


There's More to the Story: Comment on Ebert and Colleagues

Sherman W. Horn III 

To understand Middle Preclassic social processes at Cahal Pech, we must consider the dynamic and complex record of architectural development in its entirety.

Keywords: Cahal Pech, Middle Preclassic, architecture, Belize

Para comprender los procesos sociales del Preclásico Medio en Cahal Pech, debemos considerar el registro dinámico y complicado del desarrollo arquitectónico en su totalidad.

Palabras clave: Cahal Pech, Preclásico Medio, arquitectura, Belice

Ebert and colleagues' (2021) recent report, which describes a potential Middle Preclassic E-Group structure, Str. B8, from Plaza B at Cahal Pech, Belize, raises important questions for conceptualizing how, and when, complex societies developed in the eastern Maya Lowlands. Monument creation in an established village does not take place in a social vacuum, and we must consider all extant data from Plaza B to contextualize its role in community development. Previous research documents residences, patios, middens, problematic features, and open spaces around Str. B8 that bear on its interpretation (e.g., Cheetham 1996; Garber 2010; Healy et al. 2004; Horn 2015, 2020).

The authors report the first construction of Str. B8 after 1000 cal BC, with significant enlargement around 735–405 cal BC and functional continuity between structures. They suggest that the early version of Str. B8 was built when “public buildings replaced small domestic structures” and “the Middle Preclassic inhabitants of Cahal Pech invested in the construction of formal masonry buildings” (Ebert et al. 2021:215). This initial two-phase building sequence, with later

modifications and expansion, contrasts with the complicated changes in platform plans, building materials, and construction tempo recorded in architectural sequences beneath Plaza B (Horn 2020:102–104). The early manifestation of Str. B8, and potentially its larger successor, are likely to be contemporaneous with residential architecture documented by Belize Valley Archaeological Project (BVAP) excavations in the central areas of Plaza B near the proposed E-Group assemblage (cf. Ebert et al. 2019:Figure 4).

These BVAP excavations exposed 135 m² of Middle Preclassic architecture and deposits across Plaza B from 2004 to 2009. The largest excavation was a 1 × 53 m, north–south trench through the center of the plaza, which was augmented by extensions, test units, and excavation blocks (Horn 2020:Figure 4.1). Middle Preclassic deposits—averaging 1 m thick and dated by associated ceramics and stratigraphy—were sandwiched between bedrock and the thick, Late Preclassic plaster plaza floors that capped them. Architectural sequences and artifact assemblages in this compressed stratigraphy revealed dynamic changes in the Middle

Sherman W. Horn III ■ Exploring Solutions Past—The Maya Forest Alliance, PO Box 3962, Santa Barbara, CA 93130, USA (sherman_horn@ucsb.edu)

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Preclassic built environment that indicate Plaza B did not become a formalized public or ritual space until Late Preclassic times.

Trench excavations uncovered a series of superimposed marl floors and small platforms—interpreted as domestic spaces—dating to early Middle Preclassic times (ca. 900–600 BC) just north of the plaza's center. A square masonry platform, supporting residential structures and measuring about 18 m on a side, chopped through patio floors and engulfed earlier structures toward the end of this period. This platform, which was occupied into the late Middle Preclassic (ca. 600–300 BC), appears to overlap Str. B8 and intrude into the plaza space separating the east and west structures of the proposed E-Group assemblage.

A four-phase architectural sequence recorded in the south of Plaza B reflects the changing nature of domestic structures and the persistent residential use of this space. An early Middle Preclassic rectangular platform, faced with finely dressed masonry blocks, subsumed a smaller cobble-and-marl structure and patio floor in the third phase. We might expect such increased formality in platform plan and building materials as Cahal Pech became more complex through time, but the final domestic platform reversed this trend: it was built to an irregular apsidal plan and was faced with stones that were more crudely cut than on its predecessor, suggesting a change in fortune for the resident household. This platform was renovated at least once and continued in use until the Late Preclassic plaza covered its surface.

Making sense of early Maya complexity is a thorny task, and interpreting the Middle Preclassic record is rarely straightforward. The examples given here illustrate the complexity of deposits at Cahal Pech and the need to examine the entire record when interpreting new findings. Stratigraphic correlations and ceramic dating connect architecture from BVAP excavations to a developmental sequence across Plaza B (Horn 2015, 2020). How this construction history relates to Str. B8 and the proposed E-Group is unclear, but the area that became Plaza B was the setting for myriad activities—both sacred and secular—through most or all of the Middle Preclassic. Relating the radiocarbon chronology of Str. B8 to nearby architectural sequences is essential to unraveling

the convoluted relationships inside this community as social organization became more complex. We can achieve such a synthesis only by integrating previous research with the newly reported data on emergent monumentality at Cahal Pech.

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Data Availability Statement. All data presented in this comment have been published in a monograph (Horn 2020) and doctoral dissertation (Horn 2015). The digital records on which both publications are based remain in the possession of the author.

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