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Death and Veneration at El Perú-Waka': Structure M14-15 as Ancestor Shrine

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I hadn't expected to find all these bodies in Structure M14-15. The fact of the matter is that, in the 2005 field season at El Perú-Waka', I wasn't supposed to be unearthing burials at all. The original research goals centered on the application of economic models from Highland Mexico to Classic Maya domestic midden assemblages. Especially given the generous support from the National Science Foundation, I planned on spending much of that field season sinking test pits into heaps of kitchen refuse. The most dramatic finds expected were low ANOVA F-statistics. Before test pitting began however, the project director, David Freidel, asked me to briefly look into Structure M14-15. The building had been partially and imperfectly excavated before, and Freidel wanted a good map, a brief construction history, and confirmation of a reported C-shaped bench. I agreed, thinking that a week or two on this small, heavily damaged building was a manageable task, not too heavy a price to pay for unrestricted access to the site's middens. My field excavators and I opened Structure M14-15 in February of 2005. The building then proceeded to devour my field season. Three months later, we had our good map, a detailed construction history, and multiple burials of Maya nobles, spanning the very period of the Classic collapse. Incidentally, there was no C-shaped bench, and the test pitting of those middens gets less and less likely to ever happen. All due to David Freidel asking me to look into this little pile of ruins.

Structure M14-15 at El Perú-Waka' is a small, ranged structure located along the north side of a residential compound

(Figures 1, 3). The surviving portions of the building consist of several walls, a nice bench, and five burials of secondary nobles from the period AD 780-850. As such, it is probably best understood as an ancestor shrine of the type discussed by Leventhal (1983:56-57, 73) and McAnany (1998:278-279; also see Becker 1999:2-3). Therefore, the building functioned as a piece of specialized ceremonial architecture, serving both to venerate spiritually and house physically the honored dead. Such structures do not appear to have been connected to the main civic rituals taking place at the site center, but were most likely restricted to the inhabitants of the residential compound in which they were located (Leventhal 1983:75).

These residential compounds, what Gordon Willey (1980:255) termed the "building block" of Maya settlement, housed large extended households, related by blood, oath, or obligation, if not all three (Willey 1980:254-256, 1981:390-391; Haviland 1988:122; Webster 1992:145; Sharer 1993:97). The larger and more elaborate the residential compound and ceremonial architecture, the higher the status of the occupying household. In this schema, specialized ceremonial or ritual architecture most likely serves as a metric of familial wealth, prosperity, and, potentially, elite status (Haviland 1981:100-102, 1998:122-123; Tourtellot 1998:107-109; Guderjan et al. 2003:33-35).

With treatment upon death often matching social position held in life, a connection can be made between status within the household and placement within funerary architecture (Brown 1981:29; Beck-



Figure 1. Excavated eastern portion of Structure M14-15 (photo by Keith Eppich).

er 1992:187-188; Weiss-Krejci 2004:374). Put simply, not everyone gets buried in the ancestral shrine. The burials therein are going to be the highest status individuals within a small group of related persons; the highest ranked being founders, lineage heads, or equivalent individuals (see Haviland 1981:94-99, 105-110). Structure M14-15 then, especially given its fairly restricted period of use, holds the highest ranked persons from this Late Classic noble household, potentially even a collection of the household's own lineage heads. The burials are associated with various architectural modifications and are not part of a single, simultaneous deposit, but instead follow one another in fairly short order. What Dr. Jennifer Piehl, my field excavators, and myself appear to have found in M14-15 could be a sequence of noble lineage heads, reflecting almost a narrative overview of an elite family at the terminus of Classic civilization. This is not unlike a carved stela bearing the genealogy of a ruling house. Inside Structure M14-15 we do not have an epigraphic record of ancestors and descendants. We probably have the ancestors and descendants themselves.

The following report builds from and can be consid-

ered part of the published archaeological field reports from the Grupo Tolok (Eppich 2006; Eppich and Matute in press). The field reports from 2006 and 2007 contain firsthand descriptions of the excavations and artifacts themselves. Interested parties are strongly urged to turn to these reports for greater detail and resolution. As indicated above, this report will confine itself to the interpretations and implications of Structure M14-15 as an elite ancestor shrine within the context of the end of Classic-period El Perú-Waka'. While epigraphy reveals the status and position of the ruling lines of Classic society, for most others, commoners and nobles alike, we must turn to the archaeological record.

The occupational sequence of El Perú-Waka'

Structure M14-15 sits in the Grupo Tolok at the ruined Maya city of El Perú-Waka'. Under the direction of David Freidel and Hector Escobedo, members of the Proyecto Arqueológico El Perú-Waka' have carried out a series of investigations in and around the site center since 2003 (Escobedo and Freidel 2004, 2005). The site itself lies just to the north of the junction of the Ríos San Pedro Mártir and San Juan in the western portion

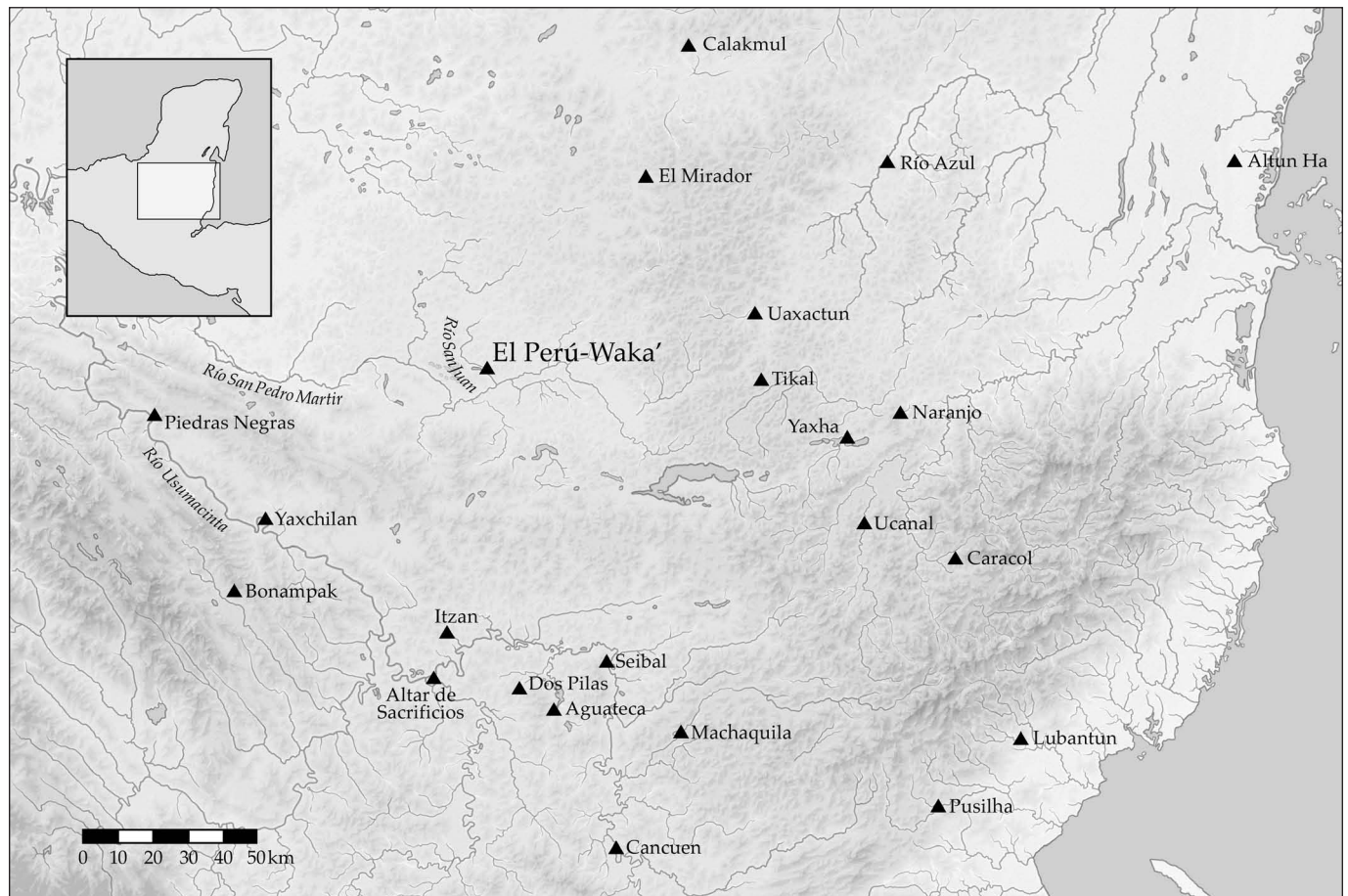


Figure 2. El Perú-Waka' and the Greater Petén (Precolumbia Mesoweb Maps).

of the Department of the Petén in the Republic of Guatemala (Figure 2). The center is prominently situated, placed atop a 200-meter escarpment, looking down on both rivers and their junction. From the summit of the tallest pyramid, one can hazily see the tops of the Sierra Lacandón, some 70 km to the southwest. Settlement appears to spread outward from the site center in, to borrow a turn of phrase from Norman Hammond (1985:43), a circumambient fashion. Abandoned house-mounds and upturned cut stones litter the triangular area between the two rivers. The site center itself consists of roughly 25-30 residential compounds of various sizes centered about a long rectangular concourse running diagonally, southeast to northwest (Tsesmeli 2004; Tsesmeli and Marken 2005; Tsesmeli et al. 2005).

While much of the excavated material waits to be addressed in a comprehensive manner, initial analyses have revealed a surprising sequence for the long occupation and shifting fortunes of this Classic center (Eppich 2004, 2006; Eppich et al. 2005; Pérez 2005). El Perú-Waka' first appears to be settled at some point in the Late Preclassic, reaching its peak of wealth and power during its Early Classic occupation, roughly the period

AD 250-500. The Maya constructed much of the site's major civic-ceremonial architecture, the rulers closely associating themselves with the "New Order" of the Early Classic (Martin and Grube 2000:29-31; Guenter 2005:368-369). In more ways than one, El Perú-Waka' stands as the western counterpart to Río Azul, linked through Tikal as well as through the symbols and personalities of Central Mexico. Coincident with events at these other sites, El Perú-Waka' suffers a major blow in the sixth century, resulting in a nearly century-long epigraphic hiatus, from 554-657 (Guenter 2005:371). The site seems to recover from the late seventh to the mid-eighth century, only to be seriously dashed for a second time at the end of the 700s. First there is a major military defeat by Tikal in 743 (Martin and Grube 2000:49), followed by a substantial desecration of ceremonial architecture around the year 800 (Farr 2004:30, 2005:22-23). Despite what appears to be a series of revitalization rituals, including the reentry of several tombs and remodeling of ceremonial architecture, centralized authority never appears to reestablish itself. The last, securely dated ruler receives no further mention after a 790 date and, despite several heavily

eroded Terminal Classic monuments, the site's epigraphy appears to end at the conclusion of the eighth century (Guenther 2005:378-379).¹ Indeed, David Freidel has characterized the site's ninth and tenth century occupation as its "post-royal period." As with other sites around the periphery of the Petén, the Terminal Classic occupation becomes the site's period of maximal population. Every household, every ranged structure, every residential compound appears covered by either a Terminal Classic habitation or a substantial Terminal Classic sheet midden. The site's Terminal Classic occupation must have been a crowded and messy affair. Even this fades as well, with patches of abandoned structures appearing into the tenth century. By the year 1000, the site seems to lie wholly abandoned, sherds of Tohil Plumbate turning up in surface scatters as the site's final temporal marker.

It is the transitional period between the Late and Terminal Classic that chiefly concerns the M14-15 excavations. Unlike other sites in and around the Petén, at El Perú-Waka' the potting traditions of the Late Classic flow for the most part seamlessly into those of the Terminal Classic. Ceramic types normally seen as clear markers of the ninth and tenth centuries, chiefly the distinctive fine pastewares, appear alongside the Late Classic high-quality polychrome traditions. Particularly, this period sees the gradual fading of polychrome vessels and the incorporation of fine-line incised design, a shift evident in the recovered vessels from the M14-15 burials (Smith 1955:25; Rands 1973a:56-57). Ceramically, researchers have designated this period as the Morai Complex, representing an overlap between Late and Terminal Classic potting traditions (Eppich et al. 2005:325-327, 335). While the assignment of calendric dates for ceramic complexes remains a difficult and problematic effort (Rands 1973a:43-44), the original date for the Morai Complex was tentatively assessed as 770-850.

Upon further reflection, however, these dates do require some degree of revision. Particularly given the excellent work of Foias and Bishop (2005:34-35) concerning the introduction of fine pastes into the Petén, I would suggest that the 770 date is possibly a decade or two too early. Chablekal Grey is extremely rare at El Perú-Waka', while the fine orange and fine grey pastes occur with some regularity. As our understanding and familiarity with the ceramic sequence grows, I can propose here a series of revised dates for the site's Morai Complex, most likely dating to a period between 790 and 850. While these dates must always be considered somewhat fluid, they remain supported by the epigraphic evidence from Burial 21. Vessel 4, as we shall shortly see, features a historically known figure whose rule dates to the very end of the eighth century, thus lending a nice confirmation to these dates. All five buri-

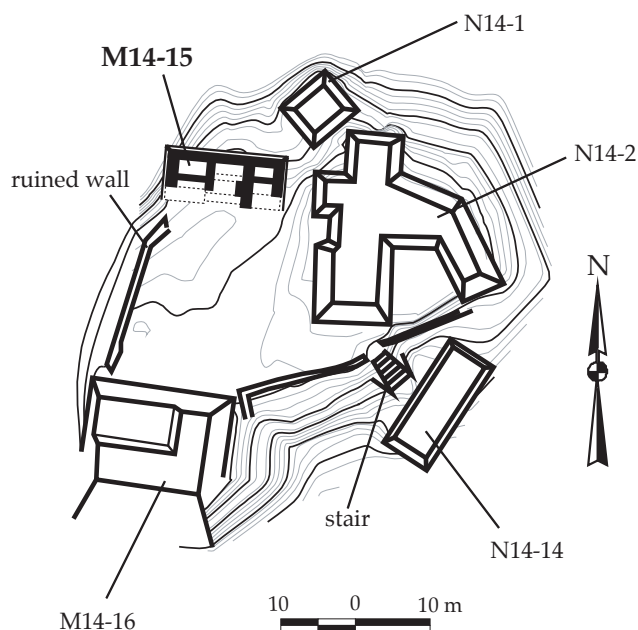


Figure 3. Map of the Grupo Tolok (drawing by Keith Eppich).

als from M14-15 date to this six-decade period. If these interments represent lineage heads, it is very likely that for 790 to 850 in Structure M14-15, in terms of lineage heads, we might very well have them all.

The Grupo Tolok and Structure M14-15

The Grupo Tolok itself consists of a collection of ruined structures atop an artificially shaped hillock located to the south and east of the site's central concourse (Figure 3). In terms of elevation, it is the highest residential group at the site, being some 10 meters higher than the surrounding terrain and 20 meters above the nearest big plaza. The group meets all the qualifications proposed by Guderjan et al. (2003:19-21) for identification of elite residences, in terms of its degree of architectural form and complexity, the structures' specific spatial relations, and the rich material assemblages unearthed in the excavations (see Haviland and Moholy-Nagy 1992:51-51). In particular, the group's viewshed is unrivaled for any other residence at the site. In antiquity, inhabitants of the Grupo Tolok would not only have looked across the landscape, but they would have looked down on the settlement around them, including the site's main funerary monuments, neighboring residence groups, and even down on the Northwest Palace group, the probable royal residence for much of the site's history. There is little doubt that the occupants of the Grupo Tolok were elites and potent elites

¹ Potentially post-dating this are the illegible Terminal Classic monuments, as well as a ruler, Aj Yax Chow Pat (see Guenther 2005 for a full discussion).

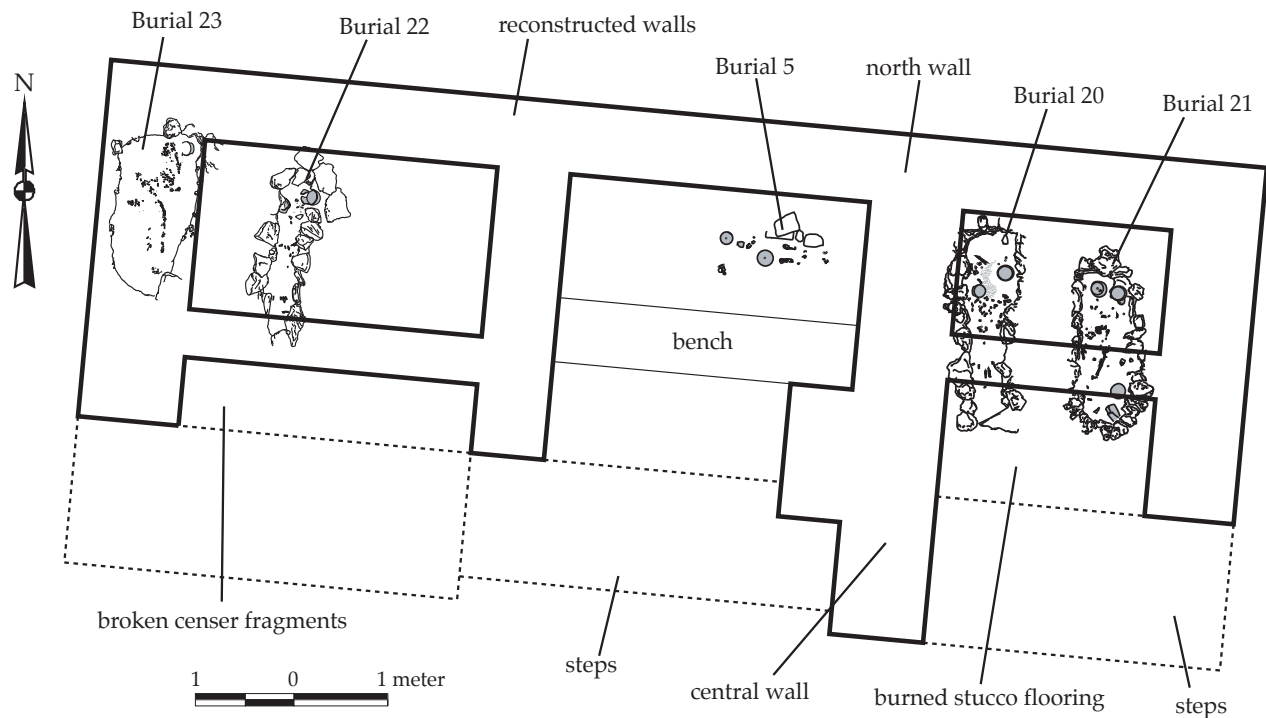


Figure 4. Structure M14-15, Operation 9, 2005 excavation (drawing by Keith Eppich).

at that.

The group itself consists of five major structures and an unknown number of smaller, wholly ruined buildings. These structures were designated according to their position on a map grid and, with readers hopefully forgiving the ensuing alphabet soup, the buildings are, clockwise, M14-15, N14-1, N14-2, N14-14, and M14-16. As determined by excavations into its domestic middens, N14-2 is the main residence, a largish J-shaped structure, curling tightly around its own private courtyard. On N14-2's front slope lay a fallen and heavily eroded monumental stone, probably a small, ruined stela. Excavations also revealed a wall feature circumscribing the group. The wall feature was two meters thick and a half-meter tall and was made up of well cut limestone masonry blocks firmly set into place (Eppich 2006:307-308). This feature closely resembles the masonry bases for perishable fortifications documented in the Petexbatun (Demarest et al. 1997:233-236). Furthermore, these fortifications do not appear to be ad hoc constructions, built across abandoned buildings, or later additions built to accommodate pre-existing structures, but instead appear to be part of a single, fully realized plan (see Webster 1980:837-839). After the brush was cleared from the southern slope, investigators recognized a ruined stair leading down from the group's main entrance to the back of Structure N14-14. This would mean that to enter the group, one would either have to travel through N14-14 or around it, thus passing beneath the group's walls. Such a cir-

cuitous entrance is also characteristic of Maya fortification (Demarest et al. 1997:234-235, 242). The evidence strongly suggests, then, that the Grupo Tolok existed as a fortified elite residence in the middle of a densely populated landscape.

Excavations in and around the group revealed a largely single-component construction and a fairly brief period of occupation. Beneath the plaza and structures lay a thick layer of bulk construction fill, leveling out an uneven mass of large, irregular bedrock outcroppings. From the ceramics recovered from this fill, the infilling and leveling took place sometime in the middle or towards the end of the Late Classic. From the middens to the north and east of N14-2, excavators recovered substantial quantities of ceramics with Late and Terminal Classic attributes. However, the group lacks the very large middens of pure Terminal Classic material known from elsewhere at the site (Arroyave and Matute 2005:99-101; Eppich et al. 2005:327-328). It is unlikely, therefore, that the group was inhabited throughout the site's overall Terminal Classic phase. The best estimates for the group's occupation, from construction to abandonment, would begin in the mid-to-late-eighth century and terminate in the mid-to-late-ninth century. In other words, the dates for the Grupo Tolok closely adhere to those proposed above for the Late-to-Terminal transitional period.

During the group's occupation, it seems that construction on M14-15 hardly ceased. The building was so heavily modified that its original configuration can

only be guessed at. As excavated, M14-15 appears as a long ranged structure with three rooms, the eastern and western ones being completely sealed (Figure 4). Excavators found no vault stones, indicating that the building probably had a thatch roof. Each of the rooms looked to have been constructed at different times with different construction techniques, and each possessed its own series of plastered steps. The westernmost walls were little more than thin and irregular lines of stones, little more than stone foundations for perishable walls. The large central wall, more than a meter thick, was built with two masonry support walls atop a foundation of large, flat stones. The Maya then packed the space between the support walls with a construction fill of earth and chunks of limestone. While some of the limestone pieces were heavily weathered, others included well-cut limestone blocks, smoothed on one surface. These are pieces taken from older, ruined buildings and simply dumped into the construction fill. The use of scavenged materials in elite architecture does not seem to speak well for the site's health at the end of the Late Classic.

The earliest portion is the long rear wall that stretches the length of the building. As such, it is the only part of the structure that was relatively unchanged for the duration of M14-15's use-life. With each interment, the room holding the burial was considerably modified, creating a series of architectural superpositions. These relationships can be read and the burials placed in chronological order, based on the interments' association with the architecture above it.

Burials 20 and 21

The two deepest and earliest interments are Burials 20 and 21. Whatever manner of structure M14-15 was previously, the placement of these two individuals greatly altered that. Much of the earlier structure was demolished, leaving only the northern rear wall. The old plaster floor was cut and the space beneath the floor largely hollowed out (Figure 5). The crypts were prepared and the individuals placed within. On top of the capstones, the ancient Maya placed a half-meter thick layer of snow-white marl. Scattered in the layer of marl were a few eroded bodysherds, some of which were of fine orange paste, placing the interment of the burials sometime after the beginning of the ninth century and the funerary vessels towards the beginning of the site's transitional Morai Complex, as discussed above. After the marl filled up the floor cut, the ancient Maya constructed the large central wall and a second plaster floor across the central room. The easternmost room was sealed off with a wall actually passing directly atop the cists (see Merwin and Valliant 1932:27). Excavators found a large patch of burned plaster floor in front of this wall, indicating some manner of burn-



Figure 5. Jennifer Piehl finishing excavation on Burial 21 (photo by Keith Eppich).

ing or fire-censing ritual taking place in front of where these two personages lay (see Stuart 1998:384-385).

As the layer of marl covers them both, the two burials were interred together and can be considered a single ritual deposit. Like the other burials, the skeletal remains themselves were too badly decomposed to determine gender or age. However, such deposits are often paired male-female interments (Welsh 1988:300-308, 334), leading researchers to suggest that elite couples were often interred either together or in associated architecture (Healy 1990:255; Healy et al. 1998:270; also see Haviland 1981:105-107, 109). The situation with the paired burials here might not be too dissimilar. This question will have to wait until a more intensive analysis of the remains takes place. Given the level of deterioration present, an answer might not be possible. Burial 21, reproduced here in Figure 6, shows the level of damage present. The project osteologist is set to undertake a more intensive osteological analysis in the near future. Currently, however, little can be said other than that both are adults of somewhat diminutive stature. The presence of teeth and the small bones of the hand and foot are evidence of a primary interment. A heavy scatter of cinnabar covered the upper body of the Burial 20 personage, and the Burial 21 individual possessed at least a few jade-inlaid teeth, confirming their status as Maya elite. The most prominent artifacts remain the seven whole ceramic vessels, two from Burial 20 (Figure 9a, b) and five from Burial 21 (Figure 8), four of which were polychromes.

While largely intact, the surfaces of the recovered vessels are highly distressed, some much more so than others. Vessels 1 and 2 of Burial 20, for instance, remain

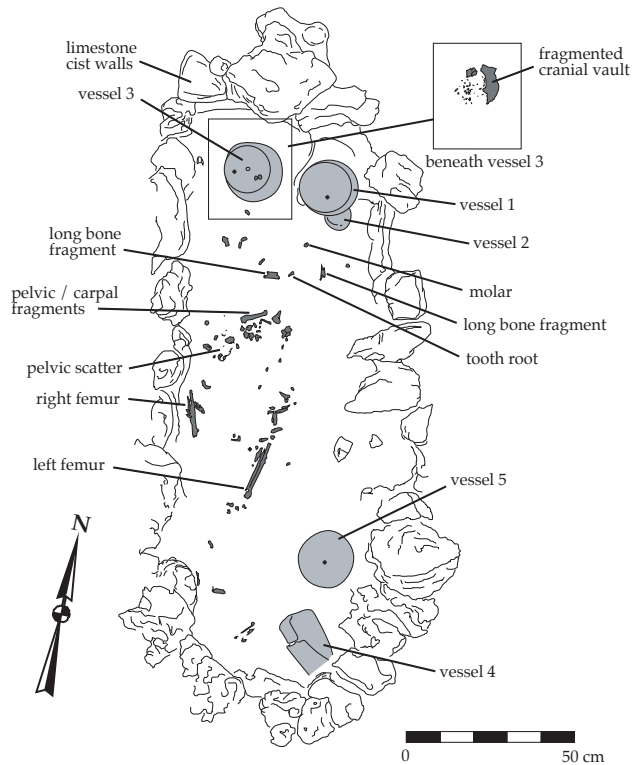


Figure 6. Burial 21 (drawing by Keith Eppich).

so damaged that great care had to be taken to prevent them from crumbling as excavators removed them. In particular, their surface treatment—a low-luster, watery slip, thin and poorly bonded to the underlying paste—seems an attribute rather common to the monochrome vessels of the Late to Terminal transition (see Sabloff 1975:181; Ball 1977:36; Rice 1987:65; Foias 1996:479-480). Whatever the reason, during this time potters seem largely unable to achieve the luster, the brightness, or the bondedness of earlier periods. The polychromes of Burial 21 are affected as well, though to a much lesser extent (Figures 7, 8). While most of the original design elements have been completely effaced, the bright colors and intricate designs would speak to quite high production values. What could account for such disparity? I would suggest that the vessels from Burial 20 and those from Burial 21 are probably coming from a period of great dynamism in the site's potting tradition. It is known that monochrome and polychrome vessels form, to some extent, parallel traditions, and polychrome vessels can disappear from a site with little impact on the frequency of monochrome vessels. This is apparently the situation during Seibal's Tepejilote-Bayal transition, for example (Sabloff 1976:13). At El Perú-Waka', if it is not too speculative to advance such an idea, there seems to be a general divergence of these traditions. While much of the site's potting tradition shifts away from slipped vessels and painted designs,

and accordingly the expertise to make them well, the elites continue to favor older, more conservative styles. This would explain why elites are not being interred with the highly complex and well crafted modeled-carved fine pastes, evident from across the site at the same period. But who knows? It is clearly an area in which much work still waits to be done.

Of the two interments with polychrome vessels and individuals with jade-inlaid teeth, Burial 21 is clearly the more important (Figure 7). The material remains of this interment are poorly preserved, having deteriorated greatly from the moist air trapped in the closed crypt. The skeleton is that of a fully articulated adult, lying in a supine position with one arm folded over the abdomen (Figure 6). All the bones seem present and a primary burial is strongly suggested. Vessel 3 was placed atop the cranium with a kill hole driven through the vessel's base. The cranium below was highly fragmented. A small highly polished flask, Vessel 2 (Figure 8b), is present, one of the "poison bottles" known from other sites (Reents-Budet et al. 1994:214-215). Based on glyphs found on such bottles, these vessels appear to have held tobacco (Stuart 2005:132). Instead of a "poison bottle," Vessel 2 is most likely this person's snuff-box.

Various teeth were recovered, one of which was drilled to hold a jade inlay and another still possessing its jade inlay. As Burial 21 represents the richest interment in the Grupo Tolok and, with Burial 20, the earliest, a series of inferences can be made. If one considers that the ceramics from these burials place the interment itself at or after the beginning of the ninth century, and that the construction of the Grupo Tolok itself occurred at or after the mid-to-late-eighth century, then one is left with the inescapable conclusion that the construction of the residence group itself must have taken place during the lifetime of the person in Burial 21. The Burial 21 individual, then, is associated with the earliest architecture in the group, and construction must have been completed either at, or slightly before, the time of death. At Tikal, William Haviland (1981:105-108, 1988:125) has used such associations to suggest that similar individuals represent lineage founders. An original, exceptionally capable individual was able to acquire sufficient wealth and prestige to build and fortify the residence group and impress progeny enough to become a revered ancestor. Burial 21 gets the precious vessels and the half-meter of marl and the ritual architecture because this individual was, almost certainly, the founder of the lineage that dwelt here.

Vessel 4, Burial 21

Vessel 4 from Burial 21 stands as one of the more dramatic finds from the Grupo Tolok (Figure 10). Obviously not originating from El Perú-Waka', it is an Ik'-style cyl-



Figure 7. Burial 21 vessels (photo by Keith Eppich).

inder vase with a slightly tapering waist. The Ik'-style describes a series of distinct vessels found throughout the western Petén and thought to be associated with the site of Motul de San José (Coe 1978:130-133; Reents-Budet 1994:172-179; Foias 2003:2). As characterized by Reents-Budet et al. (1994:172), Ik'-style vessels possess bright white backgrounds, black-painted rims with a scallop motif on the interior rim band, and glyphic elements outlined in a dark rose and often filled in with a pinkish wash. The style seems restricted to cylindric vases and dishes with outflaring walls. The exterior of such vessels deals exclusively with social or ritual events involving historically known individuals. This is critical to the interpretation of the scene as presented below, and it is important here to note that the subject content of the Ik'-style vessels is largely free from mythological scenes, gods, ancestor-spirits, or any of the thousand monsters that populate Classic cosmology. Based on our current understanding, the individuals in the Ik'-style scenes are real individuals, enacting events that took place in antiquity.

Vessel 4 from Burial 21 was broken but intact, and the painted scene, while quite distressed, can be reconstructed. Digital photography, aided by computer software, recreated the scene shown here in Figure 10. The scene itself consists of four figures arrayed around a single, central, royal personage. From the column at the far left, it can be ascertained that this scene is taking place in a palace setting (Reents-Budet 2001:199-203). Numerous glyphic texts identify the actors, although

Stanley Guenter, who closely examined the vessel, could only tease a meaning from a few of them. Remains of a dedicatory text circle the rim, its glyphs nearly wholly effaced. The central figure, wearing a tall, plumed headdress, is identified by the oversized glyphs in front of him as Tayel Chan K'inich, the late eighth-century ruler of the Ik' polity itself.² Two figures stand to his rear, although their actions are unclear. One appears to helping the king dress while the other holds one of the scene's war banners. In similar scenes from other vessels, such figures would be members of the royal court—nobles, courtiers, scribes, etc. (Houston and Stuart 2001:69-71; Reents-Budet 2001:213-215). The king is facing two additional figures, the nearer one kneeling before him. The kneeling figure is identified by the glyphs above him, and while his name cannot be deciphered, he is identified as holding the title of *baah ajaw*, the "head lord." The *baah ajaw* title appears rarely on texts and remains poorly understood, at least by this non-epigrapher. It seems to refer to the most senior member of a group of subordinate nobility (Houston and Stuart 2001:62; Miller and Martin 2004:26). Certainly, his kneeling position clearly marks him as socially inferior to Tayel Chan K'inich, following the Maya practice of manifestly expressing social rank through art, in an "iconography of hierarchy"

² Tayel Chan K'inich is a poorly understood ruler of the Ik'-site towards the very end of the eighth century. He has at least one other appearance on a polychrome vase, numbered K4996 in the Kerr Archive at www.famsi.org.

(Houston 1998:522; Marcus 2006:217).

The scene itself fits into a recognized canon depicting the subordination of nobles to a royal figure. These presentation scenes, or "tribute scenes," are often found on Maya ceramics and, much less frequently, on carved monumental stones (Schele and Miller 1986:153; Stuart 1998:411-413, 2005:113-133; Miller and Martin 2004:85, 242). Such scenes contain easily recognizable elements that occur with great frequency. The setting is usually one of a palace, involves an identified royal figure, and emphasizes the verticality of the social relations involved. These scenes leave no doubt as to who is subordinate to whom. Most important, however, is the act of presentation itself. Subordinates physically present their superiors with preciosities: feathers, plates filled with food, bundles of cloth, cacao, and sometimes captives (Reents-Budet 1994:95, 257-269). This material is occasionally identified as *ikaatz*, 'cargo,' or *pa-ta*, 'service / tribute,' with the clear implication that such exchanges were part of a formalized, possibly even standardized, exchange between secondary elites and their royal masters.

However, on Vessel 4 the kneeling lord is offering neither goods nor captives. In the place where one would normally expect a heap of tribute or gifts, there is a large shield-parasol-shaped object. Such objects have been identified as "war banners" or "battle standards" (Freidel et al. 1993:236-238). These banners are not uncommon in the art of Mesoamerica, and particularly good examples can be found in the Kerr archive.³ At the time of Contact, the Maya used them to organize and direct companies of men into battle (Tozzer 1941:125; Díaz 1963:23, 72; see also Hassig 1992:140). Indeed on the murals of Bonampak this appears to be precisely how these banners are being used (Freidel et al. 1993:303-304). Such banners, closely associated with warfare, also appear in state rituals, being seen as "highly charged objects... emblematic of the polity or political division" (Reese-Taylor and Koontz 2001:18). Given the highly individualized nature of Maya politics, I would further suggest that, for the Classic Maya, such banners would be closely associated with specific individuals or lineage groups, making them highly desired objects. So, is our lord on Vessel 4 presenting the king with a captured standard, or his own? Given the way he appears to hold it, I would suggest the latter possibility, with his position reminiscent of some act of fealty. In this scenario, the war banner being offered could be his own service, presented in tribute to a great king, a move made especially interesting as this great king is not from El Perú-Waka'.

Ik'-style vessels bear actual events featuring historical individuals, and there is a strong temptation to assign the identity of the Burial 21 personage to the kneeling figure in the scene. Both are nobles of high and equivalent rank, and both are present during the same period of time. Vessel 4 was probably gifted from Tayel Chan K'inich to our Burial 21 individual, in which case both knew and served the Ik' lord. These high-quality polychromes existed as invaluable pieces of political currency, being given by potent individuals to their subordinates (LeCount 1999:240-241, 2001:943-946). They served as textbook examples of inalienable objects, items so loaded with prestige and status as to be unusable by any other individual (Weiner 1992:36-40; Earle 2002:12, 42). Indeed, such items were so closely associated with specific persons, once that individual passes on, there remains little that can be done with the vessel other than to bury it with its owner. Regardless of whether the

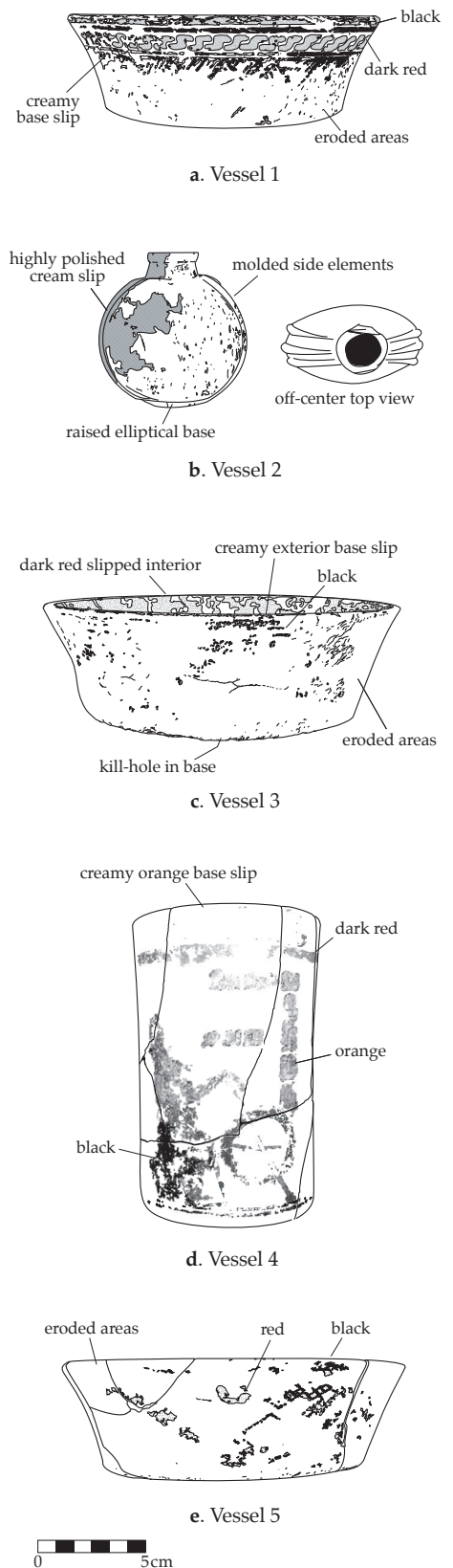


Figure 8. Ceramic vessels of Burial 21 (drawings by Keith Eppich).

³ At www.famsi.org, see vessels K5416, K7716, and K3464 in the Kerr Archive.

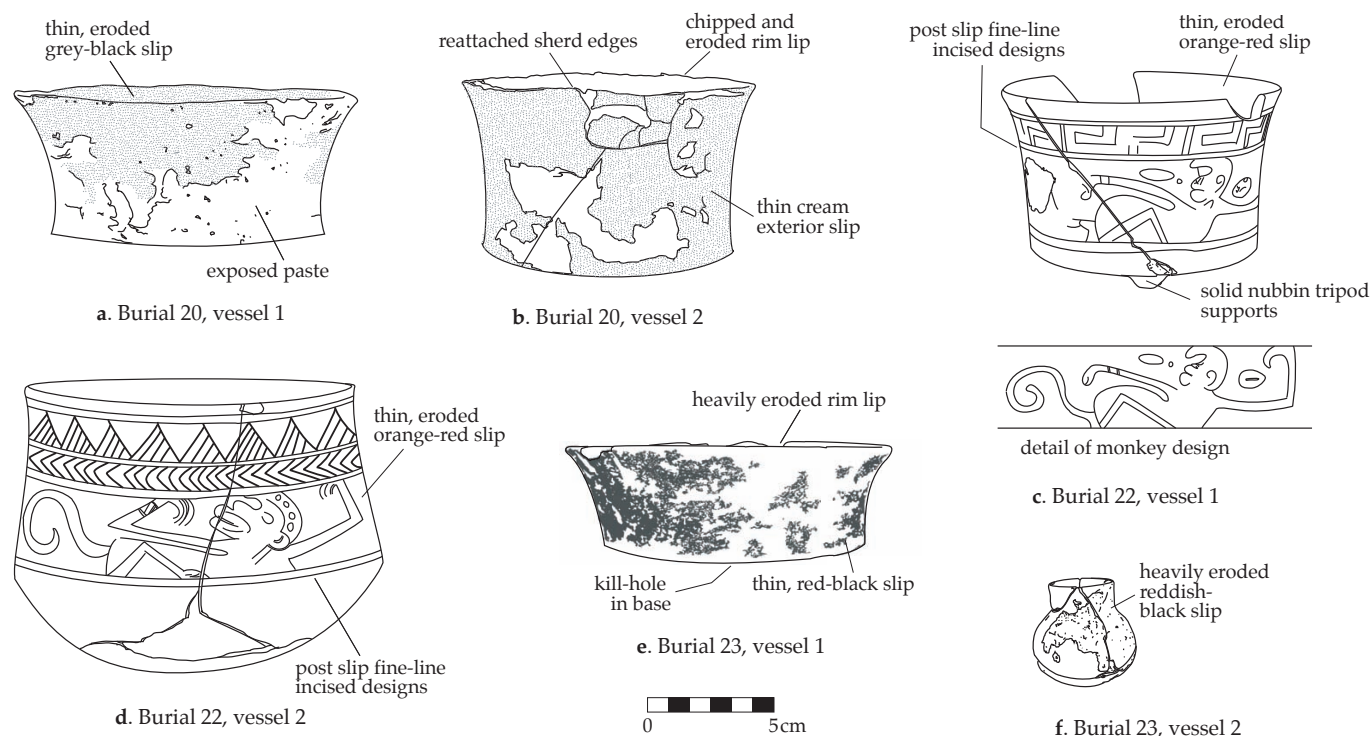


Figure 9. Ceramic vessels, M14-15 (drawings by Keith Eppich).

Burial 21 individual is depicted on Vessel 4, it is his vase and shows a direct connection to the ruler of Ik'. It remains my opinion, admittedly speculative, that there are too many coincidences lining up and that the Burial 21 individual is most likely the *baah ajaw* pictured on Vessel 4. This is impossible to prove, however, and it must always be kept in mind that the scene on a vessel and the vessel itself bear no necessary relationship to the context in which it is found. Sometimes they do, but not always.

From a careful reading of the archeological record then, the Burial 21 individual emerges as this somewhat exceptional figure. This personage is probably both the founder of the lineage that inhabited the Grupo Tolok, and the one who oversaw its construction and fortification. The individual was not a ruler, but was a noble who knew rulers, and had received Vessel 4 as a gift from one. If this individual is portrayed on Vessel 4, then this individual is of some military standing and pledges it in tribute. One can't speak to where this individual came from, but the interment seems to hold the aura of some manner of *arriviste*. And all of this is taking place as rulership at El Perú-Waka' unravels.

Burials 22 and 23

Burials 22 and 23 lay in the heavily damaged western portion of M14-15 (Figure 4). What remains of the structure is in the process of eroding off the northern

edge of the hillock. The walls in this western section have, for the most part, been reduced to a single line of stones in a mass of collapsed construction fill. Plaster floors are present only in irregular patches with uncertain relationships to the surviving architecture. The capstones of Burial 23 were actually lying exposed on the unexcavated ground surface. Both crypts were collapsed, the skeletal remains suffering heavy damage (Figure 11). The burials lie in close association with each other and beneath the surviving wall segments. These walls, while quite ruined, about those architectural elements constructed in the wake of Burials 20 and 21. Hence Burials 22 and 23 must postdate those earlier interments. Additionally, since the ceramics from the building's western portion still place this construction in the site's Late-to-Terminal Morai Complex, the two sets of interments can only be separated by a handful of decades. Burials 22 and 23 represent the passing of at most a generation or two away from those earlier interments.

The skeletal remains are complete, if heavily damaged. Both consist of adults lying in a supine position in a primary interment. They are, again, a set of paired adults placed in ceremonial architecture and may be, as discussed above, a buried elite couple. However, gender and exact age seem impossible to determine given the state of preservation. Hopefully, future osteological analysis will provide more information, but this does not seem likely.

The deposit of Burials 22 and 23 required either a substantial modification of, or addition to, the existing architecture. Either way, the burials were placed at the same time, making a single large ritual deposit. However, the scale of the effort, the quality of the architecture, and the quantity of the funerary goods are generally impoverished relative to the earlier interments. Burials 20 and 21 were nearly a meter below the plaster floor that covered them, while 22 and 23 lay directly beneath the floor and walls that buried them. The plaster floor of the western chamber was placed on top of the crypt capstones. Burial 23 even lacked a full stone-lined cist, being placed in what is, technically, only a partial cist. The walls built over the interments were, for the most part, thin masonry constructions. These are probably not freestanding stone walls but rather functioned as masonry foundations for walls of wood or wattle-and-daub. The low quality of the construction contributed significantly to its poor preservation. The Maya placed the burials and built the western chamber over them, a wall extending over the foot of Burial 22 and sealing the room. Like its eastern counterpart, the western chamber possesses no means of entrance. The plastered steps are broken into small, poorly preserved patches with no evidence of burning or scorching. However, excavators recovered large censer fragments of fine orange from the area in front of this wall, so some degree of censuring activity took place on these steps.

In terms of the ceramics associated with the western architecture, the recovered sherds possess more obvious traits of the Terminal Classic and possess these traits in greater abundance. This includes such attributes as thin, watery slips that easily erode, increased use of fine-line incising, and the presence of fine orange and grey pastewares. In the construction fill, excavators recovered only a handful of high-quality polychrome sherds, some even with glyphs painted below the rim.⁴ In the same deposits, we found numerous fragments of fine pastewares, making this area stand in marked contrast to the eastern construction. In Burials 20 and 21, those frequencies were reversed. In those interments, one sees the very beginnings of the transition from Late to Terminal Classic material. In Burials 22 and 23, that transition is already well underway, if not mostly completed.

Excavators recovered two whole vessels from each of these interments (Figure 9c-f). These vessels, as well, seem a poor imitation of the earlier funerary goods. All four vessels are slipped monochromes with thin, watery slips, poorly bonded to the underlying paste and greatly eroded. The Burial 23 ceramics are unremarkable and would not look out of place in a much humbler context (Figure 9e, f). The interment's Vessel 2 is another of these "poison-bottles," or "snuff-boxes," again probably for tobacco. Much more interesting are

the vessels from Burial 22, the "monkey pots" (Figure 9c, d). Both vessels possessed the same thin and watery, highly eroded, orange-red slip. By the time these vessels came into creation, it seems that the polychrome tradition overall had greatly diminished at El Perú-Waka' and that high-quality polychromes had largely vanished. The Burial 22 vessels hold fine-line incised designs of fanciful, dancing monkeys. Such designs are not uncommon in the Late to Terminal transition, probably arising directly from incised decorations on the fine grey vessels traded along the Usumacinta (Rands 1973b:176-177; Foias 1996:593; Foias and Bishop 2005:26, 33; see also Sabloff 1975:120, 124). Sabloff (1975:151) identified a very similar, if not identical ceramic from Seibal. Most compelling are the similarities between Vessel 2 (Figure 9d) and a monkey vase, numbered NA10835, from the Chamá site (Danien 1998, 2005:48; Grant 2006:29, 350). These vessels share surface treatments in slip color, slip bondedness, and decorative motifs, including the dancing monkeys and the use of incised chevrons along the rim band. Although the exact nature of such shared attributes is difficult to ascertain at present, it seems that the ceramic corpus of El Perú-Waka' has largely oriented itself away from earlier influences in the Central Petén. By the end of this transition period, these elites have connected themselves to whatever manner of exchange network is operating along the Terminal Classic Usumacinta and have, correspondingly, disconnected from their former contacts at Tikal or Ik' (see Rice and Forsyth 2004:39-41; Eppich et al. 2005:336-337). If these vessels represent the kind of patronage that the Ik' vase suggests, then in the scatter of decades between Burials 21 and 22 there has been a significant realignment of power politics in the Southern Maya Lowlands. The Classic Maya Collapse, whatever one means by that, has begun.

Perhaps appropriately, it is at this stage that our archaeological perspective begins to lose resolution. Construction appears to cease and the middens thin out at the end of the ninth century. The Grupo Tolok lies in one of the pockets of ruined and abandoned settlement that dot El Perú-Waka' at this time. The inhabitants of the center simply seem to drift away. There remain surface scatters of artifacts across the plaza floor, thoroughly mixed with the humus of ten centuries. On walking across this plaza, I recovered a single bodysherd of Tohil Plumbate lying directly on the ground surface. Plumbate is a very distinctive ceramic and a superb marker object for the Early Postclassic (Smith 1971:27; Ball 1977:47; Neff and Bishop 1988:506). Does this scat-

⁴ Such material is not necessarily related to the architectural elements surrounding Burials 22 and 23. The use of refuse for construction fill often places older ceramics into much later contexts, what Culbert (2003:50) has termed the "upwelling" effect.

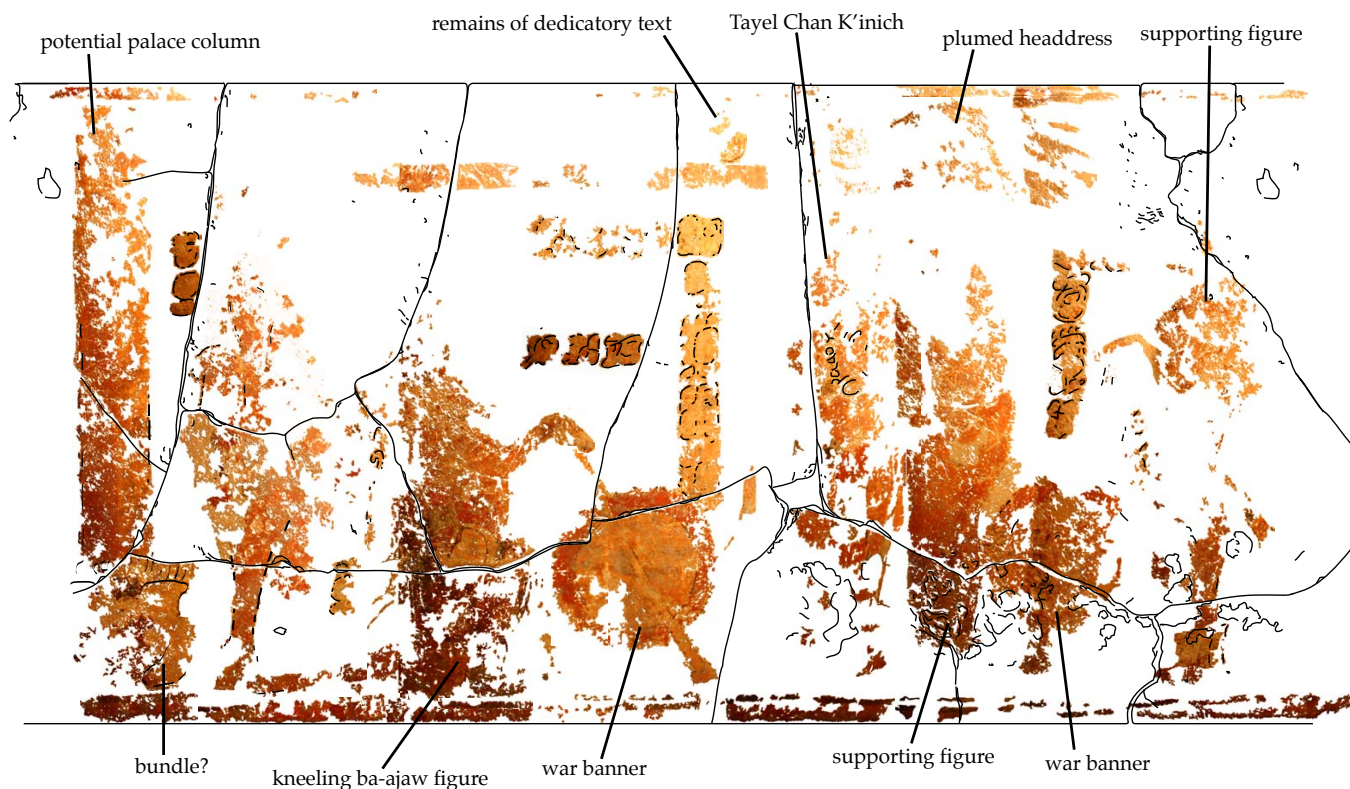


Figure 10. Rollout of Burial 21, Vessel 4 (composite by Keith Eppich).

ter represent a last bit of debris before abandonment? Is it trash dumped on a deserted compound by the remaining inhabitants of the site? Or is it simply a single aberrant sherd brought to the surface by a set of taphonomic processes? Whatever the case, there is no one living at the site center past the year 1000. After some twelve centuries of activity, El Perú-Waka' vanishes under the jungle canopy. Even four seasons of excavation represent only pinpricks into the archaeological record of this ancient ruined city.

Burial 5

Burial 5 is difficult to place within the context of M14-15. It lies beneath a floor cut behind the central bench of the structure. The Maya therefore placed it in association with the preexisting architecture. With all the elements already in place, Burial 5 must represent the final interment within the ancestral shrine. It is, however, impossible to understand at present. Burial 5 was part of the earlier excavations that involved neither Jennifer Piehl nor myself. The excavation itself took place under less than ideal conditions and, as such, it remains unclear as to what materials were associated. The excavation records do not match the recovered artifacts. Attempts to clean and edit the excavation records by well intentioned individuals only further muddled

the situation. It is hoped that in the future a comprehensive review of these materials can clarify Burial 5, but until then, there remains little that this interment can contribute to our current understanding.

Discussion and Conclusions

What was uncovered inside Structure M14-15 were five noble burials inside a piece of specialized funerary architecture. What we can learn from M14-15 operates on two similar levels, one involving the persons of the deceased and the other involving the ritual nature of the building itself. In terms of the funerary architecture, the Maya possess a long tradition of such structures, ranging from simple altars and shrines to the iconic Maya pyramids themselves. M14-15 is one of these, in particular a range structure with multiple rooms and individuals buried inside these rooms. Continued use of such a structure would necessitate significant architectural modification over time. M14-15 is not even the largest or most elaborate of such constructions. At the site of Holmul, in their 1932 report, Merwin and Valiant (1932:20-41) describe a mammoth version of this same type of architecture. Group II's Building B dated from the Early Classic and possessed entire suites of vaulted architecture and a staggering 22 individual interments. The reuse of tombs for multiple burials that

features so largely in the literature is yet another manifestation of this, as is the placement of multiple tombs inside the same piece of architecture (Hammond et al. 1975; Welsh 1988:36-38; Chase and Chase 1996, 1998; Healy et al. 1998; Weiss-Krejci 2004:393-394). The important aspect here does not concern the manner of deposition, but rather the linkage between the interment of honored, high-ranking Maya and the buildings in which they are buried and with which they are thereafter associated. Such structures served as both mausoleum and temple, "sleeping places" for the ancestral spirits, capable of aiding their descendants in times of need and punishing them for their transgressions (Freidel et al. 1993:182, 188-191). On Copan's famous "Dazzler" vase, the founding king looks out from the door of the building that entombs him (Reents-Budet et al. 2003:178-179). Copan's king is watching over his lineage and watching the actions of his descendants.

Such ancestors are contacted through rituals conducted in and around their funerary architecture (Freidel et al. 1993:179-180; McAnany 1995:26-28, 49-55). Stuart (1998:396-399), in particular, has identified some of these ceremonies. Such activities center around a *muknal*, a compound of **MUK-**, 'to bury,' and **-NAL**, "place" (McAnany 1998:289). Usually glossed together as "tomb," I would tentatively suggest that it might apply to all manner of funerary buildings, even the type of ancestor shrines such as we see here. Certainly the functionality and connected rituals seems remarkably similar. Rituals involved a "censing" or "burning" at these *muknal* in efforts to renew the dwelling place of the ancestor (Stuart 1998:397-399, 418). Stuart's decipherment brings to mind the patches of burned stucco and ceramic censor fragments found along the front of M14-15. By calling upon their ancestors, the Maya establish a propriety claim on the landscape, making the construction of such buildings overtly political statements (McAnany 1998:271, 273). The reputation of the dead justified the authority and presence of their living progeny.

The living progeny of the Burial 21 individual interred the body within their ancestral shrine, the burial itself serving largely to consecrate the structure. In the veneration of the Burial 21 personage, the surviving household reaffirmed their own claim to the Grupo Tolok, as well as their political and social position within the matrix of Classic society. It also establishes a claim of some permanence; the planting of a ritual flag, to some extent, evidence that the lineage was established and had no immediate plans to move. Such a gesture seems especially poignant, given that the Burial 21 individual, in all likelihood, may have personally attained this hard-fought position.

It does not, however, seem to have been a position that could be held for long. The tide had turned



Figure 11. Collapsed Burial 22 crypt (photo by Keith Eppich).

against the inhabitants of El Perú-Waka'. In the succeeding generation or two, the household's fortunes decline sharply. The poverty of Burials 22 and 23 contrast strongly against that of their more successful grandfather. While the occupation of the Grupo Tolok continues for a while, the structures no longer house an ascendant noble lineage, but rather an increasingly impoverished elite in the center of a dying site.

What can the burials of M14-15 tell us about the structure of Classic Maya society and the place of these individuals within it? These personages clearly belonged to that segment of society collectively known as subroyal elite or secondary nobles. Such groups did not inhabit some interstitial class sandwiched between the royal families and commoners, so much as they largely dwelled at the apex of their own small social pyramids. The epigraphic record is replete with examples of secondary elites in acts of subordination, allegiance, or open acts of war with each other and their rulers (Pohl and Pohl 1994:148-151; Houston and Stuart 2001:62-64; Marcus 2006:217-220). Indeed, Houston

and Stuart (2001:74-75) have suggested that towards the end of the Late Classic, such secondary elites become more numerous and powerful, appearing with greater frequency, and in positions of greater importance in the epigraphic record. How do the nobles buried in M14-15 relate to this? The early ninth century at El Perú-Waka' was a time of apparently loose, if not altogether absent, royal authority. Was the Burial 21 individual seeking royal patronage from a potent neighbor? Was this a common response to the collapse of rulership? Being so different from the contemporary ceramics at El Perú-Waka', were the Burial 22 vessels also gifts from distant powers? There are a number of foreign vessels in similar contexts at the site (Eppich et al. 2005:Fig. 10). Are they also occurring during periods of weak rulership? Could secondary elites enter into relations with neighboring kings any time they wished? Perhaps.

At this point, we've reached the limits of M14-15 to answer such questions. But contrary to reasonable expectations, I will not conclude with a call for more research on the subject. Exploring the position of this family and others like it will take center stage in the ongoing research in and around the site of El Perú-Waka'. In this way, the discovery of these burials in M14-15 did more than occupy us for much of a field season; they have, in fact, charted an entirely new course of research. This research continues to roll forward, and additional reports will appear in the near future. There is no need to call for new research because this research is already underway.

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lieve, the best way to repay the debt of gratitude owed for being allowed to study the rich and fascinating cultural patrimony of the Guatemalan nation. I can only hope the preceding came close to these goals.

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