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Recent investigations in a large, enclosed courtyard on the southwest corner of the ancient Maya site of Pacbitun, Belize, revealed evidence of successive emplacements of ritually important deposits within its plaza. Initial analysis of the stratigraphy and ceramic material suggests that the entire courtyard plaza has only one or two floors, with construction and use during the Late Classic period (AD 550–800). Graves with slate capstones were found west of the central excavation unit. Either these were initially intrusive through the plaza floor, or subsequent revisiting of the burials breached the plaza floor. A burial on top of the western-most slate capstones was particularly interesting, with associated fragments of a partially restorable Ulua Valley-style carved marble vase and a pair of carved shell atlatl finger loops as grave goods.

Introduction
During renewed excavations into what is believed to be an elite residential and administrative area of Pacbitun, i.e. Courtyard 3, we encountered two unusual artifacts. Neither the Ulua Valley-style carved marble vase, nor carved shell atlatl finger loops, have ever been found before at Pacbitun. In fact, these are rare finds for any site in the Maya Lowlands. Since these artifacts were found together in a single burial, they help identify the social status of the individual interred and stylistically date the burial to the latter half of the Late Classic Period (Cec Phase, AD 550–800).

Description of Pacbitun
Pacbitun is a medium-sized site located along the southern rim of the Belize Valley and on a limestone plateau adjacent to the Maya Mountains. The site core is located three kilometers to the east of San Antonio village in the Cayo District, Belize (Figure 1). Its position intersects two ecozones with resulting access to a wide variety of economic and ritual resources including granite, slate, pine, springs, and fertile agricultural land (Healy 1990:248).

The habitation zones are archaeologically defined as three separate areas based on presumed function and population density: the Epicenter, the Core, and Periphery Zones (Healy et al. 2007:17). The Epicenter is the location of the main religious and administrative structures. It sits on an artificially-leveled hill, oriented east-west, and has 41 known masonry buildings, three main plazas, and an additional two plazas that are adjacent to the north side, labeled Plazas A to E (Figure 2; Healy 1990:250). An additional architectural group located to the northeast of Plaza A was designated as the Eastern Court (Cheong 2013). A large reservoir is located just north of this architectural complex.

The Core Zone encompasses the Epicenter and a one-square kilometer buffer around it (Campbell-Trifirht 1990). The area beyond the Epicenter is dotted with small mounds, although a few larger structures, courtyard groups, agricultural terraces, springs or reservoirs, and four sinkholes are also present (Healy et al. 2007:18, Figure 3; Richie 1990; Spenard et al. 2012; Sunahara 1995).

The Periphery Zone is estimated to cover nine square kilometers around the site. It is the agricultural area for the site center, consisting of several hundred small house mounds spread over the landscape, as well as several smaller (~5 m tall), hill-top pyramidal structures, plaza groups, minor centers, and terraces (Spenard 2011; Turner et al. 2015; Ward 2013; Weber 2011; Weber and Micheletti 2016; Weber and Powis 2014).

Previous Excavations of the Pacbitun Courtyards
At the southern end of the Epicenter are three enclosed courtyards, flanked by 13 structures (Figure 3). These courtyards and surrounding structures are generally described as the “palace” of the Epicenter, due to the surrounding range structures, the sequential elevation differences from Courtyards 1 to 3, and the restricted access to each courtyard. Investigations into the northern structure of Courtyard 2 (Structure 23) were carried out by Cassandra Bill and Paul Healy in 1986 (Bill 1987; Healy 1990; Healy et al. 1995; Healy et al. 2014).
Two Unusual Finds from Courtyard J, Pachbitun, Belize

Figure 1. Map of Belize Valley showing location of Pachbitun, and all the sites mentioned in the text. Red arrow highlights location of Pachbitun, Belize.

Figure 2. Map of Pachbitun Site Core including Structure 10.
Figure 3. Map of Pachitun Site around Courtyards 1 to 3 showing all excavation units (Unit numbering in zoomed portion leave off the initial 17-B-CT3 of all unit name).
2007). Additional excavations of the eastern most structure (Structure 25) in 2016 (Skaggs et al. 2017), the northern end of Courtyard 3 (Structures 22 and 33) (Pierce and Skaggs n.d.), and the centers of Courtyards 2 and 3 in 2017 (Skaggs and Cherico n.d.) provide additional evidence on the nature of the “palace” area.

Excavations into the plazas of all three courtyards reveal only one or two plaster floors above bedrock. The courtyard plaza construction differs considerably through time as each courtyard required differing amounts of leveling before the first plaster floor was laid down. A 3 m by 3 m excavation unit was placed in the center of Courtyard 2, revealing a wall that measured 0.7 m high. It was six courses high and two courses wide running NE to SW across the northern side of the unit (Figure 4). A midden-like layer containing animal bone, jute, ceramics, and a few pieces of jade was found covering the wall. Preliminary ceramic analysis suggests the midden is the same late Middle Preclassic (600-300 BC) depositional event that occurred in Plazas A and B. This midden was ultimately covered by the first limestone plaster floor (Skaggs and Cherico n.d.). Bill’s (1987) trench into Courtyard 2, under Structure 23, and into Plaza B also encountered a single course wide wall around 0.7 m high; however, in her operations the wall ran directly north to south, and the facing was east in Courtyard 2 and west under Structure 23 and in Plaza B. The proximity of the east-facing wall in Bill’s (1987) operation and the south facing wall in the center of Courtyard 2 excavation from 2017 suggests these may be part of the same construction. The west facing walls under Structure 23 and Plaza B suggest there is more than one structure, and covering a larger area than the earliest structures in Plaza B (Crow and Powis n.d.). A single radiocarbon date, in material Bill characterized as similar to but not midden, from next to the wall returned a date range of 40 BC – AD 220 (Bill 1987:123-128) suggesting the wall was covered in or before the Terminal Preclassic (Ku Phase, 100 BC – AD 300). Courtyard 2 clearly had early occupation of some sort, and in buildings unlike those found in either Plaza A or B.

Excavations in Courtyards 1 and 3 show little evidence of such early occupation, however. In Courtyard 1, under the north end of Structure 25 and presumably under Structure 24, evidence of a Preclassic midden was encountered, but no charcoal useful for dating purposes was found. Just above the midden on the north end, a fill layer was found containing a Pocate Brown, Hermitage Complex ceramic dish with sooting located on its interior surface. A sample of the sooting was submitted for radiocarbon dating. Results indicated a Late Classic (AD 550-650) date. Furthermore, charcoal found in a unit just above bedrock centered in front of Structure 25 yielded a radiocarbon date of AD 640 – 675. In these central units, the first plaster floor sits on top of core. Limestone boulders ranging from 0.6 m to 1.5 m in diameter were stacked nearly two meters high before ballast and plaster was laid down on top. Structure 25 was built on top of
this first plaster floor surface. A facing found in the core suggests there may have been an earlier platform built directly on bedrock, which was subsequently covered by later core (Skaggs et al. 2017).

Courtyard 3 has no evidence at all for construction before the Late Classic Period. The central excavation unit revealed only one preserved plaster floor located above a thick white marl layer that sat directly on bedrock. Charcoal from two primarily Dolphin Head Red, Spanish Lookout Complex ceramic caches cut into this plaster floor dated to AD 552-648 and AD 545-645, respectively (Skaggs and Cherico n.d.). These caches were between graves in Unit 17-B-CT3-1, both of which will be discussed in future publications.

2017 Excavations in Courtyard 3

Over the course of the 2017 field season at Pacbitun, we conducted operations in the plaza of Courtyard 3. From an elevation point of view, Courtyard 3 is the deepest of the three courtyards making up the 'palace' area of Pacbitun. We placed a large 3 m by 3 m excavation unit (17-B-CT3-1) in the center of the plaza to get its chronological history. During our investigations, we identified five caches and two burials in this initial unit. The graves extended outside the unit, so we continually expanded to the west in order to fully expose the haphazard capstone cist graves (after Welsh 1988). During the expansion, we found additional graves above and below slate slabs. These additional burials were found in highly disturbed contexts. The two unusual artifacts, forming the basis of this paper, were found during the investigations into these special deposits.

To the west of the capstone cist burials in Unit 17-B-CT3-1, we found two long (1.3 m) slate slabs (Figure 5). While defining the extent of the slabs, we encountered smaller slate slabs and a 1 m wide column of burnt limestone rocks (Figure 6). These smaller slabs were laid down horizontally to form the top of a haphazard cist under the column of limestone rocks. The column itself was covering part of a burial which sat on top of the slate slabs. We are labeling this column of burnt limestone rocks a 'cairn capstone cist', making the grave a dual cist

![Figure 6. Photograph of the column of burnt limestone found in center excavation units of Courtyard 3. The limestone terminated below the humus layer, and was piled up on a burial sitting above a slate capstone cist seen in Figure 5. Photo courtesy of Jeff Powis.](image)

![Figure 7. Map of Units 17-B-CT3-5 and 6 and burials in blue and purple with slate slabs in yellow. Left, position of skeleton and grave goods (including two unusual artifacts) above small slate slabs; right, position of skeleton without grave goods found below small slate slabs.](image)

arrangement (Figure 7 and 8). Previously, slate capstones have only been associated with elite Tomb 1-9, found in Structure 1 at Pacbitun (see Figure 2). There are similarities in the presumed status of the individual found in Tomb 1-9 and our burial based on the artifacts we found. Tomb 1-9 was placed 5 m below the axial stair in Structure 1, and is the only vaulted tomb ever found at the site (Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2004). In the tomb, the skeleton of only one individual was found under a layer of thousands of chert flakes and cores, with the head and torso also covered in cinnabar. The burial contained 19 slipped vessels, with a quarter of them having polychrome designs. Additionally, one painted marine valve, three polished jade beads, one pyrite tube, a pair of circular shell earspools, five
hollow bone tubes, and a drilled circular slate mirror backing were also recovered (Healy et al. 2004).

2017 Unusual Finds in Courtyard 3

The first unusual artifact was found across multiple excavation units. Fragments of it started appearing about 40 cm below the ground surface in the northwestern corner of the 3 m by 3 m unit. The artifact is an Ulua Valley-style carved marble vase (Figure 9). These vases were carved during the Late Classic Period (AD 650-850) from white marble blocks located in the Ulua Valley of Northwest Honduras (Luke et al. 2006). The vase was broken and scattered across the plaza, but most fragments were found among the rocks of the cairn capstone cist. Other pieces of the marble vase were found in association with, and under the skeletal material of the cairn capstone burial CT3-2, which was just above the horizontal slate slabs (Figure 10).

These vases are rare finds, with only 153 fragmentary or whole vessels in museum collections, and only 53 were excavated by what was considered professional archaeologists at the time of discovery (Davis-Salazar et al. 2007; Wells et al. 2014). Only one whole vase, from a burial in Palmarajo, Honduras (Wells et al. 2014), has been recovered and analyzed with the full suite of modern archaeological techniques. Pacbitun now joins one of only four sites in the lowland Maya Region where fragments of these vases have been found. Fragments from the other find sites (Altun Ha, Chac Balam, San Jose, and Uaxactun) have stylistic elements similar to the vase found at Pacbitun. These features, such as taller cylinder height to diameter dimensions, frontal zoomorphic heads, feline handles, and borders with voussoir (half-moon) motifs, date to the latter half of the production time range (Luke 2010). Through isotopic analysis of a number of these marble vases, the source of these luxury craft goods has
been correlated to production in Travesia (Luke et al., 2006; Luke and Tykot, 2007). The locations of lowland Maya vase ﬁnds are associated with elite locations, such as temples and palace area caches or burials, dating to Late Classic or Terminal Classic Periods (Luke 2010).

The Pacbitun vase, although not complete, was reconstructed in order to determine its dimensions. It stands at a height of 24.5 cm (although it may be up to 5 cm taller as there is evidence of a ring base that broke oﬀ), and an outside diameter of 15.2 cm. The walls of the vase are carved to 0.8 cm thickness, smoothed on the inside with a pattern of volutes (swirling scroll like patterns around a central dot) in bas relief on the exterior. An anthropomorphic face with a headdress dominates the center of the vase with hints of proﬁle faces along the sides.

Borders across the top and bottom of the vase are overlapping voussures. The obverse and reverse of the vase are separated by two protruding handles, which, unfortunately, were not recovered. These handles are important in stylistically dating the piece. Evidence remains around the blank area of the vase where the handles connected to mammalian feet carved into the bas relief pattern. Therefore, the animal portrayed was prone with all four feet resting on the vase itself, unlike earlier style vases with bat heads or animals connected by the back instead of the feet to the vase. The form of the feet appears to suggest a feline form, which correlates with the other late (AD 750-850) style elements (Luke 2010).

The other unusual artifact is also a unique ﬁnd for Pacbitun. It consists of a pair of carved marine shell (cf. West Indian chank - Turbinella angulata), crescent-shaped lunates (Figure 11). The lunates are sometimes mistaken for ear spools, pendants, or bracelets/adorments; we believe the artifacts were actually part of an ornate atlatl that was buried with the individual. Ekholm ﬁrst suggested that “U” shaped stone or shell carvings such as these were the ﬁnger loops of an atlatl after he observed an intact loop on a historically collected atlatl from Mexico housed the British Museum (1962). The pair from Pacbitun were found close enough together (Figure 10) that they certainly could have been
lashed to an atlatl. Unfortunately, no other parts of the atlatl were recovered.

The finger loops were found where the skull of the cairn capstone cist burial’s head should actually have been located. The finger loops were found in the darker burial soil at the very southern edge of the grave, along with two thin jade beads and a tooth filed to form the “T” symbol (Romero classification C3; Romero 1986). While there is some debate, Williams and White’s study (2006) suggests that there may be a relationship between filed teeth and elite status. They also found that the C3 modification was exclusive to males at Lamanai. The relative locations of artifacts, bones, and jade beads are shown in Figure 10 and Figure 12. There were a number of other finds with this burial which are similar to artifacts from Tomb 1-9 such as a fine limestone bead and a carved bone tube. Interestingly, the lower burial (CT3-3) below the slate slabs contained no grave goods at all.

The finger loops from archaeological contexts in Mexico examined by Ekholm were housed in the American Natural History Museum and the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation. He examined a total of 3 complete pairs and 17 single loops (Ekholm 1962). Of all potential Maya Lowland examples, there is only one other shell atlatl finger loop, which was found at Uaxactun (Kidder 1947:66). Intact specimens of whole wood atlatls, including the wood finger loops, were found in a cemetery at Chichén Itzá (Coggins and Shane 1984:108), and in situ carved bone finger loops were found in a burial layer of Tikal palace Structure 5D-51 (Harrison 2003:105). Another archaeologically excavated Maya atlatl comes from a possible Early Classic shell atlatl hook found in a Caracol burial, Special Deposit C1171-1 (Chase and Chase 2011:11). Beyond these examples, evidence of atlatl use by the Maya comes from comparisons of different projectile points to try to determine darts from arrows (Aoyama 2005; Cofalo 2012). Maya atlatl use is also clear from evidence based on iconography, with examples ranging from AD 378 to the Postclassic period at sites like Tikal, Ucúnam, Naranjo, Caracol, Uaxactún, and Chichén Itzá (Chase and Chase 2002:43; Hassig 1992; Schleie and Freidel 1990:156-157). From these contexts, it is clear that elites used atlatls, and that the atlatl might even have been a symbol of power.

Conclusions
These unusual finds from Courtyard 3 at Pacbitun come from the same burial (CT3-2), but the context is quite disturbed, as evidenced by the Ulua Valley-style carved marble vase fragments being found in different layers and up to 2 m away from the grave itself. All the finds from this burial certainly could have come from a Late Classic period interment that was later revisited or intentionally desecrated. There are also other artifacts, like fragments of fine ground stone bowls and a figurine head, found less than 2 m away from the grave. All of these may have once been part of the same burial. However, pending radiocarbon analysis of the bone, teeth, and charcoal fragments found in the burial, it is uncertain exactly the age of the burial. The stratigraphy and preliminary ceramic analysis suggest Late Classic Period for the burial fill, but that only tells us that the grave was likely placed through an early Late Classic plaster floor (which the caches were cut into), and some of the contents removed at a later time. The Ulua Valley-style carved marble vase stylistically dates the burial to the latter half (AD 750-850) of the Late Classic period (Coe Phase, AD 550-800). The individual buried was elite, as shown by the elite grave goods, filed teeth, and the placement of the grave in the center of the courtyard. The burial arrangement, with one
cist grave on top of another is unusual as well, and the cairn of burnt stone covering the top individual might be quite rare, since we can find no references of this burial pattern.

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