
13 THE DEVELOPMENT OF TERMINAL PRECLASSIC AND EARLY CLASSIC ROYAL ARCHITECTURE AT CHAN CHICH, BELIZE

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The archaeological site of Chan Chich is the southernmost and the second largest Maya city in the Belizean portion of the Three Rivers adaptive region. Excavations at the Upper Plaza, located in the site's center, have yielded evidence of a continuous occupation that dates from the Middle Preclassic to the Late Classic period and includes a Terminal Preclassic royal Maya tomb. Excavations in this area during the 2017 season yielded evidence of different types of elite architecture, such as a long platform, dated to 400 BC, and a funerary crypt containing a probable royal burial dated to the Early Classic period. The results of our excavations give us rich information about Chan Chich's transition from a small village to an early Maya kingdom.

Introduction

Chan Chich is the southernmost Maya city in the Belizean portion of the Three Rivers adaptive region, which spans portions of Belize, México, and Guatemala (Dunning et al. 1998; Garrison and Dunning 2009). The Río Bravo, Booth's River, and Río Azul/Río Hondo and their watersheds define the region and encompass over a dozen large sites including Chan Chich, Dos Hombres, and La Milpa in Belize, and San Bartolo, Xultun, La Honradez, and Río Azul in Guatemala (Figure 1). The Guatemalan half of the region was home to some spectacular Preclassic developments including a royal tomb, dating to 150 BC, and elaborate polychrome murals, perhaps 50 years younger, at San Bartolo (Saturno 2006:73).

Although smaller than the largest centers in the western portion of the region, by the Late Classic period Chan Chich was the second largest site in the eastern half of the Three Rivers adaptive region, trailing only La Milpa in monumental area (Houk 2015:Table 10.1). The monumental core of the site is centered on a 350-m long, north-south line of contiguous plazas on a broad hill overlooking Chan Chich Creek (Figure 2). The architectural center of the site is arguably Structure A-1, a large tandem range building that divides the Main Plaza from the Upper Plaza, separating public space from private space. Elevated approximately 7 m above the Main Plaza, the Upper Plaza constitutes an elevated acropolis or palace group with two large temple-pyramids, attached lateral courtyards, and a commanding view of the Main Plaza from the central landing and eight once-vaulted rooms that face north from Structure A-1. Accessed by stairways on either side, the

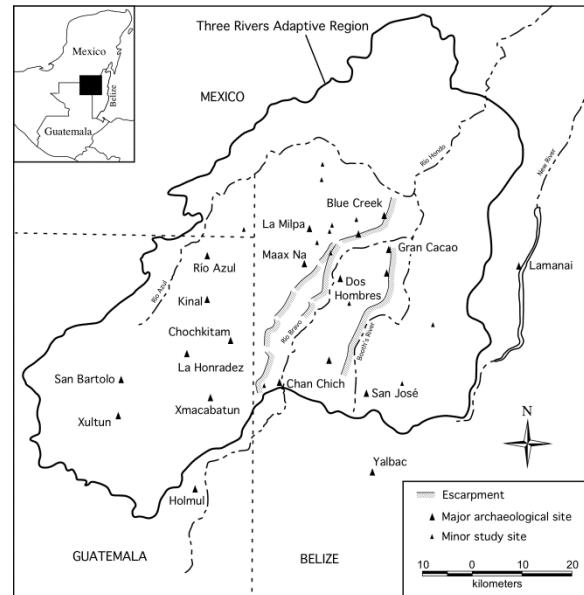


Figure 1. Map of northwestern Belize and Three Rivers adaptive region showing the locations of major Maya sites.

central landing on Structure A-1 is the only formal entryway into the Upper Plaza.

During the first season of excavations at Chan Chich in 1997, the Chan Chich Archaeological Project encountered a Terminal Preclassic royal Maya tomb in the Upper Plaza at the site (Houk et al. 2010). That discovery, coupled with subsequent excavations of early Middle Preclassic floors and features, promoted additional excavations in the Upper Plaza to investigate the earliest settlement of the site and the subsequent transformation of a small village into the seat of power for an early Maya king. In this paper, we summarize our evolving understanding of the Preclassic foundations of Chan Chich and present our newest data on the

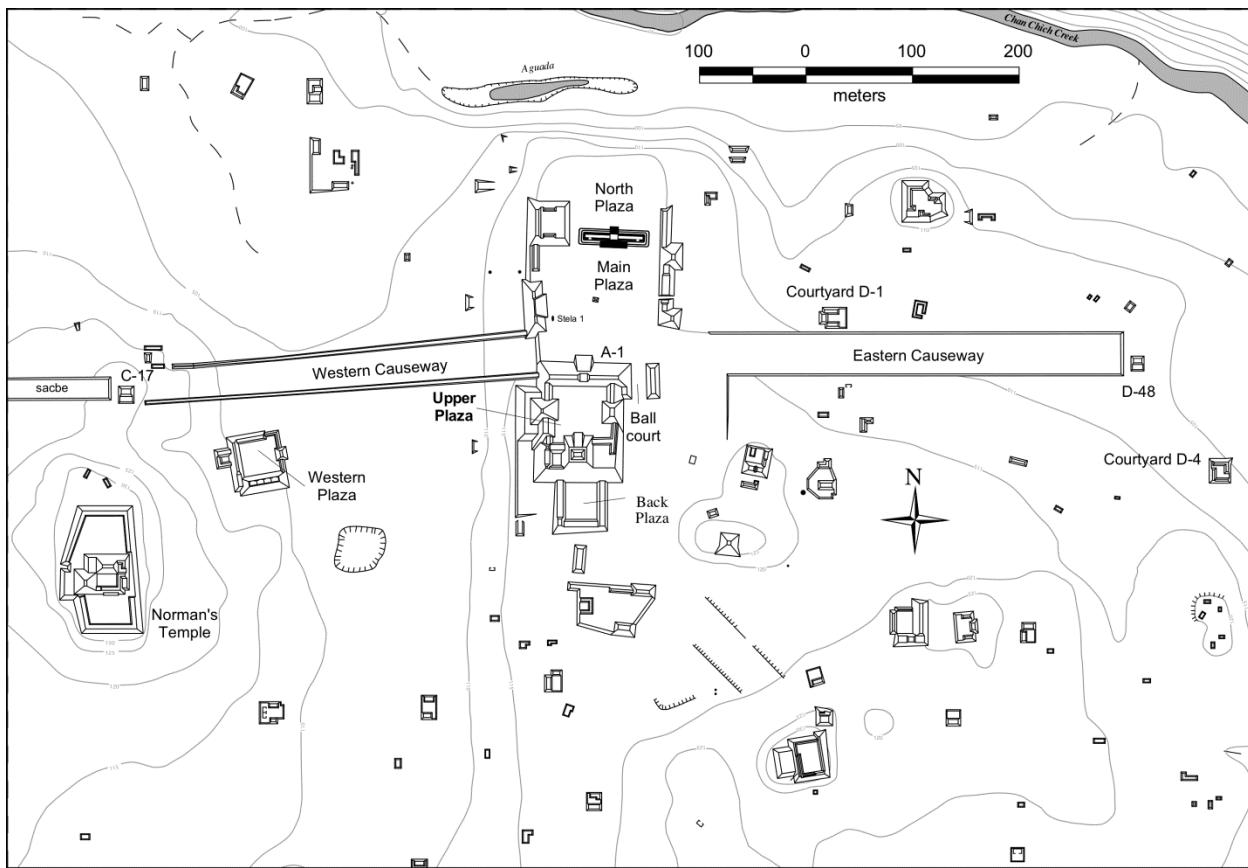


Figure 2. Map of Chan Chich.

Terminal Preclassic and Early Classic royal architecture at the site.

History of Excavations

During the first three seasons of CCAP excavations (1997–1999), Hubert Robichaux (2000) directed investigations in the Upper Plaza, documenting looters' trenches, excavating chronological test pits, exposing collapsed rooms on Structure A-1, and studying the final architectural phases of Structure A-13. A major focus of Robichaux's work, however, particularly during the 1997 seasons, involved documenting a collapsed royal tomb, which Robichaux discovered during the course of test pit excavations in front of Structure A-15, the large temple-pyramid on the southern side of the Upper Plaza (Houk et al. 2010).

The Upper Plaza has been a primary area of interest over the past six seasons, and the 2016 and 2017 seasons in the Upper Plaza, part of a three-year Alphawood Foundation grant,

specifically set out to study “the development of the royal acropolis and its dynastic architecture subsequent to the establishment of a royal dynasty at the site ca. AD 200–250 and to examine how architecture reflects the evolving relationship between political organization (i.e., divine kingship) and monumental construction” (Houk 2016a:6). The investigations included additional stratigraphic excavations, broad horizontal exposures of buried architectural features, and a robust program of radiocarbon dating. While the 2016 and 2017 investigations focused on deposits in the plaza, the planned 2018 season include new excavations on the buildings bordering the plaza.

In 2016 and 2017, the CCAP excavated chronological test pits in the center of the plaza, in the southeast corner of the plaza, in front of Structure A-13, at the base of Structure A-1, and in the southwestern courtyard at the base of Structure A-15 (Figure 3). Combined with results from previous seasons, the data from

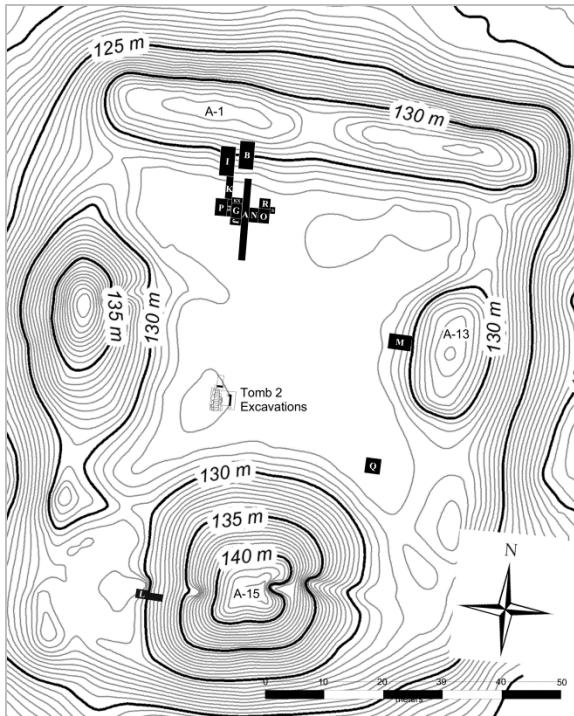


Figure 3. Contour map of the Upper Plaza showing the 2017 excavations, Subop CC-15-B from 2016, and the location of Tomb 2.

these units provide a much more detailed chronology for the plaza's development. The most complicated and informative excavations, however, constitute a block of units in the northern part of the plaza, which exposed the truncated platform of a buried temple and a later intrusive crypt, which contained the remains of potentially another royal individual. These discoveries are described below.

The Middle Preclassic Community: Evidence from the North and East Upper Plaza

It appears, although our excavation sample is limited in many areas of the site, that the first occupants of Chan Chich settled on the hilltop that is now buried by the Upper Plaza during the Middle Preclassic period, around 900 BC or slightly earlier. Occupation remained focused on this area for several centuries until the beginning of the Late Preclassic period when the small village expanded into areas now covered by the Main Plaza, Back Plaza, Western Plaza, and Norman's Temple. Even with this expansion, however, the Upper Plaza remained the center of the village.



Figure 4. Photograph of floor and surface and terrace of early version of Structure A-1 in Subop CC-17-I. View to the north.

The oldest radiocarbon dates come from the deepest floors in the north-central part of the Upper Plaza and suggest the first occupants of the site settled there in the early Middle Preclassic period. The two samples, which came from floor fill above bedrock and were collected over the course of two seasons from the same excavation unit, returned 2-sigma date ranges of cal 911–804 BC and cal 931–833 BC (Gallareta et al. 2017:Tables 2.2 and 2.3). The residents of the site gradually expanded their settlement on the hilltop throughout the Middle Preclassic period, and samples from the north-central, northeast, and east parts of the plaza, as well as from below Structure A-1, yielded radiocarbon dates spanning cal 800–400 BC (Gallareta et al. 2017:Tables 2.2 and 2.3).

Thus far, our excavations have only documented plaster surfaces—some of which are presumably plaza floors, while others may be platform surfaces—that date to the Middle

Preclassic period, with one notable exception. Excavations in 2016 at the base of Structure A-1 documented an apparent buried structure (Lot CC-15-B-4), which two radiocarbon samples date to cal 766–540 BC and 749–407 BC as described by Houk (2016a:11). This may be the earliest version of Structure A-1, which forms the northern edge of the Upper Plaza (Figure 4). Hubert Robichaux (1998) encountered the same structure approximately 10 m to east and documented a thick plaster surface, which rolled down as a step or terrace. The 2016 and 2017 excavations similarly documented a 35–40 cm step or terrace, indicating the presence of a long structure that oversaw Chan Chich's Upper and Main Plaza areas from the Middle Preclassic.

The lower surface exposed on this structure during the 2016 excavations is at the approximate elevation of the modern plaza floor—and was originally mistaken for the plaza floor. Below the surface, the 2016 excavations encountered 1.1 m of cobble/small boulder fill, which buried a well-preserved plaster floor (Lot CC-15-B-9). Below this surface, excavations documented an additional five floors above bedrock, which lay approximately 2.5 m below the modern plaza surface in this area. An additional four radiocarbon dates, spanning the Middle Preclassic period, date this sequence, with the deepest sample from above the oldest floor, returning the oldest age range of cal 826–782 BC (Houk 2016a:Table 1.4).

Excavations in 2012 in the northeast area of the Upper Plaza encountered a sequence of six floors above bedrock, which was 2.25 m below the modern plaza surface. The deepest deposits included an eroded plaster floor, which was possibly constructed to create a level surface over uneven bedrock. A single radiocarbon sample from the 15–50-cm thick fill layer returned a range of cal 805–569 BC (Houk 2016b:Table 7.10). Above this floor, the excavations revealed a 40-cm thick midden, which contained Swasey ceramics (Kelley 2014:56) and produced a single cal 799 to 766 BC date from charcoal (Houk 2106b:Table 7.10). Robichaux (1998) encountered this same midden near the base of Structure A-1 in 1997.

Structure A-13 consists of a large mound located at the eastern section of the Upper Plaza. A chronology-building test pit at the base of the

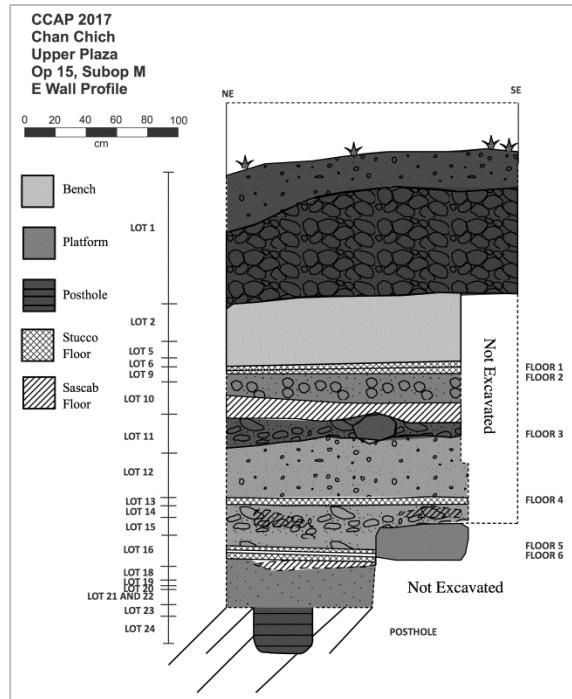


Figure 5. East wall profile of Subop CC-15-M.

structure documented additional Middle Preclassic floors overlying bedrock (Figure 5). The 2-x-3-m unit yielded evidence of six plaster floors and ceramic materials that range from the Middle Preclassic period on the lower floors to the Late Classic period. At its lowest level, we observed evidence of a posthole (Figure 6) with Mamom ceramics and two AMS dates (cal 554–411 BC and cal 644–552 BC) that bracket this ancient feature to the Middle Preclassic period. The area was later covered by a plaster floor and a platform foundation made of carved stones, oriented east to west and dated to cal 762–482 BC (Gallareta et al. 2017:Tables 2.2 and 2.3).

The Late Preclassic City: Evidence of Royal Architecture in the Upper Plaza

During the Late Preclassic period, the Upper Plaza expanded to south—as documented in Subop CC-15-Q in the southeast corner of the plaza and Subop CC-15-L at the western base of Structure A-15—and vertically with new floors and new structures. Subops CC-15-Q and CC-15-L yielded evidence of two architectural features, possibly platforms: the oldest, in Subop CC-15-Q, dated to cal 358–278 BC and the latter to cal 236–185 BC (Gallareta et al. 2017:Tables 2.2 and 2.3). In the central part of the plaza, the



Figure 6. Photograph of the Middle Preclassic posthole in bedrock at the bottom of Subop CC-15-M.

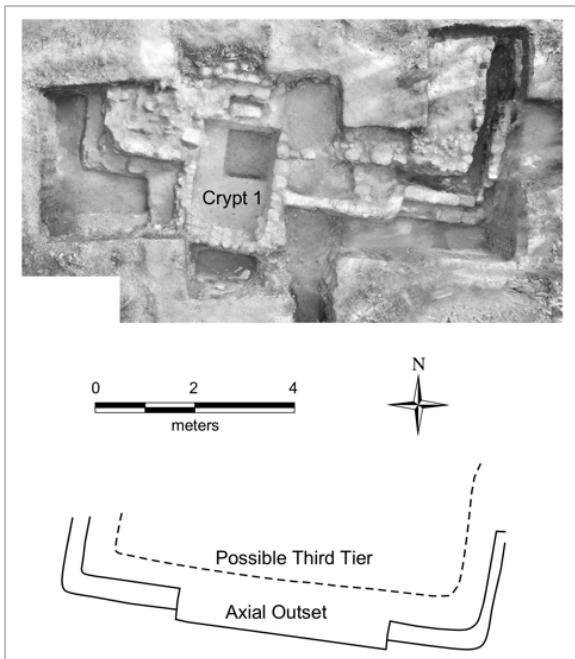


Figure 7. Orthomosaic of the 2017 northern block excavations showing the plan of Blanca and Crypt 1 (top) and plan drawing of Blanca (bottom).

Late Preclassic sequence began with a series of floors with thin layers of construction fill, which buried the Middle Preclassic floors. In the southern end of Subop CC-15-A, an 11 m long trench, excavations documented six floors spanning the early Middle Preclassic into the Late Preclassic that predate the first documented structural feature in this part of the plaza—an alignment of cut stone blocks constructed on an eroded plaster floor (Lot CC-15-A-7). This alignment of finely shaped and regular limestone blocks extends at least 22.5 m east-west (Herndon et al. 2014:38) and has been exposed in multiple excavation units between 2012 and 2017. While we have been unable to date Lot CC-15-A-7, the floor upon which the feature rests, the next oldest floor (Lot CC-15-A-8) returned a cal 767–434 BC date (Gallareta et al. 2017:Tables 2.2 and 2.3). Subsequent to the construction of the alignment, the Maya raised the plaza floor to the south—comparable floors are not found on the north side of the alignment. The first floor was plaster, like those that preceded it, but the second floor was a compact dirt surface that apparently extended over much of the plaza area south of the alignment and elevated the plaza floor to the same elevation as the top of the alignment (Kelley 2014). This floor measured 20-cm thick and was constructed during the Late Preclassic or Terminal Preclassic period based on a date of cal 204–96 BC from a sample obtained in 2014 (Houk 2016b:Table 7.10) and a date of cal AD 128–236 from a sample collected in 2016 (Houk 2016:Table 1.5). Combined, these dates bracket the construction of the alignment, suggesting it was built near the end of the Late Preclassic period. Our current interpretation of this alignment is that it was a step or platform associated with a buried substructural platform nicknamed Blanca and described below.

Blanca's Construction Sequence and its Relation to the Upper Plaza

Excavations of the 2017 season revealed the presence of a buried, truncated platform in the northern section of the Upper Plaza, south of Structure A-1 (Figure 7). The structure base was made with large rectangular, white blocks of cut limestone, which were slightly inclined inwards—excavators nicknamed the structure

Blanca because of the white stones. The uncovered section of the structure measured 8.75 m east-west by 4.20 m north-south and we know the structure continues to the east and north, beyond our excavation block. Blanca's form is complex and its partial dismantling obscures its final Late Preclassic configuration. The portion we exposed consists of two, possibly three, tiers with a projecting front axial outset, which would have measured 4.5 m wide but was partially destroyed by subsequent construction (discussed below). The overall shape is rectangular with rounded corners. The axial outset is battered, while the other faces are not. The two tiers are low enough to possibly function as steps. Additionally, a stone alignment located to the north of the basal body is interpreted as a possible third tier of the platform.

The plaster floor in front of Blanca suggests that the northern plaza was repaved at least three times while the structure was in use. The three plaster floors were very close together, only separated by thin layers of fill. Ceramics recovered above the last floor associated to Blanca are from the Mamom (600–400 BC) and Chicanel (400 BC–AD 150) spheres. Ceramics from the inside of Blanca were mostly Chicanel (400 BC–AD 150) types. Based on architectonic style and associated ceramic materials we suggest that Blanca was constructed around 400 BC.

Before the Early Classic, and probably around the Terminal Preclassic period, Blanca was dismantled or “chopped” and buried under a massive renovation, which apparently elevated the Upper Plaza’s floor to its modern level in the northern part of the plaza. An intrusive primary burial was placed on top of Blanca after the structure was already in-filled and covered by the main Upper Plaza floor, providing a *terminus ante quem* for Blanca’s destruction. Burial CC-B17 consisted of a prone and extended individual oriented north-south with his hands on top of his pelvis. The cranium was covered with an inverted large Society Hall Impressed bowl dated to the Late Preclassic period (Gallareta Cervera et al. 2017). It is unclear if the individual was buried in a prepared cist or deposited as a simple burial; although we noticed three rough stones to the west of the burial, we cannot say conclusively that any

funerary architecture or prepared surfaces were present. It is also unclear if the Late Classic plaza floor was broken in order to inter this burial or if the floor was constructed above this individual. However, a single radiocarbon date obtained from a piece of bone from the burial returned a 2-sigma age range of cal 154 BC–AD 47 (Gallareta Cervera et al., 2017, Tables 2.2 and 2.3).

Terminal Preclassic, Tomb 2

The construction of Tomb 2 and its capping shrine is the next documented significant construction event in the Upper Plaza. Located in the southern part of the plaza, north of Structure A-15, Tomb 2 occupied a portion of the plaza south of the major construction that buried Blanca. The elliptical tomb chamber spanned 3.25 m by 0.8 m and cut 1.15 m into bedrock. Placing the tomb in bedrock required cutting through a series of four older floors. Kelley (2014), based on subsequent excavations east and north of the tomb, suggested the youngest floor cut by the tomb’s construction was the compact dirt surface described above and documented in multiple locations in the southern and central areas of the plaza, meaning the tomb was constructed after cal AD 128–236. This assessment aligns with the ceramic data, which suggest an approximate date of AD 200–350 for the vessels in the tomb (Houk et al. 2010). Twelve large limestone capstones sealed the chamber; these, in turn, were buried beneath rubble fill and an apparent low shrine platform (Houk et al. 2010:232–233). In addition to the 11 ceramic vessels, the tomb contained the deteriorated remains of an adult male, several poorly preserved organic artifacts, and four jade jewels—two ear spools, a tubular bead, and a helmet-bib head pendant (Houk et al. 2010). The latter diadem—particularly when combined with the elaborateness of the tomb’s construction, the tomb’s location, and the diversity of grave goods—indicates the individual buried in Tomb 2 was an early king of Chan Chich (Houk et al. 2010).

The Early Classic Acropolis: Excavations of the Upper Plaza Chamber

Excavations at the north of the Upper Plaza between Structure A-1 and Tomb 2

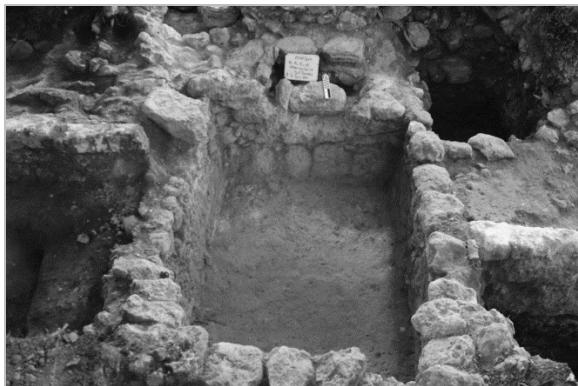


Figure 8. Upper Plaza crypt after excavation. View to the north.

discovered an intrusive, rectangular chamber, oriented north-south that sliced through Blanca's platform face and several underlying floors (Figure 8). The chamber's builders re-used a Middle Preclassic floor as the chamber's floor. The chamber's four walls were heterogeneous in style and construction techniques. The chamber measured 1.60 m east-west by 2.3 m north-south, and the walls were preserved to a height of 1.25 m. The northern wall was made of large and nicely carved rocks covered with stucco and faint traces of red paint remaining. Additionally, the north wall had a possible step composed of two large, semi-carved stones of the same size and shape. A small, carved stone directly to the south of this wall might have been used as a step into the chamber. The east and west walls were different; both were made of small, uncut, and roughly faced rocks. The southern wall is the most unusual and consists of two parts. The lower part is a layer of compact soil between the chamber surface and a plaster floor, not a formally constructed wall. The upper part of the wall consisted of roughly shaped stones placed on top of this stucco floor. The chamber floor rolled up onto the dirt fill at the south of the chamber, suggesting that this was the original construction technique used to build the chamber.

The upper preserved courses on the western and southern walls were apparent vault stones—many of the stones on the western wall's upper course were inadvertently removed during excavations, before the field crew recognized the chamber as a constructed feature—but the preserved examples jut into the

chamber. This suggests that the chamber was originally a sunken, vaulted room, accessed via stairs on the north. If so, the vault would have risen above the level of the Plaza Floor. However, after a period of use, the vault was destroyed and the chamber filled to the level of the plaza as discussed below. All four walls had evidence of deteriorated stucco plastering. Samples recovered from under the chamber's reused floor suggest it was constructed and between cal 796 to 748 BC, and a charcoal sample from the floor surface yielded a date of cal AD 237–333 (Gallareta Cervera et al. 2017: Tables 2.2 and 2.3).

Although we are unsure of the original function of the chamber, the Maya used it as a crypt prior to filling it, and we have designated the feature Crypt 1. Excavations in the chamber yielded the remains of at least two individuals located in the southern half of the chamber directly on the surface floor. The center and northern portions of the crypt did not yield any cultural remains. One of these individuals (Burial CC-B16B) was articulated, primary, and extended, with its head to the east and its feet, crossed at the ankle, to the west (Figure 9; Novotny et al. 2017). A bone sample dates Burial CC-B16B to cal AD 247–353 (Gallareta Cervera et al. 2017: Tables 2.2 and 2.3). A funerary offering of an Ixcanrio Orange Polychrome pedestal bowl dated to the Terminal Preclassic or Early Classic period was associated with Burial CC-16B. When buried, the individual was wearing two *Spondylus* shell ear flares and a serpentine helmet-bib head pendant—associated with rulership and a possible heirloom from the Late Preclassic period (see Houk et al. 2010)—as funerary regalia. Although similar in style to the diadem from Tomb 2, the helmet-bib head pendant from Crypt 1 is thinner, less well crafted, and of less exotic raw material. Ceramics in the chamber fill and surrounding the burial consisted mostly of Tzakol sherds with some Chicanel sherds, suggesting that this context dates to the Early Classic period.

Burials CC-B16A, -B16C and -B16D consisted of clusters of disarticulated bone fragments belonging to adults located at the south end of the crypt. Burial CC-B16A consisted of bones of the left foot, an articulated



Figure 9. Photograph of Burial CC-B16B during the 2017 season, view to the south. The remains recorded as Burial CC-B16C are visible at the right edge of the photograph, north of Burial CC-B16B's feet, and the remains recorded as Burial CC-B16D include the cranium and long bones visible south of Burial CC-B16B's lower legs. Burial CCB-16A is not in this photograph as it was excavated in 2016.

right leg, and an articulated right wrist and hand (Novotny et al. 2016). Burial CC-B16C was a cluster of bones located adjacent to the feet of Burial CC-B16B, approximately 10 cm to the south of Burial CC-B16A. Burial CC-B16D was immediately south of the lower legs of Burial CC-B16B and comprised a cranium stacked on top of a pile of long bones in the southwestern corner of the crypt. Novotny and colleagues (2017) suggest that the best explanation for the burial location within the chamber is that Burial CC-B16A was interred first, perhaps in a flexed position given the position of the right leg, and subsequently disturbed by the interment of Burial CC-B16B before decomposition was complete. Burials CC-B16A, -B16C and -B16D may be the displaced remains of the same person (Novotny et al. 2017).

At some point after Burial CC-B16B was interred, the Maya destroyed the crypt's vault and filled the chamber with large, medium, and small boulders and sediment, before covering it with the final floor of the Upper Plaza. The fill in the northern part of the chamber yielded higher artifact densities as well as evidence of burning, approximately 65 cm above the floor in the room. The nature of this event is unclear, but charcoal from the deposit yielded a date of cal 55 BC–AD 211 (Gallareta Cervera et al. 2017: Tables 2.2 and 2.3). Charcoal recovered from beneath possible capstones in the fill returned a date range of cal AD 87–227. Ceramics from the chamber's context are mixed, yielding a mix of Early Classic and Late Preclassic types. Despite these two Terminal Preclassic dates, six other samples from the crypt largely date to the Early Classic period

(Gallareta Cervera et al. 2017: Tables 2.2 and 2.3).

Discussion

Middle Formative Community

Our excavations indicate that around 900 BC, during the Middle Preclassic period, the community of Chan Chich occupied and gave meaning to the landscape through the construction of formal architecture in the Upper Plaza. Stratigraphic evidence suggests the construction of multiple plaza floors in the north, middle, and east portions of the Upper Plaza, as well as possible public buildings made of vernacular architecture at the plaza's north and east edges. Unfortunately, most evidence of Middle Preclassic architecture comes from plaster floors and platform surfaces. However, evidence in the north of the plaza reveals evidence of a substructure that predates Structure A-1 and dates to cal 766–540 BC and 749–407 BC (Houk 2016a:11). Based on previous and current excavations we estimate that this Middle Preclassic version of the structure extended at least 15 m east-west along the north edge the plaza. This long structure oversaw the Middle Preclassic landscape from a perch at the edge of the Upper Plaza's hilltop. An early version of Structure A-13 suggests the use of platforms made of large rectangular carved stones and postholes likely used to sustain a wood and thatch superstructure. Robichaux (1999:34) also documented a Middle Preclassic posthole south of Structure A-1, further suggesting the use of this vernacular architectural style at the Upper Plaza. Moreover, Robichaux (1999:37) also suggests that the size and location of the feature might indicate that the structure was quite large and public in function. The five to six floor renovations and the raising of the plaza surface 2.25 m above its natural level during the Middle Preclassic period suggests a high degree of community cooperation and organization.

Late and Terminal Preclassic Village Turned Kingdom

The Late Preclassic period at Chan Chich's Upper Plaza was a time of political growth and architectural expansion. The plaza expanded to the south with the construction of

platforms and stone buildings, suggesting a growth of political relevance and consolidation of power by elite members. The floor sequence in the northern Upper Plaza is complex. Excavations have yielded a sequence of eight Preclassic plaster floors associated with Structure A-1 in Subop CC-15-B. On the western corner of Blanca, we uncovered three plaster floor levels, but we did not reach bedrock, which suggests that there might be more floors underneath this area.

The excavation of Blanca, an 8.75-m long platform made with large rectangular, cut blocks of white limestone and with round corners constructed around 400 BC, gives us a small window to explore the stratigraphic complexity of the Late Preclassic and Terminal Preclassic periods at Chan Chich. We know that the southern face of Blanca's axial outset was slightly battered, sloping inward, and consisted of cut and regular limestone blocks. At its eastern and western edges there might have been two steps or terraces in addition to the outset's platform face. We also know that this substructure continues to the north and to the east, but its final form is unclear.

The floor at Blanca's base was renovated at least three times during the Late Preclassic period and it is likely contemporaneous with the Late Preclassic platform buried beneath Structure A-1 (see Houk 2016). At this time, this early version of Structure A-1 had been actively used as the northern edge of the Upper Plaza for around 500 years. Excavations also suggest that Blanca was "chopped" and buried under the plaza floor in the Late Preclassic and further dismantled to accommodate a crypt during the Early Classic.

By the end of the Terminal Preclassic period, the Upper Plaza apparently housed an early divine king. This individual's tomb was placed in the southern part of the plaza sometime around AD 250, based on ceramic and stratigraphic data. This early king indicates the elite had further consolidated their power and ruled a small kingdom from the royal architecture of the Upper Plaza.

Early Classic Funerary Crypt

Excavations of the intrusive chamber, which cut through part of Blanca, suggest that

the chamber: a) is in fact an improvised crypt, b) dates to the Early Classic period, c) housed multiple elite burials, and d) was probably re-entered during its use. Architecturally, the unit consisted of four walls that formed a rectangular chamber with its longest side oriented north-south. We also identified large cut stones—which we interpret as vault stones—in the south, east and center portions of the chamber, although these were floating in fill within the chamber. The four masonry walls from this chamber were not homogeneous, and their construction cut through Blanca, the Late Preclassic period platform. This can be observed on the east and west walls and particularly on the southern wall, which was built on top of a floor level before reaching the crypt floor. The northern wall was made of carved stones and originally was covered with a layer of stucco. On top of this wall, we found at least two steps, which suggest an entrance to the chamber.

Crypt 1 had two burials: one primary and one secondary. The primary individual (Burial CC-16B) had associated funerary items and elite markers that identify it as a high elite, or perhaps royal, individual. Burial CC-B-16A was interred in the middle of the chamber, and then disturbed sometime later when Burial CC-B-16B was interred. During the Early Classic period, the chamber vault was removed and the crypt was filled with a silty matrix and medium-to-large, uncut stones.

There are some interesting parallels between Tomb 2 and Crypt 1. Both consisted of elaborate funerary architecture protecting the remains of individuals with objects associating them to the high elite. The crypt, however, consisted of a reused funerary space and was hence less exclusive than Tomb 2. Funerary paraphernalia and grave goods were also less prominent in the crypt—Burial CC-B16B only had one vessel, a serpentine jade object, and *Spondylus* ear flares as grave goods. However, the inclusion of a helmet-bib head pendant, a possible heirloom from the Late Preclassic period, indicates that the burials belonged to a set of powerful individuals, perhaps even a divine king from the Early Classic period. Analysis by Novotny et al. (2017) reveals that there were a minimum of two individuals, all

adults and possibly males, present at the crypt. The location of the crypt, an almost mirror of Tomb 2 but at the northern portion of the Upper Plaza, and its proximity to Structure A-1, a monumental structure used since the Middle Preclassic period, associates this burial with regal activities. We suggest that Burial CC-B16 consists of members of the Chan Chich royal court who were in office at the beginning of the Early Classic period and that the chamber, an elite crypt, function as an exclusive burial space for important members of the royal court.

Conclusions

Although our excavations have not yet targeted the structures surrounding the Upper Plaza to any great degree yet, the picture emerging from the excavations within the plaza itself shows the transformation of a small Middle Preclassic village into a small kingdom by the Terminal Preclassic period. The rulers used the plaza as a royal necropolis for an early king and a likely successor in the Terminal Preclassic and Early Classic periods, respectively. Through time, the ruling family radically modified the Upper Plaza, truncating and burying an early temple and creating, and then filling, a royal crypt, as they enhanced the monumentality of their small kingdom. Future excavations in the Late Classic structures surrounding the plaza should add clarity to this picture.

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