
22 NON TEMPLE – SUMMIT RITUALS AT YALBAC

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Maya elite rituals, commonly described ethnohistorically as occurring in the semi-exclusive contexts of temple summits, have long been an archaeological research concern. However, this exclusive focus on the temple locales has resulted in a neglect of research on public participation and its implications. In this regard, our excavations during the 2008 Valley of Peace Archaeology (VOPA) field season at Yalbac revealed significant evidence for extra-temple, or non-temple-summit, ritual activities – even within a site dominated by large temples. In this article, we explore these non-temple-summit ritual activities in regards to public participation and the construction of social memories and histories.

Introduction

Halbwachs' (1992) concept of communal memory, as something that resides within each individual yet is shared among other members of a social group, has been re-invented in archaeology through practice theory. The concept of social memory is now understood as actively and continually (re)created through the practices of social actors, rather than something that is passively absorbed. Among the actions through which social memories are created, public ritual is generally considered to be an important, though not exclusive, means. As such, ritual practices that occurred in more inclusive spaces, such as plazas or platforms, rather than on temple-summits, would likely have been more effective in the creation and dissemination of broader historical memories.

We draw our discussion from Paul Connerton's (1989) performative understanding of social memory through his use of 'incorporating' – or bodily - practices and 'inscribing' – or writing - practices – though we also approach these concepts as not mutually exclusive (*sensu* Mills and Walker 2008). We discuss the construction, use, and commemoration of inclusive ritual spaces at the center of Yalbac as a means by which broad historical memories were created through inscription on the landscape, and recreated through incorporative practices.

Structure 2F Excavations

The original goal in 2005 of the 2 x 2 m test unit on the Structure 2F platform was to search for *stelae* (Figure 1). Excavations revealed several plaster floors superimposing and abutting the corner of a platform. We

continued excavations in 2008. At c. 1.5 m below surface, we came upon what appeared to be a jumbled series of floors and platforms that at first did not make sense. As we excavated deeper, we saw in the southern profile wall a truncated wall and series of fills (Figure 2) indicating an empty chamber. This chamber had clearly been a focus of ritual commemorations based on the numerous associated floors (many burned)– activities that would have been largely public as they were located on the most accessible plaza at Yalbac.

Having reached sterile ground in a portion of the excavation pit, we were able to devise a construction sequence from plaza-level through final platform level – a sequence that appears to have covered a span of nearly 1000 years (Jenny Creek phase of the Middle Preclassic through the Late Classic). Ceramics from the lowest excavated level (L12) of the 2001 Plaza 2 center 2 x 1 m test pit date between 100 B.C. and A.D. 250; however, the earliest dates from Plaza 2 range between 300 and 100 B.C. based on ceramics recovered from Level 9 (Conlon and Ehret 2002). The ceramics recovered from what was likely the lowest cultural level of the Str. 2F test pit date to the Jenny Creek phase of the Middle Preclassic. This may suggest that the Structure 2F area was either used for a period of time prior to the use of Plaza 2; Plaza 2 had been 'cleaned' and reconstructed/replastered at some point prior to or during the Barton Creek phase of the Late Preclassic; or the Plaza 2 test pit did not reach sterile ground.

The early use at the platform is unclear as the earliest deposits come from a 50 cm x 50

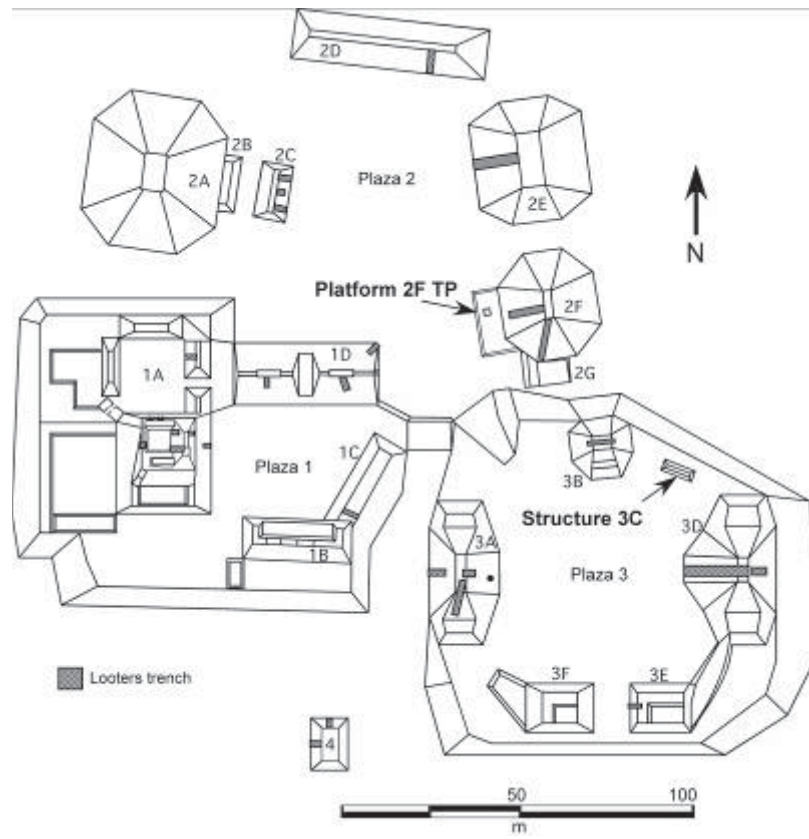


Figure 1. Yalbac with excavation units mentioned in text

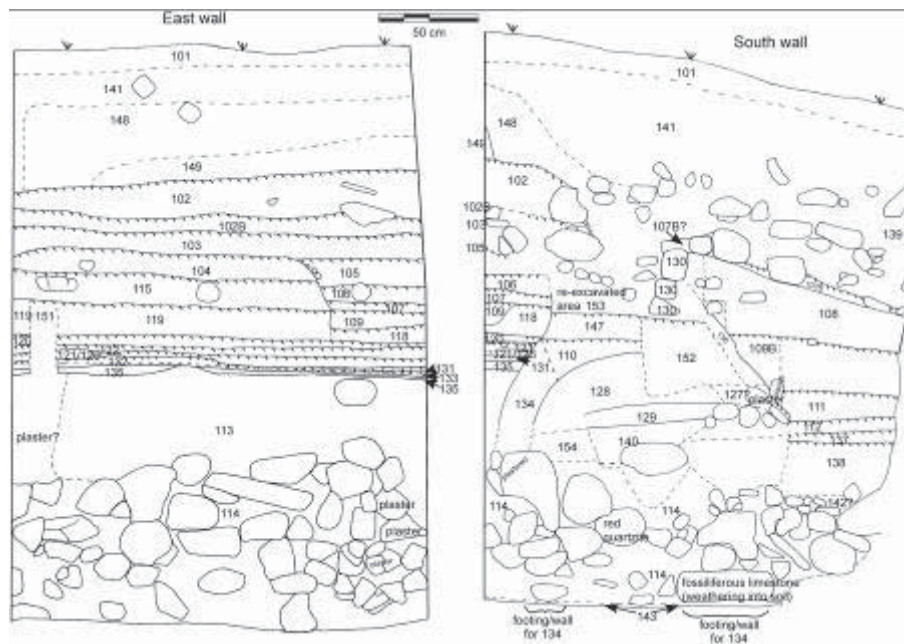


Figure 2. Platform 2F east and south profile walls

cm test pit within the test pit. In this 'mini test pit', a dark-brown fill that yielded ceramics dating to c. 900-300 B.C superimposed the sterile level. A thin plaster floor superimposed this dark fill; this floor had some light burning, small pieces of charcoal and burnt limestone and also dated to the Jenny Creek phase. Upon this plaster floor a thin layer of dark brown compact fill was spread across the test pit – possibly in anticipation of or in preparation for the next major construction episodes.

It appears that large rocks were piled in the southern portion of the test pit with loose dark brown sandy-clayey fill between. Part of this boulder configuration appears to have included deliberately stacked boulders used as support foundations, which clearly can be seen in the south wall profile. The loose fill deposited between the support foundations contained ceramics from the Late Preclassic (300-100 B.C.) and Protoclassic (A.D. 1-300). This time range appears to be due to a mixing of stratigraphic layers during excavations; in plan view, there was no apparent difference between fill from the southern $\frac{3}{4}$ of the unit, which was the boulder platform, and the northern $\frac{1}{4}$, which appears to have been added to the exterior of the boulder platform at a later date. Once this difference became apparent in the profiles, it would appear that the fill from the boulder platform in the southern portion of the unit dates to the Late Preclassic.

This boulder platform does not appear to have been the intended final product, but rather was meant to support a chamber which we believe may have been a possible burial crypt. What appears to have been one of the floors of the chamber (Stratum 140) contained ceramics that date to the Floral Park phase (A.D. 1-260). A series of plaster floors abutted the western side of this chamber (Strata 142, 138, 137, 112 and 111) that created a series of platforms that, over time, extended further to the north and possibly to the west (unknown as they extend beyond the test unit). The lowest platform floor (Stratum 142) contained ceramics dating to the late facet of the Jenny Creek phase (600-300 B.C.) – later than Stratum 114, which it superimposes. This is problematic and may suggest either: 1) there is an earlier portion of

Stratum 114 which lies under Stratum 142 from which we did not recover dateable ceramics, while the ceramics we did recover were from a portion of Stratum 114 which was not superimposed by Stratum 142; 2) Stratum 142 ceramics are from the latest part of the Middle Preclassic and Stratum 114 ceramics are from the earliest part of the Late Preclassic; therefore both types of pottery were in use during the construction this platform; or 3) Stratum 142 was constructed using fill from an earlier deposit elsewhere. In any case, this portion of the structure, together with the chamber wall (Stratum 134 on Figure 2) yielded ceramics suggesting construction and use during the later part of the Middle Preclassic (600-300 B.C.), while the dark sandy fill to the east of the chamber (Stratum 113) have both Middle and Late Preclassic ceramics.

This chamber or crypt, which may have been at least 90-100 cm from floor to ceiling, likely originally contained one important person. The importance of its contents is inferred based on the series of floors or platforms that were constructed around the chamber. Beginning in the Protoclassic (A.D. 1-260), the Maya constructed a series of thin floors to the east of the chamber directly on the sandy fill containing Late Preclassic ceramics. These floors, beginning with an orange-brown soil – similar to that which had been used to 'cleanse' the floor under the boulder platform, were thin and many were burned. These included, from lower to higher, Strata 135, 131, 121/126, 122, and 120; each were 2-4 cm thick and at times discontinuous across the western side of the unit. Stratum 131 was a very even, smooth and heavily burned plaster floor, which included a circular, more-heavily-burned area north of the chamber area. The Maya placed a thin plaster floor directly on top of this stratum, which they also burned (Stratum 121/126). The northern portion of this floor was partially plastered over with another thin floor of clean plaster containing few ceramics and some fire cracked rock (Stratum 124), followed by another even, thin floor of smooth plaster – Stratum 120. Stratum 120 was sterile and had small drying cracks on its surface, suggesting little foot traffic on this floor and its brief usage. This entire

series of floors dated to the Protoclassic (A.D. 1-260), suggesting a rapid depositional sequence.

The Maya then capped these thin floors along the eastern side of the chamber with a series of thick additions and smaller floors, creating what appears to have been a shifting series of platforms. One such addition during the Protoclassic (Stratum 119) was a light-colored ballast consisting of small pebbles covered by a thin plaster floor. A similar floor, also dating to the Protoclassic, was added to the south of this stratum to create an even floor. On top of Stratum 119, another fairly thick ballast covered with thin plaster floor (Stratum 115) was added to create a small platform, which was then matched to the south by two thinner floors (Strata 107 and 106), creating a nearly level, larger platform. Finally, Stratum 115 was capped with Stratum 104, completing the smaller platform. Although no diagnostic artifacts were recovered from Strata 115 or 104, Stratum 107 produced Protoclassic dates, suggesting that Stratum 115 at least was a Protoclassic construction.

During this same time period, a series of floors were also constructed along the west side of the chamber, creating a series of progressively larger platforms, which were thicker than the floors to the east. This series began with Stratum 137, a floor that superimposed the late Middle Preclassic floor (Stratum 142), which may have formed the first floor of the chamber. Stratum 137 also dated to the Protoclassic and appears to have connected to a roughly stacked line of large boulders, which ran east-west across the northern part of the unit, creating a platform along the southwestern portion of the unit. This platform was superimposed by another plaster floor (Stratum 112) which appears to have originally reached as far north as Stratum 137 but was then extended 60 cm further north – reaching to another apparent line of stacked boulders and creating a larger platform. This extended floor was then capped by another floor (Stratum 111), which mirrored the extent of Stratum 112 and contained ceramics dating to the Protoclassic. Finally, a thicker platform (Stratum 109B) was added to Stratum 111 but did not extend as far north, creating a smaller platform or step. There were no diagnostic artifacts recovered from this

step; however, subsequent evidence would also suggest a Protoclassic construction.

At some point during the Protoclassic period (A.D. 1-260), the Maya dug into the chamber and removed its contents. This re-opening is indicated by a truncation of the chamber wall as well as Strata 118, 107, and 106. The original contents of this chamber remain unknown, as the Maya completely emptied it, re-plastered the floor and burned it twice, and then refilled it with loose soil (Strata 128 and 132). One such re-plastered floor, Stratum 140, yielded Protoclassic ceramics, as did the loose fill which was mounded inside of the re-excavated crypt, clearly demonstrating that the re-excavation episode and removal of either the remains of an important figure or some important ritual object occurred during the Protoclassic.

The Maya cut through floors abutting the east side of the chamber, as well as the platforms abutting the west. After its contents were removed and loose fill was mounded inside, the Maya capped the re-excavated area with a thin plaster floor – ceramics from this floor date to the Late Preclassic, overlapping in time with the Protoclassic ceramics from the chamber fill. This area appears to have undergone a subsequent re-excavation along the east side of the chamber, including deposition of sterile soil and another thin plaster floor (Strata 152 and 147, respectively).

After this re-excavation process, the Maya continued re-visiting the chamber; construction continued with the addition of another series of platforms. A ballast and plaster floor (Stratum 105) was added at the same level as the top level of the small eastern platform in order to create a larger platform. This platform either covered the top of the re-excavated chamber or may have been truncated in a subsequent re-excavation into the area. The addition creating the larger platform contained ceramics dating to the Early Classic (A.D. 300-600). The Maya then capped it with another, extensive, addition of ballast and plaster floor (Stratum 103) that covered the smaller platform and the floors added to expand it, thus extending it to the north. This larger platform was constructed during the Late Classic (A.D. 600-850), as were two subsequent platform additions

(Strata 102B and 102). This series of platforms appears to have possibly been cut through by another re-excavation into the chamber area.

To the west of the chamber area, fill and plaster floor were also added during the Late Classic (Spanish Lookout phase A.D. 700-900). This fill and floor created a slope up to the re-excavated chamber area, using a short wall of rocks to support this floor within the re-excavated area. In profile, this floor appears to have been the same as Stratum 102B.

The Maya added another series of platforms to the pre-existing structure after the Late Classic; since diagnostic artifacts were not recovered, dating these strata is not possible. A thick fill deposit, consisting of loose dark soil, was added to the northwest of these platforms to level out the area and support what may have been a 'flagstone' level. This consisted of a number of flat rectangular rocks and boulders that extended from the area over the chamber to the west and north. Two final platforms were added to the east side, possibly at the same time as the latest abuts the 'flagstone' level.

The construction of the platforms built after the first re-excavation episode, appears to have occurred at longer time intervals than earlier additions to this structure. Floor and platform constructions at and around the chamber during its use, as well as the initial re-excavation of the chamber, all occurred in within the 260 years of the Protoclassic. After the initial re-excavation of the chamber and the removal of its contents, construction activity occurred over the 600-year range of the Early and Late Classic. Perhaps the chamber's contents had been an important focus of public and communal memory/history – one that remained important enough to continue commemorating, but which was no longer physically commemorated on a regular basis.

Structure 3C Excavations

We focused our efforts at Structure 3C because of its size (7 x 7 m) and location on a semi-restricted plaza between two large temples as a possible priest's house. However, it seems more likely that Structure 3C functioned as a public ritual space, indicated by the unusual assortment of artifacts including two cached vessels, a burial, and additions to the west side

of the structure, and several burned plaster floors that the Maya had cut through on the east side of the structure.

Structure 3C sits betwixt Temples 3D and 3B oriented 20° off of north with the front and back wall oriented east to west. Its front faces the interior of the semi-restricted Plaza 3, while the east side is relatively aligned with the west edge of Temple 3D. This structure is easily visible from the plaza, from the tops of all Plaza 3 temples, as well as from behind below the raised plaza. It is a rectangular building with a central staircase (Stratum 108) and a staircase and dais on the west side (Stratum 104, 103, 122) (Figure 3). Its east side had been cut through at least three times by the Maya, as evidenced by the exposed partial plaster floors and burned surfaces. The lower floor was intact and expands past the east wall to the probable exterior of the structure. The north side of the structure sat on the edge of the raised plaza, making it difficult to locate the back wall. The lack of cut limestone blocks forming the back wall could be due to the blocks falling off the backside.

The front (south side) of Structure 3C consisted of a three-course cut stone staircase (108) with a later circular platform added to the summit of the stairs (122). We also found a concentration of sherds near the stairs on the east side that largely consisted of large jars, bowls, and serving vessels dating to the Late Classic. The vessels were broken and presumably part of a termination ritual, although no burning was obvious. Two sharp angled large jar sherds with fingernail impressions around the shoulder, one with red slip and one with no slip, were recovered on either side of the central stair (possibly a McRae Impressed). It appears that the Maya placed the one sherd each on either side of the central stair, and another one on top of the northeast corner of the building.

A cache was uncovered directly at the base of the front central staircase (Stratum 108A). It consisted of a complete inverted Yalbac Smudged Brown: Yalbac Variety (Spanish Lookout) bowl with red slip interior, with a perfectly circular 8 cm diameter base. Small chert flakes, one obsidian blade, burned bone, and a turtle neck bone were found



Figure 3. Structure 3C, looking east, with burial (left) and cache vessels (right)

associated with the vessel. One chert flake and a flaked piece of limestone were located in the interior of the bowl. The vessel was in pristine condition without a kill hole, suggesting that it was made specifically for the purpose of caching. Associated sherds included a painted vase fragment with a hieroglyph. No other portion of the vase was recovered suggesting that the Maya curated this particular piece for a specific ritual purpose. However, the hieroglyph is badly eroded and indecipherable.

Another inverted vessel was found on the north side of the building near the center axis in line with the cache 108A. This second vessel, a Kaway Impressed bowl with a red slipped interior, was associated with a burial. The skull was located 20-25 cm to the east of the vessel and was associated with a small red and blue chert flake pushed up against the exterior of the cranium. The skull was in very poor condition and crumbled to the touch. There was a small circular superficial puncture mark on the top of the skull, probably post mortem. The skull was close to the surface and only covered by a few

centimeters of soil making it susceptible to post mortem damage.

The burial was associated with a limestone cap that at one point probably plastered entirely over the now partially exposed burial. Two large limestone blocks were imbedded in the cap and were located directly west of the skull. The Kaway Impressed vessel was located directly north of these limestone blocks. With the burial being so close to the surface, it may have served as the final termination episode, however the burial was only partially excavated due to time constraints and none of the evidence was conclusive.

On the west side of the structure, the Maya added a stepped dais and circular stair (Stratum 103, 104) to the exterior of the west wall along with a large, later possible platform (Stratum 132). This platform likely was a later addition to the structure, but due to the lack of diagnostic artifacts, we could not determine a secure date. However, the lack of cut stone and the use of large rough boulders to build this addition suggest that it was added later than the

dais or circular stair which was constructed using faced and cut stone limestone blocks.

The east side of the structure was cut through by the Maya multiple times to reveal three separate floor and ballast sequences with multiple burned areas. Few artifacts were found directly upon any of these floors. The Maya excavated through floor 105 in order to reach floor 107 evidenced by the fact that it was not dug through and only a specific part of floor 105 was excavated through to reach floor 107. No artifacts were found associated with floor 107, suggesting that the Maya removed whatever was present, burned the area and then refilled it. Floor 105 also has a concentrated burned section near the area that was excavated through to reach floor 107. Burned sherds were recovered on its surface and from the fill above, not none were diagnostic enough for dating purposes.

Floor 115 was the upper most floor with two burned sections, one on the north east end of the floor, the other under the rocky limestone cap (Stratum 121) in the north central area of the floor. Floor 115 presumably continues under the limestone cap that tops the burial at the north, central end of the structure. The clay fill (Stratum 114) between floor 105 and floor 115 dates to the Late Classic. The sequences of burning, excavating into the floors, and burning again suggest that the Maya returned to these specific areas at a particular, possibly important point in time to retrieve or remember some essential part of their past.

Underneath the front staircase was a possible molded and plastered bench (Stratum 139, 135), which demonstrates that the Maya had been building in this spot at least since the Late Classic. However, time constraints did not allow us to excavate further. Orange paste and volcanic ash sherds were recovered from this context suggesting a long occupation throughout the Late Classic. The possible molded bench is oriented east-west and sits atop the lowest plaster floor exposed during excavations (Stratum 134). The Maya appeared to have excavated through the bench to this floor. The bench has two distinct phases resulting in a stepped façade; however, the upper level was dug through in antiquity presumably before constructing the front, central staircase.

The overall artifact assemblage from Structure 3C consisted of sherds of large, thick walled storage jars and serving vessels (some over 2 cm thick), and a few finely made and painted vase sherds, large bowl sherds, and fragments from plates. Mano and metate fragments were also recovered from topsoil and back dirt contexts, but were not directly associated with any specific context. *Nephronaias* and ridged and smoothed *jute* shells were commonplace among the assorted jumble of cut and uncut limestone blocks, fill, and plaster floors. Red laterite, pink quartzite and blue chert cobbles were also found consistently throughout the units along with chert blades, cores and flakes. Fire cracked rock was also recovered. Complete and incomplete obsidian blades were collected from topsoil and the assortment of material associated with the central stair cache. One serpentine celt was also recovered from the topsoil.

Overall, Structure 3C appears to have served as a ritual space more accessible to the public, visually and physically, than the surrounding temples. This building may have functioned as a place of memory for Maya priests or as a public space to gather or to bring and store large vessels full of organic material or offerings. This place may have functioned as a place of remembrance, revisited by both commoners and elites who deemed this structure relevant to public or private ritual. Importantly, this space is part of non-summit temple ritual that is made more available to the commoners who gathered at Yalbac.

Discussion and Conclusions

For the Maya, rituals of life, death, and renewal appear to have been performed by commoners, elites, and royals alike – at least in practices of ancestor veneration, dedication, and termination rites (Lucero 2008). Iconography and inscription indicate that it was atop the temple that priests and rulers performed rites for public or private view. Archaeologists have explored Maya ritual as practices of memory- and history-making, though often focusing on **either** commoner **or** elite/royal contexts separately. In our 2008 field excavations at Yalbac, we attempted to investigate memory creation in non-temple summit ritual spaces –

spaces that would have been more inclusive and may have been viewed by commoners and elites/royals alike.

While the ritual spaces we explored were no doubt related to, and may have even referenced, the sizeable temples surrounding them, they would have been more widely accessible to a greater number of individuals of varying status – the platform at Structure 2F creating a fairly low stage facing the most inclusive plaza at Yalbac, and Structure 3C doing the same facing the semi-restricted plaza between two larger temples. It was through ritual practices in these places that memory was embodied, enacted and recreated, forging broader social histories – ones which may have included commoners, elite and royals alike. Perhaps it was in these spaces where emerging elites used “traditional” household practices of ancestor veneration, termination and dedication to “promote political agendas” (Lucero 2008:190), thereby creating new political histories.

For Structure 3C, memory was enacted in the building, deconstructing, caching and burying of a possible important person in a presumably public ritual space between two large temples. This space was accessible from the plaza and could have easily been viewed from the temple tops and the area below. The uncharacteristic assortment of artifacts and the addition and removal of stairs, floors, and platforms suggests that Structure 3C was important in the everyday ritual and practice of remembering of the people of Yalbac during the Late and Terminal Classic periods.

When the Maya excavated and burned three plaster floors, and perhaps removed objects, they were returning to this space to remember some important past. The assortment of artifacts, including massive jar sherds, red and blue stones, obsidian blades and inverted cached vessels, relates to the history of this structure and the activities that take place between two traditional temple-summit ritual spaces (Temples 3C and 3D). The caching of the two vessels, with the burial and in front of the stairs, suggests episodes of commemoration to the structure itself or in direct relationship to the act of interring an important individual.

Social memories are constructed during the interactions between ritual participants, commoner or elite, and the objects they are utilizing at that particular moment in space and time (Mills 2008). Mills suggests that part of the act of commemorating or terminating a space with a cache of objects or a burial is also an act of forgetting. It is in the act of placing these objects out of sight during ritual moments that allows people to remember their history. At Structure 3C this performance of caching incorporates the public and allows them to remember that particular place while inscribing onto the landscape a visual marker of a past history. The practice of caching functioned as the physical embodiment of memory onto the space that was accessible by both elite and commoners at the Maya center of Yalbac.

The Structure 2F platform, on the other hand, provides us with a means for understanding how the Maya inscribed social histories onto the landscape through the creation of place, simultaneously (re)creating and incorporating these memories through commemorative practices. The construction of a chamber, presumably for the interment of some important figure – perhaps an early leader at Yalbac – created an important space. The importance of this chamber, and the ancestor figure within, is commemorated through the construction of plaster floors and platforms around this chamber – practices through which the history of that place would have been incorporated and embodied.

The construction of the chamber at Structure 2F appears to have occurred during the late facet of the Jenny Creek phase during the Late Preclassic (600-300 B.C.). It was not until perhaps 300 years later, during the Protoclassic, that the most frequent commemorative practices surrounding the chamber, including the layering and burning of thin plaster floors, occurred. It was also during this period that the Maya re-excavated the chamber and removed its contents– perhaps this period was one of social or political change in which the ancestor interred in the chamber was ‘reanimated’, and perhaps used in the creation of a new social history. Given the location of the chamber, these activities would have been largely public,

including not just royals or elite, but likely including commoners as well.

Commemorative constructions did not end with the removal of the chamber's contents, but continued with a series of platforms built over and around the location of the chamber. These building episodes continued with varying rapidity for at least another 600 years, indicating a continued historical importance of this location for the community of Yalbac – perhaps a history that was enacted during the addition of each new platform.

The recent excavations at Yalbac have provided a unique view of non-temple summit rituals and how they may have been an important component in the creation and dissemination of social histories. Through the use of rituals that were similar in practice, though not necessarily in material, among commoners, elite and royals, social histories may have been created and performed in these inclusive spaces. The findings from Structures 2F and 3C, though preliminary, demonstrate the importance of considering spaces and contexts in which social memories are created for broader portions of the population through which communities and their histories were constructed.

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