archaeological park offers visitor facilities such as restrooms, cafeteria and a handicraft shop, and there is a continual training programme for guards and guides in order to ensure that the visitors receive the best possible information during their visits. The Regulation of behaviour for visitors to archaeological sites and national parks under the administration of the Ministry of Culture and Sports was approved in 2012 (Ministerial Decree No. 1171-2012), and offers a basis to control visitors to the site.

Visitors to the National Archaeological Park can find twenty-four strategically located interpretive maps and two scale models of the entire archaeological site. Additionally, visitors have access to a temporary archaeological exhibition on-site and are offered printed information and booklets. The Tak'alik Ab'aj "El Caracol del Tiempo" ("The Snail of Time") José Luis Balda González site museum has been under construction since 2007. The State Party provided additional information in February 2022 on the time-frame of the museum construction, its design and layout, and the selection of the building site. The museum once completed will include four exhibition halls, a sculpture room, a souvenir shop, a cafeteria, a conference room, two study halls, storage areas, and a conservation area, among others. No documentation centre or laboratories are included. For that reason, the existing installations will continue in use. ICOMOS recommends that visitor management tools

should be updated to include references to the new museum.

Indigenous communities represent an important group of visitors, the predominant cultural and linguistic groups being K'iche', Mam, Kaqchikel and Tz'utujil, who perform rituals at the Archaeological National Park. An average of 250 ceremonies are held annually, with the participation of more than 1,760 people.

The National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj received the highest category of *Sello Q Verde* (Green Q Seal) certification in 2017 under the Tourism Quality and Sustainability certifications programme of the Guatemalan Institute of Tourism. It has since served as an example for other parks and natural areas.

Community involvement

The State Party does not address community involvement in detail, but does mention that representatives of the National Archaeological Park held a meeting with key participants of the El Asintal municipality to validate the management plan. There is also mention of community workshops held with Indigenous participation, focused on the World Heritage nomination. There may be a further need for communication and the possibility of more active community participation.

The ritual activities of the Indigenous community at the site are protected by Ministerial Decrees 981-2011 and 1171-2012, issued by the Ministry of Culture and Sports. The Decrees grant the right to spiritual guides (Ajq'ijab') to access the archaeological site, individually or accompanied by a group of people who practice ancestral spirituality, recognising it as a Sacred Place of the local Indigenous communities, thus providing traditional protection of the site. The Decrees also guarantee the respectful behaviour of visitors to the site in relation to the activities carried out by Indigenous communities. These Decrees make some degree of community involvement or consultation probable, and ICOMOS is not aware of any conflicts with the traditional communities.

Concerning the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous communities, as is prescribed in paragraph 123 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, additional information provided by the State Party in November 2021 advises that two phases of socialisation activities have been held, in 2014 and 2020. In the framework of these activities, workshops were held and opinion polls for visitors were carried out. As a result, there are signed letters of free, prior and informed consent by representatives of local communities, representatives of the central and municipal government, and members of civil society. A 2021 survey carried out for the Mayan Spiritual Guides indicates a general feeling of acceptance towards the possible inscription of the nominated property on the World Heritage List.

The private owners of the lands surrounding the nominated property also appear to be generally

supportive, having granted access to their lands for monitoring activities. However, they have not expressed an interest in having their lands included within a buffer zone that has land use restrictions. The discussions with the owners are described as complicated and ongoing.

Effectiveness of the protection and management of the nominated property

In summary, ICOMOS recognises that the nominated property is protected at the highest level of national legislation but considers that further details are needed about the regulation of present and future land uses, especially in the area around the nominated property, and that the regulations that will allow application of the relevant laws need to be created. ICOMOS considers that the system and management plan are adequate. However, more information is needed on the newly proposed non-governmental organisation to strengthen the involvement of the population and the independent accounting agency. Risk management and conservation need to be addressed in a more specific and practical manner than in the very general plans presented in the February 2022 additional information. Finally, mechanisms for Heritage Impact Assessments need to be included in the management system.

6 Conclusion

ICOMOS considers that the most remarkable aspect of Tak'alik Ab'aj is the variety of sculpture styles that document in great detail the transition from the Olmec civilisation to the emergence of Early Mayan culture. Also of interest is the nominated property's participation in a wide-ranging trade network through which many of the materials and ideas that now define Mesoamerican culture travelled. The nominated property also shows manifestations of urban planning that include water management, cosmological precepts and astronomical orientations.

The continuous investigation and documentation of the archaeological record at the site for more than three decades has provided a solid basis for conserving and managing the nominated property. The good state of conservation is a result of this commendable work.

ICOMOS acknowledges that National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj has the potential to justify Outstanding Universal Value on the basis of criteria (ii) and (iii).

ICOMOS nevertheless considers that additional work is required to address a number of significant concerns.

The lack of an effective buffer zone with clear and effective land-use zoning around the nominated property is the main concern, as well as the missing regulations that make application of existing legislation to protect the archaeological site surrounding the nominated property difficult. While management of the site seems generally adequate, several of the management tools (visitor and conservation plans and a risk management plan, for

example) in their present state do not seem to reflect the experience accumulated at the nominated property, nor offer sufficient guidance for future action at the nominated property. Furthermore, quantifiable monitoring indicators need to be adopted, all of which need to be related to the attributes that support the proposed Outstanding Universal Value.

7 Recommendations

Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the nomination of the National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj, Guatemala, be **referred back** to the State Party to allow it to:

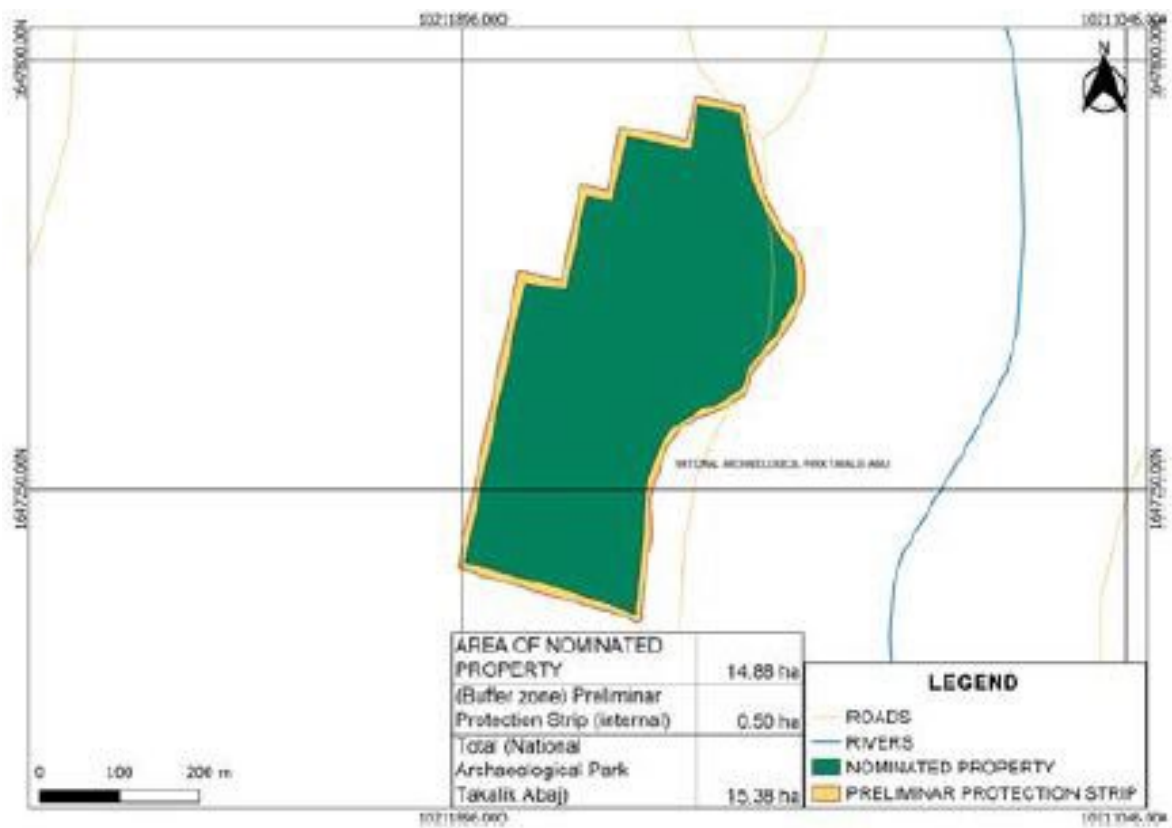
- Analyse the limitations of the legal protection of the nominated property and the surrounding archaeological site caused by the lack of regulations that allow the application of the relevant laws, and put in place these regulations;
- Establish a buffer zone that effectively reduces the threat of land-use in the areas surrounding the nominated property that could affect the property's proposed Outstanding Universal Value in a negative manner and meets the requirements outlined in paragraphs 103-107 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*;
- Define the exact location and extension of the "protection islands", as well as the permitted land-uses and their legal status, and consider their inclusion within the boundaries of the buffer zone;
- Update the management plan to include a practical risk management plan, a visitor management plan and a detailed conservation plan aligned with the research framework, all aimed at sustaining the proposed Outstanding Universal Value of the nominated property, and make more explicit the connection between the management goals and the proposed Outstanding Universal Value;
- Ensure Heritage Impact Assessments are included in the management processes and are undertaken as a pre-requisite for any development projects and activities that are planned for implementation within or around the nominated property, as is required under paragraph 118bis of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*;
- Further include local and Indigenous communities in decision-making processes for the nominated property.

ICOMOS further recommends that the name of the nominated property be changed in order to facilitate the differentiation between the nominated property and the entire archaeological site.

Additional recommendations

ICOMOS further recommends that the State Party give consideration to the following:

- a) Developing quantifiable monitoring indicators that measure the state of conservation of all the attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value, and that take into account the factors affecting the nominated property,
- b) Addressing the potential fire hazard at the current storage and archive installations,
- c) Establishing an independent accounting competency to minimise exposure to budget fragility and limited capacity for implementation,
- d) Further exploring the creation of a non-governmental organisation to strengthen the involvement of the population,
- e) Revising the roofing solutions for the protected elements on-site in order to evaluate their effectiveness and visual impact,
- f) Improving security measures around open excavations;



Map showing the boundaries of the nominated property