
5 **LIVING THROUGH COLLAPSE: AN ANALYSIS OF MAYA RESIDENTIAL MODIFICATIONS DURING THE TERMINAL CLASSIC PERIOD AT ACTUNCAN, CAYO, BELIZE**

David W. Mixter, Kara A. Fulton, Lauren Hahn Bussiere, and Lisa J. LeCount

Research during the 1990s by the Xunantunich Archaeological Project found that Mopan River Valley populations experienced a relatively rapid decline during the ninth century in association with the collapse of Classic Maya polities. Recent research by the Actuncan Archaeological Project indicates a locally different demographic pattern. Rather than a slow abandonment, Actuncan's urban households continued to grow during the Terminal Classic period. This paper reports on the patterns of architectural modifications within three households at Actuncan during the Late and Terminal Classic periods and their possible implications for shifting social and political power structures within the Mopan Valley region.

Introduction

In recent years, the ninth and tenth century collapse of Classic Maya society in the southern lowlands has been increasingly characterized as varied in pace and form (Aimers 2007; Demarest et al. 2004). As the regimes of Classic period kings failed, the institution of divine kingship marked by the title *k'uhel ajaw* was rejected (Rice et al. 2004); however, the processes of collapse varied substantially between polities (Yaeger and Hodell 2008). This variability was particularly true for Maya occupying secondary centers in the hinterlands of eighth century capitals. These populations may have had greater latitude in reacting to political turmoil, possibly because distance allowed them to disassociate themselves from failing rulers.

How hinterland communities responded to the collapse of centralized power has been a particular concern of research in the upper Belize River Valley (Ashmore et al. 2004; Connell and Silverstein 2006; Hoggarth 2012). Multi-scalar research on rural and secondary center households provides evidence to investigate different reactions to collapse within a single polity (Golden and Scherer 2013; Manahan 2004). For example, during the dissolution of the Xunantunich polity, the majority of rural households emigrated in step with the declining political authority of capital elites during the latter part of the Late Classic period (Ashmore et al. 2004). Yet some populations remained longer than others. At the farming village of San Lorenzo, founding households endured into the Terminal Classic

period, reflecting their deep investment in land and local resources. In a similar vein, we view the collapse through the lens of strategies adopted by households at Actuncan, located 2 km south of Xunantunich. Here, populations remained stable through the Late to Terminal Classic periods, indicating a different set of strategies than those adopted by households at Xunantunich, San Lorenzo and other minor and major centers in the valley. Investigating the varied responses of households within sites, as well as across different sites, will help us untangle the socio-political impact of the collapse at all scales of Maya society.

Antonia Foias (2013) emphasizes three different scales of socio-political interaction: macro-, middle- and micro-scales. Macro-scale politics address interactions between polities, which for Mayanists is largely reconstructed through events recorded in hieroglyphic texts found on monuments, gifts exchanged across royal families, and similarities in site layouts (Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; Martin and Grube 2008). Middle-scale politics focus on the structure of political organization and administration within polities, evident through site-size hierarchies and the distribution of populations across the landscape. Finally, micro-scale politics focus largely on household mechanisms for establishing, maintaining, or resisting community and polity level authorities as signaled through household architecture and artifact assemblages (Canuto and Yaeger 2000). The two smaller scales provide an opportunity to understand the agency of commoner and non-royal elite households within Maya politics.

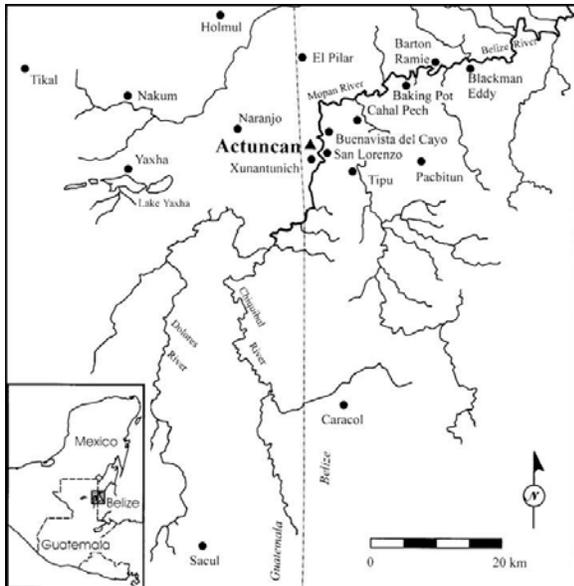


Figure 1. Location of Actuncan along the Mopan River (LeCount 2004:Figure 1).

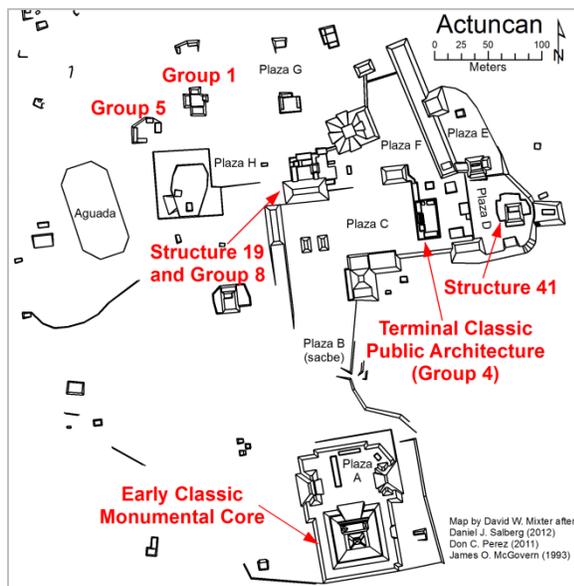


Figure 2. Map of Actuncan showing features discussed in the text.

This multi-scalar approach is particularly important in understanding the substantial political transformations of the Maya collapse. Without a doubt, the failure of some royal regimes was influenced by pan-Maya, macro-scale politics; however, the variability in events following regime failures points to the importance of intra-polity dynamics in determining local trajectories. Middle-scale dynamics can be tracked through demographic

changes within a polity and geographic shifts in the centers of regional power. At the micro-scale, changes in power relations can be seen by carefully tracking changes within individual households. These lower-order investigative scales focus on understanding the collapse from the variable, agent-driven reactions of communities and households rather than top-down failures of Classic hierarchies.

In this paper, we focus on middle- and micro-scales to explore the strategies adopted by Actuncan households. We begin by examining demographic trends within the Xunantunich polity, of which Actuncan was a member by the Late Classic period (A.D. 600-780). However, Actuncan's construction of new Terminal Classic (A.D. 780-1000) civic architecture reflects a re-centering of local power. Actuncan's Terminal Classic prosperity may have derived partially from its history as the first Preclassic capital of the region, which attracted people intent on revitalizing the site and local culture (Mixer 2013). But its success would have been founded on micro-scale political negotiations that established stable power dynamics among local community members. To address micro-scale politics, we look at how three Terminal Classic households modified their architecture and then link these modifications to the adoption of more collaborative relationships among households. These collaborative relationships differ from the hierarchical ones seen in the Late Classic period. Ultimately, this renegotiation of relations allowed Actuncan to succeed as a post-collapse community for at least a century after the failure of its neighbors.

Actuncan and the Fall of Xunantunich

Actuncan is located on top of a ridge along the Mopan River upriver of its confluence with the Macal River (Figure 1). The site is well-known for its Late Preclassic and Early Classic monumental architecture and an early carved stela (Fahsen and Grube 2005). Research on the site's monumental architecture by James McGovern (2004) identified negligible amounts of Late Classic construction and no evidence of construction associated with the site's monumental core during the Terminal Classic period (Figure 2). McGovern concluded that by

the end of the Early Classic period (A.D. 300-600), Actuncan's ceremonial center ceased to serve as the seat of a local king, a finding that recent Actuncan Archaeological Project excavations have largely confirmed (Mixter et al. 2013). Classic authority shifted from Actuncan to Buenavista del Cayo before the end of the Early Classic period and to Xunantunich sometime in the first part of the Late Classic period (LeCount and Yaeger 2010; Leventhal and Ashmore 2004).

Despite the loss of power, Actuncan was not abandoned in the Early Classic period. Recent excavations on households within the Actuncan core indicate that most households continued to be occupied throughout the Classic period, at which time the site likely functioned as a small secondary center within the Buenavista and later, Xunantunich polities. The rise and fall of Xunantunich as a center of authority has been well documented (LeCount and Yaeger 2010; LeCount et al. 2002). Under the probable sponsorship of an ascendant king at Naranjo, Xunantunich rose rapidly to power during the seventh century accompanied by a boom in civic construction and the growth of hinterland populations connected to the capital. Actuncan's allegiance to Xunantunich during Late Classic period is documented by the erection of Group 8 and remodeling of Structure 19 (the site's largest range structure) into a household group befitting a vassal noble (Mixter et al. 2013). Yet, by the end of the Late Classic period, Xunantunich's palace was sacked and ritually buried (Yaeger 2010a). This action and the erection of three carved stela between A.D. 820 and 849 indicate a transition to local rule and the attenuation of Naranjo's authority within the valley (Helmke et al. 2010). Nonetheless, even as Xunantunich gained independence, its new leaders began to lose control over their own polity. This trend is marked by changes in both the Xunantunich center and in its hinterlands. Much of the site's civic complex was abandoned and public activities were restricted to one small plaza in front of the site's largest ceremonial structure (Jamison 2010). At the same time, other local centers, such as Buenavista del Cayo and Cahal Pech (Awe 2013; Helmke et al. 2008), began to bury individuals in the manner of kings, possibly contesting Xunantunich's claim

to wide-reaching regional authority. Other local settlements, such as Arenal and Actuncan, initiated new programs of civic construction (LeCount et al. 2011; Taschek and Ball 1999). Taken together, these events indicate a decentralization of Terminal Classic power within the immediate region.

The dissolution of Xunantunich's power provided opportunities for previously allied centers and households to gain independence and make their own decisions. At some centers, such as Cahal Pech, ostentatious displays of wealth, in the form of kingly burials, represented a declaration of power. Other centers, including Actuncan, resumed the construction of public architecture, representing an aggregation of labor and authority at these locations. Individually, households also reacted to the failing power at Xunantunich, most strikingly by deciding whether or not to leave their homesteads and resettle in other territories.

Population Dynamics and the Collapse

Household decisions to stay, to leave, or to build anew reflect middle-scale political dynamics. In this section, we present data that describe the changing distribution of people across the valley landscape from the Late Classic to Terminal Classic periods (Figure 3). Three sets of data are presented here (Table 1). First, Xunantunich Settlement Survey (XSS) data document the occupation of residential mound groups along Transect 2 (Ehret 1995), which ran from the northern edge of Xunantunich to Callar Creek, a secondary center between Xunantunich and Buenavista del Cayo (see Yaeger 2008:Figure 3). The transect was divided in four sections to chart the distribution of settlement clusters between these competing centers. From south to north, these segments are Xunantunich, Actuncan, Vaca Bravo, and Callar Creek. Conveniently, the transect ran just west of Actuncan's core but did not include households located within the Actuncan core. Second, data collected by Jason Yaeger (2010) document occupational phases of residential structures within the village of San Lorenzo, located across the Mopan River from Xunantunich and Actuncan. These data result from excavations at 29 individual structures from 15 mound groups. Finally, data collected

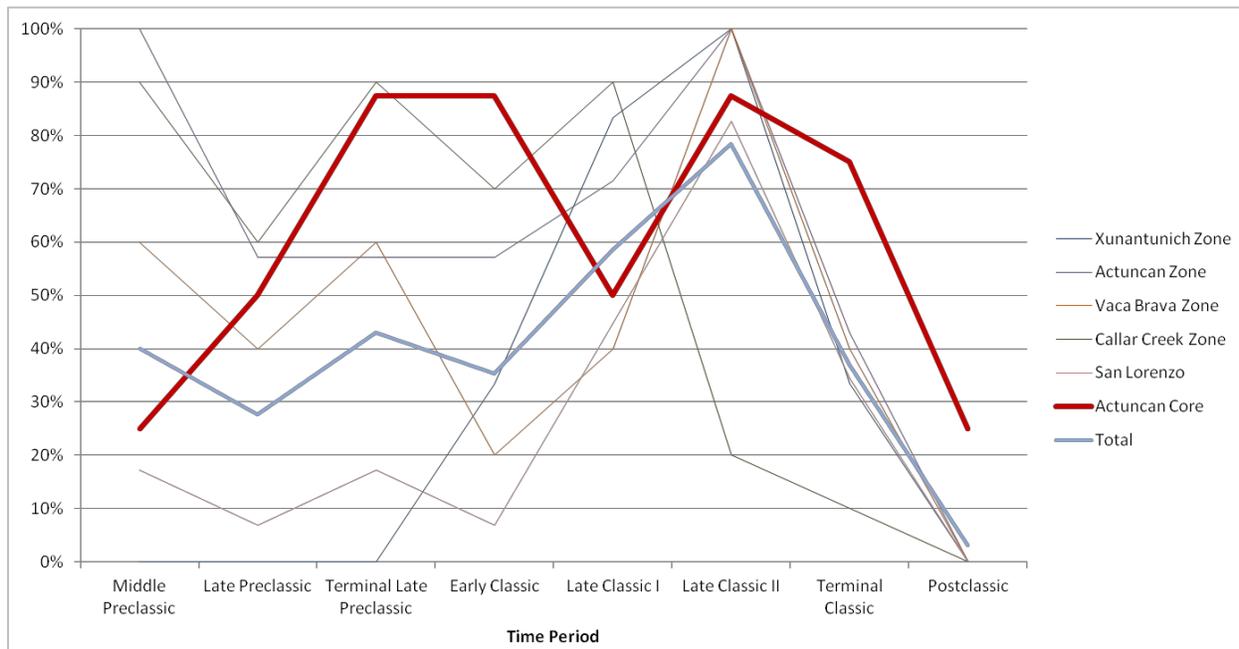


Figure 3. Chart showing the percentage of residences occupied during each time period within settlement zones along the Mopan River Valley (modified from Yaeger 2008:Figure 4).

by the Actuncan Archaeological Project document the occupation of eight intensively excavated residential mound groups, through the excavation of 20 structures (Table 2)¹.

Data from XSS indicate that all hinterland zones reach a peak of population during the second half of the Late Classic period, followed by a substantial decrease in the Terminal Classic period, and near complete abandonment by the Postclassic period (Yaeger 2008). While 79 percent of tested households are occupied in the Late Classic period, only 38 percent of households were occupied during the Terminal Classic period. The testing program of urban households at Actuncan indicates a more measured pace of abandonment. After a decrease in occupation from the Early Classic to the first half of the Late Classic period, some households are reoccupied during the second half of the Late Classic period. Unlike other areas of the Mopan River Valley, household occupation then declines by only one household in the Terminal Classic period with evidence of continued occupation into the Early Postclassic period. Contrary to previous models, which see the Mopan River Valley slowly but entirely depopulated, these data strongly indicate that

Actuncan maintained its population following the collapse of Xunantunich.

Taken in aggregate, these figures indicate a difference in decision-making between the occupants of Actuncan's core and other local centers and communities. Yaeger and Cynthia Robin (Ashmore et al. 2004; Robin 2013:168-171; Robin et al. 2010) document that the longest remaining households were also the oldest at the villages of San Lorenzo and Chan, and they attribute this pattern to the greater historical control of resources afforded founding families following the Principle of First Occupancy. Robin (2013:168-171) also documents that those Chan households showing the strongest affiliation to Xunantunich were among the earliest to be abandoned, perhaps indicating that their position in the community was largely contingent on political backing from the center.

At Actuncan, the question of first occupancy does not apply because no clear decline in population happened until its final abandonment in the Postclassic period. Further, the only household abandoned before the Terminal Classic period is Group 8, the noble compound focused on Structure 19. Mixer and

Table 1. Occupation histories of Mopan River Settlement zones (after Yaeger 2010b:Table II.3 from Ehret 1995, Yaeger 2000, 2008; Actuncan core data is courtesy of the Actuncan Archaeological Project).

Periods	Xunantunich Transect		Actuncan Transect		Vaca Brava Transect		Callar Creek Transect		San Lorenzo		Actuncan Core		Total	
	(N)	Freq (%)	(N)	Freq (%)	(N)	Freq (%)	(N)	Freq (%)	(N)	Freq (%)	(N)	Freq (%)	(N)	Freq (%)
	N = 6		N = 7		N = 5		N = 10		N = 29 ¹		N = 8		N = 65	
Middle Preclassic	0	0%	7	100%	3	60%	9	90%	5	17%	2	25%	26	40%
Late Preclassic	0	0%	4	57%	2	40%	6	60%	2	7%	4	50%	18	28%
Terminal Late Preclassic	0	0%	4	57%	3	60%	9	90%	5	17%	7	88%	28	43%
Early Classic	2	33%	4	57%	1	20%	7	70%	2	7%	7	88%	23	35%
Late Classic I	5	83%	5	71%	2	40%	9	90%	13	45%	4	50%	38	58%
Late Classic II	6	100%	7	100%	5	100%	2	20%	24	83%	7	88%	51	78%
Terminal Classic	2	33%	3	43%	2	40%	1	10%	10	34%	6	75%	24	37%
Postclassic	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	25%	2	3%

1. San Lorenzo frequencies refer to structures following Yaeger 2010b while both Xunantunich Settlement Survey (Ehret 1995) and Actuncan core counts refer to residential groups.

Table 2. Residential groups investigated at Actuncan and their associated structures. Structures in bold have been the target of excavations.

One Structure-focused Patio Cluster Group 8 Structures 19, 19b, 20, 21a, 21b, 22, 24, 25
Four Patio-focused Groups Group 1 Structures 59, 60, 61, 62 Group 5 Structures 63, 64, 65, 66 Group 6 Structures 53, 54 Group 7 Structures 55, 56, 57, 58
Three Large Single Mound Residences Structure 29 Structure 41 Structure 73

colleagues (2013) document that Structure 19 was razed by the end of the Late Classic period and certain parts of the compounds received termination rituals in the early part of the Terminal Classic period, actions that point to Actuncan's rejection of Xunantunich's rule. This palace termination did not adversely affect Actuncan's urban core; rather, it preceded the creation of a large civic platform (Group 4), the largest documented Terminal Classic building within this portion of the Mopan Valley (LeCount et al. 2011). The construction of this new center of governance points to Actuncan's success in consolidating their post-collapse community. This building is symbolic of a political consensus among households about the nature of post-royal leadership, while the continued occupation of households marks successful household negotiations to create a new social contract.

In the remainder of the paper, we address the micro-scale politics of the collapse through the results of excavations at three households at Actuncan. These investigations have revealed a complex pattern of household construction,

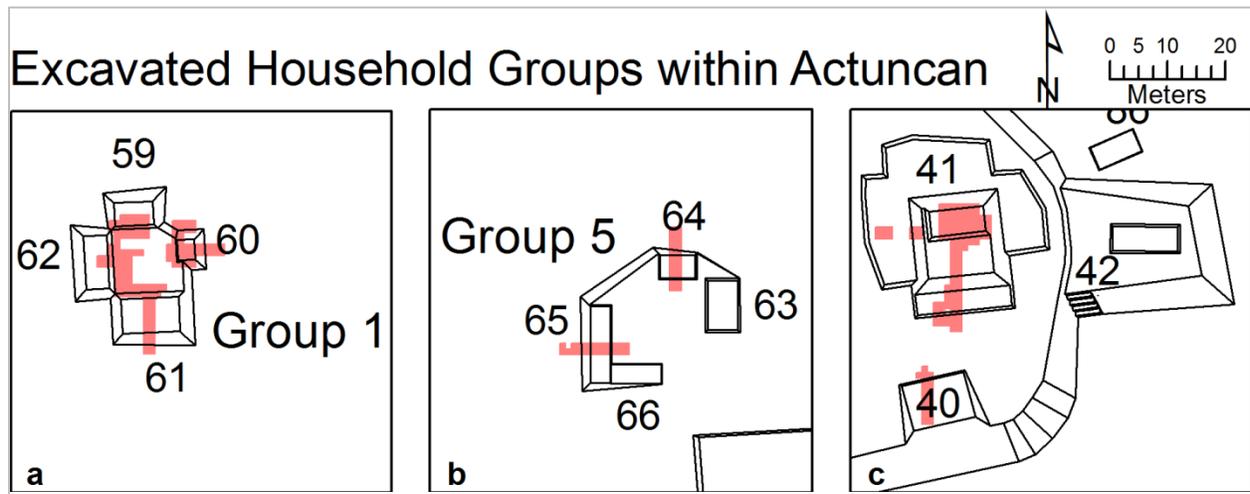


Figure 4. Plans of household groups discussed in the text. The gray blocks indicate areas of excavation. (a) Group 1. (b) Group 5. (c) Structure 41 and attached auxiliary buildings. Note the large terraced work areas around Structure 41's main platform.

abandonment, and reoccupation that speaks to both the site's complex political history and the entanglement of individual urban households in that history. In particular, we look at Late and Terminal Classic renovations in order to understand the social strategies adopted by Actuncan's households following the collapse. From these strategies we can begin to infer aspects of social regeneration at Actuncan and the engagement of specific households in this process.

Three Actuncan Households

Eight households within the Actuncan site core have been intensively excavated: one structure-focused patio cluster (Group 8), four patio-focused groups (Groups 1, 5, 6, and 7) and three large single mound residences (Structures 29, 41, and 73). For the purposes of this paper, we limit the sample to the two most extensively investigated patio-focused groups and one large single mound residence. The patio-focused groups, Groups 1 and 5, consist of several buildings oriented towards a central patio (Figures 4a and 4b) and are situated on the northwest edge of the site's civic core. The large single mound residence, Structure 41, is located on the eastern edge of Actuncan's core (Figure 4c). During the Classic period, the large patio-focused groups may have been the residences of wealthy commoners given their close proximity to the civic core. In contrast,

Structure 41 was likely a founding elite family of the Terminal Preclassic civic center and "big house," similar to the *nimja* documented in the Maya highlands (Braswell 2003; Carmack 1981). For each of these households, we briefly summarize the occupation history and focus on the Late and Terminal Classic architectural modifications.

Group 1

Group 1 is the largest patio-focused group within the Actuncan core. Founded sometime in last years of the Late Preclassic period, Group 1 grew into the largest patio-focused group both in terms of area and mound size. Major building periods were marked by the laying down of three plaster patio floors, the last of which was constructed in the Early Classic period. After a break of at least 80 years, architectural modification began again in the second half of the Late Classic and continued into the Terminal Classic period. During this time, building platforms were raised and expanded, but only dirt floors accumulated on top the Early Classic plaster patio floor.

While excavations have uncovered some ceramic material from the first part of the Late Classic period (Samal phase), no construction is clearly dated to this period. While we don't have strong evidence to indicate that the group was abandoned during this time, the lack of household renovation suggests it may have been.

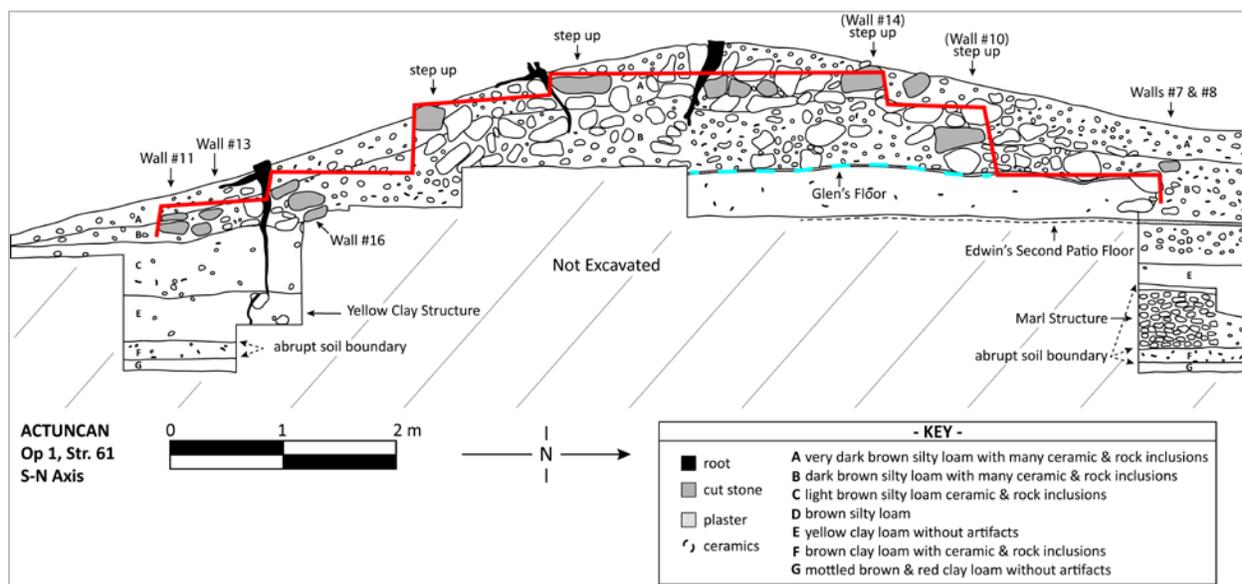


Figure 5. Profile of excavations through Structure 61. Note massive dry-laid stone fill construction event located above Glen's Floor and delineated by the red and blue lines.

But if residents remained, their inability to renovate speaks to diminished access to labor.

Group 1 is renovated during the second half of the Late Classic period with architectural modifications present on all four structures. However, during the Terminal Classic period, residents focused their architectural efforts on the enlargement of the southernmost structure, Structure 61, which faces the public plaza to the south. No other Terminal Classic architectural modifications are evident elsewhere in the group. Structure 61's building platform was increased by at least 1 m in size using dry laid, chert-cobble fill not unique to Group 1 (Figure 5). Elsewhere in the site, we have found dry laid cobble-fill to be a hallmark of Terminal Classic construction, indicating a distinct change in building practices from the densely packed cobble, dirt and midden fill of the Late Classic period. Because of Structure 61's location fronting Plaza H, it seems likely that the effort to increase its size was meant to amplify the grandeur of the group's appearance when viewed from this plaza, south of Group 1. Residents may have been attempting to emphasize their perceived socio-political importance to regain prestige within the community. In short, this construction could have been an effort by residents to emphasize

their return to prominence or an attempt by new occupants to assert their importance within the community.

Group 5

Group 5 is a small patio-focused group in the northwestern part of the site center, just west of Group 1. Occupation began during the Terminal Preclassic period and continued into the Terminal Classic period. Unlike the building hiatus at Group 1, occupation at Group 5 shows continuity and stability throughout the sequence. Our 2011 excavations at Group 5 focused on trenches through the group's northern and western structures, Structures 64 and 65, respectively. Both of these structures have long occupation histories that stretch back to at least the Terminal Preclassic period, when most of the civic core was constructed.

During the Terminal Classic period, architectural modifications served to enlarge the size of both buildings. A bench feature was added to Structure 64, and the orientation of Structure 65 was shifted from 350 degrees to almost directly north-south (Figure 6). All Terminal Classic building phases are associated with the creation of new patio floors, some of which were plastered, indicating that occupants had a more consistent access to resources than



Figure 6. Final two versions of Structure 65's eastern edge showing change in orientation.

those living at Group 1, where dirt floors accumulated. In sum, Group 5 does not appear to have suffered a dramatic decline in the Terminal Classic period as measured by building episodes. Instead, the residents continued to build platforms with dressed stones and plaster surfaces. This pattern is especially interesting given that of the three residential groups discussed in this paper, Group 5 is the smallest in size. If size can be equated with socio-economic status, then it was the lowliest patio-focused group.

Structure 41

Structure 41 is a single large platform surrounded on all sides by low terraces. It is considered a domestic building because of its large attached terraces, which likely functioned as work areas, and its association with two auxiliary buildings located off its east side. We view this residential layout as suggesting multiple tiered and segregated work areas similar to those reported in elite residences at Calakmul (Folan et al. 2001).

The building has a long history of modifications. It was originally constructed during the Late Preclassic period and modified substantially in the Terminal Preclassic period. The Early Classic version of the structure likely supported a masonry superstructure based on the buried remains of a low wall stub and vault stones located off the northern edge of the structure (Figure 7). Before the end of the Early Classic period, a termination deposit of finely decorated ceramics was placed on the structure's southern terrace marking the abandonment of the structure. This deposit was not covered by a

subsequent construction until the end of the Late Classic period, at which time the structure was rededicated, renovated, and reoccupied.

When the southern façade was renovated, the Early Classic termination deposit was covered by a single large deposit of chert river-cobbles. The masonry structure was torn down and the southern half of the platform was cut into and lowered slightly, creating the two tiered platform. In the process of removing the masonry superstructure, only the basal course was left in place. Burning on the Early Classic floor and the remaining wall stones suggests intentional destruction (Figure 7). After its dismantlement, the wall stub was covered by a plaster platform surface, on which a pole and thatch building was constructed. This structure, 41-1st, was used for over a century. Ceramic data indicates the building remained occupied through the Terminal Classic period and was abandoned sometime during the Early Postclassic period. During the Terminal Classic period, the upper section of the platform underwent a series of minor architectural modifications typical of long occupied households.

The identity and social status of the Terminal Classic occupants of Structure 41 is not entirely clear. Because of the break in occupation between the Early Classic and Terminal Classic periods, we cannot assume continuity in kinship of the occupants. Although the Early Classic residents of Structure 41 were likely among the site's most powerful elite, the group that reoccupied the building did not adopt the same architectural symbols of elevated status. Most tellingly, by removing the masonry structure and replacing it with pole and thatch, the new occupants lived in conditions on par with their neighbors in patio-focused groups.

Discussion

These three households are examples of the types of Terminal Classic constructions built by Actuncan residents during the time when Xunantunich underwent its protracted dissolution. Each of the households discussed here outlasts Xunantunich by as much as 100 years. Group 1 and Structure 41 survived into the Postclassic period, and Group 5 has multiple phases of Terminal Classic construction.



Figure 7. Plan and photograph of masonry wall stub associated with the Early Classic version of Structure 41. In the plan drawing, note the areas of burning and preserved red paint on the floor.

Further, the residents of these households formed part of the labor party that built Group 4, the Terminal Classic civic building. Given these data, it is clear that following the termination of Xunantunich Late Classic regime, Actuncan's households were able to successfully establish a new social order. But each household responded differently to the developing political situation. The occupants of Group 1 felt the need to legitimize their importance within the new society through the enlargement of their southern structure, possibly as a display of long-term connections to the past and their substantial command of labor. In contrast, the occupants of Group 5, the most continuously occupied but lowest ranked group, did not change their pattern of renovation. It is possible that this group's deep roots in the community and humble architecture positioned them well for post-royal Actuncan. Unlike the changes in façade, fill, and patio floor construction techniques seen in Group 1, the residents of Group 5 continued to build using masonry block façades and plaster patio surfaces, a practice that indicates continued access to resources and labor in Actuncan's Terminal Classic society. Structure 41 experienced the most dramatic changes. While the platform is reoccupied at the end of the Late

Classic period, the occupants did not live in the masonry superstructure previously located on the platform's surface. The destruction of this superstructure indicates to us that the occupants were sensitive to social disparities. The razing of the superstructure may have functioned as a leveling mechanism marking a rejection of socially overt elites. Based on these data, we suggest that the Actuncan community negotiated the collapse at the micro-scale by rejecting the Classic period hierarchical social system. In its place, they relied on a more heterarchical system, complete with leveling mechanisms, to integrate their new community.

Conclusions

Terminal Classic populations adopted a variety of strategies to reorganize their communities during the collapse. Many emigrated, possibly to the northern lowlands or the southern highlands. Others took advantage of the power void to establish new regimes under different rules. What is important about the site of Actuncan is that it was the setting of an in situ reorganization. The local community banded together, along with possible immigrants, to create a new community structure.

From a population perspective, Actuncan was very successful in weathering the collapse. Middle-scale analysis indicates that populations across the valley declined, even in established agrarian settlements, such as San Lorenzo and Chan, where only the oldest families remained into the beginnings of the Terminal Classic period. In contrast, most members of the Actuncan community remained and established new political structures founded on the recognition of greater equality. Overt displays of class difference, such as masonry superstructures, were no longer acceptable. Although class boundaries dimmed or disappeared, wealth differences apparently continued to exist. Distributional studies of obsidian indicate that formerly elite households, such as Structure 41, had substantially greater access to obsidian during the Terminal Classic period than their plaza-focused neighbors (Shults and LeCount 2013). The possibility that material differentiation continued to exist, and in some situations considered socially acceptable, presents an interesting tension to the apparent rejection of class differentiation at the time.

Ultimately, the Terminal Classic revival at Actuncan did not last. Ceramics from the Terminal Classic civic center and several households indicate continued occupation into the Postclassic period (LeCount et al. 2011). By this time, most other local sites were entirely abandoned except Baking Pot, Barton Ramie, and Tipu (Aimers 2004). At Xunantunich and Chan, small altars used for reverential offerings mark Postclassic visitation, but no solid evidence remains for residential occupation (Brown 2011; Robin et al. 2012). During the Late Postclassic period, the center of public life switched to Tipu located in the Macal River Valley (Graham et al. 1985). Regardless, Actuncan's short-term success points to one way local populations reorganized themselves after regime failure during the Maya collapse.

¹Occupation data collected from within the Actuncan core are presented with residential groups as the basic unit of analysis rather than individual domestic structures, as used by Yaeger (2010) for San Lorenzo. We decided to aggregate structure occupation rates into mound group occupation rates because this article focuses on the decisions made at the household level rather than the level of the nuclear family. Growth in structure numbers shows

the growth of households through the developmental cycle, but it doesn't effectively indicate migration decisions made household leaders. Further, by using residential groups, our data are represented similarly to Ehret's presentation of the XSS survey data.

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