EARLY MAYA MONUMENTAL ARCHITECTURE IN THE BELIZE RIVER VALLEY: RECENT ARCHaeOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF EL QUEMADO AT PACBITUN

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In the Middle Preclassic (900-300 BC), physical evidence of the increasing complexity of Maya society can be found in the form of monumental public architecture. However, the origins of temple building are poorly understood during this time period, especially in the Belize Valley. At the site of Pacbitun we have been exploring the initial purpose of public architecture as constructions to bring like-minded communities together for ritual, ceremonial, and/or social functions. Archaeological investigations by the Pacbitun Regional Archaeological Project (PRAP) have recently unearthed a large, radial pyramid (dubbed El Que'umado) buried beneath Plaza A in the site center. El Que'umado is very reminiscent of Str. E-VII-Sub at Uaxactun and our excavation of this sub-plaza temple may shed new light on the evolution of the E Group located in Plaza A as well as on the foundation, nature, and development of the site's early social and political structure. This paper will summarize our research to date, including a look at other architectural complexes in the Belize Valley that were involved in early public activities similar to what we have identified at Pacbitun.

Introduction

The installation and development of Preclassic monumental architecture is a subject that is poorly represented in the Belize River Valley. In large part, this is owed to the fact that early structures often lie below several layers of sequential architecture making it difficult to locate. Even when large Preclassic structures are located and identified, excavations often only provide a small glimpse of the building; the exposure of the building is too limited to investigate its architectural features. Therefore, a well-preserved Preclassic monumental structure that can be relatively easily exposed would be a rare find in the Belize Valley and could greatly enhance our knowledge and understanding of the subject. Fortunately, such a structure has been discovered at the ancient Maya site of Pacbitun.

Pacbitun is a medium-sized site located in the southern periphery of the Belize River Valley region (Figure 1). Although much of the surface architecture found in each of the five main plazas at Pacbitun date to the Classic period, excavations have revealed that the site was occupied much earlier. Over the years, excavations into its plazas have led to several Preclassic discoveries. Although early investigations of the range structures in Plaza B suggested that this was a residential area, exploration beneath the plaza surface revealed that this area's residential function goes back as far as 800 BC. Remnants of several residential structures were located meters beneath the modern day Plaza B surface (Figure 2). By the late Mai phase (600 – 300 BC), the structures had become slightly more elaborate and were laden with evidence of craft specialization involving the production of marine shell beads.

Figure 1. (top) The Belize River Valley and Pacbitun; (bottom) The site core of Pacbitun.
Early Maya Monumental Architecture at Pacbitun

implying the early prominence of the site (Healy et al. 2004; Hohmann 2012; Powis et al. 2009). Interestingly, early excavations into the site’s E Group complex in Plaza A, the site’s ceremonial heart, revealed that construction may have begun shortly after the abandonment of the early Plaza B structures (Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2004). However, like Plaza B, investigations beneath the Plaza A surface in 2012 revealed that Pacbitun’s ceremonial history goes back much further and supports the site’s early importance.

El Quemado

Since the mid-1980s, archaeologists have walked over and probed into Plaza A, narrowly missing what lay centimeters beneath. Prior to excavations in the summer of 2013, geophysical survey using ground penetrating radar (GPR) was conducted in Plaza A resulting in the discovery of several anomalies beneath the plaza floor (Skaggs and Powis 2014). Test units were set up to investigate these anomalies. One set of four 1 m by 1 m units located in the northern portion of Plaza A unearthed a portion of a task unit. Cut stones (possibly stone robbed from previous architecture) were stacked several courses high to form a construction pen that likely served to divide labor into manageable segments across Plaza A (Loten and Pendergast 1984:15). Task units have been found in several areas beneath the Plaza A surface and are thought to run across the entire area to support the massive build-up of Plaza A in the early Late Preclassic (Figure 3). What was interesting about this plaza unit, however, was not the cut stones of the task unit but what these stones were set upon. Here, at a depth of approximately one meter, a well preserved plaster surface that nearly spanned the entire 4 m by 1 m unit was discovered. Additionally, the plaster curved down like a step in one portion. After exposing 11 meters east-west by 7 meters north-south, it was obvious by the end of the 2013 field season that we had discovered a large sub-plaza temple. In 2014 and 2015, the Pacbitun Regional Archaeological Project (PRAP) continued to uncover the massive platform, now dubbed El Quemado, or “Q” for short, meaning “the burned one” due to extensive burning on much of its plaster surface (Figure 4).

Radiocarbon samples taken from a test unit exploring the structure’s presumed midpoint corresponds with the ceramic evidence and confirms a Middle Preclassic (ca. 700-400 BC) date. This test unit into Q also found no earlier architecture suggesting that the platform may have been built as a single construction effort. The excavation of Q, currently measuring 25 meters east-west, almost spans the width of Plaza A. Twelve meters have been uncovered north-south almost completely exposing the southern face of the building. Lining the southern central axis of the platform, seven stairs run from its presumed base to its summit. Flanking the southern central stairs are four armatures, two on each side encasing the ascending stairs. The top two armatures extend out to the south from a long east-west platform near the summit of the building. This platform also has narrow side stairs that descend down the east and west sides of the building. Finally, just
before reaching the summit, set onto the armature platform and on axis with the side stairs, a small central landing is flanked to the east and west by two smaller raised rectangular platforms. Excavations of the summit have yet to produce any evidence of postholes; thus, without a superstructure, Q would most accurately be termed a platform structure.

Although the preservation of Q is quite good, there are several areas that appear to have been purposefully destroyed. The summit of Q, which stands approximately 3 m tall, is the least well preserved and also exhibits the most extensive burning. The armatures that line the southern stairs also appear to have been purposefully destroyed (Figure 5). In this case, however, the stucco debris was not discarded but was left piled in front of each armature where it had been chopped. Although heavily eroded, we propose that the stucco piles found are likely remnants of masks that adorned each armature. Additionally, two more sets of partially destroyed stairs were also found lining the outer edges of the southern armatures. These narrow stairs were likely destroyed prior to the placement of the task unit stones. Leading up to the top armature platform, the broken southern stairs meet and share a landing with the east and west side stairs (Figure 6). The poor condition of the stairs is likely a consequence of the destruction of the southeast and southwest corners of the building. Q appears to have once had corners composed of three or more terraces set between and linking each corner stair.

To date, no comparable architecture has been found in the Belize River Valley. At the moment, Q is the largest and most elaborate Middle Preclassic structure found in the region. Aside from the structure’s architectural uniqueness, what further distinguishes Q from other architecture in the Belize Valley is the method of its abandonment. Evidence suggests that Q was abandoned around 400 BC. Rather than razing and incorporating elements of Q as

Figure 4. The first photo (top) is of El Quemado after the excavation of 2015; the second photo (bottom) shows one of many heavily burned areas on the surface of Q; this area in particular was found centered on the upper armature platform.

Figure 5. A photo of the stucco debris piled directly in front of the broken armatures on Q’s south face.
core within a later building construction, a common practice throughout Mesoamerica, the inhabitants of Pacbitun decided to bury this monumental building virtually intact to start anew. Evidence such as chopped corners, extensive burning, ceramic offerings, and the possible destruction of masks suggest that the platform may have been ritually terminated. The platform was then covered in a thick layer of muck aiding in its preservation. Task units were set to build up and enlarge the plaza to its maximum extent, ultimately covering the massive early platform with a floor just above its summit, thereby sealing Q below what became the main plaza during Pacbitun’s subsequent Classic period apogee. Now, with the building exposed once again, our goal has been to determine the architectural shape, style, and orientation. Understanding Q’s architecture may help to identify its form and function and possibly reveal an early plaza scheme that may involve other Plaza A structures.

Plaza A Configurations
To better understand El Quemado’s significance at Pacbitun, it is important to reconfigure the architectural dimensions and features to identify the platform’s orientation and plaza scheme. Unfortunately, the large scale excavations in Plaza A have yet to uncover enough of Q to take precise measurements. Moreover, the destruction of the corners of Q has also made it difficult to determine the structural dimensions of the platform. However, looking at the platform’s exposed dimensions, architectural style, and plaza location has allowed us to postulate Q’s appearance; and its possible plaza configurations. Using these indicators, we believe Q could either be an east-west oriented northern structure or a radial pyramid.

If Q is oriented east-west, it is likely the northern structure of a much earlier Plaza A layout; the old plaza seemingly sharing a similar concept of directionality and orientation with its replacement. Not only does Q sit within the
northern portion of the plaza but its north-south central axis appears to align with Plaza A’s current northern (Structure 3) and southern (Structure 6) buildings. Q’s east-west axis is also closely aligned with Structure 4, the eastern triad’s northern structure not likely in existence at this time. Interestingly, early versions of Structure 1 and Structure 2, both dating to around the late Middle Preclassic, may fit into Q’s plaza scheme (Healy et al 2004:209-210). However, more investigation is necessary to confirm this architectural relationship.

On the other hand, the current dimensions of the summit and the location and symmetry of the armature platforms and corner stairs may suggest that Q was a radial temple. If this is correct, with the southern half exposed, the northern half of the platform would still lie beneath Structure 3 to the north. Excavations during the 2013 field season did locate earlier architecture beneath Structure 3 (designated as Structure 3-2nd) that may be associated with Q (Micheletti and Stanchly 2013:52). If future testing can confirm that the architecture beneath Structure 3 belongs to Q and that the platform is truly radial, its architectural design would bear a striking resemblance to Tikal’s Lost World Pyramid (Figure 7) and Uaxactun’s E-VII sub (Figure 8), although at a smaller scale. Both of these structures are radial in formation and share a similar architectural style with Q. Both structures were also adorned by stucco masks; another feature thought to be present on Q. Interestingly, the Lost World Pyramid and E-VII sub had earlier buildings within them dating back to the Middle and Late Preclassic periods.

(Laporte and Fialko 1994:336; Ricketson and Ricketson 1937; Chase and Chase 1995:92), which look like Q in some way. This suggests to us that perhaps the form of Q may have been similar to Preclassic precursors of the Tikal and Uaxactun buildings.

Radial pyramids are often associated with two types of architectural layouts. This includes the Twin Pyramid complex and the E Group complex. However, the Twin Pyramid complex was not initiated until sometime in the Classic period (AD 600 – 800) making this explanation less likely (Cohodas 1980:214). Alternatively, the E Group complex was a common plaza scheme in the Preclassic period (Chase and Chase 1995). The radial pyramid in an E Group configuration is centrally positioned on the western border of a plaza and is paired with a long, low, north-south oriented eastern plaza platform that can support one or three structures. Both the Lost World Pyramid and E-VII sub are western structures of E Group complexes.
Could Q have been an early western structure of an E Group complex?

Pacbitun’s Plaza A is actually home to an E Group complex; however, the E Group configuration was completed long after El Quemado was buried. Q’s northern plaza position and close proximity to the three eastern buildings also argues against it ever functioning as an early western structure for the current eastern triad in Plaza A. If Q ever functioned as an E Group’s western structure, its eastern counterpart would have to be positioned to the northeast of the eastern triad’s current location. A closer look at the elevation of the site core at Pacbitun may actually support this claim.

As previously mentioned, Q was buried sometime in the Late Preclassic beneath Plaza A’s surface. The event that buried Q simultaneously raised the entire plaza surface several meters. This is evident when examining the contour map of the main plaza in the site core (Figure 9). Curiously, the elevation of Plaza A remains consistent to the northeast of the plaza, as indicated by the orange contour line in Figure 9, possibly suggesting that this area was also built up to bury architecture. If this is correct, Q and the architecture covered by this elevated area would be in a more appropriate E Group east-west alignment. Unfortunately, only limited investigations have been conducted in this area of the site. However, excavations carried out in 2010 in Pacbitun’s Eastern Court went down several meters into plaza space and recovered Preclassic materials similar to the Plaza A fill (Cheong 2013). Future exploration into Plaza A and the elevated region at Pacbitun will need to be conducted to reveal whether Q was accompanied by an eastern counterpart. Until then, it remains unclear whether other monumental structures, constructed above or hidden below the plaza surfaces, ever coexisted with Q.

Questions for the Future

Although our current excavation progress of El Quemado has significantly broadened our understanding of the early ceremonial center at Pacbitun, more research is necessary to fully understand Q and its relationship with the other structures in Plaza A. Its discovery, not unlike any other major archaeological discovery, has brought about dozens of questions. For example, what is Q’s true architectural shape and plaza orientation? Did Q ever coexist with current Plaza A architecture? Are more structures buried beneath the elevated surface at Pacbitun? If so, what was their architectural relationship to Q? Answering these questions will help us to better understand the early occupation at Pacbitun. What we have established is that the presence of Q in Plaza A confirms an even larger and more complex community at the site of Pacbitun than previously known; a community that is not only focused on shell bead production in the residential setting of Plaza B but also largely invested in ritual/ceremonial performance in Plaza A. The activities occurring in both plazas suggest a division of labor; a clear sign of social stratification. More investigation into each plaza may help to identify early status markers.

Finally, our understanding of Pacbitun’s early community as a whole may also, one day, provide clues to the site’s early socio-political standing within the Belize River Valley. The mass production of exchange goods (shell beads) and construction of public ritual/ceremonial architecture both suggest the early significance of Pacbitun. Intriguingly, if Pacbitun is as significant as it seems, what could have transpired at the site during the early Late Preclassic that caused such a drastic
transformation? Why was Q methodically destroyed (or terminated) and then hidden beneath the main plaza floor during the Late Preclassic Plaza A expansion? What sociopolitical factors led to a major Late Preclassic reconfiguration of Plaza A? These are some of questions we hope to address with further excavations of El Quemado and Pacbitun.

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