

This is an extract from:

Social Patterns in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica

David C. Grove and Rosemary A. Joyce, Editors

Published by

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection

Washington, D.C.

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Washington, D.C.

Printed in the United States of America

www.doaks.org/etexts.html

Pre-Classic Cityscapes: Ritual Politics among the Early Lowland Maya

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Religious change from particularism to greater universalism has its own momentum rather than being a mere correlate or after-effect of other transformations. (Werbner 1977: xxiii)

The themes of this volume find strong resonances in two of the most dynamic facets of recent Maya archaeology, research into ancient Maya ideology and investigations of the roots of Maya civilization. Fieldwork carried out from the mid-1970s onward has dramatically altered our ideas about the size and complexity of Late Formative lowland Maya centers. Initial discovery of Late Formative monumental architecture at Uaxactun¹ (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937) was amply confirmed by substructures encountered in the North Acropolis trench at Tikal (W. R. Coe 1965). Further discoveries of substantial Late Formative public architecture are now well known from Cerros, Komchén, Cuello, Nakbe, El Mirador, Tikal, Uaxactun, Lamanai, and elsewhere (Fig. 1). In most cases the associations of these structures are hard-won, being often buried beneath later construction phases, but a few sites—Cerros (Robertson and Freidel 1986; Scarborough 1991a), Cuello (Hammond 1991), Komchén (Andrews and Ringle 1992), and El Mirador (Dahlin 1984; Matheny and Matheny 1990)—are largely free of later overburden and provide some insight into community organization during the period. Settlement surveys at several sites have shown that Late Formative occupations frequently eclipse

¹ Although the earliness of E-VII-Sub was appreciated at the time, further excavations were undertaken in 1940 to confirm this. The exploratory trench into E-VII-Sub yielded a surprisingly small number of sherds, 29 of 30 being Chicanel (Smith 1955: 20).

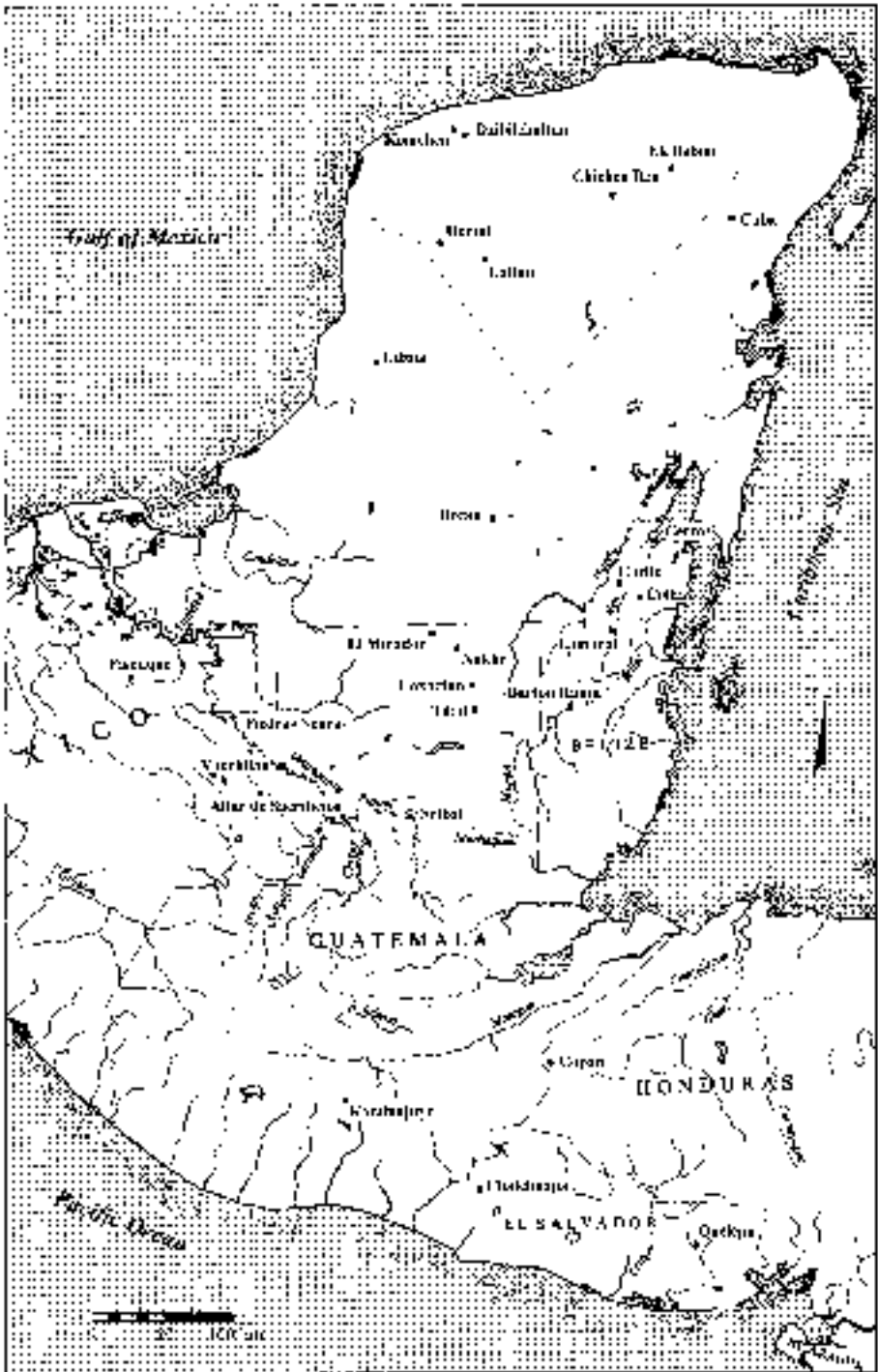


Fig. 1 Map of the Maya Lowlands showing major archaeological sites (after Andrews 1990: map 1.1, used with permission of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University). Courtesy of E. W. Andrews V.

those of the Early Classic period and occasionally even Late Classic densities.

In addition, recent research has imparted a deeper appreciation for the sophistication and considerable ancestry of early Maya ritual. One striking feature of what we know of Formative ritual life is the degree of continuity it exhibits with that of later times. Iconographic studies have demonstrated the Pre-Classic roots of many facets of Classic period ritual practice: human sacrifice (Laporte and Fialko 1990, 1995; Hammond, Clarke, and Estrada Belli 1992: 42; Hammond, this volume), deities such as the "Jester God" (Fields 1991; Freidel 1990), costume (Freidel and Andrews n.d.), and office (Freidel and Schele 1988). In the best of cases we can reconstruct at least some aspects of the Late Formative belief system (Schele and Freidel 1990: chap. 3). Aspects of temple architecture and decoration likewise continue into the Classic period, and excavations have demonstrated that in some cases Formative sacred places endured for centuries, good examples being the North Acropolis and Mundo Perdido of Tikal. This suggests that early in their history the Maya developed certain organizational principles, and certain ways of symbolically expressing them, which were flexible enough to order the significantly more complex societies of the Classic and Post-Classic periods.

My own perspective on the themes of this volume has been heavily influenced by the opportunity to do fieldwork at two Formative sites, Komchén in northwest Yucatan (E. W. Andrews V, director) and El Mirador in Guatemala (Bruce H. Dahlin, director). But it is the architecture and site layout of the Classic period site of Ek Balam, where George Bey and I have been working for a number of years, that stimulated my interest in site layout and caused me to reexamine earlier sites. I maintain that the clear continuities between the Formative and Classic sites are due in part to the persistence of segmentary organization among many Maya polities. As several commentators have noted, ritual tends to play a prominent political role in such societies because centralized political leadership is often weak and bureaucracies underdeveloped (Southall 1988; Wolf 1982). Organization is typically pyramidal, with considerable replication of functions. Thus one reason that early urban templates could persist was that later growth was largely additive and did not force a drastic hierarchical restructuring of society.

GENERAL COMMENTS ON RITUAL AND IDEOLOGY

In this chapter I consider the generative role of ritual and religion in the rise of Maya civilization. The majority of recent discussions on the topic emphasize the coercive nature of ideology, religion and ritual being seen mainly as vehicles for elite legitimation and propaganda. While there can be no doubt that

they were, we must remember that religious rationales for inequalities of wealth and status are usually embedded in a larger vision of social cohesion. A simple legitimation model can only partially explain the elaboration and particular configurations of Maya ritual. More important, such models say little about why ritual should have been an effective vehicle for social control. In particular, it is difficult to see how legitimation alone can engender belief. Rather, legitimation would seem to depend upon a prior system of beliefs, which only later could have been appropriated and modified for political ends. Thus we must look elsewhere for the roots of ritual.

In my view, we need to examine more closely the expressive and organizational roles of religion in Maya culture. During the Formative period especially, when avenues of information exchange were fewer, simpler, and rapidly becoming overburdened by population growth, religion provided institutional means for expressing order and accommodating change. For a preliterate society lacking formal legal codes, religion and ritual provided visible statements of the obligations linking its members to each other and to the cosmos. As discussed below, ideology provided a set of metaphors whose application to society grew and changed over time, but nevertheless continued to reflect their Formative roots. At the same time, religion was a developing institution with its own internal conditions of growth, providing some of the earliest opportunities for specialization and status differentiation. Temple construction indicates the increasing involvement of religion in the management of labor and resources. Finally, as will be shown, religious expansion accompanied significant changes in residential organization. As such, it cannot simply be reduced to the "epiphenomenal" result of certain configurations of production and social organization, but was itself an active agent of social change.

Since the changes wrought during the Late Formative were so substantial, and since the period lasted several hundred years, the mature Formative ritual complex does not appear full-blown nor everywhere concurrently. At least two horizons seem identifiable. The first construction of monumental architecture begins near the Middle-to-Late Formative transition. This correlates with the appearance of domestic compounds, but in my view occurs within a still largely egalitarian society with limited differences of rank (see Hammond, this volume; Hendon, this volume; Ringle n.d. for evidence as of 1985). A second stage occurs during the last two centuries b.c. and is manifested by the spread of a particular iconographic complex in the southern lowlands, particularly temples faced with monster masks, ballcourts, *sacbeob*, and imagery associated with rulership. At this time, earlier metaphors begin to be applied to status differences, resulting in the complex stratified societies so apparent during the Classic period.

The question of monumentality is a related issue. Why did the Pre-Classic Maya, like several other formative civilizations, invest inordinate amounts of energy in constructing monumental architecture? Here the achievements of the inhabitants of El Mirador are particularly impressive, since the Late Formative Tigre and Danta complexes are two of the largest examples of monumental architecture from the entire span of Mesoamerican prehistory. In light of recent work at Nakbe, Tikal, Lamanai, and elsewhere, however, these no longer seem exceptional but part of a broader impetus toward monumentality.

Again, materialist approaches have stressed the role of elite legitimization. Mendelssohn (1971), discussing the early appearance of pyramids in Egypt, saw these vast construction projects as a means of divorcing peasants from their subsistence base, insuring their future dependence on elites. Pharaohs organizing such projects were literally inventing the state, using continual pyramid building as a means of uniting a workforce that could be bent to the will of the state, and in the process engulfing formerly independent "tribal units." Trigger (1990), forwarding a "thermodynamic" perspective, sees monumental architecture as examples of conspicuous consumption by elites, as Flannery (1968) argued some time ago with regard to the buried mosaic pavements of La Venta:

Monumental architecture and personal luxury goods become symbols of power because they are seen as embodiments of large amounts of human energy and hence symbolize the ability of those for whom they were made to control such energy to an unusual degree. Furthermore, by participating in erecting monuments that glorify the power of the upper classes, peasant laborers are made to acknowledge their subordinate status and their sense of their own inferiority is reinforced. (Trigger 1990: 125)

To me it seems improbable that Formative elites could somehow hoodwink an entire populace into building massive reminders of their humble station in life. Monuments may have conveyed this message subliminally, but I do not think it could have been their inspiration. Nor does Formative monumental construction appear to be accompanied by cults of individual rulers, which appear only later. I think we must instead remind ourselves that for the ancients, no less than for ourselves, monumental construction expressed aspects of communal life that were of deepest importance. This is not to deny their employment as tools of power and social coercion, for surely they were, but in a much more sophisticated and oblique manner than most materialist explanations would suggest.

One limitation of our attempts to understand the ritual role of architecture

is a tendency to regard monumental architecture as “ritual materialized and petrified” (Wilson 1988: 134–135, emphasis mine). We have been content to imagine monumental buildings functioning as restored, but essentially inert, versions of the ruins we investigate today. Broda (1987), however, reminds us that while monumental architecture does have an autonomous symbolic existence, its role as a backdrop to ritual performance is every bit as important, if not more so. Buildings, far from being petrified, are constantly being transformed by the particular ceremonies enacted within their precincts (compare Cyphers, this volume).

It is not just that buildings were stages with constantly changing sets, for motion had a much deeper significance in Mesoamerican ritual. Motion was an inherent quality of life, and energy and spirit continually moved through the twin fields of time and space. Ritually this was manifested by the many pilgrimages and processions that moved through a series of prescribed stations according to a ritual calendar. Deities and destinies too were shaped by their associations with particular dates and directions. This restless, ceaseless flow between the dialectical extremes of experience is everywhere evident in Mesoamerican imagery and has much to tell us about the organization of monumental architecture.

THE MIDDLE-LATE FORMATIVE DEMOGRAPHIC AND RESIDENTIAL TRANSITION

Pre-Classic monumental construction must first be seen within the context of some general trends in Formative settlement patterns. Evidence suggesting precocious Early Formative developments in Belize has recently been reexamined, resulting in a significantly shortened lowland Formative chronology (Andrews and Hammond 1990; Andrews 1990). Andrews (1990) doubts any lowland ceramic complex is truly Early Formative, the earliest instead beginning sometime at the outset of the Middle Formative.² The initially distinct Swasey, Eb, and Xe complexes, representing the earliest settlers, were replaced sometime during the seventh century by the Mamom sphere, whose makers spread rapidly throughout the lowlands and were responsible for first colonizing the north. The similarity of Mamom complexes is such that Andrews believes actual population movements were responsible for its spread, at least into northern Yucatan. I have speculated that this expansion may have been spurred in part by the availability of Nal-Tel maize hybrids capable of thriving in the humid lowlands (Ringle n.d.), but Formative macrobotanical remains are still

² Hammond, Clarke, and Estrada Belli (1992) argue for an earlier start, perhaps ca. 1200 b.c.

scarce. For most of the Middle Formative, the lowlands were probably a rapidly expanding frontier of swidden farmers. The rapidity with which this occurred, the low population density, and the lack of competition for land resulted in a simple material culture with few traces of substantial construction or ritual elaboration, at least in the initial stages of expansion.

As the Middle Formative drew to a close, two general features marked the transition to Late Formative: the vastly more widespread, substantive, and complex archaeological record and the appearance of new organizational patterns. Impressionistically, Late Formative remains are found in nearly all the subregions of northern Yucatan in substantial quantities, although in relatively lower densities in the Puuc hills. Because Middle Formative remains are often perishable, deeply buried, or both, it is difficult to estimate population increases, but two- to tenfold increases have been claimed at several lowland sites.³ This translates into annual rates of population growth of between 0.2 and 0.7 percent, rates that are high but not unknown in the preindustrial Old World (Cowgill 1975; Hassan 1981).

This rapid rise in population was probably due only in part to *in situ* expansion. Since conditions were such in many large early communities that population would actually have decreased if not counterbalanced by considerable immigration (e.g., Storey 1985), a similar influx was probably necessary to fuel the rapid growth of the large Late Formative centers. Although the reasons for this growth are still unclear, the general benefits of nucleation probably included protection and guaranteed access to land. Nucleation would also have provided opportunities for the emergence of wealth and power differentials. Given the relatively uniform distribution of major resources and limited mineral deposits of the Maya Lowlands, in my view craft specialization and exchange were relatively minor components of the Late Formative economy. Except at unusual sites such as Colha and perhaps Komchén, which grew as the result of nearby concentrations of otherwise scarce resources, land and labor were the bases of wealth in most lowland Formative centers, wealth correlating directly with the ability to command labor and tribute.

Recruitment and retention of migrants must therefore have been a central

³ See Ringle (n.d.: 319–322) for a summary of the evidence as of that date. Tourtellot (1988) estimates as much as a tenfold increase at Seibal, although Willey (1990: 241) cautions that consideration of phase length and other factors may indicate a rate only half that. Wilk and Wilhite (1991) calculate a growth factor of between four to six (from 571 to 711 at Cuello during the Middle Pre-Classic to 2128–2598). These figures are of course subject to a number of caveats, but their replication across several sites with differing residential remains inspires some confidence in the general trend.

concern among the leadership of these emerging polities. In the lowlands, the rapid infilling of the landscape was accompanied by significant changes in residential patterns, most notably the partial replacement of small perishable structures by permanent raised masonry or earthen house platforms.⁴ At some sites, such as Seibal (Tourtellot 1988: 376), Cerros (Scarborough 1991a: 107), and Komchén (Andrews and Ringle 1992; Ringle n.d.; Ringle and Andrews 1988), large platforms supporting multiple perishable houses were common (Fig. 2). At El Mirador, *plazuela* complexes, characteristic of the central Peten Classic period, seem to have their genesis during the Late Formative. During 1982, as part of Bruce Dahlin's mapping project, William Loker, Brian Bogle, and I mapped about 4 sq km of El Mirador's peripheries. Our work demonstrated the plazuela group to be the predominant residential configuration (Fig. 3). Unfortunately, our sample is undated, but the principle of abundance would suggest the majority are coeval with the apogee of monumental construction during the Late Formative.⁵ Excavations by the Harvard project that same year (Demarest et al. 1984) confirmed that some of these groups nearer the site center were Late Formative, and although some overlay Mamom middens, no excavated structures could be dated to the Middle Formative (e.g., Operation 70). This emphasis on more formally defined and permanent domestic arrangements reflects the emergence of more inclusive kin networks—perhaps clans or lineages—and the beginnings of segmentary organization (see also Hendon, this volume).

LATE FORMATIVE CEREMONIAL ARCHITECTURE

The archaeological record also suggests a concurrent shift in the locus of sacred activities. Prior to the Late Formative, evidence suggests a domestic ritual focus. In common with a general Mesoamerican pattern (Drennan 1976: 352–353), the most common Middle Formative “ritual” artifacts are the figurines found at many southern lowland sites, primarily in household rubbish.⁶ Both

⁴ Ringle (n.d.: chap. 7) is a summary of the evidence as of 1985.

⁵ Polychrome sherds from looters' trenches in some of the civic architecture showed that there was clearly some Late Classic activity in the area, as was true of El Mirador itself.

⁶ Reports of Middle Pre-Classic figurines include: Seibal: Willey 1978: 9–12; Uaxactun: Smith 1955: 5, and Hendon, this volume; Tikal: Laporte and Fialko 1995: 46; Altar: Willey 1972: 7–14; and Nakbe: Forsyth 1993. One figurine from Seibal and six of the forty Pre-Classic figurines from Altar are possibly Late Formative, but Willey (1972: 5, 13) notes that the contexts of the latter are uncertain and that stylistic similarities with Middle Formative types may indicate their earlier placement. The Late Formative figurine from Seibal (S-631) is quite dissimilar to earlier forms and was found in a mixed Pre-Classic-Classic period deposit. Forsyth (1993: 41, figs. 19, 20) illustrates several Ox phase (Middle Pre-Classic)

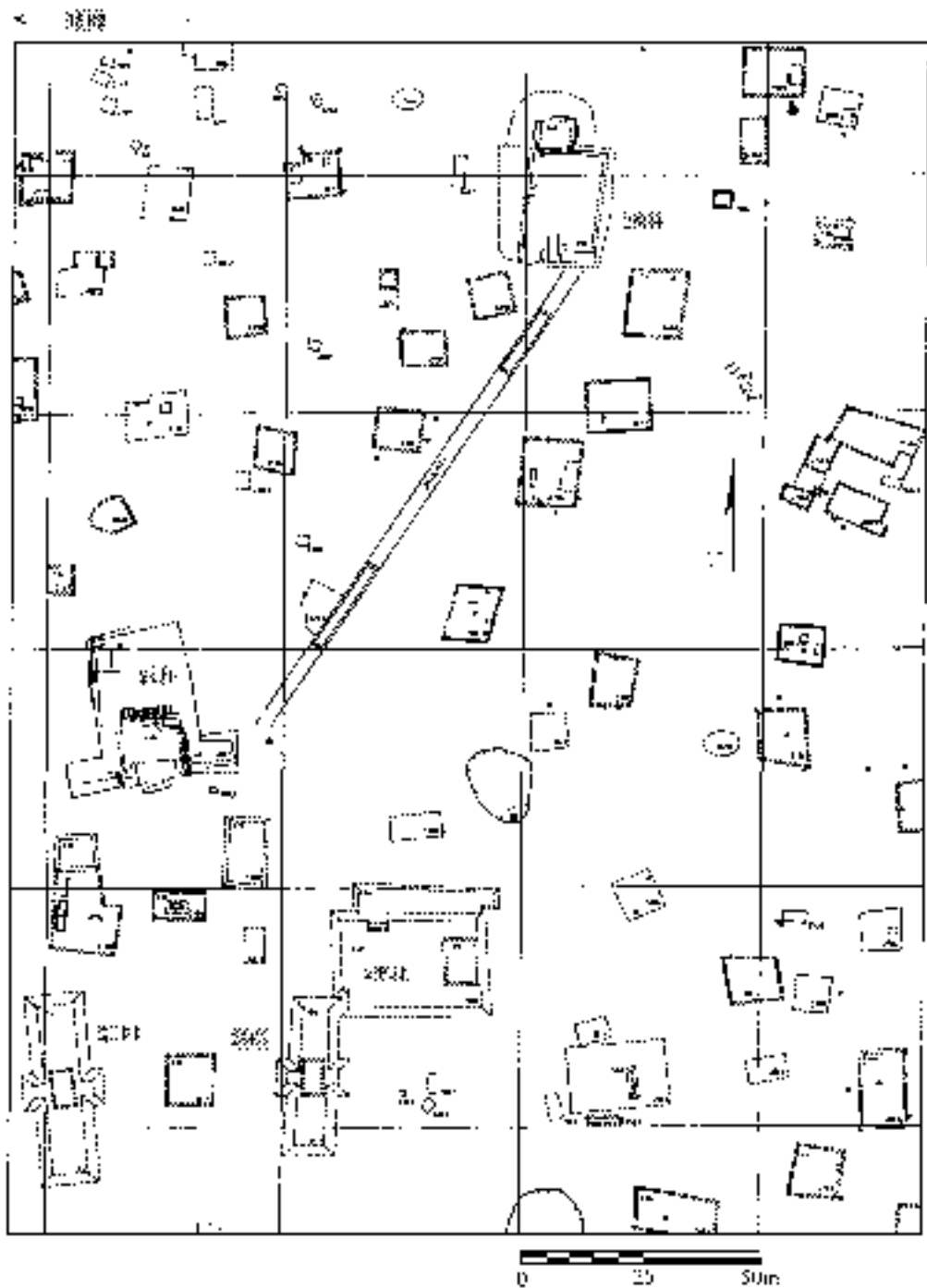


Fig. 2 Central buildings of Komchén (after Andrews, Gonzalez, and Ringle 1980: detail of map, used with permission of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University). Courtesy of E. W. Andrews V.

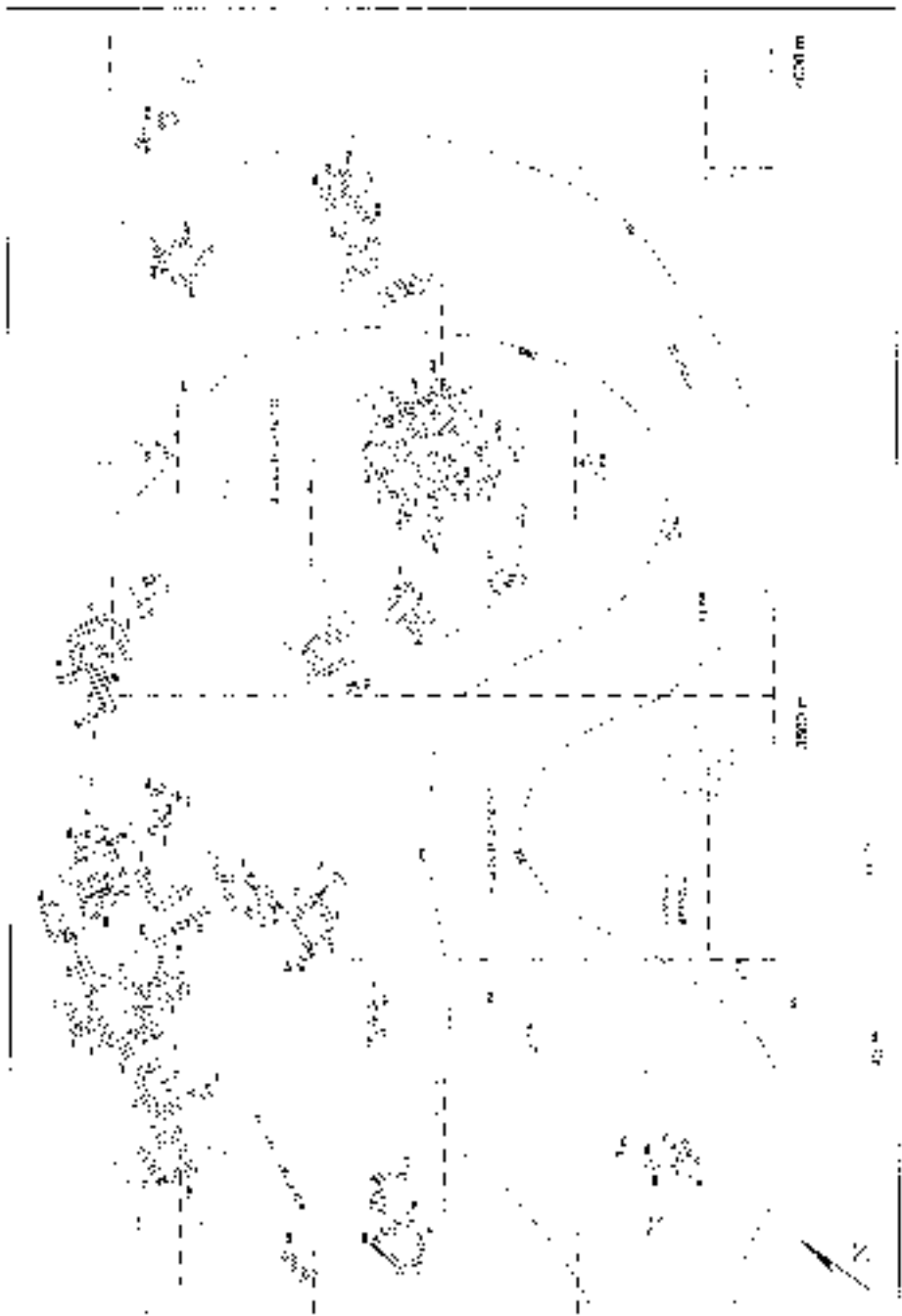


Fig. 3 Plazuela groups from the El Mirador settlement survey. Courtesy of Bruce Dahlin.

males and females are present, although the latter seem to predominate. Although figurines are of unknown function, scholarly consensus favors a ritual use (compare Hendon, Joyce, Marcus, all in this volume). Rands and Rands (1965) speculate they may have been part of a fertility cult, while Hammond (1989), following Grove and Gillespie's (1984) analysis of Middle Formative figurines from Chalcatzingo, has suggested they may be elite portraits used for unknown ritual purposes. The important fact, however, is that there is little, if any, evidence for more centralized ritual activity (see Hendon, this volume, for similar conclusions).

The figurine tradition ends just when household architecture becomes more permanent and formally arranged, and as construction of monumental architecture begins. Although the timing of this transition varies somewhat from region to region, residential reorganization and monumental construction seem closely related developments—at least it cannot be said that monumental construction was a later development. The process seems to begin in the south toward the close of the Middle Formative period. Mound B-IV at Altar de Sacrificios is placed by Smith (1972: 111) in the late San Felix subphase (500–300 b.c.), at which time it was a 5 m tall mound faced with *almeja* coating. However, because this early construction phase was encountered at the base of a 1.5 m square test pit and not further exposed, we have little idea of its extent. During the Escoba phase (600–300 b.c.) at nearby Seibal, Willey (1990: 195) indicates the construction of small temple pyramids in several localities, as well as a possible locus of public architecture deep beneath Group A, although no architectural remains confirm this.

figurines from Nakbe very similar to those from Uaxactun. It is unclear from the report whether these come from domestic contexts and predate the substantial architecture reported from the site.

Some suggestion of a later continuance comes from Cuello, where Hammond (1991: 177, 232–233) states figurines continue in limited use during the Cocos Chicanel, although again with the possibility of redeposition. Willey (1978: 7–8) notes similarities of the Seibal and Altar types with those of San José I, Copan Archaic, Jenny Creek, and Barton Creek phases of the Belize River survey, and Dzibilnocac II, all of which postdate the Middle Formative. A few figurine fragments were found in Tigre excavations at El Mirador (Hansen 1990: 269), mostly in mixed Middle-Late Formative fill, but a few pieces are placed in the Late Formative. In contrast, Formative figurines were not reported from Monos (Copeland 1989) or Danta complexes (Howell 1989), the latter of which had almost no Middle Pre-Classic sherds. Figurines appear to be absent from Cerros, which had occupation only from the Late Formative onward.

Figurines are very rare at northern sites, perhaps because of the scarcity of Middle Formative deposits. None were found in the Komchén excavations, and none of the figurines from Dzibilchaltun could be securely dated as Formative (see Taschek [1994: 203–208] for a more extended comparative treatment of the evidence from northern Yucatan).

At El Mirador, Copeland's (1989) excavation in the lowest terrace of the Monos Complex yielded a nearly pure Middle Formative assemblage beginning a meter below the surface in a deposit 3.85 m deep. However, the radiocarbon date ($3220 \text{ b.p.} \pm 60$; CALIB 397 b.c.) obtained from very nearly the bottom of this excavation indicates it was built very late in the Middle Formative. The profile (Copeland 1989: fig. 4) indicates that this earlier structure may have been only 1 to 1.5 m above bedrock. No Middle Formative structural remains were found in either the Danta (Howell 1989) or Tigre (Hansen 1990: 208–209) excavations. More impressive remains of Middle Formative ceremonial architecture come from the initial stages of the Mundo Perdido complex at Tikal (Laporte and Fialko 1990, 1995). Laporte and Fialko state that the earliest architecture, a radial pyramid and a rectangular platform west of it, probably was built during the Late Eb period (600–500 b.c.). Both were later greatly enlarged during the Tzec phase (500–250 b.c.). The results from Nakbe, where remains of substantial Middle Formative architecture are claimed, may dramatically revise this scenario, but Don Forsyth (personal communication, 1994) informs me that excavations as of that date indicate early monumental construction dates to the later Middle Pre-Classic.

The earliest monumental architecture in the north is less impressive and somewhat later, but shows the same close correlation with residential reorganization. Radiocarbon dates from three of the major buildings of Komchén (Figs. 2, 4) suggest construction began early in the Late Nabanche phase (350–150 b.c.). A sample from a midden below the lowest construction of 23F1 yielded a date of $2330 \pm 80 \text{ b.p.}$ and was associated with ceramics of the Kin complex (450–350 b.c.), as was a date of $2310 \pm 180 \text{ b.p.}$ from below 24G1. A radio-carbon date of $2200 \pm 90 \text{ b.p.}$ came from Construction Period 3A of Str. 25O1, the major building at the other end of the *sacbe* (Andrews and Andrews 1980: 55). During this Late Nabanche construction phase the pyramid was considerably enlarged, but the plaza before it had not yet been filled in and raised.

The earliest building stage of 21J1 (Fig. 2), the main ceremonial platform, sealed a pure Early Nabanche deposit.⁷ The dimensions of the earliest building stage are difficult to determine due to later destruction, but the platform measured at least 39 m east-west and supported a pyramid more than 22 m across. The pyramid was preserved to a height of 2.8 m above the platform, but its

⁷ Information on 21J1 comes from an unpublished excavation report by E.W. Andrews V and Kathy Rowlands in the Middle American Research Institute archives. Andrews will be preparing the final report on this work. Another date of $3275 \pm 80 \text{ B.P.}$ came from the surface below the building, but is considered too early.

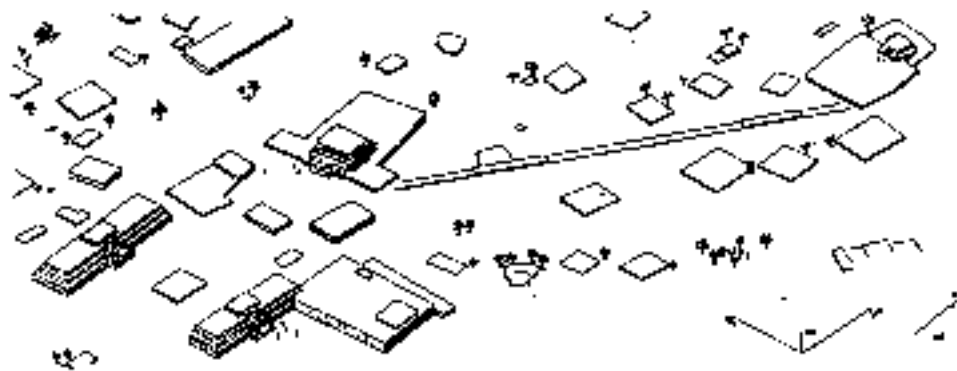


Fig. 4 Reconstruction drawing of the central plaza and *sacbe* of Komchén viewed from the southeast (after Andrews and Ringle 1992: fig. 2, with permission of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University). Courtesy E. W. Andrews V.

original height is unknown. Several additional construction stages and intervening periods of apparent abandonment occurred throughout the Formative. A radiocarbon date of 2215 ± 80 b.p. follows a major stage of construction activity during which 21J1 approached its maximum extent. Smaller modifications follow, but virtually all appear to have been Late Nabanche or earlier.

Komchén was not an isolated phenomenon, but few subsequent projects in the north have been concerned with Formative occupations. Important Formative public structures have been identified and excavated at Yaxuna by David Freidel, Charles Suhler, and Traci Ardren and are in the process of being reported (e.g., Suhler n.d.). Our own unpublished reconnaissance in the vicinity of Ek Balam has resulted in the tentative identification of at least one Late Formative center with monumental architecture, X-Huyub, based upon limited excavations and surface collections.

An intermediate level in the religious hierarchy also appears during the Late Formative, the local or minor temple. These smaller pyramids occur singly or in association with domestic groups. At Seibal, Tourtellot (1988: 277–284, 381) notes a regular distribution of minor temples (his Class M structures) in the peripheries during the Early Cantutse phase (300 b.c.–a.d. 1), each about 560 m apart. Our settlement work at El Mirador demonstrated small temples peppered the countryside there as well (Figs. 3, 5). At Komchén, substantial platforms supporting secondary platforms, such as 15R2 and 25O1, were found at some distance from the center while Str. 603 of the nearby Mirador Group of

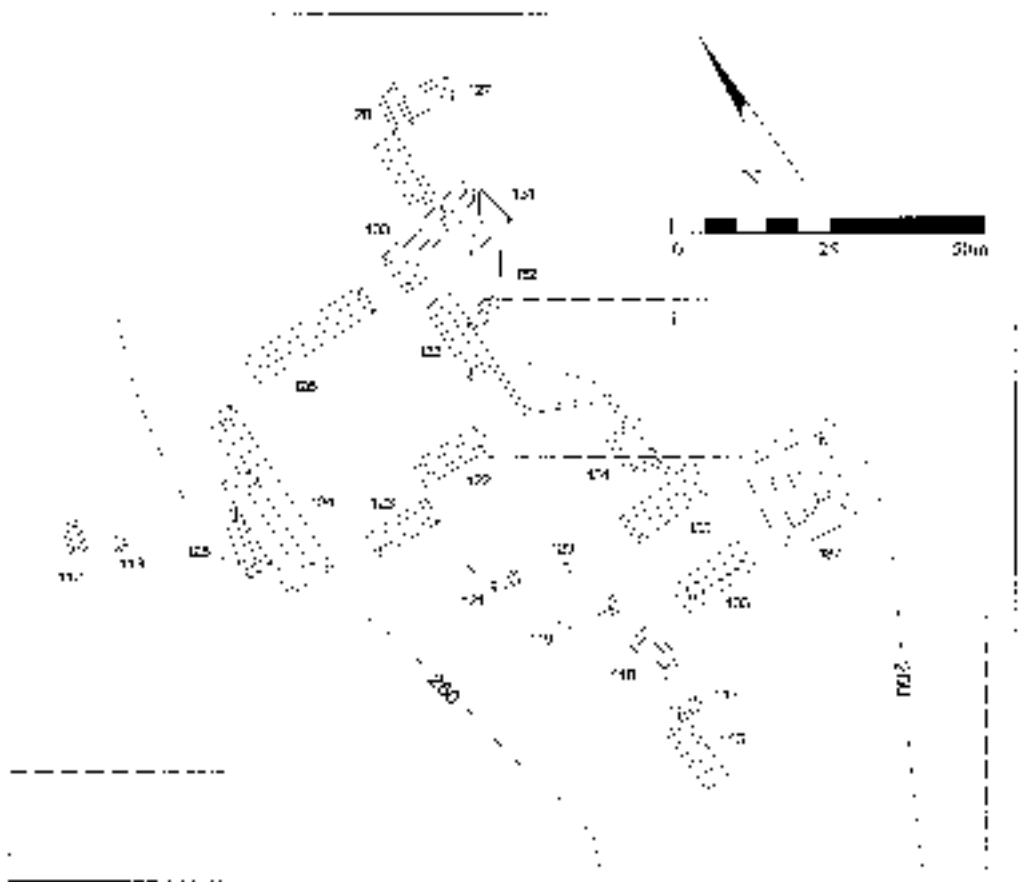


Fig. 5 Plaza Plan II group at El Mirador. Courtesy of Bruce Dahlin.

Dzibilchaltun (Fig. 6; Andrews and Andrews 1980: 20–40) might be classified as a local temple because of its size and placement within a formally arranged plaza.

The deployment of local temples within domestic compounds or among clusters of house mounds suggests the involvement of a now more centralized and hierarchically organized cult in this reorganization of residential life. One arrangement common in the Peten during the Classic period, Becker's (n.d.) Plaza Plan II, may have had its genesis at this time since so many of the plazuela groups at El Mirador had this pattern (Figs. 3, 5). Another common Formative pattern, perhaps related to Plaza Plan II units, was to place large platforms

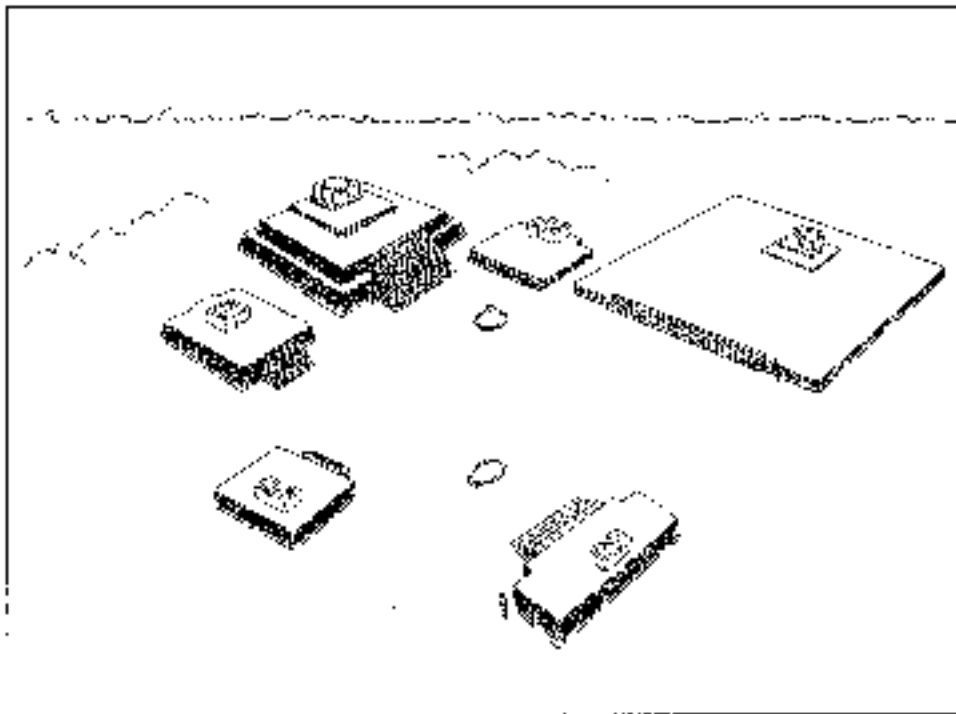


Fig. 6 Mirador Group, Dzibilchaltun viewed from the west (after Andrews and Andrews 1980: fig. 4, used with permission of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University). Courtesy of E. W. Andrews V.

adjacent to local temples. This arrangement characterizes the hearts of Komchén (Strs. 21J1 and 24G1; Fig. 2) and the Mirador Group of Dzibilchaltun. In the latter, the 3.5 m high pyramid Str. 603 was adjacent to Str. 605, at that time apparently a large low platform without superstructures. The pattern is true for Seibal as well, where minor temples tend to be associated with Class L platforms (Tourtellot 1988: 376), either adjacent to or across from the temple. (Class L structures are large basal platforms with “substantial height . . . in many cases but most notably a large ground area . . . and proportionately large upper surface” [Tourtellot 1988: 274]). Another pattern was to combine pyramidal and platform into a single structure, as with 25O1 and 21J1 at Komchén (Figs. 4, 9).

Local temples may have been prominent in domestic organization because organizational solutions developed elsewhere in Mesoamerica were inapplicable or undesirable. In many highland centers, occupational *barrios* provided a means of marking differences and organizing residence, perhaps as far back as

the late Early Formative (e.g., in Oaxaca: Pires-Ferreira 1976; Flannery and Marcus 1976: 376). But if I am correct in my characterization of the Formative Maya economy, this was generally not possible in the lowlands. Nor were overt ceramic markers of ethnic or residential identity, such as have been suggested for Formative Oaxaca (Pyne 1976) and Copan (Fash 1991), well developed among the Mid-Late Formative lowland Maya, although the material record is rather limited. Mamom and Chicanel phase ceramics are relatively homogeneous over large areas, even as far as northern Yucatan, and begin to diverge substantially only toward the close of the Late Formative period. While there are differences from site to site, and from region to region, the impression is rather a conscious desire to minimize ethnic or political distinctions. This conformity in the material record may also be reflected in the relative lack of linguistic diversification across the peninsula, all of which may have acted as an incentive to exchange, political alliance, and population movements.

Local temples seem instead to have served as residential organizational nodes in the lowlands. I would agree with Tourtellot's statement that they pertain to "a series of long-established local corporate social groups each with its own idiosyncratic service center or 'chief's establishment'" (1988: 377). In many cases, temples are also associated (or combined) with open areas or platforms that were perhaps used for dances or public ceremonies. The association of temples with adjacent large platforms is a hallmark of the "temple assemblage," a group believed to be the site of lineage activities and ritual during the Late Classic and Post-Classic periods (Fox 1989; Proskouriakoff 1962; Bey and Ringle n.d.; Ringle and Bey n.d.). Hence this pattern may also have a Formative origin, indicating the importance of centralized performance and display at this early date.

ASPECTS OF THE SACRED

The central issue relating residential reorganization and ceremonial construction was, it seems to me, the emergence of hierarchy. The inability of egalitarian communities to deal with increasing population levels and perhaps the dwindling availability of land demanded some concentration of authority. To me, the plans of Maya urban centers into the Post-Classic period seem to be extended meditations on the problematic relation of the center to the whole. It was a question of more than idle speculation, given the importance of population recruitment and retention to these early polities, and one whose dimensions were constantly evolving as differentials of wealth and power increased. If the segmentary model is correct, the problem was acute because there were multiple centers of power, often with conflicting agendas and differing com-

mitments to the paramount. Thus we cannot speak simply of center and periphery.

This ultimately became a religious question for two reasons: first, the segmentary divisions were clear points of potential conflict, and hence demanded the sanctions and boundaries that the sacred could confer. Second, religion provided a means of representation, of thinking about the problem. The peculiar power of religious explanation, aside from its claims of ultimate authority, is its metaphoric ability to connect the disparate fields of experience. The commonplaces that religion links individuals to the cosmos, or that religion mirrors society, become somewhat more interesting if we consider how metaphors achieve those links. In the following section I suggest some metaphoric transformations of this problem of hierarchy and their resultant expression in civic layouts.

A fundamental role of ideology in general and ritual in particular is to express a vision of social cohesion. General experience in societies of any complexity is of a series of differences—distinctions of occupation, status, class, and so on. What then provides a sense of belonging, a sense of identity and equality with one's fellow citizens? Victor Turner (1969, 1974) has brilliantly shown how these are in fact two polarities of the sacred. On the one hand is what Turner would define as "communitas," a direct, egalitarian, unstructured experience of social bonding. On the other is a rationale for hierarchy and difference:

To simplify a complex situation, it might be said that ancestral and political cults and their local embodiments tend to emphasize ancestral cults representing crucial power divisions and classificatory distinctions within and among politically discrete groups, while earth and fertility cults represent ritual bonds between those groups and even . . . tendencies toward still wider bonding. The first type stresses exclusiveness, the second inclusiveness. The first emphasizes selfish and sectional interests and conflict over them; the second, disinterestedness and shared values. (Turner 1974: 185)

He further shows that these two poles are spatially segregated in many complex agricultural societies. Being associated with hierarchy and power, political/ancestral rituals usually occupy the central ground and fertility rituals the peripheries. This was not completely true for Mesoamerica, as can be seen in the twin temples of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc in the Aztec Templo Mayor, but their very pairing at the center of the empire indicates the power of this dialectic, and, as discussed below, there were many instances where this spatial pattern

was indeed followed.

The degree to which social distinctions, roles, and categories are embedded in the sacred is frequently a measure of the degree to which they are perceived as sources of potential conflict. Strong taboos and sanctions may be created to discourage the crossing of these bounds. Nevertheless, individuals move through a series of social categories in the course of their lives, and such boundaries must often be mediated. Most often this is done by rites of passage, which commonly involve a series of inversions, of “antistructure” and “liminality,” following which the initiate enters his or her new station (Turner 1969, 1974). Thus, paradoxically, antistructure reaffirms structure. This is also a fruitful way to look at community, since similar communal rituals are periodically needed to rekindle a sense of *communitas* on the one hand and to delineate the bounds of power on the other. Important to this discussion is Turner’s (1974) demonstration that in more complex agricultural societies, collective pilgrimages play an equivalent structural role to rites of passage for the individual.

Several widespread Mesoamerican ideas concerning the sacred suggest the conceptual, or metaphoric, basis for mediating *communitas* and hierarchy. A concept of spirit in Mesoamerica whose wide distribution suggests great antiquity is known in lowland Maya languages as *ch’ulel* or *k’ulel*, a *mana*-like sense of numen or vital force infusing all important aspects of life (Vogt and Vogt 1970). *Ch’ulel* has obvious similarities to the Zapotec conception *pèe* (Marcus, Flannery, and Spores 1983: 37–39), Mixtec *ini*, and Nahuatl *teotl* (Townsend 1979). The strong communal bond of *ch’ulel* not only links different social ranks⁸ but crosses other significant boundaries as well. As a quality of animals, plants, and places it spans the culture/nature boundary, while as a quality of deities it links the occupants of this world with the supernatural.

As explained by Vogt, *ch’ulel* is located in the heart and circulates through the bloodstream (see Stuart 1988 for related imagery). The circulatory aspect links it with another widespread concept, the belief in the efficacy of motion mentioned earlier. This animating power of spirit is expressed most powerfully on page 1 of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (Fig. 7a) and the related image on pages 75–76 of the Codex Madrid, where motion follows a path uniting time—here the *tonalamatl*—with the four world directions defining space. However, the direction is not circumambulatory, but at each station bends inward toward the center. This animating flow from periphery to center is reinforced by the

⁸ During the Classic period, rulers and places were marked with this quality, as were deities and other denizens of the underworld (Ringle 1988). The degree to which this marked an appropriation of this quality by elites remains to be understood.

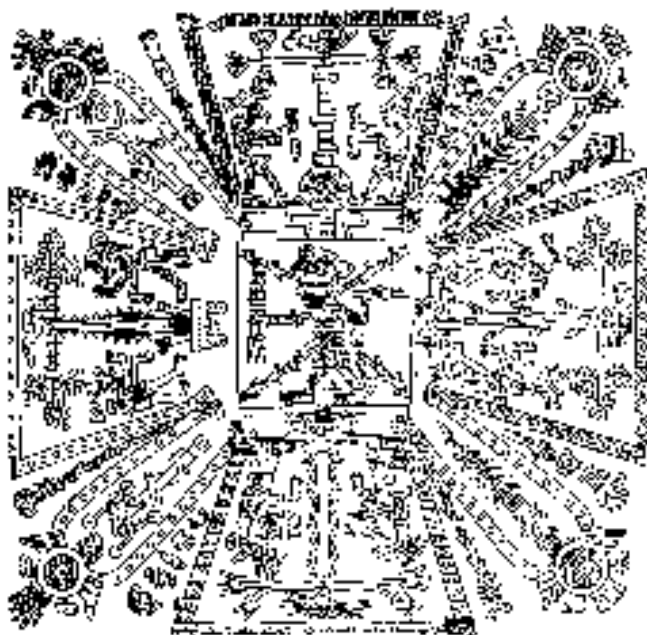


Fig. 7a Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, page 1 (after Anders, Jansen, and Pérez-Jimenez 1994: 183).

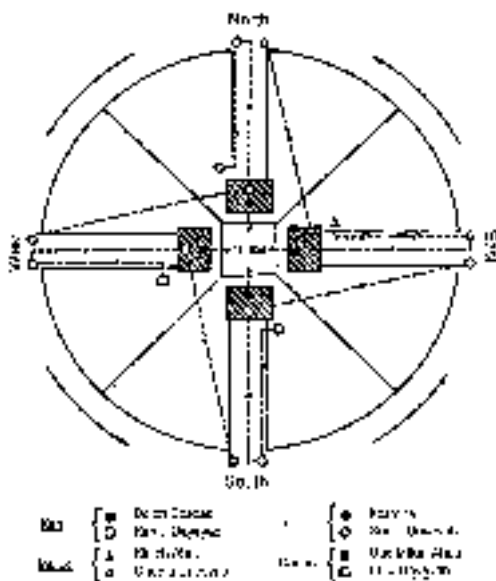


Fig. 7b Uayeb ritual circuit (after M. D. Coe 1965: fig. 1).

flow of blood from symbols of Tezcatlipoca at each of the four corners in toward the center (Leon-Portilla 1985; Anders, Jansen, and Pérez-Jimenez 1994). Thus the pattern of motion outlined in the two codices is an attempt not only to circumscribe time and space but to solve the relation of center to periphery.

The manifestations of *ch'ulel* are not always benign, and hence culture is viewed as a buffer between humans and the forces of nature. This is not only a contrast between civilization and the powers of the surrounding forests, mountains, and bodies of water, but also reflects man's dual nature. This duality is reflected in another widespread belief, that of the animal companion (Nahuatl *tonal*, Maya *way*) whose parallel life in the wild intersects that of his civilized counterpart only at moments when the structure of everyday life is imperiled (Vogt and Vogt 1970). The importance of this concept during the Classic period is clear from inscriptions and iconography (Houston and Stuart 1989), and its wide distribution again suggests a Formative origin, if not earlier.

Among Mesoamerican peoples, certain natural features such as mountaintops, cenotes, and caves have traditionally been regarded as extremely powerful, in part because they function as thresholds to the underworld. Central to the process of experiencing or propitiating the forces dwelling in these remote natural spots was the journey. Such pilgrimages mark a transition from the protective sphere of culture to the very edges of the world, and hence involve danger and structural inversion. The importance to the Maya of such spots, and of journeys to them, is clear from the archaeological, iconographic, and ethnographic record. Stuart's (1987) decipherment of the *witz* (mountain) glyph, for instance, has shown the importance of such spots in Classic ritual. Bassie-Sweet (1991) provides a useful overview of Maya cave ritual and argues for their central role in the scenes depicted on Classic period Maya sculpture. Although our knowledge of Pre-Classic nature shrines is scant, such rituals should logically be among the oldest practices. An example might be the northern Maya cave of Loltun (Velázquez 1980; Andrews 1986: 29), where excavations in cave chambers uncovered Middle and Late Formative ceramics. Although their ritual use has not been established, some of the earliest northern Maya relief images are carved above one of the entrances (Freidel and Andrews n.d.) and on bed-rock outcrops before it.

But there is also a mimetic path to harnessing and experiencing the sacred, less fraught with danger because it occurs within the sphere of culture. This is reflected in yet another pan-Mesoamerican practice, that of ritual impersonation. By donning the garb of a particular deity, speaking the necessary words, and dancing the necessary steps, the celebrant—ruler or slave—succeeds in invoking the deity's presence. The practice of costuming celebrants, victims,

and effigies as deities is perhaps best known for Aztec ritual (*teixiptla*; see Townsend 1979: 23–36), but masked figures are common in the art of Oaxaca, the Maya area, and elsewhere. In Townsend's view, particular vestments are used not so much to imitate this or that deity (or historical figure) as to signal the particular configuration of spirit being invoked:

It is questionable that they represented gods in any conventional sense of the term. What they were connected with was designated in two ways: first, by the word *teotl*, and, second, by a metaphoric cult name. . . . *Teotl* expresses the notion of sacred quality, but with the idea that it could be physically manifested in some specific presence—a rainstorm, a mirage, a lake, or a majestic mountain. . . . And for ritual purposes, of course, a *teixiptla* especially acted as a talismanic token of the sacred. (1979: 28)

Teixiptlas did not primarily advertise a personality, though the reliefs of emperors and kings were doubtlessly accompanied by dates and name-glyphs; rather, *teixiptlas* commemorated a lasting relationship between a community—personified by its leader—and the animating spirits of the universe. (1979: 34)

Like Vogt's (1964) conception of structural replication, ritual impersonation is at base simply another metaphoric process. Since *teixiptlas* may also be effigies, this suggests that the concept may be applied to other human creations as well. It may therefore be useful to look at the arrangement of ceremonial architecture, the "cityscape," as a similar imitation establishing a set of correspondences between the sacred geography of the natural world and the sacred, but built, topography of the community.

It is now abundantly clear from epigraphy and comparative ethnohistoric accounts that earlier suggestions (Vogt 1964; Holland 1964) that Maya pyramids were ceremonial mountains are true.⁹ Much as the ideal landscape consists of a center fringed by a ring of enclosing mountains, so too the central temple of many Maya centers was surrounded by a lesser series of temple "mountains." The construction of artificial caves is another example of the imitation and appropriation of natural portals. Brady and Veni (1992) report the excavation

⁹ Similar suggestions have been made for elsewhere in Formative Mesoamerica, for example, Heizer's (1968) suggestion that La Venta Complex C was a volcano effigy and Grove's (this volume) discussion of Chalcatzingo. The idea is unlikely to have been a Mayan innovation, given the priority of monumental construction outside the Maya Lowlands.

of tunnels at several highland Maya sites in which the form, the offerings, and the traces of fire clearly demonstrate their ritual use. What is particularly interesting is that several of these are excavated directly beneath main plazas. As the authors (1992: 160) note: "This would impart the impression that the very layout of the central ceremonial complex was ordained by the cave below it."

The cityscape therefore stands in the same mimetic relation to the otherworld as does the *teixiptla*: much as *teixiptla* acts to configure and channel spirit, so too the "cityscapes" of Maya centers may be viewed as templates for the direction of similar energies. But the imitation of the natural landscape by the center is in reality a double metaphor: on the one hand there is the opposition between culture and nature, symbolized by the central temple-wilderness shrine dyad. But within the realm of culture there is a further opposition, between the "mountain(s)" of the central precinct and those of the urban peripheries. Just as the pilgrim's trek to a mountain fastness is a prerequisite for spiritual renewal, so too a similar "journey" must periodically be made between the temple "mountains" of the community. Although this latter journey takes place entirely within the sphere of culture, moving as it does from the temple "mountains" of the center to those of the periphery, it involves crossing boundaries no less significant, although they are of human making (compare Grove, this volume).

PROCESSIONS AND SACBE SYSTEMS

In short, I am suggesting an additional correspondence between pilgrimages and ritual processions. Processions are of course reflected in the distinctive Maya practice of linking major architectural groups by means of *sacbeob*. Present evidence from two sites, Komchén and Cerros, indicate these causeways first appeared during the Late Formative period. Cerros Sacbe 1 (Fig. 8) has been assigned an early Tulix date (50 b.c.–a.d. 150), and although the dating of the second *sacbe* is not specifically discussed, it is apparently contemporary (Scarborough 1991a: 151, fig. 3.7). At Komchén (Figs. 2, 4), a trench through the *sacbe* suggests its construction during the Xculul phase (150 b.c.–a.d. 150). Xculul sherds were found throughout the loose rubble fill, but in low frequencies, perhaps indicating it was built early in the phase. Another site near Komchén, Tamanche, has two causeways thought also to be Late Formative in date (Kurjack and Garza 1981: 301). In the southern lowlands, Jones' (n.d.) excavations of some of the El Mirador *sacbeob* places much of the construction during the Late Formative. An intersite causeway apparently links El Mirador to Nakbe (Graham 1967), while an internal *sacbe* connects the two major groups of Nakbe (Forsyth 1993: fig. 2), which face each other along its axis. Dates for either have yet to be published.

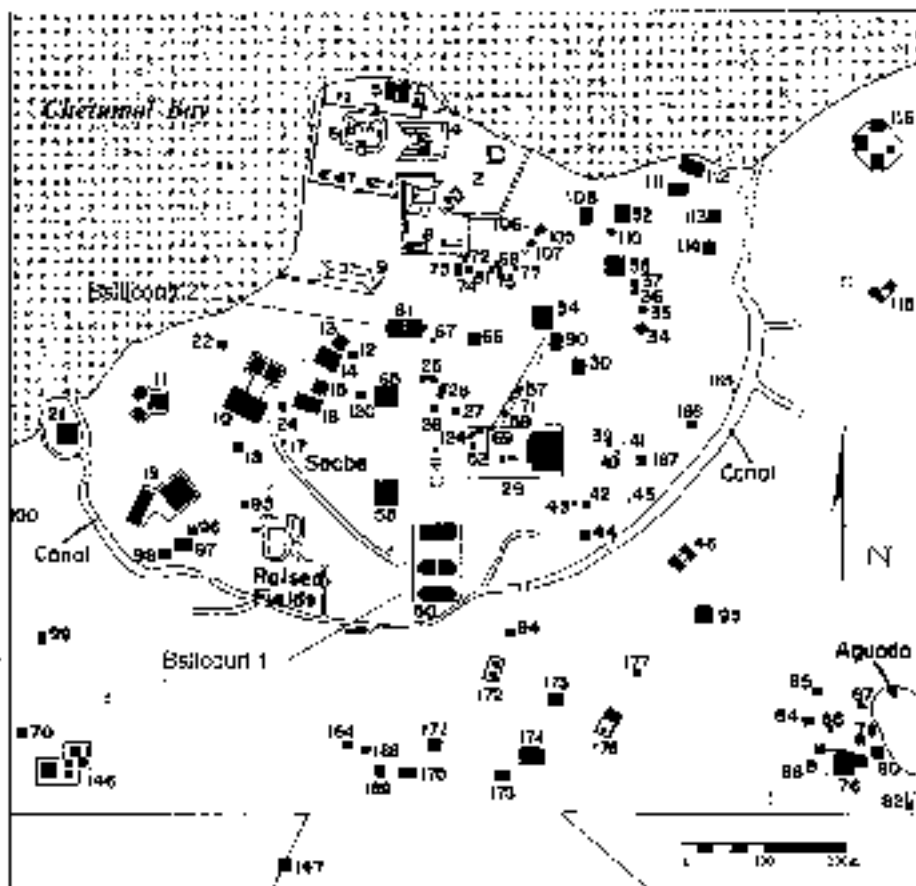


Fig. 8 Map of Cerros (after Scarborough 1991a: fig. 2.1). Courtesy of David Freidel.

The ritual function of most of these *sacbeob* is indicated by the type of structures they connect.¹⁰ The Komchén *sacbe* connected two of the largest platforms, 25O1 and 21J1,¹¹ both of which undoubtedly had ritual functions.

¹⁰ Scarborough (1991a: 150) argues that the Cerros *sacbeob* may also have served as dike walls for reservoirs within Cerros. Dennis Jones (n.d.: 73–79) suggests the *sacbeob* crossing the El Mirador *bajos* served several purposes, religious among them, although further exploration of the areas at the distal ends of these roads is necessary.

¹¹ The first structure designation is that of the Komchén Project (E. Wylls Andrews V, director), the second that of the Dzibilchaltun Project. The earlier project explored only these two structures: Str. 25O1 was excavated in 1959–60 by Robert Funk, but planned excavations in 21J1 in 1961–62 had to be abandoned because of personnel problems (Andrews

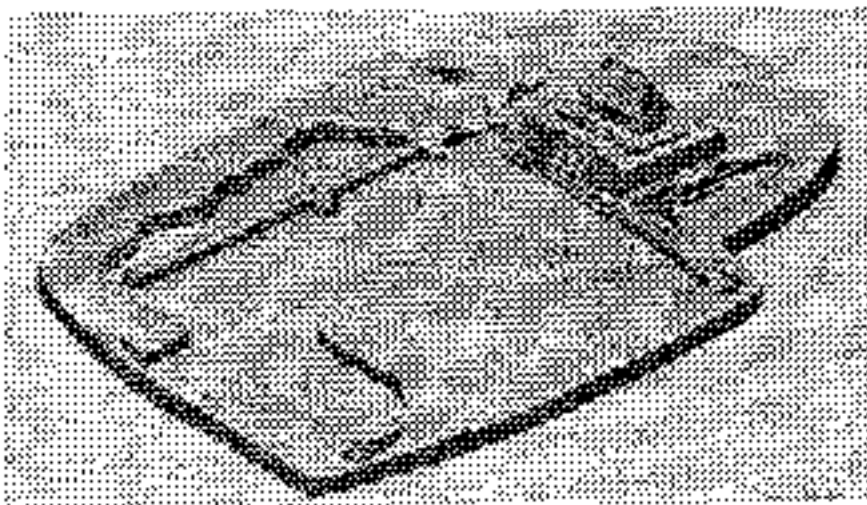


Fig. 9 Komchén Structure 25O1 (formerly Str. 450) (after Andrews and Andrews 1980: figs. 27 and 41, used with permission of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University). Courtesy of E. W. Andrews V.

The building of the *sacbe* also apparently correlates with major changes in 25O1, in particular the construction of a massive raised platform fronting the temple and burying an earlier enclosed court (Fig. 9; Andrews and Andrews 1980: 42–55). Cerros Sacbe 1, while it apparently skirted areas periodically inundated, connected three special-purpose architectural groups, Strs. 10,¹² 16, and 50. The last of these is a ballcourt, and in later times ballcourts and *sacbeob* were closely associated (Ringle and Bey n.d.). Sacbe 2 unites a large “civic facility,” Str. 29, with two other large mounds, Strs. 54 and 90, also apparently civic/ritual in function.

and Andrews 1980: 42–58). Str. 25O1 was not reexamined by the Komchén project, but E. W. Andrews V and Kathy Rowlands intensively excavated 21J1 throughout the 1980 season.

The original Formative phase designations and their spans have been revised twice since the excavation of 25O1. The temporal units used by the Komchén project are (Andrews 1988):

Early Nabanche	700–450 b.c.
Ek Complex	450–350 b.c.
Late Nabanche	350–150 b.c.
Xculul	150 b.c.–A.D. 250

¹² Although the secondary platforms are Early Classic, Scarborough (1991a: 53) indicates the basal platform was built during the Tulix phase. However, the ceramic samples seem equivocal (Scarborough 1991a: 52–55).

The function of *sacheob* has been a perennial topic of speculation, but it is noteworthy that the appearance of road systems accompany the changes in residential and monumental architecture previously mentioned. Kurjack (1979) has suggested that intersite *sacheob* represent kinship links, specifically elite marriage ties. We (Bey and Ringle n.d.; Ringle and Bey n.d.) believe they primarily represent political axes, linking segments with the center. These views need not be mutually exclusive since segments were undoubtedly allied by means of marriage. But it is significant that the vast majority of *sacheob* are radial, connecting center and peripheries, whereas a more complex system connecting outlying architectural complexes might be expected if kinship links alone were being commemorated.

These interpretations, however, neglect the performative aspect of *sacheob*, the fact that they were in effect extended stages for ritual. While we may be forever ignorant of the specifics of such rituals, they surely involved processions, as we know they did in the Uayeb year-end rites of later centuries (Fig. 7b). This movement from center to periphery and back is, I believe, intended as an imitation of the dynamic of *ch'ulel* discussed above. There is a remarkable homology, for instance, between the cardinaly oriented processions of Uayeb rituals and the first page of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (Fig. 7a-b). While the codex depicts the actual flow of spirit, the Uayeb procession marks the transport of deities from temples of the center to one of the peripheral shrines and back again. This flow is equally applicable to single *sache* systems since the fundamental component is the reciprocal movement linking the center with its peripheries.

The importance of performance also appears to be reflected in the type of buildings connected by *sacheob*. At both Komchén and Cerros, the *sacheob* reach large platforms supporting pyramids at one end (Str. 29 at Cerros, Strs. 21J1 and 25O1 at Komchén). In all cases, the large open terraces of the basal platforms face the *sacheob*. The evolution of Komchén Str. 25O1 is particularly interesting in this respect (Andrews and Andrews 1980: 42-55). Initially a small platform was fronted by a broad, low terrace delimited by a series of low, wide walls. During the Xculul phase, approximately at the same time the *sache* was built, the terrace was filled in and raised to create a substantial basal platform. It seems likely that such terraces were areas of public assembly and the locations of ritual dances involving substantial numbers of people. While it cannot be proven at this point, the association of possible large dance plazas with *sacheob* suggests that such structures may have been prototypes of the *popolna*, the architectural setting for lineage dance rituals during the Post-Classic and Classic periods that were also often linked to *sacheob*.

Like the pilgrimage, the procession serves to link and mediate structural opposites. Like pilgrimage routes, *sacheob* occasionally link the community with natural portals. The most famous example is Chichén Itzá Sacbe 1, which leads from the Gran Nivelación to the Cenote of Sacrifice. (Recent work by Peter Schmidt and Rafael Cobos, of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, has discovered other *sacheob* linking structures with cenotes at this site.) At Ek Balam, the eastern *sacbe* also leads to a small architectural group around the rim of a large cenote. Similarly, Landa (Tozzer 1941) indicates that Uayeb rituals were associated with *sacbe* processions, and the Uayeb ritual on Dresden page 27 shows an “opossum impersonator” standing in what is probably a symbol for “cenote” (Fig. 10).

However, *sacheob* far more often lead to outlying groups of elite architecture, and in the examples from Ek Balam and Chichén Itzá there seems to be an attempt to “mix metaphors” by equating the symbolic associations of processions and pilgrimages. Although the cultural opposition being mediated by the latter may simply be the conflict between authority and egalitarianism, as Turner suggests, the northern *sacbe* systems of the Classic period suggest that segmental oppositions were the more specific concern. Later northern *sacbe* systems (and indeed those of Komchén and Tamanche) seem frequently to lead from specific buildings of the center to outlying complexes, for example, there is no common point of convergence. The implication is that *sacheob* do not necessarily link the center with an undifferentiated periphery, nor the periphery with an undifferentiated center.

We believe that in such cases *sacheob* instead link different aspects of the same segment. If the segmentary model is correct, a key point of structural conflict would be between the roles of elites as segmentary lords and their

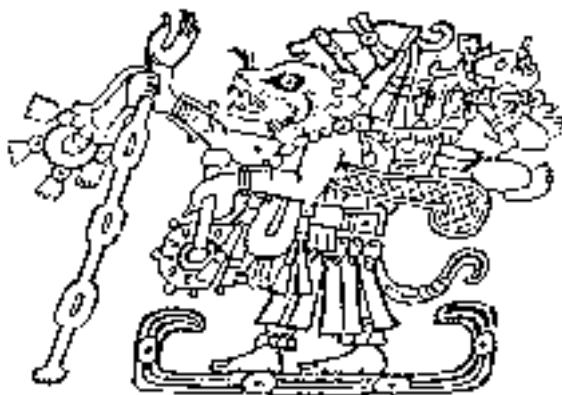


Fig. 10 Dresden Codex New Year Ceremonies, page 27, showing “Opossum Imitator” standing in cenote symbol (after Villacorta and Villacorta 1977).

roles as polity leaders. Such tension would have been particularly great for the paramount segment. Thus I would hazard the guess that even these early *sacheob* did not link two ranked segments, but instead mediated the public and segmental personae of its ruling lineage. Implicit is yet another mediation between *communitas* and hierarchy, but complicated by the fact that while hierarchy and privilege are exemplified by the center, in a segmentary society the center is also the sole point of political solidarity. Likewise, while the peripheries are usually associated with *communitas*, in fact segmental conflict is a chief threat to social coherence. Perhaps for these reasons, the movement between center and periphery is a reciprocal one.

BALLCOURTS

In linking the public and segmental roles of elites, *sache* systems are clear statements of the reciprocal relations of power in such societies. This is supported by another component of the emerging cityscape, ballcourts. Ballcourts appeared most probably midway through the Late Formative, although only three have yet been excavated: Cerros (Scarborough 1991a, 1991b; Schele and Freidel 1990), Pacbitun (Healy 1992), and Colha (Eaton and Kunstler 1980). The role of the leader as hero (impersonator) in the ball game through reenactment of the defeat of death by the Hero Twins has been ably explained by a number of commentators. What I wish to comment upon briefly are some liminal aspects that the ball game seems to share with pilgrimages and processions.

As a game ostensibly involving some element of chance and risk, the ball game invites the abandonment of structure. Although at one level the game is a ritual drama (or re-creation), on another the advantages of rank are abandoned in a contest of athletic ability. The game is also about motion, given the metaphorical associations of the ball with heavenly bodies. And like remote mountain or cave shrines, the ballcourt was conceived of as a portal to the underworld. The association of human sacrifice makes the transformative aspect of the game explicit.

Examination of where ballcourts are placed with respect to monumental architecture confirms their involvement in this "meditation on the center." Gillespie (1991) and Scarborough (1991b) have demonstrated the role of ball games as boundary markers. Bey and I (Ringle and Bey n.d.) have further shown that ballcourts are typically placed along *sacheob*, further associating them with transition and liminality. Although the Formative evidence is slight, there is a convincing body of evidence from Classic and Post-Classic sites and images to show their involvement with segments and interpolity relations (Gillespie

1991; Ringle and Bey n.d.). Closer examination shows ballcourts usually occur at the extremes of *sacheob*, either marking the entrance to outlying architectural complexes or the articulation of *saches* with the center. This pattern is true for the major Cerros ballcourt, Str. 50, which is found at the southern end of the primary north-south axis of the ceremonial center and also at the southern terminus of Sacbe 1. Although the Pacbitun ballcourt is not associated with a *sache*, it is at the northern fringe of the main ceremonial compound. The second Cerros ballcourt, Str. 61, would seem to be an exception in that it is located near the center of the site and is unassociated with roadways. Nevertheless, the fact that it somehow served a mediatory function is indicated by its location along the north-south axis (as was Str. 50) and its position midway between the northern acropolis and the major temple complex, Str. 29. The placement of the ballcourt along the borders of the ceremonial center, often at the juncture of causeways, suggests again the metaphoric mediation of structural fault lines.

MONUMENTAL ARCHITECTURE

While the above aspects of ritual practice were expressive of the segmental divisions of society, others, perhaps even more evident, expressed the primacy of the center. Some comments are therefore necessary concerning the monumentality of Formative constructions, the largest examples of which were the equals of any later period in the lowlands. While some low platforms of the Middle Formative may have had ritual functions (see Hendon, this volume), the Middle to Late Formative transition witnessed a geometric rise in the ratio of temple to domestic architectural volumes. Nor were temples the sole recipients: large earthworks at sites such as Becan and El Mirador, and ditches, again at Becan and perhaps Cerros, served to define and protect ceremonial precincts.

Theories mentioned earlier, stressing elite legitimation, attribute monumental temple building to elite strategies for impressing, intimidating, and exploiting their subjects. In other words, temple construction is viewed as a *local* strategy of subordination. Such Cecil B. DeMille-like visions of sweating helots bending to the lash of the overseer seem, however, as unsatisfying for the Maya as they do for Egypt. It is doubtful for one thing that Formative elites had the means necessary to exact such labor coercively without risking rebellion, and a purely local focus does not explain why temple construction spread so widely so rapidly.

To return to a point made earlier, recruitment would have been of special concern to emerging centers. Since in most cases tribute and command over labor would seem to have been the bases of Formative wealth, revenues would

have varied directly with population size. Hence mechanisms for attracting new followers (and retaining them) would have been of special interest. Yet the political administration of tribute networks must have presented great obstacles for the as yet small-scale Formative polities. As Hicks (1991) demonstrates for the Aztecs, the alternatives of hegemonic or politically administered “empires” each had their drawbacks: direct political or military administration was costly in resources and personnel, although greater amounts of surplus could be forcibly extracted. Hegemonic relations had the advantage that the bureaucratic investment was less, but they were inherently less profitable. Reciprocal relations meant that lower levels of surplus production could be demanded, “gifts” were necessary to maintain tribute relations, and frequently there were several layers in the process, each extracting its own cut. Finally, it was easier for subject territories to assert their independence, demanding costly wars of reconquest.

The sponsorship of religious cults was a third possible pathway to social complexity, involving neither the military costs of political administration nor the reciprocal obligations of a tribute system. As cults expanded their membership, and as cult objects became of more than local significance, they could have provided powerful incentives to recruitment. Cultic practice would have been especially valuable in providing a prior language of hierarchy and inequality that could easily have been transferred to the economic and political spheres. Such metaphors were also significant in that they operated at both the individual and regional level, providing models for the development of secular status differences and settlement hierarchies.

At the outset of monumental construction, near the Middle-to-Late Formative transition, we are not yet speaking of “world religions”—the later appearance of stucco masked temples across the Peten may mark this horizon—but rather of regional cults. As defined by Werbner (1977: ix), regional cults “are cults of the middle range—more far-reaching than any parochial cult of the little community, yet less inclusive in belief and membership than a world religion in its most universal form.” Two aspects of this inclusiveness are of interest: the demographic inclusiveness of the cult itself and the inclusiveness of the cult objects, in other words, the scope of their spiritual and cosmic spheres of influence. Although we have little evidence of the nature of cult objects at this time, the disappearance of figurines from domestic contexts does suggest their replacement by figures with power over wider aspects of the community and nature. By the time religious imagery becomes widespread in the mid-Late Formative, deities are clearly of universal import, such as the sun god or the jaguar god of the underworld.

Regional cults are attractive to a wider clientele, but as Werbner (1977, 1989)

emphasizes, this clientele is not necessarily coextensive with existing political or ethnic boundaries. Regional cults frequently cross-cut these limits, promoting the exchange of information, personnel, and goods, and thus may have been an initial vehicle in expanding religiopolitical boundaries beyond the limits of the community (for an early Andean example, see Burger's [1992: 192–203] discussion of the role of regional cults in the genesis and spread of Chavín ideology). And regional cults are frequently organized as a series of client shrines recognizing a central parent temple, oftentimes the locus of a particularly important event or the dwelling of the major spokesman or prophet. These central places frequently become significant sources of wealth. This is especially true of pilgrimage centers (compare Freidel 1983): markets and fairs frequently accompanied medieval European pilgrimages, and certainly the Sacred Cenote of Chichén Itzá drew objects from an enormous area in later times.

What might have initiated this process? Several recent discussions (compare examples in Earle 1991) of the rise of inequality downplay the functional or adaptive value of “big men” and chiefs, finding little evidence for their role in risk distribution or enhancement of political networks. Instead, conflict, exploitation, and individual intentionality and self-interest are emphasized. For instance, Hayden and Gargett (1990), in a recent discussion of the problem in Mesoamerica, pose the question of how early “accumulators” could have broken free from an egalitarian ethos and justified inequalities of power and wealth. They favor a model in which such differences arose in the contexts of cargo systems and the resultant competition for cargo positions. In cases where communities were able to generate surpluses, competitive feasting provided a privileged means for amassing wealth and personal prestige without incurring social opprobrium. Feasts would have been viewed favorably by all, they would have provided a means whereby the organizer could accrue debts from large numbers of people, and sponsorship would have provided potential “big men” with access to ritual or sacred positions (Hayden and Gargett 1990: 14–15).

I believe that this view, appropriately modified, has much to recommend it. The scope of such activities might first be criticized. Hayden and Gargett's model is essentially local in focus: competition occurs between rivals within a given cargo system. “It is precisely because there is no possibility of drawing in profit from outside the community that frenetic attempts by the highest community leaders to out-give each other . . . are curtailed” (Hayden and Gargett 1990: 14). Such a view does not consider the role of competitive intercommunity feasting and gift giving. Although that may have been a subsequent development, a mechanism that could organize resources from a wider area for

purposes of display, such as a regional cult, would seem an equally powerful route to social ranking.

Also in their view the sacred was not a necessary component of this process, but more of a derived benefit. Perhaps one way that differentiation began to occur was through spiritual, rather than material, accumulation, however. My reading of the archaeological evidence suggests that the explosion in temple construction began before status differences became significant. Thus cults may be a preferable framework for the emergence of “big men.” Cults share nearly all the same traits as cargo competitions: certainly ostentatious displays of wealth and power, as well as feasting, are well-known aspects of Mesoamerican ritual life, and human sacrifice and the destruction of other forms of material wealth are common to both.¹³ The great advantage for sponsors is of course that such activities would be ritually sanctioned and ostensibly for the direct benefit of the community, and offerings would be for beings of recognized superior authority.

A necessary first step must have been the acceptance of imitation. Werbner (1989: 242) makes the interesting point that although Turner (1974) claims that earth or nature cults promote *communitas*, such cults are also “place-bound” and paradoxically more restrictive “because highly particularistic, not generic, bonds were required.” Acceptance of metaphoric, rather than metonymic, relations with the spirit world would have permitted the recentering and replication of cults, moving religions toward “person-bound” systems (Werbner 1989: 239). Such recenterings of metaphoric mountains, caves, and other portals to the otherworld within the community of course placed them in contexts where communities and “big men” could directly benefit from cult activities. Much as mountains or caves could be accepted as imitations of sacred places, so too individuals must have been accepted gradually as imitations of sacred figures, eventually acquiring divine status.

As the material rewards of cult leadership began to be appreciated, centers may have been stimulated to greater investment in sacred displays. In my view, these served primarily to inspire a sense of spiritual identity and provide charismatic attractions for potential recruits, and only secondarily to humble subjects. But most important, this model emphasizes that monumental construction did not come from the expansion of the egos of local elites, but occurred within a framework of *regional* competition between neighboring regional cults.

¹³ See Hammond, this volume, for a possible Late Formative example; Middle Formative (Tzuc) dedicatory burials have been found in the second stage of Str. 5C-54, the main pyramid of the Mundo Perdido complex, Tikal (Laporte and Fialko 1995: 48).

A positive feedback cycle is easily imagined: to the extent that cult centers were successful in increasing tribute and labor, they could afford additional investments in ritual displays and sacred architecture. At some point, probably in the first two centuries b.c., regional rivalry seems to have resulted in the winnowing of less competitive cults and the emergence of yet more comprehensive “world” religions. Energies could then be redirected into purely economic or political arenas. Such cycles were probably not limited to the Formative, but reoccurred throughout the span of Maya history because of the instabilities inherent in segmentary organizations.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have tried to show how certain concepts of spirit may have influenced the layout of early Maya ceremonial centers. My approach has essentially been structural in attempting to show how this involved a series of metaphoric oppositions: a nature-culture opposition was equated with a center-periphery dichotomy, which was in turn applied to political oppositions. The utility of the approach derives from the fact that the Maya were themselves trying to solve structural problems involved with the appearance of hierarchy. At base, this “meditation on the center” concerned the fundamental opposition between *communitas* and privilege. But by the Late Formative, the basic armature of political organization was already in place, and the problem became the more specific one of the allocation of power between individual social segments and the authority of the paramount.

I have further attempted to show that these structural fault lines were mediated by architectural features such as *sacbeob* and ballcourts. But mediation could only be effected by the animation of these structures, hence the critical associations of movement and processions, and by extension with the experience of the pilgrimage. The flow of *ch'ulel* across the boundaries separating nature and culture thus became a direct metaphor for the passage of power between the central power of the polity and the peripheral power of the segmental leaders.

These ideas had less to do with legitimation than with providing a comprehensive vision of society. I suggest that these metaphors were primarily employed during the Pre-Classic to define the relations between segments and paramounds. Hence they played a key role in recruitment and organization of the growing population, although mortuary evidence suggests that status or class differences were as yet limited (see, for example, Hammond, this volume). But again the role of monumental architecture was not simply reactive. Monumental architecture fostered growth, prosperity, and political expansion. As such, it provided an example of what a wealth-driven, expansionistic social order

might be like, in contrast to what for the most part were probably closed egalitarian communities.

During the Classic period, these same metaphors were borrowed and appropriately modified for the task of expressing economic differences. The *sacbe* complex is a good example. Axial organization, coupled with rotational rituals, provided a natural vehicle for polity expansion. New segments could simply be added as additional spokes and sacred “mountains” in the ritual cycle. And like good metaphors, it could be expanded into new realms. In northern Yucatan, sometime during the Classic period, the system was expanded to include intersite causeways. Kurjack and Andrews (1976) present a strong case that such causeways marked polity limits. Again *sacbeob* were used to mark the passage to the liminal margins of a political unit, but in this case it is a different order of social integration and a new concept of the relation of the center to the periphery. Similar arguments may be made for the ball game (Ringle and Bey n.d.). But despite the significant organization changes, the metaphoric associations between successive applications provided the strong thread of continuity permitting us to trace their earlier Formative heritage.

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