
4 THE ACTUNCAN EARLY CLASSIC MAYA PROJECT PROGRESS REPORT ON THE SECOND FIELD SEASON

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Our preliminary investigations at Actuncan in 2001 confirmed that the Early Classic period was indeed a time of significant demographic shifts. Only one out of three households that we sampled in the northern portion of the site showed evidence of long-term habitation that spans the Formative and Classic periods. It is intriguing that the processes that gave rise to the systemic state (sensu Blanton) in the Belize Valley may have done so under circumscribed conditions. This season's research at Actuncan sampled a wider array of elite and commoner house mounds, as well as a previously identified Early Classic ceramic dump, in the northern civic area. This paper reports our findings concerning the spatial and contextual extent of Early Classic deposits from this important center and presents ideas about factors that gave rise to institutionalized kingship at Actuncan

Our research at Actuncan attempts to understand the processes associated with the institutionalization of Maya kingship during the Early Classic period from A.D. 250 to 600. Actuncan is an excellent location to study the maturation of Maya statecraft since its occupation spans the Late Formative and Early Classic periods (Figure 1).

According to Joyce Marcus (1993:115), part of the process by which Maya rulers institutionalized their positions involved severing the bonds of kinship that had once linked leaders to community members. This action resulted in a two class-endogamous society and a well-developed ideology of stratification by which upper-stratum noble's claimed separate descent from lower-stratum commoners. According to Quigley (1993:127), "kingship is the denial of kinship, an assertion that not all men are brothers, and that kinship does not have the power to operate throughout social life". This said, the dominance of state administration over kinship does not mean that kin relations are no longer a source of power in state-level societies. Maya kings cajoled and coerced kin leaders, who were

immersed in community relations, to organize hinterland tribute and labor, just as they called on their own kin to provide sumptuary goods and loyal courtiers (see Inomata and Houston 2001).

An equally important process was the creation of hierarchies; a characteristic that Marcus (1993:116) has concluded exemplifies archaic states. This organizational mode is lacking in middle range societies such as chiefdoms where power is concentrated in the hands of an elite lineage whose paramount leader is at the head of the political, social and religious orders. These individuals wield great personal power, very similar to kings in state-level societies, but in state-level societies the sources of power increasingly are centralized and segmented.

We believe hierarchies developed when expanded state responsibilities at the local and regional level forced Maya rulers to delegate decisions and authority to individuals outside his or her immediate family, in essence creating new positions within a growing political apparatus (LeCount 2004). This process results in the promotion and linearization of political positions into a hierarchical arrangement of

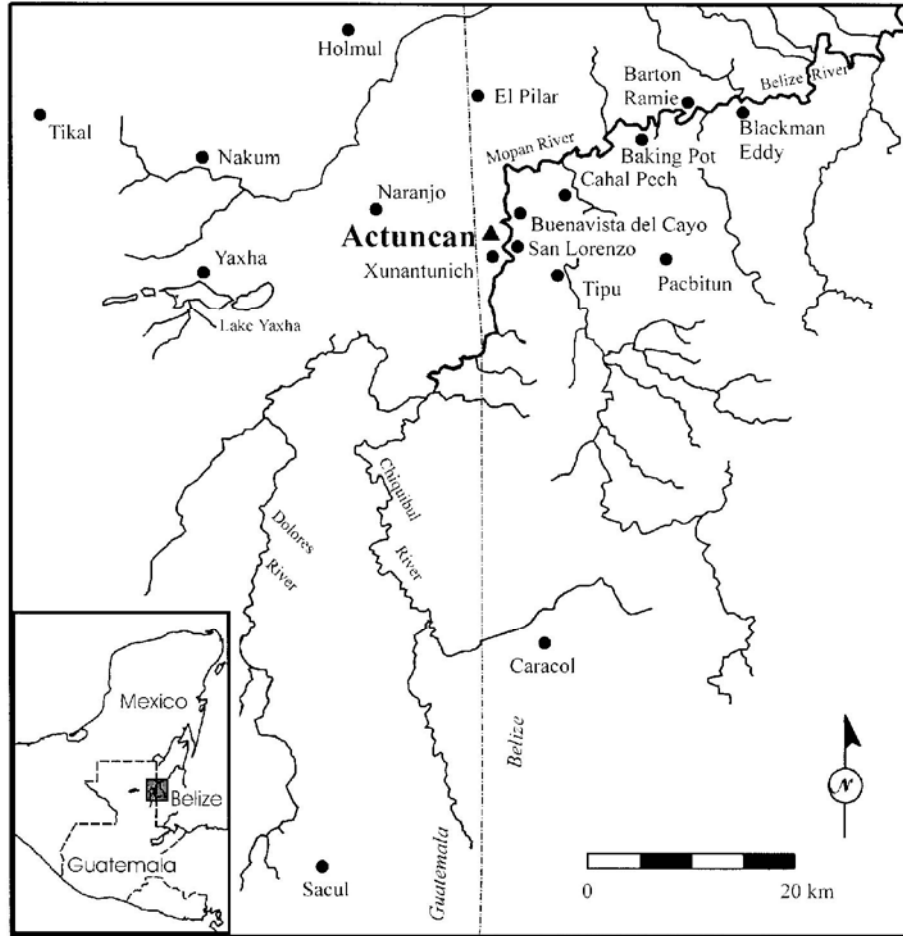


Figure 1. Map showing the location of Actuncan in relation to nearby archaeological sites.

relationships and institutions (Flannery 1972). For instance, kings required loyal office holders, who could be trusted to enforce the laws of the state. Certainly, some office holders may have been recruited from cadet lines within the leader's extended family; however, these people also would have been the king's most potent rivals. Promotion of non-kin might have been the safest and most effective way to install officers.

Households, therefore, should hold a key to understanding the processes associated with the institutionalization of political power. Many large households, especially those associated with founding

families, might have had the most to lose in the political and social transformations associated with Maya statecraft. If kings effectively instigated strategies that limited control over land, labor, and wealth by traditional kin-based leaders, then the influence of many previously powerful lineages would have contracted rather than expanded during the Early Classic period. On the other hand, some upstart households may have gained authority and wealth as officer holders and supporters of the state by siding with the ruling lineage rather than traditional kin-based leaders. If this is indeed the case, the Early Classic period should be marked by the appearance of what

we might think of as *nouveaux riches* households that look larger than expected given normal developmental cycles. Support for this hypothesis come from this year's conference participants (Pyburn this volume; D. Chase this volume; and Sullivan this volume), who comment that the Early Classic period is marked by conspicuous differences in accumulated wealth among households and the appearance of a striking gap between rich and poor households.

In sum, the difference between Formative leaders and Classic rulers might have hinged upon the ruler's ability to delegate at least some modicum of power and privilege to non-kin officers. Therefore, the archaeological evidence for the Maya state will be written not only in the institutionalization of Maya kingship as an aristocratic position with all its hereditary privileges and trappings of royal power, but in the promotion and proliferation of new houses and new wealth among commoner families.

Research Design and Previous Research

Actuncan is arguably the most impressive Late Formative center in the upper Belize valley as it contains 14 ha of civic and domestic structures. In comparison, Xunantunich, 2 km to the south, covers 14.9 ha. The site is situated on a long, low ridge overlooking the Mopan river valley, and is divided into two sections: Actuncan South (the well-known Formative temple complex) and Actuncan North (the Classic period civic center).

Actuncan South is dominated by a massive triadic temple complex, which is 72 by 120 m in size and rises 32 m above the surrounding terrain. The temple complex rests on an expansive Middle Formative basal platform that forms the elevated surface of Plaza A. Sitting on this basal foundation are three pyramids placed in a "Capitoline" arrangement (von

Faulkenhausen 1985:120), the largest of which is Structure 4 located to the south. Structure 4 is surmounted by a second set of three pyramids arranged in a U-shaped pattern. According to von Faulkenhausen (1985:120), this arrangement is diagnostic for the Early Classic period and is found throughout the Maya lowlands.

The Formative ritual center was connected to a northern civic center, Actuncan North, by a wide causeway, and it is here that we have focused our efforts. The large formal civic zone is complete with a ball court, range structures, and pyramids, some as tall as eight meters. Plazas D, E, and F to the north and east contain small pyramidal structures and elite residential compounds. Small plaza-focused house mounds are located to the extreme north and west of the civic center.

We began limited testing small plaza-focused house mounds at the northern end of Actuncan in 2001 (LeCount and Blitz 2001; LeCount 2004). Only one out of three households that we sampled showed evidence of long-term habitation that spans the Formative and Classic periods. Actuncan Plazuela Group One (AP-1) is the largest multi-mound group (Structures 59, 20, 61, and 62) in this area. A patio unit excavation (Op. 1A) revealed a long occupational history beginning in the Late Formative period and ending in the Terminal Classic period. Three major construction episodes are exemplified by thick plaster floors and their associated sub-floor fills: Plaza Floor 1 dates to the Classic period, Plaza Floor 2 dated to the Terminal Late Formative (approximately A.D. 0 to 250), and Plaza Floor 3 dates to the Late Formative period date (approximately 300 B.C. to 0 A.D.). Floor 3 is underlain by a compact yellowish brown living surface also dated to the Late Formative.

Two other plazuela groups appear to have been built predominately in the Late

Classic period with only ephemeral early occupation. Actuncan Plazuela Group Two (AP-2) is a three-mound group (Structures 50, 51, and 52) located on the southern periphery of Plaza G. AP-2 is open to the south and thus, its inhabitants face the largest range structure (Structure 19) in Actuncan North, presumed to be the royal palace. A single one-by-two meter test pit (Op. 2A) in the patio revealed that Structure 51 and patio was constructed entirely in the Late Classic. Underlying this patio is a 20-cm thick occupation surface of compact brown clay that contains a few basal flange bowl fragments and a possible Balanza black sherd. These sherds lead LeCount to suggest that this initial occupation surface dates to the Early Classic.

Actuncan Plazuela 3 (AP-2) is a northwest to southeast trending patio group located on the northeastern periphery of Plaza G. It consists of three low mounds (Structures 45, 46, and 47) around a patio. A single one-by-two meter plaza test pit (Op. 3A) revealed that most of the patio was built in the Late Classic period. However, sitting on the lowest plaza floor is a thin layer of occupation material possibly dated to the Early Classic period. Below it lies *in situ* occupation debris containing Late Formative and possibly Early Classic materials used as ballast for the initial plaza floor. Apparently, many of the small *plazuelas* on the extreme northern end of the site present a Late Classic expansion into this previously underutilized area of the ridge top.

New Excavation Data from Actuncan

This season we sampled a wider set of archaeological contexts in order to recover Early Classic remains from a broader set of social strata.

The Palace (Structure 19) and Its Northern Courtyard

The most likely candidate for an early palace is a complex of buildings, Structures 19, 20, 21, and 22, defining the northern boundary of Plaza C. Structure 19 exhibits the high, long substructure that supports a set of masonry rooms typical of a ruler's residence. Abutting the northern exposure of Structure 19 is a set of low platforms that form an elevated plaza and enclosed courtyard. James McGovern (1994:114) tested the southern façade of Structure 19 and found an Early Classic staircase overlaying a Formative plaza floor. We excavated a 2-by-2 meter unit (Op. 4A) near the southwest corner of the northern courtyard and found three floors: one Tiger Run floor and two floors containing Floral Park materials, which in Gifford's (1976) chronology would be assigned to the Protoclassic period. However, in this paper, we use the term "Protoclassic" to signify a ceramic assemblage that contains "Floral Park" or "Holmul I"-like ceramics, rather than a general developmental stage between the Formative and Classic eras or a chronological period extending from approximately 50 B.C. to A.D. 250 (see Brady et al. 1998:18).

We also trenched across the top of Structure 20, the small western platform in the northern courtyard (Op. 4B, C, D and E). Here, the terminal phase architecture dates to the Late Classic Hats' Chaak phase (A.D. 660-780). We did not conduct penetrating excavations below the first plaza floor or into platform fill to find earlier materials. However, looters dug into the platform during the last weekend of the 2004 field season. Based on inspection of the looter's trench profile, we know that the terminal platform was constructed using large boulder wall foundations and small cobble core material. Above these boulder wall foundations, faced limestone blocks were used to construct the masonry superstructures. Behind Structure 20, a

thick lens of cobbles packed against the rear wall bolstered the platform itself. One wonders if the ancient Maya covered this crude sloping rear façade with plaster. These architectural construction techniques were also encountered at Structure 41, an elite residence described below.

Elite Residences

Two elite residences bordering Plaza D and the eastern edge of the site were tested: Structures 41 and 29. We excavated either behind or beside the actual residences in an attempt to locate stratified trash deposits and to date plaza floors. Both these structures are large tiered buildings built on cobble terraces. Structure 41's substructure is 5.25 meters high and likely supported a corbelled arched superstructure since "key" stones were found tumbled down the rear of the building. An elevated (> 4 m) front terrace faces the major temple at Actuncan; while in the back there is a low (< 2 m) L-shaped terrace. Structure 29's substructure stands only 2.6 meters above the present ground surface at the back of the building; however, the dwelling presents an imposing façade since the front terrace takes advantage of the rise of the hill slope. The lower eastern terrace completes the C-shaped dwelling. Like Structure 41, Structure 29's staircase orients the dwelling toward Actuncan South.

At the rear of Structure 41, the main platform was built on two, closely spaced floors. The top floor (Op. 6A6, 6B4, & 6C4) dates to the Early Classic period and terminates at a small midden (Op. 6D2 & 6D3) of the same age off the back end of the patio floor. This midden contained many obsidian blades, an expended core, and a large, slightly chipped cylindrical jade bead. It is surprising that the ancient Maya would have intentionally discarded such a large piece of jade, but its presence in the trash may be indicative of how the Maya may

have seen such items as disposable wealth during the Early Classic period. Sometime during the Late Classic Hats' Chaak phase, the Maya built a low foundation wall of large limestone blocks on top this floor that might have acted to contain the cobble buttressing at the rear of the building. It may also have served to restrict access to the building itself. Below the first floor is a patchy *sascab* floor (Op. 6A7, 6B5, & 6C5) dating either to the initial part of the Early Classic period or slightly earlier. Plaza Floor 2 rests atop a sterile stratum of yellowish clay. Given our limited testing, it is possible that an earlier Formative platform is deeply buried under the substructure at the southern end of the dwelling.

At Structure 29, the eastern terrace was built of massive river cobbles during the Early Classic period (Op. 7E1-7). This construction engulfs an earlier platform that can be seen running diagonally across the southern most portion of the unit at 1.30 meters below present ground surface. Unlike the cobble architecture of the eastern terrace, the wall of this earlier platform was constructed of large cut-limestone blocks. Given its distinctly different orientation and construction materials, it is unclear at this time if this wall represents an earlier construction phase of the terrace or a deeply buried structure. It is possible that this deeply buried platform represents the earlier, Formative period occupation of this area.

Actuncan Plazuela I

We continued our excavations at AP-1 begun in 2001. At that time, we encountered two impressive stone crypts cut into Plaza Floor 2, both of which contained Protoclassic materials. These crypts were located 25 cm apart along a north/south axis just one meter east of the western platform (LeCount and Blitz 2001). We excavated only the southern crypt (1A7B1) due to time

constraints that year. This year we excavated the second stone lined crypt (Op. 1D25B4).

In order to reach Burial 4, we excavated a portion of the small northern structure, which covered at least half this burial. Structure 59 was a wattle-and-daub house that spanned the early and late phases of the Late Classic period and contained at least three floors. Abundant trash was tossed in the alleyway between it and the western platform (Structure 62). Beneath the western wall of Structure 59-3rd was a modest burial (1D20B3) of an individual marked only by the presence of a single upright limestone slab. This individual may have been an offering to the house at the time of its initial construction during the Early Classic period. The house was built on top large rock fill 40 cm above Plaza Floor 2. We did not excavate below Plaza Floor 2 this field season, but rather, concentrated our efforts around the second crypt (Op. 1D25B4).

Like the individual in crypt 1 (Op. 1A7B1), the person interred in crypt 2 lay face down, with the head –what little remained of it– to the south. Only small fragments of the occipital plate and a few teeth were found in association with the body; however, more cranial fragments were found in the pot placed over the person's head. Three pots (Figure 2) were positioned in the crypt with this individual: 1) a Chan Pond jar placed over the knees; 2) an Aguacate Orange Z-angled dish with four broken hollow supports, presumably mammiform in shape, covered the missing head and contained cranial fragments; and 3) an Aguacate Orange effigy chocolate pot situated to the right of the individual's missing cranium. This pot may have acted as a symbolic substitute for the missing head. Both Aguacate Orange vessels exhibit hard, “glossy” slips and fine light colored pastes; however, neither exhibits the

distinctive white to buff undersurface of Early Classic types.

According to James Gifford's (1976) Barton Ramie scheme, these pots belong to the Floral Park subcomplex; however, LeCount is reluctant to assign a Protoclassic date (approximately 50 B.C. to A.D. 250) to these burials. Although these pots taken by themselves appear to be good examples of “Protoclassic” types, they lie at the same stratigraphic level as the brown-ware effigy lid associated with crypt 1 (Figure 3). As LeCount (2004) has suggested before, this pot appears similar to Tzakol 1 effigy lids at other sites. Thus, like other “Protoclassic” assemblages across the eastern periphery of the Peten (Brady et al. 1998), Classic and Formative ceramic modes co-occur in vessels from the same excavation lot at Actuncan. According to Brady and colleagues (1998:34), however, Protoclassic assemblages chronologically overlap the Late Formative and Early Classic periods as traditionally defined. Given the ambiguities in defining the “Protoclassic”, more detailed ceramic analysis and radiocarbon dating are needed to securely place these pots into a ceramic complex. This will require additional excavation at this stratigraphic level to retrieve a larger sample of pottery, preferably from domestic middens, in order to better understand assemblages associated with the transition from the Formative to Classic period.

What is interesting about these crypts is their impressive size and construction techniques and the richness of their burial goods. Apparently this household was influential during that transitional period from the Terminal Formative to the Early Classic period, later, however this family seemed to have lost much of its authority since we have yet to find evidence of those highly diagnostic basal flange bowls so characteristic of the later phases of the Early Classic. Nor did

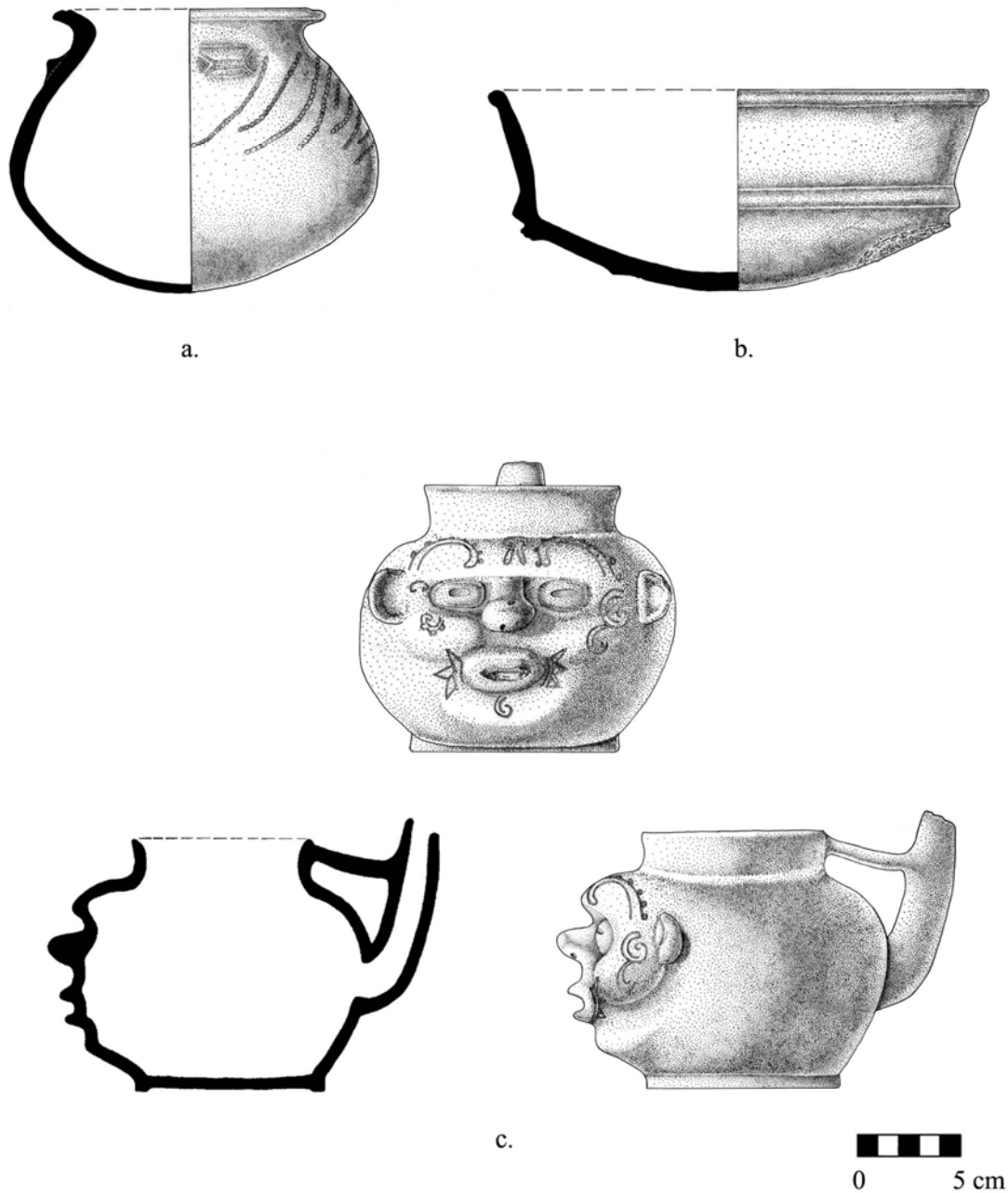


Figure 2. a: Chan Pond jar (1D25B4SA3); b: Aguacate Orange Z-angled dish (1D25B4SA1); and c: Aguacate Orange effigy chocolate pot (1D25B4SA2)..

the Late Classic *plazuela* members bury their ancestors in the same plaza location as earlier members had, although it is entirely

possible that they might have buried them nearby. These patterns are indicative of the types of processes we associate with the

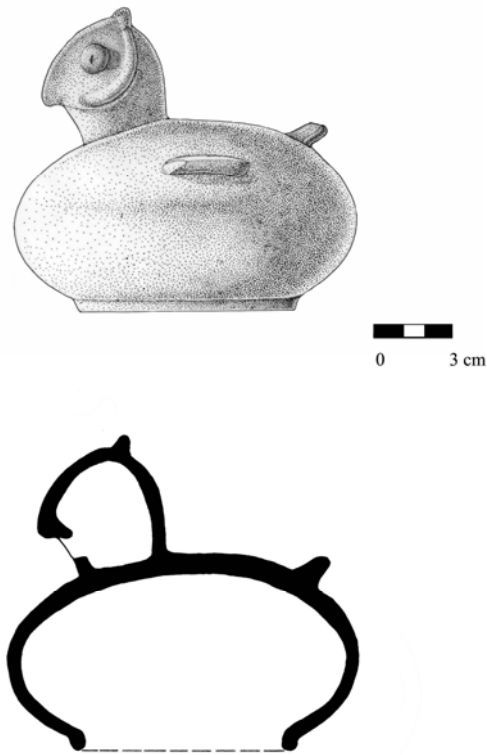


Figure 2: Unspecified brown-ware effigy lid (1A7B1SA1).

shift away from kin-based authority and the widening gap in wealth among households in early state-level societies.

Off-plaza Trash Deposit

Two 2-by-2 units were placed off the edge of Plaza C in a ravine below Structure 15, a pyramidal structure that defines the nexus between Actuncan North and Actuncan South. Here, a 60-cm deep Early Classic trash deposit was encountered beneath a small residential platform, Structure 18, and spreading down slope into the ravine. Structure 18's platform dates to the early part of the Late Classic and a single floor caps this trash deposit. The ancient Maya interred at least two individuals in simple side-by-side graves lined with small limestone slabs and river cobbles (Op. 5A6B2 and 5A7B2) into this

trash deposit. Parts of a third individual were encountered immediately above these graves in and around a cairn of three limestone slabs (Op. 5A4B2). Other human bones were found randomly scattered throughout the Early Classic deposit. These individuals do not appear to be directly associated with the Late Classic platform above them since they were clearly interned underneath the platform and did not intrude through it.

The origin of the Early Classic material in this trash deposit is an important question to address because the crux of hypotheses concerning the nature of elite and common Early Classic pottery assemblages hinge on context. We suggest that this material originated from activities on the civic plaza rather than those associated with Structure 18. Structure 18 is a low platform built in a ravine below the northern civic center. Although we originally assumed it represented a commoner house, it is also possible that this platform served a specialized function, such as a kiosk for a gatekeeper or temple guard. None of these interpretations are congruent with the materials found underneath it because the Early Classic deposit contains mostly elite materials, such as large basal flange bowls and painted plaster, and little household trash, such as *manos* and *metates*. Jason Yaeger (pers. communication 2004) suggests that this deposit might be the result of temple or civic building remodeling because large chunks of painted plaster are rarely found in domestic trash. Thus at this juncture, we suggest this material represents the remains of elite activities, although we cannot specify what kinds of activities they represent.

Discussion and Conclusions

In summary, we excavated in three types of residential groups –a palace courtyard, elite residences, and commoner

residences— associated with the Early Classic period. Materials recovered from these contexts clearly indicate that Actuncan was a major site during the Late Formative and Early Classic periods; nonetheless, the Late Classic component of the site represents Actuncan’s population maximum.

Non-royal residences at Actuncan appear to fit into two architectural layouts: *plazuela* (plaza-focused mounds) and terraced dwelling. In general, we associate *plazuelas* with Haviland’s (1988) and Tourtellot’s (1988) rendition of the developmental model in which a founding family grows from living in a single structure to a descent group whose members live in multiple buildings around a patio. Unlike these plaza-focused groups, terraced dwellings appear to be more akin to Levi-Strauss’ model of a house, recently revisited by Susan Gillespie (2000). According to Gillespie (2000:468), houses are corporate, long-lived units that utilize relationships of consanguinity and affinity, real and fictive, to express unity and perpetuity for specific ends.

Examining these two kinds of household organizations at Actuncan is beyond the scope of this talk, but what we may be looking at here is not only differences between elite and common modes of living, but also differences between agrarian and urban families. Our guess is that these households are fundamentally different in the way family labor is organized. But it is important to note at this juncture that the architectural layouts—*plazuelas* and terraced dwellings—need not conform exclusively to a single organizational model. Based on our excavations, it is clear that the historical trajectory of AP-1 spanned many centuries, but it is nearly impossible to envision how the entire use-life of this *plazuela*, which was occupied for over a 1000 years, could be attributed to the developmental cycle of a

single localized patrilineage. Later residents may have ritually constituted themselves as the “descendants” of AP-1 founders in order to anchor themselves to this specific place, but if this was indeed the case, then we must evoke the concept of the house to explain the later history of this *plazuela*.

It is equally interesting to note that AP-1 pre-dates Structures 29 and 41, both of which were built during the Early Classic expansion of the site. It could be suggested that Structures 29 and 41 were the houses of nouveaux riches families, which, at least archaeologically, appear to have had no antecedents at the site. Yet these families prospered during the time in which kingship became institutionalized, whereas the fortunes of AP-1 members waxed and waned through the Classic period. Clearly, some founding families did not gain status because of their long-term standing in the community as kingship became more entrenched during the Early Classic period.

The off-plaza trash deposit contains the best sample of Early Classic material we have excavated to date. Sherds are large and abundant, and there are many rims representing domestic forms such as large striated jars, simple bowls and bolstered cauldrons. Characterization of domestic wares is critical for better recognizing Early Classic components in commoner households where basal flange bowls are less abundant. Pottery from this trash deposit is not only impressive because of the quantity of “standard” Early Classic types, such as Balanza Black and Dos Arroyo Polychrome, but also because Sierra Red sherds are so scarce in these lots. Although detailed analysis has yet to be performed on this collection, LeCount would estimate that less than 10 percent of the sherds can be classified as such. There is a healthy amount of waxy wares, but they do not appear to be Sierra Red varieties. Rather, the Paso Caballo waxy wares in this

collection look less mottled and more homogeneous in color, display more orange than red slip colors, and have simpler lips and thinner bodies than those indicative of the Sierra Ceramic Group. Further analysis of this assemblage should help broaden our understanding of the Early Classic pottery assemblage in the upper Belize valley.

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