

IDENTIFYING ARCHETYPAL ATTRIBUTES OF MAYA CEREMONIAL  
ARCHITECTURE: CLUES TO THE LATE CLASSIC SOCIOPOLITICAL STATUS OF  
PACBITUN, BELIZE

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The E Group complex is one of the most widely known archetypes in Maya archaeology. The complex's easily recognized configuration has helped archaeologists to identify this archetype at hundreds of sites throughout the Southern Maya Lowlands. However, things are not always what they appear to be. Conducted by Jaime Awe and colleagues (2016), a reinvestigation of excavation data of assemblages long designated as E Group complexes in a region known as the Belize River Valley revealed several unique attributes not typical of the E Group complex. Awe et al. (2016) suggest that these assemblages appear to function more as "eastern shrines" than E Groups and propose they be relabeled as "eastern triadic assemblages." Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to provide a more comprehensive and methodological study of a single Belize Valley assemblage located at the site of Pacbitun, Belize. The temporal examination of Pacbitun's assemblage provided in this thesis was able to identify physical, spatial, and functional attributes associated with each phase of construction. These attributes were then compared with attributes associated with E Groups, eastern shrines, and eastern triadic assemblages. The results revealed that, while Pacbitun's assemblage does follow the architectural progression exhibited by other Belize Valley assemblages, the assemblage does not truly become an eastern triadic assemblage until the beginning of the Late Classic period (AD 550). Furthermore, the transition of Pacbitun's assemblage coincides with several other architectural modifications in and around the site suggesting that Pacbitun was experiencing sociopolitical change or unrest at this time. The breakdown of the political organization of the Belize Valley will provide scenarios concerning Pacbitun's political situation as well as an explanation for the unique architectural progression of Pacbitun's assemblage through time. This study hopes to not only contribute to current and future research of the Belize Valley

eastern triadic assemblages but also to the understanding of the Classic period political situation of Pacbitun in the Belize River Valley.

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My path to becoming an archaeologist began sometime around 2010. It was shortly thereafter, in 2011, that I chose to focus on the Maya civilization. In large part, this was due to my Pacbitun field school experience with Dr. Terry Powis. Terry's enthusiasm for archaeology, dedication to his work and students, and determination for perfection is unmatched. Much of what I have learned about archaeology and all that it entails is thanks to him. The opportunities he has entrusted in me, both in the field and in professional settings, has given me the confidence to succeed in my endeavors. Thus, it is with immense gratitude that I acknowledge Dr. Terry Powis for his encouragement and guidance through my research process.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

To aid in the identification and categorization of structures and plaza formations, Marshall Becker (2003) examined the architectural composition of plazas. Studying the organization of structures within plaza groups at the large Maya site of Tikal, Becker (1971, 1982, 2003, 2004) categorized a total of ten distinct arrangements designated as “Plaza Plans.” Basically, Becker was able to use architectural and spatial attributes of structures within plaza groups to categorize and assign function. This categorization was created to help archaeologists hypothesize functions of plaza groups prior to excavation. Becker (2003:253) also states that “each group pattern, or ‘plaza plan,’ reveals an architectural grammar that can be used to understand urban and rural settlement patterns throughout the Maya realm.” The two plaza patterns pertaining to this thesis are Plaza Plan 10 (PP10) and Plaza Plan 2 (PP2). The architecture that defines these groups are the E Group complex (PP10) and the eastern shrine residential group (PP2). Both types are well documented and their functional identities are continuing to become more distinct.

In the context of this thesis, an E Group or eastern shrine “archetype” will refer to structures with similar physical, spatial, and/or functional attributes constructed to represent an original version of that particular structure. To provide a modern day example, a church is an archetype that can be identified by several basic shared attributes. Architectural attributes of churches may include a steeple, nave, and stain glass windows. Spatially, churches can be cruciform in shape and located near cemeteries. When looking at function, most know that a church generally operates as a public space for religious worship. However, to limit functional ambiguity, resources such as religious items, art, and text associated with a church may also help to categorize that church’s specific religious function. For example, a missalette is to

Catholicism just as a shofar is to Judaism. These artifacts help to narrow the religious practice and, thus, become functional attributes of their associated archetypes. When dealing with ancient Maya archetypes, physical, spatial, and functional attributes can be observed and identified in a similar manner. Unfortunately, Maya archaeologists do not have the advantage of observing the entire artifactual picture, nor do they have the luxury of predetermined function for architecture. Maya architecture is often vaguely identified as either domestic or ritual/ceremonial with little functional identities. However, by linking common attributes, it is possible to categorize Maya architecture and attempt to determine function. This thesis will try to do just that.

Simply defined as a trio of eastern plaza temples on a shared platform paired with a single western plaza structure, the E Group's architectural variability and overall function is often a topic of debate. One of the most recent E Group studies, conducted by Jaime Awe and colleagues (2016), reinvestigates several excavated E Group assemblages in the Belize River Valley region. Superficially, the Belize Valley assemblages appear to be architecturally similar to the E Group in that they are composed of an eastern triadic formation often paired with a single western plaza structure. However, Awe et al.'s (2016) study of the Belize Valley assemblages have documented several physical and functional attributes that are not thought to be typical of the E Group archetype. According to Awe and colleagues (2016), the Belize Valley assemblages have several distinct architectural characteristics and an unusual amount of burials when compared to E Groups outside of this region. In fact, the attributes of the Belize Valley assemblages appear to be more indicative of attributes commonly associated with eastern shrines which suggests that these assemblages could be acting as triadic versions of this archetype (Awe et al. 2016). Because of these unique attributes, Awe and colleagues (2016) have proposed that

the Belize Valley assemblages should no longer be designated as E Groups but should be re-categorized beneath a new archetypal label. To reflect the proposed function of these assemblages, Awe and colleagues (2016) originally referred to the Belize Valley assemblages as “eastern triadic shrines” but would later decide that the label should be more function neutral. They now refer to the archetype as either an “eastern triadic assemblage” when discussing the complex as a whole (the three eastern buildings and the western structure), or an “eastern triadic structure” when only discussing the three eastern buildings (Awe et al. 2016). Ultimately, the eastern triadic assemblage/structure label implies that the unique attributes shared by the Belize Valley assemblages, varying enough from both the E Group and eastern shrine archetypes, justify the development of the new archetypal category.

Although Awe et al.’s (2016) investigation of these assemblages demonstrates that the Belize Valley architecture is clearly unique when compared to the E Group complex, due to the implications of these findings, it is important that each of the Belize Valley assemblages under question be thoroughly analyzed. Thus, I examined a single eastern triadic assemblage at the site of Pacbitun located on the southern periphery of the Belize River Valley. Included in Awe and colleagues 2016 study, Pacbitun’s assemblage appears to fit the eastern triadic assemblage model quite well. Therefore, the purpose of my examination of Pacbitun’s assemblage was not to test Awe et al.’s (2016) model. Rather, in an attempt to offer an explanation for the unique attributes of these assemblages, I thought it would be important to refine the eastern triadic assemblage model by conducting a more comprehensive and methodological study focusing on each structure that composes Pacbitun’s assemblage. As a result, after carefully sorting through the admixture of archetypal attributes exhibited in each structure’s architectural and burial data, the archetypal status of Pacbitun’s assemblage became slightly more complex.

Importantly, the key element that separates and augments my investigation from the earlier research is that my study observed the construction and development of Pacbitun's assemblage and associated burials through time. My investigation explores the construction events of each structure composing Pacbitun's assemblage from their initial constructions to the final construction phase. The examination was designed to identify the attributes associated with each individual construction phase. The attributes of each construction phase of Pacbitun's assemblage were then compared with defining attributes belonging to the E Group and eastern shrine archetypes as well as with the newly formulated eastern triadic assemblage archetype. My study's temporal organizational approach allowed for the recognition of the installation, development, and cessation of all archetypal attributes exhibited by the assemblage. Thus, as the first goal of this thesis, it was imperative to replicate my examination of Pacbitun's assemblage to demonstrate how this method of investigation was able to provide clues to explain the existence of the assemblage's unique attributes. As the data will indicate, the early construction phases of Pacbitun's assemblage does not initially conform to the E Group archetype and appears to precisely follow the Belize Valley architectural progression of an eastern triadic assemblage (Awe et al. 2016). However, despite the odd architectural evolution, my investigation suggests that the assemblage may have acquired E Group attributes over the course of the first few construction events. Moreover, although my investigation of Pacbitun's assemblage does identify attributes belonging to Awe et al.'s (2016) eastern triadic assemblage model, a few vital attributes associated with this model were not present in the early phases. In fact, some of these vital eastern triadic assemblage attributes were not entirely apparent until the assemblage's second to last construction phase dating to the early Late Classic (AD 550-700). It is after this event that Pacbitun's assemblage may have been converted from an E Group-like assemblage

into the Belize Valley eastern triadic assemblage archetype. I plan to show how the timing and duration of E Group and eastern shrine attributes of Pacbitun's assemblage actually coincide with the widespread Lowland installation and development of these archetypes.

The second and final goal of this thesis is to identify possible reasons for the sudden installation of eastern shrine attributes at Pacbitun. Interestingly, evidence suggests that a single burial placed into Pacbitun's assemblage during the early Late Classic (AD 550-700) event may have served to convert the assemblage into a triadic version of an eastern shrine archetype. Marshall Becker (1999:144-145; 2004:129) details the specific actions that are thought to be required to convert a non-shrine structure into an eastern shrine. A review of the role and evolution of Maya ancestor veneration will help to explain the purpose of the conversion of Pacbitun's most sacred architecture and could indicate that the site was experiencing sociopolitical change or unrest. A detailed description of other Late Classic constructions and modifications at Pacbitun appears to support this hypothesis. Moreover, a closer look at the events occurring in the Belize Valley and Southern Maya Lowlands at this time may elucidate Pacbitun's political situation and offer a possible explanation for the conversion of the assemblage. The results of this investigation will help to facilitate further discussion at the site level, which, in turn, will engender greater comparisons at the regional level.

Chapter 2, broken into three sections, will introduce and discuss the E Group complex, the eastern triadic assemblage, and the eastern shrine archetypes. The first section will begin with a historical review of E Group research including a summary of the hypothesized functional interpretations of the complex. The second section will provide an explanation of Awe and colleagues (2016) model for eastern triadic assemblages in the Belize River Valley. The third section will then conclude with a review of eastern shrine research. Ultimately, the purpose of

these three sections is to inform the reader of attributes that belong to each archetype. Chapter 3 will open with a brief site description and provide background information on the site of Pacbitun. The majority of this chapter, however, will detail the excavation history of Pacbitun's E Group arrangement providing an in-depth description of the architecture and interment data. To avoid confusion and the attribution of function, when discussing all four structures that comprise Pacbitun's "E Group" (Structures 1, 2, 4, and 5), this thesis will refer to the group of structures as the "ceremonial assemblage." Combining the earlier excavation data with the more recent 2014 investigation, Chapter 3 will chronologically detail the construction events and interments of Pacbitun's assemblage from the Middle Preclassic (900 – 300 BC) to the late Late Classic period (AD 700 -900). Chapter 4 will then chronologically sort and categorize the attributes that are present and attempt to assign an archetype label, if applicable, to each time period. This chapter will also detail the precise moment when Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage becomes an eastern triadic assemblage. Once a timeline has been developed for Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage, I will demonstrate how the time frame of the site's proposed E Group and eastern triadic assemblage architecture compares with the construction and duration of E Group and eastern shrine archetypes elsewhere in the Lowlands. Chapter 5 will then discuss what the presence of these two archetypes and their interments might have meant for the site. To support the socio-political turmoil of Pacbitun and the Belize Valley, Chapter 6 will detail the site's Late Classic constructions and modifications and discuss the regional events that may have influenced changes at this time. This discussion will also explain how Pacbitun's sociopolitical changes could have been internally or externally motivated and in an attempt to identify who may have been responsible for the conversion of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage. Finally, Chapter 7 will provide a concluding discussion of the ceremonial assemblage at Pacbitun and the

Belize Valley and will also present this study's limitations and suggest how this investigation might benefit from further inquiry.

## **CHAPTER TWO: E GROUP, EASTERN TRIADIC ASSEMBLAGE, AND EASTERN SHRINE ARCHETYPAL ATTRIBUTES**

### The E Group Archetype

The Maya area can be subdivided into three geographical zones; the Pacific Coastal Plains, the Highlands, and the Lowlands. The Lowland zone is characterized by low elevation and stretches from the Yucatan Peninsula down through the northern portion of Guatemala where it transitions into the northern Highlands (Sharer and Traxler 2006:41-52). As previously mentioned, the E Group complex is almost exclusively a Lowland archetype, located predominantly in the southern half of this zone (Figure 1) (A. Chase and D. Chase 2016).



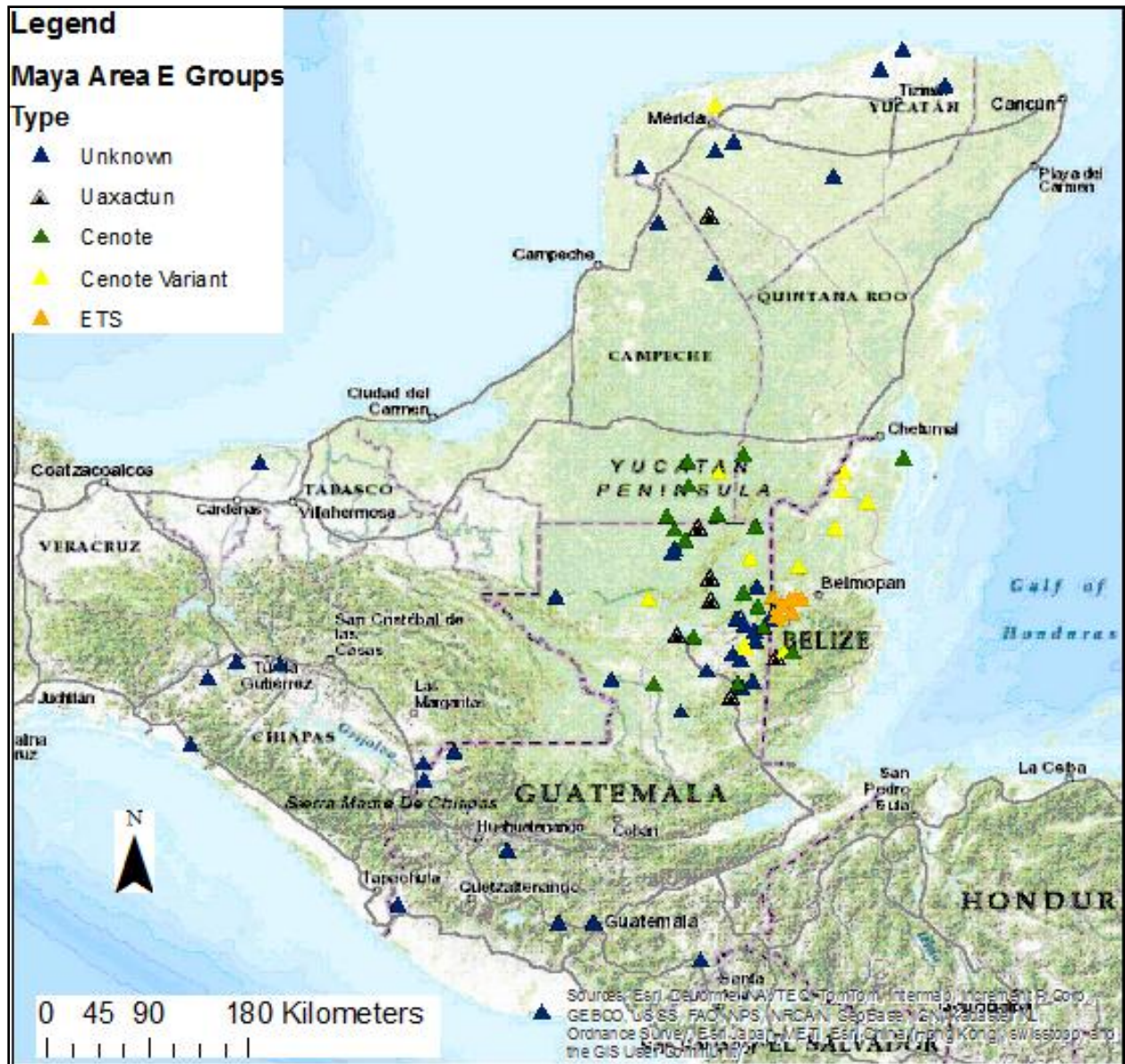


Figure 1: A map of the Maya area demonstrating the concentration of E Groups in the Southern Maya Lowlands (created by author; basemap courtesy of Esri).

Excavations at Ceibal in Guatemala suggest that the Maya were constructing E Groups as early as 1000 BC (Inomata et al. 2013:3-4). However, the formation, thought to be derived from the earlier Olmec civilization, may be much older (Lowe 1977:224-226). Nevertheless, the E Group is thought to be one of the earliest forms of monumental architecture in the Southern Maya Lowlands.

The earliest and most basic configuration of the complex is composed of a long, low, north-south oriented platform bordering an eastern plaza edge that is paired with a single, central western plaza structure. Although not all are found with a western structure, this plaza formation and orientation are the basic physical and spatial attributes of the E Group complex (Figure 2).

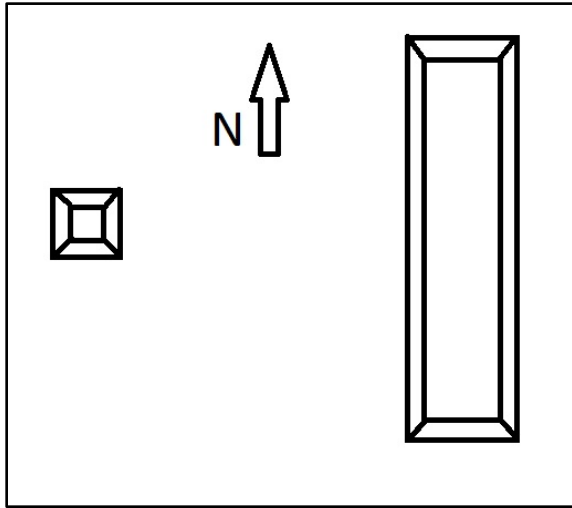


Figure 2: An plan view illustration of the basic physical and spatial attributes of an E Group complex (drawn by author).

However, there are also several other architectural attributes that can be associated with the majority of Maya E Group assemblages to help further categorize the complex. Arlen and Diane Chase (1995:99) created two sub-categories of E Groups known as the Uaxactun style and the Cenote style; both deriving their name from the sites at which they were found. The two categories simply distinguish between the architectural differences of the eastern plaza platform. Although both styles contain the basic attributes of E Groups mentioned above, additional constructions to the eastern platform usually went in one of two directions. According to A. Chase and D. Chase (1995:93), the Uaxactun style “comprises a separate rectangular unit, usually about 70m in length and supporting three buildings;” and in the Cenote style, “the

supporting platform is much longer and narrower and there is a focus on the squarish central pyramid which appears in plan to be appended to the much lower platform” (Figure 3). A. Chase (1983:187) also alludes to another style known as the Cenote Variant (Aimers and Rice 2006:81). James Aimers and Prudence Rice (2006:81) describe this type as “having significant morphological differences” than the Uaxactun and Cenote styles. Examples of the Cenote Variant can be found at Cahal Pichik and Hatzcab Ceel.

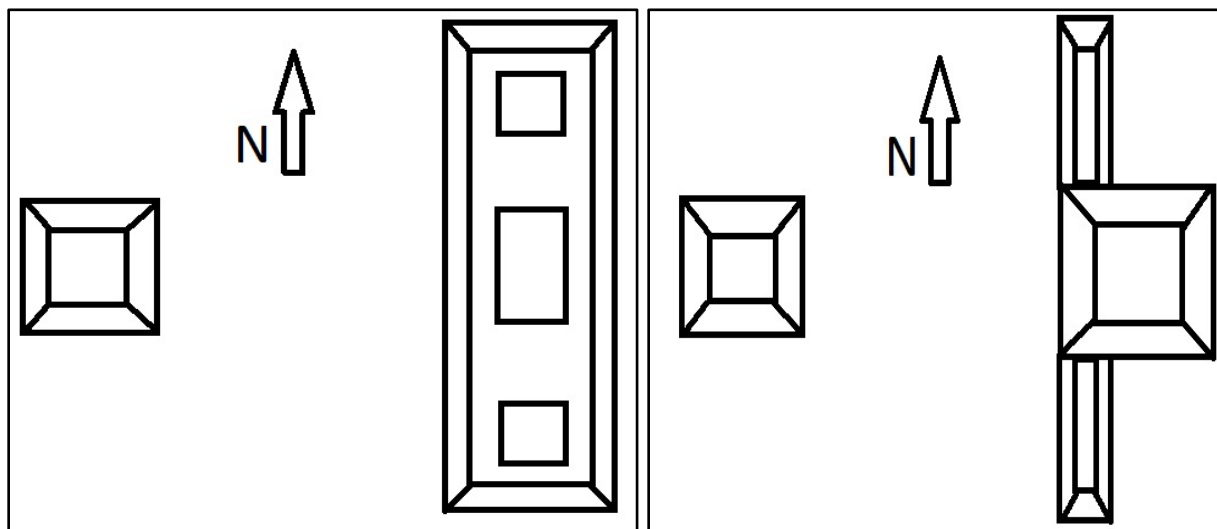


Figure 3: An illustration of the Uaxactun (left) and Cenote (right) style E Group complexes (redrawn by author after A. Chase and D. Chase 2016, Figure 1).

No matter the style, E Groups are generally paired with a pyramidal structure on the opposing side, or western side of the plaza. Western structures in E Group arrangements are often thought to represent radial pyramids (Cohodas 1980). Radial pyramids are large structures with four stairways on four symmetrical sides (Figure 4). Early versions of these pyramids are also often found without superstructures (Cohodas 1980:209). Although the western structures in E Groups are not always radial, Marvin Cohodas (1980) believes the structure’s similarities in orientation, architecture, and symbolism implies that they are related to radial pyramids in both

form and function. Therefore, a radial formation may be considered a physical attribute of an E Group's western structure.

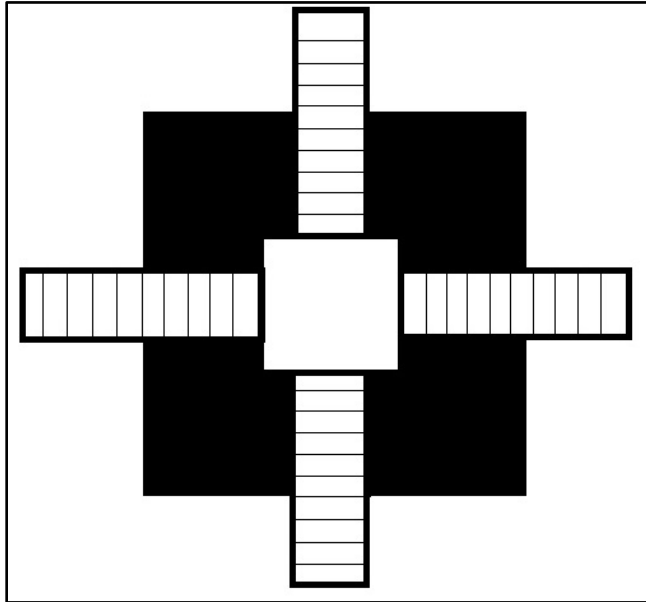


Figure 4: A plan view illustration of a radial pyramid (drawn by author).

Aside from architecture and arrangement, there are several other indicators that help to identify an E Group complex. Features often associated with E Group complexes include monuments such as stone stelae and altars and another common form of monumental architecture known as a Maya ballcourt (Aimers and Rice 2006:89-93). E Group assemblages are also frequently centrally located within the site core and are thought to be “the central organizational focus for a given center” (Aimers 1993; A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:100). Looking closely at the spatial characteristics of E Groups, a study conducted by Aimers (1993:209, Table 3) found that the majority of these complexes are found in unrestricted or semi-

restricted plazas. Although the precise function of the E Group is unknown and heavily debated, scholars generally agree that the assemblage was used for ritual/ceremonial purposes.

### E Group Function

There are six functional explanations that have been proposed for E Group complexes (Awe et al. 2016). These functions include the astronomical observatory hypothesis, agriculture and trade scheduling, agricultural ritual, geomancy, ancestor ritual, and calendrical ritual (Aimers and Rice 2006; Aylesworth 2004; Carlson 1981; Coggins 1983; A. Chase and D. Chase 1995; Rathje 1972; 1978; Ricketson and Ricketson 1937). For the purpose of this thesis, only three of these proposed functions will be discussed due to their validity and their significance to the current study: the astronomical observatory hypothesis; the calendrical period ending valedictory hypothesis, and the ancestral ritual hypothesis.

### *Astronomical Hypothesis*

The E Group complex was first documented by Frans Blom (1924) during his excavations in the 1920s in Group E at the ancient Maya site of Uaxactun in Guatemala. The complex's wide spread recognition had come after the discovery of the solstitial and equinoctial observatory capabilities first recognized by Blom (1924) and later by Oliver and Edith Ricketson (1937). An observer standing on Structure E-VII looking east would see the sun rise over the northern edge of Structure E-I on the summer solstice, over the southern edge of Structure E-III during the winter solstice, and over Structure E-II during both vernal and autumnal equinoxes (Sharer and Traxler 2006:321; Figure 7.11.). Thus, the solar astronomical observatory hypothesis was formulated (for more see Aimers and Rice 2006; Aylesworth 2004; Doyle 2012;

Ricketson and Ricketson 1937). Since its discovery, hundreds of E Group complexes have been documented at sites throughout the Maya Lowlands (Friedel et al. 2016). Several of these E Groups were also tested by those who questioned the observational accuracy of the complex. Karl Ruppert and John Denison (1943) were the first to test and identify similar architecture at other sites. Ruppert and Denison (1943) concluded that those E Group assemblages that did not accurately mark the solar positions were ritual settings built to mimic the complex at Uaxactun - the complex they believed to be the E Group prototype. Later, excavations of E Groups at Cahal Pichik (Belize), Cenote (Guatemala), Hatzcap Ceel (Belize), and Tikal (Guatemala) all revealed earlier architecture dating to the early Late Preclassic, thus discrediting Uaxactun's complex as the "original and purest expression of the assemblage" (A. Chase 1983:1241-1244, 1985; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987; A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:91; Laporte and Fialko 1987, 1990; Thompson 1931). To further contradict Uaxactun's E Group as the prototype for all other E Groups, excavations of the E Groups at Caracol, Belize and Tikal, Guatemala revealed that both assemblages were originally constructed in the Cenote style and were later transformed into a Uaxactun style (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:99). Therefore, the Cenote style is now thought to predate the Uaxactun style.

Anthony Aveni and Horst Hartung (1989), experts in the field of archaeoastronomy, also tested the observational capabilities of Uaxactun and several other sites with E Group complexes using transit measurements. They found that, prior to the final constructions of Structure E-VII, Uaxactun's group could accurately mark the summer and winter solstices; however, the central structure would have failed to precisely mark the equinoxes. Furthermore, Aveni and Hartung (1989:455) originally believed that other E Group complexes would have likely served as nonfunctioning replicas. Aveni and Hartung (1989:455) supported Ruppert and Dennison's

(1943) nonfunctioning solar observatory hypothesis stating that the Maya would have been more concerned with the accuracy of the ritual and ceremonial aspects of the complex than the accuracy of solar observation. This, however, was later retracted after an alignment study conducted by Aveni and colleagues (2003) found that E Groups would have, at one point, accurately marked the four important solar positions and may have even tracked important solar zenith passages as well.

Testing the Belize Valley assemblages on the summer solstice, Aimers and Rice (2006:86) found that the north buildings failed to accurately mark the solar phenomenon. Although this may be, in part, due to the incorrect orientation or alignment of the structures that make up the assemblages, the nonsymmetrical architectural attribute of the Belize Valley assemblages, a major point supporting Awe and colleagues (2016) eastern triadic assemblage argument, could be the cause of the inaccuracy.

The nonfunctioning solar observatory hypothesis suggests that Lowland E Group complexes were used solely for ritual and ceremonial use. This is not to say that early forms of E Groups did not track the movements of the sun, as Aveni and colleagues (2003) have more recently suggested. As Aimers and Rice (2006:92) state, by the Middle Preclassic “these large, centrally located, and morphologically distinctive architectural complexes became increasingly grandiose commemorations of the sun’s journey-- and of time itself, in a more metaphorical sense.” Although nonfunctional, this would explain the continuation of the E Group’s symmetrical theme. Thus, if the ancient Maya were paying homage to the yearly movements and significant positions of the sun, the easiest deduction of a ritual and/or ceremonial function of the complex may point to important calendrical cycles pertaining to trade (Rathje 1972, 1978),

agriculture (Cohodas 1980), and even temporally-based political affairs (Aimers and Rice 2006:83; Rice 2004).

### *Agricultural Cycles and Valedictory Celebrations*

The close tie between the Maya calendar and agricultural cycles may indicate that the E Group, possibly ritually/ceremonially associated with annual celebrations, functioned as a complex for agricultural ritual (Aimers 1993:46; Aveni and Hartung 1986; Cohodas 1980). Several lines of architectural and spatial evidence of E Groups support the agricultural claim. As previously mentioned, the E Groups western structure is thought to represent a radial pyramid. According to Cohodas (1980:210) “radial-associated assemblages functioned as symbolic settings for the performance of public agricultural rituals regulated by the solar calendar.” Cohodas (1980:219) believed that the four stairways leading to the summit platform represented the quadripartite surface of the earth that would symbolically mark the ascent and descent of the equinoctial sun signaling important yearly agricultural cycles. Clemency Coggins (1980) believed radial pyramids were also constructed to resemble the day/sun Mayan hieroglyph.

Aimers and Rice (2006:88-89), the first to propose the calendrical function of the E Group complex, believe “that E Groups emerged initially in association with celebrations of annual solar cycling,” however “sometime thereafter, they came to be constructed to celebrate longer calendrical cycles known as *katuns*.” An indication that E Groups were used for commemorating important cycles of time can be seen in the inscriptions carved onto large stone monuments, or stelae, which were often situated in association with the complex. Aimers and Rice (2006:91) found that stelae associated with E Group architecture frequently marked significant calendrical completion dates. Along with these dates, texts found on stelae would



mostly record events pertaining to kings, warfare, and cosmology. Aimers and Rice (2006:91) suggest that the erection of these monuments may have eventually had political ramifications possibly beginning sometime in the Late Preclassic.

Post-Colonial accounts from Bishop Diego de Landa mention that inhabitants of Mayapan would erect a stone monument once every 20 years followed by celebrations (Gates 2008:40). The recording of *katun* period endings on stone stelae became prominent around the Early Classic (AD 250 – 600) on through the Terminal Classic (AD 800 – 900) (Aimers and Rice 2006). According to Rice (2004), a ritual cycle known as the *may* would “seat” power capitals to rule the entire Maya area for 256 years (260 TUNS or 13 *katuns*). During their reign, the capital and important surrounding cities would “seat” a jaguar priest, or *b’alam*, and other significant political positions once every *katun* for 13 *katuns* (Aimers and Rice 2006:91; Edmonson 1986:21-29; Rice 2004:76). Rice (2004:86-92) believes that the E Group complex may have been the literal “*may ku*” or “cycle seat” of a given site (Edmonson 1986:4-5). The most significant evidence of the E Group’s involvement with the *may* cycle are the stone stelae commemorating completions of *katun* cycles set in front of the eastern structure.

A. Chase and D. Chase (2013:16-20) agree with the temporal ritual interpretations as one component of the functionality of E Group complexes. However, excavation of the E Group at Caracol revealed evidence of architectural renewal, interments and caches, and commemorating stelae celebrating *baktuns* and half *baktuns* suggesting that these cycles may have also been important (A. Chase and D. Chase 2013:16-17). E Groups at the site of Yaxha, Guatemala and Ucanal, Guatemala also show evidence of the importance of *baktun* cycles. The site of Yaxha, Guatemala contains “a Cenote-style E Group constructed for the 8<sup>th</sup> Cycle; a Uaxactun-style E Group immediately east of the early one and constructed for the 9<sup>th</sup> Cycle; and, a radial pyramid

intruded into the original E Group plaza, probably with the onset of the 10<sup>th</sup> Cycle” (A. Chase and D. Chase 2016:18, Figure 11). These examples and many others underline the relationship of the E Group complex and rituals associated with tracking significant temporal cycles of the Maya calendar.

While the E Group’s valedictory hypothesis is intriguing, Awe and colleagues (2016) find two issues with Aimers and Rice’s (2006) proposal that directly affect the assemblages of the Belize Valley. The stelae associated with the assemblages in the Belize Valley were rarely carved. If these stelae were painted, textual evidence would have been washed and eroded away centuries ago. Furthermore, several medium and small sites with E Groups do not have stelae. Thus, with these issues, it is difficult to test the valedictory hypothesis in the Belize Valley region. However, long before the first carved stela were erected, evidence may suggest that E Groups in the Maya Lowlands performed a different community related ritual associated with ancestor veneration. This short-lived shrine function may actually tie into the eastern triadic assemblage model.

#### *The E Group Transition and Ancestor Veneration*

Although some E Group complexes have been dated to around the Middle Preclassic (1000 – 400 BC), the archetype becomes more widespread in the southern Lowlands during the Late Preclassic-Early Classic transition (AD 100 – 250) implying the gaining cultural importance of the structure (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:100). As presented above, archaeological evidence indicates that the functionality of the E Group may have changed or transitioned throughout the complex’s existence. At no other period in time is this more obvious than during the Terminal Preclassic (AD 100 – 250). Once thought to function as a ritual/ceremonial hub associated with

important agricultural cycles, the E Group began to shift toward a more socio-political importance sometime during the Terminal Preclassic (AD 100 – 250) (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995). It is at this point that ritual caching practices, the predominant deposited material found associated with E Group architecture, was replaced by interments for a short period of time (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:100). Large sites like Caracol, Cenote, and Tikal began to inter important elite members of the community into or in association with their E Group assemblage. However, the practice of interring into E Groups was short lived and included very few individuals. Returning full circle back to Awe and colleagues (2016) proposal, Caracol, Cenote, and Tikal are clear examples demonstrating that some E Groups, like the Belize Valley's "eastern triadic assemblages," include interments. However, what distinguishes these triadic assemblages from E Groups, aside from the architectural discrepancies, is the quantity of interments and temporal duration of interring. In fact, the methods of interring exhibited in the Belize Valley assemblages more closely resemble another well-recognized archetype known as the eastern shrine.

#### The Belize River Valley and the Model for "Eastern Triadic Assemblages"

In west central Belize, two major river systems, the Mopan and Macal, run north-northeast and eventually combine to form the Belize River which flows east and empties into the Caribbean Sea. Sites running along these river systems, from where the Mopan crosses the Guatemalan-Belizean border to the modern day capital of Belmopan, make up the Belize River Valley region (Chase and Garber 2004:1-2). Furthermore, the upper and central Belize Valley regions divide sites that are located before and after the conjunction of the Mopan and Macal rivers. Bordering the southern periphery of the upper Belize Valley, Pacbitun is often grouped

with this region due to its close proximity and confirmed social relationships. In a recent study of the upper and central Belize Valley, Awe and colleagues (2016) investigate and challenge the validity of architecture long designated as E Group complexes. Out of the ten Belize Valley sites thought to have E Group architecture, only seven have excavation data from their triadic groups. Therefore, the sites included in the 2016 study were Baking Pot, Blackman Eddy, Cahal Pech, Chan, El Pilar, Pacbitun, and Xunantunich (Figure 5).

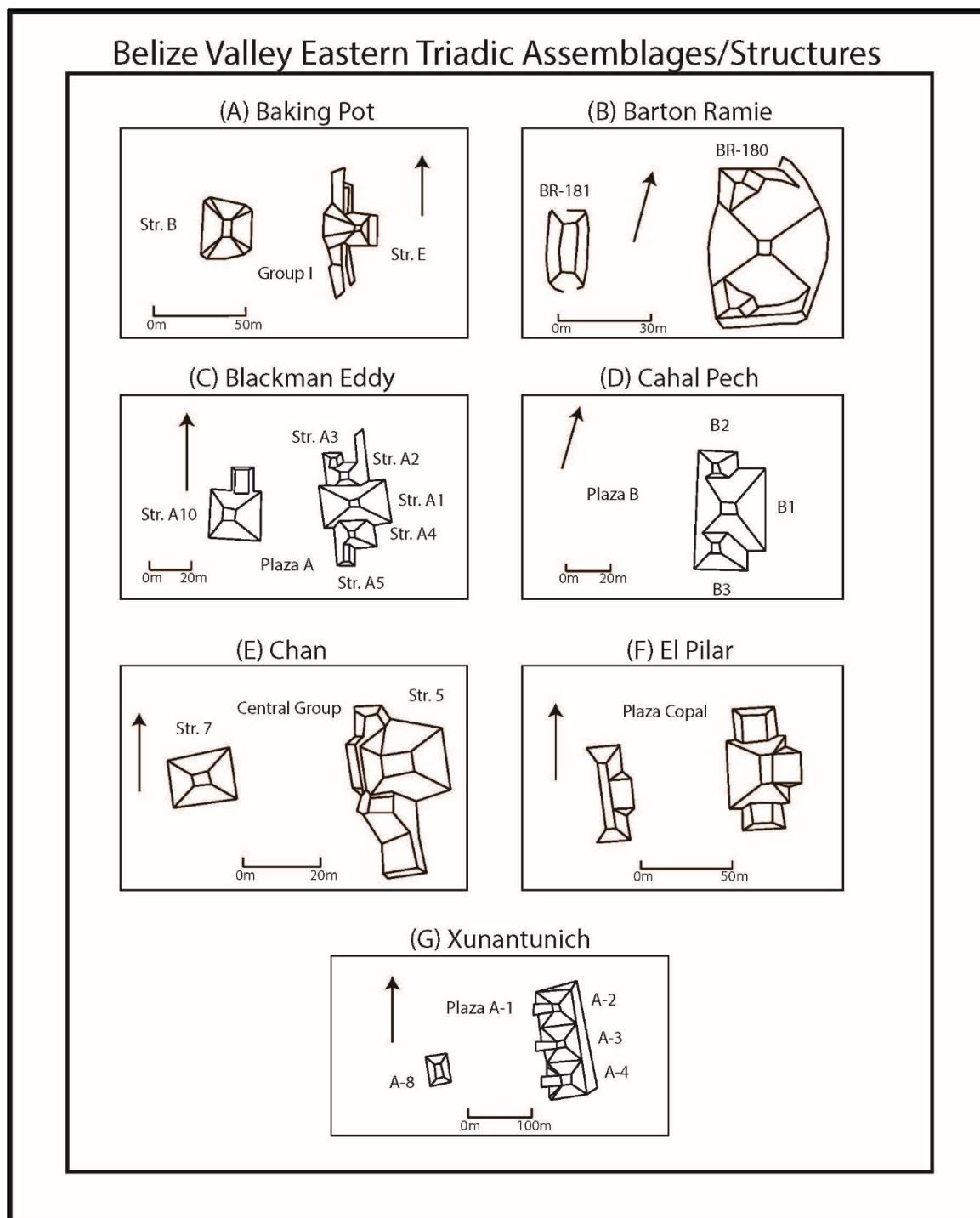


Figure 5: An illustration of the Belize Valley Eastern Triadic Assemblages/Structures at; (A.) Baking Pot (drawn from <http://www.famsi.org/reports/02090/images/fig01.jpg>), (B.) Barton Ramie (drawn from Willey et al. 1965), (C.) Blackman Eddy (drawn from Garber et al. 2004:50, Figure 4.1), (D.) Cahal Pech (drawn from <http://www.nichbelize.org/ia-maya-sites/archaeology-of-cahal-pech.html>), (E.) Chan (drawn from Robin 2012:115, Figure 6.1), (F.) El Pilar (drawn from Whittaker et al. 2009:136, Figure 2), (G.) Xunantunich (drawn from <http://www.nichbelize.org/ia-maya-sites/archaeology-of-xunantunich.html>).

## Architecture of the Belize Valley Eastern Triadic Assemblages

At first glance, the triadic assemblages located in the central, ceremonial hub of the aforementioned sites bear all the right elements of E Group architecture. However, a reinvestigation of excavation data, some going back almost 30 years, has convinced researchers that appearances can be deceiving. Beginning with architecture, Awe and colleagues (2016) compare the constructions of the Belize Valley eastern triadic structures to E Group architectural attributes. Their (2016) first major distinction of the two archetypes does not concern an architectural component that is slightly different or unique, but actually concerns a component that is absent. The long, low, north-south oriented, eastern plaza platform, thought to be the earliest and arguably the most fundamental architectural component of the E Group complex, does not exist beneath the Belize Valley eastern triadic structures (Awe et al. 2016). Thus, the three buildings were never supported by a coalescing sub-structure but instead were constructed directly on the plaza floor. In fact, some evidence suggests that, initially, the eastern side of these Belize Valley plazas did not include the flanking north and south structures but began with a single, central building (Awe et al. 2016). Moreover, even though the flanking structures were constructed shortly after or during the Late Preclassic (400 – 100 BC), all three structures were not connected initially, but rather sat independently from one another (Awe et al. 2016). When these structures were eventually connected, it was through amalgamation caused by subsequent enlarging construction episodes.

Awe and colleagues (2016) also note that the construction episodes of the Belize Valley assemblages only seemed to focus on one or two structures in the group (Awe et al. 2016). This is most notable when only one of the two flanking structures (north or south) is modified leaving its counterpart untouched which ultimately disrupts the symmetry of the assemblage (Figure 6).

Looking at excavation material from well documented E Group's such as at Caracol, Tikal, and Uaxactun, construction episodes of the superstructures are found to be uniform suggesting the importance of architectural symmetry (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:98, Figure 60; Laporte and Fialko 1987; 1990; Ricketson and Ricketson 1937). Therefore, Awe and colleagues (2016) believe the main indicators that architecturally differentiate the Belize Valley eastern triadic assemblages from the E Group complex are the missing platform, the independent construction/modification episodes, and the lack of symmetry. Importantly, these are the architectural attributes that define eastern triadic assemblages.

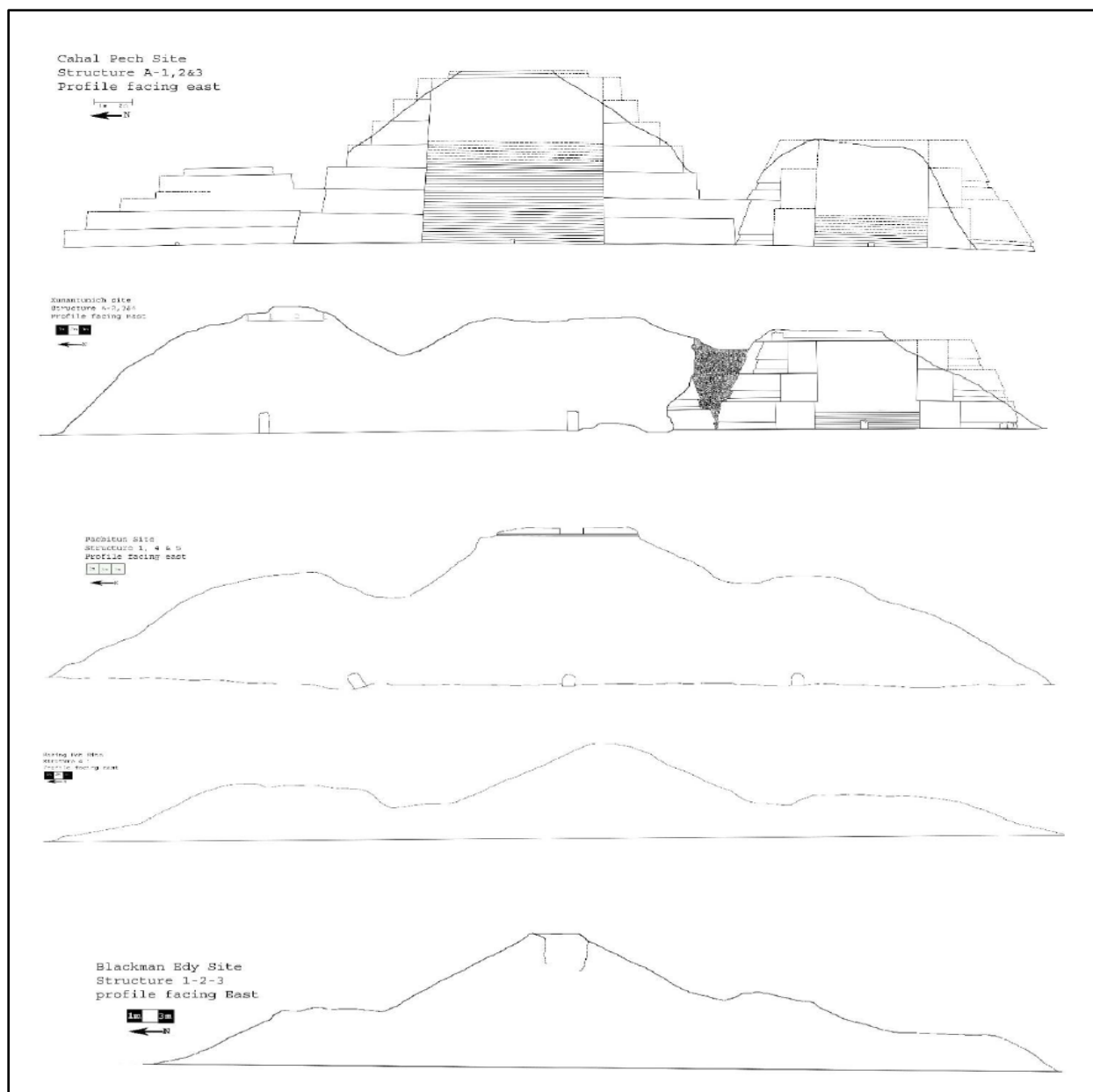


Figure 6: An illustration of the east facing profiles of the eastern triads at (top to bottom) Cahal Pech, Xunantunich, Pacbitun, Baking Pot, and Blackman Eddy illustrating the lack of architectural symmetry (Awe et al. 2016, Figure 2).

### Burials of the Belize Valley Eastern Triadic Assemblages

Shifting away from architecture, Awe et al.'s (2016) most compelling argument for the distinction between E Groups and the Belize Valley eastern triadic assemblages is what lies



buried inside. Unlike E Groups, the Belize Valley assemblages have been found with an abundant amount of elite interments and caches (Awe et al. 2016). As mentioned above, burials have also been found associated with E Group complexes; however, the number of burials found within the Belize Valley eastern triadic assemblages is greater than the number of burials found in E Groups (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of burials and caches found in the north, central, and southern structures of the eastern triads in the Belize Valley (after Awe et al. 2016, Table 2).

Site Name	Total # of Burials/Caches	Central Str.	Northern Str.	Southern Str.
Cahal Pech	18 Bu. – 8 Ca.	12 Bu. – 6 Ca.	2 Bu.	4 Bu. – 2 Ca. *
<b>Pacbitun</b>	<b>14 Bu. – 11 Ca.</b>	<b>9 Bu. – 9 Ca.</b>	<b>3 Bu. – 1 Ca.</b>	<b>2 Bu. – 1 Ca.</b>
Baking Pot	4 Bu. – 4 Ca.	4 Bu. – 4 Ca.	NDA	NDA
Chan	9 Bu. – 8 Ca.	8 Bu. – 5 Ca. *	1 Bu. – 3 Ca *	NDA
Xunantunich	3 Bu. – 4 Ca.	NDA	NDA	3 Bu. – 3 Ca.
Blackman Eddy	4 Bu. – 1 Ca.	1 Ca. *	NDA *	4 Bu. *
El Pilar	NDA	NDA *	NDA	NDA

Excavations of the eastern triadic structure at Cahal Pech uncovered 18 burials and seven caches; twelve burials and six caches lined the primary axis of the central building (Awe et al. 2016). Although Chan’s eastern triadic structure has been looted, investigations into the northern and central buildings located nine burials and eleven caches (Kestle 2004; Mierhoff et al. 2004). Of these, eight burials and caches were found lining the center axis of the central structure (Mierhoff 2004:37). Moreover, five burials were also located within this plaza’s western structure (Robin et al. 2008). At Blackman Eddy, another site that was heavily looted, excavations were able to find four burials within the southern building of the eastern triadic structure which included a looted crypt (Garber 2004:61-62). A single cache was also found within the central building (Garber 2004:60). Despite limited excavations, burials have also

been recovered from the assemblages at Baking Pot and Xunantunich where only two of the six eastern buildings have been excavated. Four burials and caches were found within the central eastern building at Baking Pot along with a single burial within the plaza's western structure (Aimers 1997:30-34; Audet 2006:175-213). Three burials and caches were also found within the southern building of the eastern triadic structure at Xunantunich (Audet 2006:140-146). Finally, in Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage, six burials have been found in the western structure (Structure 2) while 14 burials and 11 caches have been found in the eastern triad (Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2004a).

In comparison, well documented E Groups outside of the Belize Valley contain very few burials. The E Group at Cenote was only found with two burials within the central eastern building, both dating to around the onset of the Early Classic (A. Chase 1983). Caracol's eastern buildings contained a total of four burials also dating to the Early Classic (AD 250 – 600) (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:97). At Uaxactun, only a single interment was located in the E Group's western structure, Structure E-VII, while several skull caches and the bones of a child were located within the eastern buildings (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:49-58). Thus, the number of burials located in the eastern triadic assemblages of the Belize Valley greatly outnumber those found in E Groups outside of this region.

Consequently, the unique architecture and abundant interments have led to a repudiation of the E Group designation of the Belize Valley eastern triadic assemblages. The numerous interments into eastern structures have influenced Awe and colleagues (2016) to believe that the Belize Valley assemblages functioned more as mortuary complexes, or shrines, for the veneration of ancestors. Because of this new designation, it will be important to review eastern

shrine architecture and ancestor veneration so that attributes from this archetype may also be compared to Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage.

### The Eastern Shrine Archetype

The attributes of Becker's (1971) Plaza Plan 2 (PP2), or eastern shrine group, was primarily based on the presence of a single pyramidal structure centered on the eastern edge of a plaza. This structure is predominantly square and may be tall in stature. Several other rectangular buildings were usually constructed on the remaining edges framing the plaza area (Figure 7). Although ancestor shrines have also been found on the northern border of plazas, the eastern edge becomes the predominant locus in the Lowlands during the Classic period (McAnany 1995:101; Welsh 1988:202-204, Table 105, 106). Platforms, altar blocks, stair blocks, shrines, benches and pedestals were common additions to ancestor shrines and were often placed directly over or in association with burials (Welsh 1988:188-190). These features may also signal the conversion of a temple or ceremonial structure into an ancestor shrine.

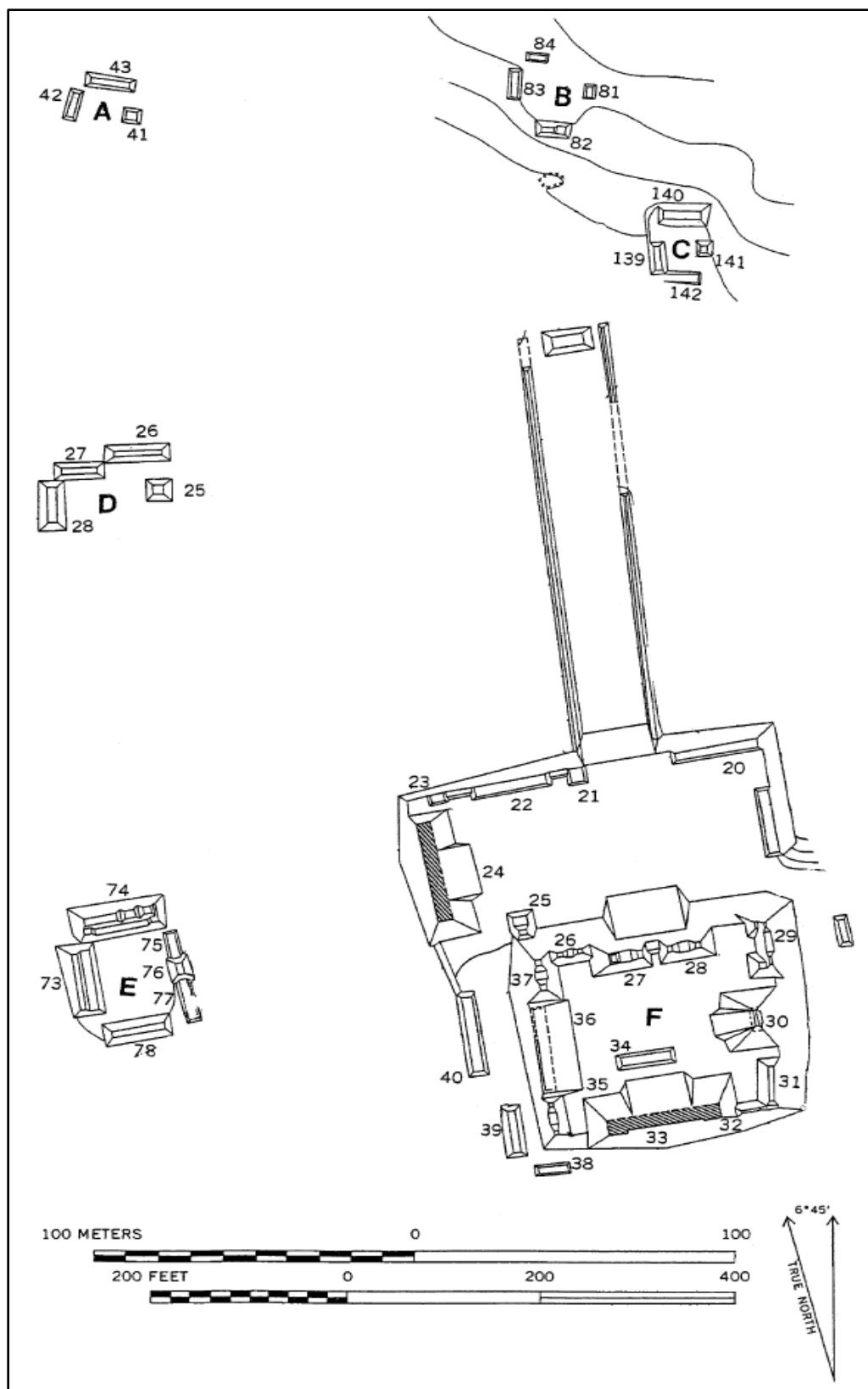


Figure 7: Examples of Plaza Plan 2 or Eastern Shrine groups at Tikal (Becker 2004, Figure 1).

Apart from plaza orientation and architectural attributes, consistencies between shrines can be found in the placement and condition of burials within the structure. The interments are often placed on the structure's central axis and are typically found to be better furnished compared to other burials found in non-shrine contexts such as beneath floors or within platform or plaza construction fill (Welsh 1988:190). Furthermore, indications of the continued ritual/ceremonial use of these structures can be seen archaeologically in caching practices, habitual burning, and placement of secondary interments or sacrificial victims over time (Welsh 1988:192). In sum, attributes such as the construction efforts, status goods, and ritual commemoration all signal the importance of the deceased individual.

Interestingly, eastern shrines have been found in both large and small residential and public space in both elite and non-elite contexts indicating that what has been interpreted to be ancestral veneration was a ubiquitous social institution. Attempting to understand the true function and connection between PP2 groups, Becker (2004:134) suggests that eastern shrines represent "a decentralized PP (plaza plan) associated with specific extended families." Furthermore, some have suggested that PP2 groups could represent the leaders of lineage groups (Becker 1999:144; Haviland 1968:109; McAnany 1995:104). Often times, clusters of groups without eastern shrines surround PP2 groups and may represent lesser lineage members (McAnany 1995:104). When looking at PP2 groups at different sites, Becker (2004:134) has suggested that "the sharing of this architectural grammar reflects the sharing of other cognitive elements" such as "religious traditions or other cultural traits." In other words, because of the architectural and mortuary similarities of this archetype, occupants of PP2 groups must have a common interest. The standardization of shrine structures at both the elite and non-elite levels of society has led Becker (2004:132) to believe that "something else is involved in the

configuration of these groups – something embedded within the culture that transcends status or wealth.” For now, what is clear is that only a few members of a community were interred within eastern shrines which not only suggests the communal importance of these individuals but also implies the ritual/ceremonial significance of each PP2 group.

### Sequential Placement Patterns and Cyclical Interments

Based on site map configurations, Becker (1982:120) predicted that about 14 percent of Tikal’s architectural groups conform to PP2. Studies conducted at the sites of Caracol (Belize), Cenote (Guatemala), and Tayasal (Guatemala) by A. Chase and D. Chase (1989:53) have also demonstrated the importance of PP2 or an eastern shrine group. A. Chase and D. Chase (1989:54) have found that over 60 percent of residential groups at Caracol conform to the PP2 arrangement. Many investigations over the years, into Caracol’s large PP2 sample size have led to several interpretations concerning the structures and their interments. D. Chase and A. Chase (2011) believe that shrine burials were placed in a particular sequence separated by specific intervals of time (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004). “The sequences of formal burials appear to follow set patterns involving the placement of tombs in the construction core followed by the interment of burials at the stairway base. Later burials are then placed relative to new stairways extensions, within the steps of buildings, or at the summit of structures (which usually restart the burial pattern)” (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004:13-14).

Becker (1999; 2004) also recognized a similar interment placement pattern at Tikal. According to Becker (2004:129), a grammatical element of the PP2 mortuary structure that he termed the “intrusive interment and covering” rule states that “no PP2 can exist without first intruding a burial chamber into the bedrock and then covering it with a ritual building that is tall

and square in plan. Each subsequent rebuilding was preceded by the intrusion of another high status burial” (Becker 1971; 1999). Interestingly, Becker (1999:144-145; 2004:129) also notes that other plaza plans at Tikal were transformed into a Plaza Plan 2 by converting the eastern structure into a shrine using a modified form of the interment-covering rule. The eastern non-shrine structure can be converted by penetrating through all previous phases of architecture down to bedrock where a tomb would be built (Becker 1999:145; 2004:129). A structure conforming to the PP2 scheme would then be built over top, covering the previous structure and burial (Becker 1999:145; 2004:129). As it turns out, this particular phenomena will play a vital role in the investigation of Pacbitun’s ceremonial assemblage; thus, the action should be duly noted.

What is more, interments found in shrine architecture not only follow a locational sequence but are also thought to follow a cyclical temporal pattern. Ritual deposits at Caracol known as face caches, tightly dated with hieroglyphics, radiocarbon dating, ceramic seriation, and stratigraphic association may indicate the importance of *katun* cycles; an important 20 year cycle used in the Maya calendar (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004:17). The tightly dated face caches associated with shrine interments suggest that burials were either placed every 40 years to honor a double-*katun* cycle or every 52 years to honor a calendar round cycle; the calendar round representing another important cycle of the Maya calendar (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004:17; 2013:20). Thus, A. Chase and D. Chase (2004:19; 2013:20) believe that the interments in Caracol’s eastern mortuary structures may actually be placed to celebrate cycles of time.

## Chapter Summary

The information presented in the previous three sections divides the discussion of the defining attributes of E Groups and eastern shrines with the discussion of the newer proposition for eastern triadic structures. All three sections list and discuss important attributes that have been assigned to these archetypes. To summarize, physical and spatial attributes of the E Group archetype include a long, low, north-south oriented eastern plaza platform paired with a single, centrally positioned, western radial-like structure. Additions to the eastern platform include a large central superstructure which would sometimes be flanked to the north and south by two smaller superstructures. The triadic arrangement and formation of the E Group's eastern assemblage are often symmetrically aesthetic which could be linked to the archetype's astronomical ritual/ceremonial associations. E Groups, often centrally located within a site, were situated within open access plazas suggesting that these areas were designated for communal ritual activity. Functionally, they have been ritually/ceremonially linked to astronomy, agriculture, calendar cycles, ancestor veneration, and politics. Stelae found associated with E Groups are often indicators of these functions. The architectural attributes that differentiate the eastern triadic structure from the E Group are the missing eastern sub-platform, the lack of eastern triadic symmetry, and independent construction episodes. The inclusion of multiple burials suggests that the Belize Valley archetype functions more as a shrine. Physical and spatial attributes belonging to the eastern shrine include a single, tall, square pyramidal structure centered on the eastern edge of a plaza. A multitude of burials into eastern shrines suggests, as the name implies, that this archetype functions as a plaza group's shrine structure.

With a better understanding of the physical, spatial, and functional attributes of each archetype, I was able to methodically examine the construction events of Pacbitun's ceremonial



assemblage and observe when attributes were installed and developed. I was also able to identify when these attributes ceased to exist. Thus, the following investigation of the evolution of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage through time should help to demonstrate how this method helped to identify attributes associated with E Groups, eastern shrines, and eastern triadic shrines.

## **CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS OF THE CEREMONIAL ASSEMBLAGE AT PACBITUN**

### Archaeological History and Research at Pacbitun

Pacbitun, located on the southern rim of the Belize River Valley, is linked to this region due to its proximity and archaeologically confirmed social relationships (Figure 8) (Healy et al. 2004a:225-226). Approximately 3 km to the east of the modern day village of San Antonio, Pacbitun is set in an ecologically diverse location between the pine ridge of the Maya Mountains to the south and the rain forests of west central Belize to the north (Healy et al. 2004a:207). The unique location was advantageous for the ancient inhabitants of Pacbitun who were able to exploit valuable resources from both areas.

Pacbitun is thought to extend out approximately 9 km<sup>2</sup> from its epicenter (Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2007:17). The core zone of Pacbitun, approximately 1.5 km<sup>2</sup>, is composed of five main plazas (Plaza A-E) that include over 40 masonry structures (Figure 9) (Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2007:17).

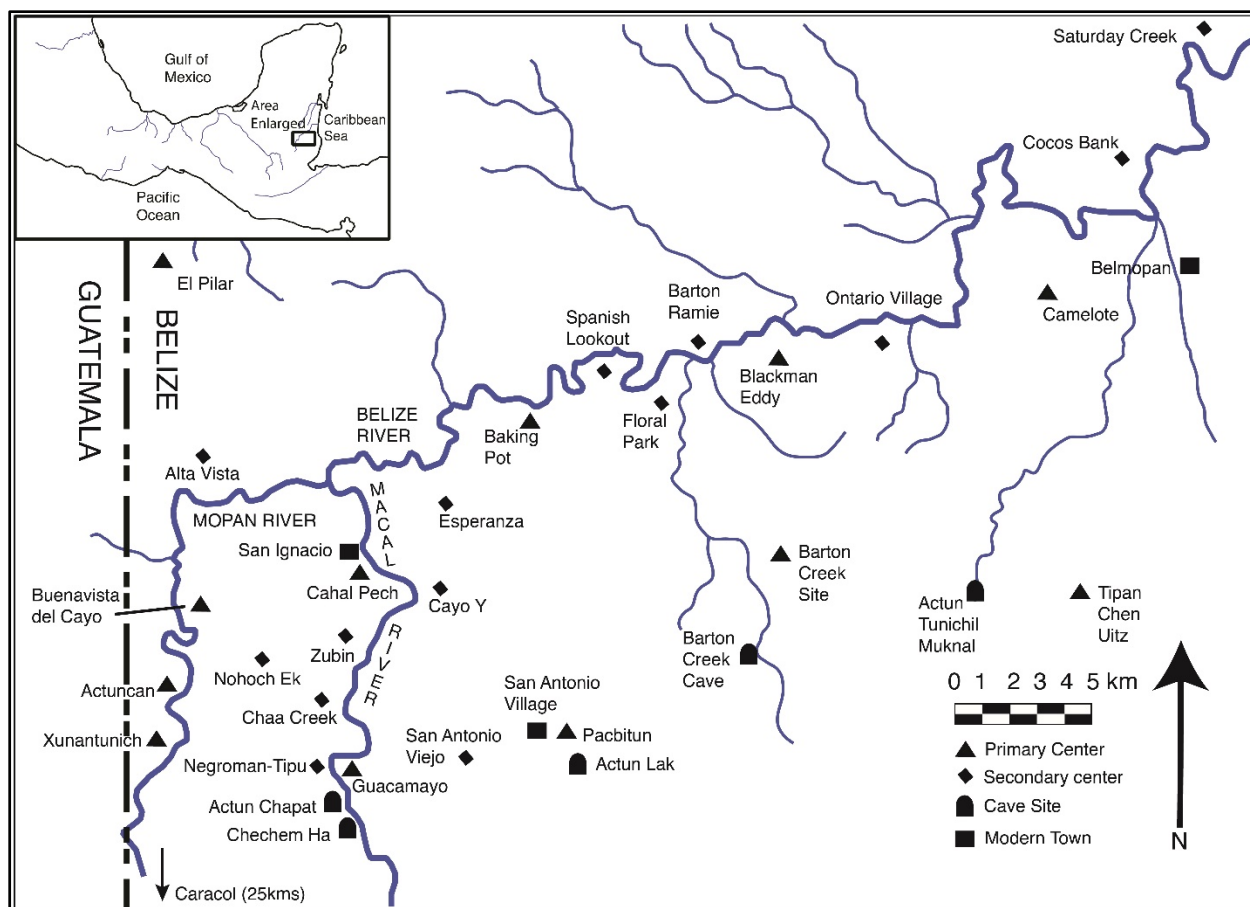


Figure 8: An illustration of Pacbitun and the Belize River Valley (Courtesy of Jon Spenard).

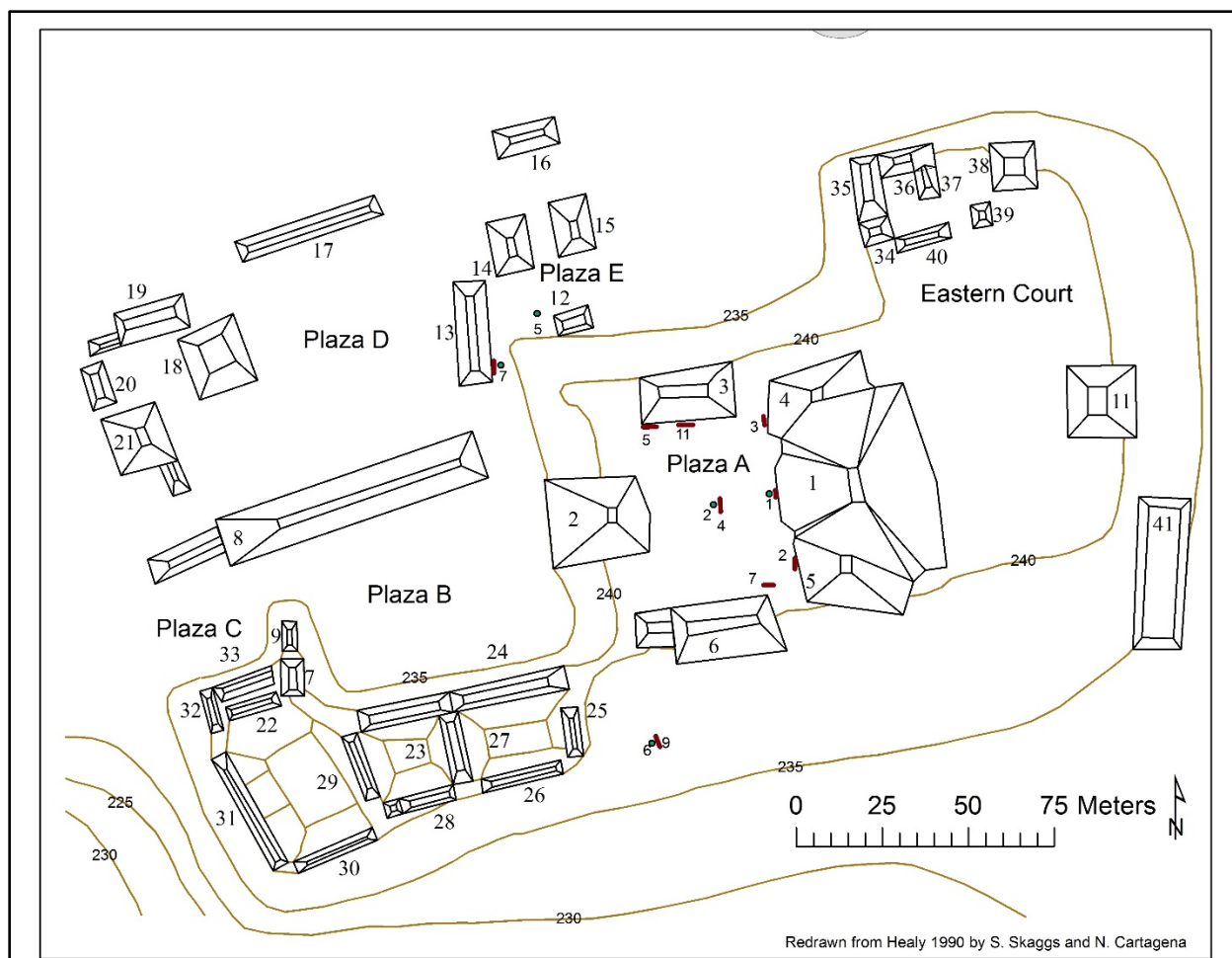


Figure 9: An illustration of the site core at Pacbitun (stela in red, altars in green) (Courtesy of Terry G. Powis).

The first archaeological investigation of Pacbitun and its periphery was conducted by Paul Healy of Trent University in 1980. While the initial focus of the study was to investigate the hillslope terracing in the periphery of the site, a surface survey of Pacbitun's site core was also conducted (Healy et al. 1983; Healy 1990). After a short field season in 1984, the Trent University-Pacbitun Archaeological Project began large scale excavations in 1986 and 1987 focusing on both the site core and periphery (Healy 1990). Excavations in the core zone investigated Structure 23 in Plaza B, Structure 38 of the Eastern Court, Structures 14 and 15 (the site's

ballcourt) in Plaza E, Structures 1, 2, 4, and 5 in Plaza A, and also included several other plaza excavations (Bill 1987; Campbell-Trithart 1990; Healy 1988; 1990a; 1990b; 1992; Healy et al. 1995; Healy et al. 2004a; Healy et al. 2009). Transects extending from the corners of the 1.5 km<sup>2</sup> core zone of Pacbitun into the four intercardinal directions were also established to investigate the periphery of the site (Richie 1990; Sunahara 1995). From this early research at Pacbitun, ceramic seriation suggests that the site was occupied sometime around 900 BC and abandoned during the tenth century AD (Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2004a:207-208). Table 2 identifies Pacbitun's ceramic chronological sequence. It should be noted that the Terminal Classic ceramic collection has yet to be defined at Pacbitun. Thus, although Pacbitun's Tzib ceramic phase (AD 700 – 900) overlaps with other Belize Valley Terminal Classic ceramic phases, when discussing this time period I will only be referring to ceramics belonging to the late Late Classic period (Terry Powis, personal communication, 2015; Table 3).

Table 2: Pacbitun's ceramic sequence (after Healy et al. 2004a:208).

Late Late Classic period	Tzib phase	AD 700 – 900
Early Late Classic period	Coc phase	AD 550 – 700
Early Classic period	Tzul phase	AD 300 – 550
Terminal Preclassic period	Ku phase	100 BC – AD 300
Late Preclassic period	Puc phase	300 – 100 BC
Middle Preclassic period	Mai phase	900 – 300 BC

Table 3: A ceramic chronology chart comparing Pacbitun's ceramic phases with Uaxactun, Tikal, and other Belize Valley sites (redrawn from LeCount et al. 2002:45, Figure 3).

Period	Time	Uaxactun	Tikal	Barton Ramie	Xunantunich	Cahal Pech	Pacbitun
P O S T C L A S S I C	1400						
	1300			New Town			
	1200						
	1100		Caban				
	1000					Jirones	
C L A S S I C	900		Eznab			Sacbalam	
	800	Tepeu 3	Imix	Spanich Lookout	Tsak'	Paloverde	Tzib
	700				Hats' Chaak	Mills	
	600		Ik	Tiger Run	Samal	Gadsden	Coc
	500						
P R E C L A S S I C	400	Tzakol 2	Manik	Hermitage	Ak'ab	Ahcabnal	Tzul
	300					Madrugada	
	200		Cimi	Floral Park			
	100	Chicanel	Cauac	Mount Hope	Pak'kat	Xakal	Ku
	A.D./B.C.						
P R E C L A S S I C	100						
	200		Chuen	Barton Creek	Ok'inal		Puc
	300						
	400					Umbral	
	500	Mamom	Tzec		Nohol	Kanluk	Mai
P R E C L A S S I C	600			Jenny Creek			
	700		Eb				
	800						
	900						
	1000				Muyal	Cunil	
P R E C L A S S I C	1100						
	1200						

Investigations continued at Pacbitun from 1994 to 1997 under the direction of Healy and Awe (1995) and the Belize Valley Preclassic Maya Project (BVPMP). The excavations at Pacbitun were mainly restricted to Plaza B searching for the site's earliest occupation (Arendt et al. 1996; Hohmann 2002; Hohmann and Powis 1996; 1999; Hohmann et al. 1999). It was in this location, buried beneath the plaza, where several Middle Preclassic Mai phase (900 – 300 BC) household structures were located and a shell bead production area identified (Healy et al. 2004a; Hohmann 2002; Powis et al. 2009). In 2008 and 2009, under the guidance of Terry Powis (2009; 2010a; Powis et al. 2009), the Pacbitun Preclassic Project continued investigations in Plaza B in search of more Preclassic evidence at the site.

Powis (2011a; 2011b; 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015) has since expanded upon Pacbitun's research goals with the current project, the Pacbitun Regional Archaeological Project (PRAP) which reinstated a dual focus in 2010 and 2011 concentrating on both the core zone and periphery of the site. Periphery investigations included survey and excavation of local caves, causeways, and a hilltop site (Reese 2012; Spenard 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2013; Spenard et al. 2012; Spenard et al. 2013; Weber 2011a; 2011b; 2012; 2013; 2014; Weber and Powis 2011; Weber et al. 2012). Also included were periphery excavations of a granite *mano* and *metate* production area called the Tzib Group located approximately 0.75 km to the northwest of Pacbitun's epicenter (Balinger et al. 2015; Skaggs and Powis 2014; Ward 2013; Ward and Micheletti 2013; Ward and Powis 2013). Site core investigations included the excavation of a small plaza group known as the Eastern Court located to the northeast of Pacbitun's main plaza (Cheong 2011; 2013).

#### Plaza A Investigations

Currently, aside from the peripheral excavations at the Tzib Group, the main area of focus at Pacbitun has been in Plaza A. After successfully locating Preclassic evidence beneath Plaza B, plaza excavations have continued in Plaza A looking for more evidence of Preclassic habitation at the site. Excavations into Plaza B as well as into Plazas C and D have found the site's initial habitation in the form of several simple Middle Preclassic (900 – 300 BC) household structures (Healy et al. 2004a; Hohmann and Powis 1996; 1999; Powis 2009). Although these early structures were buried, the residential function of Plaza B is thought to have continued in this location for the duration of the site's existence. Interestingly, a similar trend has developed in Plaza A, Pacbitun's ritual/ceremonial heart. In an attempt to illuminate sub-plaza structures,

ground penetrating radar (GPR) was conducted in 2012 and 2014 in each of Pacbitun's plazas (Skaggs and Powis 2014; Skaggs et al. 2015). Several sub-surface anomalies in Plaza A were detected using this method. Initial investigations of an anomaly in the northern portion of Plaza A resulted in the discovery of a large buried Middle Preclassic (550 – 400 BC) platform titled El Quemado (Micheletti and Powis 2015; Micheletti et al. 2016). Thus, like the residential function of Plaza B, the monumental construction of El Quemado signifies the continuation of the ritual/ceremonial function in Plaza A (Micheletti 2016). Although the investigation of El Quemado is ongoing (continuing into the 2016 field season), there is much that has been discerned from the early platform. Predating Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage by a few hundred years, evidence suggests that El Quemado was possibly terminated and intentionally buried (Micheletti and Powis 2015; Micheletti et al 2016). Located approximately 1 m beneath the ground surface, the platform was covered over by a plaster floor sometime in the Late Preclassic Puc phase (300 – 100 BC) (Davis and Powis 2014; Micheletti and Powis 2015; Micheletti et al. 2016). More on El Quemado and its connections with Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage will be discussed at length in the next section of this chapter.

Another recent Plaza A investigation that pertain to the study of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage includes the excavation of Structure 3 (the north building in Plaza A) (Micheletti and Stanchly 2014). The purpose of the Structure 3 excavation was to investigate its relationship with the plaza's ceremonial assemblage. Structure 6, the southern structure in Plaza A, is the only structure in this plaza that has not yet been excavated. Finally, for the direct purpose of this thesis, it was necessary to finish the unexcavated portion of Structure 5 (the southern building of the eastern triad in Plaza A) (Micheletti et al. 2015). My excavation of Structure 5 served to link Healy's earlier summit and basal units to complete the investigation of this structure's west



central axis (Micheletti and Powis 2015). With the excavation of the central axis of Structure 5 complete, the four structures (Structures 1, 2, 4, and 5) making up the ceremonial assemblage at Pacbitun are now all excavated to the same extent (Figure 10).

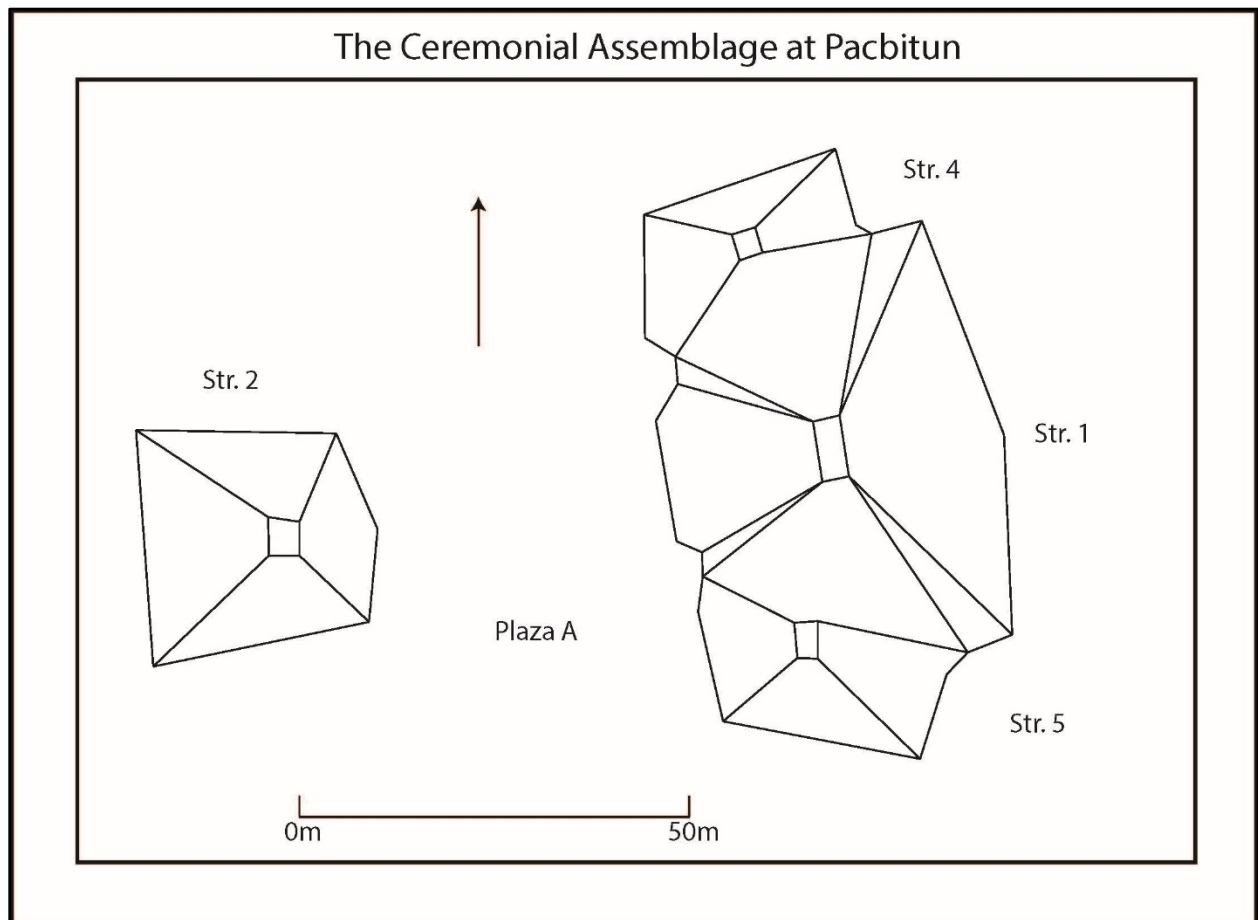


Figure 10: An illustration of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage (Structures 1, 2, 4, and 5) (redrawn from site core map).

### Pacbitun's Ceremonial Assemblage

The placement of Pacbitun's ceremonial architecture in the area known as Plaza A was no accident. Constructed upon the site's highest elevation (5 m higher than Plaza B), the earliest

forms of monumental architecture demarcated Pacbitun's ceremonial heart. The inhabitants initially immortalized this sacred space with the construction of El Quemado, a large tiered platform built in the midst of the Middle Preclassic Mai phase (550 – 400 BC) (Micheletti and Powis 2015; Micheletti et al. 2016).

In the Late Preclassic Puc phase (300 – 100 BC), Plaza A underwent a massive transformation shifting the architectural importance from El Quemado to the quickly growing ceremonial assemblage that would dominate the space for the remainder of the site's occupation. Structure 1, the tallest and most prominent temple at the site, is the central building of the triadic group. Contiguous to the central building, Structure 4 and Structure 5 flank Structure 1 to the north and south respectively completing the eastern triad in Plaza A (Healy et al. 2004a:210). A single temple, Structure 2, sits across from Structures 1, 4, and 5 centered on the western edge of Plaza A. Each capped with a 4 m vaulted masonry superstructure, Structure 1 stood 16.5 m tall; Structure 2, 11.2 m; Structure 4, 12.2 m; and Structure 5, about 10.9 m (Healy et al. 2004a:210).

Initial excavation in the 1980s extensively investigated Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage. As the most imposing edifice at the site, Structure 1 received a large 10m by 7.5m summit unit in an effort to expose the terminal superstructure as well as a 4m wide trench bisecting the central axis of the structures western face (Healy 1990:251). Here, excavations reached a depth of 8m. Like Structure 1, Structure 4 also received summit clearing and a large bisecting trench on its western face (Healy 1990:252). Structure 2, in addition to a large bisecting trench on its eastern face, a 2.5m by 2m summit unit was also established which reached a depth of 4 m (Healy 1990:252). As mentioned earlier, unlike the other ceremonial structures, Structure 5 did not receive a large bisecting trench. The investigation of Structure 5 consisted of a 6 m (north-south) by 5m (east-west) summit unit penetrating down 5m before the

depth and loose fill made it too risky to continue (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). A second 3 m (north-south) by 4.5 m (east-west) basal unit was also dug exposing a series of steps belonging to several architectural phases (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). Healy's excavations revealed that all three eastern structures were composed of five major architectural phases, while the western Structure 2 was only composed of four major structural phases (Healy 1990:252).

Investigations of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage continued in 2014, completing the excavation of the western face of Structure 5 (Micheletti and Powis 2015:209). A 3 m (north-south) by 6 m (east-west) trench was set between Healy's earlier units. The investigation would link and complete the central axis excavation of the western face of Structure 5, matching Healy's earlier excavations of Structures 1, 2, and 4. Similar to Healy's summit excavation of Structure 5, the 2014 investigation was halted at a depth of just over 5 m due to the instability of construction fill. The primary purpose of the excavation was to not only get a better idea of the architectural sequence of Structure 5 but also to add to the existing dataset of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage.

Looking at the interment data, a total of 38 burials have been recovered at the site of Pacbitun (Micheletti and Stanchly 2014:48-49; Robertson 2011:88). Twenty-two burials have been found in the site's epicenter with the other 16 interments recovered in the surrounding settlement (Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2004a:214; Micheletti and Stanchly 2014:48-49). All 22 of these burials, apart from one, have been located in Plaza A architecture. Furthermore, 20 of these epicentral burials have been exhumed from, or in association with, Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage. Six burials were recovered in Structure 2 while the remaining 14 were found in the eastern triadic structure. Structure 1 held the most interments of any architecture with a total of

nine. The flanking structures held a total of five burials; three in Structure 4 and two in Structure 5.

### Construction Sequence of the Ceremonial Assemblage at Pacbitun

The premise of the remainder of this chapter is to present the architectural and burial data of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage gathered through the excavations conducted first by Healy and, later, by myself. From El Quemado and the transformation of Pacbitun's main plaza to the final phase of construction of the four structures discussed above, the remainder of this chapter walks through the known temporal progressions of the ceremonial architecture of Plaza A. To accomplish this, each construction event and burial is broken down chronologically beginning with the Middle Preclassic Mai phase (900 – 300 BC) and concluding with the late Late Classic Tzib phase (AD 700 – 900). Each time period will begin with a summarization of the associated construction event(s) of the ceremonial assemblage. Each section will also conclude with a description of the time period's associated interments. It should be noted that, although Awe et al.'s (2016) investigation included the number of cache deposits found within each assemblage, the information pertaining to the cache material located within Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage was not fully available. Thus, aside from the information regarding the quantity and context, data regarding the ceremonial assemblage's cache deposits is limited. It should also be noted that while Awe et al.'s 2016 study does include small details concerning the western structures of the Belize Valley ceremonial assemblages, the main focus of their investigation is on the eastern triadic assemblages. Because western structures are essential E Group components, I found it necessary for this study to include a detailed description of the western structure at Pacbitun.

Importantly, as the following section demonstrates, the completion of the excavation of Structure 5 in 2014 was extremely vital to this investigation. Because the architectural attributes of Awe et al.'s (2016) eastern triadic assemblage focuses heavily on symmetry, construction sequences, and height discrepancies, it was important to be able to compare the development of Structure 5 with Structure 4. Therefore, any time period with an architectural event involving Structure 5 will also include an in-depth description of this structure's construction activity deduced through the collaboration of Healy's early research and my own 2014 investigation.

#### The Mai Phase (900 – 300 BC)

The initial investigation in Plaza A in the 1980s led Healy to believe that Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage was the earliest monumental architecture at the site dating as far back as the late Middle Preclassic. This would also suggest that the ceremonial assemblage was the site's founding monumental architecture. However, as mentioned earlier, investigations carried out by Terry G. Powis (2012) beneath the northern plaza area discovered a large platform suggesting that activities in Plaza A began much earlier. Carbon samples taken from within the platform correspond with the ceramic evidence and place the structure firmly in the late Middle Preclassic (550-400 BC). The extensive burning on much of the structure's surface has earned the platform the title of El Quemado, Spanish for "the burned one" (Figure 11). It is likely that El Quemado, or "Q" for short, will closely span the entirety of the plaza east to west. Current estimates suggest that Q measures over 30 m east-west and stands approximately 3 m tall (Terry Powis, personal communication, 2016). Although excavations of Q have, thus far, only uncovered 12 m north-south, some symmetrical characteristics of Q may suggest that the platform is radial in formation. If this is correct, excavations may have only uncovered the

southern half of the building suggesting that the northern half of the structure still lies unexposed beneath Structure 3, the northern structure in Plaza A. Q's monumental size, evidence of burning, and lack of superstructure suggest that the early platform was used for ritual/ceremonial performance. Furthermore, the Middle Preclassic platform not only predates all four structures of the ceremonial assemblage but also appears to be the preeminent ceremonial structure in Plaza A at this time. As I will later discuss, the existence of Q may prove to be important when looking at the development and transition of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage.



Figure 11: A photo of the Middle Preclassic sub-plaza platform, El Quemado (Courtesy of Terry G. Powis).

## The Puc (300 – 100 BC) and Ku (100 BC – AD 300) Phases

To manage large construction projects, retaining walls or “task units” were a common technique thought to divide the contribution of labor into more practicable portions (Loten and Pendergast 1984:14). Stacked rows of stones, thought to be wall segments of task units, have been found in excavations throughout Plaza A at Pacbitun and have been temporally designated to the early Late Preclassic (Figure 12) (Powis 2011:222). Q has at least three task unit walls running up the terraces and stairs of its south face. Pacbitun’s task units were used to hold large amounts of fill that raised and expanded Plaza A to its maximum extent, ultimately burying the Middle Preclassic platform (Micheletti and Powis 2015:211). Once enough fill had been brought in, Plaza A’s initial floor (Floor 4) was placed directly overtop the summit of Q, expanding and enlarging the plaza to its maximum extent (Terry Powis, personal communication, 2015). The question that still remains is whether Q was accompanied by any other Plaza A architecture prior to its deposition.





Figure 12: A photo of a task unit wall found beneath Plaza A at Pacbitun (Courtesy of Terry G. Powis).

Before El Quemado's discovery, a radiocarbon sample ( $520 \text{ BC} \pm 100$ , Beta-25378) from Structure 1 confirmed the buildings Middle Preclassic origin (Healy et al. 2004a:209-210; Healy et al. 2004b:229). This suggests the possibility of architectural contemporaneity with Q and the ceremonial assemblage under discussion. If the Middle Preclassic radiocarbon date is correct, it is possible that Structure 1 may have coexisted alongside Q; however, more evidence is needed to know whether it was constructed before or after the Late Preclassic plaza build up and burial of Q.

Contemporaneous or not, Structures 1 and 2 were the first two structures of the ceremonial assemblage to be built, set on the east and west sides of the plaza respectively (Figure



13). It is important to note that Structure 1 sat alone for a period of time. Thus, the eastern triad was not the original arrangement in Plaza A. This arrangement did not exist until the Late Preclassic or Puc phase (300-100 BC) (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014).

Structures 4 and 5, flanking Structure 1 to the north and south respectively, began as flat-topped, stepped platforms constructed sometime in the Late Preclassic (Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2004a:210). Initially, Structures 4 and 5 sat unattached; however, after a Ku phase (100 BC – AD 300) enlargement, Structure 1 “engulfed Structures 4 and 5 to create one massive construction” (Figure 14) (Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2004a:210). Both flanking structures also received additional phases of renewal and building during the Ku phase (Healy 1990:256). Structures 4 and 5 would have been less than 3 m tall while Structure 1 may have stood around 7 m in height (Healy 2004:210; 1990:256; Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). Like Structures 1 and 2, it is unclear whether the eastern flanking structures ever coexisted with Q.

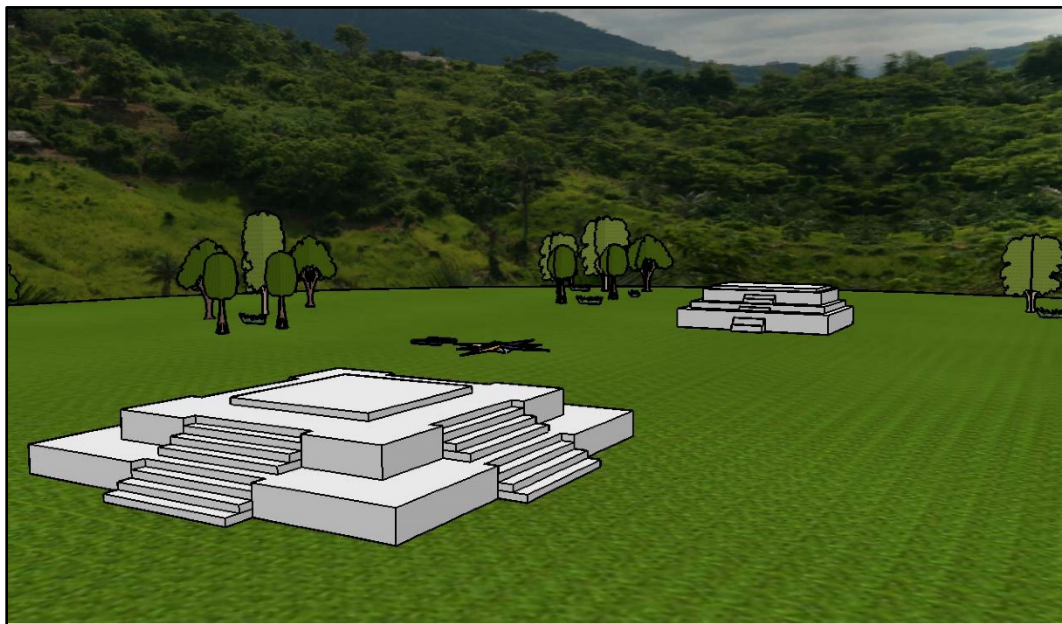


Figure 13: An artistic rendition of Structure 1 to the east (background) and Structure 2 to the west (foreground) in the late Middle Preclassic in Plaza A at Pacbitun (created by author using Sketchup).

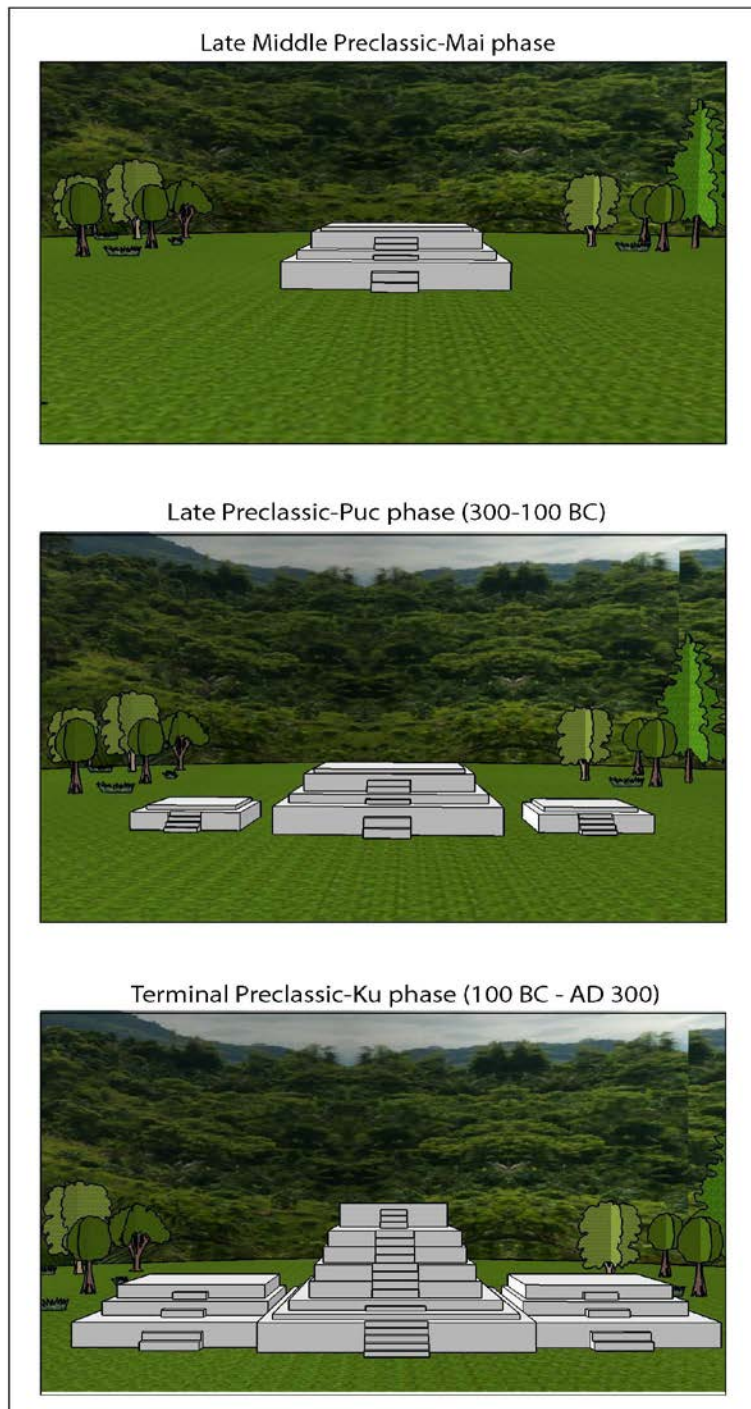


Figure 14: An artistic rendition of the temporal progression of Pacbitun's eastern triad in Plaza A beginning in the late Middle Preclassic-Mai phase (top) to the Late Preclassic-Puc phase (center) and Terminal Preclassic-Ku phase (bottom) (created by author using Sketchup).

As previously mentioned, the earliest phase recognized by Healy's excavation of Structure 5 dates back to the Late Preclassic period or Puc phase (300 – 100 BC) (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2015). The earliest architectural and artifactual evidence found during the 2014 investigation of Structure 5 was located at a depth of approximately 4.25 m beneath the modern summit of the structure (Figure 15). Here, in a scaled down unit measuring 2.5 m square and set near the eastern boarder of the 6 m long trench, a heavily eroded surface was encountered that was mostly composed of soft marl and brown soil with small patches of plaster material (Micheletti et al. 2014:47). This surface is likely the remains of an earlier summit floor.

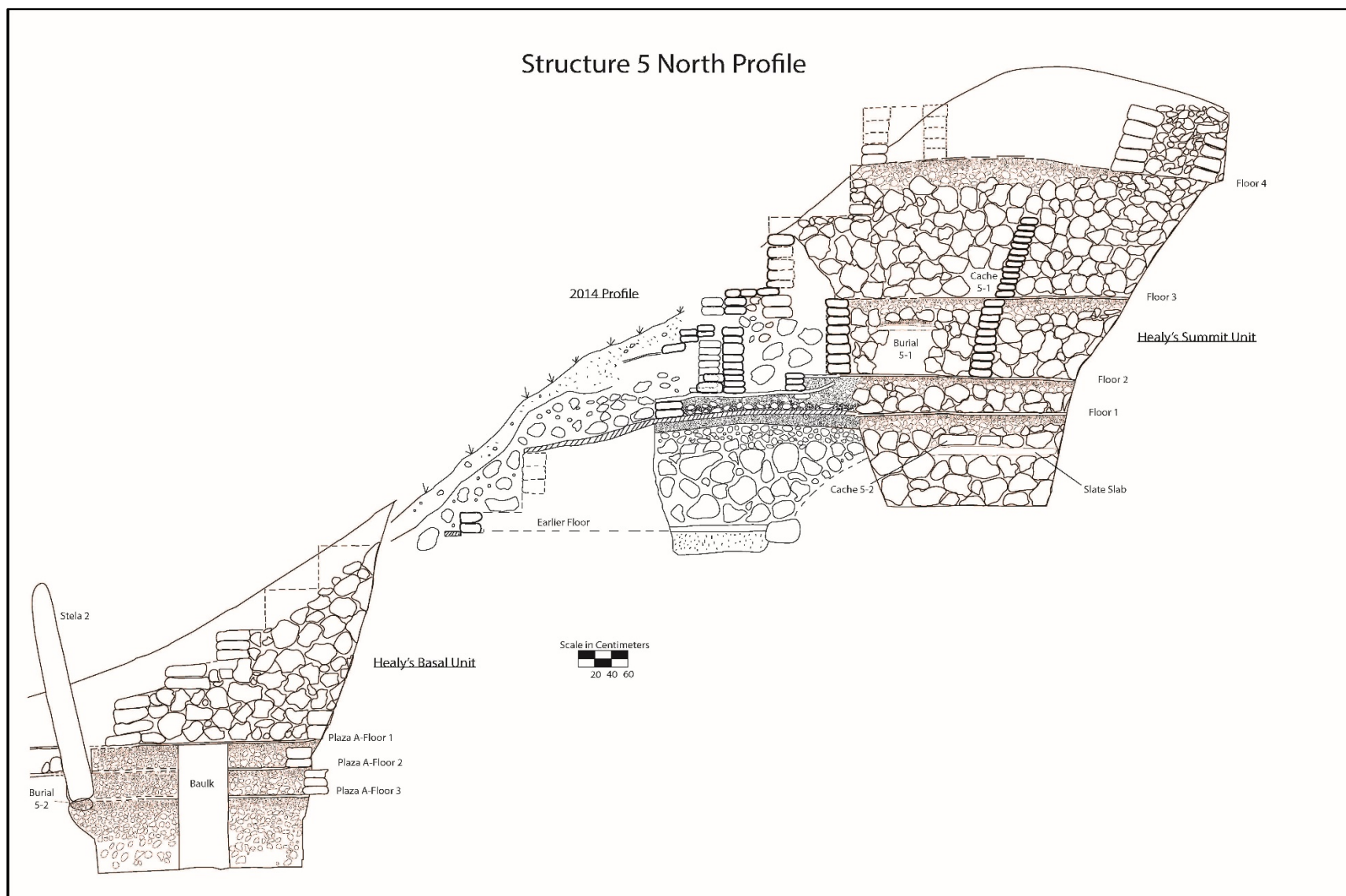


Figure 15: An illustration of the North Profile of Structure 5; the 2014 profile is set between Healy's summit and basal profiles (Summit and basal profiles courtesy of Paul Healy, Illustrated by author).

Neither cache nor burial were found associated with this Structure 5 architectural level, making it difficult to determine a solid date for the early floor. Therefore, the ceramic sherds recovered within the fill below this surface are the only resources available for dating. These imply a late Late Preclassic or early Terminal Preclassic date (Terry Powis, personal communication, 2015). If the eroded surface was an earlier summit of Structure 5 it would have stood 2.4 m above Plaza A Floor 1, 2.7 m above Plaza A Floor 2, or 3 m above Plaza A Floor 3. The latter two floors are the more likely in that both floors date to the Late Preclassic Puc (300-100 BC) and Terminal Preclassic Ku (100 BC-AD 300) phases (Healy 1990:256). Furthermore, Healy mentions that by the Ku phase “Structures 4 and 5 were less than 3m tall” indicating that Floor 2 may be the most logical possibility (Healy et al. 2004a:210). An important detail to take away from the provided information thus far, is that the four structures of Pacbitun’s ceremonial assemblage, though missing a low eastern sub-platform, all now partially conform to an E Group-like arrangement. Also important is the fact that Pacbitun’s eastern triad appears to be symmetrical.

#### The Tzul Phase (AD 300 – 550)

Pacbitun’s Early Classic Tzul phase (AD 300-550) consisted of several architectural renewals and refurbishing to the ceremonial assemblage. During this time, two structures were superimposed over Structure 1 including a “masonry-and-timber shrine in the center of the lower stair” (Healy 1990:256). Structures 4 and 5 also underwent two enlargements during this phase (Figure 16).



### Early Classic-Tzul Phase (AD 300 - 550)

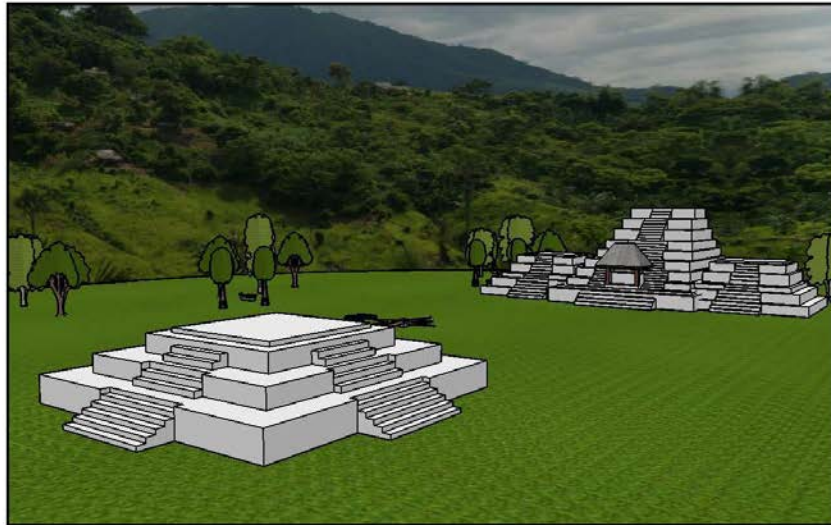


Figure 16: An artistic rendition of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage in the Early Classic-Tzul phase (300 – 550 AD) (created by author using Sketchup).

Evidence gathered from the 2014 excavation of Structure 5 revealed that the first Early Classic enlargement was quite significant, being raised 1 to 1.3 m in height. The first evidence

of a terrace step was found close to the western limit of the excavation trench just below the mid-point of the structure. A single row of cut riser stones piled one-to-two courses high stretched the north-south width of the excavation trench. These stones, approximately 4 m from the base of Structure 5, were set directly on the western edge of what is believed to be the previous Late Preclassic summit surface as indicated in Figure 15. Although the riser stones were fairly well preserved, only a single stone remained near the northern edge of the trench. To the east, rising up 60 cm from the tread was the first Early Classic plaster summit surface, or Floor 1 in Healy's Structure 5 profile (Figure 15). Thus, the summit would have measured more than 6.7 m from front to back (east to west). From the western edge of the floor, the surface gradually sloped up to the east for the next 1.6 m gaining approximately 40 cm in height before leveling off. The slope was probably caused by the slumping of loose fill at the base of Structure 5 (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). Other than the slumping, the floor was fairly well preserved, but was heavily and uniformly burned.

Like the previous construction phase, no cache or burial deposits were recovered within this enlargement, so dating relied heavily on ceramics found within fill. Ceramics associated with this phase seemed to date slightly later than the previous phase suggesting that construction occurred sometime during the first few centuries AD near the end of the Ku phase (100 BC – AD 300) (Terry Powis, personal communication, 2015). Although this date is relatively early when compared to Healy's original Early Classic assignation, it is likely the result of the small sherd sample size procured in 2014. At this time, the summit of Structure 5 would have stood approximately 4 m above Plaza A Floor 1 or 4.3 m from Plaza A Floor 2. Healy (1990:256) mentions that Plaza A Floor 1, the last floor to be placed, was laid down in the Early Classic Tzul Phase (AD 300 – 500). If this phase of architecture dates to the Terminal Preclassic-Early

Classic transition, the final Plaza A floor may not have been constructed. Thus, it is unclear which plaza floor this phase of architecture is associated with.

The second enlargement of Structure 5 is thought to occur in the Early Classic and involved a minor addition to the summit with indications of several plaster floor resurfacings. The 2014 investigation indicated that this floor began 1.6 m west of the western edge of Floor 1 of Structure 5, and stood about 20 cm higher. The surface was well preserved aside from a small area just west of Healy's summit unit. The plaster in this area was extremely eroded and difficult to detect. This surface was unusual because it sits approximately 20cm below Healy's Floor 2. However, evidence may suggest that this surface may have once sloped up to the west to meet with Healy's Floor 2 (Figure 15). If this is correct, it would explain the later addition of a stair which would have been constructed to permanently fix the slope or collapse of the floor (Micheletti et al 2015:46).

Although it is difficult to determine when the stair was added, the ceramics collected from within the fill during the 2014 investigation confirm Healy's Early Classic date for this construction phase (Terry Powis, personal communication, 2015). Unfortunately, the slope of the surface and the stair addition have made it difficult to confirm a height for this architectural phase. To the west of the Floor 2 step, the summit of Structure 5 stands approximately 4.3 m above Plaza A Floor 1 (Figure 15) (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). However, assuming that the stair was added to fix the slope, the height measurement of this architectural phase should include the stair. Thus, with the Floor 2 step, the summit sat 4.5 m above Plaza A Floor 1 (Figure 15) (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). Importantly, it appears Structure 4 underwent two strikingly similar constructions during the Early Classic (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). Therefore, the assemblage continues to be symmetrical.



### *Ku (100 BC – AD 300) and Tzul (AD 300 – 550) Phase Burials*

It is important to note that only two burials (Burials 1-5, 1-6) are associated with the ceremonial assemblage up to this point. The earliest known burial found within the ceremonial assemblage at Pacbitun was located in Structure 1 and dates to the Terminal Preclassic (Healy 1990:256). Burial 1-5 was a single male adult placed in a simple crypt with head to the south (Robertson 2011:168, Appendix 1). The earliest multiple burial recorded at the site (Bu. 1-6) was also found in Structure 1 dating to the Early Classic period (Robertson 2011:168, Appendix 1). Burial 1-6 included a male and female adult placed into an elaborate crypt (Robertson 2011:168, Appendix 1). The male was extended with his head to the south while the female was found in a seated position (Robertson 2011:168, Appendix 1).

### *The Coc Phase (AD 550 – 700)*

During the Coc phase (AD 550 – 700) of the Late Classic, all four of the structures in Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage were not only enlarged but were also uniquely modified. Aside from its enlargement, Late Classic alterations of Structure 1 included the addition of a stair block approximately midway up the temple stairs (Healy 1990:251). Also during this major construction event, Structure 2 was the first in the ceremonial assemblage to receive a vaulted masonry superstructure (Healy 1990:257). The most significant modifications in terms of this study, however, were those received by Structures 4 and 5. It is after this construction event that the eastern triad lost its architectural symmetry (Figure 17).

### Early Late Classic-Coc phase (AD 550 - 700)

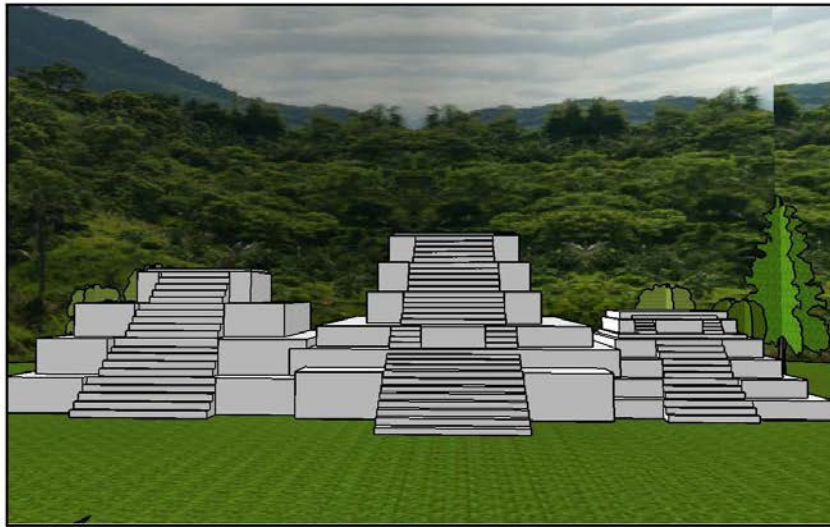


Figure 17: An artistic rendition of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage in the early Late Classic-Coc phase (AD 550 – 700) (created by author using Sketchup).

The early Late Classic construction episode raised the summit of Structure 5 an additional 90-100 cm (Figure 15) (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). Thus, the summit of the structure (Floor 3) stood approximately 5.3 m above Plaza A Floor 1 (Paul Healy,

personal communication, 2014). This seems relatively minor when compared to modifications of Structure 4 which raised the summit up approximately 3.5 m. This marks the first time in the assemblage's history that Structure 4 and Structure 5 stand at drastically different heights. Additions to Structure 5 also included a stair block found on the central axis near the summit of the structure. A single stair on the south end of the stair block's west-facing wall was all that remained of its flanking stairs.

Again, no burial or cache deposits were recovered during the 2014 investigation to help date this phase of construction. However, a charcoal sample (Beta-417408) was taken from construction fill and provided a radiocarbon date of AD 390-540 with a 95% standard deviation. The sample also provided a date of AD 490-540 with a 68% standard deviation. Again, this date is slightly earlier than Healy's early Late Classic Coc phase (AD 550 – 700) designation. The ceramic sherds associated with this sample are also mostly of the Hermitage complex dating to the Tzul phase (AD 300 – 550) or Early Classic period corresponding with the radiocarbon dates (Terry Powis, personal communication, 2015). If the construction phase occurred around the Early Classic-Late Classic transition (ca. AD 550), it would make sense that the fill used to construct the building at this time would mainly consist of Early Classic material (Healy et al. 2004a:207-208; Terry Powis, personal communication, 2015).

#### *Coc Phase Burials (AD 550 – 700)*

A total of ten interments dating to the Late Classic period were recovered from Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage by Healy's early excavations; five in Structure 1 (Bu. 1-1, 1-2, 1-4, 1-8, 1-9), two in Structure 2 (Bu. 2-3, 2-4), two in Structure 4 (Bu. 4-1, 4-2), and one in Structure 5 (Bu. 5-1) (Robertson 2011:168, Appendix 1). In an assortment of grave types

ranging from capped pit to tomb, each interment was placed in an extended position and, apart from Burial 1-1, had head to the south (Robertson 2011:168, Appendix 1). Burial 2-3 and 4-2 were the only multiple interment burials made during the Late Classic; both interments contain the remains of a male and female (Robertson 2011:168, Appendix 1). The rest contained either an adult male (Bu. 1-2, 1-9, 2-4, 5-1) or female (Bu. 1-1, 1-4, 1-8, 4-1) individual. The influx of interments placed within the uncharacteristically modified architecture may indicate a physical and functional transformation of the ceremonial assemblage.

#### The Tzib Phase (AD 700 – 900)

All four of the structures in the ceremonial assemblage undergo one last renovation during the late Late Classic Tzib phase (AD 700 – 900). Each of the buildings were then crowned with a vaulted masonry superstructure. In its final form, the western base of Structure 1 measured 17.8 m wide and its plastered summit stood 12.5 m above Plaza A Floor 1. Stairs measuring 11.6 m wide led to the structure's first vaulted masonry superstructure composed of a single room with doors opening to the east and west. The superstructure stood an additional 4m higher bringing the total height of Structure 1 to 16.5 m (Healy 1990:251; Healy et al. 2004a:210). The eastern base of Structure 2 measured 25 m with a 5.6 m wide central stair. Structure 2, composed of five terraces in its final form, received a second 4m tall vaulted masonry superstructure bringing the final height of the building to 11.2 m (Healy 1990:252). Similar to Structure 1, Healy (1990:252) believes the superstructure of Structure 2 included two doors that would have overlooked Plaza A to the east and Plaza B to the west. Structure 2 also received a stair block constructed on the eastern face on the upper portion of the stairs. Structures 4 and 5, in their final form, measured 16-18 m at their base with their superstructures

raising the height of the buildings up to 12.2 m and 10.9 m respectively (Healy 1990:252; Healy et al. 2004a:210).

Also included in this construction event are the placement of several stone stelae and altars. Although not all have confirmed dates, fourteen of Pacbitun's 20 monuments were found in Plaza A contexts. Stela 6, found collapsed onto Plaza A Floor 1, and Altar 3 and Altar 4, both found in cached locations, are the only carved monuments and all date to the Early Classic period (Healy 2004:213; Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014; Helmke and Awe 2012; Helmke et al. 2006). However, at least seven other monuments are thought to have been erected sometime during the Coc (AD 550 – 700) and Tzib (AD 700 – 900) phases (Healy et al. 2004a:213). Among those that could be firmly dated to the late Late Classic construction event, the Stela 1-Altar 1 pair was set at the base of Structure 1 while Stela 2 was erected in front of Structure 5. These could be dated due to burials placed beneath both stela (Healy 1990:259).

During the late Late Classic construction event, the summit of Structure 4 was only raised about 0.4 m standing 8.2 m (not including the vaulted superstructure) above Plaza A Floor 1 in its final form (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). The final phase of construction of Structure 5 was significant, raising the summit approximately 1.7 m (Figure 15). The base of Structure 5 was extended out into the plaza about 2.4-2.5 m to the west of the previous basal step. Stela 2 lies directly to the west of this step. Due to heavy slumping and collapse, this step was all that remained of the terminal architecture on the bottom half of the structure (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). After clearing the collapse debris from the upper half of the structure however, the 2014 investigation was able to uncover a fairly well preserved stair block about midway up the western face. Here, ascending Structure 5 to the east, one or two inset steps would have rose up to a small landing at the top of the terrace. The small landing then led

to an upper front terrace wall; the well was partially dismantled from Healy's previous excavation. The upper-most terrace would have stood nearly 90 cm high and was the final landing before reaching the summit some 60 cm higher. Thus, excluding the vaulted superstructure, the summit of Structure 5 in its final form stood 6.9 m above Plaza A Floor 1. Furthermore, the ceramics associated with this phase of construction were able to confirm the late Late Classic Tzib phase (AD 700 – 900) date assigned by Healy (Gifford 1976; Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2004a; Terry Powis, personal communication, 2015).

#### *Tzib Phase Burials (AD 700 – 900)*

Seven burials dating to the late Late Classic (Bu. 1-3, 1-7, 2-1, 2-2, 2-5, 2-6, 5-2) were recovered within the final architectural construction phase of the ceremonial assemblage. Two sub-stela burials (1-3, 5-2) and two urn style burials (2-5, 2-6) are thought to be sacrificial victims. Burial 1-3 was a multiple burial containing the remains of a male, female, and juvenile – all placed in a simple cist beneath Stela 1 in front of Structure 1. A single individual whose sex was not identified was placed within a simple pit beneath Stela 2 in front of Structure 5. The urn-style burials were both placed into simple pits within Structure 2; each urn contained the remains of a juvenile (Healy et al. 2004a:215). The individuals of Burial 2-1 (female) and Burial 2-2 (male) were each placed within simple crypts in an extended position with head to the south (Robertson 2011:168, Appendix 1). Finally, a male and female pair (Bu. 1-7) was placed into Structure 1 within a cist/capped pit in an extended position with their heads to the south. Interestingly, although these seven interments were also associated with non-symmetrical terminal architecture, only three of these burials seem to resemble the previous early Late Classic style of mortuary practice.

## Post-Abandonment Burial

The site of Pacbitun is thought to be abandoned around AD 900. While the ceremonial assemblage did not receive further modifications, a single post-abandonment burial (Bu. 4-3) was discovered near the summit of Structure 4 (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2013). Burial 4-3 was not located on the structure's central axis and was found in a flexed position, differing from the previous pattern of interments associated with the ceremonial assemblage (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2013; Robertson 2011:168, Appendix 1).

## **CHAPTER FOUR: PHYSICAL, SPATIAL, AND FUNCTIONAL ATTRIBUTES OF PACBITUN'S CEREMONIAL ASSEMBLAGE**

Each construction event and interment of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage has helped to identify physical, spatial, and functional attributes. After the temporal examination of the construction events and interments, it is clear that the assemblage is composed of E Group, eastern shrine, and eastern triadic assemblage attributes. It also appears that these attributes are not constant through time. This chapter will identify attributes that are associated with each time period and attempt to indicate which archetype the ceremonial assemblage most resembles architecturally and functionally.

### The Mai Phase

Looking as far back as the Middle Preclassic, the presence of El Quemado in Plaza A is a clear indication that the ceremonial assemblage was not Pacbitun's founding monumental architecture. Q's early radiocarbon dates infer that the platform predates the ceremonial assemblage by at least a few hundred years (Terry Powis, personal communication, 2015). Interestingly, in the Lowlands, E Groups are often the first monumental structures built at a given site and are usually the dominant ceremonial architecture. E Groups are also thought to represent the foundation, legitimacy, and autonomy of a site (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:100-101). If any of the ceremonial assemblage ever existed during Q's reign, it is clear that Q was more spatially and architecturally dominant, hinting at the building's ritual/ceremonial superiority. The impressive size and complexity of this Middle Preclassic platform strongly suggests an early socio-political prominence at Pacbitun whose inhabitants are either not yet or only partially invested in E Group or shrine ideology in their main plaza. However, the Late



Preclassic transformation of Plaza A clearly identifies a shift in architectural importance. It is possible that the burial (or termination) of Q and subsequent construction (or modification) of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage may indicate a new beginning and signal the "foundation" of Pacbitun's new way of thinking. Therefore, it is difficult to confirm or deny the existence of an E Group complex or eastern shrine at Pacbitun based solely on the early presence of Q.

Affirmation, however, may be derived after examining the sequence of construction of the four structures that make up the ceremonial assemblage.

The initial constructions of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage present several characteristics that strongly conflict with E Group defining attributes. Instead of the long, low, north-south oriented, eastern platform typical of foundational E Group architecture, the first construction of Pacbitun's assemblage is Structure 1 on the eastern edge of the plaza and Structure 2 on the western edge of the plaza (Healy et al. 2004a:210). If a low north-south oriented platform is considered the primary E Group attribute, the assemblage's initial constructions obviously do not at first comply with the E Group archetype. Pacbitun's central eastern structure (Structure 1) was the first to be constructed in the east and sat alone on the plaza surface for a short period of time (Awe et al. 2016; Healy 1990;). Awe et al.'s (2016) study finds that several of the ceremonial assemblages in the Belize Valley began with the central eastern structure suggesting that this may be the initial phase of the architectural sequence of an eastern triadic structure (Awe 1992; 2013; Awe et al. 2016; Conlon 2013; Robin 2008; 2012). Furthermore, a single structure centrally positioned on the eastern edge of a plaza seems to follow attributes assigned to eastern shrines (Becker 1971; 1982; 2003; 2004). If these central structures were initially built to function as eastern shrines, it may explain the shrine attributes

discussed by Awe et al. (2016). However, at Pacbitun, no burials were located in either structure thus refuting any shrine function at this time.

### The Puc Phase

Importantly, the next phase of construction adds the final two eastern buildings. Structure 4 and Structure 5 both separately flank the central structure to the north and south completing the eastern triadic formation. Because the eastern triadic formation is an attribute that belongs to both the E Group complex and eastern triadic assemblage, it is necessary to find other attributes that may better support one archetype or the other. Focusing first on architectural attributes, as Awe et al.'s (2016) study implies, the fundamental eastern platform component of E Groups, was never constructed at Pacbitun. An E Group's low platform served to support and, more importantly, symbolically united the three eastern structures. Without the platform, Pacbitun's three eastern structures were constructed on and built up from the plaza surface as separate entities. Both flanking structures were likely built simultaneously, but initially sat unattached from their central counterpart. Thus, a larger central structure would have been closely, but separately, flanked to the north and south by two smaller platform structures. Evidence of the ceremonial assemblages at other Belize Valley sites indicates that their eastern flanking structures were also built sometime after the central structure and were initially set unattached (Awe et al. 2016).

Looking at the architectural attributes of Pacbitun's assemblage up to this point, the construction sequence appears to precisely follow Awe et al.'s (2016) description of other eastern triadic assemblages found in the Belize Valley. The unique construction sequence, beginning with a central eastern structure followed by two flanking eastern structures, is not

compliant with the E Group archetype and could suggest that these assemblages functioned in a different manner. However, it is important to note that aside from the missing north-south sub-platform, Pacbitun's Late Preclassic symmetrical eastern triadic group paired with the single western plaza structure appears to include the physical and spatial attributes of the Uaxactun style E Group complex. It is also important to remember that architectural variants of the E Group complex, all of which are thought to function in a similar manner, have been documented elsewhere. Therefore, it is possible that Pacbitun's assemblage could be another variant form of an E Group complex. Although the architectural attributes of Pacbitun's assemblage are closely related to both the E Group and eastern triadic assemblage, the fact that there are no burials associated with any of the four structures almost certainly negates any shrine function at this time.

### The Ku Phase

As Healy et al. (2004:210) indicates, subsequent construction enlargements caused the eastern structures to join or amalgamate sometime in the Ku phase (100 BC – AD 300) or Terminal Preclassic. It is at this point that Pacbitun's eastern structures are considered a single triadic complex or assemblage. Thus, Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage is continuing to follow the Belize Valley assemblage's architectural progression. However, when looking at the assemblage's attributes, the most notable architectural feature that may help to identify this structure's function up to this point is the symmetry of the eastern buildings. Awe et al. (2016) state that the Belize Valley "eastern triadic structures were clearly constructed, or modified, independently of one another." Although it is true that the initial construction of Pacbitun's eastern structures began independently, the Terminal Preclassic construction event appears to

include each of the three eastern structures; all three structures receiving renovations and enlargements at the same time. The architectural modifications to the flanking structures also appear to be uniform and proportionate to one another so that the eastern complex retained its symmetrical formation. Both of these features are E Group attributes and, at least up to this point, conflict with Awe et al.'s (2016) arguments for an eastern triadic shrine at Pacbitun.

On the other hand, the one indication that Pacbitun's assemblage may have been functioning as a shrine in the Terminal Preclassic is the placement of Burial 1-5 into Structure 1. Although the body's position was indiscernible, the head of the individual was oriented to the south. This was a common theme at Pacbitun and may suggest early ancestor veneration. What is unusual about the interment is the fact that no grave goods were documented making it difficult to infer the importance or status of the individual (Robertson 2011:170). If formal burials are considered to be an attribute of eastern shrines, the lack of grave goods may be indicative of lesser importance or status and argue against a shrine function. Oddly though, even if Burial 1-5 was a shrine interment, the burial may actually strengthen the E Group argument; a point I will return to shortly. Thus, it may be best to refrain from attempting to assign any archetypal label to the assemblage until after the discussion of the Early Classic period.

### The Tzul Phase

Looking at the architecture of the Early Classic, similar to the earlier two phases, Pacbitun's assemblage is modified uniformly and to the same scale so that it retained its symmetrical appeal. Thus, this E Group attribute appears to remain constant for Pacbitun's assemblage. Conversely, the construction of the small masonry and timber shrine may suggest otherwise. The Early Classic shrine that was added to Structure 1 was placed "directly over a Ku

phase crypt” referring to Burial 1-5 (Healy 1990:256). According to Welsh (1988:190), the construction of this type of feature “over a grave placed in an already existing temple or ceremonial platform” is a form of commemoration and ancestor veneration. Furthermore, Burial 1-6 was also placed into Structure 1 sometime in the Early Classic period. The addition of this burial brings the ceremonial assemblage’s interment total to two. The position and orientation of the male individual of Burial 1-6 along with the prestigious grave goods and elaborate grave construction on the central axis of its structure is all indicative of an elite status and suggestive of a shrine function for Pacbitun’s assemblage (Welsh 1988:190-192). So again, the physical, spatial, and functional attributes of Pacbitun’s assemblage after this construction event includes an admixture of attributes related to the E Group, eastern shrine, and eastern triadic shrine archetypes. However, this admixture of shrine and E Group attributes may simply be explained by a widespread southern Lowland E Group phenomena occurring around this time (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:100).

Though difficult to determine, if the consolidation of the three eastern structures was done intentionally to conform to an E Group like arrangement, the placement of both burials may actually follow the Late Preclassic-Early Classic short-lived theme of placing ancestral remains within E Group architecture (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:100). Furthermore, even though the three eastern structures were now attached and considered a single complex, Structures 4 and 5 were still devoid of burials to this point, continuing to make it difficult to assume that the entire assemblage was wholly functioning as a triadic shrine. It seems more appropriate to suggest that the assemblage has a partial shrine function. Moreover, because Pacbitun’s Early Classic assemblage exhibits physical and spatial attributes belonging to the E Group archetype and spatial and functional attributes belonging to the eastern shrine archetype, it may be more correct

to state that the assemblage is actually an amalgam of both. This would also seem to be an appropriate assumption for most E Groups with shrine-like interments. Thus, although difficult to say with complete certainty, the combination of E Group and shrine attributes of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage may actually help to identify the assemblage as an E Group complex in the Early Classic. Fortunately, after the construction event of the early Late Classic, the function of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage was anything but uncertain.

### The Coc Phase

From the ceremonial assemblage's beginning through the Early Classic construction events, attributes belonging to the E Group, eastern shrine, and eastern triadic assemblage are all present and intertwined. However, after the ceremonial assemblage's early Late Classic construction event, highlighted by the installment of irregular constructions and the placement of a large amount of interments, it is clear that Pacbitun's assemblage changes physically and functionally. The evidence presented below will indicate that the assemblage's attributes strongly evince a shrine function and support Awe et al.'s (2016) eastern triadic assemblage model.

Prior to the early Late Classic construction event, the architectural additions and renovations to Structures 4 and 5 are simultaneous and identical. Likely as a result of this early Late Classic event, however, the two structures were transformed from simple platforms "into more elaborate temple-pyramids, with more distinct identities" (Healy 1990:252). The most notable architectural discrepancy between Structure 4 and Structure 5 after the Late Classic construction event is their height differential. Contrasting from the previous events, the flanking eastern structures were each uniquely modified, paying no attention to symmetry. While the

additions to Structure 5 raised the building about 1 m in height, Structure 4 was raised approximately 3.5 m (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). This is by no means a slight height differential. The 2.5 m height advantage of Structure 4 over Structure 5 disrupts the assemblage's symmetry. Without the symmetrical attribute, the assemblage looks less like an E Group and more like Awe et al.'s (2016) eastern triadic assemblage.

Several facts can also be derived when looking at the Late Classic interments. A major point to remember is the fact that these interments coincide with the construction event that disrupts the symmetry of the entire assemblage. Prior to this event, only two burials are placed into the ceremonial assemblage. Both Burial 1-5 and Burial 1-6 are found in Structure 1 leaving the other three buildings devoid of burials. This means that only two interments are associated with a single structure in the assemblage from the time it was constructed through to the Early Classic period; a duration of time that likely spans nearly ten centuries. Then, sometime during the early part of the Late Classic or Coc phase (AD 550-700), a period of time spanning less than two centuries, ten burials were either placed all at once during the construction event or intermittently throughout the time period. The ten early Late Classic interments count for half of the ceremonial assemblage's entire burial collection. Importantly, for the first time in the assemblage's history each of the four structures now hold at least one or more burials. Thus, within a short amount of time, an unusual amount of interments were placed into architecture that did not follow the previous pattern of construction; a clear indication that the function of the assemblage had been transformed along with its appearance.

More shrine attributes can be identified by closely examining interment characteristics. Healy et al. (2004:215) states that "there was a striking degree of uniformity in burial practices in the Core Zone." Aside from the two urn burials and two flexed burials, "all other individuals

were found in an extended position, mostly supine, with legs crossed and heads oriented to the south” (Healy et al. 2004a:215). The majority of burials were also located on the central axis of their associated structure (Healy et al. 2004b:229). Compared to other interments at the site, the ten early Late Classic burials in the ceremonial assemblage were more elaborate, better furnished, and seem to follow more stringent burial regulations (Robertson 2011:103-115). According to Welsh (1988:186), these are definite signs of ancestor shrines. The most definitive proof of the ceremonial assemblage’s transition to a shrine function, however, may be evident in the construction of the site’s only documented tomb.

#### Burial 1-9 and the “Intrusive Interment and Covering” Rule

The adult male individual placed into the tomb categorized as Burial 1-9 interred within Structure 1 is thought to be the remains of an early Late Classic royal lord or ruler of Pacbitun (Figure 18) (Healy et al. 2004b). The north-south oriented tomb was capped and sealed by a row of six 1 m long by 0.5 m wide trimmed slate slabs, stacked three high in some places, and covered with an 8-10 cm thick bed of chert flakes (Healy et al. 2004b:230). The hollowed, oval-shaped, corbel vaulted tomb was composed of 12-course high, cut stone walls. Similar to the other interments in the assemblage, the individual in Burial 1-9 was placed in a supine, extended position with head to the south (Healy et al. 2004b:232). The skull was placed onto a painted *Spondylus* valve shell and the body of the individual was heavily peppered with red ochre, or cinnabar (Healy et al. 2004b:231-232). Both of these practices are indicative of high status and have been found with identified rulers at other sites (Haviland and Moholy-Nagy 1992:53-54; Healy et al. 2004b:231). The interment proved to be the richest grave at Pacbitun containing 19 painted ceramic vessels, polished jadeite, iron pyrite beads, shell ear flares, and several other



prestigious grave goods (Healy et al. 2004b:231). The ceramics helped to date the burial to the early part of the Late Classic or Coc phase (AD 550 – 700) (Healy et al. 2004b:231).

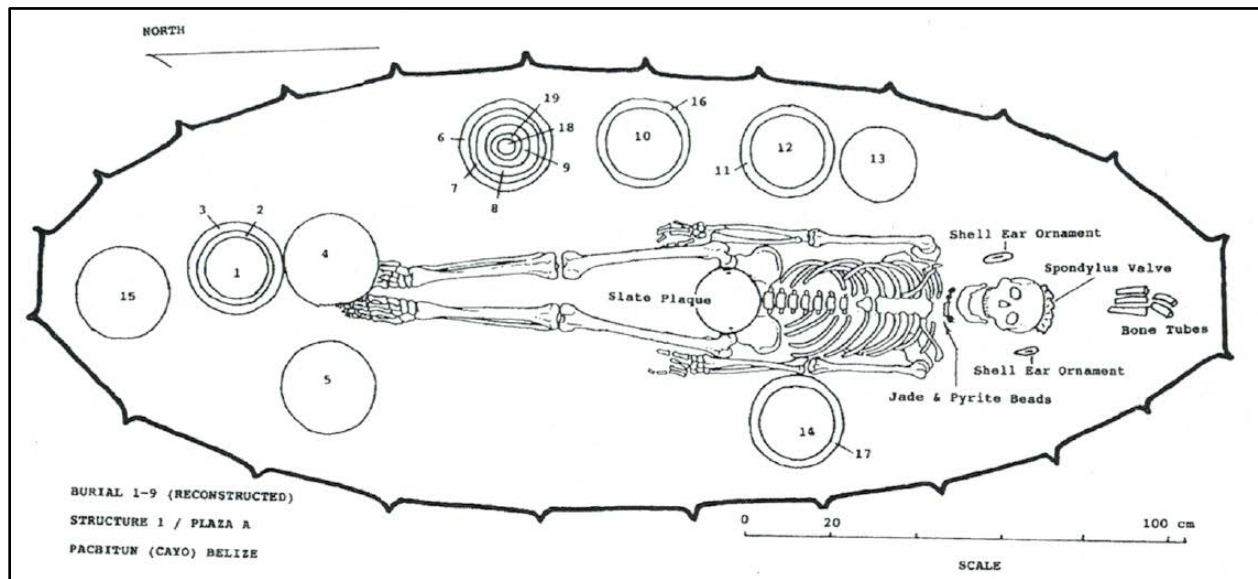


Figure 18: An illustration of Burial 1-9 found in Structure 1 at Pacbitun (Healy et al. 2004b, Figure 14.1).

Notably, the most significant part of this interment is not the status or date of the individual. It is the location of the tomb that is important and may be the key to identifying what is happening to Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage in the early part of the Late Classic. Just before the early Late Classic construction event, along the central axis of Structure 1 about mid-way up the west face, a 5m deep shaft was dug, penetrating the Early Classic surface down through "a series of earlier pyramidal forms" (Healy et al. 2004b: 230). Here, deep in the heart of Structure 1, the tomb of Burial 1-9 was constructed. After the tomb was capped and the shaft refilled, an entirely new structure was built over the Early Classic Structure 1 architecture (Healy et al. 2004b:233). The process of penetrating and placing a tomb deep into the existing architectural phases of an eastern structure and covering the burial and previous structure with an

entirely new facade seems to be the exact process defined by Becker's (1999:144-145; 2004:129) "intrusive interment and covering" rule. According to Becker (1999:144-145; 2004:129), a building that was not previously a shrine could be converted by following the interment-covering process. Thus, it may be that Burial 1-9 was placed to convert the function of the ceremonial assemblage from non-shrine to shrine. Moreover, D. Chase and A. Chase (2004:13) also discuss an interment location sequence in eastern shrines at Caracol that often begins with a tomb placed into the core of a structure. Although Burial 1-9 was preceded by Burial 1-5 and 1-6, the tomb's penetration into previous architecture might not only have served to convert the structure's function but might also have served to emphasize the importance of Burial 1-9 over the previously interred individuals.

As discussed above, the construction or conversion of a temple, similar to those events occurring at Pacbitun in the early Late Classic, can be an indication of commemoration of an important ancestor. Further evidence to support this can be found in the special architectural features included with or added to an eastern structure (McAnany 1998:280; Welsh 1988:190-191). Two of these architectural features are associated with the early Late Classic construction event of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage. The first feature is the vaulted masonry superstructure added to the summit of Structure 2. Although Becker (2004:129) states that "only a few examples of the largest of the diagnostic eastern buildings at Tikal appear to have been vaulted" and that vaulting was not an important trait of eastern shrines, it is still interesting that Structure 2's superstructure, possibly the first at Pacbitun, along with the first two interments into this building (BU. 2-3, 2-4) occur during the early Late Classic construction event (Healy 1990:257; Robertson 2011). The second feature is a stair block built midway up the western face of Structure 1. Compared to the superstructure, the stair block is a bit more redolent of

commemoration because it contains the remains of two burials (BU. 1-1, 1-2) and, more importantly, was built directly over Burial 1-9 (Healy et al. 2004b:233). Although the conditions of the two burials within the stair block are far less ornate than Burial 1-9, both interments' prestigious grave goods imply elite status. Objects such as the musical instruments included in Burial 1-1 are also thought to suggest the funerary rather than dedicatory purpose for these interments (Healy 1988; 2003:60). Thus, architectural features like the stair block and vaulted superstructure served as ritual/ceremonial areas to commemorate the important individuals placed beneath them.

The architectural innovations and increased interments occurring in the early Late Classic provide strong evidence that Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage was most likely functioning as an eastern triadic assemblage (Awe et al. 2016). Looking ahead to the final construction event in the latter part of the Late Classic, at first glance it appears that the assemblage continues to exhibit the same shrine attributes as the previous construction event. However, while the shrine function may continue, a closer look at the late Late Classic data indicates that some of the shrine attributes are unique when compared to the early Late Classic event.

### The Tzib Phase

After the late Late Classic or Tzib phase (AD 700-900) renovations, Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage continued to be non-symmetrical. However, unlike the previous early Late Classic event, the late Late Classic renovations to Structure 4 were quite minor when compared to those of Structure 5. Though the height differential was drastically reduced during the late Late Classic construction event, Structure 4 still stood about 1.3 m taller than Structure 5, continuing to follow the eastern triadic structure formation. Both of the flanking structures also

received a vaulted masonry superstructure. Again, features like these superstructures added to shrine buildings would seem to suggest that they served as designated areas for ritual/ceremonial activity involving ancestor veneration. What is interesting, however, is that no interments were placed into Structure 4 or Structure 5 during this event. If these superstructures were erected for commemoration, they were likely constructed for those individuals who were already interred into these structures during the previous early Late Classic event. The stair block added to the upper portion of Structure 2 signals a similar issue. Unlike the early Late Classic stair block added to Structure 1, the late Late Classic stair block of Structure 2 did not contain interments (Healy 1990:252). However, the early Late Classic Structure 2 surface beneath the stair block was not penetrated during the excavation. Thus, it remains unknown whether the stair block was constructed over an earlier interment analogous to the Structure 1 stair block and Burial 1-9.

On the other hand, the newly constructed summit and replacement superstructure atop Structure 2 was accompanied by two late Late Classic burials (BU. 2-1, 2-2). The more prominent of the two, Burial 2-1 was placed below the summit floor in a simple crypt lined with limestone blocks and capped with slate slabs (Healy 1988; 2003:63). Here, the remains of a single female individual were found in an extended position with head to the south. Although not a tomb interment, Burial 2-1 was only slightly less ornate than Burial 1-9. Along with nearly 30 ceramic vessels that helped to date the burial to the Tzib phase (AD 700 – 900) (Tepeu 3 complex), Burial 2-1 was found with a jadeite “portrait head” pendant, jadeite drilled beads, a brown flint bi-point dagger covered in red ochre, and over a dozen musical instruments including figurine ocarinas, flutes, and a maraca (Healy 1988; 1990:259; Healy 2003:59-66). Like those found in Burial 1-1, the musical instruments were probably used in a procession, implying the funerary nature of this interment.

Structure 1 also received its first vaulted masonry superstructure during the late Late Classic construction event. Unlike its flanking structures however, the renovations to Structure 1 included the elite interment of Burial 1-7. Thus, the superstructures added to the summits of each of the structures of the ceremonial assemblage likely served as ritual/ceremonial areas for the veneration of those associated ancestors.

Interestingly, the remaining four late Late Classic burials (BU. 1-3, 5-2, 2-5, 2-6) are considered to be sacrificial, meaning that Burial 1-7, 2-1, and 2-2 are the only elite remains placed into the ceremonial assemblage at this time. The urn burials (BU. 2-5, 2-6), each containing the sacrificial remains of a child, were placed within the fill on the central axis of Structure 2 (Healy et al. 2004a:215). Healy et al. (2004a:215) states that these urn burials were placed during “dedicatory ceremonies associated with architectural renewal.” According to Welsh (1988:65, 170), burials within urns placed into cache locations should be considered “dedicatory cache burials.” Welsh (1988:169-170) also considers sub-stela interments as dedicatory cache burials. On the east side of the plaza, Burial 1-3 was placed beneath Stela 1 in front of Structure 1 and Burial 5-2 was placed beneath Stela 2 in front of Structure 5. The lack of grave goods, placement beneath stela, and poor overall condition suggest the sacrificial nature of the two burials.

The placement of stelae in Plaza A further obscures the functional picture of the ceremonial assemblage during the late Late Classic. Images and hieroglyphs carved onto stelae usually record calendrical, historical, mythological, and cosmological events. Stelae associated with E Groups are sometimes associated with important period or cycle ending dates. Other stelae were used as displays to publically portray a ruler’s connection to divine ancestors (1995:39-49). Unfortunately, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the stelae at Pacbitun are not

carved, making it almost impossible to know the reason for their placement. Thus, a sub-stela interment may have been placed as a dedication to honor the ancestors, a cycle of time, architectural renewal, or even to commemorate the erection of the stelae itself.

In the case that Pacbitun's stela did in fact record important period ending dates, the interments placed to celebrate these cycles of time would not necessarily detract from the ceremonial assemblage's shrine function. As A. Chase and D. Chase (2013:20) mention, interments placed within shrine structures at Caracol may be linked to cycles of time stating that "a burial may commemorate a larger event or cycle and not the simple death of an individual" (D. Chase and A. Chase 2011). Furthermore, Becker (1992:67-68) states that "the use of burials as caches (offerings) may reflect Maya cosmological concerns with using human remains to feed the gods (or to impregnate the earth) in order to bring forth renewed life and to continue the cycle of being (rather than to dispose of the unwanted corpse of the dead, as if a life had come to an end)."

Looking at the late Late Classic construction event as a whole, it appears that Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage once again exhibits attributes that belong to E Group, eastern shrine, and eastern triadic assemblage archetypes. Thus, the function of the assemblage is difficult to determine. Although the interments suggest that the shrine function is continuing, the four sacrificial victims do not follow the pattern presented in the early Late Classic construction event. Excluding the sacrificial interments, Structure 1 is the only eastern building to receive an elite burial at this time. A single interment into the central structure is slightly reminiscent of the Early Classic ceremonial assemblage. The assemblage remains nonsymmetrical, although the flanking structure's height differential is drastically lessened. The placement of stelae in front of the eastern structures, a common E Group feature, further obscures the assemblage's function.

Any attempt to determine the assemblage's function at this time would mostly be based on speculation. However, similar to the Early Classic construction, the fact that the ceremonial assemblage continues to exhibit both E Group and eastern shrine attributes may suggest that the assemblage exhibits the collaboration of ideologies represented by both archetypes.

### Summary

After closely examining the data, it is clear that E Group, eastern shrine, and eastern triadic assemblage attributes are present throughout the existence of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage. Yet, there are a few instances during the assemblage's evolution when one archetypal function is more apparent than the other. Just as Awe et al. (2016) imply, the Belize Valley assemblages each began as a single eastern structure; all receiving their unattached flanking structures a short time afterwards. These flanking structures were later attached through subsequent modifications (Awe et al. 2016). Similarly, Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage began with the central eastern structure (Structure 1) and single western structure (Structure 2). Structure 4 and Structure 5 were then added to flank Structure 1 shortly after. Initially, all three structures were separate but would later amalgamate to form one unit. This pattern of construction exhibited by the ceremonial assemblages at Pacbitun and the other Belize Valley sites differs from the typical north-south low platform associated with early E Group arrangements outside of this region.

While Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage does mimic the early construction pattern of the Belize Valley assemblages thought to be eastern triadic structures, other attributes of the assemblage may still support an eventual E Group function. Architecturally, the assemblage maintains its symmetrical attribute after the Terminal Preclassic amalgamation and Early Classic

modifications. Symmetry is thought to be an important E Group attribute; a characteristic likely derived from the astronomical implications of the E Group prototype. Therefore, although the function of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage is somewhat obscure after the first few phases, by the Early Classic the assemblage most resembles the typical E Group complex found outside of this region. Moreover, the placement of the two interments associated with the ceremonial assemblage prior to the early Late Classic construction event may also be connected to an E Group mortuary function of interring ruling elite individuals which began around the onset of the Early Classic (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:100).

Any remaining uncertainty concerning the function of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage is lost after the early Late Classic construction event. It is at this time that the assemblage most resembles Awe et al.'s (2016) eastern triadic assemblage model. During this event, each structure is uniquely modified resulting in a loss of symmetry. Attributes such as the quantity, quality, status, and placement sequence of interments along with the inclusion of architectural features associated with ancestor veneration all undoubtedly indicate the assemblage's transition to a shrine function. Even if Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage is not functioning as an E Group before the early Late Classic event, it is clear that the building is transformed and its shrine function enhanced. Although the shrine function seems to continue after the final late Late Classic construction event, the placement of stela and inclusion of sacrificial victims, once again, muddles the E Group, eastern shrine, and eastern triadic assemblage picture. Nevertheless, the most important piece of information, particularly for the purpose of this thesis, is that Pacbitun's data implies that the ceremonial assemblage did not fully function as an eastern triadic assemblage as defined by Awe et al. (2016) until after the early Late Classic construction event.



Interestingly, when comparing the evolution of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage with the evolution of other E Group and eastern shrine archetypes in the Southern Maya Lowlands, the architectural development and functional transformation of the assemblage is not that unexpected. Assuming that Pacbitun does conform to an E Group complex prior to the early Late Classic construction event, the initial constructions and subsequent modifications of the ceremonial assemblage up to the Early Classic period coincides with the appearance and mass production of hundreds of other E Groups in the Southern Maya Lowlands (Freidel et al. 2016). Like the widespread construction of E Groups, the transition of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage into an eastern triadic assemblage comes at a time when eastern shrines were becoming more prevalent in the Southern Maya Lowlands during the Classic period.

The institution and development of eastern shrines also seems to come at a time when E Groups are no longer being constructed and are less frequently utilized. In fact, the increase of PP2 groups at different sites during the Classic period has led Becker (2003:261; 2004:131) to believe that the E Group plaza plan (PP10), prominent in the Preclassic and Protoclassic periods, evolved into and was replaced by eastern shrine groups (PP2). Based on this prediction, Becker (2004:167) states that central eastern structures of E Groups should be associated with mortuary practices. This prediction has been confirmed at several sites with E Group complexes including those at Caracol and Cenote (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995; 2016). Becker (2004:167) also predicts that early eastern shrines would be flanked by solsticial markers. Although this phenomena has yet to be documented for any eastern shrine, it would be a fascinating theory to test. Regardless, Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage appears to be a prime example of the PP10 to PP2 transition proposed by Becker (2003:261; 2004:131). Evidently, the interment of Burial 1-9 and the early Late Classic construction event served to change the assemblage and its

function from an E Group to an eastern triadic assemblage. Again, even if this structure was not functioning as an E Group, Burial 1-9 still clearly altered the ceremonial assemblage's previous role evinced in the addition of several more Late Classic interments.

So the question that still remains is: what might the ceremonial assemblage's early Late Classic transition, changing from an E Group-like complex with a partial shrine function to a unique triadic assemblage with an increased shrine function (eastern triadic assemblage), mean for the site of Pacbitun? To better understand the conversion of Pacbitun's assemblage, it will be important to first understand what the E Group and eastern shrine archetypes were thought to represent in the Maya Lowlands. It will also be important to understand what it meant to place important lineage members into these archetypes. As the following chapter will reveal, E Groups were as much political as they were ritual/ceremonial.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: E GROUPS, EASTERN SHRINES, AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE MEANING OF ANCESTOR VENERATION**

Some believe the E Group configuration may have possibly been derived from a similar Olmec form of architecture known as the Middle Formative Chiapas (MCF) pattern found near central Chiapas, Mexico (Clark and Hansen 2001; Inomata et al. 2013; Lowe 1977). The early date of Ceibal's E Group complex (ca. 1000 BC) has led Inomata et al. (2013:470) to suggest that the Maya were not just the recipients of a spreading idea but would have "likely participated actively in the process of this innovation." Thus, interregional interactions led to the standardization of the E Group complex which "represented the coalescence of formal Maya communities that shared a unified belief system" (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995; 2006; 2016; Inomata et al. 2013). Typically found as the oldest form of monumental architecture at a given site, the E Group's epicentral location implies that the assemblage would be a site's "central organizational focus" (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995). Open-access plazas further suggest that E Groups were used for events that involved the local community (Aimers and Rice 2006). Eventually, by the Terminal Preclassic, the construction and widespread distribution of the E Group complex in the Southern Maya Lowlands is thought to be an exhibition of social hierarchy. The presence of the complex is thought to legitimize a site and, more importantly, advertise the social position of a site's ruling elite lineage (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:100-101). It is important to understand that the institution and standardization of the E Group is by no means the introduction of an elite hierarchy but is thought to be a part of the development and "formalization of what was to become the Classic Period Maya social hierarchy" (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:100).

Therefore, the eventual construction of an E Group-like arrangement (ca. Terminal Preclassic to Early Classic) in Plaza A at Pacbitun is likely the result of communication and trade and exchange with sites in the Belize Valley and the Southern Maya Lowlands (A. Chase and D. Chase 2016). Attempting to justify social position, Pacbitun and other Belize Valley sites may have constructed their own E Group assemblage – the architectural theme spreading and replicating throughout the countryside. Like other sites in this region, the ruling elite at Pacbitun would have used the E Group to demonstrate and display their social position to their own people and to their surrounding local communities. Pacbitun’s E Group complex would have served not only as centralized communal space for ritual/ceremonial performance but would have also serve as a public display of power and prestige for ruling elite lineage members. Thus, if the E Group complex displayed the social rank of the ruling elite, what would it have meant to place the remains of a deceased ancestor into this type of ceremonial architecture?

#### Ancestor Veneration and Interments into Ritual/Ceremonial Architecture

According to Patricia McAnany (1995:11), ancestor veneration is defined as the “ritual and practices surrounding the burial and commemoration, by name, of apical ancestors of kin groups.” Starting in the Preclassic period, the Maya would inter important figures within household architecture. These early interments, thought to be the founders and “true owners” of the residence, were placed within close proximity not only so that the “ancestor” may be commemorated but also so this ancestor may preside and protect the house and the surrounding agricultural land (McAnany 1995:100). Drawing from ethnographic resources and Lowland Maya archaeological data, the concept of creating ancestors for, what McAnany (1995:96-100) refers to as “genealogy of place,” constitutes two things: 1) the establishment of the “principle of

first occupancy” and 2) the assurance of territorial inheritance by the lineage. In other words, the founder’s burial within the residence justifies the proclamation of ownership and solidifies, through genealogy and ancestor veneration, the transmission of land and resource rights to the descendants of the deceased. Generations of inheritors would often continue to inter select lineage members into ancestral shrines; the structure being refurbished, modified, and expanded with every interment (Haviland 1988:123-125). In the following passage, McAnany (1995:110) predicates the potential effects this type of landholding system may have had, stating that:

when we detect archaeologically the selective social practice of creating ancestors, this indicates that proprietary resource rights have crystallized, generally at the level of a macrofamily grouping such as a lineage. When this more restricted pattern of use-rights emerges (that is, when ancestors become the guardians of the fields), the place where the ancestors ‘sleep’ can become a strategic locale in reference to social identity and economic rights. The sequential interment of ancestors establishes a genealogy of place in the same sense that hieroglyphic texts give credence to the genealogical constructs of rulers.

Over time, social and political hierarchies were slowly developed due to the monopolization of fertile land and vital resources by these, now wealthy and prosperous, elite founding lineages. Differential access to land and resources not only created inequalities between lineages but also within lineages, as far down as the household level, where inheritance was not always equal (McAnany 1995:112-123).

By the Classic period (ca. AD 250), lineage elites of the Southern Maya Lowlands began to use ancestors not just for inheritance and resource rights but also as political means to legitimize royalty, authority, and even semi-divinity portrayed hieroglyphically, iconographically, and symbolically on monuments and architecture (Freidel and Schele 1988; McAnany 1995:125; Schele and Miller 1986 106-107). Some have even suggested that the institution of Maya kingship is based upon ancestor veneration (Schele and Miller 1986:14-15; McAnany 1995:127). As Linda Schele and Mary Miller (1986:107) state, “they (the Maya)

asserted through myth and symbol that differential social ranking and a ruling elite are the natural order of existence ordained by the gods. The massive construction projects and intensive use of symbolic displays communicated this new ideology to the public.”

Therefore, interring an elite lineage member for the purpose of public ancestral veneration into an assemblage that is already held in such high regard by the community was, most likely, profoundly advantageous for the deceased’s lineage. Such individuals were likely strategically placed into sacred public architecture to assert, as McAnany (1995:99-100) states, dynastic rights to land, resources, and, most importantly, rule. Thus, interments into an E Group complex, an assemblage associated with both ritual and political functions, would have had the desired effect for an elite lineage attempting to legitimize semi-divinity and establish dynastic reign. According to A. Chase and D. Chase (1995:100), “this placement of deceased members of a ruling family in central civic architecture indicates a conjoining of civic and dynastic ritual.” Interring ruling elite members of the community into E Group architecture likely signals a sociopolitical change that eventually results in political centralization (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:100; Willey 1977:151). Essentially, founding elite lineages, who had likely already established ritual centralization at the local level, were now attempting to establish political dominance by placing ancestors into sacred architecture.

If the purpose of placing ancestors into sacred architecture was ritually and politically motivated, what might the early Late Classic conversion of an E Group-like assemblage into a fully functioning shrine mean for the site of Pacbitun? From an archaeological perspective, the sudden functional transformation of social and political institutions represented by Pacbitun’s ceremonial assemblage may suggest a drastic ideological conversion. Interestingly, Pacbitun does not seem to modestly adopt the eastern triadic assemblage theme. Although the assemblage

was partially functioning as a shrine before the early Late Classic conversion, the intensification of this practice and the physical transformation of Pacbitun's oldest and most sacred architecture after the early Late Classic construction event demonstrates an alteration or conversion of long revered communal ritual/ceremonial ideologies. More importantly, the conversion of an assemblage that represented and legitimized not only ritual authority but also political authority for Pacbitun's ruling elite lineage may signal a time of sociopolitical change and/or unrest.

Consequently, if Pacbitun was experiencing sociopolitical change in the early Late Classic, one may expect to see other drastic changes to the site. Thus, in the following chapter, a detailed description of other events at Pacbitun will demonstrate that the site did in fact receive drastic modifications during and after the time of the ceremonial assemblage's transition which supports a sociopolitical change at the site. This chapter will also examine and compare Pacbitun's events with other sites in this region and attempt to elucidate whether the events at Pacbitun were internally or externally influenced. As a result, the examination of the Belize Valley's Late Classic political landscape may help to explain why Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage exhibits the admixture of archetypal attributes.

## **CHAPTER SIX: EVIDENCE OF SOCIOPOLITICAL CHANGE AT PACBITUN**

### The Late Classic at Pacbitun

The transformation of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage in the early Late Classic appears to be only a segment of a large, site-wide construction event. According to Healy (1990:257), Pacbitun underwent its peak stage of development during the Coc phase (AD 550 – 700) of the early Late Classic. In the epicenter, while the structures of the ceremonial assemblage were being modified in Plaza A, the plaza's northern structure (Structure 3) was also undergoing construction. Structure 3 is a range-type structure that stands approximately 5 m tall and measures 26 m east-west by 12 m north-south. In 2013, excavations revealed that Structure 3 had been dramatically modified receiving much of its architectural form sometime in the Late Classic (Figure 19) (Micheletti and Stanchly 2014:58-59). Associated with this construction phase, a single Late Classic interment was located just beneath the southern end of the Structure 3 summit near the structure's top step (Micheletti and Stanchly 2014:49). Similar to other burials at the site, the individual was placed in a simple cyst in an extended position with head to the south. Like eastern structures, northern buildings are also often found with interments. Although the northern structure is clearly not the main shrine focus of Plaza A, it is interesting that the burial was placed at around the same time that the ceremonial assemblage receives its large quantity of burials.



### Eastern Profile of Structure 3

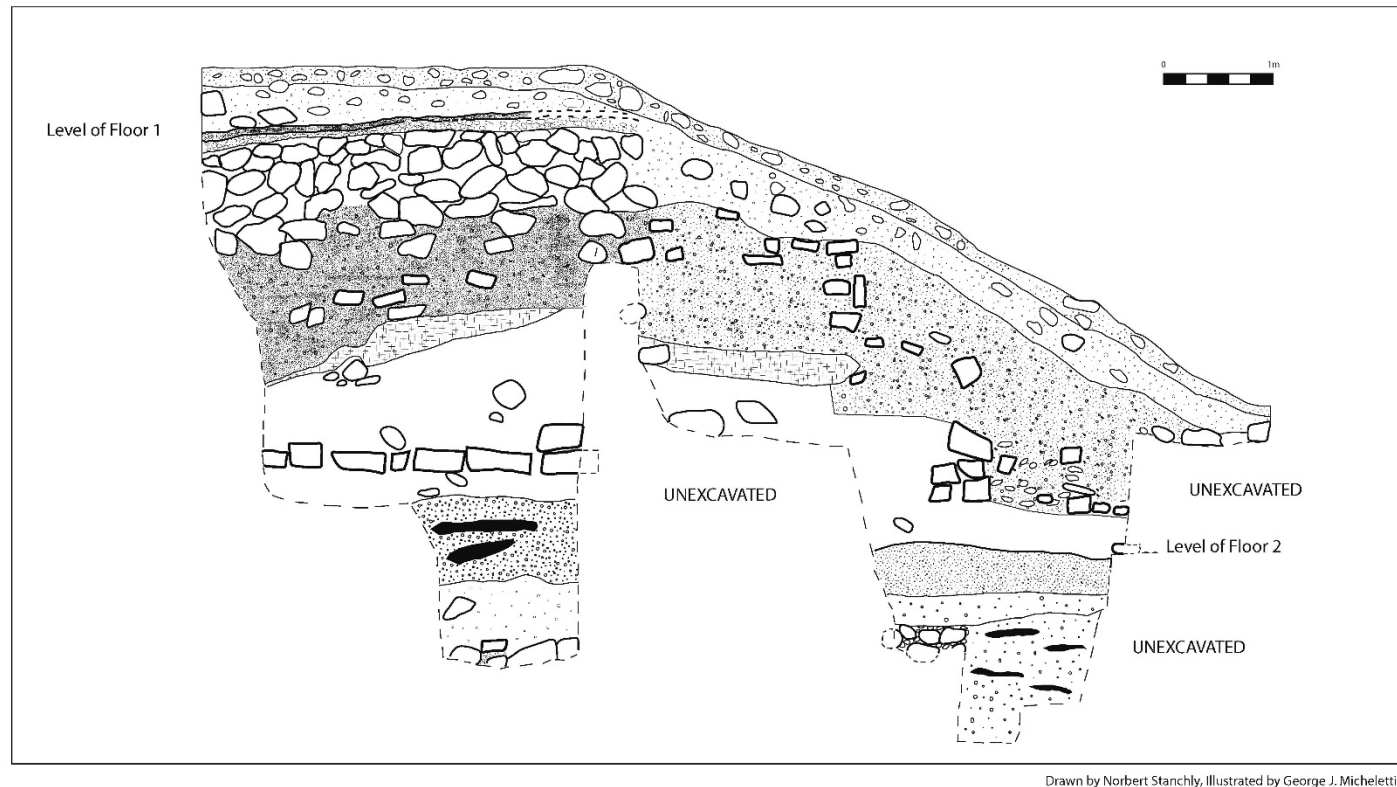


Figure 19: An illustration of the Eastern profile of Structure 3 (drawn by Norbert Stanchly, illustrated by author).

To the northeast of Plaza A, Structure 38 of the Eastern Court and Structures 36 and 37 of the North Group all indicate a Classic period origin. Like Structure 3, the construction of Structure 38 began in the Late Classic period; the structure built sometime during the latter half of this period in the Tzib phase (AD 700 – 900) (Cheong 2013:76; Healy 1990:254). A single interment dating to the same time period was found at the western base (EC-BU-1) of Structure 38 and was likely placed as a dedicatory cache offering for the structure (Cheong 2013:77). The North Group structures both date back to the Early Classic; however, Structure 37 bordering the eastern edge of the plaza contains two burials (EC-BU-2, EC-BU-3) both dating to the late Late Classic period (Cheong 2013:80-81).

Structure 23, a large range structure bordering the southern area of Plaza B, also received the majority of its modifications during the Late Classic period. Beginning as a 1.2 m tall platform, an early Late Classic construction episode added the structure's first masonry architecture. The building continued to become more complex during the Late Classic and would eventually serve as both a residential and administrative complex (Bill 1987:297). A western extension, Structure 23-Annex, was also constructed sometime in the Late Classic to restrict access between the courtyards and Plaza B (Bill 1987:147; Healy 1990:253-254; Healy et al. 2004a:210-211). Structure 23-Annex is thought to have functioned as a slate production/storage area (Healy et al. 1995); one of two craft production areas established at the site of Pacbitun during the Late Classic period.

The most intriguing piece of evidence concerning the Late Classic architectural surge at Pacbitun can be seen in the structural modifications of the site's ballcourt. Located to the north of Plaza A in Plaza E, Structures 14 and 15 comprise Pacbitun's ballcourt and were initially constructed around the time of the eastern triad's amalgamation in the Terminal Preclassic Ku

phase (100 BC – AD 300) (Healy 1992:233). Only simple modifications were made to the ballcourt up to the Early Classic period; however, these structures were significantly altered during the early Late Classic construction event (Healy 1992:234-235). At this time, the sloped playing wall surfaces of each structure were converted into upright walls, completely changing the angles and likely the strategies of the game (Figure 20) (Healy 1992:235; Healy et al. 2004a:212, Figure 13.3). Like the ceremonial assemblage, the complete transformation of the ballcourt architecture may indicate that its functions in ritual and possibly political matters, as suggested by Healy (1992:238), were also altered. Although the ceramics recovered by Healy (1992:235) confirmed the early Late Classic date of the ballcourt's construction event, a radiocarbon sample (Beta 25380) of  $AD\ 300 \pm 70$  was taken from the construction fill of Structure 15 (Healy 1992:235). The early date of the radiocarbon sample is similar to the sample recovered in Structure 5 in 2014 and may suggest that both the ballcourt and ceremonial assemblage were modified during an Early Classic-Late Classic transitional construction event. It could also suggest that the fill used in both areas were from Early Classic contexts.

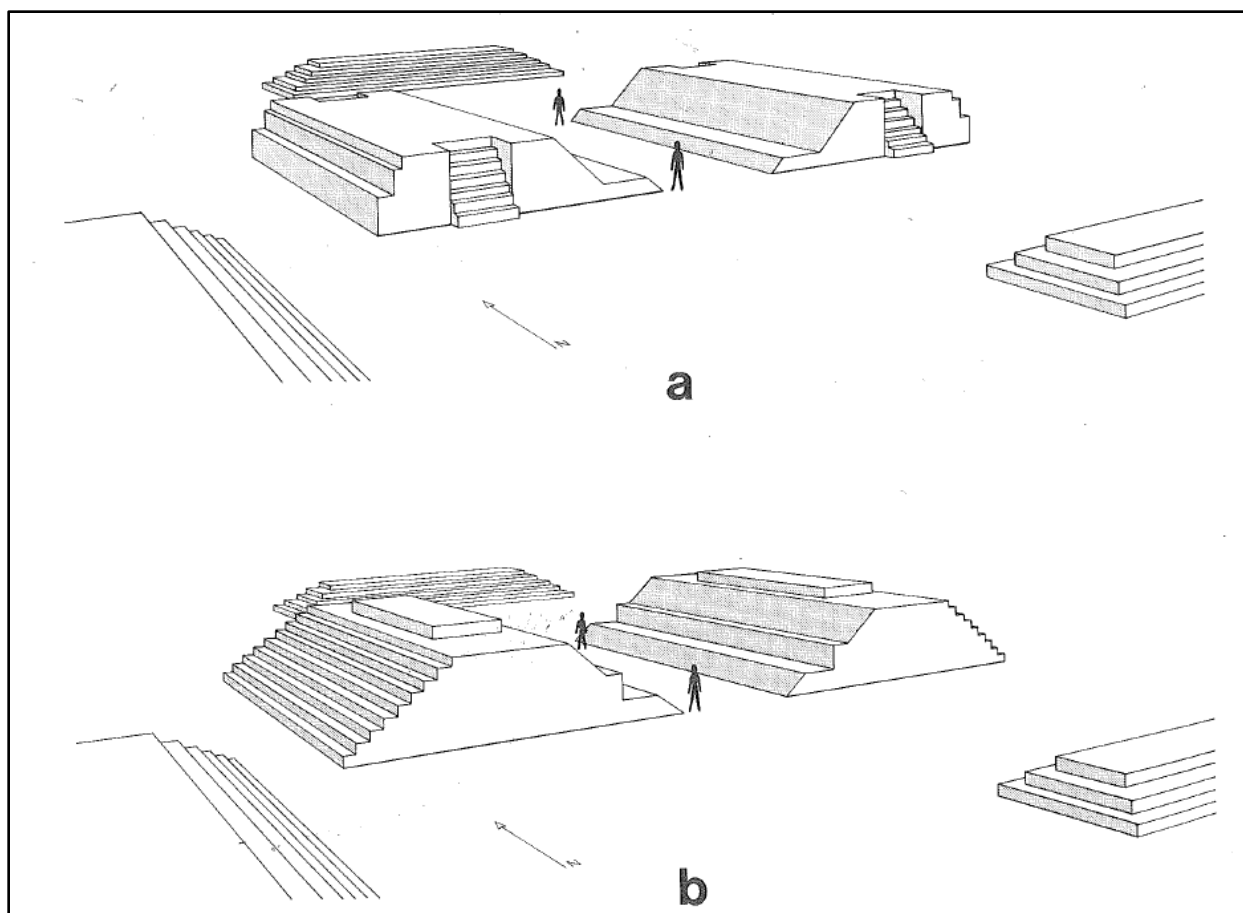


Figure 20: An artist's rendition of the architectural transformation of Pacbitun's Ballcourt from the Early Classic to the early Late Classic (Healy 1992, Figure 8).

Moving away from the epicenter, settlement survey and test pit excavations of the core zone (the area immediately surrounding the site) and periphery (the area outside of 1 km square) of Pacbitun suggests a slight population increase (to 14% of mounds tested) during the Early Classic period (Healy et al. 2007:24; Richie 1990; Sunahara 1995). However, Pacbitun's periphery population doubles during the early Late Classic period and by the late Late Classic the mounds tested were at 100% occupancy (Healy et al. 2007:24). It should also be noted that 14 of the 15 burials found during the excavation of the core zone date to the late Late Classic period (Robertson 2011:168-169, Appendix 1). Although a closer look is needed to investigate

whether these burials were found in shrine architecture, these mounds and their orientation may suggest that the shrine theme may not have been restricted to the elites of Pacbitun's epicenter.

Pacbitun's two main causeways are also thought to be constructed during the Late Classic period. The Tzul Causeway begins on the south end of the site core and runs southwest approximately 2.6 km to Tzul's Cave (Figure 9) (Weber and Powis 2011:202). Investigations of Tzul's Cave and others around Pacbitun suggest that these areas were most heavily utilized during the late Late Classic period (Spenard 2014:331). At this time, the intensification of ritual performances for invoking rain in these caves is likely due to population pressures and drought (Spenard 2014:8). The second causeway, known as the Mai Causeway, begins on the east side of Pacbitun and runs 273 m to Structure 10. Excavations at the base of Structure 10 into the structure's large western platform exposed three flooring phases spanning the entire Late Classic period (Weber and Kieffer 2013:161-167; Weber and Powis 2013). Here, a cache also dating to the Late Classic contained fragments of an infant's cranium.

Agricultural intensification in the form of terracing, particularly for the production of a storable staple crop like maize, also occurred during the Late Classic period likely as a result of the dramatic increase in population (Healy et al. 2004a:221-222). Isotopic analysis of human bone collagen confirmed the mass production of maize by showing an increase in maize consumption in the early Late Classic; however, by the late Late Classic, maize consumption declined by about 10% indicating that the intensification was not successful (Healy et al. 2004a:222; White et al. 1993:366-367). Also coinciding with the increased production of maize, another craft production area was located about 0.75 km to the northwest of the site core. This area has been designated as a granite workshop for the production of manos and metates (Balinger et al. 2015; Skaggs and Powis 2014; Ward 2013; Ward and Micheletti 2013; Ward and

Powis 2013). Although the production of manos and metates during a time of increased maize production at the site is not likely a coincidence, the mass amount of debitage and worked fragments strongly suggest that the workshop was not just producing for the site but was a large scale operation probably built for local and/or regional distribution (Balingier et al. 2015; Skaggs and Powis 2014; Ward 2013; Ward and Micheletti 2013; Ward and Powis 2013).

Thus, after looking at Pacbitun during the Late Classic, it is obvious that the ceremonial assemblage is only a part of the transformation of the site. Clearly, the site of Pacbitun began to change around the onset of the Late Classic. The major construction events occurring during the Late Classic further indicates that the site was experiencing sociopolitical change or unrest. The prosperity of the site during the early Late Classic is not only evident in the large scale construction projects and modifications but also in the elaborate construction of elite graves and increase in prestigious goods (Healy 1990:259; Robertson 2010:103, 112). What is interesting however, is that even though the site continues to grow in size and population, and craft production is at its peak during the late Late Classic, elite graves and prestigious goods become far less extravagant at this time (Healy 1990:259; Robertson 2010:103,112). This suggests that Pacbitun is experiencing an economic decline. Fortunately, Pacbitun is not the only site in this region to experience a sudden early Late Classic opulence followed by a late Late Classic economic regression. In fact, several sites in the Belize Valley follow a similar theme. So the question now becomes: what, or who, is responsible for Pacbitun's Late Classic sociopolitical change or unrest? A closer look at the Late Classic events around this area of the Maya Lowlands may help to understand the sociopolitical situation of the Belize Valley and, more specifically, the site of Pacbitun.

## The Late Classic Period in the Belize Valley and the Southern Maya Lowlands

The Late Classic period, generally thought to span the seventh to ninth centuries AD, is characterized by population growth and the development of the Maya state. According to Robert Sharer and Loa Traxler (2006:495), during the Late Classic period:

the political environment for all Maya states became increasingly competitive. As the number and size of polity capitals increased throughout the lowlands, and most polity capitals commanded ever-larger populations, the competition for land, water, food, and other resources accelerated. As a result, the intensity of conflict between polities increased dramatically. Older and established powers were challenged by an expanding host of lesser centers jockeying for advantage. Some smaller polities were allied to more powerful kingdoms, others attempted to remain unaligned, or were defeated and added to the realms of larger capitals, while still others gained their independence when the opportunity arose.

Although the centralized-decentralized Maya state debate is ongoing, the majority of scholars believe that the political organization of the Southern Maya Lowlands was centralized (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996; 1998b; 2001; Fash 1991; Folan et al. 2001; Folan et al. 1995). However, McAnany (1995:144-145) believes there are a few areas in less centralized regions of the Maya Lowlands that enjoyed a semiautonomous existence. The smaller polities in areas such as these could benefit from political alliances and trading opportunities with nearby larger kingdoms but would have been in “constant danger of being absorbed into this centralized and extractive system of governance” (McAnany 1995:145). The Belize River Valley, composed of several small to medium sized sites, is considered to be one of these areas. According to the dynamic model, centralized and decentralized forms of political organizations existed in the Classic period, but both were in a perpetual state of flux caused by the shifting of power and alliances (Demarest 1996; Fash 1994; Feinman and Marcus 1998; Haviland 1997; Henderson and Sabloff 1993; Lucero 1999; Marcus 1993; 1998; Sabloff 1996). Supporting the dynamic model, Carolyn Audet (2007:343), states that “the political organization of the Belize Valley during the Late and Terminal Classic is characterized by periods of foreign control followed by independence.” Set

near the formidable realms of Calakmul and Tikal and between the ever-combatant kingdoms of Caracol and Naranjo, the sites of the Belize Valley would have likely been influenced or subjugated by one of these major centers at one point in time (Figure 21). However, as the following section will demonstrate, there may have also been fleeting moments of autonomy.



Figure 21: An illustration of the Belize Valley in association with the large kingdoms of Calakmul, Caracol, Naranjo, and Tikal (illustrated by author).



## Evidence for Early Late Classic Autonomy at Pacbitun

Vying for sovereignty, epigraphic evidence details battles between Caracol and Naranjo starting around AD 626; both sites known to have interacted and influenced the upper Belize Valley. Although more evidence is needed, ceramic connections and proximity have led Joseph Ball and Jennifer Taschek (1991:162) to believe that the Belize Valley may have been under the control of Naranjo for a majority of their existence (A. Chase 2004:329). Nevertheless, Naranjo is thought to have placed Buenavista del Cayo as an early local administrative center and “seat of power” of the Belize Valley (Taschek and Ball 2004:198). The growth and expansion of Buenavista around the beginning of the Late Classic “may mark Naranjo’s first or continued attempt at controlling the valley and more clearly demarcates the ‘tension zone’ between its own polity and that of Caracol” (Leventhal and Ashmore 2004:170). However, after the defeat of Naranjo in AD 631, Caracol is believed to have held sway over the site of Naranjo for approximately 50 years; thus, the Belize Valley may have also been under Caracol’s control at this time (A. Chase 2004:329; Martin and Grube 2000:91-92). Interestingly, although evidence does support a ritualistic influence seen in some caching practices, Caracol’s cultural impact is, for the most part, minimal in the upper Belize Valley (A. Chase 2004:330; Arlen Chase, personal communication, 2016). Audet (2007:347) states that the prosperity of the sites in this region during the early part of the Late Classic period may come at a time when activities of these large kingdoms are being concentrated elsewhere.

Demands of tribute in the form of food and other valuable resources would have kept subjugated sites from succeeding economically. However, like Pacbitun, a number of Belize Valley sites such as Baking Pot, Blackman Eddy, Buenavista del Cayo, Cahal Pech, and Xunantunich all seem to experience a sudden florescence during the early part of the Late

Classic. Excavations at Xunantunich originally attributed the site's growth and development to their affiliation with Naranjo (LeCount 1996; LeCount et al 2002; Leventhal and Ashmore 2004). However, the current belief is that the prosperity of the site was not commissioned by Naranjo but was actually an attempt by Xunantunich to break free from subjugation at a time when their oppressors were vulnerable around the mid-seventh century AD (Ashmore 2010; Audet 2007:83). Thus, the prosperity of the Belize Valley sites during the early part of the Late Classic period is thought to be caused by a period of independence. This independence would have allowed the more powerful centers of the Belize Valley region to benefit economically and politically (Audet 2007:347). In fact, the general consensus of the Belize Valley's socio-political situation during the early Late Classic is that the major centers were autonomous at this time (Ashmore 1998, 2010; Ball and Taschek 1991; Healy 1990; Helmke and Awe 2012:65; Helmke et al. 2006; Helmke et al. 2010; Houston et al. 1996). Does this explain the early Late Classic growth of Pacbitun and other sites in this area?

If this is truly the case, like the other sites in this region, Pacbitun's economic surge beginning in the early Late Classic may be the result of few or no relations with either force triggering a period of independence. Of course, this would insinuate that Pacbitun was at least partially subjugated prior to this period of independence. Without demands of tribute and institutionalized control, the site would have been able to flourish economically and politically. Thus, what caused the construction event and, more importantly, the conversion of the ceremonial assemblage at Pacbitun was internally influenced meaning that the site was acting under its own will. In this scenario, the intrusive Burial 1-9 and the conversion of the ceremonial assemblage could mean that Pacbitun's founding elite lineage was attempting to solidify and/or reestablish their dynasty and rights to resources and rule. The architectural conversion and

intensification of ancestor veneration may have been an adaptation to new local ideologies as a strategy to maximize the rights to land, resources, and dynastic rule during a time of territorial upheaval. It could also mean that another elite lineage representing Pacbitun was attempting to establish their own dynasty and rights over whoever was previously in power at the site.

Conversely, while Pacbitun's early Late Classic prosperity does coincide with the fluorescence and independence of other Belize Valley sites, there are several indications evinced in Pacbitun's social, economic, and political organizations that may imply that the site's period of prosperity was brought about through interactions with a foreign dominant polity at this time. Before presenting this evidence, however, it will be important to understand the types of relationships smaller polities like Pacbitun and other Belize Valley sites may have had with the larger kingdoms of the Southern Maya Lowlands.

### Incorporation Strategies

Although epigraphic data continues to enhance our understanding of the ancient Maya, areas like the Belize Valley have little to offer in terms of a written record forcing researchers to rely heavily on the archaeological record. Therefore, without good epigraphic evidence, the key to determining if a polity was incorporated or subjugated is to identify the presence of foreign influence evinced in a polity's social, economic, and political organizations. If identified, the extent of the foreign influence may also reveal the level of control imposed by the dominant polity.

Lisa LeCount and Jason Yaeger (2010:20) refer to subordinate centers as "provincial polities" and suggest that the political organization at these sites were constantly in flux. LeCount and Yaeger (2010) reiterate Michael Doyle's (1986:135) informal and formal modes of

control while discussing incorporation strategies used by Maya kingdoms to create and expand imperial dominion. As an incorporation strategy, paramount centers could informally control polities through a patron-client relationship or through some form of alliance (D'Altroy 1992:5; LeCount and Yaeger 2010:30-31). While a patron-client relationship is "minimally intrusive on client polities" seen archaeologically through gifting practices, alliances between subordinate and dominant centers may involve more influence and interaction based on the dependency status of the smaller polity (LeCount and Yaeger 2010:33). Compared to independent subordinate allies, a dependent subordinate polity would have more frequent tribute payments and may need to re-organize their own economic system to meet tribute demands (LeCount and Yaeger 2010:34-35). In some cases, the re-organization of the subordinate polity may reflect the cultural influence of their dominant ally. The greater the presence of foreign influence evinced in the subordinate polity's social, economic, and political organizations, the greater the level of control imposed by the oppressor (Doyle 1986:38; LeCount and Yaeger 2010:34-35). It is important to note that influence based on informal control would mainly be visible in elite contexts because interactions and negotiations were only done at the elite level (LeCount and Yaeger 2010:35).

On the other hand, when dominant polities attempt to incorporate subordinate polities through military force and/or annexation, or formal control, alterations to the weaker polity are significant and, according to Katharina Schreiber (2001:74), can be archaeologically recognized in three different ways (LeCount and Yaeger 2010:35-36). "First, local political institutions were reorganized to establish state control. Second, economies were reorganized to provide tribute for the dominant state, thereby intensifying or changing local production. Third, dominant states may co-opt local ritual activities, artifacts, or landscapes and replace them with

state ideologies” (LeCount and Yaeger 2010:35-36; Schreiber 2001:74). Thus, a formal mode of control would exhibit the most amount of foreign cultural influence on all societal levels of the subordinate polity’s social, economic, and political organizations.

#### Evidence for External Influence during the Late Classic at Pacbitun

Taking a look back at the Late Classic events at the site of Pacbitun presented in the beginning of this chapter, there appears to be foreign influence exhibited on multiple cultural levels which may imply that the site was interacting with or incorporated by a dominant polity. As previously mentioned, Pacbitun’s early Late Classic Coc phase (AD 550 – 700) prosperity can be seen archaeologically not only by the large construction projects but also through the elaborate construction of graves and the inclusion of prestigious goods. One of the elaborate features of Pacbitun’s graves at this time was the use of slate slabs as capping stones. In fact, according to Healy et al. (1995) slate slabs were almost solely used for capping the site’s elite graves. Interestingly, although slate artifacts and debitage are present throughout Pacbitun’s existence, there is a dramatic increase in slate production in the Late Classic at the site (Healy et al. 1995, Table 3, Table 4). In fact, compared to other burials in the Maya Lowlands, Pacbitun’s burials have a “greater representation of slate artifacts” (Healy et al. 2004a:214). According to Healy et al. (1995), Pacbitun has the highest concentration of worked slate material and includes the most diverse assemblage of slate artifacts recorded in the Belize Valley. This has led Healy and colleagues (1995) to believe that the site may have been producing slate for more than just local consumption. Thus, the surplus of slate artifacts produced could have been used for either trade and/or tribute. Furthermore, the increase of prestigious goods during the Coc phase at Pacbitun implies the reciprocity in exchange for goods and services. Although it is possible that

intensified slate production was a local institution, it is also possible that the sudden introduction of a large scale slate producing workshop may have been the influence of a dominant polity. The large quantity of prestigious goods may further support a trade and/or tribute relationship with this wealthy dominant polity during the Late Classic.

Even more interesting is the fact that Pacbitun's slate production/storage area is attached to Structure 23; a structure that would later become a partial administrative building in Plaza B. Healy et al. (1995) state that "the location and circumstances of the facility at Pacbitun suggest such activities were associated with, or overseen by, the elites who utilized the range buildings bordering Plaza B." This would again suggest that the introduction of slate craft production was an institution managed by centralized control.

Additionally, an agricultural intensification method known as terracing also appears to be introduced at Pacbitun during the early Late Classic Coc phase (AD 550 – 700). It is important to note that the increase in maize consumption in the Coc phase likely implies that the agricultural intensification may not have been developed for trade or tribute payment but may have been implemented to feed Pacbitun's ever-increasing population. However, like the intensification of slate production, the widespread development of a terracing system not previously utilized at a large scale suggests that this method may have been an outside influence.

It is clear that the site's increase in maize consumption, abundance of slate artifacts, and use of slate slabs for grave construction indicate that Pacbitun was prospering from its own endeavors during the Coc phase; both the agricultural and craft producing innovations playing a part in the site's early Late Classic prosperity. However, it is the sudden development, regulation, and intensification of these innovations that suggests the site was influenced at this time. If Pacbitun's prosperity truly signals a period of independence, it would seem to make

more sense that terracing and slate production would have been developed, regulated, and intensified for tribute payment while the site was allegedly subjugated prior to the early Late Classic construction event. This would allow Pacbitun to reap the rewards from these endeavors once their independence was gained. Yet, it appears that Pacbitun's period of prosperity occurs simultaneously with these innovations. It would seem that the sudden development, regulation, and intensification of agricultural terracing and slate production during the early Late Classic would suggest, at the very least, a partial reorganization of Pacbitun's social and economic systems; evidence that could imply that the site may have had a relationship with a dominant polity (LeCount and Yaeger 2010:34-35; Schreiber 2001:74). If this is the case, these agricultural and production techniques were either established by Pacbitun or introduced and institutionalized by a foreign polity potentially for tribute purposes. Focusing on other evidence, further confirmation of Pacbitun's possible relationship can be found in another form of social reorganization involving Pacbitun's ceremonial architecture.

From a sociopolitical standpoint, the transformation of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage and ballcourt, both considered to convey a substantial amount of ritual/ceremonial significance, would seem to signal an ideological change. Looking at the ceremonial assemblage's shrine function beginning in the Terminal Preclassic Ku phase and increasing, albeit dramatically over time, it is possible to believe that the assemblage's functional transition was a long, drawn out process. However, the simultaneous occurrence of the physical transformation of the assemblage along with the intensification of the shrine function strongly suggests otherwise. A sudden transition might be an indication that a dominant polity was introducing or co-opting state ideologies into local ritual activity; another indication of foreign influence discussed by LeCount and Yaeger (2010:35-36; Schreiber 2001:74). Furthermore, as implied earlier, the unrestricted

access scheme of Plaza A is an indication that the ceremonial assemblage was a space for communal gatherings. In this case, the physical and functional transformation of sacred public architecture such as Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage signals an ideological change that would have affected not only the elite but the community as well. Embodying both authority and prestige, Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage was the key to substantiating and portraying economic, social, and, most importantly, political rights to the people of the community. Thus, with these associations, those dominant polities who would have had the power to manipulate or subjugate Pacbitun and its community may have used the ceremonial assemblage to legitimize their own rights. These rights not only granted ritual and political superiority but also offered access to and control over the land and its resources as mentioned above.

As an incorporation strategy, Burial 1-9 and the conversion of the ceremonial assemblage may have served to reorganize the local political institution; even more evidence to support foreign influence (LeCount and Yaeger 2010:34-35; Schreiber 2001:74). The question then becomes, who are these individuals interred into Pacbitun's assemblage during the early Late Classic construction event? Becker (2003:131) has suggested that "the introduction of PP2 or some variation on this plan to any site may reflect the founding of a new lineage or other co-residential factors." Although Becker's proposition needs to be tested further, if this is truly the case at Pacbitun, the conversion of such a sacrosanct assemblage may mean that the site was undergoing a dynastic alteration or change. Did Pacbitun's early Late Classic ceremonial assemblage contain individuals belonging to the site's original founding lineage or was a new "founding" lineage introduced to convert the assemblage into an ancestor shrine?

A period of prosperity during the Coc phase (AD 550 – 700) suggests that the ruling elite at Pacbitun may have remained, at least economically, independent of this dominant polity. The



act of reorganizing the site's economic, social, and political institutions may be an indication that Pacbitun's early relationship with this dominant polity is what LeCount and Yaeger (2010:33) refer to as a "dependent allegiance." While a dependent allegiance may suggest Pacbitun was subjugated through war, the site would still have enjoyed a semi-autonomous existence possibly allowing the site to prosper from their new economic institutions for a short period of time. On the other hand, the reorganization of Pacbitun's institutions may also suggest that the site was taken by force or annexed and placed under formal control. In this case, Pacbitun's ruler would have been deposed and replaced by foreign rule. Again, evidence for this power shift may be seen through the transformation of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage in the Coc phase. Thus, the prosperity of the site would have been the direct result of the reorganization of the institutions imposed by the newly appointed ruler.

More proof of Pacbitun's relationship with a dominant polity may be evinced in the only carved monuments found at the site. Stela 6, Altar 3, and Altar 4 are all thought to date to the Early Classic Tzul phase (AD 300 – 550) (Healy 1990b:109; Helmke and Awe 2012:68-69; Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). What is interesting about these monuments, aside from their carvings, is the condition and location in which they were found. Stela 6, discovered in the southeast corner of Plaza A, was found lying face up in articulated fragments (Healy 1990b:110). Altar 3 was also discovered in fragmented form found cached in construction core of Structure 1 (Helmke and Awe 2012:68). Also in fragmented form, Altar 4 was found cached with slate slabs in Structure 5 (Paul Healy, personal communication, 2014). Broken and defaced monuments are often signs of pillaging and destruction during times of warfare (Sharer and Traxler 2006:300). Thus, broken in antiquity, it is likely that Pacbitun's Early Classic carved monuments were destroyed as part of some martial action against Pacbitun (Christophe Helmke, personal

communication, 2016). Might these be supportive of a power shift or hostile take-over of the site? What is even more interesting is the fact that the two carved altar fragments were found cached into Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage. Caching these monuments after their destruction may signal an attempt to re-consecrate or ceremoniously terminate these items; an act possibly performed by those most associated or affiliated with these objects. Might these destroyed carved monuments be connected to the early Late Classic transformation of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage as well as the other events that are thought to signal sociopolitical unrest at the site?

Further support of Pacbitun's relationship with a dominant polity may be seen in the late Late Classic Tzib phase (AD 700 – 900). The ceremonial assemblage's recently introduced shrine function appears to continue with the inclusion of several burials associated with the Tzib phase (AD 700 – 900) architecture. However, as mentioned in Chapter 4, there are several attributes that make it difficult to determine the assemblage's precise function. Regardless, the construction of stair blocks and vaulted superstructures and the erection of stone stelae suggest that the ceremonial assemblage still held significant political importance. Interestingly, similar to the Early Classic carved monuments, the uncarved stelae found in Plaza A also seem to have been destroyed. While it is possible that these monuments were broken sometime after the site's abandonment, the top halves of all stelae in this plaza as well as in others areas of the site appear to have been knocked down or halved leaving the bottom half of the stone in situ protruding from the ground. Might the destruction of these uncarved stelae also be evidence of Late Classic sociopolitical unrest at Pacbitun?

Also during the late Late Classic Tzib phase (AD 700 – 900), the use of agricultural terracing continued to spread at Pacbitun while the production of slate reached its maximum state

(Healy et al. 1995; Healy et al. 2004a). It is also at this time when large scale granite production began just outside the site core (Skaggs and Powis 2014). Unlike the early Late Classic, however, Pacbitun would no longer benefit from these endeavors in the Tzib phase (AD 700 – 900). Although intensification continued in agriculture and slate and granite production, Pacbitun was in the midst of an economic decline. Again, this is evident in the lack of prestigious goods and a decrease in grave construction effort. Artifacts such as polychrome vessels and jade are found less frequently in burial contexts. Furthermore, even at a time when slate production is at its greatest the use of slate for grave construction also declines (Robertson 2011:112). It now appears that the introduction, regulation, and intensification of agricultural terracing, slate production, and now granite production was an intentional reorganization of Pacbitun's socioeconomic system. Either locally organized or externally influenced, it is clear that Pacbitun's was no longer the beneficiary to these institutions which were now likely forms of tribute for the dominant polity. Moreover, while the decrease in maize consumption during the late Late Classic could signal that the intensified agricultural terracing systems failed to feed a growing population, it could have also been the result of an imposition of higher tribute demands by a dominant polity.

After looking at the evidence, the reorganization of Pacbitun's economic, social, and political institutions in the Late Classic implies that the site may have actually been influenced by a dominant polity. It would be easier to suggest that Pacbitun gained its independence had only one of the site's organizations been altered in the Late Classic. However, the fact that all three important institutions were effected supports the external influence of a dominant force. Pacbitun's relationship with this dominant polity becomes more apparent during the Tzib phase of the late Late Classic when the subjugation of the site clearly increases. While Pacbitun

continued to grow in size and population and agricultural and craft production intensified, the site appears to have experienced an economic decline suggesting an increase in subjugation likely involving higher tribute demands.

With the evidence seemingly leaning toward the influence and/or subordination of the site of Pacbitun, the next question is, which dominant Maya Lowland site might be responsible for the Late Classic events at Pacbitun? According to LeCount and Yaeger (2010:35) “in cases where a dependent ally goes through significant reorganization, this reorganization should bear the stamp of its origin.” Because Pacbitun appears to have experienced a drastic reorganization, evidence of the influencer should be apparent in these newly introduced institutions. Pacbitun’s cultural connections have been tied to the Belize Valley as well as to the sites of Caracol and Naranjo. The following section will identify the cultural attributes that Pacbitun is thought to share with these areas. As this section will prove, although more research is needed, the evidence at Pacbitun suggests that the site may have actually been influence by all three parties.

#### *Potential Affiliates of Pacbitun in the Classic Period*

Pacbitun’s Classic period affiliations have increasingly become a topic of debate. The site’s closest and most apparent affiliation is with the Belize Valley. This can be seen largely through mortuary practices. The practice of placing an individual in a supine, extended position with legs crossed and head to the south is common in the Belize Valley area (Healy et al. 2004a:215; Welsh 1988:226, Table 112). The ceramic assemblage at Pacbitun also suggests that the site was stylistically more closely affiliated with the Belize Valley during the Late Classic period (Bill 1987; Campbell-Trithart 1990; Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2007; Richie 1990; Spenard 2014:349; Sunahara 1995). A recent study of Pacbitun’s karstscape ceramics conducted by Jon

Spenard (2014:349) found an abundant amount of Mount Maloney Black pottery; a ceramic type dating to the Spanish Lookout phase of the Late Classic period that is directly linked to the upper Belize Valley site of Xunantunich (Gifford et al. 1976; LeCount 2010:210). Although Pacbitun's settlement has produced very little evidence of this ceramic type, the abundance of Mount Maloney Black in the karstscape ceramic assemblage, particularly during Xunantunich's Hats' Chaak ceramic phase (AD 670-780), implies a connection between the two sites (Spenard 2014:349). Spenard's (2014:352-353) study also finds that Pacbitun was producing these ceramics locally, meaning they were not imported by Xunantunich for pilgrimage to the Pacbitun caves. What is more, if Pacbitun is affiliated with Xunantunich in the latter part of the Late Classic, their relationship may indicate that the site was also under the watch of Naranjo.

On the other hand, there are several lines of evidence to suggest that Pacbitun was also closely affiliated with the kingdom of Caracol. Evidence at Pacbitun may suggest their interactions with Caracol were far more extensive compared to other sites in the Belize Valley during the Late Classic period. Nearly 40 km away, Pacbitun is much closer to Caracol than other sites in the region and may be more accessible and, thus, susceptible to dealings with this kingdom. Based on Healy's (1990; Healy et al. 2004a) excavations, A Chase (2004:330) has suggested that Pacbitun "may represent the northernmost known extension of the complete Caracol tradition." While the ceramics and other cultural indications clearly show that Pacbitun is still socially engaged with Xunantunich and the Belize Valley, Pacbitun's relationship with Caracol is thought to be represented by ceramic styles, burial patterns, and agricultural practices (Chase 2004:330; Spenard 2014:347).

Furthermore, like other sites in the Belize Valley, Pacbitun also appears to be ritualistically influenced by Caracol; although, this influence may be present on a slightly larger

scale. For the most part, the interments at Pacbitun follow a stringent Belize Valley mortuary pattern of head to the south with the body commonly in an extended position with legs crossed (Healy et al. 2004a:225). However, Pacbitun also includes multiple burials, or the placement of multiple individuals into a single grave. This is considered to be a common Caracol mortuary practice (D. Chase and A. Chase 1996) not associated with the Belize Valley. What is more, multiple burials may not be the only mortuary custom Pacbitun has in common with Caracol. Now, with the identification of the early Late Classic conversion of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage to shrine architecture, the site may further be linked to Caracol.

As previously mentioned, the PP2 arrangement is exceedingly more common at Caracol than it is at Tikal (Becker 1999:145; 2003:129; D. Chase and A. Chase 2011:84). Becker (1999:145) believes the appearance of and conversion to PP2 groups at Tikal may have been influenced by Caracol, the victor in a war over Tikal in AD 562. Using Tikal's Temple I as a prime example for the intrusive interment and covering rule, Becker (1999:144-145) believes the tomb of Burial 116 (Ruler A) was placed to convert the previous architecture and plaza into a PP2 arrangement. With most of the previous 22 rulers interred within the group's northern architecture, Ruler A, or *Jasaw Chan K'awiil I*, broke the cycle of interments in the North Acropolis and ultimately converted the plaza into a PP2 (Becker 1999:145; Martin and Grube 2000:43,47). Even more interesting is the fact that Caracol's influence begins to manifest at Tikal around the time of Ruler A's accession in AD 682 (Haviland 1994). This has led Becker (1999:145) to suggest that the origins of Ruler A may be traced back to Caracol; a possible descendant of those who conquered Tikal in AD 562. Whether Ruler A is of Caracol descent or not, the appearance of and conversion to PP2 groups at Tikal, both thought to occur during or after the AD 562 event, could signal the cultural influence of their conquerors (Becker

1999:144). If the PP2 group is truly associated with Caracol, might the intrusive Burial 1-9 and the early Late Classic construction event of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage also be an influence of Caracol?

Importantly, Caracol is also known for its extensive terracing. A. Chase and D. Chase (1998a:73) state that "the magnitude and formality of the landscape modification involved in Caracol's large-scale terracing indicates planning and implementation of the fields by something larger than the family unit" and suggest that "Caracol's Late Classic terraces must have operated under some form of centralized control" (Healy et al. 1983:402). If Pacbitun's agricultural terracing systems were almost solely built and utilized in the Late Classic as Healy and colleagues (2004a) have implied, could Caracol or an affiliate of Caracol have introduced and administered this agricultural technique at Pacbitun?

For the sake of the Caracol-Pacbitun affiliation argument, it should again be noted that Xunantunich's Late Classic prosperity was originally hypothesized to be the result of the Naranjo's direct interaction and influence of the site. Although this assumption has since been updated, Wendy Ashmore (2010:57) has suggested that the layout and necessary workforce for architectural labor at Xunantunich demonstrates the "outside intervention" of Naranjo. Might a similar scenario have occurred between Caracol and Pacbitun?

Although Pacbitun appears to be experiencing increased subjugation in the late Late Classic Tzib phase (AD 700 – 900), it is difficult to suggest who was responsible for the site's subordination. Furthermore, because of the constant turmoil of Caracol and Naranjo in the Late Classic, it is possible that Pacbitun was influenced by both sites during this time period. As previously mentioned, Caracol's defeat of Naranjo in AD 631 would put them in the position to control the Belize Valley for a period of time. Although Caracol's influence is minimal in the

Belize Valley, it appears to be more apparent at the site of Pacbitun during the early Late Classic Coc phase (AD 550 – 700). However, in the late Late Classic period, Naranjo experiences a resurgence and re-establishes its dominion over several Belize Valley sites (Martin and Grube 2000:74-77). Just prior to their revival, epigraphic evidence indicates that Naranjo had defeated Caracol in February of AD 680 (Martin and Grube 2000:73). Although the archaeological record clearly shows that Caracol experiences a period of population increase and prosperity, after this defeat the site almost completely disappears from the written record for a period of over 100 years (A. Chase 2004:327; D. Chase and A. Chase 2000). Naranjo's written record, on the other hand, is on the upswing; although this time, the records indicate that the site is under the auspices of a new dynastic reign (Martin and Grube 2000:74-76).

Archaeological evidence in the form of ceramic vessels linked to Naranjo have been found at Baking Pot, Buenavista del Cayo, and Xunantunich indicating that these sites were again under the sway of the large kingdom (Audet 2007:348-350; Ball and Taschek 2004:160-161). The presence of these prestigious vessels at these sites may be a sign of gifting suggesting a patron-client relationship between the polities. However, while each of these sites continue to grow in size and population, an economic recession evinced in the lack of elite tombs and prestigious goods in the late Late Classic supports the fact that these sites were, once again, subjugated and paying tribute (Audet 2007:348-350). This suggests that these Belize Valley sites were, at the very least, under the indirect control of a dominant polity. As mentioned above, Pacbitun underwent a similar economic recession during the late Late Classic period (Healy 1990:259; Robertson 2011:103, 112). With Pacbitun's clear affiliations to the Belize Valley, it is possible that the site was also indirectly subjugated by the Naranjo polity.



Importantly, epigraphic data thought to discuss Pacbitun may provide further clues to the site's Late Classic political situation.

An altar fragment (Altar 3) found cached within Pacbitun's Structure 1 is thought to include a hieroglyphic representation of Pacbitun's emblem glyph (Figure 22) (Helmke and Awe 2012:68). Intriguingly, a similar glyph has been found on Caracol's Stela 21 (Figure 23). Stela 21, Caracol's sole epigraphic contribution during its hiatus, is thought to show a confrontational relationship with Pacbitun. The stela depicts a bound captive kneeling before a Caracol ruler (Helmke and Awe 2012:68-69). Inscribed next to the captive is his royal title which ends with Pacbitun's supposed emblem glyph. According to Christophe Helmke and Awe (2012:69), "the text of Stela 21 would relate that the current king of Caracol attempted to expand the northern reaches of his domain sometime around AD 702. It is as part of these actions that Pacbitun would have fallen prey to Caracol." If Helmke and Awe's (2012) interpretation is correct, the conquest of Pacbitun would imply that the site did not have a working relationship with Caracol and was, therefore, not under Caracol's control at this time. This would imply that Pacbitun was either independent or affiliated with another dominant polity. However, as presented above, this does not necessarily refute an earlier Caracol-Pacbitun relationship. According to Helmke and Awe (2012:68-69), the event that captures Pacbitun's ruler is said to occur in AD 702; some 22 years after Naranjo's victory over Caracol in AD 680. Hypothetically, if Pacbitun was affiliated with Caracol prior to Naranjo's victory, it is possible that they also fell victim to the opposing force. In this case, Caracol's defeat of Pacbitun would actually be reclamation.

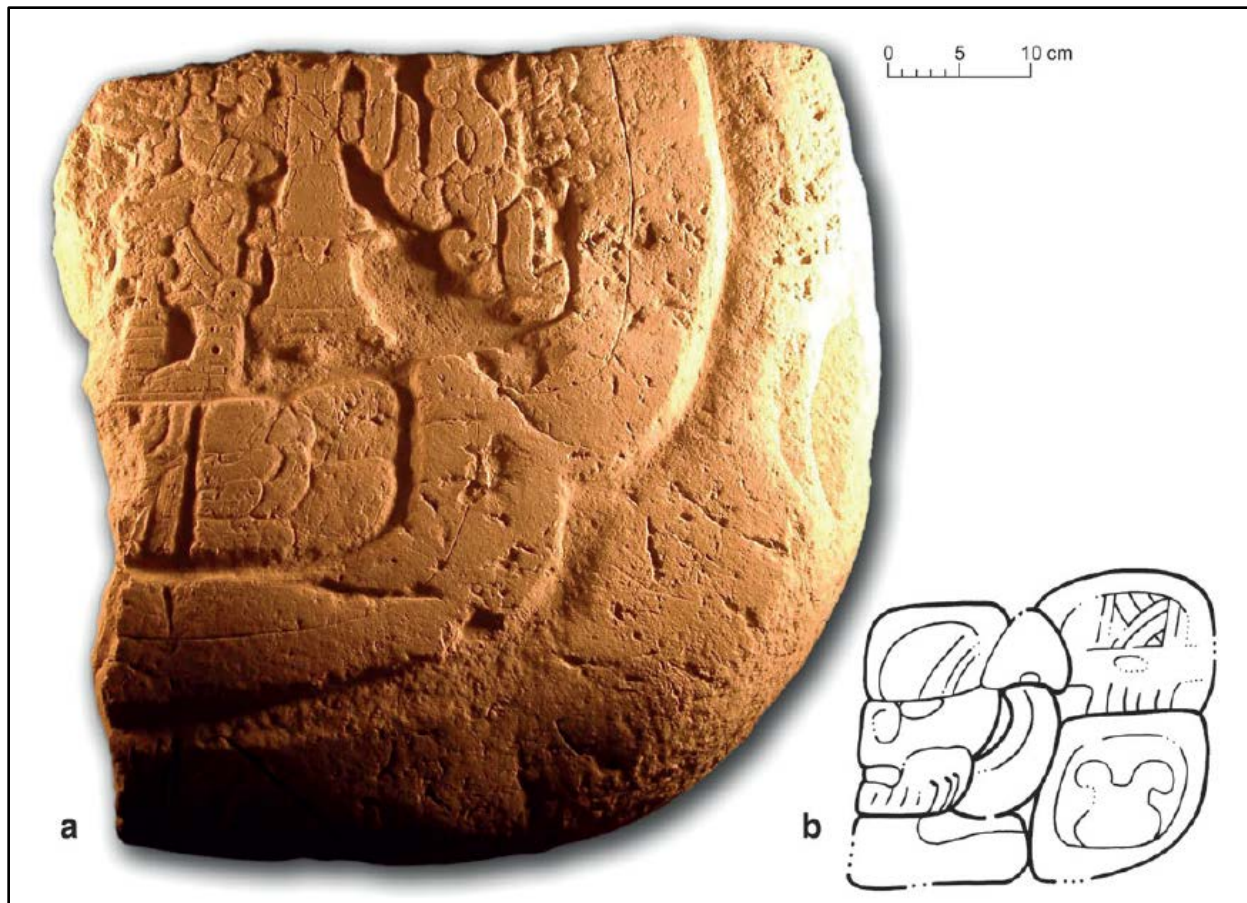


Figure 22: a) An image of Pacbitun's Altar 3; b) an illustration of Pacbitun's carved emblem glyph (Helmke and Awe 2012, Figure 8; Courtesy of Christophe Helmke, Jaime Awe, and Contributions in New World Archaeology).

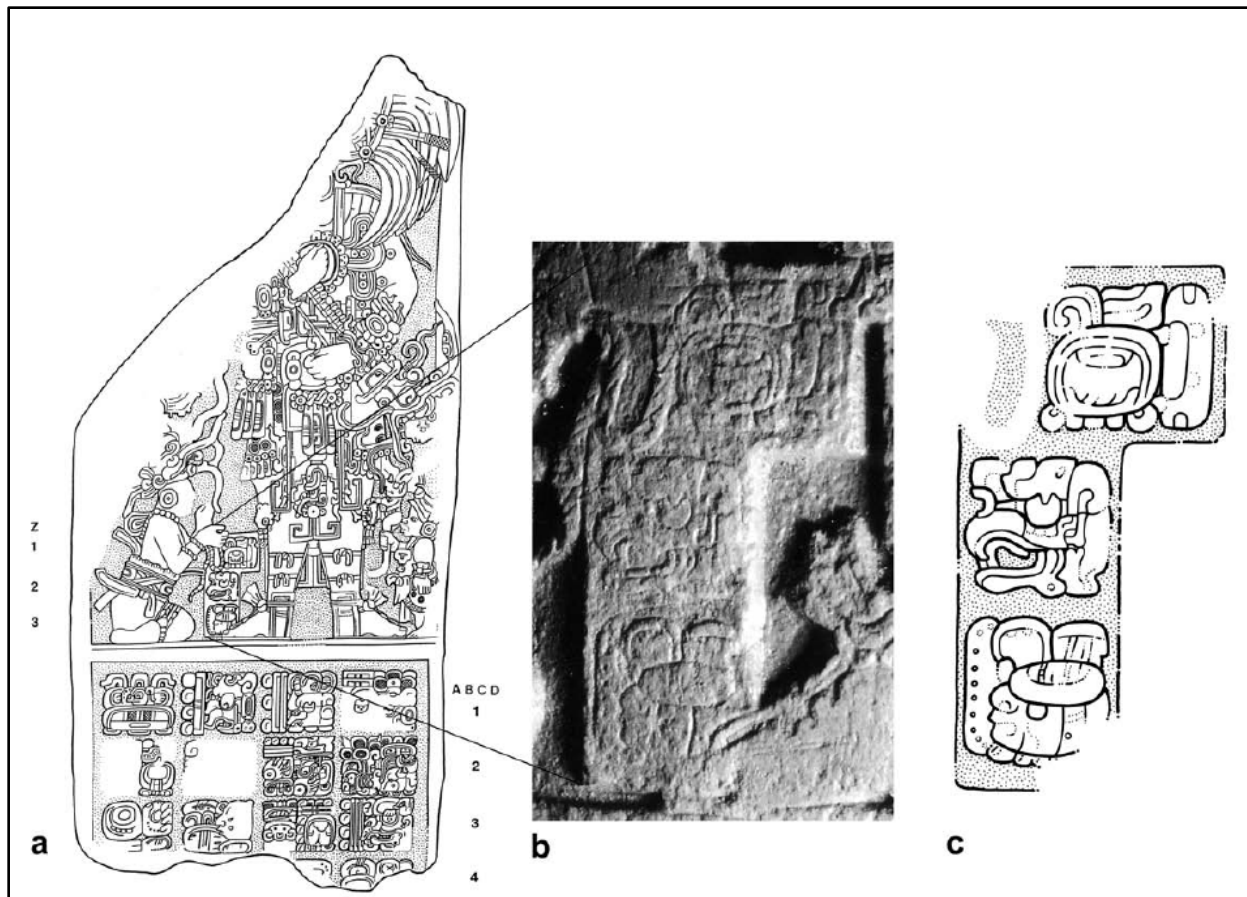


Figure 23: a) An illustration of Caracol's Stela 21 (drawing by Nikolai Grube); b) photo of the caption identifying a royal captive thought to be from Pacbitun (adapted from a photo, by A. Hamilton Anderson, courtesy of the Belize Institute of Archaeology); c) an illustration of the caption thought to end with Pacbitun's emblem glyph (Helmke and Awe 2012, Figure 9).

### Summary

On what side, if any, did Pacbitun's loyalties lie? This question cannot yet be answered with confidence. As the current chapter demonstrates, the large-scale constructions and modifications at Pacbitun during the Late Classic period coincide with the warring of Caracol and Naranjo. While the early Late Classic florescence of the Belize Valley may signal a period of independence for some sites in this region, the reorganization of Pacbitun's economic, social, and political institutions at this time suggests the site may have had a relationship with a

dominant polity. By the late Late Classic, the sites of the Belize Valley were in an economic decline suggesting that the area, like Pacbitun, was under the subjugation of a dominant polity. If there is anything that can be solidly stated, it is the fact that the economic fluctuation seen in the Belize Valley and at the site of Pacbitun is likely the result of the conflict between the two urban centers and their periodic influential interactions with these smaller sites. A. Chase (2004:232-233) believes that control of the upper Belize Valley, a borderland region and area of interest, likely changed hands several times. Thus, as a point of emphasis for this thesis, the most logical explanation for the early Late Classic transformation of Pacbitun and its ceremonial assemblage is that the site clearly played the role of a borderland polity; a polity that was likely intermittently influenced by the two archrival superpowers as well as by its Belize Valley neighbors.

Because several cultural/social indicators imply that Pacbitun had relations with the Belize Valley, the site would have also, at the very least, had indirect relations with Naranjo for a period of time. The mortuary practices at Pacbitun are also suggestive of a direct influence from the site of Caracol. Thus, the sociopolitical unrest triggered by the periodic influence of these two powerful kingdoms is a likely explanation for the early Late Classic transformation of the ceremonial assemblage and site of Pacbitun. Regardless of who was responsible, it is clear that something major occurred during the early Late Classic causing the site to experience sociopolitical change. At the center of this change is Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage. Understanding the influential power this assemblage had over its community, those responsible for its conversion were able to legitimize not only their ritual and political authority and semi-divinity but also their rights to manipulate, manage, and control land for the intensification of agricultural production and the procurement of vital resources for craft production.

What is more, although the assemblage's early Late Classic transition is the most noticeable, the assemblage's odd architectural evolution suggests that this may not have been the only time Pacbitun experienced sociopolitical change and/or influence. However, this is not to say that Pacbitun's assemblage was in constant transition changing from one archetype to the other. It could actually mean that the function of the assemblage incorporated and utilized multiple attributes simultaneously. When looking at the Early Classic and late Late Classic construction events of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage, there are clearly times when both E Group and eastern shrine attributes are present and employed side by side. It is possible that the admixture of archetypal attributes seen throughout the existence of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage may indicate a syncretistic adaptation owed to the interaction with two or more influential parties. In other words, the inhabitants at Pacbitun may have actually fused their own local beliefs with the foreign beliefs of Caracol, Naranjo, and/or the Belize Valley resulting in a blended assortment of attributes as evinced in Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage. Whether this blend was the result of force, coercion, or free will is unknown. Regardless, it may be that the proposed eastern triadic assemblage archetype, at least for the site Pacbitun, is actually a result of syncretism of ideologies belonging to the E Group and eastern shrine archetypes.

What is even more interesting is the relationship that appears to be developing between the E Group and eastern shrine archetypes. Clearly, these were two separate architectural entities, functioning in two diverse manners, their significance spanning two different periods of time only briefly overlapping in the Early Classic period. However, evidence in the form of shared physical, spatial, and functional attributes suggest that these two archetypes may share an overarching ideological theme. As Becker (2003:161; 2004:131) mentions, the E Group is believed to transition into shrine architecture sometime in the Early Classic and, therefore, must

have some underlying commonalities. Physically, these two archetypes are often the most dominant architectural form in their respective plazas. Spatially, aside from the E Group's western structure, both archetypes occupy an eastern plaza position; a direction known to be symbolically and culturally significant to the Maya. Moreover, shared plaza space may be suggestive of a common cosmological interest. Functionally, as two of the most widespread ritual/ceremonial archetypes in the Maya Lowlands, E Groups and eastern shrines are both associated with ancestor veneration, sacrificial burials and caching practices, as well as calendar related rituals. These common functions further support a shared ideology. And finally, the relationship culminates with the physical amalgamation of these two archetypes now evinced at the borderland polity of Pacbitun. Might Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage represent a time when both E Group and eastern shrine archetypes supported a similar principal ideology?

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

The Belize Valley ceremonial assemblages are a true testament to the importance of excavation. At first glance, these assemblages appear to exhibit all the basic attributes of the E Group complex. However, their E Group resemblance is slightly misleading. As Awe et al.'s (2016) investigation indicates, excavations into the Belize Valley ceremonial assemblages have discovered unique architectural and functional attributes not typical of the E Group archetype. My own investigation of Pacbitun's assemblage has confirmed the presence of these unique attributes. However, by examining the physical, spatial, and function attributes of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage through time, this investigation found that the assemblage did not always function as an eastern triadic assemblage but was converted into this archetype in the early Late Classic. Other attributes prior to the transition may suggest that the assemblage was possibly functioning as an E Group at least by the Early Classic. The timing and duration of the E Group and shrine architecture at Pacbitun both coincide with the institution and development of these archetypes elsewhere in the Lowlands.

Although this thesis provides an in-depth study of Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage, there are several ways in which this investigation would stand to benefit from more research. First, I was unable to include data pertaining to the cache deposits located within the assemblage. An investigation of these cache deposits may provide attributes that could help to further identify Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage. Moreover, although the excavations of the four structures that compose the assemblage were extensive, earlier architecture, particularly in Structure 1 and Structure 2, may hold more interments and caches and suggest either an earlier or more prevalent mortuary practice. However, although this may slightly alter the interpretation of the early development of the assemblage, it would not affect or dissuade the assemblage's early Late

Classic conversion. The broad excavations into Structure 4 and Structure 5 confirm that these were not utilized as shrines until the early Late Classic event.

This study would also benefit from an intensified method of dating. With tighter dates, it may be possible to identify if the Late Classic burials were cyclically placed as identified by A. Chase and D. Chase (2013) at Caracol. Tighter dates may also reveal whether the modifications of the ceremonial assemblage were done simultaneously or intermittently. Although a closer look at the ceramics may be helpful, the small sample size and lack of comparable contextual data are issues that, at least at this point, would likely prove this method ineffective. On the other hand, chemical dating used to date bone and teeth would be a more reliable resource, particularly for a study attempting to chronologically date burials belonging to a single time period.

After looking closely at the events of the Belize Valley and Southern Maya Lowlands during the Late Classic period, it is clear that Pacbitun and other sites in this region were likely borderland polities who were periodically influenced by the surrounding kingdoms of Caracol and Naranjo. As Chapter 6 demonstrated, the development and economic gain of Pacbitun and the Belize Valley during the early part of the Late Classic is thought to be caused by a period of independence. However, the evidence presented in Chapter 6 clearly indicates that the transformation of Pacbitun and its ceremonial assemblage during the early Late Classic effected the site's political, economic, and social organizations suggesting a relationship with a dominant polity. Importantly, while the conversion of Pacbitun's most sacred architecture does suggest that the site was experiencing sociopolitical change, it is unknown whether this was internally or externally motivated. While evidence does suggest that Pacbitun was connected to Caracol at this time, more work is needed to confirm this relationship. Following the early Late Classic



prosperity, the economic decline seen in the late Late Classic may indicate that Pacbitun, like other sites in the Belize Valley, was subjugated. Again, more work is necessary to identify which polity, if any, is responsible for this subjugation.

For now, the combination of attributes belonging to E Group, eastern shrine, and now eastern triadic assemblage archetypes evinced in Pacbitun's ceremonial assemblage are suggestive of the confluence of ideas amassed from multiple areas of influence. Interestingly, just as Awe and colleagues (2016) imply, Pacbitun does follow the initial developmental pattern exhibited by the other Belize Valley ceremonial assemblages. Could this suggest a similar fate for these assemblages? Only further investigation will confirm if and when these assemblages became eastern triadic assemblages. Thus, it is imperative that the other Belize Valley ceremonial assemblages be thoroughly examined in a similar temporal manner so that a comparison can be made.

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