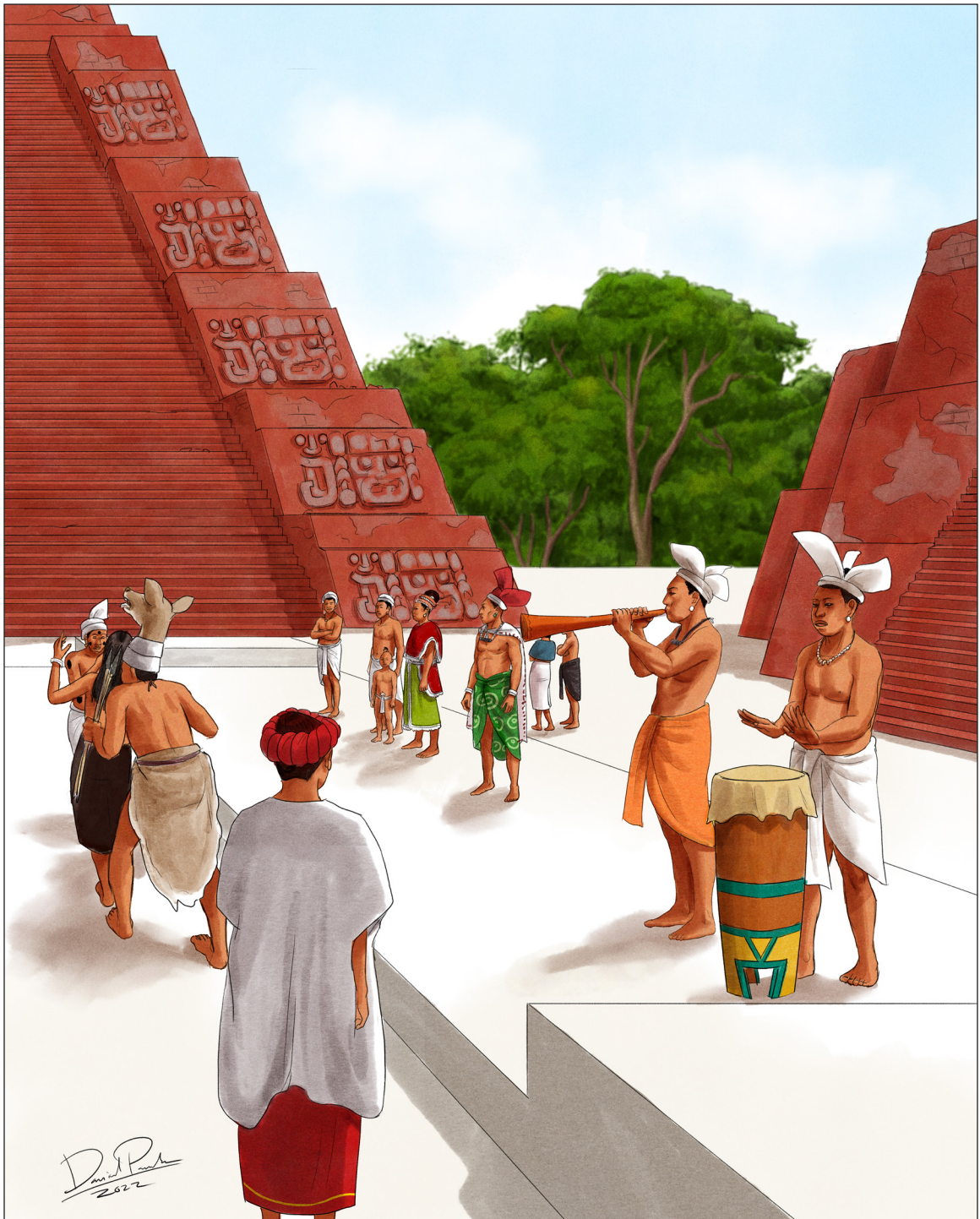


Building Ritual Space at Post-Royal Actuncan, Belize

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The Terminal Classic period in the Maya Lowlands, known colloquially as the Maya collapse, was a period of political fragmentation and social upheaval. At the same time, some local communities, such as at Actuncan in western Belize, were experimenting with new political organizations that were no longer led by Classic period style divine rulers. This transformation produced an ideological crisis because Classic period rulers had positioned themselves as key conduits between the Maya and the gods that controlled the natural cycles. In this article, I report on how the community at Actuncan created a new ritual center within the ruins of an old Preclassic triadic pyramid group as the community built a post-royal political system.

Key Words: Terminal Classic, Ritual, Actuncan, Triadic Groups, Architecture



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The Terminal Classic period (A.D. 780–1000), known colloquially as the period of the Maya collapse in the southern Maya Lowlands, was a complex time of political fragmentation, social disruption, economic isolation, and substantial emigration. Recent research has provided increasingly fine-grain data on both elite and commoner behavior during this era and shows that the collapse was a complex, multi-century process that impacted communities differentially (Aimers 2007; Demarest et al. 2004; Iannone et al. 2016; Lamoureux-St-Hilaire et al. 2015). While the ultimate outcome of this collapse was the rejection of the Classic institution of divine rulership, individual political communities reached that outcome in distinct fashions as they experimented with social and political forms (Chase and Chase 2006; Okoshi et al. 2021).

During this period, the communities of the lower Mopan River valley of modern-day Belize adopted diverse political arrangements as they grappled with shifting political ideologies (Figure 1). The region's Late Classic (A.D. 600–780) capital of Xunantunich clung to the Classic period ideology of divine rulership, even as its rulers' authority contracted (Ashmore et al. 2004; Helmke et al. 2010; LeCount et al. 2002; LeCount and Yaeger 2010; Yaeger 2008). Nearby Buenavista del Cayo, once within the Xunantunich polity, revived its claim to royal authority by burying a king in royal style (Helmke et al. 2008). In contrast, the occupants of Actuncan, located between the previous two sites, rejected divine rulership and the entanglement of politics and cosmology, instead building a new collective form of governance (Mixer 2016, 2017a). This paper explores how the Terminal Classic people of Actuncan built a new ritual space within Plaza A, the Late-to-Terminal Preclassic triadic pyramid group. This new space facilitated the ritual needs of a community adopting a political ideology that disentangled apical leaders from their divine role as supernatural interlocutors. In previous publications I have argued for the roles of the manipulation of communal memory, the intentional political messaging embedded in the reorganization of Actuncan's site layout, and the careful ritual resignification of select public buildings during establishment of the new Terminal Classic political order (Mixer 2017b, 2020; Simova et al. 2015). In this article, I build on that work by providing new details about the community's renovations and reuse of Actuncan's triadic group. I relate these actions to the cosmological significance of triadic groups and ruins specific to the Maya to explain the function of this space for Actuncan's Terminal Classic community.



Actuncan in the Terminal Classic Period: New Ritual Space on Flower Mountain

Settled by 1000 B.C., the site of Actuncan thrived as a Late and Terminal Preclassic capital (400 B.C.–A.D. 250). During its apogee, the city was laid out around at least six broad plazas surrounded by temples, administrative buildings, and elite residences (Figure 2). The site was subdivided in two sections, Actuncan North and Actuncan South, separated by a broad plastered causeway, or *sacbe*, and a ravine. By A.D. 450, Actuncan was superseded as the local capital, first by Buenavista del Cayo and then by Xunantunich. As Xunantunich's authority waned in the Terminal Classic period, the people of Actuncan partially dismantled and ritually terminated the Classic period palace of a noble vassal of Xunantunich (LeCount and Lawhon 2020; Mixer et al. 2013), tore facing

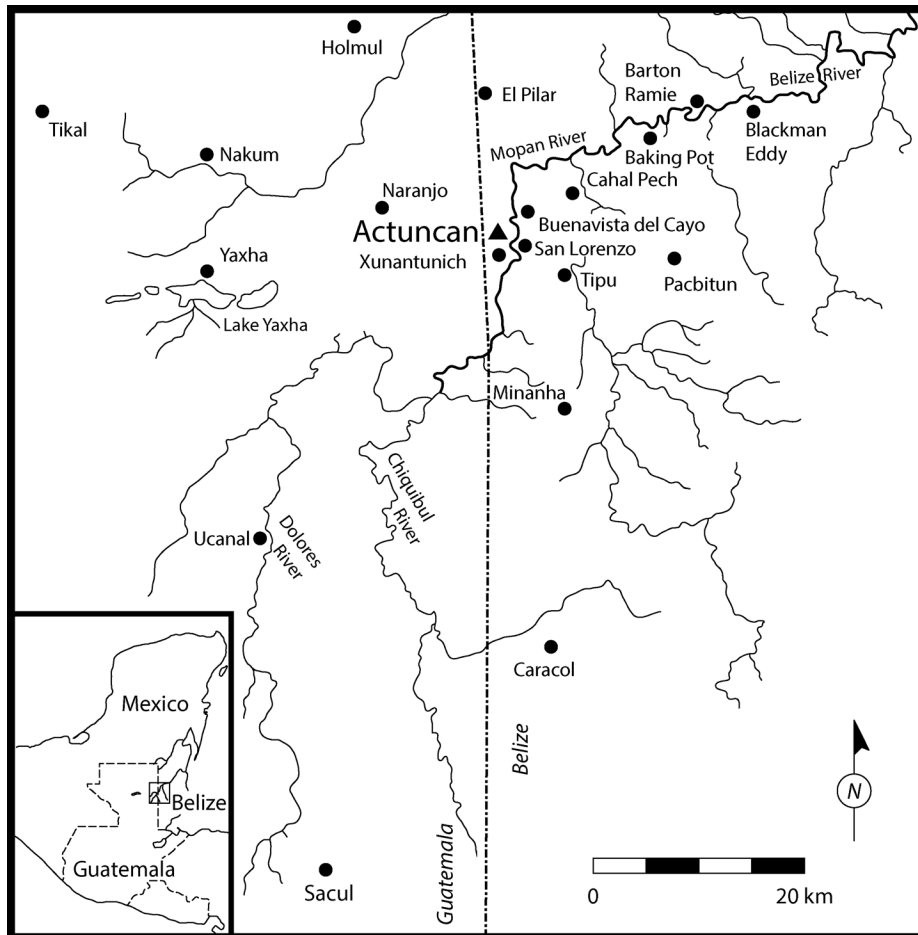


Figure 1. Map showing the location of Actuncan in the context of the lower Mopan River valley.

stones from most of Actuncan North’s Preclassic civic architecture (Mixer 2020), and built a broad platform in Actuncan North to anchor a new and more collective form of governance (Mixer 2016, 2017a).

As community members were building this new civic infrastructure in Actuncan North, they turned their attention to Actuncan South (Figure 3)—a monumental triadic pyramid group whose Structures 1, 2, 3, and 4 form the tallest architectural complex at Actuncan, rising 27 m above the surface of Plaza A. Along with Structures 5 and 6—located on the east and west sides of Plaza A—these buildings were constructed on a 4 m tall basal platform accessed from the site’s central *sacbe* by a broad staircase to the north. Collectively, these six structures form a nested arrangement of triadic structures similar to those constructed across the Maya Lowlands in the Late Preclassic period (Hansen 1998).

While Actuncan South was likely originally constructed as the primary locus of ritual for

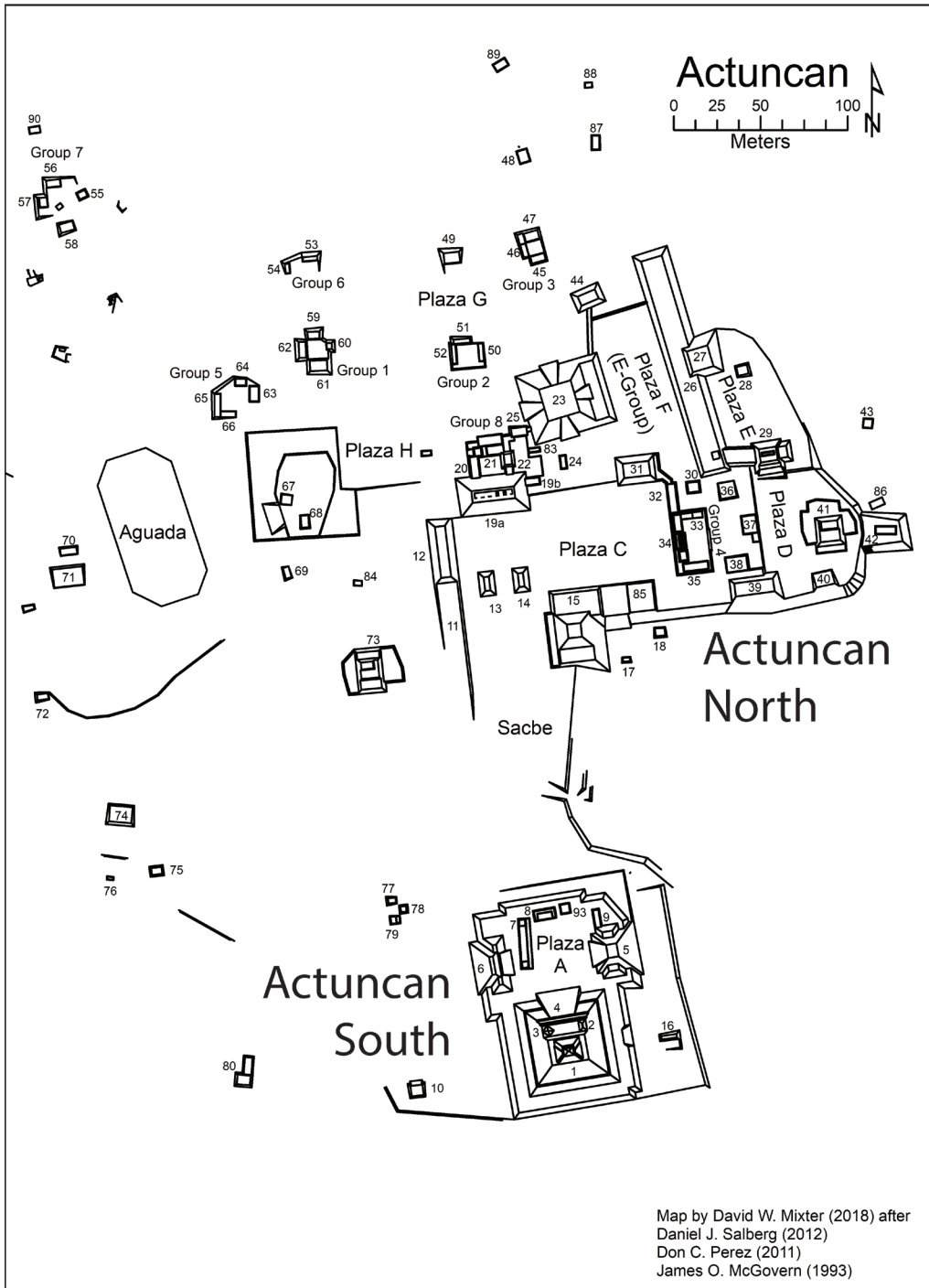


Figure 2. Map of Actuncan.

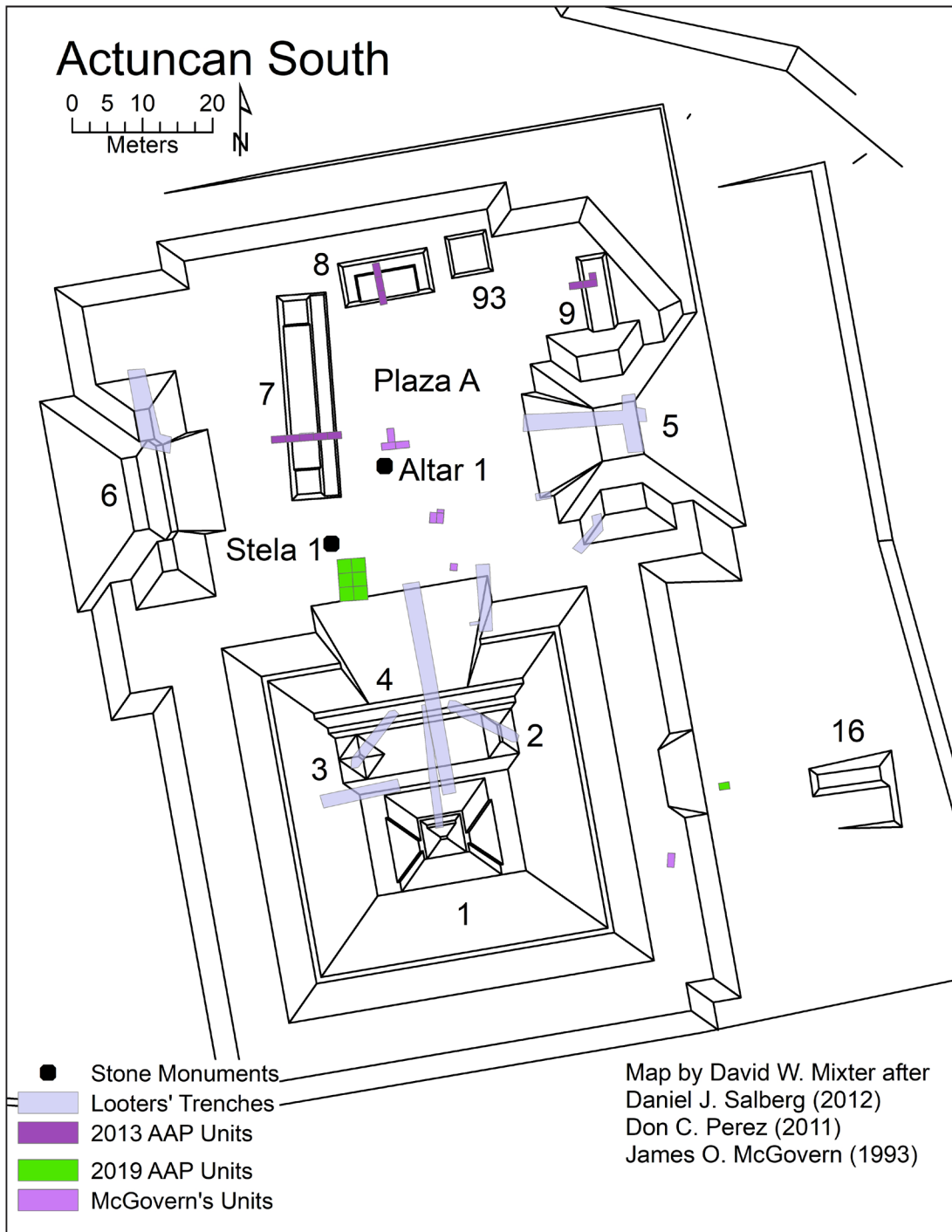


Figure 3. Maps of Actuncan South showing the location of past excavations.

Actuncan's Preclassic rulers, the group's layout referenced concepts that remained relevant to the site's Terminal Classic occupants. Drawing on ancient Maya cosmology, triadic temple groups are often associated with places of origin because they are reminiscent of the three stone arrangement of Maya hearths (Freidel et al. 1993; Hansen 1998:80; Taube 1998). The three-hearthstone place is understood to be the location of creation in Maya cosmology. Recently, Szymański (2014) has argued that triadic groups may also be representative of flower mountain, a lush place conceived as the source of sustenance and the resurrection of the Maize God (following Saturno et al. 2005; Taube 2004). In this interpretation, triadic groups could be the focus of celebrations that connected royal power to the agricultural cycles through reenactments of the rebirth of the Maize God. Similarly, Halperin (2014), drawing on ethnography and the iconography of triadic groups, has argued that abandoned temple-pyramids such as Cerro Mo' at Tayasal were seen as flower mountains—likely with a particular emphasis on the wilderness aspect of these primordial places—and ancestral places. In Halperin's (2014) example, the ancestors inhabiting the effigy mountain were nonspecific. It is likely that each of these meanings were at play in the Terminal Classic understanding of Actuncan, even if the specific political importance of the structure during the Late and Terminal Preclassic periods did not endure (Mixer 2017b).

Approximately 400 years after the end of Actuncan's time as a royal capital, the Terminal Classic community renewed Actuncan South as a space to fit the cosmologically loaded ritual needs of the post-royal community. Because Actuncan was continually occupied from the Preclassic through the Terminal Classic period, community members would have seen and likely passed through Actuncan South during those four centuries. Actuncan South was not a forgotten place. Rather, it had genealogical salience to the local community (Mixer 2017b). Furthermore, I have argued that the physical distance between Actuncan North and South allowed for the creation of separate civic and ritual zones, physically separating the responsibilities previously unified under divine rulers (Mixer 2020). Additionally, the chronological gap in use may have kept Actuncan South safe from the recent negative associations with divine rulership (Mixer 2017b).

In the section that follows, I detail how the architectural transformations that took place within Actuncan South in the Terminal Classic period demonstrate that it was reinterpreted both through transcendent Maya cosmological understandings and the context of specifically Classic period cultural practices.

A Terminal Classic Ritual Place

Our understanding of Actuncan South's Terminal Classic revitalization comes from two sources. First, during the 1990s, McGovern (2004) inspected and mapped the looters' trenches in the triadic group and excavated test pits into Plaza A for a volumetric analysis of the architecture. Through collection of ceramics from the looters' trench profiles, he determined that Actuncan South was largely built during the Late and Terminal Preclassic periods into the Early Classic period (A.D. 250-600). Second, the Actuncan Archaeological Project has undertaken excavations and inspected new looters' trenches within the group since 2013 (Mixer 2019; Mixer and Ferrara 2020; Mixer and Langlie 2014). A radiocarbon date indicates that the last major construction phase of Structure 4, the triadic group's large central structure, occurred A.D. 235-380 (20

calibrated range; UCIAMS-261344). Actuncan South then seems to have been left alone until activity resumed during the Terminal Classic period, as indicated by both radiocarbon and ceramics. One radiocarbon date (A.D. 680-995; 2 σ calibrated range; AA-31355; LeCount et al. 2002) comes from a large, burned deposit of Terminal Classic ceramics on the summit of Structure 5 (described below), while a second date (A.D. 725-885; 2 σ calibrated range; UCIAMS-261345) comes from a tread of the Structure 4 staircase, pointing to renewed activity and possibly renewed construction. These dates are associated with Terminal Classic ceramic diagnostics, which LeCount et al. (2002) argue emerged around A.D. 780.

McGovern (1994:112–113, 2004:159) identified conclusive evidence of Terminal Classic ritual reuse of Actuncan South. He found a dense deposit of burned Terminal Classic ceramics in a masonry room at the summit of Structure 5, the eastern structure of the triadic complex:

A .6 to .75 m. thick layer of [...] burnt Late Classic II and Terminal Classic sherds, broken but complete bowls, dishes, and vases, and charcoal resting on the floor and stairs [...] They were obviously smashed and burnt in situ in what can only be considered a termination ritual. (McGovern 1994:112–113)

The remarkable depth of the deposit on Structure 5 suggests it was likely produced through multiple events rather than a single conflagration. Similar deposits relating to post-royal activity have been identified across the Maya Lowlands (Braswell et al. 2004; Chase and Chase 2004; Navarro-Farr et al. 2008; Stanton et al. 2008). McGovern's (1994:110) clearing of the looters' trench on the summit of Structure 4 provides additional evidence for the Terminal Classic reuse of Actuncan's monumental architecture in the form of a smashed Terminal Classic plate and 12 lithic eccentrics in nearby postholes. Additionally, Mixer and Ferrara (2020) recovered ceramics at the foot of Structure 4's basal staircase near the Terminal Classic radiocarbon date described above (analysis is pending).

A Terminal Classic Constructed Place

Actuncan's triadic group was the site of renewed construction in the Terminal Classic period. Four new buildings, Structures 7, 8, 9, and 93, were built in Plaza A at this time. Their construction blocked access to Plaza A, disrupted the group's Terminal Preclassic symmetry, and created a new ceremonial space reflecting a Classic rather than Preclassic spatial logic. The placement of these buildings shifted focus from the largest Preclassic pyramid, Structure 1 located to the south, to Structure 5, Actuncan South's eastern pyramid. I argue that this shift in orientation reflects the locally salient association between the east and the burial of ancestors that likely was not a major ordering principle for the construction of triadic groups in the Preclassic period when Actuncan South was originally built. During the 2013 field season, narrow trenches were placed across Structures 7, 8, and 9 to determine their layout, date of construction, and function (Mixer and Langlie 2014). Analysis of ceramics from all contexts were used to assign Terminal Classic construction dates to all these buildings following the established ceramic chronology for the region (Gifford 1976; LeCount 1996; LeCount et al. 2002). Structure 93, located between Structures 8 and 9, was first mapped during the 2013 field season, but has not been excavated, and is assumed to be

contemporaneous because it also disrupts the original form of Plaza A.

The following sections detail Structures 7, 8, and 9 based on observations made during mapping and excavations within Plaza A. Additionally, primary artifact deposits from Structures 8 and 9 are described in detail. I have interpreted these buildings and the new space they created as primarily ritual in function based on their location within a Preclassic temple group and the massive contemporaneous ritual deposit on the summit of Structure 5. Additionally, artifact densities and patterns were used to rule out other possible functions (following work from Tidwell 2020). The vast majority of artifacts recovered from Structures 7, 8, and 9 were broken ceramics sherds and lithic debris accompanied a very small number of freshwater jute snail shells (*Pachychilus* sp.), obsidian fragments, groundstone objects, and slate objects. Based on Tidwell's analysis, these contexts were unremarkable in their ceramic density, neither showing the high densities expected in domestic contexts nor the low densities found in non-ritual administrative contexts at Actuncan, such as Actuncan's contemporaneous Terminal Classic civic center (Mendelsohn and Keller 2011; Mixter 2016). Densities of lithics were among the lowest found anywhere at the site, indicating an absence of economic activities. Other artifact classes were recovered in small enough numbers that density figures may not be reliable; however, it is notable that no daub fragments were recovered from these excavations as is typical where platforms supported domestic superstructures. These findings combined with the clear evidence for ritual activity on Structure 5 and 8, as well as the performative setting created by these building, point to a primary ritual function for these Terminal Classic buildings.

Structure 7. Built in three construction phases, Structure 7 is a long and low structure located in the western portion of Plaza A that blocks the front of Structure 6, the triadic group's western pyramid. It was composed of two raised square platforms measuring 3.4 m by 3.4 m connected by a 28 m long lower linear platform. Structure 7 is not wide enough in its earlier phases to have held a superstructure. Rather, the building could have served as a venue for numerous performers to spread out across a broad space with Structure 6 as a dramatic backdrop (Figure 4). Alternatively, the building could have been a location where local dignitaries sat, framed by Structure 6 to observe performances happening in Plaza A on or in front of Structure 5. Each subsequent version of Structure 7 expanded the performance space, allowing for larger performances.

To understand Structure 7's construction, a single 1x10 m trench was placed south of the structure's centerline (Figures 3 and 5). Structure 7-3rd, the earliest version of of the building, was built on a well-polished plaster floor likely built in the Late Classic period over an Early Classic fill layer (likely reflecting the initial renewal of Plaza A). Structure 7-3rd was a 2.4 m wide platform about 30 cm in height. It was built of cut limestone block facings and covered by a plaster floor that may have been built in the Late Classic II period (A.D. 670 to 780).

Sometime before the construction of Structure 7-2nd, the plaza floor between Structures 7 and 6 was raised approximately 15 cm. Although largely eroded, the construction of this plaster floor meant that all future versions of Structure 7 were taller to the east than the west. Structure 7-2nd was a 2.9 m wide platform constructed through a minor modification to Structure 7-3rd. The western side of the structure was extended 50 cm further west with the construction of a new exterior platform face.



Figure 4. Photograph facing west of Structure 7-1st during excavation. Note Structure 6 in the background, which would have served as a backdrop to activities taking place on Structure 7 during the Terminal Classic period.

Structure 7-1st was a 4.3 m wide, 50 cm high platform with a lower 2.3 m wide, 25 cm high terrace extending from its eastern face (Figure 4). This was built by adding additional courses of thin, horizontally placed cut stones on the earlier eastern platform face to raise its height to 50 cm. A new stacked stone western platform face was built in the raised portion of Plaza A between Structures 7 and 6, while the eastern face of the terrace was formed by a row of thin cut limestone blocks placed on their ends so that the wide edge formed the terrace riser. Plaster surfaces covered both the terrace and platform. The addition of this low terrace created a dual-level platform with each level rising 25 cm in height.

All three of Structure 7's construction phases date to the Terminal Classic period. These data indicate that the Terminal Classic Actuncan community was able to marshal labor on multiple occasions to expand and refurbish both ritual and civic structures, implying that the site's Terminal Classic occupation was not short-lived. As the platform widened, it could have accommodated a larger number of performers or observers, while the addition of the terrace would have provided additional space for multiple levels of individuals, increasing possibilities for performative drama. Importantly, as a broad space, the building does not provide a space to elevate a single primary individual. Rather, people on Structure 7's 28 m length would have been at two visual levels. The

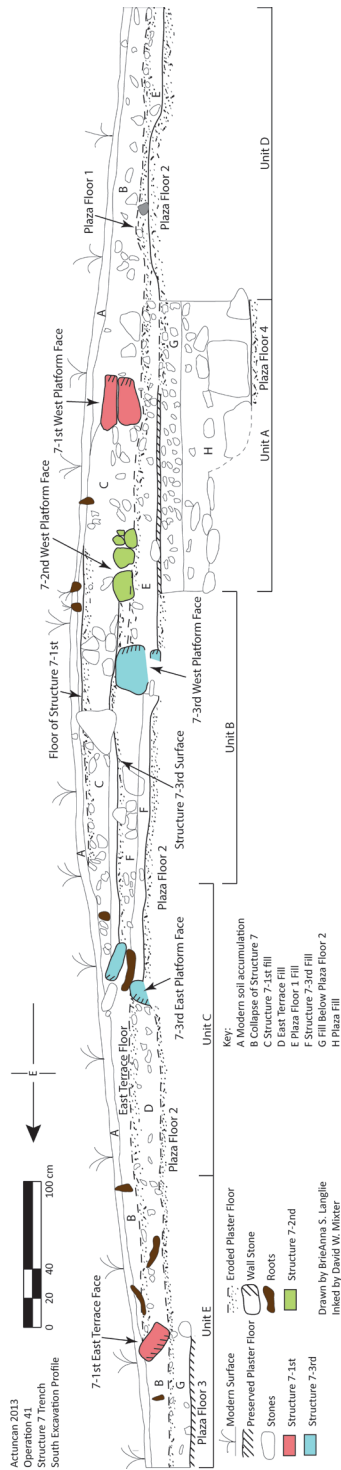


Figure 5. Excavation profile showing the construction phases of Actuncan Structure 7.

building’s length and location also fundamentally reoriented the Preclassic layout of Plaza A. The construction of Structure 7 shifted the center of the plaza east towards Structure 5, emphasizing the group’s east-west axis, and away from the looming Structure 4, by far the group’s tallest building.

Structure 8. Structure 8 is a low rectangular mound centered on the northern margin of Plaza A. This structure blocks the monumental staircase that served as a point of entry to Plaza A from the *sacbe*, creating a threshold building at the top of a previously unimpeded staircase. This kind of building is quite common in the Classic period at the entrance to monumental platforms, but less common in the Preclassic period. A single 1x6 m wide trench was placed to determine the construction sequence and purpose of Structure 8 (Figures 3 and 6). Structure 8 was built in three phases all in the Terminal Classic period, first as a gradually widening platform and then as small structure with a C-shaped wall that was open to the south.

The earliest version, Structure 8-3rd, was a 2.5 m wide plastered platform measuring 20–30 cm in height that was built on the top step of the Early Classic staircase up to Plaza A. The north platform edge sits on the top step of that earlier platform, requiring people to step up and over Structure 8 to gain access to Plaza A. This construction would have restricted access, likely requiring community members to step through a perishable superstructure to access the plaza. The platform faces were built of cut limestone blocks. The northern face was built of a single course of large blocks set flat, while the southern face was built of a single course of thinner stones set on their ends. These upright stones were used as the southern face of the building in each further renovation.

Structure 8-2nd was constructed at the same time as a new primary staircase was built on the north edge of Actuncan South, replacing the old Early Classic staircase and moderately expanding the size of the platform under the entire group. The stairway expansion represents the largest known Terminal Classic construction event

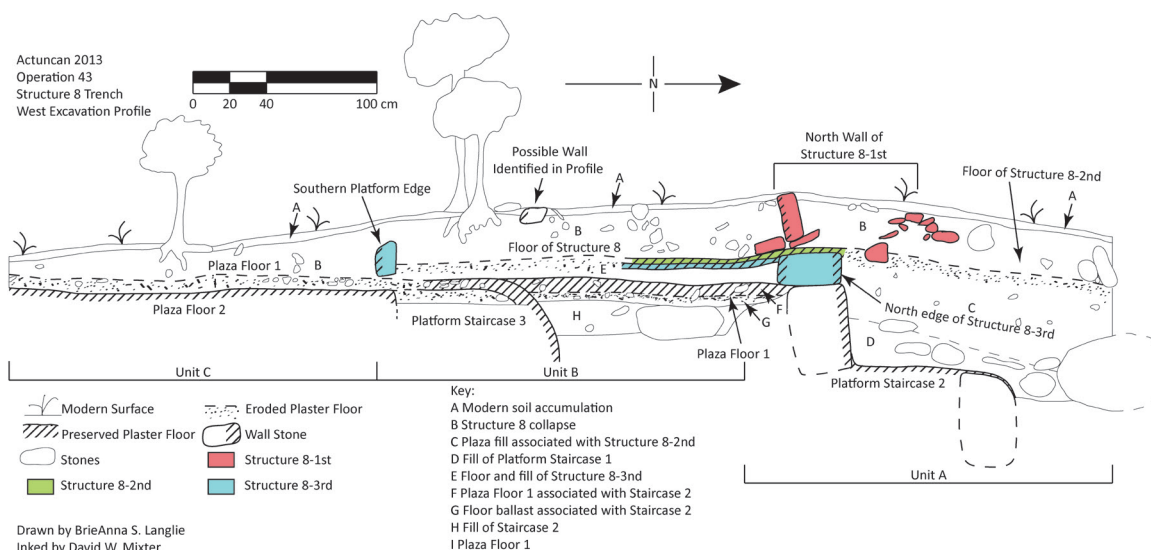


Figure 6. Excavation profile showing the construction phases of Actuncan Structure 8.

in Actuncan South. Built on top of this staircase renovation, Structure 8-2nd is an expansion of Structure 8-3rd to the north. It was at least 4 m wide at perhaps continued to the top step of the terminal staircase; however, the north platform face lies outside our trench and was not identified.

Structure 8-1st was a C-shaped structure built on the Structure 8-2nd platform. A line of vertically set limestone slabs, visible on the modern surface, identified the building's north and side wall. These vertical stones appear to have formed the inner line of a 35 cm tall double-faced masonry wall that served as a footing to secure the poles of a perishable superstructure (Figure 7). A central door in the north wall is evident from a break in the upright stones, and two additional flanking doors may have been blocked in antiquity. The building did not have southern wall and instead was open to Plaza A, with only the 20–30 cm eastern platform edge separating the building from the plaza.

It is possible that one final renovation added a raised interior space approximately 35 cm tall within Structure 8. Several stacked stones were identified in the eastern profile that may form the southern face of this raised area; however, this area is heavily disturbed by bioturbation, so this interpretation is tentative.

In summary, Structure 8-1st was likely a perishable structure with C-shaped walls that was open to the south. The building and its northern wall restricted access to Plaza A from the staircase and limited the visibility of activities happening in Plaza A to those approaching from the north. It also created a formal entrance into the plaza space. The open south side of Structure 8-1st would have allowed free interactions from its interior to Plaza A. Notably, buildings with C-shaped walls become more common in the Terminal Classic period and appear to be the antecedent of the C-shaped open halls (Proskouriakoff 1962) that are common in the Northern Lowlands and Petén Lakes region during the Postclassic period. As such, Structure 7 may provide some evidence of Actuncan's



Figure 7. Photograph of Structure 8-1st facing south into Plaza A. Note the double-faced wall that formed Structure 8-1st's northern edge.

participation in broader Terminal Classic post-royal networks.

The final events surrounding Structure 8 appear to have been ritual. Along the southern edge of the building platform, a collection of broken Terminal Classic ceramics was uncovered along with a quarter of a jade bead and two groundstone objects resting directly on the step recorded as Feature 43-1 (Figure 8; see also Mixer 2017b:286–288; Simova et al. 2015:201–202). This dense collection appears to be an isolated deposit and could either represent a midden from some event that took place in Plaza A or vessels that had been stored in the western portion of Structure 8 at the time of abandonment. At a minimum, the ceramic materials included fragments of an imitation Fine Orange vase, at least two large partially reconstructible McRae Impressed dishes, a Pedregal Modeled censer, 16 Mount Maloney Black incurving bowls, and 29 large unslipped Cayo group jars with flared or piecrust lips diagnostic to the Terminal Classic period. Based on their location within the open-sided Structure 8, this deposit would have been visible to individuals gathered in the plaza. As

such, my colleagues and I (Simova et al. 2015:201–202) have previously argued that these objects represented a public display visible to the broader community. Whether these objects were in storage in anticipation of future events or were intentionally broken in place, as the partial jade bead might suggest, their visibility indicates they were associated with inclusive rituals and gatherings that occurred in Plaza A.

Structure 9. Structure 9 is a low, linear platform attached to the southern edge of Structure 5, measuring 10 m in length and 60 cm in height, and is the most enigmatic of the Terminal Classic structures in Plaza A. Initially, a 1x4 m trench was placed to penetrate Structure 9 from the west (Figures 3 and 9). A 1x1 m unit was added to the north to fully uncover Feature 45-1, a cached

vessel described below. Excavations revealed a single construction phase built of large, piled river cobbles, similar to the construction of Actuncan North. Because of crude construction methods and extensive bioturbation on the platform's surface, the boundaries of Structure 9 proved difficult to define. The platform surface that likely topped this structure is now fully eroded. Excavations did not uncover a clear western platform wall. Either the façade was stripped of its cut-limestone block facing stones in antiquity, or the platform face was constructed of river cobbles piled so that their naturally flattened sides faced outward. Structure 9 was constructed on top of a well-preserved polished plaster floor that formed the terminal surface of Plaza A. Ceramics recovered from Structure 9 indicate that it was likely constructed in the Late or Terminal Classic, with continued occupation through the Terminal Classic period; however, the dry-laid fill and unpreserved surface make this chronological attribution only tentative. The construction of Structure 9, when paired with Structures 93 and 7, drew the focus to the patio's northeast.

A cached ceramic vessel, Feature 45-1, was found at the center of Structure 9 on the terminal plaza floor (Figure 10). The vessel is a long, narrow, rectangular platter measuring 57 x 23 cm with low walls that flare out slightly. This unusual vessel was placed upright and oriented north-south. Placed prior to the construction of Structure 9, Feature 1 was likely a dedication offering intended to ensoul the platform (Freidel and Schele 1989).

Together, Structures 7, 8, 93, and 9 created a new ritual center for Terminal Classic Actuncan anchored by a new formal entrance structure and a long, linear performance platform that used Structure 6 as a dramatic backdrop. These buildings centered Structure 5 as the central ritual building of the group's Terminal Classic occupation. By placing these buildings within Plaza A, the center of focus shifted towards the northeast to the center of this new ring of buildings. That focus is

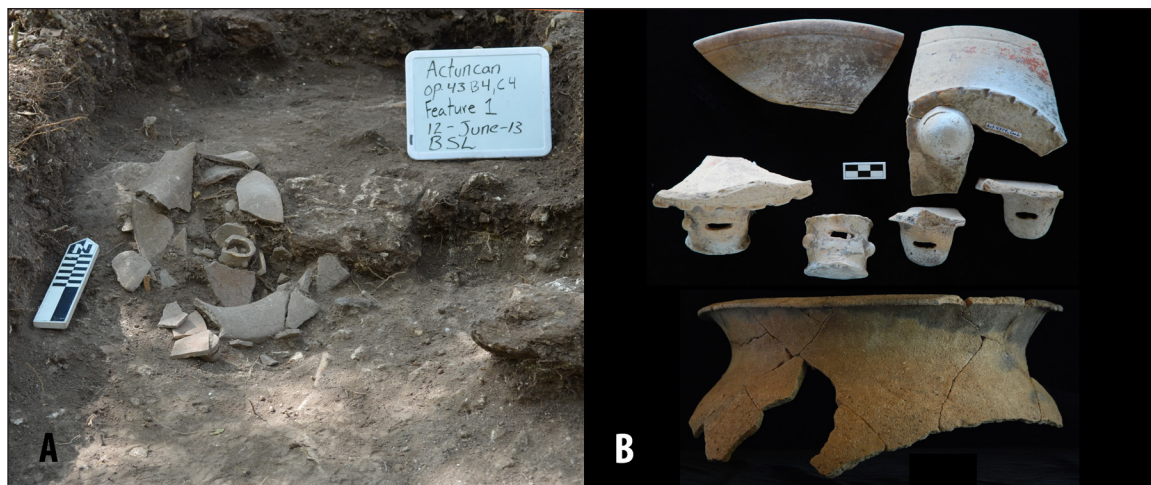


Figure 8. Images of Feature 43-1, a Terminal Classic deposit of ceramics and a quarter jade bead left on the southern step of Structure 8. A) Photograph of the deposit *in situ*. B) Detail of Terminal Classic diagnostic ceramics from the deposit, including at least two McCrae Impressed dishes and a Cayo Unslipped jar with a downflaring rim.

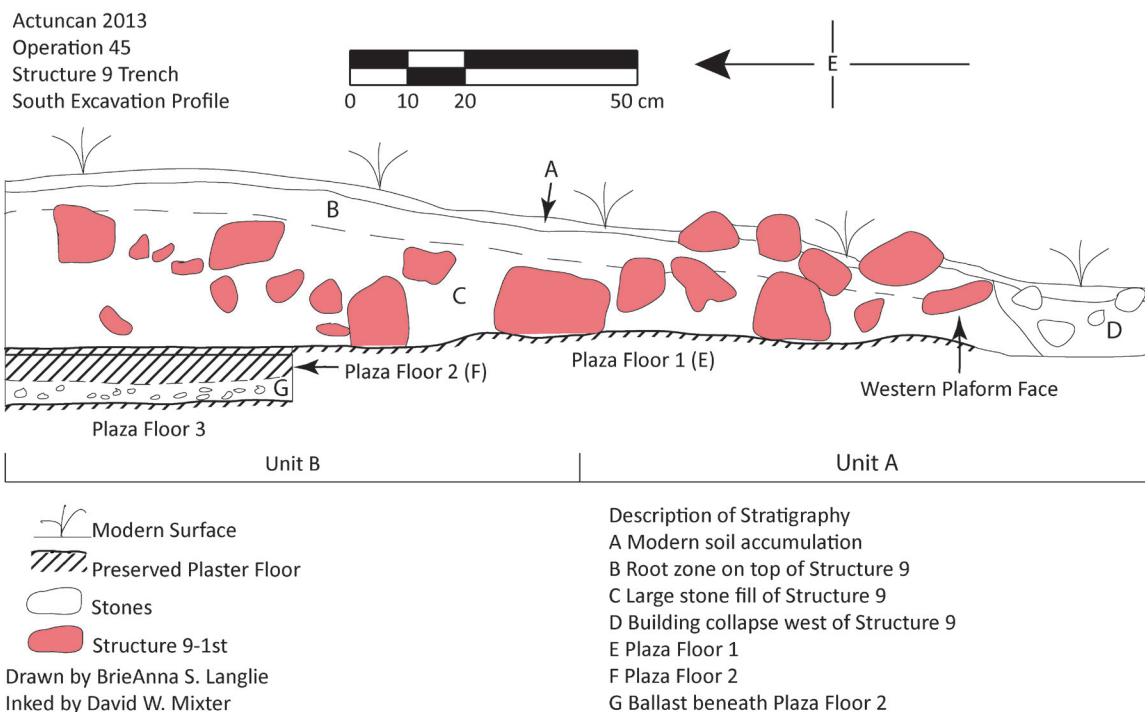


Figure 9. Excavation profile showing the construction of Structure 9.

anchored by Structure 7, which faced Structure 5 and produced a performative space between these two buildings. The renewed importance of Structure 5 is emphasized by the massive deposit of ritual materials that McGovern reported from its summit. These deposits point to a space constructed to facilitate periodic ritual gatherings. The focus on Structure 5 is important because the Terminal Classic community chose to focus on the smaller eastern pyramid rather than the taller Structure 4. I argue that this choice reflects how the community's repurposing of Plaza A was produced through a combination of Actuncan's history and an understanding of Late Classic norms.

Discussion

It has long been understood that Maya pyramids were metaphors for sacred mountains (Benson 1985; Stone 1992, 1995; Stuart 1997). Halperin (2014) argues that if abandoned or left unused, these pyramid-mountains become part of the wilderness, home to spirits, wild animals, nonspecific ancestors, and other supernatural beings. For the Maya, ruins often reference the time of creation (Hamann 2002), especially when those ruins are constructed in a triadic form referencing the Maya three hearthstones of creation. Additionally, both ruins and mountains can be associated with ancestors even if no genealogical connection is known (Borgstede 2010; Halperin 2014).

However, as I have previously argued (Mixer 2017b), the treatment of individual temple-pyramid-mountains during the political upheaval and experimentation of the Terminal Classic period depended on the specific historical context and the choices of individual communities in addition

to their broader cultural meaning. At Waka', for example, we see the transformation of the site's primary Classic period mortuary temple into a community shrine during the Terminal Classic period (Navarro-Farr 2016; Navarro-Farr et al. 2008; Navarro-Farr and Arroyave Prera 2014). This reaction, and contemporaneous urban repurposing at other Late Classic period centers (Bazy and Inomata 2017; Braswell et al. 2004; Child and Golden 2008; Demarest et al. 2016; Halperin and Garrido 2020; Schwake and Iannone 2016; Żrałka and Hermes 2012) is conditioned by a relatively detailed community understanding of that building's use in its recent past. At Actuncan, we see reactions to this kind of specific memory in the treatment of buildings within Actuncan North (Mixer 2017b, 2020; Mixer et al. 2013).

In contrast, the end of Preclassic construction at Actuncan South happened centuries before its Terminal Classic reworking. As at Actuncan, Terminal Classic populations reused Preclassic triadic groups at other sites. I consider here the few examples I identified of triadic groups that were abandoned before their Terminal Classic reuse. At sites such as Calakmul and Lamanai (Braswell et al. 2004; Pendergast 1986) triadic groups were used and renovated continually from the Preclassic to Late Classic periods and therefore their Terminal Classic treatment was conditioned by their recent use rather than their antiquity. These two examples were both transformed into complex spaces that served as part of those communities' Late Classic palace administrative infrastructure following the Calakmul model (Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; Folan et al. 2001)

At El Mirador, Tayasal, and Cerros, Terminal Classic populations reoccupied triadic groups or their environs after a period of disuse; however, unlike at Actuncan, these places were not reused by the same populations. A Terminal Classic village was built on the collapse debris of the Danta triadic pyramid group at El Mirador (Hansen et al. 2008). At Tayasal, a Terminal Classic village sprung up around the Cerro Mo' triadic group, and residents passed by and left small offerings within the triadic group (Halperin 2014). The Tayasal community never built on Cerro Mo' during the Terminal Classic period. Rather, it was a place to leave offerings for the spirits and ancestors. Each

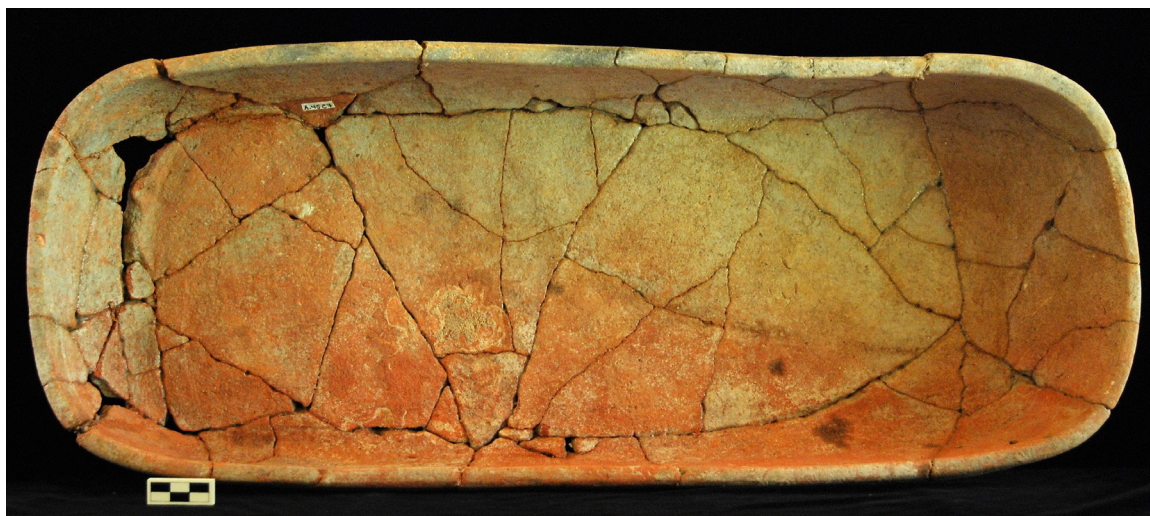
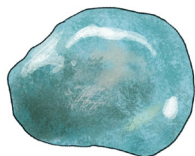


Figure 10. A unslipped cache vessel found in Feature 45-1.

of these actions reflects the specific ways these places were remembered. At El Mirador, Danta's repurposing was logistical, whereas at Tayasal the local community did not remember the original importance of Cerro Mo' but understood that it was occupied by someone's ancestors. Similarly, Cerros, Belize was reoccupied as a residential center during the Terminal Classic period; however, Structure 4, one of that site's triadic groups, was not reused until the Postclassic (Walker 1990).

On the other hand, Actuncan -- along with nearby rural settlements (Lindley 2021) -- was occupied continuously, from the construction of Actuncan South during the Late Preclassic period to the Terminal Classic period (Fulton and Mixter 2022; LeCount et al. 2019; Mixter et al. 2014). Even though they fell out of use during the Late Classic period, Actuncan's pyramids were visually dominant on the landscape and could not have been forgotten by the community living at their bases. In contrast to Tayasal, I suggest that the construction of new buildings within Actuncan South reflects the community's genealogical connection to these buildings. Because of this persistent connection, Actuncan South never became fully understood as dangerous wilderness. Instead, the persistent association of triadic groups with places of origin, sustenance, and the rebirth of the Maize God drew the Terminal Classic community to this place so that they could propitiate their gods for rain and productive harvests as they built new ritual practices that did not reify the authority of a divine ruler.



Yet, the orientation of the low Terminal Classic architecture in Plaza A towards Structure 5 combined with the primary evidence of massive repeated ritual on the summit of that structure recorded by McGovern (2004) indicates that the Terminal Classic ritual practices were focused on Actuncan South's eastern pyramid rather than the much larger southern pyramid. This is strange because the central nested pyramid would have been the focus of Preclassic use of the plaza. This reorientation speaks to the legacy of the recent and therefore well-remembered Classic period spatial logic (Mixter 2017b). During the Classic period in the Mopan River valley, people were consistently buried in the east in both domestic and monumental contexts. In local domestic groups, the eastern structure is very frequently an ancestor shrine in the mold of Becker's (1971) Plaza Plan 2 (e.g. Braswell 1998; Connell 2000; Helmke 2000; Iannone 1996). In Late and Terminal Classic domestic contexts at Actuncan, the shrine was less important than the direction. In Group 1, burials were placed in the eastern portion of the domestic patio rather than under a structure (Freiwald 2012; Freiwald et al. 2015; Freiwald and Micklin 2013), indicating that it was the direction rather than the shrine that held more importance for long established households. Indeed, at Actuncan's Group 8, a noble compound established during the Late Classic period, a tall and visible eastern shrine structure contained no burials (Mixter and Freiwald 2013). To my colleagues and I, this indicates that the local household constructed the shrine to create the appearance of ancestral legitimacy, even though they were new members of the community (Mixter 2017b; Mixter et al. 2013). Additionally, in local monumental centers, community leaders and royal individuals were often buried in pyramids on the eastern edge of public plazas during the Late Classic period (Audet 2006; Awe 2013; Healy et al. 2004; Novotny 2012). In sum, during the Late Classic period, eastern buildings of both public plazas and domestic patios were understood to be homes to important ancestors.

When the Terminal Classic community focused attention on Structure 5 through new construction and enacted repeated ritual practices on its summit, I argue that they assumed that location was a burial place for Actuncan's ancestors. I have previously argued that Actuncan's Terminal Classic community was intentionally building connections to the site's mythic Preclassic to bypass the

unpleasant more recent past associated with the site's domination by divine kings from elsewhere (Mixer 2017b). Ironically, it is unlikely that anyone was ever buried in Structure 5 because important ancestors were rarely buried in Preclassic triadic temple groups (Hansen 1998:89). Yet, the Terminal Classic community may well have believed Structure 5 to be Actuncan's primary ancestral place because of the way community memory became conditioned by Classic period planning logic.

The construction of platforms in Plaza A is important because it points to the community's intentionality in adopting the triadic group as their primary sacred precinct. The community understood Actuncan South as cosmologically significant and may also have remembered it as historically significant, even if the details were no longer known. This context was key to establishing a new ritual space that could be isolated from the community's political institutions as they attempted to reconfigure religious principles as divine rulers disappeared from the equation.

Within a broader regional context, the ritual strategies at Actuncan represent just one of many possible reactions to the end of divine kingship. Indeed, the nearby communities of Xunantunich and Buenavista del Cayo clung to the ideology of divine kingship as they tried to rebuild or maintain political authority. This solution was easy because it was familiar and did not require any new ideological formulations. In contrast, Actuncan's solution to building new ritual infrastructure that no longer centered a royal person worked because it built on the fundamental Maya understandings of the cosmos and their built environment. Yet, it was locally conditioned by the historical and cultural contingencies of the Actuncan community. As political networks fragmented and long-distance communication frayed in the turmoil of the Terminal Classic period, it seems likely that similar experiments of building post-royal ritual infrastructure at other sites across the Maya Lowlands came to different outcomes. At Actuncan, this new ritual formulation lasted several generations, as evidenced by the multiple construction phases of Structures 7 and 8, before final abandonment. These kinds of localized institutional experiments during this time of political fragmentation provided inspiration for the broader coherence later achieved during the Postclassic period.

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