

This is an extract from:

*Function and Meaning
in Classic Maya Architecture*

Stephen D. Houston, Editor

Published by

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection

Washington, D.C.

© 1998 Dumbarton Oaks

Trustees for Harvard University

Washington, D.C.

Printed in the United States of America

www.doaks.org/etexts.html

Ancestors and the Classic Maya Built Environment

PATRICIA A. McANANY
BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Built environments are emergent phenomena that undergo constant change and transformation. They rarely form and crystallize as a singular vision or construction event but rather accrue form and meaning through a continued and dynamic interaction between people and places. This process leads to what Pred (1986: 5) has termed “place as historically contingent process” or locations at which historical events are encoded architecturally. Through ritual and performance, building activities transform places in profoundly social ways. Such a perspective on the built environment is particularly relevant to Classic Maya constructions, for which descriptive terms such as “organic, accretional, or agglutinative” often have been used, suggesting repetitive cycles of ritual performance and building activity. I suggest that this architectural style results, in part, from the incorporation of ancestors—both their physical remains and their iconic images—into the Classic Maya built environment. Through their inclusion, ancestors facilitated a social definition of residence and augmented the political centrality of selected locales. To demonstrate this point, I first pursue a general discussion of burial ritual and the creation of ancestors; second, I examine the role of ancestors in the “ritual establishment of home” (Saile 1985: 87); third, I consider the incorporation of ancestors into monumental architecture to establish a political and ritual *axis mundi*; and, finally, I turn to a discussion of iconographic representations and textual references to ancestors and their burial places.

BURIAL RITUAL AND THE CREATION OF ANCESTORS

For Turner (1977), ritual performance was a response to a breach in the social fabric; it was a means of reintegrating society and moving through a liminal state such as that which occurs at the death of an important individual.

In contrast, Humphreys (1981) argues that death, a dangerous and chaotic rupture in the social order, also presents an opportunity for the living to reorder the system, to gain previously unforeseen advantage, or to promote themselves and their family line. In this view, protracted burial ritual, including secondary and tertiary interment as well as construction of ancestor shrines, allows time for maneuvering among the living. This method of “drawing power from the past for projection into the future” also has been emphasized by Feuchtwang (1974) in his analysis of Chinese geomancy and tomb placement. As we shall see, such attitudes seem also to have prevailed in Classic Maya society.

However one approaches it, burial ritual provides social rules for the living. Not only about the dead, such ritual helps forge linkages between the living and the dead (Pearson 1993: 227). The elaboration of burial ceremony and the extent to which the material remains of a deceased person are interred within a remembered and revered place, in turn, depend on the desire of the living to perpetuate an established order or to promulgate an unbroken chain of inheritance. For this reason, Glazier (1984: 133) used the term “domestication of death” to refer to the newly found meaning given to burial locales among the Mbeere of Kenya when the British Colonial government accorded legal status to ancestral burial grounds during tribal boundary disputes.

In a more specific sense, ancestor veneration, as it was practiced among both elites and nonelites in Classic Maya society, was a selective social practice in that ancestors were a subset of all deceased; ancestors were those who validated political power, status, and access to resources. Moreover, as facilitators of power transfers between the generations, ancestors played a particularly critical role in times of social transformation, such as the Early Classic period. Although the rituals of Classic Maya ancestor veneration no longer exist, we can study the places where ancestors were buried and their spirits were summoned for the benefit of the living.

ANCESTORS AND THE RITUAL ESTABLISHMENT OF HOME

Temple I of Tikal, the tomb of Ruler A, is a familiar monument and serves to exemplify the sense of political centrality given to a place by an ancestor interment (Jones 1977). As far back as the early part of the twentieth century, Ricketson (1925: 386) remarked on the strong association between pyramids and royal tombs. Less intuitively obvious is the creation of a sense of residence—of home—as imparted by the presence of an ancestor. From the early days of the Middle Formative, important dead were placed within the cores of structures. This pattern is a common one, whether one is examining burial data from Platform 5D-4-10th beneath the North Acropolis of Tikal (Coe 1990),

the basal strata of Operation I at K'axob (Bobo n.d.), or the early structures of Cuello (Robin and Hammond 1991). From the very start, the maintenance of links with the deceased via physical proximity within a built environment is a prominent characteristic of Maya society.

Retrodicting from contemporary practices, we can speculate that burial placement may have played an important role in what Saile (1985: 87) has called the ritual establishment of home. Here I speak of home in the sense of an economic, ritual, political, and social hive of activity in nonindustrial society and not the more passive, television- and bedroom-dominated abodes of contemporary Western society. In regard to the former, the study of Davis (n.d.) on the topic of residence and land among K'anjobal Maya of Huehuetenango is particularly pertinent. Davis (n.d.: 80) describes residential units as having an unusually large or prominent structure called *yatut jichmam* ("house of the ancestor"). Within landholdings, which Davis (n.d.: 84) refers to as ancestor estates or *tx'otx jichmam*, "residents were joined together in a single religious community wherein prayer to the dead ancestors perpetuated the fertility of lands which the living gained through inheritance." Thus, among these highland Maya, home is integrally related to landholdings, and ancestors dwell metaphorically in the former and safeguard the latter. The principle of ancestors as guardians of fields and forests and occupants of residential structures is prevalent also among Quiche, who maintain lineage shrines (Bunzel 1952: 35–36; Carmack 1981: 161; Tedlock 1982: 77, 81), and among Tzotzil Maya, who venerate ancestors at shrines strategically positioned on the landscape (Vogt 1969: 391). Although ancestors are no longer physically interred within dwellings, but rather in cemeteries as prescribed by Christian practice, the residence is still considered to be an abode of the ancestors. This principle seems to have considerable antiquity and broad applicability. Both Stephen Houston and David Stuart (this volume) note that Classic-period pyramidal structures were named the *nah* or house of a specific ancestor.

Ancestral presence matters greatly in home and inheritance among contemporary Maya. Logically, then, the absence of interments in some Classic-period structures suggests that these are not homes—that is, these structures did not serve as residences. Based on the absence of burials, Harrison (n.d.: 251, 278), for instance, has argued against a residential function for much of the Central Acropolis of Tikal. The possibility exists, of course, that portions or all of the Central Acropolis were residential in function and that the esteemed inhabitants of these dwellings were buried in separate places of ritual designated for royalty, such as the large temple structures. Nevertheless, the Central Acropolis pattern presents a sharp contrast to a group such as A-V of Uaxactun, where

the number of burial interments and their diversity in age and sex increase throughout the Classic period (Smith 1950: table 7). Ancestral presence, in fact, is generally coincident with the larger, temporally stable, residential complexes. Within Las Sepulturas group of Copan, Diamanti (1991: 212–225) notes that small, ancillary structures in residential compounds do not contain burials. Likewise, Gonlin (1993: table 3.16) found burials associated with only two of seven excavated rural Copan valley complexes, suggesting that rural inhabitants had strong ties to other focal residences. This evidence indicates that, although the data patterns are complex, ancestor presence played a role in defining residence (and its attendant privileges in terms of land and inheritance) within the built environment. When dealing with royal ancestors, “home” may have been defined on the much larger scale of a site rather than an individual residential complex. As discussed below, royal ancestors could also be evoked through more portable and referential media, such as personal ornamentation and sculpture.

When ancestor remains are present, longitudinal trends generally can be detected in the manner and location of interment within structures. From Middle Formative deposits at sites such as Tikal (Coe 1990), Cuello (Robin and Hammond 1991), and K’axob (Lockard n.d.), burials tend to be of single individuals of all ages and both sexes placed in an extended position. During the Late Formative and Early Classic this pattern is amplified. Burials of multiple individuals (representing a wide spectrum of ages and both sexes) were often interred within one centrally located and elaborately prepared grave. Late Formative Burial 2 from K’axob is a prime example of this pattern. It contained stratified deposits from separate burial events, which totaled nine individuals and included one child, one adolescent, five young adults, and two mature adults (Rebecca Storey, personal communication, July 1997; Fig. 1). Most of the interments were secondary, and this feature was opened and resealed several times before it was closed for the final time and capped by the construction of an Early Classic pyramid. In another example of a multiple interment, Burial 48 from Tikal, the central figure—an elderly male—was buried without head and hands and was covered with a black, organic material indicative of a textile wrapping (Coe 1990: 120). Taken together these interments suggest several things:

- (1) protracted treatment of the dead, including defleshing, and selective retention of certain anatomical parts, particularly the cranium;
- (2) elaborate wrapping of the corpse, sometimes into a tightly flexed and seated position and;
- (3) in certain contexts—such as K’axob Burial 2—the grouping together of several individuals into what might be called a family mausoleum.

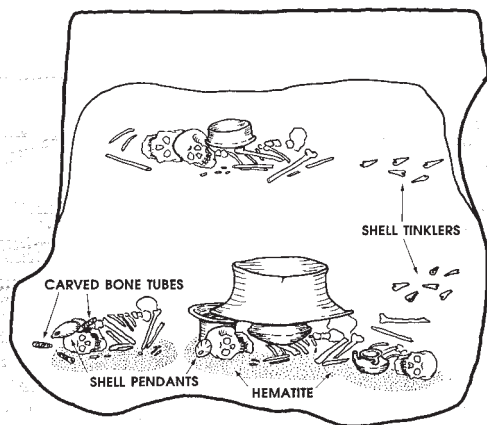


Fig. 1 Late Formative Burial 2 from K'axob, Belize, showing an example of a multiple, sequential burial interment. Drawing by J. Walkey (after McAnany 1995; reprinted courtesy of the University of Texas Press).

This pattern is elaborated at Caracol, where family tombs were used throughout the Classic period, as Chase and Chase (this volume) demonstrate. Group burial locales entail repeated opening and sealing of a tomb or pit, which serves to confirm the centrality of a locale through iterative ritual interaction between descendants and the place of their ancestors.

Merwin and Vaillant (1932) report on a particularly striking example of an Early Classic mausoleum at Holmul. Building B, located at the north end of Group II, was built in four major phases commencing in the Terminal Formative, as indicated by the fact that the burial vault under Room 9 contained mammiform tetrapodal vessels. Throughout subsequent renovations and expansions, additional interments—primarily of adults—were added to Building B. During the Early Classic, a four-room suite of vaulted rooms was constructed. This too was ultimately transformed into a mausoleum and the doorways—which once held movable wooden doors—were permanently sealed. In conjunction with the building of a pyramid capping this structure, yet another burial vault was added to the north end of Building B. The human remains described by Merwin and Vaillant (1932: 30–40) encompass considerable variability in position and completeness—extended, flexed, fully articulated, partially and completely disarticulated—and altogether comprise a total of 22 individuals. This pattern indicates that whereas some of these remains constitute primary interments, others were gathered from primary contexts and reinterred in this focal structure in a series of burial rituals that interdigitated with

sequential building phases. As Karl Taube (personal communication, July 1994) notes, niches resembling cache vessels were modeled into the exterior façade of this structure—further indicating that propitiatory ritual was enacted at this locale.

ANCESTORS AND THE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT OF AN *AXIS MUNDI*

With the onset of the Maya Late Formative, many individuals were buried in a seated or tightly flexed position. Probably indicative of the emergence of institutionalized authority as Marcus (n.d.) has noted for San José phase figurines from Oaxaca, the seated burial position, moreover, necessitated thorough wrapping of a corpse, probably in twine and cotton. Mummy bundle depictions from Central Mexico (Fig. 2) and preserved Andean mummies from the Paracas Peninsula serve to indicate the popularity of this position. Once wrapped in this fashion, a corpse becomes much more portable and can be placed temporarily within a structure or interment and later moved to a specially prepared burial shrine or tomb. This elaboration of postmortem treatment provides “breathing space” for descendants who may need time to mobilize resources and labor to initiate a new construction that will not only house the deceased but also mark the successful passing of power between generations and the continued ability of a ruling family to mobilize support for “royal work” (Feeley-Harnik 1985: 293). Verano (1997) has documented a similar spacing between death and final interment among some of the females interred with the Lord of Sipan; apparently these “retainer burials” were transported from another holding locale. Among the Classic Maya, the time lapse between recorded death dates and shrine dedication dates for royal individuals (discussed below) suggests that construction of burial facilities and delayed transport of the dead occurred in this tropical lowland region as well. As a result, the death of an important person—soon to be an ancestor—not only triggered a series of social negotiations but also could initiate profound transformation of the built environment. The dead may have been held in temporary storage (or displayed) while their final crypt was constructed. Wrapping and preservation of a corpse ensured that the dead continued to serve the needs of the living, particularly during that liminal stage of interregnum.

A seated burial reproduces the regal position of a headman, chief, or lord seated on a stool, mat, or throne; Burial C1 of Uaxactun provides a vivid example (Fig. 3). This adult male was placed on a low throne-like platform supported by a stucco-pillow backrest. The Tzakol 3 vessels arrayed around him included an incised, individual serving bowl (originally placed in his lap), a cylindrical drinking vessel, and two larger serving bowls. His facial bones had

Fig. 2 Seated and tightly wrapped corpse just prior to cremation (after *Codex Magliabechiano* 1970: fol. 66).

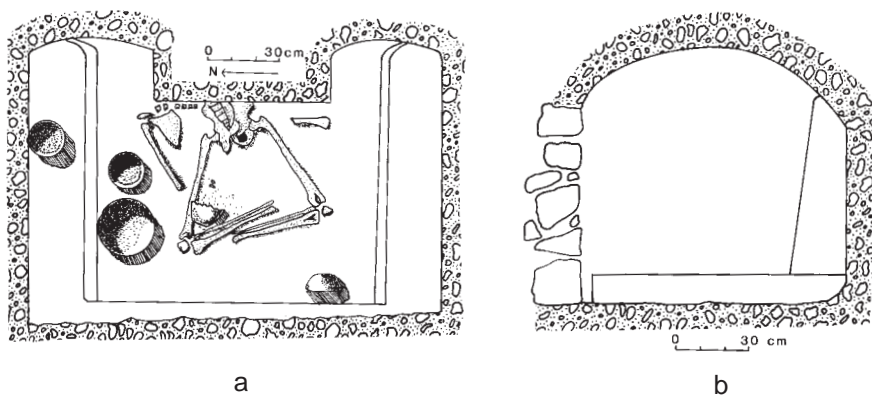
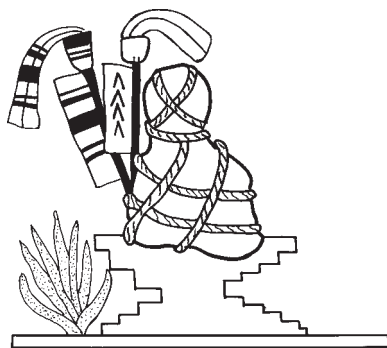


Fig. 3 Seated male burial C1 from Uaxactun shown with associated burial offerings: (a) plan and (b) side views (after Smith 1950: fig. 140).

been removed and a regal mask of jade, shell, and obsidian was substituted in their place. Not 2 m away from this throne-crypt, a simple pit had been excavated and an adult female with filed incisors was placed in a tightly flexed position. Tzakol 3 vessels with which she was interred also included an incised, individual serving bowl and a cylindrical drinking vessel. Unlike the male, however, the female ceramic accoutrements included two quintessentially Maya basal-flange Tzakol 3 bowls. Placed within the northern structure of Group C, a position suggested by Ashmore (1991) to be associated with ancestors, this ancestral couple seem to be overseers or guardians of Uaxactun. The pyramid

placed over them probably served as a facility for ritual performance among descendant generations. In this way, ancestor interments encoded into the built environment a temporal dimension within a compressed spatial frame.

From the later part of the Early Classic through the Late Classic, single interments again become quite common and, in most locales, replace the family mausolea. Leventhal (1983) has discussed the coeval construction of ancestor-related shrines. Such structures, present in large residential complexes from Copan to Palenque, show pronounced variability in form, orientation, and inclusion of physical remains. They seem to have been built not so much to house the dead as to commemorate them and to celebrate the continued prosperity of the family line. During the Late Classic, burial within a house or a shrine was reserved for an increasingly selective subset of the population. Based on analysis of excavations in the elite households of Las Sepulturas, Copan, by Hendon (1991) and Diamanti (1991), there were pronounced differences in where and how individuals were interred. For instance, 19 of 20 tombs were placed in central locations within or below "alpha" structures and predominantly contained mature adults (Diamanti 1991: 214–215). More casual pit interments, on the other hand, tended to occur behind and on the side of structures and were less likely to contain the remains of middle-aged and older adults (Diamanti 1991: 214–215).

Becker (n.d.: 178–179) has labeled the repeated, separate interments within a designated shrine structure at Tikal as Plaza Plan 2. These eastern shrine structures contain distinctive mortuary assemblages as well as extensive axial burning on the plaster floors and enigmatic "problematical deposits." Such physical characteristics reinforce the linkage between ancestor interment and ritual performance. Taking a closer look at the eastern structures of Group 7F of Tikal, Haviland (1981: 94–95) draws our attention to the close articulation between burial interments and construction activity. This physical interlocking of ancestors and construction was not limited to shrines but also occurred at smaller residential complexes lacking shrines, such as Group 2G-1 of Tikal. A relatively modest complex, Group 2G-1 contained adult burials associated with sequential reconstruction of the houses, particularly the alpha Structure 2G-59, which was the largest and stratigraphically most complex (Haviland 1988: 123, 125). In more recent excavations in Late Formative structures at K'axob, McCormack (n.d.) and Henderson (n.d.) note a similar pattern, indicating a strong precedent for this practice.

Becker (1992: 189–193) has commented recently on the strong parallels between interment of burials and interment of caches. Certainly, both involve ritual performance keyed to a transformation or enhancement of the built en-

vironment. Because burial interments are often followed by structure renovation, such graves may have been viewed as indices of rebirth (see also Becker 1992: 190; Coggins 1988) and the sustained prosperity of a family line through inheritance. Parallelism in these two types of deposits is echoed in hieroglyphic texts, where references to “sealing” or “closing” (*u-mak-wa*) and to “opening” (*pas-ah*) refer interchangeably to tombs and caches (Houston 1987; Stuart, this volume).

The temporal dimension of ancestor interments provides a segue in the transformation of a place from that of a residence (firmly anchored by the corporeal presence of ancestors) to that of a shrine in which ancestral presence defined an *axis mundi* or central place in a political sense and within a grand cosmological scheme. Classic-period pyramids often are constructed over earlier residences at places such as Plaza B of K'axob (Fig. 4), the North Acropolis of Tikal (Coe 1990), and parts of Group 10L-2 at Copan (Andrews and Fash 1992). These pyramids impart a notion of sacralization of place in that the construction of an artificial hill or *wits* converts a portion of the built environment into purely ritual space. Perhaps more to the point, this transformation presages the highly political arena in which ancestors were utilized throughout

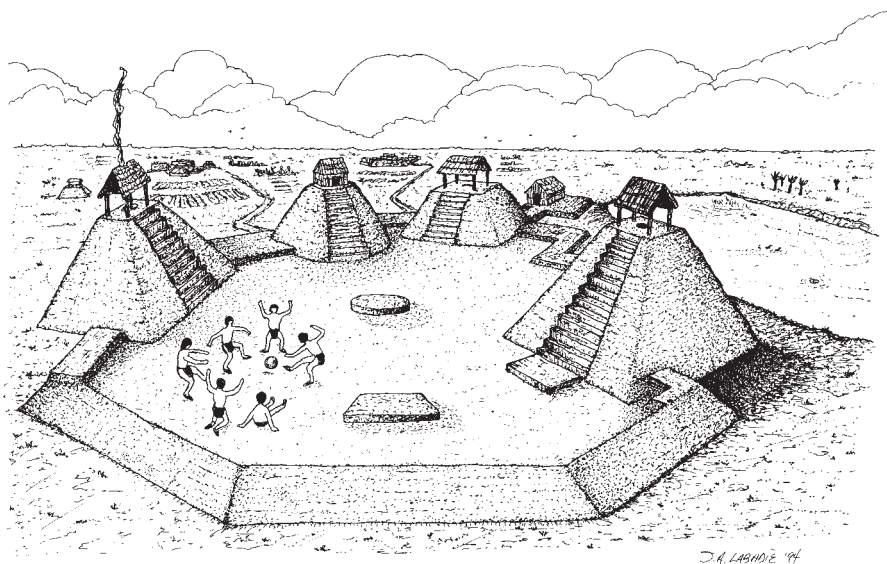


Fig. 4 Plaza B, K'axob, as it may have looked in the Late Classic. Excavated Middle Formative deposits, which include burials intruded into the floors of dwellings, are located in front of the pyramid on the right. Drawing by J. A. Labadie (after McAnany 1995; reprinted courtesy of the University of Texas Press).

the Classic period.

The mortuary pattern of elite burials at Altun Ha (Pendergast 1979, 1982) provides a clear example of the use of ancestors to define an *axis mundi*. At Altun Ha, moreover, the interments most often were linked to new construction events. Of the burials and tombs in Groups A and B, 13 were placed on the principal axis of a pyramidal structure. No subtlety here—12 of the 13 were adults and 100% ($n = 8$) of interments that were securely identified as to sex were male. Most significantly, the incidence of *intrusive* burials (from the surface of and into a preexisting structure) is very low—only 2 of the 13 interments. My reading of the architectural cross sections and burial descriptions suggests the following pattern. Ten of the 13 burial crypts were constructed within the core of ambitious new building programs, generally a platform, stairway, or stairblock. Unfortunately, the architectural relationship of Burial 1 of Structure B-6 could not be determined in the field and two other burials appear to be intrusive from and into preexisting structures (i.e., Tomb 1 of Structure A-1 and Burial 1 of Structure A-3). The latter seems to have been intruded into a preexisting stairway; after completion of the interment ritual, however, the old stairway was not patched, rather a new stairway was constructed over the crypt. Burial 1, therefore, is not simply intrusive but did engender construction of a new series of steps. Tomb 1 (Structure A-1) was built soon after a major renovation to Structure A-1 had just been completed. This enlargement of the structure had included the addition of a low platform at the base of a new stairway leading to the summit temple. Two burials—one of a juvenile—were sealed within this earlier construction event. The ultimate use of the low platform for an intrusive burial tomb hints at an untimely death and/or the inability of descendants to initiate another episode of construction. As one examines the plans and descriptions of osteological remains from Altun Ha, one cannot help but be struck by the highly variable state of preservation of the skeletal material. Although some of this variation undoubtedly is caused by localized atmospheric conditions and the harmful effects of building collapse, another equally important factor may be the time elapsed between date of death and date of interment. In sum, for the majority of Altun Ha axial interments in monumental architecture, new construction events had been initiated. The new stairways, platforms, and stairblocks, therefore, were built as part of the housing or frame of a burial interment and, as such, present clear evidence of the contribution of ancestor interments to the Classic Maya built environment.

ICONOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS AND TEXTUAL REFERENCES TO
ANCESTORS AND THEIR BURIAL PLACES

David Freidel and associates (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993) as well as Karl Taube (this volume) examine the central place of hearthstones in Maya cosmology. Symbolic of home and residence, hearthstones in Late Classic royal iconography became a metaphor of much more than a great place to find a fresh tamale. In a similar fashion, Classic Maya royal ancestor veneration became an overtly political institution couched within a grand cosmological scheme—see Ashmore (1991), Freidel and Schele (1989), Marcus (1992), McAnany (1995), and Schele and Miller (1986) among others. Toward the end of the Formative and through the Early Classic period, semidivine ancestors (many wearing the symbols of K'inich Ahaw, the sun deity) were depicted in a highly schematic fashion. During the Late Classic, on the other hand, emphasis shifted to realistic portraiture of immediate, ascending ancestors. In both cases, ancestors seem to provide an “anchor,” as Schele and Freidel (1990: 140–141) have suggested, that ground the rule of their descendants (real or fictive) in weighty precedent. The hieroglyphic staircase of Copan, for example, is an iconographic example of royal dynastic ancestors as human ideogram (Geertz 1980: 130). Each occupies a stratum of the staircase in a manner that is similar to the layers of heaven occupied by Tzotzil ancestors (Gossen 1986: 5). As one ascended the staircase, one generally traveled both back in time and farther up into the heavens (see Houston, this volume). In hieroglyphic texts, Late Classic Maya sculptors wrote of the dedication of burial shrines (*muknal*) to house the actual remains of royal ancestors (Stuart, this volume). The political potency of ancestor remains rendered these *muknal* a target in times of hostility. For instance, Stela 23, a war monument from Naranjo, describes the plundering of the tomb of a Lord of Yaxha (David Stuart, personal communication, October 1994). Through both image and the structures built to house their remains, therefore, royal ancestors established a kind of “super-residence” and defined an *axis mundi*. Perhaps still in their role as guardians, royal ancestors helped to secure the kingdom rather than the fields and home; as always, they were available for consultation and required propitiation through offerings.

Coggins (n.d.: 186) was among the first to codify the notion that “floating” heads, facing downward and placed at the top of a composition, represent ancestors. In fact, the close juxtaposition of ancestors with living rulers, *de rigueur* in the iconography of Maya statecraft, occurred in many media: freestanding stone sculpture, shell pendants, pottery, and architectural façades. A small stela from El Mirador (Fig. 5) illustrates an early depiction in the lowlands, whereas

Fig. 5 Stela 18, El Mirador, showing the downward-facing head of an ancestor.

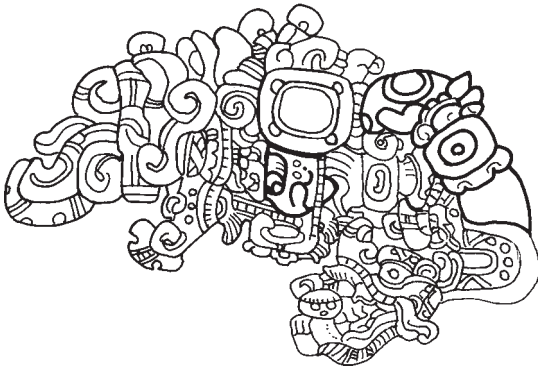
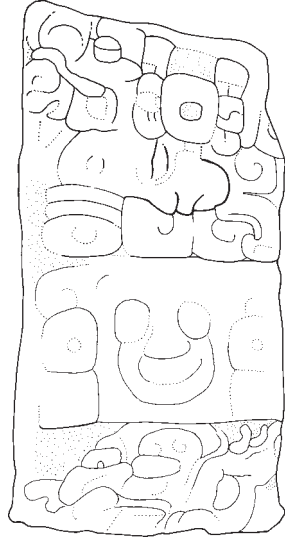


Fig. 6 Two ancestor representations as shown by downward-facing head and a single arm: *top*, Stela 2, Abaj Takalik, and *bottom*, Stela 31, Tikal (after Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: fig. 23).

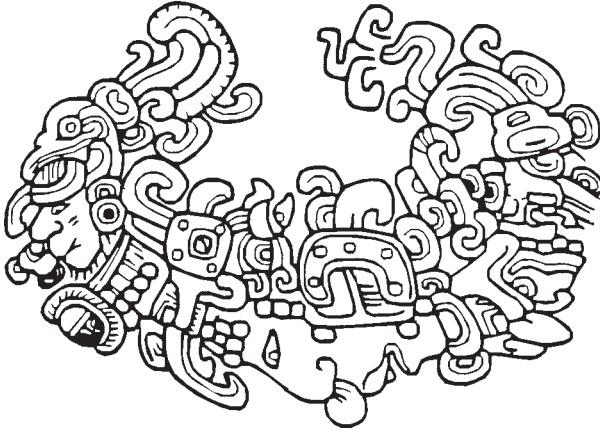


Fig. 7 Shell pendant carved with image of ancestor from Tikal (after Iglesias n.d.: 539).

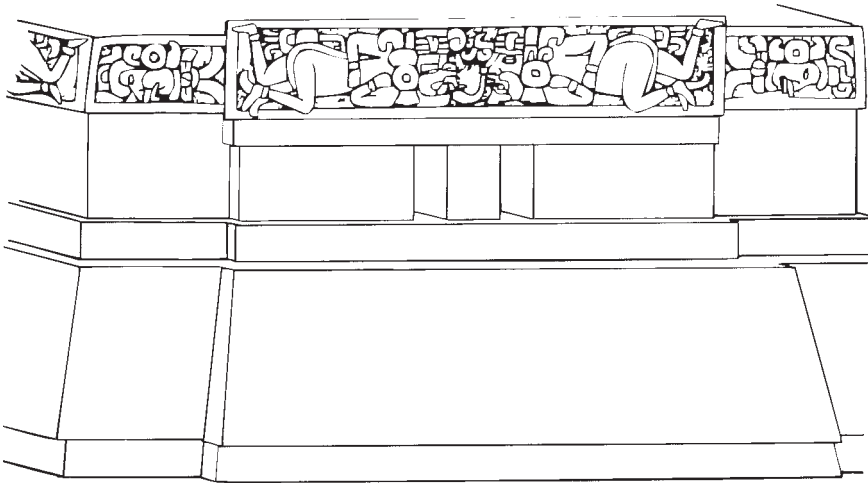


Fig. 8 Stucco frieze showing downward-facing ancestors from the south palace of Group H, Uaxactun (after Valdés 1990: fig. 10).

Late Formative Stela 2 from Abaj Takalik (Fig. 6, top) is a more ornate version of this theme, with the addition of a single arm. Variations on this composition occur on other stelae, such as the Early Classic stela of Stormy Sky from Tikal (Fig. 6, bottom). In contrast, Late Classic stelae, such as Ucanal Stela 4 and Jimbal Stela 1, show floating figures who appear to be supernatural, without any ancestral referent. Schele and Miller (1986), Houston (personal communication, 1994) and others have emphasized the heirloom-ancestry quality of Classic Maya regal ornamentation—a point strengthened by the ancestral head-and-arm images on shell pendants (Fig. 7). In the case of jewelry, the individual literally wears an image of an ancestor and absorbs the power of precedent in amulet fashion.

From Early Classic Uaxactun, Valdés (1990) reports an occurrence of downward-facing ancestors placed high on a cornice frieze on the Sub 2 structure of the south palace of Group H (Fig. 8). Here two full-bodied, prostrate figures are framed by images of two male ancestors emerging from smoke scrolls. As shown by Valdés (1990: fig. 11b), these stucco masks show differentiation in headgear; their “head-only,” downward-facing demeanor marks them as specific ancestors rather than generalized supernatural beings. The structure they adorn, furthermore, may have functioned as an ancestor shrine. A similar function has been suggested for Structure 10L-29 at Copan (Andrews and Fash 1992: 63). In general, the guardian-like quality of “head” imagery is probably true to form; the following translation by Whittaker and Warkentin (1965: 88) from a Chol text confirms this interpretation: “Each one guards the boundaries of his land. When the spirit leaves (the body), the head goes with the spirit, just down to his shoulders. His strength and his head and his heart go wherever they want to.”¹ Similar conceptions of the human anatomy exist among the Nahua who consider the words “head” (*tzontecomatl*) and “sky” (*ilhuicatl*) to be synonymous and note that “the head and face confer honor as well as being honored” (López Austin 1988: 171–172). The head, moreover, is “the place from which the vital force of breath issues to the outside, breath which . . . is charged with feeling and moral values” (López Austin 1988: 171). The Nahua association of head with moral values accords well with the notion of ancestors as guardians not only of land and kingdom but also of the path of life.

During the Late Classic period, ancestor imagery shifts away from schematically drawn, semidivine progenitors to portraiture of immediate ascending ancestors. The cartouches of Yaxchilan provide a well-known example. First identified by Proskouriakoff (1963, 1964), the ancestors occupy a prominent

¹ I am grateful to Karl Taube for bringing this reference to my attention.

place, generally in the upper register, of accession monuments such as Stelae 4, 6, 8, 10, 30, and 33 (Figs. 9 and 10). Often framed as couples, female as well as male ancestors take on increased significance during the Late Classic, possibly because of the importance accorded to dual, royal bloodlines in an increasingly crowded field of royal contenders. In the palace at Palenque, cartouches or medallions are fully integrated within the architectural setting and occupy a conspicuous locale in the eastern gallery of House A (Robertson 1985: 25–31). This type of portraiture is not unique to the Maya lowlands. Tomb 5 of Suchilquitongo, Oaxaca, contains a stela upon which is represented a dead lord



Fig. 9 Stela 10, Yaxchilan.

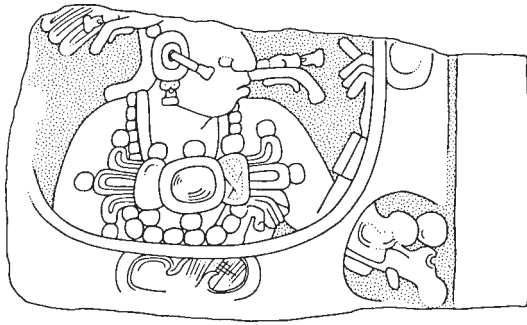


Fig. 10 Stela 30, Yaxchilan (after Tate 1992: 153, fig. 46).

“as a living ancestor” along with the year and day of his death (Miller 1991: 220). The stela is carved in the style of a later Post-Classic monument and may have been added to the Late Classic tomb during a reentry ritual (Miller 1991: 216). Miller (1991: 223) also suggests that the stela was commissioned by a descendant of the consort of Lady 12 N, possibly to strengthen the genealogical linkage to an apical ancestor.

In the Maya region, the sculptural “frame” for the ancestor image generally is a cartouche or a quatrefoil and is very similar to the *clipeata imago* of Roman Classical ancestor portraits (D’Ambra 1995: 66). For instance, the tops of Altars R and Q from Quirigua feature quatrefoils enclosing badly eroded figures, which may be ancestors. A portion of a quatrefoil is shown in the basal register of Piedras Negras Stela 40 (Fig. 11). Hammond (1981) suggested that this figure might represent an ancestor buried within a subterranean vault. Indeed, we see the familiar head-and-one-arm depiction of the lower, enthroned individual. Beneath the throne is the enigmatic glyph compound of nine plus an undeciphered glyph. Stephen Houston (personal communication, July 1994) has noted that the same compound is present on the Dumbarton Oaks white stone bowl, where it is positioned within an offering vessel held by a woman. Stela 40, however, differs from earlier stelae with ancestor imagery in a very provocative way. Specifically, the ancestor is shown below, rather than above, the central protagonist. Into this subterranean cavity, a descendant wearing a high-hat headdress performs a scattering ritual; this individual is linked directly to the ancestral world by a cord that terminates in the nose of the lower figure. To my knowledge, this is one of the few monuments that depicts the physical place of the ancestors (that is, underground) as opposed to the metaphorical place in which ancestors reside (the “heavens,” north, “up”). Stela 40 also shows very

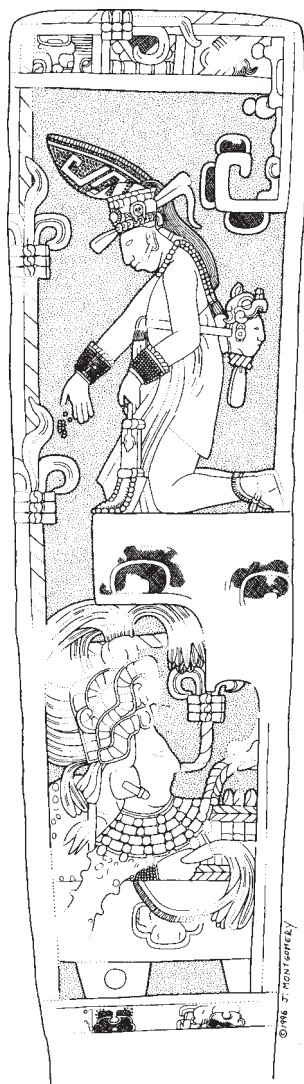


Fig. 11 Stela 40, Piedras Negras.
Drawing by John Montgomery © 1996.

clearly the lack of closure between the two worlds. The place of the ancestors (referred to as a *nah* or “home” in the accompanying text) is not represented as sealed and separate from the place of the living but rather is vitally linked through a kind of umbilical cord. This stela conveys a message on two levels; that is, the abode of the ancestors could be entered through both ritual performance and physical reentry of the burial vault.



Fig. 12 Altar 5, Tikal (after Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: fig. 23).

A dramatic example of what appears to be the opening of a tomb is shown on Altar 5 of Tikal, where two individuals in elaborate ritual regalia stand over a stack of long bones and a skull (Fig. 12). The lower band of text identifies a royal woman from Topoxte (Stuart and Houston 1994); David Stuart deciphered the glyph at position 26 as *pas-ah*, the verb “to open.” It is not clear why this event would be recorded in this manner, but it clearly indicates sequential staging in the disposition of physical remains. At times, this sequence included defleshing, as Becker (1992: 189) has suggested for the headless elites in Burials 48 and 85 from Tikal (over which a shrine was later constructed). Such protracted treatment of the dead accompanied by construction of burial and shrine structures is also indicated through recent analysis of hieroglyphic texts from the western region. Specifically, David Stuart has deciphered the glyph *muknal*, translated as burial place or shrine after *muk-ah* (“is buried” or “is covered”) and

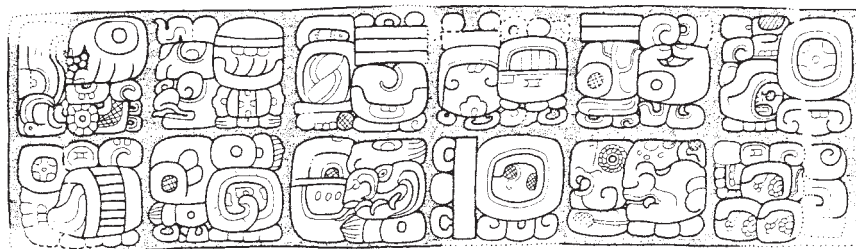


Fig. 13 Panel 5 of Hieroglyphic Stairway 1, Seibal; the black triangle points to the *muknal* glyph. Drawing by James Porter (after Graham 1990: fig. 1).

the toponymic reference *nal* (“place of”). This glyph includes a telltale skull inside of what appears to be a prepared platform. Often occurring in conjunction with death dates and structure dedication dates, the *muknal* glyph has been identified on a number of texts including Panel 5 of the hieroglyphic staircase of Seibal (Fig. 13); the West Tablet of the Temple of the Inscriptions (Fig. 14); the Dumbarton Oaks panel; and Monument 69 from Tonina as well as a new disk recently published by Yadeun (Fig. 15). So far, nine occurrences of the *muknal* glyph in conjunction with death dates and later *muknal* dedication dates have been found (Table 1).²

Assuming that interment within a *muknal* constructed posthumously involved transport of a corpse from another locale, examination of the amount of time elapsed between the two dates gives us insight into the protracted nature of Classic Maya elite burial ritual. The median number of days elapsed between death and interment within a *muknal* was 482 days or about a year-and-a-half (Table 1). The least number of elapsed days was 260 or one revolution of the sacred calendar; this pattern occurred twice at Tonina. The longest span of time, recorded on Piedras Negras Panel 3, was 8884 days or approximately 24 years! This latter date may represent a retroactive effort by a family line to boost the status of their lineage through dedication or refurbishment of a *muknal* for a previously underrecognized but highly venerable ancestor. Such a construction may be construed as a statement by descendants of their ability to amass labor and wealth. In this regard, *muknal* construction is quite similar in rationale to the forward-looking motivations underlying Chinese geomancy and ancestor

² These data have been compiled by Stephen Houston, who graciously offered to share them with me.

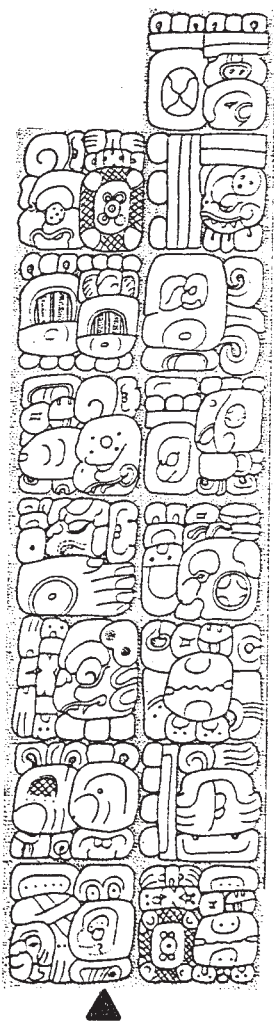


Fig. 14 Final portion of text, West Tablet, Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque, identifying the locale as the *muknal* of Pakal the Great; the black triangle points to the *muknal* glyph. Drawing by Linda Schele (after Robertson 1983: fig. 97).

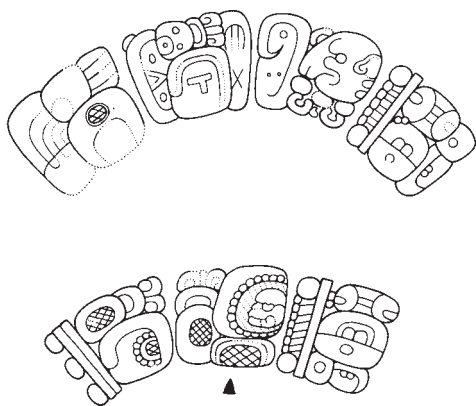


Fig. 15 Portion of circular monument from Tonina; the black triangle points to the *muknal* glyph. Drawing by John Montgomery.

Table 1. Sites for Which Muknal Dedication Dates Have Been Found

Site/Provenience	Monument Number	Death Date	Muknal Date	Elapsed Time (Days)
Piedras Negras	Panel 3	9.16.6.11.17 7 Caban 0 Pax, G3	9.17.11.6.1 12 Imix 19 Zip, G4	8884
Piedras Negras	Panel 4	9.10.6.2.1 15 Imix 19 Kayab, G5	9.11.6.1.8. 3 Lamat 6 Ceh, G1	7187
"Hellmuth Panel"	n/a	9.12.14.1.3 3 Akbal 1 Tzec, G5	9.12.15.12.9 4 Muuhc 2 Pax, G6	586
Tonina	69	9.17.4.12.5 8 Chicchan 18 Zac, G2	9.17.5.7.5 8 Chicchan 13 Xul, G1	260
Tonina	n/a	9.18.5.10.3 12 Akbal 11 Zotz, G5	9.18.6.5.3 12 Akbal 11 Kayab, G4	260
(Dumbarton Oaks)	n/a	9.15.1.6.3 6 Akbal 11 Pax, G6	9.15.2.7.1 7 Imix 4 Kayab, G6	378
Tonina	n/a	not given	9.14.18.14.12 5 Eb 10 Yaxkin, G4	
Tamarindito	HS 2	not given	9.16.11.7.13 7 Ben 11 Yax, G9	
Seibal	HS 1	not given	9.15.16.7.17 6 Caban 10 Kankin, G4	

Data compiled by Stephen Houston, July 1994.

^{n/a} Monument number not available.

tomb construction (Feuchtwang 1974). Miller (1986: 37) too has drawn a distinction between tombs of Tikal rulers—the underworld homes of the ancestors—and the aboveground structures or temples that are linked to the future of the kingdom.

What type of physical construction was a *muknal*? The glyph occurs on the Temple of the Inscriptions—apparently referring to the underlying pyramid as the *muknal* of Pakal the Great—and also is used on the circular stones of Tonina that are not in demonstrable association with a pyramidal structure. *Muknal*, therefore, probably refers to a variety of burial locales, all of which included a crypt and some kind of above-ground marker. The latter may have ranged in elaboration from a small, low platform to a nine-tiered, temple-topped pyramid. Within this small sample of *muknal* dedication dates, there also is some patterning in seasonality. That is, five of the nine dedications occurred between the middle and end of the wet season or between October and December. This period is the slack season for agricultural work in most parts of the lowlands and reinforces the notion of complementary scheduling between agrarian work and royal work.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Both ideologically and physically, the boundary between the living and the ancestors was a permeable one. Powerful individuals of the Classic period, whether elite or non-elite, male or female, continued to play a role in society long after their death. At their place of interment or point of entry to the underworld, a historically contingent place emerged and a sense of residence was established. Construction of dwellings, shrines, and large temples at these locations provided staging for later ritual and commemoration. By their presence, these structures conditioned the placement and size of later alterations to the built environment (Abrams, this volume; Webster, this volume). Important parts of the Classic Maya landscape developed through an iterative process of ancestor interment and above-ground construction punctuated by ritual performance.

Imaging and placement of ancestors within the built environment of the lowland Maya changed significantly throughout the two millennia of the Formative and Classic periods. The weighty influence of the ancestors can be traced back to the Middle Formative, when their physical remains were placed under the floors of dwellings in primary interments. At this time, their presence most likely was linked to safeguarding fields and home and effecting the transmission of such property through the generations. During the Late Formative, however, burial practices diversified to include tightly wrapped and seated burials,

secondary interment of defleshed bones, and burial locales with multiple, sequential interments. These practices suggest increased spacing between death and interment, possibly including the display of corpses. Increasingly, special structures were built to house the dead. Iconographically, Early Classic ancestors were represented as a fusion of supernatural and human characteristics—primarily male—and reference to ancestors was somewhat vague genealogically. During the Late Classic period, however, portraiture of both female and male progenitors of one or two ascending generations became common, particularly in the western Usumacinta region. During this time, ancestors seem to have served the very direct purpose of linking an ascendant ruler to established and revered bloodlines. When there are many elites, the ability to demonstrate a royal pedigree along both paternal and maternal lines would have been extremely beneficial (Marcus 1992: 223–260).

For early Archaic Greece, Antonaccio (1994, 1995) has discussed the role of ancestor veneration and the hero cult in mediating social change.³ So too in the Maya lowlands, ancestor depictions and physical remains occupied a prominent place in the built environment. During the Early Classic, specifically, the concept of a ritual establishment of home through ancestor interment was amplified to provide a home for dead royalty and to impart a notion of centrality and continuity within a grand political and cosmic scheme.

³ I thank Norman Hammond for bringing this research to my attention.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andrews, E. Wyllys, V, and Barbara Fash
1992 Continuity and Change in a Royal Maya Residential Complex at Copan. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 3: 63–88.
- Antonaccio, Carla M.
1994 Contesting the Past: Hero Cult, Tomb Cult, and Epic in Early Greece. *American Journal of Archaeology* 98: 389–410.
1995 *An Archaeology of Ancestors: Tomb Cult and Hero Cult in Early Greece*. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, Md.
- Ashmore, Wendy
1991 Site-Planning Principles and Concepts of Directionality among the Ancient Maya. *Latin American Antiquity* 2: 199–226.
- Becker, Marshall J.
1992 Burials as Caches; Caches as Burials: A New Interpretation of the Meaning of Ritual Deposits among the Classic Period Lowland Maya. In *New Theories on the Ancient Maya* (E. C. Danien and R. J. Sharer, eds.): 185–196. University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
n.d. The Identification of a Second Plaza Plan at Tikal, Guatemala, and Its Implications for Ancient Maya Social Complexity. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1971.
- Bobo, Matthew R.
n.d. Operation I Excavation Report. In *K'axob Project, Interim Report, 1993 Field Season* (Patricia A. McAnany, ed.). Report on file, Departments of Archaeology, Boston University and Belmopan, Belize, 1994.
- Bunzel, Ruth
1952 *Chichicastenango: A Guatemalan Village*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Carmack, Robert M.
1981 *The Quiche Mayas of Utatlan*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- CODEX MAGLIABECHIANO
1970 *Codex Magliabechiano, CL. XIII*. 2 vols. Codices selecti phototypice impressi, vol. 23. Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz, Austria.
- Coe, William R.
1990 *Excavations in the Great Plaza, North Terrace and North Acropolis of Tikal*. Tikal Report, no. 14. University Museum Monograph 61. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Coggins, Clemency C.
1988 Classic Maya Metaphors of Death and Life. *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 16: 64–84.
n.d. Painting and Drawing Styles at Tikal: An Historical and Iconographic Reconstruction. Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1975.

Ancestors and the Classic Maya Built Environment

D'Ambra, Eve

- 1995 Mourning and the Making of Ancestors in the Testamentum Relief. *American Journal of Archaeology* 99: 667–681.

Davis, Shelton H.

- n.d. Land of Our Ancestors: A Study of Land Tenure and Inheritance in the Highlands of Guatemala. Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1990.

Diamanti, Melissa

- 1991 *Domestic Organization at Copan: Reconstruction of Elite Maya Households through Ethnographic Models*. University Microfilms, Ann Arbor.

Feeley-Harnik, Gillian

- 1985 Issues in Divine Kingship. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 14: 273–313.

Feuchtwang, Stephan D. R.

- 1974 *An Anthropological Analysis of Chinese Geomancy*. Vithagna, Southern Materials Center, Taipei.

Freidel, David A., and Linda Schele

- 1989 Dead Kings and Living Temples: Dedication and Termination Rituals among the Ancient Maya. In *Word and Image in Maya Culture* (W. F. Hanks and D. S. Rice, eds.): 233–243. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.

Freidel, David A., Linda Schele, and Joy Parker

- 1993 *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*. William Morrow, New York.

Geertz, Clifford

- 1980 *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.

Glazier, Jack

- 1984 Mbeere Ancestors and the Domestication of Death. *Man* (n.s.) 19: 133–148.

Gonlin, Nancy

- 1993 *Rural Household Archaeology at Copan, Honduras*. University Microfilms, Ann Arbor.

Gossen, Gary H.

- 1986 Mesoamerican Ideas as a Foundation for Regional Synthesis. In *Symbol and Meaning beyond the Closed Community: Essays in Mesoamerican Ideas* (Gary H. Gossen, ed.): 1–8. Studies on Culture and Society. Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, State University of New York, Albany.

Graham, John A.

- 1990 Monumental Sculpture and Hieroglyphic Inscriptions. In *Excavations at Seibal, Department of Peten, Guatemala* (Gordon R. Willey, ed.): 1–79. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

Hammond, Norman

- 1981 Pom for the Ancestors: A Reexamination of Piedras Negras Stela 40. *Mexicon* 3 (5): 77–79.

Harrison, Peter D.

- 1970 *The Central Acropolis, Tikal, Guatemala: A Preliminary Study of the Functions and Its Structural Components during the Late Classic Period*. University Microfilms, Ann Arbor.

Patricia A. McAnany

Haviland, William A.

- 1981 Dower Houses and Minor Centers at Tikal, Guatemala: An Investigation into the Valid Units in Settlement Hierarchies. In *Lowland Maya Settlement Patterns* (Wendy Ashmore, ed.): 89–117. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.
- 1988 Musical Hammocks at Tikal: Problems with Reconstructing Household Composition. In *Household and Community in the Mesoamerican Past* (R. R. Wilk and Wendy Ashmore, eds.): 121–134. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Henderson, H. Hope

- n.d. Operation XII Excavation Report. In *K'axob Project, Interim Report, 1993 Field Season* (Patricia A. McAnany, ed.). Report on file, Departments of Archaeology, Boston University and Belmopan, Belize, 1994.

Hendon, Julia A.

- 1991 Status and Power in Classic Maya Society: An Archaeological Case Study. *American Anthropologist* 93: 894–918.

Houston, Stephen D.

- 1987 Notes on Caracol Epigraphy and Its Significance. In *Investigations at the Classic Maya City of Caracol, Belize, 1985–1987* (Arlen F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase, eds.): 85–100. Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, San Francisco.

Humphreys, Sally C.

- 1981 Death and Time. In *Mortality and Immortality: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Death* (Sally C. Humphreys and H. King, eds.): 261–283. Academic Press, London.

Iglesias Ponce de León, María Josefa

- n.d. Excavaciones en el grupo habitacional 6D-V, Tikal, Guatemala. Ph.D. dissertation, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1987.

Jones, Christopher

- 1977 Inauguration Dates of Three Late Classic Rulers of Tikal, Guatemala. *American Antiquity* 42: 28–60.

Jones, Christopher, and Linton Satterthwaite

- 1982 *The Monuments and Inscriptions of Tikal: The Carved Monuments*. Tikal Report, no. 33, pt. A, University Museum Monograph 44. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Leventhal, Richard M.

- 1983 Household Groups and Classic Maya Religion. In *Prehistoric Settlement Patterns: Essays in Honor of Gordon R. Willey* (Evon Z. Vogt and Richard M. Leventhal, eds.): 55–76. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., and University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Lockard, Angela

- n.d. Analysis of K'axob Burials, 1990–1993 Field Seasons. Manuscript on file, Department of Archaeology, Boston University, 1994.

López Austin, Alfredo

- 1988 *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas* (Thelma Ortiz

Ancestors and the Classic Maya Built Environment

- de Montellano and Bernard Ortiz de Montellano, trans.). University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.
- Marcus, Joyce
- 1992 *Mesoamerican Writing Systems: Propaganda, Myth and History in Four Ancient Civilizations*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.
 - n.d. Men's and Women's Ritual in Formative Oaxaca. In *Social Patterns in Pre-Classical Mesoamerica* (D. C. Grove and R. A. Joyce., eds.). Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C. (In press.)
- McAnany, Patricia A.
- 1995 *Living with the Ancestors: Kinship and Kingship in Ancient Maya Society*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- McCormack, Valerie
- n.d. Field Report of Excavations at Operation XI. In *K'axob Project, Interim Report, 1993 Field Season* (Patricia A. McAnany, ed.). Report on file, Departments of Archaeology, Boston University and Belmopan, Belize, 1994.
- Merwin, R. E., and G. C. Vaillant
- 1932 *The Ruins of Holmul, Guatemala*. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 3, no. 2. Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
- Miller, Arthur G.
- 1986 *Maya Rulers of Time*. University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
 - 1991 The Carved Stela in Tomb 5, Suchilquitongo, Oaxaca, Mexico. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 2: 215–224.
- Pearson, Mike P.
- 1993 The Powerful Dead: Archaeological Relationships between the Living and the Dead. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 3 (2): 203–229.
- Pendergast, David M.
- 1979 *Excavations at Altun Ha, Belize, 1964–1970*, vol. 1. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.
 - 1982 *Excavations at Altun Ha, Belize, 1964–1970*, vol. 2. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.
- Pred, Allan
- 1986 *Place, Practice and Structure: Social and Spatial Transformation in Southern Sweden, 1750–1850*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Proskouriakoff, Tatiana
- 1963 Historical Data in the Inscriptions of Yaxchilan, Part I. *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 3: 149–167.
 - 1964 Historical Data in the Inscriptions of Yaxchilan, Part II. *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 4: 177–201.
- Ricketson, Oliver
- 1925 Burials in the Maya Area. *American Anthropologist* 27: 381–401.
- Robertson, Merle Greene
- 1983 *The Sculpture of Palenque*, vol. 1: *The Temple of the Inscriptions*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.

Patricia A. McAnany

- 1985 *The Sculpture of Palenque*, vol. 3: *The Late Buildings of the Palace*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.
- Robin, Cynthia, and Norman Hammond
1991 Burial Practices. In *Cuello: An Early Maya Community in Belize* (Norman Hammond, ed.): 204–225. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Saile, D. G.
1985 The Ritual Establishment of Home. In *Home Environments* (I. Altman and C. Werner, eds.): 87–111. Plenum Press, New York.
- Schele, Linda, and David Freidel
1990 *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya*. William Morrow, New York.
- Schele, Linda, and Mary E. Miller
1986 *Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*. George Braziller, New York, and Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Tex.
- Smith, A. Ledyard
1950 *Uaxactún, Guatemala: Excavations of 1931–1937*. Carnegie Institution, Publication 588. Washington, D.C.
- Stuart, David, and Stephen Houston
1994 *Classic Maya Place Names*. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.
- Tate, Carolyn E.
1992 *Yaxchilan: The Design of a Maya Ceremonial City*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Tedlock, Barbara
1982 *Time and the Highland Maya*. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.
- Turner, Victor
1977 Frame, Flow, and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality. In *Performances in Post Modern Culture* (M. Benamou and C. Caramello, eds.): 33–55. Coda Press, Madison, Wis.
- Valdés, Juan Antonio
1990 Observaciones iconográficas sobre as figuras preclásicas de cuerpo completo en el área maya. *Estudios: Organó de Divulgación del Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Antropológicas y Arqueológicas* 20: 23–49.
- Verano, John W.
1997 Human Skeletal Remains from Tomb 1, Sipán (Lambayeque River Valley, Peru), and Their Social Implications. *Antiquity* 71 (273): 670–682.
- Vogt, Evon Z.
1969 *Zinacantan: A Maya Community in the Highlands of Chiapas*. Belknap Press for Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Whittaker, Arabelle, and Viola Warkentin
1965 *Chol Texts on the Supernatural*. Summer Institute of Linguistics of the University of Oklahoma, Norman.