
2 ***ALIVE AND KICKING IN THE 3rd TO 6th CENTURIES A.D.: DEFINING THE EARLY CLASSIC IN THE BELIZE RIVER VALLEY***

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It has been expounded upon that the Early Classic Period is one of the least understood archaeological periods in Maya civilization. What archaeologists know about the Early Classic is based predominantly on excavations at large sites such as Tikal and Holmul. In the Belize Valley some researchers suggest a severe depopulation of the area and aggregation of the remaining populace into a few centers. This paper reviews the data available from the sites of Barton Ramie, Buenavista, Pacbitun, Cahal Pech and selected cave sites (Chechem Ha, Actun Chapat, Uchentzab) along the Macal valley charting a number of diagnostic features which can be used to define the nature of the Early Classic Maya, and confirming that the Early Classic was actually one of the most dynamic periods in the prehistory of Belize. Significantly, this article exposes the apparent absence of architectural and iconographic diagnostic aspects of the material culture of Teotihuacan in western Belize, which indicate that the Belize Valley sites may have formed a more cohesive network of interaction, and one less exposed to sites under hypothesized Teotihuacan influences.

Introduction

In a paper published in the first volume of the Research Reports in Belizean Archaeology, LeCount (2004:27-28) accurately noted that "...the Early Classic is one of the least understood archaeological time periods in the Maya lowlands." She added that "much of our understanding of this critical time period is based on the tomb and temple excavations at a few large sites", such as Tikal, Uaxactun, Holmul and Copan. Furthermore, when Early Classic remains are identified outside of the central Peten, they are usually associated with elite contexts.

In the Belize Valley and western Peten, this assumed rarity of Early Classic remains has led some researchers to "suggest a severe depopulation of the area and aggregation of the remaining populace into a few centers such as Actuncan" (LeCount 2004:27). In contrast with this view, other researchers (Awe 1992, Demarest 1992, Lincoln 1985) have suggested that the paucity of Early Classic

diagnostics in some regions may simply reflect the continuity of Late Preclassic assemblages beyond the third and fourth centuries A.D. Some of us (cf. Audet and Awe 2004:52) also believe that because previous investigators have tried to define the Early Classic on the basis of a few Peten-centric diagnostic ceramic types, they have generally failed to record evidence for local development during this time. By reviewing the data available for selected sites in the Belize River valley, we want to demonstrate two points: first, that there are a number of diagnostic features which can be used to define the nature of Early Classic Maya culture in the Belize Valley, and secondly, that the available data serves to confirm that the Early Classic was actually one of the most dynamic periods in the prehistory of western Belize.

Barton Ramie

At Barton Ramie Willey et al. (1965:350) and Gifford (1975) designated the Early Classic period as the Hermitage

phase. Overlapping Hermitage with the slightly earlier Floral Park phase, their Terminal Preclassic – Early Classic periods were dated from A.D. 100 to 600 and correlated with the Matzanel-Tzakol phases at Uaxactun.

The settlement survey and excavations conducted by Willey and his colleagues noted that the Hermitage phase at Barton Ramie was characterized by a considerable increase in population. They (Willey et al. 1965:350) report that 76.9% or 50 out of the 65 mounds that were tested produced evidence of occupation during the Hermitage phase. In 30 mounds there was also evidence of platform construction. Most of the platforms were rectangular in form, except for BR 190, which was circular in plan and had an attached ramp and rectangular terrace.

At least eight burials at Barton Ramie were dated to the Hermitage phase (Willey et al. 1965:545-558). The orientation of these burials was extended with head to the south, and in prone or supine positions. A few individuals were also placed in seated positions (Willey et al. 1965:565-566).

Non-ceramic artifacts of the Hermitage phase at Barton Ramie included small and large varieties of *metates*, bark beaters, obsidian cores, pyrite mosaic mirrors, *Olivella* shell tinklers, plus shell pendants and beads. Willey et al. (1965:566) further suggested that stemmed projectile points or knives were likely first introduced during the Hermitage phase.

The Floral Park-Hermitage phases at Barton Ramie also witnessed the introduction of new ceramic innovations (Figure 1). New Floral Park ceramic types included pottery designated as Aguacate Orange and Ixcario Polychrome. The most diagnostic form of this pottery is a large bowl with mammiform tetrapodal supports. The diagnostic pottery of the subsequent

Hermitage phase was found to be closely related with the glossy wares and polychromes that are found in the northeastern Peten. The two principal polychrome types for Hermitage were Actuncan Orange and Dos Arroyos Orange, both produced in basal-flanged bowl forms (Willey et al. 1965:566). Furthermore,

The Aguacate Ceramic Group of the previous Floral Park Phase is not extinguished but continues in a variety known as Privacion. Also, the old resident red monochrome tradition has its descendant in the Minanha Red type which is also made in the basal-flange bowl form. Striated utility pottery, which has a long and more or less continuous history throughout the Barton Ramie sequence is particularly plentiful in the Hermitage Phase. Finally, Early Classic modes of Teotihuacan inspiration are seen in the slab-footed tripod jars most frequently occurring in the Balanza Black Ceramic Group. These Teotihuacan-like forms are not as common as at ceremonial centers of Uaxactun or Tikal, but they are definitely present in the house mound detritus at Barton Ramie. (Willey et al. 1965:566).

Despite obvious cultural changes, the Barton Ramie ceramic data thus reflects clear continuities from the Protoclassic Mount Hope phase to the Hermitage phase. As Willey et al. (1965:565) accurately concluded, “The picture is that of a definite mingling and fusion of the new with the old.”

Pacbitun

At Pacbitun, Paul Healy (1990a) employed a chronology that closely resembles that of Willey et al. (1965) at Barton Ramie. Here the Terminal Preclassic or Protoclassic period, which was designated as the Ku phase, extends from 100 BC to AD 300. This is followed by the Early Classic Tzul phase that spans from AD 300 to 550.

Barton Ramie - Protoclassic and Early Classic ceramic types



Vessels of the Floral Park and Hermitage complexes. All from mound BR-123. *a*, Actuncan Orange-polychrome: Actuncan Variety (Cat. No. 1759) (Diam. 30.5 cm. at orifice); *b*, Fowler Orange-red: Fowler Variety (Cat. No. 1760) (Diam. 14.5 cm.); *c*, Aguacate Orange: Aguacate Variety (Cat. No. 1706) (Diam. 25.5 cm.); *d*, Aguacate Orange: Privación Variety (Cat. No. 1396) (Diam. 14.5 cm.); *e*, Actuncan Orange-polychrome: Actuncan Variety (Cat. No. 1391) (Diam. 27.5 cm. at orifice). *a, b, c*, found with Burial 13; *d, e*, found with Burial 19. (After Willey and Gifford, 1961, fig. 1.)

Excavations in the site core at Pacbitun revealed considerable construction activity during the Early Classic. Healy et al (2004:210) note that by the middle of the Ku phase, the in-line tripartite eastern buildings reached heights of between 3 and 6 meters above plaza level. To the southwest of Plaza A, construction of the palace complex (Str. 23) began in the Late Preclassic /Early Classic transition” (Healy et al. 2004:211). The first phase of the Plaza E ballcourt was also constructed during the latter part of the Ku phase (Healy 1992). A cache in the eastern structure of the ballcourt contained two ceramic vessels placed “lip to lip”. Within the vessels were approximately 200 shells of the freshwater snail known as *jute*. Other objects in the deposit included the following:

...polished celt; jadeite bead; large, finely chipped green obsidian bipoint; large,

stemmed, plano-convex chert point; stingray (Rajiformes) spine, fitting valves of a small thorny oyster (*Spondylus americanus*), and six small (< 3 cm) flat, notched, lozenge-shaped objects (possibly abstract human forms) made of slate (2), white shell (2); and orange/pink shell (2).

The discovery of the green, Pachuca obsidian, leaf-shaped bi-point, and the stemmed, plano-convex point in the same context is particularly important because it provides evidence that both projectile forms were being produced in Early Classic times. At Altun Ha, Pendergast (2003) also discovered several eccentrics made from green Pachuca obsidian, suggesting that settlements along the Belize River may have participated in a trade network that had expanded considerably following the end of the Late Preclassic period.

Investigations at Pacbitun recorded 20 stone monuments. These include 13 stelae and 7 altars. Three of the monuments, Stela 6 (Figure 2), as well as Altars 3 and 4, bear evidence of carving and were dated to the Early Classic Tzul Phase. Based on their interpretation of the inscriptions, Healy (1990b; also Healy et al. 2004:214) proposed that Stela 6 commemorated an event celebrated about A.D. 475 (or 9.2.5.?.?). A more recent re-examination of this monument by Christophe Helmke, Nikolai Grube, and Jaime Awe recorded many more details of the glyphic text on Stela 6, and secured a Long Count placement of A.D. 485 (or 9.2.10.0.0), obviously at odds with Healy et al.'s (2004) proposition. Our recent illustration also produced considerable more detail than was captured by the earlier field drawing of the monument. Deciphered portions of the text appear to refer to a mythological episode as a prelude for the historical event commemorated by the erection of the stela itself (Helmke et al. 2004). In addition, the lord of Pacbitun depicted on the stelae may be titled as a *yajaw k'ahk* or 'Lord of Fire.' The subsidiary text that serves as a caption to the iconographic program refers to an accession ceremony (perhaps to the rank of 'Lord of Fire?'), which may have taken place under the agency of an overlord; though on account of erosion this interpretation must remain tentative (Helmke et al. 2004). This evidence indicates that, as a seat of royal power, Pacbitun played an active role within wider networks of elite interaction, a point also highlighted by the cohesiveness and broad geographic distribution of shared ceramic modes and forms at the time. Despite these relations, the absence of any Teotihuacan iconographic elements or themes on the carved monuments of Pacbitun is notable—a feature also shared by contemporary monuments at Blackman Eddy and Caracol.

This absence indicates that the Belize Valley sites, and perhaps Caracol, may have formed a more localized and cohesive network of interaction, and were less exposed to central Mexican influences like the sites under hypothesized Teotihuacan control.



Figure 2. Pacbitun Stela 6 as found in situ (photograph by J. Awe)

Buenavista del Cayo

At Buenavista Ball and Taschek (2004:156) report that “There is little evident change in the overall archaeological material record” from the Terminal Preclassic Xakal to the Protoclassic Madrugada (ca. 100-50 B.C.- A.D. 150) ceramic phases, “...but those changes that did occur were culturally profound”. They add that:

while there is overall a smooth continuity in the material cultural record of the valley,

analytically noticeable (Preclassic/Protoclassic) changes did occur, and while some of these likely were no more than “natural” local evolutions in ceramic technology and style, some may have had considerable local, social or political significance (e.g. the limited importation of Peten Gloss Ware black Balanza and polychrome Dos Arroyos group dishes, bowls, and other vessels.)

In contrast to the Terminal Preclassic/Protoclassic phases, Ball and Taschek (2004:157) argue that the subsequent Early Classic Ahcabnal ceramic phase (ca. A.D. 240-420-540) “was marked by dramatic discontinuities in long-established ceramic types, groups, wares, and functional forms in use at both elite and commoner levels...”. Ceramic discontinuities that occur between A.D. 240 and A.D. 420 at Buenavista “ranged from replacement of the ... Tumbac ...and Chan Pond unslipped domestic utility ceramic tradition by the Uaxactun Unslipped Ware Triunfo-Cayo tradition”. Likewise, the Early Classic witnessed the complete disappearance of the longstanding “waxy” tradition and its replacement by the new Peten gloss ware tradition. The Ahcabnal phase also sees the production of polychrome pottery and high quality black-ware and brown-ware vessels in forms that included basal-flanged dishes and bowls, tripod cylinder vases, and flat-base cylinder vases and bowls.

Ball and Taschek (2004:157) claim that there is considerable evidence for Early Classic architectural activity in the Buenavista site core and sustaining area. They (Ball and Taschek 2004:157) argue that there is “marked augmentations in the size and distribution of the resident zonal population and with a proliferation in the numbers of new suburban residential patio groups...”. They also report that in the site center finding evidence for “major surges”

in the construction of monumental public and residential buildings.

Baking Pot

At Baking Pot a substantial body of data has been recorded, both within the site core and the periphery, which provides evidence for Early Classic developments at the site (Aimers et al. 2000; Audet 2000, 2004; Audet and Awe 2004; Bullard and Bullard 1965; Colas et al. 2002; Conlon and Powis 2004; Conlon et al. 1994; Powis 1993; Ricketson 1931). In Group 1 of the site core, excavations at the base of the in-line triadic eastern shrine uncovered two crypts containing slab-footed (Teotihuacan inspired) Balanza Black and Pucte Brown cylinder vases. The presence of these Early Classic pottery types and forms suggests that this, E-Group-like, architectural configuration was likely formalized by at least the 6th century A.D. Other excavation in the main plaza recovered a variety of Early Classic ceramic types and forms, indicating that one or more of the plaza floors were constructed during this time. At the base of Str. E, a sub-stela cache containing the remains of two infants and lip to lip Hewlett Bank unslipped vessels, provide additional evidence for Early Classic ritual activity in the site core.

Within the sites sustaining area investigations recorded Early Classic components in two *plazuelas* and at a *sacbe* terminus complex. At the Yaxtun Group, located northeast of Group 1, Audet (2000, also Audet and Awe 2004) reported that ceramic remains below the sealed floor of Str. 198/3rd contained a mixture of Late Preclassic and Early Classic pottery. The ceramic types identified included vessels of Sierra Red, Polvero Black, Dos Arroyos Orange Polychrome, Balanza Black, Lucha Incised and Minanha Red Groups.

Approximately two kilometers southwest of the site core, investigations at

the Bedran Group (Audet and Awe 2004, Colas et al. 2002, Conlon et al. 1994, Powis 1993) have also uncovered considerable evidence for Early Classic development. On Structure 2, the eastern shrine of this formal *plazuela* group, excavations revealed that the first construction phase was represented by a circular platform. The discovery of a cache containing an Aguacate Orange vessel helps to date this construction phase to the Protoclassic – Early Classic transition. Within the subsequent architectural phase, another cache and a burial contained a Balanza Group Lucha Incised vessel and an Urita Gouged Incised bowl. Both of these Early Classic vessels were decorated with Primary Standard Sequences just below their rims. The presence of these glyphic-inscribed vessels is notable because they bear some of the earliest examples of PSS texts in Belize and certainly in the Belize Valley. The texts further point to the crystallization of ritual practices and expressions –apparently developing over the course of the Late Preclassic– with which vessels were dedicated. Equally important is the fact that the vessels make reference to royal patrons or owners holding Emblem Glyphs and, if the vessels were locally produced, as they seem to be, they mark Baking Pot as the central node of a royal realm.

More recent investigations on Structure 190, an architectural complex at the terminus of a *sacbe* that originates at Group 2 in the site core, has produced additional new data for Early Classic activity at Baking Pot (Audet 2004). Excavations in the mound revealed that Str. 190/1st was represented by a low rectangular platform with a large circular altar at its summit. Associated with the platform were two stelae (Figure 3), one axially located at the northern base of the platform, and a second at the northwestern base of the structure. Excavations below the floors of

the altar and platform uncovered more than a hundred lip to lip vessels of the Early Classic Hewlett Bank Unslipped type. Most of the vessels within the altar contained human phalanges, constituting the earliest reported example of finger bowl caches in the Belize Valley. At the base of the northwestern Stela we also uncovered numerous ceramic vessels, including several censers with some affinities to Late Early Classic Candelario Appliquéd specimens from Caracol (A. Chase 1994:163, fig. 13.2 f).



Figure 3. Stela 2 associated with Structure 190 at Baking Pot. Note the exposed sub-stela cache (photograph by C. Audet).

Cahal Pech

Several years of research at Cahal Pech by Awe (1992) and his colleagues (Cheetham 1995, 2004, Healy and Awe 1995, 1996, Iannone 1996, Powis 1996) has recorded evidence for dynamic growth at this site between A.D. 300 and 600. As

Table 1. Early Classic Architectural Modifications and Cultural Activity at Cahal Pech.

STRUCTURE #	DATE	COMMENTS
A1 Sub	EC	Looted tomb with Balanza Black slab-foot Vase
A2 Sub2	LP-EC	Residential range type building
A4 Sub	LP-EC	Residential range type building
Plaza	EC	Resurfacing of Plaza floor (Floor 3)
B1 Sub	EC	Formalization of In-line triadic eastern shrine
B2	EC	Structure modified twice. Flat top temple with aproned terraces and central stairway
B4/11 th	LP-EC	Flat top temple with aproned terraces and central stairway
B5 Sub	EC	Vaulted building with possible sweathouse
East Ballcourt	EC	Earliest phase of ballcourt constructed
Plaza C	EC	First plaza wide surfacing of courtyard floor
Plaza D	EC	Large vaulted building with painted (red) walls below terminal phase plaza floor
F1/2 nd	EC	Long raised platform that probably supported perishable superstructure
Plaza F	EC	Plaza floor resurfaced
Plaza G	EC	New plaza floor (Floor 3) replaces Preclassic surface
G1	LP-EC	First two architectural phases constructed
G2/1 st	EC	First architectural phase constructed. Sub floor cache containing 5 (Hewlet Bank Unslipped) ceramic vessels nested on each other
Tzinic Group	EC	Architectural modification on Structures 1,2 and 5
Zotz Group	EC	Structure 2/3 rd constructed
Tolok Group	EC	At least 90% of all structures modified
Cas Pek Group	LP-EC	Platforms 3 and 4 constructed. Sub floor burials with Balanza Black and Chan Pond Unslipped vessels
Zubin Group	EC	Early phase of Structure 1 is erected. Sub floor crypt containing several Early Classic ceramic vessels (including effigy vessel and enema pot)

Table 1 indicates, this growth was also not limited to the site core for there is substantial evidence for coeval developments throughout the site's periphery.

Within the central precinct just about every excavation revealed evidence for architectural modifications and cultural activity during the Early Classic (Awe 1992). In Plaza A, Structure A1, A2 and A4, all contained Early Classic period components, and the courtyard were resurfaced at least once. In the more public Plaza B, Structure B4-11th and B5 Sub were both constructed during Early Classic period. The latter building has a small

vaulted room with a narrow, low doorway and unusually high bench. It is possible that this room may have served as a sweat bath. Within the eastern half of the central acropolis, the floors of Plaza's C, D, F and G were resurfaced, one of the first phases of the Eastern Ballcourt was constructed, and at least Structures F1, G1 and G2 were modified. On the western half of the acropolis, excavations also exposed a large vaulted and painted building deep below the present floor of Plaza D.

Investigations outside the site core recorded Early Classic components at the Tzinic, Zotz, Tolok, Cas Pek, Zubin and Zopilote Groups. Except for Cas Pek and

Zopilote, all these settlements contain formal patio clusters and all of them have relatively large architecture. At Tzinic, Structures 1, 2 and 5 were modified during the Early Classic. Structure 1 was subsequently transformed into an imposing, vaulted, eastern shrine. Coeval changes at the Tolok Group resulted with modifications in at least 90% of all the structures, and similar activity was noted at Zopilote, Zubin, and Cas Pek.

Evidence for Early Classic burials and caches at Cahal Pech has a similar distribution to that of architecture. Within the core and periphery they were discovered in both elite and non-elite domestic contexts. One cache within Structure G2 contained five Hewlett Bank Unslipped bowls nested on each other. In the site core, burials are reported from a tomb in Str. A1 Sub and possibly in structure B1. In the periphery they were recorded in a crypt at Zubin (Ilanonne 1996) and in a simple, sub-floor, burial at Cas Pek (Lee and Awe 1995). One of the vessels from the A1 burial was a Balanza Black slab-footed cylinder vase and the Zubin burial contained a Pucte Brown, effigy enema pot.

Non-ceramic cultural remains at Cahal Pech reflect a similar repertoire of objects as that recorded for the Hermitage phase at Barton Ramie and Pacbitun (see above for details). The latter include stemmed projectile points, bark beaters, turtle back metates, and green, Pachuca obsidian, blades. The pottery at both sites is also relatively indistinguishable. The Cahal Pech assemblage includes basal flange bowls of the glossy Actuncan and Dos Arroyos Orange polychrome types, as well as monochromes of the Minanha Red Group. Other Peten Gloss Wares are present in specimens of Balanza Black and Pucte Brown, occasionally in the so-called Teotihuacan inspired slab-footed cylinder vase form. Unslipped types are represented

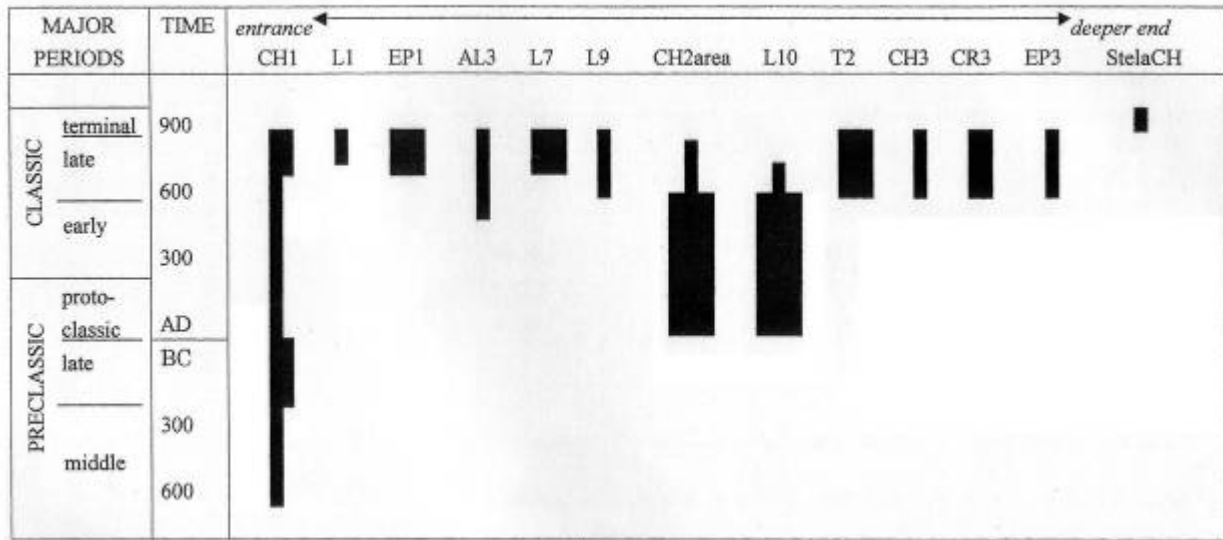
by jars of the Mopan and Succotz Groups, and bowls of the Hewlett Bank Group. At Cahal Pech, the ceramics from the Hermitage phase Mopan and Succotz Unslipped Groups were relatively indistinguishable from Barton Ramie's Floral Park Stumped Creek and Old River Unslipped Groups. These similarities at the latter site led Willey and his colleagues (1965:337, 350) to classify the unslipped pottery from both phases as Uaxactun Unslipped.

Caves in the Macal Valley

Cave sites in western Belize contain a rich body of data that has rarely been incorporated in previous assessments of local cultural development. This neglect is unfortunate for the materials within them shed important light on synchronic and diachronic ritual activity in the Belize River valley (Awe 1998). On this premise the Western Belize Regional Cave Project (WBRCP) spent several seasons conducting intensive research at Chechem Ha Cave, Actun Chapat, Actun Halal, Stela Cave and Uchentzub, all located within the hills flanking the western banks of the Macal River. Ongoing analysis of cultural remains from these sites indicates that, at least in Actun Halal, prehistoric human utilization of these subterranean sites began as far back as pre-ceramic times. The other sites contain evidence for ancient Maya use spanning from the Middle Preclassic to the Terminal Classic Period.

Of all the subterranean sites investigated by the WBRCP, Chechem Ha presently provides the best picture of prehistoric Maya cave use in the upper Belize Valley. Spatial analysis of the cultural materials at this site indicates that the entrance to the cave began to be used from Middle Preclassic time, while utilization of the deeper dark zones increases in the Early Classic to Terminal Classic

Actun Chechemha



Schematic diagram of time span of use by Area.

Table 2. Diachronic usage of various areas of Actun Chechem Ha (Table by R. Ishihara).

periods (Ishihara 2000). Interestingly, Protoclassic and Early Classic remains were concentrated in Chambers 1 and 2 and on Ledge 10 (See Table 2). These activity areas are located near the entrance to the cave, and approximately midway between the entrance and furthest accessible point in the site respectively. In contrast, ceramic remains within the deepest sections of the cave only date to the Terminal Classic period.

Analysis of the ceramic remains in Chechem Ha suggests that more than 300 pottery vessels may have been taken into the cave. The vast majority of the vessels were large, Late Classic, Cayo unslipped jars and Mount Maloney Black bowls. Early Classic vessels predominantly included basal flanged polychromes with a few red and black monochromes and unslipped jars. The Early Classic Polychromes included specimens of Dos Arroyos and possibly Actuncan Orange types, and the monochromes were primarily represented by vessels of the Balanza Black Group.

Discussion

The preceding study of cultural remains for selected sites in western Belize serve to demonstrate that there is considerable data for Early Classic Maya settlements, artifacts, architecture and ritual activity in the upper Belize River Valley. The settlement data for at least Barton Ramie, Baking Pot and Cahal Pech indicate that throughout the valley there was a substantial increase in population. This is clearly borne out by Willey et al's. (1965) settlement survey, which noted that 50 of the 65 mounds tested at Barton Ramie produced evidence for occupation at this time. It is further supported by the increase of construction activity within the site cores of Cahal Pech, Buena Vista and Pacbitun.

In the case of non-ceramic artifacts, the Early Classic period witnesses a continuity of certain Late Preclassic forms, such as manos and metates, and the introduction of several new types and modes. At Barton Ramie, for example,

Willey et al. (1965) suggest that there is an increase in the popularity of bark beaters and stemmed projectile points. At Pacbitun, the discovery of a Pachuca obsidian, laurel leaf-shaped point alongside a stemmed point in Early Classic context suggests that both of these forms were contemporaneous. At the same time, the presence of Pachuca obsidian (at Pacbitun, Cahal Pech and Altun Ha) suggests that local elite were seeking new sources from which to acquire and appropriate exotic status symbols. Furthermore, the eccentric forms of the green obsidian artifacts from Altun Ha may likely indicate the incipience of the eccentric lithic tradition at sites in the Belize River drainage.

In the case of ceramic artifacts, there is considerable evidence for typological continuities and discontinuities in the Belize Valley. For at least Barton Ramie, Cahal Pech and Baking Pot, it appears that pottery from the Sierra and Aguacate Groups may have continued into the early facet of the Hermitage Phase. Comparison between unslipped Protoclassic pottery with specimens of Early Classic date at the three sites demonstrates that the ceramics are relatively indistinguishable. This situation led Gifford (1976) and Willey et al. (1965:337, 350) to classify pottery of the Mount Hope, Stumped Creek and Old River Ceramic Groups and the Hermitage, Mopan, Sucutz and White Cliff Groups as Uaxactun Unslipped Ware. Noteworthy ceramic innovations are reflected by the introduction of glossy wares such as pottery from the Balanza Black and Pucte Brown Ceramic Groups, and the Actuncan and Dos Arroyos Orange Polychromes.

The Early Classic, monumental, architectural tradition of the Belize Valley also reflects some divergence from Preclassic architecture forms and styles. By the end of the fourth century there appears to be a cessation of circular platforms with

their appended rectangular ramps, and we see the introduction of the first vaulted buildings and tombs. Despite the latter, however, flat-topped, terraced pyramids remain the predominant form of most temples. Other Early Classic changes may have resulted with the formalization of in-line triadic structures, which appear to have functioned as eastern family shrines in the central precincts of site cores and in many formal (i.e. Plaza Plan 2) *plazuela* groups.

Perhaps of greater architectural significance in the Belize Valley is the apparent absence of Teotihuacan-like Talud-Tablero architecture. While Peten sites such as Tikal and some of its neighbors appear to embrace this style with relative eagerness, there are simply no examples reported in western Belize (Figure 4). Interestingly, the introduction of the Talud-Tablero form of architectural terraces has been correlated with the appearance of certain historical figures on the inscriptions of some Peten monuments. One such character is Sihyaj K'ahk' or "Smoking Frog", an elite character who is assumed to have had Teotihuacan connections (Martin and Grube 2000:30-32). Recent investigations at La Sufricaya, close to the Peten-Belize border, by Francisco Estrada-Belli (this volume) have also brought to light a monument (Stela 6) that makes contemporary mentions to Sihyaj K'ahk'. These references, coupled with other evidence, suggest that the furthest eastern extent of the influence of this individual, and the associated Teotihuacan symbolism, was the Peten-Belize border. This dividing line of sorts is significant as none of the monuments from Pacbitun, Blackman Eddy, or Caracol exhibit Teotihuacan motifs in their iconography or make reference to that site in their glyphic texts. Indeed, evidence for connections between the Belize Valley and Teotihuacan is limited and is primarily evidenced by

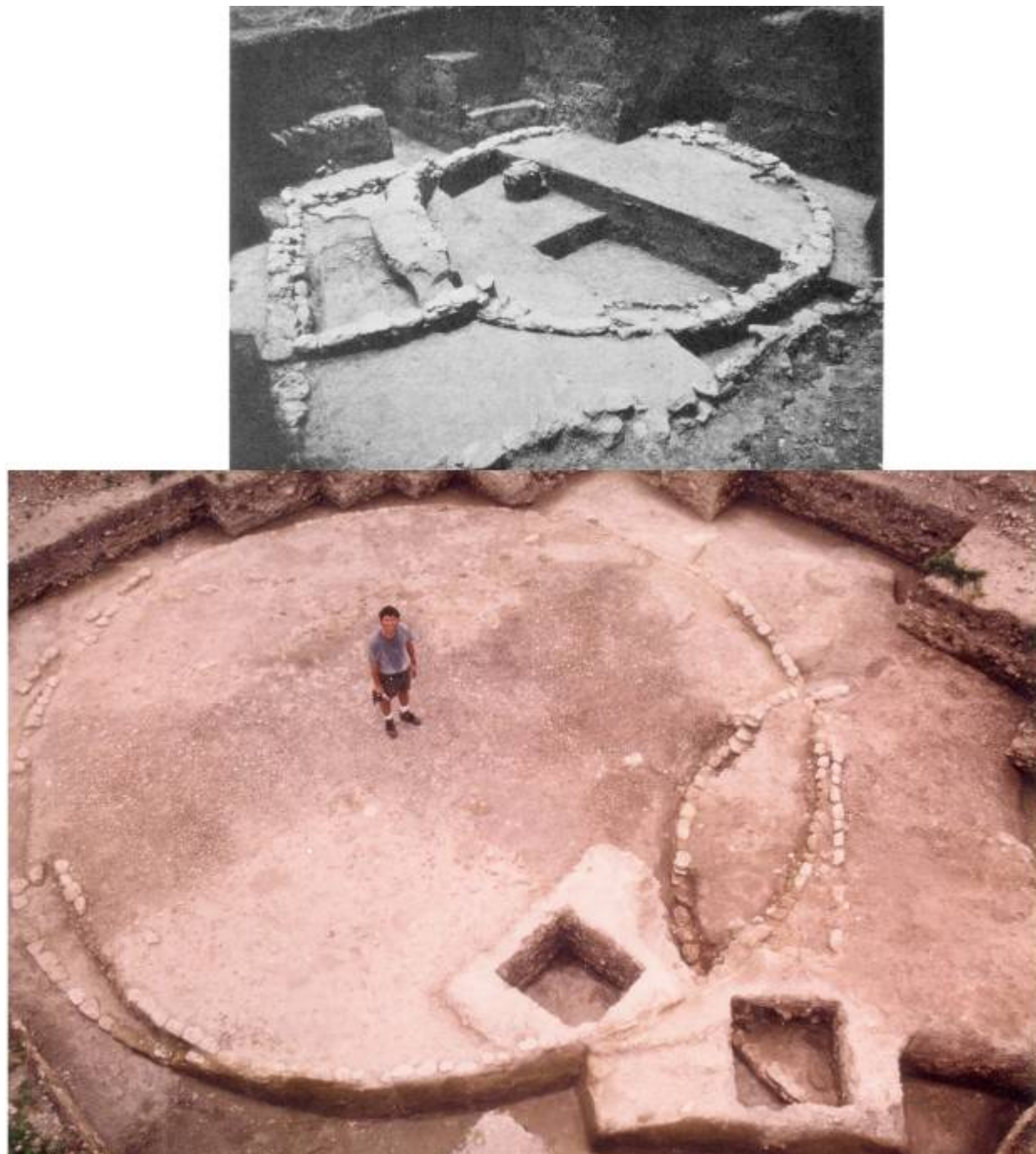


Figure 4. Examples of round structures in the upper Belize Valley, at the sites of Barton Ramie and Cahal Pech (Tolok).

portable objects that were likely acquired by direct or indirect contact.

Early Classic ritual activity in the Belize Valley appears to follow the same developmental trajectory as that of other

cultural characteristics. Burial patterns continue to be predominantly represented by extended burials with head to the south, but there appears to be greater differentiation in grave goods (in both quality and quantity).

Dedicatory caches appear to increase in number, but innovations include the introduction of finger bowls and eccentric flints. There is also an apparent increase in the dedication of inscribed monuments, followed by a cessation of these carved monuments at the end of the Early Classic period. At the same time, the two Hermitage Phase ceramic vessels from burials at Baking Pot suggest that the Primary Standard Sequence dedicatory formulae on ceramics was introduced at this time, and that this tradition continued well into the Late Classic period. Finally, data from several of the subterranean sites in the lower Macal drainage provide a growing body of data that reflect increasing Early Classic ritual activity in caves.

Conclusion

In the past, a number of Mayanists have reported that few sites in the eastern lowlands appear to have been occupied during the Early Classic period. In some cases, these claims were even made for sites that were unequivocally thriving during the Late Preclassic. In an effort to address this apparently enigmatic issue, we decided to conduct a study of published data for several sites in the region. Rather than confirming the lack of Early Classic occupation at the sites in question, our analysis indicates that the Early Classic was actually one of the most dynamic periods in the development of the Belize Valley. There is overwhelming evidence for a substantial increase in population, the introduction of inscribed monuments, considerable production of monumental architecture, growing complexity in ritual activity, and clear evidence for cultural continuities and discontinuities. Despite this improved vision of the Early Classic Belize Valley, however, there still remain important questions that require further scientific attention. One of the most crucial topics is

the reason for the limited nature of Teotihuacan-inspired cultural traits in western Belize. We believe that the Teotihuacan connection has very likely been overstated in the Central Peten, but only future research will confirm or negate this assessment.

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3 THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE AND RITUAL IN THE RISE OF COMPLEXITY: AN EXAMPLE FROM BLACKMAN EDDY, BELIZE

M. Kathryn Brown and James F. Garber

The nature of Middle Preclassic architecture and associated ritual deposits has been difficult to study due to overlying Classic Period remains. Recent investigations at the site of Blackman Eddy have revealed a developmental sequence of Middle Preclassic public architecture and associated ritual deposits, which suggests that the function of these buildings change dramatically through time. Low, broad platforms dating to the early Middle Preclassic functioned as integrative features within the community, which served multiple, functions including the location for communal ritual feasting activities. The pyramidal architecture style appears for the first time at the end of the late Middle Preclassic, which also corresponds to the introduction of sub-floor cache deposits. The elaborate architectural form and associated sacred rituals reinforces the adoption of new ideological concepts to legitimize a changing social order and uneven wealth distribution within the community. Evidence suggests that the consolidation of wealth, prestige, and power by emerging elite over time, culminated in the use of public architecture and material culture as mediums to transmit ideologically related messages pertaining to the social order of the community.

Introduction

The study of public architecture and defined sacred space is of great importance to the understanding of the development of complex societies because it provides physical manifestations of labor and resources. This, in turn, reflects aspects of the social order of a society. As the society becomes more complex, architecture plays a role in perpetuating the new ideology of order, which legitimizes status differences. Ritual associated with special architecture sanctifies status differences within the community, allowing these differences to be socially accepted. The nature of Middle Preclassic architecture and associated ritual deposits, however, has been difficult to study due to overlying Classic Period remains. This has caused a sampling bias with respect to our understanding of this critical time period. Recent investigations at the site of Blackman Eddy have revealed a developmental sequence of Middle Preclassic public architecture and associated

ritual deposits. Evidence suggests that the consolidation of wealth, prestige, and power by emerging elite over time, culminated in the use of public architecture and material culture as mediums to transmit ideologically related messages pertaining to the social order of the community.

The architectural sequence from Blackman Eddy suggests that the function of public architecture changed dramatically through time. Low, broad platforms dating to the early Middle Preclassic functioned as integrative features within the community and served multiple functions including the location for communal ritual feasting activities (Brown 2003). The excavation evidence from Blackman Eddy suggests that through time public architecture became more elaborate while ritual deposits shifted towards a more restrictive form. The pyramidal architecture style appears for the first time at the end of the late Middle Preclassic, which also corresponds to the introduction of sub-floor cache deposits

(Brown 2003). The construction history of Structure B1 spans over 2000 years and is associated with numerous ritual deposits, which change in form through time. Through the analysis of this early public architecture and associated ritual deposits, we argue that the basis for late Preclassic kingship and ritual activity in legitimizing the role of the king developed out of an earlier communal ritual and feasting tradition associated with early public architecture. We suggest that the role of ritual and public architecture changes through time and reflects the rise of social/political complexity within the community. We also suggest that early public platforms functioned as integrative facilities, while later more elaborate pyramidal structures functioned as ritual performance space restricted to use by elite members of the society. Schele and Mathews (1998:23) state that “Maya architects designed their buildings to encompass motion and performance so that they operated like stage sets in which drama and ritual unfolded”. During the Maya Classic period access to the elaborate pyramidal buildings was limited to the elite segment of the population, which in turn reinforced their exalted position. The community may not have had physical access to the monumental buildings; however, visually these buildings would continue to integrate the community by merging the supernatural and natural landscape thus maintaining a sense of place that was established early in the community's history (Brown 2003).

Architectural Sequence from Structure B1 at Blackman Eddy

The site of Blackman Eddy is located on a hilltop overlooking the first alluvial terrace of the Belize River. It is a fairly small ceremonial center, although it exhibits all the features of a major ceremonial center

including, large monumental architecture, a number of stelae, and a ballcourt (Figure 1) (Garber et al. 2004a). Unauthorized bulldozing activities during the 1980s partially destroyed Plaza B at the site. Structure B1 was literally cut in half. The bulldozer cut profile was cleaned and mapped (Figure 2). The remaining portion of the mound was at risk of complete destruction due to erosion. At the request of the Department of Archaeology, the Belize Valley Archaeology Project redirected the project goals and began excavating Structure B1 down to bedrock (Brown and Garber 2000). Structure B1 presented a rare

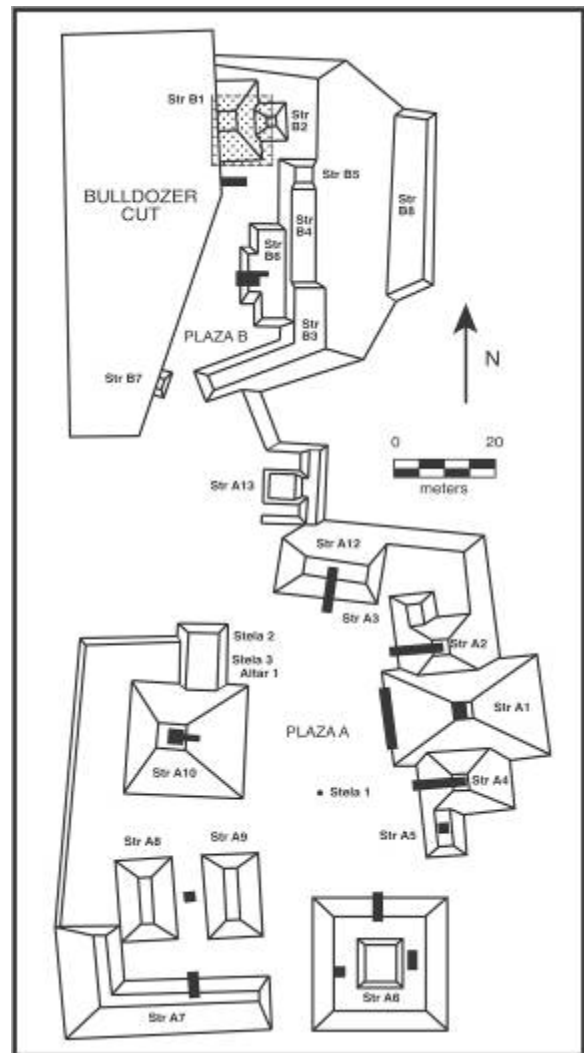


Figure 1. Blackman Eddy site core.

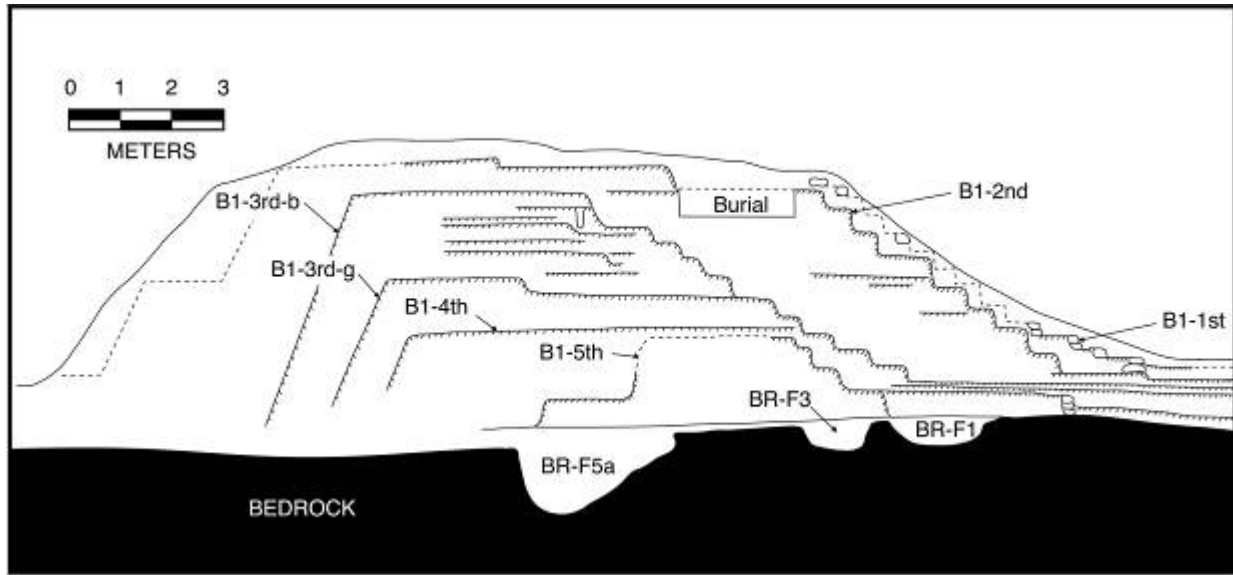


Figure 2. Profile of Structure B1.

opportunity to investigate Maya architecture using extensive horizontal/clearing excavation methods. This allowed an examination of the depositional context of ritual remains in association with early public architecture.

The initial occupation at the site, designated the Kanocha Phase (1100-900 B.C.), began towards the end of the Early Preclassic and lasted into the early Middle Preclassic (Garber et al. 2004). The sequence began with a series of bedrock level constructions that are evident through postholes carved into bedrock (Figure 3). One of these, Structure B1-13th had a plaster floor surface. Evidence suggests that the first occupants modified bedrock by leveling and filling in low areas. The presence of the posthole patterns within the Structure B1 sequence indicates a number of wattle-and-daub constructions. A number of domestic features were cut into bedrock including a two-chambered *chultun*.

Although it is clear that *chultuns* had a domestic function within household groups, these features appear to have

symbolic ideological meaning as well. Brady and Ashmore (1999:138) argue that

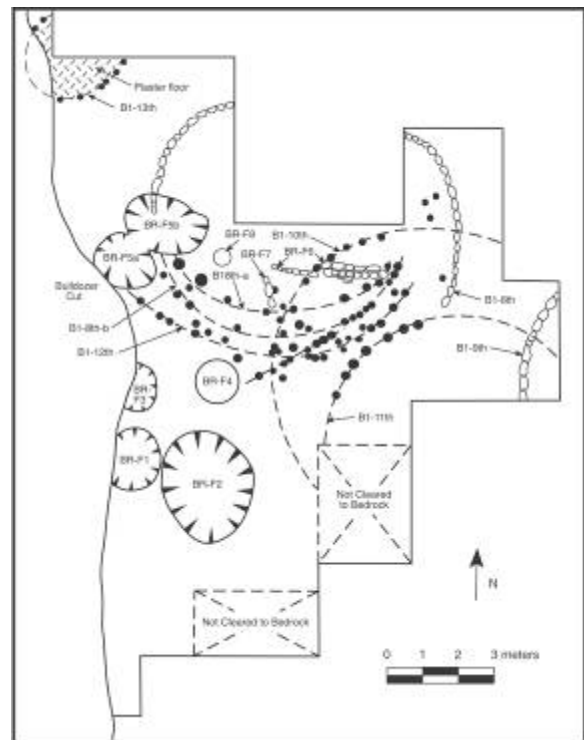


Figure 3. Plan view of bedrock features, Structure B1, Blackman Eddy.

chultuns “could plausibly be an artificial cave, next to the domestic mountain of a household platform”. Both archaeological and iconographic evidence suggests that caves were symbolically viewed as portals to the otherworld and figure prominently in Maya ideology. Puleston (1965) notes that *chultuns* are a common feature within residential household groups at Tikal as well. The early *chultun* found within the B1 sequence may be a symbolic representation of a cave or portal, which established the sacred nature of this location from the Early Preclassic. Similar bedrock features were also found at the site of Uaxactun. These included pit-like features cut into bedrock which were filled with domestic artifactual debris including conch fragments and clam shells, bone needles, carved bone, grooved stones, figurines, a bird whistle, and chert flakes and bifaces (Hendon 1999).

Numerous artifacts were encountered associated with the Kanocha Phase occupation at the site including; bone needles, stone spheres, lithic debris, a stone *tecomate*, manos, a complete colander vessel, as well as numerous Kanocha ceramic sherds. Remains of marine shell beads were found in various stages of production and numerous small chert drills and awls were also located, which suggests early craft specialization (Brown 2003; Garber et al. 2004).

Household level ritual activities are evident at Blackman Eddy from the numerous figurines found associated with the early deposits. These figurines are similar in style to Early and Middle Preclassic figurines found in other regions of Mesoamerica including Central Chiapas, Honduras, and the Northern Guatemala Highlands (Garber et al. 2004).

Early structures at Blackman Eddy appear to be associated with numerous exotic items that include obsidian, greenstone, and marine shell. The evidence

of equally numerous exotics from the nearby site of Cahal Pech indicates that the early inhabitants of the Belize River Valley were tied into a larger long-distance trade network (Awe 1992; Garber et al. 2004). The early ceramics of the Kanocha phase are very similar in form and surface decoration to early Cunil Phase ceramic material uncovered at Cahal Pech. The Kanocha phase ceramic material comprises two wares, one utilitarian with calcite and quartzite temper, and the other a dull-slipped ware characterized by ash temper (Brown 2003; Garber et al. 2004). Two apsidal or circular-shaped platforms were encountered above the early bedrock constructions at Blackman Eddy and appear to be domestic in function, as suggested from comparative data at other Middle Preclassic sites.

During this time period, new ceramic types appear in the record including Savana Orange types and the first appearance of spouted chocolate pots. Residue analysis conducted by Powis et al. (2002) on a Middle Preclassic spouted vessel from the site of Colha suggests that this form of vessel was used to serve chocolate at this early date. This establishes the use and importance of this commodity early in the Prehistory of the Maya and may be associated with early ritual feasting activities.

The early inhabitants erected low rectangular platforms over the earlier domestic apsidal platforms and perishable structures (Brown 2003; Garber et al. 2004). Structures B1-7th and B1-6th were larger and more finely constructed than other structures dating to the early Middle Preclassic and represent a considerable increase in labor investment. The platforms appear to be public in function.

Structure B1-7th had an interesting feature built into the summit surface that consisted of a plaster-lined, bathtub shaped basin which may have held water for some

special purpose. Taube suggests that in Mesoamerica, water-filled bowls were symbolically related to mirrors and were often used for divinatory scrying (1992:189). Similar water basins were found at the Middle Preclassic site of San José Mogote in Oaxaca associated with domestic households. One basin there had a diameter of 1.2m, and was covered in lime plaster and painted red. Marcus (1999) suggests that these basins may have been used for ritual divination similar to ethnohistorically documented water basins. Although the San Jose Mogote examples appear to be related to household ritual behavior, the feature from Structure B1-7th may have been used for public rituals within the community.

Located on the summit of Structure B1-6th was the basal wall of a circular platform. Although this feature had been almost completely dismantled in antiquity, making it impossible to determine its dimensions, the placement of a circular platform on top of a well-constructed and plastered rectangular platform suggests a ritual function. Similar Middle Preclassic circular platforms interpreted as ritual structures have been uncovered at Cahal Pech (Powis 1996), Rio Azul (Hendon 1989), and Uaxactun (Smith 1950). The circular platform at Rio Azul not only was heavily plastered but also was painted red on its surface (Hendon 1999). Hendon (1999:112) suggests that the “energetic investment, decoration, and lack of a superstructure point to these round platforms as having a different purpose from houses”. She suggests that round structures without superstructures may have been a form of Middle Preclassic ceremonial architecture possibly functioning as performance space (Hendon 1999).

Structures B1-7th and B1-6th appear to represent an increased emphasis on communal ritual activity within the

community. This is reflected in the ritual deposits associated with these low rectangular platforms. Evidence of feasting was located west of the platforms in the form of a deposit that consisted of smashed vessels, numerous riverine bivalve and jute shells, faunal remains, lithic flakes and debris, as well as small amounts of exotic items such as marine shell and obsidian. The deposit extended over a wide area and appears to be the debris left from a feasting event (Brown 2003).

Another ritual deposit encountered south of the platforms consists of a basin-shaped depression cut into the bedrock. This feature was cut into the bedrock and layered with approximately 15,000 riverine shells. Other artifacts present consisted of marine shell fragments, faunal remains, lithic material and numerous ceramic sherds, consisting mostly of broken water jars. This deposit indicates the importance of water symbolism to the early inhabitants (Brown 1998).

The following construction phase, Structure B1-5th, clearly served a public non-domestic function as can be seen through its size complexity and associated ritual deposits (Brown 2003; Garber et al. 2004a). Structure B1-5th had a linear triadic arrangement consisting of a central platform flanked by two lower platforms to the west and east (Figure 4). The eastern platform did not support a perishable structure, as no postholes were located. The platform appears to have functioned as performance space, and may represent an early version of a dance platform. The openness and unrestricted nature of this platform arrangement suggests that this structure may have functioned as both a special ceremonial location and as an integrative feature within the community (Brown 2003). This is further supported by an elaborate ritual deposit which was

encountered within the core of the central platform.

This deposit was placed horizontally across the inner base of the platform. The deposit was spread over the base of the building indicating that the ritual act occurred after the construction of the building had started but before the building was finished. The variability of the material remains suggests a communal ritual event that coincided possibly with the construction effort. It is conceivable that the local inhabitants participated in a communal feasting ceremony which corresponded with the construction of the building, as numerous faunal remains, smashed ceramics, and carbon were encountered. Wealth and labor from the community were invested in the construction of the building which in turn reinforced group identity and solidarity and increased the prestige of the individual sponsoring the event (Brown 2003).

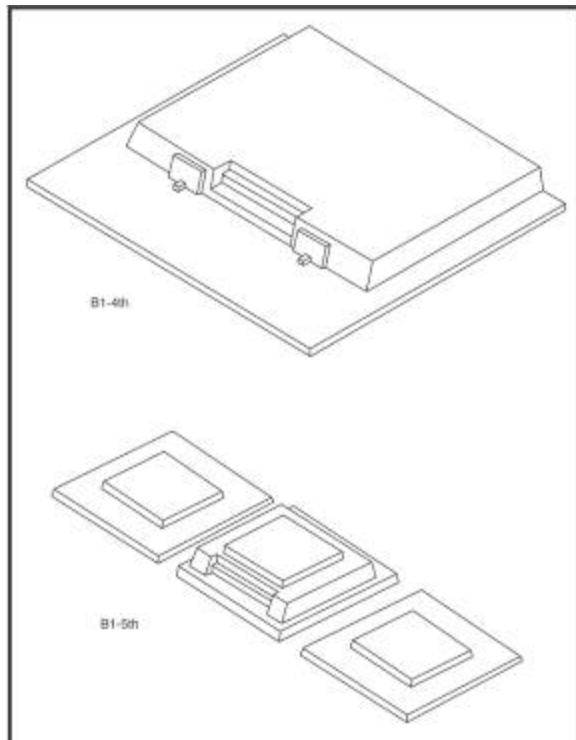


Figure 4. Isometrics of Structure B1-4th and Structure B1-5th.

The ceremonial and public function of Structure B1-5th is further supported by the physical layout of the platforms. The in-line triadic arrangement appears to reflect the Maya worldview and may symbolize the three-stone place of creation (Brown 2003; Garber et al. 2004a). Two ritual deposits were encountered above Structure B1-5th. The first deposit was encountered in the “alley” between the central and eastern platforms of B1-5th and consisted of smashed vessels, faunal remains, riverine bivalve and jute shells, lithic debitage, and carbon (Brown 1998; Garber et al. 2004). Only a few sherds could be refitted and only one complete vessel was present. A polished deer metapodial bone implement, possibly a bloodletter, was placed at the base of the deposit. Also, several small marine shell beads and a bone bead fragment were found scattered throughout the lens. Several mammal species have been identified by Norbert Stanchly from this deposit including domestic dog, rabbit, white-tailed deer, brocket deer, peccary, and armadillo.

This ritual deposit at Blackman Eddy may represent a ceremonial feasting event, which corresponds to the termination, or ritual ending, of the structure. Dumped as it was in the alleyway, the ritual feasting debris would symbolically represent the termination of the use of the structure.

An elaborate offering was encountered above and to the east of the termination deposit between the two platforms. This offering appears to be a consecration or dedication feasting deposit related to the subsequent construction phase, Structure B1-4th. The deposit extended over several square meters and consisted of four restorable vessels, several partial vessels, a jade bead, a deer mandible and scapula, numerous ceramic sherds, a broken mano, and the inner core of a conch shell (Brown and Garber 1998; Brown et al. 1998, 1999). The jade bead was placed upon a partial

ceramic plate, which appears to have been broken in half. Several other partially restorable vessels were excavated including two unusual Savana Orange: Rejolla Variety stirrup-spouted vessels. Overall, the ceramic data from the deposit constitutes an assemblage dating to the break between the early and late Middle Preclassic (700-600 B.C.). It is interesting to note that all of the restorable and partial vessels were serving vessels (Brown 2003).

Constructed above Structure B1-5th is Structure B1-4th, a Middle Preclassic single-tiered rectangular platform with an inset staircase and an extended basal platform which was decorated by a stucco mask façade (Figure 4). This is the earliest documented architectural mask found within the Maya Lowlands as of yet, dating to the Late Middle Preclassic (Brown and Garber 1998; Brown et al. 1998). The summit surface of Str. B1-4th was heavily burned and the mask facade was desecrated in antiquity possibly indicating warfare activity at this time and unfortunately, no iconographic evidence could be recovered from the mask façade (Brown and Garber 2003; Brown et al. 1998). However, the ideological implications of a god mask flanking a Middle Preclassic platform include emerging elitism and the use of public architecture to legitimize the elevated status of the elite (Brown 2003).

The origins of mask facades in the Maya Lowlands have been difficult to understand due to the lack of evidence for an earlier mask tradition. The discovery of a Middle Preclassic mask indicates that Late Preclassic and Classic architectural decoration actually evolved out of an earlier mask tradition and, hence that the material symbol system of kingship had antecedents in the Middle Preclassic (Brown and Garber 1998; Brown et al. 1998). This is not to suggest that the institution of kingship was present at this early date, but rather that the

ideological concepts which would have allowed the transition to, and acceptance of, the institution of kingship were in the early stages of development at this time.

Structure B1-3rd was erected above Structure B1-4th and marks a shift in construction materials and architectural style involving an increase in labor and material investment. Structure B1-3rd, involved six additions to the original structure, four of which date to the Late Preclassic (Figure 5). The earliest three sub-phases, B1-3rd-g, B1-3rd-f, and B1-3rd-e, date to the late Middle Preclassic and indicate a dramatic increase in rebuilding activities. The basal platform of Structure B1-3rd is a large rectangular structure with outset platforms that flank an inset staircase. These platforms were constructed of large monolithic cut limestone blocks and appear to have functioned as formal performance space (Brown 2003). Located on the summit of the basal platform was a deposit of several whole and partial vessels dating to the late Middle Preclassic, numerous riverine bivalve and jute shells, a chert blade, faunal remains including rodent bones, and carbon fragments. This deposit represents the last event of this nature within the Structure B1 sequence. Above it, a small cache was found associated with the addition to the summit platform. It consisted of a single carved shell pendant and an obsidian blade placed within the fill of the platform that appears to represent a modest dedication deposit.

Structure B1-3rd-d signals a change in architectural style to a more pyramidal form (Brown 2003). Evidence discussed below also indicates a shift in ritual behavior as well. A single Joventud vessel was placed in front of the building intrusive into the associated plaza surface and appears to be associated with Structure B1-3rd-d. The single-vessel dedication cache is important because it signals a change in ritual behavior

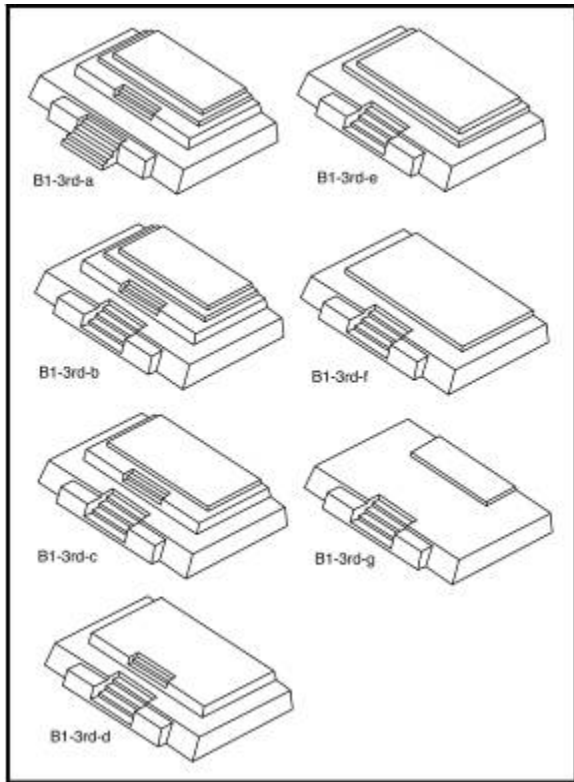


Figure 5. Construction phases of Structure B1-3rd.

from communal ritual activity to a more restrictive form of caching behavior that appears for the first time at the end of the Late Middle Preclassic (Brown 2003). Caches placed within buildings and under associated plaza surfaces become the dominant form of ritual deposits during the Late Preclassic and Classic periods, as opposed to deposits placed on top, between, and in front of platforms. Baines and Yoffee (2002) argue that many symbolic and aesthetic items produced solely for elite use were often deposited in restrictive places. It is interesting to note that this pattern is also seen at other sites in the Belize Valley. For example, at Las Ruinas de Arenal, a plaza dedicatory cache dating to the Late Preclassic was found beneath the plaza surface in front of Structure 1-3rd. It consisted of 19 ceramic dishes, one of which had a single jade bead placed inside (Taschek and Ball 1999). Awe (1985) notes

that at the site of Caledonia ceramic vessels were the central objects in Classic period caches and Thompson (1931) noted a similar pattern at the site of Mountain Cow.

Structure B1-3rd was modified repeatedly in order to increase the height of the ceremonial structure, suggesting that the inhabitants of Blackman Eddy needed to invest more labor and material goods in order to compete with neighboring communities. There does appear to be substantial expansion in labor costs due to the increased size of the structure and the quarrying and transportation of the monolithic stones used in the construction. Larger architecture begins to appear elsewhere in the Belize Valley during the transition from Middle to Late Preclassic as seen at Actuncan, Cahal Pech, Pacbitun, El Pilar, Buenavista del Cayo, and possibly Xunantich. It becomes apparent that the inhabitants of Blackman Eddy were struggling to compete with several sites within the Belize Valley that may well have been gaining power during this time.

The construction of Structure B1-2nd marks a significant change in the sequence, with the addition of large stucco mask facades flanking the central staircase of the pyramid (Figure 6). Structure B1-2nd has two sub-phases, of which the earlier version dates to the Late Preclassic/Protoclassic time period and the later version dates to the

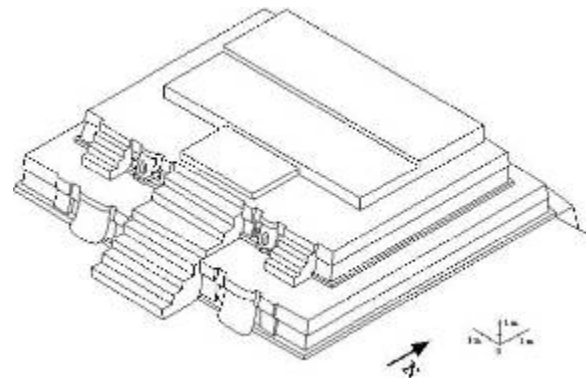


Figure 6. Isometric of Structure B1-2nd.

Early Classic time period.

The central section of the mask on Structure B1-2nd represents a head of an anthromorph. The basal section of the mask is well preserved and iconographic elements are present. A bowl is seen in cross-section with an outwardly flaring rim. Three dots are depicted on the bowl (Garber et al. 1995). The face of the mask is poorly preserved and very little detail could be ascertained, but the face does appear to have featured some form of helmet or headgear given the double course of outset stones that were encountered above it (Garber et al. 1995).

The iconographic theme of the mask facade exhibits a head emerging from a bowl in profile. Garber et al. (2000, 2004) suggests that the central head represents a prominent figure within the Maya creation story, the father of the hero twins, who was sacrificed by decapitation by the lords of the underworld. The mask facade illustrates the head of first father emerging from a bowl or a portal place. This emergence or symbolic birth reflects the transformation of the severed head into the Maize God (Garber et al. 2000). The bowl represents a bloodletting bowl from which the head is emerging. Bowls with bloodletting paraphernalia placed inside are common within the corpus of Classic Maya iconography (Freidel et al. 1993). Also of importance, three stucco dot elements reflecting the three stones of creation are located on the bowl beneath the head. The three stones of creation symbolically reflect the hearthstones at the center of a Maya household, which, in turn, represents the centering of the cosmos and the separation of the earth and sky at the moment of creation (Freidel et al. 1993).

Maize god insignia are intricately tied to the institution of kingship and are seen throughout the Classic period on a variety of media, which indicates the importance of this iconographic display on

Structure B1-2nd. Such decoration on the architecture clearly communicates the significance of sacrifice and bloodletting rituals, which in turn helps maintain the social order (Brown 2003). The ruler would perform sacred rituals on this building, linking himself to the supernatural and therefore legitimizing his role within the community.

The ritual deposits associated with Structure B1-2nd further illustrate the restricted nature of the newly defined sacred space. An interesting cache consisting of an infant burial and a Protoclassic vessel was encountered beneath the plaza surface in front of Structure B1-2nd. This cache was most likely a dedication deposit associated with the initial construction of the pyramid, Structure B1-2nd-b. The burial was housed in a partial crypt and the vessel was placed in the lap of the infant. The infant remains were poorly preserved and the cause of death could not be determined. However, infant sacrifices are commonly used in dedication rituals during the Classic period and therefore it seems probable that the infant was sacrificed during the consecration of the building.

A single-vessel cache was also encountered intrusive through the lower tier summit surface and contained a Santa Elena Orange: Dos Arroyos Variety polychrome basal flange vessel. The vessel had a kill hole slightly off center, and was associated with freshwater shells and carbon.

Other evidence at Blackman Eddy such as the erection of a ballcourt and the flurry of construction activities in Plaza A indicates an emphasis on reinforcing sacred power at the site. That Early Classic inhabitants were attempting to compete for power within the Belize Valley is suggested by the addition to B1-2nd. Early Classic monuments including a carved stela were also found in Plaza A indicating the acknowledgment of its prominence. This is

the earliest stela with a long count date within the Belize Valley. The monument was carved in an earlier tradition (Garber and Brown 2000), which may be an effort to deliberately reflect on a previous time when Blackman Eddy was a relatively powerful center within the valley. However, it is quite apparent that Blackman Eddy was unable to compete with several major polities located in the upper end of the valley. The political and social landscape within the valley was transformed during the transition from the Protoclassic to the Early Classic and a number of more powerful centers emerged and erected massive monumental architecture.

There does appear to be a short hiatus in construction on Structure B1 during the latter part of the Early Classic and the early part of the following Late Classic period. The Late Classic at Blackman Eddy witnessed the continuation of construction within Plaza A and the ballcourt was also modified at this time, so it seems that the focus of activity at the site shifted to the southern section of the site core.

Several problematic deposits were encountered in association with the Late Classic construction phase, but appear to have been dumped on the side of Structure B1-2nd during the short hiatus of construction (Pagliaro et al. 2000). These deposits may reflect ceremonial rituals occurring at the source of ideological power located at the northern end of the site (Structure B1). These deposits contain large quantities of broken ceramic sherds and an array of other cultural materials in various stages of use. Preliminary analysis of the ceramic material indicates a Late Classic date, which suggests that this deposit was placed in the alleyway after Structure B1-2nd was no longer in use but prior to the construction of Structure B1-1st.

The final construction phase of Structure B1 (B1-1st) was erected hastily.

Due to deterioration and poor preservation, little is known about this final phase. The dimensions and position of the intact remains of Structure B1-1st relative to the contours of the mound suggest that it was probably a two-tiered structure reaching a height of approximately 4.2 meters from the associated plaza surface. Seven partially preserved steps were encountered although excavations at the top of the structure clearly showed that more steps would have been necessary to reach the summit of the building. The building was constructed of finely cut limestone masonry of variable sizes. This may indicate that the pyramid was erected so quickly that building stones were borrowed from previous construction phases.

Another interesting deposit was encountered at the base of Structure B1-1st. Here, a dense deposit of ceramic sherds was uncovered which is similar to terminal deposits found at Blackman Eddy Group 1 (Garber et al. 1992) Ontario Village (Garber et al. 1994) and Floral Park (Brown et al. 1996; Glassman et al. 1995). This deposit appears to be the final ritual act at the site and may represent an abandonment termination ritual which in essence “deactivated” the sacred space of the site. No further construction was encountered on Structure B1 or elsewhere at the site.

By the Late Classic it is evident that the inhabitants of Blackman Eddy played only a minor role in the sociopolitical landscape of the Belize Valley although the final construction of Structure B1 may reflect a futile last-ditch effort to proclaim their authority (Brown and Garber 2000). Shortly thereafter, during the Terminal Classic period, the site was abandoned.

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper we examined the role of public architecture, defined sacred space, and ritual in the rise of complexity at the site

of Blackman Eddy. The examination of architectural styles and associated ritual deposits from a diachronic perspective provides insight into the transformation of ideological concepts which support developing social ranking within the society. Ancient Maya ritual behavior may be inferred not only from the direct material remains of ritual acts, but also from the attributes of architectural features such as the arrangement of structures, architectural decoration, and performance space.

The recent investigations of Structure B1 at Blackman Eddy have provided an unprecedented database of Preclassic architecture and ritual activity. This new evidence suggests that emerging elites initially used low platforms to host communal feasts, which bolstered their prestige within the community. As certain individuals gained support and more power, new architectural forms and ritual caching behavior were introduced which reflect a change in social order. This manifests itself in the archaeological record as limited access to both public architecture and associated ritual activities. The introduction of new elaborate architectural forms, such as the pyramid, reinforces the adoption of new ideological concepts to legitimize a changing social order and uneven wealth distribution within the community.

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