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THE PRECLASSIC AND MONUMENTAL PAST IN THE HOLMUL REGION: RESULTS OF THE 2003 AND 2004 FIELD SEASONS AT CIVAL, PETÉN

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In the past thirty years, abundant information was produced about the Preclassic Maya period. Research works conducted at Cuello, Cerros, Nakbe, El Mirador and Dzibilchaltun, among other sites, have radically modified our previous notions regarding the social development of the Maya and have given way to new theories about the development of incipient polities in the Lowlands. Notwithstanding these investigations on the Preclassic period, our understanding of the social processes occurred both during the Late Preclassic and Early Classic spans at the Maya Lowlands is still uncertain. Though the initial evidence of massive architecture and the social complexity associated with El Mirador was first considered to be an anomaly, research conducted in places outside the Mirador Basin have yielded comparable data. However, the works at Cival focused on the Late Preclassic period have offered evidence that contributed to enhance the potential data, encouraging new ideas and theories on the transition of a more complex society in the Maya Lowlands.

SETTING AND ENVIRONMENT

Cival is a Preclassic center located within the Holmul region, in northeastern Petén. The core of the site is found 6.5 km to the north, and Holmul is located in the northernmost part of precisely that same mountain range (Figure 1). The cordillera has an approximate southwest to northeast orientation, and is limited at west by the Tintal swamp and at east by the Holmul River and an additional swamp. The core of the site rests on top of a natural hill which raises 50 m above the nearby *bajos*. The hill was intentionally modified to emphasize the climb to the top of the hill and the site. Several ceremonial buildings, including the Group E type Assemblage and the

Triadic Group or Acropolis, occupy the hill; the architecture on the hill is limited to large platforms with buildings and temples with an orthogonal orientation.

At the east of this hill, the incline of the slope levels up and the settlement ends at the south in a seasonal waterhole or *sibal*, the name with which the site is known. At the south of this water source there is a smaller site, probably dating to the Preclassic period (Figure 2). At east and north, the ground becomes level and the settlement ends in the large swamps and seasonal ponds created by the Holmul River along the dry season. At west, the settlement extends at least 1 km out of the site core. In addition, there is a 1 m thick defensive wall that surrounds most of the site core, and follows the most scarped edges of the hill (Figure 1).

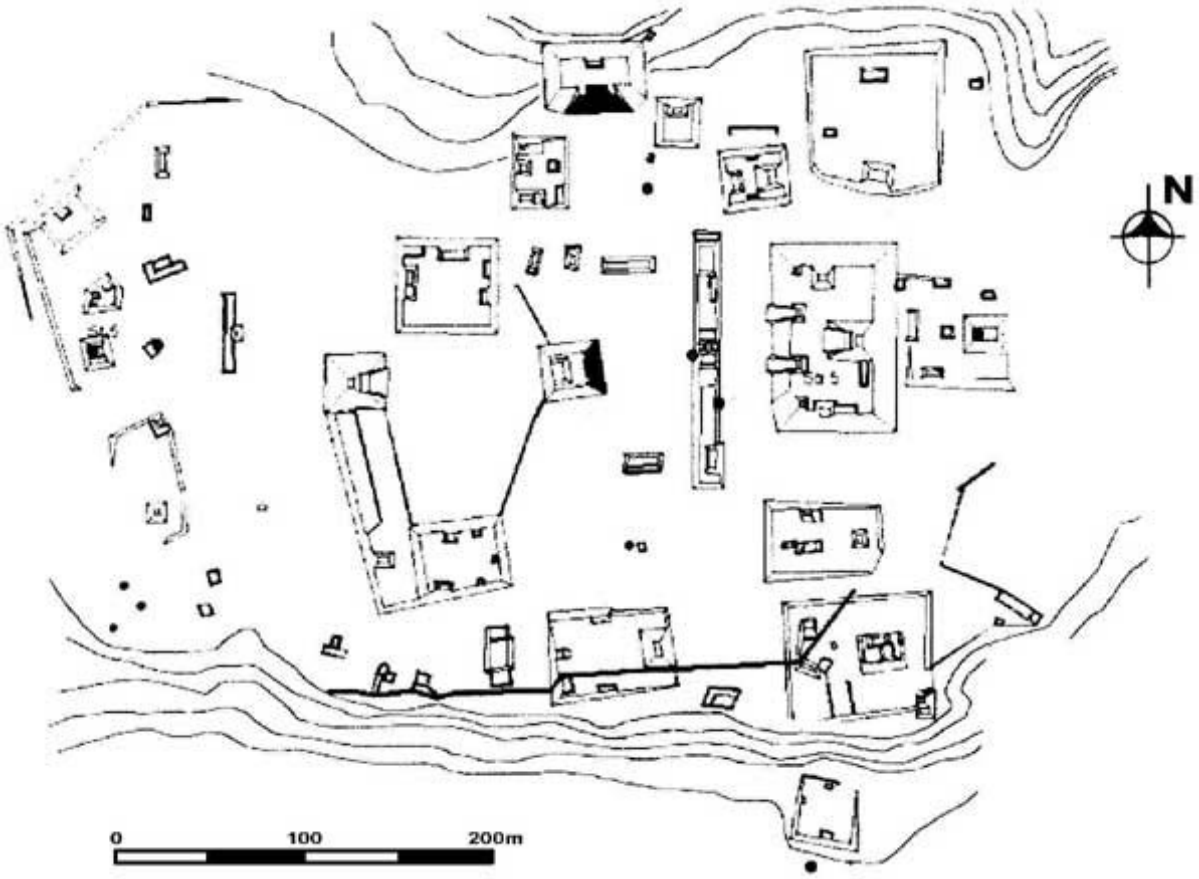

Figure 1. Map of Cival's central area (drawing by Marc A. Wolf; Kristen Gardella and Francisco Estrada-Belli, based on the original map by Ian Graham).

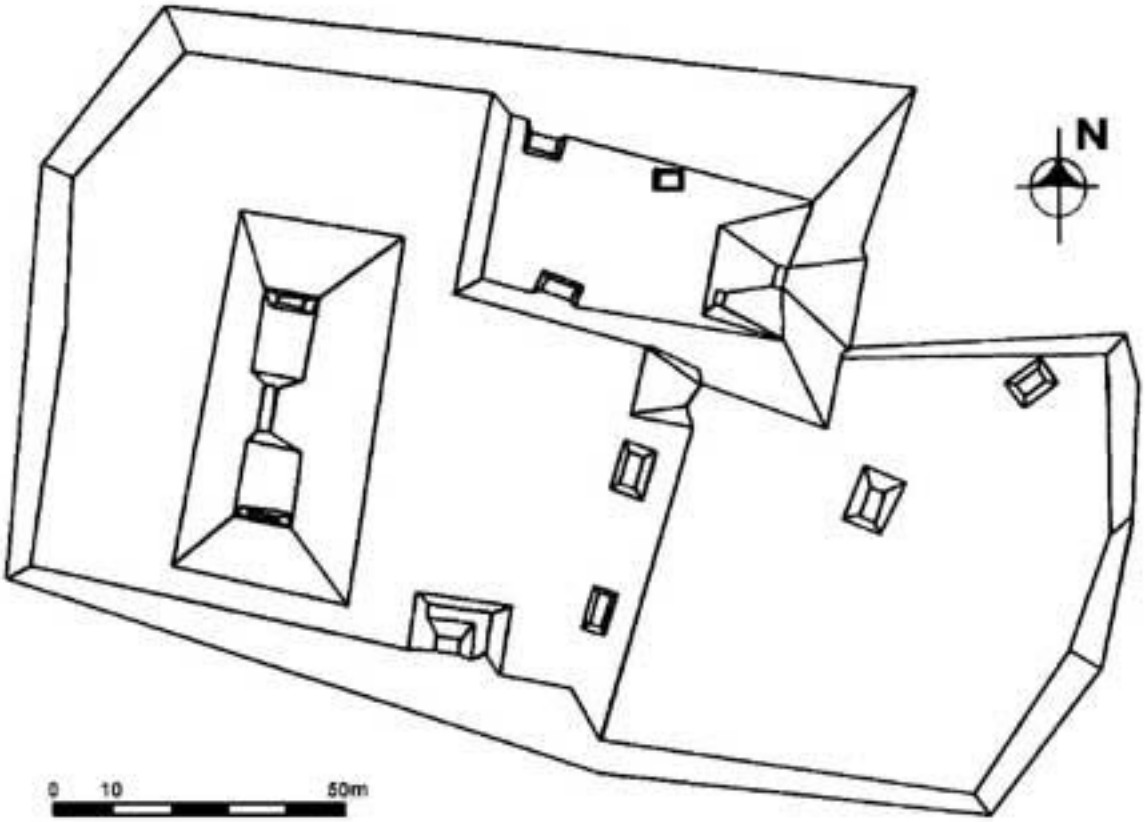

Figure 2. Map of the small site located at the south of Cival (drawing by Francisco Estrada-Belli and Colin Watters).

Cival has been the focus of investigation of the Holmul Archaeological Project undertaken by the Vanderbilt University in 2001. However, Raymond Merwin visited the site when he was working at Holmul in 1911, and in 1984 Ian Graham drew a map of it. The survey of Cival by the new project was initiated with the purpose of asserting its relationship and temporal situation with respect to Holmul. This was first achieved with the mapping of the additional plazas and of the surrounding residential area. These research works led to the rediscovery of Stela 2 (Figure 3; the one originally photographed by Merwin in 1911) and the recording of several monuments and additional architectural groups, covering an area twice as large as the central area mapped by Graham. However, and until 2003, no significant excavation was initiated at Cival, though several looting trenches were examined, including one in Structure 5 located on top of the Triadic Group (Estrada-Belli *et al*. 2003a, 2003b).

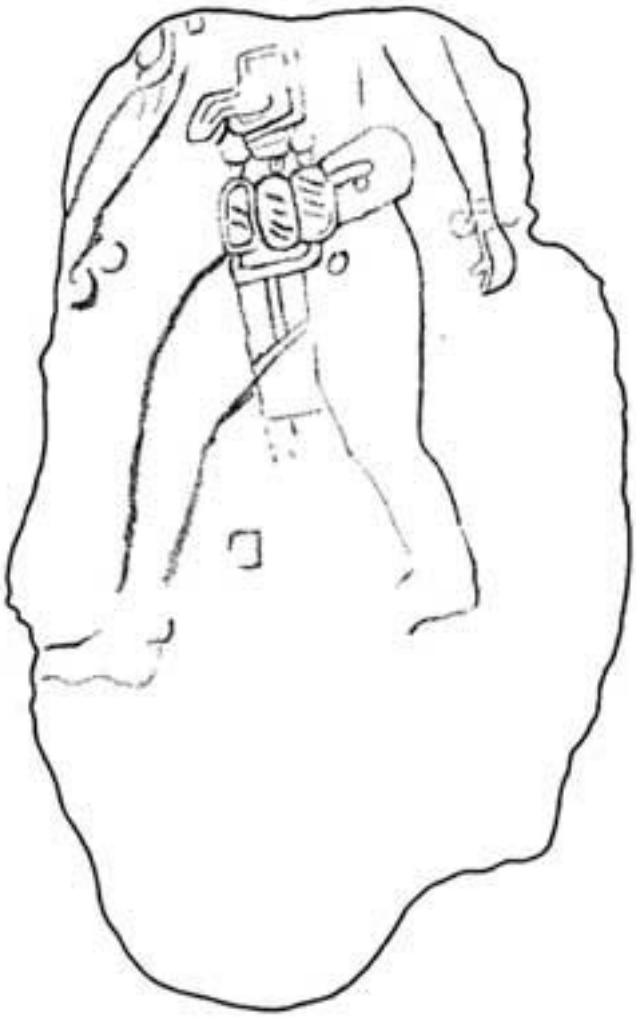

Figure 3. Stela 2 at Cival (drawing by Nikolai Grube).

To achieve a deeper comprehension of its history, in 2003 and 2004 the excavation of structures and monuments from Cival was initiated (Estrada-Belli *et al*. 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Specifically, the main plaza that formed a Group E type Assemblage and the massive Triadic Group were proposed as intensive excavation areas. The architectural investigation was initiated with the documentation, photography and salvage of a great number of looting trenches. Other excavations examined the monuments to define dates, and an additional test pit concentrated on the defensive wall (Figure 4). These excavations produced an unusually dense sequence of architectural development and ritual offerings that began by the end of the Middle Preclassic period and extended to the end of the Late Preclassic period, that is to say, the Late Terminal Preclassic period (from now on referred to as Terminal Preclassic period).

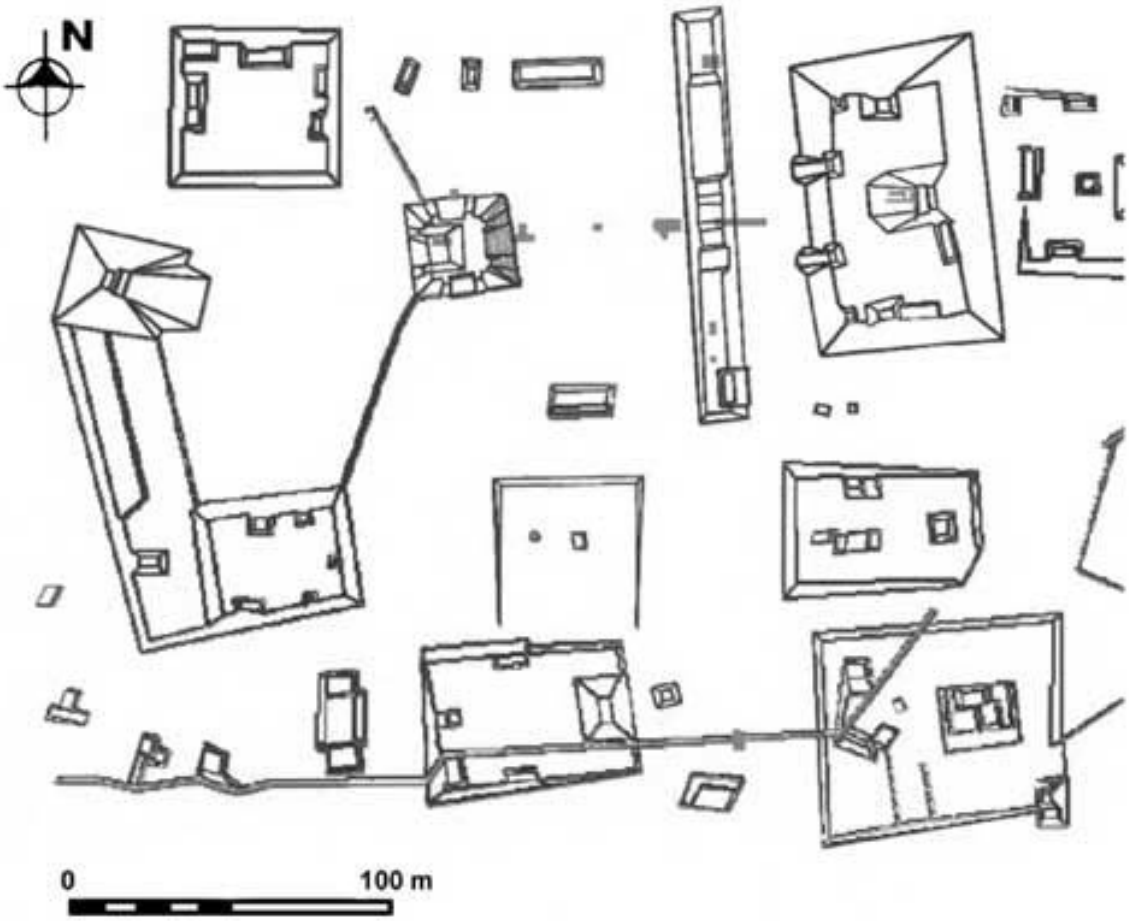

Figure 4. Map of Cival showing the excavations accomplished in 2003 and 2004.

EXCAVATIONS AT THE GROUP E TYPE ASSEMBLAGE (STRUCTURES 7 AND 12)

Group E from Cival consisted of a pyramid located west (Structure 9), 17 m tall, and one platform at the east (Structure 7), 129 m long and 3 m tall, on which a central pyramid was resting (Structure 12; Figures 1 and 4). At west of Structure 12, Nikolai Grube rediscovered Stela 2, which no longer was in its original place (Stela 1 in the past, see Mathews 1985; Figure 3). Grube (Estrada-Belli *et al*. 2003a, 2003b), dated the stela stylistically for the first part of the Late Preclassic period, so that an excavation was undertaken to define the place of origin.

Also, a looting trench that penetrated into the western façade of Structure 12 made it possible to establish the architectural phases and the plaza floors. The clearing of the looting trench and the excavation of the plaza in front of Structure 12 began in 2003 under the supervision of Molly Morgan, and continued in 2004 under the supervision of Jeremy Bauer. The excavations revealed a central pyramid with a sequence of at least six major construction stages and a number of remodeling works and demolitions associated with the numerous plaza floors. The phase sequence is still under consideration, but with the initial data obtained, a sequence may now be postulated. Construction works began by the end of the Middle

Preclassic period, with the creation of a plaza and an artificial structure built on a natural rocky hill. To do this, all the green, occupational areas as well as the building materials were removed in an area of 100 x 100 m, on which the Group E type Assemblage was built, with a useful plaza area of 70 x 70 m. At the eastern side of the plaza there was a structure 2.40 m tall and a pyramid or long platform with stairways to the west. Following the construction of this platform, the first cache or ritual offering was buried at the base of Structure 12 (see the discussion below).

The construction activities in Structures 7 and 12 continued up to the Terminal Preclassic period, and included an abundance of demolition and building events. Like we said, the sequence is still under consideration, but it has been concluded that the central pyramid structure (Structure 12) maintained the same basic shape throughout the entire Terminal Preclassic period. This structure is a simple stepped platform with stairways on the west façade and terraces on the east side. During the penultimate phase, Structure 12 consisted of a temple 5 m high with an inset stairway, with evidence of modeled stucco masks that flanked that stairway. The penultimate phase was erected during the peak of the construction activity in Cival and –based on similar construction techniques- this was probably coincident with the building of the Triadic Group platform (Figure 5). On the basis of ceramic data corresponding to the final stage, it would seem that it was built during the Terminal Preclassic period.

Figure 5. Photo of the area between Structure 12 (left), and the Triadic Group at Cival (right).

Therefore, the East Structure of the Group E type Assemblage at Cival was built late in the Middle Preclassic period, and its use and modifications continued up to the final phase of the Terminal Preclassic period, after modifications in the Triadic Group had ceased. The construction techniques applied in the final phase of Structure 12 exhibit a lack of sophistication which is not evident in previous phases. At that time, there was no stucco evidence on the terrace façades, and the cut blocks show a stiff contrast, compared with the uniform blocks previously used in the construction of the Triadic Group stairways (Figure 5). According to the excavations in the East Structure and the West Pyramid of the Group E type Assemblage at Cival, it is clear that the final construction phases were built by individuals with lesser skills than those who worked in the previous ones.

CACHES AND PLAZA MONUMENTS

At the western base of Structure 12, a sequence of ritual offerings was found along its central line. Each one of the offerings was dedicated to several monuments, some of which were removed in ancient times. The earliest offering dates to the end of the Middle Preclassic period (BC 600-400), and the most recent one apparently dates to the end of the Late Preclassic period (BC 400 – AD 250).

The earliest cache was discovered in 2003, at the base of the first phase of Structure 12, along the central axis and placed under the bedrock floor. This cut was made after the original version of Structure 12, in other words, it was carved in the bedrock. The cut for the offering was accomplished in the form of a *kan cross* measuring 2.20 m long, 2.50 m wide, and 1.30 m deep, oriented towards the cardinal points (Figure 6). Inside the cut there was a rich deposit of artifacts: four large pots with a diameter of 0.45 m were placed on each point of the cruciform cut, while there was a fifth pot placed at the center. The vessels are diagnostic of the Middle Preclassic period (Juventud Red, Chunhinta Black and Desprecio Incised), and the disc seems to be a Preclassic diagnostic. This would yield a date probably around BC 450-350.

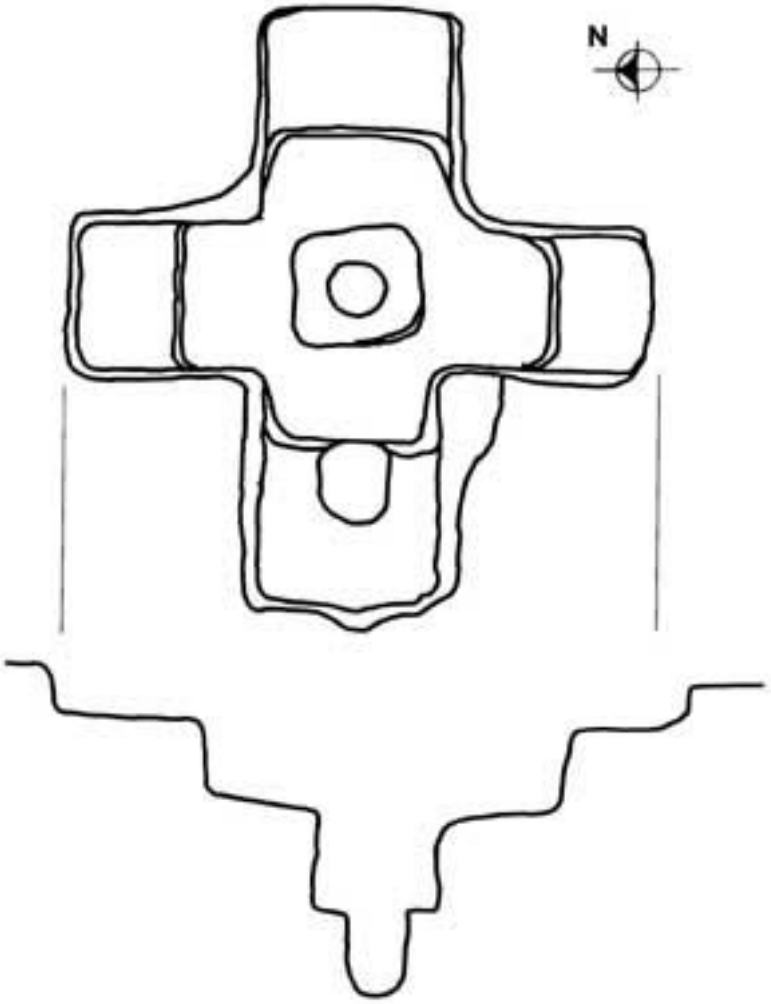

Figure 6. Floor plan (above) and profile (below) of the cruciform cache cut (drawing by Jeremy Bauer).

Under the pot placed at the center, five axes vertically arranged were found, forming as well a cruciform pattern. The central and western axes were made of blue jade, while the others were green jade. Axes were surrounded by a spread of 114 green and blue jade pebbles. At the east of the vessels and on an upper level of the same cut, a circular ceramic disc was found. At the center of the cache there was a posthole, suggesting that the cache was dedicated to a wooden post. A thick stucco floor covered the offering.

The cruciform cache at Cival is a clear representation of the Mesoamerican cosmos; there is also evidence of a Middle Preclassic cache at Ceibal (Smith 1982), and other jade caches in the Olmec region (Lowe 1989). The shape of the cruciform cut shapes the symbolic reconstruction of the concept of the Maya universe. Inside the cross, the large pots represent water, just like the small blue and green jade pebbles spread around the base of the offering. The vertical axes would seem to symbolize the growing corn (Taube 1995; Schele 1992). To the Maya, the green color symbolized the conceptual heart of the universe (Stross 1985). It is not a surprise that the center of the cache was occupied by an offering rich in jade. The posthole found in the floor that covers the cache, suggests a symbolic connection between

the jades, the corn plants and a central world tree. In this case, the post originally placed in the cache shows the symbolism of the world tree, as well as associations with the growing plant of corn that appear to be stronger than the associations with the Ceiba tree. Its location on the central axis of the East Platform, that is to say on the equinoctial axis of the assemblage, links the cache to the rituals of the *Sun God*, based on the agricultural cycle of the Maya. Clearly, the ceramic disc found on the east side of the cache seems to represent the sun at dawn, based on the characteristics of solar observations known from Group E in Uaxactun (Ricketson 1928; Aveni and Hartung 1989; Aveni *et al*. 2003). It is believed that the presence of this red ceramic disc supports the idea that both the Group E and this cache were used to commemorate the celestial observation. The cache was probably dedicated to worshipping the Maize and Sun Gods, and their correlations within the agricultural cycle, as suggested by Laporte (1999).

In-between this cache and the following one, at the base of Structure 12, there are several architectural phases. After the sealing of the plaza floor and of the cruciform cache, a small platform was built at the base of Structure 12. This low platform had at least five remodeling phases before any other new feature was dedicated. In the second phase of the ritual action, a large monument was dedicated at the base of Structure 12. Because of the size of the tenon, it may have been a stela; however, the upper portion was removed possibly with a ritual, in ancient times. Little can be said about the meaning of the monument, though it possibly had some kind of relief. The remains of the monument were subsequently used in the construction of Structure 12's base, while the area between this and the lower platform was leveled through several remodeling works of the floor.

When the floors were being cut, a third offering was discovered. This cache included one small pot of the Flor Cream type, the fragmented remains of a Sierra Red pot, two small jade fragments, one sea shell, and one fragment of hematite. This offering seems to have been dedicated to a wooden post, as was the case with the cruciform cache mentioned earlier.

Once again, the plaza floor was cut, meaning that it presented two cuts and caches, probably in relation with a stela and an altar. By cutting the floor that originally covered the offering with the pot of the Flor Cream type, a cut for a stela was identified in the bedrock, with a length of 1.80 m, a width of 0.90 m, and a depth of 0.75 m. At the center of the cut there was an arrangement of stones that created a central void. These stones seem to have served the purpose of support for a stela that was removed in ancient times. The cut for the monument is quite large, possibly for Cival's Stela 2; however, there is no corroborated evidence to connect Stela 2 with the cut, except for the fact that it was found precisely on the cut.

Given the early stylistic date and the trend to have stelas erected in the Group E type Assemblages (Laporte 1999), it would seem that the most plausible original location was the western façade of the East Platform of the assemblage, under the stones that likely supported the stela, right where a cache with a stone lid was detected. The cut was accomplished in the bedrock, where a bowl of the Sierra Red type was recovered, placed on top of two bivalve sea shells that encapsulated a perforated shell disc, one jade tube, one hematite fragment, and cinnabar powder.

Based on stratigraphy, it has been assumed that a nearby cut was associated with a stela. This was located west of the stela. In the upper levels of the cut, the tenon of some monument was discovered, which seemed to be the remains of a razed altar. Under the eroded tenon of the monument there were four cylindrical vessels with four bowls that worked as lids. The vessels were arranged following a cruciform pattern, with a bowl and a cylindrical vessel placed at each cardinal direction.

STRUCTURE 9

In 2004, excavations were conducted in Structure 9 of the Group E type Assemblage, under the supervision of Daniel Leonard, through several units that helped defining the architecture and the date of the structure. Excavation CIV.T.12 examined the east façade of the structure, in search of the stairway. By means of the excavations, two architectural stairway phases were observed; nonetheless, the final phase was hardly visible. The final stairway corresponding to this phase may likely have been an extension towards east, less important than the already existing ones. The moment of the final phase of construction is uncertain, but it probably corresponds to a date within the Terminal Preclassic period. Under the remains of the final stairway there were several steps built with very dense blocks of limestone, with average dimensions of 0.45 m in width, 0.45 m in height, and 1 m in length. The weight estimates for the blocks were based on the density of each stone, while the majority of the blocks revealed an average weight of 350 pounds, and up to 550 pounds for the larger blocks. A ceramic cache, consisting of a bowl of the Acordeon Incised type, was associated with the base of the building, yielding a date that falls into the Late Preclassic period.

The excavation CIV.T.20 conducted along the north side of Structure 9 was made with the purpose of finding out whether this was a radial structure. The stairway was found right under the collapse, suggesting that there was not a final stage corresponding to the construction, as seen on the east side. The blocks that encompass the north stairway were built with a blend of limestone materials, including several large blocks such as those on the east side.

In the upper portion of Structure 9, excavation CIV.T.15 revealed an incomplete phase of the final construction. Excavations did not lead to the finding of the walls associated with the thick refill that covered the original sub-structure (Figure 7). The final phase consisted of several retaining walls that intersected different types of masonry works, such as gravel, cobbles and reused cut blocks. The blocks reused in the masonry resemble in dimension and shape others reported for Cival corresponding to the end of the Late Preclassic period.

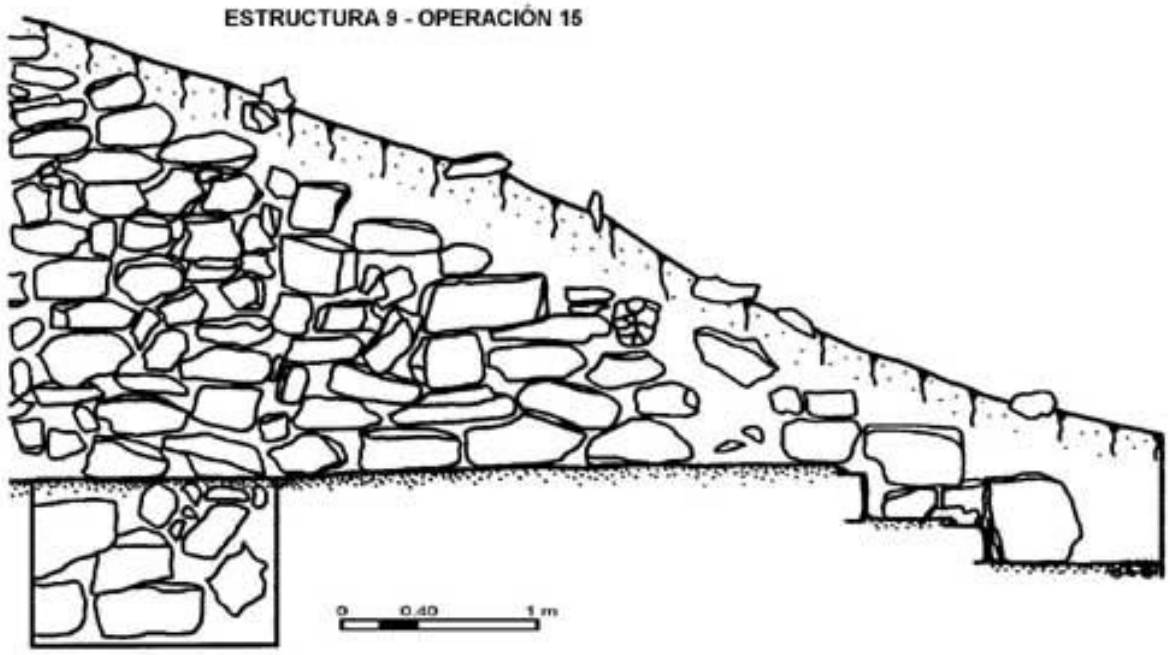

Figure 7. Profile of Excavation CIV.T.15 in Structure 9 (drawing by Daniel Leonard).

This kind of block was used in the previous phase under the masonry, and under the refill a well preserved floor was uncovered, as well as the steps of a platform. The upper platform consisted of a simple stucco bed, which likely supported a perishable super-structure. To the east, several steps provided access to the pyramid's façade. All sides of these stairways included armatures for possible small masks. The excavations suggested that the penultimate phase of Structure 9 at Cival was similar to that of E-VII-sub, in Uaxactun. According to the observation of mask frames that were found in the upper levels of the pyramids, it has been inferred that Structure 9 at Cival included eight masks, at least, and possibly 16, flanking the four stairways, while in the upper west portion of the pyramid there was a 3 m tall platform, on top of which there was a perishable structure.

EXCAVATIONS AT THE TRIADIC GROUP

In addition to the investigations at the Group E type Assemblage, the Triadic Group was also paid significant attention during the field seasons 2003 and 2004. The Triadic Group in Cival consisted of a platform 20 m high, which was the base of a group of pyramids 4.12 m tall. It was located at the east of the Group E type Assemblage, with an arrangement that resembled that of Group H from Uaxactun.

A tunnel opened by Angel Castillo inside the central pyramid or Structure 1 of the Triadic Group revealed the remains of a well preserved sub-structure. Up to now, only portions of the west façade of the buried sub-structure have been exposed, but the results of both field seasons have been impressive. In 2003, a stucco mask incredibly well preserved was discovered in the northwest façade of the pyramid (Figure 8: Estrada-Belli *et al*. 2004). Possibly, the building had four masks similar to those found in Structure 5C-2, in Cerros. Consequently, in the field season 2004, an

identical mask was found on the southwest face of the sub-structure, flanking the central stairway inset between the masks. Both masks seem to represent images of the Mayan Maize God. These masks share several characteristics with those of Uaxactun, El Mirador, and those recently discovered at Calakmul; however, their style and content are unique.

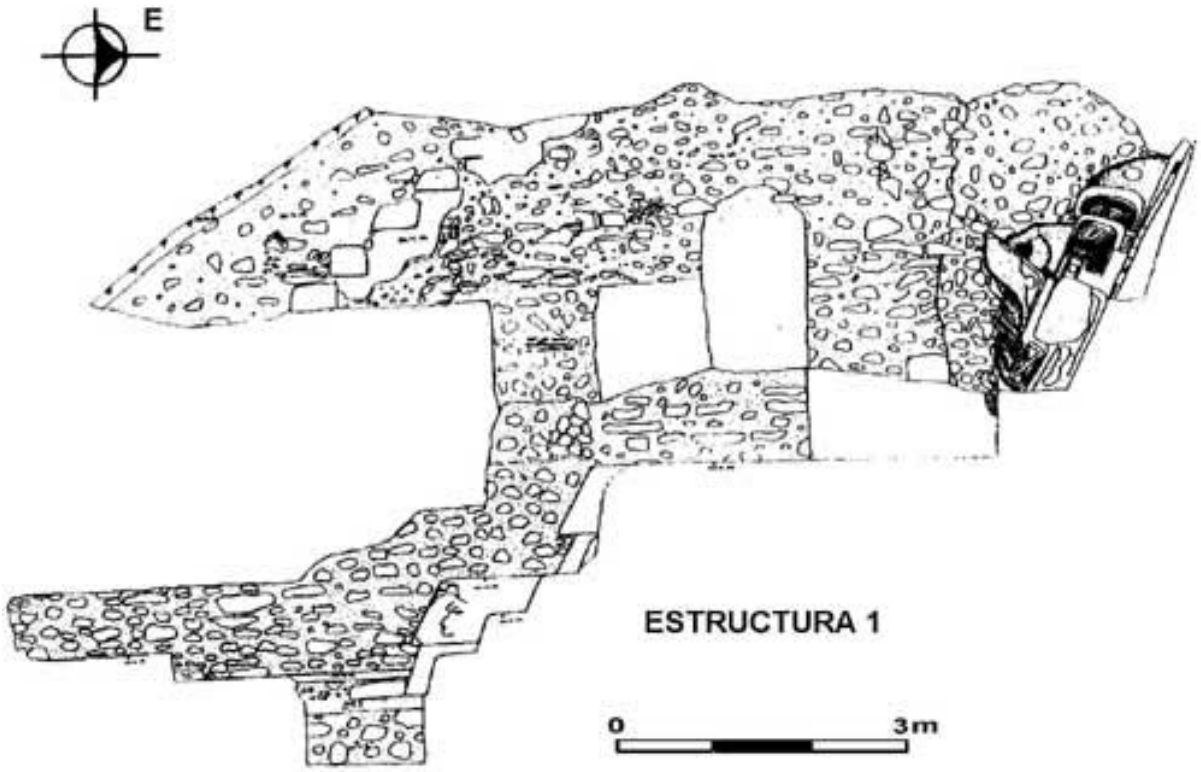

Figure 8. Profile of tunnel inside Structure 1 of the Triadic Group at Cival (drawing by Angel Castillo).

Structure 1

An additional tunnel was opened under the upper masks, with the purpose of finding lower masks in the sub-structure's façade, having discovered an inset stairway and a stepped platform with cornices in each one of the exposed terraces. In the jamb of the lower terrace, at the side of the stairways, there was a painting (Figure 8). The painting seems to be a depiction of the Maize God in profile. The proposed date of the ceramic for the sub-structure with the masks points to the mid-Late Preclassic period, not later than AD 100.

During the works in Structure 1 in Cival, several blocks were also uncovered, with stucco painted surfaces. Some of the painted images apparently represent human figures, while others exhibit the *lamat* glyph, in other words, the Venus glyph. Although it has been originally inferred that the blocks came from the sub-structure buried inside Structure 1, it is now clear that such was not the case. The place of origin was likely located in some central structure, the top of the missing stairway of the Triadic Group, similar to the triadic groups known from Preclassic times, like those from Uaxactun and El Mirador.

EXCAVATIONS AT THE DEFENSIVE WALL

As observed, there is a slow defensive wall surrounding Cival. Marc Wolf and Kristen Gardella saw this wall in 2002, during the mapping of the site. Although it is not massive, the wall probably supported wooden posts, as has been proposed for other defensive systems; fast constructions, like those found in the Petexbatun region (Demarest *et al*. 1997, Inomata 1997). The wall at Cival covers the architecture and the hill on which the ceremonial center was built. The wall also covered nearly all the residential platforms of the elite within the ceremonial center. In 2004, Daniel Leonard supervised a small excavation in the defensive wall, located directly south of the Group E type Assemblage, with the purpose of providing a preliminary date.

Leonard's excavation revealed that the wall was very quickly built using assorted blocks laid down on the final floor of the South Plaza. None of the façades of the wall remained intact, and it is suspected that this was simply a riprap where to support the most impressive wooden posts. Although the dating of the wall is still under consideration, the ceramic is associated with the Terminal Preclassic period. Precaution is suggested at this point. Although the initial data indicate a date corresponding to the Terminal Preclassic period for the defensive wall, as a rule, defensive systems are not easy to date, as they mark the end of an occupation at a given site. For this reason the ceramic present in defensive walls is scarce. Only further extensive excavations of the defensive system built at Cival could clarify the dating of the wall.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE INVESTIGATIONS

After four field seasons, an outline of Cival's history is now beginning to emerge regarding the nature of its peak and sudden fall. The data suggest that Cival was occupied early in the Middle Preclassic period. The mixed middens suggest that the occupation may have been initiated earlier, around the end of the Early Preclassic period, though for the moment, no pure deposits corresponding to the end of this period or of the Middle Preclassic period have been discovered.

By the end of the Middle Preclassic period, the ceremonial center of this site was erected. The earliest evidence of construction of the public space comes from the excavations of the Grup E type Assemblage, which continued to be a place of public constructions and ceremonial activities, as shown by the presence of caches and abundant monuments found at the western base of Structure 12. The construction within the Group E type Arrangement was in use during the entire Terminal Preclassic span. Even though a number of sherds from the Early Classic period were discovered in the upper levels, no sherds corresponding to the construction phases were recovered. Thus, construction activities in Structure 12 ended during the Terminal Preclassic span (AD 200-250). In Structure 9, construction was begun at some undefined moment, probably around the end of the Middle Preclassic period, to continue up to the end of the Late Preclassic period.

At the east of the Group E type Assemblage, the earlier phases of the Triadic Group were also built around the mid-Late Preclassic period. In the upper section of Structure 1, several stucco modeled masks were built for the ornamentation of the sub-structure's western façade. The construction activity at the Triadic Group concluded by the end of the Late Preclassic period (AD 100), while the remodeling works continued in the western Group E type Arrangement for almost a century.

The collapse of Cival, though not yet entirely understood, seems to have taken place sometime during the final part of the Late Preclassic period. This would align the abandonment of the site with that of other centers in the Lowlands, such as El Mirador, Nakbe, Cerros, and the recently discovered San Bartolo. The defensive wall at Cival suggests that this internal war seems to have partly contributed to the collapse. It is too early at this time to speculate about the cause of this extended war; however, the presence of defensive systems of the Preclassic is not an exclusive trait of Cival. Cerros and Edzna seem to have been surrounded by fosses, El Mirador and Becan had Preclassic massive defensive systems, and the defensive systems in Tikal could date to the final portion of the Late Preclassic period (Hansen 1998; Webster 1977; Puleston and Callender 1967). The defensive system of Cival requires additional investigation, to clarify the synchronization of the abandonment of the site and the implications for our understanding of the profound historical, ideological, demographical and socio-political changes occurred at the beginning of the Early Classic age.

It is our hope that the research works on Cival may contribute to the comprehension of each one of the poorly understood major moments in Maya history.

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