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## **All the World's a Stage**

### **The Late Classic Built Environment of Chan Chich, Belize**

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The Chan Chich Archaeological Project has investigated the ancient Maya site of Chan Chich, Belize for 13 field seasons between 1996 and 2019, the last four of which Alphawood Foundation funded. The project has researched a wide range of topics at the site, but a primary focus of the Alphawood research has been to investigate the development and nature of Maya urbanism. More specifically, the project studies the relationships between rulers, their architectural complexes, and the process of city planning and building among the ancient Maya. While the cultural landscape at any large Maya site comprises a variety of urban features including monumental architectural complexes, pathways, residential courtyards, agricultural fields, workshops, marketplaces, and water management features, to name but a few, in this chapter we are specifically interested in the monumental epicenter of Chan Chich, where the largest and most impressive constructions are found (Figure 8.1).

Chan Chich has a long history of occupation, beginning as far back as the Middle Preclassic period and extending to the Terminal Classic period (Houk 2015). During this roughly 1,750-year span from about 900 BCE to 850 CE, the rulers and residents of Chan Chich transformed their settlement from a small agricultural village into a moderately sized Maya city with impressive monumental constructions. Our work has documented two major periods of construction that significantly modified the core of the site: one in the Terminal Preclassic period and another in the Late Classic period. The former occurred around the time a divine king apparently ruled from the Upper Plaza (Houk et al. 2010), but this chapter focuses on

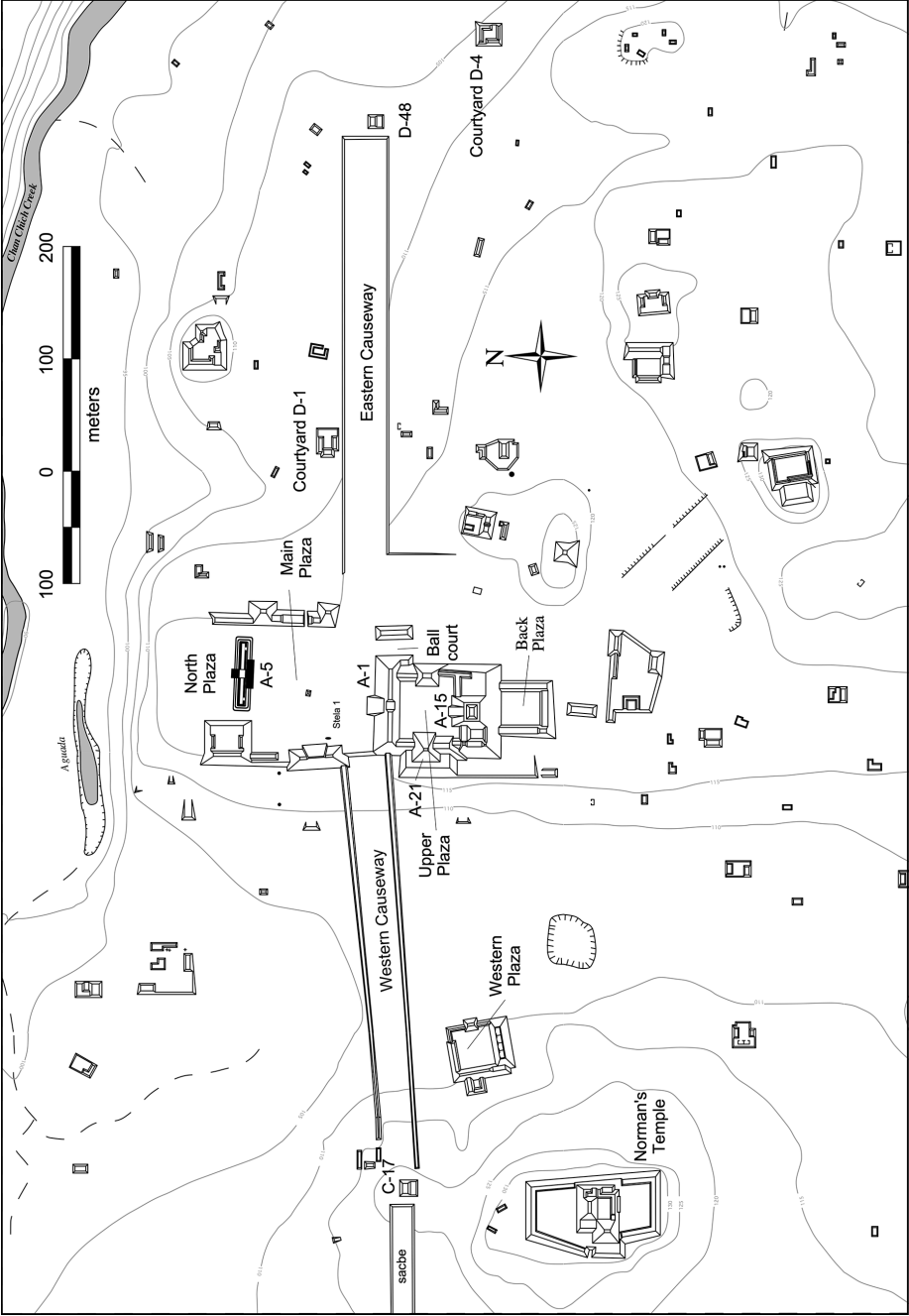


Figure 8.1. Map of Chan Chich, Belize (map drawn by Brett A. Houk).

the latter period of construction around 650 to 750 CE during the Late Classic period. Although plazas, buildings, and causeways may have had multiple functions, we use excavation data, comparisons to other sites, and depictions in Maya art to argue that the Late Classic rulers of Chan Chich designed some of their monumental architecture to function in part as the theater for public rituals and spectacles, including processions. We suggest that competition drove the political need to host public spectacles, which in turn influenced many site-planning decisions and shaped the monumental landscapes at Chan Chich and other sites in the region during the Late Classic period.

### PUBLIC SPECTACLES AND THE ANCIENT MAYA

In the field of archaeology, performance theory has been used to examine how rulers in premodern societies generated political power and created a sense of community by hosting large public events. Takeshi Inomata and Lawrence Coben (2006:11) propose that large, centralized polities could not have developed anywhere “without frequent public events, in which agents of political power presented themselves in front of a large number of spectators,” who shared in the performance through their presence.

While public events can encompass a wide range of actions and occur at many scales, in this chapter we focus on large-scale public events, which Inomata (2006a, 2006b) and Inomata and Coben (2006), among others, refer to as “spectacles.” One of the characteristics of spectacles is that they potentially involve not only multiple performers but perhaps thousands of spectators as well (Inomata 2006a:807). Among the ancient Maya, spectacles could include theatrical performances ranging from dances, to a ball game, to a formal procession, complete with musicians and elaborately costumed elites. While costume, motion, and color would have been important elements of spectacles, so too would have been sound and smell, as musical instruments, singing, and burning incense would have enhanced the sensory experience (Houston 2006).

Such performances, regardless of their constituent elements, all shared the same need for space, both a stage for the performers and a viewing area for the spectators (see Inomata 2006b). Inomata (2006a, 2006b) argues that plazas at Maya sites functioned as both stages for various performances and space for community members to gather and witness the performances. Similarly, he proposes that the wide causeways at Tikal functioned in part “as additional theatrical stages” as the city’s population exceeded

the capacity of Tikal's plazas (Inomata 2006a:817). These causeways "were probably stages for processions by elites, which may have been viewed by a large audience occupying spaces along their edges" (Inomata 2006a:817).

Planning, staging, and hosting a large public event would have been complicated and time-consuming endeavors for the ruling elite of any given polity, so there must have been some benefit for the ruler to put on a spectacle. Inomata (2006a:818) argues that hosting mass spectacles was a critical political tool: such events forged community identity and integration and facilitated economic and social connections, which were otherwise lacking in the dispersed, rural, and potentially mobile non-elite that made up the vast majority of a Maya polity's population. Furthermore, he argues that "it is probable that theatrical performance merged inseparably with polity administration" in the Classic period, and "the preparation and organization of theatrical events, along with the acquisition of related materials and the construction of theatrical spaces, were probably a significant part of [the] work of court officials" (Inomata 2006b:213).

Spectacles would have been one of the things that attracted the rural population to cities in the first place (Hutson 2016). In part, this was due to multiplicity; "unstructured contact with strangers," which provides excitement, offers the possibility for new social contacts, and promotes "the expansion of social capital" (Hutson 2016:22). However, on another level, the monumental landscape of the city itself would have attracted people because "monumental architecture is undeniably salient" (Hutson 2016:185). In other words, towering temple-pyramids, expansive plazas, massive range buildings, and even causeways were so different from the other types of architecture the rural Maya encountered each day that being near them "arouse[d] perception" and was "therefore pleasurable" (Hutson 2016:185). Finally, commoners may have contributed to the construction of the very architecture used as stage and viewing stand, and thus felt a personal connection to the monumental landscape and the performance itself (see Hutson 2016:181). Spectacles offered "a spiritual and social life that was more striking and attractive" than that experienced on a regular day in the hinterlands, and the monumental architecture of the city contributed to this feeling (Hutson 2016:195).

### **Evidence for Late Classic Spectacles and Processions in Art**

Inomata (2006b), Scott Hutson (2016), and others reference colonial accounts of large spectacles being held in plazas, but an excellent contemporary example is found in the Late Classic murals at Bonampak, Mexico. The

murals, which occupy three rooms in the same building, depict an elaborate Maya spectacle complete with musicians, dancers, and costumed participants. The murals in Room 1 show two processions of musicians, which converge on the south wall of the room. The troupe includes a trumpet player and percussionists playing rattles, drums, and turtle shells (Miller and Brittenham 2013). In the same room as the musical procession is a depiction of a group of costumed individuals, dressed as a crocodile, a giant crustacean, and individual deities (Miller and Brittenham 2013). The scenes of the procession show the performers, not the audience, leaving the viewer of the murals with the same perspective the original audience enjoyed. The murals also show us that much of the action took place on stairways, and Mary Miller (1986:115) convincingly argues that the murals depict actual stairways at Bonampak.

Inomata (2006b:199) proposes, based on Miller's observation, that "ample stairways were designed not only for access to the buildings but also for theatrical effects." As in the case of the spectacle shown in the murals at Bonampak, stairways could elevate performers, making them visible to an audience in the plaza, and, in the case of plaza-based ceremonies, could serve as grandstands for the spectators (Inomata 2006b:199). The important conclusion from this observation is that the occasional use of stairways as a stage or viewing stand affected architectural design and compelled some architects to design much broader stairways than would have been needed for simple access.

Other Late Classic evidence for spectacles, particularly processions, may be found in the graffiti at Tikal. A number of images show retainers carrying large palanquins bedecked with a statue towering over a seated ruler (see Trik and Kampen 1983). Witnessing this undoubtedly real event affected several spectators so profoundly that they felt compelled to record it in graffiti. Rulers are similarly shown on palanquins in carved lintels at the site (Sharer and Traxler 2006) and on Late Classic polychrome cylinder vessels (Halperin 2014:60).

### Archaeological Evidence for Processions

As described below, Chan Chich and Xunantunich, an important Late Classic center in the Belize River Valley (see Brown and Yaeger, Chapter 14 this volume), share many similarities in terms of architectural layout, and Angela Keller's (2006:612) research on the form, function, and meaning of the causeways at Xunantunich represents the best archaeological evidence for intrasite causeways' functioning as "stages for ceremonial performance."

Xunantunich is best known for El Castillo, a 39 m high palace complex anchoring the southern end of the site core (Leventhal 2010:80–81). Two causeways enter the plaza in front of El Castillo: Sacbe I from the east and Sacbe II from the west (see Figure 14.5). The former is a 1 m high, 15 m wide elevated feature lined with low parapets along its margins that ultimately terminates at Group D to the southeast—the road runs 140 m east from the plaza before turning south for 150 m. The latter is a 40 m wide, 0.5 m high road, also lined with parapets, that terminates at Structure A-21, 135 m west of the plaza (Keller 2010:Table 9.1).

Keller (2006) excavated “clearing units” along the edges of the causeways where she thought trash might accumulate. Importantly, she found a partially reconstructable ceramic drum near Sacbe II in an apparent dump and subsequently identified a small number of probable drum sherds along both causeways. As she notes, “these drum pieces remain some of the only documented instrument fragments found outside of special deposits and in association with their probable use locations” (Keller 2006:610).

Keller (2006:610, 612) also found other types of artifacts along the causeways including a chert eccentric, a pyrite mirror fragment, a marine shell pendant, a jade bead, portions of ceramic bowls, and obsidian blades. Some of this debris she interprets as bits of costumes lost during processions, but some she construes as the remnants of rituals conducted along the procession route (Keller 2006:610). Perhaps, by stopping the procession along its route to perform some offering or ritual, the participants could engage an even larger number of spectators.

Keller’s (2006) investigations at Structure A-21 produced evidence that performances on the causeways involved the termini structures. Along with censer fragments and sherds from offering bowls found in front of Structure A-21, excavations also recovered drum sherds from the structure’s platform and stairs and concluded that “the rituals enacted on Structure A-21 were directly associated with musical performance along the causeways” (Keller 2006:452).

## CHAN CHICH

Chan Chich is in northwestern Belize, very near the modern border with Guatemala. The major architecture at the site occupies a series of low hills overlooking Chan Chich Creek. In terms of size, Chan Chich is the seventh-largest ruin in Belize, based on the area covered by its site core, and is part of a line of large sites in northern Belize that roughly parallel the

border with Guatemala, extending from La Milpa in the north to Xunantunich in the Belize River Valley (Houk 2015:Table 10.1).

The Main Plaza and the Upper Plaza dominate the monumental architecture at the site. The Main Plaza covers 13,080 m<sup>2</sup> and is the third-largest plaza in the region (Garrison 2007:Table 6.3). Structures surround it on all sides, with formal and informal access points created by gaps between buildings. Structure A-5 divides the Main Plaza from the North Plaza, which is a less formal architectural space but clearly shows evidence of modification and use, perhaps as a marketplace. From the northern end of the North Plaza to the southern end of the smaller Back Plaza, which is tucked behind and below the Upper Plaza, the contiguous monumental architecture extends roughly 350 m.

Situated approximately in the center of this line of plazas and buildings is Structure A-1, the largest building at Chan Chich. This 70 m long and 13 m high mound divides the Main Plaza from the higher Upper Plaza. Separated by a central landing, Structure A-1 supports two once-vaulted buildings on its summit—tandem-range buildings each with four rooms facing the Main Plaza and four rooms facing the Upper Plaza (Herndon et al. 2014).

The Upper Plaza houses the tomb of an early king at the site (Houk 2015; Houk et al. 2010) and, by the Late Classic period, served as the site's acropolis. Structure A-15 is the tallest building at the site and occupies the southern part of the plaza. It rises 15 m above the Upper Plaza and over 25 m above the Back Plaza to the south. Structure A-21, a smaller temple-pyramid, occupies the western part of the plaza. Multiple looters' trenches pierce the two pyramids, revealing older architectural phases covered by the final Late Classic period buildings.

Two causeways with contrasting architectural styles enter the Main Plaza from the east and west in front of Structure A-1. The Eastern Causeway is a 40 m wide, elevated *sacbe* that extends for nearly 400 m before terminating at a low mound, Structure D-48. The causeway connects to the southeastern corner of the Main Plaza at a gap between the ball court and Structure A-9, one of two small temple-pyramids that line the eastern edge of the plaza. The Western Causeway is composed of two parallel, linear mounds or parapets defining a 40 m wide corridor between them. Where the causeway meets the Main Plaza, it is elevated slightly, but as it extends west it appears to become a ground level pathway defined entirely by its bordering parapets (Booher 2016a). Excavations of the northern mound uncovered the base of a 1.4 m thick masonry wall composed of cut limestone blocks



with a cobble wall core and preserved as high as 45 cm above the causeway's surface (Booher and Nettleton 2014:64). It is unclear if the parapet once supported a wooden wall. While that is a possibility, it is also possible the walls served as seating areas for spectators. The Western Causeway extends from the southwestern corner of the Main Plaza in the gap between Structure A-1 and Structure A-2, running west for approximately 380 m before terminating at an isolated hilltop mound, Structure C-17. The causeways were both built in the Late Classic without antecedents (Booher 2016a; Booher and Nettleton 2014).

The site's ball court occupies a level platform that extends off the Eastern Causeway in the southeastern corner of the Main Plaza. The ball court exhibits an unusual style with its western structure attached to the base of Structure A-1 and a freestanding eastern structure. Like most courts in the eastern lowlands, Chan Chich's ball court is oriented north-south (Houk 2015).

### Late Classic Chan Chich

Like many of the sites in the eastern lowlands, Chan Chich experienced something of an architectural florescence in the Late Classic, and it was during this time period that the final plan of the site took shape with a series of significant construction efforts. Although the excavation sample within the Main Plaza is small, available data suggest a Late Classic construction episode raised the plaza floor to its current level (Houk 1998, 2000). Renovations to Structure A-5 at the north end of the plaza resulted in its final form: a long, narrow platform, capped by a largely perishable superstructure and accessed by central stairways on its northern and southern faces (Herndon et al. 2013). Structure A-1, the massive building dividing the Upper Plaza from the Main Plaza, was expanded into its final configuration (Herndon et al. 2014), other buildings around the Main Plaza were either constructed or enlarged (Houk 2015), and the ball court was modified into its final form (Ford 1998).

Also during the Late Classic, the city's planners oversaw the construction of the Eastern and Western Causeways (Booher 2016a), as noted previously. Excavations confirmed that both causeways represent single construction episodes (Booher 2016a).

Like the Main Plaza, the Upper Plaza achieved its final form during the Late Classic. In the southern two-thirds of the plaza, the deposition of approximately 1 m of fill elevated the plaza surface to its present level. Renovations to the structures surrounding the plaza accompanied this effort,



and excavations and data from looters' trenches have documented apparent Late Classic renovations to Structures A-13, A-15, A-18, A-20, A-21, and A-22 (Houk 2015). Access to the plaza became more restricted during the Late Classic, and the only formal entrance into the group became the central stairways on the southern and northern faces of Structure A-1, which led up to a landing on the structure's summit. Once the apparent center of a small village during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods, by the Late Classic period, ca. 650–750 CE, the Upper Plaza likely served as a private compound for the ruling family.

Excavations in the Back Plaza, a courtyard attached to the southern base of the Upper Plaza's platform, determined the final versions of the low structures surrounding the courtyard and the courtyard surface itself date to the Late Classic period. Artifactual and contextual data suggest servants prepared meals and performed other support functions for the occupants of the Upper Plaza but lived elsewhere (Vazquez 2015). A radiocarbon sample from the ashy matrix of an apparent kitchen building returned a 2-sigma calibrated range of 673 to 863 CE, with a high likelihood (87.3%) that the sample falls within 673–779 cal CE (Vazquez 2015:Figure 6.43).

In other parts of the site, Late Classic construction events buried older features or resulted in entirely new architectural groups. As examples of the former, renovations to the hilltop complex known as Norman's Temple, 400 m west of the Upper Plaza (Booher 2016b), and to the Western Plaza (Harrison 2000), a palace group 250 m west of the Main Plaza, resulted in the final configurations of the two groups. Similarly, older Late Preclassic deposits were buried over by Courtyard D-1 during the Late Classic period. Investigations there documented multiple renovations to the two excavated structures during the Late Classic (Booher 2016a).

As the monumental core of the city expanded, construction of residential groups filled in some of the space around the epicenter in areas not previously occupied. This is best evidenced by work at Courtyard D-4, a residential group 550 m east of the Upper Plaza. Gertrude Kilgore and colleagues (2017) determined that the residents of the group constructed and modified their courtyard in the Late Classic period, without any earlier antecedent. Similarly, Richard Meadows and Kristen Hartnett's (2000:25) work at Group H, 1 km east-southeast of the Main Plaza, determined the lithic workshops and associated house mounds there all date to the Late Classic period.

## Setting the Stage: Late Classic Site Planning at Chan Chich

The Late Classic construction program at Chan Chich formalized the final plan of the city and appears to have been well planned. Although notoriously difficult to detect archaeologically, evidence for planning comes from the coordination of buildings in the site core and the shared planning elements among cities in the region, following Michael Smith (2007). First, as Brett Houk (2015:Table 10.5) notes, 64% of the buildings at Chan Chich share a common orientation, suggesting a high degree of coordinated arrangements of buildings and spaces. Furthermore, the buildings in the site core are arranged in an orderly fashion, suggesting a high degree of formality, as defined by Smith (2007). Although its structures lack the construction volume of counterparts at Xunantunich, the site imparts a moderate degree of monumentality with its massive Main Plaza, imposing Structure A-1, and unusually wide causeways (Houk 2015).

The high degree of planning is most evident in the construction and integration of the two causeways into the city's plans. The two causeways enter the Main Plaza directly opposite each other and are both 40 m wide. Accommodating such wide causeways required the city's architects to reserve significant percentages—over 30% in the case of the Eastern Causeway—of the eastern and western edges of the plaza, leaving these wide gaps free of impinging structures. Although constructed late in the history of the site, the two causeways were not site-planning afterthoughts; rather, planners factored their size and location into the overall design of the plaza. Furthermore, their excessive widths and the fact they do not connect to large architectural groups suggest that transportation was not the primary function of the causeways. Each one terminates at a small mound, and Houk (2013) suggests that these termini structures served some function related to ritual use of the causeways (see below). The causeways represent significant labor investments and space allocation in the Late Classic site plan. Collectively, the architecture of the causeways—their excessive widths, their terminating at small shrines, their entering the Main Plaza directly in front of the most massive building at the site and the ball court—support the interpretation that the city's planners designed the causeways as processional routes rather than internal transportation features.

Other evidence for planning comes from standardization among cities (Smith 2007). As Smith (2007:25) suggests, the “presence of similar buildings, layouts, and other urban features in a series of related cities suggests adherence to a common plan or idea of city planning.” Similarly, Houk

(2015:276–277) suggests architects borrowed planning ideas from nearby centers, allowing for specific design trends to spread in a region without necessarily being universally adopted. Therefore, the sources for planning ideas may be inferred through comparisons to other nearby sites.

In the case of Chan Chich, the Late Classic site plan shares standard design elements with neighbors to the north, south, and west. The site's massive plaza echoes a regional trend in the Three Rivers adaptive region that clearly favored the construction of one massive public plaza at what Garrison (2007:318) identified as territorial capitals. Houk (1996, 2003, 2015) notes that the sites sharing this planning concept have these massive plazas at the northern end of the civic-ceremonial core of the city. The Main Plaza at Chan Chich represents both a significant labor expenditure and a deliberate allocation of prime real estate for vacant horizontal space rather than monumental buildings. Thomas Garrison (2007:319) suggests the massive plazas seen in the Three Rivers region “are explicit statements of hierarchical control [capital cities had] over their hinterland populations during the Late Classic Period.” Garrison (2007:320) proposes that rulers used the large plazas as “locales for the gathering of the entire hinterland population . . . to celebrate important public rituals which were not permitted outside of the capital.” Recently, Barbara Stark and Wesley Stoner (2017:413) proposed that “some plazas may have been ‘overdesigned’; that is, larger than any expected crowd in order to create an imposing spatial grandeur, perhaps symbolizing the importance of a center [or] establishing room for processions.” The massive plazas at Chan Chich and other Three Rivers region centers may be examples of this type of design principle.

The radial causeways at Chan Chich appear to be part of another city planning idea shared with cities to the west and south, including La Honradez in northeast Petén and El Pilar and Xunantunich in the Belize River valley (Houk 2017:10). Chan Chich's elevated Eastern Causeway is unique among the radial causeways in the region, but its parapet-lined Western Causeway has counterparts at La Honradez, El Pilar, and Xunantunich.

Although Xunantunich has much larger structures than Chan Chich, most notably the massive El Castillo palace complex anchoring the southern end of Plaza A-I, the two sites resemble one another in other ways. In both cases, radial causeways enter the site core from the east and the west directly in front of the most massive structure. Rather than connecting the site centers to other groups of monumental architecture, the causeways at Xunantunich and Chan Chich terminate at individual structures or courtyards.

The two sites also have attached ball courts—an unusual form in which one of the ball court's buildings is physically attached to another larger structure. Regionally, attached ball courts are also found at La Honradez and the smaller center of Saturday Creek in the Belize River valley. At Chan Chich, the ball court's position, too, is an interesting planning choice. It sits on a level platform that joins the western end of the Eastern Causeway. This platform and the Main Plaza to the north would have provided space for crowds to watch a game played in the court, perhaps with the city's elite observing the action from above on the edge of the Upper Plaza (see Stark and Stoner 2017).

Elements of Chan Chich's Late Classic site plan appear coordinated and designed to function together as an architectural stage for public spectacles, particularly ones involving processions (Booher 2016a). Ashley Booher and Houk (2016) and Houk (2013, 2015) have previously suggested the Main Plaza, Structure A-1, the ball court, the two causeways, and the small structures at the ends of the causeways acted as "processional architecture" designed to function as stage and viewing area during spectacles, following closely the form and function of architecture at Xunantunich described above. In fact, a ritual/performance-based interpretation of these design elements explains many of the site-planning decisions embedded into the Late Classic monumental landscape of Chan Chich. For example, the need to elevate either performers or spectators, or both, depending on the type of ritual or performance, accounts for the width of Structure A-1's southern stairway, which rises 10 m up the face of the building (Houk 2015). At 15 m wide (Houk 1998:28), the stairway is more than 12 m wider than the central landing on Structure A-1's summit (see Herndon et al. 2014:56) and its counterpart leading down from the summit into the Upper Plaza.

### Archaeological Evidence for Processions at Chan Chich

Booher's (2016a) thesis research tested the possibility that the causeways and related structures at Chan Chich functioned, at least in part, as stages for ritual processions. To accomplish this, excavations assessed the form and age of the two causeways, targeted Courtyard D-1—immediately adjacent to the Eastern Causeway—and tested Structures D-48 and C-17 at the ends of the Eastern and Western Causeway, respectively. Crews also excavated nine clearing units, which generally measured 2 by 2 m, along the causeways' margins to look for trash or other debris that might be related to the causeways' function(s), following Keller's (2006) approach at Xunantunich (Booher and Houk 2016).

In general, the clearing units and the units placed to examine causeway construction did not yield clear evidence of processions along the causeways, but our sample of approximately 62 m<sup>2</sup> of area along the edges of the two features represents approximately 1% of what we would conservatively consider the likely zone for debris to accumulate—4 m wide strips centered on the causeways' edges. One class of recovered artifacts, however, is potentially indicative of ritual activity along the causeways: obsidian blades. While the Maya used obsidian for quotidian activities, they also commonly used obsidian blades in bloodletting or other ritual activities (Aoyama 2014). Attesting to its ritual importance, obsidian is a common constituent of special deposits in the Three Rivers region, including a Late Classic cache of 17 complete blades on the summit of Structure A-1 at Chan Chich (Herndon et al. 2014:58), a Late Classic cache of over 160 blades beneath an altar at Dos Hombres (Houk 1996:185), and a layer of over 23,000 obsidian artifacts that capped an Early Classic tomb at Dos Hombres (Houk and Valdez 2011:154; Robichaux and Durst 1999).

Booher's (2016a) investigations only recovered five obsidian blades from the clearing units and architectural units, but all came from above the terminal phase architecture and are therefore potentially associated with activities performed on the causeways. If this sample represents the density of obsidian across the rest of the potential debris zone, then there are possibly over 400 obsidian blades in areas we did not test. Keller (2006:494) also encountered obsidian blades in generally low densities along the causeways at Xunantunich, noting that of the more than 50 clearing units she excavated along Sacbe I at Xunantunich, "only a handful encountered any obsidian artifacts whatsoever." However, a pair of units along the southern parapet of Sacbe I, 20 m east of the plaza, discovered 28 obsidian blades and one chert eccentric, and another pair of units on the northern parapet directly north of the first pair encountered an additional five blades (Keller 2006:493–495). Ruling out other formation processes, Keller (2006:496) suggests "that the blades were used . . . in association with ceremonies at the threshold between the road and plaza spaces."

Excavations revealed another locus of comparatively high obsidian density at Structure D-48 at the end of Chan Chich's Eastern Causeway. This small structure proved to be a 1.5 m high platform with a 20 cm high patio attached to its southern face. Excavation units on the platform, the patio, and along the patio's western base, covering 19 m<sup>2</sup>, recovered 16 obsidian blades along with 57 non-obsidian stone tools, 16 ground stone artifacts,

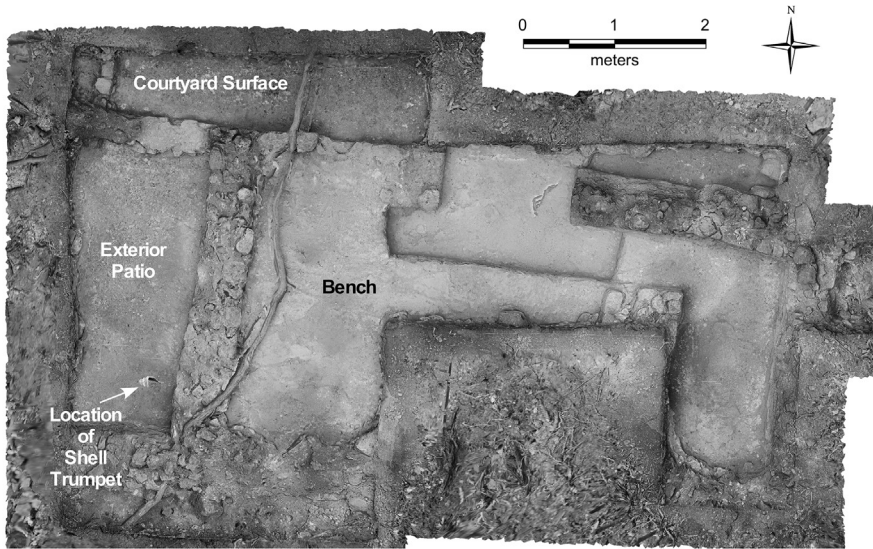


Figure 8.2. Orthomosaic of excavations at Structure D-3 (image created by Brett A. Houk).

and 1 piece of shell jewelry (Booher 2016a:Table 7.1). The 16 obsidian blades represent a density of 0.84 blades per m<sup>2</sup> of excavated area.

Due to the presence of three large trees on its summit, we could not investigate Structure C-17, the mound at the western end of the Western Causeway, as intensively as Structure D-48. A single 2 by 4 m unit, placed at the base of the mound, encountered the lowest step of the structure and recovered five obsidian blades from above the terminal phase architecture for a density of 0.625 blades per m<sup>2</sup> of excavated area (Booher et al. 2015).

While we commonly find obsidian in domestic contexts, it usually occurs in lower densities. For example, at Courtyard D-4, which is the most intensively studied residential courtyard at the site, extensive excavations of room interiors, exterior space, and midden-like deposits recovered 21 obsidian blades associated with the final Late-Terminal Classic period occupation of the group in approximately 126 m<sup>2</sup> of excavation area, for a density of only 0.16 blades per m<sup>2</sup>. The higher densities of obsidian artifacts seen at the two termini structures suggest they represent “ritual refuse,” like that described by Keller (2006:496) along Sacbe I at Xunantunich.

The most promising evidence for processions’ taking place comes not from either causeway but from Courtyard D-1, a small group of three structures immediately north of the Eastern Causeway approximately 170 m east of the Main Plaza (Figure 8.2). Booher’s (2016a) extensive excavations of





Plate 8.1. Shell trumpet, made from a West Indian Chank shell, in situ at Courtyard D-1, Chan Chich (photo by Brett A. Houk).

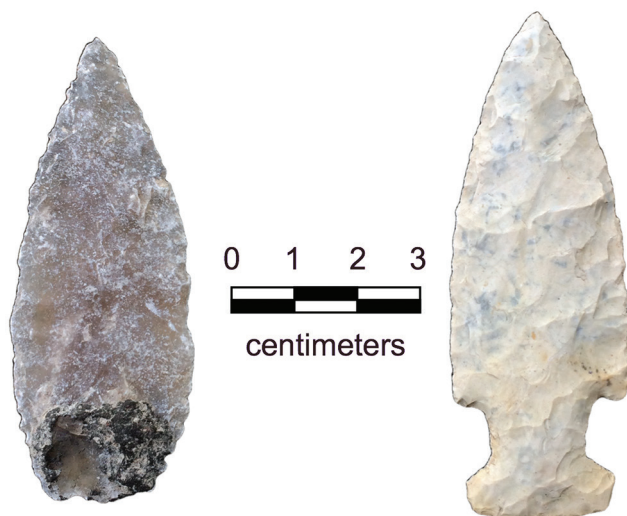


Plate 8.2. Spear points from Structure D-3, Chan Chich (after Booher et al. 2015:Figure 2.21). Note the asphaltum hafting residue on the left specimen (photo by Brett A. Houk).



two of the three structures recovered a partial ceramic drum, a shell trumpet (Plate 8.1), three shell tinklers, and two spear points (Plate 8.2), all of which could have been used in processions.

Other features of the structures in the courtyard suggest that it served some specialized function (Booher and Houk 2016), and its proximity to the Eastern Causeway suggests a functional relationship (Guderjan 1991). The largest building in the group, Structure D-1, occupies the western edge of the courtyard and faces east. The building's modest architecture comprised a mid-height masonry wall and perishable super structure, but was apparently embellished with a vaulted entrance, based on the volume of collapse debris, which included a large number of vault stones, between the two doorway jambs (Booher and Houk 2016:267). The ceramic drum sherds mentioned above were found at the base of a c-shaped bench immediately inside the entrance to the room.

A burial found within the bench is an additional data point suggesting a specialized function for the courtyard. Discovered in the southeastern corner of the bench, Burial CC-B14 contained the remarkably well-preserved remains of an adult female (Plate 8.3). She was interred in a seated position with her arms crossed over her chest. The few grave goods buried with her included a mold-made ceramic spindle whorl, a shell bead, and a piece of deer antler, which was found directly behind her skull, suggesting perhaps she was buried with some sort of headdress. Three of her teeth, including two incisors, had B4 modifications, following Javier Romero's (1970) scheme, and Karl Mayer (1983:18) has associated this form of filing with the glyph for "Ik." Mayer (1983:18) notes that "Ik" translates as "air, wind, breath, the life, the spirit, etc.," and "this association suggests that Ik-shaped upper central incisors were not only intended as a simple adornment, but also had a religious or esoteric significance."

We have previously suggested that the individual in Burial CC-B14 was a ritual specialist based on her dental modifications and associated grave goods (Booher and Houk 2016), but here we propose that the location of her grave and the position of her body are further indications of either her elite status or some specialized occupation. As Carolyn Freiwald and colleagues (2014:98, 100) observe, seated burials account for fewer than 2% of individuals in Classic period contexts from a sample of 27 sites and nearly 1,600 individuals. Patricia McAnany and colleagues (1999:142) conclude that seated burials, at least during the Preclassic period, are related to positions of authority, and Freiwald and colleagues (2014:105) propose that

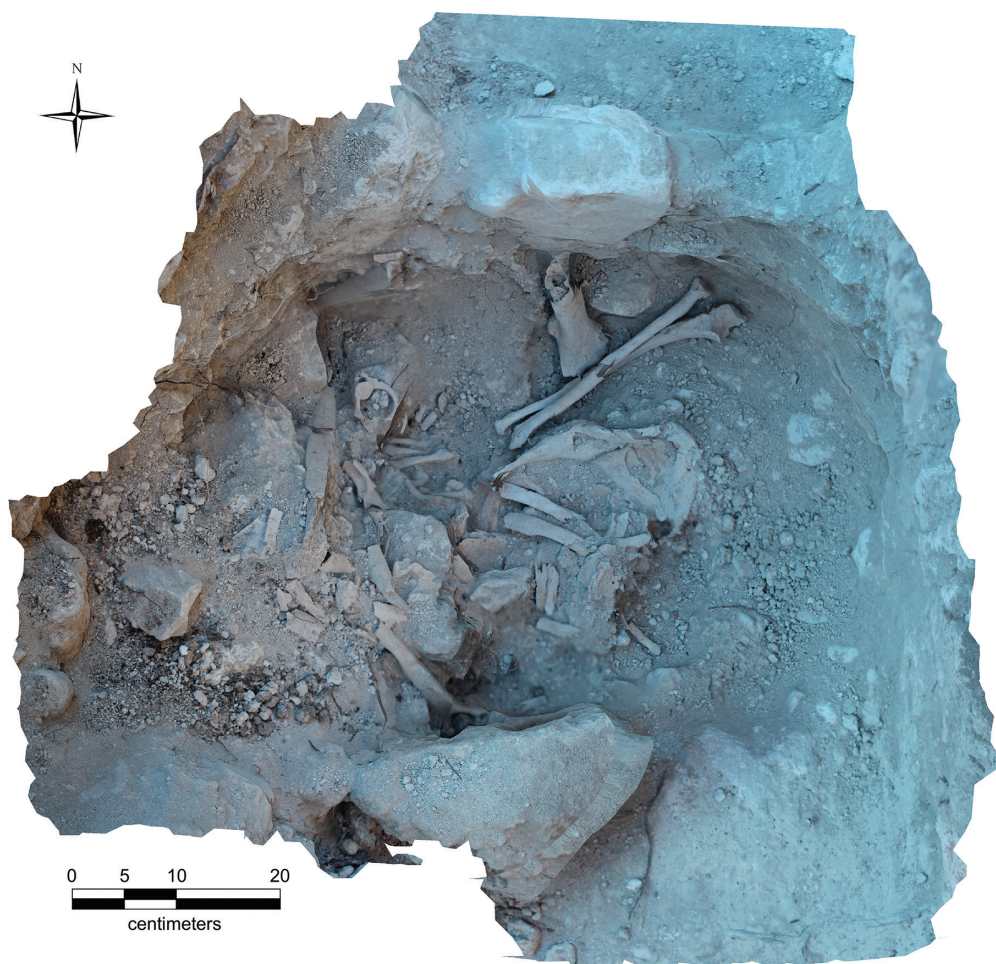


Plate 8.3. Orthomosaic of Burial CC-B-14 during excavations at Chan Chich (after Booher et al. 2015:Figure 2.14) (image created by Brett A. Houk).

these uncommon burials “represent special and possibly individualized phenomena.”

With its proximity to the Eastern Causeway, evidence for costumes and musical instruments, unusual architecture, and the burial of a possible ritual specialist, we propose that Courtyard D-1 may have served as a locale for preparations related to processions. Perhaps musicians, dancers, or some type of religious specialists used it as a staging area during the Late Classic period.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The Late Classic monumental landscape at Chan Chich represents both careful planning and substantial expenditures of labor and resources. While plazas, causeways, and structures served multiple functions, we suggest that many planning and engineering decisions addressed the need for the site center to serve as a stage for processions and spectacles. Echoing Keller's (2006:612) lament that the artifacts potentially indicative of processions and spectacles are "frustratingly few in number," the comparatively high densities of obsidian blades from the termini structures and causeway clearing units support our contention that the two causeways functioned in part as stages for ceremonial processions and performances. This conclusion is bolstered by data from Courtyard D-1, which is less than 5 m from the Eastern Causeway and arguably functionally related. There, artifactual, architectural, and burial data combine to suggest the group served a specialized, ritual function during the Late Classic, perhaps as a staging area for performers.

The site-planning analysis presented above, when combined with Classic period depictions of processions and spectacles, provides additional evidence that creating a massive stage for ritual and performance guided many planning decisions at Chan Chich in the Late Classic period. As Inomata (2006a:818) has previously suggested, "securing sufficient spaces for public events was a primary concern in the design of Maya cities," and the integrated causeways and termini structures, the massive Main Plaza, the ball court, and Structure A-1—likely a stage and grandstand at various times—reflect this concern. The rulers at Chan Chich were not alone in making planning decisions of this sort. As previously discussed, Xunantunich follows the same planning model, and Houk (2015:280) has identified likely "processional architecture" at La Milpa, Dos Hombres, El Pilar, and Minanha. Each of these cities has idiosyncratic design elements that can be explained in the context of political theater and public performance.

Large-scale public spectacles and ritual performances created "moments of 'real' communities" (Inomata 2006a:818), and the built environment of Maya cities—the arrangement of the monumental spaces and structures—created inviting places and enhanced the attraction and attachment non-elite members of a polity felt to the city and its rulers (Hutson 2016:201). Creating this sense of community and attachment may have been the ultimate unstated intent of all this planning, construction, and theatricality. As small kingdoms proliferated across the lowlands in the Classic

period, competition for resources, labor, power, and prestige accelerated. Competition could manifest itself in many ways, from outright violence to ostentatious architectural displays like Caana at Caracol or El Castillo at Xunantunich (see Sharer and Traxler 2006:495). Hosting and staging spectacles, which attracted the potentially independent and fragmented rural population, may have been another manifestation of Late Classic elite competition, and “theatrical events . . . may have served as centripetal forces that counteracted centrifugal tendencies of Maya polities” (Inomata 2006b:206). At Chan Chich—and at many of its neighbors—the political need for the ruler to integrate the community and compete with his peers guided the planning and construction decisions in the Late Classic period and transformed the monumental landscape into a vast and coordinated stage for political theater.

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