

In the Palace of the Fallen King: The Royal Residential Complex at Aguateca, Guatemala

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The Aguateca Archaeological Project extensively excavated two structures (M7-22 and M7-32) in the Palace Group of the Late Classic Maya (A.C. 600–830) center of Aguateca, Guatemala. Multiple lines of evidence, including site layout, architectural features, soil chemistry, objects stored in a sealed room, and abandonment processes, suggest that these were the buildings where the ruler and his family lived and worked. The use of space in these structures shows some similarities to those of the rapidly abandoned elite residences at Aguateca and of palace-type buildings at other Maya centers. The occupants of this royal complex retained a certain level of visibility, indicating the importance of the ruler's body as the focus of theatrical display. After the royal family evacuated the center, an invading enemy ritually destroyed these buildings, attesting the symbolic importance of the royal residences. The center was almost completely abandoned after this incursion.

Introduction

Elaborate multi-chambered buildings that are generally called “palaces” have been an important focus of research in Maya archaeology (e.g., Adams 1974; Harrison 1970; Thompson 1966: 66–67; see also papers in Ciudad Ruiz, Ponce de León, and Martínez Martínez 2001; Christie, editor 2003; Houston 1998; Inomata and Houston 2001). Archaeological evidence now indicates that many of these buildings were residences of the ruling elite and not administrative structures without residential functions (see Kowalski 1987: 75–86; Webster 2001 for reviews of the evidence). Yet, two factors still hinder our understanding of palace remains of the Classic Maya. First, most Maya

centers were gradually abandoned, and the residents carried away most of their belongings, while durable stone buildings were often reoccupied by squatters (see Harrison 1999: 192–199). Thus, artifacts associated with these structures do not necessarily reflect their original use. Second, in many centers palace complexes underwent a series of construction episodes, and their final forms represent palimpsests of different patterns of use, making their interpretation difficult.

The Late Classic Maya (A.C. 600–830) center of Aguateca (FIG. 1), Guatemala was occupied for a relatively short period around the 8th century A.C., and most buildings had only one construction episode. Invaders attacked



Figure 1. Map of the Maya area with the locations of Aguateca and other sites discussed in the text.

Aguateca around A.C. 810 and burned its central part, whence elite residents fled or were captured, abandoning their belongings. Although the excavation of the architectural complex that we call the Palace Group did not reveal patterns of rapid abandonment, a sealed storage room containing royal paraphernalia and ritual deposits associated with the destruction of the buildings provide unique information on the function and meaning of this compound. In addition, the chemical analysis of floors provides critical data on activity areas. Although our analyses are still in progress, we have enough information to conclude that the Palace Group was indeed a royal residential and administrative complex.

The Archaeology of the Royal Palace

In this paper the term *royal palace* refers to a large and elaborate residential complex of the ruler or ruling family, exhibiting a certain level of monumentality. The term overlaps with the concepts of *palace-type buildings* and *royal residences*, but they are not synonymous. Palace-type buildings

are named for morphological attributes of structures—in the Maya area, large and elaborate edifices with multiple rooms—but may include non-residential structures and those occupied by non-royal groups (Andrews 1975: 43). Royal residences are defined by their functions and potentially include small and unelaborate structures occupied by the ruler (Inomata and Triadan 2003). Although we focus on the royal palace in this paper, we are not excluding the possibility that the ruler spent some time in plainer structures.

The royal palace in this sense is far more than living quarters of the ruling family. Palaces of various societies, such as the Buckingham Palace and the Forbidden City, have been used for political interactions, administrative work, and diplomatic negotiation. The ostentation of a palace not only facilitates the luxurious lifestyle of the ruling elite but is also closely associated with the royal symbolism and state ideologies that are materialized in its design and enacted through the performance of its occupants and visitors. Thus, royal palaces reflect the nature of both rulership and political organization.

In the Maya area, artifactual remains have been of limited use for the interpretation of palace-type buildings. Although expeditions to various Maya sites during the early 20th century focused on palace-type structures, the careful documentation of artifacts found at floor levels was not a main concern for most early scholars. Even today, in excavations of monumental structures motivated for architectural restoration and tourism, artifacts on floors are not always recorded adequately. Moreover, the analysis of artifacts associated with palace-type buildings is complicated by gradual abandonment and reoccupation. Careful evaluation of formation processes is critical (see Cameron and Tomka 1993; Schiffer 1987; Stevenson 1982). Patterns of abandonment may be conditioned by the political and symbolic importance of the building and the social circumstance of abandonment (Inomata and Webb in press). As discussed below, this was the case for the Palace Group of Aguateca. Particularly important in this regard is the notion of termination rituals. Freidel and his colleagues (Freidel and Schele 1989; Garber 1983; Mock 1998) have demonstrated that certain structures at various Maya centers were ritually destroyed and broken objects deposited.

Architectural configurations and features reflect the identities of occupants and their activities to a certain degree. A comparison with rapidly abandoned structures with numerous in situ objects aids this line of inquiry. Yet, the same architectural arrangements may potentially serve for various uses, and the occupants and the use of architectural spaces may change through time. The chemical analysis of floors may mitigate this problem. Soils and stuc-

co floors absorb chemical elements deposited through human activities. Unlike visible artifact remains, such chemical signatures are not easily erased by sweeping and various types of abandonment behavior. The most commonly examined element is phosphate, which derives from organic material and reflects the preparation, consumption, and discard of food (Manzanilla and Barba 1990; Terry et al. 2000). In addition, metal elements such as iron and copper may be related to activities involving the use of pigments.

Our study also involves the analysis of the royal palace as theatrical space (see Inomata 2001a). The symbolism of rulership was expressed not only through the presence of royal palaces but also through the practices and interactions of the individuals who occupied or visited those buildings (Houston and Taube 2000: 289). Theatricality is prevalent in most aspects of human life, including unconscious daily activities, but it is particularly prominent in courtly interactions in which royalties and courtiers are highly conscious of the theatrical effects of their actions (Geertz 1980; Brown and Elliott 1980; see Beeman 1993; Schechner 1988 for a general discussion of theatrical performance). As Foucault (1977) noted, visibility is a critical element in understanding how power and the state operate. He argued that political power in premodern Europe depended heavily on spectacles, in which the sovereign and other elements of the state were constantly on display. In his study of historic Bali, Geertz (1980: 13) goes further in suggesting that theatrical spectacles of the royal court were the *raison d'être* of the state. Along these lines, Kertzner (1988) and Handelman (1990: 191–233) demonstrate that even in modern states theatrical performances on such occasions as state ceremonies and public speeches play critical roles in defining power relations and creating community identities. Our goal is not to make uncritical analogies from premodern Europe or historical Bali, but to examine the nature, implications, and effects of theatrical performance in the specific cultural and historical contexts of Classic Maya society. The analysis of the royal palace as theatrical space helps us to understand the nature of courtly interactions and the intended audience (see Fash 1998: 239–247;Looper 2001; Moore 1996: 151–167; Reese-Taylor and Koontz 2001).

Aguateca

Aguateca is located in the lowland rainforest in the sw part of the Department of El Petén, Guatemala (FIG. 1). It was a medium-sized center built in a naturally defensible location on top of a steep escarpment. Work by Graham (1967) has shown that calendrical dates inscribed on stone monuments found in the Main Plaza span a relatively short period of time, from 9.15.0.0.0 (A.C. 731) to 9.18.0.0.0

(A.C. 790). A subsequent epigraphic study by Houston (1993; see also Martin and Grube 2000: 54–67) has demonstrated that Aguateca served along with Dos Pilas as a twin capital for an intrusive dynasty that probably originated from Tikal. Graham and Houston have also noted the presence of a series of stone walls in various parts of the center.

From 1990 to 1993 Inomata conducted systematic archaeological investigations at Aguateca as a part of the Petexbatún Regional Archaeological Project. Detailed mapping and excavations indicated that, during the reigns of Ruler 3 and Ruler 4 (K'awiil Chan K'inich) of the Dos Pilas/Aguateca dynasty in the early to mid 8th century, Aguateca became a densely occupied center (Inomata and Stiver 1998: fig. 2). During the late 8th century A.C., the ruling elite left Dos Pilas and Ruler 5 (Tan Te' K'inich) used Aguateca as his main seat of power (Demarest et al. 1997; Houston 1993; Inomata 1997, in press a). Excavations also confirmed that stone walls probably sustaining palisades were constructed during the reign of Ruler 5. In the elite residential structures located along the Causeway, excavators revealed numerous complete and reconstructible objects along with evidence of burning, which suggested that enemies attacked Aguateca and burned its central part (Inomata and Stiver 1998). From 1996 to 1999, Inomata, Triadan, and Ponciano directed the Aguateca Archaeological Project, focusing on the extensive excavation of burned structures along the Causeway. Rich floor assemblages left by the residents in the excavated buildings indicated that the area was occupied by high courtiers who engaged in administrative work and artistic production (Inomata 2001b, 2001c; Inomata and Triadan 2000, 2003; Inomata et al. 1998; Triadan 2000). We did not find any clear signs that these burned structures were later scavenged or reoccupied.

During the 1998 and 1999 seasons, we also excavated the Palace Group (Inomata et al. 1998). Prior to excavation, several lines of evidence suggested that this architectural compound was the royal palace of Aguateca. First, it was far larger than any other residential complex, although its square plan surrounding a plaza was comparable to others. In comparison to the Main Plaza, a public ceremonial space surrounded by temples and dotted with stone monuments, the Palace Group appeared to have been a more private space with limited access. Second, the Causeway, a well-defined, wide street, connected this compound with the Main Plaza. This location implied that the Palace Group was the most important residential complex at Aguateca. Third, a test excavation next to Structure M7-9 located to the north of the Palace Group unearthed several limestone *manos* at the floor level. These grinding stones

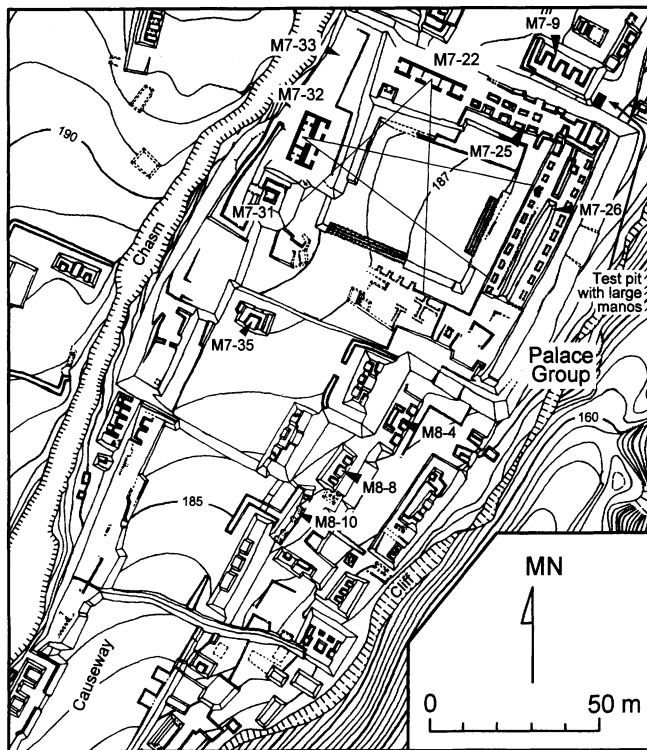


Figure 2. Map of the Palace Group and the area along the Causeway with 1 m contour lines, showing the locations of the structures discussed in the text. It also indicates the angles visible from the central bench of Structures M7-22 and M7-32.

were larger than most of those found in other residential structures (FIG. 2). This pointed to the residential function of the Palace Group with Structure M7-9 or a nearby structure serving as its kitchen facility. Fourth, defensive walls were placed in a roughly concentric pattern with the Palace Group located at its center. The Palace Group was originally protected with the natural features of a steep cliff on the east side and a deep chasm on the west. Along the chasm, walls were laid out for the defense of the east side, on which the Palace Group was located, against attackers crossing this geological feature from the west side, on which the Main Plaza was located. In other words, the focus of defense was not the Main Plaza but the Palace Group, which accorded with the assumption that the latter was the royal palace.

We extensively excavated Structures M7-22 and M7-32 of the Palace Group with the hypothesis that they were the main residential quarters of the ruler and his family (FIG. 2). We nicknamed them “the House of Masks” and “the House of Bones,” respectively, without any functional implications simply because such names are easier to remember than numbered designations. Structure M7-22 and M7-32 were the only two buildings with confirmed ma-

sonry roofs at Aguateca. Although the stone roofs had collapsed, we could discern their approximate floor plans on the surface, which contained multiple chambers comparable to other elite residences. Most other structures in the Palace Group appeared to have had non-residential functions. Structures M7-25 and M7-26 on the eastern side were long open buildings with multiple pillars and entrances, indicating that they were buildings of a more public nature. Arnauld (2001: 374–376) has suggested a residential function for Structure M7-26 because of the presence of numerous domestic objects recovered during the Guatemalan Government Restoration Project. We, however, find it problematic to infer the original use of the building directly from the materials on the floor, given the complex abandonment process discussed below. Structure M7-31 near the sw corner of the complex had a pyramidal base and may have been a temple. The other buildings of the Palace Group were significantly less elaborate and may have been used primarily by other courtiers, visitors, or royal attendants.

Excavation

Excavations proceeded following a 2×2 m grid system established parallel to the long axis of each building. The thick layers of collapsed stone roofs contained few artifacts, and excavators started to screen soils with $1/4$ " mesh when they approached floor levels. When significant deposits of artifacts were encountered, we switched to $1/16$ " mesh. Artifacts found on the floors were exposed in situ, photographed, and drawn. Samples of stucco and soils for chemical analysis were taken at intervals of 0.5 and 1 m at the floor levels. They were processed through Mehlich II extraction for phosphate and DTPA extraction for copper, iron, mercury, manganese, zinc, and lead (see Parnell, Terry, and Nelson 2002; Terry et al. 2000; Wells et al. 2000 for a discussion of analytical procedures). Although we did not excavate the subfloor levels of Structures M7-22 and M7-32, excavations below the plaza floor of the Palace Group in 1991 demonstrated that the plaza was built in one construction episode over bedrock, reflecting the short occupation history of the site.

Structure M7-22, or the House of Masks, consisted of five main rooms: the easternmost, east, central, west, and westernmost rooms (FIGS. 3, 4). Collapsed vault stones were often found next to each other, and it appears that the entire roof collapsed at once. The central room was larger than the others and had a spacious bench. This chamber was originally connected to the east and west rooms through narrow passages, but the aperture between the central and east rooms was later sealed. To the south of the easternmost room was a small front room. A similar room

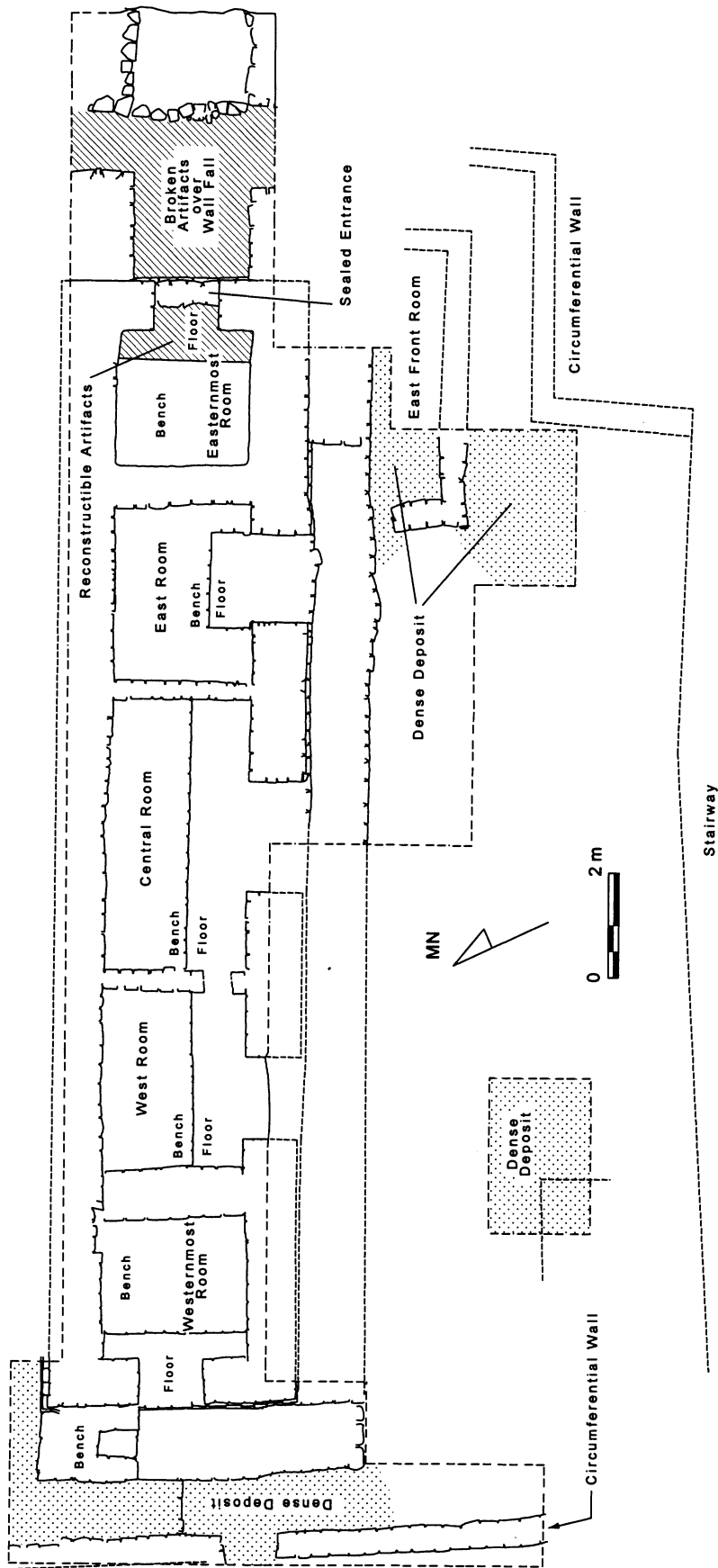


Figure 3. Plan of Structure M7-22.

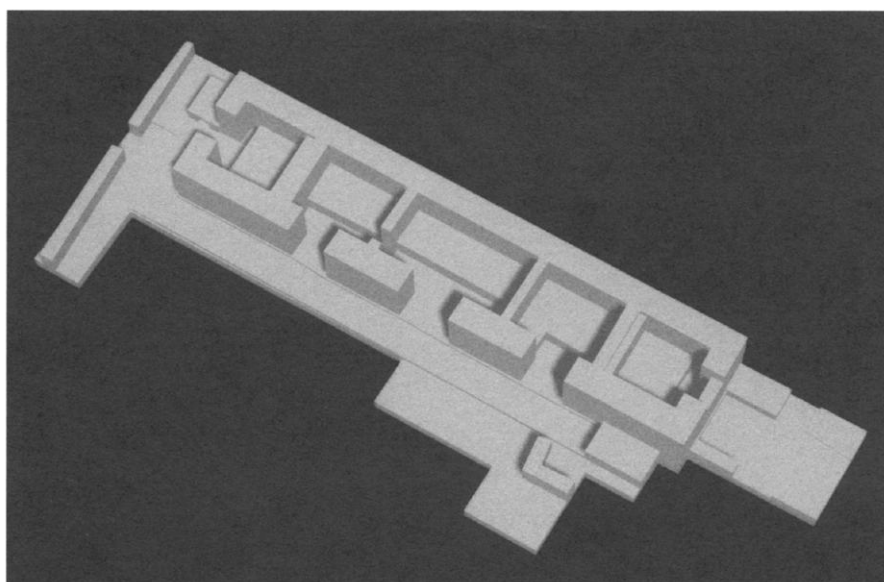


Figure 4. Computer-generated model of Structure M7-22 without the stone roof, viewed from the south. The model only shows the excavated area.

may have existed in an unexcavated area to the south of the westernmost room. Thin walls consisting of a few courses of stones were found south of the easternmost room and west of the westernmost room. Whereas the east, central, west, and westernmost rooms were nearly devoid of artifacts, the easternmost room contained a large quantity of objects. Its doorway appears to have been completely sealed at one point with cut stones and roughly shaped blocks. These stones collapsed forward possibly by deliberate force, leaving two courses of blocks in situ (FIG. 5). A large number of broken objects were scattered over these collapsed stones in front of the room. Unlike other rooms, the interior walls of this room were covered with 3 cm stucco that had been heavily burned. The east front room consisted of a few courses of cut stones and roughly shaped stones, and appears to have been added to the main part of the building at the end of its occupation. Inside and to the south of the east front room, to the south of the probable west front room, and to the west of the westernmost room, excavators uncovered dense deposits measuring up to 30 cm in thickness, that contained ceramic sherds consisting largely of common Late Classic types, fragments of grinding stones, chipped stone tools, shell ornaments, greenstone ornaments, pieces of pyrite mosaic mirrors, and fragments of alabaster vessels with the Aguateca emblem glyph and other hieroglyphic incisions. Unlike the ceramic fragments found in the rapidly abandoned elite residences along the Causeway, these sherds were mostly unreconstructible. Soils mixed in these deposits were black and ashy, and many artifacts exhibited clear traces of burning.

Structure M7-32, or the House of Bones, was more elaborately built than Structure M7-22 (FIG. 6). The structure consisted of the north, central, south, and front rooms (FIGS. 7, 8). Dense deposits of broken objects similar to those associated with Structure M7-22 were found in front of the C-shaped bench of the central room, in the front room, and along the northern exterior walls. The bench of the central room had a niche under each wing, but the capstone of the northern niche was deliberately removed and the bench surface next to it was destroyed (FIGS. 9, 10). Dense deposits of fragmentary objects also filled these damaged areas. Of particular interest are broken human bones of at least two individuals mixed in these deposits. According to Lori Wright, they include fragments of crania, mandibles, a scapula, a humerus, an ulna, a radius, fibulae, tibiae, and metatarsi. They were scattered on the floor in front of the central bench, in the broken floor of the bench, in the front room, and on the exterior floors north and south of the building, and some were burned.

The Abandonment of the Palace Group

The Absence of Reconstructible Objects

Before we discuss the original use of the Palace Group, it is necessary to evaluate its mode of abandonment and the nature of the associated deposits. The absence of in situ floor assemblages of complete and reconstructible objects stands in contrast with other elite residences. Three interpretations seem possible. The first possibility is that the structures were originally kept empty of artifacts. This sce-



Figure 5. The doorway of the easternmost room of Structure M7-22 after excavation viewed from the east. Note that two courses of stones sealing its entrance are still in situ.

nario appears unlikely. We suspect that even non-residential structures dedicated to political meetings and the reception of visitors contained a significant amount of furniture and artifacts. Ceramic vase paintings of meeting scenes typically portray ceramic jars, vases, bowls, and plates, as well as various types of furniture. Inomata (1995; Inomata and Stiver 1998; Inomata 2001b) has argued that the central rooms of the rapidly abandoned elite residences were used mainly for meetings and the reception of visitors, as well as for scribal and artistic work. The numbers of objects found in the central rooms are usually smaller than those in side-rooms, but they still contained objects that are comparable to those depicted in ceramic paintings. Such objects appear to have been routinely kept in rooms for meetings and receptions. In addition, the presence of a possible kitchen facility in proximity suggests that the Palace Group functioned as a residence or a space for feasting. The buildings then probably contained various objects, including serving vessels. Moreover, the construction of defensive walls with the apparent purpose of protecting

the Palace Group rather than the temples in the Main Plaza seems odd if these buildings were kept empty.

The second possible interpretation is that the buildings originally contained numerous objects, but the enemies who invaded Aguateca removed these materials. This scenario also seems improbable. As discussed below in more detail, the intruders appear to have ravaged the easternmost room of Structure M7-22, which stored various pieces of royal possessions, but left numerous complete objects and broken fragments behind. If the invaders were responsible for removing objects from the other rooms of Structures M7-22 and M7-32, one would expect to find numerous fragments and unwanted items left by them. These areas, however, were emptied completely and swept clean at one point.

The third possibility is that the original residents evacuated this compound before the attack and carried away or removed their possessions. This interpretation accords well with the finds in the easternmost room, and we consider this scenario most likely.



Figure 6. Structure M7-32 after excavation viewed from the east.

The Storage of Royal Possessions

Objects stored in the easternmost room of Structure M7-22 include two carved long bones with hieroglyphic texts, a large conch shell incised with a glyphic text, three probable bone bloodletters, three small ceramic drums, various greenstone ornaments, nine round pyrite mosaic mirrors (6.7 to 8.9 cm in diameter), two ceramic masks, and several ceramic vessels of Late Classic types (FIGS. 11, 12). Found among the greenstone ornaments was a fragment of a celt-shaped plaque with a perforation at the narrower end. It was probably a part of the royal attire, hung at the belt, as shown in images of rulers on stelae.

The ceramic masks are badly fragmented, but one of them probably represents an image of an old man painted in red whereas the other appears to portray a deity or monster with large eyes and fangs. Both masks had small perforations along the edges for fastening strings. The old-man mask had openings at the positions of the eyes, indicating that it was wearable over the face. To make these masks, artisans appear to have soaked cloth pieces in light clay and layered them on a mold. The objects were then

fired, leaving hollow impressions of textiles in the clay. This technique allowed artisans to produce lightweight masks in complex shapes with walls measuring 2 mm in thickness (Beaubien 2000). Although numerous ceramic paintings and stelae depict rulers and nobles wearing masks on ceremonial occasions, to our knowledge no such objects had been recovered archaeologically. The clay-textile laminate technique of these masks had also been virtually unknown to Maya archaeologists. At Aguateca, badly damaged fragments of the same material have been found in the central room of Structure M8-4 by Triadan and in Structure M7-26 by Mónica Urquizú of the Guatemalan Government Restoration Project. Small fragments of this material were recovered in Structures L7-5, L7-42, L8-17, and M8-10 (Inomata 1995: 601). Another set of similar fragments was recovered from the Los Quetzales cave in the Petexbatún region by James Brady (Beaubien 2000).

The fact that the entrance to the room was sealed indicates that these items were intentionally stored in this room by the departing royal family. The stucco layer on the walls probably served to prevent pests from invading the

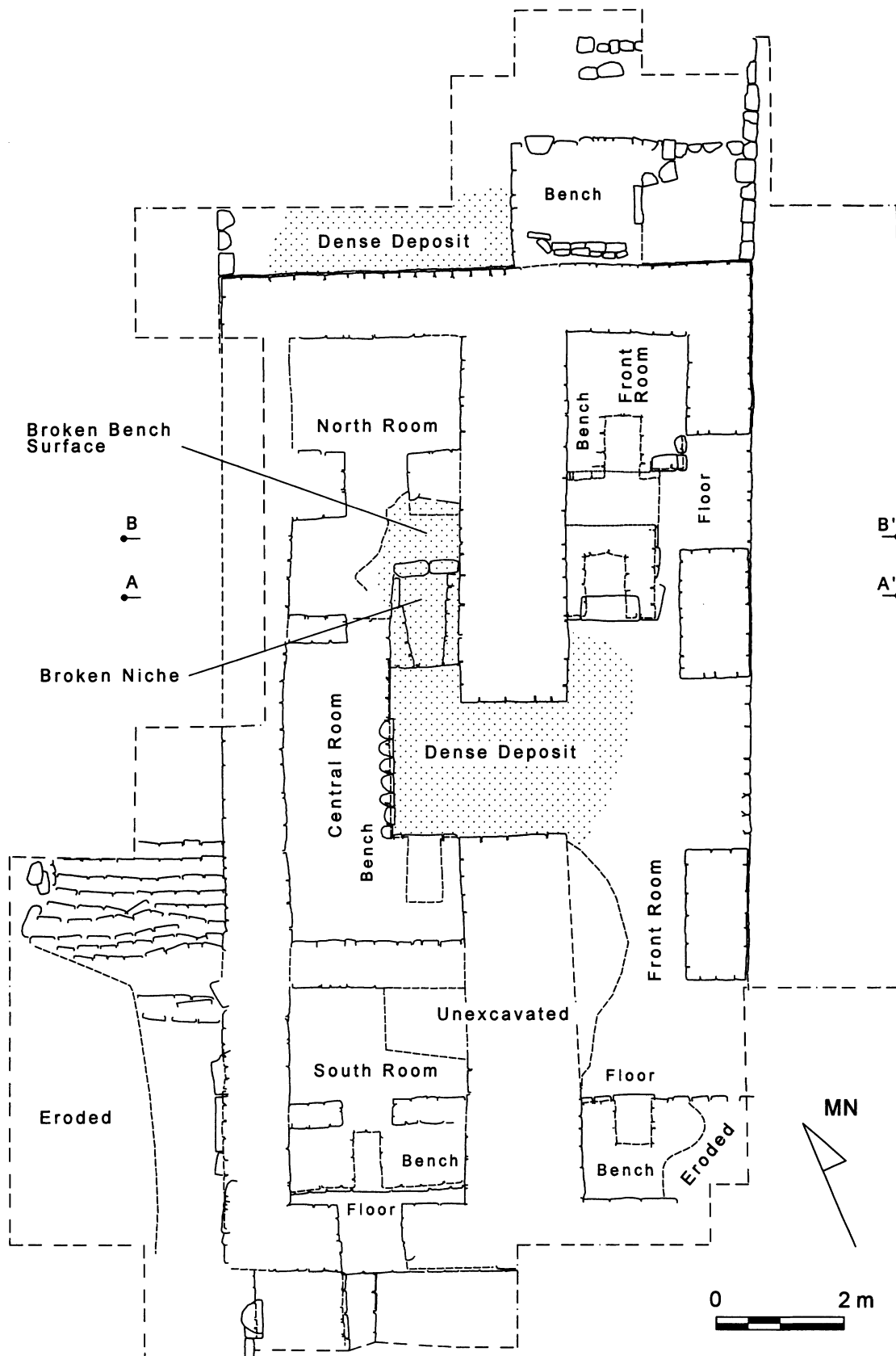


Figure 7. Plan of Structure M7-32. A-A' and B-B' indicate the lines of the cross-sections shown in Figure 9.

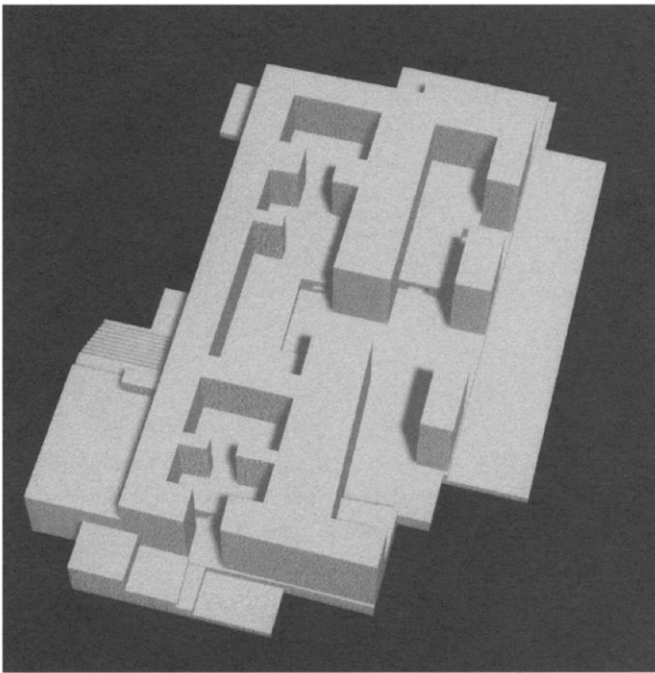


Figure 8. Computer-generated model of Structure M7-32 without the stone roof, viewed from the south. The model only shows the excavated area.

storage room. Many objects were on the floor in front of the bench, but some were mixed in with the collapsed stones and may have originally been stored in higher locations, such as the bench surface and rafters. The bench surface was devoid of objects when it was excavated. It is not clear whether a large part of the bench surface was kept clean or perishable materials were placed there. Numerous fragments of ceramics and other objects found outside of the room in front of the doorway were stratigraphically sandwiched between the rubble of the entrance seal and a layer of roof fall. The exterior floor below the collapsed stones was almost clean of artifacts (Inomata in press b). This pattern suggests that most objects, including those found in front of the room, were originally stored inside the room behind the completely sealed doorway.

Heavy traces of fire found in the room suggest that the building was burned down. We suspect that the easternmost room was opened before the building was set on fire. If the room was completely sealed when the fire started, the interior of the room would have been protected from the fire (Inomata in press b). The recent results of lab analysis lend further support to this interpretation. Five greenstone fragments were refitted into a pendant with an image of a face. Two pieces were found inside the room, whereas three fragments were recovered outside the room 3–4 m east of the doorway. This distribution pattern could not

have resulted from the collapse of the building during the fire. The enemies who invaded Aguateca probably opened this room and intentionally broke some objects before they set the building on fire. They also may have removed some stored items. It is possible that the invaders fed fuel into the room unless the room originally contained a large quantity of flammable materials.

Termination Rituals

The dense deposits in and around Structures M7-22 and M7-32 remain difficult to interpret, but we favor the hypothesis that they were termination ritual deposits dumped by the enemies when they ritually burned and destroyed the buildings. It seems unlikely that they were middens deposited by the original occupants or by squatters for the following reasons. First, there were no comparable deposits inside or in front of other elite residences. It is inconceivable that the royal residents threw garbage in the palace buildings while other elites maintained their houses neatly. Second, it is equally unlikely that elites deposited refuse in these buildings after the departure of the royal family. The presence of royal possessions in the storage room suggests that the ruler was not ousted by other Aguatecans, but he chose to evacuate the center, hoping to come back some day. The remaining elites, who maintained the traditional courtly way of life, probably remained loyal to their king. In addition, it would have been easier for most residents of these areas to throw garbage into the chasm or cliff than to carry it to the royal palace. Third, numerous usable items left in rapidly abandoned elite residences, such as greenstone ornaments and igneous rock *metates*, were not scavenged. It is highly unlikely that the Palace Group was occupied by squatters for a substantial period. Most middens excavated in other areas of Aguateca were much shallower, reflecting a short occupation. Fourth, the deposits contain numerous precious items, including greenstone and shell ornaments. The significant quantity of still usable ornaments, such as unbroken greenstone beads and carved shells, distinguishes these deposits from ordinary midden refuse. Fifth, the presence of numerous human bones points to the ritual nature of these deposits. Sixth, the soil phosphate levels were relatively low, although David Lentz identified some remains of maize in floatation samples taken from these areas. This stands in contrast with common household middens (FIG. 13). Seventh, if these materials were deposited as middens while the structures were still occupied and they later received fire when the buildings were burned, traces of burning on artifacts would not be so conspicuous or would be limited to artifacts found in the top layers of the deposits. Eighth, in Structure M7-32 these materials covered the en-

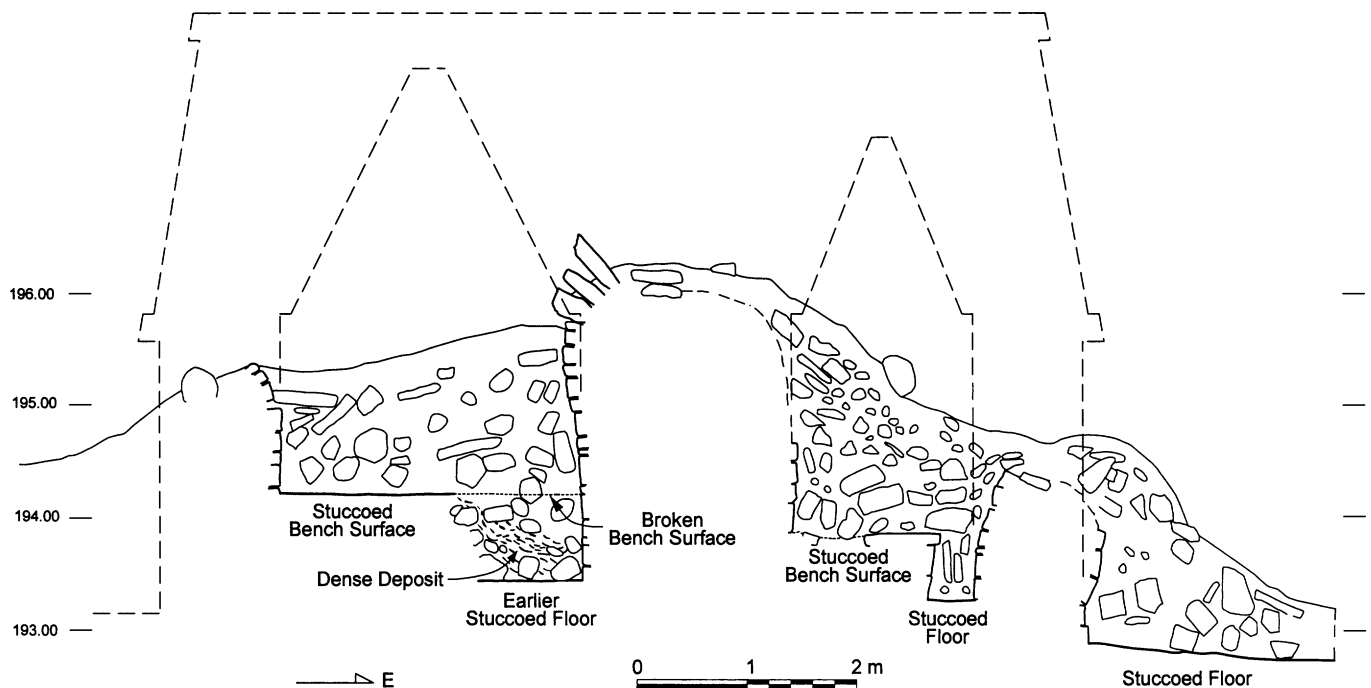


Figure 9. Cross-section of the central room of Structure M7-32. The section of levels above the floors was drawn along the A-A' line and was combined with the section of the dense deposit below the broken bench surface taken along the B-B' line in Figure 7.

ture area in front of the bench of the central room, blocking the access to it, which suggests that they were not deposited by those who occupied the structure.

Although we do not deny the possibility that the departing royal family or the remaining elites left some refuse in these areas, a large part of the dense deposits was most likely placed by the invaders for symbolic reasons. The heavy traces of burning and the intentional destruction of a bench conform to the reported patterns of termination rituals. Ritually broken stucco floors have also been found at Yaxuna (Ambrosino 2003). At Aguateca, covering the destroyed parts of the bench with broken objects appears to have been a symbolic act. In addition, a small number of broken objects found inside the east, central, and west rooms of Structure M7-22 were not directly on the floors but on a layer of calcareous white soil, which measured roughly 2–5 cm in thickness. At Cerros and Yaxuná, investigators detected layers of white marl deposited in ritually terminated buildings (Freidel 1986). It is possible that the white layer in Structure M7-22 was intentionally deposited during the termination ritual.

We should also note a unique characteristic of the Aguateca deposits. Robertson (1983: 112) and Walker (1998) have reported that termination ritual deposits at Cerros contained large ceramic fragments, many of which can be fitted together. This pattern suggested to them that

complete vessels were used during rituals and were broken at the end of rites. Most sherds from the dense deposits of Structures M7-22 and M7-32, however, could not be glued together and appear to have been brought from other locations in the form of already broken materials. An intriguing piece of evidence is a ceramic whistle refitted by Triadan. One section came from a deposit in the southern part of the front room of Structure M7-32, and another from the north room of the rapidly abandoned elite residence of Structure M8-4. Although data are still inconclusive, some materials in termination ritual deposits may have been taken from the nearby elite residential area.

The Palace for the King

The Palace as a Residential and Administrative Complex

Although artifacts found in Structures M7-22 and M7-32 do not reflect the original use of the buildings, certain architectural features provide clues to their functions. In Structure M7-22 the central room was larger than other rooms. It is probable that the ruler or his close relative used this room to give audience to their subjects and to receive emissaries from other centers. The west room connected with the central room may have been a more private space for the ruler or the royalty who used the central room. The



Figure 10. The destroyed niche and the bench surface of the central room of Structure M7-32 viewed from the west. Note that they are filled with broken materials.

east room may have had comparable functions, but after its access to the central room was closed, it may have been used by other members of the royal family. Likewise, in Structure M7-32, the large central room may have been a throne room of the ruler, and the north room connected with the central room may have been his private chamber. The south room with a separate entrance may have been used by other royal personages.

Support of this interpretation comes from the rapidly abandoned elite residences at the site (Structures M7-35, M8-4, M8-8, and M8-10). These elite residential structures exhibited layouts similar to those of Structures M7-22 and M7-32, consisting of the larger central rooms flanked by side rooms, although their rooms were not connected with each other. The artifact distribution in these elite residences suggested to Inomata (1995; Inomata and Stiver 1998) that the household heads used the central rooms with a moderate quantity of artifacts for their work and political meetings. One of the side rooms in Structures M8-4 and M8-10 contained scribal implements and may

also have served for the work of the household head, while Structures M7-35 and M8-8 had a side room with a small quantity of objects, which may have been a sleeping area. Each of the four residences had a side room with numerous objects related to food storage and preparation, as well as tools for textile production, which may have been used primarily by females. Thus, use patterns of Structures M-22 and M7-32 suggested by architectural layouts are comparable to those of the rapidly abandoned elite residences as inferred from artifact distribution.

Soil chemistry data from Structure M7-22 also appear consistent with this interpretation. The iron concentrations were higher in the side rooms (around 8 mg/kg in the westernmost, west, and east rooms) than in the central room (around 4 mg/kg). The high iron level (around 12 mg/kg) in the easternmost room may have resulted from the floor having been painted in red (FIG. 14). Lead levels were also comparable (around 3 mg/kg in the westernmost, west, and east rooms; and around 2 mg/kg in the central and easternmost rooms). Although we cannot spec-



Figure 11. The northern part of the area in front of the bench in the easternmost room of Structure M7-22 during excavation, viewed from the south. The old-man mask is seen in the upper left corner, to the right of which is fragments of the incised conch. Near the lower right corner is a ceramic drum.

ify the activities responsible for producing these slight elevations in chemical levels, these patterns may reflect the primary use of the central room for meetings in contrast with other types of activities in the side rooms. We did not detect clear differences in levels of iron, lead, and other elements among the rooms of Structure M7-32, which might imply a more administrative function for this building.

Similar use patterns are found at other Maya centers. Palace-type structures in the Maya area commonly have a tripartite composition, with the central room flanked by two side rooms (Christie 2003; Kowalski 1987: 120–125). The central rooms are often larger and have a more ample or elaborate bench than the side rooms. The layouts of the central rooms facilitate display toward viewers occupying the courtyard in front of the buildings. For example, the large central room dominates the floor plan of Structure 5D-46 in the Central Acropolis of Tikal, which Harrison (1999: 76–78) identifies as the house of the ninth ruler of

this center. In an early stage of the elaborate elite residence of Structure 9N-82 of Copán, one of the side rooms was connected with the central room through a narrow break in the room partition, as is the case with Structures M7-22 and M7-32 of Aguateca (Webster 1989: figs. 5, 10, 17–21). Structure 66S of elite group 8N-11 at Copán also exhibits a similar pattern (Webster et al. 1998). This basic tripartite design is often maintained even for buildings consisting of more than three rooms. In the case of the House of the Governor of Uxmal, the long building is divided into three sections by transverse vaults (Kowalski 1987: 113–131). In the middle section of this building, the central room is significantly larger than the side rooms. The central rooms in these tripartite buildings were probably the foci of political interactions.

A potential difference between the buildings of the Palace Group and the rapidly abandoned elite residences at Aguateca is the location of food preparation. All the excavated elite residences along the Causeway contained large

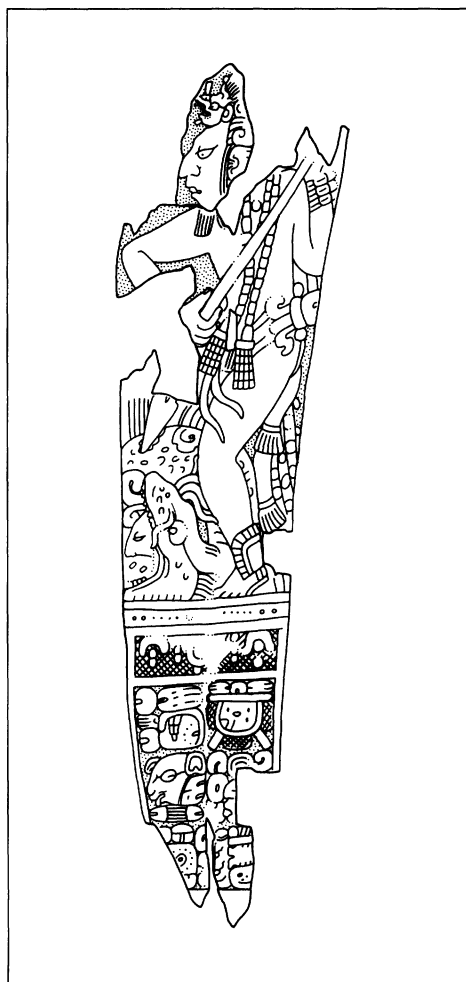


Figure 12. Drawing of a carved bone found in the easternmost room of Structure M7-22. Drawing by Stephen Houston.

storage jars and grinding stones, suggesting that food was stored and prepared in the same structures (Triadan 2000). In the case of the Palace Group, we suspect that a possible kitchen facility was located in a nearby structure to the north. The phosphate concentrations inside Structures M7-22 and M7-32 do not vary significantly, which may be due to the lack of food preparation activities in these buildings (see FIG. 13). This appears to have been a common arrangement for royal palaces. At Tikal, kitchen facilities for the royal palace complex of the Central Acropolis may have been set up outside of the compound in nearby small structures, including Structure 5D-131, where excavators found a midden with food preparation refuse and remains of hearths (Harrison 1970; Webster 2001: 150). The lack of evidence for food preparation associated with masonry buildings of palace complexes at Caracol despite the presence of reconstructible objects in some sectors of the site

suggests to Chase and Chase (2001: 131–132) that food preparation took place outside of the core parts of palace complexes. At Piedras Negras, Houston and his colleagues (Houston et al. 2000: 11) propose that an area below the royal palace complex of the Acropolis contained “servant’s quarters,” where food for the royal family was prepared. At Xunantunich, a set of small platforms (A-23, -24, and -25) attached to the probable royal palace compound is interpreted as a service area for food preparation (LeCount 2001: 940).

The Palace as Theatrical Space

Important factors defining the nature of a theatrical space include its access and visibility among participants. In terms of access, the wide causeway provided the main entrance to the Palace Group. Although there appear to have been small stairways on the northern and eastern sides of the complex, the ruler, royal family, and foreign dignitaries most likely used the Causeway to enter and exit from the Palace Group. The Causeway measured 22–37 m in width and may have served as a stage for large processions.

With regard to visibility, it is significant that the central room of Structure M7-22 is located along the axis of the Causeway and the main entrance of the Palace Group rather than on the central axis of the Palace Group (FIG. 2). This placement appears to have been deliberate. Because there are no traces of a closed gate at the entrance of the Palace Group, a person sitting on the bench of the central room of Structure M7-22 would have been visible not only to the people standing in the plaza but also to those occupying the northern part of the Causeway. Visibility of a seated person began to decline at a distance of 120 m from the structure because of the slope of the Causeway. The roof of this building and banners, if placed in front of the structure, were still visible farther down the Causeway. Although small circumferential walls, probably added in a late stage of occupation to the western and SE sides of Structure M7-22, may signal an intention to reduce the visibility of the occupants of this building, the area in front of the central room appears to have remained open.

The central room of Structure M7-32 was more shielded from public view because of its location off the axis of the Causeway and the designs of the building consisting of two rows of rooms (FIG. 2). Still, the bench of the central room was placed along the central access of the building, and if there was enough light in the room, the person would have been visible from a large part of Structure M7-26, an open-gallery-type structure on the other side of the Palace Group.

These patterns suggest that certain aspects of royal domestic life were not completely secluded from public eyes.

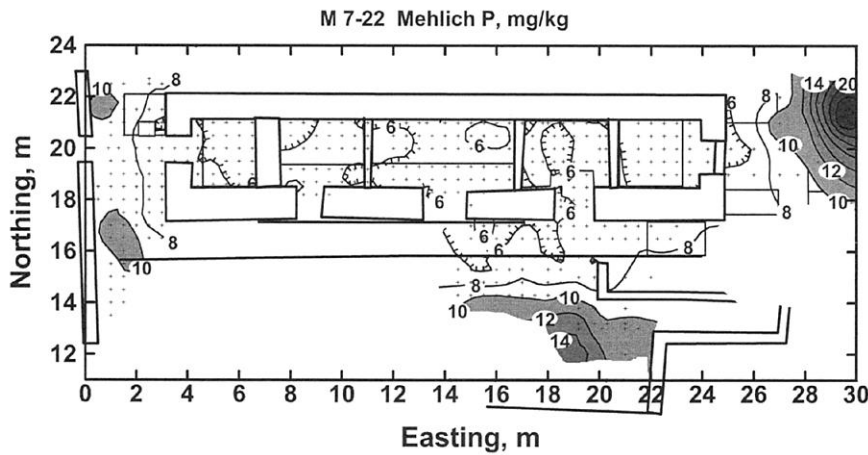


Figure 13. Phosphate concentrations in soils and floor materials of Structure M7-22.

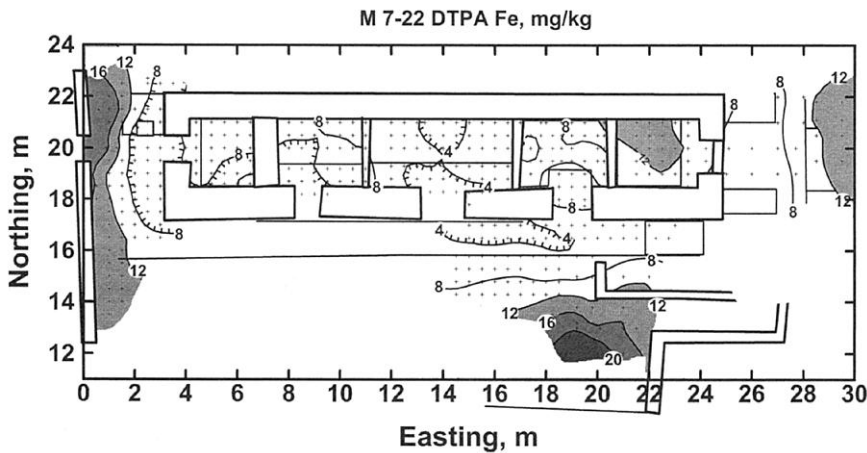


Figure 14. Iron concentrations in soils and floor materials of Structure M7-22.

Moreover, some political and diplomatic interactions that took place in the royal palace were not secretive ones, but retained a certain level of visibility. In this regard, many ceramic paintings recording meeting scenes provide relevant information (Reents-Budet 2001). Such paintings are typically drawn from the perspective of the audience occupying a courtyard in front of the palace building, and often indicate that curtains of the meeting rooms were rolled up, exposing the attendants to public view. The prominence of meeting scenes in ceramic paintings even suggests that certain gatherings were meant to be witnessed. It is probable that some meetings involved numerous spectators that did not appear in ceramic paintings. In addition, such gatherings often included several participants sitting or standing outside of rooms, and the general scene of meetings could have been clearly witnessed from a distance. Some meetings took place at night, which accords with an account on

Contact-period Yucatan by Bishop Landa (Tozzer 1941: 87). The interior of rooms illuminated by torches and surrounded by the darkness of night would have been clearly visible from outside.

The elaborate construction of Structure M7-32 suggests that its central room was the main throne room of the ruler. We reiterate the symbolic importance of this throne reflected in its post-abandonment mutilation. Similar examples of destroyed thrones include Throne 1 of Piedras Negras and the hieroglyphic bench of the Murcielago Palace of Dos Pilas (Demarest et al. 2003). The occupants of Structure M7-22 are more difficult to identify. Did the Aguateca ruler who mainly occupied the central room of Structure M7-32 also use the central bench of Structure M7-22, or was it used by another royal personage? It is common in Maya design to place the most imposing building on one side of a courtyard, flanking it with two abut-

ting wings; thus the courtyard group as a whole represents a basic tripartite arrangement. Such patterns can be seen in the elite and royal residential complexes of 9N-8 and 10L-2 at Copán (Andrews and Fash 1992: fig. 3; Webster 1989: fig. 5; see Hansen 1998: 77–81 for Preclassic architecture). In this basic plan, the northern side of the Palace Group of Aguateca where Structure M7-22 was located would have been the most important section. In addition, royal thrones appear to have been preferentially placed across from the entrance to the courtyard. A good example is Structure J-6 of Piedras Negras with its magnificent Throne 1 placed opposite to a wide stairway rising from the public plaza below. At Palenque, House E of the Palace contained a throne of K'inich Janaab' Pakal and subsequent rulers (Robertson 1985: 28, fig. 92). Although the Palace complex underwent a series of modifications, this throne building continued to occupy a position opposite from the entrance from a public plaza. If the Aguateca ruler followed these conventions, Structure M7-22 may have been an important setting for royal audience and ceremonies. It is probable that the ruler used both Structures M7-22 and M7-32 to control his visibility depending on the nature of his political and ceremonial actions. This interpretation is supported by the unique post-abandonment treatment of the two buildings.

Even more explicit theatrical performance may have taken place in the Palace Group of Aguateca. Excavators revealed two benches without evidence of permanent roofs over them, one attached to the western exterior wall of Structure M7-22 and the other built against the northern exterior wall of Structure M7-32. In front of these outdoor benches was Structure M7-33 (FIG. 2). Although this low platform has not been excavated, a careful examination of its surface did not detect any evidence of superstructures. Structure M7-33 may have been an open platform used for dancing, which could have been seen by individuals sitting on the outdoor benches of Structures M7-22 and M7-32, as well as those occupying the plaza. At Copán, a similar low platform, Structure 10L-25, is also interpreted as a dancing stage (Fash et al. 1992).

Conclusion

The archaeological study of the royal palace is not an easy task. While any single line of evidence would remain inconclusive, various sets of data in our study converge to shape the most likely interpretation. The overall site layout, architectural configurations, soil chemistry data, abandonment patterns, the storage of objects in a sealed room, and post-abandonment treatment, all point to the unique qualities of the Palace Group as the royal palace complex. We, however, should consider the possibility that there existed

other royal residences. In this regard, the Palace Group of Aguateca was originally used as the secondary residence when the primary palace existed at Dos Pilas. Structures M7-22 and M7-32 were probably the main living quarters of the ruler and the royal family within this palace complex. These buildings also served administrative functions with the central rooms used as settings for royal audience and other political meetings. Certain morphological resemblances between these structures and other elite residences seem to reflect functional similarities. In the case of Aguateca, a significant difference between the royal palace and other elite residences is found in the locations of food preparation.

The configuration of this royal palace complex suggests that the ruler maintained a certain level of visibility. In particular, meetings held in the central room of Structure M7-22 were visible to those who were not allowed into the Palace Group. In the royal palace complexes of larger centers, such as the Central Acropolis of Tikal, the Palace of Palenque, the Acropolis of Piedras Negras, and Caana of Caracol, the rulers were more shielded from public eyes. In the case of Tikal, Palenque, and Piedras Negras, this resulted partly from a series of palatial expansions over the centuries (Harrison 1970; Houston et al. 1999: 14; Robertson 1985). It is also probable that at larger centers, the seclusion of the ruler was of greater concern. Nonetheless, royal palaces of the Classic Maya were generally open in comparison with royal complexes in other parts of the world, such as the Forbidden City of China, the Labyrinth of Knossos, and the compounds of Chan Chan, Peru (Flannery 1998).

The prominence of meeting scenes in Maya ceramic paintings suggests that certain gatherings in royal palaces were meant to be witnessed. Classic Maya palaces were political theaters where ritual dances, diplomatic receptions, and other courtly interactions unfolded. This characteristic of royal compounds, along with common depictions of rulers on stone monuments, points to the importance of the ruler's body as the focus of theatrical display. Relevant to this issue is the *il*-glyph, deciphered by Houston and Stuart, which means "to see" and "to witness." The occurrence of this glyph in inscriptions indicates the political importance of the act of witnessing among the Classic Maya (Houston 1993: 139; Houston and Taube 2000: 286–287; Stuart 1987).

Toward the turn of the 9th century A.C., the threat of enemy attacks forced the Aguatecans to construct a series of defensive walls primarily for the defense of the royal palace. It appears that before the final attack, the royal family cleaned the rooms of Structures M7-22 and M7-32 and left the center. They probably hoped to come back to

Aguateca later because they stored some of their possessions in the sealed easternmost room of Structure M7-22. Thus, the royal family was not ousted in an internal revolt, but evacuated the palace under the threat of an external force. Most courtiers who occupied the area along the Causeway stayed in the center. The last ruler of Aguateca recorded in the monuments is Tan Te' K'inich (Houston 1993; Martin and Grube 2000: 64–67). The name of this ruler also appears on a carved human skull found in the rapidly abandoned elite residence of Structure M8-11 (Inomata and Stiver 1998). It was probably Tan Te' K'inich who left the center and to whom some objects stored in the easternmost room of Structure M7-22 belonged. Aguateca was finally attacked by enemies at the same time around A.C. 810 and the elite residential area to the south of the Palace Group was burned. The enemies opened the easternmost room of Structure M7-22 and broke some of the stored objects, scattering their fragments outside of the room. They also conducted termination rituals at Structures M7-22 and M7-32, in which they deposited a large amount of broken objects, destroyed a throne, and set the buildings on fire. The burning of wooden lintels and beams probably caused the structures to collapse. By desecrating the royal palace, the invaders may have intended to terminate the political and religious authority of the defeated dynasty. We did not find evidence of termination rituals in other excavated structures, including the elite residences along the Causeway and temples in the Main Plaza. These unique abandonment and post-abandonment processes of Structures M7-22 and M7-32 reflect the symbolic and political importance of the royal residences as conceived by both the residents of this center and the invading, victorious enemy.

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