

Early Maya Ceremonial Architecture at Pacbitun, Belize

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The development of Middle Preclassic (900–300 BC) ceremonial architecture is receiving more attention by archaeologists conducting research in the Maya Lowlands. Although a few examples have been partially excavated, there is still a dearth of information on how and why monumental constructions were originally built. This is largely because early structures often lie below several layers of sequential architecture, making them difficult to locate. Even when Middle Preclassic architecture is identified, exposure is often too limited to fully investigate its form and function. A well-preserved and accessible Middle Preclassic platform would be a rare find and could greatly enhance our knowledge and understanding of the subject. At Pacbitun, Cayo District, Belize, such a discovery has been made beneath the artificially raised surface of the main plaza. To make the most of this opportunity, five seasons of excavation worked to expose this massive building in its entirety. In this article, we provide details concerning the structural design of the platform and its abandonment, as well as present potential architectural comparisons. We conclude by reevaluating complexity at Pacbitun.

Keywords: Maya, Middle Preclassic, monumental architecture, Pacbitun, Belize

El desarrollo de la arquitectura ceremonial del Preclásico medio (900-300 aC) está recibiendo más atención por parte de los arqueólogos que realizan investigaciones en las tierras bajas mayas. Sin embargo, todavía es escasa la información acerca de cómo y por qué se construyeron originalmente las estructuras monumentales. Esto se debe, en gran parte, al hecho de que las estructuras tempranas a menudo se encuentran debajo de varias capas de arquitectura secuencial, lo que dificulta su localización. Incluso cuando se identifica una gran plataforma del Preclásico medio, las excavaciones, en general, solo proporcionan una pequeña visión de ella y la exposición es demasiado limitada para investigar completamente su forma y función general. En consecuencia, una plataforma del Preclásico medio bien conservada y accesible sería un hallazgo excepcional y podría mejorar enormemente nuestro conocimiento y comprensión del tema. En Pacbitun (Belize) se ha realizado el hallazgo de una estructura debajo de la superficie artificialmente elevada de la plaza principal del sitio. Para exponer este enorme edificio en su totalidad, se llevaron a cabo cinco temporadas de excavación, exponiendo gradualmente una gran plataforma ceremonial. En este trabajo se proporcionan detalles sobre el diseño estructural de la plataforma y el método de abandono. Asimismo, se exponen posibles comparaciones y se reevalúa la complejidad en Pacbitun.

Palabras Clave: Maya, Preclasico medio, arquitectura monumental, Pacbitun, Belice

Our knowledge of the origins of Maya ceremonial architecture has improved over the past decades. Investigations at sites like Blackman Eddy (Garber et al. 2004), Cahal Pech (Awe 1992), Ceibal (Inomata et al. 2013), Nakbe (Hansen 2005), Tikal (Laporte

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and Fialko 1995), Xocnaceh (Gallareta Negrón 2018), and Xunantunich (Brown et al. 2018) have revealed some of the earliest examples of monumental public architecture in the Maya Lowlands and provide new insight into the level of sociopolitical complexity during the Middle Preclassic period (900–300 BC). These physical manifestations are clear indicators of a ranked society and an emerging elite class. Archaeological investigations by the Pacbitun Regional Archaeological Project (PRAP) recently unearthed a large platform in the main plaza, Plaza A. The platform is unlike any other early ceremonial construction excavated in the Maya Lowlands. Our excavation of this platform sheds new light on the foundation, nature, and development of early social and political structure at Pacbitun and shapes our perception of public activities of the Maya Lowlands during the Middle Preclassic period.

Site Description and Background

Pacbitun is a medium-sized site located along the southern rim of the Belize River Valley region (Figure 1). It is situated in the foothills of the Maya Mountains at the juncture of two contrasting ecozones: the tropical rain forest and the Mountain Pine Ridge. The epicenter of Pacbitun was constructed on an east–west orientation, atop a limestone knoll approximately 240 m asl. Plaza B contains Classic period (AD 550–800) elite residences, whereas the adjacent Plaza A, situated 5 m above the residential area, appears to be the ritual and ceremonial hub during this time. Dividing these two social spaces, Structure 2 bounds the edge of Plaza A and acts as the western component of a Belize Valley E-Group variant (Awe et al. 2017). The epicenter of Pacbitun was first settled during the Middle Preclassic period as a small farming community likely drawn to the fertile soils, numerous tributaries, and diverse resources. The epicenter slowly expanded throughout the Classic period and eventually consisted of more than three dozen monumental masonry constructions and two causeways. The site epicenter is also marked by the remains of 20 stelae and altars, three of which exhibited traces of carved Mayan hieroglyphic writing (Healy 1990; Helmke et al. 2006; Skaggs et al. 2017).

The Belize River Valley, located in west central Belize, is one of the earliest known settled regions in the Maya Lowlands, originating at sites like Blackman Eddy (Garber et al. 2004) and Cahal Pech (Awe 1992) founded circa 1100 BC. Occupation at Pacbitun began about two centuries later as a small agricultural village of approximately 50 people (Healy 1990; Powis et al. 2017). The economy of the site was driven by marine shell bead production, which flourished as a domestic activity within the earliest residential structures in Plaza B (Hohmann 2002). Marine shells were imported whole from the Caribbean Sea, a distance of 120 km, and were possibly manufactured into disk beads destined for markets in the Petén of Guatemala. With this industry enduring for nearly 600 years, the Middle Preclassic endeavors brought Pacbitun early success. During this time frame, the houses in Plaza B increased in size, height, and quality of construction. Eventually, during a residential reconfiguration at the height of the period (ca. 600 BC), the residents of Pacbitun constructed the first public building to the east in the adjacent Plaza A, at a natural rise in the landscape 5 m above the houses in Plaza B. The size, architectural design, and elevated location are all indicative of its ceremonial function.

Q: Discovery, Description, and Destruction

In 2012, PRAP conducted a geophysical survey using magnetometry and ground-penetrating radar to look for evidence of Middle Preclassic architecture below Plaza A (Skaggs and Powis 2014; Skaggs et al. 2016). One anomaly revealed a burned surface approximately 50 cm below the present-day ground surface. Horizontal exposure during the 2013–2017 field seasons identified this surface as the summit of a Middle Preclassic ceremonial platform. The extensive burning on all surfaces of the platform led to the name “El Quemado” (The Burned One; hereafter “Q”)

Q is a large pyramidal structure measuring 32.5 m long (east–west) by 20.4 m wide (north–south) by 2 m high (Figure 2a). Ceramic artifacts and radiocarbon assays from inside three excavation units that penetrated its summit to bedrock indicate that it was built around

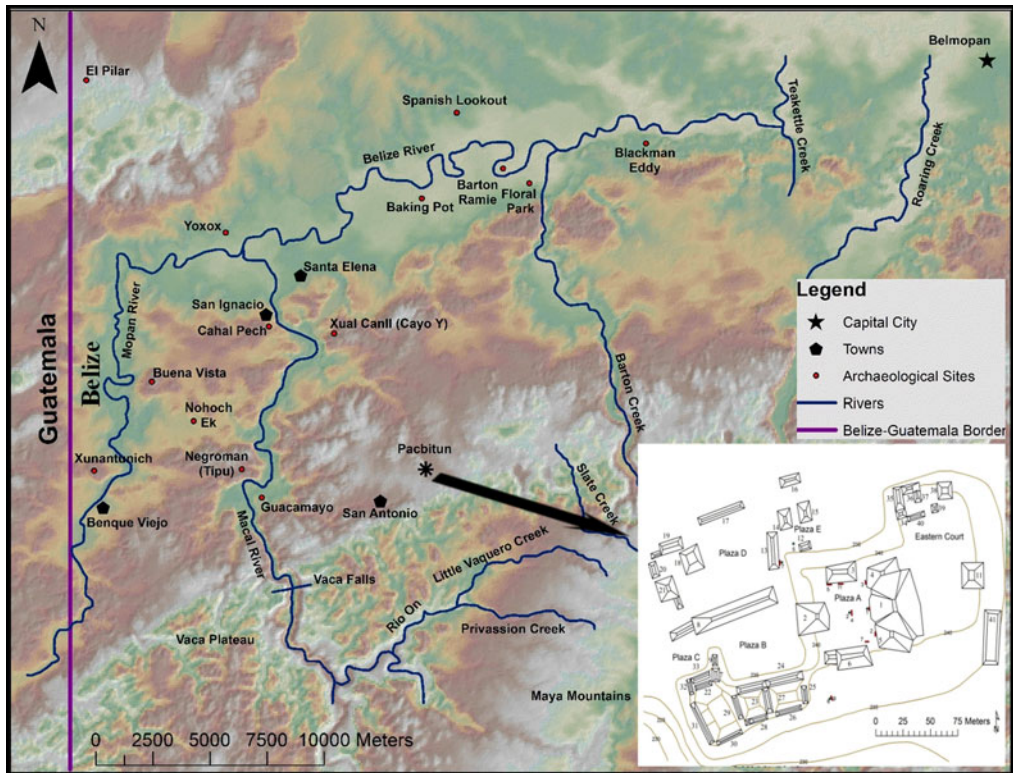


Figure 1. (Color online) The Belize River Valley and Pacbitun (courtesy Sheldon Skaggs and Nicaela Cartagena).

600 BC and buried between 400–300 BC. Excavations on the summit revealed no evidence of a superstructure, supporting the public ceremonial function of the building. Q is oriented east to west, aligned 16 degrees west of north. On the south face, a pair of plain upper and lower armatures separate the main staircase from two flanking, supplementary stairways. All three stairs ascend to the same wide landing (six steps up from the plaza floor via the central staircase) appended to the south side of the main platform (Figure 3a). Two additional staircases, also fixed to the platform, descend the landing to the east and to the west. Centered between these stairs, a long shallow step flanked by two raised platforms is positioned below the summit (Figure 2b).

In addition to architecture, what distinguishes Q from other structures of the Belize Valley is the method of its abandonment. Fragments of sculptured plaster chopped from the southern fascia were found on the appended east and west descending stairs, indicating that

masks had once adorned the corner facades of the building. In addition to the decimation of the masks, all the terraces, armatures, corners, and the nose of each stair had been chopped. Coupled with the extensive burning across the entire surface, as indicated by the calcined plaster, the platform was partially razed at the end of the late Middle Preclassic (400–300 BC). Before that act, the surface of Q was swept clean of artifactual material. Two ritual offerings (Offerings 1 and 2), each composed of a single ceramic vessel of the Savana Orange: Rejolla Variety (Gifford 1976), were placed post-immolation on the summit of the building (Figure 3b). Rather than renewing the building with subsequent constructions, the inhabitants of Pacbitun decided to bury the building virtually intact, the interment and destructive rites suggesting the ritual termination of Q. The platform was then covered in a 5 cm thick layer of clay, aiding in its preservation. Four north–south oriented task units set at 8 m intervals were constructed to build up and enlarge

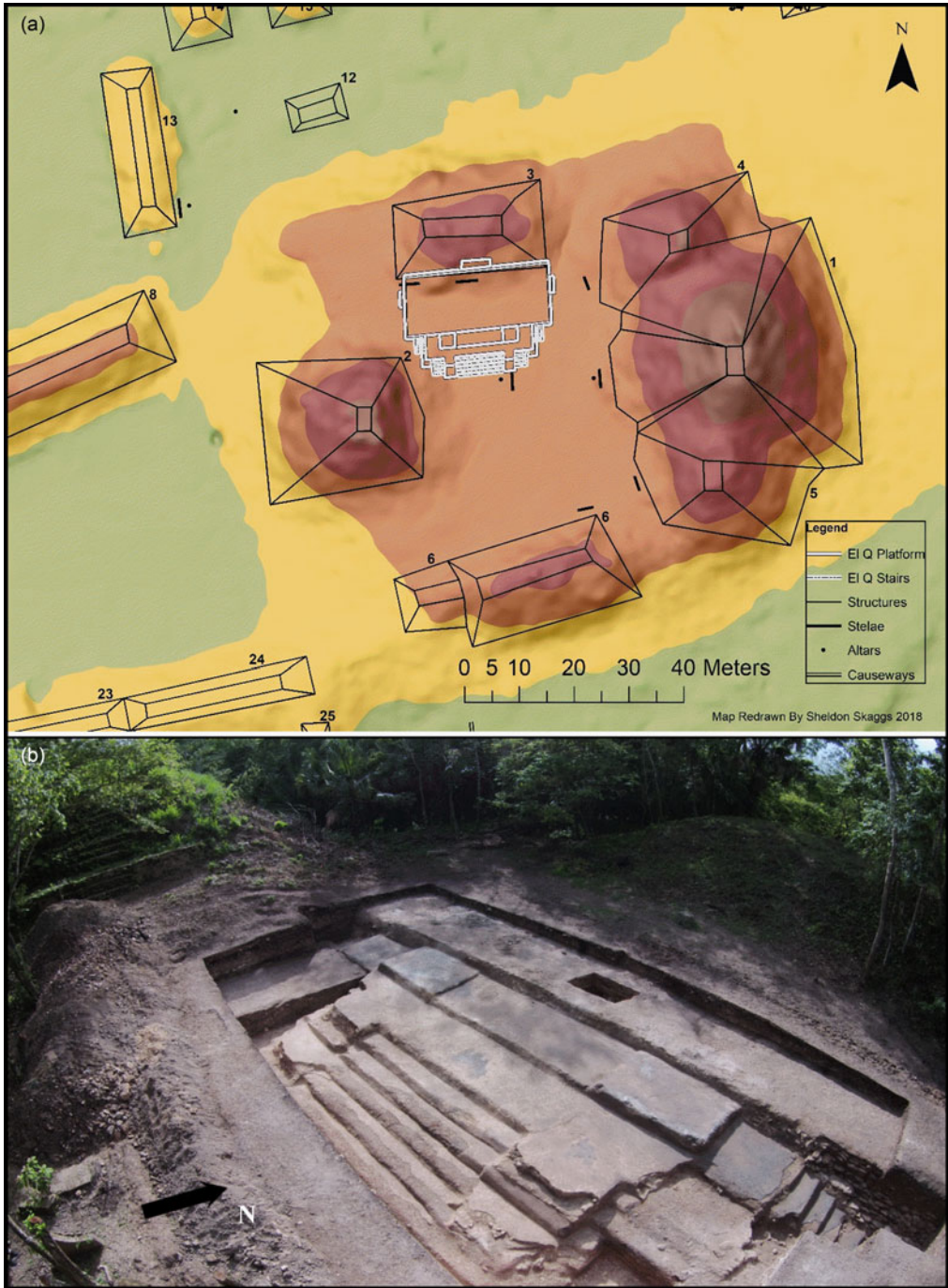


Figure 2. (Color online) (a) Location of Q at the north end of Plaza A (courtesy Sheldon Skaggs); (b) photograph of Q, looking north, with Structure 3 in the background (courtesy Jeffrey A. Powis).

the plaza, ultimately covering the early platform with a thick early Late Preclassic floor just above its summit. This floor sealed Q below

what became the main plaza that would support the E-Group variant during the subsequent Classic period apogee at Pacbitun.

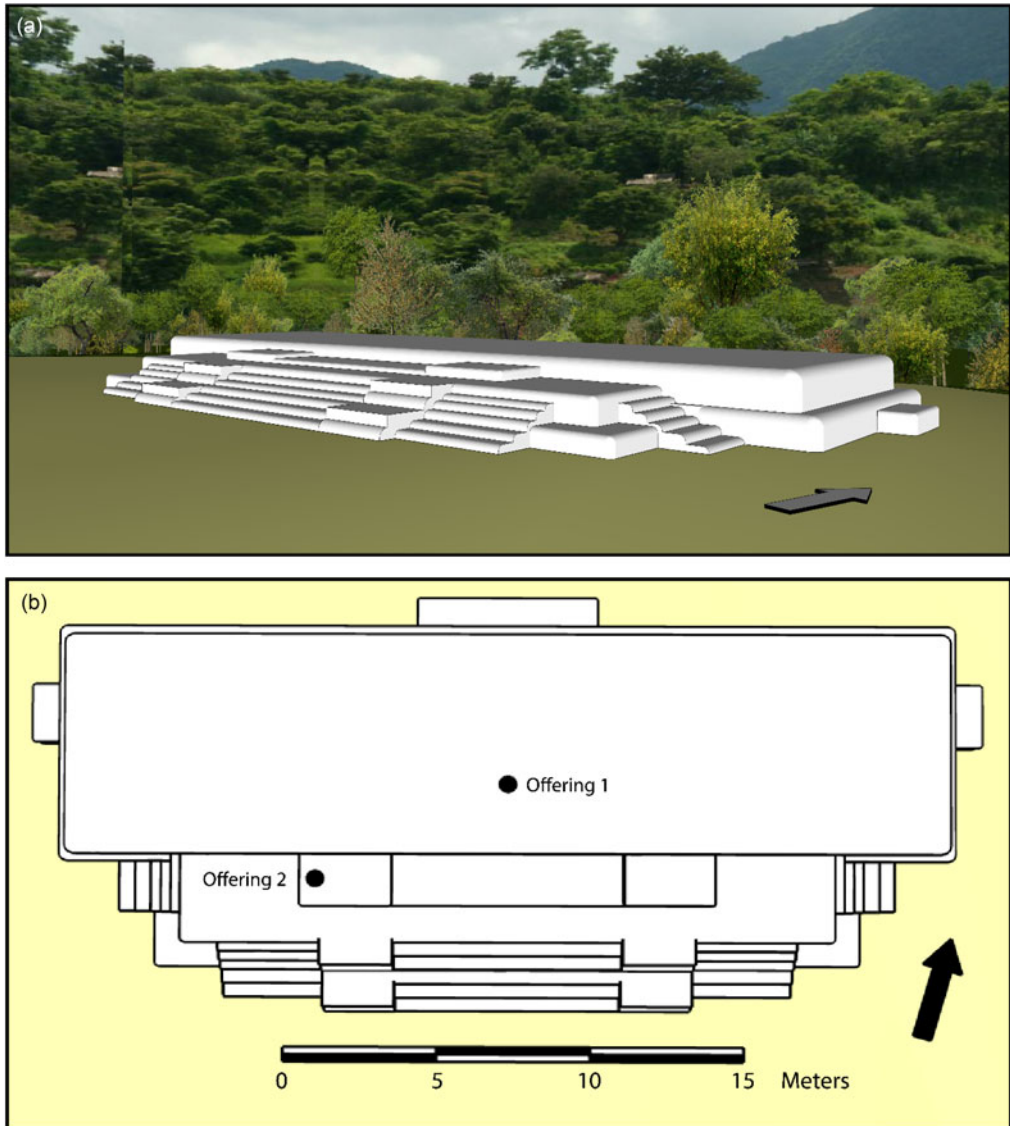


Figure 3. (Color online) (a) Reconstruction of Q in SketchUp, looking northwest; (b) plan view of Q in SketchUp (courtesy George Micheletti).

Architectural Comparisons

Very few Maya architectural antecedents compare to the overall architectural design of Q. Examining the plan of the southern facade, comparisons can be made to the Lost World Pyramid at Tikal, E-VII Sub at Uaxactun, and earlier Middle Preclassic buildings within both structures (Laporte and Fialko 1995:48; Ricketson and Ricketson 1937). Of note, the ornate stucco masks that decorate these two structures

may further support their erstwhile existence on the southern facade of Q. Regionally, some of the early building phases of Structure B1 at the Belize Valley site of Blackman Eddy (Garber et al. 2004:42–43) share similar architectural features with Q. Structure B1-4th and B1-3rd most resemble the ceremonial platform at Pacbitun and were roughly contemporary. In addition to the architectural resemblances with Q, Structure B1-4th was also documented to have been

similarly destroyed. The summit of B1-4th had evidence of extensive burning, whereas the masks and upper surfacing of the walls had been torn from its edges (Brown and Garber 2003:98). Outside of the Belize Valley region, other documented examples of this destructive process include Structure 315 at Cuello (Gerhardt and Hammond 1991:104–115; Hammond and Gerhardt 1990:462, 469, 478; Hammond et al. 2000) and Structure G-103 Sub at Rio Azul (Valdez 1995). Considering the fate of these early platforms, the intentional desecration could either represent reverential destruction for termination purposes or politically motivated conflict. Brown and Garber (2003:102) have concluded that Structure B1-4th was the result of a warfare event, partly because of the lack of ritual deposits associated with the structure. Are the two ceramic offerings found on the summit of Q enough evidence to suggest that the desecration of this platform and the warfare event that took place at Blackman Eddy near the end of the Middle Preclassic period were unrelated? More research will be needed in other areas of Plaza A to find contemporaneous architecture and determine whether the actions at Pacbitun were done with reverence or were acts of violence.

Conclusions

The discovery of Q beneath Plaza A is just cause for reevaluating the level of social complexity at the dawn of the Late Preclassic period at Pacbitun. Before creation of the platform, Middle Preclassic Pacbitun was a community whose social development was commensurate with their involvement in a burgeoning economic enterprise focused on shell bead production: there is little to no evidence of inequality or division(s) of labor in any construction/artifactual assemblages at the site. With the monumental construction of Q around 600 BC, the site exhibits a heightened communal cohesion brought about by labor organization for the purpose of ritual centralization.

Furthermore, as the ceremonial predecessor of the E-Group, Q seems to be a much older ritual institution in Plaza A that indicates the communal propagation of knowledge concerning the

ancient and ongoing sacredness of this space. Q stood as a powerful symbol of community transformation. Its placement in Plaza A, separated by height and distance from the households in Plaza B, represents a novel form of community planning. With the permanence of Q, residents may have developed a new sense of place to accompany their new social identity/solidarity (see Joyce 2004). This new sense of place is further reinforced with the construction of the E-Group in Plaza A around 400–300 BC, which begins the period of conformity to a larger identity sweeping the southern Maya Lowlands (Chase and Chase 1995, 2017; Inomata et al. 2013).

Data Availability. Original field notes, level forms, drawings, photographs, and maps are housed in the Department of Geography and Anthropology at Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia.

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