BURIAL PRACTICES AT ACTUNCAN, BELIZE: A SEATED BURIAL AND ONGOING ANALYSIS FROM THE 2001-2013 FIELD SEASONS

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Introduction

Archaeologists learn a great deal about the Maya from the burials they excavate in households, monumental architecture, caves and rock shelters, and myriad other locations in and around ancient sites. Reconstructing the life histories of each individual makes it possible to explore broader patterns in the burial population, including health and epidemiology, status differentiation, funerary practices, religious beliefs, migration networks, and even how identity was expressed by an individual and his or her community. At first glance, Maya burials appear to be quite variable: burials might include a whole body or a single bone, an individual or a family, and bones might be added or removed (Chase and Chase 1994; Harrison 1997; Welsh 1988). However, patterns can be reconstructed by studying details such as the orientation of a bone or its elevation in relation to other parts of the body.

Eastern structures in the Belize Valley were often used as domestic mausolea where the Maya curated their dead and practiced rites of ancestor veneration (Ek 2006; Gillespie 2002; Helmke 2006; Iannone 1996). At the Belize Valley center of Actuncan, connections between land and lineage served as ancestral sources of authority and may have legitimized claims to power (LeCount 2012; Mixter et al. 2013). Burial grounds served as places where these connections were manifested through funerary displays (Devlin 2007).

We present an overview of burial practices at Actuncan, which were highly patterned for generations. Eighteen burials include a minimum of 26 individuals (Table 1), with additional graves that have been identified, but not excavated. The predominant burial pattern was a prone, extended position and southern orientation. In contrast, one individual placed in a seated position (Burial 11) was associated with reoccupation and renovation of an elite residence (Mixter 2012) and may have represented an important source of ancestral authority (McAnany 1998) for this household as Actuncan grew during the Late and Terminal Classic periods.

Burials at Actuncan

Actuncan was settled as early as 1000 B.C., with continuous occupation through the Terminal Classic period (A.D. 780-1000). The site reached its political apogee during the Terminal Preclassic (A.D. 100-250) and Early Classic (A.D. 250-600) periods, and returned to similar population levels during the second half of the Late Classic period (A.D. 600-780) (Mixter et al. this volume). Actuncan was first excavated by James McGovern (2004) as part of the Xunantunich Archaeological Project, but the burials were excavated by the Actuncan Archaeological Project between 2001 and 2013 (Figure 1). Most were identified in residential structures, but two burials were associated with civic architecture.

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Table 1. Question marks denote probable age and sex estimations. Data from Freiwald 2012; Freiwald and Micklin 2013; LeCount and Blitz 2002, 2005; Scopa Kelso 2005. More information on the burials can be found in the 2014 Actuncan Archaeological Report chapters by Donohue, Freiwald, and Simova.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial #</th>
<th>Provenience</th>
<th>Minimum number of individuals</th>
<th>Body position and orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1, Op. 1A/1C Group 1, residential patio</td>
<td>Individual 1(unknown)</td>
<td>Prone, extended, to the south, right arm flexed behind the back.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2, Op. 5A In non-residential refuse by Plaza C near residence Str. 18</td>
<td>Individual 1 Individual 2 Individual “0”</td>
<td>Supine, extended, oriented to the south Semi-flexed, on right side, head to the south Unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3 Op. 1D Group 1, residential patio</td>
<td>1 individual (2-4 years)</td>
<td>Supine, head to the south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4 Op. 1D Group 1, residential patio</td>
<td>1 individual</td>
<td>Prone, extended, to the south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B5 Op. 6 XXXX/YYYY Residential Str. 41</td>
<td>1 individual</td>
<td>Head to the south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B6 Op. 12 Group 1 patio, residential</td>
<td>1 individual</td>
<td>Prone, extended, head to the south, right arm flexed behind the back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B7 Op. 12 Group 1 patio, residential</td>
<td>Individual 1 (adolescent 12-18 years) Individual 2 (unknown)</td>
<td>Prone, extended, head to the south, right arm flexed behind the back head prone, to the south and body disturbed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B8 Op. 12 Group 1 patio, residential</td>
<td>Individual 1 (unknown) Individual 2 (unknown) Individual 3 (unknown)</td>
<td>Prone, extended, to the south, right arm flexed behind the back Prone, extended, to the north? Partially excavated Prone, extended, to the south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B9 Op. 12 Group 1 patio, residential</td>
<td>Individual 1 (adult male?) Individual 2 (adult male?)</td>
<td>Prone, extended, to the south Prone position, oriented to the south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B10 Op. 12 Group 1 patio, residential</td>
<td>Individual 1 (unknown) Individual 2 (unknown)</td>
<td>Prone, extended, to the south, right arm flexed behind the back Extended position, partly excavated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B11 Op. 6 Residential Str. 41</td>
<td>Individual 1 (mid-old age adult male? 36-44 years)</td>
<td>Seated, semi-flexed arms and legs, facing south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B12 Op. 16 Residential Str. 57</td>
<td>Individual 1 (perinate?)</td>
<td>Oriented to the south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B13 Group 1 patio, residential</td>
<td>1 individual (unknown)</td>
<td>Supine, extended, to the south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B14 Op.12 Group 1 patio, residential</td>
<td>1 individual (adult female?)</td>
<td>Prone, to the south (not fully excavated)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B15 Op. 18 Residential Str. 73</td>
<td>Individual 1 (unknown) Individual 2 (juvenile)</td>
<td>Individual 1: prone, extended, to the south Individual 2: flexed (not fully analyzed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B16 Op. 18 Residential Str. 73</td>
<td>1 individual (adult)</td>
<td>Prone, extended position, oriented to the south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B17 Op 18 Residential Str. 73</td>
<td>1 individual (adult)</td>
<td>Prone, extended position, oriented to the south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B18 Op. 39I, G, E-Group structures 26 and 27</td>
<td>1 individual (unknown)</td>
<td>Prone, extended position, oriented to the south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sixteen burials (twenty-two individuals) were identified in residential contexts, including patio-focused groups and single mound houses. Ten burials (15 individuals) were found in Group 1, spanning the Terminal Preclassic to Late Classic periods (Freiwald 2012; Rothenberg 2012; Scopa Kelso 2005) (Figure 2). Burials from the same broad timeframe also were found in Structure 57, the western building of patio-focused residential Group 7 (Burial 12),
and in single mound residential Structures 73 (Burials 15, 16, and 17) and 41 (Burials 5 and 11).

However, not all residences served as burial grounds (Freiwald and Micklin 2013; Mixter and Freiwald 2013). No burials were found during excavations adjacent to the eastern building (Structure 22) in Group 8, a group of nine structures and three patios that is interpreted as the ruling family’s residence during the Late Classic period (Mixter et al. 2013). Nor were any burials identified in the Group 5 household, although excavations focused on the central axis of the western and northern buildings (Hahn 2012).

The Burial Population

Analysis of the remains will not be completed until next year, but the burial population thus far includes one perinate (Burial 12), two children (Burials 3 and 5), one juvenile (Burial 15), one adolescent (Burial 7-1), four probable adult males (Burials 9-1, 9-2, 11, and 13), one female (Burial 14), and four adults (Burials 1, 2-1, 6, and 7-2). Age estimates range from 1-3 years to >30 years based on dental development and attrition, with patterns that vary from unworn occlusal surfaces to complete crown loss. Other preliminary age and sex determinations based on bone development and morphology follow standard conventions (e.g., Baker et al. 2006; Scheuer et al. 2010; Steele and Bramblett 1988; Ubelaker and Buikstra 1994; White and Folkens 2005).

The burial population at Actuncan was a relatively healthy one, similar to individuals at Chaa Creek and Xunantunich (Adams 1998). Observable pathologies were limited mostly to non-specific incidents of stress during childhood (Hillson 1996; Goodman and Rose 1990). Billstrand has completed dental analysis on 211 teeth from 16 individuals that has concentrated on the identification of hypoplastic activity, primarily the linear form. Twelve of sixteen individuals have observable linear enamel hypoplasias. Seven individuals had multiple incidents of stress. Twenty-six percent (56 teeth) have observable hypoplasias and 8% (17 teeth) are marked with two or more enamel defects (also see Scopa-Kelso 2005).
Most burials followed the Belize Valley convention of interring the dead in a prone, extended body position, with the head oriented to the south (Table 1). At least 11 of the burials were re-entered or disturbed, but it still was possible to observe that 85% percent of the individuals were oriented to the south, and more than 50% were placed in a prone, extended position. Only one individual had a northern orientation, and just three were interred in a supine position.

Two burials were identified in Structure 41, including the Terminal Preclassic period burial of a child (Burial 5), and the individual interred during the Late Classic period in a seated position (Burial 11) (Figure 3). Structure 41 was a large single mound house that likely served as the residence for a noble family at Actuncan. It originally was constructed during the Terminal Preclassic period, though a deep test excavation below the structure indicates that this portion of the site core was occupied as early as 1000 B.C. (Mixter 2012).

Burial 5 consisted of the fragmentary remains of a 3-5-year-old child, which were located immediately south of Structure 41 on a Late Preclassic plaza floor that was burned and buried by the construction of a Terminal Preclassic floor, which formed the architectural base on which all later construction phases were built (Mixter 2012).

Burial 11 was located in a terrace attached to the southern side of Structure 41. The burial event dates to the second half of the Late Classic, or the Terminal Classic period, based on direct dating of femoral cortical bone that will be presented in a forthcoming publication. The burial of one middle-aged probable male was contemporaneous with the construction of Structure 41-1st and appears to mark the reoccupation of the residence following at least 100 years of disuse. A description and interpretation of the skeletal remains and the burial context follows an overview of seated burials in the Maya lowlands.

Seated Burials in the Maya Lowlands

The seated burial position has been interpreted as a sign of high status (Lucero 2006), possible evidence for sacrifice (Tourtellot 1990), a marker of ancestor veneration, or as a symbol of authority (McAnany et al. 1999). Seated burials formed ~50% of burials at Cuello and K’axob during parts of the Preclassic period (McAnany et al. 1999; Robin et al. 1991). In contrast, a compilation of burial data that includes 1592 individuals (1425 burials) from 27 Classic-period sites shows that seated burials
Table 2. A summary of seated burials at some Maya lowland sites: MNI=Minimum number of individuals, A=adult, Yad=young adult, M=male, F=female. Burials marked with an asterisk were only partially excavated. Additional references can be found in Welsh (1988: 19-20) and Freiwald (2011: 415-428).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Burials</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Seated Burials</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>255 burials MNI 325</td>
<td>Altun Ha</td>
<td>C13-14 (300-100 B.C.) A F</td>
<td>Welsh 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 burials MNI 48</td>
<td>Ambergis Caye</td>
<td>2 (Terminal Classic) A M &gt;40 San Juan site</td>
<td>Glassman 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44 burials MNI 46</td>
<td>Baking Pot</td>
<td>none reported</td>
<td>Audet 2006; Freiwald 2011; McRae 2004; Piehl 2008, 2006; Welsh 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 burials MNI 3</td>
<td>Benque Viejo</td>
<td>none reported</td>
<td>Welsh 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 burial MNI 3</td>
<td>Blackman Eddy</td>
<td>none reported</td>
<td>Freiwald 2011; Garber et al. 2004; Piehl 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 burials MNI 9</td>
<td>Buenavista</td>
<td>none reported</td>
<td>Mitchell 2000; Peuramaki-Brown 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 burials MNI 20</td>
<td>Cahal Pech</td>
<td>none reported (includes some Zotz, Zopilote, and Tolok burials)</td>
<td>Cheetham 2004; Garber et al. 2004; Mitchell 2006; Piehl 2006; Song 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 burials MNI 15</td>
<td>Chaa Creek</td>
<td>Chultun 2, Chamber 3</td>
<td>Adams 1998; Connell 2000; Lee et al. 2000 in Schwake 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67 burials MNI 69</td>
<td>Copan</td>
<td>6-46 (A.D. 575-825) A 16 (no date) A</td>
<td>Welsh 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>116 burials MNI 113</td>
<td>Dzibilchultun</td>
<td>612-3 (A.D. 450-600) M</td>
<td>Welsh 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 burials MNI 5</td>
<td>Esperanza</td>
<td>none reported</td>
<td>Schubert et al. 2001; Freiwald 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 burials MNI 10</td>
<td>Floral Park</td>
<td>none reported</td>
<td>Brown et al. 1996; Freiwald 2011; Piehl 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 burials MNI 25</td>
<td>Holmul</td>
<td>none reported</td>
<td>Welsh 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 burials MNI 33</td>
<td>Mountain Cow</td>
<td>5 (A.D. 0-200) Yad M 13 (no date) “youth”</td>
<td>Welsh 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 burials MNI 29</td>
<td>Palenque</td>
<td>11 (A.D. 600-650) A</td>
<td>Welsh 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 burials MNI 14</td>
<td>Piedras Negras</td>
<td>none reported</td>
<td>Welsh 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 burials MNI 9</td>
<td>Pook’s Hill</td>
<td>none reported</td>
<td>Helmke 2006; Helmke et al. 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 burials MNI 70</td>
<td>San Jose</td>
<td>19 (A.D. 700-800), 1 infant</td>
<td>Welsh 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 burials MNI 3</td>
<td>San Lorenzo, Belize</td>
<td>none reported</td>
<td>Adams 1998; Yaeger 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burials</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>MNI</td>
<td>Age/Period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Seibal</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1 (A.D. 825-925) Yad F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>116</td>
<td>Uaxactun</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>none reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Xunantunich</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>none reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Zubin</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>none reported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

account for less than 2% of individuals with recorded positions (Table 2).

Burials with seated individuals are not well-understood. A comparison of 28 seated burials in Table 2 shows that a great deal of variability exists in the location and type of grave, the number of grave goods, the demography of the seated individuals, and the burial position itself.

Burials described as seated include a variety of body positions. Tourtellot (1990: 87-88) described Burial 1 at Seibal as ventrally flexed, with the left leg crossed over the right, but with the trunk bent over the legs. The arms were flexed at the elbows, placed either behind the back or in front of the chest. While some post-mortem movement of the body occurred, the drawing shows how the alignment of the vertebrae and placement of ceramic vessels marked the original location of the head (Figure 4).

At Saturday Creek, Burials 2 and 11 contained individuals who were seated upright in strikingly similar positions, with the arms bent at the elbow and crossed in front of the body (Lucero 2006: 98-99). The legs were bent at a 90° angle with the left lower leg crossed over the right (Figure 5). An inverted dish also marked the location of the head in Burial 10, which was only partially excavated, but this individual appears to have been seated upright with the arms crossed in front of the body (Lucero 2006: 106, 110).

Variation in body position also is found at Barton Ramie. BR-1 Burial 6 was placed in an upright position with the arms and legs semi-flexed, but not crossed (Figure 6). The legs met at the ankles, the right hand rested on the right hip, and the left hand was on the left knee (Willey et al. 1965: 81). BR-1 Burials 7 and 9 were buried in the same mound in similar positions, although each individual had unique arm positions and there was greater movement of the bones post-burial (Willey et al. 1965: 84). In addition, burials in mounds BR-123, BR-5, and BR-4 had different seated body arrangements (Willey et al. 1965: 80, 118),
showing that ‘seated’ actually describes a wide variety of distinct body positions.

Orientation is reported for only 10 seated individuals in Table 2. It is not clear whether the direction a seated individual faced held a meaning similar to the orientation of the head in an extended or flexed burial, which has strong regional patterning (Schwake 2008; Welsh 1988; Willey et al. 1965). At Altar de Sacrificios, three distinct orientations are noted for four individuals. However, at Barton Ramie and Saturday Creek in the Belize River Valley, four of six individuals whose orientations are described faced a southern direction, the predominant burial orientation in the region. Placing vessels over the head of the deceased also was common in both seated and non-seated burials in the region (Welsh 1988).

There also is no clear pattern among grave types, grave goods, and burial locations of seated burials. Grave types of 30 seated individuals in a total sample of 836 burials include simple graves (50%), crypts (30%), cists (13%), and tombs (10%) in both residential locations and civic architecture (Welsh 1988). Many individuals buried in a seated position are accompanied by large numbers of grave goods; however, grave goods more likely to be found in tombs. Welsh’s (1988) data show a ratio of 9:3 goods in tombs versus simple graves at Mountain Cow for all types of burials, as well as at Holmul (6:3), Tikal (17:2), and Uaxactun (22:0.63), and at Baking Pot (2:0.62) and Barton Ramie (3:0.88) in a comparison of simple graves to crypts.

Nineteen of the seated individuals had grave goods, while none are reported for eight. Thirteen of the individuals had multiple goods, including three seated individuals buried in Tikal’s North Acropolis who were interred with jade and dozens of vessels (Welsh 1988). Rich burials with seated individuals also were identified at Seibal (Burial 1), Palenque (Burial II), and San Juan, Ambergis Caye (Burial 2) (Glassman 1995; Tourtellot 1990; Welsh 1988). The identity of the grave occupant may be responsible for some of the differences. Grave goods are more than twice as likely to be included with males as with females at Altun Ha, Tikal, and Uaxactun, although males and females interred at Barton Ramie had equal numbers of grave goods (Welsh 1988). More than twice as many males are interred in seated positions as females (12 males and 5 females). Three males have rich burials with dozens of goods as compared to one female, but this is not a statistically significant difference ($x^2 = 0.176, df = 1, p = 0.6744$).

McAnany and colleagues (1999) report predominantly males in Preclassic seated burials, but a Preclassic female is interred in a seated position, and by the Late and Terminal Classic periods, seated interments include an infant, a male adolescent, four male and four female adults, and one old-age male adult (Table 2). None of these variables alone—the individual’s sex, status as suggested by grave goods and construction, or body position that might be
linked to sacrifice or other non-funerary interment practices – explain why some individuals were buried in a seated position and not others. Instead, the context of the burial and a broader exploration of Actuncan burial practices suggest that ancestors and the historically rooted authority they represented provide insight that is useful for interpreting the seated burial at Actuncan.

Actuncan Burial 11

Burial 11 was interred in a pit cut into the southern terrace of Structure 41’s penultimate phase (Structure 41-2nd). The pit was adjacent to the façade of the central mound and was cut into the terrace’s plaster floor along the face of a red painted wall with an apron molding. The burial location was significant: the remains of a large ceramic smashing event were exposed on the terrace’s plaster floor and marked the termination of Structure 41-2nd. The interment of the seated individual likely signaled the dedication of Structure 41-1st, the construction of which involved extensive renovations that may have included the destruction of a masonry superstructure, the building of a new perishable superstructure, and the reorientation of the entire building from the west to the south (Mixter 2012; Mixter et al. this volume). The seated individual was oriented to face a southern direction, which may have emphasized this new architectural alignment.

Burial 11 was placed within a prepared grave ~25 cm deep in a 60-cm x 60-cm area. The apron-molded wall was carefully covered by a protective retaining wall of stacked chert river cobbles that formed the north side of the burial pit. The individual’s back was aligned with this wall, and the body sat on a partial metate, which represents the only burial good in the grave. The pit was not sealed by capstones after the burial, but instead was covered by construction fill during the extension of Structure 41-1st’s central platform. The fill consisted of large chert cobbles like those used to create and fill the grave, so the task of separating formal construction of the grave from construction fill was difficult. The fill in the burial cavity later settled, leaving large chert cobbles that had previously covered the body interspersed with the skeletal remains.

Mixter supervised excavation of Burial 11 during the 2011 field season (Mixter 2012), recording the orientation and position of each bone. Each bone fragment or cluster of fragments was numbered, photographed, drawn, and plotted three-dimensionally following Freiwald (2013; also see Nawrocki 2011). This excavation technique combines forensic and archaeological methods (e.g., Duday 2006; Duday et al. 1990; Dupras et al. 2011; Nilsson Stutz 2008; Tiesler et al. 2010) to reconstruct the taphonomic history of each individual buried at the site. It is especially useful when used with biological profiles in reconstructing complex Maya burial practices that involve multiple stages of funerary treatment (Novotny 2012; Tiesler 2010).

Freiwald and Billstrand completed the lab analysis during the fall of 2013 at University of Mississippi. The bones were washed so that surfaces could be observed and documented. The burial consisted of 998 bone fragments (667.95 grams), with orientations recorded for 67 identified bones and bone clusters and positions determined for 64 bones.

The seated position in this burial presents yet another variation of body position discussed in the lowland sample presented in Table 2. Burial 11 was placed in a seated position with the legs flexed at the knees, and the right leg crossed under the left (Figure 7). The arms were bent at the elbow and crossed at a 90° angle in front of the chest. The position of the bones and the size of the burial cavity suggest that the body was bent over rather than seated in an upright position.

During the excavation, the knees were the first part of the body visible at the top of the burial, along with the right side of the mandible and fragments of the top two cervical vertebrae, the atlas and the axis (Figure 8). These bones delimited the southern edge of the burial. The northwestern edge of the burial was formed by three aligned thoracic vertebrae, with the back of the spinal column on top and the uppermost vertebra oriented to the southeast. This is the same alignment as the legs, suggesting that the individual’s head was oriented to the southeast as well. The cranial fragments were found on the eastern edge of the burial near the left leg, including a temporal and frontal fragment.
Figure 7. Burial 11 flexed, seated position. Image by N. Billstrand.

Figure 8. Both legs and the mandible are visible at the top of Feature 7, Burial 11. Photo by D. Mixter.

Mandible fragments also were found in the vicinity of the skull near the lower legs.

Although the femora and the tibiae were the first bones visible to the excavators, they also formed the lowest level of the burial because they were inclined at a 45° angle, differing in elevation from the south to the north by as much as 10 cm. The femora lay parallel, oriented to the southeast, while the tibiae were crossed at the ankles with the feet touching. The right foot lay on its side, with the first digit (the 1st metatarsal and proximal phalanx of the big toe) on top, and other digits (the 4th and 5th metatarsals) situated underneath.

Both phalanges of the 1st digit of the left foot also were located near the right foot bones.

The right arm bones were still articulated, with the upper arm (humerus) adjacent to the body, and its posterior surface in parallel with the legs (Figure 9). The arm was semi-flexed at the elbow joint, and the ulna and radius lay across the rib cage. The left lower arm (the proximal radius and a probable ulna shaft) crossed over the left femur so that the hand rested between the upper legs, where left wrist and hand elements (the scaphoid and manual phalanges) were found. Rib and vertebrae fragments lay on top of the arms and legs, in approximate anatomical position by the location of the spinal cord.

Like Burial 1 at Seibal, the body is ventrally flexed. However, the body position is better described as seated than bundled. The
foot and hand bones formed the lowest level of the burial, along with the left lower leg (Figure 10), and the upper body and knees formed the upper level. In addition, the post-burial movement of the bones is not consistent with a bundled corpse. The left hand bones were approximately 10 cm lower than the lower arm bones, and the proximal left fibula fragment had fallen to a near-vertical position at the edge of the burial near the left knee joint. More obvious is the movement of the head, which lay on the left side of the body, demonstrating some open space or loose fill in this small grave.

The settling of grave fill displaced and broke some of the bones, including the mandible. The left side was broken and rotated 180°, while the right side was found several centimeters away. This occurred after the bone was dry, months or years after death. Movement of the bones also occurred within the space of the body as it decomposed, including the rotation of both lower legs so that each tibia rested under the corresponding fibula instead of at its side. Smaller bones, such as rib and vertebrae fragments, demonstrated movement within the space of the body cavity.

Most bones were incomplete, but it is possible that the individual was male. A frontal cranial fragment shows the presence of a brow ridge that is too fragmentary to score. The size and robusticity of the bones suggest a large individual with substantial muscle attachments, especially on the clavicle and the radius, which along with those on the tibiae and ulna, demonstrate marked strength and physical activity. Although the bones were too fragmentary, even for stature estimates even using partial bones (e.g. Steele and Bramblett 1988: 229-239), in situ measurements provide a minimum height estimate of 5’ 6” to 5’ 9” using the right ulna from its articulation with the humerus to the incomplete distal end (Steele and Bramblett 1988: 169).

The distal fragment of the pubic symphysis supports an average age of 36-44 years at death. The fine-grained symphyseal surface, relatively complete oval outline, and lipping on the ventral margin are comparable to Todd’s stages VII-VIII (also see Brooks and Suchey 1990; Bramblett and Steele 1988: 206-207). Osteophytes indicative of both age and activity are present on two proximal rib facets, distal manual and pedal phalanges, and a cervical vertebral centrum that also was concave and misshapen.

Burials 5 and 11 both were associated with construction events in Structure 41. These burial contexts were significantly different than those in the Group 1 patio, but each clearly were used to bury a carefully-selected group of ancestors. Like Structure 41, Group 1 was constructed during the Preclassic and in use during the Late Classic period (LeCount 2012; Mixter 2012; Rothenberg 2012). The solitary nature of the single individual in a seated position contrasts sharply with the Late Classic re-use of a relatively small area of patio space (seven 1 x 1 m units) for more than twelve individuals adjacent to the eastern structure in Group 1.

One difference may relate to the abandonment and later reoccupation of structures. Group 1 likely was continuously occupied, with similar burial practices from the Terminal Preclassic through the Late Classic periods (Freiwald 2012; Freiwald and Micklin 2013; Rothenberg 2012). In contrast, Burial 11 may have marked the reoccupation of Structure 41 with the interment of a single, but important ancestor in the same space used for the termination ritual associated with the building’s initial abandonment. Evidently, different types of funerary practices could demonstrate a family’s claim to a place on the Actuncan landscape.

Conclusion

The rarity and variability of seated burial practices makes a singular interpretation unlikely. It is possible that some individuals were sacrificed, but body position is not sufficient to interpret the cause of death. The position may be linked to elite status in some cases, but despite Burial 11’s location in an elite household, it included only a single metate. Interpretations may require biological, taphonomic, and contextual data to understand the meaning of each seated burial.

Body position and orientation were important markers of community burial practices, which kin-based groups may have manipulated to gain political advantage using
their ancestral associations (McAnany 1998). Burial traditions typically lasted for generations, or even centuries, and the same places were used repeatedly to inter important ancestors following the same funerary norms (Becker 1992; Chase and Chase 1994; Ek 2006). At Actuncan, the seated position in Burial 11 is notable because it differs from the standard burial practices at the site during the Late Classic period. More broadly, seated burials are uncommon and follow no regional or pan-lowland pattern, indicating that they represent special and possibly individualized phenomena.

McAnany (1998) suggests that ancestors created links to land claims, and may have played a role in the rank a lineage held as it competed with other groups, including the ruling family. The burial of an ancestor may have been necessary to renew a family’s ties to a specific location. McAnany and colleagues (1999) associate seated burials with authority, citing examples of bundled ancestors in Postclassic texts and seated figurines in Preclassic Mesoamerica. The use of this burial type at Actuncan appears to celebrate an unusual event – the reclaiming and reoccupation of a previously abandoned residence. The burial of this middle-aged male would have provided an important source of ancestral power for the household as local political power was re-centered at Actuncan during the Late to Terminal Classic transition (LeCount et al. 2011; Mixter et al. this volume). The case of Burial 11 provides one example of how choices of burial location and body position may reflect household level strategies related to claims of land and lineage at Actuncan, and perhaps more broadly in the Belize Valley and southern Maya lowlands.

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