

DEDICATION, TERMINATION AND PERPETUATION: A LATE CLASSIC PERIOD SHRINE AT SAN BARTOLO, PETEN

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Research at San Bartolo has continued providing evidence of the use of ceremonial conduct to maintain social, political and spiritual order at the site. Evidence of such activities was found both through space and time, suggesting continuity in the cosmovision of San Bartolo along its entire development. While the amazing Late Preclassic period murals still narrate the histories of mythology and creation, activities at Structure 63 –a Late Classic period shrine located at the site’s center- suggest the community’s wish to be in direct communication with the gods.

Structure 63 is a small building located at the Main Plaza, approximately 50 m south of the Tigrillo Palace (Figure 1). Excavations there have provided evidence of ceramic offerings placed before and after the building was erected, as well as evidence of burning and one deposit with human remains inside the structure. The offering and burning event on the building’s floor were located around a sculpture that depicts a pot-bellied figure. The stratigraphic information and the material remains of Structure 63 show that there were multiple separated ceremonial events with different objectives. While the pot-bellied figure dated to the Late Preclassic period, the majority of these activities had to do with the use of the building as a shrine during the Late Classic period occupation at San Bartolo.

Shrines are important and sacred places for communities throughout the world, both in our days and in the past. In general, shrines are worshipping places, at times restricted to specific members of the community, and at times opened to public use. The “use” may include different activities. Those who visit a shrine may be mere spectators, or may occasionally offer some prayer, chants or objects. From the point of view of archaeology, the action of offering material remains provides evidence of the use of a shrine and allows for the investigation of the sacred features. They have been ethnographically examined in the Maya Highlands area, for example through the investigations conducted at the Maya K’iche’ shrines of Momostenango by Barbara Tedlock (1982). While this subject has not been sufficiently approached in discussions about the Maya during the Preclassic and Classic periods, the sacrifice of material remains, an activity traditionally used to tag a “dedication” or a “termination” act, are well-known issues in the common erudition about this society. The evidence present at Structure 63 suggests that this terminology is not explaining the idea of offerings in a

complete manner, thus restricting our understanding in regard to the ritual behavior of the ancient Maya.

The concepts of dedication and termination have been dominant in discussions about the ceremonial activities of the Maya. In William Coe's view (1959), one of the pioneer experts who established a relationship of these traits with something more than simply "problematic deposits", offerings of dedication were cached objects placed prior to or during the construction of a structure, as opposed to offerings of termination, put in place when the stage of use of the building had come to an end. James Garber (1983) used the condition of the offerings contents to establish a distinction between dedication and termination. He stated that while the deposits of dedication contained complete vessels, the objects used in rituals of termination were usually broken. These types of offerings are very different in their sense, in a way that both the condition of the materials and the context should be considered as a whole for the interpretation of their meanings.

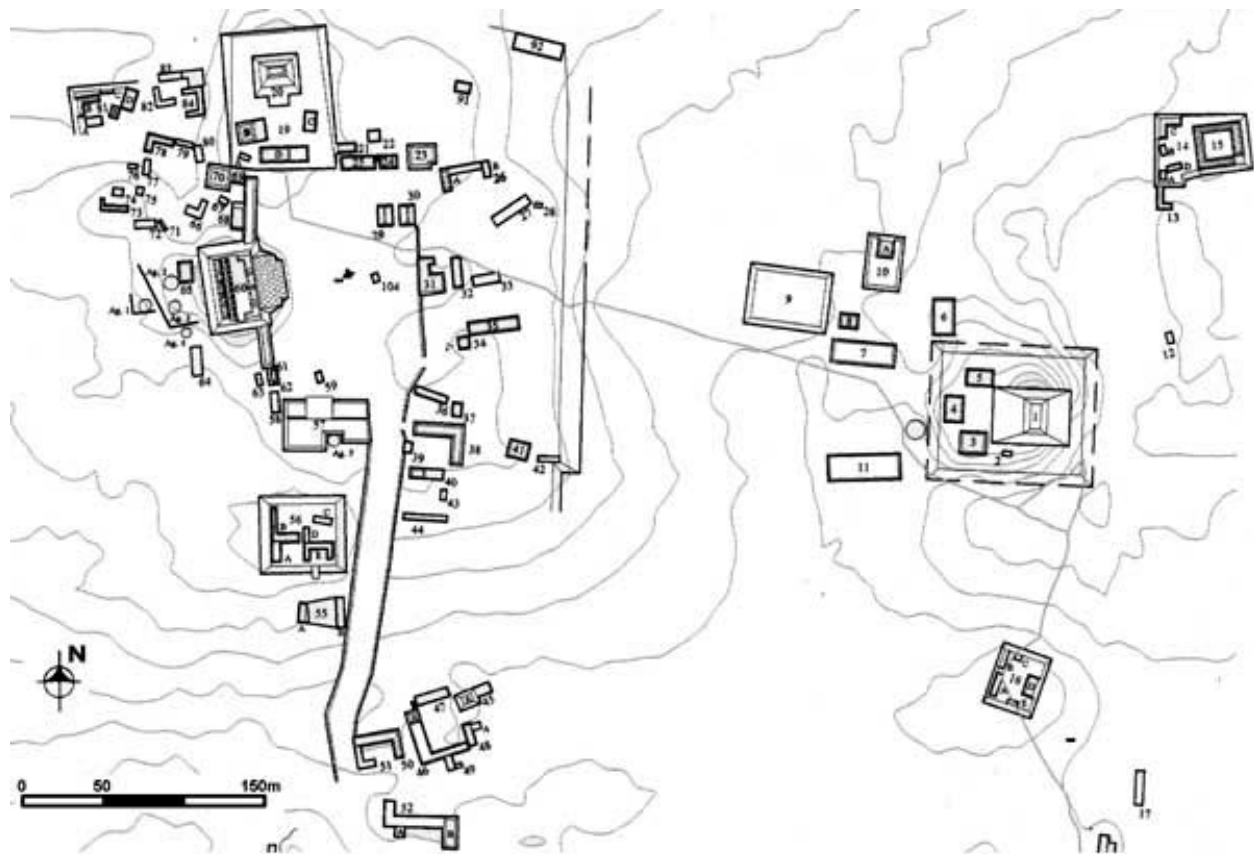


Figure 1. Location of Structure 63.

The dedication deposits were made with the purpose of commemorating new constructions or phases of use. The ceremonies ensured strength and life to the event, building, or stage. For this reason, some caches were placed in powerful locations and at the inside of the architecture, as in Lamanai (Pendergast 1998), Caracol (Chase and

Chase 1998), and Piedras Negras (Coe 1959). On the contrary, the termination deposits usually accompanied the end of the use of a structure, or the end of a stage within a community. While the dedication ceremonies were intended to grant life and power upon a structure, the termination was intended to “kill” the building, or to mark the end of its use. Evidence of termination rituals was found at Cerros (Freidel *et al.* 1998), Yaxuna (Walter 1998), and Blue Creek (Guderjan 1998).

Evidence of dedication and termination events was found during the excavation of Structure 63. However, the stratigraphic information and the characteristics of the material remains suggest that the ritual activities which took place above and under the floor of the structure cannot be fully explained using only the dedication and termination concepts. While this building was the place where dedication and termination ceremonies were held, the structure worked as a shrine, and most of the material remains found there are the product of its role it played as a sacred place and a continuous use in San Bartolo.

STRUCTURE 63

Structure 63 is a looted mound which was discovered by Héctor Mejía and Thomas Garrison during the reconnaissances of 2002. Excavations at Structure 63 were conducted in 2002 and 2003. These investigations exposed a small structure in the shape of a “T”, located within the ceremonial center of the site. The building contained an offering with over 9000 sherds, human remains and evidence of burning, while the central focus of such activities was a pot-bellied figure. Research conducted under the floor of the building exposed an offering of sherds and two complete vessels placed prior to the construction of the structure, and simultaneously with the placement of the pot-bellied figure. These investigations have as well revealed that the building was built with the specific purpose of accommodating this monument.

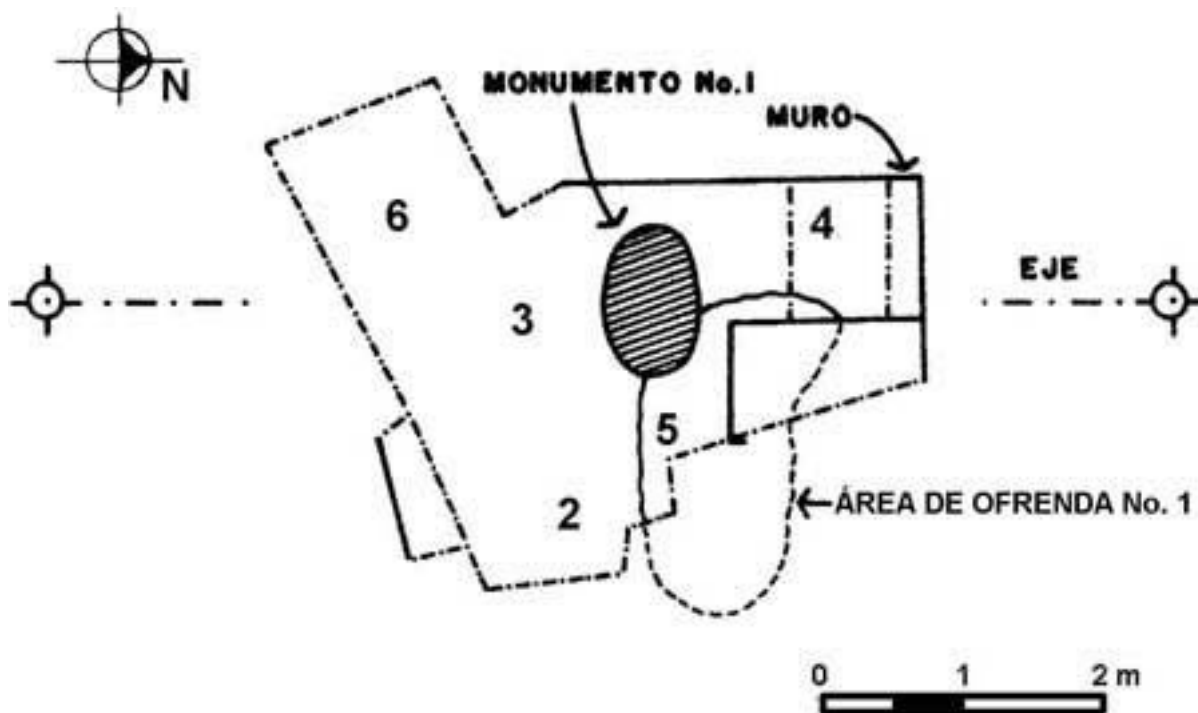


Figure 2. Excavation units and walls of the structure.

During the investigations of 2003, three walls that formed the north side of Structure 63 were exposed (Figure 2) –one of them ran parallel to the west side of the monument; there was also a shorter one, parallel to the east, and a third one to the north that connected them both. Two portions of the central walls are indicative of the “T” shape featured by the structure. Each wall was built with cut stones of a uniform size. Apparently, the remaining walls had a height of 1 m from the floor to the humus layer. Structure 63 had one floor only, and presented one architectural phase.

THE POT-BELLIED FIGURE

In 2003, this pot-bellied figure was 75% exposed, with the help of curators Rae Beaubien and Batyah Shtrum. The monument is 1 m long and 50 cm wide, with a height of 1.20 m (Figure 3). This monument was made using one single piece of lime rock. Diagnostic attributes are very limited. The pot-bellied figure consisted of a big head with no evident facial features, one arm at each side, and a sculpture that represented a turtle placed on the back of the figure. The turtle sculpture is 80 cm tall and 35 cm wide, and presents an oval shell, a neck, four feet and a tail. The neck of the figure was formed by two parallel lines that stretched from the shell to the head of the pot-bellied figure. Apparently, the turtle was sculpted without a head.



Figure 3. The pot-bellied figure.

NARANJITO

The monument was found 20 cm below Floor 1, inside a refill layer 74 cm thick, suggesting that the pot-bellied figure was placed prior to the construction of the floor (Figure 4). In addition, a portion of the floor ran across the monument in several parts. Since the pot-bellied figure is assumed to have been deposited prior to laying Floor 1 and building the walls of Structure 63, it is probable that the building was erected with the specific purpose of accommodating the monument.

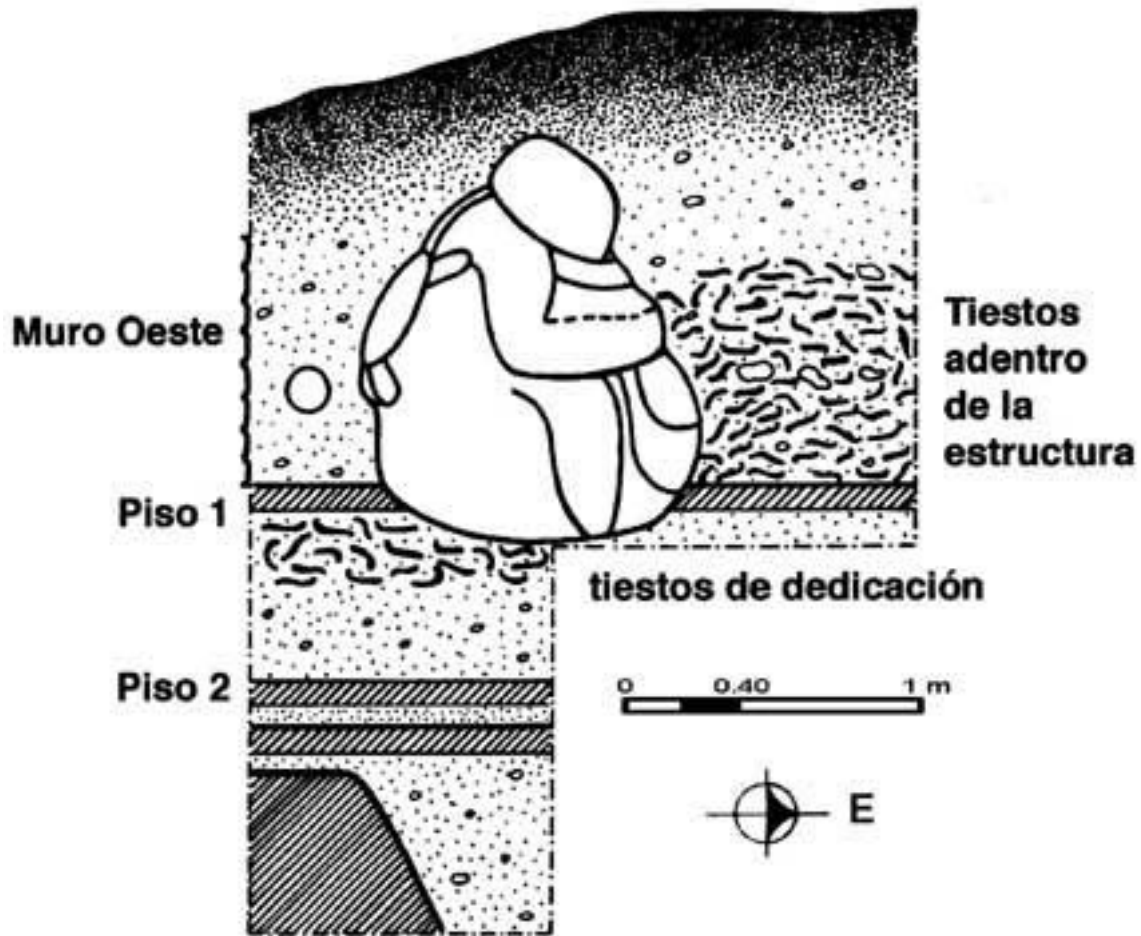


Figure 4. SB-3B-3, north profile.

PER UNIT INVESTIGATIONS

The investigations conducted at Structure 63 in 2002 and 2003 produced over 9000 sherds; 95% of this material was recovered above Floor 1, or between Floors 1 and 2. The ceramic and other material remains were obtained from the four sides of the pot-bellied figure, and from under the floor of the structure on the north and south sides of the building. Excavations on the east side, in front of the sculpture, exposed a compact ceramic deposit, evidence of burning, and human remains (Figure 4). The ceramic layer included 6000 sherds; it was 1 m thick, and ended directly above the floor of the structure. There was no evidence of stratigraphic division inside the deposit. No complete vessel was recovered in this area of the structure. The evidence of burning was concentrated within the area of direct contact with the monument. The human remains were found 1m to the southeast of the pot-bellied figure. Formal analyses of the bones have not been accomplished so far, but preliminary tests suggest that there is evidence of partial remains of multiple individuals, because the set includes two right kneecaps. The bones have provided no information in regard to age or sex. The human remains were found mixed with sherds and small pieces of burnt bones that could not

be identified; therefore, they were probably part of the offering rather than of some burial.

The excavations on the west side of the monument reached down to the floor. The investigations conducted in this area have yielded no compact ceramic deposit, but instead, similar evidence of burning was observed, as well as a complete vessel and some sherds. The vessel is of the Flor Cream type, and was found precisely behind the monument. The investigations down to the floor of Structure 63, on the north side of the monument, have not produced a significant collection of sherds. Two vessels were found under the floor, while a scarce group of sherds was recovered right under the floor of the structure (Figures 5 and 6). The vessels are of the Tinaja Red type. They were found upside down and surrounded by *sascab*.

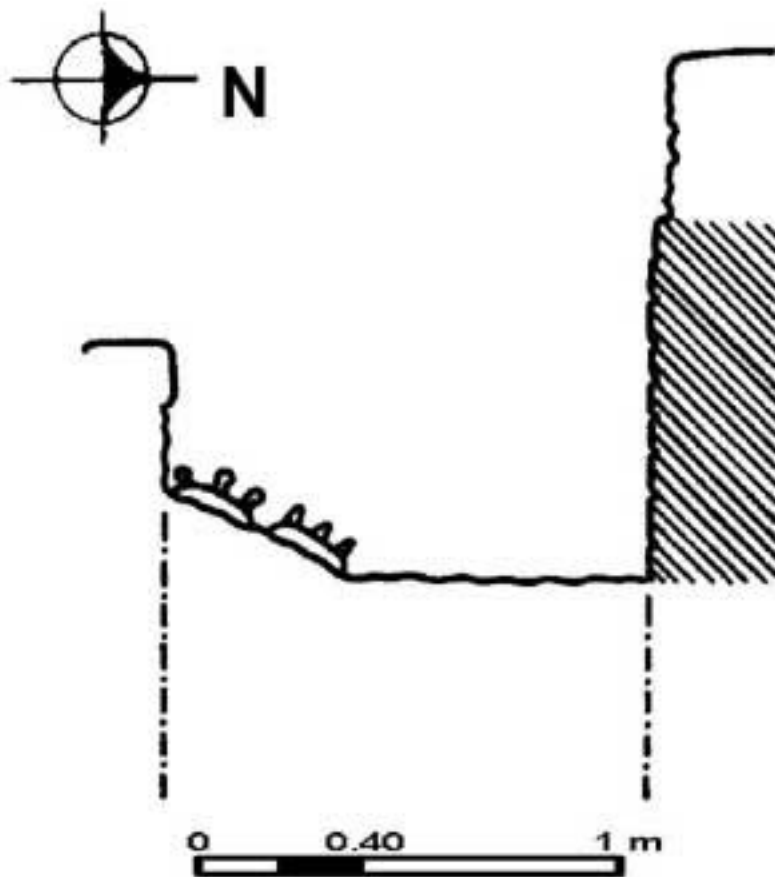


Figure 5. Dedication vessels.

COROZAL TORRE

The unit located to the south of the monument could not be excavated down to the floor due to the disturbance caused by the looting, which altered the offering and broke the floor. There was a compact deposit of over 1300 sherds directly under the floor of this unit. This ceramic layer, while much smaller than the deposit found above the floor,

resembled the group found inside the structure in terms of general types and density. However, a difference between the two contexts is that the layer under Floor 2 showed no evidence of burning.

The excavations proceeded down to 80 cm below Floor 2 in the south unit, and to the bedrock in the north unit. These investigations revealed no evidence of ritual activity under the sherd layer to the south of the pot-bellied figure or under the vessels cached to the north of the monument. Thus, the features that suggest a ceremonial conduct were found only over Floor 1, or right under Floor 1.



Figure 6. Dedication vessels – Tinaja Red.

DATING

Activities at Structure 63 have been stylistically dated through ceramic analysis and two radiocarbon dates. These lines of evidence suggest that the building was built during the Late Classic period, and that the offering inside the structure was placed during the Late Classic period and possibly the Terminal Classic period. The ceramic types represented in the deposits under and over the floor of Structure 63 date mainly to the Late Classic period. Of the sherds found on top of Floor 1, 88% of the set corresponds to the Late Classic period, and 90% of the deposit found under Floor 1 corresponds to Late Classic period types. The deposit included predominantly utilitarian types such as Cambio Unslipped, though there were other finer ones.

Two radiocarbon dates from the deposits of Structure 63 were analyzed by *Beta Analythic laboratory*. Sample 1 was taken on top of Floor 2, and yielded a date of 690-900 AD. This date corresponds to the construction of Structure 63 and the deposit of the monument. Sample 2 was taken right in front of the monument's head and yielded a date of 780-990 AD. This date is consistent with the ritual activity which took place after the construction of Structure 63.

INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSION

The rituals that took place at Structure 63 are somehow atypical. Given the volume of ceremonial materials recovered from over and under the floor, the rituals of dedication and termination cannot fully explain the activities performed in this small building during the Late Classic period occupation of San Bartolo. The event under the floor of Structure 63, including the two complete vessels on the north side of the monument and the sherd deposit on the south side of the pot-bellied figure, refer to a dedication ceremony carried out during the placement of the monument and the construction of the building. While broken sherds are usually associated with termination events, the absence of burning evidence, together with the location of the deposit immediately under the floor of Structure 63, justify the interpretation that the activity in this context was directly associated with the construction of the building (Figure 4). The two vessels of the Tinaja Red type were found in the same context of the sherds and they were likely cached as a dedication event. The third vessel found in Structure 63 was behind the monument; the location of this artifact between the structure's wall and the back of the pot-bellied figure, suggests it was intentionally cached as part of the dedication ritual. The purpose of depositing these sherds and the vessels was to habilitate the structure for its imminent use.

The activity on top of the floor of Structure 63 is harder to explain (Figure 4). The evidence of burning, the condition of the broken sherds, and their location on the structure's floor are characteristics typical of termination events. However, the deposit is too big, given the volume of Structure 63 and the Late Classic period occupation of San Bartolo, to be the result of a termination ritual. The deposit of 6500 sherds may be better explained like the result of the continued use of Structure 63 as a shrine. The evidence found in this building suggests that during the Late Classic period and possibly the Terminal Classic period, the ceremonial events in the structure involved processes of dedication and perhaps of termination, but the activity that was predominant in Structure 63 was its permanent use, its "perpetuation" as a shrine during this time span. The age of the pot-bellied figure, which dates to the Late Preclassic period, corroborates that it was very important in terms of worth and veneration.

Additional research is necessary to find out who used this shrine. However, the excavations at the Group of Las Plumas conducted by Roxandra Ortiz, offer some possible answers. Las Plumas is a Late Classic period elite precinct, located approximately 50 m south of Structure 63. The discovery of this building suggests that – while there was not such an intensive occupation for major architectural projects- there indeed was a Late Classic period community at San Bartolo. In turn, the location of Structure 63 in front of the Main Plaza suggests that the Late Classic period residents used this building as a public space.

The concept of perpetuation is simply the uninterrupted use of some sacred place. This notion allows us to study not only the birth and death of a structure, but also its life span. Evidence provided by Structure 63 indicates that the processes of dedication, perpetuation and termination were intended to honor the pot-bellied figure by the Late Classic period inhabitants of San Bartolo. These investigations underline the limitations

of the terminology, as far as ceremonial activities in Maya archaeology are concerned. The introduction of the perpetuation concept creates a *continuum* of the ceremonial behavior, in a way that a wider range of these activities may be recognized and discussed at the time of investigating Maya rituals.

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Figure 1 Location of Structure 63

Figure 2 Excavation units and walls of the structure

Figure 3 The pot-bellied figure

Figure 4 SB-3B-3, north profile

Figure 5 Dedication vessels

Figure 6 Dedication vessels – Tinaja Red