

# Fanning the Sacred Flame

## Mesoamerican Studies in Honor of H. B. Nicholson

*Edited by Matthew A. Buxt and Brian D. Dillon*

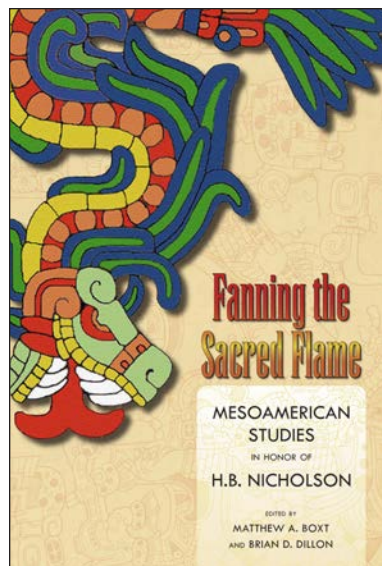
*Foreword by David Carrasco*

*Fanning the Sacred Flame: Mesoamerican Studies in Honor of H. B. Nicholson* contains twenty-two original papers in tribute to H. B. “Nick” Nicholson, a pioneer of Mesoamerican research. His intellectual legacy is recognized by Mesoamerican archaeologists, art historians, ethnohistorians, and ethnographers—students, colleagues, and friends who derived inspiration and encouragement from him throughout their own careers. Each chapter, which presents original research inspired by Nicholson, pays tribute to the teacher, writer, lecturer, friend, and mentor who became a legend within his own lifetime.

Covering all of Mesoamerica across all time periods, contributors include Patricia R. Anawalt, Alfredo López Austin, Anthony Aveni, Robert M. Carmack, David C. Grove, Richard D. Hansen, Leonardo López Luján, Kevin Terraciano, and more. Eloise Quiñones Keber provides a thorough biographical sketch, detailing Nicholson’s academic and professional journey.

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MESOAMERICAN  
STUDIES

IN HONOR OF

H. B. NICHOLSON

EDITED BY

MATTHEW A. BOXT

AND BRIAN DERVIN DILLON

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WITH A FOREWORD BY

DAVÍD CARRASCO AND

EDUARDO MATOS MOCTEZUMA

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*Reading the Sacred Maya Mesoamerican Studies in Honor of H. B. Nicholson*, edited by Matthew A. Rest and Brian Dorian Dillon, is a superb addition to our Mesoamerican Studies series. Its twenty-one essays shed the light on the expansive ways Henry Nicholson organized his willing teaching and thinking during his lifelong involvement in deciphering Mesoamerican societies. Readers will find insightful essays on Olmec, Maya, Mixtec, and Aztec cultures, as well as on ethnography, ethnohistory, and Mexico's national past. As though retracing Nicholson's scholarly footsteps, this book takes us to such places as La Venta, Teuchitlan, Tikal, Tikal, Tikal, Teotihuacan, and Chichén Itzá and touches such topics as the invention of writing, kidnapping, human sacrifice, caves, the Mixteca-Puebla tradition, flowerly trees, the Tzotz, K'iche' Maya, and Nahuatl deities, feathered serpents, the Tree Song, and Indian clothing. It is also significant that the range of methodological approaches found in this book parallels the sweep of the approaches that animated our series "Mesoamerican Worlds: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs" over its seventeen years of work and thirty-five publications. Rest and Dillon worked passionately to produce this outstanding volume, and the results are innovative and expansive. It is very fitting that this book, dedicated to the work and memory of H. B. Nicholson, will be the final publication in the series that has attempted to deepen and broaden our understanding of Mesoamerican worlds.

## KINGSHIP IN THE CRADLE OF MAYA CIVILIZATION: THE MIRADOR BASIN

*Richard D. Hansen*



More than two decades of research in the Mirador Basin have led me (Hansen 1982, 1984, 2005; Hansen, Howell, and Guenter 2008) and others (Matheny 1986, 1987a, 1987b), based on specific criteria presented in this chapter and elsewhere (Stutz-Landeen 1986; Howell and Copeland 1989; Hansen 1990, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1998, 2000, 2001, n.d.a), to suggest that a true state-level society came to an apogee there during the Late Preclassic Period between 300 BC and AD 150. Earlier excavations at Maya Lowland sites such as Cerros, Cuello, and Colha (Freidel 1981, 1985, 1986; Matheny 1986, 1987a, 1987b; Freidel and Schele 1988a, 1988b; Reese-Taylor 1996; Hansen and Guenter 2005) suggested that the origins of Maya kingship and related cultural sophistication began in the Late Preclassic Period.

However, more recent archaeological evidence suggests that the formation of kingdoms in the Maya Lowlands began much earlier, in the Middle Preclassic Period, temporally comparable to cultural developments in the Gulf Coast and Oaxaca areas (Hansen 1992a, 1992b, 1998, 2001, 2005; Reilly 1994; Marcus and Flannery 1996; Clark and Hansen 2001; Garber, Hartman, and Brown 2002; Hansen and Guenter 2005). Similarly, early developments have been observed at the site of Cival in the eastern Petén (Estrada-Belli 2006) and at Blackman Eddy and Pacbitun in Belize (Hohmann and Powis 1996; Garber, Hartman, and Brown 2002). The dynamic formation of kingly and state-level hierarchies can best be

understood through observation of the earlier, incipient stages of development (Fields 1989; Clark 1991; Clark and Blake 1994; Clark and Hansen 2001).

The socio-political dynamics and evolution of kingly authority can be identified and evaluated within the Maya Lowlands. Archaeological evidence from excavations in the Mirador Basin of Northern Guatemala is particularly relevant to questions about the origins of Maya hierarchical structure or "kingship." Specific evidence for the earliest manifestations of status, logistics, and production systems has been documented elsewhere (Hansen 2001, 2005, n.d.a, n.d.b; Hansen and Guenter 2005) and is mentioned only briefly in this chapter. The ideological manifestations of power, which H. B. Nicholson particularly studied, are examined in light of ongoing research within the Mirador Basin and elsewhere in the Maya Lowlands.

Nicholson was justifiably concerned about scholarly inattention to the ideological components of Mesoamerican society. In keeping with his orientation, this chapter explores the ideological foundations and underpinnings of incipient Maya kingship as interpreted from recent archaeological investigations in the Maya Lowlands. I believe that initially, Early Maya Lowland rulers acquired status through production systems, wealth accrual, and logistics control; they maintained their status by incorporating and perpetuating a religious ideology to form an organic solidarity (Hansen 1992a). Display of resultant economic, social, and political disparity was first manifested in residence constructions, but that status was facilitated and perpetuated by ideological display on stone monuments supplanted by human portraiture. Stone monuments, however, became subservient to ritually charged architectural formats, architectural art and iconography, and specialized causeway systems—all symptomatic of a deeply ingrained religious ideology but implemented through control of labor, construction, and artistic resources.

Others have noted the connection between authority and architectural construction programs: "Historically, we can trace the origins of kings as actual or nominal builders to the lineage of headmen, master artisans, and religious specialists who direct the construction of community dwellings, men's houses, initiation quarters, or communal ceremonial-political centers in tribal and chiefdom societies" (Helms 1993: 78).

Privileged individuals most likely attained rank or status originally on the basis of skills, talents, and accrued personal wealth. Their position encouraged them to reduce societal resistance to their accumulation of personal power and the expansion of wealth and prestige (Clark and Blake 1994). As this process evolved, personal qualifiers became less significant than selected lineages, and leadership acquired by achievement became subordinate to ascribed or inherited status sanctioned and recognized by those ruled. The display of power was manifested in stone monuments and monumental architecture imbued with religious, cosmological, and ritual symbolism that displayed true regal and religious

authority. The commission of other public works, however—such as water collection systems, agricultural terrace systems, and causeways—demonstrated that the governance was also concerned for the governed; this reciprocity both fueled and maintained kingly power and wealth.

The earliest monuments found thus far in the Mirador Basin do not display human protagonists, although this situation may change as more monuments are identified. Admittedly, the corpus of early sculpture is restricted as of yet, and some of our present interpretations can and will be improved as our database expands. However, based on available information, the subject matter of early monuments is that of ideological and cosmological creatures. La Isla Stela 1 and Nakbé Monument 8 are depictions of saurian monsters rather than portraits of rulers (Hansen n.d.a, n.d.b). The strategic placement of monuments in centerline axis formats, such as Nakbé Altar 4, is consistent with antecedent and contemporary behavior in other areas of Mesoamerica.

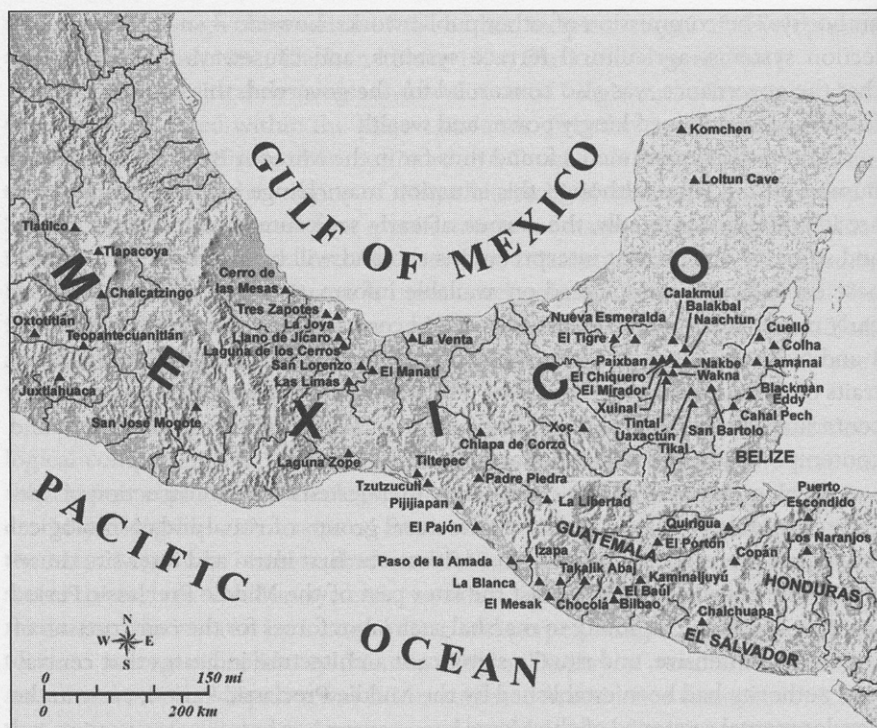
Ideological power is first consistently manifested in the construction of specialized Middle Preclassic Period architectural groups of ritual and cosmological importance termed "E-Groups." In addition, the first intra- and inter-site causeways were constructed by at least the later part of the Middle Preclassic Period (ca. 500–400 BC). The ability to marshal such labor forces for the construction of large, labor-intensive, and ritually significant architecture indicates that centralized authority had been established by the Middle Preclassic Period, early in the developmental sequence of the Maya.

By the time of the Late Preclassic apogee of Early Maya kingship, rulers were using a highly specialized and ubiquitous form of architecture known as the Triadic Architectural Style. This style dominated Preclassic architecture from about 300 BC until about AD 150 and was used sporadically throughout subsequent Maya history. The ideological framework suggested by art and architecture reinforced the legitimacy of early rulers; its successful exploitation established an architectural legacy of unprecedented proportions.

### GEOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The Mirador Basin is located in the extreme north-central Petén of Guatemala and the southernmost part of Campeche, Mexico (figure 5.1). The Mirador Basin is part of the Buena Vista Formation of early Eocene age (Force and Dohrenwend 2008) and is an uplifted plateau circumscribed by a range of karstic hills on its north, east, and south and somewhat lower and less-pronounced elevations on its western edge. It is a triangular-shaped depression of seasonal swamps, or *bajos*. Drainage near the northern section of the Mirador Basin extends toward the Candelaria River drainage system in Campeche and Tabasco, a possible contact route with the complex societies in the Gulf Coast region during the Middle Preclassic Period.

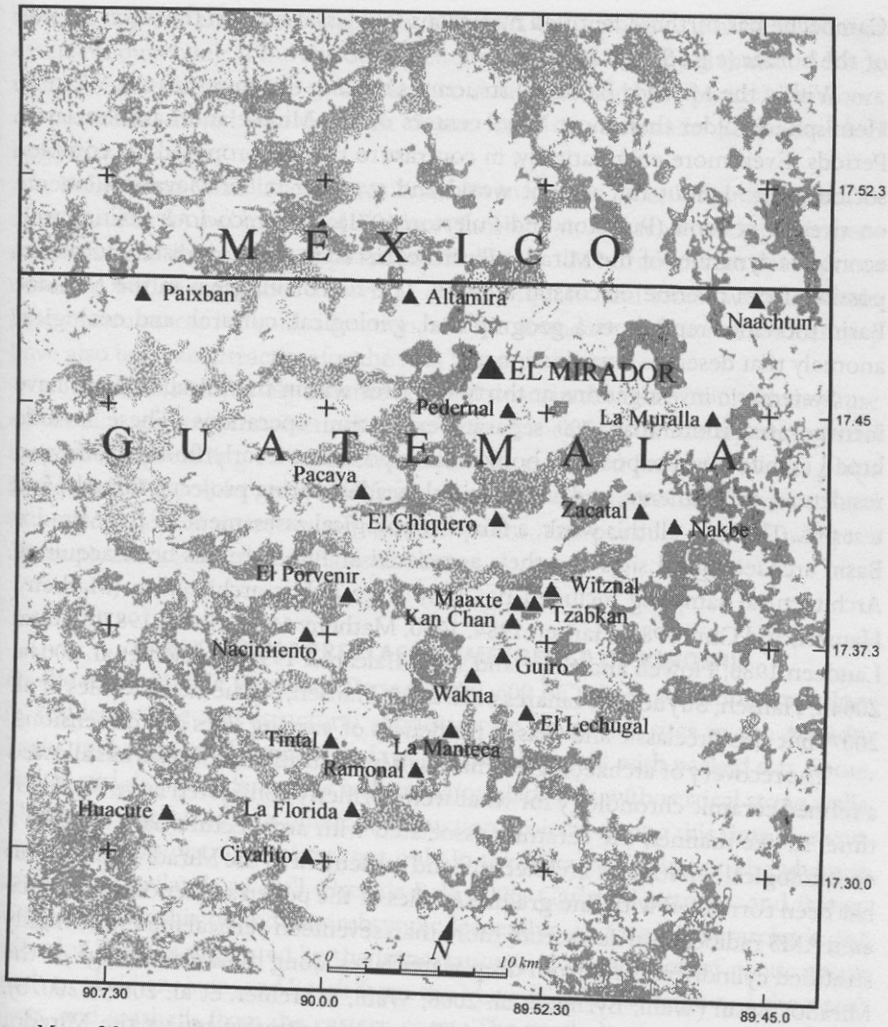




5.1. Map of Mesoamerica showing the Mirador Basin region and other archaeological sites. By Rusty van Rossmann, after Clark and Pye 2000.

Bajos comprise the majority of the surface area (figure 5.2). The bajo is one of the unique geological features of the basin and represents the result of a slow-moving accumulation of water with hydrologic pressure from the higher karstic ridges surrounding the basin on all sides. The soils of the Mirador Basin consist of clay types known as Uaxactún, Macanché, and Yaloch; are of poor to medium fertility (Simmons, Tarano, and Pinto 1959; Stevens 1964; FYDEP 1968); and are distinct from soils to the west and east of the basin. The Mirador Basin is also known to have rare or uncommon minerals (Dixon, Jacob, and White 1994).

Explorations by the Carnegie Institution in the 1920s and 1930s identified several major sites within the Mirador Basin (Morley 1938; Ruppert and Denison 1943). Subsequent work by Ian Graham in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in the first maps of major sites such as El Mirador and Nakbé (Graham 1967). The first systematic survey work was conducted by Bruce Dahlin and Ray Matheny between 1978 and 1983 and defined a major Preclassic presence at El Mirador (Dahlin, Foss, and Chambers 1980; Matheny, Hansen, and Gurr 1980; Dahlin 1984; Matheny 1986, 1987a, 1987b). In 1987, investigations on a regional scale



5.2. Map of the Mirador Basin with bajos stippled, showing their relationships with the major ancient centers. By Richard D. Hansen and E. Ortega, after Hansen 1992a: 276.

in the Mirador Basin began with the birth of the UCLA RAINPEG (Regional Archaeological Investigation of the North Petén, Guatemala) Project, which gradually transformed into the Mirador Basin Project, under my direction. Extensive work has identified the antiquity and range of occupation within the Mirador Basin (Forsyth 1989, 1992, 1993; Hansen 1990, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2005; Balcarcel 1999; Hansen, Howell, and Guenter 2008). The Mirador Basin Project has now mapped thirty-five major and minor sites within Guatemala, and work by Nikolai Grube and Ivan Sprajc in southern



Campeche has further identified numerous Preclassic sites on the Mexican side of the border (e.g., Sprajc 2005).

Within the Mirador Basin are structures rivaling the largest in the Western Hemisphere, older than most Maya centers of the Middle and Late Preclassic Periods. Even more enigmatically, in contrast to models proposed for complex societies throughout the ancient world and even for initial Maya settlements on riverine systems (Puleston and Puleston 1971), the precocious political and economic dynamics of the Mirador Basin coalesced in the most distant locations possible from riverine or coastal regions. The rise of kingship in the Mirador Basin therefore represents a geographical, geological, cultural, and ecological anomaly that deserves investigation.

Systematic investigations at thirty-five sites within the Mirador Basin have incorporated more than 700 separate excavation operations. These include broad architectural exposures; horizontal exposures of early floors, platforms, residences, monuments, and architectural facades; coring projects; tunnels; and test pits. Through all this work, a fair chronological assessment of the Mirador Basin archaeological sites and their associated architecture has been acquired. Architectural sampling included not only large public architecture (Matheny, Hansen, and Gurr 1980; Hansen 1984, 1990; Matheny 1986, 1987a, 1987b; Stutz-Landeen 1986; Howell and Copeland 1989; Balcarcel 1999; Hansen et al. 2004a, 2004b; Hansen, Suyuc-Ley, Linares et al. 2005; Hansen, Suyuc-Ley, Morales et al. 2007) but also Preclassic and Classic residences of varying sizes and dimensions.

The recovery of archaeological materials from stratified contexts has allowed a refined ceramic chronology for what were formerly considered large blocks of time. In like manner, the ceramics associated with architecture have allowed a chronological seriation of architecture and settlement in the Mirador Basin. This has been correlated with fine-grained studies of the pollen sequences and associated AMS radiocarbon dates from more than seventeen vertical meters of highly stratified cylindrical cores from deep-water lakes along the western edge of the Mirador Basin (Wahl, Byrne, et al. 2006; Wahl, Schreiner, et al. 2007a, 2007b). These stratified pollen samples are believed to accurately reflect the Mirador Basin's cultural and ecological sequences, since the predominant winds come from the east, carrying pollen from agricultural or natural botanical sources.

Numerous radiocarbon assays and chronologically distinctive pottery suggest that the earliest permanent occupation of the Mirador Basin occurred somewhere near 1000 BC, particularly at the site of Nakbé (figure 5.7) and possibly at Xulnal (Forsyth 1993; Hansen 1998, 2001, 2005). At Nakbé the initial sedentary occupation corresponds to a period dubbed the "early Ox" Phase. Ceramics include red washed rims on unslipped tecomate bodies and punctuated, unslipped bodies with red slipped, restricted rims. Some ceramics incorporate incised lines on everted rims. A chert blade technology existed, but there is no evidence of obsidian importation or other outside contact at this earliest

time. It appears that there was only a limited occupation at Nakbé, although extensive quarrying at the site during later periods has destroyed much evidence of earlier settlements. The earliest known residences had hard-packed clay floors or postholes carved into bedrock. Some form of settlement nucleation had begun by this time.

Pollen data (Wahl 2000, 2005; Wahl, Byrne, et al. 2006; Wahl, Schreiner, et al. 2007a, 2007b) and stable isotope data (Jacob 1994; Hansen et al. 2002) demonstrate that the seasonal swamps around Nakbé and El Mirador were open, grass-covered, wetland marshes known as *civales*. Aquatic and forest wildlife would have been attracted to such a location, and the abundance of such resources may have also been an attraction for the first Maya pioneers.

The *civales* ultimately became crucial factors in the rise of kingship because of the rich, organic marsh mucks that were farmed and ultimately transported to terraces, providing the economic abundance needed for incipient kingships to flourish. Phytoliths recovered from ancient field surfaces have demonstrated the production of corn, squash, gourds, palms, and possibly cotton and cacao (Bozarth 2000; Bozarth and Hansen 2001).

### EARLY MIDDLE PRECLASSIC EMERGENCE OF KINGSHIP

By the Early Middle Preclassic Period (1000–600 BC) there are ample variations in residence size and structural sophistication at several sites in the Mirador Basin, including small, stone-lined residential platforms with packed clay floors, wattle-and-daub residences, as well as major platforms with vertical stone walls. The labor marshaled into public construction projects during this time was controlled by administrative elites, not only in the Mirador Basin but elsewhere in the Maya Lowlands as well (Estrada-Belli 2006; Garber, Hartman, and Brown 2002). During this period an embryonic leadership and status hierarchy in the Mirador Basin is suggested by the importation and distribution of exotic goods such as obsidian, jade, and basalt from the Maya Highlands, imported chert artifacts, and seashells from the eastern coast. The symbols representative of rank and the status of a patron elite also appear.

The importation of shell appears to have had singular importance at this time. Small shells (*Margenellidae*: *Prunum apicinum*) were brought into the Mirador Basin, and shell ornaments were being worked. But some of the most significant imports into Nakbé and other Middle Preclassic sites in the interior Maya Lowlands were the *Strombus* shells (*Strombus costatus* sp.) and other gastropods (*Turbinella angulata*) from the Caribbean Sea (figure 5.3); most of these shells were cut and drilled conically (unidirectionally) or occasionally bi-conically (bi-directionally), leaving the spines and natural protuberances of the shell intact. These shells are exclusive to the Early Middle Preclassic Period and have not been found in any deposits of subsequent periods, either in the



5.3. *Strombus* shells from Early Middle Preclassic deposits from the Mirador Basin. Photo by Richard D. Hansen.

Mirador Basin or at Tikal, Uaxactún, and numerous sites in Belize. The unique presence of the shells in Early Middle Preclassic deposits of a ritual and elite character suggests that they represented an important economic symbol or perhaps even a currency. *Strombus* shells do not appear in any of the extensive Late Preclassic contexts in the Mirador Basin, suggesting that the shell's function may have been as specialized as it was temporally restricted. Their presence is useful as a period marker as well as a possible demonstration of economic and political prowess.

Other exotic imports during the Middle Preclassic Period include obsidian—primarily from San Martín Jilotepeque (Kunselman 2000)—jade, and coral. The obsidian was transported as nodules with cortex and initially worked into prismatic blades at the local sites. This can be interpreted as a mechanism encouraging craft specialization and the control of exotic-foreign commodities by an emerging elite. By 800 to 600 BC, symbols of hierarchical status included cranial deformation, dental inlay of hematite disks, jade beads, sherds with the woven mat motif, and enlarged platform constructions (Hansen 2001).

### LATE MIDDLE PRECLASSIC KINGSHIP MATURATION

By the Late Middle Preclassic Period, 600 to 400 BC, kingcraft had evolved to the point where pyramidal structures up to 18 m high were constructed at Nakbé,



5.4. Roughly hewn stones from an Early Middle Preclassic wall at the base of Nakbé Structure 5, ca. 900–800 BC. Photo by Richard D. Hansen.

Xulnal, Wakna, El Pesquero, and, on a lesser scale, at La Florida. A ballcourt was built at Nakbé during this time, consistent with the Middle Preclassic ballcourt discovered at Takalik Abaj (Schieber de Lavarreda 1994). However, with the maturation of kingship, a major new focus became the economic and social organization of massive labor forces to construct ritually significant architecture. Blocks quarried throughout the ancient centers changed radically in size from small, roughly hewn stones (figure 5.4) to those 1.4 m long, 0.50 m high, and 0.50 m wide (figure 5.5), indicating that specialist development and procurement were clearly in place by this time (Sidrys 1978).

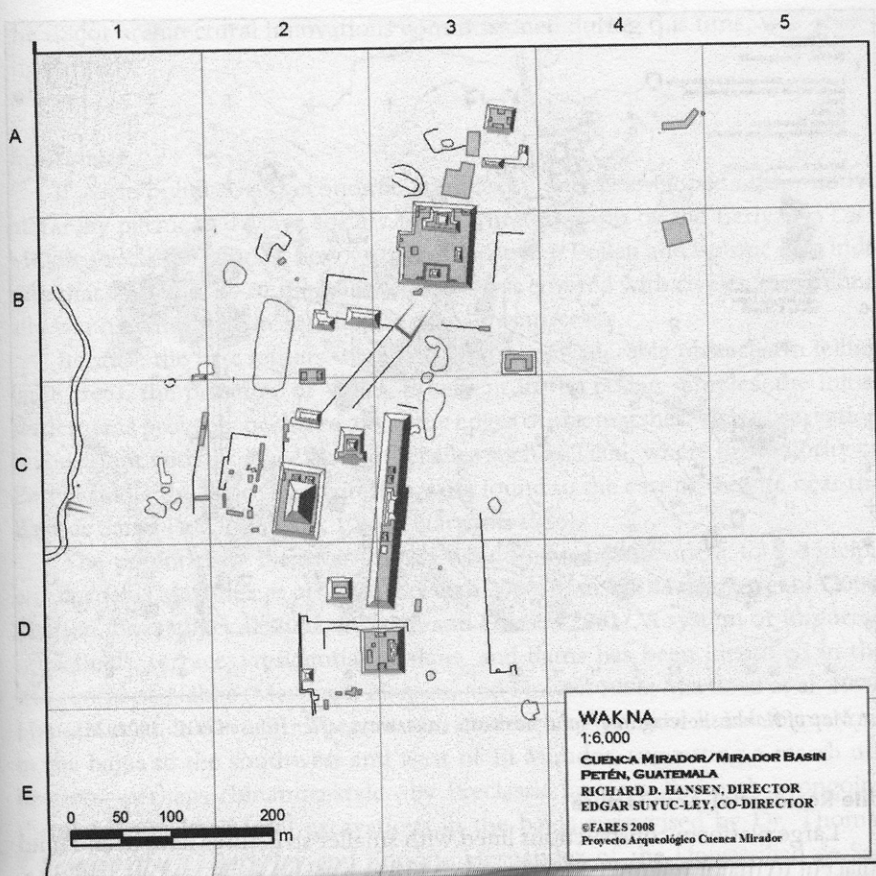
### Ritual Architecture

One of the most important architectural formats has been called the E-Group (figure 5.6), named after Group E at Uaxactún where the ritual pattern was first detected in 1924. This standardized structural format consists of a dominant pyramidal structure on the west side of a plaza, frequently with quadripartite stairways, while an elongated platform structure is placed on the east side of the plaza (Laporte and Fialko 1993, 1995; Laporte and Valdés 1993; Chase and Chase 1995; Hansen 1998, 2000, 2001, 2005; Estrada-Belli 2006).



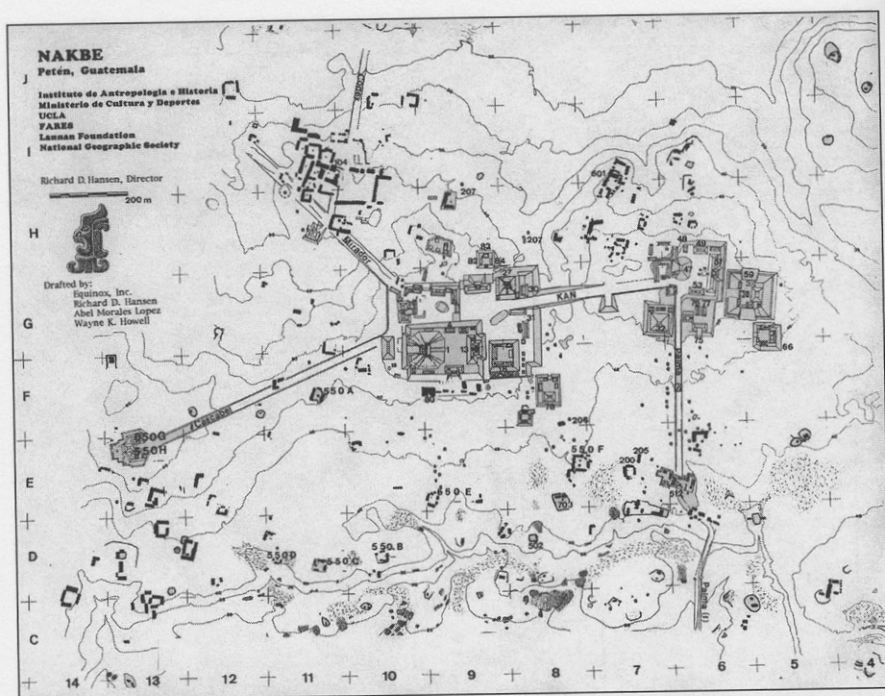


5.5. Major block wall from Late Middle Preclassic Structure 35 at Nakbé showing the long axis of the stones parallel to the wall alignment. Blocks are 1.0–1.2 m long. Photo by Richard D. Hansen.



5.6. Map of a portion of the site of Wakna showing the E-Group in Quadrants C 2 and C 3. By Hector Mejia, © FARES 2008.

Occasionally, but not always, one or several structures appear on the platform of the eastern elongated structure. The E-Group pattern of architecture can be considered the earliest consistent ritual format that spread throughout Preclassic Mesoamerica; it most likely originated among the Lowland Maya (Hansen 2005, n.d.a). It is found in Eb and Tzec Phase architecture within Structure 5C-54 at Tikal (Laporte and Valdés 1993; Laporte and Fialko 1995) and Group D at Uaxactún (Renaldo Acevedo, personal communication, 1998) and also appears prior to 700 BC at Nakbé in Str. 51 Sub 1. Through a combination of cosmology and ritually consistent architecture, administrative authority was justified and solidified. The ideological importance of this architectural group was so substantial that it endured well into the Classic Period.



5.7. Map of Nakbé showing inter- and intra-site causeways, after Hansen et al. 2002: 285.

### Elite Residential Architecture

Large platform constructions lined with smaller structures have been found adjacent to major religious-ceremonial architecture, such as Group 18 at Nakbé, located directly east of the largest pyramid on the primary platform in the West Group of the city (figure 5.7). Excavation of these platforms suggests that this compound was the residence area for an elite hierarchy of Middle and Late Preclassic Nakbé, either for priests who functioned in the sacred precinct immediately to the west or for the king and his court (Clark and Hansen 2001).

### Causeways

Causeways at Nakbé whose earliest levels date to the Late Middle Preclassic Period are the Kan, Palma, and Mirador causeways. These indicate that organized labor had been marshaled into intra-site (Kan, Palma) and inter-site (Mirador-Nakbé and Mirador-Tintal) efforts (figure 5.7). Subsequently, Late Preclassic floors were added to these original constructions. Major causeways, 24 to 40 m wide and 2 to 6 m high, connote massive amounts of labor as well as political, economic, and social cohesion between the major sites of the Mirador Basin. Hierarchical structure (i.e., kingship) in the Mirador Basin, to judge from



the major architectural innovations commissioned during this time, was growing strongly.

### **Agriculture**

If socio-political and economic complexity and a developed authoritative hierarchy permeated Maya society in the Mirador Basin by the Early and Late Middle Preclassic Periods, how were they financed? Pollen and isotope data indicate that the majority of the Mirador Basin was covered with civales, or perennially wet marshes, rich in aquatic and faunal resources.

Because the first settlers would have faced considerable obstacles in felling large trees, the presence of which is evident in the pollen samples, the initial settlements probably occurred along the edges of the marshes. This observation is consistent with evidence from other sites such as Tikal, where the majority of Early Middle Preclassic (Eb) materials were found to the east of the site near the Bajo de Santa Fé (Coe 1965a, 1965b; Harrison 1986).

The potential of the swamp soils would have been evident to the incipient farmers (Martínez et al. 1999; Bozarth 2000; Hansen, Martínez, et al. 2000; Hansen, Bozarth, et al. 2002; Bozarth and Hansen 2001). A system of imported mud fields, terraces, residential gardens, and dams has been identified in the site center of Nakbé (Martínez, Hansen, and Howell 1996; Martínez et al. 1999; Hansen et al. 2002: 289). There is also evidence of unusual lineal formations in the bajos to the southwest and west of El Mirador, suggesting a marsh utilization—perhaps chinampa-style—by Preclassic farmers. Research is ongoing through large horizontal excavations in the bajos supervised by Dr. Thomas Schreiner of UC Berkeley and Enrique Hernandez of the Universidad de San Carlos. The discovery of imported soil fields, check dams, and artificial terrace constructions suggests that intensive agriculture had been incorporated into Maya society of the Mirador Basin by the Late Middle Preclassic Period, if not earlier. Such innovative farming practices provided the economic surpluses needed to propel the accumulating or “aggrandizing” elite into the more sophisticated dynamics of the succeeding Late Preclassic Period.

### **EMPIRICISM OF HIERARCHY: STONE MONUMENTS**

Carving stone monuments is a universal kingship strategy. The social and political ideology of monument erection in key locations legitimizes regal authority and suggests the immortality of the governing elite (Kappelman 1997). However, in the case of the Early Maya in the Mirador Basin, the earliest monuments do not directly depict rulers but rather display deity portraits or cosmic monsters, perhaps to pay homage to an all-governing deity pantheon. Such homage would have served emergent rulership well because it demonstrated that even kings

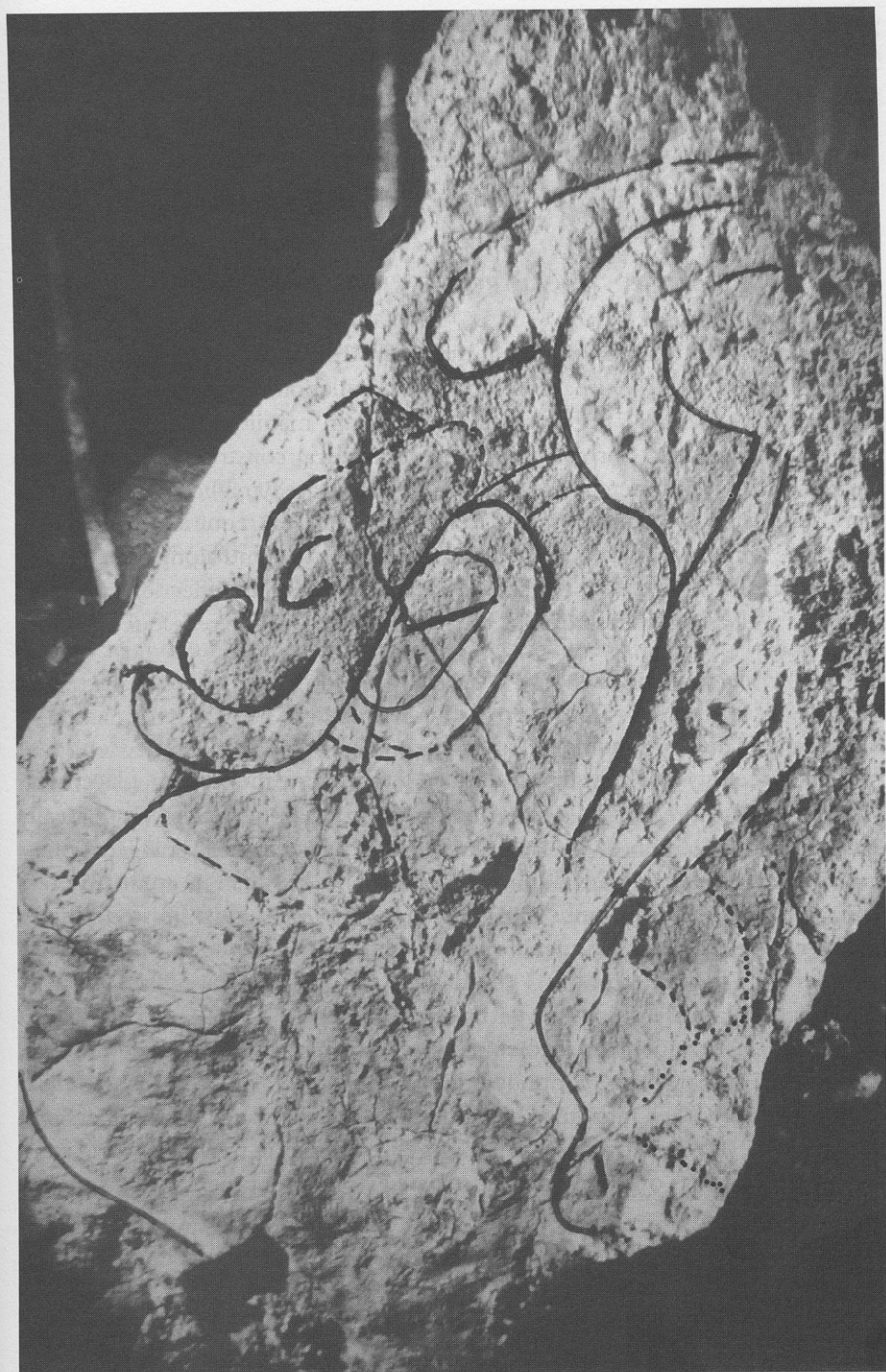
were subservient to cosmological laws; therefore, the general populace should also be subject to "divine" governance.

The earliest carved monument recovered to date in the Mirador Basin is believed to be Stela 1 at the site of La Isla (figure 5.8), located on an "island" of elevated terrain in the bajo between Nakbé and El Mirador (figure 5.2). This monument is an unmodified limestone slab stone 1.67 m high with an upward-peering saurian creature incised on its face. The early date for the monument is based on style and theme rather than archaeological context, since it appears that the monument had been reset in its discovery position. The earliest securely dated monument is Altar 4 at Nakbé, placed in the centerline axis of Middle Preclassic architecture—directly associated with Middle Preclassic ceramics and with uncorrected carbon dates of between 800 and 600 BC, which usually implies an even earlier actual date (Hansen 1992a, n.d.b).

The presence of an emergent elite with possible connections to kingship is suggested by the stone monuments; woven mat symbols on ceramics; status items such as dental inlays (figure 5.10) of hematite (Mata Amado and Hansen 1992); exotic imported items of an exclusive nature such as *Strombus* shells, obsidian, coral, basalt, and jade; as well as evidence of cranial deformation and symbols of royalty on figurines (Hansen 1992b, 1992c, n.d.a). By the end of the Middle Preclassic Period between 600 and 400 BC, on the basis of ceramics and radiocarbon dates, there was an amalgamation of architectural specialists by an emerging and powerful elite—as suggested by the construction of massive platforms and monumental architecture, the building of the first causeways, variations in the size and sophistication of residences, dramatic changes in the shape and form of stones used in architecture, and the presence of stone monuments, including monuments of increasing size and complexity (see Justeson and Mathews 1983).

One of the most notable monuments is Nakbé Stela 1, nearly 5 m high, featuring two standing protagonists in royal costumes with elaborate headdresses and ceremonial belts with jade plaques, belt heads, and spools. The scene likely represents an early king acknowledging his source of authority from the founding father of the dynasty (Hansen n.d.b; Hansen et al. 2007). The legitimization of authority must be established *before* the exercise of economic and political power through massive labor expenditures, public works constructions, and inter-polity integrations, as were to follow in the Late Preclassic Period; monuments depicting kings were powerful tools for displaying the legitimization of power.

Middle Preclassic Period kingship and political centralization can be inferred from the use of sculptured stone monuments, increasing lime production and stucco utilization, agricultural intensification, and major transformations in the size and form of limestone blocks used in architectural constructions. Cultural-social-political innovations may have been fueled by differential access to wealth, organized exploitation of natural resources, implementation of systematic, intensive agriculture, and increasing labor intensification and specialist production



5.8. La Isla, Stela 1, a Middle Preclassic monument. Photo by Richard D. Hansen.

systems. Such radical transformations served to consolidate the economic and political power of an emerging administrative elite. One of the consolidants that fused society was a rigid cosmological ideology in the public manifestations of power, represented by such architectural forms of ritual and ideological importance (Hansen 1998) as the Middle Preclassic E-Group compounds at Nakbé, Xulnal, possibly Wakna, Tikal (5C–54 Sub), and Uaxactún (Group D).

### LATE PRECLASSIC PERIOD KINGSHIP APOGEE

By the Late Preclassic Period (300 BC–AD 150) in the Mirador Basin, human populations and administrative authority reached an apogee. Major centers saw a maximum of settlement occupation, with population densities unmatched in subsequent periods. During this period maximum manifestations of kingship also became apparent through massive architectural constructions and dense nucleation of monumental architecture. Orchestrated public works projects were completed by populations apparently so large as to require residence constructions within marginal living areas such as the bajos and along the edges of escarpments. The size of the architecture may be a direct reflection of kingly power as well as a manifestation of the sophistication of the religious authority at the time.

### Kingship and Stone Monuments

The ideology of kingship continued with stone monument placement, but by the Late Preclassic Period monument size had decreased dramatically (Hansen n.d.b; Hansen et al. 2007). Stones that had previously ranged from 4 to 5 m in height were reduced to small monuments less than 80 cm to 1 m tall. They were carved with symbols of kingship with a new twist: incised writing (Hansen 1991, 2001). Monuments such as Stela 2 at El Mirador, Monument 3 at Pedernal, El Chiquero Stela 1 (figure 5.9), and La Toronja Stela 1 were all carved in miniature fashion but with texts (Hansen 1991, 2001, n.d.b; Hansen et al. 2007). Subsequent monuments believed to be from the Mirador Basin, such as the Hauberg Stela, continued this small sculptural pattern (Schele 1985; Guenter 2002). Other miniature monuments lack carved texts (Chambers and Hansen 1996). It is ironic that while the largest pyramids in the Maya world were being built, displays of kingship on associated stone monuments were reduced to small banner stones. The use of writing, however, established a new immortality of kingly ideology.

### Kingship and Sacbeob

Causeways, or sacbeob ("white roads"), of massive fill and topped with thick layers of plaster united major centers throughout the Mirador Basin. The



5.9. Late Preclassic miniature Stela 1, El Chiquero, showing eroded glyph panel. Drawing by E. Ortega and Richard D. Hansen.

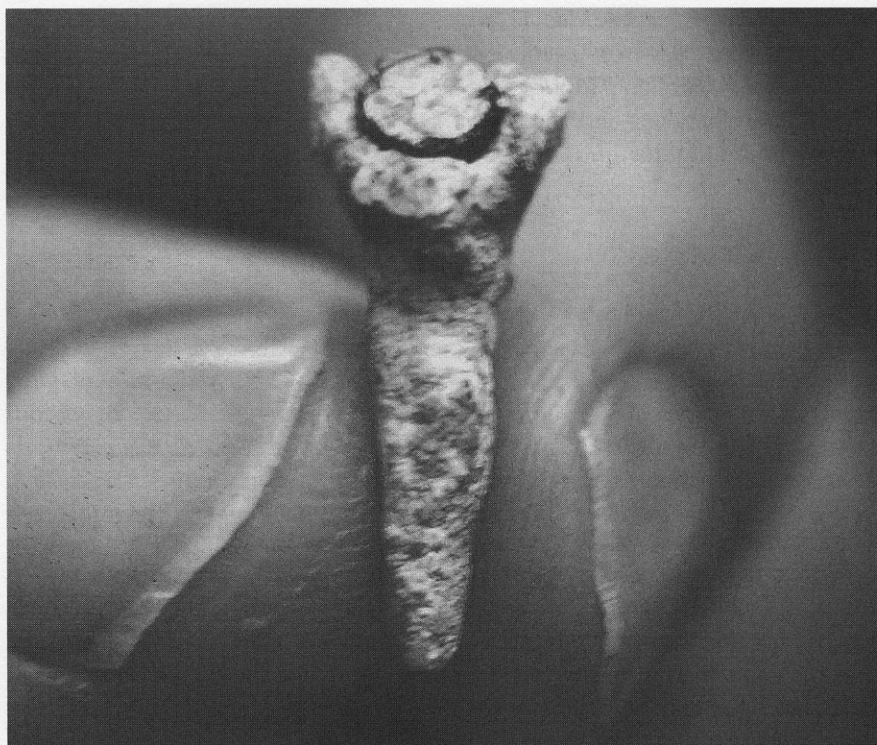


Tintal-Mirador causeway was rebuilt on at least four separate occasions. These constructions, ranging from 2 to 6 m high and 24 to 40 m wide, extended up to 25 km in length. The precise engineering of the causeways is evident in their straight alignments over upland areas and through the bajos. There is little doubt that the causeways also controlled water systems for the irrigation of raised fields and what may be a chinampa-style agricultural system in the bajos to the north, west, and south of the civic center of El Mirador and on the southern side of Nakbé.

While the more obvious functions of the causeways can be reliably interpreted, such as trade and commodity transport, inter-site alliances, military movements, and political and economic homogeneity, the ideological concepts that initiated causeway construction and maintenance should also be considered as viable denominators of royal power postures. Alfred M. Tozzer (1941) and Arthur G. Miller (1974) reported a fascinating account of a Yucatec myth noted as the *kusansum* pathway, with a reference to the strategic and cosmological importance of the causeways. According to Maya informants near Valladolid, in the first period of world existence there

was a road suspended in the sky, stretching from Tuloom [sic] and Coba to Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. This pathway was called *kusansum* or *sabke* [sic] (white road). It was in the nature of a large rope (*sum*) supposed to be living (*kusan*) and in the middle flowed blood. It was by this rope that the food was sent to the ancient rulers who lived in the structures now in ruins. For some reason, this rope was cut, the blood flowed out, and the rope vanished forever. (Tozzer 1907: 153, cited in Miller 1974: 172)

In this sense, the causeways served as an umbilical cord or lifeline over which rulers were able to send and receive food, trade goods, and similar commodities.



5.10. Human incisor with hematite disk inlay, Early Middle Preclassic, ca. 800 BC. Photo by Richard D. Hansen.

However, Miller also notes the strong representations of the umbilical cord as lineage markers, certainly a primary concern of ancient kingship, particularly in the *Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus* and the *Codex Laud* (Miller 1974: 175–176). The causeways may have represented the life blood of sacred Maya kingship, meaning they allowed for the kinds of societal cohesion and control that were so important for the acceptance and maintenance of royal power. They also, however, could have represented a cosmic dimension to “express the formation of two contrasting and once connected worlds: the natural world and the supernatural world” (Miller 1974: 172), implied by the relationship with the umbilical cord and the “Cosmic Roads” referred to in the *Popul Vuh* (Tedlock 1985: 334). The *cahib xalcat be* were the celestial crossroads, associated with cardinal direction colors, that interacted with the Milky Way as part of the “complex system navigation” through the ideological and cosmological labyrinth of Maya ideology. In every functional sense the causeways provided the economic, political, and social benefits that enhanced rulers’ administrative capabilities and formed a key element in the maintenance and coordination of the ideology of kingship.

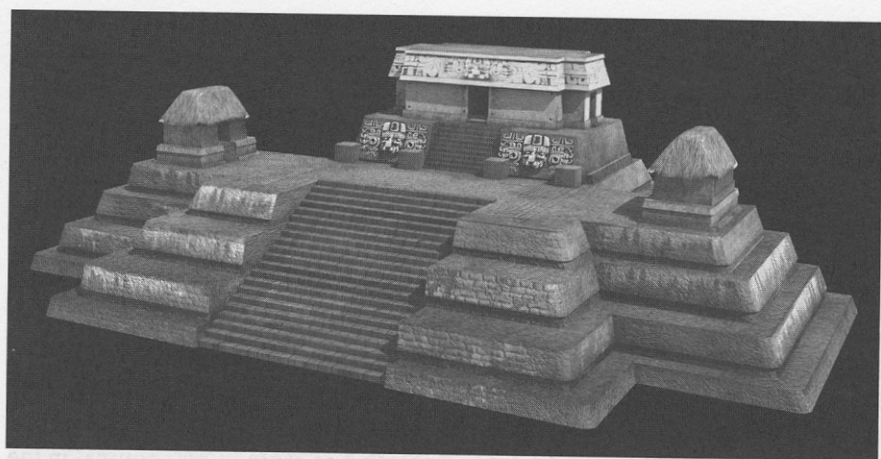
### Kingship and Triadic Architecture

Another crucial component by the early Late Preclassic Period (early Cycle 7) was the advent of the Triadic Architectural Style. The vast majority of the monumental architecture at the major sites throughout the Mirador Basin was constructed in the triadic format (figure 5.11): three structures placed atop a major platform, a single, central, dominant structure flanked by two smaller structures facing each other (see Graham 1967: 45–46; Hansen 1984, 1990, 1992a, 1998, 2001; Hansen, Howell, and Guenter 2008). This was the most ubiquitous architectural form in the Late Preclassic Period in the Maya Lowlands and was replicated on special occasions or at special events for centuries later, as at Uaxactún Str. A-V and the interior precincts of the North Acropolis at Tikal (Strs. 5D–22, 5D–23, 5D–24). Specialized triadic structures may have continued in use by the Historic Lowland Maya. Nicholas Hellmuth (1977: 425) noted that Nicolas de Valenzuela referred to a triadic pattern of “community houses” in the seventeenth-century Lacandón village of Sac Balam, Chiapas. Late Classic kings such as Chan Bahlum II replicated the thousand-year-old triadic architectural form in the Palenque Cross Group as a personal statement of royal authority, genealogical privilege, and regal power following the demise of Pacal the Great (Hansen 1992a: 149ff, 1998: 77ff). At El Mirador alone, more than twenty-six monumental structures—including nearly all of the largest structures—and the largest structures at Tintal, Xulnal, Wakna, and Nakhbé are all in Triadic Architectural Style. The triadic pattern was thus a very important denominator of royal architecture.

Outside the Mirador Basin, the Cross Group at Palenque provides a case of a triadic style format complete with one of the largest compilations of hieroglyphic texts in the Maya world. I have suggested elsewhere (Hansen 1992a: 149–152) a possible correlation between this triadic architectural arrangement and its Preclassic antecedents. The Cross Group’s radical departure from the standard Palenque architectural agenda of earlier centuries suggests that the ruler Chan Bahlum was reaching deep into the historic past to legitimize his royal position at that site. As David Freidel and Linda Schele (1988b: 67) have noted: “The choice of archaic costume and the emphasis on the Gods of the Triad, so prevalent in the Early Classic cache complex, was deliberately evoked as the basis of political sanction; it legitimized the Palenque lineage at the most ancient and most orthodox level of Maya political and religious thought and cosmology.”

Another important clue as to the meaning of the triadic format may have been retained by the contemporary Maya. During a translation of the *Popul Vuh* with the aid of Quiché shamans, Barbara and Dennis Tedlock noted that the three stars Alnitak, Saiph, and Rigel, located in the constellation of Orion (lower belt star and the two knees), represent the celestial hearth as a metaphor for the three hearthstones of the Maya kitchen (Tedlock 1985: 261). The nebula contained within these three stars, Nebula M42, represents the ash and embers





5.11. Triadic architecture: hypothetical reconstruction of Structure 34, El Mirador. Courtesy, Fernando Paiz, Studio C, Guatemala.

of the fires of creation. In traditional Maya households, the three stones of the typical Maya hearth stabilize the *comal* and the cooking pots. Every morning Maya women fan the fires of the previous day's cooking activities into active use, bringing light and sustenance to the Maya family. The triadic format may represent a metaphoric statement or symbolic depiction of the creation, universally accepted and recognized by Maya populations. The rigorous manipulation and control of labor by the administrative elite during the Late Preclassic Period for the construction of the massive architectural triads, even if ultimately based on the three hearth stones, was unequaled throughout all subsequent Maya history.

### Kingship and Formal Tombs

Another clear advent of kingship and associated ideology is the placement of formal tombs in architecture. Royal tomb placement in the Mirador Basin is not consistent with later, Classic Period tomb location patterns outside it. Thousands of Preclassic structures have been looted throughout the Mirador Basin, with a general lack of success in finding tomb locations despite major damage to monumental architecture. Tombs have been scientifically located at several Middle and Late Preclassic Period Maya Highland sites (Sharer and Sedat 1987: plate 4.3). Lowland royal burials of similar age, however, are extremely scarce, with locations known from Tikal (Burials 164, 166, 167, 85, 117, and 125; Coe and McGinn 1963; Coe 1965a, 1965b), San Bartólo (William Saturno, personal communication, 2005), and Wakna (Hansen 1998: 90–95). In the case of Wakna, three mortuary chambers were found, with two burials directly at the base on each side of a triadic style major structure, while the third burial was

located in the centerline axis of the dominant structure of the triadic style building. However, numerous excavations in triadic structures of similar size, shape, and antiquity have failed to locate funerary constructions in identical locations, thus frustrating attempts to define consistent funerary patterns in Preclassic kingships.

### Architectural Art

In addition to the causeways, Triadic Architectural Style, tombs, and monuments, the incipient Maya kings of the Late Middle and early Late Preclassic Periods commissioned sophisticated and complex ideological masks flanking stairways on structural facades (figure 5.11). Early masks were sculpted from stone, while later ones were modeled in plaster directly over roughly hewn stone armatures. The plastic medium of lime plaster was crucial in the depiction of the elements and symbols of kingship and royal authority, and extensive studies have documented the production and use of this medium (Schreiner 2001, 2002, 2003). Early versions of this art depict a standardized theme of J-scrolls and brackets with monumental masks and panels in rich colors of red, cream, and black.

Late Middle Preclassic/early Late Preclassic masks have been discovered at Rio Azul and have recently been found inside Structure 34 at El Mirador on the facade of Structure 34 Sub 1. The depiction of royal authority in such imposing art forms at Mirador Basin sites (El Mirador, Nakbé, El Pesquero, Wakna, Tintal), as well as outside the Mirador Basin (Uaxactún, Tikal, San Bartólo, and Cival), clearly indicates the universal status of architecture as a billboard for kingcraft, skillfully tied into religious ideology to wield secular and religious control over expanding populations. As the architectural art evolved, it began to include subtle references to explicit individuals. For example, Late Middle Preclassic art on Structure 1 at Nakbé and Structure 34 Sub 1 at El Mirador depicts deity portraits and associated symbolisms, while the Late Preclassic art on the facade of Structure 34 at El Mirador depicts deity masks, but with jaguar paw panels that may be associated with names and titles of specific individuals. In this case, the personage depicted would possibly be the thirteenth ruler of an identified sequence of Preclassic kings from the Mirador Basin known as Yi'chaak K'ak (Guenther 2002, 2004, 2007).

### CONCLUSION

H. B. Nicholson was a giant within Mesoamerican studies. He was one of the primary reasons I selected UCLA for graduate school, and I profited much from his insights and observations. His interests spanned the Mesoamerican chronological gamut, ranging from the Preclassic Period (Nicholson 1976) to the Spanish

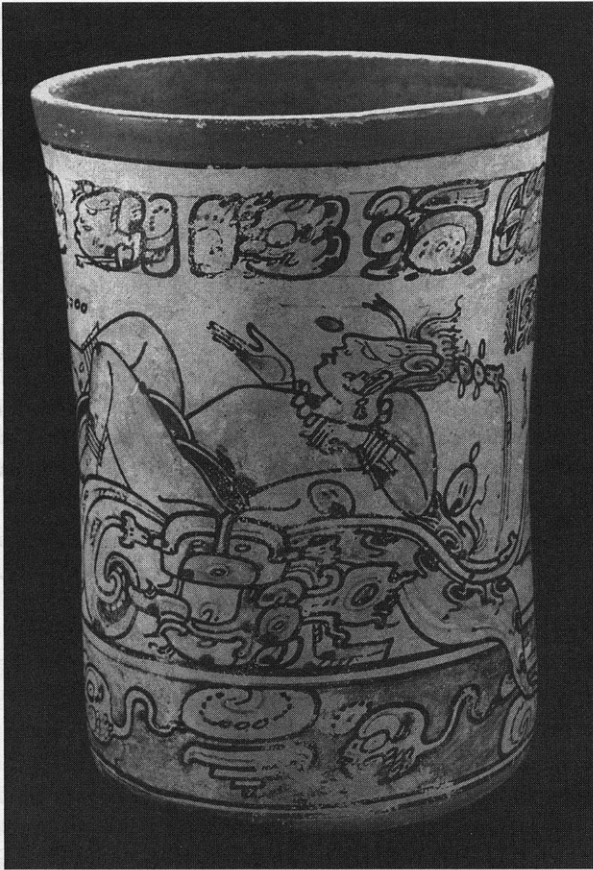
Conquest (Nicholson 1974). A primary concern of his was the need to consider socio-ideological and cosmological themes when interpreting culture history:

Precisely what is conspicuously lacking in . . . analysis of major evolutionary trends in Mesoamerican civilization is any genuinely adequate consideration of the religious-ritual-divinatory ideology that constituted such a massive dimension of the history of this area co-tradition . . . [I]deology and esthetics are precisely those dimensions that provided most of the distinctive cultural personality of this great area co-tradition and most clearly set it apart from any other in world history. (Nicholson 1976: 3, 6)

The advantage of long-term and comprehensive investigations on a regional scale is that they facilitate a broad, multidisciplinary perspective based on multiple lines of evidence. This notwithstanding, my review of cultural developments in this chapter has never strayed too far from the ideological and aesthetic dimensions that meant so much to Dr. Nicholson. The Mirador Basin monuments and buildings are silent witnesses to a unique saga of human history that began during the Middle Preclassic Period and existed vibrantly until several hundred years after the time of Christ, when construction programs and occupation began to wane. Although there must have been subsequent kings in the Mirador Basin, shortly after AD 150 the entire area appears to have suffered a large-scale depopulation. This is corroborated by the pollen data (Wahl 2000, 2005; Wahl, Schreiner, and Byrne 2005; Wahl, Byrne, et al. 2006; Wahl, Schreiner, et al. 2007a, 2007b). Jungle returned to cover the great Preclassic structures, and only limited and dispersed populations then lived amid the ruins (Hansen 1996; Hansen, Howell, and Guenter 2008).

The Preclassic kings of the Mirador Basin created a built environment unrivaled in the Maya Lowlands at any period of time. The great sites of the Mirador Basin must have been the objects of pilgrimages for centuries, as suggested by incense burners on the summits of the largest pyramids and the preponderance of unique artistic and thematic Late Classic ceramics, such as the codex style pottery painted between ca. AD 680 and AD 740 by scribes residing among the ruins of the great Preclassic cities (Robicsek and Hales 1981; Hansen, Bishop, and Fahsen 1991). Late Classic codex style ceramics from the Nakbé region (figure 5.12) found their way into royal burials such as that found at Calakmul Structure 2. During the Late Middle and Late Preclassic Periods, ca. 500 BC–AD 150, the Mirador Basin kings created a state-level society, the Kan kingdom. Strategic causeways linking the kingdom's major cities symbolize the economic and political alliances between them. Causeways also facilitated the construction of the largest platforms, palaces, and pyramidal structures in most of the major sites within the study area.

Ongoing epigraphic, iconographic, and archaeological research on the advent of kingship in the Kan polity should expand this preliminary work. If



5.12. Late Classic codex-style vessel manufactured in Nakbé, found in Burial 2, Structure 2, Calakmul. Photograph by R. D. Hansen.

my chronological and cultural interpretations of Mirador Basin developments are correct, then this area could be considered the cradle of Maya civilization. And, if properly conserved, the tangible legacy of ancient Maya kings, their monuments of stone, mud, and stucco, will stand as proud sentinels within the enshrouding tropical forest for centuries to come.

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