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Between the Patio Group and the Plaza: Round Platforms as Stages for Supra-Household Rituals in Early Maya Society

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Abstract

Low, open, circular platforms were built in residential areas at sites across the Maya lowlands during the Preclassic period (c. 1000 BC – AD 300). These structures were probably used for ritual performances, such as dances. Here, we describe three examples excavated at Ceibal, Guatemala. We argue that round structures were used in supra-household rituals that created overlapping communities between the levels of domestic and public. Using the principles of heterarchy and a practice-based approach to ritual, we examine the physical characteristics of the architecture. During the Late Middle Preclassic (c. 700-350 BC), in the absence of rulers or a strong hierarchy, supra-household rituals at circular platforms in residential areas created different social relationships than did the communal ceremonies in the public plaza. At the transition to the Late Preclassic (c. 350 BC), ritual practices and spaces were reorganized, becoming more homogeneous across residential and public contexts, and relationships among households changed. We suggest that studies of the practices that bring together social groups at levels between public and domestic can yield more complete views of social complexity that are not based solely on inequality or hierarchy.

Keywords: social organization, ritual, architecture, Preclassic Maya, Mesoamerica

Introduction

Archaeologists often use the term *social complexity* interchangeably with *inequality* or *hierarchy*, especially in Mesoamerica and other regions where state-level societies developed. However, societies can be *complex*, or made up of many different parts, without being highly centralized or hierarchical. All societies are organized both hierarchically (vertically, ranked) and non-hierarchically (horizontally, unranked), to varying degrees – a concept known as *heterarchy* (Crumley 1995). In the Maya area, the Preclassic period is frequently shown as an era of gradually increasing in sociopolitical inequality, culminating in the emergence of the first Maya rulers, but archaeologists find little evidence for inequality at Maya settlements throughout the long Middle Preclassic period (c. 1000-350 BC). We are interested in the social organization of these early Maya settlements. Rather than asking how Maya kingship evolved, we focus on



relationships that existed during the Middle Preclassic itself (see also Canuto 2016; Pugh 2021). While our positions within modern nation-states may cause archaeologists to assume the development of inequality and state-level society is inevitable or natural, studies of early and nonwestern complex societies, like that of the Middle Preclassic Maya, give a richer and more varied picture of the ways in which people can organize themselves.

The concept of heterarchy was introduced into archaeology by Carole Crumley (Crumley 1987, 1995). Crumley defines heterarchy as “the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked or when they possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways, depending on conditions” (Crumley 2003). She points out that human societies (among other complex structures) are not necessarily organized into hierarchies, with elements nested and influence moving from the top down (Crumley 1995). Rather, they are often made up of overlapping, or cross-cutting, elements that affect one another in multiple directions. A society may be very hierarchical in one aspect (e.g., politically), but not hierarchical in another aspect (e.g., economically). Crumley emphasizes the flexibility and adaptability of heterarchies, in which both vertical and horizontal relationships may be reorganized in response to changing conditions. She explains that social systems may become more centralized (more rigidly hierarchical) or less centralized (more democratic) over time. Many scholars have found heterarchy useful in understanding ancient Maya social organization (Ashmore 2004; Becker 2004; Joyce and Hendon 2000; Potter and King 1995; Scarborough et al. 2003).

Here, we focus on the ways communities are formed and transformed through ritual practices. We define *community* as a supra-household social group, created through interactions, that shares concerns, beliefs, or identities (Yaeger and Canuto 2000:5–9). Communities cross-cut one another, and smaller communities are nested within larger ones. They include diverse and contradictory interests. Ritual unites communities while simultaneously facilitating divisions in those communities. While communal rituals are inclusive, ritual spaces, objects, and knowledge are often restricted to specialists. Ritual specialists may gain higher status and authority – or not. Catherine Bell (Bell 1992) defines *ritualization* as the processes (including repetition, formalization, and others) by which certain actions are set apart and argues that ritualized practices create political relationships within societies. However, she points out, ritual is a flexible strategy for the creation of such relationships, as ritual can be reinterpreted, changed, or rejected by participants. As rituals create social relationships, they differentiate “local” communities, which may be integrated into larger communities through other performances at certain times (Bell 1992:125). By identifying rituals archaeologically, we should be able to see social and political relationships in a past society and how those relationships changed over time.

While archaeologists cannot directly observe the rituals of past societies, ritualized actions should leave physical evidence. One way to investigate ritual is through the built environment. Architecture often serves as a stage for ritual performances, and the characteristics of that architecture affect the phenomenological aspects of rituals, determining, for example, the distance between performer and audience (Fogelin 2003; Inomata 2006; Inomata and Coben 2006; Mills 2007; Moore 1996). Labor investment in architecture may also give insight into the organization of groups that built and maintained spaces for ritual performances (Abrams 1994; Murakami 2015). Here, we analyze a particular form of ritual architecture to better understand social and political relationships in early Maya communities.



Bell notes that multiple systems of ritual coexist within societies, sometimes in tension (Bell 1997:173–177). These systems may be integrated and differentiated to different degrees. People often participate in two seemingly incompatible systems, such as ancestor veneration and Christianity. Alternatively, complementary systems may be integrated into an overarching hierarchy. As MacLellan has shown elsewhere, throughout the Middle Preclassic period, Maya domestic and public rituals had little in common (MacLellan 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Communal rituals in public plazas involved the caching of greenstone objects and elevation of specialists on increasingly tall platforms. Meanwhile, domestic rituals involved low, circular platforms and probably ceramic figurines. Public and domestic ritualized activities created different but intersecting communities in early Maya society. Two distinct systems coexisted until a major shift in ritual practices occurred around 350 BC, at the transition to the Late Preclassic period, when public and domestic rituals became more similar and more integrated. This raises questions about the relationships among early Maya households and how those changed around 350 BC.

The preceding description of domestic and public rituals gives a simplified picture of society. While the dichotomy of domestic vs. public has been a useful tool in discerning patterns in Preclassic Maya activities, it is a somewhat artificial division. Many spaces and activities do not fit into the opposing categories of public and private, but rather create overlapping, intermediate communities. Public contexts can also be domestic, as in the case of palaces. Supra-household ritual practices and spaces also existed in the residential areas of Maya sites.

Ethnographies and historical documents from the Maya area indicate that during the modern period, multiple groups of religious specialists conduct different rituals within a community (Bunzel 1952; Colby and Colby 1981; La Farge 1947; La Farge and Byers 1931; Oakes 1951; Reina 1966; Vogt 1969). The rituals include prayers, blessings, dances, channeling of spirits, divinations, healing, feasts, and calendrical ceremonies. Many supra-household rituals take place within or around dwellings. Community members often take turns serving in religious offices and hosting important objects and costly events in their homes. These accounts help us to imagine ways in which ritual could have shaped relationships among Preclassic households.

Investigations at the level between the domestic and the public should improve our understanding of Middle Preclassic Maya society. Three Late Middle Preclassic (c. 700-350 BC) round structures recently excavated at Ceibal, in Guatemala, provide evidence that household and supra-household rituals were carried out within the domestic groups. These findings provide an avenue for the investigation of the relationships created among early Maya households through rituals outside of the public plaza.

Preclassic Round Platforms

Early in the transition to a sedentary, agriculturalist lifestyle, the ancient Maya began to build low, clay and marl platforms on which perishable dwellings were raised. These platforms, arranged around rectangular open spaces, formed patio groups, a form of domestic architecture that would persist throughout the Classic and Postclassic periods and, in some areas, into modern times. During the Late Middle Preclassic period, after c. 700 BC, the Maya adopted the practice of building stone-walled platforms to elevate the dwellings. Patio groups were rebuilt many



times in the same locations, indicating inheritance of property and attachment to place, likely based on kinship (McAnany 1995).

A patio group may be interpreted as one household or a group of households. In anthropology, a household is generally a group of people who reside together and cooperate economically, whether or not they are related by blood or marriage (Yanagisako 1979). In his study of the Tzotzil Maya community of Zinacanteco, in highland Chiapas, Evon Vogt describes a domestic group “composed of kinsmen, living together in a house compound and sharing a single maize supply” and “engaging in close economic and social cooperation”(Vogt 1969:127–129). Richard Wilk refers to modern Q’eqchi’ Maya patio groups as “household clusters” and sees a high degree of flexibility in their organization (Wilk 1988). During the Late Classic period (c. AD 600-950), individual dwellings within Maya patio groups seem to have performed many economic functions independently and, therefore, might be considered separate households (Inomata and Stiver 1998; Triadan 2000). However, patio groups also shared activity areas and ritual structures, such as shrines. Here, we attribute the patio group to a single household, loosely defined. Economically, it is unclear how independently the individual dwellings operated during the Preclassic period. Since this study is focused on ritual, we emphasize that residents of a patio group shared ritual structures and cooperated in ritual activities. When we discuss supra-household activities, we refer to multiple patio groups.

Along with the patio group, another form of domestic architecture spread throughout the lowlands during the Late Middle Preclassic period. Low, circular or “keyhole-shaped” (circular with a rectangular protrusion) platforms began to be constructed in residential areas, within or near patio groups. These platforms show no evidence of superstructures (no post-holes) and are normally too small (3-6 m diameter) to have served as dwellings. Some were built in the same manner as contemporaneous house platforms, with walls of rough stones, but many required higher investment of labor and materials (e.g., plaster coatings). At some sites, round structures disappear at the end of the Middle Preclassic, while at other sites they continue during the Late Preclassic period (c. 350 BC - AD 300). Aimers et al. and Hendon describe the Preclassic round platforms in detail and argue, convincingly, that these structures served as stages for ritual performances (Aimers et al. 2000; Hendon 1999, 2000; see also Szymanski 2010). Interestingly, the site of San José Mogote, in Oaxaca, also features a low, circular, adobe structure (6 m in diameter) interpreted as a dance platform and dated to the equivalent of the Late Middle Preclassic (Rosario ceramic phase) (Marcus and Flannery 1996:130–131).

Due to the presence of multiple burials in or near the circular structures of Cahal Pech, in the Belize River Valley, Aimers and colleagues connect the architecture to the form of ancestor veneration described by McAnany at K’axob, in northern Belize (McAnany 1995). However, the majority of the Cahal Pech burials date to later time periods, when, based on the site stratigraphy, the round platforms were not visible (Aimers et al. 2000; Awe 1992:173–203; Lee 1996; Lee and Awe 1995; Powis 1995). The burials are not placed directly in the round platforms or oriented in a way that suggests knowledge of the location of the buried structures. It is likely that these burials were interred in a later domestic patio floor, as became customary throughout the lowlands, and happened to partially intrude into the Middle Preclassic platforms. In general, Middle Preclassic burials are rare outside of northern Belize (Awe 1992:334–335; Ringle 1985:288–313), so most round platforms are not associated with interments. Although rituals on



round platforms could have involved ancestors, there is no evidence of the human-remains-centered veneration practices documented at K'axob.

In a response to Aimers et al., Hendon points out that the rituals on round platforms would have fostered the formation of household-level identities (Hendon 2000). While such rituals certainly could have promoted group cohesion, we note that they may also have created different roles within (and between) households. Elsewhere, Hendon interprets the construction of round structures in patio groups during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods as a response to the monopolization of public ritual by early Maya rulers, suggesting that increased investment in household level ritual challenged the centrality of the ruler (Hendon 1999:118–119). We should note that the circular structures significantly predate the earliest clear evidence of Maya rulers (which appears around 100 BC). However, we agree that domestic rituals created smaller group identities, or local communities, than were formed in communal rituals in public plazas. During the Middle Preclassic, domestic ritual may have been a centrifugal force in opposition to, or in tension with, public ceremonies.

With these discussions in mind, from 2009 to 2015, we investigated two areas (Platform A-24 and the Karinel Group) at the early Maya site of Ceibal, in southwestern Petén, Guatemala, and recorded three Late Middle Preclassic round structures. Our analyses give a complex picture of the roles of circular platforms and suggest the presence of supra-household rituals outside of a public plaza setting.

Middle Preclassic Ceibal

In the 1960s, a team of Harvard University archaeologists led by Gordon Willey investigated the ancient Maya center of Ceibal (Seibal) and uncovered evidence of the site's surprisingly early foundation (Willey et al. 1975). In 2005, Takeshi Inomata and Daniela Triadan of the University of Arizona began the Ceibal-Petexbatún Archaeological Project to investigate the origins of Maya society. The project has confirmed that Ceibal was founded as a ceremonial center with a monumental public plaza around 1000 BC (Inomata et al. 2013; Inomata, Triadan, et al. 2017). The ceramic chronology of the site was created by Jeremy Sabloff of the Harvard project (Sabloff 1975) and refined by Inomata (Inomata 2017).

Ceibal is important in understanding the development of complex society in the Maya lowlands, because it was founded around the time that the Maya began living a sedentary, agriculturalist lifestyle and using pottery. Other sites that date to the same period include Cuello, in northern Belize, and Blackman Eddy and Cahal Pech, in the Belize River Valley (Awe 1992; Brown and Garber 2005; Garber et al. 2004; Hammond 1991; Healy et al. 2004). However, Ceibal is the only securely dated Maya site with a public space that dates to the transition to sedentism. At Ceibal, we have the opportunity to trace changes in the relationship between public and domestic spheres from the beginning of sedentary life (Inomata, MacLellan, and Burham 2015).

The earliest period of occupation at Ceibal is divided into the Real (Early Middle Preclassic, c. 1000-700 BC) and Escoba (Late Middle Preclassic, c. 700-300 BC) ceramic phases. During the first part of the Early Middle Preclassic (Real 1-2 ceramic phases), many of the people who built and gathered in the Central Plaza of Ceibal seem to have maintained a semi-mobile lifestyle



(Inomata, MacLellan, Triadan, et al. 2015). We find the first clear evidence of permanent domestic structures after 750 BC (Real 3 ceramic phase) (Triadan et al. 2017). During that phase, Ceibal’s earliest known patio groups were built.

During the subsequent Late Middle Preclassic period, many sites were founded throughout the Maya lowlands, including several with monumental public architecture. A distinct “Maya” material culture, more homogenous and recognizable than before, was shared across the region. As mentioned above, patio groups were built on labor-intensive stone foundations and then rebuilt in the same location, over generations. Some were associated with round platforms. The Ceibal-Petexbatún Archaeological Project excavated substantial Late Middle Preclassic domestic architecture and deposits in three areas: the East Court, Platform A-24, and the Karinel Group (Fig. 1). We uncovered one round structure at Platform A-24 and two at the Karinel Group (Table 1).

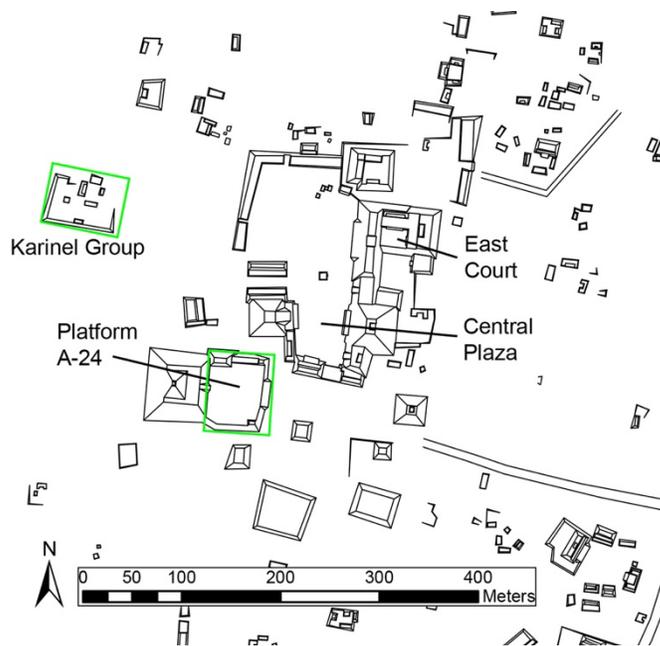


Figure 1. Map of central Ceibal, with Platform A-24 and the Karinel Group outlined (after Smith 1982).

Table 1. Late Middle Preclassic round platforms excavated at Ceibal.

Structure	Location	Approx. date constructed	Approx. end of use	Diameter	Height
Kotko	Platform A-24	600-450 BC	350 BC	3.85 m	0.30 m
Sutsu	Karinel Group	600-450 BC	350 BC	5 m	0.40 m
47-Sub-3	Karinel Group	600-450 BC	350 BC	6 m	0.20 m

Structure Kotko at Platform A-24

Platform A-24 is located near the Central Plaza of Ceibal. The Ceibal-Petexbatún Archaeological Project began investigating the platform in 2005, and Castillo oversaw the excavations from



2009 to 2011. Like the Central Plaza, the first version of A-24 dates to about 1000 BC (Castillo 2013; Triadan et al. 2017). From the beginning, A-24 was a monumental structure, 1.3 m tall and at least 34 m wide. During the Early Middle Preclassic, A-24 reached 3.5 m in height and supported small, burned clay superstructures, which may or not have been residential. If the superstructures were dwellings, they predate all other examples from the site, and A-24 may have been home to high-status or specialist individuals from the earliest phase of Ceibal's occupation. The evidence, however, is not conclusive.

During the Late Middle Preclassic, A-24 was remodeled, and stone-walled superstructures were built there for the first time. Castillo found the round Structure Kotko (Fig. 2) among a series of Escoba 2 phase (c. 600-450 BC) platforms built at A-24, near the eastern edge of the Late Middle Preclassic basal platform (Castillo 2013:33–40). Kotko was built over an earlier, smaller rectangular platform. It had a retaining wall of one row of roughly shaped limestone blocks, one to two courses high. Kotko appeared to be roughly semicircular and north-facing, although the southern part of the structure was not well preserved or defined. A small area of flagstone flooring abutted the northwest wall, possibly indicating an entrance point and giving the structure more of a “keyhole” shape. The structure had a diameter of 3.85 m and height of about 0.30 m. Castillo found no postholes in the surface of Kotko (and no postholes in the surface of its rectangular predecessor). Structure Kelko, a long and narrow rectangular structure less than a meter east of Kotko, also lacked superstructures and may have served as a boundary. No clear dwellings were found. However, dense middens of ceramic sherds, animal bones, and charcoal were found on two successive floors associated with Kotko. These trash deposits could indicate either residential occupation or ceremonial feasting. Either way, we expect that a contemporaneous domestic patio group existed at A-24, west of Kotko.



Figure 2. Structure Kotko (photo by Takeshi Inomata). The flagstone surface and Structure Kelko are outlined.

Structure Kotko is not the only Preclassic Maya round building found near the edge of a basal platform. Similar architecture has been excavated at Uaxactun and Cahal Pech.

Uaxactun Group E

Castillo compares Structure Kotko to a group of four Preclassic round structures found at Group E, Uaxactun (Castillo 2013:68–69). During the Late Middle Preclassic or beginning of the Late Preclassic, Structures E, F, and G were built in the residential area Group E, but were separated from the domestic patio group by a low wall, discussed in more detail below (Hendon 1999:105, 112–113; Ricketson 1937:114–117, 134–137). The four platforms were 0.30-0.45 m tall and 5-6 m in diameter. Structures E and F were keyhole-shaped. Structure G was made up of two circular platforms connected by a rectangular plaster platform or pathway. All four round structures were covered in hard stucco, and none had signs of superstructures. These open platforms were located at the northeastern corner of the basal platform of Group E. The area was bounded by a 0.33-0.43 m tall stone wall in the west and south and the steep edge of the basal platform in the north and east. Hendon connects this boundary to the low walls or lines of stones that demarcated spaces for dances or other rituals at Preceramic Gheo-Shih and Early Formative San José Mogote, in Oaxaca (Drennan 1983a, 1983b; Hendon 1999:117; Marcus 1989; Marcus and Flannery 2004).

Cahal Pech Structure B-4

Structure Kotko also resembles a Middle Preclassic round platform found at Structure B-4 at Cahal Pech. An early elite household may have occupied the area of Structure B-4 as early as the Early Middle Preclassic period (Awe 1992:112–137). During the Late Middle Preclassic, a large basal platform supported small, likely residential, superstructures (Awe 1992:114–119). Near the northern edge of the basal platform, where steps led down to the public space of Plaza B, Awe encountered the edge of round Structure B-4/7th, the wall of which is made up of two to three courses of limestone blocks (Aimers et al. 2000; Awe 1992:116–118, 136–138, 211–212). B-4/7th could be circular, semicircular, or apsidal, but it is interpreted as an example of the Preclassic circular platforms found throughout the lowlands. The location of Structure B-4/7th near a stairway leading to the plaza suggests that non-residents may have participated in or witnessed performances on this platform.

Structure Kotko fits a pattern of low, open, round platforms located in residential, non-public, areas but separated from the actual domestic architecture. While some Preclassic circular structures are found within patio groups, the examples from Ceibal A-24, Uaxactun Group E, and Cahal Pech B-4 were built in special areas where audiences that extended beyond the members of the local household could have gathered. However, these bounded areas were not very accessible and would not have allowed for audiences on the scale of a public plaza. Rather, we suggest these platforms were used for supra-household ritual performances, possibly including feasts. Evidence from the Karinel Group gives a more complex picture of these events.

Round Structures at the Karinel Group

The Karinel Group is a residential area located 160 m west of the Central Plaza, first occupied in the Real 2 phase but apparently without permanent domestic architecture until the Real 3 phase. Unlike the residential groups at the East Court and A-24, it is not elevated on a monumental



platform. The group was first investigated by Gair Tourtellot in the 1960s (Tourtellot 1988:171–174). MacLellan oversaw four seasons of excavations at the Karinel Group from 2012 through 2015, with the goal of studying the role of domestic ritual in the development of ancient Maya society (MacLellan 2019a, 2019b).

During the Late Middle Preclassic, a patio group existed in the northeast, where the bedrock is highest. The smoothed and cleaned sterile soil served as the first patio floor. During the Escoba 2 phase (c. 600–450 BC), a circular platform called Structure Sutsu was built in the patio (Fig. 3, 4). Structure Sutsu is about 0.40 m tall and 5 m in diameter. The outer wall is made up of two concentric rings of limestone blocks. A layer of stones outside the southwest wall of Sutsu was removed during excavation, but it may have indicated the entrance point and created a “keyhole” shape, like the flagstone surface to the northwest of Kotko. The surface of Sutsu was not plastered, or the plaster did not preserve. There is no evidence of a superstructure. Structure Sutsu was built 1.6 m west of a rectangular platform called Structure Saqb’in-1, which was likely a house platform. A small, contemporaneous midden (a small quantity of deer bones, snail shells, chert debitage, and Escoba phase sherds) was deposited southwest of Structure Sutsu.



Figure 3. Structure Sutsu after excavation of fill down to leveled bedrock surface (photo by Takeshi Inomata). Note the location of the small midden. The possible entrance and Structure Saqb'in-1 are outlined.

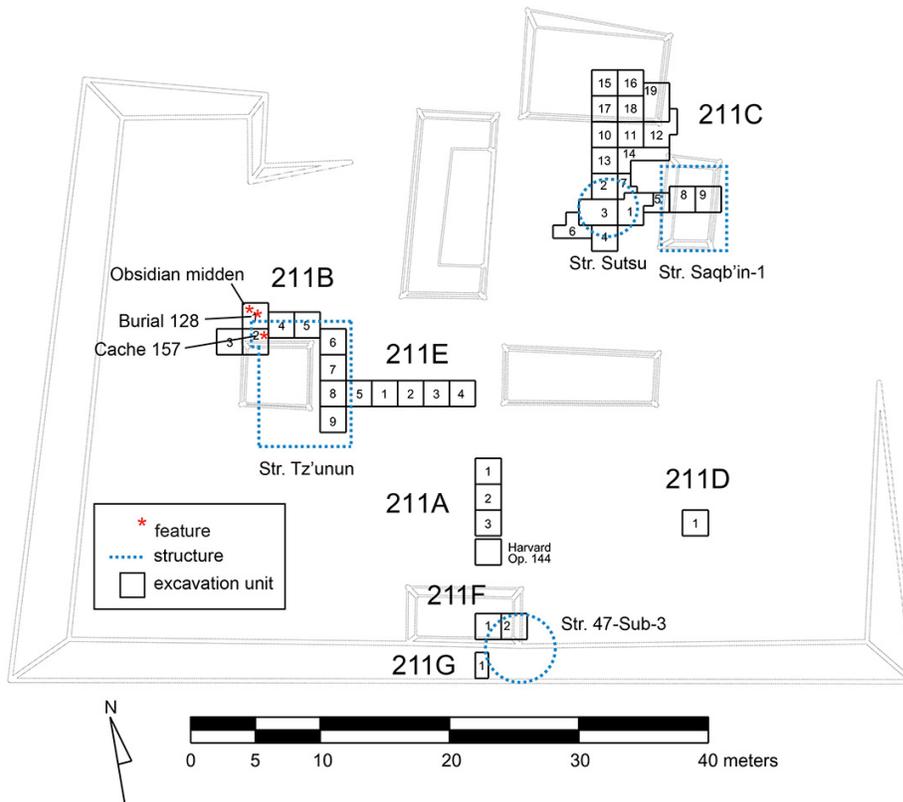


Figure 4. Map of the Karinel Group (after Smith 1982) showing the excavated units and features dated to the Escoba 2 phase (c. 600-450 BC). Limits of structures are approximated. Features are described in other publications (Aoyama 2017:291–292; Aoyama et al. 2017; MacLellan 2019a, 2019c).

A broken slate pectoral plaque (Fig. 5) decorated with a pyrite mosaic was found in the fill of Structure Sutsu. Slate artifacts were common at Cahal Pech and Pacbitun (Cheetham 1996; Healy et al. 1995; Hohmann and Powis 1996), and pectoral pyrite mosaic mirrors are also found in the Olmec region (Carlson 1981; Healy and Blainey 2011; Marshack 1975). Olmec-style greenstone pectoral plaques were found in caches in the Central Plaza of Ceibal, but we do not know if they were worn or imported only for ritual caching (Inomata, Pinzón, et al. 2017; Inomata and Triadan 2015). A personal ornament, as opposed to an object cached in communal ceremonies, the slate pectoral may indicate that a member of the Karinel Group household held a special status during the Late Middle Preclassic.

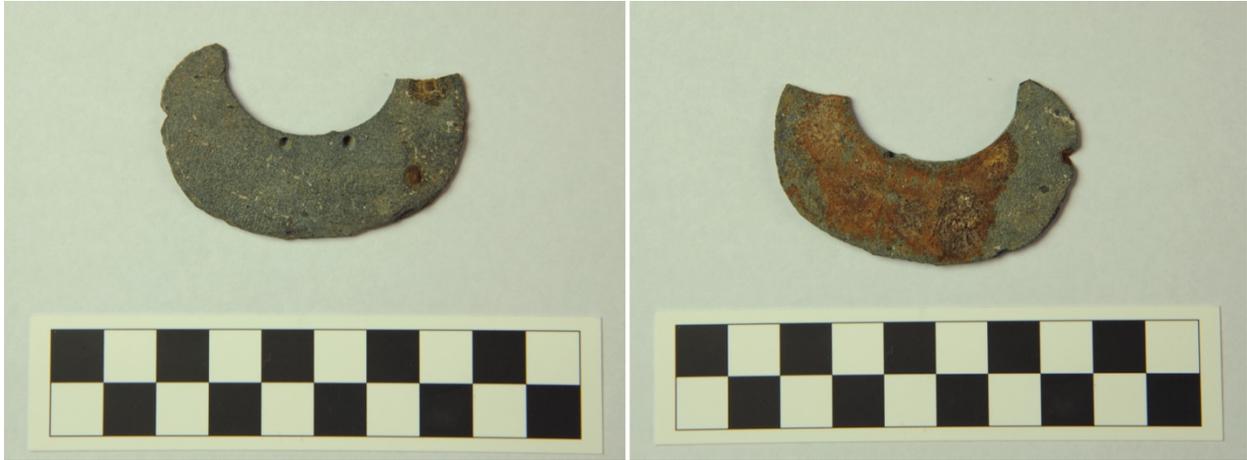


Figure 5. Back (L) and front (R) of slate pectoral plaque (photos by Takeshi Inomata). Note the perforations for hanging and pyrite inclusions visible on the back and traces of pyrite mosaic on the front.

Structure Sutsu remained in use throughout the Escoba 3 ceramic phase (c. 450-350 BC), when additional house platforms were built to the north (Fig 6). A large midden that may represent feasting was deposited in an oval-shaped pit in the patio between these platforms -- an unusual location for a trash deposit. The pit measured 2 m by 1.2 m and was 0.4 m deep at the deepest point. Considering its position in the middle of the patio, the pit was probably filled in a single event. The midden contained freshwater snail (*Pomacea*) shells, animal bones (including dog), chert, greenstone beads, obsidian, ceramic figurine fragments, and discs made from potsherds. The ceramic sherd assemblage included segments of several large serving plates (type Juventud Red) and unusual vessel forms, including “mushroom stands.” The ceramics were attributed to the Escoba 3 phase based on the vessel forms and decorations. A charcoal sample provided a consistent radiocarbon date (AA-107121: 2252 ± 25 BP, 391-207 BC 2σ cal., IntCal-20). In terms of the artifact classes and vessel forms, this midden resembles a Late Middle Preclassic deposit recorded at Nixtun-Ch’ich’ in northeastern Guatemala (Rice and Pugh 2017:7–8). The Nixtun-Ch’ich’ midden was found in a public ceremonial area, and Rice and Pugh interpret the feature as the result of feasting, after which the serving vessels and other items were ritually broken and deposited into a deep pit. The partial plates and other materials from the Karinel Group midden could also have been part of a feast that ended in a ritualized deposition.

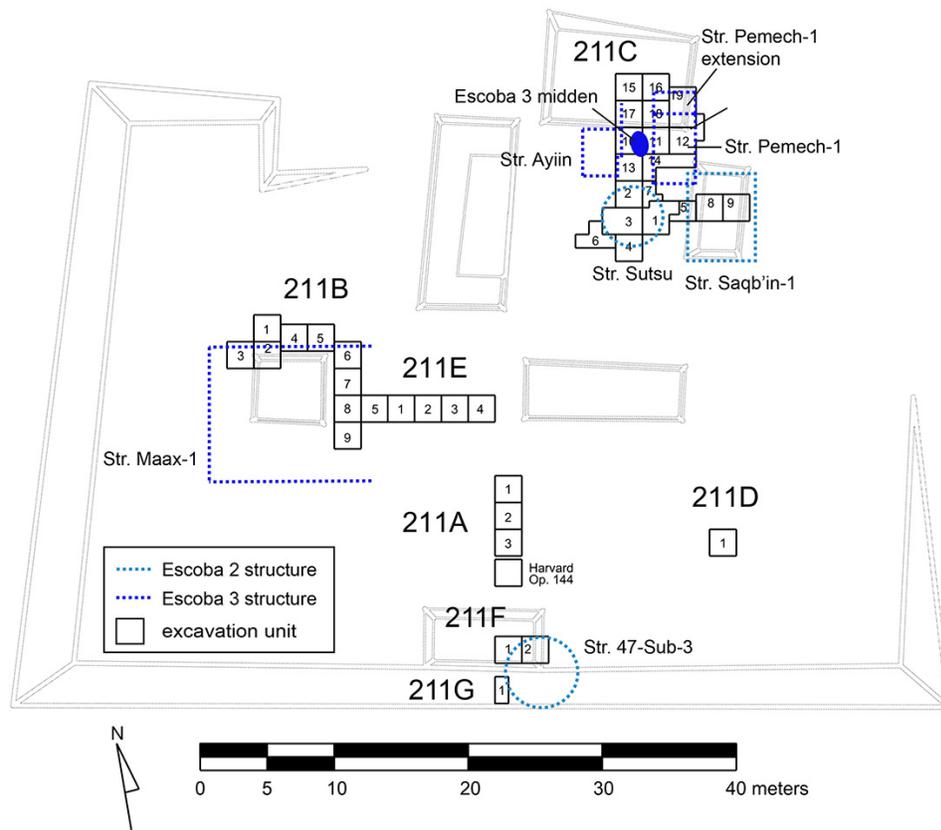


Figure 6. Map of the Karinel Group (after Smith 1982) showing the excavated units and features dated to or in use during the Escoba 3 phase (c. 450-350 BC). The limits of the structures are approximated.

To the south, where the bedrock is naturally lower, the basal platform of the Karinel Group was built up and leveled during the Early and Middle Preclassic periods. However, this area remained lower in elevation than the area of the patio group. Below Structure 47, a small shrine or temple visible at the modern ground level, we uncovered another round platform dated to the Escoba 2 phase (Fig. 4, 7). Structure 47-Sub-3 is contemporaneous with Structure Sutsu, although the base of 47-Sub-3 is about 0.4 m lower in elevation than that of Sutsu. Like Structure Kotko at Platform A-24 (also of the Escoba 2 era), 47-Sub-3 is located near the edge of a basal platform. The partially excavated platform is circular or semi-circular, and its diameter is approximately 6 m. Most of the interior of 47-Sub-3 was destroyed in antiquity, but no signs of a superstructure were found. The wall of 47-Sub-3 is made up of pure white, soft, limestone blocks and is 0.20 m tall. The surface was a yellow plaster. Unlike most of the Karinel Group, the area around 47-Sub-3 was resurfaced with several successive, thin, plaster and burned clay floors. More time and resources were invested in the construction and maintenance of this southern sector of the Karinel Group than in other areas of the group. Like Structure Sutsu, 47-Sub-3 remained a round platform throughout the Escoba 3 ceramic phase, until the end of the Middle Preclassic period.



Figure 7. Structure 47-Sub-3 (photo by Takeshi Inomata). Excavation measures 2 m north to south and 4 m east to west.

No burials were associated with Structures Sutsu and 47-Sub-3. Burial 160 was found in the bedrock below Structure Sutsu, but radiocarbon dating of bone shows that the burial predates the building significantly (PSU-5950: 2640 ± 20 BP, 826-789 BC 2σ cal., IntCal-20).

As Hendon observes, Preclassic round structures can be found both within and outside of domestic patios (Hendon 2000). However, to the best of our knowledge, the Karinel Group is the only location where round structures have been found both within *and* outside of a patio group. Comparisons may be made to the multiple circular platforms of Uaxactun's Group E (Hendon 1999; Ricketson 1937), described above, but the coexistence of Structures Sutsu and 47-Sub-3 is different in an important way. These two platforms suggest two levels or spheres of ritual. The less energetically expensive Sutsu would have been surrounded by domestic buildings. Performances there were visible and accessible to a relatively small number of people at a given time. Meanwhile, 47-Sub-3 seems to have been located at the southern edge of an open space, where a larger group could have assembled. A larger community may also have contributed to the relatively expensive and elaborate construction at 47-Sub-3. Based on both the audience area and labor investment, that community should be smaller than the one that built and used the Central Plaza but larger than the household (or cluster of cooperating households) that occupied the Karinel Group and whose dwellings surrounded Structure Sutsu.

Transition to the Late Preclassic



Structure Sutsu and Structure 47-Sub-3 were covered by new construction around the beginning of the Late Preclassic period (c. 350-300 BC), when the Karinel Group's spaces and ritual practices were reorganized. The Middle Preclassic patio group was filled in and replaced by a long platform with a front terrace, Structure 45a-Sub-1. The Late Preclassic structure resembles Structure 312 at Cuello, where an early patio group was also filled in at the end of the Middle Preclassic (Hammond et al. 1991:41–44). Structure 47-Sub-3 was transformed into a rectilinear platform, although the white arc of its limestone wall was left visible in the surface of the earliest version of Structure 47-Sub-2. At Platform A-24, round Structure Kotko and neighboring small Escoba 2 phase structures were also covered by the construction of a large, open platform at the end of the Middle Preclassic period (Castillo 2013:39–40; Triadan et al. 2017).

Although round structures continued to be built at some Maya sites during the Late Preclassic period (c. 350-75 BC), including Cahal Pech and Río Azul (Aimers et al. 2000; Hendon 1999) this was not the case at Ceibal. The end of Ceibal's Preclassic circular structures coincides with a transformation in ritual practices that occurred across the lowlands. Around 350 BC, public and domestic rituals became much more similar to one another, as people created intrusive caches of ceramic vessels and other objects in residential areas and even built temple pyramids in peripheral groups (Burham 2019; Burham et al. 2020; Burham and MacLellan 2014; MacLellan 2019c; Ringle 1999; Tourtellot 1988:277–284, 381). At the same time, Preclassic ceramic figurines, thought to be involved in domestic rituals, fell out of use in the Maya area and other parts of Mesoamerica (Guernsey 2020). This relatively abrupt shift in ritual practices must be connected to changes in social organization and deserves further investigation.

Discussion

We are interested in the hierarchical and non-hierarchical relationships among households that made up Middle Preclassic Ceibal. By studying rituals, we can learn more about those relationships, since ritual practices can create and change communities and power relations. To understand the complexity of early Ceibal, we cannot restrict our analysis to the public or the domestic. Rather, we are looking for the groups and practices that existed in between, or overlapped with, the public and the domestic.

Keeping the principles of heterarchy in mind, we consider multiple, overlapping aspects of early Maya society, including the economy. In general, archaeologists find very little evidence of economic inequality during the Middle Preclassic period. All Maya households seem to have had access to basically the same goods (King 2016). As was true during the Classic period, individual households most likely stored and processed their own foods and engaged in craft production (Inomata and Stiver 1998; Triadan 2000). At the Karinel Group, this included obsidian blade manufacture (Aoyama 2017:291–292). However, By 700 BC, a residential patio group at the East Court of Ceibal was built on a monumental basal platform, indicating that one household could marshal a large labor pool to elevate its private dwellings (Triadan et al. 2017). (The basal platform at A-24 could be an even earlier example, but we are not confident that it was used as a residential space before 700 BC.)

We are also interested in the political leadership at early Ceibal. In contrast with the Olmec region, there are no clear depictions of rulers or other authority figures at Middle Preclassic



Maya sites. That does not mean that early Ceibal had no leaders. Ritual specialists with access to Olmec-style greenstone axes and knowledge of the Middle Formative Chiapas style of public ceremonial complex must have organized the site's foundation around 1000 BC (Inomata et al. 2013; Inomata, Pinzón, et al. 2017). We assume that much of the population of Ceibal, along with visitors from within and outside of the Maya area, gathered in the Central Plaza for periodic ceremonies led by these specialists.

The social relationships created through the public rituals became more hierarchical over time. Throughout the Middle Preclassic, the platforms around the Central Plaza grew taller and less accessible, increasing the distance between a relatively small number of performers and the audience (Inomata et al. 2013; Inomata, Pinzón, et al. 2017). The same can be seen at other early sites with monumental public architecture in the Maya lowlands, including Cival, Tikal, and Uaxactun (Clark and Hansen 2001; Estrada-Belli 2011; Laporte and Valdés 1993). At Ceibal, the area of the Central Plaza was also increased, allowing for larger audiences. The changes in architecture did not simply reflect an increasing status differentiation, but rather helped create that differentiation. To create sociopolitical relationships, ritual works on the body (Bell 1992). For example, kneeling or bowing can physically lower a participant before a superior or a symbol of a religious hierarchy. The built environment plays an important role in this process by constraining movements and sensual perceptions. For example, in a study of landscapes, Tadahiko Higuchi shows that increasing the elevation of an object has a physical effect on observers, forcing them to crane their necks backward (Higuchi 1983). Jerry Moore uses Higuchi's work to compare the physical effects of different forms of ancient Andean public architecture (Moore 1996). Moore argues that increasing distance between performer and audience, along with decreasing accessibility of performance spaces, facilitated the development of socio-political hierarchies in the Andes. The elevated residences near the plaza (at the East Court and possibly A-24) may represent elite households emerging through sponsorship and organization of communal rituals and construction projects (Castillo 2013; Clark and Blake 1994; Hill and Clark 2001; Triadan et al. 2017).

However, public ritual was only one ritual system at early Ceibal. As discussed above, rituals in residential areas had little in common with rituals in the Central Plaza throughout the Middle Preclassic period (Burham and MacLellan 2014; MacLellan 2019b, 2019c). The sociopolitical relationships created through domestic and supra-household ritual were not as hierarchical as the public counterparts. In contrast with the public architecture of Ceibal and other early Maya centers, Preclassic circular platforms do not become taller or less accessible over time. They tend to be less than half a meter tall and about 3-6 meters in diameter, like the Ceibal examples (Aimers et al. 2000) (Table 1). Spectators would not have had to crane their necks to see all the action occurring on the round structures. They could also easily hear, smell, and even touch performers. People could step up onto or down from the platforms, changing the makeup of the performers and audience. The shape of the architecture ensured that, as in a modern theater-in-the-round, the audience could have equal access to the performance from multiple positions.

The shape and size of the round platforms do not suggest stratification, but we should also consider differences in investment in the architecture. Some Preclassic circular structures are more elaborate than others, with features like small stairways. Lime plaster, found on some round structures, is costly in terms of time and materials (Abrams 1994; Murakami 2015).



Interestingly, investment in round structures is not tied to the apparent socioeconomic status of households. For example, the Karinel Group featured both a simple (Structure Sutsu) and a more elaborate (Structure 47-Sub-3) circular platform during the Escoba 2 ceramic phase. Meanwhile, the potential emerging elites at A-24, on an elevated platform near the plaza, had the simple Structure Kotko. The same pattern can be seen at Cahal Pech, where Structure B-4-7th is simpler, shorter, and less expensive than Structure 2/2nd at the Zotz Group, an unremarkable, non-elevated patio group in the site periphery (Aimers et al. 2000). While some households may have gained status from rituals on round structures, the emerging elite households that occupied monumental platforms near public plazas at Ceibal (A-24 and East Court) and Cahal Pech (B-4) are not the households with impressive circular platforms. This disjunction is further evidence that two separate ritual systems existed during the Middle Preclassic, one enacted in the public plaza and the other in residential areas.

Many households across the Maya lowlands constructed circular platforms, indicating a widely shared set of practices requiring low, round stages. We agree with others who have studied this form of architecture that the stages were most likely for ritual performances, such as dances (Aimers et al. 2000; Hendon 2000). Like the public rituals in the Central Plaza of Ceibal, ritualized acts on these round stages would have required special knowledge, shared among households. In comparison to public plazas, Preclassic circular structures were built for smaller groups of participants and audiences. The area available to spectators atop and around these round platforms was much smaller than that of the public constructions. That area varied, as seen in the comparison of Structure Sutsu to Structure 47-Sub-3 at the Karinel Group. More and wider excavations of Middle Preclassic residential areas would be necessary before we could quantify the audience spaces with any confidence. However, it seems that round structures not built directly inside patio groups were meant for gatherings larger than that of a single household. In the case of Uaxactun Group E, the four circular platforms were clearly separated from the domestic structures by a low wall and located near the edge of the basal platform. Structures Kotko and 47-Sub-3 at Ceibal, along with B-4/7th at Cahal Pech, are also located near platform edges. Due to their low height, these structures were probably not built to be seen from lower elevations outside the basal platforms. The audience space should instead be the open areas atop the basal platforms, outside the patio groups.

The materials and features associated with round platforms provide more information about the activities that occurred on and around the structures. Preclassic ceramic figurines can be loosely associated with the round platforms, since they are similarly found in residential areas and go out of fashion at the end of the Middle Preclassic period. Several scholars argue that Preclassic figurines were used in domestic rituals in different parts of Mesoamerica (Cyphers Guillén 1993; Grove and Gillespie 2002; Hendon 1999; Love and Guernsey 2007; Marcus 1998; Ringle 1999). Flannery and Drennan identify some early Oaxacan figurines as dancers, raising the possibility of a more direct connection between Preclassic figurines and dance platforms (Flannery and Drennan 1976).

Burials and caches would tell us more about the use and meaning of round structures. As discussed above, no burials are associated with Structures Kotko, Sutsu, and 47-Sub-3. More broadly, the Middle Preclassic burials of Ceibal do not show evidence of the increasing inequality or ancestor veneration practices recorded at Cuello and K'axob, in northern Belize



(Hammond 1999; McAnany 1995; Palomo et al. 2017). For the Middle Preclassic Maya, the ritual caching of objects in intrusive pits was a communal practice that took place in public plazas (MacLellan 2019c). In contrast, the caches identified in residential areas are of (often broken) objects left on surfaces or placed in fills during construction events. No caches are associated with the Preclassic round platforms at Ceibal, with the possible exception of the slate and pyrite pectoral plaque in the fill of Structure Sutsu. That broken object may have been placed intentionally or discarded into a midden that was later incorporated into the fill. The pectoral suggests that personal adornments marked a household member's status by the Escoba 2 phase.

The middens found around Structures Kotko and Sutsu could be the result of feasts hosted by the surrounding households, although it is often difficult to distinguish ceremonial feasting remains from accumulations of everyday domestic trash. Of all the relevant middens, the Escoba 3 pit near Sutsu provides the most evidence of a ritualized event. While Rice and Pugh interpret the Nixtun-Ch'ich' midden as a performance and reification of elite status (Rice and Pugh 2017:7–8), we agree with Brown et al. that most Middle Preclassic Maya feasting was reciprocal and inclusive, rather than hierarchical and exclusive, given the limited evidence for social stratification (Brown et al. 2018:98). Feasts at early Ceibal could have been what Dietler calls “empowering feasts,” events in which individuals or groups attempt to gain prestige by providing large amounts of food (Dietler 1996:92–99, 2001:75–88). However, Smith explains that feasting is a risky and expensive strategy that can fail to deliver higher status (Smith 2015). She also points out that solidarity and social networking are alternative motives for feasting and that feasts and other rituals do not necessarily become more hierarchical over time. We cannot say whether feasting around Middle Preclassic round structures increased inequality, but, like dances, it would have created social relationships among households.

Considering the sparse evidence for inequality among Middle Preclassic households and the characteristics of the architecture, we argue that the communities created through rituals on circular structures were not very hierarchical. Responsibility for hosting dances, feasts, and other events may have cycled among households within early Maya settlements, in a reciprocal fashion. As Hendon suggests, gatherings at the circular platforms in residential areas could have counteracted the centripetal force of the communal, public ceremonies (Hendon 1999). In this way, domestic and supra-household ritual may have maintained relatively horizontal social relationships among groups of households throughout the Middle Preclassic period. These communities were distinct from, but also overlapped with, the one created through public ritual in the Central Plaza. Following Crumley, the mixture of ranked and unranked relationships would have allowed for more flexibility and adaptation in the face of new challenges.

At the major transformation in ritual practices and spaces around 350 BC, rituals became more uniform across all levels of Maya society, from domestic to public. The communities created through ritual must have changed as well. The integration of ritual systems seems to have paved the way for the increase in sociopolitical inequality during the Late Preclassic, as elites began to build their own temple-pyramids in outlying residential groups. At Ceibal, circular platforms were no longer in use, going the way of ceramic figurines. However, circular platforms continued at some sites. The shift in ritual practices was therefore varied and piecemeal, and some relationships based on Middle Preclassic supra-household rituals survived. We speculate that a reduction in the variety of social relationships among households and transition to a more



strongly hierarchical society during the Late Preclassic may have left Ceibal and other sites vulnerable to environmental and political crises during the period of c. 75 BC - AD 300, when they experienced major population declines (Inomata, Triadan, et al. 2017).

Conclusions

At first glance, Preclassic Maya circular structures may seem like a topic of narrow interest. However, by analyzing this unimposing form of architecture, we begin to understand relationships among early Maya households, formed through supra-household rituals. By addressing a scale of social organization between the domestic and the public, we have presented a new, complex view of early Maya social organization. The lens of heterarchy, along with insights from performance studies and practice theory, allow us to see communities that are normally left out of models of Preclassic Maya society. Further excavations in early residential areas and engagement with ethnographic and historic sources could enrich this narrative. We suggest that closer studies of the activities that brought supra-household groups together, without necessarily creating hierarchies, can give archaeologists working around the world a more complete understanding of social complexity in the past.

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