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Materialized cosmology among ancient Maya commoners

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ABSTRACT

Classic Maya inscriptions and iconography reveal more than just royal customs since their origins lie in traditional Maya practices. They provide a key to unlocking how commoners created their own domestic universe. To explore how commoners mapped their cosmology and recorded their history, I discuss domestic ceramic clusters based on color, placement, and association with other artifacts at the minor center of Saturday Creek, Belize. Results show that cached items served to contextualize their place in the cosmos. Commoners may not have had the written word, but they had the means to record their own history, one with which they interacted daily – under their feet, within walls, and under their roof.

KEYWORDS

ancient Maya commoners • ceramic assemblages • materialized cosmology

As archaeologists we plot the location and movement of goods; as anthropologists we interpret their significance. The former is typically obvious; the latter, less so. After all, ‘one cannot observe an economy,

kinship system, or religion. Such constructs are theoretical, and thus are only directly related to empirical – i.e. material – reality’ (Walker and Schiffer, 2006: 70). An aspect of this reality is how the life histories of objects continue (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Walker, 1995, 1999) long after they disappear from sight. Determining how and why objects reach their final destination is crucial to reveal their role in the life of the living, a concept I assess through a discussion of Classic Maya commoner¹ ritual deposits. Specifically, I detail how the Maya made their own universe through the making, using and depositing of artifacts as part of house building. Ironically, information obtained from royal contexts serves as a major interpretive tool. It is ironic because royals comprise such a small percentage of the society. And since Maya archaeologists have typically focused on royal life (palaces, temples, tombs, monuments, etc.), Maya commoners are underappreciated, even though they comprise the majority of the population (Gonlin and Lohse, 2007; Johnston and Gonlin, 1998; Lohse and Valdez, 2004; Lucero, 2001: 2–5).

As a matter of fact, Classic Maya inscriptions and iconography divulge more than just royal customs since their origins lie in traditional Maya practices, such as the significance of directionality and colors, deities, ancestors, the underworld, and the heavens (Garber et al., 1998; Lucero, 2003, 2006; Mathews and Garber, 2004; Robin, 2003; Schele and Freidel, 1990; Schele and Miller, 1986; Thompson, 1934). They provide a key to unlocking how commoners created their own domestic universe, something of which we know relatively little (Gillespie, 2000). We know, for example, that the Mayan word *witz* has two meanings (Stuart, 1987; Stuart and Houston, 1994: 82): ancestral mountains and caves; and their artificial counterparts – temples and doorways.

To reveal how commoners mapped their cosmology and recorded their history in the built or artificial environment, I assess the context of artifacts at the minor center of Saturday Creek, Belize (Figures 1 and 2). Their analysis based on color, placement, and association with other artifacts reveals patterns signifying purposeful – and symbolic – meaning. This practice was particularly critical in the Late Classic period (c.AD 550–850) at the height of rulers’ power when commoners needed to maintain their identity (Hendon, 1999) in the face of political attempts to redefine them as subjects and social inferiors.

■ COMMONER RITUAL LIFE

The archaeological record shows that Maya rituals have changed little over the millennia for royals and commoners alike (Lucero, 2003, 2006). Taking a closer look provides deeper insights and requires the use of alternative

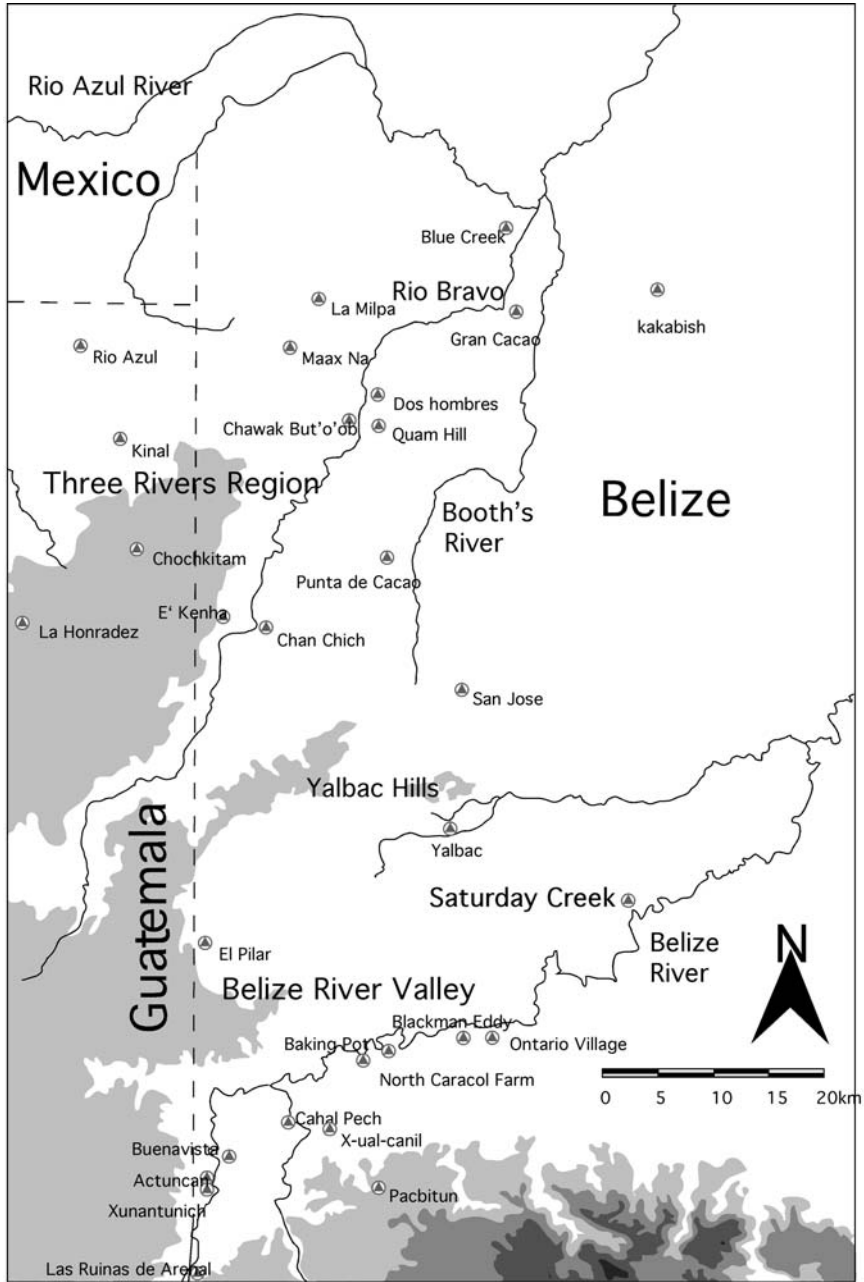


Figure 1 Saturday Creek's location in the Maya area

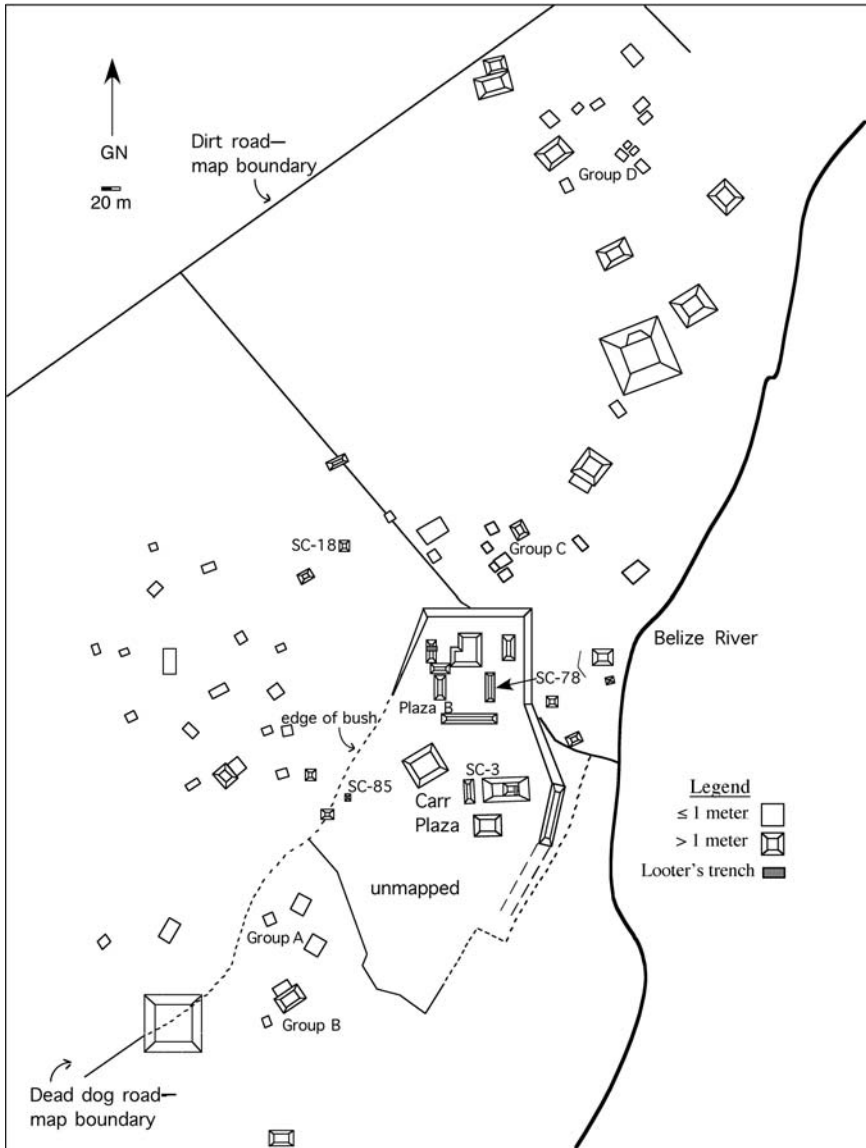


Figure 2 Saturday Creek

means; a step in this direction takes into account the context of artifacts (Richards and Thomas, 1984; W.H. Walker, 1998, 2002), their arrangement (Pollard, 2001), and association with other items (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996[1979]: 49). Not only do these methods reveal structured deposits, but also people–artifact interactions, important since ‘The meaning is in the



relations between all the goods [and people], just as the music is in the relations marked out by the sound and not in any one note' (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996[1979]: 49).

For millennia, Maya have performed dedication ceremonies to animate new things, from portable items to houses. To transform a house into a home, the Maya cached objects under house floors to thank earth gods and ancestors (Becker, 1992; Coe, 1959: 77–8; Vogt, 1993). To maintain the home, they kept ancestors' remains close and conducted rites to honor and thank them (Vogt, 1970). When someone died, the family had to begin anew, which meant terminating the house to de-activate or de-animate it, a rite that involved breaking objects, partially destroying houses, and burning incense (Garber, 1986). Afterwards, they built a new one on top of the old and dedicated it with a new slew of offerings and prayers.

Interestingly, while everything more or less was animated, things had to be de-animated as part of their transformation into a different 'thing' (Lucero, 2008). How the roles or agency of objects impacted on people's lives determined whether or not their life histories would include recording family history (e.g. heirlooms). For example, Joyce (2000, 2003) found several inscribed items in noble and royal tombs proffered 100 years after their inscribed date. Maya farmers also cached heirloom vessels, albeit simpler and incomplete (Lucero, 2008; see below). Plotting the transformation of an object from one used in daily life to a specialized category is challenging. We can, however, identify them when their path diverted with their removal from daily view to their placement underneath house floors. At this stage, heirlooms joined other artifacts in creating a family's place in the cosmos. The Maya personalized their domestic universe by depositing items that had a particular history with the family. Simultaneously, a piece of family history was recorded – not forgotten (Rowlands, 1993). Maya children learned about their family history because they lived surrounded by it; the material world reflected the non-material and interacted with the living. The Maya house, thus, is an excellent example 'to show how the things that people make, make people' (Miller, 2005: 38). Consequently, social relations were created and maintained (Weiner, 1992: 4), including those with the supernatural world and nonhuman agents (Walker, 2008).

Items used in daily life can change; domestic goods become ritual items when they are taken out of daily use and used in a ceremony. For example, the Maya would render useless particular 'utilitarian' vessels by 'killing' them and then proffering them as offerings (Lucero, 2006: 58–9). The Maya de-animated vessels to prepare them for the next stage in their life history as a ceremonial cache. Their story or history changed and became a piece of the cosmological map. Objects, thus, have a say.

Objects out of sight were not out of mind (cf. Gosden, 2005); the Maya knew that items previously used and viewed now resided in a different place to serve a different purpose – as pieces of a cosmological map that together

with other artifacts and burials served to contextualize their place in the cosmos. This practice exemplifies the concept of materiality in how objects impact on people's notions of the world in which they live (see Meskell, 2005; Miller, 2005).

■ COSMOLOGY IN THE HOME

Maya kings are famous for building artificial ancestral mountains and caves – temples and doorways. Commoners did not build temples, but worshiped at real mountains and caves. They did, however, construct their own universe, most of which comprises the domestic material record. In this sense, materialization is a type of documentation. Commoners wrote their own history through a cosmological lens, and they accomplished this through ritual practices and deposits. Ritual offerings thus make up a large component of the depositional histories of houses (Lucero, 2008) and illustrate how '[t]he events during which special spaces and places were created through structured deposition were contexts of marked participatory experience . . .' (Joyce, 2008: 37). The challenge is to translate these deposits.

The [super]natural world of the ancient Maya was complex and multi-dimensional. It included three layers: a heaven with 13 levels, the surface or earth, and the underworld with nine levels (Schele and Freidel, 1990: 67). The world in which the Maya lived floated on a primordial sea, often represented as the back of a crocodile or turtle. Also important in orientating their daily lives were the cardinal directions; each direction has its own suite of representative and associated elements – birds, trees, colors, and deities.

East, the major direction symbolized by red, 'was where the sun was born' (Schele and Freidel, 1990: 67). On the other side of the world is west, represented by black, where the sun dies. North (white) is associated with the origins of rain, while south (yellow) is associated with the sun. Also important is the center, represented by blue-green. Based on a linguistic and contextual analysis of royal iconography and inscriptions, Houston and his colleagues (2009: 28) suggest that certain combinations of colors (e.g. black, red) bring to mind concepts about gods: 'A basic dyad of red and black commemorates the arc of the sun from crimson dawn to the dark tones of dusk' (p. 100). Black, however, has more negative connotations – darkness, the night, danger, dangerous places, and so on.

At Chan Nòohol, a Late Classic (AD 660–790) farming community in west-central Belize, Robin's excavations (2002) revealed much about daily commoner practices, including color-charged deposits, such as the one associated with one of the seven farmsteads. From the top of a sealed *chultun*, a subterranean chamber dug into the limestone bedrock, they exposed stones with a story:



The north cobble had two white lines, the south cobble had one yellow line, the west cobble was half black and half red with the black half towards the west and the red half towards the east, and at the center of these was a broken and heavily battered fragment of a greenstone axe. (2002: 255)

This cosmological patterning comes from a long tradition. For example, at Cival, Guatemala, Cache 4 (c.600 BC) in the E-Group Plaza includes five jars; four were positioned at the cardinal directions and one in the center, symbolizing not only the quadripartite division of the Maya universe, but its association with the Maize God (Estrada-Belli, 2006). Further, the Maya placed the only non-black jar, a red one, on the east side of the cache.

The shape and alignment of ritual deposits comprise part of the map as well, via the cross motif and quadripartite divisions (Kunen et al., 2002; McAnany et al., 1999; Vogt, 1998). For instance, among the contemporary Zinacantecos of Chiapas, Mexico, the cross symbolizes ancestral gods and the house's soul (Vogt, 1993). The alignment of artifacts divides the home into quarters; and since most are termination deposits, they are soon covered over with a new floor to create a domestic underworld. Artifacts are often found in groups or layers of three, one of the most significant numbers in Maya cosmology, reflecting the three layers of the universe (Garber et al., 1998). The underworld was also recreated when occupants dug into floors and placed items and interred the deceased.

Offerings found in cached lip-to-lip vessels can also signify the three layers of heaven, earth, and either the primordial sea or the underworld. For the former, the domed lid represents heaven; jade, hematite, red ochre, cacao, foodstuff, and stones the earth; and sponges, stingray spines, shell, and coral the sea (Bozarth and Guderjan, 2004; Guderjan, 2004). For the latter, heaven is represented by the empty space under the domed lid; the earth by twigs and rodent bones; and the underworld by marl and nine flakes representing the levels of the underworld (Garber et al., 1998).

The Maya passed down heirloom objects until either broken accidentally or purposefully; either way, they required burial. Even these fragmented objects play a role. Chapman (2000), based on his work on Mesolithic and Neolithic Balkan artifact assemblages, suggests that the life history of particular objects continued long after people purposefully or accidentally broke them. In this sense, objects were part of the enchainment process whereby people created relationships with others through fragments. Thus, objects were purposefully broken, exchanged and eventually ceremoniously deposited 'throughout the settlement and beyond' (Chapman, 2000: 23), resulting in 'a geography of social relations' (Pollard, 2008: 52).

One type of artifact offered by all Maya is groundstone: *metates* and *manos*, fragmented or whole (Garber, 1986). These sacrificed tools, used to grind maize, represent the never-ending importance of maize in daily life. The Maya also deposited obsidian and chert items. Chert was believed to have been created by lightning and was also used to start fires for the gods

(Miller and Taube, 1993: 88). In royal ceremonies, obsidian knives were used for auto-sacrifice.

When the Maya manufactured items expressly for ritual deposition, they never were animated (i.e. they did not have a life history) and thus did not need to be de-animated (Lucero, 2008). They were deposited untouched. In contrast, items kept as heirlooms or used for cooking, serving, storage, jewelry and so on, had served another purpose before they became offerings (i.e. they had a life history). Part of their transformation involved their ‘killing’ by breaking them, drilling a kill hole, or removing parts of them (e.g. rims).

Burials also played a role in how the Maya created their universe. For instance, an analysis of nearly 300 burials from elite residential compounds at Caracol, Belize, shows that the Maya did not bury every family member in the eastern shrine or family ‘crypt’ – they actually only interred c.10 percent (Chase and Chase, 2004, in press). With the hieroglyphic and radio-carbon dates providing a fine-tuned chronology, the Chases suggest that the major determining factor in selecting who to bury in the home was calendrical – namely, who died closest to either the 52-year calendar round when the ritual and solar calendars conjoined, or two *katuns* (c.40 years). We know that Maya kings denoted each *katun* of their reign with *stelae* or temples (Jones, 1991; Rice, 2007). As a matter of fact, Coggins (1980) argues that quadripartite symbols (e.g. the *Kan* cross or *kin* sign) represent a *katun* cycle, or 7200 days. Chase and Chase make the point that the focus was not on the deceased, as evidenced by the disturbance, mixing or removal of earlier interments, but rather on the significance of the calendrical/burial rite itself. The timing of burial rites thus related to determining *when* their domestic universe needed an update.

The Maya have been materializing their cosmology and place in society for millennia; I want to continue this story through a discussion of commoner ritual deposits at Saturday Creek, Belize.

■ MATERIALIZED COSMOLOGY AT SATURDAY CREEK, BELIZE

The Maya built the minor center of Saturday Creek along the Belize River on a floodplain (20 m asl) in central Belize on the eastern periphery of the southern Maya lowlands (Figure 1). The Maya lived there from at least 900 BC to AD 1500 (Conlon and Ehret, 2002) in farmsteads (100–151 structures/km²) consisting of solitary mounds (67%, n = 53) and mound groups or *plazuelas* (2–4 buildings) dispersed around the site core, which is comprised of a ball court, temples up to c.10 m tall, and elite compounds (Figure 2; Lucero et al., 2004).

We excavated two solitary mounds or commoner residences, SC-18 (10 x 8 m, 1.24 m high) and SC-85 (6 x 4 m, 1.34 m in height); an eastern



structure of an elite compound, SC-78 (29.4 x 9.5 m, 3.85 m in height); and a temple-platform ball court, SC-3 (48 x 24 m, 5.44 m in height) (Figure 3). For the two smaller mounds, excavations concentrated in center trenches that bisected the length of the mounds. We horizontally exposed about 60 percent of SC-18 and about 75 percent of SC-85. We excavated a 2-meter wide trench and several 2 x 2 m test pits at SC-78 and a 1-meter wide trench at SC-3 bisecting the temple (5 x 5 m, 2.44 m in height), platform (3 m in height), and ball court sidewall and alley (4.5 x 1 m trench).

While I mainly focus on Late Classic commoner ritual deposits, I include elite contexts and burials briefly to highlight similarities and differences.

SC-85, a commoner residence

SC-85 is a commoner residence with six construction phases, consisting of thin plaster floors and foundation walls of one to three courses of boulders for a wattle-and-daub structure (Lucero, 2006: 76–8). A long line of family members occupied this home from c.AD 400 through to AD 1150. Residents acquired some exotic goods (e.g. Colha chert tools, marine shells, obsidian blades, jade and hematite pieces). For being the smallest and

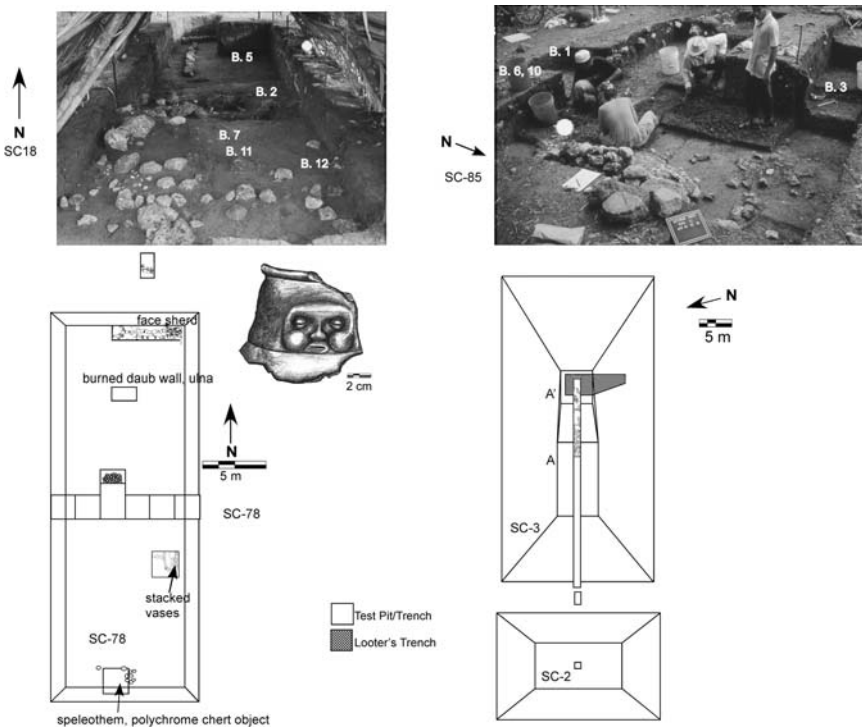


Figure 3 Oblique photos of SC-18 and SC-85; plan views of SC-78 and SC-3

humblest site, it has a noticeable number of ceramic clusters or special deposits – at least seven, not counting the seven burials.

One of the more recent deposits, found on a surface (stratum 103) in the southwest quadrant of the mound dating to c.AD 800–900, included six ceramic clusters with few rims, two of which show obvious burning (Table 1). The Maya had placed them c.20 cm apart from each other in a diagonal line northwest to southeast. The earliest types date to c.300–100 BC. Five of the clusters have black-slipped vessels. One of the more colorful clusters had red, brown, orange, pink, and black vessels.

Another deposit on a living surface near the mound center (stratum 110) dating to c.AD 800–900 included a rimless and smashed upright Sapote Striated jar (c.300–100 BC) surrounded by burned daub chunks and is probably associated with a burial (Bu. 9). Two of the three clusters lack rims altogether, including two smashed jars (Tu Tu Camp Striated and a red-slipped Cayo Unslipped). One of the clusters includes a large slightly convex body sherd on top of which the Maya had placed the long bones of a deer.

Between c.AD 700 and 800 near the mound center, the Maya burned and placed partial vessels (stratum 115) resulting in 10 ceramic clusters, consisting mostly of body sherds. It also included halved jar rims and necks; and some vessels were poorly fired. Four clusters surrounded six orange clusters, each placed c.30 cm distant at the cardinal points (Figure 4). The



Figure 4 Cross-shaped cluster formation (stratum 115), SC-85

**Table 1** Commoner residence (SC-85) clusters

Stratum	Location	Position	Vessel/clusters	Vessel features**	Predominant surface color	Date	Features
103	SW quadrant	c. 20 cm apart aligned NW to SE	6 clusters 86% body sherds (n = 294)*	38 types (9 sherds per type, n = 342) Mostly bowls and jars figurine fragment	5 of 6 clusters have black-slipped sherds; one cluster has red, brown, orange, pink/light orange, and black vessels	AD 800–900, also AD 650–750, AD 400–600, 300–100 BC	2 clusters burned, chert artifacts, obsidian (9/22 notched), groundstone, human and mammal bone, marine shell
110	Center	–	3 clusters (2 lack rims) and rimless jar 100% body sherds (n = 88)	9 types (9.8 sherds per type)	Dark orange or brown; light orange; red	AD 800–900, also 300–100 BC	Mammal bones on plate sherd; burned, un-burned daub surrounding jar; associated w/ Bu, 9
115	Center	6 clusters in center surrounded by 4 clusters at cardinal points	10 clusters 88% body sherds (n = 350)	29 types (15.7 sherds per type) Some poorly fired, jars and bowls, halved jar neck and rims	Predominantly orange; some black, brown	AD 700–800, also AD 400–600, AD 250 and earlier up to 300 BC	Burning, Colha tool, chert artifacts, obsidian, marine shell, serpentine, groundstone
125	SE of center	Clusters aligned N–S	6 clusters complete but broken vessels	16 types (26.6 sherds per type) Majority inverted, basal flange bowls, jars	Brown/buff, gray, orange/red, white	AD 650–750, also AD 400 and earlier up to 300 BC	Groundstone, obsidian

Note: * body sherd totals only (n)
** the total sherd count includes unknown types and unidentified sherds

Maya also had placed white stones in the center; and one of the clusters yielded a shaped green serpentine oval disk, chert flakes, and a metate fragment. Red wares are noticeably rare – only two out of 454 sherds. The varied jars and bowls date from 300 BC all the way to AD 800.

In an earlier deposit just southeast of the mound's center (stratum 125), we encountered six clusters dating to c.AD 650–750 aligned north–south c.1.40 m in length (not all exposed) and c.60 cm wide. The Maya had inverted complete but broken vessels including several brown and red jars dating from 300 BC to AD 700, three polychrome basal flange bowls dating to c.AD 250, as well as mano, metate, and obsidian blade fragments.

SC-18, a commoner residence

SC-18 has at least six construction phases with thin plaster floors and cobble ballasts with several ceramic clusters and five burials dating from c.AD 400 to AD 1150 (Lucero, 2006: 75–6). Single or double-course boulder walls aligned north–south provided the foundation for a wattle-and-daub structure. Its occupants were relatively successful farmers who acquired exotics such as obsidian objects, marine shell, and jade, hematite, and slate pieces.

In a termination event dating to c.AD 700–900 northeast of the mound center, the Maya placed three layers (1–4 cm thick) of upright smashed and burned rimless Cayo Unslipped jars, one stacked on top of the other (stratum 102), as well as a complete but smashed Sotero Red Brown bowl encased in 196 red and orange body sherds to the south (Figure 5) (Table 2). The bowl is complete, the jars rimless.

In the approximate mound center, the Maya dug a 10 cm diameter pit into a clay loam fill (stratum 123), burned something organic, and then placed an unburned Palmar Orange Polychrome dish rim dating to c.AD 700–900. Interestingly, we found another sherd of the same type, found only at SC-18, on top of a plaster floor dating to the same period (stratum 110) above and to the northeast of the pit. The few other sherds found on this surface were also polychrome, but date to c.AD 1–250.

Also intruding into this fill is a deposit dating to c.AD 800–900 (stratum 128) consisting of three clusters (c.2 cm thick) of inverted smashed vessels set in a rectangular pattern oriented north–south (Figure 6). A charred vessel was placed on its west side; elsewhere we found two upper portions of halved or quartered red jars. Again, most vessels are basically complete save their rims and date from AD 600 to 900. This termination deposit was the final event of a funerary rite (Burial 5; see below).

In another incompletely exposed rectangular-shaped deposit oriented north–south dating to c.AD 650–750 (stratum 136) located just north and west of the mound center, we came upon three layers of burned ceramics, mostly body sherds (Figure 7). The Maya had placed various items at



Table 2 Commoner residence (SC-18) clusters

Stratum	Location	Position	Vessel clusters	Vessel features	Predominant surface color	Date	Features
102	N/NE of center		Stacked clusters 98% body sherds (n = 231)	8 types (29.5 sherds per type) 3 layers (1–4 cm thick) upright smashed and burned rimless jars and a complete bowl	Red and orange; some brown	AD 700–900	Burned mammal bone, marine shell, obsidian (2/3 notched)
pit in 123	Center	Within pit	–	Palmar Orange Polychrome dish rim sherd – also found on top of contemporary floor 110	Orange slip with red and black designs	AD 700–900	Burned organic
Intrusive in 123, 128	Center	Rectangular pattern aligned N–S; charred vessel on west side	3 clusters: 2 clusters, all body sherds (n = 103) 1 cluster 84% body sherds (n = 89)	14 types (14.9 sherds per type) 2 cm thick, mostly rimless inverted smashed vessels; 2 upper halved or quartered sections of twist applied jars	Red, orange, brown, buff	AD 800–900, and as early as AD 600–700	Marine shell and a polished and shaped burned bone; final burial rite event (Bu.5)
136	NW of center	Rectangular pattern aligned N–S; artifacts placed in cardinal directions	3 layers of sherds 96% body sherds (n = 223) top layer: 95% body sherds (n = 104) middle: 97% body sherds (n = 68) bottom: 96% body sherds (n = 51)	9 types (25.9 sherds per type) top layer has polychrome sherds and 6 types (18.3 sherds per type) middle has 3 types (23.3 sherds per type) bottom has 3 types (17.7 sherds per type)	Top layer the most colorful; cream, orange, tan, and red Middle: red-orange, brown Bottom: orange with red and black designs, orange, brown	AD 650–750, AD 400–600	Remains (ash) of possible mat/textiles at bottom and in between layers. Colha macoflake tool, Over Bu. 7 and 12

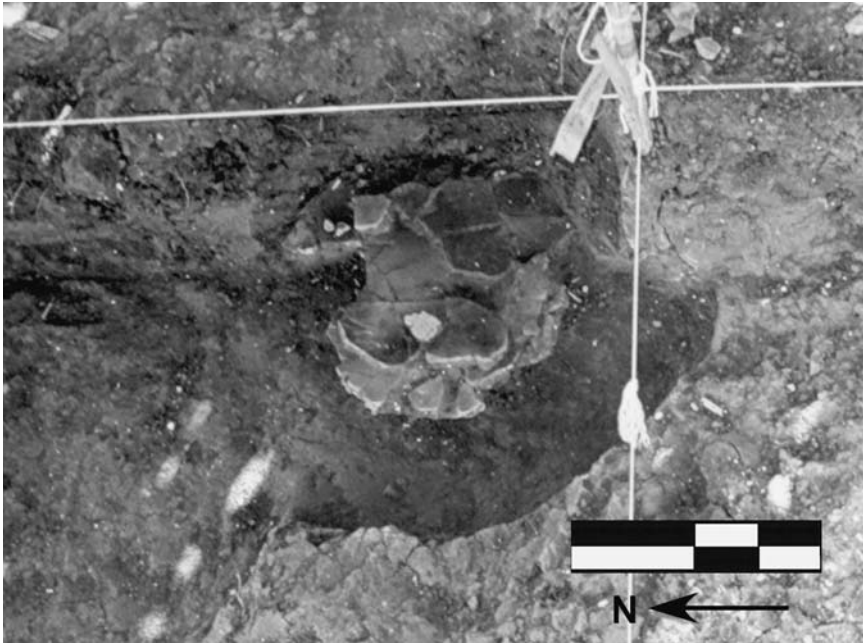


Figure 5 Three stacked rimless jars (top, stratum 102) and associated sherds (bottom), SC-18



Figure 6 Rectangular cluster with charred jar on west side (stratum 128), SC-18



Top layer



Middle layer



Bottom layer

Figure 7 Three-layered rectangular deposit (stratum 136), SC-18

cardinal directions in all three layers, which is particularly visible in the burned staining underneath the artifacts and ash – perhaps remnants of burned textiles or mats (e.g. the red patch on the east side). The bottom layer, which the Maya had placed on the surface over Burials 7 and 12, included ceramics dating to c.AD 400–600, including a rimless and broken Socotz Striated brown jar surrounded by several orange sherds and a single chert flake. The middle layer included at least one orange-red slipped jar sherd dating the entire deposit to c.AD 650–750. The top layer is a colorful array of sherds, many decorated and inverted – cream, orange, tan, and red, as well as a Colha macroflake tool (fine-grained chert with brown striations).

Burials at SC-85 and SC-18

To further show how the Maya built their universe using complex ceremonial and material practices, I make brief mention of some of the commoner burials. For instance, the funerary rite for an adult of unknown sex (Burial 5; Sanchez and Chamberlain, 2002) at SC-18 (c.AD 400–600) involved the Maya digging a pit in which they placed broken pottery and chert flakes and burned the entire deposit (Lucero, 2006: 112). Afterwards, they placed an antler and a pink-red quartz stone in the center of the pit, added fill, and then placed the body. They put more fill on top of the body and smashed and burned more vessels. They then put *mano* and *metate* fragments and more ceramics near the body, and then added more dirt. Finally, they placed vessels and other items just south of the skull and again burned the entire deposit (stratum 128, see above).

We exposed 12 burials underneath floors, most located on the south sides of the mounds – five at SC-18 and seven at SC-85; none were recovered at SC-78 and SC-3. Complete and whole vessels comprise the majority of vessels. Vessel surfaces are predominantly red and orange – none are black. A few of the vessels apparently were made specifically as grave goods since they lack temper and are poorly fired. Most were placed on the upper portion of the body or inverted over the head.

While two burials date to c.AD 400–600 (Burials 5 and 6), the remainder dates from c.AD 600 up to 1150. Some of the remains are missing; in some cases, the clays accelerated decomposition, while in others the Maya removed body parts for safekeeping and/or for future redeposition (Chase and Chase, 1996, 1998). For example, between c.AD 700 and 750, the Maya interred an adult (Bu. 7), likely female (c.20–30 years); they placed a Dolphin Head Red bowl over her knees and freshwater shell disc beads. At c.AD 750, the Maya removed her entire upper torso and skull to inter a seated adult, perhaps male (Bu. 11, unknown age), with a large Mountain Pine Red dish inverted over his skull. However, they placed her long bones in front of the seated adult, perhaps reiterating their family ties. We did not find the rest of her remains.



The placement of grave goods, not to mention the body, was significant. In one burial, a *metate* fragment had been placed over the right knee and a *mano* fragment near the pelvis (Bu. 5). Within the matrix of this same burial we recovered scattered jar sherds ($n = 30$) that nearly make a complete Mopan Striated (White) jar. The torso and pelvic girdle are missing; the arms are present and the deceased's family had placed the adult's hands on top of the pelvis. Body parts were also removed from sub-adults; Burial 4 at SC-85 (c.AD 800–900) was of an extended child whose entire left leg, foot and innominate bone are missing, as well as the right foot and lower leg. The young adult male interred sometime between c.AD 700 and 900 did not have any body parts missing (Bu. 8). His face was directed towards a Dolphin Head Red dish (AD 700–800) that had been placed on its side open to the east; a red-slipped Yaha Creek Cream jar (AD 700–900) was placed upright near the chest over his right (east) shoulder and upper arm, as well as a polished bone near his mandible, one-half of a *mano*, marine shell, and two poorly fired temper-less vessels, one inverted over his left knee and the other just above his right knee.

The placement of deceased family members and grave goods, like other ritual deposits, was not haphazard. They were arranged with a purpose, one that served to record family history. While we did not recover any burials at the elite compound or temple, their ritual deposits still have a story to tell, as my brief foray into the elite realm illustrates.

SC-78, an elite platform

SC-78 is a stepped platform on the eastern side of a *plazuela* group with several domestic and specialized structures, some with substantial plaster floors, standing walls with cut stone, and wattle-and-daub buildings (Lucero, 2006: 78–9).

One of the most interesting types of deposit consists of rimless vases set upright on plaster floors on the east side of the platform (see Figure 3) (Table 3). For instance, we came upon three stacked rimless cylinder vases, one inside the other, on a floor (stratum 165) dating to c.AD 700–900. The top and bottom vases were slipped black (Achote), while the middle one was a Benque Viejo Polychrome. In addition, between the middle and bottom vase was an intact ring base of an unidentified vessel. In the same context we also found two relatively rare Vaca Fall Red jar sherds.

Sometime during the ninth century AD in the north-center of the platform, the Maya burned a 40–55 cm thick layer of daub (stratum 133) to seal a pit with burned and smashed decorated and rimless vessels, mostly upright (stratum 136). The Maya placed a human ulna on top of a large Iguana Creek rimless dish (300–100 BC); the deposit also included chert flakes, an incised drilled marine shell pendant and a drilled and carved shell (Lucero, 2006: 105). Next to the dish was a quartered red-rimmed plate

Table 3 Elite platform (SC-78) clusters

Stratum	Location	Position	Vessel clusters	Vessel features	Predominant surface color	Date	Features
165	East side	Upright on floor surface	3 stacked rimless vases	Top and bottom black vases (Achte), middle one polychrome (Benque Viejo); between middle and bottom was a ring-base of unidentified type	Black, red, orange with red and black designs	AD 700–900	Associated sherds include 2 rare Vaca Falls jar sherds, mammal bones, marine shell, obsidian blades (2/7 notched), chert core and flakes, <i>metate</i> fragment, and daub
133, 136	North center	Deposit sealed with 40–55 cm of burned daub	Several clusters of smashed and burned vessels 94% body sherds (n = 88)	16 types (5.9 sherds per type) One cluster, 10 types (6.6 sherds per type) One cluster, 5 types (6 sherds per type) One cluster, 5 types (4.6 sherds per type) Decorated and rimless vessels, mostly upright; human ulna placed on Iguana Creek rimless dish or plate; inverted miniature black jar	Red, black, orange, tan-brown	Iguana Creek dates to 300–100 BC; AD 800–900	Chert flakes, incised and drilled marine shell pendant, drilled and carved shell, chert tool and flake, canine tooth, marine shell, obsidian blades (1/2 notched)
128	North center	Abutting north terrace wall	High density of sherds several clusters 94% body sherds (n = 236)	27 types (9.3 sherds per type) One cluster, 18 types (3.9 sherds per type) One cluster, 13 rims representing 9 types (1.4 sherds per type) One cluster, 18 types (3.9 sherds per type) Vaca Falls sherd with molded face design; mostly jars and bowls that date earlier	Black, red, orange, buff	AD 800–900; AD 250–400	Notched obsidian blade
101	South platform edge	Topsoil	Polished shaped flake	Polychrome	Striations of blue, white, orange-red, and brown	AD 1150–1500	



containing a partial bowl with incising, as well as a jar rim. Nearby, we recovered an inverted whole black-slipped miniature jar.

On the north platform terrace we found a dense concentration of artifacts dating to c.AD 800–900 (stratum 128), including a Vaca Fall Red jar rim and neck with a molded face design (see Figure 3). The Maya had placed this sherd upright with the face against the terrace step (stratum 131) near a burned plaster floor. Even with the high artifact density, we were still able to distinguish several clusters, mostly jars and bowls dating to c.AD 250–400.

Finally, even though a multi-colored shaped and polished flake found on the south platform edge comes from a deposit dating to after AD 1150, I include it because of its colors – blue, white, orangish-red, and brown striations. Further, its smooth polished surface indicates much handling – perhaps a result of it having been passed down through the generations.

SC-3, a temple ballcourt-platform

SC-3 is a temple the Maya built on top of a stepped platform aligned 10° west of north (Lucero, 2006: 79), which later also served as the eastern half of a Late Classic ball court (Jeakle, 2002). The temple surface is comprised of a plastered shaped stone façade with clay fill; an additional 10 strata were exposed. The platform trench revealed steep, tiered walls, and plastered steps. Due to time constraints, we were not able to reach sterile soil or bedrock. Excavated material, however, dates from at least c.300 BC to AD 1500, though ceramics dating as early as 600 BC were found in fill deposits.

In a consistent series of events at the foot of the temple along the central axis, the Maya burned items and left inverted, broken, and largely rimless vessels (Table 4). Immediately underneath the topsoil on the final platform surface (stratum 103), for example, we came upon an inverted Belize Red dish with only part of its rim (c.AD 800–900). While this surface did not have many artifacts, the fill (stratum 104) underneath did, including Rosario Incised sherds and one of the few black-slipped vessels (eight Balanza Black vase sherds with cacao bean impressions). At another AD 800–900 event at the central base of the temple below stratum 103, the Maya placed an inverted quartered Vaca Falls Red rimless bowl on a burned surface (stratum 110).

While ritual events are consistent at the foot of the temple, the Maya also conducted ceremonies on the temple summit at a circular altar (c.1 m in diameter) nearby (e.g. burning a layer of corozo palm nuts, depositing ceramic balls, quartz, monkey finger bones, mica, ceramic clusters, notched obsidian blade fragments), and in the ball court alley (e.g. burning of organics in the center of the alley, ceramic clusters, feasting, playing ball games).

Table 4 Temple ballcourt (SC-3) clusters

<i>Stratum</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Vessel clusters</i>	<i>Vessel features</i>	<i>Predominant surface color</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Features</i>
103, 104	Center axis	Foot of temple	Inverted, largely rimless vessel Fill: 88% body sherds (n = 112.)	Belize Red dish Fill: 13 types (9.8 sherds per type)	Black, red, orange, brown	AD 800–900	Underlying fill (104); black slipped vessels, chert flakes and cores, marine shell, bone, and notched obsidian blade fragment
110	Center axis	Foot of temple beneath the above	Inverted rimless bowl, all body sherds (n = 17)	Quartered Vaca Falls Red bowl Associated: 4 types (2 sherds per type)	Red	AD 800–900	Burned surface
128	Center axis	Foot of temple beneath the above	Several clusters 2 clusters all body sherds (n = 93) 1 cluster 94% body sherds (n = 80)	74 types (11.4 sherds per type) Macal Orange Red bowl, Humes Bank Unslipped jar	Orange-red, brown, black	AD 700–800; AD 650–750, AD 700–900	Burned surface; chert flakes, a chunk, and one utilized flake



To summarize, even though SC-18 and SC-85 are relatively small houses, their construction histories are dense with symbolism. Deposits at SC-78 and SC-3 show that all Maya practiced dedication, funerary and termination rites; the differences lie in the quality, quantity, and diversity of offerings (Lucero, 2006). We exposed several color-coded aligned clusters with partial, complete or rimless vessels, inverted and upright ones, some poorly fired vessels, and heirloom fragments. Beyond the halved and quartered vessels, we found several sherd clusters stacked in layers of three. The quadripartite placement of the burned and smashed inverted vessels shows how commoners created their own universe in the home. The penetration of the earth or living surface not only served as a repository for cached items and deceased family members, but opened a portal into another world.

■ DISCUSSION

As interpreter, I focus on what artifacts' color, arrangement, and association with other artifacts signify. These structured deposits were embedded in daily living and '... one of the things we engage when we talk about structured deposits or ritual deposition is a moment or moments of more explicit discourse, for which the material deposits became a continued touchstone' (Joyce, 2008: 35). This was the case for the Maya.

Creating their universe did not stop at the walls, roof, support posts, and floors, but encompassed objects used or placed within their homes. Thus, in evaluating depositional practices, we need to keep in mind two things: 1) placement was important and related to both aesthetic and cosmological issues; and 2) once placed and buried, the objects, whole or broken, disappeared from sight but not memory. The only time the Maya would see them again was when they dug through floors to inter the deceased (e.g. Burials 7 and 11) and de-animated things. By doing so, they rewrote or revised history to highlight recent events, especially since funerary rites were followed by termination rites and the building of a new house over the old – requiring its own dedication caches and cosmological designation. They updated history; the floor underneath their feet thus enfolded their family story.

The Maya used 'transformative technologies' (Jones, 2002), whereby they interacted with charged elements to manufacture things of a particular shape and color; their creation of vessels, just like the building of their houses, was a means for them to play a creator role in manufacturing items for their domestic universe. I expand this concept to encompass the transformative qualities of placement – how the deposition of things created more than a home, but rather, their place in the cosmos, their own plane

with which to reach ancestors and gods (Benson, 1985). Basically, they lived within a universe of their own making (Ashmore, 1991; Hanks, 1990: 297–9; Vogt, 1993: 58).

All contexts included notched obsidian blade fragments, which may have served as smaller, commoner versions of eccentrics, or perhaps were de-animated in this manner (Lucero, 2006: 111). Other common artifacts were shell, which was linked to water, life and fertility, and groundstone, which served as the main tool for preparing maize as food for people – and the gods.

Clearly the visual senses mattered (Houston and Taube, 2000). The visual ‘killing’ of things and buildings was part of the de-animation process. In this sense, incantations and the burning of incense were inadequate in and of themselves for de-animation (see also Vogt, 1993: 187, 205). The visual disfigurement or disarming – the burning, smashing, and final placement – would have been a sight to behold and remember. The face sherd at SC-78 was de-animated twice; first the Maya broke the vessel in such a way as to preserve the face, then placed it with its face away from viewers.

Cached vessels often are inverted, over human remains, a living surface, or another vessel lip-to-lip. Inverted vessels, as Pollard (2008: 57) suggests, could represent ‘a process of negation, or . . . intended to keep something in, perhaps dangerous essences or supernatural agencies . . .’. Upright vessels could have contained organic materials that did not preserve in the humid tropics. Inverted vessels thus represented death or the end of something, whereas upright vessels containing living matter represented sustenance or offerings to supernatural protectors. This interpretation would explain why vessels in burial contexts are often inverted.

While some deposits lack red wares, perhaps the use of orange ones indicates that the Maya did not conceptually distinguish orange and red, just as they did not distinguish green and blue (Houston et al., 2006: 25). Red and orange slipped flared bowls or plates are commonly found as lip-to-lip offerings (Guderjan, 2004). Red’s association with east could signify the kinds of offerings vessels contained – items likely having to do with fecundity and prosperity. Burning blackens and smokes; the latter rises to the gods, and what remains sustains the underworld. The same could be said for black slipped jars, even though they are noticeably few in number and lacking in burials altogether; perhaps the Maya only wanted to use colors in the home that were associated with the realm of the living. For instance, one deposit included 10 clusters (stratum 115, SC-85) with green (serpentine disk) and white (stone) in the center, and orange and black elsewhere (burned and unburned broken and largely rimless vessels). If we attempt a translation, green represents the center of the universe, white rain, orange sunrise and life, and black death. While yellow (sun) is not represented, maize is by the presence of the metate fragment. These items in place became part of the family’s lived experience.



Fragmented items are common and clearly signified something important, and likely represented the whole. Not just any vessel, but ones that were special to a family because of who had owned it and what purpose it had served while it 'lived'. The greater frequency of fragmented vessels in non-burial contexts could indicate that objects involved in community ceremonies were broken and distributed to certain partakers, while whole vessels were the property of the deceased to be taken with them in death (collective vs. individual ownership; Mills, 2004, 2008). Complete jars also could have symbolized domestic portals or caves (Moyes et al., 2009), containers for sacred water (López Luján, 1998), or for use in water rites (Taube, 2001).

The missing vessel parts were just as significant as those left behind; their absence or exclusion is telling us something. What did the Maya do with the missing or excluded rims and other 'body' parts? Some may have ended up in midden piles, others could have been passed out to other family and community members, and others deposited in sacred places, such as caves. For instance, in Actun Tunichil Muknal, a cave in western Belize, 278 out of 718 sherds (39%) could not be re-fitted (Moyes, 2001: 75). Archaeologists have also recovered entire jar necks and rims from caves (Moyes et al., 2009). Caves and other openings in the earth are considered home to Chac the rain god, as well as portals to the underworld, a place through which the deceased must journey before becoming ancestors (Schele and Freidel, 1990). Another possibility is that Maya could have used sherds from community rites in domestic ceremonies to underscore community membership. For instance, at c.AD 400 at Cerros, Belize, the Maya scattered sherds on house foundations from vessels broken in a major rite atop the site's main temple (Str. 4B-1st) (D.S. Walker, 1998). Perhaps some of the missing parts are in *milpas* (fields); among contemporary Maya, the *milpa* is also thought to represent the universe (Redfield, 1961[1941]: 120). No matter their reasons, the Maya linked symbolically charged events through fragments.

Burying deceased family members not only established place, but affirmed continuance or regeneration (McAnany, 1995; Meskell, 2001). Funerary rites thus set the stage to rebuild and begin anew. Burial practices vary from other contexts in that the Maya deposited whole vessels, often inverted over the upper body or skull. None of the vessels were black. Did the Maya avoid depositing black vessels with the deceased since those being buried in the home still had a role to play in the lives of the living as ancestors? Similar to inverted vessels in other deposits, inverting the vessel over the head may have been a way to de-animate the vessel while animating the ancestor (Lucero, 2008) and/or to protect the body (McAnany et al., 1999). The accompanying vessels and groundstone may have been to contain and prepare food for the soul (Vogt, 1998) for the journey through the underworld. Family members removed body parts from some individuals

sometime after burial either to make way for another interment, to keep as ancestral keepsakes, for re-burial with other ancestors, or as offerings (e.g. the human ulna on the plate at SC-78) (cf. Chase and Chase, 1996). The Maya clearly remembered where burials had been placed; sealing a burial did not mean that it was erased from memory.

Further, the Maya only buried select family members. This practice could reflect calendrical rites every 40 or 52 years (Chase and Chase, 2004, in press). If this were the case, it further shows how everything the Maya interred had symbolic significance beyond merely a domestic rite. This intermittent burial practice would explain why we find women, men and children buried; they died closest to the designated calendrical date. Alternatively, since thatch structures need to be re-roofed every 20–30 years, this may also have played a role in deciding when to de-animate a house.

■ CONCLUDING REMARKS

Maya commoner houses are dense with symbolic meaning. As Walker (2008) eloquently notes, much of what archaeologists uncover is the result of how humans materially engaged with nonhuman or supernatural agents. These material practices engaged their observers because of what they invoke regarding cosmology and tradition, what Meskell (2005: 66) terms ‘visualized memory’. Domestic ceremonies are closely tied to one another, and all, in one sense or another, established people’s place in the universe. Dedication offerings are only cached after rebuilding, which only took place after a particular family member was interred in the home. After the funeral rites, the house and what it contained were destroyed and burned; this ceremonial destruction provided the basis for the new house, which could only be animated through dedication rites. Cached and destroyed items were not placed haphazardly, but in such a way as to make their symbolic significance complete. Everything about the house was a representation of their universe writ and materialized small. Houses thus represent the three layers of the universe – the space inside the heavens; the living surface upon which the living walk, sleep and cook, the earth; and burials, cached pots, and pits the underworld. Offerings were significant to the family and by their deposition also recorded their family story.

These practices indicate that family identity was enforced daily. External interactions, such as contributing goods and labor to local or regional leaders and attending ball games and large-scale ceremonies and markets, occurred intermittently. Most of the time was spent on family and community events.

Commoners may not have had the written word, but they had the means to record their own history, one with which they interacted daily.



Inscriptions and iconography have revealed much about royal ceremonial life and cosmology. Expanding this information to explain commoner symbolism provides another window into their rich ceremonial life. Creating their own universe defined their place in the world as vital participants, and not just farmers and subjects to Maya kings and leaders.

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Note

- 1 For a detailed discussion of the term 'commoner', see Gonlin and Lohse (2007), Lohse (2007), Lohse and Valdez (2004), and Lucero (2001: 2–5).

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