
6 **EXPLORING CLASSIC MAYA POLITICS: YALBAC, CENTRAL BELIZE**

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The long-term research goals of the Valley of Peace Archaeology (VOPA) project are to address the question of how Classic Maya rulers acquired and maintained political power in the southern Maya lowlands (c. A.D. 250-850). The focus is on how replicating and expanding traditional rituals provided a means for aspiring Maya rulers to integrate people and acquire political power, defined here as the ability to exact tribute (surplus goods and labor). I explore this process at Saturday Creek and Yalbac. In this paper, however, the focus is largely on Yalbac. Yalbac is a major center with six major temples, several range structures, a ball court, causeways, a possible aguada, three large plazas, and a royal acropolis over 20 meters tall. Results from the 2002 season are described based on the excavations of two residences on the outskirts of Yalbac.

Introduction

In this paper, I summarize results from the 2001 and 2002 field seasons at Yalbac in central Belize. After permission was granted by the Belize Department of Archaeology in 2001, we spent 15 days mapping core features, testing two of the three major plazas, and conducting a preliminary survey of hinterland settlement (most of the 2001 season was spent at the minor river center of Saturday Creek) (Lucero 2002a). In 2002, we excavated two small residences, cleaned and profiled two looters trenches, continued mapping core features, conducted survey north of Yalbac to the Cara Blanca pools, recorded more looters trenches (for a total of 28), and tied Yalbac into a regional archaeology map thanks to Dr. William Poe (Lucero 2003). Before presenting results of the 2001 and 2002 seasons, I briefly summarize a model on the emergence of Maya rulership, which data from Yalbac will eventually test.

The Emergence of Rulership

My long-term research goals are to address the question of how Classic Maya rulers acquired and maintained political power in the southern Maya lowlands (c.

A.D. 250-850). I argue that replicating and expanding traditional rituals provided a means for aspiring Maya rulers to integrate people and acquire political power, defined here as the ability to exact tribute (surplus goods and labor) (Lucero 2003). Emerging Maya rulers expanded family-scale rites, particularly dedication, ancestor veneration and termination (e.g., Coe 1990; Garber 1986; McAnany 1995), into larger communal ceremonies that drew labor from farmsteads to civic-ceremonial centers. This process was gradual and incremental, and rulers conducted rites in progressively larger social settings (cf. Cohen 1974:37-39). Ambitious political agents began to expand rituals during the Late Preclassic (c. 300 B.C. - A.D. 250), and continued to do so, culminating in large-scale royal rites in the Early Classic (c. A.D. 250-550). By the Late Classic (c. A.D. 550-850), rulers could associate royal families with the divine.

The scale and degree to which Maya rulers and elites used ritual at minor, secondary, and regional civic-ceremonial centers were largely conditioned by the distribution of agricultural land, settlement patterns, scale of water systems, and seasonal water availability (Lucero 2002b).

Rulers of Tikal, Caracol, Calakmul, and other regional centers located in areas with large patches of fertile land without lakes or rivers, built artificial reservoirs next to temples and other monumental architecture to attract dispersed farmers during the annual six-month dry season (Lucero 1999). They became responsible for providing potable water during seasonal water shortages through maintaining reservoirs and performing key rites to propitiate deities such as Chac, the rain god (e.g., Scarborough 1998). In contrast, the regional centers of Palenque and Copan are located along rivers with concentrated alluvium surrounded by densely settled farmers. Rulers, however, also relied on water systems as a means to acquire tribute—reservoirs at Copan and aqueducts at Palenque—as well as large-scale public rituals.

Rulers at secondary centers, typically located along rivers, did not attain as much political power because they could not control completely access to dispersed pockets of agricultural land and small-scale water systems, and scattered farmers (e.g., Yalbac, Seibal, Yaxchilan, Piedras Negras, Xunantunich, Bonampak). Rulers, however, conducted public ceremonies to acquire what tribute they could. Elites at minor centers along major rivers relied on their wealth, as landowners, for example, to procure prestige goods and organize local ceremonies (e.g., Saturday Creek, Barton Ramie). A major factor preventing elites from acquiring political power was their

inability to restrict access to extensive alluvium and integrate dispersed farmers. Nor did they use water systems because water was plentiful and farmers relied on the annual rising and subsiding of rivers for agriculture (e.g., recession agriculture).

To document the replication and expansion of domestic rituals, I have been collecting detailed chronological, stratigraphic, and contextual information on ritual deposits from houses, elite compounds, palaces, and temples with long occupation histories before, during, and after the advent of rulership (c. 400 B.C.-A.D. 950) (Lucero and Brown 2002; Lucero et al. 2002a, 2002b; Jeakle 2002; Jeakle et al. 2002). In 2001 we focused our efforts at commoner and elite residences and a temple ball court at the minor river center of Saturday Creek, 19 km southeast of Yalbac (funded by a National Science Foundation grant) (Lucero 2003). I will compare these data with published ritual data from throughout the southern Maya lowlands.

Data from Saturday Creek and Tikal indicate support for this model, which is discussed in greater detail in Lucero (2003). Saturday Creek, which exhibits an occupation from at least c. 600 B.C. through A.D. 1500, has a long ritual history, though no rulers. There is clear evidence for dedication, ancestor veneration, and termination rites throughout its entire occupation. At the most powerful and largest Classic Maya center of Tikal, small residences show the same ritual history, from c. 900 B.C. to A.D. 900 when the center was largely abandoned. Royal monumental architecture, however, tells the same ritual story, albeit on a much grander and more expensive scale. Commoners, elites, and royals all conducted the same traditional rites, just at a different scale in different arenas (domestic v. public). In addition, there was a difference in the quantity, quality, and diversity of offerings. Public plazas and temples became domestic

arenas writ large so rulers could incorporate and integrate more people. They could also demonstrate to their subjects their success as supplicating ancestors and the gods in such a manner where everyone benefited (when everyone had plenty food to eat and water to drink). When rulers disappeared in the Terminal Classic (c. A.D. 850-950), Maya farmers, wealthy and poor, continued to conduct the same traditional rites they always had before, during, and after the advent of rulership.

Since Saturday Creek is a minor river center without rulers and Tikal was home to some of the most powerful Classic Maya rulers, we need more research on secondary centers such as Yalbac in order to test the model of the emergence of Maya rulership. We also need more ritual data from commoner and elite contexts rather than from royal ones. We hope to accomplish this goal in the coming years at Yalbac. In the following section I present preliminary results from the 2002 season at Yalbac.

Yalbac

The major center of Yalbac is located in the uplands near pockets of good agricultural land along a perennial stream, Yalbac Creek, in central Belize. Yalbac translates either as 'small bone' or 'small egret' (Weldon Lamb, pers. comm. 2002). While the exact history of the name is currently unknown, loggers named a logging camp nearby Yalbac Camp, and several historic villages also went by the name of Yalbac (Leventhal et al. 2000). At present, the site is on protected, private property owned by Yalbac Cattle and Ranch Company. The land south of Yalbac Creek is owned by the Government of Belize, on which lies the village of Yalbac, which at present is inhabited by about 20 families.

Yalbac consists of five major temples, several range structures, a ball court, causeways, a possible *aguada*, three large

plazas, and a royal acropolis over 20 meters tall (Figure 1) (Graebner 2002; Lucero et al. in press). The excavated 1 x 2 m test pits in the centers of Plazas 2 and 3 both had 13 natural levels, or at least six construction phases (plaster floors and cobble ballasts) with ceramics dating from c. 300 B.C. to A.D. 900 (Conlon and Ehret 2002).

Plaza 2 is c. 70 x 49 m, around which are seven monumental structures, two of which comprise a temple ball court (Structures 2B and 2C). Plaza 3 is c. 52 x 48 m, around which are six large buildings. Plaza 1 is the smallest (37 x 35 m), and is ringed by five structures, one of which is the royal acropolis (1A). The acropolis is c. 57 x 52 m and is over 20 m in height. It has four sunken plazas surrounded by 19 structures. One of the looters trenches (LT 1) on the highest structure has exposed two rooms, one with an intact and well-preserved corbel arch and red-plastered walls, as well as a possible roof comb. Another (LT 2) has exposed a bench (throne) that overlooks Plaza 1.

In 2001 we conducted a preliminary survey of the area peripheral to the core using compass and pace (Graebner 2002). Survey crews walked 1000 m transects, east and west, at 50 m intervals using an all weather, roughly north-south road as a baseline. Over 150 hinterland structures were mapped in an area roughly 5 km². The majority of sites mapped are solitary mounds. Crews also mapped groups of three to six structures; all constructed with cut or faced stone. Surface ceramics were collected from 78 structures, which predominantly date to c. A.D. 700-900, but range from c. A.D. 400 to 1150-1500. The highest density of structures are located northwest of Yalbac in hilly areas with good agricultural soils.

Yalbac Residential Excavations

Site 94E22N-14

Site 14 is located southeast of Plaza 3 at a bearing of 133° and distance of 154

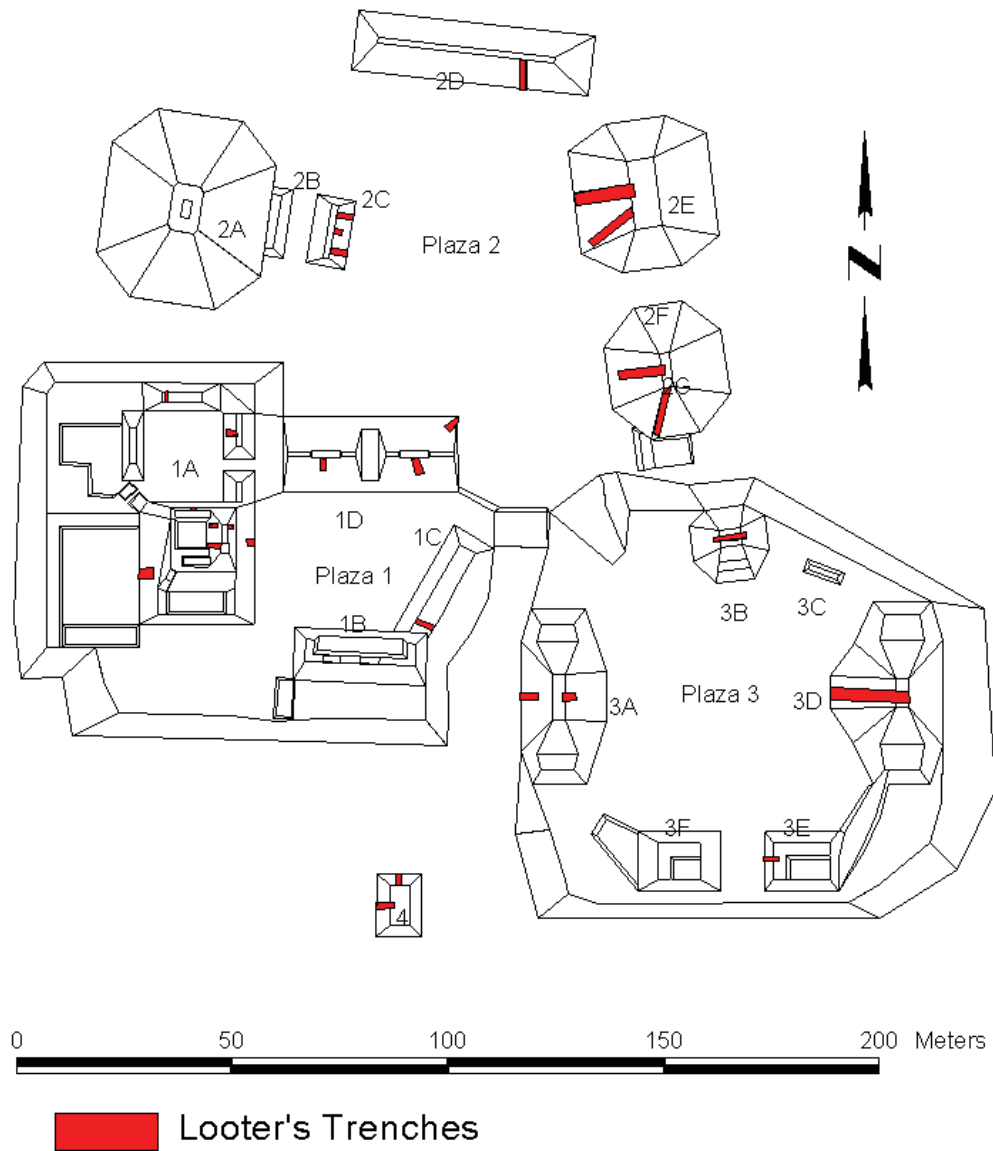


Figure 1. Yalbac.

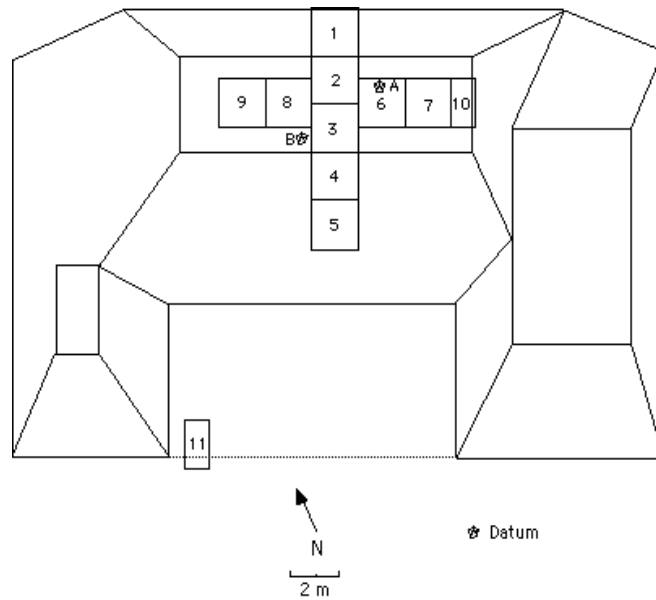


Figure 2. Site 14 plan.

meters. It is a U-shaped structure, likely residential, oriented east-west that measures 28.5 x 18 meters and is approximately from 1.7 (north side) to 3 (south side) meters in height (Figure 2). The raised platform occupies the northern portion of the structure, while the two lower arms extend south from the eastern and western ends of the platform (Graebner and Lucero 2003). It appears to have been built entirely in the Late Classic.

Site 14 was comprised of several construction episodes consisting of a series of standing walls, faced limestone steps, plaster floors, ballasts, and cobble fill. Large cut stone was noted throughout the mound, especially in the southeastern area of the platform, likely resulting from the collapse of a superstructure. Ceramics were the most predominant artifact class recovered, though in general artifact density is relatively low.

Site 14 began as a small structure with a hardened living surface, perhaps originally plastered (142). The plaster floor was then lengthened and expanded westwards, and built up in different stages. As the structure increased in height and expanded west, a faced wall (146) was constructed with cobble

fill (156), the latter topped with plaster floors (145, 136), creating a platform consisting of a lower and upper floor (Figures 3 and 4). The height of this structure was increased by another faced wall (150) with cobble fill (151) surfaced by plaster floor (141). Floor 141 was the most extensive floor of the site; the Maya had added a 2-meter thick fill (143) west of the western most wall (146), creating a level platform across the entire structure in an east-west orientation. The top of the structure/platform was covered by a possible bench (3.6 x 1.15 m) enclosed by walls 109, 104, 119, and 120 in a series of stages. On top of floor 141 within the bench walls was floor 127, upon which a fill (124) was added, after which another floor (117) was laid. Finally, floor 103 (and its ballast) was added, level with the tops of walls 104, 109, 119, and 120.

The primary axis (north-south) trench exposed a frontal staircase consisting of four plastered steps (106, 106a/b, 107, and 108), the top most of which (108) abutted plaster floor (141), as well as abutted and ran under the bottom of the foundation of the faced walls (104, 109, 109a) or substructure that

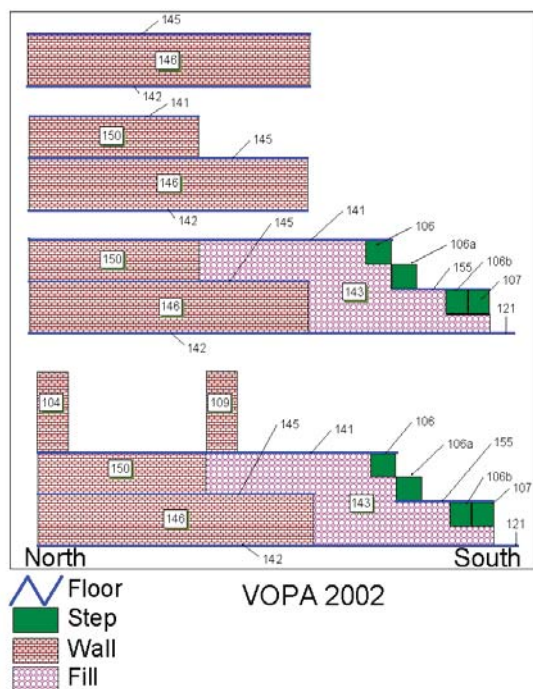


Figure 3. East wall schematic profile of Site 14.

during occupation or after abandonment of site 14 is unknown—the presence of a noticeable amount of historic artifacts (17 glass, metal, and ceramic objects) might indicate historic period destruction (Kinkella 2003).

While we were able to expose the earliest western section of Site 14, rain prevented us from revealing as much in the eastern section, where we had begun to expose a complex series of walls, floors, and fill including what might be the north edge of a bench (157) (1.3 x 0.4 m), which had been heavily charred. To the north of the possible bench is a semi-circular wall (158) that surrounds floor 159. The Maya dug a pit into floor 159 (and likely fill 160) and deposited a Benque Viejo polychrome vessel. The bench and semi-circular structure likely were built after living surface 142, but definitely comprise some of the earliest construction episodes. The next phase consisted of a

supported the most recent and primary structure. The remains of a collapsed superstructure could be seen in the profiles. Whether or not the superstructure collapsed room/structure with a single coursed-wall (153) with stones faced on the inside and a floor (152), both of which lie above a cobble fill/ballast (161).

While we did not recover any burials, we found evidence for possible dedication and termination rites (some mentioned above). For example, at the base of the south side of the structure steps (107) likely is a dedicatory offering consisting of a partial peccary, as well as metate fragments, a figurine fragment, marine shell, burned ceramics, and a chert blade. Other possible dedication caches include notched and un-notched obsidian blades and chert blades and cores (e.g., fills 112, 114, 143 and floor 113), marine shell (e.g., fills 124, 143), ceramic clusters without rims (e.g., fill 131), and a celt (wall 150). Evidence for termination rites consisted of burnt floors, which were noted on nearly every plaster floor (e.g., 113, 117, 118, 123a, 127, 128, 141, 145), as well as ceramic clusters without rims (e.g., top of floor 123a). For example, a large burned area of approximately 60 x 30 cm was found on top of a plaster floor (145). We also noted metate fragments on burned surfaces (e.g., step 106, floor 113), a spherical chert nodule on top of the burned surface of step 107 (Figure 4), obsidian pieces, and smashed vessels on top of burned surfaces (and some burned themselves) (e.g., floor 123a, step 108).

Site 94E22N-18

Site 18 is located east of 2F at a bearing of 89° and a distance of 320 meters. It is a square-shaped residential structure oriented north-south that measures 9.5 x 9.5 m and is approximately from 0.62 (north side) to 1.5 (south side) m in height (Figure 5) (Lucero and Graebner 2003). Site 18 is



Figure 4. Site 14 staircase with metate and chert nodule.

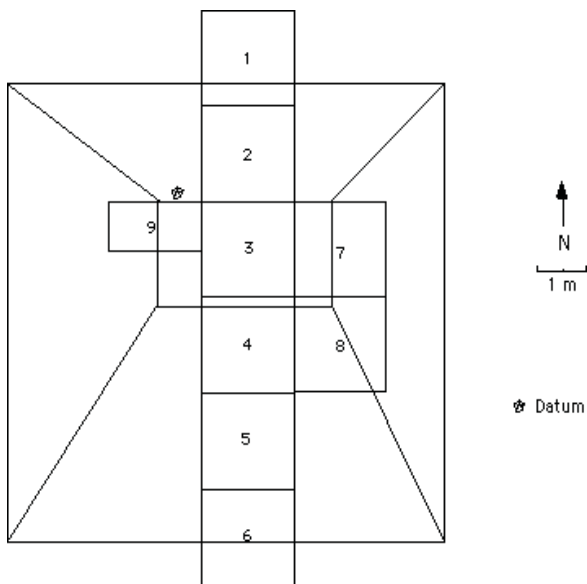


Figure 5. Site 18 plan.

Associated with at least two other structures, located north and northwest that may be part of a small residential group. Artifacts consisted primarily of ceramic sherds, lithics (chert cores, flakes, bifaces, and a few blades), shell, and obsidian. It likely served a domestic function, perhaps for a family of farmers. It was built slightly earlier than Site

14, with deposits dating from Early Classic through Late Classic.

We exposed what appears to be a single room structure with a porch on the south side. Other than plaster floors, architectural remains were limited to a prominent 4-7 coursed faced walls (102, 103) on the south side that abutted a plastered step (108). The northern units did not expose comparable walls, though there may have been a rough wall of some sort. Nor does it appear that there were walls on the east side.

The plaster floor (104) north and inside of the faced wall was very compact and well preserved (1+ cm thick). The plaster floor did not appear to extend east or west and was isolated in the center of the platform indicating that the most recent structure was relatively small. It also was replastered (floor 110) and extended to the south, upon which the step (108 and fill 109) and walls (102 and 103) were placed. Although boulder-sized stones were removed during excavation, there is no definite evidence that this structure had a stone superstructure other than walls 102 and 103. However, it is clear that the substructure and foundation were constructed with boulders and cobbles (e.g., fills 106, 111, 105). Continued excavation east and southeast of the platform center uncovered earlier plaster floors (112, 116, 118) indicating that as the platform increased in height, it decreased in surface area.

Possible evidence for dedication activities include chert and obsidian blades (e.g., fills 111, 117, wall 103) and marine shell (e.g., fills 111, 117). Fill 107, above the uppermost floor (104), yielded a notched ceramic sherd and a Pachuca obsidian flake. Evidence for termination rites consist of burned artifacts and floors. For example, ceramics (usually burned) were found on top of floors (e.g., 104, 112), as well as ceramic

clusters (e.g., floor 110). In addition, burned plaster, cobbles, and other materials were found in nearly every stratum. Finally, while excavating floor 116 southeast of the steps, a possible chamber or chultun was exposed. Floor 116 actually might consist of a seal for the chamber/chultun; it was much thicker (5-7 cm) and softer than a typical plaster floor. Although unexpected rainfall prevented further investigation into the contents of this feature, we did see ceramic vessels inside (possible broken jars) that might indicate ritual activity or storage.

Concluding Remarks

While I had hoped to recover evidence for Preclassic through Late Classic rituals at Yalbac residences, the data at least demonstrate that the Maya continued to perform rituals in their homes during the height of Classic rulership at Yalbac. In other words, rulers at Yalbac and other Maya Centers did not expropriate or restrict the traditional rites they appropriated. I would expect that the majority of elite and commoner ritual deposits are largely similar to those at Saturday Creek. Rites at monumental architecture, however, likely would be quite different—they would be more expensive and diverse. Temple rituals likely were conducted for audiences from all walks of life, whereas some ceremonies conducted in the acropolis might have been more restricted, for just a few (royals and their elite underlings). Rulers likely owned land in the immediate vicinity from which they could generate enough wealth to maintain a royal lifestyle. Farmers in the immediate area many have worked royal land in exchange for a portion of the crop. Rulers also acquired power through their participation, and likely monopolization of, prestige-goods exchange. They never acquired the degree of power as that seen at centers such as Tikal and Caracol because they did not have much means to draw in

farmers from beyond the center core and immediate environs.

Notes

1. I thank Dr. Jaime Awe and Carolyn Audet for taking time from their busy schedules to provide ceramic dates.
2. Numbers represent matrix stratum designations.

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