3 Q AND A: EXPOSING EL QUEMADO’S ARCHITECTURAL CONFIGURATION IN PLAZA A AT PACBITUN, BELIZE

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Since the discovery of El Quemado beneath the epicentral plaza at the ancient Maya site of Pacbitun in Belize, ongoing excavations have continued to investigate the Middle Preclassic platform’s dimensions, orientation, and features. Based on excavations prior to the 2016 field season, the physical attributes of Q are suggestive of a few possible architectural configurations. Therefore, to limit these possibilities, the primary objective of the Pacbitun Regional Archaeological Project (PRAP) during the 2016 field season was to further expose the structure. After unearthing a larger portion of Q, we were able to examine additional architectural attributes which has allowed us to eliminate potential configurations and gain a better understanding of the platform’s structural composition. With a better understanding of Q’s physical configuration, the potential for eventually comprehending the platform’s spatial configuration increases. This knowledge will not only allow us to explore Q’s relationship with known structures in Plaza A, but will also aid in future explorations searching for associated architecture beneath the plaza surface. This paper will summarize our research to date on El Q and how its presence at Pacbitun shapes our perception of public activities during the Middle Preclassic.

Introduction

Over the past four years, excavations conducted by the Pacbitun Regional Archaeological Project (PRAP) have focused on a large structure found buried beneath the main plaza at the site of Pacbitun, Belize. Investigations from 2013 to 2015 have provided the project with a basic understanding of this building. Radiocarbon analysis suggests that the structure was built in the late Middle Preclassic sometime around 550 BC and was buried around the beginning of the fourth century BC. With no evidence of a superstructure, the large platform is thought to have had a public ritual/ceremonial function. The structure’s Spanish name, El Quemado, meaning “the burned one,” is indicative of its heavily burned plaster surface. This type of burning is a derivative of either long term habitual/sacramental use of the structure or of a single termination event. Although we have learned much about the platform’s physical attributes, extensive excavations have only just begun to reveal the nature of El Quemado’s architectural configuration. After the 2015 field season, we were able to begin to interpret and hypothesize Q’s structural configuration. Based on attributes such as Q’s architectural features, orientation, and plaza location, the 2015 excavations led us to determine that the platform was either a northern plaza structure or a radial pyramid. With Q narrowed down to these two architectural configurations, the goal of the 2016 field season was to test which of these hypotheses the platform best represented.

The 2013-2015 Excavations of El Quemado

Located in the southern periphery of the Belize River Valley, Pacbitun is one of just a few sites in this region thought to have had a significant Middle Preclassic occupation (Figure 1). While excavations of the monumental...
architecture at Pacbitun has identified a Late Classic prominence, sub-plaza investigations in Plaza B have also suggested that the site had experienced an even earlier opulence (Hohmann and Powis 1996, 1999; Hohmann et al. 1999; Healy 1990; Powis and Healy 2012; Powis et al. 2009). In an attempt to connect the Middle Preclassic residential area found beneath Plaza B with early ceremonial architecture, investigations into Plaza A in 2013 discovered El Quemado in a test unit set to explore anomalies located by ground penetrating radar (GPR) (Skaggs and Powis 2014; Skaggs et al. 2016). The 2013 excavation continued to expose what would later be recognized as a narrow eastern staircase leading up to platform features associated with the structure’s southern face. Work in 2014 and 2015 continued to excavate the southern half of Q, partially exposing the summit and much of the southern face. Although the platform’s immensity and architectural complexity had made it difficult to fully understand the structure’s dimensions and form, considerable information had been gained through the first three years of excavation.

Q’s burned surface and ostensibly organized destruction may indicate that this structure was either abandoned and/or terminated. For example, each of the armatures are thought to have once featured plaster masks that were chopped and destroyed leaving mounds of smashed plaster on the structure’s surface. Moreover, the nose of each stair was also chopped and destroyed. Similar to burning, the partial desecration of structural features and masks is a common practice in termination events. Sometime after Q was desecrated, several task units were constructed in the area south of the structure. Likely running the length of the plaza, these task units run up the south side of Q to the structure’s summit. These were built to support an immense amount of dirt and marl fill brought in to raise and enlarge the plaza. Buried beneath the construction fill, El Quemado’s fate was sealed with a Plaza A plaster floor which would serve as the base on which the monumental constructions of the Classic period at Pacbitun would sit. Hidden from view, Q remained a secret for nearly two and a half millennia before finally being discovered in 2013.

The exposure of Q through 2015 had focused on the summit and south face of the platform which is composed of a large central staircase flanked by two other narrower staircases (Figure 2). A pair of upper and lower armature platforms (four armatures in total) divide each southern staircase into three vertical sections. A large majority of the outer staircases have been destroyed prior to the platform’s burial leaving a narrow vertical remnant of each stair. All three staircases ascend and terminate at the upper armature platform. Two more staircases ascend the east and west sides of Q and meet with their southern staircase counterparts at the upper armature platform. Unfortunately, the missing sections of the destroyed southern staircases have made it difficult to determine whether the stairs of Q’s southeast and southwest corners were adjoined by an inset or outset corner feature. One final diagnostic architectural feature on Q’s southern face is the east-west rectangular platform centered and abutted against the south edge of the structure’s summit. Set between the two staircase landings, the rectangular feature is composed of two smaller raised rectangular platforms flanking a longer, shallower platform.

Potential Architectural Configurations of El Quemado

By the end of the 2015 field season, excavations had reached 25m east-west by 12m north-south. While the expansions continued to unearth more of the structure’s southern features, the investigation was unable to reveal any further evidence of Q’s true architectural form. Fortunately, with one whole side of Q almost completely exposed, we were able to examine the platform’s physical and spatial attributes and begin to postulate possible configurations. Attributes such as Q’s architectural symmetry, northern plaza location, and decorated southern face suggest that Q could be a northern plaza structure.

Conversely, even though Q’s attributes correspond well with northern plaza structures, many of these attributes are also associated with a common Maya Lowland archetype known as a radial pyramid. Radial pyramids are typically square in plan with stairs lining all four sides. Often centrally located within a site, radial
pyramids usually lack superstructures and can include stucco deity masks and ancillary staircases (Cohodas 1980). After examining Q in 2015, it appeared that the structure’s southern face possessed many of these attributes. In fact, Q’s features bear a striking resemblance to E-VII sub, a radial pyramid in Group E at Uaxactun. Nevertheless, Q’s similarity to northern plaza structures and radial pyramids would necessitate further archaeological testing. Armed with this new information, the excavation plans for the 2016 field season could be structured according to these two possible architectural configurations.

Knowing little of Q’s dimensions and form, excavations from 2013 to 2015 had systematically expanded in all directions. In 2016, equipped with a better understanding of Q, excavations could now be more directionally oriented. Thus, to ensure the identification of Q’s architectural form, the 2016 investigations would expand from the previous excavation limits in each cardinal direction to try and locate the corners of the building. The east-west expansion would follow the surface of the summit to locate each side of the structure. Since it was determined that Q was either a northern plaza structure or radial pyramid, the exposure of the east and west sides of the platform would provide crucial information for this investigation and would ultimately prove to be the determining factor of the structure’s configuration. Excavations would also expand to the north and south on Q’s central axis. To the south, excavations hoped to expose the structure’s basal stair(s) and associated plaza floor. Following the summit to the north, our goal was to connect the current excavation of Q with a previous excavation of Structure 3, the northern structure of Plaza A. Interestingly, the purpose of this investigation was to explore Q’s potential relationship with another early structure found buried beneath Structure 3 in 2013 (Micheletti and Stanchly 2014).

The 2016 Eastern Excavation of Q

One of the most important goals of the 2016 field season was to expose the east and west sides of Q. Regardless of whether Q is a northern plaza structure or a radial pyramid, the east and west sides of the structure would most likely be mirror images of one another. Thus, once we began to understand the architecture on the east edge, excavations attempting to expose the western edge could be organized accordingly.

Our first task was to remove back dirt from the eastern and western excavation limits to re-expose the summit and side staircases. Once complete, excavations would continue east on the east-side staircase to expose any remaining stairs down to a plaza surface. Excavations would also continue east on the poorly preserved summit surface to locate the structure’s southeastern corner. Work near the stairs would eventually come down upon a task unit wall just to the east of the lowest step. Further investigation around this area would reveal that the task unit wall abutted against the structure’s south face and aligned with the southeastern corner of the building (Figure 3). After more of the corner and eastern edge of Q had been exposed, it became apparent that the building is likely composed of two platform levels (Figure 4). If this is the case, the lower platform appears to be slightly larger than the upper platform, extending 0.5m further to the east. Much of the plaster facade appears to be missing or stripped away from the upper platform’s cut limestone blocks that formed the south and east face walls. In fact, the entire southeastern corner was stripped of its plaster facade from the summit down to a distinctly burned plaza surface. However, the eastern edge’s lower platform, standing 0.8m from the plaza surface, appears to have been left largely intact. Stones from the southeastern corner and
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Figure 3. West facing photo of task unit aligning with Q’s southeastern corner. Photo courtesy of Jeff Powis.

Figure 4. West facing photo of upper and lower platform on the eastern side of Q. Photo courtesy of Jeff Powis.

Figure 5. West facing photo of appendage extending from the lower platform on the eastern side of Q. Photo courtesy of Jeff Powis.

the upper platform’s eastern edge appear to be missing, possibly robbed for the construction of the task units in Plaza A. However, measurements suggest that the building would have stood nearly 2.5m tall.

Moving north along the eastern edge of the building, an appendage measuring nearly 2m wide extends out from the lower platform 1.5m (Figure 5). The appendage appears to be bounded to the north and south by thin balustrades that have been partially destroyed. Although difficult to say with certainty, the feature’s balustrades give the impression that the appendage may have been a staircase. To the north of the appendage, only remnants of a partially dismantled lower platform remains, disappearing into the northern limits of our excavation, 7.6m from the southeastern corner.

The 2016 Western Excavation of Q

We began the western excavation by exposing more of the southern summit and the last few stairs of the western staircase. Like much of Q’s summit, the surface in the southwest region was also very poorly preserved. Just as we had predicted, excavations continuing in this location revealed a similar pattern of architecture which essentially mirrored what had been exposed in the eastern excavations. Like the eastern staircase, the nose of each step of the western staircase was chopped revealing a similar marl fill covered by a thick layer of heavily burned plaster. However, unlike the eastern staircase, the plaster facade of the south face wall above the southwestern stairs was left partially intact. Only a few cut stones were exposed in the wall near the upper steps of the staircase.

With investigations searching for Q’s southwestern corner edging closer to Plaza A’s western structure, Structure 2, architecture thought to be associated with the western structure’s northeastern corner was found about a meter beneath the modern surface. Continuing to a depth of 2m, our first indication of nearing Q’s southwestern corner came in the form of a task unit wall found abutting the structure’s south face. Like the eastern task unit, the task unit on the west end of the structure also aligned with the structure’s southern corner (Figure 6). Mimicking the east face of Q, excavations on the western edge of the structure exposed an upper and lower platform (Figure 7). While the upper platform on the west side of Q was also stripped of its plaster facade, it differed from the east side in that it was composed of several more courses of cut stone. It is unknown whether these
additional courses represent the true height of the structure’s summit or if these stones were stacked onto the original summit during the Late Preclassic Plaza A build-up. Although only the very top of the lower platform was exposed on the west end of the structure, the stones uncovered were still faced with a thick plaster layer suggesting that the plaster facade remained intact on the west end of the building as well.

The 2016 Southern Excavation of Q

Our first objective for the excavation of the southern stairs was to remove a large area of back dirt from the previous year’s excavation. This was done so that we could locate the building’s center axis by exposing just enough of the lower armatures to use them as a guide. With the stairs exposed, we would also be able to follow the known architecture once our excavation reached down to the lowest exposed step. Again, the purpose of the excavation in this location was to search for the structure’s basal step and associated plaza surface. A 6.25m (east-west) by 3m (north-south) area composed of two units was set on the south edge of the 2015 excavation on the structure’s central axis. The south edge of these two units are approximately 2.3m from Altar 2 and Stela 4; an altar and stela pair set in the center of Plaza A on the center line of Structure 1 and Structure 2. Excavations in this area, down to a depth of 50cm, located several plaza floors. The state of preservation of each floor continued to improve at greater depths and was best preserved in the eastern unit. Beneath the final plaza floor is a 1.5m level of multiple marl and clay stratums which served as construction fill to bury Q and raise the height of the plaza. As we continued down into this construction fill, a task unit wall was found projecting from the western profile wall of our excavation unit (Figure 8). This task unit had once run up the south stairs near the west pair of upper and lower armatures but had been removed prior to the final pictures taken at the close of the 2015 field season.

Nearing the level of Q’s lowest step, excavations in both units were suspended so that the last strata of fill composed of a thin layer of white marl could be carefully removed. This marl layer has consistently been found covering the surface of Q and was likely placed over the entire building prior to the mass amount of marl and dirt construction fills that helped to build up Plaza A. As the thin layer of white marl was troweled away, it became apparent that the plaster surface would only continue a few more
centimeters before terminating at a break where the plaster had been chopped in antiquity. Exploring to the south of this break, excavations would eventually hit bedrock approximately 50cm below the broken plaster surface indicating that this was likely the southernmost extent of Q’s architecture (Figure 9). Interestingly, no plaza surface was encountered to the south of the break. This has led us to believe that the broken plaster surface was not Q’s basal step but was actually a remnant of the structure’s plaza floor.

The 2016 Northern Excavation of Q

Excavations would also move in a northern direction, trenching toward the previous excavation of the south face of Structure 3. While excavating the central axis of Structure 3 in 2013, the project exposed Late Preclassic Puc phase (300 BC – AD 100) architecture (Structure 3-2nd) found deeply buried beneath the Late Classic Coc phase (AD 550 – 700) north building (Micheletti and Stanchly 2014). Interestingly, the Late Preclassic architecture designated as Structure 3-2nd was constructed upon a very well preserved plaster surface closely associated with Q’s summit (Figure 10). This plaster surface was either the summit of Q or the first Plaza A floor (Floor 4) constructed directly over-top of Q after the entire structure had been buried. Thus, further exploration was necessary to identify the association between Q and Structure 3-2nd.

Structure 3-2nd and the plaster surface found beneath the basal steps of the south face of Structure 3 were re-exposed along with a small trench on Q’s summit stretching from the platform’s re-exposed southern stairs to Stela 11 at the base of Structure 3. Excavations to the east of Stela 11 would discover a south facing staircase belonging to Structure 3-2nd (Figure 11). The staircase appears to have two or more phases of construction, all of which were poorly preserved. Further exploration searching for the plaster surface between Stela 11 and Structure 3-2nd revealed a north-south stone alignment. The stone alignment is below the level of the plaster surface and runs to the south beneath the Structure 3-2nd staircase implying its earlier origin (Figure 12). Regrettably, time did not allow us to continue down and explore the stone alignment. However, upon further inspection of this area, the orientation of Structure 3-2nd appears to be more aligned with the surface
structures (8 degrees west of north) while the stone alignment is more closely oriented with Q several more degrees west of north. Further investigation of this stone alignment will need to be conducted to identify its relationship with Q.

The last remnant of Q’s summit was found about 1.5m to the south of Stela 11. The poor preservation of the summit has made it difficult to determine whether it had once connected with the plaster surface that Structure 3-2nd was constructed upon. If the surface did at one point connect, it is conceivable that the erection of Stela 11 may have penetrated and destroyed the surface in this area. Thus, if this entire surface was the summit of Q, Structure 3-2nd would be the platform’s superstructure. However, we believe it is more likely that the structure’s foundation is a well-preserved Plaza A Floor 4, the floor that sealed Q beneath the current plaza. Nevertheless, this area will need to receive further investigation before stating anything conclusively.

Conclusion
While each of the directional excavations of the 2016 field season has provided us with more information regarding El Quemado’s dimensions and physical features, the eastern and western investigations were the most vital for understanding the structure’s configuration. After exposing the nearly vertical eastern and western facing walls extending down from the summit of Q, it is logical to assume that the building is a northern plaza structure. Although the northern portion of Q has yet to be exposed, it is likely that the stairs of the southern face were used as the structure’s primary access. While Q’s location beneath the northern portion of the artificially built-up Plaza A was suggestive of the structure’s northern plaza position, it was imperative to correlate the structure’s architecture with this assumption. Knowing the structure’s dimensions and configuration will not only help to coordinate future excavations of Q but will also aid in the search for other associated plaza structures still buried beneath the Plaza A construction fill. If present, the function, orientation, and configuration of these associated structures will help to establish a more complete understanding of the early ritual/ceremonial center at Pacbitun. PRAP is hoping to further this goal in subsequent years by excavating in plausible locations in search of other potential buildings associated with Q’s plaza scheme.

Along with the speculation of the existence of other associated sub-plaza structures, we can also begin to postulate the meaning of Q and its northern plaza position. Through the cooperation and coordination of a large labor force, the monumental construction of Q is a testament to the sacredness of this location not only to the site’s early inhabitants but also to the surrounding local communities. Q’s lack of superstructure and exposed, ornate southern facade likely indicate that the southern face acted as a stage for performance during public gatherings. Assuming Q is the most prominent public ritual/ceremonial structure in the plaza during the Middle Preclassic, the platform’s plaza position may be suggestive of the ideological significance of “north” at Pacbitun. However, this cannot be stated with confidence until after the other plaza positions have been thoroughly tested.

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References


