

9 **ACTUNCAN'S NOBLE COURT: NEW INSIGHTS INTO POLITICAL STRATEGIES OF AN ENDURING CENTER IN THE UPPER BELIZE RIVER VALLEY**

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In ancient Mesoamerica, some long-occupied centers cycled through periods of prominence, decline, and resurgence. Actuncan was one such center. It rose to prominence in the upper Belize River valley during the Terminal Preclassic period, declined in the Early Classic period, and resurged again during the Terminal Classic period. We suggest Actuncan's position on the landscape and the collective memory of its past were a source of social capital for political leaders and dissidents alike to manipulate, making the site a powerful agent of change. This manipulation can be seen in the reworking of Actuncan's Structure 19 into a nobility palace when the site was subsumed into the Late Classic polity of Xunantunich. Although Structure 19's substructure dates to the Terminal Preclassic period, much of the summit architecture and ancillary buildings that formed a noble court were built in the Late Classic period. Later, the complex was razed late in the Late Classic period before a new Terminal Classic integrative building (Group 4) was built to the east. Based on these data, we suggest these actions are symptomatic of Actuncan's dissidents' rejection of Xunantunich's divine authority and their rapid adoption of a new form of authority during the Terminal Classic period.

Introduction

Claims to a primordial homeland and a local ancestral lineage were the primary method for legitimizing a Classic Maya leader's right to rule (Ashmore 1998; McAnany 1995). These connections were materialized through the construction of monumental architecture and the erection of monuments that memorialize dead kings (Schele and Freidel 1990). As these buildings and monuments aged, they continued to emanate authority due to the collective memory of their erection, the reading of hieroglyphic texts, and the performance of rituals by leaders attempting to reinforce their connections to the past (Inomata 2006; Leventhal and Jamison 1996). However, the dynamic politics of the Maya lowlands often led to breaks in dynastic lines and the founding of new centers of power. In these cases, new rulers could not claim the right to rule through direct patrilineal ancestry to a local house. Instead, they grafted their families onto those of local dynasts through the repurposing of ancient landscapes and civic monuments that placed the new regimes within historical power structures (Martin 2000; Stuart 2000). Actuncan is one place that sees its powerful history repurposed.

Actuncan, like Cahal Pech, Xunantunich's Group E, and Blackman Eddy, has been a location of monumental construction for thousands of years making it a permanent part of the local landscape of memory (Awe 1992;



Figure 1. Map showing the location of Actuncan in relation to nearby archaeological sites (LeCount 2004:Figure 1).

Brown et al. 2011; Brown and Garber 2008). The ridge-top on which Actuncan sits was settled by 1000 B.C., and the ceremonial center was well-established in the Late Preclassic period (LeCount and Blitz 2005; Mixter 2012). By the Terminal Preclassic, Actuncan was the political center of the region (McGovern 2004). Its architecture includes many hallmarks of early civic construction, such as a 32-m high triadic pyramid group, an E-Group, and a ballcourt (Estrada-Belli 2011; Hansen 1998). A Preclassic

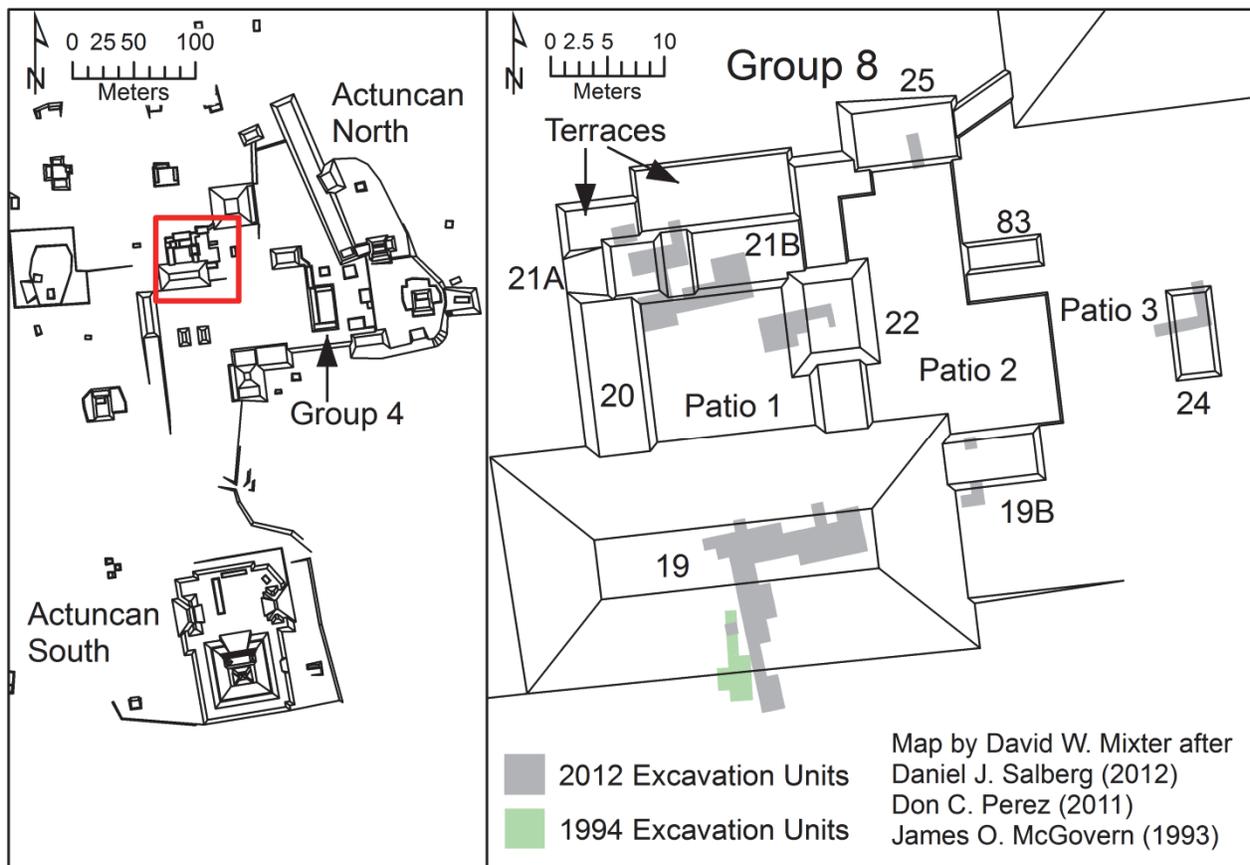


Figure 2. Map of Actuncan showing the location and layout of Structure 19 and Group 8. The inset image indicates the location of James McGovern’s 1994 trench into Structure 19 and the Actuncan Archaeological Projects 2012 excavations. Note the low terraces located on the northern side of Group 8. Also note the location of Group 4, a new civic group constructed during the Terminal Classic following the abandonment of Structure 19.

carved stela points to the early adoption of kingship at the site (Fahsen and Grube 2005:79). Despite the center’s early authority, construction of monumental architecture halts during the Early Classic period and several large elite households were ritually terminated and abandoned (Mixter 2012; Simova 2012). These actions signal the end of Actuncan’s role as the seat of a local polity and the beginning of a three hundred year long hiatus of civic construction. Although Actuncan was no longer a center of power, its prominent silhouette on the landscape would have perpetuated the memory of the site’s ancient rulership and position of authority. Due to this memory, the ancient center served as both an opportunity and an obstacle to later groups or individuals aspiring to power.

Actuncan’s presence on the landscape almost certainly played a political role during

Xunantunich’s rapid rise to authority in the Late Classic period. Wendy Ashmore (1998) has long hypothesized that Actuncan was the “ancestral seat” of power for Xunantunich. Its location 2 km north of Xunantunich would place the older site in the direction the Maya associated with the heavens. However, to date, archaeological evidence for the connection between these sites has not been found.

Here, we report on the Actuncan Archaeological Project’s 2012 excavations of Structure 19 and its attached compound, Group 8, which together formed the Late Classic ruler’s residence. Our excavations revealed that Structure 19’s substructure was built almost entirely in the Terminal Preclassic period from 0 to A.D. 250. However, renovations to the Preclassic masonry building on its summit were undertaken during the Late Classic period, and

termination rites marked the de-consecration of the structure during the Terminal Classic period. We attribute these activities to political manipulations of the site by leaders of Xunantunich and other local power seekers. While our excavations help us to reconstruct the long history of Actuncan, perhaps more intriguingly, they also point to the ways the site's deep history and prominent position on the landscape served as a place of memory and cultural capital for later populations' claims of sovereignty even after the site's decline in the Early Classic period.

Actuncan

Actuncan is situated on a low ridge overlooking the Mopan River near the present day border between Belize and Guatemala (Figure 1). The goal of the Actuncan Archaeological Project is to investigate the roles households played in the rise of Maya kingship. To that end, we have excavated commoner plaza-focused groups and elite houses finding a complex pattern of household construction, abandonment, and reoccupation that speaks to both the site's complex political history and the entanglement of urban households in that history (LeCount et al. 2011; Mixer et al. 2012). Our 2012 excavations at Structure 19 and its ancillary structures were designed to understand the development of the ruler's house and a noble court during the transition from the Preclassic to Classic period.

Structure 19, Actuncan's largest range structure, and the attached Group 8 are considered the most likely candidate for a Classic period ruler's residence at the site (Figure 2). The compound's location at the western edge of Plaza C, the site's largest public space, and the northern end of the *sacbe* that leads from the Triadic Temple Group, lend evidence to suggest that it played important roles in regal, ritual, and administrative functions at the site. In the mid-1990s, James McGovern (2004) excavated a 2 by 8 m trench into the southern flank of the substructure and encountered a poorly preserved staircase, two Late Preclassic retaining walls, and two associated floors. Based on the length and width of the building and McGovern's work, we hypothesized that, in its final configuration,

Structure 19 was a multi-staged platform that supported a vaulted masonry building composed of five lateral rooms.

Group 8, a small, but formal compound is attached to the north side of Structure 19 and conforms to the organization of a structure-focused patio cluster (Ashmore 1981). Remapping of the structures identified three patio groups attached to Structure 19 (Figure 2), which point to the incipient expansion of Group 8 into a multi-patio palace complex. Despite its spatial complexity, Group 8 is decidedly unimposing. The small sizes of the structures indicate a brief occupational history. Excavations were designed to determine the layout of the terminal superstructures, their use, and construction histories. In the remainder of this paper, we report on our findings.

Excavations at Structure 19

Excavations directed by Thomas Jamison uncovered the eastern half of Structure 19's terminal summit architecture and penetrated the building's substructure. The excavations revealed two buried construction phases within the substructure and several sub phases related to Structure 19's superstructure.

While the steep form of the unexcavated Structure 19 mound suggested the presence of an intact vaulted building on a relatively short substructure, our investigations revealed a taller, steeper substructure that supported only the partial remains of masonry walls, up to a maximum height of 90 cm. As a result of the substructure's steep form, very little of its exterior treatment remains in place. We encountered only a small portion of the central staircase (Staircase 1) preserved at the base of the structure (Figure 3). On the summit, excavations discovered three rooms of Structure 19-1st's masonry palace with three south facing doors and a continuous north wall (Figure 4). Because the Maya typically built range structures with a great deal of symmetry, we reconstruct the summit building as having had 5 rooms, numbered 1 to 5 from the east to west.

Clearing Rooms 2 and 3 revealed five distinct subphases of construction. During the building's earliest subphase, Rooms 2 and 3 formed a single contiguous space that extended into the unexcavated Room 4 to the west, and a

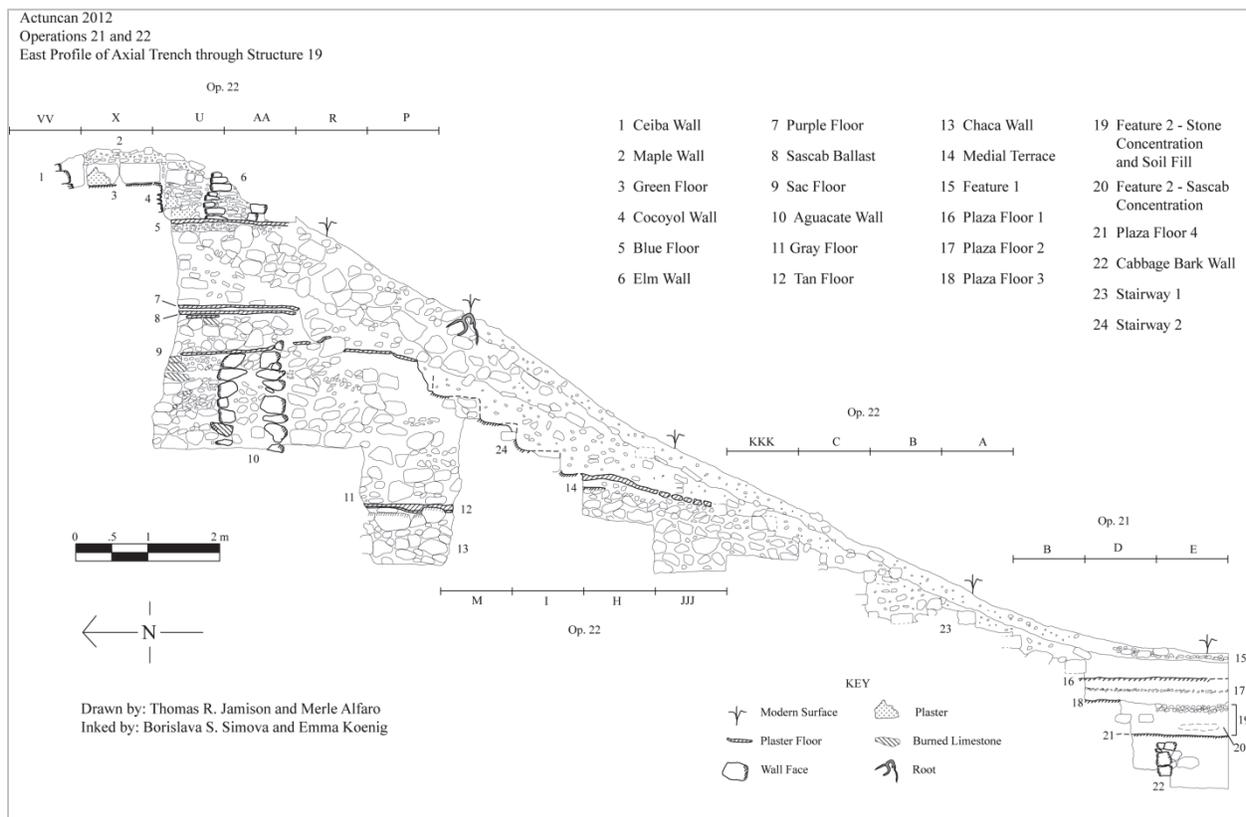


Figure 3. Structure 19 profile. Note that three phases of construction can be identified in this profile.

large continuous bench ran along the back wall of the rooms. In the second subphase, a 50 cm thick interior wall (Cedar Wall in Figure 4) divided Rooms 2 and 3. In the third subphase, the bench in Room 3 was reconfigured into a C shaped by extending the ends forward perpendicularly to meet the south wall on either side of the central door. In a fourth subphase, the wall between Rooms 2 and 3 was thickened to 2 m in width by constructing Maple Wall (Figure 4), greatly restricting the size of Room 3 and transforming the C-shaped bench into an L-shaped bench (Figure 5).

We surmise the series of small alterations to Rooms 2 and 3 stemmed from structural instability during its occupation. Some of the walls such as the door jamb between Rooms 2 and 3 (Elm Wall in Figure 4) are slumping to the south. When Cedar Wall was constructed to divide rooms 2 and 3, it filled in the slumped face of Elm Wall indicating that the slumping occurred prior to Cedar Wall's construction (Figure 6). We posit that these increasingly

thick interior walls were constructed to support the building's ever more unstable vaulted roof. Although little evidence of such a roof remains today, the thickness of the wall stubs are within the range of vaulted rooms at other sites (Andrews et al. 2003; Mongelluzzo 2011; Yaeger 1997), particularly Early Classic vaulted rooms (Stanley H. Loten, personal communication, 2012).

The construction date of Structure 19-1st may further explain the building's instability. Excavations into sealed fill contexts within the substructure below Room 3 encountered only Late and Terminal Preclassic ceramics. Based on the secure Terminal Preclassic construction date of Structure 19-1st's building platform, we also place the initial construction of the masonry superstructure in Terminal Preclassic period. In comparison, ceramics from the fill of Maple Wall supports a Late Classic date for the sequence of internal renovations described previously. Importantly, this Early Classic hiatus in construction marks a likely gap in the

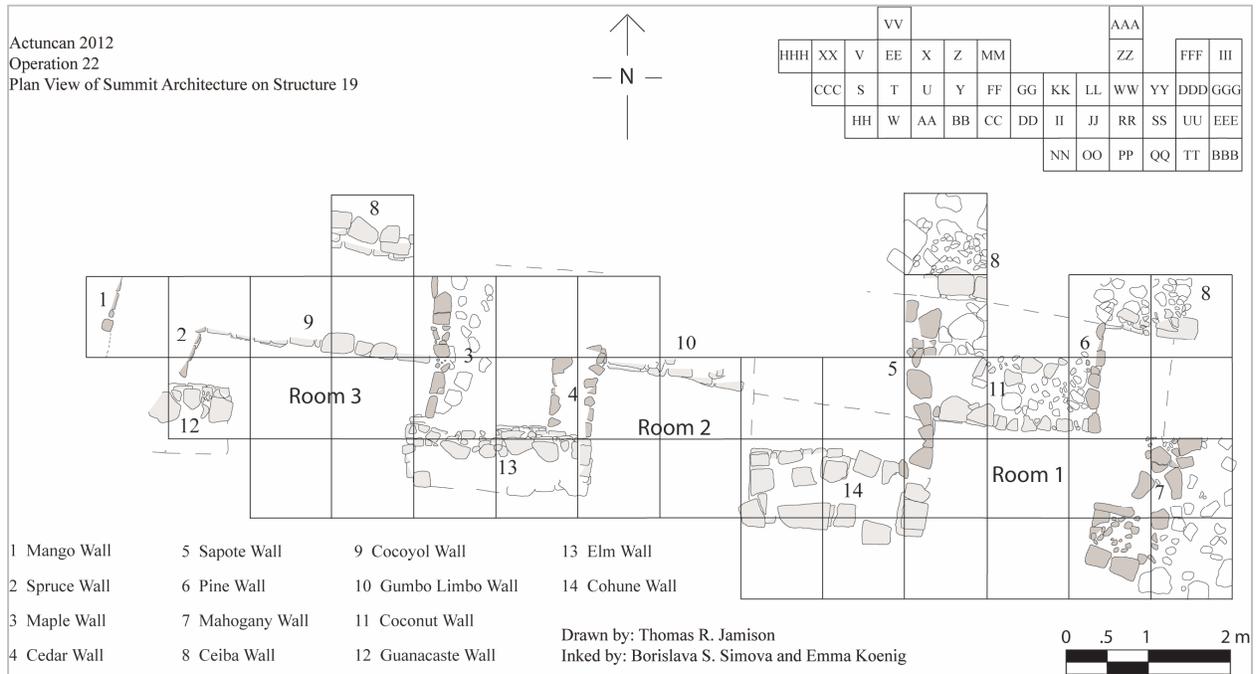


Figure 4. Plan showing the terminal architecture of Structure 19-1st prior to the final subphase of construction when rooms 2 and 3 were filled with limestone rubble.

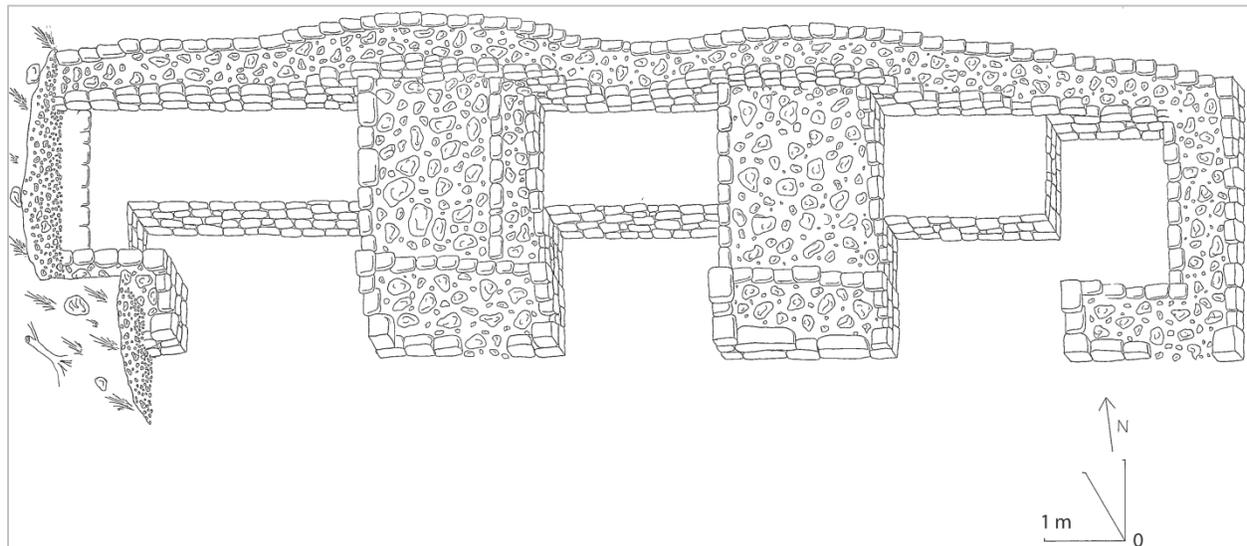


Figure 5. Axonomic reconstruction of Structure 19-1st.

building’s use and maintenance. Upon the building’s reoccupation in the Late Classic period, internal modifications were used to reinforce the walls after 300 years of neglect.

During the final modifications, Rooms 2 and 3 were filled with fine sediments packed around rough and cut limestone blocks,

including the placement of a single large vault cap stone in each doorway. The fill extended evenly throughout the rooms and over their benches. In Room 2, well-preserved remnants of a plaster floor covered this fill, indicating that the room was intentionally filled rather than filled naturally during the building’s collapse.



Figure 6. Image of the collapsing southern wall of Structure 19. Note how the internal wall addition was constructed to fill in where the outer wall has pushed outwards.



Figure 7. Materials found in the Terminal Classic termination deposits located on Structure 19 and south of Structure 21A. (a) Carved marine shell pendant. (b) Carefully halved Belize Red Incised ocarina.

The very limited amount of collapse debris found on Structure 19's summit, as well as the presence of cap stones in the doorways, indicates that the building's roof was dismantled, either intentionally or catastrophically, and scavenged for building materials prior to the filling of Rooms 2 and 3. Ceramics from this filling episode date the removal of the building's roof and filling of the rooms to the Hats' Chaak phase near the end of the Late Classic period. The Maya also may have cut down the walls to a uniform height to construct a building with a perishable roof using posts footed into the wall stubs, given the presence of a plaster floor in Room 2 above the fill. The absence of Terminal Classic occupation on Structure 19, however, indicates that this reoccupation would likely have been limited in time. Alternatively, it is possible that collapsing the roof and filling the rooms served to terminate the building's use and marked the end of its functional life. The placement of cap stones in the doorways of rooms lends evidence for the ceremonial closure of the building.

On the eastern end of the masonry structure, Room 1 was not subject to the same complex set of modifications. This room contains a bench stretching partway across the northern wall abutting the western wall of the room. We found no evidence of the wall modifications or filling seen in Rooms 2 and 3, though the articulation of the bench with the west wall indicates that it was constructed after the wall layouts were complete. A concentration of ceramics that included a Terminal Classic Mount Maloney bowl and fragments of a carved marine shell pendent were found at the eastern end of the bench resting on the floor (Figure 7a). This deposit provides the only example of Terminal Classic ceramics from the summit of Structure 19. Based on their location and temporal uniqueness, we interpret these materials as part of a termination ceremony following the building's abandonment.

In sum, Structure 19-1st's construction sequence indicates that the substructure and vaulted superstructure were initially built during the Terminal Preclassic period. After a hiatus in the Early Classic period, Structure 19-1st's superstructure was refurbished and structurally reinforced in the Late Classic period. Although

abandonment may be the best explanation for the building's structural failings, it is possible that natural disasters or benign neglect was the cause. Because the timing of Structure 19's reoccupation is contemporaneous with the rise of Xunantunich (LeCount et al. 2002), we suggest that this space was re-commissioned at the behest of that site's ruler.

Two earlier construction phases were revealed by excavations in a 2 m wide by 17 m long axial trench that ran from the bottom to the top of the substructure and a 2 by 4 m deep sounding below Room 3 (Figure 3). Both structures—19-2nd and 19-3rd—date to the Terminal Preclassic period. Of Structure 19-2nd, we exposed a section of a medial terrace, the upper portion of Staircase 2, and a small portion of the structure's summit platform surface (Purple Floor). Staircase 2 was dismantled in antiquity as most of the limestone blocks making up the risers had been removed prior to the construction of Structure 19-1st. Additionally, a large amount of sculpted and painted plaster was found scattered over the top of the stairs indicating that a frieze or other sculpture was dismantled before the structure's interment. The floor of Structure 19-2nd had been burned in several areas, hinting that rituals may have terminated the building's use. This floor was about 1.5 m down from the earliest floor of Structure 19-1st.

Structure 19-3rd was exposed in a 1 by 2 m sounding 4 m down from the earliest floor of Structure 19-1st. Structure 19-3rd consists of a well-made plaster floor (Gray Floor in Figure 3) constructed on large chert boulder fill. Like Structure 19-2nd, it dates to the Terminal Preclassic period. While Structure 19-3rd is the earliest version identified, we expect earlier phases exist further below because of the thick Late Preclassic plaza floors found immediately to the south of Structure 19 in our 2 by 2 m test pit there.

Excavations at Group 8

Excavations also targeted Group 8, the compound attached to the north and eastern sides of Structure 19. Group 8 consists of four structures (20, 21A, 21B, and 22) aligned around a central patio immediately to the north of the range structure and five structures (19B, 22, 25,

83, and 24) that form two additional auxiliary patios attached to the east (Figure 2). Based on the form of Group 8 and its attachment to Structure 19, we hypothesized that it served as residential space for rulers administrating from Structure 19 during the Late Classic period. The small size of Group 8's structures does not seem to fit the model of complex Late Classic palace architecture typically seen at long occupied sites such as Tikal, Cahal Pech, and Buenavista del Cayo (Ball and Taschek 2001; Harrison 1970; Yaeger et al. 2012) or the grand palace spaces built at upstart regional powers constructed during the Late Classic period (Demarest et al. 2003; Yaeger 2010). By mapping the group's terminal architecture and determining its construction history, we hoped to understand the reasons for this unusual architectural arrangement.

Axial excavations at Structure 22, hypothesized to be the eastern shrine of Group 8, were directed by Carolyn Freiwald. Units were placed into the patio immediately to the west of the structure and into the platform to locate burials or other evidence of ancestor worship. At Group 1, a commoner patio-focused group located nearby, Freiwald (2012) had previously encountered multiple overlapping and entwined burials in an analogous context. The placement of ancestors in a similar pattern within the ruler's residence would both speak to long term occupation of Group 8 by one lineage and continuity of burial practices across social classes. Freiwald's 3 m by 3 m excavation unit was designed to test these ideas. Although the excavations discovered a sequence of four plaster floors dating from the Late Preclassic to Late Classic periods, no burials were found. While this finding does not rule out Structure 22's function as an ancestor shrine, it does mean that the rulers were following a different pattern of burial than commoners living nearby. A small looters' trench in the top of Structure 22 may have destroyed a central burial and other features; however, cleaning of the looters' pits and expanded summit excavations found no evidence that the looters had disturbed any such deposits. Further investigations deeper into the structure may find burials beyond the current limits of our excavation.

Our axial trench into Structure 22 exposed

two construction episodes---Structures 22-1st and 2nd---both dating to the second half of the Late Classic period. Structure 22-1st is a 2 m tall platform constructed of large, cut limestone blocks that likely held a perishable structure since we found no evidence of masonry walls on the summit. Atypically of eastern shrines, Structure 22-1st does not have an outset staircase on the building's western side (Becker 1999). Structure 22-2nd, on the other hand, has a three stair staircase that was blocked off by the construction of the later structure's platform edge. This earlier platform was 90 cm high with a partial freestanding masonry wall on its eastern side. Unlike the later platform, it could have held a partial masonry structure with a perishable roof and a perishable wall on the building's less public western side where no masonry wall was found. The freestanding masonry wall is the only one of its kind we have found on a comparably sized structure at Actuncan and is likely an indication of the elite status of the occupants.

David Mixer's excavations in the northwestern portion of Group 8 explored the unusual nature of two structures: 21A and 21B. Structure 21A is located in the northwest corner of Group 8 and faces both the plaza to the west and the courtyard buildings to the east. Structure 21B is a low platform that runs east to west across the northern end of the group abutting Structure 22 and Structure 21A. A bajareque wall footed in a trench between two lines of upright limestone slabs (Chichem and Gumbolimbo Walls in Figure 8) may have been constructed along the northern edge of Structure 21B to provide more privacy to interior space located around the patio. On the north side of this wall, terraces protruding from both structures may have served as auxiliary space for activities performed outside the bajareque fence. The function of this space may reflect a more modest version of the attached palace kitchens that served the royal residence at Xunantunich (LeCount 2010).

Structure 21A-1st is a low square platform about 4 m² high and raised slightly above the level of the adjoining structures (Figure 8). Excavations defined two phases of construction both dating to the later part of the Late Classic period. Structure 21A-1st consisted solely of a

construction. Structure 21B was built in only one construction phase and dates exclusively to the later part of the Late Classic period. This platform likely held one or more perishable structures and served as residential space similar to Structure 20 to the west. A single step provided access down into to the noble courtyard to the building's south. Structure 20, the group's western structure, was excavated in 2004 field season at which time Lisa LeCount and John Blitz (2005) found a low residential platform built solely during the Late Classic period.

After Group 8 was abandoned in the Terminal Classic period, the compound was the scene of termination rituals. In the northwest corner of the Group 8 patio, we encountered partial smashed ceramic vessels, two manos, and an incised ocarina carefully halved lengthwise (Figure 7b). This deposit represents the only Terminal Classic ceramics found in Group 8. Similarly, the only Terminal Classic ceramics on Structure 19 were in the deposit found sitting on the floor of Room 1. To us, these deposits indicate that this complex was abandoned in the Late Classic, but not ritually terminated until the Terminal Classic period. This action is significant because most of Actuncan's other households have a robust Terminal Classic occupation (Mixter et al. 2012).

Conclusions

Maya palaces typically served a multiplicity of functions beyond serving as a residence (Inomata and Houston 2001). They served as the setting for a broad array of public events, such as political meetings, tribute collection, religious rites, and feasts that frequently took place inside and on the steps of large, centrally located range structures (Reents-Budet 2001). As Actuncan's largest and most centrally located range structure, Structure 19-1st likely served as the location for many of these kinds of events. However, the building's single row of publically oriented rooms lack the private spaces typical of residential palaces, which often exhibit floor plans in which tandem rooms are flanked by transverse rooms (Christie 2003). Therefore, Structure 19 likely was the scene of public functions, but not the location of the ruler's residence. Its position at the northern end

of Actuncan's *sacbe* opposite the site's major ceremonial group and immediately behind the site's only ballcourt indicates that it served as a stage for public performance and an endpoint for ritual processions. Group 8, immediately to the north of Structure 19, appears to have been a briefly occupied noble residential group established during the Late Classic period and abandoned before the Terminal Classic period. The lack of historical depth to Group 8 indicates that Structure 19 stood alone during Actuncan's Terminal Preclassic apogee, diminishing the possibility that the complex served as domestic space during that time period. Instead, the Terminal Preclassic ruler's residence must have been elsewhere at the site.

Of significance to this paper, we note the close timing between the abandonment of Actuncan's Structure 19, the closure of its noble court, and the dismantling of Xunantunich's palace before the start of the Terminal Classic period (Yaeger 2010). We suggest that during the Late Classic period, Xunantunich placed a steward at Actuncan to reoccupy Structure 19 and construct the Group 8 compound. Because of Actuncan's Terminal Preclassic legacy of power, placing a vassal at Structure 19 would have allowed the rulers of Xunantunich to draw on the memory of Actuncan's past to legitimize their rulership of the region. Structure 19's central location and its ancillary court area signify the occupants' high noble status, but the short use-life of its ancestor shrine may indicate that the occupants were new to the Actuncan community, possibly derived from an offshoot of the Xunantunich court.

Xunantunich's control over Actuncan lasted only a short time. Coincident with the abandonment of the ruler's residence at Xunantunich at the end of the Late Classic period, Actuncan's noble court was abandoned, signaling a rapid political disconnect with the overlords at Xunantunich. Concurrent with this abandonment, some long-occupied residential structures were expanded and other previously abandoned domiciles were reoccupied and refurbished. Soon afterward, a new integrative Terminal Classic political organization, centered on Group 4, replaced old institutions once anchored by Structure 19's palace compound (Figure 2; Mendelsohn and Keller 2011).

As Jason Yaeger (2008) has noted, while divine authority faltered at Xunantunich, claims of authority were increasingly made by neighboring centers. At Buenavista del Cayo and Cahal Pech, these claims are identified through the construction of rich tombs (Awe 2012; Helmke et al. 2008). There, local elites may have attempted to perpetuate the system of Classic divine rule; but at Actuncan, people formed a new kind of authority, one in which groups participated more equitably in decision-making. Just as Late Classic Xunantunich had partially rooted its legitimacy in Actuncan's deep history, the Terminal Classic residents of Actuncan used the site's pre-royal origins to authenticate their post-royal community.

Acknowledgments We would like to thank the staff of the Institute of Archaeology for their continued support of the Actuncan Archaeological Project. In particular, we benefited from the observations and suggestions of Drs. Jaime Awe, John Morris, and Allan Moore during their visit to our excavations of Structure 19 and Group 8. The spring 2012 excavations were funded through a grant from the National Science Foundation (BCS-0923747). We are grateful for the support of our American and Belizean colleagues without whom this research would not have been possible. In particular, we would like to thank Drs. John Blitz and Carolyn Freiwald who joined us in the field during the spring. We would also like to thank Borislava Simova and Emma Koenig for their work digitizing figures 3 and 4, and BrieAnna Langlie and Dr. David Freidel for reading drafts of this paper. As always, our research was dependent on the skillful work of Belizean men and women from the nearby towns of San Jose de Succotz and Benque Viejo del Carmen. We thank our hosts at Clarissa Falls Ecolodge, especially Azucena Galvez and her extended family, for providing us with a beautiful and stress-free place to live and work.

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