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RUINS OF THE PAST

*The Use and Perception of Abandoned Structures
in the Maya Lowlands*

Travis W. Stanton

AND

Aline Magnoni,

EDITORS

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NOTES

1. There is some question, however, as to exactly how rapidly Tetimpa was abandoned (Plunket and Uruñela 2003). Residents may have begun to abandon the site shortly before the eruption of the volcano.
2. By this definition, substructures are abandoned, although people may still be living on top of them.
3. These can be physical or even mythical locations.
4. In fact, places and architecture themselves can be considered a form of history (Curtoni, Lazzari, and Lazzari 2003; Küchler 1993; Yelvington 2002:232).
5. Among the Maya, the importance of place has recently been emphasized in the debate over the house model (Gillespie 2000a, 2001; Gillespie and Joyce 1997; Hutson, Magnoni, and Stanton 2004; Joyce and Gillespie 2000; see also Houston and McAnany 2003). What we find to be the essential point of this model is how people can organize themselves around places that are negotiated by the collective. While the model is applicable to the study of small-scale social organizations such as domestic groups, it can easily be applied to larger groups of people such as those organized around entire sites.
6. The issue of qualia (see Crick and Koch 1990).
7. None of these media is memory itself (see Forty 1999).
8. The state of decay may affect the perception and use of a structure.



Forgotten Structures, Haunted Houses, and Occupied Hearts

*Ancient Perspectives and Contemporary Interpretations of
Abandoned Sites and Buildings in the Mirador Basin, Guatemala*

Richard D. Hansen, Wayne K. Howell, and Stanley P. Guenter

When considering how the ancient Maya perceived and utilized the structures and landscapes that were shaped and then abandoned by their ancestors, the Mirador Basin of the northern Petén, Guatemala (Figure 1.1), is a critical area to consider, as it offers a nearly 2,500-year record of such behavior. Yet to address the concept of “perception,” a notion that requires an attempt to enter the emic (or native) “mind” of the ancient Maya, it is necessary to take the (perilous) step beyond the theoretical models offered by traditional and processual archaeology and employ the interpretive model commonly referred to as “cognitive archaeology.” This paradigm is an “approach that seeks explanations of human behavior, at least in part, by explicit reference to the human mind” (Whitley 1998:6). It provides an opportunity to interpret certain elements of the archaeological record that would otherwise seem peripheral to an understanding of the ancient Maya but that offer an intriguing glimpse into past behavior (see also Marcus and Flannery 1994, 2000). To take this interpretive step, we rely primarily on two fields of study: ethnography and epigraphy.

Ethnography, the described behavior of living societies, offers directly observed accounts of Maya ritual behavior. These accounts commence historically at the time of the conquest and extend to modern ethnographic research of contemporary Maya societies. Although significantly removed in time from the archaeological past, some of these accounts are remarkably cohesive, suggesting their substantial utility for archaeological study. We consider the observed behaviors described in such accounts to be capable of producing physical evidence similar to what we have recovered archaeologically, thus supporting a more ethnically based and potentially more accurate interpretation of the archaeological record (Marcus and Flannery 1994, 2000). In addition to published ethnographic observations, we also rely on our own personal observations of contemporary Maya ritual behavior.

Epigraphy, the study of ancient inscriptions, offers another portal into the ancient "mind," as decipherment of the written word allows the ancient Maya to speak for themselves, insofar as the interpretations of their texts are correct and their contexts plausible. Of special importance for this study are the detailed historical records kept by the Maya of the Classic period and possibly even the Formative period, which made considerable effort to name people, places, buildings, events, and politics. Recent interpretations of some of the written evidence and associated data recount the activities of certain Maya individuals of the Classic period, which we believe took place within the ruins of Formative sites of the Mirador Basin. These abandoned sites were likely chosen for ritual activity because of their historical or spiritual significance.

Ultimately, however, our interpretations rest on the archaeological record. Based on twenty-five years of archaeological investigation (see Copeland 1989; Forsyth 1989; Hansen 1984, 1990a, 1998, 2001; Howell 1989; Matheny 1986), a basic understanding of the culture history, settlement patterns, and many past cultural behaviors has emerged for the Mirador Basin. Most investigations have been centered on the large sites of El Mirador and Nakbé, but studies have also included major excavations, architectural consolidation, reconnaissance, mapping, and archaeological testing at twenty-two additional sites to gain a perception of regional cultural and ecological dynamics. Although it consists of many hundreds of excavation operations, some large by any archaeological standard, we recognize that this work represents limited testing of a vast archaeological record.

Through the extraction of basic necessities from the tropical lowland forests and swamps, the ancient Maya transformed the landscape on a truly monumental scale and subsequently left a profuse and richly detailed archaeological record. As the archaeology indicates a 500-year hiatus between major occupational periods throughout much of the basin, this chapter will focus on how one group of ancient Maya, primarily those of the Late Classic, responded to the copious cultural remains left by their Formative predecessors. We interpret these responses as

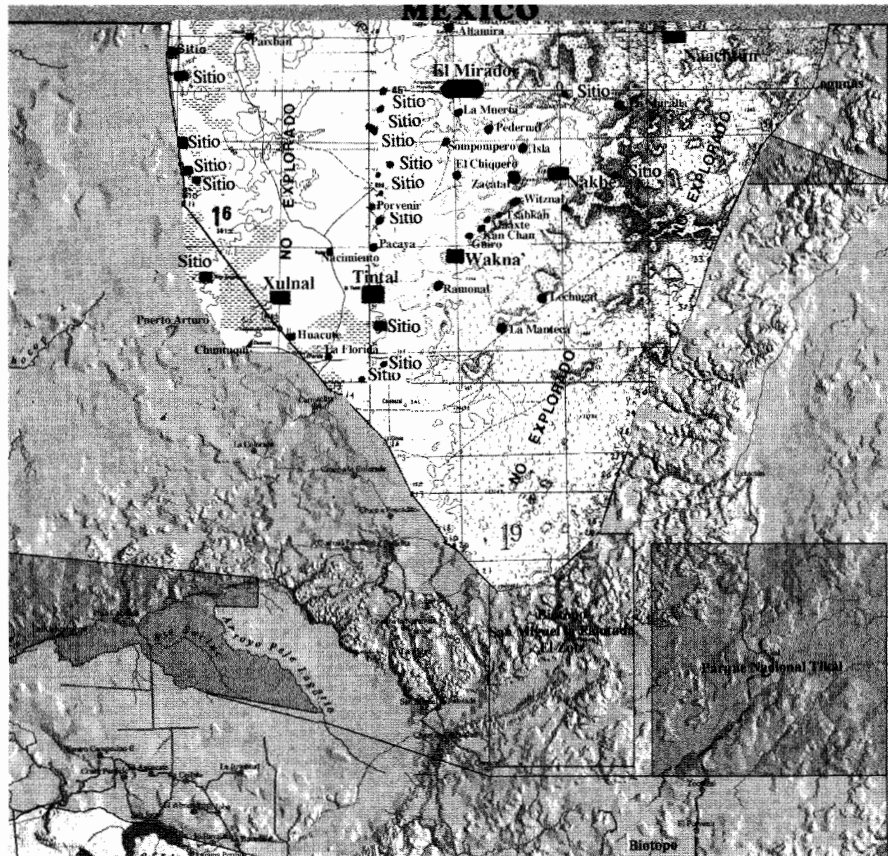
(1) reuse-activities, which recognized the utility of past constructions and employed them; and (2) reoccupation, which we define as settlement and interaction with past constructions without particular regard for the function such constructions may have served in the past (see Stanton and Magnoni, Chapter 1, this volume). Our data also reveal that during the approximately 500-year occupation hiatus and again following the final Late Classic abandonment, there appears to have been a ritual focus on the region by what we interpret to be religious pilgrims. This ritual activity, nonutilitarian in nature, suggests that later societies maintained memories of long abandoned places, and through the maintenance of cycles of pilgrimage and ritual, the ancient Maya cognitively transcended the abandonments of these places. We rely in part on ethnographic and ethnohistoric comparisons to support this interpretation of the archaeological record.

Further, the apparent pattern of ritual pilgrimages to sites in the Mirador Basin may have been driven by cultural perceptions as revealed in the epigraphic record. The sites were revered places that symbolized a mythological past to the Classic Maya from other, sometimes distant sites. In this sense, the Mirador Basin could have served as a Tamoanchan/Tollan, the mythical birthplace of gods, kings, humans, and culture as known from ethnohistorical records, legends, and documents. While the historical record indicates several Tamoanchan/Tollan titles for various areas throughout Mesoamerican history, the two areas most like the detailed descriptions are the Gulf Coast region of Mexico (Olmec) and the Mirador Basin (Maya). It is suggested here that the Mirador Basin may have been one of the original Tamoanchan/Tollan regions of Mesoamerican mythology.

In this chapter we first present a description of the evidence from the archaeological record, which indicates various types of use and reuse of earlier constructions ranging from mere utility to veneration. In addition, our interpretations also rely on ethnography to help interpret those remains. Finally, by using epigraphy, one can rely on the words of the ancient Maya themselves in an attempt to understand the deeper rationale behind the behaviors that created the archaeological record we attempt to interpret.

THE FORMATIVE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The Mirador Basin is a broad, low-relief, oval-shaped basin occupying 2,200 square km in extreme north-central Petén in Guatemala, with an additional 700 or so square km extending into Campeche, Mexico (Figure 2.1). The basin is circumscribed by a chain of low-relief karstic hills that demarcate it from the rest of Petén. This area was the scene of vibrant cultural development during the Middle and Late Formative periods of Maya civilization (Figure 2.2; Hansen 1998, 2001, 2004). Starting with the early Middle Formative period (ca. 1000–800 B.C.), settlements



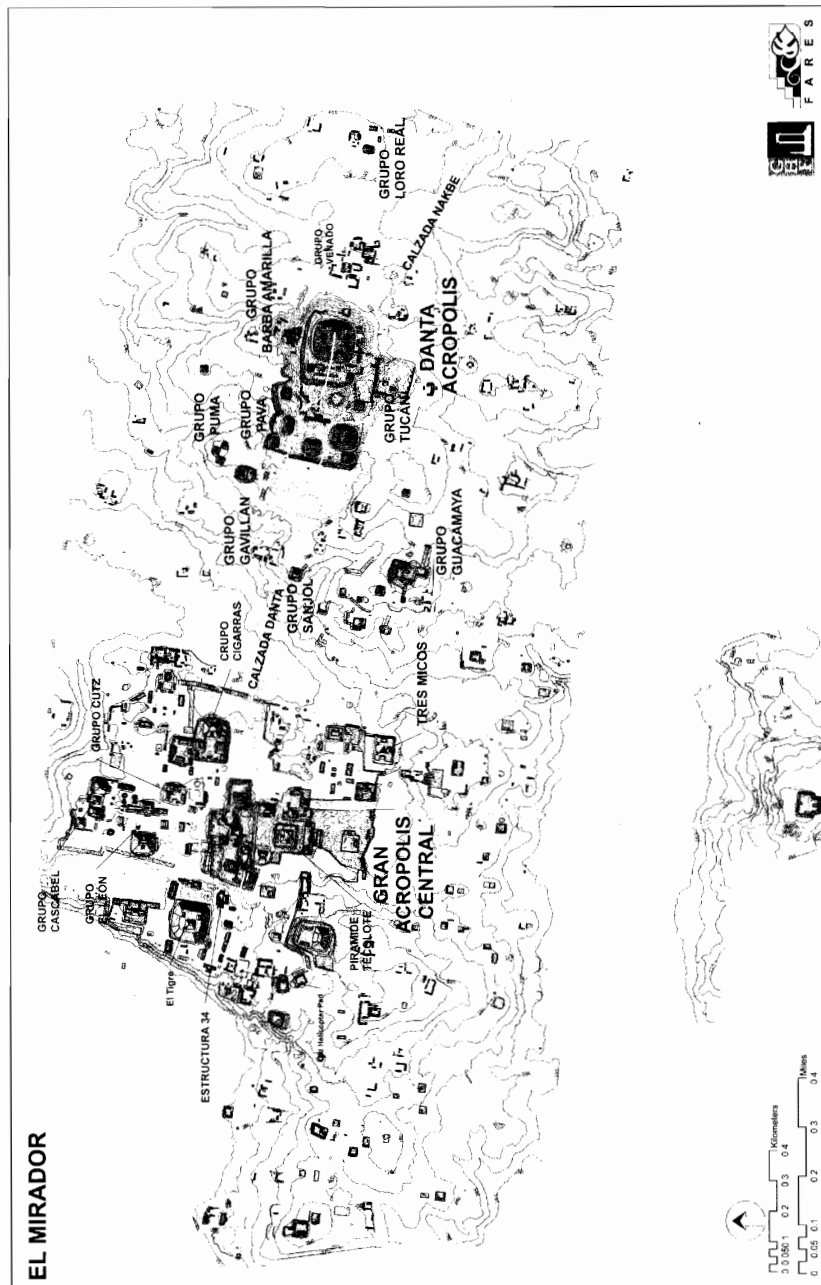
2.1 Map of the Mirador Basin with Principal Sites Named. Major Causeways Joined Principal Sites of the Region

were established on swamp-surrounded upland ridges throughout the basin. By the Late Formative, this geographic area contained one of the largest concentrations of sites and architecture in the Maya world. El Mirador (Figure 2.3) became the central hub of a network of large sites connected by elevated causeways (Figure 2.4), the principal outliers being Nakbé, Wakna', Tintal, La Ceibita, Xulnal, Naachtún, and Paixbán, among others. Other major sites of the basin in Campeche included Calakmul, Balakbal, Uxul, Cheyokolna, Yaxnohcah, and Altamira (Sprajc 2005). Outside the large centers, dozens of smaller sites with monumental architecture and numerous hamlets occupied many ridges and low rises, particularly those flanking the seasonal swamps, commonly known as *bajos*. The four largest sites on the Guatemalan side of the border—El Mirador, Nakbé, Naachtún, and Tintal—shared a common settlement history near the *bajos* (although Naachtún

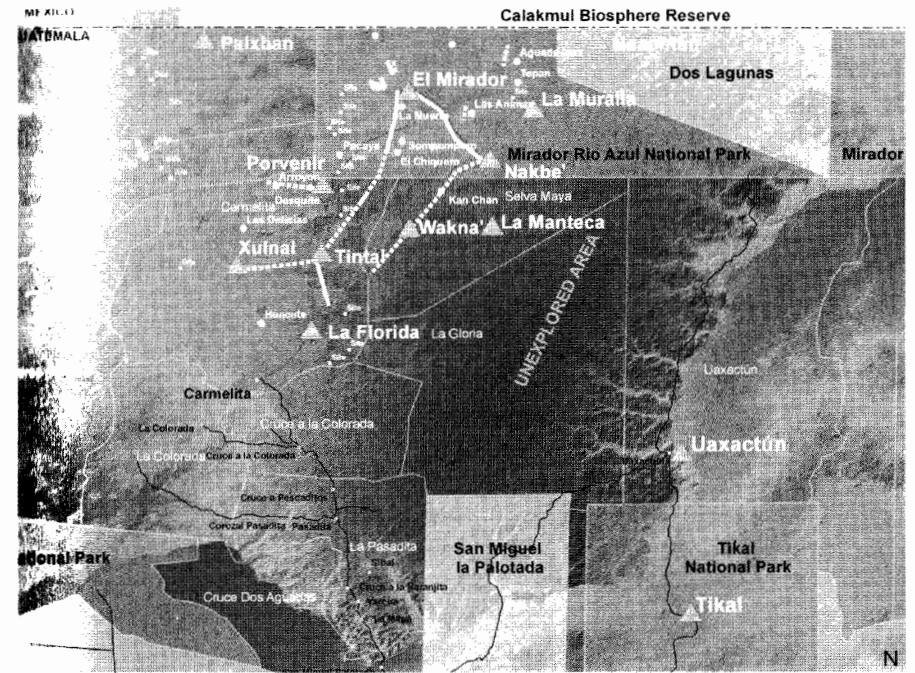
		Pasion		Core		Belize		Mirador	Basin
Period	Date	Seibal	Altar de Sacrificios	Uaxactun	Tikal	Belize River Valley	Cuello	Nakbe	El Mirador
Postclassic			Jimba			Spanish Lookout	Water Bank		
Terminal Classic	900	Bayal	Boca	Tepeu 3	Eznab		Tecepe		Post Lac Na
Late Classic	800	Tepejilote	Pasion	Tepeu 2	Imix	Tiger Run	Santana Tepeu	Uuc	Lac Na
	700			Tepeu 1	Ik				
Early Classic	600	?	Chixoy Veremos	Tzakol 3		Hermitage	Nuevo Tzakol	Uuc	Acropolis
	500	Junco	Ayn	Tzakol 2	Manik 3				
	400		Salinas	Tzakol 1	Manik 1 Manik 2				
	300			Matzanel	Manik 1				
Proto-classic	200	Late Cantutse	Late Plancha	Chicanel tardio	Cimi			Ho	Paixbancito
Late Preclassic	100							Late Kan	Late Cascabel
	0	Cantutse		Chicanel	Cauac	Barton Creek	Cocos Chicanel	Kan	Cascabel
	100	Early Cantutse	Plancha	Chicanel temprano	Chuen			Early Kan	Early Cascabel
	200		Early Plancha						
Middle Preclassic	300	Escoba Tardio	Late San Felix	Mamom	Late Tzec	Late Jenny Creek	Lopez Mamom	Late Ox	Monos
	400		San Felix		Early Tzec			Ox	
	500		Early San Felix						
	600	Escoba Temprano							
	700					Early Jenny Creek	Bladen / Early Chiwa	Middle Ox	?
	800						Swasey/Bolay	Early Ox	
	900	Real	Xe	Pre-Mamom	Eb	Cunil/Kanocha			
Early Preclassic	1000								
	1100								

2.2. Cultural Chronology with Comparative Sites as Understood to Date in the Mirador Basin.

has an important Early Classic occupation not found in the others) and were laid out on a similar east-west axis with large clusters of monumental architecture at each end of the axis (Hansen 1998). The repetitive architectural pattern for these sites, which lack common topographic determinants to lay out, is in itself suggestive of a cognitive pattern.



2.3 Map of El Mirador Showing General Area of Site's Civic Center. Map Technician, Josie Thompson, Global Heritage Fund. © Fares 2006.

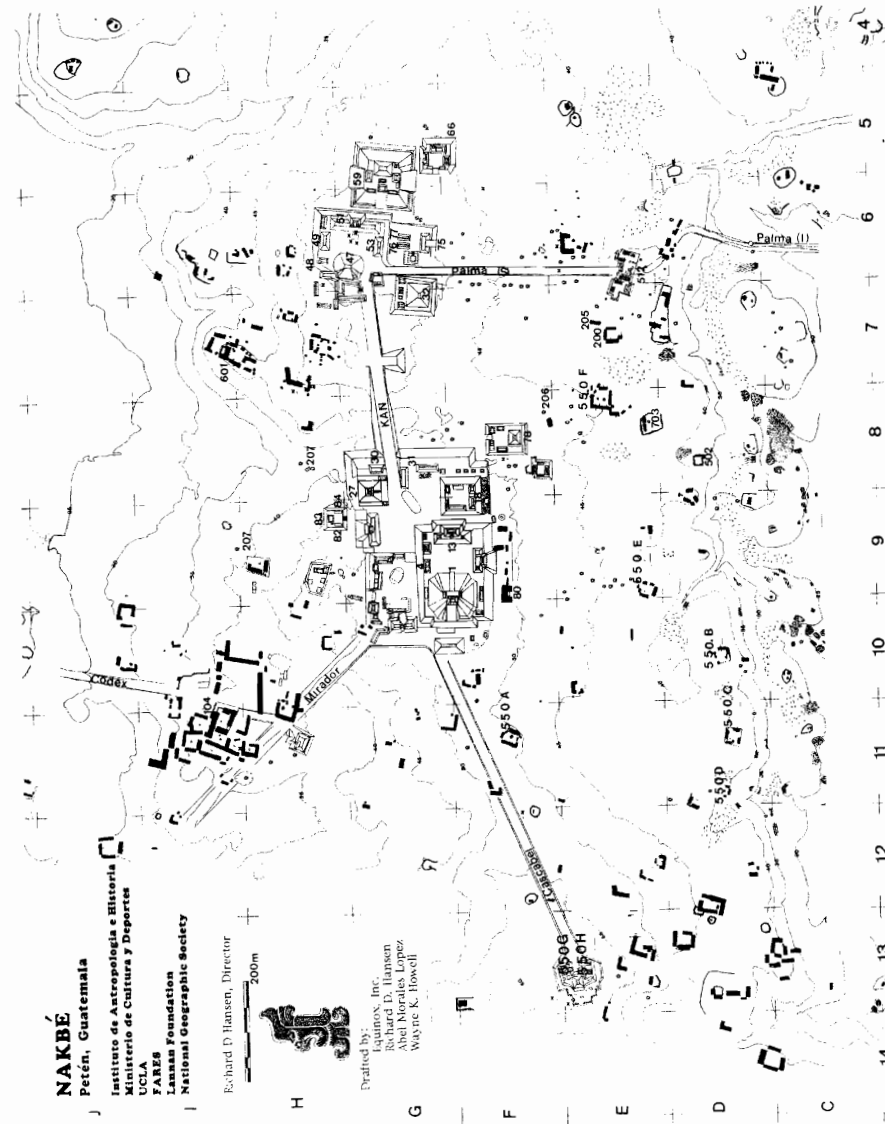


2.4 Map of Northern Area of the Mirador Basin Indicating Known and Suspected Causeways in the Area. Map Technician, Josie Thompson, Global Heritage Fund. © Fares 2005.

As mapped to date, the civic center of El Mirador (Figure 2.3) covers around twenty square km of major architecture, with massive concentrations of monumental architecture anchoring eastern (Danta) and western (Tigre) core areas and with dense scatterings of Formative house platforms between and surrounding the civic center. Some of these platforms are of considerable size and complexity and range from palaces (e.g., Str. 313) to hard-packed clay floors with perishable superstructures (e.g., Crossroads, west *bajo*). Causeways radiate out from the site centers: southeast to Nakbé, southwest toward Tintal and Caracol, and to the west and northwest toward concentrations of residential platforms or to unknown destinations. Nakbé covers six square km of major architecture as currently mapped and has the same basic site plan as El Mirador, although of lesser scale and volume (Figure 2.5). Many of the constructions at Nakbé predate those at El Mirador, and, given their commonalities in layout, we consider Nakbé the direct predecessor to its larger neighbor.

Nearly all Mirador Basin sites were located on upland ridges for the dry, well-drained surfaces and elevation above the swamps. These upland ridges also provided access to limestone bedrock, which was extensively quarried for building

2.5 Total Station
Contour and Rectified
Map of Nakbé (from
Hansen et al. 2002).



materials. Evidence of quarrying activities is manifest by the cratered landscape surrounding the core areas. Extensive mapping around Nakbé and El Mirador has also revealed an elaborate network of agricultural terraces that formed the formative agricultural base. At Nakbé, these fields were primarily concentrated along a series of large natural terraces on the southern slope of the site, but they have also been found throughout the civic center. Stone retaining walls were constructed in natural drainages to capture sediments and moisture. Toward the lower margins of the slope, the number and extent of artificial terraces increase with proximity to the *bajo*. Archaeological investigations on these features have revealed that the Formative Maya farmers hauled nutrient-rich sediments from the wetland marshes that surrounded the sites (these ancient marshes later evolved into the present-day seasonally dry or seasonally inundated *bajos*) to build the fields and terraces (Hansen 2000a; Hansen et al. 2000, 2002; Martínez Hidalgo et al. 1999). Formative Maya farmers located their residences throughout this system of terraced fields, taking advantage of every low rise of terrain available. This pattern is also evident in other parts of the basin such as Tintal, Wakna', and Xulnal.

Monumental architecture was a hallmark of the sites in the Mirador Basin. The four largest sites (El Mirador, Nakbé, Tintal, and Naachtún) have monumental architectural complexes at either end of their east-west axes. These complexes included massive basal platforms, pyramids, acropolis groups, palaces, and expansive public plazas covered with thick and, in places, sculpted layers of stucco. The quarry-pocked terrain surrounding these massive constructions is testament to the volume of material that went into them. These architectural complexes have all the trappings of ritual-regal centers (see Sanders and Webster 1988; Webster 2002; Webster and Sanders 2001) and, based on epigraphic evidence discussed later in this chapter, may have been the stages for the earliest kingships of the Maya lowlands.

During the Middle and Late Formative periods, a tradition of erecting stone monuments also developed in the Mirador Basin. To date, forty-eight monuments have been recovered: twenty-two at El Mirador, fifteen at Nakbé, two at Tintal, and a total of nine from smaller sites such as Pedernal, La Florida, Isla, and El Chiquero. Terminal Formative monuments and ceramics from El Mirador, El Chiquero, and Pedernal also contain traces of finely incised glyphs (Hansen 1991, 2001, 2004). The monuments were carved on elongated or circular limestone slabs. During the Late Formative, these monuments were mostly small in comparison with the earlier sculptures and thus were fairly portable, an important consideration in our later discussion. Most of these monuments are fragmentary or badly weathered, although images of cosmic scenes or human figures attired in regal dress can still be discerned.

The Mirador Basin reached its cultural apogee by the second and first centuries B.C., but by the beginning of the Classic period (ca. A.D. 250) all of the

major sites were abandoned (Hansen 1990a, 2001) with the possible exception of Naachtún (Reese-Taylor, personal communication 2003). During this time, major construction ceased and buildings fell into disrepair. Residences and major architecture were abandoned, with Formative artifacts still in situ on floors. Eventually, the ancient cities of the Mirador Basin were overgrown with jungle (see Hansen 1990b). This archaeological interpretation is corroborated by detailed pollen studies from several lakes along the western edge of the Mirador Basin, which show an end to deposition of corn pollen in lake sediments and a resurgence of tropical forest pollen around A.D. 150, suggesting large-scale depopulation (Wahl 2000; Wahl and Schreiner 2002; Wahl, Schreiner, and Byrne 2000, 2001).¹ In addition, carbon isotope analyses of soils suggest that the original vegetation of the marshes, consisting primarily of C-4 type plants (grasses and corn), was buried by a meter of sediments with abundant C-3 type plants (species of tropical forest) (Hansen et al. 2002; Jacob 1994), indicating a transformation in vegetation types typical of abandonment scenarios.

LATE FORMATIVE USES OF ABANDONED STRUCTURES

Evidence of Late Formative reoccupation of earlier constructions, seemingly without particular regard for what functions they might have served earlier, is abundant. For example, construction fill from many Late Formative buildings at El Mirador, and particularly at Nakbé, contains abundant Middle Formative artifact assemblages. This is an indicator that much of the surrounding landscape was scoured for construction materials, occasionally at the cost of dismantling earlier buildings and their associated artifact scatters, as rubble and artifacts are scrambled together in these fills. Other buildings appear to have simply been covered over by later constructions and incorporated as integral building blocks, as excavations in some of the major structures in the basin have revealed. Such practice was also common in residential compounds, where testing reveals that many Late Formative residences overlay those of the Middle Formative. This was particularly common in the vicinity of agricultural features, where it appears Formative farmers located their domiciles in proximity to their fields for nearly a thousand years.

Evidence of stone robbing, in which earlier buildings were systematically dismantled, implies that structures may have been viewed simply as a convenient source of stone. Data at a number of buildings, however, suggest that stone robbing may have been something other than random resource procurement. For example, a late Middle Formative building underlying the seventeen-m-high Str. 34 at El Mirador was partially dismantled, with a large modeled stucco mask representing a deity left entombed within the structure. A number of finely cut, ninety-cm long stones, likely taken from the northern wall of the earlier building, were

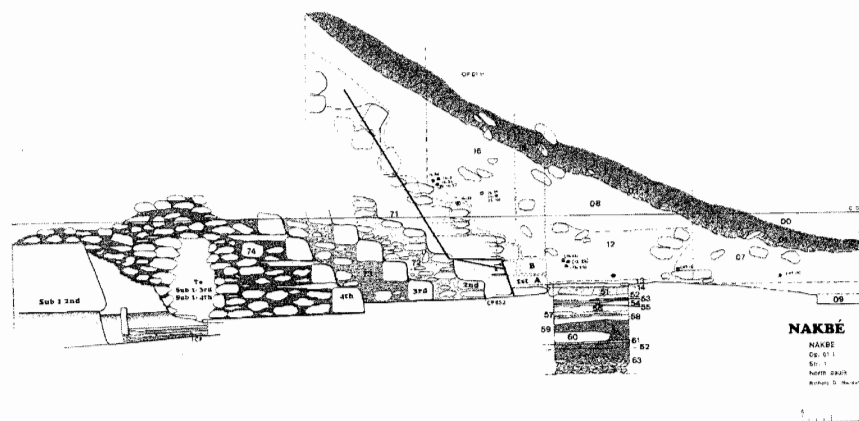


2.6 South Wall of Central Triadic Structure on South Side of the Tigre Complex, Known as the Jaguar Paw Temple, or Str. 34. This Is One of the Oldest Known Standing Walls in Mesoamerica. Photo by R. D. Hansen.

incorporated as cornice stones atop the superstructure walls of the later structure, a remodeling event that presented an outward manifestation of the earlier, now buried building (Figure 2.6).

Reutilization by dismantling architecture and reusing building materials was a common practice documented at other sites and during later times in the Maya lowlands. For example, at Yaxchilán, Tate (1992) noted repositioning of lintels, while at Chichén Itzá, Morris and colleagues (1931) noted that an altar/throne from a substructure had been removed and integrated into the temple of the later building. Coe and Laporte have also documented that much of the interior construction fill of the North Acropolis and the Lost World Complex at Tikal consisted of blocks and stucco fragments of dismantled earlier structures (Coe 1965; Laporte and Fialko 1993).

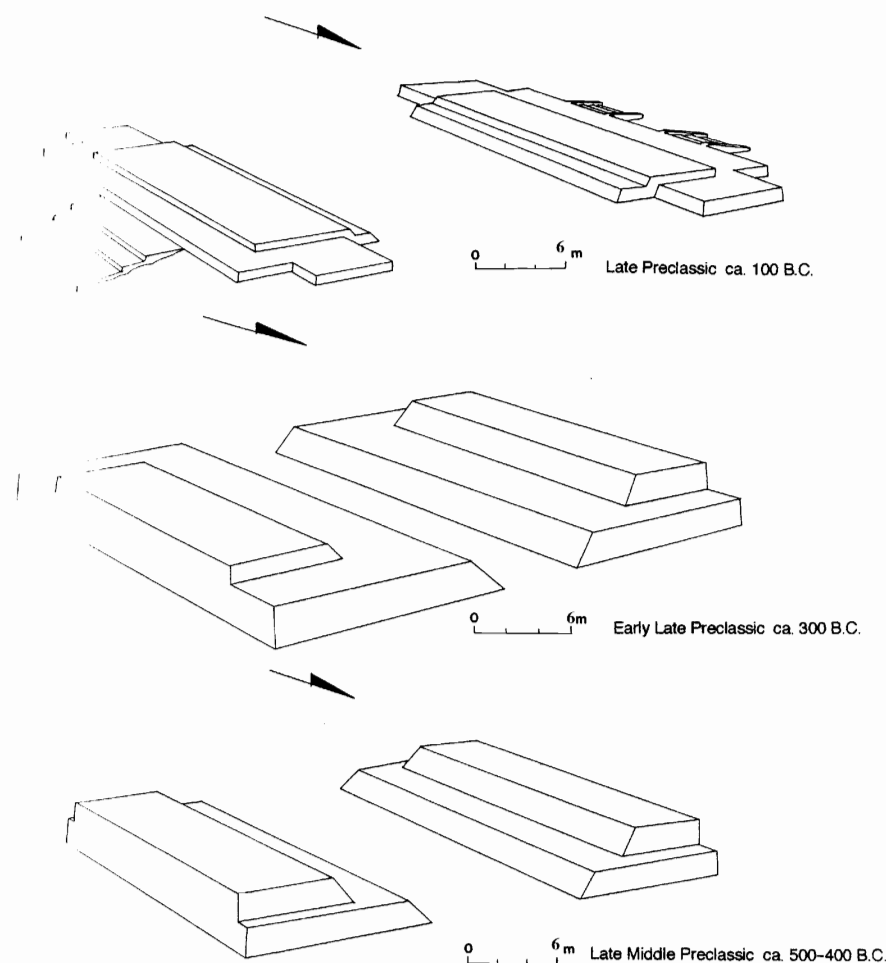
At Nakbé Str. 1, the largest pyramid at the site, the Late Formative Maya removed the entire eastern façade from a buried Middle Formative and early Late Formative (ca. 600–200 B.C.) substructure during a subsequent major construction phase (Figure 2.7). This building had been the focus of repeated remodeling, with



2.7 Profile Drawing of Phases and Sequences of Earlier Substructure inside Nakbé Str. 1. Interior Buildings Date to the Middle Preclassic Period. Drawing by R. D. Hansen.

at least four construction phases during the Middle Formative and four others during the Late Formative. At the interface of these construction phases, the Maya had carefully laid stones to cap the earlier structure as they initiated the newer construction program. This practice is also evident at El Mirador in the Guacamaya Complex, where an earlier structure had been built over by a much larger Late Formative building. Yet in constructing the latter structure, the builders took great care to cap the fine stucco veneer of the earlier building with a thin layer of fine dark clay. Although difficult to interpret, these respectful responses to earlier structures suggest that the ancient Maya were cognizant that those buildings contained some intrinsic value, and they honored that notion by expending great effort in entombing them. A similar treatment has been observed at the Formative site of San Bartolo (Saturno, Taube, and Stuart 2005).

Other Middle Formative constructions seem to have been unaltered by the Late Formative inhabitants, even though they occupied prime spaces within the sites. For example, at Nakbé an impressive Middle Formative architectural complex arranged in an E-Group configuration² lies at the center of the East Group (see Figure 2.5). Str. 51 is an elongated, elevated platform with a single mound on its crest and borders the eastern side of the plaza, while Str. 47 is the pyramidal structure consistently found on the west side of such groups. Sitting at the juncture of two causeways, the precinct also includes (just south of the E-Group) a large symmetrical depression that appears to have been a water collection facility, complete with steps along its eastern side, and Nakbé's only known ballcourt (Figure 2.8). Centrally located as this E-Group complex was, however, it does not appear to have been altered or regularly maintained following the Middle Formative (see



2.8 Construction Sequence of Ballcourt at Nakbé (after Hansen 2001).

Hansen 1998), and it must have existed as a somewhat decayed, perhaps overgrown and abandoned looking place during the Late Formative, even as the massive Str. 59 acropolis was built in its final form immediately behind it and the final version of the Str. 32 pyramid arose just to the southeast of it. Yet other data suggest that through time this was not a forgotten place, for, as we shall see later, this Middle Formative precinct became the focus of minor ritual activity during a Protoclassic interlude and particularly during the Late Classic reoccupation of the site, an indicator that it still held significant meaning for the Maya even after a millennium of decay.

FOLLOWING THE FORMATIVE ABANDONMENT

Perhaps thousands of ruined Formative buildings now dot the landscape of the Mirador Basin, an indicator of wholesale abandonment at the end of the Formative. Archaeological testing at twenty-two sites within the basin suggests that after occupation ceased, many Formative structures were simply left to deteriorate. In some buildings at least, site abandonment appears to have been rapid. For example, at El Mirador, Wakna', and Nakbé, Late Formative ceramic vessels were left directly on the floors of nearly all Formative public buildings investigated to date (Figure 2.9; e.g., Hansen 1990a, 1992; Howell 1989; Matheny et al. 1983). At Str. 4D2-1, an important building directly across the main stairway of Tigre Pyramid in the Tigre Complex, a flaked bifacial chert tool was left on the floor with the stone flakes produced during its manufacture still around it (Hansen 1990a). Similarly, at the site of La Florida a series of Formative *chultuns* (boot-shaped subterranean chambers) was abandoned, leaving Late Formative ceramic vessels in situ. In these and other buildings, abandoned artifacts remained unmolested until they were eventually covered by structural collapse. Investigations to date have attempted to look for the causes behind this Late Formative demographic abandonment. We have identified deforestation and soil loss as a result of the massive production of lime for construction purposes as a contributing factor in local environmental degradation (see Hansen 1995; Hansen et al. 2002; Schreiner 2001, 2002, 2003). Climatic change and political factors may also have played a role in the societal stresses that precipitated major depopulations in the Maya lowlands (Hansen et al. 2002).

During the century following abandonment, there is some limited evidence of human activity for the transitional period, termed the Protoclassic (A.D. 150–250), and into the Early Classic. For example, several Formative *chultuns* located in the large public plaza at the base of Tigre Pyramid and around a small structure on the principal platform of Monos Pyramid at El Mirador became receptacles for Protoclassic midden deposits, as they were found to contain dense deposits of Protoclassic sherds, lithic debitage, and other household debris. In the case of Tigre Pyramid, small residential “squatter” mounds were found scattered throughout Tigre Plaza (Copeland 1989; Hansen 1990a). The ceramic assemblage recovered from these *chultuns* contained the full spectrum of pottery types and shapes typical for the period (e.g., mammiform tetrapod vessels, hooked rims, orange wares, primitive polychromes, and others). From these data a brief occupational presence has been inferred, although no major architectural constructions can be ascribed to this period. Protoclassic ceramics were found on top of the floor of one of the small buildings on Monos Pyramid (Copeland 1989), but no evidence yet indicates that the building is later than the Late Formative.

This nebulous Protoclassic occupation can be clarified at Nakbé where a Late Formative residential platform located on the southern side of the civic architec-



2.9 Formative Ceramics (Three Whole Vessels) Left Directly on the Floors of Buildings at El Mirador (Str. 4D2-1, Directly East across the Plaza from Tigre Pyramid).

ture at the site (Str. 730) appears to have been reoccupied during the Protoclassic period (Balcarcel 1999). At this platform an oval-shaped Late Formative residential platform was found, consisting of a ring of perishable structures surrounding a twenty-m-diameter central plaza, with a large *chultun* located in the center of the plaza. The Formative *chultun* was found to contain a Protoclassic midden deposit, similar to the El Mirador *chultuns*, but found nearby were the scant remains of a perishable structure with associated Protoclassic ceramics, indicating a Protoclassic occupation.

On the principal platform of Nakbé Str. 51—the eastern building within the Middle Formative E-Group—there was an extensive layer of ash that included a scatter of Protoclassic sherds. This Protoclassic ash deposit lay in direct contact with the Middle Formative floor of the building, but no attempt to alter the earlier architecture has yet been detected. The activity in this location, which we interpret as ritual, is significant, for, as we shall see later in the discussion, this building (at its base) also became the focus of ritual activity during the Late Classic. The deposits suggest that people were living (“squatting”?) in and among the ruins, but we have found no evidence to date of efforts to modify existing buildings or construct formal architecture.

The use or reuse of *chultuns* by Protoclassic and Classic peoples has been documented in other areas of Petén (e.g., Puleston 1971), but they have on some occasions

been associated with ritual activity, such as at Topoxté, where an elaborate *chultun* formation was associated with rich Protoclassic deposits (Bernard Hermes, personal communication 2001). Similar Protoclassic deposits were associated with a sealed *chultun* found on the island of Flores (Chan 1997; Hansen 1997; Suasánvar 1997). The evidence recovered thus far in the Mirador Basin suggests that *chultuns* were frequently associated with refuse disposal, particularly in the Protoclassic, a peculiar detail when considering the extent and range of *chultuns* in Petén.

Horizontal excavations have revealed abundant evidence of another common activity during the centuries of the Protoclassic and the Early Classic: the hacking of intrusive pits into stuccoed floors of public buildings. Offerings were also burned (possibly copal), and on occasion ceramic and jade offerings were deposited. Str. 34 at El Mirador has abundant evidence of repeated episodes of this type of activity; nine such pits have been found on this structure. At some point, long after the initial abandonment, a pit was chopped into the floor of the central chamber and an offering was burned. This charcoal provided an Early Classic radiocarbon date of A.D. 490³ (uncorrected 1460 ± 80 B.P.; Beta-1963) (Hansen 1990a:34–35). Nearby, another shallow pit was chopped into the lower step of the upper stairway, and loose building rubble was used to further contain an offering that was subsequently burned to a fine ash. This pit provided a radiocarbon date of 115 B.C. (uncorrected 2065 ± 90 B.P.; Beta-1965). Although this date is problematic, we accept its archaeological context as valid—a rubble-ringed pit was hacked into the stucco floor after the building had fallen into disuse but before the roof structure had collapsed—and one could interpret the early date as attributable to the burning of old wood such as *chico sapote*, a dense hardwood commonly utilized by the ancient Maya for architectural components such as lintels and rafters, elements that would have been readily available among the ruins.

On the upper platform of Str. 34, large and small intrusive pits were placed on both sides of the upper central staircase, as well as in the main floor of the platform. One of these pits on the eastern side of the main platform floor held a Sacluc Black-on-Orange potsherd (Terminal Formative/Early Protoclassic), with an early, incised hieroglyphic text (possible *kan* and *ajaw* glyphs) and a scraped *Spondylus* shell (Hansen and Linares 2004). After the building had fallen, another offering of jade—a flat, finely carved, and highly polished ornament (known as a “spangle”)—was placed in the rubble at the mound’s summit (Hansen 1990a:292–293).

Similar intrusive pits were found dug into the stuccoed stairs of the Pava Acropolis in the Danta Group at El Mirador, where an uncalibrated radiocarbon date of A.D. 170 (uncorrected 1780 ± 60 B.P.; Beta-5549) was obtained (Howell 1989). At another nearby structure, an Aguila Orange ceramic bowl dating to the Early Classic (A.D. 300–600) was placed along the building’s centerline in earth that had already begun to accumulate over the abandoned structure (Howell 1989). At

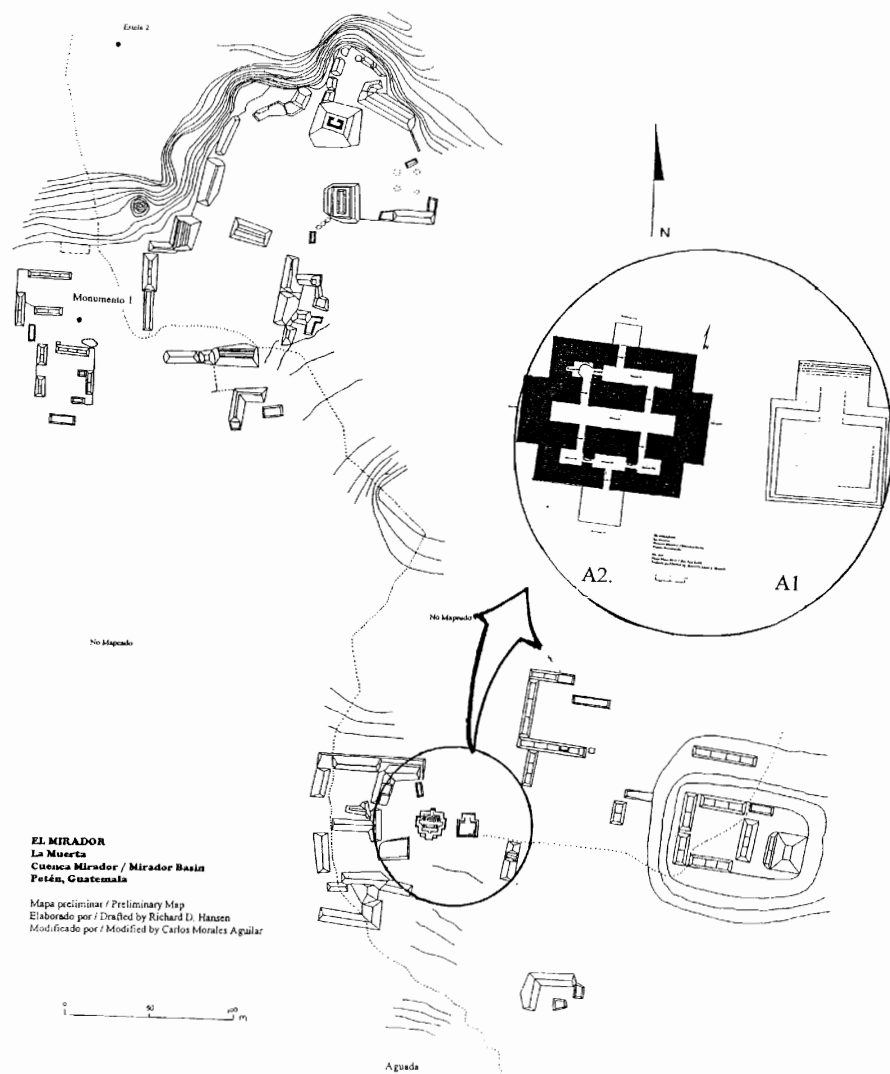
Nakbé during the Early Classic, a large pit was excavated into the base of Str. 30, a small mound near the Str. 27 pyramid, where a large cache of whole corn ears and squash was burned as an offering (Forsyth and Acevedo 1994).

Additional evidence indicates that people were returning to sites in the Mirador Basin during the Early Classic and Late Classic periods to bury or pay homage to the deceased. At La Muerta, a residential suburb on the southern side of El Mirador, an Early Classic funerary structure, Str. A-2 (Figure 2.10), was built with a series of carefully constructed tunnels that allowed generations of subsequent visitors access to the principal burial chambers (most of which were looted by the time they were discovered). The vicinity of this mortuary structure was the focus of later interest, as is evident from the abundance of Late Classic artifacts recovered from within the chambers. The practice of retaining ancestral remains within domiciles—both physically and through ritual practice—as a way of maintaining property ownership (see Gillespie 2002; McAnany 1995) could explain the effort it took to return the deceased to the Mirador Basin for internment, as found at La Muerta.

In addition, during the Late Classic, Str. A-1 was erected immediately adjacent to the Early Classic structure. The vaulted chamber at the building’s summit contained a number of finely crafted, life-size, modeled stucco heads that had apparently adorned the interior of the chamber, each with individual features and defining characteristics, including punctate eyes (Middle Formative figurine style) and downturned “Olmec” mouths. We interpret these heads to be visages of ancestors and the building a shrine for their veneration (Hansen et al. 2005).

At Tintal, a two-m-high structure was added at the northwestern corner of the base of the massive Formative triadic structure in the Puma Paw Complex during the Early Classic. The small addition contained a buried Formative stela, Stela 1, and a male human burial adorned with jade and shell mosaic ornaments, beads, ceramics, and what appears to be a belt with a row of human mandibles and several trophy heads (Hansen, Suyuc-Ley, and Balcarcel 2005). Inscriptions on some jade ornaments identify the individual as affiliated with the Kan (snake) polity, discussed later.

At Nakbé during this same time, the summit of Str. 1 was the focus of much ritual activity. A number of incense burners were strewn across the summit of the structure long after the building had fallen into ruins. In an account written during the entradas of 1695, Avendaño y Loyola described a similar activity while traveling on the “Camino Real” along the western fringes of the Mirador Basin. Avendaño y Loyola (1987:27) noted that the exceptionally high structures observed by the Spanish were so large that “it seemed impossible that that work could have been done by hand, unless it was with the aid of the devil,” and that such structures were often the home of “idols” that had been placed on the summits or in chambers.



2.10 Portion of Map at La Muerta, Indicating Early Classic Str. A-2, El Mirador, Guatemala. Map by R. D. Hansen and C. Morales.

The archaeological examples mentioned previously indicate that the Maya continued to visit the abandoned and decaying buildings in the centuries following the Formative abandonment. Although our interpretation of these activities is admittedly biased by our sampling strategy (often focused on large “public” buildings, recognizable architectural groups, and residential compounds) and our test-

ing has been limited with respect to the vast archaeological record, a pattern is discernible. To date, testing has found no significant Protoclassic (only one instance of a perishable structure) or Early Classic residential architecture and only scant artifact deposits that might suggest ephemeral occupation during these centuries. Rather, the data, which consist primarily of the remains produced by the burning and leaving of offerings on public buildings after they had fallen into disrepair, are suggestive of the itinerant passage of people, perhaps religious pilgrims. In addition, Early Classic mortuary structures were placed in strategic locations on elevated hills (e.g., La Muerta Str. A-2) overlooking the Formative ruins, but the lack of known residential Early Classic architecture in these contexts suggests the possibility that these mortuary events may have been conducted by groups from more distant places. Again, it is noteworthy that a substantial Early Classic and Late Classic occupation has been recently identified at Naachtún, possibly the ancient site of Masal (Kathryn Reese-Taylor, personal communication 2003). Notably missing from our archaeological data for this period is evidence of more elaborate ritual activities, as discussed later in this chapter.

LATE CLASSIC RESETTLEMENT

Following five centuries of occupational hiatus and limited human presence, Late Classic settlers began to return to the Mirador Basin. These modest Late Classic settlements would eventually spread throughout the basin and occupy nearly every site documented to date.⁴ The settlement data suggest that the Late Classic population was much more modest in size than the Formative predecessors, as indicated by the reduced size and quantity and sparser distribution of architecture (Hansen 1996). No stone stelae or monuments were erected within the major sites of the basin (excluding Naachtún) commemorating Late Classic rulers from the area (Hansen 1996), indicating perhaps reduced political clout. Texts on Late Classic ceramics, however, indicate names, titles, and adjectives for a number of *ajaw* figures in the region. In many cases, Late Classic housemounds were dispersed throughout the ruins of the Formative centers and were often placed directly on earlier Formative residence structures (e.g., Str. 200 at Nakbé). Late Classic demographic densities clearly did not rival the levels seen in the Late Formative.

The timing and nature of this resettlement are suggested by the resumption of agricultural activity, as indicated by pollen data extracted from the Zacatal reservoir (*aguada*) near Nakbé and the permanent lakes of Chuntuqui, Puerto Arturo, and Puxbán along the western edge of the basin (Wahl 2000; Wahl and Schreiner 2002; Wahl, Schreiner, and Byrne 2000, 2001). These pollen samples indicate that the tropical forest had reestablished itself during the Early Classic, but by A.D. 500–650 the Late Classic Maya were initiating the process of clearing areas near

the marshes and beginning agricultural production again, primarily in the form of maize. Archaeological evidence suggests a resumption of planting on the ancient agricultural terraces at Nakbé, as indicated by the presence of Late Classic residential constructions near the Formative terraces (Hansen et al. 2002). At Nakbé, these farmers located many of their residences adjacent to the constructed Formative fields in much the same way as their predecessors and thus built over many former Formative houses.

In building their residences, the Late Classic settlers at Nakbé also found the Formative stone quarries useful for extracting materials to fit their building needs. For example, excavations of quarries have revealed evidence that the Maya were cutting beveled triangular vault stones (unique to Late Classic architecture) from Formative quarries (Woods and Titmus 1996). The Late Classic inhabitants at Nakbé were also probably responsible for the removal of portions of the façades of the Middle Formative structures 49, 51, and 32, where the majority of the massive blocks forming the stairways were extracted at this time.⁵ Only the lower portions of the Formative stairs, apparently buried by debris and rubble, were left intact. On the opposite side of the E-Group plaza, at the base of the western side of Str. 47 (see Figure 2.5), Late Classic residences were built by excavating and removing rubble and stones from the base of the Formative pyramid to accommodate a single nonvaulted room.

At El Mirador, Late Classic residents also robbed cut stones from Formative buildings, as evident in the Danta Complex where massive cut-stone blocks were extracted from Str. 2A6-9, leaving impressions of their edges in the Formative stucco floors and stairways (Howell 1989). In the Tigre Complex, on the southwest exterior wall of Str. 34, stones were removed down to the original floor surface in similar fashion (Hansen 1990a).

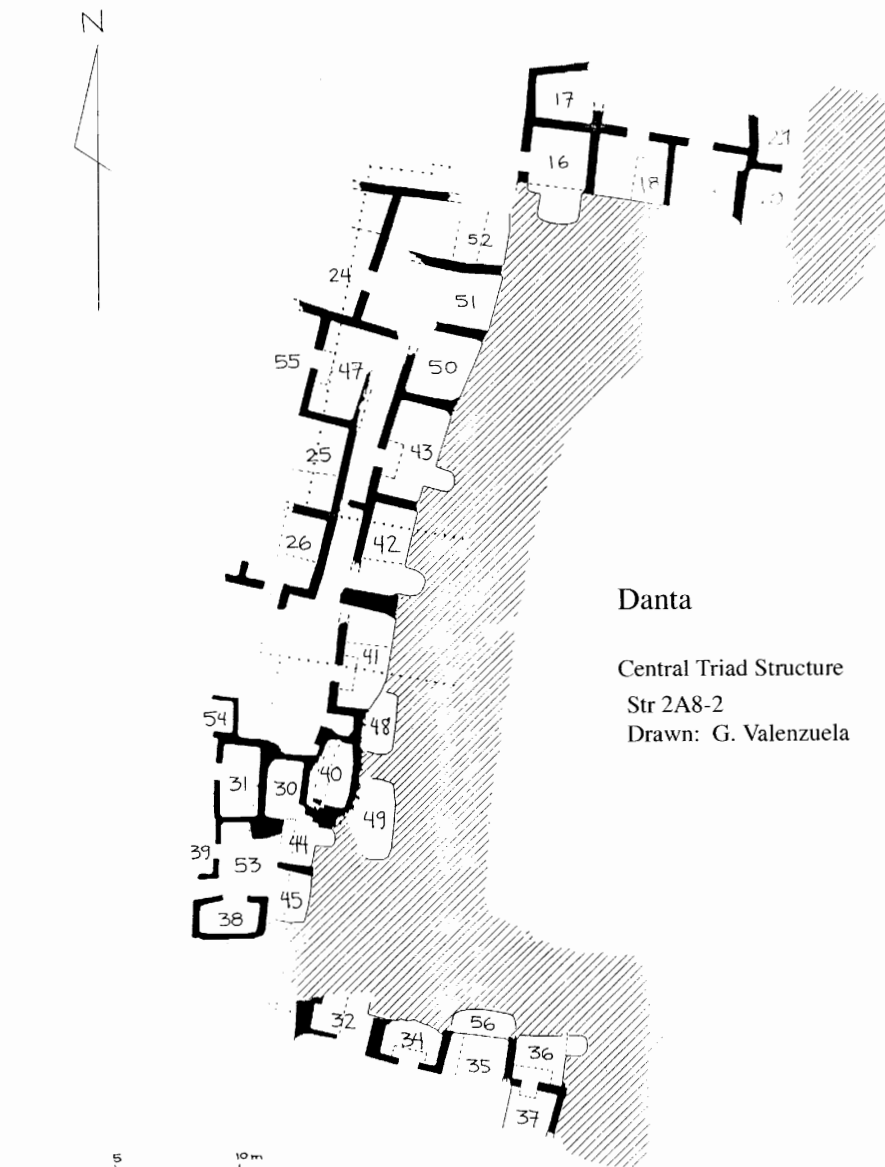
While Late Classic settlers were reoccupying a landscape replete with abundant monumental architecture, they responded to it in two basic ways: they largely ignored much of that architecture in practical terms, yet they clearly venerated some buildings by engaging in rituals on them and, in a few instances, conducting additional minor constructions or maintenance. In contrast to practices at other lowland Maya sites where large Formative public architecture was regularly encapsulated by later Classic constructions (e.g., Str. E Sub-7 at Uaxactún [Ricketson and Ricketson 1937] and the North Acropolis at Tikal [Coe 1990]), that practice has not been evident in the Mirador Basin, with the exception of residential architecture. Rather, Late Classic settlers moved in among the massive ruins with little apparent effort and reconfigured the earlier monumental architecture to fit their needs (minor exceptions are discussed earlier and later). Late Classic residential units at El Mirador and Nakbé were nestled around Formative plazas and pyramids, acropolis groups, and palaces but often left the public spaces of the bygone era



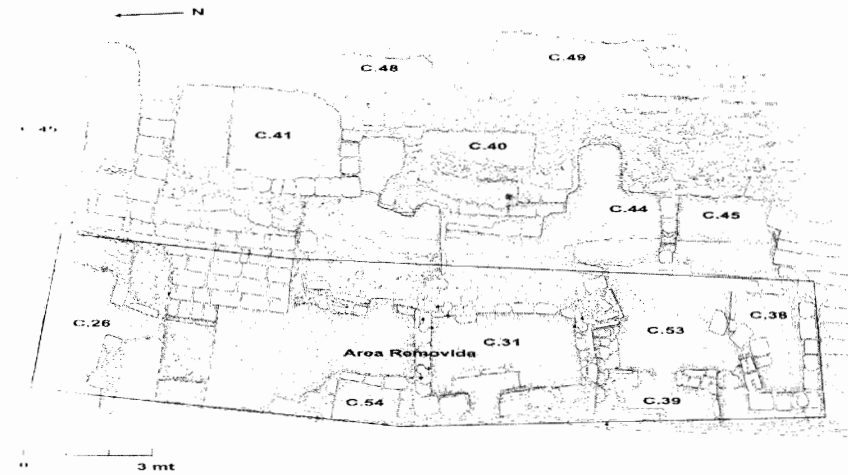
Figure 2.11 Central Structure of Summit Triad Group on Danta Pyramid with Terminal Late Classic Residences Attached to Base of Structure. Photo by C. D. Bieber.

unencumbered with their constructions. These Late Classic residential buildings framed their small central plazas in typical quadrilateral or triliteral fashion yet seemed to ignore the grand buildings and public spaces from earlier periods, with the exception of occasional stone robbing.

An exception seems to be the Late Classic settlement around the Danta Pyramid at El Mirador. A modest Terminal Late Classic village was located around three sides of the pyramid with a small neighborhood built on the second and third platforms of this massive structure, where apartment-like clusters of rooms were nestled adjacent to the Formative walls of the central dominant structure of the triadic group at the summit (Figure 2.11). The occupants were residing on debris and detritus of the Formative structure, which had accumulated to a depth of two to three m. The cluster of residences surrounding the upper primary building (Figure 2.12) indicates that they actually quarried into the Formative structure and placed storage chambers in the Formative fill (Figure 2.13). Figurines, manos, metates, bark beaters, chunks of unworked jade, whistles, drums, and ocarina fragments associated with what appears to be sweatbath constructions (Room 17 on the north side of Str. 2A8-2) tend to support the notion of a residential compound that possibly could have accommodated pilgrims. Further, the presence of a narrow Late Classic causeway connecting the larger Late Classic residential compounds located several hundred meters east of the Danta Pyramid to the Late



2.12 Plan of Terminal Late Classic Residences Surrounding Base of Central Triad Structure of Danta. Drawing by G. Valenzuela.



2.13 Detailed Plan of Terminal Late Classic Residences at Southwest Base of the Central Structure of Danta. Note the Massive Blocks of the Formative Stairway Near the Center of the Drawing. Drawing by G. Valenzuela, E. Lopez, and P. Morales.

Classic groups on its second platform suggests that its builders believed the large building was important.

The largest and most impressive Late Classic architectural unit at Nakbé is the Codex Group, a rambling arrangement of residential compounds and plazas situated on the ridge slope northwest of the main site center and built partially beside the major Formative causeway that links Nakbé to El Mirador (see Figures 2.4 and 2.5). This architectural group derives its name from “codex-style” pottery (discussed later) and has been recognized as the production center for this unique style of Maya pottery. This important Late Classic community was home to skilled artists, scribes, and at least four epigraphically mentioned individuals with *ajaw* titles (Guenther 2002). Dozens of looters’ trenches now scar the group of structures and attest to the quantity of illegal excavations required to obtain this rare pottery (Hansen 1997; Hansen, Bishop, and Fahsen 1991). The placement of several residential compounds on the Formative causeway, as well as a large quarry excavated into it, suggests that the Late Classic Maya did not perceive of the great ancient roadway in the same way their predecessors did—as a regal thoroughfare linking the two primary centers.

Although the Formative causeway could have served as the principal thoroughfare between the Late Classic settlements at the two sites (given that it is the straightest route between them and provided elevated transit across the swampy *bajos*), it is clear that during the Late Classic it did not function as it had in previous

eras. In addition to quarries, several residential groups were constructed on the elevated causeway, requiring travelers to detour entirely off the causeway and into the surrounding terrain to continue on the route. Similar treatment of other Formative causeways is evident at Nakbé, such as the Cascabel and Palma causeways (see Figure 2.5), which were also interrupted by Late Classic residences and quarries. It is also apparent that no maintenance seems to have been enacted on the original causeways. The causeways were probably not functional during the Classic, and the Late Classic Maya of the Mirador Basin were likely living in a social, political, and economic environment distinct from that of their predecessors.

The apparent Late Classic indifference toward some Formative constructions aside, other data suggest that the Classic Maya were fully cognizant of the importance and meanings of certain Formative features. The most obvious example is the Late Classic Maya treatment of Formative stelae and monuments. Formative stone monuments, often in a broken or fragmented state, were placed among the ruins in obvious ritual contexts. In some cases, such as El Chiquero, the context suggests the monument may have been imported from elsewhere, a typical Late Classic behavior (discussed later). El Chiquero is a modest and isolated Late Classic settlement to the south of El Mirador with no obvious Formative architecture that would warrant a stela. Yet the site produced a small Late Formative monument depicting the lower portion of a king dressed in royal regalia and an associated text box (Hansen 2001:63).

At Nakbé, some monuments appear to have been moved for effect. For example, Formative Stela 1, Monument 2, and Monument 3 were placed on or near a small, 1.5-m-high platform (Str. 52) of Late Classic construction within the plaza of the Middle Formative E-Group complex. As mentioned, this architectural group does not appear to have been altered during the Late Formative and had lain virtually undisturbed for over a millennium. Yet it was a place chosen for Late Classic ritual activity. Monuments 2 and 3, fragments from larger monuments believed to date to the late Middle Formative, had been placed on the low platform with an associated lidded cache vessel below them (Hansen 2001:56). Stela 1, a very large stela portraying two Formative kings, either depicting a historic meeting or possibly impersonating the Hero Twins of the Popol Vuh, had been erected intact on the eastern side of Str. 52 and was probably originally associated with the massive flat altar stone placed directly in front of the adjacent Str. 51 in the Middle Formative. These monuments were associated with extensive ceramic middens, burning, and possible bloodletting rituals, as suggested by the presence of several obsidian prismatic blades directly located at the base of the monuments in an ash-covered and burned area on the floor. The entire summit of the low platform was littered with a dense deposit (up to eighty cm thick) of Late Classic ceramics (Figure 2.14), consisting primarily of a restricted orifice vessel known as Chinja



Figure 2.14 Concentration of Sherds in Situ on Str. 52, Indicating Possible Feasting Activity Near Monument 2, Nakbé. Photo by R. D. Hansen.

Impressed (Figure 2.15) but also with plates, bowls, and drums. The restricted-neck Chinja Impressed ceramics are commonly interpreted as vessels for liquid storage, liquid transportation, or both.

The ethnographic record might suggest an interpretation of this archaeological deposit. Observing the Yucatec Maya, Bishop Diego de Landa noted that the first day of Pop (the first month for the Yucatec Maya) "was a very solemn festival among them, as it was universal and all took part in it and so the whole town jointly made the feast to all the idols" (Tozzer 1941:152–153). He stated that on the Yucatec Maya New Year's Day, the men gathered and burned incense and drank copious quantities of indigenous wine:

[A]ll having come together with the presents of food and drinks, which they had brought, and also a great quantity of wine, which they had made, the priest purified the temple seating himself in the middle of the court, clothed like a pontiff, having near him a brazier and the little boards with incense. The Chacs [four chosen officials] seated themselves at the four corners and stretched from one to the other a new cord, within which were to enter all those who had fasted. . . . [T]he Chacs kindled the new fire, and lighted the brazier . . . and burned incense to the idol with new fire and the priest began to throw this incense into it, and all came in their turn, beginning with the lords, to receive incense from the hands of the priest . . . and they threw it into the brazier little by little waiting until it had finished burning. After this perfuming, they all ate the gifts and presents and the wine went round till they became very drunk. (Tozzer 1941:152–153)

This account documents observed Maya behavior at a festival time that included veneration of an idol (or monument or building), as well as the burning of offerings and drinking. The thick deposits of Chinja Impressed sherds associated with Stela 1 could be interpreted to represent such activity, and the liquid involved with the shattered vessels may have been pulque, *balché*, or perhaps another drink traditionally associated with ritual feasting activity, such as *cacaw*.

A similar ceramic deposit was found at the site of Pedernal, located on the southern side of El Mirador near the causeway to Nakbé. On top of an eight-m-high platform at this site, six Formative monuments were arranged at the base of a three-m-high structure set back on the eastern edge of the platform. Dense Late Classic ceramic deposits covered the entire summit of the building and platform. As with Nakbé, the majority of ceramics consisted of Chinja Impressed restricted-neck vessels, drums, and bowls, suggesting that drinking and ritual played an important role in the festivities associated with these early monuments.

This pattern repeats itself at Tintal, where a Middle to Late Formative monument had been placed on a low platform and a dense concentration of Late Classic ceramics and an ash lens were subsequently deposited around it. These ceramics,

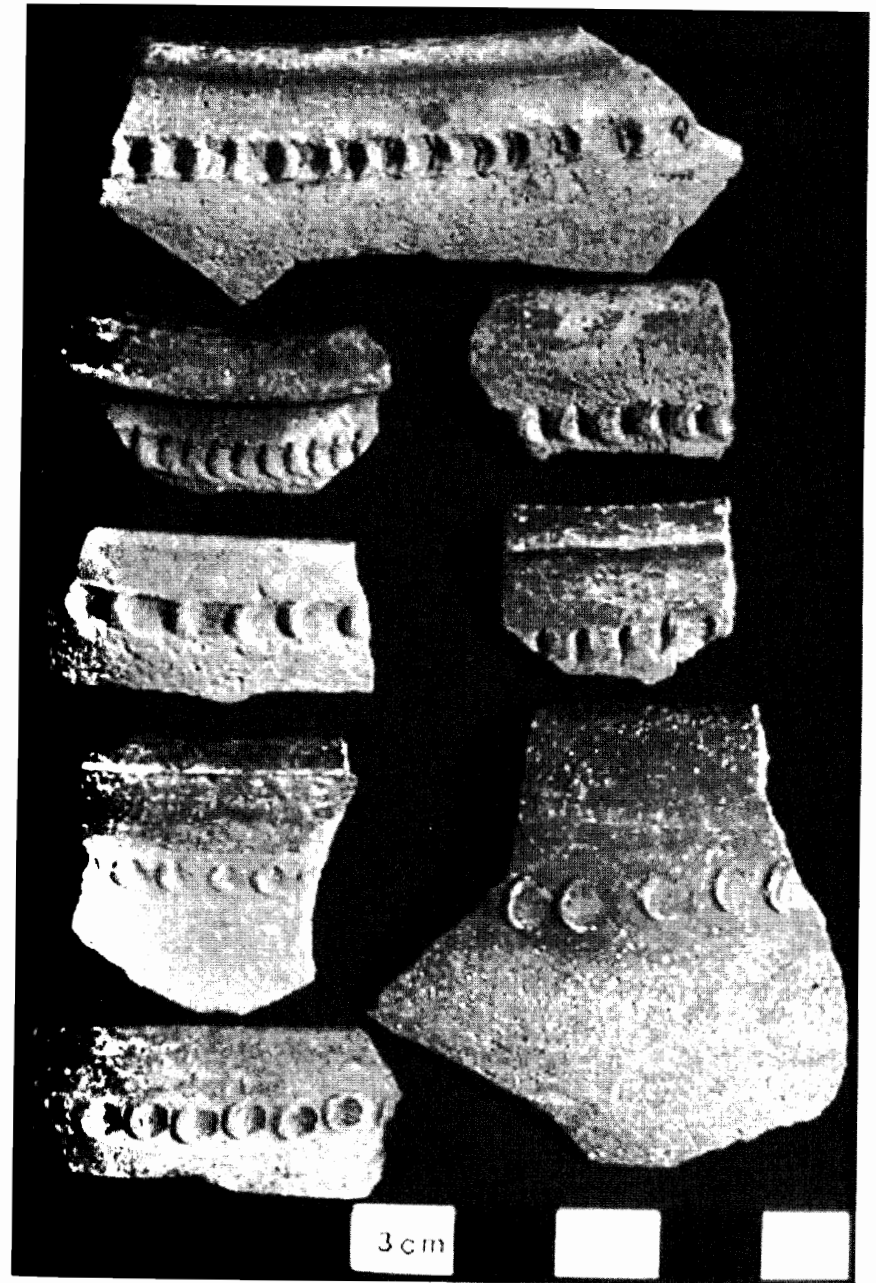


FIGURE 2.15 Variation of Late Classic Restricted Neck Vessels (Chinja Impressed), Which Dominate the Ritual Deposits. These Vessels Are Believed to Have Contained Liquids. Photo by R. D. Hansen

however, consisted primarily of bowls and plates (for food) and had fewer Chinja Impressed sherds than were found at other sites. Fragments of several large spiked *incensarios* suggest that ritual incense burning was also an important component of the activities venerating this monument.

The precinct of the Middle Formative E-Group at Nakbé came into play in another way during the Late Classic. As mentioned, the Nakbé ballcourt was initially constructed during the Middle Formative just south of the E-Group. The ballcourt was remodeled and utilized during the Late Formative. No ballcourts, however, were observed in association with any of the Late Classic architectural groups. Yet a Late Classic codex-style vase from Nakbé has a text around the rim identifying the owner of the vessel as an *Itz'aat* (sage) and a *pitzil* (ballplayer) (Hansen, Bishop, and Fahsen 1991). The lack of known Late Classic ballcourts in the Mirador Basin proved puzzling until, during archaeological excavations in the East Group ballcourt, archaeologist Juan Luis Velásquez (1999) discovered that a low stone veneer, less than one course high, had been added as a minor renovation during the Late Classic period. Although this alteration amounted to little more than a cleaning and a thin application of lime plaster to the floor surface, it provided the possibility that the elite scribes and artists we have identified at Late Classic Nakbé may have been playing ball in one of the most ancient ballcourts in the Maya world.

Evidence of occupation into the Terminal Classic period has been found at only two sites: a Terminal Classic apartment-type complex built atop Danta Pyramid and a fortified hilltop site east of Nakbé. These Terminal Classic residents returned to abandoned Late Classic structures to carry out ritual activities. In the Danta Complex at El Mirador, for example, three Terminal Classic burials were recovered from the crest of a collapsed Late Classic-period mound (Str. 2A8-5), placed there after the Late Classic residential structure had been abandoned and left to fall into ruin. The residential building apparently held sufficient importance in the minds of the living that they retained knowledge of its location and returned there to bury the deceased. This behavior is perhaps similar to that described by Susan Gillespie (2002) in which a small corporate group retains possession not only of property but also of the ancestral spirit by curating the dead in the ancestral place. Such activity would require that the corporate group, in this case a "house" (to infer the extension of a contemporary social norm into the past), maintain a memory of an ancestral place through time.

Late Classic occupation continued into the first decades of the ninth century, at which time construction appears to have halted. Pollen analysis from Zacatal and the permanent lakes on the western edge of the basin has revealed that by A.D. 850, agricultural production had ceased (Wahl 2000; Wahl and Schreiner 2002; Wahl, Schreiner, and Byrne 2000, 2001), and the jungle again began to reclaim the sites of the Mirador Basin.

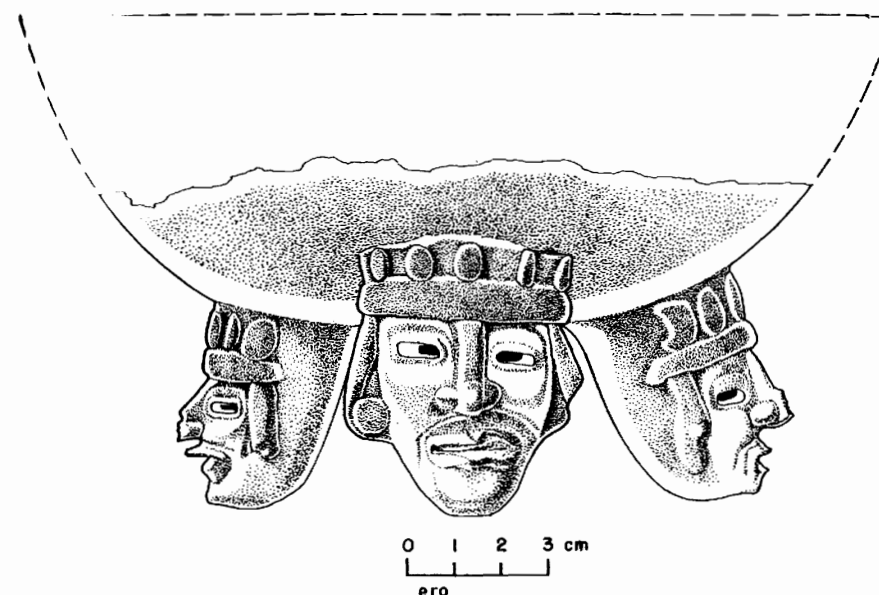


Figure 2.16 Postclassic-Period Vessel Placed as an Offering in a Late Classic Burial under Upper Chamber Floor of Str. 104, Codex Group, Nakbé. Later Meddling Had Disturbed the Bones and Artifacts of the Previously Deceased, But Artifacts (e.g., Ceramics) Appear to Have Been Returned. Drawing by Edgar R. Ortega.

Even following this agricultural abandonment, some people continued to frequent the area. At Nakbé, a Postclassic ceramic vessel was found placed as a cache (Figure 2.16) into a Late Classic burial under the upper chamber floor of the largest Late Classic structure (Str. 104, eight m high) in the Codex Group. Other evidence of later period activity was found at the summits of the two tall pyramids at El Mirador and Nakbé: Tigre and Str. 1, respectively (Hansen 1990a, 1992). At Nakbé the summit of Str. 1 was littered with at least six spiked *incensarios* (Figure 2.17), which contained burned copal residues. Near the summit of the Tigre Pyramid at El Mirador, Postclassic figurine fragments were recovered on the surface, in addition to fragments of spiked incense burners (Hansen 1990a). These few Postclassic artifacts represent the last vestiges of Maya activity documented thus far in the Mirador Basin.

Similar ritual activity on or around abandoned structures is recounted from the Historic period and in fact can be observed today. For example, Bishop de Landa noted that the Yucatec Maya "held Cozumel and the well of Chichén Itzá in the same veneration as we have for pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Rome, and so they used to go to visit these places and to offer presents, especially to Cozumel,



2.17 *Incensarios* That Covered the Summit of Str. 1 at Nakbé. Photo by R. D. Hansen.

as we do to holy places, and if they did not go themselves, they always sent their offerings, and those who went there were in the habit of entering the abandoned temples also, as they passed by them, to offer prayers there and to burn copal" (quoted in Tozzer 1941:109–110).

A fascinating observation of more contemporary rituals (mid-1940s) conducted on ancient pyramids was recorded by Oakes (1951) in the Mam village of Todos Santos Cuchumatán, Guatemala. The main ruinous pyramid at the site, known as Cumanchum, was the focus of a variety of ritual customs, including leaving the body of a deceased *chimán* (shaman) with paraphernalia on the pyramid (Oakes 1951:51), burning copal, and leaving other offerings by the *chimán* on the pyramid on behalf of a sick person and for other auspicious events (Oakes 1951:152). Such offerings could include the Caja Real—a box of objects belonging to the "Ancient Ones"—or a cross during certain rituals (Oakes 1951:67, 230, 245).

The observant student will note similar modern-day activities at Iximché' and at the summit of the remaining main pyramid at Izamal. At Iximché', Hansen has noted that offerings consist of blood (chicken) sacrifices, flowers, candles, *aguardiente*, and pine boughs and are made at the base of an unexcavated pyramid off the main plaza and at the edge of the plateau, with rituals carried out at three altars or pyres built along the base of the structure. Hansen has also observed offerings consisting of candles, flowers, coins, and postcards placed in a hidden niche in a small pit on the summit of the dominant pyramid at Izamal, Yucatán, on the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe in December.



2.18 Ritual Arrangement for Maya Ceremony Conducted at El Mirador on February 18, 2006. Note Strategic Placement of Candles, Fruits, Incense Burners, Textiles, Flowers, and Bundles. Photo by R. D. Hansen.

In February 2006, a group of Kaqchikel Maya priests and priestesses conducted a major ceremony in the center of the plaza of the monumental architectural complex (an "E-Group") of Leon at El Mirador. They selected the location after examining the site for an entire day and relying on their feelings and spiritual awareness. Ritual activity included the burning of numerous candles within a ritual parameter of twenty candles, burning of incense, and the use of an *incensario*, a variety of fruits, textiles, flowers, and "bundles"—all strategically placed and coordinated with hours of fasting, prayers, dance, cleansing and ritual purification rites, and petitions to the ancestors (Figure 2.18).

EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

Aide from the archaeological record and the utility of using ethnographic information to help interpret that record, the ancient Maya also provided poignant insights into how they perceived their ancestral landscape. Rich epigraphic accounts of ritual behavior in Maya architecture have been sufficiently deciphered to render the

first attempts to investigate an emic account of how the Maya perceived their own ritual and social space (Stuart 1998b). Stuart (1998b:374) noted, for example, that while many texts do record royal political history and activities, most texts "record or commemorate the ownership or manufacture of venerated things," including construction of architecture, fire-entering and fire-drilling rites, the burning of incense or "house censuring," tomb renewal ceremonies, tribute lists, and structure utilization and function information.

The data indicating Late Classic and Postclassic pilgrimages and ritual activity in the Mirador Basin, described earlier, do not fully explain why the sites continued to be so important to later generations of Maya. Recent epigraphic studies, however, support the idea that the ruined centers of the Mirador Basin were venerated ruins that held a ritual aura about them long into the Classic period. Unfortunately, few inscriptions have been recovered from Late Formative contexts; and, of these, many were effaced anciently, are still not deciphered, or have since eroded beyond legibility (see Hansen 1991). In addition, the Late Classic inhabitants of the known majority of the basin eschewed monumental texts (with the exception of perhaps Naachtún and Uxul), preferring to venerate the fragments of Formative monuments. While many hundreds of Late Classic ceramic vessels with hieroglyphic texts are known from the basin, only a handful have been recovered archaeologically. The result is that the Mirador Basin, despite the number of enormous sites with abundant monumental architecture, is one of the least understood in terms of epigraphic studies. Nevertheless, recent work is beginning to find likely references to the great cities of the Mirador Basin in the Classic-period texts of Calakmul, Tikal, Palenque, Copán, and a host of other sites.

It has been known for some time that during the Classic period the Mirador Basin was probably controlled politically and culturally by the great capital city of Calakmul, Campeche. The snake emblem glyph that identifies the rulers and perhaps elite citizens of this kingdom has been found on numerous codex-style ceramics from the basin (Figure 2.19; Coe 1978; Marcus 1976; Martin 1997). Kan, meaning "serpent," was the ancient name and the title associated with "Snake Kings," or *kan ajaw*. The title was adopted during the Classic period by the rulers of Dzibanché (Quintana Roo) and, later, Calakmul. Recent epigraphic work, however, suggests that the Classic-period Snake Kings appropriated their royal title and the name of their kingdom from the ancient polity that ruled the Mirador Basin in the Late Formative (Guenter 2001a, in press a). While the kings of Calakmul sported the snake emblem glyph during the Late Classic, this was not the case during the Early Classic, when the city's kings bore a very different emblem glyph (Simon Martin, personal communication 2002). The fact that the Mirador Basin was home to the original Snake Kingdom is suggested by the fact that the earliest examples of the snake emblem glyph, dating to the Late Formative and Early Classic periods, have

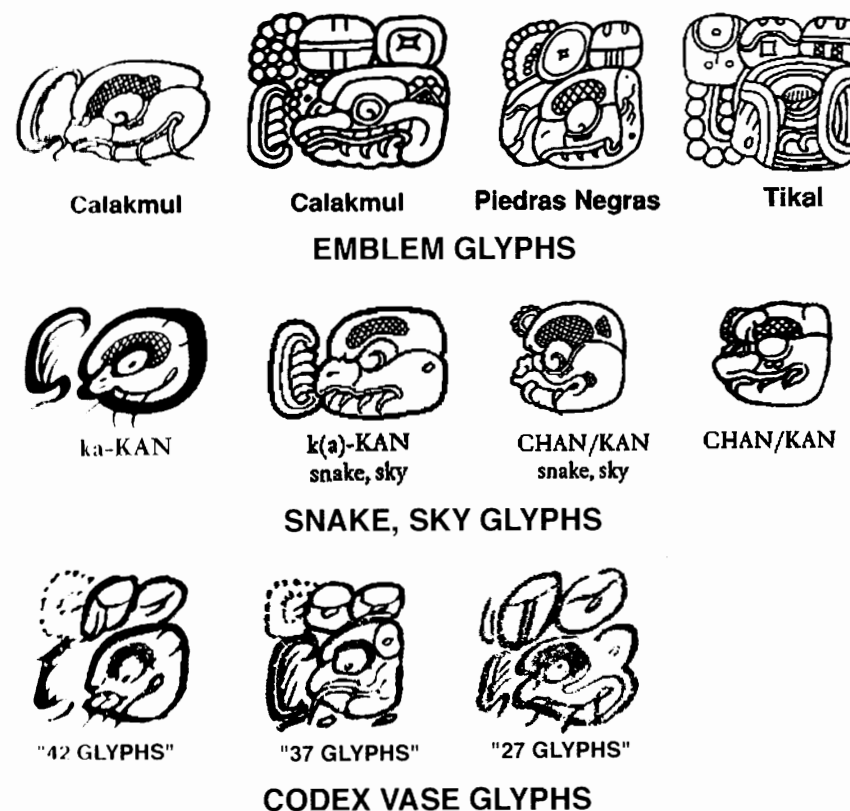


Figure 2.19 Kan Glyphs from Late Classic Vessels (after Guenter 2001b). Emblem glyphs by Simon Martin (left) and John Montgomery; Snake, Sky glyphs by John Montgomery (right) and Michael Coe; Codex Vase glyphs by MLC (left) and The November Collection.

been recovered from the Mirador Basin sites of Tintal, Nakké, and El Mirador (Figure 2.20). Interestingly, a hieroglyphic block that once formed part of a longer text at Calakmul records that an unknown event took place *ti Kan ch'een*, or "at the Snake city." This suggests that perhaps members of Calakmul's royalty were carrying out rituals among the site they revered as the Kan capital, perhaps even the ruined pyramids of Nakké, El Mirador, and other sites of the Mirador Basin. It must be noted, however, that one Late Classic codex-style vase joins the two toponyms *Kana'* (Snake City) and *Oxte'tuun* (Three Stones), the latter the toponym of Calakmul itself (Simon Martin, personal communication 2002). This may indicate that during the Late Classic, lords of Calakmul appropriated unto themselves the name of the "Snake City," reminiscent of the way Byzantium/Constantinople was also known as "New Rome."



2.20 Kan Glyph on a Large Bedrock Carving (Protoclassic–Early Classic) Excavated by Edgar Suyuc at La Muerta, El Mirador, Guatemala. Photo by R. D. Hansen.

It is likely no coincidence that the only site apart from those in the southern Mirador Basin (where codex-style vessels and sherds have been found) is Calakmul, where examples have been recovered in royal tombs. These vases, with their heavy concentration of mythological scenes, have been linked to pilgrimage visits to Mirador Basin sites (Reents-Budet et al. 2000), and it seems likely that they were considered specially inspired portraits of ancient myths and legends because of the place in which they had been created. It is noteworthy that while the codex vessels at Calakmul originated in Nakbé, no vessels yet identified at Nakbé came from Calakmul. Additionally, it may also be significant that the major title of lords of the Mirador Basin, and even kings of Calakmul, was *Chatan Winik*, a title carried by individuals and gods on codex-style vases (Figure 2.21).

While there is much archaeological evidence of pilgrimage and reoccupation of Mirador Basin sites such as Nakbé in the Late Classic, there is increasing epigraphic evidence for the importance of El Mirador as well. In recent reexaminations of Early Classic texts referring to the Late Formative and Early Classic periods, the importance of a single site to the foundation of dynasties from Tikal to Copán to Yaxchilán has been noted (Grube and Martin 2001; Guenter 2001b). The



2.21 *Chatan Winik* Glyph as a Title on Ceramics from Mirador Basin and Calakmul.

site has been nicknamed the *Chi*-Throne site, as the specific glyph has yet to be deciphered phonetically. This glyph is connected with the Snake Kingdom on the Hieroglyphic Stairway of Palenque and on three looted codex-style vessels. In fact, on the codex-style vases, it is connected with the accession of an early Snake King in such a way as to suggest that it was the capital city of the Snake Kingdom. The dynastic founders of Yaxchilán and Tikal are specifically associated with this site. At Copán, the site is linked to a lord nicknamed “Foliated Ajaw,” who performed a period ending ritual at this site in A.D. 159 before probably officially founding Copán as a royal center one year later, in A.D. 160, at the approximate time when the Mirador Basin was being abandoned at the end of the Formative. These epigraphic considerations make it likely that the *Chi*-Throne site is one of the great sites of the Mirador Basin, possibly El Mirador itself (Guenter 2001b).

On Tikal Stela 31 the *Chi*-Throne site is associated with another toponym, the enigmatic “Moon-Zero Bird” glyph once thought to be the name of an early Tikal king (Figure 2.22). By context, it is likely that these two places must be found at the same site. On Tikal Stela 31, the *Chi*-Throne–Moon-Zero Bird site is the location where the earliest recorded event took place. Only the second half of this passage has been preserved atop Stela 31, the first half having been destroyed when the lower half of the stela was broken and burned in antiquity. A comparison of this passage with later sections of Stela 31 suggests that this event may have been the accession of Tikal’s dynastic founder, Yax Ehb’ Xook (Guenter, in prep). This event took place sometime around the end of the first century A.D. (Martin and Grube 2000), and if this interpretation of Stela 31 and the *Chi*-Throne glyph holds true, it may have taken place at one of the large architectural complexes in El Mirador. While Yax Ehb’ Xook ruled at the end of the Late Formative, when El Mirador was still a functioning center, there are suggestions that similar royal accessions continued to occur at this same location for at least several centuries thereafter. The Moon-Zero Bird location is also found on Tikal’s Altar 13 (Figure 2.22; see Lathen 1987), which was associated with Stela 29, the earliest Long Count–dated



2.22 The “Moon-Zero Bird” Hieroglyph: (a) Tikal Altar 13, (b) Tikal Stela 31, and (c) Leiden Plaque.

monument in the Maya lowlands (A.D. 292). Stela 29 likely marks the accession of a new ruler (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982), and the Moon-Zero Bird mentioned on Altar 13 may indicate that this early and anonymous king of Tikal acceded at El Mirador, at this time mostly abandoned and well under way to being engulfed by jungle growth.

The famous Leiden Plaque provides the third and most convincing example of a royal accession at the Moon-Zero Bird place (Figure 2.22). The text on the reverse of the plaque records the “seating” of a lord named Chanal Chak Chapat at the Moon-Zero Bird location in A.D. 320. It was at this approximate time as well that Yaxchilán’s founder, Yopaat B’alam I, became king. On Yaxchilán Lintel 21 this lord is specifically titled a *yajawte’* of the *Chi*-Throne site. These data suggest that at the beginning of the Classic period, many kings may have set out to establish their legitimacy by staging their accession rituals in the hallowed and revered but abandoned cities of the Mirador Basin.

While the *Chi*-Throne site faded in importance as the Classic period continued, there are indications of reoccupation of the *Chi*-Throne place during some time frames in the Late Classic. The Hieroglyphic Stairway at Palenque records an attack on this Chiapas center in the seventh century A.D. by a lord from the Calakmul polity who is said to have been a *yajawte’*, a title with apparent military connotations (Alfonso Lacadena, personal communication 2002), from the *Chi*-Stone Throne site. Also in the seventh century, the sculptor of Arroyo de Piedra Stela 1 titled himself an *ajaw* of the *Chi*-Stone Throne site, providing further support for the view that in the Late Classic, the great sites of the Mirador Basin were associated with the arts. It may be that the ancient Maya believed their arts were somehow enhanced by being created or taught beneath the towering, mysterious reminders of the Formative glory of the Mirador Basin. Certainly, some of the masterpieces of Classic Maya ceramic art were produced in the workshops of Nakbé and other sites in the basin, such as Porvenir (Hansen, Bishop, and Fahsen 1991).

CONCLUSIONS

A review of the extent and nature of abandoned sites, buildings, and monuments in the Mirador Basin shows varied but patterned behavior by later Maya occupants of Formative sites, with activities ranging from stone robbing and quarrying to outright veneration and pilgrimage. Epigraphic and ethnographic data provide insights into the nature of ruins, which served as a link between the historical past and subsequent rulers in the Maya lowlands. The archaeological, ethnological, and epigraphic data are beginning to elucidate ancient conceptual images and associated ritual and cultural activities that occurred in the Mirador Basin. Combined, these three approaches hold the promise of enhancing our ability not only to interpret the archaeological record but also to direct future research in that arena. For example, without the insights provided by recent epigraphic interpretations, one might never have realized the need to seek to archaeologically identify such places as the Moon-Zero Bird place or the *Chi*-Throne site.

The constructed world of the ancestors exerted a powerful influence over the subsequent spectrum of ancient Maya society, from the level of house group to that of polity. This interaction was centered on the intangible world of social relations, political power, and mythology; and it governed much of what the ancient Maya did and were. The recurrence of this patterned behavior through time implies a norm inherent in the ancient Maya cultural system that has persisted to modern times. This observable persistence and a methodological and theoretical approach may allow the student to more reliably enter the emic mind of the ancient Maya.

Just as El Mirador occupied the center of a network of ancient causeways that linked it to the sites that comprised an ancient kingdom (see Guenter 2001a, 2001b; Hansen 1998, 2001), at least some of the Maya of later epochs and distant lands looked back on the abandoned sites of the Mirador Basin as the spiritual and political heart of their world. If our interpretations of the epigraphic record are correct, rulers from kingdoms throughout the Maya world laid claim to direct ties to the dynastic history of the Snake, or Kan, polity. If indeed the Classic rulers from the warring factions of Tikal and Calakmul were claiming ancestral ties to the ancient kingdom—even to the point of returning there for important rites—the Mirador Basin and other core areas of the lowlands could have been a version of a Maya Tolan or *Pu* place (see also Freidel 2000; Schele 1998:495). Hansen has suggested that the mythological birthplace of political dynasties throughout Mesoamerica, ranging from the highlands of Mexico to the feuding Yucatecan polities of the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods, was also referred to as Tamoanchan, which is not a Nahuatl or a Mixe-Zoque word but rather a Maya word signifying “Land of Rain or Mist” (Coe 1994:61; Thompson 1950:115). It is curious that the Tamoanchan place is associated with the “first populations” (*primeros pobladores*)

(Sahagún 1955 I:14) or the "house of descent, place of birth . . . where gods and men originated" (Seler 1904:220). Further, the Tamoanchan place is clarified by Sahagún to have been in the province of Guatemala: "And from that port [the original landing at Panutla], they began to march along the edge of the sea, observing the white capped mountains and the volcanoes, until they arrived in the province of Guatemala; being guided by their priest who carried with him a symbol of their god, with whom he always counseled as to what they should do and they went to populate Tamoanchan, where they were a long time and they never failed to have their wise ones, or wizards called *amoxoaque*, which is to say, men who understand the ancient paintings" (Sahagún 1955 II:307; translation Richard D. Hansen).⁶

If Tamoanchan and Tollan can be reliably interrelated, and it is evident that these terms may have been widely applied to large centers by Postclassic times, particularly Tula and Chichén Itzá, they provided consistent references to ancestral homelands (see discussions in Jiménez Moreno 1966:59–60; Norman 1976:204–206). The definition for both places suggests a more humid tropical environment, perhaps associated with swamps. Tollan is defined as "The Place of the Reeds" or "Rushes" (Miller and Taube 1993:170), while Tamoanchan, as noted earlier, is "Land of Rain or Mist" (Thompson 1950:115) or "Place of the Misty Sky" (Miller and Taube 1993:160). Both of these references, while aptly suited to the swampy Gulf Coast region, could equally apply to the Mirador Basin, especially as it was known to have existed in Formative times with abundant marshes, swamps, and extraordinary cultural accomplishment by the Middle Formative and Late Formative periods.

The abandoned great ancient sites of the Mirador Basin provided the mythical backdrop for the potential formation of mythical places of origin. This is consistently supported by the association of nobility of Calakmul, Dzibanché, and other Maya sites to the Kan polity. If Martin's and Guenter's identification of the dynastic sequence on the codex-style dynasty pots is truly a retrospective history, then even names were appropriated by subsequent rulers, a practice well-known to exist throughout many sites in the Maya lowlands. Such perspectives allowed the "haunted" ruins and structures to form the ideological basis for the perpetuation of myth and ritual throughout the Maya world and perhaps even throughout Mesoamerica for generations.

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NOTES

1. A notable exception appears to be the site of Naachtún, located approximately twenty-four km northeast of El Mirador. Naachtún appears to have experienced continued monumental architectural construction through the Early Classic and into the Late Classic (Eduardo Reese-Taylor, personal communication 2003).

2. This architectural convention was first described at Uaxactún (Ricketson and Peterson 1937). It consists of two principal structures: an eastern structure forming an elongated north-south platform and to the west a larger pyramid, often with a stairway on each of its four sides.

3. We prefer to present radiocarbon dates as uncorrected, since those numbers will never change. Corrected dates will change as correction techniques are refined.

4. A notable exception appears to be the site of Xulnal in the southwest sector of the basin where our surface reconnaissance indicates abundant Middle and Late Formative architecture but none dating to the Late Classic.

5. It has not yet been determined how these stones were employed in Late Classic architecture, but it is possible they were broken up for lime making, since the reused stones have not been recovered in other archaeological excavations.

6. Y desde aquel Puerto comenzaron a caminar por la ribera de la mar, mirando las montañas nevadas y los volcanes, hasta que llegaron a la provincia de Guatemala; siendo guiados

por su sacerdote, que llevaba consigo a su dios de ellos, con quien siempre se aconsejaba para lo que habían de hacer y fueron a poblar en Tamoanchan, donde estuvieron mucho tiempo, y nunca dejaron de tener sus sabios, o adivinos que se decían *amoxoaque*, que quiere decir hombres entendidos en las pinturas antiguas.”



*The Transformation of
Abandoned Architecture at Piedras Negras*

Mark B. Child and Charles W. Golden

Anthropologists have long recognized that the built environment is culturally meaningful and can easily point out the ways in which architecture, and the spaces it defines, are dynamic constituents and loci of social memory, political discourse, religious community, and social life more generally (Geertz 1973; Lawrence and Low 1990; Rapoport 1990). Yet even when we focus on the dynamics of human movement through architectural spaces and places, archaeologists often speak in static, functional terms. Thus a building may be defined as a “royal palace” or a “sweatbath” and the structure atop a pyramid as a sacrosanct “temple.” A building may indeed have functioned as a palace, sweatbath, or temple during some part of its use-life, but we also know that structures were modified, abandoned, buried, and re-inhabited on a regular basis, often with concomitant changes in meaning and function.

Despite the depictions presented in the wonderful, yet static, reconstructions of artists such as Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1963) and others, Maya urban centers and rural households were never complete and never static. If we ignore the incomplete places, abandoned places, and reuse of space and place, we are sidestepping what