

## WALLED COMPOUNDS: AN INTERPRETATION OF THE DEFENSIVE SYSTEM AT CHICHEN ITZA, YUCATAN

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During the Terminal Classic and the Early Postclassic periods, Chichen Itza was quickly transformed into a great economic, political and religious power, having achieved as well a remarkable military development that allowed them to dominate important cities of the Puuc and others, and to control most of the Northern Lowlands of the Yucatan peninsula.

Chichen Itza is located in the central area of the northern portion of the Yucatan peninsula, 120 km away from Merida and 35 km away from Valladolid. It is less than 20 km away from Yaxuna, the terminal point of the grand *sacbe* that connects this major center with the city of Coba, near the Caribbean coast (Schmidt 1981). At the time of its maximum splendour, the city involved an approximate surface of 25 to 30 km<sup>2</sup>, making it possible to presume the existence of 30 thousand or more inhabitants organized under a highly sophisticated political and religious system. The settlement core extends some 800 m from north to south, and 550 m from east to west, although the occurrence of vestiges ramifies much beyond these borders.

This is observed in all of its buildings, now ruined, where the residents left behind traces of their past. In addition, there are several texts from the XVI and XVII centuries written in Maya language with known Latin characters, like the “Chilam Balam”, which narrate historic events that apparently took place before the Spanish arrival, the Chumayel being the most important of them (Mediz Bolio 1930; León Portilla 1991). A different source is “La Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán”, written by Friar Diego de Landa, a work considered crucial for the knowledge of Maya civilization (Landa 1983). This list should also include the “Relaciones Histórico-Geográficas de la Gobernación de Yucatán”, whose elaboration was ordered by King Philip II of Spain, who wanted to learn more about the dimensions of his kingdom (De la Garza 1983).

This work presents some partial results obtained during the field seasons conducted at Chichen Itza in recent years.

Throughout this timeframe, several previous concepts about Chichen Itza, made known in a large number of works published after the Carnegie Institution completed the works directed by Sylvanus G. Morley in 1935, were redefined. Although these publications are and will always be the basis for all archaeological

works conducted at Chichen Itza, we must not forget that 68 years have passed, and many of the objectives pursued at that time have changed, although the main one has persisted, which is the will of achieving a comprehensive panorama of Chichen Itza's history.

Chichen Itza has been considered one of the most important sites in the north portion of the peninsula, while the influence it has cast on the entire region has also been recognized. Since the second quarter of the XIX century, a large number of amateurs and professional archaeologists have devoted themselves to the study of the amazing ruins located at the core of the ancient city (Stephens 1997; Charnay 1992, 1994; Desmond 1989; Le Plongeon 2001; Maudslay 1974; Maler 1895; Holmes 1895; Seler 1915; E. Thompson 1914; Morley 1925, 1972; Schmidt and González 2002).

Since 1993, Chichen Itza has been the subject of intense research activities, accomplished by the Chichen Itza Archaeological Project, headed by Peter J. Schmidt, with achievements that are expressed in the evident complexity and monumentality involved in the construction of the excavated and consolidated buildings, in the proliferation of reliefs, sculptures and other paraphernalia associated with the fine arts that are still being revealed through these exploring efforts (Osorio León 2004).

## **ARCHITECTURAL GROUPS**

At Chichen Itza, the concept of "group" is the one commonly used: Group of the Castle, Group of the Thousand Columns, Group of the Ossuary, Group of the Nuns, etc. In order to define this term and to apply it correctly, we have conducted minute analyses of several common characteristics present in each one of them: the space with or without an artificial foundation that is delimited by a wall and communicated with the outside through *sacbeob* or causeways that end in gates built to provide access to the inside of the groups. At times, there is also a small structure that functions like an outpost, to check the entrance to the inner area.

Inside these groups there are temples, palaces, altars and residential areas, Ballgames, sweat baths, colonnades and patio-galleries that often times form plazas with different levels.

Many of the groups documented during the exploration works feature these characteristics. The groups already known were re-explored with a new perspective (Pérez Ruiz, 2003).

Given the significance of applying this notion, a more detailed study of each one of the groups was proposed, to create a detailed record capable of reflecting the extension and distribution of the buildings, so as to help us understand the vastness of Chichen Itza.

## THE CAUSEWAYS

In the Maya area, the *sacbeob* played a major role, as they were used to connect, from the social, political, religious and economical point of view, the large population centers, as well as the small communities that depended on such ruling cores. Along these causeways, goods and construction materials were transported, and pilgrims and traders were able to come and go.

The *sacbeob* are also status markers among the upper social classes, as they were the only ones who could afford roads to connect their residential groups, through these main causeways, with the population centers.

The exploration of the *sacbeob* at Chichen Itza has revealed the complexity of this great metropolis, and the strict internal political control that existed through this sophisticated network, one that extended in a concentrated manner all across the site (Pérez Ruiz 2001).

The documentation of these roads has grown with years of work, and it is now possible to define some characteristics that are common to each one of them. For example, it was possible to separate the local and regional *sacbeob* by applying the same criteria that were established and defined in the past by other researchers (Benavídes 1976:144). The *sacbeob* known as local, were used for internal communication among the groups located close to the Great Leveling, while the regional *sacbeob* connected the groups that were farther away from the center.

The fact that all the main causeways led directly or indirectly to the center of Chichen Itza has encouraged a more in-depth study of this area, integrated by the Group of the Castle and the Group of the Thousand Columns, both built on top of the Great Leveling.

Of the many *sacbeob* now documented (to this day, over 80 causeways distributed throughout the area), we can state for sure that only nine of them reached the two main groups of the site: *Sacbeob* 1, 2, 5, 6, 10, 31, 32, 49, 58, and 74.

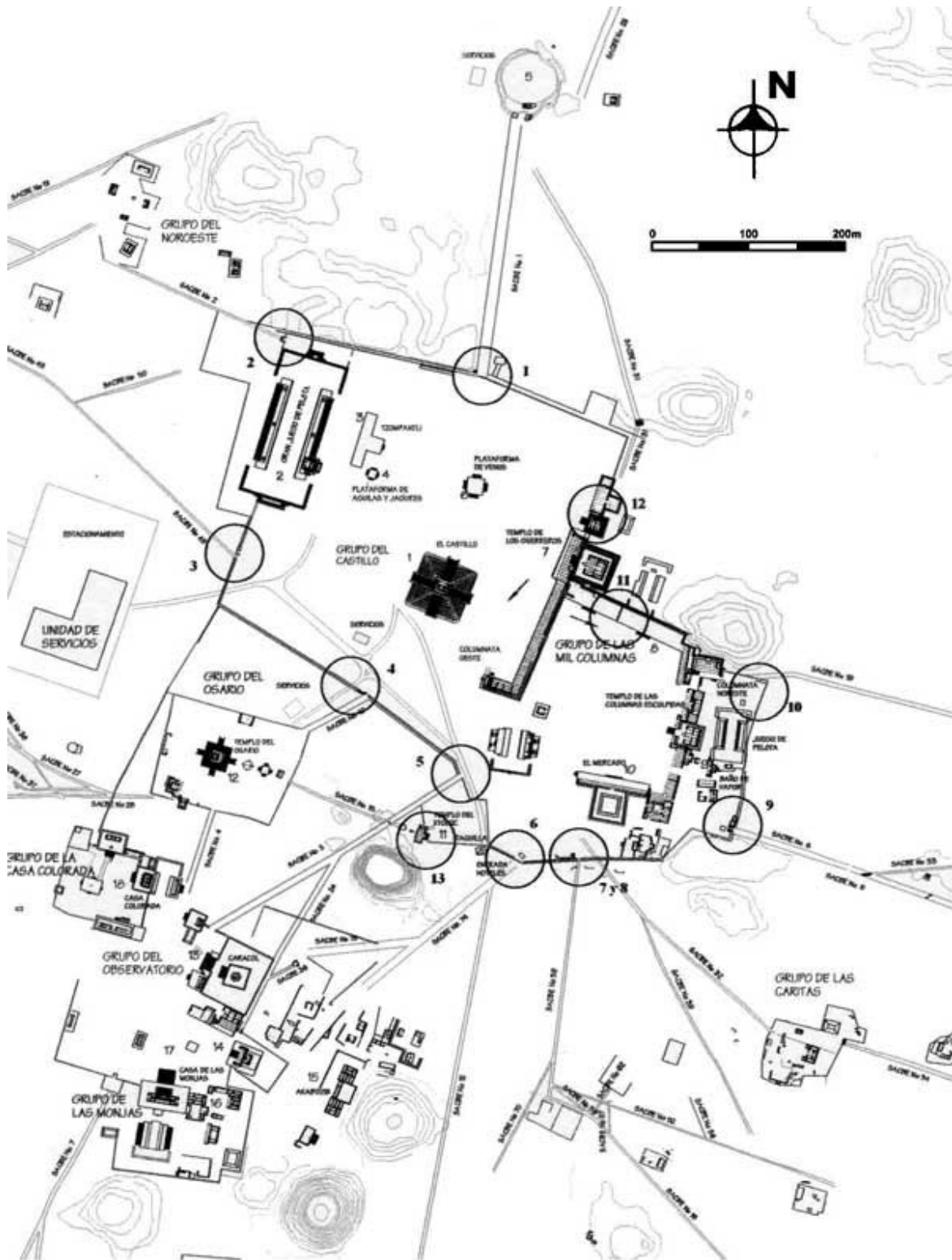


Figure 1. General plan of the Chichen Itza center, showing with a circle the location of the thirteen accesses that led to the Great Leveling.

### THE GREAT LEVELLING

The Great Leveling is surrounded by a wall of 0.60 m to 0.70 m wide, 1.50 to 2 m high, and 2060 m long. To enclosing the perimeter outlined by this wall, it was reinforced from the outside with an aggregate, 1.15 m wide. It is very probable

that the height of the wall was increased with the help of some palisade, to a height of 3 m (Figure 1).

## **THE ACCESS GATES**

Right at the point of arrival of the *sacbeob*, there were very well defined gates, with average bay dimensions of 2.50 m for the narrowest one, to 8 m for the widest one, providing access to the two main groups. Those accesses were numbered from 1 to 13, following a counter clock-wise order, for an easier identification (Figure 1).

This work will not refer to Accesses 8, 10, 11, and 13, as they are still in the process of investigation.

Another characteristic of these accesses to the causeways are a number of associated structures, which may have been outposts for control and surveillance of what was taking place at the inside. These structures feature very different shapes and dimensions.

### **ACCESS 1**

The north gate has a doorway 8 m wide and 0.70 m thick, and the access was blocked with a masonry wall made with reused stones. On the west side there is a stairway, right in the junction of the road and the Great Leveling, that allows for descending from the *sacbe* and from the leveling to the original height of the terrain.

At a distance of 25 m from the access to the wall, there is Structure 2D13, of the colonnade type, 20 m long and 4 m wide, with 14 columns that once supported a perishable roof.

At the center of this construction there is one door with 1 m bay that communicates the interior of the structure with the exterior corridor that surrounds the Great Leveling; on the eastern wall there are several stones in the form of steps to compensate the height of the wall; at the outside of this side, there is a structure, a possible altar, that communicates with the leveling through another small road.

*Sacbe* 1 begins in this access, and heads to the Sacred Cenote. It is located at the north side of the Great Leveling, with dimensions of 8 m in width and 350 m in length; its retaining walls are sloped and were built with carefully faced stones, with a height that varied according to the characteristics of the terrain, from 2.40 m at the beginning of the route to the Sacred Cenote, to 50 cm in its ending portion. On the two lateral edges there were walls 0.70 m wide along its entire extension to the causeway (Figure 2).

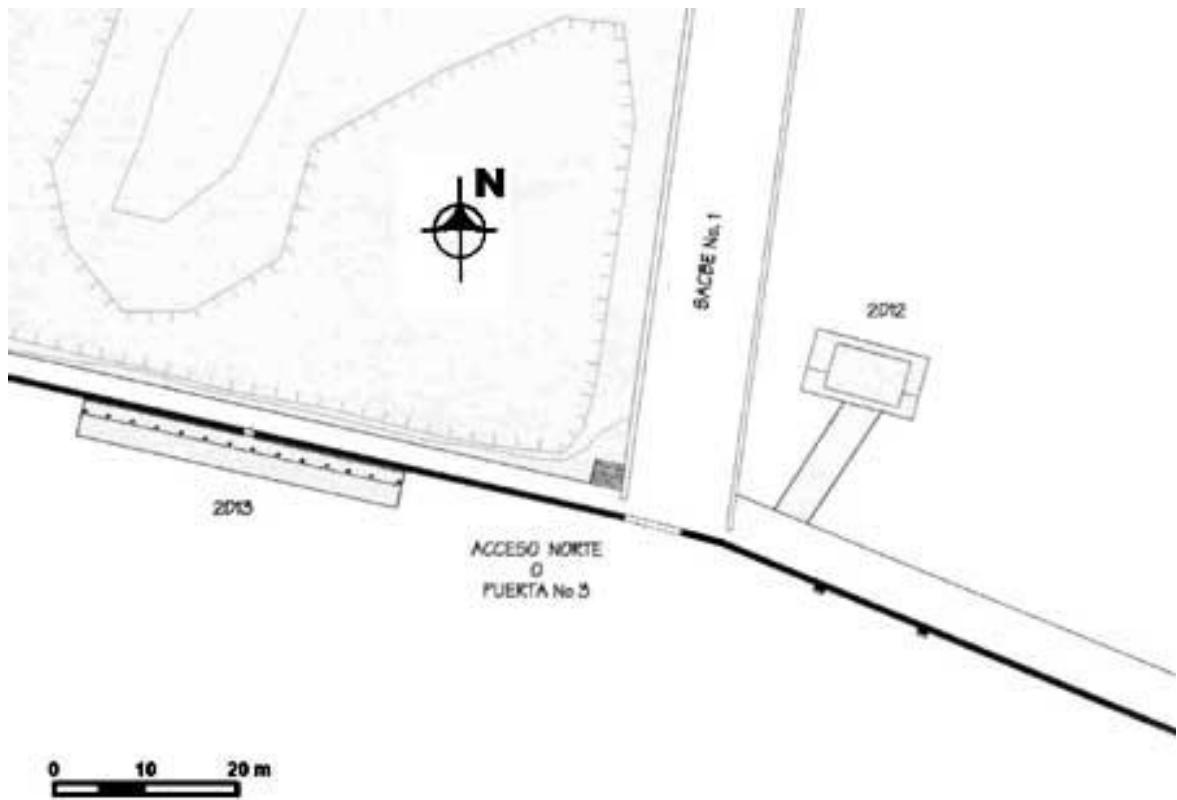


Figure 2. Access 1, showing the annexed Structure 2D13 and the wall blocking the access through Sacbe 2.

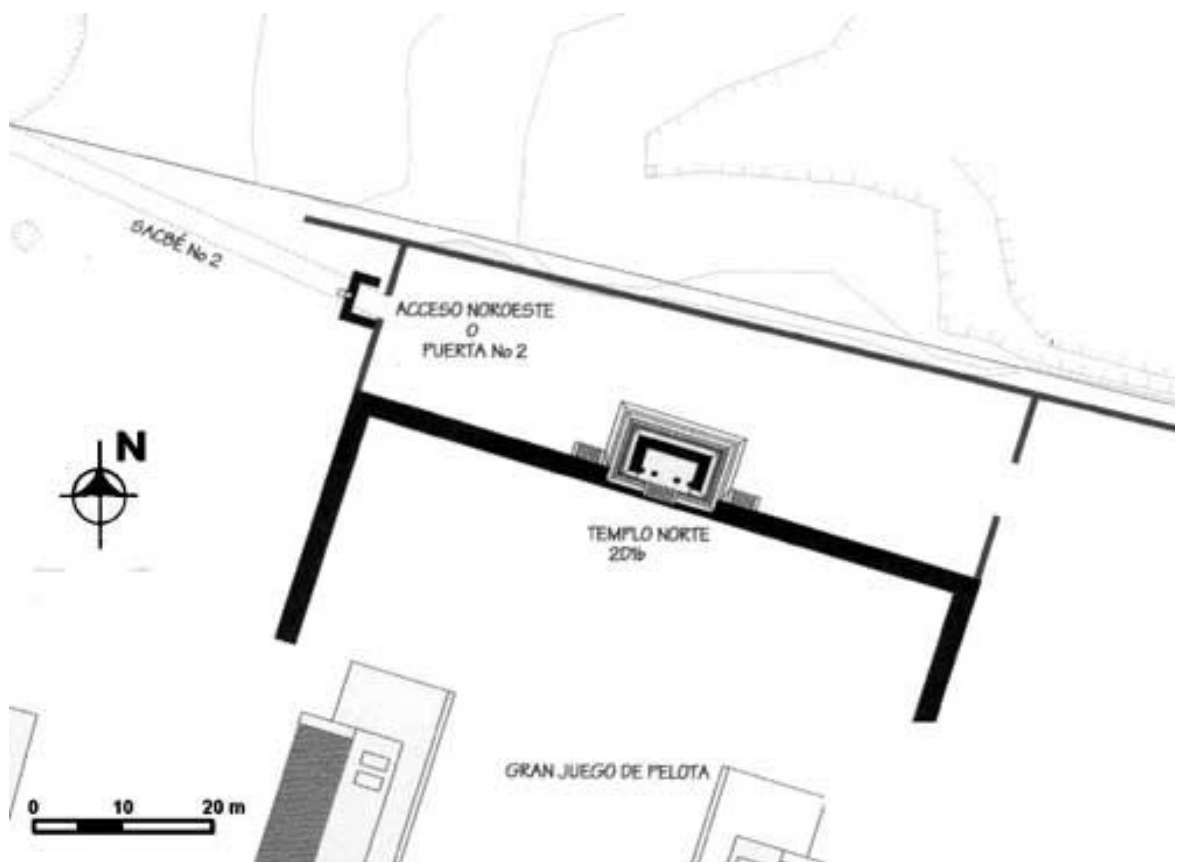


Figure 3. Access 2, showing the annexed Structure 2D13 and the wall blocking the access through Sacbe 2.

## **ACCESS 2**

The gate is located north of the Grand Ballgame, with a 3 m bay and a width of 80 cm. This access, as well as Door 1, was blocked to obstruct the access through the *sacbe*, though in this case a parapet was built in the form of a “C”, with 1.20 m in width on the three sides, with a small access bay of 1 m on the north side. It has an average height of 1 m and 1.50 m, and presents a large serpent head that was placed on the outer side of the parapet.

Interestingly, this access presents a second access more to the east, creating an enclosed area 68 m long and 16 m wide, the limits of which have not been defined so far.

This door provides access to *Sacbe 2*, which communicates the Grand Leveling with the Northwest Group. The dimensions of *Sacbe 2* are of 3 m in width and 250 m in length; the retaining walls are sloped and were built with finely carved stones (Figure 3).

## **ACCESS 3**

This door provides access to *Sacbe 49*, located west of the Grand Leveling. We do not know much about this door, as it was destroyed at the time of building the ancient road that connected Merida with Puerto Juarez back in the 1950's, but we do have a description and a drawing made by Alberto Ruz (1951). In 1995, Peter Schmidt excavated the north side of the road, consolidated part of the wall, and made a thorough clearing of the remains located at the south of the road, making it possible to carry out a hypothetical reconstruction of the door (Figure 4).

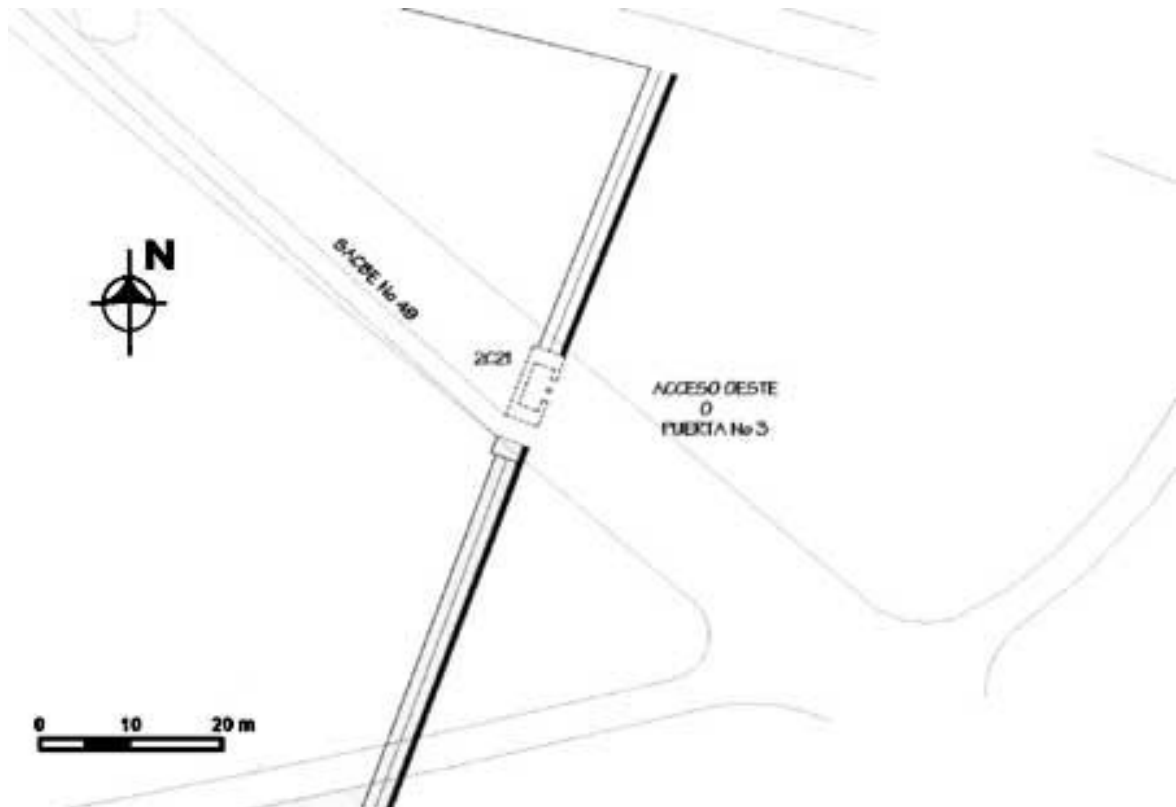


Figure 4. Access 3, hypothetical reconstruction as of the remains recovered during the excavation and restoration of the large wall.

#### ACCESS 4

This door provides access to *Sacbe* 10, which begins here. The door has an access with a 2.60 m bay, and two small masonry bodies lined with faced stones that functioned as jambs. It is associated with Structure 3D34, which still shows remains of the inner bench. The dimensions of this structure are of 10 m in length and 3 m in width, the *sacbe* is 6 m wide and 80 m long and communicates the Group of the Castle with the Group of the Ossuary; it has sloped retaining walls made with finely faced stones, and has walls on the edges, similar to those of *Sacbe* 1 (Figure 5).



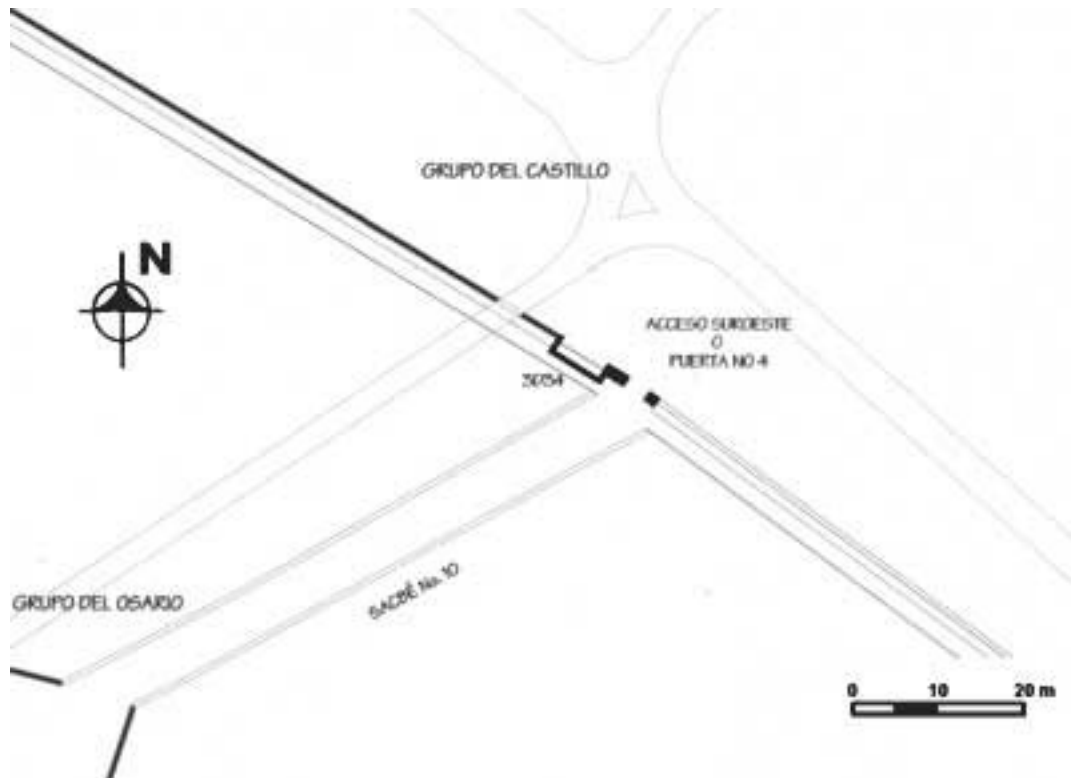


Figure 5. Access 4, entrance to *Sacbe* 10, originated in the Group of the Ossuary.

## ACCESS 5

This door provides access to *Sacbe* 5, which communicates the Grand Leveling with the plaza of the Observatory. Unfortunately, Door 5 was destroyed at the same time that Door 3; therefore, the only thing we have at hand is Alberto Ruz's comment (1951:334), stating that it was 5 m wide and was split in two separate spaces by a couple of columns that crossed the causeway at that point.

This *sacbe* is 6 m wide and 2.97 m long. It presents a crossroad with *Sacbe* 15, which originates in the Group of the Ossuary and heads towards the Xtoloc Cenote; at the crossroad there was a paving made with finely faced stones, the retaining walls were sloped, and it also had walls in the lateral edges, alike *Sacbeob* 1 and 10. As a primary characteristic, it has a drainage feature with an entrance located in the upper part, on top of the *Sacbe* (Figure 7).

## ACCESS 6

This door provides access to *Sacbe* 74, which begins in this door and joins together the Great Leveling and the Group of the Sculpted Panels; 159 m away, it splits into three, forming *Sacbeob* 75, 5, and 76 (Figure 8).

## **ACCESS 7**

This door provides access to *Sacbe* 58, which heads to the Group of the Jaguar. Structure D33, 20 m long and 4 m wide, is associated with this access, and apparently, it had columns that once supported a perishable roof. The access bay is 2.50 m wide, and walls are 0.70 m thick. The *sacbe* is 3 m wide and 300 m long, it has sloping walls and it features a small stairway with three steps (Figure 8).

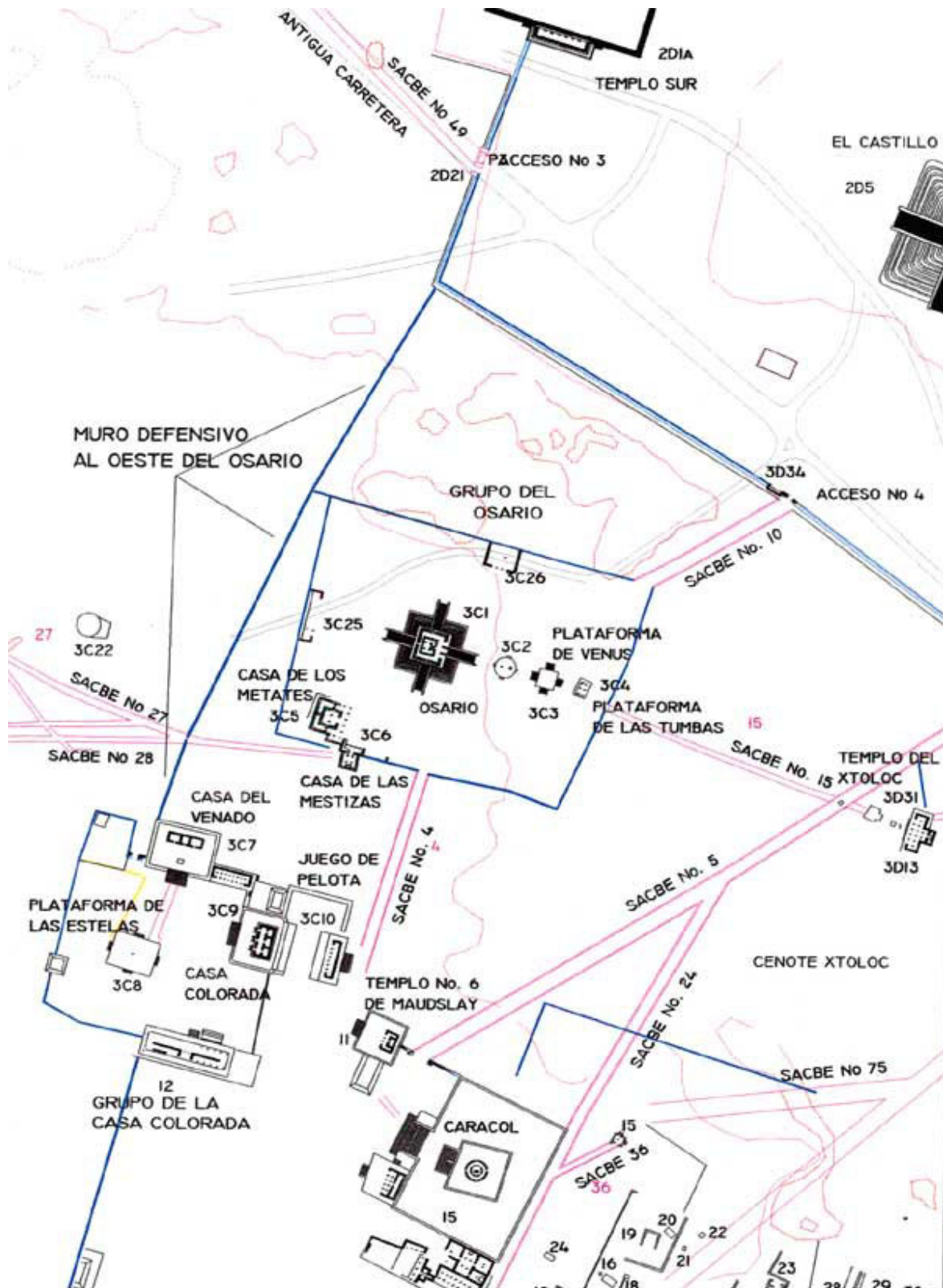


Figure 6. The Group of the Ossuary, showing the defensive wall at the west side of the group, and the access built at the intersection of Sacbeob 27 and 28.

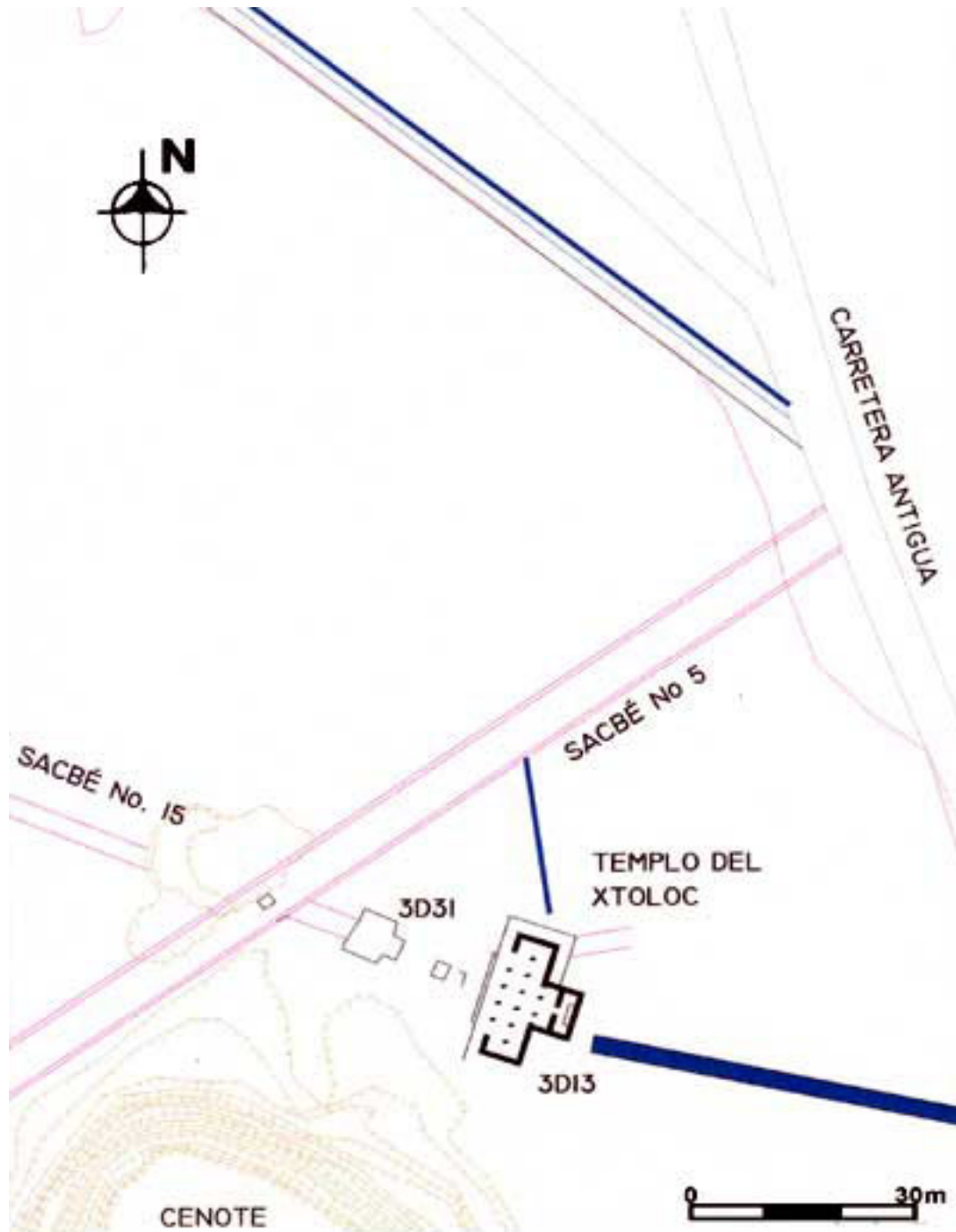


Figure 7. Access 5; this entrance was destroyed during the construction of the road back in the 1950's.

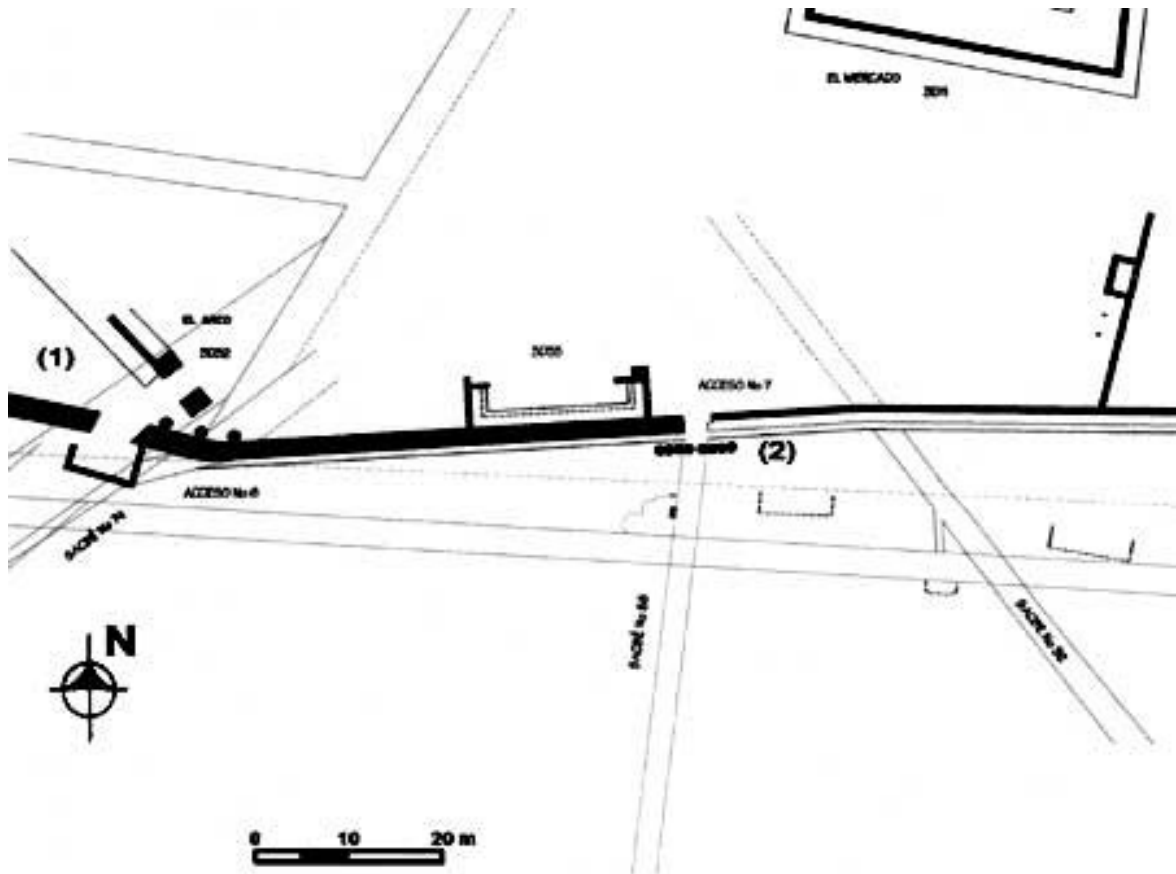


Figure 8. Accesses 6 and 7: 1) showing the “C”-shaped parapet that blocked the access through *Sacbe* 74, and also showing the columns used as steps to watch from the wall; 2) showing the columns that blocked Access 7 through *Sacbe* 58.

## ACCESS 9

This door provides access to *Sacbe* 6, and consists of two masonry bodies lined with finely faced stones; it is associated with Structure 3E16, integrated by two rooms internally communicated. The *sacbe* is 6 m wide and 254 long, and connects the Grand Leveling, from the Group of the Thousand Columns, with the nearby East Group, or Group of the Vaults. The retaining walls of the *sacbe* are also sloped (Figure 9).

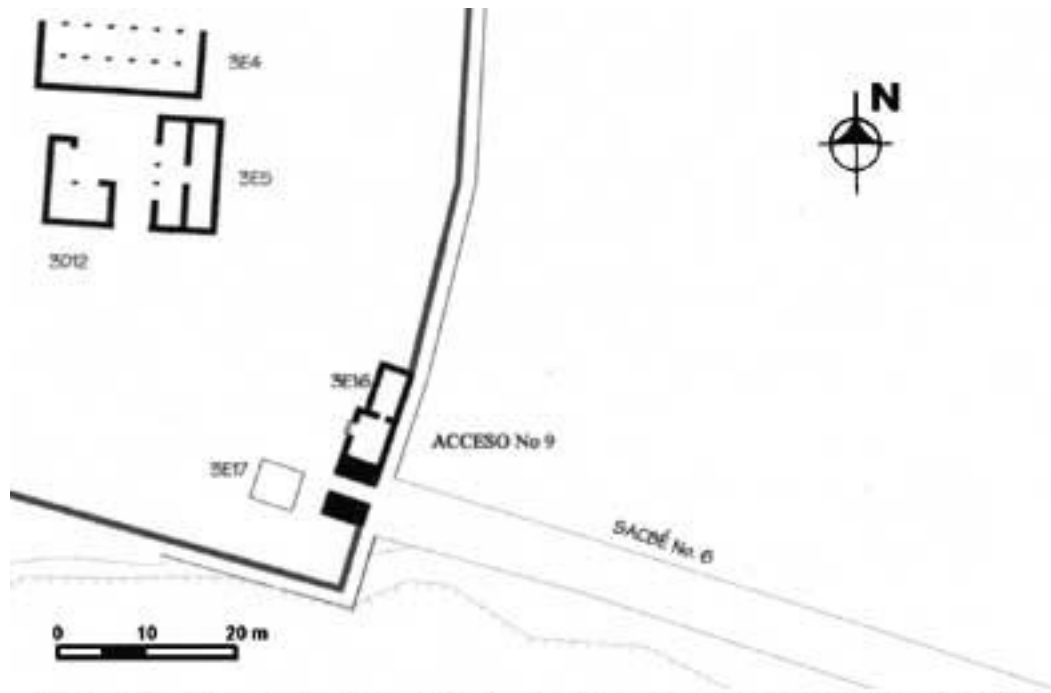


Figure 9. Access 9, showing the surveillance structure and the two bodies that lead to *Sacbe* 6.

## ACCESS 12

This door provides access to *Sacbe* 31, located on the northeast side of the Plaza of the Castle. This door was found during the excavation and consolidation works on Structures 2D6 and 2D7 or Temple of the Large Tables. *Sacbe* 31 heads from this place towards the Sacred Cenote, and it presents in the depression of the terrace, a stairway that compensates the height with respect to the foundation of the Great Leveling (Figure 10).

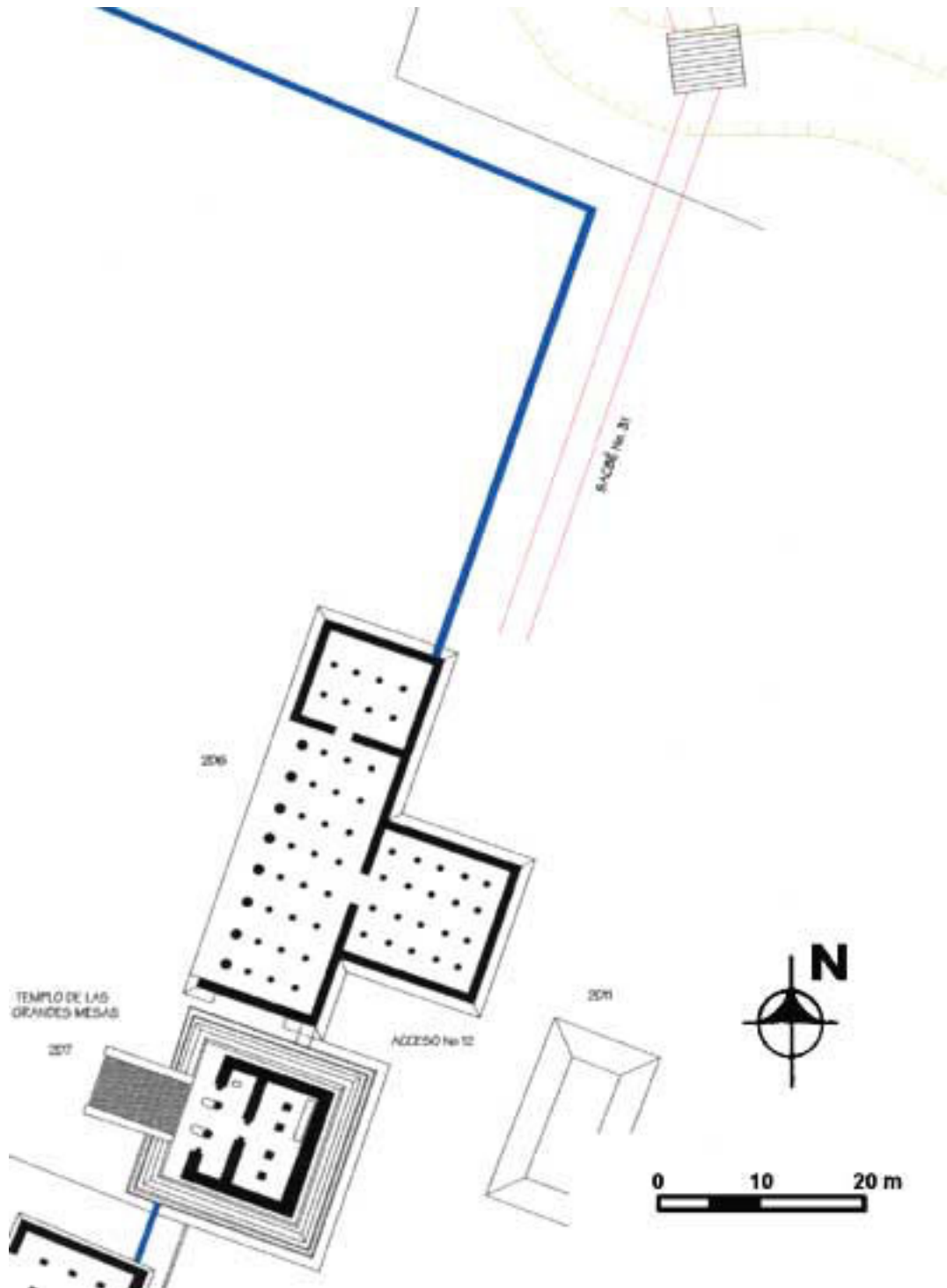


Figure 10. Access 12, showing the corridor that provides access to the Great Leveling, from *Sacbe 31*.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented in this work would allow us to infer that apparently, at a certain time, the residents of Chichen Itza faced the need to block their accesses with defensive purposes, mainly in the more vulnerable areas, in this case, those places with an easy access to the central area (Figure 6). If, in fact, there was a

war, the residents expected a hit against their main political, economical and religious center, and therefore, built the defensive structures necessary to repel their enemies. Chichen Itza has no wall for the protection of the entire city, but instead, it has independent large walls that protect each particular civic and religious group, as well as the residential ones. We already know that the defensive constructions failed, as they were the ones who lost the war, according to the Chilam Balam de Chumayel (Barrera 1984).

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- Figure 4 Access 3, hypothetical reconstruction as of the remains recovered during the excavation and restoration of the large wall.
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