

## THE TERMINAL CLASSIC IN THE AREA OF THE YAXHA LAGOON, PETÉN

*Bernard Hermes  
Gustavo Martínez*

**Keywords:** Maya archaeology, Guatemala, Petén, Yaxha, Topoxte, Terminal Classic period

The time span comprised approximately between AD 850 and AD 950 has been denominated Terminal Classic in the Central Petén area. The archaeological evidence suggests that this period witnessed several upheavals which affected most of the cities that flourished during the Late Classic period. However, in the area of the Yaxha Lagoon, evidence provided by archaeological works conducted there suggests that the situation had a different development than that of some other centers investigated so far. The information gathered through the analysis of archaeological materials suggests that during the Terminal Classic period, the site was inhabited by a hierarchical society, led by an elite group that tried to maintain the sociopolitical system of the Late Classic rulers.

Yaxha lies in the northwestern region of Petén. Located on the northern bank of the lagoon with the same name, it extends along a large scarp that runs parallel to the lagoon bank along a distance of 3 km. It includes a number of buildings, plazas and causeways built after the ground was arranged through leveling and terracing, in a descending east-to-west order.

The occupation of the site began in the Middle Preclassic period, and just like all the other sites from Central Peten, it witnessed a strong development during the Late Preclassic, which extended throughout the first half of the Early Classic period. The poor evidence of activity during the second half of this period and the first half of the Late Classic period, allows for presuming that the site underwent a *hiatus*, which came to an end around the beginning of the second half of the Late Classic, when the city achieved its largest proportions. During the Terminal Classic period, the city presented evidence of remodeling works on buildings of the preceding period, the construction of vaulted buildings and the relocation of sculpted monuments.

### THE MALER GROUP

Investigations conducted at the Maler Group have provided evidence of small platforms associated to the façades of the final occupation of the buildings, cubes or small square masses affixed to the façades, together with stone alignments in the chambers of some of the buildings, which were probably parts of benches. In Building 1, the most significant trait that allowed to be related to the Terminal Classic period was the use of limestone blocks of the “brick” type in the walls of the upper chamber,

seated on a platform and with a style reminiscent of a *talud-tablero*. In Building 2, the west façade was affixed a cube or square-shaped masonry piece that modified the form of the façade during the Terminal Classic period. Building 3 repeated the pattern of Building 2, in other words, a cube was used in the north façade, which represented a change of design occurred around the Terminal Classic period.

Building 4 had a chamber (now destroyed) that might have been built during the Terminal Classic period, and a bench at the north edge of the west chamber. Building 5 was built during the Terminal Classic period, possibly in association with the remodeling works conducted on the eastern façade of Building 4 and on the north façade of Building 6. The latter shows that the remodeling works accomplished during the Terminal Classic period focused on the support platform, which was re-arranged according to the architectural scheme of the building. Apparently, the final version of the building presented three stepped bodies and was flat in its upper portion. Three benches or small platforms were built in association with the south façade, delineating a new architectural design for this construction.

In turn, and close to the main stairway of this building there is some sort of altar that may represent a trait defining the Terminal Classic architecture of the site, similar to that of the West Group. Preliminary, these traits could be associated with a modification in the function of the building, when the architectural traits of both the Preclassic and the Classic periods were covered up. The south stairway was covered up as well, together with the refill of the chamber located in the upper part, where the masks of the north façade were also covered. Besides, the room that abutted the west façade of the building was built.

Southeast of the plaza there was a platform that featured, towards the south, a number of low walls and floors built during the last occupation of the site. Also a chamber abutting the west façade was built, and possibly, too, a stairway in the middle area of the platform, to communicate it with the Plaza of the Maler Group. On top of the support platform of Building 6 and during the Terminal Classic period, Building 7 was erected just off the east half of the south façade of Building 6. This was a building with a rectangular ground plan and stairways to the south.

## **THE BLOM CAUSEWAY**

This causeway maintained characteristics similar to those of the preceding period (335 m long x 33.50 m wide in the north and central sectors, 36.50 m wide in the south sector, and a 5° orientation), with outer walls built in two bodies, the lower cornice usually featuring the tiers located in the middle portion of the west side with dimensions of 5.65 m long and a ledge of 2.30 m (while the steps show risers measuring 0.30 m and treads measuring 0.30 m). The modifications it suffered consisted in raising the upper level with the laying of a stucco floor throughout, and the building of a bench 2.75 m wide and 0.90 m tall in the south half of the outer west wall. The causeway floor still features a slope eastwards, to carry rain water to the seasonal waterholes located in this sector, thanks to the canals built along the parapet, whose height was cut down in 0.20 m, because of the stucco floor that was built there.

## THE NORTH ACROPOLIS

This architectural pattern is characterized for having a triadic pattern, typical of the Late Preclassic, in Buildings 142, 144, and 137. The use of this area was discontinued by the end of this period, and it remained that way until the beginning of the Terminal Classic period, when several buildings were erected on the southern border of the plaza and in the northeastern corner area. The possibility exists that the lower half of the foundation corresponding to the final stage of Buildings 137, 142 and 144 was dismantled to use the materials in the new constructions.

In Building 142, a low platform was built in the front of the superstructure, canceling access to it. A stairway was built in the middle section of the south façade of the foundations of the Acropolis. At the end of the stairway was Building 135, featuring two construction stages that dated to the Terminal Classic period. The stairway was built southwards, that is, towards the access to the Acropolis and not towards the plaza, like the other buildings composing the North Acropolis were. Limestone façade blocks were used in association with the main front walls.

Building 134 was located immediately west of Building 135, a probable twin of Building 136, which was located in turn at the east of Building 135. Building 134 was a palace with eight vaulted chambers built on a one-mass foundation with a stairway that faced north. The four sides of the foundation were decorated with an inset rectangular area in its middle portion that extended along the entire façade. Between Buildings 134 and 144 there is a raised platform that supports Buildings 145, 146 and 147. The north and south façade of the platform are decorated with an inset zone in its middle section, just like the final versions of Building 134.

The eastern façade maintains the decorative trait in the sector adjacent to the northeast and southeast corners; the walls are joined by sloping walls (*taludes*) that project themselves towards east, and by the ledge of the stairway. The stairway is of the lineal type, with nine steps, and communicates the plaza level with the upper floor of the foundation, which leads to the doorway that provides access to the chamber of Building 146. This doorway was placed at the center, in relation to the foundation, but due to the construction of Building 145, which shares the east façade with Building 146, it was shifted north in relation to the inner space of the vaulted chamber. At the north and south of the supporting foundation of Buildings 145, 146 and 147, two middens dating to the Terminal Preclassic period were recovered within an ash matrix.

## BALLGAME 2 (buildings 132 and 133)

Located south of the North Acropolis, only one test pit excavation was accomplished in this Ballgame during the general sampling program of the site, having recovered materials dated to the Terminal Classic period. Perhaps the construction of this Ballgame was directly associated with the construction of the buildings located on the south border of the North Acropolis plaza.

## **NORTHEAST ACROPOLIS**

During the general sampling works at the site conducted by the Triangle Project, IDAEH, one of the pits at the south of Building 59 showed traces of a stone pavement (possibly a floor base) dating to the Terminal Classic period. This floor was possibly associated with the low buildings located at the northeast and southeast corners of the upper part of the foundation and with minor remodeling works accomplished on Late Classic buildings.

## **WEST GROUP**

The few research works conducted in this group located northwest of Plaza G (Hellmuth 1993), have led to the recovery of evidence that clearly indicates construction activity dating to the Terminal Classic period.

## **BUILDING 128**

This pyramid building is located southwest of the Northeast Acropolis, between Plazas D and E. Although it has not yet been examined, its upper part shows the remains of a chamber built with the same type of small stone used in Building 1.

## **SOUTH ACROPOLIS**

It is associated with the elite residential area located at the site core. It consists of six patios limited at the sides by buildings with vaulted chambers. The greatest complexity was achieved during the Late Classic period, although some constructions show traits that presumably may be assigned to the Terminal Classic period. One of the traits detected was Building 383, which closed the end of the access stairway from Road 6 to the interior of the complex. This building pattern closing an entrance, similar to that of Building 135 from the North Acropolis, may be related to the construction patterns corresponding to the Terminal Classic period.

## **LAKE CAUSEWAY AND ROAD 5**

The Causeway and Road 5 were examined by the IDAEH by the mid 1990s (Hermes *et al.* 1999). During the Late Classic period, the useful space along the entire causeway was limited by, and demarcated with, the construction of two parapets at its east and west sides. In the southern border of the causeway a leveled platform was habilitated and covered with a stucco floor. At the crossroad of the causeway and Road 5, there was a construction that limited the circulation space to a narrow corridor. This restricted space suggests that this place served as an access control spot between the south and central areas of the site. Road 5 achieved its present shape, while the difference in height with the elevated platform that occupied the northern extreme, was solved with a sloping floor in the form of a ramp that run all along its north and south extremes. During the Terminal Classic, the platform

adjacent to the lagoon was modified, and the construction located at the intersection of the causeway and Road 5, disappeared.

The irregularities of the ground in the south end of the causeway were covered with limestone refills retained by small stepped walls or landings, which later served as the foundation of the stone paving that covered the entire footway and whose laterals adopted the form of a ramp. Possibly, it was then that Monument A was put in place; this piece seems to be the representation of a zoomorphic head on top of the platform. The construction that limited the circulation in the junction of the two footpaths where work was conducted was covered by a very hard refill of well laid stones joined together by a mud mortar, which leveled its height with that of Road 5, providing an unrestricted pass along the broad causeway.

### **TWIN PYRAMID COMPLEX (PLAZA A)**

This complex is located north of the East Acropolis, and rests on an artificially elevated platform. Although it is comparable to other complexes of this type from Tikal, there is a difference, because the building located north –which was supposed to be a nine-door palace-, consists instead of a platform that apparently supported a construction built with perishable materials. The east pyramid has no front plain stela or altar, and the building located south (the stela's chamber) does not show any carved monument inside; only one plain altar and the west pyramid have a carved monument at the front, Stela 13. The general sampling program of the site conducted by the IDAEH has recovered ceramics dating to the Terminal Classic period in the upper lots of the plaza refill. It is clear that the building located north includes two aggregates in the rear wall similar to those mentioned for Buildings 2 and 3 of the Maler Group.

### **EAST ACROPOLIS**

The excavations conducted by the IDAEH on the East Acropolis (Hermes *et al.* 1997), have allowed us to identify remodeling works carried out in the lower portion of the stairway and the first platform of the pyramid of Building 216-1. Associated with such works, Stela 41 was relocated in front of the stairway. The removal of this monument from its original place is inferred by the absence of a tenon, and because in order to place the stones that support it, the patio floors were broken.

Recent works accomplished by the IDAEH in Building 218 have revealed remodeling works inside the chambers and an ash matrix on the foundation of the west side of the building. Building 216-1 was built during the second half of the Late Classic period; this building consists of a pyramid foundation that includes nine stepped masses with rounded corners, to support a temple with three accesses to the west, two vaulted chambers and crest; its current maximum height is of approximately 30 m.

For a time span possibly extending between the end of the second half of the Late Classic period and the beginning of the Terminal Classic period, Building 216-1 was remodeled in the first body of its foundations. At both sides of the stairway, it was

further added a terrace type construction to widen the building towards west. This aggregate presents two inset corners, with dimensions of 11.10 m long x 5.30 m of maximum width, and a height of 3 m. In the stairway area, the remodeling works reached up to the fourth body. In association with these works, Stela 41 was placed at the plaza, at the middle section of the stairway. Only the lower part of the monument -1.05 m high-, possibly removed from its original location, is still in place, as no tenon is visible and it is supported by stones that were put in place by breaking the plaza floors.

## **PLAZA B**

Plaza B is located at the immediate west of the East Acropolis and was used to climb to the upper part of the Acropolis. Possibly it was opened to the south, the side where the outlet of the Galindo Causeway was located, and through which Plazas B and C communicated. It is limited to the east by the East Acropolis, to the west by Building 90, and to the north by Buildings 91 to 94. Building 90 was excavated during the 1970s (Hellmuth 1993:23). These works confirmed that the upper portion included six pillars that formed seven doorways; the pillars were built with small stones like those of the chambers of Buildings 1 and 128; there were no vault stones in the interior, but ceramics dating to the Terminal Classic period were found. This building is comparable to Buildings 6C-24 and 5D-31/42 from Tikal. The buildings at the northern edge (91 to 94) are truncated pyramids very similar to one another. Building 94 was partially excavated by Hellmuth, who found no stairway vestiges on the north and south walls, though clearly, Buildings 92 and 93 include a masonry construction on their upper part.

## **RELOCATION OF MONUMENTS**

One additional aspect regarding the events occurred during the Terminal Classic period at Yaxha that must be looked into, is the relocation of the sculpted monuments. Even though new monuments were not erected, many of them were relocated there where there is evidence of a Terminal Classic occupation, like for example at the Maler Group, the North Acropolis, the East Acropolis and Plaza B.

## **EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE**

According to Grube (2000), around the end of the Late Classic period Yaxha achieved, for some time, such a degree of independence that they could even build monuments of their own at the core of the city. Stela 13 shows two dates (September 21, AD 793, and August 31 AD 797) and depicts the king giving away offerings; the text mentions the name of the king *K'inich lakantunil* (Great sun big stone). Stela 31 recalls a capture occurred on August 10, AD 796. Stela 35 of Naranjo states that on September 3, AD 799, the Yaxha king was defeated by the king of Naranjo, *Itzamnaj K'awil*; this event was also extensively chronicled in Stela 12 of that site, mentioning that the conflict was initiated on February 18, AD 799, and then it is ended saying that on May 22, AD 800, the king of Yaxha was to pay tribute to the king of Naranjo.

This shows that Yaxha's short span of independence rendered in Stelas 13 and 31 came to an end in the early IX century, when Yaxha was forced to reintegrate to the territory of Naranjo.

### **ISLANDS (TOPOXTE, CANTE AND PAXTE)**

In the islands that at that time were a part of the Yaxha polity, the distribution of Tolobojo materials was quite peculiar, given the fact that the only evidence in Topoxte was obtained from two pits excavated east of Buildings E and H. There, and within an ash matrix, lots each with materials from this period were recovered. Besides this evidence, the other archaeological works accomplished have provided few isolated sherds with no relation whatsoever to any particular cultural manifestation. Meanwhile, the occupation in the other islands poses no doubts, and the presence of material remains proved relatively abundant. This argues in favor of the possibility that the Tolobojo people had not used the island of Topoxte as a center for developing a number of different activities but rather, that it remained abandoned, in spite of the benefit they could have obtained by using the existing structures of the Late Classic period (which included monumental architecture).

This possibility is based only on negative evidence that makes substantiation difficult, so that –from the viewpoint of the islands-, the proposed abandonment is not fully clear and the grounds are weak. But from the viewpoint of Yaxha, the center of power to which the inhabitants of the islands were subjected to, perhaps one could find that some event occurred around the end of the Late Classic period, made the leader that ruled during the Tolobojo times to refrain from using Topoxte. Only Cante's *Chultun 2* shows activity unequivocally dated to this time span.

### **THE LAGOON BANKS**

During the Terminal Classic there was a drastic shift in the situation observed during the Late Classic period, as over 90 % of the occupied sites were abandoned. There was total abandonment in the north and south banks, while two minor sites at west had evidence of occupation. This information is consistent with the data reported by Don and Prudence Rice in all the lagoons basins they investigated.

### **ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL**

Included in the ceramic industry, and together with the vessels, there are hollow mould-made figurines, as well as different types of artifacts. Practically the totality of the slipped ceramics corresponds to Peten Shiny, with little examples of the ceramic types Vinaceous Tawny, Fine Orange and Fine Gray (Chunhuitz, Altar and Tres Naciones Groups). As to technology, and like in the previous period, the red color was still a favorite for the final finishing of the monochrome vessels, even though the use of brown and black slips increased significantly. The abundant variety of pastes used in the manufacture of these pieces is to be outlined.

The predominant forms were the bowls with a large diameter and a variety of inverted rims. New forms were integrated to the inventory. Among them, the following should be mentioned:

- Tripod dishes with concave bases, convergent straight walls, direct rim and sharp or rounded lip
- “Belly” necked jars with everted spouts
- Tetrapod plates with notched basal flange and straight divergent walls
- Pyriform dishes with pedestal support, straight convergent walls and decoration imitating that of the Fine Orange class.
- Unslipped incense burners with hollow and solid hafts

A radical change occurred with polychrome materials, as the preference for the use of a base orange slip that traced back to the Protoclassic period, finally switched to a cream hued slip. The most common forms were the tetrapod plates with no supports. Materials with no slip were the ones that abounded the most in the tested sample, known as Uaxactun Unslipped, and like in all the preceding complexes, the jars constituted the primary form, with the typical lip and impressed decoration.

Lithic industry primarily shows, for the carved type, two fundamental raw materials (flint and gray obsidian). In the sample of the polished class, raw materials were in its majority quartz, chalcedony quartz, limestone, and quartzified limestone (all of them of local origin).

## **GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS**

If we base ourselves on the information provided in Naranjo’s Stela 35, which narrates that by the mid AD 800 the king of Yaxha started to pay tributes to the king of Naranjo, we would be entitled to grant a 25 to 50 year-long span to place the beginning of the construction activities that characterized Yaxha’s Terminal Classic period.

Ever since, the surrounding areas of the lagoon evidenced a decrease in population, while the major urban center deployed a remarkable construction effort characterized by the construction of palaces, as well as major remodeling works accomplished on other types of monumental buildings from the preceding period. The best known examples of activity are those of the Maler Group, the West Group, Building 128, and the North and East Acropolis. The Lake Causeway underwent modifications at its south edge, while the construction present at the crossroad of the causeway and Road 5, disappeared.

Probably by then, Stela 7 was removed from its original position and placed in front of the stairway built on the south side of the North Acropolis’ foundation; the relocation of this monument may have had something to do with activities related to the Ballgame field (Buildings 132 and 133). The same happens with Stelas 6, 9 and 10, which were re-erected just off Building 4, with Stela 13 in the Complex of the Twin Pyramids (Plaza A), and with Stela 41, in front of Building 216.

The excavations accomplished in the East Acropolis have led to the discovery of large remodeling works accomplished in the lower portion of the stairway and in the lower platform, at the east side of the foundations of Building 216-1a. The islands still remain a part of Yaxha. In Topoxte, the only evidence of Tolobojo materials came from two pits placed at the northeast of the main plaza, east of Buildings E and H.

In short, in the areas surrounding the Yaxha lagoon –as opposed to other sites located east, west and north- there was no populational continuity between the Terminal Classic and the Postclassic periods. At the same time, during the Terminal Classic period in the area of Central Peten there is a confusing situation that affects most of the cities. However, in the Yaxha Lagoon area this situation appears to be different. At the city, major remodeling works were detected in Late Classic constructions. Information supplied by archaeological materials shows a hierarchically organized society, led by an elite group that tried to maintain close ideological links with Late Classic rulers. Apparently, the elite tried to organize the population within the site, in the framework of a revitalization that attempted to maintain the Late Classic ruling system. In other words, an attempt was made to concentrate the dispersed population in the area, after the collapse of other major centers.

The archaeological situation in the area presents evidence of the abandonment of smaller sites during the Terminal Classic period:

- In the area comprised between Yaxha and Nakum, evidence to this day is very poor, suggesting that the area did not witness the same revitalization reaction shown in the vicinities of Yaxha.
- In the area comprised between Yaxha and Naranjo, archaeological evidence has shown a remarkable decrease in population.
- The loss of political order in the area and constant warfare between Naranjo and Yaxha, have rendered this archaeological behavior of occupational decrease throughout this intersite area.
- In the area comprised between Tikal, in the Nakum and Yaxha direction, several peripheral sites show a strong influence from the major site, something that scholars have defined as a political expansion of Tikal towards that area.
- Obviously, the need to strengthen the relationships between the center and the secondary sites under its rule, as a consequence of the wars fought by this site against Calakmul and Naranjo.
- Finally, the evidence of the dating of several sites for Tepeu 3, suggests that one possible destination for a portion of Tikal's population, following the collapse, might have been Yaxha.

## REFERENCES

Grube, Nikolai

- 2000 Monumentos esculpidos e inscripciones jeroglíficas en el Triángulo Yaxha-Nakum-Naranjo, región noreste de Petén, Guatemala. In *El sitio Maya de Topoxte: Investigaciones en una isla del lago Yaxha, Peten, Guatemala* (57), pp. 249-268. Materialien zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Archäologie, KAVA-DAI, Bonn.

Hellmuth, Nicholas

- 1993 *A Report for IDAEH on Research Accomplished at the Maya Ruins of Yaxha, Peten, Guatemala*. Foundation for Latin American Anthropological Research.

Hermes, Bernard, Raúl Noriega and Zoila Calderón

- 1997 Investigación arqueológica y trabajos de conservación en el Edificio 216 de Yaxha. In *Beiträge zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Archäologie* (17), pp. 255-307. KAVA-DAI, Bonn.

Hermes, Bernard, and Raúl Noriega

- 1998 El período Postclásico en los alrededores de la laguna Yaxha. Una visión desde Topoxte. In *XI Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 1997* (J.P. Laporte and H. Escobedo, editors), pp. 755-778. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala.

Hermes, Bernard, Paulino Morales and Sebastián Möllers

- 1999 Investigación arqueológica en Yaxha, Petén: La Calzada del Lago y la Vía 5. In *XII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 1998* (J.P. Laporte, H. Escobedo and A.C. de Suasnávar, editors), pp. 115-148. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala.

Wurster, W.

- 2000 *El sitio Maya de Topoxte: Investigaciones en una isla del lago Yaxha, Petén, Guatemala*. Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz.