
7 ***POLITICAL CHANGE EXPRESSED IN PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE: THE TERMINAL CLASSIC MAYA CIVIC COMPLEX AT ACTUNCAN, BELIZE***

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In contrast to the longstanding focus on the 9th century political and demographic collapse in the southern Maya Lowlands, little attention has focused on the strategies of remnant groups in the immediate aftermath of this collapse. In the absence of divine kings, individual communities first negotiated new forms of political authority and legitimacy at the local level. One such community was located at the site of Actuncan in the lower Mopan River Valley of western Belize. In contrast to this regional trend, the population of Actuncan's site core remained steady throughout the Terminal Classic period (A.D. 780 to 1000). Terminal Classic political life at the site is marked by the construction of a large public platform (Group 4) placed in the middle of the site's Classic period core. In this paper, I compare Group 4 to Actuncan's Late Classic noble palace using three criteria: access; each space's potential to be used for state performance; and daily use. During the Terminal Classic period, the open architectural form and evidence for public events at Group 4 indicate a shift from the exclusionary power strategies that took place in the Late Classic palace to more integrative practices after the collapse of divine kingship.

Introduction

Near the end of the Late Classic period, the use of Actuncan's palace came to a dramatic end (Mixter et al. 2013). Its vaulted roof was collapsed, vault stones were placed in the room's doors, and the rooms were filled in with rubble. Finally, a plaster cap was placed over the rubble fill, effectively ending the building's period of use. Previously, this palace had served as a noble residence, a stage for political spectacle, and the primary location of civic administration. Soon after, during the Terminal Classic period (A.D. 780 to 1000), many of the building's cut stones were stripped and repurposed in the construction of Group 4, a new civic center that replaced many of the administrative and performative functions of the Classic period palace, but in a very different architectural package.

In 2010, researchers on the Actuncan Archaeological Project (AAP) were surprised to encounter a substantial Terminal Classic period occupation at the site of Actuncan (LeCount et al. 2011), located in western Belize (Figure 1). Previous research by James McGovern (2004) had indicated that the site's major monumental construction dated to the Late Preclassic (400 to 150 B.C.), Terminal Preclassic (150 B.C. to A.D. 250), and Early Classic (A.D. 250 to 600) periods, with only limited renovation in the Late Classic period (A.D. 600 to 780) and a single ritual deposit dating to the Terminal Classic period. Additionally, earlier AAP testing in

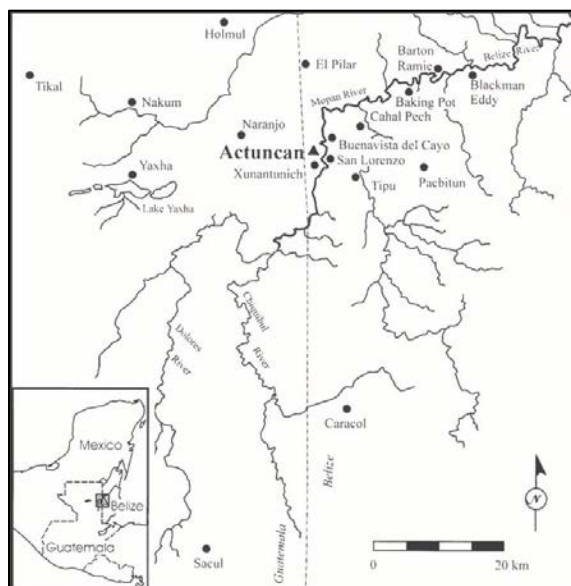


Figure 1. Map showing the location of Actuncan within the Maya Lowlands and the Belize River Valley (LeCount 2004:Figure 1).

household contexts had identified an expected Late Classic period occupation, but little evidence for Terminal Classic occupation (LeCount 2004; LeCount and Blitz 2005). Although our subsequent research has confirmed that most of Actuncan's monumental architecture was constructed during the site's Late Preclassic to Early Classic apogee (Donohue 2014; Heindel 2016; Mixter et al. 2013; Simova and Mixter 2016), the Terminal Classic period resumption of monumental construction complicates an already complex

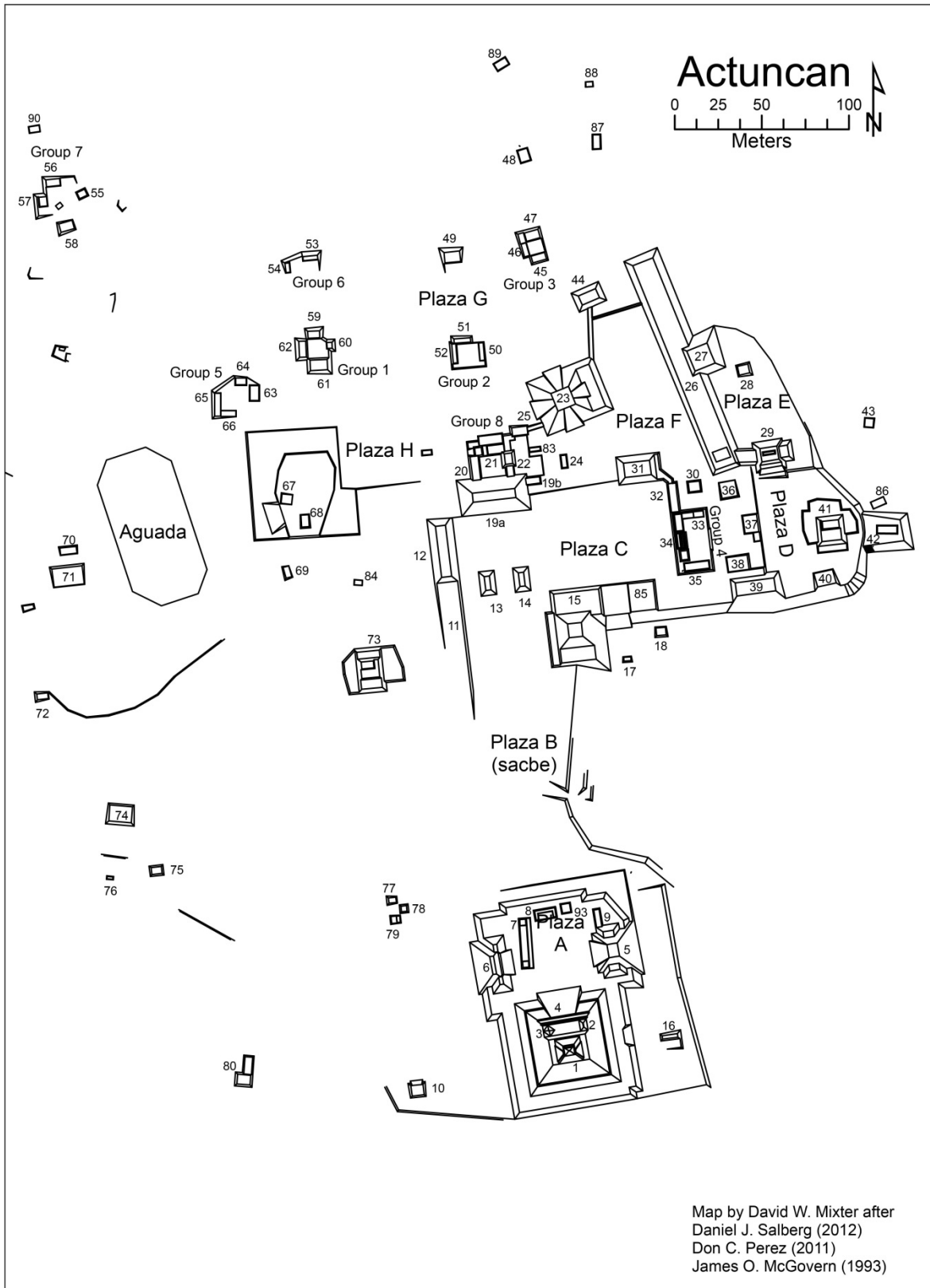


Figure 2. Map of Actuncan's site core. Note the location of Structure 19a, Group 4, and Group 8.

local political landscape during the Late and Terminal Classic periods. Actuncan's urban plan reflects the final result of this palimpsest construction process (Figure 2).

Late Classic period politics in the upper Belize River Valley were dominated by the hegemonic rulers centered at the site of Xunantunich, located just 2 km south of Actuncan (LeCount and Yaeger 2010; LeCount et al. 2002). However, by the Terminal Classic period, the power of Xunantunich's king had begun to erode (Ashmore et al. 2004; Yaeger 2008). Residents of the hinterlands emigrated and elites at other local centers, including Buenavista del Cayo and Cahal Pech, began to bury their dead in the manner of divine kings (Awe 2013; Helmke et al. 2008). Similarly, the re-initiation of monumental construction at Actuncan seems to reflect a return to local rule at a time when Xunantunich was contracting. Within the Xunantunich site center, activities became increasingly focused on a single public plaza as the Late Classic period ruler's palace was sacked and other sections of the site center fell out of use (Jamison 2010; Yaeger 2010).

Of course, the diminution of Xunantunich's ruler fits within the broader pattern of social change known as the Classic Maya Collapse evident across the Maya world at this time. Across the southern Lowlands, royal regimes collapsed and large proportions of the population emigrated to permanent water sources and more stable regions. As divine kingship in the Classic period model was slowly abandoned as a political institution (Demarest et al. 2004; Iannone et al. 2016), leaders and communities adopted new political organizations anchored around different kinds of political strategies.

My research at Actuncan aims to understand changing political strategies evident at the site in the Terminal Classic period. In this paper, I compare public architecture used during the Late and Terminal Classic periods to explore how political strategies differed between the Late Classic period, when the site was part of the Xunantunich polity, and the Terminal Classic period, when authority appears to have been resituated at Actuncan. In the context of the broader known shifts in ancient Maya political organization, the differences between

Structure 19a and Group 4 are illustrative of how political strategies may have changed in many places during the Maya Collapse.

Architecture as Instruments of Power

For the ancient Maya, monumental buildings were important instruments of power that reproduced social positions within Maya society. Classic period palaces, in particular, promoted the hegemony of rulers and the royal courts that lived and worked in them. These large, sprawling complexes emphasized the integral link between power and ruling courts by locating the practical center of power within an elite residence (Christie 2003; Inomata and Houston 2001b).

However, before and after the Classic period, key political functions were often not located within a residence. Indeed, any monumental space that serves as a venue for political action or political administration is instrumental to the exertion and legitimation of power; as such, variations in the spatial distribution of political functions and residences of the powerful speak strongly to variability in political organization and the political strategies of the powerful.

During the Terminal Classic period, a time of known political rupture, changes in the spatial arrangement of political functions provide important clues into changing political strategies adopted by individual communities during this time. Here, I focus on three aspects of civic architecture that point to changing political strategies from the Late Classic to Terminal Classic periods: 1) access to spaces of political significance; 2) the public performance of authority; and 3) the location of the day-to-day business of polity administration.

Access. Maya palaces were typically complex spaces composed of multiple patios formed by monumental range structures. They often had only a single public entrance at the top of a steep staircase. For most Maya, access to the palace would only have been granted when they had special business. As a result, palaces' impressive facades would have shielded occupants of inner courtyards and rooms from the prying eyes of Maya commoners passing nearby. Because of their dramatic form, palaces

were well suited to emphasize the formal social elevation of those who had access.

Performance. In addition, monumental architecture serves as a primary performance where individuals could be elevated over a gathered crowd either to perform or observe from an elevated locale (Reese-Taylor and Koontz 2001). Monumental staircases that fronted many Classic period palaces provided one such venue. These staircases often overlooked broad plazas and provided a form of stage (Inomata 2006). Whether the ruler was speaking from the stairs or watching a performance in the plaza below, his position above the crowd would have emphasized his social separation from the masses. The particular activities that took place in these spaces point to the level of social cooperation inherent in each form of political rule.

Daily Use. In addition to serving as royal residences and symbols of royal power, palaces were the primary location of civic administration within Maya polities. There, the king and his administrators held audiences with foreign dignitaries, adjudicated differences between members of the polity, and collected tribute (Inomata and Houston 2001a). Palaces also hosted courtly artisans who produced goods for elite or ritual consumption, which were then stored within the palace complex to restrict access (Inomata 2001). Each of these activities was critical to day-to-day administration of the polity and reflects the pragmatic deployment of power to facilitate the operations of the state.

Although the performative aspects of public architecture have often been emphasized because of their obvious awe-inspiring monumentality, the daily operations of the state may have been more essential to maintaining the division of power and ensuring the continuity of Maya polities. As such, it would not be surprising if the daily functioning of state spaces changed fundamentally after the Classic period ended and political systems transformed. How these transformations happened speak to which aspects of state apparatus retained significance after the collapse.

The particulars of how each of these political tools were deployed may vary between

centers, but what is clear is that Classic period palaces served as critical instruments for the exertion and maintenance of courtly power. As I will show, the Terminal Classic Maya at Actuncan drew on these political tools in a different set of ways to deploy an inclusive political strategy.

Actuncan's Urban Landscape

Located along the lower Mopan River Valley of western Belize, Actuncan is a long-lived site situated within a dynamic landscape of competing city-states. From the Middle Preclassic to the Terminal Classic period, Actuncan and its neighbors, Xunantunich and Buenavista del Cayo, each served as the local capital during different time periods.

In the Late Classic period, Actuncan was a secondary center within the Xunantunich polity. At this time, Actuncan's largest range structure, Structure 19a, was renovated into a noble palace, likely occupied by a noble vassal of the king of Xunantunich (Mixer et al. 2013). To do this, Group 8, a multi-patio residential complex, was added to the north side of Structure 19a (Figure 3). This transformed Structure 19a from a single range structure into a modest palace.

During this time, Actuncan's center was organized as it had been originally laid out during the Preclassic period. Structure 19a overlooked the broad Plaza C to its south and south east. This space is the largest plaza in the Actuncan core and as such could have been occupied by the largest number of constituents. Additionally, this space is directly accessible from the formal entrance to the Actuncan site core, located to the east of Structure 15.

The space directly to the south of Structure 19a forms a particularly important ceremonial district occupied by a ball court (Structures 13 and 14). From the top of Structure 19a, leaders could have easily observed ceremonial ball games (and been observed watching those games). Additionally, from the Structure 19a central staircase, ritual processions could have passed on a straight line south through the ball court, along a formal *sacbe*, into Plaza A, the group's primary triadic temple group (Figure 4). When constructed during the Preclassic period, this processional

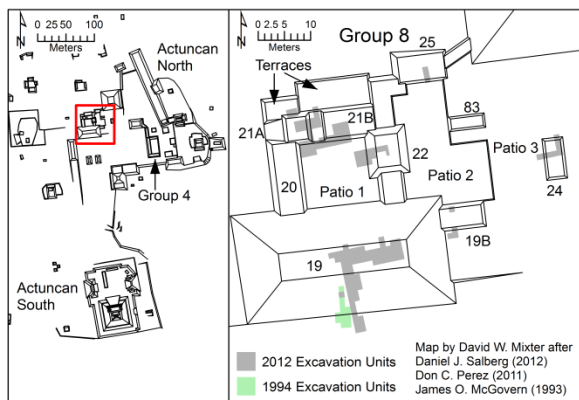


Figure 3. Maps showing the location of and arrangement of Structure 19a and Group 8 (Mixer et al. 2013: Figure 2).

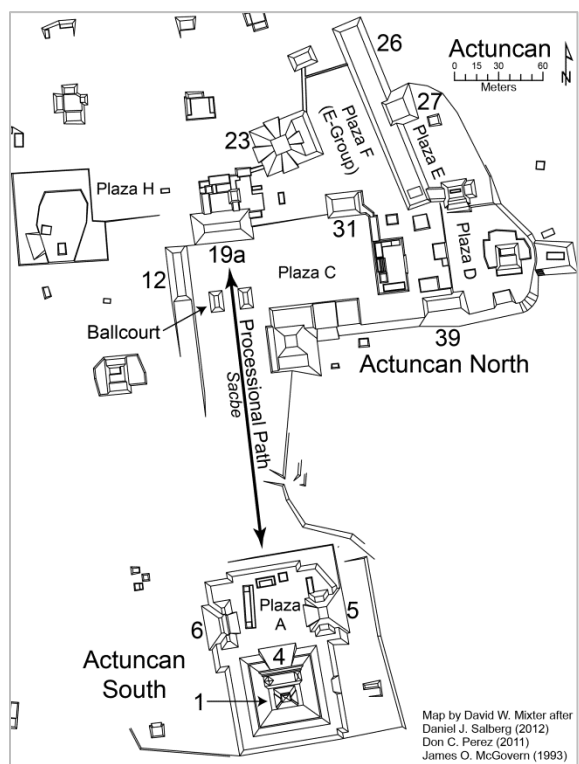


Figure 4. Map showing the hypothesized processional path connecting Structure 19a to Plaza A (Mixer 2016: Figure 8.1).

pathway may have created a metaphorical connection between the ruler's center of worldly, administrative power to the center of supernatural power, focused in the triadic temple group (Mixer 2016). Along the way, the ball court may have served as a metaphorical portal connecting the ruler's everyday power and the supernatural source of that power's legitimation.

In the Late Classic period, this space appears to be relatively unmodified. Indeed,

evidence for minor renovations within Plaza A paired with construction in the ball court and on Structure 19a indicate that the local rulers used or at least alluded to this old metaphorical connection. However, with the addition of a multi-patio residence to Structure 19a, the connotations associated with this space may have been much different. I suggest that rather than simply connecting the ruler's office with supernatural legitimacy, the creation of a palace at the northern end of this processional path would have connected its residents, likely a noble lineage, with the same supernatural connections.

In the Terminal Classic period, the kings of Xunantunich were diminished in power as the authority of divine kings gradually collapsed across the Maya world. In contrast to the regional trend of depopulation, Actuncan's population remained comparatively stable (Mixer et al. 2014). Members of the Actuncan community chose to remain and the evidence indicates that the site center was revived as a local capital. Unlike the Terminal Classic period revivals at Buenavista and Cahal Pech where royal-style burials have been identified, Actuncan's residents seem to have tried something different. They appear to have rejected sacred kingship in favor of some new kind of political organization.

This shift in political legitimation is evident in the reorganization of Actuncan's urban core. In the Terminal Classic period, changes to the urban plan mark the broader rejection of divine rule. By dismantling Structure 19a and constructing a building across the entrance of the triadic temple group, the community cut off the Classic period processional path. Furthermore, Preclassic and Classic period monumental architecture in the northern part of the site was dismantled, leaving Group 4 as the only operational civic space. Plaza A remained in use as a ritual locale, but it was spatially separate from Group 4. This separation demarcated distinct civic and ritual zones, a rejection of the spatial integration that symbolized divine kings' melding of political and cosmological duties.

Structure 19a and Group 4 are clearly very different kinds of civic spaces, each adapted to the political institutions in place when

it was in use. In the section that follows, I will compare Actuncan's palace and Group 4 along the three dimensions described above. Because we have previously published on the details of Actuncan's palace in this venue (Mixer et al. 2012), I will only briefly review our understanding of this structure and then consider Group 4 in greater detail.

Structure 19a

Although Structure 19a and Group 8 form a relatively small ruler's palace that likely housed a noble administrator, our investigations indicate that the space served all the functions that typically took place in a royal palace.

Access. Like larger Classic period palaces, access was limited to the interior of Actuncan's palace. Structure 19a was only accessible by a steep staircase on the building's south side. The primary courtyard of Group 8 was only accessible through a small private back entrance identified in the group's northwest corner (Figure 5). Furthermore, Group 8 would have been lined by perishable structures that limited visibility of things going on inside the group's courtyards. Masonry post braces along the group's northern edge point to the presence of perishable curtain walls constructed of wooden posts that would have prevented outsiders from seeing activities inside (Figure 6).

Performance. Structure 19a and Plaza C to the south provided a monumental venue where the ruler could host spectacles. From the summit of Structure 19a, the ruler and his court could have been seen by the entire community gathered in the plaza and alley of the ballcourt below. Furthermore, the ruler could have sat at the summit and observed ceremonial ballgames taking place right at the base of his home. He would have been observed by the gathered masses sitting in full splendor at the building's summit. Finally, as already discussed, Structure 19a would have been the starting point for ritual processions. These kinds of performances would have emphasized the court's social elevation and the ruler's cosmological role.

Pragmatics of Daily Use. Actuncan's palace was also an important center for the day-to-day



Figure 5. Private entrance located in Structure 21a.



Figure 6. Masonry post braces encountered on the edge of Structure 21b's platform.

administration of the polity. Group 8 was likely primarily used as residence for the noble lord and his family. A previous study indicated that the surface of Group 8's patio featured an unpatterned distribution of geochemical signatures that indicate this space was used for generalized residential activities (LeCount et al. 2016).

In contrast, Structure 19a served as the site's primary administrative and audience space. Room 3, Structure 19a's central room contained a broad L-shaped bench that likely served as a venue for the ruler to hold audiences (Figure 7). Evidence of discrete deposits of phosphorous on the bench point to the repeated placement of organics, likely dishes containing food, in specific places on this bench. This pattern may point to shared meals following specific ritualized protocols as might be expected if a leader were meeting with courtiers

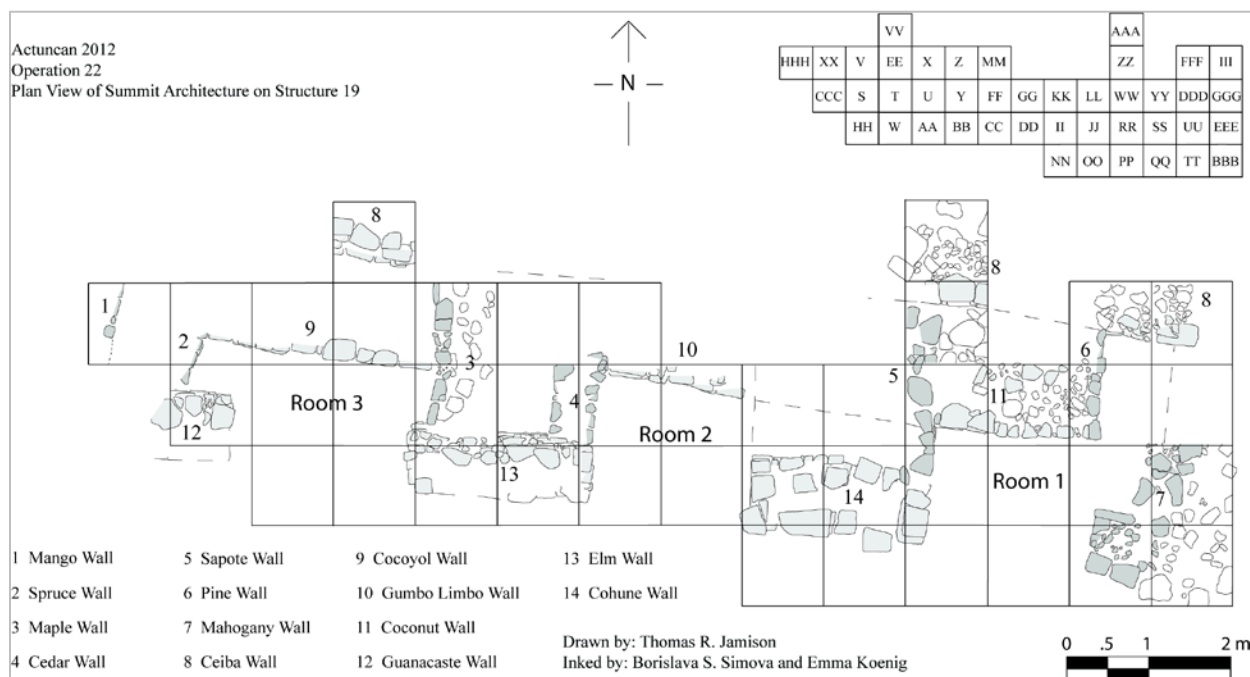


Figure 7. Figure showing the arrangement of Structure 19a's eastern three rooms (Mixer et al. 2013: Figure 4).

or visiting dignitaries (LeCount et al. 2016). In contrast, in Room 2 the distribution of phosphorous around the foot of the bench in combination with the presence of heavy metals used in pigments indicates that this space was multifunctional. This space could have been used for storage of organics, such as food, pelts, or feathers, and ritual paraphernalia decorated in bright colors (LeCount et al. 2016). One possibility is that this room was used for the reception and storage of tribute goods.

Even though Actuncan's palace was likely occupied by a noble vassal, the noble palace likely fulfilled many of the functions typically found in royal palaces. In addition to serving as a residence, Structure 19a and Group 8 likely served as a center of political meeting and polity administration. Additionally, its size and exclusivity created a clear message of difference between Actuncan's ordinary residences and the lineage that occupied Group 8. Through performance, Structure 19a elevated the residents of Group 8 and linked them metaphorically to a source of supernatural legitimacy. In other words, Structure 19a formed the lynchpin that connected Actuncan's leading family to polity administration and a deeper cosmological form of legitimacy.

Group 4

In 2013, I directed extensive excavations at Group 4 to evaluate how Terminal Classic political strategies differed from those utilized by Classic period kings. Preliminary research by the AAP in 2010 revealed that Group 4 is one of the few examples of Terminal Classic monumental architecture in the region (LeCount et al. 2011; Mendelsohn and Keller 2011). Group 4 is arranged on a broad platform with an area of about 800 square meters. Buildings on the north, west, and south sides of the platform surround a central patio (Figure 8). The eastern side of the patio is open and overlooks Plaza D.

Group 4's size and consequent effort in construction imply that this complex was likely the primary location for the performance and practice of political authority at Actuncan and, possibly, the lower Mopan Valley. Based on the C-shaped arrangement of these buildings and the general paucity of artifacts, Keller (LeCount et al. 2011) hypothesized that this complex may have been a *popol nah* or council house, following identifications elsewhere (Bey et al. 1997; Fash et al. 1992). While I will not directly address their council house hypothesis here, Mendelsohn and Keller's (2011; LeCount et al. 2011) research did raise the question whether the

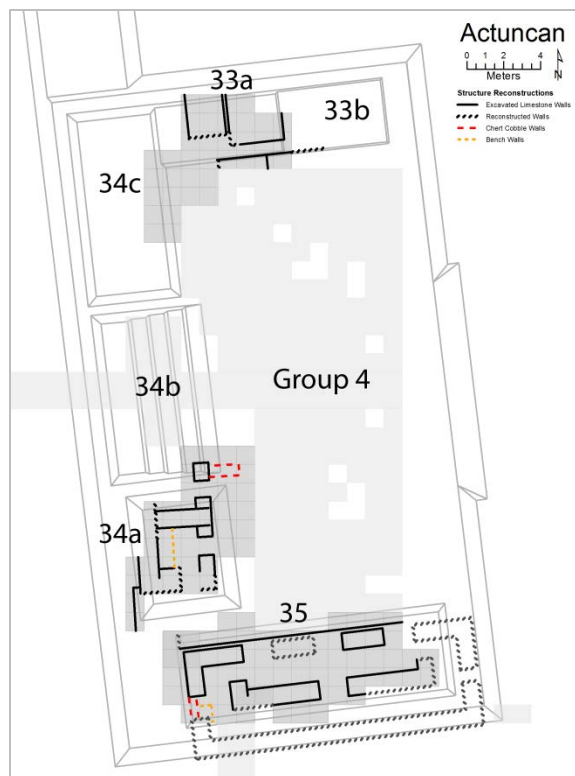


Figure 8. Map of Group 4, showing the extent of excavations and a reconstruction of the group's exposed architecture (Mixer 2016: Figure 5.32).

construction of Group 4 reflected a shift from the exclusionary power strategies common to the Classic period to a more corporate power strategy, with greater power sharing (following Blanton et al. 1996). In contrast to the exclusionary power embodied by Structure 19a, I would expect a corporate power structure to be based around an easily accessible civic space that hosted inclusive performances. Additionally, I would expect the day-to-day civic functions to be inclusive in nature. The data I present below indicate that more inclusive political principles were at play in Terminal Classic Actuncan as compared to the Late Classic period.

To this end, I undertook extensive excavations of Group 4 to define its surface architecture and identify activity areas. In total, 354 square meters were excavated, partially uncovering the plans of the group's bounding structures. To look for direct evidence of the activities that took place in this space, 132 microartifact samples were collected and analyzed along with 279 geochemical samples.

These data are directly comparable to the chemical data from the Classic period palace summarized above (see also LeCount et al. 2016). These data will be discussed in summary here. A full description of these data can be found elsewhere (Mixer 2016).

Access. The first communal aspect of Group 4, is its accessibility. In contrast to the closed courtyards of the Classic period palace, Group 4's buildings were built around a large, elevated patio. A broad staircase allowed unfettered access to Group 4's low patio from the large public plaza to the east. In effect, Group 4 and Plaza D formed a single broad continuous open space. Once within the plaza, community members would have had full access to Group 4 and all of its constituent buildings. Given declining regional populations during the Terminal Classic period and the low population of Actuncan's urban core, it seems likely that Group 4 and Plaza D could have accommodated the entire population of the polity.

Performance. Several lines of evidence point to Group 4's use as a venue for performance and periodic community gatherings. First, excavations revealed that the group featured a slightly pitched patio surface that rose from east to west and resulted in a total difference in elevation of over 80 cm. This pitch may reflect the use of the platform as a stage. The raised western portion of the platform would have allowed performers in the back to be seen by an audience located on the ground. Performance events would have included the participation of part of the community as performers and the remainder as an audience.

Additionally, chemical and microartifact data indicate that the Group 4 patio was a venue for food production and consumption. These data provide evidence for two discreet activity zones, one associated with the Group 4 patio and a second associated with structures. The concurrent high densities of phosphorous, potassium, magnesium, and strontium in the northeast quadrant of Group 4's patio point to the presence of wood ash and organics. The ceramics may have been the remains of those broken in the food service process. One interpretation of these data is that food

production and consumption were going on in this space. Given the public nature of this location, I suggest that this food production was likely ceremonial. The low elevation of Group 4's patio suggests that those in Plaza D participated in these food production and consumption ceremonies. These kinds of activities point to inclusive feasts and performances aimed at encouraging participation in Actuncan's Terminal Classic public life.

In contrast to the Classic period palace, there is no architectural evidence to indicate that performances at Group 4 were presided over by a single leader. Only one bench was encountered on the entire platform, located in a secluded corner. We found no evidence for a visible and centrally located bench or platform appropriate to elevate a presiding lord. Instead, the group's wide accessible space likely encouraged broad participation in political life.

Pragmatics of Daily Use. Like the Classic period palace, Group 4 was a venue for day-to-day civic administration; however, the kinds of activities that took place inside buildings differ.

Within Group 4's interior spaces, we encountered very low chemical enrichment. This indicates that these spaces were not used intensively for production or consumption activities. This pattern contrasts with spaces in the Classic period palace, where high concentrations of heavy metals point to elite crafting or the storage of ritual regalia (LeCount et al. 2016). The lack of enrichment inside Group 4's buildings indicates that these spaces may have been used primarily for gathering, meeting, or storage, not activities such as food consumption and craft production.

Excavations of Structure 34a in Group 4's south-east corner revealed two rooms separated by a masonry wall. These rooms are the only known example of private space within Group 4. The small southern room contains a small bench and can be accessed by two 1 m wide doors located to the east and the south. The superstructure is anchored by a single square column in the southeast corner, leaving the space quite open to the outside. Given these rooms' small size and quiet chemical signatures, they could have served as storage or administrative space.

Structure 35 on Group 4's south edge was the most thoroughly investigated of all the buildings on the platform's surface. Our excavations revealed that the building was a tandem structure with a long open front gallery and a closed back room covered by a perishable superstructure. The front room would have been suitable for small gatherings or public audiences, while the back room would have provided space for private meetings. This spatial arrangement is similar to the *cabildo* described at Zinacantán (Vogt 1969).

Conclusions

Group 4's open layout and evidence of communal activities indicate a shift in the kinds of political strategies deployed at Actuncan in the Terminal Classic period. In contrast to the earlier palace, Group 4 was open to the entire community. By allowing access to the patio, the civic business taking place in the group's buildings would have been visible to all. Similarly, performances and feasts that took place within Group 4 appear to have emphasized inclusivity rather than exclusivity, with gatherings moving freely from Group 4 to Plaza D below. Finally, Group 4's interior spaces facilitated gathering and cooperation. Unlike the Classic period palaces, we found no evidence that Group 4 was used as a residence or to produce ritual objects.

The short-lived renaissance at Actuncan during the Terminal Classic period was important because it provides evidence for the transition away from divine kingship to new forms of authority. The architecture and activity patterns uncovered on Group 4 show how new political strategies were adopted in the wake of the failing divine kings. Importantly, the trend towards more corporate decision-making foreshadowed the greater flexibility of Postclassic Maya political structures and the council-based rule of Postclassic multipal councils. Furthermore, principles of egalitarianism and kin-based leadership continue to be important to the organization of Maya communities today. Sites like Actuncan provide a window into how more egalitarian principles emerged from the stark hierarchy of the Classic period.

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