REPORT: MACROBOTANICAL ANALYSIS OF FLOTATION SAMPLES FROM THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR, MACHUPICCHU

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Introduction

Between October 1995 and December 1996, Lcda. Elva Torres Piño of the Instituto Nacional de Cultura (I.N.C.), Cuzco, Perú collected and floated 46 soil samples from excavations she was supervising at the Inca archaeological site of Machu Picchu (Figure 1). These samples, excavated from 14 units located in three different sectors, were the first soil samples ever collected from this world-renowned site for the purpose of conducting an archaeobotanical analysis. In addition to the samples sent to our lab for macrobotanical analysis in 1999, Ms. Torres also collected samples for isotope, pollen, and soil chemistry assays — these last two in conjunction with the Wright Paleohydrological Institute of Denver, CO (Wright, et al. 1999 and 2000). The overall goals of the project were to:

- Investigate the sophisticated Inca agricultural system by examining the use, structure, and function of the complex of terraces and canals that sculpt the hill and mountain slopes surrounding Machu Picchu.
- Address what crops, and in what quantities, the Incas might have grown on these terraces by employing botanical and soil analyses (Torres Piño 1996:1).

In fall 2000, I began the sorting, identification, and analysis of the 46 light fraction² flotation samples collected by Ms. Torres. The analysis concluded in spring 2001. I specifically hoped to address the following questions:

- 1) What types of crops were grown on the terraces?
- 2) Are there detectable spatial distribution patterns of plant taxa across the site?

Before presenting my results and interpretations, I will briefly describe the site, the location of the excavation units, and the field and laboratory methodologies. Figures and raw data tables are appended at the end of this report.

¹ Flotation is the process of submerging and agitating soil samples in water so that carbonized plant remains 'float' to the top of the flotation machine where they can then be collected for archaeobotanical analysis. Carbonized plant remains are generally too small to be spotted by the naked eye during the course of excavation.

² During the course of flotation heavier items sink to the bottom of a mesh lined bucket that sits inside the flotation tank while lighter items, such as carbonized seeds and wood fragments, float to the top. These lighter items, which are collected and analyzed separately, are known as the light fraction.

Site Background

Machu Picchu, the royal estate of the Inca ruler Pachacuti, was occupied sometime between 1450 and 1540 A.D. The permanent population only numbered 300 or so inhabitants, but could have reached around 1000 inhabitants when the Inca ruler was in residence (Rowe 1990). Today the site which is located in the district of Machupicchu, province of Urubamba, department of Cuzco, is Peru's most visited tourist attraction and a strong symbol of cultural pride.

The site was first described to the Western world by the American explorer and archaeologist

Hiram Bingham who visited the site in 1911. Since the 'discovery' of Machu Picchu, numerous

archaeologists, notably Bingham and the resident archaeologists from the I.N.C., have conducted excavation
and restoration work at the central core of site, as well as mapping and recording the many surrounding sites
that comprise the way stations of the Inca trail. Most of this archaeological work has centered on
documenting the impressive architectural remains.

It wasn't until 1974 that the 'Agricultural Sectors' of the site, with their remarkable terracing and irrigation, received any archaeological attention. Arminda Gibaja of the Cuzco I.N.C. recorded 60 terraces, both rectangular and semi-circular in form, that were beautifully adapted to the topography of the place. She and Alfredo Valencia estimated that the cultivable area of Machu Picchu totaled some 44,913 m2 (Torres Piño 1996:2). As to what plants, if any, were grown on these terraces, researchers could only guess.

Located 13 degrees south of the equator on a high mountain ridge overlooking a cloud rain forest, Machu Picchu is surrounded by remarkable ecological diversity. It sits at an elevation of 2,438 m. above sea level and is characterized by a mild, temperate climate. Both the lowland jungle and the highland puna are only a day's walk away to the east and to the west. Galiano and Nuñez have recorded more than 2700 plant species -- most famously 190 different species of orchids -- within the sanctuary of Machu Picchu (Galiano 2000). While this makes for a breathtaking landscape, it also complicates the process of macrobotanical identification as discussed later in the report.

Proveniences of Samples

Torres collected the 46 soil samples from 14 two by two meter excavation units in three different sectors of the site. Units 1,2, 3, and 4 were located in the upper part of sector I (zona Agrícola), bordered to the north by the terrace associated with the "Guard's House" and to the west by two terraces in the area known as the cemetery. Unit 5 was located in the lower part of sector I on the second to last terrace. Units 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 13 were located in sector II, sub-sector B (zona Urbano, parte baja). Finally, units 14, 15, and 16 were located in the principal plaza, in sector V (Torres 1996:4-5). Unfortunately I don't have a map that pinpoints the unit locations.

Methods

Field methods

Samples of approximately 8 liters each were collected from every natural level (i.e. defined stratigraphically), and in those cases where natural levels were large enough to warrant further division, from arbitrary 10 cm. sub-levels as well. It is unclear whether or not the samples were collected as bulk or as scatter samples.

Samples were processed using a motorized flotation system, modified from the SMAP machine design described by Watson in 1976. Light fraction residues were bagged, labeled, and sent to our laboratory for analysis. The heavy fractions are currently being stored in the I.N.C. storehouse at Machu Picchu. As no poppy seed tests were run (see Wagner 1982, 1988) as a check on the functioning of the flotation machine, I cannot comment on the recovery rate for these samples.

Laboratory methods

Samples were first weighed (see Appendix 2 for weights). In order to facilitate sorting (it is easier to focus one's eyes on items of roughly the same size), samples were next passed through a series of 2mm, 1.18, and 0.5 mm geologic sieves. Using a low power stereoscopic microscope (6-25 X) lit by a fiber optic light source, I extracted all charred material larger than 0.5 mm from the samples. Because very small pieces of wood are too difficult to identify wood was not removed from the <2 mm fraction. Due to the small size of the samples, each sample was completely sorted. I identified items with the assistance of Dr. Hastorf's

modern and archaeological plant reference collections housed in the Paleoethnobotany Lab as well as referring to botany reference works such as Martin and Barkley's <u>Seed Identification Manual</u> (2000). Seeds I could not identify were examined by Dr. Hastorf, and in cases where no identification could be made, seeds were added to the Lab's unknown seed collection to await future identification. Taxon counts and weights of wood > 2 mm were entered onto standardized recording forms.

Quantification Methods

In order to analyze the plant taxa recovered from the samples, I entered taxa counts and wood weights into an Excell database and employed three different quantification schemes, density, ubiquity, and relative percentages, in order to present the results. **Density** is the number of seeds, or seed fragments, per liter of site matrix. If one had 25 *Chenopodium* spp. seeds in a 10 liter sample, the density of *Chenopodium* spp. would be 2.5 seeds per liter of matrix. Density measures standardized counts so that one can compare samples with different original volumes. Each taxon can also be considered independently (Pearsall 2000, Popper 1988). **Ubiquity** is calculated as the percentage of samples which contain each taxon (Popper 1988). Thus if one identified *Chenopodium* spp. 25 out of 50 samples, it would have a ubiquity of %50. One advantage of this method is that the amount of each taxon in a sample does not affect the ubiquity value. Finally, **relative percentages** state the percentage each taxon makes up relative to the number of items in an individual sample. All taxa can be viewed at once with this method (often in the form of a pie chart), and relative proportions of taxa from different units can be easily compared.

List of Plant Taxa

Plant remains were most often identified to the family level, occasionally to a broader category such as "Herbaceous Material", and even more occasionally to genus or species.

Lumps (unidentifiable charred plant fragments, potentially fragments of domesticates)
Parenchymous Tissue (likely fragments of tubers)
Tuber fragments
Domesticated Fabaceae
Wild Fabaceae
Chenopodium spp.
Zea mays kernels and cob fragments
Nutshell
Unk. Drupe
Herbaceous Material (unidentifiable, non-seed, plant material)

Rubus

Galium

Poaceae

Relbunium

Labiatae

Amaranthus

Potamogeton

Nyctaginaceae

Sisrhynchium

Malvaceae

Euphorbaceae

Cyperaceae

Solanaceae

Asteraceae

Scirpus

Scupu

Oxalis

Rosaceae

Unk. Aggregate

Unidentifiable Seed (too eroded/broken for identification)

Unknown Seed 321

Unknown Seed 322

Unknown Seed 323

Unknown Seed 324

Unknown Seed 325

Unknown Seed 326

Unknown Seed 327

Unknown Seed 328

Unknown Seed 329

Unknown Seed 330

Unknown Seed 331

Wood and Twig Fragments

Discussion of Results

The most striking pattern present in the data is the ubiquity and density of wild plant taxa in all of the samples analyzed (Figure 3, Figure 6). Wild plant taxa such as Malvaceae, Poaceae, and Nyctaginaceae far and away outnumber everything else, even the relatively abundant carbonized wood and lumps. I suspect that most of these wild taxa (which naturally occur in the surrounding area) accidentally found their way into the archaeological contexts. The common agricultural practice of field burning, for example, would explain the high percentage of carbonized wild plant seeds in the samples. Seed densities, and especially wild seed densities, are highest in the upper levels of the units (see Figure 8, for example) and may be the result of relatively recent burning episodes. Many of the wild taxa could have important economic and social uses, but given the sheer diversity of the Machu Picchu flora, collecting, identifying, and ethnographically researching the wild taxa of the zone would be a monumental (though worthwhile) effort. Even the process

of identifying these wild taxa is daunting. Despite my best efforts, 85% of the wild taxa eluded identification and could only be classified as as "Unknowns" (see Figure 7).

Domesticates, such as Andean tubers, Beans (Fabaceae), and especially *Zea mays* sp. are present, but in low numbers. Nonetheless their presence does support the idea that these terraces were used for bean and corn agriculture (see Wright et al. 2000 for a similar conclusion). The small size and vascular structure of some of the carbonized wood fragments is suggestive of maize stalks – perhaps suggesting that dried out maize stalks were burned during field clearings.

Spatially, plant taxa are most abundant and diverse in Sector II-B, the 'urban' zone of the site. Interestingly enough, Units 6, 7, 8, and 10, the units with the highest plant remain densities (both carbonized wood and seed see Figures 4 and 5) lie in the plaza immediately adjacent to the "temple of the Condor" one of the most important shrines at Machu Picchu. Units 6 and 8 also have the highest densities of maize for the whole site (Figure 6). While it's advisable not to speculate too wildly without more detailed provenience information, it is possible that these higher densities may be the residue of ritual feasting at the plaza. Sector I, the Agricultural zone, and Sector V, the principal plaza of the urban center shows markedly lower plant densities (Figure 9). In general (and somewhat ironically) terraces are not necessarily the best places to obtain macrobotanical data since there are generally fewer opportunities for the carbonization of seeds than in contexts where you might encounter hearths and food preparation areas. This may explain the low densities in Sector I. I currently have no ready theories to explain the low density of plant remains in Sector V.

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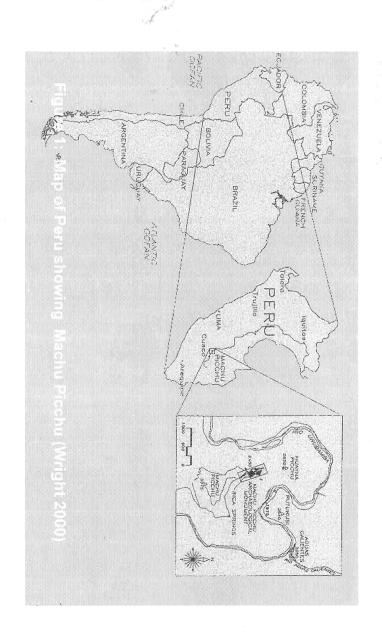
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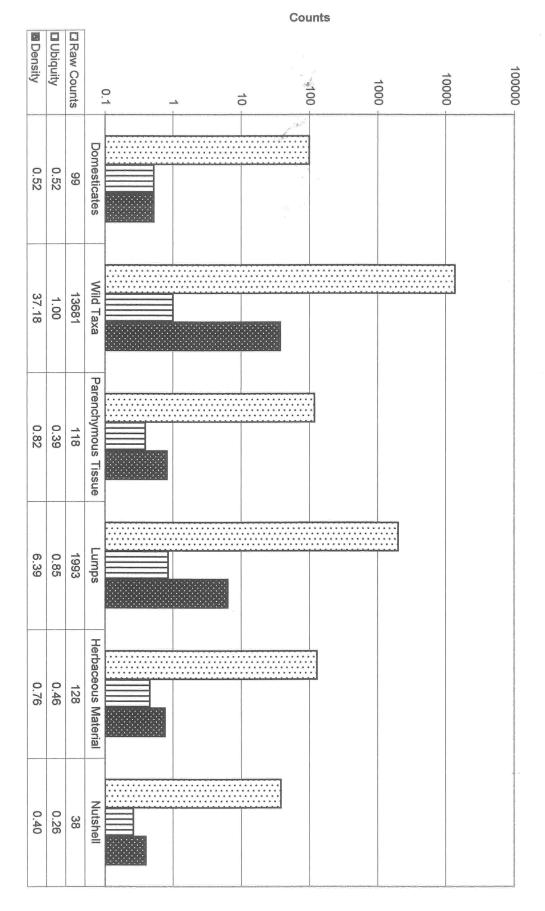
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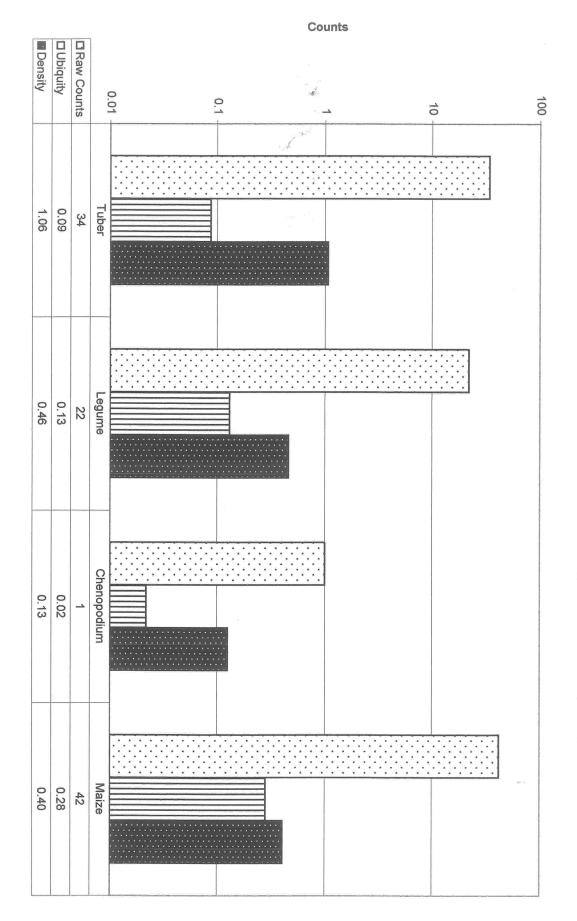


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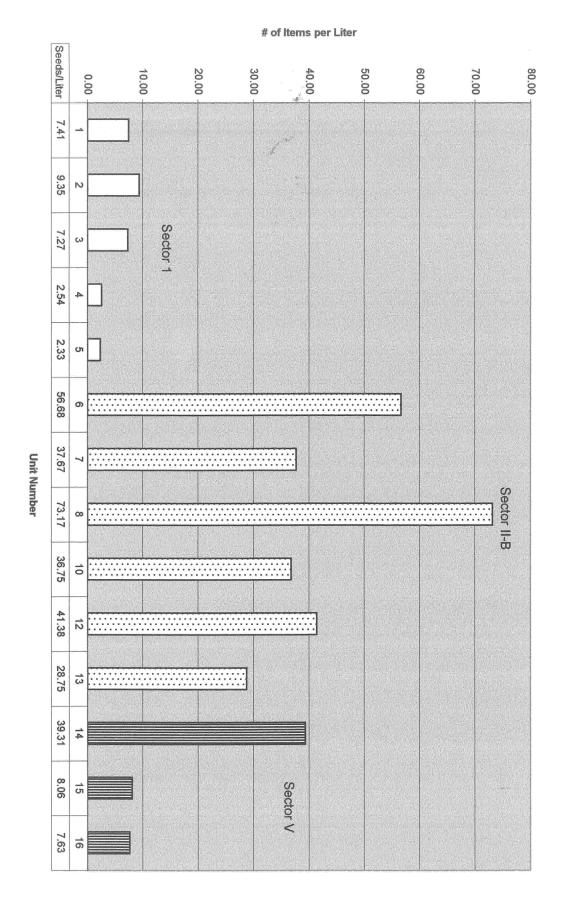
Combined Values for the Whole Site, Plotted on a Logarithmic Scale (N=46) Figure 2: Raw Counts, Ubiquities, and Densities for Domesticated, Wild, and Other Taxa



Combined Values for the Whole Site, Plotted on a Logarithmic Scale (N=24) Figure 3: Raw Counts, Ubiquities, and Densities for Domesticated Taxa







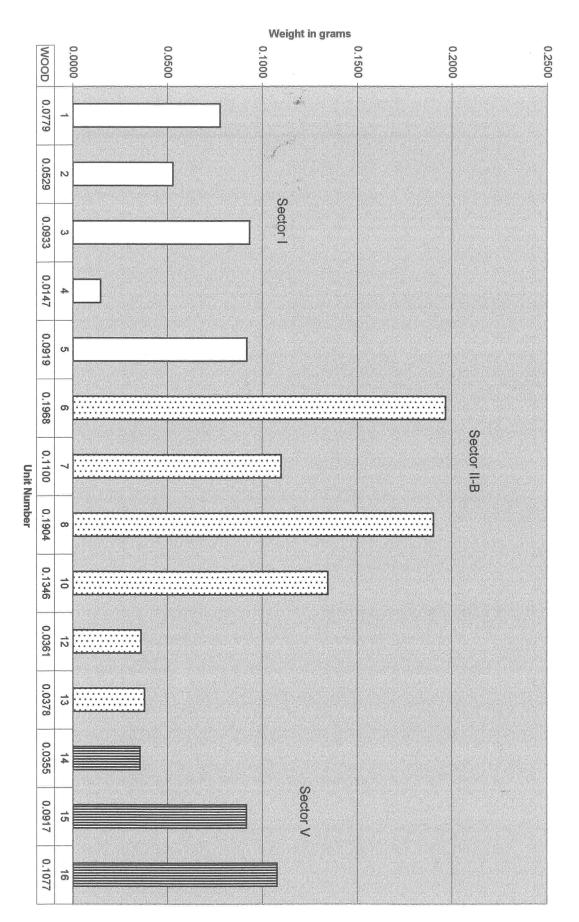
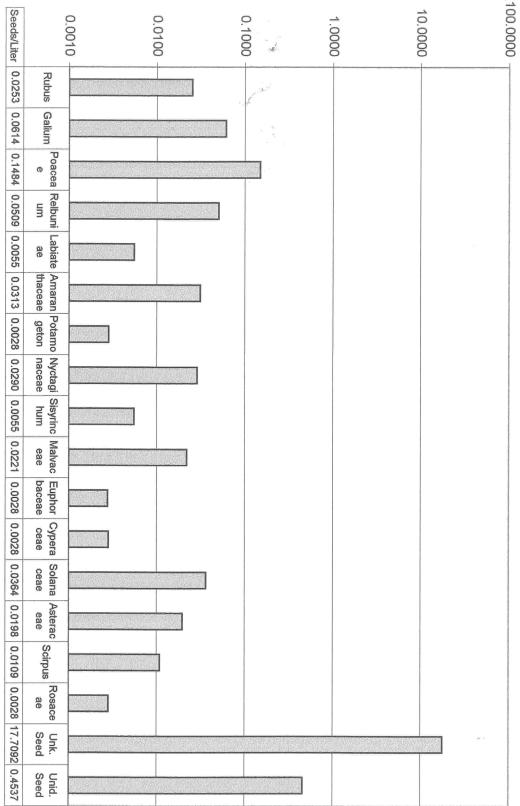


Figure 5: Wood Density by Sector and Unit (N=46)

Figure 6: Relative Taxa Percentages by Unit (N=46)

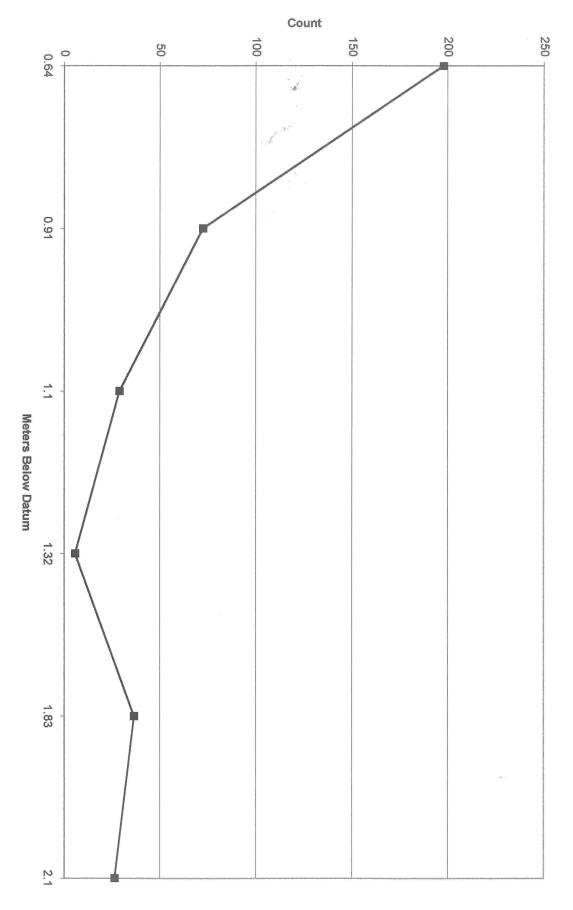
	Lumps	■ Parenchyma	□Tuber	□Legume	☐ Chenopod.	■Maize	Nutshell	■Herbaceous	□Wild Taxa	6	0%		10%		20%	7°-	3070	308		40%		50%		%U0	2	/0%	1	00.70	0000	90%	100%
	3.19	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.97	3.03	_	3	3		2		1/2			3	1/2]
	5.67	0.15	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.06	0.04	0.15	2.90	2		1/2		3	1//	3	2	Z	1/2	1/2	3		3		1						3
	3.69	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.08	0.06	3.10	ω	Z	1/2	/ // /	33	1	1/2		Z	3		33		11							•	
	1.46	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.42	0.50	4	2	3		Z		3/2		2	3		3		3	9]
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	12.75	0.38	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.13	0.50	0.13	24.88	12	7	3		33		3/2		1	E				•			•			<u>::</u>]
	2.94	0.06	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.06	12.31	13	3	3		Z		•			<u>:</u>		• • •		<u>:</u>	•							
	10.13	0.38	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.13	0.38	0.00	28.00	14		3		3		3	N :	•	•			<u> </u> 	<u>:</u>]
	3.81	0.00	0.25	0.13	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.19	2.50	15	32	2		1	1	23	X		1/2		3		1	I							
	3.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.13	0.00	3.75	16			1/2	2				<u> </u>			§ :								•••		

Figure 7: Wild Seed Densities, Combined Values for the Whole Site, Plotted on a Logarithmic Scale (N=46)



Counts

Figure 8: Sector II-B, Unit 6: Seed Density by Elevation (N=6)



1 X d. H ... Y_b

0.0110	22.89	2.29	_	16	<	2.29	5	=	16	<	E	05/11/92	MAPI	145
1.7121	85.91	1.30	ω	161	<		ယ	-	16	<		05/11/92	MAPI	144
0.0871	7 12.45	2.17	_	15 III	<	2.17	_	Ξ	15	<		19/11/96	MAPI	139
1.3802	27.22	0.93	2	15	V		2		15	<	ET	13/11/96	MAPI	134
4.6070	2 37.25	1.12	_	14	<	1.12	-	=	14	<	ET	29/10/96	MAPI	132
1.0772	22.68	0.69	2	14	<	0.69	2	11	14	<	ET	24/10/96	MAPI	128
0.1229	34.10	1.34	_	13	II-B	1.34	1	III	13	II-B	ET	16/08/96	MAPI	124
0.4816	22.24	0.91	-1	13	II-B	0.91	1	I	13	II-B	ET	15/08/96	MAPI	123
0.2884	2 37.33	0.52		121	II-B	0.52	1	-	12	II-B	ET	08/06/92	MAPI	1118
0.3742	18.15	1.39	2	10 11	II-B	1.39	2	III.	10	II-B	Eľ	18/06/96	MAPI	103
1.7798		0.53	-4	101	II-B	0.53	1	-	10	II-B	EI	14/06/96	MAPI	99
0.2262		1.48	_	8	II-B	1.48	_	Ш	Oo	П-В	ET	27/05/96	MAPI	91
1.2981		1.16	12	8	II-B	1.16	2	=	Co	II-B	ET	25/05/96	MAPI	87
3.0444		1.16	_	8	II-B	1.16	1	_	00	II-B		22/05/96	MAPI	84
0.0782		1.17	-	7 11	II-B	1.17	_		7	II-B	E	27/05/96	MAPI	89
0.5687		0.65	N	7	II-B		2		7	II-B	ET	22/05/96	MAPI	85
1.9931	28.69	0.53		7	II-B	0.53			7	Ъ	E	22/05/96	MAPI	82
0.2363	12.96	2.10	ω	6	II-B	2.1	ယ		6	II-8	ET	06/11/91	MAPI	77
0.7960	14.37	1.32	_	6	II-B	1.32	_	=	6	II-B		06/11/91	MAPI	76
2.1570	46.55	1.83	2	6	II-B	1.83	2	Ξ	6	II-B		06/11/91	MAPI	73
0.3737		1.10	ω	61	II-B	1,1	ώ	1	6	∏-В	El A	05/11/91	MAPI	70
1.3599	32.11	1.10	ω	61	II-B	1,1	ယ	Т	6	II-B	E	05/11/91	MAPI	69
2,8070	27.48	0.91	2	6	II-B	0.91	2	_	6	II-B	E	04/14/91	MAPI	65
3.2919	32.81	0.64	1	6	II-B	0.64	1	1	6	II-B	ET I	01/11/91	MAPI	62
0.5614	3.88	1.50	ω	5 II	_	1.5	ω	Ш	Ch		E	29/11/95	MAPI	60
1.3375	6.44	1.27	2	5 II		1.27	2	Ш	5		ET	28/11/95	MAPI	56
0.3072	2.18	0.72	2	5	_	0.72	2	_	CI		E	26/11/95	MAPI	54
0.0326	3.45	6.15	1	4		6.15	1	Ш	4		ET	07/10/91	MAPI	5]
0.1195	13.53	4.88	1	4		4.88	_	=	4		ET	05/10/91	MAPI	48
0.1996		4.61	N	4		4.61	N	_	4		Ξ	05/10/91	MAPI	46
0.2131		4.60	ω	3		4.6	w		ယ		ET	30/10/95	MAPI	38
0.4514		4.60	ω			4.6	w	H	ငယ		ET	30/10/95	MAPI	37
0.8300		3.90	1			3.9	_	=	ယ		=	29/10/95	MAPI	35
0.5139		3.90	_	3 11		3.9	_		S			29/10/95	MAPI	34
1.3764	13.03	3.80	N	3		3.8	2		Ç		E	28/10/95	MAPI	32
1.0920		3.80	2	3		3.8	2	=	ငယ		ET	28/10/95	MAPI	Ç.V
0.4077	15.39	3.20	N			3.2	2	Ш	2		E	26/10/95	MAPI	27
0.5435	10.36	3.20	N	2 III		3.2	2		2	*		26/10/95	MAPI	26
0.3337	9.82	2.99	_	2 111		2.99	_	Ξ	2		田	25/10/95	MAPI	23
0.3850	10.70	2.99	_	2 III		2.99	_	≡	2		EI	25/10/95	MAPI	22
0.7104	11.94	2.80	N	2 11		2.8	2	Ξ	2		Ξ	24/10/95	MAPI	20
0.1570		2.80	N	2 =		2.8	2	=	2		E	24/10/95	MAPI	19
0.9327		2.71	1-5	1 =		2.71	1-5	Ш	1		EI II	10/09/91	MAPI	14
1.1667		2.77	4	1 =		2.77	4		_			10/09/91	MAPI	
0.1628		2.27	_	1 =		2.27	_	Ξ	1		E	09/09/91	MAPI	6
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