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## 19 **CHANGING SPHERES OF INTERACTION IN TERMINAL CLASSIC WESTERN BELIZE**

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*Archaeological investigations in western Belize have recorded a growing body of evidence that is indicative of non-central lowland Maya influences in this Maya sub-region during the Terminal Classic period. Evidence for Yucatec and non-Maya influence in the Belize River Valley is manifested by the presence of new architectural styles and programs, and by the introduction of “foreign” artifacts and ideologically charged symbols. These cultural changes represent a departure from the previous Late Classic cultural tradition which reflects closer ties with central Peten sites. Besides providing evidence for Yucatecan style architecture and artifacts in western Belize, we suggest that these non-local traits were likely associated with the waning influence of Peten sites during a period of economic and political decline in the central Maya lowlands, and with the concurrent rise of Terminal Classic polities in the northern lowlands of the Yucatan Peninsula and the Gulf Coast of Mexico.*

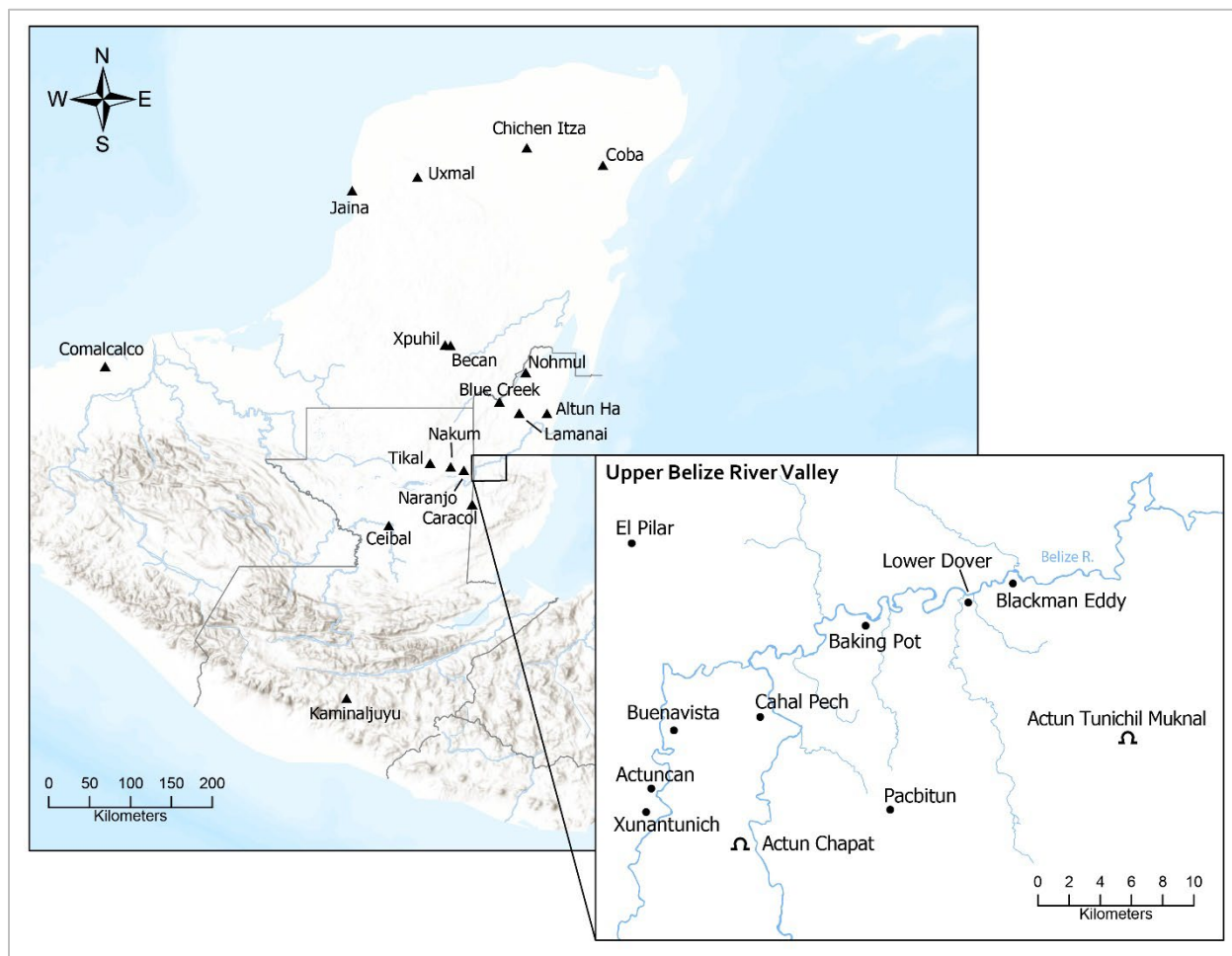
*“What significant “external” or “foreign” influences affected Lowland Maya cultural development? This has long been a major question in Maya research, and it continues to be so today, so that an occasional review, or “stock-taking”, of the subject seems in order. What progress has been made?” (Gordon R. Willey 1977:57)*

### **Introduction**

In the opening sentence of an article published more than 45 years ago, Gordon Willey (1977) asked the foregoing question which we believe was as relevant in the 1970s as it is now in 2023. The focus of Willey’s 1970s article, titled “External Influences on the Lowland Maya”, was to compare what was known of this topic 35 years after Hay et al. (1940) published their seminal volume on “The Maya and Their Neighbors”. In retrospect, Willey really did not have much information to work with in the 1970s, for what was known then about the Terminal Classic in the Belize Valley was limited to his own work at Barton Ramie, and on evidence recovered in the 1930s by Eric Thompson at San Jose and Xunantunich (known as Benque Viejo at the time). In the case of San Jose, Thompson (1939:153, 231-232) reported the discovery of spindle whorls painted with asphaltum, slate ware ceramic vessels, and fine orange pottery which he identified as clear indicators of Gulf Coastal and Yucatecan influences in west central Belize. In contrast to central Belize, non-local cultural remains at Altar and Ceibal in western Peten were more considerable, and included architectural,

artifactual, and iconographic evidence for what Willey termed “foreign impingements” in the western lowlands, and for which his colleagues suggested was clear evidence of “foreign” intrusions and/or invasions into that lowland Maya sub-region (Adams 1973, Sabloff 1973, Willey and Shimkin 1973). The latter perspective became a central theme of the 1970s Santa Fe symposium that led to the publication of the volume on the Maya Collapse (Culbert and Adams 1973), and it was again an important topic of discussion in the volume on the Terminal Classic Maya Lowlands edited by Demarest et al. in 2004. Importantly, one of the key differences between the latter two volumes is that whereas several contributors to the first (1973) tome interpreted foreign influences as the result of invasion or migration of “Mexicanized” groups into the region, contributors to the more recent (2004) volume credited Terminal Classic cultural changes in the western lowlands as the product of emulation and trade, and of elite use of foreign symbols for legitimizing their statuses during a period of societal stress and political disintegration (Demarest et al. 2004; Tourtellot and Gonzales 2004).

Of particular significance to this present paper is that neither of the aforementioned volumes incorporated much data from the Belize River Valley (BRV). Each volume, in fact, had only one article focusing on the Belize Valley and both articles were primarily site specific. Willey’s (1973) article in the first volume, for example, was based solely on his investigations at Barton Ramie where he noted no evidence of foreign influences in the Terminal Classic



**Fig. 1.** Map of the Maya Area with Belize River Valley inset.

cultural assemblage of that site. Likewise, an article by Ashmore et al. (2004) in the 2004 volume provided an excellent overview of the Terminal Classic strategies of Xunantunich and its hinterlands but mentioned no evidence of external influences in the architecture, iconography, or artifact assemblage of that site. A major focus of this paper is to address this omission and to provide a regional perspective on this topic based on significant new data collected during the last 20 plus years. Our purpose here is threefold. First, we begin by presenting the considerable and diverse types of archaeological evidence for external influences in the Belize Valley sub-region (Fig. 1) during the Late Classic period. Second, we explore the origins and timing for the introduction of these influences. Third, we examine whether there were specific socio-political and economic factors that may

have contributed to the increase of “foreign influences in the BRV during this time. In addressing these questions, we would like to underscore that unlike the previous efforts of our former colleagues, we are in a much better position to provide a more informed assessment of cultural changes in the BRV for the simple fact that we benefit from a significant increase in archaeological activity in this area during the last twenty years.

**Archaeological Evidence for Yucatec and Gulf Coast Influences in the Belize River Valley**

Long-term investigations by the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance (BVAR) Project, the Western Belize Regional Cave Project, as well as the research conducted by several of our colleagues in western Belize indicate that there is considerable archaeological

evidence for Terminal Classic Yucatec and Gulf Coast influences in this lowland Maya sub-region. The extant evidence is also diverse and manifested by new architectural styles and programs, the introduction of “foreign made” or “foreign” inspired material culture, and by the increasing use of “Mexicanized” ideological symbols. Below, we describe these various types of evidence under the three categories of architecture, artifacts, and ideology.

### Architectural Evidence

In a paper describing their research at Nohmul, Belize, Diane and Arlen Chase (1982:596) commented that architecture is especially important for determining “foreign” influences because, unlike portable objects that are easily traded, similar architectural features and programs in widely separated cultural sub-regions provide clear examples of “shared ideological and/or functional concepts”. We concur with the Chases observation and note that during the last 23 years, the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance (BVAR) and the Tourism Development Projects recorded several architectural features in western Belize that clearly reflect foreign influence. These architectural features include a Puuc-style ballcourt with vertical hoops or ballcourt rings, a small shrine with a portico entrance, circular structures, radial platforms, structures with decorative or non-functional stairways, albaradas, and possibly the re-introduction of balustrades flanking the central stairways of elite-related architecture.

### Puuc Style Ballcourt with Ballcourt Rings or Vertical Hoops

Ballcourt 1 at Xunantunich (Str. A18 and Str. A19) provides an excellent and unique example of a Puuc style ballcourt in western Belize. In addition to having ballcourt rings (Fig. 2), the angles of the benches, the form of the ballcourt buildings, and the T-shaped or half enclosed playing alley of Ballcourt 1 (Fig. 3), are reminiscent of the ballcourt at Uxmal and other courts in Yucatán. We should also note that while Xunantunich Ballcourt 1 is the only known ballcourt that incorporates Puuc style ballcourt rings in Belize, it is not the only ballcourt of this type known in the central Maya lowlands.



Fig. 2. Ballcourt Rings at Xunantunich.

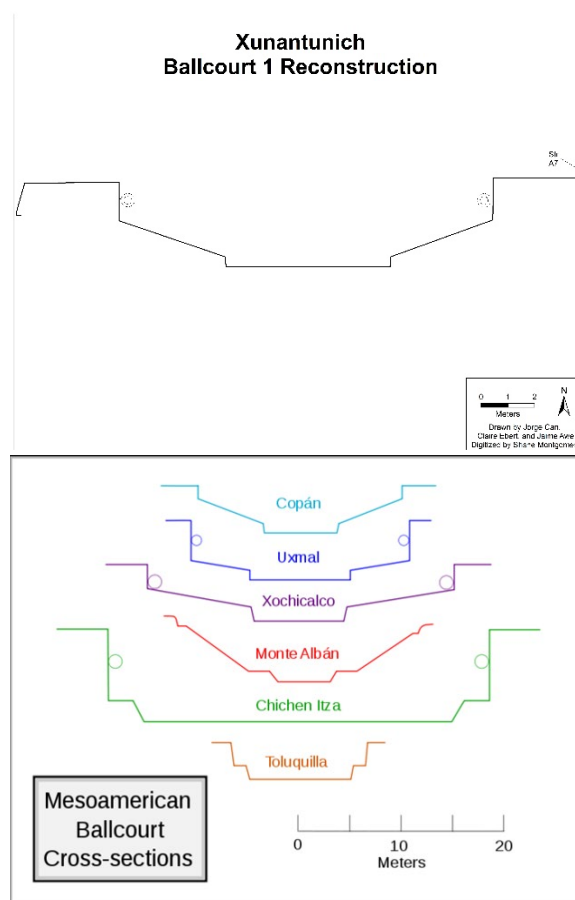
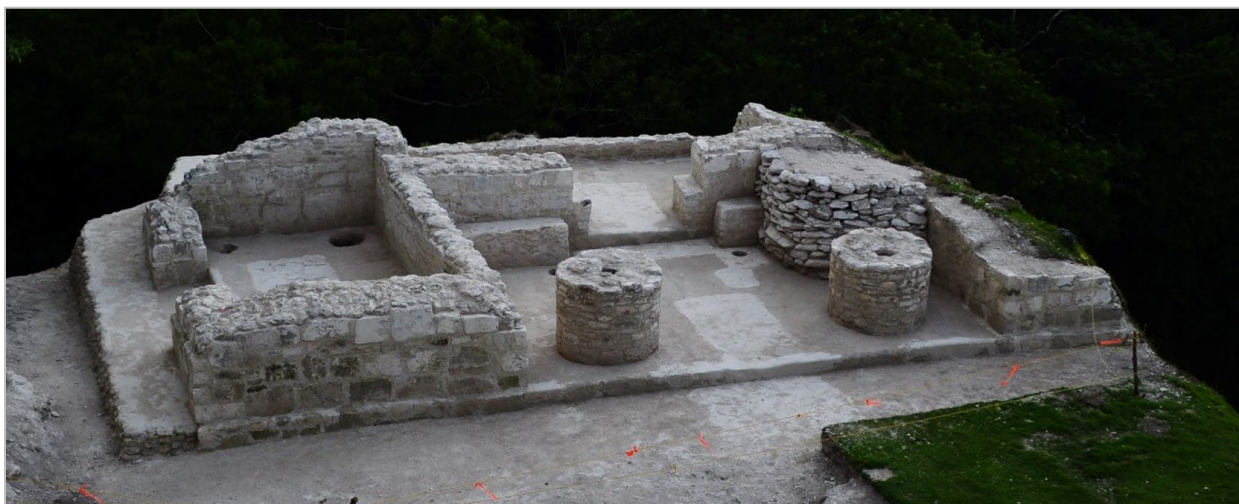


Fig. 3a-b. Profile of Ballcourt 1 at Xunantunich and of Ballcourts across Mesoamerica.

Ballcourt rings have also been found at Naranja (Graham 1980:187) and Xultun in Peten, Guatemala. The Naranja specimen, represented by a large (one third) fragment of the complete ballcourt ring, is designated as Ballcourt Sculpture 1 and is inscribed with two glyphs (Graham 1980; also see, Helmke et al 2015:18, Fig. 15). This ballcourt ring was first reported by



**Fig. 4.** Str. 20 at Xunantunich with a Portico Entrance.

Ian Graham (1980:187) in the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*. According to Graham, Naranjo site guards discovered the hoop or ring laying on the surface next to Structures B-32 and B-33 in 1979. Structures B-32 and B-33 form one of the two ballcourts in the Naranjo site core. Another ballcourt ring was recorded by vonEuw (1978) at Xultun, a site located approximately 10 kilometers from Naranjo. The Xultun ballcourt ring, which is missing its tenon, was found just to the north of Structures A-16 and A-17, the Late Classic period ballcourt at the site.

### **Buildings with Portico Entrances**

Structures with portico entrances should not be confused with portico gallery or colonnaded buildings. Gendrop (1998:150) defines structures with portico entrances as buildings with wide doorways that are flanked by two columns, and he notes that they are a common architectural form of the Puuc region (see also Mayer 1981). In contrast, portico gallery or colonnaded buildings have multiple or several columns and are also typical of Terminal Classic Puuc architecture.

Str. 20 at Xunantunich (Fig. 4) is presently the only known Terminal Classic period structure with a portico entrance in western Belize. This small temple or shrine is located on the upper western flank of the Castillo. Dating between the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> and start of the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, Str. 20 is also one of the last buildings constructed at the site. The two circular columns

flanking the entrance or doorway into the building are uncommon architectural elements within the central Maya lowlands but are typical of shrines at Chichen Itza (e.g., Templo de los Buhos), and later at Mayapan. The only other possible structures with portico entrances in the central lowlands are at Lamanai, Aguateca, and possibly Uxactun and Nakum. Other buildings with rounded columns have been reported at Blue Creek, Belize (Driver 2002), Copan (the "Chorcha" structure, Fash et al. 1992), Tikal (the East Plaza ballcourt, Structures 5D-42 and 5E-3 1; Jones 1996), and Yaxha (Structure 90; Hellmuth 1972), but these structures are colonnaded buildings rather than shrines with portico entrances. Another structure with rounded columns was discovered at Buena Vista in summer 2023 by Jason Yaeger (personal communication) but, like the Blue Creek structure, the Buena Vista building is likely Early Classic in date. Tikal Group G, also known as the Palace of Grooves or Channelled Walls, has pseudo columns that serve as a façade of the building, and DesMeules and Foias (2016) note that carved columns at Piedras Negras and the Puuc region provide evidence of connections between the northern and southern Maya lowlands during the Late Classic period.

At Lamanai, Pendergast (1986:232) noted that Structure N10-2 "yielded reasonably secure evidence of a columned entryway" and that the use of colonnades at the site was an "apparent innovation early in the Terminal



Fig. 5. Str. 5D-43 at Tikal with Tajin-style Architecture.

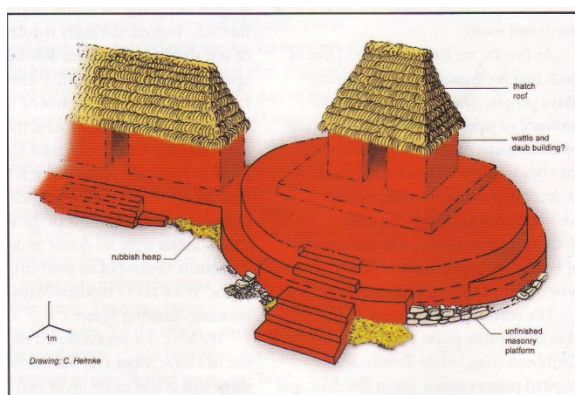


Fig. 6. Circular Structure A4-1<sup>st</sup> at Pook's Hill.

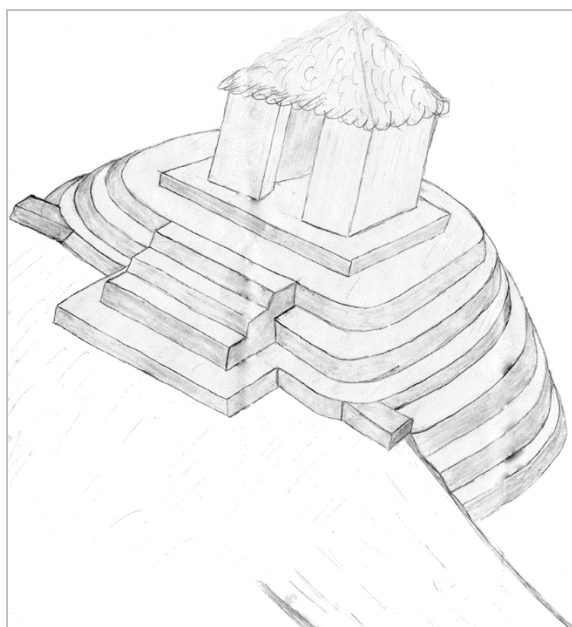


Fig. 7. Artistic Reconstruction of Circular Structure 209 at Baking Pot (drawing by Gustavo Valenzuela).

Classic". Graham (2004:236) also noted that Str. N10-77 at Lamanai reminded her of a structure in the Nunnery Quadrangle at Uxmal, and Aimers (2007:349) added that "architectural similarities to Uxmal and Champoton are evident" in the Ottawa Group at the site. In spite of these reported architectural similarities with the Puuc region, it is important to note that Graham (personal communication 2023) recently informed us that the columns on N10-2 are assumed to have been wooden. Given this new information, we are not completely certain if Structure N10-2 was a colonnaded building or whether it had a portico entrance.

In Peten, Guatemala, Smith (1950:47-48) reported that Strs. A2 and A4 at Uaxactun incorporated pillars in their façades. Valdes and Fahsen (2004:154) also note that rounded columns were discovered on Str. M8-37 at Aguateca, and that the Terminal Classic date of these buildings reflect foreign influences in the Peten. At Nakum, Zralka & Hermes (2012:164, 179) mention "the use of stone pillars and the construction of round and tandem structures (Structures 12 and 63A respectively)" and that this architecture suggests influences from Chichen and Puuc sites. Zralka and Hermes (2012:179) also report that Str. E at Nakum has "talud-tablero-reverse talud motif" which is "especially characteristic of the Epiclassic period centers of Veracruz and central Mexico (e.g., El Tajín and Xochicalco)." These connections remind us of Str. 5D-43 at Tikal which has talud-tablero terraces but with added flaring cornices that are reminiscent of the architecture of El Tajin (Fig. 5), Xochicalco, and Cacaxtla (see Jones 1996; Sharer 1977:547; Schele and Mathews 1998:72).

### Circular Structures

Circular structures have a long, but episodic, history in the Belize Valley (Aimers et al. 1995; Awe 1992). They first appear in the Middle Preclassic period, disappear from the archaeological record between the Early Classic and Late Classic periods, and are then reintroduced in the Terminal Classic. The circular platforms of the Middle Preclassic are also very different from the later structures which share greater similarities with coeval architecture in the Gulf Coast, Yucatán, and western Peten.

Terminal Classic circular structures in western Belize include Str. A4-1<sup>st</sup> at Pook's Hill (Fig. 6), and Str. 209 at Baking Pot (Fig. 7). Str. A4-1<sup>st</sup> at Pook's Hill has two circular terraces that are capped by a rectangular platform at its summit and an outset stairway facing west. Str. A4-1<sup>st</sup> was also constructed above an earlier rectilinear building that served as the eastern shrine of the main plaza at Pook's Hill. Helmke (2003:125) who excavated Str. A4-1<sup>st</sup> at Pook's Hill structure, concluded that the circular structure appears to be associated with socio-political restructuring, population movement and changes in ritual practices occurring under the influence of so-called 'Mexicanised' Maya neighbours. The round structure at Baking Pot is located along a short causeway that links the two major architectural complexes in the site core. The structure has three circular terraces, a west facing outset stairway, and a small rectangular platform at its summit (Audet 2006: 222-252). Like at Pook's Hill, the latter likely supported a perishable building.

Similar structures, with circular terraces and rectangular upper platforms, have been reported at several sites in Yucatán, including Calera, Chichen Itza, and Quiengola (Andrews and Andrews 1975; Pollock 1936). Closer to western Belize, Harrison-Buck and McAnany (2006, 2013:303) describe circular structures at the Sibun Valley sites of Pechtun Ha, Oshon, and Obispo, and D. Chase and A. Chase (1982) previously reported on a circular structure (Str. 9) at Nohmul. Just northwest of the Belize - Mexico border, there is an excellent example of this type of architecture at Becan, and Folan (1987:317-348) describes a similar structure at Calakmul. To the west, in Peten, Terminal Classic circular structures are present at Ceibal (Str. C-79; Smith 1982; Tourtellot and Gonzalez 2004:72; Szymański 2010) and at Nakum (Str. 12, Żrańka and Hermes 2012). Interestingly, the Ceibal circular platform (Str. 79), like Baking Pot's circular Str. 209, is also located along a causeway terminus (Tourtellot and Gonzalez 2004:72).

Żrańka and Hermes (2012: 171) note that Ringle and his colleagues (1998:299-22) "associate Terminal Classic round structures with feathered serpent symbolism" while "in central Mexico circular constructions are associated with Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, a wind aspect of

Quetzalcoatl." They (Żrańka and Hermes 2012: 171) further propose that "Terminal Classic-Postclassic round structures in the Maya area may bear a closer relationship with the wind god (Ik' k'uh in Classic Mayan) than the feathered serpent" and that they do reflect interaction between the central lowland Maya and their northern and western neighbors. This position was previously suggested by D. Chase and A. Chase (1982) who commented that the circular structure at Nohmul provided strong evidence of interaction between the Terminal Classic Maya of northern Belize and Gulf Coastal and Yucatecan people to the north. In contrast, Harrison-Buck and McAnany (2013:302-303) suggested that the presence of circular architecture "at strategic points along the coast and rivers of the Caribbean Watershed" suggest that "small groups of Chontal-Itza [migrants] may have entered places like the Sibun Valley [in Belize] and become permanent or semipermanent residents" and that this could explain the presence of circular shrines in this area. As we caution below, one should not assume that cultural changes are always the result of migrations without sound scientific evidence to support these assumptions. Bioarchaeological research on Terminal Classic skeletal remains in the Belize Valley, for example, has yet to yield any evidence of immigrants originating in either the Gulf Coast or northern Yucatán, thus supporting the argument for interaction and emulation rather than immigration.

### **Structures with Decorative or Non/functional Stairways**

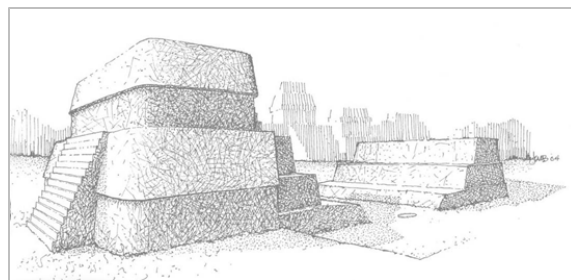
Structures with decorative, or non-functional, stairways are typical of Rio Bec architecture. Structure 1 at Xpuhil, which is beautifully illustrated on the cover of Proskouriakoff's (1963) "Album of Maya Architecture", is probably the best example of this architectural form. Sharer and Traxler (2006:114, 531) note that classic Rio Bec architecture is primarily a product of the Terminal Classic period when sites (e.g., Becan, Xpuhil and Rio Bec) in this subregion become heavily influenced by Puuc culture from northern Yucatán.

Our investigations in western Belize recorded two structures with non-functional/decorative stairways, these include

Str. B 9 at Caracol (Fig. 8) and Str. A2 at Lower Dover. Structure B9 at Caracol is the eastern building of Ballcourt B and its decorative stairway faces Plaza B (Caana Plaza) to the east. The west side of the structure faces the other ballcourt building to the west. We believe that the east side of Str. B9 was purposely decorated with the non-functional stairway to disguise the back side of the ballcourt building by creating a façade that looked like a temple facing Plaza B. Another interesting aspect of the architecture within Caracol's Plaza B is that several of its perimeter structures incorporate foreign-inspired features. These include the decorative stairway on Str. B9, balustrades flanking the midsection of the stairway leading to the summit of Caana, low-lying rectangular platforms in front of all the major structures in the plaza, and stucco masks in the form of the Storm Gods (Tlaloc) on the stair sides of Str. B5 (described below). The decorative stairway on Lower Dover Str. A2 was only partially excavated so beside the fact that the stairway faces Plaza A to the west, there is not much we can presently say of this feature at that site.

### Radial Platforms

George Andrews (1975) and Marvin Cohodas (1980) previously noted that there are two types of radial structures in the Maya lowlands, the radial pyramid and the “altar platform”. The former is typically represented by the western structures of E-Group complexes. The latter is defined by Cohodas (1980:209) as “a small radial structure that functions as a secondary element in its architectural complex and is usually placed on axis with a larger structure.” Instead of applying the very functional “altar platform” designation to these structures, we prefer to identify them as radial platforms. We also define them as low structures or platforms which, like most radial pyramids, often, but not always, have steps on all four sides and are often centrally located in epicentral courtyards. Two of the best-known examples of these radial platforms are the Pillory Shrine and Jaguar Throne structures that are axially located east of the central stairway of the Governor's Palace at Uxmal. Radial platforms are also common architectural features of other Puuc sites and are present to the west and south of Yucatán



**Fig. 8.** Str. B9 at Caracol with Non-Functional Stairway (after Joseph Balay).



**Fig. 9.** Radial Platforms at Lubaantun.

during the Terminal Classic period (e.g., the radial platform in the courtyard of the Cross Group at Palenque).

Radial platforms, which appear as late additions to the architectural assemblage of western Belize sites, are present at Baking Pot, the Benque Site, Caracol, and possibly at Xunantunich (Str. A1). In southern Belize, Structure 32 at Lubaantun (Fig. 9) is another very good example of this architectural type. Braswell (2022:156) notes that Postclassic sherds were found around Structure 32 at Lubaantun, but that this pottery is indicative of Post abandonment ritual pilgrimages to the site. The radial platform at Baking Pot, Str. N, is one course high, it is in the center of Plaza 2 in Group 1 and is axially located between the E-Group assemblage at the site (Aimers 2002:429, 2003:159). In contrast, the radial platforms at the Benque Site (Str. 7) and at Caracol are located on the side of their respective courtyards. The radial platform at the Benque Site, like that of Lubaantun, has steps on all four sides of the platform. The Caracol platform, which is located just southwest of the Barrio Group, has a single stairway on the south

side, while the Baking Pot platform has no steps. Aimers (2002:429) previously observed that the Baking Pot form of the radial platform is “sometimes used as a marker of the Terminal Classic-Postclassic” period, and that ceramics recovered “from Mound N date to this era.” He also commented that previous researchers suggested that this type of radial platform was Central Mexican in origin, and that it was introduced into the Maya area by foreign invaders or immigrants.

Above, we suggested that Str. A1 at Xunantunich could be considered a type of radial platform. This structure, which has stairways on its north and south sides, was constructed in the latter part of the 9<sup>th</sup> century at the center of what was originally a large open plaza in the heart of the city. Its construction served to cut the large courtyard in two thereby creating Plazas A-1 and A-II. The major difference between Str. A1 and other radial platforms in the Belize Valley is its size. Whereas all other radial structures in the valley are low-lying platforms, the size of Str. A1 is more in line with what Cahodas (1980) defined as radial pyramids. Unlike radial pyramids that are associated with Preclassic E-Group Complexes, however, Str. A1 at Xunantunich is not associated with an E-Group and neither does it date to the Preclassic period.

### **Albarradas**

Our investigations in western Belize have recorded low stone walls at several sites across this lowland Maya subregion. Too often, in our opinion, these low stone walls are automatically assumed to be defensive in nature (Awe and Morton 2023; Demarest 2004) with little effort expended to discriminate between defensive and non-defensive functions. From our point of view, and based on our examination of their contexts, mode of construction, and chronology, these features more likely represent *albarradas*, that is, low stone walls that serve to demarcate “property” or to enclose household spaces. *Albarradas* have a long history of use in Yucatán, where they became prominent during the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods, and where they continue to be used and modified today. In the greater Belize Valley, these low stone walls are present at Cahal Pech, Lower Dover, Tipan Chen Uitz, and Xunantunich, and

they are all associated with the final, Terminal Classic, phase of occupation at all four sites. South of the valley, there is also an *albarrada* at Caracol that originally enclosed a large area to the east and south of the Barrio Group and Plaza B. Like those of the Belize Valley, the Caracol *albarrada* also dates to the Terminal Classic period and is in a location that provides no defensive advantages to the site’s core area.

### **Foreign-made or Foreign-inspired Objects** *Spindle whorls*

Eric Thompson was one of the first archaeologist to identify foreign-made or foreign-inspired artifacts in western Belize. In his San Jose report, published in 1939, Thompson observed that spindle whorls at the site were painted in what he identified as asphaltum (black asphalt/resin). He added that the asphaltum and incised designs on the spindle whorls were very similar to “spindle whorls from the Huastec region of northern and north central Veracruz” (Thompson 1939:153). Thompson’s observations are supported by Patel (2012:240-241) who recently reported that figurines in Veracruz were “often accented with a black asphalt/resin – a convention unique to this coastal region.” Patel added that more than 500 spindle whorls were discovered in the Pyramid of the Flowers at Xochitécatl in Tlaxcala, that the Carnegie Institution of Washington recovered more than 100 from ritual contexts at Chichen Itza, and that some 200 plus specimens were found at the Isla de Sacrificios in Veracruz. Many of the latter were decorated with isthmian symbols and motifs (Patel 2012, Fig. 7.41 c-g) that are akin to those from San Jose, Belize.

### **Hachas**

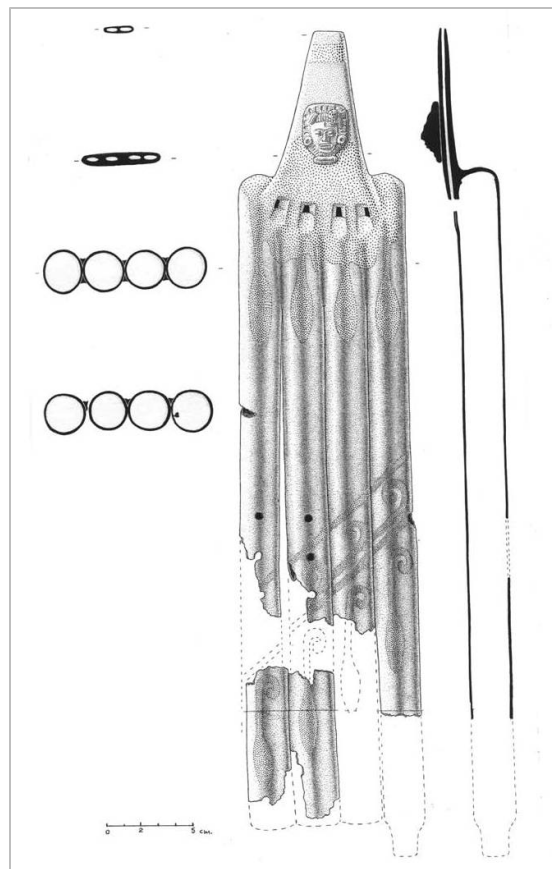
Ballgame paraphernalia are another type of artifact that is closely linked to Gulf Coast cultures, and particularly with the site of El Tajin in Veracruz. This makes the discovery of an hacha at the Belize Valley site of Buenavista significant for it provides another example of late influences originating from the Gulf Coast region. According to Helmke et al. (2018:11) the Buena Vista hacha was found on a mound just outside of the site core, about “300 meters west of the royal palace.” Helmke and his colleagues



(2018:11) add that nine yokes were found at Copan, that two fragments of yolks are known from Ceibal, and that ballgame paraphernalia have also been discovered at Altun Ha and Caracol in Belize, and at Palenque, Tonina, and Bolomkin in the western Maya area. In regard to the Palenque ballgame paraphernalia, Rands (1973:196) previously reported that the “[t]hin stone heads and fragments of yokes” were considered by Alberto Ruz Lhuillier “to indicate intrusions from the Veracruz Gulf Coast.”

### ***Quadruple Ceramic Flutes***

During our investigations of the circular Str. A9 at Baking Pot (see above), we discovered two quadruple flutes in Burial 2 (see Audet 2006:239). The Baking Pot flutes (Fig. 10) are very similar to four-chambered or quadruple flutes that Martí (1968, 1978) previously assigned to Gulf Coast origins. A more recent study of these musical instruments by Arndt (2014) indicates that quadruple flutes have been found in Tabasco, Jaina, Oaxaca, and the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, and especially at Teotihuacan (Arndt 2014) where several fragmented specimens have been discovered in diverse contexts. The Teotihuacan versions of these flutes, however, are generally smaller than that those that were produced later in the Gulf Coast, and the anthropomorphic figures on their mouthpiece differ in style from the Baking Pot specimen. Neutron-activation analysis of the Baking Pot flutes (BVAV026) by Reents-Budet and Ron Bishop (see Reents-Budet et al. 2005:367, 370, 381) noted that their chemical composition is not local to the Belize Valley thus indicating an undetermined place of origin, but likely from the Gulf Coast or possibly the Motagua River Valley. Based on their form and style, it is much more likely that the Belize Valley quadruple flutes were imported from the Gulf Coast region rather than from Central Mexico or the Motagua region. A recent study of Terminal Classic three-chambered flutes from Jaina and Copan by Zalaquett Rock and Espino Ortiz (2019) noted that except for the number of chambers, the three chambered flutes from the latter sites are shaped similar to the quadruple specimens from Baking Pot, and that they also reflect close similarities with three-chambered flutes from the Gulf Coast.



**Fig. 10.** Quadruple Flute from Baking Pot (drawing by Gustavo Valenquela).



**Fig. 11.** Fine Orange Vase from Pook's Hill.

### **Pottery**

Ceramic remains, including fine paste pottery, slate ware, comales, and frying pan censers are among the most common cultural materials that reflect non-local influences in the greater Belize Valley during the Terminal Classic period. Fine Orange pottery (Fig. 11) is almost ubiquitous at Belize Valley sites (see Helmke 2001; Helmke and Reents-Budet 2008; Ting et al. 2015), and fine orange moulded-carved vases are consistently recovered in caves and surface site contexts. Another significant feature of fine orange pottery in the Belize Valley is that most of it appears to be locally, or regionally, produced, with only a few specimens of the Usumacinta-related Pabellon Modelled-carved type present. The most common of two locally/regionally produced types is Ahk'utu' moulded-carved vases (see Helmke and Reents-Budet 2008; Ting et al. 2015) with diagnostic, bulbous, tripod supports. The fact that the latter are predominantly produced in the region suggests that most fine orange pottery in the Belize Valley represent emulation or foreign inspiration of a non-local ceramic tradition.

Slate ware was first identified at San Jose by Thompson (1930), who accurately noted that it reflected ties with sites in northern Yucatán. More recently, slate ware has been identified at several other sites in central Belize, including Cahal Pech, Caracol, Altun Ha, and the Sibun Valley (Aimers 2002; Awe et al. 2020a; Chase and Chase 2007; Harrison-Buck and McAnany 2006). Aimers (2003:380-381) previously suggested that affinities between the Central Belize slate ware with that of the Sotuta complex at Chichen Itza likely suggests that this ceramic type was introduced by immigrants from northern Yucatán. Harrison-Buck and McAnany (2006), in contrast, propose that the large quantity of northern-style pottery at Sibun sites is more in line with local production, thus imitation, rather than direct imports. Because we have yet to conduct petrographic or iNAA studies of the Cahal Pech slate ware vessels, we cannot, at present, state whether they represent imports or the product of emulation. We should also note that slate ware ceramics, and comales, are common in northern Belize, especially along coastal sites. Mason and Boteler-Mock (2004:383, 393) suggest that the distribution of

these materials was associated with a Terminal Classic interaction sphere that was dominated by Chichen Itza.

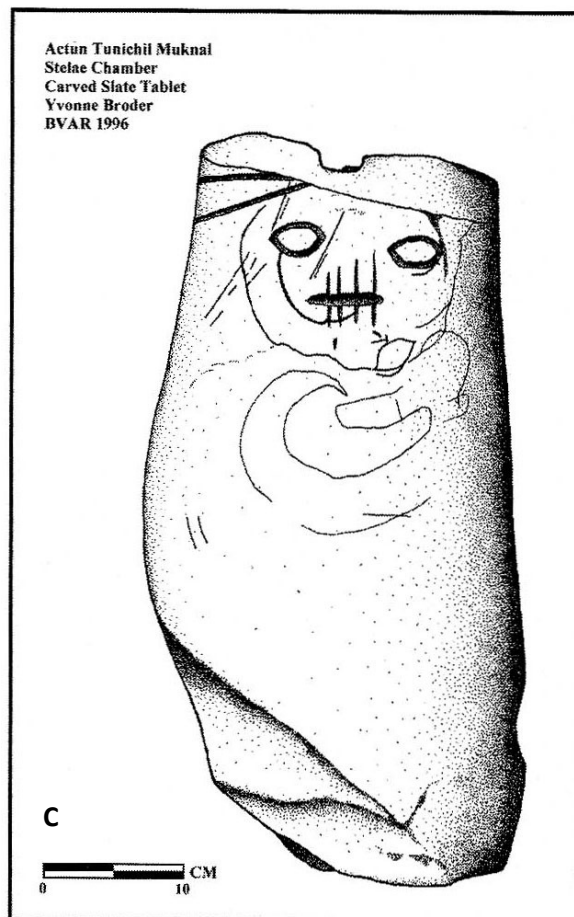
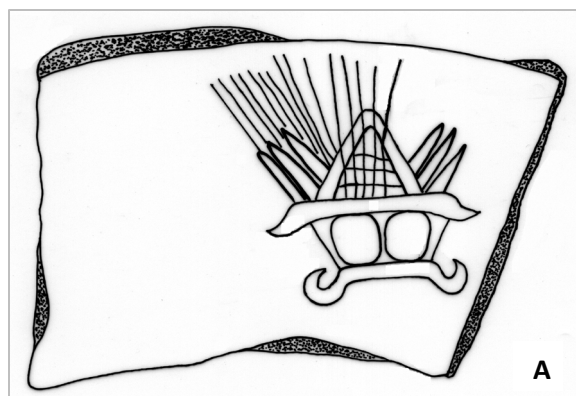
### ***Ceramic, Jaina-like, Mould-made Figurines/Ocarinas***

The production of figurines and ocarinas in the Belize Valley began at the end of the Early Formative period (Awe 1992). By the end of the Late Formative, however, figurine production was discontinued, and following a hiatus that lasted for most of the Classic period, they were eventually re-introduced during the Terminal Classic. Besides their date of production, there are several other significant differences between the early and late figurine traditions in the valley. Whereas Formative period figurines are solid, hand-modelled, unslipped, and stylistically unsophisticated, the Terminal Classic specimen are hollow, mould-made, and have facial and dress features executed in great detail. The latter figurines are also often painted with red and orange slips, and occasionally with Maya blue pigment.

In the Belize Valley, Terminal Classic mould-made figurines and ocarinas have been recovered at Cahal Pech, Xunantunich, Baking Pot, and Pacbitun (Awe et al. 2020a,b; Cheong et al. 2014; Healy 1988). Petrographic analysis of a sample of the Pacbitun assemblage indicated that there were both locally made and foreign specimens in the collection. While we have yet to conduct source analysis of the Cahal Pech, Baking Pot, and Xunantunich specimen, similarities with the Pacbitun foreign-made figurines suggests that a similar distribution can be reasonably expected at the former sites. What we are uncertain of is the exact place of origin for the foreign-made figurines. Stylistically, several of them display similarities with figurines and ocarinas from Jaina where some specimens are also painted with various colors, including Maya blue.

### ***Maya Blue Pigment***

Although the use of Maya blue extends into the Late Preclassic in the Maya lowlands, there is a clear increase in the use of this pigment, on pottery, murals, and sculpture, during the Terminal Classic period (Arnold 2005). Arnold (2005) has also identified Terminal Classic mines



for the extraction of palygorskite, a major component of Maya blue pigment, near Sacalum and Ticul, Yucatán. Given the discovery of these palygorskite mines, we can deduce that Maya blue was most likely produced in Yucatán, and that the pigment was exported to cities in the central and southern lowlands. The use of Maya blue in the Belize Valley during the Terminal Classic would also suggest that this pigment was imported from the northern lowlands at this time.

**Fig. 12a-d.** Mexican Storm god incised on Belize Red Sherd at Cahal Pech, carved out of Slate at Bajo del Lago, incised on Slate Slab at Actun Tunichil Muknal, and on a moulded tripod vessel from Esquintla Guatemala (after Anderson and Helmke 2013), drawing by N. Latsanoupoulos.

***Ceramic Griddles or Comales, Grater Bowls, and Frying Pan Censers***

Frying pan censers, flat ceramic griddles, or comales and, to a lesser extent, grater bowls, are present in the Terminal Classic ceramic

assemblages of Baking Pot, Cahal Pech, Xunantunich, and Caledonia, and they have also been found at Altun Ha, Caracol, and several cave sites in central Belize (Aimers 2002; Awe 1985, 2008; A. Chase and D. Chase 2007:16, 23; Pendergast 1979). Halperin (2017:16) notes that the earliest evidence for the use of flat ceramic griddles is in Central Mexico and Oaxaca, although they are also known from late Early Classic contexts at Quirigua and Copan. In the Belize Valley *comales* and grater bowls first appear in Terminal Classic times and, along with frying pan censers, are generally found in the same contexts as fine orange vessels. This pattern is also evident at Caracol where, in addition to frying pan censers and fine orange pottery, there are also “Mixtec-style” incense burners (A. Chase and D. Chase 2007:16, 23). At Xunantunich, LeCount (2010: 147) suggests that *comales* were used in elite palace kitchens. Ardren (2020:280-281) indicates that “grater bowls and griddles [*comales*] presented radically new methods of food preparation” in Yucatán and that they do not show up at Chichen Itza, and by extension the northern lowlands, until during the Terminal Classic period. She adds that from Yucatán their use for making tortillas likely spread southward.

### Terminal Classic, “Mexicanized”, Ideological Symbols and Yucatec-inspired(?) Rituals in the Belize Valley

In the Belize Valley, “Mexicanized” ideological symbols are manifested by images of the Mexican Storm god (Tlaloc), the Mexican Year Sign, and by pecked crosses and patollis. Other “foreign” ideologies that were likely introduced during the Terminal Classic period are rituals associated with round structures and radial platforms, an increase of child sacrifices in caves, and the introduction of frying pan and Mixtec-style censers.

Mexican Storm god (Tlaloc) images in the BRV are depicted on a Terminal Classic, Belize Red, ceramic sherd from Cahal Pech (Fig. 12a), and they are carved on slate at Bajo del Lago in the upper Macal (Fig. 12b), and at Actun Tunichil Muknal (Fig. 12c) along Roaring Creek. They are also featured on two large stucco masks that flank the central stairway of the terminal architectural phase of Structure B5 at Caracol

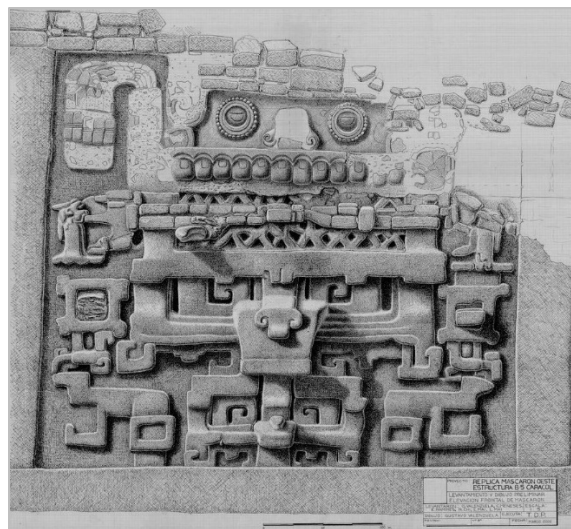


Fig. 13. Mexican Storm god depicted on Mask Flanking the stairway of Str. B5 at Caracol.

(Fig. 13). The incised image on the Cahal Pech sherd represents a frontal depiction of the Central Mexican Storm god wearing a headdress that includes the trapeze and ray element in the middle (aka. the Mexican Year Sign). The Storm god on the Cahal Pech sherd can be identified by the goggles as well as the pronounced and curving upper lip (usually referred to as a “*bigote*” in the literature concerning this deity). Rice (1983) and Aimers (2003:408) argue that reptilian motifs on Terminal Classic and Postclassic period art in the central lowlands, including western Belize, “represent the movement of Mexicanized Maya people from the Gulf Coast and Yucatán into the Belize Valley during and after the Terminal Classic or at least some sort of unspecified “influence” of Mexicanized groups from the Gulf Coast or Yucatán”.

The Mexican Year sign is evident on a polychrome vase from Actun Chapa (Fig. 14), a cave located about six kilometres south of Cahal Pech (Awe et al. 2019:44, Fig. 13). At the center of the iconographic field, the vase is adorned with two Mexican Year Signs. Awe et al. (2019:44) previously noted that Mexican Year Signs are typically associated with central Mexican cultures and with Teotihuacan in particular. What is significant about the Actun Chapat vase, however, is that it was produced long after Teotihuacan had collapsed and following the depopulation of this central Mexican metropolis. This situation led Awe and his colleagues



Fig. 14. Mexican Year Sign painted on Vase from Actun Chapat, Macal River Valley.

(2019:44) to suggest that the late manifestation of the Mexican Year Sign in the BRV was likely associated with “a Late Classic revivalist movement wherein motifs of central Mexican origin and especially those tied to and associated with Teotihuacan saw renewed vigor in their use and application.” They further added that “The pairing of this symbol with the simplified Maya glyph for *ajaw* “king” along the rim” of the vase is interesting for the Mexican Year Sign often decorates the headdresses of rulers at Teotihuacan (see Nielsen and Helmke 2017). When considered in tandem, these iconographic features confirm and support Ringle et al. (1998) previous suggestion that a cult of Quetzalcoatl was partly responsible for the Terminal Classic spread of symbolic elements and mythology to the Maya lowlands.

Pecked crosses and patollis are both present in Terminal Classic architectural contexts at Xunantunich. The Xunantunich pecked cross (Fig. 15a) was carved or pecked into the floor of a small room in Structure A20, the small shrine with the portico entrance described above. This pecked cross consists of some 40 small circular depressions, and two larger ones at the north and south end of the cross. Wanyerka (1999:109) and Woodfill (2014) report that pecked crosses are predominantly found in Central Mexico, particularly at Teotihuacan where Aveni associates them with “astronomical sighting devices”. Aveni et al. (1978:278) also note that pecked crosses are often associated with patolli boards at Aztec sites. This association is certainly the case on Structure 20 at Xunantunich, and at



Fig. 15a-b. Pecked Cross and Patolli incised on the floor of Str. A20, Xunantunich.

the site of Lagarto in southern Belize where both features have been found near to each other (Wanyerka 1999).

In the case of *patollis*, Watkins et al. (2023; also, Fitzmaurice et al. 2021 and Saldana et al. 2023) note that Xunantunich (Fig. 15b)

contains the second most *patollis* recorded in the central Maya lowlands. Structure 13, in particular, contains about a dozen of these game boards carved into the floor of rooms in this elite residential building. Zralka's (2014:70) study of *patollis* indicates that some of the earliest *patollis* known are from Teotihuacan. Other examples are known from El Tajin and later at Tula, Hidalgo, and at Aztec sites in Central Mexico. Zralka notes that the Teotihuacan *patollis* are generally quadrangular with a cross-like pattern at their center. The Aztec boards are more typically X-shaped. The Xunantunich *patollis* share greater similarities with the Teotihuacan types rather than with the later Aztec types. In the Belize Valley, *patollis* are also almost always found in association with graffiti. Zralka (2014:193-196) notes that some graffiti, particularly those of Terminal Classic date, reflect "foreign" or "Mexicanized" influence and that they are likely linked to the "International Style" typical of this period.

To the southeast of the BRV, several *patollis* have been discovered in the Stan Creek (Graham 1994) and Toledo Districts (Wanyerka 1999). The Lagarto Ruins in southern Belize has several monuments, Monuments 5, 10, and 12, that are all decorated with *patolli* designs and also Wanyerka 1999, Figs. 3, 4, 5). These Lagarto monuments share close similarities with altars that were found paired with Stela 10 and Stela 22 in Group A at Ceibal (Smith 1977: Figs. 4-7). Significantly, Stelae 10 and 22 at Ceibal are both decorated with what Smith suggests are non-local rulers, and Group A was the primary courtyard of Ceibal during the Terminal Classic period (Smith 1977:360-361). Smith (1977:361) also argues that the presences of *patollis* at Ceibal, Belize, and Uxmal represent influences from Tula. Stresser-Péan (1971:599), in contrast, notes that *patollis* are very common among the Huasteca of Veracruz, but that the earliest examples appear to be at Teotihuacan.

Concurrent with the introduction of these non-local ideological symbols in the BRV is an increase in cave rituals, and new styles of incense burners. Frying pan censers, in particular, were introduced during the Terminal Classic period at Baking Pot, Cahal Pech, Caledonia, and Xunantunich (Aimers 2002, 2003; Audet 2006; Awe 1985; Awe et al. 2020b). A. Chase and D.

Chase (2007:16, 23) also report "frying pan" and "Mixtec-style" incensarios at Caracol where they represent foreign influences during the Terminal Classic period.

Our investigations also reflect coeval changes in cave rituals at this time. Cultural remains in caves along the Roaring Creek, Barton Creek, and Macal River, for example, indicate that there was a significant increase in cave ritual activity during the Terminal Classic period (Awe et al. 2019, 2020b, Helmke 2009; Moyes 2006; Moyes et al. 2009). An important aspect of ritual intensification in subterranean sites at this time was human sacrifice, particularly that of children (Ardren 2011; Awe et al. 2020b; But 2020; Owens 2005). Given the widespread evidence for child sacrifice in caves and cenotes in Yucatán (Ardren 2011), it is possible that this practice in the BRV was a result of influences deriving in the northern lowlands.

### **Origin of Influences**

More than 80 years ago, Thompson (1939) suggested that slate ware pottery, fine orange ceramics, and spindle whorls painted with asphaltum at San Jose provided strong evidence of Gulf Coastal and Yucatecan influences in western Belize. Several years later, Richard Adams (1973) and Jeremy Sabloff (1973; see also, Willey and Shimkin 1973) argued that new architectural styles, the introduction of fine orange pottery, and iconographic representations on monuments at Altar de Sacrificios and Ceibal indicated that foreign "Mexicanized" groups invaded and conquered the western Maya lowlands via the Usumacinta River. Thompson (1975) subsequently noted similar changes in the iconography of stelae at Ucanal and suggested that these influences were likely associated with Putun or Chontal Maya incursions into the central Maya lowlands. Willey (1977:69) later supported Thompson's view and noted that "Late Classic foreign influences on the Lowland Maya [may have derived from] Chollula or Xochicalco, or sites in Veracruz" and that "these ideas may have been mediated by Chontal or Putun Maya groups, on the western edge of the Maya Lowlands." Ball (1974) also noted that the late florescence of Usumacinta sites was likely a result of Yucatecan groups who moved into the area during the Terminal Classic period. More

recently Laporte (2004:229) suggested that foreign influences at Ucanal may be associated with Mopan immigrants from the Yucatan.

Following the discovery of foreign influences at Nohmul in northern Belize, and at Terminal Classic sites along the eastern seaboard of the Maya area, Arlen Chase (1985) questioned the “single vector, west to east” origins of foreign influences that had been proposed by Adams, Sabloff, Thompson, and Willey. In contrast to the latter, he suggested a two-pronged intrusion for the influences, one deriving from the west via the Usumacinta drainage around 9.16.0.0.0 (ca 750 AD), and the other emanating from Chichen Itza around 9.19.0.0.0 (ca 810 AD) and following an easterly coastal direction then inland via riverine routes. Another significant difference of Chase’s model is that rather than explicitly crediting invaders for changes in the Terminal Classic assemblages of central lowland Maya sites, he hypothesized that changes in the iconography of centers like Caracol likely resulted when the city’s last two rulers “entered into some sort of alliance with individuals foreign to the site” and that these individuals “may have come from somewhere to the north” (Chase 1985:106).

In the volume on the Terminal Classic in the Maya lowlands, Tourtellot and Gonzalez (2004:78) questioned the migration/invasion model previously proposed for the Usumacinta region. They commented that many of the theories regarding military conquest of, or migration into, Ceibal during the Terminal Classic “smack of unexamined biological determinism, as if Classic and non-Classic Maya cultures were carried by the biology of their origins.” They further supported Ringle et al.’s (1998) suggestion that foreign influences were more likely introduced because of the spread of “a new Epiclassic world-religion”, the cult of Quetzalcoatl, which strongly recognized “that new ideas also moved by means other than conquest and migration.” Tourtellot and Gonzalez (2004:74) further note that, “Rather than seeing late invasions as disrupting Classic Maya civilization, serious trouble may already have developed in the Late Classic from internal processes, producing conditions under which people eventually sought and developed alternatives for rule and worship that offered them hope.”

For the Belize River Valley, Aimers (2007:345-46) recently observed that sites in this region have yet to provide evidence of invasion in spite of the fact that “stylistic change [in the Terminal Classic] was great compared to earlier periods”. Aimers added that “[c]eramic styles related to northern Belize, Yucatán, and the Gulf Coast do not definitely indicate foreign presence, but they show that the people of the Belize Valley were familiar with exotic styles and did not hesitate to adopt them.” A similar case has been made by Harrison-Buck and McAnany (2006, 2013) for the Sibun River Valley, where they recorded architecture and cultural remains that reflect connections and interaction with Terminal Classic centers in Yucatan.

The biggest problem with previous studies that have argued for invasion/migration as the causal factor for Terminal Classic foreign influences in the central Maya lowlands is that almost none of these studies have applied biological data for addressing this critical question. Fortunately, this sin of omission is changing, and new and ongoing research has begun to provide interesting insights regarding migrations during and after the decline of the central lowlands. Recent studies of population dynamics in the BRV, for example, indicate that there was considerable migration (between 10% and 40%) of people into the area around this time (Freiwald 2021, Freiwald et al. 2014; Hoggarth et al. 2021, 2022). Most immigrants into the Belize Valley, however, appear to have come from adjacent regions to the south (Maya Mountains), and from Peten in the west. Another recent analysis of the dental morphology of a sample of 676 individuals from 11 sites in central Belize, Peten, and Yucatan also indicate that some Terminal Classic members of the central Belize population were non-local (Wrobel et al. 2022). When the central Belize samples were compared with the small representative sample from sites in Yucatan and Peten, differences between the two groups suggest that the origin of the central Belize “foreigners” likely lies outside of the northern lowlands, or at least not from the sites analysed in the study. It is hoped that a planned future analysis of samples from a larger number of sites may yet help to determine the diverse regions of origin for the Terminal Classic immigrants in central Belize. Despite these

**Table 1.** Sources of Terminal Classic Foreign Influences in the Belize River Valley.

<b>Sources of TC Foreign Influences in Western Belize</b>			
<b>Yucatan</b>	<b>Gulf Coast</b>	<b>Central Mexico</b>	<b>Usumacinta</b>
<b>Slate ware</b>	Hachas	Storm god	Fine orange
<b>Maya blue</b>	Asphaltum	Mexican Year sign	
<b>Jaina figurines</b>	Quadruple flutes	Pecked crosses	
<b>Frying pan censers</b>	Circular platforms	Patolli	
<b>Ballcourt rings</b>	Comales	Comales	
<b>Portico entrances</b>	Patolli??	Arrow points??	
<b>Radial platforms</b>	Arrow points??		
<b>Decorative stairs</b>			
<b>Child sacrifices in caves?</b>			

limitations, our study of non-local architectural styles, ideological symbols, and artifacts in the Belize Valley (see Table 1) suggests that most of the influences derived from Yucatan, followed by the Gulf Coast, and then central Mexico. The one exception was fine orange pottery which likely originated in the Usumacinta region, and either introduced overland across the Peten, or via the Caribbean coast or by inland trade routes that connected the Rio Bec region with the northern and southern regions of the lowlands. The latter route has been suggested by Rice and Rice (2004:281) who noted that “Becan seems to have enjoyed a brief tenure as an important trading port in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, as the main transpeninsular trading route from the Gulf to the Caribbean.” Whatever the actual route of foreign influences into the BRV may be, the widespread geographic origins and diversity of these cultural influences lend support to the development and dissemination of international styles across Mesoamerica during the Terminal Classic period.

#### **Dating the Introduction of Foreign Influences into the Belize River Valley**

Arlen Chase (1985) previously suggested that Yucatecan influences manifested in northern and central Belize around the start of the 9<sup>th</sup> century (9.19.0.0.0 ca. 810 AD). Data from the Belize Valley roughly supports this time frame,

but also indicates that it may have begun as early as the last few decades of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. We propose this earlier time frame for a couple of reasons. First, our 14C dates of cultural remains in caves with evidence of Terminal Classic foreign influences generally tend to cluster between 750-900 AD. This is especially true of Actun Tunichil Muknal which contains fine orange and plumbate pottery, the image of a Mexican Storm God carved onto a slate slab, and considerable evidence for child sacrifice (Awe et al. 2005; 2020b).

Our second reason for suggesting a slightly earlier date for the introduction of Terminal Classic influences in western Belize is based on observations by colleagues working in several other neighboring sub-regions. Robles and Andrews (1986), for example, argue that data from the East Coast of Yucatán reflect a decline of Peten influences by about 750 AD and to the start of Puuc florescence in Yucatán around this same time. This situation, they claim, is quite evident at Coba, and at other sites in Quintana Roo. Further south in Honduras, Fash et al. (2004:283) note that beginning in Terminal Classic times, Copan’s previous links to the central lowlands began to dissipate, and that they “show [greater] contact with central Honduras and influence from lower Central America that is absent at other southern Maya lowland sites during this turbulent time period.”



Closer to the Belize Valley, Mason and Mock (2004:367) argue that the “burgeoning network of circum-peninsular maritime trade that formed around the Yucatán [stimulated by Chichen Itza]... directly undermined the economic foundations of older, inland regional capitals in the Belize subregion.” This perspective conforms with Sabloff and Rathje’s (1975) previous observation which suggested that trade with inland sites dissipated as their political systems disintegrated. Because this disintegration is now known to have begun by the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Kennett et al. 2012), it appears prudent to suggest that the introduction of foreign influences from Yucatan and the Gulf Coast was a coeval development in the Belize Valley.

As to the factors that led to the introduction of foreign influences from the north and northwest, we suggest two main factors. First and foremost, archaeological data strongly suggest that the disintegration of political and economic systems in the central lowlands, that is, to the west in Peten, led to decreasing interaction between cities in western Belize and their contemporaries in the eastern Peten. This void was eventually filled by interactions with the rising polities of the north, particularly with the booming economies of Chichen Itza and other cities in the Puuc region of Yucatan. A second factor that influenced these changes was the spread and adoption of international Mesoamerican styles and ideologies that was on the rise during this time of socio-political, economical, and environmental stress in the central Maya lowlands. The spread of both Maya and non-Maya goods, ideas and concepts at this time was undoubtedly facilitated by an increase in maritime trade across greater Mesoamerica, and cities that lay along the new trade routes quickly became the recipients of this broader interaction network.

## Conclusion

In this paper we noted that our long-term research in western Belize has recorded considerable evidence for the introduction of non-central lowland Maya influences into this Maya sub-region during the Terminal Classic period. These influences, which originated in the Puuc region of Yucatan, the Gulf Coast, and

central Mexico, are manifested by the presence of new architectural styles and programs, and by the introduction of “foreign” artifacts and ideologically charged symbols. The introduction of these cultural materials and traits in the Belize Valley during the Terminal Classic period represents a significant departure from the previous Late Classic cultural tradition which reflected much closer ties with large polities in central Peten such as Tikal, Calakmul, and Naranjo. But what is it that led to these changing spheres of cultural interaction? From our point of view, and based on considerable archaeological evidence, we posit that the introduction of northern and northwestern traits was likely associated with the waning influence of Peten sites during a period of economic and political decline in the central Maya lowlands, and with the concurrent rise of Terminal Classic polities in the northern lowlands of the Yucatan Peninsula, the Gulf Coast, and the central valley of Mexico.

Another important observation of our research is that while scholars have traditionally touted the influences of Teotihuacan on the lowland Maya during the Early Classic period, we think it is important to underscore that Teotihuacan’s influence pales considerably when compared with the influences from Yucatan and the Gulf Coast during the Terminal Classic period. When perceived through a comparative lens, we find that Teotihuacan’s influence was predominantly elite centric, that it included a few material objects (primarily green Pachuca obsidian and a small number of ceramic types/forms), and, to a very limited degree, talud-tablero architecture. Equally telling is the fact that Teotihuacan’s influences are mostly manifested at a few major Maya capitals such as at Copan, Kaminaljuyu, and Tikal. In contrast, Yucatecan and Gulf Coastal influences during the Terminal Classic period are geographically more widespread, they transcend social classes, and ideologically they were considerably more impactful.

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