

AN EARLY ROYAL MAYA TOMB FROM CHAN CHICH, BELIZE

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Abstract

In 1997, the Chan Chich Archaeological Project excavated a Terminal Preclassic/Early Classic period Maya tomb at Chan Chich, Belize. Tomb 2 represents the earliest royal tomb in the Three Rivers Region of the east-central Yucatan Peninsula and has striking similarities to Burial 85 at Tikal, the tomb of the dynastic founder Yax Ehb' Xook. This paper describes Tomb 2 and its contents and considers its significance within the context of the significant political and cultural changes that marked the transition from the Late Preclassic to the Early Classic period. We argue that the tomb is an early example of a regional expression of elite competition for status and power in the Central Lowlands that included the use of a subcomplex of ceramics and exotic artifacts to express prestige. Tomb 2 is also an example of an early royal burial pattern that may be more widespread than believed but has been overlooked due to excavation bias.

Chan Chich is a medium-to-large site for northwestern Belize. During the first season of excavations there in 1997 researchers encountered—in a fortuitously-placed test pit—a tomb carved into bedrock and buried beneath a plaza at the site (Robichaux 1998). This feature was designated Tomb 2 and became the subject of three seasons of investigations. Artifacts within the tomb and supporting stratigraphic evidence indicate Tomb 2 was most likely constructed during the Terminal Preclassic or the beginning of the Early Classic period, around A.D. 200–350. The ceramics within the tomb include forms typically associated with the “Protoclassic” period in northern Belize. For the purposes of this paper, we utilize the term Terminal Preclassic rather than Protoclassic when referring to this chronological period.

In this article, we describe the discovery of Tomb 2 and its contents. We argue that it represents the earliest known royal tomb in the region and is a regional expression of an emerging pattern of elite competition in the Central Lowlands, which began earlier in the Preclassic and intensified and transformed during the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods (e.g., Freidel and Schele 1988: 549). In particular, we examine the strong similarities between Chan Chich Tomb 2 and Tikal Burial 85, the tomb of Yax Ehb' Xook—the founder of Tikal's dynasty. We also discuss the possibility that Terminal Preclassic kings were more numerous than commonly believed. However, because of archaeological excavation bias and preconceptions regarding royal burial practices, many of their tombs may lie undiscovered beneath plazas and platforms.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF CHAN CHICH TOMB 2

Before describing Chan Chich and Tomb 2, it is perhaps useful to frame the discussion in a larger context—a time of turbulent political

and social transition from the Late Preclassic to the Early Classic period in the Central Lowlands. Although the institution of kingship arguably appeared in the Lowlands as early as the Middle Preclassic, it was during the Late Preclassic and into the Early Classic periods that it proliferated. Some have argued that kingship evolved “in the context of exchange systems” (Reese-Taylor and Walker 2002:99) and involved not only the appropriation of the pre-existing practice of ancestor veneration (McAnany 1995:164), but also the supplanting of shamanism with something more political (e.g., Loten 2003: 239). During this interval “emergent elites appropriated the practice of ancestor veneration and converted it to an institution that cemented the transmission of political power” (McAnany 1995:164) through what Lucero (2003:523) has described as “the replication and expansion of domestic rituals.” Ritual, particularly as related to ancestor worship, helped create and perpetuate royal dynasties.

While the origin and nature of the earliest Maya kings remain debated, there is evidence for royal dynasties as early as the second century B.C. At San Bartolo, Saturno (2006:73) reports the earliest known royal Maya tomb from around 150 B.C. and murals showing a royal coronation from about fifty years later. Krecji and Culbert (1995:103, 108) note that “highly elite tomb burials” or “Royal burials” first appeared in the Lowlands during the Late Preclassic period. Presumably some of the earliest and most powerful early kings were at El Mirador, the largest Late Preclassic site in the Lowlands. However, with the decline of El Mirador at the end of the Late Preclassic period, the political and social landscape of the Central Lowlands was profoundly altered. Markers of change include “new architectural programs, new iconographic programs, and a proliferation of ceramic surface treatments and modes” (Reese-Taylor and Walker 2002:98). With El Mirador's hegemony crumbling, precocious leaders at a number of sites entered a competitive political arena, which may be accounted for by a number of different social and environmental changes. Archaeologically, this competition and expanding institution of kingship is reflected

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in the appearance of royal tombs, the adoption of royal symbols, and the use of specialized assemblages of prestige artifacts in burials and caches at a handful of Central Lowland sites.

An early and successful entrant into the political arena of the Late Preclassic period was Tikal, where a royal dynasty was apparently founded around A.D. 100 by Yax Ehb' Xook (Martin 2003:5). There is some agreement that the founder is the headless individual interred in Burial 85 beneath Str. 5-Sub.2-2nd (Martin 2003:5; Sharer and Traxler 2006:310). Yax Ehb' Xook was likely responsible for a significant expansion of the site center a few decades before his death (Jones 1991:107; Loten 2003:238), and Loten (2003:238–239) notes “the radical change in architectural form and increased richness of Burial 85 ... might embody a more ambitious claim for ... dynastic legitimacy ... than had been made earlier.”

While there are earlier elite burials in the North Acropolis of Tikal, Yax Ehb' Xook's is singled out as royal because of a “fuch-site portrait head” pectoral depicting a human face wearing a “Jester God headdress that would be the crown of kings for the next thousand years” (Schele and Freidel 1990:135). Schele and Freidel (1990:120–121) have suggested that related to the jade pectorals worn by early kings are helmet-bib head pendants, what they call diadems or “royal jewels,” worn as part of a headband by Late Preclassic kings (see also Freidel and Schele 1988:555). The presence of helmet-bib head pendants and similar jade artifacts in Late Preclassic burials and caches is commonly used to infer connection to the *ajaw* of the polity in question (e.g., Freidel and Schele 1988; Hammond 1987; Saturno 2006; Schele and Freidel 1990).

At Tikal, Yax Ehb' Xook's tomb (which is discussed in more detail later in this article), Burial 166, and Burial 167, all three of which were in constructed chambers and capped by shrine platforms (Coe 1990:217, 230, 237), were both an expansion of and a significant departure from domestic burial patterns in the Late Preclassic period. They supplanted the practice of burying the dead beneath the house floor by interring them in a public location within a specialized chamber and beneath a new shrine structure marking the location of the burial. These Late Preclassic tombs began the centuries-long use of the North Acropolis as a royal necropolis.

Another important indicator of change at the end of the Late Preclassic period was in ceramics. The Terminal Preclassic is thought of as a period of ceramic experimentation and innovation (Pring 2000:39). As Kosakowsky (2005:8) observes (based on a study of material from northern Belize) ceramics show a gradual change in vessel forms, advances in firing techniques, and experimentation in slips and surface decoration. While experimentation was taking place during the Terminal Preclassic period, there was a “conservative and practical use for those attributes (forms, slips, etc.) that function well” (Valdez 1998:76). Recent studies have shown that Late Preclassic types persisted into the Early Classic period in some areas (Kosakowsky and Sagebiel 1999; Sagebiel 2005; Sullivan 2002; Sullivan and Valdez 2006). Because of the gradual nature of ceramic change and the tendency for many forms and slips to persist, the Terminal Preclassic period, therefore, is only recognized in contexts where special diagnostic types appear. Chief among these diagnostics are attributes commonly associated with the Protohistoric including “those locally definitive of a Holmul I style ...; a Floral Park sphere ...; the broader orange-glossware tradition; and multicolor (polychrome), positive-painted decoration on orange, buff, and/or glossware pottery” (Brady et al. 1998:18). Diagnostic forms include mammiform tetrapod vessels, spouted vessels (chocolate pots), ring bases, and z-angle vessels (Adams 1971; Pring 2000:12).

The above diagnostic forms and attributes appear in various combinations across the Lowlands between approximately 75 B.C. and A.D. 400, which Brady et al. (1998:18, 33–34) and Pring (2000:33) refer to as the protoclassic ceramic stage and subdivide into Facet 1 (75 ± 25 B.C. to A.D. 150) and Facet 2 (ca. A.D. 150 to 400 ± 20). In northern Belize, Terminal Preclassic types “are identified, though generally in small quantities relative to the entire ceramic inventories present, often from restricted contexts, such as *chultuns*, burials, and tombs, and ... with limited distribution” (Kosakowsky 2005:6; see also Pring 2000:33–34). Reese-Taylor and Walker (2002:98) describe the constellation of attributes as a “phenomenon [that] was ultimately political in nature, paralleling increasingly complex times.” We argue that the elite were using so-called protoclassic ceramics, a specialized sub-complex of ceramics, as status markers and symbols of their participation in the burgeoning competitive political arena of the Terminal Preclassic and Early Classic periods. It is in the just-described context that we consider Tomb 2 at Chan Chich.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF CHAN CHICH

Chan Chich is in the south-central portion of the Three Rivers Region, a geographically defined study area in the east-central Yucatan Peninsula, straddling portions of the modern nations of Belize, Mexico, and Guatemala (Figure 1). Richard Adams (1995: 5) initially defined the region, and in the past decade the label has been widely adopted by researchers, particularly in northwestern Belize (e.g., Scarborough et al. 2003). The area encompasses approximately 2,000 km² (Adams 1995:5; Houk 1996, 1998a) and is home to more than a dozen medium-to-large-sized ruins, including Río Azul, La Milpa, La Honradez, and San José, in addition to Chan Chich (see Figure 1).

A series of three southwest-to-northeast trending escarpments marks the eastern edge of the Peten Karst Plateau (Dunning et al. 2003:14). The La Lucha Escarpment, the western and highest of the three, separates the rugged La Lucha Uplands from the Río Bravo Terrace. Chan Chich is in the Río Bravo Terrace Lowland, a karstic region that has “weathered into a rugged landscape of ridges, conical hills, and irregular depressions, or *bajos*” (Dunning et al. 2003:16). The site is located approximately 4 km east of the Guatemalan border, on the western bank of Chan Chich Creek. Several hundred meters north of the site, Little Chan Chich Creek and Chan Chich Creek meet to form the Río Bravo, which courses northward through the Río Bravo Terrace Lowland before following the base of the Río Bravo Escarpment on its way to join the Booth's River southeast of the site of Blue Creek. The divide between the Río Hondo and Belize River watersheds is about 18 km south of Chan Chich.

The site of Chan Chich was first recorded in 1988, and initial investigations included mapping the core area of the site and profiling looters' trenches (Guderjan 1991a). The Chan Chich Archaeological Project (CCAP) mapped 1.54 km² around the site in 1996 and conducted excavations in 1997–1999 and 2001 (Houk 1998a, 2000; Houk and Robichaux 2003). For the most part, the CCAP excavations were small-scale testing studies of various features and components of the site. The unexpected discovery of Tomb 2 in the Upper Plaza, however, resulted in a large-scale excavation (Houk 1998b:93).

The major architecture at Chan Chich is clustered around the Main Plaza, a very large public space measuring approximately 110 m × 110 m (Figure 2). Examinations of now in-filled looters' trenches

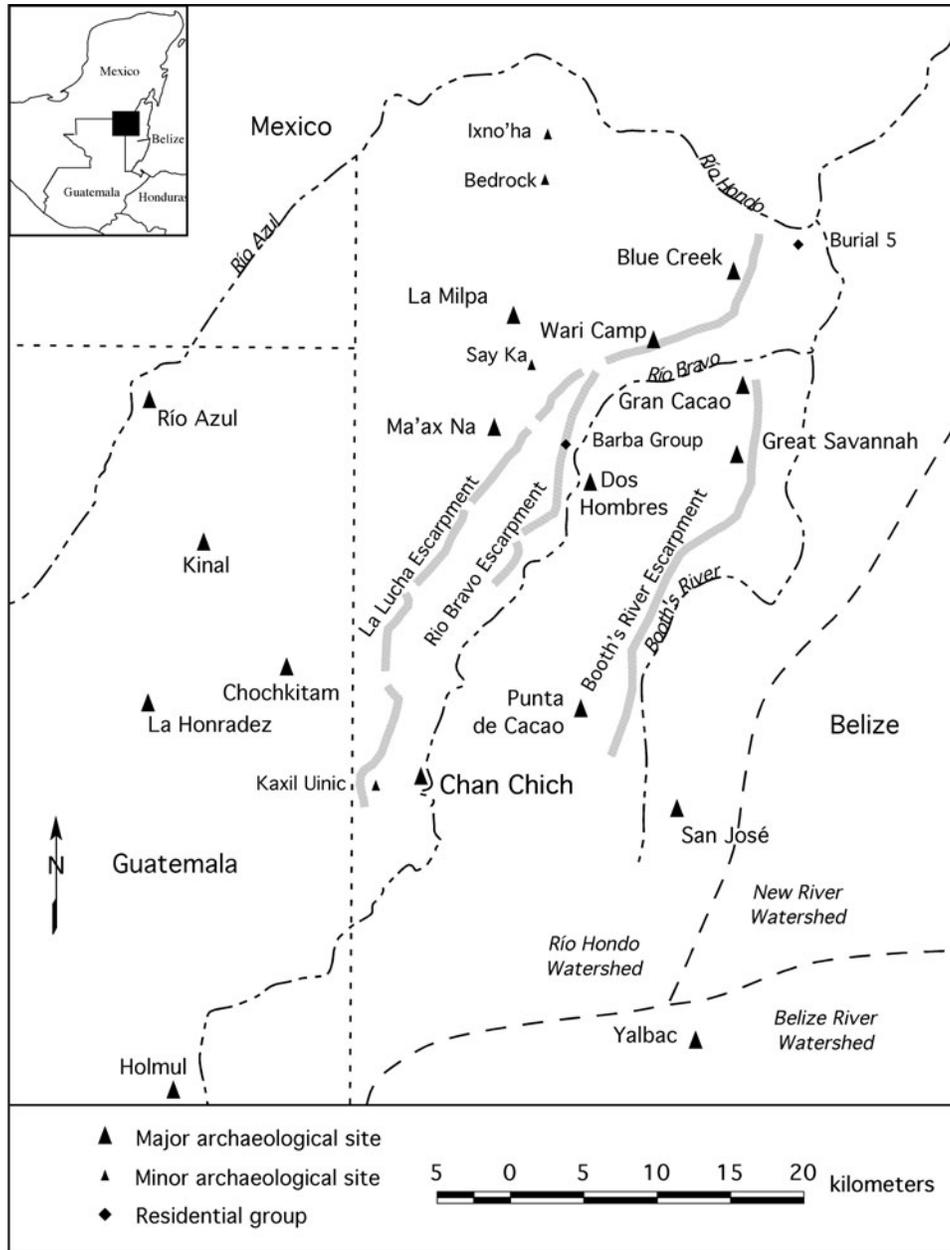


Figure 1. Map of the Three Rivers Region.

in the surrounding structures suggest that most of the visible mounds at the plaza were built during the Late Classic period (Guderjan 1991a). CCAP test excavations encountered Late Preclassic period deposits beneath the plaza, indicating that the Late Classic constructions cover earlier architecture (Houk 1998c, 2000). The only known stela at the site, an uncarved and badly burned monument, is found on the western side of the Main Plaza.

Structure A-1 is a massive range structure linking the Main Plaza on its north side to the Upper Plaza on its south side. During the Late Classic period, a wide stair on the north side of Structure A-1 and a broad landing in the center of the building provided access to the enclosed and restricted Upper Plaza.

The Upper Plaza was constructed on a natural rise and has a long construction history (Figure 3). Within the plaza itself, excavations documented a Middle Preclassic period midden, dated to

770 cal. B.C. (Robichaux 1998:34), and Tomb 2, dated to the Terminal Preclassic or beginning of the Early Classic period based on ceramic and other data. The larger surrounding structures, including Structure A-15, the tallest mound at the site, have looters' trenches revealing complicated construction sequences, probably beginning in the Late Preclassic period (Guderjan 1991a:39; Houk 1998b:94). Intensive study of the trenches and structures was not a major focus of the CCAP; however, previous researchers reported four separate construction episodes for Structure A-15 based on an examination of looters' trenches (Guderjan 1991a: 39). Of interest to this discussion are the earliest two phases. Structure A-15 Sub 3 was "a low platform buried by later construction, rising about 3 m above" the Upper Plaza (Guderjan 1991a:39). On top of this platform "is at least one and probably two small temples, [Structure A-15 Sub 2], each about 4 m tall. Each

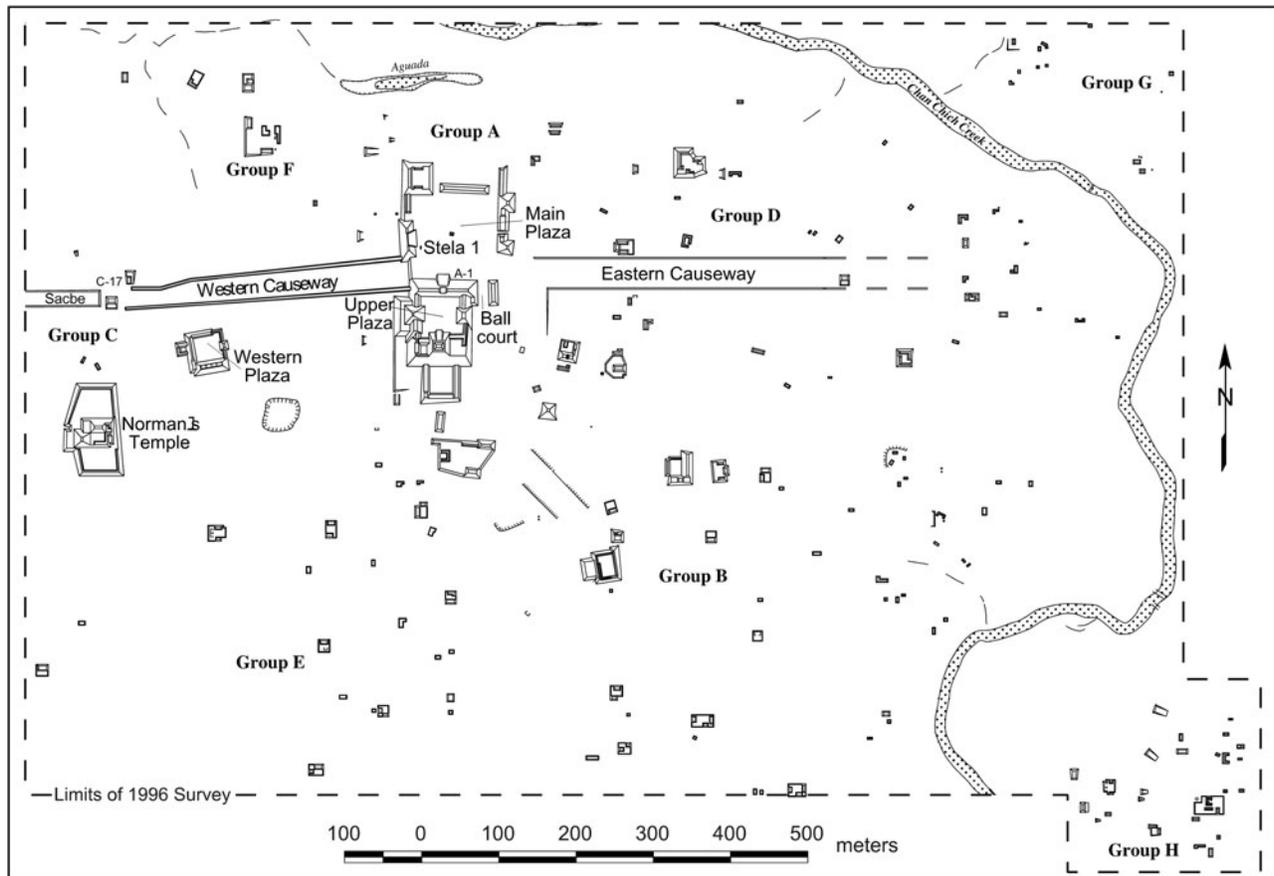


Figure 2. Map of Chan Chich, Belize.

contained at least one corbelled vault room with unpainted, plastered walls. [Structure A-15 Sub 2] would have appeared very much like Str. A-V at Uaxactun, which dates to the Early Classic period. Thus [the earliest two phases] may be the earliest public architecture at Chan Chich" (Guderjan 1991a:39).

TOMB 2

Discovery

The 1997 CCAP excavations focused, in large part, on establishing the construction history and chronology of the various plazas at the site, and project staff planned two test pits in the Upper Plaza, Suboperations 2-A and 2-H (see Figure 3). Suboperation 2-H, at the southern base of Structure A-1, documented seven floors spanning the Middle Preclassic through the Late Preclassic period capped by Late Classic period construction materials related to the final phase of Structure A-1. The earliest occupation found anywhere at the site was discovered in Suboperation 2-H. A Middle Preclassic midden and a posthole cut into bedrock marked this occupation, suggesting that the Upper Plaza was the early epicenter of site occupation.

Suboperation 2-A was placed on the southern half of the plaza approximately 6 m north of Structure A-15 to test the plaza construction sequence and investigate a circular hole in the surface of the plaza. This hole, which was approximately 80 cm in diameter and had sides lined with large and irregular stones, extended 1.1 m below the surface of the plaza. Shortly after Suboperation 2-A was opened, the excavations were extended to encompass the hole, ultimately resulting in

an irregular excavation area with final maximum dimensions of 4.2 m east-west by 3.0 m north-south. These excavations uncovered Tomb 2, exposed portions of a low shrine capping it, and revealed that the hole was the result of an ancient collapse of the roof of the tomb. Additional suboperations were opened in 1998 and 1999 to expand the tomb excavations (Figure 4).

Upper Plaza and Tomb 2 Construction Sequence

Based on the 1997–1999 excavation data, during the Late Preclassic period the Upper Plaza comprised an artificial platform, likely bound at least on the north and south by the initial versions of Structures A-1 and A-15, respectively. We surmise, based on Guderjan's (1991a:39) description of the earliest phases of architecture, that Structure A-15 on the southern side of the plaza was a low platform supporting one or two temples during this period.

The Upper Plaza underwent at least three—possibly four—renovations during the Late Preclassic period, each accompanied by a new and higher plaza floor (Floors 1–4, from oldest to youngest). About the end of the Terminal Preclassic period, the Maya selected an area north of Structure A-15 to create Tomb 2. The Terminal Preclassic Maya excavated a pit through four Late Preclassic floors and 1.15 m into the limestone bedrock beneath to create the tomb (Figure 5). The tomb's chamber formed an ellipse approximately 3.25 m long and 0.8 m wide (Figure 6). The chamber was capped by 12 large capstones, which were plastered into place to span the roof of the tomb. An apparent wall of

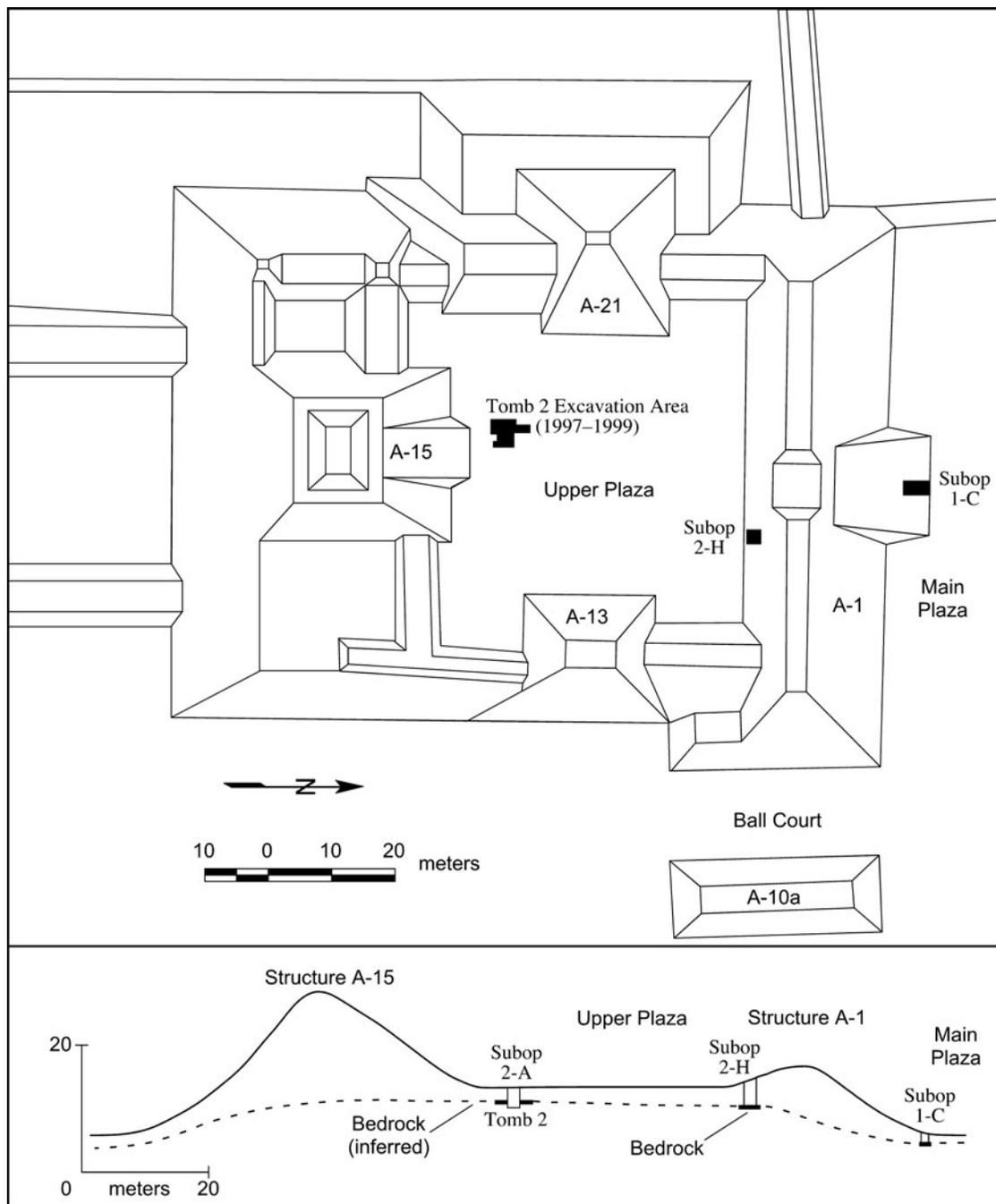


Figure 3. Map of excavations related to Tomb 2 and chronological test pitting with western cross section of the Upper Plaza.

similar stones was found beneath the ninth capstone from the south and may indicate that the northern end of the tomb was an antechamber serving as the point of egress for the burial party. No grave goods were encountered north of the wall. After the tomb was capped, it was covered in dry-laid cobble fill. Perhaps significantly, the fill capping Tomb 2 did not contain alternating layers of chert debitage, which is a common trait of Early Classic tombs in the region (e.g., Adams 1999; Guderjan 2007; Hall 1987, 1989; Hammond et al. 1996). It may be that Tomb 2 was constructed before the tradition of capping tomb shafts with chert debitage began or was introduced into the region. Finally, a low platform, measuring

approximately 25 cm high was built over the tomb and surfaced with Floor 5. The platform capping the tomb was not fully excavated and may have been damaged by later renovations to the plaza. Its shape is unknown, but we estimate that it originally covered the entire tomb shaft and was centered above it. This platform apparently supported a low-walled room, and we interpret this to be a shrine marking the location of the tomb within the plaza. During the Late Classic period, as part of the final major renovation of the Upper Plaza, the shrine was entirely buried beneath Floor 6.

At some point, erosion filled the tomb with a 15-cm-thick deposit of marly sediment that completely buried the articles on

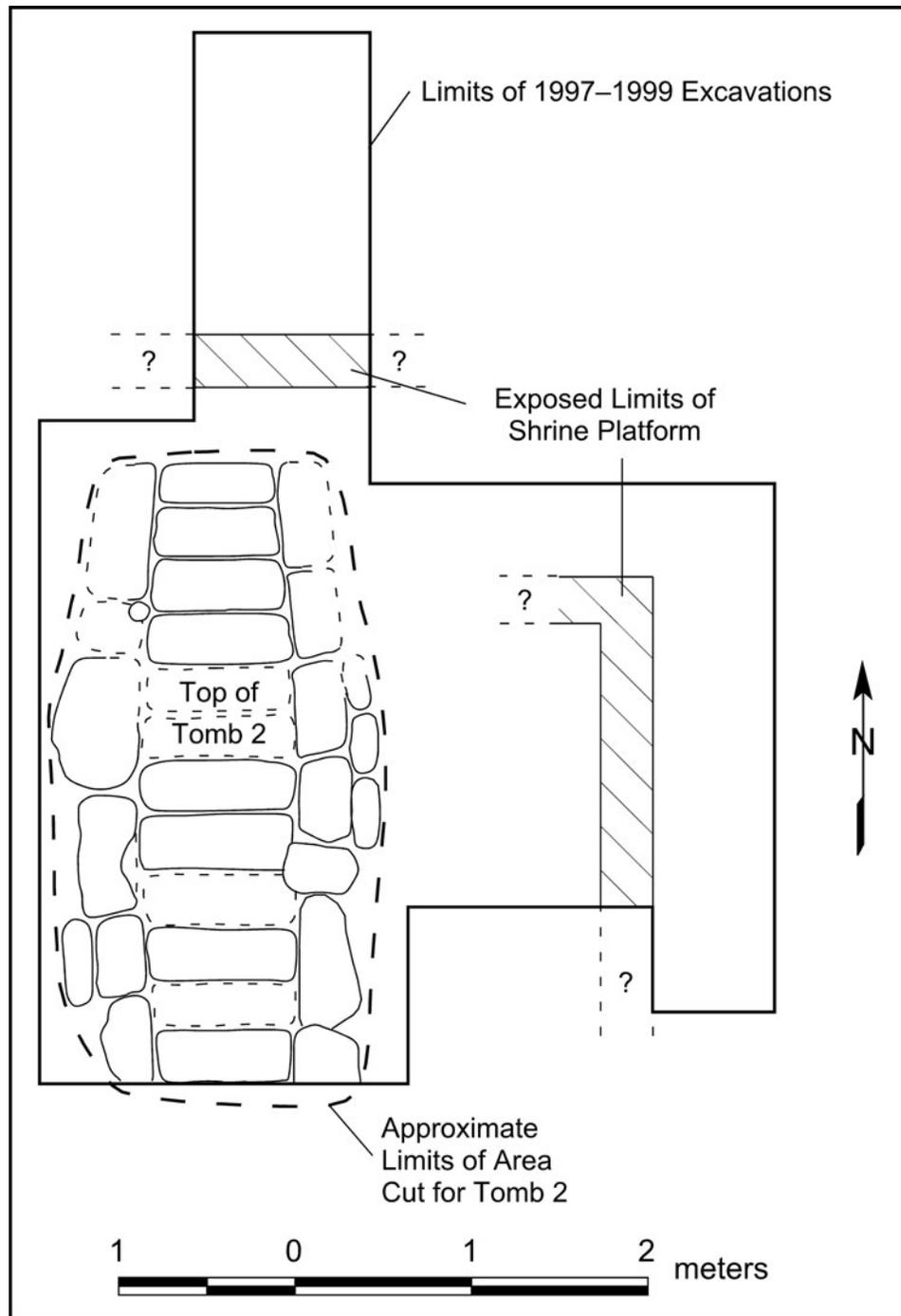


Figure 4. Final extent of excavations at Tomb 2 showing the top plan of the tomb as well as the excavated portions of the shrine platform capping the tomb.

the floor of the tomb. The fifth and sixth capstones then collapsed, presumably after the site had been abandoned, allowing the rest of the chamber to fill with sediment and creating the hole observed in the modern plaza surface.

Excavation of Tomb 2

Discovered as it was during the course of plaza test pitting, Tomb 2 was a rather unexpected find in 1997, and the excavations were

logistically and technically challenging. Nevertheless, the portion of the tomb containing artifacts and human remains was completely excavated in 1997, and subsequent excavations in 1998 and 1999 targeted the northern end of the chamber and attempted to clarify the stratigraphy of the plaza in the area of the tomb (Robichaux 2000; Robichaux et al. 2000).

The infilling and subsequent collapse of a portion of the chamber's roof encased the artifacts and skeletal material in a tightly packed marl matrix. While this actually preserved the

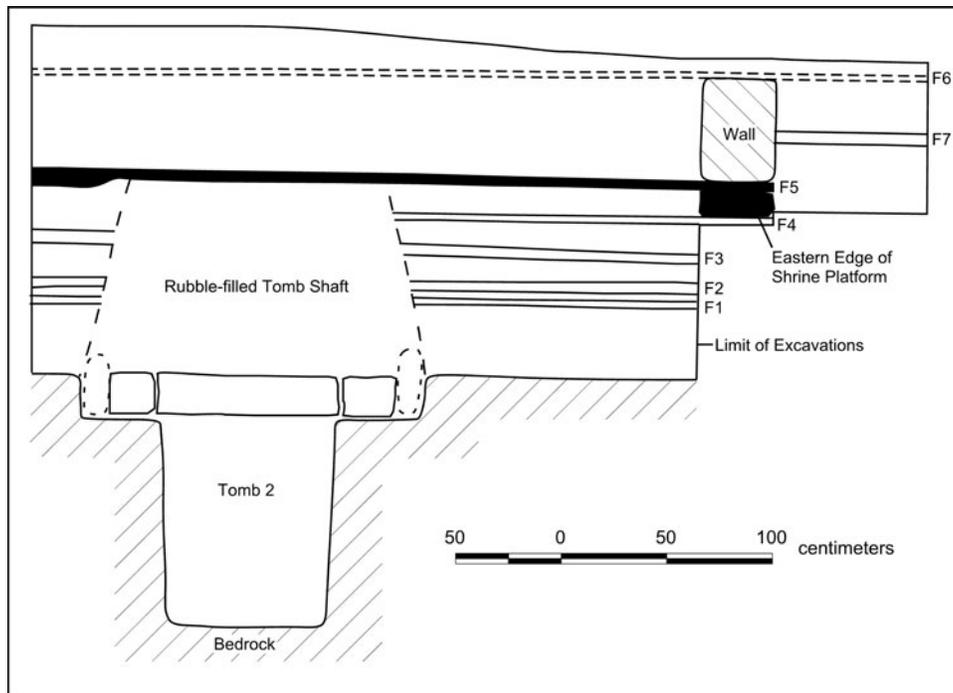


Figure 5. Northern cross section of Tomb 2 with floors (F) mentioned in text. Platform covering Tomb 2 shown in black.

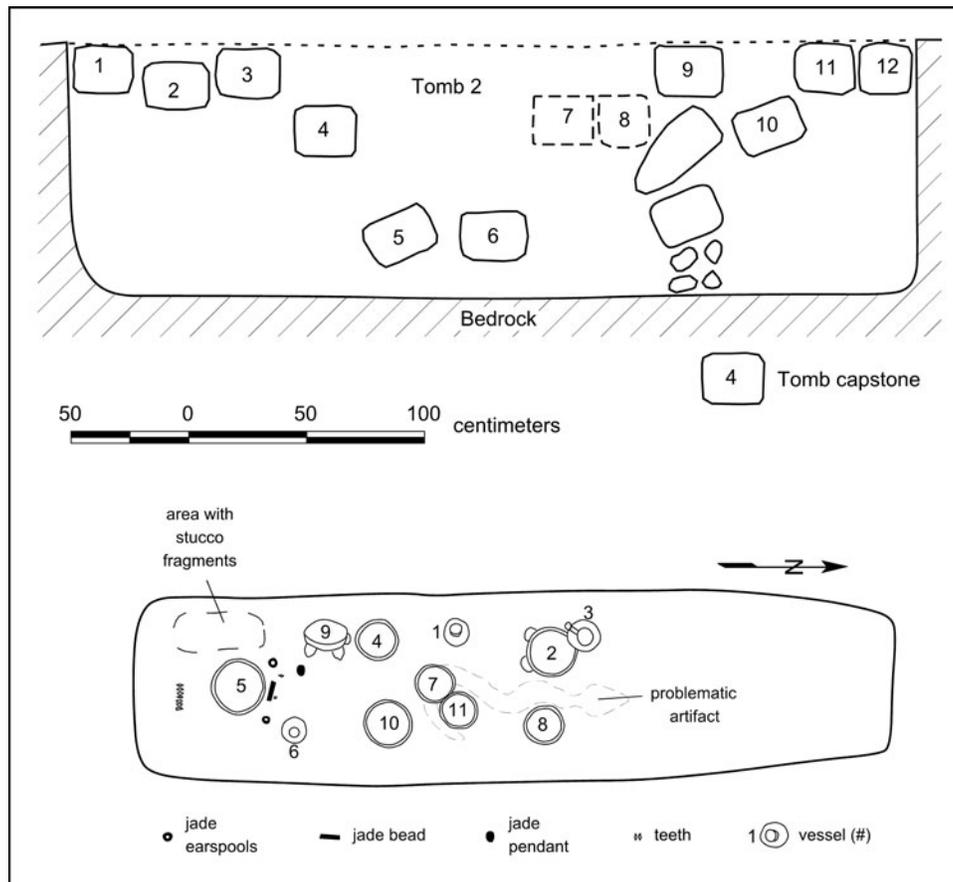


Figure 6. Plan map of top of Tomb 2 (bottom) and western cross section of chamber (top).

ceramic vessels to some degree—they would have been entirely crushed had the capstones fallen directly on the floor of the tomb—the marl proved to be a harsh, alkaline environment that accelerated the deterioration of organic material in the tomb.

Description of Tomb 2

Tomb 2 contained the badly preserved remains of an adult male, 11 ceramic vessels, four jade artifacts, a possible fragment of cotton paper, small fragments of stucco or paint, a small piece of wood, and a problematic artifact apparently made of wood. The artifacts and human remains were contained in the southern 2.15-m section of the tomb, south of an apparent wall separating the burial chamber from the possible antechamber at the northern end of the tomb (see Figure 6).

Skeletal Remains. Badly deteriorated human bone was recovered from 30 separate locations within the tomb, widely scattered across its floor. Given the nature of the deposit and the extremely fragmentary state of the remains, most of the skeletal material was recovered from screened matrix, provenienced by area, or from the matrix within vessels, which was excavated in the field laboratory. Four of the ceramic vessels on the tomb floor had bone within them, and some bone was also found resting on the rim of one vessel.

The tomb had a single occupant, a robust male in the age range of 30–45 years who was interred in an extended, supine position, with his head to the south (Robichaux 1998). Aside from 16 teeth, no other diagnostic skeletal elements were identifiable except for several apparent rib fragments. Therefore age and sex determinations are based on limited data (Julie Saul, personal communication 1998). Thirteen maxillary teeth were found near the southern end of the tomb, marking the position of the skull. Three mandibular teeth were found 40 cm to the north, suggesting the mandible separated from the skull and fell or was otherwise moved to the chest area of the individual. Three of the recovered teeth were decorated. The right maxillary canine had a hematite insert and had been filed, matching Romero's (1970) G-15

modification. The right lateral incisor also had an apparent hematite insert but was not filed, matching Romero's (1970) E-1 modification. The left maxillary canine had been filed but had no insert, also matching Romero's (1970) C-5 modification.

The tomb floor was covered in many areas with a red pigment that may be cinnabar or powdered hematite, but it was not chemically analyzed. Six of the vessels had this material in the bottoms of their interiors. Four of the vessels in the center of the tomb (Vessels 4, 7, 9, and 10) had bone fragments within them. In each of these vessels the bone was resting atop the red pigment, but pigment was also present on the skeletal remains.

Julie Saul's (personal communication 1998) analysis suggests that the skeleton was still articulated at the time of burial. Bone was also found resting upon the rim of Vessel 5, indicating the tomb's occupant was interred on a low, perishable litter that was placed above the vessels on the tomb's floor. A similar inference concerning the presence of an elevated litter was made for an Early Classic tomb discovered at La Milpa, based upon the relationship of bone to ceramic furnishings within the tomb (Hammond et al. 1996:89).

Ceramics. The tomb contained 11 whole vessels, differentially preserved depending on vessel form and wall thickness (Figures 7 and 8). Eight of the vessels were assigned to previously described types, and Valdez and Houk (2000) proposed three new types for the remaining vessels (Table 1). In general, the assemblage of vessels represents in types, forms, and slips what is commonly observed in the Terminal Preclassic period. The vessels include five mammiform tetrapod support bowls, one of which was missing its supports, two spout-and-bridge jars, two basal flange bowls, a ring base jar, and a basal angle bowl. The ceramic types include those traditionally associated with the Chicanel Sphere, including Sierra Red and Matamore Dichrome, and perhaps the early Tzakol Sphere, such as Rio Bravo Red (e.g., Sagebiel 2005: 247–253; Sullivan and Valdez 2006:79). The new types described based on vessels in the tomb were assigned to the Trogon Complex at Chan Chich, part of the Terminal Preclassic period,

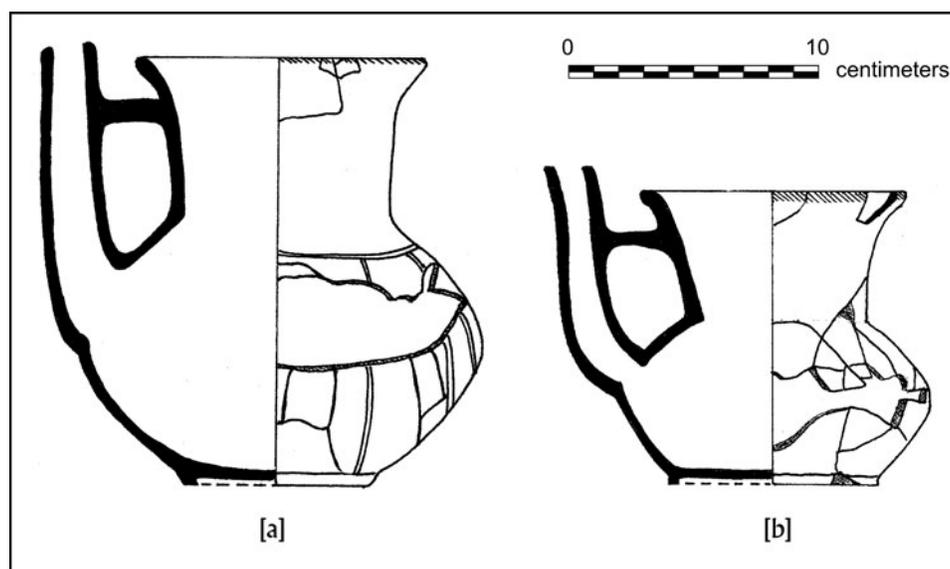


Figure 7. Spout-and-bridge vessels from Tomb 2. (a) Vessel 3, Cashew Red-and-Buff: Unspecified variety; (b) Vessel 1, Mango Incised: Unspecified variety (illustrations by Ashlyn Madden).

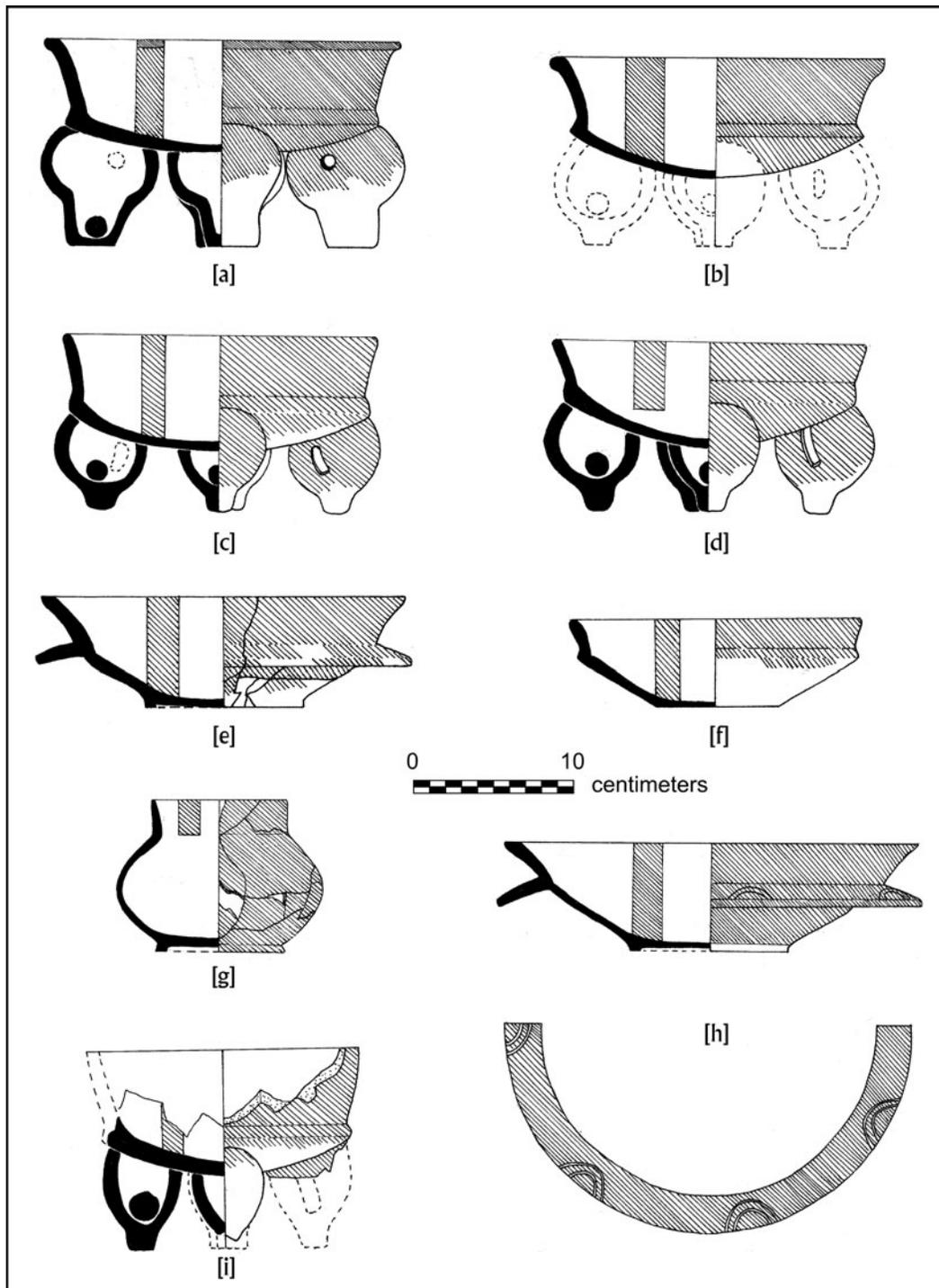


Figure 8. Remaining vessels from Tomb 2. [a–d] Vessels 2, 4, 8, and 9, Sierra Red: Unspecified variety; [e–g] Vessels 10, 7, and 6, Rio Bravo Red: Unspecified variety; [h] Vessel 5, Laguna Seca Incised: Unspecified variety; [i] Vessel II, Matamore Dichrome: Unspecified variety (illustrations by Ashlyn Madden).

and include Laguna Seca Incised, the incised version of Rio Bravo Red; Mango Incised; and Cashew Red-and-Buff (Valdez and Houk 2000:130). The Laguna Seca Incised vessel is a basal flange bowl with a Sierra Red slip, highlighting the nature of the assemblage.

Vessel 2, a Sierra Red tetrapod bowl with large, flat mammiform supports, is unlike the other mammiform vessels in the assemblage. It is remarkably similar in size and form to Vessel 10 from a burial in

Room 8 at Holmul, which was described by Hammond (1984: Figure 2). The Holmul vessel was a polychrome bowl with a dead white fabric, which led Hammond (1984:4) to suspect the vessel was an imported object. While no obvious paste differences were noted in the Chan Chich assemblage, it is possible the vessels were acquired from a variety of sources, as Hammond (1984) suspected of the Holmul assemblage.

Table 1. Whole Vessels and Type Names from Tomb 2

Vessel	Figure	Type	Form	Notes
1	7b	Mango Incised: unspecified variety	Spout-and-bridge jar	New type name from Chan Chich; highly fragmented vessel and only partially reconstructable
2	8a	Sierra Red: unspecified variety	Mammiform support bowl	Ash-tempered paste; likely from the Belize River Valley
3	7a	Cashew Red-and-Buff: unspecified variety	Spout-and-bridge jar	New type name from Chan Chich; highly fragmented vessel and only partially reconstructable
4	8b	Sierra Red: unspecified variety	Mammiform support bowl	Supports missing from vessel
5	8h	Laguna Seca Incised: unspecified variety	Basal flange bowl	New type name from Chan Chich representing the incised version of Rio Bravo Red; flange incised with nine double-lined semicircles
6	8g	Rio Bravo Red: unspecified variety	Ring base jar	-
7	8f	Rio Bravo Red: unspecified variety	Basal angle bowl	-
8	8c	Sierra Red: unspecified variety	Mammiform support bowl	-
9	8d	Sierra Red: unspecified variety	Mammiform support bowl	-
10	8e	Rio Bravo Red: unspecified variety	Basal flange bowl	-
11	8i	Matamore Dichrome: unspecified variety	Mammiform support bowl	Vessel not well fired; paste extremely soft

Given the poor preservation conditions in the tomb, no residue analyses were conducted on the Chan Chich ceramics. However, it is likely they contained food or beverage at the time of burial. Powis et al. (2002) have shown that spouted vessels from the Late Preclassic period frequently were used as chocolate pots.

Jade. Four jade artifacts—two ear spools, one tubular bead, and a sculpted pendant—were found in Tomb 2 (Figure 9). The pendant is a helmet-bib head pendant (Proskouriakoff 1974:10), characterized by a helmetlike headdress and biblike object surrounding the lower portions of the face. The Chan Chich specimen has a three-part headdress, with a raised central element. Hammond (1987:22), based on examples from Pomona, Cerros, and Nohmul, has argued that this form of helmet-bib head pendant is a “Preclassic sun god portrait.” The contexts in which the Cerros and Nohmul helmet-bib head pendants were found link them to the personages of the *ajaw* of the respective polities (Freidel and Schele 1988:552–558; Hammond 1987:23; Schele and Freidel 1990:102), and David Freidel (personal communication 1997) characterized the Chan Chich pendant as a “royal insignia jewel.”

Proskouriakoff (1974:11) has dated helmet-bib head pendants to the Preclassic period, and Hammond (1987:22) and Schele and Freidel (1990:98–121) more specifically assign them to the Late Preclassic. Helmet-bib head artifacts recovered from archaeological contexts at Cerros and Nohmul have been dated to around 100 B.C. (Hammond 1987:22). Several helmet-bib head pendants were found in a large cache at Blue Creek, dating from the end of the Early Classic period, approximately A.D. 500 (Guderjan 2007:30–33); given their late date, they may represent heirloom pieces.

Other Artifacts. Owing to the harsh depositional environment, the other artifacts in the tomb were fragmentary and poorly preserved. They do, however, indicate that a wide range of artifacts was originally included in the burial. John Jones (personal

communication 1998) identified a small (ca. 1 × 1 cm) fragment of “pressed Gossypium cotton paper” that has “blue and black brush strokes” on it. He suggests it “may be an old text fragment.” In some instances what appear to be the remains of ancient “codex” books in elite Maya tomb contexts have been reported from a few sites, including Copan, Honduras (Agurcia et al. 1989:483–486). The surmise that the small fragment in Chan Chich Tomb 2 is a codex fragment is consistent with the sun god pendant and is supportive of the royal status of the person buried in the tomb.

Near the southwestern corner of the tomb floor, to the side of where the head of the buried person is believed to have lain, excavators documented a large number of small, thin fragments of fragile material, which were green, red, or green on red. Observed edge on, the center of many of these fragments had a blackish color. The texture of the material seemed to be similar to flattened stucco. Examination of the material by John Jones (personal communication 1998) indicates the green and red material appears to have been painted onto a curved surface that had decayed. A reasonable possibility is that the material represents painted decorative elements on either a wooden vessel or gourd, which subsequently decayed and left the highly fragmented decorative material on the tomb floor. Similar cases were noted at Río Azul in Tombs 23 and 19 (Adams 1999:53; Hall 1987:132–133, 1989:76–78), and Hammond et al. (1996:90) report a stuccoed “wooden or gourd bowl of which only part of the painted lining survives” from an Early Classic tomb at La Milpa. An alternative possibility, given the material’s position in the tomb, is that it may represent decorative elements on a headdress made of perishable material.

A small fragment of possible *Pinus* sp. wood (John Jones, personal communication 1998) found near the tomb floor may be part of the burial litter or a fragment of some other artifact. This specimen, however, presents significant analytical problems. It was recovered from the screen during excavations because it was so encased in marl it was originally thought to be a small rock.

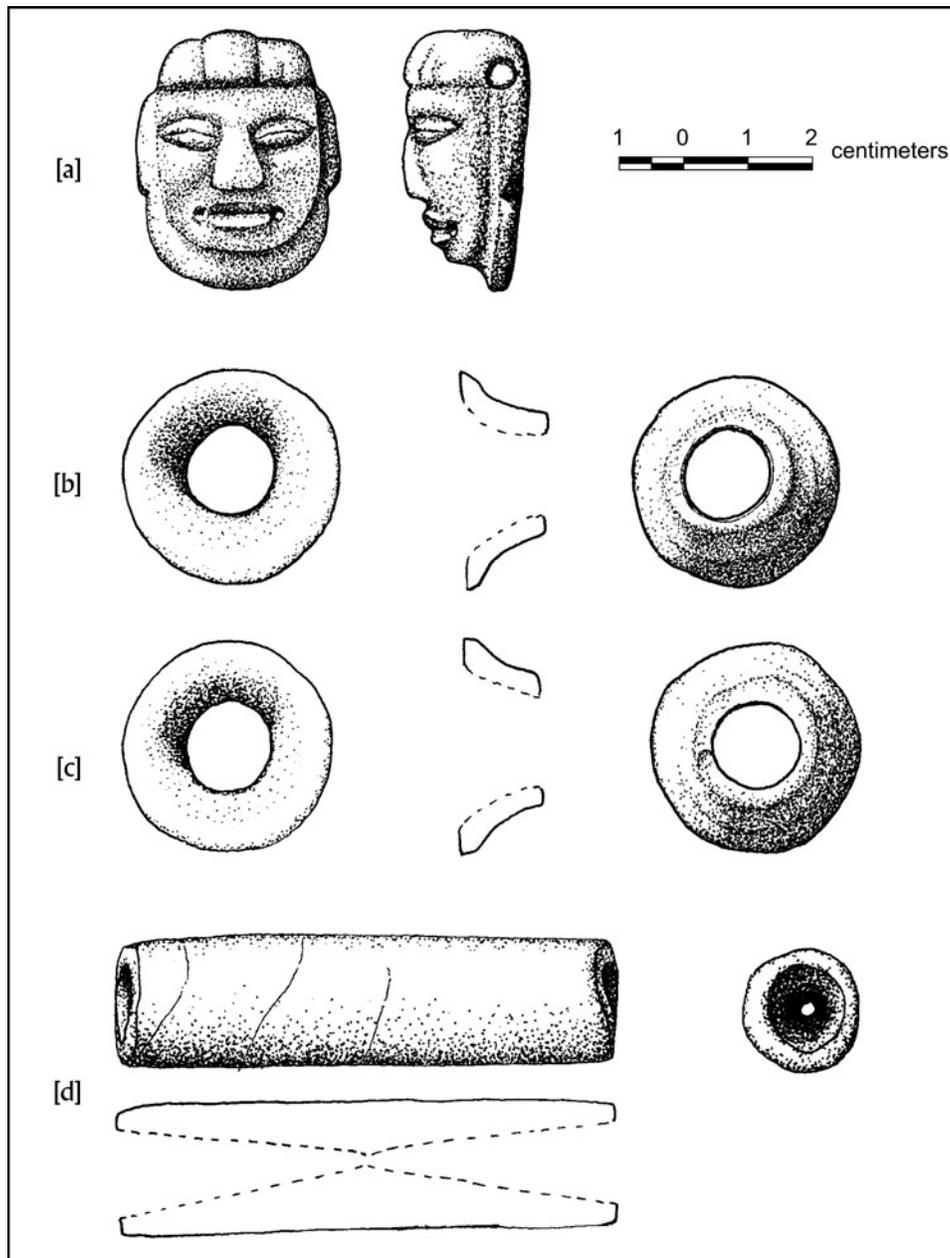


Figure 9. Jade artifacts from Tomb 2. (a) helmet-bib head pendant; (b and c) ear spoons; (d) bead (illustrations by Ashlyn Madden).

The fragment measured $7.8 \times 2.7 \times 0.2$ cm. The fragment of wood was submitted to Beta Analytic for radiocarbon dating, and the results were a millennium younger than expected: 530 ± 50 B.P. (Beta-126352; wood; $\delta^{13}C = -26.1\%$). The calibrated age ranges of the sample are cal A.D. 1325–1340 and cal A.D. 1390–1460 ($p = .95$). Given the apparent Postclassic period age of the specimen, it is likely the wood was unrelated to the tomb; it was probably a piece of intrusive root. John Jones (personal communication 2008) notes that “some root morphologies produce features that mimic *Pinus* ‘wood’.”

A badly deteriorated, curvilinear object, thought possibly to be of wood, lay across the northern half of the tomb floor; again, the preservation conditions in the tomb adversely affected the artifact. In plan, it loosely resembled a curved staff or other implement,

perhaps in the shape of a snake. Several samples were removed from the object for testing; however, the results were conflicting. Two experts consider the sample material to be bone (John Jones, personal communication 1998; Julie Saul, personal communication 1998). Beta Analytic, however, reported that during efforts to cleanse a sample of the object for dating, the material almost totally dissolved, leaving only a very small residue of woody pulp. This usually indicates that the sample has been poorly preserved and subjected to extreme conditions during its burial. The sample may retain its structure but very little of its content (R. E. Hatfield [Beta Analytic], personal communication 1998). Paul Francisco, a conservator at the former Department of Archaeology in Belize, examined the object *in situ* and removed a sample for microscopic analysis. He found that the upper surface of his sample was

uneven and displayed consistent scrape marks. Furthermore, the specimen exhibited grains consistent with a hardwood, but that it appeared to be petrified—a finding consistent with Beta Analytic's. Francisco also identified four strands of blue thread, one strand of red thread, and one strand of grayish-green thread attached to the sample of the artifact that he examined under microscopic analysis (Paul Francisco, personal communication 1997).

Given the poor state of preservation and the conflicting results, analysis of the curvilinear artifact remains problematic. It could be part of the burial litter, the remains of a wooden staff or scepter or something altogether different, including a root fragment. However, based on the excavation data, the results of Beta Analytic's attempts to analyze the artifact, and Paul Francisco's observations, it is our conclusion that the artifact was most likely a carved artifact made of a tropical hardwood, probably a staff or scepter that originally had been adorned or decorated, as suggested by the strands of thread. A staff, particularly one with serpent-like characteristics, would be another symbol of rulership. Its shape and placement along the central axis of the tomb argue against the likelihood of its being a root, but that possibility cannot be completely dismissed.

Dating Chan Chich Tomb 2

The alkaline conditions of the marly sediment encasing the contents of the tomb were not conducive to good preservation of organic materials. Of the skeletal material, only teeth and small fragments of bone survived in the tomb at the time of discovery. The problematic artifact, apparently made of wood, had been essentially petrified; its organic matrix replaced by calcium carbonate. Two samples submitted for radiocarbon dating from the tomb were unsuccessful: one sample—from the problematic artifact—could not be processed, and the other returned a Postclassic period age. Therefore, the age of Tomb 2 can only be estimated based on the artifacts within it and from its stratigraphic position; both methods are largely dependent on relative dates of ceramic types and both point to a Terminal Preclassic/early Early Classic period age for the tomb's construction.

When the tomb was constructed, the builders cut through a series of Late Preclassic floors—defined by Chicanel ceramics in the sub-floor fill—before excavating the tomb chamber into bedrock (see Figure 5). Sullivan and Sagebiel (2003:Figure 3.1) estimate the date range of the Late Preclassic period in the region to be around 400 B.C. to A.D. 250. Tzakol 1 ceramics from the fill within the platform capping the tomb indicate a possible Early Classic period date for the tomb's excavation and the platform's construction. In the Three Rivers Region, the TR-Tzakol 1–2 ceramic complex dates to around A.D. 250–450 (Sullivan and Sagebiel 2003:Figure 3.1).

The ceramic artifacts in the tomb have been assigned to the Trogon Complex at Chan Chich by Valdez and Houk (2000:129), who noted "a significant overlap ... between types" defined for the Jacamar Complex (Late Preclassic) and the Trogon Complex (Terminal Preclassic). As observed above, the assemblage of ceramics is Terminal Preclassic in slips and forms. The ceramic forms—bowls with bulbous mammiform supports, basal flange dishes, spout-and-bridge jars, and a jar with a ring base—are primarily "Facet 2" diagnostics of the protohistoric ceramic stage (e.g., Brady et al. 1998:29–34), dating to around A.D. 150–400. The style of the jade pendant from the tomb has been dated to the Late Preclassic period, around 100 B.C. (Hammond 1987:22). The combined artifact and stratigraphic data, therefore, suggest the tomb was likely created at the end of the Terminal Preclassic or

the very beginning of the Early Classic period in the region. We suggest that A.D. 200 to 350 is a reasonable estimate for the tomb's age.

EARLY ELITE AND ROYAL TOMBS IN THE REGION

Blue Creek Burial 5 is arguably the earliest elite burial known in the region (Table 2); it was discovered in the very northeastern fringe of the Three Rivers Region, off of the Río Bravo Escarpment and approximately 4.25 km east of the site of Blue Creek (see Figure 1). The burial was discovered in a *chultun* in an elaborate residential group on a large hill rising out of the otherwise flat floodplain shared by the Río Hondo and Río Bravo. Above the tomb was a thick Late Preclassic midden that was apparently capped by an Early Classic period occupation. The burial included the remains of three individuals; 28 whole ceramic vessels; over 100 pieces of jade; an assortment of obsidian, hematite, and cloth fragments; and faunal and floral remains (Kosakowsky and Lohse 2003).

The 28 ceramic vessels belong to the Terminal Preclassic Linda Vista Ceramic Complex at Blue Creek (Kosakowsky and Lohse 2003). None of the pots are Usulután vessels, but there are some trickle-style imitations in the collection—either organic resist or a wipe-off technique with double slipping, similar to Cimi ceramics from Tikal; Kosakowsky (personal communication 2003) notes some similarities with vessels from Nohmul, as well. Temporally and content-wise, Burial 5 appears to fall within the protohistoric Facet 1 according to Sagebiel (2005:723), who observes that "it contained bowls, dishes, and jars (including one spouted jar) that either lack supports or have small supports that are Facet 1 diagnostics." Brady et al. (1998:18, 33) suggest a range of 75 ± 25 B.C. to A.D. 150 for Facet 1, meaning Burial 5 may be a century or two older than Tomb 2 at Chan Chich.

Early Classic tombs (see Table 2) have been excavated in various contexts in the Three Rivers Region, including within or beneath temples and other types of structures at Río Azul (Adams 1999; Hall 1986), beneath the Main Plaza at La Milpa (Hammond et al. 1996), under a residential structure west of the ball court at Dos Hombres (Durst 1998; Sullivan and Sagebiel 2003), and at the rural Barba Group 2.5 km northwest of Dos Hombres (Hageman 2004; Sullivan and Sagebiel 2003). All of these tombs are regarded to be more recent than Tomb 2.

Burial 5 near Blue Creek is slightly older than Tomb 2 at Chan Chich. Its artifact assemblage may be an expression of prestige, but its rural location argues against its being an indication of power or rulership. It also represents the reuse of a *chultun* as a burial chamber, not the intentional construction of a specialized tomb.

The royal insignia jewel (the helmet-bib head pendant), the possible wooden scepter or staff, and Tomb 2's location within the heart of the site core argue for the individual's status as the ruler of the Chan Chich polity. Tomb 2, therefore, holds the distinction of thus far being the earliest royal tomb discovered in the Three Rivers Region as well as being the earliest constructed tomb in the region.

EARLY ROYAL BURIAL PATTERNS

With the exception of Burial B11.67 at La Milpa, all of the documented Early Classic tombs in the region were found in temples, palaces, or elite residential structures. We suggest that Chan Chich Tomb 2 follows an earlier tomb pattern, one in which rulers were interred not in temples, but in shrines in the center of their polities. The prototype for this pattern is found in the North

Table 2. Reported and Suspected Late Preclassic–Early Classic Period Tombs in the Three Rivers Region

Period	Location	#	Royal?	Age	Temporal Diagnostics	Notes	Source(s)
Terminal Preclassic A.D. 100/150–250)	4.25 km east of Blue Creek	Burial 5	N	Linda Vista Ceramic Complex; Chicanel Ceramic Sphere	28 ceramic vessels	Burial in <i>chultun</i> ; "richest" burial to date in region	Kosakowsky and Lohse (2003); Guderjan (2000)
Terminal Late Preclassic/Early Classic (ca. A.D. 200–350)	Chan Chich, Upper Plaza	Tomb 2	Y	Trogon Ceramic Complex	11 ceramic vessels; jade helmet-bib head pendant	Age assessment based on stratigraphy and tomb contents; first constructed tomb in region; first royal tomb in region	Houk and Robichaux (2003); Robichaux (1998); Valdez and Houk (2000)
Early Classic 1	Río Azul, Str. F-38	Tomb 29	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 250–357); Mucu Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 1 Ceramic Sphere (Richard E.W. Adams, personal communication 2008)	One Balanza Black: Balanza Variety bowl	Small cryptlike tomb	Walling et al. (2000:208–209, 212)
Early Classic 1	Río Azul, Str. F-38	Tomb 30	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 250–357); Mucu Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 1 Ceramic Sphere (Richard E.W. Adams, personal communication 2008)	Two vessels; Caal Red Polychrome: Caal Variety basal flange bowl and Totbol Matte Brown on Cream: Totbol Variety bowl	Small cryptlike tomb	Walling et al. (2000:208–209, 212–213)
Early Classic 2	Río Azul, Str. A-2	Tomb 7	Y	Early Classic (three possible dates based on short count: 8.19.2.11.2 [October 21, 418], 9.1.15.6.2 [October 8, 470], or 9.4.8.1.2 [September 26, 522])	-	Looted chamber with painted text on walls. Adams (personal communication 2008) suspects this to be tomb of male ruler, paired with female in Tomb 4 and believes the October 8, 470 date is the most likely based on stratigraphy.	Adams (1999:93, 186); Hall (1989:182)
Early Classic 2	La Milpa, Str. 1	Tomb 1	Y?	Inferred Early Classic age (ca. A.D. 250–600)	-	Looted chamber in Structure 1; capped by alternating layers of debitage and limestone aggregate	Guderjan (1991b:12)
Early Classic 2	Río Azul, Str. C-7	Tomb 5	?	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 400–450)	-	Looted chamber; shaft leads to top of tomb; shaft capped by 5–10-cm-thick layer of chert debitage; one of the Early Classic painted tombs	Adams (1999:99, 186); Hall (1984:56–57, 1986:69–74, 1989:177–179)
Early Classic 2	Say Ka, Str. A-2	None	?	Inferred Early Classic age (ca. A.D. 250–600)	-	Inferred tomb in looted structure based on alternating bands of debitage and fill visible in two looters' trenches	Houk and Hageman (2007)
Early Classic 2	Río Azul, Str. B-56	Tomb 24	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 357–530); Early Classic Totbol Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 2–3 Ceramic Sphere	Balanza Black vessel, possible heirloom(?)		Adams (1999:96)
Early Classic 2	Río Azul, Str. F-38	Tomb 28	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 357–530); Totbol Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 2–3 Ceramic Sphere (Richard E.W. Adams, personal communication 2008)	-	Looted, small cryptlike tomb; dating based on stratigraphy	Walling et al. (2000:208–209, 212)
Early Classic 2	Río Azul, Str. F-38	Tomb 31	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 357–530); Totbol Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 2–3 Ceramic Sphere (Richard E.W. Adams, personal communication 2008)	Three vessels including one Yat Cream on Brown: Yat Variety cylindrical tripod with scutate lid	Small cryptlike tomb	Walling et al. (2000:208–209, 213)

Continued

Table 2. Continued

Period	Location	#	Royal?	Age	Temporal Diagnostics	Notes	Source(s)
Early Classic 2	Río Azul, Str. F-38	Tomb 32	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 357–530); Totbol Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 2–3 Ceramic Sphere (Richard E.W. Adams, personal communication 2008)	-	Small cryptlike tomb; dating based on stratigraphy	Walling et al. (2000:208–209, 213)
Early Classic 2	Dos Hombres, B-17 Group, 100 m west of ball court	Str. B-16 Tomb	N?	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 350–500); TR-Tzakol 2 Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 2 Ceramic Sphere (Lauren Sullivan, personal communication 2008)	Dos Arroyos Orange Polychrome basal flange bowl; Yaloche Cream Polychrome scutate lid; other vessels	Tomb capped by 20,000 pieces of obsidian; beneath cut in floor of elite residential structure, near main plaza and ball court	Durst (1998); Robichaux and Durst (1999); Sullivan and Sagebiel (2003)
Early Classic 3	La Milpa, Plaza A	Burial B11.67	Y	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 450–600); Gentle Work Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 3 Ceramic Sphere (note AMS date of bone ca. A.D. 220–350)	Paradero Fluted Teotihuacán-style tripod cylinder; three other vessels and scutate lid	Corbelled vault tomb in plaza, capped by layers of pink and blue chert flakes; jade vulture diadem in tomb; probable royal tomb	Hammond et al. (1996); Sagebiel (2005); Sullivan and Sagebiel (2003)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. A-1	Tomb 4	Y	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 400–500)	-	Looted chamber in Str. A-3 Complex (Note: Adams [personal communication 2008] suspects this to be tomb of female, paired with male in Tomb 7)	Adams (1999:93)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. A-5	Tomb 10	Y	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 400–500)	-	Looted chamber in Str. A-3 Complex; corbelled vaulted chamber (Note: Adams [personal communication 2008] suspects this to be tomb of female, paired with male in Tomb 12)	Hall (1986:105–110, 1989:182–184)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. B-11	Tomb 3	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 400–500)	-	Looted chamber; similar in type to Tomb 10	Hall (1989:184)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. B-46	Tomb 18	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 400–500)	-	Looted chamber in Str. B-56 Complex	Adams (1987:16)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. D-47	Tomb 17	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 400–500)	-	Looted chamber with painted walls with badly faded text possibly reading “Stormy Sky, Lord...Sky Bone”; one of the Early Classic painted tombs	Adams (1999:99, 186); Hall (1986:103); Robichaux (1990:102–103)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. C-1	Tomb 1	Y	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 460); Totbol Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 2–3 Ceramic Sphere	None found in situ; fragment of wooden bowl discarded by looters probably from Tomb 1	Looted chamber with painted text on walls; tomb of Governor X, ruler or Río Azul, born A.D. 417	Adams (1999:142); Hall (1989)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. A-1	Tomb 2	Y?	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 450–525)	-	Looted chamber; dating based on stratigraphic associations; interred individual was likely secondary to person buried in Tomb 4	Adams (1999:94–95)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. A-4	Tomb 12	Y	Early Classic (9.0.14.8.13 [March 18, 450] or 9.3.7.13.8 [March 6, 502])	None found in situ; possible vessel from tomb in collection at Detroit Institute of Arts (Kerr 1446)	Looted chamber with painted text on walls with date of 8 Ben 16 K’ayab; apparent tomb of “Six Sky”, member of ruling family; one of the Early Classic painted tombs (Note: Adams [personal communication 2008] suspects this to be tomb of male ruler, paired with female in Tomb 10)	Adams (1999:93, 186); Hall (1989:182); Stuart (1987:167)

Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. C-1	Tomb 23	Y?	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 480); Totbol Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 2–3 Ceramic Sphere	22 ceramic vessels including 13 tripod cylinder vessels; types include Aguila Orange: Aguila Variety bowls and Balanza Black: Balanza Variety tripod cylinders	Tomb of advisor to Governor X	Adams (1999:96–99, 142–143); Hall (1987:118–142; 1989)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. A-4	Tomb 6	N?	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 450–530)	-	Looted chamber; one of the Early Classic painted tombs	Adams (1999:143, 186)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. A-9	Tomb 9	Y?	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 450–530)	-	Looted chamber; one of the Early Classic painted tombs (Note: Adams [personal communication 2008] suspects this to be tomb of female, paired with undiscovered tomb in Str. A-3)	Adams (1999:186); Hall (1986:101–103, 1989:181–182)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. B-56	Tomb 8	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 450–530)	-	Looted chamber in Str. B-56 Complex; one of the Early Classic painted tombs	Adams (1987:16; 1999:186)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. B-56	Tomb 13	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 450–530)	-	Looted chamber in Str. B-56 Complex; one of the Early Classic painted tombs	Adams (1987:16; 1999:186)
Early Classic 3	Río Azul, Str. B-56	Tomb 25	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 450–530)	Seven vessels; types include Balanza Black: Balanza Variety, Aguila Orange: Aguila Variety, and Caal Red Polychrome: Caal Variety	Only tomb of female found at Río Azul; tomb walls painted with three witz glyphs and one possible name, “Nine Darkness”; one of the Early Classic painted tombs	Adams (1999:95–96, 169, 186); Ponciano (1989)
Early Classic 3	Barba Group, 2.5 km northwest of Dos Hombres	Burial 2	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 450–550); TR-Tzakol 3 Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 3 Ceramic Sphere (note AMS date on bone of cal. A.D. 284 +/- 157)	Three effigy vessels; Teotihuacán-style tripod cylinder with lid	Small tomb cut into bedrock	Hageman (2004:353, 374); Sullivan and Sagebiel (2003)
Early Classic 3/ Late Classic 1	Blue Creek, Str. 1	Tomb 4	Y?	Transitional Early Classic/Late Classic (ca. A.D. 600); Aguas Turbias Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 3/Tepeu 1 Ceramic Sphere	Saxche Orange Polychrome plate; Molino Black bowl; Molino Black basal ridged bowl with ring base	Tomb accompanied Structure 1-V phase of building; grave goods included three ceramic vessels, two jade earspools, a stingray spine, and a possible toolkit for bloodletting	Driver (2002:73); Guderjan (2007:25, Table 6.2)
Early Classic 3/ Late Classic 1	Blue Creek, Kín Tan, Str. 34	Tomb 7	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 500–600); Río Hondo Ceramic Complex; Tzakol Ceramic Sphere or Transitional Early Classic/Late Classic (ca. A.D. 600); Aguas Turbias Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 3/Tepeu 1 Ceramic Sphere (Laura Kosakowsky, personal communication 2008)	One secure whole vessel; transitional Tzakol3/Tepeu 1 polychrome (Laura Kosakowsky, personal communication 2008)	Small cryptlike tomb; grave goods included two ceramic vessels, a jade pendant in form of “acrobat glyph,” and triangular jade bead	Guderjan (2007:76–80)
Early Classic 3/ Late Classic 1	Blue Creek, Kín Tan, Str. 45	Tomb 8	N	Early Classic (ca. A.D. 450–600); Río Hondo Ceramic Complex; Tzakol Ceramic Sphere or Transitional Early Classic/Late Classic (ca. A.D. 600); Aguas Turbias Ceramic Complex; Tzakol 3/Tepeu 1 Ceramic Sphere (Laura Kosakowsky, personal communication 2008)	Two whole vessels, both of which appear to be poorly made late Aguila Orange open shallow bowls, with internal offsets (Laura Kosakowsky, personal communication 2008)		Guderjan (2007:Table 6.2)

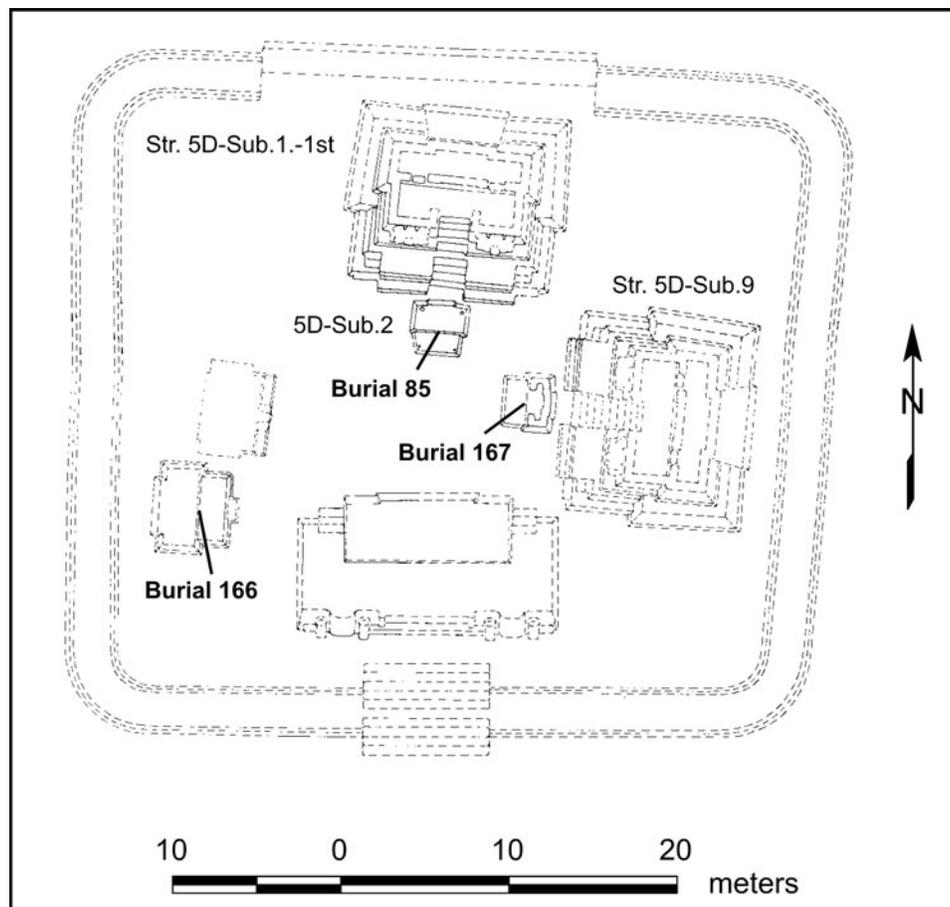


Figure 10. Plan of the Terminal Preclassic period North Acropolis at Tikal showing the locations of Burials 85, 166, and 167 beneath shrines (after Coe 1990:Figure 10e).

Acropolis at Tikal, exemplified by the tomb of the founder, Yax Ehb' Xook. There are striking architectural similarities between the tomb of the dynastic founder at Tikal and Tomb 2 at Chan Chich.

During the Terminal Preclassic period, two pyramids—Str. 5D-Sub.1-1st on the north and Str. 5D-Sub.9 on the east—were constructed on the North Acropolis. The pyramids were adorned with stucco masks flanking their central stairs and capped by two-room temples (Coe 1990:210–214, 224–226, Figures 21, 22, and 29). Subsequently, tombs were excavated into the basal platform in front of the two temples, with a third tomb placed on the western side of the platform, and low shrines were constructed to cap the tombs (Figure 10). Sequentially, these burials began with Burial 166 in the southwestern corner of the Acropolis, included Burial 167 in front of the eastern temple, and concluded with Burial 85 in front of the northern temple (Coe 1990:232).

As discussed previously, despite the fact that the other two burials are earlier, Tikal Burial 85 is considered to be the tomb of the founder, and thus the first royal burial. As Coe (1990:217) describes the burial chamber of Yax Ehb' Xook, it was “cut through burned Fl. 10 as a rough rectangle (3.20 m north-south and 2.20 m east-west), the more or less vertically-walled excavation was carried down to 2.5 m and leveled off almost on bedrock” (Figure 11). The tomb chamber was then framed by four walls (0.70–1.0 m high), creating a floor plan 2.40 m long (north-south) by 1.10 m wide. The “mud-plastered lower side walls supported rustic vaulting of amorphous small slabs ... spanned by six

transverse stones, 0.80–0.90 m long; two had collapsed” (Coe 1990:218). The tomb’s shaft was filled with “dark earth (with bits of charcoal), stone rubble and blocks” and covered with Str. Sub.2.-2nd, a 0.40-m-high platform (Coe 1990:217, 218).

Yax Ehb' Xook was interred in a bundle with his head and femora missing. His tomb was stocked with 18 ceramic vessels from the Late Preclassic Cauac Ceramic Complex, the fuchsite mask noted above, a cylindrical jade bead, a stingray spine, various shell objects, a stuccoed wooden bowl, and various textile fragments (Coe 1990:218–220). Coe (1990:220) comments that the tomb “by its sheer size must have been linked to Str. 5D-Sub.1-1st, patently the supreme edifice of the times. Surmised is that interment, so northerly and axially sited, either was for a man so prominent that he deserved it, or that he had played an outstanding role in the structure’s evidently lengthy life.”

The significant differences between Burial 85 and Chan Chich Tomb 2 are their age, with Burial 85’s being perhaps 100–200 years older, and the directional relationship between tomb and temple. However, the parallels are more informative. Both tombs were specially constructed chambers placed within the architectural heart of each site. Both were placed within the plaza in front of what are believed to be the largest temples at the time and then capped by low shrines. Finally, both Tikal Burial 85 and Chan Chich Tomb 2 housed early kings.

We suggest that Burial 85 and Chan Chich Tomb 2, though not contemporaneous, are both examples of an early royal burial pattern in the Lowlands in which rulers were buried not within funerary temples constructed by themselves or their heirs, but beneath

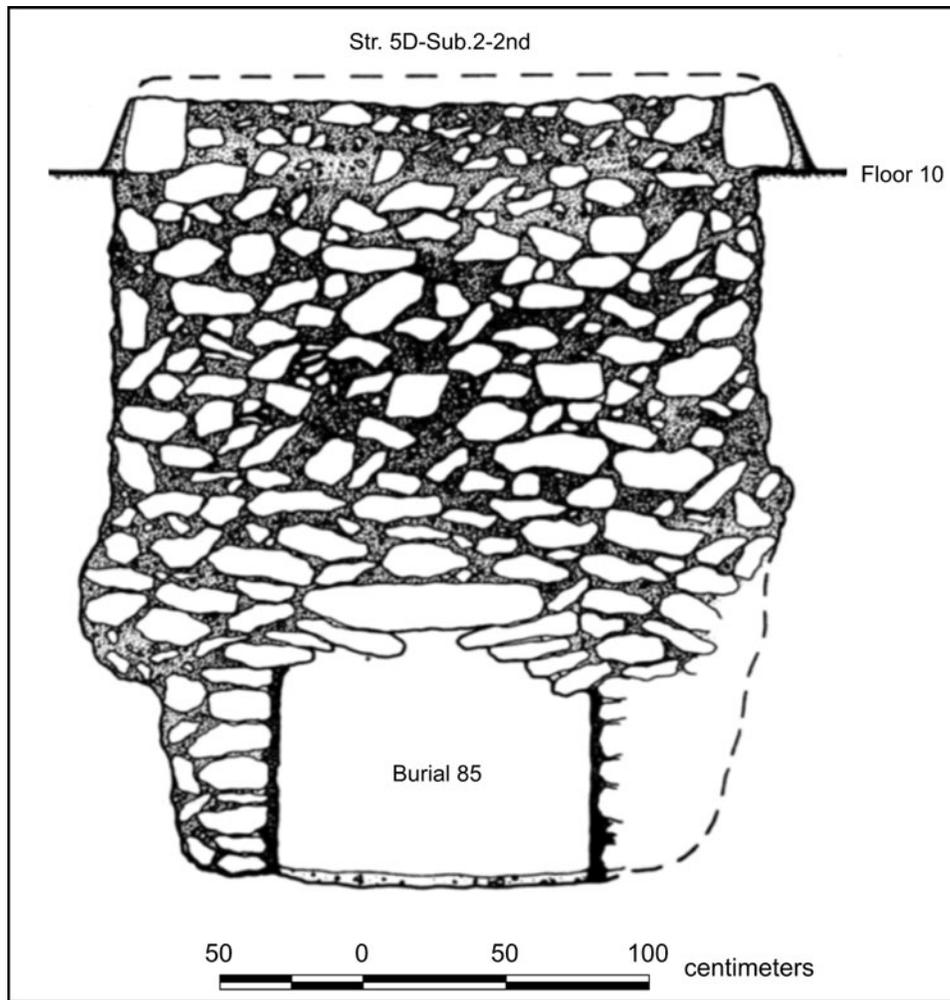


Figure II. North cross section of Str. 5D-Sub.2-2nd and Burial 85 (after Coe 1990:Figure 27b).

shrines in front of the temples they used during life. During the Early Classic period, royal tombs began to be constructed differently: initially they were carved into bedrock beneath pyramids, and later they were constructed within the pyramids themselves. Commonly, lenses of chert debitage capped the Early Classic tomb shafts. Thus, Burial B11.67 at La Milpa may be viewed as a blending of the older pattern seen at Tikal and Chan Chich, in which tombs were placed near an associated temple, and the Early Classic pattern of capping tombs with chert debitage. Krejci and Culbert (1995:109) have previously noted a significant change in royal burial patterns, primarily in the contents of tombs, between the Manik 2 and Manik 3 ceramic phases at Tikal. It is possible the architectural and locational changes of Early Classic burials we are describing are another manifestation of the change Krejci and Culbert (1995) previously noted.

ELITE COMPETITION IN THE THREE RIVERS REGION AND BEYOND

Despite his apparent claims to divine kingship, the individual buried in Tomb 2 was likely one of many competing rulers vying for power in a rapidly changing political landscape. This competition in the region began sometime earlier, and the unusually rich Burial 5, near Blue Creek but over 4 km from the site center, is a sign that

political relationships may have remained contested around the peripheries of the growing sites. Chan Chich Tomb 2 and Burial 5 from near Blue Creek are early examples of elite participation in a burgeoning and competitive political arena.

Initially, elite people like the king at Chan Chich and the primary individual buried in Burial 5 adopted “a political and/or ritual sub-complex” of ceramics (Sagebiel 2005:723)—which constitutes the protoclassic in the Three Rivers Region—to express their participation in this regional political arena. This ritual subcomplex included mammiform tetrapods. Chan Chich Tomb 2 is one of a handful of examples that Reese-Taylor and Walker (2002:106) describe as “Holmul I” style tombs, “a group of architecturally and materially distinct tombs ... in northeastern Petén and northwestern Belize.” They observe that these tombs contain mammiform tetrapod vessels, “made in a variety of forms and surface treatments,” with basal flange bowls, spouted jars, and other forms (both standard and special), as well as jade, *Spondylus* shell, and other imported prestige goods (Reese-Taylor and Walker 2002:107).

It is our position that the pattern noted above is one of the early ways that the elite and newly founded royal dynasties of the Central Lowlands expressed in death the competition for power and prestige that undoubtedly marked their political lives. Through time—as the region entered and passed through the Early Classic period—the

competition among rulers/powerful elite manifested itself more dramatically through (1) monumental construction at some sites and (2) a more diverse system of “exchange of luxury goods and/or local emphasis on symbols associated with powerful sites from afar” (e.g., Sullivan and Sagebiel 2003:31) at others. The former is perhaps best typified by the significant expansion of monumental architecture at Río Azul (which grew quickly to be a dominant site in the region), La Milpa, and Blue Creek. At Río Azul, the first construction of palace structures occurred at the beginning of the Early Classic period, and the initial phase of the massive A-3 complex of five temples began around A.D. 385 (Adams 1999:42). At La Milpa, there was “substantial growth during the Early Classic, much of it in Plaza A, including the plaza itself and the monumental buildings on it,” and at least seven stelae were erected in Plaza A during the Early Classic (Sagebiel 2005:726). At Blue Creek, the Early Classic was a period of dynamic architectural growth and innovation (Driver 2007). While the initial expansion of the site core was rather modest, the latter half of the period witnessed an extensive rebuilding episode during which a large, colonnaded building and a temple adorned with a stucco panel were built (Driver 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

Tomb 2 at Chan Chich provides early evidence relating to the establishment of rulership at a site in the Three Rivers Region.

It also reflects the identification on the part of the local elite with the developing trappings of rulership in the wider arena of the Maya Lowlands. Tomb 2 emulated in placement and construction Tikal Burial 85, and its occupant was interred with one of the first symbols of royalty to appear in the Maya lowlands—the royal insignia jewel worn on the headbands of kings. Participation in this political arena was expressed regionally by the use of protoclassic ceramics and other exotic artifacts (jade, shell, obsidian, etc.) in burial contexts. Through time, this competition changed to include specialized tomb construction, dramatic expansion of monumental architecture, the use of stucco adornment on buildings, and a wider range of exotic artifacts, which were placed in caches, as well as burials.

Chan Chich Tomb 2 follows a Late Preclassic royal burial pattern, perhaps originating at Tikal, in which early kings were buried beneath shrines in front of their principal structure, rather than within a funerary temple. From a research perspective, it is possible that early royal burial customs in the Central Lowlands may be more diverse than commonly believed. Important information about the early history of dynastic lineages at other sites may lay undiscovered in tombs beneath plazas rather than within pyramid platforms. The seeming scarcity of Terminal Preclassic and early Early Classic period tombs may, therefore, be at least partially attributable to excavation bias.

RESUMEN

Chan Chich es un sitio arqueológico de los Mayas antiguos localizado en el noroeste de Belice. Es de tamaño mediano, y fue ocupado desde el preclásico medio hasta el clásico tardío. En 1997, el Proyecto Arqueológico de Chan Chich encontró una tumba tallada en la roca madre, debajo de una plaza situada en el centro del sitio. La tumba fue designado Tumba 2. Artefactos descubiertos dentro de la tumba, y la estratificación presente, indicaron que la Tumba 2 fue construida cerca del fin del preclásico tardío o al principio del clásico temprano, en torno a d.C. 200–350.

Para construir la tumba, los Maya excavaron a través de una serie de pisos del preclásico tardío, y en la roca madre abajo. La cámara de la tumba fue 3,25 m de largo y 0,8 m de ancho y fue cubierta por 12 grandes piedras rectangulares. La tumba contuvo los restos mal conservados de un hombre adulto, 11 vasijas de cerámica, cuatro artefactos de jade, un posible fragmento de papel de algodón, unos pequeños fragmentos de estuco o pintura, un pequeño pedazo de madera, y un artefacto hecho probablemente

de madera. Un colgante de jade indica que la tumba es un entierro real. Las cerámicas en la tumba incluyen formas típicamente asociadas con el “proto-classic” en el norte de Belice. La tumba fue debajo de una plataforma baja que probablemente sirvió como un santuario. La evidencia indica que la Tumba 2 de Chan Chich representa la primera tumba real conocida en la región, y que la tumba refleja un nuevo modelo de competencia entre élites en las Tierras Bajas Central de los Mayas antiguos. Esa competencia comenzó al principio del preclásico y se intensificó y se transformó durante los periodos preclásico tardío y el clásico temprano. Hay una fuerte semejanza entre la Tumba 2 de Chan Chich y el Entierro 85 de Tikal, la tumba de Yax Ehb' Xook, el fundador de la dinastía de Tikal.

Finalmente, observamos que, debido a la tendencia de arqueólogos a buscar tumbas reales dentro y bajo pirámides, y no bajo el superficie de plazas, es bien posible que los reyes del preclásico tardío fueron mas numerosos que anteriormente fue creído.

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